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23rd December, 2025

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The Hindu Analysis 23rd December, 2025

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India, New Zealand wind up FTA talks, set to boost trade

New Delhi hopes to enjoy tariff-free access to Wellington's markets; island nation promises 5,000 work visas every year; Prime Minister Modi hails 'historic milestone' reflecting 'shared ambition'

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

India and New Zealand on Monday concluded discussions on a free trade agreement (FTA) that will give India tariff-free access to the island nation's markets, bring in $20 billion in investments over 15 years, and help double bilateral trade to $5 billion in the next five years.

The deal will remove or cut tariffs on 95% of New Zealand's exports – from timber to fruits – to India, but New Delhi safeguarded the interests of its farmers and dairy farmers, considered politically sensitive, and made no concessions on import of dairy, onions, sugar, spices, edible oils, and rubber.

New Zealand will give temporary employment visas for Indian professionals in skilled occupations with a quota of 5,000 visas annually and a stay of up to three years under the proposed agreement.

'Protecting interests'

Union Minister for Commerce Piyush Goyal said the government has been "sensitive in protecting interests" of farmers and dairy persons. "Rice, wheat, dairy, soya and various other agricultural products have not been opened up with any access," he said.

Hailing the FTA, to be signed in the first half of 2026, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "Concluded in just nine months, this historic milestone reflects a strong political will and shared ambition to deepen economic ties between our two countries."

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Easing access

The proposed deal will give duty-free access to a range of domestic goods and includes an FDI commitment of **$20 billion over 15 years**

New Zealand to get

- Duty-free access to goods such as sheep meat, wool, coal and over **95%** of forestry and wood articles
- Duty concessions on items such as kiwi fruit, wine, seafood, cherries, avocados, persimmons, bulk infant formula, Manuka honey, and milk albumins
- No concessions in dairy sector

Indian professionals in skilled occupations to get temporary employment entry visa pathway and stay of up to **3 years**

Ties on track: Union Minister Piyush Goyal with New Zealand Minister Todd McClay in New Delhi on Monday. PTI

The deal is expected to be signed in the first half of 2026 and aims at doubling bilateral trade to **$5 billion in five years**

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Right to Disconnect: Drawing the line after work

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The Right to Disconnect Bill has been introduced as a private member's bill, a form of legislation that is rarely enacted. It comes in the context of India's recent consolidation of labour law through the four labour codes, which regulate working hours, overtime, and employer control. Against this background, the Bill marks a pivotal moment in Indian labour law. In this age of digital technologies, work increasingly extends beyond the physical workspace. Therefore, it is only prudent for the legislature to reconsider how labour law responds to constant connectivity. However, it does so in a framework that regulates work primarily through time-based constructs.

Indian labour law is yet to define what constitutes as 'work' in a digital economy. While the Bill regulates after-hours communication, it does so without clarifying the scope of 'work'. This omission becomes crucial when the Bill is read alongside other codes governing working time and employer control. Therefore, we examine unresolved questions concerning the definition of 'work', the scope of the proposed right, and its potential constitutional character, while drawing a comparison as well.

Some ambiguity

The Bill provides employees the right to not respond to work-related calls or mails beyond the prescribed working hours. However, it fails to address whether such after-hours engagement falls within the legal constructs of work.

This ambiguity is particularly obvious in the interaction of the Bill with the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020, which continues governing working hours and overtime in Indian labour law. However, the Bill does not clarify whether after-hours digital engagement amounts to "work" under the Code. This inadvertently creates a conceptual gap where communication is regulated without being integrated in the legal framework governing working time. As a consequence, the right to disconnect operates more as a behavioural norm than a labour standard.

> Until the Bill directly addresses how digital labour complies with existing labour laws, it continues to rely on a framework designed to regulate physical workplaces

Approach of other jurisdictions

The gaps become apparent when compared with jurisdictions that have already imbibed the right to disconnect in their legal regimes. In the European Union, employer control became a key parameter for assessing working time. Through judicial precedents, an expansive definition was adopted, which included on-call time, standby periods, and other forms of availability, even where no active work is performed but the employer continues to exercise control. This principle further evolved through decisions such as *SIMAP, Tyco,* and *Jaeger*, where the European Court of Justice equated employer's control with work. Similarly, France does not try to redefine work. Instead, its labour law demarcates working time and rest time. Periods of availability under employer control are considered working time, and digital communication is integrated into this framework through collective bargaining. Germany enforces strict working time and rest period regulations as well. These comparisons are not offered for replication in India, but to engage with an unresolved legal question: when does an employee's time belong to the employer?

The Indian labour code contains mandatory rules, prescribing limits on working hours, and contractual terms negotiated through employer policy and agreements. The Right to Disconnect Bill does not specify whether the given right is a mandatory labour standard or its term can be modified via a contract.

