

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

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The new law is both regressive and unconstitutional



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'Strategic autonomy' or strategic isolation?

Gurdeep Singh Sappal on how the Modi government's foreign policy has left India without any real friends

Diplomatic failure doesn't always announce itself. It manifests in silences at the United Nations, in the slow cooling of relationships once taken for granted. At some point, the accumulated loss becomes undeniable. For Indian diplomacy, March 2026 drove home this dull recognition.

After Independence, India had fashioned itself as one of the most consequential swing states, as a bridge between civilisations, as the natural leader of the Global South. Today, it is friendless on its borders, a spectator in the defining conflict of the moment, squeezed on trade by the superpower it cultivated, and presiding over a BRICS bloc that it has conspicuously broken ranks with. 'Strategic autonomy', the foreign policy mantra of the Narendra Modi government, is looking more like 'strategic isolation'.

Pakistan's diplomatic resurrection

To understand how far India has slipped, consider the trajectory of its most persistent adversary. As recently as 2018, Pakistan was on the Financial Action Task Force grey list. It was publicly shamed before the international community for harbouring terrorist financing networks linked to the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. Its officials were put through a humiliating 34-point action plan. In 2009, Pakistan boycotted the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), of which it is a founding member, unable to prevent India's external affairs minister from addressing that 57-nation body in Abu Dhabi. And not to forget that Osama bin Laden was found living in Abbottabad, in close vicinity of Pakistan's military academy, in 2011.

That was the Pakistan of recent memory. But something changed. After the Pahalgalam attack in 2025, Pakistan secured 182 votes to chair the United Nations Security Council. India voted against, but found only two nations standing with it. After Operation Sindoor, which the Modi government tried to present as a moment of Pakistan's diplomatic isolation, their COAS (Chief of Defence Forces) Field Marshal Asim Munir was hosted for lunch at the White House by US President Donald Trump. And now it is Pakistan that is playing the key interlocutor—alongside Turkey, Egypt and Oman—in a bid to end hostilities in the ongoing US-Israel-India war.

Absent from every table

This war has become the most brutal stress test of India's self-proclaimed centrality in world affairs, its 'Vishwaguru' claims. India has civilisational ties to Iran spanning millennia. It made big investments

in the Chabahar port as its gateway to Central Asia through the International North-South Transport Corridor. It was Iran's largest customer for crude oil before American sanctions hit. And yet, when the US and Israel began their military campaign against Iran, India was not among the voices of concern, not among the nations that dared speak the word 'ceasefire' and is not among the mediators. The government called it 'calibrated silence', but the world saw it as a client state's compliance.

This is not the first such absence. When American forces withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, New Delhi was frozen out of subsequent negotiations. India had over the years invested over \$3 billion in the reconstruction of war-ravaged Afghanistan and had maintained a substantial diplomatic presence in Kabul. Whereas Pakistan had housed, nurtured and maintained communication channels with the Taliban throughout the twenty years of war. Yet, Pakistan was at the negotiating table alongside Russia and China; India was not.

* A superpower aspirant must, above all, stand for something. Its partners and adversaries alike must be able to read its posture and commitments, to calibrate their own positions accordingly. Over the past five or so years, India's foreign policy has been opaque and swung like a pendulum.

After the Galwan skirmish of 2020, the Modi government banned Chinese apps and telecom companies, but when economic pressure mounted, it quietly rescinded many of those bans. It embraced the Quad grouping (consisting of the US, India, Japan and Australia) as a strategic counter to China's growing influence, but then signalled discomfort when the grouping acquired harder security edges. It deepened energy dependence on Russian crude after the Ukraine invasion, publicly defying Western sanctions, then surrendered to Trump's tariff blackmail. It has now let down the BRICS grouping it chairs.

The result is a foreign policy that no partner fully trusts and no adversary really fears. Washington extracts compliance without offering support. Moscow provides oil but no security. Beijing remains the biggest trade partner with a huge trade surplus, but actively supports Pakistan in armed conflict against India. And Saudi Arabia, which the government pitches as a Modi success story in the Muslim world, signed a defence treaty with Islamabad in September 2025 after India's silence on Gaza.

A hostile neighbourhood
India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy,

Photo: Getty Images



Where's India? Foreign ministers of (from left) Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey and Egypt meet in Islamabad to discuss ways to end the ongoing war in West Asia

Over the past five or so years, India's foreign policy has been opaque and swung like a pendulum

formally articulated more than a decade ago, was about making India the region's indispensable partner. What it has delivered instead is a South Asia in which India is simultaneously the largest power and the most distrusted one.

The Maldives ejected Indian military personnel in May 2024 after an explicit electoral mandate based on their 'India Out' campaign. Bhutan, India's most reliable partner, has begun a quiet recalibration. It co-hosted a Chinese New Year celebration with Beijing, attended by members of its

royal family, referred to Tibet officially as 'Xizang' in a signal to Beijing, and is engaged in direct border negotiations with China bypassing New Delhi. Chinese settlements have come up in north Bhutan's uninhabited Jakarlung and Menchuma valleys and India has been unable to reverse that reality. The Siliguri Corridor, a.k.a. 'Chicken Neck', connecting India's northeastern states to the mainland, is exposed to high ridges where Chinese infrastructure has steadily advanced.

Bangladesh has swung from trusted partner to open adversary. The interim government of Muhammad Yunus had even offered his country as a gateway for China to India's landlocked northeastern states. India answered the provocation with trade route restrictions that will affect trade worth an estimated \$770 million. This has deepened the resentment without restoring Indian influence.

In Nepal, a new generation of political actors has assumed power with no inherited ties to New Delhi and little patience for the asymmetry that has always characterised the relationship.

In Myanmar, India bet on a junta that now controls barely thirty per cent of the country's territory. With the resistance forces that increasingly govern the border regions, India has cultivated no relationship at all. China has not merely filled the vacuum India has left, it has actively capitalised on it.

Squandering an inheritance

The Modi government brags about the success of its G20 presidency in 2023. No doubt the inclusion of the African Union as a permanent member was an initiative of note. The Gulf partnerships of the early Modi years were real, commercially significant and diplomatically productive. Free trade agreements have been signed with the EU, UK, New Zealand and a few other countries.

But most of these 'achievements' were either inherited from the UPA era or building upon earlier initiatives. Some were reputational more than structural; they didn't translate into durable alliances, binding commitments or crisis-proof relationships.

India's G20 'success' is a direct outcome of growth during the Manmohan Singh years. The FTAs follow the same trajectory as UPA-era FTAs with Japan, South Korea, Singapore, the ASEAN and over ten other prominent nations. It took the Modi government eight years to sign its first FTA and it took Trump's tariff tantrums to close deals with the EU and UK!

The failure to convert these relationships into stress-proof alliances has really cost India. Its claim of 'strategic autonomy' rings hollow and its foreign policy isolation is only too real. ■

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FCRA noose tightens

Why charities and religious groups are dreading the likely new law

Herjinder

A century-old dispute in Kerala's Saint Thomas Christian community may appear, at first glance, to be a local affair. The long-running feud between factions of the Malankara Church has already seen court interventions, frozen accounts and divided congregations. But today, that dispute is beginning to echo far beyond Kerala, offering an early glimpse into the potential nationwide impact of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026.

For years, several accounts linked to the Malankara Church factions have remained frozen due to ongoing litigation. Affiliated institutions, ranging from churches and seminaries to hospitals and schools, have had to function under a cloud of financial uncertainty. Yet, despite these constraints, both sides had the assurance that their assets, built over decades, through community effort and occasional foreign contributions, would remain under their ownership, subject only to judicial outcomes.



The bill converts regulatory compliance into a Damoclean threat, where procedural delays or lapses can lead to permanent loss of assets



Unsettling move MoS Home Nityanand Rai introducing the FCRA Amendment Bill in Parliament; (left) St. Mary's Malankara Seminary in Kerala

The introduction of the FCRA Amendment Bill, 2026, has unsettled that assumption.

Tabled in Parliament on 25 March 2026, the bill proposes sweeping changes to the regulatory framework governing foreign contributions. At the heart of the controversy is a provision that allows the central government to take over assets created using foreign funds if an organisation's FCRA registration is cancelled, expires, is surrendered, or even if its renewal is delayed.

For organisations entangled in disputes, this provision is alarming. A delay caused by

litigation, administrative hurdles, or even technical lapses could potentially lead to state takeover of properties and institutions.

Across India, thousands of NGOs (non-governmental organisations), religious bodies, educational institutions and charitable trusts operate with varying degrees of reliance on foreign contributions. Many of them do not receive such funds continuously. They may access foreign assistance intermittently—during crises, for specific projects or for limited periods. Organisations often do not prioritise timely renewal of their FCRA registration if they are not receiving foreign funds on a regular basis.

Under the proposed amendments, this pattern could become a vulnerability.

Critics argue that the bill makes regulatory compliance a Damoclean threat, where procedural delays or lapses, intentional or otherwise, can lead to permanent loss of assets. The other cause for alarm is the concentration of discretionary power in the hands of the executive.

Veteran journalist John Dayal describes the bill as a 'draconian measure', drawing parallels with other contentious laws affecting minority communities. According to him, the FCRA amendments could have a disproportionately adverse impact on Christian institutions, much like the changed Waqf laws affected the assets of Muslim organisations.

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Dire straits for millions of Indian workers

The current conflict in West Asia exposes the fragility of India's labour market and export sector

Nandita Haksar

The escalating US-Iran conflict has dealt a severe blow to Indian workers in the region. According to the ministry of external affairs, an estimated 260,000 Indian nationals have been evacuated or have returned on commercial flights. At least two Indian workers in the war zone have been reported killed. Then there are those waiting to go to the Gulf for jobs. Estimates from Indian recruitment agencies put this number at more than 3 lakh.

The safe return of the workers is, of course, good but it is not without consequences. The returnees are unlikely to find jobs here. Additionally, annual remittances worth over Rs 12 lakh crore from West Asia will be hit. Jewellery, garment exports and pharmaceutical shipments too will bear the brunt.

America's war on Iran has already led 63 per cent of Indian companies to downsize or put a freeze on hiring; 15 per cent have shifted to contracts, eroding job security and morale across manufacturing, IT and services sectors.

The shortage of gas, surge in prices of raw material and supply chain breakdown has disrupted Haryana's industries, particularly textiles and basmati rice exports. Dyeing units are the backbone of Panipat's Rs 60,000 crore handloom/textile industry (including a Rs 20,000 crore export market). Around 400 of these have shut down due to LPG cuts. Rationing of PNG supplies by 60 per cent to 150 units have led to losses across textiles and related sectors.

Over 125 units in Barhi and Kundli have closed, feeding into a total of 300 textile factory shutdowns. The ensuing losses have left over 35,000 jobless with many migrant workers going back to their home states. The government has been sympathetic to corporations, big business and industry, forgetting that its first duty or 'raj dharma' is to protect citizens, workers and farmers.

It could move in this direction by placing before the nation a report on the impact of the war and new technologies on the working class, as also the measures it intends to take to protect the most vulnerable sections.

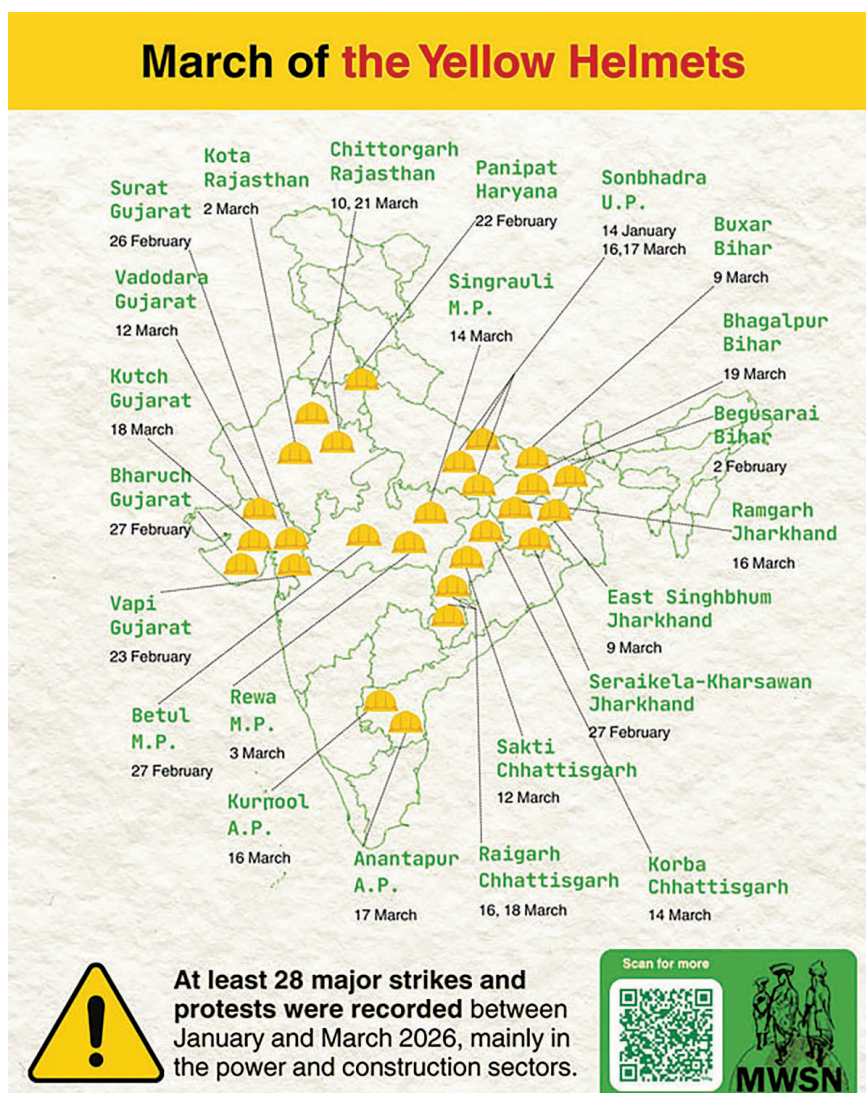
Higher energy and commodity prices, supply chain disruptions, trade and

remittance shocks, financial market volatility, and strategic uncertainties are all fallouts of the war. One of the first signs of its impact has been felt in the private sector. March 2026 recorded the slowest expansion in over three years, which cannot be attributed to trade union activities or strikes.

In the past, conflicts in West Asia have repeatedly pushed up crude oil and gas prices, raising India's import bill, feeding into wholesale and retail inflation, and squeezing margins for energy intensive industries such as airlines, shipping, petrochemicals and heavy manufacturing. Add to that the plight of millions of migrant workers in conflict zones.

Economic stress is fuelling unrest. The Migrant Workers Solidarity Network (MWSN) has recorded 28 large-scale protests and strikes in the first three months of 2026. A look at the accompanying map dramatically illustrates the extent of the nation-wide protests. The all-India strike by central trade unions on 1 April should be seen in the context of these protests. As workers and farmers took to the streets demanding the war be stopped, they also demanded that the new labour codes be repealed and farmers protected. The new labour codes facilitate hiring flexibility for employers at the cost of workers' rights, stripping contract workers of prior legal protections, including their right to be regularised when employed in perennial roles.

One of the rights won by workers all over the world was the eight-hour workday. With the development of new technologies, mainly robotics and AI, and because of the interconnectivity of global markets, the corporate world has pushed



safety in the workplace, triggered in some cases by the death of workers on duty and the callous attitude of employers. The protests have cut across public and private sectors, including at companies owned by the Patas, Ambanis and Adanis.

People have been largely unaware of the protests because they have not been covered by mainstream media, regional media or even social media. The reason for this deafening silence could be the success of the campaign to demonise trade unions and workers. Even political parties and judges from the labour courts to the Supreme Court have succeeded in stigmatising the very word *mazdoor*.

Are workers really responsible for the growing number of factory closures? Figures from the ministry of corporate affairs indicate that over 2,04,000 private companies closed down between 2020-21 and 2024-25. This trend, however, can be directly linked to restructuring, insolvency and market stress, not to labour unrest.

The lack of permanent jobs is dramatically illustrated by the number of employees in Maruti Suzuki's plants in Haryana's Gurgaon, Manesar and Chharkhoda. Maruti Suzuki employs around 35,000-36,000 workers across its plants, but only 17-18 per cent of them are permanent—around 6,000-6,500 individuals with an average pay of Rs 1.3 lakh per month who largely work in supervisory roles. The remaining 82-83 per cent includes 40 per cent contractual workers, 21 per cent trainees/apprentices who earn anything between Rs 12,000-30,000.

The largest planned facility at Chharkhoda—with a target of producing 2.5 lakh vehicles per year by 2029—currently hires fixed-term employees on 3-year contracts made legal by the new codes.

MWSN documentation shows that contract workers have been fighting for decades for the right to permanency. The courts had upheld their right to regularisation if they worked in jobs of a perennial nature. The new labour codes took away this legal safety net. In times of war, their future looks even more uncertain.

NANDITA HAKSAR is a human rights activist and author of *How Robots Stole Our Jobs: Struggles of Suzuki Workers in the Age of AI (Aakar, 2026)*

America's war on Iran has already led 63% of Indian companies to downsize or put a freeze on hiring; 15% have shifted to contracts, eroding job security and morale

governments to help create a labour market in which they can hire and fire workers.

This has happened in India too. Over the years, the number of permanent workers in private and public sectors has fallen while the number of non-permanent workers—contract, casual, migrant—has been growing. The 28 major strikes so far were organised by contract workers. Their key demands include an eight-hour work shift, payment of months of pending wages and

FCRA noose tightens

Continued from page 1

The concern, however, is not limited to any one community. Civil society groups working across sectors—in healthcare, education, disaster relief or social welfare—see the bill undermining their operational autonomy. Many such organisations have built schools, hospitals and community centres through a combination of local contributions and occasional foreign funding. The prospect that these assets could be taken over due to regulatory technicalities has sent ripples of concern through the sector.

Congress MP Manish Tewari has framed the issue in constitutional terms, arguing that the bill "suffers from serious constitutional maladies". He points to Article 300A, which guarantees the right to property, and warns that allowing the government to assume control over assets due to procedural lapses undermines this safeguard. In his view, the amendments blur the line between legitimate regulation and excessive state intervention.

Another line of criticism relates to the principles of natural justice. The bill, it is argued, grants unbridled powers to the state, with insufficient checks against arbitrary or selective action. In a polarised environment, they fear that such powers could be used to target organisations perceived as critical of the government or not aligned with its ideology. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) has warned that such powers could have a chilling effect on charitable and religious activities across the country.

At a rally in Kerala on 30 March, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi said the amendments are designed to redirect the flow of foreign funds in a way that puts independent welfare organisations at a disadvantage while benefiting entities aligned with the ruling establishment. He said the bill places community organisations at the "mercy of the central government," effectively turning regulation

into an instrument of control. Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan has also weighed in, stating that the amendments have "generated apprehensions among minority communities". The existing legal framework has sufficient powers to address undermining their operational autonomy, he said. His position reflects a broader concern among states about the concentration of power at the Centre.

To understand the depth of these concerns, it is important to look at the evolution of the FCRA regime. The law was amended in 2020 under the Manmohan Singh government to enhance transparency and accountability. Organisations receiving foreign contributions were required to disclose detailed information about funds received and their utilisation every three months, with this data made publicly accessible.

In 2022, further amendments under the current government introduced a different set of changes, which included some relaxations but also greater central oversight. Critics argue that the 2026 bill marks a decisive shift towards control rather than transparency, fundamentally altering the balance between regulation and autonomy.

For organisations on the ground, the implications are immediate and practical. Consider a charitable trust that builds a rural hospital with some foreign funding a decade ago. If that trust did not renew its FCRA registration because it no longer receives foreign contributions, the new provisions could expose its assets to state takeover. Institutions entangled in legal disputes—like the Malankara Church—are similarly vulnerable.

As Parliament debates the bill, the central question is: where should the line be drawn between legitimate oversight of foreign funding and the protection of institutional autonomy?

For thousands of organisations across India, the answer to that question may determine not just their compliance obligations but their very survival.

Akhilesh has his eye on her vote

Nandlal Sharma

Mamta Gautam makes a living working as domestic help. A Dalit farmer and activist, she also leads a movement to save her land from the clutches of the Adani Group. On 22 March, Mamta was one of 26 women to receive the Murti Devi-Malti Devi Samman at the Samajwadi Party headquarters in Lucknow. Named after Akhilesh Yadav's mother and grandmother, the honorees were mainly from the backward, Dalit and minority (Pichhda-Dalit-Alpasankhyak or PDA) communities.

Sunaina Devi belongs to the Musahar community. Married off as a child, she could not go to school. Today, thanks to her effort, hundreds of children from the Musahar community have received schooling. Program coordinator Vandana Mishra said, "Sunaina Devi's path wasn't easy. She was beaten and subjected to violence. Yet, she didn't back down." Women like Mamta and Sunaina don't make mainstream headlines.

With women comprising half the population, Akhilesh knows just how crucial women's votes are in the 403-seat UP assembly elections and has begun establishing women influencers and leaders. Party vice-president of Meerut district Sandeep Yadav says that there is a plan to steadily increase the outreach by women leaders among women voters.

Veteran Samajwadi leader Uday Pratap Singh also spoke at the awards ceremony, recalling that early in his political career Murti Devi Singh had gone to jail for the first time fighting for a Dalit woman. He also marked that most of the Murti Devi-Malti Devi awardees were from backward and Dalit communities.

The results of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections seem to have convinced Akhilesh Yadav that his social PDA coalition could turn the political tide in the 2027 UP assembly elections. The message he wants to convey is this: when it comes to representation, he will go all out to create opportunities for women from backward and Dalit communities.

On 29 March, kicking off the UP election campaign with the Samajwadi Samaanta Bhaichara rally in Dadri, Gautam Buddha Nagar, Akhilesh said, "Pain is the thread that binds the people of the PDA together. On one side are the arrogant people who neglect and oppress, and on the other side are the oppressed and the neglected. There are such unfortunates in every caste and religion. Those who have not suffered the pain of oppression, discrimination and injustice may show sympathy, but they cannot truly feel that pain—the pain we felt when our home was washed with Ganga jal, or when a temple was 'purified' after our visit." (Following the Samajwadi Party's defeat in 2017, the chief minister's residence was



Outreach Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav with the awardees of the Murti Devi-Malti Devi Samman

reportedly 'purified' with water from the Ganga before Yogi Adityanath moved in. Similarly, during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, after Akhilesh Yadav visited a Shiva temple in Kannauj, BJP workers washed it with 'holy' water.)

Akhilesh Yadav appears completely clear and confident about his campaign. Recently, the party appointed Rukmini Nishad, late MP Phoolan Devi's elder sister, as leader of the UP Samajwadi Mahila Sabha. Earlier, in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, he built his strategy around the PDA socio-political equation and, in alliance with the Congress, the SP won 43 out of 80 seats in Uttar Pradesh. Rahul Gandhi's 'Save the Constitution' campaign also played a major role in this victory, but Akhilesh Yadav ensured there was no ambiguity about his intentions—whether in ticket distribution or organisational representation—towards different social groups.

At the Dadri rally, Akhilesh promised that if his party comes to power, it would pay Rs 40,000 annually to poor women under the Stree Samman Samridhi Yojana and revive the Samajwadi Women's Pension Scheme. He also

spoke of strengthening the 1090 helpline to improve women's safety. At the awards ceremony, former chief secretary Alok Ranjan, who has worked with Akhilesh, highlighted initiatives such as the 1090 helpline, Dial 100, the distribution of bicycles, the Asha Jyoti scheme and the Kanya Vidyan scheme started during Mulayam Singh's tenure, emphasising the party's ongoing commitment to women's safety and empowerment.

Senior journalist Bhavesh Chandra says that even after nine years in power, chief minister Yogi Adityanath lacks the confidence to seek votes on a positive note. Six or seven minutes into his speeches, he starts talking about law and order under previous governments.

The dominant belief, though, is that women as welfare beneficiaries are increasingly eliding caste and religion to vote for the BJP. According to the Lokniti-CSDS Post Poll Survey 2022, the BJP had a significant 13 per cent lead among women voters compared to the Samajwadi alliance. The largest gender gap in favour of the BJP was observed among the upper castes, where women supported the BJP more than men (90 per cent versus 83 per cent). Among rural women too, the BJP enjoyed a significant lead, with a 16 percentage point gap in the vote share of the two parties.

Senior social activist and professor Rooprekha Verma says women are more intensely aware of their Dalit, backward or caste affiliations. The social status of their husbands imposes a double burden. This is particularly evident among Dalit women. She cites the old practice of *dola pratha*, where a newly wed Dalit bride was forced to spend her first night with the local landlord. While Prof. Verma believes that pain can be a unifier, in the case of women, a lot depends on which caste they come from.

The Lok Sabha results of 2024 convinced Akhilesh that his social PDA coalition is a winner



Mamata's love-hate ties with the RSS

In this election, the Sangh is not playing behind the scenes, it's doing a lot of hyper-local heavy lifting

Sourabh Sen

When the BJP's central leadership chose Nagnendra Ray alias Ananta Maharaj, for a Rajya Sabha seat from West Bengal in July 2023, the RSS expressed strong displeasure. Local RSS leaders felt that BJP should have nominated someone more aligned with their ideological roots, rather than this self-styled king who spearheaded the movement to carve a separate state (Greater Cooch Behar) out of West Bengal. Eyebrows were raised when Maharaj was elected unopposed and quickly dropped his demand for Greater Cooch Behar. This suited both the TMC and the RSS just fine.

In February 2026, when the state government conferred the Banga Vibhushan—the state's highest civilian award—on Ananta Maharaj, once again, eyebrows were raised. Political observers interpreted it as chief minister Mamata Banerjee's way of driving a wedge between the RSS and BJP in the run-up to the assembly elections.

Banerjee's relationship with the RSS can be described as transactional and fluid. Pre-2011, when she needed an ally to fight the Left, she described RSS volunteers as patriots. Post 2011—safely ensconced in state secretariat Nabanna — she praised the 'good people' of the RSS. Now, as West Bengal braces for another crucial election, the relationship has turned adversarial. The Trinamool Congress sees the RSS as the 'main force' behind the BJP's anti-Bengal agenda, the instigation of communal politics and the mass deletion of voters through the SIR.

The RSS has also repositioned itself from a behind-the-scenes ideological influencer to a hyper-local, constituency-specific heavy lifter. "This election has become a matter of life-and-death for Bengal. The RSS will do anything, politically and socially, to ensure the survival of Bengali Hindus," senior RSS leader Jisnu Basu told *National Herald*.

Nearly 40 per cent of the BJP nominees started their political career either as RSS swayamsevaks or pracharakas before being 'loaned' to the BJP. The party has fielded high-profile candidates with deep RSS roots like Dilip Ghosh from Kharagpur Sadar. Swayamsevaks will also actively manage booths on election day, ensuring voter turnout in areas where the BJP is strong. "BJP supporters in affluent urban areas do not like to go through the rigour of manning polling booths on election days," a CPM worker pointed out. In rural Bengal, RSS workers will plug any such gaps.

The RSS workers are focusing on four



Mamata Banerjee with BJP Rajya Sabha MP Nagendra Ray alias Ananta Maharaj (to her left) at a recent function in Kolkata

geographic zones where they believe the election will be won or lost. The priority is the Matua heartland with 17-21 seats across constituencies like Gaighata, Bongaon Uttar (SC) and Bagda (SC) in North 24 Parganas, and Nadia district.

Under the SIR, 9.5 per cent of Matuas were marked 'non-mapped' after they failed to produce legacy documents. The RSS has opened documentation help desks concentrated around the Matua religious hub of Thakur Nagar.

In Murshidabad, Malda and Uttar Dinajpur—districts with large Muslim populations along the India-Bangladesh border—the RSS is focusing on creating voter awareness about demographic changes. Chopra, Goalpokhar and Islampur are constituencies where the BJP is hyping infiltrator rhetoric at rallies, while the RSS is busy discussing cultural preservation at local clubs and libraries. The RSS is particularly active in those constituencies where a large number of voters are 'under adjudication'.

"The electoral success of Jamaat-e-Islami in areas across the border in Bangladesh is a real concern," an RSS worker told *National Herald*.

In West Bengal's urban and industrial areas like Kolkata, Howrah and Asansol, where there have been maximum voter roll deletions, the RSS is conducting *sadbhav baithaks* (goodwill meetings) to address the missing voter phenomenon. In Jorasanko, Chowringhee and Kolkata Port—cosmopolitan constituencies with a large Hindi-speaking population—the RSS is trying to leverage sentiment associated with local issues.

In the Jangalmahal tribal belt spanning Jhargram, Purulia and Bankura, it is the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram that is driving the campaign through its 'Panch Parivartan Initiative' of social harmony, family values, environment, self-reliance and civic duties. The hope is that igniting *swabodh* (self-esteem) in tribal villages will counter dependency on state welfare schemes like Yuvasree and Lakshmi Bhandar.

Whether the RSS's activities will help or harm the BJP or the TMC is a question being hotly debated.

"Mamata Banerjee is an RSS creation and the RSS would not want to dislodge her

from Bengal," says Rabin Deb, veteran CPM leader and former member of the central committee. According to Deb, it was the RSS that was behind the formation of two regional parties in the late 1990s—Tamil Maanila Congress in Tamil Nadu in 1996 under G.K. Mooppanar, and Trinamool Congress in West Bengal in 1998. The idea, he says, was to wipe out the Congress in both states. "The Durga Angan that Mamata Banerjee is now building in New Town has Mohan Bhagwat's blessings. It was Bhagwat who described Mamata Banerjee as Durga," says Deb.

There is no denying that it was under the Trinamool that the RSS expanded its footprint in West Bengal. When Mamata came to power in 2011, the RSS had around 830 shakhas. This number has grown nearly five-fold since. In Central Bengal, it added 500 new shakhas between 2023 and 2025 taking the number from 1,320 to 1,823. There has also been a concerted effort to increase the number of daily shakhas, weekly milans and monthly mandalis across rural Bengal, particularly in the border districts. Reports indicate 4,540 such units are operational, with a target of 8,000 units before the 2026 assembly elections at the end of this month.

The expansion of RSS-affiliated schools—operating under the Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan and its state-level wings (Saraswati Shishu Mandir and Saraswati Vidya Mandir)—are another example of the peaceful coexistence of the RSS and TMC in Bengal. These schools, which challenge both the Left-secular state board and the elite missionary schools, gathered momentum after 2011. There are currently more than 1,500 Vidya Bharati-affiliated schools with a cohort of 3.5 lakh students.

The BJP meanwhile is finding it difficult to reconcile internal power groups. While one group, with Dilip Ghosh as its centre of gravity, has the blessings of the RSS, the other, fronted by Suvendu Adhikari, draws its clout from Amit Shah. The tussle between the two groups over ticket distribution is already out in the open. If the RSS decides to treat Mamata Banerjee with kid gloves—for instance by not turning up to 'man the booths'—Bengal may remain outside the BJP's schema, despite an engineered voter list, despite Amit Shah changing the entire state administration from the governor to the district magistrate, despite the deployment of 50,000 paramilitary personnel with more still to come. ■

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Despite engineered voter lists, a pre-poll overhaul of the state administration and 50,000+ paramilitary personnel, Bengal may still elude the BJP

Undoing hard-won transgender rights

Chittajit Mitra on why the new transgender law is regressive

On 13 March 2026, the social justice and empowerment minister Virendra Kumar tabled the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026 in the Lok Sabha. When I first heard this, I thought, in all my naïveté, they're finally bringing in the changes the transgender community has been asking for. Provisions for horizontal reservations, for example, or just punishment for the different kinds of violence (against trans people) that had been clubbed together in the 2019 Act. But reality bit hard. The new bill, instead of expanding the rights of the community, retracts almost all the rights they had won after fighting for decades.

Even amid demands by the Opposition that the bill be referred to a select committee for wider consultation, and a plea by lawyers and activists that the President withhold assent, the regressive provisions are now the new law.

Why are these changes regressive? How do the amendments undermine or violate fundamental rights and dilute protections under Article 14 (equality before the law), Article 15 (non-discrimination), Article 19 (freedom of expression) and Article 21 (protection of life, personal liberty, bodily integrity)?

First, the new law narrows the definition of 'transgender person'. It delegitimises self-identification and empowers medical boards and district magistrates to *grant* recognition. In doing this, it goes against the Supreme Court's landmark NALSA ruling (of 2014) that recognised the constitutional rights of transgender persons and established the principle of self-identification of gender identity.

The system of graded punishments introduced in the new law, ostensibly to criminalise coercion/ deception/ allurements to make someone present themselves as transgender, uses overbroad language where even gender-affirming care can be interpreted as coercion. It ignores

the community's lived realities and potentially criminalises their support systems.

I grew up in Uttar Pradesh listening to rumours about the transgender community: they are supposedly people with indeterminate genitals; they are involved in stealing and kidnapping children; they force people to castrate themselves... and so on. This kind of demonisation, which marginalised the community, now has the force of law behind it.

In narrowing the definition of 'transgender person' to specific socio-cultural identities (*kinnar*, *hijra*, *aravani*, *jogta*) plus intersex variations, and in folding intersex persons into the transgender category—even though intersex variations are biological and distinct from gender identity—the new law disenfranchises individuals who don't belong to these socio-cultural groups (what about trans groups like the Nupi Manbi from Manipur?) and non-binary, gender-diverse individuals.

It attaches biological markers to 'transgender-ness' that contradict internationally accepted definitions of gender identity. As the European Institute for Gender Equality puts it, gender identity is 'each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms'.

It reintroduces the formation of district-level medical boards to effectively certify transgender persons. This contentious provision has a history: it was initially proposed in 2016, flagged by activists as medical and bureaucratic gatekeeping and as a violation of the NALSA judgement

In narrowing the definition of 'transgender person' to socio-cultural identities plus intersex variations, the new law delegitimises other non-binary, gender-diverse individuals



Fighting for their rights A protest in the national capital against the amended trans law

(2014) and then withdrawn in the 2019 Act.

The 2019 Act was far from ideal. Its disregard for the community's right to dignity was conspicuous in the manner that violent crimes like rape and physical abuse were clubbed with milder offences against the community (like obstructing their use of public spaces) under a catch-all provision, carrying the same light punishment. Is it really, then, about 'Protection of Rights'—as the phrasing of the law may have you believe?

When transgender members of the National Council for Trans Persons (NCTP) were called from different parts of the country for an urgent meeting with social justice minister Virendra Kumar, he thought it better to skip the interaction and sent bureaucrats instead. Resigning from the NCTP on 25 March (when the bill was passed by Rajya Sabha), Council members Kalki Subramaniam and Rituparna Neog shared what transpired during the deliberations. Asked about the unequal rape laws, for instance, the bureaucrats cited "biological differences" between trans women and cisgender women. This reveals the discriminatory mentality and the bio-essentialism—the belief that biological factors are the essence of who a person is—sitting at the core of the new law.

Another treacherous amendment introduces severe punishment (10 years to life imprisonment) for attempts to 'compel

any person or child 'to outwardly present a transgender identity'. The clause may appear harmless, even benevolent, but the overbroad definition of abuse can have a chilling effect on the support systems the community has relied on—NGOs, CBOs (community-based organisations), even traditional groups. Many trans individuals face natal violence and are forced to hide their true self at home. If they run away and seek refuge at any of these institutions, their families can easily file an 'abduction or allurements' case against those who gave them a safe space. This archaic understanding that parents or natal families can do no harm to the child has been proven wrong time and again, and yet we are blindly handing over the rights of transgender individuals to the family.

Finally, the Indian queer community must understand that politics based on the disenfranchisement of any section of society will one day come round to haunt them as well. A small section of India's LGBTQ+ has been desperately trying to seek validation from majoritarian forces; the new law should tell them where they stand. The malicious attempt to further marginalise and undercut us in the upcoming Census will not be tolerated. It is time to raise our voices as one. ■

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Photo: Vipin



Gen Z standing up to be counted

Young voters look all set to reshape Assam's political landscape, writes **Sourabh Sen**

Can Gen Z do in Assam what we saw recently in Bangladesh and Nepal? As electoral phase grips the state for its single-phase assembly election on 9 April, the spotlight has shifted to a constituency that is no longer just a voting bloc but a decisive political force. With over 72.8 lakh voters aged 18-29—accounting for nearly 30 per cent of the 25 crore electorate—young people are going to be the makers in this high-stakes contest.

According to the Election Commission of India (ECI), the 2026 rolls have seen a significant jump in the number of young voters, including 6.28 lakh first-time voters. Gen Z voters make a cohesive constituency, being digital natives who are less tied to traditional party loyalties than previous generations. In constituencies like Guwahati Central, for example, the presence of young candidates—such as 27-year-old Kunki Chowdhury (Assam Jatiya Party), who is taking on BJP veteran Vijay Kumar Gupta—underscores a shift where the youth are not just casting votes but seeking to lead.

With the BJP born out of the anti-CAA movement, Chowdhury strongly advocates the implementation of the Assam Accord to protect Assamese identity and the interests of all legally recognised citizens of India. This pitches her against the BJP's—more specifically chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's—shrill rhetoric based on persecution of miyas (Bengali-speaking Muslims). "We need a holistic approach based on inclusive regionalism because of the current situation in Assam," says Chowdhury.

At 25, Lobo Narzary, independent candidate from Kokrajhar, is one of the youngest contestants. Making a point of the enthusiasm of his youthful support base, Narzary says power brokers control nominations, reserving them for the highest bidder, but it's time to move beyond the narratives of corruption and communal hatred. "Identity politics dominates when corrupt syndicates and drug lords take over the system," he

says. "Society develops when people can live peacefully with their families and work the way they want. I do not believe that constructing shopping malls is development," Narzary told *National Herald*.

Sapali Marak (31) is the Congress candidate from Baikhungri. She faces the challenge of reconciling Baikhungri's complex community equations with Bodos, Garos and Santhals pulling in different directions. But "education, health and jobs," she says "...are going to be my priorities."

The BJP has opted to promote leadership from its youth cadre. A case in point is Dipu Ranjan Sarmah contesting from the New Guwahati constituency. Sarmah, a former state president of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM), shot to fame after a bypoll in 2024 when he won from Samaguri—a Congress bastion. During a recent visit, Sarmah says the cumulative efforts of the central and state governments and municipal corporations ("triple engine") have created "a feel-good factor" among voters. "The work done by the government has eased my job. I just need to reach out to the people and seek their blessings," he told the media.

Is Assam's politics in the grip of a generational change that will demand new talking points and new ways of doing things? The entry of candidates like Narzary and Chowdhury are early signs of a shift towards a Gen Z-influenced political landscape in Assam, where digital campaigns and local development issues are in play as much as identity politics.

Despite government claims of providing 1.65 lakh jobs, urban and rural youth continue to flag the lack of private sector opportunities and the need for better vocational training. Students at institutions like Cotton University have voiced demands for reduced fees, better academic facilities and modern work cultures over populist rhetoric.

With young voters making up a big chunk of the electorate, Assam's 2026 poll campaign is being fought as much on smartphones as on the streets. Parties have devoted resources to digital campaigns that include youth-oriented issues like availability of high-speed internet, start-up grants and transparent governance.

Even as old-style politicians like Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma froth at the mouth with their divisive rhetoric, hoping communal emotions will drive voting, new-generation leaders, especially from the Asom Sonmilito Morcha (ASM)—the opposition alliance of the Congress, Rajiv Dal, AJP, CPI(M) and others—are talking about pressing life issues like employment and skill gaps, education and health infrastructure. While issues like the NRC, CAA and infiltration still matter, the younger generation views these through the lens of economic stability and social harmony rather than just ethnic



Young candidates wooing Gen Z voters could queer the pitch for the BJP in Assam

polarisation.

The mainstreaming of Gen Z issues, especially through the ASM alliance, means that the assembly election will no longer be a cakewalk for the BJP. "Formation of the alliance means the BJP will have to fight it out in some constituencies," says author and journalist Sanjoy Hazarika. Sensing this, the BJP too has jettisoned the pitch of its communal rhetoric, and persuaded ally Asom Gana Parishad to field Muslim candidates in 13 out of its quota of 26 seats.

Himanta is also downplaying another emotive Gen Z issue—of delivering justice to Assam's cultural icon Zubeen Garg. After Garg died in Singapore on 19 September 2025, Sarma pre-empted the investigation and announced that the singer was murdered and promised justice to his family and fans. Many were arrested. On 25 March, Singapore's state coroner Adam

Nakhoda reportedly said that Garg's death was "simply due to an unfortunate and tragic accidental drowning" and no one had forced, coerced or pushed him. And so the promise to ensure justice for Zubeen Garg has been brushed under the carpet.

On 10 March the government transferred Rs 9,000 each to 40 lakh women as part of its Orunodoi 3.0 scheme. The Rs 3,600 crore direct benefit transfer largesse, worth four months' assistance plus a Bihu bonus, is obviously to enlist the support of women in the upcoming election. But Assam's Gen Z is asking uncomfortable questions and there are signs of fatigue with the politics of money, muscle, polarising emotions and election-time carrots. ■

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With social media playing an outsize hand in shaping political narratives, the 2026 campaign is being fought as much on smartphones as on the streets



Will the cult of personality be the unmaking of Pinarayi Vijayan?

K.A. Shaji

Smoke rose over the Parassinikadavu Snake Sanctuary, one of Asia's finest reptile sanctuaries, long before Pinarayi Vijayan became the most powerful political figure in Kerala. In the late 1980s, after a stinging electoral defeat at the hands of his political mentor turned rival M.V. Raghavan, CPI(M) workers in Kannur turned their rage not on their opponents, but on the snake park run by a trust associated with Raghavan who had crossed over to the Congress-led UDF, challenging the party in its own citadel.

What followed was carnage. Flames engulfed enclosures. King cobras and rare serpents were burned alive. Birds fell from trees. Monkeys and smaller animals were hunted down as they fled. For hours, the spectacle unfolded in full public view. Vijayan was then the all-powerful district secretary of Kannur. Instead of distancing the party from the incident, he invoked Newton's third law, describing the violence as an equal and opposite reaction. It was a glimpse of the political instinct that understands how response makes the boundaries of excess negotiable.

In hindsight, Parassinikadavu was not an aberration. The methods were crude, carried out openly by cadres. Today, the methods are more sophisticated, embedded within the machinery of the state. But the underlying message, critics say, is the same: power must not appear to bend. As

Kerala approaches a decisive assembly election on 9 April, Vijayan is not merely contesting for a third consecutive term from Dharmadam, his home turf in Kannur. As chief campaigner for the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), he is asking voters to legitimise a decade of governance that has steadily hollowed out the democratic and ideological foundations on which India's Left once stood.

Critics within and outside the LDF say that what began as a promise of stable administration has become a tightly controlled political system centred on a single leader. This election is thus less about continuity and more about whether Kerala is willing to endorse a model of governance historically opposed by the Left, one that increasingly resembles the centralised structures under prime minister Narendra Modi.

To his supporters, Vijayan's political life is a story of grit and upward mobility. Born into a poor toddy tapper family in Pinarayi village near Dharmadam, his rise through the ranks of the CPI(M) reflected an acute understanding of power within a faction-ridden party. From a milieu where cycles of retaliatory killings involving CPI(M) and BJP-RSS cadres, crude bombs and machetes were instruments of political messaging, Vijayan emerged as a figure who could consolidate control, neutralise opponents and enforce discipline. The shadow of that political culture never entirely receded. The 2012 murder of rebel CPI(M) leader

T. P. Chandrasekharan, who was hacked to death, continues to be cited as emblematic of intolerance towards dissent. Vijayan has consistently denied any role, but the controversy persisted, sharpened by allegations of repeated paroles and preferential treatment for the CPI(M) workers who were convicted.

Chandrasekharan's widow, K.K. Rama, now a UDF-supported candidate for Vatakara, alleges that "the politics of violence patronised by Vijayan is making democracy a mockery in an otherwise progressive Kerala." From student politics to his years as CPI(M) state secretary, Vijayan cultivated a reputation for being methodical and uncompromising. His prolonged battle with senior party colleague V.S. Achuthanandan ended with Vijayan asserting near total control over the party apparatus.

When Vijayan assumed office in 2016, there was little to suggest that he would fundamentally alter Kerala's political culture.

"The turning point, paradoxically, came through crisis—the 2018 floods, followed by the Nipah outbreak and the Covid pandemic," observes veteran journalist K.A. Antony, who has closely followed Vijayan's political trajectory. "His daily press briefings during Covid, widely praised for their clarity and consistency, also served to concentrate political attention on a single figure." Dr Azad Malayattil, retired college

"Wherever you look in Kerala, you see his face—buses, roadside hoardings, TV, newspaper jackets... Sound like someone?"

is seen as evidence of limiting power to a closed circle.

Veteran CPI(M) leader G. Sudhakaran, once a trusted associate, turned openly critical in his later years, and is now contesting as a UDF-backed independent in Ambalapuzha, the constituency that is home to Punnappara and Wayalar, two uprisings that stabilised the Left in Kerala. "Both the CPI(M) and the government have become privately controlled entities of the chief minister," asserts partners like the CPI are subservient," observes Bhadrhan Bhaskaran, an environmental activist from Kuttanad who broke with the party over coastal mineral sand mining and ecological damage.

"What we have witnessed under Vijayan is the subordination of institutions," says C.P. John, former CPI(M) leader who left the party along with M.V. Raghavan, a UDF candidate from Thiruvananthapuram. "The party has not just abandoned its principles," asserts J. Reghu, thinker and academic, "it has reinterpreted them in ways that suit it."

"Despite their ideological differences, both Modi and Vijayan have centralised authority, cultivated leader-centric political narratives and relied on tightly controlled communication strategies. In Kerala, this has resulted in a political culture where elections revolve less around policy debates and more around the persona of the chief minister," observes writer and cultural critic M.N. Karassery.

