

STRATEGIC STEP

The proposed India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) marks an important milestone in India's expanding global trade and economic diplomacy. As both nations work towards deeper engagement, the FTA reflects a shared commitment to strengthening bilateral ties, enhancing market access, and promoting sustainable and inclusive growth. For India, the agreement aligns with its broader strategy of diversifying trade partnerships and integrating more deeply with key economies in the Indo-Pacific region.

New Zealand, a developed economy with strengths in agriculture, dairy, education, and innovation, sees India as a high-growth market with immense long-term potential. India, on the other hand, views New Zealand as a trusted partner with complementary economic interests, advanced technologies, and strong regulatory standards. An FTA between the two countries can unlock new opportunities across goods, services, investment, and people-to-people linkages.

Trade liberalisation under the agreement is expected to reduce tariffs, simplify customs procedures, and improve ease of doing business. Indian exporters, particularly in pharmaceuticals, textiles, information technology, engineering goods, and processed foods, stand to gain improved access to the New Zealand market. Similarly, New Zealand exporters, especially in dairy products, agricultural goods, and education services, may find greater opportunities in India's vast and expanding consumer base.

Beyond trade in goods, the FTA has the potential to strengthen cooperation in services, innovation, research, and skill development. Enhanced mobility for professionals and students can deepen cultural and educational exchanges, while collaboration in renewable energy, climate-smart agriculture, and digital technologies can support sustainable development goals for both countries.

However, the agreement also presents challenges that require careful balancing. Sensitive sectors, particularly agriculture and dairy in India, have long been areas of concern due to livelihood and food security considerations. Ensuring adequate safeguards, phased liberalisation, and protection for small farmers and domestic industries will be critical for building public and political consensus around the FTA.

From a strategic perspective, the India-New Zealand FTA carries significance beyond economics. It strengthens India's engagement in the Indo-Pacific, reinforces shared democratic values, and contributes to a rules-based international trading system. At a time of global economic uncertainty and supply chain disruptions, such partnerships enhance resilience and mutual trust.

India's new FTA to increase Jobs and Prosperity from Farms to Factories

■ PIYUSH GOYAL

The India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) represents a strategic leap in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's trade diplomacy-one that accelerates job creation, boosts investment, and opens transformative opportunities for small businesses, students, women, farmers, and youth across India.

Announced jointly by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and New Zealand Prime Minister Rt. Hon. Christopher Luxon, this agreement is the seventh FTA negotiated by the Modi government and the third major trade pact concluded in 2025, following landmark, win-win agreements with the United Kingdom and Oman. Significantly, all these FTAs are with developed economies with substantially higher per-capita incomes than India, underscoring India's growing strength and credibility in global trade negotiations.

Each agreement has been negotiated after extensive consultations with all stakeholders, ensuring balanced outcomes and genuine win-win engagement with the developed world.

Jobs, Growth and Market Access

A central pillar of this FTA is job creation. New Zealand will provide zero-duty access to 100% of Indian exports, delivering a major boost to India's labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, leather, apparel, footwear, marine products, gems and jewellery, handicrafts, and engineering goods. This directly benefits Indian workers, artisans, women entrepreneurs, youth, and MSMEs.

India has also secured its best-ever market access and services offer, covering 118 services sectors, including telecommunications,

construction, IT, financial services, travel, and tourism. This expanded access will generate large-scale employment and new growth avenues for Indian professionals and businesses.

Opportunities for Professionals, Students and Youth

The agreement provides improved entry and stay provisions for Indian professionals and students. It enables work opportunities during studies, post-study employment, and a structured working-holiday visa framework.

STEM graduates and post-graduates can now work for up to three years, while doctoral scholars can work for four years, creating unprecedented global exposure and career pathways for India's youth. A new Temporary Employment Entry Visa further supports skilled Indian professionals seeking international opportunities.

Farmers to Flourish

Prime Minister Modi's vision is clear: Indian farmers must play a meaningful role on the global stage. The FTA reflects this commitment.

The agreement establishes an Agricultural Productivity Partnership covering apples, kiwi, and honey, aimed at enhancing domestic productivity and increasing farmer incomes. New Zealand has also committed to GI-level protection for Basmati rice, offering strong support to Indian rice farmers.

Crucially, India has ensured that sensitive sectors such as rice, dairy, wheat, soya, and other key agricultural products remain fully protected, with no market opening that could harm domestic livelihoods.

