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- **A shift in free speech jurisprudence**
- **India, Maldives to review economic and maritime security partnership**
- **India views China as 'primary adversary' and Pakistan more as 'ancillary' security problem, says U.S. report**
- **Meghalaya's new cave-dwelling fish adapts to streams overground: study**

Frontier of progress: India must recognise the northeast's diversity to tap its potential

Syllabus

That unity in diversity is India's strength might sound clichéd, but it is as true as ever. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while speaking at the **Rising North East Investors Summit 2025** last week, cited the diversity of India's northeastern region to underscore the vast diversity of the country.

Frontier of progress

India must recognise the northeast's diversity to tap its potential

That unity in diversity is India's strength might sound clichéd, but it is as true as ever. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while speaking at the Rising North East Investors Summit 2025 last week, cited the diversity of India's northeastern region to underscore the vast diversity of the country. The northeast is rich in its cultural diversity and natural resources, and its location, topography and complex histories make it a unique space. But its numerous linguistic, tribal and cultural affinities can be a source of conflict within the Indian state. At times, these conflicts can be violent as the one in Manipur, which erupted on May 3, 2023, and is still simmering between the Kuki and Meiti communities. The Modi government and State governments in the region have sought to turn the region into an attractive destination for investors and tourists. The Sela Tunnel in Arunachal Pradesh, the Bhuben Hazarika bridge in Assam, the construction of 11,000 kilometres of highways, extensive new rail lines, more airports, the development of waterways on the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers, the expansion of mobile telephony, and a 1,600-km-long Northeast Gas Grid are examples of the new dynamism of the region. The Modi government has built on the initiatives of its predecessor United Progressive Alliance governments.





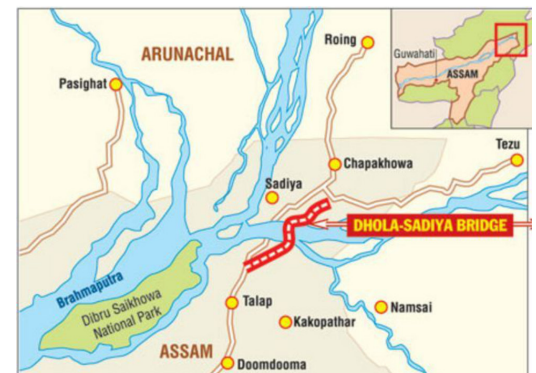
Northeast's Strengths:

- **Cultural & Ethnic Diversity:** Rich in tribal, linguistic, and cultural communities.
- **Geographical Advantage:** Strategic location, vast natural resources, and proximity to Southeast Asia.
- **Economic Potential:** Emerging as a destination for tourism, infrastructure development, and investment.



Key Development Projects:

- **Infrastructure Boost:**
 - ♦ Sela Tunnel (Arunachal Pradesh)
 - ♦ Bhupen Hazarika Bridge (Assam)
 - ♦ 11,000 km highways, new rail lines, airport expansions
 - ♦ Waterways on the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers
 - ♦ 1,600-km Northeast Gas Grid
 - ♦ Expansion of mobile connectivity
- **Major Investment:**
 - ♦ ₹27,000 crore Tata semiconductor plant in Assam





Peace Efforts by Government:

- **Peace Accords & Agreements:**
 - ◆ NSCN Framework Agreement (2015) – now stalled
 - ◆ Bodo Peace Accord (2020)
 - ◆ Bru refugee resettlement (2020)
 - ◆ Partial withdrawal of AFSPA from several areas
 - ◆

Ongoing Challenges:

- **Ethnic Conflict:** Manipur violence (Kuki vs. Meitei) continues since May 2023.
- **Unresolved Peace Talks:** Stagnation in Nagaland peace process.
- **Border Disputes:** Persist between States, though Assam has made progress with Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh.
- **Environmental Concerns:** Hydroelectric projects in Arunachal face local protests over displacement and ecological impact.
- **Social Tensions:** Rise in communal anxiety due to anti-immigrant rhetoric (Bangladesh & Myanmar).

The Way Forward:

- We must:
 - ◆ Recognise and respect the **diversity** of the Northeast.
 - ◆ Ensure **inclusive development** that benefits local communities.
 - ◆ Balance **development with environmental sensitivity**.
 - ◆ Align internal policies with its **Act East Policy**, promoting better ties with **East Asian economies**.
 - ◆ Prioritise **conflict resolution and sustainable growth**.

A shift in free speech jurisprudence

The story so far:

Ashoka University professor Ali Khan Mahmudabad was granted interim bail by the Supreme Court on May 21 after his May 8 and May 11 social media posts regarding Operation Sindoor led to his arrest on May 18 and two FIRs being filed against him. The investigation will continue.

