

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

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CBSE 2026 TEST RESULTS

Put students ahead of political theatre

Transferring the CBSE chairman and other worthies doesn't validate the results. A full offline re-evaluation may be the answer, writes **A.J. Prabal**

On 2 June 2026, hours after 17-year-old Sarthak Sidhant, a schoolboy from Ranchi, made a presentation to the parliamentary standing committee on education, the government transferred the chairman and secretary of the CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education), both IAS officers. It also announced a departmental inquiry committee to look into the hurried introduction of a digital evaluation system that led to this fiasco.

Since the CBSE Class 12 results were announced on 13 May, lakhs of harried students have reported totalling errors, unmarked questions, mismatched answer sheets, blurred scans and missing supplementary sheets. Lakhs have applied for verification. In a tweet on 26 May, the CBSE acknowledged receiving 4.04 lakh 'applications for scanned copies of answer books'. The same tweet claimed to have received '11.31 lakh requests for answer books'. The distinction was not clear to this reporter.

For students waiting for re-evaluation, this is no longer a technical glitch. The results are now suspect and at risk are college admissions that are often provisional pending proof that candidates have secured the necessary cut-off marks in their board exams.

Transferring a few worthies and demanding that the education minister resign does not solve the students' problems nor secure their future. Even now, after its hurriedly introduced on-screen marking (OSM) web domain has been conclusively proven to be hackable, the CBSE's response is to accept re-evaluation requests—for a fee! It has even managed to come up with a graded fee structure for this re-evaluation. And, believe it or not, will conduct the re-evaluation on the same compromised web domain. If the CBSE has alternative plans, there have been no public announcements to that effect.

Sarthak Sidhant and 19-year-old Nisarga Adhikary from Siliguri have thoroughly exposed the OSM platform used to evaluate the CBSE Class 12 board papers of 18 lakh students. Sarthak went a step further and exposed how the CBSE tweaked conditions to favour Hyderabad-based Coemtp Edudeck over Tata Consultancy Services (TCS).

Quick aside: TCS with 600,000 employees, an annual revenue of \$29 billion (Rs 2.40 lakh crore) and 57 years of experience lost out to a company with 51 employees and an average annual turnover of Rs 50 crore.

Sure, size doesn't bestow credibility but 'CBSE did not just pick a bad software vendor by accident. They lowered financial baselines. They dropped software security certifications. They cut the corrupt practices cooling-off period by half. They removed the physical server isolation requirement. They erased the



Photo: Vipin

word 'blacklisting' from their penalty matrix via a last-minute corrigendum, before bidding; and they bypassed their own mandatory CERT-In production audits,' Sarthak points out in a blog post.

Why did TCS lose the contract? CBSE floated the tender thrice in 2025—in February, May and August—each time diluting some of the conditions, lowering the bar and making it easier for Coemtp Edudeck to bid. On paper, TCS with its vast network, expertise and collaborators abroad, did look qualified to roll out India's first online evaluation platform. But it became clear that the CBSE was doing everything possible to keep it out. It even decided that the vendor needn't have its own 'data centre and disaster recovery centre', that it would do if the vendor relied on a 'MeitY-empowered data and disaster recovery centre'.

There were other tweaks in the OSM tender that Sarthak Sidhant prised open and laid bare. 'They gambled with our data security, our marks, our mental health; the institution failed us,' Sarthak writes in his blog.

Nisarga, who had discovered how vulnerable the platform was back in February 2026, three months before the Class 12 Board examination began (on 17 May), was equally scathing. He could have sold the data

The CBSE needs to answer some questions. For instance, was it under pressure to award the contract to Coemtp Edudeck?

and made a lot of money, he said. But he didn't. He could have also kept quiet and used the loopholes to manipulate the marks for whoever was willing to pay. He didn't. If access to the evaluators' platform was as easy as Nisarga had demonstrated, what is the guarantee that bad actors did not?

Nisarga, the ethical hacker, promptly informed India's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) what he had found and shared what needed to be done to plug the loopholes. CBSE and CERT-In were both casual and callous. Coemtp Edudeck, presumably alerted by the CBSE and CERT-In, ignored the warning from the student. What would a Class 12 student possibly do? The company, the 19-year-old flagged, had 'not only kept the door to the evaluators' platform open but kept the key hanging in the lock.' The password to access the platform was in full public view and he could easily retrieve data and details of schools and examiners, Nisarga said. Anyone could take over any examiner's account, view answer sheets and edit marks.

Nisarga reported this to CERT-In on 25 February. He was asked for a screen recording and he promptly shared the 'full walkthrough', retracing the steps he took to gain access. He received an acknowledgment and a case reference number:

CERTIn-16590126. He was assured that CERT-In was in touch with the agencies concerned. However, the loopholes remained till the results were declared on 13 May.

Another examinee, Vedant Srivastava, demanded to see his marked Physics answer sheet, which was emailed to him by the CBSE. Vedant was horrified to find that while the first page of the answer sheet, where roll number, school code etc. had to be filled, was in his own handwriting, the rest of the answer sheet was in somebody else's handwriting. After the CBSE stonewalled him, he took to X on 22 May to complain. He was trolled as a 'Pakistani', an 'anti-national'. By a hostile TV anchor, among others.

