

Freedom is in Peril. Defend it with all you might. Jawaharlal Nehru

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### NATION

#### STAYING ALIVE WITH 'AQI PORN'

So what if you can't escape the pollution, you can still obsess about it

► P3



### NATION

#### SAMBHAL, THE LIFE OF A TOWN

A year after the violent communal flareup of 24 November 2024

► P4

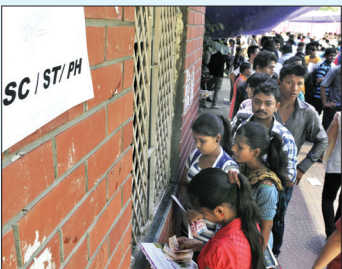


### INSIGHT

#### AN IDIOT'S GUIDE TO MACAULAY

Why Dalit thinkers see in him an accidental emancipator

► P5



# Why the IMF doesn't buy India's GDP data

What the cheerleaders of this government do not see is that you need reliable data for sound policymaking

Arun Kumar

The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) unflattering report on India's national accounts has once again focused attention on the dubious nature of the country's macroeconomic data. In its 2025 'Article IV Consultation Report on India', announced on 26 November, the Fund has accorded a 'C' rating for the data used in India's national accounts because 'the data provided [by India] to the Fund have some shortcomings that somewhat hamper surveillance'.

While the IMF is mandated to accept government data on GDP, it is saying the data is not reliable. In plain terms, a 'C' grade implies that India's official data is not up to the mark—in other words, the IMF would have us take the latest GDP growth figure (8.2 per cent for Q2 of FY26) with a pinch of salt.

In fact, there are indicators that suggest growth cannot be that high. For instance, reports of investment projects being withdrawn or curtailed, and of net FDI turning negative. These are not the signs of an economy that is growing rapidly.

Among the shortcomings in data the IMF has flagged are the use of an outdated base year (2011-12); sizeable discrepancies in GDP data, possibly due to the lack of informal sector data; weak statistical techniques used in the quarterly compilation of national accounts; and the lack of consolidated data on states and local bodies after 2019.

These points have been raised by several analysts since the demonetisation of November 2016. The economy also experienced shocks due to the faulty implementation of GST in 2017, the NBFC crisis in 2018 and the pandemic in 2020. Each of these crises aggravated the issues flagged by the IMF.

Analysts have, in fact, raised a deeper question about the GDP in the new series (base year: 2011-12) that the IMF does not touch upon. The new series was announced in 2015 during the NDA years even though work on it had started during UPA II.

A government committee was asked to rework the series, but its work was rejected when it showed higher growth during the UPA years than in the NDA period. The Niti Aayog was now asked to produce the new series, even though it wasn't qualified for the job. It did produce a series nevertheless—which showed higher growth during the NDA period, fulfilling the political ask, and was duly accepted.

But former Chief Economic Advisor (CEA) to the government Arvind Subramanian showed through econometric modelling

that the GDP was being overstated by 2.5 percentage points or more.

Next, out of 18 lakh companies in the MCA21 database, three lakh were removed as being 'shell companies'. As this author had pointed out then, this should have impacted the GDP estimate—as shell companies are typically used for under- and over-invoicing to divert income from regular companies—but this did not happen.

Also, 35 per cent of companies couldn't be found at their given addresses—so these were likely fake companies putting out fake data. All these discrepancies put a question mark on the GDP data. Finally, GDP calculations cannot account for the black economy—a whole different can of worms. Bottomline: the new GDP series (base year: 2011-12) has been manipulated and is seriously flawed.

#### More data manipulation

The current government has been systematically rejecting or withholding adverse data. For instance, the 2017-18 consumer survey was not released.



Photo: Getty Images

*Reports of investments being withdrawn or curtailed, and of net FDI turning negative are not signs of a rapidly growing economy*

Unemployment data was withheld before the 2019 elections, because it showed that joblessness was at a 45-year high. The multi-dimensional deprivation data is being manipulated to show lower poverty.

A comparison is made between 2015-16 and 2019-21. This contains the pandemic year 2020, when people's income fell and education and health deteriorated. So, how could deprivation (and poverty) have decreased?

Our data is suspect also because samples are drawn on the basis of the outdated 2011 Census. India skipped the Census exercise in 2021; it's now supposed to be held in 2026, while it could have been done in 2022 or 2023 as many other countries did. It matters because there have been demographic changes since the last Census, so samples drawn from the 2011 Census will not yield correct estimates and the conclusions will not be reliable either. This further strengthens the IMF's point.

Even the Consumer Price Index (CPI) is based on 2011-12 data. The distribution of income has since changed, which impacts

consumption patterns. Newer goods and services have become available, which must be included in the analysis but can't be if we continue with 2011-12 base data.

The IMF report also flags discrepancies between the production and expenditure approaches to measuring GDP.

Definitionally, there shouldn't be a difference between these two estimates, but as pointed out by this author earlier, both estimates have errors for lack of independent data for the unorganised sector. This impacts the two estimates differently, so the discrepancy too changes from year to year.

When there are shocks to the economy, the divergence increases, as has happened in India since demonetisation. Not only has a small variation become much larger, it is also swinging wildly from positive to negative and back, thereby indicating unreliability of data.

In quarterly estimates of GDP, the lack of current data necessitates the use of proxies. But the growing organised sector cannot act as a proxy for the declining unorganised sector. That is why there is overestimation of GDP. In fact, higher the growth rate of the organised sector, higher the mis-estimation of the unorganised sector.

Extrapolations are common in the compilation of annual GVA (gross value added) series. But when this is done for a shock year, there is overestimation—the actual decline in economic growth is not captured. No wonder official data for the demonetisation year (2016-17) showed a high growth of 8 per cent when the economy had, in fact, contracted.

When the use of proxies leads to overestimates in the contribution of the unorganised sector, it inflates estimates of the production of consumption goods and services, thereby leading to overestimation of consumption in the economy.

It is argued that since data is not available for the unorganised sector, some assumptions must be made for estimation. That is true, but conditionally correct assumptions become invalid when the economy experiences shocks like demonetisation. So, the assumptions must change, but this has not been done, leading to wide gaps between reality and official data.

The IMF presumably felt compelled to finally acknowledge the unreliability of India's GDP data. Unfortunately, what the cheerleaders of this government do not see is that you need reliable data for sound policymaking—that is, if your government is in the business of good governance. ■

ARUN KUMAR is retired professor of economics, JNU, and author of Indian Economy's Greatest Crisis: Impact of the Coronavirus and the Road Ahead

# Are BLOs being made the fall guys?

Nandlal Sharma and Rashme Sehgal

Between circulating celebratory videos of dancing Booth Level Officers (BLOs) and issuing threatening FIRs against those who have been 'slacking off' on their SIR duties, a serious doubt has gone largely unaddressed. How has the Election Commission selected and trained the BLOs?

The Commission claims to have 'trained' BLOs and supervisors in Uttar Pradesh over four days between 29 October and 3 November 2025. A large number of BLOs, including Mohit Chaudhary and Firdous, say they never saw a minute of this training.

On 2 December, Chaudhary, an irrigation department employee in Meerut deputised as a BLO attempted suicide by consuming pesticide. His wife Jyoti said her husband had been distressed for days. He had confessed to feeling nervous about performing a task he wasn't prepared for. Voters expected him to fill up their forms, even accept incomplete forms.



A BLO helps voters fill their enumeration forms in Noida, 1 December

Photo: Getty Images

His supervisors expected him to upload flawless forms—or else. He feared he would be suspended or even lose his job. Mohit was lucky—Jyoti rushed him to Lokpriya Hospital and he survived.

Bipin Yadav, a BLO from Gonda, Uttar Pradesh, was not so lucky. He left a video of his last moments. Bipin had confided to his brother-in-law Prateek that the SDM, Lekhpal and BDO were pressuring him to delete the names of OBCs and Dalits. Like Mohit Chaudhary, he felt trapped. If he refused, he risked falling afoul of the 'system'. If he obliged, he might face the wrath of the voters for his 'mistake'.

Firdous, a BLO in Meerut, looked traumatised when we met her on 25 November. She too says she received no training. When she voiced doubts about her competence for the job, she was told she could not refuse it. Look, she says, it's already 4 p.m. and I've only been able to upload two enumeration forms till now.

Firdous was scared of computers, never having used one. Nor had anyone else at home. And no, she hadn't received a single rupee, yet she was soldiering on. She was terrified of losing this 'job' and the Rs 7,500 she received as an Anganwadi worker.

Firdous solicited the help of Nazmeen, who has some experience of working as a BLO in earlier elections. The two women were struggling to upload the forms on their mobile phones. If the server works and the signal is strong, it takes five minutes to upload one form, Nazmeen tells us. It takes me 10 minutes, says Firdous. At this rate, uploading 100 enumeration forms would take 16 hours of non-stop work a day!

This is the story one hears from UP to Gujarat to West Bengal. Most Anganwadi workers, auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs) and ASHA workers who have been drafted as BLOs are facing technical issues for lack of training and exposure. Many cannot scan and upload documents. School teachers are similarly handicapped. If the Election Commission is to be believed, this has not come in the way of a successful SIR.

The haste with which it is forging on has led people to speculate that the Commission actually wants BLOs to trip up. They can be blamed and punished for making 'mistakes' that ECI officials can selectively (and retrospectively) correct. Doubtless, such 'corrections' would really be deletions.

The video of beaming BLOs in Kerala shaking a leg during break time is not the only proof offered of how well the SIR is going. On 2 December 2025, the Election Commission issued a press note claiming that nearly 46 crore forms—over 90 per cent—had already been 'digitised' and that 99.78 per cent of voters in the 12 states and UTs where the exercise is being conducted had already received their enumeration forms. The press note also provided a state-wise breakup, claiming that West Bengal had digitised 97.38 per cent of the forms, Madhya Pradesh 95.69 per cent, Tamil Nadu 94.32 per cent and Gujarat 91.45 per cent. Uttar Pradesh lagged behind with only 79 per cent of its forms digitised.

The figures raise a heap of questions. If it's going so well in Bengal, then why was

► Continued on page 2





# ‘Divide and rule’ comes handy amid an identity crisis

Sourabh Sen

Assam’s tribes are up in arms against the state government after a Group of Ministers (GoM) recommended Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for six more communities currently classified as Other Backward Classes (OBCs). These six communities—Tai Ahom, Chutia, Moran, Matak, Koch-Rajbongshi and ‘Tea Tribes’ (Adivasis)—were promised ST status in 2015–16 but are only now being enlisted, just ahead of the 2026 assembly elections.

The GoM report, tabled in the assembly on 29 November, proposes creation of a distinct “ST (Valley)” category for the six communities, granting them separate reservation quotas in state government jobs and educational institutions.

Assam’s existing ST quota is split between ST (Plains) at 10 per cent and ST (Hills) at 5 per cent. While these quotas will remain protected, the inclusion of the six communities will push Assam’s tribal population to nearly 40 per cent, significantly reshaping the reservation landscape.

This recommendation ignited fierce opposition from the Coordination Committee of Tribal Organisations of Assam (CCTOA), which represents 14 recognised tribal communities, including Bodo, Karbi, Miri, Rabha and Kachari. The CCTOA sees the move as a dilution of hard-won rights, threatening political representation and cultural autonomy.

“The GoM recommendations will dilute the very basis of setting up autonomous councils to protect tribal culture, language and customs,” said a senior Bodo leader, highlighting anxieties that tribal identities and privileges could be eroded if the new groups enter the ST fold.

Dissatisfaction over granting ST status to these communities boiled over in Bodoland Territorial Region on 29 November—a day before the report of the GOM was tabled—when thousands of students marched from Bodoland University to the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Secretariat in Kokrajhar. The massive rally started peacefully, but on the way back from the BTC Secretariat, it turned violent.

The students broke through the police cordon, forced open the Secretariat gates and ransacked offices. The district administration clamped prohibitory orders and brought the situation under control. BTC Chief Executive Member Hagrama Mohilary blamed the All-Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) and the United People’s Party Liberal (UPPL) for the violence, pointing out that such violent incidents have no place in a democracy.

ABSU president Dipen Boro, however, refuted Mohilary’s charges. “We were in a meeting when we heard students were



Tribal women queue up at a polling booth in Assam’s Kamrup

marching. They were from different local colleges and tribal communities. We never want violence in a peaceful movement,” Boro told *National Herald*, adding, “If even one per cent proof is found against ABSU, I will resign and walk straight to jail.”

This unrest reflects a growing fissure within Assam’s tribal politics, where student groups fear intensified competition for limited reservations and political spaces.

The timing of the report is unmistakably linked to Assam’s electoral calendar. After years of delay, the BJP government appears eager to consolidate votes by co-opting communities whose inclusion in the ST category would create a sizeable captive electoral bloc.

“We welcome the state government’s decision,” said Palindra Borah, president of

the All-Moran Students’ Union. The Moran community is concentrated in Upper Assam’s Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Sivasagar districts. Borah’s reaction lends credence to the argument that the torch light marches and rallies organised by these six communities at various locations across Assam in August–September this year had the tacit support of Himanta Biswa Sarma’s government.

That the GoM report will erode their political power is a concern among Assam’s tribes. Take for instance the Bodoland Council which has 46 members. Of these, 40 are elected and six are nominated by the Governor of Assam. Of the 40 elected seats, 30 are reserved for ST, with 15 open for non-Bodo tribes. If the GoM recommendations are implemented, the

newly-anointed tribes will be able to contest these seats.

Tribal politicians like Mohilary sense an opportunity to co-opt the new tribes and expand their political support base. This has pitted them against tribal students who have taken to the streets.

“The GoM report may have added a separate category to Assam’s tribal list, but when our boys and girls compete for all-India examinations like railways, banks, medical, IIMs and IIT, they will be clubbed into the single all-India ST list. A larger number of tribal students from Assam will compete for the same number of seats,” explained a student leader.

And then, there is the question of Axom asmita. Although Assam’s tribes have retained their language, culture, customs and religion, many of the six OBC communities in question have subsumed themselves into a pan-Axom cultural identity, now revived by Zubeen Garg’s unfortunate and mysterious passing.

Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has so far pandered to Garg’s unifying cultural undercurrent, positioning himself as a crusader delivering justice. He appears to have pinned his hopes on these neo-converts to carry Garg’s cross-community appeal to the hustings.

The political roadmap ahead of the Assam elections is clear with the tribal question expected to dominate much of the volatility. How the government balances the aspirations of the six communities against fears of established tribes’ marginalisation will shape the social fabric and electoral outcomes for years to come. ■

SOURABH SEN is a Kolkata-based independent writer and commentator

## Are BLOs being made the fall guys?

» Continued from page 1

the deadline extended from 4 December to 11 December? What about the BLOs reported to have killed themselves due to harassment on their ‘slow progress’? What of the massive publicity given to the alleged exodus of Bangladeshi Muslims from West Bengal, with settlement after settlement apparently abandoned by voters in border districts? The figures do not tally with ground reports.

Then, there’s a whole caboodle of glitches. The BLO app, proudly rolled out in regional languages, works best only in English and Hindi, say the BLOs who are actually using it. Erratic internet speeds and stalling servers are common complaints. BLOs need to scan the forms before uploading them, but with so many not being smartphone savvy, that’s another hurdle.

Maya Ben, a teacher in Bhavnagar, Gujarat, says the ‘order’ to start working as a BLO was a bolt from the blue. She spent sleepless nights, while her days were an endless stream of people struggling to fill and upload their forms. Most wanted her to fill them up.

After several reports of BLOs in Gujarat collapsing on duty or resorting to suicide, the Gujarat government engaged operators to upload the forms, Maya tells us.

In West Bengal, the chief electoral officer invited applications for data entry operators on contract for a year. This, days before the SIR is set to conclude.

Unlike the annual summary revisions of electoral rolls, when BLOs sit at the polling booth and accept forms for additions and deletions, the SIR is a door-to-door marathon. BLOs must visit every household, deliver pre-printed enumeration forms based on the 2002–03 rolls, issue carbon-copy receipts and then upload everything to the BLO app. Voters are often not at home, which means repeat visits. No wonder so many BLOs are breaking down.

Outside metropolitan cities, BLOs

are at the receiving end of municipal misgovernance. Even in Meerut town area, houses seem to have arbitrary numbers. House number 1,200 is next to house number 1,500 which is next to house number 900, points out local resident Mahendra Sharma. Unwittingly perhaps, he provides an insight into why it’s taking so long to distribute and collect forms.

In West Bengal, a BLO was as stumped as septuagenarian Subhash Chandra Roy who was unknowingly asked a ‘third son’ he didn’t know he had. The BLO insisted the form clearly specified him as the father. Scandalised, the old man insisted he had no such son.

Uncorrected glitches from the rolls of 2002–03 have crept into the SIR, vitiating the exercise further. Fathers-in-law have been shown as husbands, husbands as fathers. It’s highly unlikely these will be sorted within the tight deadline, which adds to the BLOs woes.

Mahendra Sharma of Meerut seemed sympathetic to their plight. The forms, he says, are confusing. Whether ‘relative’ should be mentioned? Father, grandfather or husband? BLOs are at a loss to explain. Some forms carry the wrong names and phone numbers of assigned BLOs. Sharma, who works as a Booth Level Agent of a political party, recalls calling one Ashok Kumar for a clarification. The call, however, was received by one Sandeep who lives in Mawana, 20 kilometres away. On another form, the BLO listed was a woman but the phone number was her husband’s.

Shahid Manzoor, former education minister in UP and four-term-MLA, estimates that not more than 4–5 per cent of the BLOs are tech-savvy. The Commission, he says, should have done due diligence in selecting and training the BLOs adequately.

Criticising the policy of engaging government school teachers for everything from human and animal census to midday meals to BLOs, Manzoor is aggrieved by the flurry of FIRs lodged against BLOs in UP. They are kicking the can down the road, shirking their own responsibilities and setting up the BLO as the scapegoat, says Manzoor.

Against the background of BLOs succumbing to nervous breakdowns, supervisors are anxious to reach the finish line without more mishaps. “Zehar mat khaa lena,” (Please don’t take poison), says Mukesh Singh Kushwaha, a supervisor in Baheri, UP, to his BLOs, offering to help them if necessary. Not all supervisors are as sympathetic.

Smooth, simple and seamless? It would take nothing short of a miracle to accept the ECI’s version of how the SIR is unfolding. ■

“Zehar mat khaa lena,”  
Mukesh Singh  
Kushwaha, a supervisor  
in Baheri tells his BLOs,  
offering to help them  
if necessary



## Look who’s now talking ‘vote chori’!

Shikha Mukerjee

The second instalment of the Election Commission’s purge of India’s voter lists is in full swing. While the exercise is on across 12 states and Union Territories in this round, the West Bengal is unmistakably on one state—Real Bengal. If alleged ‘illegal migrants’ were the initial targets, now a hunt is on for ‘dead’ voters—21 lakh of them—with the help of some judiciously leaked information from ‘sources’ in the office of the West Bengal chief electoral officer.

That’s the latest number to have emerged as the Special Intensive Revision grinds on in the state (due to conclude on 11 December, the new date set by the EC). At the beginning of the new decade, North 24 Parganas topped the districts with the largest number of dead voters—pegged at around 2.75 lakh.

This is significant not just because so many dead voters have remained on the electoral rolls since the special revision of 2003, but also because the district lies on the border and holds both the headquarters and a major concentration of the scheduled caste Namasudra (Matua) community.

The Matuas number anywhere between 2.5 to 2.75 crore in West Bengal, out of whom 1.7 crore are voters, representing 17 per cent of the state’s schedule caste population. This makes it the second largest group after the Rajbongshis, who are mostly concentrated in North Bengal with a spillover into Assam. While their electoral

influence is undeniable, there appear to be only seven Matua MLAs in the state assembly, six of whom are in the ruling Trinamool Congress. This may partly explain the deletions and additions in the North and South 24 Pargana districts, as well as in Nadia, areas with a substantial concentration of Matuas.

Conducting the dead and deleting their names ought to have been a routine job with the near continuous revision of electoral rolls undertaken by the Election Commission at considerable public expense.

Prasenjit Bose, chairperson of the State Committee to Safeguard the Right to Vote and Citizenship of the People of West Bengal—set up by the state unit of the Congress party—has raised a basic question. Why did the Election Commission not use the online Civil Registration System for births and deaths to identify dead voters? In fact, why did the Election Commission not draw up a list of new voters based on the births registered?

If the Commission had spent more time and resources in the run-up to the SIR, Bose suggests, the fuss over ‘absent’, ‘shifted’, ‘dead’ and ‘duplicate’ voters would have been considerably less. Not only for the Block Level Officers (BLOs) handling the new-fangled method of filling and uploading enumeration forms, but also for the political parties battling each other over the roll revision process.

Had the Election Commission done its homework, the optics of preparing for the 2026 West Bengal assembly elections would have been markedly different.



Hundreds of Bangladeshi nationals stranded at a border check post in Hakimpur, West Bengal

The dead, duplicate and absent voters still on the electoral rolls are potentially the names that can be used to create fake identities and provide the cover for ‘false’ voters. If the BJP and CPI(M) are to be believed, the Trinamool Congress has turned the several lakh dead, duplicate and absent voters into a vote bank that accounted for its spectacular success in previous elections.

The irony is that the BJP in West Bengal is appropriating the ‘vote chori’ narrative that the Congress and the Opposition claims is the basis for the BJP and National Democratic Alliance’s victories in Bihar and Maharashtra. The BJP’s West Bengal unit has accused the government of hijacking BLOs to compromise the electoral process—an allegation routinely levelled in BJP-ruled states too. It has demanded an audit of booths and constituency-wise electoral rolls with suspicious ‘entries’.