Opposition leader V.D. Satheesan, the face of the Congress in this election, is blunt: "The government spent crores from the exchequer to support his PR. Wherever you look, you see his face—on public transport buses, roadside hoardings, on TV, on newspaper jackets... His omnipresent cutouts are making us wonder whether we are living in Kerala. It reminds me of the infamous 'India Shining' campaign. Such campaigns are counterproductive."

A. Suresh, former CPI(M) leader who left the party and is now contesting under the Congress symbol from Malampuzha, says, "The party has become stronger under Pinarayi, but it has also become narrower."

Pinarayi Vijayan's decade in power has undeniably reshaped Kerala. But it has also raised fundamental questions about the cost of that success. And so the story circles back to Pinarayi village. To Parappam. To the modest spaces where Kerala's Communist movement once took shape through quiet conversations and collective imagination. ■

Will Kerala endorse a model of governance always opposed by the Left, one that looks more and more like the centralised structures under Narendra Modi?



Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan with party workers at a roadshow in Kannur

Karnataka Jnana Bhandar Manuscripts & Digitisation Bill, 2026

RECLAIMING THE WRITTEN SOUL OF A CIVILISATION

How Karnataka's landmark legislation will rescue centuries of knowledge from obscurity — and place it, for the first time, in the hands of every citizen.

Somewhere in Karnataka today, a manuscript rests in the quiet darkness of a wooden chest. Its palm leaves, inscribed by a scholar perhaps eight hundred years ago, carry verses on medicine, mathematics, devotion, or statecraft — knowledge painstakingly recorded when ink on leaf was the only way to pass wisdom from one generation to the next. The chest has not been opened in years.

The family that keeps it does so with reverence, but without the means to preserve what lies inside. The leaves, fragile with age, are slowly yielding to moisture, pests, and time. If nothing is done, that knowledge will vanish — not with drama, but with the quiet finality of dust.

It is precisely to interrupt this slow disappearance that the Karnataka Legislative Assembly, in its Ninth Session of the Sixteenth Assembly, passed the Karnataka Jnana Bhandar Manuscripts and Digitisation Bill, 2026. In doing so, Karnataka has taken a step of extraordinary cultural significance — not merely preserving artefacts but actively legislating the survival of civilisational memory.

A FIRST-OF-ITS-KIND LAW

When Minister H. K. Patil rose in the Assembly to explain the intent behind the Bill, he described a situation both urgent and deeply human. Across the state, countless manuscripts lie with private individuals, institutions, and families — preserved with devotion, but in many homes neither opened nor read.

The knowledge they contain spans religion, medicine, science, history, and philosophy, recorded in Sanskrit, Kannada, Prakrit, Pali, Tamil, Telugu, Arabic, Persian, Modi, Sharada, and other scripts. Some are handwritten on paper. Others are inscribed on palm leaves, birch bark, cloth, copper plates, and stone. Together, they constitute an archive of human thought that no library catalogue has ever fully captured.

The Bill is, in the Minister's own words, a first of its kind. For the first time in the state's history, a legal framework will require every person or institution in possession of manuscripts



Photo: Gettyimages

to self-declare those holdings to the government — irrespective of the condition of the manuscript — within one year of the Act's commencement.

This is not a fiction. It is an act of collective acknowledgement: that what was written by scholars of Karnataka belongs, in some essential sense, to all of Karnataka.

THE AUTHORITY THAT WILL GUARD KARNATAKA'S KNOWLEDGE

At the heart of the legislation is the Karnataka Manuscripts Authority — a statutory body corporate with perpetual succession and a common seal, established by the State Government through notification.

The Authority is constitutionally broad in its membership. It will be chaired by the Minister in-charge of

Archaeology and draw together the Secretaries of Tourism, Finance, and Higher Education; the Vice-Chancellor of Hampi Kannada University; the Director of the Oriental Research Institute, Mysuru; and the Commissioner of the Department of Archaeology, Museums and Heritage. Complementing these official voices are three eminent scholars in Indology, Kannada literature, or manuscriptology within Karnataka, and of manuscripts that originated in or relate to Karnataka but are held abroad.

The composition is a deliberate statement: that manuscripts demand not only bureaucratic stewardship but scholarly intelligence and community trust. The Authority's mandate is sweeping. It will conduct a comprehensive survey of manuscripts in both public and private custody within Karnataka, and of manuscripts that originated in or relate to Karnataka but are held abroad.

It will prepare and maintain a State Register of Manuscripts — a digital and physical record of the location, ownership, physical condition, script, language, subject matter, and access conditions of every known manuscript

"These manuscripts must be protected by the government. We must preserve this repository of knowledge."

H. K. Patil, Minister for Law, Tourism & Parliamentary Affairs

in the state.

It will promote conservation — both preventive and curative — alongside digitisation, critical editing, translation, and publication. It will establish or recognise Manuscript Conservation Centres and Resource Centres. And it will frame guidelines for access, reproduction, and commercial use, while protecting the intellectual property rights of traditional custodians.

The Authority is also charged with preventing illicit trafficking of manuscripts and facilitating the repatriation of Karnataka manuscripts

held abroad — a provision that speaks to the long, painful history of cultural assets finding their way out of the subcontinent through colonial-era expropriation or clandestine trade.

THE MISSION: FIVE LAKH FOLIOS A YEAR

The Bill does not stop at creating an authority and issuing mandates. It establishes a time-bound operational programme: the Karnataka Manuscript Conservation and Digitisation Mission. Under this Mission, the Authority is required to achieve the high-resolution digitisation of at least five lakh folios every year.

It is a target that signals political seriousness. Announcing a Mission with a numerical commitment is, in the landscape of cultural policy, comparatively rare — and it reflects the urgency that the government has attached to this legislation.

What does digitisation actually involve, for a palm leaf that may have lain undisturbed for centuries? Experts who have worked in the field describe a careful and technically demanding process. Manuscripts retrieved from families are first subjected to de-acidification and fumigation — procedures that must be carried out with precision, since overdoing them can cause as much destruction as neglect.

The material is then converted into a form suitable for digitisation, using specialised techniques and archival-grade materials to stabilise fragile paper and inks. Only then does the high-resolution scanning take place, capturing not just the text but the texture, condition, and materiality of the original document.

The digitised manuscripts that enter the public domain will be made freely available on a dedicated portal — the Karnataka Jnana Bhandara — accessible to any citizen with an internet connection.

Where an owner has imposed justified restrictions for religious or privacy reasons, access will remain limited; but the presumption of the law is openness. The idea that a student in Bidar or a researcher in Mangaluru should be able to call up a twelfth-century text on traditional medicine from the comfort of a smartphone is no longer speculative. It is, with this legislation, becoming state policy.

- Karnataka Jnana Bhandara — the state's dedicated manuscript portal — will offer free public access to digitised manuscripts in the public domain, making centuries of knowledge available to every citizen for the first time.
- 5 Lakh Folios to be digitised annually under the Mission
- 1 Year Deadline for mandatory self-declaration by manuscript holders
- 10+ Scripts and languages covered under the Bill's definition

OWNERS REMAIN OWNERS

A critical aspect of the Bill — one that the government has been at pains to communicate — is that mandatory reporting does not mean mandatory surrender. After conservation and digitisation, manuscripts will be returned to their owners. A token of appreciation, in the form of a certificate acknowledging ownership, will also be provided.

If an owner wishes, under any circumstances, to cede the manuscript to the government, that option is available — but it is emphatically a choice, not a requirement. Where owners do not wish the content of their manuscripts to be made public, that wish will be respected: the manuscript will remain private.

This assurance matters deeply in a landscape where families and religious institutions have, for generations, been the quiet custodians of texts that the state barely knew existed. The Bill asks them to step forward — not by taking their inheritance away, but by inviting them into a larger, publicly supported project of preservation.

ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH LAW

The legislation also carries teeth. Any person who wilfully damages, destroys, or exports a manuscript declared as a Karnataka Heritage Manuscript without the prior written permission of the Authority faces imprisonment of up to three years, a fine of up to five lakh rupees, or both.

The same penalties apply to persons who fail to comply with the mandatory

reporting requirement within the stipulated one-year period. These provisions are not punitive in spirit — they are protective, designed to create a legal environment in which the destruction or trafficking of manuscripts carries genuine consequences.

Funding for the Authority and its Mission will come through the Karnataka Manuscripts Fund — a non-lapsable fund supported by grants from the State Government, schemes of the Central Government, corporate social responsibility contributions, and public donations. The Bill's financial memorandum notes that no extra expenditure is involved in the proposed legislative measure, a reflection of the government's intention to finance the Mission through the Fund's own accumulated resources rather than fresh budgetary allocation.

EDUCATION, REPATRIATION, AND THE SOLIGA QUESTION

The Authority's mandate extends into the classroom as well. The Bill specifically tasks it with integrating manuscript knowledge into school and university curricula — a recognition that conservation without comprehension is incomplete.

Karnataka's manuscripts are not museum pieces to be admired from a distance; they are living intellectual heritage that belongs in the pedagogical mainstream.

The debate in the Assembly surfaced another dimension worth noting. BJP Member of the Legislative Assembly S. Suresh Kumar, while supporting the Bill, raised the question of traditional knowledge systems that exist outside written manuscripts — such as those held by the Soliga community, Karnataka's tribal forest dwellers whose understanding of ecology, medicine, and the natural world has been transmitted orally across generations.

"This is a very good and necessary Bill," he said, "however, there are traditional knowledge systems like those of the Soliga community. Such knowledge may be lost over time." The observation is a reminder that the written manuscript, however precious, is only one strand of Karnataka's epistemic heritage — and that the state's commitment to preservation must eventually reckon with oral traditions as well.

PRESERVATION IS CIVILISATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

There is a phrase the Minister used in the Assembly that deserves to be lingered over. Describing manuscripts preserved in homes but left unopened and unread, he said they were kept with devotion — but that devotion alone was not enough to prevent their slow disappearance. Devotion without infrastructure is love without means.

The Karnataka Jnana Bhandar Manuscripts and Digitisation Bill, 2026 is, in essence, the government's commitment to providing that infrastructure: the legal framework, the institutional architecture, the financial mechanism, and the technological ambition to match the devotion that private custodians have shown for centuries.

When the Bill was passed by the House, it marked a moment that will be recorded — fittingly — in the annals of Karnataka's legislative history. The manuscripts that now lie undisturbed in chests and temple storerooms across the state are not yet safe. But for the first time, the law is on their side.



Photo: Gettyimages

The great Indian graduate lottery

Competitive examinations for government jobs have become a gigantic waiting room for India's qualified unemployed, writes **Ajit Ranade**

Imagine spending the best years of your life, from age 22 to 29, in a waiting room. You are educated, ambitious and capable. But the job that you are waiting for has odds worse than a lottery. So, you study harder, make an attempt once more, and wait again. Meanwhile, your peers elsewhere are earning, saving, climbing career ladders, getting married, starting families. You are doing none of that. You are preparing for the next exam.

This is the lived reality for an estimated 11 million young graduates in India today. The fifth edition of the 'State of Working India 2026' report published in March by Azim Premji University reveals a startling statistic: 67 per cent of all unemployed youth aged 20-29 are graduates. That's 1.1 crore people.

In 2004, graduates constituted just 32 per cent of the unemployed youth cohort. Their share in the youth population has risen from 10 per cent to 28 per cent over two decades. But employment has not kept pace. Between 2004 and 2023, India produced roughly 50 lakh graduates every year. Of them, only 28 lakh graduates found any employment annually, and a mere 17 lakh entered salaried work. The arithmetic of national waste is criminal.

The overall unemployment rate among all graduates in the same age group runs as high as 33 per cent. Yet this same rate drops to below 4 per cent after age 30. Something happens around age 30 to dissolve what had been an acute crisis just years earlier. What happens is not eventually—it's resignation.

Young men eventually succumb to economic pressure, marriage obligations or parental urgency and accept whatever work is available, however dead-end. Young women, by contrast, often exit the labour force altogether, retreating into unpaid domestic care work. The data shows this unambiguously: male unemployment falls because men find a job, whatever it might be; female unemployment falls because women stop looking.

Why do millions of graduates spend their prime in this limbo? The answer lies in a rational calculation, which is ultimately socially ruinous. The private sector offers starting salaries that have barely moved in two decades. In 2011, a young male graduate earned about Rs 21,800 a month. By 2023, this figure had fallen to Rs 19,573. That is a drastic drop, and when adjusted for inflation, it is disastrous. No wonder those educated youths do not mind missing out on joining the private sector treadmill of entry-level jobs.

Government jobs are a different story. A government driver may earn four times



Young aspirants at a big job fair. Only 8.25% of graduates find roles aligned with their qualifications

his private sector counterpart. A government clerk enjoys health cover, a pension, iron-clad job security and social prestige. To wait for the aspiring graduate chooses to wait.

This wait takes a specific and peculiar form: the endless preparation for competitive government examinations. A study by Harvard alumnus Kunal Mangal of data released by the Tamil Nadu Public

Service Commission (TNPSC) found that a single TNPSC Group 4 recruitment in 2018-19 drew 13.7 million applicants, nearly four times the next largest recruiter in the state.

About 80 per cent of all unemployed individuals in Tamil Nadu were simultaneously preparing for a TNPSC exam. When the state imposed a partial hiring freeze between 2001 and 2006, vacancies fell by 86 per cent, but exam applications actually rose by 7 per cent. Preparation for a government job was crowding out private sector employment. This pattern is not peculiar to Tamil Nadu. It is seen across states. The government exam has become India's great waiting room.

The private sector, meanwhile, offers a treadmill at the entry level, not a career. The Economic Survey 2024-25 noted that only 8.25 per cent of graduates work in roles aligned with their qualifications. Nearly half are in elementary or semi-skilled work—jobs that require a degree for eligibility but deliver no skill development, no learning by doing, no career progression. Between 2012 and 2019, India's GDP grew at 6.7 per cent annually while employment grew at 0.1 per cent. Of 83 million jobs added between 2021-22 and

2023-24, nearly half were in agriculture. Labour laws, rather than protecting workers, encouraged employers to substitute permanent employees with casual and contract labour.

The gender dimensions of this crisis deserve special attention. For young women, the problem is not just unemployment but erasure. PLFS (Periodic Labour Force Survey) data confirm that educated women in their early 20s report high unemployment, signalling a genuine desire to work. But by their late 20s, instead of finding employment, they exit the labour force. Marriage expectations and the assumption that domestic care falls entirely on women extinguish participation.

The waste is particularly stark in medicine: women constitute 51 per cent of each incoming medical batch, yet only 17 per cent of practising doctors are women. In rural areas, just 6 per cent. Half the talent, trained at taxpayer expense, simply disappears. These non-practising women doctors represent a big loss to society.

Now consider the perverse policy feedback loop. Governments, sympathetic to the plight of unemployed graduates, subsidised with cash transfer schemes and

This fiscal expenditure, though well-intentioned, tightens the budget constraint—which, ironically, leaves the government with less room to hire. Vacant central government posts more than doubled between 2014-15 and 2021-22, from 4.21 lakh to 9.64 lakh. The subsidy deepens the exam-lottery culture; the hiring freeze defeats the purpose. State agencies that subsidise UPSC coaching are, in a sense, funding the lottery queue while letting the prize shrink.

The consequences for India's reservation policy are painful. Affirmative action can only function if the government is actually hiring. When recruitment slows, reserved posts go unfilled. SC employees in central government jobs fell by 47 per cent in absolute numbers between 2003 and 2021. The very communities that reservation was designed to lift—Dalits, Adivasis, OBCs—see their representation erode. When one generation gains a government post, the next generation climbs higher; that intergenerational ladder breaks when the post is never filled. It is no coincidence that the scarcity of government posts has intensified demands for reservation from communities not traditionally covered, such as Marathas in Maharashtra or Gujjars in Rajasthan. Conflict over reservation shares is, at its root, a symptom of an economy failing to create enough good jobs.

The policy prescription follows from the diagnosis. Reduce search frictions through better labour market information, job portals and portable apprenticeship schemes that benefit both employers and workers. Fix skills mismatch through employer-driven, not certificate-driven, training. Critically, reduce the enormous premium on government employment through rationalised pay, fixed-term contracts and wider staffing structures. Unemployment support must be conditioned on active job search, not passive waiting. Remove structural barriers that push women out of the workforce, with support like creches, flexible work arrangements and safety in commuting.

Eleven million educated young Indians are today squandering the most productive years of their lives in a lottery they will almost certainly lose. The waiting room has become a national institution. It is a waste of individual lives and of public investment in education. We cannot afford to let our demographic dividend rot in a coaching class or a waiting room. ■

AJIT RANADE is a noted economist
Courtesy: The Billion Press

The smallest take the hardest hit

The war in West Asia and the severe LPG shortage has dealt MSMEs another fatal blow, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

India's migrant workers are once again jobless, moneyless and homeless as thousands wind their way back to their home states. Surat, one of India's key textile manufacturing hubs, saw over one lakh workers leaving at one go. Why? Because gas prices spiking to Rs 500 per kg made it impossible for them to cook. Both men and women were seen crowding Udhna railway station trying to find a berth back to Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and Bihar.

With over three lakh workers needed to run the power looms, factory owners were forced to reduce working hours and close their units for two days a week to control production and cost overruns. Rising yarn prices have been followed by a fall in demand as consignments meant for export are lying at ports or in transit.

A severe LPG shortage, both commercial and domestic, caused by the West Asia war, has disrupted industries, hotels and restaurants, foundries and other MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises).

With the government doing nothing to allay fears, a sense of panic has spread, eerily similar to scenes witnessed during Covid.

Rakhi Saxena, 53, a migrant from Uttar Pradesh who works as domestic help in south Delhi's Sangam Vihar, has decided to pack her bags and go home. "A 19 kg cylinder is selling in the black market for Rs 5,000. Who can afford it? There are rumours of a lockdown for the next seven-eight months. Better to go home, at least there we can cook on firewood."

In north Delhi's Azad Market, Chandni Chowk, Sadar Bazaar and Lajpat Nagar, owners have seen a dip in migrant workers. Several RWAs (residents' welfare associations) are complaining about the exodus of domestic help and workers.

"Workers are going home and fresh labourers aren't coming in. Whatever government assurances may be, with domestic LPG cylinders going at Rs 4,000 in the black market, the working class is facing a great deal of difficulty," said

Mohd. Sayeed Khan, RWA president of Beri Wala Bagh.

With the government prioritising household, commercial users are receiving only about 20 per cent of their usual LPG supply. Restaurants and hotels in several states warn of curtailed menus. Those living in hostels cannot rely on their food suppliers.

The foundry sector in Coimbatore district faces the threat of shutdown, being dependent on LPG for core baking, ladle preheating and heat treatment processes. When one segment is hit, a whole range of downstream industries such as automotive, pumps, compressors, valves, and general engineering sectors also get hit.

In the last one month, the cost of carbides, industrial oils, lubricants, packing materials and petroleum-based chemicals such as binders, coatings and resins have all become costlier due to supply constraints, making production increasingly unviable for MSMEs.

The crisis is also impacting export commitments. Production delays are making it difficult to meet delivery schedules, forcing companies to consider air freight at significantly higher costs. Increased air fares have made business travel non-affordable, affecting customer engagement and market development.

The industry has urged the government to ensure uninterrupted LPG supply for industrial use, stabilise petroleum-based input availability, support transition to alternative fuels such as PNG and address labour and supply chain challenges.

Despite MSMEs contributing nearly 30 per cent to the GDP, accounting for 45 per cent of exports, and providing employment to 240 million people, they have largely operated without the support of the government.

Minister for MSMEs Jitan Ram Manjhi reported in a written reply to the Lok Sabha that 49,342 of one million registered

MSMEs have closed, resulting in the loss of 317,641 jobs during the last decade. Those still open have taken a further decline in the last four weeks.

There are 9.6 million MSMEs located in UP alone. Dinesh Goyal, national president of the Indian Industries Association, has emphasised that the recent hike in the prices of aluminium, ferrous and non-ferrous metals needs to be regulated as this affects machinery and building material manufacturing industries. Goyal has also spoken out on the rising costs of international logistics due to the non-availability of marine insurance. Cancellation of supply orders by domestic buyers and imposition of penalties for delayed supplies has made a bad situation worse.

K.E. Raghunathan, National President of the Association of Indian Entrepreneurs, emphasises a lack of foresight. "The government had ample time to put an emergency plan in place to assist MSMEs, given that 80 per cent of our LPG comes through the Strait of Hormuz. Where is the support system? Despite being fully aware of how vulnerable the majority of MSMEs are, nothing was done to help them tide over this crisis." Payment dislocation, container shortage, slump in sales are only some of the issues he listed.

Renowned economist Prof. Arun Kumar points out that most micro units that employ an average of 1.7 people—effectively making them single operators—have been the hardest hit, "with no capacity to bear the price increase." If prices continue to rise and production continues to decline, it will result in stagflation and recession, warns Prof. Kumar.

Despite the government announcing a Rs 100 crore economic stabilisation package to keep the deficit in check, many key goods remain in short supply. A shortage of sulphuric acid—needed to make sugar—led to prices quadrupling from Rs 15,000 per tonne to Rs 60,000 per tonne. Prices of polyester, polymer and tonne. Prices of polyester, polymer and tonne—used in automotive and defence—have also risen sharply.

Texas-based energy expert Dr Anas Alhaji said in the course of a media interview that while China has 1.4 billion barrels of crude oil in reserve, India has only 100 million barrels. It will need to increase its reserves to a minimum of 400 million barrels, said Alhaji, and fast.

India is presently spending an additional \$200 million per month on the oil it has been "allowed" to import from Russia. This at three times the discounted price it was getting before it bent to US diktat.

Raghunathan believes that successive shocks from global tariff wars, geopolitical



Exodus from Surat The LPG crisis has again forced migrant workers to go back home

conflicts, raw material disruption and domestic policy uncertainties are pushing millions of small businesses to the brink. This is no longer a cyclical slowdown. It reflects a deep structural stress.

"Yet our policy response remains fragmented and inadequate. Without immediate and decisive intervention, the consequences will be severe—widespread closures, job losses and long-term damage to India's entrepreneurial ecosystem."

Raghunathan's course-correction entails the immediate announcement of a five-year road map on tariffs, trade and taxation. "The government needs to set up an MSME War and Tariff Mitigation Fund and also provide direct financial support for units impacted by global disruptions."

Other measures would be to reintroduce emergency credit support, rationalise duties and create mechanisms for assured and affordable supply of critical inputs. A period of 30 days for repaying government dues and restructuring or deferring EMI payments without asset classification downgrade is suggested.

"MSMEs are not seeking handholding—they are seeking survival," he added.

Prof. Arun Kumar believes that even if the war stops, it will take six to seven months for the economic situation to improve. The problem is that India has not focused adequately on reversing import dependence. Five decades ago, India's dependence on oil imports was to the tune of 30 per cent; in early 2026 that reached a record high of 88.6 per cent. ■

MSMEs contribute ~30% of GDP, 45% of exports and provide employment to 240 million people. Yet they receive minimal support from the government

Assam Wants Change - Rising Public Discontent Against the Himanta Government



Photo: Gettyimages

A strong undercurrent of dissatisfaction is increasingly visible across Assam as the state heads toward another crucial electoral battle. What was once projected as a period of decisive governance is now being questioned by large sections of the population, who feel that key decisions of the present government have deepened divisions rather than delivering inclusive development. From rural belts to urban centres, conversations are increasingly revolving around issues of fairness, transparency, and the direction in which the state is headed.

At the heart of this growing discontent lies the controversial eviction drives carried out across several districts. The state government has consistently maintained that these drives are aimed at reclaiming government land and curbing illegal

encroachments. However, the scale, timing, and execution of these operations have triggered intense criticism from opposition parties, civil society groups, and affected communities.

Thousands of families, many of them economically vulnerable, have reportedly been displaced in these drives. In riverine and char areas, where communities already face challenges such as erosion and lack of infrastructure, the impact has been particularly severe. For many, eviction has not just meant losing land, but also their homes, livelihoods, and access to essential services like education and healthcare.

Critics argue that the issue is not merely about reclaiming land but about the manner in which the policy has been implemented. Allegations of selective targeting and lack of due

process have surfaced repeatedly, raising concerns about whether the actions are guided by administrative necessity or political considerations. The absence of adequate rehabilitation measures has further compounded the problem, leaving displaced families in uncertain and often precarious conditions.

Assam Congress leaders have been

vocal in their criticism, asserting that eviction as a policy must be humane and rooted in constitutional safeguards. They point out that while land regulation is necessary, it cannot be pursued at the cost of human dignity. "Eviction cannot become a spectacle. Governance must be about justice, not optics," has been a recurring sentiment expressed by state Congress leadership, including Gaurav Gogoi.

Adding another layer to the controversy are claims that significant parcels of land have been transferred to corporate entities in the name of development. Reports suggesting that over 40,000 bighas of land have been allocated for industrial or commercial projects have raised questions about the government's priorities. Opposition leaders argue that while the government cites land scarcity to justify evictions, it appears willing to

make large-scale allocations to private players, creating a perception of double standards.

The debate has now evolved into a broader discussion on identity, rights, and the future of Assam's diverse communities. Civil society organisations have flagged the social and humanitarian consequences of these policies, warning that they risk deepening fault lines in an already sensitive socio-political landscape.

On its part, the government led by Himanta Biswa Sarma has defended its actions, stating that all measures are within legal frameworks and necessary for the state's development. It has emphasised the need to enforce law and order while pursuing infrastructure and investment-led growth.

However, political observers note that perception often plays a decisive role in elections. The growing belief

that governance decisions are driven more by optics than by long-term planning could significantly influence voter behaviour, particularly in rural and marginalised communities.

The Congress and its allies are attempting to channel this sentiment into a broader narrative of change. They are positioning themselves as advocates of inclusive development, promising policies that balance growth with social justice. Their emphasis is on ensuring that any eviction policy is accompanied by proper rehabilitation, legal safeguards, and transparency.

As Assam approaches the polls, a fundamental question is gaining prominence: can development be considered meaningful if it excludes or displaces those it is meant to uplift? For many voters, the answer to this question may well determine their choice at the ballot box.

The ST Status Debate - Between Assurances and Uncertainty



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Granting ST status involves multiple layers of scrutiny, including socio-economic studies, legal validation, and ultimately, approval by Parliament. Congress has reiterated that their should be fair approach in initiating and sustaining this process.

The demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by several communities in Assam has once again emerged as a defining political issue, reflecting both long-standing aspirations and the complexities of policy-making in a diverse society. Despite decades of discussions, committee reports, and political assurances, the issue remains unresolved, leading to frustration and growing mistrust among stakeholders.

Communities such as the Chutia, Koch-Rajbongshi, Matak, Moran, Tai Ahom, and Tea Tribes have consistently argued that they meet the socio-economic and historical criteria required for ST recognition. For them, the demand is not merely symbolic but deeply linked to access to opportunities in education, employment, and political representation.

Over the years, successive governments have acknowledged these demands, often promising to address them through structured processes. However, progress has been slow and inconsistent. Under the current government, expectations were particularly high, given repeated assurances that a resolution would be pursued actively.

Instead, the issue has remained in a state of limbo. While committees have been formed and discussions held, there has been little visible movement toward a final decision. This perceived inaction has led to protests and renewed mobilisation by community organisations, who feel that their concerns are once again being sidelined.

One of the key challenges in resolving the issue is the need to balance competing interests. Existing Scheduled Tribe communities have expressed concerns that expanding the list could dilute the benefits they currently receive. This has made consensus-building a complex and sensitive task, requiring careful consultation and transparent dialogue.

Critics argue that the government has failed to create a credible and inclusive mechanism to address these concerns. The absence of a clear roadmap has only added to the uncertainty, with different stakeholders expressing divergent views on how the issue should be resolved.

Statements suggesting that ST status would not be granted before elections have further intensified the debate. Many community leaders interpreted this as a signal that the

issue is being deferred rather than addressed, leading to a sense of disillusionment.

Granting ST status involves multiple layers of scrutiny, including socio-economic studies, legal validation, and ultimately, approval by Parliament. Congress has reiterated that their should be fair approach in initiating and sustaining this process.

For the communities involved, the delay has tangible consequences. Without ST recognition, they continue to face limitations in accessing reservation benefits, which can impact their socio-economic mobility. For younger generations, in particular, the lack of clarity affects educational and employment prospects.

The Congress has sought to present itself as a facilitator of dialogue and consensus. It has proposed a structured, time-bound mechanism involving legal experts, demographers, and representatives from all concerned communities. The emphasis is on creating a process that is transparent, inclusive, and capable of withstanding legal scrutiny.

Congress leaders argue that the issue cannot be resolved through ad hoc announcements or electoral promises. Instead, it requires sustained

engagement and a commitment to balancing equity with practicality. "A solution must be fair, legally sound, and acceptable to all stakeholders," has been a consistent position articulated by party leadership.

Meanwhile, the government continues to highlight the complexities involved, maintaining that efforts are ongoing. Yet, for many in Assam, patience is running out. The repeated cycle of promises and delays has eroded trust, making the issue a critical test of political credibility.

As elections draw closer, the ST status debate is likely to remain at the forefront of public discourse. Voters will be evaluating not just the promises being made, but also the sincerity and clarity of the proposed solutions. In a state where identity and opportunity are deeply intertwined, the outcome of this debate could have far-reaching implications.

The Congress has sought to present itself as a facilitator of dialogue and consensus. It has proposed a structured, time-bound mechanism involving legal experts, demographers, and representatives from all concerned communities.

Governance at the Crossroads - Education, Corruption and Regional Imbalance

While identity politics and land-related issues dominate headlines, the Assam election is also shaping up as a referendum on governance. Concerns related to education, corruption, and regional imbalance are increasingly influencing public opinion, particularly among youth, middle-class voters, and rural communities.

The education sector has emerged as a major area of concern. Reports of government schools being closed, merged, or facing resource shortages have triggered anxiety among parents and educators. In many rural areas, government schools are the primary if not the only accessible institutions for children. Any disruption in their functioning directly affects enrolment, attendance, and overall learning outcomes.

Congress leaders argue that instead of strengthening public education, the current approach has weakened it. They contend that reduced investment in infrastructure, teacher shortages, and administrative challenges have collectively impacted the quality of education. The long-term implications of such trends, they warn, could be significant, affecting the state's human capital and economic prospects.

Gogoi. The other, they claim, is characterised by centralisation, polarisation, and a focus on headline-driven governance.

Regional imbalance is another critical issue. While the government has highlighted infrastructure projects and urban development initiatives, particularly in and around Guwahati, many other regions feel left behind. Districts in Upper Assam, Barak Valley, and remote areas continue to demand greater attention in terms of investment, connectivity, and public services.

This perceived imbalance has led to calls for decentralised development, where resources and opportunities are distributed more equitably. Local communities are increasingly vocal about the need for policies that reflect their specific needs rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

The government, led by Himanta Biswa Sarma, has been putting a false narrative claiming improvements in infrastructure, investment inflows, and administrative efficiency but Congress has exposed these false claims as these achievements are often overstated and do not fully address ground realities. Congress argues that development must be measured not just by large projects but by improvements in everyday life better schools, accessible healthcare, job opportunities, and social harmony.

As the campaign gathers momentum, the Congress and its allies are presenting themselves as a credible alternative. Their pitch revolves around corruption-free governance, inclusive policies, and balanced regional development. They are seeking to tap into what they describe as a growing desire for change among the electorate.

The feeling of ousting the BJP-led government resonates strongly with voters as they prefer course correction over continuity. The change chosen by voters of Assam will not only determine the political future of the state but also shape its developmental trajectory in the years to come.

"Young people need opportunities, and education is the foundation of those opportunities," has been a recurring theme in Congress messaging. Leaders like Gaurav Gogoi have emphasised the need for a renewed focus on public education, including better infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and modernised curricula.

Corruption is another issue that continues to resonate with voters. The Congress has repeatedly raised questions about transparency and accountability, accusing the ruling establishment of failing to uphold clean governance standards. Allegations of irregularities and selective action have been used to argue that the system lacks consistency and fairness.

The political narrative has also been shaped by the movement of leaders across party lines. Critics often point out that several individuals who were once part of the Congress are now in influential positions within the BJP-led government. This has led to questions about ideological consistency and whether the political landscape represents genuine change or merely a reconfiguration of existing power structures.

Congress leaders have framed the election as a choice between two contrasting visions. One, they argue, is rooted in the inclusive and welfare-oriented approach associated with former Chief Minister Tarun



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From West Asia Turmoil to Assam's Doorstep, Economic Mismanagement

Exposes BJP's Governance Failures

The deepening crisis in West Asia is no longer a distant geopolitical concern it is now directly impacting India's economy and, more importantly, the daily lives of ordinary citizens. The Congress party has sharply raised the issue of the Centre's alleged mismanagement of the situation, warning that the ripple effects are being felt across states like Assam, where rising prices, fuel shortages, and economic distress are becoming increasingly visible. At the heart of this crisis is Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi, who has cautioned that the current trajectory points towards a severe cost-of-living crisis.

Mr Gandhi has issued a stark warning about the weakening of the rupee and the surge in industrial fuel prices, linking these developments directly to global instability and domestic policy failure. "The rupee weakening towards 100 against the dollar and the sharp rise in industrial fuel prices are not just statistics, but clear signs of coming inflation," Mr Gandhi said, underlining the seriousness of the situation. His remarks come at a time when tensions in West Asia have disrupted global supply chains, particularly affecting crude oil availability and pricing critical factors for an import-dependent country like India.

One of the most pressing concerns being flagged by Congress is the emerging shortage of LPG, which has significant implications for transportation, industry, and household consumption. With supply disruptions and rising import costs, states like Assam are witnessing a steady increase in fuel prices, which in turn is pushing up the cost of essential commodities. For a state heavily reliant on road transport for goods movement, even marginal increases in fuel costs have a cascading effect on food prices and everyday expenses.

Assam, already grappling with economic vulnerabilities, is facing a particularly acute impact. Tea garden workers, small traders, and daily wage earners are among the most affected, as their incomes remain stagnant while expenses continue to



Photo: Gettyimages

rise. Reports from across the state indicate that the prices of essential items such as rice, pulses, edible oil, and vegetables have seen noticeable increases in recent months. For many households, managing monthly budgets is becoming an uphill task.

Mr Gandhi has highlighted the challenges of this crisis, stating, "Production and transport will become expensive, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) will be hit the hardest, prices of everyday goods will increase, and Foreign Institutional Investors (FII) money will exit faster, putting pressure on the stock market." His warning underscores the interconnected nature of the economy, where global shocks, if not managed effectively, can trigger widespread domestic distress.

The MSME sector in Assam, which plays a crucial role in employment generation, is already under strain. Rising input costs, especially fuel and raw materials, are squeezing profit margins and forcing many small businesses to either scale down operations or pass on the burden to consumers. This has a direct impact on employment, with fewer opportunities available for the state's youth a key electoral

demographic. Equally concerning is the situation in rural Assam, where farmers are facing higher costs for irrigation, transportation, and fertilisers. With agricultural incomes already under pressure, the additional burden of rising expenses is eroding profitability and pushing many into financial uncertainty. The Congress has argued that this reflects a failure of both central and state governments to anticipate and mitigate the impact of global crises.

Targeting the BJP-led governments, Congress has accused them of lacking a coherent strategy to deal with the unfolding economic challenges. Mr Gandhi did not mince words when he said, "The government has neither direction nor strategy only rhetoric. The question is not what the government is saying, but what is left on your plate." This sharp critique resonates strongly in Assam, where the BJP government has often highlighted development achievements but is now facing questions over its handling of inflation and economic distress.

Critics argue that the state government has failed to provide adequate relief measures to cushion the impact on vulnerable sections. Despite rising prices, there has been

limited intervention in terms of subsidies, price controls, or targeted welfare schemes. This perceived inaction is becoming a major political issue in the run-up to the Assembly elections, with Congress positioning itself as the voice of the common people.

Another dimension of the crisis is the potential increase in fuel prices after the elections, a concern explicitly raised by Mr Gandhi. "It is only a matter of time after elections, when petrol and diesel prices will also be increased," he warned. Such a move, if it materialises, could further exacerbate the financial strain on households already struggling with high living costs.

Economists have pointed out that a depreciating rupee makes imports, especially crude oil, more expensive, thereby fuelling inflation. In a state like Assam, where transportation costs significantly influence the price of goods, this creates a vicious cycle of rising expenses. The impact is not limited to urban areas; rural communities, too, are feeling the pinch as the cost of essential services and commodities rises.

The Congress has sought to draw a clear link between global instability, central policy failures, and state-level governance issues. By highlighting the real-life impact on people in the political narrative aims to shift the Assam narrative towards bread-and-butter issues that directly affect voters.

As the state heads towards crucial elections, the people of Assam is not just about political promises, but about economic realities. The West Asia crisis may have originated far from India's borders, but its consequences are being felt in every household. In this context, the Congress's critique raises a fundamental issue: whether the current governments both at the Centre and in the state have the vision and capability to navigate such challenges effectively. For many in Assam, daily lives are getting tough with rising prices, shrinking incomes, and an uncertain future. Congress led government is ready to make a difference in their lives.

Healthcare System Under Pressure Claims vs Ground Reality in Assam

Assam's healthcare system today stands at a critical juncture, where government claims of improvement are increasingly being questioned by ground realities. Despite announcements of infrastructure expansion and policy interventions, the lived experience of people especially in rural and remote areas tells a very different story.

Across districts, government hospitals continue to struggle with shortages of doctors, nurses, essential medicines, and diagnostic facilities. In many primary health centres (PHCs), and community health centres (CHCs), patients are forced to travel long distances even for basic treatment. The gap between urban and rural healthcare remains stark, with rural areas facing significant challenges.

Data reveals the seriousness of the situation. Assam continues to have one of the highest maternal mortality ratios (MMR) in the country, with nearly 195 deaths per 100,000 live births around double the national average. Infant mortality and child health indicators also remain concerning, reflecting gaps in both preventive and curative care systems.

The shortage of healthcare personnel is a major concern. Many rural health centres operate without specialist doctors, while diagnostic services such as blood tests, ultrasound, and emergency care remain inaccessible. This forces patients to depend on private healthcare, increasing out-of-pocket expenditure and pushing vulnerable families into debt.

The Covid-19 pandemic had exposed

these structural weaknesses, from oxygen shortages to inadequate hospital beds and poor emergency preparedness. However, Congress leaders argue that the lessons from the pandemic have not translated into long-term healthcare planning. Instead of strengthening district-level healthcare systems, the focus has remained on announcements rather than execution.

Maternal and child health remains a key concern. High levels of anaemia among women and children, inadequate antenatal care, and delayed referrals continue to contribute to poor outcomes. The state's own data shows that a significant percentage of children suffer from malnutrition and underweight conditions, pointing to deeper public health challenges.

The Congress has sharply criticised the BJP-led government for failing to prioritise healthcare as a basic right. It argues that despite years of governance, the state has not been able to build a resilient, accessible, and affordable healthcare system. As part of its roadmap, Congress has promised a comprehensive overhaul of the healthcare sector. This includes strengthening district hospitals, ensuring the availability of doctors and medicines at the grassroots level, expanding free treatment schemes, and improving maternal and child health services.

The central question for voters is clear: can a system under visible strain deliver quality healthcare to every citizen, or is a structural reset needed to truly make healthcare accessible and equitable?



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Tea Garden Communities

A Continuing Crisis of Health and Education

The tea garden communities of Assam, which form the backbone of the state's globally renowned tea industry, continue to face a deep and education. Despite decades of policy promises and targeted welfare schemes, the condition of these communities remains alarming, exposing systemic neglect.

Health indicators among tea garden workers are among the worst in the state. Studies show that anaemia is widespread, with some estimates suggesting that nearly 95% of women in these communities suffer from it. This has a direct impact on maternal health, making pregnancy and childbirth highly risky. Maternal mortality is disproportionately high in tea garden areas. Research indicates that a significant share of maternal deaths in Assam occurs among tea garden workers, driven by poor nutrition, lack of timely medical care, and inadequate healthcare access. The



Photo: Gettyimages

crisis is not limited to health alone. Education remains another major challenge. Many tea garden areas lack adequate schools, and dropout rates among children are high. Historical patterns of neglect continue to persist,

with generations of families trapped in cycles of poverty and limited access to opportunities. Access to healthcare facilities is severely constrained. Many tea estates lack functional hospitals, forcing workers to depend on distant

government facilities. Delays in accessing medical care, especially during childbirth, often prove fatal. Studies have highlighted that lack of transport and delayed referrals are key contributors to maternal deaths in these

communities. Despite multiple welfare schemes announced for tea tribes, implementation remains weak. Benefits often fail to reach the intended beneficiaries due to administrative gaps, lack of awareness, and

poor monitoring. This has led to growing dissatisfaction among tea garden workers, who feel excluded from the state's development narrative.

The Congress believes that the condition of tea garden communities is a central issue. It has proposed a focused roadmap that includes mobile health units to reach remote primary healthcare services, and dedicated maternal health programmes.

On the education front, Congress has promised residential schools for children of tea garden workers, along with targeted scholarships and skill development initiatives. Nutrition schemes aimed at addressing anaemia and child malnutrition are also a key part of the proposed intervention.

The situation in Assam's tea gardens raises concern as most vulnerable communities continue to struggle for basic healthcare and education. It is clearly the time for change.

Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Assam Raised the Voice for Justice

The Assam leg of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, led by Rahul Gandhi, emerged as one of the most politically charged and people-centric phases of the nationwide campaign. As the Yatra entered Assam it carried forward its core message of Nyay—economic, social, and political justice—while sharply focusing on the ground realities and governance concerns of the state.

From Jorhat to Majuli, Lakhimpur to Barpeta, and further towards Dhubri, the Yatra witnessed an overwhelming response from people across communities—tea garden workers, farmers, students, tribal groups, and civil society organisations. The journey in Assam was not just symbolic; it became a platform for direct dialogue, where people shared their struggles and expectations from governance.

One of the central themes raised repeatedly during the Assam leg was the issue of corruption and alleged misuse of power. Addressing multiple public gatherings, Rahul Gandhi launched a direct attack on the state government, calling it “one of the most corrupt governments,” and alleging a deep nexus between political authority and select business interests. He asserted that Assam’s resources were not being utilised for its people, but were instead benefiting a handful of powerful entities.

The Yatra also brought into focus the plight of tea garden workers, who spoke about low wages, poor living conditions, and lack of basic facilities. Their testimonies highlighted the gap between official claims and ground reality. Similarly, farmers and rural communities raised concerns about



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flood devastation, soil erosion, and the absence of effective long-term solutions. In Majuli and Lakhimpur, environmentalists and local representatives emphasised the urgent need for sustainable policies to address erosion and protect livelihoods.

Another major issue that dominated the Assam chapter was social justice. Delegations from tribal communities, including the Mising and Tai Ahom groups, met Rahul Gandhi and

demanded greater political representation, protection of cultural identity, and improved access to education and economic opportunities. The demand for strengthening autonomous councils and ensuring fair participation in governance was strongly articulated.

The Yatra also highlighted concerns around the NRC process and its impact on ordinary citizens. Several delegations shared their experiences of

exclusion, legal uncertainty, and hardship. Rahul Gandhi assured them that their voices would be raised at the national level, reiterating Congress’ commitment to protecting the rights and dignity of every citizen.

Significantly, the Assam leg was marked by repeated attempts to obstruct the Yatra. From restrictions on public gatherings to preventing Rahul Gandhi from visiting the revered Bordowa Than, the state administration’s actions

became a major political flashpoint. The denial of temple entry despite prior permission led to a peaceful protest, with Rahul Gandhi and party workers sitting on the road and singing devotional songs, turning the moment into a powerful statement on freedom and democratic rights.

Further tensions were witnessed in Guwahati, where the Yatra convoy was stopped from entering the city, and Congress workers faced police action. Rahul Gandhi used these incidents to underline what he described as an “attack on democracy,” stating that attempts to silence voices of dissent would not succeed.

Throughout the journey, Rahul Gandhi consistently emphasised the five pillars of the Nyay Yatra—Yuva Nyay, Kisaan Nyay, Naari Nyay, Shramik Nyay, and Bhagidari Nyay. He reiterated that without justice in these areas, true development is impossible. His interactions with students, women, and youth reflected concerns about unemployment, rising prices, and lack of opportunities.

As the Yatra concluded its Assam leg, it left behind a strong political message. It highlighted the disconnect between governance claims and ground realities, amplified voices of marginalised communities, and positioned the Congress as a party committed to justice, transparency, and inclusive growth.

The Assam chapter of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra thus became a crucial moment in the larger political narrative transforming a political campaign into a people’s movement for accountability, dignity, and a more equitable future. It is time to bring the change to Assam.

The Yatra also highlighted concerns around the NRC process and its impact on ordinary citizens. Several delegations shared their experiences of exclusion, legal uncertainty, and hardship.

Development or Deal-Making? Why Assam is Questioning Corruption and Demanding Change

The BJP government in Assam has promised Assam development but only development that happened is in the net-worth of the Chief Minister and few chosen ones. A Corruption Model has been set up by the Himanta Government. As people are ready to vote for a New Assam on April 9, 2026, development claims and campaign promises by the BJP have fallen flat. People are now ready for a government with credibility. There is a deeper concern in the minds of the people that has development in Assam been guided by public interest, or has it been compromised by corruption, favouritism, and a contractor-driven ecosystem? The election is increasingly being seen as a referendum on transparency, accountability, and clean governance.



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a select network of contractors and politically connected entities. Roads, bridges, and urban projects are being showcased as symbols of progress, but many citizens are asking whether these projects have been executed with integrity, or inflated through cost overruns and opaque tendering processes.

The issue of corruption is not being raised in isolation it is closely linked to the question of who benefits from development. Critics argue that public funds have not always translated into public good, with concerns over inflated project costs, delays, and limited local employment generation. In several areas, infrastructure exists on paper or in announcements, but its quality and long-term impact remain questionable. This disconnect has led to a growing belief that development has become more about contracts than communities.

