

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

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**NATION**

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# Who really needs to make the sacrifices?

**Arun Kumar** on what lies ahead and how to brace for the war shocks

Speaking to members of the Indian diaspora at The Hague in mid-May, Prime Minister Modi said the war in West Asia can overturn the gains of the Indian economy in the past decade. Mass poverty could return, he warned, while listing the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing wars and the global energy crisis.

To meet these challenges, he continued, India needs resilient supply chains, and conservation of energy must be seen as a national duty. Readers might remember similar exhortations during the demonetisation of November 2016.

No doubt, the pandemic was not of India's making nor the current supply shock due to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Both adversely impact the economy, especially the unorganised sector. But all was not well with the economy before these shocks came.

Government policies have privileged the organised sector at the expense of the unorganised sector since 2014. As a result, the capital and energy intensity of the economy has risen and so have unemployment and inequality. The health of the Indian economy has increasingly depended on the organised sector, which employs a meagre 6 per cent of the work force. Even a small change in their fortunes and actions produces a disproportionate impact on the economy.

The black economy generated by the well-off and the organised sector has resulted in poor governance and policy failure and the flight of capital has created a shortage of capital and a loss of foreign exchange leading to a weak balance of payments. The corrupt rich hold hundreds of billions of dollars abroad that are not available to the national economy—and the prime minister has to make appeals for austerity and to conserve

foreign exchange. India's economic data is suspect. This is partly due to the black economy but also for methodological reasons. The national GDP is overestimated; inflation is underestimated. The government's default setting is to paint a glowing picture without bothering to remedy underlying weaknesses, which gets exposed in times of crisis.

The supply shock due to closure of the Strait of Hormuz is aggravating the underlying weakness of the economy and impacting it hard. The unorganised sector is reeling from forced cutbacks in production, declining incomes and rising unemployment. The all-round rise in prices has hit their purchasing power. The official CPI inflation of 3.5 per cent does not reflect the reality of the poor—it fails to account for the black market, which takes effective inflation up to 30-40 per cent.

The depreciation of the rupee vis-à-vis the dollar—more than 5 per cent in 75 days and a steep annual rate of 24 per cent—also impacts the poor because it jacks up prices of imported essentials like fertilisers. The sharp decline in the rupee is related to capital leaving India, which in turn is due to waning confidence in the Indian economy.

From Rs 83.28 to a dollar in May 2024, the exchange rate is now Rs 96 and rising. The rupee has dropped 15.2 per cent in two years. Thus, the return on investment in India, measured in dollar terms, has fallen sharply. Whereas the US stock market has risen sharply on the back of technology stocks, Indian tech companies are under pressure from AI-led displacement. So, foreign capital (including NRIs) is pulling out of India. Further, since the rupee

is declining, exporters are delaying bringing back proceeds while importers are importing more. Both these reduce India's dollar holdings. Remittances are also impacted as workers in West Asia lose jobs and return to India.

Free market economists argue that the decline in the rupee is market-driven and the RBI shouldn't defend the rupee. This argument is flawed. Speculators take advantage and make money by beating down the currency further. Also, free markets are not really free; they are dominated by monopolies and big players. A rapid decline in the value of the rupee can set off a chain reaction, like the Southeast Asia Contagion, which led to the collapse of the booming Thai economy in 1997-98. India also faced a similar predicament between 1988 and 1991.

**The foreign investment saga**

Foreign investors have been leaving India since late 2024. It is argued that they need to be lured with more concessions. But, as stated above, they are leaving because they see better returns in the US vis-à-vis India.

But why is this such a big worry? In gross terms, it is 8 per cent of the total investment in India and in net terms, less than 1 per cent. Also, if India could stop the flight of domestic capital linked to its black economy, it would have no forex shortage.

Internal investment is 99 per cent of the total, and the real cause for worry is the inadequacy on this count. Low internal investment is linked to low capacity utilisation, due to inadequate demand, triggered by growing inequality. So, action is needed to reduce inequality via redistribution of income through taxation and employment generation, rather than more concessions to capital, as business economists



Photo: Getty Images  
**People feel the pain** Long queues for LPG cylinders are again a common sight



*Knee-jerk policies can lead to runaway inflation and loss of control over the economy*

suggest. For them, reform means concessions to businesses whereas what is required is more employment generation in the unorganised sector. Foreign capital will only come to the organised sector and will hardly generate net (net) employment given its use of high technology. It will further marginalise the unorganised sector and reduce employment generation.

The unorganised sector constitutes a huge potential internal market—much larger than the external markets. This sector is so

poor and unemployed that if it gets work, incomes will get a boost as will demand. Whatever is exported, like textiles, leather goods, food items, could also be sold in India if people had incomes. So, a drastic rethink is required.

Advanced countries are onshoring capital to shorten supply chains and boost employment. Trump is exhorting businesses and bullying allies to invest in the US. Trade won't solve India's problems, given that we lack the technology to compete. India must look inwards and onshore capital. Why is Mr. Ambani investing \$300 billion in the US and not in India?

**Need for a strategy reset**

There is no escaping the impact of supply shocks on production and prices. It is uncertain how long the Strait of Hormuz will remain closed and these effects may persist or worsen. The economy will be constrained by shortages and production will take a hit. India can only plan to minimise the impact, especially on vulnerable sectors.

Essential consumption must be maintained, otherwise inflation will shoot up and there will be social disruption. Inessential consumption—unnecessary travel and tourism, the five-star life, social waste—can be curtailed.

Economically, this will be less disruptive. Reduced inessential consumption will save both forex and energy, which can be redirected towards essentials. Employment, incomes and demand will inevitably be hit, and workers in affected sectors will need support.

Investment is likely to decline due to cutbacks in production, uncertainty and excess capacity in various sectors. But public investment in essentials, the social sector and welfare for the marginalised must be maintained.

The government has dithered for close to 90 days since the 2026 edition of the Iran war began on 28 February. Knee-jerk policies might lead to runaway inflation and a total loss of control over the direction of the economy. Mass poverty never went away, Mr Prime Minister, but it can certainly get worse with bad policy moves. Instead of asking India's precariat to brace for the worst and prepare to make more sacrifices, consider a targeted appeal to the 3 per cent well-off Indians with their hoards stashed abroad and a five-star lifestyle. ■

ARUN KUMAR is author most recently of Indian Economy's Greatest Crisis: Impact of the Coronavirus and the Road Ahead

# How do you trust the CBSE 2026 test results?

The integrity of the new on-screen marking (OSM) system has been proven to be suspect. What if there are bad actors at work?

**A.J. Prabal**

In early 2026, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) embarked on what it claimed was a revolutionary upgrade of India's examination system: the on-screen marking (OSM) protocol. The promise was alluring—standardised marking, quicker results, transparency, elimination of manual errors and the convenience of remote evaluation.

Yet, this 'brave new experiment' went horribly wrong. OSM was announced on 9 February, barely a week before the class 12 board exams began on 17 February. It was deployed on 3 March, when evaluation began. 'Pariksha pe charcha'—Prime Minister Narendra Modi's annual interaction with examinees, teachers and parents—was aired nationally on 9 February. Surely no coincidence. (Not a peep out of the PM since, despite complaints from students and teachers, and demands to scrap the results that were declared on 13 May 2026.)

The pressing question is: why such a rush to introduce an all-new marking system? Had the CBSE taken time to pilot-test the system or phase in the rollout, initial glitches—if that's what these were—and security flaws could have been detected and fixed.

Rushed implementation meant insufficient system testing leading to portal crashes, login failures, slow-loading user interfaces and poor scan quality. Some answer sheets went missing or were blurred; supplementary sheets were lost or wrongly linked.

An estimated 25,000-30,000 teachers participated in the marking, but many reported that training was limited to a few hurried webinars and mock evaluations. Some evaluators said they got less than a week's worth of dry runs, others that the process

continued till the day before results were announced. Evaluators had to juggle marking with their regular teaching and administrative responsibilities, including Booth Level Officer duties in poll-bound states! Multitasking under surveillance was stressful and compromised the quality of assessment, with many evaluators reporting screen fatigue.

As Prof. Anita Rampal, educationist and former dean, faculty of education, Delhi University, said in a panel discussion, "We cannot replace

human agency and cognitive processes... with something completely mindless. You don't scroll an answer sheet and then mark it in a linear manner. Also, people are conscious they are being monitored. The camera is there. If someone took longer, they said they got a phone call: 'Why is this evaluator taking so long on this question?' We are not robots and we shouldn't be turning humans into robots."

The CBSE's claim that OSM would sharply reduce demands for verification and re-evaluation now sounds like a bad joke. A record

4 lakh examinees—four times higher than last year—applied for re-evaluation, unhappy with scores and pipeline chaos that led to massive distress for students and teachers alike.

The CBSE's assurance that digital logs would enhance transparency and traceability, by recording who marked what and when, ignored a more important question: is the system secure? The ease with which it was hacked has thrown the entire marking process into doubt, raising all sorts of uncomfortable questions. Who insisted on transitioning to this new system in such a hurry? How was the vendor picked? Were there bad actors at play? How does the CBSE vouch for the sanctity of these results?

While many universities and education boards have indeed digitised evaluation, none made the shift so hurriedly or on such a massive scale. Most largescale deployment occurs after years of pilot testing, capacity building, contingency planning and strengthening of infrastructure.

The UK's AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance), for example, evaluates 13 lakh students through OSM, with 60,000 trained evaluators—double the number CBSE engaged for a far larger

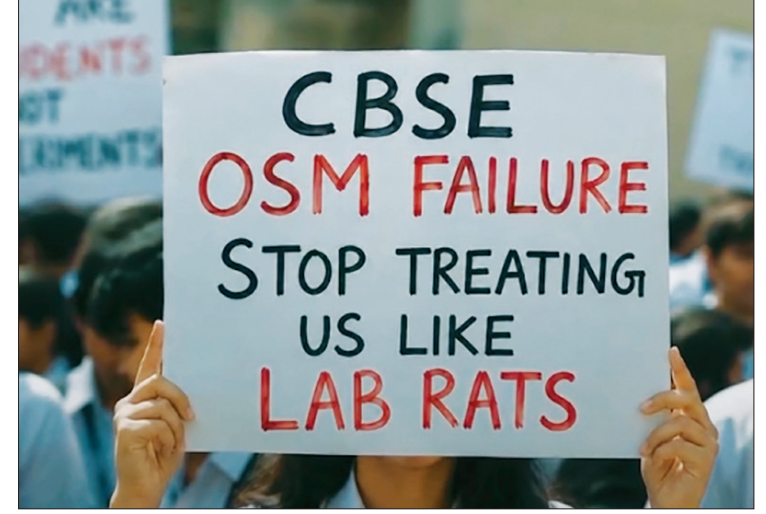
cohort. CBSE's rushed effort, with ill-equipped evaluators and unstable IT infrastructure, was a recipe for disaster.

Its choice of technology vendor is also suspect. Coempt Edutech (formerly Globarena Tech) was awarded the contract in August 2025, giving it less than six months to develop, test, train and deploy a mission-critical system.

Opposition leaders, including LoP (Lok Sabha) Rahul Gandhi, have highlighted the company's tainted record. In 2019, the evaluation for Telangana's intermediate public examination was outsourced to Globarena. Marking errors, including being marked absent for the exam, led to a tragic number of suicides.

Given this vendor's track, one wonders about the integrity of the due diligence exercise—on technical, security and ethical grounds. CBSE has not disclosed the selection or bidding criteria, who the other bidders were and why a tainted vendor was picked over the others, if any were in the fray.

The delayed and sketchy commencement of evaluator training is another red flag. If the contract was awarded in August 2025, why did training begin in early 2026?



*The CBSE's claim that OSM would slash re-evaluation demands sounds like a bad joke. A record 4 lakh have applied!*

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# When a falling rupee produces a fiscal windfall

Ajit Ranade

A falling rupee is usually treated as a macroeconomic problem. It raises the cost of imports, worsens inflationary pressures, unsettles investors and dents national pride. But India's recent experience has produced a curious paradox. The same rupee weakness that creates external stress has also produced a fiscal bonanza for the Union government. The Reserve Bank of India's dollars of the rupee—by selling dollars from its reserves—has yielded large realised profits, which are then transferred to the Centre as surplus. The RBI is thus not merely managing the currency. It is increasingly becoming a fiscal stabiliser, almost a treasurer to the government. This needs more scrutiny.

The RBI central board has now approved a record surplus transfer of Rs 2,86,588 crore to the Union government for FY25-26. This is higher than the previous record of Rs 2,68,590 crore in FY24-25, Rs 2,10,874 crore in FY23-24 and Rs 87,416 crore in FY22-23. The latest transfer is reportedly backed by robust RBI earnings, including gains from large dollar sales to support the rupee and higher income on foreign assets.

Nearly Rs 2.9 trillion is not a rounding-off item. It is close to 8 per cent of the Centre's revenue receipts. It gives the government fiscal breathing space without raising taxes, cutting expenditure or borrowing more from the market. At a time of elevated crude prices, geopolitical uncertainty and pressure on the fiscal deficit, this is a very useful cushion. But it's worrying for the same reason, for a cushion can quietly become a habit.

The arithmetic is simple. The RBI accumulated dollars over many years when the rupee was much stronger. When it sells those dollars today at a weaker exchange rate, it books a rupee gain. Not a paper gain from revaluing foreign reserves, but realised gain from actual dollar sales. Under the economic capital framework, unrealised revaluation gains on gold or foreign exchange are not meant to be distributed. But realised income from forex operations can flow into the RBI's income and then into its surplus transfer to the government.

This means the rupee's weakness has produced a fiscal windfall. That's an uncomfortable sentence, but it captures the paradox. The same depreciation that hurts importers, raises the cost of oil, reduces India's dollar GDP and unsettles foreign investors also boosts RBI profits when dollars are sold.

This matters for another reason. If India's nominal GDP grows by 10 per cent in rupee terms, but the rupee depreciates by more than 10 per cent against the dollar, then India's GDP in dollar terms barely grows. This isn't statistical hair-splitting: global rankings, investor perceptions and geopolitical heft are measured in dollars. A country can grow fast domestically and yet appear stagnant internationally if currency depreciation wipes out the gain. Persistent rupee weakness can, therefore, become a strategic concern.

But that does not mean the rupee must be defended at all costs. India is a current account deficit economy. It imports much more oil, gold, electronics and critical inputs than it exports. It also has a higher inflation rate than the US over the medium term. Some depreciation of

the rupee is natural. It can even be desirable. A weaker currency acts as a shock absorber. It protects export competitiveness, discourages non-essential imports and keeps the economy honest about external imbalances.

The danger is not depreciation per se, but disorderly depreciation. That is where the RBI intervenes as it should: to manage volatility, prevent panic and anchor expectations. But defending a level is different from managing volatility. If the market believes that the RBI will always protect a particular exchange rate, then large importers and dollar borrowers may under-hedge their exposures. An artificially strong rupee subsidises imports, penalises exports and delays adjustment. The eventual correction then becomes more painful.

*A government shouldn't treat the central bank's forex operations as a recurring source of revenue*



Photo: Getty Images

There is also a fiscal morality issue. If defending the rupee produces large RBI profits, and those profits help the Centre, then depreciation begins to have a hidden fiscal upside. That is not a healthy incentive structure. No government should start treating the central bank's forex operations as a recurring revenue source.

India's fiscal system already has an inbuilt support mechanism for government borrowing. Through the statutory liquidity ratio, banks are required to invest a substantial share of their deposits in government securities. This creates a captive market for sovereign debt. It is legal, longstanding and part of India's financial architecture. But it is still a form of financial repression: household savings are partially channelled into government borrowing by regulation. If, in addition, the government becomes dependent on large RBI surplus transfers, the line between

monetary authority and fiscal support begins to blur.

The RBI is not the finance ministry. Its job is price stability, financial stability, currency management and monetary credibility. It is also banker to the government, but that should not turn it into the government's cash cow. Elected governments naturally prefer more spending, lower borrowing costs and convenient financing. That is precisely why monetary institutions need insulation.

The rupee story is also linked to India's external financing challenge. Gross FDI inflows may look healthy, but net FDI has weakened sharply because of repatriation, disinvestment and outward flows. Foreign companies and private equity investors are exiting at attractive valuations. Indian equity markets remain expensive partly because domestic SIP inflows have become stymie and powerful. The

SIP habit is good for financialisation and household participation in markets. But it has also created a strong domestic bid that prevents a sharp market correction despite large FII outflows.

This raises a sensitive question. Are Indian domestic investors, through SIPs and IPO subscriptions, indirectly facilitating profitable exits for foreign investors? In many recent marquee IPOs, a large share of the money raised has gone not into fresh capital for the company but into offers for sale by existing investors. New investors buy the promise; old investors take the cash. This is not illegal. It is how markets work. But when it becomes widespread, it deserves scrutiny.

There have also been many high-profile foreign exits or partial exits: Holcim, Ford, Harley Davidson, Citibank's retail business, Metro AG, GM, Cairn, Lafarge, parts of Vodafone's story, Disney's restructuring, Whirlpool's dilution and others. Each case has its own explanation. But taken together, they point to a larger economic pathology: India is always easy as a market, but not always easy as a place to build, operate and retain capital.

This does not mean foreign confidence has vanished. Google's data centre plans, Meta and Google's investment in Jio, and other strategic investments show that global capital still wants exposure to India. But there is a difference between entering India for digital scale and committing patient capital to deep manufacturing. India needs durable FDI, not merely valuation-driven entry and exit.

In this context, the rupee is not just a number on a screen. It reflects oil dependence, gold imports, external financing gaps, portfolio flows, domestic market valuations and confidence in doing business. The RBI can smooth the ride, but it cannot permanently change the road. ■

AJIT RANADE is a noted economist. Courtesy: The Billion Press

## How do you trust the CBSE test results?

Continued from page 1

CBSE found itself with more egg on its face after a 19-year-old student, Nisarga Adhikary from Siliguri, West Bengal, hacked into the OSM portal on 25 February 2026. "I got curious," he said, speaking to *Moneycontrol*. "They had rolled out a new portal (http://cbse.onmark.co.in) for digital evaluation of copies. I started looking around and found the domain. Teachers were already using it and there were videos about it online."

He examined the website's publicly accessible Java script files and located the master password through a simple keyboard search: Ctrl+F. What he found inside was, in his own words, 'horrible'.

In a public blogpost, the teenager flagged five critical vulnerabilities from authentication bypass to full account takeover:

- 1 Anyone could log in as an examiner using publicly obtainable school codes and a master password 'leaked in the front-end'
- 2 OTP validation was reduced to 'pure theatre' with the 'secret' given directly to the browser
- 3 No 'route guards' made it a 'walk-in', so you could access any internal page with no authentication at all
- 4 Since no current password was ever verified, you could change it to any new password you liked
- 5 A catastrophic vulnerability at the architectural level—Insecure Direct Object Reference—meant anybody could take over any examiner's account, view assigned answer papers, and alter marks

*Nisarg Adhikary flagged five key vulnerabilities in the OSM protocol*



'At the scale of a national board exam,' Nisarga wrote, 'the integrity implications speak for themselves.'

When he reported the vulnerabilities to CERT-In (Computer Emergency Response Team-India) that very day, they asked for details and video proof and assured him that it was taking up the issue with CBSE. While some flaws pointed out by him were indeed fixed, others were not addressed at all.

In May, Nisarga discovered another vulnerability that exposed usernames, passwords and bank details of evaluators. Once again, he reported the issue to CERT-In. This time, he received only an email acknowledgement.

On 26 May, the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) posted on X, 'When a national board exam system can be hacked this easily, the question is no longer just cybersecurity. It becomes a question of fairness, trust and the future of millions of students.' The IFF has written to the secretary, department of school education and literacy and the director-general, CERT-In. It has sought a ministerial investigation into the CBSE's procurement, deployment and operation of the OSM portal, a review of the contract with the vendor and his liability, immediate remedial measures including a forensic review of the evaluation of class 12 results and an independent public audit and publication of its findings.

CBSE was so deeply in denial, it initially denied that the portal was live, that Nisarga had hacked a dummy site. When he pointed out that the domain was shared in official CBSE communications to students, the portal was quietly retired. ■

## If our democracy is robust, why do we duck questions?

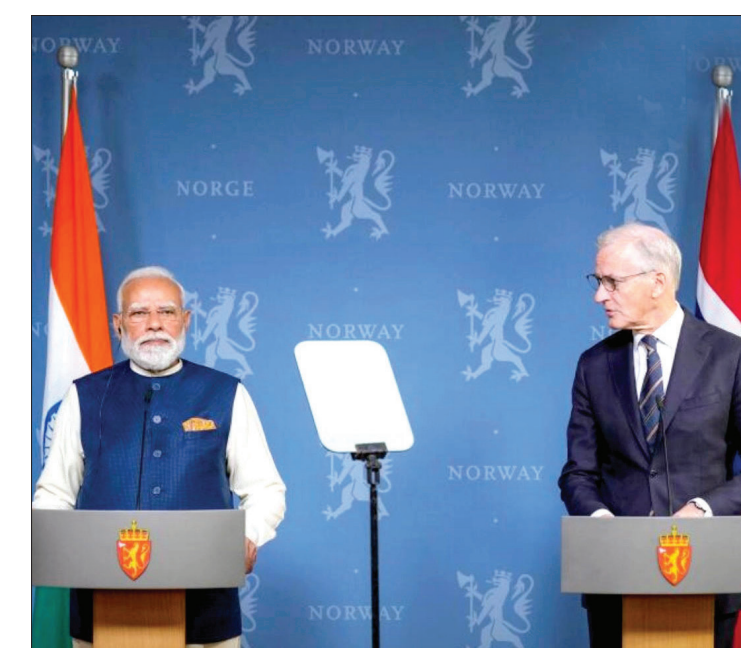
Wouldn't it be easier all round if our government stopped lying about the kind of nation it really wants? Never mind 'We, the People'

Aakar Patel

Assume for a moment that I am a big, strong fellow who lifts heavy weights easily and is flexible and fit. If someone approached me to comment on what they saw as my lack of health and absence of strength, would it affect me? If I am, in fact, big and strong, it should not make any difference. In all likelihood, I will ignore the comments and move on.