Innovative FTAs and Investment Commitments

India's FTAs today go well beyond tariff reductions. They are instruments to unlock new opportunities for farmers, MSMEs, women, and youth, while safeguarding national interests.

With various trade agreements, Indian exports benefit from immediate or rapid tariff elimination, while India's own market opening remains calibrated and gradual. New Zealand has committed Foreign Direct Investment of USD 20 billion over the next 15 years, mirroring the innovative investment-linked provisions in India's FTA with EFTA countries-Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein.

For New Zealand, this marks a giant leap in Foreign Direct Investment in India. Over the past 25 years, New Zealand invested about ₹643 crore in India. The new commitment-approximately ₹1.8 lakh crore over 15 years-represents a dramatic expansion, backed by a clawback mechanism if investment targets are not met.

Much of this investment will support agriculture, dairy, MSMEs, education, sports, and youth development, ensuring broad-based and inclusive growth.

India's First Women-Led FTA

This agreement also marks a historic milestone: it is India's first women-led FTA. Almost the entire negotiating team-from the chief negotiator and deputy chief negotiator to leads for goods, services, investment, and our ambassador to New Zealand-comprised women. Our women of substance are increasingly playing leadership roles in the PM's development agenda.

India's FTA Strategy

The India-New Zealand FTA exemplifies India's clear strategy: partnering with devel-

oped economies that open their markets to India's labour-intensive industries without competing unfairly with Indian products.

Trade agreements under the Modi government are not transactional-they are part of a broader mission to strengthen the economy and improve the lives of Indians, especially the poorest of the poor. This strategy has transformed India from being labelled among the "Fragile Five" in 2014 to becoming an engine of global growth and a preferred partner for trade and investment worldwide.

Today, India negotiates from a position of confidence and strength, ensuring that agriculture, dairy, and other sensitive sectors are fully protected, and that agreements are signed only when they deliver mutual benefit.

Refreshing Change in Trade Governance

India's current approach stands in sharp contrast to the past. Earlier trade strategies recklessly exposed Indian markets to low-cost imports, endangered small businesses and jobs -- often without adequate consultation. The decisive leadership of Prime Minister Modi has restored India's stature, credibility, and negotiating power on the global stage.

The India-New Zealand FTA, applauded across Indian industry, is a product of this refreshing change in governance since 2014.

By integrating goods, services, investment, and mobility-while safeguarding national interests-the agreement reflects India's modern, inclusive, and balanced trade diplomacy. As India and New Zealand deepen economic integration, this FTA demonstrates how trade can unlock markets while delivering human-centric growth and shared prosperity across borders.

(The author is the Union Minister for Commerce and Industry)

When Masks Hide Smiles, But Not Civic Responsibility

■ POOJA RANI

In recent months, commuting on city roads has become increasingly difficult due to extensive road repair and infrastructure work. Exeavated stretches, loose gravel, uncovered drains, dust clouds, traffic diversions, and the absence of clear signage have transformed daily travel into a stressful experience for thousands of commuters. For two-wheeler riders in particular, these conditions demand heightened alertness and patience at every turn.

Like many working professionals, I commute to my office daily on a two-wheeler. While this mode of transport is economical and time-saving, it also exposes riders directly to dust, pollution, and road hazards-especially during construction work. To safeguard myself from excessive dust and breathing discomfort, I recently started wearing a face mask while riding.

It was during one such routine commute earlier this week that an incident occurred which, though brief, raised

serious questions about civic sense, traffic discipline, and our collective responsibility on the roads.

As I approached a turn on my way to the office, I suddenly encountered an elderly man

riding his vehicle on the wrong side of the road. The turn was narrow, visibility was poor due to dust, and loose stones were scattered across the surface. Recognizing the immediate risk of a collision, I stopped my vehicle without hesitation and gave him adequate space to pass safely.

Situations like these are becoming alarmingly frequent. Wrong-side driving, often justified as a shortcut or a momentary convenience, has almost become normalized during road repair work. What is often overlooked is that such behavior places not only the violator but also law-abiding commuters at risk.

In an attempt to keep the situation calm, I smiled politely-hoping that a simple gesture of cooperation would con-

vey understanding and prevent unnecessary conflict. However, the mask I was wearing concealed that smile. What was intended as courtesy was misinterpreted as resistance.