The controversy surrounding land allocation and eviction drives has further intensified these concerns. The government’s push to clear vast tracts of land has been presented as a step towards development and encroachment removal. However, opposition voices have alleged that such exercises often lack transparency and disproportionately affect vulnerable communities, while raising questions about whether cleared land ultimately benefits large corporate or private interests. These concerns have placed land rights, displacement, and alleged favouritism at the centre of the electoral battle.

Across the state from the tea belts of Upper Assam to the flood-affected regions of Barak Valley there is a growing perception that development has not only been uneven but also influenced by vested interests.

Rural Distress, Flood Failures Drive Assam’s Demand for Accountable Governance

The reality in rural Assam continues to expose the limitations of the current model. Interior regions still struggle with poor connectivity, weak public services, and limited access to healthcare and education. Every year, floods caused by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries devastate vast areas, yet long-term flood management solutions remain elusive.

Critics argue that despite repeated budgetary allocations, the absence of durable infrastructure and planning points to systemic inefficiencies—and possibly leakages—in implementation. Agriculture, the backbone of Assam’s economy, presents another troubling picture. Farmers continue



Photo: Gettyimages

to face irrigation shortages, inadequate storage facilities, and weak market linkages. Despite repeated announcements, the lack of robust agricultural infrastructure has fuelled suspicions that funds meant for rural development have not been effectively utilised. For many farmers, the issue is not just neglect, it is the feeling that governance has

failed to prioritise their needs over other interests.

These concerns are now shaping voter sentiment across constituencies. Issues such as land ownership, flood relief, rural distress, and alleged corruption in public works have emerged as central themes in the campaign. The last-minute announcements by the

BJP Government cannot substitute for sustained, transparent governance, and question whether these promises will translate into real change on the ground. In contrast, the Congress-led alliance has built its campaign around the promise of clean governance and accountable development. Led by Gaurav Gogoi, the alliance has positioned itself as a credible alternative that seeks to break what it describes as a nexus between political power and contractor interests. The campaign has consistently highlighted the need to restore transparency in public spending and ensure that development projects are designed to benefit local communities rather than a select few.

Congress Blueprint for Comprehensive Growth

The Congress blueprint emphasises decentralised and balanced growth, moving beyond a Guwahati-centric approach. It prioritises investment in Upper Assam, Barak Valley, and the hill districts, with a focus on strengthening rural infrastructure, improving irrigation, and building effective flood management systems. Crucially, the alliance has stressed that development must be linked with employment generation and local economic growth, ensuring that public investment directly benefits the people of Assam. Equally significant is the alliance’s focus on institutional accountability. By promising stricter oversight of public projects, transparent tendering processes, and stronger anti-corruption



Photo: Gettyimages

mechanisms, the Congress aims to rebuild public trust. The campaign has also underscored the importance of inclusive governance and social harmony, positioning itself against divisive politics and advocating for a development model that is both equitable and ethical.

The 2026 Assam Assembly election is therefore shaping up as a decisive moment. It is not merely a

political contest but a choice between two contrasting approaches one that is being questioned for opacity and alleged favouritism, and another that promises transparency and people-centric governance.

As the campaign intensifies, the mood on the ground suggests that voters are looking beyond slogans. They are demanding accountability, fairness, and a system where development is not overshadowed by allegations of corruption. The Congress-led alliance, drawing strength from this sentiment, has expressed strong confidence that Assam is ready for a new direction, one where governance is clean, development is inclusive, and public resources truly serve the people.

The 2026 Assam Assembly election is therefore shaping up as a decisive moment.

Natun Bor Axom - Congress' 5 Pratishruti for a New Assam

In a decisive political moment ahead of the Assam Assembly elections, the Congress party, led by its national president Mallikarjun Kharge, unveiled a comprehensive and people-focused manifesto titled "5 Pratishruti", laying out a clear roadmap for what it calls a "Natun Bor Axom" — a new, inclusive and progressive Assam. Released at a major public rally in Naoboicha, the manifesto reflects Congress' attempt to directly address the economic hardships, social inequalities and governance concerns that have increasingly shaped public discourse in the state.

Framed around five key guarantees, the manifesto seeks to connect with diverse sections of society with women citizens, indigenous communities, and economically vulnerable families offering them tangible benefits that promise dignity, security and opportunity. At the launch, Kharge underscored the intent behind these guarantees, stating, "These are the guarantees which we will provide, I request the voters to support Congress and help us rid Assam of misrule and corruption." His remarks set the tone for a campaign that blends welfare-driven policies with a strong political critique of the current administration.

Monthly Support & ₹50,000 for Women's Empowerment

At the heart of the Congress manifesto lies a transformative vision for women's empowerment. Recognising that women often form the backbone of households yet remain financially dependent, the party has proposed a dual-benefit scheme aimed at ensuring both immediate financial support and long-term economic independence.

Under this promise, every woman in Assam will receive an unconditional monthly cash transfer directly into her bank account. In addition, a one-time financial assistance of ₹50,000 will be provided to help women start new businesses or expand existing ventures. This initiative is designed not merely as welfare support but as a catalyst for grassroots entrepreneurship, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where access to capital remains limited.

Explaining the rationale behind the scheme, Mallikarjun Kharge made a pointed distinction between Congress' approach and existing welfare models. "We are calling the cash transfer unconditional as giving to women now is conditional. To become a beneficiary, one has to be a member of the BJP, but we won't impose such conditions

and everyone will be given cash benefits," he said. This statement not only reinforces the party's emphasis on inclusivity but also positions the scheme as a universal right rather than a selective benefit.

If implemented effectively, this measure could significantly alter the socio-economic landscape of Assam. Increased financial independence for women is expected to enhance household decision-making, improve nutrition and education outcomes for children, and stimulate local economies and small business activity. By placing women at the centre of its economic vision, Congress is attempting to redefine a gender-inclusive lens.

Justice for Zubeen Garg Within 100 Days: A Commitment to Accountability

In a politically and emotionally charged promise, the Congress has pledged to deliver justice in the case of Zubeen Garg within 100 days of coming to power. The issue has deeply resonated with the people of Assam, becoming a symbol of broader concerns around transparency, law enforcement efficiency and the pace of justice delivery.

Kharge's statement on the matter was unequivocal: "We also promise to provide justice to late Zubeen Garg within 100 days of coming to power. We will find out who killed him and what was the conspiracy within that time period." By committing to a strict timeline, the Congress is signalling its intent to prioritise accountability and ensure that justice is neither delayed nor denied.

The case, which is currently under judicial scrutiny with proceedings in a fast-track court, has drawn significant public attention. Congress' public seeks to align with this public sentiment, offering a governance model that is responsive and time-bound. Beyond the specifics of the case, the commitment also reflects a broader political message that a Congress government would focus on strengthening institutional mechanisms and restoring public trust in the justice system.

Such assurances are likely to resonate strongly with voters who feel disillusioned with delays and inefficiencies in governance. By placing justice at the centre of its manifesto, Congress is attempting to underline its commitment to rule of law and transparent administration.

₹1,250 Per Month Pension for Senior

Citizens

Another key pillar of the Congress manifesto is its focus on senior citizens, a demographic that often faces financial insecurity and limited access to structured welfare support. To

where many senior citizens live in rural areas with limited economic opportunities, such financial assistance could play a crucial role in ensuring dignity and stability in their later years. In addition to the pension

approach, the party aims to address the multifaceted challenges faced by the elderly population.

The significance of this promise lies not just in the financial support it offers but also

policy focus.

Healthcare Guarantee: ₹25 Lakh Cashless Coverage for Every Family

family in the state.

This ambitious scheme is aimed at ensuring that no family is left behind in financial distress due to medical emergencies. By covering a wide range of treatments across both government and private hospitals, the initiative seeks to improve access to quality healthcare while reducing out-of-pocket expenses.

Highlighting the feasibility of this promise, Mallikarjun Kharge pointed to similar schemes implemented in Congress-ruled states such as Rajasthan, Karnataka and Telangana. These examples are being used to reinforce the party's claim that its guarantees are grounded in proven governance models rather than mere electoral rhetoric.

For Assam, where many rural areas still struggle with limited healthcare facilities, this scheme could be transformative. It has the potential to bridge the gap between urban and rural healthcare access, ensure timely treatment, and improve overall health outcomes. Moreover, by reducing the financial burden on families, it could contribute to greater economic stability and resilience.

Land rights for 10 Lakh Indigenous People: Security, Stability and Dignity

Land ownership has long been a contentious and sensitive issue in Assam, particularly for indigenous communities who often face uncertainty due to temporary or unclear land rights. Addressing this, Congress has promised to convert 'Eksoniya pattas' into permanent 'Miyadi pattas' for 10 lakh indigenous people.

This reform is aimed at providing long-term security and eliminating the need for annual renewals, which often involve bureaucratic hurdles and opportunities for corruption. By granting permanent land rights, the party promises to empower indigenous communities, ensuring that they have both legal ownership and socio-economic stability. Explaining the impact of this move, Kharge said, "This will ensure that people don't have to renew their records annually or request favours from officials and run from one place to another." The statement reflects a broader commitment to reducing administrative inefficiencies and restoring dignity to citizens.

The promise also carries significant economic implications. Secure land ownership can enable individuals to invest in agriculture, access credit, and improve their livelihoods. For indigenous communities, it represents not just economic security but also cultural and social recognition.

The infographic is a central graphic with a yellow background and a grid of colored hexagons. At the top, it says "5 PRATISHRUTI ASSAM" in a circular logo. Below this, five hexagons represent the promises:

- WOMEN** (blue): Unconditional monthly cash transfer to every woman's bank account. ₹50,000 to start or grow businesses.
- SENIOR CITIZENS** (purple): ₹1,250/month pension. Dedicated Ministry.
- HEALTH** (teal): ₹25 Lakh cashless health cover for every family.
- LAND** (orange): Conversion of Eksoniya pattas into Miyadi pattas for 10 Lakh Indigenous people.
- JUSTICE** (light blue): Justice for Zubeen Garg within 100 days.

 At the bottom, it says "Our Pratishruti to the people of Assam" and features the signatures of Gaurav Gogoi MP and Dehabrata Saikia, MLA. The slogan "HAATOT HAATH DHOROK, NATUN BOR AXOM GORHOK" is written in large blue letters at the very bottom.

address these challenges, the party has announced a guaranteed monthly pension of ₹1,250 for all senior citizens in Assam.

This initiative aims to provide a steady and reliable source of income, helping elderly individuals meet their basic needs without being entirely dependent on family support. In a state

scheme, Congress has proposed the creation of a dedicated ministry for senior citizens. This institutional mechanism is expected to streamline welfare projects, improve access to healthcare services, and ensure targeted policy implementation. By moving beyond fragmented schemes to a more coordinated

in its recognition of senior citizens as a priority group in governance. With rising healthcare costs and increasing life expectancy, the need for structured support systems has become more pressing than ever. Congress' proposal seeks to address this gap, offering both immediate relief and long-term

Healthcare has emerged as one of the most critical issues in Assam, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed significant gaps in infrastructure and access. Addressing this, the Congress manifesto promises a comprehensive ₹25 lakh cashless health insurance cover for every

Inclusive Growth for Assam Beyond 5 Guarantees

Beyond these five guarantees, the Congress manifesto presents a broader vision of governance centred on inclusivity, transparency and economic empowerment. Leaders like Gaurav Gogoi have emphasised the need to move away from divisive politics and focus on unity and development.

The manifesto's emphasis on direct benefit transfers, healthcare security and land rights reflects a strategy aimed at strengthening grassroots economies and improving quality of life. By putting money directly into the hands of citizens, Congress is seeking to stimulate demand, boost local markets and create a cycle of economic

growth. As Mallikarjun Kharge reiterated during the launch, the goal is to ensure dignity, opportunity and progress for every citizen.

At the same time, the focus on justice and the emphasis on rebuilding public trust in governance. The combination of welfare measures and structural changes forms the backbone of the "Natun Bor Axom" vision. The Congress manifesto for

Assam, encapsulated in the "5 Pratishruti," represents a comprehensive attempt to address the aspirations and concerns of the state's diverse population. By combining economic support, social justice and governance reforms, the party is offering a clear alternative vision for Assam's future.

As Mallikarjun Kharge reiterated during the launch, the goal is to ensure dignity, opportunity and progress for every citizen. The coming elections will ultimately determine whether this vision resonates with voters, but for now, the narrative of "Natun Bor Axom" has firmly taken centre stage in Assam's political landscape.

From Turmoil to Transformation Congress' Governance Record in Assam



Photo: Gettyimages

When the Congress party assumed power in Assam in 2001, the state was grappling with deep instability, administrative breakdown, and widespread public fear. The period preceding Congress rule was marked by uncertainty and unrest, with one of the darkest phases being the era of "secret killings" between 1998 and 2001. During this time, relatives and sympathisers of ULFA insurgents were allegedly targeted and killed by unknown assailants, leaving a deep scar on Assam's socio-political fabric.

The Congress government, under the leadership of late Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, prioritised restoring peace and normalcy. One of its earliest and most significant achievements was rebuilding public confidence. Through a balanced approach combining dialogue and development, the government successfully reduced insurgency and brought several militant outfits, including ULFA, to the negotiating table. At a time when bomb blasts, ethnic conflicts, and demands for separate statehood were common, the shift towards peace and development marked a decisive turning point.

The Congress administration also inherited a fragile economy. During the

preceding regime, the state faced severe financial stress, including delayed salaries for government employees and mounting overdrafts. Within its first tenure, the Congress government stabilised the financial situation and set Assam on a path of steady economic growth. Development activities resumed after years of stagnation, and governance structures were strengthened.

A major institutional achievement during this period was the initiation of the process to update the National Register of Citizens (NRC). The Congress viewed the NRC as a crucial step toward addressing concerns over illegal migration while ensuring that genuine citizens were protected from harassment. This initiative reflected the party's commitment to balancing national concerns with human rights.

The Congress government also played a key role in advancing peace in the Bodoland region. By extending full cooperation to the Centre, it facilitated the peace process with the Bodo Liberation Tigers, culminating in the 2003 Bodo Peace Accord. This agreement led to the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, paving the way for greater autonomy

and stability in the region.

Economically, the transformation during the Congress years was significant. Per capita income in Assam rose from ₹13,059 in 2001 to ₹49,480 in 2015. The Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) increased from ₹38,313 crore to ₹1,62,652 crore during the same period. The growth rate of the state economy improved substantially, rising from 1.75 percent in 2001-02 to 6.78 percent by the end of the Eleventh Five Year Plan in 2011-12.

Revenue generation also saw remarkable improvement. Tax collection increased from ₹1,270 crore to over ₹8,177 crore, while excise revenue rose from ₹147 crore to ₹665 crore. Banking activity expanded, with deposits growing from ₹10,992 crore to ₹76,795 crore, indicating rising public confidence and financial inclusion.

Agriculture, the backbone of Assam's economy, witnessed notable progress. Agricultural production increased from 38.54 lakh tonnes in 2001 to 54.50 lakh tonnes in 2014. Institutional credit flow to farmers expanded significantly, with agricultural loans reaching ₹6,000 crore by 2014-15.

Infrastructure development under the Congress government was unprecedented. The length of pucca roads increased from just 545 km in 2001 to over 25,000 km by 2013-14. National highways expanded, and numerous bridges were constructed, improving connectivity across the state. These projects not only enhanced mobility but also boosted trade and regional integration.

In the power sector, the Congress government expanded electrification across rural Assam and increased transmission capacity from 550 MW to 1,600 MW. This ensured better access to electricity and supported industrial and domestic growth.

The education sector saw transformative initiatives. Free textbooks for students up to Class VIII, uniforms for economically weaker sections, and large-scale teacher



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recruitment improved access to education. Over 45,000 teachers were provincialised, and more than 52,000 primary teachers were appointed through the introduction of the Teachers Eligibility Test (TET). The government also introduced free laptops for meritorious students and established six state universities, along with multiple medical and engineering colleges.

Healthcare infrastructure expanded significantly, with new medical colleges in Jorhat, Barpeta, and Tezpur. Schemes such as Mamata, Majani, and Maram Sanjeevani were launched to support maternal and child health. The introduction of free ambulance services

improved emergency response across the state. The Congress government also focused on inclusive governance by creating 29 development councils for various communities, including Moran, Mottock, Gorkha, Adivasi, Koch Rajbongshi, and others. These councils aimed to address the unique socio-economic needs of diverse groups, ensuring broader participation in development.

Women's empowerment was another key focus area. The formation of self-help groups and initiatives such as bicycle distribution for girls helped reduce dropout rates and improve mobility. Reservation of 50 percent

seats for women in local bodies strengthened grassroots democracy and increased women's participation in governance.

In sports, Assam witnessed a major boost with the successful completion of the 33rd National Games and the 2016 South Asian Games. World-class infrastructure, including the Indira Gandhi Athletic Stadium and other sports complexes, positioned Assam as a sporting hub in the Northeast.

From restoring peace to driving economic growth and strengthening social infrastructure, the Congress government's 15-year tenure laid a strong foundation for Assam's progress.

Congress' Roadmap for Assam's Future, Peace and Shared Prosperity

Building on its governance legacy, the Congress party is presenting a forward-looking vision for Assam that emphasises inclusive development, democratic participation, and sustainable growth. At a time when concerns over social cohesion, economic opportunities, and institutional integrity are growing, the party is positioning itself as a force committed to restoring balance and ensuring equitable progress.

Central to Congress' vision is the idea that development must reach every section of society. The party has consistently advocated policies that empower marginalised communities, protect indigenous identities, and promote social harmony. Drawing from its experience of establishing development councils for various communities, Congress aims to expand participatory governance mechanisms that give voice to diverse groups.

Economic revival and job creation are key priorities. Congress plans to focus on sectors such as agriculture, small industries, and services to generate employment opportunities for youth. By strengthening rural economies and promoting entrepreneurship, the party aims to reduce migration and create sustainable livelihoods within the state.

In agriculture, Congress is expected to push for enhanced credit



Photo: Gettyimages

access, better irrigation facilities, and market linkages to ensure fair prices for farmers. The emphasis will be on modernising farming practices while preserving traditional strengths, thereby improving productivity and income levels.

Infrastructure development will remain a cornerstone of Congress' agenda. Building on its past achievements in road construction and

connectivity, the party aims to further expand transportation networks, improve rural roads, and enhance digital connectivity. This will not only facilitate economic growth but also improve access to essential services.

Education and healthcare are expected to receive renewed focus. Congress has indicated its commitment to strengthening public education systems by improving infrastructure,

recruiting qualified teachers, and ensuring access to quality learning resources. In healthcare, the emphasis will be on expanding medical facilities, improving affordability, and strengthening primary healthcare systems.

Women and youth empowerment will be central to the party's development strategy. Congress is likely to expand self-help group

networks, provide financial assistance to women entrepreneurs, and introduce targeted schemes for skill development. For youth, the focus will be on education, skill training, and employment generation.

The party has also stressed the importance of protecting Assam's cultural and linguistic diversity. Upholding the principles of the Assam Accord, including the 1971 cut-off, remains a key commitment. Congress has consistently maintained that safeguarding the identity of indigenous people must go hand in hand with ensuring justice and fairness for all residents.

Democratic governance and institutional accountability form another pillar of Congress' vision. The party has emphasised the need for transparent decision-making, strengthening local bodies, and ensuring that governance remains responsive to people's needs. By promoting decentralisation, Congress aims to empower grassroots institutions and enhance citizen participation.

Environmental sustainability is also emerging as a priority area. With Assam being prone to floods and ecological challenges, Congress is expected to focus on disaster management, river management, and conservation efforts. Sustainable

development practices will be integrated into policy planning to ensure long-term resilience.

Importantly, Congress' approach is rooted in the idea of cooperative federalism. Drawing from its past experience of working closely with the Centre to secure funds and implement schemes, the party aims to ensure that Assam receives its due share of resources for development. Restoring favourable funding patterns and advocating for the state's interests at the national level will be key aspects of this approach.

The party also plans to revive the narrative of peace and development that defined its earlier tenure. By fostering dialogue, addressing grievances, and promoting inclusive policies, Congress aims to strengthen social cohesion and prevent the resurgence of conflict.

As Assam moves toward a new political phase, the Congress party is seeking to position itself as a credible alternative with a proven track record and a clear roadmap for the future. By combining its legacy of governance with a renewed commitment to inclusivity and democratic values, the party is aiming to reconnect with the aspirations of the people.

Assam's progress must be built on peace, participation, and shared prosperity.

How the US will pay for Trump's expansionism

Ashok Swain

Donald Trump's second term has stripped away the ideological veil that once softened America's manoeuvres on global dominance. The earlier US administrations framed as the defence of democracy and a rules-based international order has now been recast in blunt, transactional terms.

This is not a stylistic shift. It's a more profound transformation and has come at a moment when American hegemony is being challenged by the rise of China. Paradoxically, though, in trying to counter China's rise through coercive diplomacy and aggressive expansionism, Trump's strategy seems to be accelerating the erosion of American power and strengthening its principal rival.

In the Trump doctrine of US national security, China is no longer an ideological adversary but an economic competitor. Gone is the moral posturing of old, the language of democracy and human rights that once underpinned America's claim to global leadership. The narrowing of focus on economic protectionism and material advantage betrays a loss of confidence and/or interest in its universal appeal or acceptance. This shift appeared pragmatic to many—certainly to his 'America First' MAGA base—but the sacrifice of values has come at the cost of influence.

Trump's naked ambition to annex new territories, his assertions to dominate the Western Hemisphere have further eroded America's stature. The bid to reassert US primacy through economic pressure and war signals a neo-imperialist design, but the approach misunderstands the nature of contemporary power. Influence in Latin America and Africa, for example, will no longer be determined by military presence but through trade, investments and long-term economic engagement. China's deepening ties with the Global South cannot be undone through coercion. On the contrary, heavy-handed American policies



Photo: Getty Images

are pushing the region further into Beijing's orbit.

The military campaign against Iran, strategic capabilities and reshaping regional dynamics, has also revealed the limits of America's coercive power. What was presented as a quick, decisive operation has turned into a protracted, uncertain conflict, with Iran waging an asymmetric war on its own terms.

The war has other strategic costs for the US. Apart from further straining alliances and raising questions about the reliability of American leadership in times of crisis, the conflict has forced the US to commit both military resources and political attention to West Asia. Which in turn will affect its capacity to operate effectively in the Indo-Pacific. The diversion creates strategic space for China to strengthen its position, both economically and militarily. The pattern is familiar. Previous American entanglements in Iraq and Afghanistan provided Beijing with the opportunity to rise with minimal interference. A similar dynamic is playing out now, except that China today has vastly enhanced capabilities.

China's response to the Iran war has been remarkably restrained and calculated. Rather than getting entangled in the conflict, Beijing has positioned itself as a cautious observer, avoiding direct confrontation while securing its economic

interests and providing intelligence to Iran. This approach allows China to benefit at the cost of an overstretched America, without incurring reinforcers costs.

The war also reinforces China's narrative of the US as a destabilising force, enhancing its appeal among countries in the region and outside seeking alternatives to Western dominance. In this sense, the Iran conflict is not just a regional crisis but the precursor to a global strategic shift that will further tilt the balance of power in Beijing's favour.

Trump's foreign policy approach amplifies these dynamics. His willingness to undermine longstanding alliances within NATO and the Quad and his penchant for unilateral action has weakened the network of partnerships that historically extended American influence. At the same time, his inconsistent stance on China, oscillating between confrontation and accommodation, creates uncertainty about US intentions. This lack of coherence undermines credibility and reduces the effectiveness of US policy.

For decades, the United States positioned itself—even if the reality was different—as a model of governance, a guardian of the rules-based international order. That claim lies in tatters. The Iran war, widely seen as an act of unilateral aggression, has reinforced scepticism about American intentions. As this perception spreads, it will further erode American leadership and strengthen China's push towards an alternative global order. For China, Trump's missteps are a cheap way to expand its influence without even confronting the US directly.

Trump loyalists stubbornly argue that his disruptive policies are necessary to confront an unfair international system and to counter China's rise. They contend that previous strategies had failed to address structural imbalances in trade and technology. These concerns are not entirely without merit, but the paradox of Trump's foreign policy lies in its unintended consequences. By abandoning the ideological framework that once legitimised American power, it weakens that power. By engaging in expansionist actions and costly conflicts, it accelerates strategic overstretch. By focusing on short-term dominance rather than long-term stability, it creates conditions that favour the rival it seeks to contain. ■

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For decades, the US positioned itself as a guardian of the rules-based international order. That claim now lies in tatters

A weaker West Asia suits the US and Israel

Is the illegal war on Iran really meant to divide and weaken the Muslim world?

Hasan Suroor

As the US-Israeli war on Iran enters the second month with its ultimate aim still shrouded in confusion, there's much speculation whether it is part of a broader agenda to further divide and weaken the Muslim world. Though the war has set the globe a-jitter, its biggest collateral casualties have been Muslim countries.

Whatever the final outcome of this illegal war, one thing is blindingly obvious: a region already riven by rivalries, personality clashes and ideological differences is likely to emerge as an even more fractious and weakened bloc. Dragged into an unprovoked conflict launched on a whim, it faces a long period of internal strife, as well as economic and political uncertainty.

Fuelled by war rhetoric on the one hand and intra-Arab irritants on the other will deepen. And this, some argue, is exactly what America and Israel want: a Muslim street more vulnerable to manipulation.

An immediate consequence will be the future of Palestinians—already forgotten by the world. Their dream of an independent Palestinian state—or whatever remained of it after Israel's ruthless and disproportionate response to Hamas's strike on 7 October 2023—looks practically dead, a victim of the larger post-war geopolitical shift in West Asia. With Iran, their most vocal champion through Hamas and other proxies, on the backfoot, Palestinians are left with few friends.

The truth is that most Muslim countries never really cared much for Palestine. Their only interest in seeking a resolution of the 'Palestinian problem' has been to get rid of an estimated seven million displaced

Palestinians living in Arab countries, seen as a huge drain on public services and a source of social tensions. Post-war realities will only further distract attention from the issue and increase Palestinian isolation.

This vacuum will allow Israel to have a free hand in its aggressive campaign of annexing the West Bank while simultaneously frustrating efforts to facilitate the return of the nearly two million displaced Palestinians who were forced to flee their homes over the past three years. Nearly 55 per cent of Gaza remains under Israeli military control. Israel is in no mood to give Gaza up, nor does it face any pressure to do so either from the US or the international community.

Israel under Benjamin Netanyahu has never made any secret of its opposition to a two-state solution. He has publicly vowed not to allow an independent Palestinian state to become a reality. "There will not be a Palestinian state. It's very simple: it will not be established," he said in an interview with *Abu Ali Express*, a popular local Telegram channel, a few months ago.

Asked by the interviewer if his opposition holds even if it jeopardises normalisation with Riyadh—which insists on a credible plan for Palestinian statehood in exchange for such ties—Netanyahu said: "The answer is: a Palestinian state will not be established. It is an existential threat to Israel."

A view echoed by his cabinet colleagues. Finance minister Bezalel Smotrich, for instance, who sparked a controversy in January when he declared that his government's purpose in tightening its grip on West Bank is "to kill" the idea of a Palestinian state.

Israel fiercely resisted a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution on the next phase of Trump's Gaza 'peace plan' as a 'credible pathway' to Palestinian statehood. It has also long opposed the 2016 UNSC resolution declaring that Israeli settlements in the West Bank have 'no legal validity' and are in 'flagrant violation' of international law.

According to experts, there has been an alarming rise in the Israeli government's authorisation of settlement expansions and infrastructure facilities, including building roads that will cut the West Bank in half. Previous US administrations tried to rein in Israel when its actions appeared to fall foul of international law, but that has changed under Trump.

Prominent British military historian and West Asia expert Max Hastings says that Trump has 'empowered the Israeli leader [Netanyahu] to forge a Greater Israel' by allowing him to fast-track his programme of the relentless annexation of Palestinian land for Jewish settlements. In an article in the *Sunday Times*, Hastings illustrates how 'Jewish settler attacks on



The price of war As many as 40 children were killed in West Bank in 2025, a fifth of all Palestinian deaths over the same period

Palestinians' are almost 'never punished'.

He narrates the story of a 14-year-old Palestinian boy, Jad Jaddallah, who allegedly threw a rock at Israeli troops, and was shot. The incident took place in a refugee camp last November. 'Thereafter,' Hastings writes, 'a video shows soldiers standing around him, refusing access to ambulances, until he bleeds to death. To this day, for reasons that are unclear, the Israelis refuse to release Jad's body'. According to the UN, at least 40 Palestinian children were killed by Israeli forces in occupied West Bank in 2025. That's one-fifth of all Palestinians killed in the territory over the same period.

The Palestinian Authority, at the best of times an impotent and corrupt body, has become a bit of a joke. It operates under Israeli military control and its president, Mahmoud Abbas, is widely despised by his own people, who see him as the western powers' 'useful idiot'. With the Gaza strip in ruins and its population facing one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent times, and with the West Bank reduced to a zombie zone, the dream of an independent Palestine couldn't be farther from becoming

With the West Bank reduced to a zombie zone, the dream of an independent Palestine couldn't be farther from becoming a reality

a reality.

Palestinian expats, forced to flee their country after previous wars, expect more of their countrymen and women to leave and start a new life abroad. Old Palestine is history. And so is old Iran with its pan-Arab clout and its network of proxies drastically reduced. For all its resilience—which has taken America by surprise—Iran has suffered some heavy knocks which it will take years to recover from. Not to mention the diplomatic cost it may have to pay for annoying its neighbours, which it has targeted to punish Washington.

It will be more isolated—not only in the region but most likely domestically too—with anti-regime tendencies likely to feel more emboldened.

Sanam Vakil, head of the West Asia project at the London-based Royal Institute of International Affairs, has said that while the Iranian regime will survive this war in one form or another, "it's the internal situation in Iran that will be unviable ... They're effectively screwed."

The same can be said about its Arab and Gulf neighbours who have been thrown under the bus by Trump. ■

The Shia-Sunni divide and intra-Arab irritants will deepen. And this, some argue, is exactly what America and Israel want: a Muslim street more vulnerable to manipulation

What if the tables were turned?

Aakar Patel proposes a thought experiment that reveals our biases when we look at America's war on Iran

Consider this thought experiment. Imagine that two large missiles struck the White House. The first hit the residential quarters at a time when the family were all home—President Trump, his wife Melania, his sons Donald and Eric and their wives and their children. Imagine they were killed by the first missile, all of them. Imagine a second missile landed just when rescuers ran to help the first family and killed them as well.

Imagine Trump's cabinet bombed in their homes, with their families. Foreign minister (they call it secretary of state) Mark Rubio, defence secretary Peter Hegseth and the others usually seen around Trump.

Imagine that the same people who did all this strike an American school, killing more than 150 schoolgirls.

We all know that America has the greatest navy in history—11 giant aircraft carriers, each with a dozen or more ships attached in support. So now imagine that without a declaration of war, the same entity that killed all these people, surreptitiously torpedoed one of the great American battleships and sank it, killing most of the sailors on board.

Readers of these words will not require much imagination to carry out this thought experiment, because all these things actually happened to the Iranians—at the hands of the Americans. If the words above

Would our prime minister and foreign minister have said and done the same things had it been American ministers, schoolgirls and sailors who were killed?



Photo: Getty Images

Nothing kosher about this partnership President Donald Trump with Benjamin Netanyahu

appear jarring that's because we are conditioned to think of Americans and Iranians differently. This is particularly true of the Anglophone world, of which we are part, but is generally true almost anywhere.

The constant demonisation and maligning of Iran (as was the case with Iraq, Afghanistan, Russia...) has meant that we are not able to empathise with them as we might with the Americans.

Now set aside our thought experiment and consider these two lists of conditions that the two sides have laid out to end the war. The Americans have 15 items on their list. These are as follows:

- 1 Iran must completely dismantle its nuclear program
- 2 End all uranium enrichment
- 3 Allow America unhindered inspections
- 4 Stop ballistic missile development

- 5 Scale back military capabilities
- 6 End support for groups in Palestine and Lebanon
- 7 End influence abroad
- 8 Cede control of the Hormuz Strait
- 9 Cede control over shipping lanes
- 10 Stop attacks against US allies in Gulf
- 11 De-escalate war in the region
- 12 Submit to US-led negotiations
- 13 Accept long-term monitoring and compliance conditions
- 14 Limit arms transfers
- 15 Change future behaviour

The Iranians have a list of five conditions:

- 1 End assassinations of Iranian leaders
- 2 Guarantee of no future war
- 3 Compensation for damage of this war
- 4 End of Israel's wider war on the region
- 5 Recognition of Iran's sovereign rights over Strait of Hormuz

We can observe a few things here. There are elements missing from Iran's list, which they have spoken about and which have been heard by the world.

Iran, like India, like Pakistan and indeed like America and Israel, has the right to a peaceful nuclear programme that includes the enrichment of uranium. Why have they left it out? Likely because it should not be said to the world that Iran must not and cannot be treated differently from the rest.

Other than that, Iran's list is defensive in nature and makes no demands on those who have waged war on it.

What can be said about America's list which has been confirmed by Trump? Only that it is offensive, maximalist and deranged. Offensive in the sense of threatening, maximalist because it in no way offers room for negotiations. And

deranged because it assumes that America and Israel are currently in a position to drive the direction of this conflict, which they are not. For this reason, unfortunately for all involved in this conflict and its fallout, including us, the pain is not expected to end soon.

Now consider one final thing: if the thought experiment we began with had indeed come to pass. That had it been America and Trump and his family and his ministers and American schoolgirls and sailors who had been murdered without provocation, would our prime minister and foreign minister have said and done the same things as they have since 28 February? I doubt it.

When we say *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* do we actually mean that India's wisdom is to consider the world and all its people as one big family?

Trump's 15-point list was deranged because it assumed that the US and Israel were in a position to set the direction of the war

The answer is no, as India's actions rather than words show clearly and transparently.

The world has a hierarchy and the family has immediate members and distant aunts and forgotten uncles and disliked cousins.

Relatives who are geographically quite close (Iran and India shared a physical border till 1947) but mentally distant can be set aside and their trauma overlooked, as we have so comprehensively done in the case of Iran.

I'm not arguing for a new way to approach this crisis; this can be done elsewhere. I'm asking merely that we consider the prejudices and biases we have burdened ourselves with when we examine the world and what is happening in it today. ■

Views are personal

The triple whammy of AI, climate change and war

...is driving us closer to climate Armageddon, writes **Avay Shukla**

It's a disturbing sign of the times that the global levers of power today are controlled by genocidal murderers, sex offenders, megalomaniacs, war criminals and rapacious billionaires who should all be in jail. Collectively, these psychopaths are driving the human race ever closer to the seventh mass extermination, this time of homo sapiens—which is probably a good thing from a planetary perspective, for we do not deserve this wonderful orb.

Any one of three forces—artificial intelligence (AI), climate change, war—has the capacity to exterminate us, but it gets even worse: the last three years have demonstrated that all these three forces are now coming together to do the job under the guidance of the sociopaths mentioned above.

As we edge ever closer to a war-driven holocaust in Ukraine and West Asia, this three-way synergy is becoming more pronounced and evident. AI is being used to assassinate leaders, military chiefs and scientists, to communicate and snoop, to guide missiles and bombs, to make war autonomous. The fate of 'enemies' is now being decided by algorithms, not rational humans.

The harnessing of AI for war has been exposed in the tussle between the AI R&D company Anthropic and the Pentagon, when the latter refused to accept the guardrails which Anthropic had inserted into its algorithms to prevent their misuse. Anthropic was blacklisted for taking an ethical stand, but Open AI and others quickly filled the void. AI is making even conventional/non-nuclear wars more lethal, opportunistic and acceptable for those nations that possess the technology.

In the hands of robber baron warlords and criminal syndicates masquerading as elected governments, AI is being used to wage illegal wars, driving us ever closer to climate Armageddon by destroying the natural environment, increasing the emission of GHGs (greenhouse gases) and polluting the soil and water of dozens of nations. Sadly, no one is talking about the environmental catastrophe unfolding in ever-widening concentric circles—all eyeballs are fixated on missiles, drones,

aircraft carriers and the Strait of Hormuz.

A study has revealed that three years of the Russia-Ukraine war has released an additional 350 million tons of pollutants/GHG/CO2 into the atmosphere—that's one per cent of annual global emissions—through bombings, explosions and fires.

The destruction of the Kakhovka dam in Kherson region of Ukraine by Russia in 2023 flooded 600-plus sq. km of the downstream area, causing a humanitarian and ecological disaster on an unparalleled scale: more than 83,000 tonnes of silt contaminated with heavy metals (lead, cadmium, nickel) are deposited downstream, making the soil and water there toxic and poisoned for decades.

Gaza Strip's entire 365 sq. km has been carpet bombed by Israel to such an extent there is not a shred of farmland or green cover remaining. Around 71,000 tonnes of unexploded ordnance are buried in its soil and cities. As much as 80 per cent of all buildings in Gaza have been destroyed. According to an estimate by the UN, this has generated 63 million tonnes of rubble, which will take 15 years to remove at the rate of 200 truckloads per day! The cost?

The Netanyahus, Putins and Trumps of the world are not just waging illegal wars and trashing humanitarian covenants, they are committing ecocide on a horrendous scale

More than a billion US dollars. Effectively, Gaza Strip has been degraded into a wasteland.

The environmental impact of the ongoing US-Israel war on Iran will be much worse, both for the land and the sea, especially now that oil facilities are fair game for all parties. Israel initiated this new phase of environmental warfare by bombing Tehran's oil storage tanks in the second week of March: the resultant massive plumes of black smoke which persisted for days was bad enough. But



Photo: Getty Images

what was worse was the 'black rain' that fell, carrying all the released pollutants which have now leached into the soil, making it toxic and barren for decades, and contaminating the ground water.

Israel's attack on Iran's Pars gas field on 18 March is the beginning of ecocide in the whole region: it processes 600 million m3 (cubic metre) of natural gas every day. With such a humongous volume of gas being set on fire, the toxic fumes will envelop not only Iran but the entire Gulf region, and could travel even as far as Pakistan and India. Iran's inevitable retaliation by bombing the oilfields of Israel and the Gulf countries will exponentially multiply this pollution. One shudders to



Israel's attack on Iran's South Pars gas field on 18 March was the beginning of ecocide in the whole region. The toxic fumes will envelop the entire Gulf region

think to what extent.

Tens of millions of litres/barrels of oil are contained in the ships, both military and civilian, that ride on the Persian Gulf, all in

harm's way of the war. More than 13 million barrels of oil and 500,000 tonnes of gas are presently locked up in 300 ships in the Strait of Hormuz alone. If even half-a-dozen of them are sunk, the waters of the Gulf shall be contaminated for decades, all marine life destroyed. Have we conveniently forgotten what happened during the Iraq war, when Saddam Hussein spilled millions of litres of oil in the sea? That marine area has yet to recover, even after 26 years.

A recent study quoted in *The Guardian* reveals that 5 million tonnes of CO2 were emitted in the first 14 days of the current war, from destroyed buildings (2.4 million tonnes), fuel for military vehicles (529,000

tonnes), bombing of oil facilities (1.88 million tonnes), destroyed military hardware (172,000 tonnes) and munitions (55,000 tonnes). This is equivalent to the annual carbon budget of the 84 lowest carbon-emitting countries in the world.

The Netanyahus, Putins and Trumps of the world are not only waging illegal wars and trashing humanitarian covenants, they are committing ecocide on a horrendous scale. This is another reminder that fossil-fuelled geopolitics is incompatible with a liveable planet.

The Doomsday Clock in Chicago University, on which midnight signifies total Apocalypse, is getting ever closer to that point in time. It was at 17 minutes to midnight in 1991, today it is at 85 seconds to midnight. The world is running out of time fast, and that is not just a metaphor. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

Congress' People-Centric Guarantees for Keralam

Photo: Gettyimages

As Keralam awaits freedom from a decade of mis governance, Congress has unveiled a set of targeted guarantees aimed at addressing the state's evolving socio-economic challenges. These promises come at a time when Keralam is grappling with rising unemployment among educated youth, an increasing cost of living, fiscal pressures impacting welfare delivery, and the growing demand of an ageing population. In this backdrop, the party has sought to move beyond broad political assurances and instead position its commitments as targeted, issue-specific interventions designed to respond directly to the everyday concerns of citizens.

Drawing from its governance legacy and welfare-oriented approach, the Congress has positioned these promises as practical, implementable, and rooted in Keralam's socio-economic realities. These guarantees attempt to respond to rising cost-of-living pressures, unemployment concerns, and the growing demand for inclusive growth.

Below is a detailed look at the key promises and their broader implications

higher education institutions and enhance safety of women by promoting public transport usage. This will not only reduce household expenditure on daily commuting but will empower women and girls by increasing their mobility. This model has seen success in other states, where free transport schemes have led to increased female participation in economic activities. For Keralam, with its strong social indicators, such a move could further strengthen gender equity while boosting economic productivity.

₹1,000 Monthly Financial Assistance for College Girls

Recognizing the financial challenges faced by students, especially young women, the Congress has promised



Keralam's ageing population makes this promise particularly relevant. With a growing proportion of senior citizens, enhanced pension support could play a crucial role in ensuring quality of life.

Interest-Free Loans up to ₹5 Lakh for Youth Entrepreneurs

Unemployment, particularly among educated youth, remains a pressing concern in Keralam. Despite high literacy rates, job creation has not kept pace with the aspirations of young people. To address this, the Congress has proposed providing interest-free loans of up to ₹5 lakh for young entrepreneurs. This initiative is expected to encourage entrepreneurship and innovation to reduce dependence on government jobs. Medium enterprises will also promote local employment opportunities. Keralam has a strong base of skilled youth and a growing startup ecosystem. By easing access to entrepreneurial potential and stimulate economic growth at the grassroots level.

₹25 Lakh Health Insurance Scheme Named After Shri Oommen Chandy

Healthcare remains an integral part of Keralam's development model. Building on this legacy, the Congress has promised a comprehensive health insurance scheme worth ₹25 lakh per family, named after former Chief Minister Shri Oommen Chandy. The scheme aims to provide financial protection against major medical expenses. It will also reduce out-of-pocket healthcare costs for citizens. Congress will also ensure access to quality treatment across public and private hospitals. Strengthening of Keralam's healthcare safety net will be the focus of the Congress led government. Keralam's healthcare system is widely regarded as one of the best in India, but rising medical costs have become a concern. A high-value insurance scheme could significantly ease the burden on families, especially in cases of critical illness.

Keralam's education system is one of the strongest in India, but rising costs of higher education including fees, accommodation, and study materials continue to burden families. This scheme is expected to reduce dropout rates among female students along with providing support to girls from economically weaker backgrounds.

for the people of Keralam.

Free Bus Travel for Women in KSRTC Buses Enhancing Mobility and Independence

One of the most impactful promises is free bus travel for all women in buses operated by Keralam State Road Transport Corporation. Mobility remains a critical factor in determining access to education, employment, and healthcare, especially for women. Keralam has a high female literacy rate, yet workforce participation among women has remained relatively low. Limited access to safe and affordable public transport has often been cited as a barrier. By eliminating travel costs, the Congress aims to and encourage more women to join the workforce. Congress promises to improve access to

₹1,000 per month as financial assistance for college-going girls.

Keralam's education system is one of the strongest in India, but rising costs of higher education including fees, accommodation, and study materials continue to burden families. This scheme is expected to reduce dropout rates among female students along with providing support to girls from economically weaker backgrounds. Congress promises to encourage continuation of higher education for the girls in Keralam. This scheme will also promote gender parity in professional fields. This initiative aligns with Keralam's long-standing commitment to education while addressing emerging economic pressures. By directly supporting students, the Congress aims to ensure that financial constraints do not hinder academic aspirations.

Welfare Pension to be Increased to ₹3,000 for strengthening Social Security

Keralam has one of the most extensive social welfare pension systems in the country. However, with inflation and rising living costs, the adequacy of pensions has become a concern. The Congress has proposed increasing welfare pension to ₹3,000 per month. This would benefit senior citizens, widows, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. The move is significant for several reasons. It provides financial stability to the

Dedicated Ministry for Senior Citizens for Institutional Focus on Ageing Population

In a first-of-its-kind initiative, the Congress has proposed setting up a dedicated ministry for senior citizens. Keralam is among the fastest ageing states in India, with unique demographic challenges. A focused ministry would address healthcare needs specific to the elderly. The ministry will be responsible for developing age-friendly infrastructure. The Congress will improve access to pensions and welfare schemes and promote community-based care systems. Such an institutional framework would ensure that senior citizens are not treated as an afterthought but as a priority demographic. It reflects a shift toward more specialized governance tailored to Keralam's demographic realities.