Another question concerns the Bill's constitutional character. The freedom to disengage bears an evident relationship with Article 21 of the Constitution. Yet the Bill neither traces its constitutional lineage nor articulates how these guarantees are to be realised within the workplace. The Bill leaves unresolved whether the right to disconnect is purely statutory or indicative of a deeper constitutional engagement between work and individual autonomy.

Conclusion

The Bill recognises that digital work has blurred the traditional boundaries between working time and personal time, but it does not explain how this transformation is to be accommodated within the legal framework which governs working hours, overtime and employer control.

A comparative study reveals that the right to disconnect becomes effective when an employee's time is treated as working time. This gap is yet to be filled. Until the Bill addresses how digital labour complies with existing labour laws, it will continue to rely on a framework designed for regulating physical workplaces.

The Bill leaves open whether the right has a constitutional character. Although there is an evident connection between Right to Disconnect and individual autonomy under Article 21 of the Constitution, this is not made apparent by the legislature. The Bill neither identifies this gap nor acknowledges it, which leaves it open to divergent interpretations.

For these reasons, the Bill is best seen as the beginning of a broader conversation, one that the Indian labour law jurisprudence will eventually address.

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India tops global doping list for the third consecutive year

Global comparisons show that despite more rigorous testing regimes, the doping rate is much lower in many other countries

DATA POINT

Devyanshi Bihani

India has recorded the highest number of doping offenders globally for the third consecutive year, according to the latest World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) report. According to the WADA's 2024 report, India recorded 260 positive doping cases from 7,113 samples **(Chart 1A)** – a 3.6% positivity rate **(Chart 1B)**. This figure is more than double of any other nation's numbers, as no other country exceeded a 1.75% positivity rate in 2024.

Norway documented the second-highest proportion of positive cases at 1.75%, followed by the U.S. at 1.15% **(Chart 2)**. In terms of absolute figures, France registered the next highest volume of violations in 2024 with 91 cases, followed closely by Italy with 85. Russia and the U.S. reported 76 cases each, while Germany and China recorded 54 and 43 cases, respectively.

Crucially, these nations recorded fewer positive results in both absolute and percentage terms than India, despite maintaining much more rigorous testing regimes. China, for example, conducted over 24,000 tests in 2024 **(Chart 3)**, more than triple India's volume, yet reported fewer than one-fifth of the violations.

The findings have come at a time when India is positioning itself as a credible global sporting host. The country is preparing to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games, seen as a stepping stone towards its larger ambition of hosting the 2036 Olympics.

Sport-wise data from India shows that athletics recorded the most positive results in absolute terms. Of the 260 positive cases in 2024, as many as 76 came from athletics, followed by weightlifting (43) and wrestling (29). Boxing and powerlifting recorded 17 cases each, while kabaddi accounted for 10 cases. **(Table 4)** These figures reflect a pattern that has held over several years, with endurance and strength-based sports dominating the list of violations. In July, under-23 wrestling champion and Paris Olympics quarter-finalist Reetika Hooda tested positive for banned substances and was provisionally suspended, drawing attention to doping risks even among elite athletes.

At the grass-roots level, enforcement itself appears to be a deterrent. During India's University Games earlier this month, there were reports of several athletes skipping track and field events after anti-doping officials arrived at venues, in some cases leaving only a single competitor to participate.

India's National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) has defended its record, arguing that higher numbers reflect improved detection rather than rising drug use. In a statement issued on Wednesday, the agency said India had "significantly strengthened" its anti-doping framework in recent years.

However, global comparisons suggest that India's problem is not merely one of testing volume. Several countries with comparable or higher testing numbers continue to report far lower positivity rates.

The WADA report comes months after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) expressed concern over the widespread use of performance-enhancing drugs in India and urged authorities to "set their house in order". In response, the Indian Olympic Association constituted a new anti-doping panel in August.

The government has also moved to tighten the legal framework. Parliament recently passed the National Anti-Doping (Amendment) Bill, 2025, incorporating changes sought by WADA to bring India's anti-doping regime in line with global standards. The Bill prohibits doping in sports, and provides a framework for testing, enforcement, and adjudication of violations.