Instead of acknowledging the effort to avoid an accident, the man began arguing. What shocked me most was his remark: "This is a road-what do you mean by right side?" The statement was startling in its simplicity and disturbing in its implication. If the very concept of right and wrong sides of the road is questioned, it raises an unsettling concern about how traffic systems can function at all.

Traffic rules are not abstract ideas imposed arbitrarily. They are the result of long-standing experience, safety studies, and collective understanding. Roads are shared public spaces, and their safe functioning depends on predictability. When everyone follows the same set of rules, accidents are minimized and movement becomes smoother. When individuals choose personal convenience

over discipline, chaos replaces order.

Wrong-side driving is not a minor infraction. It significantly increases the risk of head-on collisions-one of the most fatal types of road accidents. During road construction, when surfaces are uneven and visibility compromised, such behavior becomes even more dangerous. A moment's impatience can lead to irreversible consequences.

The incident also highlighted a deeper issue: the gradual erosion of civic courtesy. A nod of acknowledgment, a pause to allow safe passage, or a willingness to follow basic rules can prevent countless conflicts. Unfortunately, impatience and entitlement increasingly replace empathy on our roads.

Age, urgency, or familiarity with a route cannot justify indiscipline. In fact, seniority should ideally bring greater responsibility and awareness. Road safety is not about who asserts dominance, but about who values life-one's own and that of others.

Poor infrastructure and delayed repair

work undoubtedly test public patience. Frustration is understandable. However, when roads are already unsafe, abandoning discipline only compounds the danger. It is precisely during such challenging conditions that greater caution, patience, and cooperation are required from all road users.

Another important aspect this incident brings to light is communication in a changing social environment. Masks, now commonly used due to pollution and health concerns, may hide facial expressions, but they should not hide our intentions or responsibilities. In the absence of visible expressions, our actions-slowing down, stopping, giving way-become even more important signals of civic behavior.

Civic sense is not enforced by traffic police alone. It is cultivated through everyday choices made by ordinary citizens. Following rules when no one is watching, showing restraint when provoked, and prioritizing safety over haste are signs of a mature society.

Roads often mirror the social values of a community. Where discipline prevails, roads are safer. Where rules are ignored, accidents become frequent and trust erodes. Each commuter contributes, consciously or unconsciously, to the culture of the road.

Masks may cover our faces, but they should never cover our sense of responsibility. A functioning society depends on small, consistent acts of discipline. Respect for traffic rules is not merely a legal obligation-it is a moral commitment we make to protect one another.

If each of us chooses responsibility over convenience, patience over aggression, and discipline over defiance, our roads can become safer spaces for everyone. In doing so, we not only prevent accidents but also reaffirm the values of mutual respect and shared responsibility that hold society together.

(The writer is Assistant professor (Education), Jammu)

Delhi Gurjar Mahotsav: Historic Confluence of Culture, Consciousness, and Constitutional Aspirations

Gurjars demanded a Cabinet berth and inclusion of Gojri language in Eighth Schedule

■ ADVOCATE CH. RASHID AZAM INQLABI



vision, participation, and organisation, the Mahotsav emerged not merely as a cultural festival but as a powerful expression of collective identity, social maturity, and forward-looking consciousness of the Gurjar community.

In which Union Minister Krishan Pal Gurjar, Mian Altaf Ahmed, Member of Parliament from Jammu and Kashmir, Rajesh Nager, Minister from Haryana, former Minister Avtar Singh Badhana, Manmohan Badhana (MLA), Attaul Pradhan (MLA), Satish Fagan (MLA), Mangu Choudhary (MLA), Congress MP Deepinder Hooda, Chander Shekhar Azad (MP), Kartar Tawar (MLA), Ravinder Bhati, Ant Ram Tawar, Ranvir Chandel, Raj Kumar Bhati, spokesperson of the Samajwadi Party, and Bindu Dara Singh, renowned film actor, participated and appealed for preserving Gurjar culture.

In every measurable dimension-visitor turnout, thematic depth, infrastructure, inclusivity, intellectual engagement, and discipline-the Fourth Gurjar Mahotsav set new benchmarks. It reaffirmed that cultural pride, when guided by responsibility and vision, can evolve into a platform of national relevance.

Beyond a Festival: A Visionary Social Movement

From the outset, the Mahotsav reflected a purpose far broader than celebration alone. It seamlessly blended cultural heritage with intellectual discourse, traditional sports with modern organisation, spirituality with social reform, and community pride with constitutional awareness. This holistic approach transformed the Mahotsav into a multidimensional gathering that addressed not only the past and present of the community but also its future aspirations.

