

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

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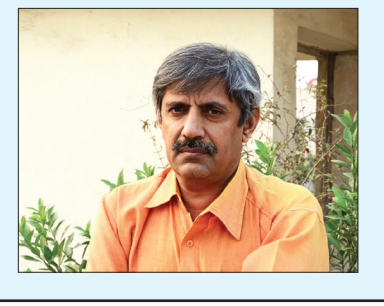
NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

**RIVERS**

**Q&A WITH HIMANSHU THAKKAR**

On why river linking defies common sense

► P3



**NATION**

**HAS THE ECI DONE ENOUGH IN BENGAL?**

To swing the election for its masters, that is

► P4



**WORLD**

**PRESIDING OVER OUR OWN IRRELEVANCE**

India's position as BRICS chair couldn't be more incongruous

► P7



# A towering inferno of bad policies

**Pankaj Chaturvedi** on the manmade dimensions of the heat stress India is currently experiencing

**A**pril was never this hot. As temperatures soared to 45°C and above and people huffed and puffed, it didn't help to learn from weather update apps that 45 felt like 49. Social media feeds sizzled with deep crimson heat maps. On 24 April, @WeatherMonitors released a list—the 100 hottest cities in the world that day were all in India. Amidst a hellscape for those labouring outdoors, public hospitals like Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital in New Delhi informed the public that heat stroke units for 'rapid, intensive care to combat high mortality rates, including specialised cooling tubs, 200 kg ice-making machines and portable ice packs' were available.

A summer action plan unveiled by the Delhi government advised parents to ensure that children wear 'thin, cotton clothes'. Schools introduced a 'water bell' to remind kids to drink water. Union minister Jyotiraditya Scindia advised people to carry an onion in their pocket to beat the heat. Like he did, Scindia, who apparently never rode in AC cars or sat in AC offices. Social media posts with the multiple AC units in his office circled in red mocked the minister's claims.

Who or what is to blame for the escalating fury of the Indian summer? Even as the El Niño-Southern Oscillation turns the dial towards extreme heat, the more inconvenient truth is becoming harder—if not impossible—to ignore. India is witnessing a hybrid disaster—the convergence of global warming and a domestic policy that has systematically dismantled the natural cooling systems of our land, water and forests.

What we call 'heat stress' is as much a result of man's greed masquerading as 'development' as it is a meteorological event. In the summer of 2024 and through the current cycles of 2026, the frequent breaching of the 48°C mark in north India and Bundelkhand is biologically lethal. The impact of this manmade inferno is harshest on the very people who build the structures that displace nature.

For millions of construction workers and street vendors, heat is a physical assault that translates into massive economic loss. Realistic data suggests that India could lose up to 5.8 per cent of its working hours by 2030 due to heat stress, equivalent to 34 million full-

time jobs. In cities like Banda in Uttar Pradesh, roadside workers are trapped in 'urban heat islands' where asphalt and concrete radiate heat long after the sun has set, keeping local temperatures 5-7°C higher than the surrounding rural areas.

Policy failures in labour protection mean that mandated work-breaks or the provision of cooling shelters remain largely theoretical. As these workers suffer from heat exhaustion and chronic kidney disease—also called 'sugarcane nephropathy' in agricultural belts—the lack of localised cooling infrastructure reflects a policy blind spot that views labour as infinitely expendable.

This oversight extends into the rural heartlands, where the agrarian economy reels under a double blow. Agriculture is suffering from thermal shock, where sudden spikes in temperature during the 'milking stage' of wheat cause the grain to shrivel. In recent years, this has led to yield losses of nearly 15-25 per cent in heat-sensitive pockets. Yet government policies often continue to favour water-intensive crops in parched zones, ignoring the urgent need for indigenous, heat-resilient cropping patterns.

The impact on flora and fauna is reaching a tipping point. The 'One Health' approach that 'aims to sustainably balance and optimise the health of people, animals and ecosystems' is compromised as forests are fragmented for mining and highways, stripping away the natural canopy that regulates local humidity. The decline in the fisheries and agricultural sectors is a testament to the irresponsibility of policies that view development and environment as adversaries.

In Chhatarpur, the proximity of development projects to the Panna Tiger Reserve has led to a documented increase in human-wildlife conflict. As natural water holes dry up—a direct result of destroying catchment areas for stone mining—wildlife is forced to migrate toward human settlements. Data from forest departments show that during peak summer months, instances of leopards and bears entering village peripheries in search of water increase by nearly 40 per cent. These are not natural disasters—they are the direct outcomes of a policy failure that

prioritises short-term infrastructure gains over long-term ecological stability.

Policymakers must realise that forests cleared for concrete expansion were never just clusters of trees—they were the guardians of a micro-climate that shielded crops from thermal shock and preserved the vital moisture of the soil. Every acre of forest lost in a plateau region like Bundelkhand results in a permanent loss of groundwater recharge capacity, further exacerbating the thirst of the land.

Rectifying manmade contributions to climate change requires a fundamental shift in how we perceive progress. We must acknowledge that every hill

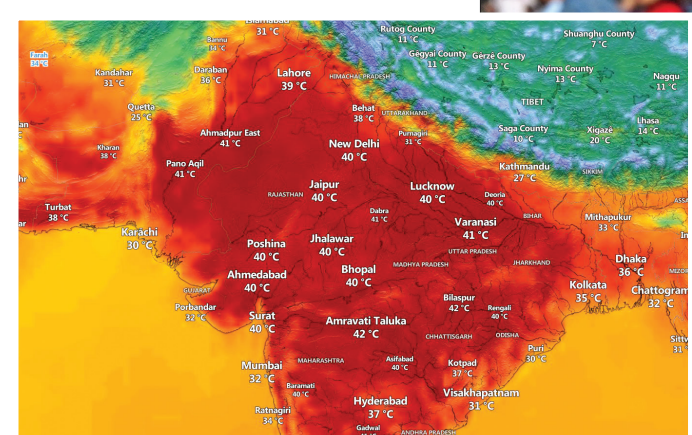


Photo: Getty Images

On 24 April, the 100 hottest cities in the world were all in India, as per @WeatherMonitors

*The indiscriminate clearing of forests for dams, highways and mining dismantles the natural cooling agents that defend us against the heat*

flattened for stone mining in Banda and every riverbed stripped of its sand in the Ken basin is a cooling agent lost forever. Unless 'green engineering' is prioritised in infrastructure and environmental regulations upheld with integrity, the economic toll of extreme heat—measured in lost labour productivity, crop failure and public health crises—far outweighs any perceived financial gains from these projects.

As we analyse the ground realities, the primary policy challenge lies in acknowledging that 'heat stress' is a consequence of systemic human error. The most glaring contradiction in our current policy framework is the negligence and institutionalised haste inherent in environmental clearance processes for massive infrastructure projects. When we sanction the indiscriminate clearing of forests for mega-dams, highways and mining, we are effectively dismantling the natural carbon

sinks and cooling agents that serve as our only defence against blistering heat.

The failure of our current Heat Action Plans lies in their narrow focus on human mortality in urban centres, largely ignoring the biological distress of the soil and wildlife. Government intervention must integrate soil moisture conservation as a mandatory part of climate-smart agriculture (CSA), providing financial incentives for mulching and organic manure that keep the earth cool. 'One Health' must become the gold standard for district-level governance, breaking the administrative silos between veterinary, agricultural and forest departments to monitor the health of the entire ecosystem as a single unit. Policy must pivot toward radical accountability where every infrastructure project is judged by its impact on the region's heat absorption capacity.

Policy choices must privilege the protection of primary forests and the rigorous enforcement of Eco-Sensitive Zones. The transition to district-level Heat Action Plans must evolve towards a holistic 'One

Health' framework that treats soil, water and wildlife as an interconnected ecosystem. In the agriculture sector, this would necessitate the deployment of local agro-meteorological stations that go beyond temperature readings to provide irrigation protocols that shield crops from thermal shock.

Forest management must adopt ecological water budgeting, utilising satellite data to identify parched hotspots where solar-powered reservoirs can prevent desperate migration of wildlife.

Instead of interlinking rivers at untenable cost (See Q+A with Himanshu Thakkar of SANDRP, Page 3), we must protect ancient water bodies like the Chandel-era tanks of Bundelkhand as decentralised cooling systems.

When natural cycles like El Niño combine with man's disregard for nature—as seen in sundry 'development' misadventures—you get the kind of extreme weather phenomena we are witnessing now and are perhaps doomed to encounter with ever-increasing frequency. Can we break out of this loop? The portents are ominous. ■



## Time for India to go solar

In a world where oil routes can be disrupted overnight, energy independence is a necessity

**Ajit Ranade**

**T**he ongoing crisis in West Asia has exposed India's vulnerability as the world's third largest consumer of crude oil, importing nearly 89 per cent of its requirement i.e. around 1.75 billion barrels a year or 4.8 million barrels every day. Over 60 per cent of that flows through the geopolitically sensitive Strait of Hormuz.

In 2024-25, India's crude oil import bill was \$137 billion. If prices stay at the March average of \$113.57 then the import bill would balloon to nearly \$200 billion. Every \$10 rise in the price of a barrel of crude adds \$14 to \$16 billion to India's import

bill. That is money drained from our precious foreign exchange reserves.

There is, however, a way to reduce this vulnerability.

India is gifted with a geographical location that brings blazing sunshine for more than 300 days a year. Summer heat can also be a curse—especially for the most vulnerable. April saw India at the epicentre of a global heat surge, with AQL.in reporting that 19 of the 20 hottest locations in the world were located in India, as well as 95 of the 100 hottest cities globally. But this climate burden is simultaneously an energy opportunity of historic proportions.

India leads the International Solar Alliance, a coalition of over 120 sunshine-rich nations. In 2025, India

added 38 gigawatts of new solar capacity, surpassing the United States, which added 35 gigawatts. Total installed solar capacity now stands at over 150 gigawatts, and annual solar generation has rocketed from 3.4 terawatt-hours in 2013-14 to 144 terawatt-hours in 2024-25.

On 25 April 2026, as the brutal heatwave pushed temperatures into the mid-forties and air conditioners across north India ran at full blast, the electricity grid faced its highest

ever demand: 256 gigawatts. Solar power alone was generating 81 gigawatts on that critical day. This was one-third of total national generation. The grid did not collapse. It passed the stress test.

Solar's potential is not just about clean energy but also about securing our foreign exchange reserves.

Even a ten per cent reduction in oil import dependence would save between \$13 to \$20 billion annually depending on oil prices. A displacement of 100 million barrels through solar-powered electricity substituting diesel gensets, electric pumps replacing diesel pumps, and electric vehicles reducing petrol and diesel demand would still save \$7.5 to \$11 billion a year in foreign exchange.

There is an additional intriguing possibility: India could become an energy exporter.

India's refining capacity of 258 million metric tonnes already exceeds its domestic consumption of 239 million metric tonnes. (This refined oil goes into trucks that move goods, tractors that farm fields, fishing boats that feed coastal communities. It also powers diesel generators that keep telecom towers humming across rural India.)

*The sun rises over India every morning without negotiation, geopolitics or a price tag. Can India use it speedily, at scale?*

► Continued on page 2

# Time for India to go solar

Continued from page 1

In 2025, India exported 64.7 million metric tonnes of refined petroleum products—petrol, diesel, aviation fuel—worth over \$52 billion, a record high. Refining capacity is set to expand further, to 309 million metric tonnes by 2028.

If solar and electrification progressively reduce domestic fuel consumption, more and more of what India refines goes abroad, earning precious dollars. India would be importing crude, refining it far more efficiently and exporting value-added fuel—functioning as an energy hub for the region.

The trajectory, if pursued with determination, could see India transition from being an energy importer to becoming a net energy value exporter. It is conceivable.

The hurdles on the solar journey are real, but not insurmountable. Solar panels need large tracts of land. This is a genuine constraint in a country where farmland is scarce and contested. The answer lies in deploying solar panels on fallow wasteland, rooftops, highway corridors and canal banks. India already has programmes for all of these.

Solar panels also need water to wash off the thick dust that settles on them. This is a problem, especially in Rajasthan and Gujarat where solar potential is greatest, but water scarce. Waterless robotic panel cleaners are an emerging solution. India should produce these at scale domestically.

Most critically, the sun sinks every evening, but demand does not. Without storage, solar power has a structural limitation. India urgently needs massive deployment of storage systems. In 2025, India curtailed 2.3 terawatt-hours of clean solar power simply because the grid could not absorb it. That is both an engineering failure and an economic one.

Then there is the China problem. India imports most of its solar panels and components from China, which deepens trade asymmetry. However,

domestic solar module manufacturing capacity has grown to 172 gigawatts. The government has set a target of domestically produced solar cells and wafers by 2028. An India that makes its own solar equipment would truly be energy sovereign.

Here are five action points:

- 1 Treat solar energy as national security infrastructure, equal in priority to defence. Funding should be at least doubled.
- 2 Invest urgently and massively in battery storage. Or every evening the grid will have to fall back on coal and diesel.
- 3 Upgrade the national transmission grid. Solar-rich states like Rajasthan and Gujarat need to be able to evacuate to demand centres in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.
- 4 Accelerate electric vehicle adoption across two-wheelers, three-wheelers and buses since transport is the single largest consumer of petroleum.
- 5 Scale rooftop solar energy through PM Surya Ghar and allied schemes.

India's peak power demand is projected to rise further to 271 gigawatts, driven partly by rising incomes and the spread of air conditioning. The opportunity and the urgency are both enormous.

The current crisis in West Asia offers us a window. In a world where oil routes can be disrupted overnight by wars India did not start, energy independence becomes a sovereign necessity. Every gigawatt of solar power installed is one step away from the Strait of Hormuz. Every electric vehicle on the road is a barrel of oil India does not have to import. Every rooftop panel is a small act of genuine self-reliance.

The sun rises over India every morning without negotiation, without geopolitics and without a price tag. The only question is: can India harvest it at the scale and speed the moment demands? ■

AJIT RANADE is an economist  
Courtesy: The Billion Press

## DELIMITATION IN ASSAM

# One panchayat, two MPs and three MLAs

Sourabh Sen

A panchayat of 10 villages in Barpeta used to be represented by one MP in the Lok Sabha and one MLA in the state assembly. The same panchayat will now be represented by two MPs and three MLAs. This bizarre outcome, said journalist Rokibuz Zaman in a video interview to *Scroll*, was achieved by the Election Commission's delimitation of constituencies in Assam in 2023.

In 2023, ignoring previous guidelines—which laid down that a block or a tehsil, the smallest administrative unit, should not be broken up—the ECI commission made the village the smallest unit and decided to split up panchayats instead. Makes sense?

A look at the map of Assam will indicate a redrawing of political boundaries that disregards natural and geographical barriers. While the idea is to 'balance' the number of voters in each constituency to ensure that the value of each vote remains more or less equal, delimitation can also enhance the political advantage of one political party or group of people. Gerrymandering, to use the American term, was carried out in both Assam and Jammu and Kashmir in 2023.

Being opaque and non-justiciable, no legal challenge could be mounted against the process. Having tested it in Assam, the BJP would have foisted it on the rest of the country, had it not failed to get the Delimitation Bill through Parliament on 17 April 2026.

Experts have described the 2023 delimitation of Assam's parliamentary and assembly constituencies as the most "consequential and contentious exercise in the state's recent political history," which, they believe, worked "in favour of the BJP" in the recently-concluded assembly elections on 9 April.

The devil in Assam's delimitation exercise lies in its details. Prima facie, the state merely complied with a constitutional mandate to redraw its electoral boundaries to reflect demographic changes. Articles 82 and 170 of the Constitution provided for such readjustment following each census. However, constitutional amendments in 2001 and 2003 froze the total number of seats in the assembly to 126, permitting only internal reconfiguration based on the 2001 Census. This meant that Assam's delimitation—conducted nearly 50 years after the last exercise in 1976—was carried out using outdated demographic data.

Instead of carrying it out under the



Congress MPs from Assam Pradyut Bordoloi and Abdull Khaliq protest against the delimitation in Assam outside Parliament

Delimitation Act, though, the exercise was conducted under Section 8A of the Representation of the People Act, 1950. This provision, specifically crafted for certain northeastern states, empowered the ECI to carry out delimitation on a preferential order limited the earlier desiderata. In February 2020, the President rescinded this deferment, paving the way for the exercise.

For Assam, this meant there was no independent Delimitation Commission, usually headed by a retired Supreme Court judge. Instead, it was the Election Commission which carried out Assam's delimitation. Without any judicial oversight, Assam's delimitation exercise was open to manipulation.

The exercise classified Assam's districts into three categories based on population density. It allowed for a 10

per cent deviation from the average state population per constituency. This ensured that sparsely-populated hill districts were not under-represented, while densely populated areas did not dominate. There were extensive consultations, including deliberations over 1,200 public representations. It also ensured greater representation for Scheduled Tribes and addressed the demands from autonomous and tribal regions. The state government projected the increase in reserved seats for SC and ST as part of its commitment to social justice and inclusion.

According to a retired state government official, deviation from procedure was not the only unique feature of Assam's delimitation. It also achieved the unstated—yet obvious—objective of diluting the political influence of Muslims and other key minority communities though 'communal gerrymandering'. This was accomplished through 'cracking' (splitting concentrated minority populations), 'packing' (consolidating them into a few seats) and 'stacking' (merging them with larger majority populations to ensure electoral defeat).

Constituencies like Barpeta saw significant restructuring, including the removal of Muslim-dominated areas and the conversion of the seat into a reserved SC constituency. In Naoboicha, previously a competitive seat with notable minority representation, reservation effectively altered the electoral landscape. In Katigorah, demographic reconfiguration allegedly shifted the constituency's balance in favour of Hindus. The net outcome was a sharp reduction in the number of constituencies where Muslim voters

*The unstated yet obvious objective of the delimitation in Assam was to dilute the influence of Muslims*

Parth M.N.

He didn't even have a bank account when he realised he was contesting Maharashtra's assembly elections. His wife, a teacher in an Adivasi residential school, lent him Rs 15,000. His party workers contributed whatever they could, and he managed to put together a sum of Rs 52,000 before filling up the election form.

"My cousin brother later loaned me 70,000 rupees..." he says with a wry smile, sitting on a plastic chair outside his office in Dahanu, in the tribal-dominated district of Palghar. "That was the only cash I had ahead of the elections."

The odds couldn't have been stacked worse against CPI(M) member Vinod Nikole. His primary challenger was Dhanare Paskal Janya, a sitting BJP MLA, who won from Dahanu in 2014 with a margin of over 16,000 votes. (The BJP officially admitted to spending over Rs. 82 crore in the assembly elections that year.) Yet, when the results came in, Nikole won with a margin of nearly 5,000 votes.

It seems like a story from an India that doesn't exist anymore. But it happened in 2019, and again in 2024. At a time when politics seems like a game that can't be won without vulgar expenditure, Nikole, 48, is comfortably into his second term. This, in a state where 93 per cent of legislators are corepatris, as per an analysis of the outgoing 2024 Maharashtra Assembly by the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR).

Born to brick kiln workers in the village of Waki, four km from Dahanu town, Nikole is the poorest MLA in Maharashtra, where the richest MLA declared assets worth

# The poorest MLA in India's richest state

Vinod Nikole, a Warli Adivasi from Palghar district, proves that money does not always talk

Rs. 500 crore. He can't nor can he see money before elections hand out hire social media teams to push his agenda. His capital comes from being on the ground and staying accessible to ordinary people, mainly tribal farmers and labourers.

"That's the only way I can win elections," he says. "Every morning after 10 you can find me at my office. Anyone can walk in and talk to me."

In January 2026, the CPI(M) affiliated All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) organised two massive protest marches of Adivasi farmers in the tribal belt of Palghar, Nashik and Ahmednagar (formerly Maharashtra). Nikole, himself a Warli Adivasi, was at both rallies. He walked with farmers, slept on the floor and ate the food they ate.

"One of his strengths is that he sees himself as part of a collective leadership and united movement," says AIKS president Ashok Dhawale.

"You don't see that nowadays," says Ishwati Gahala, a Warli Adivasi who participated in one of the protest marches. "It makes you feel you are properly represented and heard."



Vinod Nikole's capital comes from participating in grassroots movements and being accessible to ordinary people

The day I met Nikole in Dahanu, he had just arrived from Boisar after addressing a meeting of contract labourers. "We managed to increase their monthly salaries from 12,000 to 13,050 rupees," he tells me.

