

NATION

WHY ARE CAG WARNINGS FALLING ON DEAF EARS?
A series of reports on frauds in government are being met with deafening silence

► P3



NATION

THE CHANGING FACE OF BANARAS
The makeover of this holy city is stripping it of its soul

► P4



NATION

THE PLUNDER OF GREAT NICOBAR
How 'development' is wreaking havoc in this fragile ecology

► P5



Is Form 7 the new weapon of mass deletion?

Sourabh Sen

When the Election Commission of India (ECI) quietly altered the rules governing Form 7 in 2023, nobody seemed to notice. Form 7 allows a voter to challenge the inclusion of another individual in the electoral rolls and request their removal.

Earlier, only neighbours or voters registered at the same polling station were eligible to submit Form 7. This rule was changed in 2023. The new rule allowed any voter registered in any booth of the assembly constituency to submit Form 7. Another big change was to allow an unlimited number of submissions per applicant. Neither change was challenged, and both have been in effect since late 2023.

As has become evident in the ongoing Special Revision (SR) in Assam and the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in 12 states/ Union territories, almost all objections have been raised against Muslim, Dalit or tribal voters, and many filed using the name and EPIC (Elector's Photo Identity Card) numbers of unsuspecting Muslim voters.

On 29 January, Congress Organising Secretary K.C. Venugopal drew the Election Commission's attention to the "massive misuse of Form 7 by the BJP" to eliminate voters suspected of supporting the Opposition. In his letter, Venugopal calls the misuse elaborate, systematic and extensive, and alleges that the BJP appears to have asked its workers to submit objections in bulk, particularly in poll-bound states. A key element of the centralised fraud, he points out, is to ensure that notices informing legitimate voters of the objections never reach them.

The fraud, Venugopal points out, is neither localised nor isolated. Reports from Kerala, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh and Assam indicate a similar pattern. A common feature is the mass printing of Form 7, using illegible

names and signatures, random or invalid phone numbers and EPIC numbers belonging to other legitimate voters.

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In Gujarat, Haji Ramkadu, a folk artiste from Junagadh, who was awarded a Padma Shri on Republic Day, accidentally found that an objection had been filed against him. Born in Junagadh, he has lived in the same house for 70 years, is well known in the state and is credited with having performed for free at 25,000 fund-raising programmes for *gaushalas*. That didn't stop BJP corporator Sanjay Manwar from submitting a Form 7 objection against Ramkadu.

As the news spread and outrage grew, Manwar sheepishly said the artiste's Aadhaar card bore the name Mir Haji Kasam, while his EPIC identified him as Haji Rathod. These very common inconsistencies in official documents are being weaponised. Married women are particularly hard put to explain the changes in their given names. In West Bengal, when Salma Sardar and Saeeda Molla become Salma and Saeeda Naskar, objections were raised.

In Rajasthan, allegations that BJP functionaries were pressuring Booth Level Officers to delete Muslim voters surfaced from Hawa Mahal, a Muslim-majority constituency the BJP had won in 2023 by a narrow margin of 974 votes. A video circulating on social media showed BLO Kirti Kumar alleging pressure from senior officials to process objections against 470 voters—nearly 40 per cent of the electorate in his booth. "I'd rather kill myself than do this," Kumar was heard saying in the video.

In Madhya Pradesh, the Congress alleged that several hundred objections were being submitted for each booth by BJP workers in Bhind, Singrauli and Sehore. In West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress reported—and recorded—a vehicle intercepted with several thousand copies of Form 7 being carried by BJP workers. Clashes erupted in Murshi-



The ongoing special revision of electoral rolls in Assam seems to be more about deletion of names

dabad after BJP supporters tried to submit a large number of Form 7 applications.

The ECI has argued that submission of Form 7 does not automatically lead to deletions, that filing Form 7 objections on false grounds is punishable and voters whose names are removed on false grounds can seek legal redress.

Assam's chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma seems to have declared a 'jihad' against 'miyas', a pejorative term used for Muslims allegedly of Bangladeshi origin.

Sarma had no compunction declaring in public, "Yes, we are trying to steal miya votes... we've made arrangements so they can't vote in Assam... when the SIR comes to Assam, four to five lakh miya votes will have to be cut."

Sumona Rahman Choudhury, a BLO in Sribhumi (formerly Karimgunj) district, and 14 other BLOs were called for a training session on 19 January. When Choudhury turned up, officials handed her a bunch of objection forms (Form 7), challenging the inclusion of 133 voters in her booth. Some of the details were already printed while others were handwritten.

All 133 objections were filed by one person,

who claimed that 133 voters in Choudhury's booth in Srimanta Kanishail village, Karimganj North assembly constituency—all Muslims—were either dead, had permanently shifted or been enrolled more than once. Choudhury, a teacher at the government school, personally knows the voters.

Speaking to *National Herald* over the phone, she said, "When I visited them during enumeration, they were at home. I got them to fill up the forms and collected their signatures... The deletion list included the name of my headmaster, whom I report to everyday. There were also names of parents of my students, who I know personally. How could I ask them to come for a hearing? And on what grounds? What if they filed an FIR against me?"

Choudhury and four other BLOs—who faced a similar predicament at the same training session—told officials that they did not think it necessary to send notices and summon the voters for a hearing, leave alone delete their names. They rejected the objections raised because they knew them to be false.

► Continued on page 5

Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma seems to have declared a 'jihad' against 'miyas', a pejorative term used for Muslims allegedly of Bangladeshi origin

Gujarat-model ghettoisation comes to Rajasthan

When selling property becomes a crime, you know you're in Modi's India, writes Aakar Patel

On 21 January, Rajasthan's cabinet approved a segregation bill that most Indians may not know of because it is unlikely that the media will report it. Let us look at what the Rajasthan Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Provisions for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from the Premises in Disturbed Areas Bill, 2026, intends to achieve.

Poor people who are forced to live clubbed together is what we call a slum. An ethnic group forcibly relegated to certain neighbourhoods is a ghetto. The former have no means to go elsewhere. The latter have no choice, even if they have the means. Apartheid means apartness and refers to South Africa's policy of racial segregation, where black Africans were forced into ghettos. They could only live in fixed spaces by law.

When segregation in the United States was legally ended in the 1960s, the government passed laws that sought to integrate the races. For instance, the Fair Housing Act which prevented discrimination in the buying and selling of properties which had thus far kept the races separate.

Across Gujarat, the BJP government has done the opposite. Muslims are deliberately forced into ghettos through a law called the Gujarat Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Provision for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from Premises in Disturbed Areas Act.

This law requires citizens living in particular neighbourhoods to seek permission from the government before selling their property or changing their tenants; and filters them by religion. The application must list the name of the buyer

and the seller, and includes an affidavit that the sale has been made without coercion, at market price.

The law was initially passed by the Congress. In 2009, the Modi government amended the Act to give the collector discretionary powers to hold inquiries and take possession of property under the Act. In July 2019, another change was introduced. Previously, property sellers had to apply for permission to transfer their property and register their consent on affidavit. Now, it would not matter even if the sale was made freely (in terms of consent) and fairly (in terms of value). The collector could stop the sale of property if his discretion dictated that the transfer would lead to a 'disturbance in

demographic equilibrium' or 'improper clustering of persons of a community' or 'likelihood of polarisation'.

The collector could reject an application for the legal transfer of a property after making an assessment on these grounds. Punishment for transferring property without clearance was raised to six years in jail (it was six months when the law was first introduced). The law now also allowed the state government to form a monitoring and advisory committee to keep a check on the demographic structure of neighbourhoods. This committee would advise the collectors on which sales could be permitted.

The act is currently in force in large parts

of Gujarat's largest cities, Ahmedabad, Vadodara and Surat, as well as in Bharuch, Kapadvanj, Anand and Godhra. These are also the places where Gujarat's Muslims are concentrated. In effect, they have been permanently ghettoised. In effect, foreigners can lease and buy property in Gujarat that Indian Muslims cannot.

This is what will now happen in Rajasthan. Law minister Jogaram Patel said neighbourhoods with 'improper clustering' would be targeted. The transfer of immovable properties in these areas without the government's permission would be void.

Like other laws persecuting minorities, this too has a long and benign name: the Rajasthan Prohibition of Transfer of

Immovable Property and Provisions for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from the Premises in Disturbed Areas Bill, 2026.

Its effects will, of course, be the same as we have seen in Gujarat. It criminalises social and commercial exchange between communities, in much the same way that Nazi Germany did. Violation of the law's provisions are non-bailable and cognisable, and punishable with imprisonment of up to five years and a fine. You could go to jail for renting a property.

The Congress in the state opposes the passing of the law, but it lacks the numbers and will not be able to stop it. Rajasthan Congress Committee president Govind Singh Dotasra said, "Demographic imbalance is not a legal term. There is no mention of the basis on which an area will be declared disturbed. The BJP wants to remain in power by following the Gujarat model."

This is true. India under Modi has hollowed out the Constitution's secularism through a slew of laws that have met no resistance. The courts have looked away, the Opposition is too weak and the media is complicit. Criminalisation of the possession of beef was introduced in 2015, starting with Maharashtra and Haryana. Criminalisation of interfaith marriage came in 2018, starting with Uttarakhand. Criminalisation of Muslim divorce came in 2019, as did their specific exclusion from the Citizenship Amendment Act. The Rajasthan law carries this progression forward. Step by step, law by law, we have entered New India, a majoritarian state that is shedding its carapace of secularism. ■



A town in Rajasthan, where a stretch of tarmac divides the rich and poor

India under Modi has hollowed out the Constitution's secular ethos through a slew of laws that have met with no resistance. The courts too have looked the other way

Views are personal

MGNREGA and the meaning of gram swaraj

Meenakshi Natarajan

Swaraj, or freedom, is never a one-way street—and the very impulse to seek the truth enjoins thorough scrutiny. Much has already been written about the new scheme that has come to replace the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), a key feature of which was the right to demand work. This right has been extinguished under the new scheme. But to grasp MGNREGA properly, one must understand its economic and social dimensions—and its political economy. That terrain is complex, and it is not uniform across India.

In regions with scant rainfall and barely one crop a year, MGNREGA was a lifesaver. In other areas, where agriculture itself generates ample work—especially where two or three crops are harvested annually—dependence on MGNREGA as a source of employment was lower. Coincidentally, western Malwa in Madhya Pradesh has long enjoyed relatively prosperous agriculture, though even there falling groundwater levels are beginning to change the picture.

Conversations in village *chaupals* have thrown up some questions. First: did regions like these not need MGNREGA at all? And if so, will its withdrawal have no impact there? Should MGNREGA have been restricted only to regions where agriculture cannot sustain livelihoods? If demands for its restoration are made again, should such regional variations be factored in? Is MGNREGA merely a job-creation entitlement, or is it a deeper, transformative institutional arrangement?

MGNREGA functioned as a guarantee establishing a minimum wage for labourers—much as the minimum support price (MSP) fixes a floor for agricultural produce. That early post-Independence decision meant crops wouldn't be sold at throwaway prices. Later, the CPA government extended support prices to minor forest produce as well, breaking the grip of middlemen and exploitative commission agents—though further reforms are still badly needed. Pulses and oilseeds are procured only up to about 25 per cent of output; grains face no such ceiling. For marginal farmers, this is hardly reassuring. Socially, too, they occupy the lowest rung. In *mandis*, private traders continue to dominate government procurement. Still, the legal compulsion of the minimum support price does exist.

MGNREGA delivered a similar transformative right to labourers. Living near a predominantly tribal district, my entire childhood was spent watching men and women workers alight from early morning trains at the town square. For decades, daily wages never rose beyond Rs 10 or Rs 20—later Rs 50 at best—whether for construction or harvesting. The entire rural economy ran, in effect, on cheap labour.

Benevolent landowners sometimes allowed workers to take home a little grain—usually the refuse. MGNREGA changed this. Wages were first fixed at ₹150, then gradually raised; in western Malwa, minimum wages reached ₹222. Today, wages below ₹300 are rare anywhere. MGNREGA sparked a wage revolution. It is hardly surprising that repeated demands were made to link MGNREGA with agriculture—a recommendation still voiced in many places, particularly by large farmers.

MGNREGA was, in fact, linked to agriculture. Marginal farmers were allowed to improve their own land, with the government paying wages if family members worked on it. But had MGNREGA been fully integrated with agriculture, wage rates would have collapsed again. It'll happen even today if the arrangement is revisited. Labourers will receive government rates alright but they will lose the premium that comes from competitive wages. Wages will then get locked into an official minimum rate.

The new scheme is even more damaging. Since work will no longer be demand-driven, no year-end, agricultural seasons will offer no alternative. Labourers will be forced to accept whatever rate the landowner sets. The result will be predictable: within a year, wage rates will start falling.

Many progressives argue that in rural areas where landowners come from backward classes, this new arrangement is particularly welcome. It signals a return of older forms of social dominance. This group also happens to be close to the ruling party. A small section within it has actively nurtured majoritarian ideas—the same group that opposed land titles for Scheduled Castes, resisted bank nationalisation, objected fiercely to legal curbs on usury, and treats such measures as sin. Yet agriculture itself has been under growing pressure in recent years.

Marginal farmers, too, must pay higher wages. With limited resources, they fall behind. Costs have risen across the board, but crop prices have not kept up with higher input costs. In regions where soyabean once yielded handsome profits—prices had touched ₹4,500 per quintal in 2011-2012—imports have crashed the market. The government aligns customs duties with the interests of large businesses, deepening ties with edible oil brands like Fortune (owned by AWL Agri Business, formerly Adani Wilmar).

Soyabean becomes cheap while oil gets more expensive. Domestic procurement prices fall. The same trend plays out internationally. China, the world's biggest buyer, turns to cheaper Brazilian soja.



Photo: Getty Images

Up in arms Villagers attend a MGNREGA chaupal near Rae Bareilly on 20 January (left) Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi at a national MGNREGA workers convention in New Delhi



Photo: Vipin

Even large farmers—landowners from backward classes—found themselves pushed to the margins, squeezed between rising input costs and rising wage bills, without commensurate returns on their crops.

The new regime may bring some relief to this class. Perhaps the ruling dispensation calculated that this would draw them closer, countering campaigns for caste census and social justice. Most of them belong to relatively affluent backward communities. In the absence of a political consciousness, this manoeuvre may appear comforting. But let's be clear: the government has not acted out of empathy for their class.

This class rose through hard work, skill and enterprise—supported by early post-Independence reforms such as the abolition of the zamindari system of landlordism, income-tax exemptions and subsidies. They experimented with agriculture—from polyhouses to horticulture, medicinal crops and orchards—striving to make farming profitable. To form prejudiced opinions against them would also be a betrayal of the idea of swaraj.

Yet this class, too, must ensure that easing its own economic stress does not mean forcing the weakest into desperation. It must stand up for their rights—and simultaneously push for fair prices, rationalised crop insurance and broader reform.

Every political organisation must carry both sides together. Rural stability will not ease without structural changes in

agriculture. Trade policy is drafted with big farmers in control; the farmers' voices never reach the commerce ministry. In today's tariff scenario, customs duties mustn't be interests without factoring in the farmers' interests.

The entire system of assessing losses needs overhaul. Though the procedure has ended, outdated revenue procedures persist in many states. The method of calculating average losses is deeply flawed: it treats an entire area as a unit rather than individual fields, even though losses are borne by individual farmers. Crop insurance benefits private companies; farmers rarely receive compensation.

The meaning and purpose of swaraj lie in understanding the entire rural economy and being sensitive to every class within it. Genuine rural self-reliance and development are possible only when both land and labour receive justice. That justice will not come by cutting wages. Landowners must grasp this. Expensive labour—not cheap labour—is the true marker of prosperity.

But this must be accompanied by fair crop prices, reformed insurance, farmer participation in trade policy, assured procurement at support prices, democratic *mandis*, and a thorough overhaul of village revenue systems. None of this can be achieved by killing MGNREGA or by excluding marginal farmers from its ambit. Pitting farmers and agricultural labour against each other is an assault on social justice. ■

The meaning and purpose of swaraj lie in understanding the entire rural economy and being sensitive to every class within it

Turbulent ties, broken bridges

It's time Delhi and Dhaka reset their strategies, writes Sreeradha Datta

To say that relations between India and Bangladesh are currently tense will be an understatement. It is difficult to apportion blame, but both sides seem equally intent on distancing themselves from each other. The connectivity corridor which India and Bangladesh had worked hard to build is no longer in use. The withdrawal of tourist visas and numerous trade facilities by both countries has led to a sharp decline in bilateral trade, which had seen a high of nearly \$18 billion in 2021-22.

India has revoked a 2020 agreement that permitted Bangladesh to use Indian Land Customs Stations (LCSs), ports and airports for the transshipment of goods to third countries. In May 2025, India stopped the entry of readymade garments from Bangladesh through land transit posts in the northeast. This was followed in June 2025 by severe import restrictions on jute and related products—henceforth permitted into India only through the Nhava Sheva port in Navi Mumbai.

In response to India's ban on land routes, Pakistan was quick to offer Bangladesh the use of its Karachi port. There was also some chatter about Bangladesh buying Pakistani fighter jets and the restoration of direct flights between Dhaka and Karachi.

While the ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina disallowed 'anti-India activity', the interim government feels no such pressure. Additionally, Bangladesh's invite to China to build infrastructure close to India's sensitive border in the Dooars region (the Teesta masterplan) didn't make India happy.

Both countries seem to be working overtime to ensure that bilateral ties remain as limited as ever. Bangladesh was upset when India cold-shouldered a request from Prof. Yunus for a bilateral meeting. India, in turn, was miffed over the chief advisor's visit to China and his public statements there. In July 2025, when a

Bangladesh Air Force fighter jet crashed into a school in Dhaka's Diabari area, killing 27 people and injuring over 170, Bangladesh requested medical assistance from India. The team of burn specialists from Delhi did arrive but was initially not allowed to treat patients, simply observe.

Just when the Indian external affairs minister's presence at former prime minister Khaleda Zia's funeral sent out positive signals, there came the ill-advised and ill-timed diktat to drop Bangladesh cricket cricketer Mustafizur Rahman from one of the Indian Premier League teams (Kolkata Knight Riders). The Bangladesh Cricket Board's security concerns and refusal to play in the ICC T20 World Cup coincided with India notifying Bangladesh as a 'non-family posting' for diplomats, citing similar security concerns.

India's increasingly shrill rhetoric about 'illegal Bangladeshis'—which has found considerable traction in the Bangladesh-bordering states of West Bengal and

Assam—and exaggerated claims in mainstream India media about the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh have also kept temperatures high.

Volatile shifts in the relationship were to be expected when India granted asylum to Sheikh Hasina, who was forced to flee Bangladesh on 5 August 2024. The outpouring of anti-India fury, attacks on the Indian High Commission and social media campaigns on both sides aggravated the schism. The shock of losing its closest partner in the neighbourhood altered the way India looked at Bangladesh. Repeated attacks on minorities, mobs on the streets and the move to ban Awami League's political activities deepened distrust. The interim government's move to lift the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami and its tendency to turn a blind eye to rowdy Islamist elements further contributed to the hostility.

The recent audio-leak of a conversation between a US diplomat and journalists in Dhaka, as reported by *Washington Post*,

added another twist to an already volatile cocktail, suggesting as it did the US warming up to the Jamaat. Students and the youth in Bangladesh have always disliked Hasina's pro-India tilt. They have been increasingly outspoken in their impression of India as a bully with double standards.

A joke circulating in New Delhi says a lot about the corner India finds itself in. Policy analysts have been quipping that the Awami League is about to be recognised as a political party in India.

It is in India, after all, that a large number of former ministers and senior Awami League leaders have taken refuge. They would not have been able to do so without the knowledge, if not consent, of the government in New Delhi. Judging by the number of press conferences being addressed by Awami League leaders in India—as campaigning intensifies for the 12 February elections in Bangladesh—the joke may be closer to the bone than we realise.



Photo: IANS

As volatile politics vitiates India-Bangladesh ties, sports advisor Asif Nazrul speaks on the withdrawal of the Bangladesh men's team from the ICC T20 World Cup

Sooner rather than later, India will have to take a clearer stand on how much liberty it extends to Sheikh Hasina and exiled Awami leaders

Sheikh Hasina's activities from India have complicated relations further. Bangladesh is aggrieved that she is allowed to address press conferences online and comment freely on political developments in Bangladesh. The interim government had sent a *note verbale* requesting her extradition which India did not deem necessary to respond to. While the verdict of the International Criminal Tribunal of Bangladesh—ironically established by Sheikh Hasina—in holding her guilty of 'crimes against humanity' and sentencing her to death is problematic, it has renewed the clamour for her extradition. India's stony silence on this issue intensified anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh and was amplified on social media.

The popular perception of India being supportive of the Hasina government has been reinforced by India's seeming reluctance to address Bangladesh's core concerns: water sharing and border killings. Sooner rather than later, India will have to take a clearer stand on how much liberty it can extend to Sheikh Hasina and Awami leaders exiled in India.

Despite the Awami League being banned from participating in forthcoming elections in Bangladesh, its shadow looms large. The outcome will depend in no small measure on which side supporters tilt in an evolving electoral equation. The perception that India is interfering in the election has been reinforced by allowing Sheikh Hasina to address her supporters and air her concerns from India.

The golden days are undoubtedly over. Both Dhaka and Delhi need to remember that ground realities have changed. India will not tolerate security threats, real or perceived, and Bangladesh's engagement with external powers will add to India's discomfiture.

The harsh reality is that neither country can prosper without the other. Bangladesh must realise that what India offers cannot be easily replaced. India must recognise that tit-for-tat measures are poor strategy and poorer diplomacy, and that it is in the interest of both Delhi and Dhaka to reset their ties. ■

SREERADHA DATTA is a professor at Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University and non-resident senior fellow, ISAS-NUS, Singapore

STATES 360° MAHARASHTRA



“We are not statistics. Listen to us!”

Jaideep Hardikar

On 25 January 2026, National Highway 160 was a stream of red flags as thousands marched from Nashik towards Mumbai. Their mission? To knock on the doors of Mantralaya and remind the politicians and bureaucrats that a promise made seven years ago remained unfulfilled.