Or, assume that I am wealthy and have been for generations. Would a remark from a stranger pitying the fact that I was poor or that I looked destitute upset or anger me? Not if I was, in fact, not only rich but had been so forever.

Someone else's view of me will not affect me negatively if that view is not only wrong but the opposite of what I know to be reality. The remarks from others only bite when they are close to the truth and when I am insecure about the very things that their words carry.



PM Modi at the press conference in Oslo, Norway, where he was confronted by a Norwegian journalist who asked why he wouldn't take questions

The words of a young woman, a foreign reporter, have caused the mighty ministry of external affairs to lecture her—and the world at large—about the greatness of this nation. Lessons were given about our heritage and our culture and our ancient traditions in response to an anodyne question about freedom.

Something was also said about constitutional values and fundamental rights including the right to approach the Supreme Court. The young reporter followed up with a question that will not occur to most Indians. Why, she asked, did Indians have to approach the Supreme Court to claim fundamental rights?

The answer from our foreign office grandee was that it was his press conference and therefore she should (presumably) shut up. The Indian media jumped in. Not on the side of its fraternity, mind you, but to close ranks with the government and scream at the reporter for daring to ask things that were so

obviously false.

The point of any of this was lost on the dispassionate observer, but it is interesting to examine the pathology here. Why do we get angry and upset when questioned about our behaviour and values if we are secure in the truth? The answer can only be that we are not, in fact, secure. Which raises more questions: is that because we are insecure despite the truth? Or insecure because what we are claiming is not true?

Let us assume the first is the case: that India and its government are insecure despite the truth and the facts: we are a democratic nation, where individuals are free and the state is not malign.

We are, in fact, not insecure, merely touchy on the subject. If that is so, then the advice to foreign reporters and observers is to treat us like children.

We should be patted on the head, told we are good boys and girls, and given some sort of lollipop. Being asked hard questions will provoke a tantrum from us and this should be avoided. It should be mentioned here that this is how other nations deal with our government.

If they want something from us, they offer us a lollipop (or a medal) and a place to recite our little speech and then extract what they

need from us. When Israel is told it is misbehaving in the region and that its idiotic war has damaged the world, Benjamin Netanyahu has been pointing to the validation provided to Israel by the 'mother of democracy'. That medal was extremely valuable for money.

Let us now turn to the other possibility: that we are insecure because we know we are insecure because we are claiming is false. That we are not, in fact, as democratic or liberty-loving as we claim to be. To be reminded of this upsets and angers us. If that is the case, there is an easier solution which does not concern the external world (which will then not need to calibrate its behaviour towards us or treat us like children).

This solution is to simply speak the truth. For the past 12 years, India's diplomats have been operating under a Nehruvian carapace. We have been telling the world, particularly democratic and developed nations, that we are secular, pluralist and liberal. That we respect human rights and individual liberties. This is, of course, false. And when the foreign media examines the facts, they know it to be false. It is just that India's government now speaks with a forked tongue. At home, it says different things and behaves in a different way.

It does not brag to the world and their reporters about bulldozers and lynchings and bail denials and voter deletions and community exclusions that are the true basis of new India. It talks the language of Nehru and inclusion. It would be easier for all of us—and for the world and its reporters—if we stopped lying about what we are actually all about.

Some wit once said that diplomats are individuals sent abroad to lie for their country. Given the anxiety and anger that lying produces, we should consider the option that honesty might truly be the best diplomatic policy. ■

Views are personal

# The cow, the carcass and the republic

Jaideep Hardikar

India's profound economy is marred by a tangled contradiction. The regime that invokes the cow as a sacred symbol and those who curb vigilante attacks on ferals who trade in cattle also presides over one of the world's largest bovine meat export industries, earning billions from exports. It claims to protect rural India but destabilises the economic chain that links farmers, traders, tanneries, transporters and leather workers. Most recently, that contradiction played out sharply in West Bengal ahead of Eid al-Adha.

Soon after the installation of the new Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari, Bengal's BJP government tightened regulations, effectively restricting the slaughter of cattle below 14 years of age unless certified unfit for breeding or work. The Calcutta High Court declined to stay the order, observing that cow sacrifice is not an essential part of Eid rituals.

Amid fears of harassment, seizures and communal targeting, reports from Bengal's cattle markets suggest that many Muslim cattle traders and buyers have become overly cautious. Not only are they dissuading cattle breeders from selling their livestock for slaughter, they are turning them down.

Hindu livestock farmers have reportedly complained that weak demand is hurting prices and disrupting rural economies. In some cattle markets in Bengal buyers are simply not turning up. Having invested money in rearing cows for Eid, many farmers fear ending up in debt. In an economy built on interdependence between Hindu farmers and Muslim cattle traders, fear of retribution from vigilante groups seems to have travelled quickly.

Meanwhile, the meat export business has been thriving.

## The billion-dollar contradiction

India officially prohibits the export of cow meat. But buffalo meat—marketed globally as 'carabeef'—is one of India's largest agricultural export sectors.

According to the APEDA animal products export database, India exported more than 1.25 million metric tonnes of buffalo meat in 2024-25 alone, worth over \$4 billion, accounting for nearly 80 per cent of all animal product exports. The biggest buyers include Vietnam, Egypt, Malaysia, the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

As per a recent Lok Sabha reply, India has 94 APEDA-registered export-grade slaughterhouses

spread across Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Haryana and Punjab. Vigilantism, however, rarely distinguishes between cows and buffaloes, legal exports and illegal smuggling. Muslims have been killed or thrashed at the mere whiff of a suspicion. The politics around beef obscures the fact that our export industry is overwhelmingly buffalo meat, not cow meat. That ambiguity has led to a thriving export economy in an atmosphere of fear around cattle transport.

Cow vigilantism has become one of the defining social phenomena of the last decade. Data compiled by journalists, rights groups and researchers show that most reported cow-related mob attacks occurred after 2014, with Muslims disproportionately targeted. The date is crucial. That's when Narendra Modi came to power at the Centre. In 2017, Reuters reported that at least 28 people—24 of them Muslims—had been killed in cow-related violence between 2010 and mid-2017.

That violence altered the livestock economics.

## The broken rural chain

For generations, rural India functioned through a circular cattle economy. Farmers sold ageing or unproductive cattle to traders. Traders supplied slaughterhouses and meat processors. Hides moved to leather clusters. Bones, fat and by-products fed ancillary industries. Selling ageing cattle

gave farmers the liquidity to buy seeds, repay loans or survive a bad agricultural season. Cow vigilantism has disrupted that chain, leaving farmers vulnerable in moments of crisis. Mind you, livestock is a reliable liquid asset.

With cow vigilantism galloping across India—save in those BJP-ruled states where eating beef is permitted for political goals—that circular economy began to founder. Transporters no longer move cattle at night. Traders fear highway attacks. In several states, farmers abandon ageing cattle because selling them is too risky. The result is a surge in stray cattle destroying standing crops, especially in Uttar Pradesh.

One of India's distinguished geneticists and animal scientists, Dr Chanda Nimbkar argues that Maharashtra's cow slaughter restrictions have severely distorted the livestock economy. In an illuminating essay in the Marathi daily *Loksatta*, she urged the lifting of the ban on cattle sale and slaughter to provide relief. 'Even buffalo traders are increasingly targeted by self-styled *gau rakshaks*... directly hurting small livestock farmers'.

She is right. Two years ago, Qureshi traders—increasingly under attack in Maharashtra—boycotted the cattle trade in all the major markets of the state (similar to what is unfolding in West Bengal today). Prices of male calves and buffaloes plummeted, creating great unrest among farmers and ill will against the state government.

Nimbkar writes, if the government can't control vigilante violence, it must compensate the farmers. Sales resumed only after mediation, pushback from the farmers and assurances from the Maharashtra government that no harm would come to the traders. Till date, they haven't returned to normalcy. Economically lagging dry-land areas have been hardest hit by the disrupted cattle trade, which has crippled the small farmer economy and added to their financial woes.

Dr Nimbkar's critique cuts deeper. She argues that governments subsidise overcrowded *gaushalas* while denying farmers the economic flexibility to manage unproductive animals. The irony, she notes with frustration, is that indigenous cattle and bull populations in Maharashtra have continued to decline despite aggressive 'cow protection' politics, while goat populations—linked to a freer, more flexible market—have risen

significantly. In short, cow vigilantism, patronised by the state's ruling regime, exposes the fundamental contradiction at the heart of cow politics: laws framed in the name of protection actually undermine both livestock conservation and rural livelihoods.

Few sectors reveal this contradiction more starkly than India's leather industry which depends on the slaughter economy for hides. Disrupt slaughter, transport and cattle markets, and the leather sector feels the shock almost immediately.

As early as 1950, the Centre had warned states that blanket slaughter bans would hurt India's tanning industry and exports. Today that warning is proven prophetic.

India's leather industry employs roughly 4-4.5 million people directly and indirectly, many of them Dalits and Muslims concentrated in tanning, carcass handling, leather processing and footwear manufacturing. Current estimates show the sector contribute roughly \$5 billion annually when domestic market value and exports are combined. In FY2024-25, the leather industry's export earnings stood at around \$4.8-5.7 billion. The domestic market is even bigger. In 2025, the council for leather exports (CLE) estimated that India's domestic leather and footwear market was worth about \$19 billion

with ambitious plans to expand substantially over the next decade. Major leather clusters in Kanpur, Unnao, Chennai and Kolkata depend on a stable supply of hides. Bengal is one of India's important leather-processing centres, with Kolkata and Bantala accounting for nearly a quarter of India's tanning activity. In a state where industry is flagging, a big dent in its leather trade could be fatal.

After cattle trade restrictions intensified in 2017, leather industry bodies warned of falling hide availability and shrinking exports. Industry reports documented declining domestic hide supply as slaughter rates fell and cattle transport became increasingly risky. The economic logic is brutal: fewer sales devastate farmers, disrupted slaughter reduces hide supply, tanneries slow down, exports weaken, workers lose jobs.

The worst affected are those on the margins—Muslim traders, Dalit leather workers, transporters and informal sector labourers.

**Who owns the beef economy?** One of the least discussed aspects of India's meat economy is that it cuts across religious identities more than politics reveals.

Some of India's largest buffalo meat exporters are Hindu-owned firms. The export industry itself is not controlled by any one community. Yet public discourse has communalised the entire trade,

collapsing distinctions between legal export businesses, local livestock markets and everyday cattle transport.

A single video of vigilante attacks has the potential to cripple transport routes and turn rural markets into communal flashpoints. Entire groups start withdrawing from traditional trades out of fear.

**The republic at a crossroads** India's cattle economy has always involved an uneasy weave of religion, caste, livelihood, agriculture and commerce. But during the Modi regime, it has also become a theatre of nationalism.

The same State that promotes export-oriented buffalo meat production because it earns foreign exchange criminalises and intimidates the people who keep that economy functioning.

The burden falls on the farmer with an unproductive animal he cannot sell; on the transporter way-laid by vigilantes; on the tannery worker without raw hides to cure; on the cattle trader who quits a market out of fear; and on communities learning to mistrust each other in spaces once built on everyday cooperation.

The cow may be sacred in India's politics. But the economy around it is unshaky. ■



Hindu traders in West Bengal have slammed the BJP crackdown on Eid cattle trade

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# ECI finds more ways to cull voters

Since when is the number of children an eligibility criterion for voters? **Nandlal Sharma** on the madness in the method

Can an Indian citizen lose voting rights for having 'six or more' children?

Apparently, yes, as Sonu Giri (35), a voter from Varanasi Cantonment discovered. Soon after the publication of the draft voter list on 6 January 2026, the Election Commission sent Sonu a notice asking him to respond to allegations that he had 'six or more' children. When the final voter list was released, Sonu Giri's name had been deleted.

He is not the only one. *National Herald* studied voter lists from 20 booths across four polling stations—Hamidia Madrasa, Bajardiha (177); Goenka Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya, Assi Sangam (345); Markazi Madrasa Ansarul Uloom, Kazipura Khurd (15); and Kanya Primary and Upper Primary School, Shankuldhar (228) in the Varanasi Cantonment assembly constituency and found large number of deletions on similar grounds.

Girijesh Kumar, 49, (Assi Sangam) received a notice citing 'an age difference of less than 40 with grandparents' and 'having six or more children'.

Jitendra Maurya, 38, (Shankuldhar) received a notice citing 'name discrepancy' and 'having six or more children'.

In the final list, Sonu, Girijesh, Jitendra and many other deleted voters were categorised as 'Q'—'disqualified'. (Other deleted voters were coded: 'E' (expired), 'S' (shifted), 'R' (repeated/duplicated), 'M' (missing).)

At Sonu Giri's booth (Hamidia Madrasa), the EC deleted 150 names—61 men and 89 women. Reasons included 'non-mapping with the final SIR' (91 voters) and 'having six or more children' (27).

At Goenka Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya, 187 voters—including 78 women—were deleted. The main reasons were 'not mapped' (102 voters), 'grandparent age difference under 40 years' (40) and 'having six or more children' (20).

At Kazipura Khurd, 114 voters (58 men and 56 women) were deleted, with 103 removed because they 'could not be mapped with the final SIR'.

At Kanya Primary and Upper Primary Girls' School, 57 were deleted.

On 28 June 2025, the ECI declared that under Article 326 of the Constitution, 'only Indian citizens above the age of 18 and ordinarily resident in an assembly constituency are eligible to become voters'.

Looking at the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) conducted in Uttar Pradesh, it seems like the EC has altered the very criteria for voter eligibility. Deleting voters for 'having six or more children' begs the question: how did the Commission determine how many children a voter has? Enumeration forms did not ask for the number of children, just Aadhaar, EPIC and mobile numbers, as well as the names of the voter's father/guardian, mother, spouse.

A primary school teacher who served as a Booth Level Officer (BLO) during the SIR in Meerut South, said she had seen cases where voters were deleted due to an age gap of less than 15 years with their parents. However, she denied knowledge of deletions linked to number of children.

Dr Noor Mohammad, who served

Q 355	INB3219854
नाम : सोनु गिरि पिता का नाम : सत्य नारायण मकान संख्या : सन 3/114-35 आयु : 35 दिनांक पुरुष	फोटो उपलब्ध है
Q 201	INB0575373
नाम : गिरिजेश कुमार पिता का नाम : आनन्दी मकान संख्या : 143सी/10क3 आयु : 49 दिनांक पुरुष	फोटो उपलब्ध है
Q 188	INB2691129
नाम : जितेन्द्र मोर्या पिता का नाम : देवी प्रसाद मोर्या मकान संख्या : सन 16/116 आयु : 38 दिनांक पुरुष	फोटो उपलब्ध है

**Sonu Giri: Children ≥ 6**  
**Girijesh Kumar: Age difference with grandparents <40; children ≥ 6**  
**Jitendra Maurya: Name discrepancy, children ≥ 6**

as Uttar Pradesh's chief election officer for nine years is outraged. "India follows universal adult franchise. Data provided during enumeration cannot be rejected merely on the basis of 'logical discrepancies'. The only consideration for determining eligibility is the minimum age requirement." The number of children or any other discrepancy is immaterial. "This simply cannot

be done," he says

"This kind of profiling on a criterion which [the EC] just invented is undesirable," senior advocate Shyam Divan argued in the Supreme Court on 19 January. "Where is the statutory sanction? What has the electoral roll got to do with progeny? Can it even be a relevant consideration for the EC?"

The EC argued that voter records in West Bengal and Tamil

Nadu showed unusually high numbers of electors with an abnormally high number of children: 4.59 lakh with more than five children, 2.06 lakh with more than six and 8,682 with more than 10. According to *The Print*, the ECI even claimed to have found electors with over 100 children!

Dr Mohammad finds the entire process suspicious and says it should be conducted again.

"Earlier, Form 6 only asked for the voter's age; anyone above 18 could be registered. In many cases, records were not available, so a declaration by the head of the family, or the village head, was considered sufficient. If an objection arose, an investigation was conducted. In case of a dispute, a doctor's opinion was sought. I know of a case involving two siblings

whose age difference was recorded as just three months," he shares. The teacher who recorded the dates of birth was clearly distracted.

Regarding the age difference with parents or grandparents, he says, "Showing a 15-year age gap with the father is, in itself, absurd. Has the Election Commission assumed that child marriages no longer happen? In most cases, even the ages of fathers and grandfathers aren't accurately recorded."

At a presser on 10 April, CEO of UP Navdeep Rinwa claimed no deletions had occurred without due process: "If a name appeared in the draft list but is missing from the final list, it means either Form 7 was filed against that voter, or the ERO decided, after hearing the notice, to exclude them."

He said 1.04 crore voters had been dropped because of their failure to map their legacy, and 2.22 crore voters were flagged for 'logical discrepancies'. Notices were sent from 14 January 2026 onwards and hearings completed by 27 March.

Before the SIR, the number of voters in UP stood at 15.44 crore. In the draft list, this fell to 12.55 crore. In the final voter list, the number stood at 13.39 crore.

Rinwa said after 6 January, 815,999 names were deleted. Of these, 350,436 voters failed to respond satisfactorily to notices, 328,350 were absent or had permanently shifted, 79,076 were registered elsewhere, and 55,865 had died. Another 2,269 were deleted for not being Indian citizens or for being under 18.

In effect, the SIR has disenfranchised 2.05 crore voters in UP.

Unlike in West Bengal, where judicial officers were drafted to adjudicate logical discrepancies and an appellate tribunal is still wading through 27 lakh appeals, there is no clarity on the fate of UP's deleted voters. Rinwa has said affected voters could appeal exclusions under the Representation of the People Act, 1950.

We aren't holding our breath. ■

“This kind of profiling on a criterion the ECI has just invented has no statutory sanction”

# Yellow survey stones and a project called SilverLine



Seeing red over yellow The survey stones had become symbols of state repression

**K.A. Shaji**

When the yellow survey stone appeared one morning inside K. Thankamma's kitchen courtyard in Alappuzha's Kozhuvallur village, the 68-year-old widow felt as if somebody had quietly marked her family for eviction. The stone looked innocuous, but its message was terrifying.

These stones were used to mark the proposed alignment of the controversial SilverLine high-speed railway corridor, projected by the then Pinarayi Vijayan-led LDF government as Kerala's biggest infrastructure dream.

For Thankamma and thousands of others across the state, the yellow stones became symbols of fear, humiliation and uncertainty. Homes that had been around for generations faced demolition. Land prices crashed. Banks hesitated to grant new home loans. Families postponed weddings, house repairs and investments because nobody knew when the eviction notices or bulldozers might arrive.

With the new Congress-led UDF

government, led by chief minister V.D. Satheesan, officially scrapping the project, relief has swept across villages that spent years living in a state of fear. "I used to wake up every day wondering whether this house would survive," Thankamma told this reporter, standing beside the now fading yellow mark near her kitchen compound. "My husband built this home after years of hard work in the Gulf. After the yellow stone came, peace left this house. Even cooking in this kitchen became painful."

From Kasaragod in the north to Thiruvananthapuram in the south, the yellow survey stones had entered courtyards, wells, paddy fields, kitchens and bedrooms. They had transformed ordinary homes into sites of anxiety.

Their removal now marks one of the most dramatic political reversals in Kerala's recent history and a rare victory for sustained public resistance against a mega infrastructure project backed by the full might of the state.

In Thottolityzhavam near Kozhikode city, P.V. Shashindran

spent years studying debt consumption his family. He slowly borrowed heavily to build a modest house and get his three daughters married. His liabilities crossed Rs 15 lakh. The only way out was to sell a portion of his ancestral property. Then the yellow stones arrived.

Powerful buyers disappeared overnight. Nobody wanted land that could soon be acquired for SilverLine. Financial institutions too were reluctant to touch it. For Shashindran, this was worse than a nightmare—he had legal title of the land but couldn't mortgage it or sell it. "The project destroyed our peace even before it had taken an inch of land," he said.

In Meenchanda near Kozhikode, Abdul Razak had just finished construction of his new house when officials arrived with police escorts to place survey stones near the property. Panic entered the household at a time when his son was about to get married.

K.V. Razak, also a native of Meenchanda and a heart patient who actively joined the protests,

collapsed during demonstrations against the survey. Images of elderly residents crying before police personnel travelled across Kerala.

Families felt abandoned by the state. Nobody would even say if their homes would survive. Even after the authorities hinted at possible alignment changes, the uncertainty continued.

For many continued, this uncertainty was worse than displacement. People stopped renovating homes. Property transactions froze. Young couples postponed life decisions. Elderly residents were heard saying they would probably be gone before there was clarity.

## Rebellion and relief

Madappally near Changanassery in Kottayam district emerged as a hotbed of resistance. Nearly 400 houses here were expected to be affected by the project.