"The two most important issues here are worker rights and land rights. We have unions in 50-60 companies here, and we regularly negotiate with them for better wages." His party has a union at the Adani thermal power plant as well. "Unions become ineffective when leaders sell out. That will

Photos: Parth M.N.

never happen to us." Suresh Jadhav, 54, a contract worker at the thermal plant, says his salary was Rs 2,600 in 2010 when they first unionised.

"Today, we make 28,000 rupees a month."

That's a pay-rise of almost 1,000 per cent over 16 years—unimaginable for workers back in the day. Jadhav says their voices automatically carry more weight because the MLA is on their side. "It was easier to ignore us before 2019," Jadhav says. "Our demands are taken more seriously now."

After dropping out of college due

to financial difficulties, Nikole was working in a canteen in Dahanu serving food and cleaning utensils when a senior CPI(M) leader convinced him to join the party.

"The membership fee was Rs 5 at the time," Nikole recalls. He asked the senior leader: "You had breakfast at my canteen and I'm supposed to give you five rupees? Shouldn't it be the other way round?"

After he cut the receipt for Rs 5, the leader replied, "You are now a party member."

"I didn't understand what it meant at the time," Nikole says. "But he took me under his wing, and I started working for the party."

When he became an MLA in 2019,

enjoyed influence and representation. And when communities lost influence due to delimitation, so did leaders, especially those who were at the receiving end.

"Delimitation made my seat unwinnable," said veteran Assam leader and former BJP MP Rajen Gohain, who quit the BJP in late 2025 after serving the party for 30 years during which he represented Nagaon in the Lok Sabha four consecutive times. Gohain has been vocal against Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, accusing him of running the state like a "commercial enterprise" and neglecting marginalised and indigenous communities. Gohain is confident of winning the 2026 assembly elections as an Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJP) nominee from Barhampur.

"The opposition alliance is coming to power in Assam. The undercurrent of dissatisfaction against Himanta Biswa Sarma is now boiling over," Gohain told *National Herald* days before counting of votes on 4 May.

The new political equations thrown up by delimitation in Assam manifested in internal bickering within the Assam BJP where Biswa Sarma has inducted and given party nomination to a new set of leaders to fight a rejuvenated Opposition. According to the Guwahati grapevine, Amit Shah's observation during an internal meeting that Congress-turned-BJP leader and minister Pijush Hazarika had managed to secure nomination for 15 of his followers—out of the 90 seats the BJP contested—did not go down well with Biswa Sarma.

To diminish Hazarika's growing stature, Biswa Sarma began promoting Jayanta Malla Barman, Hazarika's bête noire since NSUI days, making Barman the point of contact for alliance partners like the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and Asom Gana Parishad. Hazarika's role was whittled down to fund and media management. The BJP's alliance with the BPF also meant the latter would have a greater say on the syndicates that controlled the flow of traffic through the Srirampur entry gate on the West Bengal-Assam border—a role Hazarika reportedly played with élan. Assam's old guard did not hide their dissatisfaction, with veteran BJP leaders like Gautam Das openly revolting against Biswa Sarma to contest as independent candidates.

While the BJP waxes euphoric over a clear-cut win in Assam, the buzz over a captured Opposition victory—captured in a number of exit polls—is getting stronger. Biswa Sarma is clearly fronting a political party that is divided, bruised and propped up by local interests, rather than steered by a grand vision for the state.

If tailored electoral rolls and redrawn constituency maps combined with shrill communal rhetoric do not yield the desired results for the BJP, the knives will soon be out for Assam's beloved 'mama'. ■

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

*"You have to earn their trust. Then, when others try to throw money at them, voters won't sell their vote"*

Courtesy: People's Archive of Rural India

# The river we're fighting over is no longer the same

The Cauvery basin is losing its ability to store water when it is available and endure scarcity when it is not

**K.A. Shaji**

**T**he tragedy is not that we are fighting over the Cauvery. It is that the river we are fighting over is slowly disappearing."

In Ayappa's acclaimed short film *The Story of Kaveri*, the river speaks as a living presence, reflecting on how those who depend on it have turned against one another. That imagined yet deeply resonant voice captures the paradox of one of India's most contested rivers.

For decades, the Cauvery has been the site of court battles, tribunal awards, protests and political negotiations. Beneath these visible struggles lies a quieter crisis. The river itself is changing.

Nearly 800 kilometres long, the Cauvery supports more than 80 million people across Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry, draining a basin of over 81,000 sq km. For centuries, it enabled a highly organised irrigation system, particularly in the delta, where paddy cultivation flourished. That long history of stability is now under strain.

At first glance, the river does not appear broken. Each monsoon, reservoirs fill, canals reopen and water flows into fields. What this seasonal recovery conceals is the Cauvery's increasing inability to convert rainfall into reliable flows.

Rainfall is not necessarily declining. Climate projections suggest that parts of peninsular India may receive stable or even slightly higher precipitation. Yet the river itself is expected to carry less water.

A basin-scale climate study by IIT Gandhinagar (published this year in *Earth's Future*) used CMIP6 climate models to show that effective water availability in the Cauvery basin will continue to decline until at least 2050, beyond which recovery remains uncertain. The study estimates a further reduction of around 3.5 per cent in flows between 2026 and 2050. This may appear modest, but it follows a much larger historical decline: streamflow in the Cauvery dropped by nearly 28 per cent between 1951 and 2012.

"The Cauvery basin stands out as an exception," the study notes. "While several Indian rivers may see increased discharge, this basin shows a persistent decline due to

rising evapotranspiration and altered rainfall patterns."

Unlike Himalayan rivers, the Cauvery has no glacial buffer. It depends almost entirely on monsoon rainfall. That dependence is now becoming a vulnerability.

What is changing is not just how much rain falls, but how it behaves. Increasingly, rainfall arrives in short, intense bursts followed by prolonged dry spells. A study on precipitation trends by Tamil Nadu Agricultural University notes that 'short-duration extreme rainfall events are increasing in frequency and intensity, leading to higher runoff and reduced infiltration.'

Rapid runoff reduces groundwater recharge, weakening the base flows that sustain rivers during dry periods. At the same time, rising temperatures increase evapotranspiration, meaning more water is lost to the atmosphere.

The result is hydrological decoupling. Rainfall no longer translates into river flow in a predictable manner. Reservoirs fill quickly during intense rainfall events but struggle to retain levels through extended dry periods. Farmers who once relied on predictable irrigation cycles now face uncertainty within a single season.

Human intervention has heightened this instability. The Cauvery is one of India's most regulated rivers, with major dams such as Krishnaraja Sagar in Karnataka and Mettur in Tamil Nadu. Built to stabilise irrigation, these dams also altered the river's natural rhythms.

Flood pulses that once replenished floodplains are curtailed. Sediment that sustained the delta is trapped upstream. Lean-season flows now depend on administrative decisions rather than ecological continuity. "The regulation of flows has reduced the river's resilience," note basin-level assessments.

The consequences are most visible in the Cauvery delta. Spread across nearly 14.7 lakh hectares and contributing about 45 per cent of Tamil Nadu's rice production, the delta has been the backbone of the state's agrarian economy. Today, reduced freshwater inflows, erratic rainfall and rising sea levels are reshaping the region. Salinity is pushing inland. Groundwater is turning brackish. Coastal erosion is



Photos: K.A. Shaji



Spread across 14.7 lakh hectares, the Cauvery delta covers for 45 per cent of Tamil Nadu's rice production. The farmers are now struggling with reduced freshwater inflows and rising sea levels

increasing. Studies indicate that seawater intrusion has intensified as freshwater discharge weakens.

In parts of Thanjavur and Nagapattinam, cropping intensity has declined. Traditional *kuruvai* and *samba* cultivation cycles are becoming harder to sustain. Some farmers are shifting to pulses or aquaculture. Others are leaving the land fallow.

"We cannot plan anymore," says K. Veerapandi, a farmer from Thiruvaiyaru. "Water may come, or it may not. Even if it comes, we don't know when."

Leaders of farmer organisations echo this uncertainty. P.R. Pandian of the Cauvery Delta Farmers Protection Association notes that unpredictable releases make cultivation increasingly risky. Activist Ayyakannu has pointed to rising distress, including debt and migration.

When the region was declared a Protected Special Agriculture Zone in 2020, farmer leader S. Ranganathan said, "This will help the delta survive for more than a thousand years." Others weren't so hopeful. "The bill does not have the power to stop ongoing hydrocarbon projects," says P. Maniarsan.

Even as the state seeks to protect agriculture, large-scale extractive projects continue to be planned. Proposals by ONGC and Vedanta include drilling hundreds of hydrocarbon wells across the delta.

Farmers have resisted these projects, highlighting contamination and land degradation in places like Neduvasal and Kathiramangalam. Environmental groups warn that petrochemical and refinery projects could further strain an already fragile ecosystem. Scientific studies have

found heavy metals and chemical pollutants in parts of the Cauvery, including in sediments and fish.

"The presence of heavy metals in fish indicates bioaccumulation in the food chain," notes a 2024 study by N.G. Nikita Gupta and S. Arunachalam, published in *Frontiers in Public Health*.

Contamination comes from industrial discharge, agricultural runoff and untreated sewage. Over time, pollutants accumulate, creating long-term reservoirs of toxicity. This introduces a second dimension of scarcity. Water may be

available, but not usable.

Groundwater, once a fallback, is also under severe strain. Across the basin, extraction has exceeded recharge. Borewells are going deeper. In coastal areas, falling water tables are enabling seawater intrusion.

Assessments by the Central Ground Water Board, which classify several Cauvery basin blocks as over-exploited, along with IIT Gandhinagar projections that show declining runoff, suggest the basin is approaching a point where both surface and groundwater systems will be stressed simultaneously.

Urban demand has added to the pressure. Cities like Bengaluru depend heavily on Cauvery water, intensifying competition between urban and agricultural uses.

Meanwhile, political conflicts continue. The Cauvery dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu has long centred on allocation. As availability declines, the focus is shifting from sharing to scarcity. Frameworks designed for a more stable river are struggling to adapt to a new hydrological reality. Traditional water systems that once buffered variability are weakening. Tanks, canals and local storage structures have deteriorated. Urbanisation has reduced infiltration and increased runoff. The basin is losing its ability to store water when it is available and endure scarcity when it is not.

The Cauvery can no longer be considered a perennial river that guarantees stability. It is becoming a seasonal, heavily managed, increasingly unreliable system. For millions across the basin, this transition is already felt in the unpredictability of irrigation, the deepening of wells, the risks of cultivation and the shrinking margins of survival.

While we are still fighting over the same river, the river we are fighting over is no longer the same. ■

*Unlike Himalayan rivers, the Cauvery has no glacial buffer. It depends almost entirely on monsoons. That dependence is its vulnerability*

# An idea delinked from commonsense

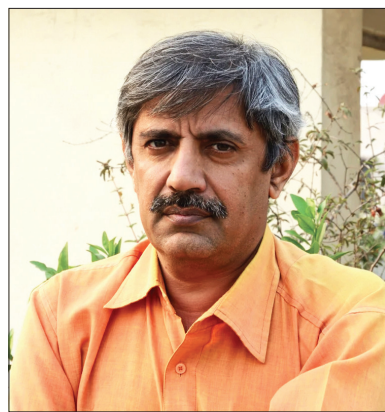
An engineer from IIT-Bombay, **Himanshu Thakkar** is currently the coordinator of South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People (SANDRP) and the editor of *Dams, Rivers & People*. He has been associated with the water and environment sector for more than 25 years and has worked closely with the World Commission on Dams, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Centre for Science and Environment. **Rashme Sehgal** draws him out on India's ill-conceived river-linking projects

**Prime Minister Modi says interlinking the Ken river (in Madhya Pradesh) to the Betwa (in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh) will help irrigate 1.06 million hectares, provide drinking water to 6.2 million people and generate 130 MW of hydropower and solar energy. Are these valid claims?**

The Ken-Betwa Link Project (KBLP) that PM Modi laid the foundation for in December 2024 does not have (valid) forest or wildlife clearances. Let me clarify. Both clearances were on the condition that the hydropower component would be taken out of the protected area. But it hasn't been done.

The hydrological figures remain a state secret and have not been peer reviewed or put in the public domain. There is absolutely no basis to conclude that Ken has surplus water and Betwa is water-deficient. Worse, the project documents do not even look at far cheaper, quicker, less destructive alternatives. To paraphrase what PM Modi said in the context of the Polavaram dam, politicians think of dams as ATMs.

The environmental impact assessment of the project is so shoddy it hasn't even properly studied the impact on the Panna Tiger Reserve (PTR). When the MoEF (ministry of environment and forests) expert appraisal committee (EAC) on river valley projects refused to clear the project after four meetings, Uma Bharati (then Union water resources minister) threatened a *dharna*.

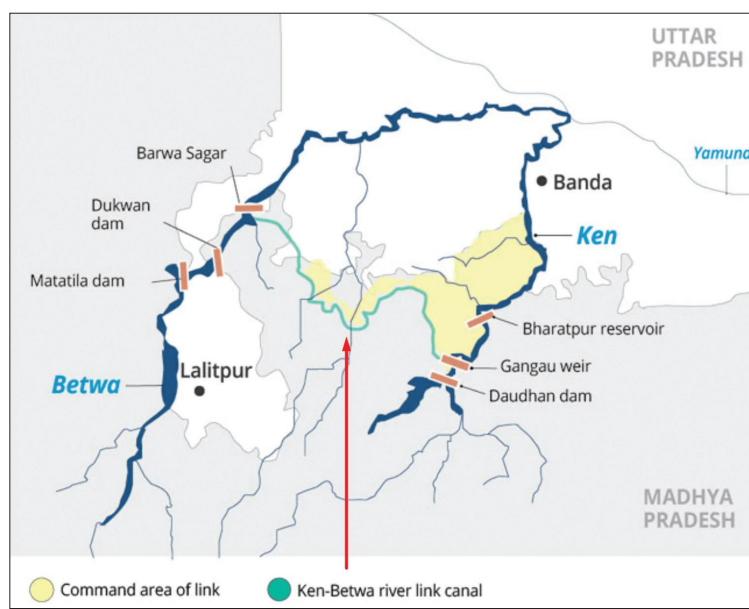


The ministry then reconstituted the EAC, with S.K. Jain as chairman, and cleared the Ken-Betwa project in its very first meeting in December 2016, overruling the reasons for refusal. The same S.K. Jain went on to become director-general of the project.

The forest advisory committee (FAC) and the Supreme Court-appointed central empowered committee (CEC) argued forcefully against the project, but the CEC report was not even considered by the apex court!

**Senior foresters had warned against building a canal on the Ken and a connecting dam between the two rivers. The Betwa already has seven dams on it and none provide the amount of irrigation water being claimed by the irrigation department.**

The official minutes of the FAC



meeting note that the project will involve felling 46 lakh trees (each of a girth greater than 20 cm) from the forest area alone. This will have a huge hydrological impact, besides adversely impacting the environment, biodiversity and climate of this entire region. But none of these impacts have been properly assessed. The FAC and the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) had recommended the height of the dam be reduced, and all inflows into the dam be released as environment flows in non-monsoon months. It wanted an independent assessment of the claim that there is no alternative for Bundelkhand. The CEC report had conclusively proved that this claim was false.

The project was sold with one USP: that it would solve Bundelkhand's water problem. But from the very beginning, the detailed project report (DPR) showed that the key objective of the project was to facilitate water transport to the upper Betwa basin areas like Raisen and Vidisha. So, the Ken-Betwa project will in fact facilitate export of water out of

drought-prone Bundelkhand!

**The project lays down a plan to irrigate 6.35 lakh hectares of farmland in six districts (three each in MP and UP) at a cost of Rs 45,000 crore, besides providing jobs in construction and tourism.**

There is no hydrological justification for spending Rs 45,000 crore. The ground reality is that this interlinking is not about helping the tribal people of this region or even those living in the downstream areas of UP's Banda district. Most of Bundelkhand has an average annual rainfall of over 900 mm, which if harvested can solve Bundelkhand's water problems. Far better alternatives exist. Four decades ago, Bundelkhand was not known for water stress. It was a region of dense forests and good local water systems. Continuous neglect has led to the present situation and the project will end up destroying the hydrological backbone of the Ken.

Recent studies show that the gap between the so-called surplus and deficit basins has narrowed, which further negates the justification for

ILR (inter-linking of rivers).

Studies have also shown that ILR projects can adversely impact the thermal and temperature gradient in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean, thereby impacting our monsoons, but the government has chosen to ignore all this data.

**But the government is planning river-linking at scale—in Punjab, Kerala, Telangana... Is it even feasible?**

The ILR concept is flawed. The suggestion that floods indicate water surplus and drought means water deficit is flawed. By that logic, parts of Rajasthan are water surplus these days, as they have excess rainfall, and parts of Meghalaya, the home of rain-clouds, are water-deficit. Water-intensive crops like sugarcane and paddy can turn any area drought-prone. So, the [ILR] concept itself is flawed. As [flawed as] the notion that water flowing into the sea is a waste. Rivers are supposed to flow to the sea, and estuaries, where the river meets the sea, are the most fertile and biodiverse areas.

All states are ready to accept water from another state, but no state wants to give water to another state—the party in power would consider it suicidal.

**The Ken-Betwa project will submerge 6,017 ha. of forest land in the heart of the Panna Tiger Reserve (PTR). The Ken Gharial Sanctuary is also endangered.**

The adverse impact of the project on the PTR is well documented even in the official CEC report. PTR is home to tigers, leopards, sloth bears, chinkara, chausanga, wolves, the mugger crocodile, the long-snouted gharial, mahseer fish and several species of raptors. Striped hyenas, civet cats, jackals, foxes, nilgai, chital, sambar, wild pigs, langurs and rhesus monkeys are also found in the area.

The massive dam is bound to isolate the upstream aquatic fauna, directly impacting the breeding

habits of the aquatic life forms both upstream and downstream of the dam.

What is not so well known is that the project will also destroy some of the geological wonders of India. Raneh Falls, just downstream from the proposed dam site is described as India's mini Grand Canyon and mini-Niagara. This wonderful geological site is likely to be permanently destroyed.

**You've been vocal on the urgent need for an overhaul of the institutional architecture of our water sector, on disbanding the Central Water Commission.**

The CWC has a large number of conflicting functions and responsibilities and its record is very poor—in areas like hydrology, geomorphology, rivers, dam safety and design, flood forecasting, flood management and early warning systems, which are supposed to be its core competency areas. The CWC functions more like a lobby for large dams with practically no accountability.

The state of our water resources is worrisome. We have meandered along using groundwater as our back-up. Groundwater is our water lifeline.

Ninety per cent of the additional water India has used in the past 50 years was groundwater—where the CWC has no role. In the shadow of the CWC's dam advocacy, our local water systems, rivers, wetlands have been completely neglected and destroyed. This has had a hugely adverse impact on groundwater recharge, which is fast approaching an ICU-like situation.

**What kind of local water management solutions should we go for?**

Local, participatory management has to be the backbone of water governance. It must extend to all aspects of monitoring, managing, developing water resources, including groundwater, rivers, local water systems as also rainfall monitoring and sand mining. Rainwater harvesting, groundwater recharge, water budgeting and selection of appropriate crops are all best left to local communities. ■

# Question on 3 May: has the ECI done enough?



Photo: Getty Images

Or can she pull off another victory? Chief minister Mamata Banerjee in Bhabanipur on voting day

## A.J. Prabal

No adult living in India today, with a constitutionally guaranteed right to vote, will ever forget the S.I.R. Not even the legions of India's unlettered, who won't even know what those dreaded letters stand for.

The state of West Bengal had its tryst with the process over the past six months, after Bihar had seen it first. In Phase 2 of the SIR that got under way on 4 November 2025, the Election Commission of India (ECI) lavished special attention on Bengal, though it was only one of 12 states and Union territories that were covered in this round.

The people of Bengal had seen it coming even before the process started here, when lakhs of deleted voters in Bihar were scrambling desperately to get back onto the electoral rolls. And now, a full six months after the grind started here, they are finally awaiting the results on 4 May.

Irrespective of which way they lean, neither the voters nor the pundits in even pollsters of any integrity are sure how thoroughly gamed this supposedly 'free and fair' process is. Has the ECI done enough to swing it for its political masters?

"If the BJP finally wins West Bengal," a state this Hindi heartland party has long

coveted, "it'll be because of the SIR," reflected a veteran of many earlier poll battles, preferring not to be named. "But if it loses again, even after *all* it has done, it'll be because of the SIR."