It brought back memories of the long march of 2018, when the poorest of Maharashtra’s marginalised farmers and farm labourers walked 180 kilometres, singing protest songs, spending nights on the highway. On 12 March, they poured into Mumbai at dawn, careful not to disrupt the business of the big city or the SSC board exams. What that peaceful rally of nearly 70,000 protestors at Azad Maidan was saying was this: “We can’t be reduced to statistics. Hear us.”

This writer spent three days walking and talking with the *padayatri*s that year. They had no option, they said, but to enter the heart of power to be heard, loud and clear. That year, Mumbai heard, and empathised. The state government too seemed to have heard: assuring them that their demands would be fulfilled in a time-bound manner.

But the ruling alliance led by Devendra Fadnavis—which found both the time and the resources to implement the Ladki Behna Yojana before the 2024 elections—did not keep its word.

“We are back on the streets,” the protestors said, “because we have been betrayed.”

The long march of January 2026 was therefore unlike any other protest in its rekindling of a democratic assertion, the only weapon of the masses when the State reneges on its assurances time and again. Led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its peasant front, the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), the protestors in this year’s adivasi-mazdoor-kisan march came from across northern Maharashtra’s hamlets and villages.

It followed on the heels of a massive rally mobilised by the AIKS on 21 January. More than 50,000 tribal poor marched from the village of Charoti to the district collectorate’s office in Palghar. When the district collector assured them that all



Back on the streets The adivasi–mazdoor–kisan protest march winds its way from Nashik to Mumbai

promises except those that needed ratification by the state government would be fulfilled, they resolved to march to Mumbai. Assembling in Nashik, they spent Republic Day on the national highway.

Their demands included the granting of community and individual forest rights, regularisation of their land *pattas*, supply of potable drinking water, uninterrupted electricity to their villages, access to quality education, the earnest implementation of existing laws and the reinstatement of the recently annulled Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

As one protestor put it: “That guarantee is our lifeline.”

In the winter session of Parliament, the central government made structural changes and renamed MGNREGA the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and

The long march of January 2026 was the rekindling of democratic assertion, the only weapon of the masses when the State reneges on its assurances

Ajeevika Mission Gramin (VB-G-RAM-G), reneging on a legal guarantee for work and placing the bulk of the burden of financing the scheme on the shoulders of state governments.

“Only changing the name is not enough,” Sakharam Kharpade, 45, from Murbad village, told the People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI). “There are more people in need of work and wages, but fewer villagers get work—maybe five or six at a time, out of hundreds.” PARI reported one of the protestors on the Palghar march, Lakshmi Dattu Boba, as saying: “Forget the whole year, we don’t get work ... for a day.” She, for one, would not shy away from taking to the streets again, if their demands remained unmet.

On 27 January, a delegation met chief minister Devendra Fadnavis in Mumbai. In a meeting that lasted over two hours,

Fadnavis provided point-by-point assurances that every single demand would be fulfilled within a three-month timeframe.

Dr Ajit Nawale of the AIKS told protestors that the CM had promised “all forest rights claims will be re-examined” to correct past injustices arising from incorrect departmental reports. It is a fact borne out by data that barring Gadchiroli and some other regions of eastern Maharashtra, the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in the state remains a non-starter, facing as it does stiff resistance from the department of forests.

The march was called off, but the accumulation of unaddressed grievances, the routine failure of governance and the insensitivity and inaccessibility of bureaucracy were repeatedly highlighted. The protestors affirmed their future course will depend on whether Fadnavis’ assurances translate into action. If not, they will march again.

The recent padayatra also served as a reminder that those who produce our food, steward our forests and sustain rural communities are not to be invisibilised—they are central actors in our economy. Even the route—the long stretch of highway connecting rural Nashik to metropolitan Mumbai—symbolised the socio-economic distance between policy pronouncements and their reality at the grassroot level.

Both the FRA and the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act were designed to shift power back to tribal and traditional forest-dwelling communities and extend meaningful local governance, but their spirit has been annulled by the State’s refusal to loosen its control over these precious resources. As a result, decades after these laws were passed, implementation remains shoddy, contested and slow.

Former MLA and CPI(M) leader Jeeva Gavit reminded people that the 2026 march merely sought enforcement of rights already on statutes, and noted that earlier meetings with officials—in 2018, 2019 and even as recently as 2023—did not yield tangible results. Can Fadnavis be trusted to deliver this time? ■

JAIDEEP HARDIKAR is a senior Nagpur-based journalist and author of Ramrao: The story of India’s farm crisis

Why are CAG warnings falling on deaf ears?

Sucheta Dalal

A decade and a half ago, a report of the comptroller and auditor general (CAG), claiming a huge ‘presumptive’ loss in the sale of telecom spectrum and coal blocks, ignited a nationwide movement against corruption and voted out the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. Today, a series of damning reports since December 2025, exposing systemic fraud across India’s flagship welfare schemes, are met with deafening silence.

CAG reports in the past weeks have exposed fraud and mismanagement in goods and services tax (GST) collections, direct benefit transfers (DBT), skill development schemes, housing programmes and healthcare delivery—with amounts running into thousands of crores of rupees. Yet, the findings of a constitutional audit authority no longer stir the national conscience. What explains this contrast?

Digital mirage

The ruling government has repeatedly claimed that DBT and ‘Digital India’ were a game-changer that enabled the smooth transfer of ₹34 lakh crore directly to beneficiaries and ‘saved’ ₹2.7 lakh crore. Ministers routinely disparage former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi’s 1985 observation that only 15 paise of every rupee reached the intended beneficiaries in drought-affected areas, contrasting this with much better quality of delivery. But recent CAG audits suggest digital systems have not solved this problem; nor can they hide it any longer.

On 18 December 2025, CAG Sanjay Murthy warned that thousands of crores of rupees were flowing through DBT systems without mandatory checks. CAG reports have flagged pensions being paid to thousands of deceased beneficiaries in 2023 because databases are not being ‘de-duplicated’ and many government departments continue to work in silos even within the same ministry. This indicates structural failures, despite the availability of much-vaunted

digital infrastructure.

CAG reports tabled at the end of 2025 and 2026—mostly for the period ending 2023—show that digital systems are often facilitating fraud rather than preventing it. The audits have flagged ghost payments, glitches, data fraud, payments to ineligible beneficiaries, unutilised funds and outright mismanagement leading to thousands of crore rupees being squandered, while the poorest Indians are denied welfare, homes and healthcare.

Our own digging into just 250 accounts with the Reserve Bank of India’s (RBI’s) Depositor Education and Awareness Fund (DEAF) shows welfare funds transferred to it after staying dormant for a decade.

Shockingly, even sophisticated, automated systems for tax collection have turned out to be dodgy. On 11 December 2025, a CAG audit exposed inconsistencies worth ₹21,695 crore in GST collections. The report detailed systemic failures including mismatches in input tax credit (ITC), compliance deviations in over 2,519 cases and short payments of tax and interest. If the country’s primary revenue engine is leaking, is it surprising that social welfare schemes are riddled with bigger holes?

Skills illusion

The rot extends to health and skill development. A performance audit on the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY),

That CAG findings provoke little to no public reaction shows that we have normalised corruption and the failures of governance

tabled in December 2025, revealed that between 2015 and 2022, over 94 per cent of beneficiary records—affecting 9.06 million people had missing, bogus or invalid bank details. Placeholders like ‘123456’ or ‘null’ were used for bank accounts, indicating that the identity of trainees and the veracity of payments cannot be trusted. Thousands of underage and ineligible candidates were certified and training partners made wildly fake claims such as conducting training on 31 February! While the government approved an additional ₹8,800 crore to restructure the mission in early-2025, lakhs of candidates did not receive the promised incentives.

Similarly, over ₹1,024 crore of Central funds for scheduled caste/scheduled tribe (SC/ST) students in Himachal Pradesh lay idle due to ‘non-compliance’, leading to dropouts among those who need the support most.

Awass Yojana fakes

The housing sector has an equally grim story. Despite claims of great progress, a recent CAG audit of the Pradhan Mantri Awass Yojana (PMAY) in Uttar Pradesh unearthed massive implementation gaps. Tens of thousands of houses claimed as ‘complete’ were found to be of poor quality or missing essential toilets, electricity and water. It also detected cyber fraud, where ₹86.20 lakh, intended for 159 beneficiaries, was diverted to unauthorised bank accounts.

In Chhattisgarh, housing benefits were handed to those earning above the income ceiling, while over ₹230 crore remained blocked due to geo-tagging and social audit issues. Significant funds were simply stuck and beneficiaries remained unpaid due to delays in fund transfers, inadequate beneficiary verification and unresolved payout issues.

Fatal failures

That CAG audit findings are not getting the attention they deserve is clear from the water contamination deaths in Indore which has been winning awards for being India’s cleanest city. A CAG audit in 2019, covering the period between 2013 and 2018, had warned that nearly



900,000 people were being supplied contaminated water. Remember, the audit covered a period from 2013 to 2018 and the vulnerability to raw sewage seeping into drinking water had been highlighted! This is by no means an exception. In 2024, a CAG report pointed out how urban local bodies had consistently failed to implement mandatory water quality testing and pipeline maintenance protocols. Activists have labelled this ‘criminal negligence’. And yet, in January 2026, over a dozen people lost their lives and hundreds of others fell ill after drinking water contaminated with sewage.

Parallel horrors have emerged in Delhi, our capital city. A Delhi Jal Board report tabled this month reports that 55 per cent of groundwater is unfit for consumption, posing serious health risks; moreover, carcinogenic poly-electrolytes continue to be used at water treatment plants, despite explicit bans.

The Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) is similarly plagued by fraud and misreporting. While funds flow into JJM, the water pipelines are often missing or remain dry after installation. A policy circle report documents over 17,000 complaints involving procurement lapses and has recorded price deviations of up

to 30 per cent in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, leading to the blacklisting of several contractors and action against 2,300 officials.

Healthcare travails

Nowhere is the crisis of accountability more visible than in healthcare. The CAG’s 2023 performance audit of the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) had already made headlines when it exposed 749,000 ‘ghost’ beneficiaries registered under a single fake mobile number (9999999999). By January 2024, the rot had spread to what investigators call a ‘murder for money’ racket. In Gujarat, a doctor was arrested for performing unnecessary heart surgeries on villagers solely to siphon off PMJAY funds. Over 1,000 hospitals have since been de-empanelled and ₹231 crore in penalties levied. At the same time, private hospitals are increasingly refusing to offer ‘free’ treatment, frustrated with losses resulting from unpaid reimbursement. Every other day, viral media posts have exposed the hollowness of the healthcare promise, even while large sums are earmarked for the scheme.

Normalising failure

That CAG findings provoke little

public reaction shows that we have normalised corruption and failure, or worse, that citizens are barely aware that vast sums allocated for poverty reduction in every Union Budget are simply not delivering results. Digital India was meant to remove intermediaries; instead, it has often replaced them with opacity, automated fraud and ghost beneficiaries. Those who attempted to expose scholarship scams have paid with their lives. Even the connection between large public infrastructure projects and election funding—outside the CAG’s remit—has come to be accepted without serious scrutiny of shoddy execution, planning failures or outright collapse.

CAG fulfils its constitutional role by documenting these failures; but its reports increasingly resemble post-mortems on programmes already buried by the time Parliament sees them. When the media does not carry these findings forward, citizens lack the information needed to demand accountability, prosecution or structural reform. In the absence of such pressure, governance is being driven more by propaganda than by the delivery of a better quality of life. ■

The piece first appeared in moneylife.in

The changing face of Banaras

The ongoing makeover of this holy city, for the consumption of Hindu tourists, is stripping it of its soul, writes **Vishwanath Gokarn**

It is said that Kashi exists outside of time. That it is enchanted, otherworldly, incomparable—a riddle, a mystery, a giver of salvation (or ‘moksha’ in the Hindu tradition). In Kashi, death is considered auspicious. Kashi is soaked in Shiva, steeped in knowledge, a oldest city of spiritual powers. The bedrock of this land, Kashi has been described in these very terms in the Puranas—from the Shiva Purana to the Skanda Purana to the Vishnu Purana. That world is now behind us. This is a different age.

Kashi is keeping pace with the times, turning towards what is called ‘development’. In the process, it’s not just changing its appearance but its immanent character as well. Present day Kashi/ Banaras/ Varanasi seems to have escaped the paranes of scripture into the brochures of the tourism industry. Kashi is no longer a repository of ritual or ancient knowledge. Today, the city brings to mind tourism, the hotel industry, food carnivals; it’s a hub of every imaginable kind of street food.

There was a time when Kashi meant broken, narrow lanes; single-track roads; filth at every corner; heaps of garbage; the sluggish crawl of cycle rickshaws; people loitering and spitting paan. Everyone was part of this—Hindu and Muslim alike. Traffic was a nightmare. There were no traffic cops at crossings, no signals. Jams would form anytime, anywhere. Getting from one place to another often felt impossible.

That meaning of Kashi has changed—or is changing. Today, its lanes are paved with neatly laid stone blocks. Walls once permanently stained with paan spit now carry painted narratives of Kashi’s legends. Many roads that were once single-lane have been widened into four-lane thoroughfares. In temple areas, streets and lanes are cleaned two or three times a day; there’s no garbage in sight. Partial cleaning of the ghats and the Ganga itself has changed the city’s appearance.

Kashi has always been divided into two parts—‘Pakka Mahaal’ and ‘Kachcha Mahaal’. Pakka Mahaal—the old Banaras—was the neighbourhood of permanent houses, inhabited largely by



Cremations continue at Manikarnika Ghat even as one side is being flattened to give it a new look

Photo: Getty Images

orthodox Hindu families. Kachcha Mahaal once consisted of mud houses with handlooms installed inside them to weave the famed Banarasi saris. Since those weavers were predominantly Muslim, this was a predominantly Muslim area.

But as power looms replaced handlooms, these houses too became permanent structures. Improvements in streets and infrastructure are now visible everywhere. There was a time when bypasses, flyovers or ring roads were unimaginable in Kashi; today, they are a reality.

Work is underway to widen

For the common people of Banaras, the new wave of ‘development’ has alienated them from the city they still call home

several narrow lanes leading to the Kashi Vishwanath corridor and the Ganga ghats into four-lane roads. Hundreds of houses are being vacated after compensation. The most prominent among these is the Daalmandi area. Daalmandi is one of the city’s largest commercial hubs. Its lane is historic, with a daily turnover running into crores of rupees.

There is anger among sections of Banaras over the widening of Daalmandi. They argue that demolition is happening because most residents here are Muslim. It’s true that most properties belong to one community, but more than half the business conducted in Daalmandi involves traders from the other community. From cosmetics to sundry bric-a-brac and every other imaginable commodity—both wholesale and retail markets across Banaras depend on Daalmandi. If the buildings disappear, where will this market go? Both communities are caught in this uncertainty.

A similar situation has unfolded in the Ardali Bazaar area near the district court. As the name suggests, this locality once belonged to court attendants (*ardali*). When their children took up hockey, the area came to be known as a nursery

of Indian hockey. Nearly every household in this tiny stretch of 200-odd metres produced at least one player who competed at the national level. Nearly a dozen represented India at the junior or senior level.

It was in this area that a star named Mohammad Shahid was born—often called India’s second Dhyana Chand. Shahid represented India in three Olympic Games, captained the Indian hockey team and was honoured with the Arjuna Award and the Padma Shri. The road was named Mohammad Shahid Marg in his honour.

That area has now been demolished in the name of road widening. Around 47 houses—including Mohammad Shahid’s—have been razed. The signboard bearing Shahid’s name has been uprooted. Even the compensation given to residents here is far lower than what was paid in the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project.

The winds of development have now reached Manikarnika Ghat. Thirty-eight new cremation platforms are being built, each fitted with tall chimneys. Old *madhis*, structures where priests once sat, are being demolished to expand the ghat. The wood trade here is also set to come under

government control. Plans include community buildings, public toilets and other facilities. Officials claim all this is for the convenience of those who come to cremate their dead.

But the old-timers of Banaras are deeply disturbed. They argue that mourners have never sought these amenities, that people who come here to grieve their departed are not looking for conveniences. Negotiations over the price of firewood are understandable, they say, but they oppose the removal of traditional wood traders. As for toilets—defecating near the Ganga has always been considered a sin in Kashi. Who, then, wants toilets at Manikarnika?

It is widely rumoured that the redevelopment of Manikarnika is meant to favour the head priest of a nearby ashram. Close to the powers that be, he is allegedly pushing to shift the ancient Mahashmashan (crematorium) itself. Recently, a tourism official in Banaras announced that Manikarnika will soon be added to city tour packages, that Indian and foreign tourists will be taken on guided tours to the great cremation ground. For the ‘moksha tour’, the Mahashmashan too is being equipped with various modern amenities. In other words, Manikarnika—as indeed the sacred city of Kashi itself—is being readied to woo and wow the tourist.

For now, Banaras is struggling with the return flow of pilgrims coming back from the Magh Mela in Prayagraj. This is an old problem, and traffic jams are worse at this time. So, a ropeway is being introduced. Running between Varanasi Junction and Dashaashwamedha Ghat, it will operate 148 gondolas, each carrying 18 passengers. There will be five stations, all under construction. Each station is being designed like a small mall.

The hotel industry is expanding aggressively in anticipation of greater tourist traffic. Homestays and guesthouses have mushroomed in every lane. Since the cricket stadium began coming up on the city’s outskirts, luxury hotels have lined up. Taj, Ramada, Radisson were already present, now hospitality giants have bought ancient riverside buildings, dressed them up as heritage properties, and

spread their footprint along the Ganga.

Seeing this boom, royal families across the country have begun converting their historic ghat-side properties into hotels. The Taj group has bought the sprawling Mehta Hospital at Ram Ghat and turned it into Taj Avantika. The Scindia family has initiated the conversion of its Ganga Mahal near Manikarnika into a hotel, set to open soon. The palace houses an ancient Lakshmi Narayan temple. Another Balaji temple owned by the Scindias at Panchganga Ghat is also slated for similar conversion.

Earlier, reaching ghat-side hotels was a challenge. Government intervention has changed that. Tourists are now brought by road from the airport to Namo Ghat, then transferred to their hotels on steamers or cruise vessels. Soon, helicopter services will begin from the airport to Namo Ghat; three helipads have already been built. Hundreds of steamers and boats operate daily, besides a dozen-odd cruise vessels, to give tourists a look-see of all the 84 ghats. A regular cruise service from Kashi to Gangasagar is also in the works.

Since the construction of the Kashi Vishwanath corridor, the city has transformed. Ayodhya has now been added to pilgrimage packages that include Kashi, Gaya and Prayag, swelling tourist numbers from India and abroad. The Vindhyaachal corridor has further increased the influx. Soon, work will begin on the Kaalbhairava corridor, stretching from Kaalbhairava to the Bindumaadhava temple—known as Kashi’s Vaikunth Lok. This is the very site where Aurangzeb demolished the mosque and built the Aalamgir mosque.

If construction begins this year, pilgrimage will take on an entirely new dimension.

The administrative machinery of Banaras is pleased with the tourism boom. But its people are not. For the commonfolk of Banaras, this wave of ‘development’ has alienated them from the city they still call home. The reels and memes flooding social media do not tell the truth of Banaras, they insist.

Translated from the Hindi original, simultaneously published in Sunday Navjivan, issue date: 1 February

Being anti-Muslim is Dhami’s survival tool

A new report sheds light on Uttarakhand’s politics of hate

Rashme Sehgal

Bulle Shah, the Sufi mystic known as the ‘father of Punjabi enlightenment’ is revered by Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims alike for his powerful poetry championing love, unity and spiritual freedom. On 24 January, a handful of fanatics belonging to the Hindu Raksha Dal broke into the Wynberg-Allen school in Mussoorie and demolished his shrine, claiming that the 100-year old structure was an illegal encroachment on their ‘Devbhoomi.’ They were so confident that no action would be taken against them that they even uploaded a video of demolishing it with hammer and rods. The Uttarakhand police registered FIRs against three individuals but made no arrests.

In November 2025, another century-old mazaar, located inside Doon School, was demolished at the behest of another Hindutva group led by hate-monger Radha Dhoni who heads Sanatan Sanskriti, a right-wing organisation whose reason for existence seems to be to target Muslim shopkeepers, road-side chaiwalas and rehriwalas (street vendors).

Uttarakhand chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami, whose son is a student at Doon School, takes pride in informing the public that over 400 ‘illegally constructed’ mazaars have been demolished during his tenure. Leaning on a survey undertaken by his own officials (you can imagine how objective that would be) Dhami claims his government has recovered 5,000 acres from ‘land jihadists’.

Two enterprising activists

decided to get to the truth behind this relentless anti-Muslim propaganda. They travelled the length and breadth of Uttarakhand to document how Muslims have been victims of violence between 2021-25 with several hundred being forced to flee their homes to become refugees in their own country. The report titled ‘Excluded, targeted and displaced: Communal narratives and violence in Uttarakhand’ was published on 22 January by the Association of Protection of Civil Rights (APCR). It reinforces our worst fears about how a peaceful state has mutated into a hot bed of fanaticism.

The hate-mongering campaign was kicked off in December 2021 at the Haridwar Dharma Sansad, where Yati Narasinghanand, Prabodhanand Giri, Patindranand Giri, Sadhvi Annapurna, Swami Anand Svaroop and Kalicharan Maharaj openly called for a Hindu Rashtra and the killing of Muslims. Their speeches triggered a surge in violence, economic boycotts and hate crimes climaxing in the Purolo incident of 2023, where a false kidnapping case led to Muslim families fleeing and selling their properties. This model spread to Tehri, Uttarkashi, Chamoli and Gairsain. Dhami amplified this brazen communalism by harping on ‘land jihad’, ‘mazaar jihad’, ‘thook jihad’ and ‘love jihad’. Days after the India Hate Lab’s annual report labelled the Uttarakhand chief minister as ‘the most prolific hate speech actor’ of 2025, Dhami responded by saying he “accepts the tag”. His latest fatwa is banning the entry of non-Hindus to Kedarnath and Badrinath.