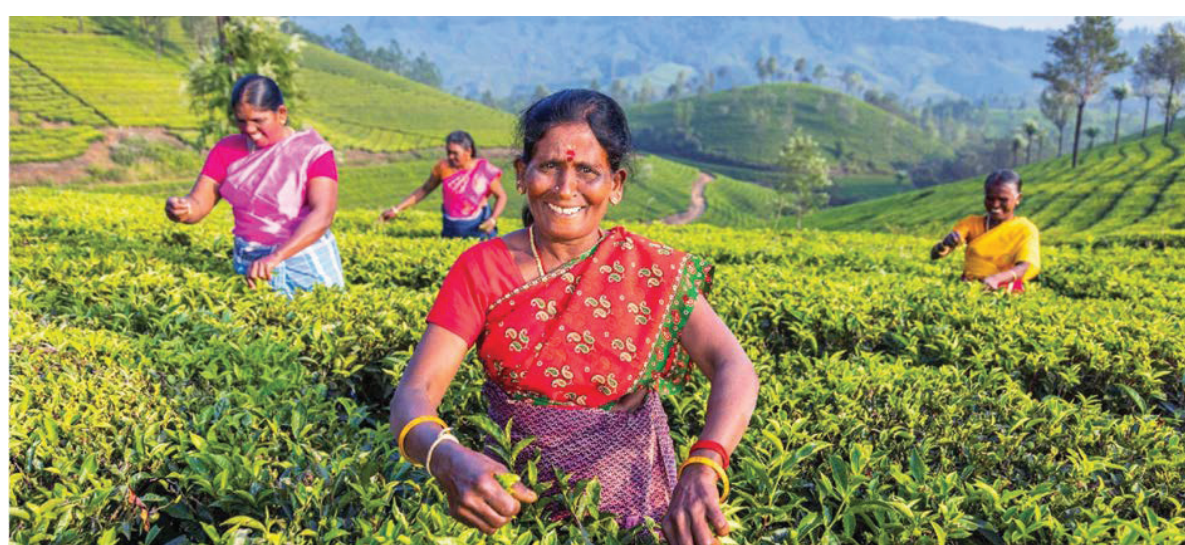
elderly and marginalised and helps offset rising healthcare and living expenses for them. Congress also

promises to strengthen state's social safety net by supporting dignity and independence for beneficiaries.

Congress Pitches Targeted Guarantees for Inclusive Growth and Social Security

As Keralam heads into a crucial electoral contest, the Congress has unveiled a set of carefully structured guarantees aimed at addressing the state's evolving socio-economic challenges. These promises come at a time when Keralam is grappling with rising unemployment among educated youth, an increasing cost of living, fiscal pressures impacting welfare delivery, and the growing demand of an ageing population. In this backdrop, the party has sought to move beyond broad political assurances and instead position its commitments as targeted, issue-specific interventions designed to respond directly to the everyday concerns of citizens.

What distinguishes these guarantees is their focused and practical approach. Rather than proposing entirely new systems, many of the schemes build upon Keralam's existing governance frameworks, which have historically been recognised for their efficiency and



reach. The emphasis is on strengthening and expanding current mechanisms in sectors such as mobility, education, healthcare, employment, and social security. This not only enhances the feasibility of implementation but also aligns with the administrative realities of the state. By targeting specific segments—

women, students, entrepreneurs, and senior citizens—the Congress aims to ensure that benefits are both measurable and impactful.

A central theme running through the Congress' vision is the attempt to balance welfare with economic growth. While critics often raise concerns about the fiscal sustainability of

expanded welfare programmes, the party has framed its guarantees as long-term investments in Keralam's human and economic capital rather than short-term expenditures. For instance, proposals like free transport for women are expected to improve workforce participation by reducing mobility barriers, while financial

support for students is seen as a means to strengthen human capital and future productivity. Similarly, entrepreneurial loan schemes are designed to stimulate economic activity and job creation, and enhanced healthcare coverage aims to reduce long-term financial distress for families, thereby contributing to overall economic stability.

This approach reflects a broader shift in electoral politics, particularly in Keralam, where voters increasingly demand accountability and tangible outcomes. The Congress' guarantees are structured to be clear, quantifiable, and linked to specific beneficiary groups, marking a departure from generic announcements that often lack measurable benchmarks. Each commitment is articulated in a way that allows voters to assess both intent and delivery, signalling a move toward more transparent and performance-driven governance.

Politically, this strategy indicates an understanding of changing voter

expectations. With high literacy levels and strong civic engagement, Keralam's electorate closely scrutinises policy proposals and governance records. By presenting a blueprint that combines welfare assurances with economic logic, the Congress is attempting to position itself as both socially responsive and fiscally responsible.

As the state prepares for the elections, these guarantees collectively outline a vision centred on dignity, and opportunity. By focusing on key demographic groups such as women, youth, senior citizens, and vulnerable communities, the party seeks to address immediate challenges while also laying the groundwork for long-term development. Ultimately, the effectiveness of these promises will depend on implementation, financial planning, and administrative efficiency. However, as an electoral framework, they represent a concerted effort to align public policy with the lived realities and aspirations of the people of Keralam.

“Congress Will Deliver for Keralam”

Rahul Gandhi Assures Welfare and Jobs Push with Five Guarantees

Launching the Congress campaign for the upcoming Keralam Assembly elections, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, laid out a comprehensive “guarantee card” for the state, promising targeted welfare measures, employment generation, and social security. Addressing a United Democratic Front (UDF) rally in Kozhikode virtually from Delhi, Mr Gandhi asserted that the Congress would translate its promises into action, drawing on what he described as the party’s track record in other states.

“We have walked the talk in Karnataka and Telangana. These five schemes are commitments we will deliver,” Mr Gandhi said, positioning the guarantees as credible and implementable assurances rather than mere electoral promises.

At the core of the Congress pitch are five key guarantees aimed at addressing everyday challenges faced by the people of Keralam. Among the headline measures is free bus travel for women, a move aimed at improving mobility and enhancing workforce participation. The party has also promised ₹1,000 per month for college-going girls, seeking to support education and reduce financial burdens on families.

In a significant push for social security, Mr Gandhi announced that welfare pensions would be increased to ₹3,000 per month. He also unveiled an ambitious healthcare proposal—an annual health insurance cover of ₹25 lakh per family, to be named after former Chief Minister Oommen Chandy. The plan, he said, would not only strengthen healthcare access but also generate employment within the sector.

For the youth, the Congress has proposed interest-free loans of up to ₹5 lakh to encourage entrepreneurship and revive small businesses. “This will help young people stand on their own feet and rebuild enterprises that have suffered in recent years,” Mr Gandhi said, emphasising the need to create opportunities within the state.

Framing the election as a battle of governance models, Mr Gandhi sharply criticised the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), accusing it of failing to address unemployment and economic distress. “One out of three educated youth in Keralam is unemployed because the LDF has not delivered on its promises,” he said. He



Photo: Gettyimages

The Congress leader also raised concerns about rising drug abuse in the state, citing figures that suggest a growing number of users, including students. “This is a serious social issue that requires urgent attention and a coordinated response,” he said, adding that the Congress would prioritise both prevention and rehabilitation.

alleged that job opportunities were not being created at the promised scale and questioned the fairness of recruitment processes.

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Politically, Mr Gandhi positioned the contest as a direct fight between the Congress-led UDF and the ruling dispensation, while alleging a tacit understanding between the LDF and the BJP. “The BJP is the hidden partner of the LDF,” he said, arguing that both parties were aligned in their political approach despite public differences.

He also questioned the functioning of central investigative agencies, alleging selective action against opposition leaders. “I have faced multiple cases and repeated questioning. Why is there no similar

action in cases involving the Keralam Chief Minister?” Mr Gandhi asked, raising concerns about what he termed unequal scrutiny.

Throughout his address, Mr Gandhi said Congress as a party focused on inclusive growth, welfare delivery, and accountability. He emphasised that the guarantees were designed to address both immediate needs and long-term aspirations of Keralam’s people.

“The people of Keralam deserve a government that listens, understands, and delivers. Congress will work for every section—women, youth, farmers, and the vulnerable,” he said.

With its guarantee-driven campaign and sharp political messaging, the Congress is aiming to consolidate support across demographics and present itself as a credible alternative. As the election approaches, Mr Gandhi’s assurance of delivery and governance remains central to the party’s pitch, signalling a focused effort to translate promises into policy and secure a decisive mandate in Keralam.

Kharge Targets LDF-BJP Nexus, Calls for Decisive Mandate in Keralam

With the Keralam Assembly elections approaching, Congress President Mr Mallikarjun Kharge has sharpened the

current regime. “Under the LDF government, there are only backdoor appointments. No transparency, no merit. Those with connections get



Photo: Gettyimages

Mr Kharge also highlighted the concerns of Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs), praising their contribution while criticising the state government’s response during times of crisis. “I am proud that the people of Keralamm are spread across the world, and they deserve proper treatment. But when they return during crises, this government makes no arrangements for them,” he said.

party’s attack on the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), accusing it of failed promises, lack of transparency in governance, and a tacit understanding with the BJP. Addressing public gatherings and party workers, Mr Kharge struck a strong, assertive tone, expressing confidence that the people of Keralam have made up their minds to bring the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) to power.

Launching a direct attack on the LDF’s employment record, Mr Kharge drew parallels with the BJP’s national promises. “The LDF promised 40 lakh jobs, just like Modi promised two crore jobs every year. In twelve years, 24 crore jobs should have been created. Where are they?” he asked, urging voters to question governments that fail to deliver. “Do not support those who repeatedly lie. Ask them questions,” he said, framing the election as a test of accountability.

Highlighting concerns over recruitment practices, Mr Kharge alleged a lack of fairness under the

jobs, while deserving candidates are ignored,” he said, pointing to growing frustration among Keralam’s youth.

Reaching out directly to young voters, the Congress President called the upcoming election a turning point. “To every youngster, this election is your chance to decide and bring change,” Mr Kharge said, adding, “You are talented, connected, and ambitious, and you deserve a government that matches your aspirations.” He emphasised that the Congress’ vision is aligned with the ambitions of Keralam’s youth, promising opportunities based on merit and fairness.

Mr Kharge also highlighted the concerns of Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs), praising their contribution while criticising the state government’s response during times of crisis. “I am proud that the people of Keralamm are spread across the world, and they deserve proper treatment. But when they return during crises, this government makes no arrangements for them,” he said.

Taking a broader political swipe, Mr Kharge accused the LDF of indirectly aiding the BJP. “Voting for the LDF means voting for the BJP. If people vote for the LDF, it means they are strengthening the BJP,” he said, adding that there is a widespread perception of a “secret understanding” between the two. “People here even call it the ‘Communist Janata Party,’” he remarked, alleging that the BJP fields weak candidates in Keralam to benefit the LDF. “They are not trying to win; they are trying to help the LDF win. Every vote for the BJP is a vote gifted to the LDF,” he added.

The Congress President also raised concerns about regional imbalance, particularly in North Keralam. “Malabar today faces fewer government jobs and inadequate healthcare. Kozhikode and the rest of North Keralam have been treated as an afterthought by the LDF,” he said, accusing both the LDF and BJP of neglecting the region and promoting divisive politics.

Invoking Keralam’s rich social and cultural legacy, Mr Kharge underscored the Congress’ commitment to secularism and inclusivity. “Keralamm is the land of Sree Narayana Guru and Mahatma Ayyankali, where diverse communities have lived together for centuries. Kozhikode has welcomed people from across the world for over 500 years with a spirit of true secularism—this is what the Congress stands for,” he said. In contrast, he criticised the BJP’s ideological approach, stating, “The BJP does not understand Keralamm, its history, or its values.”

He further accused the LDF of deviating from its secular claims. “The LDF says it is secular, but it is protecting the BJP’s agenda. How can this happen?” he asked, questioning the credibility of the ruling alliance.

Projecting confidence in the electoral outcome, Mr Kharge asserted that the momentum is clearly with the Congress-led alliance. “The public has made up its mind to vote for the UDF and form the government. Pinarayi Vijayan will lose this election,” he said.

As the campaign intensifies, the Congress is positioning itself as the only viable alternative capable of delivering transparent governance, inclusive growth, and real opportunities. With a strong message of accountability and unity, Mr Kharge’s call to voters is clear: “The only genuine vote for change is a vote for the UDF.”

Congress Confident of UDF Landslide, Says Pawan Khera

As Keralam moves closer to the Assembly elections, the Congress has exuded strong confidence about a decisive victory for the United Democratic Front (UDF), citing growing anti-incumbency and a visible shift in voter sentiment. Senior Congress leader Pawan Khera, responding to the media, asserted that the political mood in the state clearly favours change and that the party’s alliance is poised for a sweeping mandate.

“Ground reports from across Keralam indicate that people are eager and ready for change. The UDF is going to win with a landslide victory,” Khera said while interacting with journalists, pointing to what he described as a strong undercurrent against the ruling Left government.

Highlighting the Congress’ campaign narrative, Pawan Khera said that voters are increasingly connecting with the party’s vision and guarantees, which focus on key issues such as employment, welfare delivery, and



Photo: Gettyimages

economic stability. “This election is different. People are understanding the

Congress’ vision, the guarantees we have given, and the promises we have

made. There is a clear alignment between what people want and what we are offering,” he noted.

The Congress has built its campaign around targeted guarantees aimed at women, youth, farmers, and vulnerable communities. Party leaders maintain that these promises are not generic assurances but structured interventions designed to deliver measurable benefits. According to Khera, this approach has resonated with voters who are looking for both immediate relief and long-term opportunities.

a swipe at the ruling Left leadership, Khera also accused it of borrowing political language from the BJP. Responding to recent remarks by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, he said, “The Keralam Chief Minister has even borrowed the word ‘appeasement’ directly from the BJP’s vocabulary. You can understand who is echoing whose line.” He reiterated that the Congress’ ideological foundation remains rooted in inclusivity. “The

ideology of the Congress is inherently inclusive. The allegation that we work for any one community or caste can never be levelled against us,” he added.

Khera further pointed to governance concerns as a major factor driving voter sentiment. Issues such as rising cost of living, unemployment among educated youth, and challenges in welfare delivery have contributed to what the Congress describes as growing dissatisfaction with the current government. “There is a clear sense of fatigue among people. They are looking for a government that is responsive, accountable, and focused on their everyday concerns,” he said.

Positioning the Keralam contest within a broader political context, Khera also expressed confidence about Congress’ prospects in other states, particularly Assam, where he said similar anti-incumbency trends are visible. However, he emphasised that in Keralam, the focus remains firmly on consolidating support for the UDF

and translating public sentiment into electoral success. On the party’s electoral strategy, Khera underlined the importance of grassroots mobilisation and organisational strength. “We are reaching out to every section, every household. Our effort is to ensure that our message and our guarantees reach every voter,” he said, adding that the Congress is leaving no stone unturned in its campaign.

As campaigning gathers momentum, the Congress is projecting the election as a decisive moment for Keralam. With a narrative centred on governance, inclusivity, and targeted welfare, the party is positioning itself as a credible alternative to the incumbent regime.

“The people of Keralam have made up their mind. This time, the mandate will be decisive and overwhelming,” Khera said, expressing confidence that the UDF is set to form the next government and usher in what he described as a new phase of growth and opportunity for the state.

Defeat the corrupt LDF, Let Keralam breathe Again

The Congress has framed the election as a decisive moment for Keralam's youth, positioning it as a referendum on governance, accountability, and opportunity. "I want to tell every young person in Keralam that this election is about your future, your employment," Gandhi emphasised, urging voters to focus on long-term prospects rather than short-term political narratives.

As Keralam heads into a crucial electoral contest, unemployment and youth distress have emerged as defining issues shaping political discourse. The Congress-led UDF has sharpened its attack on the ruling LDF, accusing it of presiding over a decade of "jobless growth, backdoor recruitments, and broken promises."

The scale of the crisis is stark. According to opposition claims, nearly one in three young people in Keralam are unemployed, a statistic that underscores the widening gap between promises and delivery. Both the LDF and the BJP had committed to large-scale job creation. However, those assurances have come under scrutiny.

Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi, while launching the UDF's campaign, directly questioned the credibility of these commitments. "Modi ji promised 2 crore jobs at the national level. Keralam Chief Minister promised 40 lakh jobs in the state, and after a decade, you find that they have not given a single job to the people; in fact, they have destroyed jobs," he said.

Beyond unemployment, the Congress has raised concerns about alleged irregularities in hiring processes. The issue of "backdoor appointments" has been repeatedly flagged, with the opposition arguing that merit-based recruitment has been compromised. This, they claim, has eroded trust among aspirants and



Photo: Gettyimages

they have made you number one in drug cases," Rahul Gandhi said, linking the unemployment crisis to the growing drug menace.

The Congress has framed the election as a decisive moment for Keralam's youth, positioning it as a referendum on governance, accountability, and opportunity. "I want to tell every young person in Keralam that this election is about your future, your employment," Gandhi emphasised, urging voters to focus on long-term prospects rather than short-term political narratives.

The Congress has also accused both the LDF and the BJP of evading accountability. "Neither the BJP nor the LDF believe they are answerable to the people. They do not believe that the people of Keralam should be able to ask them questions," Gandhi said, highlighting what the opposition calls a democratic deficit in governance.

In contrast, the Congress brings a coalition focused on transparency, inclusive growth, and employment generation. Party leaders argue that Keralam's educated youth cannot be sustained on migration and informal work alone, and that structural reforms are urgently needed to revive job creation. With elections approaching, the central question remains whether the electorate will endorse the LDF's record or respond to the UDF's call for change. For many young voters, the choice may ultimately hinge on one critical factor that who can realistically secure their future.

weakened institutional integrity.

The economic distress is also spilling into social challenges. Keralam, once celebrated for its human

development indicators, is now facing an alarming rise in drug abuse cases. The opposition cites figures suggesting over 8.25 lakh drug users in the state,

presenting it as a direct consequence of policy failure.

"Instead of making you number one in employment and technology,

From Healthcare to Social Harmony

Congress Flags Systemic Breakdown Under LDF

Keralam's long-standing reputation as a model state for healthcare and social cohesion is facing renewed political scrutiny, with the Congress-led UDF alleging a "systemic breakdown" under the ruling LDF government.

The opposition has raised serious concerns about deteriorating hospital infrastructure, and declining public confidence in the healthcare system. Once regarded as a global benchmark, Keralam's public health network is now being described by critics as overstretched and under-resourced.

Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi invoked a personal experience to highlight the state's healthcare paradox strong human capital but weakening systems. Recalling his recent visit to a hospital, he said, "I was comforted by only one thing... a nurse from Keralam who came in every hour to check on my mother... She would smile, and she would hold

her hand."

He used the example to underline the resilience and compassion of Keralam's workforce, particularly its nurses, who are globally respected. "While the whole world sleeps, women from Keralam... are comforting people, holding their hands, and making them feel at ease," he said.

However, the Congress argues that this human strength is being undermined by governance failures. "Hospital infrastructure is crumbling, and there are shortages of medical equipment. The LDF is destroying the healthcare system that was once a global model," Gandhi alleged.

Beyond healthcare, the UDF has also flagged concerns over law and order and alleged corruption. The controversy surrounding temple administration, including reported theft at Sabarimala Temple, has been cited as an example of institutional failure. The

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opposition claims that such incidents reflect deeper issues of accountability and respect for public faith.

"How can a government that does not respect Lord Ayyappa respect the people of Keralam?" Gandhi asked, raising questions about governance priorities.

At the same time, the Congress has sharpened its ideological attack, accusing the LDF and the BJP of fostering division rather than unity. "There are actually only two sides fighting here in Keralam. One is the UDF alliance, and the other is the partnership between the BJP and the LDF," Gandhi said, alleging tacit alignment between the two rivals.

The UDF has positioned itself as a defender of Keralam's secular and inclusive ethos. Drawing from the metaphor of a nurse, Gandhi described the state's identity as one rooted in equality and compassion. "A nurse does not differentiate based on a patient's religion, community, or whether they are rich or poor... This is the spirit of Keralam," he said.

The Congress argues that preserving this social fabric is central to the election. With rising concerns over communal polarisation and governance deficits, the party is framing the contest as a choice between "division and unity."

"I want to tell every family struggling under debt, the drug menace, and a broken healthcare system that your answer is April 9," Gandhi said, calling for a mandate for change.

As Keralam prepares to vote, the debate has clearly shifted beyond routine politics to larger questions about governance, accountability, and the preservation of its social model.

No Place for BJP's Hate Politics and LDF's Polarisation Agenda in Keralam

From the controversy surrounding Sabarimala Temple to the larger debate on secularism and minority rights, Congress says it's time to define Keralam's social fabric and future direction. The Sabarimala issue continues to remain one of the most politically sensitive matters in Keralam. The Congress has accused the ruling LDF of mishandling the issue, leading to social unrest and hurting the sentiments of devotees.

The BJP, on the other hand, has consistently tried to mobilise political support around the issue, projecting itself as a defender of faith. However, the Congress maintains that both the BJP and the LDF have used Sabarimala for political gains rather than seeking a balanced and respectful resolution.

Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi raised concerns over governance and accountability linked to the temple, stating, "They have not even left Sabarimala alone. Kilos of sacred gold have been stolen... How can a government that does not respect Lord Ayyappa respect the people of Keralam?" Congress' calls it irresponsible governance.

Keralam's diverse structure has made minority politics a key electoral factor. The Congress has positioned itself as a party that balances interests across communities, while accusing both the LDF and the BJP of pursuing divisive strategies.

The BJP's political narrative has often focused on religious identity, which the Congress argues is aimed at polarising voters. At the same time, the Congress has accused the LDF of selectively engaging in minority politics while failing to address core governance issues such as unemployment, healthcare, and law and order.

Rahul Gandhi directly attacked what he described as divisive politics, stating, "Expose the BJP's politics of hate." He emphasised that Keralam's strength lies in its unity and social harmony, warning that any attempt to divide communities would weaken the state's core identity.

The Congress argues that minority welfare cannot be reduced to symbolic politics, and must instead be rooted in equal opportunity, education, and economic empowerment.

The current political discourse in Keralam reflects increasing ideological polarisation. The Congress has framed the election as a contest between inclusive governance and divisive politics. "There are actually only two sides fighting here in Keralam. One is the UDF alliance, and the other is the partnership between the BJP and the LDF," Rahul Gandhi said, alleging a convergence of interests between the two rivals. According to the Congress, this polarisation is not accidental but a result of deliberate political manoeuvres that shift focus away from governance failures. Issues such as unemployment,

rising drug abuse, and healthcare challenges, the party claims, are being overshadowed by ideological conflicts.

The Congress has also highlighted how Keralam's long-standing secular ethos is under pressure. The party argues that the state, known for its social harmony and progressive outlook, risks being drawn into divisive narratives that have impacted other parts of the country.

Congress Calls for Inclusive Secularism

Congress-led UDF has emphasised its commitment to inclusive and secular governance. The party's approach focuses on balancing faith with constitutional values, ensuring that no community feels excluded or targeted. Rahul Gandhi used a powerful metaphor to describe Keralam's identity, saying, "A nurse does not differentiate based on a patient's religion, community, or whether they are rich or poor... This is the spirit of Keralam." The statement underscores the Congress' vision of a society built on equality, compassion, and mutual respect.

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From Promises to Performance

Keralam's Development Model Leaving People Behind

Keralam's ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) has consistently projected infrastructure development as the cornerstone of its governance model over the past decade. From highways and port-led expansion to large-scale projects funded through the Keralam Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB), the government has highlighted an ambitious vision of modernisation. However, as the state heads towards crucial Assembly elections, the debate has shifted from announcements to outcomes raising a key question: are these achievements as substantial as claimed?

Keralam government has tall claims on the infrastructure development of the state but the fact is that the gap between announcements and delivery remains significant. Many infrastructure projects have faced delays, cost overruns, and implementation bottlenecks.

Reports indicate that several KIIFB-funded projects have experienced slow progress due to financial constraints and procedural challenges. Questions have also been raised about the sustainability of KIIFB's borrowing model, with concerns over increasing debt liabilities for the state.

Highway development, though progressing, has faced issues related to land acquisition, environmental clearances, and local resistance. In some cases, timelines have been extended significantly, raising doubts about efficiency.

Congress leaders have raised the concerns that the LDF government has prioritised publicity over performance. According to them, infrastructure announcements have often been amplified without corresponding progress on the ground.

K-Rail Controversy: Development or Disruption?

One of the most contentious projects under the LDF government has been the proposed K-Rail SilverLine semi-high-speed rail corridor. The project, aimed at improving north-south connectivity in Keralam, has triggered widespread protests across the state.

Local communities, environmental activists, and opposition parties have raised concerns about displacement, ecological damage, and financial viability. Critics argue that the project could lead to



Photo: Gettyimages

large-scale land acquisition, affecting thousands of families.

Environmental concerns have also been central to the opposition against K-Rail, with fears that it could disrupt fragile ecosystems and increase the state's vulnerability to natural disasters.

The protests against the project have highlighted a broader debate whether development is being pursued in a participatory and sustainable manner.

Senior Congress leader Sachin Pilot has intensified criticism of the LDF government, alleging a lack of accountability and ineffective governance.

Escalating his attack, Pilot said that both the LDF government and the BJP-led Centre have worked in tandem over the past decade, claiming that there has been little visible resistance from the CPI(M)-led alliance against central policies.

Referring to the Wayanad tragedy, he pointed out that despite demands for substantial financial assistance, the state received only a loan. He highlighted that it was leaders like Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and UDF MPs who actively protested against the Centre, questioning the LDF's approach.

Pilot further remarked that the Chief Minister appears unable to defend ten years of governance, leading to what he described as "baseless allegations" against the opposition.

UDF's Alternative Vision - Sustainable and People-Centric Development

The United Democratic Front (UDF), led by the Congress, has positioned itself as a proponent of balanced and inclusive development. The UDF argues that infrastructure growth must be aligned with environmental sustainability, fiscal responsibility, and public consultation.

According to Congress leaders, development should not come at the cost of displacement or ecological damage. They emphasise transparent governance, timely execution of projects, and prioritisation of local needs.

Pilot stated that the UDF's upcoming manifesto would be "positive, futuristic and inclusive," reflecting inputs from diverse sections of society. He underlined that Keralam's development model must focus on job creation and improving opportunities within the state.

As Keralam approaches the Assembly elections, infrastructure development has emerged as a central electoral issue. While the LDF continues to highlight its ambitious projects, the opposition is questioning their execution, sustainability, and impact.

The choice before voters, therefore, is not just about development, but about the model of development — whether it is driven by large-scale announcements or grounded in transparency, accountability, and people-centric policies.

Keralam has long been regarded as a model state for human development indicators, but in recent years, questions have emerged about whether its economic and infrastructure policies are keeping pace with public expectations. As elections approach, the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) has sharpened its attack on the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), arguing that the state's development narrative is increasingly disconnected from ground realities.

Big Announcements vs Everyday Challenges

The LDF government has consistently highlighted its achievements in infrastructure, citing investments in highways, ports, and KIIFB-funded projects as evidence of progress. These initiatives, the government claims, are laying the foundation for long-term economic growth.

However, opposition leaders



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Pilot highlighted that the party's guarantees, inspired by Rahul Gandhi, reflect immediate priorities, while the manifesto will present a broader vision for the state's future.

argue that these projects have not translated into tangible improvements in the daily lives of citizens. Issues such as traffic congestion, employment in public works, and lack of development opportunities continue to affect large sections of the population.

According to Congress leaders, development cannot be measured solely by the scale of projects announced but must be evaluated based on their real impact.

Employment Concerns and Migration

One of the key criticisms raised by the Congress is the lack of adequate employment opportunities in the state. Senior leader Sachin Pilot pointed out that many young people are being forced to leave Keralam in search of jobs.

"People are not leaving because they are finding better opportunities; they are leaving because they have no opportunities in Keralam," he said, highlighting what he described as a growing employment crisis.

The issue of migration has become a significant political concern, with many families relying

on income from outside the state. Critics argue that despite large infrastructure investments, job creation has not kept pace.

Centre-State Dynamics and Political Questions

Pilot also raised questions about the relationship between the LDF government and the BJP-led Centre. He alleged that over the past ten years, there has been little visible confrontation or sustained protest by the Left against central policies affecting Keralam.

Citing the response to the Wayanad tragedy, he questioned why stronger action was not taken by the state government to demand financial assistance.

In contrast, he noted that leaders such as Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and UDF MPs had actively protested to secure support for the state.

These remarks have added a political dimension to the development debate, with the Congress attempting to position itself as a more assertive voice for Keralam's interests.

The UDF has promised a shift towards a more inclusive and

sustainable development model. The Congress leadership has indicated that its manifesto will focus on employment generation, support for small businesses, and policies that address the needs of Keralam's diverse population.

Pilot highlighted that the party's guarantees, inspired by Rahul Gandhi, reflect immediate priorities, while the manifesto will present a broader vision for the state's future.

He emphasised that policymaking in Keralam must take into account regional diversity, environmental concerns, and the aspirations of young people.

The Congress has framed the contest as a choice between what it describes as "headline-driven development" and a more grounded, people-centric approach.

Pilot expressed confidence that the UDF would secure a comfortable majority but refrained from making specific predictions. He stressed that the party remains focused on engaging with voters and presenting a credible alternative.

The upcoming elections in Keralam are shaping up to be more than just a referendum on infrastructure projects. They represent a broader debate on governance, economic opportunity, and the direction of the state's development model. As voters weigh their options, the key question remains whether the current approach has delivered meaningful change or whether a new model, as proposed by the UDF, is needed to address the challenges ahead.

Congress Guarantees an Inclusive Future with Strong Leadership

Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) has put forward a clear, structured vision focused on welfare, economic opportunity, and social justice. Backed by specific guarantees and a strong organisational network, the Indian National Congress is projecting itself as a credible and stable alternative ready to deliver on its promises.

At the heart of the Congress campaign are concrete guarantees aimed at addressing the everyday concerns of people across the state. One of the most prominent promises is free bus travel for all women in KSRTC buses, a move designed to ease the financial burden on households while improving women's mobility and participation in education and employment. In addition, the party has announced a monthly financial assistance of ₹1,000 for college-going girls, aiming to support higher education and reduce dropout rates.

For Keralam's growing elderly population, the Congress has promised the creation of a dedicated ministry for senior citizens, ensuring focused



Photo: Gettyimages

policymaking and welfare delivery. Social security remains a key focus, with the party committing to increase welfare pensions to ₹3,000 per month, addressing long-standing concerns over delays and inadequate support.

Youth empowerment is another central pillar of the UDF's agenda. The

Congress has pledged to provide interest-free loans of up to ₹5 lakh for young entrepreneurs to start their own businesses. This initiative is expected to encourage self-employment, boost innovation, and create local job opportunities, especially at a time when unemployment remains a major concern

in the state. Healthcare, too, features prominently in the Congress vision. The party has proposed a comprehensive health insurance scheme of up to ₹25 lakh, named after former Chief Minister Oommen Chandy. This scheme aims to ensure affordable and accessible treatment for families, reducing the

financial strain caused by rising medical costs and strengthening Keralam's public health framework.

Beyond these guarantees, the strength of the Congress lies in its organisational depth and governance experience. The UDF has a long-standing grassroots presence

across Keralam, with leaders and workers actively engaging with communities and understanding local issues. The alliance is presenting a united front, emphasising stability, transparency, and accountability in governance.

The Congress is also positioning itself as a balanced alternative, focusing on inclusive development while avoiding political polarisation. Its campaign highlights a commitment to fiscal responsibility, efficient welfare delivery, and infrastructure development that is both timely and accountable. With clearly defined guarantees and a renewed political push, the Congress-led UDF is seeking a fresh mandate from the people of Keralam. The message is direct and simple: a government that listens, delivers, and prioritises the needs of its citizens. As the election draws closer, the UDF's combination of welfare promises and organisational strength is shaping the narrative of a strong and viable alternative for the state's future. Congress calls the people of Keralam to build a bright future together.

“Unprecedented Partnership”

Keralam Poll as Ideological Battle

In a politically charged campaign swing through Kannur, Rahul Gandhi sharpened his attack on both the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), framing the upcoming Kerala Assembly elections as a defining ideological battle rather than a routine electoral exercise.

Addressing a packed rally as the principal campaigner for the United Democratic Front (UDF), Gandhi alleged that Kerala is witnessing an “unprecedented partnership” between ideologically opposed forces — the Left and the BJP. “This election is a fight between two ideologies, the Left and the UDF. But for the first time, we are seeing a partnership between the Left and the BJP,” he declared.

The Congress leader’s remarks were aimed directly at Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and his government, which Gandhi accused of abandoning the foundational principles of the Left movement. According to him, the present-day Left no longer represents workers, farmers, and marginalised communities, but has instead developed a “soft corner for corporates.”

From Ideology to “Convenience Politics”

Gandhi’s argument rests on what he described as visible contradictions in Kerala’s political landscape. Historically, the CPI(M)-led Left and the BJP have formed fierce ideological adversaries. However, Gandhi suggested that their current political conduct indicates a tacit understanding. He pointed to two “clues” to support his claim, he noted that Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who frequently raises religious



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issues across India, refrains from doing so in Kerala — particularly on something like Sabarimala. “Why is it that the Prime Minister speaks about religion everywhere but remains silent in Kerala?” Gandhi asked. Second, Gandhi highlighted what he described as selective enforcement of investigative scrutiny. “I have multiple cases against me. I lost my Lok Sabha membership. I was questioned for hours. But what about the Chief Minister and his family?” he asked, implying a systemic bias. “The BJP wants the CPI(M) in power because they can control it. They cannot control a Congress-led UDF government,” Gandhi asserted, positioning Congress as the only force capable of enforcing a credible national challenge to the BJP.

A key visual moment at the rally was the presence of veteran former

CPI(M) leaders T.K. Govindan and V. Kunjikrishnan, now contesting as UDF-backed candidates. Gandhi used their presence to underline what he described as a deeper churn within the Left ecosystem. “This is proof that even committed Left leaders recognise that the movement has changed,” he said. According to Gandhi, such defections are not isolated incidents but indicators of growing dissatisfaction within the Left ranks. Political observers note that Kannur, long considered a Left stronghold, carries symbolic weight in Kerala’s politics. Gandhi’s decision to anchor his ideological attack reflects a strategic attempt to disrupt the Left’s narrative on its home turf.

Kerala’s Legacy vs Present Politics

Framing his appeal in broader

philosophical terms, Gandhi invoked Kerala’s legacy of social reform, inclusiveness, and communal harmony. “Kerala has always stood for unity, non-violence, and inclusiveness,” he said.

Contrasting this with what he termed the “Left-BJP partnership,” Gandhi argued that the UDF represents “love and brotherhood,” while its opponents thrive on division.

“The UDF brings people together through love and brotherhood, while this partnership promotes division,” he said, appealing to voters to protect Kerala’s social fabric.

As the campaign intensifies, Rahul Gandhi’s ideological framing seeks to consolidate anti-BJP and anti-incumbency sentiments while repositioning Congress as the natural custodian of Kerala’s pluralistic ethos.

“India’s Policies Being Dictated”

Rahul Gandhi Targets Modi on Economy, Foreign Policy

Expanding his attack beyond Kerala’s borders, Rahul Gandhi launched a scathing critique of the Narendra Modi government’s economic and foreign policy decisions, alleging that India’s sovereignty is being compromised under external influence.

Addressing a public gathering ahead of the April 9 polls, Gandhi claimed that India’s strategic autonomy particularly in energy procurement has been weakened. “If India wants to buy oil from Russia, Iran or Saudi Arabia, we need to get permission from Donald Trump. There is nothing more shameful than this,” he said, referring to global geopolitical pressures.

His remarks came amid heightened tensions in West Asia and concerns over energy security, a critical issue for India’s import-dependent economy.

Energy Security and Strategic Autonomy

Gandhi warned that India’s ability to independently navigate global energy markets is under threat. By invoking countries such as Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, he highlighted the traditional diversity of India’s oil sourcing strategy.

According to Rahul Gandhi, recent policy shifts have narrowed this flexibility, exposing India to geopolitical vulnerabilities. “India’s energy decisions should be made in Delhi, not influenced by Washington,” he implied.

His criticism taps into a broader opposition narrative that questions the government’s handling of international alignments and their domestic economic consequences.

Trade Deal Concerns, Impact on Farmers

The Congress leader also raised concerns over a reported trade arrangement with the United States, alleging that it disproportionately favours American interests at the cost of Indian farmers and small producers.

He claimed that India could be lured to purchase goods worth ₹9 lakh crore from the US, a move he said

would undermine domestic industries and the government’s own “Make in India” initiative.

“This will hurt our farmers those growing rubber, corn, soya, and fruits,” Gandhi warned, linking global trade decisions to local economic distress.

For Kerala, where rubber cultivation is a significant economic activity, such concerns carry particular resonance. Gandhi’s remarks appeared calibrated to connect national policy decisions with state-specific anxieties.

Data Sovereignty and Digital Concerns

In a striking allegation, Gandhi claimed that India’s data infrastructure has effectively been opened to external control. “He has handed the entire data of India to the US. They can store it wherever they like and use it however they want,” he said. While the government has consistently defended its digital policies as necessary for growth and innovation, Gandhi framed the issue as one of national security and sovereignty.

He went further to allege that the Prime Minister is “compromised” in his dealings with global powers a charge likely to intensify political debate in the run-up to the elections.

Politics of Distraction vs Governance

Rahul Gandhi also criticised Narendra Modi for focusing on religious themes in his speeches rather than governance issues. “The Prime Minister speaks about temples and Hinduism, but not about jobs, farmers, or the economy,” he said.

This line of attack reflects a consistent Congress strategy of contrasting what it describes as “divisive politics” with bread-and-butter issues such as employment, inflation, and economic growth. By bringing national issues into the Kerala campaign, Gandhi is attempting to elevate the electoral discourse and position the state election as part of a larger ideological struggle shaping India’s future.

“Selective Action, Systemic Bias”

Congress Raises Corruption, LDF-BJP Dynamics

Turning his focus back to Kerala’s internal politics, Rahul Gandhi launched a direct attack on the LDF government, accusing it of corruption, lack of accountability, and benefiting from what he described as a politically convenient arrangement with the BJP.

Gandhi made pointed allegations regarding the handling of sensitive issues, including those linked to Sabarimala. “The Left stole gold, they replaced gold with brass. Their leaders stole from Sabarimala, and no action was taken,” he alleged.

While the LDF has denied such charges, Gandhi’s remarks signal Congress’ intent to foreground corruption as a key campaign issue.

He argued that the absence of strong action in such cases reflects a deeper systemic problem. “Why is there no accountability?” he asked, framing the issue as one of governance failure rather than isolated incidents.

Selective Targeting of Opposition Leaders

A central theme of Gandhi’s



Photo: Gettyimages

speech was the allegation of selective use of investigation agencies against opposition leaders. Citing his own experience, he said, “I have many cases against me. I am out on bail. Everyone knows that whoever attacks Modi will have cases filed against them.”

He contrasted this with what he described as the lack of scrutiny faced by Pinarayi Vijayan and his family. “What about the Chief Minister and his family? It’s because they are part

of the same system,” he claimed. This rhetorical seeks to portray a broader political ecosystem in which adversaries of the BJP face pressure, while others are allegedly shielded.

Why BJP Doesn’t Target LDF Aggressively

Gandhi also questioned the BJP’s relatively restrained approach toward the LDF in Kerala. “Why does the BJP not attack the Left strongly? Because it suits them politically,” he

said. According to Gandhi, the BJP opponent, unlike a Congress. “The BJP understands that the Left cannot effectively challenge it in India. It knows that only the Congress has the ideology and strength to take it on,” he asserted.

This argument reinforces Congress’ positioning as the principal national alternative to the BJP, while simultaneously attempting to erode the Left’s credibility among its traditional

A Vision Beyond Criticism



Photo: Gettyimages

Despite his sharp attacks, Gandhi also, expressing hope that Kerala would one day elect a woman Chief Minister. The remark, though brief, aligns with Congress’ broader messaging on gender representation and inclusive governance.

As Kerala heads toward the Assembly elections, Gandhi’s campaign strategy appears to rest on three pillars: ideological contrast,

governance critique, and national vision. By linking local issues with national narratives from corruption and governance to foreign policy and economic sovereignty the Congress leader is attempting to reshape the electoral conversation. The election in Kerala. Is not merely and political contest for Congress but an endeavour to reshape the aspirations of the state. For Congress it is a larger battle over the direction of politics, governance, and values in India.

Jinnah, Mohd. Iqbal, Sir Syed...

Jammu University's proposal to remove key Muslim figures from the PG Political Science syllabus is unsurprising but dangerous

Haroon Reshi

The recent proposal to remove references to Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Dr Mohammad Iqbal and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan from Jammu University's postgraduate Political Science syllabus has shocked those who value academic freedom and oppose the erasure of historical perspectives. Critics warn that this move is a dangerous attempt to erase key perspectives and rewrite modern Indian history.

Even more shocking is how quickly, in just four days, the recommendation to drop these names from the syllabus was pushed through.

The controversy began on 20 March, when the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) protested the chapter on Jinnah in the 'Minorities and the Nation' paper. Almost immediately, vice-chancellor Umesh Rai formed a committee to review the syllabus. Led by Prof. Naresh Padha, the committee recommended removing all material related to Jinnah, Syed Ahmad Khan and Mohammad Iqbal from the MA Political Science syllabus.

The press release issued by the head of the department of Political Science, Jammu University reads: 'The faculty/ department affairs committee (DAC) meeting was held on 22 March 2026... After a thorough consideration, the committee unanimously resolved to recommend the removal of topics concerning Mohd. Ali Jinnah, Syed Ahmad Khan and Mohd. Iqbal from the course content of PIPSTC 102 of the One Year Postgraduate Programme and course content of P2PSTC 302 of the Two Year Postgraduate Programme in Political Science.'

The recommendation was forwarded to the board of studies (BoS), which was scheduled to meet online on 24 March to deliberate and take a final decision. Although the BoS's decision was not made public, it is widely believed that the proposed changes have been approved. All of this happened within a span of four days—without public debate, without consulting academics, and without seeking input from other educational institutions.

The alarming fact is that this move met practically no resistance. No prominent institution, no veteran academics, no civil society leader stepped forward to challenge or stop it.

Amir Choudhary, chief spokesperson of the Gujjar Bakerwal Students Alliance (GBSA), who had strongly opposed the proposal, said the alliance's campaign failed to garner support from civil society and even sections of liberal academia.

"Honestly, I am not surprised," Choudhary told *National Herald*. "There

have been ongoing efforts to saffronise the university, and it seems these efforts have now succeeded."

He pointed to another recent example of this trend. According to Choudhary, the ABVP and the BJP pressured the university to remove the word 'Jammuiyat' from the title of a two-day cultural event held on 13 March.

"The event was originally called 'Jammuiyat: Sahitya-Sanskriti Samagam', he explained. "But 'Jammuiyat' was dropped because it is an Urdu word. They claimed it was being added in the same way that 'Kashmiriyat' was once said to have been 'invented.'"

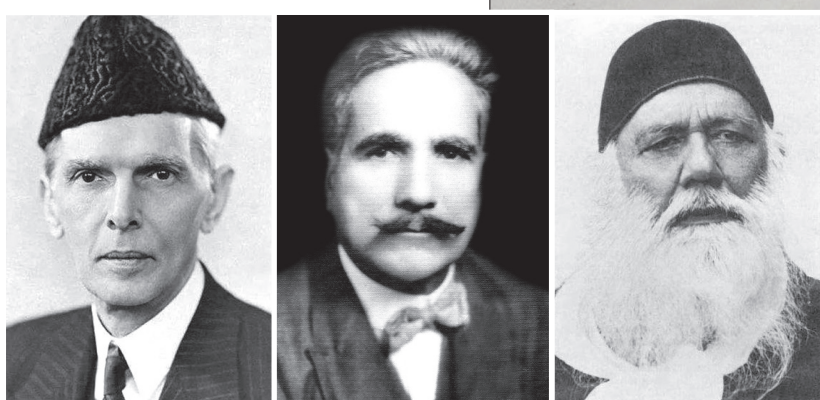
These actions reveal the ongoing push to alter the university's cultural and academic identity, said Choudhary, adding that erasing such historical and linguistic references is worrying.

Senior academic Prof. Noor Ahmad Baba, former head of the Political Science Department at Kashmir University, described the decision as "laughable".

Speaking to *National Herald* he said, "Such acts do not suit a university which is



(Above) A faculty-plus-students photo-op at Jammu University's history department; (far left to right) Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Mohammad Iqbal, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan



supposed to be a centre of higher learning and contested ideas. History cannot be denied. The figures whose references have been removed from the syllabus played a pivotal role in shaping modern Indian history, and no one can ignore their impact. From an Indian perspective, they may be seen as heroes or villains, but their contributions cannot be erased. Omitting them without acknowledging their significance only distorts our understanding of modern Indian history... Such actions are shortsighted."

Sohail Kazmi, political analyst, editor with the Urdu *Daily Taskeen*, and a well-known social figure in Jammu sees a diabolical pattern.

"It's not just about the university. The entire Jammu region is being turned into

a hub for such unwanted activities. Based on my understanding, Jammu is emerging as the RSS's next big stronghold after Nagpur. They are relentlessly attempting to alter a social fabric that was once rooted in secular and democratic values, transforming it into one marked by bigotry and hatred."

Recalling a more inclusive past, Kazmi told *National Herald*, "In 2011, we organised the 'Jashn-e-Faiz' programme in Jammu and invited eminent scholars and writers from Pakistan and India. This grand two-day event was financed by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), with Dr Karan Singh, who headed the ICCR at the time, playing a leading role to ensure its smooth execution. Even the then director general of police (DGP), Kuldeep Khoda, extended support through various schemes in his department. In today's Jammu, organising such an event is unimaginable. We have lost our secular and democratic values, as well as our social ethics."

Kazmi is of the opinion that dropping references to Muslim figures from the syllabus should be condemned in the strongest possible terms by everyone who believes in the ethics of education.

"At the very least, education must be spared from religious and political biases," he said, adding, "Had Jinnah been a militant leader in India, I would have supported dropping his reference from the syllabus. But he was one of the brightest minds—highly educated and, above all, one of the most significant political leaders of India. How can we erase his name from history, or even from the syllabus of a college or university? Similarly, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan played a vital role in reforming education in our country. He founded Aligarh Muslim University which is an institution every citizen of India can be proud of. Why should we remove him? How can Iqbal, who gave us 'Saarey jahan se achha,' be considered a threat?"