This apparent paradox isn't really. If you discount the SIR for just a moment and think only of the palpable mood of the electorate of this state, its people and the BJP are not really ready for each other. Not even after 15 years of Mamata Banerjee and all the talk about the need for *poriborton* (change). *Poriborton* may yet come—if not organically through a popular mandate, then via the BJP's joint venture with the ECI. But if it doesn't, the seething anger of voters with the ECI will have played a big hand.

For a while it looked like the ECI was still trying to keep the real agenda under wraps, its attempt to re-engineer the electorate to the BJP's advantage. The BJP has made no secret of its support for the exercise, and a fair-minded outsider might wonder why it's only the Opposition that worries about largescale exclusions.

Union minister Shantanu Thakur, a representing the party from the BJP's

Bongaon Lok Sabha constituency, said it was preferable to sacrifice 20,000 Hindus to weed out 200,000 Rohingyas. But of the 58.2 lakh ASDD (Absent/Shifted/Dead/Duplicate) deletions in the draft list of December 2025, not one was Rohingya or Bangladeshi. Soon after, the ECI deployed a mysterious software that flagged 1.3 crore voters for 'logical discrepancy'—a newly minted category of provisional deletions—and asked them to produce documents at in-person hearings.

Migrant workers, men, women, the elderly and the ailing queued up to produce the documents they could muster. No receipts were given, no evidence provided that they had been 'heard', pointed out Sahidul Munshi, retired justice of the Calcutta High Court, who found his name had been dropped. Following an interview published in *Bar & Bench*, his name was quickly restored but others were not so lucky.

From the pre-SIR baseline of 7.66 crore voters, the number was down to 7.08 crore (after ~58 lakh deletions) in the draft list of December 2025. The 'final list' of 28 February 2026 had 7.04 crore names, with ~60 lakh now placed 'under adjudication'. Post-adjudication by judicial officers, engaged to do the ECI's job at the direction

of the Supreme Court, 27 lakh names were cleared, which still left 32 lakh voters disenfranchised, who were now advised to approach 19 single-member appellate tribunals, made up of retired chief justices and judges of the Calcutta High Court.

By 23 April (Phase 1 voting day) for 152 assembly constituencies, a total of 138 appeals had been heard and 136 cleared for inclusion; by Phase 2 (on 29 April for 142 constituencies), another 1,474 appeals had been processed and 1,468 names revalidated. At this rate of disposal, the tribunals would have taken 10-12 years to hear the rest of the appeals!

At the end of Bengal's SIR nightmare, the state's count of eligible voters for this election was ~90 lakh short of its pre-SIR baseline of 7.66 crore!

No wonder the senior BJP leader who spoke on the condition of anonymity felt the anger of the people might singe the party, but he also admitted he didn't have the courage to warn the party's big guns from Delhi of the potential backlash.

In West Bengal, he explained, the SIR had completely overshadowed anti-incumbency. All the pre-SIR talking points—corruption, jobs, lack of industries, recruitment scams—had disappeared from the electoral discourse.

Muslims rallied behind the ruling Trinamool Congress, convinced that the SIR was a diabolical plot to strip them of citizenship. Even the Matuas—Scheduled Caste Hindus from Bangladesh, many of whom found their names deleted—felt betrayed by the BJP. Migrant workers were incensed by the harassment and financial loss in travelling back and forth.

The voter turnout was a record 92.4 per cent and both the TMC and BJP were outwardly confident this was a sign of a mandate in their favour. The BJP would have us believe the political wind is

blowing towards 'poriborton', the TMC insists the same wind is blowing for 'pratyaborton'—the return of 71-year-old Mamata Banerjee as chief minister for a fourth term.

Before returning to Delhi, Union home minister Amit Shah excluded the fact that the BJP would get an absolute majority, even quoting a number—177—that sounded suspiciously omniscient. But, then, he had also predicted a 200+ majority for the BJP in 2021!

If indeed the BJP's brag about the popular mood is right, what was the unprecedented security bandobast in the run-up to elections about? The deployment of 2.8 lakh CAPF troops looked like an invasion, manlier than an election. (For context, Manipur had 29,000 CAPF troops on ground at the peak of the 2023 ethnic violence.) Why was the NIA (National Investigating Agency), normally tasked with counter-terrorism duties, strutting around polling booths? Why were central troops threatening Kolkata mayor Firhad Hakim in Bhabanipur (Mamata Banerjee's constituency) at 1 a.m. on polling day? "*Aap Mayor saab ho na? Agar kuchh hua, toh aap ke liye achha nahi hoga.*" (You're the Mayor, right? If anything [untoward] happens, you'll be in trouble.)

A post-election wisecrack summed up the mood thus: "This is an election the BJP will lose even if it wins. It won't savour confronting Mamata Banerjee even in Opposition." Wisecracks aside, if she loses, Mamata Banerjee will certainly be seen as a martyr, defeated unfairly by an unscrupulous rival with the help of the official machinery and a compromised Election Commission.

Most exit polls have predicted a close race, some have forecast a BJP majority, some others a clear return mandate for TMC. Historically, the verdict in West Bengal has been one-sided, with the winning party securing over 200 of the 294 seats in the assembly. In the past three elections (2011, 2016, 2021), the TMC won 226, 211 and 215 seats, respectively. The Left Front fell four short of the 200-mark in 1996 but made up in the next election by taking its tally to 235. We'll see if this trend persists.

Five years ago, pollsters People's Pulse and Axis-My India had predicted the BJP would win 173-192 seats, comfortably ahead of the majority mark of 148. (The BJP won 77.) This time, Axis-My India (rejoined from projecting a number, claiming that 70 per cent of voters preferred not to divulge who they had voted for. People's Pulse has predicted 95-110 seats for the BJP, and sees the TMC coasting to victory with 177-187 seats.

We wouldn't wager any money on these predictions, though exit polls do create a flutter in the stock market and the *satta bazaar*, and those with an appetite for risk do make a quick crore or a few. For other people who have a taste for political theatre but are less invested in the outcome, exit polls are excellent entertainment, certainly worth the price of a PVR movie ticket! ■

With inputs from Kunal Chatterjee

# When boundaries become battlelines

Why should our southern states that acted responsibly to shore up their human development indicators pay a political price?

## Herjinder

Delimitation is often described in dry constitutional language as the periodic redrawing of electoral boundaries to ensure equal representation. On paper, it appears to be a neutral administrative correction—an exercise in balancing constituencies according to population. In reality, delimitation in India is far more than a technical process. It is a politically charged, socially disruptive and constitutionally sensitive undertaking that can alter the balance of power between states, communities and political parties for generations.

As India approaches the 2026 deadline, when the decades-long freeze on seat allocation is set to expire, the country stands at the threshold of one of the most consequential federal debates since Independence. If handled mechanically through a 'cookie-cutter' population formula, delimitation could trigger not merely electoral rearrangement but a full-blown constitutional crisis.

The principle of 'one person, one vote' is foundational to democracy. Yet in a vast and unequal federal republic like India, democracy cannot function on arithmetic alone. Representation must also preserve the federal bargain that binds the Union together. States that invested in family planning, public health, education and economic modernisation cannot be punished for their success by losing parliamentary representation to states where population growth remained unchecked.

This was precisely why, following the 1971 Census, India froze seat allocation. The political compact was simple: southern and better-performing states would not be penalised for implementing national population-control goals. That carefully negotiated equilibrium was extended in 2001, but it is now nearing expiry. Once the freeze lapses, constitutional provisions may revert representation to population metrics based on the latest Census, currently

underway.

The consequences could be cataclysmic. A simplistic population-based reallocation would significantly increase parliamentary strength in the Hindi heartland while diminishing the relative voice of southern states. More than a loss of numbers, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala fear political marginalisation. Their concern is not hypothetical—it is existential. Federalism itself could be destabilised if representation is recast solely through demographic expansion.

Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K. Stalin has called this framework a "calculated trap" and a "black law," arguing that it unfairly targets southern states. DMK spokesperson Salem Dharanidharan has spoken that the current framework should continue for at least another 25 years, just as earlier freezes protected states that fulfilled freezable priorities like population control. Their argument is compelling: why

should states that acted responsibly pay a political price?

The crisis is not merely about the north versus the south. It is also about who controls the process.

At a time when the country is already witnessing serious anxiety over voter exclusion through exercises like the Special Intensive Revision (SIR), delimitation is too serious a matter to be left to executive discretion alone. No meaningful national discourse has begun. No broad-based consensus-building mechanism is visible. The issue remains trapped in partisan calculations, even though its implications are constitutional.

Yamini Aiyar, senior visiting fellow at Brown University, captured this concern sharply when she warned that the BJP has obvious electoral incentives to shape delimitation in ways that entrench power, especially given recent experiences with SIR and Assam.

The Assam delimitation exercise offers a

troubling preview of how the process can be manipulated. Rather than adhering to the 2009 norm of using blocks or tehsils as the basic administrative unit, the delimitation process reportedly used villages. This 'surgical' approach enabled demographic engineering at an unprecedented scale.

In Barpeta, for instance, Muslim voter concentration reportedly dropped from around 60 per cent to nearly 35 per cent by relocating Muslim-majority panchayats while incorporating Hindu-majority areas. The result not merely altered boundaries but transformed political outcomes. Wonky constituency lines emerged in minority-dominated regions. Ruling-party strongholds retained more conventional shapes. Historically, Assam sent two Muslim MPs to the Lok Sabha; after the 2023 redrawing, only one was elected.

The political messaging was barely concealed. Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma publicly claimed that

delimitation had secured the reproduction—if not domination—of 'indigenous' communities. A senior minister openly suggested that Muslim legislative presence would decline.

The Assam precedent raises an alarming question: if delimitation can be used as a tool of gerrymandering in one state, what prevents similar exercises on a national scale?

Former Lok Sabha Secretary General P.D.T. Achary rightly points out that while Parliament can propose increasing the total number of seats, arbitrary formulas—such as blanket percentage increases—cannot simply be imposed by government fiat. Any such exercise requires independent institutional legitimacy.

This is why delimitation cannot be left to the whims of the executive or the electoral ambitions of the ruling party. It demands national consensus, constitutional foresight and a genuinely independent body insulated from partisan objectives.

India urgently needs a rational, scientific formula that balances population with developmental achievement, federal stability and democratic fairness. A weighted system, phased adjustment or renewed constitutional freeze may all deserve serious debate. What is unacceptable is silence followed by unilateralism.

Rahul Gandhi has already alleged that the current trajectory could allow the ruling establishment to gerrymander Lok Sabha seats ahead of 2029. Whether one agrees or not, the suspicion itself reveals a dangerous erosion of trust.

The urgency is immediate. The census process will reignite this debate by 2027, and any delay in building consensus now will only intensify conflict later.

Delimitation must not become a political weapon that reshapes India's democratic map to suit temporary power. If mis-handled, the 'delimitation rupture' could bleed into constitutional blunders where representative institutions no longer reflect justice, balance or trust. ■

*If delimitation could be used to gerrymander constituencies in Assam, what will prevent its iteration on a national scale?*



Photo: Getty Images

The delimitation and 'special revision' in Assam had only one motive—to keep Muslims out

# TWO PILLARS, ONE VISION: KARNATAKA'S LEAP INTO THE FUTURE OF TECHNOLOGY

AI-powered research and a world-class innovation museum redefine the state's approach to growth and public engagement.

As evening light settles over the granite expanse of Vidhana Soudha, Karnataka's iconic seat of governance stands as both a symbol of democratic continuity and a stage for forward-looking ambition. Within its stately halls, decisions taken in recent weeks have quietly yet decisively marked a new chapter in the state's development journey—one that embraces the transformative promise of deep technology while reinforcing Karnataka's enduring identity as India's innovation capital.

In a landmark Cabinet session held this April 17, the Government of Karnataka approved two major initiatives that together articulate a coherent and future-ready vision.

The first is the establishment of a Centre of Excellence for Artificial Intelligence in Biotechnology (AI-CoE) at the Institute of Bioinformatics and Applied Biotechnology (IBAB) in Electronics City, Bengaluru.

The second is the development of the Karnataka Technology & Innovation Museum on the historic New Government Electric Factory (NGEF) campus in Baiyappanahalli, to be implemented through an innovative Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model.

Though distinct in their immediate scope, these initiatives converge on a shared purpose: preparing Karnataka for what policymakers have described as the "Deep Tech Decade."

This vision reflects a deeper recognition that the next phase of global transformation will not be defined by incremental improvements in software services alone, but by science-led revolutions emerging from the convergence of artificial intelligence, biotechnology, advanced materials, and data-driven discovery.

Karnataka's response is therefore not reactive but intentional—a strategic effort to move from participation in the global innovation ecosystem to leadership within it.

## Why AI and Biotechnology?

The significance of this initiative lies not only in institutional collaboration but in its timing. As global innovation shifts toward deep tech ecosystems, the convergence of AI and biotechnology is emerging as one of the most transformative frontiers of the 21st century.

Artificial intelligence enables the analysis of vast biological datasets, revealing patterns and predictions that were previously beyond human reach. When applied to life sciences, this capability opens entirely new possibilities in healthcare, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals.

In healthcare, AI-driven systems are enabling precision medicine, where treatment is tailored to an individual's genetic profile and clinical history, improving outcomes while reducing inefficiencies in traditional care models.

In agriculture, machine learning algorithms are helping design climate-resilient crops capable of adapting to environmental stress, thereby addressing food security challenges in a changing climate. In pharmaceuticals, AI is accelerating drug discovery by simulating molecular interactions, dramatically reducing both time and cost in bringing new treatments to market.

These applications are not theoretical. They represent a rapidly evolving global shift in how science is conducted and how innovation ecosystems are structured.

## Building a Future-Ready Ecosystem

Karnataka's investment in the AI-CoE positions the state at the forefront of this transition, ensuring that it is not merely adapting to global trends but actively shaping them.

The importance of this initiative was underscored by Minister for



investing in emerging fields and taking decisive steps to deepen the state's AI and innovation ecosystem.

## Preserving Innovation, Inspiring Futures: The Technology Museum

The AI-CoE is designed not merely as a research facility but as a living ecosystem of innovation. It will bring together scientists, engineers,

While the AI-CoE represents Karnataka's forward-looking investment in scientific discovery, the second major initiative reflects an equally important dimension of development: the preservation and interpretation of technological heritage.

## Beyond Traditional Museums

Unlike traditional museums that focus on static preservation, the



## Building a Future-Ready Ecosystem

*Karnataka's investment in the AI-CoE positions the state at the forefront of this transition, ensuring that it is not merely adapting to global trends but actively shaping them. The importance of this initiative was underscored by Minister for Rural Development & Panchayat Raj and Information Technology & Biotechnology and Electronics, Priyank Kharge, who emphasized Karnataka's long-standing leadership in technology and its renewed commitment to deep tech innovation. He noted that as the world enters a decade defined by convergence technologies, the state is focused on building capabilities at the intersection of artificial intelligence and biotechnology. The Centre of Excellence, he observed, will strengthen the research ecosystem, accelerate innovation, and enable Karnataka to lead in high-impact, next-generation technologies. He further highlighted that the Government, through its Departments of Electronics, IT, Biotechnology, and Science & Technology, is proactively investing in emerging fields and taking decisive steps to deepen the state's AI and innovation ecosystem.*

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entrepreneurs, and industry stakeholders in a shared environment that encourages experimentation and cross-disciplinary collaboration.

By integrating computational intelligence with biological research, the Centre aims to create pathways for scalable innovation that extend beyond academic publications into real-world solutions and commercial applications.

Equally important is its role in human capital development. As deep tech industries evolve, the demand for skilled professionals who can navigate both computational and biological domains is increasing rapidly.

The AI-CoE is expected to serve as a training ground for this new generation of scientists, equipping them with interdisciplinary capabilities essential for future innovation economies.

## A New Chapter for a Historic Site

*The Karnataka Technology & Innovation Museum, to be established on the historic NGEF campus in Baiyappanahalli, represents a thoughtful reimagining of space and memory. The New Government Electric Factory (NGEF), once a cornerstone of Karnataka's industrial landscape, played a significant role in the state's manufacturing economy during the 20th century. Its transformation into a modern innovation museum reflects a broader philosophy of continuity—honouring the past while shaping the future. The project, with an estimated cost of Rs 100 crore, will be developed through a Public-Private Partnership model. The Government of Karnataka will contribute Rs 49 crore along with the land, while the Unboxing BLR Foundation will invest Rs 51 crore and take responsibility for design, curation, and operations. This near-equal partnership reflects a balanced governance approach that combines public accountability with private sector efficiency and creativity.*

Karnataka Technology & Innovation Museum is envisioned as an immersive, interactive experience.

It will use augmented reality, virtual reality, and digital storytelling to bring scientific milestones and technological breakthroughs to life.

Visitors will engage with exhibits that simplify complex scientific ideas, explore startup innovations, and participate in hands-on maker spaces designed to foster creativity and experimentation.

The museum is also intended as a narrative space—one that tells the story of Bengaluru's transformation from a "Garden City" to a global technology hub.

In doing so, it connects generations of innovation, offering citizens a shared understanding of how the state's technological identity has evolved over

time.

## The Power of Public-Private Partnership

The decision to adopt a PPP model is particularly noteworthy. It reflects a broader shift in governance philosophy, where the state acts as an enabler rather than a sole operator.

By transferring a 51% stake in the museum's foundation to a private entity while retaining a significant minority stake, the government ensures that the project benefits from professional management, global standards, and operational sustainability—without compromising public accessibility or accountability.

This model also reduces fiscal burden on the state while maximizing the impact of public investment.

## The Convergence Frontier: AI Meets Biotechnology

At the centre of this strategy lies the newly approved AI-CoE, a project that signals both ambition and structural foresight. Situated in Electronics City Phase 1, a location synonymous with India's information technology revolution, the Centre represents a natural evolution of Karnataka's technological journey.

With an approved outlay of Rs 20 crore over four years, the initiative



aims to transform IBAB into a globally

competitive hub for interdisciplinary research at the intersection of artificial intelligence and biotechnology.

Centre will be developed in collaboration with the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Platforms (C-CAMP), creating a powerful institutional partnership. IBAB brings established strengths in bioinformatics, computational

biology, and data-driven life sciences, while C-CAMP contributes expertise in translational research, innovation incubation, and commercialization pathways.

Together, they create a continuum that connects discovery, development, and deployment—bridging a long-standing gap between academic research and societal application.

## A Cohesive Policy Vision: Governance in the Deep Tech Era

Together, the AI-CoE and the Technology Museum represent two complementary dimensions of Karnataka's development strategy. One focuses on advancing the frontiers of knowledge creation, while the other ensures that this knowledge is accessible, contextualized, and socially embedded.

This dual approach reflects a mature understanding of innovation as both a technical and cultural process. The broader policy framework underlying these initiatives is anchored in four guiding principles: research leadership, public engagement, fiscal prudence, and ecosystem integration.

## Staying Ahead of the Curve

Karnataka's strategy emphasizes collaboration across academia, industry, and government, ensuring that innovation is not confined to isolated institutions but embedded within a wider ecosystem. The use of PPP models further strengthens this approach by enabling efficient resource utilization and high-quality execution while maintaining public accountability.

In many ways, these initiatives mark a transition in Karnataka's economic philosophy. While the state has long been a leader in IT services, the global economy is now shifting toward knowledge-intensive, science-driven sectors that demand deeper integration of research and industry.

Deep tech domains such as synthetic biology, AI-driven healthcare, and advanced computational systems are expected to define the next wave of global economic growth.

Karnataka's strategic investments signal its intent to lead in this emerging landscape.

## A State in Transition

This transition is not merely technological but structural. It reflects a move from service-based growth to innovation-led value creation.

It also reflects a broader understanding that continuous competitiveness requires continuous investment in research, talent, and institutional capacity. As the lights of Vidhana Soudha illuminate the Bengaluru skyline, they serve as a quiet reminder of the responsibilities that accompany leadership in a rapidly changing world.

Governance today is not only about managing present needs but about anticipating future possibilities and building the systems that will enable them.

Through its dual investments in AI-driven biotechnology and public innovation infrastructure, Karnataka is doing precisely that. It is constructing a framework in which scientific discovery, industrial application, and public engagement reinforce one another. It is creating spaces where ideas can be developed, tested, and shared. The message emerging from these decisions is both clear and forward-looking. The future of technology will not unfold as an abstract inevitability; it will be shaped by deliberate choices, institutional vision, and sustained collaboration.