Villagers turned into full-time protesters. Women slept inside makeshift tents. Elderly residents guarded roads at night fearing sudden survey operations. Families organised marches, sit-ins and human chains for years.

*The appearance of the dreaded yellow stones transformed people's homes into sites of anxiety*

The movement shook Kerala after visuals emerged of grassroots activist Roselin Philip being dragged away by the police during a protest while her young daughter stood by and cried.

When authorities planted a survey stone in front of Thankamma's kitchen in Kozhuvallur, villagers felt the state had crossed an invisible line. Protests intensified when the police reinstated the survey stone after activists had once removed it. Sindhu James, a homemaker, was mangled and later alleged physical and mental harassment in custody.

The incident transformed the anti-SilverLine agitation into a larger statewide movement against what was seen and commonly described as authoritarian governance in Pinarayi Vijayan's second term.

Environmental activist K.V. Ravishankar said the project failed because it ignored Kerala's ecological and social realities. "SilverLine represented a dangerous development model imposed without listening to people or understanding Kerala's fragile environment. The protests showed that ordinary people were no longer willing to sacrifice their homes and livelihoods or the wetlands for projects that mainly benefit contractors and politicians."

SilverLine, a.k.a. K-Rail, became a moral and political question about whether 'development' could justify uprooting thousands of families in one of India's most densely populated states.

When the new government announced the decision to scrap the project, residents threw crackers and distributed sweets. Many described the moment as liberation from a prolonged psychological siege.

## The project that made Kerala see red

The Pinarayi Vijayan government had tried to sell SilverLine to the people as an infrastructure dream. The estimated cost: Rs 63,941 crore. The benefit: a speedy rail link (<4 hours) connecting the length of the state, from state capital Thiruvananthapuram in the south to Kasaragod in the north.

The proposed route cut through densely populated settlements, wetlands, paddy fields, rivers, backwaters and ecologically fragile regions including Madayippara, Kadalundi estuary and Kole wetlands.

It required acquisition of nearly 1,383 hectares of land across Kerala.

Environmentalists warned that the corridor could trigger severe hydrological consequences in a state already battered by floods, landslides and coastal erosion. Experts argued that enormous quantities of granite, soil and sand required for embankments and elevated corridors would intensify pressure on the fragile Western Ghats ecosystem.

The financial implications were also controversial. Critics questioned how debt-stressed Kerala could support the cost of the project when it was already struggling with welfare commitments, climate disasters and fiscal instability.

Many experts argued that upgrading the existing railway network with electronic signalling, track doubling and modernisation could substantially reduce travel time without triggering mass displacement and ecological destruction.

Resistance to the project united an unusual coalition of environmentalists, church groups, scientists, civil society organisations and ordinary residents, including sections traditionally sympathetic to the Left.

SilverLine became a referendum on Kerala's development politics.

## Not just SilverLine

SilverLine was possibly the most emblematic of the governance trajectory but not the only infrastructure project under the Pinarayi Vijayan government that drew sharp criticism. The EMCC deep sea fishing project, which threatened the livelihoods of traditional fisher communities, the Vizhinjam port project, the extensive quarrying in ecologically fragile regions, disputes over buffer zones surrounding protected forests and allegations related to coastal mineral sand (black sand) mining had put the erstwhile LDF government on the defensive in the run-up to the recent elections.

While announcing the SilverLine project, just days after taking the oath of office, chief minister V.D. Satheesan said: "We cannot impose development by destroying people's lives and the ecology. ... Kerala needs modern infrastructure. But every project must [consider] environmental sustainability and respect democratic consultation and the dignity of ordinary citizens." ■

# Who's taking on the BJP in Bengal?

**Sourabh Sen**

Assembly elections have decisively installed the BJP in power in West Bengal with 208 seats. It has reduced the Trinamool Congress to a rump opposition in the fray—CPM, Congress, ISF—no longer matter in the grand scheme of things. In terms of vote share, however, more people voted against the BJP than for it, leaving a wide-open space for the Opposition to regroup. In this two-part series, we try to decode how this space might shape up, who the possible players could be, what kind of political challenges they may pose (if any), and what kind of pressure they may bring to bear when it comes to framing policies and addressing issues.

Since his swearing in on 9 May, West Bengal's new chief minister Suwendu Adhikari seems to be a man in a tearing hurry. Bulldozers were despatched to clear roads and demolish structures (including Kolkata's iconic Hogg Market). Government employees were issued gag orders. Hawkers were evicted from railway platforms. A dissenting like Garga Chatterjee was put behind bars. The West Bengal Animal Slaughter Control Act, 1950, was invoked and operationalised to regulate the slaughter of cows in the run-up to Eid and beyond.

'Holding centres'—a euphemism for detention camps—were set up to confine people suspected of being illegal Bangladeshi nationals. (Last

heard, 12 inmates were moved into shelters in Murshidabad and Malda.) Acres of land were handed over to the Border Security Force to 'strengthen border security' with barbed-wire fencing.

Sealing off the India-Bangladesh border was part of the BJP's campaign promise to justify its narrative of the illegal influx of Bangladeshi Muslims into West Bengal, which the party proclaimed, was changing the state's demography. This was the justification for the SIR which eventually struck 34 lakh people off the voter list. The BJP won the election by a margin of 30 lakh votes.

Kolkata's tony living rooms and a pliable media have lapped up the BJP's moves, interpreting them as essential to dismantling the TMC's network of corruption and nepotism.

Mid-level BJP leaders say it's all part of an essential consolidation of the BJP's fledgling support base. The winning party's overwhelming majority in the assembly loses much of its sheen when seen in the light of the percentage of votes it has won—45.84 per cent against the TMC's 40.8 per cent. In fact, even after the deletion of 34 lakh names, more of West Bengal's 6.5 crore voters have voted against the BJP than for it.

The bulk of these anti-BJP voters are still aligned with the TMC. This, along with the CPI-M (4.45 per cent), Congress (2.97 per cent) and others (5.94 per cent), defines the contours of West Bengal's opposition space—now up for grabs among the state's political parties.

The TMC, which was confident of a fourth stint, faces the clear and present danger of becoming irrelevant less than a month after the results. The loss of around

seven per cent votes pushed it overnight from ruling party to Opposition. In hindsight, the writing on the wall was clear. And now come early signs of a TMC meltdown.

There is open dissent against Abhishek Banerjee. Around ten MLAs stayed away from a crucial post-election strategy meeting convened by Mamata Banerjee on 6 May. A flurry of councillors from municipal and other elected bodies have resigned. There are reports of elected MLAs approaching the Congress or the CPI-M.

Speculations are also rife about TMC MLAs joining the BJP.

On 26 May, MP Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar, along with six TMC MLAs, attended an administrative meeting convened by Adhikari. (This was after she was replaced as the TMC's parliamentary chief whip.) Ghosh Dastidar has since resigned from all her party positions.

Many TMC MLAs believe the party's organisational structure has

*In the churn after the TMC's defeat, the Opposition space has opened up in West Bengal*



Bulldozers and lathicharges are a common sight these days on the streets of Kolkata

weakened due to over-centralisation around the figure of Mamata Banerjee and her coterie. Leaders who once enjoyed local authority feel politically insecure after the defeat. Some fear investigation, others fear losing relevance in a BJP-dominated Bengal.

Is there a viable Opposition in West Bengal, and if yes, what does it look like?

"For a variety of reasons, there has been a steady decline in West Bengal's non-BJP vote share, especially since the 2021 elections. Non-TMC opposition parties have suffered a similar decline, although they are under the illusion that no such thing has happened," explains political scientist Ranabir Samaddar, alluding to the falling vote share of both the CPI-M and the Congress.

Samaddar points out two other reasons why a robust opposition may prove elusive. One, the inability to set an alternative agenda. In 2016, the TMC was able to launch schemes like Ganyashree or Sabuj Sathi, which signalled a recognisable departure in the way social welfare was packaged. In 2021, the Faray Samadhan component of Duare Sarkar (government at your doorstep) redefined the last mile delivery of governance.

Had the TMC won in 2026, what

would it have brought to the table? Perhaps Rs 1,700 instead of Rs 1,500 under Lakshmir Bhandar, Rs 7 lakh instead of Rs 5 lakh under Swastha Sathi. Its web of corruption and rent-seeking would still have flourished. The TMC, in Opposition, is not in the position to set an alternative agenda. Not because it lost, but because it ran out of ideas. Addressing law and order and human rights issues had long gone off the party's radar. By agitating the hawkers' issue and demanding their rehabilitation before eviction, it is the CPI-M that has kept the opposition space alive.

The second impediment is that governments in West Bengal, once voted to power, do not change as frequently as they do in states like Karnataka, Kerala or Rajasthan. "This is because in West Bengal, legislative politics is interlaced with the politics of the street in a fundamental way," Samaddar told *National Herald*. "As a result, it becomes difficult to change a party that comes to power with an agenda." In this context, harping on the TMC's corruption and governance failures is the BJP ecosystem's all-out effort to stymie any alternative agendas.

Having said that, the BJP is also fumbling. Even after twenty days in the saddle, it has not been able to announce a fully functional cabinet. To stave off any influx of TMC discards, BJP state president Samik Bhattacharya had initially announced that the party's doors were closed for TMC workers. However, it only took ten days for Bhattacharya to do a volte face, saying the BJP would welcome "good Trinamool workers", indicating a dearth of ground-level mobilisers and leaders in their present set up.

Meanwhile, its policy regulating cow slaughter has backfired. With Muslims deciding not to buy cows, the livelihood of lakhs of Hindu livestock farmers has been affected. The gag order and stay on releasing DA instalments has made government employees restive. Could these become the building blocks of an alternative agenda for the Opposition?

For the moment, it's all up in the air. The BJP dominates the assembly but not the streets. The TMC is struggling to hold itself together. The Congress and the Left are still searching for a foothold.

What will emerge from this churn is anybody's guess. ■

With inputs from Kunal Chatterjee and Gautam Bhattacharyya

# Dawn of the Q-Era: How Karnataka is Shaping Asia's Quantum Future



The next great technological revolution is no longer confined to conventional computing power or semiconductor manufacturing. It is unfolding in the extraordinary realm of quantum science—where particles can exist in multiple states simultaneously, enabling computational possibilities far beyond the limits of classical systems. Across the world, nations are racing to secure leadership in this frontier technology. In India, Karnataka is positioning itself at the forefront of that transformation.

With the launch of its ambitious Quantum Vision 2035, the Government

*While Bengaluru will remain the anchor for frontier research and international collaboration, regional quantum innovation zones are planned across Mysuru, Dharwad, Kalaburagi, and Mangaluru.*

Karnataka has laid out a strategic roadmap to establish the state as Asia's leading quantum innovation hub. The mission aims to build a quantum economy exceeding USD 20 billion by 2035, spanning advanced research, hardware manufacturing, software platforms, cybersecurity, intellectual property, and high-value employment.

More importantly, Karnataka's approach places citizens and public benefit at the centre of this transformation. The vision is not limited to laboratories and elite institutions; it seeks to translate frontier science into practical solutions for healthcare, agriculture, governance, industry, and national security.

## Building an Integrated Quantum Ecosystem

Karnataka's Quantum Vision 2035 recognizes that leadership in deep technology requires more than isolated investments. It demands a coordinated

## Laboratory Discoveries → Scalable Technologies → Globally Competitive Enterprises → Trusted Public Infrastructure

At the heart of this ecosystem is the Quantum Research Park (QuRP), which acts as the foundational engine for scientific discovery and technology translation. The park supports research in quantum computing, communication, sensing, and advanced materials while nurturing collaborations between

ecosystem connecting research institutions, startups, industry, manufacturing, talent development, and government support. The state's roadmap follows a clear progression:

### Quantum Technologies for Public Good

The state's quantum strategy is deeply connected to real-world challenges and public service delivery. Investments are being directed toward applications capable of transforming key sectors of the economy and governance.

### Accelerating Drug and Materials Discovery

Quantum computing has the potential to dramatically shorten the time required to design new medicines and advanced materials. Problems that currently take years of simulation and testing may eventually be solved within days, enabling faster development of pharmaceuticals, clean energy materials, and industrial compounds.

### Strengthening Cybersecurity

As digital infrastructure expands, cybersecurity has become a strategic priority. Karnataka is supporting the development of quantum-secure communication systems, including Quantum Key Distribution (QKD) and Post-Quantum Cryptography (PQC), to build highly secure digital networks resistant to future cyber threats.

### Advancing Agriculture and Resource Management

Quantum sensing technologies can improve monitoring of soil quality, crop health, and water resources with unprecedented precision. These capabilities could significantly strengthen agricultural productivity and climate resilience across the state.

### Enhancing Governance and Public Services

Quantum-enabled optimization tools can improve logistics, transportation systems, urban planning, administrative efficiency, and large-scale public data

academia, startups, and industry.

Complementing this effort is the planned development of Q-City—an integrated quantum innovation and manufacturing hub envisioned as the economic anchor of Karnataka's quantum ecosystem. Q-City will bring together research labs, fabrication units, startup incubators,

management, helping governments deliver services more effectively.

### Bengaluru and the Statewide Quantum Network

Karnataka's greatest strength lies in its concentration of world-class scientific institutions and deep-tech talent. Bengaluru already hosts some of India's premier research centres, including:

- Indian Institute of Science
- Raman Research Institute
- Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research
- International Centre for Theoretical Sciences
- National Centre for Biological Sciences
- Indian Institute of Astrophysics

Together, these institutions represent a powerful interdisciplinary ecosystem of more than 15,000 students, researchers, engineers, and innovators.

To ensure balanced regional development, Karnataka is adopting a hub-and-network strategy inspired by successful international quantum ecosystems such as Switzerland's regional innovation hubs, Munich Quantum Valley, and the Chicago Quantum Exchange.

While Bengaluru will remain the anchor for frontier research and international collaboration, regional quantum innovation zones are planned across Mysuru, Dharwad, Kalaburagi, and Mangaluru. These centres will expand access to skilling, research participation, and entrepreneurship opportunities across Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities.

A cloud-based Quantum-as-a-Service (QaaS) platform is also envisioned to provide remote access to quantum infrastructure, enabling researchers, startups, and students across the state to work with advanced systems regardless of location.

### Research, Startups, and Industry Collaboration

Karnataka's quantum ecosystem already

testing facilities, and global industry partners within a unified ecosystem designed for rapid commercialization and export readiness. Through this architecture, Karnataka seeks to transition from being primarily a consumer of advanced technologies to becoming a global producer and exporter of quantum solutions.

includes a growing network of startups, research laboratories, and multinational collaborations.

### The Rise of Quantum Startups

Bengaluru has rapidly emerged as India's leading hub for quantum entrepreneurship. Several startups are already developing globally competitive solutions:

- QpiAI is building integrated quantum hardware and software systems, including India's first full-stack 25-qubit superconducting quantum computer.
- QNu Labs develops quantum-secure cybersecurity products and communication systems.
- Quan2D Technologies focuses on advanced photonic and nanomaterial technologies.
- Avinya SQ Technologies is building enterprise-ready post-quantum cryptography solutions.
- QuSyn Technologies works on photon sources, sensing tools, and secure communication technologies.

### Global Industry Partnerships

Leading international and Indian

## Research and National Institutions

The Quantum Technology Initiative (QTI) at IISc has emerged as a major driver of research in quantum computing, communication, and sensing. The Wadhvani Innovation Network – Centre of Excellence in Quantum Technologies (WIN-CoE) supports technology commercialization and startup incubation.

The Foundation for Quantum Computing Innovation (FQCI) at IISc is also contributing to national capability building through advanced quantum simulators and research tools.

Other institutions bring complementary strengths:

- JNCASR advances nanoscience

## Q-City: Karnataka's Quantum Economic Hub

Q-City represents the most ambitious element of the roadmap. Conceived as a fully integrated quantum innovation district near Bengaluru, it will serve as the meeting point for research, manufacturing, entrepreneurship, and global investment. The ecosystem will operate across four major platforms:

### 1. Services

Cloud-accessible quantum computing, optimization, and AI-integrated solutions for enterprises and public institutions.

### 2. Research and Development

Shared laboratories, testing facilities, and collaborative research centres

linking academia and industry.

### 3. Entrepreneurship

Startup incubation, regulatory sandboxes, and intellectual property support systems to accelerate commercialization.

### 4. Manufacturing and Export

Fabrication units, assembly lines, testing facilities, and certification centres designed for global-scale production and exports.

By integrating these capabilities into a single ecosystem, Karnataka aims to build a globally competitive quantum industrial base capable of serving both domestic and international markets.

technology firms have also embedded quantum research and development operations within Karnataka's ecosystem.

These include IBM, Fujitsu, Tata Consultancy Services, Atos, LTIMindtree, Rigetti Computing, and Capgemini.

Their participation strengthens Karnataka's ability to integrate global research standards, enterprise applications, and advanced manufacturing capabilities into the local ecosystem.

## Government as the Catalyst

The Government of Karnataka is playing a central catalytic role through the proposed Karnataka Quantum Mission (KQM), backed by a planned allocation of ₹1,000 crore.

### Key focus areas include:

- Establishing Q-City and a dedicated Quantum Hardware Park.
- Supporting more than 100 startups through incubation and venture financing.
- Promoting intellectual property generation and patent development.
- Expanding quantum education into universities and higher secondary institutions.
- Funding approximately 150 PhD fellowships annually.
- Creating specialized workforce development programs across the state.

This coordinated intervention is designed to ensure long-term technological sovereignty while generating employment and industrial growth.

## Karnataka's Global Quantum Position

Karnataka's strategy aligns closely with India's National Quantum Mission while simultaneously building international partnerships with leading institutions and innovation networks.

Collaborations with organizations such as Swissnex, GESDA, the Open Quantum Institute, and the Chicago Quantum Exchange are expected to strengthen research exchange, student mobility, and technology transfer.

Formal partnerships with institutions including University

College London, University of Waterloo, and University of Cambridge further reinforce Karnataka's emerging global role.

## A Future Being Built Today

From advanced nano-fabrication laboratories in Bengaluru to emerging innovation centres in Dharwad and Kalaburagi, Karnataka is executing a long-term strategy to lead the next era of technological transformation.

By integrating public investment, academic excellence, startup innovation, and global partnerships under a coordinated governance framework, the state is building more than a research ecosystem—it is creating the foundations of a future-ready economy.

Quantum technology may still be in its early stages globally, but Karnataka has already taken decisive steps toward leadership. Through Quantum Vision 2035, the state is positioning itself not only as India's quantum capital, but as one of Asia's most significant centres for next-generation science, industry, and innovation.

## Four Pillars of Quantum Vision 2035

Karnataka's roadmap rests on four mutually reinforcing pillars:

### Pillar I: Talent and Skilling

The state aims to build a workforce of more than 10,000 quantum-ready professionals by 2035 through expanded academic programs, faculty development, specialized training initiatives, and international collaboration.

### Pillar II: Research and Technology Targets

- The roadmap establishes clear milestones:
- Indigenous benchmarking on 100-physical-qubit systems in the near term.
  - Scaling toward 1,000 physical qubits by 2030.
  - Achieving fault-tolerant quantum computing capabilities by 2035.

### Pillar III: Infrastructure Development

A comprehensive research-to-production backbone will include:

- QuRP for foundational discovery.
- Quantum Fabline facilities leveraging IISc's advanced cleanrooms.
- The proposed Institute for Quantum Algorithms, Modelling and Software (IQAMS).
- A dedicated Quantum Hardware Park for industrial scaling.

### Pillar IV: Industry and Business Growth

Karnataka plans to nurture over 100 startups, secure at least 100 foundational patents, and strengthen global partnerships through international summits, institutional collaborations, and science diplomacy initiatives.

# Guess who isn't calling the shots?

Ashok Swain on the message from the Xi-Putin summit for Trump's America and the rest of the world

When Vladimir Putin arrived in Beijing days after Donald Trump had left, Xi Jinping did not merely host another summit. He staged a geopolitical statement. Trump had come to China believing that personal diplomacy if not transactional pressure could still bend the world to Washington's will. Xi answered by standing beside Putin, as if to declare that the age of unquestioned American dominance is nearing the end.

The Xi-Putin summit was a calculated performance. By signing a declaration on a multipolar world, China and Russia were mounting a direct challenge to the central assumption of Trump's foreign policy that the US can still define the global order, decide which wars are legitimate, determine who is to be punished and expect others to fall in line.

Trump's worldview has chronically overestimated US leverage. He has banked on America's ability to coerce other nations—China, Russia, India, Iran, even NATO allies—to cooperate or pay a price. Sanctions, tariffs, military strikes, theatrical summits and Truth Social ultimatums have become US strategy. But where some powers like India have capitulated in the face of bullying, China and Russia and more recently Iran have pushed back and successfully called his bluff.

These countries and their leadership read Trump's vulnerabilities. Xi has never confronted Trump with reckless gestures. Instead, he steadily accumulates leverage. He receives Trump with courtesies, keeps economic channels open, avoids unnecessary rupture, and then immediately hosts Putin to show that China will not be trapped inside a Washington-designed international order. This is the essence of Xi's challenge, careful in tone, forceful in substance.

The condemnation of US and Israeli military strikes on Iran gave the summit its sharpest edge. By framing these strikes as violations of international law and basic norms of international relations, Xi and Putin placed Washington in the dock, not Tehran. This was not only about Iran. It was about the wider claim that no power, however strong, has the right to bomb, sanction or destabilise another state outside the authority of the United Nations.

