

EC RULES ON UNUSUAL ELECTION SYMBOLS

Election Symbols in India: What the Rules Say

- **Allocation of Election Symbols** - The Election Commission (EC) allocates election symbols under the **Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968**. These symbols help voters identify parties and candidates on the ballot.
- **Reserved Symbols for Recognised Parties** - Recognised national and state parties are allotted their exclusive reserved symbols. For example, the BJP uses the lotus, while the Congress uses the hand symbol.
- **Free Symbols for Others** - Unrecognised political parties and independent candidates are allotted symbols from the EC's list of "free symbols". These are not permanently reserved for any party.
- **No Guaranteed Choice** - Candidates and unrecognised parties may request a preferred symbol from the free-symbol list, but the Election Commission is not obligated to grant their choice.

What Symbols Are Allowed by the Election Commission?

- The Election Commission's **list of free symbols** includes a wide range of simple and easily identifiable images drawn from everyday life.
- These cover categories such as fruits, vegetables, household appliances, farm tools, sports equipment, and food items.
- **Diverse Range of Free Symbols** - The latest EC list, released in May 2025, contains 184 free symbols, including items such as air-conditioners, balloons, door bells, dustbins, frying pans, jackfruits, and grapes.
- **Everyday Objects and Food Items** - The list also features common household objects like immersion rods, latches, mixers, toothbrushes, and TV remotes, along with various fruits, vegetables, cakes, and toffees to ensure easy voter recognition.

Can a New Political Party Choose Any Election Symbol?

- **Free Symbols Are the Usual Option** - In most cases, new or unrecognised political parties must choose from the Election Commission's approved list of free symbols, which contains over 100 options.
- **How Symbol Allotment Works** - Parties can indicate their preferred symbols, but the final decision rests with the Election Commission.
- **If Multiple Parties Want the Same Symbol** - When more than one party seeks the same symbol, allotment may be decided on a **first-come-first-served basis** or through a **draw of lots**.
- **EC Has the Final Say** - Even if a party requests a particular symbol, the Election Commission can allot a different free symbol if the preferred one is unavailable.

Why a Cockroach Is Unlikely to Become an Election Symbol?

- **EC's Ban on Animal Symbols** - The Election Commission largely stopped allotting animals as election symbols in the 1990s following concerns raised by animal welfare activists about the misuse and mistreatment of animals during election campaigns.
- **Background to the Decision** - The move was influenced by incidents such as the 1989 Tamil Nadu Assembly election, when roosters used as a party symbol were reportedly subjected to cruelty during campaign activities.
- **Existing Exceptions** - Some parties that received animal symbols before the ban continue to retain them. The most prominent example is the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which still uses the elephant as its reserved symbol.
- **Cockroach Symbol Unlikely** - Given the Election Commission's long-standing policy against allotting animal symbols, a cockroach is unlikely to be approved as an election symbol for any new political party or candidate.

INDIA'S ROAD THROUGH MYANMAR IS ONE OF ENGAGEMENT

- Myanmar's President U Min Aung Hlaing visited India from May 30 to June 3, 2026 — his first visit in his capacity as President.
- Before arriving in New Delhi for talks, he stopped at the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya — a deliberate civilisational signal.
- This article argues that India's decision to engage the Myanmar military government — despite its controversial 2021 coup — is driven by geography, strategic necessity, and the inescapable reality of China.

The Infrastructure Stakes: Two Corridors, Two Delays

- Two connectivity projects dominated the Modi-Hlaing agenda, and both tell a story of ambition delayed by conflict.
- **The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project**
 - This project connects **Kolkata to Sittwe** (Rakhine State) by sea, then follows the Kaladan River inland to Paletwa, before linking by road to Zorinpui in Mizoram.
 - The sea and river components are operational — the first cargo shipment reached Sittwe in May 2023.
 - But the critical 109 km Paletwa-Zorinpui road through mountainous, flood-prone Chin State remains incomplete. Full operationalisation is now targeted for 2027.
- **India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway**
 - This carries an even grander vision: linking **Moreh in Manipur to Mae Sot in Thailand** through roughly 1,360 km of Myanmar, with planned extensions to Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Vietnam.
 - Once complete, it could transform India's landlocked northeast into a true gateway to Southeast Asia. It was supposed to be finished by 2019. It still is not.
 - The reason for both delays is the same: Myanmar's internal armed conflict. Armed groups control large stretches of territory along both corridors, making construction dangerous and unpredictable.