## Designing the Future

Karnataka's approach demonstrates an understanding that leadership in the deep tech era requires not only technical capability but also strategic imagination. In charting this course, the state is not simply responding to global change. It is actively participating in its design. And in doing so, Karnataka reaffirms its position not just as India's technology capital, but as a place where the future of innovation is being thoughtfully and deliberately constructed.

# Why education is slipping out of the grasp of India's poor

Gurdeep Singh Sappal

There was a faith in a simple yet revolutionary idea: 'Padh jaayenge, toh badh jaayenge'. It was the escape route out of caste, out of poverty, out of the inherited disadvantages of birth. Education was enshrined in the Constitution as a promise to India's most poor and disadvantaged citizens.

Public universities, the IITs, the IIMs, government medical colleges were not merely institutions; they were the physical architecture of social mobility.

But the faith India's poor and excluded had in education is faltering. And it's not by accident but the consequence of a policy drift.

What began as creeping privatisation two decades ago has been deliberately accelerated under twelve years of BJP rule, turning it into a strategy designed to price education out of the reach of the poor.

Coupled with stagnant salaries, the cost of education is leading to worsening poverty.

The entry of private capital into higher education began in the late 1990s and accelerated through the 2000s. It was propelled by the experience of underperforming and crumbling public universities. The infusion of private capital, it was believed, would bring both quality and greater access. But the experience of the past three decades has proven the folly of those expectations.

India's higher education system is the third largest in the world by enrolment. We have 43 million students in over 60,000 colleges and 1,200 universities. These numbers underline the monumental wasted potential.

A country that aspires to be a knowledge superpower is producing graduates who can't find jobs and innovators who fail the test of commercial application. It is re-engineering education in a way that dulls critical faculties and equates success with the ability to crack multiple-choice tests.

## The higher education economy

The single most consequential effect of privatisation has been the transformation of a public good into a private commodity. Private institutions have mushroomed while public ones by and large are starved for resources.

The fees of premium institutions have shot up. The tuition fees of IIM-A (Ahmedabad), for example, surged from Rs 4 lakh in 2007 to Rs 27 lakh in 2021; of IIT Bombay from Rs 1.08 lakh in 2021 to Rs 8 lakh in 2024-25. In the private sector, a regular BA degree in an average university today costs Rs 3-6 lakh; a B.Tech Rs 8-20 lakh. Management degrees can cost from



The rising cost of higher education is proving highly exclusionary

Rs 5-30 lakh. And the burden of higher cost has been passed on to students.

High tuition fees is the whole story. India's higher education system has been captured at the point of entry by a parallel, unregulated, multi-billion-rupee coaching industry. JEE and NEET, the two national entrance examinations for engineering and medicine, are so disconnected from the school curriculum that it is now practically impossible to crack these exams without coaching. The entrance examination, which is supposed to select talent from the educational system, has itself become a separate educational system.

The GST collection from coaching institutes grew from nearly Rs 2,200 crore in 2019-20 to over Rs 5,500 crore in 2023-24! This is an industry that profits from the failure of the formal education system; it's a business model built on institutional inadequacy.

The coaching industrial complex is not educating India; it is extracting wealth from anxious families by exploiting the gap between what schools teach and what entrance tests demand.

## Education as a loss-making business

In the UPA years under Dr Manmohan Singh, salaries in India grew three to five times over ten years. Nurses, engineers, teachers, civil servants, private sector

employees, all saw real income growth. In these circumstances, the investment in education felt like a rational decision because the 'returns' were generous. The social contract between education and its reward was intact.

By contrast, for nearly a decade in the Modi years, starting salaries for fresh graduates have stagnated at Rs 3-4 lakh per annum, even as the cost of education has multiplied three to seven times. And this, if they get a job. Most don't!

The last available figures of the All-India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22 show total enrolment in higher education at 4.33 crore. The average has hovered in the same range for the past few years. In 2023, only 81.2 lakh got a job, including 39.1 lakh in sectors like IT services and banking.

The India Skills Report 2025 places graduate employability at 60 per cent for B.Tech graduates and 45 per cent for arts graduates. Nearly 45 per cent of graduates aged 20 to 24 are jobless. In 2024, two out of five IIT graduates, or 40 per cent, went unemployed.

Meanwhile, corporate profits in several sectors have gone up five times. Wealth is being generated alright, but it's not reaching those who labour. By design. Labour

protections have been weakened systematically. Wage floors have not been raised to compensate for inflation and employment has been 'casualised'. The rich are getting richer and the poor graduate gets a crippling debt with his degree.

This is not a market outcome; it's a policy outcome. When corporate profits grow five times and salaries do not move, the distribution of economic gains has been determined by a government that chose whose interests it will prioritise and protect.

## The accreditation scandal

Aspiring families will pay any price for a degree if the brand has cachet, if the positioning is attractive. This psychology drives the explosion of private universities. Designer courses are being fashioned with fancy names for maximum marketability and advertised aggressively with fraudulent student statistics.

Gullible students and their families are often unable to tell a good course from a scam. Accreditation ratings and NIRF (National Institute Ranking Framework) ratings are of little help. The accreditation architecture itself is in a shambles. In February 2025, the CBI arrested NAAC inspection committee members for accepting cash, gold and phones in exchange for A++ ratings.

The NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council) dismissed 900 of its 5,000 assessors after the scandal, but it still didn't invalidate the fraudulent grades they had awarded! Tainted institutions with fake A++ ratings continue to attract students and their families' hard-earned money.

In March 2025, the Madurai bench of the Madras High Court stayed the NIRF rankings. It found that the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) relies entirely on unverified, self-submitted data. A 2024 exposé found over 50 institutions falsely advertising accreditations or using forged certificates.

The government's own Economic Survey 2024-25 acknowledged the need for regulatory transparency in higher education. It's an admission that the current framework is failing.

Investing in education is today making families poorer. Even those fortunate enough to get jobs work on salaries that will take them years to recover just the fees paid for their education.

During the UPA years, an entire generation moved into their own houses, buying them on EMIs. Today, it's practically impossible for young employees to dream of their own house.

When the poor and marginalised conclude that education is no longer affordable, that a degree will lead nowhere, that the salary will never recover the cost, they will gravitate towards a rational decision: to stop sending their children to universities.

When that happens, these children will perform better to hereditary, caste-based occupations, undoing the Constitutional promise of social mobility for all Indian citizens. ■

GURDEEP SINGH SAPPAL is a Permanent Invitee to the Congress Working Committee

*The faith India's poor and excluded had in education is faltering. And it is not by accident but the consequence of a policy drift*

# The slippery art of sounding inclusive

Why the BJP says one thing and does another on Muslim representation

Aakar Patel

Last month, a story was reported under this headline: 'No Muslim name finds place in BJP's Bengal list' (*Times of India*, 8 April 2026). The story went on to provide the numbers, that is to say, how many tickets were distributed and so on, but beyond that headline, there wasn't much to add. Which does not surprise most of us because, since 2014, the data has taught us what the BJP wants.

In the last three Lok Sabhas, the BJP has won 282, 303 and 260 seats without a single Muslim candidate. It has over 100 MPs in the Rajya Sabha—none of them Muslim. A decade or so ago, it was reported that it had over a thousand MLAs across India, of whom one was Muslim. For the first time since 1947, there is no Muslim minister in the Union cabinet.

Again, this does not surprise us because, if there is one thing to be appreciated about the BJP, it is honesty. The party, especially in its current edition under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is clear about the fact that it seeks the total exclusion of India's largest minority, against whom it holds historical resentment.

We need not go into the merits of this sentiment, other than to acknowledge that this is how the party and many of its votaries feel. The issue to consider is something else. Why—given how clear the BJP in general and the prime minister in particular are about pushing this exclusion—do we hear things like 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas', '140 crore Indians', and so on? The party and the leader could just as well be honest and craft slogans that are as exclusionary as their behaviour, but they do not. Why?

There are two ways to answer this, and the first is the less complicated one. The slogans are coined and regurgitated to assuage those who are anxious about such things. They don't mean much because the reality of exclusion is right before us in the way that it is practised.

This answer is not particularly satisfying because the BJP doesn't address the issue of why the BJP needs to do it at all, given the transparency of its practices. It also does not accommodate the fact that, in the very acts of being full-throated and genuine about the exclusion and persecution of Muslims, the prime minister has won over many people who want this sort of behaviour and this sort of society.

The real reason the party and the prime minister are forced into hypocrisy is that their desire for total exclusion does not sit well with Indian society and Indian culture. Who says things like 'vasudhaiva kutumbakam' (the whole world is a family) in their manifesto? It is not the Opposition or intelligentsia. It is the BJP. When it comes to advertising its wares, it rests on Indian wisdom while peddling something else entirely.

The constituency for the BJP's authentic offering exists, of course, but it is smaller than the total set of BJP voters. It is for this reason that 'development' is, or at least was, such a large part of the party plank. The fangs have to be kept hidden in formal declarations and particularly in engaging

*Support for the BJP's authentic offering is smaller than the full set of BJP voters. 'Vikas' is, or was, a party plank for that reason*



There is no place for Muslims at the BJP's high table

with the wider world. Our poor diplomats have to juggle with this dilemma of acting brutishly at home while pretending to be liberal abroad.

On one of his visits to the United States in May 2021, external affairs minister S. Jaishankar had an interview with Donald Trump's former national security advisor Gen. H.R. McMaster. This is what the general, who is familiar with India and has visited it, said to Jaishankar: "I wanted to ask you about how you see political developments in your own country. You are not a partisan person. You have served with great distinction across many administrations. There is concern in the midst of the pandemic about some of these Hindutva policies that could be undermining the secular nature of Indian democracy... Are India's friends right

to be concerned about some of these recent trends?"

Jaishankar avoided answering the question directly and went into a segue about how rations were distributed and cash transferred. He did not address McMaster's specific question regarding the problem of Hindutva policies.

What are they? India's introduction of religion into citizenship. The implementation of new laws that criminalise Muslim marriage, Muslim divorce, and the possession of beef. The forced ghettoisation of Muslims in Gujarat by law. The use of shotguns on crowds only in one part of India—Kashmir. The government's demonisation of Muslims for, among other things, spreading Covid...

These are the things that India's friends were concerned about. Jaishankar replied

to McMaster without using the word 'Hindutva' even once and without referring to the laws that India was getting pulled up for around the world. The reason he ran away from the debate is, of course, that there is no defence. Obfuscation and avoiding the issue was the only way to respond to the accusation—an accurate one—that India was harming itself and its own people through Hindutva.

This should give some hope, even if just a sliver, to those who rightly worry about our society, where it has landed and where it is headed. If even those who successfully divide Indians by faith find it uncomfortable to stand by their beliefs when challenged, it reveals this is not the truth we ultimately want nor who we truly are. ■

Views are personal

# Presiding over its own irrelevance

India's position as BRICS chair couldn't be more incongruous, writes **Ashok Swain**

It's India's turn at the helm of BRICS this year and its position in the bloc—once seen as a counterweight to Western-dominated alliances and a US-led international order—couldn't be more incongruous. As New Delhi prepares to host the 18th BRICS summit in September this year, India finds itself presiding over a divided grouping while becoming increasingly isolated within it.

The BRICS grouping was already beset with contradictions but the ongoing Iran war seems to have split it wide open. Once projected as a platform for coordinated political assertion, for its commitment to multipolarity, it now appears incapable of even issuing a joint statement on a major geopolitical crisis involving one of its own members.

The BRICS MENA meeting, of deputy foreign ministers and special envoys of the Middle East and North Africa, in New Delhi on 23-24 April, ended without consensus, forcing New Delhi to fall back on issuing a 'chair's summary' rather than a collective declaration. That distinction is not procedural; it's political—you get a chair's summary when you lack consensus.

The divisions in the group are structural. Iran, now a BRICS member, expected solidarity from the bloc in the face of military confrontation. Yet other members, particularly the UAE, which has since withdrawn from OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), resisted the use of strong language against the US and Israel. China and Russia lean towards Tehran. India equivocated with vague expressions of concern.

This paralysis has left BRICS unable to take a stand even when a member state has been attacked, when its leaders have been assassinated. Draft statements have failed and negotiations have stalled.

India's role in this deadlock has been revealing. As chair, it was expected to provide direction but has instead chosen ambiguity. India's reluctance to take a firm stand reveals the contradictions in the Modi government's foreign policy. In pursuing what its external affairs minister S. Jaishankar describes as 'strategic autonomy', India has developed trade, defence and strategic partnerships with the US and Israel, economic and energy ties

with the Gulf, and cultural and diplomatic cooperation with Iran. With the war forcing a show of hands, India has tried to hedge to avoid alienating anyone.

But within BRICS, a grouping that increasingly defines itself through a critique of US dominance, that ambiguity comes at a cost. India's refusal to take a position on a conflict involving BRICS bête noire US and a BRICS member is seen not as prudence but a lack of commitment. Iran has openly expressed its expectation that India, as BRICS chair, will mobilise the bloc in its favour, but New Delhi's interests are too deeply embedded in the US-Israel alliance to hazard such a stance.

At the same time, China's influence within the grouping continues to expand. The enlargement of BRICS, often presented as a sign of its growing global appeal, has in fact strengthened Beijing's centrality. Many of the newer members share closer strategic alignment with China than with India. The balance within BRICS has shifted decisively. India is no longer a co-equal pillar. It has become a dispensable player in a structure increasingly shaped by China.

*The BRICS grouping was already beset with contradictions but the ongoing US-Iran war seems to have split it wide open*



Embarrassingly for host India, the BRICS MENA meeting in New Delhi on 23-24 April couldn't come up with a joint declaration

This shift has made India's position more uncomfortable. Its strained bilateral relations with China, marked by unresolved border conflicts and strategic rivalry, limits the possibility of meaningful cooperation within BRICS. India's position is further complicated by Trump's warnings of imposing punitive tariffs on countries pursuing alternative trade arrangements under BRICS. Wary of the Trump administration, the Modi government won't risk taking a stand that might invite retaliation at various levels it cannot afford.

Consequently, New Delhi has been hesitant about endorsing initiatives that will be seen as a challenge to a US-dominated global economic order. Take for instance, talks of de-dollarisation. The consequence is a narrowing of India's strategic space within BRICS. It cannot fully align with the bloc's more assertive agenda without risking economic and diplomatic repercussions. Yet by holding back, it undermines its standing within the group.

The internal contradictions of BRICS have never been so thoroughly exposed. For the first time, the grouping is confronting a situation where its members are divided over an ongoing military conflict involving one of their own. The inability to forge a consensus reflects deep incompatibilities.

India's chairmanship has coincided with this rupture, and its own ambiguity has rendered it totally ineffective in managing the contradictions in the group. If anything, the crisis has exposed the limits of India's influence.

The implications for the upcoming summit are difficult to ignore. Expectations are low. China's President is unlikely to attend. With divisions unresolved and no shared strategic direction, the summit is unlikely to produce anything of consequence. At best, it will generate carefully worded statements that skirt contentious issues. And this, in turn, will reinforce the perception that India has no locus to lead the Global South.

This moment also raises big questions

about India's foreign policy. Its attempt to straddle competing geopolitical alignments is hard to sustain. Within BRICS, that strategy is already failing. The more India hedges, the more space China occupies. The more India avoids taking a stand on global issues, the less influence it commands.

The credibility of BRICS as the pivot of an alternative global order was already fading. Under India's chairmanship, that decline has become unmistakable. The grouping continues to expand, add members and meet, but its capacity for meaningful collective action is eroding.

The Modi government's failure to define a clear role for India within the bloc means that India now chairs BRICS without commanding it. It will play host without shaping the outcome in any way. The September summit in New Delhi will only lay bare its irrelevance. ■

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

# Civilisation, according to those who drop the bombs

The West's civilisational sermon in West Asia rings hollow amidst war, sanctions and selective outrage, writes **Avay Shukla**

Civilisations are created by poets, writers, painters, architects, and destroyed by politicians and their armies. We would do well to remember this truth at a time when an existential civilisational war is taking place almost on our borders, in West Asia.

Make no mistake, the illegal assaults on Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Iran are not just about Greater Israel or uranium enrichment or oil: these are just the cover for new Crusades against the non-Christian, non-Caucasian world, a new religious imperialism by the USA and Israel, and wink-wink support from most of Europe. Large numbers of Christians in these countries appear to have embraced the spirit of Zionism.

The sheer temerity and audacity of this is hard to grasp. Here we have two countries, one barely 75 years in existence and the other whose cultural pillars are hamburgers and Kentucky Fried Chicken, presuming to destroy genuine civilisations that are thousands of years old.

As the Iranian foreign minister

reminded Trump: the Persians were inscribing the laws of human rights on the Cyrus Cylinder when the Europeans and Americans were still living in caves.

Today's bloodthirsty Zionists are probably not even aware that it was a Persian mathematician who invented algebra in the 9th century CE, that Jews exist today because Persian kings like Cyrus (5th century BCE) and Xerxes (6th century BCE) had decreed that Jews be allowed to live in peace in their kingdoms and not be harmed in any way. That today's Jews should seek to slaughter the descendants of these Persians says all that needs to be said about true civilisations and barbarians.

Evidence of attempted civilisational supremacy is mounting by the day. The policy was officially declared by a Cuban immigrant who, like a snake which has lost its bearings, tries to devour its own tail. I speak of Marco Rubio, the US secretary of state.

At the Munich Security Conference in February this year, he unashamedly laid out Trump's new MAGA Carta to a standing

ovation by other European leaders.

Rubio expressed nostalgia for the past, when Europe's "missionaries, pilgrims, soldiers, explorers poured out from its shores to settle new continents". He called for "a new age of Western dominance", to reverse the decline of the West since 1945, in effect proclaiming the launch of a new era of neo-colonialism. The USA, he stated, is "fixing" the problem, and in doing so will have no hesitation in rejecting the core elements of the existing international order.

This has been amply demonstrated by the fact that the USA has between 750 and 800 military bases in 80 countries to maintain its hegemony; by the bombing of 41 countries in the last 80 years—all but one of which (Serbia) are in either Asia or Africa. One expert estimates that these assaults, and the sanctions that have accompanied them, have killed at least 32 million people.

Gaza, Lebanon and Iran are only the latest expressions of this attempted neo-colonialism. Trump has openly boasted that he has taken Venezuelan oil, that he wants

Iran's oil reserves and a share in the toll revenues from Hormuz.

He has shown utter racial contempt for one of the oldest civilisations in the world by killing its leaders, calling them "bastards who belong to the Stone Age". The Israeli defence minister has described Palestinians as "worse than animals" and called for their extermination.

The West Asia genocide by Israel and the USA has been fully, though more quietly, supported by Western Europe and the G7, with the exception of a couple of countries like Spain and Ireland. Their continued trade with Israel hovers at about \$50 billion annually; they have sanctioned Iran and Venezuela but will not dream of sanctioning Israel; they continue to arm the rogue terrorist state to the teeth; they have formed a coalition of 12 European states to open the Straits of Hormuz but will not do so to protect Gaza or south Lebanon.

Worse, they will not allow their own citizens to protest against Israel: the UK has arrested thousands of protesters and France has just introduced the YADAN law criminalising any anti-Israel public protest with a five-year jail term. The West's war of civilisation is being waged in full earnest.