Rather than remaining confined to folklore and entertainment, the event consciously projected Gurjar culture as a living, evolving, and inclusive heritage-one that contributes meaningfully to India's social, democratic, and cultural fabric.

Record Participation

A defining feature of the Fourth Gurjar Mahotsav was its unprecedented footfall. Preliminary estimates indicate that more than 25 lakh visitors attended the event over its duration, significantly surpassing the turnout of previous years. What made this achievement even more remarkable was the diversity of participation. Visitors arrived from different regions, age groups, professions, and communities. The enthusiastic presence of people from outside the Gurjar community was particularly notable.

Landmark Additions that Expanded the Scope

The Fourth Gurjar Mahotsav distinguished itself through sev-

eral significant new initiatives that enhanced its intellectual, cultural, and organisational depth.

A major attraction was the Kabaddi Competition, featuring eight elite teams. Deeply rooted in rural and warrior traditions, kabaddi resonated strongly with the youth and promoted discipline, physical fitness, teamwork, and sportsmanship.

For the first time, a dedicated Art Exhibition by Gurjar artists was organised. Paintings and artworks reflecting history, folklore, social life, and contemporary themes were displayed. This initiative provided long-overdue recognition to Gurjar artists and revealed a rich creative dimension often overshadowed by other cultural forms.

The Budhijivi Manch

It emerged as one of the most intellectually powerful components of the Mahotsav. Eminent advocates, professionals, social thinkers, and community leaders engaged in serious discussions on advocacy, social justice, constitutional rights, and legal empowerment. A particularly impactful session addressed the demolition of Badoli, Anant Nagar, surrounding areas of Faridabad, and in Jammu and Kashmir, focusing on due process of law, constitutional safeguards, and citizens' rights. This transformed the Mahotsav into a platform of informed civic discourse rather than mere festivity.

Hospitality and Professional Management

Significant enhancements were made to food and hospitality arrangements. The introduction of the Haveli Restaurant added both aesthetic charm and improved service standards. Traditional cuisine was served in a hygienic, organised, and culturally immersive environment, greatly enhancing visitor satisfaction.

A separate stage for honouring achievers was another notable innovation. Individuals from education, sports, administration, social service, arts, and entrepreneurship were felicitated, reinforcing the values of merit, inspiration, and positive role models within the community.

Recognising the importance of structured communication, a dedicated Media Zone was established. This ensured responsible coverage, streamlined interactions, and accurate dissemination of information, thereby strengthening the public narrative and national image of the Mahotsav.

Gurjar Sansad Manch

The Gurjar Sansad Manch emerged as a resolute democratic voice, forcefully raising the long-denied issue of constitutional and political exclusion of the Gurjar community. Speakers asserted that it is a matter of grave injustice that even after 78 years of Independence, the Gurjar community has never been granted representation in the Union Cabinet of the Government of India. This prolonged exclusion was described as a clear failure of inclusive governance and democratic fairness.

The Manch unequivocally demanded the immediate induction of a Gurjar representative as a Cabinet Minister, emphasising that a community with a vast population, national presence, and historic contribution can no longer be ignored in the country's highest executive body.

Intellectuals and social leaders also strongly pressed for the constitutional recognition of the Gojri language by its inclusion in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India, calling it a long-pending cultural and linguistic justice for millions of Gojri-speaking citizens.

Further, the forum highlighted the near-total absence of Gurjar representation in the higher judiciary and demanded the appointment of Gurjar judges in the High Courts and the Supreme Court of India, stating that true social justice is impossible without diversity and representation in constitutional institutions.

The collective voice of the Gurjar Sansad Manch made it clear that silence, neglect, and tokenism are no longer acceptable, and that the Gurjar community will continue its democratic struggle until its rightful place in governance, judiciary, and constitutional recognition is firmly secured.

Renewed Excellence

Alongside new initiatives, traditional features of the Mahotsav were presented with greater professionalism and visual appeal.

The Samvad Manch hosted meaningful dialogues on contemporary social and community issues, encouraging reflection and constructive debate.