Apart from everything else, SIR 2025–2026 will go down in history for the damage done to the mental health of both voters and BLOs, harassed by the complexities of a process that has stapled proof of citizenship with verification of eligible voters.

The public perception of the SIR in West Bengal is, in one word, exclusion. Who will be deleted from the electoral rolls and why—this discourse is animated by the number of Hindu voters versus the number of ‘Bangladeshi’, i.e. supposedly illegal Muslim migrants likely to be excised.

The Matuas—split between BJP supporters, Trinamool Congress supporters and those who swing between the two—stand to lose heavily if the SIR process takes away their voting rights. The same risks apply to Rajbongshis and to those (mostly) Muslim residents who were allowed to remain in India as Bangladeshi citizens.

This bizarre situation stems from every’s decision to offer stateless residents living in disputed enclaves a choice of citizenship. Under the Land Boundary Agreement (originally signed in 1974) and ratified in 2015, 111 enclaves became Indian territory, while 511 went to Bangladesh.

Of the 15,000 people in the enclaves now in India, fewer than 1,000—mostly Hindus—chose Indian citizenship; the rest remained Bangladeshi citizens while continuing to live and work on ancestral land within India. In contrast, Bangladesh granted full citizenship to both Hindus and Muslims living in the enclaves within Bangladesh. How the SIR will reshape the lives of ‘Bangladeshis’ in India remains a story to watch. ■



# Staying alive with dark humour and ‘AQI Porn’



A protest against rising air pollution in Delhi at Jantar Mantar, 5 December 2025

## Herjinder

It’s become an annual ritual. The moment winter sets in, Delhi plunges into AQI panic. Newsrooms, TV panels and social media timelines spew warnings about the city’s toxic air. A fresh batch of ‘new’ solutions are aired—some long past their expiry date, others so fantastical they seem like they’re from another planet. Everyone knows the truth: none of this will fix the air that Delhiites are condemned to breathe. In fact, can it be called air at all? ‘We’re not breathing air anymore,’ a netizen posted on X, ‘We’re inhaling death every day.’

To grasp how grave the crisis has become, it helps to listen to Dr Randeep Guleria, former director of AIIMS and head of pulmonology, before that. He draws a chilling parallel: Delhi’s pollution is now

killing more people than Covid-19. Even the Supreme Court harked back to the pandemic era, asking why Delhi saw blue skies then, despite stubble-burning.

One answer was the lockdown. While the Covid lockdown was excessive, experts are justifying the current pollution crisis might just require such an extreme measure. The analogy reveals an uncomfortable truth: the problem is too immense for half-measures.

Very few people believe that governments—state or central—have what it takes to clean up the air. Today, we clutch at straws, hoping that relief from Delhi’s pollution will come from the Supreme Court. It was way back in 1987 that environmental lawyer M.C. Mehta first approached the court over Delhi’s deteriorating air quality. Since then, countless petitions have been heard and

numerous orders issued. Yet, pollution levels have only climbed—from ‘worrying’ to ‘deadly’.

For nearly 38 years, different aspects of Delhi’s pollution crisis have repeatedly come before the Supreme Court—with the same outcome: zilch. The one intervention that *did* make a noticeable difference dates back to 1998, when the Supreme Court ordered the complete conversion of Delhi’s diesel-run public transport to CNG.

At the time, the idea of shifting the entire fleet of buses, taxis and auto-rickshaws to CNG seemed wildly unrealistic. No major city in the world had attempted such a transition. Predictably, the decision triggered protests, strikes and fierce resistance. But the court held firm. Once completed, the task paid off: the

improvement in Delhi’s air quality was unmistakable.

Former East Delhi MP Sandeep Dixit argues that only such bold decisions can deliver real results. But they demand strong political will—something he believes is missing today, with the BJP (mis)governing both the Centre and all of Delhi’s neighbouring states.

Truth is, the scale of intervention required today is far greater than anything attempted in the past. Most of the government’s current measures—like the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP)—feel more like tired bureaucratic routines than real solutions and their impact has never been convincingly demonstrated.

The Kejriwal government’s odd-even scheme, introduced with much fanfare, failed to make any real difference. The idea of cloud seeding to trigger artificial rain and wash away our pollution woes was another ill-conceived band-aid on a festering sore of a problem. Rekha Gupta’s government floated the same proposal.

An RTI by activist Ajoy Bose revealed that the Delhi government paid Rs 38 lakh to IIT, Kanpur, to produce artificial rain via cloud seeding. Forget pollution-clearing showers—Delhi did not receive even a drizzle.

The list of such failed experiments is long—anti-smog towers, anti-smog guns, water sprinklers, bio-decomposers—each the equivalent of using a newspaper to dodge a bullet. What the government has been surprisingly efficient at, though, is tweaking, hiding and downplaying AQI data. (Social media was awash with one such ‘innovative solution’—videos of water trucks spraying AQI monitoring stations to lower AQI readings!)

Targets have regularly been missed. In 2019, the National Clean Air Programme set an ambitious goal of reducing Delhi’s PM2.5 levels by 20–30 per cent by 2024. One

year past that deadline, PM2.5 levels have instead surged dramatically to ‘severe’.

While governments have failed quite spectacularly to deliver clean air to the National Capital Region—society has not done much better. Carpooling, a practice adopted in many global cities, has never appealed to Delhi’s car-owning elite. Even small contributions to reducing traffic and emissions like the share-a-cab options offered by Uber and Ola have now been discontinued altogether.

India has become a society where private fixes are expected to compensate for public failures. When government hospitals falter, people turn to private healthcare. When the state school system disappoints, parents opt for private education. When clean drinking water is unreliable, households instal RO systems. So naturally, when the air turns toxic, people buy air purifiers—that is, those who can afford them.

Clean air is now a luxury, a consumer product available only to those with the means to buy it. For everyone else, the conversation about the basic human ‘right to clean air’ has all but vanished.

Air purifiers have become a middle-class staple—installed in living rooms, bedrooms, offices, even cars. Words like ‘HEPA filter’ have entered our everyday vocabulary.

When records from Delhi’s Public Works Department (PWD) showed that the government had quietly ordered 15 ‘smart air purifiers’ for its own offices in October 2025—at a cost of Rs 5.5 lakh—the public was not amused.

Media images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta meeting visitors in their air-purified offices were derided.

Yet even the privileged cannot fully escape. No matter how many purifiers one instals, stepping outdoors means confronting the same hazardous AQI that lesser mortals must. One can limit outdoor time, but there’s no way to escape the air that surrounds us all.

AQI has now begun to function like a strange new dopamine hit. We obsess over it, reciting the dangers of toxic air as if listing symptoms could somehow keep them at bay. Memes and jokes circulate on WhatsApp, as though laughter might cleanse our lungs. It’s the first thing we check when we get up. Every evening, we compare AQI charts the way people once compared cricket scores. This poisonous air has not just created an entire genre of ‘AQI porn’, it has transformed our fantasies. We no longer fantasise about distant beaches—we yearn for just about any place where the air is breathable.

We cannot stop the toxic particles from entering our bodies with every breath, so we try to steal tiny moments of relief from the very crisis that consumes us. Since we cannot escape it, we seek comfort in complaining about it. ■

*AQI has now begun to function like a strange new dopamine hit. We obsess over the dangers of toxic air as if listing symptoms will somehow keep them at bay*

# ‘Third World’ or not, that is the question

## Sarosh Bana

US President Donald Trump’s 27 November announcement on Truth Social that he’ll suspend migration from ‘Third World countries’—made after an Afghan national shot at two National Guard soldiers (one of whom later died) in Washington the previous day—has triggered speculation on whether India too is on Trump’s radar besides a raging debate on whether India fits that description.

India has a lot at stake: it consistently secures the maximum number of the coveted H-1B visas and has recently overtaken China to become the largest source of international students in the US.

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services estimates that over 72 per cent of the 380,000 H-1B visas issued in 2023 went to Indians, largely for jobs in STEM fields that fetch them an average yearly salary of \$118,000. Trump’s policy amending H-1B rules has, however, already affected India.

The National Foundation for American Policy disclosed that the top seven India-based IT companies got only 4,573 H-1B applications approved for new employment in FY25, which is 37 per cent fewer than in FY24 and a 70 per cent drop since 2015.

According to the Institute of International Education’s ‘Open Doors 2024 Report’, more than 331,000 Indian students—compared to around 277,000 from China—enrolled at American universities for the academic year 2023–24, accounting for nearly a third (29.4 per cent) of the 1.1 million international students in the US.

While its 2025 report shows a significant drop in new international student enrolments for the Fall 2025 semester, the number of Indian students has continued to rise, with over 360,000 enrolled in FY25.

Many Indian students and H-1B holders eventually settle in the US. According to the Department of Homeland Security, of the 11 million illegal immigrants in the US in 2022, as many as 220,000 were Indian. Meanwhile, the US immigration and customs enforcement identified nearly 18,000 undocumented Indian nationals among the 1.5 million individuals marked for deportation.

The question about India’s ‘Third World’ status has expectedly pitted those aligned with the right-wing BJP government against civil libertarians.

Here’s a reality check:

The 2025 World Press Freedom Index ranked India #151 out of 180 countries—below Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh—placing it in the ‘very serious’ category. The ranking is a reflection of concentrated media ownership, the use of sedition and defamation laws and intimidation of journalists, with most mainstream outlets blatantly partisan in their reportage.

India’s largest English-language broadsheet, the *Times of India*, raised the question, ‘Is India a third world country?’ and—without offering any reasons—responded ‘certainly not’.

The *Times of India* wrote that the term ‘Third World’, which came into vogue during the Cold War, is now ‘lazily used to refer to poor or underdeveloped countries, which India has ceased to be’. It didn’t explain how.

The article went on to highlight the varied classifications for India: ‘lower-middle’ by the World Bank, ‘medium’ by the UN Human Development Report and ‘emerging market and developing’ by the International Monetary Fund.

Social media was flooded with similar praise (read: denial), extolling the BJP government for making India the world’s fourth-largest economy in 2025, surpassing Japan with a \$4.2 trillion GDP, and for its unexpected surge in GDP growth.

The National Statistical Office (NSO) reported a six-quarter high of 8.2 per cent in July–September, up from 7.8 per cent in April–June. BJP supporters crowed about PM Modi’s repeated assertions that India’s economy will reach \$5 trillion in the next three years and \$7 trillion by 2030, ‘driven by reforms and resilience’.

Even if their voices are barely heard in traditional media and overwhelmed on social media, not everyone buys this sunny narrative. Just days before the ministry of statistics put out the unlikely GDP growth figure of 8.2 per cent for Q2 of FY26, the IMF, in its annual staff report for 2025, retained a ‘C’ grade for India’s national account statistics, suggesting that the GDP data provided to the Fund had ‘some shortcomings that somewhat hamper surveillance’.

So critics draw our attention to the sanctity of our current macroeconomic data, and assert that the Modi government’s ‘obsession’ with GDP growth is perhaps more accurately described as an obsession



The Global Hunger Index 2025 classifies India’s condition as ‘serious’. At #102 of 123 countries, India is ranked below Pakistan (#94), Bangladesh (#88) and Sri Lanka (#66)

with *projecting* growth by whatever means possible—‘fixing’ the methodology, fudging data and other such adroit deceptions.

Economists less inclined to peddle the government’s story on GDP growth have also argued that for a truer picture, we must look at GDP per capita, which exposes the skew in income distribution and living standards. India, with an estimated GDP per capita of \$2,820, is currently ranked by the IMF at #136, behind countries like Ghana, Mongolia, Angola, Bhutan, Iran, Djibouti, Indonesia, Namibia and Ukraine.

The top 1 per cent in India hold about 40 per cent of national wealth and the bottom 50 per cent a measly 6.4 per cent.

For most Indians, wage growth has lagged far behind soaring executive salaries, with CEOs taking home 50 per cent more in 2024 than they did in 2019. The ‘Hurun India Rich List 2025’ estimates the family wealth of Mumbai-based Mukesh Ambani—Asia’s richest man—at roughly 8 per cent of India’s GDP.

*In Human Development Index terms, India is ranked #130 out of 193 countries—behind Iran, Iraq, Gabon, Sri Lanka, Albania and Cuba*

Another source puts the combined wealth of all 284 Indian billionaires at around \$1.2 trillion, which is about a third of the country’s GDP.

Civil libertarian critics of the Modi government also draw our attention to a bunch of other indicators:

In the 2025 World Population Review of ‘Third World’ countries, for example, India, with an HDI (Human Development Index) reading of 0.685, is classified as a ‘developing economy’ and a ‘lower middle-income country’ with a poverty line of \$4.2 per day. In HDI terms, India is ranked #130 out of 193 countries—behind Iran, Iraq, Gabon, Sri Lanka, Albania and Cuba.

The 2024 UNDP Global Multidimensional Poverty Index identifies India as home to the largest number of people living in multidimensional poverty—234 million, or nearly a fourth of the world’s 1.1 billion poor.

The Global Hunger Index 2025 classifies India’s condition as ‘serious’. At #102 of 123 countries, India is ranked below Pakistan (#94), Bangladesh (#88) and Sri Lanka (#66). Approximately 806 million—that’s 55 per cent of India’s population of 1.46 billion—are currently covered under the National Food Security Act for highly subsidised foodgrains.

Education is another challenge, with India spending just 4.6 per cent of GDP—well below the 6 per cent target suggested by the 2020 National Education Policy and even less than Kyrgyzstan, Senegal and Burkina Faso. Latest data show over 1.17 million children are out of school across India, raising the question: how is the country to fulfil its objective of becoming a global technology hub when 19.1 per cent of its adult population is illiterate?

Bragging about his government’s unprecedented achievements for society and the economy, Modi once remarked, “I am looking forward to the day when Americans will be in queue for an Indian visa.” It was his external affairs ministry that informed Parliament in 2023 that a record 1.38 million Indians renounced their citizenship between 2014—the year Modi took office—and June 2023.

But what do these grim ratings mean if you can manufacture a chorus that all is hunky-dory? ■



# Sambhal, the life of a sleepy town in UP

Prabhat Singh returned to see firsthand what has changed since 24 November last year

D riving into Sambhal, a couplet by the city's own poet, Musavvir Sabzwari, comes to mind: 'Khush-fahmiyon ke khel ki ab kya saheel hai/ kaghaz ki ek nav hai aur khushk jheel hai' (What way out of the games of self-delusion? All we have is a paper boat and a dry lake). After a whole day wandering the city's lanes and bylanes, meeting its people, talking to its shopkeepers, artisans and clerks, the wisdom of the couplet strikes home.

I knew Sambhal's long, layered history—yet, for the longest time, I had really known it only through its hakims and its bone-and-horn craft. More recently, new reasons have surfaced to understand this town, and insistently so.

Under the Sultanate, this region enjoyed special importance. In the Mughal era, it held the status of a royal province, a crucial midway point between Delhi and Agra. But through British rule, and for decades after independence, Sambhal was just a part of Moradabad district. When it was finally designated a district in 2011, it was given a new name—Bhimmnagar. The following year, the old name was restored. But none of these administrative changes seem to have changed much in the daily life of the town or its people.

Sambhal still feels like a weary, half-desolate *qasba* even though the powers that be are eager to give it a facelift. Not that nothing has changed; some things have, in striking ways.

In Chakki Paat mohalla, the old *lakhori* brick wall has been replaced by red sandstone, and high atop it a new millstone glitters. Local lore has it that Udai (of the Alha-Udai duo) once leapt to hang the millstone on the fort wall.

In Kot Poorvi, the ancient Shri Kalki Vishnu temple—once repaired under the patronage of Ahilyabai Holkar—is getting three new rooms. The prime minister laid the foundation stone for a new Kalki Dham temple just last February.

In Kot Garvi, near the Shahi Jama Masjid built in 1530, a Satyavrata police post has sprung up (some scholars believe Sambhal was known as Satyavrata in the Satya Yuga). Every path leading to the mosque is now blocked off with

bamboo barricades.

The small room near the mosque steps now houses the Rapid Response Force (RRF). And they say only locals may enter this ASI-protected monument.

In the neighbouring village of Firozpur, the wide-open field known as the old fort now has an ASI boundary wall, and the lone surviving stone gate is being repaired. Children still play cricket on the ground, and as always, the new wall doubles as a place for neighbours to hang their washing.

The town—once spoken of in phrases like *bavan sarai* and *chhattis purey*—looks, in many ways, unchanged. The streets and bazaars swarm with disorderly crowds; neon signboards blink over newer shops; old eateries continue to thrive. At Babu Hotel, lovers of urad-chawal gather. Maroof, the haleem maestro, and Nazim Kababi pull in connoisseurs chasing another flavour.

Guru's shop produces countless new sweets, but his pedas are still the biggest draw. The horn-comb artisans have learnt to work with fibre and now make all kinds of ornaments. And most of those who went to Delhi to learn the trade of dyeing and then set up workshops on the outskirts of town have been penalised for pollution and locked out of their small businesses.

Explaining Sambhal's sacred geography—68 *tirthas*, 19 sacred wells—the priest of the ancient Shri Kalki Vishnu temple, Mahendra Sharma, spoke with fervour: "Bhagwan Kalki will surely come. And our scriptures say he will be born here, in Sambhal."

Yet he is pained: the town's historic stature has never been honoured; no real attention has gone into developing its infrastructure. They never built educational institutions good enough to hold back the youth. The city constantly loses its own children to migration. What has changed in his lifetime? "Only this," he says, "that the path to the temple used to be a dirt track with camel carts; now it's a tar road. Otherwise they made Sambhal a district, yes—but to submit an application to any officer, we still have to travel 25 kilometres to Behjoi."

From the temple, we made our



Photos: Prabhat Singh



way to Kot Garvi. On the main road, from the signpost for Shaukat Ali Road, the high wall and upper dome of the Jama Masjid are visible. A steep, narrow lane climbs upward, guarded by RRF soldiers sitting at its mouth on chairs.

Walking up, two inscriptions flash into view—on the new building, the signboard 'Satyavrata police post', and below it, a stone marking Matloob Yar Street.

Rights near the stone are bamboo barricades. Cross them, and to your left a board announces the Shahi Jama Masjid. Follow the arrow, and you first see RRF uniforms. The mosque steps enter your line of sight a little further ahead.

We were climbing the steps

when a soldier stopped us. Were we locals or outsiders? Even after we said we'd come not to photograph but simply to see the mosque, he repeated: only locals may enter. Outsiders must stay out.

Soon the committee secretary, Masood Ali Farooqi, and member Zia arrived. The secretary said, "There's a court order. You cannot go inside." But Zia sahib quietly took us in anyway.

It was dusk. The greying sky lay utterly still. A couple of children darted around the ablution tank. Zia sahib let out a deep sigh: "It was built five hundred years ago. Why start a feud over it now?" We spoke awhile and then quietly began our descent.

The fastest train between Sambhal and Moradabad is the Moradabad Passenger. It comes in from Moradabad, once in the morning and once in the evening, and then trundles back with its two-and-a-half coaches. Five tiny halts, 47 kilometres and a journey of nearly three hours.

Its passengers are usually people with time on their hands—or people carrying too much luggage. The fare, thirty rupees, is its only real draw; otherwise the bus gets you to Moradabad in an hour and a quarter. The UPSRTC ticket is eighty-four rupees. Buses run all day. The train takes a weekly holiday—Saturday.

I'd planned to reach the station before the evening train, but the day slipped away. Nadeem said a motor-rickshaw wouldn't make it; the approach is too narrow. Best to take a motorcycle. So we cut through the narrow lanes, finally reaching the station. A brick path climbs from an empty ground to the platform. The train had long gone. The doors of rooms with nameplates

*We were climbing the steps when a soldier stopped us. Were we locals or outsiders? Only locals may enter, outsiders must stay out, he insisted*

had padlocks on them. The platform lay drenched in a deep, echoing silence—but it was well lit.

At the far end, outside the locked stationmaster's office, someone lay on a *charpai* under a mosquito net. Our conversation must have disturbed him; gathering his jacket, he followed us. Munshi is a trackman. By day, he maintains the tracks; by night, he guards the station.

Yes, there's an RPF post, he said; someone comes by during the day, but no one stays at night. The station master doubles as ticket-seller, so once the train leaves, his duty ends.

Of the many details that emerged in conversation, one stood out: nowadays the train has two trackmen on board, who hop off at every level crossing, close the gate, reopen it after the train has passed, and then hop on again. Earlier, the task fell upon the engine driver or the guard. This too explains the long, slow crawl of the journey.

I found myself thinking of priest Mahendra Sharma—nearly 70, yet like so many in the town, he has never taken this train. His lament about Sambhal's sluggish development stayed with me. And then, the very next morning, I read in the paper that the chief minister, in a meeting with officials, had declared that Sambhal's development is a government priority, and that efforts were underway to identify and restore the town's *tirthas* and wells.

Sambhal now has 224 CCTV cameras across 60 locations. On 24 November, the RRF and PAC, along with 16 sector magistrates, the DM and the SSP, carried out precautionary patrols across the town. Drones hovered over areas around the Jama Masjid; the bazaars were mostly subdued.

It was on 24 November last year that violence broke out during a survey of the Jama Masjid, and five people were killed. Speaking to the media, DM Rajendra Pensia remarked, "Sambhal is not what it used to be." Now, who wouldn't wish this may forever be true? ■

Best read in the Hindi original that appeared in the pages of our sister publication, Sunday Navjivan, 30 November

## 'SIR is error-prone by design'

**Dr Noor Mohammad served as chief electoral officer of Uttar Pradesh for nine years, followed by another nine years as deputy election commissioner in the Election Commission of India. He was selected by the United Nations to oversee elections in Afghanistan and later served as advisor to the India International Institute of Democracy and Election Management, New Delhi, set up by the ECI. Excerpts from his conversation with Herjinder and Nandlal Sharma:**

### On why the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) has become so controversial

No electoral roll can be perfect because people are dynamic. The process of revising voter lists is immensely complicated. Having said that, I believe a series of errors and misjudgements by the ECI has made it controversial.