This is the context in which we should view Iran's tenacious defence of its sovereignty and its people. Iran is fighting to decolonise the Global South. It has effectively reversed and turned on its head the Western narrative of the southern nations being 'barbarians' and 'terrorists'. The emerging global perception is that Israel and the US are the biggest terrorist nations, that it is they who constitute the biggest threat to peace and the world order, that their leaders are declared war criminals. The barbarians have lost this war but, by definition, are too stupid to admit it. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



Photo: Getty Images

*For good reason, the world today sees Israel and the US as the biggest terrorists, as the biggest threats to world peace*

Every day brings with it new, near-impossible challenges for the people of Palestine

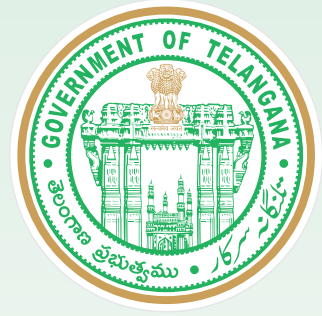
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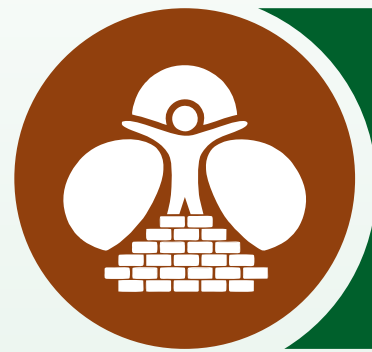
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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

**RIVERS**

**Q&A WITH HIMANSHU THAKKAR**  
On why river linking defies common sense



► P3

**NATION**

**HAS THE ECI DONE ENOUGH IN BENGAL?**  
To swing the election for its masters, that is



► P4

**WORLD**

**PRESIDING OVER OUR OWN IRRELEVANCE**  
India's position as BRICS chair couldn't be more incongruous



► P7

# A towering inferno of bad policies

**Pankaj Chaturvedi** on the manmade dimensions of the heat stress India is currently experiencing

**A**pril was never this hot. As temperatures soared to 45°C and above and people huffed and puffed, it didn't help to learn from weather update apps that 45 felt like 49. Social media feeds sizzled with deep crimson heat maps. On 24 April, @WeatherMonitors released a list—the 100 hottest cities in the world that day were all in India. Amidst a hellscape for those labouring outdoors, public hospitals like Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital in New Delhi informed the public that heat stroke units for 'rapid, intensive care to combat high mortality rates, including specialised cooling tubs, 200 kg ice-making machines and portable ice packs' were available.

A summer action plan unveiled by the Delhi government advised parents to ensure that children wear 'thin, cotton clothes'. Schools introduced a 'water bell' to remind kids to drink water. Union minister Jyotiraditya Scindia advised people to carry an onion in their pocket to beat the heat. Like he did. Scindia, who apparently never rode in AC cars or sat in AC offices. Social media posts with the multiple AC units in his office circled in red mocked the minister's claims.

Who or what is to blame for the escalating fury of the Indian summer? Even as the El Niño-Southern Oscillation turns the dial towards extreme heat, the more inconvenient truth is becoming harder—if not impossible—to ignore. India is witnessing a hybrid disaster—the convergence of global warming and a domestic policy that has systematically dismantled the natural cooling systems of our land, water and forests.

What we call 'heat stress' is as much a result of man's greed masquerading as 'development' as it is a meteorological event. In the summer of 2024 and through the current cycles of 2026, the frequent breaching of the 48°C mark in north India and Bundelkhand is biologically lethal. The impact of this manmade inferno is harshest on the very people who build the structures that displace nature.

For millions of construction workers and street vendors, heat is a physical assault that translates into massive economic loss. Realistic data suggests that India could lose up to 5.8 per cent of its working hours by 2030 due to heat stress, equivalent to 34 million full-

time jobs. In cities like Banda in Uttar Pradesh, roadside workers are trapped in 'urban heat islands' where asphalt and concrete radiate heat long after the sun has set, keeping local temperatures 5-7°C higher than the surrounding rural areas.

Policy failures in labour protection mean that mandated work-breaks or the provision of cooling shelters remain largely theoretical. As these workers suffer from heat exhaustion and chronic kidney disease—also called 'sugarcane nephropathy' in agricultural belts—the lack of localised cooling infrastructure reflects a policy blind spot that views labour as infinitely expendable.

This oversight extends into the rural heartlands, where the agrarian economy reels under a double blow. Agriculture is suffering from thermal shock, where sudden spikes in temperature during the 'milking stage' of wheat cause the grain to shrivel. In recent years, this has led to yield losses of nearly 15-25 per cent in heat-sensitive pockets. Yet government policies often continue to favour water-intensive crops in parched zones, ignoring the urgent need for indigenous, heat-resilient cropping patterns.

The impact on flora and fauna is reaching a tipping point. The 'One Health' approach that 'aims to sustainably balance and optimise the health of people, animals and ecosystems' is compromised as forests are fragmented for mining and highways, stripping away the natural canopy that regulates local humidity. The decline in the fisheries and agricultural sectors is a testament to the irresponsibility of policies that view development and environment as adversaries.

In Chhatarpur, the proximity of development projects to the Panna Tiger Reserve has led to a documented increase in human-wildlife conflict. As natural water holes dry up—a direct result of destroying catchment areas for stone mining—wildlife is forced to migrate toward human settlements. Data from forest departments show that during peak summer months, instances of leopards and bears entering village peripheries in search of water increase by nearly 40 per cent. These are not natural disasters—they are the direct outcomes of a policy failure that

prioritises short-term infrastructure gains over long-term ecological stability.

Policymakers must realise that forests cleared for concrete expansion were never just clusters of trees—they were the guardians of a micro-climate that shielded crops from thermal shock and preserved the vital moisture of the soil. Every acre of forest lost in a plateau region like Bundelkhand results in a permanent loss of groundwater recharge capacity, further exacerbating the thirst of the land.

Rectifying manmade contributions to climate change requires a fundamental shift in how we perceive progress. We must acknowledge that every hill

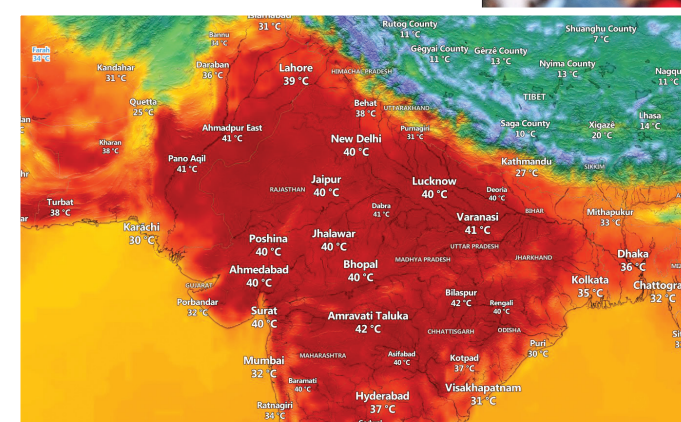


Photo: Getty Images



On 24 April, the 100 hottest cities in the world were all in India, as per @WeatherMonitors

*The indiscriminate clearing of forests for dams, highways and mining dismantles the natural cooling agents that defend us against the heat*

flattened for stone mining in Banda and every riverbed stripped of its sand in the Ken basin is a cooling agent lost forever. Unless 'green engineering' is prioritised in infrastructure and environmental regulations upheld with integrity, the economic toll of extreme heat—measured in lost labour productivity, crop failure and public health crises—far outweighs any perceived financial gains from these projects.

As we analyse the ground realities, the primary policy challenge lies in acknowledging that 'heat stress' is a consequence of systemic human error. The most glaring contradiction in our current policy framework is the negligence and institutionalised haste inherent in environmental clearance processes for massive infrastructure projects. When we sanction the indiscriminate clearing of forests for mega-dams, highways and mining, we are effectively dismantling the natural carbon

sinks and cooling agents that serve as our only defence against blistering heat.

The failure of our current Heat Action Plans lies in their narrow focus on human mortality in urban centres, largely ignoring the biological distress of the soil and wildlife. Government intervention must integrate soil moisture conservation as a mandatory part of climate-smart agriculture (CSA), providing financial incentives for mulching and organic manure that keep the earth cool. 'One Health' must become the gold standard for district-level governance, breaking the administrative silos between veterinary, agricultural and forest departments to monitor the health of the entire ecosystem as a single unit. Policy must pivot toward radical accountability where every infrastructure project is judged by its impact on the region's heat absorption capacity.

Policy choices must privilege the protection of primary forests and the rigorous enforcement of Eco-Sensitive Zones. The transition to district-level Heat Action Plans must evolve towards a holistic 'One

Health' framework that treats soil, water and wildlife as an interconnected ecosystem. In the agriculture sector, this would necessitate the deployment of local agro-meteorological stations that go beyond temperature readings to provide irrigation protocols that shield crops from thermal shock.

Forest management must adopt ecological water budgeting, utilising satellite data to identify parched hotspots where solar-powered reservoirs can prevent desperate migration of wildlife.

Instead of interlinking rivers at untenable cost (See Q+A with Himanshu Thakkar of SANDRP, Page 3), we must protect ancient water bodies like the Chandel-era tanks of Bundelkhand as decentralised cooling systems. When natural cycles like El Niño combine with man's disregard for nature—as seen in sundry 'development' misadventures—you get the kind of extreme weather phenomena we are witnessing now and are perhaps doomed to encounter with ever-increasing frequency. Can we break out of this loop? The portents are ominous. ■



## Time for India to go solar

In a world where oil routes can be disrupted overnight, energy independence is a necessity

**Ajit Ranade**

**T**he ongoing crisis in West Asia has exposed India's vulnerability as the world's third largest consumer of crude oil, importing nearly 89 per cent of its requirement i.e. around 1.75 billion barrels a year or 4.8 million barrels every day. Over 60 per cent of that flows through the geopolitically sensitive Strait of Hormuz.

In 2024-25, India's crude oil import bill was \$137 billion. If prices stay at the March average of \$113.57 then the import bill would balloon to nearly \$200 billion. Every \$10 rise in the price of a barrel of crude adds \$14 to \$16 billion to India's import

bill. That is money drained from our precious foreign exchange reserves.

There is, however, a way to reduce this vulnerability.

India is gifted with a geographical location that brings blazing sunshine for more than 300 days a year. Summer heat can also be a curse—especially for the most vulnerable. April saw India at the epicentre of a global heat surge, with *AQI.in* reporting that 19 of the 20 hottest locations in the world were located in India, as well as 95 of the 100 hottest cities globally. But this climate burden is simultaneously an energy opportunity of historic proportions.

India leads the International Solar Alliance, a coalition of over 120 sunshine-rich nations. In 2025, India

added 38 gigawatts of new solar capacity, surpassing the United States, which added 35 gigawatts. Total installed solar capacity now stands at over 150 gigawatts, and annual solar generation has rocketed from 3.4 terawatt-hours in 2013-14 to 144 terawatt-hours in 2024-25.

On 25 April 2026, as the brutal heatwave pushed temperatures into the mid-forties and air conditioners across north India ran at full blast, the electricity grid faced its highest

ever demand: 256 gigawatts. Solar power alone was generating 81 gigawatts on that critical day. This was one-third of total national generation. The grid did not collapse. It passed the stress test.

Solar's potential is not just about clean energy but also about securing our foreign exchange reserves.

Even a ten per cent reduction in oil import dependence would save between \$13 to \$20 billion annually depending on oil prices. A displacement of 100 million barrels through solar-powered electricity substituting diesel gensets, electric pumps replacing diesel pumps, and electric vehicles reducing petrol and diesel demand would still save \$7.5 to \$11 billion a year in foreign exchange.

There is an additional intriguing possibility: India could become an energy exporter.

India's refining capacity of 258 million metric tonnes already exceeds its domestic consumption of 239 million metric tonnes. (This refined oil goes into trucks that move goods, tractors that farm fields, fishing boats that feed coastal communities. It also powers diesel generators that keep telecom towers humming across rural India.)

*The sun rises over India every morning without negotiation, geopolitics or a price tag. Can India use it speedily, at scale?*

►► Continued on page 2

# Time for India to go solar

Continued from page 1

In 2025, India exported 64.7 million metric tonnes of refined petroleum products—petrol, diesel, aviation fuel—worth over \$52 billion, a record high. Refining capacity is set to expand further, to 309 million metric tonnes by 2028.

If solar and electrification progressively reduce domestic fuel consumption, more and more of what India refines goes abroad, earning precious dollars. India would be importing crude, refining it far more efficiently and exporting value-added fuel—functioning as an energy hub for the region.

The trajectory, if pursued with determination, could see India transition from being an energy importer to becoming a net energy value exporter. It is conceivable.

The hurdles on the solar journey are real, but not insurmountable. Solar panels need large tracts of land. This is a genuine constraint in a country where farmland is scarce and contested. The answer lies in deploying solar panels on fallow wasteland, rooftops, highway corridors and canal banks. India already has programmes for all of these.

Solar panels also need water to wash off the thick dust that settles on them. This is a problem, especially in Rajasthan and Gujarat where solar potential is greatest, but water scarce. Waterless robotic panel cleaners are an emerging solution. India should produce these at scale domestically.

Most critically, the sun sinks every evening, but demand does not. Without storage, solar power has a structural limitation. India urgently needs massive deployment of storage systems. In 2025, India curtailed 2.3 terawatt-hours of clean solar power simply because the grid could not absorb it. That is both an engineering failure and an economic one.

Then there is the China problem. India imports most of its solar panels and components from China, which deepens trade asymmetry. However,

domestic solar module manufacturing capacity has grown to 172 gigawatts. The government has set a target of domestically produced solar cells and wafers by 2028. An India that makes its own solar equipment would truly be energy sovereign.

Here are five action points:

- 1 Treat solar energy as national security infrastructure, equal in priority to defence. Funding should be at least doubled.
- 2 Invest urgently and massively in battery storage. Or every evening the grid will have to fall back on coal and diesel.
- 3 Upgrade the national transmission grid. Solar-rich states like Rajasthan and Gujarat need to be able to evacuate to demand centres in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.
- 4 Accelerate electric vehicle adoption across two-wheeled, three-wheeled and buses since transport is the single largest consumer of petroleum.
- 5 Scale rooftop solar energy through PM Surya Ghar and allied schemes.

India's peak power demand is projected to rise further to 271 gigawatts, driven partly by rising incomes and the spread of air conditioning. The opportunity and the urgency are both enormous.

The current crisis in West Asia offers us a window. In a world where oil routes can be disrupted overnight by wars India did not start, energy independence becomes a sovereign necessity. Every gigawatt of solar power installed is one step away from the Strait of Hormuz. Every electric vehicle on the road is a barrel of oil India does not have to import. Every rooftop panel is a small act of genuine self-reliance.

The sun rises over India every morning without negotiation, without geopolitics and without a price tag. The only question is: can India harvest it at the scale and speed the moment demands? ■

AJIT RANADE is an economist  
Courtesy: The Billion Press

## DELIMITATION IN ASSAM

# One panchayat, two MPs and three MLAs

Sourabh Sen

A panchayat of 10 villages in Barpeta used to be represented by one MP in the Lok Sabha and one MLA in the state assembly. The same panchayat will now be represented by two MPs and three MLAs. This bizarre outcome, said journalist Rokibuz Zaman in a video interview to *Scroll*, was achieved by the Election Commission's delimitation of constituencies in Assam in 2023.

In 2023, ignoring previous guidelines—which laid down that a block or a tehsil, the smallest administrative unit, should not be broken up—the ECI commission made the village the smallest unit and decided to split up panchayats instead. Makes sense?

A look at the map of Assam will indicate a redrawing of political boundaries that disregards natural and geographical barriers. While the idea is to 'balance' the number of voters in each constituency to ensure that the value of each vote remains more or less equal, delimitation can also enhance the political advantage of one political party or group of people. Gerrymandering, to use the American term, was carried out in both Assam and Jammu and Kashmir in 2023. Being opaque and non-justiciable, no legal challenge could be mounted against the process. Having tested it in Assam, the BJP would have foisted it on the rest of the country, had it not failed to get the Delimitation Bill through Parliament on 17 April 2026.

Experts have described the 2023 delimitation of Assam's parliamentary and assembly constituencies as the most "consequential and contentious exercise in the state's recent political history," which, they believe, worked "in favour of the BJP" in the recently-concluded assembly elections on 9 April.

The devil in Assam's delimitation exercise lies in its details. Prima facie, the state merely complied with a constitutional mandate to redraw its electoral boundaries to reflect demographic changes. Articles 82 and 170 of the Constitution provided for such readjustment following each census. However, constitutional amendments in 2001 and 2003 froze the total number of seats in the assembly to 126, permitting only internal reconfiguration based on the 2001 Census. This meant that Assam's delimitation—conducted nearly 50 years after the last exercise in 1976—was carried out using outdated demographic data.

Instead of carrying it out under the



Congress MPs from Assam Pradyut Bordoloi and Abdull Khaliq protest against the delimitation in Assam outside Parliament

Delimitation Act, though, the exercise was conducted under Section 8A of the Representation of the People Act, 1950. This provision, specifically crafted for certain northeastern states, empowered the ECI to carry out delimitation on a preferential order limited the earlier desiderata. In February 2020, the President rescinded this deferment, paving the way for the exercise.

For Assam, this meant there was no independent Delimitation Commission, usually headed by a retired Supreme Court judge. Instead, it was the Election Commission which carried out Assam's delimitation. Without any judicial oversight, Assam's delimitation exercise was open to manipulation.

The exercise classified Assam's districts into three categories based on population density. It allowed for a 10

per cent deviation from the average state population per constituency. This ensured that sparsely-populated hill districts were not under-represented, while densely populated areas did not dominate. There were extensive consultations, including deliberations over 1,200 public representations. It also ensured greater representation for Scheduled Tribes and addressed the demands from autonomous and tribal regions. The state government projected the increase in reserved seats for SC and ST as part of its commitment to social justice and inclusion.

According to a retired state government official, deviation from procedure was not the only unique feature of Assam's delimitation. It also achieved the unstated—yet obvious—objective of diluting the political influence of Muslims and other key minority communities though 'communal gerrymandering'. This was accomplished through 'cracking' (splitting concentrated minority populations), 'packing' (consolidating them into a few seats) and 'stacking' (merging them with larger majority populations to ensure electoral defeat).

Constituencies like Barpeta saw significant restructuring, including the removal of Muslim-dominated areas and the conversion of the seat into a reserved SC constituency. In Naoboicha, previously a competitive seat with notable minority representation, reservation effectively altered the electoral landscape. In Katigorah, demographic reconfiguration allegedly shifted the constituency's balance in favour of Hindus. The net outcome was a sharp reduction in the number of constituencies where Muslim voters

*The unstated yet obvious objective of the delimitation in Assam was to dilute the influence of Muslims*

Parth M.N.

He didn't even have a bank account when he realised he was contesting Maharashtra's assembly elections. His wife, a teacher in an Adivasi residential school, lent him Rs 15,000. His party workers contributed whatever they could, and he managed to put together a sum of Rs 52,000 before filling up the election form.

"My cousin brother later loaned me 70,000 rupees..." he says with a wry smile, sitting on a plastic chair outside his office in Dahanu, in the tribal-dominated district of Palghar. "That was the only cash I had ahead of the elections."

The odds couldn't have been stacked worse against CPI(M) member Vinod Nikole. His primary challenger was Dhanare Paskal Janya, a sitting BJP MLA, who won from Dahanu in 2014 with a margin of over 16,000 votes. (The BJP officially admitted to spending over Rs. 82 crore in the assembly elections that year.) Yet, when the results came in, Nikole won with a margin of nearly 5,000 votes.

It seems like a story from an India that doesn't exist anymore. But it happened in 2019, and again in 2024. At a time when politics seems like a game that can't be won without vulgar expenditure, Nikole, 48, is comfortably into his second term. This, in a state where 93 per cent of legislators are corepatris, as per an analysis of the outgoing 2024 Maharashtra Assembly by the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR).

Born to brick kiln workers in the village of Waki, four km from Dahanu town, Nikole is the poorest MLA in Maharashtra, where the richest MLA declared assets worth

# The poorest MLA in India's richest state

Vinod Nikole, a Warli Adivasi from Palghar district, proves that money does not always talk

Rs. 500 crore. He can't nor can he money before elections nor can he hire social media teams to push his agenda. His capital comes from being on the ground and staying accessible to ordinary people, mainly tribal farmers and labourers.

"That's the only way I can win elections," he says. "Every morning after 10 you can find me at my office. Anyone can walk in and talk to me."

In January 2026, the CPI(M) affiliated All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) organised two massive protest marches of Adivasi farmers in the tribal belt of Palghar, Nashik and Ahmednagar (formerly Maharashtra). Nikole, himself a Warli Adivasi, was at both rallies. He walked with farmers, slept on the floor and ate the food they ate.

"One of his strengths is that he sees himself as part of a collective leadership and united movement," says AIKS president Ashok Dhawale.

"You don't see that nowadays," says Ishwati Gahala, a Warli Adivasi who participated in one of the protest marches. "It makes you feel you are properly represented and heard."



The day I met Nikole in Dahanu, he had just arrived from Boisar after addressing a meeting of contract labourers. "We managed to increase their monthly salaries from 12,000 to 13,050 rupees," he tells me.

