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It pays to invest in warning systems

Navin Joshi

On 28 May 2025, a towering serac collapsed in the Swiss Alps, sending an avalanche of glacial ice and rock hurtling down the mountain. The torrent of water, mud, moraine and rock debris buried the entire village of Blatten. The devastation was enormous, yet only one person died.

That was possible because of advance warning, preparedness and swift rescue operations. There were systems in place to read the signs of impending danger.

We don't yet know the full extent of the loss of life and property in Tibet/Nepal in the late August catastrophe. According to information available so far, more than a thousand people have died and nearly four thousand are missing.

The high Himalaya has witnessed several such disasters in recent years—the Chorabari-Kedarnath catastrophe of 2013, Rishiganga-Chamoli in 2021, Lhonak in north Sikkim in 2023 and the devastating Kheer Ganga-Dharali disaster of 2025. Memories of these disasters send shivers down the spine. Hundreds of lives were lost, entire villages and hydropower plants were swept away or buried.

But there weren't any advance warnings for any of these disasters. What question, then, of preparedness for rescue?

Even allowing for the considerable differences in the structure and nature of the Alps and the Himalaya, it is surely worth asking: after remote sensing satellites, glaciology, Himalayan studies, geology and a vast body of related research—not to mention intensive studies by the IITs and the Indian Institute of Science—is it really not possible to put in place even a rudimentary system of advance warning for such disasters? Or is this simply not among our priorities?

Himalayan peaks, passes and rivers also form international frontiers. There have been allegations from several quarters that even after the disaster struck, had China alerted Nepal, hundreds of lives might have been saved. We might say China is a closed



No advance warnings ...and no lessons learnt either from the disasters at (clockwise from top) Kedarnath (2013), Chamoli (2021), Sikkim (2023) and Dharali (2025)

society, but is there any treaty or understanding of this kind among India, Nepal and Pakistan? Is anyone even thinking about creating such a mechanism?

At an altitude of six and a half thousand feet, the Birahi valley in Garhwal, Uttarakhand, is hemmed in on three sides by towering peaks. The river flowing through it is also called the Birahi.

One day in 1893, an enormous rock broke loose from one of the peaks and crashed down at the mouth through which the Birahi river flowed out of the valley. The river was blocked. A lake began forming between the mountains.

By the time British government officials and engineers reached the site, the lake was already a mile wide, five miles long and four hundred feet deep. It came to be called Gauna Lake, after a nearby village. The British engineers saw it as a big

We don't even have the rudimentary warning systems of the past. Why? Is it not a priority?

and had a telegraph station built there so that whenever the lake appeared about to burst, an alarm could be sent to the valleys downstream. Eventually, one day, the lake did burst. But the warning system had alerted people all the way down to Haridwar.

That year, 1894, only the upper hundred feet of Gauna Lake gave way. A lake three hundred feet deep remained in place for decades. On 20 July 1970, it finally burst in its entirety with terrifying force.

India had been independent for many years by then. But there was no longer a telegraph station, nor any other system to warn people of collapsing mountainsides, falling trees, tumbling boulders and the enormous mass of earth and debris rushing downstream. The horrifying trail of destruction all the way to Haridwar is there in the records.

Even today, landslides that dam mountain rivers and create temporary lakes cause devastating floods and deaths almost every year when these lakes burst. We still do not have a comprehensive warning system for such dangers. How, then, are we to expect a mechanism capable of reading the movements deep inside the enormous glaciers of the high Himalaya and issuing timely warnings? We are not even able to keep adequate watch on the lakes forming and expanding among the glaciers.

Experts point out that this is no easy task. Himalayan glaciers are spread over an area of about 48,000 square kilometres and, according to researchers, contain more than 5,000 lakes. Around 500 of these are considered dangerous. As many as 388 instances of glacial lake outbursts have been recorded across the Himalaya and Karakoram ranges, producing sudden floods. The disasters at Kedarnath, Chamoli, Sikkim and Dharali were caused by such glacial lake outbursts.

Such disasters are becoming more frequent—and more ferocious. Experts say the scale of the catastrophe in Nepal may be beyond precedent even in the past

thousand years. Glaciers may look tranquil from above, but all kinds of movements are constantly taking place within them. It is worth remembering that the Himalaya is a geologically young range—an infant in mountain-time—and is still rising. That is precisely why it is considered among the world's most fragile mountain systems. The unrestrained race for 'development' and the pressure of human settlement are taking their toll as well. And rising global temperatures are, of course, an enormous threat. Glaciers are melting and retreating. Some have effectively become bombs suspended in the air.

A recent study by IIT Bhubaneswar and the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, has identified 219 such hanging glaciers in the upper reaches of the Alaknanda valley alone. They need constant monitoring.

It may be like 'looking for a needle in a haystack', but it is not impossible. What it requires is money, an institutional mechanism and political will. The cost would be far lower than what we repeatedly lose in disasters and spend on relief and rehabilitation. The bursting of the Lhonak glacial lake in north Sikkim alone was estimated to have caused losses of Rs 25,000 crore.

The Government of India has begun to map and study glaciers and the lakes forming among them with the help of space research centres. But the real task is continuous monitoring of glaciers identified as vulnerable. Signals obtained through remote sensing satellites can help. We need to learn and seek assistance from the countries of the Alps, where glaciers are being studied, mapped and monitored in this manner.

And, as the American scientist and researcher Austin Lord has suggested, local communities—shepherds, Gujars and fisherfolk—should also be brought into the process. They possess generations of empirical knowledge about how to read the signs of danger. ■

NAVIN JOSHI is a veteran journalist and author

Of fake forms and deletions

► Continued from page 1

Several voters are of the opinion that outspoken critics of the government have been deliberately deleted. The Sabar report also found environment activist Reenu Paul is one of them. "My name has been deleted while my husband Vijendra Paul is there. I believe this has been done to harass me," Paul said.

Another vocal critic Kamala Pant, who heads the Uttarakhand Mahila Manch, says she has been spared but her husband Nandan Pandey's name has vanished. (Pandey had served as Uttarakhand's director of education.) Congress vice president Suryakant Dhasmana maintains, "They are targeting minorities, especially Muslims and Christians. All the voters identified are Congress voters. The intention is clearly mala fide. The state election commission has ordered an enquiry but we are yet to receive a satisfactory response to our queries."

In the last one year, the SIR exercise in India has seen nearly six crore voters deleted. Minorities in Uttarakhand fear they are next in line.

Muslims in the state believe the SIR is being used to systematically target them. Factors such as impossibly tight verification timelines, discrepancies in names and addresses caused by scribal errors, marriages and migrations; and classifications like 'logical discrepancies' could lead to disproportionate exclusions. The boogey that those living in border areas adjacent to Uttar Pradesh are also registered in cities such as Bareilly, Moradabad and Rampur is false—a rumour circulated to disenfranchise them.

The Sabar report also found that in 45 of Uttarakhand's 70 Assembly constituencies, the number of voters deleted exceeded the winning margin recorded in the 2022 assembly election. The BJP is known to be closely monitoring 23 assembly seats that they lost in the 2022 assembly elections

with special focus on Khatima (represented by chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami in 2012 and 2017; lost in 2022).

Apart from the Kichha seat where around 9,300 objections have been filed, Rudrapur recorded 2,818 objections, Gadarpur 1,370, Khatima 394 and Nanakmatta 391. Most of these objections have been filed by individuals with close links to the BJP.

Purushottam has tried to reassure voters, telling them not to panic if they receive such notices, and that errors in names, addresses and other particulars can be corrected by submitting the prescribed documents. He himself received a notice after a discrepancy was found in the electoral records. 'Routine discrepancy cases' will be verified and disposed of at the BLO level, he said, adding that district election officers have been instructed to ensure that voters aren't unnecessarily inconvenienced.

Nainital sub-divisional magistrate Nawazish Khalik claims BLOs were visiting households to verify voter details and collect the required information. In Nainital, a notice was served at the residence of BJP MLA Sarita Arya, seeking voter verification details for both the legislator and her younger son. A similar notice reached Kumaon Commissioner Deepak Rawat.

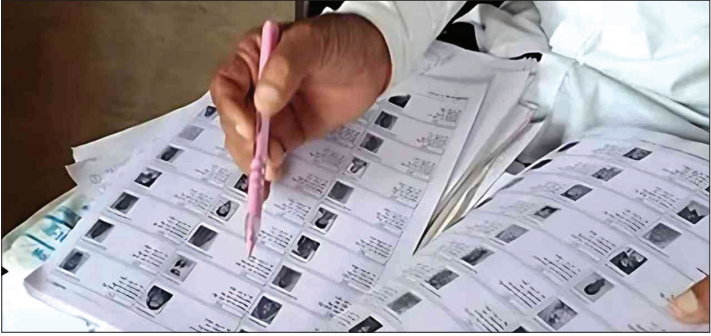
The claims and objections period will remain open until 13 August and the deadline for disposing notices is 11 September. The comprehensive breakdown of individual voter deletions will be published by the Election Commission on 15 September. What will be the fate of those permanently struck off?

Dhasmana reminds us that in West Bengal, the Supreme Court-appointed SIR appellate tribunals have restored 91 per cent of only 2.7 per cent of the appeals brought before them. "This means the vast majority is still left hanging. All these people were not given the right to vote. The Bengal elections should be declared null and void, and fair and free elections should be held once again." ■

THE SIR HORROR SHOW

15,00,00,000

That's the approximate number of adult Indians—each with a right to vote—that the SIR will declare ineligible by the time the ECI is quite done with the exercise. A.J. Prabal on the mayhem



Wrap your mind around this: over the three phases of the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of voter rolls in India, we have seen the deletion of 13 crore names so far, and it is estimated that by the time the Election Commission of India is done with this exercise, the number will swell to 15 crore. India's estimated adult (voting age-eligible) population is 97–99 crore.

Consider the following: Maharashtra, covered in SIR/Phase 3, has seen the highest drop in absolute numbers—2.06 crore (or 21 per cent). In Uttar Pradesh (SIR/Phase 2), 2.04 crore names have been deleted (~19 per cent). In Karnataka (SIR/Phase 3), 1.07 crore names (19.5 per cent). These three account for the highest absolute numbers of deletions.

The SIR draft roll for Maharashtra, which was published on 31 August, has 7.72 crore voters, which is 2.06 voters less than the state's pre-SIR baseline. Curiously, as MP and Congress national spokesperson Pawan Khera has pointed out, between the Lok Sabha election in May 2024 and the assembly election later that year, the same ECI had reason to add 40 lakh new voters to the state's electoral list. The Congress and other Opposition parties had at the time flagged the abnormal increase in the space of five months, and the ECI maintained the additions were all bona fide.

Delhi (Phase 3) has the dubious distinction of recording the highest percentage drop—nearly 33 per cent of its pre-SIR electorate are out of the draft roll. That's nearly one in three voters. It has a large working class migrant population, and a study published in *The Wire* found that the 47.56 lakh deletions in Delhi are heavily skewed towards working-age men in temporary, informal housing; mainly migrant, blue-collar workers from Poovanchal.

Ninety-one per cent deletions in Delhi are based on officers not being able to find someone. Every removal carries one of four reasons—absent, shifted, dead or duplicate (ASDD). Two reasons dominate in Delhi: 'permanently shifted' accounts for 31.6 lakh (or nearly two of three) deletions while 'untraceable or absent' accounts for another 11.7 lakh (or one in four). Together, these two reasons account for 91 per cent of deletions in Delhi. 'Death' accounts for less than 6 per cent and 'duplicate' registrations <3 per cent.

Five constituencies in Bengaluru have lost more than half of their electors while nine of Hyderabad's 15 constituencies have seen more than 40 per cent deleted. SABAR Institute, a Kolkata-based public policy research non-profit, found that in two constituencies in Hyderabad, the number of deletions is higher than the number of votes cast in the last election.

If there are mistakes in the list, the ECI argues, voters can appeal and get their names restored. Not exactly a cinch, as horror stories of voters running from pillar to post—before and after elections—have demonstrated. In an RTI reply to Member of Parliament Rishi Khan Chowdhury from Malda (West Bengal), the ECI has claimed that only 7 lakh out of the 27 lakh voters declared 'not eligible'—after they were mapped, produced documents and attended hearings—actually approached an appellate tribunal. (West Bengal is the only state that even has these appellate tribunals—19 of them, set up on a Supreme Court order after the last list in West Bengal saw 27 lakh voters still out of the voter lists. In other states, appeals have to be directed to local election officials.)

The RTI reply, dated 17 August 2026, revealed that of the 38,10,620 (38.1 lakh) appeals filed in the state, only 82,782 (2.17 per cent) had been

disposed of by 7 August. At that speed, clearing the backlog would take more than 20 years!

Incidentally, of the appeals decided, 75,443 names (about 91 per cent) were to be restored, the tribunals decided. The RTI also reveals that more than 20 lakh appeals were filed by the ECI itself, challenging the inclusion of voters who had already been cleared by judicial officers during the adjudication phase.

The ECI, as alert readers will remember, has been making ad hoc rules on the fly, as it has gone from one phase of the exercise to another, rather than playing punctiliously by the rule book. There is one, believe it or not! Even after all the exposés that raised deeply unsettling questions about the SIR, the Supreme Court has given it a clean chit, even chiming in with remarks like why those deleted unfairly have not protested. Here's a short list of dissonant details their Lordships might like to consider:

- The ECI has not provided written reasons for deletion of names nor has it transparently separated voters 'absent' from voters who

Rules have been changed on the fly even while the SIR has been ongoing

have 'shifted' as per the SIR. It's 'Manual on Electoral Rolls' (2023) explicitly states that 'an absentee voter is that person who is found to be absent for a limited period from [...] his ordinary residence where he is enrolled as an elector. [...] But his name cannot be deleted, as in the existing law, a person absents himself temporarily from his place of ordinary residence shall not, by reason thereof, cease to be ordinarily resident therein.' This definition questions the legality of voters absent during enumeration being deleted in the first place.

- The rules for Form 7 applications requesting deletion of names from the electoral rolls or to file an objection against a proposed inclusion have been progressively loosened. From a maximum of 10 a day per BLA (booth-level agent) in 2023, it became 50 a day in 2025 to no limits in 2026 (with a caveat that more than five will trigger reviews). In Uttarakhand (see overleaf on page 1), BJP workers have filed bulk applications to delete voters. In Kichha, 99 per cent of all deletion requests came from a single BJP booth-level agent, who filed 4,855 objections—all against Muslim voters. According to a *Newslandry* report, in Jhabrera, Haridwar, 35 people listed as applicants in 1,657 objections said they had never filed them and that their identities had been misused. In affidavits submitted to the Haridwar district administration on 18–19 August, they said unknown persons had used their names, EPIC numbers and forged signatures to file Form 7 applications seeking voter deletion.
- The use of BLA-1 and BLA-2 forms and the underlying responsibilities of BLAs have triggered legal battles, with the Delhi High Court intervening on 3 September 2026, to strip away an administrative mandate imposed on BLAs. Political parties filed petitions challenging a rule requiring agents appointed via BLA-2 forms to sign an undertaking certifying that they had personally verified 'every single detail' contained in the electors' house-to-house enumeration forms. Justice Amit Bansal ruled that booth-level agents are not liable for verifying data in SIR enumeration forms and that data verification is a statutory duty for government officers not party workers.
- The SIR voter lists are still not machine-readable and omit key booth/constituency information. How much is enough, Lordships, to demand some answers from the Election Commission of India? ■

Protest. Capitulation. Repeat

The infectious protests sweeping India have reached the tribal student hostels of Maharashtra. **Jaideep Hardikar** reports

Five days before three tribal girls died of snakebite in a residential school in Maharashtra’s Gadchiroli district, the Devendra Fadnavis government had issued an order saying every tribal hostel should have cots, mattresses, blankets and pillows. The girls had none. On the night of 10 August, six girls at the Japtalai Ashram School in Dhanora taluka were bitten by a poisonous snake while they were sleeping on the floor. Three died. The other three were hospitalised and one of them, 14-year-old Samruddhi, is still critically ill. She was moved to a hospital in Nagpur.

Within a fortnight, the state government cancelled the school’s licence and ordered an audit of more than 500 government-aided tribal residential schools. Infuriated by the turn of events, the tribal students hit the streets, taking their cue no doubt from the cascade of student protests witnessed of late. Their demands went way beyond compensation for the families of the dead students. For 17 days, Adivasi students sat on hunger strike at Manjari in Pune. Students in Nagpur, Nashik and other parts of Maharashtra joined the agitation in their respective cities. The protest grew in size and got more strident—and on 29 August, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis accepted all their demands and gave a written assurance that he would review the implementation of his commitments within three months.

The Gadchiroli tragedy is not an isolated story. Officials have since disclosed that 584 students have died in two years—causes ranging from illness and accidents to snakebite and suicide—in Maharashtra’s government-run or -aided ‘ashramshalas’. The students have withdrawn their strike for now, with a stern warning that they will hit the streets again if the government fails to keep its promise. Their resentment has been growing over the past few years over sundry government rules/orders impacting student hostels, food provisions, scholarships and suchlike, which together betray the government’s whole approach to tribal education. Take the new rules for tribal hostels notified by the Fadnavis government in August. One provision fixed an age ceiling of 26 for admission. (It was revised to 30 after protests and eventually scrapped). Students asked: why should a tribal student pursuing higher education at 26, 28 or 30 become ineligible for a hostel? Adivasi students do not necessarily make the grades as per a calendar the government may consider the norm. Poverty, distance, poor schooling, family responsibilities and interrupted education can push a



Tribal students sit on dharna after three girls died of snake bite at the Japtalai ashram school, Dhanora

student’s college years well beyond the conventional age. For an Adivasi student in a remote village, a college admission is not enough to break free. The state has to make it possible for these students to remain in college, with assistance for bare necessities like food, books, medicines and a place to live and study. For a student from a remote tribal village, to not have that hostel can mean the end of her higher education dreams. On top of those age restrictions, the Fadnavis government also lay down restrictions on all manner of protests and, as per the Adivasi Adhikar Bachav Kruti Samiti, intends to outsource the management of all tribal hostels in the state to a public charitable trust run by people close to the BJP/RSS.

Maharashtra has no dearth of schemes for tribal students. What’s missing is the intent to deliver

meals, money would go directly to students. The money never arrives on time. (Another matter that even if it did, the money can find other uses when resources are so scarce and subsidised meals are a different kind of assurance.) Tribal students repeatedly complained of delays—sometimes as long as two years—in DBT payments and scholarships. Some have had to borrow money or leave hostels because they could not afford food and everyday expenses, or the local eateries would not give them credit beyond three months. There were also reports of diversion of funds meant for tribal students to other populist schemes such as the Ladki Bahin Yojana. On the back of the students’ unrest, there is now an assurance from the state government that the DBT system will be scrapped and local kitchens reinstituted in these hostels. Maharashtra has around 500 government-run tribal hostels, accommodating an estimated 58,000 to 60,000 poor students from remote villages who need a place to stay near their colleges and universities. But these hostels lack study rooms, libraries, computers and

internet access and often even basic amenities like clean drinking water and functional toilets. The students want hostels relocated to areas closer to educational institutes, libraries and hospitals and accessible by public transport. On 22 August, at the Congress party’s ‘Chhatron ki Goonj’ event in Pune, the testimony of a tribal student named Nisha Sable created a firestorm. Sable said that female students returning from vacation to their tribal hostels in Maharashtra were being forced to take pregnancy tests. The matter was first reported late last year and an inquiry ordered by the state tribal welfare department. The documentary record is scant. Government rules on health examinations for hostel students do not prescribe such a pregnancy test. Local tribal development authorities have denied issuing such an order. But a day after the Maharashtra State Women’s Commission visited the tribal girls’ hostel in Wakad, Pune, for a surprise inspection (on 23 September 2025), a Pune civil surgeon told the media that medical personnel had been orally instructed to conduct pregnancy tests when girls returned from vacation. We still don’t know who authorised the tests or, if there was no written order, who gave the verbal instruction? It is highly improbable, though, that tests were conducted across several tribal hostels in the state without any instruction from anywhere.