This SIR cannot be called an enumeration. Earlier, enumerators would visit households, collect information on all the adult members, get the forms signed by the head of the household and submit the details. Voters' lists were prepared on the basis of such enumeration. Now, the ECI is distributing pre-printed forms and demanding supporting documents to prove citizenship.

Another reason for controversy is this: for the first time the onus is on the voters to prove that they are not non-citizens and are thus eligible to vote. In all the past revisions, summary or intensive, the onus was on the Election Commission.

Incorporating provisions of the Citizenship Act in the guidelines for SIR was a mistake. Citizenship is determined by the ministry of home affairs (MHA). Every time the ECI received a complaint about someone on the rolls not being a citizen, the name would be referred to the MHA for inquiry and determination. The Election Commission should not be doing the MHA's job.

**On the ECI's refusal to consult political parties before**

### launching SIR in Bihar

The Election Commission is a public authority and is required to be transparent. Before implementing any changes, the Commission's practice was to call an all-party meeting, invite and incorporate suggestions. Since the last SIR took place 22 years ago, it was all the more necessary to hold such a meeting.

### On whether this SIR is exclusionary

The end-result will be exclusionary. A large number of eligible electors will be left out. This SIR is error-prone by design as the deadline is too tight, with not enough time for training (before) and corrections (after). It pains me to hear such allegations against the Election Commission of India, which I served and hold in high

esteem. In a country like India, expecting electors to prove their date and place of birth is not practical. A large number of people have no idea how old they are, forget trying to produce a birth certificate.

### On SIR aiming to weed out infiltrators

I am not privy to what the ECI intended to achieve. In my experience, infiltrators tend to live in crowded cities which allow anonymity. Subjecting villagers to a citizenship test does not appear necessary.

Moreover, citizenship to be determined by the MHA—the ECI need not have waded into this jurisdiction. None of the documents listed by the ECI prove citizenship. Demanding additional documents—which may be difficult or impossible to obtain—from certain groups of people effectively shuts them out of the voting process.

### On the ECI's reluctance to share machine-readable voter lists with political parties

I can't think of any reason why such a list should be denied, especially now that there is a centralised database. Earlier, duplication of voters was detected first at district and then at state level. With centralised lists, the likelihood of central manipulation is certainly higher. That's also why voter lists in machine-readable formats should be shared.

**On anomalies such as voters**

### living in houses numbered '0' or '00'

I'm surprised to hear that these are notional numbers assigned to the homeless. The problem of homelessness is certainly not new. In Mumbai, for example, for as long as one remembers, the homeless slept on pavements, near lampposts and under flyovers. The ECI had a protocol of numbering the pillars and indicating that the voters named would be available only at night. For more than one person occupying the same spot, the practice was to indicate them as by 1/1, 1/2, 1/3 and so on for pillar number 1.

Marking voters' addresses with a zero is absurd because then nobody can track them.

### On the BLOs' training

I believe the training was limited to briefings on the step-by-step process to be followed. Such briefings are held in batches to cover all the field staff engaged. It is therefore incorrect to assume that each BLO went through 4-5 days of training.

### On the BLOs' ability

It is unfair to expect Anganwadi workers, auxiliary nurse midwives and junior school teachers to become tech-savvy after one short briefing. In most cases, BLOs would seek help, possibly from the Booth Level Agents (BLAs) of political parties. Ruling parties with proactive BLAs stand to gain from this arrangement. This is why the burden of registration should not have been shifted to the voters.

What's more, 30 days is too short a time to complete the exercise.

### On a better alternative

It would have been a better idea to collect data through family enumeration forms, as per the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960. The BLOs would have managed that fairly well. Data entry and uploading could have been done by trained data entry operators at the ERO (Electoral Registration Officer) level with every log-in and log-out punched in. That way, anyone who messed up could be

held accountable.

### On the same elector's photograph appearing multiple times in a constituency, as in the case of the Brazilian model in Haryana

I can only say that there's obviously a failure at some level. In 2003, we noticed that some draft voter lists had abusive words added after the names.

The reason, we found, was that the data entry firm engaged for the purpose had not paid the operators—who expressed their anger in this manner. Mistake or mischief, this can happen at any and every level of data management and maintenance. EPIC contractors or anyone with access could be responsible.

### On tracking the culprits

The Election Commission does maintain a log of everyone accessing the data at any given time. Each one is given a password and all changes made can be tracked. Responsible management of data can fix responsibility. De-duplication software exists, which is capable of spotting similar images and names through phonetic matching algorithms. There's clearly some laxity.

### On electoral rolls displaying 90 or more people living in the same house

There can be several factors: incorrect enumeration, wrong data entry, manipulations to impersonate voters on polling day, failure to assign house numbers... However, the primary responsibility to prepare an accurate and inclusive voters' list rests with the Election Commission.

### On the same house in Bihar registering a large number of voters from different castes and communities living together

In metropolitan cities where migrant workers converge, this may happen, as shared vulnerabilities create more inclusive and secular spaces for survival. In districts in Bihar? It needs to be probed. ■



# An idiot’s guide to Macaulay’s legacy

Hasnain Naqvi on the Sangh Parivar’s politically motivated misreading and the battle over access to knowledge

Delivering the sixth Ramnath Goenka lecture on 17 November, Prime Minister Narendra Modi replayed an old familiar theme of the Sangh Parivar—the exhortation to free India of the ‘Macaulay mindset’, or to use their ‘Indian’ language of choice ‘मैकॉले की मानसिकता से मुक्ति’. The invocation is not new, nor did Mr Modi start it—it has been an integral part of the RSS–Jana Sangh–BJP lexicon for decades. The invocation is convenient for the Parivar because it serves as a dog-whistle against the old Nehruvian–Congress elite who were English-educated and by default secular. It dovetails perfectly with the RSS demand for ‘Bharatiya’ education (भारतीय शिक्षा पद्धति) and the replacement of the ‘Macaulay model’ with something rooted in India’s ancient texts. Most conveniently for the Parivar, in this framing of Macaulay’s legacy and his effect on Indian education, to be ‘anti-colonial’ is to be ‘anti-English’, which segues neatly into their pro-Hindi/Sanskrit cultural nationalism.

But for the Parivar, India is frustratingly diverse, as it has found on several occasions when it has tried to force Hindi down the throats of reluctant Indians who speak a myriad other tongues. The National Education Policy (NEP) is the newest weapon of coercion in this enterprise.

Inconveniently for the BJP–Sangh, Macaulay’s legacy, imperfect as it may be, represents a more meaningful freedom for many Indians, who comprise the ‘bahujan’ majority of anti-caste agitations. For them, this is a deeper conflict over India’s knowledge order—who controls it, who benefits from it and whose histories and aspirations it serves.

Despite Macaulay’s colonial arrogance, many Dalit thinkers have an unshakeable belief that his ‘reforms’ cracked open a caste-sealed system of learning that had kept them out for millennia. Chandra Bhan Prasad—writing recently in the *Indian Express*—reminds us that English education created the first structural breach in the Brahminical monopoly over knowledge.

For these thinkers, Macaulay may have been a colonial supremacist, but he was an accidental emancipator. Historian Ruchira Sharma reminds us that social reformer Savitribai Phule even wrote paeans in praise of Macaulay.



Students seeking admission in Delhi University submit their application forms

Photo: Getty Images

It wasn’t really in Macaulay’s design to open up education in this way—it was a byproduct of his proposed ‘reforms’ to create an intermediary class of Indians, ‘a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinion, in morals and in intellect who would act as interpreters between the British rulers and the millions they governed.’ (from ‘Minute by the Hon’ble T.B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835’, more commonly referred to as ‘Macaulay’s Minute on Education’ or ‘Macaulay’s Minute’.)

### The Dalit embrace

When Dalit intellectuals defend Macaulay, they do so not as acolytes of empire but as critics of caste. For centuries, Manusmriti-based social arrangements reserved literacy, scripture and intellectual life for the upper castes. For Dalits, education—oral, textual, philosophical—was off-limits. When Macaulay pushed for English education, the doors creaked open. Suddenly, Dalits could access the same

*For the ‘bahujan’, this is a deeper conflict over India’s knowledge order—who controls it, who benefits from it and whose histories and aspirations it serves*

language as the ruling classes, the same texts, the same administrative opportunities. English became both an escape hatch and an equaliser.

This is why Chandra Bhan Prasad calls English ‘the greatest gift’ modern India received—not because it was Western, but because it was casteless. A Dalit child learning English did not carry the historical weight of Sanskrit exclusion; the classroom could not easily reproduce the ritual hierarchy of the gurukul. English created India’s first truly

horizontal linguistic sphere—where caste could be disguised, challenged or defied. It became the medium through which Dalits articulated modern democratic claims, from Phule to Ambedkar to post-Mandal political thinkers.

In the ‘bahujan’ imagination, Macaulay is tied to this emancipatory trajectory.

### Arrogance versus practical merit

To acknowledge these benefits is not to romanticise Macaulay, or to deny his

arrogance about the greatness of English—‘I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value... I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.’

This feature of Macaulay’s legacy has overshadowed the practical merits of what he built—particularly in law and education. His uniform criminal code, drafted through the Indian Penal Code (IPC), was revolutionary not because it was British but because it decisively broke with Manu-smriti’s jurisprudence. India moved from a hierarchical legal regime—with differential punishments based on caste and gender—to a universal framework in which all persons were equal before the law.

Macaulay’s contempt for indigenous knowledge must be condemned, but the system he designed dismantled discriminatory structures deeply embedded in the subcontinent long before colonialism.

### Macaulay versus Manu

The Sangh–BJP invocation of ‘civilizational pride’ often conflates cultural recovery with a revival of ancient hierarchies. Manusmriti’s social and penal codes institutionalised rigid caste segregation, gender inequality and differential punishments.

By contrast, Macaulay’s ‘reforms’, no doubt colonial in design, introduced a uniform criminal law, equality before law, meritocratic entry to administration and access to modern scientific knowledge.

So, what is framed as ‘Western versus Indian’ is perhaps more accurately seen in the post-colonial context as ‘hierarchy versus equality’. Dalit thinkers recognise this distinction sharply but upper caste traditionalists often blur it.

For sure India’s modernity must draw on its own civilisational depth but it must do so without resurrecting structures that Ambedkar described as ‘a system of graded inequality’.

HASNAIN NAQVI is a former member of the history faculty at St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai

## Is the law being misused to gamble away forest land?

In Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Assam, Maharashtra and Uttarakhand, forest officers are speaking up against flagrant violation of rules, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

Forest departments in several states are resisting the decision to hand forests back to forest dwellers under the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, better known as the FRA.

A growing number of forest officials claim that while the Act was passed with the hope that forest dwellers would continue to protect their forests, in reality the opposite has happened. Underscoring the need to review the provisions of the FRA, they say that market demands and the pressure to cultivate land are behind the huge loss of forests witnessed over the past decade-and-a-half.

In a moment of extravagance, riding his electoral victory and installation as chief minister of Madhya Pradesh for the fourth time running, Shivraj Singh Chouhan had

distributed 1,300 land *pattas* (land lease papers) on a single day. However, once he shifted to Delhi as Union agriculture minister, the Madhya Pradesh forest department took cognisance of this largescale distribution and ordered an inquiry. An incensed Chouhan declared that he was “willing to sacrifice his life for the rights of the tribals”. Nobody would dare evict them, Chouhan told the tribals in his Lok Sabha constituency of Vidisha.

The inquiry was ordered by the Madhya Pradesh forest department on the basis of a complaint lodged by Azad Singh Dabas, a retired divisional forest officer (DFO) who has been singlehandedly waging a war against Chouhan for what he claims is “illegal distribution of forest land for the last 12 years without following due process”.

Dabas told this writer, “The cut-off date

under the Law is 13 December 2005. Besides, land pattas can only be given to those tribals whose families have lived in the forests for three generations. In addition, land can only be allotted after each case is vetted by the district magistrate, the district forest officer and an officer from the ministry of tribal affairs. This due process is not being followed by our politicians because of vote bank politics.”

When Krishna Gaur—another DFO in active service in Madhya Pradesh—refused to lend his signature to this “wholesale loot” taking place under the FRA, he was victimised and not given a posting for six months.

The misuse of the FRA is rampant across many of our forested states including Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. Foresters allege that

the minutes of meetings are being fabricated and facsimile signatures being used on title deeds. The FRA categorically states that the DFO must physically sign every land transfer. But politicians across several states have found a way out and facsimile signatures have become the norm.

Retired forest service officer M. Padmanabha Reddy has filed a PIL highlighting how the misuse of FRA provisions has led to irreversible environmental damage, with virgin forest lands being encroached upon under political pressure.

Madhya Pradesh is not the only state where forest officers are speaking out against such flagrant violations. In Telangana, under chief minister K. Chandrashekar Rao, widespread irregularities in the distribution of forest land were reported. The gram sabhas and district committees chose to ignore detailed reports of largescale encroachments filed by the district forest officers.

Retired forester P.K. Jha, who headed Telangana’s forest department in 2023, points out that over 11.5 lakh acres of forest land was claimed under FRA, but only 1.6 lakh acres was found eligible for distribution. That did not stop the KCR government from distributing 4.06 lakh acres just before the 2023 state elections.

A matter of grave concern is how the ministry of tribal affairs is no longer willing to accept satellite imagery as ‘independent evidence’ of the denudation of forest areas. Satellite images show a stark contrast between dense tropical forests and cultivated land through distinct colour compositions—clear proof of how much land is being farmed and what remains pristine.

This amendment was made in 2012, points out retired IFS officer Arvind Jha, who served in Maharashtra and was also the chairman of the Scheduled Tribe Certificate Scrutiny Committee. “The rules now state that satellite imagery and other uses of technology may supplement other forms of evidence and shall not be treated as a replacement. This ends up reducing the evidentiary value of the most objective evidence available today,” says Jha.

Probably realising the idiocy of not accepting satellite images as evidence, the Madhya Pradesh government has since backtracked.

Official data of the ministry of tribal affairs (as on 30 November 2024) reveals that over 77 lakh hectares of forest land, almost equal to the area of Assam, has been granted under the FRA since 2008. Individual rights account for 20.54 lakh hectares while the rest comes under community ownership. As populations increase in these scattered enclaves, succeeding generations of forest

dwellers will inevitably expand their holdings, heading towards a point of no return.

There is no dispute that ill-planned development projects cause serious harm to forests. While available data show that 6.33 lakh hectares were diverted for development over 36 years (1980–2016), over three times as much—20.54 lakh hectares—has been granted for habitation and cultivation under the FRA in just the past 16 years.

This is in addition to the 43 lakh hectares of forest lost to agriculture and encroachment between 1950 and 1980 under different government schemes. It can, it seems, no longer be argued that developmental schemes are primarily responsible for causing forest loss.

Rajeev Mehta, honorary wildlife warden of the Rajaji Tiger Reserve in Uttarakhand, cites the example of the Van Gujjars who were granted forest grazing rights over eight decades ago.

In the Shyampur range of Haridwar district—which forms one boundary of the tiger reserve—he notes that Van Gujjar families settled inside the reserve have grown significantly in number, as has their livestock.

“Today they own over 9,000 buffaloes who are competing for the same grass that sustains the deer and wild elephant populations. As a result, the forest has become severely degraded, the canopy has disappeared and even the river water is now heavily polluted,” Mehta says.

According to Mehta, the children of the Van Gujjars are keen to move out in search of a good education and a good life. “The problem,” he explains, “is that the state government’s rehabilitation scheme applies only to families living inside the forest, not those in the buffer zone. These Van Gujjars live in the buffer zone and so cannot avail of it.”

After 300 families moved out of Corbett Park and Rajaji, the rivers and forests in those areas have begun to recover, which has “proved beneficial for wildlife”, Mehta adds.

The foresters’ claims, however, need to be scrutinised because in several parts of the country, tribals are indeed resisting the felling of their forests.

Evidence suggests that the FRA has caused massive forest loss and fragmentation, even as several NGOs and ecologists continue to push for the ‘democratisation of forests’ by handing them over to gram sabhas.

While foresters agree that forest governance desperately needs reform, some argue that entrusting our national ecological assets to gram sabhas in the hope that they will look after them is a utopian gamble that we can ill afford.



Tribal forest dwellers of Jagdalpur, Chhattisgarh

Photo: Getty Images

*While foresters agree that forest governance desperately needs reform, some argue that entrusting our national ecological assets to gram sabhas is a utopian gamble*



# India and human rights: the (mis)rule of law

India’s seat on the UNHRC has brought much bombast from the government, with little to match it on the ground

Aakar Patel

In October 2025, India was elected to the UN Human Rights Council from Asia, along with Pakistan and Iraq. The UNHRC’s mission statement says it ‘is responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe’—which presumably includes India as well.

As expected, the Indian government made much of the election, stating that it ‘reflects India’s unwavering commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms. We look forward to serve this objective during our tenure.’ Of course.

Since there is no point talking in abstract terms, I want to focus on a particular case that will illustrate the condition of human rights in India. India’s conduct on this front should be judged with respect to those whose rights it intentionally violates.

On 22 November 2025, Khurram Parvez completed four years of detention without trial. He sits hundreds of kilometres away from his home in Srinagar, held in Delhi’s Rohini jail, while his wife and two young children wait in Kashmir for a justice system that has refused to move.

His imprisonment has become one of the most emblematic examples of how India’s counter-terrorism law—the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act or UAPA—is being used to silence human rights defenders.

Even in ‘New India’, Jammu and Kashmir remains one of the most heavily militarised regions in the world. While residents live under a government they elected, the central government has hollowed out its powers, as we can see in



The 60th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva

Photo: Getty Images

the bulldozing of Afraz Daing’s house on 27 November, days after the journalist alleged that the former sub-divisional police officer of Jammu (East) was connected with a local family involved in drug trafficking.

Jammu and Kashmir continues to witness punitive home demolitions, unlawful killings, arbitrary arrests under abusive administrative detention laws, illegal surveillance and travel bans. It is a place where people already denied basic rights have been further stripped of their dignity.

For these reasons, Parvez’s work of documenting these abuses was not only necessary, it was indispensable. For two decades, Parvez was considered one of Kashmir’s most respected and renowned human rights voices. I can vouch for this because I have been on global panels where his incarceration has been

discussed with concern.

As programme coordinator of the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS), Parvez helped build one of the region’s most credible human rights groups. Through painstaking documentation of torture, indefinite detention and enforced disappearances, JKCCS produced work so rigorous the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights relied extensively on it in their 2018 and 2019 reports on Kashmir.

It is precisely this work that made Parvez a target. On 21 November 2021, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) arrested him on charges of ‘terror funding’, ‘conspiracy’ and ‘waging war against the state’.

Four years later, despite a long list of accusations, his case has not yet gone on trial. Parvez remains jailed with no clarity on when—or whether—he will ever see a courtroom.

He isn’t alone. In March 2023, another

journalist Irfan Mehraj, who was also associated with JKCCS, was arrested in the same case. In August 2023, the NIA raided the home of JKCCS founder Parvez Imroz and summoned him to Delhi for questioning.

Raids and summons without a lawful basis strike at the heart of freedom of association and expression; when accompanied by detention, they threaten the rights to privacy, liberty and security.

International human rights bodies have repeatedly raised concerns. In June 2023, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that Parvez’s detention was arbitrary and called for his immediate release. To date, Indian authorities have neither complied nor provided any updates to the Working Group.

This is not the first time Parvez has faced reprisals for engaging with the UN. In September 2016, he was blocked from travelling to Geneva to attend a Human Rights Council session and was arbitrarily detained for 76 days. His case has been included in the UN secretary-general’s annual report on reprisals every year since 2018.

In October 2023, UN human rights experts again raised concerns about UAPA, particularly its 180-day pre-trial detention period, which can be further extended. They called this excessive and urged India to reform the law in line with international human rights standards.

JKCCS. Their work owes this to Parvez and to human rights violations faced by hundreds of thousands of Kashmiris for nearly two decades. Today, he is one of the most alarming casualties of the mounting misuse of counter-terrorism laws in India. His case encapsulates the threats faced by human rights defenders everywhere who challenge power and are swiftly branded enemies of the state.

When those who investigate, document or talk about human rights abuses do so under fear of reprisals, India cannot credibly claim to be a country governed by the rule of law.

Parvez should never have been arrested in the first place. A single day in detention would have been an injustice for a human rights defender whose only ‘crime’ has been to document human rights abuses. Yet, he has (at the time of going to press) spent 1,475 days behind bars, and counting.

Every additional day of his detention is a reminder why his immediate release is long overdue.

His cruel detention should educate Indians about the actual position of human rights in India. It is contrary to the bombast put out by our government, preening about its perch on the UN Human Rights Council and pretending it is ‘strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe’.

Views are personal



Kashmiri journalists Khurram Parvez (left) and Irfan Mehraj are both associated with JKCCS

*India cannot credibly proclaim its ‘commitment to human rights’ when those who talk about human rights abuses fear reprisal when they do so*

# America’s phony war on drug trafficking

Operation Southern Spear brings to mind old alarming patterns in the hemisphere, writes Ashok Swain

The United States maintains that it is conducting a war on drugs in the Caribbean, yet the scale and posture of Operation Southern Spear suggest a larger ambition. Warships, aircraft and thousands of troops have been positioned near Venezuela in a show of force that far exceeds what the stated objective might require. Trump has escalated the confrontation in part to demonstrate that he can accomplish in Venezuela what previous US presidents could not—using threat of force to make a breakthrough.