"The two most important issues here are worker rights and land rights. We have unions in 50-60 companies here, and we regularly negotiate with them for better wages." His party has a union at the Adani thermal power plant as well. "Unions become ineffective when leaders sell out. That will



Vinod Nikole's capital comes from participating in grassroots movements and being accessible to ordinary people

never happen to us." Suresh Jadhav, 54, a contract worker at the thermal plant, says his salary was Rs 2,600 in 2010 when they first unionised. "Today, we make 28,000 rupees a month."

That's a pay-rise of almost 1,000 per cent over 16 years—unimaginable for workers back in the day. Jadhav says their voices automatically carry more weight because the MLA is on their side. "It was easier to ignore us before 2019," Jadhav says. "Our demands are taken more seriously now."

After dropping out of college due

to financial difficulties, Nikole was working in a canteen in Dahanu serving food and cleaning utensils when a senior CPI(M) leader convinced him to join the party.

"The membership fee was Rs 5 at the time," Nikole recalls. He asked the senior leader: "You had breakfast at my canteen and I'm supposed to give you five rupees? Shouldn't it be the other way round?"

After he cut the receipt for Rs 5, the leader replied, "You are now a party member."

"I didn't understand what it meant at the time," Nikole says. "But he took me under his wing, and I started working for the party."

When he became an MLA in 2019,

enjoyed influence and representation. And when communities lost influence due to delimitation, so did leaders, especially those who were at the receiving end.

"Delimitation made my seat unwinnable," said veteran Assam leader and former BJP MP Rajen Gohain, who quit the BJP in late 2025 after serving the party for 30 years during which he represented Nagaon in the Lok Sabha four consecutive times. Gohain has been vocal against Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, accusing him of running the state like a "commercial enterprise" and neglecting marginalised and indigenous communities. Gohain is confident of winning the 2026 assembly elections as an Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJEP) nominee from Barhampur.

"The opposition alliance is coming to power in Assam. The undercurrent of dissatisfaction against Himanta Biswa Sarma is now boiling over," Gohain told *National Herald* days before counting of votes on 4 May.

The new political equations thrown up by delimitation in Assam manifested in internal bickering within the Assam BJP where Biswa Sarma has inducted and given party nomination to a new set of leaders to fight a rejuvenated Opposition. According to the Guwahati grapevine, Amit Shah's observation during an internal meeting that Pijush Hazarika had managed to secure nomination for 15 of his followers—out of the 90 seats the BJP contested—did not go down well with Biswa Sarma.

To diminish Hazarika's growing stature, Biswa Sarma began promoting Jayanta Malla Barman, Hazarika's bête noire since NSUI days, making Barman the point of contact for alliance partners like the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and Asom Gana Parishad. Hazarika's role was whittled down to fund and media management. The BJP's alliance with the BPF also meant the latter would have a greater say on the syndicates that controlled the flow of traffic through the Srirampur entry gate on the West Bengal-Assam border—a role Hazarika reportedly played with elan. Assam's old guard did not hide their dissatisfaction, with veteran BJP leaders like Gautam Das openly revolting against Biswa Sarma to contest as independent candidates.

While the BJP waxes euphoric over a clear-cut win in Assam, the buzz over a captured Opposition victory—captured in a number of exit polls—is getting stronger. Biswa Sarma is clearly fronting a political party that is divided, bruised and propped up by local interests, rather than steered by a grand vision for the state.

If tailored electoral rolls and redrawn constituency maps combined with shrill communal rhetoric do not yield the desired results for the BJP, the knives will soon be out for Assam's beloved 'mama'. ■

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

*"You have to earn their trust. Then, when others try to throw money at them, voters won't sell their vote"*

Courtesy: People's Archive of Rural India

# The river we're fighting over is no longer the same

The Cauvery basin is losing its ability to store water when it is available and endure scarcity when it is not

**K.A. Shaji**

The tragedy is not that we are fighting over the Cauvery. It is that the river we are fighting over is slowly disappearing."

In Ayappa's acclaimed short film *The Story of Kaveri*, the river speaks as a living presence, reflecting on how those who depend on it have turned against one another. That imagined yet deeply resonant voice captures the paradox of one of India's most contested rivers.

For decades, the Cauvery has been the site of court battles, tribunal awards, protests and political negotiations. Beneath these visible struggles lies a quieter crisis. The river itself is changing.

Nearly 800 kilometres long, the Cauvery supports more than 80 million people across Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry, draining a basin of over 81,000 sq km. For centuries, it enabled a highly organised irrigation system, particularly in the delta, where paddy cultivation flourished. That long history of stability is now under strain.

At first glance, the river does not appear broken. Each monsoon, reservoirs fill, canals reopen and water flows into fields. What this seasonal recovery conceals is the Cauvery's increasing inability to convert rainfall into reliable flows.

Rainfall is not necessarily declining. Climate projections suggest that parts of peninsular India may receive stable or even slightly higher precipitation. Yet the river itself is expected to carry less water.

A basin-scale climate study by IIT Gandhinagar (published this year in *Earth's Future*) used CMIP6 climate models to show that effective water availability in the Cauvery basin will continue to decline until at least 2050, beyond which recovery remains uncertain. The study estimates a further reduction of around 3.5 per cent in flows between 2026 and 2050. This may appear modest, but it follows a much larger historical decline: streamflow in the Cauvery dropped by nearly 28 per cent between 1951 and 2012.

"The Cauvery basin stands out as an exception," the study notes. "While several Indian rivers may see increased discharge, this basin shows a persistent decline due to

rising evapotranspiration and altered rainfall patterns."

Unlike Himalayan rivers, the Cauvery has no glacial buffer. It depends almost entirely on monsoon rainfall. That dependence is now becoming a vulnerability.

What is changing is not just how much rain falls, but how it behaves. Increasingly, rainfall arrives in short, intense bursts followed by prolonged dry spells. A study on precipitation trends by Tamil Nadu Agricultural University notes that 'short-duration extreme rainfall events are increasing in frequency and intensity, leading to higher runoff and reduced infiltration.'

Rapid runoff reduces groundwater recharge, weakening the base flows that sustain rivers during dry periods. At the same time, rising temperatures increase evapotranspiration, meaning more water is lost to the atmosphere.

The result is hydrological decoupling. Rainfall no longer translates into river flow in a predictable manner. Reservoirs fill quickly during intense rainfall events but struggle to retain levels through extended dry periods. Farmers who once relied on predictable irrigation cycles now face uncertainty within a single season.

Human intervention has heightened this instability. The Cauvery is one of India's most regulated rivers, with major dams such as Krishnaraja Sagar in Karnataka and Mettur in Tamil Nadu. Built to stabilise irrigation, these dams also altered the river's natural rhythms.

Flood pulses that once replenished floodplains are curtailed. Sediment that sustained the delta is trapped upstream. Lean-season flows now depend on administrative decisions rather than ecological continuity. "The regulation of flows has reduced the river's resilience," note basin-level assessments.

The consequences are most visible in the Cauvery delta. Spread across nearly 14.7 lakh hectares and contributing about 45 per cent of Tamil Nadu's rice production, the delta has been the backbone of the state's agrarian economy. Today, reduced freshwater inflows, erratic rainfall and rising sea levels are reshaping the region. Salinity is pushing inland. Groundwater is turning brackish. Coastal erosion is



increasing. Studies indicate that seawater intrusion has intensified as freshwater discharge weakens.

In parts of Thanjavur and Nagapattinam, cropping intensity has declined. Traditional *kuruvai* and *samba* cultivation cycles are becoming harder to sustain. Some farmers are shifting to pulses or aquaculture. Others are leaving the land fallow.

"We cannot plan anymore," says K. Veerapandi, a farmer from Thiruvaiyaru. "Water may come, or it may not. Even if it comes, we don't know when."

Leaders of farmer organisations echo this uncertainty. P.R. Pandian of the Cauvery Delta Farmers Protection Association notes that unpredictable releases make cultivation increasingly risky. Activist Ayyakannu has pointed to rising distress, including debt and migration.

When the region was declared a Protected Special Agriculture Zone in 2020, farmer leader S. Ranganathan said, "This will help the delta survive for more than a thousand years." Others weren't so hopeful. "The bill does not have the power to stop ongoing hydrocarbon projects," says P. Maniarsan.

Even as the state seeks to protect agriculture, large-scale extractive projects continue to be planned. Proposals by ONGC and Vedanta include drilling hundreds of hydrocarbon wells across the delta.

Farmers have resisted these projects, highlighting contamination and land degradation in places like Neduvasal and Kathiramangalam. Environmental groups warn that petrochemical and refinery projects could further strain an already fragile ecosystem. Scientific studies have

found heavy metals and chemical pollutants in parts of the Cauvery, including in sediments and fish.

"The presence of heavy metals in fish indicates bioaccumulation in the food chain," notes a 2024 study by N.G. Nikita Gupta and S. Arunachalam, published in *Frontiers in Public Health*.

Contamination comes from industrial discharge, agricultural runoff and untreated sewage. Over time, pollutants accumulate, creating long-term reservoirs of toxicity. This introduces a second dimension of scarcity. Water may be

available, but not usable.

Groundwater, once a fallback, is also under severe strain. Across the basin, extraction has exceeded recharge. Borewells are going deeper. In coastal areas, falling water tables are enabling seawater intrusion.

Assessments by the Central Ground Water Board, which classify several Cauvery basin blocks as over-exploited, along with IIT Gandhinagar projections that show declining runoff, suggest the basin is approaching a point where both surface and groundwater systems will be stressed simultaneously.

Urban demand has added to the pressure. Cities like Bengaluru depend heavily on Cauvery water, intensifying competition between urban and agricultural uses.

Meanwhile, political conflicts continue. The Cauvery dispute between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu has long centred on allocation. As availability declines, the focus is shifting from sharing to scarcity. Frameworks designed for a more stable river are struggling to adapt to a new hydrological reality. Traditional water systems that once buffered variability are weakening. Tanks, canals and local storage structures have deteriorated. Urbanisation has reduced infiltration and increased runoff. The basin is losing its ability to store water when it is available and endure scarcity when it is not.

The Cauvery can no longer be considered a perennial river that guarantees stability. It is becoming a seasonal, heavily managed, increasingly unreliable system. For millions across the basin, this transition is already felt in the unpredictability of irrigation, the deepening of wells, the risks of cultivation and the shrinking margins of survival.

While we are still fighting over the same river, the river we are fighting over is no longer the same. ■

*Unlike Himalayan rivers, the Cauvery has no glacial buffer. It depends almost entirely on monsoons. That dependence is its vulnerability*

# An idea delinked from commonsense

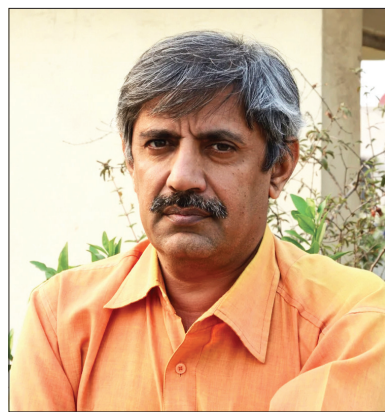
An engineer from IIT-Bombay, **Himanshu Thakkar** is currently the coordinator of South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers & People (SANDRP) and the editor of *Dams, Rivers & People*. He has been associated with the water and environment sector for more than 25 years and has worked closely with the World Commission on Dams, the Narmada Bachao Andolan and the Centre for Science and Environment. **Rashme Sehgal** draws him out on India's ill-conceived river-linking projects

**Prime Minister Modi says interlinking the Ken river (in Madhya Pradesh) to the Betwa (in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh) will help irrigate 1.06 million hectares, provide drinking water to 6.2 million people and generate 130 MW of hydropower and solar energy. Are these valid claims?**

The Ken-Betwa Link Project (KBLP) that PM Modi laid the foundation for in December 2024 does not have (valid) forest or wildlife clearances. Let me clarify. Both clearances were on the condition that the hydropower component would be taken out of the protected area. But it hasn't been done.

The hydrological figures remain a state secret and have not been peer reviewed or put in the public domain. There is absolutely no basis to conclude that Ken has surplus water and Betwa is water-deficient. Worse, the project documents do not even look at far cheaper, quicker, less destructive alternatives. To paraphrase what PM Modi said in the context of the Polavaram dam, politicians think of dams as ATMs.

The environmental impact assessment of the project is so shoddy it hasn't even properly studied the impact on the Panna Tiger Reserve (PTR). When the MoEF (ministry of environment and forests) expert appraisal committee (EAC) on river valley projects refused to clear the project after four meetings, Uma Bharati (then Union water resources minister) threatened a *dharna*.

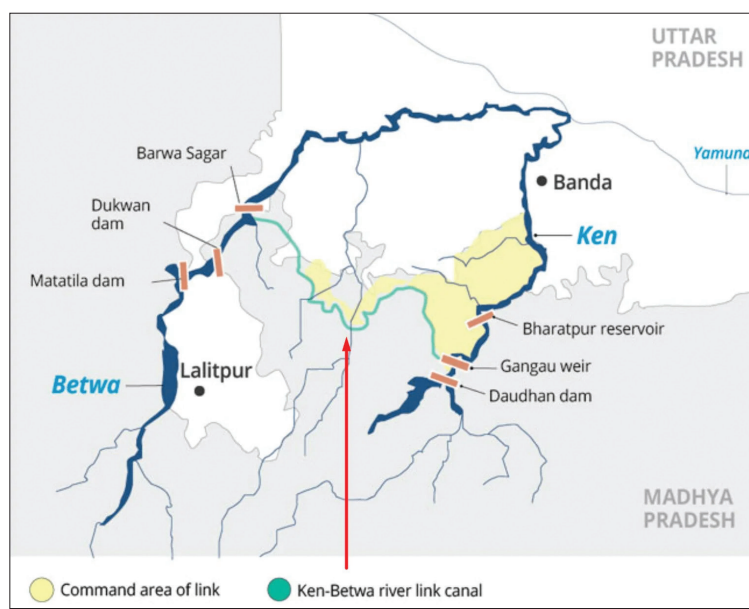


The ministry then reconstituted the EAC, with S.K. Jain as chairman, and cleared the Ken-Betwa project in its very first meeting in December 2016, overruling the reasons for refusal. The same S.K. Jain went on to become director-general of the project.

The forest advisory committee (FAC) and the Supreme Court-appointed central empowered committee (CEC) argued forcefully against the project, but the CEC report was not even considered by the apex court!

**Senior foresters had warned against building a canal on the Ken and a connecting dam between the two rivers. The Betwa already has seven dams on it and none provide the amount of irrigation water being claimed by the irrigation department.**

The official minutes of the FAC



meeting note that the project will involve felling 46 lakh trees (each of a girth greater than 20 cm) from the forest area alone. This will have a huge hydrological impact, besides adversely impacting the environment, biodiversity and climate of this entire region. But none of these impacts have been properly assessed. The FAC and the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) had recommended the height of the dam be reduced, and all inflows into the dam be released as environment flows in non-monsoon months. It wanted an independent assessment of the claim that there is no alternative for Bundelkhand. The CEC report had conclusively proved that this claim was false.

The project was sold with one USP: that it would solve Bundelkhand's water problem. But from the very beginning, the detailed project report (DPR) showed that the key objective of the project was to facilitate water transport to the upper Betwa basin areas like Raisen and Vidisha. So, the Ken-Betwa project will in fact facilitate export of water out of

drought-prone Bundelkhand!

**The project lays down a plan to irrigate 6.35 lakh hectares of farmland in six districts (three each in MP and UP) at a cost of Rs 45,000 crore, besides providing jobs in construction and tourism.**

There is no hydrological justification for spending Rs 45,000 crore. The ground reality is that this interlinking is not about helping the tribal people of this region or even those living in the downstream areas of UP's Banda district. Most of Bundelkhand has an average annual rainfall of over 900 mm, which if harvested can solve Bundelkhand's water problems. Far better alternatives exist. Four decades ago, Bundelkhand was not known for water stress. It was a region of dense forests and good local water systems. Continuous neglect has led to the present situation and the project will end up destroying the hydrological backbone of the Ken.

Recent studies show that the gap between the so-called surplus and deficit basins has narrowed, which further negates the justification for

ILR (inter-linking of rivers).

Studies have also shown that ILR projects can adversely impact the thermal and temperature gradient in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean, thereby impacting our monsoons, but the government has chosen to ignore all this data.

**But the government is planning river-linking at scale—in Punjab, Kerala, Telangana... Is it even feasible?**

The ILR concept is flawed. The suggestion that floods indicate water surplus and drought means water deficit is flawed. By that logic, parts of Rajasthan are water surplus these days, as they have excess rainfall, and parts of Meghalaya, the home of rain-clouds, are water-deficit. Water-intensive crops like sugarcane and paddy can turn any area drought-prone. So, the [ILR] concept itself is flawed. As [flawed as] the notion that water flowing into the sea is a waste. Rivers are supposed to flow to the sea, and estuaries, where the river meets the sea, are the most fertile and biodiverse areas.

All states are ready to accept water from another state, but no state wants to give water to another state—the party in power would consider it suicidal.

**The Ken-Betwa project will submerge 6,017 ha. of forest land in the heart of the Panna Tiger Reserve (PTR). The Ken Gharial Sanctuary is also endangered.**

The adverse impact of the project on the PTR is well documented even in the official CEC report. PTR is home to tigers, leopards, sloth bears, chinkara, chausanga, wolves, the mugger crocodile, the long-snouted gharial, mahseer fish and several species of raptors. Striped hyenas, civet cats, jackals, foxes, nilgai, chital, sambar, wild pigs, langurs and rhesus monkeys are also found in the area.

The massive dam is bound to isolate the upstream aquatic fauna, directly impacting the breeding

habits of the aquatic life forms both upstream and downstream of the dam.

What is not so well known is that the project will also destroy some of the geological wonders of India. Raneh Falls, just downstream from the proposed dam site is described as India's mini Grand Canyon and mini-Niagara. This wonderful geological site is likely to be permanently destroyed.

**You've been vocal on the urgent need for an overhaul of the institutional architecture of our water sector, on disbanding the Central Water Commission.**

The CWC has a large number of conflicting functions and responsibilities and its record is very poor—in areas like hydrology, geomorphology, rivers, dam safety and design, flood forecasting, flood management and early warning systems, which are supposed to be its core competency areas. The CWC functions more like a lobby for large dams with practically no accountability.

The state of our water resources is worrisome. We have meandered along using groundwater as our back-up. Groundwater is our water lifeline.

Ninety per cent of the additional water India has used in the past 50 years was groundwater—where the CWC has no role. In the shadow of the CWC's dam advocacy, our local water systems, rivers, wetlands have been completely neglected and destroyed. This has had a hugely adverse impact on groundwater recharge, which is fast approaching an ICU-like situation.

**What kind of local water management solutions should we go for?**

Local, participatory management has to be the backbone of water governance. It must extend to all aspects of monitoring, managing, developing water resources, including groundwater, rivers, local water systems as also rainfall monitoring and sand mining. Rainwater harvesting, groundwater recharge, water budgeting and selection of appropriate crops are all best left to local communities. ■

# Question on 3 May: has the ECI done enough?



Photo: Getty Images

Or can she pull off another victory? Chief minister Mamata Banerjee in Bhabanipur on voting day

## A.J. Prabal

No adult living in India today, with a constitutionally guaranteed right to vote, will ever forget the S.I.R. Not even the legions of India's unlettered, who won't even know what those dreaded letters stand for.

The state of West Bengal had its tryst with the process over the past six months, after Bihar had seen it first. In Phase 2 of the SIR that got under way on 4 November 2025, the Election Commission of India (ECI) lavished special attention on Bengal, though it was only one of 12 states and Union territories that were covered in this round.

The people of Bengal had seen it coming even before the process started here, when lakhs of deleted voters in Bihar were scrambling desperately to get back onto the electoral rolls. And now, a full six months after the grind started here, they are finally awaiting the results on 4 May.

Irrespective of which way they lean, neither the voters nor the pundits in even pollsters of any integrity are sure how thoroughly gamed this supposedly 'free and fair' process is. Has the ECI done enough to swing it for its political masters?

"If the BJP finally wins West Bengal," a state this Hindi heartland party has long

coveted, "it'll be because of the SIR," reflected a veteran of many earlier poll battles, preferring not to be named. "But if it loses again, even after all it has done, it'll be because of the SIR."

This apparent paradox isn't really. If you discount the SIR for just a moment and think only of the palpable mood of the electorate of this state, its people and the BJP are not really ready for each other. Not even after 15 years of Mamata Banerjee and all the talk about the need for *poriborton* (change). *Poriborton* may yet come—if not organically through a popular mandate, then via the BJP's joint venture with the ECI. But if it doesn't, the seething anger of voters with the ECI will have played a big hand.

