

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

RNI: DELENG/2017/73913, Postal Reg. No. DL(C)-14/1410/2026-28 Magazine Post Reg. No. DL(DS)-30/MP/2025-26-27 License To Post Without Pre Payment No. U(C)-126/2023-25

www.nationalheraldindia.com www.facebook.com/nationalheraldindia/ @NH_India www.navjivanindia.com, www.qaumiaawaz.com

New Delhi • 18 January 2026 • Pages: 8 • National • Vol. 9 Issue 14 • ₹20

NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

STATES 360°

West Bengal, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Kerala

► P2,3,4



HOME & ABROAD

IS THE REVOLUTION BEING HIJACKED?

Real change in Iran cannot come from one form of tyranny replacing another

► P3



HOME & ABROAD

OUR SILENCE ADDS INJURY TO INSULT

Or why we should take another's public humiliation personally

► P6



Who cares for India's workers?

Hasty legislation weakens the rights of the urban and rural workforce as India faces mounting US trade demands

Arun Kumar

The timing of two recent Bills, introduced hastily and passed equally hastily by Parliament, has puzzled most observers. What prompted the ruling party to suddenly implement the Labour Codes which were enacted in 2019 and 2020? Why was there such hurry and stealth to replace the MGNREGA with VB-GRAM-G? They did not make much sense beyond the usual rhetoric of structural reforms and modernising the economy.

The objective of both these acts is however becoming clearer—they diminish the bargaining power of labour and depress wages. Workers, farmers and the opposition have been quick to join the dots, prompting nationwide protests. With over 600 million workers in rural and urban India, their resistance could become formidable if mobilised effectively.

Some key questions persist: will there be adverse political consequences for the ruling party? Can rural and urban workers do what the farmers did? Can they force the government to roll back the twin changes designed to weaken them?

The Labour Codes curtail the bargaining power of workers, weaken trade unions and strip individual workers of protection from exploitation by employers.

The MGNREGA, though imperfect, did bolster rural poor employment and incomes. Despite low wages (often less than the minimum wage) and a limit of a maximum of 100 days of work per adult member of a family (approximately 20 days of wages per family member per year), it supplemented incomes in times of crises, like the Covid-19 pandemic. Though it offered only 50 days of work on average as against the promised 100—due to underfunding—it still offered relief to marginalised communities.

The government, while justifying the changes, now argues that the Labour Codes will protect workers' rights and the VB-G-RAM-G will benefit farm workers by increasing workdays from 100 to 150. The Centre has proposed raising the allocation to Rs 95,692 crore from Rs 86,000 crore in 2024-25.

But if the states are unable to spend Rs 55,590 crore, given their weak budgetary position and high debt, the Centre will also spend less, effectively reducing the total allocation to well below that of 2024-25.

In effect, this transition from a demand-driven MGNREGA to a supply-constrained scheme will allow the Centre to decide on allocations and subject the states to its political whims. Despite giving a pro-labour



Photo: Getty Images

Grim future Cheap imports will drive agriculture prices below the MSP, worsening farmers' losses

spin to the changes, the reforms are inherently designed to weaken labour both in the agriculture and non-agriculture sectors.

Historically, workers' movements in India have been weak with 94 per cent of the workforce in the unorganised sector. They lack bargaining power to demand increase in wages in line with inflation—the data of which itself is suspect since it is outdated. The low and declining share of wages in output tells its own tale. Technological advances are further reducing work availability.

Why then the sudden move to weaken labour? The elephant in the room is US President Trump's bullying and its consequences for the Indian economy. On the one hand, labour-intensive exports are getting impacted while on the other the US is demanding opening up of much of the Indian agriculture sector which, once conceded, will adversely impact the income of around 50 per cent Indians.

The changes strive to address these two threats to the Indian economy. The new Labour Codes address the non-agriculture sector while VB-GRAM-G addresses the challenge to agriculture. In both cases, the

Indian government is seeking to put the burden of Trump's demands on labour.

Indian businesses are keen on an early trade agreement with the US. But Trump's demand that India reduce Russian crude imports and open up the agriculture sector are politically fraught issues.

Yet, India has been caving in to Trump's demands. Last year's budget saw a cut in several import duties, increased import of energy from the US, mention of increase in import of defence equipment, and suspension of import duty on cotton.

The SHANTI Bill, passed hastily in the recent winter session of Parliament, reduces the liability of nuclear equipment suppliers to enable US suppliers to sell to India. The current buzz in Washington is to levy up to 500 per cent tariff on countries importing Russian oil. No trade will then be possible.

High tariff (up to 50 per cent) on India's exports to the US have made them uncompetitive, forcing exporters to slash profit margins and/or cut wages. Exporters are routing part of their trade through third countries like the UAE, with lower tariffs. But this requires paying intermediaries. This impacts profit margins. Exporters have been hurting due to the declining trend of exports in the last few months. They have however

been helped a little by the decline in the value of the rupee since it leads to a decline in the dollar price without cutting the rupee price. It is through this prism that one has to understand why the RBI is enabling the fall of the rupee versus the dollar.

But none of this would be required if Trump reduces tariffs on Indian goods.

Sanctions on Russian oil companies have led to cuts in the import of crude oil (a partial compliance with US demand) but tariff reduction still remains elusive. This suggests there is no escaping a trade agreement with the US and that almost certainly requires opening up of the agriculture sector. Would policy makers under pressure from businesses sacrifice the interest of Indian agriculture and milk markets?

Can Indian farmers compete with heavily subsidised EU and US farmers? Cheap imports will drive agriculture prices below the MSP, worsening farmers' losses. That is why squeezing wages and increasing input subsidies become a strategic move.

The VB-GRAM-G Bill reduces real farm wages. This is in line with the demand of well-off farmers for dilution of MGNREGA which, according to them, caused shortage of labour and higher wages. The new Bill caters to this demand by giving exemptions in the peak harvest and sowing seasons.

Should the wealthier farmers be happy then? Not really, since the gain from lower farm wages will be far less than what the farmers will lose due to cheaper imports.

Finally, there is no certainty that Trump, in his current antagonistic mood towards India, will lower tariffs at par with India's competitors. The US has been drifting away from a strategic partnership with India. Given this ambiguity, should the government even think of opening up the agriculture markets?

The weakening of labour is therefore no accident. It is designed to prepare the ground, and is possibly a signal for the eventual capitulation to Trump. Depressed real wages and the likely opening up of Indian agriculture will widen inequality in India, weaken demand, and adversely impact investment, employment and rate of growth of the economy. This will obviously harm workers and farmers. However, instead of coming to their rescue, the ruling party has chosen to protect the interests of business. ■

ARUN KUMAR taught Economics at JNU and is the author of Indian Economy's Greatest Crisis: Impact of the Coronavirus and the Road Ahead

The weakening of labour is no accident. It is designed to prepare the ground, and possibly a signal, for the eventual capitulation to Donald Trump

SIR A purge and a voter list made to order

Who decided that the 6.5 crore names deleted no longer count as voters—and by what authority, asks **Anand Teltumbde**

On 27 October 2025, the Election Commission of India launched a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls across nine states and three Union Territories (after a test run in Bihar). By early January 2026, provisional lists revealed an astonishing outcome: nearly 6.5 crore citizens had been removed from the rolls.

India has not witnessed a net decline in registered voters of this magnitude since the introduction of universal adult franchise in 1950—not during wars, not during famines, not even during the COVID-19 pandemic that claimed millions of lives. The scale of deletion alone rules out benign explanations.

The question before the republic is no longer administrative but existential: if the State can erase 6.5 crore citizens without census data, without parliamentary debate, without transparent criteria and without meaningful due process, does universal adult franchise exist as a right—or merely as a constitutional ornament?

A net decline of such magnitude can be explained by only three phenomena: mass death, mass emigration or mass



Photo: Getty Images

India has not witnessed a net decline in registered voters of this magnitude since 1950

disenfranchisement.

India has experienced none of these. Even the most expansive estimates of excess COVID-19 deaths—figures the state has resisted acknowledging—fall far short. More tellingly, the pandemic's peak lies years behind us. If mortality were the cause, deletions would have peaked then, not now.

Internal migration offers no escape from this arithmetic. Migrants do not lose citizenship by moving; they merely change location. Migration complicates voter registration, but it cannot shrink the electorate by tens of millions unless the

system is designed to exclude itinerants rather than accommodate them.

Only one explanation remains: this is political engineering of the electorate. The central question is therefore not how the Election Commission executed the deletions, but who decided that these 6.5 crore people no longer count as voters—and by what authority.

Electoral roll revision is a routine democratic exercise. It adds new voters, removes the deceased based on records and corrects errors. It is incremental, cautious and overwhelmingly additive. Democracies assume that electorates grow.

The SIR departs radically from this logic. It is subtractive. Most critically, it reverses the constitutional burden of proof. Instead of the State establishing grounds for deletion, citizens are required to prove their continued eligibility.

This inversion is not procedural trivia—it is constitutional sabotage. Universal adult franchise rests on the presumption of inclusion. The State must prove death, duplication or loss of citizenship. The SIR replaces this presumption with suspicion. Voting ceases to be a right flowing from citizenship and becomes an administrative privilege, contingent on documentation, deadlines and bureaucratic discretion.

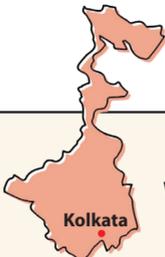
A right that must be periodically re-earned is no longer a right.

The decade-long absence of a national census is not incidental to this mass deletion—it is its enabling condition. A census is the epistemic foundation of democracy.

Electoral roll revision is a routine democratic exercise. It is incremental and additive. The SIR, on the other hand, is subtractive

► Continued on page 2

STATES 360° WEST BENGAL



Mamata versus the Election Commission of India

Shikha Mukerjee

It's not yet clear if the Election Commission of India has taken disciplinary action against Mousam Sarkar, the Assistant Electoral Registration Officer (AERO) who resigned on 8 January after publicly protesting against the SIR process.

In his resignation letter addressed to the Chief Electoral Officer, the block development officer stated that many of the discrepancies in names, spellings and dates that had occurred during the Intensive Revision of 2002 in Bengal were corrected by voters using Form 8, in accordance with ECI rules. Ditto in cases of age-related discrepancies. Those same discrepancies were now being flagged as 'logical discrepancies'. Summoning voters for 'hearings' on these grounds was both unnecessary and unfair, said Sarkar.

The West Bengal CEO told media that as an employee of the ECI, the AERO could have raised his concerns through 'proper channels'. By airing his grievance publicly, he was, it seems, guilty of gross insubordination and had made himself liable for suitable

punishment.

The case of the recalculated AERO is among various issues flagged by chief minister Mamata Banerjee. The escalating confrontation over the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) has seen the chief minister shooting off as many as five letters to Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar in the first fortnight of January.

Banerjee has accused the ECI and the CEO of sharing lists of deleted voters only with the BJP. She pointed out that the CEO had

The escalating confrontation over SIR has seen Mamata Banerjee shoot off as many as five letters to Gyanesh Kumar



Mamata Banerjee leads a protest against SIR in North 24 Paraganas

passed on instructions to revise and change processes on WhatsApp. She flagged that vehicles had been intercepted in Bankura and several other districts, carrying BJP leaders and thousands of pre-filled forms (Form 7) meant to delete voters in bulk. In its own guidelines issued in October 2025, the ECI had stipulated that no BLA (booth level agent) may submit more than 50 Form 7

publications of the draft list, and no more than 10 per day thereafter.

How, then, were thousands of these forms being carted around? And why has the ECI deployed micro-observers only in West Bengal? (Her party believes micro-observers have been pressurising officials to delete names.) If a BLO is mandated to visit each voter three times during the SIR, and the ECI has already obtained, completed and

signed enumeration forms, what justifies calling voters to offices located 10–15 kilometres or more away?

She has also exhorted people to demand receipts for documents submitted and objected to senior citizens being summoned for 'hearings'.

Among those summoned are Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, a host of sports persons who represented India internationally, celebrated poet Joy Goswami, a 104-year-old voter from Murshidabad Haru Sheikh, and Members of Parliament, past and present. That they have to establish their bona fides and correct minor errors made in the past, often by ECI officials themselves, is shocking.

Even more distressing is that lakhs of voters—who are not VIPs—have no option but to verify themselves the hard way. The unusually biting cold this year has added to the distress, with several voters reported to have fallen dead at the camps. The ECI's identification of 54 lakh 'unlogged' voters and 1.3 crore cases of 'logical discrepancies', coupled with its insistence on physical verification at camps, has led to confusion and

chaos. By creating various categories of voters, the ECI has turned the verification process into a nightmare.

There are also reports that verification and hearing notices have been selectively issued to voter concentrations in specific constituencies, a charge made by CPI(M) state secretary Mohammad Salim. Additionally, reports indicate that carloads of Forms 7 and 8—used to object to the inclusion of a voter's name and to seek corrections of particulars—have been found.

At the last count, only 6.6 per cent of 1.3 crore voters who are to be 'heard' and 'detected-deleted-deported' or reinserted into the voters list have been dealt with by the ECI. With the deadline of 7 February around the corner, Mamata Banerjee has demanded an extension.

The BJP has accused the Trinamooli cadre of intimidating Booth Level Officers and slammed the Election Commission for failing to ensure their safety. Party leaders have also blamed the ECI for targeting whistle-blowers and demanded that the Chief Election Commissioner personally visit the state to hear grievances. ■

SIR A purge and a voter list made to order

Continued from page 1

It establishes demographic facts against which representation, welfare and electoral rolls are verified. By refusing to conduct a census for over a decade, the State has dismantled this foundation. There is now no authoritative benchmark against which the EC's claims can be tested.

In this vacuum, numbers acquire an oracular status: asserted, not validated.

The irony is brutal. A State that demands documents to prove citizenship refuses to document its own population. Papers are demanded selectively and weaponised against the vulnerable. Conducted without census data, the SIR process expresses sovereign power unmoored from empirical accountability.

When the State can remove 6.5 crore people from the electoral rolls without proving that they have died, emigrated or lost citizenship, it is editing it.

*

Administrative exercises never operate on neutral terrain. They carry a sociology. Who survives them depends on who has documents, stable addresses, literacy to navigate forms, time to contest errors and lives that leave paper trails that the State recognises as legitimate.

Those most vulnerable to deletion are entirely predictable: migrant workers with shifting addresses; the urban and rural poor living in informal housing; Dalits and Adivasis whose historical exclusion translates into thin documentary records; Muslims whose citizenship has been rendered perpetually suspect through NRC-CAA discourse; informal-sector workers whose labour leaves no bureaucratic trace; and citizens whose

precarious lives do not generate the paperwork modern governance demands.

These are precisely the populations Indian democracy has struggled to include and that are electorally inconvenient to the ruling powers. They vote disproportionately against incumbents, resist nationalist mobilisations and benefit least from welfare regimes. That they are also the first to disappear from electoral rolls is neither coincidence nor accident.

The quiet rewriting of citizenship

Voting rights now hinge on citizenship being demonstrated to administrative satisfaction. This shift has occurred without parliamentary debate, without legislation, without constitutional amendment. Universal adult franchise remains intact on paper while being hollowed out in practice through circulars, verification protocols and any administrative fiat.

The deeper crisis is institutional. The Election Commission was conceived as a counter-majoritarian authority, tasked with protecting electoral integrity from executive interference. Its authority rested on public trust earned through restraint and impartiality.

That authority is now gravely compromised. By presiding over mass deletions without census data, transparent criteria or credible public justification—with effects that fall overwhelmingly on marginalised populations—the Commission has ceased to function as neutral referee. Institutional capture through manipulated appointments and an internal culture of deference has made it a participant in a project to reengineer the electorate.

The pattern is visible well beyond the SIR: asymmetric enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, indulgence toward ruling-party violations, silence on inflammatory rhetoric and compliance in matters such as electoral bonds.

Defenders argue that deletions can be corrected through objections and re-verifications. This misses the point. The problem is not error but design. The scale ensures mass exclusion; the speed precludes verification; the opacity blocks scrutiny; and the burden is placed on those least equipped to bear it.

Asking 6.5 crore citizens to 'reapply' for their vote converts a constitutional right into a remedial permit.

These 'remedies' themselves reproduce inequality. They require literacy, time,

money, access and persistence—resources the excluded do not possess.

What is being revised, finally, is not the electoral roll but the meaning of who belongs. The political logic is plain. Large segments of the population are 'managed' through welfare. Food rations, cash transfers, housing schemes, fuel subsidies—all delivered as favours.

In such a regime, voting is expendable—and sometimes inconvenient. A population 'disciplined' through welfare dependency may vote on grievance rather than gratitude, demand more than survival schemes offer or support forces that challenge the distributional and ideological order. For a regime that governs through calculated 'generosity', electoral agency becomes a liability.

Mass deletion from electoral rolls is therefore not a contradiction of welfare politics but its logical complement. Those who cannot vote can still be governed; those without electoral power can still receive benefits.

Indeed, benefits become easier to manage when they are detached from political bargaining and delivered administratively. The ideal subject of this order is not the citizen but the beneficiary—compliant, grateful and silent. What emerges is a decisive shift. Democracy presumes that power flows upwards from citizens to the State.

What makes this moment especially dangerous is its procedural camouflage. There are no emergency proclamations, no suspended constitutions, no tacks on the streets. Instead, it's a silent attack through databases, verification protocols and administrative circulars.

The fabric of democracy painstakingly woven over seven decades is frayed through acts presented as technical necessity. This is authoritarianism without the spectacle.

The technocratic framing isn't incidental. When disenfranchisement is presented as electoral 'clean-up' rather than political exclusion, resistance dissipates. Citizens are more likely to accept loss of rights described as clerical error. Administrative language anesthetises deliberate democratic damage. Overt repression and declared emergencies provoke opposition; procedural normalisation does not.

When millions vanish from electoral rolls through spreadsheets, transformation occurs below the threshold of outrage, accumulating until reversal becomes politically unthinkable.

Universal franchise was our republic's founding rupture with colonial rule—the principle that transformed subjects into citizens and made the people's vote the source of legitimacy.

When tens of millions lose voting rights through administrative action, that foundation is breached. The crucial question is no longer who will win elections, but who will be allowed to participate in them.

Democracies that begin by excluding inconvenient voters rarely stop there. They proceed, step by procedural step.