The US military operation has sunk small boats and killed alleged traffickers, but there has been no public evidence linking these vessels to drug shipments and experts have assessed that these boats lacked the stability, fuel capacity and seaworthiness to reach US shores. At the same time, Washington has designated the Venezuelan government a foreign terrorist organisation, offered a \$50 million bounty

for information leading to the arrest of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, and expanded covert CIA operations.

Trump had recently spoken with Maduro and says he is open to meeting him even while insisting that the Venezuelan leader presides over a criminal network. The administration has also gathered senior advisors to discuss possible next steps and maintains that both diplomatic and military options are active. Trump has also threatened that he will soon strike targets inside Venezuela.

These mixed signals suggest a strategy to keep all options open, from an agreement that reshapes Venezuelan politics to a more coercive approach if negotiations stall.

Latin America has seen this pattern before. The US has framed forceful actions as necessary responses to external threats throughout the past century—from the Cold War to the war on terror and now the war on drugs. The rhetoric shifts but the underlying dynamic remains the same.

Pressure campaigns blur into military interventions. These covert or overt operations accompany public demands for regime change. Diplomatic overtures are made in tandem with sanctions and military mobilisation. The region carries the memory of these cycles, and that memory shapes today’s apprehensions.

The Venezuelan opposition is divided. The Nobel Peace Prize for Maria Corina Machado energised many who hope for a transition, and her dedication of the prize to Trump reflects a belief among some factions that external pressure can break the current stalemate. Yet these visions of a rapid political shift following a foreign intervention overlook the reality on the ground.

The Venezuelan state remains heavily securitised, backed by hundreds of militia units and irregular groups that will resist any intrusion. Even if a strike were swift, the aftermath would be unstable, with rival groups competing for control in a

fragmented political landscape.

For ordinary Venezuelans the uncertainty is exhausting. Years of economic collapse and political contestation have left people drained and wary of further upheaval. Many want change but fear that the US military action would make things worse. Each day unfolds in a haze of conflicting rumours and terse statements from abroad, heightening the sense that the future is being shaped elsewhere. Even a limited clash could unleash another massive wave of migration, far beyond what the region can absorb.

This uncertainty has also strengthened the Maduro government’s internal narrative. Maduro loyalists emphasise national defence and warn of foreign aggression to mobilise support across the country. State media highlights militia training exercises and presents the buildup as proof of an external threat to Venezuelan sovereignty. As in past moments of standoff

between Washington and governments in the region, foreign pressure consolidates domestic support rather than eroding it. Hardliners inside Caracas now point to the risk of intervention as justification for tighter controls and greater surveillance.

Regional governments are responding with caution. Colombia’s president has voiced concern that a strike on Venezuela could spill across the border and undermine peace accords in his country. Other Latin American governments acknowledge flaws in Venezuela’s recent election, yet they fear that armed conflict would destabilise the hemisphere and fuel more humanitarian crises. A military confrontation would almost certainly deepen divisions across the region and invite the involvement of outside powers with strategic interests of their own.

The shifting approach in Washington, combining threats with the possibility of talks and negotiations, increases the risk of miscalculation. It can embolden actors inside Venezuela to take risks or misinterpret the intentions of the other side, potentially setting off a chain of events that neither side wants.

The deeper worry is that the hemisphere may once again be drifting into a familiar pattern of action justified by specious urgent claims. Guatemala’s descent into civil war following the 1954 coup, the long shadow over Chile after 1973, the human toll of the Contra war in Nicaragua and the enduring trauma of the Panama invasion all serve as reminders that even short operations can set off long-term instability. Each produced devastating consequences that reshaped regional politics and scarred societies for generations.

Venezuelans have every right to a political future shaped by their own institutions rather than by external force. A path still exists for renewed diplomacy, credible elections and humanitarian relief. But that path narrows when a foreign military buildup overshadows negotiations. Operation Southern Spear may be framed as a counter-narcotics mission, but its scale gives away a much larger design.

ASHOK SWAIN is a professor of peace and conflict research at Uppsala University, Sweden



A US Navy warship arrives in Trinidad and Tobago near the coast of Venezuela, as Washington ratchets up pressure on drug traffickers and Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro (inset); a narco boat hit by US military



*The shifting approach in Washington, combining threats with the possibility of talks and negotiations, increases the risk of miscalculation*

Photos: Getty Images



KARNATAKA IT POLICY 2025–2030:

State's Roadmap For From IT Capital to Deep Tech Powerhouse

The Government of Karnataka has unveiled the Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030, a landmark policy framework designed to cement the state’s leadership in IT and IT-enabled Services (ITeS) while preparing for the next era of global digital transformation. With an ambitious vision, the policy positions Karnataka as a preferred destination for global and domestic enterprises, offering a unique blend of world-class talent, robust infrastructure, innovation-driven ecosystems, and a progressive regulatory environment.

Building on a Legacy of Technological Leadership

Karnataka’s journey in IT began over three decades ago, setting the foundation for India’s software revolution. At the Bengaluru Tech Summit 2025, Shri Siddaramaiah, Hon’ble Chief Minister, reflected on the state’s pioneering role in shaping India’s IT landscape. He highlighted Karnataka’s distinction as the first state to announce an Information Technology Policy in 1997, a move that laid the groundwork for the Millennium IT Policy in 2000. These policies catalyzed a transformation that turned Bengaluru into the “Silicon Valley of India” and positioned Karnataka as the undisputed IT capital of the country.

However, the Chief Minister noted that the global IT landscape is now on the cusp of disruption. “IT as we have known it is undergoing profound transformation. Emerging technologies are reshaping the sector and the very nature of work—faster than anyone could have imagined five years ago,” he said. In response, the Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030 focuses on equipping the ecosystem for emerging technologies, enabling innovation, and fostering grassroots research. The policy aims to be ambitious, inclusive, business-friendly, and future-ready, charting a bold course for Karnataka’s digital future.

A Bold Vision for Employment and Growth

At the heart of the Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030 is an ambitious employment creation target of over 90 lakh direct and indirect jobs across the state. These opportunities extend well beyond Bengaluru, encompassing emerging clusters in Mysuru, Mangaluru, Hubballi-Dharwad, Belagavi, Shivamogga, Tumakuru, and Kalaburagi. The policy recognizes the evolving nature of technology-driven employment and is designed to cover not only traditional IT and ITeS sectors but also frontier technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Quantum Computing, Web3, Blockchain, and Green IT.

The strategy combines expansion of existing companies, incentivization of startups, and development of technology-driven industrial hubs to ensure that the new jobs are inclusive, high-quality, and accessible. A special emphasis is placed on promoting employment opportunities for women, mid-career professionals, and local talent, ensuring that Karnataka’s growth is both equitable and sustainable.

Leading India in Software Exports

Karnataka has long held the distinction of being India’s leading software exporter, and the 2025–2030 policy sets

even higher benchmarks. The state aims to triple its software exports from INR 4.09 lakh crore in 2023–24 to INR 11.5 lakh crore by 2030, reinforcing its position as the nation’s largest software-exporting state.

This ambitious growth will be driven by R&D-led product development, sector-specific clusters, and targeted incentives for export-oriented companies. Karnataka is strategically promoting clusters in high-growth sectors including AgriTech, HealthTech, FinTech, EduTech, Cleantech, AVGC (Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming, Comics), and advanced manufacturing. By focusing on these emerging domains, the state aims to not only increase exports but also enhance its global competitiveness and technological edge.

Driving Emerging Technologies and Innovation

The Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030 is designed to position the state as a hub for deep tech innovation. Initiatives such as the Centre for Applied AI for Tech Solutions (CATS) and Technoverse Integrated Technology Campuses are creating vibrant ecosystems for R&D, product prototyping, immersive labs, and sector-specific innovation zones. These platforms foster cross-sectoral collaboration between industry, academia, and government, nurturing solutions that are scalable, market-ready, and globally competitive.

Karnataka’s approach aligns with national initiatives such as Digital India, Startup India, IndiaAI, and the Semiconductor Mission, ensuring that its innovations integrate seamlessly with India’s broader technology landscape. At the same time, the state is committed to global standards, ensuring compliance with regulations like GDPR and the EU AI Act, and positioning its products and services for international markets.

Inclusive Regional Growth: Beyond Bengaluru

Recognizing that sustainable growth requires development across the state, Karnataka’s policy emphasizes inclusive regional development. The Beyond Bengaluru initiative is central to this strategy, nurturing emerging IT hubs in cities such as Mysuru, Mangaluru, Hubballi-Dharwad, Belagavi, Shivamogga, Tumakuru, and Kalaburagi.

Through strategic infrastructure investments, industry-ready talent pipelines, and innovation clusters, these regions are being transformed into globally competitive IT hubs. By promoting inclusive employment for women, mid-career professionals, and local graduates, Karnataka ensures that the benefits of technological progress extend to every corner of the state.

Shri D.K. Shivakumar, Hon’ble Deputy Chief Minister, emphasized Karnataka’s evolution into one of the world’s most vibrant and diverse technology ecosystems, hosting global enterprises, startups, R&D labs, centres of excellence, and academic institutions. The policy, he noted, promotes balanced, equitable growth, ensuring that investment and opportunity are not concentrated in



Bengaluru alone. He also highlighted Karnataka’s focus on strategic human capital development and deep tech innovation, inviting enterprises to leverage the state’s talent, infrastructure, and innovation-friendly environment.

Anchoring Deep Tech and Future-Ready Talent

Shri Priyank M Kharge, Hon’ble Minister for Electronics, IT, Bt, and Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, reaffirmed Karnataka’s status as the torchbearer of India’s IT revolution, noting that the state’s IT exports have nearly quadrupled over the past decade. He described the Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030 as a bold leap toward establishing Karnataka as a deep tech innovation destination.

The policy is structured around five foundational pillars, collectively known as F.R.A.M.E.:

- Frontier, Future & Emerging Technology – driving innovation in AI, quantum computing, Web3, and more.
- Regional Development – promoting growth and opportunity across Karnataka, beyond Bengaluru.
- Alignment and Acceleration with National and Global Strategies – integrating with programs like Digital India and adhering to global standards.
- Market Creation and Sectoral

Deepening – fostering specialized industry clusters to boost exports and innovation.

Enterprise Facilitation and Ecosystem Orchestration – enhancing ease of doing business, supporting startups, and enabling scaling for IT companies.

Through this framework, Karnataka is investing in infrastructure, human capital, business continuity, and industry promotion, while introducing measures to encourage the return of global talent, ensuring the state

remains competitive and future-ready.

Dr. Manjula N., IAS, Secretary to Government, Department of Electronics, IT, Biotechnology, and Science & Technology, highlighted that the policy reaffirms Karnataka’s commitment to maintaining its position as India’s foremost technology powerhouse. Bengaluru continues to serve as the nerve centre of India’s innovation landscape, spearheading advancements in core and emerging technologies. Yet, what

emerging domains such as AI, cybersecurity, and quantum computing. Karnataka is now prepared to partner with



exports. Its talent ecosystem is reinforced by premier institutions such as the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), International Institute of Information Technology Bangalore (IIIT-B), and National Institute of Technology Karnataka (NITK).

Infrastructure plays a pivotal role in Karnataka’s success. The state was the first in India to establish an extended international gateway and Network Operations Centre (NOC) at the STPI Bengaluru facility in Electronic City. Decentralized STPI sub-centres across Mysuru, Mangaluru, Manipal, Davanagere, and Hubballi further promote balanced, regional IT growth, complementing Karnataka’s strategic initiatives to develop innovation hubs beyond Bengaluru.

The Beyond Bengaluru initiative ensures that investment, innovation, and employment are not confined to the capital. By nurturing emerging IT hubs, Karnataka is generating high-value employment opportunities and supporting inclusive regional development—a model that sets an example for other states in India.

A Launchpad for the Technologies of Tomorrow

With its robust ecosystem, world-class talent, strategic infrastructure, and forward-looking policy framework, Karnataka is more than just an IT hub—it is the launchpad for the technologies of tomorrow. The Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030, coupled with initiatives like Beyond Bengaluru, reflects the state’s commitment to inclusive growth, regional development, and deep tech innovation.

For global enterprises, startups, and technology leaders seeking growth, innovation, and access to world-class talent, Karnataka offers unmatched opportunities to be part of a transformative digital journey. From AI and quantum computing to Web3, blockchain, and Green IT, the state is cultivating an ecosystem where innovation thrives, businesses scale, and talent leads the way.

Looking Ahead: A Future-Ready Karnataka

The Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030 embodies a bold, inclusive, and future-ready vision. It balances Bengaluru’s continued global leadership with statewide innovation, regional development, and frontier technology advancement. By prioritizing emerging technologies, nurturing talent, fostering collaborative ecosystems, and facilitating ease of doing business, Karnataka is poised to remain India’s IT powerhouse and a global hub of technological innovation for the next decade and beyond.

As Karnataka charts this ambitious course, it invites the world to invest, innovate, and thrive in a state where technology, talent, and policy converge to create opportunities that are transformative, inclusive, and globally competitive. Karnataka is not just shaping the future of IT in India—it is defining the next era of digital innovation worldwide.

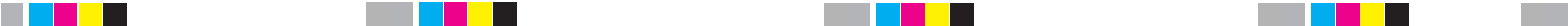
industry, startups, academia, and investors to build a globally competitive digital economy.

Karnataka’s IT Ecosystem: A Model of Excellence

Karnataka has long been recognized as India’s IT powerhouse. The state is home to over 5,500 IT and ITeS companies, including nearly 750 multinational corporations, and accounts for 43.67% of India’s total software

distinguishes Karnataka is the diverse talent and infrastructure across the state, helping it consistently top the NITI Aayog India Innovation Index.

Dr. Manjula noted that status quo is not an option. With the IT/ITeS sector poised for disruption, the policy focuses on strengthening industry-academia linkages, digital inclusion, and workforce readiness in





# The republic of toddy

How a drink from Kerala’s backwaters holds the memory of caste, class and resistance

K.A. Shaji

On winter mornings in Kuttanad, in Kerala’s Alappuzha, when mist hangs low over the narrow canals of its backwaters, you can smell toddy long before a soul is awake. It’s the lingering scent of the night’s last fermentation—mildly sweet, slightly sour, unmistakably alive. It wafts through coconut groves, crosses flooded bunds and settles over paddy fields. In those first fragile minutes of daylight, toddy feels like it’s the land itself flirting with the rising sun.

From a low slung built on wooden stilts, shallots crackle in coconut oil. Pepper is crushed on stone. Dried chillies hiss as they meet hot oil. A clay stove behaves like an ancient animal coaxed awake. Here is where Kerala’s mornings truly begin—in its toddy shops.

In Kerala, toddy is more than a drink. It is generational memory, sensory geography, social contract, working-class archive, political battlefield... It is a republic built on the backs of barefoot climbers, of cooks who stood in smoky kitchens mastering the simmering pots.

No toddy shop embodies this world more intimately than Nedumudy’s legendary New York Toddy Shop in Kuttanad—a maze of canals, shimmering polders and houseboats that move like slow rumination.

Outsiders are amused by the name ‘New York’. For locals, the name evokes respect for a shop that grew from a reed-roofed hut into its own legend, its story retold by boatmen. K.V. Kuttappan, the founder, was a toddy tapper who once worked in the Gulf. He befriended a Malayali who had returned from America—the words ‘New York’ stayed with him. So, when he opened his shop, on a bund so fragile that even goats stepped carefully, that was the name he chose.

“This is the world headquarter of tastes,” he apparently said. “Let the world

come and stand right here.”

And it did. Boatmen finishing their rounds at dawn, paddy workers wearing the smell of slush, newlyweds, filmmakers, bored clerks, wandering journalists—everyone converged at New York. As crowds grew, annexes sprang up like mangrove roots—San Francisco, Chicago, Washington DC, Portland, Alaska—bamboo-walled rooms perched on stilts.

“Why fly to America?” the owner jokes. “We made our America here. Toddy is our passport.”

But the real passport is the food.

Karimeen pollichathu arrives wrapped in a steamed banana leaf parcel. Turmeric, pepper, garlic, chilli, lime and coconut oil rise as a single aroma. The pearl spot’s flesh yields at the slightest touch.

“The fish here tastes of the lake itself,” says K.C. Ulahannan, the cook, as he stirs duck roast with long, patient strokes. “You eat it and you know where you are.”

The duck roast is an edible biography of Kuttanad: slow-cooked, darkened by roasted spices, held together by green chilli and black pepper.

Crab roast glows deep brown with coconut. Beef *perattu*, in the Irinjalakuda-Chalakudy style, is shredded, smoky, almost perfumed. *Kakka thoran* carries the scent of low tide, the image of women gathering clams at dawn with bare hands. Tapioca with *meen* curry is the centrepiece of every table.

Everything in a toddy shop is about a gentle intoxication that waxes softly and wanes slowly.

“One glass makes you remember your body,” says James Joseph, a boatman in Nedumudy. “Two down, you forget everything else.”

The journey to the shops is part of the ritual. You glide through canals where egrets stand. Men transplant paddy in waist-deep fields of water. Children cannonball into sunlit channels. The river carries conversations, gossip, laughter. You tie your boat to a palm root, climb a



Photo: Getty Images

Everything in a toddy shop is about a gentle intoxication that waxes softly and wanes slowly

In this quiet Thrissur village in the late 1940s and early 1950s, toddy workers began organising in the midst of land agitation, caste reform and the early communist movement. Meetings took place under palm trees after dark. Pamphlets travelled secretly between hands. Young workers seething with anger found respite in collective action. Strikes erupted. Tappers refused to cut the flowers, choking the supply chain where it hurt most.

M.K. Velayudhan, a veteran tapper from Anthikkad, recalls: “We were nothing before the contractors. The union taught us to stand straight.”

The movement spread quickly—through Kuttanad, Kodungallur, Irinjalakuda, Kollazhy, Alappuzha, Kollam—turning the state’s backwaters into arteries of rebellion. Toddy shops became union halls. Kitchens fed strikers. Recipes became instruments of solidarity: steaming rice, *karimeen* stew, fish curry ladled into steel plates.

In these smoky rooms, Kerala’s communist rhetoric was shaped not by theoretical treatises but by rope-belts, injuries, hunger, debt and daily risk.

If politics fermented in Anthikkad, supply pulsed from Chittur in Palakkad—Kerala’s toddy heartland. Chittur’s plains were lined with palms as far as the eye could see. Tankers left before dawn. Contractors operated with military precision. Tamil migrants worked seasonally, living in makeshift huts near the groves.

Since then, climate change has damaged this ecosystem. Hotter summers weaken palms. Drought stretches sap thin. Industrial demands drain groundwater. Entire belts of palms have become unproductive.

“Palm trees get tired too,” says K.G. Kannadas, a tapper in Nallepilly. “When the sun becomes cruel, the sap becomes thin.”

Adulteration scandals scarred Kerala. There are tales of poisoning, hospitalisations, raids. Old-timers recount infamous variants: Jesus Christ, the bottle that brought redemption after three days; Anamayakki, so strong it was called the Elephant Tamer; Manavatti, sweet but treacherous...

Yet pure toddy is almost medicinal. Neera, its non-alcoholic sibling, is now promoted as a wellness drink. Leave neera alone for a few hours, and it turns into toddy, sure as sunrise.

Another silent revolution is unfolding today: women enter toddy shops without guilt, shame or second glances. In New York’s family rooms, Mullappanthal’s bright dining hall, Karimbunkala’s open-air grove, Kadamakkudy’s island shops—women sit with the same ease men once fiercely guarded.

“Why should flavour be a man’s property?” asks P.K. Manjusha of Kainakary, sipping from her glass. “We work hard. We want joy too.”

Tourism has added its own undercurrent. Houseboats deliver foreign tourists, who sniff cautiously at toddy before taking a sip. Food bloggers descend with ring lights. Five-star hotels design ‘toddy shop platters’, curated versions that locals dismiss as sterile.

“Toddy needs the smell of mud,” a boatman tells me. “Hotel plates cannot give that.”

Authenticity holds its ground. At Mapranam near Irinjalakuda, beef *ularthiyathu* gleams with roasted coconut. At Mullappanthal in Udayamperoor, queues form before noon. At Karimbunkala, the lake breeze carries the smell of duck roast into the road. In Kadamakkudy, fresh fish hold the shimmer of the water they lived in.

Toddy shops remain Kerala’s most democratic spaces. Farm workers sit beside landowners, fishermen next to software engineers. Migrant labourers share tables with tourists. Friendships bloom. Someone admits heartbreak; another celebrates a wage increase. Someone argues about politics; another walks out to cool off. The toddy shop becomes a village parliament without formal rules, held together by food, drink and unspoken recognition.

As evening glides across the canals, the water glows copper. Fires burn red. Cooks wipe sweat off their necks. Ladies strike pans with metronomic certainty. The first pour of evening toddy settles into bell-shaped glasses shaped for a tapper’s grip—wide at the base, warm in the hand. ■



slippery step and enter the thick embrace of smoke, spice and chatter.

The story of toddy is older and heavier than you see. It’s rooted deeply in caste and resistance. Toddy tapping was long the hereditary occupation of Ezhavas and Thiyyas—communities that lived at the margins, their labour exploited by contractors and feudal structures that treated tappers as expendable. Long before safety belts or unions, tappers climbed towering palms with rope coils and bare palms hardened from childhood.