Trump may unpredictably talk peace and even covet the Nobel Peace Prize, but

his administration spouts the doctrine of 'peace through strength', an euphemism for flexing muscle to achieve desired outcomes. He attacks multilateral institutions, then complains when others build alternatives. He invokes sovereignty when it suits America but violates the principle flagrantly, as evidenced by US actions in Israel's wars. Xi has seized on this contradiction and turned it into a diplomatic weapon.

China's message is simple: the UN, not Washington, must remain central to international legitimacy.

Of course, Beijing's own record is not spotless. Its positions on Taiwan, the South China Sea and its human rights record invite criticism. Likewise, Russia's invasion of Ukraine makes Moscow's position untenable in any discussion of sovereignty. Yet the power of Xi's move lies not in its moral principle but in political timing. Trump's unilateralism and the unreliability of his word and actions has made it easier for China to present itself as a defender of rules, restraint and global balance.

The more Trump attacks the international order in the name of American greatness, the more space he creates for Xi to claim global responsibility.

Photo: Getty Images



The making of a geopolitical statement The Xi-Putin summit, hot on the heels of Donald Trump's visit, is seen as a diplomatic counterstrike

The more Washington behaves like a hegemon, the more convincing Beijing's language of multipolarity sounds to many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Russia.

Xi is not asking the world to choose Russia over America. He is asking the world to question why America should remain the final arbiter of every other nation's conduct. That is a far more sophisticated challenge. It appeals not only to authoritarian states but also to governments tired of the West's double standards.

The Beijing summit also showed that Russia needs China more than China needs Russia. Putin requires markets, technology, diplomatic cover and energy buyers. Xi requires Russia as a strategic counterweight, but he is careful not to become dependent on Moscow. The failure to finalise key pipeline plans, including long-delayed pipeline plans, reveals the limits of the partnership.

Xi is mindful of these limits. So, he engages with Putin without yielding to him. He engages with Trump without trusting

him. He talks about the centrality of the United Nations in the international order even while expanding China's influence through trade, infrastructure, technology and diplomacy. This is statecraft.

Trump, by contrast, treats foreign policy as spectacle. His visits produce headlines, handshakes and declarations, but not durable order. Xi's summits are designed differently. They are meant to place China at the centre of every conversation. Trump comes to Beijing seeking a deal. Putin comes seeking reassurance. Others come seeking access. Xi receives them all, and the image is unmistakable—the world is no longer kowtowing to Washington.

The call for a multipolar world is not an abstract slogan. For China, multipolarity weakens US primacy and gives Beijing time to expand its own influence without triggering a direct confrontation. For Russia, it offers protection from isolation. For many states in the Global South, it offers bargaining space. For Trump's America, though, it's a rude reminder that its military might does not automatically

translate into leverage or legitimacy.

The call for 'multipolarity' is really a push towards competing spheres of influence. Big powers may invoke sovereignty but violate it when convenient. Russia has done exactly that in Ukraine and China has made low-key assertions in its own neighbourhood.

The Xi-Putin summit should, therefore, be read as a diplomatic counterstrike. It told Trump that China will not yield to US pressure. It told the world that Beijing has partners, platforms and an alternative vision of international order.

Xi Jinping is challenging the US carefully yet forcefully—carefully because China still needs stability and forcefully because he believes history is moving in China's direction. Trump's policy missteps and hegemonic misadventures are no small help. ■

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

*Xi engages with Putin without yielding to him. He engages with Trump without trusting him. This is a lesson in statecraft*



Futures at stake The leaked question papers of NEET-UG 2026 triggered protests against the National Testing Agency (NTA) in New Delhi, Chennai, Patna, Mumbai...

# Of leaked papers and shattered dreams

The demand-supply mismatch and an overstretched examination system fuel corruption and despair, writes Rashme Sehgal

Controversies surrounding the conduct of examinations in India aren't limited to cheating scandals. They expose deep-rooted corruption and systemic flaws that threaten medical education and the wellbeing of student aspirants. There have been 89 paper leaks and 48 re-exams of major tests between 2016 and 2026. The latest is the leaked NEET-UG 2026 paper, scheduled for a re-test on 21 June. This affects 23 lakh students who face yet another emotionally and financially exhausting ordeal. There is no guarantee, of course, that the re-exam will be glitch-free. Meanwhile, the evaluation scandal around the CBSE class 12 examination further highlights the unfairness and uncertainties of India's examination system.

At least four students who appeared for NEET-UG in May 2026 have died by suicide. The youngsters—from Sikar, Lakhimpur Kheri, Delhi and Goa—couldn't take the pressure to restart preparations and chose to take their lives instead.

The core problem, says Maheshwar Peri, chair of Careers 360, is the massive mismatch between demand and supply. As many as 23 lakh students are competing for just 30,000 seats available in government medical colleges. Private medical colleges charge anything from Rs 1-5 crore, as opposed to Rs 5-6 lakh in government institutions.

That explains the desperation, despair and despondency. "Parents do not mind shelling out Rs 10-15 lakh for a set of question papers if they are sure of securing a seat in a government medical college for their wards," says Peri.

Nitin Kuckreja, CEO Allen Career Institute, also mentions this demand-supply mismatch. A medical degree, he says, is

considered key to a financially secure future. "But only a high NEET score can enable admission in reputed government institutions," he adds. The latest *India Today* Best Colleges Survey shows the lowest monthly fee in a government medical college at Rs 1,628 per month as against Rs 1.9 lakh per month in a private college.

After this year's NEET paper leak, the CBI has so far made eleven arrests—coaching centre directors, principals and educators—from Jaipur, Gurugram, Nasik, Pune, Latur and Ahilyanagar.

Despite investigating 15 paper leak cases since 2015, CBI's track record is dismal—only one conviction so far. Meanwhile, the Enforcement Directorate is probing 11 cases but has secured no convictions.

For years, coaching institutes have been under suspicion. Hundreds of them vie for students, with many institutions and their affiliated 'ghost schools' directly or indirectly linked to politicians. Former vice-president Jagdeep Dhankhar denounced coaching hubs as "poaching centres" and "black holes for talent".

This politician-coaching centre nexus was highlighted in 2024 when a large number of toppers in NEET-UG emerged from one exam centre in Bahadurgarh, Haryana. Six toppers had roll numbers in the same sequence. Investigation showed that the centre was being run by the wife of the local BJP youth wing chief. The day of the exam saw a mix-up in question papers leading to delays in starting. It emerged later that some of these 'toppers' didn't do well in their board exam, casting doubts over their high NEET scores.

In 2024, 67 students from a centre in Sikar secured a perfect score (720/720). This

centre was found to have close links with a Rajasthan-based politician.

Another scandal in 2024 involved students at an obscure Jay Jalaram centre in Godhra, where answers partially filled by them were completed post-exam by teachers after the answer key was released. The Gujarat police found that at least 26 students from across the country had paid Rs 10-66 lakh each to clear NEET from this centre alone.

Educationalists are asking why NEET cannot follow the example of the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) system—where question papers are generated automatically from a vast, encrypted bank meticulously developed over many years and decrypted only when the candidates begin their exam. The JEE is conducted twice a year over 5-6 days; 1.4 million students sit for it. Top IIT professors are involved in setting the questions for the JEE-Main. In the case of NEET, neither the Indian Medical Board nor professors from leading medical colleges have any role in setting the question papers.

Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has now said that NEET will switch from pen-and-paper to a computer-based test (CBT) like the JEE. While CBTs too are plagued by technical glitches and occasional cases of impersonation, these are generally less severe compared to the issues NEET faces.

Before the NTA was formed, the CBSE conducted the All-India Pre-Medical/Pre-Dental Entrance Tests (AIPMT), alongside the exams conducted by states. A student clearing AIPMT could take direct admission into any medical college under the central government and also avail of the

15 per cent quota for non-resident students in every state medical college.

The NTA is modelled along the Educational Testing Service (ETS) of the United States, which conducts the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), the American College Test (ACT) and the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE). However, unlike the ETS, which has more than 200 permanent staff members, the NTA operates with just over two dozen permanent employees in its Delhi office.

This severe understaffing has led the agency to outsource critical functions such as paper-privating, distribution and data security to private providers, increasing the risk of leaks.

R. Subrahmanyam, former secretary of

higher education, says the NTA was created to conduct online exams. It is not competent to conduct an exam like NEET which is held on such a gigantic scale involving over two lakh people to administer it.

Experts call for a deeper review. Dr Anita Rampal (ret'd) dean, faculty of education, Delhi University, is opposed to holding common entrance exams for universities. "Multiple choice questions do not assess the depth of understanding of a student. Nor do they assess whether the student possesses the ability and empathy to become a good doctor," she says.

Rampal points out how NEET has resulted in the marginalisation of state boards. "A centralised test ends up testing your social advantages. Tamil Nadu opted against NEET because they wanted good functioning clinics in their villages. The present test ends up creating self-serving doctors, not doctors who serve," she says.

She is equally critical of NTA's lack of vision for students. "It has to be made a statutory body answerable to Parliament. A constitutional status will empower NTA to directly penalise affiliated schools that conduct these exams and indulge in wrongdoing. At present, they are not accountable to NTA," she points out.

"A country of our size should ideally have at least three, four, even five exams so that if a student does badly in one, they have the chance of appearing in another and saving their year," says Faizan Mustafa, former vice-chancellor of NALSAR University of Law.

There is the added apprehension of criminal elements infiltrating the system. The money involved is huge. From a Rs 60,000 crore annual turnover, the coaching industry is now estimated to be making over Rs 1.5 lakh crore. ■

*And now, we hear, NEET too will switch from pen-and-paper to a computer-based test like the JEE*

# An apology may be in order, your lordship

An open letter to the Chief Justice of India from a concerned citizen

Hon'ble Chief Justice,

May I, a humble member of the Blatta (Oriental) genus of cockroaches, make so bold as to express my utter stupefaction at your recent statement in open court in which you termed unemployed youth, RTI activists, media personnel and social media activists as 'cockroaches' and 'parasites'? Posterity will record these uncalled for and demeaning words as the nadir of judicial propriety and gravitas. Kindly allow me to explain why.

It appears, from what is available in the public domain, that you were at the time dealing with the issue of a proliferation of lawyers with dubious degrees. Your desire to identify and weed out such elements from the legal profession is understandable, and even commendable, and should be supported by all.

But your subsequent leap of hubris, not faith, was totally unwarranted and a step too far even in these dismal times when the vocabulary of public discourse has plumbed new depths. The contemptuous characterisation of our youth and civil society is something we have come to expect from our politicians, but not from the seniormost judicial officer in the country, the custodian of the letter and spirit of the Constitution, whose every word is engraved in time, the beacon and conscience-keeper of the nation.

Which is why, my lord, it pains me to say that your unfair and insensitive *obiter dictum* has dimmed the glow of the beacon and induced a perception that the keeper has not been true to his charge. It has, at one fell swoop, insulted and humiliated these sections of society, cast on them aspersions which are neither



true nor justified and, even more dangerous, exposed a heart of darkness in the country's judicial anatomy which does not bode well for a liberal democracy. Your lordship's subsequent 'clarification' does not dispel the apprehensions your comments have generated.

A democracy remains healthy not only on the basis of institutions of the state, but on the shoulders of a vibrant civil society and non-state actors. These participants—activists, NGOs, social media, RTI applicants, fact checkers—are the benign bacteria in our body politic that maintain our immune systems, keep in check those organisms

that would destroy us, and ensure that democracy and a liberal order survive. By castigating them in such derogatory language, my lord, you have exposed a side of the higher judiciary we did not imagine existed. It has left us confused, apprehensive and fearful.

Are you aware, your honour, that there are 28 million educated unemployed youth in the country, and an additional 100 million who have stopped looking for jobs (*The Wire*, 23 May 2026)? That 67 per cent of unemployed youth today are graduates, compared to 32 per cent in 2004? (Azim Premji University 'State of Working India Report', *Deccan Herald*, 1 May 2026). That 80 million workers have left cities owing to

lack of job opportunities and gone back to their villages? And that the government classifies them as employed in agriculture?

This worsening position is not due to the indolence of these unfortunate youngsters, but because of faulty government policies in education, industrialisation and economic 'growth' that promote inequity, concentration of wealth and capital-intensive projects, and have decimated the MSME sector. These youngsters deserve our empathy, not elitist condemnation.

Finally, my lord, heed the power of language and choose carefully the patois you employ. For language is a double-edged sword, it can soothe or wound, it can demean or dignify, it can sustain or destroy, it can be a pean or a dog whistle. It is dangerous to employ words loosely.

History is replete with instances where such words have preceded and laid the ground for mass persecution, ethnic cleansing and even genocide.

The killing of a million Tutsis in Rwanda was preceded by a campaign that classified them as '*inyenzi*' which, coincidentally, means cockroaches. In Hitler's Germany, Jews were called parasites and rats; Zionists later called Palestinians 'vermin' and 'animals'. Closer home, minorities from Bangladesh are stigmatised as 'termites' and protesters as '*andolanjeevi*' (bitten by the bug of revolution). Such branding is invariably followed by the dehumanisation of entire sections of society and their persecution on a large scale.

It is possible your unfortunate vocabulary may have the same effect in India, for your words feed into the executive's own narrative: the segments of society you have, perhaps unwittingly and unintendedly, vilified are precisely the ones the government of the day considers its enemies, obstacles to its authoritarianism. It may now be emboldened to move against them even more aggressively, confident that it has your institution's support.

That would be a disaster, an opening of the floodgates that shall eventually consume all the pillars of democracy, including the one over which your honour presides.

At the end of the day, your lordship, this unnecessary disparagement of the youth, civil society activists and social media may lead to a loss of credibility in the institution you head, in its ability (or even willingness) to confront an authoritarian executive, to protect the rights of minorities, and to uphold the letter and spirit of a liberal and inclusive Constitution. A democracy cannot long survive such a loss.

Which is why, sir, you may consider a more explicit retraction and withdrawal of the statement made by you, not just a clarification. An apology to the nation at large will go a long way in restoring the confidence of the citizenry in an institution which is, after all, the last bastion of rights and liberty. To err is human, to admit it is divine.

With profound regards and my own humble apologies for intruding on your valuable time,

I remain, your lordship,

A.C. Roach

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

*In Rwanda, Tutsis were classified as 'inyenzi' (which means cockroaches). In Hitler's Germany, Jews were called 'rats'. Zionists called Palestinians 'vermin'*

# The case for a carpool law in India

...and not just because a tanker is delayed somewhere off the Strait of Hormuz, write Hardik Malik and Vedant Chaudhary

The Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 draws a sharp line between private (white-board) and transport (yellow-board) vehicles. A private car used 'for hire or reward' without a permit invites penalties and possible suspension of registration. The 2019 amendment created a statutory category of 'aggregator' and introduced a licensing regime, but it was drafted for ride-hailing, not ride-sharing.

The ministry of road transport and highways issued Motor Vehicle Aggregator Guidelines in 2020, followed by a substantially revised version in 2025 covering Ola, Uber, Rapido and similar platforms, with detailed rules on surge pricing, driver compensation, insurance and grievance redressal. Neither framework, however, creates a dedicated regime for genuine cost-shared carpooling between commuters. The result is policymaking by improvisation.

In late 2023, Karnataka's transport department, after sustained lobbying by taxi unions, declared the use of white-board cars on carpooling apps such as BlaBlaCar and Quick Ride illegal, attracting fines under state motor vehicle rules.

Bengaluru—India's most congested city, where BJP MP Tejasvi Surya has noted that vehicle numbers have risen sixty-fold since 1990—was effectively asked to prioritise taxi-operator revenues over peak-hour decongestion. Maharashtra's Aggregator Cabs Policy 2025 takes the opposite approach, expressly recognising carpooling, capping drivers at 14 pool trips per user per week, and requiring fares not to exceed RTA base rates.

Some states tolerate the apps; others penalise the same activity. Transport falls within the Concurrent List, but this patchwork looks less like a defensible division of powers than a refusal to legislate, for which commuters are paying the price.

That cost is most visible on the Noida-Greater Noida Expressway at 6 p.m. The 25-km corridor carries lakhs of IT and corporate employees daily, yet metro coverage thins beyond Sector 137, bus connectivity remains uneven, and corporate shuttles are available mainly to employees of larger firms. Everyone else improvises.

Informal lifts are commonplace. Women travelling to and from night shifts often rely on strangers because there is simply no reliable alternative. A regulated carpooling regime—with verified profiles, in-app tracking, women-only and women-driver options, and SOS integration—would in fact be safer than the unverified hitchhiking that weak public transport already

forces on many commuters every day.

The absence of a central rule also explains why traffic police, relying on a literal reading of 'hire or reward', penalise pool riders on the assumption that any payment between strangers converts a private vehicle into a commercial one. Until the statute itself distinguishes a contribution to fuel from a commercial fare, that line will continue to be drawn by the constable on the highway.

Fuel prices may be the immediate trigger, but the larger case for regulating carpooling lies in climate policy and trade.

India's updated Nationally Determined Contribution commits the country to a 45 per cent reduction in emissions intensity below 2005 levels by 2030 and to net-zero emissions by 2070. Phase I of India's Carbon Credit Trading Scheme (CCTS), notified in 2023 and rolling out through 2026, covers nine energy-intensive industrial sectors. Its Offset Mechanism pipeline includes transport, though methodologies for shared-mobility credits remain under development.

Meanwhile, the European Union's new Emissions Trading System, ETS2—postponed last November by a year but now scheduled to begin trading in January 2028—will, for the first time, impose an upstream carbon price on fuel suppliers for road transport and buildings, with a cap declining by more than 5 per cent annually towards a 42 per cent emissions reduction by 2030. The existing EU ETS covers heavy industry and aviation; ETS2 is the mechanism that will, in effect, price the petrol burned in private cars.

India's CCTS will eventually have to interact with ETS2 and with a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism whose scope may yet widen. If app-mediated carpool trips were recognised as eligible activity under the CCTS Offset Mechanism, millions of empty seats could begin functioning as climate assets.

Indian transport policy would also be better positioned for the international carbon-market integration that is approaching, whether or not we are prepared for it.

A dedicated chapter in the Motor Vehicles Act—or a stand-alone Shared Mobility (Carpooling) Regulation, 2026—should do a few straightforward things.

First, it should draw a clear statutory distinction between commercial ride-hailing and genuine cost-shared carpooling by defining the latter through a per-kilometre cost-recovery cap, daily and weekly trip ceilings and a strict no-profit rule. White-board cars operating within those conditions should be expressly



Policy paradox While some states recognise carpooling, others penalise the same activity

Photo: Getty Images

exempt from commercial permit requirements.

Second, the law should incorporate safeguards already present in the 2025 Aggregator Guidelines: KYC and police verification, location tracking, women-passenger options, in-app SOS functions, and certified app security.

Third, governments should pilot dedicated high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes on major corridors such as Delhi-Meerut, Mumbai-Pune, and Noida-Greater Noida. American experience with HOV lanes since 1969, and the French use of white-diamond lanes around Paris, Lyon and Grenoble—backed by substantial penalties for solo drivers—suggests that even partial, dynamically activated systems can move more people in fewer vehicles.

Finally, the law should integrate verified pool trips into the CCTS Offset Mechanism, giving aggregators—and eventually commuters—a direct financial stake in shared mobility.

The counter-arguments deserve serious consideration. Licensed taxi and auto operators worry, with reason, about

livelihoods. But a strict per-kilometre cap and trip ceiling can ensure that pooling does not become unlicensed ride-hailing by another name. Women's safety advocates rightly demand robust verification; the regulatory template already exists. State governments guard their Concurrent List prerogatives, but a framework law establishing a national baseline while allowing states to notify fares and HOV lanes would preserve federal balance.

What is harder to defend is the current arrangement: the prime minister urges citizens to carpool while a regional transport office somewhere down the highway fines them for doing exactly that.

The Delhi government's announcement, Kerala's caps and the global crude shock have together opened a narrow but genuine window for a sensible central carpooling law. The law should seize it before the next tanker is delayed somewhere off the Strait of Hormuz. ■

HARDIK MALIK and VEDANT CHAUDHARY are assistant professors of law and researchers on constitutional governance and regulatory policy

*When Mr Modi urges citizens to carpool and a transport office fines them for doing just that, what's the recourse?*



# Telangana's jewel, The journey of the People's Government.



### Mahalakshmi

Free travel  
for women in  
RTC buses



### Cheyutha

₹10 Lakhs  
free medical  
treatment under  
Rajiv Aarogyasri



### Gruha Jyothi

200 units  
of free electricity



### Indiramma Indlu

₹5 Lakhs  
financial  
assistance for  
house construction



### Mahalakshmi

Gas cylinder  
for ₹500



### Fine Rice

6 kg  
of free fine  
rice for every  
individual

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

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**NATION**

**A BILLION-DOLLAR CONTRADICTION**

The State that bans cow slaughter also earns billions by exporting 'carabeef'

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**HOME & ABROAD**

**MESSAGE FROM THE XI-PUTIN SUMMIT**

Time's up for the US to lord over the world and shape the global order as it pleases

► P6




**NATION**

**AN OPEN LETTER TO THE CJI**

An unqualified apology may be in order, lordship

► P7



# Who really needs to make the sacrifices?

**Arun Kumar** on what lies ahead and how to brace for the war shocks

Speaking to members of the Indian diaspora at The Hague in mid-May, Prime Minister Modi said the war in West Asia can overturn the gains of the Indian economy in the past decade. Mass poverty could return, he warned, while listing the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing war and the global energy crisis.