The deletion of 6.5 crore voters is a constitutional crisis. When voters become editable, citizenship provisional and rights revocable by procedure, democracy survives only as shell—its language intact, its substance gone. ■

ANAND TELTUMBDE is a writer and civil rights activist. Republished with permission from The Wire

STATES 360° PUNJAB



Religious summons and political rehearsals

Herjinder

In Punjab's political theatre, controversies rise and fade with remarkable speed. Yet, three weeks into the new year, one issue has dominated all others: chief minister Bhagwant Mann's appearance before the Akal Takht. The summons was the result of a cluster of controversies, largely rooted in Mann's outspoken remarks, which the Akal Takht felt transgressed the sanctity of Sikh tradition. It also sought an explanation for a video that Mann and his party described as fabricated.

For Mann and the Aam Aadmi Party, this posed an unfamiliar test. Their initial response revealed their uncertainty; a party spokesperson even accused the Shiromani Akali Dal of using the SGPC as a political tool. Mann himself first insisted that he would appear only if the proceedings were broadcast live—a demand the Akal Takht rejected, unwilling to turn a solemn religious forum into a reality show. As the seriousness of the moment sank in, internal dissent faded, and Mann announced he would appear barefoot and submit his explanation.

History offers some perspective here. Four Punjab chief ministers, including Mann—and even President Giani Zail Singh—have previously been summoned by the Akal Takht. What made this instance different was the venue. Mann was asked to appear before the Akal Takht Secretariat, not its *fasil* or platform, on the grounds that he is not an Amritdhari Sikh and was therefore termed a '*patiti*' Sikh. This distinction opened a deeper fault line: can every non-Amritdhari Sikh be labelled thus?

The controversy widened within the SGPC itself. Former president Bibi Jagir Kaur wrote to the current president Harjinder Singh Dhani, and Akal Takht Jathedar Kuldeep Singh Gargaj, arguing that his mere presence violated Sikh sanctity, since only an Amritdhari Sikh can be summoned by the Akal Takht.

When Mann finally arrived on 15 January, he carried two bags, reportedly containing documents to prove his innocence. After the hearing, Jathedar Gargaj told the media that the chief minister had shown humility, accepted fault on several counts and acknowledged that certain statements should not have been made.

With that, the immediate political din subsided. But the matter itself remains unresolved. The full record of Mann's appearance will now go before the five Singh Sahibans (*punj pyaras*), whose judgment—punishment or acquittal—will determine how this chapter ultimately ends.

Political circus

This year, the annual Maghi Mela at Muktsar Sahib was less a religious congregation and more a crowded political circus. With the sole exception of the Congress, every major party in Punjab erected its own pavilion and staged large rallies. As a result, news flowing out of an



Punjab chief minister Bhagwant Singh Mann before Jathedar Giani Kuldeep Singh Gargaj

event commemorating the 40 martyrs of the Battle of Muktsar was more political than spiritual.

The largest show was mounted by the Aam Aadmi Party. Its opulent pavilion had already attracted attention, amid allegations that nearly 1,600 buses were arranged to ferry supporters. Alongside the chief minister and his cabinet colleagues, senior leader Manish Sisodia was also present. Mann's speech made headlines when he referred to the recovery of 169 out of 328 missing copies of the Guru Granth Sahib from the SGPC, a remark that also appeared to generate sympathy on the eve of his appearance before the Akal Takht.

For AAP, Muktsar Sahib is familiar political ground. The party had used the 2016 Maghi Mela as a launchpad when it was still new to Punjab. This year's mobilisation carried echoes of that moment, with an eye firmly on the 2027 assembly elections.

The Shiromani Akali Dal, led by Sukhbir Badal, was not far behind. Taking the stage, Badal reeled off a series of assurances that effectively resembled a draft manifesto for the next elections.

For the first time, the BJP also set up a separate stage. Previously, it had shared space with the Akali Dal at such events. Union Minister Anurag Thakur, Ravneet Singh Bittu, Punjab BJP president Sunil Jakhhar and Haryana Chief Minister Jayrab Singh Saini—once again wearing a saffron turban—were present. In Punjab's political circles, Saini's frequent appearances at religious events are seen as part of the BJP's attempt to carve out space in the state. The stage rang with praise for the 'double-engine government', though the crowd was thinner than at other rallies.

Simranjit Singh Mann's Akali Dal (Amritsar) and Waris Punjab De—the party of MP Amritpal Singh, currently jailed in Dibrugarh under the NSA—also held their own programmes.

The Congress alone stayed away. Citing a 2017 Akal Takht *hukumnama* (edict) against political events on religious occasions, state party chief Amarinder Singh Warring said the Congress did not believe in mixing religion with politics.

Absence does not mean irrelevance. With elections still a year away, the political churn set in motion at Muktsar will no doubt continue. ■



When crores lose voting rights due to administrative actions, India's foundation is breached



STATES 360°

UTTARAKHAND

Devbhoomi losing its holy sheen

Rashme Sehgal

Anger over Ankita Bhandari's murder in 2022 erupted in December 2025 and carried into the new year. The killing of the 19-year-old, who refused sexual favours to a VIP, came to symbolise the collapse of Uttarakhand's long-held dream.

Formed 25 years ago after sustained agitation, Uttarakhand was meant to fulfil a Gandhian vision of self-governance. Instead, it has been overwhelmed by crass commercialisation and a development model that has eroded agriculture, destroyed homes and frayed the social fabric.

Ankita was murdered by Pulkit Arya, son of BJP minister Vinod Arya and owner of the Vanantra resort where she worked as a receptionist. After Pulkit's conviction, the staff spoke openly of the resort being a hub of drugs, alcohol and prostitution.

This only served to confirm the public's worst fears: thousands of resorts and homestays that have mushroomed across the state—many owned by politicians and retired bureaucrats—are hubs of prostitution where young girls are lured and subsequently blackmailed to become sex workers.

Rishita, who was a receptionist at Vanantra, before Ankita joined, said, "I felt they wanted me to get into it (sex work). I was unwilling, and so they abused me with the choicest of *gaalis*."

Two months into the job, Rishita and her husband Vivek quit. Instead of paying their salaries, Pulkit charged Vivek with theft. When Vivek went to the cops to file a complaint, he was directed to meet the patwari who handles law and order in the area. Not surprisingly, the patwari sided with Pulkit.

Kamla Pant, whose organisation Uttarakhand Mahila Manch came out in support of Ankita's parents, is apprehensive about the state going the Thailand way. Prostitution is illegal in Thailand but is openly practised in go-go bars, massage parlours and nightclubs.

"We are afraid that politicians want to set up dens like that here. Sex trade is on the rise; even small grocery shops are encouraged to sell liquor. Uttarakhand used to be such a quiet place where people would settle after retiring. Now it has become a den of vice, with thousands of resorts, hotels and homestays—from the cheapest to the most expensive."

The owner of a small boutique hotel on Rajpur Road in Dehradun says, "Couples now want to hire rooms on an hourly basis. This suits owners of smaller hotels because they can make a quick buck."



Pulkit Arya, who was managing Vanantra, convicted for the murder of Ankita Bhandari

Uttarakhand used to be a quiet place where people would settle after retiring. Now it has become a den of vice with thousands of resorts and hotels

Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. According to the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB), Uttarakhand recorded the largest number of rape cases among the Himalayan states, and the highest number of POCSO cases in 2023. Pressured by Hindu extremist groups, the police are using the law to target Muslim teens in interfaith relationships.

Statistics released by the NCRB show an alarming surge in cases of kidnapping, murder and theft in 2024 as compared to earlier years. Sharing details of this surge, RTI activist and advocate Nadeem Uddin says, "Thefts increased by 9 per cent, murder cases by 5 per cent, kidnappings with the intention to murder surged by 100

per cent, and women's abductions increased by 91 per cent. Other forms of kidnapping rose by a dramatic 144 per cent from 2022."

The rise in crimes against women has been mirrored by an unprecedented surge in liquor sales. According to data from the Excise Department, over 6.67 lakh cases of liquor were sold across the state during the Diwali fortnight in 2025. This generated revenue exceeding Rs 367 crore, while sales on New Year's Eve alone brought in Rs 143 crore. Alcohol is the state's biggest money spinner, helping generate an income of Rs 3,353 crore—nearly Rs 200 crore more than in 2024.

While bulk liquor licences are being issued only to Uttarakhand residents by the state government, under the new excise policy for 2025-26 all liquor shops located near religious places will be shut down.

A study conducted by AIIMS Rishikesh, which interviewed 400 individuals, highlighted the growing problem of alcohol consumption in the districts of Dehradun and Haridwar. Published in 2018, the study found that the highest proportion of alcohol users were aged 30 to 49, with 72 per cent males and 28 per cent females struggling with alcoholism.

This problem has grown worse in the last five years. Women in the hill villages of Garhwal have taken matters into their hands and formed mahila mangal dals to ensure that no alcohol is sold or consumed in their village. In December 2025, a student of a private school in Haldwani was caught with vodka in her water bottle during a surprise check. The

principal of the school, Dr Yuvraj Pant, admitted that alcoholism and smoking had spiked among senior students.

The youth and adolescents are also susceptible to drug addiction. Drugs are easily available as Uttarakhand's geographical location makes it an ideal transit route for drug trafficking. A study published in the International Journal of Science and Research, revealed that in the Kumaon region, an estimated 26 per cent of senior secondary school students are addicted to drugs including synthetic drugs and opioids.

With adolescent girls and boys moving out of their villages to larger towns in search of economic opportunities, the family structure has disintegrated. Sex ratio has shown a rapid decline: at present there are 840 girls for every 1,000 boys, one of the worst in India. When girls aren't valued, life becomes an uphill climb—marked by violence, forced marriages, trafficking and fewer choices.

Congress spokesperson Sujata Paul emphasises that "sexual exploitation and sex trafficking" have become rampant. "Take the example of Vanantra. The Arya family had been given permission to open a amla candy factory but were running a resort right under the nose of the government."

Paul named several prominent BJP leaders who have been convicted for sexual misdemeanours. BJP MLA Mahesh Negi from Dwarhat has been charged with rape and criminal intimidation. Mukesh Bora, head of the State Cooperative Dairy Federation, was accused of sexually exploiting a widow and her daughter—the BJP removed him from his post in 2024. Another BJP leader who was a member of the minority cell, Aditya Raj Saini, was removed from his post and expelled from the party after he was booked for raping and murdering a 13-year-old Dalit girl in Haridwar in 2013.

"This is the moral fibre of present leaders. Obviously, they will encourage all kinds of sexual wrongdoings. Hundreds of women are coming forward with complaints but the police is pressured into hushing them up," Paul added.

The preference among young people for live-in relationships over marriages coincides with an increase of violence in such relationships. Chairperson of Uttarakhand's State Women's Commission Kusum Kandwal said, "The trend is alarming and underscores the need for greater awareness and legal measures to protect women's rights." ■

Official data confirms the disturbing rise in human trafficking in Uttarakhand. The warning signs were visible as early as 2016, when the women's wing of the Uttarakhand Parivartan Party organised a candlelight march to sound the alarm. Scores of women—particularly from Almora district—went missing from their homes. Activists believe many were pushed into sex work.

The march brought to light claims that distressed women were being sexually exploited by influential persons, allegedly in collusion with the management of a shelter home in Dehradun.

Between 2016 and 2022, there was a four-fold increase in crimes against young women registered under the Protection of



Women march in Nainital for safety and dignity

Is the revolution in danger of being hijacked?

To present monarchy as a solution today is to forget why Iranians rose against it in the first place nearly half a century ago, writes **Ashok Swain**

Iran has once again entered a familiar and dangerous moment. Since late December, protests that began over soaring prices, unpaid wages and deepening economic despair have turned into the most widespread and politically explicit uprising the country has seen since 2022. What started as anger at empty refrigerators and collapsing livelihoods has transformed into open calls for the end of the Islamic Republic itself. Demonstrations have spread far beyond Tehran, cutting across provinces, ethnic lines and social classes, while the Iranian diaspora has poured into the streets of cities from Lyon to Los Angeles. Slogans are no longer cautious or coded—they are direct, angry and revolutionary.

This time, the regime looks weaker than it has in years. Western sanctions have tightened further, oil revenues are constrained, inflation is punishing ordinary households and the currency has lost much of its value. Israeli airstrikes in June 2025, aimed at military and strategic targets, have added to a sense of vulnerability that the leadership has struggled to conceal. Iran's regional posture of strength is also under severe strain. Allies and proxies in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine are either severely weakened or fighting for survival, exposing the limits of Tehran's influence and draining resources at home. For many Iranians, the promise that regional power would translate into dignity and prosperity has long since collapsed.

The regime's response has followed a grimly predictable script. Internet shutdowns, mass arrests and live ammunition are once again being used to terrorise the streets into silence. Some of the human rights organisations are estimating that more than 500 protesters have been already killed. State television beams images of hundreds of thousands of regime loyalists chanting rehearsed slogans, while the Supreme Leader dismisses the protesters as foreign agents. Beneath this performance of defiance lies a system under real stress. The security apparatus is overstretched, legitimacy is eroding even among former supporters and fear no longer works as efficiently as



Israeli bombs target the Evin Prison in Tehran

it once did.

There is no doubt that Iranians deserve a system that reflects their will, protects their rights and offers them a future. The theocratic state, built on clerical supremacy and enforced by coercion, has failed on all counts. It has crushed political life, marginalised women and minorities, squandered national wealth and dragged the country into endless confrontation abroad. That millions are now demanding its removal should surprise no one.

What is worrying, however, is the direction in which parts of this anger are being channelled. Alongside chants for freedom and dignity, a new and troubling demand has gained visibility: the return of monarchy. Some protesters and diaspora activists are calling for the restoration of the Pahlavi dynasty and the installation of Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of the deposed Shah, as Iran's ruler. In interviews and public statements, he has not only urged Iranians to intensify protests but has also openly called on the United States, and

particularly President Donald Trump, to militarily intervene in Iran to overthrow the current regime.

This should alarm anyone who genuinely cares about Iran's future. The Islamic Republic may be discredited, but the memory of the Shah's rule is not the romantic tale that monarchists now sell. The pre-1979 monarchy was not a golden age of freedom stolen by clerics. It was an authoritarian system sustained by a brutal security apparatus, political repression, torture and the systematic exclusion of popular participation. The 1979 revolution, which ultimately produced the current theocracy, was itself a response to decades of dictatorship, inequality and foreign-backed rule.

To present monarchy as a solution today is to forget why Iranians rose up in the first place nearly half a century ago. It also ignores the basic fact that legitimacy cannot be inherited in exile. Reza Pahlavi has not lived under the conditions his supporters claim he should now rule. He has not faced sanctions, repression or the daily humiliations imposed by the State. More importantly, he has never been chosen by Iranians through any democratic process. Crowds chanting his name abroad do not amount to a social contract at home.

The call for foreign military intervention is even more dangerous. Iran's modern history offers a clear lesson on the cost of external interference. From the 1953 CIA-engineered coup that overthrew Mohammad Mossadegh to decades of Cold War manipulation, foreign involvement has repeatedly undermined democratic possibilities and empowered authoritarian forces. Any foreign-led intervention today would almost certainly produce chaos, civilian suffering and fragmentation, not freedom. It would also hand the regime its most powerful narrative weapon: that the uprising is a foreign conspiracy, thereby justifying even greater repression.

There is also a moral contradiction at the heart of monarchist appeals. To oppose a theocracy that claims divine authority, only to replace it with a hereditary ruler backed by foreign power, is not liberation. It is a substitution of one unaccountable system with another. Iranians are

protesting because they want dignity, agency and control over their lives. They are not risking death in the streets to become subjects once again.

It would be unfortunate for this uprising to be hijacked, as the 1979 revolution was, by forces that do not represent its original demands. Then, a broad-based movement against dictatorship was captured by clerical networks that were better organised and ruthless enough to seize the moment. Today, there is a risk that a vacuum of leadership and coordination could allow loud unrepresentative voices to define the future in advance, especially from outside the country.

The real challenge facing Iran's protesters is not simply to bring down the current regime, but to prevent the emergence of another imposed order. That requires resisting both internal repression and external manipulation. It means insisting that any transition be led by Iranians inside Iran, through inclusive and genuine democratic processes. It means rejecting the false choice between the turban and the crown.

The West, for its part, should tread carefully. Supporting human rights, documenting abuses and providing platforms for Iranian civil society are all legitimate and necessary actions. Engineering a regime change, backing exiled claimants or threatening military action are not. Such moves would weaken the very forces it claims to support and deepen Iran's long-standing siege mentality.

Iran stands at a crossroads, and history suggests that the road ahead will not be straight or easy. The courage of those protesting should not be underestimated, nor should the regime's capacity for using brute force to suppress them. Yet amid the uncertainty, one principle must remain clear: Iranians deserve the right to choose their future freely, without clerical coercion, dynastic nostalgia or foreign bombs. A revolution that replaces one form of domination with another would not be a victory. It would be a second betrayal. ■

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



When the silver screen becomes a battleground



Release dates and festival slots are instruments of political signalling in Tamil Nadu

K. A. Shaji

During Pongal in Tamil Nadu, everyday politics no longer announces itself from a party office, a secretariat corridor or a rally ground dusted with flags. It begins in the darkness of a cinema hall. Outside theatres, firecrackers burst before dawn, milk is poured on towering cut-outs, slogans echo with ritual familiarity, and the crowd that assembles already knows what it wants to believe. What unfolds on the screen before them is not merely a film. It is a dress rehearsal, a collective act of remembering and anticipating, a reminder that in Tamil Nadu, cinema has long been the first ballot. That is how Tamil Nadu has always done politics.

This Pongal, the argument was about what two films carried into the public imagination and what they sought to awaken. *Parasakthi* released in theatres after weeks of controversy, censor cuts and political sparring. *Jana Nayagan*, widely understood as actor Vijay's farewell to cinema before he plunges fully into politics, was scheduled for release a day earlier, then abruptly postponed. Between one film that arrived carrying the weight of history and another that did not arrive but refused to disappear from conversation, the Pongal box office became a political metaphor, with the upcoming assembly election hovering as an unspoken subtext.

Tamil cinema has rarely been apolitical, but there are moments when it decisively alters the course of public life. The release of the original *Parasakthi* in 1952 was one such rupture. Written by a young M. Karunanidhi at a time when mythologicals dominated the screen, the film shattered pieties and replaced them with a searing social critique. Religion was interrogated, caste hierarchy exposed, gender injustice confronted and Brahminical authority dragged into public debate. Audiences who entered theatres expecting reverence walked out unsettled, even angered, forced to question inherited beliefs.