Amir Choudhary raised another pressing question: "How can university authorities deny young students the right to learn about such pivotal figures in Indian history? By erasing their references from our historical narrative, what kind of scholars can our educational institutions hope to cultivate? If our institutions abandon this responsibility, we risk producing generations schooled in ignorance rather than insight." ■

"It's not just the university. Jammu is emerging as the Sangh's next big stronghold after Nagpur"



NEHRU CENTRE AUDITORIUM

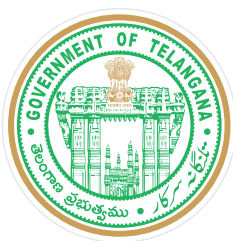
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'Strategic autonomy' or strategic isolation?

Gurdeep Singh Sappal on how the Modi government's foreign policy has left India without any real friends

Diplomatic failure doesn't always announce itself. It manifests in silences at the United Nations, in the slow cooling of relationships once taken for granted. At some point, the accumulated loss becomes undeniable. For Indian diplomacy, March 2026 drove home this dull recognition.

After Independence, India had fashioned itself as one of the most consequential swing states, as a bridge between civilisations, as the natural leader of the Global South. Today, it is friendless on its borders, a spectator in the defining conflict of the moment, squeezed on trade by the superpower it cultivated, and presiding over a BRICS bloc that it has conspicuously broken ranks with. 'Strategic autonomy', the foreign policy mantra of the Narendra Modi government, is looking more like 'strategic isolation'.

Pakistan's diplomatic resurrection

To understand how far India has slipped, consider the trajectory of its most persistent adversary. As recently as 2018, Pakistan was on the Financial Action Task Force grey list. It was publicly shamed before the international community for harbouring terrorist financing networks linked to the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. Its officials were put through a humiliating 34-point action plan. In 2009, Pakistan boycotted the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), of which it is a founding member, unable to prevent India's external affairs minister from addressing that 57-nation body in Abu Dhabi. And not to forget that Osama bin Laden was found living in Abbottabad, in close vicinity of Pakistan's military academy, in 2011.

That was the Pakistan of recent memory. But something changed. After the Pahalgalam attack in 2025, Pakistan secured 182 votes to chair the United Nations Security Council. India voted against, but found only two nations standing with it. After Operation Sindoor, which the Modi government tried to present as a moment of Pakistan's diplomatic isolation, their COAS (Chief of Defence Forces) Field Marshal Asim Munir was hosted for lunch at the White House by US President Donald Trump. And now it is Pakistan that is playing the key interlocutor—alongside Turkey, Egypt and Oman—in a bid to end hostilities in the ongoing US-Israel-India war.

Absent from every table

This war has become the most brutal stress test of India's self-proclaimed centrality in world affairs, its 'Vishwaguru' claims. India has civilisational ties to Iran spanning millennia. It made big investments

in the Chabahar port as its gateway to Central Asia through the International North-South Transport Corridor. It was Iran's largest customer for crude oil before American sanctions hit. And yet, when the US and Israel began their military campaign against Iran, India was not among the voices of concern, not among the nations that dared speak the word 'ceasefire' and is not among the mediators. The government called it 'calibrated silence', but the world saw it as a client state's compliance.

This is not the first such absence. When American forces withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, New Delhi was frozen out of subsequent negotiations. India had over the years invested over \$3 billion in the reconstruction of war-ravaged Afghanistan and had maintained a substantial diplomatic presence in Kabul. Whereas Pakistan had housed, nurtured and maintained communication channels with the Taliban throughout the twenty years of war. Yet, Pakistan was at the negotiating table alongside Russia and China; India was not.

A superpower aspirant must, above all, stand for something. Its partners and adversaries alike must be able to read its posture and commitments, to calibrate their own positions accordingly. Over the past five or so years, India's foreign policy has been opaque and swung like a pendulum.

After the Galwan skirmish of 2020, the Modi government banned Chinese apps and telecom companies, but when economic pressure mounted, it quietly rescinded many of those bans. It embraced the Quad grouping (consisting of the US, India, Japan and Australia) as a strategic counter to China's growing influence, but then signalled discomfort when the grouping acquired harder security edges. It deepened energy dependence on Russian crude after the Ukraine invasion, publicly defying Western sanctions, then surrendered to Trump's tariff blackmail. It has now let down the BRICS grouping it chairs.

The result is a foreign policy that no partner fully trusts and no adversary really fears. Washington extracts compliance without offering support. Moscow provides oil but no security. Beijing remains the biggest trade partner with a huge trade surplus, but actively supports Pakistan in armed conflict against India. And Saudi Arabia, which the government pitches as a Modi success story in the Muslim world, signed a defence treaty with Islamabad in September 2025 after India's silence on Gaza.

A hostile neighbourhood
India's 'Neighbourhood First' policy,

Photo: Getty Images



Where's India? Foreign ministers of (from left) Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Turkey and Egypt meet in Islamabad to discuss ways to end the ongoing war in West Asia

Over the past five or so years, India's foreign policy has been opaque and swung like a pendulum

formally articulated more than a decade ago, was about making India the region's indispensable partner. What it has delivered instead is a South Asia in which India is simultaneously the largest power and the most distrusted one.

The Maldives ejected Indian military personnel in May 2024 after an explicit electoral mandate based on their 'India Out' campaign. Bhutan, India's most reliable partner, has begun a quiet recalibration. It co-hosted a Chinese New Year celebration with Beijing, attended by members of its

royal family, referred to Tibet officially as 'Xizang' in a signal to Beijing, and is engaged in direct border negotiations with China bypassing New Delhi. Chinese settlements have come up in north Bhutan's uninhabited Jakarlung and Menchuma valleys and India has been unable to reverse that reality. The Siliguri Corridor, a.k.a. 'Chicken Neck', connecting India's northeastern states to the mainland, is exposed to high ridges where Chinese infrastructure has steadily advanced.

Bangladesh has swung from trusted partner to open adversary. The interim government of Muhammad Yunus had even offered his country as a gateway for China to India's landlocked northeastern states. India answered the provocation with trade route restrictions that will affect trade worth an estimated \$770 million. This has deepened the resentment without restoring Indian influence.

In Nepal, a new generation of political actors has assumed power with no inherited ties to New Delhi and little patience for the asymmetry that has always characterised the relationship.

In Myanmar, India bet on a junta that now controls barely thirty per cent of the country's territory. With the resistance forces that increasingly govern the border regions, India has cultivated no relationship at all. China has not merely filled the vacuum India has left, it has actively capitalised on it.

Squandering an inheritance

The Modi government brags about the success of its G20 presidency in 2023. No doubt the inclusion of the African Union as a permanent member was an initiative of note. The Gulf partnerships of the early Modi years were real, commercially significant and diplomatically productive. Free trade agreements have been signed with the EU, UK, New Zealand and a few other countries.

But most of these 'achievements' were either inherited from the UPA era or building upon earlier initiatives. Some were reputational more than structural; they didn't translate into durable alliances, binding commitments or crisis-proof relationships.

India's G20 'success' is a direct outcome of growth during the Manmohan Singh years. The FTAs follow the same trajectory as UPA-era FTAs with Japan, South Korea, Singapore, the ASEAN and over ten other prominent nations. It took the Modi government eight years to sign its first FTA and it took Trump's tariff tantrums to close deals with the EU and UK!

The failure to convert these relationships into stress-proof alliances has really cost India. Its claim of 'strategic autonomy' rings hollow and its foreign policy isolation is only too real. ■

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

FCRA noose tightens

Why charities and religious groups are dreading the likely new law

Herjinder

A century-old dispute in Kerala's Saint Thomas Christian community may appear, at first glance, to be a local affair. The long-running feud between factions of the Malankara Church has already seen court interventions, frozen accounts and divided congregations. But today, that dispute is beginning to echo far beyond Kerala, offering an early glimpse into the potential nationwide impact of the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2026.

For years, several accounts linked to the Malankara Church factions have remained frozen due to ongoing litigation. Affiliated institutions, ranging from churches and seminaries to hospitals and schools, have had to function under a cloud of financial uncertainty. Yet, despite these constraints, both sides had the assurance that their assets, built over decades, through community effort and occasional foreign contributions, would remain under their ownership, subject only to judicial outcomes.



The bill converts regulatory compliance into a Damoclean threat, where procedural delays or lapses can lead to permanent loss of assets



Photo: IANS

Unsettling move MoS Home Nityanand Rai introducing the FCRA Amendment Bill in Parliament; (left) St. Mary's Malankara Seminary in Kerala

The introduction of the FCRA Amendment Bill, 2026, has unsettled that assumption.

Tabled in Parliament on 25 March 2026, the bill proposes sweeping changes to the regulatory framework governing foreign contributions. At the heart of the controversy is a provision that allows the central government to take over assets created using foreign funds if an organisation's FCRA registration is cancelled, expires, is surrendered, or even if its renewal is delayed.

For organisations entangled in disputes, this provision is alarming. A delay caused by

litigation, administrative hurdles, or even technical lapses could potentially lead to state takeover of properties and institutions.

Across India, thousands of NGOs (non-governmental organisations), religious bodies, educational institutions and charitable trusts operate with varying degrees of reliance on foreign contributions. Many of them do not receive such funds continuously. They may access foreign assistance intermittently—during crises, for specific projects or for limited periods. Organisations often do not prioritise timely renewal of their FCRA registration if they are not receiving foreign funds on a regular basis.

Under the proposed amendments, this pattern could become a vulnerability.

Critics argue that the bill makes regulatory compliance a Damoclean threat, where procedural delays or lapses, intentional or otherwise, can lead to permanent loss of assets. The other cause for alarm is the concentration of discretionary power in the hands of the executive.

Veteran journalist John Dayal describes the bill as a 'draconian measure', drawing parallels with other contentious laws affecting minority communities. According to him, the FCRA amendments could have a disproportionately adverse impact on Christian institutions, much like the changed Waqf laws affected the assets of Muslim organisations.

► Continued on page 2

Dire straits for millions of Indian workers

The current conflict in West Asia exposes the fragility of India's labour market and export sector

Nandita Haksar

The escalating US-Iran conflict has dealt a severe blow to Indian workers in the region. According to the ministry of external affairs, an estimated 260,000 Indian nationals have been evacuated or have returned on commercial flights. At least two Indian workers in the war zone have been reported killed. Then there are those waiting to go to the Gulf for jobs. Estimates from Indian recruitment agencies put this number at more than 3 lakh.

The safe return of the workers is, of course, good but it is not without consequences. The returnees are unlikely to find jobs here. Additionally, annual remittances worth over Rs 12 lakh crore from West Asia will be hit. Jewellery, garment exports and pharmaceutical shipments too will bear the brunt.

America's war on Iran has already led 63 per cent of Indian companies to downsize or put a freeze on hiring; 15 per cent have shifted to contracts, eroding job security and morale across manufacturing, IT and services sectors.

The shortage of gas, surge in prices of raw material and supply chain breakdown has disrupted Haryana's industries, particularly textiles and basmati rice exports. Dyeing units are the backbone of Panipat's Rs 60,000 crore handloom/textile industry (including a Rs 20,000 crore export market). Around 400 of these have shut down due to LPG cuts. Rationing of PNG supplies by 60 per cent to 150 units have led to losses across textiles and related sectors.

Over 125 units in Barhi and Kundli have closed, feeding into a total of 300 textile factory shutdowns. The ensuing losses have left over 35,000 jobless with many migrant workers going back to their home states. The government has been sympathetic to corporations, big business and industry, forgetting that its first duty or 'raj dharma' is to protect citizens, workers and farmers.

It could move in this direction by placing before the nation a report on the impact of the war and new technologies on the working class, as also the measures it intends to take to protect the most vulnerable sections.

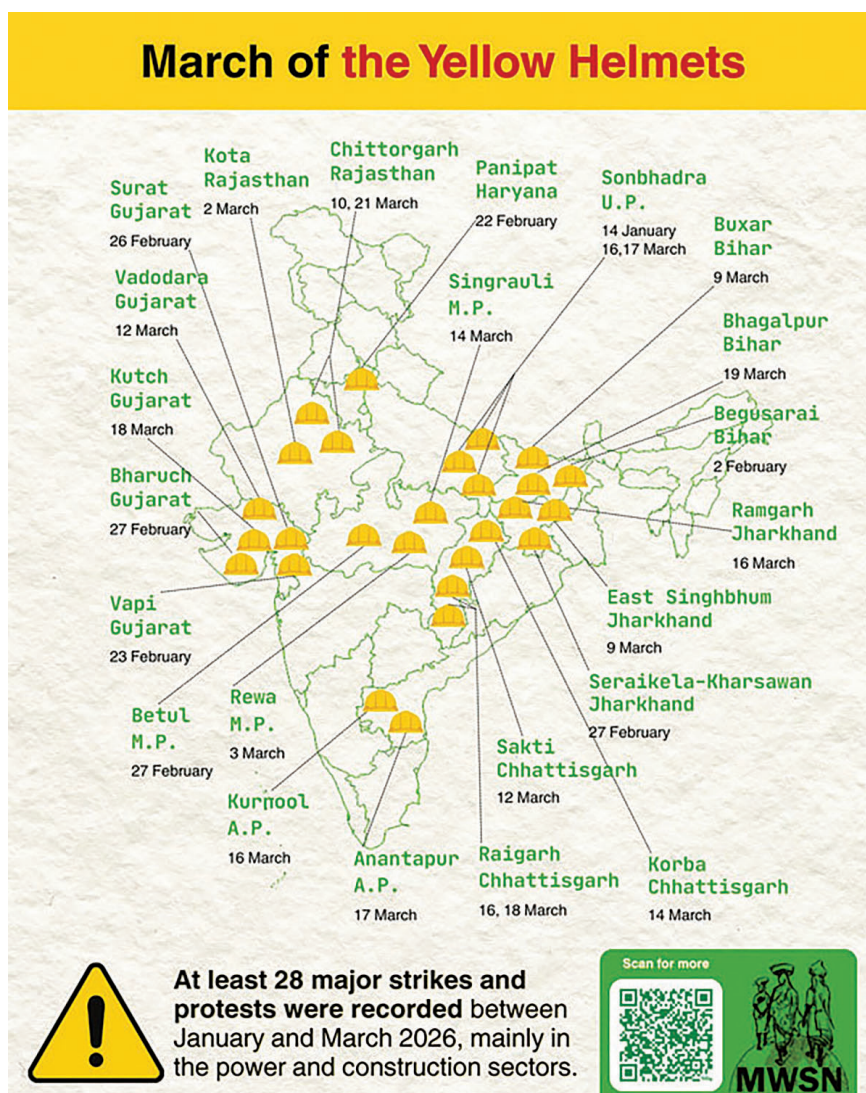
Higher energy and commodity prices, supply chain disruptions, trade and

remittance shocks, financial market volatility, and strategic uncertainties are all fallouts of the war. One of the first signs of its impact has been felt in the private sector. March 2026 recorded the slowest expansion in over three years, which cannot be attributed to trade union activities or strikes.

In the past, conflicts in West Asia have repeatedly pushed up crude oil and gas prices, raising India's import bill, feeding into wholesale and retail inflation, and squeezing margins for energy intensive industries such as airlines, shipping, petrochemicals and heavy manufacturing. Add to that the plight of millions of migrant workers in conflict zones.

Economic stress is fuelling unrest. The Migrant Workers Solidarity Network (MWSN) has recorded 28 large-scale protests and strikes in the first three months of 2026. A look at the accompanying map dramatically illustrates the extent of the nation-wide protests. The all-India strike by central trade unions on 1 April should be seen in the context of these protests. As workers and farmers took to the streets demanding the war be stopped, they also demanded that the new labour codes be repealed and farmers protected. The new labour codes facilitate hiring flexibility for employers at the cost of workers' rights, stripping contract workers of prior legal protections, including their right to be regularised when employed in perennial roles.

One of the rights won by workers all over the world was the eight-hour workday. With the development of new technologies, mainly robotics and AI, and because of the interconnectivity of global markets, the corporate world has pushed



At least 28 major strikes and protests were recorded between January and March 2026, mainly in the power and construction sectors.



safety in the workplace, triggered in some cases by the death of workers on duty and the callous attitude of employers. The protests have cut across public and private sectors, including at companies owned by the Patas, Ambanis and Adanis.

People have been largely unaware of the protests because they have not been covered by mainstream media, regional media or even social media. The reason for this deafening silence could be the success of the campaign to demonise trade unions and workers. Even political parties and judges from the labour courts to the Supreme Court have succeeded in stigmatising the very word *mazdoor*.

Are workers really responsible for the growing number of factory closures? Figures from the ministry of corporate affairs indicate that over 2,04,000 private companies closed down between 2020-21 and 2024-25. This trend, however, can be directly linked to restructuring, insolvency and market stress, not to labour unrest.

The lack of permanent jobs is dramatically illustrated by the number of employees in Maruti Suzuki's plants in Haryana's Gurgaon, Manesar and Charkhoda. Maruti Suzuki employs around 35,000-36,000 workers across its plants, but only 17-18 per cent of them are permanent—around 6,000-6,500 individuals with an average pay of Rs 1.3 lakh per month who largely work in supervisory roles. The remaining 82-83 per cent includes 40 per cent contractual workers, 21 per cent trainees/apprentices who earn anything between Rs 12,000-30,000.

The largest planned facility at Charkhoda—with a target of producing 2.5 lakh vehicles per year by 2029—currently hires fixed-term employees on 3-year contracts made legal by the new codes.

MWSN documentation shows that contract workers have been fighting for decades for the right to permanency. The courts had upheld their right to regularisation if they worked in jobs of a perennial nature. The new labour codes took away this legal safety net. In times of war, their future looks even more uncertain.

NANDITA HAKSAR is a human rights activist and author of *How Robots Stole Our Jobs: Struggles of Suzuki Workers in the Age of AI (Aakar, 2026)*

governments to help create a labour market in which they can hire and fire workers.

This has happened in India too. Over the years, the number of permanent workers in private and public sectors has fallen while the number of non-permanent workers—contract, casual, migrant—has been growing. The 28 major strikes so far were organised by contract workers. Their key demands include an eight-hour work shift, payment of months of pending wages and

FCRA noose tightens

Continued from page 1

The concern, however, is not limited to any one community. Civil society groups working across sectors—in healthcare, education, disaster relief or social welfare—see the bill undermining their operational autonomy. Many such organisations have built schools, hospitals and community centres through a combination of local contributions and occasional foreign funding. The prospect that these assets could be taken over due to regulatory technicalities has sent ripples of concern through the sector.

Congress MP Manish Tewari has framed the issue in constitutional terms, arguing that the bill “suffers from serious constitutional maladies”. He points to Article 300A, which guarantees the right to property, and warns that allowing the government to assume control over assets due to procedural lapses undermines this safeguard. In his view, the amendments blur the line between legitimate regulation and excessive state intervention.

Another line of criticism relates to the principles of natural justice. The bill, it is argued, grants unbridled powers to the state, with insufficient checks against arbitrary or selective action. In a polarised environment, they fear that such powers could be used to target organisations perceived as critical of the government or not aligned with its ideology. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) has warned that such powers could have a chilling effect on charitable and religious activities across the country.

At a rally in Kerala on 30 March, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi said the amendments are designed to redirect the flow of independent welfare organisations at a disadvantage while benefiting entities aligned with the ruling establishment. He said the bill places community organisations at the “mercy of the central government,” effectively turning regulation

into an instrument of control. Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan has also weighed in, stating that the amendments have “generated apprehensions among minority communities”. The existing legal framework has sufficient powers to address undermining their operational autonomy, he said. His position reflects a broader concern among states about the concentration of power at the Centre.

To understand the depth of these concerns, it is important to look at the evolution of the FCRA regime. The law was amended in 2020 under the Manmohan Singh government to enhance transparency and accountability. Organisations receiving foreign contributions were required to disclose detailed information about funds received and their utilisation every three months, with this data made publicly accessible.

In 2022, further amendments under the current government introduced a different set of changes, which included some relaxations but also greater central oversight. Critics argue that the 2026 bill marks a decisive shift towards control rather than transparency, fundamentally altering the balance between regulation and autonomy.

For organisations on the ground, the implications are immediate and practical. Consider a charitable trust that builds a rural hospital with some foreign funding a decade ago. If that trust did not renew its FCRA registration because it no longer receives foreign contributions, the new provisions could expose its assets to state takeover. Institutions entangled in legal disputes—like the Malankara Church—are similarly vulnerable.

As Parliament debates the bill, the central question is: where should the line be drawn between legitimate oversight of foreign funding and the protection of institutional autonomy?

For thousands of organisations across India, the answer to that question may determine not just their compliance obligations but their very survival.

Akhilesh has his eye on her vote

Nandlal Sharma

Mamta Gautam makes a living working as domestic help. A Dalit farmer and activist, she also leads a movement to save her land from the clutches of the Adani Group. On 22 March, Mamta was one of 26 women to receive the Murti Devi-Malti Devi Samman at the Samajwadi Party headquarters in Lucknow. Named after Akhilesh Yadav's mother and grandmother, the honorees were mainly from the backward, Dalit and minority (Pichhda-Dalit-Alpasankhyak or PDA) communities.

Sunaina Devi belongs to the Musahar community. Married off as a child, she could not go to school. Today, thanks to her effort, hundreds of children from the Musahar community have received schooling. Program coordinator Vandana Mishra said, “Sunaina Devi's path wasn't easy. She was beaten and subjected to violence. Yet, she didn't back down.” Women like Mamta and Sunaina don't make mainstream headlines.

With women comprising half the population, Akhilesh knows just how crucial women's votes are in the 403-seat UP assembly elections and has begun establishing women influencers and leaders. Party vice-president of Meerut district Sandeep Yadav says that there is a plan to steadily increase the outreach by women leaders among women voters.

Veteran Samajwadi leader Uday Pratap Singh also spoke at the awards ceremony, recalling that early in his political career Mulam Singh Yadav had gone to jail for the first time fighting for a Dalit woman. He also marked that most of the Murti Devi-Malti Devi awardees were from backward and Dalit communities.

The results of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections seem to have convinced Akhilesh Yadav that his social PDA coalition could turn the political tide in the 2027 UP assembly elections. The message he wants to convey is this: when it comes to representation, he will go all out to create opportunities for women from backward and Dalit communities.

On 29 March, kicking off the UP election campaign with the Samajwadi Samaantha Bhaichara rally in Dadri, Gautam Buddha Nagar, Akhilesh said, “Pain is the thread that binds the people of the PDA together. On one side are the arrogant people who neglect and oppress, and on the other side are the oppressed and the neglected. There are such unfortunates in every caste and religion. Those who have not suffered the pain of oppression, discrimination and injustice may show sympathy, but they cannot truly feel that pain—the pain we felt when our home was washed with Ganga jal, or when a temple was ‘purified’ after our visit.” (Following the Samajwadi Party's defeat in 2017, the chief minister's residence was



Outreach Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav with the awardees of the Murti Devi-Malti Devi Samman

reportedly ‘purified’ with water from the Ganga before Yogi Adityanath moved in. Similarly, during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, after Akhilesh Yadav visited a Shiva temple in Kannauj, BJP workers washed it with ‘holy’ water.)

Akhilesh Yadav appears completely clear and confident about his campaign. Recently, the party appointed Rukmini Nishad, late MP Phoolan Devi's elder sister, as leader of the UP Samajwadi Mahila Sabha. Earlier, in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, he built his strategy around the PDA socio-political equation and, in alliance with the Congress, the SP won 43 out of 80 seats in Uttar Pradesh. Rahul Gandhi's ‘Save the Constitution’ campaign also played a major role in this victory, but Akhilesh Yadav ensured there was no ambiguity about his intentions—whether in ticket distribution or organisational representation—towards different social groups.

At the Dalit rally, Akhilesh promised that if his party comes to power, it would pay Rs 40,000 annually to poor women under the Stree Samman Samridhi Yojana and revive the Samajwadi Women's Pension Scheme. He also

spoke of strengthening the 1090 helpline to improve women's safety. At the awards ceremony, former chief secretary Alok Ranjan, who has worked with Akhilesh, highlighted initiatives such as the 1090 helpline, Dial 100, the distribution of bicycles, the Asha Jyoti scheme and the Kanya Vidyan scheme started during Mulayam Singh's tenure, emphasising the party's ongoing commitment to women's safety and empowerment.

Senior journalist Bhavesh Chandra says that even after nine years in power, chief minister Yogi Adityanath lacks the confidence to seek votes on a positive note. Six or seven minutes into his speeches, he starts talking about law and order under previous governments.

The dominant belief, though, is that women as welfare beneficiaries are increasingly eliding caste and religion to vote for the BJP. According to the Lokniti-CSDS Post Poll Survey 2022, the BJP had a significant 13 per cent lead among women voters compared to the Samajwadi alliance. The largest gender gap in favour of the BJP was observed among the upper castes, where women supported the BJP more than men (90 per cent versus 83 per cent). Among rural women too, the BJP enjoyed a significant lead, with a 16 percentage point gap in the vote share of the two parties.

Senior social activist and professor Rooprekha Verma says women are more intensely aware of their Dalit, backward or caste affiliations. The social status of their husbands imposes a double burden. This is particularly evident among Dalit women. She cites the old practice of *dola pratha*, where a newly wed Dalit bride was forced to spend her first night with the local landlord. While Prof. Verma believes that pain can be a unifier, in the case of women, a lot depends on which caste they come from.

The Lok Sabha results of 2024 convinced Akhilesh that his social PDA coalition is a winner



Mamata's love-hate ties with the RSS

In this election, the Sangh is not playing behind the scenes, it's doing a lot of hyper-local heavy lifting

Sourabh Sen

When the BJP's central leadership chose Nagnendra Ray alias Ananta Maharaj, for a Rajya Sabha seat from West Bengal in July 2023, the RSS expressed strong displeasure. Local RSS leaders felt that BJP should have nominated someone more aligned with their ideological roots, rather than this self-styled king who spearheaded the movement to carve a separate state (Greater Cooch Behar) out of West Bengal. Eyebrows were raised when Maharaj was elected unopposed and quickly dropped his demand for Greater Cooch Behar. This suited both the TMC and the RSS just fine.

In February 2026, when the state government conferred the Banga Vibhushan—the state's highest civilian award—on Ananta Maharaj, once again, eyebrows were raised. Political observers interpreted it as chief minister Mamata Banerjee's way of driving a wedge between the RSS and BJP in the run-up to the assembly elections.

Banerjee's relationship with the RSS can be described as transactional and fluid. Pre-2011, when she needed an ally to fight the Left, she described RSS volunteers as patriots. Post 2011—safely ensconced in state secretariat Nabanna — she praised the 'good people' of the RSS. Now, as West Bengal braces for another crucial election, the relationship has turned adversarial. The Trinamool Congress sees the RSS as the 'main force' behind the BJP's anti-Bengal agenda, the instigation of communal politics and the mass deletion of voters through the SIR.

The RSS has also repositioned itself from a behind-the-scenes ideological influencer to a hyper-local, constituency-specific heavy lifter. "This election has become a matter of life-and-death for Bengal. The RSS will do anything, politically and socially, to ensure the survival of Bengali Hindus," senior RSS leader Jisnu Basu told *National Herald*.

Nearly 40 per cent of the BJP nominees started their political career either as RSS swayamsevak or pracharak before being 'loaned' to the BJP. The party has fielded high-profile candidates with deep RSS roots like Dilip Ghosh from Kharagpur Sadar. Swayamsevak will also actively manage booths on election day, ensuring voter turnout in areas where the BJP is strong.

"BJP supporters in affluent urban areas do not like to go through the rigour of manning polling booths on election days," a CPM worker pointed out. In rural Bengal, RSS workers will plug any such gaps.

The RSS workers are focusing on four



Mamata Banerjee with BJP Rajya Sabha MP Nagendra Ray alias Ananta Maharaj (to her left) at a recent function in Kolkata

geographic zones where they believe the election will be won or lost. The priority is the Matua heartland with 17-21 seats across constituencies like Gaighata, Bongaon Uttar (SC) and Bagda (SC) in North 24 Parganas, and Nadia district.

Under the SIR, 9.5 per cent of Matuas were marked 'non-mapped' after they failed to produce legacy documents. The RSS has opened documentation help desks concentrated around the Matua religious hub of Thakur Nagar.

In Murshidabad, Malda and Uttar Dinajpur—districts with large Muslim populations along the India-Bangladesh border—the RSS is focusing on creating voter awareness about demographic changes. Chopra, Goalpokhar and Islampur are constituencies where the BJP is hyping infiltrator rhetoric at rallies, while the RSS is busy discussing cultural preservation at local clubs and libraries. The RSS is particularly active in those constituencies where a large number of voters are 'under adjudication'.

"The electoral success of Jamaat-e-Islami in areas across the border in Bangladesh is a real concern," an RSS worker told *National Herald*.

In West Bengal's urban and industrial areas like Kolkata, Howrah and Asansol, where there have been maximum voter roll deletions, the RSS is conducting *sadbhav baithaks* (goodwill meetings) to address the missing voter phenomenon. In Jorasanko, Chowringhee and Kolkata Port—cosmopolitan constituencies with a large Hindi-speaking population—the RSS is trying to leverage sentiment associated with local issues.

In the Jangalmahal tribal belt spanning Jhargram, Purulia and Bankura, it is the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram that is driving the campaign through its 'Panch Parivartan Initiative' of social harmony, family values, environment, self-reliance and civic duties. The hope is that igniting *swabodh* (self-esteem) in tribal villages will counter dependency on state welfare schemes like Yuvasree and Lakshmi Bhandar.

Whether the RSS's activities will help or harm the BJP or the TMC is a question being hotly debated.

"Mamata Banerjee is an RSS creation and the RSS would not want to dislodge her

from Bengal," says Rabin Deb, veteran CPM leader and former member of the central committee. According to Deb, it was the RSS that was behind the formation of two regional parties in the late 1990s—Tamil Maanila Congress in Tamil Nadu in 1996 under G.K. Mooppanar, and Trinamool Congress in West Bengal in 1998. The idea, he says, was to wipe out the Congress in both states. "The Durga Angan that Mamata Banerjee is now building in New Town has Mohan Bhagwat's blessings. It was Bhagwat who described Mamata Banerjee as Durga," says Deb.

There is no denying that it was under the Trinamool that the RSS expanded its footprint in West Bengal. When Mamata came to power in 2011, the RSS had around 830 shakhas. This number has grown nearly five-fold since. In Central Bengal, it added 500 new shakhas between 2023 and 2025 taking the number from 1,320 to 1,823. There has also been a concerted effort to increase the number of daily shakhas, weekly milans and monthly mandalis across rural Bengal, particularly in the border districts. Reports indicate 4,540 such units are operational, with a target of 8,000 units before the 2026 assembly elections at the end of this month.

The expansion of RSS-affiliated schools—operating under the Vidya Bharati Akhil Bharatiya Shiksha Sansthan and its state-level wings (Saraswati Shishu Mandir and Saraswati Vidya Mandir)—are another example of the peaceful coexistence of the RSS and TMC in Bengal. These schools, which challenge both the Left-secular state board and the elite missionary schools, gathered momentum after 2011. There are currently more than 1,500 Vidya Bharati-affiliated schools with a cohort of 3.5 lakh students.

The BJP meanwhile is finding it difficult to reconcile internal power groups. While one group, with Dilip Ghosh as its centre of gravity, has the blessings of the RSS, the other, fronted by Suvendu Adhikari, draws its clout from Amit Shah. The tussle between the two groups over ticket distribution is already out in the open. If the RSS decides to treat Mamata Banerjee with kid gloves—for instance by not turning up to 'man the booths'—Bengal may remain outside the BJP's schema, despite an engineered voter list, despite Amit Shah changing the entire state administration from the governor to the district magistrate, despite the deployment of 50,000 paramilitary personnel with more still to come. ■

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

Despite engineered voter lists, a pre-poll overhaul of the state administration and 50,000+ paramilitary personnel, Bengal may still elude the BJP

Undoing hard-won transgender rights

Chittajit Mitra on why the new transgender law is regressive

On 13 March 2026, the social justice and empowerment minister Virendra Kumar tabled the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026 in the Lok Sabha. When I first heard this, I thought, in all my naïveté, they're finally bringing in the changes the transgender community has been asking for. Provisions for horizontal reservations, for example, or just punishment for the different kinds of violence (against trans people) that had been clubbed together in the 2019 Act. But reality bit hard. The new bill, instead of expanding the rights of the community, retracts almost all the rights they had won after fighting for decades.

Even amid demands by the Opposition that the bill be referred to a select committee for wider consultation, and a plea by lawyers and activists that the President withhold assent, the regressive provisions are now the new law.

Why are these changes regressive? How do the amendments undermine or violate fundamental rights and dilute protections under Article 14 (equality before the law), Article 15 (non-discrimination), Article 19 (freedom of expression) and Article 21 (protection of life, personal liberty, bodily integrity)?

First, the new law narrows the definition of 'transgender person'. It delegitimises self-identification and empowers medical boards and district magistrates to *grant* recognition. In doing this, it goes against the Supreme Court's landmark NALSA ruling (of 2014) that recognised the constitutional rights of transgender persons and established the principle of self-identification of gender identity.

The system of graded punishments introduced in the new law, ostensibly to criminalise coercion/ deception/ allurements to make someone present themselves as transgender, uses overbroad language where even gender-affirming care can be interpreted as coercion. It ignores

the community's lived realities and potentially criminalises their support systems.

I grew up in Uttar Pradesh listening to rumours about the transgender community: they are supposedly people with indeterminate genitals; they are involved in stealing and kidnapping children; they force people to castrate themselves... and so on. This kind of demonisation, which marginalised the community, now has the force of law behind it.

In narrowing the definition of 'transgender person' to specific socio-cultural identities (*kinnar*, *hijra*, *aravani*, *jogta*) plus intersex variations, and in folding intersex persons into the transgender category—even though intersex variations are biological and distinct from gender identity—the new law disenfranchises individuals who don't belong to these socio-cultural groups (what about trans groups like the Nupi Manbi from Manipur?) and non-binary, gender-diverse individuals.

It attaches biological markers to 'transgender-ness' that contradict internationally accepted definitions of gender identity. As the European Institute for Gender Equality puts it, gender identity is 'each person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms'.

It reintroduces the formation of district-level medical boards to effectively certify transgender persons. This contentious provision has a history: it was initially proposed in 2016, flagged by activists as medical and bureaucratic gatekeeping and as a violation of the NALSA judgement

In narrowing the definition of 'transgender person' to socio-cultural identities plus intersex variations, the new law delegitimises other non-binary, gender-diverse individuals



Fighting for their rights A protest in the national capital against the amended trans law

(2014) and then withdrawn in the 2019 Act.

The 2019 Act was far from ideal. Its disregard for the community's right to dignity was conspicuous in the manner that violent crimes like rape and physical abuse were clubbed with milder offences against the community (like obstructing their use of public spaces) under a catch-all provision, carrying the same light punishment. Is it really, then, about 'Protection of Rights'—as the phrasing of the law may have you believe?

When transgender members of the National Council for Trans Persons (NCTP) were called from different parts of the country for an urgent meeting with social justice minister Virendra Kumar, he thought it better to skip the interaction and sent bureaucrats instead. Resigning from the NCTP on 25 March (when the bill was passed by Rajya Sabha), Council members Kalki Subramaniam and Rituparna Neog shared what transpired during the deliberations. Asked about the unequal rape laws, for instance, the bureaucrats cited "biological differences" between trans women and cisgender women. This reveals the discriminatory mentality and the bio-essentialism—the belief that biological factors are the essence of who a person is—sitting at the core of the new law.

Another treacherous amendment introduces severe punishment (10 years to life imprisonment) for attempts to 'compel

any person or child 'to outwardly present a transgender identity'. The clause may appear harmless, even benevolent, but the overbroad definition of abuse can have a chilling effect on the support systems the community has relied on—NGOs, CBOs (community-based organisations), even traditional groups. Many trans individuals face natal violence and are forced to hide their true self at home. If they run away and seek refuge at any of these institutions, their families can easily file an 'abduction or allurements' case against those who gave them a safe space. This archaic understanding that parents or natal families can do no harm to the child has been proven wrong time and again, and yet we are blindly handing over the rights of transgender individuals to the family.

Finally, the Indian queer community must understand that politics based on the disenfranchisement of any section of society will one day come round to haunt them as well. A small section of India's LGBTQ+ has been desperately trying to seek validation from majoritarian forces; the new law should tell them where they stand. The malicious attempt to further marginalise and undercut us in the upcoming Census will not be tolerated. It is time to raise our voices as one. ■

CHITTAJIT MITRA (he/they) is a writer and translator based in Allahabad

Photo: Vipin



Gen Z standing up to be counted

Young voters look all set to reshape Assam's political landscape, writes **Sourabh Sen**

Can Gen Z do in Assam what we saw recently in Bangladesh and Nepal? As electoral phase grips the state for its single-phase assembly election on 9 April, the spotlight has shifted to a constituency that is no longer just a voting bloc but a decisive political force. With over 72.8 lakh voters aged 18-29—accounting for nearly 30 per cent of the 25 crore electorate—young people are going to be the makers in this high-stakes contest.

According to the Election Commission of India (ECI), the 2026 rolls have seen a significant jump in the number of young voters, including 6.28 lakh first-time voters. Gen Z voters make a cohesive constituency, being digital natives who are less tied to traditional party loyalties than previous generations. In constituencies like Guwahati Central, for example, the presence of young candidates—such as 27-year-old Kunki Chowdhury (Assam Jatiya Party), who is taking on BJP veteran Vijay Kumar Gupta—underscores a shift where the youth are not just casting votes but seeking to lead.

With the BJP born out of the anti-CAA movement, Chowdhury strongly advocates the implementation of the Assam Accord to protect Assamese identity and the interests of all legally recognised citizens of India. This pitches her against the BJP's—more specifically chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's—shrill rhetoric based on persecution of miyas (Bengali-speaking Muslims). "We need a holistic approach based on inclusive regionalism because of the current situation in Assam," says Chowdhury.

At 25, Lobo Narzary, independent candidate from Kokrajhar, is one of the youngest contestants. Making a point of the enthusiasm of his youthful support base, Narzary says power brokers control nominations, reserving them for the highest bidder, but it's time to move beyond the narratives of corruption and communal hatred. "Identity politics dominates when corrupt syndicates and drug lords take over the system," he

says. "Society develops when people can live peacefully with their families and work the way they want. I do not believe that constructing shopping malls is development," Narzary told *National Herald*.

Sapali Marak (31) is the Congress candidate from Baikhungri. She faces the challenge of reconciling Baikhungri's complex community equations with Bodos, Garos and Santhals pulling in different directions. But "education, health and jobs," she says "...are going to be my priorities."

The BJP has opted to promote leadership from its youth cadre. A case in point is Dipu Ranjan Sarmah contesting from the New Guwahati constituency. Sarmah, a former state president of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM), shot to fame after a bypoll in 2024 when he won from Samaguri—a Congress bastion. During a recent visit, Sarmah says the cumulative efforts of the central and state governments and municipal corporations ("triple engine") have created "a feel-good factor" among voters. "The work done by the government has eased my job. I just need to reach out to the people and seek their blessings," he told the media.

Is Assam's politics in the grip of a generational change that will demand new talking points and new ways of doing things? The entry of candidates like Narzary and Chowdhury are early signs of a shift towards a Gen Z-influenced political landscape in Assam, where digital campaigns and local development issues are in play as much as identity politics.

Despite government claims of providing 1.65 lakh jobs, urban and rural youth continue to flag the lack of private sector opportunities and the need for better vocational training. Students at institutions like Cotton University have voiced demands for reduced fees, better academic facilities and modern work cultures over populist rhetoric.

With young voters making up a big chunk of the electorate, Assam's 2026 poll campaign is being fought as much on smartphones as on the streets. Parties have devoted resources to digital campaigns that include youth-oriented issues like availability of high-speed internet, start-up grants and transparent governance.

Even as old-style politicians like Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma froth at the mouth with their divisive rhetoric, hoping communal emotions will drive voting, new-generation leaders, especially from the Asom Sonmilito Morcha (ASM)—the opposition alliance of the Congress, Rajiv Dal, AJP, CPI(M) and others—are talking about pressing life issues like employment and skill gaps, education and health infrastructure. While issues like the NRC, CAA and infiltration still matter, the younger generation views these through the lens of economic stability and social harmony rather than just ethnic



Young candidates wooing Gen Z voters could queer the pitch for the BJP in Assam

polarisation.

The mainstreaming of Gen Z issues, especially through the ASM alliance, means that the assembly election will no longer be a cakewalk for the BJP. "Formation of the alliance means the BJP will have to fight it out in some constituencies," says author and journalist Sanjoy Hazarika. Sensing this, the BJP too has jettisoned the pitch of its communal rhetoric, and persuaded ally Asom Gana Parishad to field Muslim candidates in 13 out of its quota of 26 seats.

Himanta is also downplaying another emotive Gen Z issue—of delivering justice to Assam's cultural icon Zubeen Garg. After Garg died in Singapore on 19 September 2025, Sarma pre-empted the investigation and announced that the singer was murdered and promised justice to his family and fans. Many were arrested. On 25 March, Singapore's state coroner Adam

Nakhoda reportedly said that Garg's death was "simply due to an unfortunate and tragic accidental drowning" and no one had forced, coerced or pushed him. And so the promise to ensure justice for Zubeen Garg has been brushed under the carpet.

On 10 March the government transferred Rs 9,000 each to 40 lakh women as part of its Orunodoi 3.0 scheme. The Rs 3,600 crore direct benefit transfer largesse, worth four months' assistance plus a Bihu bonus, is obviously to enlist the support of women in the upcoming election. But Assam's Gen Z is asking uncomfortable questions and there are signs of fatigue with the politics of money, muscle, polarising emotions and election-time carrots. ■

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

With social media playing an outsize hand in shaping political narratives, the 2026 campaign is being fought as much on smartphones as on the streets



Will the cult of personality be the unmaking of Pinarayi Vijayan?

K.A. Shaji

Smoke rose over the Parassinikadavu Snake Sanctuary, one of Asia's finest reptile sanctuaries, long before Pinarayi Vijayan became the most powerful political figure in Kerala. In the late 1980s, after a stinging electoral defeat at the hands of his political mentor turned rival M.V. Raghavan, CPI(M) workers in Kannur turned their rage not on their opponents, but on the snake park run by a trust associated with Raghavan who had crossed over to the Congress-led UDF, challenging the party in its own citadel.

What followed was carnage. Flames engulfed enclosures. King cobras and rare serpents were burned alive. Birds fell from trees. Monkeys and smaller animals were hunted down as they fled. For hours, the spectacle unfolded in full public view. Vijayan was then the all-powerful district secretary of Kannur. Instead of distancing the party from the incident, he invoked Newton's third law, describing the violence as an equal and opposite reaction. It was a glimpse of the political instinct that understands how response makes the boundaries of excess negotiable.

In hindsight, Parassinikadavu was not an aberration. The methods were crude, carried out openly by cadres. Today, the methods are more sophisticated, embedded within the machinery of the state. But the underlying message, critics say, is the same: power must not appear to bend. As

Kerala approaches a decisive assembly election on 9 April, Vijayan is not merely contesting for a third consecutive term from Dharmadam, his home turf in Kannur. As chief campaigner for the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), he is asking voters to legitimise a decade of governance that has steadily hollowed out the democratic and ideological foundations on which India's Left once stood.

Critics within and outside the LDF say that what began as a promise of stable administration has become a tightly controlled political system centred on a single leader. This election is thus less about continuity and more about whether Kerala is willing to endorse a model of governance historically opposed by the Left, one that increasingly resembles the centralised structures under prime minister Narendra Modi.

To his supporters, Vijayan's political life is a story of grit and upward mobility. Born into a poor toddy tapper family in Pinarayi village near Dharmadam, his rise through the ranks of the CPI(M) reflected an acute understanding of power within a faction-ridden party. From a milieu where cycles of retaliatory killings involving CPI(M) and BJP-RSS cadres, crude bombs and machetes were instruments of political messaging, Vijayan emerged as a figure who could consolidate control, neutralise opponents and enforce discipline. The shadow of that political culture never entirely receded. The 2012 murder of rebel CPI(M) leader

T. P. Chandrasekharan, who was hacked to death, continues to be cited as emblematic of intolerance towards dissent. Vijayan has consistently denied any role, but the controversy persisted, sharpened by allegations of repeated paroles and preferential treatment for the CPI(M) workers who were convicted.

Chandrasekharan's widow, K.K. Rama, now a UDF-supported candidate for Vatakara, alleges that "the politics of violence patronised by Vijayan is making democracy a mockery in an otherwise progressive Kerala." From student politics to his years as CPI(M) state secretary, Vijayan cultivated a reputation for being methodical and uncompromising. His prolonged battle with senior party colleague V.S. Achuthanandan ended with Vijayan asserting near total control over the party apparatus.

When Vijayan assumed office in 2016, there was little to suggest that he would fundamentally alter Kerala's political culture.

"The turning point, paradoxically, came through crisis—the 2018 floods, followed by the Nipah outbreak and the Covid pandemic," observes veteran journalist K.A. Antony, who has closely followed Vijayan's political trajectory. "His daily press briefings during Covid, widely praised for their clarity and consistency, also served to concentrate political attention on a single figure." Dr Azad Malayattil, retired college

"Wherever you look in Kerala, you see his face—buses, roadside hoardings, TV, newspaper jackets..." Sound like someone?

is seen as evidence of limiting power to a closed circle.

Veteran CPI(M) leader G. Sudhakaran, once a trusted associate, turned openly critical in his later years, and is now contesting as a UDF-backed independent in Ambalapuzha, the constituency that is home to Punnappra and Wayalar, two uprisings that stabilised the Left in Kerala. "Both the CPI(M) and the government have become privately controlled entities of the chief minister," asserts partners like the CPI are subservient," observes Bhadrhan Bhaskaran, an environmental activist from Kuttanad who broke with the party over coastal mineral sand mining and ecological damage.