The same day Nisarga made his blogpost public amplifying how the platform was an invitation to manipulate marks. The CBSE claimed it was a test portal, but quietly deleted its tweet after a friend of Nisarga bought the domain for Rs 99. On 25 May, Nisarga detected another vulnerability, and again reported it to CERT-In. Four hours later, the CBSE took the whole portal down. On 31 May, he managed to access another CBSE portal with details of 45,074 failed payments for re-evaluation including emails, phone numbers, payment IDs and order IDs. The CBSE doubled down to say there was nothing wrong, that the system was robust.

There are questions that the CBSE needs to answer. Was it under any pressure to award the contract to the Hyderabad-based company? Why did it fail to heed warnings given by its own governing body members and evaluators? Why were tender conditions tweaked? Who demanded these tweaks and who approved them? Why was Coemtp Edudeck picked despite its dubious track?

Most importantly, how will the CBSE restore faith in the sanctity of these results short of a full re-evaluation of all papers, by means that are considered fair and above board by independent auditors.

Given that these ethical hackers have repeatedly and conclusively demonstrated that the OSM domain is compromised, that it can be hacked and marks altered at will, what is the guarantee that this hasn't happened? Is the CBSE in a position to vouch that bad actors were not involved to game the results for a price?

'You study day and night for two full years. You sacrifice sleep, fun, family time, everything, just to score well in your Class 12 boards. You dream of JEE, NEET, a good future. Then the results come... and everything is destroyed. This is not a story. This is what lakhs of CBSE students are living right now,' Tanmay Kashyap, a CBSE Class 12 student from Patna wrote on social media, echoing the sentiment of lakhs of students. ■

Is India running on empty?

Herjinder

The LPG crisis is already an old story. In metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru, cooking gas cylinders can be obtained, despite delays and repeat trips to distribution centres. In smaller cities and towns, long queues outside LPG depots have become a familiar sight. Yet, it's the larger picture that's even more troubling. Across India, households are being forced to tighten their belts, businesses are cutting back operations, and policymakers are scrambling to prevent a supply shock from turning into a full-blown economic crisis.

The first warning signs emerged in March. LPG and fuel shortages began affecting businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises. Industry associations reported that nearly 20 per cent of hotels and restaurants in parts of Mumbai had either shut down or drastically curtailed operations due to soaring energy costs and unreliable fuel supplies. In Gujarat's industrial hub of Morbi, around 170 factories reportedly ceased operations, affecting close to one lakh workers.

For many small food vendors, survival meant adaptation. Many shifted from LPG to

electric cooking systems. Sales of induction and infrared cooktops exploded. Daily sales that once averaged around 2,000 units surged to between one and two lakh units across the country.

But that 'solution' created a new problem.

With demand for electricity surging and fuel shortages affecting power generation,

many cities and semi-urban areas are now experiencing prolonged power cuts in addition to routine load shedding. The shift from gas to electricity has merely transferred pressure from one stressed system to another.

Recognising the severity of the crisis, the Government of India invoked provisions of the Essential Commodities Act, 1955, allowing authorities to divert natural gas supplies to designated priority sectors. Whether this intervention will prove sufficient remains uncertain. Shortages are now spreading beyond kitchens and factories.

In mid-May, reports from Pune indicated that several fuel stations had begun rationing supplies. A report in *The New Indian Express* described the way a strict fuel-rationing mechanism imposed by oil marketing companies affected Andhra Pradesh. Under the policy, long-haul trucks and interstate buses were reportedly restricted to purchasing only 200 litres of fuel in a single transaction. Fleet operators responded by refuelling in neighbouring states, causing delays in supply chains while simultaneously depriving Andhra Pradesh of valuable fuel tax revenue.

A video uploaded on X from Maharajganj

Photos: Getty Images



Chaos and crisis (From top left) Hoteliers seek relief; restaurants shut down; daily wage labourers wait in vain for work; small workshops down shutters

The supply shock triggered by the war in West Asia is at risk of becoming a full-blown economic crisis

Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most important energy corridors. A significant share of India's crude oil and nearly one-third of its natural gas imports transit through this narrow maritime route.

Reduced or no shipments at all from major suppliers such as Qatar and Abu Dhabi have already forced companies, including Petronet LNG, to invoke force majeure clauses. The result has been a combination of supply shortages, price volatility and growing uncertainty.

Despite repeated government assurances, such reports raise questions about the actual state of fuel availability.

India's vulnerability stems from a structural reality: we import nearly 88 per cent of our crude oil requirements and depend heavily on imported natural gas. US-Israel's heedless war on Iran has severely disrupted shipping through the

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Is India running on empty?

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Compounding the problem is India's limited strategic petroleum reserve (SPR) capacity of 5.33 million tonnes of crude. Reserves reportedly stand at 3.37 million tonnes—roughly 64 per cent of capacity. Even at 100 per cent, our reserves are worth national requirements for about two weeks.

The implications extend far beyond transport and cooking fuel. A farmer leader from western Uttar Pradesh warns that if the monsoon underperforms, diesel demand for irrigation could rise dramatically. Any rationing of diesel during the kharif season would directly threaten agricultural production. For millions of farmers already struggling with rising input costs, the coming months could prove exceptionally difficult.

Three months into the conflict, the shortage of crude is threatening to become a shortage of almost everything. Petroleum is not just fuel but the foundation of modern manufacturing. Household goods, plastics, caps, crates, synthetic textiles, packaging material, adhesives used in footwear and furniture, industrial lubricants and solvents—all depend on petroleum derivatives.

Yet perhaps the most serious threat lies in agriculture. As the kharif sowing season approaches, fertiliser availability is a major concern. India imports substantial quantities of phosphates, potash and natural gas required for fertiliser production. Roughly one-third of these supplies originate from or transit through routes linked to the Strait of Hormuz.