“Every time we climbed, we left our lives at the foot of the tree,” says P.P. Govindan, an elderly tapper from Cherthala. “We never knew if we would come back down.”

Many did not. Falls were common. Lifelong injuries were accepted as fate. Wages were meagre. Respect scarce. Exploitation routine.

Then came Anthikkad.



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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

### NATION

#### STAYING ALIVE WITH 'AQI PORN'

So what if you can't escape the pollution, you can still obsess about it

► P3



### NATION

#### SAMBHAL, THE LIFE OF A TOWN

A year after the violent communal flareup of 24 November 2024

► P4

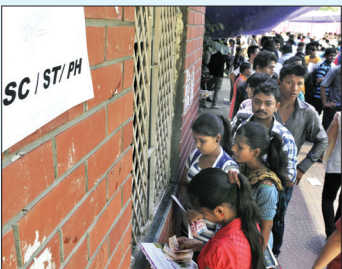


### INSIGHT

#### AN IDIOT'S GUIDE TO MACAULAY

Why Dalit thinkers see in him an accidental emancipator

► P5



# Why the IMF doesn't buy India's GDP data

What the cheerleaders of this government do not see is that you need reliable data for sound policymaking

### Arun Kumar

The International Monetary Fund's (IMF) unflattering report on India's national accounts has once again focused attention on the dubious nature of the country's macroeconomic data. In its 2025 'Article IV Consultation Report on India', announced on 26 November, the Fund has accorded a 'C' rating for the data used in India's national accounts because 'the data provided [by India] to the Fund have some shortcomings that somewhat hamper surveillance'.

While the IMF is mandated to accept government data on GDP, it is saying the data is not reliable. In plain terms, a 'C' grade implies that India's official data is not up to the mark—in other words, the IMF would have us take the latest GDP growth figure (8.2 per cent for Q2 of FY26) with a pinch of salt.

In fact, there are indicators that suggest growth cannot be that high. For instance, reports of investment projects being withdrawn or curtailed, and of net FDI turning negative. These are not the signs of an economy that is growing rapidly.

Among the shortcomings in data the IMF has flagged are the use of an outdated base year (2011-12); sizeable discrepancies in GDP data, possibly due to the lack of informal sector data; weak statistical techniques used in the quarterly compilation of national accounts; and the lack of consolidated data on states and local bodies after 2019.

These points have been raised by several analysts since the demonetisation of November 2016. The economy also experienced shocks due to the faulty implementation of GST in 2017, the NBFC crisis in 2018 and the pandemic in 2020. Each of these crises aggravated the issues flagged by the IMF.

Analysts have, in fact, raised a deeper question about the GDP in the new series (base year: 2011-12) that the IMF does not touch upon. The new series was announced in 2015 during the NDA years even though work on it had started during UPA II.

A government committee was asked to rework the series, but its work was rejected when it showed higher growth during the UPA years than in the NDA period. The Niti Aayog was now asked to produce the new series, even though it wasn't qualified for the job. It did produce a series nevertheless—which showed higher growth during the NDA period, fulfilling the political ask, and was duly accepted.

But former Chief Economic Advisor (CEA) to the government Arvind Subramanian showed through econometric modelling

that the GDP was being overstated by 2.5 percentage points or more.

Next, out of 18 lakh companies in the MCA21 database, three lakh were removed as being 'shell companies'. As this author had pointed out then, this should have impacted the GDP estimate—as shell companies are typically used for under- and over-invoicing to divert income from regular companies—but this did not happen.

Also, 35 per cent of companies couldn't be found at their given addresses—so these were likely fake companies putting out fake data. All these discrepancies put a question mark on the GDP data. Finally, GDP calculations cannot account for the black economy—a whole different can of worms. Bottomline: the new GDP series (base year: 2011-12) has been manipulated and is seriously flawed.

#### More data manipulation

The current government has been systematically rejecting or withholding adverse data. For instance, the 2017-18 consumer survey was not released.



Photo: Getty Images

*Reports of investments being withdrawn or curtailed, and of net FDI turning negative are not signs of a rapidly growing economy*

Unemployment data was withheld before the 2019 elections, because it showed that joblessness was at a 45-year high. The multi-dimensional deprivation data is being manipulated to show lower poverty.

A comparison is made between 2015-16 and 2019-21. This contains the pandemic year 2020, when people's income fell and education and health deteriorated. So, how could deprivation (and poverty) have decreased?

Our data is suspect also because samples are drawn on the basis of the outdated 2011 Census. India skipped the Census exercise in 2021; it's now supposed to be held in 2026, while it could have been done in 2022 or 2023 as many other countries did. It matters because there have been demographic changes since the last Census, so samples drawn from the 2011 Census will not yield correct estimates and the conclusions will not be reliable either. This further strengthens the IMF's point.

Even the Consumer Price Index (CPI) is based on 2011-12 data. The distribution of income has since changed, which impacts

consumption patterns. Newer goods and services have become available, which must be included in the analysis but can't be if we continue with 2011-12 base data.

The IMF report also flags discrepancies between the production and expenditure approaches to measuring GDP.

Definitionally, there shouldn't be a difference between these two estimates, but as pointed out by this author earlier, both estimates have errors for lack of independent data for the unorganised sector. This impacts the two estimates differently, so the discrepancy too changes from year to year.

When there are shocks to the economy, the divergence increases, as has happened in India since demonetisation. Not only has a small variation become much larger, it is also swinging wildly from positive to negative and back, thereby indicating unreliability of data.

In quarterly estimates of GDP, the lack of current data necessitates the use of proxies. But the growing organised sector cannot act as a proxy for the declining unorganised sector. That is why there is overestimation of GDP. In fact, higher the growth rate of the organised sector, higher the mis-estimation of the unorganised sector.

Extrapolations are common in the compilation of annual GVA (gross value added) series. But when this is done for a shock year, there is overestimation—the actual decline in economic growth is not captured. No wonder official data for the demonetisation year (2016-17) showed a high growth of 8 per cent when the economy had, in fact, contracted.

When the use of proxies leads to overestimates in the contribution of the unorganised sector, it inflates estimates of the production of consumption goods and services, thereby leading to overestimation of consumption in the economy.

It is argued that since data is not available for the unorganised sector, some assumptions must be made for estimation. That is true, but conditionally correct assumptions become invalid when the economy experiences shocks like demonetisation. So, the assumptions must change, but this has not been done, leading to wide gaps between reality and official data.

The IMF presumably felt compelled to finally acknowledge the unreliability of India's GDP data. Unfortunately, what the cheerleaders of this government do not see is that you need reliable data for sound policymaking—that is, if your government is in the business of good governance. ■

ARUN KUMAR is retired professor of economics, JNU, and author of Indian Economy's Greatest Crisis: Impact of the Coronavirus and the Road Ahead

# Are BLOs being made the fall guys?

### Nandlal Sharma and Rashme Sehgal

Between circulating celebratory videos of dancing Booth Level Officers (BLOs) and issuing threatening FIRs against those who have been 'slacking off' on their SIR duties, a serious doubt has gone largely unaddressed. How has the Election Commission selected and trained the BLOs?

The Commission claims to have 'trained' BLOs and supervisors in Uttar Pradesh over four days between 29 October and 3 November 2025. A large number of BLOs, including Mohit Chaudhary and Firdous, say they never saw a minute of this training.

On 2 December, Chaudhary, an irrigation department employee in Meerut deputised as a BLO attempted suicide by consuming pesticide. His wife Jyoti said her husband had been distressed for days. He had confessed to feeling nervous about performing a task he wasn't prepared for. Voters expected him to fill up their forms, even accept incomplete forms.



A BLO helps voters fill their enumeration forms in Noida, 1 December

Photo: Getty Images

His supervisors expected him to upload flawless forms—or else. He feared he would be suspended or even lose his job. Mohit was lucky—Jyoti rushed him to Lokpriya Hospital and he survived.

Bipin Yadav, a BLO from Gonda, Uttar Pradesh, was not so lucky. He left a video of his last moments. Bipin had confided to his brother-in-law Prateek that the SDM, Lekhpal and BDO were pressuring him to delete the names of OBCs and Dalits. Like Mohit Chaudhary, he felt trapped. If he refused, he risked falling afoul of the 'system'. If he obliged, he might face the wrath of the voters for his 'mistake'.

Firdous, a BLO in Meerut, looked traumatised when we met her on 25 November. She too says she received no training. When she voiced doubts about her competence for the job, she was told she could not refuse it. Look, she says, it's already 4 p.m. and I've only been able to upload two enumeration forms till now.

Firdous was scared of computers, never having used one. Nor had anyone else at home. And no, she hadn't received a single rupee, yet she was soldiering on. She was terrified of losing this 'job' and the Rs 7,500 she received as an Anganwadi worker.

Firdous solicited the help of Nazmeen, who has some experience of working as a BLO in earlier elections. The two women were struggling to upload the forms on their mobile phones. If the server works and the signal is strong, it takes five minutes to upload one form, Nazmeen tells us. It takes me 10 minutes, says Firdous. At this rate, uploading 100 enumeration forms would take 16 hours of non-stop work a day!

This is the story one hears from UP to Gujarat to West Bengal. Most Anganwadi workers, auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs) and ASHA workers who have been drafted as BLOs are facing technical issues for lack of training and exposure. Many cannot scan and upload documents. School teachers are similarly handicapped. If the Election Commission is to be believed, this has not come in the way of a successful SIR.

The haste with which it is forging on has led people to speculate that the Commission actually wants BLOs to trip up. They can be blamed and punished for making 'mistakes' that ECI officials can selectively (and retrospectively) correct. Doubtless, such 'corrections' would really be deletions.

The video of beaming BLOs in Kerala shaking a leg during break time is not the only proof offered of how well the SIR is going. On 2 December 2025, the Election Commission issued a press note claiming that nearly 46 crore forms—over 90 per cent—had already been 'digitised' and that 99.78 per cent of voters in the 12 states and UTs where the exercise is being conducted had already received their enumeration forms. The press note also provided a state-wise breakup, claiming that West Bengal had digitised 97.38 per cent of the forms, Madhya Pradesh 95.69 per cent, Tamil Nadu 94.32 per cent and Gujarat 91.45 per cent. Uttar Pradesh lagged behind with only 79 per cent of its forms digitised.

The figures raise a heap of questions. If it's going so well in Bengal, then why was

► Continued on page 2





# ‘Divide and rule’ comes handy amid an identity crisis

Sourabh Sen

Assam’s tribes are up in arms against the state government after a Group of Ministers (GoM) recommended Scheduled Tribe (ST) status for six more communities currently classified as Other Backward Classes (OBCs). These six communities—Tai Ahom, Chutia, Moran, Matak, Koch-Rajbongshi and ‘Tea Tribes’ (Adivasis)—were promised ST status in 2015–16 but are only now being enlisted, just ahead of the 2026 assembly elections.

The GoM report, tabled in the assembly on 29 November, proposes creation of a distinct “ST (Valley)” category for the six communities, granting them separate reservation quotas in state government jobs and educational institutions.

Assam’s existing ST quota is split between ST (Plains) at 10 per cent and ST (Hills) at 5 per cent. While these quotas will remain protected, the inclusion of the six communities will push Assam’s tribal population to nearly 40 per cent, significantly reshaping the reservation landscape.

This recommendation ignited fierce opposition from the Coordination Committee of Tribal Organisations of Assam (CCTOA), which represents 14 recognised tribal communities, including Bodo, Karbi, Miri, Rabha and Kachari. The CCTOA sees the move as a dilution of hard-won rights, threatening political representation and cultural autonomy.

“The GoM recommendations will dilute the very basis of setting up autonomous councils to protect tribal culture, language and customs,” said a senior Bodo leader, highlighting anxieties that tribal identities and privileges could be eroded if the new groups enter the ST fold.

Dissatisfaction over granting ST status to these communities boiled over in Bodoland Territorial Region on 29 November—a day before the report of the GOM was tabled—when thousands of students marched from Bodoland University to the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) Secretariat in Kokrajhar. The massive rally started peacefully, but on the way back from the BTC Secretariat, it turned violent.

The students broke through the police cordon, forced open the Secretariat gates and ransacked offices. The district administration clamped prohibitory orders and brought the situation under control. BTC Chief Executive Member Hagrama Mohilary blamed the All-Bodo Students’ Union (ABSU) and the United People’s Party Liberal (UPPL) for the violence, pointing out that such violent incidents have no place in a democracy.

ABSU president Dipen Boro, however, refuted Mohilary’s charges. “We were in a meeting when we heard students were



Tribal women queue up at a polling booth in Assam’s Kamrup

Photo: Getty Images

newly-anointed tribes will be able to contest these seats.

Tribal politicians like Mohilary sense an opportunity to co-opt the new tribes and expand their political support base. This has pitted them against tribal students who have taken to the streets.

“The GoM report may have added a separate category to Assam’s tribal list, but when our boys and girls compete for all-India examinations like railways, banks, medical, IIMs and IIT, they will be clubbed into the single all-India ST list. A larger number of tribal students from Assam will compete for the same number of seats,” explained a student leader.

And then, there is the question of Axom asmita. Although Assam’s tribes have retained their language, culture, customs and religion, many of the six OBC communities in question have subsumed themselves into a pan-Axom cultural identity, now revived by Zubeen Garg’s unfortunate and mysterious passing.

Chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has so far pandered to Garg’s unifying cultural undercurrent, positioning himself as a crusader delivering justice. He appears to have pinned his hopes on these neo-converts to carry Garg’s cross-community appeal to the hustings.

The political roadmap ahead of the Assam elections is clear with the tribal question expected to dominate much of the volatility. How the government balances the aspirations of the six communities against fears of established tribes’ marginalisation will shape the social fabric and electoral outcomes for years to come. ■

SOURABH SEN is a Kolkata-based independent writer and commentator

## Are BLOs being made the fall guys?

» Continued from page 1

the deadline extended from 4 December to 11 December? What about the BLOs reported to have killed themselves due to harassment on their ‘slow progress’? What of the massive publicity given to the alleged exodus of Bangladeshi Muslims from West Bengal, with settlement after settlement apparently abandoned by voters in border districts? The figures do not tally with ground reports.

Then, there’s a whole caboodle of glitches. The BLO app, proudly rolled out in regional languages, works best only in English and Hindi, say the BLOs who are actually using it. Erratic internet speeds and stalling servers are common complaints. BLOs need to scan the forms before uploading them, but with so many not being smartphone savvy, that’s another hurdle.

Maya Ben, a teacher in Bhavnagar, Gujarat, says the ‘order’ to start working as a BLO was a bolt from the blue. She spent sleepless nights, while her days were an endless stream of people struggling to fill and upload their forms. Most wanted her to fill them up.

After several reports of BLOs in Gujarat collapsing on duty or resorting to suicide, the Gujarat government engaged operators to upload the forms, Maya tells us.

In West Bengal, the chief electoral officer invited applications for data entry operators on contract for a year. This, days before the SIR is set to conclude.

Unlike the annual summary revisions of electoral rolls, when BLOs sit at the polling booth and accept forms for additions and deletions, the SIR is a door-to-door marathon. BLOs must visit every household, deliver pre-printed enumeration forms based on the 2002–03 rolls, issue carbon-copy receipts and then upload everything to the BLO app. Voters are often not at home, which means repeat visits. No wonder so many BLOs are breaking down.

Outside metropolitan cities, BLOs

are at the receiving end of municipal misgovernance. Even in Meerut town area, houses seem to have arbitrary numbers. House number 1,200 is next to house number 1,500 which is next to house number 900, points out local resident Mahendra Sharma. Unwittingly perhaps, he provides an insight into why it’s taking so long to distribute and collect forms.

In West Bengal, a BLO was as stumped as septuagenarian Subhash Chandra Roy who was known as father of a ‘third son’ he didn’t know he had. The BLO insisted the form clearly specified him as the father. Scandalised, the old man insisted he had no such son.

Uncorrected glitches from the rolls of 2002–03 have crept into the SIR, vitiating the exercise further. Fathers-in-law have been shown as husbands, husbands as fathers. It’s highly unlikely these will be sorted within the tight deadline, which adds to the BLOs woes.

Mahendra Sharma of Meerut seemed sympathetic to their plight. The forms, he says, are confusing. Whether ‘relative’ should be mentioned? Father, grandfather or husband? BLOs are at a loss to explain. Some forms carry the wrong names and phone numbers of assigned BLOs. Sharma, who works as a Booth Level Agent of a political party, recalls calling one Ashok Kumar for a clarification. The call, however, was received by one Sandeep who lives in Mawana, 20 kilometres away. On another form, the BLO listed was a woman but the phone number was her husband’s.

Shahid Manzoor, former education minister in UP and four-term-MLA, estimates that not more than 4–5 per cent of the BLOs are tech-savvy. The Commission, he says, should have done due diligence in selecting and training the BLOs adequately.

Criticising the policy of engaging government school teachers for everything from human and animal census to midday meals to BLOs, Manzoor is aggrieved by the flurry of FIRs lodged against BLOs in UP. They are kicking the can down the road, shirking their own responsibilities and setting up the BLO as the scapegoat, says Manzoor.

Against the background of BLOs succumbing to nervous breakdowns, supervisors are anxious to reach the finish line without more mishaps. “Zehar mat khaa lena,” (Please don’t take poison), says Mukesh Singh Kushwaha, a supervisor in Baheri, UP, to his BLOs, offering to help them if necessary. Not all supervisors are as sympathetic.

Smooth, simple and seamless? It would take nothing short of a miracle to accept the ECI’s version of how the SIR is unfolding. ■

“Zehar mat khaa lena,”  
Mukesh Singh  
Kushwaha, a supervisor  
in Baheri tells his BLOs,  
offering to help them  
if necessary



## Look who’s now talking ‘vote chori’!

Shikha Mukerjee

The second instalment of the Election Commission’s purge of India’s voter lists is in full swing. While the exercise is on across 12 states and Union Territories in this round, the West Bengal is unmistakably on one state—Real Bengal. If alleged ‘illegal migrants’ were the initial targets, now a hunt is on for ‘dead’ voters—12 lakh of them—with the help of some judiciously leaked information from ‘sources’ in the office of the West Bengal chief electoral officer.

That’s the latest number to have emerged as the Special Intensive Revision grinds on in the state (due to conclude on 11 December, the new date set by the EC). At the beginning of the new decade, North 24 Parganas topped the districts with the largest number of dead voters—pegged at around 2.75 lakh.

This is significant not just because so many dead voters have remained on the electoral rolls since the special revision of 2003, but also because the district lies on the border and holds both the headquarters and a major concentration of the scheduled caste Namasudra (Matua) community.

The Matuas number anywhere between 2.5 to 2.75 crore in West Bengal, out of whom 1.7 crore are voters, representing 17 per cent of the state’s schedule caste population. This makes it the second largest group after the Rajbongshis, who are mostly concentrated in North Bengal with a spillover into Assam. While their electoral

influence is undeniable, there appear to be only seven Matua MLAs in the state assembly, six of whom are in the ruling Trinamool Congress. This may partly explain the deletions and additions in the North and South 24 Pargana districts, as well as in Nadia, areas with a substantial concentration of Matuas.

Conducting the dead and deleting their names ought to have been a routine job with the near continuous revision of electoral rolls undertaken by the Election Commission at considerable public expense.

Prasenjit Bose, chairperson of the State Committee to Safeguard the Right to Vote and Citizenship of the People of West Bengal—set up by the state unit of the Congress party—has raised a basic question. Why did the Election Commission not use the online Civil Registration System for births and deaths to identify dead voters? In fact, why did the Election Commission not draw up a list of new voters based on the births registered?

If the Commission had spent more time and resources in the run-up to the SIR, Bose suggests, the fuss over ‘absent’, ‘shifted’, ‘dead’ and ‘duplicate’ voters would have been considerably less. Not only for the Block Level Officers (BLOs) handling the new-fangled method of filling and uploading enumeration forms, but also for the political parties battling each other over the roll revision process.

Had the Election Commission done its homework, the optics of preparing for the 2026 West Bengal assembly elections would have been markedly different.

The dead, duplicate and absent voters still on the electoral rolls are potentially the names that can be used to create fake identities and provide the cover for ‘false’ voters. If the BJP and CPI(M) are to be believed, the Trinamool Congress has turned the several lakh dead, duplicate and absent voters into a vote bank that accounted for its spectacular success in previous elections.

The irony is that the BJP in West Bengal is appropriating the ‘vote chori’ narrative that the Congress and the Opposition claims is the basis for the BJP and National Democratic Alliance’s victories in Bihar and Maharashtra. The BJP’s West Bengal unit has accused the state government of hijacking BLOs to compromise the electoral process—an allegation routinely levelled in BJP-ruled states too. It has demanded an audit of booths and constituency-wise electoral rolls with suspicious ‘entries’.

Apart from everything else, SIR 2025–2026 will go down in history for the damage done to the mental health of both voters and BLOs, harassed by the complexities of a process that has stapled proof of citizenship with verification of eligible voters.

The public perception of the SIR in West Bengal is, in one word, exclusion. Who will be deleted from the electoral rolls and why—this discourse is animated by the number of Hindu voters versus the number of ‘Bangladeshi’, i.e. supposedly illegal Muslim migrants likely to be excised.

The Matuas—split between BJP supporters, Trinamool Congress supporters and those who swing between the two—stand to lose heavily if the SIR process takes away their voting rights. The same risks apply to Rajbongshis and to those (mostly) Muslim residents who were allowed to remain in India as Bangladeshi citizens.

This bizarre situation stems from every’s decision to offer stateless residents living in disputed enclaves a choice of citizenship. Under the Land Boundary Agreement (originally signed in 1974) and ratified in 2015, 111 enclaves became Indian territory, while 511 went to Bangladesh.