A shift in free speech jurisprudence

Why was Ashoka University professor Ali Khan Mahmudabad arrested? What did the Supreme Court say about the content of his posts? When is freedom of speech restricted? Does the current ruling go against what has already been laid down by the top court in previous judgments?

EXPLAINER

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:
On May 21, the Supreme Court granted interim bail to Ashoka University professor Ali Khan Mahmudabad but declined to stay the ongoing investigation into his social media posts related to Operation Sindoor. The professor was arrested on May 18, following the registration of two first information reports (FIRs) in connection with his online posts.

What did the posts say?
In a Facebook post dated May 8, Mr. Mahmudabad criticised the actions of Pakistan's military while condemning the strategic restraint exercised by the Indian armed forces. Calling civilian deaths on both sides "tragic," he called for de-escalation. He also noted that the inclusion of women officers – Colonel Sofiya Qureshi and Wing Commander Yoonika Singh – in India's press briefings reflected the country's pluralist ideals but would amount to "hypocrisy" if not backed by tangible change on the ground, referring to instances of bulldozing of houses and mob lynching. In a May 11 post, he condemned the online abuse directed at Foreign Secretary Vikram Mitter for announcing the ceasefire and denounced the "blind bloodlust for war" displayed by certain sections.

What are the charges against him?
Mr. Mahmudabad faces serious charges under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, following comments by BJP Haryana Morcha leader Yogesh Jathedi and Haryana Women's Councils' Chairperson Renu Bhatia. Mr. Jathedi's complaint led to an FIR invoking Section 152 which penalises acts "endangering sovereignty, unity and integrity of India" – a provision closely mirroring the language of the colonial-era sedition law. Additional charges include Sections



Curbed speech: Various teacher's organisations condemn the arrest of Ali Khan Mahmudabad, at the Press Club of India in New Delhi, on May 20. SANJAY SHUKLA

General of Police, Haryana, was ordered to constitute a three-person SIT comprising senior IPS officers from outside both Haryana and Delhi to assess the true meaning of the posts.

Is 'unpatriotic' speech penalised?
The Constitution permits restrictions on speech only on eight narrowly defined grounds under Article 19(2), such as incitement to offence and public disorder. In *Shreya Singhal versus Union of India* (2015), the Supreme Court struck down Section 66A of the Information Technology Act, 2000, ruling that vague grounds like "insult" or "hated" cannot justify criminalising speech. It affirmed that even "offensive" or "disturbing" speech is protected under Article 19(2). However, Justice Kant observed that *prima facie*, certain words used by Mr. Mahmudabad appeared to carry a "dual meaning". Accordingly, the Director

reaffirmed that the grounds under Article 19(2) are exhaustive. "I do not believe there is anything inherently objectionable in Mr. Mahmudabad's posts," Justice Gautam Patel, former judge of the Bombay High Court, told *The Hindu*. "Nothing in them appears to violate the restrictions outlined in Article 19(2). Even if the posts are complex or open to varied interpretations, constitutional principles require that the reading favouring the right to free speech must prevail." He further observed that while the state must be given an opportunity to present any incriminating material, an alleged deficiency of "patriotism" cannot serve as a legitimate basis to criminalise speech.

Have there been inconsistent precedents?

As recently as March, the Supreme Court set clear standards for the registration of FIRs under Sections 196, 197(1), and 299 of the BNS while hearing a petition by Congress MP Imran Pratapgari, who had been booked for a social media post quoting one of his poems. A Bench of Justices Abhay S. Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan underscored that the impact of spoken or written words must be assessed from the perspective of "reasonable, strong-minded, firm and courageous individuals," rather than those who perceive criticism as a threat to their power or position. The judges further observed that speech may well discomfort even members of the judiciary, but it remains the court's duty to "zealously protect" the fundamental freedoms guaranteed under Article 19(1A). Alok Prasanna Kumar, advocate and co-founder of the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, observed that judicial disregard for precedents set by coordinate benches has become a "routine feature" of the courts. "Judges are increasingly allowing personal biases or prevailing public sentiment to influence their decision-making. Rather than upholding constitutional guarantees, there is a growing tendency to project a veneer of neutrality – one that is, in truth, farcical," he told *The Hindu*.

THE GIST

In a Facebook post dated May 8, Professor Ali Khan Mahmudabad criticised the actions of Pakistan's military while commending the strategic restraint exercised by the Indian armed forces. He also noted that the inclusion of women officers in India's press briefings reflected the country's pluralist ideals but would amount to "hypocrisy" if not backed by tangible change on the ground.

A Bench of Justices Surya Kant and N. Kotturwar Singh granted interim bail to the professor, clarifying it was solely to facilitate the investigation.

The Constitution permits restrictions on speech only on eight narrowly defined grounds under Article 19(2), such as incitement to offence and public disorder.





What did the posts say?