What is unique about the APCR

report is the recording of testimonies of those at the receiving end of orchestrated violence in Uttarakhand. It also documents the role of the police, who remain mute spectators, refusing in most cases to take action against the perpetrators. Here are a few examples:

On 23 October 2024, right-wing groups led by Swami Darshan Bharti, head of Devbhoomi Raksha Abhiyan, took out a rally demanding the demolition of a mosque in Uttarkashi’s Barahahat. Shops owned by Muslims were vandalised and looted. Reshma Hussain, 37, the only earning member of a family of four said, “They broke the lock of my shop and barged in. I suffered a loss of around 1 lakh rupees.”

In the nearby town of Srinagar, a local BJP leader Lakhpatri Bhandari instigated the exodus of



Bulle Shah’s mazaar in Mussoorie, which was vandalised on 24 January

15 Muslim families who were forced to return to Najibabad. Shoaib Akhtar, a school teacher at a government school in Srinagar, said, “Lakhpatri Bhandari was invited as chief guest for a function where the principal [of the school where Shoaib teaches] spoke about love jihad and land jihad. If a principal talks like this in public, what kind of impression does that leave on students?”

An English teacher in the same school asked Ahmed, a Class 12 student, why people like him were taking over land to build illegal mosques. “What land have I captured? I feel targeted,” said Ahmed.

Mukesh Semwal, a social activist based in Srinagar, believes this communal unrest was deliberately stoked for the BJP to win the Kedarnath assembly polls, especially after having lost Ayodhya and Badrinath.

In August 2024, communal tension worsened in Chauras after right-wing groups forced five Muslim shopkeepers and their families to flee. The provocation? A Hindu woman and a Muslim man who came from Najibabad were said to be in a relationship.

Wasim, the father of the boy who had been accused of ‘love jihad’,

said, “They were friends. Is friendship a crime? Will our children consider religion before befriending someone? They instigated our exodus based on baseless rumours. Even the girl’s family did not file a complaint against my son.”

Fifty-year-old Taseem Ahmed has lived in the town of Gauchar in Chamoli district for the last 45 years. His brother got into a fight with a Hindu man over the parking of his scooty on 15 October 2024. The Hindutva brigade forced ten Muslim shopkeepers to leave the town.

“It is shocking how such a small fight over parking changed our lives for the worse. We lived there for 45 years. Everybody in the locality knew us by name. But nobody supported us. We left Gauchar at midnight,” said Ahmed.

In Nandprayag, Chamoli district, the anti-Muslim campaign took a violent turn in August-September 2024 after eve-teasing allegations against a Muslim barber. On 22 August, the barber was asked to vacate his shop. He went back to Najibabad.

Uthman Hassan, the owner of a drycleaning shop for 20 years, and a resident of Nanda Ghat since 1975, said at least 15 families had to flee

on the night of 3 September.

“On 31 August, the locals held a meeting and filed an FIR against the Muslim barber... On 1 September, the vyapar mandal gave a call to protest in front of Nanda Ghat police station. We Muslims also went to the protest. We thought we should support our business community. Little did we know that there was no solidarity among businessmen. We were targeted based on our religion. Anti-Muslim slogans were raised at the meeting such as ‘Mullon ke dalaalon ko joote maar saalon ko’ (Beat the bastard brokers of mullahs).”

Hassan’s shop was broken into by the Hindutva mob who stole Rs 4 lakh from his cash box. They looted everything and threw it in the river. He blamed Darshan Bharti, the Hindutva leader who led the Uttarkashi rally against the mosque. “I still get shivers recalling that incident...”

Hassan filed a plea in the Uttarakhand High Court asking for protection. Despite the court ordering the SSP to ensure that no untoward incident took place against any community, none of the Muslims felt safe enough to return. Hassan re-opened his shop, only to find that nobody was willing to support or even talk to him, as if he was a criminal.

At present, Hassan is the lone Muslim living in Nanda Ghat. This is a sad commentary on our times.

If you need any further indication of Dhami’s communally-led agenda, consider the passing of the Uniform Civil Code of Uttarakhand Act, 2024, the enactment of the Freedom of Religion and Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion (Amendment) Bill, and the Minorities Educational Institutions Bill, 2025 which dissolves the Muslim-controlled Madrasa Education Board (where Muslims held 9 of 12 seats) and replaces it with a government body where Muslims hold only one of 12 seats.

Having failed on the governance front, Dhami is confident that his xenophobic discourse will pay electoral dividends in the assembly elections of 2027.

Form 7 a weapon of mass deletion

»Continued from page 1

Their refusal to follow ‘procedure’ did not go down well with the officials. As their narrative on the bulk submission of fake Form 7s went viral on social media, all five BLOs received show cause notices (dated 22 January) from the electoral officer of 123-Karimgunj North constituency.

They stand accused of unauthorised interactions with media personnel and making public statements on objections and deletions. The notice also claims that their social media video did not ‘correctly and fully reflect the actual legal and procedural position... that claims and objections are processed strictly as per law and no voter entry is deleted or modified without due verification and completion of the prescribed statutory procedure’.

All 133 forms were submitted using the name and EPIC number of one Selim Ahmed, who denied any knowledge of the objections attributed to him. “I’m unemployed and know nothing of the incident,” Ahmed told *National Herald*, adding with a hint of dark humour, “I myself have been listed as a dead voter among these 133 names.”

Ahmed has filed an affidavit with the deputy commissioner of Sribhumi district, objecting to the misuse of his name for en masse deletions.

*

“If Himanta Biswa Sarma is so confident of winning the election, why delete Muslim voters through fake objections?” asked Sushmita Dev, Rajya Sabha member and national spokesperson of Trinamool Congress. “He has already carried out delimitation and eviction of Muslims and denied Muslim voters into 22 constituencies. He knows he cannot win these seats, but all he cares about is polarising the state on communal lines!”

Is the BJP in Assam—reeling under allegations of corruption and poor performance—banking on ‘tailormade’ electoral rolls to win the upcoming assembly elections? The draft electoral rolls were published on 27 December, and then came the spate of objections, via Form 7.

What reinforces the widespread suspicion of foul play is another plea submitted by 22 inhabitants of the Borkhola constituency—all Muslims—seeking the registration o=f an FIR against one Mohan Lal Das. The petition accuses Das of fraudulently filing objections and falsely claiming they had requested that their



names be dropped from the electoral roll.

Writing to the chief election commissioner on 23 January, Sushmita Dev drew attention to the unusually high number of objections filed across several constituencies: approximately 15,304 in 118-Silchar LAC, 9,671 in 116-Katigorah, 8,602 in 50-Mangaldoi, 10,151 in 30-Zhajo-Sualkuchi and 10,249 in 38-Barkhetri.

‘To serve each and every such voter a notice and conduct a hearing within 11 days is an impossible task, which is bound to deprive genuine voters of an effective hearing, leading to the loss of their democratic right to vote,’ Dev noted. ■

SOURABH SEN is a Kolkata-based independent writer and commentator on politics, human rights and foreign affairs

Is the BJP in Assam banking on tailormade electoral rolls to win the upcoming assembly elections?

“Nobody wins if we let politics spill onto the cricket pitch”

Has the International Cricket Council (ICC), the global governing body for the game, turned into a glorified event manager? The question has acquired a bleeding edge ahead of the T20 World Cup 2026—and it bothers former ICC chairman Ehsan Mani no end.

Now 80, the suave chartered accountant from Pakistan spent his best years as part of a cricketing ecosystem where the big guns of the Indian subcontinent believed in working together to make their voices heard.

Mani was ICC chairman between 2003 and 2006, the period when its headquarters shifted to Dubai, and chairman of its finance & commercial affairs committee between 1996 and 2002. As the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) representative from 1989 to 1996, and then 2018–2021—brought back at the behest of Imran Khan, then prime minister of Pakistan—Mani was an influential voice in the ICC boardroom.

This January, there’s a sense of déjà vu from last year’s ICC Champions Trophy. Bangladesh, in the thick of it this time, argues that India was given preferential treatment. When India refused to play in host country Pakistan citing a ‘threat perception,’ it was allowed to play all its matches in Dubai, while other teams had to shuttle between Pakistan and the UAE. When Bangladesh pressed its case after the Mustafizur Rehman row, the ICC refused to budge and voted them out of the tournament.

With Bangladesh holding firm and Pakistan keeping the ICC waiting, there may well be an implosion in cricket’s power corridors unless a semblance of fair play is re-introduced in the way the ICC treats member countries. What would Mani’s recipe be to restore its credibility? Excerpts from a conversation with Gautam Bhattacharyya:

Is the troubled build-up to the T20 World Cup a wake-up call for the ICC, facing allegations of an India bias?

Yes, India’s stranglehold on the ICC’s decision-making process is damaging. There needs to be a serious governance review as all board members are thinking about their own interests rather than the sport. Chairman Jay Shah is in a terribly conflicted position. For neutrality and greater transparency, I feel there is a need for more independent directors.

That’ll require a new constitution, which may not be easy. Can the more powerful boards make a difference if they speak up?

England and Australia are the biggest culprits for letting the status quo prevail. They are frightened of upsetting India as that would mean a huge loss of revenue. The last England versus India Test series was one of the best in recent times—with a great turnout at all venues. Both these countries are in a position to speak their minds, but their boards don’t want to rock the boat.



Erstwhile Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Ehsan Mani

As someone who ran ICC’s financials for several years, what do you feel about the unequal distribution of funds among member countries?

It’s a valid grouse as the money should go where it’s needed most. What’s the point of giving small amounts to the West Indies, which consists of so many islands, or to South Africa? New Zealand can still manage because they have a small population. Meanwhile, new full member nations like Afghanistan and Ireland don’t even get enough money to give their cricketers full-time professional status.

In our time, [Jagmohan] Dalmiya and I insisted that every country should play each other every four years—that doesn’t happen anymore. You only have the creamy layer playing the full five Test series among themselves. No one is looking after cricket; they’re looking after themselves.

Do you think Bangladesh had a strong enough case to pull out?

The ICC should not have allowed it to come to this. That’s why I say a governance review is so critical. First, the BCCI shouldn’t have dropped a player [Mustafizur Rehman] from IPL after accepting him in auction. When India cannot guarantee the security of one player, the question about their team’s safety is certainly relevant.

But they made a tactical error—their government should have taken the lead in forbidding the team from going to India, not the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB). India did that when they refused to travel to Pakistan for the ICC Champions Trophy. Pakistan insisted on the same rules being applied, and the hybrid model was accepted.

The hybrid model may have defused the crisis of venue selection for India-Pakistan matches

till 2027 but is it a permanent solution?

It’s the wrong solution. Cricket should follow the IOC or FIFA model. The host country should be in a position to issue visas and ensure the safety and security of players and officials, or lose the right to host.

India and Pakistan have had their share of conflicts. Remember, Kargil happened in 1999. There was a period of five years or so when the two countries didn’t play bilateral series. I engaged with the Indian government and we hosted them in 2004. It was a great series. During our time, be it Sir Clyde Walcott, Dalmiya or myself, we didn’t allow politics to muddy administration.

The ICC ploy to always club India, Pakistan in the same group in major tournaments may be a money-spinner but doesn’t it dilute the importance of other fixtures? Even the ACC now does the same...

True. As PCB chairman, whenever I asked, the ICC would put it on the broadcasters. I told them they needed our permission. If India is taking a major part of the revenue despite Pakistan being an equal stakeholder, what’s in it for us? Rameez (Raja), who succeeded me in the PCB role, didn’t follow through on that.

If all goes well, India and Pakistan will play on 15 February in Colombo. Do you foresee a replay of the handsbake row?

Cricketers around the world are a community and respect each other. The kind of adulation Virat Kohli enjoys among the players of Pakistan is no secret.

Nobody wins if India–Pakistan politics is allowed to spill onto the cricket turf. That’s why I found (Gautam) Gambhir’s justification of his players’ stance wrong. That kind of thing shouldn’t happen. ■

“We didn’t pay for fish, now we worry about jobs”

Pankaj Chaturvedi writes the obituary of a way of life as the development juggernaut rolls on in the Great Nicobar

Conservation, prime minister Narendra Modi once said, is an article of faith for his government. Yet the drift of his government’s ‘development’ drive—be it in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand or the country’s forest areas or the island outposts of Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands—suggests the exact opposite. Let’s take, for example, the misleadingly named ‘The Great Nicobar Holistic Development Project (emphasis added).

Despite environmental red flags, ethical concerns and legal hurdles, the government looks all set to clear the Rs 92,000 crore infrastructure push to transform the southern Andaman and Nicobar Islands into a strategic maritime hub near the Malacca Strait.

Envisaged as one of the world’s busiest transhipment ports, the project includes an airport large enough to allow the largest commercial aircraft to land, a township for an initial population of 3.5 lakh, a power plant and demarcated areas for ‘tourist resorts’. The scale is unimaginable for the fragile Andaman and Nicobar Islands, if concern for the environment is any sort of consideration. But, of course, the development juggernaut must roll on.

The environmental clearances for the project are before a bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT), which had reserved its order in November last year. The forest clearances have been challenged in the Calcutta High Court, where the matter has been posted for ‘final hearing’ in the week beginning 30 March.

Meanwhile, serious allegations have



The extent of damage to the fragile ecosystem of Andaman and Nicobar Islands is unimaginable

emerged from the islanders. On 22 January the Tribal Council in Little and Great Nicobar alleged it was being pressured to “surrender our ancestral land”. Council chairman Barnabas Manju, said officials called a meeting on 7 January at the PWD guesthouse in Campbell Bay, produced maps of the project area, sought the views of council members of the Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS) and asked them to sign a ‘surrender certificate’. The AAJVS is an autonomous body established in 1976 under the Registration of Societies Act 1861, dedicated to the protection, welfare and development of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. “The

meeting lasted barely ten minutes,” Manju said.

Earlier, in August 2025, the Tribal Council had in a letter to Union tribal affairs minister Jual Oram complained that the A&NI administration had made a ‘false representation’ to the Centre claiming that forest rights of locals had been identified and settled as per provisions of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) when, in fact, the processes had “not even been initiated”.

“If our forest rights have truly been settled, why are we being asked to sign a ‘surrender certificate?’” asked Manju.

The Tribal Council letter further states: “The Gram Sabha that is said to have given consent for forest diversion did not include the Nicobarese of Great Nicobar whose ancestral villages—Chingenh, Haeng Loi, Pulo Baha, Kokeon, Pulo Pakka and others—will be directly affected by the proposed project.’ These villages were evacuated after the 2004 tsunami and residents assured they would eventually return to their ancestral land. But the government has only now revealed its hand.

The project, warn anthropologists and activists, threatens some of the most vulnerable indigenous communities in the world. They point out that decades of state intervention have severely damaged the heritage, culture and environment of tribes like the Jarawas, the Great Andamanese and the Shompen.

The tribes are presented to tourists as exotic curiosities, the activists say with disgust. If they refuse to oblige, mainland settlers are dressed up as Jarawas and made to dance at the airport to welcome visitors. Jarawas, who for centuries had no interaction with the outside world, have been taught to wear clothes and forced to beg for money, alcohol and even betel leaves.

The ‘mission’ to ‘civilise’ the tribes has radically altered their lifestyle. “Earlier we never needed money,” says an ‘educated’ woman from the Great Nicobarese tribe. “We did not pay for fish, forest produce or coconut. Now we worry about money and jobs.” What is worse, she adds, is that there are no jobs. Children are refusing to attend school questioning the need for education when educated adults sit at home. “We have always been calm, peace-loving people; anger was alien to us, but now many of us

get angry,” she says.

Activists recall the efforts by officials to enrol the Shompen as voters. The Shompen, they say, have no concept of nation states, leave alone politics or political parties. UNESCO estimates their population at around 200, and even today there is little clarity on their numbers or location. “Yet we are hell-bent on delivering development to people we barely understand,” says one activist.

The southernmost island of the Nicobar archipelago, the Great Nicobar Biosphere reserve alone spans over 103,000 hectares of tropical evergreen forest and is home to nearly 650 plant species and more than 1,800 animal species, many of them endemic.

The government argues that the project is strategically vital. Great Nicobar is located near major international shipping routes. Its proximity to the Malacca Strait is frequently cited. A naval presence already exists here and ex-servicemen have been resettled in parts of the islands. Critics do not deny the strategic considerations but ask why the government is not keen on port expansion in Chennai or Visakhapatnam.

Environmental concerns remain central. While the government claims that fewer than one million trees will be felled, activists estimate the figure to be six or seven times higher. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands—a cluster of 572 islands—were recognised by UNESCO in 2013 under its Man and Biosphere Programme.

The project also plans to increase the population of the Nicobar islands from an estimated 8,000 tribespeople to over half a million. Activists describe this as cultural genocide with a devastating effect on the health, language and culture of the tribespeople. The Tribal Council suggested that development be allowed outside the tribal habitation, but this has been ignored.

Even worse, the environmental damage in Great Nicobar is supposed to be ‘compensated’ with afforestation in Haryana or Madhya Pradesh! This obviously makes no sense to communities whose livelihoods depend on their coconut groves, pandanus trees and forest produce and fruits or whose lands hold graves and sacred places. But faced with the might of a marauding state and powerful corporate interests, they are left with little room to resist. ■





Photos: Najeeb Shah

When a river turns into a faultline

K.A. Shaji on the attempt to recast an ecological and administrative issue as a civilisational conflict

At dawn in Thirunavaya, before the Bharathapuzha stirs, Muslim lotus growers step quietly into the shallow ponds close to the river. Their movements are careful and practised. Stems are cut, flowers gathered, mud washed away. By mid-morning, bundles of pink and white lotus are loaded onto autorickshaws and small trucks. They will travel to temples across Kerala—to Guruvayur, Sabarimala, Kodungallur—and also to several shrines in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Traders here say that when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the Guruvayur temple two years ago, the lotus offered to the deity likely came from these very ponds in Thirunavaya.

No drama here. No speeches about harmony. No statements on coexistence. The lotus simply moves from coexistence into Hindu ritual life, as it has for decades. This unremarkable continuity is the everyday reality of Thirunavaya. It is also the reality that sits awkwardly with the controversy that has now engulfed this riverside town.

The Maha Magha Mahotsavam (18 January to 3 February) in Thirunavaya was projected as Kerala's first 'Kumbh Mela' by organisers and sections of the political class. Even before the first ritual bath was taken, the festival triggered a storm: an

administrative stop memo was framed as proof of Hindu faith being threatened in Muslim majority Malappuram. Repeated often enough, the claim sounded plausible in distant television studios. On the ground, it quickly collapsed.

Thirunavaya is not an accidental venue. It occupies a distinctive place in Kerala's cultural memory. Situated on the banks of the Bharathapuzha, also known as the Nila, it was once the site of Mamankam, a medieval assembly held every twelve years. Mamankam was not a 'religious' festival, in the narrow sense of the word. It was a grand convergence of ritual, commerce, politics and spectacle. Pilgrims, traders, poets and warriors from across South India gathered on the river's wide sandbanks. The Bharathapuzha was the axis of this gathering. It did not divide communities. It brought them together.

By the late 18th century, Mamankam faded, disrupted by political upheaval and colonial intervention. But Thirunavaya did not lose its character as a place of convergence. Muslim and Christian settlements grew, shaping a town where shared spaces became the norm rather than the exception. The Navamukunda temple, one of the 108 Divya Desams of Vaishnavite tradition, continues to draw devotees.

Today, Thirunavaya's social life reflects

that layered history. Temple festivals depend heavily on Muslim percussionists, electricians and technicians. Many of the most sought-after chenda artists and fireworks experts are Muslim. Mosque renovations routinely employ Hindu labour. Church feasts spill into common streets and markets. These arrangements are not extraordinary, they are simply how life works here.

It is into this ecosystem that the Maha Magha Mahotsavam was introduced. Organisers of the festival called it a revival, a spiritual and cultural reawakening, an attempt to restore Thirunavaya to its historical prominence in the Hindu ritual calendar. Led by Swami Anandavanam Bharathi, a Mahaman-daleshwar associated with the Juna Akhara, one of the oldest monastic orders in India, the programme included daily ritual baths on auspicious dates, yajnas and homams, spiritual discourses, cultural performances, community feeding and commemorative rituals linked to the Mamankam tradition.

The ambition was evident. By invoking the language and symbolism of the Kumbh, the organisers sought to place Thirunavaya on a national religious map dominated by North Indian pilgrimage sites.

In early January, a stop memo directed the organisers to halt construction work on

the Bharathapuzha sand bed. This included the building of a temporary pedestrian bridge and ground-levelling by machines. Officials cited the absence of clear permissions, violation of river protection norms and concerns about public safety. The memo categorically applied only to construction activity on the riverbank. It did not prohibit the religious festival or ritual bathing. That distinction was quickly lost in the din.

Senior BJP leader Kummanam Rajasekharan publicly criticised the stop memo, calling it illegal and a violation of religious freedom. He alleged a conspiracy to sabotage the event and demoralise devotees.

As the political temperature rose, Malappuram district collector V.R. Vinod stepped in to contain the situation. Subsequently, the administration granted conditional permission, subject to strict compliance with safety and environmental norms.

The collector issued a detailed 21-point safety directive. It mandated certification of the temporary bridge by competent agencies, limits on the number of people allowed on it at any given time, round the clock deployment of lifeguards, 24-hour medical teams, emergency evacuation plans, sanitation facilities and coordinated crowd management systems. The organising committee was made responsible for ensuring compliance.

What vanished from the debate was the river. Bharathapuzha is Kerala's second longest river. It is also among the most degraded. Decades of sand mining, reduced flow due to upstream interventions, encroachments and pollution have left it ecologically vulnerable. Its wide, exposed sandbanks are symptoms of stress.

Environmental activists point out that mass gatherings on riverbeds pose real risks. Temporary structures can destabilise sand formations. Heavy footfall can accelerate erosion.

Waste generation can further pollute an already weakened river. These concerns apply regardless of whether the gathering is religious, political or commercial.

What gave the controversy a nasty edge was the way Malappuram entered the frame. As a Muslim-majority district, Malappuram has long been a convenient target for communal stereotyping. In this

case, administrative action was quickly recast as evidence of Muslim opposition to a Hindu festival.