"*Parasakthi* taught people to listen differently," said Salem Dharanidharan, national spokesperson of DMK, recalling how cinema became the Dravidian movement's classroom. In 1967, when the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam captured power, the ideological groundwork had already been laid not in pamphlets or



Two films that nearly clashed Vijay's *Jana Nayagan* was pitted against DMK-backed *Parasakthi* this Pongal

speeches but in cinema halls across the state, where voters had been emotionally prepared long before they were politically mobilised.

Seventy years later, the new *Parasakthi* draws directly from the anti-Hindi agitations of the 1960s, especially 1965, when Tamil Nadu erupted against what was perceived as cultural and linguistic domination by the Centre. That agitation, more than any manifesto, cemented the emotional foundations of Dravidian federalism. Language became resistance.

This history is not archival. It lives in

family stories, in school lessons, in political memory that resurfaces whenever linguistic uniformity is pushed from Delhi.

The release dates sparked speculation of an actor-politician Vijay and the ruling DMK: *Jana Nayagan* on 9 January and *Parasakthi* on 10 January. Even before audiences saw a single frame, the clash was framed as symbolic. Social media amplified it. Political camps interpreted it.

Then, *Jana Nayagan* was postponed. The delay only sharpened the political reading. In Tamil Nadu, timing is never accidental. Release dates, festival slots and first shows have long been instruments of political signalling.

Parasakthi is distributed by Red Giant Movies, now owned by Inban Udhayanidhi, who succeeded his father, Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin. Inban is also the grandson of chief minister M.K. Stalin and the great-grandson of Karunanidhi, the original *Parasakthi*'s scriptwriter and the Dravidian movement's most effective communicator. This lineage matters deeply in Tamil politics. The 1952 *Parasakthi* was Sivaji Ganesan's debut and Karunanidhi's ideological breakthrough, establishing cinema as the Dravidian movement's most potent instrument of mass persuasion.

The new *Parasakthi* consciously draws from that tradition, blending historical fact

with fictionalised narrative to tell the story of students from the erstwhile Madras Presidency who rose against Hindi imposition. It speaks to a generation for whom language politics may seem distant until it suddenly returns to the centre of national debate.

The film's journey to release, marked by cuts and scrutiny, turned cinema into a site of institutional conflict. The DMK and its allies accused the Centre of weaponising the Central Board of Film Certification. The BJP rejected this charge. "If the Centre wanted to obstruct films politically, *Parasakthi* would have been the first to be stopped," said BJP state leader S. Khushboo. "Red Giant is close to the DMK. But the CBFC only follows rules."

On *Jana Nayagan*, Khushboo insisted the delay was procedural rather than political. "You cannot announce a release date without a CBFC certificate. That is the producer's responsibility," she said. "As a Vijay fan, I am upset too, but the rules apply to all."

Congress MP Sasikanth Senthil offered a far darker reading. "They will not hesitate to use any institution. This is the power of fascism," he said, arguing that central institutions had become tools of control rather than neutral arbiters. At the same time, he warned Tamil Nadu against the sight of governance debates, pointing to changes proposed to employment schemes and welfare frameworks under the

AIADMK-BJP alignment. The exchange revealed how cinema had once again become a proxy for deeper anxieties about federalism, its autonomy and institutional trust.

Jana Nayagan's politics is ethical rather than structural. Corruption is the enemy. Leadership is personalised. Justice flows from the hero's moral authority rather than from collective struggle or institutional reform. This aligns precisely with Vijay's political positioning so far.

Widely seen as his farewell to cinema before entering politics full-time, *Jana Nayagan* recalls an older Tamil tradition. M.G. Ramachandran, too, stepped away from the screen at the height of his popularity to legitimize cinema as a political legitimacy. But there is a crucial difference. MGR inherited and reshaped Dravidian ideology. He entered politics through it. Vijay has so far kept his distance from that legacy. His Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam does not claim the Dravidian inheritance; it seeks to position itself as an alternative to established binaries.

As *Parasakthi* began drawing audiences into debates on language, history and resistance, *Jana Nayagan*'s posthumous creation created a different kind of momentum. For Vijay's supporters, it reinforced the narrative of an outsider confronting entrenched systems. For the DMK, it allowed *Parasakthi* to occupy the cultural space unchallenged, at least temporarily, reaffirming its claim over the Dravidian cinematic tradition.

Early box office patterns hinted at a familiar divide. *Parasakthi* found steady audiences in semi-urban and rural belts, among politically conscious viewers for whom language politics remains visceral and personal. *Jana Nayagan*, even before its delay, generated enormous buzz among urban youth and first-time voters, signalling where Vijay's emerging strength lies. Neither constituency can be dismissed. Together, they map the fault lines of a changing electorate.

Tamil Nadu has seen this pattern before. *Parasakthi* prepared the emotional ground for DMK's rise. MGR's films turned benevolence into political charisma. Jayalithaa's screen authority translated into party dominance. This Pongal moment fits squarely into that lineage.

C. Laskhmanan, former faculty of Madras Institute of Development Studies, said, "Cinema does not decide elections in Tamil Nadu. But it often sets their emotional grammar. It tells voters what kind of contest they are entering before parties say a word. Karunanidhi once used cinema to teach people how to question power. Vijay is using it to ask whether they still trust those who inherited it. The answer will not be found in ticket sales or opening weekend numbers."

It will emerge later, quietly, when the screen fades to black and the ballot boxes open. ■

Between one film that arrived carrying the weight of history and another that refused to fade away from conversation, the Pongal box office became a political metaphor

STATES 360° KERALA

Thiruvananthapuram

Congress campaign faces electoral complexities

Amal Chandra

In the verdant hills of Sultan Bathy in Wayanad, far from the clamour of assembly constituencies and electioneering, the Congress party's recent two-day Lakshya leadership summit emerged as a defining moment in Kerala politics. What was seemingly another pre-election strategy meet, in substance and spirit, galvanised the United Democratic Front (UDF), of which Congress is the core, into what strategists now describe as a "moment of political recalibration" as Kerala heads for assembly elections in April.

At the heart of this resurgence are the twin catalysts of the recent performance in the local body polls and a firm strategic direction from senior party elders. The UDF delivered remarkable results in the December 2025 local body elections—winning 505 gram panchayats, 79 panchayats, 54 municipalities and seven district panchayats. The resurgence dwarfed the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), which is enjoying its second consecutive term in office.

While the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) grabbed headlines by capturing the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation, ending 45 years of Left dominance, the broader picture across Kerala showed that UDF's grassroots strength remained robust and widespread, a critical advantage in the run up to the polls.

The local body results provided a narrative shift for the Congress. At the inaugural session of the summit, AICC general secretary K.C. Venugopal framed the electoral calculus firmly in this context. Stressing the value of empirical performance and political groundwork, he asserted that the party would rigorously evaluate both its victories and setbacks from the local body polls to shape its strategy for the assembly campaign.

Underscoring the importance of not giving in to complacency, Venugopal had said before the session that the party

would evaluate its victories as well as setbacks. At the session his message was clear: internal factionalism must end and discipline strictly maintained to avoid merely to the political disarray. "We should not make self-announcements about candidature... Let us wait for the party's declared decision," Venugopal stressed.

The disciplined approach is strategic: it signals that Congress intends to shape, not merely react to, the political narrative leading to the assembly elections.

The deliberations at the session were businesslike, resulting in a concrete road map for statewide mobilisation. Key initiatives include a Kerala Yatra—to be led by Satheesan, starting in February—booth restructuring, social media campaign and early groundwork to finalise candidates.

For Satheesan, the summit reaffirmed trust in his leadership, after a vigilance report was leaked ahead of the summit seeking a CBI probe into issues involving him. Speaking to reporters, Satheesan dismissed the allegations as a "poll gimmick" by the LDF and said he would remain focused on connecting with the people on issues that matter to them.

Across party fronts, there was a noticeable shift—from internal squabbles to disciplined strategy and unity. Shashi Tharoor, MP and CWC member, used Lakshya to underscore this cohesion. Taking to social media, he said he "enjoyed interacting with senior Congress colleagues" and stressed that the local body results had "intensified self-belief and confidence" within the party. Tharoor also articulated the dual perspective of confidence and caution that now defines UDF's campaign narrative.

Senior leaders sharpened their critique of the LDF government. Ramesh Chennithala accused chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan of 'divide and rule' policies to deepen communal rifts rather

than address real governance issues. He even alleged in publicity between the CPM and the BJP in pushing divisive narratives. KPCC president Sunny Joseph interpreted the strong rejection in the local body polls as "a sweeping rejection of the LDF government's anti-people policies."

Meanwhile, the chief minister dismissed talk of any anti-incumbency wave and was confident of securing a majority once again. PWD minister P.A. Mohamed Riyas echoed this sentiment and reiterated an ambitious target of 110 seats. However Congress leaders see this as



Ready for a change Participants at the Lakshya Summit got a clear message to demonstrate unity ahead of assembly polls (left) KPCC president Sunny Joseph

A Congress success will depend not just on organisational prowess or electoral arithmetic but on its ability to weave a cohesive narrative

mere posturing by a government on the defensive. Venugopal was particularly scathing of the CM's recent press conference, describing it as "the lament of a losing captain."

By strategising its campaign around governance and accountability on everyday issues such as voter list revisions and socio-economic concerns, the Congress pushed to neutralise the LDF's attempts at polarisation and counter any BJP narratives that could chip away at the UDF base. The party's emphasis on strengthening booth committees, early candidate selection, campaigning and streamlined internal discipline indicate lessons learnt from past setbacks in 2016 and 2021.

Yet the challenges are formidable. Kerala's electorate is discerning, with diverse issues ranging from

unemployment to agrarian distress, and from urban infrastructure pressures to youth aspirations. The success of the Congress will depend not just on organisational prowess or electoral arithmetic, but on its ability to weave these socio-economic themes into a cohesive narrative across constituencies.

Participants left the summit with a strong message: this is not an ordinary election; more than winning, it is about demonstrating unity and strategic execution.

For the first time in years, the Congress in Kerala seems to have found a coherent strategic compass—one that projects confidence, unity and a credible path to electoral success. ■

AMAL CHANDRA is an author, political analyst and columnist. He tweets @ens_socialis

From Belagavi to the Constitution: Karnataka's Stand Against Social Boycott

Breaking the silence of exclusion: Why Karnataka's Social Boycott Law matters

There are moments in legislative history when a House does more than debate policy or pass a statute. It pauses, looks inward, and decides what kind of society it is willing to defend. The unanimous passage of the Karnataka Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Bill, 2025 during the winter session of the Sixteenth Karnataka Legislative Assembly at Belagavi was one such moment—quiet in procedure, but profound in consequence.

As the Suvarna Vidhana Soudha stood against the December chill, the Assembly spoke with rare unity. Members across party lines endorsed a principle that goes to the heart of the Constitution: no individual or family in Karnataka can be denied dignity, livelihood, or belonging by the fiat of informal community bodies.

Naming an injustice long normalized:

For far too long, social boycott has survived in the shadows of law and governance. It has thrived not because it is lawful, but because it is normalised. In villages and semi-urban pockets, entire families have been cut off from water, work, shops, schools, temples, and burial grounds—not by any court, but by self-appointed caste or community panchayats.

When Social Welfare Minister Dr H C Mahadevappa, who piloted the Bill, rose in the Assembly, he framed the issue with stark clarity. Social boycott, he said, persists because sections of privileged communities continue to treat the underprivileged as second-class citizens. Despite constitutional guarantees, exploitation and exclusion remain routine. Existing laws, he candidly acknowledged, have not been enough. "This is a historic step towards bringing equality to our society," Dr. Mahadevappa told the House. He spoke of people pushed out of village life, denied the right to attend funerals, barred from buying groceries, and isolated through decisions taken by informal councils. The aim of the Bill, he emphasised, is not merely punishment, but the



Photo: Gettyimages

Importantly, the law also acknowledges the quieter, crueller forms of exclusion—cutting off social ties, forcing cultural conformity, expelling individuals from their community, or preventing children from playing with peers from a “boycotted” family.

protection of human dignity from extra-judicial power.

Restoring the Constitutional Promise

At its core, the legislation is anchored in constitutional morality. Dr. Mahadevappa reminded the Assembly that while Article 17 abolished untouchability decades ago, its modern manifestations—economic and social exclusion enforced through boycotts—have often escaped effective legal

scrutiny. Social boycott, he asserted, is a direct violation of civil rights and an assault on the basic principles of the Constitution.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, lending weight to the debate, placed the law within a broader moral and political framework. Known for his consistent advocacy for marginalised communities, the Chief Minister underlined that no individual or family should be harassed under the guise of community

discipline. Human rights, he said, must prevail over regressive customs, and the State can no longer afford to be a silent spectator when caste or community panchayats override the law of the land.

The message from the government benches was unambiguous: constitutional authority, not social coercion, will govern public life in Karnataka.

From individual acts to

collective accountability

A recurring theme in the Assembly debate was the recognition that social boycott is rarely enforced by one person acting alone. It is planned, discussed, voted upon, and enforced collectively. The Bill therefore breaks new ground by targeting the decision-makers, not just the visible enforcers.

Any gathering convened to deliberate on imposing a social boycott is declared an unlawful assembly. Every member of a body—such as a caste panchayat—who votes in favour of a boycott, or uses influence to enforce it, is deemed to have committed the offence. Those who provoke, encourage, or aid such acts face the same penalties as those who directly carry them out. This approach reflects a deeper understanding of power. It dismantles the anonymity that has long shielded informal councils and ensures that collective injustice carries collective responsibility.

A rare political convergence

In an era marked by sharp political divisions, the Bill witnessed rare unanimity. With opposition members of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Janata Dal (Secular) joined the ruling party in supporting the legislation, recognising the universality of the harm caused by social boycott.

BJP State President B Y Vijayendra articulated this shared moral ground when he said that eradicating untouchability and

Selected acts among the 20 forms of Social Boycott:

- Refusal to deal with, employ, hire, or conduct business with a person
- Denial of access to services or contractual opportunities
- Obstruction from participating in social, religious, or community functions
- Preventing marriages, funerals, or religious rites
- Blocking access to schools, hospitals, community halls, burial grounds, or places of worship
- Cutting off social or commercial ties
- Forcing cultural conformity, including dress or language
- Discrimination based on morality, social acceptance, political inclination, or sexuality
- Expulsion from the community
- Any other act that results in social ostracism

social boycott is not a political issue, but a matter of human dignity. The Leader of the Opposition, R Ashoka, while maintaining a watchful eye on implementation, acknowledged the urgency of addressing informal bodies that override the legal system. JD(S) legislators, too, extended their support, urging the government to ensure adequate protection for officers tasked with enforcing the law in sensitive rural areas. This bipartisan backing lent the legislation both legitimacy and moral force.

Strengthening enforcement: Listening to the house

The Assembly's deliberations also improved the law. Former Law Minister T. B. Jayachandra raised a critical concern: victims of social boycott are often under such intense pressure that expecting them to file complaints is unrealistic. In many cases, approaching the police could deepen their isolation or invite retaliation.

Dr. Mahadevappa accepted this argument without hesitation. Acting on the suggestion, the government amended the Bill to empower the police to register cases suo motu—on their own initiative—whenever instances of social boycott come to light. This change transformed the law from a passive framework into an active instrument of protection.

Police officers are now authorised not only to register cases but also to remove barricades, open gates, and dismantle physical mechanisms used to enforce exclusion.

Placing the victim at the centre

Unlike many criminal statutes, the Social Boycott Act places victims at the heart of the justice process. Courts are mandated to hear victims on the question of sentencing before passing orders, ensuring that punishment reflects lived suffering. Provisions for compensation from fines imposed on offenders further reinforce this victim-centric approach.

The law also allows, in appropriate cases, for compounding of offences with court approval—often tied to community service—recognising that accountability and reconciliation can coexist, provided the victim's dignity is never compromised.

To support implementation, the Bill provides for the appointment of Social Boycott Prohibition Officers, senior Group-A officers tasked with detecting violations, assisting

magistrates, and coordinating with district authorities. Their role is crucial in bridging the gap between law and lived reality.

Learning from painful precedents

The legislation did not emerge in a vacuum. Karnataka has witnessed repeated incidents of collective exclusion—Dalit families denied access to shops and temples, children assaulted for crossing caste boundaries, families ostracised for pursuing legal remedies, and communities enforcing boycotts during religious festivals. While laws like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act address certain forms of exclusion, they do not fully capture boycotts imposed within communities or enforced through informal bodies. The new law consciously fills this gap, extending protection to any person or group, regardless of identity.

A clear signal to society

More than its penalties—up to three years' imprisonment and fines of up to Rs 1 lakh—the Karnataka Social Boycott Act sends a clear signal. Tradition cannot be a shield for injustice. Morality cannot be enforced through deprivation. Community discipline cannot override constitutional rights.

As Home Minister Dr G Parameashwara has often observed in the context of social exclusion, the deepest wounds are psychological. This law, he has said, is about social harmony, not political victory.

The road ahead

Implementation will demand vigilance, sensitivity, and courage. Deep-seated customs do not dissolve overnight. But laws shape behaviour not only through fear of punishment, but through the values they articulate.

As this legislation travels from the Assembly floor to village squares and neighbourhoods across the state, it carries a promise—to children who deserve to play without fear, to families who seek livelihoods without coercion, and to elders who deserve dignity even in death. From Belagavi, the message is unmistakable: no council, no caste, and no community stands above the Constitution of India.

In passing the Karnataka Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Bill, 2025, the state has not merely enacted a law. It has reaffirmed a moral choice—to stand with dignity, equality, and the quiet courage of those who have waited too long to be heard.

Understanding how exclusion works

Photo: Gettyimages



One of the most significant strengths of the Bill lies in its realism. Social boycott is rarely a single act. It is a chain—economic strangulation followed by social isolation, psychological trauma, and enforced silence. Recognising this, the law identifies 20 specific forms of social boycott, capturing the many ways exclusion is imposed.

These range from refusal to deal with, hire, or do business with a person, to denying access to services, employment, or contractual opportunities. The Bill addresses obstruction from participating in social, religious, or community functions, interference in marriages or funeral rites, and the blocking of access to schools, hospitals, community halls, burial grounds, and places of worship maintained by the community.

Importantly, the law also acknowledges the quieter, crueller forms of exclusion—cutting off social ties, forcing cultural conformity, expelling individuals from their community, or preventing children from playing with peers from a “boycotted” family. Discrimination based not only on caste, but also on morality, social acceptance, political inclination, or sexuality, is explicitly brought within the law's ambit.