Of the 15,000 people in the enclaves now in India, fewer than 1,000—mostly Hindus—chose Indian citizenship; the rest remained Bangladeshi citizens while continuing to live and work on ancestral land within India. In contrast, Bangladesh granted full citizenship to both Hindus and Muslims living in the enclaves within Bangladesh. How the SIR will reshape the lives of ‘Bangladeshis’ in India remains a story to watch. ■



Hundreds of Bangladeshi nationals stranded at a border check post in Hakimpur, West Bengal

Photo: Getty Images



# Staying alive with dark humour and ‘AQI Porn’



A protest against rising air pollution in Delhi at Jantar Mantar, 5 December 2025

## Herjinder

It’s become an annual ritual. The moment winter sets in, Delhi plunges into AQI panic. Newsrooms, TV panels and social media timelines spew warnings about the city’s toxic air. A fresh batch of ‘new’ solutions are aired—some long past their expiry date, others so fantastical they seem like they’re from another planet. Everyone knows the truth: none of this will fix the air that Delhiites are condemned to breathe. In fact, can it be called air at all? ‘We’re not breathing air anymore,’ a netizen posted on X, ‘We’re inhaling death every day.’

To grasp how grave the crisis has become, it helps to listen to Dr Randeep Guleria, former director of AIIMS and head of pulmonology, before that. He draws a chilling parallel: Delhi’s pollution is now

killing more people than Covid-19. Even the Supreme Court harked back to the pandemic era, asking why Delhi saw blue skies then, despite stubble-burning.

One answer was the lockdown. While the Covid lockdown was excessive, experts are justifying the current pollution crisis might just require such an extreme measure. The analogy reveals an uncomfortable truth: the problem is too immense for half-measures.

Very few people believe that governments—state or central—have what it takes to clean up the air. Today, we clutch at straws, hoping that relief from Delhi’s pollution will come from the Supreme Court. It was way back in 1987 that environmental lawyer M.C. Mehta first approached the court over Delhi’s deteriorating air quality. Since then, countless petitions have been heard and

numerous orders issued. Yet, pollution levels have only climbed—from ‘worrying’ to ‘deadly’.

For nearly 38 years, different aspects of Delhi’s pollution crisis have repeatedly come before the Supreme Court—with the same outcome: zilch. The one intervention that *did* make a noticeable difference dates back to 1998, when the Supreme Court ordered the complete conversion of Delhi’s diesel-run public transport to CNG.

At the time, the idea of shifting the entire fleet of buses, taxis and auto-rickshaws to CNG seemed wildly unrealistic. No major city in the world had attempted such a transition. Predictably, the decision triggered protests, strikes and fierce resistance. But the court held firm. Once completed, the task paid off: the

improvement in Delhi’s air quality was unmistakable.

Former East Delhi MP Sandeep Dixit argues that only such bold decisions can deliver real results. But they demand strong political will—something he believes is missing today, with the BJP (mis)governing both the Centre and all of Delhi’s neighbouring states.

Truth is, the scale of intervention required today is far greater than anything attempted in the past. Most of the government’s current measures—like the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP)—feel more like tired bureaucratic routines than real solutions and their impact has never been convincingly demonstrated.

The Kejriwal government’s odd-even scheme, introduced with much fanfare, failed to make any real difference. The idea of cloud seeding to trigger artificial rain and wash away our pollution woes was another ill-conceived band-aid on a festering sore of a problem. Rekha Gupta’s government floated the same proposal.

An RTI by activist Ajoy Bose revealed that the Delhi government paid Rs 38 lakh to IIT, Kanpur, to produce artificial rain via cloud seeding. Forget pollution-clearing showers—Delhi did not receive even a drizzle.

The list of such failed experiments is long—anti-smog towers, anti-smog guns, water sprinklers, bio-decomposers—each the equivalent of using a newspaper to dodge a bullet. What the government has been surprisingly efficient at, though, is tweaking, hiding and downplaying AQI data. (Social media was awash with one such ‘innovative solution’—videos of water trucks spraying AQI monitoring stations to lower AQI readings!)

Targets have regularly been missed. In 2019, the National Clean Air Programme set an ambitious goal of reducing Delhi’s PM2.5 levels by 20–30 per cent by 2024. One

year past that deadline, PM2.5 levels have instead surged dramatically to ‘severe’.

While governments have failed quite spectacularly to deliver clean air to the National Capital Region—society has not done much better. Carpooling, a practice adopted in many global cities, has never appealed to Delhi’s car-owning elite. Even small contributions to reducing traffic and emissions like the share-a-cab options offered by Uber and Ola have now been discontinued altogether.

India has become a society where private fixes are expected to compensate for public failures. When government hospitals falter, people turn to private healthcare. When the state school system disappoints, parents opt for private education. When clean drinking water is unreliable, households instal RO systems. So naturally, when the air turns toxic, people buy air purifiers—that is, those who can afford them.

Clean air is now a luxury, a consumer product available only to those with the means to buy it. For everyone else, the conversation about the basic human ‘right to clean air’ has all but vanished.

Air purifiers have become a middle-class staple—installed in living rooms, bedrooms, offices, even cars. Words like ‘HEPA filter’ have entered our everyday vocabulary.

When records from Delhi’s Public Works Department (PWD) showed that the government had quietly ordered 15 ‘smart air purifiers’ for its own offices in October 2025—at a cost of Rs 5.5 lakh—the public was not amused.

Media images of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta meeting visitors in their air-purified offices were derided.

Yet even the privileged cannot fully escape. No matter how many purifiers one instals, stepping outdoors means confronting the same hazardous AQI that lesser mortals must. One can limit outdoor time, but there’s no way to escape the air that surrounds us all.

AQI has now begun to function like a strange new dopamine hit. We obsess over it, reciting the dangers of toxic air as if listing symptoms could somehow keep them at bay. Memes and jokes circulate on WhatsApp, as though laughter might cleanse our lungs. It’s the first thing we check when we get up. Every evening, we compare AQI charts the way people once compared cricket scores. This poisonous air has not just created an entire genre of ‘AQI porn’, it has transformed our fantasies. We no longer fantasise about distant beaches—we yearn for just about any place where the air is breathable.

We cannot stop the toxic particles from entering our bodies with every breath, so we try to steal tiny moments of relief from the very crisis that consumes us. Since we cannot escape it, we seek comfort in complaining about it. ■

*AQI has now begun to function like a strange new dopamine hit. We obsess over the dangers of toxic air as if listing symptoms will somehow keep them at bay*

# ‘Third World’ or not, that is the question

## Sarosh Bana

US President Donald Trump’s 27 November announcement on Truth Social that he’ll suspend migration from ‘Third World countries’—made after an Afghan national shot at two National Guard soldiers (one of whom later died) in Washington the previous day—has triggered speculation on whether India too is on Trump’s radar besides a raging debate on whether India fits that description.

India has a lot at stake: it consistently secures the maximum number of the coveted H-1B visas and has recently overtaken China to become the largest source of international students in the US.

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services estimates that over 72 per cent of the 380,000 H-1B visas issued in 2023 went to Indians, largely for jobs in STEM fields that fetch them an average yearly salary of \$118,000. Trump’s policy amending H-1B rules has, however, already affected India.

The National Foundation for American Policy disclosed that the top seven India-based IT companies got only 4,573 H-1B applications approved for new employment in FY25, which is 37 per cent fewer than in FY24 and a 70 per cent drop since 2015.

According to the Institute of International Education’s ‘Open Doors 2024 Report’, more than 331,000 Indian students—compared to around 277,000 from China—enrolled at American universities for the academic year 2023–24, accounting for nearly a third (29.4 per cent) of the 1.1 million international students in the US.

While its 2025 report shows a significant drop in new international student enrolments for the Fall 2025 semester, the number of Indian students has continued to rise, with over 360,000 enrolled in FY25.

Many Indian students and H-1B holders eventually settle in the US. According to the Department of Homeland Security, of the 11 million illegal immigrants in the US in 2022, as many as 220,000 were Indian. Meanwhile, the US immigration and customs enforcement identified nearly 18,000 undocumented Indian nationals among the 1.5 million individuals marked for deportation.

The question about India’s ‘Third World’ status has expectedly pitted those aligned with the right-wing BJP government against civil libertarians.

Here’s a reality check:

The 2025 World Press Freedom Index ranked India #151 out of 180 countries—below Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh—placing it in the ‘very serious’ category. The ranking is a reflection of concentrated media ownership, the use of sedition and defamation laws and intimidation of journalists, with most mainstream outlets blatantly partisan in their reportage.

India’s largest English-language broadsheet, the *Times of India*, raised the question, ‘Is India a third world country?’ and—without offering any reasons—responded ‘certainly not’.

The *Times of India* wrote that the term ‘Third World’, which came into vogue during the Cold War, is now ‘lazily used to refer to poor or underdeveloped countries, which India has ceased to be’. It didn’t explain how.

The article went on to highlight the varied classifications for India: ‘lower-middle’ by the World Bank, ‘medium’ by the UN Human Development Report and ‘emerging market and developing’ by the International Monetary Fund.

Social media was flooded with similar praise (read: denial), extolling the BJP government for making India the world’s fourth-largest economy in 2025, surpassing Japan with a \$4.2 trillion GDP, and for its unexpected surge in GDP growth.

The National Statistical Office (NSO) reported a six-quarter high of 8.2 per cent in July–September, up from 7.8 per cent in April–June. BJP supporters crowed about PM Modi’s repeated assertions that India’s economy will reach \$5 trillion in the next three years and \$7 trillion by 2030, ‘driven by reforms and resilience’.

Even if their voices are barely heard in traditional media and overwhelmed on social media, not everyone buys this sunny narrative. Just days before the ministry of statistics put out the unlikely GDP growth figure of 8.2 per cent for Q2 of FY26, the IMF, in its annual staff report for 2025, retained a ‘C’ grade for India’s national account statistics, suggesting that the GDP data provided to the Fund had ‘some shortcomings that somewhat hamper surveillance’.

So critics draw our attention to the sanctity of our current macroeconomic data, and assert that the Modi government’s ‘obsession’ with GDP growth is perhaps more accurately described as an obsession



The Global Hunger Index 2025 classifies India’s condition as ‘serious’. At #102 of 123 countries, India is ranked below Pakistan (#94), Bangladesh (#88) and Sri Lanka (#66)

with *projecting* growth by whatever means possible—‘fixing’ the methodology, fudging data and other such adroit deceptions.

Economists less inclined to peddle the government’s story on GDP growth have also argued that for a truer picture, we must look at GDP per capita, which exposes the skew in income distribution and living standards. India, with an estimated GDP per capita of \$2,820, is currently ranked by the IMF at #136, behind countries like Ghana, Mongolia, Angola, Bhutan, Iran, Djibouti, Indonesia, Namibia and Ukraine.

The top 1 per cent in India hold about 40 per cent of national wealth and the bottom 50 per cent a measly 6.4 per cent.

For most Indians, wage growth has lagged far behind soaring executive salaries, with CEOs taking home 50 per cent more in 2024 than they did in 2019. The ‘Hurun India Rich List 2025’ estimates the family wealth of Mumbai-based Mukesh Ambani—Asia’s richest man—at roughly 8 per cent of India’s GDP.

*In Human Development Index terms, India is ranked #130 out of 193 countries—behind Iran, Iraq, Gabon, Sri Lanka, Albania and Cuba*

Another source puts the combined wealth of all 284 Indian billionaires at around \$1.2 trillion, which is about a third of the country’s GDP.

Civil libertarian critics of the Modi government also draw our attention to a bunch of other indicators:

In the 2025 World Population Review of ‘Third World’ countries, for example, India, with an HDI (Human Development Index) reading of 0.685, is classified as a ‘developing economy’ and a ‘lower middle-income country’ with a poverty line of \$4.2 per day. In HDI terms, India is ranked #130 out of 193 countries—behind Iran, Iraq, Gabon, Sri Lanka, Albania and Cuba.

The 2024 UNDP Global Multidimensional Poverty Index identifies India as home to the largest number of people living in multidimensional poverty—234 million, or nearly a fourth of the world’s 1.1 billion poor.

The Global Hunger Index 2025 classifies India’s condition as ‘serious’. At #102 of 123 countries, India is ranked below Pakistan (#94), Bangladesh (#88) and Sri Lanka (#66). Approximately 806 million—that’s 55 per cent of India’s population of 1.46 billion—are currently covered under the National Food Security Act for highly subsidised foodgrains.

Education is another challenge, with India spending just 4.6 per cent of GDP—well below the 6 per cent target suggested by the 2020 National Education Policy and even less than Kyrgyzstan, Senegal and Burkina Faso. Latest data show over 1.17 million children are out of school across India, raising the question: how is the country to fulfil its objective of becoming a global technology hub when 19.1 per cent of its adult population is illiterate?

Bragging about his government’s unprecedented achievements for society and the economy, Modi once remarked, “I am looking forward to the day when Americans will be in queue for an Indian visa.” It was his external affairs ministry that informed Parliament in 2023 that a record 1.38 million Indians renounced their citizenship between 2014—the year Modi took office—and June 2023.

But what do these grim ratings mean if you can manufacture a chorus that all is hunky-dory? ■



# Sambhal, the life of a sleepy town in UP

Prabhat Singh returned to see firsthand what has changed since 24 November last year

D riving into Sambhal, a couplet by the city's own poet, Musavvir Sabzwari, comes to mind: 'Khush-fahmiyon ke khel ki ab kya saheel hai/ kaghaz ki ek nav hai aur khushk jheel hai' (What way out of the games of self-delusion? All we have is a paper boat and a dry lake). After a whole day wandering the city's lanes and bylanes, meeting its people, talking to its shopkeepers, artisans and clerks, the wisdom of the couplet strikes home.

I knew Sambhal's long, layered history—yet, for the longest time, I had really known it only through its hakims and its bone-and-horn craft. More recently, new reasons have surfaced to understand this town, and insistently so.

Under the Sultanate, this region enjoyed special importance. In the Mughal era, it held the status of a royal province, a crucial midway point between Delhi and Agra. But through British rule, and for decades after independence, Sambhal was just a part of Moradabad district. When it was finally designated a district in 2011, it was given a new name—Bhimmnagar. The following year, the old name was restored. But none of these administrative changes seem to have changed much in the daily life of the town or its people.

Sambhal still feels like a weary, half-desolate *qasba* even though the powers that be are eager to give it a facelift. Not that nothing has changed; some things have, in striking ways.

In Chakki Paat mohalla, the old *lakhori* brick wall has been replaced by red sandstone, and high atop it a new millstone glitters. Local lore has it that Udai (of the Alha-Udai duo) once leapt to hang the millstone on the fort wall.

In Kot Poorvi, the ancient Shri Kalki Vishnu temple—once repaired under the patronage of Ahilyabai Holkar—is getting three new rooms. The prime minister laid the foundation stone for a new Kalki Dham temple just last February.

In Kot Garvi, near the Shahi Jama Masjid built in 1530, a Satyavrata police post has sprung up (some scholars believe Sambhal was known as Satyavrata in the Satya Yuga). Every path leading to the mosque is now blocked off with

bamboo barricades.

The small room near the mosque steps now houses the Rapid Response Force (RRF). And they say only locals may enter this ASI-protected monument.

In the neighbouring village of Firozpur, the wide-open field known as the old fort now has an ASI boundary wall, and the lone surviving stone gate is being repaired. Children still play cricket on the ground, and as always, the new wall doubles as a place for neighbours to hang their washing.

The town—once spoken of in phrases like *bavan sarai* and *chhattis purey*—looks, in many ways, unchanged. The streets and bazaars swarm with disorderly crowds; neon signboards blink over newer shops; old eateries continue to thrive. At Babu Hotel, lovers of urad-chawal gather. Maroof, the haleem maestro, and Nazim Kababi pull in connoisseurs chasing another flavour.

Guru's shop produces countless new sweets, but his pedas are still the biggest draw. The horn-comb artisans have learnt to work with fibre and now make all kinds of ornaments. And most of those who went to Delhi to learn the trade of dyeing and then set up workshops on the outskirts of town have been penalised for pollution and locked out of their small businesses.

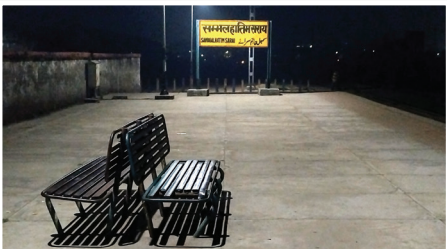
Explaining Sambhal's sacred geography—68 *tirthas*, 19 sacred wells—the priest of the ancient Shri Kalki Vishnu temple, Mahendra Sharma, spoke with fervour: "Bhagwan Kalki will surely come. And our scriptures say he will be born here, in Sambhal."

Yet he is pained: the town's historic stature has never been honoured; no real attention has gone into developing its infrastructure. They never built educational institutions good enough to hold back the youth. The city constantly loses its own children to migration. What has changed in his lifetime? "Only this," he says, "that the path to the temple used to be a dirt track with camel carts; now it's a tar road. Otherwise they made Sambhal a district, yes—but to submit an application to any officer, we still have to travel 25 kilometres to Behjoi."

From the temple, we made our



Photos: Prabhat Singh



way to Kot Garvi. On the main road, from the signpost for Shaukat Ali Road, the high wall and upper dome of the Jama Masjid are visible. A steep, narrow lane climbs upward, guarded by RRF soldiers sitting at its mouth on chairs.

Walking up, two inscriptions flash into view—on the new building, the signboard 'Satyavrata police post', and below it, a stone marking Matloob Yar Street.

Rights near the stone are bamboo barricades. Cross them, and to your left a board announces the Shahi Jama Masjid. Follow the arrow, and you first see RRF uniforms. The mosque steps enter your line of sight a little further ahead.

We were climbing the steps

when a soldier stopped us. Were we locals or outsiders? Even after we said we'd come not to photograph but simply to see the mosque, he repeated: only locals may enter. Outsiders must stay out.

Soon the committee secretary, Masood Ali Farooqi, and member Zia arrived. The secretary said, "There's a court order. You cannot go inside." But Zia sahib quietly took us in anyway.

It was dusk. The greying sky lay utterly still. A couple of children darted around the ablution tank. Zia sahib let out a deep sigh: "It was built five hundred years ago. Why start a feud over it now?" We spoke awhile and then quietly began our descent.

*We were climbing the steps when a soldier stopped us. Were we locals or outsiders? Only locals may enter, outsiders must stay out, he insisted*

The fastest train between Sambhal and Moradabad is the Sambhal Hatim Sarai—Moradabad Passenger. It comes in from Moradabad, once in the morning and once in the evening, and then crundles back with its two-and-a-half coaches. Five tiny halts, 47 kilometres and a journey of nearly three hours.

Its passengers are usually people with time on their hands—or people carrying too much luggage. The fare, thirty rupees, is its only real draw; otherwise the bus gets you to Moradabad in an hour and a quarter. The UPSRTC ticket is eighty-four rupees. Buses run all day. The train takes a weekly holiday—Saturday.

I'd planned to reach the station before the evening train, but the day slipped away. Nadeem said a motor-rickshaw wouldn't make it; the approach is too narrow. Best to take a motorcycle. So we cut through the narrow lanes, finally reaching the station. A brick path climbs from an empty ground to the platform. The train had long gone. The doors of rooms with nameplates

had padlocks on them. The platform lay drenched in a deep, echoing silence—but it was well lit.

At the far end, outside the locked stationmaster's office, someone lay on a *charpai* under a mosquito net. Our conversation must have disturbed him; gathering his jacket, he followed us. Munshi is a trackman. By day, he maintains the tracks; by night, he guards the station.

Yes, there's an RPF post, he said; someone comes by during the day, but no one stays at night. The station master doubles as ticket-seller, so once the train leaves, his duty ends.

Of the many details that emerged in conversation, one stood out: nowadays the train has two trackmen on board, who hop off at every level crossing, close the gate, reopen it after the train has passed, and then hop on again. Earlier, the task fell upon the engine driver or the guard. This too explains the long, slow crawl of the journey.

I found myself thinking of priest Mahendra Sharma—nearly 70, yet like so many in the town, he has never taken this train. His lament about Sambhal's sluggish development stayed with me. And then, the very next morning, I read in the paper that the chief minister, in a meeting with officials, had declared that Sambhal's development is a government priority, and that efforts were underway to identify and restore the town's *tirthas* and wells.

Sambhal now has 224 CCTV cameras across 60 locations. On 24 November, the RRF and PAC, along with 16 sector magistrates, the DM and the SSP, carried out precautionary patrols across the town. Drones hovered over areas around the Jama Masjid; the bazaars were mostly subdued.

It was on 24 November last year that violence broke out during a survey of the Jama Masjid, and five people were killed. Speaking to the media, DM Rajendra Pensia remarked, "Sambhal is not what it used to be." Now, who wouldn't wish this may forever be true? ■

Best read in the Hindi original that appeared in the pages of our sister publication, Sunday Navjivan, 30 November

## 'SIR is error-prone by design'

Dr Noor Mohammad served as chief electoral officer of Uttar Pradesh for nine years, followed by another nine years as deputy election commissioner in the Election Commission of India. He was selected by the United Nations to oversee elections in Afghanistan and later served as advisor to the India International Institute of Democracy and Election Management, New Delhi, set up by the ECI. Excerpts from his conversation with Herjinder and Nandlal Sharma:

### On why the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) has become so controversial

No electoral roll can be perfect because people are dynamic. The process of revising voter lists is immensely complicated. Having said that, I believe a series of errors and misjudgements by the ECI has made it controversial.