The protesting Adivasi students have also demanded that thousands of vacant posts reserved for Scheduled Tribe candidates be filled. There are nearly 12,500 such vacancies in the state. They have raised questions about bogus caste certificates and the protection of ST reservation and recruitment under PESA (a national law to promote self-governance for tribal communities living in scheduled areas). Genuine ST candidates often struggle to validate their status while people with fake certificates go on to claim positions reserved for STs. Maharashtra has no dearth of schemes for tribal students. There are government departments, portals, welfare programmes and designated officers. The problem is the lack of political will and the intention to deliver what is mandated. But in this season of protests, it looks like the state’s tribal students have also decided enough is enough.

Who needs a safe house?

Tamil Nadu confronts the dark world of ‘honour killings’ and caste-based violence

K.A. Shaji

In Udumalpet, Tiruppur district, Kausalya Sankar and her husband V. Shankar were attacked in plain sight on 13 March 2016. Shankar, a 22-year-old Dalit engineering graduate, was hacked to death. Kausalya, then 19, suffered serious head injuries. CCTV footage of Shankar collapsing as the killers fled shocked the whole country. Kausalya, who married against the wishes of her family, survived and went on to become one of Tamil Nadu’s most visible voices against caste violence. Her legal crusades following Shankar’s death are milestones in a state where honour killings continue despite its progressive moorings and socio-political advancements. She welcomed the Joseph Vijay government’s recent decision to establish safe houses in every district (all 38 of them) for individuals and families vulnerable to or affected by honour killings, caste killings and related violence. Kausalya told *National Herald*, “When a couple goes against the wishes of their parents to get married, they have nowhere to go. If only we had such a safe house, I would not have lost my husband.” Her words remind of the chasm between constitutional rights and the reality confronting couples who dare to cross caste boundaries. Social justice minister Vanni Arasu announced the decision in the assembly on 28 August, saying it heard representations from survivors and activists, and was in line with the Supreme Court’s landmark judgement in the well-known Shakti Vahini case In *Shakti Vahini vs. Union of India* (2018), the court affirmed that consenting adults have the right to choose their partners, free from interference by family, caste or community. It directed states to establish district-level special cells and 24-hour helplines to address threats and harassment, with the police required to take immediate preventive action. Where necessary, couples were to be shifted to safe houses, particularly those facing threats over inter-caste or inter-faith

relationships. Authorities could provide protection and, if requested, assistance with marriage and registration. Safe-house stays were envisaged for one month, extendable monthly up to one year based on the threat. Tamil Nadu plans to provide additional counselling, legal aid and rehabilitation support. It is also considering a special law against honour killings. A committee headed by retired Supreme Court judge K.N. Basha has been examining measures to prevent such crimes; legislation will follow the committee’s recommendations. Arasu said that funds would be allocated in two weeks and facilities would start functioning very soon. Tight security would be provided for newly-weds until tensions de-escalated and families became less hostile. The period would also help couples find proper jobs and homes of their own. Safe houses could become a critical intervention because the danger often begins long before a murder. Couples are threatened, abducted, confined, assaulted or separated by their families. In many cases, the police are approached only after the threats become acute. For a young couple forced out of home, there is often no place to go.

Tamil Nadu has a troubling history of violence. The 2003 abduction and murder of Dalit youth Murugesan and his Vanniyar wife Kannagi in Cuddalore became one of the state’s defining cases, exposing police complicity and investigative failures. It took 22 years for the Supreme Court to uphold the convictions of the 11 accused in 2025. In 2014, the Vimaladevi case revealed how the machinery meant to protect was itself the source of danger. Vimaladevi, a caste Hindu woman, had married Dalit youth Dhilipkumar. A crowd from her community gathered at the police station, where the cops separated the couple despite their insistence that they were married. Vimaladevi later died under suspicious circumstances. These allegations were recorded by the Madras High Court, which transferred the investigation and ordered

systemic measures, including district special cells and a 24-hour helpline. In 2015, Dalit engineering graduate Gokulraj was abducted from a temple in Tiruchengode for being with a woman from the Kongu Vellalar community. His body was found the next day. In 2022, a special court convicted 10 people, and the Madras High Court later upheld convictions against eight. Shankar’s case remains particularly salient because Kausalya survived to testify and campaign against caste violence. Her father was sentenced to death by a trial court, and later acquitted by the Madras High Court. Kausalya’s appeal against that acquittal is still pending before the Supreme Court. The problem has not disappeared. In July 2025, a 27-year-old Dalit software engineer Kavin Selvaganesh was killed in Tirunelveli allegedly for his relationship with a dominant-caste woman. The



V. Shankar was hacked to death in plain sight in March 2016. His wife Kausalya survived the attack to testify. She went on to become one of Tamil Nadu’s most prominent voices against caste violence

investigation was transferred to the CB-CID and the case remains before the courts. The data reveal an even deeper problem: Tamil Nadu does not have a dependable official count of ‘honour killings’, which are not a separate offence in Indian criminal law. Motives are recorded as murder, suicide, abduction or other. Official statistics therefore reveal less than what civil society organisations find. Evidence, a Madurai-based rights organisation, says 59 people were murdered in 53 honour-killing incidents in Tamil Nadu between 2017 and 2025. It recorded 14 deaths in 2023, 11 in 2024 and seven in 2025. The organisation submitted FIRs and case documents relating to all 53 incidents to the Basha Commission in March. Between 2016 and 2020, research by Evidence had identified 55 suspected honour killings. Over 25 years (1999-2024), only six cases had resulted in convictions: Shankar-Kausalya, Kannagi-Murugesan, Gokulraj, Amirthavalli, Kalpana and Abirami. Arokiasamy Vincent Raj, also known as ‘Evidence’ Kathir for his work with the organisation, argues that the low conviction record cannot be separated from the way such crimes are investigated: “Honour killings are the product of social engineering. Political pressure and casteism in the criminal justice system both play roles.” He points out that caste killings also occur beyond the Dalit-dominant-caste binary, among backward communities and between different marginalised groups.

Shaped by Periyar’s anti-caste movement, Tamil Nadu is seen as India’s laboratory of social justice

Modi's Indus brinkmanship is another diplomatic blunder

India's rejection of the international court ruling on the 1960 water treaty hands China a dangerous precedent

Ashok Swain

When India placed the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance after the Pahalagam terror attack of April 2025, the decision was presented by the Modi government as an act of strategic resolve. The message was that Pakistan could not support cross-border terrorism while continuing to benefit from cooperation over shared rivers. The slogan might have been politically compelling but the policy behind it was legally doubtful, materially ineffective and strategically shortsighted. The latest ruling by the Court of Arbitration in The Hague, and India's categorical refusal to accept it, have now converted a self-defeating decision into a serious diplomatic blunder.

The Court has ruled that the 1960 treaty remains in force and India cannot unilaterally suspend its obligations. It has also ordered interim restrictions on construction at the Ratle Hydroelectric Plant in Kashmir. India must not raise the dam wall or power intake structure beyond specified levels until 90 days after a World Bank-appointed neutral expert delivers a decision, expected by July 2027. New Delhi has responded by calling the tribunal illegally constituted and insisting that its pronouncements will have no effect on India's projects.

India has long contested the simultaneous establishment of a Court of Arbitration and a neutral expert process under the Treaty. It is entitled to advance that legal argument. But refusing to participate does not make the proceedings disappear, nor does labelling an adverse award an assault on sovereignty dispose of India's treaty obligations. Sovereignty includes the capacity to enter binding agreements. It does not grant a state the freedom to disregard them whenever compliance becomes politically inconvenient.

The Indus Waters Treaty contains no provision allowing either party to place it in abeyance unilaterally. Indeed, its durability came from insulating water cooperation from the violent fluctuations of India-Pakistan relations. It survived the wars of 1965 and 1971, the Kargil conflict and repeated military crises. If even war did not extinguish the Treaty, linking its operation to an open-ended demand that Pakistan end all support for terrorism effectively turns a water agreement into an indefinite instrument of political caprice.

Terrorism is a legitimate and grave security concern for India. Pakistan must



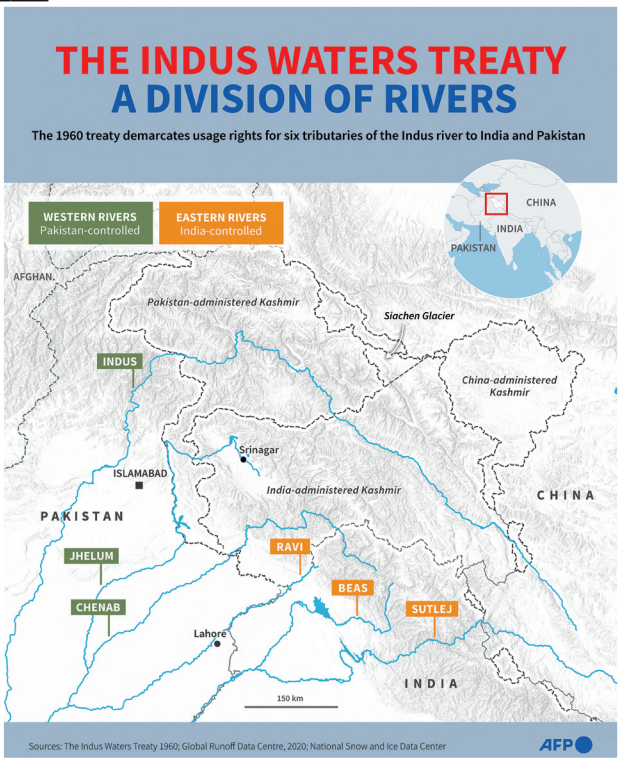
Photo: Getty Images

The Baglihar dam on the river Chenab before it flows into Pakistan; (right) the rivers that feature in the Indus Waters Treaty

be held accountable for any assistance given to groups carrying out violence across the border. But punishment must be lawful, proportionate and strategically useful. Suspending a treaty that sustains Pakistan's agriculture does not meet those tests. It shifts attention from terrorism to India's conduct, allows Pakistan to portray itself as the defender of international law and exposes millions of ordinary people to uncertainty over a resource essential for food and livelihoods.

The treaty benefits to India are also greatly exaggerated. India lacks the storage and diversion infrastructure required to

India cannot mount a defence of treaty obligations when it suits and dismiss an arbitral ruling when it imposes curbs



Infographic: Getty Images

stop or substantially redirect the western rivers. The mountainous terrain makes large-scale transfer of their waters extremely difficult, while much of Indian-administered Kashmir already has more water than it can readily use for irrigation. New Delhi can disrupt data sharing, alter reservoir operations and create anxiety during sensitive agricultural periods. It cannot, however, simply turn off the Indus system without years of construction, enormous expenditure and profound environmental and security risks.

A policy that imposes substantial legal and diplomatic costs without usable leverage is political theatre, not tactical toughness. Keeping the Treaty in abeyance helps Modi maintain the veneer of resolve after Operation Sindoor failed to secure its military objectives. Yet symbolic retaliation cannot be a substitute for coherent regional strategy. Water weaponisation may satisfy the domestic clamour for punishment, but it gives Pakistan the international platform that India has traditionally sought to deny it.

Islamabad has approached the World Bank and taken the issue to the United Nations Security Council. The Treaty bears the World Bank's signature for specified

procedural responsibilities, and its dispute-resolution architecture depends on appointments made through the institution. India's confrontation is therefore no longer confined to Pakistan. By rejecting the arbitral process outright, it challenges an international framework it accepted and used for decades. This weakens India's claim to be a responsible power committed to a rules-based international order.

The timing is particularly damaging. Pakistan's relations with Washington have improved, while its strategic partnership with China remains exceptionally strong. During Operation Sindoor, China supplied Pakistan with military equipment and operational and intelligence support. Pakistan can now combine its downstream vulnerability with diplomatic access in Washington and strategic backing from Beijing. Instead of isolating Pakistan, India's Indus policy has created an issue on which Pakistan can mobilise wider international sympathy.

China is also the upstream power on the Yarlung Tsangpo, which becomes the Brahmaputra in India. Its enormous hydropower project near the Great Bend, close to the Indian border, will give Beijing greater capacity to regulate a river vital to

India's northeast. China may not be able to arrest the Brahmaputra completely; much of its flow is generated downstream of Tibet. Nevertheless, reservoir operations, the withholding of hydrological data and sudden releases can create serious risks. India cannot persuasively demand transparency and restraint from China while asserting the right to disregard binding obligations towards its own downstream neighbour.

The consequences extend to Bangladesh. The Ganga Waters Treaty expires in December 2026. Relations between New Delhi and Dhaka have deteriorated and Bangladesh's engagement with China and Pakistan has expanded. Negotiations over a successor agreement already face obstacles involving dry-season scarcity, the Farakka Barrage and West Bengal's political objections. India's behaviour on the Indus will inevitably shape Bangladeshi expectations. If New Delhi can suspend one river treaty after a security crisis, why should Dhaka trust that another will remain insulated from political pressure?

Reputation is not a diplomatic luxury. It determines whether neighbours trust India's assurances, whether international institutions accept its legal claims and whether smaller states view Indian leadership as cooperative or coercive. New Delhi cannot, in the same breath, advocate respect for sovereignty when China violates its borders, defend treaty obligations when they protect Indian interests, and dismiss an arbitral ruling when it imposes constraints. Sustained multilateralism diminishes credibility at a time when India seeks greater global influence and a permanent place on the Security Council.

The Indus Waters Treaty needs updating. Climate change, glacier retreat, changing river flows and new energy demands were not adequately anticipated in 1960. India also has legitimate concerns about receiving its permitted share of benefits from the western rivers. But change must come through negotiation and the Treaty's procedures, not unilateral suspension. India should comply with the interim measures, re-engage with the Permanent Indus Commission and seek structured talks on technical and climatic aspects. Far from appearing like a 'reward' for terrorism, returning to the Treaty would demonstrate the confidence of a country that can defend its security without abandoning the rules it expects others to follow.

India's original decision produced negligible material gain while internationalising the dispute and strengthening Pakistan's diplomatic hand. Rejecting the Court's ruling now compounds that error. Rivers connect countries even when politics divides them. By treating the Indus as a weapon, the Modi government has weakened India's legal standing, frightened its downstream neighbours and handed China a precedent that may one day be used against us. ■

ASHOK SWAIN is a professor of peace and conflict research and UNESCO Chair on International Water Cooperation at Uppsala University, Sweden

When is a policy U-turn acceptable?

Ajit Ranade

The Reserve Bank of India recently released a small but revealing lesson in economic policymaking. On 5 August, RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra was asked whether the special FCNR(B) scheme, designed to attract foreign currency deposits from non-resident Indians, might be closed before its scheduled 30 September deadline. He said there was no proposal to do so. Nine days later, the RBI abruptly advanced the closing date to 31 August.

There may have been perfectly valid economic reasons. The scheme had worked almost too well. Dollar inflows were strong, while the subsidy cost of providing assured protection against depreciation was mounting. There was the growing headache of liquidity management and future forex liabilities. The issue is not whether the RBI is entitled to change course but why give a categorical assurance to the contrary when the possibility of an early exit is already being discussed.

Economic policy is full of U-turns. Some are evidence of agility and learning. Others betray poor preparation, political pressure or plain unpredictability. How do we tell the difference?

Donald Trump's tariff policy is the most glaring example of the latter. Since the 'Liberation Day' tariff announcements of April 2025, duties have been imposed, paused, modified, lowered, threatened again and sometimes re-imposed. Firms managing supply chains have to brace for a tariff now and for uncertainty over the tariff regime six months down the line. Policy volatility itself becomes a tax on investment.

India has its own examples of U-turns. The three farm reform laws, for example—enacted with an iron hand and then repealed after a determined pushback from farmers. The ethanol blending programme—rushed towards E20 as the default option and then backtracking in the face of mounting evidence of its effect on vehicles and other concerns.

Or take pension reforms. The New Pension Scheme (NPS) moved government pensions away from an unfunded, defined-

benefit promise towards a funded, contribution-based system. Political pressure for restoration of the Old Pension Scheme then produced the Unified Pension Scheme, which restores an assured pension element while retaining contributions. Yet by March 2026, only about 1.24 lakh of 24.14 lakh eligible central government employees had opted for UPS.

All these reversals are not, however, the same kind: sometimes the politics changes; sometimes evidence changes; sometimes the original policy was not thought through. Sometimes the policy question itself is badly framed.

Consider the question: 'Does industrial policy work?' There can hardly be a universal yes or no. Which industry? What instrument? For how long? Under what governance arrangements? Is support conditional on performance? Is there competition or protection of incumbents? Is India's Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme uniformly good policy?

Economics cannot provide watertight answers to policy questions because economic behaviour is not governed by

fixed parameters. A policy changes behaviour and changed behaviour alters the environment in which the policy operates. A farm reform changes incentives but also political mobilisation. A production subsidy can prop up an industry, but that industry then becomes a constituency that lobbies for continuation of the subsidy. Political economy is not an external disturbance; it is part of the system.

Even the most hallowed international institutions have had to learn this lesson.

During the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, IMF-supported programmes in Thailand, Indonesia and Korea initially emphasised tight macroeconomic policies alongside sweeping structural reforms. Malaysia did not enter an IMF programme. It eventually imposed capital controls, pegged the ringgit and subsequently staged a strong recovery. Was IMF policy wrong? Malaysia became an important counter-example to the then prevailing IMF hostility towards capital controls.

The euro-area sovereign debt crisis of 2011 produced another awkward episode.

Greek debt was judged to be unsustainable. But the IMF changed its own exceptional-access framework. It did not impose immediate debt restructuring but gave generous aid to Greece. This was because European institutions and governments were firmly opposed to restructuring Greek sovereign debt. The contrast with the rigidity shown towards Asian borrowers in 1997 inevitably led to accusations of double standards. Or was this a U-turn due to fresh thinking about fiscal austerity?

The World Bank provides an even more striking example. Its influential 1993 'East Asian Miracle' report concluded that promotion of specific industries had generally not worked. At the time, it helped entrench the Washington Consensus that market-friendly policies were the way to go rather than state-led industrial planning alternatives. Three decades later, its 2026 report says industrial policy is back and offers governments an evidence-based toolkit for using it. That is good news for India's PLI but is it not a U-turn?

For years the World Bank published its Doing Business rankings, which acquired

enormous influence over how 'business friendly' a country was thought to be. Yet ironically, in *Doing Business 2010*, India was #133, Brazil #129 and Russia #120 out of 183 economies; China was #89. Clearly the World Bank indicators had failed to explain why these poorly ranked BRIC economies were growing so rapidly. Nonetheless, following a mini scandal, the Bank in 2021 discontinued its Doing Business rankings. It has been replaced by another metric.

None of this is to say that economists or policymakers cannot or should not change their minds. To stick to your guns in the face of contrary evidence is not consistency, it's dogma. The problem arises when institutions speak with greater certainty than the underlying economics warrants or when reversals driven primarily by political expediency are presented as economic necessity.