There is no factual basis for this claim. No Muslim organisation issued a statement opposing the festival. There were no protests, no formal objections, no mobilisation.

What did circulate were rumours—WhatsApp forwards and online posts alleging that Muslims were stopping Kerala's Kumbh, that Malappuram was hostile to Hindu worship and concern for the river was 'a Muslim plot'.

Mainstream Muslim organisations and leaders chose not to dignify the controversy with comments, recognising it as an externally manufactured furor.

Malappuram-based author and documentary filmmaker Shajahan Thoppil put it clearly: "Malappuram is a land of harmony and coexistence. No hate agenda can survive here. What is being projected has very little to do with the lived reality of this place."

Examples of that lived reality are easy to find. In Angadipuram, home to the historic Thirumandhamkunnu temple, local Muslim communities have traditionally played a role in protecting temple processions, especially during periods of heightened communal tension elsewhere.

Such acts rarely attract attention because they disrupt the preferred narrative of conflict.

The political culture of the district has also played a role.

The Indian Union Muslim League, a major political force in Malappuram for decades, has consistently positioned itself as a stakeholder in communal peace, working to de-escalate sensitive moments.

During floods and other disasters, Malappuram has repeatedly demonstrated a capacity for collective response that cuts across religious lines.

Mosques have opened their halls as relief camps. Temples have run community kitchens. Churches have coordinated medical aid and rehabilitation.

At dawn, the lotus blooms still open quietly in the ponds of Thirunavaya. The Bharathapuzha flows on.

Long after the storms fade and the social media storms move elsewhere, the river will remain.

So, one trusts, will the habits of coexistence it has nurtured. ■



No drama here. No speeches about harmony. No statements on coexistence. The lotus simply moves from Muslim ritual life, as it has for decades

How deep does Indian secularism run?

Yogendra Yadav

The Republic of India was founded seventy-six years ago, but the foundations of its inner life/ nature ('svadharma') were laid nearly 3,000 years earlier. The Indian Republic of today is a confluence of the currents of Bharatvarsha, Hindustan and India. Traces of every stage of this civilisational journey live in our collective subconscious. That is why the svadharma of the Indian Republic is neither rigid nor eternal. It is shaped by movement—both internal and external. Our svadharma is fluid, constantly in motion.

For this reason, the search for India's svadharma cannot be conducted in the so-called eternal values of ancient India. India's svadharma is not to be found only in formal documents, written ideals, established ideologies or institutional religious texts. It reveals itself in the language of movements. First Buddhist and Jain philosophy, then the Sufi and Bhakti traditions and, in the modern era, the national movement—each challenged entrenched power, interrogated civilisational values, stirred the public conscience, and in the process redefined our svadharma. By understanding these religious, social and political movements, we can broadly identify four threads that define the svadharma of the Indian Republic. This essay and the three that follow will examine these four threads.

The first thread of svadharma begins with 'maitri' (friendship), passes through the idea of 'sulah-e-kul', and arrives at the modern concept of secularism, or 'sarva dharma sambhava'. In contemporary debates on secularism, both sides often assume that secularism is a new idea—a new solution to a new problem. But seen from the perspective of Indian civilisation, neither the problem nor its solution are new. The coexistence of diverse views, sects, traditions and lineages has long been one of the defining features of Indian civilisation. That is why, from the very

beginning, efforts were made—by both society and the State—to develop this coexistence not merely as a condition or compulsion, but as an ideal. The idea of our civilisation animated the svadharma of our civilisation.

Maitri is often associated with Emperor Ashoka or with Gautam Buddha—and rightly so. But Buddhist philosophy itself developed an earlier idea. In the Rigveda, the deity Mitra symbolises covenant, harmony and concord. In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, 'Mitra' becomes a marker of balance and mutuality. Building on this lineage, Gautam Buddha establishes maitri (in Pali, 'metta') as an ideal—one of the four *brahmauiharas*. Maitri is a mental disposition of non-hatred and equanimity. Ashoka's inscriptions transformed maitri into a social and political ideal. He linked the principles of non-hatred, non-violence and compassion with communal harmony. Though a Buddhist himself, Ashoka's edicts instruct respect for all *shramana* traditions (various Buddhist orders, Jains, Ajivikas and other mendicant sects) as well as

brahmanas (followers of the Vedic tradition). By institutionalising sarva dharma sambhava as state policy and restraint as a social ideal, Ashoka laid the groundwork for what we today call secularism.

Akbar's policy of sulah-e-kul expanded this principle of sarva dharma sambhava whose foundations Ashoka had laid. Whatever the personal religious inclinations of the emperor, the subjects would enjoy complete freedom of belief, worship and ritual. There would be no forced conversions. The state would not interfere in religious affairs, institutions or practices. Administrative laws and regulations would not belong to any one religion. No sect, denomination or faith would face discrimination. And the state would extend patronage and grants to all religious institutions and sites. Clearly, Akbar's policy was not secular in the modern sense—nor could it have been. The point is that Akbar recognised India's svadharma.

The secularism of our Constitution is

merely an extension of the policies of Ashoka and Akbar. This is also how the term 'secular' is used in contemporary India. In common usage, 'secularism' or '*dharma nirapekshata*' means viewing all religions and sects with equal regard and opposing the dominance of any one.

But if we examine the history of these words and their implications, neither dharma nirapekshata nor secularism in the European sense is quite adequate to explain this policy.

Since *dharma* in our tradition has never meant religion in the narrow sense, dharma nirapekshata unnecessarily conveys indifference to a society's moral values.

In this regard, the term *panth nirapekshata* used in the official Hindi text of the Constitution is more appropriate. Similarly, 'secularism' drags into our discourse a European context that has little to do with either our problem or its solution.

Our issue is not the relationship between Church and State. We face no threat of rule by a pope, a caliph or a

The secularism of our Constitution is not an import but an extension of the policies of Ashoka and Akbar



Photo: Getty Images

Translated and edited excerpts from the author's forthcoming book Ganrajya ka Svadharma, Setu Prakashan

Strong Steps of Himachal Towards Self-Reliance

Jai Hind! Jai Himachal!

हिमाचल प्रदेश के पूर्ण राज्यत्व दिवस की हादिक शुभकामनाएं

“हमारी सरकार ने व्यवस्था परिवर्तन को सुशासन के मूल मंत्र के रूप में आत्मसात करते हुए संसाधन सृजन कर हरित, आत्मनिर्भर और नशामुक्त हिमाचल बनाने का संकल्प लिया है। इस उद्देश्य की पूर्ति के लिए कई साहसिक और ऐतिहासिक फैसले लिए गए हैं जिनके परिणाम आने शुरू हो गए हैं। आइए हम सब मिलकर हिमाचल को समृद्ध और खुशहाल राज्य बनाने में अपना सहयोग दें।”

ठाकुर सुखविन्द सिंह सुक्खू
मुख्यमंत्री, हिमाचल प्रदेश

हिमाचल सरकार के ऐतिहासिक निर्णय

- ओपीएस बहाल, देश का पहला राज्य।
- महिलाओं को चरणबद्ध तरीके से 1500 रुपये प्रतिमाह की सम्मान राशि।
- 680 करोड़ रुपये की 'राजीव गांधी स्टार्ट-अप योजना' आरम्भ।
- ई-टैक्सी पर 50 प्रतिशत अनुदान।
- प्राकृतिक खेती से उगाए उत्पादों पर एमएसपी देने वाला देश का पहला राज्य।
- दूध पर सर्वाधिक समर्थन मूल्य देने वाला राज्य।
- 6000 अनाथ बच्चे बने चिल्ड्रन ऑफ द स्टेट।
- विशेष राजस्व अदालतों में 5,10,257 मामलों का निपटारा।

सुन्दर-सुगम हिमाचल

- कांगड़ा जिला बना प्रदेश की पर्यटन राजधानी।
- कांगड़ा हवाई अड्डा होगा अन्तर्राष्ट्रीय स्तर का।
- गोविन्दसागर में पहली बार क्रूज शिकारा, हाउस बोट, जैट-स्की, हाई-टेक मोटर बोट और वॉटर स्कूटर का रोमांच।

चिट्ठामुक्त हिमाचल

- 15 नवम्बर, 2025 को शिमला से एंटी चिट्ठा वाकाथॉन जन आंदोलन का शुभारम्भ। शिमला, धर्मशाला, हमीरपुर, बिलासपुर में वाकाथॉन आयोजित।
- नशा तस्करी की जांच के लिए स्पेशल टास्क फोर्स गठित, नशा तस्करी की सम्पत्तियों की कुर्क, अवैध सम्पत्तियों पर बुलडोजर। इंस्पेक्टर सहित 11 पुलिस कर्मचारी नौकरी से बर्खास्त।

स्वस्थ हिमाचल

- एआईएमएसएस, चमियाना तथा डॉ. राजेन्द्र प्रसाद राजकीय चिकित्सा महाविद्यालय, टांडा में रॉबोटिक सर्जरी की ऐतिहासिक शुरुआत। ऑटोमैटिक लैब की जाएगी स्थापित।

शिक्षित हिमाचल

- सभी सरकारी स्कूलों में पहली कक्षा से अंग्रेजी मीडियम।
- पूर्ण साक्षर राज्य बना हिमाचल।
- 42 विधानसभा क्षेत्रों में राजीव गांधी राजकीय आदर्श डे-बोर्डिंग स्कूलों के निर्माण को स्वीकृति।
- राष्ट्रीय उपलब्धि सर्वेक्षण-2024 में प्रदेश को समग्र राष्ट्रीय रैंकिंग में पांचवां स्थान मिला, वर्ष 2021 के 21वें स्थान से उल्लेखनीय सुधार।

सूचना एवं जन संपर्क विभाग, हिमाचल प्रदेश सरकार | www.himachalpr.gov.in | HimachalPradeshGovtIPRDept | diprhimachal

A CENTURY OF LIGHT: KARNATAKA’S TRIBUTE TO THE UNIVERSAL VISION OF SREE NARAYANA GURU



Photo: Gettyimages

The Golden Chapter: Gandhi And The Guru

December 2025 was also infused with deep historical resonance, marking exactly 100 years since the historic 1925 dialogue between Mahatma Gandhi and Sree Narayana Guru at the Sivagiri Ashram. Recalling this exchange, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah highlighted the famous mango-leaf analogy. When Gandhi compared human diversity to the varied leaves of a mango tree, Guru responded that while appearances may differ, the essence—the juice within—is the same.

This dialogue profoundly influenced Mahatma Gandhi, sharpening his stance against untouchability and contributing to the renaming of his newspaper to Harijan. By commemorating this centenary, the Government of Karnataka bridged the ideals of the freedom movement with contemporary struggles for social justice, reaffirming that the vision of Navabharata must be rooted in radical equality.

The Chief Minister traced the Guru’s influence in Karnataka to his 1908 visit to Mangaluru, facilitated by reformist leader Sahukar Koragappa. This visit culminated in the consecration of the Kudrolli Gokarnanatheshwara. This visit in 1912, where Guru famously declared, “I have not installed your Shiva; I have installed our Shiva,” asserting the universal right to divinity.

commitment to social justice, secular values, and ethical governance. Their joint participation reaffirmed Sivagiri as a unique space where spirituality, governance, ethics, and nation-building intersect meaningfully.

“Sree Narayana Guru was not just a saint; he was a movement for equality and morality,” Siddaramaiah stated in his address. He observed that the Guru’s philosophy offers a clear response to contemporary challenges posed by religious majoritarianism and identity politics devoid of justice. Guru, he noted, understood that when religion is stripped of compassion and ethics, it becomes an instrument of domination rather than liberation. The Chief Minister urged that the Sivagiri Pilgrimage continue to evolve as an intellectual and global movement of humanity, not as a ritual confined to symbolism.

A Legacy Without Borders: The Five-Acre Vision

Recognising that the Guru’s transcendence administrative boundaries, the Government of Karnataka has taken a historic step to establish a permanent institutional presence for Sivagiri within the state. During the centenary celebrations of the Mahasamadhi of Sree Narayana Guru held in December 2025, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah announced that the Government of Karnataka would allocate five acres of land in either Dakshina Kannada or Udupi district for a branch of the Sivagiri Mutt.

The announcement, made at Mangalagangothri campus, was accompanied by clear directions to senior leaders, including Legislative Council Member Shri B.K. Hariprasad, to expedite the identification of suitable land so that the project could move forward without delay.

The proposed Sivagiri Mutt branch in Karnataka is envisioned not merely as a place of worship, but as a comprehensive centre for social reform, vocational and industrial training, spiritual education, and intellectual dialogue. In keeping with the Guru’s own instructions for his institutions, the centre is expected to house a library, vocational training facilities, and a Brahma Vidhyalaya model.

It is intended to serve as a hub where youth can learn that true strength arises from organisation and that true enlightenment flows from education—principles that formed the backbone of the Guru’s transformative success in Kerala and beyond.

Education As Liberation: The Mangalore University Milestone

The intellectual heart of this movement finds its strongest institutional expression at Mangalore University’s Konaje campus. On December 3, 2025, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah inaugurated the newly completed Brahmashree Narayana Guru Study Chair (Adhyayana Peetha)

building complex, a landmark academic initiative spanning over 1,457 square metres.

The building stands as a living monument to the Guru’s conviction that education is the ultimate tool for liberation from the “slavery of the mind.” Designed as a theme-based study centre, the complex integrates reflection, rigorous scholarship, and social history. It includes spaces dedicated to meditation on universal human values, facilities for academic research on Guru’s seminal works such as the Atmopadesa Satakam, and a museum documenting the history of social justice movements in coastal Karnataka.

During the inauguration, the Chief Minister also laid the foundation stone for Phase II expansion, supported by an additional investment of ₹3 crore. This expansion will facilitate research fellowships, academic exchanges, and international conferences, positioning Mangalore University as a global hub for the study of social harmony, ethical governance, and U.T. Khader.

Speaker Shri R.E. M. Khader announced that the university grounds hosting these historic events would be officially named “Guru–Gandhi Maidan,” symbolising the convergence of two of the twentieth century’s most influential moral reformers.

A Vision for the Vishwamanava

Karnataka’s commitment to the Guru’s legacy extends far beyond physical infrastructure. Under the leadership of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, the state institutionalised the statewide celebration of Brahmashree Narayana Guru Jayanti in 2016. The Guru’s life and philosophy have also been integrated into school textbooks, ensuring that future generations inherit a moral compass grounded in equality, compassion, and human dignity.

In his concluding remarks at various centenary events, the Chief Minister emphasised that development must be measured not merely by roads and bridges, but by the dignity afforded to every individual. “When someone undergoes surgery, no one asks the caste of the person whose blood saved them,” he observed. “But when cured, we return to those questions. This mindset must change.”

Through the Study Chair, the proposed Sivagiri Mutt branch, and the sustained promotion of the Guru’s ideals, the Government of Karnataka is ensuring that the “sap” of humanity remains pure, regardless of the “leaves” we represent.

As the 93rd Sivagiri Pilgrimage concluded and new institutions opened their doors, a clear message resonated across Karnataka and beyond: the state is not merely participating in the legacy of Sree Narayana Guru—it is carrying his flame forward as a modern custodian of ethical nation-building.

Jai Hind. Jai Samvidhan.
Jai Narayana Guru.

The Chief Minister’s presence alongside Kerala Chief Minister Shri Pinarayi Vijayan, and a high-level delegation that included AICC General Secretary Shri K.C. Venugopal, highlighted a shared southern commitment to social justice, secular values, and ethical governance. Their joint participation reaffirmed Sivagiri as a unique space where spirituality, governance, ethics, and nation-building intersect meaningfully.

The Dawn of a Moral Revolution

In the quiet, salt-misted air of Varkala and the vibrant academic landscape of Mangaluru, a profound historical resonance has been felt this season—one that seamlessly bridges geography, history, governance, and conscience. Across temple courtyards echoing with reflection, university campuses alive with scholarly debate, pilgrimage paths filled with seekers, and public platforms resonating with democratic ideals, the timeless philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru has once again emerged as India. At this significant juncture, under the visionary leadership of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, the Government of Karnataka has embarked on an ambitious and purposeful journey not merely to commemorate the Guru, but to institutionalise his universal philosophy within the very framework of governance, education, and social development.

This endeavour marks more than a commemorative exercise. It represents a conscious reorientation of public life toward ethical clarity and social justice. It is the narrative of a state that looks decisively toward a future of total inclusivity by anchoring its public policy, cultural engagement, and institutional vision in the Guru’s revolutionary proclamation of “One Caste, One Religion, One God for Mankind.” At a time when societies across the world grapple with polarisation, inequality, and moral uncertainty, Karnataka’s initiatives stand as a deliberate affirmation that enduring reform lies in the moral foundations laid by India’s great social philosophers.

For decades, the coastal belt of Karnataka has shared a deep spiritual and intellectual artery with the reform movements of Kerala. Long before political boundaries hardened into administrative divisions, ideas flowed freely across the coastlines of the Arabian Sea. The message of Sree

Narayana Guru—one that ignited a powerful sense of self-respect among oppressed and marginalised communities in the late nineteenth century—found particularly fertile ground in the Karavali region. Communities such as the Billavas, Edigas, Mogaveeras, and several other backward classes encountered in the Guru’s teachings a pathway to dignity, organisation, education, and collective empowerment.

These teachings did not remain confined to religious discourse. They became instruments of social awakening, challenging entrenched hierarchies and asserting the inherent worth of every human being. Over time, what began as a reformist philosophy transformed into a lived social ethic across coastal Karnataka. Today, this historic connection has been elevated from deeply rooted community tradition to a cornerstone of state policy.

Through landmark land grants, the establishment and expansion of world-class research institutions, the integration of the Guru’s life and philosophy into educational curricula,

and sustained high-level engagement at Sivagiri, the Government of Karnataka is ensuring that the Guru’s Vishwamanava—the ideal of the Universal Man—emerges not as an abstract concept, but as a living blueprint for a harmonious, plural, and democratic society.

The Pilgrimage Of The Mind: Siddaramaiah At Sivagiri

This renewed commitment found its most profound expression on December 31, 2025, when the sacred hills of Sivagiri, in Varkala witnessed a moment of immense spiritual, cultural, and national significance. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah arrived as the Chief Guest for the 93rd Sivagiri Pilgrimage (Sivagiri Theerthadanam), describing the pilgrimage not as a physical journey measured in distance, but as one that was “moral rather than geographical.”

Standing at the Mahasamadhi of Sree Narayana Guru—the very site where the reformer attained samadhi in 1928—the Chief Minister paid heartfelt homage to the man who dismantled

centuries-old caste hierarchies and redefined spirituality as a force for equality, compassion, and ethical living. The moment symbolised continuity across generations: between history and governance, moral philosophy and public responsibility, and between spiritual reform and democratic practice.

Addressing lakhs of devotees gathered at the expansive 200-acre Sivagiri Mutt campus, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah described Sivagiri as the “Moral University of India’s Conscience.” He spoke of a “living Constitution” embedded in the Guru’s teachings—one that predates the Indian Constitution, yet resonates powerfully with its core values of equality, fraternity, liberty, and dignity. In doing so, he underscored the idea that India’s democratic ethos did not emerge in isolation, but was shaped by centuries of ethical and reformist thought.

The Chief Minister’s presence alongside Kerala Chief Minister Shri Pinarayi Vijayan, and a high-level delegation that included AICC General Secretary Shri K.C. Venugopal, highlighted a shared southern

Sivagiri: A Living Moral University

Held annually from December 30 to January 1, the Sivagiri Pilgrimage has evolved since its modest beginnings in 1933 into one of India’s most enduring spiritual-cum-social movements. Drawing lakhs of participants from across India and the world, it stands today as a platform for ethical dialogue, social reform, and national introspection.

The 93rd edition acquired special national significance with the participation of both the Kerala and Karnataka Chief

Ministers. Addressing the gathering, Shri Pinarayi Vijayan expressed gratitude to the organisers for accommodating his official commitments by adjusting the programme schedule. He acknowledged the collective spirit, coordination, and moral discipline that have long characterised the Sivagiri tradition.

Established by Sree Narayana Guru, the Sivagiri Mutt remains a major spiritual and pilgrim centre of the Ezhava community and a living embodiment of the Guru’s proclamation of

“One Caste, One Religion, One God for humankind.” Far from being a mere slogan, this declaration continues to function as a foundational ethical philosophy guiding progressive social thought across generations.

Born on 20 August 1856 and attaining samadhi on 20 September 1928, Sree Narayana Guru was a saint, philosopher, spiritual leader, and social reformer whose influence reshaped Kerala and radiated across South India. He championed education, organisation, cleanliness, agriculture,

and self-reliance, believing that knowledge, dignity, and ethical living were the foundations of true freedom.

True to his vision of religious equanimity, Guru envisaged Sivagiri as a space where the principles of all religions could be studied with equal respect. The establishment of the Brahma Vidhyalaya at Sivagiri fulfilled this vision. Today, the institution offers a rigorous seven-year course in Indian Philosophy, encompassing the works of Sree Narayana Guru alongside the scriptures of major world religions.



NATION

WHY ARE CAG WARNINGS FALLING ON DEAF EARS?
A series of reports on frauds in government are being met with deafening silence

► P3



NATION

THE CHANGING FACE OF BANARAS
The makeover of this holy city is stripping it of its soul

► P4



NATION

THE PLUNDER OF GREAT NICOBAR
How 'development' is wreaking havoc in this fragile ecology

► P5



Is Form 7 the new weapon of mass deletion?

Sourabh Sen

When the Election Commission of India (ECI) quietly altered the rules governing Form 7 in 2023, nobody seemed to notice. Form 7 allows a voter to challenge the inclusion of another individual in the electoral rolls and request their removal.

Earlier, only neighbours or voters registered at the same polling station were eligible to submit Form 7. This rule was changed in 2023. The new rule allowed any voter registered in any booth of the assembly constituency to submit Form 7. Another big change was to allow an unlimited number of submissions per applicant. Neither change was challenged, and both have been in effect since late 2023.