West Asia is a big supplier of ammonia, sulphur and phosphoric acid—key raw materials for fertiliser production. At the peak of the Hormuz disruption, international urea prices reportedly surged towards \$950 per tonne. Higher insurance premiums and vessel diversions have further extended delivery timelines.

A complex web of spillover effects from the conflict in West Asia threaten world economies

Agriculture, however, abides by an unforgiving calendar. Fertilisers are needed at specific stages of crop growth. Delayed delivery cannot be compensated for later. If fertilisers arrive late, yields decline.

After water, fertiliser is the farmer's most critical requirement, says Dr Sunilam of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha. He fears prolonged shortages could trigger widespread unrest, even riots. During the previous rabi season, farmers in several regions already faced shortages and were reportedly forced to buy supplies at inflated prices through unofficial channels. That crisis could become much worse.

The government's promotion of nano urea and nano DAP (diammonium phosphate) as alternatives has found little acceptance among farmers, many of whom argue that these products cannot adequately replace conventional fertilisers.

Nor are fertilisers the only concern. Supplies of key ingredients used in insecticides, pesticides and herbicides are also affected. Every disruption raises production costs and threatens agricultural output. India may possess sizeable foodgrain stocks today, but a decline in future production would inevitably affect food security and intensify rural distress.

The broader economic outlook is equally worrying. In a recent blog post, the International Monetary Fund observed that the world faces a complex web of spillover effects from the conflict at a time when many economies have limited capacity to absorb additional shocks. The conclusion was sobering: higher prices, slower growth.

India is already grappling with inflationary pressures driven largely by supply-side constraints. The West Asia crisis threatens to add a powerful new layer to these challenges. Any substantial increase in fuel prices would quickly ripple through transport, manufacturing and agriculture.

Credit rating agency CRISIL has already warned that the impact will extend far beyond energy markets. Higher transportation costs are expected to push up both food inflation and core inflation, affecting virtually every household.

Yet, at precisely the moment when inflation is becoming a central economic concern, the government has chosen to overhaul the statistical framework used to measure it. This will do little to ease the burden on ordinary citizens struggling with rising prices and shrinking availability of goods. ■

Quit writing our obituaries, we aren't dead yet

“The revival of the Left and the survival of democracy are now two sides of the same coin”

Dipankar Bhattacharya

The results of the assembly elections in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry have reinforced the myth of the BJP's invincibility in the age of Modi. And we are being offered this myth bundled with a whole set of obituaries as free gifts: an obituary for Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu, an epitaph for regional parties and for the INDIA coalition as a whole, and of course a eulogy for the good old legacy of the Left.

The myth of invincibility was almost (but not quite) demolished in 2024 when the BJP's own tally stopped at 240, thirty-three short of a simple majority. Modi 3.0 was made possible only with the backing of two regional parties, the JD(U) and the TDP. Since that partial setback, the regime has perfected the art of insulating elections from anti-incumbency shocks and manufacturing magical majorities by combining brazen systemic manipulation with meticulous social engineering. From Maharashtra, Haryana and Delhi to Bihar and, most recently, Assam and West Bengal, we have seen this strategy at work in election after election.

While the Sangh's post-2024 election strategy awaits an effective counter, the obituaries that are being written for regional parties. The DMK-led coalition has surely suffered a big defeat, but it is not the BJP nor its ally AIADMK that replaced it. Instead, we witnessed the rise of yet another regional party in Tamil Nadu, the TVK, which seemed to live up to the meaning of its name (the Victory Party of Tamilakam). The

BJP may now be in power in 22 states and Union Territories, but in six of them it still shares power with regional parties.

If the defeat of the DMK and TMC is being presented as the beginning of the end of regional parties, the LDF's defeat in Kerala is being exaggerated as a sign of the Left's marginalisation in India's political landscape. It is true that since 1977, the Left has always been in power in at least one of three states (West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala). West Bengal witnessed uninterrupted Left rule for 34 years (1977-2011), Tripura for 25 years (1993-2018) and Kerala for 10 years (2016-2026). But unlike West Bengal and Tripura, Kerala always had an alternating pattern where governments changed every five years (the 2021 election being an

exception).

The defeat of the LDF was therefore an expected outcome, and any talk of the Left's 'irrelevance' or 'obsolescence' simply because no state has a Left government is absurd. Communists were the first non-Congress trend to come to power in any state but, until 1977, the Left was essentially seen as a movement-based oppositional current.

In electoral terms, the concern for the Left should therefore be not so much the loss of power in a state, but its decline in vote share in states where it hitherto commanded a sizeable base. In this sense, the CPI(M)-led Left Front has suffered the biggest decline in West Bengal—from a little above 41 per cent in 2011 to just around 5 per cent in the recent elections.

The 2011 defeat of the Left Front was perfectly understandable after a prolonged stint of 34 years, especially in the wake of a major rupture and erosion in the Left's rural base following the unpopular land acquisition drive in the name of industrialisation. It is the dramatic rise of the BJP from a vote share of just around 10 per cent and three seats in 2016 to nearly 46 per cent and 208 seats in 2026 that should be the greatest concern not just for the CPI(M) but the entire Left.