By naming these acts, the State makes clear that what has been lived as humiliation will now be recognised as a crime.

When we don't demur in the face of injustice

Apoorvanand weighs in on the sorry spectacle of a boorish VC insulting a writer at a university seminar



The public humiliation of a celebrated author evoked no discerning disquiet from the audience

The boorish conduct of Vice-Chancellor Alok Kumar Chakrawal towards writer Manoj Rupda at Guru Ghasidas University, in Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, is being condemned for good reason. Vice-Chancellor Chakrawal was speaking at a seminar on the Hindi short story organised by his university in collaboration with Sahitya Akademi. In the video of the incident that has since circulated widely, he can be heard making some unfortunately flippant remarks.

At some point, his gaze drifts towards the audience seated in front of him and he is heard telling someone that they appear uncomfortable. From the audience comes a reply—possibly that he is not speaking on the subject, or a request that he do so.

The Vice-Chancellor retorts that if the person is uncomfortable, they should leave; that they do not know how to speak to a VC, and so on.

At this, Manoj Rupda stands up and turns out of the room. The VC turns to his officials and asks who invited this person in the first place. He'd been observing for some time, that this

gentleman seemed uneasy. No one who is ill at ease, he adds, should not remain in the room.

Even after widespread condemnation, Chakrawal also told me to see anything wrong with his conduct. If it was an outburst on the spur of the moment, the appropriate response would have been to express regret and apologise to Rupda. But our man has doubled down on defending himself.

The VC made several other errors. When he agreed to attend the seminar, he should have asked his office for a briefing—the topic of the seminar, who the other participants were, and so on. He should have agreed to participate only after gathering this information from the department concerned.

Asking “who invited him” was an act of extreme discourtesy. He was a guest by the institution itself, and unless a guest behaves offensively, it is the responsibility of the institution—and its head—to ensure that the guest's dignity is not violated.

As the head of an institution, a Vice-Chancellor is required to attend

programmes on a wide range of subjects. It is impossible for anyone to have expertise in all. In such situations, it is standard practice for departments to provide a few talking points. The VC's role is usually a formal one—representing the institution. Chakrawal's academic background is in commerce; his knowledge of literature is likely to be limited. Precisely for this reason, he should have prepared appropriately, in keeping with the dignity of his office.

But like many others, he probably assumed that since anyone can read a short story, anyone can speak about it too. A university is a space for thoughtful deliberation—not the kind of street-corner banter he was indulging in. Was the VC mindful of those expectations?

Sadly, VCs in India today seem unconcerned even about their own dignity. Chakrawal did not pause to consider that even if others in the hall did not walk out, their assessment of his speech would hardly differ from Manoj Rupda's.

Nor is Chakrawal alone in this. Many institutional heads today appear on stage cracking jokes, showing little regard for the dignity of their office. Audiences usually sit with lowered heads, enduring this foolishness—and the discreet wait for the moment to pass.

In his defence, Chakrawal told the *Indian Express*, that while speaking he noticed Rupda's attention was elsewhere, that he was repeatedly looking at his mobile phone. “I politely asked if he was bored. He told me to speak on the subject. This was an insult to the stage, so I asked him to leave the room.” Chakrawal also told the newspaper that after this incident, he'd been receiving abusive phone calls and subjected to foul language. “Is this our culture?” he asked.

So now the Vice-Chancellor is invoking ‘our culture’! And yet, he is not entirely wrong. The language being used by some writers on social media does require reflection. One might argue this is just wordplay, but calling him ‘*kulkaṅk*’ (a blot on the lineage, for the cheap thrill of playing on the word ‘*kulpātī*’ (the Hindi word for vice-chancellor) is not just in bad taste; it is also heedless of the casteist and patriarchal mindset embedded in the word.

The wordplay may seem witty, but the term carries with it ideas of lineage and dishonour. We need to consider how appropriate it is to use such language against anyone. Also, if the language of our protest is coarse, we end up nourishing the very culture we oppose.

Another culture of this incident deserves

attention. When Manoj Rupda stood up and left, there was no discernible disquiet among the other guests present in the hall—they remained seated. This is hardly an exception: I have personally witnessed senior intellectuals not just tolerating the incoherent ramblings of many VCs and other honourables at public events, but also silently listening to their hate-filled remarks about Muslims. In private conversations later, they express regret, but publicly, when it matters, voicing protest does not come naturally to us.

There is one primary reason for this: the culture of ‘respecting elders’ produced by casteist social practices. No matter how rude or uncouth the elder, oppressing them is considered bad manners.

In the caste hierarchy, Brahmins or the upper castes are the elders; within families, they are parents or elder brothers; in classrooms, teachers; in institutions, office-bearers. How, then, could one possibly object to a Vice-Chancellor?

Questions are also being raised about the Sahitya Akademi's involvement in this episode. Many institutions get financial assistance from the Akademi to organise seminars. Beyond that, its role in these events is usually negligible. It is unclear whether it has any say in selecting speakers. But irrespective, since the Akademi's name is attached to this event, keeping mum does not enhance its standing.

One could ask who really cares? For when the culture ministry barred the Akademi from announcing its annual awards, all its office-bearers should have resigned. They are not even Akademi employees. Even today, they are chosen by writers and sent to the Akademi as their representatives. Yet they behave like government functionaries. How, then, can one expect them to speak up in this matter?

Those who still consider the Sahitya Akademi autonomous can only be described as naive. Quite like when Gulzar and Vinod Kumar Shukla accepted the Jnanpith Award and their decision was seen in that light. Just before them, the award had been conferred on a person who openly spews caste hatred and hatred against Muslims.

No one was asking Gulzar or Vinod Kumar Shukla to make political statements, but they could have refused the award—or even while accepting it, expressed their dissent against a social culture rooted in hatred. That would not have required great courage, only sensitivity. To accept a garland from someone who garlands killers is to extend the culture of killing.

If the humiliation of Muslims and the humiliation of Dalits is not our collective humiliation, then who are we? Because we lack this sensitivity, the public humiliation of Manoj Rupda was presumably seen by the writers present at the gathering as a personal affront—it did not wound them in any way. ■

APoorvanand is an author and academic. Translated from the Hindi original first published in *The Wire*

A university is a space for thoughtful deliberation—not the kind of street-corner banter Chakrawal was indulging in. Was the VC mindful of those expectations?

How Donald Trump is throwing it all away

For the first time, America is pursuing a course where it is undoing the admirable, and doubling down on the disliked

Aakar Patel

There is much to admire about America, and plenty to dislike. The thing to admire most is its openness and ability to attract many of the world's most talented people.

Some 15 per cent of the US population is foreign-born, including 50 lakh Indians. This is actually a great asset. A nation, say India, raises and educates a child, spending resources on food, shelter, clothing. The child grows up and goes to the best state institutions, subsidised by Indians, only to move, in his or her 20s, permanently to the United States.

American universities and corporations benefit from Microsoft and Tesla like from the value added by such individuals from abroad. The investment was returned on the investment is fulfilled there.

This ability of America is, to some extent, replicated in Europe,

America is so intent on putting an end to immigration that it is okay with the ICE militia murdering its own citizens

but it does not exist in countries like China or India. We neither attract external talent, nor do we want it. If we are honest, almost all of us who can move abroad do so and the numbers prove it. Today, America is so intent to put an end to this that it is okay with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) militia hunting immigrants and ending up murdering its own citizens, as happened in Minneapolis on 7 January. This was not expected by those who admired the US.

Those who are aware of the United States' conduct in the world, particularly after World War II, have always found much to dislike. Its endless interventions in Asia, Africa, Latin America and even Europe have harmed millions of people. This has always been the case right from the Korean War in the 1950s to Serbia in the 1990s and then of course its post-9/11 adventurism.

To my mind, this is the first time that America is pursuing a course where it is undoing the very thing that is to be admired, and doubling down on precisely what is disliked.

By closing America off to immigrants, the US is harming itself. India is the nation with the largest number of H1-B visa beneficiaries, some two-thirds of the total. It is true that these individuals do not want to live in India and would rather live in the US if allowed. The quality they add to the workforce is not easy to replicate.

Similarly, even those who are undocumented and come to America illegally, do so because they want to be more productive. Getting rid of them and discouraging others from coming, as is happening now, can only

impact America negatively. As attacks on immigration have mounted, unemployment in the US has worsened over the last year. This is because the larger economy has been harmed by the actions against labour. What was admirable has been undone.

Looking into the other side of the ledger, the United States is pursuing a course which continues its imperialist tendencies when it comes to violence abroad—with an added edge.

Imperialism is evident from America's invasion of Venezuela, its kidnapping of Maduro and his wife and its naked claim on

Venezuelan oil. The dozens murdered in this event find little mention and no sympathy in the US press. The bombing of Iran and the assistance to Israel to attack all its neighbours is also part of America's post-World War II tendency.

The new element added by Trump is the ferocity with which he has turned on allies. He wants Canada, he wants Greenland, he wants the Panama Canal.

Europeans, long accustomed to assuming fraternity with America on the basis of race alone, are terrified and do not know how to react. They have made a show of closing ranks, but if Trump sends

his Marines to Greenland, there is little they can do.

Japan and Korea, nations which volunteered to be partners with the US in security and trade and have been allies for decades, find themselves blackmailed into trade deals. India, which wanted to be close to America, especially under the last two prime ministers, and whose leader asked Indians in America to vote for Trump, is also in shock.

We can discuss the incompetence and utter naivete with which our government approached Trump, but let us leave that for another day. Today, we are examining the US

Trump has turned on his allies with an element of ferocity. He wants Canada, he wants Greenland, he wants the Panama Canal



The aftermath of a shooting in Minneapolis on 7 January

and what it is doing to itself. Great empires of the past usually faded over long periods of time. It took Rome centuries to erode, away. In the modern era, this has been happening faster. The British fell from the heights of the Delhi Durbar of 1911 to the crippling crisis of 1945 after the war. The Soviet Union vanished in a matter of weeks.

But none of these great powers damaged themselves as gratuitously as the US is doing today.

Trump is dismissing with contempt the external talent that has added so much to the US, and is taking down the system—the ‘rule-based order’—that America devised to dominate the world.

What he has done and is still doing has damaged—and will continue to damage—the US in the short and the long term. This is as sad to those who have long admired the US as it is satisfying to those who have disliked its actions. ■

Views are personal.

India needs a Zohran Mamdani

The New York mayor embodies the much-needed counter-current to the kind of autocratic majoritarian State that democratic India has morphed into

Malay Mishra

Wearing his democratic socialist heart on his sleeve, Zohran Mamdani took the oath of office as the mayor of New York in a decommissioned subway station in Manhattan to symbolise his affinity with the city's workers and the marginalised people whose cause he said he would serve. The 34-year-old was administered the oath by veteran Democratic senator Bernie Sanders, a torchbearer of democratic socialism in America, with Congresswoman Alexandria Cortez by his side.

There was hardly any coverage in the Indian media of this historic moment, and the seminal impact of Mamdani's election on American politics. The man who broke several taboos in taking charge of the Big Apple remains taboo in India. Through its media handlers, the government made it a point to invisibilise Mamdani despite his stupendous victory, ousting his nearest rival, two-time Democrat governor Andrew Cuomo, by polling more than 50 per cent of the vote. Over one million New Yorkers, cutting across race, religion, ethnicity and economic background, with many immigrants among them, voted for him in a groundbreaking election that created waves across the world. His home country India was the only one that did not salute Mamdani's unprecedented win, rising from an Assemblyman to head America's richest city.

Mamdani has several firsts to his name: the first American of Asian descent and African origin, the first Muslim and the youngest to be elected Mayor of New York. His parents are a celebrated power couple: Mira Nair, the globally acclaimed filmmaker with films like *Salaam Bombay*, *Monsoon Wedding* and *Namesake* to her credit, and Mahmood Mamdani, Professor Emeritus at Columbia University and post-colonial theorist whose celebrated work, *Good Muslim Bad Muslim*, published soon after 9/11, stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for weeks. But Mamdani never chose to remain cocooned within the elite legacy he was born into. On the contrary, he took up the cause of the immigrants—New York hosts more than 150 nationalities.

Secular and liberal in orientation, Mamdani has proven that he cares for the plight of every New Yorker. Outspoken about Netanyahu's role in the genocidal killings of Palestinians, he distanced himself from allegations of antisemitism. (The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, America's largest pro-Israel lobbying group, and the New York Jewish Foundation had played an active role in canvassing support for Cuomo.) The results

saw an even split of the Jewish vote: the younger generation rooted for Mamdani while the older, wealthier and Hasidic Jews voted en masse for Cuomo.

President Trump's fulminations and public denunciations of Mamdani, his threats to cut off federal funds and his open support for his Democrat rival Cuomo, hardly dented Mamdani's surging popularity. Calling Mamdani a Marxist and anti-national, Trump sought to nix Mamdani's political career even before it had begun. Mamdani, mayor of New York, turned the tables on Trump by appearing at the White House for a courtesy meeting, stressing his primary objective of affordability for all New Yorkers through free transport, childcare, housing and government-run grocery stores as he had promised in his election campaign. Surprisingly, perhaps gauging the public mood, Trump turned turtle and assured Mamdani of his full support. Two ideologically contrarian politicians of the right and left in the same frame—one, mean-minded, vindictive, unpredictable; the other, defiant, committed and fearless.

With Trump defying all international norms and capturing the elected President and first lady of Venezuela, a sovereign country, the American system literally collapsed. The media stayed largely and perniciously silent; both Congress and the Supreme Court were voiceless against this flagrant abuse of power. Mamdani stood up

Photos: Getty Images



People's power Zohran Mamdani is the youngest leader of a new generation of Americans to emerge victorious without relying on corporate or political backing (left) With his filmmaker mother Mira Nair



to condemn the brazen act of aggression as a "declaration of war".

Known for his outspoken views (he had called Narendra Modi a fascist) Mamdani has positioned himself securely on the side of the people. While calling for the Palestinians' right to a peaceful homeland on their own soil, he cautioned the Israeli prime minister not to ever land in New York. If he did, he would have him arrested for committing "crimes against humanity" by massacring thousands of helpless Palestinians—women and children, the old and the sick.

With a Kutchi Gujarati father, a Hindu Punjabi mother and a Syrian Muslim wife, Mamdani radiates the kind of cosmopolitanism that is as unequivocally liberal

Known for his outspoken views (he had called Narendra Modi a fascist), Mamdani has positioned himself securely on the side of the people

as it is comfortable with taking his oath on a historic old Quran to reaffirm his Muslim ancestry. (The five boroughs of New York have a sizeable Muslim population—Mamdani won their near unanimous vote.)

Mamdani embodies the much-needed counter-current to the kind of autocratic majoritarian State that democratic India has morphed into over the last decade or so. With India's secular and democratic credentials founded on a nonviolent freedom struggle, it is no wonder that Mamdani chose to quote from Nehru's iconic 'Tryst with destiny' speech when he vanquished all his opponents to emerge as the youngest leader of a new generation of Americans, without relying on any corporate or political backing, simply the people's support.

In his seminal work *The Idea of India*, eminent political scientist Sunil Khilnani writes: 'Modern Indian politics continues to plunder the nationalist pantheon for its iconography while, at the same time, in its practical struggles, it moves further and

further away from the nationalist world and its distinctive temperament. The old arguments and battles are replayed today with the current generation's new meanings and desires: Ambedkar is once again ranged against Gandhi, Patel is brought into battle against Nehru. Even as they divide, these struggles themselves testify to the presence of a common history, a shared Indian past... These struggles constitute the identity of India's history since 1947. And, in its ability constantly to encompass diverse ideas of what India is, this history is itself expressive of the Indian idea'.

India's strength lies in its civilizational diversity; no attempts to paint with a monochromatic brush can bring the real Indian canvas to life. In its hour of reckoning in a world tossed between powerful and opposing ideological blocs, India needs a Zohran Mamdani. ■

MALAY MISHRA is a retired diplomat and policy analyst. Courtesy: The Billion Press



NEHRU CENTRE AUDITORIUM

Located in the heart of Mumbai on the Western Expressway, adjacent to BKC and close to the airport



Ideal for:

- Corporate/HR meetings, seminars and training sessions
- Lectures
- Book launches and readings
- Panel discussions
- Cultural events

The auditorium is available for:

Day-long bookings: 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Half-day bookings: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

To make a booking or for further information, please call: +91 22-26470102, 8482925258 or email contact@nehrucentre.com
Nehru Centre Auditorium, 2nd Floor AJL House, 608/1A Plot No. 2, S. No 341, Near PF Office, Bandra, Mumbai – 400051





Incredible India
www.incredibleindia.org



JANUARY
festival
WEEK

KITES
HOT AIR BALLOONS AND
DRONES

13-18 JAN | HYDERABAD

ALL EVENTS ARE FREE AND
OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

CELEBRATE THE SKY

This January, Hyderabad's skies turn into a celebration. January Festival Week brings together kites, hot air balloons and drone experiences across the city.

From traditional kite flying and festive activities during the day to hot air balloon shows and drone displays in the evening, the festival offers something for everyone.



Kite and Sweet Festival '26

13-15 JAN
11 AM - 8 PM

PARADE GROUND, SECUNDERABAD
• NALLA CHERUVU, KUKATPALLY
• BATHUKAMMA KUNTA, AMBERPET
• BUMRUKH-UD-DOWLA, RAJENDRANAGAR

- NYLON MANJHA IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED.
- PUBLIC TRANSPORT RECOMMENDED.



HOT AIR BALLOON Festival '26

16-18 JAN
5 PM - 8 PM

PARADE GROUND (EVENING ONLY)

- NIGHT GLOW BALLOON SHOW
- ENTRY FREE FOR ALL



TELANGANA DRONE Festival '26

16-17 JAN
11 AM - 8 PM

GACHIBOWLI STADIUM

- DRONE RACES
- DRONE SOCCER • DRONE SHOW
- VIRTUAL TOURISM EXPERIENCE

Freedom is in peril. Defend it with all your might. Jawaharlal Nehru

RNI: MAHENG/2021/84829, Postal Reg. No. MCN/328/2024-2026
Magazine Post Reg. No. MSD/059/2025, License To Post Without Pre Payment No. MR/Tech/WPP-363/North/2025-26

www.nationalheraldindia.com www.facebook.com/nationalheraldindia/ @NH_India www.navjivanindia.com, www.qaumiaawaz.com

Mumbai • 18 January 2026 • Pages: 8 • Vol. 5 Issue 12 • ₹20

NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

STATES 360°
West Bengal, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Kerala

► P2,3,4



HOME & ABROAD

IS THE REVOLUTION BEING HIJACKED?
Real change in Iran cannot come from one form of tyranny replacing another

► P3



HOME & ABROAD

OUR SILENCE ADDS INJURY TO INSULT
Or why we should take another's public humiliation personally

► P6



Who cares for India's workers?