The RBI could have said the FCNR(B) window will remain open until 30 September or till inflows crossed a specified threshold or indeed arose about financial stability. Inconceivable, one critique of the episode makes precisely this point: pre-specified triggers could have preserved flexibility without sacrificing predictability.

Good policymaking requires humility, transparency, accountability but also decisiveness. Humility means accepting that forecasts and models can be wrong. Transparency means explaining what changed. Accountability means acknowledging the consequences of a reversal. Decisiveness means uncertainty cannot become an excuse for paralysis.

U-turns are not necessarily signs of weakness. Sometimes they show that policy is learning and is agile. But there is a difference between changing direction because the evidence changed and changing direction because the political wind changed. Institutions preserve credibility not by pretending that they are never wrong but by explaining why they changed their minds, what has changed on the ground and why the new course deserves greater confidence. ■

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



Photo: Getty Images

RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra reneged on his commitment vis-à-vis FCNR(B) deposits

Good policymaking requires humility, transparency, accountability and also decisiveness

WEIGHT, AND VOICE: A CASE CARVED IN STONE

Karnataka CM D.K. Shivakumar makes the South's case against dilution at Mahabalipuram

Along the shores of the Bay of Bengal, where the surf washes against granite carved by Pallava-era sculptors into temples, chariots, and reliefs of extraordinary craftsmanship, Mahabalipuram has long stood as a quiet testament to the endurance of southern India's civilisational achievements.

The town's Shore Temple, weathered by a thousand years of sea wind, and its cluster of monolithic rathas — each carved whole from a single boulder rather than assembled piece by piece — remain among the finest surviving expressions of Dravidian architecture, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that has withstood tide, time, and the passage of dynasties. It was against this evocative backdrop that the 31st meeting of the Southern Zonal Council was convened.

The choice of venue was, by most accounts, a deliberate one. Historically known as Kadalmallai — prosperity enriched by maritime trade — the ancient port town offered a fitting symbolic setting for a Council convened to deliberate on economic cooperation and regional development.

The location also carried practical weight: its proximity to Chennai, some forty kilometres to the north, ensured seamless logistical access for the Union Home Minister, the visiting chief ministers, and senior officials, while the resort-lined East Coast Road offered the secure, closed-door setting such deliberations require.

That reputation for calm, closed-door deliberation mattered as much this time as the setting's beauty. The Council met amid genuine friction between the Centre and southern states over fiscal devolution, delimitation, and representation, and the choice of a coastal, retreat-like venue over a conventional government setting appeared designed to ease that tension, allowing leaders to engage candidly across four hours away from the immediate glare of political theatre.

The same seclusion proved useful for the Council's other business: mediating the long-running Cauvery water-sharing dispute and the more recent contention over the Mekedatu project between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, discussions for which a controlled environment offered real advantage over a public standoff.

It was in this setting — deliberately chosen, historically resonant, and quietly conducive to consensus — that Karnataka Chief Minister D. K. Shivakumar carried to the Council his central proposal: that the Lok Sabha's strength be fixed at its present 543 seats for the next twenty-five years.

The argument was, at its core, one about permanence — about resisting the pressure to expand and instead holding a structure steady so that what has been carefully built is not diluted by unchecked growth.

It was an argument not unlike the one embodied in the monuments surrounding the Council itself, carved once, deliberately, to endure rather than to be added to piecemeal. Few venues could have framed the day's central demand with such quiet symbolism.

Anchoring delimitation to the 1971 census

Closely tied to this was Shivakumar's call for the Union government to continue treating the 1971 census as the reference point for any future delimitation exercise.

This is not unfamiliar in India's federal history; the 1971 census has served as the basis for seat allocation since the freeze on Lok Sabha strength was first introduced, precisely to ensure no state would be disadvantaged for having successfully moderated its population growth.

With delimitation discussions gaining renewed attention, southern leaders have sought clear reassurance that this safeguard will be honoured going forward.

"Let the 1971 basis be honoured," Shivakumar said, "and let the strength of our voice be protected." Together,



the fixed House size and fixed demographic baseline formed the two supporting pillars of his broader appeal — a request that the South's disciplined record on population management not become the basis for its comparative disadvantage.

Women's reservation: Implementation without further delay

A third element of Shivakumar's address concerned the Women's Reservation Act — legislation welcomed in principle but whose implementation has, in practice, been linked to a fresh delimitation exercise, on the reasoning that reserved constituencies require settled boundaries. Shivakumar respectfully but firmly questioned this sequencing, observing that women have waited a considerable time for meaningful political representation.

"Women have waited long enough for their rightful representation," he said. "Their reservation should not have to wait for a population count."

His proposed solution was notably practical: implement the reservation within the Lok Sabha's existing 543 seats, rather than deferring it until after a future delimitation exercise.

This removed the procedural basis often cited for delay, while ensuring the South's proportional representation would remain undisturbed.

"Weight, and Voice": The underlying principle

Running beneath all three proposals was a single, carefully articulated

"We welcome the assurance that no southern state will lose seats," he said. "But representation is not only about numbers. It is about weight, and about voice." A state's seat count remaining unchanged, he explained, carries less significance if the overall House expands and other states gain a larger share of that increase.

The distinction, gently made, captured the essence of the South's position: that fairness must be measured not only in seats retained, but in influence preserved.

The fiscal dimension: Contribution without commensurate return

Having addressed political representation, Shivakumar turned to the distribution of central resources, pointing to figures that have featured prominently in recent southern discourse — that the five southern states together contribute close to a third of India's GDP, while accounting for a comparatively smaller share of its population. He noted that despite this contribution — and a strong record of tax compliance, industrial output, and innovation — the southern states have seen their share of central tax devolution gradually decline under successive Finance Commission formulas.

"Fairness in our voice is one half of the story. Fairness in our resources is the other," he told the Council, drawing a clear link between political and economic equity. A region that shoulders a significant share of the nation's fiscal responsibilities, in his

chief ministers as at the Union government, framing the three proposals as a shared regional stand rather than a Karnataka-specific request. "I therefore urge this Council to move a resolution to freeze the number of seats in the Lok Sabha at the current number and provide women's reservation within that number," he said, calling on his counterparts "to stand together behind our shared stand."

The demographic roots of the South's concern

Underlying all three proposals was a shared historical context: decades ago, the southern states responded conscientiously to national appeals for population stabilisation, and their fertility and growth rates declined accordingly, while several northern states continued to register comparatively higher growth.

This asymmetry is the structural reason the delimitation question carries such weight — any exercise tied strictly to current figures risks converting a public health achievement into a political disadvantage.

A trade-off worth acknowledging: Constituency size and governability

A freeze of this kind, however, addresses one structural concern while quietly

populations than their southern counterparts — some potentially running into millions of voters per Member of Parliament. Such disparities already exist to a degree, but a sustained freeze would likely widen them considerably, raising practical questions about how effectively an individual MP can represent so vast and growing a constituency, and about the administrative strain of outreach, grievance redressal, and local development work at that scale.

Shivakumar's proposal does not so much resolve this tension as trade one imbalance for another: it protects the South's proportional political weight, while leaving the question of constituency-level governability in the fast-growing north to be addressed separately — through administrative reform, greater delegation to local bodies, or eventual policy revision once the freeze runs its course.

Situating the debate within India's federal framework

Zonal councils were established under the States Reorganisation Act of 1956, to foster cooperative dialogue among states and provide a platform where regional concerns could be raised outside the more adversarial setting of Parliament. Shivakumar's intervention sat comfortably within the original spirit of the institution — one that Mahabalipuram's own history as a hub of exchange seemed only to reinforce.

The delimitation question is not new to

person, one vote" principle against the risk of penalising states for responsible demographic management.

Similarly, Finance Commission devolution formulas have evolved over successive commissions, with criteria such as population, income distance, and demographic performance weighted differently over time.

A constructive appeal, offered in a spirit of federal partnership

Considered together, Shivakumar's remarks amounted to a carefully reasoned appeal rather than a confrontational one — reflecting a broader sentiment that decades of disciplined governance should be recognised and preserved, not allowed to translate into a diminished political or economic standing.

Whether the Council formally adopts a resolution along these lines remains to be seen; zonal councils function as consultative bodies whose resolutions carry political weight but are not binding on the Centre. Even so, the presence of a shared position among the southern chief ministers, articulated openly before the Union Home Minister, was a notable feature of the day.

There was something fitting, delegates remarked, in the fact that an appeal for permanence and proportion should be voiced in a town whose own monuments have stood, unaltered and undiminished, for well over a thousand years, and whose calm, secluded shoreline had already proved its worth as a stage for consequential dialogue.

As the Council's agenda moved to matters of infrastructure coordination and inter-state disputes, the themes Shivakumar raised remained part of the broader conversation — questions that will ultimately be settled through sustained deliberation in Parliament and within successive Finance Commissions. What the 31st meeting of the Southern Zonal Council ultimately demonstrated was a clear and measured message: a willingness among the southern states to engage constructively in shaping these outcomes, guided by the principle that fairness in a federal union should give equal weight to demographic responsibility and economic contribution — an argument for endurance and balance, delivered, fittingly, in a town built to embody exactly that.

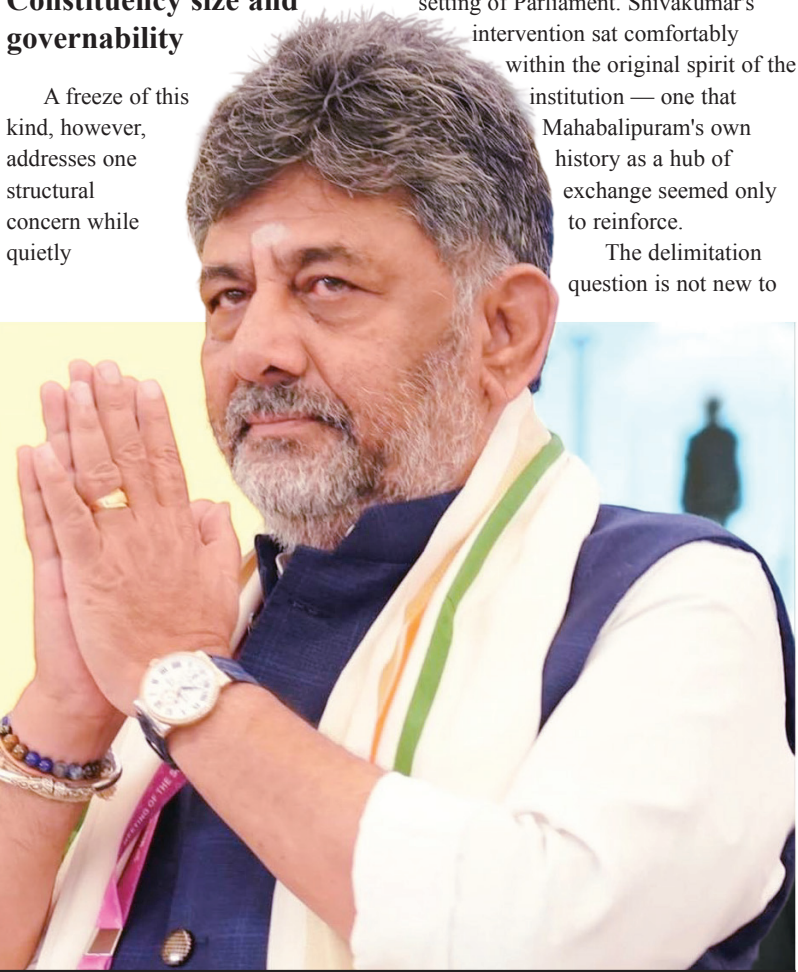
The central demand: Freezing the Lok Sabha at 543 seats

At the heart of Shivakumar's address was a single, clearly stated request: that the Council adopt a resolution urging the Union government to hold the Lok Sabha at 543 seats for the next twenty-five years.

This was not resistance to institutional growth, but a considered means of preserving proportional balance among states during a period of continued demographic divergence. With population growth slowed markedly in the South while continuing at a faster pace elsewhere, an expansion of the House risked leaving southern states with a diminished share of seats even if their own numbers held steady.

"Our economic weight must be matched with political voice," Shivakumar told the Council, appealing to his fellow chief ministers to stand together on a shared position.

philosophy. Shivakumar acknowledged the assurances already extended by the Union government, noting appreciatively that no Southern state has been told it will lose seats outright — yet suggested this addresses only part of the concern.



introducing another. If the Lok Sabha's strength remains fixed even as population continues to grow faster in the north, northern constituencies would, over the freeze's twenty-five-year span, come to represent progressively larger

Indian federal discourse. It has surfaced periodically since the freeze on Lok Sabha seats was first enacted, drawing attention from policy analysts, demographers, and constitutional scholars, each weighing the "one

The State has no role in faith

Thirteen Indian states today, 11 ruled by the BJP, have variations of a ‘Freedom of Religion’ law which in fact places severe restrictions on said freedom. In this open letter, **A.J. Philip** addresses the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, which joined the bandwagon on 28 August

Dear Shri Devendra Fadnavis Ji,

You may be happy that the Freedom of Religion Bill has come into force in Maharashtra. But there is an irony you may have missed.

In Pune, your police were so eager to implement the law that they did not even wait for President Droupadi Murmu’s assent before invoking it in two cases. They withdrew the provisions after the home department made it clear that the law would come into force only on 28 August.

Everyone knows who the principal target of your legislation is even though the law does not name any religion. Christians constitute a tiny fraction of the population of Maharashtra. The community that apparently frightens your government so much is hardly a threat to public order. Why this anxiety about a tiny, largely law abiding, highly literate community?

The way these laws are being applied across the country should concern every citizen, not just Christians. In Madhya Pradesh, seven Christians—six of them pastors—were sentenced in June this year to five years’ imprisonment under the state’s anti-conversion law and related provisions. They were accused of attempting to induce conversion while attending a child’s birthday party. The Jabalpur High Court has since granted bail to all seven, pending appeal.

You may say the courts will separate truth from falsehood. But why should an innocent citizen first have to spend time in prison, arrange money for bail and endure the stigma of being branded a conversion offender?

The law creates a structure in which the private spiritual decision of an adult becomes an object of government scrutiny. Imagine that tomorrow you wish to become a Christian. I know it’s unlikely but suppose you did. Under this law, requiring prior notification to the authorities, you’d

have to disclose this deeply personal decision to the state before acting upon it.

Think about the absurdity of the situation. You are the Chief Minister. You announce that you have changed your faith. You would become a political pariah; your political career would be over. If this can happen to a powerful chief minister, imagine the vulnerability of a poor labourer, an uneducated villager, a tribal, a Dalit who decides to change his faith.

Under Article 25, the Constitution protects freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practise and propagate religion. The framers did not say that a citizen must first obtain the State’s permission to decide what to believe.

The Constituent Assembly debates are instructive. Rev. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy, himself a member of the Assembly, strongly defended the freedom of conscience and the right to propagate religion. At the same time, he clearly opposed conversion through fraud, coercion or undue influence. That is the distinction your law risks destroying. Coercion and fraud are crimes; conviction of conscience is not.

You may also recall the example of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, one of the principal architects of the Constitution and a son of Maharashtra. On 14 October 1956, he embraced Buddhism at Nagpur’s Deekshabhoomi along with a vast gathering of followers.

What if a law like yours had been applied to Ambedkar’s decision? Would you have wanted the State to question him before allowing him to change his religion? Surely not.

There is another serious problem with this law: it reverses the burden of proof. Instead of the accuser having to establish coercion, fraud or unlawful inducement, the law places an extraordinary burden upon the accused to establish that the

conversion was voluntary. Presumption of innocence is a basic principle of criminal jurisprudence.

The provisions relating to marriage are equally troubling. By looking at interfaith marriages through the prism of conversion, the law will reinforce the poisonous narrative of ‘love jihad’. Two consenting adults should not have to prove to vigilantes, police officers or bureaucrats that their relationship is genuine just because they belong to different faiths.

Nor should prayer meetings become occasions for surveillance. Reports emerging from Maharashtra even before the law came into force have shown the anxiety it has created. Some small churches have started collecting declarations from worshippers stating that they attend prayer meetings voluntarily, apparently as a precaution against allegations of unlawful conversion.

I once visited a church in Uttar Pradesh as the chief guest at its annual Day. Ninety-nine per cent of the congregation consisted of people who had once lived as beggars.



“
If the State cannot tell me whom to vote for, why should it tell me whom to pray to?”



Photo: Getty Images

Many had been alcoholics. Some had been involved in petty crimes. Almost all were illiterate. Their children begged on the streets. That congregation went through a dramatic transformation.

The men had found work and were supporting their families. The children were going to school. The families were properly dressed. Women once illiterate could read passages from the Bible without any hesitation. Would you rather they remained beggars, alcoholics and petty criminals so that nobody could accuse the Church of ‘conversion’?

There is also a misconception about what Christians mean when they speak about service. The Church does not regard its work among the poor as ‘social work’. A Christian believes that serving a hungry person, clothing someone who has nothing to wear or caring for someone abandoned by society is an act of service to God. Jesus commanded his followers to love their neighbours. He did not add the word ‘Christian’ before ‘neighbours’.

That is why Christians run schools, hospitals, orphanages and other institutions, often in remote and difficult parts of the country. It is also why missionaries and Christian organisations have worked for generations among tribal and marginalised communities. Go to a remote tribal area and you will often find a Christian tribal family whose children are better educated, whose members are better dressed and who have moved from bare survival to a more dignified existence.

That is not necessarily the result of someone handing them money. Sometimes it is the result of education. Sometimes it follows from healthcare, or recovering from

alcoholism or simply discovering that they too have dignity.

If somebody chooses Christianity because he believes it offers him spiritual truth, that is his constitutional right. The same principle applies to a Buddhist, a Muslim or a Hindu. The State has no business choosing among these possibilities. Your law is, therefore, not merely about conversion. It is about the relationship between the citizen and the State. Imagine a law saying that a citizen who is a Communist today, a Congress supporter tomorrow and a BJP supporter the day after must inform the district collector before changing political affiliation. You would rightly call it ridiculous.

But religious belief is even more intimate than political preference. A political party is an organisation. Faith is a matter of conscience. If the State cannot tell me whom to vote for, why should it tell me whom to pray to?

The Constitution gives you the freedom to remain a Hindu. It also gives you the freedom, if your conscience ever takes you elsewhere, to become something else. Please extend the same freedom to the poorest citizen of Maharashtra.

I wish you good health and hope that you will have the courage to protect the rights of those with whom you may profoundly disagree.

Yours etc.
A.J. Philip

A longer version of this open letter first appeared in Indian Currents

The wonder that is India

...and why the future looks so abysmal for the ‘mother of democracy’

Aakar Patel

A foreign outlet interviewed me last week and, after we had wrapped up, the interviewer confessed to being surprised. He said he had no idea this was the position India was in, which I find is quite a common reaction. Other than the academics who study India and foreign correspondents posted here, few realise how much India has changed from the image they had of it.

I will recap the interview for readers to compare it with their own assessment of where India stands today.

The first thing he wanted to look at was Hindutva—its origins, ideological foundations and how it differs from

Hinduism as a religion. I told him Hindutva combined the word Hindu and the suffix *tva* meaning Hindu-ness. The word was used in Savarkar’s book a century ago, in which he wrote that India and Hindu come from the same root as Indus and Sindhu. He felt that one could only be Hindu—and by extension Indian—if one’s holy sites were in India and not in Jerusalem, Mecca or elsewhere.