For a while it looked like the ECI was still trying to keep the real agenda under wraps, its attempt to re-engineer the electorate to the BJP's advantage. The BJP has made no secret of its support for the exercise, and a fair-minded outsider might wonder why it's only the Opposition that worries about largescale exclusions.

Union minister Shantanu Thakur, a representing Matua party from the BJP's

Bongaon Lok Sabha constituency, said it was preferable to sacrifice 20,000 Hindus to weed out 200,000 Rohingyas. But of the 58.2 lakh ASDD (Absent/Shifted/Dead/Duplicate) deletions in the draft list of December 2025, not one was Rohingya or Bangladeshi. Soon after, the ECI deployed a mysterious software that flagged 1.3 crore voters for 'logical discrepancy'—a newly minted category of provisional deletions—and asked them to produce documents at in-person hearings.

Migrant workers, men, women, the elderly and the ailing queued up to produce the documents they could muster. No receipts were given, no evidence provided that they had been 'heard', pointed out Sahidul Munshi, retired justice of the Calcutta High Court, who found his name had been dropped. Following an interview published in *Bar & Bench*, his name was quickly restored but others were not so lucky.

From the pre-SIR baseline of 7.66 crore voters, the number was down to 7.08 crore (after ~58 lakh deletions) in the draft list of December 2025. The 'final list' of 28 February 2026 had 7.04 crore names, with ~60 lakh now placed 'under adjudication'. Post-adjudication by judicial officers, engaged to do the ECI's job at the direction

of the Supreme Court, 27 lakh names were cleared, which still left 32 lakh voters disenfranchised, who were now advised to approach 19 single-member appellate tribunals, made up of retired chief justices and judges of the Calcutta High Court.

By 23 April (Phase 1 voting day) for 152 assembly constituencies, a total of 138 appeals had been heard and 136 cleared for inclusion; by Phase 2 (on 29 April for 142 constituencies), another 1,474 appeals had been processed and 1,468 names revalidated. At this rate of disposal, the tribunals would have taken 10-12 years to hear the rest of the appeals!

At the end of Bengal's SIR nightmare, the state's count of eligible voters for this election was ~90 lakh short of its pre-SIR baseline of 7.66 crore!

No wonder the senior BJP leader who spoke on the condition of anonymity felt the anger of the people might singe the party, but he also admitted he didn't have the courage to warn the party's big guns from Delhi of the potential backlash.

In West Bengal, he explained, the SIR had completely overshadowed anti-incumbency. All the pre-SIR talking points—corruption, jobs, lack of industries, recruitment scams—had disappeared from the electoral discourse.

Muslims rallied behind the ruling Trinamool Congress, convinced that the SIR was a diabolical plot to strip them of citizenship. Even the Matuas—Scheduled Caste Hindus from Bangladesh, many of whom found their names deleted—felt betrayed by the BJP. Migrant workers were incensed by the harassment and financial loss in travelling back and forth.

The voter turnout was a record 92.4 per cent and both the TMC and BJP were outwardly confident this was a sign of a mandate in their favour. The BJP would have us believe the political wind is

blowing towards 'poriborton', the TMC insists the same wind is blowing for 'pratyaborton'—the return of 71-year-old Mamata Banerjee as chief minister for a fourth term.

Before returning to Delhi, Union home minister Amit Shah excluded the fact that the BJP would get an absolute majority, even quoting a number—177—that sounded suspiciously omniscient. But, then, he had also predicted a 200+ majority for the BJP in 2021!

If indeed the BJP's brag about the popular mood is right, what was the unprecedented security bandobast in the run-up to elections about? The deployment of 2.8 lakh CAPF troops looked like an invasion, rather than an election. (For context, Manipur had 29,000 CAPF troops on ground at the peak of the 2023 ethnic violence.) Why was the NIA (National Investigating Agency), normally tasked with counter-terrorism duties, strutting around polling booths? Why were central troops threatening Kolkata mayor Firhad Hakim in Bhabanipur (Mamata Banerjee's constituency) at 1 a.m. on polling day? "Aap Mayor saab ho na? Agar kuchh hua, toh aap ke liye achha nahi hoga." (You're the Mayor, right? If anything [unintended] happens, you'll be in trouble.)

A post-election wisecrack summed up the mood thus: "This is an election the BJP will lose even if it wins. It won't savour confronting Mamata Banerjee even in Opposition." Wisecracks aside, if she loses, Mamata Banerjee will certainly be seen as a martyr, defeated unfairly by an unscrupulous rival with the help of the official machinery and a compromised Election Commission.

Most exit polls have predicted a close race, some have forecast a BJP majority, some others a clear return mandate for TMC. Historically, the verdict in West Bengal has been one-sided, with the winning party securing over 200 of the 294 seats in the assembly. In the past three elections (2011, 2016, 2021), the TMC won 226, 211 and 215 seats, respectively. The Left Front fell four short of the 200-mark in 1996 but made up in the next election by taking its tally to 235. We'll see if this trend persists.

Five years ago, pollsters People's Pulse and Axis-My India had predicted the BJP would win 173-192 seats, comfortably ahead of the majority mark of 148. (The BJP won 77.) This time, Axis-My India branched from projecting a number, claiming that 70 per cent of voters preferred not to divulge who they had voted for. People's Pulse has predicted 95-110 seats for the BJP, and sees the TMC coasting to victory with 177-187 seats.

We wouldn't wager any money on these predictions, though exit polls do create a flutter in the stock market and the *satta bazaar*, and those with an appetite for risk do make a quick crore or a few. For other people who have a taste for political theatre but are less invested in the outcome, exit polls are excellent entertainment, certainly worth the price of a PVR movie ticket! ■

With inputs from Kunal Chatterjee

# When boundaries become battlelines

Why should our southern states that acted responsibly to shore up their human development indicators pay a political price?

## Herjinder

Delimitation is often described in dry constitutional language as the periodic redrawing of electoral boundaries to ensure equal representation. On paper, it appears to be a neutral administrative correction—an exercise in balancing constituencies according to population. In reality, delimitation in India is far more than a technical process. It is a politically charged, socially disruptive and constitutionally sensitive undertaking that can alter the balance of power between states, communities and political parties for generations.

As India approaches the 2026 deadline, when the decades-long freeze on seat allocation is set to expire, the country stands at the threshold of one of the most consequential federal debates since Independence. If handled mechanically through a 'cookie-cutter' population formula, delimitation could trigger not merely electoral rearrangement but a full-blown constitutional crisis.

The principle of 'one person, one vote' is foundational to democracy. Yet in a vast and unequal federal republic like India, democracy cannot function on arithmetic alone. Representation must also preserve the federal bargain that binds the Union together. States that invested in family planning, public health, education and economic modernisation cannot be punished for their success by losing parliamentary representation to states where population growth remained unchecked.

This was precisely why, following the 1971 Census, India froze seat allocation. The political compact was simple: southern and better-performing states would not be penalised for implementing national population-control goals. That carefully negotiated equilibrium was extended in 2001, but it is now nearing expiry. Once the freeze lapses, constitutional provisions may revert representation to population metrics based on the latest Census, currently

underway.

The consequences could be cataclysmic. A simplistic population-based reallocation would significantly increase parliamentary strength in the Hindi heartland while diminishing the relative voice of southern states. More than a loss of numbers, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala fear political marginalisation. Their concern is not hypothetical—it is existential. Federalism itself could be destabilised if representation is recast solely through demographic expansion.

Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K. Stalin has called this framework a "calculated trap" and a "black law," arguing that it unfairly targets southern states. DMK spokesperson Salem Dharanidharan has spoken that the current framework should continue for at least another 25 years, just as earlier freezes protected states that fulfilled freezable priorities like population control. Their argument is compelling: why

should states that acted responsibly pay a political price?

The crisis is not merely about the north versus the south. It is also about who controls the process.

At a time when the country is already witnessing serious anxiety over voter exclusion through exercises like the Special Intensive Revision (SIR), delimitation is too serious a matter to be left to executive discretion alone. No meaningful national discourse has begun. No broad-based consensus-building mechanism is visible. The issue remains trapped in partisan calculations, even though its implications are constitutional.

Yamini Aiyar, senior visiting fellow at Brown University, captured this concern sharply when she warned that the BJP has obvious electoral incentives to shape delimitation in ways that entrench power, especially given recent experiences with SIR and Assam.

The Assam delimitation exercise offers a

troubling preview of how the process can be manipulated. Rather than adhering to the 2009 norm of using blocks or tehsils as the basic administrative unit, the delimitation process reportedly used villages. This 'surgical' approach enabled demographic engineering at an unprecedented scale.

In Barpeta, for instance, Muslim voter concentration reportedly dropped from around 60 per cent to nearly 35 per cent by relocating Muslim-majority panchayats while incorporating Hindu-majority areas. The result not merely altered boundaries but transformed political outcomes. Wonky constituency lines emerged in minority-dominated regions. Ruling-party strongholds retained more conventional shapes. Historically, Assam sent two Muslim MPs to the Lok Sabha; after the 2023 redrawing, only one was elected.

The political messaging was barely concealed. Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma publicly claimed that

delimitation had secured the reproduction—if not domination—of 'indigenous' communities. A senior minister openly suggested that Muslim legislative presence would decline.

The Assam precedent raises an alarming question: if delimitation can be used as a tool of gerrymandering in one state, what prevents similar exercises on a national scale?

Former Lok Sabha Secretary General P.D.T. Achary rightly points out that while Parliament can propose increasing the total number of seats, arbitrary formulas—such as blanket percentage increases—cannot simply be imposed by government fiat. Any such exercise requires independent institutional legitimacy.

This is why delimitation cannot be left to the whims of the executive or the electoral ambitions of the ruling party. It demands national consensus, constitutional foresight and a genuinely independent body insulated from partisan objectives.

India urgently needs a rational, scientific formula that balances population with developmental achievement, federal stability and democratic fairness. A weighted system, phased adjustment or renewed constitutional freeze may all deserve serious debate. What is unacceptable is silence followed by unilateralism.

Rahul Gandhi has already alleged that the current trajectory could allow the ruling establishment to gerrymander Lok Sabha seats ahead of 2029. Whether one agrees or not, the suspicion itself reveals a dangerous erosion of trust.

The urgency is immediate. The census process will reignite this debate by 2027, and any delay in building consensus now will only intensify conflict later.

Delimitation must not become a political weapon that reshapes India's democratic map to suit temporary power. If mis-handled, the 'delimitation rupture' could bleed into constitutional blunders where representative institutions no longer reflect justice, balance or trust. ■

*If delimitation could be used to gerrymander constituencies in Assam, what will prevent its iteration on a national scale?*



Photo: Getty Images

The delimitation and 'special revision' in Assam had only one motive—to keep Muslims out

# TWO PILLARS, ONE VISION: KARNATAKA'S LEAP INTO THE FUTURE OF TECHNOLOGY

AI-powered research and a world-class innovation museum redefine the state's approach to growth and public engagement.

As evening light settles over the granite expanse of Vidhana Soudha, Karnataka's iconic seat of governance stands as both a symbol of democratic continuity and a stage for forward-looking ambition. Within its stately halls, decisions taken in recent weeks have quietly yet decisively marked a new chapter in the state's development journey—one that embraces the transformative promise of deep technology while reinforcing Karnataka's enduring identity as India's innovation capital.

In a landmark Cabinet session held this April 17, the Government of Karnataka approved two major initiatives that together articulate a coherent and future-ready vision.

The first is the establishment of a Centre of Excellence for Artificial Intelligence in Biotechnology (AI-CoE) at the Institute of Bioinformatics and Applied Biotechnology (IBAB) in Electronics City, Bengaluru.

The second is the development of the Karnataka Technology & Innovation Museum on the historic New Government Electric Factory (NGEF) campus in Baiyappanahalli, to be implemented through an innovative Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model.

Though distinct in their immediate scope, these initiatives converge on a shared purpose: preparing Karnataka for what policymakers have described as the "Deep Tech Decade."

This vision reflects a deeper recognition that the next phase of global transformation will not be defined by incremental improvements in software services alone, but by science-led revolutions emerging from the convergence of artificial intelligence, biotechnology, advanced materials, and data-driven discovery.

Karnataka's response is therefore not reactive but intentional—a strategic effort to move from participation in the global innovation ecosystem to leadership within it.

## Why AI and Biotechnology?

The significance of this initiative lies not only in institutional collaboration but in its timing. As global innovation shifts toward deep tech ecosystems, the convergence of AI and biotechnology is emerging as one of the most transformative frontiers of the 21st century.

Artificial intelligence enables the analysis of vast biological datasets, revealing patterns and predictions that were previously beyond human reach. When applied to life sciences, this capability opens entirely new possibilities in healthcare, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals.

In healthcare, AI-driven systems are enabling precision medicine, where treatment is tailored to an individual's genetic profile and clinical history, improving outcomes while reducing inefficiencies in traditional care models.

In agriculture, machine learning algorithms are helping design climate-resilient crops capable of adapting to environmental stress, thereby addressing food security challenges in a changing climate. In pharmaceuticals, AI is accelerating drug discovery by simulating molecular interactions, dramatically reducing both time and cost in bringing new treatments to market.

These applications are not theoretical. They represent a rapidly evolving global shift in how science is conducted and how innovation ecosystems are structured.

## Building a Future-Ready Ecosystem

Karnataka's investment in the AI-CoE positions the state at the forefront of this transition, ensuring that it is not merely adapting to global trends but actively shaping them.

The importance of this initiative was underscored by Minister for



investing in emerging fields and taking decisive steps to deepen the state's AI and innovation ecosystem.

## Preserving Innovation, Inspiring Futures: The Technology Museum

The AI-CoE is designed not merely as a research facility but as a living ecosystem of innovation. It will bring together scientists, engineers,

While the AI-CoE represents Karnataka's forward-looking investment in scientific discovery, the second major initiative reflects an equally important dimension of development: the preservation and interpretation of technological heritage.

## Beyond Traditional Museums

Unlike traditional museums that focus on static preservation, the



## Building a Future-Ready Ecosystem

*Karnataka's investment in the AI-CoE positions the state at the forefront of this transition, ensuring that it is not merely adapting to global trends but actively shaping them. The importance of this initiative was underscored by Minister for Rural Development & Panchayat Raj and Information Technology & Biotechnology and Electronics, Priyank Kharge, who emphasized Karnataka's long-standing leadership in technology and its renewed commitment to deep tech innovation. He noted that as the world enters a decade defined by convergence technologies, the state is focused on building capabilities at the intersection of artificial intelligence and biotechnology. The Centre of Excellence, he observed, will strengthen the research ecosystem, accelerate innovation, and enable Karnataka to lead in high-impact, next-generation technologies. He further highlighted that the Government, through its Departments of Electronics, IT, Biotechnology, and Science & Technology, is proactively investing in emerging fields and taking decisive steps to deepen the state's AI and innovation ecosystem.*

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entrepreneurs, and industry stakeholders in a shared environment that encourages experimentation and cross-disciplinary collaboration.

By integrating computational intelligence with biological research, the Centre aims to create pathways for scalable innovation that extend beyond academic publications into real-world solutions and commercial applications.

Equally important is its role in human capital development. As deep tech industries evolve, the demand for skilled professionals who can navigate both computational and biological domains is increasing rapidly.

The AI-CoE is expected to serve as a training ground for this new generation of scientists, equipping them with interdisciplinary capabilities essential for future innovation economies.

## A New Chapter for a Historic Site

*The Karnataka Technology & Innovation Museum, to be established on the historic NGEF campus in Baiyappanahalli, represents a thoughtful reimagining of space and memory. The New Government Electric Factory (NGEF), once a cornerstone of Karnataka's industrial landscape, played a significant role in the state's manufacturing economy during the 20th century. Its transformation into a modern innovation museum reflects a broader philosophy of continuity—honouring the past while shaping the future. The project, with an estimated cost of Rs 100 crore, will be developed through a Public-Private Partnership model. The Government of Karnataka will contribute Rs 49 crore along with the land, while the Unboxing BLR Foundation will invest Rs 51 crore and take responsibility for design, curation, and operations. This near-equal partnership reflects a balanced governance approach that combines public accountability with private sector efficiency and creativity.*

Karnataka Technology & Innovation Museum is envisioned as an immersive, interactive experience.

It will use augmented reality, virtual reality, and digital storytelling to bring scientific milestones and technological breakthroughs to life.

Visitors will engage with exhibits that simplify complex scientific ideas, explore startup innovations, and participate in hands-on maker spaces designed to foster creativity and experimentation.

The museum is also intended as a narrative space—one that tells the story of Bengaluru's transformation from a "Garden City" to a global technology hub.

In doing so, it connects generations of innovation, offering citizens a shared understanding of how the state's technological identity has evolved over

time.

## The Power of Public-Private Partnership

The decision to adopt a PPP model is particularly noteworthy. It reflects a broader shift in governance philosophy, where the state acts as an enabler rather than a sole operator.

By transferring a 51% stake in the museum's foundation to a private entity while retaining a significant minority stake, the government ensures that the project benefits from professional management, global standards, and operational sustainability—without compromising public accessibility or accountability.

This model also reduces fiscal burden on the state while maximizing the impact of public investment.

## The Convergence Frontier: AI Meets Biotechnology

At the centre of this strategy lies the newly approved AI-CoE, a project that signals both ambition and structural foresight. Situated in Electronics City Phase 1, a location synonymous with India's information technology revolution, the Centre represents a natural evolution of Karnataka's technological journey.

With an approved outlay of Rs 20 crore over four years, the initiative



aims to transform IBAB into a globally

competitive hub for interdisciplinary research at the intersection of artificial intelligence and biotechnology.

Centre will be developed in collaboration with the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Platforms (C-CAMP), creating a powerful institutional partnership. IBAB brings established strengths in bioinformatics, computational

biology, and data-driven life sciences, while C-CAMP contributes expertise in translational research, innovation incubation, and commercialization pathways.

Together, they create a continuum that connects discovery, development, and deployment—bridging a long-standing gap between academic research and societal application.

## A Cohesive Policy Vision: Governance in the Deep Tech Era

Together, the AI-CoE and the Technology Museum represent two complementary dimensions of Karnataka's development strategy. One focuses on advancing the frontiers of knowledge creation, while the other ensures that this knowledge is accessible, contextualized, and socially embedded.

This dual approach reflects a mature understanding of innovation as both a technical and cultural process. The broader policy framework underlying these initiatives is anchored in four guiding principles: research leadership, public engagement, fiscal prudence, and ecosystem integration.

## Staying Ahead of the Curve

Karnataka's strategy emphasizes collaboration across academia, industry, and government, ensuring that innovation is not confined to isolated institutions but embedded within a wider ecosystem. The use of PPP models further strengthens this approach by enabling efficient resource utilization and high-quality execution while maintaining public accountability.

In many ways, these initiatives mark a transition in Karnataka's economic philosophy. While the state has long been a leader in IT services, the global economy is now shifting toward knowledge-intensive, science-driven sectors that demand deeper integration of research and industry.

Deep tech domains such as synthetic biology, AI-driven healthcare, and advanced computational systems are expected to define the next wave of global economic growth.

Karnataka's strategic investments signal its intent to lead in this emerging landscape.

## A State in Transition

This transition is not merely technological but structural. It reflects a move from service-based growth to innovation-led value creation.

It also reflects a broader understanding that continuous competitiveness requires continuous investment in research, talent, and institutional capacity. As the lights of Vidhana Soudha illuminate the Bengaluru skyline, they serve as a quiet reminder of the responsibilities that accompany leadership in a rapidly changing world.

Governance today is not only about managing present needs but about anticipating future possibilities and building the systems that will enable them.

Through its dual investments in AI-driven biotechnology and public innovation infrastructure, Karnataka is doing precisely that. It is constructing a framework in which scientific discovery, industrial application, and public engagement reinforce one another. It is creating spaces where ideas can be developed, tested, and shared. The message emerging from these decisions is both clear and forward-looking. The future of technology will not unfold as an abstract inevitability; it will be shaped by deliberate choices, institutional vision, and sustained collaboration.

## Designing the Future

Karnataka's approach demonstrates an understanding that leadership in the deep tech era requires not only technical capability but also strategic imagination. In charting this course, the state is not simply responding to global change. It is actively participating in its design. And in doing so, Karnataka reaffirms its position not just as India's technology capital, but as a place where the future of innovation is being thoughtfully and deliberately constructed.