Hasty legislation weakens the rights of the urban and rural workforce as India faces mounting US trade demands

Arun Kumar

The timing of two recent Bills, introduced hastily and passed equally hastily by Parliament, has puzzled most observers. What prompted the ruling party to suddenly implement the Labour Codes which were enacted in 2019 and 2020? Why was there such hurry and stealth to replace the MGNREGA with VB-GRAM-G? They did not make much sense beyond the usual rhetoric of structural reforms and modernising the economy.

The objective of both these acts is however becoming clearer—they diminish the bargaining power of labour and depress wages. Workers, farmers and the opposition have been quick to join the dots, prompting nationwide protests. With over 600 million workers in rural and urban India, their resistance could become formidable if mobilised effectively.

Some key questions persist: will there be adverse political consequences for the ruling party? Can rural and urban workers do what the farmers did? Can they force the government to roll back the twin changes designed to weaken them?

The Labour Codes curtail the bargaining power of workers, weaken trade unions and strip individual workers of protection from exploitation by employers.

The MGNREGA, though imperfect, did bolster rural poor employment and incomes. Despite low wages (often less than the minimum wage) and a limit of a maximum of 100 days of work per adult member of a family (approximately 20 days of wages per family member per year), it supplemented incomes in times of crises, like the Covid-19 pandemic. Though it offered only 50 days of work on average as against the promised 100—due to underfunding—it still offered relief to marginalised communities.

The government, while justifying the changes, now argues that the Labour Codes will protect workers' rights and the VB-G-RAM-G will benefit farm workers by increasing workdays from 100 to 150. The Centre has proposed raising the allocation to Rs 95,692 crore from Rs 86,000 crore in 2024-25.

But if the states are unable to spend Rs 55,590 crore, given their weak budgetary position and high debt, the Centre will also spend less, effectively reducing the total allocation to well below that of 2024-25.

In effect, this transition from a demand-driven MGNREGA to a supply-constrained scheme will allow the Centre to decide on the allocations and subject the states to its political whims. Despite giving a pro-labour



Photo: Getty Images

Grim future Cheap imports will drive agriculture prices below the MSP, worsening farmers' losses

spin to the changes, the reforms are inherently designed to weaken labour both in the agriculture and non-agriculture sectors.

Historically, workers' movements in India have been weak with 94 per cent of the workforce in the unorganised sector. They lack bargaining power to demand increase in wages in line with inflation—the data of which itself is suspect since it is outdated. The low and declining share of wages in output tells its own tale. Technological advances are further reducing work availability.

Why then the sudden move to weaken labour? The elephant in the room is US President Trump's bullying and its consequences for the Indian economy. On the one hand, labour-intensive exports are getting impacted while on the other the US is demanding opening up of much of the Indian agriculture sector which, once conceded, will adversely impact the income of around 50 per cent Indians.

The changes strive to address these two threats to the Indian economy. The new Labour Codes address the non-agriculture sector while VB-GRAM-G addresses the challenge to agriculture. In both cases, the

The weakening of labour is no accident. It is designed to prepare the ground, and possibly a signal, for the eventual capitulation to Donald Trump

Indian government is seeking to put the burden of Trump's demands on labour.

Indian businesses are keen on an early trade agreement with the US. But Trump's demand that India reduce Russian crude imports and open up the agriculture sector are politically fraught issues.

Yet, India has been caving in to Trump's demands. Last year's budget saw a cut in several import duties, increased import of energy from the US, mention of increase in import of defence equipment, and suspension of import duty on cotton.

The SHANTI Bill, passed hastily in the recent winter session of Parliament, reduces the liability of nuclear equipment suppliers to enable US suppliers to sell to India. The current buzz in Washington is to levy up to 500 per cent tariff on countries importing Russian oil. No trade will then be possible.

High tariff (up to 50 per cent) on India's exports to the US have made them uncompetitive, forcing exporters to slash profit margins and/or cut wages. Exporters are routing part of their trade through third countries like the UAE, with lower tariffs. But this requires paying intermediaries. This impacts profit margins. Exporters have been hurting due to the declining trend of exports in the last few months. They have however

been helped a little by the decline in the value of the rupee since it leads to a decline in the dollar price without cutting the rupee price. It is through this prism that one has to understand why the RBI is enabling the fall of the rupee versus the dollar.

But none of this would be required if Trump reduces tariffs on Indian goods.

Sanctions on Russian oil companies have led to cuts in the import of crude oil (a partial compliance with US demand) but tariff reduction still remains elusive. This suggests there is no escaping a trade agreement with the US and that almost certainly requires opening up of the agriculture sector. Would policy makers under pressure from businesses sacrifice the interest of Indian agriculture and milk markets?

Can Indian farmers compete with heavily subsidised EU and US farmers? Cheap imports will drive agriculture prices below the MSP, worsening farmers' losses. That is why squeezing wages and increasing input subsidies become a strategic move.

The VB-GRAM-G Bill reduces real farm wages. This is in line with the demand of well-off farmers for dilution of MGNREGA which, according to them, caused shortage of labour and higher wages. The new Bill caters to this demand by giving exemptions in the peak harvest and sowing seasons.

Should the wealthier farmers be happy then? Not really, since the gain from lower farm wages will be far less than what the farmers will lose due to cheaper imports.

Finally, there is no certainty that Trump, in his current antagonistic mood towards India, will lower tariffs at par with India's competitors. The US has been drifting away from a strategic partnership with India. Given this ambiguity, should the government even think of opening up the agriculture markets?

The weakening of labour is therefore no accident. It is designed to prepare the ground, and is possibly a signal for the eventual capitulation to Trump. Depressed real wages and the likely opening up of Indian agriculture will widen inequality in India, weaken demand, and adversely impact investment, employment and rate of growth of the economy. This will obviously harm workers and farmers. However, instead of coming to their rescue, the ruling party has chosen to protect the interests of business. ■

ARUN KUMAR taught Economics at JNU and is the author of Indian Economy's Greatest Crisis: Impact of the Coronavirus and the Road Ahead

SIR A purge and a voter list made to order

Who decided that the 6.5 crore names deleted no longer count as voters—and by what authority, asks **Anand Teltumbde**

On 27 October 2025, the Election Commission of India launched a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls across nine states and three Union Territories (after a test run in Bihar). By early January 2026, provisional lists revealed an astonishing outcome: nearly 6.5 crore citizens had been removed from the rolls.

India has not witnessed a net decline in registered voters of this magnitude since the introduction of universal adult franchise in 1950—not during wars, not during famines, not even during the COVID-19 pandemic that claimed millions of lives. The scale of deletion alone rules out benign explanations.

The question before the republic is no longer administrative but existential: if the State can erase 6.5 crore citizens without census data, without parliamentary debate, without transparent criteria and without meaningful due process, does universal adult franchise exist as a right—or merely as a constitutional ornament?

A net decline of such magnitude can be explained by only three phenomena: mass death, mass emigration or mass



Photo: Getty Images

India has not witnessed a net decline in registered voters of this magnitude since 1950

disenfranchisement.

India has experienced none of these. Even the most expansive estimates of excess COVID-19 deaths—figures the state has resisted acknowledging—fall far short. More tellingly, the pandemic's peak lies years behind us. If mortality were the cause, deletions would have peaked then, not now.

Internal migration offers no escape from this arithmetic. Migrants do not lose citizenship by moving; they merely change location. Migration complicates voter registration, but it cannot shrink the electorate by tens of millions unless the

system is designed to exclude itinerants rather than accommodate them.

Only one explanation remains: this is political engineering of the electorate. The central question is therefore not how the Election Commission executed the deletions, but who decided that these 6.5 crore people no longer count as voters—and by what authority.

Electoral roll revision is a routine democratic exercise. It adds new voters, removes the deceased based on records and corrects errors. It is incremental, cautious and overwhelmingly additive. Democracies assume that electorates grow.

The SIR departs radically from this logic. It is subtractive. Most critically, it reverses the constitutional burden of proof. Instead of the State establishing grounds for deletion, citizens are required to prove their continued eligibility.

This inversion is not procedural trivia—it is constitutional sabotage. Universal adult franchise rests on the presumption of inclusion. The State must prove death, duplication or loss of citizenship. The SIR replaces this presumption with suspicion. Voting ceases to be a right flowing from citizenship and becomes an administrative privilege, contingent on documentation, deadlines and bureaucratic discretion.

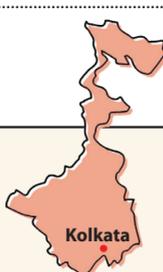
A right that must be periodically re-earned is no longer a right.

The decade-long absence of a national census is not incidental to this mass deletion—it is its enabling condition. A census is the epistemic foundation of democracy.

Electoral roll revision is a routine democratic exercise. It is incremental and additive. The SIR, on the other hand, is subtractive

► Continued on page 2

STATES 360° WEST BENGAL



Mamata versus the Election Commission of India

Shikha Mukerjee

It's not yet clear if the Election Commission of India has taken disciplinary action against Mousam Sarkar, the Assistant Electoral Registration Officer (AERO) who resigned on 8 January after publicly protesting against the SIR process.

In his resignation letter addressed to the Chief Electoral Officer, the block development officer stated that many of the discrepancies in names, spellings and dates that had occurred during the Intensive Revision of 2002 in Bengal were corrected by voters using Form 8, in accordance with ECI rules. Ditto in cases of age-related discrepancies. Those same discrepancies were now being flagged as 'logical discrepancies'. Summoning voters for 'hearings' on these grounds was both unnecessary and unfair, said Sarkar.

The West Bengal CEO told media that as an employee of the ECI, the AERO could have raised his concerns through 'proper channels'. By airing his grievance publicly, he was, it seems, guilty of gross insubordination and had made himself liable for suitable

punishment.

The case of the recalculated AERO is among various issues flagged by chief minister Mamata Banerjee. The escalating confrontation over the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) has seen the chief minister shooting off as many as five letters to Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar in the first fortnight of January.

Banerjee has accused the ECI and the CEO of sharing lists of deleted voters only with the BJP. She pointed out that the CEO had

The escalating confrontation over SIR has seen Mamata Banerjee shoot off as many as five letters to Gyanesh Kumar



Mamata Banerjee leads a protest against SIR in North 24 Paraganas

passed on instructions to revise and change processes on WhatsApp. She flagged that vehicles had been intercepted in Bankura and several other districts, carrying BJP leaders and thousands of pre-filled forms (Form 7) meant to delete voters in bulk. In its own guidelines issued in October 2025, the ECI had stipulated that no BLA (booth level agent) may submit more than 50 Form 7

publications of the draft list, and no more than 10 per day thereafter. How, then, were thousands of these forms being carted around? And why has the ECI deployed micro-observers only in West Bengal? (Her party believes micro-observers have been pressurising officials to delete names.) If a BLO is mandated to visit each voter three times during the SIR, and the ECI has already obtained, completed and

signed enumeration forms, what justifies calling voters to offices located 10–15 kilometres or more away?

She has also exhorted people to demand receipts for documents submitted and objected to senior citizens being summoned for 'hearings'.

Among those summoned are Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen, a host of sports persons who represented India internationally, celebrated poet Joy Goswami, a 104-year-old voter from Murshidabad Haru Sheikh, and Members of Parliament, past and present. That they have to establish their bonafides and correct minor errors made in the past, often by ECI officials themselves, is shocking.

Even more distressing is that lakhs of voters—who are not VIPs—have no option but to verify themselves the hard way. The unusually biting cold this year has added to the distress, with several voters reported to have fallen dead at the camps. The ECI's identification of 54 lakh 'unlogged' voters and 1.3 crore cases of 'logical discrepancies', coupled with its insistence on physical verification at camps, has led to confusion and

chaos. By creating various categories of voters, the ECI has turned the verification process into a nightmare.

There are also reports that verification and hearing notices have been selectively issued to voter concentrations in specific constituencies, a charge made by CPI(M) state secretary Mohammad Salim. Additionally, reports indicate that carloads of Forms 7 and 8—used to object to the inclusion of a voter's name and to seek corrections of particulars—have been found.

At the last count, only 6.6 per cent of 1.3 crore voters who are to be 'heard' and 'detected-deleted-deported' or reinserted into the voters list have been dealt with by the ECI. With the deadline of 7 February around the corner, Mamata Banerjee has demanded an extension.

The BJP has accused the Trinamooli cadre of intimidating Booth Level Officers and slammed the Election Commission for failing to ensure their safety. Party leaders have also blamed the ECI for targeting whistle-blowers and demanded that the Chief Election Commissioner personally visit the state to hear grievances. ■

SIR A purge and a voter list made to order

Continued from page 1

It establishes demographic facts against which representation, welfare and electoral rolls are verified. By refusing to conduct a census for over a decade, the State has dismantled this foundation. There is now no authoritative benchmark against which the EC's claims can be tested.

In this vacuum, numbers acquire an oracular status: asserted, not validated.

The irony is brutal. A State that demands documents to prove citizenship refuses to document its own population. Papers are demanded selectively and weaponised against the vulnerable. Conducted without census data, the SIR process expresses sovereign power unmoored from empirical accountability.

When the State can remove 6.5 crore people from the electoral rolls without proving that they have died, emigrated or lost citizenship, it is editing it.

*

Administrative exercises never operate on neutral terrain. They carry a sociology. Who survives them depends on who has documents, stable addresses, literacy to navigate forms, time to contest errors and lives that leave paper trails that the State recognises as legitimate.

Those most vulnerable to deletion are entirely predictable: migrant workers with shifting addresses; the urban and rural poor living in informal housing; Dalits and Adivasis whose historical exclusion translates into thin documentary records; Muslims whose citizenship has been rendered perpetually suspect through NRC-CAA discourse; informal-sector workers whose labour leaves no bureaucratic trace; and citizens whose

precarious lives do not generate the paperwork modern governance demands.

These are precisely the populations Indian democracy has struggled to include and that are electorally inconvenient to the ruling powers. They vote disproportionately against incumbents, resist nationalist mobilisations and benefit least from welfare regimes. That they are also the first to disappear from electoral rolls is neither coincidence nor accident.

The quiet rewriting of citizenship

Voting rights now hinge on citizenship being demonstrated to administrative satisfaction. This shift has occurred without parliamentary debate, without legislation, without constitutional amendment. Universal adult franchise remains intact on paper while being hollowed out in practice through circulars, verification protocols and any administrative fiat.

The deeper crisis is institutional. The Election Commission was conceived as a counter-majoritarian authority, tasked with protecting electoral integrity from executive interference. Its authority rested on public trust earned through restraint and impartiality.

That authority is now gravely compromised. By presiding over mass deletions without census data, transparent criteria or credible public justification—with effects that fall overwhelmingly on marginalised populations—the Commission has ceased to function as neutral referee. Institutional capture through manipulated appointments and an internal culture of deference has made it a participant in a project to reengineer the electorate.

The pattern is visible well beyond the SIR: asymmetric enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, indulgence toward ruling-party violations, silence on inflammatory rhetoric and compliance in matters such as electoral bonds.

Defenders argue that deletions can be corrected through objections and re-verifications. This misses the point. The problem is not error but design. The scale ensures mass exclusion; the speed precludes verification; the opacity blocks scrutiny; and the burden is placed on those least equipped to bear it.

Asking 6.5 crore citizens to 'reapply' for their vote converts a constitutional right into a remedial permit.

These 'remedies' themselves reproduce inequality. They require literacy, time,

money, access and persistence—resources the excluded do not possess.

What is being revised, finally, is not the electoral roll but the meaning of who belongs. The political logic is plain. Large segments of the population are 'managed' through welfare. Food rations, cash transfers, housing schemes, fuel subsidies—all delivered as favours.

In such a regime, voting is expendable—and sometimes inconvenient. A population 'disciplined' through welfare dependency may vote on grievance rather than gratitude, demand more than survival schemes offer or support forces that challenge the distributional and ideological order. For a regime that governs through calculated 'generosity', electoral agency becomes a liability.

Mass deletion from electoral rolls is therefore not a contradiction of welfare politics but its logical complement. Those who cannot vote can still be governed; those without electoral power can still receive benefits.

Indeed, benefits become easier to manage when they are detached from political bargaining and delivered administratively. The ideal subject of this order is not the citizen but the beneficiary—compliant, grateful and silent. What emerges is a decisive shift. Democracy presumes that power flows upwards from citizens to the State.

What makes this moment especially dangerous is its procedural camouflage. There are no emergency proclamations, no suspended constitutions, no takedowns on the streets. Instead, it's a silent attack through databases, verification protocols and administrative circulars.

The fabric of democracy painstakingly woven over seven decades is frayed through acts presented as technical necessity. This is authoritarianism without the spectacle.

The technocratic framing isn't incidental. When disenfranchisement is presented as electoral 'clean-up' rather than political exclusion, resistance dissipates. Citizens are more likely to accept loss of rights described as clerical error. Administrative language anesthetises deliberate democratic damage. Overt repression and declared emergencies provoke opposition; procedural normalisation does not.

When millions vanish from electoral rolls through spreadsheets, transformation occurs below the threshold of outrage, accumulating until reversal becomes politically unthinkable.

Universal franchise was our republic's founding rupture with colonial rule—the principle that transformed subjects into citizens and made the people's vote the source of legitimacy.

When tens of millions lose voting rights through administrative action, that foundation is breached. The crucial question is no longer who will win elections, but who will be allowed to participate in them.

Democracies that begin by excluding inconvenient voters rarely stop there. They proceed, step by procedural step.

The deletion of 6.5 crore voters is a constitutional crisis. When voters become editable, citizenship provisional and rights revocable by procedure, democracy survives only as shell—its language intact, its substance gone. ■

ANAND TELTUMBDE is a writer and civil rights activist. Republished with permission from The Wire

STATES 360° PUNJAB



Religious summons and political rehearsals

Herjinder

In Punjab's political theatre, controversies rise and fade with remarkable speed. Yet, three weeks into the new year, one issue has dominated all others: chief minister Bhagwant Mann's appearance before the Akal Takht. The summons was the result of a cluster of controversies, largely rooted in Mann's outspoken remarks, which the Akal Takht felt transgressed the sanctity of Sikh tradition. It also sought an explanation for a video that Mann and his party described as fabricated.