"What we have witnessed under Vijayan is the subordination of institutions," says C.P. John, former CPI(M) leader who left the party along with M.V. Raghavan, a UDF candidate from Thiruvananthapuram. "The party has not just abandoned its principles," asserts J. Reghu, thinker and academic, "it has reinterpreted them in ways that suit it."

"Despite their ideological differences, both Modi and Vijayan have centralised authority, cultivated leader-centric political narratives and relied on tightly controlled communication strategies. In Kerala, this has resulted in a political culture where elections revolve less around policy debates and more around the persona of the chief minister," observes writer and cultural critic M.N. Karassery.

Opposition leader V.D. Satheesan, the face of the Congress in this election, is blunt: "The government spent crores from the exchequer to support his PR. Wherever you look, you see his face—on public transport buses, roadside hoardings, on TV, on newspaper jackets... His omnipresent cutouts are making us wonder whether we are living in Kerala. It reminds me of the infamous 'India Shining' campaign. Such campaigns are counterproductive."

A. Suresh, former CPI(M) leader who left the party and is now contesting under the Congress symbol from Malappuzha, says, "The party has become stronger under Pinarayi, but it has also become narrower."

Pinarayi Vijayan's decade in power has undeniably reshaped Kerala. But it has also raised fundamental questions about the cost of that success. And so the story circles back to Pinarayi village. To Parappram. To the modest spaces where Kerala's Communist movement once took shape through quiet conversations and collective imagination. ■

Will Kerala endorse a model of governance always opposed by the Left, one that looks more and more like the centralised structures under Narendra Modi?



Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan with party workers at a roadshow in Kannur

Karnataka Jnana Bhandar Manuscripts & Digitisation Bill, 2026

RECLAIMING THE WRITTEN SOUL OF A CIVILISATION

How Karnataka's landmark legislation will rescue centuries of knowledge from obscurity — and place it, for the first time, in the hands of every citizen.

Somewhere in Karnataka today, a manuscript rests in the quiet darkness of a wooden chest. Its palm leaves, inscribed by a scholar perhaps eight hundred years ago, carry verses on medicine, mathematics, devotion, or statecraft — knowledge painstakingly recorded when ink on leaf was the only way to pass wisdom from one generation to the next. The chest has not been opened in years.

The family that keeps it does so with reverence, but without the means to preserve what lies inside. The leaves, fragile with age, are slowly yielding to moisture, pests, and time. If nothing is done, that knowledge will vanish — not with drama, but with the quiet finality of dust.

It is precisely to interrupt this slow disappearance that the Karnataka Legislative Assembly, in its Ninth Session of the Sixteenth Assembly, passed the Karnataka Jnana Bhandar Manuscripts and Digitisation Bill, 2026. In doing so, Karnataka has taken a step of extraordinary cultural significance — not merely preserving artefacts but actively legislating the survival of civilisational memory.

A FIRST-OF-ITS-KIND LAW

When Minister H. K. Patil rose in the Assembly to explain the intent behind the Bill, he described a situation both urgent and deeply human. Across the state, countless manuscripts lie with private individuals, institutions, and families — preserved with devotion, but in many homes neither opened nor read.

The knowledge they contain spans religion, medicine, science, history, and philosophy, recorded in Sanskrit, Kannada, Prakrit, Pali, Tamil, Telugu, Arabic, Persian, Modi, Sharada, and other scripts. Some are handwritten on paper. Others are inscribed on palm leaves, birch bark, cloth, copper plates, and stone. Together, they constitute an archive of human thought that no library catalogue has ever fully captured.

The Bill is, in the Minister's own words, a first of its kind. For the first time in the state's history, a legal framework will require every person or institution in possession of manuscripts



Photo: Gettyimages

to self-declare those holdings to the government — irrespective of the condition of the manuscript — within one year of the Act's commencement.

This is not a fiction. It is an act of collective acknowledgement: that what was written by scholars of Karnataka belongs, in some essential sense, to all of Karnataka.

THE AUTHORITY THAT WILL GUARD KARNATAKA'S KNOWLEDGE

At the heart of the legislation is the Karnataka Manuscripts Authority — a statutory body corporate with perpetual succession and a common seal, established by the State Government through notification.

The Authority is constitutionally broad in its membership. It will be chaired by the Minister in-charge of

Archaeology and draw together the Secretaries of Tourism, Finance, and Higher Education; the Vice-Chancellor of Hampi Kannada University; the Director of the Oriental Research Institute, Mysuru; and the Commissioner of the Department of Archaeology, Museums and Heritage. Complementing these official voices are three eminent scholars in Indology, Kannada literature, or manuscriptology within Karnataka, and of manuscripts that originated in or relate to Karnataka but are held abroad.

The composition is a deliberate statement: that manuscripts demand not only bureaucratic stewardship but scholarly intelligence and community trust. The Authority's mandate is sweeping. It will conduct a comprehensive survey of manuscripts in both public and private custody within Karnataka, and of manuscripts that originated in or relate to Karnataka but are held abroad.

It will prepare and maintain a State Register of Manuscripts — a digital and physical record of the location, ownership, physical condition, script, language, subject matter, and access conditions of every known manuscript

"These manuscripts must be protected by the government. We must preserve this repository of knowledge."

H. K. Patil, Minister for Law, Tourism & Parliamentary Affairs

in the state.

It will promote conservation — both preventive and curative — alongside digitisation, critical editing, translation, and publication. It will establish or recognise Manuscript Conservation Centres and Resource Centres. And it will frame guidelines for access, reproduction, and commercial use, while protecting the intellectual property rights of traditional custodians.

The Authority is also charged with preventing illicit trafficking of manuscripts and facilitating the repatriation of Karnataka manuscripts

held abroad — a provision that speaks to the long, painful history of cultural assets finding their way out of the subcontinent through colonial-era expropriation or clandestine trade.

THE MISSION: FIVE LAKH FOLIOS A YEAR

The Bill does not stop at creating an authority and issuing mandates. It establishes a time-bound operational programme: the Karnataka Manuscript Conservation and Digitisation Mission. Under this Mission, the Authority is required to achieve the high-resolution digitisation of at least five lakh folios every year.

It is a target that signals political seriousness. Announcing a Mission with a numerical commitment is, in the landscape of cultural policy, comparatively rare — and it reflects the urgency that the government has attached to this legislation.

What does digitisation actually involve, for a palm leaf that may have lain undisturbed for centuries? Experts who have worked in the field describe a careful and technically demanding process. Manuscripts retrieved from families are first subjected to de-acidification and fumigation — procedures that must be carried out with precision, since overdoing them can cause as much destruction as neglect.

The material is then converted into a form suitable for digitisation, using specialised techniques and archival-grade materials to stabilise fragile paper and inks. Only then does the high-resolution scanning take place, capturing not just the text but the texture, condition, and materiality of the original document.

The digitised manuscripts that enter the public domain will be made freely available on a dedicated portal — the Karnataka Jnana Bhandara — accessible to any citizen with an internet connection.

Where an owner has imposed justified restrictions for religious or privacy reasons, access will remain limited; but the presumption of the law is openness. The idea that a student in Bidar or a researcher in Mangaluru should be able to call up a twelfth-century text on traditional medicine from the comfort of a smartphone is no longer speculative. It is, with this legislation, becoming state policy.

Karnataka Jnana Bhandara — the state's dedicated manuscript portal — will offer free public access to digitised manuscripts in the public domain, making centuries of knowledge available to every citizen for the first time.

- 5 Lakh Folios to be digitised annually under the Mission
- 1 Year Deadline for mandatory self-declaration by manuscript holders
- 10+ Scripts and languages covered under the Bill's definition

OWNERS REMAIN OWNERS

A critical aspect of the Bill — one that the government has been at pains to communicate — is that mandatory reporting does not mean mandatory surrender. After conservation and digitisation, manuscripts will be returned to their owners. A token of appreciation, in the form of a certificate acknowledging ownership, will also be provided.

If an owner wishes, under any circumstances, to cede the manuscript to the government, that option is available — but it is emphatically a choice, not a requirement. Where owners do not wish the content of their manuscripts to be made public, that wish will be respected: the manuscript will remain private.

This assurance matters deeply in a landscape where families and religious institutions have, for generations, been the quiet custodians of texts that the state barely knew existed. The Bill asks them to step forward — not by taking their inheritance away, but by inviting them into a larger, publicly supported project of preservation.

ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH LAW

The legislation also carries teeth. Any person who wilfully damages, destroys, or exports a manuscript declared as a Karnataka Heritage Manuscript without the prior written permission of the Authority faces imprisonment of up to three years, a fine of up to five lakh rupees, or both.

The same penalties apply to persons who fail to comply with the mandatory

reporting requirement within the stipulated one-year period. These provisions are not punitive in spirit — they are protective, designed to create a legal environment in which the destruction or trafficking of manuscripts carries genuine consequences.

Funding for the Authority and its Mission will come through the Karnataka Manuscripts Fund — a non-lapsable fund supported by grants from the State Government, schemes of the Central Government, corporate social responsibility contributions, and public donations. The Bill's financial memorandum notes that no extra expenditure is involved in the proposed legislative measure, a reflection of the government's intention to finance the Mission through the Fund's own accumulated resources rather than fresh budgetary allocation.

EDUCATION, REPATRIATION, AND THE SOLIGA QUESTION

The Authority's mandate extends into the classroom as well. The Bill specifically tasks it with integrating manuscript knowledge into school and university curricula — a recognition that conservation without comprehension is incomplete.

Karnataka's manuscripts are not museum pieces to be admired from a distance; they are living intellectual heritage that belongs in the pedagogical mainstream.

The debate in the Assembly surfaced another dimension worth noting. BJP Member of the Legislative Assembly S. Suresh Kumar, while supporting the Bill, raised the question of traditional knowledge systems that exist outside written manuscripts — such as those held by the Soliga community, Karnataka's tribal forest dwellers whose understanding of ecology, medicine, and the natural world has been transmitted orally across generations.

"This is a very good and necessary Bill," he said, "however, there are traditional knowledge systems like those of the Soliga community. Such knowledge may be lost over time." The observation is a reminder that the written manuscript, however precious, is only one strand of Karnataka's epistemic heritage — and that the state's commitment to preservation must eventually reckon with oral traditions as well.

PRESERVATION IS CIVILISATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

There is a phrase the Minister used in the Assembly that deserves to be lingered over. Describing manuscripts preserved in homes but left unopened and unread, he said they were kept with devotion — but that devotion alone was not enough to prevent their slow disappearance. Devotion without infrastructure is love without means.

The Karnataka Jnana Bhandar Manuscripts and Digitisation Bill, 2026 is, in essence, the government's commitment to providing that infrastructure: the legal framework, the institutional architecture, the financial mechanism, and the technological ambition to match the devotion that private custodians have shown for centuries.

When the Bill was passed by the House, it marked a moment that will be recorded — fittingly — in the annals of Karnataka's legislative history. The manuscripts that now lie undisturbed in chests and temple storerooms across the state are not yet safe. But for the first time, the law is on their side.



Photo: Gettyimages

The great Indian graduate lottery

Competitive examinations for government jobs have become a gigantic waiting room for India's qualified unemployed, writes **Ajit Ranade**

Imagine spending the best years of your life, from age 22 to 29, in a waiting room. You are educated, ambitious and capable. But the job that you are waiting for has odds worse than a lottery. So, you study harder, make an attempt once more, and wait again. Meanwhile, your peers elsewhere are earning, saving, climbing career ladders, getting married, starting families. You are doing none of that. You are preparing for the next exam.

This is the lived reality for an estimated 11 million young graduates in India today. The fifth edition of the 'State of Working India 2026' report published in March by Azim Premji University reveals a startling statistic: 67 per cent of all unemployed youth aged 20-29 are graduates. That's 1.1 crore people.

In 2004, graduates constituted just 32 per cent of the unemployed youth cohort. Their share in the youth population has risen from 10 per cent to 28 per cent over two decades. But employment has not kept pace. Between 2004 and 2023, India produced roughly 50 lakh graduates every year. Of them, only 28 lakh graduates found any employment annually, and a mere 17 lakh entered salaried work. The arithmetic of national waste is criminal.

The overall unemployment rate among all graduates in the same age group runs as high as 33 per cent. Yet this same rate drops to below 4 per cent after age 30. Something happens around age 30 to dissolve what had been an acute crisis just years earlier. What happens is not eventually—it's resignation.

Young men eventually succumb to economic pressure, marriage obligations or parental urgency and get whatever work is available, however dead-end. Young women, by contrast, often exit the labour force altogether, retreating into unpaid domestic care work. The data shows this unambiguously: male unemployment falls because men find a job, whatever it might be; female unemployment falls because women stop looking.

Why do millions of graduates spend their prime in this limbo? The answer lies in a rational calculation, which is ultimately socially ruinous. The private sector offers starting salaries that have barely moved in two decades. In 2011, a young male graduate earned about Rs 21,800 a month. By 2023, this figure had fallen to Rs 19,573. That is a drastic drop, and when adjusted for inflation, it is disastrous. No wonder those educated youths do not mind missing out on joining the private sector treadmill of entry-level jobs.

Government jobs are a different story. A government driver may earn four times



Young aspirants at a big job fair. Only 8.25% of graduates find roles aligned with their qualifications

his private sector counterpart. A government clerk enjoys health cover, a pension, iron-clad job security and social prestige. To wait for the aspiring graduate chooses to wait.

This wait takes a specific and peculiar form: the endless preparation for competitive government examinations. A study by Harvard alumnus Kunal Mangal of data released by the Tamil Nadu Public

Service Commission (TNPSC) found that a single TNPSC Group 4 recruitment in 2018-19 drew 13.7 million applicants, nearly four times the next largest recruiter in the state.

About 80 per cent of all unemployed individuals in Tamil Nadu were simultaneously preparing for a TNPSC exam. When the state imposed a partial hiring freeze between 2001 and 2006, vacancies fell by 86 per cent, but exam applications actually rose by 7 per cent. Preparation for a government job was crowding out private sector employment. This pattern is not peculiar to Tamil Nadu. It is seen across states. The government exam has become India's great waiting room.

The private sector, meanwhile, offers a treadmill at the entry level, not a career. The Economic Survey 2024-25 noted that only 8.25 per cent of graduates work in roles aligned with their qualifications. Nearly half are in elementary or semi-skilled work—jobs that require a degree for eligibility but deliver no skill development, no learning by doing, no career progression. Between 2012 and 2019, India's GDP grew at 6.7 per cent annually while employment grew at 0.1 per cent. Of 83 million jobs added between 2021-22 and

2023-24, nearly half were in agriculture. Labour laws, rather than protecting workers, encouraged employers to substitute permanent employees with casual and contract labour.

The gender dimensions of this crisis deserve special attention. For young women, the problem is not just unemployment but erasure. PLFS (Periodic Labour Force Survey) data confirm that educated women in their early 20s report high unemployment, signalling a genuine desire to work. But by their late 20s, instead of finding employment, they exit the labour force. Marriage expectations and the assumption that domestic care falls entirely on women extinguish participation.

The waste is particularly stark in medicine: women constitute 51 per cent of each incoming medical batch, yet only 17 per cent of practising doctors are women. In rural areas, just 6 per cent. Half the talent, trained at taxpayer expense, simply disappears. These non-practising women doctors represent a big loss to society.

Now consider the perverse policy feedback loop. Governments, sympathetic to the plight of unemployed graduates, subsidised with cash transfer schemes and subsidised coaching for competitive exams.

A recent study throws up a startling statistic: 67 per cent, or 1.1 crore, unemployed youth aged 20-29 are graduates

The smallest take the hardest hit

The war in West Asia and the severe LPG shortage has dealt MSMEs another fatal blow, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

India's migrant workers are once again jobless, moneyless and homeless as thousands wind their way back to their home states. Surat, one of India's key textile manufacturing hubs, saw over one lakh workers leaving at one go. Why? Because gas prices spiking to Rs 500 per kg made it impossible for them to cook. Both men and women were seen crowding Udhna railway station trying to find a berth back to Uttar Pradesh, Odisha and Bihar.

With over three lakh workers needed to run the power looms, factory owners were forced to reduce working hours and close their units for two days a week to control production and cost overruns. Rising yarn prices have been followed by a fall in demand as consignments meant for export are lying at ports or in transit.

A severe LPG shortage, both commercial and domestic, caused by the West Asia war, has disrupted industries, hotels and restaurants, foundries and other MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises).

With the government doing nothing to allay fears, a sense of panic has spread, eerily similar to scenes witnessed during Covid.

Rakhi Saxena, 53, a migrant from Uttar Pradesh who works as domestic help in south Delhi's Sangam Vihar, has decided to pack her bags and go home. "A 19 kg cylinder is selling in the black market for Rs 5,000. Who can afford it? There are rumours of a lockdown for the next seven-eight months. Better to go home, at least there we can cook on firewood."

In north Delhi's Azad Market, Chandni Chowk, Sadar Bazaar and Lajpat Nagar, owners have seen a dip in migrant workers. Several RWAs (residents' welfare associations) are complaining about the exodus of domestic help and workers.

"Workers are going home and fresh labourers aren't coming in. Whatever government assurances may be, with domestic LPG cylinders going at Rs 4,000 in the black market, the working class is facing a great deal of difficulty," said

Mohd. Sayeed Khan, RWA president of Beri Wala Bagh.

With the government prioritising household, commercial users are receiving only about 20 per cent of their usual LPG supply. Restaurants and hotels in several states warn of curtailed menus. Those living in hostels cannot rely on their food suppliers.

The foundry sector in Coimbatore district faces the threat of shutdown, being dependent on LPG for core baking, ladle preheating and heat treatment processes. When one segment is hit, a whole range of downstream industries such as automotive, pumps, compressors, valves, and general engineering sectors also get hit.

In the last one month, the cost of carbides, industrial oils, lubricants, packing materials and petroleum-based chemicals such as binders, coatings and resins have all become costlier due to supply constraints, making production increasingly unviable for MSMEs.

The crisis is also impacting export commitments. Production delays are making it difficult to meet delivery schedules, forcing companies to consider air freight at significantly higher costs. Increased air fares have made business travel non-affordable, affecting customer engagement and market development.

The industry has urged the government to ensure uninterrupted LPG supply for industrial use, stabilise petroleum-based input availability, support transition to alternative fuels such as PNG and address labour and supply chain challenges.

Despite MSMEs contributing nearly 30 per cent to the GDP, accounting for 45 per cent of exports, and providing employment to 240 million people, they have largely operated without the support of the government.

Minister for MSMEs Jitan Ram Manjhi reported in a written reply to the Lok Sabha that 49,342 of one million registered

MSMEs have closed, resulting in the loss of 317,641 jobs during the last decade. Those still open have taken a further decline in the last four weeks.

There are 9.6 million MSMEs located in UP alone. Dinesh Goyal, national president of the Indian Industries Association, has emphasised that the recent hike in the prices of aluminium, ferrous and non-ferrous metals needs to be regulated as this affects machinery and building material manufacturing industries. Goyal has also spoken out on the rising costs of international logistics due to the non-availability of marine insurance. Cancellation of supply orders by domestic buyers and imposition of penalties for delayed supplies has made a bad situation worse.

K.E. Raghunathan, National President of the Association of Indian Entrepreneurs, emphasises a lack of foresight. "The government had ample time to put an emergency plan in place to assist MSMEs, given that 80 per cent of our LPG comes through the Strait of Hormuz. Where is the support system? Despite being fully aware of how vulnerable the majority of MSMEs are, nothing was done to help them tide over this crisis." Payment dislocation, container shortage, slump in sales are only some of the issues he listed.

Renowned economist Prof. Arun Kumar points out that most micro units that employ an average of 1.7 people—effectively making them single operators—have been the hardest hit, "with no capacity to bear the price increase." If prices continue to rise and production continues to decline, it will result in stagflation and recession, warns Prof. Kumar.

Despite the government announcing a Rs 100 crore economic stabilisation package to keep the deficit in check, many key goods remain in short supply. A shortage of sulphuric acid—needed to make sugar—led to prices quadrupling from Rs 15,000 per tonne to Rs 60,000 per tonne. Prices of polyester, polymer and tonne—used in automotive and defence—have also risen sharply.

Texas-based energy expert Dr Anas Alhaji said in the course of a media interview that while China has 1.4 billion barrels of crude oil in reserve, India has only 100 million barrels. It will need to increase its reserves to a minimum of 400 million barrels, said Alhaji, and fast.

India is presently spending an additional \$200 million per month on the oil it has been "allowed" to import from Russia. This at three times the discounted price it was getting before it bent to US diktat.

Raghunathan believes that successive shocks from global tariff wars, geopolitical



Exodus from Surat The LPG crisis has again forced migrant workers to go back home

conflicts, raw material disruption and domestic policy uncertainties are pushing millions of small businesses to the brink. This is no longer a cyclical slowdown. It reflects a deep structural stress.

"Yet our policy response remains fragmented and inadequate. Without immediate and decisive intervention, the consequences will be severe—widespread closures, job losses and long-term damage to India's entrepreneurial ecosystem."

Raghunathan's course-correction entails the immediate announcement of a five-year road map on tariffs, trade and taxation. "The government needs to set up an MSME War and Tariff Mitigation Fund and also provide direct financial support for units impacted by global disruptions."

Other measures would be to reintroduce emergency credit support, rationalise duties and create mechanisms for assured and affordable supply of critical inputs. A period of 30 days for repaying government dues and restructuring or deferring EMI payments without asset classification downgrade is suggested.

"MSMEs are not seeking handholding—they are seeking survival," he added.

Prof. Arun Kumar believes that even if the war stops, it will take six to seven months for the economic situation to improve. The problem is that India has not focused adequately on reversing import dependence. Five decades ago, India's dependence on oil imports was to the tune of 30 per cent; in early 2026 that reached a record high of 88.6 per cent. ■

MSMEs contribute ~30% of GDP, 45% of exports and provide employment to 240 million people. Yet they receive minimal support from the government

AJIT RANADE is a noted economist
Courtesy: The Billion Press

Assam Wants Change - Rising Public Discontent Against the Himanta Government



Photo: Gettyimages

A strong undercurrent of dissatisfaction is increasingly visible across Assam as the state heads toward another crucial electoral battle. What was once projected as a period of decisive governance is now being questioned by large sections of the population, who feel that key decisions of the present government have deepened divisions rather than delivering inclusive development. From rural belts to urban centres, conversations are increasingly revolving around issues of fairness, transparency, and the direction in which the state is headed.

At the heart of this growing discontent lies the controversial eviction drives carried out across several districts. The state government has consistently maintained that these drives are aimed at reclaiming government land and curbing illegal

encroachments. However, the scale, timing, and execution of these operations have triggered intense criticism from opposition parties, civil society groups, and affected communities.

Thousands of families, many of them economically vulnerable, have reportedly been displaced in these drives. In riverine and char areas, where communities already face challenges such as erosion and lack of infrastructure, the impact has been particularly severe. For many, eviction has not just meant losing land, but also their homes, livelihoods, and access to essential services like education and healthcare.

Critics argue that the issue is not merely about reclaiming land but about the manner in which the policy has been implemented. Allegations of selective targeting and lack of due

process have surfaced repeatedly, raising concerns about whether the actions are guided by administrative necessity or political considerations. The absence of adequate rehabilitation measures has further compounded the problem, leaving displaced families in uncertain and often precarious conditions.

Assam Congress leaders have been

vocal in their criticism, asserting that eviction as a policy must be humane and rooted in constitutional safeguards. They point out that while land regulation is necessary, it cannot be pursued at the cost of human dignity. "Eviction cannot become a spectacle. Governance must be about justice, not optics," has been a recurring sentiment expressed by state Congress leadership, including Gaurav Gogoi.

Adding another layer to the controversy are claims that significant parcels of land have been transferred to corporate entities in the name of development. Reports suggesting that over 40,000 bighas of land have been allocated for industrial or commercial projects have raised questions about the government's priorities. Opposition leaders argue that while the government cites land scarcity to justify evictions, it appears willing to

make large-scale allocations to private players, creating a perception of double standards.

The debate has now evolved into a broader discussion on identity, rights, and the future of Assam's diverse communities. Civil society organisations have flagged the social and humanitarian consequences of these policies, warning that they risk deepening fault lines in an already sensitive socio-political landscape.

On its part, the government led by Himanta Biswa Sarma has defended its actions, stating that all measures are within legal frameworks and necessary for the state's development. It has emphasised the need to enforce law and order while pursuing infrastructure and investment-led growth.

However, political observers note that perception often plays a decisive role in elections. The growing belief

that governance decisions are driven more by optics than by long-term planning could significantly influence voter behaviour, particularly in rural and marginalised communities.

The Congress and its allies are attempting to channel this sentiment into a broader narrative of change. They are positioning themselves as advocates of inclusive development, promising policies that balance growth with social justice. Their emphasis is on ensuring that any eviction policy is accompanied by proper rehabilitation, legal safeguards, and transparency.

As Assam approaches the polls, a fundamental question is gaining prominence: can development be considered meaningful if it excludes or displaces those it is meant to uplift? For many voters, the answer to this question may well determine their choice at the ballot box.

The ST Status Debate - Between Assurances and Uncertainty



Photo: Gettyimages

Granting ST status involves multiple layers of scrutiny, including socio-economic studies, legal validation, and ultimately, approval by Parliament. Congress has reiterated that their should be fair approach in initiating and sustaining this process.

The demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status by several communities in Assam has once again emerged as a defining political issue, reflecting both long-standing aspirations and the complexities of policy-making in a diverse society. Despite decades of discussions, committee reports, and political assurances, the issue remains unresolved, leading to frustration and growing mistrust among stakeholders.

Communities such as the Chutia, Koch-Rajbongshi, Matak, Moran, Tai Ahom, and Tea Tribes have consistently argued that they meet the socio-economic and historical criteria required for ST recognition. For them, the demand is not merely symbolic but deeply linked to access to opportunities in education, employment, and political representation.

Over the years, successive governments have acknowledged these demands, often promising to address them through structured processes. However, progress has been slow and inconsistent. Under the current government, expectations were particularly high, given repeated assurances that a resolution would be pursued actively.

Instead, the issue has remained in a state of limbo. While committees have been formed and discussions held, there has been little visible movement toward a final decision. This perceived inaction has led to protests and renewed mobilisation by community organisations, who feel that their concerns are once again being sidelined.

One of the key challenges in resolving the issue is the need to balance competing interests. Existing Scheduled Tribe communities have expressed concerns that expanding the list could dilute the benefits they currently receive. This has made consensus-building a complex and sensitive task, requiring careful consultation and transparent dialogue.

Critics argue that the government has failed to create a credible and inclusive mechanism to address these concerns. The absence of a clear roadmap has only added to the uncertainty, with different stakeholders expressing divergent views on how the issue should be resolved.

Statements suggesting that ST status would not be granted before elections have further intensified the debate. Many community leaders interpreted this as a signal that the

issue is being deferred rather than addressed, leading to a sense of disillusionment.

Granting ST status involves multiple layers of scrutiny, including socio-economic studies, legal validation, and ultimately, approval by Parliament. Congress has reiterated that their should be fair approach in initiating and sustaining this process.

For the communities involved, the delay has tangible consequences. Without ST recognition, they continue to face limitations in accessing reservation benefits, which can impact their socio-economic mobility. For younger generations, in particular, the lack of clarity affects educational and employment prospects.

The Congress has sought to present itself as a facilitator of dialogue and consensus. It has proposed a structured, time-bound mechanism involving legal experts, demographers, and representatives from all concerned communities. The emphasis is on creating a process that is transparent, inclusive, and capable of withstanding legal scrutiny.

Congress leaders argue that the issue cannot be resolved through ad hoc announcements or electoral promises. Instead, it requires sustained

engagement and a commitment to balancing equity with practicality. "A solution must be fair, legally sound, and acceptable to all stakeholders," has been a consistent position articulated by party leadership.

Meanwhile, the government continues to highlight the complexities involved, maintaining that efforts are ongoing. Yet, for many in Assam, patience is running out. The repeated cycle of promises and delays has eroded trust, making the issue a critical test of political credibility.

As elections draw closer, the ST status debate is likely to remain at the forefront of public discourse. Voters will be evaluating not just the promises being made, but also the sincerity and clarity of the proposed solutions. In a state where identity and opportunity are deeply intertwined, the outcome of this debate could have far-reaching implications.

The Congress has sought to present itself as a facilitator of dialogue and consensus. It has proposed a structured, time-bound mechanism involving legal experts, demographers, and representatives from all concerned communities.

Governance at the Crossroads - Education, Corruption and Regional Imbalance

While identity politics and land-related issues dominate headlines, the Assam election is also shaping up as a referendum on governance. Concerns related to education, corruption, and regional imbalance are increasingly influencing public opinion, particularly among youth, middle-class voters, and rural communities.

The education sector has emerged as a major area of concern. Reports of government schools being closed, merged, or facing resource shortages have triggered anxiety among parents and educators. In many rural areas, government schools are the primary if not the only accessible institutions for children. Any disruption in their functioning directly affects enrolment, attendance, and overall learning outcomes.

Congress leaders argue that instead of strengthening public education, the current approach has weakened it. They contend that reduced investment in infrastructure, teacher shortages, and administrative challenges have collectively impacted the quality of education. The long-term implications of such trends, they warn, could be significant, affecting the state's human capital and economic prospects.

"Young people need opportunities, and education is the foundation of those opportunities," has been a recurring theme in Congress messaging. Leaders like Gaurav Gogoi have emphasised the need for a renewed focus on public education, including better infrastructure, teacher recruitment, and modernised curricula.

Corruption is another issue that continues to resonate with voters. The Congress has repeatedly raised questions about transparency and accountability, accusing the ruling establishment of failing to uphold clean governance standards. Allegations of irregularities and selective action have been used to argue that the system lacks consistency and fairness.

The political narrative has also been shaped by the movement of leaders across party lines. Critics often point out that several individuals who were once part of the Congress are now in influential positions within the BJP-led government. This has led to questions about ideological consistency and whether the political landscape represents genuine change or merely a reconfiguration of existing power structures.

Congress leaders have framed the election as a choice between two contrasting visions. One, they argue, is rooted in the inclusive and welfare-oriented approach associated with former Chief Minister Tarun

Gogoi. The other, they claim, is characterised by centralisation, polarisation, and a focus on headline-driven governance.

Regional imbalance is another critical issue. While the government has highlighted infrastructure projects and urban development initiatives, particularly in and around Guwahati, many other regions feel left behind. Districts in Upper Assam, Barak Valley, and remote areas continue to demand greater attention in terms of investment, connectivity, and public services.

This perceived imbalance has led to calls for decentralised development, where resources and opportunities are distributed more equitably. Local communities are increasingly vocal about the need for policies that reflect their specific needs rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.

The government, led by Himanta Biswa Sarma, has been putting a false narrative claiming improvements in infrastructure, investment inflows, and administrative efficiency but Congress has exposed these false claims as these achievements are often overstated and do not fully address ground realities. Congress argues that development must be measured not just by large projects but by improvements in everyday life better schools, accessible healthcare, job opportunities, and social harmony.

As the campaign gathers momentum, the Congress and its allies are presenting themselves as a credible alternative. Their pitch revolves around corruption-free governance, inclusive policies, and balanced regional development. They are seeking to tap into what they describe as a growing desire for change among the electorate.

The feeling of ousting the BJP-led government resonates strongly with voters as they prefer course correction over continuity. The change chosen by voters of Assam will not only determine the political future of the state but also shape its developmental trajectory in the years to come.



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From West Asia Turmoil to Assam's Doorstep, Economic Mismanagement

Exposes BJP's Governance Failures

The deepening crisis in West Asia is no longer a distant geopolitical concern it is now directly impacting India's economy and, more importantly, the daily lives of ordinary citizens. The Congress party has sharply raised the issue of the Centre's alleged mismanagement of the situation, warning that the ripple effects are being felt across states like Assam, where rising prices, fuel shortages, and economic distress are becoming increasingly visible. At the heart of this crisis is Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi, who has cautioned that the current trajectory points towards a severe cost-of-living crisis.

Mr Gandhi has issued a stark warning about the weakening of the rupee and the surge in industrial fuel prices, linking these developments directly to global instability and domestic policy failure. "The rupee weakening towards 100 against the dollar and the sharp rise in industrial fuel prices are not just statistics, but clear signs of coming inflation," Mr Gandhi said, underlining the seriousness of the situation. His remarks come at a time when tensions in West Asia have disrupted global supply chains, particularly affecting crude oil availability and pricing critical factors for an import-dependent country like India.

One of the most pressing concerns being flagged by Congress is the emerging shortage of LPG, which has significant implications for transportation, industry, and household consumption. With supply disruptions and rising import costs, states like Assam are witnessing a steady increase in fuel prices, which in turn is pushing up the cost of essential commodities. For a state heavily reliant on road transport for goods movement, even marginal increases in fuel costs have a cascading effect on food prices and everyday expenses.

Assam, already grappling with economic vulnerabilities, is facing a particularly acute impact. Tea garden workers, small traders, and daily wage earners are among the most affected, as their incomes remain stagnant while expenses continue to



Photo: Gettyimages

rise. Reports from across the state indicate that the prices of essential items such as rice, pulses, edible oil, and vegetables have seen noticeable increases in recent months. For many households, managing monthly budgets is becoming an uphill task.

Mr Gandhi has highlighted the challenges of this crisis, stating, "Production and transport will become expensive, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) will be hit the hardest, prices of everyday goods will increase, and Foreign Institutional Investors (FII) money will exit faster, putting pressure on the stock market." His warning underscores the interconnected nature of the economy, where global shocks, if not managed effectively, can trigger widespread domestic distress.

The MSME sector in Assam, which plays a crucial role in employment generation, is already under strain. Rising input costs, especially fuel and raw materials, are squeezing profit margins and forcing many small businesses to either scale down operations or pass on the burden to consumers. This has a direct impact on employment, with fewer opportunities available for the state's youth a key electoral

demographic. Equally concerning is the situation in rural Assam, where farmers are facing higher costs for irrigation, transportation, and fertilisers. With agricultural incomes already under pressure, the additional burden of rising expenses is eroding profitability and pushing many into financial uncertainty. The Congress has argued that this reflects a failure of both central and state governments to anticipate and mitigate the impact of global crises.

Targeting the BJP-led governments, Congress has accused them of lacking a coherent strategy to deal with the unfolding economic challenges. Mr Gandhi did not mince words when he said, "The government has neither direction nor strategy only rhetoric. The question is not what the government is saying, but what is left on your plate." This sharp critique resonates strongly in Assam, where the BJP government has often highlighted development achievements but is now facing questions over its handling of inflation and economic distress.

Critics argue that the state government has failed to provide adequate relief measures to cushion the impact on vulnerable sections. Despite rising prices, there has been

limited intervention in terms of subsidies, price controls, or targeted welfare schemes. This perceived inaction is becoming a major political issue in the run-up to the Assembly elections, with Congress positioning itself as the voice of the common people.

Another dimension of the crisis is the potential increase in fuel prices after the elections, a concern explicitly raised by Mr Gandhi. "It is only a matter of time after elections, when petrol and diesel prices will also be increased," he warned. Such a move, if it materialises, could further exacerbate the financial strain on households already struggling with high living costs.

Economists have pointed out that a depreciating rupee makes imports, especially crude oil, more expensive, thereby fuelling inflation. In a state like Assam, where transportation costs significantly influence the price of goods, this creates a vicious cycle of rising expenses. The impact is not limited to urban areas; rural communities, too, are feeling the pinch as the cost of essential services and commodities rises.

The Congress has sought to draw a clear link between global instability, central policy failures, and state-level governance issues. By highlighting the real-life impact on people in the political narrative aims to shift the Assam narrative towards bread-and-butter issues that directly affect voters.

As the state heads towards crucial elections, the people of Assam is not just about political promises, but about economic realities. The West Asia crisis may have originated far from India's borders, but its consequences are being felt in every household. In this context, the Congress's critique raises a fundamental issue: whether the current governments both at the Centre and in the state have the vision and capability to navigate such challenges effectively. For many in Assam, daily lives are getting tough with rising prices, shrinking incomes, and an uncertain future. Congress led government is ready to make a difference in their lives.

Healthcare System Under Pressure Claims vs Ground Reality in Assam

Assam's healthcare system today stands at a critical juncture, where government claims of improvement are increasingly being questioned by ground realities. Despite announcements of infrastructure expansion and policy interventions, the lived experience of people especially in rural and remote areas tells a very different story.

Across districts, government hospitals continue to struggle with shortages of doctors, nurses, essential medicines, and diagnostic facilities. In many primary health centres (PHCs), and community health centres (CHCs), patients are forced to travel long distances even for basic treatment. The gap between urban and rural healthcare remains stark, with rural areas lagging significantly.

Data reveals the seriousness of the situation. Assam continues to have one of the highest maternal mortality ratios (MMR) in the country, with around 195 deaths per 100,000 live births nearly double the national average. Infant mortality and child health indicators also remain concerning, reflecting gaps in both preventive and curative care systems.

The shortage of healthcare personnel is a major concern. Many rural health centres operate without specialist doctors, while diagnostic services such as blood tests, ultrasound, and emergency care remain inaccessible. This forces patients to depend on private healthcare, increasing out-of-pocket expenditure and pushing vulnerable families into debt.

The Covid-19 pandemic had exposed

these structural weaknesses, from oxygen shortages to inadequate hospital beds and poor emergency preparedness. However, Congress leaders argue that the lessons from the pandemic have not translated into long-term healthcare planning. Instead of strengthening district-level healthcare systems, the focus has remained on announcements rather than execution.

Maternal and child health remains a key concern. High levels of anaemia among women and children, inadequate antenatal care, and delayed referrals continue to contribute to poor outcomes. The state's own data shows that a significant percentage of children suffer from malnutrition and underweight conditions, pointing to deeper public health challenges.

The Congress has sharply criticised the BJP-led government for failing to prioritise healthcare as a basic right. It argues that despite years of governance, the state has not been able to build a resilient, accessible, and affordable healthcare system. As part of its roadmap, Congress has promised a comprehensive overhaul of the healthcare sector. This includes strengthening district hospitals, ensuring the availability of doctors and medicines at the grassroots level, expanding free treatment schemes, and improving maternal and child health services.

The central question for voters is clear: can a system under visible strain deliver quality healthcare to every citizen, or is a structural reset needed to truly make healthcare accessible and equitable?



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Tea Garden Communities

A Continuing Crisis of Health and Education

The tea garden communities of Assam, which form the backbone of the state's globally renowned tea industry, continue to face a deep and education. Despite decades of policy promises and targeted welfare schemes, the condition of these communities remains alarming, exposing systemic neglect.

Health indicators among tea garden workers are among the worst in the state. Studies show that anaemia is widespread, with some estimates suggesting that nearly 95% of women in these communities suffer from it. This has a direct impact on maternal health, making pregnancy and childbirth highly risky. Maternal mortality is disproportionately high in tea garden areas. Research indicates that a significant share of maternal deaths in Assam occurs among tea garden workers, driven by poor nutrition, lack of timely medical care, and inadequate healthcare access. The



Photo: Gettyimages

crisis is not limited to health alone. Education remains another major challenge. Many tea garden areas lack adequate schools, and dropout rates among children are high. Historical patterns of neglect continue to persist,

with generations of families trapped in cycles of poverty and limited access to opportunities. Access to healthcare facilities is severely constrained. Many tea estates lack functional hospitals, forcing workers to depend on distant

government facilities. Delays in accessing medical care, especially during childbirth, often prove fatal. Studies have highlighted that lack of transport and delayed referrals are key contributors to maternal deaths in these

communities. Despite multiple welfare schemes announced for tea tribes, implementation remains weak. Benefits often fail to reach the intended beneficiaries due to administrative gaps, lack of awareness, and

poor monitoring. This has led to growing dissatisfaction among tea garden workers, who feel excluded from the state's development narrative.

The Congress believes that the condition of tea garden communities is a central issue. It has proposed a focused roadmap that includes mobile health units to reach remote primary healthcare services, and dedicated maternal health programmes.

On the education front, Congress has promised residential schools for children of tea garden workers, along with targeted scholarships and skill development initiatives. Nutrition schemes aimed at addressing anaemia and child malnutrition are also a key part of the proposed intervention.

The situation in Assam's tea gardens raises concern as most vulnerable communities continue to struggle for basic healthcare and education. It is clearly the time for change.

Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra in Assam Raised the Voice for Justice

The Assam leg of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra, led by Rahul Gandhi, emerged as one of the most politically charged and people-centric phases of the nationwide campaign. As the Yatra entered Assam it carried forward its core message of Nyay—economic, social, and political justice—while sharply focusing on the ground realities and governance concerns of the state.

From Jorhat to Majuli, Lakhimpur to Barpeta, and further towards Dhubri, the Yatra witnessed an overwhelming response from people across communities—tea garden workers, farmers, students, tribal groups, and civil society organisations. The journey in Assam was not just symbolic; it became a platform for direct dialogue, where people shared their struggles and expectations from governance.

One of the central themes raised repeatedly during the Assam leg was the issue of corruption and alleged misuse of power. Addressing multiple public gatherings, Rahul Gandhi launched a direct attack on the state government, calling it “one of the most corrupt governments,” and alleging a deep nexus between political authority and select business interests. He asserted that Assam’s resources were not being utilised for its people, but were instead benefiting a handful of powerful entities.

The Yatra also brought into focus the plight of tea garden workers, who spoke about low wages, poor living conditions, and lack of basic facilities. Their testimonies highlighted the gap between official claims and ground reality. Similarly, farmers and rural communities raised concerns about



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flood devastation, soil erosion, and the absence of effective long-term solutions. In Majuli and Lakhimpur, environmentalists and local representatives emphasised the urgent need for sustainable policies to address erosion and protect livelihoods.

Another major issue that dominated the Assam chapter was social justice. Delegations from tribal communities, including the Mising and Tai Ahom groups, met Rahul Gandhi and

demanded greater political representation, protection of cultural identity, and improved access to education and economic opportunities. The demand for strengthening autonomous councils and ensuring fair participation in governance was strongly articulated.

The Yatra also highlighted concerns around the NRC process and its impact on ordinary citizens. Several delegations shared their experiences of

exclusion, legal uncertainty, and hardship. Rahul Gandhi assured them that their voices would be raised at the national level, reiterating Congress’ commitment to protecting the rights and dignity of every citizen.

Significantly, the Assam leg was marked by repeated attempts to obstruct the Yatra. From restrictions on public gatherings to preventing Rahul Gandhi from visiting the revered Bordowa Than, the state administration’s actions

became a major political flashpoint. The denial of temple entry despite prior permission led to a peaceful protest, with Rahul Gandhi and party workers sitting on the road and singing devotional songs, turning the moment into a powerful statement on freedom and democratic rights.

Further tensions were witnessed in Guwahati, where the Yatra convoy was stopped from entering the city, and Congress workers faced police action. Rahul Gandhi used these incidents to underline what he described as an “attack on democracy,” stating that attempts to silence voices of dissent would not succeed.

Throughout the journey, Rahul Gandhi consistently emphasised the five pillars of the Nyay Yatra—Yuva Nyay, Kisaan Nyay, Naari Nyay, Shramik Nyay, and Bhagidari Nyay. He reiterated that without justice in these areas, true development is impossible. His interactions with students, women, and youth reflected concerns about unemployment, rising prices, and lack of opportunities.

As the Yatra concluded its Assam it left behind a strong political message. It highlighted the disconnect between governance claims and ground realities, amplified voices of marginalised communities, and positioned the Congress as a party committed to justice, transparency, and inclusive growth.

The Assam chapter of the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra thus became a crucial moment in the larger political narrative transforming a political campaign into a people’s movement for accountability, dignity, and a more equitable future. It is time to bring the change to Assam.

The Yatra also highlighted concerns around the NRC process and its impact on ordinary citizens. Several delegations shared their experiences of exclusion, legal uncertainty, and hardship.

Development or Deal-Making? Why Assam is Questioning Corruption and Demanding Change

The BJP government in Assam has promised Assam development but only development that happened is in the net-worth of the Chief Minister and few chosen ones. A Corruption Model has been set up by the Himanta Government. As people are ready to vote for a New Assam on April 9, 2026, development claims and campaign promises by the BJP have fallen flat. People are now ready for a government with credibility. There is a deeper concern in the minds of the people that has development in Assam been guided by public interest, or has it been compromised by corruption, favouritism, and a contractor-driven ecosystem? The election is increasingly being seen as a referendum on transparency, accountability, and clean governance.



Photo: Gettyimages

a select network of contractors and politically connected entities. Roads, bridges, and urban projects are being showcased as symbols of progress, but many citizens are asking whether these projects have been executed with integrity, or inflated through cost overruns and opaque tendering processes.

The issue of corruption is not being raised in isolation it is closely linked to the question of who benefits from development. Critics argue that public funds have not always translated into public good, with concerns over inflated project costs, delays, and limited local employment generation. In several areas, infrastructure exists on paper or in announcements, but its quality and long-term impact remain questionable. This disconnect has led to a growing belief that development has become more about contracts than communities.

The controversy surrounding land allocation and eviction drives has further intensified these concerns. The government’s push to clear vast tracts of land has been presented as a step towards development and encroachment removal. However, opposition voices have alleged that such exercises often lack transparency and disproportionately affect vulnerable communities, while raising questions about whether cleared land ultimately benefits large corporate or private interests. These concerns have placed land rights, displacement, and alleged favouritism at the centre of the electoral battle.

Across the state from the tea belts of Upper Assam to the flood-affected regions of Barak Valley there is a growing perception that development has not only been uneven but also influenced by vested interests.

Rural Distress, Flood Failures Drive Assam’s Demand for Accountable Governance

The reality in rural Assam continues to expose the limitations of the current model. Interior regions still struggle with poor connectivity, weak public services, and limited access to healthcare and education. Every year, floods caused by the Brahmaputra and its tributaries devastate vast areas, yet long-term flood management solutions remain elusive.