# Why education is slipping out of the grasp of India's poor

Gurdeep Singh Sappal

There was a time when the poor had faith in a simple yet revolutionary idea: 'Padh jaayenge, toh badh jaayenge'. It was the escape route out of caste, out of poverty, out of the inherited disadvantages of birth. Education was enshrined in the Constitution as a promise to India's most poor and disadvantaged citizens.

Public universities, the IITs, the IIMs, government medical colleges were not merely institutions; they were the physical architecture of social mobility.

But the faith India's poor and excluded had in education is faltering. And it's not by accident but the consequence of a policy drift.

What began as creeping privatisation two decades ago has been deliberately accelerated under twelve years of BJP rule, turning it into a strategy designed to price education out of the reach of the poor.

Coupled with stagnant salaries, the cost of education is leading to worsening poverty.

The entry of private capital into higher education began in the late 1990s and accelerated through the 2000s. It was propelled by the experience of underperforming and crumbling public universities. The infusion of private capital, it was believed, would bring both quality and greater access. But the experience of the past three decades has proven the folly of those expectations.

India's higher education system is the third largest in the world by enrolment. We have 43 million students in over 60,000 colleges and 1,200 universities. These numbers underline the monumental wasted potential.

A country that aspires to be a knowledge superpower is producing graduates who can't find jobs and innovators who fail the test of commercial application. It is re-engineering education in a way that dulls critical faculties and equates success with the ability to crack multiple-choice tests.

## The higher education economy

The single most consequential effect of privatisation has been the transformation of a public good into a private commodity. Private institutions have mushroomed while public ones by and large are starved for resources.

The fees of premium institutions have shot up. The tuition fees of IIM-A (Ahmedabad), for example, surged from Rs 4 lakh in 2007 to Rs 27 lakh in 2021; of IIT Bombay from Rs 1.08 lakh in 2021 to Rs 8 lakh in 2024-25. In the private sector, a regular BA degree in an average university today costs Rs 3-6 lakh; a B.Tech Rs 8-20 lakh. Management degrees can cost from



The rising cost of higher education is proving highly exclusionary

Photo: Getty Images

Rs 5-30 lakh. And the burden of higher cost has been passed on to students.

High tuition fees is the whole story. India's higher education system has been captured at the point of entry by a parallel, unregulated, multi-billion-rupee coaching industry. JEE and NEET, the two national entrance examinations for engineering and medicine, are so disconnected from the school curriculum that it is now practically impossible to crack these exams without coaching. The entrance examination, which is supposed to select talent from the educational system, has itself become a separate educational system.

The GST collection from coaching institutes grew from nearly Rs 2,200 crore in 2019-20 to over Rs 5,500 crore in 2023-24! This is an industry that profits from the failure of the formal education system; it's a business model built on institutional inadequacy.

The coaching industrial complex is not educating India; it is extracting wealth from anxious families by exploiting the gap between what schools teach and what entrance tests demand.

## Education as a loss-making business

In the UPA years under Dr Manmohan Singh, salaries in India grew three to five times over ten years. Nurses, engineers, teachers, civil servants, private sector

employees, all saw real income growth. In these circumstances, the investment in education felt like a rational decision because the 'returns' were generous. The social contract between education and its reward was intact.

By contrast, for nearly a decade in the Modi years, starting salaries for fresh graduates have stagnated at Rs 3-4 lakh per annum, even as the cost of education has multiplied three to seven times. And this, if they get a job. Most don't!

The last available figures of the All-India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE) 2021-22 show total enrolment in higher education at 4.33 crore. The average has hovered in the same range for the past few years. In 2023, only 81.2 lakh got a job, including 39.1 lakh in sectors like IT services and banking.

The India Skills Report 2025 places graduate employability at 60 per cent for B.Tech graduates and 45 per cent for arts graduates. Nearly 45 per cent of graduates aged 20 to 24 are jobless. In 2024, two out of five IIT graduates, or 40 per cent, went unemployed.

Meanwhile, corporate profits in several sectors have gone up five times. Wealth is being generated alright, but it's not reaching those who labour. By design. Labour

protections have been weakened systematically. Wage floors have not been raised to compensate for inflation and employment has been 'casualised'. The rich are getting richer and the poor graduate gets a crippling debt with his degree.

This is not a market outcome; it's a policy outcome. When corporate profits grow five times and salaries do not move, the distribution of economic gains has been determined by a government that chose whose interests it will prioritise and protect.

## The accreditation scandal

Aspiring families will pay any price for a degree if the brand has cachet, if the positioning is attractive. This psychology drives the explosion of private universities. Designer courses are being fashioned with fancy names for maximum marketability and advertised aggressively with fraudulent student statistics.

Gullible students and their families are often unable to tell a good course from a scam. Accreditation ratings and NIRF (National Institute Ranking Framework) ratings are of little help. The accreditation architecture itself is in a shambles. In February 2025, the CBI arrested NAAC inspection committee members for accepting cash, gold and phones in exchange for A++ ratings.

The NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council) dismissed 900 of its 5,000 assessors after the scandal, but it still didn't invalidate the fraudulent grades they had awarded! Tainted institutions with fake A++ ratings continue to attract students and their families' hard-earned money.

In March 2025, the Madurai bench of the Madras High Court stayed the NIRF rankings. It found that the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) relies entirely on unverified, self-submitted data. A 2024 exposé found over 50 institutions falsely advertising accreditations or using forged certificates.

The government's own Economic Survey 2024-25 acknowledged the need for regulatory transparency in higher education. It's an admission that the current framework is failing.

Investing in education is today making families poorer. Even those fortunate enough to get jobs work on salaries that will take them years to recover just the fees paid for their education.

During the UPA years, an entire generation moved into their own houses, buying them on EMIs. Today, it's practically impossible for young employees to dream of their own house.

When the poor and marginalised conclude that education is no longer affordable, that a degree will lead nowhere, that the salary will never recover the cost, they will gravitate towards a rational decision: to stop sending their children to universities.

When that happens, these children will perform better to hereditary, caste-based occupations, undoing the Constitutional promise of social mobility for all Indian citizens. ■

GURDEEP SINGH SAPPAL is a Permanent Invitee to the Congress Working Committee

*The faith India's poor and excluded had in education is faltering. And it is not by accident but the consequence of a policy drift*

# The slippery art of sounding inclusive

Why the BJP says one thing and does another on Muslim representation

Aakar Patel

Last month, a story was reported under this headline: 'No Muslim name finds place in BJP's Bengal list' (*Times of India*, 8 April 2026). The story went on to provide the numbers, that is to say, how many tickets were distributed and so on, but beyond that headline, there wasn't much to add. Which does not surprise most of us because, since 2014, the data has taught us what the BJP wants.

In the last three Lok Sabhas, the BJP has won 282, 303 and 260 seats without a single Muslim candidate. It has over 100 MPs in the Rajya Sabha—none of them Muslim. A decade or so ago, it was reported that it had over a thousand MLAs across India, of whom one was Muslim. For the first time since 1947, there is no Muslim minister in the Union cabinet.

Again, this does not surprise us because, if there is one thing to be appreciated about the BJP, it is honesty. The party, especially in its current edition under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is clear about the fact that it seeks the total exclusion of India's largest minority, against whom it holds historical resentment.

We need not go into the merits of this sentiment, other than to acknowledge that this is how the party and many of its votaries feel. The issue to consider is something else. Why—given how clear the BJP in general and the prime minister in particular are about pushing this exclusion—do we hear things like 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas', '140 crore Indians', and so on? The party and the leader could just as well be honest and craft slogans that are as exclusionary as their behaviour, but they do not. Why?

There are two ways to answer this, and the first is the less complicated one. The slogans are coined and regurgitated to assuage those who are anxious about such things. They don't mean much because the reality of exclusion is right before us in the way that it is practised.

This answer is not particularly satisfying because the BJP doesn't address the issue of why the BJP needs to do it at all, given the transparency of its practices. It also does not accommodate the fact that, in the very acts of being full-throated and genuine about the exclusion and persecution of Muslims, the prime minister has won over many people who want this sort of behaviour and this sort of society.

The real reason the party and the prime minister are forced into hypocrisy is that their desire for total exclusion does not sit well with Indian society and Indian culture. Who says things like 'vasudhaiva kutumbakam' (the whole world is a family) in their manifesto? It is not the Opposition or intelligentsia. It is the BJP. When it comes to advertising its wares, it rests on Indian wisdom while peddling something else entirely.

The constituency for the BJP's authentic offering exists, of course, but it is smaller than the total set of BJP voters. It is for this reason that 'development' is, or at least was, such a large part of the party plank. The fangs have to be kept hidden in formal declarations and particularly in engaging

*Support for the BJP's authentic offering is smaller than the full set of BJP voters. 'Vikas' is, or was, a party plank for that reason*



There is no place for Muslims at the BJP's high table

Photo: Getty Images

with the wider world. Our poor diplomats have to juggle with this dilemma of acting brutishly at home while pretending to be liberal abroad.

On one of his visits to the United States in May 2021, external affairs minister S. Jaishankar had an interview with Donald Trump's former national security advisor Gen. H.R. McMaster. This is what the general, who is familiar with India and has visited it, said to Jaishankar: "I wanted to ask you about how you see political developments in your own country. You are not a partisan person. You have served with great distinction across many administrations. There is concern in the midst of the pandemic about some of these Hindutva policies that could be undermining the secular nature of Indian democracy... Are India's friends right

to be concerned about some of these recent trends?"

Jaishankar avoided answering the question directly and went into a segue about how rations were distributed and cash transferred. He did not address McMaster's specific question regarding the problem of Hindutva policies.

What are they? India's introduction of religion into citizenship. The implementation of new laws that criminalise Muslim marriage, Muslim divorce, and the possession of beef. The forced ghettoisation of Muslims in Gujarat by law. The use of shotguns on crowds only in one part of India—Kashmir. The government's demonisation of Muslims for, among other things, spreading Covid...

These are the things that India's friends were concerned about. Jaishankar replied

to McMaster without using the word 'Hindutva' even once and without referring to the laws that India was getting pulled up for around the world. The reason he ran away from the debate is, of course, that there is no defence. Obfuscation and avoiding the issue was the only way to respond to the accusation—an accurate one—that India was harming itself and its own people through Hindutva.

This should give some hope, even if just a sliver, to those who rightly worry about our society, where it has landed and where it is headed. If even those who successfully divide Indians by faith find it uncomfortable to stand by their beliefs when challenged, it reveals this is not the truth we ultimately want nor who we truly are. ■

Views are personal

# Presiding over its own irrelevance

India's position as BRICS chair couldn't be more incongruous, writes **Ashok Swain**

It's India's turn at the helm of BRICS this year and its position in the bloc—once seen as a counterweight to Western-dominated alliances and a US-led international order—couldn't be more incongruous. As New Delhi prepares to host the 18th BRICS summit in September this year, India finds itself presiding over a divided grouping while becoming increasingly isolated within it.

The BRICS grouping was already beset with contradictions but the ongoing Iran war seems to have split it wide open. Once projected as a platform for coordinated political assertion, for its commitment to multipolarity, it now appears incapable of even issuing a joint statement on a major geopolitical crisis involving one of its own members.

The BRICS MENA meeting, of deputy foreign ministers and special envoys of the Middle East and North Africa, in New Delhi on 23-24 April, ended without consensus, forcing New Delhi to fall back on issuing a 'chair's summary' rather than a collective declaration. That distinction is not procedural; it's political—you get a chair's summary when you lack consensus.

The divisions in the group are structural. Iran, now a BRICS member, expected solidarity from the bloc in the face of military confrontation. Yet other members, particularly the UAE, which has since withdrawn from OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries), resisted the use of strong language against the US and Israel. China and Russia lean towards Tehran. India equivocated with vague expressions of concern.

This paralysis has left BRICS unable to take a stand even when a member state has been attacked, when its leaders have been assassinated. Draft statements have failed and negotiations have stalled.

India's role in this deadlock has been revealing. As chair, it was expected to provide direction but has instead chosen ambiguity. India's reluctance to take a firm stand reveals the contradictions in the Modi government's foreign policy. In pursuing what its external affairs minister S. Jaishankar describes as 'strategic autonomy', India has developed trade, defence and strategic partnerships with the US and Israel, economic and energy ties

with the Gulf, and cultural and diplomatic cooperation with Iran. With the war forcing a show of hands, India has tried to hedge to avoid alienating anyone.

But within BRICS, a grouping that increasingly defines itself through a critique of US dominance, that ambiguity comes at a cost. India's refusal to take a position on a conflict involving BRICS bête noire US and a BRICS member is seen not as prudence but a lack of commitment. Iran has openly expressed its expectation that India, as BRICS chair, will mobilise the bloc in its favour, but New Delhi's interests are too deeply embedded in the US-Israel alliance to hazard such a stance.

At the same time, China's influence within the grouping continues to expand. The enlargement of BRICS, often presented as a sign of its growing global appeal, has in fact strengthened Beijing's centrality. Many of the newer members share closer strategic alignment with China than with India. The balance within BRICS has shifted decisively. India is no longer a co-equal pillar. It has become a dispensable player in a structure increasingly shaped by China.

*The BRICS grouping was already beset with contradictions but the ongoing US-Iran war seems to have split it wide open*



Embarrassingly for host India, the BRICS MENA meeting in New Delhi on 23-24 April couldn't come up with a joint declaration

This shift has made India's position more uncomfortable. Its strained bilateral relations with China, marked by unresolved border conflicts and strategic rivalry, limits the possibility of meaningful cooperation within BRICS. India's position is further complicated by Trump's warnings of imposing punitive tariffs on countries pursuing alternative trade arrangements under BRICS. Wary of the Trump administration, the Modi government won't risk taking a stand that might invite retaliation at various levels it cannot afford.

Consequently, New Delhi has been hesitant about endorsing initiatives that will be seen as a challenge to a US-dominated global economic order. Take for instance, talks of de-dollarisation. The consequence is a narrowing of India's strategic space within BRICS. It cannot fully align with the bloc's more assertive agenda without risking economic and diplomatic repercussions. Yet by holding back, it undermines its standing within the group.

The internal contradictions of BRICS have never been so thoroughly exposed. For the first time, the grouping is confronting a situation where its members are divided over an ongoing military conflict involving one of their own. The inability to forge a consensus reflects deep incompatibilities.

India's chairmanship has coincided with this rupture, and its own ambiguity has rendered it totally ineffective in managing the contradictions in the group. If anything, the crisis has exposed the limits of India's influence.

The implications for the upcoming summit are difficult to ignore. Expectations are low. China's President is unlikely to attend. With divisions unresolved and no shared strategic direction, the summit is unlikely to produce anything of consequence. At best, it will generate carefully worded statements that skirt contentious issues. And this, in turn, will reinforce the perception that India has no locus to lead the Global South.

This moment also raises big questions

about India's foreign policy. Its attempt to straddle competing geopolitical alignments is hard to sustain. Within BRICS, that strategy is already failing. The more India hedges, the more space China occupies. The more India avoids taking a stand on global issues, the less influence it commands.

The credibility of BRICS as the pivot of an alternative global order was already fading. Under India's chairmanship, that decline has become unmistakable. The grouping continues to expand, add members and meet, but its capacity for meaningful collective action is eroding.

The Modi government's failure to define a clear role for India within the bloc means that India now chairs BRICS without commanding it. It will play host without shaping the outcome in any way. The September summit in New Delhi will only lay bare its irrelevance. ■

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

# Civilisation, according to those who drop the bombs

The West's civilisational sermon in West Asia rings hollow amidst war, sanctions and selective outrage, writes **Avay Shukla**

Civilisations are created by poets, writers, painters, architects, and destroyed by politicians and their armies. We would do well to remember this truth at a time when an existential civilisational war is taking place almost on our borders, in West Asia.

Make no mistake, the illegal assaults on Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Iran are not just about Greater Israel or uranium enrichment or oil: these are just the cover for new Crusades against the non-Christian, non-Caucasian world, a new religious imperialism by the USA and Israel, and wink-wink support from most of Europe. Large numbers of Christians in these countries appear to have embraced the spirit of Zionism.

The sheer temerity and audacity of this is hard to grasp. Here we have two countries, one barely 75 years in existence and the other whose cultural pillars are hamburgers and Kentucky Fried Chicken, presuming to destroy genuine civilisations that are thousands of years old.

As the Iranian foreign minister

reminded Trump: the Persians were inscribing the laws of human rights on the Cyrus Cylinder when the Europeans and Americans were still living in caves.

Today's bloodthirsty Zionists are probably not even aware that it was a Persian mathematician who invented algebra in the 9th century CE, that Jews exist today because Persian kings like Cyrus (5th century BCE) and Xerxes (6th century BCE) had decreed that Jews be allowed to live in peace in their kingdoms and not be harmed in any way. That today's Jews should seek to slaughter the descendants of these Persians says all that needs to be said about true civilisations and barbarians.

Evidence of attempted civilisational supremacy is mounting by the day. The policy was officially declared by a Cuban immigrant who, like a snake which has lost its bearings, tries to devour its own tail. I speak of Marco Rubio, the US secretary of state.

At the Munich Security Conference in February this year, he unashamedly laid out Trump's new MAGA Carta to a standing

ovation by other European leaders.

Rubio expressed nostalgia for the past, when Europe's "missionaries, pilgrims, soldiers, explorers poured out from its shores to settle new continents". He called for "a new age of Western dominance", to reverse the decline of the West since 1945, in effect proclaiming the launch of a new era of neo-colonialism. The USA, he stated, is "fixing" the problem, and in doing so will have no hesitation in rejecting the core elements of the existing international order.

This has been amply demonstrated by the fact that the USA has between 750 and 800 military bases in 80 countries to maintain its hegemony; by the bombing of 41 countries in the last 80 years—all but one of which (Serbia) are in either Asia or Africa. One expert estimates that these assaults, and the sanctions that have accompanied them, have killed at least 32 million people.

Gaza, Lebanon and Iran are only the latest expressions of this attempted neo-colonialism. Trump has openly boasted that he has taken Venezuelan oil, that he wants

Iran's oil reserves and a share in the toll revenues from Hormuz.

He has shown utter racial contempt for one of the oldest civilisations in the world by killing its leaders, calling them "bastards who belong to the Stone Age". The Israeli defence minister has described Palestinians as "worse than animals" and called for their extermination.

The West Asia genocide by Israel and the USA has been fully, though more quietly, supported by Western Europe and the G7, with the exception of a couple of countries like Spain and Ireland. Their continued trade with Israel hovers at about \$50 billion annually; they have sanctioned Iran and Venezuela but will not dream of sanctioning Israel; they continue to arm the rogue terrorist state to the teeth; they have formed a coalition of 12 European states to open the Straits of Hormuz but will not do so to protect Gaza or south Lebanon.

Worse, they will not allow their own citizens to protest against Israel: the UK has arrested thousands of protesters and France has just introduced the YADAN law criminalising any anti-Israel public protest with a five-year jail term. The West's war of civilisation is being waged in full earnest.

This is the context in which we should view Iran's tenacious defence of its sovereignty and its people. Iran is fighting to decolonise the Global South. It has effectively reversed and turned on its head the Western narrative of the southern nations being 'barbarians' and 'terrorists'. The emerging global perception is that Israel and the US are the biggest terrorist nations, that it is they who constitute the biggest threat to peace and the world order, that their leaders are declared war criminals. The barbarians have lost this war but, by definition, are too stupid to admit it. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



Photo: Getty Images

*For good reason, the world today sees Israel and the US as the biggest terrorists, as the biggest threats to world peace*

Every day brings with it new, near-impossible challenges for the people of Palestine

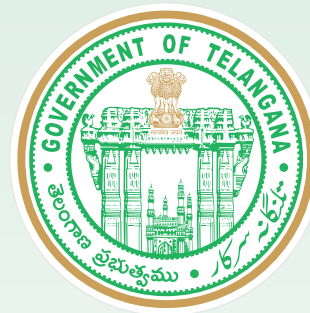
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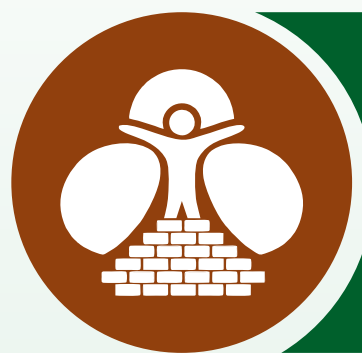
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