This SIR cannot be called an enumeration. Earlier, enumerators would visit households, collect information on all the adult members, get the forms signed by the head of the household and submit the details. Voters' lists were prepared on the basis of such enumeration. Now, the ECI is distributing pre-printed forms and demanding supporting documents to prove citizenship.

Another reason for controversy is this: for the first time the onus is on the voters to prove that they are not non-citizens and are thus eligible to vote. In all the past revisions, summary or intensive, the onus was on the Election Commission.

Incorporating provisions of the Citizenship Act in the guidelines for SIR was a mistake. Citizenship is determined by the ministry of home affairs (MHA). Every time the ECI received a complaint about someone on the rolls not being a citizen, the name would be referred to the MHA for inquiry and determination. The Election Commission should not be doing the MHA's job.

On the ECI's refusal to consult political parties before

### launching SIR in Bihar

The Election Commission is a public authority and is required to be transparent. Before implementing any changes, the Commission's practice was to call an all-party meeting, invite and incorporate suggestions. Since the last SIR took place 22 years ago, it was all the more necessary to hold such a meeting.

### On whether this SIR is exclusionary

The end-result will be exclusionary. A large number of eligible electors will be left out. This SIR is error-prone by design as the deadline is too tight, with not enough time for training (before) and corrections (after). It pains me to hear such allegations against the Election Commission of India, which I served and hold in high

esteem. In a country like India, expecting electors to prove their date and place of birth is not practical. A large number of people have no idea how old they are, forget trying to produce a birth certificate.

### On SIR aiming to weed out infiltrators

I am not privy to what the ECI intended to achieve. In my experience, infiltrators tend to live in crowded cities which allow anonymity. Subjecting villagers to a citizenship test does not appear necessary.

Moreover, citizenship is to be determined by the MHA—the ECI need not have waded into this jurisdiction. None of the documents listed by the ECI prove citizenship. Demanding additional documents—which may be difficult or impossible to obtain—from certain groups of people effectively shuts them out of the voting process.

### On the ECI's reluctance to share machine-readable voter lists with political parties

I can't think of any reason why such a list should be denied, especially now that there is a centralised database. Earlier, duplication of voters was detected first at district and then at state level. With centralised lists, the likelihood of central manipulation is certainly higher. That's also why voter lists in machine-readable formats should be shared.

On anomalies such as voters

### living in houses numbered '0' or '00'

I'm surprised to hear that these are notional numbers assigned to the homeless. The problem of homelessness is certainly not new. In Mumbai, for example, for as long as one remembers, the homeless slept on pavements, near lampposts and under flyovers. The ECI had a protocol of numbering the pillars and indicating that the voters named would be available only at night. For more than one person occupying the same spot, the practice was to indicate them as by 1/1, 1/2, 1/3 and so on for pillar number 1.

Marking voters' addresses with a zero is absurd because then nobody can track them.

### On the BLOs' training

I believe the training was limited to briefings on the step-by-step process to be followed. Such briefings are held in batches to cover all the field staff engaged. It is therefore incorrect to assume that each BLO went through 4-5 days of training.

### On the BLOs' ability

It is unfair to expect Anganwadi workers, auxiliary nurse midwives and junior school teachers to become tech-savvy after one short briefing. In most cases, BLOs would seek help, possibly from the Booth Level Agents (BLAs) of political parties. Ruling parties with proactive BLAs stand to gain from this arrangement. This is why the burden of registration should not have been shifted to the voters.

What's more, 30 days is too short a time to complete the exercise.

### On a better alternative

It would have been a better idea to collect data through family enumeration forms, as per the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960. The BLOs would have managed that fairly well. Data entry and uploading could have been done by trained data entry operators at the ERO (Electoral Registration Officer) level with every log-in and log-out punched in. That way, anyone who messed up could be

held accountable.

### On the same elector's photograph appearing multiple times in a constituency, as in the case of the Brazilian model in Haryana

I can only say that there's obviously a failure at some level. In 2003, we noticed that some draft voter lists had abusive words added after the names.

The reason, we found, was that the data entry firm engaged for the purpose had not paid the operators—who expressed their anger in this manner. Mistake or mischief, this can happen at any and every level of data management and maintenance. EPIC contractors or anyone with access could be responsible.

### On tracking the culprits

The Election Commission does maintain a log of everyone accessing the data at any given time. Each one is given a password and all changes made can be tracked. Responsible management of data can fix responsibility. De-duplication software exists, which is capable of spotting similar images and names through phonetic matching algorithms. There's clearly some laxity.

### On electoral rolls displaying 90 or more people living in the same house

There can be several factors: incorrect enumeration, wrong data entry, manipulations to impersonate voters on polling day, failure to assign house numbers... However, the primary responsibility to prepare an accurate and inclusive voters' list rests with the Election Commission.

### On the same house in Bihar registering a large number of voters from different castes and communities living together

In metropolitan cities where migrant workers converge, this may happen, as shared vulnerabilities create more inclusive and secular spaces for survival. In districts in Bihar? It needs to be probed. ■



# An idiot’s guide to Macaulay’s legacy

Hasnain Naqvi on the Sangh Parivar’s politically motivated misreading and the battle over access to knowledge

Delivering the sixth Ramnath Goenka lecture on 17 November, Prime Minister Narendra Modi replayed an old familiar theme of the Sangh Parivar—the exhortation to free India of the ‘Macaulay mindset’, or to use their ‘Indian’ language of choice ‘मैकॉले की मानसिकता से मुक्ति’. The invocation is not new, nor did Mr Modi start it—it has been an integral part of the RSS–Jana Sangh–BJP lexicon for decades. The invocation is convenient for the Parivar because it serves as a dog-whistle against the old Nehruvian–Congress elite who were English-educated and by default secular. It dovetails perfectly with the RSS demand for ‘Bharatiya’ education (भारतीय शिक्षा पद्धति) and the replacement of the ‘Macaulay model’ with something rooted in India’s ancient texts. Most conveniently for the Parivar, in this framing of Macaulay’s legacy and his effect on Indian education, to be ‘anti-colonial’ is to be ‘anti-English’, which segues neatly into their pro-Hindi/Sanskrit cultural nationalism.

But for the Parivar, India is frustratingly diverse, as it has found on several occasions when it has tried to force Hindi down the throats of reluctant Indians who speak a myriad other tongues. The National Education Policy (NEP) is the newest weapon of coercion in this enterprise.

Inconveniently for the BJP–Sangh, Macaulay’s legacy, imperfect as it may be, represents a more meaningful freedom for many Indians, who comprise the ‘bahujan’ majority of anti-caste agitations. For them, this is a deeper conflict over India’s knowledge order—who controls it, who benefits from it and whose histories and aspirations it serves.

Despite Macaulay’s colonial arrogance, many Dalit thinkers have an unshakeable belief that his ‘reforms’ cracked open a caste-sealed system of learning that had kept them out for millennia. Chandra Bhan Prasad—writing recently in the *Indian Express*—reminds us that English education created the first structural breach in the Brahminical monopoly over knowledge.

For these thinkers, Macaulay may have been a colonial supremacist, but he was an accidental emancipator. Historian Ruchira Sharma reminds us that social reformer Savitribai Phule even wrote paeans in praise of Macaulay.



Students seeking admission in Delhi University submit their application forms

Photo: Getty Images

It wasn’t really in Macaulay’s design to open up education in this way—it was a byproduct of his proposed ‘reforms’ to create an intermediary class of Indians, ‘a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinion, in morals and in intellect who would act as interpreters between the British rulers and the millions they governed.’ (from ‘Minute by the Hon’ble T.B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835’, more commonly referred to as ‘Macaulay’s Minute on Education’ or ‘Macaulay’s Minute’.)

### The Dalit embrace

When Dalit intellectuals defend Macaulay, they do so not as acolytes of empire but as critics of caste. For centuries, Manusmriti-based social arrangements reserved literacy, scripture and intellectual life for the upper castes. For Dalits, education—oral, textual, philosophical—was off-limits. When Macaulay pushed for English education, the doors creaked open. Suddenly, Dalits could access the same

*For the ‘bahujan’, this is a deeper conflict over India’s knowledge order—who controls it, who benefits from it and whose histories and aspirations it serves*

language as the ruling classes, the same texts, the same administrative opportunities. English became both an escape hatch and an equaliser.

This is why Chandra Bhan Prasad calls English ‘the greatest gift’ modern India received—not because it was Western, but because it was casteless. A Dalit child learning English did not carry the historical weight of Sanskrit exclusion; the classroom could not easily reproduce the ritual hierarchy of the gurukul. English created India’s first truly

horizontal linguistic sphere—where caste could be disguised, challenged or defied. It became the medium through which Dalits articulated modern democratic claims, from Phule to Ambedkar to post-Mandal political thinkers.

In the ‘bahujan’ imagination, Macaulay is tied to this emancipatory trajectory.

### Arrogance versus practical merit

To acknowledge these benefits is not to romanticise Macaulay, or to deny his

arrogance about the greatness of English—‘I have no knowledge of either Sanscrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value... I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.’

This feature of Macaulay’s legacy has overshadowed the practical merits of what he built—particularly in law and education. His uniform criminal code, drafted through the Indian Penal Code (IPC), was revolutionary not because it was British but because it decisively broke with Manu-smriti’s jurisprudence. India moved from a hierarchical legal regime—with differential punishments based on caste and gender—to a universal framework in which all persons were equal before the law.

Macaulay’s contempt for indigenous knowledge must be condemned, but the system he designed dismantled discriminatory structures deeply embedded in the subcontinent long before colonialism.

### Macaulay versus Manu

The Sangh–BJP invocation of ‘civilizational pride’ often conflates cultural recovery with a revival of ancient hierarchies. Manusmriti’s social and penal codes institutionalised rigid caste segregation, gender inequality and differential punishments.

By contrast, Macaulay’s ‘reforms’, no doubt colonial in design, introduced a uniform criminal law, equality before law, meritocratic entry to administration and access to modern scientific knowledge.

So, what is framed as ‘Western versus Indian’ is perhaps more accurately seen in the post-colonial context as ‘hierarchy versus equality’. Dalit thinkers recognise this distinction sharply but upper caste traditionalists often blur it.

For sure India’s modernity must draw on its own civilisational depth but it must do so without resurrecting structures that Ambedkar described as ‘a system of graded inequality’.

HASNAIN NAQVI is a former member of the history faculty at St. Xavier’s College, Mumbai

## Is the law being misused to gamble away forest land?

In Madhya Pradesh, Telangana, Assam, Maharashtra and Uttarakhand, forest officers are speaking up against flagrant violation of rules, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

Forest departments in several states are resisting the decision to hand forests back to forest dwellers under the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, better known as the FRA.

A growing number of forest officials claim that while the Act was passed with the hope that forest dwellers would continue to protect their forests, in reality the opposite has happened. Underscoring the need to review the provisions of the FRA, they say that market demands and the pressure to cultivate land are behind the huge loss of forests witnessed over the past decade-and-a-half.

In a moment of extravagance, riding his electoral victory and installation as chief minister of Madhya Pradesh for the fourth time running, Shivraj Singh Chouhan had

distributed 1,300 land *pattas* (land lease papers) on a single day. However, once he shifted to Delhi as Union agriculture minister, the Madhya Pradesh forest department took cognisance of this largescale distribution and ordered an inquiry. An incensed Chouhan declared that he was “willing to sacrifice his life for the rights of the tribals”. Nobody would dare evict them, Chouhan told the tribals in his Lok Sabha constituency of Vidisha.

The inquiry was ordered by the Madhya Pradesh forest department on the basis of a complaint lodged by Azad Singh Dabas, a retired divisional forest officer (DFO) who has been singlehandedly waging a war against Chouhan for what he claims is “illegal distribution of forest land for the last 12 years without following due process”.

Dabas told this writer, “The cut-off date

under the Law is 13 December 2005. Besides, land pattas can only be given to those tribals whose families have lived in the forests for three generations. In addition, land can only be allotted after each case is vetted by the district magistrate, the district forest officer and an officer from the ministry of tribal affairs. This due process is not being followed by our politicians because of vote bank politics.”

When Krishna Gaur—another DFO in active service in Madhya Pradesh—refused to lend his signature to this “wholesale loot” taking place under the FRA, he was victimised and not given a posting for six months.

The misuse of the FRA is rampant across many of our forested states including Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh. Foresters allege that

the minutes of meetings are being fabricated and facsimile signatures being used on title deeds. The FRA categorically states that the DFO must physically sign every land transfer. But politicians across several states have found a way out and facsimile signatures have become the norm.

Retired forest service officer M. Padmanabha Reddy has filed a PIL highlighting how the misuse of FRA provisions has led to irreversible environmental damage, with virgin forest lands being encroached upon under political pressure.

Madhya Pradesh is not the only state where forest officers are speaking out against such flagrant violations. In Telangana, under chief minister K. Chandrashekar Rao, widespread irregularities in the distribution of forest land were reported. The gram sabhas and district committees chose to ignore detailed reports of largescale encroachments filed by the district forest officers.

Retired forester P.K. Jha, who headed Telangana’s forest department in 2023, points out that over 11.5 lakh acres of forest land was claimed under FRA, but only 1.6 lakh acres was found eligible for distribution. That did not stop the KCR government from distributing 4.06 lakh acres just before the 2023 state elections.

A matter of grave concern is how the ministry of tribal affairs is no longer willing to accept satellite imagery as ‘independent evidence’ of the denudation of forest areas. Satellite images show a stark contrast between dense tropical forests and cultivated land through distinct colour compositions—clear proof of how much land is being farmed and what remains pristine.

This amendment was made in 2012, points out retired IFS officer Arvind Jha, who served in Maharashtra and was also the chairman of the Scheduled Tribe Certificate Scrutiny Committee. “The rules now state that satellite imagery and other uses of technology may supplement other forms of evidence and shall not be treated as a replacement. This ends up reducing the evidentiary value of the most objective evidence available today,” says Jha.

Probably realising the idiocy of not accepting satellite images as evidence, the Madhya Pradesh government has since backtracked.

Official data of the ministry of tribal affairs (as on 30 November 2024) reveals that over 77 lakh hectares of forest land, almost equal to the area of Assam, has been granted under the FRA since 2008. Individual rights account for 20.54 lakh hectares while the rest comes under community ownership. As populations increase in these scattered enclaves, succeeding generations of forest

dwellers will inevitably expand their holdings, heading towards a point of no return.

There is no dispute that ill-planned development projects cause serious harm to forests. While available data show that 6.33 lakh hectares were diverted for development over 36 years (1980–2016), over three times as much—20.54 lakh hectares—has been granted for habitation and cultivation under the FRA in just the past 16 years.

This is in addition to the 43 lakh hectares of forest lost to agriculture and encroachment between 1950 and 1980 under different government schemes. It can, it seems, no longer be argued that developmental schemes are primarily responsible for causing forest loss.

Rajeev Mehta, honorary wildlife warden of the Rajaji Tiger Reserve in Uttarakhand, cites the example of the Van Gujjars who were granted forest grazing rights over eight decades ago.

In the Shyamprur range of Haridwar district—which forms one boundary of the tiger reserve—he notes that Van Gujjar families settled inside the reserve have grown significantly in number, as has their livestock.

“Today they own over 9,000 buffaloes who are competing for the same grass that sustains the deer and wild elephant populations. As a result, the forest has become severely degraded, the canopy has disappeared and even the river water is now heavily polluted,” Mehta says.

According to Mehta, the children of the Van Gujjars are keen to move out in search of a good education and a good life. “The problem,” he explains, “is that the state government’s rehabilitation scheme applies only to families living inside the forest, not those in the buffer zone. These Van Gujjars live in the buffer zone and so cannot avail of it.”

After 300 families moved out of Corbett Park and Rajaji, the rivers and forests in those areas have begun to recover, which has “proved beneficial for wildlife”, Mehta adds.

The foresters’ claims, however, need to be scrutinised because in several parts of the country, tribals are indeed resisting the felling of their forests.

Evidence suggests that the FRA has caused massive forest loss and fragmentation, even as several NGOs and ecologists continue to push for the ‘democratisation of forests’ by handing them over to gram sabhas.

While foresters agree that forest governance desperately needs reform, some argue that entrusting our national ecological assets to gram sabhas in the hope that they will look after them is a utopian gamble that we can ill afford.



Tribal forest dwellers of Jagdalpur, Chhattisgarh

Photo: Getty Images

*While foresters agree that forest governance desperately needs reform, some argue that entrusting our national ecological assets to gram sabhas is a utopian gamble*



# India and human rights: the (mis)rule of law

India’s seat on the UNHRC has brought much bombast from the government, with little to match it on the ground

Aakar Patel

In October 2025, India was elected to the UN Human Rights Council from Asia, along with Pakistan and Iraq. The UNHRC’s mission statement says it ‘is responsible for strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe’—which presumably includes India as well.

As expected, the Indian government made much of the election, stating that it ‘reflects India’s unwavering commitment to human rights and fundamental freedoms. We look forward to serve this objective during our tenure.’ Of course.

Since there is no point talking in abstract terms, I want to focus on a particular case that will illustrate the condition of human rights in India. India’s conduct on this front should be judged with respect to those whose rights it intentionally violates.

On 22 November 2025, Khurram Parvez completed four years of detention without trial. He sits hundreds of kilometres away from his home in Srinagar, held in Delhi’s Rohini jail, while his wife and two young children wait in Kashmir for a justice system that has refused to move.

His imprisonment has become one of the most emblematic examples of how India’s counter-terrorism law—the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act or UAPA—is being used to silence human rights defenders.

Even in ‘New India’, Jammu and Kashmir remains one of the most heavily militarised regions in the world. While residents live under a government they elected, the central government has hollowed out its powers, as we can see in



The 60th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva

Photo: Getty Images

the bulldozing of Afraz Daing’s house on 27 November, days after the journalist alleged that the former sub-divisional police officer of Jammu (East) was connected with a local family involved in drug trafficking.

Jammu and Kashmir continues to witness punitive home demolitions, unlawful killings, arbitrary arrests under abusive administrative detention laws, illegal surveillance and travel bans. It is a place where people already denied basic rights have been further stripped of their dignity.

For these reasons, Parvez’s work of documenting these abuses was not only necessary, it was indispensable. For two decades, Parvez was considered one of Kashmir’s most respected and renowned human rights voices. I can vouch for this because I have been on global panels where his incarceration has been

discussed with concern.

As programme coordinator of the Jammu Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS), Parvez helped build one of the region’s most credible human rights groups. Through painstaking documentation of torture, indefinite detention and enforced disappearances, JKCCS produced work so rigorous the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights relied extensively on it in their 2018 and 2019 reports on Kashmir.

It is precisely this work that made Parvez a target. On 21 November 2021, the National Investigation Agency (NIA) arrested him on charges of ‘terror funding’, ‘conspiracy’ and ‘waging war against the state’.

Four years later, despite a long list of accusations, his case has not yet gone on trial. Parvez remains jailed with no clarity on when—or whether—he will ever see a courtroom.

He isn’t alone. In March 2023, another

journalist Irfan Mehraj, who was also associated with JKCCS, was arrested in the same case. In August 2023, the NIA raided the home of JKCCS founder Parvez Imroz and summoned him to Delhi for questioning.

Raids and summons without a lawful basis strike at the heart of freedom of association and expression; when accompanied by detention, they threaten the rights to privacy, liberty and security.

International human rights bodies have repeatedly raised concerns. In June 2023, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded that Parvez’s detention was arbitrary and called for his immediate release. To date, Indian authorities have neither complied nor provided any updates to the Working Group.

This is not the first time Parvez has faced reprisals for engaging with the UN. In September 2016, he was blocked from travelling to Geneva to attend a Human Rights Council session and was arbitrarily detained for 76 days. His case has been included in the UN secretary-general’s annual report on reprisals every year since 2018.

In October 2023, UN human rights experts again raised concerns about UAPA, particularly its 180-day pre-trial detention period, which can be further extended. They called this excessive and urged India to reform the law in line with international human rights standards.

JKCCS. Their work owes this to Parvez and to human rights violations faced by hundreds of thousands of Kashmiris for nearly two decades. Today, he is one of the most alarming casualties of the mounting misuse of counter-terrorism laws in India. His case encapsulates the threats faced by human rights defenders everywhere who challenge power and are swiftly branded enemies of the state.

When those who investigate, document or talk about human rights abuses do so under fear of reprisals, India cannot credibly claim to be a country governed by the rule of law.

Parvez should never have been arrested in the first place. A single day in detention would have been an injustice for a human rights defender whose only ‘crime’ has been to document human rights abuses. Yet, he has (at the time of going to press) spent 1,475 days behind bars, and counting.

Every additional day of his detention is a reminder why his immediate release is long overdue.

His cruel detention should educate Indians about the actual position of human rights in India. It is contrary to the bombast put out by our government, preening about its perch on the UN Human Rights Council and pretending it is ‘strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe’.

Views are personal



Kashmiri journalists Khurram Parvez (left) and Irfan Mehraj are both associated with JKCCS

*India cannot credibly proclaim its ‘commitment to human rights’ when those who talk about human rights abuses fear reprisal when they do so*

# America’s phony war on drug trafficking

Operation Southern Spear brings to mind old alarming patterns in the hemisphere, writes Ashok Swain

The United States maintains that it is conducting a war on drugs in the Caribbean, yet the scale and posture of Operation Southern Spear suggest a larger ambition. Warships, aircraft and thousands of troops have been positioned near Venezuela in a show of force that far exceeds what the stated objective might require. Trump has escalated the confrontation in part to demonstrate that he can accomplish in Venezuela what previous US presidents could not—using threat of force to make a breakthrough.