Critics argue that despite repeated budgetary allocations, the absence of durable infrastructure and planning points to systemic inefficiencies—and possibly leakages—in implementation. Agriculture, the backbone of Assam’s economy, presents another troubling picture. Farmers continue



Photo: Gettyimages

to face irrigation shortages, inadequate storage facilities, and weak market linkages. Despite repeated announcements, the lack of robust agricultural infrastructure has fuelled suspicions that funds meant for rural development have not been effectively utilised. For many farmers, the issue is not just neglect, it is the feeling that governance has

failed to prioritise their needs over other interests.

These concerns are now shaping voter sentiment across constituencies. Issues such as land ownership, flood relief, rural distress, and alleged corruption in public works have emerged as central themes in the campaign. The last-minute announcements by the

BJP Government cannot substitute for sustained, transparent governance, and question whether these promises will translate into real change on the ground. In contrast, the Congress-led alliance has built its campaign around the promise of clean governance and accountable development. Led by Gaurav Gogoi, the alliance has positioned itself as a credible alternative that seeks to break what it describes as a nexus between political power and contractor interests. The campaign has consistently highlighted the need to restore transparency in public spending and ensure that development projects are designed to benefit local communities rather than a select few.

Congress Blueprint for Comprehensive Growth

The Congress blueprint emphasises decentralised and balanced growth, moving beyond a Guwahati-centric approach. It prioritises investment in Upper Assam, Barak Valley, and the hill districts, with a focus on strengthening rural infrastructure, improving irrigation, and building effective flood management systems. Crucially, the alliance has stressed that development must be linked with employment generation and local economic growth, ensuring that public investment directly benefits the people of Assam. Equally significant is the alliance’s focus on institutional accountability. By promising stricter oversight of public projects, transparent tendering processes, and stronger anti-corruption



Photo: Gettyimages

mechanisms, the Congress aims to rebuild public trust. The campaign has also underscored the importance of inclusive governance and social harmony, positioning itself against divisive politics and advocating for a development model that is both equitable and ethical.

The 2026 Assam Assembly election is therefore shaping up as a decisive moment. It is not merely a

political contest but a choice between two contrasting approaches one that is being questioned for opacity and alleged favouritism, and another that promises transparency and people-centric governance.

As the campaign intensifies, the mood on the ground suggests that voters are looking beyond slogans. They are demanding accountability, fairness, and a system where development is not overshadowed by allegations of corruption. The Congress-led alliance, drawing strength from this sentiment, has expressed strong confidence that Assam is ready for a new direction, one where governance is clean, development is inclusive, and public resources truly serve the people.

The 2026 Assam Assembly election is therefore shaping up as a decisive moment.

Natun Bor Axom - Congress' 5 Pratishruti for a New Assam

In a decisive political moment ahead of the Assam Assembly elections, the Congress party, led by its national president Mallikarjun Kharge, unveiled a comprehensive and people-focused manifesto titled "5 Pratishruti", laying out a clear roadmap for what it calls a "Natun Bor Axom" — a new, inclusive and progressive Assam. Released at a major public rally in Naoboicha, the manifesto reflects Congress' attempt to directly address the economic hardships, social inequalities and governance concerns that have increasingly shaped public discourse in the state.

Framed around five key guarantees, the manifesto seeks to connect with diverse sections of society with women, senior citizens, indigenous communities, and economically vulnerable families offering them tangible benefits that promise dignity, security and opportunity. At the launch, Kharge underscored the intent behind these guarantees, stating, "These are the guarantees which we will provide, I request the voters to support Congress and help us rid Assam of misrule and corruption." His remarks set the tone for a campaign that blends welfare-driven policies with a strong political critique of the current administration.

Monthly Support & ₹50,000 for Women's Empowerment

At the heart of the Congress manifesto lies a transformative vision for women's empowerment. Recognising that women often form the backbone of households yet remain financially dependent, the party has proposed a dual-benefit scheme aimed at ensuring both immediate financial support and long-term economic independence.

Under this promise, every woman in Assam will receive an unconditional monthly cash transfer directly into her bank account. In addition, a one-time financial assistance of ₹50,000 will be provided to help women start new businesses or expand existing ventures. This initiative is designed not merely as welfare support but as a catalyst for grassroots entrepreneurship, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where access to capital remains limited.

Explaining the rationale behind the scheme, Mallikarjun Kharge made a pointed distinction between Congress' approach and existing welfare models. "We are calling the cash transfer unconditional as giving to women now is conditional. To become a beneficiary, one has to be a member of the BJP, but we won't impose such conditions

and everyone will be given cash benefits," he said. This statement not only reinforces the party's emphasis on inclusivity but also positions the scheme as a universal right rather than a selective benefit.

If implemented effectively, this measure could significantly alter the socio-economic landscape of Assam. Increased financial independence for women is expected to enhance household decision-making, improve nutrition and education outcomes for children, and stimulate local economies and small business activity. By placing women at the centre of its economic vision, Congress is attempting to redefine a gender-inclusive lens.

Justice for Zubeen Garg Within 100 Days: A Commitment to Accountability

In a politically and emotionally charged promise, the Congress has pledged to deliver justice in the case of Zubeen Garg within 100 days of coming to power. The issue has deeply resonated with the people of Assam, becoming a symbol of broader concerns around transparency, law enforcement efficiency and the pace of justice delivery.

Kharge's statement on the matter was unequivocal: "We also promise to provide justice to late Zubeen Garg within 100 days of coming to power. We will find out who killed him and what was the conspiracy within that time period." By committing to a strict timeline, the Congress is signalling its intent to prioritise accountability and ensure that justice is neither delayed nor denied.

The case, which is currently under judicial scrutiny with proceedings in a fast-track court, has drawn significant public attention. Congress' public seeks to align with this public sentiment, offering a governance model that is responsive and time-bound. Beyond the specifics of the case, the commitment also reflects a broader political message that a Congress government would focus on strengthening institutional mechanisms and restoring public trust in the justice system.

Such assurances are likely to resonate strongly with voters who feel disillusioned with delays and inefficiencies in governance. By placing justice at the centre of its manifesto, Congress is attempting to underline its commitment to rule of law and transparent administration.

₹1,250 Per Month Pension for Senior

Citizens

Another key pillar of the Congress manifesto is its focus on senior citizens, a demographic that often faces financial insecurity and limited access to structured welfare support. To

where many senior citizens live in rural areas with limited economic opportunities, such financial assistance could play a crucial role in ensuring dignity and stability in their later years. In addition to the pension

approach, the party aims to address the multifaceted challenges faced by the elderly population.

The significance of this promise lies not just in the financial support it offers but also

policy focus.

Healthcare Guarantee: ₹25 Lakh Cashless Coverage for Every Family

family in the state.

This ambitious scheme is aimed at ensuring that no family is left behind in financial distress due to medical emergencies. By covering a wide range of treatments across both government and private hospitals, the initiative seeks to improve access to quality healthcare while reducing out-of-pocket expenses.

Highlighting the feasibility of this promise, Mallikarjun Kharge pointed to similar schemes implemented in Congress-ruled states such as Rajasthan, Karnataka and Telangana. These examples are being used to reinforce the party's claim that its guarantees are grounded in proven governance models rather than mere electoral rhetoric.

For Assam, where many rural areas still struggle with limited healthcare facilities, this scheme could be transformative. It has the potential to bridge the gap between urban and rural healthcare access, ensure timely treatment, and improve overall health outcomes. Moreover, by reducing the financial burden on families, it could contribute to greater economic stability and resilience.

Land rights for 10 Lakh Indigenous People: Security, Stability and Dignity

Land ownership has long been a contentious and sensitive issue in Assam, particularly for indigenous communities who often face uncertainty due to temporary or unclear land rights. Addressing this, Congress has promised to convert 'Eksoniya pattas' into permanent 'Miyadi pattas' for 10 lakh indigenous people.

This reform is aimed at providing long-term security and eliminating the need for annual renewals, which often involve bureaucratic hurdles and opportunities for corruption. By granting permanent land rights, the party promises to empower indigenous communities, ensuring that they have both legal ownership and socio-economic stability. Explaining the impact of this move, Kharge said, "This will ensure that people don't have to renew their records annually or request favours from officials and run from one place to another." The statement reflects a broader commitment to reducing administrative inefficiencies and restoring dignity to citizens.

The promise also carries significant economic implications. Secure land ownership can enable individuals to invest in agriculture, access credit, and improve their livelihoods. For indigenous communities, it represents not just economic security but also cultural and social recognition.

WOMEN
Unconditional monthly cash transfer to every woman's bank account
₹50,000 to start or grow businesses

SENIOR CITIZENS
₹1,250/month pension
Dedicated Ministry

HEALTH
₹25 Lakh cashless health cover for every family

LAND
Conversion of Eksoniya pattas into Miyadi pattas for 10 Lakh Indigenous people

JUSTICE
Justice for Zubeen Garg within 100 days

5 PRATISHRUTI ASSAM

Our Pratishruti to the people of Assam

Gaurav Gogoi MP, President, Assam Congress
Dehabrata Saikia, MLA, CLP, Assam Congress

HAATOT HAATH DHOROK, NATUN BOR AXOM GORHOK

address these challenges, the party has announced a guaranteed monthly pension of ₹1,250 for all senior citizens in Assam.

This initiative aims to provide a steady and reliable source of income, helping elderly individuals meet their basic needs without being entirely dependent on family support. In a state

scheme, Congress has proposed the creation of a dedicated ministry for senior citizens. This institutional mechanism is expected to streamline welfare projects, improve access to healthcare services, and ensure targeted policy implementation. By moving beyond fragmented schemes to a more coordinated

in its recognition of senior citizens as a priority group in governance. With rising healthcare costs and increasing life expectancy, the need for structured support systems has become more pressing than ever. Congress' proposal seeks to address this gap, offering both immediate relief and long-term

Healthcare has emerged as one of the most critical issues in Assam, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed significant gaps in infrastructure and access. Addressing this, the Congress manifesto promises a comprehensive ₹25 lakh cashless health insurance cover for every

Inclusive Growth for Assam Beyond 5 Guarantees

Beyond these five guarantees, the Congress manifesto presents a broader vision of governance centred on inclusivity, transparency and economic empowerment. Leaders like Gaurav Gogoi have emphasised the need to move away from divisive politics and focus on unity and development.

The manifesto's emphasis on direct benefit transfers, healthcare security and land rights reflects a strategy aimed at strengthening grassroots economies and improving quality of life. By putting money directly into the hands of citizens, Congress is seeking to stimulate demand, boost local markets and create a cycle of economic

As Mallikarjun Kharge reiterated during the launch, the goal is to ensure dignity, opportunity and progress for every citizen.

growth. At the same time, the focus on justice and institutional reforms signals an effort to rebuild public trust in governance. The combination of welfare measures and structural changes forms the backbone of the "Natun Bor Axom" vision. The Congress manifesto for

Assam, encapsulated in the "5 Pratishruti," represents a comprehensive attempt to address the aspirations and concerns of the state's diverse population. By combining economic support, social justice and governance reforms, the party is offering a clear alternative vision for Assam's future.

As Mallikarjun Kharge reiterated during the launch, the goal is to ensure dignity, opportunity and progress for every citizen. The coming elections will ultimately determine whether this vision resonates with voters, but for now, the narrative of "Natun Bor Axom" has firmly taken centre stage in Assam's political landscape.

From Turmoil to Transformation Congress' Governance Record in Assam



Photo: Gettyimages

When the Congress party assumed power in Assam in 2001, the state was grappling with deep instability, administrative breakdown, and widespread public fear. The period preceding Congress rule was marked by uncertainty and unrest, with one of the darkest phases being the era of "secret killings" between 1998 and 2001. During this time, relatives and sympathisers of ULFA insurgents were allegedly targeted and killed by unknown assailants, leaving a deep scar on Assam's socio-political fabric.

The Congress government, under the leadership of late Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi, prioritised restoring peace and normalcy. One of its earliest and most significant achievements was rebuilding public confidence. Through a balanced approach combining dialogue and development, the government successfully reduced insurgency and brought several militant outfits, including ULFA, to the negotiating table. At a time when bomb blasts, ethnic conflicts, and demands for separate statehood were common, the shift towards peace and development marked a decisive turning point.

The Congress administration also inherited a fragile economy. During the

preceding regime, the state faced severe financial stress, including delayed salaries for government employees and mounting overdrafts. Within its first tenure, the Congress government stabilised the financial situation and set Assam on a path of steady economic growth. Development activities resumed after years of stagnation, and governance structures were strengthened.

A major institutional achievement during this period was the initiation of the process to update the National Register of Citizens (NRC). The Congress viewed the NRC as a crucial step toward addressing concerns over illegal migration while ensuring that genuine citizens were protected from harassment. This initiative reflected the party's commitment to balancing national concerns with human rights.

The Congress government also played a key role in advancing peace in the Bodoland region. By extending full cooperation to the Centre, it facilitated the peace process with the Bodo Liberation Tigers, culminating in the 2003 Bodo Peace Accord. This agreement led to the creation of the Bodoland Territorial Council under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, paving the way for greater autonomy

and stability in the region.

Economically, the transformation during the Congress years was significant. Per capita income in Assam rose from ₹13,059 in 2001 to ₹49,480 in 2015. The Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) increased from ₹38,313 crore to ₹1,62,652 crore during the same period. The growth rate of the state economy improved substantially, rising from 1.75 percent in 2001-02 to 6.78 percent by the end of the Eleventh Five Year Plan in 2011-12.

Revenue generation also saw remarkable improvement. Tax collection increased from ₹1,270 crore to over ₹8,177 crore, while excise revenue rose from ₹147 crore to ₹665 crore. Banking activity expanded, with deposits growing from ₹10,992 crore to ₹76,795 crore, indicating rising public confidence and financial inclusion.

Agriculture, the backbone of Assam's economy, witnessed notable progress. Agricultural production increased from 38.54 lakh tonnes in 2001 to 54.50 lakh tonnes in 2014. Institutional credit flow to farmers expanded significantly, with agricultural loans reaching ₹6,000 crore by 2014-15.

Infrastructure development under the Congress government was unprecedented. The length of pucca roads increased from just 545 km in 2001 to over 25,000 km by 2013-14. National highways expanded, and numerous bridges were constructed, improving connectivity across the state. These projects not only enhanced mobility but also boosted trade and regional integration.

In the power sector, the Congress government expanded electrification across rural Assam and increased transmission capacity from 550 MW to 1,600 MW. This ensured better access to electricity and supported industrial and domestic growth.

The education sector saw transformative initiatives. Free textbooks for students up to Class VIII, uniforms for economically weaker sections, and large-scale teacher



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recruitment improved access to education. Over 45,000 teachers were provincialised, and more than 52,000 primary teachers were appointed through the introduction of the Teachers Eligibility Test (TET). The government also introduced free laptops for meritorious students and established six state universities, along with multiple medical and engineering colleges.

Healthcare infrastructure expanded significantly, with new medical colleges in Jorhat, Barpeta, and Tezpur. Schemes such as Mamata, Majani, and Maram Sanjeevani were launched to support maternal and child health. The introduction of free ambulance services

improved emergency response across the state. The Congress government also focused on inclusive governance by creating 29 development councils for various communities, including Moran, Mottock, Gorkha, Adivasi, Koch Rajbongshi, and others. These councils aimed to address the unique socio-economic needs of diverse groups, ensuring broader participation in development.

Women's empowerment was another key focus area. The formation of self-help groups and initiatives such as bicycle distribution for girls helped reduce dropout rates and improve mobility. Reservation of 50 percent

seats for women in local bodies strengthened grassroots democracy and increased women's participation in governance.

In sports, Assam witnessed a major boost with the successful completion of the 33rd National Games and the 2016 South Asian Games. World-class infrastructure, including the Indira Gandhi Athletic Stadium and other sports complexes, positioned Assam as a sporting hub in the Northeast.

From restoring peace to driving economic growth and strengthening social infrastructure, the Congress government's 15-year tenure laid a strong foundation for Assam's progress.

Congress' Roadmap for Assam's Future, Peace and Shared Prosperity

Building on its governance legacy, the Congress party is presenting a forward-looking vision for Assam that emphasises inclusive development, democratic participation, and sustainable growth. At a time when concerns over social cohesion, economic opportunities, and institutional integrity are growing, the party is positioning itself as a force committed to restoring balance and ensuring equitable progress.

Central to Congress' vision is the idea that development must reach every section of society. The party has consistently advocated policies that empower marginalised communities, protect indigenous identities, and promote social harmony. Drawing from its experience of establishing development councils for various communities, Congress aims to expand participatory governance mechanisms that give voice to diverse groups.

Economic revival and job creation are key priorities. Congress plans to focus on sectors such as agriculture, small industries, and services to generate employment opportunities for youth. By strengthening rural economies and promoting entrepreneurship, the party aims to reduce migration and create sustainable livelihoods within the state.

In agriculture, Congress is expected to push for enhanced credit



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access, better irrigation facilities, and market linkages to ensure fair prices for farmers. The emphasis will be on modernising farming practices while preserving traditional strengths, thereby improving productivity and income levels.

Infrastructure development will remain a cornerstone of Congress' agenda. Building on its past achievements in road construction and

connectivity, the party aims to further expand transportation networks, improve rural roads, and enhance digital connectivity. This will not only facilitate economic growth but also improve access to essential services.

Education and healthcare are expected to receive renewed focus. Congress has indicated its commitment to strengthening public education systems by improving infrastructure,

recruiting qualified teachers, and ensuring access to quality learning resources. In healthcare, the emphasis will be on expanding medical facilities, improving affordability, and strengthening primary healthcare systems.

Women and youth empowerment will be central to the party's development strategy. Congress is likely to expand self-help group

networks, provide financial assistance to women entrepreneurs, and introduce targeted schemes for skill development. For youth, the focus will be on education, skill training, and employment generation.

The party has also stressed the importance of protecting Assam's cultural and linguistic diversity. Upholding the principles of the Assam Accord, including the 1971 cut-off, remains a key commitment. Congress has consistently maintained that safeguarding the identity of indigenous people must go hand in hand with ensuring justice and fairness for all residents.

Democratic governance and institutional accountability form another pillar of Congress' vision. The party has emphasised the need for transparent decision-making, strengthening local bodies, and ensuring that governance remains responsive to people's needs. By promoting decentralisation, Congress aims to empower grassroots institutions and enhance citizen participation.

Environmental sustainability is also emerging as a priority area. With Assam being prone to floods and ecological challenges, Congress is expected to focus on disaster management, river management, and conservation efforts. Sustainable

development practices will be integrated into policy planning to ensure long-term resilience.

Importantly, Congress' approach is rooted in the idea of cooperative federalism. Drawing from its past experience of working closely with the Centre to secure funds and implement schemes, the party aims to ensure that Assam receives its due share of resources for development. Restoring favourable funding patterns and advocating for the state's interests at the national level will be key aspects of this approach.

The party also plans to revive the narrative of peace and development that defined its earlier tenure. By fostering dialogue, addressing grievances, and promoting inclusive policies, Congress aims to strengthen social cohesion and prevent the resurgence of conflict.

As Assam moves toward a new political phase, the Congress party is seeking to position itself as a credible alternative with a proven track record and a clear roadmap for the future. By combining its legacy of governance with a renewed commitment to inclusivity and democratic values, the party is aiming to reconnect with the aspirations of the people.

Assam's progress must be built on peace, participation, and shared prosperity.

How the US will pay for Trump's expansionism

Ashok Swain

Donald Trump's second term has stripped away the ideological veil that once softened America's manoeuvres on global dominance. The earlier US administrations framed as the defence of democracy and a rules-based international order has now been recast in blunt, transactional terms.

This is not a stylistic shift. It's a more profound transformation and has come at a moment when American hegemony is being challenged by the rise of China. Paradoxically, though, in trying to counter China's rise through coercive diplomacy and aggressive expansionism, Trump's strategy seems to be accelerating the erosion of American power and strengthening its principal rival.

In the Trump doctrine of US national security, China is no longer an ideological adversary but an economic competitor. Gone is the moral posturing of old, the language of democracy and human rights that once underpinned America's claim to global leadership. The narrowing of focus on economic protectionism and material advantage betrays a loss of confidence and/or interest in its universal appeal or acceptance. This shift appeared pragmatic to many—certainly to his 'America First' MAGA base—but the sacrifice of values has come at the cost of influence.

Trump's naked ambition to annex new territories, his assertions to dominate the Western Hemisphere have further eroded America's stature. The bid to reassert US primacy through economic pressure and war signals a neo-imperialist design, but the approach misunderstands the nature of contemporary power. Influence in Latin America and Africa, for example, will no longer be determined by military presence but through trade, investments and long-term economic engagement. China's deepening ties with the Global South cannot be undone through coercion. On the contrary, heavy-handed American policies



Photo: Getty Images

are pushing the region further into Beijing's orbit.

The military campaign against Iran, strategic capabilities and reshaping regional dynamics, has revealed the limits of America's coercive power. What was presented as a quick, decisive operation has turned into a protracted, uncertain conflict, with Iran waging an asymmetric war on its own terms.

The war has other strategic costs for the US. Apart from further straining alliances and raising questions about the reliability of American leadership in times of crisis, the conflict has forced the US to commit both military resources and political attention to West Asia. Which in turn will affect its capacity to operate effectively in the Indo-Pacific. The diversion creates strategic space for China to strengthen its position, both economically and militarily. The pattern is familiar. Previous American entanglements in Iraq and Afghanistan provided Beijing with the opportunity to rise with minimal interference. A similar dynamic is playing out now, except that China today has vastly enhanced capabilities.

China's response to the Iran war has been remarkably restrained and calculated. Rather than getting entangled in the conflict, Beijing has positioned itself as a cautious observer, avoiding direct confrontation while securing its economic

interests and providing intelligence to Iran. This approach allows China to benefit at the cost of an overstretched America, without incurring significant costs.

The war also reinforces China's narrative of the US as a destabilising force, enhancing its appeal among countries in the region and outside seeking alternatives to Western dominance. In this sense, the Iran conflict is not just a regional crisis but the precursor to a global strategic shift that will further tilt the balance of power in Beijing's favour.

Trump's foreign policy approach amplifies these dynamics. His willingness to undermine longstanding alliances within NATO and the Quad and his penchant for unilateral action has weakened the network of partnerships that historically extended American influence. At the same time, his inconsistent stance on China, oscillating between confrontation and accommodation, creates uncertainty about US intentions. This lack of coherence undermines credibility and reduces the effectiveness of US policy.

For decades, the United States positioned itself—even if the reality was different—as a model of governance, a guardian of the rules-based international order. That claim lies in tatters. The Iran war, widely seen as an act of unilateral aggression, has reinforced scepticism about American intentions. As this perception spreads, it will further erode American leadership and strengthen China's push towards an alternative global order. For China, Trump's missteps are a cheap way to expand its influence without even confronting the US directly.

Trump loyalists stubbornly argue that his disruptive policies are necessary to confront an unfair international system and to counter China's rise. They contend that previous strategies had failed to address structural imbalances in trade and technology. These concerns are not entirely without merit, but the paradox of Trump's foreign policy lies in its unintended consequences. By abandoning the ideological framework that once legitimised American power, it weakens that power. By engaging in expansionist actions and costly conflicts, it accelerates strategic overstretch. By focusing on short-term dominance rather than long-term stability, it creates conditions that favour the rival it seeks to contain. ■

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For decades, the US positioned itself as a guardian of the rules-based international order. That claim now lies in tatters

A weaker West Asia suits the US and Israel

Is the illegal war on Iran really meant to divide and weaken the Muslim world?

Hasan Suroor

As the US-Israeli war on Iran enters the second month with its ultimate aim still shrouded in confusion, there's much speculation whether it is part of a broader agenda to further divide and weaken the Muslim world. Though the war has set the globe a-jitter, its biggest collateral casualties have been Muslim countries.

Whatever the final outcome of this illegal war, one thing is blindingly obvious: a region already riven by rivalries, personal enmities and ideological differences is likely to emerge as an even more fractious and weakened bloc. Dragged into an unprovoked conflict launched on a whim, it faces a long period of internal strife, as well as economic and political uncertainty.

Fuelled by war rhetoric on the one hand and intra-Arab irritants on the other will deepen. And this, some argue, is exactly what America and Israel want: a Muslim street more vulnerable to manipulation.

An immediate consequence will be the future of Palestinians—already forgotten by the world. Their dream of an independent Palestinian state—or whatever remained of it after Israel's ruthless and disproportionate response to Hamas's strike on 7 October 2023—looks practically dead, a victim of the larger post-war geopolitical shift in West Asia. With Iran, their most vocal champion through Hamas and other proxies, on the backfoot, Palestinians are left with few friends.

The truth is that most Muslim countries never really cared much for Palestine. Their only interest in seeking a resolution of the 'Palestinian problem' has been to get rid of an estimated seven million displaced

Palestinians living in Arab countries, seen as a huge drain on public services and a source of social tensions. Post-war realities will only further distract attention from the issue and increase Palestinian isolation.

This vacuum will allow Israel to have a free hand in its aggressive campaign of annexing the West Bank while simultaneously frustrating efforts to facilitate the return of the nearly two million displaced Palestinians who were forced to flee their homes over the past three years. Nearly 55 per cent of Gaza remains under Israeli military control. Israel is in no mood to give Gaza up, nor does it face any pressure to do so either from the US or the international community.

Israel under Benjamin Netanyahu has never made any secret of its opposition to a two-state solution. He has publicly vowed not to allow an independent Palestinian state to become a reality. "There will not be a Palestinian state. It's very simple: it will not be established," he said in an interview with *Abu Ali Express*, a popular local Telegram channel, a few months ago.

Asked by the interviewer if his opposition holds even if it jeopardises normalisation with Riyadh—which insists on a credible plan for Palestinian statehood in exchange for such ties—Netanyahu said: "The answer is: a Palestinian state will not be established. It is an existential threat to Israel."

A view echoed by his cabinet colleagues. Finance minister Bezalel Smotrich, for instance, who sparked a controversy in January when he declared that his government's purpose in tightening its grip on West Bank is "to kill" the idea of a Palestinian state.

Israel fiercely resisted a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution on the next phase of Trump's Gaza 'peace plan' as a 'credible pathway' to Palestinian statehood. It has also long opposed the 2016 UNSC resolution declaring that Israeli settlements in the West Bank have 'no legal validity' and are in 'flagrant violation' of international law.

According to experts, there has been an alarming rise in the Israeli government's authorisation of settlement expansions and infrastructure facilities, including building roads that will cut the West Bank in half. Previous US administrations tried to rein in Israel when its actions appeared to fall foul of international law, but that has changed under Trump.

Prominent British military historian and West Asia expert Max Hastings says that Trump has 'empowered the Israeli leader [Netanyahu] to forge a Greater Israel' by allowing him to fast-track his programme of the relentless annexation of Palestinian land for Jewish settlements. In an article in the *Sunday Times*, Hastings illustrates how 'Jewish settler attacks on



The price of war As many as 40 children were killed in West Bank in 2025, a fifth of all Palestinian deaths over the same period

Palestinians' are almost 'never punished'.

He narrates the story of a 14-year-old Palestinian boy, Jad Jaddallah, who allegedly threw a rock at Israeli troops, and was shot. The incident took place in a refugee camp last November. 'Thereafter,' Hastings writes, 'a video shows soldiers standing around him, refusing access to ambulances, until he bleeds to death. To this day, for reasons that are unclear, the Israelis refuse to release Jad's body'. According to the UN, at least 40 Palestinian children were killed by Israeli forces in occupied West Bank in 2025. That's one-fifth of all Palestinians killed in the territory over the same period.

The Palestinian Authority, at the best of times an impotent and corrupt body, has become a bit of a joke. It operates under Israeli military control and its president, Mahmoud Abbas, is widely despised by his own people, who see him as the western powers' 'useful idiot'. With the Gaza strip in ruins and its population facing one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent times, and with the West Bank reduced to a zombie zone, the dream of an independent Palestine couldn't be farther from becoming

With the West Bank reduced to a zombie zone, the dream of an independent Palestine couldn't be farther from becoming a reality

a reality.

Palestinian expats, forced to flee their country after previous wars, expect more of their countrymen and women to leave and start a new life abroad. Old Palestine is history. And so is old Iran with its pan-Arab clout and its network of proxies drastically reduced. For all its resilience—which has taken America by surprise—Iran has suffered some heavy knocks which it will take years to recover from. Not to mention the diplomatic cost it may have to pay for annoying its neighbours, which it has targeted to punish Washington.

It will be more isolated—not only in the region but most likely domestically too—with anti-regime tendencies likely to feel more emboldened.

Sanam Vakil, head of the West Asia project at the London-based Royal Institute of International Affairs, has said that while the Iranian regime will survive this war in one form or another, "it's the internal situation in Iran that will be unviable ... They're effectively screwed."

The same can be said about its Arab and Gulf neighbours who have been thrown under the bus by Trump. ■

The Shia-Sunni divide and intra-Arab irritants will deepen. And this, some argue, is exactly what America and Israel want: a Muslim street more vulnerable to manipulation

What if the tables were turned?

Aakar Patel proposes a thought experiment that reveals our biases when we look at America's war on Iran

Consider this thought experiment. Imagine that two large missiles struck the White House. The first hit the residential quarters at a time when the family were all home—President Trump, his wife Melania, his sons Donald and Eric and their wives and their children. Imagine they were killed by the first missile, all of them. Imagine a second missile landed just when rescuers ran to help the first family and killed them as well.

Imagine Trump's cabinet bombed in their homes, with their families. Foreign minister (they call it secretary of state) Mark Rubio, defence secretary Peter Hegseth and the others usually seen around Trump.

Imagine that the same people who did all this strike an American school, killing more than 150 schoolgirls.

We all know that America has the greatest navy in history—11 giant aircraft carriers, each with a dozen or more ships attached in support. So now imagine that without a declaration of war, the same entity that killed all these people, surreptitiously torpedoed one of the great American battleships and sank it, killing most of the sailors on board.

Readers of these words will not require much imagination to carry out this thought experiment, because all these things actually happened to the Iranians—at the hands of the Americans. If the words above

Would our prime minister and foreign minister have said and done the same things had it been American ministers, schoolgirls and sailors who were killed?



Nothing kosher about this partnership President Donald Trump with Benjamin Netanyahu

Photo: Getty Images

deranged because it assumes that America and Israel are currently in a position to drive the direction of this conflict, which they are not. For this reason, unfortunately for all involved in this conflict and its fallout, including us, the pain is not expected to end soon.

Now consider one final thing: if the thought experiment we began with had indeed come to pass. That had it been America and Trump and his family and his ministers and American schoolgirls and sailors who had been murdered without provocation, would our prime minister and foreign minister have said and done the same things as they have since 28 February? I doubt it.

When we say *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* do we actually mean that India's wisdom is to consider the world and all its people as one big family?

Trump's 15-point list was deranged because it assumed that the US and Israel were in a position to set the direction of the war

appear jarring that's because we are conditioned to think of Americans and Iranians differently. This is particularly true of the Anglophone world, of which we are part, but is generally true almost anywhere.

The constant demonisation and maligning of Iran (as was the case with Iraq, Afghanistan, Russia...) has meant that we are not able to empathise with them as we might with the Americans.

Now set aside our thought experiment and consider these two lists of conditions that the two sides have laid out to end the war. The Americans have 15 items on their list. These are as follows:

- 1 Iran must completely dismantle its nuclear program
- 2 End all uranium enrichment
- 3 Allow America unhindered inspections
- 4 Stop ballistic missile development

- 5 Scale back military capabilities
- 6 End support for groups in Palestine and Lebanon
- 7 End influence abroad
- 8 Cede control of the Hormuz Strait
- 9 Cede control over shipping lanes
- 10 Stop attacks against US allies in Gulf
- 11 De-escalate war in the region
- 12 Submit to US-led negotiations
- 13 Accept long-term monitoring and compliance conditions
- 14 Limit arms transfers
- 15 Change future behaviour

The Iranians have a list of five conditions:

- 1 End assassinations of Iranian leaders
- 2 Guarantee of no future war
- 3 Compensation for damage of this war
- 4 End of Israel's wider war on the region
- 5 Recognition of Iran's sovereign rights over Strait of Hormuz

We can observe a few things here. There are elements missing from Iran's list, which they have spoken about and which have been heard by the world.

Iran, like India, like Pakistan and indeed like America and Israel, has the right to a peaceful nuclear programme that includes the enrichment of uranium. Why have they left it out? Likely because it should not be said to the world that Iran must not and cannot be treated differently from the rest.

Other than that, Iran's list is defensive in nature and makes no demands on those who have waged war on it.

What can be said about America's list which has been confirmed by Trump? Only that it is offensive, maximalist and deranged. Offensive in the sense of threatening, maximalist because it in no way offers room for negotiations. And

The answer is no, as India's actions rather than words show clearly and transparently.

The world has a hierarchy and the family has immediate members and distant aunts and forgotten uncles and disliked cousins.

Relatives who are geographically quite close (Iran and India shared a physical border till 1947) but mentally distant can be set aside and their trauma overlooked, as we have so comprehensively done in the case of Iran.

I'm not arguing for a new way to approach this crisis; this can be done elsewhere. I'm asking merely that we consider the prejudices and biases we have burdened ourselves with when we examine the world and what is happening in it today. ■

Views are personal

The triple whammy of AI, climate change and war

...is driving us closer to climate Armageddon, writes **Avay Shukla**

It's a disturbing sign of the times that the global levers of power today are controlled by genocidal murderers, sex offenders, megalomaniacs, war criminals and rapacious billionaires who should all be in jail. Collectively, these psychopaths are driving the human race ever closer to the seventh mass extermination, this time of homo sapiens—which is probably a good thing from a planetary perspective, for we do not deserve this wonderful orb.

Any one of three forces—artificial intelligence (AI), climate change, war—has the capacity to exterminate us, but it gets even worse: the last three years have demonstrated that all these three forces are now coming together to do the job under the guidance of the sociopaths mentioned above.

As we edge ever closer to a war-driven holocaust in Ukraine and West Asia, this three-way synergy is becoming more pronounced and evident. AI is being used to assassinate leaders, military chiefs and scientists, to communicate and snoop, to guide missiles and bombs, to make war autonomous. The fate of 'enemies' is now being decided by algorithms, not rational humans.

The harnessing of AI for war has been exposed in the tussle between the AI R&D company Anthropic and the Pentagon, when the latter refused to accept the guardrails which Anthropic had inserted into its algorithms to prevent their misuse. Anthropic was blacklisted for taking an ethical stand, but Open AI and others quickly filled the void. AI is making even conventional/non-nuclear wars more lethal, opportunistic and acceptable for those nations that possess the technology.

In the hands of robber baron warlords and criminal syndicates masquerading as elected governments, AI is being used to wage illegal wars, driving us ever closer to climate Armageddon by destroying the natural environment, increasing the emission of GHGs (greenhouse gases) and polluting the soil and water of dozens of nations. Sadly, no one is talking about the environmental catastrophe unfolding in ever-widening concentric circles—all eyeballs are fixated on missiles, drones,

aircraft carriers and the Strait of Hormuz. A study has revealed that three years of the Russia-Ukraine war has released an additional 350 million tons of pollutants/GHG/CO2 into the atmosphere—that's one per cent of annual global emissions—through bombings, explosions and fires.

The destruction of the Kakhovka dam in Kherson region of Ukraine by Russia in 2023 flooded 600-plus sq. km of the downstream area, causing a humanitarian and ecological disaster on an unparalleled scale: more than 83,000 tonnes of silt contaminated with heavy metals (lead, cadmium, nickel) are deposited downstream, making the soil and water there toxic and poisoned for decades.

Gaza Strip's entire 365 sq. km has been carpet bombed by Israel to such an extent there is not a shred of farmland or green cover remaining. Around 71,000 tonnes of unexploded ordnance are buried in its soil and cities. As much as 80 per cent of all buildings in Gaza have been destroyed. According to an estimate by the UN, this has generated 63 million tonnes of rubble, which will take 15 years to remove at the rate of 200 truckloads per day! The cost?

The Netanyahus, Putins and Trumps of the world are not just waging illegal wars and trashing humanitarian covenants, they are committing ecocide on a horrendous scale

More than a billion US dollars. Effectively, Gaza Strip has been degraded into a wasteland.

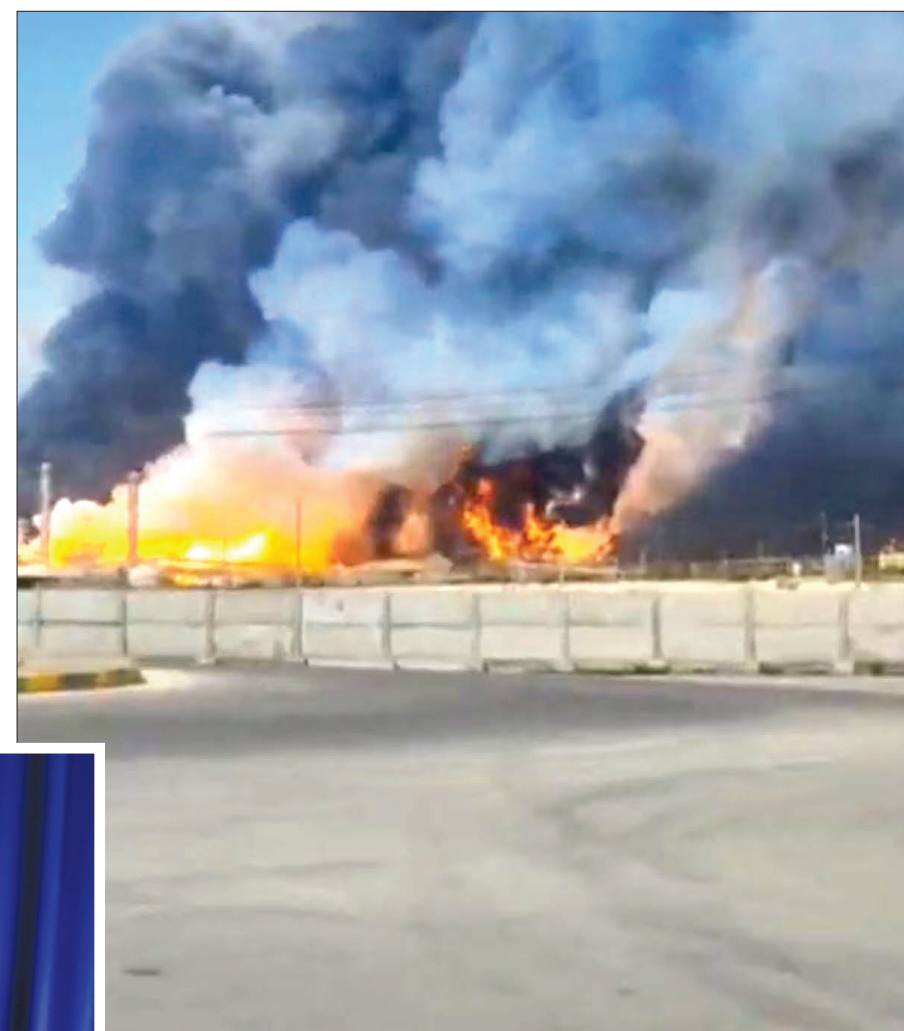
The environmental impact of the ongoing US-Israel war on Iran will be much worse, both for the land and the sea, especially now that oil facilities are fair game for all parties. Israel initiated this new phase of environmental warfare by bombing Tehran's oil storage tanks in the second week of March: the resultant massive plumes of black smoke which persisted for days was bad enough. But



Photo: Getty Images

what was worse was the 'black rain' that fell, carrying all the released pollutants which have now leached into the soil, making it toxic and barren for decades, and contaminating the ground water.

Israel's attack on Iran's Pars gas field on 18 March is the beginning of ecocide in the whole region: it processes 600 million m3 (cubic metre) of natural gas every day. With such a humongous volume of gas being set on fire, the toxic fumes will envelop not only Iran but the entire Gulf region, and could travel even as far as Pakistan and India. Iran's inevitable retaliation by bombing the oilfields of Israel and the Gulf countries will exponentially multiply this pollution. One shudders to



Israel's attack on Iran's South Pars gas field on 18 March was the beginning of ecocide in the whole region. The toxic fumes will envelop the entire Gulf region

think to what extent.

Tens of millions of litres/ barrels of oil are contained in the ships, both military and civilian, that ride on the Persian Gulf, all in

harm's way of the war. More than 13 million barrels of oil and 500,000 tonnes of gas are presently locked up in 300 ships in the Strait of Hormuz alone. If even half-a-dozen of them are sunk, the waters of the Gulf shall be contaminated for decades, all marine life destroyed. Have we conveniently forgotten what happened during the Iraq war, when Saddam Hussein spilled millions of litres of oil in the sea? That marine area has yet to recover, even after 26 years.

A recent study quoted in *The Guardian* reveals that 5 million tonnes of CO2 were emitted in the first 14 days of the current war, from destroyed buildings (2.4 million tonnes), fuel for military vehicles (529,000

tonnes), bombing of oil facilities (1.88 million tonnes), destroyed military hardware (172,000 tonnes) and munitions (55,000 tonnes). This is equivalent to the annual carbon budget of the 84 lowest carbon-emitting countries in the world.

The Netanyahus, Putins and Trumps of the world are not only waging illegal wars and trashing humanitarian covenants, they are committing ecocide on a horrendous scale. This is another reminder that fossil-fuelled geopolitics is incompatible with a liveable planet.

The Doomsday Clock in Chicago University, on which midnight signifies total Apocalypse, is getting ever closer to that point in time. It was at 17 minutes to midnight in 1991, today it is at 85 seconds to midnight. The world is running out of time fast, and that is not just a metaphor. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

Congress' People-Centric Guarantees for Keralam

Photo: Gettyimages

As Keralam awaits freedom from a decade of mis governance, Congress has unveiled a set of targeted guarantees aimed at addressing the state's evolving socio-economic challenges. These promises come at a time when Keralam is grappling with rising unemployment among educated youth, an increasing cost of living, fiscal pressures impacting welfare delivery, and the growing demand of an ageing population. In this backdrop, the party has sought to move beyond broad political assurances and instead position its commitments as targeted, issue-specific interventions designed to respond directly to the everyday concerns of citizens.

What distinguishes these guarantees is their focused and practical approach. Rather than proposing entirely new systems, many of the schemes build upon Keralam's existing governance frameworks, which have historically been recognised for their efficiency and

higher education institutions and enhance safety of women by promoting public transport usage. This will not only reduce household expenditure on daily commuting but will empower women and girls by increasing their mobility. This model has seen success in other states, where free transport schemes have led to increased female participation in economic activities. For Keralam, with its strong social indicators, such a move could further strengthen gender equity while boosting economic productivity.

Below is a detailed look at the key promises and their broader implications

₹1,000 Monthly Financial Assistance for College Girls

Recognizing the financial challenges faced by students, especially young women, the Congress has promised

Keralam's education system is one of the strongest in India, but rising costs of higher education including fees, accommodation, and study materials continue to burden families. This scheme is expected to reduce dropout rates among female students along with providing support to girls from economically weaker backgrounds.

for the people of Keralam.

Free Bus Travel for Women in KSRTC Buses Enhancing Mobility and Independence

One of the most impactful promises is free bus travel for all women in buses operated by Keralam State Road Transport Corporation. Mobility remains a critical factor in determining access to education, employment, and healthcare, especially for women. Keralam has a high female literacy rate, yet workforce participation among women has remained relatively low. Limited access to safe and affordable public transport has often been cited as a barrier. By eliminating travel costs, the Congress aims to and encourage more women to join the workforce. Congress promises to improve access to

₹1,000 per month as financial assistance for college-going girls.

Keralam's education system is one of the strongest in India, but rising costs of higher education including fees, accommodation, and study materials continue to burden families. This scheme is expected to reduce dropout rates among female students along with providing support to girls from economically weaker backgrounds. Congress promises to encourage continuation of higher education for the girls in Keralam. This scheme will also promote gender parity in professional fields. This initiative aligns with Keralam's long-standing commitment to education while addressing emerging economic pressures. By directly supporting students, the Congress aims to ensure that financial constraints do not hinder academic aspirations.



Welfare Pension to be Increased to ₹3,000 for strengthening Social Security

Keralam has one of the most extensive social welfare pension systems in the country. However, with inflation and rising living costs, the adequacy of pensions has become a concern. The Congress has proposed increasing welfare pensions to ₹3,000 per month. This would benefit senior citizens, widows, persons with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups. The move is significant for several reasons. It provides financial stability to the

Dedicated Ministry for Senior Citizens for Institutional Focus on Ageing Population

In a first-of-its-kind initiative, the Congress has proposed setting up a dedicated ministry for senior citizens. Keralam is among the fastest ageing states in India, with unique demographic challenges. A focused ministry would address healthcare needs specific to the elderly. The ministry will be responsible for developing age-friendly infrastructure. It will improve access to pensions and welfare schemes and promote community-based care systems. Such an institutional framework would ensure that senior citizens are not treated as an afterthought but as a priority demographic. It reflects a shift toward more specialized governance tailored to Keralam's demographic realities.

elderly and marginalised and helps offset rising healthcare and living expenses for them. Congress also

promises to strengthen state's social safety net by supporting dignity and independence for beneficiaries.

Keralam's ageing population makes this promise particularly relevant. With a growing proportion of senior citizens, enhanced pension support could play a crucial role in ensuring quality of life.

Interest-Free Loans up to ₹5 Lakh for Youth Entrepreneurs

Unemployment, particularly among educated youth, remains a pressing concern in Keralam. Despite high literacy rates, job creation has not kept pace with the aspirations of young people. To address this, the Congress has proposed providing interest-free loans of up to ₹5 lakh for young entrepreneurs. This initiative is expected to encourage entrepreneurship and innovation to reduce dependence on government jobs. Medium enterprises will also promote small and medium enterprises. This will generate local employment opportunities. Keralam has a strong base of skilled youth and a growing startup ecosystem. By easing access to entrepreneurial potential and stimulate economic growth at the grassroots level.