Beyond Infrastructure: Trade, Security, and People

- The summit covered significant ground beyond connectivity.
- **Trade** stood at \$1.95 billion in 2025-26. Both sides agreed to increase it through a **rupee-kyat settlement mechanism** — reducing dependence on dollar transactions. Discussions also covered critical minerals and rare-earth cooperation — an area of growing strategic importance for India.
- **Security** was equally significant. President Hlaing reiterated Myanmar's assurance that its territory would not be used against India's interests — a crucial pledge given the long presence of Indian insurgent groups and cybercrime networks in Myanmar's border regions.
- **Cybercrime and trafficking** have emerged as a new bilateral concern. More than 2,400 Indian nationals have been rescued from scam centres in Myanmar through bilateral cooperation over the past 18 months — though many remain trapped.
- **Education** received attention too. India announced an increase in **Mekong-Ganga ICCR** scholarships for Myanmar students from 36 to 100 annually from 2026 — a soft power investment in the bilateral relationship.

The Larger Reckoning

- By receiving Hlaing as Myanmar's President, India has signalled a measured acceptance of political reality — **not an endorsement** of the military government, **but a recognition** that meaningful engagement requires working with whoever holds power.
- For Myanmar, the choice of India for Hlaing's first major bilateral visit abroad as head of state is itself telling.
- It signals a deliberate effort to cultivate a relationship that can provide diplomatic and economic counterweight to overwhelming dependence on China.
- For India, the calculus is rooted in geography, security, and the historical lesson that disengagement rarely produces better outcomes than engagement.
- Pragmatic engagement, however uncomfortable, may increasingly define how the region deals with Myanmar.

FERTILISER SUBSIDY BURDEN SET TO DOUBLE AMID GLOBAL SUPPLY CRUNCH

- According to top government sources, India's fertiliser subsidy burden is likely to reach Rs. 3.4 lakh crore in 2026-27, an almost 100% increase compared to the Budget estimate of Rs. 1.7 lakh crore.
- The cost of a fertiliser sack has surged from around Rs. 2,900 post-COVID to around Rs. 4,500 now, while the government continues to sell it at a subsidised price of around Rs. 300 per sack.

Causes of the Surge

- **Global Supply Crunch**
 - The West Asia conflict and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, a critical waterway, have caused massive disruptions:
 - India's latest urea purchases were at a cost-plus-freight price of \$935-\$959 per tonne. This is more than double the year-ago figure of \$410-\$420 per tonne.
 - Global suppliers, including China, are holding on to their stock due to the Iran war.
- **China's Export Ban**
 - In mid-March 2026, China banned the export of fertilisers to secure domestic supplies, removing a critical source of supply for India.

Fertiliser Subsidy Regime in India

- The Indian government heavily subsidises fertilisers to make them affordable for farmers and maintain food security. The subsidy system operates under two main frameworks:
- **Urea Subsidy**
 - Urea is sold at a fixed Maximum Retail Price (MRP) of around Rs. 268 per 45-kg bag.
 - The difference between the production/import cost and the MRP is borne by the government as a subsidy.

- **Nutrient-Based Subsidy (NBS) Scheme**
 - Launched in April 2010 for non-urea fertilisers (DAP, MOP, complex fertilisers).
 - The government provides a fixed subsidy per kg of nutrient content (N, P, K, and Sulphur).
 - Manufacturers can fix the MRP based on market conditions.
- **Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)**
 - Since 2018, fertiliser subsidy has been routed through the DBT mechanism.
 - Sales are recorded through PoS (Point of Sale) machines at retail outlets.
 - Subsidy is released to companies based on actual sales to farmers.

Significance and Implications

- **For Farmers**
 - Continued subsidised access to fertilisers despite the global price surge.
 - Risk of supply disruptions if imports are not secured.
 - Need for soil health awareness and balanced fertiliser use.
- **For Government Finances**
 - Massive fiscal burden affecting other priorities.
 - Pressure on fiscal deficit targets.
 - Trade-offs with other welfare and capital expenditure.
- **For India's External Sector**
 - A higher import bill puts pressure on the current account deficit.
 - Foreign exchange outflows are affecting the rupee.
 - Need to diversify import sources.
- **For Agricultural Policy**
 - Long-term concerns about fertiliser subsidy sustainability.
 - Need for promoting organic and natural farming.
 - Importance of soil health management.
 - Push for nano fertilisers and precision agriculture.