The US military operation has sunk small boats and killed alleged traffickers, but there has been no public evidence linking these vessels to drug shipments and experts have assessed that these boats lacked the stability, fuel capacity and seaworthiness to reach US shores. At the same time, Washington has designated the Venezuelan government a foreign terrorist organisation, offered a \$50 million bounty

for information leading to the arrest of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, and expanded covert CIA operations.

Trump had recently spoken with Maduro and says he is open to meeting him even while insisting that the Venezuelan leader presides over a criminal network. The administration has also gathered senior advisors to discuss possible next steps and maintains that both diplomatic and military options are active. Trump has also threatened that he will soon strike targets inside Venezuela.

These mixed signals suggest a strategy to keep all options open, from an agreement that reshapes Venezuelan politics to a more coercive approach if negotiations stall.

Latin America has seen this pattern before. The US has framed forceful actions as necessary responses to external threats throughout the past century—from the Cold War to the war on terror and now the war on drugs. The rhetoric shifts but the underlying dynamic remains the same.

Pressure campaigns blur into military interventions. These covert or overt operations accompany public demands for regime change. Diplomatic overtures are made in tandem with sanctions and military mobilisation. The region carries the memory of these cycles, and that memory shapes today’s apprehensions.

The Venezuelan opposition is divided. The Nobel Peace Prize for Maria Corina Machado energised many who hope for a transition, and her dedication of the prize to Trump reflects a belief among some factions that external pressure can break the current stalemate. Yet these visions of a rapid political shift following a foreign intervention overlook the reality on the ground.

The Venezuelan state remains heavily securitised, backed by hundreds of militia units and irregular groups that will resist any intrusion. Even if a strike were swift, the aftermath would be unstable, with rival groups competing for control in a

fragmented political landscape.

For ordinary Venezuelans the uncertainty is exhausting. Years of economic collapse and political contestation have left people drained and wary of further upheaval. Many want change but fear that the US military action would make things worse. Each day unfolds in a haze of conflicting rumours and terse statements from abroad, heightening the sense that the future is being shaped elsewhere. Even a limited clash could unleash another massive wave of migration, far beyond what the region can absorb.

This uncertainty has also strengthened the Maduro government’s internal narrative. Maduro loyalists emphasise national defence and warn of foreign aggression to mobilise support across the country. State media highlights militia training exercises and presents the buildup as proof of an external threat to Venezuelan sovereignty. As in past moments of standoff

between Washington and governments in the region, foreign pressure consolidates domestic support rather than eroding it. Hardliners inside Caracas now point to the risk of intervention as justification for tighter controls and greater surveillance.

Regional governments are responding with caution. Colombia’s president has voiced concern that a strike on Venezuela could spill across the border and undermine peace accords in his country. Other Latin American governments acknowledge flaws in Venezuela’s recent election, yet they fear that armed conflict would destabilise the hemisphere and fuel more humanitarian crises. A military confrontation would almost certainly deepen divisions across the region and invite the involvement of outside powers with strategic interests of their own.

The shifting approach in Washington, combining threats with the possibility of talks and negotiations, increases the risk of miscalculation. It can embolden actors inside Venezuela to take risks or misinterpret the intentions of the other side, potentially setting off a chain of events that neither side wants.

The deeper worry is that the hemisphere may once again be drifting into a familiar pattern of action justified by specious urgent claims. Guatemala’s descent into civil war following the 1954 coup, the long shadow over Chile after 1973, the human toll of the Contra war in Nicaragua and the enduring trauma of the Panama invasion all serve as reminders that even short operations can set off long-term instability. Each produced devastating consequences that reshaped regional politics and scarred societies for generations.

Venezuelans have every right to a political future shaped by their own institutions rather than by external force. A path still exists for renewed diplomacy, credible elections and humanitarian relief. But that path narrows when a foreign military buildup overshadows negotiations. Operation Southern Spear may be framed as a counter-narcotics mission, but its scale gives away a much larger design.

ASHOK SWAIN is a professor of peace and conflict research at Uppsala University, Sweden



A US Navy warship arrives in Trinidad and Tobago near the coast of Venezuela, as Washington ratchets up pressure on drug traffickers and Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro (inset); a narco boat hit by US military



*The shifting approach in Washington, combining threats with the possibility of talks and negotiations, increases the risk of miscalculation*

Photos: Getty Images



KARNATAKA IT POLICY 2025–2030:

State's Roadmap For From IT Capital to Deep Tech Powerhouse

The Government of Karnataka has unveiled the Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030, a landmark policy framework designed to cement the state’s leadership in IT and IT-enabled Services (ITeS) while preparing for the next era of global digital transformation. With an ambitious vision, the policy positions Karnataka as a preferred destination for global and domestic enterprises, offering a unique blend of world-class talent, robust infrastructure, innovation-driven ecosystems, and a progressive regulatory environment.

Building on a Legacy of Technological Leadership

Karnataka’s journey in IT began over three decades ago, setting the foundation for India’s software revolution. At the Bengaluru Tech Summit 2025, Shri Siddaramaiah, Hon’ble Chief Minister, reflected on the state’s pioneering role in shaping India’s IT landscape. He highlighted Karnataka’s distinction as the first state to announce an Information Technology Policy in 1997, a move that laid the groundwork for the Millennium IT Policy in 2000. These policies catalyzed a transformation that turned Bengaluru into the “Silicon Valley of India” and positioned Karnataka as the undisputed IT capital of the country.

However, the Chief Minister noted that the global IT landscape is now on the cusp of disruption. “IT as we have known it is undergoing profound transformation. Emerging technologies are reshaping the sector and the very nature of work—faster than anyone could have imagined five years ago,” he said. In response, the Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030 focuses on equipping the ecosystem for emerging technologies, enabling innovation, and fostering grassroots research. The policy aims to be ambitious, inclusive, business-friendly, and future-ready, charting a bold course for Karnataka’s digital future.

A Bold Vision for Employment and Growth

At the heart of the Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030 is an ambitious employment creation target of over 90 lakh direct and indirect jobs across the state. These opportunities extend well beyond Bengaluru, encompassing emerging clusters in Mysuru, Mangaluru, Hubballi-Dharwad, Belagavi, Shivamogga, Tumakuru, and Kalaburagi. The policy recognizes the evolving nature of technology-driven employment and is designed to cover not only traditional IT and ITeS sectors but also frontier technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Quantum Computing, Web3, Blockchain, and Green IT.

The strategy combines expansion of existing companies, incentivization of startups, and development of technology-driven industrial hubs to ensure that the new jobs are inclusive, high-quality, and accessible. A special emphasis is placed on promoting employment opportunities for women, mid-career professionals, and local talent, ensuring that Karnataka’s growth is both equitable and sustainable.

Leading India in Software Exports

Karnataka has long held the distinction of being India’s leading software exporter, and the 2025–2030 policy sets

even higher benchmarks. The state aims to triple its software exports from INR 4.09 lakh crore in 2023–24 to INR 11.5 lakh crore by 2030, reinforcing its position as the nation’s largest software-exporting state.

This ambitious growth will be driven by R&D-led product development, sector-specific clusters, and targeted incentives for export-oriented companies. Karnataka is strategically promoting clusters in high-growth sectors including AgriTech, HealthTech, FinTech, EduTech, Cleantech, AVGC (Animation, Visual Effects, Gaming, Comics), and advanced manufacturing. By focusing on these emerging domains, the state aims to not only increase exports but also enhance its global competitiveness and technological edge.

Driving Emerging Technologies and Innovation

The Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030 is designed to position the state as a hub for deep tech innovation. Initiatives such as the Centre for Applied AI for Tech Solutions (CATS) and Technoverse Integrated Technology Campuses are creating vibrant ecosystems for R&D, product prototyping, immersive labs, and sector-specific innovation zones. These platforms foster cross-sectoral collaboration between industry, academia, and government, nurturing solutions that are scalable, market-ready, and globally competitive.

Karnataka’s approach aligns with national initiatives such as Digital India, Startup India, IndiaAI, and the Semiconductor Mission, ensuring that its innovations integrate seamlessly with India’s broader technology landscape. At the same time, the state is committed to global standards, ensuring compliance with regulations like GDPR and the EU AI Act, and positioning its products and services for international markets.

Inclusive Regional Growth: Beyond Bengaluru

Recognizing that sustainable growth requires development across the state, Karnataka’s policy emphasizes inclusive regional development. The Beyond Bengaluru initiative is central to this strategy, nurturing emerging IT hubs in cities such as Mysuru, Mangaluru, Hubballi-Dharwad, Belagavi, Shivamogga, Tumakuru, and Kalaburagi.

Through strategic infrastructure investments, industry-ready talent pipelines, and innovation clusters, these regions are being transformed into globally competitive IT hubs. By promoting inclusive employment for women, mid-career professionals, and local graduates, Karnataka ensures that the benefits of technological progress extend to every corner of the state.

Shri D.K. Shivakumar, Hon’ble Deputy Chief Minister, emphasized Karnataka’s evolution into one of the world’s most vibrant and diverse technology ecosystems, hosting global enterprises, startups, R&D labs, centres of excellence, and academic institutions. The policy, he noted, promotes balanced, equitable growth, ensuring that investment and opportunity are not concentrated in



Bengaluru alone. He also highlighted Karnataka’s focus on strategic human capital development and deep tech innovation, inviting enterprises to leverage the state’s talent, infrastructure, and innovation-friendly environment.

Anchoring Deep Tech and Future-Ready Talent

Shri Priyank M Kharge, Hon’ble Minister for Electronics, IT, Bt, and Rural Development and Panchayat Raj, reaffirmed Karnataka’s status as the torchbearer of India’s IT revolution, noting that the state’s IT exports have nearly quadrupled over the past decade. He described the Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030 as a bold leap toward establishing Karnataka as a deep tech innovation destination.

The policy is structured around five foundational pillars, collectively known as F.R.A.M.E.:

- Frontier, Future & Emerging Technology – driving innovation in AI, quantum computing, Web3, and more.
- Regional Development – promoting growth and opportunity across Karnataka, beyond Bengaluru.
- Alignment and Acceleration with National and Global Strategies – integrating with programs like Digital India and adhering to global standards.
- Market Creation and Sectoral

Deepening – fostering specialized industry clusters to boost exports and innovation.

Enterprise Facilitation and Ecosystem Orchestration – enhancing ease of doing business, supporting startups, and enabling scaling for IT companies.

Through this framework, Karnataka is investing in infrastructure, human capital, business continuity, and industry promotion, while introducing measures to encourage the return of global talent, ensuring the state

remains competitive and future-ready.

Dr. Manjula N., IAS, Secretary to Government, Department of Electronics, IT, Biotechnology, and Science & Technology, highlighted that the policy reaffirms Karnataka’s commitment to maintaining its position as India’s foremost technology powerhouse. Bengaluru continues to serve as the nerve centre of India’s innovation landscape, spearheading advancements in core and emerging technologies. Yet, what

emerging domains such as AI, cybersecurity, and quantum computing. Karnataka is now prepared to partner with



exports. Its talent ecosystem is reinforced by premier institutions such as the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), International Institute of Information Technology Bangalore (IIIT-B), and National Institute of Technology Karnataka (NITK).

Infrastructure plays a pivotal role in Karnataka’s success. The state was the first in India to establish an extended international gateway and Network Operations Centre (NOC) at the STPI Bengaluru facility in Electronic City. Decentralized STPI sub-centres across Mysuru, Mangaluru, Manipal, Davanagere, and Hubballi further promote balanced, regional IT growth, complementing Karnataka’s strategic initiatives to develop innovation hubs beyond Bengaluru.

The Beyond Bengaluru initiative ensures that investment, innovation, and employment are not confined to the capital. By nurturing emerging IT hubs, Karnataka is generating high-value employment opportunities and supporting inclusive regional development—a model that sets an example for other states in India.

A Launchpad for the Technologies of Tomorrow

With its robust ecosystem, world-class talent, strategic infrastructure, and forward-looking policy framework, Karnataka is more than just an IT hub—it is the launchpad for the technologies of tomorrow. The Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030, coupled with initiatives like Beyond Bengaluru, reflects the state’s commitment to inclusive growth, regional development, and deep tech innovation.

For global enterprises, startups, and technology leaders seeking growth, innovation, and access to world-class talent, Karnataka offers unmatched opportunities to be part of a transformative digital journey. From AI and quantum computing to Web3, blockchain, and Green IT, the state is cultivating an ecosystem where innovation thrives, businesses scale, and talent leads the way.

Looking Ahead: A Future-Ready Karnataka

The Karnataka IT Policy 2025–2030 embodies a bold, inclusive, and future-ready vision. It balances Bengaluru’s continued global leadership with statewide innovation, regional development, and frontier technology advancement. By prioritizing emerging technologies, nurturing talent, fostering collaborative ecosystems, and facilitating ease of doing business, Karnataka is poised to remain India’s IT powerhouse and a global hub of technological innovation for the next decade and beyond.

As Karnataka charts this ambitious course, it invites the world to invest, innovate, and thrive in a state where technology, talent, and policy converge to create opportunities that are transformative, inclusive, and globally competitive. Karnataka is not just shaping the future of IT in India—it is defining the next era of digital innovation worldwide.

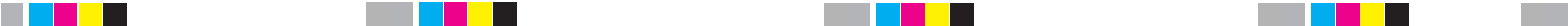
industry, startups, academia, and investors to build a globally competitive digital economy.

Karnataka’s IT Ecosystem: A Model of Excellence

Karnataka has long been recognized as India’s IT powerhouse. The state is home to over 5,500 IT and ITeS companies, including nearly 750 multinational corporations, and accounts for 43.67% of India’s total software

distinguishes Karnataka is the diverse talent and infrastructure across the state, helping it consistently top the NITI Aayog India Innovation Index.

Dr. Manjula noted that status quo is not an option. With the IT/ITeS sector poised for disruption, the policy focuses on strengthening industry-academia linkages, digital inclusion, and workforce readiness in





# The republic of toddy

How a drink from Kerala’s backwaters holds the memory of caste, class and resistance

K.A. Shaji

On winter mornings in Kuttanad, in Kerala’s Alappuzha, when mist hangs low over the narrow canals of its backwaters, you can smell toddy long before a soul is awake. It’s the lingering scent of the night’s last fermentation—mildly sweet, slightly sour, unmistakably alive. It wafts through coconut groves, crosses flooded bunds and settles over paddy fields. In those first fragile minutes of daylight, toddy feels like it’s the land itself flirting with the rising sun.

From a low slung built on wooden stilts, shallots crackle in coconut oil. Pepper is crushed on stone. Dried chillies hiss as they meet hot oil. A clay stove behaves like an ancient animal coaxed awake. Here is where Kerala’s mornings truly begin—in its toddy shops.

In Kerala, toddy is more than a drink. It is generational memory, sensory geography, social contract, working-class archive, political battlefield... It is a republic built on the backs of barefoot climbers, of cooks who stood in smoky kitchens mastering the simmering pots.

No toddy shop embodies this world more intimately than Nedumudy’s legendary New York Toddy Shop in Kuttanad—a maze of canals, shimmering polders and houseboats that move like slow rumination.

Outsiders are amused by the name ‘New York’. For locals, the name evokes respect for a shop that grew from a reed-roofed hut into its own legend, its story retold by boatmen. K.V. Kuttappan, the founder, was a toddy tapper who once worked in the Gulf. He befriended a Malayali who had returned from America—the words ‘New York’ stayed with him. So, when he opened his shop, on a bund so fragile that even goats stepped carefully, that was the name he chose.

“This is the world headquarter of tastes,” he apparently said. “Let the world

come and stand right here.”

And it did. Boatmen finishing their rounds at dawn, paddy workers wearing the smell of slush, newlyweds, filmmakers—everyone converged at New York. As crowds grew, annexes sprang up like mangrove roots—San Francisco, Chicago, Washington DC, Portland, Alaska—bamboo-walled rooms perched on stilts.

“Why fly to America?” the owner jokes. “We made our America here. Toddy is our passport.”

But the real passport is the food.

Karimeen pollichathu arrives wrapped in a steamed banana leaf parcel. Turmeric, pepper, garlic, chilli, lime and coconut oil rise as a single aroma. The pearl spot’s flesh yields at the slightest touch.

“The fish here tastes of the lake itself,” says K.C. Ulahannan, the cook, as he stirs duck roast with long, patient strokes. “You eat it and you know where you are.”

The duck roast is an edible biography of Kuttanad: slow-cooked, darkened by roasted spices, held together by green chilli and black pepper.

Crab roast glows deep brown with coconut. Beef *perattu*, in the Irinjalakuda-Chalakudy style, is shredded, smoky, almost perfumed. *Kakka thoran* carries the scent of low tide, the image of women gathering clams at dawn with bare hands. Tapioca with *meen* curry is the centrepiece of every table.

Everything in a toddy shop is about a gentle intoxication that waxes softly and wanes slowly.

“One glass makes you remember your body,” says James Joseph, a boatman in Nedumudy. “Two down, you forget everything else.”

The journey to the shops is part of the ritual. You glide through canals where egrets stand. Men transplant paddy in waist-deep fields of water. Children cannonball into sunlit channels. The river carries conversations, gossip, laughter. You tie your boat to a palm root, climb a



Photo: Getty Images

Everything in a toddy shop is about a gentle intoxication that waxes softly and wanes slowly

In this quiet Thrissur village in the late 1940s and early 1950s, toddy workers began organising in the midst of land agitation, caste reform and the early communist movement. Meetings took place under palm trees after dark. Pamphlets travelled secretly between hands. Young workers seething with anger found respite in collective action. Strikes erupted. Tappers refused to cut the flowers, choking the supply chain where it hurt most.

M.K. Velayudhan, a veteran tapper from Anthikkad, recalls: “We were nothing before the contractors. The union taught us to stand straight.”

The movement spread quickly—through Kuttanad, Kodungallur, Irinjalakuda, Kollazhy, Alappuzha, Kollam—turning the state’s backwaters into arteries of rebellion. Toddy shops became union halls. Kitchens fed strikers. Recipes became instruments of solidarity: steaming rice, *karimeen* stew, fish curry ladled into steel plates.

In these smoky rooms, Kerala’s communist rhetoric was shaped not by theoretical treatises but by rope-belts, injuries, hunger, debt and daily risk.

If politics fermented in Anthikkad, supply pulsed from Chittur in Palakkad—Kerala’s toddy heartland. Chittur’s plains were lined with palms as far as the eye could see. Tankers left before dawn. Contractors operated with military precision. Tamil migrants worked seasonally, living in makeshift huts near the groves.

Since then, climate change has damaged this ecosystem. Hotter summers weaken palms. Drought stretches sap thin. Industrial demands drain groundwater. Entire belts of palms have become unproductive.

“Palm trees get tired too,” says K.G. Kannadas, a tapper in Nallepilly. “When the sun becomes cruel, the sap becomes thin.”

Adulteration scandals scarred Kerala. There are tales of poisoning, hospitalisations, raids. Old-timers recount infamous variants: Jesus Christ, the bottle that brought redemption after three days; Anamayakki, so strong it was called the Elephant Tamer; Manavatti, sweet but treacherous...

Yet pure toddy is almost medicinal. Neera, its non-alcoholic sibling, is now promoted as a wellness drink. Leave neera alone for a few hours, and it turns into toddy, sure as sunrise.

Another silent revolution is unfolding today: women enter toddy shops without guilt, shame or second glances. In New York’s family rooms, Mullappanthal’s bright dining hall, Karimbunkala’s open-air grove, Kadamakkudy’s island shops—women sit with the same ease men once fiercely guarded.

“Why should flavour be a man’s property?” asks P.K. Manjusha of Kainakary, sipping from her glass. “We work hard. We want joy too.”

Tourism has added its own undercurrent. Houseboats deliver foreign tourists, who sniff cautiously at toddy before taking a sip. Food bloggers descend with ring lights. Five-star hotels design ‘toddy shop platters’, curated versions that locals dismiss as sterile.

“Toddy needs the smell of mud,” a boatman tells me. “Hotel plates cannot give that.”

Authenticity holds its ground. At Mapranam near Irinjalakuda, beef *ularthiyathu* gleams with roasted coconut. At Mullappanthal in Udayamperoor, queues form before noon. At Karimbunkala, the lake breeze carries the smell of duck roast into the road. In Kadamakkudy, fresh fish hold the shimmer of the water they lived in.

Toddy shops remain Kerala’s most democratic spaces. Farm workers sit beside landowners, fishermen next to software engineers. Migrant labourers share tables with tourists. Friendships bloom. Someone admits heartbreak; another celebrates a wage increase. Someone argues about politics; another walks out to cool off. The toddy shop becomes a village parliament without formal rules, held together by food, drink and unspoken recognition.

As evening glides across the canals, the water glows copper. Fires burn red. Cooks wipe sweat off their necks. Ladies strike pans with metronomic certainty. The first pour of evening toddy settles into bell-shaped glasses shaped for a tapper’s grip—wide at the base, warm in the hand. ■



slippery step and enter the thick embrace of smoke, spice and chatter.

The story of toddy is older and heavier than you see. It’s rooted deeply in caste and resistance. Toddy tapping was long the hereditary occupation of Ezhavas and Thiyyas—communities that lived at the margins, their labour exploited by contractors and feudal structures that treated tappers as expendable. Long before safety belts or unions, tappers climbed towering palms with rope coils and bare palms hardened from childhood.

“Every time we climbed, we left our lives at the foot of the tree,” says P.P. Govindan, an elderly tapper from Cherthala. “We never knew if we would come back down.”

Many did not. Falls were common. Lifelong injuries were accepted as fate. Wages were meagre. Respect scarce. Exploitation routine.

Then came Anthikkad.



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