₹25 Lakh Health Insurance Scheme Named After Shri Oommen Chandy

Healthcare remains an integral part of Keralam's development model. Building on this legacy, the Congress has promised a comprehensive health insurance scheme worth ₹25 lakh per family, named after former Chief Minister Shri Oommen Chandy. The scheme aims to provide financial protection against major medical expenses. It will also reduce out-of-pocket healthcare costs for citizens. Congress will also ensure access to quality treatment across public and private hospitals. Strengthening of Keralam's healthcare safety net will be the focus of the Congress led government. Keralam's healthcare system is widely regarded as one of the best in India, but rising medical costs have become a concern. A high-value insurance scheme could significantly ease the burden on families, especially in cases of critical illness.

Congress Pitches Targeted Guarantees for Inclusive Growth and Social Security

As Keralam heads into a crucial electoral contest, the Congress has unveiled a set of carefully structured guarantees aimed at addressing the state's evolving socio-economic challenges. These promises come at a time when Keralam is grappling with rising unemployment among educated youth, an increasing cost of living, fiscal pressures impacting welfare delivery, and the growing demand of an ageing population. In this backdrop, the party has sought to move beyond broad political assurances and instead position its commitments as targeted, issue-specific interventions designed to respond directly to the everyday concerns of citizens.

What distinguishes these guarantees is their focused and practical approach. Rather than proposing entirely new systems, many of the schemes build upon Keralam's existing governance frameworks, which have historically been recognised for their efficiency and



reach. The emphasis is on strengthening and expanding current mechanisms in sectors such as mobility, education, healthcare, employment, and social security. This not only enhances the feasibility of implementation but also aligns with the administrative realities of the state. By targeting specific segments—

women, students, entrepreneurs, and senior citizens—the Congress aims to ensure that benefits are both measurable and impactful.

A central theme running through the Congress' vision is the attempt to balance welfare with economic growth. While critics often raise concerns about the fiscal sustainability of

expanded welfare programmes, the party has framed its guarantees as long-term investments in Keralam's human and economic capital rather than short-term expenditures. For instance, proposals like free transport for women are expected to improve workforce participation by reducing mobility barriers, while financial

support for students is seen as a means to strengthen human capital and future productivity. Similarly, entrepreneurial loan schemes are designed to stimulate economic activity and job creation, and enhanced healthcare coverage aims to reduce long-term financial distress for families, thereby contributing to overall economic stability.

This approach reflects a broader shift in electoral politics, particularly in Keralam, where voters increasingly demand accountability and tangible outcomes. The Congress' guarantees are structured to be clear, quantifiable, and linked to specific beneficiary groups, marking a departure from generic announcements that often lack measurable benchmarks. Each commitment is articulated in a way that allows voters to assess both intent and delivery, signalling a move toward more transparent and performance-driven governance.

Politically, this strategy indicates an understanding of changing voter

expectations. With high literacy levels and strong civic engagement, Keralam's electorate closely scrutinises policy proposals and governance records. By presenting a blueprint that combines welfare assurances with economic logic, the Congress is attempting to position itself as both socially responsive and fiscally responsible.

As the state prepares for the elections, these guarantees collectively outline a vision centred on dignity, and opportunity. By focusing on key demographic groups such as women, youth, senior citizens, and vulnerable communities, the party seeks to address immediate challenges while also laying the groundwork for long-term development. Ultimately, the effectiveness of these promises will depend on implementation, financial planning, and administrative efficiency. However, as an electoral framework, they represent a concerted effort to align public policy with the lived realities and aspirations of the people of Keralam.

“Congress Will Deliver for Keralam”

Rahul Gandhi Assures Welfare and Jobs Push with Five Guarantees

Launching the Congress campaign for the upcoming Keralam Assembly elections, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, laid out a comprehensive “guarantee card” for the state, promising targeted welfare measures, employment generation, and social security. Addressing a United Democratic Front (UDF) rally in Kozhikode virtually from Delhi, Mr Gandhi asserted that the Congress would translate its promises into action, drawing on what he described as the party’s track record in other states.

“We have walked the talk in Karnataka and Telangana. These five schemes are commitments we will deliver,” Mr Gandhi said, positioning the guarantees as credible and implementable assurances rather than mere electoral promises.

At the core of the Congress pitch are five key guarantees aimed at addressing everyday challenges faced by the people of Keralam. Among the headline measures is free bus travel for women, a move aimed at improving mobility and enhancing workforce participation. The party has also promised ₹1,000 per month for college-going girls, seeking to support education and reduce financial burdens on families.

In a significant push for social security, Mr Gandhi announced that welfare pensions would be increased to ₹3,000 per month. He also unveiled an ambitious healthcare proposal—an annual health insurance cover of ₹25 lakh per family, to be named after former Chief Minister Oommen Chandy. The plan, he said, would not only strengthen healthcare access but also generate employment within the sector.

For the youth, the Congress has proposed interest-free loans of up to ₹5 lakh to encourage entrepreneurship and revive small businesses. “This will help young people stand on their own feet and rebuild enterprises that have suffered in recent years,” Mr Gandhi said, emphasising the need to create opportunities within the state.

Framing the election as a battle of governance models, Mr Gandhi sharply criticised the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), accusing it of failing to address unemployment and economic distress. “One out of three educated youth in Keralam is unemployed because the LDF has not delivered on its promises,” he said. He



Photo: Gettyimages

The Congress leader also raised concerns about rising drug abuse in the state, citing figures that suggest a growing number of users, including students. “This is a serious social issue that requires urgent attention and a coordinated response,” he said, adding that the Congress would prioritise both prevention and rehabilitation.

alleged that job opportunities were not being created at the promised scale and questioned the fairness of recruitment processes.

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Politically, Mr Gandhi positioned the contest as a direct fight between the Congress-led UDF and the ruling dispensation, while alleging a tacit understanding between the LDF and the BJP. “The BJP is the hidden partner of the LDF,” he said, arguing that both parties were aligned in their political approach despite public differences.

He also questioned the functioning of central investigative agencies, alleging selective action against opposition leaders. “I have faced multiple cases and repeated questioning. Why is there no similar

action in cases involving the Keralam Chief Minister?” Mr Gandhi asked, raising concerns about what he termed unequal scrutiny.

Throughout his address, Mr Gandhi said Congress as a party focused on inclusive growth, welfare delivery, and accountability. He emphasised that the guarantees were designed to address both immediate needs and long-term aspirations of Keralam’s people.

“The people of Keralam deserve a government that listens, understands, and delivers. Congress will work for every section—women, youth, farmers, and the vulnerable,” he said.

With its guarantee-driven campaign and sharp political messaging, the Congress is aiming to consolidate support across demographics and present itself as a credible alternative. As the election approaches, Mr Gandhi’s assurance of delivery and governance remains central to the party’s pitch, signalling a focused effort to translate promises into policy and secure a decisive mandate in Keralam.

Kharge Targets LDF-BJP Nexus, Calls for Decisive Mandate in Keralam

With the Keralam Assembly elections approaching, Congress President Mr Mallikarjun Kharge has sharpened the

current regime. “Under the LDF government, there are only backdoor appointments. No transparency, no merit. Those with connections get



Photo: Gettyimages

Mr Kharge also highlighted the concerns of Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs), praising their contribution while criticising the state government’s response during times of crisis. “I am proud that the people of Keralamm are spread across the world, and they deserve proper treatment. But when they return during crises, this government makes no arrangements for them,” he said.

party’s attack on the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), accusing it of failed promises, lack of transparency in governance, and a tacit understanding with the BJP. Addressing public gatherings and party workers, Mr Kharge struck a strong, assertive tone, expressing confidence that the people of Keralam have made up their minds to bring the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) to power.

Launching a direct attack on the LDF’s employment record, Mr Kharge drew parallels with the BJP’s national promises. “The LDF promised 40 lakh jobs, just like Modi promised two crore jobs every year. In twelve years, 24 crore jobs should have been created. Where are they?” he asked, urging voters to question governments that fail to deliver. “Do not support those who repeatedly lie. Ask them questions,” he said, framing the election as a test of accountability.

Highlighting concerns over recruitment practices, Mr Kharge alleged a lack of fairness under the

jobs, while deserving candidates are ignored,” he said, pointing to growing frustration among Keralam’s youth.

Reaching out directly to young voters, the Congress President called the upcoming election a turning point. “To every youngster, this election is your chance to decide and bring change,” Mr Kharge said, adding, “You are talented, connected, and ambitious, and you deserve a government that matches your aspirations.” He emphasised that the Congress’ vision is aligned with the ambitions of Keralam’s youth, promising opportunities based on merit and fairness.

Mr Kharge also highlighted the concerns of Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs), praising their contribution while criticising the state government’s response during times of crisis. “I am proud that the people of Keralamm are spread across the world, and they deserve proper treatment. But when they return during crises, this government makes no arrangements for them,” he said.

Taking a broader political swipe, Mr Kharge accused the LDF of indirectly aiding the BJP. “Voting for the LDF means voting for the BJP. If people vote for the LDF, it means they are strengthening the BJP,” he said, adding that there is a widespread perception of a “secret understanding” between the two. “People here even call it the ‘Communist Janata Party,’” he remarked, alleging that the BJP fields weak candidates in Keralam to benefit the LDF. “They are not trying to win; they are trying to help the LDF win. Every vote for the BJP is a vote gifted to the LDF,” he added.

The Congress President also raised concerns about regional imbalance, particularly in North Keralam. “Malabar today faces fewer government jobs and inadequate healthcare. Kozhikode and the rest of North Keralam have been treated as an afterthought by the LDF,” he said, accusing both the LDF and BJP of neglecting the region and promoting divisive politics.

Invoking Keralam’s rich social and cultural legacy, Mr Kharge underscored the Congress’ commitment to secularism and inclusivity. “Keralamm is the land of Sree Narayana Guru and Mahatma Ayyankali, where diverse communities have lived together for centuries. Kozhikode has welcomed people from across the world for over 500 years with a spirit of true secularism—this is what the Congress stands for,” he said. In contrast, he criticised the BJP’s ideological approach, stating, “The BJP does not understand Keralamm, its history, or its values.”

He further accused the LDF of deviating from its secular claims. “The LDF says it is secular, but it is protecting the BJP’s agenda. How can this happen?” he asked, questioning the credibility of the ruling alliance.

Projecting confidence in the electoral outcome, Mr Kharge asserted that the momentum is clearly with the Congress-led alliance. “The public has made up its mind to vote for the UDF and form the government. Pinarayi Vijayan will lose this election,” he said.

As the campaign intensifies, the Congress is positioning itself as the only viable alternative capable of delivering transparent governance, inclusive growth, and real opportunities. With a strong message of accountability and unity, Mr Kharge’s call to voters is clear: “The only genuine vote for change is a vote for the UDF.”

Congress Confident of UDF Landslide, Says Pawan Khera

As Keralam moves closer to the Assembly elections, the Congress has exuded strong confidence about a decisive victory for the United Democratic Front (UDF), citing growing anti-incumbency and a visible shift in voter sentiment. Senior Congress leader Pawan Khera, responding to the media, asserted that the political mood in the state clearly favours change and that the party’s alliance is poised for a sweeping mandate.

“Ground reports from across Keralam indicate that people are eager and ready for change. The UDF is going to win with a landslide victory,” Khera said while interacting with journalists, pointing to what he described as a strong undercurrent against the ruling Left government.

Highlighting the Congress’ campaign narrative, Pawan Khera said that voters are increasingly connecting with the party’s vision and guarantees, which focus on key issues such as employment, welfare delivery, and



Photo: Gettyimages

economic stability. “This election is different. People are understanding the

Congress’ vision, the guarantees we have given, and the promises we have

made. There is a clear alignment between what people want and what we are offering,” he noted.

The Congress has built its campaign around targeted guarantees aimed at women, youth, farmers, and vulnerable communities. Party leaders maintain that these promises are not generic assurances but structured interventions designed to deliver measurable benefits. According to Khera, this approach has resonated with voters who are looking for both immediate relief and long-term opportunities.

a swipe at the ruling Left leadership, Khera also accused it of borrowing political language from the BJP. Responding to recent remarks by Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, he said, “The Keralam Chief Minister has even borrowed the word ‘appeasement’ directly from the BJP’s vocabulary. You can understand who is echoing whose line.” He reiterated that the Congress’ ideological foundation remains rooted in inclusivity. “The

ideology of the Congress is inherently inclusive. The allegation that we work for any one community or caste can never be levelled against us,” he added.

Khera further pointed to governance concerns as a major factor driving voter sentiment. Issues such as rising cost of living, unemployment among educated youth, and challenges in welfare delivery have contributed to what the Congress describes as growing dissatisfaction with the current government. “There is a clear sense of fatigue among people. They are looking for a government that is responsive, accountable, and focused on their everyday concerns,” he said.

Positioning the Keralam contest within a broader political context, Khera also expressed confidence about Congress’ prospects in other states, particularly Assam, where he said similar anti-incumbency trends are visible. However, he emphasised that in Keralam, the focus remains firmly on consolidating support for the UDF

and translating public sentiment into electoral success. On the party’s electoral strategy, Khera underlined the importance of grassroots mobilisation and organisational strength. “We are reaching out to every section, every household. Our effort is to ensure that our message and our guarantees reach every voter,” he said, adding that the Congress is leaving no stone unturned in its campaign.

As campaigning gathers momentum, the Congress is projecting the election as a decisive moment for Keralam. With a narrative centred on governance, inclusivity, and targeted welfare, the party is positioning itself as a credible alternative to the incumbent regime.

“The people of Keralam have made up their mind. This time, the mandate will be decisive and overwhelming,” Khera said, expressing confidence that the UDF is set to form the next government and usher in what he described as a new phase of growth and opportunity for the state.

Defeat the corrupt LDF, Let Keralam breathe Again

The Congress has framed the election as a decisive moment for Keralam's youth, positioning it as a referendum on governance, accountability, and opportunity. "I want to tell every young person in Keralam that this election is about your future, your employment," Gandhi emphasised, urging voters to focus on long-term prospects rather than short-term political narratives.

As Keralam heads into a crucial electoral contest, unemployment and youth distress have emerged as defining issues shaping political discourse. The Congress-led UDF has sharpened its attack on the ruling LDF, accusing it of presiding over a decade of "jobless growth, backdoor recruitments, and broken promises."

The scale of the crisis is stark. According to opposition claims, nearly one in three young people in Keralam are unemployed, a statistic that underscores the widening gap between promises and delivery. Both the LDF and the BJP had committed to large-scale job creation. However, those assurances have come under scrutiny.

Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi, while launching the UDF's campaign, directly questioned the credibility of these commitments. "Modi ji promised 2 crore jobs at the national level. Keralam Chief Minister promised 40 lakh jobs in the state, and after a decade, you find that they have not given a single job to the people; in fact, they have destroyed jobs," he said.

Beyond unemployment, the Congress has raised concerns about alleged irregularities in hiring processes. The issue of "backdoor appointments" has been repeatedly flagged, with the opposition arguing that merit-based recruitment has been compromised. This, they claim, has eroded trust among aspirants and



Photo: Gettyimages

they have made you number one in drug cases," Rahul Gandhi said, linking the unemployment crisis to the growing drug menace.

The Congress has framed the election as a decisive moment for Keralam's youth, positioning it as a referendum on governance, accountability, and opportunity. "I want to tell every young person in Keralam that this election is about your future, your employment," Gandhi emphasised, urging voters to focus on long-term prospects rather than short-term political narratives.

The Congress has also accused both the LDF and the BJP of evading accountability. "Neither the BJP nor the LDF believe they are answerable to the people. They do not believe that the people of Keralam should be able to ask them questions," Gandhi said, highlighting what the opposition calls a democratic deficit in governance.

In contrast, the Congress brings a coalition focused on transparency, inclusive growth, and employment generation. Party leaders argue that Keralam's educated youth cannot be sustained on migration and informal work alone, and that structural reforms are urgently needed to revive job creation. With elections approaching, the central question remains whether the electorate will endorse the LDF's record or respond to the UDF's call for change. For many young voters, the choice may ultimately hinge on one critical factor that who can realistically secure their future.

weakened institutional integrity.

The economic distress is also spilling into social challenges. Keralam, once celebrated for its human

development indicators, is now facing an alarming rise in drug abuse cases. The opposition cites figures suggesting over 8.25 lakh drug users in the state,

presenting it as a direct consequence of policy failure.

"Instead of making you number one in employment and technology,

From Healthcare to Social Harmony

Congress Flags Systemic Breakdown Under LDF

Keralam's long-standing reputation as a model state for healthcare and social cohesion is facing renewed political scrutiny, with the Congress-led UDF alleging a "systemic breakdown" under the ruling LDF government.

The opposition has raised serious concerns about deteriorating hospital infrastructure, and declining public confidence in the healthcare system. Once regarded as a global benchmark, Keralam's public health network is now being described by critics as overstretched and under-resourced.

Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi invoked a personal experience to highlight the state's healthcare paradox strong human capital but weakening systems. Recalling his recent visit to a hospital, he said, "I was comforted by only one thing... a nurse from Keralam who came in every hour to check on my mother... She would smile, and she would hold

her hand."

He used the example to underline the resilience and compassion of Keralam's workforce, particularly its nurses, who are globally respected. "While the whole world sleeps, women from Keralam... are comforting people, holding their hands, and making them feel at ease," he said.

However, the Congress argues that this human strength is being undermined by governance failures. "Hospital infrastructure is crumbling, and there are shortages of medical equipment. The LDF is destroying the healthcare system that was once a global model," Gandhi alleged.

Beyond healthcare, the UDF has also flagged concerns over law and order and alleged corruption. The controversy surrounding temple administration, including reported theft at Sabarimala Temple, has been cited as an example of institutional failure. The

Photo: Gettyimages



opposition claims that such incidents reflect deeper issues of accountability and respect for public faith.

"How can a government that does not respect Lord Ayyappa respect the people of Keralam?" Gandhi asked, raising questions about governance priorities.

At the same time, the Congress has sharpened its ideological attack, accusing the LDF and the BJP of fostering division rather than unity. "There are actually only two sides fighting here in Keralam. One is the UDF alliance, and the other is the partnership between the BJP and the LDF," Gandhi said, alleging tacit alignment between the two rivals.

The UDF has positioned itself as a defender of Keralam's secular and inclusive ethos. Drawing from the metaphor of a nurse, Gandhi described the state's identity as one rooted in equality and compassion. "A nurse does not differentiate based on a patient's religion, community, or whether they are rich or poor... This is the spirit of Keralam," he said.

The Congress argues that preserving this social fabric is central to the election. With rising concerns over communal polarisation and governance deficits, the party is framing the contest as a choice between "division and unity."

"I want to tell every family struggling under debt, the drug menace, and a broken healthcare system that your answer is April 9," Gandhi said, calling for a mandate for change.

As Keralam prepares to vote, the debate has clearly shifted beyond routine politics to larger questions about governance, accountability, and the preservation of its social model.

No Place for BJP's Hate Politics and LDF's Polarisation Agenda in Keralam

From the controversy surrounding Sabarimala Temple to the larger debate on secularism and minority rights, Congress says it's time to define Keralam's social fabric and future direction. The Sabarimala issue continues to remain one of the most politically sensitive matters in Keralam. The Congress has accused the ruling LDF of mishandling the issue, leading to social unrest and hurting the sentiments of devotees.

The BJP, on the other hand, has consistently tried to mobilise political support around the issue, projecting itself as a defender of faith. However, the Congress maintains that both the BJP and the LDF have used Sabarimala for political gains rather than seeking a balanced and respectful resolution.

Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi raised concerns over governance and accountability linked to the temple, stating, "They have not even left Sabarimala alone. Kilos of sacred gold have been stolen... How can a government that does not respect Lord Ayyappa respect the people of Keralam?" Congress' calls it irresponsible governance.

Keralam's diverse structure has made minority politics a key electoral factor. The Congress has positioned itself as a party that balances interests across communities, while accusing both the LDF and the BJP of pursuing divisive strategies.

The BJP's political narrative has often focused on religious identity, which the Congress argues is aimed at polarising voters. At the same time, the Congress has accused the LDF of selectively engaging in minority politics while failing to address core governance issues such as unemployment, healthcare, and law and order.

Rahul Gandhi directly attacked what he described as divisive politics, stating, "Expose the BJP's politics of hate." He emphasised that Keralam's strength lies in its unity and social harmony, warning that any attempt to divide communities would weaken the state's core identity.

The Congress argues that minority welfare cannot be reduced to symbolic politics, and must instead be rooted in equal opportunity, education, and economic empowerment.

The current political discourse in Keralam reflects increasing ideological polarisation. The Congress has framed the election as a contest between inclusive governance and divisive politics. "There are actually only two sides fighting here in Keralam. One is the UDF alliance, and the other is the partnership between the BJP and the LDF," Rahul Gandhi said, alleging a convergence of interests between the two rivals. According to the Congress, this polarisation is not accidental but a result of deliberate political manoeuvres that shift focus away from governance failures. Issues such as unemployment,

rising drug abuse, and healthcare challenges, the party claims, are being overshadowed by ideological conflicts.

The Congress has also highlighted how Keralam's long-standing secular ethos is under pressure. The party argues that the state, known for its social harmony and progressive outlook, risks being drawn into divisive narratives that have impacted other parts of the country.

Congress Calls for Inclusive Secularism

Congress-led UDF has emphasised its commitment to inclusive and secular governance. The party's approach focuses on balancing faith with constitutional values, ensuring that no community feels excluded or targeted. Rahul Gandhi used a powerful metaphor to describe Keralam's identity, saying, "A nurse does not differentiate based on a patient's religion, community, or whether they are rich or poor... This is the spirit of Keralam." The statement underscores the Congress' vision of a society built on equality, compassion, and mutual respect.

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From Promises to Performance

Keralam's Development Model Leaving People Behind

Keralam's ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) has consistently projected infrastructure development as the cornerstone of its governance model over the past decade. From highways and port-led expansion to large-scale projects funded through the Keralam Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB), the government has highlighted an ambitious vision of modernisation. However, as the state heads towards crucial Assembly elections, the debate has shifted from announcements to outcomes raising a key question are these achievements as substantial as claimed?

Keralam government has tall claims on the infrastructure development of the state but the fact is that the gap between announcements and delivery remains significant. Many infrastructure projects have faced delays, cost overruns, and implementation bottlenecks.

Reports indicate that several KIIFB-funded projects have experienced slow progress due to financial constraints and procedural challenges. Questions have also been raised about the sustainability of KIIFB's borrowing model, with concerns over increasing debt liabilities for the state.

Highway development, though progressing, has faced issues related to land acquisition, environmental clearances, and local resistance. In some cases, timelines have been extended significantly, raising doubts about efficiency.

Congress leaders have raised the concerns that the LDF government has prioritised publicity over performance. According to them, infrastructure announcements have often been amplified without corresponding progress on the ground.

K-Rail Controversy: Development or Disruption?

One of the most contentious projects under the LDF government has been the proposed K-Rail SilverLine semi-high-speed rail corridor. The project, aimed at improving north-south connectivity in Keralam, has triggered widespread protests across the state.

Local communities, environmental activists, and opposition parties have raised concerns about displacement, ecological damage, and financial viability. Critics argue that the project could lead to



Photo: Gettyimages

large-scale land acquisition, affecting thousands of families.

Environmental concerns have also been central to the opposition against K-Rail, with fears that it could disrupt fragile ecosystems and increase the state's vulnerability to natural disasters.

The protests against the project have highlighted a broader debate whether development is being pursued in a participatory and sustainable manner.

Senior Congress leader Sachin Pilot has intensified criticism of the LDF government, alleging a lack of accountability and ineffective governance.

Escalating his attack, Pilot said that both the LDF government and the BJP-led Centre have worked in tandem over the past decade, claiming that there has been little visible resistance from the CPI(M)-led alliance against central policies.

Referring to the Wayanad tragedy, he pointed out that despite demands for substantial financial assistance, the state received only a loan. He highlighted that it was leaders like Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and UDF MPs who actively protested against the Centre, questioning the LDF's approach.

Pilot further remarked that the Chief Minister appears unable to defend ten years of governance, leading to what he described as "baseless allegations" against the opposition.

UDF's Alternative Vision - Sustainable and People-Centric Development

The United Democratic Front (UDF), led by the Congress, has positioned itself as a proponent of balanced and inclusive development. The UDF argues that infrastructure growth must be aligned with environmental sustainability, fiscal responsibility, and public consultation.

According to Congress leaders, development should not come at the cost of displacement or ecological damage. They emphasise transparent governance, timely execution of projects, and prioritisation of local needs.

Pilot stated that the UDF's upcoming manifesto would be "positive, futuristic and inclusive," reflecting inputs from diverse sections of society. He underlined that Keralam's development model must focus on job creation and improving opportunities within the state.

As Keralam approaches the Assembly elections, infrastructure development has emerged as a central electoral issue. While the LDF continues to highlight its ambitious projects, the opposition is questioning their execution, sustainability, and impact.

The choice before voters, therefore, is not just about development, but about the model of development — whether it is driven by large-scale announcements or grounded in transparency, accountability, and people-centric policies.

Keralam has long been regarded as a model state for human development indicators, but in recent years, questions have emerged about whether its economic and infrastructure policies are keeping pace with public expectations. As elections approach, the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) has sharpened its attack on the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), arguing that the state's development narrative is increasingly disconnected from ground realities.

Big Announcements vs Everyday Challenges

The LDF government has consistently highlighted its achievements in infrastructure, citing investments in highways, ports, and KIIFB-funded projects as evidence of progress. These initiatives, the government claims, are laying the foundation for long-term economic growth.

However, opposition leaders



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Pilot highlighted that the party's guarantees, inspired by Rahul Gandhi, reflect immediate priorities, while the manifesto will present a broader vision for the state's future.

argue that these projects have not translated into tangible improvements in the daily lives of citizens. Issues such as traffic congestion, employment in public works, and lack of development opportunities continue to affect large sections of the population.

According to Congress leaders, development cannot be measured solely by the scale of projects announced but must be evaluated based on their real impact.

Employment Concerns and Migration

One of the key criticisms raised by the Congress is the lack of adequate employment opportunities in the state. Senior leader Sachin Pilot pointed out that many young people are being forced to leave Keralam in search of jobs.

"People are not leaving because they are finding better opportunities; they are leaving because they have no opportunities in Keralam," he said, highlighting what he described as a growing employment crisis.

The issue of migration has become a significant political concern, with many families relying

on income from outside the state. Critics argue that despite large infrastructure investments, job creation has not kept pace.

Centre-State Dynamics and Political Questions

Pilot also raised questions about the relationship between the LDF government and the BJP-led Centre. He alleged that over the past ten years, there has been little visible confrontation or sustained protest by the Left against central policies affecting Keralam.

Citing the response to the Wayanad tragedy, he questioned why stronger action was not taken by the state government to demand financial assistance.

In contrast, he noted that leaders such as Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and UDF MPs had actively protested to secure support for the state.

These remarks have added a political dimension to the development debate, with the Congress attempting to position itself as a more assertive voice for Keralam's interests.

The UDF has promised a shift towards a more inclusive and

sustainable development model. The Congress leadership has indicated that its manifesto will focus on employment generation, support for small businesses, and policies that address the needs of Keralam's diverse population.

Pilot highlighted that the party's guarantees, inspired by Rahul Gandhi, reflect immediate priorities, while the manifesto will present a broader vision for the state's future.

He emphasised that policymaking in Keralam must take into account regional diversity, environmental concerns, and the aspirations of young people.

The Congress has framed the contest as a choice between what it describes as "headline-driven development" and a more grounded, people-centric approach.

Pilot expressed confidence that the UDF would secure a comfortable majority but refrained from making specific predictions. He stressed that the party remains focused on engaging with voters and presenting a credible alternative.

The upcoming elections in Keralam are shaping up to be more than just a referendum on infrastructure projects. They represent a broader debate on governance, economic opportunity, and the direction of the state's development model. As voters weigh their options, the key question remains whether the current approach has delivered meaningful change or whether a new model, as proposed by the UDF, is needed to address the challenges ahead.

Congress Guarantees an Inclusive Future with Strong Leadership

Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) has put forward a clear, structured vision focused on welfare, economic opportunity, and social justice. Backed by specific guarantees and a strong organisational network, the Indian National Congress is projecting itself as a credible and stable alternative ready to deliver on its promises.

At the heart of the Congress campaign are concrete guarantees aimed at addressing the everyday concerns of people across the state. One of the most prominent promises is free bus travel for all women in KSRTC buses, a move designed to ease the financial burden on households while improving women's mobility and participation in education and employment. In addition, the party has announced a monthly financial assistance of ₹1,000 for college-going girls, aiming to support higher education and reduce dropout rates.

For Keralam's growing elderly population, the Congress has promised the creation of a dedicated ministry for senior citizens, ensuring focused



Photo: Gettyimages

policymaking and welfare delivery. Social security remains a key focus, with the party committing to increase welfare pensions to ₹3,000 per month, addressing long-standing concerns over delays and inadequate support.

Youth empowerment is another central pillar of the UDF's agenda. The

Congress has pledged to provide interest-free loans of up to ₹5 lakh for young entrepreneurs to start their own businesses. This initiative is expected to encourage self-employment, boost innovation, and create local job opportunities, especially at a time when unemployment remains a major concern

in the state. Healthcare, too, features prominently in the Congress vision. The party has proposed a comprehensive health insurance scheme of up to ₹25 lakh, named after former Chief Minister Oommen Chandy. This scheme aims to ensure affordable and accessible treatment for families, reducing the

financial strain caused by rising medical costs and strengthening Keralam's public health framework.

Beyond these guarantees, the strength of the Congress lies in its organisational depth and governance experience. The UDF has a long-standing grassroots presence

across Keralam, with leaders and workers actively engaging with communities and understanding local issues. The alliance is presenting a united front, emphasising stability, transparency, and accountability in governance.

The Congress is also positioning itself as a balanced alternative, focusing on inclusive development while avoiding political polarisation. Its campaign highlights a commitment to fiscal responsibility, efficient welfare delivery, and infrastructure development that is both timely and accountable. With clearly defined guarantees and a renewed political push, the Congress-led UDF is seeking a fresh mandate from the people of Keralam. The message is direct and simple: a government that listens, delivers, and prioritises the needs of its citizens. As the election draws closer, the UDF's combination of welfare promises and organisational strength is shaping the narrative of a strong and viable alternative for the state's future. Congress calls the people of Keralam to build a bright future together.

“Unprecedented Partnership”

Keralam Poll as Ideological Battle

In a politically charged campaign swing through Kannur, Rahul Gandhi sharpened his attack on both the Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), framing the upcoming Kerala Assembly elections as a defining ideological battle rather than a routine electoral exercise.

Addressing a packed rally as the principal campaigner for the United Democratic Front (UDF), Gandhi alleged that Kerala is witnessing an “unprecedented partnership” between ideologically opposed forces — the Left and the BJP. “This election is a fight between two ideologies, the Left and the UDF. But for the first time, we are seeing a partnership between the Left and the BJP,” he declared.

The Congress leader’s remarks were aimed directly at Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan and his government, which Gandhi accused of abandoning the foundational principles of the Left movement. According to him, the present-day Left no longer represents workers, farmers, and marginalised communities, but has instead developed a “soft corner for corporates.”

From Ideology to “Convenience Politics”

Gandhi’s argument rests on what he described as visible contradictions in Kerala’s political landscape. Historically, the CPI(M)-led Left and the BJP have formed fierce ideological adversaries. However, Gandhi suggested that their current political conduct indicates a tacit understanding. He pointed to two “clues” to support his claim, he noted that Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who frequently raises religious



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issues across India, refrains from doing so in Kerala — particularly on something like Sabarimala. “Why is it that the Prime Minister speaks about religion everywhere but remains silent in Kerala?” Gandhi asked. Second, Gandhi highlighted what he described as selective enforcement of investigative scrutiny. “I have multiple cases against me. I lost my Lok Sabha membership. I was questioned for hours. But what about the Chief Minister and his family?” he asked, implying a systemic bias. “The BJP wants the CPI(M) in power because they can control it. They cannot control a Congress-led UDF government,” Gandhi asserted, positioning Congress as the only force capable of enforcing a credible national challenge to the BJP.

A key visual moment at the rally was the presence of veteran former

CPI(M) leaders T.K. Govindan and V. Kunjikrishnan, now contesting as UDF-backed candidates. Gandhi used their presence to underline what he described as a deeper churn within the Left ecosystem. “This is proof that even committed Left leaders recognise that the movement has changed,” he said. According to Gandhi, such defections are not isolated incidents but indicators of growing dissatisfaction within the Left ranks. Political observers note that Kannur, long considered a Left stronghold, carries symbolic weight in Kerala’s politics. Gandhi’s decision to anchor his ideological attack reflects a strategic attempt to disrupt the Left’s narrative on its home turf.

Kerala’s Legacy vs Present Politics

Framing his appeal in broader

philosophical terms, Gandhi invoked Kerala’s legacy of social reform, inclusiveness, and communal harmony. “Kerala has always stood for unity, non-violence, and inclusiveness,” he said.

Contrasting this with what he termed the “Left-BJP partnership,” Gandhi argued that the UDF represents “love and brotherhood,” while its opponents thrive on division.

“The UDF brings people together through love and brotherhood, while this partnership promotes division,” he said, appealing to voters to protect Kerala’s social fabric.

As the campaign intensifies, Rahul Gandhi’s ideological framing seeks to consolidate anti-BJP and anti-incumbency sentiments while repositioning Congress as the natural custodian of Kerala’s pluralistic ethos.

“India’s Policies Being Dictated”

Rahul Gandhi Targets Modi on Economy, Foreign Policy

Expanding his attack beyond Kerala’s borders, Rahul Gandhi launched a scathing critique of the Narendra Modi government’s economic and foreign policy decisions, alleging that India’s sovereignty is being compromised under external influence.

Addressing a public gathering ahead of the April 9 polls, Gandhi claimed that India’s strategic autonomy particularly in energy procurement has been weakened. “If India wants to buy oil from Russia, Iran or Saudi Arabia, we need to get permission from Donald Trump. There is nothing more shameful than this,” he said, referring to global geopolitical pressures.

His remarks came amid heightened tensions in West Asia and concerns over energy security, a critical issue for India’s import-dependent economy.

Energy Security and Strategic Autonomy

Gandhi warned that India’s ability to independently navigate global energy markets is under threat. By invoking countries such as Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, he highlighted the traditional diversity of India’s oil sourcing strategy.

According to Rahul Gandhi, recent policy shifts have narrowed this flexibility, exposing India to geopolitical vulnerabilities. “India’s energy decisions should be made in Delhi, not influenced by Washington,” he implied.

His criticism taps into a broader opposition narrative that questions the government’s handling of international alignments and their domestic economic consequences.

Trade Deal Concerns, Impact on Farmers

The Congress leader also raised concerns over a reported trade arrangement with the United States, alleging that it disproportionately favours American interests at the cost of Indian farmers and small producers.

He claimed that India could be lured to purchase goods worth ₹9 lakh crore from the US, a move he said

would undermine domestic industries and the government’s own “Make in India” initiative.

“This will hurt our farmers those growing rubber, corn, soya, and fruits,” Gandhi warned, linking global trade decisions to local economic distress.

For Kerala, where rubber cultivation is a significant economic activity, such concerns carry particular resonance. Gandhi’s remarks appeared calibrated to connect national policy decisions with state-specific anxieties.

Data Sovereignty and Digital Concerns

In a striking allegation, Gandhi claimed that India’s data infrastructure has effectively been opened to external control. “He has handed the entire data of India to the US. They can store it wherever they like and use it however they want,” he said. While the government has consistently defended its digital policies as necessary for growth and innovation, Gandhi framed the issue as one of national security and sovereignty.

He went further to allege that the Prime Minister is “compromised” in his dealings with global powers a charge likely to intensify political debate in the run-up to the elections.

Politics of Distraction vs Governance

Rahul Gandhi also criticised Narendra Modi for focusing on religious themes in his speeches rather than governance issues. “The Prime Minister speaks about temples and Hinduism, but not about jobs, farmers, or the economy,” he said.

This line of attack reflects a consistent Congress strategy of contrasting what it describes as “divisive politics” with bread-and-butter issues such as employment, inflation, and economic growth. By bringing national issues into the Kerala campaign, Gandhi is attempting to elevate the electoral discourse and position the state election as part of a larger ideological struggle shaping India’s future.

“Selective Action, Systemic Bias”

Congress Raises Corruption, LDF-BJP Dynamics

Turning his focus back to Kerala’s internal politics, Rahul Gandhi launched a direct attack on the LDF government, accusing it of corruption, lack of accountability, and benefiting from what he described as a politically convenient arrangement with the BJP.

Gandhi made pointed allegations regarding the handling of sensitive issues, including those linked to Sabarimala. “The Left stole gold, they replaced gold with brass. Their leaders stole from Sabarimala, and no action was taken,” he alleged.

While the LDF has denied such charges, Gandhi’s remarks signal Congress’ intent to foreground corruption as a key campaign issue.

He argued that the absence of strong action in such cases reflects a deeper systemic problem. “Why is there no accountability?” he asked, framing the issue as one of governance failure rather than isolated incidents.

Selective Targeting of Opposition Leaders

A central theme of Gandhi’s



Photo: Gettyimages

speech was the allegation of selective use of investigation agencies against opposition leaders. Citing his own experience, he said, “I have many cases against me. I am out on bail. Everyone knows that whoever attacks Modi will have cases filed against them.”

He contrasted this with what he described as the lack of scrutiny faced by Pinarayi Vijayan and his family. “What about the Chief Minister and his family? It’s because they are part

of the same system,” he claimed. This rhetorical seeks to portray a broader political ecosystem in which adversaries of the BJP face pressure, while others are allegedly shielded.

Why BJP Doesn’t Target LDF Aggressively

Gandhi also questioned the BJP’s relatively restrained approach toward the LDF in Kerala. “Why does the BJP not attack the Left strongly? Because it suits them politically,” he

said. According to Gandhi, the BJP opponent, unlike a Congress. “The BJP understands that the Left cannot effectively challenge it in India. It knows that only the Congress has the ideology and strength to take it on,” he asserted.

This argument reinforces Congress’ positioning as the principal national alternative to the BJP, while simultaneously attempting to erode the Left’s credibility among its traditional

A Vision Beyond Criticism



Photo: Gettyimages

Despite his sharp attacks, Gandhi also, expressing hope that Kerala would one day elect a woman Chief Minister. The remark, though brief, aligns with Congress’ broader messaging on gender representation and inclusive governance.

As Kerala heads toward the Assembly elections, Gandhi’s campaign strategy appears to rest on three pillars: ideological contrast,

governance critique, and national vision. By linking local issues with national narratives from corruption and governance to foreign policy and economic sovereignty the Congress leader is attempting to reshape the electoral conversation. The election in Kerala. Is not merely and political contest for Congress but an endeavour to reshape the aspirations of the state. For Congress it is a larger battle over the direction of politics, governance, and values in India.

Jinnah, Mohd. Iqbal, Sir Syed...

Jammu University's proposal to remove key Muslim figures from the PG Political Science syllabus is unsurprising but dangerous

Haroon Reshi

The recent proposal to remove references to Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Dr Mohammad Iqbal and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan from Jammu University's postgraduate Political Science syllabus has shocked those who value academic freedom and oppose the erasure of historical perspectives. Critics warn that this move is a dangerous attempt to erase key perspectives and rewrite modern Indian history.

Even more shocking is how quickly, in just four days, the recommendation to drop these names from the syllabus was pushed through.

The controversy began on 20 March, when the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) protested the chapter on Jinnah in the 'Minorities and the Nation' paper. Almost immediately, vice-chancellor Umesh Rai formed a committee to review the syllabus. Led by Prof. Naresh Padha, the committee recommended removing all material related to Jinnah, Syed Ahmad Khan and Mohammad Iqbal from the MA Political Science syllabus.

The press release issued by the head of the department of Political Science, Jammu University reads: 'The faculty/ department affairs committee (DAC) meeting was held on 22 March 2026... After a thorough consideration, the committee unanimously resolved to recommend the removal of topics concerning Mohd. Ali Jinnah, Syed Ahmad Khan and Mohd. Iqbal from the course content of PIPSTC 102 of the One Year Postgraduate Programme and course content of P2PSTC 302 of the Two Year Postgraduate Programme in Political Science.'

The recommendation was forwarded to the board of studies (BoS), which was scheduled to meet online on 24 March to deliberate and take a final decision. Although the BoS's decision was not made public, it is widely believed that the proposed changes have been approved. All of this happened within a span of four days—without public debate, without consulting academics, and without seeking input from other educational institutions.

The alarming fact is that this move met practically no resistance. No prominent institution, no veteran academics, no civil society leader stepped forward to challenge or stop it.

Amir Choudhary, chief spokesperson of the Gujjar Bakerwal Students Alliance (GBSA), who had strongly opposed the proposal, said the alliance's campaign failed to garner support from civil society and even sections of liberal academia.

"Honestly, I am not surprised," Choudhary told *National Herald*. "There

have been ongoing efforts to saffronise the university, and it seems these efforts have now succeeded."

He pointed to another recent example of this trend. According to Choudhary, the ABVP and the BJP pressured the university to remove the word 'Jammuiyat' from the title of a two-day cultural event held on 13 March.

"The event was originally called 'Jammuiyat: Sahitya-Sanskriti Samagam', he explained. "But 'Jammuiyat' was dropped because it is an Urdu word. They claimed it was being added in the same way that 'Kashmiriyat' was once said to have been 'invented.'"

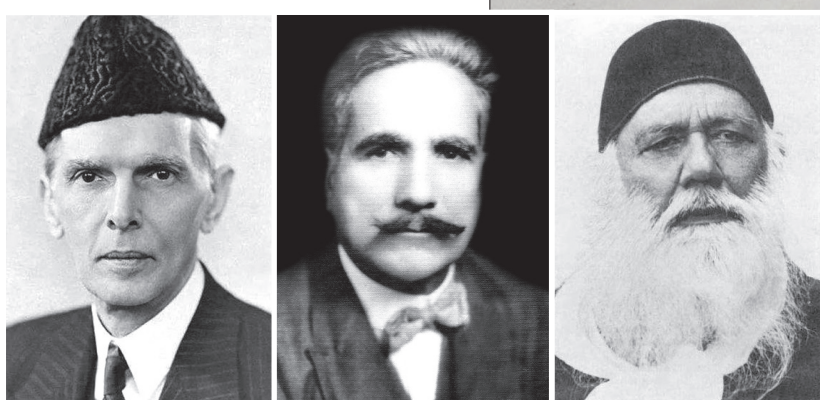
These actions reveal the ongoing push to alter the university's cultural and academic identity, said Choudhary, adding that erasing such historical and linguistic references is worrying.

Senior academic Prof. Noor Ahmad Baba, former head of the Political Science Department at Kashmir University, described the decision as "laughable".

Speaking to *National Herald* he said, "Such acts do not suit a university which is



(Above) A faculty-plus-students photo-op at Jammu University's history department; (far left to right) Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Mohammad Iqbal, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan



supposed to be a centre of higher learning and contested ideas. History cannot be denied. The figures whose references have been removed from the syllabus played a pivotal role in shaping modern Indian history, and no one can ignore their impact. From an Indian perspective, they may be seen as heroes or villains, but their contributions cannot be erased. Omitting them without acknowledging their significance only distorts our understanding of modern Indian history... Such actions are shortsighted."

Sohail Kazmi, political analyst, editor with the Urdu *Daily Taskeen*, and a well-known social figure in Jammu sees a diabolical pattern.

"It's not just about the university. The entire Jammu region is being turned into

a hub for such unwanted activities. Based on my understanding, Jammu is emerging as the RSS's next big stronghold after Nagpur. They are relentlessly attempting to alter a social fabric that was once rooted in secular and democratic values, transforming it into one marked by bigotry and hatred."

Recalling a more inclusive past, Kazmi told *National Herald*, "In 2011, we organised the 'Jashn-e-Faiz' programme in Jammu and invited eminent scholars and writers from Pakistan and India. This grand two-day event was financed by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), with Dr Karan Singh, who headed the ICCR at the time, playing a leading role to ensure its smooth execution. Even the then director general of police (DGP), Kuldeep Khoda, extended support through various schemes in his department. In today's Jammu, organising such an event is unimaginable. We have lost our secular and democratic values, as well as our social ethics."

Kazmi is of the opinion that dropping references to Muslim figures from the syllabus should be condemned in the strongest possible terms by everyone who believes in the ethics of education.

"At the very least, education must be spared from religious and political biases," he said, adding, "Had Jinnah been a militant leader in India, I would have supported dropping his reference from the syllabus. But he was one of the brightest minds—highly educated and, above all, one of the most significant political leaders of India. How can we erase his name from history, or even from the syllabus of a college or university? Similarly, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan played a vital role in reforming education in our country. He founded Aligarh Muslim University which is an institution every citizen of India can be proud of. Why should we remove him? How can Iqbal, who gave us 'Saarey jahan se achha,' be considered a threat?"

Amir Choudhary raised another pressing question: "How can university authorities deny young students the right to learn about such pivotal figures in Indian history? By erasing their references from our historical narrative, what kind of scholars can our educational institutions hope to cultivate? If our institutions abandon this responsibility, we risk producing generations schooled in ignorance rather than insight." ■

"It's not just the university. Jammu is emerging as the Sangh's next big stronghold after Nagpur"



NEHRU CENTRE AUDITORIUM

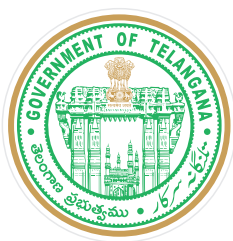
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