The Ragni Manch, dedicated to legendary folk singer Madhashya Sat Pal Dousha, preserved and celebrated oral traditions, connecting generations through authentic folk expression. The Main Cultural Stage stood out for its national-level lighting and décor: Fashion shows by community designers, presentations on traditions, and the presence of prominent social, cultural, and political personalities elevated the stage to the standards of major national festivals.

Children's art competitions were redesigned to promote creativity and cultural learning.

A unique attraction was the functional display of traditional household equipment-Hath Chakki, Chara Machine, Hand Pump, Khaat, Rahi, and Indee-allowing younger generations to connect practically with ancestral lifestyles.

Spiritual Depth and Social Reform

Traditional Gurjari attire and jewellery were attractively displayed and sold at economical rates, providing direct support to local artisans while reinforcing cultural pride and heritage. Panchayats representing various gotras demonstrated remarkable unity, organisational strength, and social cohesion, reflecting the collective spirit of the Gurjar community.

Several NGO stalls, including Pathshala, GA-500 (Akhil Bharatiya Veer Gurjar Parishad), Dahej Elk Abhishaap, and the Gurjar Mission for Education, showcased impactful, community-driven initiatives focused on educational empowerment, social reform, awareness generation, and the fight against the dowry system.

Prominent Gurjar advocates and legal experts actively participated in discussions aimed at protecting and safeguarding the constitutional and legal rights of the Gurjar community across Bharat, under the name and banner of GA-500 Law Con, with particular emphasis on demolitions in Haryana and Jammu &

Kashmir. Eminent speakers, including Advocate G. S. Awana (former DCP), Ch. Rashid Azam Inqlabi (former Deputy Commissioner from Jammu and Kashmir), Advocate Bharat Bhushan Gurjar, Advocate Suraj Adhana, N. L. Gurjar, Advocate Kuldeep Bharagh, Advocate Garima Singh, and others from Sakat and Faridabad Bar, shed valuable light on pressing legal challenges, constitutional safeguards, and judicial remedies affecting the community.

The deliberations reinforced the resolve to pursue justice, equality, and social reform through legal awareness, unity, and organised action. Historical pictorial displays of eminent Gurjar personalities and named entry gates honoured legacy and collective memory, while the continuous Agnihotra performed throughout the event symbolised environmental purification and inner spiritual refinement.

Social Harmony

Perhaps the most extraordinary feature of the Fourth Gurjar Mahotsav was the impeccable discipline displayed by the visitors. Despite the presence of lakhs of people and minimal police deployment, not a single untoward incident was reported. This rare achievement spoke volumes about the social maturity, collective responsibility, and cultural values of the community. Visitors from other communities openly appreciated the harmony, inclusiveness, and disciplined conduct, making the Mahotsav a living example of peaceful mass participation.

Gratitude and Conclusion

Such a historic achievement would not have been possible without the visionary leadership and tireless teamwork of the Chairman of the Gurjar Art and Culture Trust, Diwakar Bidhuri; G. S. Awana; Tilak Raj Bansal; Ram Phul Bansal; Om Parkash Bansal; Hari Ram Bansal; Ram Basoya; Rajesh Nager; Nirranjan Nager; Randeep Chowan; Dhaminder Foji; Nathu Sarpanch; Sany Singh Kassana; Mohinder Singh Rath; Surinder Bhati; Pawan Bhati; Manu Bidhuri; Surinder Choudhary; Prem Kumar Aria; Kartar Dehda; Sher Singh (Rajasthan); Nane Ji Bhai; Narinder Ghurriya (Madhya Pradesh); Braham Singh; Subash Bhati; Nirmal Dehda; Nisha Bidhuri; Gian Vati; Pratibha Bidhuri; Sargam; Dr. Reena Verma; Ram Kumar; Suresh Bidhuri; Rahul Chavari; Arun Bhati; Rajesh Kumar Dehda; Annu Badhana, and the entire organising team, whose dedication, foresight, and professionalism ensured flawless execution.

The Fourth Gurjar Mahotsav will be remembered not only as a proud cultural celebration but as a model of culturally rooted, socially conscious, and future-oriented collective action-a milestone that has set new standards for community gatherings across India. I reached Delhi on 12 December 2025 but attended the Mahotsav on 13 December 2025. I am thankful to Advocate Bharat Bhushan and G. S. Awana for providing companionship to visit the Gurjar Mahotsav and for extending logistical support during the event.

(The author is a former Deputy Commissioner of Jammu and Kashmir and can be reached at rainqlabi@gmail.com)