Playing it dirty

The data for the charts were sourced from the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) Anti-Doping Rule Violations (ADRVs) Report 2022, 2023 and 2024

CHART 1A: The total number of samples tested in India over the past four years

CHART 1B: The positivity rate (in %) of the tests conducted in India over the past four years

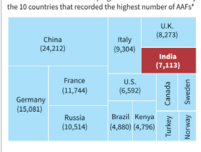

CHART 3: The number of doping tests conducted in 2024 by the 10 countries that recorded the highest number of AAFs*

CHART 2: The positive doping rate (in %) reported in 2024 by the 10 countries that recorded the highest number of AAFs*

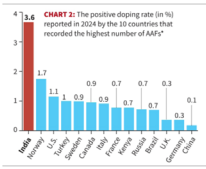

TABLE 4: The total number of samples collected, total AAFs, and the corresponding positivity rate across the 10 sports that recorded the highest number of AAFs* in India

Sport	Total Samples	Total AAFs	Positivity rate (in %)
Athletics	1,862	76	4.1
Weightlifting	664	43	6.5
Wrestling	414	29	7
Powerlifting	54	17	31.5
Boxing	413	17	4.1
Kabaddi	181	10	5.5
Bodybuilding	12	8	66.7
Judo	186	6	3.2
Wushu	111	5	4.5

Note: An Adverse Analytical Findings (AAFs)* is a laboratory report identifying the presence of a prohibited substance or its metabolites or markers (including elevated quantities of endogenous substances) or evidence of the use of a prohibited method, in line with WADA standards

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India's core sector grows at 1.8% in Nov.

Cement, steel, fertiliser and coal in positive territory; production of crude oil records contraction of 3.2%; natural gas output falls by 2.5%

Asian News International
NEW DELHI

The combined Index of Eight Core Industries (ICI) increased by 1.8% in November compared with the same period last year, data released by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry said on Monday.

Production of cement, steel, fertiliser and coal recorded positive growth in November 2025, it said.

Coal production rose by 2.1% in November. However, on a cumulative basis, coal output declined by 1.4% during the April-November 2025-26 period.

Crude oil production recorded a contraction of 3.2% in November compared with the year earlier.

The cumulative crude oil index has declined by 1.3% in the current financial year so far.

Natural gas output fell by 2.5% year-on-year in November 2025, continuing its downward trend. Cumulatively, natural gas production declined by 3% during April-November 2025-26. Petroleum refinery products, the largest component of the core industries index, saw a decline of 0.9% in November.

Despite a monthly decline, refinery output posted marginal cumulative growth of 0.2% during the period under review.

Fertiliser production registered a strong growth of 5.6% in November 2025.

On a cumulative basis, fertiliser output increased by 1.3% during April-November 2025-26.Steel production rose by 6.1% in November, reflecting robust performance in the sector. The cumulative steel index recorded a strong growth of 9.7% during the April-November 2025-26 period.

Cement emerged as the best-performing segment, recording the highest year-on-year growth of 14.5%.

Good show: Cement emerged as the best-performing segment, recording the highest YoY growth of 14.5%. C. VENKATACHALAPATHY

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Unrest unlimited

Yunus lacks the legitimacy to steer Bangladesh through the latest crisis

The violent unrest that rocked Bangladesh on Thursday night, following the death of Sharif Osman Hadi, a prominent youth leader of the July 2024 uprising against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government, was both a reflection of where the country stands today and a warning of what lies ahead. Hadi, an Islamist and a virulent critic of India, played a key role in transforming the July uprising into a broader movement aimed at remaking the country. He sought a decisive break from Bangladesh's liberation-era values and advocated greater political space for parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami, as well as for Islamist student groups. Hadi was shot by masked gunmen on December 12 and succumbed to injuries on December 18 at a hospital in Singapore, triggering widespread protests across Bangladesh. Although the police have arrested at least half a dozen suspects in connection with the attack, it remains unclear who orchestrated the killing. Some of Hadi's supporters blamed the Awami League. On December 18, mobs torched the offices of *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star*, two of the country's largest dailies, trapping staff inside. Cultural centres, Awami League offices, the homes of former ministers, and even the residence of Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's liberation hero, were attacked. In Mymensingh city, a Hindu man aged 25 was lynched over alleged blasphemy, as a crowd cheered and filmed while his hanging body was set on fire.

Fifteen months after Ms. Hasina was toppled, Bangladesh continues to reel under mob rule. Ms. Hasina's authoritarianism undoubtedly contributed to the eruption of public anger in July 2024. Her fall offered Bangladesh a chance to begin anew, grounded in reconciliation, pluralism, and democracy. That opportunity has since been squandered. The period following the uprising saw widespread violence against minorities and Awami League workers. The Awami League and its student wing, the Chhatra League, were banned, while the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami was lifted. Mr. Yunus failed to keep Islamist forces, who have a dark past, in check even as reactionary groups pressed for a total rupture with the immediate past. The result has been near-anarchy. Anti-India sentiments, amplified by Islamist forces, have further inflamed tensions. Bangladesh's rulers must heed these warning signs. The focus must shift from vendetta politics to rebuilding state capacity and restoring law and order. Mr. Yunus appears to lack either the legitimacy or the resolve to steer the country through this crisis. For Bangladesh, the only viable path forward lies in inclusive elections with the participation of all the major political parties.