To meet these challenges, he continued, India needs resilient supply chains, and conservation of energy must be seen as a national duty. Readers might remember similar exhortations during the demonetisation of November 2016.

No doubt, the pandemic was not of India's making nor the current supply shock due to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Both adversely impact the economy, especially the unorganised sector. But all was not well with the economy before these shocks came.

Government policies have privileged the organised sector at the expense of the unorganised sector since 2014. As a result, the capital and energy intensity of the economy has risen and so have unemployment and inequality. The health of the Indian economy has increasingly depended on the organised sector, which employs a meagre 6 per cent of the work force. Even a small change in their fortunes and actions produces a disproportionate impact on the economy.

The black economy generated by the well-off and the organised sector has resulted in poor governance and policy failure and the flight of capital has created a shortage of capital and a loss of foreign exchange leading to a weak balance of payments. The corrupt rich hold hundreds of billions of dollars abroad that are not available to the national economy—and the prime minister has to make appeals for austerity and to conserve

foreign exchange. India's economic data is suspect. This is partly due to the black economy but also for methodological reasons. The national GDP is overestimated; inflation is underestimated. The government's default setting is to paint a glowing picture without bothering to remedy underlying weaknesses, which gets exposed in times of crisis.

The supply shock due to closure of the Strait of Hormuz is aggravating the underlying weakness of the economy and impacting it hard. The unorganised sector is reeling from forced cutbacks in production, declining incomes and rising unemployment. The all-round rise in prices has hit their purchasing power. The official CPI inflation of 3.5 per cent does not reflect the reality of the poor—it fails to account for the black market, which takes effective inflation up to 30-40 per cent.

The depreciation of the rupee vis-à-vis the dollar—more than 5 per cent in 75 days and a steep annual rate of 24 per cent—also impacts the poor because it jacks up prices of imported essentials like fertilisers. The sharp decline in the rupee is related to capital leaving India, which in turn is due to waning confidence in the Indian economy.

From Rs 83.28 to a dollar in May 2024, the exchange rate is now Rs 96 and rising. The rupee has dropped 15.2 per cent in two years. Thus, the return on investment in India, measured in dollar terms, has fallen sharply. Whereas the US stock market has risen sharply on the back of technology stocks, Indian tech companies are under pressure from AI-led displacement. So, foreign capital (including NRIs) is pulling out of India. Further, since the rupee

is declining, exporters are delaying bringing back proceeds while importers are importing more. Both these reduce India's dollar holdings. Remittances are also impacted as workers in West Asia lose jobs and return to India.

Free market economists argue that the decline in the rupee is market-driven and the RBI shouldn't defend the rupee. This argument is flawed. Speculators take advantage and make money by beating down the currency further. Also, free markets are not really free; they are dominated by monopolies and big players. A rapid decline in the value of the rupee can set off a chain reaction, like the Southeast Asia Contagion, which led to the collapse of the booming Thai economy in 1997-98. India also faced a similar predicament between 1988 and 1991.

**The foreign investment saga**

Foreign investors have been leaving India since late 2024. It is argued that they need to be lured with more concessions. But, as stated above, they are leaving because they see better returns in the US vis-à-vis India.

But why is this such a big worry? In gross terms, it is 8 per cent of the total investment in India and in net terms, less than 1 per cent. Also, if India could stop the flight of domestic capital linked to its black economy, it would have no forex shortage.

Internal investment is 99 per cent of the total, and the real cause for worry is the inadequacy on this count. Low internal investment is linked to low capacity utilisation, due to inadequate demand, triggered by growing inequality. So, action is needed to reduce inequality via redistribution of income through taxation and employment generation, rather than more concessions to capital, as business economists



People feel the pain Long queues for LPG cylinders are again a common sight



*Knee-jerk policies can lead to runaway inflation and loss of control over the economy*

suggest. For them, reform means concessions to businesses whereas what is required is more employment generation in the unorganised sector. Foreign capital will only come to the organised sector and will hardly generate net (net) employment given its use of high technology. It will further marginalise the unorganised sector and reduce employment generation. The unorganised sector constitutes a huge potential internal market—much larger than the external markets. This sector is so

poor and unemployed that if it gets work, incomes will get a boost as will demand. Whatever is exported, like textiles, leather goods, food items, could also be sold in India if people had incomes. So, a drastic rethink is required.

Advanced countries are onshoring capital to shorten supply chains and boost employment. Trump is exhorting businesses and bullying allies to invest in the US. Trade won't solve India's problems, given that we lack the technology to compete. India must look inwards and onshore capital. Why is Mr. Ambani investing \$300 billion in the US and not in India?

**Need for a strategy reset**

There is no escaping the impact of supply shocks on production and prices. It is uncertain how long the Strait of Hormuz will remain closed and these effects may persist or worsen. The economy will be constrained by shortages and production will take a hit. India can only plan to minimise the impact, especially on vulnerable sectors.

Essential consumption must be maintained, otherwise inflation will shoot up and there will be social disruption. Inessential consumption—unnecessary travel and tourism, the five-star life, social waste—can be curtailed.

Economically, this will be less disruptive. Reduced inessential consumption will save both forex and energy, which can be redirected towards essentials. Employment, incomes and demand will inevitably be hit, and workers in affected sectors will need support.

Investment is likely to decline due to cutbacks in production, uncertainty and excess capacity in various sectors. But public investment in essentials, the social sector and welfare for the marginalised must be maintained.

The government has dithered for close to 90 days since the 2026 edition of the Iran war began on 28 February. Knee-jerk policies might lead to runaway inflation and a total loss of control over the direction of the economy. Mass poverty never went away, Mr Prime Minister, but it can certainly get worse with bad policy moves. Instead of asking India's precariat to brace for the worst and prepare to make more sacrifices, consider a targeted appeal to the 3 per cent well-off Indians with their hoards stashed abroad and a five-star lifestyle. ■

ARUN KUMAR is author most recently of Indian Economy's Greatest Crisis: Impact of the Coronavirus and the Road Ahead

# How do you trust the CBSE 2026 test results?

The integrity of the new on-screen marking (OSM) system has been proven to be suspect. What if there are bad actors at work?

**A.J. Prabal**

In early 2026, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) embarked on what it claimed was a revolutionary upgrade of India's examination system: the on-screen marking (OSM) protocol. The promise was alluring—standardised marking, quicker results, transparency, elimination of manual errors and the convenience of remote evaluation.

Yet, this 'brave new experiment' went horribly wrong. OSM was announced on 9 February, barely a week before the class 12 board exams began on 17 February. It was deployed on 3 March, when evaluation began. 'Pariksha pe charcha'—Prime Minister Narendra Modi's annual interaction with examinees, teachers and parents—was aired nationally on 9 February. Surely no coincidence. (Not a peep out of the PM since, despite complaints from students and teachers, and demands to scrap the results that were declared on 13 May 2026.)

The pressing question is: why such a rush to introduce an all-new marking system? Had the CBSE taken time to pilot-test the system or phase in the rollout, initial glitches—if that's what these were—and security flaws could have been detected and fixed.

Rushed implementation meant insufficient system testing leading to portal crashes, login failures, slow-loading user interfaces and poor scan quality. Some answer sheets went missing or were blurred; supplementary sheets were lost or wrongly linked.

An estimated 25,000-30,000 teachers participated in the marking, but many reported that training was limited to a few hurried webinars and mock evaluations. Some evaluators said they got less than a week's worth of dry runs, others that the process

continued till the day before results were announced. Evaluators had to juggle marking with their regular teaching and administrative responsibilities, including Booth Level Officer duties in poll-bound states! Multitasking under surveillance was stressful and compromised the quality of assessment, with many evaluators reporting screen fatigue.

As Prof. Anita Rampal, educationist and former dean, faculty of education, Delhi University, said in a panel discussion, "We cannot replace

human agency and cognitive processes... with something completely mindless. You don't scroll an answer sheet and then mark it in a linear manner. Also, people are conscious they are being monitored. The camera is there. If someone took longer, they said they got a phone call: 'Why is this evaluator taking so long on this question?' We are not robots and we shouldn't be turning humans into robots."

The CBSE's claim that OSM would sharply reduce demands for verification and re-evaluation now sounds like a bad joke. A record

4 lakh examinees—four times higher than last year—applied for re-evaluation, unhappy with scores and pipeline chaos that led to massive distress for students and teachers alike.

The CBSE's assurance that digital logs would enhance transparency and traceability, by recording who marked what and when, ignored a more important question: is the system secure? The ease with which it was hacked has thrown the entire marking process into doubt, raising all sorts of uncomfortable questions. Who insisted on transitioning to this new system in such a hurry? How was the vendor picked? Were there bad actors at play? How does the CBSE vouch for the sanctity of these results?

While many universities and education boards have indeed digitised evaluation, none made the shift so hurriedly or on such a massive scale. Most largescale deployment occurs after years of pilot testing, capacity building, contingency planning and strengthening of infrastructure.

The UK's AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance), for example, evaluates 13 lakh students through OSM, with 60,000 trained evaluators—double the number CBSE engaged for a far larger

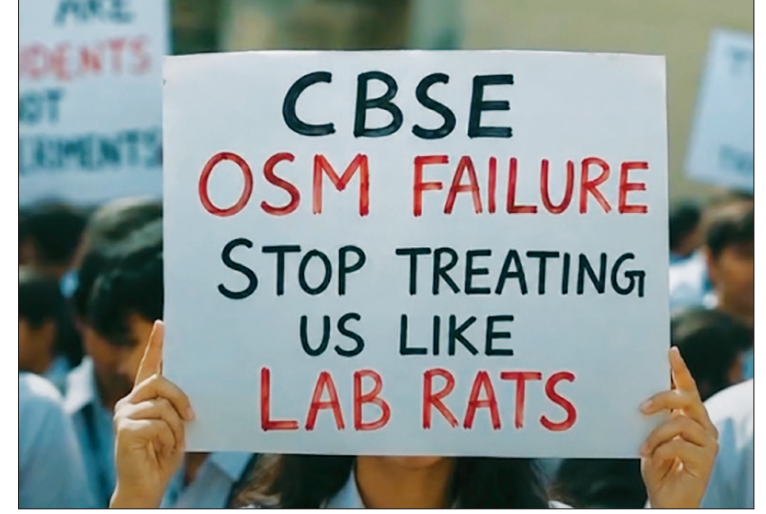
cohort. CBSE's rushed effort, with ill-equipped evaluators and unstable IT infrastructure, was a recipe for disaster.

Its choice of technology vendor is also suspect. Coempt Edutech (formerly Globarena Tech) was awarded the contract in August 2025, giving it less than six months to develop, test, train and deploy a mission-critical system.

Opposition leaders, including LoP (Lok Sabha) Rahul Gandhi, have highlighted the company's tainted record. In 2019, the evaluation for Telangana's intermediate public examination was outsourced to Globarena. Marking errors, including being marked absent for the exam, led to a tragic number of suicides.

Given this vendor's track, one wonders about the integrity of the due diligence exercise—on technical, security and ethical grounds. CBSE has not disclosed the selection or bidding criteria, who the other bidders were and why a tainted vendor was picked over the others, if any were in the fray.

The delayed and sketchy commencement of evaluator training is another red flag. If the contract was awarded in August 2025, why did training begin in early 2026?



*The CBSE's claim that OSM would slash re-evaluation demands sounds like a bad joke. A record 4 lakh have applied!*

► Continued on page 2

# When a falling rupee produces a fiscal windfall

Ajit Ranade

A falling rupee is usually treated as a macroeconomic problem. It raises the cost of imports, worsens inflationary pressures, unsettles investors and dents national pride. But India's recent experience has produced a curious paradox. The same rupee weakness that creates external stress has also produced a fiscal bonanza for the Union government. The Reserve Bank of India's dollars of the rupee—by selling dollars from its reserves—has yielded large realised profits, which are then transferred to the Centre as surplus. The RBI is thus not merely managing the currency. It is increasingly becoming a fiscal stabiliser, almost a treasurer to the government. This needs more scrutiny.

The RBI central board has now approved a record surplus transfer of Rs 2,86,588 crore to the Union government for FY25-26. This is higher than the previous record of Rs 2,68,590 crore in FY24-25, Rs 2,10,874 crore in FY23-24 and Rs 87,416 crore in FY22-23. The latest transfer is reportedly backed by robust RBI earnings, including gains from large dollar sales to support the rupee and higher income on foreign assets.

Nearly Rs 2.9 trillion is not a rounding-off item. It is close to 8 per cent of the Centre's revenue receipts. It gives the government fiscal breathing space without raising taxes, cutting expenditure or borrowing more from the market. At a time of elevated crude prices, geopolitical uncertainty and pressure on the fiscal deficit, this is a very useful cushion. But it's worrying for the same reason, for a cushion can quietly become a habit.

The arithmetic is simple. The RBI accumulated dollars over many years when the rupee was much stronger. When it sells those dollars today at a weaker exchange rate, it books a rupee gain. Not a paper gain from revaluing foreign reserves, but realised gain from actual dollar sales. Under the economic capital framework, unrealised revaluation gains on gold or foreign exchange are not meant to be distributed. But realised income from forex operations can flow into the RBI's income and then into its surplus transfer to the government.

This means the rupee's weakness has produced a fiscal windfall. That's an uncomfortable sentence, but it captures the paradox. The same depreciation that hurts importers, raises the cost of oil, reduces India's dollar GDP and unsettles foreign investors also boosts RBI profits when dollars are sold.

This matters for another reason. If India's nominal GDP grows by 10 per cent in rupee terms, but the rupee depreciates by more than 10 per cent against the dollar, then India's GDP in dollar terms barely grows. This isn't statistical hair-splitting: global rankings, investor perceptions and geopolitical heft are measured in dollars. A country can grow fast domestically and yet appear stagnant internationally if currency depreciation wipes out the gain. Persistent rupee weakness can, therefore, become a strategic concern.

But that does not mean the rupee must be defended at all costs. India is a current account deficit economy. It imports much more oil, gold, electronics and critical inputs than it exports. It also has a higher inflation rate than the US over the medium term. Some depreciation of

the rupee is natural. It can even be desirable. A weaker currency acts as a shock absorber. It protects export competitiveness, discourages non-essential imports and keeps the economy honest about external imbalances.

The danger is not depreciation per se, but disorderly depreciation. That is where the RBI intervenes as it should: to manage volatility, prevent panic and anchor expectations. But defending a level is different from managing volatility. If the market believes that the RBI will always protect a particular exchange rate, then large importers and dollar borrowers may under-hedge their exposures. An artificially strong rupee subsidises imports, penalises exports and delays adjustment. The eventual correction then becomes more painful.

*A government shouldn't treat the central bank's forex operations as a recurring source of revenue*



Photo: Getty Images

There is also a fiscal morality issue. If defending the rupee produces large RBI profits, and those profits help the Centre, then depreciation begins to have a hidden fiscal upside. That is not a healthy incentive structure. No government should start treating the central bank's forex operations as a recurring revenue source.

India's fiscal system already has an inbuilt support mechanism for government borrowing. Through the statutory liquidity ratio, banks are required to invest a substantial share of their deposits in government securities. This creates a captive market for sovereign debt. It is legal, longstanding and part of India's financial architecture. But it is still a form of financial repression: household savings are partially channelled into government borrowing by regulation. If, in addition, the government becomes dependent on large RBI surplus transfers, the line between

monetary authority and fiscal support begins to blur.

The RBI is not the finance ministry. Its job is price stability, financial stability, currency management and monetary credibility. It is also banker to the government, but that should not turn it into the government's cash cow. Elected governments naturally prefer more spending, lower borrowing costs and convenient financing. That is precisely why monetary institutions need insulation.

The rupee story is also linked to India's external financing challenge. Gross FDI inflows may look healthy, but net FDI has weakened sharply because of repatriation, disinvestment and outward flows. Foreign companies and private equity investors are exiting at attractive valuations. Indian equity markets remain expensive partly because domestic FDI inflows have become stymie and SIP inflows have become sticky and powerful. The

SIP habit is good for financialisation and household participation in markets. But it has also created a strong domestic bid that prevents a sharp market correction despite large FII outflows.

This raises a sensitive question. Are Indian domestic investors, through SIPs and IPO subscriptions, indirectly facilitating profitable exits for foreign investors? In many recent marquee IPOs, a large share of the money raised has gone not into fresh capital for the company but into offers for sale by existing investors. New investors buy the promise; old investors take the cash. This is not illegal. It is how markets work. But when it becomes widespread, it deserves scrutiny.

There have also been many high-profile foreign exits or partial exits: Holcim, Ford, Harley Davidson, Citibank's retail business, Metro AG, GM, Cairn, Lafarge, parts of Vodafone's story, Disney's restructuring, Whirlpool's dilution and others. Each case has its own explanation. But taken together, they point to a larger economic pathology: India is always easy as a market, but not always easy as a place to build, operate and retain capital.

This does not mean foreign confidence has vanished. Google's data centre plans, Meta and Google's investment in Jio, and other strategic investments show that global capital still wants exposure to India. But there is a difference between entering India for digital scale and committing patient capital to deep manufacturing. India needs durable FDI, not merely valuation-driven entry and exit.

In this context, the rupee is not just a number on a screen. It reflects oil dependence, gold imports, external financing gaps, portfolio flows, domestic market valuations and confidence in doing business. The RBI can smooth the ride, but it cannot permanently change the road. ■

AJIT RANADE is a noted economist. Courtesy: The Billion Press

## How do you trust the CBSE test results?

Continued from page 1

CBSE found itself with more egg on its face after a 19-year-old student, Nisarga Adhikary from Siliguri, West Bengal, hacked into the OSM portal on 25 February 2026. "I got curious," he said, speaking to *Moneycontrol*. "They had rolled out a new portal (http://cbse.onmark.co.in) for digital evaluation of copies. I started looking around and found the domain. Teachers were already using it and there were videos about it online."

He examined the website's publicly accessible Java script files and located the master password through a simple keyboard search: Ctrl+F. What he found inside was, in his own words, 'horrible'.

In a public blogpost, the teenager flagged five critical vulnerabilities from authentication bypass to full account takeover:

- 1 Anyone could log in as an examiner using publicly obtainable school codes and a master password 'leaked in the front-end'
- 2 OTP validation was reduced to 'pure theatre' with the 'secret' given directly to the browser
- 3 No 'route guards' made it a 'walk-in', so you could access any internal page with no authentication at all
- 4 Since no current password was ever verified, you could change it to any new password you liked
- 5 A catastrophic vulnerability at the architectural level—Insecure Direct Object Reference—meant anybody could take over any examiner's account, view assigned answer papers, and alter marks

*Nisarg Adhikary flagged five key vulnerabilities in the OSM protocol*



'At the scale of a national board exam,' Nisarga wrote, 'the integrity implications speak for themselves.'

When he reported the vulnerabilities to CERT-In (Computer Emergency Response Team-India) that very day, they asked for details and video proof and assured him that it was taking up the issue with CBSE. While some flaws pointed out by him were indeed fixed, others were not addressed at all.

In May, Nisarga discovered another vulnerability that exposed usernames, passwords and bank details of evaluators. Once again, he reported the issue to CERT-In. This time, he received only an email acknowledgement.

On 26 May, the Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) posted on X, 'When a national board exam system can be hacked this easily, the question is no longer just cybersecurity. It becomes a question of fairness, trust and the future of millions of students.' The IFF has written to the secretary, department of school education and literacy and the director-general, CERT-In. It has sought a ministerial investigation into the CBSE's procurement, deployment and operation of the OSM portal, a review of the contract with the vendor and his liability, immediate remedial measures including a forensic review of the evaluation of class 12 results and an independent public audit and publication of its findings.

CBSE was so deeply in denial, it initially denied that the portal was live, that Nisarga had hacked a dummy site. When he pointed out that the domain was shared in official CBSE communications to students, the portal was quietly retired. ■

## If our democracy is robust, why do we duck questions?

Wouldn't it be easier all round if our government stopped lying about the kind of nation it really wants? Never mind 'We, the People'

Aakar Patel

Assume for a moment that I am a big, strong fellow who lifts heavy weights easily and is flexible and fit. If someone approached me to comment on what they saw as my lack of health and absence of strength, would it affect me? If I am, in fact, big and strong, it should not make any difference. In all likelihood, I will ignore the comments and move on.

Or, assume that I am wealthy and have been for generations. Would a remark from a stranger pitying the fact that I was poor or that I looked destitute upset or anger me? Not if I was, in fact, not only rich but had been so forever.

Someone else's view of me will not affect me negatively if that view is not only wrong but the opposite of what I know to be reality. The remarks from others only bite when they are close to the truth and when I am insecure about the very things that their words carry.

The words of a young woman, a foreign reporter, have caused the mighty ministry of external affairs to lecture her—and the world at large—about the greatness of this nation. Lessons were given about our heritage and our culture and our ancient traditions in response to an anodyne question about freedom.

Something was also said about constitutional values and fundamental rights including the right to approach the Supreme Court. The young reporter followed up with a question that will not occur to most Indians. Why, she asked, did Indians have to approach the Supreme Court to claim fundamental rights?

The answer from our foreign office grandee was that it was his press conference and therefore she should (presumably) shut up. The Indian media jumped in. Not on the side of its fraternity, mind you, but to close ranks with the government and scream at the reporter for daring to ask things that were so

obviously false.