Hinduism, I said, was a religion concerned with one’s personal belief: gods, prayers, fasts, festivals. Hindutva was concerned about another’s belief: what they could not eat, where they could not pray, who they could not love and where they could not stay.

He then asked how Hindutva became

increasingly influential in Indian politics, particularly through the rise of the BJP. I replied that though it was formed in 1951, for four decades the BJP [formerly Bharatiya Jan Sangh] had only a single-digit vote share nationally. Until 1990, it did not win a single state without alliances. For all those years, the party did not know which issue to mobilise.

What made it popular, and doubled its vote share to 18 per cent, was the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992. Some 3,000 Indians were killed in the violence that made the BJP ascendant. Two other demands—stripping Muslims of their constitutional autonomy in Kashmir and taking away their personal law—kept the pot simmering.

The interviewer wanted to then discuss how Hindutva has affected India’s political institutions and the wider political environment, including the treatment of religious minorities. Here there was nothing to do other than recite the numbers which show us the total exclusion our ruling party practices as revealed by its ministers, its state legislators, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha members.

The laws criminalising possession of beef appeared in 2015, triggering beef lynchings, and the laws criminalising interfaith marriage in 2018. My interlocutor was aghast to learn about the reversal of burden of proof and the presumption of guilt. How can you call yourself a democracy with all this around you, he asked. I shrugged.

He then asked about the prime minister’s role in the normalisation of Hindutva politics, and why this political project has remained electorally successful. I said Narendra Modi was more open and honest about his championing of Hindutva than the BJP leaders before him. This made him popular with his votaries

and had taken the BJP nationally to a vote share of 38 per cent, where it has stayed.

The BJP was also, I said, enthusiastic about permanent polarisation through law and policy. I referred to the bulldozers and absence of due process and he was dumbstruck.

He then asked how Hindutva has affected India’s minorities and whether the rise of majoritarian politics is changing how minorities understand their place within the Indian state. I answered as best I could. The main point was that India has more minorities than the entire population of western Europe.

Asked about Hindutva beyond India’s borders, I told him Israel puts us on display as its trusted friend and ally when asked to justify its actions against Palestinians.

I said our ambitions since 2014 had moved from global to regional, and our obsession was getting the better of our neighbours. I told him we had stopped competing with China and I gave him the numbers on the economy and the situation since 1991.

He asked: Do BJP leaders not see the damage they are doing? I said that in my experience, they genuinely believe in their ideology. To them, it is not a means to an end but an end in itself, and for this reason, what is happening by way of exclusion and persecution will continue, no matter what the fallout.

Finally, he asked me to discuss India’s future—whether the country can move away from majoritarian politics, what role the Opposition and India’s democratic institutions might play, and whether India’s pluralist tradition can withstand the growing influence of Hindutva.

I said our natural state was pluralist and that, broadly, society did not reflect the ideology of our government. However, so many years of it being imposed on us top-down has meant ideology has seeped into institutions and society in general, and this will remain even if the party is no longer in power.

As far as the future is concerned, I said, it is dark because we have no ideas on how to transition half-a-billion people out of poverty, where they will remain. More importantly, we no longer discuss this with any urgency, nor is it the primary basis of politics in our country. We will remain poor and irrelevant but content in the knowledge that our minorities are worse off than us. ■



Photo: Getty Images

It’s time to ask whether the rise of majoritarian politics is changing how minorities understand their place in the Indian State

Views are personal

We will remain poor and irrelevant but content in the knowledge that our minorities are worse off than us



The number of tigers is now 112, up from 18 in 2010. The reserve has around 651 elephants

Photos: S Parthibhan

The forest has been reclaimed...

...but two decades after the end of Veerappan’s reign of terror, it’s still threatened. The story of Sathyamangalam

K.A. Shaji

In the deep valleys around Talavadi and Talamalai, along the winding roads of Dhimbam and across the difficult country stretching towards the Moyar, the forest guards of Sathyamangalam still remember the days when entering the jungle meant entering Veerappan’s world. Koose Munisamy Veerappan was not merely a fugitive in these forests. For more than three decades, he built a parallel empire of guns, sandalwood, ivory and informers; a reign of terror across the forests of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The human and ecological cost was enormous—180 people, including police personnel, forest officials and civilians, murdered; 2,000 elephants killed for an estimated 40,000 kg of ivory; sandalwood smuggled to the tune of Rs 100 crore. Among the gang’s 45 kidnappings was Kannada film star Rajkumar, who was held for 108 days in the year 2000. When Veerappan and three associates were killed in a Tamil Nadu Special Task Force operation near Pappalapatti on 18 October 2004, Sathyamangalam heaved a sigh of relief. With the guns

silenced and the state able to reclaim the forest, a landscape that had been battered by organised hunting and illegal extraction had a chance to recover. That recovery has been remarkable. Sathyamangalam became a wildlife sanctuary in 2008 and a tiger reserve in 2013. Spread across about 1,408 sq. km, the reserve is one of the most important wildlife corridors in south India, connecting the western and eastern ghats and linking the Nilgiris with the Biligiriranga landscape and forests further east. The latest camera-trap assessment puts the tiger population at 112, against 18 in 2010. The elephant population is estimated at around 651, while 54 anti-poaching camps now support regular protection through foot patrols, watchers, cameras and intelligence gathering. Tigers cannot flourish in such numbers without adequate prey, water, cover and space. Their return is an indicator of a broader improvement. “Animals do not recognise the boundaries dividing Tamil Nadu from Karnataka, or one forest division from another. A tiger reserve is invaluable not only for its animals but for the larger forest

system it keeps connected. This is one reason why the recovery of Sathyamangalam matters,” says K. Rajkumar, Chief Conservator of Forests and Field Director, Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve. There is another side often overlooked in the celebration of Sathyamangalam’s wildlife recovery: people. People live in and around the forest, including tribal communities whose relationship with the landscape predates the reserve, which includes parts of three development blocks (Sathy, Bhavanisagar and Talavadi) with numerous revenue villages and

Today, the enemy here is not a man with a rifle. It is roads, resorts, electric lines

a significant transformation. Conservation cannot succeed indefinitely by treating indigenous people as outsiders. * The temptation to make money from wildlife, however, persists. In the years after his death, ‘junior Veerappans’ emerged. They never acquired his muscle, but they knew the forest, its routes and the difficulties of policing a landscape spread across two states. Today, country-made guns, traps, snares and improvised explosives have replaced heavily armed gangs. Small animals and wild boar are hunted for meat, while elephants remain a target for poachers. In 2024, an 18-year-old tusker was found dead near Thalavadi with its tusks removed. Forest officials said the elephant had been shot. A Karnataka resident was arrested for being in possession of the tusks. The incident was a cruel reminder that the ivory trade has not vanished simply because the man who made elephant poaching an organised crime is gone. But Enemy No. 1 is no longer necessarily a man with a rifle. Roads are a persistent threat. Highways have increased traffic through wildlife areas, creating barriers to animal movement. Elephants crossing roads are particularly vulnerable. Electricity lines are lethal as is electric fencing erected by farmers. Elephants moving through agri-cultural and forest-edge areas have been killed after coming into contact with poorly insulated or unauthorised lines. Then there are the quarries. “Around Soosaiyapuram in Talavadi, abandoned stone quarries have become hiding places for leopards. The animals take shelter in the deep pits and rocky cavities and emerge to prey on livestock in nearby settlements,” says V.P. Gunasekharan of the tribal collective Pazhankudi Makkal Sanghom. Granite and other stone deposits in the landscape around Sathyamangalam have commercial

value, as does tourism. “Tourism can become destructive when it grows faster than regulation. Resorts imply roads, vehicles, lights, waste, water extraction and human traffic. In 2025, authorities identified dozens of resorts and farmhouses operating in the eco-sensitive zone without permissions,” says Coimbatore-based conservation activist Mohammed Saleem, founder of the Environment Conservation Group. For communities living along the forest edge, the recovery of wildlife has brought another kind of pressure. “During the dry months, when water and fodder become scarce, elephants seek sugarcane, banana and other crops. Tigers and leopards prey on cattle. Farmers respond with fences, lights, noise... Every crop raid can deepen resentment against an animal that is protected by law but appears to directly threaten our livelihood,” points out tribal leader K. Mallappa. Recent studies of the Sathyamangalam landscape have recorded crop damage, livestock losses and human casualties. The cycle is painfully predictable. An elephant enters a field, a farmer tries to drive it away, somebody gets injured or killed, and the animal is subsequently regarded as a dangerous intruder. The forest department cannot protect wildlife by ignoring the people living alongside. Compensation, early warning systems, safer fencing, better management of elephant movement and genuine local participation will be as important as anti-poaching camps. The reserve’s own conservation model is already moving in that direction. But old suspicions die hard. The discovery of a decomposed tiger carcass near Bejalatti village in the Talamalai range in August showed how the memory of Veerappan continues to shape perceptions. Missing claws and teeth prompted conservationists to demand a closer forensic examination. Forest officials said the preliminary examination did not indicate poaching and suggested that the condition of the carcass could explain the missing teeth. Even if the animal ultimately proves to have died naturally, the disagreement is significant. If human-animal coexistence is managed with fairness and respect for traditional knowledge, Sathyamangalam could demonstrate that wildlife recovery and community rights need not be opposing ideas. The tiger has returned because the forest was given a chance. The elephant has survived because protection improved. The next step is for the people who live in the forest to be given a role in protecting its future. ■



Sathyamangalam became a wildlife sanctuary in 2008, a tiger reserve in 2013

The Indian joint family is back

Gen Z is headed back to their parental homes, finds Avay Shukla, but their motivations may be different

The joint family was one of the better constituents and binding blocks of Indian society for centuries. Consisting of three or four generations living under one roof, it bonded its constituent families into one larger whole, sustained positive relationships, pooled individual resources into one economic whole. Socially speaking, perhaps its best characteristic was that it took care of the weaker members of the larger family—the infants, the old, the sick or otherwise disabled, the unemployed, the indigent—and ensured that they too were looked after and lived a dignified life. The importance of this last aspect cannot be overstated, for back then there were no government welfare schemes, pensions, hospices or Ayushman Bharat-type protective umbrellas. Looking back, I feel that my father’s generation was perhaps the last of this ‘joint family generation’ (he passed on in 2017 at the age of 93). He himself grew up in a sprawling family consisting of his parents, four siblings, innumerable uncles, aunts and their families, and a couple of near-invisible widows. They all lived together in happy chaos in a huge haveli my grandfather had built in his village in Uttar Pradesh’s Fatehpur district. God only knows how the family’s finances were managed: even a firm of chartered accountants would find it difficult to untangle the various contributions to the family kitty! One word of caution, however: don’t for a moment think that it was run on democratic lines—no, sir, it was a patriarchal autocracy, my grandfather’s word was law and everyone accepted it because it was

mutually beneficial. No other system would have worked half as well! The Indian joint family started fraying, I suspect, in the 1960s and ’70s, and it was more or less dead by the late 1990s and early 2000s. I’m sure sociologists have identified the reasons for its gradual demise, but it was an inevitable consequence of ‘development’ as we know it. Things started changing with my generation, the baby boomers. As education, mobility and job opportunities expanded, youngsters started leaving their homes, first for better education and then for jobs, and settled down independently in places distant from their parental houses. This trend only expanded with the next generation, the millennials. Joint families almost disappeared and were replaced by nuclear ones. For abandoned parents loneliness became collateral damage. I guess this social evolution was inevitable, not only for the reasons given above, but also as a consequence of improvement in girls’ education. They were no longer content to let early marriage define their lives: they now sought independent careers and their own homes after marriage. How and where couples lived was now decided not by a patriarch but by economics—jobs, salaries, career prospects and the desire to raise their own families in their own way, without any parental interference. The wheel is now coming full circle with Gen Z. Ironically, the same forces that drove them away from the joint family system are now forcing them back to it! More and more young adults in their late 20s and early 30s, employed and

unemployed, married or single, are coming back to live with their parents. This is confirmed both statistically and anecdotally. Research shows that 70-80 per cent of young adults live with their parents, as do 20 per cent of young couples, and the trend is only growing. In my own social and family circles, I find that this is true in at least one out of every two families (including my own). This shift has not happened because of any change of heart on their part but pure economic and aspirational reasons. The reasons are varied, both economic and social. Both boys and girls are marrying later: the mean marriage age for girls has gone up to 22.9 years (24 to 27.5 for girls in urban areas), and for boys to 29 years (early 30s for urban-based males). Being unmarried means

they continue to live with their parents. Conversely, divorce rates are going up too—since 1990, it has gone up from 1.1 per cent of all marriages to 1.6 per cent, low by Western standards, but an increase of 50 per cent nonetheless. Divorce means the separated entities return to the safe harbour of their parents (especially if there are kids involved). Joblessness is another reason—40 per cent of India’s graduates are unemployed, and a large cohort of those employed are barely able to subsist on the wages they get, especially in urban areas. A new NITI Aayog report states that 8.70 crore youth (between 18 and 29) are in the Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) category. They have no choice but to live with their parents. Artificial intelligence is

beginning to exert its malevolent effect: big tech companies have already cut tens of thousands of jobs and more will be on the chopping block. Real estate, whether owned or rented, has become so prohibitively expensive in even Tier 2 or 3 cities that living separately is a pipedream for most youngsters. The costs of domestic household support, or for child-rearing, are unaffordable. At these prices, even ageing parents and their cluttered houses start looking very attractive, and their expertise in bringing up kids is simply irreplaceable! And so, the joint family is suddenly back in business. And guess what? It suits us ageing baby boomers too. The empty nest is full, creeping loneliness is banished, life acquires meaning again. It’s a win-win situation: for the youngsters it

provides a material safety net, for the parents it fills an emotional vacuum. But there’s a catch, as there usually is in all good things. Nature did not intend for progeny to live with their progenitors for ever. This is why adolescent animals are banished by their parents once they are taught the skills of survival and are forced to fend for themselves. Joint families are a departure from this basic law of life. Too many adults living together generates tensions, arising from a dozen differing perceptions of personal space, views and opinions, social preferences, eating habits, financial matters, etc. The joint families of my father’s era resolved these tensions by having one dominant authority—the head of the family—whose word was final and instinctively respected by all. That is no longer the case with Gen Z, Alpha and whatever other alphabetical generations are biding their turn in the womb of time. Today’s youngsters are taught to question, not accept things at face value; to speak their minds, not acquiesce to authority blindly. This is anathema for joint families, and I see it playing out in many families. It will need a lot of patience, understanding, give-and-take, genuine care and respect for each other for Phase 2 of the joint family system to succeed. It is still work in progress and I really don’t know how it will work out. I hope it does because families are the bedrock of any society and happy, functional families make for a stable social order, something this increasingly fractured world badly needs. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



Photo: Getty Images

Joblessness is one reason—40 per cent of India’s graduates are unemployed





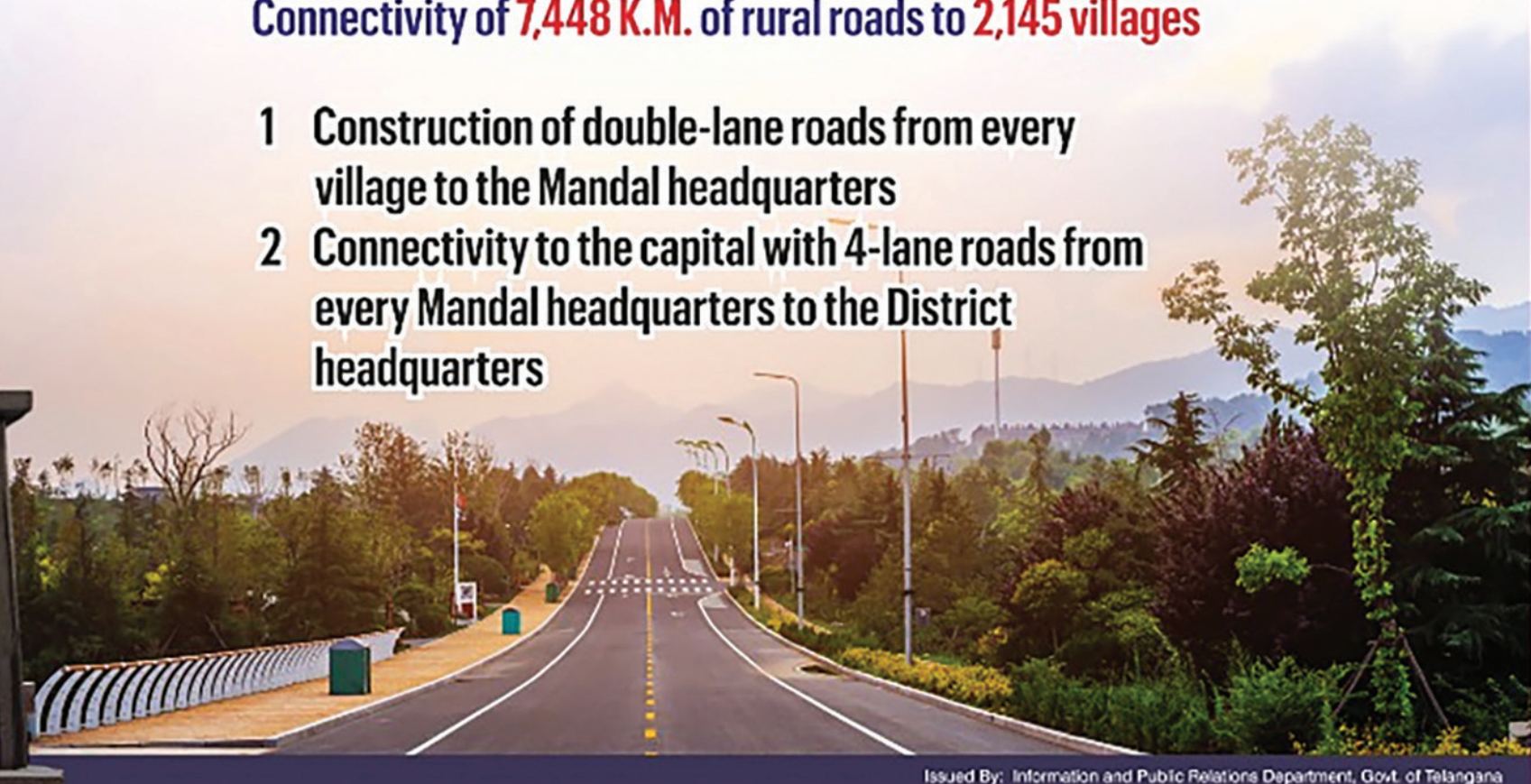
TELANGANA

THE FIRST STATE IN THE COUNTRY TO DEVELOP RURAL ROADS THROUGH HAM METHOD

Foundation Stone
and
Pylon Inauguration
for the
first phase of road development works through
Hybrid Annuity Mode (HAM)
in Telangana
by
Hon'ble Chief Minister of Telangana
Sri A. Revanth Reddy Garu
Place: Mulugu, Mulugu District

First Phase:
Project Construction Cost: **Rs. 6294.81 Crores**
Connectivity of **7,448 K.M.** of rural roads to **2,145 villages**

- 1 Construction of double-lane roads from every village to the Mandal headquarters
- 2 Connectivity to the capital with 4-lane roads from every Mandal headquarters to the District headquarters



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▶▶ *Continued on page 2*

It pays to invest in warning systems

Navin Joshi

On 28 May 2025, a towering serac collapsed in the Swiss Alps, sending an avalanche of glacial ice and rock hurtling down the mountain. The torrent of water, mud, moraine and rock debris buried the entire village of Blatten. The devastation was enormous, yet only one person died.