Over a period of just ten years, the BJP has moved from the fringe of West Bengal politics to stage centre. For all the elements of electoral purge and electoral fraud which massively inflated the BJP's scale of victory in the 2026 elections, it is the underlying organic spread of the Sangh's toxic ideology of communal hate, bigotry and divisiveness in West Bengal that should worry not just the Left but every rational, progressive Indian.

A quick look at the unfolding scene in West Bengal in the first month since the BJP's ascent to power in Kolkata will tell us that the Sangh is in a great hurry to enforce its aggressive agenda. From the cow-slaughter ban that delivered a massive blow to the rural economy to the indiscriminate eviction of street vendors and railway hawkers without any rehabilitation; from attacks on Opposition leaders and offices to the demolition of shops, memorials and statues and the herding of helpless people into detention camps benignly christened 'holding centres'. What West Bengal has ushered in is not 'paribartan' (change) but a reign of chaos and violent siege.



A CPI(M) protest march in Dum Dum against the illegal eviction of hawkers

The idea is clearly to overturn everything that defined Bengal's progressive heritage, liberal ethos and syncretic culture. For the new 'conquerors' of West Bengal, power implies insatiable vengeance and aggression, not responsibility and accountability. History reminds us that it was the East India Company's conquest of Bengal that heralded the period of colonial rule through a 'permanent settlement' with feudal power. The BJP's conquest of Bengal is analogous: signifying not just heightened politico-cultural aggression, but also the quest for a new 'permanent settlement' for today's 'West India Company'. Amidst the livelihood on small businesses and livelihoods, the waves of disenfranchisement and dispossession, it is not difficult to hear the boots of corporate acquisition and accumulation marching in.

For the Sangh brigade, West Bengal was a long-awaited 'last frontier'. The BJP's victory in

Bengal closes the chain of BJP-ruled states around Bangladesh from Tripura and Meghalaya to Assam and West Bengal. It also completes the 'Anga-Banga-Kalinga' circuit with BJP chief ministers in the three states of Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha. Emboldened, the BJP will now accelerate its 'one nation one party' expedition. Delimitation and 'one nation, one election' are intended to put India's electoral system firmly within the BJP's vicious grip. Yet, if we look at the economy, governance or international relations, the Modi government has hit rock-bottom. Not even the regime's smoothest apologists can deny it any more.

So, how does the government tackle multiple crises? It presses the bulldozer button harder. It puts workers demanding better wages in jail. It dubs students demanding re-evaluation of exam results 'Pakistani'.

Activists are called cockroaches by the Chief Justice of India. And when the angry youth hit back digitally by launching a Cockroach Janata Party, a rattled government blocks their social media handles.

For the last one hundred years, communists have been one of the most vibrant, committed and consistent voices of freedom, justice and people's rights in India. Today more than ever before, Indian democracy needs Indian communists to rise to the occasion and build a second freedom struggle from the ground up. The revival of the Left and the survival of democracy are now two sides of the same coin. ■

DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA is the general secretary of the CPI-ML (Liberation)

“More than ever before, India today needs communists to build a second freedom movement from the ground up”

Opposition, on the streets and in the House

Sourabh Sen

After a staggering defeat at the hands of the BJP-ECI in the recently concluded state assembly elections, Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress, which lorded over West Bengal for 15 years, is bleeding. So heavily that political observers are wondering whether it'll live to fight another election. The party has begun to cannibalise itself, albeit with some help from the cash-and-investigative-agencies-rich BJP. A big breakaway faction of the party, led by an expelled leader, has been anointed as 'the real TMC' in the state assembly, and it looks like the ruling BJP will face no real challenge in the House. The streets, though, present a different picture: the first stirrings of life in a down-and-out Left; and something akin to a revival of the Congress that was last in power five decades ago, between 1971 and 1977. The current churn in the Opposition space in West Bengal has all the ingredients of a textbook case study. We conclude our two-part series.

It's like an e-bomb was dropped on Bengal. The distribution of seats in the new House makes it look like a near rout (BJP: 207, AITC: 80), but it's worth remembering that the TMC still polled 41 per cent of the vote (against the BJP's 46 per cent). The psychological impact of the defeat and the witch-hunt that followed in its wake is far greater. In Kolkata's famous *addas*, the discussion is no longer whether the TMC can recover but whether it will survive.

Distrust and dejection were apparent when only 20 of 80 newly elected TMC legislators turned up at a meeting convened by LoP-designate Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay on 31 May. On 3 June, the party split as 58 rebel MLAs seized control of its legislative wing and named expelled legislator Ritabrata Banerjee as their leader. Almost on cue, Speaker Rathindra Bose granted the faction legitimacy as the real TMC, lending credence to doubts that they were 'sponsored' by the BJP, which will no doubt want a pliant Opposition.

Meanwhile, the state CID is looking into an allegation of forgery against Abhishek Banerjee. According to media reports, Banerjee, as party general secretary, had written a covering memo to the Speaker of the West Bengal assembly, endorsing the signatures of two TMC legislators (Ritabrata Banerjee and Sandipan Saha) who were part of the legislature party that elected Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay as LoP. The expelled MLAs, in their formal



Hitting the streets Former chief minister Mamata Banerjee at a protest against the 'rigged' elections in West Bengal

complaint to the Speaker on 27 May, claimed that no resolution selecting the LoP was adopted on 6 May, as claimed, and further that they had signed the legislature party meeting resolution book on 19 May.

The all-too-obvious meltdown of the TMC may not, however, automatically translate into a popular consolidation that favours the BJP. The director of a leading NGO with decades of experience working in rural West Bengal says, "The TMC's problem is that 'floating voters' made up almost 80 per cent of its support base, people who weren't ideologically or organisationally tied to the party.