As has become evident in the ongoing Special Revision (SR) in Assam and the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in 12 states/Union territories, almost all objections have been raised against Muslim, Dalit or tribal voters, and many filed using the name and EPIC (Elector's Photo Identity Card) numbers of unsuspecting Muslim voters.

On 29 January, Congress Organising Secretary K.C. Venugopal drew the Election Commission's attention to the "massive misuse of Form 7 by the BJP" to eliminate voters suspected of supporting the Opposition. In his letter, Venugopal calls the misuse elaborate, systematic and extensive, and alleges that the BJP appears to have asked its workers to submit objections in bulk, particularly in poll-bound states. A key element of the centralised fraud, he points out, is to ensure that notices informing legitimate voters of the objections never reach them.

The fraud, Venugopal points out, is neither localised nor isolated. Reports from Kerala, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh and Assam indicate a similar pattern. A common feature is the mass printing of Form 7, using illegible

names and signatures, random or invalid phone numbers and EPIC numbers belonging to other legitimate voters.

*

In Gujarat, Haji Ramkadu, a folk artiste from Junagadh, who was awarded a Padma Shri on Republic Day, accidentally found that an objection had been filed against him. Born in Junagadh, he has lived in the same house for 70 years, is well known in the state and is credited with having performed for free at 25,000 fund-raising programmes for *gaushalas*. That didn't stop BJP corporator Sanjay Manwar from submitting a Form 7 objection against Ramkadu.

As the news spread and outrage grew, Manwar sheepishly said the artiste's Aadhaar card bore the name Mir Haji Kasam, while his EPIC identified him as Haji Rathod. These very common inconsistencies in official documents are being weaponised. Married women are particularly hard put to explain the changes in their given names. In West Bengal, when Salma Sardar and Saeeda Molla become Salma and Saeeda Naskar, objections were raised.

In Rajasthan, allegations that BJP functionaries were pressuring Booth Level Officers to delete Muslim voters surfaced from Hawa Mahal, a Muslim-majority constituency the BJP had won in 2023 by a narrow margin of 974 votes. A video circulating on social media showed BLO Kirti Kumar alleging pressure from senior officials to process objections against 470 voters—nearly 40 per cent of the electorate in his booth. "I'd rather kill myself than do this," Kumar was heard saying in the video.

In Madhya Pradesh, the Congress alleged that several hundred objections were being submitted for each booth by BJP workers in Bhind, Singrauli and Sehore. In West Bengal, the Trinamool Congress reported—and recorded—a vehicle intercepted with several thousand copies of Form 7 being carried by BJP workers. Clashes erupted in Murshi-



The ongoing special revision of electoral rolls in Assam seems to be more about deletion of names

Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma seems to have declared a 'jihad' against 'miyas', a pejorative term used for Muslims allegedly of Bangladeshi origin

dabad after BJP supporters tried to submit a large number of Form 7 applications.

The ECI has argued that submission of Form 7 does not automatically lead to deletions, that filing Form 7 objections on false grounds is punishable and voters whose names are removed on false grounds can seek legal redress.

Assam's chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma seems to have declared a 'jihad' against 'miyas', a pejorative term used for Muslims allegedly of Bangladeshi origin.

Sarma had no compunction declaring in public, "Yes, we are trying to steal miya votes... we've made arrangements so they can't vote in Assam... when the SIR comes to Assam, four to five lakh miya votes will have to be cut."

Sumona Rahman Choudhury, a BLO in Sribhumi (formerly Karimganj) district, and 14 other BLOs were called for a training session on 19 January. When Choudhury turned up, officials handed her a bunch of objection forms (Form 7), challenging the inclusion of 133 voters in her booth. Some of the details were already printed while others were handwritten.

All 133 objections were filed by one person,

who claimed that 133 voters in Choudhury's booth in Srimanta Kanishail village, Karimganj North assembly constituency—all Muslims—were either dead, had permanently shifted or been enrolled more than once. Choudhury, a teacher at the government school, personally knows the voters.

Speaking to *National Herald* over the phone, she said, "When I visited them during enumeration, they were at home. I got them to fill up the forms and collected their signatures... The deletion list included the name of my headmaster, whom I report to everyday. There were also names of parents of my students, who I know personally. How could I ask them to come for a hearing? And on what grounds? What if they filed an FIR against me?"

Choudhury and four other BLOs—who faced a similar predicament at the same training session—told officials that they did not think it necessary to send notices and summon the voters for a hearing, leave alone delete their names. They rejected the objections raised because they knew them to be false.

► Continued on page 5

Gujarat-model ghettoisation comes to Rajasthan

When selling property becomes a crime, you know you're in Modi's India, writes Aakar Patel

On 21 January, Rajasthan's cabinet approved a segregation bill that most Indians may not know of because it is unlikely that the media will report it. Let us look at what the Rajasthan Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Provisions for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from the Premises in Disturbed Areas Bill, 2026, intends to achieve.

Poor people who are forced to live clubbed together is what we call a slum. An ethnic group forcibly relegated to certain neighbourhoods is a ghetto. The former have no means to go elsewhere. The latter have no choice, even if they have the means. Apartheid means apartness and refers to South Africa's policy of racial segregation, where black Africans were forced into ghettos. They could only live in fixed spaces by law.

When segregation in the United States was legally ended in the 1960s, the government passed laws that sought to integrate the races. For instance, the Fair Housing Act which prevented discrimination in the buying and selling of properties which had thus far kept the races separate.

Across Gujarat, the BJP government has done the opposite. Muslims are deliberately forced into ghettos through a law called the Gujarat Prohibition of Transfer of Immovable Property and Provision for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from Premises in Disturbed Areas Act.

This law requires citizens living in particular neighbourhoods to seek permission from the government before selling their property or changing their tenants; and filters them by religion. The application must list the name of the buyer

and the seller, and includes an affidavit that the sale has been made without coercion, at market price.

The law was initially passed by the Congress. In 2009, the Modi government amended the Act to give the collector discretionary powers to hold inquiries and take possession of property under the Act. In July 2019, another change was introduced. Previously, property sellers had to apply for permission to transfer their property and register their consent on affidavit. Now, it would not matter even if the sale was made freely (in terms of consent) and fairly (in terms of value). The collector could stop the sale of property if his discretion dictated that the transfer would lead to a 'disturbance in

demographic equilibrium' or 'improper clustering of persons of a community' or 'likelihood of polarisation'.

The collector could reject an application for the legal transfer of a property after making an assessment on these grounds. Punishment for transferring property without clearance was raised to six years in jail (it was six months when the law was first introduced). The law now also allowed the state government to form a monitoring and advisory committee to keep a check on the demographic structure of neighbourhoods. This committee would advise the collectors on which sales could be permitted.

The act is currently in force in large parts

of Gujarat's largest cities, Ahmedabad, Vadodara and Surat, as well as in Bharuch, Kapadvanj, Anand and Godhra. These are also the places where Gujarat's Muslims are concentrated. In effect, they have been permanently ghettoised. In effect, foreigners can lease and buy property in Gujarat that Indian Muslims cannot.

This is what will now happen in Rajasthan. Law minister Jogaram Patel said neighbourhoods with 'improper clustering' would be targeted. The transfer of immovable properties in these areas without the government's permission would be void.

Like other laws persecuting minorities, this too has a long and benign name: the Rajasthan Prohibition of Transfer of

Immovable Property and Provisions for Protection of Tenants from Eviction from the Premises in Disturbed Areas Bill, 2026.

Its effects will, of course, be the same as we have seen in Gujarat. It criminalises social and commercial exchange between communities, in much the same way that Nazi Germany did. Violation of the law's provisions are non-bailable and cognisable, and punishable with imprisonment of up to five years and a fine. You could go to jail for renting a property.

The Congress in the state opposes the passing of the law, but it lacks the numbers and will not be able to stop it. Rajasthan Congress Committee president Govind Singh Dotasra said, "Demographic imbalance is not a legal term. There is no mention of the basis on which an area will be declared disturbed. The BJP wants to remain in power by following the Gujarat model."

This is true. India under Modi has hollowed out the Constitution's secularism through a slew of laws that have met no resistance. The courts have looked away, the Opposition is too weak and the media is complicit. Criminalisation of the possession of beef was introduced in 2015, starting with Maharashtra and Haryana. Criminalisation of interfaith marriage came in 2018, starting with Uttarakhand. Criminalisation of Muslim divorce came in 2019, as did their specific exclusion from the Citizenship Amendment Act. The Rajasthan law carries this progression forward. Step by step, law by law, we have entered New India, a majoritarian state that is shedding its carapace of secularism. ■



A town in Rajasthan, where a stretch of tarmac divides the rich and poor

India under Modi has hollowed out the Constitution's secular ethos through a slew of laws that have met with no resistance. The courts too have looked the other way

Views are personal

MGNREGA and the meaning of gram swaraj

Meenakshi Natarajan

Swaraj, or freedom, is never a one-way street—and the very impulse to seek the truth enjoins thorough scrutiny. Much has already been written about the new scheme that has come to replace the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), a key feature of which was the right to demand work. This right has been extinguished under the new scheme. But to grasp MGNREGA properly, one must understand its economic and social dimensions—and its political economy. That terrain is complex, and it is not uniform across India.

In regions with scant rainfall and barely one crop a year, MGNREGA was a lifesaver. In other areas, where agriculture itself generates ample work—especially where two or three crops are harvested annually—dependence on MGNREGA as a source of employment was lower. Coincidentally, western Malwa in Madhya Pradesh has long enjoyed relatively prosperous agriculture, though even there falling groundwater levels are beginning to change the picture.

Conversations in village *chaupals* have thrown up some questions. First: did regions like these not need MGNREGA at all? And if so, will its withdrawal have no impact there? Should MGNREGA have been restricted only to regions where agriculture cannot sustain livelihoods? If demands for its restoration are made again, should such regional variations be factored in? Is MGNREGA merely a job-creation entitlement, or is it a deeper, transformative institutional arrangement?

MGNREGA functioned as a guarantee establishing a minimum wage for labourers—much as the minimum support price (MSP) fixes a floor for agricultural produce. That early post-Independence decision meant crops wouldn't be sold at throwaway prices. Later, the CPA government extended support prices to minor forest produce as well, breaking the grip of middlemen and exploitative commission agents—though further reforms are still badly needed. Pulses and oilseeds are procured only up to about 25 per cent of output; grains face no such ceiling. For marginal farmers, this is hardly reassuring. Socially, too, they occupy the lowest rung. In *mandis*, private traders continue to dominate government procurement. Still, the legal compulsion of the minimum support price does exist.

MGNREGA delivered a similar transformative right to labourers. Living near a predominantly tribal district, my entire childhood was spent watching men and women workers alight from early morning trains at the town square. For decades, daily wages never rose beyond Rs 10 or Rs 20—later Rs 50 at best—whether for construction or harvesting. The entire rural economy ran, in effect, on cheap labour.

Benevolent landowners sometimes allowed workers to take home a little grain—usually the refuse. MGNREGA changed this. Wages were first fixed at ₹150, then gradually raised; in western Malwa, minimum wages reached ₹222. Today, wages below ₹300 are rare anywhere. MGNREGA sparked a wage revolution. It is hardly surprising that repeated demands were made to link MGNREGA with agriculture—a recommendation still voiced in many places, particularly by large farmers.

MGNREGA was, in fact, linked to agriculture. Marginal farmers were allowed to improve their own land, with the government paying wages if family members worked on it. But had MGNREGA been fully integrated with agriculture, wage rates would have collapsed again. It'll happen even today if the arrangement is revisited. Labourers will receive government rates alright but they will lose the premium that comes from competitive wages. Wages will then get locked into an official minimum rate.

The new scheme is even more damaging. Since work will no longer be demand-driven, no year-end, agricultural seasons will offer no alternative. Labourers will be forced to accept whatever rate the landowner sets. The result will be predictable: within a year, wage rates will start falling.

Many progressives argue that in rural areas where landowners come from backward classes, this new arrangement is particularly welcome. It signals a return of older forms of social dominance. This group also happens to be close to the ruling party. A small section within it has actively nurtured majoritarian ideas—the same group that opposed land titles for Scheduled Castes, resisted bank nationalisation, objected fiercely to legal curbs on usury, and treats such measures as sin. Yet agriculture itself has been under growing pressure in recent years.

Marginal farmers, too, must pay higher wages. With limited resources, they fall behind. Costs have risen across the board, but crop prices have not kept up with higher input costs. In regions where soyabean once yielded handsome profits—prices had touched ₹4,500 per quintal in 2011-2012—imports have crashed the market. The government aligns customs duties with the interests of large businesses, deepening ties with edible oil brands like Fortune (owned by AWL Agri Business, formerly Adani Wilmar).

Soyabean becomes cheap while oil gets more expensive. Domestic procurement prices fall. The same trend plays out internationally. China, the biggest buyer, turns to cheaper Brazilian soya.



Up in arms Villagers attend a MGNREGA chaupal near Rae Bareilly on 20 January (left) Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi at a national MGNREGA workers convention in New Delhi



Photo: Vipin

Even large farmers—landowners from backward classes—found themselves pushed to the margins, squeezed between rising input costs and rising wage bills, without commensurate returns on their crops.

The new regime may bring some relief to this class. Perhaps the ruling dispensation calculated that this would draw them closer, countering campaigns for caste census and social justice. Most of them belong to relatively affluent backward communities. In the absence of a political consciousness, this manoeuvre may appear comforting. But let's be clear: the government has not acted out of empathy for their distress.

This class rose through hard work, skill and enterprise—supported by early post-Independence reforms such as the abolition of the zamindari system of landlordism, income-tax exemptions and subsidies. They experimented with agriculture—from polyhouses to horticulture, medicinal crops and orchards—striving to make farming profitable. To form prejudiced opinions against them would also be a betrayal of the idea of swaraj.

Yet this class, too, must ensure that easing its own economic stress does not mean forcing the weakest into desperation. It must stand up for their rights—and simultaneously push for fair prices, rationalised crop insurance and broader reform.

Every political organisation must carry both sides together. Rural stability will not ease without structural changes in

agriculture. Trade policy is drafted with big businesses in control; the farmers' voices never reach the commerce ministry. In today's tariff scenario, customs duties mustn't be interested in the farmers' interests.

The entire system of assessing losses needs overhaul. Though finance has ended, outdated revenue procedures persist in many states. The method of calculating average losses is deeply flawed: it treats an entire area as a unit rather than individual fields, even though losses are borne by individual farmers. Crop insurance benefits private companies; farmers rarely receive compensation.

The meaning and purpose of swaraj lie in understanding the entire rural economy and being sensitive to every class within it. Genuine rural self-reliance and development are possible only when both land and labour receive justice. That justice will not come by cutting wages. Landowners must grasp this. Expensive labour—not cheap labour—is the true marker of prosperity.

But this must be accompanied by fair crop prices, reformed insurance, farmer participation in trade policy, assured procurement at support prices, democratic *mandis*, and a thorough overhaul of village revenue systems. None of this can be achieved by killing MGNREGA or by excluding marginal farmers from its ambit. Pitting farmers and agricultural labour on social justice. ■

The meaning and purpose of swaraj lie in understanding the entire rural economy and being sensitive to every class within it

Turbulent ties, broken bridges

It's time Delhi and Dhaka reset their strategies, writes Sreeradha Datta

To say that relations between India and Bangladesh are currently tense will be an understatement. It is difficult to apportion blame, but both sides seem equally intent on distancing themselves from each other. The connectivity corridor which India and Bangladesh had worked hard to build is no longer in use. The withdrawal of tourist visas and numerous trade facilities by both countries has led to a sharp decline in bilateral trade, which had seen a high of nearly \$18 billion in 2021-22.

India has revoked a 2020 agreement that permitted Bangladesh to use Indian Land Customs Stations (LCSs), ports and airports for the transshipment of goods to third countries. In May 2025, India stopped the entry of readymade garments from Bangladesh through land transit posts in the northeast. This was followed in June 2025 by severe import restrictions on jute and related products—henceforth permitted into India only through the Nhava Sheva port in Navi Mumbai.

In response to India's ban on land routes, Pakistan was quick to offer Bangladesh the use of its Karachi port. There was also some chatter about Bangladesh buying Pakistani fighter jets and the restoration of direct flights between Dhaka and Karachi.

While the ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina disallowed 'anti-India activity', the interim government feels no such pressure. Additionally, Bangladesh's invite to China to build infrastructure close to India's sensitive border in the Dooars region (the Teesta masterplan) didn't make India happy.

Both countries seem to be working overtime to ensure that bilateral ties remain as limited as ever. Bangladesh was upset when India cold-shouldered a request from Prof. Yunus for a bilateral meeting. India, in turn, was miffed over the chief advisor's visit to China and his public statements there. In July 2025, when a

Bangladesh Air Force fighter jet crashed into a school in Dhaka's Diabari area, killing 27 people and injuring over 170, Bangladesh requested medical assistance from India. The team of burn specialists from Delhi did arrive but was initially not allowed to treat patients, simply observe.

Just when the Indian external affairs minister's presence at former prime minister Khaleda Zia's funeral sent out positive signals, there came the ill-advised and ill-timed diktat to drop Bangladesh cricket cricketer Mustafizur Rahman from one of the Indian Premier League teams (Kolkata Knight Riders). The Bangladesh Cricket Board's security concerns and refusal to play in the ICC T20 World Cup coincided with India notifying Bangladesh as a 'non-family posting' for diplomats, citing similar security concerns.

India's increasingly shrill rhetoric about 'illegal Bangladeshis'—which has found considerable traction in the Bangladesh-bordering states of West Bengal and

Assam—and exaggerated claims in mainstream India media about the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh have also kept temperatures high.

Volatile shifts in the relationship were to be expected when India granted asylum to Sheikh Hasina, who was forced to flee Bangladesh on 5 August 2024. The outpouring of anti-India fury, attacks on the Indian High Commission and social media campaigns on both sides aggravated the schism. The shock of losing its closest partner in the neighbourhood altered the way India looked at Bangladesh. Repeated attacks on minorities, mobs on the streets and the move to ban Awami League's political activities deepened distrust. The interim government's move to lift the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami and its tendency to turn a blind eye to rowdy Islamist elements further contributed to the hostility.

The recent audio-leak of a conversation between a US diplomat and journalists in Dhaka, as reported by *Washington Post*,

added another twist to an already volatile cocktail, suggesting as it did the US warming up to the Jamaat. Students and the youth in Bangladesh have always disliked Hasina's pro-India tilt. They have been increasingly outspoken in their impression of India as a bully with double standards.

A joke circulating in New Delhi says a lot about the corner India finds itself in. Policy analysts have been quipping that the Awami League is about to be recognised as a political party in India.

It is in India, after all, that a large number of former ministers and senior Awami League leaders have taken refuge. They would not have been able to do so without the knowledge, if not consent, of the government in New Delhi. Judging by the number of press conferences being addressed by Awami League leaders in India—as campaigning intensifies for the 12 February elections in Bangladesh—the joke may be closer to the bone than we realise.



As volatile politics vitiates India-Bangladesh ties, sports advisor Asif Nazrul speaks on the withdrawal of the Bangladesh men's team from the ICC T20 World Cup

Photo: IANS

Sooner rather than later, India will have to take a clearer stand on how much liberty it extends to Sheikh Hasina and exiled Awami leaders

Sheikh Hasina's activities from India have complicated relations further. Bangladesh is aggrieved that she is allowed to address press conferences online and comment freely on political developments in Bangladesh. The interim government had sent a *note verbale* requesting her extradition which India did not deem necessary to respond to. While the verdict of the International Criminal Tribunal of Bangladesh—ironically established by Sheikh Hasina—in holding her guilty of 'crimes against humanity' and sentencing her to death is problematic, it has renewed the clamour for her extradition. India's stony silence on this issue intensified anti-India sentiment in Bangladesh and was amplified on social media.

The popular perception of India being supportive of the Hasina government has been reinforced by India's seeming reluctance to address Bangladesh's core concerns: water sharing and border killings. Sooner rather than later, India will have to take a clearer stand on how much liberty it can extend to Sheikh Hasina and Awami leaders exiled in India.

Despite the Awami League being banned from participating in forthcoming elections in Bangladesh, its shadow looms large. The outcome will depend in no small measure on which side supporters tilt in an evolving electoral equation. The perception that India is interfering in the election has been reinforced by allowing Sheikh Hasina to address her supporters and air her concerns from India.

The golden days are undoubtedly over. Both Dhaka and Delhi need to remember that ground realities have changed. India will not tolerate security threats, real or perceived, and Bangladesh's engagement with external powers will add to India's discomfiture.

The harsh reality is that neither country can prosper without the other. Bangladesh must realise that what India offers cannot be easily replaced. India must recognise that tit-for-tat measures are poor strategy and poorer diplomacy, and that it is in the interest of both Delhi and Dhaka to reset their ties. ■

SREERADHA DATTA is a professor at Jindal School of International Affairs, O.P. Jindal Global University and non-resident senior fellow, ISAS-NUS, Singapore

STATES 360° MAHARASHTRA

“We are not statistics. Listen to us!”

Jaideep Hardikar

On 25 January 2026, National Highway 160 was a stream of red flags as thousands marched from Nashik towards Mumbai. Their mission? To knock on the doors of Mantralaya and remind the politicians and bureaucrats that a promise made seven years ago remained unfulfilled.

It brought back memories of the long march of 2018, when the poorest of Maharashtra’s marginalised farmers and farm labourers walked 180 kilometres, singing protest songs, spending nights on the highway. On 12 March, they poured into Mumbai at dawn, careful not to disrupt the business of the big city or the SSC board exams. What that peaceful rally of nearly 70,000 protestors at Azad Maidan was saying was this: “We can’t be reduced to statistics. Hear us.”

This writer spent three days walking and talking with the *padayatri*s that year. They had no option, they said, but to enter the heart of power to be heard, loud and clear. That year, Mumbai heard, and empathised. The state government too seemed to have heard: assuring them that their demands would be fulfilled in a time-bound manner.

But the ruling alliance led by Devendra Fadnavis—which found both the time and the resources to implement the Ladki Behna Yojana before the 2024 elections—did not keep its word.

“We are back on the streets,” the protestors said, “because we have been betrayed.”