- **May 8 post:** Criticised **Pakistan's military**, praised India's **restraint**, called deaths on both sides **tragic**, and warned against hypocrisy if the inclusion of **women officers** in briefings isn't matched by real reforms (e.g. bulldozing homes, mob lynching).

What are the charges against him?

Based on complaints two FIRs were filed, invoking serious offences under the **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023:**

- **Section 152:** Acts endangering sovereignty/unity (similar to sedition)
- **Section 196(1)(b):** Disturbing communal harmony
- **Section 197(1)(c):** Prejudicing national integration
- **Section 299:** Outraging religious feelings
- **Section 79:** Insulting modesty of a woman
- **Section 353:** Statements causing public mischief

What did the Court rule?

- Stated some words used by Mahmudabad **may have dual meanings.**
- Ordered a **Special Investigation Team (SIT)** to evaluate the posts.

Is 'unpatriotic' speech penalised?

No. Under **Article 19(1)(a)** of the Constitution, even **offensive or disturbing speech** is protected unless it clearly violates **Article 19(2)** (which lists 8 specific restrictions like incitement to violence).

These restrictions are allowed in the interests of:

Sovereignty and integrity of India, security of the State, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, contempt of court, defamation, and incitement to an offence

India, Maldives to review economic and maritime security partnership

Context:

S. Jaishankar and **Maldivian Foreign Minister Abdulla Khaleel** will review progress on the **India-Maldives Comprehensive Economic and Maritime Security Partnership** during Khaleel's **three-day** visit to India starting Monday.

Diplomatic Context

- The MEA described the visit as part of "intensified high-level political exchanges."
- Maldives is considered a **key maritime neighbour** under India's '**Neighbourhood First**' policy and the **MAHASAGAR vision** (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions).

A **Strategic Vision Document** was already jointly adopted by **PM Modi** and **Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu** in **October 2023.**

Tensions

Relations were **strained** after **President Muizzu**, with **pro-China** leanings, took office in **November 2023** and demanded **withdrawal of Indian military personnel.**





- However, during his **Delhi visit in October**, Muizzu expressed a commitment to **strengthen bilateral ties**, signalling a **thaw in relations**.

India also has increased trilateral engagement in the **Indo-Pacific region** and actively participates in **Quadrilateral, BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN)**.

India has reduced its procurement of Russian-origin military equipment but still relies on Russian spare parts to maintain and sustain its large inventory.

India almost certainly would continue promoting its “Made in India” initiative this year to build its domestic defence industry.

- **Agni-I Prime MRBM, Agni-V MIRV** tested
- Commissioned **2nd nuclear submarine** → strengthens **nuclear triad**

Referring to the agreement between India and China in October 2024 for disengagement from Depsang and Demchok, the report noted that the disengagement did not resolve the long-standing dispute about border demarcation but reduced some tension.

Meghalaya's new cave-dwelling fish adapts to streams overground: study

Discovery of New Fish Species in Meghalaya Cave

- A **new fish species**, *Schistura densiclava*, has been discovered in **Krem Mawjymbuin cave, East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya**.
- It can live both **inside caves** and **aboveground** streams.
- Found **60 metres inside** the cave, in cool (**18°C**), **low-oxygen** conditions.
- Retains **pigmentation and eyesight**, unlike most cave fishes.
- Named “**densiclava**” due to a **thick stripe** near its dorsal fin.
- **Appearance**: Pale yellow-green with 14–20 dark bars; males have irregular patterns and puffer cheeks, females are sturdier.
- **Confirmed as a new species** through **genetic testing**.
- The species is **endemic to this cave system** (found nowhere else).
- The cave is already in news due to a **conflict over a Shivalinga-like rock formation**.

Q.1

With reference to the recently discovered fish species *Schistura densiclava*, consider the following statements:

1. It was discovered in a cave located in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya.
2. *Schistura densiclava* is capable of surviving both in caves and in surface water streams.
3. Unlike most cave-dwelling fishes, it retains both pigmentation and eyesight.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. 1 and 3 only
- B. 1 and 2 only
- C. 3 only
- D. 1, 2 and 3 only





Q.2

Which of the following are grounds on which the State can impose reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the **freedom of speech and expression under Article 19(2)** of the Constitution of India?

1. Friendly relations with foreign States
2. Promotion of economic equality
3. Decency or morality
4. Contempt of court
5. Encouragement of scientific temper

Select the correct answer using the code below:

- A. 1, 2 and 4 only
- B. 1, 3 and 4 only
- C. 1, 2, 3 and 4 only
- D. 1, 2, 3, 4 and

Q.3

The Sela Tunnel, built to improve connectivity in the Northeast, is located in which Indian state?

- A. Arunachal Pradesh
- B. Assam
- C. Meghalaya
- D. Nagaland