The point of any of this was lost on the dispassionate observer, but it is interesting to examine the pathology here. Why do we get angry and upset when questioned about our behaviour and values if we are secure in the truth? The answer can only be that we are not, in fact, secure. Which raises more questions: is that because we are insecure despite the truth? Or insecure because what we are claiming is not true?

Let us assume the first is the case: that India and its government are insecure despite the truth and the facts: we are a democratic nation, where individuals are free and the state is not malign.

We are, in fact, not insecure, merely touchy on the subject. If that is so, then the advice to foreign reporters and observers is to treat us like children.

We should be patted on the head, told we are good boys and girls, and given some sort of lollipop. Being asked hard questions will provoke a tantrum from us and this should be avoided. It should be mentioned here that this is how other nations deal with our government.

If they want something from us, they offer us a lollipop (or a medal) and a place to recite our little speech and then extract what they

need from us. When Israel is told it is misbehaving in the region and that its biddie war has damaged the world, Benjamin Netanyahu has been pointing to the validation provided to Israel by the 'mother of democracy'. That medal was extremely valuable for money.

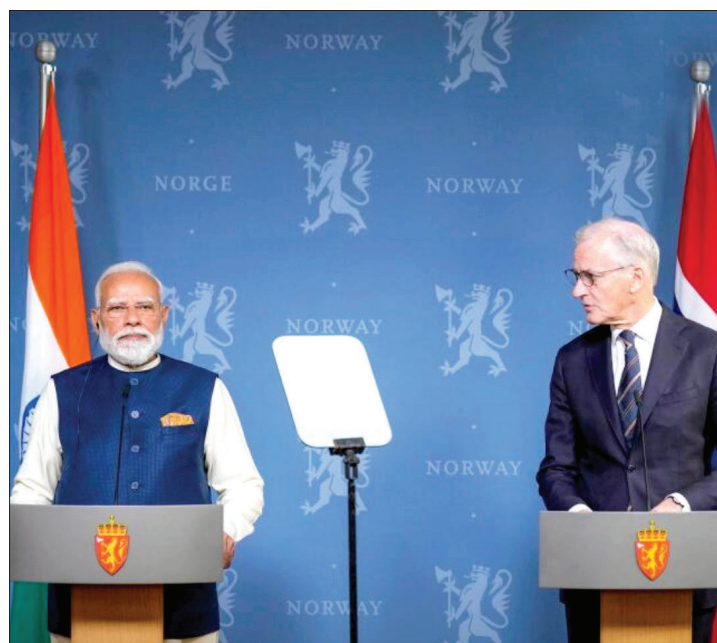
Let us now turn to the other possibility: that we are insecure because we know we are insecure because we are claiming is false. That we are not, in fact, as democratic or liberty-loving as we claim to be. To be reminded of this upsets and angers us. If that is the case, there is an easier solution which does not concern the external world (which will then not need to calibrate its behaviour towards us or treat us like children).

This solution is to simply speak the truth. For the past 12 years, India's diplomats have been operating under a Nehruvian carapace. We have been telling the world, particularly democratic and developed nations, that we are secular, pluralist and liberal. That we respect human rights and individual liberties. This is, of course, false. And when the foreign media examines the facts, they know it to be false. It is just that India's government now speaks with a forked tongue. At home, it says different things and behaves in a different way.

It does not brag to the world and their reporters about bulldozers and lynchings and bail denials and voter deletions and community exclusions that are the true basis of new India. It talks the language of Nehru and inclusion. It would be easier for all of us—and for the world and its reporters—if we stopped lying about what we are actually all about.

Some wit once said that diplomats are individuals sent abroad to lie for their country. Given the anxiety and anger that lying produces, we should consider the option that honesty might truly be the best diplomatic policy. ■

Views are personal



PM Modi at the press conference in Oslo, Norway, where he was confronted by a Norwegian journalist who asked why he wouldn't take questions

*As a wit once said, diplomats are people sent abroad to lie for their countries*

# The cow, the carcass and the republic

Jaideep Hardikar

India's profound economy is marred by a tangled contradiction. The regime that invokes the cow as a sacred symbol and those who curb vigilante attacks on fairs to trade in cattle also presides over one of the world's largest bovine meat export industries, earning billions from exports. It claims to protect rural India but destabilises the economic chain that links farmers, traders, tanneries, transporters and leather workers. Most recently, that contradiction played out sharply in West Bengal ahead of Eid al-Adha.

Soon after the installation of the new Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari, Bengal's BJP government tightened regulations, effectively restricting the slaughter of cattle below 14 years of age unless certified unfit for breeding or work. The Calcutta High Court declined to stay the order, observing that cow sacrifice is not an essential part of Eid rituals.

Amid fears of harassment, seizures and communal targeting, reports from Bengal's cattle markets suggest that many Muslim cattle traders and buyers have become overly cautious. Not only are they dissuading cattle breeders from selling their livestock for slaughter, they are turning them down.

Hindu livestock farmers have reportedly complained that weak demand is hurting prices and disrupting rural economies. In some cattle markets in Bengal buyers are simply not turning up. Having invested money in rearing cows for Eid, many farmers fear ending up in debt. In an economy built on interdependence between Hindu farmers and Muslim cattle traders, fear of retribution from vigilante groups seems to have travelled quickly.

Meanwhile, the meat export business has been thriving.

## The billion-dollar contradiction

India officially prohibits the export of cow meat. But buffalo meat—marketed globally as 'carabeef'—is one of India's largest agricultural export sectors.

According to the APEDA animal products export database, India exported more than 1.25 million metric tonnes of buffalo meat in 2024-25 alone, worth over \$4 billion, accounting for nearly 80 per cent of all animal product exports. The biggest buyers include Vietnam, Egypt, Malaysia, the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

As per a recent Lok Sabha reply, India has 94 APEDA-registered export-grade slaughterhouses

spread across Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Haryana and Punjab. Vigilantism, however, rarely distinguishes between cows and buffaloes, legal exports and illegal smuggling. Muslims have been killed or thrashed at the mere whiff of a suspicion. The politics around beef obscures the fact that our export industry is overwhelmingly buffalo meat, not cow meat. That ambiguity has led to a thriving export economy in an atmosphere of fear around cattle transport.

Cow vigilantism has become one of the defining social phenomena of the last decade. Data compiled by journalists, rights groups and researchers show that most reported cow-related mob attacks occurred after 2014, with Muslims disproportionately targeted. The date is crucial. That's when Narendra Modi came to power at the Centre. In 2017, Reuters reported that at least 28 people—24 of them Muslims—had been killed in cow-related violence between 2010 and mid-2017.

That violence altered the livestock economics.

## The broken rural chain

For generations, rural India functioned through a circular cattle economy. Farmers sold ageing or unproductive cattle to traders. Traders supplied slaughterhouses and meat processors. Hides moved to leather clusters. Bones, fat and by-products fed ancillary industries. Selling ageing cattle

gave farmers the liquidity to buy seeds, repay loans or survive a bad agricultural season. Cow vigilantism has disrupted that chain, leaving farmers vulnerable in moments of crisis. Mind you, livestock is a reliable liquid asset.

With cow vigilantism galloping across India—save in those BJP-ruled states where eating beef is permitted for political goals—that circular economy began to founder. Transporters no longer move cattle at night. Traders fear highway attacks. In several states, farmers abandon ageing cattle because selling them is too risky. The result is a surge in stray cattle destroying standing crops, especially in Uttar Pradesh.

One of India's distinguished geneticists and animal scientists, Dr Chanda Nimbkar argues that Maharashtra's cow slaughter restrictions have severely distorted the livestock economy. In an illuminating essay in the Marathi daily *Loksatta*, she urged the lifting of the ban on cattle sale and slaughter to provide relief. 'Even buffalo traders are increasingly targeted by self-styled *gau rakshaks*... directly hurting small livestock farmers'.

She is right. Two years ago, Qureshi traders—increasingly under attack in Maharashtra—boycotted the cattle trade in all the major markets of the state (similar to what is unfolding in West Bengal today). Prices of male calves and buffaloes plummeted, creating great unrest among farmers and ill will against the state government.

Nimbkar writes, if the government can't control vigilante violence, it must compensate the farmers. Sales resumed only after mediation, pushback from the farmers and assurances from the Maharashtra government that no harm would come to the traders. Till date, they haven't returned to normalcy. Economically lagging dry-land areas have been hardest hit by the disrupted cattle trade, which has crippled the small farmer economy and added to their financial woes.

Dr Nimbkar's critique cuts deeper. She argues that governments subsidise overcrowded *gaushalas* while denying farmers the economic flexibility to manage unproductive animals. The irony, she notes with frustration, is that indigenous cattle and bull populations in Maharashtra have continued to decline despite aggressive 'cow protection' politics, while goat populations—linked to a freer, more flexible market—have risen

significantly. In short, cow vigilantism, patronised by the state's ruling regime, exposes the fundamental contradiction at the heart of cow politics: laws framed in the name of protection actually undermine both livestock conservation and rural livelihoods.

Few sectors reveal this contradiction more starkly than India's leather industry which depends on the slaughter economy for hides. Disrupt slaughter, transport and cattle markets, and the leather sector feels the shock almost immediately.

As early as 1950, the Centre had warned states that blanket slaughter bans would hurt India's tanning industry and exports. Today that warning is proven prophetic.

India's leather industry employs roughly 4-4.5 million people directly and indirectly, many of them Dalits and Muslims concentrated in tanning, carcass handling, leather processing and footwear manufacturing. Current estimates show the sector contribute roughly \$5 billion annually when domestic market value and exports are combined. In FY2024-25, the leather industry's export earnings stood at around \$4.8-5.7 billion. The domestic market is even bigger. In 2025, the council for leather exports (CLE) estimated that India's domestic leather and footwear market was worth about \$19 billion

with ambitious plans to expand substantially over the next decade. Major leather clusters in Kanpur, Unnao, Chennai and Kolkata depend on a stable supply of hides. Bengal is one of India's important leather-processing centres, with Kolkata and Bantala accounting for nearly a quarter of India's tanning activity. In a state where industry is flagging, a big dent in its leather trade could be fatal.

After cattle trade restrictions intensified in 2017, leather industry bodies warned of falling hide availability and shrinking exports. Industry reports documented declining domestic hide supply as slaughter rates fell and cattle transport became increasingly risky. The economic logic is brutal: fewer sales devastate farmers, disrupted slaughter reduces hide supply, tanneries slow down, exports weaken, workers lose jobs.

The worst affected are those on the margins—Muslim traders, Dalit leather workers, transporters and informal sector labourers.

**Who owns the beef economy?** One of the least discussed aspects of India's meat economy is that it cuts across religious identities more than politics reveals.

Some of India's largest buffalo meat exporters are Hindu-owned firms. The export industry itself is not controlled by any one community. Yet public discourse has communalised the entire trade,

collapsing distinctions between legal export businesses, local livestock markets and everyday cattle transport.

A single video of vigilante attacks has the potential to cripple transport routes and turn rural markets into communal flashpoints. Entire groups start withdrawing from traditional trades out of fear.

**The republic at a crossroads** India's cattle economy has always involved an uneasy weave of religion, caste, livelihood, agriculture and commerce. But during the Modi regime, it has also become a theatre of nationalism.

The same State that promotes export-oriented buffalo meat production because it earns foreign exchange criminalises and intimidates the people who keep that economy functioning.

The burden falls on the farmer with an unproductive animal he cannot sell; on the transporter way-laid by vigilantes; on the tannery worker without raw hides to cure; on the cattle trader who quits a market out of fear; and on communities learning to mistrust each other in spaces once built on everyday cooperation.

The cow may be sacred in India's politics. But the economy around it is unshaky. ■



Hindu traders in West Bengal have slammed the BJP crackdown on Eid cattle trade

with ambitious plans to expand substantially over the next decade.

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Some of India's largest buffalo meat exporters are Hindu-owned firms. The export industry itself is not controlled by any one community. Yet public discourse has communalised the entire trade,

collapsing distinctions between legal export businesses, local livestock markets and everyday cattle transport.

A single video of vigilante attacks has the potential to cripple transport routes and turn rural markets into communal flashpoints. Entire groups start withdrawing from traditional trades out of fear.

**The republic at a crossroads** India's cattle economy has always involved an uneasy weave of religion, caste, livelihood, agriculture and commerce. But during the Modi regime, it has also become a theatre of nationalism.

The same State that promotes export-oriented buffalo meat production because it earns foreign exchange criminalises and intimidates the people who keep that economy functioning.

The burden falls on the farmer with an unproductive animal he cannot sell; on the transporter way-laid by vigilantes; on the tannery worker without raw hides to cure; on the cattle trader who quits a market out of fear; and on communities learning to mistrust each other in spaces once built on everyday cooperation.

The cow may be sacred in India's politics. But the economy around it is unshaky. ■

# ECI finds more ways to cull voters

Since when is the number of children an eligibility criterion for voters? **Nandlal Sharma** on the madness in the method

Can an Indian citizen lose voting rights for having 'six or more' children?

Apparently, yes, as Sonu Giri (35), a voter from Varanasi Cantonment discovered. Soon after the publication of the draft voter list on 6 January 2026, the Election Commission sent Sonu a notice asking him to respond to allegations that he had 'six or more' children. When the final voter list was released, Sonu Giri's name had been deleted.

He is not the only one. *National Herald* studied voter lists from 20 booths across four polling stations—Hamidia Madrasa, Bajardiha (177); Goenka Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya, Assi Sangam (345); Markazi Madrasa Ansarul Uloom, Kazipura Khurd (15); and Kanya Primary and Upper Primary School, Shankuldhar (228) in the Varanasi Cantonment assembly constituency and found large number of deletions on similar grounds.

Girijesh Kumar, 49, (Assi Sangam) received a notice citing 'an age difference of less than 40 with grandparents' and 'having six or more children'.

Jitendra Maurya, 38, (Shankuldhar) received a notice citing 'name discrepancy' and 'having six or more children'.

In the final list, Sonu, Girijesh, Jitendra and many other deleted voters were categorised as 'Q'—'disqualified'. (Other deleted voters were coded: 'E' (expired), 'S' (shifted), 'R' (repeated/duplicated), 'M' (missing).)

At Sonu Giri's booth (Hamidia Madrasa), the EC deleted 150 names—61 men and 89 women. Reasons included 'non-mapping with the final SIR' (91 voters) and 'having six or more children' (27).

At Goenka Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya, 187 voters—including 78 women—were deleted. The main reasons were 'not mapped' (102 voters), 'grandparent age difference under 40 years' (40) and 'having six or more children' (20).

At Kazipura Khurd, 114 voters (58 men and 56 women) were deleted, with 103 removed because they 'could not be mapped with the final SIR'.

At Kanya Primary and Upper Primary Girls' School, 57 were deleted.

On 28 June 2025, the ECI declared that under Article 326 of the Constitution, 'only Indian citizens above the age of 18 and ordinarily resident in an assembly constituency are eligible to become voters'.

Looking at the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) conducted in Uttar Pradesh, it seems like the EC has altered the very criteria for voter eligibility. Deleting voters for 'having six or more children' begs the question: how did the Commission determine how many children a voter has? Enumeration forms did not ask for the number of children, just Aadhaar, EPIC and mobile numbers, as well as the names of the voter's father/guardian, mother, spouse.

A primary school teacher who served as a Booth Level Officer (BLO) during the SIR in Meerut South, said she had seen cases where voters were deleted due to an age gap of less than 15 years with their parents. However, she denied knowledge of deletions linked to number of children.

Dr Noor Mohammad, who served

Q 355	INB3219854
नाम : सोनु गिरि पिता का नाम : सत्य नारायण मकान संख्या : सन 3/114-35 आयु : 35 दिग्गः पुरुष	फोटो उपलब्ध है
Q 201	INB0575373
नाम : गिरिजेश कुमार पिता का नाम : आनन्दी मकान संख्या : 143सी/10क3 आयु : 49 दिग्गः पुरुष	फोटो उपलब्ध है
Q 188	INB2691129
नाम : जितेन्द्र मोर्या पिता का नाम : देवी प्रसाद मोर्या मकान संख्या : सन 16/116 आयु : 38 दिग्गः पुरुष	फोटो उपलब्ध है

**Sonu Giri: Children ≥ 6**  
**Girijesh Kumar: Age difference with grandparents <40; children ≥ 6**  
**Jitendra Maurya: Name discrepancy, children ≥ 6**

as Uttar Pradesh's chief election officer for nine years is outraged. "India follows universal adult franchise. Data provided during enumeration cannot be rejected merely on the basis of 'logical discrepancies'. The only consideration for determining eligibility is the minimum age requirement." The number of children or any other discrepancy is immaterial. "This simply cannot

be done," he says

"This kind of profiling on a criterion which [the EC] just invented is undesirable," senior advocate Shyam Divan argued in the Supreme Court on 19 January. "Where is the statutory sanction? What has the electoral roll got to do with progeny? Can it even be a relevant consideration for the EC?"

The EC argued that voter records in West Bengal and Tamil

Nadu showed unusually high numbers of electors with an abnormally high number of children: 4.59 lakh with more than five children, 2.06 lakh with more than six and 8,682 with more than 10. According to *The Print*, the ECI even claimed to have found electors with over 100 children!

Dr Mohammad finds the entire process suspicious and says it should be conducted again.

"Earlier, Form 6 only asked for the voter's age; anyone above 18 could be registered. In many cases, records were not available, so a declaration by the head of the family, or the village head, was considered sufficient. If an objection arose, an investigation was conducted. In case of a dispute, a doctor's opinion was sought. I know of a case involving two siblings

whose age difference was recorded as just three months," he shares. The teacher who recorded the dates of birth was clearly distracted.

Regarding the age difference with parents or grandparents, he says, "Showing a 15-year age gap with the father is, in itself, absurd. Has the Election Commission assumed that child marriages no longer happen? In most cases, even the ages of fathers and grandfathers aren't accurately recorded."

At a presser on 10 April, CEO of UP Navdeep Rinwa claimed no deletions had occurred without due process: "If a name appeared in the draft list but is missing from the final list, it means either Form 7 was filed against that voter, or the ERO decided, after hearing the notice, to exclude them."

He said 1.04 crore voters had been dropped because of their failure to map their legacy, and 2.22 crore voters were flagged for 'logical discrepancies'. Notices were sent from 14 January 2026 onwards and hearings completed by 27 March.

Before the SIR, the number of voters in UP stood at 15.44 crore. In the draft list, this fell to 12.55 crore. In the final voter list, the number stood at 13.39 crore.

Rinwa said after 6 January, 815,999 names were deleted. Of these, 350,436 voters failed to respond satisfactorily to notices, 328,350 were absent or had permanently shifted, 79,076 were registered elsewhere, and 55,865 had died. Another 2,269 were deleted for not being Indian citizens or for being under 18.

In effect, the SIR has disenfranchised 2.05 crore voters in UP.

Unlike in West Bengal, where judicial officers were drafted to adjudicate logical discrepancies and an appellate tribunal is still wading through 27 lakh appeals, there is no clarity on the fate of UP's deleted voters. Rinwa has said affected voters could appeal exclusions under the Representation of the People Act, 1950.

We aren't holding our breath. ■

“This kind of profiling on a criterion the ECI has just invented has no statutory sanction”

# Yellow survey stones and a project called SilverLine



Seeing red over yellow The survey stones had become symbols of state repression

**K.A. Shaji**

When the yellow survey stone appeared one morning inside K. Thankamma's kitchen courtyard in Alappuzha's Kozhuvallur village, the 68-year-old widow felt as if somebody had quietly marked her family for eviction. The stone looked innocuous, but its message was terrifying.

These stones were used to mark the proposed alignment of the controversial SilverLine high-speed railway corridor, projected by the then Pinarayi Vijayan-led LDF government as Kerala's biggest infrastructure dream.

For Thankamma and thousands of others across the state, the yellow stones became symbols of fear, humiliation and uncertainty. Homes that had been around for generations faced demolition. Land prices crashed. Banks hesitated to grant new home loans. Families postponed weddings, house repairs and investments because nobody knew when the eviction notices or bulldozers might arrive.

With the new Congress-led UDF

government, led by chief minister V.D. Satheesan, officially scrapping the project, relief has swept across villages that spent years living in a state of fear. "I used to wake up every day wondering whether this house would survive," Thankamma told this reporter, standing beside the now fading yellow mark near her kitchen compound. "My husband built this home after years of hard work in the Gulf. After the yellow stone came, peace left this house. Even cooking in this kitchen became painful."

From Kasaragod in the north to Thiruvananthapuram in the south, the yellow survey stones had entered courtyards, wells, paddy fields, kitchens and bedrooms. They had transformed ordinary homes into sites of anxiety.

Their removal now marks one of the most dramatic political reversals in Kerala's recent history and a rare victory for sustained public resistance against a mega infrastructure project backed by the full might of the state.

In Thottolitytham near Kozhikode city, P.V. Shashindran

spent years studying debt consumption his family. He slowly borrowed heavily to build a modest house and get his three daughters married. His liabilities crossed Rs 15 lakh. The only way out was to sell a portion of his ancestral property. Then the yellow stones arrived.

Powerful buyers disappeared overnight. Nobody wanted land that could soon be acquired for SilverLine. Financial institutions too were reluctant to touch it. For Shashindran, this was worse than a nightmare—he had legal title of the land but couldn't mortgage it or sell it. "The project destroyed our peace even before it had taken an inch of land," he said.

In Meenachanda near Kozhikode, Abdul Razak had just finished construction of his new house when officials arrived with police escorts to place survey stones near the property. Panic entered the household at a time when his son was about to get married.