The long march of January 2026 was therefore unlike any other protest in its rekindling of a democratic assertion, the only weapon of the masses when the State reneges on its assurances time and again. Led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and its peasant front, the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), the protestors in this year’s adivasi-mazdoor-kisan march came from across northern Maharashtra’s hamlets and villages.

It followed on the heels of a massive rally mobilised by the AIKS on 21 January. More than 50,000 tribal poor marched from the village of Charoti to the district collectorate’s office in Palghar. When the district collector assured them that all



Back on the streets The adivasi–mazdoor–kisan protest march winds its way from Nashik to Mumbai

promises except those that needed ratification by the state government would be fulfilled, they resolved to march to Mumbai. Assembling in Nashik, they spent Republic Day on the national highway.

Their demands included the granting of community and individual forest rights, regularisation of their land *pattas*, supply of potable drinking water, uninterrupted electricity to their villages, access to quality education, the earnest implementation of existing laws and the reinstatement of the recently annulled Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

As one protestor put it: “That guarantee is our lifeline.”

In the winter session of Parliament, the central government made structural changes and renamed MGNREGA the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and

The long march of January 2026 was the rekindling of democratic assertion, the only weapon of the masses when the State reneges on its assurances

Ajeevika Mission Gramin (VB-G-RAM-G), reneging on a legal guarantee for work and placing the bulk of the burden of financing the scheme on the shoulders of state governments.

“Only changing the name is not enough,” Sakharam Kharpade, 45, from Murbad village, told the People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI). “There are more people in need of work and wages, but fewer villagers get work—maybe five or six at a time, out of hundreds.” PARI reported one of the protestors on the Palghar march, Lakshmi Dattu Boba, as saying: “Forget the whole year, we don’t get work ... for a day.” She, for one, would not shy away from taking to the streets again, if their demands remained unmet.

On 27 January, a delegation met chief minister Devendra Fadnavis in Mumbai. In a meeting that lasted over two hours,

Fadnavis provided point-by-point assurances that every single demand would be fulfilled within a three-month timeframe.

Dr Ajit Nawale of the AIKS told protestors that the CM had promised “all forest rights claims will be re-examined” to correct past injustices arising from incorrect departmental reports. It is a fact borne out by data that barring Gadchiroli and some other regions of eastern Maharashtra, the implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) in the state remains a non-starter, facing as it does stiff resistance from the department of forests.

The march was called off, but the accumulation of unaddressed grievances, the routine failure of governance and the insensitivity and inaccessibility of bureaucracy were repeatedly highlighted. The protestors affirmed their future course will depend on whether Fadnavis’ assurances translate into action. If not, they will march again.

The recent padayatra also served as a reminder that those who produce our food, steward our forests and sustain rural communities are not to be invisibilised—they are central actors in our economy. Even the route—the long stretch of highway connecting rural Nashik to metropolitan Mumbai—symbolised the socio-economic distance between policy pronouncements and their reality at the grassroot level.

Both the FRA and the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act were designed to shift power back to tribal and traditional forest-dwelling communities and extend meaningful local governance, but their spirit has been annulled by the State’s refusal to loosen its control over these precious resources. As a result, decades after these laws were passed, implementation remains shoddy, contested and slow.

Former MLA and CPI(M) leader Jeeva Gavit reminded people that the 2026 march merely sought enforcement of rights already on statutes, and noted that earlier meetings with officials—in 2018, 2019 and even as recently as 2023—did not yield tangible results. Can Fadnavis be trusted to deliver this time? ■

JAIDEEP HARDIKAR is a senior Nagpur-based journalist and author of Ramrao: The story of India’s farm crisis

Why are CAG warnings falling on deaf ears?

Sucheta Dalal

A decade and a half ago, a report of the comptroller and auditor general (CAG), claiming a huge ‘presumptive’ loss in the sale of telecom spectrum and coal blocks, ignited a nationwide movement against corruption and voted out the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. Today, a series of damning reports since December 2025, exposing systemic fraud across India’s flagship welfare schemes, are met with deafening silence.

CAG reports in the past weeks have exposed fraud and mismanagement in goods and services tax (GST) collections, direct benefit transfers (DBT), skill development schemes, housing programmes and healthcare delivery—with amounts running into thousands of crores of rupees. Yet, the findings of a constitutional audit authority no longer stir the national conscience. What explains this contrast?

Digital mirage

The ruling government has repeatedly claimed that DBT and ‘Digital India’ were a game-changer that enabled the smooth transfer of ₹34 lakh crore directly to beneficiaries and ‘saved’ ₹2.7 lakh crore. Ministers routinely disparage former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi’s 1985 observation that only 15 paise of every rupee reached the intended beneficiaries in drought-affected areas, contrasting this with much better quality of delivery. But recent CAG audits suggest digital systems have not solved this problem; nor can they hide it any longer.

On 18 December 2025, CAG Sanjay Murthy warned that thousands of crores of rupees were flowing through DBT systems without mandatory checks. CAG reports have flagged pensions being paid to thousands of deceased beneficiaries in 2023 because databases are not being ‘de-duplicated’ and many government departments continue to work in silos even within the same ministry. This indicates structural failures, despite the availability of much-vaunted

digital infrastructure.

CAG reports tabled at the end of 2025 and 2026—mostly for the period ending 2023—show that digital systems are often facilitating fraud rather than preventing it. The audits have flagged ghost payments, glitches, data fraud, payments to ineligible beneficiaries, unutilised funds and outright mismanagement leading to thousands of crore rupees being squandered, while the poorest Indians are denied welfare, homes and healthcare.

Our own digging into just 250 accounts with the Reserve Bank of India’s (RBI’s) Depositor Education and Awareness Fund (DEAF) shows welfare funds transferred to it after staying dormant for a decade.

Shockingly, even sophisticated, automated systems for tax collection have turned out to be dodgy. On 11 December 2025, a CAG audit exposed inconsistencies worth ₹21,695 crore in GST collections. The report detailed systemic failures including mismatches in input tax credit (ITC), compliance deviations in over 2,519 cases and short payments of tax and interest. If the country’s primary revenue engine is leaking, is it surprising that social welfare schemes are riddled with bigger holes?

Skills illusion

The rot extends to health and skill development. A performance audit on the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY),

That CAG findings provoke little to no public reaction shows that we have normalised corruption and the failures of governance

tabled in December 2025, revealed that between 2015 and 2022, over 94 per cent of beneficiary records—affecting 9.06 million people had missing, bogus or invalid bank details. Placeholders like ‘123456’ or ‘null’ were used for bank accounts, indicating that the identity of trainees and the veracity of payments cannot be trusted. Thousands of underage and ineligible candidates were certified and training partners made wildly fake claims such as conducting training on 31 February! While the government approved an additional ₹8,800 crore to restructure the mission in early-2025, lakhs of candidates did not receive the promised incentives.

Similarly, over ₹1,024 crore of Central funds for scheduled caste/scheduled tribe (SC/ST) students in Himachal Pradesh lay idle due to ‘non-compliance’, leading to dropouts among those who need the support most.

Awass Yojana fakes

The housing sector has an equally grim story. Despite claims of great progress, a recent CAG audit of the Pradhan Mantri Awass Yojana (PMAY) in Uttar Pradesh unearthed massive implementation gaps. Tens of thousands of houses claimed as ‘complete’ were found to be of poor quality or missing essential toilets, electricity and water. It also detected cyber fraud, where ₹86.20 lakh, intended for 159 beneficiaries, was diverted to unauthorised bank accounts.

In Chhattisgarh, housing benefits were handed to those earning above the income ceiling, while over ₹230 crore remained blocked due to geo-tagging and social audit issues. Significant funds were simply stuck and beneficiaries remained unpaid due to delays in fund transfers, inadequate beneficiary verification and unresolved payout issues.

Fatal failures

That CAG audit findings are not getting the attention they deserve is clear from the water contamination deaths in Indore which has been winning awards for being India’s cleanest city. A CAG audit in 2019, covering the period between 2013 and 2018, had warned that nearly



900,000 people were being supplied contaminated water. Remember, the audit covered a period from 2013 to 2018 and the vulnerability to raw sewage seeping into drinking water had been highlighted! This is by no means an exception. In 2024, a CAG report pointed out how urban local bodies had consistently failed to implement mandatory water quality testing and pipeline maintenance protocols. Activists have labelled this ‘criminal negligence’. And yet, in January 2026, over a dozen people lost their lives and hundreds of others fell ill after drinking water contaminated with sewage.

Parallel horrors have emerged in Delhi, our capital city. A Delhi Jal Board report tabled this month reports that 55 per cent of groundwater is unfit for consumption, posing serious health risks; moreover, carcinogenic poly-electrolytes continue to be used at water treatment plants, despite explicit bans.

The Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM) is similarly plagued by fraud and misreporting. While funds flow into JJM, the water pipelines are often missing or remain dry after installation. A policy circle report documents over 17,000 complaints involving procurement lapses and has recorded price deviations of up

to 30 per cent in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, leading to the blacklisting of several contractors and action against 2,300 officials.

Healthcare travails

Nowhere is the crisis of accountability more visible than in healthcare. The CAG’s 2023 performance audit of the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) had already made headlines when it exposed 749,000 ‘ghost’ beneficiaries registered under a single fake mobile number (9999999999). By January 2024, the rot had spread to what investigators call a ‘murder for money’ racket. In Gujarat, a doctor was arrested for performing unnecessary heart surgeries on villagers solely to siphon off PMJAY funds. Over 1,000 hospitals have since been de-empanelled and ₹231 crore in penalties levied. At the same time, private hospitals are increasingly refusing to offer ‘free’ treatment, frustrated with losses resulting from unpaid reimbursement. Every other day, viral media posts have exposed the hollowness of the healthcare promise, even while large sums are earmarked for the scheme.

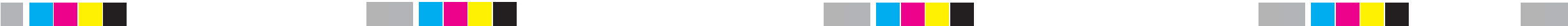
Normalising failure

That CAG findings provoke little

public reaction shows that we have normalised corruption and failure, or worse, that citizens are barely aware that vast sums allocated for poverty reduction in every Union Budget are simply not delivering results. Digital India was meant to remove intermediaries; instead, it has often replaced them with opacity, automated fraud and ghost beneficiaries. Those who attempted to expose scholarship scams have paid with their lives. Even the connection between large public infrastructure projects and election funding—outside the CAG’s remit—has come to be accepted without serious scrutiny of shoddy execution, planning failures or outright collapse.

CAG fulfils its constitutional role by documenting these failures; but its reports increasingly resemble post-mortems on programmes already buried by the time Parliament sees them. When the media does not carry these findings forward, citizens lack the information needed to demand accountability, prosecution or structural reform. In the absence of such pressure, governance is being driven more by propaganda than by the delivery of a better quality of life. ■

The piece first appeared in moneylife.in



The changing face of Banaras

The ongoing makeover of this holy city, for the consumption of Hindu tourists, is stripping it of its soul, writes **Vishwanath Gokarn**

It is said that Kashi exists outside of time. That it is enchanted, otherworldly, incomparable—a riddle, a mystery, a giver of salvation (or ‘moksha’ in the Hindu tradition). In Kashi, death is considered auspicious. Kashi is soaked in Shiva, steeped in knowledge, a oldest city of spiritual powers. The bedrock of this land, Kashi has been described in these very terms in the Puranas—from the Shiva Purana to the Skanda Purana to the Vishnu Purana. That world is now behind us. This is a different age.

Kashi is keeping pace with the times, turning towards what is called ‘development’. In the process, it’s not just changing its appearance but its immanent character as well. Present day Kashi/ Banaras/ Varanasi seems to have escaped the paranes of scripture into the brochures of the tourism industry. Kashi is no longer a repository of ritual or ancient knowledge. Today, the city brings to mind tourism, the hotel industry, food carnivals; it’s a hub of every imaginable kind of street food.

There was a time when Kashi meant broken, narrow lanes; single-track roads; filth at every corner; heaps of garbage; the sluggish crawl of cycle rickshaws; people loitering and spitting paan. Everyone was part of this—Hindu and Muslim alike. Traffic was a nightmare. There were no traffic cops at crossings, no signals. Jams would form anytime, anywhere. Getting from one place to another often felt impossible.

That meaning of Kashi has changed—or is changing. Today, its lanes are paved with neatly laid stone blocks. Walls once permanently stained with paan spit now carry painted narratives of Kashi’s legends. Many roads that were once single-lane have been widened into four-lane thoroughfares. In temple areas, streets and lanes are cleaned two or three times a day; there’s no garbage in sight. Partial cleaning of the ghats and the Ganga itself has changed the city’s appearance.

Kashi has always been divided into two parts—‘Pakka Mahaal’ and ‘Kachcha Mahaal’. Pakka Mahaal—the old Banaras—was the neighbourhood of permanent houses, inhabited largely by



Cremations continue at Manikarnika Ghat even as one side is being flattened to give it a new look

Photo: Getty Images

orthodox Hindu families. Kachcha Mahaal once consisted of mud houses with handlooms installed inside them to weave the famed Banarasi saris. Since those weavers were predominantly Muslim, this was a predominantly Muslim area.

But as power looms replaced handlooms, these houses too became permanent structures. Improvements in streets and infrastructure are now visible everywhere. There was a time when bypasses, flyovers or ring roads were unimaginable in Kashi; today, they are a reality.

Work is underway to widen

For the common people of Banaras, the new wave of ‘development’ has alienated them from the city they still call home

several narrow lanes leading to the Kashi Vishwanath corridor and the Ganga ghats into four-lane roads. Hundreds of houses are being vacated after compensation. The most prominent among these is the Daalmandi area. Daalmandi is one of the city’s largest commercial hubs. Its lane is historic, with a daily turnover running into crores of rupees.

There is anger among sections of Banaras over the widening of Daalmandi. They argue that demolition is happening because most residents here are Muslim. It’s true that most properties belong to one community, but more than half the business conducted in Daalmandi involves traders from the other community. From cosmetics to sundry bric-a-brac and every other imaginable commodity—both wholesale and retail markets across Banaras depend on Daalmandi. If the buildings disappear, where will this market go? Both communities are caught in this uncertainty.

A similar situation has unfolded in the Ardali Bazaar area near the district court. As the name suggests, this locality once belonged to court attendants (*ardali*). When their children took up hockey, the area came to be known as a nursery

of Indian hockey. Nearly every household in this tiny stretch of 200-odd metres produced at least one player who competed at the national level. Nearly a dozen represented India at the junior or senior level.

It was in this area that a star named Mohammad Shahid was born—often called India’s second Dhyana Chand. Shahid represented India in three Olympic Games, captained the Indian hockey team and was honoured with the Arjuna Award and the Padma Shri. The road was named Mohammad Shahid Marg in his honour.

That area has now been demolished in the name of road widening. Around 47 houses—including Mohammad Shahid’s—have been razed. The signboard bearing Shahid’s name has been uprooted. Even the compensation given to residents here is far lower than what was paid in the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor project.

The winds of development have now reached Manikarnika Ghat. Thirty-eight new cremation platforms are being built, each fitted with tall chimneys. Old *madhis*, structures where priests once sat, are being demolished to expand the ghat. The wood trade here is also set to come under

government control. Plans include community buildings, public toilets and other facilities. Officials claim all this is for the convenience of those who come to cremate their dead.

But the old-timers of Banaras are deeply disturbed. They argue that mourners have never sought these amenities, that people who come here to grieve their departed are not looking for conveniences. Negotiations over the price of firewood are understandable, they say, but they oppose the removal of traditional wood traders. As for toilets—defecating near the Ganga has always been considered a sin in Kashi. Who, then, wants toilets at Manikarnika?

It is widely rumoured that the redevelopment of Manikarnika is meant to favour the head priest of a nearby ashram. Close to the powers that be, he is allegedly pushing to shift the ancient Mahashmashan (crematorium) itself. Recently, a tourism official in Banaras announced that Manikarnika will soon be added to city tour packages, that Indian and foreign tourists will be taken on guided tours to the great cremation ground. For the ‘moksha tour’, the Mahashmashan too is being equipped with various modern amenities. In other words, Manikarnika—as indeed the sacred city of Kashi itself—is being readied to woo and wow the tourist.

For now, Banaras is struggling with the return flow of pilgrims coming back from the Magh Mela in Prayagraj. This is an old problem, and traffic jams are worse at this time. So, a ropeway is being introduced. Running between Varanasi Junction and Dashaashwamedha Ghat, it will operate 148 gondolas, each carrying 18 passengers. There will be five stations, all under construction. Each station is being designed like a small mall.

The hotel industry is expanding aggressively in anticipation of greater tourist traffic. Homestays and guesthouses have mushroomed in every lane. Since the cricket stadium began coming up on the city’s outskirts, luxury hotels have lined up. Taj, Ramada, Radisson were already present, now hospitality giants have bought ancient riverside buildings, dressed them up as heritage properties, and

spread their footprint along the Ganga.

Seeing this boom, royal families across the country have begun converting their historic ghat-side properties into hotels. The Taj group has bought the sprawling Mehta Hospital at Ram Ghat and turned it into Taj Avantika. The Scindia family has initiated the conversion of its Ganga Mahal near Manikarnika into a hotel, set to open soon. The palace houses an ancient Lakshmi Narayan temple. Another Balaji temple owned by the Scindias at Panchganga Ghat is also slated for similar conversion.

Earlier, reaching ghat-side hotels was a challenge. Government intervention has changed that. Tourists are now brought by road from the airport to Namo Ghat, then transferred to their hotels on steamers or cruise vessels. Soon, helicopter services will begin from the airport to Namo Ghat; three helipads have already been built. Hundreds of steamers and boats operate daily, besides a dozen-odd cruise vessels, to give tourists a look-see of all the 84 ghats. A regular cruise service from Kashi to Gangasagar is also in the works.

Since the construction of the Kashi Vishwanath corridor, the city has transformed. Ayodhya has now been added to pilgrimage packages that include Kashi, Gaya and Prayag, swelling tourist numbers from India and abroad. The Vindhyachal corridor has further increased the influx. Soon, work will begin on the Kaalbhairava corridor, stretching from Kaalbhairava to the Bindumaadhava temple—known as Kashi’s Vaikunth Lok. This is the very site where Aurangzeb demolished the temple and built the Aalamgir mosque.

If construction begins this year, pilgrimage will take on an entirely new dimension.

The administrative machinery of Banaras is pleased with the tourism boom. But its people are not. For the commonfolk of Banaras, this wave of ‘development’ has alienated them from the city they still call home. The reels and memes flooding social media do not tell the truth of Banaras, they insist. ■

Translated from the Hindi original, simultaneously published in Sunday Navjivan, issue date: 1 February

Being anti-Muslim is Dhami’s survival tool

A new report sheds light on Uttarakhand’s politics of hate

Rashme Sehgal

Bulle Shah, the Sufi mystic known as the ‘father of Punjabi enlightenment’ is revered by Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims alike for his powerful poetry championing love, unity and spiritual freedom. On 24 January, a handful of fanatics belonging to the Hindu Raksha Dal broke into the Wynberg-Allen school in Mussoorie and demolished his shrine, claiming that the 100-year old structure was an illegal encroachment on their ‘Devbhoomi.’ They were so confident that no action would be taken against them that they even uploaded a video of demolishing it with hammer and rods. The Uttarakhand police registered FIRs against three individuals but made no arrests.

In November 2025, another century-old mazaar, located inside Doon School, was demolished at the behest of another Hindutva group led by hate-monger Radha Dhoni who heads Sanatan Sanskriti, a right-wing organisation whose reason for existence seems to be to target Muslim shopkeepers, road-side chaiwalas and rehriwalas (street vendors).

Uttarakhand chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami, whose son is a student at Doon School, takes pride in informing the public that over 400 ‘illegally constructed’ mazaars have been demolished during his tenure. Leaning on a survey undertaken by his own officials (you can imagine how objective that would be) Dhami claims his government has recovered 5,000 acres from ‘land jihadists’.

Two enterprising activists

decided to get to the truth behind this relentless anti-Muslim propaganda. They travelled the length and breadth of Uttarakhand to document how Muslims have been victims of violence between 2021-25 with several hundred being forced to flee their homes to become refugees in their own country. The report titled ‘Excluded, targeted and displaced: Communal narratives and violence in Uttarakhand’ was published on 22 January by the Association of Protection of Civil Rights (APCR). It reinforces our worst fears about how a peaceful state has mutated into a hot bed of fanaticism.

The hate-mongering campaign was kicked off in December 2021 at the Haridwar Dharma Sansad, where Yati Narasinghanand, Prabodhanand Giri, Patindranand Giri, Sadhvi Annapurna, Swami Anand Svaroop and Kalicharan Maharaj openly called for a Hindu Rashtra and the killing of Muslims. Their speeches triggered a surge in violence, economic boycotts and hate crimes climaxing in the Purolo incident of 2023, where a false kidnapping case led to Muslim families fleeing and selling their properties. This model spread to Tehri, Uttarkashi, Chamoli and Gairsain. Dhami amplified this brazen communalism by harping on ‘land jihad’, ‘mazaar jihad’, ‘thook jihad’ and ‘love jihad’. Days after the India Hate Lab’s annual report labelled the Uttarakhand chief minister as ‘the most prolific hate speech actor’ of 2025, Dhami responded by saying he “accepts the tag”. His latest fatwa is banning the entry of non-Hindus to Kedarnath and Badrinath.

What is unique about the APCR

report is the recording of testimonies of those at the receiving end of orchestrated violence in Uttarakhand. It also documents the role of the police, who remain mute spectators, refusing in most cases to take action against the perpetrators. Here are a few examples:

On 23 October 2024, right-wing groups led by Swami Darshan Bharti, head of Devbhoomi Raksha Abhiyan, took out a rally demanding the demolition of a mosque in Uttarkashi’s Barahahat. Shops owned by Muslims were vandalised and looted. Reshma Hussain, 37, the only earning member of a family of four said, “They broke the lock of my shop and barged in. I suffered a loss of around 1 lakh rupees.”