For Mann and the Aam Aadmi Party, this posed an unfamiliar test. Their initial response revealed their uncertainty; a party spokesperson even accused the Shiromani Akali Dal of using the SGPC as a political tool. Mann himself first insisted that he would appear only if the proceedings were broadcast live—a demand the Akal Takht rejected, unwilling to turn a solemn religious forum into a reality show. As the seriousness of the moment sank in, internal dissent faded, and Mann announced he would appear barefoot and submit his explanation.

History offers some perspective here. Four Punjab chief ministers, including Mann—and even President Giani Zail Singh—have previously been summoned by the Akal Takht. What made this instance different was the venue. Mann was asked to appear before the Akal Takht Secretariat, not its *fasil* or platform, on the grounds that he is not an Amritdhari Sikh and was therefore termed a '*patit*' Sikh. This distinction opened a deeper fault line: can every non-Amritdhari Sikh be labelled thus?

The controversy widened within the SGPC itself. Former president Bibi Jagir Kaur wrote to the current president Harjinder Singh Dhami, and Akal Takht Jathedar Kuldeep Singh Gargaj, arguing that his mere presence violated Sikh sanctity, since only an Amritdhari Sikh can be summoned by the Akal Takht.

When Mann finally arrived on 15 January, he carried two bags, reportedly containing documents to prove his innocence. After the hearing, Jathedar Gargaj told the media that the chief minister had shown humility, accepted fault on several counts and acknowledged that certain statements should not have been made.

With that, the immediate political din subsided. But the matter itself remains unresolved. The full record of Mann's appearance will now go before the five Singh Sahibans (*punj pyaras*), whose judgment—punishment or acquittal—will determine how this chapter ultimately ends.

Political circus

This year, the annual Maghi Mela at Muktsar Sahib was less a religious congregation and more a crowded political circus. With the sole exception of the Congress, every major party in Punjab erected its own pavilion and staged large rallies. As a result, news flowing out of an



Punjab chief minister Bhagwant Singh Mann before Jathedar Giani Kuldeep Singh Gargaj

event commemorating the 40 martyrs of the Battle of Muktsar was more political than spiritual.

The largest show was mounted by the Aam Aadmi Party. Its opulent pavilion had already attracted attention, amid allegations that nearly 1,600 buses were arranged to ferry supporters. Alongside the chief minister and his cabinet colleagues, senior leader Manish Sisodia was also present. Mann's speech made headlines when he referred to the recovery of 169 out of 328 missing copies of the Guru Granth Sahib from the SGPC, a remark that also appeared to generate sympathy on the eve of his appearance before the Akal Takht.

For AAP, Muktsar Sahib is familiar political ground. The party had used the 2016 Maghi Mela as a launchpad when it was still new to Punjab. This year's mobilisation carried echoes of that moment, with an eye firmly on the 2027 assembly elections.

The Shiromani Akali Dal, led by Sukhbir Badal, was not far behind. Taking the stage, Badal reeled off a series of assurances that effectively resembled a draft manifesto for the next elections.

For the first time, the BJP also set up a separate stage. Previously, it had shared space with the Akali Dal at such events. Union Minister Anurag Thakur, Ravneet Singh Bittu, Punjab BJP president Sunil Jakhhar and Haryana Chief Minister Jayrab Singh Saini—once again wearing a saffron turban—were present. In Punjab's political circles, Saini's frequent appearances at religious events are seen as part of the BJP's attempt to carve out space in the state. The stage rang with praise for the 'double-engine government', though the crowd was thinner than at other rallies.

Simranjit Singh Mann's Akali Dal (Amritsar) and Waris Punjab De—the party of MP Amritpal Singh, currently jailed in Dibrugarh under the NSA—also held their own programmes.

The Congress alone stayed away. Citing a 2017 Akal Takht *hukumnama* (edict) against political events on religious occasions, state party chief Amarinder Singh Raja Warring said the Congress did not believe in mixing religion with politics.

Absence does not mean irrelevance. With elections still a year away, the political churn set in motion at Muktsar will no doubt continue. ■



When crores lose voting rights due to administrative actions, India's foundation is breached



STATES 360°

UTTARAKHAND

Devbhoomi losing its holy sheen

Rashme Sehgal

Anger over Ankita Bhandari's murder in 2022 erupted in December 2025 and carried into the new year. The killing of the 19-year-old, who refused sexual favours to a VIP, came to symbolise the collapse of Uttarakhand's long-held dream.

Formed 25 years ago after sustained agitation, Uttarakhand was meant to fulfil a Gandhian vision of self-governance. Instead, it has been overwhelmed by crass commercialisation and a development model that has eroded agriculture, destroyed homes and frayed the social fabric.

Ankita was murdered by Pulkit Arya, son of BJP minister Vinod Arya and owner of the Vanantra resort where she worked as a receptionist. After Pulkit's conviction, the staff spoke openly of the resort being a hub of drugs, alcohol and prostitution.

This only served to confirm the public's worst fears: thousands of resorts and homestays that have mushroomed across the state—many owned by politicians and retired bureaucrats—are hubs of prostitution where young girls are lured and subsequently blackmailed to become sex workers.

Rishita, who was a receptionist at Vanantra, before Ankita joined, said, "I felt they wanted me to get into it (sex work). I was unwilling, and so they abused me with the choicest of *gaalis*."

Two months into the job, Rishita and her husband Vivek quit. Instead of paying their salaries, Pulkit charged Vivek with theft. When Vivek went to the cops to file a complaint, he was directed to meet the patwari who handles law and order in the area. Not surprisingly, the patwari sided with Pulkit.

Kamla Pant, whose organisation Uttarakhand Mahila Manch came out in support of Ankita's parents, is apprehensive about the state going the Thailand way. Prostitution is illegal in Thailand but is openly practised in go-go bars, massage parlours and nightclubs.

"We are afraid that politicians want to set up dens like that here. Sex trade is on the rise; even small grocery shops are encouraged to sell liquor. Uttarakhand used to be such a quiet place where people would settle after retiring. Now it has become a den of vice, with thousands of resorts, hotels and homestays—from the cheapest to the most expensive."

The owner of a small boutique hotel on Rajpur Road in Dehradun says, "Couples now want to hire rooms on an hourly basis. This suits owners of smaller hotels because they can make a quick buck."



Pulkit Arya, who was managing Vanantra, convicted for the murder of Ankita Bhandari

Uttarakhand used to be a quiet place where people would settle after retiring. Now it has become a den of vice with thousands of resorts and hotels

Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. According to the National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB), Uttarakhand recorded the largest number of rape cases among the Himalayan states, and the highest number of POCSO cases in 2023. Pressured by Hindu extremist groups, the police are using the law to target Muslim teens in interfaith relationships.

Statistics released by the NCRB show an alarming surge in cases of kidnapping, murder and theft in 2024 as compared to earlier years. Sharing details of this surge, RTI activist and advocate Nadeem Uddin says, "Thefts increased by 9 per cent, murder cases by 5 per cent, kidnappings with the intention to murder surged by 100

per cent, and women's abductions increased by 91 per cent. Other forms of kidnapping rose by a dramatic 144 per cent from 2022."

The rise in crimes against women has been mirrored by an unprecedented surge in liquor sales. According to data from the Excise Department, over 6.67 lakh cases of liquor were sold across the state during the Diwali fortnight in 2025. This generated revenue exceeding Rs 367 crore, while sales on New Year's Eve alone brought in Rs 143 crore. Alcohol is the state's biggest money spinner, helping generate an income of Rs 3,353 crore—nearly Rs 200 crore more than in 2024.

While bulk liquor licences are being issued only to Uttarakhand residents by the state government, under the new excise policy for 2025-26 all liquor shops located near religious places will be shut down.

A study conducted by AIIMS Rishikesh, which interviewed 400 individuals, highlighted the growing problem of alcohol consumption in the districts of Dehradun and Haridwar. Published in 2018, the study found that the highest proportion of alcohol users were aged 30 to 49, with 72 per cent males and 28 per cent females struggling with alcoholism.

This problem has grown worse in the last five years. Women in the hill villages of Garhwal have taken matters into their hands and formed mahila mangal dals to ensure that no alcohol is sold or consumed in their village. In December 2025, a student of a private school in Haldwani was caught with vodka in her water bottle during a surprise check. The

principal of the school, Dr Yuvraj Pant, admitted that alcoholism and smoking had spiked among senior students.

The youth and adolescents are also susceptible to drug addiction. Drugs are easily available as Uttarakhand's geographical location makes it an ideal transit route for drug trafficking. A study published in the International Journal of Science and Research, revealed that in the Kumaon region, an estimated 26 per cent of senior secondary school students are addicted to drugs including synthetic drugs and opioids.

With adolescent girls and boys moving out of their villages to larger towns in search of economic opportunities, the family structure has disintegrated. Sex ratio has shown a rapid decline: at present there are 840 girls for every 1,000 boys, one of the worst in India. When girls aren't valued, life becomes an uphill climb—marked by violence, forced marriages, trafficking and fewer choices.

Congress spokesperson Sujata Paul emphasises that "sexual exploitation and sex trafficking" have become rampant. "Take the example of Vanantra. The Arya family had been given permission to open a amla candy factory but were running a resort right under the nose of the government."

Paul named several prominent BJP leaders who have been convicted for sexual misdemeanours. BJP MLA Mahesh Negi from Dwarhat has been charged with rape and criminal intimidation. Mukesh Bora, head of the State Cooperative Dairy Federation, was accused of sexually exploiting a widow and her daughter—the BJP removed him from his post in 2024. Another BJP leader who was a member of the minority cell, Aditya Raj Saini, was removed from his post and expelled from the party after he was booked for raping and murdering a 13-year-old Dalit girl in Haridwar in 2013.

"This is the moral fibre of present leaders. Obviously, they will encourage all kinds of sexual wrongdoings. Hundreds of women are coming forward with complaints but the police is pressured into hushing them up," Paul added.

The preference among young people for live-in relationships over marriages coincides with an increase of violence in such relationships. Chairperson of Uttarakhand's State Women's Commission Kusum Kandwal said, "The trend is alarming and underscores the need for greater awareness and legal measures to protect women's rights." ■

Official data confirms the disturbing rise in human trafficking in Uttarakhand. The warning signs were visible as early as 2016, when the women's wing of the Uttarakhand Parivartan Party organised a candlelight march to sound the alarm. Scores of women—particularly from Almora district—went missing from their homes. Activists believe many were pushed into sex work.

The march brought to light claims that distressed women were being sexually exploited by influential persons, allegedly in collusion with the management of a shelter home in Dehradun.

Between 2016 and 2022, there was a four-fold increase in crimes against young women registered under the Protection of



Women march in Nainital for safety and dignity

Is the revolution in danger of being hijacked?

To present monarchy as a solution today is to forget why Iranians rose against it in the first place nearly half a century ago, writes **Ashok Swain**

Iran has once again entered a familiar and dangerous moment. Since late December, protests that began over soaring prices, unpaid wages and deepening economic despair have turned into the most widespread and politically explicit uprising the country has seen since 2022. What started as anger at empty refrigerators and collapsing livelihoods has transformed into open calls for the end of the Islamic Republic itself. Demonstrations have spread far beyond Tehran, cutting across provinces, ethnic lines and social classes, while the Iranian diaspora has poured into the streets of cities from Lyon to Los Angeles. Slogans are no longer cautious or coded—they are direct, angry and revolutionary.

This time, the regime looks weaker than it has in years. Western sanctions have tightened further, oil revenues are constrained, inflation is punishing ordinary households and the currency has lost much of its value. Israeli airstrikes in June 2025, aimed at military and strategic targets, have added to a sense of vulnerability that the leadership has struggled to conceal. Iran's regional posture of strength is also under severe strain. Allies and proxies in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine are either severely weakened or fighting for survival, exposing the limits of Tehran's influence and draining resources at home. For many Iranians, the promise that regional power would translate into dignity and prosperity has long since collapsed.

The regime's response has followed a grimly predictable script. Internet shutdowns, mass arrests and live ammunition are once again being used to terrorise the streets into silence. Some of the human rights organisations are estimating that more than 500 protesters have been already killed. State television beams images of hundreds of thousands of regime loyalists chanting rehearsed slogans, while the Supreme Leader dismisses the protesters as foreign agents. Beneath this performance of defiance lies a system under real stress. The security apparatus is overstretched, legitimacy is eroding even among former supporters and fear no longer works as efficiently as



Israeli bombs target the Evin Prison in Tehran

it once did.

There is no doubt that Iranians deserve a system that reflects their will, protects their rights and offers them a future. The theocratic state, built on clerical supremacy and enforced by coercion, has failed on all counts. It has crushed political life, marginalised women and minorities, squandered national wealth and dragged the country into endless confrontation abroad. That millions are now demanding its removal should surprise no one.

What is worrying, however, is the direction in which parts of this anger are being channelled. Alongside chants for freedom and dignity, a new and troubling demand has gained visibility: the return of monarchy. Some protesters and diaspora activists are calling for the restoration of the Pahlavi dynasty and the installation of Reza Pahlavi, the exiled son of the deposed Shah, as Iran's ruler. In interviews and public statements, he has not only urged Iranians to intensify protests but has also openly called on the United States, and

particularly President Donald Trump, to militarily intervene in Iran to overthrow the current regime.

This should alarm anyone who genuinely cares about Iran's future. The Islamic Republic may be discredited, but the memory of the Shah's rule is not the romantic tale that monarchists now sell. The pre-1979 monarchy was not a golden age of freedom stolen by clerics. It was an authoritarian system sustained by a brutal security apparatus, political repression, torture and the systematic exclusion of popular participation. The 1979 revolution, which ultimately produced the current theocracy, was itself a response to decades of dictatorship, inequality and foreign-backed rule.

To present monarchy as a solution today is to forget why Iranians rose up in the first place nearly half a century ago. It also ignores the basic fact that legitimacy cannot be inherited in exile. Reza Pahlavi has not lived under the conditions his supporters claim he should now rule. He has not faced sanctions, repression or the daily humiliations imposed by the State. More importantly, he has never been chosen by Iranians through any democratic process. Crowds chanting his name abroad do not amount to a social contract at home.

The call for foreign military intervention is even more dangerous. Iran's modern history offers a clear lesson on the cost of external interference. From the 1953 CIA-engineered coup that overthrew Mohammad Mossadegh to decades of Cold War manipulation, foreign involvement has repeatedly undermined democratic possibilities and empowered authoritarian forces. Any foreign-led intervention today would almost certainly produce chaos, civilian suffering and fragmentation, not freedom. It would also hand the regime its most powerful narrative weapon: that the uprising is a foreign conspiracy, thereby justifying even greater repression.

There is also a moral contradiction at the heart of monarchist appeals. To oppose a theocracy that claims divine authority, only to replace it with a hereditary ruler backed by foreign power, is not liberation. It is a substitution of one unaccountable system with another. Iranians are

protesting because they want dignity, agency and control over their lives. They are not risking death in the streets to become subjects once again.

It would be unfortunate for this uprising to be hijacked, as the 1979 revolution was, by forces that do not represent its original demands. Then, a broad-based movement against dictatorship was captured by clerical networks that were better organised and ruthless enough to seize the moment. Today, there is a risk that a vacuum of leadership and coordination could allow loud unrepresentative voices to define the future in advance, especially from outside the country.

The real challenge facing Iran's protesters is not simply to bring down the current regime, but to prevent the emergence of another imposed order. That requires resisting both internal repression and external manipulation. It means insisting that any transition be led by Iranians inside Iran, through inclusive and genuine democratic processes. It means rejecting the false choice between the turban and the crown.

The West, for its part, should tread carefully. Supporting human rights, documenting abuses and providing platforms for Iranian civil society are all legitimate and necessary actions. Engineering a regime change, backing exiled claimants or threatening military action are not. Such moves would weaken the very forces it claims to support and deepen Iran's long-standing siege mentality.

Iran stands at a crossroads, and history suggests that the road ahead will not be straight or easy. The courage of those protesting should not be underestimated, nor should the regime's capacity for using brute force to suppress them. Yet amid the uncertainty, one principle must remain clear: Iranians deserve the right to choose their future freely, without clerical coercion, dynastic nostalgia or foreign bombs. A revolution that replaces one form of domination with another would not be a victory. It would be a second betrayal. ■

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



When the silver screen becomes a battleground



Release dates and festival slots are instruments of political signalling in Tamil Nadu

K. A. Shaji

During Pongal in Tamil Nadu, everyday politics no longer announces itself from a party office, a secretariat corridor or a rally ground dusted with flags. It begins in the darkness of a cinema hall. Outside theatres, firecrackers burst before dawn, milk is poured on towering cut-outs, slogans echo with ritual familiarity, and the crowd that assembles already knows what it wants to believe. What unfolds on the screen before them is not merely a film. It is a dress rehearsal, a collective act of remembering and anticipating, a reminder that in Tamil Nadu, cinema has long been the first ballot. That is how Tamil Nadu has always done politics.

This Pongal, the argument was about what two films carried into the public imagination and what they sought to awaken. *Parasakthi* released in theatres after weeks of controversy, censor cuts and political sparring. *Jana Nayagan*, widely understood as actor Vijay's farewell to cinema before he plunges fully into politics, was scheduled for release a day earlier, then abruptly postponed. Between one film that arrived carrying the weight of history and another that did not arrive but refused to disappear from conversation, the Pongal box office became a political metaphor, with the upcoming assembly election hovering as an unspoken subtext.

Tamil cinema has rarely been apolitical, but there are moments when it decisively alters the course of public life. The release of the original *Parasakthi* in 1952 was one such rupture. Written by a young M. Karunanidhi at a time when mythologicals dominated the screen, the film shattered pieties and replaced them with a searing social critique. Religion was interrogated, caste hierarchy exposed, gender injustice confronted and Brahminical authority dragged into public debate. Audiences who entered theatres expecting reverence walked out unsettled, even angered, forced to question inherited beliefs.

"*Parasakthi* taught people to listen differently," said Salem Dharanidharan, national spokesperson of DMK, recalling how cinema became the Dravidian movement's classroom. In 1967, when the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam captured power, the ideological groundwork had already been laid not in pamphlets or



Two films that nearly clashed Vijay's *Jana Nayagan* was pitted against DMK-backed *Parasakthi* this Pongal

speeches but in cinema halls across the state, where voters had been emotionally prepared long before they were politically mobilised.