K.V. Razak, also a native of Meenachanda and a heart patient who actively joined the protests,

collapsed during demonstrations against the survey. Images of elderly residents crying before police personnel travelled across Kerala.

Families felt abandoned by the state. Nobody would even say if their homes would survive. Even after the authorities hinted at possible alignment changes, the uncertainty continued.

For many continued, this uncertainty was worse than displacement. People stopped renovating homes. Property transactions froze. Young couples postponed life decisions. Elderly residents were heard saying they would probably be gone before there was clarity.

## Rebellion and relief

Madappally near Changanassery in Kottayam district emerged as a hotbed of resistance. Nearly 400 houses here were expected to be affected by the project.

Villagers turned into full-time protesters. Women slept inside makeshift tents. Elderly residents guarded roads at night fearing sudden survey operations. Families organised marches, sit-ins and human chains for years.

*The appearance of the dreaded yellow stones transformed people's homes into sites of anxiety*

The movement shook Kerala after visuals emerged of grassroots activist Roselin Philip being dragged away by the police during a protest while her young daughter stood by and cried.

When authorities placed a survey stone in front of Thankamma's kitchen in Kozhuvallur, villagers felt the state had crossed an invisible line. Protests intensified when the police reinstated the survey stone after activists had once removed it. Sindhu James, a homemaker, was mangled and later alleged physical and mental harassment in custody.

The incident transformed the anti-SilverLine agitation into a larger statewide movement against what was seen and commonly described as authoritarian governance in Pinarayi Vijayan's second term.

Environmental activist K.V. Ravishankar said the project failed because it ignored Kerala's ecological and social realities. "SilverLine represented a dangerous development model imposed without listening to people or understanding Kerala's fragile environment. The protests showed that ordinary people were no longer willing to sacrifice their homes and livelihoods or the wetlands for projects that mainly benefit contractors and politicians."

SilverLine, a.k.a. K-Rail, became a moral and political question about whether 'development' could justify uprooting thousands of families in one of India's most densely populated states.

When the new government announced the decision to scrap the project, residents threw crackers and distributed sweets. Many described the moment as liberation from a prolonged psychological siege.

## The project that made Kerala see red

The Pinarayi Vijayan government had tried to sell SilverLine to the people as an infrastructure dream. The estimated cost: Rs 63,941 crore. The benefit: a speedy rail link (<4 hours) connecting the length of the state, from state capital Thiruvananthapuram in the south to Kasaragod in the north.

The proposed route cut through densely populated settlements, wetlands, paddy fields, rivers, backwaters and ecologically fragile regions including Madayippara, Kadalundi estuary and Kole wetlands.

It required acquisition of nearly 1,383 hectares of land across Kerala.

Environmentalists warned that the corridor could trigger severe hydrological consequences in a state already battered by floods, landslides and coastal erosion. Experts argued that enormous quantities of granite, soil and sand required for embankments and elevated corridors would intensify pressure on the fragile Western Ghats ecosystem.

The financial implications were also controversial. Critics questioned how debt-stressed Kerala could support the cost of the project when it was already struggling with welfare commitments, climate disasters and fiscal instability.

Many experts argued that upgrading the existing railway network with electronic signalling, track doubling and modernisation could substantially reduce travel time without triggering mass displacement and ecological destruction.

Resistance to the project united an unusual coalition of environmentalists, church groups, scientists, civil society organisations and ordinary residents, including sections traditionally sympathetic to the Left.

SilverLine became a referendum on Kerala's development politics.

## Not just SilverLine

SilverLine was possibly the most emblematic of the governance trajectory but not the only infrastructure project under the Pinarayi Vijayan government that drew sharp criticism. The EMCC deep sea fishing project, which threatened the livelihoods of traditional fisher communities, the Vizhinjam port project, the extensive quarrying in ecologically fragile regions, disputes over buffer zones surrounding protected forests and allegations related to coastal mineral sand (black sand) mining had put the erstwhile LDF government on the defensive in the run-up to the recent elections.

While announcing the SilverLine project, just days after taking the oath of office, chief minister V.D. Satheesan said: "We cannot impose development by destroying people's lives and the ecology. ... Kerala needs modern infrastructure. But every project must [consider] environmental sustainability and respect democratic consultation and the dignity of ordinary citizens." ■

# Who's taking on the BJP in Bengal?

**Sourabh Sen**

Assembly elections have decisively installed the BJP in power in West Bengal with 208 seats. It has reduced the Trinamool Congress to a rump opposition in the fray—CPM, Congress, ISF—no longer matter in the grand scheme of things. In terms of vote share, however, more people voted against the BJP than for it, leaving a wide-open space for the Opposition to regroup. In this two-part series, we try to decode how this space might shape up, who the possible players could be, what kind of political challenges they may pose (if any), and what kind of pressure they may bring to bear when it comes to framing policies and addressing issues.

Since his swearing in on 9 May, West Bengal's new chief minister Suwendu Adhikari seems to be a man in a tearing hurry. Bulldozers were despatched to clear roads and demolish structures (including Kolkata's iconic Hogg Market). Government employees were issued gag orders. Hawkers were evicted from railway platforms. A dissenting like Garga Chatterjee was put behind bars. The West Bengal Animal Slaughter Control Act, 1950, was invoked and operationalised to regulate the slaughter of cows in the run-up to Eid and beyond.

'Holding centres'—a euphemism for detention camps—were set up to confine people suspected of being illegal Bangladeshi nationals. (Last

heard, 12 inmates were moved into shelters in Murshidabad and Malda.) Acres of land were handed over to the Border Security Force to 'strengthen border security' with barbed-wire fencing.

Sealing off the India-Bangladesh border was part of the BJP's campaign promise to justify its narrative of the illegal influx of Bangladeshi Muslims into West Bengal, which the party proclaimed, was changing the state's demography. This was the justification for the SIR which eventually struck 34 lakh people off the voter list. The BJP won the election by a margin of 30 lakh votes.

Kolkata's tony living rooms and a pliable media have lapped up the BJP's moves, interpreting them as essential to dismantling the TMC's network of corruption and nepotism.

Mid-level BJP leaders say it's all part of an essential consolidation of the BJP's fledgling support base. The winning party's overwhelming majority in the assembly loses much of its sheen when seen in the light of the percentage of votes it has won—45.84 per cent against the TMC's 40.8 per cent. In fact, even after the deletion of 34 lakh names, more of West Bengal's 6.5 crore voters have voted against the BJP than for it.

The bulk of these anti-BJP voters are still aligned with the TMC. This, along with the CPI-M (4.45 per cent), Congress (2.97 per cent) and others (5.94 per cent), defines the contours of West Bengal's opposition space—now up for grabs among the state's political parties.

The TMC, which was confident of a fourth stint, faces the clear and present danger of becoming irrelevant less than a month after the results. The loss of around

seven per cent votes pushed it overnight from ruling party to Opposition. In hindsight, the writing on the wall was clear. And now come early signs of a TMC meltdown.

There is open dissent against Abhishek Banerjee. Around ten MLAs stayed away from a crucial post-election strategy meeting convened by Mamata Banerjee on 6 May. A flurry of councillors from municipal and other elected bodies have resigned. There are reports of elected MLAs approaching the Congress or the CPI-M.

Speculations are also rife about TMC MLAs joining the BJP.

On 26 May, MP Kakoli Ghosh Dastidar, along with six TMC MLAs, attended an administrative meeting convened by Adhikari. (This was after she was replaced as the TMC's parliamentary chief whip.) Ghosh Dastidar has since resigned from all her party positions.

Many TMC MLAs believe the party's organisational structure has

*In the churn after the TMC's defeat, the Opposition space has opened up in West Bengal*



Bulldozers and lathicharges are a common sight these days on the streets of Kolkata

weakened due to over-centralisation around the figure of Mamata Banerjee and her coterie. Leaders who once enjoyed local authority feel politically insecure after the defeat. Some fear investigation, others fear losing relevance in a BJP-dominated Bengal.

Is there a viable Opposition in West Bengal, and if yes, what does it look like?

"For a variety of reasons, there has been a steady decline in West Bengal's non-BJP vote share, especially since the 2021 elections. Non-TMC opposition parties have suffered a similar decline, although they are under the illusion that no such thing has happened," explains political scientist Ranabir Samaddar, alluding to the falling vote share of both the CPI-M and the Congress.

Samaddar points out two other reasons why a robust opposition may prove elusive. One, the inability to set an alternative agenda. In 2016, the TMC was able to launch schemes like Ganyashree or Sabuj Sathi, which signalled a recognisable departure in the way social welfare was packaged. In 2021, the Faray Samadhan component of Duare Sarkar (government at your doorstep) redefined the last mile delivery of governance.

Had the TMC won in 2026, what

would it have brought to the table? Perhaps Rs 1,700 instead of Rs 1,500 under Lakshmir Bhandar, Rs 7 lakh instead of Rs 5 lakh under Swastha Sathi. Its web of corruption and rent-seeking would still have flourished. The TMC, in Opposition, is not in the position to set an alternative agenda. Not because it lost, but because it ran out of ideas. Addressing law and order and human rights issues had long gone off the party's radar. By agitating the hawkers' issue and demanding their rehabilitation before eviction, it is the CPI-M that has kept the opposition space alive.

The second impediment is that governments in West Bengal, once voted to power, do not change as frequently as they do in states like Karnataka, Kerala or Rajasthan. "This is because in West Bengal, legislative politics is interlaced with the politics of the street in a fundamental way," Samaddar told *National Herald*. "As a result, it becomes difficult to change a party that comes to power with an agenda." In this context, harping on the TMC's corruption and governance failures is the BJP ecosystem's all-out effort to stymie any alternative agendas.

Having said that, the BJP is also fumbling. Even after twenty days in the saddle, it has not been able to announce a fully functional cabinet. To stave off any influx of TMC discards, BJP state president Samik Bhattacharya had initially announced that the party's doors were closed for TMC workers. However, it only took ten days for Bhattacharya to do a volte face, saying the BJP would welcome "good Trinamool workers", indicating a dearth of ground-level mobilisers and leaders in their present set up.

Meanwhile, its policy regulating cow slaughter has backfired. With Muslims deciding not to buy cows, the livelihood of lakhs of Hindu livestock farmers has been affected. The gag order and stay on releasing DA instalments has made government employees restive. Could these become the building blocks of an alternative agenda for the Opposition?

For the moment, it's all up in the air. The BJP dominates the assembly but not the streets. The TMC is struggling to hold itself together. The Congress and the Left are still searching for a foothold.

What will emerge from this churn is anybody's guess. ■

With inputs from Kunal Chatterjee and Gautam Bhattacharyya

# Dawn of the Q-Era: How Karnataka is Shaping Asia's Quantum Future



The next great technological revolution is no longer confined to conventional computing power or semiconductor manufacturing. It is unfolding in the extraordinary realm of quantum science—where particles can exist in multiple states simultaneously, enabling computational possibilities far beyond the limits of classical systems. Across the world, nations are racing to secure leadership in this frontier technology. In India, Karnataka is positioning itself at the forefront of that transformation.

With the launch of its ambitious Quantum Vision 2035, the Government

*While Bengaluru will remain the anchor for frontier research and international collaboration, regional quantum innovation zones are planned across Mysuru, Dharwad, Kalaburagi, and Mangaluru.*

Karnataka has laid out a strategic roadmap to establish the state as Asia's leading quantum innovation hub. The mission aims to build a quantum economy exceeding USD 20 billion by 2035, spanning advanced research, hardware manufacturing, software platforms, cybersecurity, intellectual property, and high-value employment.

More importantly, Karnataka's approach places citizens and public benefit at the centre of this transformation. The vision is not limited to laboratories and elite institutions; it seeks to translate frontier science into practical solutions for healthcare, agriculture, governance, industry, and national security.

## Building an Integrated Quantum Ecosystem

Karnataka's Quantum Vision 2035 recognizes that leadership in deep technology requires more than isolated investments. It demands a coordinated

## Laboratory Discoveries → Scalable Technologies → Globally Competitive Enterprises → Trusted Public Infrastructure

At the heart of this ecosystem is the Quantum Research Park (QuRP), which acts as the foundational engine for scientific discovery and technology translation. The park supports research in quantum computing, communication, sensing, and advanced materials while nurturing collaborations between

ecosystem connecting research institutions, startups, industry, manufacturing, talent development, and government support. The state's roadmap follows a clear progression:

### Quantum Technologies for Public Good

The state's quantum strategy is deeply connected to real-world challenges and public service delivery. Investments are being directed toward applications capable of transforming key sectors of the economy and governance.

### Accelerating Drug and Materials Discovery

Quantum computing has the potential to dramatically shorten the time required to design new medicines and advanced materials. Problems that currently take years of simulation and testing may eventually be solved within days, enabling faster development of pharmaceuticals, clean energy materials, and industrial compounds.

### Strengthening Cybersecurity

As digital infrastructure expands, cybersecurity has become a strategic priority. Karnataka is supporting the development of quantum-secure communication systems, including Quantum Key Distribution (QKD) and Post-Quantum Cryptography (PQC), to build highly secure digital networks resistant to future cyber threats.

### Advancing Agriculture and Resource Management

Quantum sensing technologies can improve monitoring of soil quality, crop health, and water resources with unprecedented precision. These capabilities could significantly strengthen agricultural productivity and climate resilience across the state.

### Enhancing Governance and Public Services

Quantum-enabled optimization tools can improve logistics, transportation systems, urban planning, administrative efficiency, and large-scale public data

academia, startups, and industry.

Complementing this effort is the planned development of Q-City—an integrated quantum innovation and manufacturing hub envisioned as the economic anchor of Karnataka's quantum ecosystem. Q-City will bring together research labs, fabrication units, startup incubators,

management, helping governments deliver services more effectively.

### Bengaluru and the Statewide Quantum Network

Karnataka's greatest strength lies in its concentration of world-class scientific institutions and deep-tech talent. Bengaluru already hosts some of India's premier research centres, including:

- Indian Institute of Science
- Raman Research Institute
- Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research
- International Centre for Theoretical Sciences
- National Centre for Biological Sciences
- Indian Institute of Astrophysics

Together, these institutions represent a powerful interdisciplinary ecosystem of more than 15,000 students, researchers, engineers, and innovators.

To ensure balanced regional development, Karnataka is adopting a hub-and-network strategy inspired by successful international quantum ecosystems such as Switzerland's regional innovation hubs, Munich Quantum Valley, and the Chicago Quantum Exchange.

While Bengaluru will remain the anchor for frontier research and international collaboration, regional quantum innovation zones are planned across Mysuru, Dharwad, Kalaburagi, and Mangaluru. These centres will expand access to skilling, research participation, and entrepreneurship opportunities across Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities.

A cloud-based Quantum-as-a-Service (QaaS) platform is also envisioned to provide remote access to quantum infrastructure, enabling researchers, startups, and students across the state to work with advanced systems regardless of location.

### Research, Startups, and Industry Collaboration

Karnataka's quantum ecosystem already

testing facilities, and global industry partners within a unified ecosystem designed for rapid commercialization and export readiness. Through this architecture, Karnataka seeks to transition from being primarily a consumer of advanced technologies to becoming a global producer and exporter of quantum solutions.

includes a growing network of startups, research laboratories, and multinational collaborations.

### The Rise of Quantum Startups

Bengaluru has rapidly emerged as India's leading hub for quantum entrepreneurship. Several startups are already developing globally competitive solutions:

- QpiAI is building integrated quantum hardware and software systems, including India's first full-stack 25-qubit superconducting quantum computer.
- QNu Labs develops quantum-secure cybersecurity products and communication systems.
- Quan2D Technologies focuses on advanced photonic and nanomaterial technologies.
- Avinya SQ Technologies is building enterprise-ready post-quantum cryptography solutions.
- QuSyn Technologies works on photon sources, sensing tools, and secure communication technologies.

### Global Industry Partnerships

Leading international and Indian

## Research and National Institutions

*The Quantum Technology Initiative (QTI) at IISc has emerged as a major driver of research in quantum computing, communication, and sensing. The Wadhvani Innovation Network – Centre of Excellence in Quantum Technologies (WIN-CoE) supports technology commercialization and startup incubation.*

*The Foundation for Quantum Computing Innovation (FQCI) at IISc is also contributing to national capability building through advanced quantum simulators and research tools.*

*Other institutions bring complementary strengths:*

- JNCASR advances nanoscience

## Q-City: Karnataka's Quantum Economic Hub

Q-City represents the most ambitious element of the roadmap. Conceived as a fully integrated quantum innovation district near Bengaluru, it will serve as the meeting point for research, manufacturing, entrepreneurship, and global investment. The ecosystem will operate across four major platforms:

### 1. Services

Cloud-accessible quantum computing, optimization, and AI-integrated solutions for enterprises and public institutions.

### 2. Research and Development

Shared laboratories, testing facilities, and collaborative research centres

linking academia and industry.

### 3. Entrepreneurship

Startup incubation, regulatory sandboxes, and intellectual property support systems to accelerate commercialization.

### 4. Manufacturing and Export

Fabrication units, assembly lines, testing facilities, and certification centres designed for global-scale production and exports.

By integrating these capabilities into a single ecosystem, Karnataka aims to build a globally competitive quantum industrial base capable of serving both domestic and international markets.

technology firms have also embedded quantum research and development operations within Karnataka's ecosystem.

These include IBM, Fujitsu, Tata Consultancy Services, Atos, LTIMindtree, Rigetti Computing, and Capgemini.

Their participation strengthens Karnataka's ability to integrate global research standards, enterprise applications, and advanced manufacturing capabilities into the local ecosystem.

## Government as the Catalyst

The Government of Karnataka is playing a central catalytic role through the proposed Karnataka Quantum Mission (KQM), backed by a planned allocation of ₹1,000 crore.

### Key focus areas include:

- Establishing Q-City and a dedicated Quantum Hardware Park.
- Supporting more than 100 startups through incubation and venture financing.
- Promoting intellectual property generation and patent development.
- Expanding quantum education into universities and higher secondary institutions.
- Funding approximately 150 PhD fellowships annually.
- Creating specialized workforce development programs across the state.

This coordinated intervention is designed to ensure long-term technological sovereignty while generating employment and industrial growth.

## Karnataka's Global Quantum Position

Karnataka's strategy aligns closely with India's National Quantum Mission while simultaneously building international partnerships with leading institutions and innovation networks.

Collaborations with organizations such as Swissnex, GESDA, the Open Quantum Institute, and the Chicago Quantum Exchange are expected to strengthen research exchange, student mobility, and technology transfer.

Formal partnerships with institutions including University

College London, University of Waterloo, and University of Cambridge further reinforce Karnataka's emerging global role.

## A Future Being Built Today

From advanced nano-fabrication laboratories in Bengaluru to emerging innovation centres in Dharwad and Kalaburagi, Karnataka is executing a long-term strategy to lead the next era of technological transformation.

By integrating public investment, academic excellence, startup innovation, and global partnerships under a coordinated governance framework, the state is building more than a research ecosystem—it is creating the foundations of a future-ready economy.

Quantum technology may still be in its early stages globally, but Karnataka has already taken decisive steps toward leadership. Through Quantum Vision 2035, the state is positioning itself not only as India's quantum capital, but as one of Asia's most significant centres for next-generation science, industry, and innovation.

## Four Pillars of Quantum Vision 2035

Karnataka's roadmap rests on four mutually reinforcing pillars:

### Pillar I: Talent and Skilling

The state aims to build a workforce of more than 10,000 quantum-ready professionals by 2035 through expanded academic programs, faculty development, specialized training initiatives, and international collaboration.

### Pillar II: Research and Technology Targets

- The roadmap establishes clear milestones:
- Indigenous benchmarking on 100-physical-qubit systems in the near term.
  - Scaling toward 1,000 physical qubits by 2030.
  - Achieving fault-tolerant quantum computing capabilities by 2035.

### Pillar III: Infrastructure Development

A comprehensive research-to-production backbone will include:

- QuRP for foundational discovery.
- Quantum Fabline facilities leveraging IISc's advanced cleanrooms.
- The proposed Institute for Quantum Algorithms, Modelling and Software (IQAMS).
- A dedicated Quantum Hardware Park for industrial scaling.

### Pillar IV: Industry and Business Growth

Karnataka plans to nurture over 100 startups, secure at least 100 foundational patents, and strengthen global partnerships through international summits, institutional collaborations, and science diplomacy initiatives.

# Guess who isn't calling the shots?

Ashok Swain on the message from the Xi-Putin summit for Trump's America and the rest of the world

When Vladimir Putin arrived in Beijing days after Donald Trump had left, Xi Jinping did not merely host another summit. He staged a geopolitical statement. Trump had come to China believing that personal diplomacy if not transactional pressure could still bend the world to Washington's will. Xi answered by standing beside Putin, as if to declare that the age of unquestioned American dominance is nearing the end.

The Xi-Putin summit was a calculated performance. By signing a declaration on a multipolar world, China and Russia were mounting a direct challenge to the central assumption of Trump's foreign policy that the US can still define the global order, decide which wars are legitimate, determine who is to be punished and expect others to fall in line.

Trump's worldview has chronically overestimated US leverage. He has banked on America's ability to coerce other nations—China, Russia, India, Iran, even NATO allies—to cooperate or pay a price. Sanctions, tariffs, military strikes, theatrical summits and Truth Social ultimatums have become US strategy. But where some powers like India have capitulated in the face of bullying, China and Russia and more recently Iran have pushed back and successfully called his bluff.