In the nearby town of Srinagar, a local BJP leader Lakhpatri Bhandari instigated the exodus of



Bulle Shah’s mazaar in Mussoorie, which was vandalised on 24 January

15 Muslim families who were forced to return to Najibabad. Shoaib Akhtar, a school teacher at a government school in Srinagar, said, “Lakhpatri Bhandari was invited as chief guest for a function where the principal [of the school where Shoaib teaches] spoke about love jihad and land jihad. If a principal talks like this in public, what kind of impression does that leave on students?”

An English teacher in the same school asked Ahmed, a Class 12 student, why people like him were taking over land to build illegal mosques. “What land have I captured? I feel targeted,” said Ahmed.

Mukesh Semwal, a social activist based in Srinagar, believes this communal unrest was deliberately stoked for the BJP to win the Kedarnath assembly polls, especially after having lost Ayodhya and Badrinath.

In August 2024, communal tension worsened in Chauras after right-wing groups forced five Muslim shopkeepers and their families to flee. The provocation? A Hindu woman and a Muslim man who came from Najibabad were said to be in a relationship.

Wasim, the father of the boy who had been accused of ‘love jihad’,

said, “They were friends. Is friendship a crime? Will our children consider religion before befriending someone? They instigated our exodus based on baseless rumours. Even the girl’s family did not file a complaint against my son.”

Fifty-year-old Taseem Ahmed has lived in the town of Gauchar in Chamoli district for the last 45 years. His brother got into a fight with a Hindu man over the parking of his scooty on 15 October 2024. The Hindutva brigade forced ten Muslim shopkeepers to leave the town.

“It is shocking how such a small fight over parking changed our lives for the worse. We lived there for 45 years. Everybody in the locality knew us by name. But nobody supported us. We left Gauchar at midnight,” said Ahmed.

In Nandprayag, Chamoli district, the anti-Muslim campaign took a violent turn in August-September 2024 after eve-teasing allegations against a Muslim barber. On 22 August, the barber was asked to vacate his shop. He went back to Najibabad.

Uthman Hassan, the owner of a drycleaning shop for 20 years, and a resident of Nanda Ghat since 1975, said at least 15 families had to flee

on the night of 3 September.

“On 31 August, the locals held a meeting and filed an FIR against the Muslim barber... On 1 September, the vyapar mandal gave a call to protest in front of Nanda Ghat police station. We Muslims also went to the protest. We thought we should support our business community. Little did we know that there was no solidarity among businessmen. We were targeted based on our religion. Anti-Muslim slogans were raised at the meeting such as ‘Mullon ke dalaalon ko joote maar saalon ko’ (Beat the bastard brokers of mullahs).”

Hassan’s shop was broken into by the Hindutva mob who stole Rs 4 lakh from his cash box. They looted everything and threw it in the river. He blamed Darshan Bharti, the Hindutva leader who led the Uttarkashi rally against the mosque. “I still get shivers recalling that incident...”

Hassan filed a plea in the Uttarakhand High Court asking for protection. Despite the court ordering the SSP to ensure that no untoward incident took place against any community, none of the Muslims felt safe enough to return. Hassan re-opened his shop, only to find that nobody was willing to support or even talk to him, as if he was a criminal.

At present, Hassan is the lone Muslim living in Nanda Ghat. This is a sad commentary on our times.

If you need any further indication of Dhami’s communally-led agenda, consider the passing of the Uniform Civil Code of Uttarakhand Act, 2024, the enactment of the Freedom of Religion and Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion (Amendment) Bill, and the Minorities Educational Institutions Bill, 2025 which dissolves the Muslim-controlled Madrasa Education Board (where Muslims held 9 of 12 seats) and replaces it with a government body where Muslims hold only one of 12 seats.

Having failed on the governance front, Dhami is confident that his xenophobic discourse will pay electoral dividends in the assembly elections of 2027. ■

Form 7 a weapon of mass deletion

»Continued from page 1

Their refusal to follow ‘procedure’ did not go down well with the officials. As their narrative on the bulk submission of fake Form 7s went viral on social media, all five BLOs received show cause notices (dated 22 January) from the electoral officer of 123-Karimgunj North constituency.

They stand accused of unauthorised interactions with media personnel and making public statements on objections and deletions. The notice also claims that their social media video did not ‘correctly and fully reflect the actual legal and procedural position... that claims and objections are processed strictly as per law and no voter entry is deleted or modified without due verification and completion of the prescribed statutory procedure’.

All 133 forms were submitted using the name and EPIC number of one Selim Ahmed, who denied any knowledge of the objections attributed to him. “I’m unemployed and know nothing of the incident,” Ahmed told *National Herald*, adding with a hint of dark humour, “I myself have been listed as a dead voter among these 133 names.”

Ahmed has filed an affidavit with the deputy commissioner of Sribhumi district, objecting to the misuse of his name for en masse deletions.

*

“If Himanta Biswa Sarma is so confident of winning the election, why delete Muslim voters through fake objections?” asked Sushmita Dev, Rajya Sabha member and national spokesperson of Trinamool Congress. “He has already carried out delimitation and eviction of Muslims and denied Muslim voters into 22 constituencies. He knows he cannot win these seats, but all he cares about is polarising the state on communal lines!”

Is the BJP in Assam—reeling under allegations of corruption and poor performance—banking on ‘tailormade’ electoral rolls to win the upcoming assembly elections? The draft electoral rolls were published on 27 December, and then came the spate of objections, via Form 7.

What reinforces the widespread suspicion of foul play is another plea submitted by 22 inhabitants of the Borkhola constituency—all Muslims—seeking the registration o=f an FIR against one Mohan Lal Das. The petition accuses Das of fraudulently filing objections and falsely claiming they had requested that their



names be dropped from the electoral roll.

Writing to the chief election commissioner on 23 January, Sushmita Dev drew attention to the unusually high number of objections filed across several constituencies: approximately 15,304 in 118-Silchar LAC, 9,671 in 116-Katigorah, 8,602 in 50-Mangaldoi, 10,151 in 30-Zhajo-Sualkuchi and 10,249 in 38-Barkhetri.

‘To serve each and every such voter a notice and conduct a hearing within 11 days is an impossible task, which is bound to deprive genuine voters of an effective hearing, leading to the loss of their democratic right to vote,’ Dev noted. ■

SOURABH SEN is a Kolkata-based independent writer and commentator on politics, human rights and foreign affairs

Is the BJP in Assam banking on tailormade electoral rolls to win the upcoming assembly elections?

“Nobody wins if we let politics spill onto the cricket pitch”

Has the International Cricket Council (ICC), the global governing body for the game, turned into a glorified event manager? The question has acquired a bleeding edge ahead of the T20 World Cup 2026—and it bothers former ICC chairman Ehsan Mani no end.

Now 80, the suave chartered accountant from Pakistan spent his best years as part of a cricketing ecosystem where the big guns of the Indian subcontinent believed in working together to make their voices heard.

Mani was ICC chairman between 2003 and 2006, the period when its headquarters shifted to Dubai, and chairman of its finance & commercial affairs committee between 1996 and 2002. As the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) representative from 1989 to 1996, and then 2018–2021—brought back at the behest of Imran Khan, then prime minister of Pakistan—Mani was an influential voice in the ICC boardroom.

This January, there’s a sense of déjà vu from last year’s ICC Champions Trophy. Bangladesh, in the thick of it this time, argues that India was given preferential treatment. When India refused to play in host country Pakistan citing a ‘threat perception,’ it was allowed to play all its matches in Dubai, while other teams had to shuttle between Pakistan and the UAE. When Bangladesh pressed its case after the Mustafizur Rehman row, the ICC refused to budge and voted them out of the tournament.

With Bangladesh holding firm and Pakistan keeping the ICC waiting, there may well be an implosion in cricket’s power corridors unless a semblance of fair play is re-introduced in the way the ICC treats member countries. What would Mani’s recipe be to restore its credibility? Excerpts from a conversation with Gautam Bhattacharyya:

Is the troubled build-up to the T20 World Cup a wake-up call for the ICC, facing allegations of an India bias?

Yes, India’s stranglehold on the ICC’s decision-making process is damaging. There needs to be a serious governance review as all board members are thinking about their own interests rather than the sport. Chairman Jay Shah is in a terribly conflicted position. For neutrality and greater transparency, I feel there is a need for more independent directors.

That’ll require a new constitution, which may not be easy. Can the more powerful boards make a difference if they speak up?

England and Australia are the biggest culprits for letting the status quo prevail. They are frightened of upsetting India as that would mean a huge loss of revenue. The last England versus India Test series was one of the best in recent times—with a great turnout at all venues. Both these countries are in a position to speak their minds, but their boards don’t want to rock the boat.



Erstwhile Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) chairman Ehsan Mani

As someone who ran ICC’s financials for several years, what do you feel about the unequal distribution of funds among member countries?

It’s a valid grouse as the money should go where it’s needed most. What’s the point of giving small amounts to the West Indies, which consists of so many islands, or to South Africa? New Zealand can still manage because they have a small population. Meanwhile, new full member nations like Afghanistan and Ireland don’t even get enough money to give their cricketers full-time professional status.

In our time, [Jagmohan] Dalmiya and I insisted that every country should play each other every four years—that doesn’t happen anymore. You only have the creamy layer playing the full five Test series among themselves. No one is looking after cricket; they’re looking after themselves.

Do you think Bangladesh had a strong enough case to pull out?

The ICC should not have allowed it to come to this. That’s why I say a governance review is so critical. First, the BCCI shouldn’t have dropped a player [Mustafizur Rehman] from IPL after accepting him in auction. When India cannot guarantee the security of one player, the question about their team’s safety is certainly relevant.

But they made a tactical error—their government should have taken the lead in forbidding the team from going to India, not the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB). India did that when they refused to travel to Pakistan for the ICC Champions Trophy. Pakistan insisted on the same rules being applied, and the hybrid model was accepted.

The hybrid model may have defused the crisis of venue selection for India-Pakistan matches

till 2027 but is it a permanent solution?

It’s the wrong solution. Cricket should follow the IOC or FIFA model. The host country should be in a position to issue visas and ensure the safety and security of players and officials, or lose the right to host.

India and Pakistan have had their share of conflicts. Remember, Kargil happened in 1999. There was a period of five years or so when the two countries didn’t play bilateral series. I engaged with the Indian government and we hosted them in 2004. It was a great series. During our time, be it Sir Clyde Walcott, Dalmiya or myself, we didn’t allow politics to muddy administration.

The ICC ploy to always club India, Pakistan in the same group in major tournaments may be a money-spinner but doesn’t it dilute the importance of other fixtures? Even the ACC now does the same...

True. As PCB chairman, whenever I asked, the ICC would put it on the broadcasters. I told them they needed our permission. If India is taking a major part of the revenue despite Pakistan being an equal stakeholder, what’s in it for us? Rameez (Raja), who succeeded me in the PCB role, didn’t follow through on that.

If all goes well, India and Pakistan will play on 15 February in Colombo. Do you foresee a replay of the handsbake row?

Cricketers around the world are a community and respect each other. The kind of adulation Virat Kohli enjoys among the players of Pakistan is no secret.

Nobody wins if India–Pakistan politics is allowed to spill onto the cricket turf. That’s why I found (Gautam) Gambhir’s justification of his players’ stance wrong. That kind of thing shouldn’t happen. ■

“We didn’t pay for fish, now we worry about jobs”

Pankaj Chaturvedi writes the obituary of a way of life as the development juggernaut rolls on in the Great Nicobar

Conservation, prime minister Narendra Modi once said, is an article of faith for his government. Yet the drift of his government’s ‘development’ drive—be it in the Himalayan state of Uttarakhand or the country’s forest areas or the island outposts of Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands—suggests the exact opposite. Let’s take, for example, the misleadingly named ‘The Great Nicobar Holistic Development Project (emphasis added).

Despite environmental red flags, ethical concerns and legal hurdles, the government looks all set to clear the Rs 92,000 crore infrastructure push to transform the southern Andaman and Nicobar Islands into a strategic maritime hub near the Malacca Strait.

Envisaged as one of the world’s busiest transhipment ports, the project includes an airport large enough to allow the largest commercial aircraft to land, a township for an initial population of 3.5 lakh, a power plant and demarcated areas for ‘tourist resorts’. The scale is unimaginable for the fragile Andaman and Nicobar Islands, if concern for the environment is any sort of consideration. But, of course, the development juggernaut must roll on.

The environmental clearances for the project are before a bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT), which had reserved its order in November last year. The forest clearances have been challenged in the Calcutta High Court, where the matter has been posted for ‘final hearing’ in the week beginning 30 March.

Meanwhile, serious allegations have



The extent of damage to the fragile ecosystem of Andaman and Nicobar Islands is unimaginable

emerged from the islanders. On 22 January the Tribal Council in Little and Great Nicobar alleged it was being pressured to “surrender our ancestral land”. Council chairman Barnabas Manju, said officials called a meeting on 7 January at the PWD guesthouse in Campbell Bay, produced maps of the project area, sought the views of council members of the Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS) and asked them to sign a ‘surrender certificate’. The AAJVS is an autonomous body established in 1976 under the Registration of Societies Act 1861, dedicated to the protection, welfare and development of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. “The

meeting lasted barely ten minutes,” Manju said.

Earlier, in August 2025, the Tribal Council had in a letter to Union tribal affairs minister Jual Oram complained that the A&NI administration had made a ‘false representation’ to the Centre claiming that forest rights of locals had been identified and settled as per provisions of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) when, in fact, the processes had “not even been initiated”.

“If our forest rights have truly been settled, why are we being asked to sign a ‘surrender certificate?’” asked Manju.

The Tribal Council letter further states: “The Gram Sabha that is said to have given consent for forest diversion did not include the Nicobarese of Great Nicobar whose ancestral villages—Chingenh, Haeng Loi, Pulo Baha, Kokeon, Pulo Pakka and others—will be directly affected by the proposed project.’ These villages were evacuated after the 2004 tsunami and residents assured they would eventually return to their ancestral land. But the government has only now revealed its hand.

The project, warn anthropologists and activists, threatens some of the most vulnerable indigenous communities in the world. They point out that decades of state intervention have severely damaged the heritage, culture and environment of tribes like the Jarawas, the Great Andamanese and the Shompen.

The tribes are presented to tourists as exotic curiosities, the activists say with disgust. If they refuse to oblige, mainland settlers are dressed up as Jarawas and made to dance at the airport to welcome visitors. Jarawas, who for centuries had no interaction with the outside world, have been taught to wear clothes and forced to beg for money, alcohol and even betel leaves.

The ‘mission’ to ‘civilise’ the tribes has radically altered their lifestyle. “Earlier we never needed money,” says an ‘educated’ woman from the Great Nicobarese tribe. “We did not pay for fish, forest produce or coconut. Now we worry about money and jobs.” What is worse, she adds, is that there are no jobs. Children are refusing to attend school questioning the need for education when educated adults sit at home. “We have always been calm, peace-loving people; anger was alien to us, but now many of us

get angry,” she says.

Activists recall the efforts by officials to enrol the Shompen as voters. The Shompen, they say, have no concept of nation states, leave alone politics or political parties. UNESCO estimates their population at around 200, and even today there is little clarity on their numbers or location. “Yet we are hell-bent on delivering development to people we barely understand,” says one activist.

The southernmost island of the Nicobar archipelago, the Great Nicobar Biosphere reserve alone spans over 103,000 hectares of tropical evergreen forest and is home to nearly 650 plant species and more than 1,800 animal species, many of them endemic.

The government argues that the project is strategically vital. Great Nicobar is located near major international shipping routes. Its proximity to the Malacca Strait is frequently cited. A naval presence already exists here and ex-servicemen have been resettled in parts of the islands. Critics do not deny the strategic considerations but ask why the government is not keen on port expansion in Chennai or Visakhapatnam.

Environmental concerns remain central. While the government claims that fewer than one million trees will be felled, activists estimate the figure to be six or seven times higher. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands—a cluster of 572 islands—were recognised by UNESCO in 2013 under its Man and Biosphere Programme.

The project also plans to increase the population of the Nicobar islands from an estimated 8,000 tribespeople to over half a million. Activists describe this as cultural genocide with a devastating effect on the health, language and culture of the tribespeople. The Tribal Council suggested that development be allowed outside the tribal habitation, but this has been ignored.

Even worse, the environmental damage in Great Nicobar is supposed to be ‘compensated’ with afforestation in Haryana or Madhya Pradesh! This obviously makes no sense to communities whose livelihoods depend on their coconut groves, pandanus trees and forest produce and fruits or whose lands hold graves and sacred places. But faced with the might of a marauding state and powerful corporate interests, they are left with little room to resist. ■





Photos: Najeeb Shah

When a river turns into a faultline

K.A. Shaji on the attempt to recast an ecological and administrative issue as a civilisational conflict

At dawn in Thirunavaya, before the Bharathapuzha stirs, Muslim lotus growers step quietly into the shallow ponds close to the river. Their movements are careful and practised. Stems are cut, flowers gathered, mud washed away. By mid-morning, bundles of pink and white lotus are loaded onto autorickshaws and small trucks. They will travel to temples across Kerala—to Guruvayur, Sabarimala, Kodungallur—and also to several shrines in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Traders here say that when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the Guruvayur temple two years ago, the lotus offered to the deity likely came from these very ponds in Thirunavaya.

No drama here. No speeches about harmony. No statements on coexistence. The lotus simply moves from coexistence into Hindu ritual life, as it has for decades. This unremarkable continuity is the everyday reality of Thirunavaya. It is also the reality that sits awkwardly with the controversy that has now engulfed this riverside town.

The Maha Magha Mahotsavam (18 January to 3 February) in Thirunavaya was projected as Kerala's first 'Kumbh Mela' by organisers and sections of the political class. Even before the first ritual bath was taken, the festival triggered a storm: an

administrative stop memo was framed as proof of Hindu faith being threatened in Muslim majority Malappuram. Repeated often enough, the claim sounded plausible in distant television studios. On the ground, it quickly collapsed.

Thirunavaya is not an accidental venue. It occupies a distinctive place in Kerala's cultural memory. Situated on the banks of the Bharathapuzha, also known as the Nila, it was once the site of Mamankam, a medieval assembly held every twelve years. Mamankam was not a 'religious' festival, in the narrow sense of the word. It was a grand convergence of ritual, commerce, politics and spectacle. Pilgrims, traders, poets and warriors from across South India gathered on the river's wide sandbanks. The Bharathapuzha was the axis of this gathering. It did not divide communities. It brought them together.

By the late 18th century, Mamankam faded, disrupted by political upheaval and colonial intervention. But Thirunavaya did not lose its character as a place of convergence. Muslim and Christian settlements grew, shaping a town where shared spaces became the norm rather than the exception. The Navamukunda temple, one of the 108 Divya Desams of Vaishnavite tradition, continues to draw devotees.

Today, Thirunavaya's social life reflects

that layered history. Temple festivals depend heavily on Muslim percussionists, electricians and technicians. Many of the most sought-after chenda artists and fireworks experts are Muslim. Mosque renovations routinely employ Hindu labour. Church feasts spill into common streets and markets. These arrangements are not extraordinary, they are simply how life works here.

It is into this ecosystem that the Maha Magha Mahotsavam was introduced. Organisers of the festival called it a revival, a spiritual and cultural reawakening, an attempt to restore Thirunavaya to its historical prominence in the Hindu ritual calendar. Led by Swami Anandavanam Bharathi, a Mahaman-daleshwar associated with the Juna Akhara, one of the oldest monastic orders in India, the programme included daily ritual baths on auspicious dates, yajnas and homams, spiritual discourses, cultural performances, community feeding and commemorative rituals linked to the Mamankam tradition.

The ambition was evident. By invoking the language and symbolism of the Kumbh, the organisers sought to place Thirunavaya on a national religious map dominated by North Indian pilgrimage sites.

In early January, a stop memo directed the organisers to halt construction work on

the Bharathapuzha sand bed. This included the building of a temporary pedestrian bridge and ground-levelling by machines. Officials cited the absence of clear permissions, violation of river protection norms and concerns about public safety. The memo categorically applied only to construction activity on the riverbank. It did not prohibit the religious festival or ritual bathing. That distinction was quickly lost in the din.

Senior BJP leader Kummanam Rajasekharan publicly criticised the stop memo, calling it illegal and a violation of religious freedom. He alleged a conspiracy to sabotage the event and demoralise devotees.

As the political temperature rose, Malappuram district collector V.R. Vinod stepped in to contain the situation. Subsequently, the administration granted conditional permission, subject to strict compliance with safety and environmental norms.

The collector issued a detailed 21-point safety directive. It mandated certification of the temporary bridge by competent agencies, limits on the number of people allowed on it at any given time, round the clock deployment of lifeguards, 24-hour medical teams, emergency evacuation plans, sanitation facilities and coordinated crowd management systems. The organising committee was made responsible for ensuring compliance.

What vanished from the debate was the river. Bharathapuzha is Kerala's second longest river. It is also among the most degraded. Decades of sand mining, reduced flow due to upstream interventions, encroachments and pollution have left it ecologically vulnerable. Its wide, exposed sandbanks are symptoms of stress.

Environmental activists point out that mass gatherings on riverbeds pose real risks. Temporary structures can destabilise sand formations. Heavy footfall can accelerate erosion.

Waste generation can further pollute an already weakened river. These concerns apply regardless of whether the gathering is religious, political or commercial.

What gave the controversy a nasty edge was the way Malappuram entered the frame. As a Muslim-majority district, Malappuram has long been a convenient target for communal stereotyping. In this

case, administrative action was quickly recast as evidence of Muslim opposition to a Hindu festival.

There is no factual basis for this claim. No Muslim organisation issued a statement opposing the festival. There were no protests, no formal objections, no mobilisation.

What did circulate were rumours—WhatsApp forwards and online posts alleging that Muslims were stopping Kerala's Kumbh, that Malappuram was hostile to Hindu worship and concern for the river was 'a Muslim plot'.

Mainstream Muslim organisations and leaders chose not to dignify the controversy with comments, recognising it as an externally manufactured furor.

Malappuram-based author and documentary filmmaker Shajahan Thoppil put it clearly: "Malappuram is a land of harmony and coexistence. No hate agenda can survive here. What is being projected has very little to do with the lived reality of this place."