“We voted for the BJP, hoping to teach the TMC a lesson. Now we realise we made a mistake”

This kind of vote dissipation as fast as it consolidates. But the BJP-RSS are mistaken if they believe that Bengal has overnight dumped its Left-leaning tradition and switched en masse to the Right."

"We voted for the BJP, hoping to teach the TMC a lesson. Now we realise we made a mistake," said Pabitra Mandal, from South 24 Parganas, who works as a family retainer in Kolkata. "Back in my village, schools have no teachers. The young people have no work. Let the government address those issues. Instead, they are evicting hawkers, snatching away livelihoods and wasting time on who gets Annapurna assistance. We didn't survive on doles! We were quite accustomed to buying essentials from ration shops."

Mandal's remarks validate the argument that the election results, to the extent that they reflect popular sentiment, were more anti-incumbency than pro-BJP. They also indicate the opening up of a new space for opposition forces to move in. The CPI(M) and other Left parties realise this and have hit the streets. They are currently fronting demonstrations on issues like hawker eviction, the plight of cattle farmers and the gag order on government employees.

"We'll pick up these issues in a bigger way, working towards a Left consolidation that strengthens our organisation," said Palas Das. Das showed no aversion to sharing opposition space with the Congress.

The Congress is ambivalent about TMC workers and MLAs who have reportedly approached the party. "The PCC will repeat past mistakes if they agree to let in TMC discards," veteran Congress leader Abdul Mannan told *National Herald*.

Call it the real or rump TMC, but that faction, led by the doughty Mamata Banerjee, has also hit the streets. On 2 June, she addressed a rally, surrounded by the TMC old guard, many of whom had been shunted out by the Abhishek-led cotierie. The party has dissolved all its organisational committees, from block to state level, for 'a comprehensive introspection, performance review and organisational assessment'.

"It's barely a month since the BJP seized power and the shadows of fascism have already engulfed the state. A united front with the TMC, Congress and the Left has to be the answer," says Pratikur Rehman, a former CPI-M crowd-puller who switched to the TMC before the elections.

"A reinvented TMC and the Congress are likely to come closer," says Dipankar Bhattacharya, general secretary of the CPI-ML(Liberation). "The Left will dominate the opposition space by leading the agitations at the street level. If Bengal's civil society up their game, they can emerge as the third force." ■

With inputs from Kunal Chatterjee and Gautam Bhattacharyya

Sarna, ORP and the assertion of 'Adivasiyat'

Kumar Rana on why the BJP-Sangh are bent upon abolishing the 'Other Religions and Persuasions' classification from the Census exercise

Be very careful! The Census operation has begun. The enumerators may insist that you mention your religion as Hindu. Never do that. Mention Sarna as your religion. Sarna is the identity of the Adivasis. We must not lose that. Even the most casual observer can hear the campaign's resonance across Jharkhand.

The longstanding demand of Adivasis in Jharkhand and neighbouring states for a separate Sarna code in the Census has acquired renewed urgency with the Union government's proposal to abolish the 'Other Religions and Persuasions' (ORP) category (Code 7). Many Adivasi organisations view this proposal as an extension of demands advanced by the RSS and allied organisations to 'delist' Adivasi Christians from the Scheduled Tribe category.

As an Adivasi activist remarked at a street corner meeting in Dumka in mid-May, the move is "an attack on Adivasis who have increasingly been asserting their distinct identity." In his view, the government is not only rejecting the demand for recognition of Sarna but also eliminating the limited space for indigenous religious self-identification available under the ORP category.

Coupled with the campaign for delisting, the proposal is widely seen as an attempt to weaken both Adivasi identity and constitutional protections. Consequently, the demand for a separate Sarna code has become a broader assertion of 'Adivasiyat', or Adivasi peoplehood. The campaign has found support beyond Jharkhand. A massive rally held on 23 May in Jashpur, Chhattisgarh, against delisting echoed the demand.

In contrast, organisations aligned with the government have intensified efforts to push Adivasis to join the broader Hindu fold. On 24 May, the Janjati Suraksha Manch (JSM) organised a rally in New Delhi under the slogan: 'Tu main ek rakt, vanvasi-gramvasi-nagarvasi, hum sab Bharatvasi (You and I are one blood, forest-dwellers, villagers, city-dwellers, we are all Indians).' The use of 'vanvasi'—long promoted by Hindu nationalist organisations—instead of Adivasi is significant, as it rejects the indigenous status implied by Adivasi. Home Minister Amit Shah, the principal speaker at the event, also consistently used the term vanvasi.

Adivasi apprehensions are, therefore, not unfounded. The proposal to abolish ORP, combined with the campaign to delist and the refusal to recognise a Sarna code, is a deliberate attempt to reshape the politics of identity, representation and power.

Let us look at the demographic background. According to the 2011 Census, about 79.4 lakh Indians—0.66 per cent of the



The demand for a separate Sarna code has become a broader assertion of 'Adivasiyat'

national population—were enumerated under ORP. The largest concentrations were in Jharkhand (42.4 lakh), Madhya Pradesh (6 lakh), Chhattisgarh (4.9 lakh), Odisha (4.8 lakh) and Arunachal Pradesh (3.6 lakh).