That was possible because of advance warning, preparedness and swift rescue operations. There were systems in place to read the signs of impending danger.

We don't yet know the full extent of the loss of life and property in Tibet/Nepal in the late August catastrophe. According to information available so far, more than a thousand people have died and nearly four thousand are missing.

The high Himalaya has witnessed several such disasters in recent years—the Chorabari-Kedarnath catastrophe of 2013, Rishiganga-Chamoli in 2021, Lhonak in north Sikkim in 2023 and the devastating Kheer Ganga-Dharali disaster of 2025. Memories of these disasters send shivers down the spine. Hundreds of lives were lost, entire villages and hydropower plants were swept away or buried.

But there weren't any advance warnings for any of these disasters. What question, then, of preparedness for rescue?

Even allowing for the considerable differences in the structure and nature of the Alps and the Himalaya, it is surely worth asking: after remote sensing satellites, glaciology, Himalayan studies, geology and a vast body of related research—not to mention intensive studies by the IITs and the Indian Institute of Science—is it really not possible to put in place even a rudimentary system of advance warning for such disasters? Or is this simply not among our priorities?

Himalayan peaks, passes and rivers also form international frontiers. There have been allegations from several quarters that even after the disaster struck, had China alerted Nepal, hundreds of lives might have been saved. We might say China is a closed



No advance warnings ...and no lessons learnt either from the disasters at (clockwise from top) Kedarnath (2013), Chamoli (2021), Sikkim (2023) and Dharali (2025)

society, but is there any treaty or understanding of this kind among India, Nepal and Pakistan? Is anyone even thinking about creating such a mechanism?

At an altitude of six and a half thousand feet, the Birahi valley in Garhwal, Uttarakhand, is hemmed in on three sides by towering peaks. The river flowing through it is also called the Birahi.

One day in 1893, an enormous rock broke loose from one of the peaks and crashed down at the mouth through which the Birahi river flowed out of the valley. The river was blocked. A lake began forming between the mountains. By the time British government officials and engineers reached the site, the lake was already a mile wide, five miles long and four hundred feet deep. It came to be called Gauna Lake, after a nearby village. The British engineers saw it as a big

We don't even have the rudimentary warning systems of the past. Why? Is it not a priority?

and had a telegraph station built there so that whenever the lake appeared about to burst, an alarm could be sent to the valleys downstream. Eventually, one day, the lake did burst. But the warning system had alerted people all the way down to Haridwar.

That year, 1894, only the upper hundred feet of Gauna Lake gave way. A lake three hundred feet deep remained in place for decades. On 20 July 1970, it finally burst in its entirety with terrifying force.

India had been inflicting for many years by then. But there was no longer a telegraph station, nor any other system to warn people of collapsing mountainsides, falling trees, tumbling boulders and the enormous mass of earth and debris rushing downstream. The horrifying trail of destruction all the way to Haridwar is there in the records.

Even today, landslides that dam mountain rivers and create temporary lakes cause devastating floods and deaths almost every year when these lakes burst. We still do not have a comprehensive warning system for such dangers. How, then, are we to expect a mechanism capable of reading the movements deep inside the enormous glaciers of the high Himalaya and issuing timely warnings? We are not even able to keep adequate watch on the lakes forming and expanding among the glaciers.

Experts point out that this is no easy task. Himalayan glaciers are spread over an area of about 48,000 square kilometres and, according to researchers, contain more than 5,000 lakes. Around 500 of these are considered dangerous. As many as 388 instances of glacial lake outbursts have been recorded across the Himalaya and Karakoram ranges, producing sudden floods. The disasters at Kedarnath, Chamoli, Sikkim and Dharali were caused by such glacial lake outbursts.

Such disasters are becoming more frequent—and more ferocious. Experts say the scale of the catastrophe in Nepal may be 91 percent when even in the past

thousand years. Glaciers may look tranquil from above, but all kinds of movements are constantly taking place within them. It is worth remembering that the Himalaya is a geologically young range—an infant in mountain-time—and is still rising. That is precisely why it is considered among the world's most fragile mountain systems. The unrestrained race for 'development' and the pressure of human settlement are taking their toll as well. And rising global temperatures are, of course, an enormous threat. Glaciers are melting and retreating. Some have effectively become bombs suspended in the air.

A recent study by IIT Bhubaneswar and the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, has identified 219 such hanging glaciers in the upper reaches of the Alaknanda valley alone. They need constant monitoring.

It may be like 'looking for a needle in a haystack', but it is not impossible. What it requires is money, an institutional mechanism and political will. The cost would be far lower than what we repeatedly lose in disasters and spend on relief and rehabilitation. The bursting of the Lhonak glacial lake in north Sikkim alone was estimated to have caused losses of Rs 25,000 crore.

The Government of India has begun to map and study glaciers and the lakes forming among them with the help of space research centres. But the real task is continuous monitoring of glaciers identified as vulnerable. Signals obtained through remote sensing satellites can help. We need to learn and seek assistance from the countries of the Alps, where glaciers are being studied, mapped and monitored in this manner.

And, as the American scientist and researcher Austin Lord has suggested, local communities—shepherds, Gujars and fisherfolk—should also be brought into the process. They possess generations of empirical knowledge about how to read the signs of danger. ■

NAVIN JOSHI is a veteran journalist and author

Of fake forms and deletions

» Continued from page 1

Several voters are of the opinion that outspoken critics of the government have been deliberately deleted. The Sabar report also found environment activist Reenu Paul is one of them. "My name has been deleted while my husband Vijendra Paul is there. I believe this has been done to harass me," Paul said.

Another vocal critic Kamala Pant, who heads the Uttarakhand Mahila Manch, says she has been spared but her husband Nandan Pandey's name has vanished. (Pandey had served as Uttarakhand's director of education.) Congress vice president Suryakant Dhasmana maintains, "They are targeting minorities, especially Muslims and Christians. All the voters identified are Congress voters. The intention is clearly mala fide. The state election commission has ordered an enquiry but we are yet to receive a satisfactory response to our queries."

In the last one year, the SIR exercise in India has seen nearly six crore voters deleted. Minorities in Uttarakhand fear they are next in line.

Muslims in the state believe the SIR is being used to systematically target them. Factors such as impossible tight verification timelines, discrepancies in names and addresses caused by scribal errors, marriages and migrations; and classifications like 'logical discrepancies' could lead to disproportionate exclusions. The boogey that those living in border areas adjacent to Uttar Pradesh are also registered in cities such as Bareilly, Moradabad and Rampur is false—a rumour circulated to disenfranchise them.

The Sabar report also found that in 45 of Uttarakhand's 70 Assembly constituencies, the number of voters deleted exceeded the winning margin recorded in the 2022 assembly election. The BJP is known to be closely monitoring 23 assembly seats that they lost in the 2022 assembly elections

with special focus on Khatima (represented by chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami in 2012 and 2017; lost in 2022).

Apart from the Kichha seat where around 9,300 objections have been filed, Rudrapur recorded 2,818 objections, Gadarpur 1,370, Khatima 394 and Nanakmatta 391. Most of these objections have been filed by individuals with close links to the BJP.

Purushottam has tried to reassure voters, telling them not to panic if they receive such notices, and that errors in names, addresses and other particulars can be corrected by submitting the prescribed documents. He himself received a notice after a discrepancy was found in the electoral records. 'Routine discrepancy cases' will be verified and disposed of at the BLO level, he said, adding that district election officers have been instructed to ensure that voters aren't unnecessarily inconvenienced.

Nainital sub-divisional magistrate Nawazish Khalik claims BLOs were visiting households to verify voter details and collect the required information. In Nainital, a notice was served at the residence of BJP MLA Sarita Arya, seeking voter verification details for both the legislator and her younger son. A similar notice reached Kumaon Commissioner Deepak Rawat.

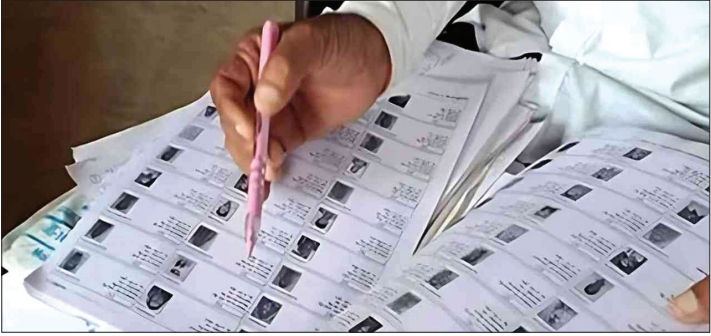
The claims and objections period will remain open until 13 August and the deadline for disposing notices is 11 September. The comprehensive breakdown of individual voter deletions will be published by the Election Commission on 15 September. What will be the fate of those permanently struck off?

Dhasmana reminds us that in West Bengal, the Supreme Court-appointed SIR appellate tribunals have restored 91 per cent of only 2.7 per cent of the appeals brought before them. "This means the vast majority is still left hanging. All these people were not given the right to vote. The Bengal elections should be declared null and void, and fair and free elections should be held once again." ■

THE SIR HORROR SHOW

15,00,00,000

That's the approximate number of adult Indians—each with a right to vote—that the SIR will declare ineligible by the time the ECI is quite done with the exercise. A.J. Prabal on the mayhem



Wrap your mind around this: over the three phases of the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of voter rolls in India, we have seen the deletion of 13 crore names so far, and it is estimated that by the time the Election Commission of India is done with this exercise, the number will swell to 15 crore. India's estimated adult (voting age-eligible) population is 97–99 crore.

Consider the following: Maharashtra, covered in SIR/Phase 3, has seen the highest drop in absolute numbers—2.06 crore (or 21 per cent). In Uttar Pradesh (SIR/Phase 2), 2.04 crore names have been deleted (~19 per cent). In Karnataka (SIR/Phase 3), 1.07 crore names (19.5 per cent). These three account for the highest absolute numbers of deletions.

The SIR draft roll for Maharashtra, which was published on 31 August, has 7.72 crore voters, which is 2.06 voters less than the state's pre-SIR baseline. Curiously, as MP and Congress national spokesperson Pawan Khera has pointed out, between the Lok Sabha election in May 2024 and the assembly election later that year, the same ECI had reason to add 40 lakh new voters to the state's electoral list. The Congress and other Opposition parties had at the time flagged the abnormal increase in the space of five months, and the ECI maintained the additions were all bona fide.

Delhi (Phase 3) has the dubious distinction of recording the highest percentage drop—nearly 33 per cent of its pre-SIR electorate are out of the draft roll. That's nearly one in three voters. It has a large working class migrant population, and a study published in *The Wire* found that the 47.56 lakh deletions in Delhi are heavily skewed towards working-age men in temporary, informal housing; mainly migrant, blue-collar workers from Poovanchal.

Ninety-one per cent deletions in Delhi are based on officers not being able to find someone. Every removal carries one of four reasons—absent, shifted, dead or duplicate (ASDD). Two reasons dominate in Delhi: 'permanently shifted' accounts for 31.6 lakh (or nearly two of three) deletions while 'untraceable or absent' accounts for another 11.7 lakh (or one in four). Together, these two reasons account for 91 per cent of deletions in Delhi. 'Death' accounts for less than 6 per cent and 'duplicate' registrations <3 per cent.

Five constituencies in Bengaluru have lost more than half of their electors while nine of Hyderabad's 15 constituencies have seen more than 40 per cent deleted. SABAR Institute, a Kolkata-based public policy research non-profit, found that in two constituencies in Hyderabad, the number of deletions is higher than the number of votes cast in the last election.

If there are mistakes in the list, the ECI argues, voters can appeal and get their names restored. Not exactly a cinch, as horror stories of voters running from pillar to post—before and after elections—have demonstrated. In an RTI reply to Member of Parliament Rishi Khan Chowdhury from Malda (West Bengal), the ECI has claimed that only 7 lakh out of the 27 lakh voters declared 'not eligible'—after they were mapped, produced documents and attended hearings—actually approached an appellate tribunal. (West Bengal is the only state that even has these appellate tribunals—19 of them, set up on a Supreme Court order after the last list in West Bengal saw 27 lakh voters still out of the voter lists. In other states, appeals have to be directed to local election officials.)

The RTI reply, dated 17 August 2026, revealed that of the 38,10,620 (38.1 lakh) appeals filed in the state, only 82,782 (2.17 per cent) had been

disposed of by 7 August. At that speed, clearing the backlog would take more than 20 years!

Incidentally, of the appeals decided, 75,443 names (about 91 per cent) were to be restored, the tribunals decided. The RTI also reveals that more than 20 lakh appeals were filed by the ECI itself, challenging the inclusion of voters who had already been cleared by judicial officers during the adjudication phase.

The ECI, as alert readers will remember, has been making ad hoc rules on the fly, as it has gone from one phase of the exercise to another, rather than playing punctiliously by the rule book. There is one, believe it or not! Even after all the exposés that raised deeply unsettling questions about the SIR, the Supreme Court has given it a clean chit, even chiming in with remarks like why those deleted unfairly have not protested. Here's a short list of dissonant details their Lordships might like to consider:

- The ECI has not provided written reasons for deletion of names nor has it transparently separated voters 'absent' from voters who

have 'shifted' as per the SIR. It's 'Manual on Electoral Rolls' (2023) explicitly states that 'an absentee voter is that person who is found to be absent for a limited period from [...] his ordinary residence where he is enrolled as an elector. [...] But his name cannot be deleted, as in the existing law, a person absents himself temporarily from his place of ordinary residence shall not, by reason thereof, cease to be ordinarily resident therein.' This definition questions the legality of voters absent during enumeration being deleted in the first place.

- The rules for Form 7 applications requesting deletion of names from the electoral rolls or to file an objection against a proposed inclusion have been progressively loosened. From a maximum of 10 a day per BLA (booth-level agent) in 2023, it became 50 a day in 2025 to no limits in 2026 (with a caveat that more than five will trigger reviews). In Uttarakhand (see overleaf on page 1), BJP workers have filed bulk applications to delete voters. In Kichha, 99 per cent of all deletion requests came from a single BJP booth-level agent, who filed 4,855 objections—all against Muslim voters. According to a *Newsland* report, in Jhabrera, Haridwar, 35 people listed as applicants in 1,657 objections said they had never filed them and that their identities had been misused. In affidavits submitted to the Haridwar district administration on 18–19 August, they said unknown persons had used their names, EPIC numbers and forged signatures to file Form 7 applications seeking voter deletion.
- The use of BLA-1 and BLA-2 forms and the underlying responsibilities of BLAs have triggered legal battles, with the Delhi High Court intervening on 3 September 2026, to strip away an administrative mandate imposed on BLAs. Political parties filed petitions challenging a rule requiring agents appointed via BLA-2 forms to sign an undertaking certifying that they had personally verified 'every single detail' contained in the electors' house-to-house enumeration forms. Justice Amit Bansal ruled that booth-level agents are not liable for verifying data in SIR enumeration forms and that data verification is a statutory duty for government officers not party workers.
- The SIR voter lists are still not machine-readable and omit key booth/constituency information. How much is enough, Lordships, to demand some answers from the Election Commission of India? ■

Rules have been changed on the fly even while the SIR has been ongoing

Protest. Capitulation. Repeat

The infectious protests sweeping India have reached the tribal student hostels of Maharashtra. **Jaideep Hardikar** reports

Five days before three tribal girls died of snakebite in a residential school in Maharashtra’s Gadchiroli district, the Devendra Fadnavis government had issued an order saying every tribal hostel should have cots, mattresses, blankets and pillows. The girls had none. On the night of 10 August, six girls at the Japtalai Ashram School in Dhanora taluka were bitten by a poisonous snake while they were sleeping on the floor. Three died. The other three were hospitalised and one of them, 14-year-old Samruddhi, is still critically ill. She was moved to a hospital in Nagpur.

Within a fortnight, the state government cancelled the school’s licence and ordered an audit of more than 500 government-aided tribal residential schools. Infuriated by the turn of events, the tribal students hit the streets, taking their cue no doubt from the cascade of student protests witnessed of late. Their demands went way beyond compensation for the families of the dead students. For 17 days, Adivasi students sat on hunger strike at Manjari in Pune. Students in Nagpur, Nashik and other parts of Maharashtra joined the agitation in their respective cities. The protest grew in size and got more strident—and on 29 August, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis accepted all their demands and gave a written assurance that he would review the implementation of his commitments within three months.

The Gadchiroli tragedy is not an isolated story. Officials have since disclosed that 584 students have died in two years—causes ranging from illness and accidents to snakebite and suicide—in Maharashtra’s government-run or -aided ‘ashramshalas’. The students have withdrawn their strike for now, with a stern warning that they will hit the streets again if the government fails to keep its promise. Their resentment has been growing over the past few years over sundry government rules/orders impacting student hostels, food provisions, scholarships and suchlike, which together betray the government’s whole approach to tribal education.

Take the new rules for tribal hostels notified by the Fadnavis government in August. One provision fixed an age ceiling of 26 for admission. (It was revised to 30 after protests and eventually scrapped). Students asked: why should a tribal student pursuing higher education at 26, 28 or 30 become ineligible for a hostel? Adivasi students do not necessarily make the grades as per a calendar the government may consider the norm. Poverty, distance, poor schooling, family responsibilities and interrupted education can push a



Tribal students sit on dharna after three girls died of snake bite at the Japtalai ashram school, Dhanora

student’s college years well beyond the conventional age. For an Adivasi student in a remote village, a college admission is not enough to break free. The state has to make it possible for these students to remain in college, with assistance for bare necessities like food, books, medicines and a place to live and study. For a student from a remote tribal village, to not have that hostel can mean the end of her higher education dreams. On top of those age restrictions, the Fadnavis government also lay down restrictions on all manner of protests and, as per the Adivasi Adhikar Bachav Kruti Samiti, intends to outsource the management of all tribal hostels in the state to a public charitable trust run by people close to the BJP/RSS.

Maharashtra moved government-run tribal hostels away from the traditional canteen system in April 2018 during Fadnavis’ first term as chief minister and introduced direct benefit transfers (DBT) for food expenses. Instead of the government or contractors providing

meals, money would go directly to students. The money never arrives on time. (Another matter that even if it did, the money can find other uses when resources are so scarce and subsidised meals are a different kind of assurance.) Tribal students repeatedly complained of delays—sometimes as long as two years—in DBT payments and scholarships. Some have had to borrow money or leave hostels because they could not afford food and everyday expenses, or the local eateries would not give them credit beyond three months. There were also reports of diversion of funds meant for tribal students to other populist schemes such as the Ladki Bahin Yojana. On the back of the students’ unrest, there is now an assurance from the state government that the DBT system will be scrapped and local kitchens reinstituted in these hostels.

Maharashtra has around 500 government-run tribal hostels, accommodating an estimated 58,000 to 60,000 poor students from remote villages who need a place to stay near their colleges and universities. But these hostels lack study rooms, libraries, computers and

internet access and often even basic amenities like clean drinking water and functional toilets. The students want hostels relocated to areas closer to educational institutes, libraries and hospitals and accessible by public transport.

On 22 August, at the Congress party’s ‘Chhatron ki Goonj’ event in Pune, the testimony of a tribal student named Nisha Sable created a firestorm. Sable said that female students returning from vacation to their tribal hostels in Maharashtra were being forced to take pregnancy tests. The matter was first reported late last year and an inquiry ordered by the state tribal welfare department.