Seventy years later, the new *Parasakthi* draws directly from the anti-Hindi agitations of the 1960s, especially 1965, when Tamil Nadu erupted against what was perceived as cultural and linguistic domination by the Centre. That agitation, more than any manifesto, cemented the emotional foundations of Dravidian federalism. Language became resistance.

This history is not archival. It lives in

family stories, in school lessons, in political memory that resurfaces whenever linguistic uniformity is pushed from Delhi.

The release dates sparked speculation of a proxy on-screen political battle between actor-politician Vijay and the ruling DMK: *Jana Nayagan* on 9 January and *Parasakthi* on 10 January. Even before audiences saw a single frame, the clash was framed as symbolic. Social media amplified it. Political camps interpreted it.

Then, *Jana Nayagan* was postponed. The delay only sharpened the political reading. In Tamil Nadu, timing is never accidental. Release dates, festival slots and first shows have long been instruments of political signalling.

Parasakthi is distributed by Red Giant Movies, now owned by Inban Udhayanidhi, who succeeded his father, Deputy Chief Minister Udhayanidhi Stalin. Inban is also the grandson of chief minister M.K. Stalin and the great-grandson of Karunanidhi, the original *Parasakthi*'s scriptwriter and the Dravidian movement's most effective communicator. This lineage matters deeply in Tamil politics. The 1952 *Parasakthi* was Sivaji Ganesan's debut and Karunanidhi's ideological breakthrough, establishing cinema as the Dravidian movement's most potent instrument of mass persuasion.

The new *Parasakthi* consciously draws from that tradition, blending historical fact

with fictionalised narrative to tell the story of students from the erstwhile Madras Presidency who rose against Hindi imposition. It speaks to a generation for whom language politics may seem distant until it suddenly returns to the centre of national debate.

The film's journey to release, marked by acts and scrutiny, turned cinema into a site of institutional conflict. The DMK and its allies accused the Centre of weaponising the Central Board of Film Certification. The BJP rejected this charge. "If the Centre wanted to obstruct films politically, *Parasakthi* would have been the first to be stopped," said BJP state leader S. Khushboo. "Red Giant is close to the DMK. But the CBFC only follows rules."

On *Jana Nayagan*, Khushboo insisted the delay was procedural rather than political. "You cannot announce a release date without a CBFC certificate. That is the producer's responsibility," she said. "As a Vijay fan, I am upset too, but the rules apply to all."

Congress MP Sasikanth Senthil offered a far darker reading. "They will not hesitate to use any institution. This is the power of fascism," he said, arguing that central institutions had become tools of control rather than neutral arbiters. At the same time, he warned Tamil Nadu against the sight of governance debates, pointing to changes proposed to employment schemes and welfare frameworks under the

AIADMK-BJP alignment. The exchange revealed how cinema had once again become a proxy for deeper anxieties about federalism, its autonomy and institutional trust.

Jana Nayagan's politics is ethical rather than structural. Corruption is the enemy. Leadership is personalised. Justice flows from the hero's moral authority rather than from collective struggle or institutional reform. This aligns precisely with Vijay's political positioning so far.

Widely seen as his farewell to cinema before entering politics full-time, *Jana Nayagan* recalls an older Tamil tradition. M.G. Ramachandran, too, stepped away from the screen at the height of his popularity to legitimize cinema as a political legitimacy. But there is a crucial difference. MGR inherited and reshaped Dravidian ideology. He entered politics through it. Vijay has so far kept his distance from that legacy. His Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam does not claim the Dravidian inheritance; it seeks to position itself as an alternative to established binaries.

As *Parasakthi* began drawing audiences into debates on language, history and resistance, *Jana Nayagan*'s postponement created a different kind of momentum. For Vijay's supporters, it reinforced the narrative of an outsider confronting entrenched systems. For the DMK, it allowed *Parasakthi* to occupy the cultural space unchallenged, at least temporarily, reaffirming its claim over the Dravidian cinematic tradition.

Early box office patterns hinted at a familiar divide. *Parasakthi* found steady audiences in semi-urban and rural belts, among politically conscious viewers for whom language politics remains visceral and personal. *Jana Nayagan*, even before its delay, generated enormous buzz among urban youth and first-time voters, signalling where Vijay's emerging strength lies. Neither constituency can be dismissed. Together, they map the fault lines of a changing electorate.

Tamil Nadu has seen this pattern before. *Parasakthi* prepared the emotional ground for DMK's rise. MGR's films turned benevolence into political charisma. Jayalithaa's screen authority translated into party dominance. This Pongal moment fits squarely into that lineage.

C. Laskhmanan, former faculty of Madras Institute of Development Studies, said, "Cinema does not decide elections in Tamil Nadu. But it often sets their emotional grammar. It tells voters what kind of contest they are entering before parties say a word. Karunanidhi once used cinema to teach people how to question power. Vijay is using it to ask whether they still trust those who inherited it. The answer will not be found in ticket sales or opening weekend numbers."

It will emerge later, quietly, when the screen fades to black and the ballot boxes open. ■

Between one film that arrived carrying the weight of history and another that refused to fade away from conversation, the Pongal box office became a political metaphor

STATES 360° KERALA

Thiruvananthapuram

Congress campaign faces electoral complexities

Amal Chandra

In the verdant hills of Sultan Bathy in Wayanad, far from the clamour of assembly constituencies and electioneering, the Congress party's recent two-day Lakshya leadership summit emerged as a defining moment in Kerala politics. What was seemingly another pre-election strategy meet, in substance and spirit, galvanised the United Democratic Front (UDF), of which Congress is the core, into what strategists now describe as a "moment of political recalibration" as Kerala heads for assembly elections in April.

At the heart of this resurgence are the twin catalysts of the recent performance in the local body polls and a firm strategic direction from senior party elders. The UDF delivered remarkable results in the December 2025 local body elections—winning 505 gram panchayats, 79 panchayats, 54 municipalities and seven district panchayats. The resurgence dwarfed the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), which is enjoying its second consecutive term in office.

While the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) grabbed headlines by capturing the Thiruvananthapuram Corporation, ending 45 years of Left dominance, the broader picture across Kerala showed that UDF's grassroots strength remained robust and widespread, a critical advantage in the run up to the polls.

The local body results provided a narrative shift for the Congress. At the inaugural session of the summit, AICC general secretary K.C. Venugopal framed the electoral calculus firmly in this context. Stressing the value of empirical performance and political groundwork, he asserted that the party would rigorously evaluate both its victories and setbacks from the local body polls to shape its strategy for the assembly campaign.

Underscoring the importance of not giving in to complacency, Venugopal had said before the session that the party

would evaluate its victories as well as setbacks. At the session his message was clear: internal factionalism must end and discipline strictly maintained to avoid merely to the political narrative leading to the assembly elections.

The disciplined approach is strategic: it signals that Congress intends to shape, not merely react to, the political narrative leading to the assembly elections. The deliberations at the session were businesslike, resulting in a concrete road map for statewide mobilisation. Key initiatives include a Kerala Yatra—to be led by Satheesan, starting in February—booth restructuring, social media campaign and early groundwork to finalise candidates.

For Satheesan, the summit reaffirmed trust in his leadership, after a vigilance report was leaked ahead of the summit seeking a CBI probe into issues involving him. Speaking to reporters, Satheesan dismissed the allegations as a "poll gimmick" by the LDF and said he would remain focused on connecting with the people on issues that matter to them.

Across party fronts, there was a noticeable shift—from internal squabbles to disciplined strategy and unity. Shashi Tharoor, MP and CWC member, used Lakshya to underscore this cohesion. Taking to social media, he said he "enjoyed interacting with senior Congress colleagues" and stressed that the local body results had "intensified self-belief and confidence" within the party. Tharoor also articulated the dual perspective of confidence and caution that now defines UDF's campaign narrative.

Senior leaders sharpened their critique of the LDF government. Ramesh Chennithala accused chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan of 'divide and rule' policies to deepen communal rifts rather

than address real governance issues. He even alleged in publicity between the CPM and the BJP in pushing divisive narratives. KPCC president Sunny Joseph interpreted the strong rejection in the local body polls as "a sweeping rejection of the LDF government's anti-people policies."

Meanwhile, the chief minister dismissed talk of any anti-incumbency wave and was confident of securing a majority once again. PWD minister P.A. Mohamed Riyas echoed this sentiment and reiterated an ambitious target of 110 seats. However Congress leaders see this as



Ready for a change Participants at the Lakshya Summit got a clear message to demonstrate unity ahead of assembly polls (left) KPCC president Sunny Joseph

A Congress success will depend not just on organisational prowess or electoral arithmetic but on its ability to weave a cohesive narrative

mere posturing by a government on the defensive. Venugopal was particularly scathing of the CM's recent press conference, describing it as "the lament of a losing captain."

By strategising its campaign around governance and accountability on everyday issues such as voter list revisions and socio-economic concerns, the Congress pushed to neutralise the LDF's attempts at polarisation and counter any BJP narratives that could chip away at the UDF base. The party's emphasis on strengthening booth committees, early candidate selection, campaigning and streamlined internal discipline indicate lessons learnt from past setbacks in 2016 and 2021.

Yet the challenges are formidable. Kerala's electorate is discerning, with diverse issues ranging from

unemployment to agrarian distress, and from urban infrastructure pressures to youth aspirations. The success of the Congress will depend not just on organisational prowess or electoral arithmetic, but on its ability to weave these socio-economic themes into a cohesive narrative across constituencies.

Participants left the summit with a strong message: this is not an ordinary election; more than winning, it is about demonstrating unity and strategic execution.

For the first time in years, the Congress in Kerala seems to have found a coherent strategic compass—one that projects confidence, unity and a credible path to electoral success. ■

AMAL CHANDRA is an author, political analyst and columnist. He tweets @ens_socialis

From Belagavi to the Constitution: Karnataka's Stand Against Social Boycott

Breaking the silence of exclusion: Why Karnataka's Social Boycott Law matters

There are moments in legislative history when a House does more than debate policy or pass a statute. It pauses, looks inward, and decides what kind of society it is willing to defend. The unanimous passage of the Karnataka Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Bill, 2025 during the winter session of the Sixteenth Karnataka Legislative Assembly at Belagavi was one such moment—quiet in procedure, but profound in consequence.

As the Suvarna Vidhana Soudha stood against the December chill, the Assembly spoke with rare unity. Members across party lines endorsed a principle that goes to the heart of the Constitution: no individual or family in Karnataka can be denied dignity, livelihood, or belonging by the fiat of informal community bodies.

Naming an injustice long normalized:

For far too long, social boycott has survived in the shadows of law and governance. It has thrived not because it is lawful, but because it is normalised. In villages and semi-urban pockets, entire families have been cut off from water, work, shops, schools, temples, and burial grounds—not by any court, but by self-appointed caste or community panchayats.

When Social Welfare Minister Dr H C Mahadevappa, who piloted the Bill, rose in the Assembly, he framed the issue with stark clarity. Social boycott, he said, persists because sections of privileged communities continue to treat the underprivileged as second-class citizens. Despite constitutional guarantees, exploitation and exclusion remain routine. Existing laws, he candidly acknowledged, have not been enough. "This is a historic step towards bringing equality to our society," Dr. Mahadevappa told the House. He spoke of people pushed out of village life, denied the right to attend funerals, barred from buying groceries, and isolated through decisions taken by informal councils. The aim of the Bill, he emphasised, is not merely punishment, but the



Photo: Gettyimages

Importantly, the law also acknowledges the quieter, crueller forms of exclusion—cutting off social ties, forcing cultural conformity, expelling individuals from their community, or preventing children from playing with peers from a “boycotted” family.

protection of human dignity from extra-judicial power.

Restoring the Constitutional Promise

At its core, the legislation is anchored in constitutional morality. Dr. Mahadevappa reminded the Assembly that while Article 17 abolished untouchability decades ago, its modern manifestations—economic and social exclusion enforced through boycotts—have often escaped effective legal

scrutiny. Social boycott, he asserted, is a direct violation of civil rights and an assault on the basic principles of the Constitution.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, lending weight to the debate, placed the law within a broader moral and political framework. Known for his consistent advocacy for marginalised communities, the Chief Minister underlined that no individual or family should be harassed under the guise of community

discipline. Human rights, he said, must prevail over regressive customs, and the State can no longer afford to be a silent spectator when caste or community panchayats override the law of the land.

The message from the government benches was unambiguous: constitutional authority, not social coercion, will govern public life in Karnataka.

From individual acts to

collective accountability

A recurring theme in the Assembly debate was the recognition that social boycott is rarely enforced by one person acting alone. It is planned, discussed, voted upon, and enforced collectively. The Bill therefore breaks new ground by targeting the decision-makers, not just the visible enforcers.

Any gathering convened to deliberate on imposing a social boycott is declared an unlawful assembly. Every member of a body—such as a caste panchayat—who votes in favour of a boycott, or uses influence to enforce it, is deemed to have committed the offence. Those who provoke, encourage, or aid such acts face the same penalties as those who directly carry them out. This approach reflects a deeper understanding of power. It dismantles the anonymity that has long shielded informal councils and ensures that collective injustice carries collective responsibility.

A rare political convergence

In an era marked by sharp political divisions, the Bill witnessed rare unanimity. With opposition members of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Janata Dal (Secular) joined the ruling party in supporting the legislation, recognising the universality of the harm caused by social boycott.

BJP State President B Y Vijayendra articulated this shared moral ground when he said that eradicating untouchability and

Selected acts among the 20 forms of Social Boycott:

- Refusal to deal with, employ, hire, or conduct business with a person
- Denial of access to services or contractual opportunities
- Obstruction from participating in social, religious, or community functions
- Preventing marriages, funerals, or religious rites
- Blocking access to schools, hospitals, community halls, burial grounds, or places of worship
- Cutting off social or commercial ties
- Forcing cultural conformity, including dress or language
- Discrimination based on morality, social acceptance, political inclination, or sexuality
- Expulsion from the community
- Any other act that results in social ostracism

social boycott is not a political issue, but a matter of human dignity. The Leader of the Opposition, R Ashoka, while maintaining a watchful eye on implementation, acknowledged the urgency of addressing informal bodies that override the legal system. JD(S) legislators, too, extended their support, while urging the government to ensure adequate protection for officers tasked with enforcing the law in sensitive rural areas. This bipartisan backing lent the legislation both legitimacy and moral force.

Strengthening enforcement: Listening to the house

The Assembly's deliberations also improved the law. Former Law Minister T. B. Jayachandra raised a critical concern: victims of social boycott are often under such intense pressure that expecting them to file complaints is unrealistic. In many cases, approaching the police could deepen their isolation or invite retaliation.

Dr. Mahadevappa accepted this argument without hesitation. Acting on the suggestion, the government amended the Bill to empower the police to register cases suo motu—on their own initiative—whenever instances of social boycott come to light. This change transformed the law from a passive framework into an active instrument of protection.

Police officers are now authorised not only to register cases but also to remove barricades, open gates, and dismantle physical mechanisms used to enforce exclusion.

Placing the victim at the centre

Unlike many criminal statutes, the Social Boycott Act places victims at the heart of the justice process. Courts are mandated to hear victims on the question of sentencing before passing orders, ensuring that punishment reflects lived suffering. Provisions for compensation from fines imposed on offenders further reinforce this victim-centric approach.

The law also allows, in appropriate cases, for compounding of offences with court approval—often tied to community service—recognising that accountability and reconciliation can coexist, provided the victim's dignity is never compromised.

To support implementation, the Bill provides for the appointment of Social Boycott Prohibition Officers, senior Group-A officers tasked with detecting violations, assisting

magistrates, and coordinating with district authorities. Their role is crucial in bridging the gap between law and lived reality.

Learning from painful precedents

The legislation did not emerge in a vacuum. Karnataka has witnessed repeated incidents of collective exclusion—Dalit families denied access to shops and temples, children assaulted for crossing caste boundaries, families ostracised for pursuing legal remedies, and communities enforcing boycotts during religious festivals. While laws like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act address certain forms of exclusion, they do not fully capture boycotts imposed within communities or enforced through informal bodies. The new law consciously fills this gap, extending protection to any person or group, regardless of identity.

A clear signal to society

More than its penalties—up to three years' imprisonment and fines of up to Rs 1 lakh—the Karnataka Social Boycott Act sends a clear signal. Tradition cannot be a shield for injustice. Morality cannot be enforced through deprivation. Community discipline cannot override constitutional rights.

As Home Minister Dr G Parameashwara has often observed in the context of social exclusion, the deepest wounds are psychological. This law, he has said, is about social harmony, not political victory.

The road ahead

Implementation will demand vigilance, sensitivity, and courage. Deep-seated customs do not dissolve overnight. But laws shape behaviour not only through fear of punishment, but through the values they articulate.

As this legislation travels from the Assembly floor to village squares and neighbourhoods across the state, it carries a promise—to children who deserve to play without fear, to families who seek livelihoods without coercion, and to elders who deserve dignity even in death. From Belagavi, the message is unmistakable: no council, no caste, and no community stands above the Constitution of India.

In passing the Karnataka Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Bill, 2025, the state has not merely enacted a law. It has reaffirmed a moral choice—to stand with dignity, equality, and the quiet courage of those who have waited too long to be heard.

Understanding how exclusion works

Photo: Gettyimages



One of the most significant strengths of the Bill lies in its realism. Social boycott is rarely a single act. It is a chain—economic strangulation followed by social isolation, psychological trauma, and enforced silence. Recognising this, the law identifies 20 specific forms of social boycott, capturing the many ways exclusion is imposed.

These range from refusal to deal with, hire, or do business with a person, to denying access to services, employment, or contractual opportunities. The Bill addresses obstruction from participating in social, religious, or community functions, interference in marriages or funeral rites, and the blocking of access to schools, hospitals, community halls, burial grounds, and places of worship maintained by the community.

Importantly, the law also acknowledges the quieter, crueller forms of exclusion—cutting off social ties, forcing cultural conformity, expelling individuals from their community, or preventing children from playing with peers from a “boycotted” family. Discrimination based not only on caste, but also on morality, social acceptance, political inclination, or sexuality, is explicitly brought within the law's ambit.

By naming these acts, the State makes clear that what has been lived as humiliation will now be recognised as a crime.

When we don't demur in the face of injustice

Apoorvanand weighs in on the sorry spectacle of a boorish VC insulting a writer at a university seminar



The public humiliation of a celebrated author evoked no discerning disquiet from the audience

The boorish conduct of Vice-Chancellor Alok Kumar Chakrawal towards writer Manoj Rupda at Guru Ghasidas University, in Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh, is being condemned for good reason. Vice-Chancellor Chakrawal was speaking at a seminar on the Hindi short story organised by his university in collaboration with Sahitya Akademi. In the video of the incident that has since circulated widely, he can be heard making some unfortunately flippant remarks.