Nationally, Sarna constitutes the largest indigenous religion within the ORP category. Nearly 62.5 per cent of all ORP adherents identified as Sarna followers in 2011. If followers of Sari Dharam, who share the same broad community base (specifically Santal), are included, the proportion is even higher. The next largest categories—Gond/Gondi and Sari Dharam (considered separately)—accounted for only 12.9 per cent and 6.4 per cent, respectively. The political import of these figures is most evident in Jharkhand. The state recorded 42.4 lakh persons under ORP, representing 12.8 per cent of its population. More than 41.3 lakh identified as Sarna, constituting 97.5 per cent of the state's ORP population. Among Jharkhand's Adivasis, Sarna followers substantially outnumber those who identify as Hindu.

This demographic reality has major political implications. Regional parties such as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) have derived much of their legitimacy from questions of identity and self-determination. The demand for a separate Sarna code has emerged as one of the most visible expressions of this assertion. Indeed, identifying with Sarna in Jharkhand is a feature well reflected in the 1991 and 2001 Census.

The continuing electoral success of the

Abolishing ORP won't just eliminate a census category; it will bolster the ideological claim that all Adivasis are Hindu

JMM-led coalition, despite the broader expansion of the BJP across eastern and central India, demonstrates the enduring political strength of Adivasi identity. In this context, abolishing ORP would do far more than eliminate a census category. If Sarna followers are compelled to identify as Hindus or any other recognised religion, their collective visibility in official statistics will disappear. Such a move would strengthen the claim that Adivasis are part of the Hindu fold while weakening the demographic basis of political

mobilisation around a distinct indigenous identity. In electoral terms, this will work to the BJP's advantage.

The implications extend beyond Jharkhand. West Bengal—where the BJP has made significant gains among the Adivasis, who share a common cultural, linguistic and clan membership with Jharkhand's Adivasis—also has a substantial ORP population. According to the 2011 Census, nearly ten lakh people in the state were enumerated under ORP, with Sarna and Sari Dharam followers comprising the majority.

This points to a contradiction in the BJP's tribal strategy. While the party has expanded its electoral support among Adivasis, many of these communities continue to maintain religious identities outside Hinduism. The Jharkhand experience demonstrates how demands for religious recognition can evolve into broader claims for cultural autonomy, political representation and indigenous rights, thereby challenging projects of cultural assimilation and political absolutism.

Their diversity also creates a potential faultline in Adivasi politics. A movement centred on Sarna can be perceived and presented as just one regional stream of indigenous assertion rather than representing the collective aspirations of all tribal peoples. While Sarna has become the principal symbol of indigenous religious assertion in Jharkhand, Odisha,

West Bengal, Bihar and parts of Chhattisgarh, it is not the only indigenous faith tradition. The northeast presents a very different landscape.

In Arunachal Pradesh, nearly 90 per cent of the ORP population identifies with Doni Polo. In Manipur, more than 95 per cent identify as Sanamahi followers. Indigenous communities in Meghalaya follow the Khasi, Niamtre and Songsarek traditions, while Nagaland's ORP population is dominated by the Heraka tradition. In Sikkim, many indigenous communities identify with Yumasam and related traditions.

These religions are rooted in distinct linguistic, cultural and historical contexts and have evolved independently of the Sarna movement. Consequently, Sarna may not automatically serve as a common religious identity for indigenous peoples across India.

The JSM gathering in New Delhi saw substantial participation from northeast tribal groups. While publicly presented as a celebration of 'one tribal culture' and 'national unity', it also demonstrated that different tribal communities can be mobilised through frameworks other than indigenous religious assertion.

The strategic significance of such mobilisation is its capacity to accentuate regional distinctions within India's tribal population. If Sarna is portrayed (and seen) as primarily a Jharkhand-centric project, with communities from the northeast pursuing their own separate trajectories, the prospects for a unified indigenous political platform become considerably weaker. A broad movement for indigenous religious recognition, stretching from Jharkhand to Arunachal Pradesh, would pose a powerful challenge to projects of cultural homogenisation.

The debate over ORP, therefore, concerns much more than census enumeration. It is fundamentally a struggle over how Adivasis will be seen and counted in the Indian nation state. The proposed abolition of ORP advances two interconnected objectives: the absorption of indigenous communities into the Hindu fold and the fragmentation of a possible pan-Adivasi political identity by accentuating regional, ethnic and religious differences among India's tribal communities.

Irrespective of whether diverse Adivasi traditions can (or should) be brought together within a broader framework of indigenous solidarity, the issue of the religious identity of Adivasis cannot be seen as an exclusive Adivasi concern. It should concern all practitioners of democracy. ■

KUMAR RANA is a research activist

Move over FCI, Adani is here

In the garb of modernising our food chain, is the Modi government enabling a takeover by another 'dear friend'?

Rashme Sehgal

The concentration of grain storage in the hands of Adani Agri Logistics and Leap India Food & Logistics Private Ltd heralds an alarming shift for Indian agriculture, transforming it from a decentralised, largely state-run model into a corporate-run entity.

By cleverly removing the anti-monopoly clause that formed an integral part of the Food Corporation of India's (FCI) silo modernisation programme, the government has awarded 110 of 134 contracts to the two companies to store and manage Rs 16,500 crore worth of grain.

The enormity of this allocation can be understood from the fact that 46.5 lakh metric tonnes (LMT) out of the total planned storage of 60 LMT will now be handled by Adani and Leap India (known to be financed by powerful private equity funds including the UK-backed Neev Fund and the Danish SGD Fund).