The documentary record is scant. Government rules on health examinations for hostel students do not prescribe such a pregnancy test. Local tribal development authorities have denied issuing such an order. But a day after the Maharashtra State Women’s Commission visited the tribal girls’ hostel in Wakad, Pune, for a surprise inspection (on 23 September 2025), a Pune civil surgeon told the media that medical personnel had been orally instructed to conduct pregnancy tests when girls returned from vacation.

We still don’t know who authorised the tests or, if there was no written order, who gave the verbal instruction? It is highly improbable, though, that tests were conducted across several tribal hostels in the state without any instruction from anywhere.

The protesting Adivasi students have also demanded that thousands of vacant posts reserved for Scheduled Tribe candidates be filled. There are nearly 12,500 such vacancies in the state. They have raised questions about bogus caste certificates and the protection of ST reservation and recruitment under PESA (a national law to promote self-governance for tribal communities living in scheduled areas). Genuine ST candidates often struggle to validate their status while people with fake certificates go on to claim positions reserved for STs.

Maharashtra has no dearth of schemes for tribal students. There are government departments, portals, welfare programmes and designated officers. The problem is the lack of political will and the intention to deliver what is mandated. But in this season of protests, it looks like the state’s tribal students have also decided enough is enough. ■

Who needs a safe house?

Tamil Nadu confronts the dark world of ‘honour killings’ and caste-based violence

K.A. Shaji

In Udumalpet, Tiruppur district, Kausalya Sankar and her husband V. Shankar were attacked in plain sight on 13 March 2016. Shankar, a 22-year-old Dalit engineering graduate, was hacked to death. Kausalya, then 19, suffered serious head injuries. CCTV footage of Shankar collapsing as the killers fled shocked the whole country.

Kausalya, who married against the wishes of her family, survived and went on to become one of Tamil Nadu’s most visible voices against caste violence. Her legal crusades following Shankar’s death are milestones in a state where honour killings continue despite its progressive moorings and socio-political advancements. She welcomed the Joseph Vijay government’s recent decision to establish safe houses in every district (all 38 of them) for individuals and families vulnerable to or affected by honour killings, caste killings and related violence.

Kausalya told *National Herald*, “When a couple goes against the wishes of their parents to get married, they have nowhere to go. If only we had such a safe house, I would not have lost my husband.” Her words remind of the chasm between constitutional rights and the reality confronting couples who dare to cross caste boundaries.

Social justice minister Vanni Arasu announced the decision in the assembly on 28 August, saying it heard representations from survivors and activists, and was in line with the Supreme Court’s landmark judgement in the well-known Shakti Vahini case

In *Shakti Vahini vs. Union of India* (2018), the court affirmed that consenting adults have the right to choose their partners, free from interference by family, caste or community. It directed states to establish district-level special cells and 24-hour helplines to address threats and harassment, with the police required to take immediate preventive action.

Where necessary, couples were to be shifted to safe houses, particularly those facing threats over inter-caste or inter-faith

relationships. Authorities could provide protection and, if requested, assistance with marriage and registration. Safe-house stays were envisaged for one month, extendable monthly up to one year based on the threat.

Tamil Nadu plans to provide additional counselling, legal aid and rehabilitation support. It is also considering a special law against honour killings. A committee headed by retired Supreme Court judge K.N. Basha has been examining measures to prevent such crimes; legislation will follow the committee’s recommendations.

Arasu said that funds would be allocated in two weeks and facilities would start functioning very soon. Tight security would be provided for newly-weds until tensions de-escalated and families became less hostile. The period would also help couples find proper jobs and homes of their own.

Safe houses could become a critical intervention because the danger often begins long before a murder. Couples are threatened, abducted, confined, assaulted or separated by their families. In many cases, the police are approached only after the threats become acute. For a young couple forced out of home, there is often no place to go.

Tamil Nadu has a troubling history of violence. The 2003 abduction and murder of Dalit youth Murugesan and his Vanniyar wife Kannagi in Cuddalore became one of the state’s defining cases, exposing police complicity and investigative failures. It took 22 years for the Supreme Court to uphold the convictions of the 11 accused in 2025.

In 2014, the Vimaladevi case revealed how the machinery meant to protect was itself the source of danger. Vimaladevi, a caste Hindu woman, had married Dalit youth Dhilipkumar. A crowd from her community gathered at the police station, where the cops separated the couple despite their insistence that they were married. Vimaladevi later died under suspicious circumstances. These allegations were recorded by the Madras High Court, which transferred the investigation and ordered

systemic measures, including district special cells and a 24-hour helpline.

In 2015, Dalit engineering graduate Gokulraj was abducted from a temple in Tiruchengode for being with a woman from the Kongu Vellalar community. His body was found the next day. In 2022, a special court convicted 10 people, and the Madras High Court later upheld convictions against eight.

Shankar’s case remains particularly salient because Kausalya survived to testify and campaign against caste violence. Her father was sentenced to death by a trial court, and later acquitted by the Madras High Court. Kausalya’s appeal against that acquittal is still pending before the Supreme Court.

The problem has not disappeared. In July 2025, a 27-year-old Dalit software engineer Kavin Selvaganesh was killed in Tirunelveli allegedly for his relationship with a dominant-caste woman. The



V. Shankar was hacked to death in plain sight in March 2016. His wife Kausalya survived the attack to testify. She went on to become one of Tamil Nadu’s most prominent voices against caste violence



investigation was transferred to the CB-CID and the case remains before the courts.

The data reveal an even deeper problem: Tamil Nadu does not have a dependable official count of ‘honour killings’, which are not a separate offence in Indian criminal law. Motives are recorded as murder, suicide, abduction or other. Official statistics therefore reveal less than what civil society organisations find.

Evidence, a Madurai-based rights organisation, says 59 people were murdered in 53 honour-killing incidents in Tamil Nadu between 2017 and 2025. It recorded 14 deaths in 2023, 11 in 2024 and seven in 2025. The organisation submitted FIRs and case documents relating to all 53 incidents to the Basha Commission in March.

Between 2016 and 2020, research by Evidence had identified 55 suspected honour killings. Over 25 years (1999-2024), only six cases had resulted in convictions: Shankar-Kausalya, Kannagi-Murugesan, Gokulraj, Amirthavalli, Kalpana and Abirami.

Arokiasamy Vincent Raj, also known as ‘Evidence’ Kathir for his work with the organisation, argues that the low conviction record cannot be separated from the way such crimes are investigated: “Honour killings are the product of social engineering. Political pressure and casteism in the criminal justice system both play roles.” He points out that caste killings also occur beyond the Dalit-dominant-caste binary, among backward communities and between different marginalised groups.

Shaped by Periyar’s anti-caste movement, Tamil Nadu is seen as India’s laboratory of social justice

Modi’s Indus brinkmanship is another diplomatic blunder

India’s rejection of the international court ruling on the 1960 water treaty hands China a dangerous precedent

Ashok Swain

When India placed the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance after the Pahalgam terror attack of April 2025, the decision was presented by the Modi government as an act of strategic resolve. The message was that Pakistan could not support cross-border terrorism while continuing to benefit from cooperation over shared rivers. The slogan might have been politically compelling but the policy behind it was legally doubtful, materially ineffective and strategically shortsighted. The latest ruling by the Court of Arbitration in The Hague, and India’s categorical refusal to accept it, have now converted a self-defeating decision into a serious diplomatic blunder.

The Court has ruled that the 1960 treaty remains in force and India cannot unilaterally suspend its obligations. It has also ordered interim restrictions on construction at the Ratle Hydroelectric Plant in Kashmir. India must not raise the dam wall or power intake structure beyond specified levels until 90 days after a World Bank-appointed neutral expert delivers a decision, expected by July 2027. New Delhi has responded by calling the tribunal illegally constituted and insisting that its pronouncements will have no effect on India’s projects.

India has long contested the simultaneous establishment of a Court of Arbitration and a neutral expert process under the Treaty. It is entitled to advance that legal argument. But refusing to participate does not make the proceedings disappear, nor does labelling an adverse award an assault on sovereignty dispose of India’s treaty obligations. Sovereignty includes the capacity to enter binding agreements. It does not grant a state the freedom to disregard them whenever compliance becomes politically inconvenient.

The Indus Waters Treaty contains no provision allowing either party to place it in abeyance unilaterally. Indeed, its durability came from insulating water cooperation from the violent fluctuations of India-Pakistan relations. It survived the wars of 1965 and 1971, the Kargil conflict and repeated military crises. If even war did not extinguish the Treaty, linking its operation to an open-ended demand that Pakistan end all support for terrorism effectively turns a water agreement into an indefinite instrument of political caprice.

Terrorism is a legitimate and grave security concern for India. Pakistan must



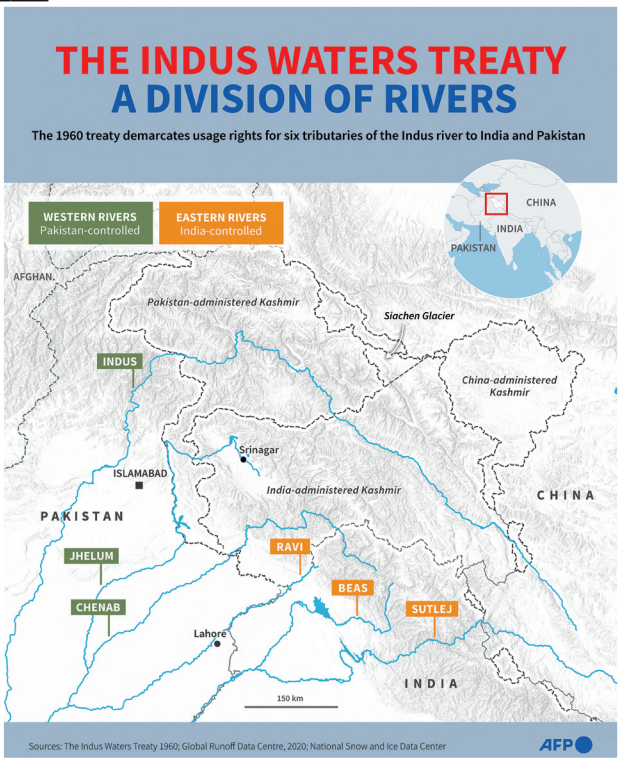
Photo: Getty Images

The Baglihar dam on the river Chenab before it flows into Pakistan; (right) the rivers that feature in the Indus Waters Treaty

be held accountable for any assistance given to groups carrying out violence across the border. But punishment must be lawful, proportionate and strategically useful. Suspending a treaty that sustains Pakistan’s agriculture does not meet those tests. It shifts attention from terrorism to India’s conduct, allows Pakistan to portray itself as the defender of international law and exposes millions of ordinary people to uncertainty over a resource essential for food and livelihoods.

Greatly exaggerated. India lacks the storage and diversion infrastructure required to

India cannot mount a defence of treaty obligations when it suits and dismiss an arbitral ruling when it imposes curbs



Infographic: Getty Images

stop or substantially redirect the western rivers. The mountainous terrain makes large-scale transfer of their waters extremely difficult, while much of Indian-administered Kashmir already has more water than it can readily use for irrigation. New Delhi can disrupt data sharing, alter reservoir operations and create anxiety during sensitive agricultural periods. It cannot, however, simply turn off the Indus system without years of construction, enormous expenditure and profound environmental and security risks.

A policy that imposes substantial legal and diplomatic costs without usable leverage is political theatre, not tactical toughness. Keeping the Treaty in abeyance helps Modi maintain the veneer of resolve after Operation Sindoor failed to secure its military objectives. Yet symbolic retaliation cannot be a substitute for coherent regional strategy. Water weaponisation may satisfy the domestic clamour for punishment, but it gives Pakistan the international platform that India has traditionally sought to deny it.

Islamabad has approached the World Bank and taken the issue to the United Nations Security Council. The Treaty bears the World Bank’s signature for specified

procedural responsibilities, and its dispute-resolution architecture depends on appointments made through the institution. India’s confrontation is therefore no longer confined to Pakistan. By rejecting the arbitral process outright, it challenges an international framework it accepted and used for decades. This weakens India’s claim to be a responsible power committed to a rules-based international order.

The timing is particularly damaging. Pakistan’s relations with Washington have improved, while its strategic partnership with China remains exceptionally strong. During Operation Sindoor, China supplied Pakistan with military equipment and operational and intelligence support. Pakistan can now combine its downstream vulnerability with diplomatic access in Washington and strategic backing from Beijing. Instead of isolating Pakistan, India’s Indus policy has created an issue on which Pakistan can mobilise wider international sympathy.

China is also the upstream power on the Yarlung Tsangpo, which becomes the Brahmaputra in India. Its enormous hydropower project near the Great Bend, close to the Indian border, will give Beijing greater capacity to regulate a river vital to

India’s northeast. China may not be able to arrest the Brahmaputra completely; much of its flow is generated downstream of Tibet. Nevertheless, reservoir operations, the withholding of hydrological data and sudden releases can create serious risks. India cannot persuasively demand transparency and restraint from China while asserting the right to disregard binding obligations towards its own downstream neighbour.

The consequences extend to Bangladesh. The Ganga Waters Treaty expires in December 2026. Relations between New Delhi and Dhaka have deteriorated and Bangladesh’s engagement with China and Pakistan has expanded. Negotiations over a successor agreement already face obstacles involving dry-season scarcity, the Farakka Barrage and West Bengal’s political objections. India’s behaviour on the Indus will inevitably shape Bangladeshi expectations. If New Delhi can suspend one river treaty after a security crisis, why should Dhaka trust that another will remain insulated from political pressure?

Reputation is not a diplomatic luxury. It determines whether neighbours trust India’s assurances, whether international institutions accept its legal claims and whether smaller states view Indian leadership as cooperative or coercive. New Delhi cannot, in the same breath, advocate respect for sovereignty when China violates its borders, defend treaty obligations when they protect Indian interests, and dismiss an arbitral ruling when it imposes constraints. Successful multilateralism diminishes credibility at a time when India seeks greater global influence and a permanent place on the Security Council.

The Indus Waters Treaty needs updating. Climate change, glacier retreat, changing river flows and new energy demands were not adequately anticipated in 1960. India also has legitimate concerns about receiving its permitted share of benefits from the western rivers. But change must come through negotiation and the Treaty’s procedures, not unilateral suspension. India should comply with the interim measures, re-engage with the Permanent Indus Commission and seek structured talks on technical and climatic aspects. Far from appearing like a ‘reward’ for terrorism, returning to the Treaty would demonstrate the confidence of a country that can defend its security without abandoning the rules it expects others to follow.

India’s original decision produced negligible material gain while internationalising the dispute and strengthening Pakistan’s diplomatic hand. Rejecting the Court’s ruling now compounds that error. Rivers connect countries even when politics divides them. By treating the Indus as a weapon, the Modi government has weakened India’s legal standing, frightened its downstream neighbours and handed China a precedent that may one day be used against us. ■

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When is a policy U-turn acceptable?

Ajit Ranade

The Reserve Bank of India recently released a small but revealing lesson in economic policymaking. On 5 August, RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra was asked whether the special FCNR(B) scheme, designed to attract foreign currency deposits from non-resident Indians, might be closed before its scheduled 30 September deadline. He said there was no proposal to do so. Nine days later, the RBI abruptly advanced the closing date to 31 August.

There may have been perfectly valid economic reasons. The scheme had worked almost too well. Dollar inflows were strong, while the subsidy cost of providing assured protection against depreciation was mounting. There was the growing headache of liquidity management and future forex liabilities. The issue is not whether the RBI is entitled to change course but why give a categorical assurance to the contrary when the possibility of an early exit is already being discussed.

Economic policy is full of U-turns. Some are evidence of agility and learning. Others betray poor preparation, political pressure or plain unpredictability. How do we tell the difference?

Donald Trump’s tariff policy is the most glaring example of the latter. Since the ‘Liberation Day’ tariff announcements of April 2025, duties have been imposed, paused, modified, lowered, threatened again and sometimes re-imposed. Firms managing supply chains have to brace for a tariff now and for uncertainty over the tariff regime six months down the line. Policy volatility itself becomes a tax on investment.

India has its own examples of U-turns. The three farm reform laws, for example—enacted with an iron hand and then repealed after a determined pushback from farmers. The ethanol blending programme—rushed towards E20 as the default option and then backtracking in the face of mounting evidence of its effect on vehicles and other concerns.

Or take pension reforms. The New Pension Scheme (NPS) moved government pensions away from an unfunded, defined-

benefit promise towards a funded, contribution-based system. Political pressure for restoration of the Old Pension Scheme then produced the Unified Pension Scheme, which restores an assured pension element while retaining contributions. Yet by March 2026, only about 1.24 lakh of 24.14 lakh eligible central government employees had opted for UPS.

All these reversals are not, however, the same kind: sometimes the politics changes; sometimes evidence changes; sometimes the original policy was not thought through. Sometimes the policy question itself is badly framed.

Consider the question: ‘Does industrial policy work?’ There can hardly be a universal yes or no. Which industry? What instrument? For how long? Under what governance arrangements? Is support conditional on performance? Is there competition or protection of incumbents? Is India’s Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme uniformly good policy?

Economics cannot provide watertight answers to policy questions because economic behaviour is not governed by

fixed parameters. A policy changes behaviour and changed behaviour alters the environment in which the policy operates. A farm reform changes incentives but also political mobilisation. A production subsidy can prop up an industry, but that industry then becomes a constituency that lobbies for continuation of the subsidy. Political economy is not an external disturbance; it is part of the system.

Even the most hallowed international institutions have had to learn this lesson.

During the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, IMF-supported programmes in Thailand, Indonesia and Korea initially emphasised tight macroeconomic policies alongside sweeping structural reforms. Malaysia did not enter an IMF programme. It eventually imposed capital controls, pegged the ringgit and subsequently staged a strong recovery. Was IMF policy wrong? Malaysia became an important counter-example to the then prevailing IMF hostility towards capital controls.

The euro-area sovereign debt crisis of 2011 produced another awkward episode.

Greek debt was judged to be unsustainable. But the IMF changed its own exceptional-access framework. It did not impose immediate debt restructuring but gave generous aid to Greece. This was because European institutions and governments were firmly opposed to restructuring Greek sovereign debt. The contrast with the rigidity shown towards Asian borrowers in 1997 inevitably led to accusations of double standards. Or was this a U-turn due to fresh thinking about fiscal austerity?

The World Bank provides an even more striking example. Its influential 1993 ‘East Asian Miracle’ report concluded that promotion of specific industries had generally not worked. At the time, it helped entrench the Washington Consensus that market-friendly policies were the way to go rather than state-led industrial planning alternatives. Three decades later, its 2026 report says industrial policy is back and offers governments an evidence-based toolkit for using it. That is good news for India’s PLI but is it not a U-turn?

For years the World Bank published its Doing Business rankings, which acquired

enormous influence over how ‘business friendly’ a country was thought to be. Yet ironically, in *Doing Business 2010*, India was #133, Brazil #129 and Russia #120 out of 183 economies; China was #89. Clearly the World Bank indicators had failed to explain why these poorly ranked BRIC economies were growing so rapidly. Nonetheless, following a mini scandal, the Bank in 2021 discontinued its Doing Business rankings. It has been replaced by another metric.

