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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

When Tariffs Barely Matter: On the Rise of Non-Tariff Barriers

THE HINDU

19 June 2026

ECONOMY

GS2

GS3

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 Source: ujyari.com — researched, fact-checked & UPSC-mapped

INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If most global trade is now shaped by standards and regulations rather than tariffs, what should India actually negotiate for in a trade deal, and why are tariff lines no longer the headline?"

 Source: [Original editorial](#)
[The Hindu](#)
 **Every fact web-verified against primary sources** (<https://ujyari.com/how-we-verify/>)

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

As India negotiates a series of **free-trade agreements**, the binding constraint on its exporters is increasingly not tariffs but **non-tariff barriers**: standards, certification and **sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS)** rules now affecting roughly **90 percent of global trade**. For an aspirant, this is a GS2/GS3 case on the real architecture of **market access** and why FTAs now turn on **regulatory harmonisation**, not tariff lines.

THE CRUX IN 60 WORDS

Tariffs have fallen for decades, so the real gate is now the **non-tariff barrier**: technical regulations, **SPS** measures and conformity assessment, touching about **90 percent** of trade. The WTO's **TBT and SPS agreements** police these but the line between legitimate regulation and **disguised protectionism** is blurry. For India, an FTA's worth lies in **mutual recognition of standards**, not tariff concessions alone.

THE ISSUE, DECODED

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ELEMENT	WHAT IT IS	WHY IT MATTERS
Non-tariff barriers	Standards, SPS, technical rules	The real constraint on market access
TBT Agreement	WTO rules on technical regulations	Must be non-discriminatory, least trade-restrictive
SPS Agreement	WTO rules on health and safety measures	Must be science-based
Mutual recognition	Accepting each other's standards/testing	Where FTA value now lies

THE ANALYSIS: WHY TARIFFS NO LONGER DECIDE

- 1 Tariffs have fallen.** Decades of liberalisation drained tariff cuts of leverage (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/leverage/>); the binding constraint moved elsewhere.
- 2 Standards now gate trade.** Regulations, labelling, SPS and conformity assessment block goods before they cross.
- 3 The WTO rules are contested.** TBT and SPS permit legitimate regulation but the line from protectionism is blurry.
- 4 FTAs turn on harmonisation.** For India, mutual recognition of standards matters more than tariff schedules.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

non-tariff measures now affect roughly 90 percent of global trade. The agreements: the WTO Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and the Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS); both require measures to be science-based, non-discriminatory and least trade-restrictive. Key concepts: non-tariff barriers (NTBs); conformity assessment; mutual-recognition agreements (MRAs); disguised protectionism; tariffication. India frame: SPS rules hit Indian agricultural and processed-food exports; domestic standards bodies (BIS, FSSAI (<https://ujiyari.com/terms/fssa>)) and testing capacity matter. Linkage: WTO dispute settlement; FTA negotiations (India-EU, India-UK); GS2 international institutions, GS3 trade.

THE DEBATE

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Argument that tariffs still matter: In price-sensitive sectors tariffs remain decisive, and many non-tariff measures are legitimate consumer-protection regulations, not barriers to bargain away.

Argument that NTBs now dominate: With tariffs low and standards touching most trade, an FTA that cuts tariffs but ignores standards leaves markets shut; regulatory harmonisation is where access is won or lost.

The balanced verdict: Both hold partly, but the **strategic centre of gravity has shifted** to standards. India must defend legitimate regulation while building the capacity and mutual-recognition deals that convert paper openings into real market access.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (TRANSFERABLE SKILL)

A weak answer measures openness by tariff rates. The strong answer traces an export through the border, asking which standard, certificate or inspection actually blocks it, and recognises that the binding barrier is now usually regulatory. The move, "follow the good to the point it is stopped," distinguishes nominal openness from real access in any trade question.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

Decades of liberalisation -> tariffs fall -> tariff cuts lose leverage. The new gate: non-tariff barriers (standards + SPS + conformity assessment) -> ~90% of trade affected. The rulebook: WTO TBT + SPS -> legitimate regulation vs disguised protectionism (contested). India's response: build testing capacity + negotiate mutual recognition -> paper opening becomes real access.