At some point, his gaze drifts towards the audience seated in front of him and he is heard telling someone that they appear uncomfortable. From the audience comes a reply—possibly that he is not speaking on the subject, or a request that he do so.

The Vice-Chancellor retorts that if the person is uncomfortable, they should leave; that they do not know how to speak to a VC, and so on.

At this, Manoj Rupda stands up and turns out of the room. The VC turns to his officials and asks who invited this person in the first place. He'd been observing for some time, that this

gentleman seemed uneasy. No one who is ill at ease, he adds, should not remain in the room.

Even after widespread condemnation, Chakrawal also told to see anything wrong with his conduct. If it was an outburst on the spur of the moment, the appropriate response would have been to express regret and apologise to Rupda. But our man has doubled down on defending himself.

The VC made several other errors. When he agreed to attend the seminar, he should have asked his office for a briefing—the topic of the seminar, who the other participants were, and so on. He should have agreed to participate only after gathering this information from the department concerned.

Asking “who invited him” was an act of extreme discourtesy. He was a guest by the institution itself, and unless a guest behaves offensively, it is the responsibility of the institution—and its head—to ensure that the guest's dignity is not violated.

As the head of an institution, a Vice-Chancellor is required to attend

programmes on a wide range of subjects. It is impossible for anyone to have expertise in all. In such situations, it is standard practice for points to provide a few talking points. The VC's role is usually a formal one—representing the institution. Chakrawal's academic background is in commerce; his knowledge of literature is likely to be limited. Precisely for this reason, he should have prepared appropriately, in keeping with the dignity of his office.

But like many others, he probably assumed that since anyone can read a short story, anyone can speak about it too. A university is a space for thoughtful deliberation—not the kind of street-corner banter he was indulging in. Was the VC mindful of those expectations?

Sadly, VCs in India today seem unconcerned even about their own dignity. Chakrawal did not pause to consider that even if others in the hall did not walk out, their assessment of his speech would hardly differ from Manoj Rupda's.

Nor is Chakrawal alone in this. Many institutional heads today appear on stage cracking jokes, showing little regard for the dignity of their office. Audiences usually sit with lowered heads, enduring this foolishness—and the discreet wait for the moment to pass.

In his defence, Chakrawal told the *Indian Express*, that while speaking he noticed Rupda's attention was elsewhere, that he was repeatedly looking at his mobile phone. “I politely asked if he was bored. He told me to speak on the subject. This was an insult to the stage, so I asked him to leave the room.” Chakrawal also told the newspaper that after this incident, he'd been receiving abusive phone calls and subjected to foul language. “Is this our culture?” he asked.

So now the Vice-Chancellor is invoking ‘our culture’! And yet, he is not entirely wrong. The language being used by some writers on social media does require reflection. One might argue this is just wordplay, but calling him ‘*kulkaṅk*’ (a blot on the lineage, for the cheap thrill of playing on the word ‘*kulpati*’ (the Hindi word for vice-chancellor) is not just in bad taste; it is also heedless of the casteist and patriarchal mindset embedded in the word.

The wordplay may seem witty, but the term carries with it ideas of lineage and dishonour. We need to consider how appropriate it is to use such language against anyone. Also, if the language of our protest is coarse, we end up nourishing the very culture we oppose.

Another culture of this incident deserves

attention. When Manoj Rupda stood up and left, there was no discernible disquiet among the other guests present in the hall—they remained seated. This is hardly an exception: I have personally witnessed senior intellectuals not just tolerating the incoherent ramblings of many VCs and other honourables at public events, but also silently listening to their hate-filled remarks about Muslims. In private conversations later, they express regret, but publicly, when it matters, voicing protest does not come naturally to us.

There is one primary reason for this: the culture of ‘respecting elders’ produced by casteist social practices. No matter how rude or uncouth the elder, oppressing them is considered bad manners.

In the caste hierarchy, Brahmins or the upper castes are the elders; within families, they are parents or elder brothers; in classrooms, teachers; in institutions, office-bearers. How, then, could one possibly object to a Vice-Chancellor?

Questions are also being raised about the Sahitya Akademi's involvement in this episode. Many institutions get financial assistance from the Akademi to organise seminars. Beyond that, its role in these events is usually negligible. It is unclear whether it has any say in selecting speakers. But irrespective, since the Akademi's name is attached to this event, keeping mum does not enhance its standing.

One could ask who really cares? For when the culture ministry barred the Akademi from announcing its annual awards, all its office-bearers should have resigned. They are not even Akademi employees. Even today, they are chosen by writers and sent to the Akademi as their representatives. Yet they behave like government functionaries. How, then, can one expect them to speak up in this matter?

Those who still consider the Sahitya Akademi autonomous can only be described as naive. Quite like when Gulzar and Vinod Kumar Shukla accepted the Jnanpith Award and their decision was seen in that light. Just before them, the award had been conferred on a person who openly spews caste hatred and hatred against Muslims.

No one was asking Gulzar or Vinod Kumar Shukla to make political statements, but they could have refused the award—or even while accepting it, expressed their dissent against a social culture rooted in hatred. That would not have required great courage, only sensitivity. To accept a garland from someone who garlands killers is to extend the culture of killing.

If the humiliation of Muslims and the humiliation of Dalits is not our collective humiliation, then who are we? Because we lack this sensitivity, the public humiliation of Manoj Rupda was presumably seen by the writers present at the gathering as a personal affront—it did not wound them in any way. ■

APoorvanand is an author and academic. Translated from the Hindi original first published in *The Wire*

A university is a space for thoughtful deliberation—not the kind of street-corner banter Chakrawal was indulging in. Was the VC mindful of those expectations?

How Donald Trump is throwing it all away

For the first time, America is pursuing a course where it is undoing the admirable, and doubling down on the disliked

Aakar Patel

There is much to admire about America, and plenty to dislike. The thing to admire most is its openness and ability to attract many of the world's most talented people.

Some 15 per cent of the US population is foreign-born, including 50 lakh Indians. This is actually a great asset. A nation, say India, raises and educates a child, spending resources on food, shelter, clothing. The child grows up and goes to the best state institutions, subsidised by Indians, only to move, in his or her 20s, permanently to the United States.

American universities and corporations benefit from Microsoft and Tesla like from the value added by such individuals from abroad. The investment was returned on the investment is fulfilled there.

This ability of America is, to some extent, replicated in Europe,

America is so intent on putting an end to immigration that it is okay with the ICE militia murdering its own citizens

but it does not exist in countries like China or India. We neither attract external talent, nor do we want it. If we are honest, almost all of us who can move abroad do so and the numbers prove it. Today, America is so intent to put an end to this that it is okay with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) militia hunting immigrants and ending up murdering its own citizens, as happened in Minneapolis on 7 January. This was not expected by those who admired the US.

Those who are aware of the United States' conduct in the world, particularly after World War II, have always found much to dislike. Its endless interventions in Asia, Africa, Latin America and even Europe have harmed millions of people. This has always been the case right from the Korean War in the 1950s to Serbia in the 1990s and then of course its post-9/11 adventurism.

To my mind, this is the first time that America is pursuing a course where it is undoing the very thing that is to be admired, and doubling down on precisely what is disliked.

By closing America off to immigrants, the US is harming itself. India is the nation with the largest number of H1-B visa beneficiaries, some two-thirds of the total. It is true that these individuals do not want to live in India and would rather live in the US if allowed. The quality they add to the workforce is not easy to replicate.

Similarly, even those who are undocumented and come to America illegally, do so because they want to be more productive. Getting rid of them and discouraging others from coming, as is happening now, can only

impact America negatively. As attacks on immigration have mounted, unemployment in the US has worsened over the last year. This is because the larger economy has been harmed by the actions against labour. What was admirable has been undone.

Looking into the other side of the ledger, the United States is pursuing a course which continues its imperialist tendencies when it comes to violence abroad—with an added edge.

Imperialism is evident from America's invasion of Venezuela, its kidnapping of Maduro and his wife and its naked claim on

Venezuelan oil. The dozens murdered in this event find little mention and no sympathy in the US press. The bombing of Iran and the assistance to Israel to attack all its neighbours is also part of America's post-World War II tendency.

The new element added by Trump is the ferocity with which he has turned on allies. He wants Canada, he wants Greenland, he wants the Panama Canal.

Europeans, long accustomed to assuming fraternity with America on the basis of race alone, are terrified and do not know how to react. They have made a show of closing ranks, but if Trump sends

his Marines to Greenland, there is little they can do.

Japan and Korea, nations which volunteered to be partners with the US in security and trade and have been allies for decades, find themselves blackmailed into trade deals. India, which wanted to be close to America, especially under the last two prime ministers, and whose leader asked Indians in America to vote for Trump, is also in shock.

We can discuss the incompetence and utter naivete with which our government approached Trump, but let us leave that for another day. Today, we are examining the US

Trump has turned on his allies with an element of ferocity. He wants Canada, he wants Greenland, he wants the Panama Canal



The aftermath of a shooting in Minneapolis on 7 January

and what it is doing to itself. Great empires of the past usually faded over long periods of time. It took Rome centuries to erode, away. In the modern era, this has been happening faster. The British fell from the heights of the Delhi Durbar of 1911 to the crippling crisis of 1945 after the war. The Soviet Union vanished in a matter of weeks.

But none of these great powers damaged themselves as gratuitously as the US is doing today.

Trump is dismissing with contempt the external talent that has added so much to the US, and is taking down the system—the ‘rule-based order’—that America devised to dominate the world.

What he has done and is still doing has damaged—and will continue to damage—the US in the short and the long term. This is as sad to those who have long admired the US as it is satisfying to those who have disliked its actions. ■

Views are personal.

India needs a Zohran Mamdani

The New York mayor embodies the much-needed counter-current to the kind of autocratic majoritarian State that democratic India has morphed into

Malay Mishra

Wearing his democratic socialist heart on his sleeve, Zohran Mamdani took the oath of office as the mayor of New York in a decommissioned subway station in Manhattan to symbolise his affinity with the city's workers and the marginalised people whose cause he said he would serve. The 34-year-old was administered the oath by veteran Democratic senator Bernie Sanders, a torchbearer of democratic socialism in America, with Congresswoman Alexandria Cortez by his side.

There was hardly any coverage in the Indian media of this historic moment, and the seminal impact of Mamdani's election on American politics. The man who broke several taboos in taking charge of the Big Apple remains taboo in India. Through its media handlers, the government made it a point to invisibilise Mamdani despite his stupendous victory, ousting his nearest rival, two-time Democrat governor Andrew Cuomo, by polling more than 50 per cent of the vote. Over one million New Yorkers, cutting across race, religion, ethnicity and economic background, with many immigrants among them, voted for him in a groundbreaking election that created waves across the world. His home country India was the only one that did not salute Mamdani's unprecedented win, rising from an Assemblyman to head America's richest city.

Mamdani has several firsts to his name: the first American of Asian descent and African origin, the first Muslim and the youngest to be elected Mayor of New York. His parents are a celebrated power couple: Mira Nair, the globally acclaimed filmmaker with films like *Salaam Bombay*, *Monsoon Wedding* and *Namesake* to her credit, and Mahmood Mamdani, Professor Emeritus at Columbia University and post-colonial theorist whose celebrated work, *Good Muslim Bad Muslim*, published soon after 9/11, stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for weeks. But Mamdani never chose to remain cocooned within the elite legacy he was born into. On the contrary, he took up the cause of the immigrants—New York hosts more than 150 nationalities.

Secular and liberal in orientation, Mamdani has proven that he cares for the plight of every New Yorker. Outspoken about Netanyahu's role in the genocidal killings of Palestinians, he distanced himself from allegations of antisemitism. (The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, America's largest pro-Israel lobbying group, and the New York Jewish Foundation had played an active role in canvassing support for Cuomo.) The results

saw an even split of the Jewish vote: the younger generation rooted for Mamdani while the older, wealthier and Hasidic Jews voted en masse for Cuomo.

President Trump's fulminations and public denunciations of Mamdani, his threats to cut off federal funds and his open support for his Democrat rival Cuomo, hardly dented Mamdani's surging popularity. Calling Mamdani a Marxist and anti-national, Trump sought to nix Mamdani's political career even before it had begun. Mamdani, mayor of New York, turned the tables on Trump by appearing at the White House for a courtesy meeting, stressing his primary objective of affordability for all New Yorkers through free transport, childcare, housing and government-run grocery stores as he had promised in his election campaign. Surprisingly, perhaps gauging the public mood, Trump turned turtle and assured Mamdani of his full support. Two ideologically contrarian politicians of the right and left in the same frame—one, mean-minded, vindictive, unpredictable; the other, defiant, committed and fearless.

With Trump defying all international norms and capturing the elected President and first lady of Venezuela, a sovereign country, the American system literally collapsed. The media stayed largely and perniciously silent; both Congress and the Supreme Court were voiceless against this flagrant abuse of power. Mamdani stood up

Photos: Getty Images



People's power Zohran Mamdani is the youngest leader of a new generation of Americans to emerge victorious without relying on corporate or political backing (left) With his filmmaker mother Mira Nair



to condemn the brazen act of aggression as a "declaration of war".

Known for his outspoken views (he had called Narendra Modi a fascist) Mamdani has positioned himself securely on the side of the people. While calling for the Palestinians' right to a peaceful homeland on their own soil, he cautioned the Israeli prime minister not to ever land in New York. If he did, he would have him arrested for committing "crimes against humanity" by massacring thousands of helpless Palestinians—women and children, the old and the sick.

With a Kutchi Gujarati father, a Hindu Punjabi mother and a Syrian Muslim wife, Mamdani radiates the kind of cosmopolitanism that is as unequivocally liberal

Known for his outspoken views (he had called Narendra Modi a fascist), Mamdani has positioned himself securely on the side of the people

as it is comfortable with taking his oath on a historic old Quran to reaffirm his Muslim ancestry. (The five boroughs of New York have a sizeable Muslim population—Mamdani won their near unanimous vote.)

Mamdani embodies the much-needed counter-current to the kind of autocratic majoritarian State that democratic India has morphed into over the last decade or so. With India's secular and democratic credentials founded on a nonviolent freedom struggle, it is no wonder that Mamdani chose to quote from Nehru's iconic 'Tryst with destiny' speech when he vanquished all his opponents to emerge as the youngest leader of a new generation of Americans, without relying on any corporate or political backing, simply the people's support.

In his seminal work *The Idea of India*, eminent political scientist Sunil Khilnani writes: 'Modern Indian politics continues to plunder the nationalist pantheon for its iconography while, at the same time, in its practical struggles, it moves further and

further away from the nationalist world and its distinctive temperament. The old arguments and battles are replayed today with the current generation's new meanings and desires: Ambedkar is once again ranged against Gandhi, Patel is brought into battle against Nehru. Even as they divide, these struggles themselves testify to the presence of a common history, a shared Indian past... These struggles constitute the identity of India's history since 1947. And, in its ability constantly to encompass diverse ideas of what India is, this history is itself expressive of the Indian idea'.

India's strength lies in its civilizational diversity; no attempts to paint with a monochromatic brush can bring the real Indian canvas to life. In its hour of reckoning in a world tossed between powerful and opposing ideological blocs, India needs a Zohran Mamdani. ■

MALAY MISHRA is a retired diplomat and policy analyst. Courtesy: The Billion Press



NEHRU CENTRE AUDITORIUM

Located in the heart of Mumbai on the Western Expressway, adjacent to BKC and close to the airport



Ideal for:

- Corporate/HR meetings, seminars and training sessions
- Lectures
- Book launches and readings
- Panel discussions
- Cultural events

The auditorium is available for:

Day-long bookings: 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Half-day bookings: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

To make a booking or for further information, please call: +91 22-26470102, 8482925258 or email contact@nehrucentre.com
Nehru Centre Auditorium, 2nd Floor AJL House, 608/1A Plot No. 2, S. No 341, Near PF Office, Bandra, Mumbai – 400051





Incredible India
www.incredibleindia.org



JANUARY
festival
 WEEK

KITES

HOT AIR BALLOONS AND

DRONES

13-18 JAN | HYDERABAD

ALL EVENTS ARE FREE AND
 OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

CELEBRATE THE SKY

This January, Hyderabad's skies turn into a celebration. January Festival Week brings together kites, hot air balloons and drone experiences across the city.

From traditional kite flying and festive activities during the day to hot air balloon shows and drone displays in the evening, the festival offers something for everyone.



Kite and Sweet Festival '26

13-15 JAN
11 AM - 8 PM

PARADE GROUND, SECUNDERABAD

- NALLA CHERUVU, KUKATPALLY
- BATHUKAMMA KUNTA, AMBERPET
- BUMRUKH-UD-DOWLA, RAJENDRANAGAR

- NYLON MANJHA IS STRICTLY PROHIBITED.
- PUBLIC TRANSPORT RECOMMENDED.

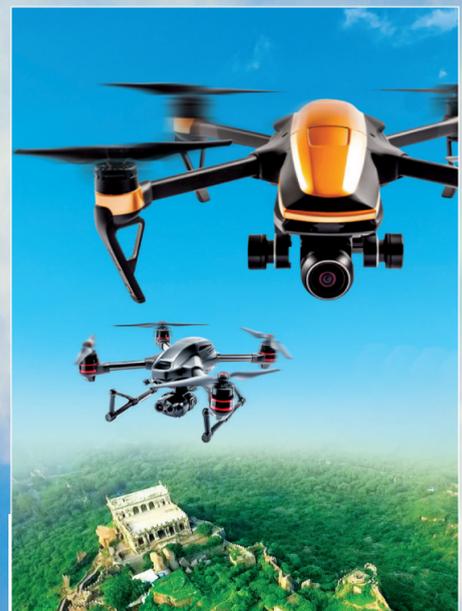


HOT AIR BALLOON Festival '26

16-18 JAN
5 PM - 8 PM

PARADE GROUND (EVENING ONLY)

- NIGHT GLOW BALLOON SHOW
- ENTRY FREE FOR ALL



TELANGANA DRONE Festival '26

16-17 JAN
11 AM - 8 PM

GACHIBOWLI STADIUM

- DRONE RACES
- DRONE SOCCER
- DRONE SHOW
- VIRTUAL TOURISM EXPERIENCE