None of this is to say that economists or policymakers cannot or should not change their minds. To stick to your guns in the face of contrary evidence is not consistency, it’s dogma. The problem arises when institutions speak with greater certainty than the underlying economics warrants or when reversals driven primarily by political expediency are presented as economic necessity.

The RBI could have said the FCNR(B) window will remain open until 30 September or till inflows crossed a specified threshold or indeed arose about financial stability. Inconceivable, one critique of the episode makes precisely this point: pre-specified triggers could have preserved flexibility without sacrificing predictability.

Good policymaking requires humility, transparency, accountability but also decisiveness. Humility means accepting that forecasts and models can be wrong. Transparency means explaining what changed. Accountability means acknowledging the consequences of a reversal. Decisiveness means uncertainty cannot become an excuse for paralysis.

U-turns are not necessarily signs of weakness. Sometimes they show that policy is learning and is agile. But there is a difference between changing direction because the evidence changed and changing direction because the political wind changed. Institutions preserve credibility not by pretending that they are never wrong but by explaining why they changed their minds, what has changed on the ground and why the new course deserves greater confidence. ■

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



Photo: Getty Images

RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra reneged on his commitment vis-à-vis FCNR(B) deposits

Good policymaking requires humility, transparency, accountability and also decisiveness

WEIGHT, AND VOICE: A CASE CARVED IN STONE

Karnataka CM D.K. Shivakumar makes the South's case against dilution at Mahabalipuram

Along the shores of the Bay of Bengal, where the surf washes against granite carved by Pallava-era sculptors into temples, chariots, and reliefs of extraordinary craftsmanship, Mahabalipuram has long stood as a quiet testament to the endurance of southern India's civilisational achievements.

The town's Shore Temple, weathered by a thousand years of sea wind, and its cluster of monolithic rathas — each carved whole from a single boulder rather than assembled piece by piece — remain among the finest surviving expressions of Dravidian architecture, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that has withstood tide, time, and the passage of dynasties. It was against this evocative backdrop that the 31st meeting of the Southern Zonal Council was convened.

The choice of venue was, by most accounts, a deliberate one. Historically known as Kadalmallai — prosperity enriched by maritime trade — the ancient port town offered a fitting symbolic setting for a Council convened to deliberate on economic cooperation and regional development.

The location also carried practical weight: its proximity to Chennai, some forty kilometres to the north, ensured seamless logistical access for the Union Home Minister, the visiting chief ministers, and senior officials, while the resort-lined East Coast Road offered the secure, closed-door setting such deliberations require.

That reputation for calm, closed-door deliberation mattered as much this time as the setting's beauty. The Council met amid genuine friction between the Centre and southern states over fiscal devolution, delimitation, and representation, and the choice of a coastal, retreat-like venue over a conventional government setting appeared designed to ease that tension, allowing leaders to engage candidly across four hours away from the immediate glare of political theatre.

The same seclusion proved useful for the Council's other business: mediating the long-running Cauvery water-sharing dispute and the more recent contention over the Mekedatu project between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, discussions for which a controlled environment offered real advantage over a public standoff.

It was in this setting — deliberately chosen, historically resonant, and quietly conducive to consensus — that Karnataka Chief Minister D. K. Shivakumar carried to the Council his central proposal: that the Lok Sabha's strength be fixed at its present 543 seats for the next twenty-five years.

The argument was, at its core, one about permanence — about resisting the pressure to expand and instead holding a structure steady so that what has been carefully built is not diluted by unchecked growth.

It was an argument not unlike the one embodied in the monuments surrounding the Council itself, carved once, deliberately, to endure rather than to be added to piecemeal. Few venues could have framed the day's central demand with such quiet symbolism.

Anchoring delimitation to the 1971 census

Closely tied to this was Shivakumar's call for the Union government to continue treating the 1971 census as the reference point for any future delimitation exercise.

This is not unfamiliar in India's federal history; the 1971 census has served as the basis for seat allocation since the freeze on Lok Sabha strength was first introduced, precisely to ensure no state would be disadvantaged for having successfully moderated its population growth.

With delimitation discussions gaining renewed attention, southern leaders have sought clear reassurance that this safeguard will be honoured going forward.

"Let the 1971 basis be honoured," Shivakumar said, "and let the strength of our voice be protected." Together,



Photo: Gettyimages

the fixed House size and fixed demographic baseline formed the two supporting pillars of his broader appeal — a request that the South's disciplined record on population management not become the basis for its comparative disadvantage.

Women's reservation: Implementation without further delay

A third element of Shivakumar's address concerned the Women's Reservation Act — legislation welcomed in principle but whose implementation has, in practice, been linked to a fresh delimitation exercise, on the reasoning that reserved constituencies require settled boundaries. Shivakumar respectfully but firmly questioned this sequencing, observing that women have waited a considerable time for meaningful political representation.

"Women have waited long enough for their rightful representation," he said. "Their reservation should not have to wait for a population count."

His proposed solution was notably practical: implement the reservation within the Lok Sabha's existing 543 seats, rather than deferring it until after a future delimitation exercise.

This removed the procedural basis often cited for delay, while ensuring the South's proportional representation would remain undisturbed.

"Weight, and Voice": The underlying principle

Running beneath all three proposals was a single, carefully articulated

"We welcome the assurance that no southern state will lose seats," he said. "But representation is not only about numbers. It is about weight, and about voice." A state's seat count remaining unchanged, he explained, carries less significance if the overall House expands and other states gain a larger share of that increase.

The distinction, gently made, captured the essence of the South's position: that fairness must be measured not only in seats retained, but in influence preserved.

The fiscal dimension: Contribution without commensurate return

Having addressed political representation, Shivakumar turned to the distribution of central resources, pointing to figures that have featured prominently in recent southern discourse — that the five southern states together contribute close to a third of India's GDP, while accounting for a comparatively smaller share of its population. He noted that despite this contribution — and a strong record of tax compliance, industrial output, and innovation — the southern states have seen their share of central tax devolution gradually decline under successive Finance Commission formulas.

"Fairness in our voice is one half of the story. Fairness in our resources is the other," he told the Council, drawing a clear link between political and economic equity. A region that shoulders a significant share of the nation's fiscal responsibilities, in his

view, merits corresponding consideration. chief ministers as at the Union government, framing the three proposals as a shared regional stand rather than a Karnataka-specific request. "I therefore urge this Council to move a resolution to freeze the number of seats in the Lok Sabha at the current number and provide women's reservation within that number," he said, calling on his counterparts "to stand together behind our shared stand."

The demographic roots of the South's concern

Underlying all three proposals was a shared historical context: decades ago, the southern states responded conscientiously to national appeals for population stabilisation, and their fertility and growth rates declined accordingly, while several northern states continued to register comparatively higher growth.

This asymmetry is the structural reason the delimitation question carries such weight — any exercise tied strictly to current figures risks converting a public health achievement into a political disadvantage.

A trade-off worth acknowledging: Constituency size and governability

A freeze of this kind, however, addresses one structural concern while quietly

populations than their southern counterparts — some potentially running into millions of voters per Member of Parliament. Such disparities already exist to a degree, but a sustained freeze would likely widen them considerably, raising practical questions about how effectively an individual MP can represent so vast and growing a constituency, and about the administrative strain of outreach, grievance redressal, and local development work at that scale.

Shivakumar's proposal does not so much resolve this tension as trade one imbalance for another: it protects the South's proportional political weight, while leaving the question of constituency-level governability in the fast-growing north to be addressed separately — through administrative reform, greater delegation to local bodies, or eventual policy revision once the freeze runs its course.

Situating the debate within India's federal framework

Zonal councils were established under the States Reorganisation Act of 1956, to foster cooperative dialogue among states and provide a platform where regional concerns could be raised outside the more adversarial setting of Parliament. Shivakumar's intervention sat comfortably within the original spirit of the institution — one that Mahabalipuram's own history as a hub of exchange seemed only to reinforce.

The delimitation question is not new to

person, one vote" principle against the risk of penalising states for responsible demographic management.

Similarly, Finance Commission devolution formulas have evolved over successive commissions, with criteria such as population, income distance, and demographic performance weighted differently over time.

A constructive appeal, offered in a spirit of federal partnership

Considered together, Shivakumar's remarks amounted to a carefully reasoned appeal rather than a confrontational one — reflecting a broader sentiment that decades of disciplined governance should be recognised and preserved, not allowed to translate into a diminished political or economic standing.

Whether the Council formally adopts a resolution along these lines remains to be seen; zonal councils function as consultative bodies whose resolutions carry political weight but are not binding on the Centre. Even so, the presence of a shared position among the southern chief ministers, articulated openly before the Union Home Minister, was a notable feature of the day.

There was something fitting, delegates remarked, in the fact that an appeal for permanence and proportion should be voiced in a town whose own monuments have stood, unaltered and undiminished, for well over a thousand years, and whose calm, secluded shoreline had already proved its worth as a stage for consequential dialogue.

As the Council's agenda moved to matters of infrastructure coordination and inter-state disputes, the themes Shivakumar raised remained part of the broader conversation — questions that will ultimately be settled through sustained deliberation in Parliament and within successive Finance Commissions. What the 31st meeting of the Southern Zonal Council ultimately demonstrated was a clear and measured message: a willingness among the southern states to engage constructively in shaping these outcomes, guided by the principle that fairness in a federal union should give equal weight to demographic responsibility and economic contribution — an argument for endurance and balance, delivered, fittingly, in a town built to embody exactly that.

The central demand: Freezing the Lok Sabha at 543 seats

At the heart of Shivakumar's address was a single, clearly stated request: that the Council adopt a resolution urging the Union government to hold the Lok Sabha at 543 seats for the next twenty-five years.

This was not resistance to institutional growth, but a considered means of preserving proportional balance among states during a period of continued demographic divergence. With population growth slowed markedly in the South while continuing at a faster pace elsewhere, an expansion of the House risked leaving southern states with a diminished share of seats even if their own numbers held steady.

"Our economic weight must be matched with political voice," Shivakumar told the Council, appealing to his fellow chief ministers to stand together on a shared position.

philosophy. Shivakumar acknowledged the assurances already extended by the Union government, noting appreciatively that no Southern state has been told it will lose seats outright — yet suggested this addresses only part of the concern.

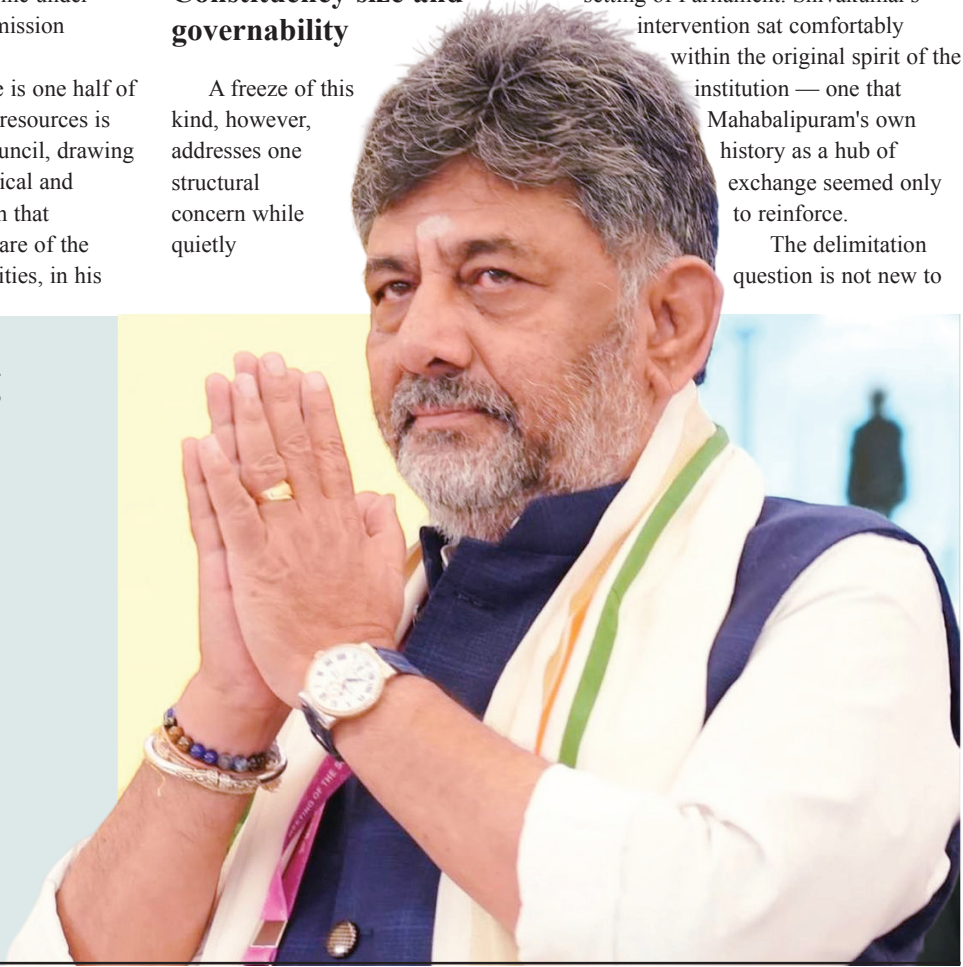
view, merits corresponding consideration.

A call for Southern solidarity

Throughout, Shivakumar's appeal was directed as much at his fellow

introducing another. If the Lok Sabha's strength remains fixed even as population continues to grow faster in the north, northern constituencies would, over the freeze's twenty-five-year span, come to represent progressively larger

Indian federal discourse. It has surfaced periodically since the freeze on Lok Sabha seats was first enacted, drawing attention from policy analysts, demographers, and constitutional scholars, each weighing the "one



The State has no role in faith

Thirteen Indian states today, 11 ruled by the BJP, have variations of a ‘Freedom of Religion’ law which in fact places severe restrictions on said freedom. In this open letter, **A.J. Philip** addresses the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, which joined the bandwagon on 28 August

Dear Shri Devendra Fadnavis Ji,

You may be happy that the Freedom of Religion Bill has come into force in Maharashtra. But there is an irony you may have missed.

In Pune, your police were so eager to implement the law that they did not even wait for President Droupadi Murmu’s assent before invoking it in two cases. They withdrew the provisions after the home department made it clear that the law would come into force only on 28 August.

Everyone knows who the principal target of your legislation is even though the law does not name any religion. Christians constitute a tiny fraction of the population of Maharashtra. The community that apparently frightens your government so much is hardly a threat to public order. Why this anxiety about a tiny, largely law abiding, highly literate community?

The way these laws are being applied across the country should concern every citizen, not just Christians. In Madhya Pradesh, seven Christians—six of them pastors—were sentenced in June this year to five years’ imprisonment under the state’s anti-conversion law and related provisions. They were accused of attempting to induce conversion while attending a child’s birthday party. The Jabalpur High Court has since granted bail to all seven, pending appeal.

You may say the courts will separate truth from falsehood. But why should an innocent citizen first have to spend time in prison, arrange money for bail and endure the stigma of being branded a conversion offender?

The law creates a structure in which the private spiritual decision of an adult becomes an object of government scrutiny. Imagine that tomorrow you wish to become a Christian. I know it’s unlikely but suppose you did. Under this law, requiring prior notification to the authorities, you’d

have to disclose this deeply personal decision to the state before acting upon it.

Think about the absurdity of the situation. You are the Chief Minister. You announce that you have changed your faith. You would become a political pariah; your political career would be over. If this can happen to a powerful chief minister, imagine the vulnerability of a poor labourer, an uneducated villager, a tribal, a Dalit who decides to change his faith.

Under Article 25, the Constitution protects freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practise and propagate religion. The framers did not say that a citizen must first obtain the State’s permission to decide what to believe.

The Constituent Assembly debates are instructive. Rev. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy, himself a member of the Assembly, strongly defended the freedom of conscience and the right to propagate religion. At the same time, he clearly opposed conversion through fraud, coercion or undue influence. That is the distinction your law risks destroying. Coercion and fraud are crimes; conviction of conscience is not.

You may also recall the example of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, one of the principal architects of the Constitution and a son of Maharashtra. On 14 October 1956, he embraced Buddhism at Nagpur’s Deekshabhoomi along with a vast gathering of followers.

What if a law like yours had been applied to Ambedkar’s decision? Would you have wanted the State to question him before allowing him to change his religion? Surely not.

There is another serious problem with this law: it reverses the burden of proof. Instead of the accuser having to establish coercion, fraud or unlawful inducement, the law places an extraordinary burden upon the accused to establish that the

conversion was voluntary. Presumption of innocence is a basic principle of criminal jurisprudence.

The provisions relating to marriage are equally troubling. By looking at interfaith marriages through the prism of conversion, the law will reinforce the poisonous narrative of ‘love jihad’. Two consenting adults should not have to prove to vigilantes, police officers or bureaucrats that their relationship is genuine just because they belong to different faiths.

Nor should prayer meetings become occasions for surveillance. Reports emerging from Maharashtra even before the law came into force have shown the anxiety it has created. Some small churches have started collecting declarations from worshippers stating that they attend prayer meetings voluntarily, apparently as a precaution against allegations of unlawful conversion.

I once visited a church in Uttar Pradesh as the chief guest at its annual Day. Ninety-nine per cent of the congregation consisted of people who had once lived as beggars.



“
If the State cannot tell me whom to vote for, why should it tell me whom to pray to?”



Photo: Getty Images

Many had been alcoholics. Some had been involved in petty crimes. Almost all were illiterate. Their children begged on the streets. That congregation went through a dramatic transformation.

The men had found work and were supporting their families. The children were going to school. The families were properly dressed. Women once illiterate could read passages from the Bible without any hesitation. Would you rather they remained beggars, alcoholics and petty criminals so that nobody could accuse the Church of ‘conversion’?

There is also a misconception about what Christians mean when they speak about service. The Church does not regard its work among the poor as ‘social work’. A Christian believes that serving a hungry person, clothing someone who has nothing to wear or caring for someone abandoned by society is an act of service to God. Jesus commanded his followers to love their neighbours. He did not add the word ‘Christian’ before ‘neighbours’.

That is why Christians run schools, hospitals, orphanages and other institutions, often in remote and difficult parts of the country. It is also why missionaries and Christian organisations have worked for generations among tribal and marginalised communities. Go to a remote tribal area and you will often find a Christian tribal family whose children are better educated, whose members are better dressed and who have moved from bare survival to a more dignified existence.

That is not necessarily the result of someone handing them money. Sometimes it is the result of education. Sometimes it follows from healthcare, or recovering from

alcoholism or simply discovering that they too have dignity.

If somebody chooses Christianity because he believes it offers him spiritual truth, that is his constitutional right. The same principle applies to a Buddhist, a Muslim or a Hindu. The State has no business choosing among these possibilities. Your law is, therefore, not merely about conversion. It is about the relationship between the citizen and the State. Imagine a law saying that a citizen who is a Communist today, a Congress supporter tomorrow and a BJP supporter the day after must inform the district collector before changing political affiliation. You would rightly call it ridiculous.

But religious belief is even more intimate than political preference. A political party is an organisation. Faith is a matter of conscience. If the State cannot tell me whom to vote for, why should it tell me whom to pray to?

The Constitution gives you the freedom to remain a Hindu. It also gives you the freedom, if your conscience ever takes you elsewhere, to become something else. Please extend the same freedom to the poorest citizen of Maharashtra.

I wish you good health and hope that you will have the courage to protect the rights of those with whom you may profoundly disagree.