THE WAY FORWARD

- ① **Build domestic standards and testing capacity** (BIS, FSSAI, accredited labs).
- ② **Negotiate mutual-recognition agreements** for standards and conformity assessment in FTAs.
- ③ **Contest disguised protectionism** through WTO TBT/SPS mechanisms.
- ④ **Treat regulatory harmonisation**, not tariff cuts, as the core of trade strategy.

THE TAKEAWAY BOX

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“Non-tariff barriers, not tariffs, now define market access.” Examine in the context of the WTO TBT and SPS agreements and India’s trade strategy. (250 words)

“A country that negotiates only over tariff lines while neglecting standards capacity will sign deals that look open on paper and stay shut in practice.”

non-tariff barriers · WTO TBT Agreement · SPS Agreement · mutual-recognition agreements · conformity assessment · BIS · FSSAI · disguised protectionism.

If most trade is now shaped by standards, what should India actually negotiate for in a trade deal?

Connects to GS2/GS3 PYQs on the WTO, India’s trade policy and FTAs; a probable question is the tariffs-versus-non-tariff-barriers framing above.

static GS3 on international trade and the WTO; the Fed-spillover and Karnataka editorials in this edition on the broader economic environment.

Sources: *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/>), *World Trade Organization* (<https://www.wto.org>)

Source: When Tariffs Barely Matter: On the Rise of Non-Tariff Barriers — Ujyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

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With non-tariff barriers such as standards, sanitary and phytosanitary measures and technical regulations now affecting roughly 90 percent of global trade, headline tariff cuts mean less than the architecture of market access, and free-trade agreements increasingly turn on regulatory harmonisation rather than tariff lines.


SUPPORTING

- Tariffs have fallen for decades under successive trade rounds, so the binding constraint on exporters has shifted to standards, certification and conformity-assessment requirements.
- The WTO's TBT and SPS agreements govern these measures, distinguishing legitimate health and safety regulation from disguised protectionism, but enforcement is contested.
- For India, this means an FTA's value lies less in tariff concessions and more in mutual recognition of standards, conformity assessment and genuine market access for its goods.


COUNTER

Some argue that tariffs still matter greatly for price-sensitive sectors and that many non-tariff measures are legitimate public-health and safety regulations, not barriers to be bargained away.


WAY FORWARD

Build domestic standards and testing capacity, negotiate mutual-recognition agreements, contest disguised protectionism at the WTO, and treat regulatory harmonisation as the core of trade strategy.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

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QUESTION

"Non-tariff barriers, not tariffs, now define market access." Examine in the context of the WTO TBT and SPS agreements and India's trade strategy. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

For a generation, trade negotiations were about cutting tariffs. The harder truth now is that a tariff line conceded is often a market still closed, because the real gate is the standard, the certificate and the inspection.

BODY

Successive rounds of trade liberalisation have pushed average tariffs steadily down, and with them the leverage of tariff cuts as a tool of market access. What has risen in their place is the non-tariff barrier: technical regulations, product standards, labelling rules, sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures, and conformity-assessment requirements that an exporter must satisfy before a single unit crosses the border. Estimates suggest such measures now touch the overwhelming majority of global trade, on the order of 90 percent. The WTO addresses them through two agreements: the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Agreement and the SPS Agreement, which permit members to regulate for health, safety and the environment but require that such measures be science-based, non-discriminatory and not more trade-restrictive than necessary.

The difficulty is that the line between a legitimate regulation and disguised protectionism is genuinely blurry, and enforcement through dispute settlement is slow and contested. The implication for India is direct.

The value of a free-trade agreement increasingly lies not in the tariff schedule but in whether it delivers mutual recognition of standards, harmonised conformity assessment and real access for Indian goods, particularly agricultural and processed products that face stringent SPS rules abroad. The fair counter is that tariffs still bite in price-sensitive sectors, and that many non-tariff measures protect consumers legitimately; both are true.

But the strategic centre of gravity has moved. A country that negotiates only over tariff lines while neglecting standards capacity will sign deals that look open on paper and stay shut in practice.

CONCLUSION

Market access today is written in standards, not just tariffs. India's trade strategy must build the testing capacity and pursue the regulatory harmonisation that turn a paper opening into a real one.


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