WHAT ARE DARK PATTERNS?



Indian consumers are losing an estimated ₹25,000 crore to ₹28,000 crore annually due to deceptive interface designs, commonly known as dark patterns, across online marketplaces, according to a recent report.

- Dark patterns, also known as **deceptive patterns**, are **deliberate design tactics** that **trick online users** into **making choices** that aren't always in their best interest.
- They are designed to **mislead users** to do something they originally did not intend or want to do.
- At their core, dark patterns **exploit cognitive biases**. They **leverage the way our brains process information** to nudge us toward specific decisions, often against our best interests.
- Dark patterns take **many forms**, and different sources may categorize them in various ways.
- Each is designed to manipulate users into **making choices that benefit the company** rather than the user.
- These deceptive design tactics can **pop up across websites, forms, emails, and apps**.
- The **Central Consumer Protection Authority notified the Guidelines** for Prevention and Regulation of Dark Patterns in 2023 and **specified 13 dark patterns**, namely:
 - **False urgency, Basket Sneaking, Confirm shaming, forced action, Subscription trap, Interface Interference, Bait and switch, Drip Pricing, Disguised Advertisements and Nagging, Trick Wording, Saas Billing and Rogue Malwares.**
- For example, **drip pricing** is when **extra costs appear** after the user has started the **purchase process**.

- **False urgency:** Dark patterns sometimes invent **deadlines or stock shortages**, sometimes known as **scarcity cues**, to **exploit a fear of missing out**, pressuring users into quick decisions without taking the time to think through the purchase.
- **Basket Sneaking:** This is when **extra products or services are added to a user's shopping cart without their explicit consent**.
- **Subscription Trap:** This dark pattern is the common case of making it substantially **harder to cancel a subscription** than it was to start the subscription in the first place.

ZOJILA TUNNEL



The Zojila Tunnel recently achieved its final breakthrough with the blast of the last five metres, marking a historic milestone in India's infrastructure story.

- It is a major under-construction road tunnel that will **connect Sonamarg in Jammu & Kashmir to Dras in Ladakh**.
- It is situated **under the Zoji La pass on the Srinagar-Leh Highway (NH-1)**.
- Upon completion, the tunnel will join the Ganderbal district of Jammu & Kashmir and the Kargil district of Ladakh, providing **all-weather connectivity between the Kashmir Valley and Ladakh**.
- It is being constructed on the complex, rocky terrain at an elevation of **11,578 feet above sea level**.
- It is the **world's longest single-tube bi-directional road tunnel at the highest altitude**.
- Once completed, it will **reduce travel time across the Zojila stretch from around 90 minutes to just 15 minutes**.
- It is being **constructed using the New Austrian Tunnelling Method (NATM)**, a method particularly **suited to fragile Himalayan geology** and variable rock conditions.

TEZPUR LITCHI



- It is one of Assam's most celebrated horticultural products.
- It is renowned for its exceptional sweetness, bright-red appearance, distinctive aroma and superior eating quality.

- The region cultivates several notable varieties, including **Bombaya, Bilati, Elaichi, Piyaji and Sahi.**
- It has received the **geographical indication (GI) tag in 2013.**

Key Facts about Litchi

- It is a **tropical fruit** belongs to Sapindaceae family.
- **Required Climatic Conditions for Litchi:**
 - **Climate:** It thrives best **under moist sub-tropical climate.**
 - It usually prefers low elevation and **can be grown up to an altitude of 800 m.**
 - **Soil:** Deep, **well drained loamy soil**, rich in organic matter and having pH in the range of 5.0 to 7.0 is ideal for the crop.
 - **Temperature:** The temperature should not go beyond 40.5 degree Celsius in summer and below freezing point in winter.
 - **Rain:** Prolonged rain may be harmful especially at the time of flowering, when it interferes with pollination.
 - The young trees **require protection against frost and hot winds** for several years till they are firmly established.
 - It is **sensitive to frost during winter** and dry heat in summer.
- **Distribution of Litchis Cultivation:**
 - India is the second largest producer of litchi in the World **after China.** Other major producing countries are **Thailand, Australia, South Africa, Madagascar and Florida** in the US.
 - It is **widely cultivated in India, especially in Bihar, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Assam.**