Yours etc.
A.J. Philip

A longer version of this open letter first appeared in Indian Currents

The wonder that is India

...and why the future looks so abysmal for the ‘mother of democracy’

Aakar Patel

A foreign outlet interviewed me last week and, after we had wrapped up, the interviewer confessed to being surprised. He said he had no idea this was the position India was in, which I find is quite a common reaction. Other than the academics who study India and foreign correspondents posted here, few realise how much India has changed from the image they had of it.

I will recap the interview for readers to compare it with their own assessment of where India stands today.

The first thing he wanted to look at was Hindutva—its origins, ideological foundations and how it differs from

Hinduism as a religion. I told him Hindutva combined the word Hindu and the suffix *tva* meaning Hindu-ness. The word was used in Savarkar’s book a century ago, in which he wrote that India and Hindu come from the same root as Indus and Sindhu. He felt that one could only be Hindu—and by extension Indian—if one’s holy sites were in India and not in Jerusalem, Mecca or elsewhere.

Hinduism, I said, was a religion concerned with one’s personal belief: gods, prayers, fasts, festivals. Hindutva was concerned about another’s belief: what they could not eat, where they could not pray, who they could not love and where they could not stay.

He then asked how Hindutva became

increasingly influential in Indian politics, particularly through the rise of the BJP. I replied that though it was formed in 1951, for four decades the BJP [formerly Bharatiya Jan Sangh] had only a single-digit vote share nationally. Until 1990, it did not win a single state without alliances. For all those years, the party did not know which issue to mobilise.

What made it popular, and doubled its vote share to 18 per cent, was the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992. Some 3,000 Indians were killed in the violence that made the BJP ascendant. Two other demands—stripping Muslims of their constitutional autonomy in Kashmir and taking away their personal law—kept the pot simmering.

The interviewer wanted to then discuss how Hindutva has affected India’s political institutions and the wider political environment, including the treatment of religious minorities. Here there was nothing to do other than recite the numbers which show us the total exclusion our ruling party practices as revealed by its ministers, its state legislators, Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha members.

The laws criminalising possession of beef appeared in 2015, triggering beef lynchings, and the laws criminalising interfaith marriage in 2018. My interlocutor was aghast to learn about the reversal of burden of proof and the presumption of guilt. How can you call yourself a democracy with all this around you, he asked. I shrugged.

He then asked about the prime minister’s role in the normalisation of Hindutva politics, and why this political project has remained electorally successful. I said Narendra Modi was more open and honest about his championing of Hindutva than the BJP leaders before him. This made him popular with his votaries

and had taken the BJP nationally to a vote share of 38 per cent, where it has stayed.

The BJP was also, I said, enthusiastic about permanent polarisation through law and policy. I referred to the bulldozers and absence of due process and he was dumbstruck.

He then asked how Hindutva has affected India’s minorities and whether the rise of majoritarian politics is changing how minorities understand their place within the Indian state. I answered as best I could. The main point was that India has more minorities than the entire population of western Europe.

Asked about Hindutva beyond India’s borders, I told him Israel puts us on display as its trusted friend and ally when asked to justify its actions against Palestinians.

I said our ambitions since 2014 had moved from global to regional, and our obsession was getting the better of our neighbours. I told him we had stopped competing with China and I gave him the numbers on the economy and the situation since 1991.

He asked: Do BJP leaders not see the damage they are doing? I said that in my experience, they genuinely believe in their ideology. To them, it is not a means to an end but an end in itself, and for this reason, what is happening by way of exclusion and persecution will continue, no matter what the fallout.

Finally, he asked me to discuss India’s future—whether the country can move away from majoritarian politics, what role the Opposition and India’s democratic institutions might play, and whether India’s pluralist tradition can withstand the growing influence of Hindutva.

I said our natural state was pluralist and that, broadly, society did not reflect the ideology of our government. However, so many years of it being imposed on us top-down has meant ideology has seeped into institutions and society in general, and this will remain even if the party is no longer in power.

As far as the future is concerned, I said, it is dark because we have no ideas on how to transition half-a-billion people out of poverty, where they will remain. More importantly, we no longer discuss this with any urgency, nor is it the primary basis of politics in our country. We will remain poor and irrelevant but content in the knowledge that our minorities are worse off than us. ■

We will remain poor and irrelevant but content in the knowledge that our minorities are worse off than us



Photo: Getty Images

It’s time to ask whether the rise of majoritarian politics is changing how minorities understand their place in the Indian State

Views are personal



The number of tigers is now 112, up from 18 in 2010. The reserve has around 651 elephants

Photos: S Parthibhan

The forest has been reclaimed...

...but two decades after the end of Veerappan’s reign of terror, it’s still threatened. The story of Sathyamangalam

K.A. Shaji

In the deep valleys around Talavadi and Talamalai, along the winding roads of Dhimbam and across the difficult country stretching towards the Moyar, the forest guards of Sathyamangalam still remember the days when entering the jungle meant entering Veerappan’s world. Koose Munisamy Veerappan was not merely a fugitive in these forests. For more than three decades, he built a parallel empire of guns, sandalwood, ivory and informers; a reign of terror across the forests of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The human and ecological cost was enormous—180 people, including police personnel, forest officials and civilians, murdered; 2,000 elephants killed for an estimated 40,000 kg of ivory; sandalwood smuggled to the tune of Rs 100 crore. Among the gang’s 45 kidnappings was Kannada film star Rajkumar, who was held for 108 days in the year 2000. When Veerappan and three associates were killed in a Tamil Nadu Special Task Force operation near Pappalapatti on 18 October 2004, Sathyamangalam heaved a sigh of relief. With the guns

silenced and the state able to reclaim the forest, a landscape that had been battered by organised hunting and illegal extraction had a chance to recover. That recovery has been remarkable. Sathyamangalam became a wildlife sanctuary in 2008 and a tiger reserve in 2013. Spread across about 1,408 sq. km, the reserve is one of the most important wildlife corridors in south India, connecting the western and eastern ghats and linking the Nilgiris with the Biligiriranga landscape and forests further east. The latest camera-trap assessment puts the tiger population at 112, against 18 in 2010. The elephant population is estimated at around 651, while 54 anti-poaching camps now support regular protection through foot patrols, watchers, cameras and intelligence gathering. Tigers cannot flourish in such numbers without adequate prey, water, cover and space. Their return is an indicator of a broader improvement. “Animals do not recognise the boundaries dividing Tamil Nadu from Karnataka, or one forest division from another. A tiger reserve is invaluable not only for its animals but for the larger forest

system it keeps connected. This is one reason why the recovery of Sathyamangalam matters,” says K. Rajkumar, Chief Conservator of Forests and Field Director, Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve. There is another side often overlooked in the celebration of Sathyamangalam’s wildlife recovery: people. People live in and around the forest, including tribal communities whose relationship with the landscape predates the reserve, which includes parts of three development blocks (Sathy, Bhavanisagar and Talavadi) with numerous revenue villages and

Today, the enemy here is not a man with a rifle. It is roads, resorts, electric lines

a significant transformation. Conservation cannot succeed indefinitely by treating indigenous people as outsiders. * The temptation to make money from wildlife, however, persists. In the years after his death, ‘junior Veerappans’ emerged. They never acquired his muscle, but they knew the forest, its routes and the difficulties of policing a landscape spread across two states. Today, country-made guns, traps, snares and improvised explosives have replaced heavily armed gangs. Small animals and wild boar are hunted for meat, while elephants remain a target for poachers. In 2024, an 18-year-old tusker was found dead near Thalavadi with its tusks removed. Forest officials said the elephant had been shot. A Karnataka resident was arrested for being in possession of the tusks. The incident was a cruel reminder that the ivory trade has not vanished simply because the man who made elephant poaching an organised crime is gone. But Enemy No. 1 is no longer necessarily a man with a rifle. Roads are a persistent threat. Highways have increased traffic through wildlife areas, creating barriers to animal movement. Elephants crossing roads are particularly vulnerable. Electricity lines are lethal as is electric fencing erected by farmers. Elephants moving through agri-cultural and forest-edge areas have been killed after coming into contact with poorly insulated or unauthorised lines. Then there are the quarries. “Around Soosaiyapuram in Talavadi, abandoned stone quarries have become hiding places for leopards. The animals take shelter in the deep pits and rocky cavities and emerge to prey on livestock in nearby settlements,” says V.P. Gunasekharan of the tribal collective Pazhankudi Makkal Sanghom. Granite and other stone deposits in the landscape around Sathyamangalam have commercial

value, as does tourism. “Tourism can become destructive when it grows faster than regulation. Resorts imply roads, vehicles, lights, waste, water extraction and human traffic. In 2025, authorities identified dozens of resorts and farmhouses operating in the eco-sensitive zone without permissions,” says Coimbatore-based conservation activist Mohammed Saleem, founder of the Environment Conservation Group. For communities living along the forest edge, the recovery of wildlife has brought another kind of pressure. “During the dry months, when water and fodder become scarce, elephants seek sugarcane, banana and other crops. Tigers and leopards prey on cattle. Farmers respond with fences, lights, noise... Every crop raid can deepen resentment against an animal that is protected by law but appears to directly threaten our livelihood,” points out tribal leader K. Mallappa. Recent studies of the Sathyamangalam landscape have recorded crop damage, livestock losses and human casualties. The cycle is painfully predictable. An elephant enters a field, a farmer tries to drive it away, somebody gets injured or killed, and the animal is subsequently regarded as a dangerous intruder. The forest department cannot protect wildlife by ignoring the people living alongside. Compensation, early warning systems, safer fencing, better management of elephant movement and genuine local participation will be as important as anti-poaching camps. The reserve’s own conservation model is already moving in that direction. But old suspicions die hard. The discovery of a decomposed tiger carcass near Bejalatti village in the Talamalai range in August showed how the memory of Veerappan continues to shape perceptions. Missing claws and teeth prompted conservationists to demand a closer forensic examination. Forest officials said the preliminary examination did not indicate poaching and suggested that the condition of the carcass could explain the missing teeth. Even if the animal ultimately proves to have died naturally, the disagreement is significant. If human-animal coexistence is managed with fairness and respect for traditional knowledge, Sathyamangalam could demonstrate that wildlife recovery and community rights need not be opposing ideas. The tiger has returned because the forest was given a chance. The elephant has survived because protection improved. The next step is for the people who live in the forest to be given a role in protecting its future. ■



Sathyamangalam became a wildlife sanctuary in 2008, a tiger reserve in 2013

The Indian joint family is back

Gen Z is headed back to their parental homes, finds Avay Shukla, but their motivations may be different

The joint family was one of the better constituents and binding blocks of Indian society for centuries. Consisting of three or four generations living under one roof, it bonded its constituent families into one larger whole, sustained positive relationships, pooled individual resources into one economic whole. Socially speaking, perhaps its best characteristic was that it took care of the weaker members of the larger family—the infants, the old, the sick or otherwise disabled, the unemployed, the indigent—and ensured that they too were looked after and lived a dignified life. The importance of this last aspect cannot be overstated, for back then there were no government welfare schemes, pensions, hospices or Ayushman Bharat-type protective umbrellas. Looking back, I feel that my father’s generation was perhaps the last of this ‘joint family generation’ (he passed on in 2017 at the age of 93). He himself grew up in a sprawling family consisting of his parents, four siblings, innumerable uncles, aunts and their families, and a couple of near-invisible widows. They all lived together in happy chaos in a huge haveli my grandfather had built in his village in Uttar Pradesh’s Fatehpur district. God only knows how the family’s finances were managed: even a firm of chartered accountants would find it difficult to untangle the various contributions to the family kitty! One word of caution, however: don’t for a moment think that it was run on democratic lines—no, sir, it was a patriarchal autocracy, my grandfather’s word was law and everyone accepted it because it was

mutually beneficial. No other system would have worked half as well! The Indian joint family started fraying, I suspect, in the 1960s and ’70s, and it was more or less dead by the late 1990s and early 2000s. I’m sure sociologists have identified the reasons for its gradual demise, but it was an inevitable consequence of ‘development’ as we know it. Things started changing with my generation, the baby boomers. As education, mobility and job opportunities expanded, youngsters started leaving their homes, first for better education and then for jobs, and settled down independently in places distant from their parental houses. This trend only expanded with the next generation, the millennials. Joint families almost disappeared and were replaced by nuclear ones. For abandoned parents loneliness became collateral damage. I guess this social evolution was inevitable, not only for the reasons given above, but also as a consequence of improvement in girls’ education. They were no longer content to let early marriage define their lives: they now sought independent careers and their own homes after marriage. How and where couples lived was now decided not by a patriarch but by economics—jobs, salaries, career prospects and the desire to raise their own families in their own way, without any parental interference. The wheel is now coming full circle with Gen Z. Ironically, the same forces that drove them away from the joint family system are now forcing them back to it! More and more young adults in their late 20s and early 30s, employed and

unemployed, married or single, are coming back to live with their parents. This is confirmed both statistically and anecdotally. Research shows that 70-80 per cent of young adults live with their parents, as do 20 per cent of young couples, and the trend is only growing. In my own social and family circles, I find that this is true in at least one out of every two families (including my own). This shift has not happened because of any change of heart on their part but pure economic and aspirational reasons. The reasons are varied, both economic and social. Both boys and girls are marrying later: the mean marriage age for girls has gone up to 22.9 years (24 to 27.5 for girls in urban areas), and for boys to 29 years (early 30s for urban-based males). Being unmarried means

they continue to live with their parents. Conversely, divorce rates are going up too—since 1990, it has gone up from 1.1 per cent of all marriages to 1.6 per cent, low by Western standards, but an increase of 50 per cent nonetheless. Divorce means the separated entities return to the safe harbour of their parents (especially if there are kids involved). Joblessness is another reason—40 per cent of India’s graduates are unemployed, and a large cohort of those employed are barely able to subsist on the wages they get, especially in urban areas. A new NITI Aayog report states that 8.70 crore youth (between 18 and 29) are in the Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) category. They have no choice but to live with their parents. Artificial intelligence is

beginning to exert its malevolent effect: big tech companies have already cut tens of thousands of jobs and more will be on the chopping block. Real estate, whether owned or rented, has become so prohibitively expensive in even Tier 2 or 3 cities that living separately is a pipedream for most youngsters. The costs of domestic household support, or for child-rearing, are unaffordable. At these prices, even ageing parents and their cluttered houses start looking very attractive, and their expertise in bringing up kids is simply irreplaceable! And so, the joint family is suddenly back in business. And guess what? It suits us ageing baby boomers too. The empty nest is full, creeping loneliness is banished, life acquires meaning again. It’s a win-win situation: for the youngsters it

provides a material safety net, for the parents it fills an emotional vacuum. But there’s a catch, as there usually is in all good things. Nature did not intend for progeny to live with their progenitors for ever. This is why adolescent animals are banished by their parents once they are taught the skills of survival and are forced to fend for themselves. Joint families are a departure from this basic law of life. Too many adults living together generates tensions, arising from a dozen differing perceptions of personal space, views and opinions, social preferences, eating habits, financial matters, etc. The joint families of my father’s era resolved these tensions by having one dominant authority—the head of the family—whose word was final and instinctively respected by all. That is no longer the case with Gen Z, Alpha and whatever other alphabetical generations are biding their turn in the womb of time. Today’s youngsters are taught to question, not accept things at face value; to speak their minds, not acquiesce to authority blindly. This is anathema for joint families, and I see it playing out in many families. It will need a lot of patience, understanding, give-and-take, genuine care and respect for each other for Phase 2 of the joint family system to succeed. It is still work in progress and I really don’t know how it will work out. I hope it does because families are the bedrock of any society and happy, functional families make for a stable social order, something this increasingly fractured world badly needs. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



Photo: Getty Images

Joblessness is one reason—40 per cent of India’s graduates are unemployed





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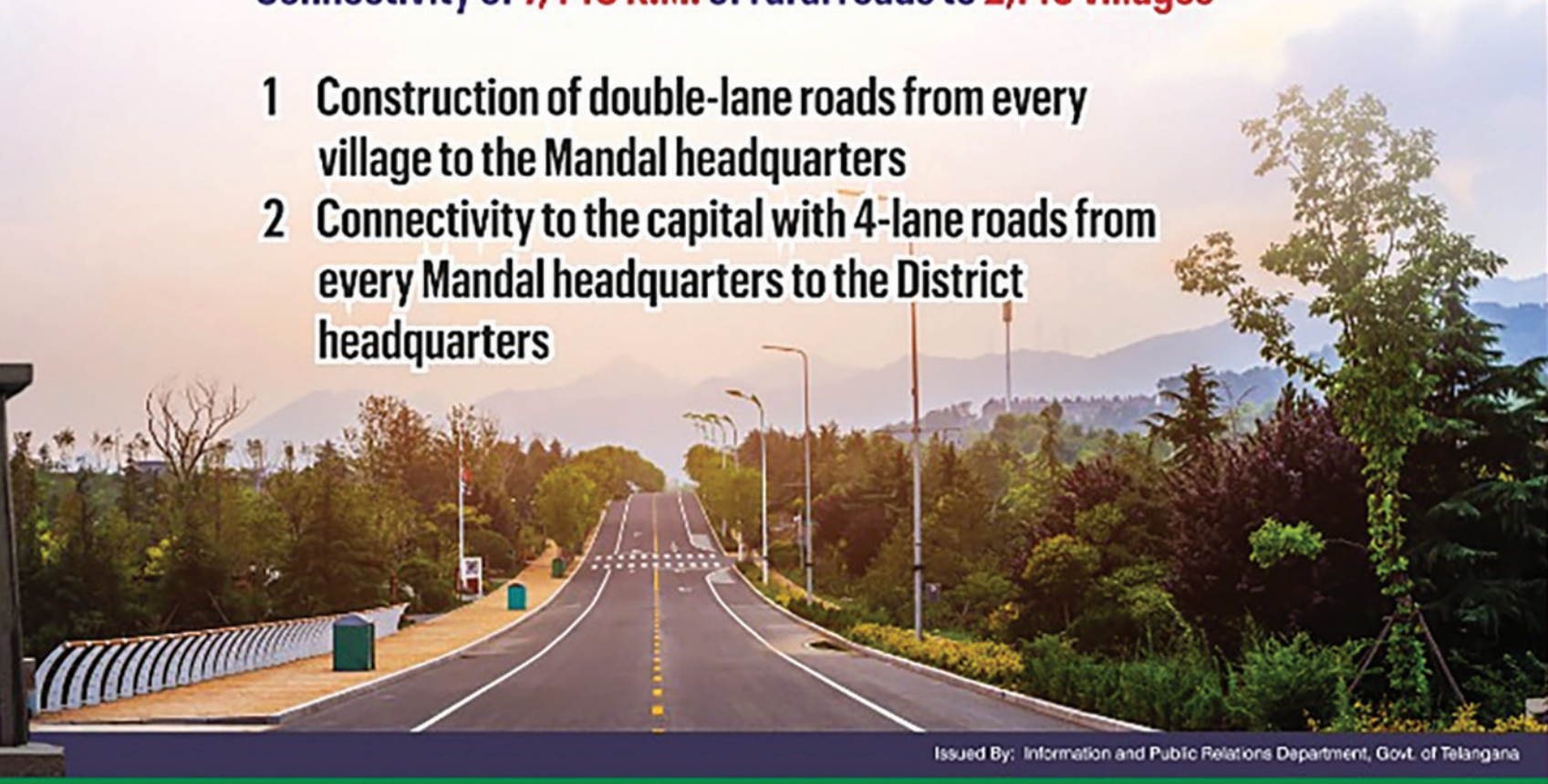
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