These countries and their leadership read Trump's vulnerabilities. Xi has never confronted Trump with reckless gestures. Instead, he steadily accumulates leverage. He receives Trump with courtesies, keeps economic channels open, avoids unnecessary rupture, and then immediately hosts Putin to show that China will not be trapped inside a Washington-designed international order. This is the essence of Xi's challenge, careful in tone, forceful in substance.

The condemnation of US and Israeli military strikes on Iran gave the summit its sharpest edge. By framing these strikes as violations of international law and basic norms of international relations, Xi and Putin placed Washington in the dock, not Tehran. This was not only about Iran. It was about the wider claim that no power, however strong, has the right to bomb, sanction or destabilise another state outside the authority of the United Nations.

Trump may unpredictably talk peace and even covet the Nobel Peace Prize, but

his administration spouts the doctrine of 'peace through strength', an euphemism for flexing muscle to achieve desired outcomes. He attacks multilateral institutions, then complains when others build alternatives. He invokes sovereignty when it suits America but violates the principle flagrantly, as evidenced by US actions in Israel's wars. Xi has seized on this contradiction and turned it into a diplomatic weapon.

China's message is simple: the UN, not Washington, must remain central to international legitimacy.

Of course, Beijing's own record is not spotless. Its positions on Taiwan, the South China Sea and its human rights record invite criticism. Likewise, Russia's invasion of Ukraine makes Moscow's position untenable in any discussion of sovereignty. Yet the power of Xi's move lies not in its moral principle but in political timing. Trump's unilateralism and the unreliability of his word and actions has made it easier for China to present itself as a defender of rules, restraint and global balance.

The more Trump attacks the international order in the name of American Greatness, the more space he creates for Xi to claim global responsibility.

Photo: Getty Images



The making of a geopolitical statement The Xi-Putin summit, hot on the heels of Donald Trump's visit, is seen as a diplomatic counterstrike

The more Washington behaves like a hegemon, the more convincing Beijing's language of multipolarity sounds to many countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Russia.

Xi is not asking the world to choose Russia over America. He is asking the world to question why America should remain the final arbiter of every other nation's conduct. That is a far more sophisticated challenge. It appeals not only to authoritarian states but also to governments tired of the West's double standards.

The Beijing summit also showed that Russia needs China more than China needs Russia. Putin requires markets, technology, diplomatic cover and energy buyers. Xi requires Russia as a strategic counterweight, but he is careful not to become dependent on Moscow. The failure to finalise key pipeline plans, including long-delayed pipeline plans, reveals the limits of the partnership.

Xi is mindful of these limits. So, he engages with Putin without yielding to him. He engages with Trump without trusting

him. He talks about the centrality of the United Nations in the international order even while expanding China's influence through trade, infrastructure, technology and diplomacy. This is statecraft.

Trump, by contrast, treats foreign policy as spectacle. His visits produce headlines, handshakes and declarations, but not durable order. Xi's summits are designed differently. They are meant to place China at the centre of every conversation. Trump comes to Beijing seeking a deal. Putin comes seeking reassurance. Others come seeking access. Xi receives them all, and the image is unmistakable—the world is no longer kowtowing to Washington.

The call for a multipolar world is not an abstract slogan. For China, multipolarity weakens US primacy and gives Beijing time to expand its own influence without triggering a direct confrontation. For Russia, it offers protection from isolation. For many states in the Global South, it offers bargaining space. For Trump's America, though, it's a rude reminder that its military might does not automatically

translate into leverage or legitimacy.

The call for 'multipolarity' is really a push towards competing spheres of influence. Big powers may invoke sovereignty but violate it when convenient. Russia has done exactly that in Ukraine and China has made low-key assertions in its own neighbourhood.

The Xi-Putin summit should, therefore, be read as a diplomatic counterstrike. It told Trump that China will not yield to US pressure. It told the world that Beijing has partners, platforms and an alternative vision of international order.

Xi Jinping is challenging the US carefully yet forcefully—carefully because China still needs stability and forcefully because he believes history is moving in China's direction. Trump's policy missteps and hegemonic misadventures are no small help. ■

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*Xi engages with Putin without yielding to him. He engages with Trump without trusting him. This is a lesson in statecraft*



Futures at stake The leaked question papers of NEET-UG 2026 triggered protests against the National Testing Agency (NTA) in New Delhi, Chennai, Patna, Mumbai...

# Of leaked papers and shattered dreams

The demand-supply mismatch and an overstretched examination system fuel corruption and despair, writes Rashme Sehgal

Controversies surrounding the conduct of examinations in India aren't limited to cheating scandals. They expose deep-rooted corruption and systemic flaws that threaten medical education and the wellbeing of student aspirants. There have been 89 paper leaks and 48 re-exams of major tests between 2016 and 2026. The latest is the leaked NEET-UG 2026 paper, scheduled for a re-test on 21 June. This affects 23 lakh students who face yet another emotionally and financially exhausting ordeal. There is no guarantee, of course, that the re-exam will be glitch-free. Meanwhile, the evaluation scandal around the CBSE class 12 examination further highlights the unfairness and uncertainties of India's examination system.

At least four students who appeared for NEET-UG in May 2026 have died by suicide. The youngsters—from Sikar, Lakhimpur Kheri, Delhi and Goa—couldn't take the pressure to restart preparations and chose to take their lives instead.

The core problem, says Maheshwar Peri, chair of Careers 360, is the massive mismatch between demand and supply. As many as 23 lakh students are competing for just 30,000 seats available in government medical colleges. Private medical colleges charge anything between Rs 1-5 crore, as opposed to Rs 5-6 lakh in government institutions.

That explains the desperation, despair and despondency. "Parents do not mind shelling out Rs 10-15 lakh for a set of question papers if they are sure of securing a seat in a government medical college for their wards," says Peri.

Nitin Kuckreja, CEO Allen Career Institute, also mentions this demand-supply mismatch. A medical degree, he says, is

considered key to a financially secure future. "But only a high NEET score can enable admission in reputed government institutions," he adds. The latest *India Today* Best Colleges Survey shows the lowest monthly fee in a government medical college at Rs 1,628 per month as against Rs 1.9 lakh per month in a private college.

After this year's NEET paper leak, the CBI has so far made eleven arrests—coaching centre directors, principals and educators—from Jaipur, Gurugram, Nasik, Pune, Latur and Ahilyanagar.

Despite investigating 15 paper leak cases since 2015, CBI's track record is dismal—only one conviction so far. Meanwhile, the Enforcement Directorate is probing 11 cases but has secured no convictions.

For years, coaching institutes have been under suspicion. Hundreds of them vie for students, with many institutions and their affiliated 'ghost schools' directly or indirectly linked to politicians. Former vice-president Jagdeep Dhankhar denounced coaching hubs as "poaching centres" and "black holes for talent".

This politician-coaching centre nexus was highlighted in 2024 when a large number of toppers in NEET-UG emerged from one exam centre in Bahadurgarh, Haryana. Six toppers had roll numbers in the same sequence. Investigation showed that the centre was being run by the wife of the local BJP youth wing chief. The day of the exam saw a mix-up in question papers leading to delays in starting. It emerged later that some of these 'toppers' didn't do well in their board exam, casting doubts over their high NEET scores.

In 2024, 67 students from a centre in Sikar secured a perfect score (720/720). This

centre was found to have close links with a Rajasthan-based politician.

Another scandal in 2024 involved students at an obscure Jay Jalaram centre in Godhra, where answers partially filled by them were completed post-exam by teachers after the answer key was released. The Gujarat police found that at least 26 students from across the country had paid Rs 10-66 lakh each to clear NEET from this centre alone.

Educationalists are asking why NEET cannot follow the example of the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) system—where question papers are generated automatically from a vast, encrypted bank meticulously developed over many years and decrypted only when the candidates begin their exam. The JEE is conducted twice a year over 5-6 days; 1.4 million students sit for it. Top IIT professors are involved in setting the questions for the JEE-Main. In the case of NEET, neither the Indian Medical Board nor professors from leading medical colleges have any role in setting the question papers.

Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan has now said that NEET will switch from pen-and-paper to a computer-based test (CBT) like the JEE. While CBTs too are plagued by technical glitches and occasional cases of impersonation, these are generally less severe compared to the issues NEET faces.

Before the NTA was formed, the CBSE conducted the All-India Pre-Medical/Pre-Dental Entrance Tests (AIPMT), alongside the exams conducted by states. A student clearing AIPMT could take direct admission into any medical college under the central government and also avail of the

15 per cent quota for non-resident students in every state medical college.

The NTA is modelled along the Educational Testing Service (ETS) of the United States, which conducts the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), the American College Test (ACT) and the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE). However, unlike the ETS, which has more than 200 permanent staff members, the NTA operates with just over two dozen permanent employees in its Delhi office.

This severe understaffing has led the agency to outsource critical functions such as paper-privating, distribution and data security to private providers, increasing the risk of leaks.

R. Subrahmanyam, former secretary of

higher education, says the NTA was created to conduct online exams. It is not competent to conduct an exam like NEET which is held on such a gigantic scale involving over two lakh people to administer it.

Experts call for a deeper review. Dr Anita Rampal (ret'd) dean, faculty of education, Delhi University, is opposed to holding common entrance exams for universities. "Multiple choice questions do not assess the depth of understanding of a student. Nor do they assess whether the student possesses the ability and empathy to become a good doctor," she says.

Rampal points out how NEET has resulted in the marginalisation of state boards. "A centralised test ends up testing your social advantages. Tamil Nadu opted against NEET because they wanted good functioning clinics in their villages. The present test ends up creating self-serving doctors, not doctors who serve," she says.

She is equally critical of NTA's lack of vision for students. "It has to be made a statutory body answerable to Parliament. A constitutional status will empower NTA to directly penalise affiliated schools that conduct these exams and indulge in wrongdoing. At present, they are not accountable to NTA," she points out.

"A country of our size should ideally have at least three, four, even five exams so that if a student does badly in one, they have the chance of appearing in another and saving their year," says Faizan Mustafa, former vice-chancellor of NALSAR University of Law.

There is the added apprehension of criminal elements infiltrating the system. The money involved is huge. From a Rs 60,000 crore annual turnover, the coaching industry is now estimated to be making over Rs 1.5 lakh crore. ■

*And now, we hear, NEET too will switch from pen-and-paper to a computer-based test like the JEE*

Photos: Getty Images

# An apology may be in order, your lordship

An open letter to the Chief Justice of India from a concerned citizen

Hon'ble Chief Justice,

May I, a humble member of the Blatta (Oriental) genus of cockroaches, make so bold as to express my utter stupefaction at your recent statement in open court in which you termed unemployed youth, RTI activists, media personnel and social media activists as 'cockroaches' and 'parasites'? Posterity will record these uncalled for and demeaning words as the nadir of judicial propriety and gravitas. Kindly allow me to explain why.

It appears, from what is available in the public domain, that you were at the time dealing with the issue of a proliferation of lawyers with dubious degrees. Your desire to identify and weed out such elements from the legal profession is understandable, and even commendable, and should be supported by all.

But your subsequent leap of hubris, not faith, was totally unwarranted and a step too far even in these dismal times when the vocabulary of public discourse has plumbed new depths. The contemptuous characterisation of our youth and civil society is something we have come to expect from our politicians, but not from the seniormost judicial officer in the country, the custodian of the letter and spirit of the Constitution, whose every word is engraved in time, the beacon and conscience-keeper of the nation.

Which is why, my lord, it pains me to say that your unfair and insensitive *obiter dictum* has dimmed the glow of the beacon and induced a perception that the keeper has not been true to his charge. It has, at one fell swoop, insulted and humiliated these sections of society, cast on them aspersions which are neither



true nor justified and, even more dangerous, exposed a heart of darkness in the country's judicial anatomy which does not bode well for a liberal democracy. Your lordship's subsequent 'clarification' does not dispel the apprehensions your comments have generated.

A democracy remains healthy not only on the basis of institutions of the state, but on the shoulders of a vibrant civil society and non-state actors. These participants—activists, NGOs, social media, RTI applicants, fact checkers—are the benign bacteria in our body politic that maintain our immune systems, keep in check those organisms

that would destroy us, and ensure that democracy and a liberal order survive. By castigating them in such derogatory language, my lord, you have exposed a side of the higher judiciary we did not imagine existed. It has left us confused, apprehensive and fearful.

Are you aware, your honour, that there are 28 million educated unemployed youth in the country, and an additional 100 million who have stopped looking for jobs (*The Wire*, 23 May 2026)? That 67 per cent of unemployed youth today are graduates, compared to 32 per cent in 2004? (Azim Premji University 'State of Working India Report', *Deccan Herald*, 1 May 2026). That 80 million workers have left cities owing to

lack of job opportunities and gone back to their villages? And that the government classifies them as employed in agriculture?

This worsening position is not due to the indolence of these unfortunate youngsters, but because of faulty government policies in education, industrialisation and economic 'growth' that promote inequity, concentration of wealth and capital-intensive projects, and have decimated the MSME sector. These youngsters deserve our empathy, not elitist condemnation.

Finally, my lord, heed the power of language and choose carefully the patois you employ. For language is a double-edged sword, it can soothe or wound, it can demean or dignify, it can sustain or destroy, it can be a pean or a dog whistle. It is dangerous to employ words loosely.

History is replete with instances where such words have preceded and laid the ground for mass persecution, ethnic cleansing and even genocide.

The killing of a million Tutsis in Rwanda was preceded by a campaign that classified them as '*inyenzi*' which, coincidentally, means cockroaches. In Hitler's Germany, Jews were called parasites and rats; Zionists later called Palestinians 'vermin' and 'animals'. Closer home, minorities from Bangladesh are stigmatised as 'termites' and protesters as '*andolanjeevi*' (bitten by the bug of revolution). Such branding is invariably followed by the dehumanisation of entire sections of society and their persecution on a large scale.

It is possible your unfortunate vocabulary may have the same effect in India, for your words feed into the executive's own narrative: the segments of society you have, perhaps unwittingly and unintendedly, vilified are precisely the ones the government of the day considers its enemies, obstacles to its authoritarianism. It may now be emboldened to move against them even more aggressively, confident that it has your institution's support.

That would be a disaster, an opening of the floodgates that shall eventually consume all the pillars of democracy, including the one over which your honour presides.

At the end of the day, your lordship, this unnecessary disparagement of the youth, civil society activists and social media may lead to a loss of credibility in the institution you head, in its ability (or even willingness) to confront an authoritarian executive, to protect the rights of minorities, and to uphold the letter and spirit of a liberal and inclusive Constitution. A democracy cannot long survive such a loss.

Which is why, sir, you may consider a more explicit retraction and withdrawal of the statement made by you, not just a clarification. An apology to the nation at large will go a long way in restoring the confidence of the citizenry in an institution which is, after all, the last bastion of rights and liberty. To err is human, to admit it is divine.

With profound regards and my own humble apologies for intruding on your valuable time,

I remain, your lordship,

A.C. Roach

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# The case for a carpool law in India

...and not just because a tanker is delayed somewhere off the Strait of Hormuz, write Hardik Malik and Vedant Chaudhary

The Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 draws a sharp line between private (white-board) and transport (yellow-board) vehicles. A private car used 'for hire or reward' without a permit invites penalties and possible suspension of registration. The 2019 amendment created a statutory category of 'aggregator' and introduced a licensing regime, but it was drafted for ride-hailing, not ride-sharing.

The ministry of road transport and highways issued Motor Vehicle Aggregator Guidelines in 2020, followed by a substantially revised version in 2025 covering Ola, Uber, Rapido and similar platforms, with detailed rules on surge pricing, driver compensation, insurance and grievance redressal. Neither framework, however, creates a dedicated regime for genuine cost-shared carpooling between commuters. The result is policymaking by improvisation.

In late 2023, Karnataka's transport department, after sustained lobbying by taxi unions, declared the use of white-board cars on carpooling apps such as BlaBlaCar and Quick Ride illegal, attracting fines under state motor vehicle rules.

Bengaluru—India's most congested city, where BJP MP Tejasvi Surya has noted that vehicle numbers have risen sixty-fold since 1990—was effectively asked to prioritise taxi-operator revenues over peak-hour decongestion. Maharashtra's Aggregator Cabs Policy 2025 takes the opposite approach, expressly recognising carpooling, capping drivers at 14 pool trips per user per week, and requiring fares not to exceed RTA base rates.

Some states tolerate the apps; others penalise the same activity. Transport falls within the Concurrent List, but this patchwork looks less like a defensible division of powers than a refusal to legislate, for which commuters are paying the price.

That cost is most visible on the Noida-Greater Noida Expressway at 6 p.m. The 25-km corridor carries lakhs of IT and corporate employees daily, yet metro coverage thins beyond Sector 137, bus connectivity remains uneven, and corporate shuttles are available mainly to employees of larger firms. Everyone else improvises.

Informal lifts are commonplace. Women travelling to and from night shifts often rely on strangers because there is simply no reliable alternative. A regulated carpooling regime—with verified profiles, in-app tracking, women-only and women-driver options, and SOS integration—would in fact be safer than the unverified hitchhiking that weak public transport already

forces on many commuters every day.

The absence of a central rule also explains why traffic police, relying on a literal reading of 'hire or reward', penalise pool riders on the assumption that any payment between strangers converts a private vehicle into a commercial one. Until the statute itself distinguishes a contribution to fuel from a commercial fare, that line will continue to be drawn by the constable on the highway.

Fuel prices may be the immediate trigger, but the larger case for regulating carpooling lies in climate policy and trade.

India's updated Nationally Determined Contribution commits the country to a 45 per cent reduction in emissions intensity below 2005 levels by 2030 and to net-zero emissions by 2070. Phase I of India's Carbon Credit Trading Scheme (CCTS), notified in 2023 and rolling out through 2026, covers nine energy-intensive industrial sectors. Its Offset Mechanism pipeline includes transport, though methodologies for shared-mobility credits remain under development.

Meanwhile, the European Union's new Emissions Trading System, ETS2—postponed last November by a year but now scheduled to begin trading in January 2028—will, for the first time, impose an upstream carbon price on fuel suppliers for road transport and buildings, with a cap declining by more than 5 per cent annually towards a 42 per cent emissions reduction by 2030. The existing EU ETS covers heavy industry and aviation; ETS2 is the mechanism that will, in effect, price the petrol burned in private cars.

India's CCTS will eventually have to interact with ETS2 and with a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism whose scope may yet widen. If app-mediated carpool trips were recognised as eligible activity under the CCTS Offset Mechanism, millions of empty seats could begin functioning as climate assets.

Indian transport policy would also be better positioned for the international carbon-market integration that is approaching, whether or not we are prepared for it.

A dedicated chapter in the Motor Vehicles Act—or a stand-alone Shared Mobility (Carpooling) Regulation, 2026—should do a few straightforward things.

First, it should draw a clear statutory distinction between commercial ride-hailing and genuine cost-shared carpooling by defining the latter through a per-kilometre cost-recovery cap, daily and weekly trip ceilings and a strict no-profit rule. White-board cars operating within those conditions should be expressly



Policy paradox While some states recognise carpooling, others penalise the same activity

Photo: Getty Images

exempt from commercial permit requirements.

Second, the law should incorporate safeguards already present in the 2025 Aggregator Guidelines: KYC and police verification, location tracking, women-passenger options, in-app SOS functions, and certified app security.

Third, governments should pilot dedicated high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lanes on major corridors such as Delhi-Meerut, Mumbai-Pune, and Noida-Greater Noida. American experience with HOV lanes since 1969, and the French use of white-diamond lanes around Paris, Lyon and Grenoble—backed by substantial penalties for solo drivers—suggests that even partial, dynamically activated systems can move more people in fewer vehicles.

Finally, the law should integrate verified pool trips into the CCTS Offset Mechanism, giving aggregators—and eventually commuters—a direct financial stake in shared mobility.

The counter-arguments deserve serious consideration. Licensed taxi and auto operators worry, with reason, about

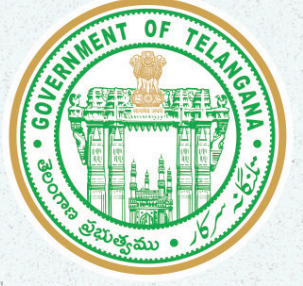
livelihoods. But a strict per-kilometre cap and trip ceiling can ensure that pooling does not become unlicensed ride-hailing by another name. Women's safety advocates rightly demand robust verification; the regulatory template already exists. State governments guard their Concurrent List prerogatives, but a framework law establishing a national baseline while allowing states to notify fares and HOV lanes would preserve federal balance.

What is harder to defend is the current arrangement: the prime minister urges citizens to carpool while a regional transport office somewhere down the highway fines them for doing exactly that.

The Delhi government's announcement, Kerala's caps and the global crude shock have together opened a narrow but genuine window for a sensible central carpooling law. The law should seize it before the next tanker is delayed somewhere off the Strait of Hormuz. ■

*When Mr Modi urges citizens to carpool and a transport office fines them for doing just that, what's the recourse?*

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# Telangana's jewel, The journey of the People's Government.



## Mahalakshmi

Free travel  
for women in  
RTC buses



## Cheyutha

₹10 Lakhs  
free medical  
treatment under  
Rajiv Aarogyasri



## Gruha Jyothi

200 units  
of free electricity



## Indiramma Indlu

₹5 Lakhs  
financial  
assistance for  
house construction



## Mahalakshmi

Gas cylinder  
for ₹500



## Fine Rice

6 kg  
of free fine  
rice for every  
individual