Examples of that lived reality are easy to find. In Angadipuram, home to the historic Thirumandhamkunnu temple, local Muslim communities have traditionally played a role in protecting temple processions, especially during periods of heightened communal tension elsewhere.

Such acts rarely attract attention because they disrupt the preferred narrative of conflict.

The political culture of the district has also played a role.

The Indian Union Muslim League, a major political force in Malappuram for decades, has consistently positioned itself as a stakeholder in communal peace, working to de-escalate sensitive moments.

During floods and other disasters, Malappuram has repeatedly demonstrated a capacity for collective response that cuts across religious lines.

Mosques have opened their halls as relief camps. Temples have run community kitchens. Churches have coordinated medical aid and rehabilitation.

At dawn, the lotus blooms still open quietly in the ponds of Thirunavaya. The Bharathapuzha flows on.

Long after the storms fade and the social media storms move elsewhere, the river will remain.

So, one remains, with the habits of coexistence it has nurtured. ■



No drama here. No speeches about harmony. No statements on coexistence. The lotus simply moves from Muslim ritual life, as it has for decades

How deep does Indian secularism run?

Yogendra Yadav

The Republic of India was founded seventy-six years ago, but the foundations of its inner life/ nature ('svadharma') were laid nearly 3,000 years earlier. The Indian Republic of today is a confluence of the currents of Bharatvarsha, Hindustan and India. Traces of every stage of this civilisational journey live in our collective subconscious. That is why the svadharma of the Indian Republic is neither rigid nor eternal. It is shaped by movement—both internal and external. Our svadharma is fluid, constantly in motion.

For this reason, the search for India's svadharma cannot be conducted in the so-called eternal values of ancient India. India's svadharma is not to be found only in formal documents, written ideals, established ideologies or institutional religious texts. It reveals itself in the language of movements. First Buddhist and Jain philosophy, then the Sufi and Bhakti traditions and, in the modern era, the national movement—each challenged entrenched power, interrogated civilisational values, stirred the public conscience, and in the process redefined our svadharma. By understanding these religious, social and political movements, we can broadly identify four threads that define the svadharma of the Indian Republic. This essay and the three that follow will examine these four threads.

The first thread of svadharma begins with 'maitri' (friendship), passes through the idea of 'sulah-e-kul', and arrives at the modern concept of secularism, or 'sarva dharma sambhava'. In contemporary debates on secularism, both sides often assume that secularism is a new idea—a new solution to a new problem. But seen from the perspective of Indian civilisation, neither the problem nor its solution are new. The coexistence of diverse views, sects, traditions and lineages has long been one of the defining features of Indian civilisation. That is why, from the very

beginning, efforts were made—by both society and the State—to develop this coexistence not merely as a condition or compulsion, but as an ideal. The idea of our civilisation animated the svadharma of our civilisation.

Maitri is often associated with Emperor Ashoka or with Gautam Buddha—and rightly so. But Buddhist philosophy itself developed an earlier idea. In the Rigveda, the deity Mitra symbolises covenant, harmony and concord. In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, 'Mitra' becomes a marker of balance and mutuality. Building on this lineage, Gautam Buddha establishes maitri (in Pali, 'metta') as an ideal—one of the four *brahmaaviharas*. Maitri is a mental disposition of non-hatred and equanimity. Ashoka's inscriptions transformed maitri into a social and political ideal. He linked the principles of non-hatred, non-violence and compassion with communal harmony. Though a Buddhist himself, Ashoka's edicts instruct respect for all *shramana* traditions (various Buddhist orders, Jains, Ajivikas and other mendicant sects) as well as

brahmanas (followers of the Vedic tradition). By institutionalising sarva dharma sambhava as state policy and restraint as a social ideal, Ashoka laid the groundwork for what we today call secularism.

Akbar's policy of sulah-e-kul expanded this principle of sarva dharma sambhava whose foundations Ashoka had laid. Whatever the personal religious inclinations of the emperor, the subjects would enjoy complete freedom of belief, worship and ritual. There would be no forced conversions. The state would not interfere in religious affairs, institutions or practices. Administrative laws and regulations would not belong to any one religion. No sect, denomination or faith would face discrimination. And the state would extend patronage and grants to all religious institutions and sites. Clearly, Akbar's policy was not secular in the modern sense—nor could it have been. The point is that Akbar recognised India's svadharma.

The secularism of our Constitution is

merely an extension of the policies of Ashoka and Akbar. This is also how the term 'secular' is used in contemporary India. In common usage, 'secularism' or '*dharma nirapekshata*' means viewing all religions and sects with equal regard and opposing the dominance of any one.

But if we examine the history of these words and their implications, neither *dharma nirapekshata* nor secularism in the European sense is quite adequate to explain this policy.

Since *dharma* in our tradition has never meant religion in the narrow sense, *dharma nirapekshata* unnecessarily conveys indifference to a society's moral values.

In this regard, the term *panth nirapekshata* used in the official Hindi text of the Constitution is more appropriate. Similarly, 'secularism' drags into our discourse a European context that has little to do with either our problem or its solution.

Our issue is not the relationship between Church and State. We face no threat of rule by a pope, a caliph or a

The secularism of our Constitution is not an import but an extension of the policies of Ashoka and Akbar



Photo: Getty Images

Translated and edited excerpts from the author's forthcoming book *Ganrajya ka Svadharma*, Setu Prakashan

Europe is late to its own sermon

Chanting ‘rules-based international order’ like an incantation is no substitute for consistency, writes **Ashok Swain**

When the prime minister of Canada, Mark Carney, told the world at Davos that the so-called ‘rules-based order’ was collapsing, it made headlines because it sounded like a verdict from inside the club. Yet the real shock is not that this order is dying, but that Western capitals kept pretending it was alive.

Carney’s intervention landed as Europe feels newly exposed. Donald Trump’s threats over Greenland unsettled Denmark and rattled those leaders who now sound like guardians of international law. Denmark, having fought alongside the US in Afghanistan and Iraq, finds itself treated as a disposable pawn. For decades, Europe accepted that America would always protect it. Now it sees a different America, one that views allies as leverage.

European leaders repeated ‘rules-based international order’ like a sacred incantation. But Europe is late to its own sermon. The order it claims to defend was not consistently rules-based; it was Western-led, often Washington-led. Europe was not an innocent bystander. It was a partner, sometimes enthusiastic, sometimes hesitant but rarely willing to break ranks.

The phrase itself has been slippery. It sounds neutral but isn’t. The order was never purely about law. It was about shaping the world to suit those who claimed to uphold the rules.

The post-Cold War period made this tension permanent. With the Soviet Union gone, the US stood unchallenged. That should have been the moment to strengthen international law and empower the UN. Instead, Washington increasingly treated global rules as optional. European allies adjusted their moral language accordingly.

The 1990s opened with a clear signal. In Panama, the US asserted the authority to seize foreign leaders, suspending sovereignty when it deemed necessary.

Justifications were dressed in legal terms, but the principle was raw power. Once normalised, the precedent was applied elsewhere.

Then came Afghanistan. The initial response to 9/11 found sympathy. But what followed was not self-defence. It became a 20-year occupation, a state-building experiment, marked by civilian deaths, torture and corruption. NATO allies did not offer token support; they made Afghanistan a shared Western project, staying long after the mission.

Iraq was more corrosive. Europe recalls it as an American mistake, but it is a selective memory. Key Western allies joined the 2003 invasion despite the lack of legal foundation and the collapse of the Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) justification. The West shattered a state in the Middle East and then spoke the language of order over the ruins.

Libya followed a similar script. The intervention was sold as protecting civilians but slid into regime change. The result was fragmentation, militia rule and chaos. Europe was not dragged in at gunpoint; Britain and France were deeply involved. The language of humanitarian responsibility again became a tool for destroying a government with no plan for what came after.

Syria represented a darker version. External powers backed armed actors, poured fuel into a civil war, and turned Syria into a proxy battlefield. The consequences were catastrophic for Syrians and destabilising for the region. When faced with the backlash of refugee flows, Europe pretended the crisis was not a manmade one.

Ukraine is where the claim becomes most revealing. After 2014, US intelligence involvement in Ukraine expanded beyond information sharing into deep security and political entanglement. In the crisis that culminated with President Yanukovich’s removal, Western involvement did not mean



The demise of the rules-based international order began the moment the West decided that rules were for others

tanks in the streets, but it did include years of political backing, diplomatic pressure and behind-the-scenes intelligence work that shaped the balance of forces.

The West’s commitment to sovereignty has always been selective. Some countries are treated as fully sovereign; others are treated as arenas where outside powers may intervene.

This selectivity becomes glaring when it comes to Israel. For decades, Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory has been treated as an exception. International law is invoked when convenient and softened when costly. Settlement expansion continues; civilian suffering is normalised through rituals of concern that rarely bring accountability. When Israel expands military action and carries out mass killings, Western

responses often tilt toward justification rather than enforcing universal standards.

Venezuela exposed the deepest hypocrisy. US military strikes hit targets around Caracas in a shock operation resembling a decapitation raid. Amid the chaos, American forces captured President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, flying them out to face prosecution in the US. Western allies who speak endlessly about sovereignty largely responded with silence. Europe’s failure to resist helped destroy the order it claims to uphold.

None of this is to say that Western states are uniquely destructive or that non-Western powers are guardians of law. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, China’s intimidation of Taiwan, and the crackdown on democracy and human rights by authoritarian and sectarian leaders in many parts

of the world, including in India, make that fantasy impossible. The point is simpler and more damning: the West built a narrative where it claimed to represent rules and law.

This is why Europe’s anxiety over Greenland is revealing. For years, European leaders participated in a world where the US could rewrite realities, topple governments, and impose punishment beyond borders, all the while insisting they were protecting order. For the first time, Europe now fears it could be treated the same way. It is discovering that loyalty to empire does not guarantee immunity from empire.

Carney’s message resonates because it admits what outsiders have long argued. The global system was marketed as universal but operated as a Western advantage. It spoke of free markets, democracy and human rights while tolerating occupations, sanctions and wars. Now Europe speaks of saving the rules-based order, as if it was pristine until Trump arrived. But Trump is not an alien invasion; he is a product of the American political system. The deeper logic is old: American primacy first, international law and rules second.

If Europe wants to blame someone for the order’s demise, it must start by looking in the mirror. For decades, European leaders chose alignment over independence. They chose the comfort of the American security umbrella while outsourcing moral responsibility. They joined legally questionable wars, tolerated occupations they condemned in theory, and justified a system where international law was applied unevenly.

Europe can still play a constructive role in rebuilding global norms, but not through nostalgia. It cannot chant ‘rules-based order’ as a substitute for consistency. If Europe truly wants rules, it must accept that they apply even when the violator is a friend and benefactor.

The demise of the rules-based order did not begin with Trump’s threats to Denmark; it began the moment the West decided that rules were for others. ■

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



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A CENTURY OF LIGHT: KARNATAKA’S TRIBUTE TO THE UNIVERSAL VISION OF SREE NARAYANA GURU

Photo: Gettyimages



The Golden Chapter: Gandhi And The Guru

December 2025 was also infused with deep historical resonance, marking exactly 100 years since the historic 1925 dialogue between Mahatma Gandhi and Sree Narayana Guru at the Sivagiri Ashram. Recalling this exchange, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah highlighted the famous mango-leaf analogy. When Gandhi compared human diversity to the varied leaves of a mango tree, Guru responded that while appearances may differ, the essence—the juice within—is the same.

This dialogue profoundly influenced Mahatma Gandhi, sharpening his stance against untouchability and contributing to the renaming of his newspaper to Harijan. By commemorating this centenary, the Government of Karnataka bridged the ideals of the freedom movement with contemporary struggles for social justice, reaffirming that the vision of Navabharata must be rooted in radical equality.

The Chief Minister traced the Guru’s influence in Karnataka to his 1908 visit to Mangaluru, facilitated by reformist leader Sahukar Koragappa. This visit culminated in the consecration of the Kudrolli Gokarnanatheshwara. This visit to Mangaluru, in the company of the reformist leader Sahukar Koragappa, in 1912, where Guru famously declared, “I have not installed your Shiva; I have installed our Shiva,” asserting the universal right to divinity.

commitment to social justice, secular values, and ethical governance. Their joint participation reaffirmed Sivagiri as a unique space where spirituality, governance, ethics, and nation-building intersect meaningfully.

“Sree Narayana Guru was not just a saint; he was a movement for equality and morality,” Siddaramaiah stated in his address. He observed that the Guru’s philosophy offers a clear response to contemporary challenges posed by religious majoritarianism and identity politics devoid of justice. Guru, he noted, understood that when religion is stripped of compassion and ethics, it becomes an instrument of domination rather than liberation. The Chief Minister urged that the Sivagiri Pilgrimage continue to evolve as an intellectual and global movement of humanity, not as a ritual confined to symbolism.

A Legacy Without Borders: The Five-Acre Vision

Recognising that the Guru’s transcendence administrative boundaries, the Government of Karnataka has taken a historic step to establish a permanent institutional presence for Sivagiri within the state. During the centenary celebrations of the Mahasamadhi of Sree Narayana Guru held in December 2025, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah announced that the Government of Karnataka would allocate five acres of land in either Dakshina Kannada or Udupi district for a branch of the Sivagiri Mutt.

The announcement, made at Mangalagangothri campus, was accompanied by clear directions to senior leaders, including Legislative Council Member Shri B.K. Hariprasad, to expedite the identification of suitable land so that the project could move forward without delay.

The proposed Sivagiri Mutt branch in Karnataka is envisioned not merely as a place of worship, but as a comprehensive centre for social reform, vocational and industrial training, spiritual education, and intellectual dialogue. In keeping with the Guru’s own instructions for his institutions, the centre is expected to house a library, vocational training facilities, and a Brahma Vidhyalaya model.

It is intended to serve as a hub where youth can learn that true strength arises from organisation and that true enlightenment flows from education—principles that formed the backbone of the Guru’s transformative success in Kerala and beyond.

Education As Liberation: The Mangalore University Milestone

The intellectual heart of this movement finds its strongest institutional expression at Mangalore University’s Konaje campus. On December 3, 2025, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah inaugurated the newly completed Brahmarshree Narayana Guru Study Chair (Adhyayana Peetha)

building complex, a landmark academic initiative spanning over 1,457 square metres.

The building stands as a living monument to the Guru’s conviction that education is the ultimate tool for liberation from the “slavery of the mind.” Designed as a theme-based study centre, the complex integrates reflection, rigorous scholarship, and social history. It includes spaces dedicated to meditation on universal human values, facilities for academic research on Guru’s seminal works such as the Atmopadesa Satakam, and a museum documenting the history of social justice movements in coastal Karnataka.

During the inauguration, the Chief Minister also laid the foundation stone for Phase II expansion, supported by an additional investment of ₹3 crore. This expansion will facilitate research fellowships, academic exchanges, and international conferences, positioning Mangalore University as a global hub for the study of social harmony, ethical governance, and U.T. Khader.

Speaker Shri R.T. Khader announced that the university grounds hosting these historic events would be officially named “Guru–Gandhi Maidan,” symbolising the convergence of two of the twentieth century’s most influential moral reformers.

A Vision for the Vishwamanava

Karnataka’s commitment to the Guru’s legacy extends far beyond physical infrastructure. Under the leadership of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, the state institutionalised the statewide celebration of Brahmarshree Narayana Guru Jayanti in 2016. The Guru’s life and philosophy have also been integrated into school textbooks, ensuring that future generations inherit a moral compass grounded in equality, compassion, and human dignity.

In his concluding remarks at various centenary events, the Chief Minister emphasised that development must be measured not merely by roads and bridges, but by the dignity afforded to every individual. “When someone undergoes surgery, no one asks the caste of the person whose blood saved them,” he observed. “But once cured, we return to those questions. This mindset must change.”

Through the Study Chair, the proposed Sivagiri Mutt branch, and the sustained promotion of the Guru’s ideals, the Government of Karnataka is ensuring that the “sap” of humanity remains pure, regardless of the “leaves” we represent.

As the 93rd Sivagiri Pilgrimage concluded and new institutions opened their doors, a clear message resonated across Karnataka and beyond: the state is not merely participating in the legacy of Sree Narayana Guru—it is carrying his flame forward as a modern custodian of ethical nation-building.

Jai Hind. Jai Samvidhan.
Jai Narayana Guru.

The Chief Minister’s presence alongside Kerala Chief Minister Shri Pinarayi Vijayan, and a high-level delegation that included AICC General Secretary Shri K.C. Venugopal, highlighted a shared southern commitment to social justice, secular values, and ethical governance. Their joint participation reaffirmed Sivagiri as a unique space where spirituality, governance, ethics, and nation-building intersect meaningfully.

The Dawn of a Moral Revolution

In the quiet, salt-misted air of Varkala and the vibrant academic landscape of Mangaluru, a profound historical resonance has been felt this season—one that seamlessly bridges geography, history, governance, and conscience. Across temple courtyards echoing with reflection, university campuses alive with scholarly debate, pilgrimage paths filled with seekers, and public platforms resonating with democratic ideals, the timeless philosophy of Sree Narayana Guru has once again emerged as India. At this significant juncture, under the visionary leadership of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, the Government of Karnataka has embarked on an ambitious and purposeful journey not merely to commemorate the Guru, but to institutionalise his universal philosophy within the very framework of governance, education, and social development.

This endeavour marks more than a commemorative exercise. It represents a conscious reorientation of public life toward ethical clarity and social justice. It is the narrative of a state that looks decisively toward a future of total inclusivity by anchoring its public policy, cultural engagement, and institutional vision in the Guru’s revolutionary proclamation of “One Caste, One Religion, One God for Mankind.” At a time when societies across the world grapple with polarisation, inequality, and moral uncertainty, Karnataka’s initiatives stand as a deliberate affirmation that enduring reform lies in the moral foundations laid by India’s great social philosophers.

For decades, the coastal belt of Karnataka has shared a deep spiritual and intellectual artery with the reform movements of Kerala. Long before political boundaries hardened into administrative divisions, ideas flowed freely across the coastlines of the Arabian Sea. The message of Sree

Narayana Guru—one that ignited a powerful sense of self-respect among oppressed and marginalised communities in the late nineteenth century—found particularly fertile ground in the Karavali region. Communities such as the Billavas, Edigas, Mogaveeras, and several other backward classes encountered in the Guru’s teachings a pathway to dignity, organisation, education, and collective empowerment.

These teachings did not remain confined to religious discourse. They became instruments of social awakening, challenging entrenched hierarchies and asserting the inherent worth of every human being. Over time, what began as a reformist philosophy transformed into a lived social ethic across coastal Karnataka. Today, this historic connection has been elevated from deeply rooted community tradition to a cornerstone of state policy.

Through landmark land grants, the establishment and expansion of world-class research institutions, the integration of the Guru’s life and philosophy into educational curricula,

and sustained high-level engagement at Sivagiri, the Government of Karnataka is ensuring that the Guru’s Vishwamanava—the ideal of the Universal Man—emerges not as an abstract concept, but as a living blueprint for a harmonious, plural, and democratic society.

The Pilgrimage Of The Mind: Siddaramaiah At Sivagiri

This renewed commitment found its most profound expression on December 31, 2025, when the sacred hills of Sivagiri, in Varkala witnessed a moment of immense spiritual, cultural, and national significance. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah arrived as the Chief Guest for the 93rd Sivagiri Pilgrimage (Sivagiri Theerthadanam), describing the pilgrimage not as a physical journey measured in distance, but as one that was “moral rather than geographical.”

Standing at the Mahasamadhi of Sree Narayana Guru—the very site where the reformer attained samadhi in 1928—the Chief Minister paid heartfelt homage to the man who dismantled

centuries-old caste hierarchies and redefined spirituality as a force for equality, compassion, and ethical living. The moment symbolised continuity across generations: between history and governance, between moral philosophy and public responsibility, and between spiritual reform and democratic practice.

Addressing lakhs of devotees gathered at the expansive 200-acre Sivagiri Mutt campus, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah described Sivagiri as the “Moral University of India’s Conscience.” He spoke of a “living Constitution” embedded in the Guru’s teachings—one that predates the Indian Constitution, yet resonates powerfully with its core values of equality, fraternity, liberty, and dignity. In doing so, he underscored the idea that India’s democratic ethos did not emerge in isolation, but was shaped by centuries of ethical and reformist thought.

The Chief Minister’s presence alongside Kerala Chief Minister Shri Pinarayi Vijayan, and a high-level delegation that included AICC General Secretary Shri K.C. Venugopal, highlighted a shared southern

Sivagiri: A Living Moral University

Held annually from December 30 to January 1, the Sivagiri Pilgrimage has evolved since its modest beginnings in 1933 into one of India’s most enduring spiritual-cum-social movements. Drawing lakhs of participants from across India and the world, it stands today as a platform for ethical dialogue, social reform, and national introspection.

The 93rd edition acquired special national significance with the participation of both the Kerala and Karnataka Chief

Ministers. Addressing the gathering, Shri Pinarayi Vijayan expressed gratitude to the organisers for accommodating his official commitments by adjusting the programme schedule. He acknowledged the collective spirit, coordination, and moral discipline that have long characterised the Sivagiri tradition.

Established by Sree Narayana Guru, the Sivagiri Mutt remains a major spiritual and pilgrim centre of the Ezhava community and a living embodiment of the Guru’s proclamation of

“One Caste, One Religion, One God for humankind.” Far from being a mere slogan, this declaration continues to function as a foundational ethical philosophy guiding progressive social thought across generations.

Born on 20 August 1856 and attaining samadhi on 20 September 1928, Sree Narayana Guru was a saint, philosopher, spiritual leader, and social reformer whose influence reshaped Kerala and radiated across South India. He championed education, organisation, cleanliness, agriculture,

and self-reliance, believing that knowledge, dignity, and ethical living were the foundations of true freedom.

True to his vision of religious equanimity, Guru envisaged Sivagiri as a space where the principles of all religions could be studied with equal respect. The establishment of the Brahma Vidhyalaya at Sivagiri fulfilled this vision. Today, the institution offers a rigorous seven-year course in Indian Philosophy, encompassing the works of Sree Narayana Guru alongside the scriptures of major world religions.