The partnership involves the construction of 200 new steel silos, the bigger hubs connected to railway lines and the smaller ones at procurement centres near farms. The estimated cost of land is between Rs 6,000-8,000 crore; the cost of building the silos between Rs 15,000-20,000 crore. While in the short run, the government 'saves money' on the price of land acquisition and construction, in the long-term, the PPP model costs the public dearly. The FCI and the government could have completed the project at a cost of Rs 45,000 crore. Under the PPP model, at the rate of Rs 4,000 crore per annum for storage and handling over a 30-year period, the damages are Rs 1.2 lakh crore.

As critics point out, under the garb of 'modernising' our food chain, the Modi government is now practically underwriting private profit.

What makes it all the more alarming is that FCI had initially proposed an anti-monopoly clause as a safeguard against precisely such concentration. A crucial document from the PPP Appraisal Committee (PPPAC) files shows the NITI Aayog and the department of economic

affairs altered the tender architecture. The most important change was not just the deletion of the anti-monopoly clause, it was the deliberate move towards bundled bidding. The larger the bundle, the greater the financing requirement. The practical effect of this arrangement is that a Rs 3,000-4,000 crore bundle cuts out mid-sized warehousing firms.

"This signals the end of India's food security and the annihilation of our public distribution system (PDS) which will now be dependent on this duopoly," warns Aflatoon, social activist and member of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha. (Under the National Food Security Act, India's public distribution system reaches around 81.35 crore people every month, making it the largest welfare programme in the world.)

By taking this 'momentous' decision, the government has reintroduced the three contentious farm laws to privatise agricultural marketing. While the government officially claims it will continue to procure rice and wheat under Minimum Support Prices (MSP), doubts prevail.

Farmers are more than worried. They point out that controlling the storage

network would enable the Adani Group—already engaged in the procurement, import and export of foodgrains—to control the supply chain. This could depress the MSP to the advantage of private players.

Farmers see this as a step toward privatising food security, echoing their earlier protests against the farm laws. With Adani and Leap India controlling nearly 80 per cent of silo capacity, farmers will have fewer options, making them vulnerable to any terms set by the duopoly.

Traditionally, the FCI procures rice and wheat directly from farmers at MSP. With private players running silos, procurement is likely to shift to them. Corporates are likely to influence procurement terms, potentially squeezing margins. Farmer unions argue that once storage and logistics are privatised, the state's bargaining power will weaken and may reduce FCI's own procurement footprint, indirectly undermining MSP. FCI has a regulated system for timely payments. Private players may not be bound by the same strict rules, raising concerns about delays, disputes and dispute redressal.

Corporate control of Indian



Farmers worry that controlling the storage network will give Adani control of the supply chain

agriculture—driven by agribusinesses monopolising inputs, supply chains and land—poses a severe threat to food security by endangering its four pillars: availability, access, utilisation and stability. Farm leaders contend that the shift from diverse, staple-based cultivation to cash crops (like broccoli, gherkins and other 'exotics') combined with volatile pricing will destroy the livelihood of over 160 million farmers.

Prominent farm leader, Dr Ashish Mittal, general secretary of the All India Kisan Mazdoor Sabha believes there are two objectives behind the 2023 amendment to the Biological Diversity Act, 2002 and the awarding of storage contracts to corporates in 2026. "One, to allow Americans to dump heavily subsidised foodstuff such as soy and corn at rates our farmers cannot compete with, and to capture agricultural land at throwaway rates and hand it over to the builders' lobby for urbanisation."

Dr Darshan Pal, anaesthetist by profession, social activist by choice and president of Krantikari Kisan Union in Punjab, believes the entire purpose of the recent move is to ease the way for big landlords to take over agricultural land.

"Already, over the last decade, we have lost four million hectares of farm land (of the 143 million hectares under cultivation). This has caused massive displacement, with peasantry forced to migrate to urban pockets. The government seems to forget that 68.5 per cent of our population lives in villages. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) accounts for only those workers who have actively applied for jobs. But there is a multitude who have not applied and are therefore not included in the PLFS. Even

our PDS system is based on the last Census. I believe one-third of the requirement for subsidised grain is not being met," said Dr Darshan Pal. (Rural households consume about 14.5 kg of cereals and pulses per month, but pulse intake remains far below nutritional requirements. While a minimally nutritious diet recommends 85 g of pulses per person per day, rural households consume only 0.46 kg per month in Rajasthan and 0.35 kg per month in Manipur.)

It is obvious this government has no interest in sustaining our agricultural sector. India's corporate debt has grown to \$645 billion which works out to almost 17 per cent of our GDP. But the cost of urea is something the government has done little about (apart from claiming to provide a 90 per cent subsidy for every bag of urea sold in the country.) "Buying oil from Iran would bring down the cost of urea," maintains Dr Darshan Pal. "The price of 45 kilos of urea is Rs 265 per bag but it is not available at even Rs 400 per bag."

Yudhvir Singh, general secretary, Bharatiya Kisan Union, says that once corporates are allowed to buy directly from farmers, the mandi system and the support farmers received from *arthiyas* (traditional commission agents) will be destroyed: "Mandis have supported farmers through centuries. Now they will have no role."

Singh cites the example of Adani Agri Fresh practically taking over the apple market in Himachal Pradesh by forcing smaller orchard owners to accept lower rates. These apple farmers have protested against the government's free trade pacts with countries like New Zealand and the US. If imported apples flood the domestic market, the livelihoods of over 15 lakh farming families in the state will be threatened.

"We have no choice but to fight. We are planning to meet in mid-June to see what strategy we can evolve to take on the government," Singh added.

Vijoo Krishnan, general secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) has demanded an immediate reinstatement of the 'anti-monopoly' clause and a cap on any single corporate group's share of silo capacity.

The AIKS has also demanded an inquiry by a joint parliamentary committee into the role of the PPPAC in eliminating the anti-monopoly and other clauses that would have prevented market concentration. Strengthening the FCI's own storage capacity through public investment, rather than wholesale handover to corporate monopolies is, he says, the need of the hour. ■

"Dependence on the Adani-Leap India duopoly will mean the end of India's food security"

Photo: Getty Images

Of black gold and broken shores

Photos: K.A. Shaji



For governments and corporations, these black sands spell enormous wealth and strategic opportunity

The demand for heavy mineral sands is opening up yet another frontier of dispossession, writes **K.A. Shaji**

An Enforcement Directorate investigation into alleged financial transactions involving Cochin Minerals and Rutile Ltd (CMRL) and Exalog Solutions, the IT company owned by T. Veena, daughter of former two-term Kerala chief minister and current Leader of the Opposition in the state assembly Pinarayi Vijayan, has once again thrust a relatively obscure industry into the national spotlight.

The controversy has largely been framed as a politico-legal issue. Yet beyond the allegations and courtroom battles lies a larger story about one of India's most strategic natural resources and the intense battles surrounding its extraction. CMRL operates in a sector that sits at the intersection of geopolitics, national security, industrial policy, environmental conflict and corporate power.

The renewed attention on the company has revived questions about the vast deposits of heavy mineral sands buried under the beaches of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, resources that have become extremely valuable in a world driven by electric vehicles, renewable energy,

advanced electronics, aerospace manufacturing and defence technologies.

For governments and corporations, these black sands spell enormous wealth and strategic opportunity. For coastal communities, though, they present an entirely different reality—of eroding shorelines, shrinking livelihoods and a protracted battle against extraction projects.

The sands of power

The dark sands that line stretches of Kerala's coast contain some of the world's most valuable mineral deposits. Mixed with ordinary beach sand are ilmenite, rutile, zircon, garnet, sillimanite and monazite, minerals that have become indispensable to modern industry.

Ilmenite and rutile are the principal ores of titanium, a metal prized for its strength, corrosion resistance and low weight. Titanium is used extensively in aircraft, spacecraft, missiles, naval vessels and medical implants. Zircon is vital for ceramics, electronics and specialised industrial applications. Monazite, perhaps the most strategically important mineral found in these deposits, contains thorium

and rare earth elements. Thorium has long occupied a central place in India's three-stage nuclear programme, while rare earth elements are essential for electric vehicles, wind turbines, semiconductors, missile systems and a range of advanced technologies that increasingly define economic and military power.

India possesses one of the world's largest monazite reserves. The Chavara belt in Kollam district and the adjoining Tamil Nadu coastline constitute one of the richest heavy mineral sand (HMS) provinces in the world. The significance of these deposits has grown dramatically as countries scramble to secure critical minerals needed for clean energy technologies and advanced manufacturing.

China currently dominates global rare earth processing and refining, giving it enormous leverage over international supply chains. Governments in the US, Europe, Japan and India are seeking alternative sources and building new supply networks. In this emerging contest, India's coastal mineral wealth has acquired unprecedented strategic value. What lies under the beaches of Kerala and Tamil

Nadu is now linked to electric vehicle factories in Europe, semiconductor industries in East Asia, renewable energy projects across continents and defence establishments around the world.

The enormous value of these resources inevitably attracts political and commercial interest. Control over mining leases, processing facilities, transportation networks and export channels translates into economic influence. For the very same reason, the mineral sands sector is also mired in controversies. Questions of regulatory oversight, political patronage and corporate influence have surfaced repeatedly over the years. The current controversy involving CMRL is only the latest reminder of how closely mineral wealth and political power are intertwined.

The coast that pays the price

While governments speak about strategic minerals and industrial development, coastal communities tell a very different story. For fisher families, beaches are not merely deposits of valuable minerals. They are workplaces, community spaces and protective barriers against the sea.

Fishing boats are anchored there. Nets are repaired there. Fish are landed, sorted, processed and sold there. The beach is not barren landscape; it's an extension of everyday life. Any change in its nature has direct consequences for livelihoods and survival.

B. Bhadrans, leader of the Alappuzha-based Anti Mineral Sand Mining Action Committee (a.k.a. Samiti), says coastal communities are always ignored in discussions about 'development'.

"Governments see minerals. Corporations see profits. We see our future disappearing. Every truck carrying mineral sand away from the coast takes away part of the protection that stands between our homes and the sea. The benefits go elsewhere; the risks remain here. Fishing communities are expected to pay the environmental price for the creation of wealth they'll never enjoy."

According to Bhadrans, local residents

have repeatedly demanded independent environmental assessments, transparent public consultations and real participation in decision-making. But they find themselves confronting institutions far more powerful than themselves.

Kerala's coastline is already facing a profound ecological crisis. Large stretches of the state's 590 kilometre coast are affected by erosion. Villages have watched the sea move closer over the past two decades. Houses have collapsed, roads have disappeared and public infrastructure has been damaged. Thousands of families have experienced repeated displacement.

Climate change and sea-level rise are major drivers of this crisis. But scientists point to the impact of human interventions along the coast. Ports, breakwaters, seawalls, dredging projects and sand extraction have altered natural sediment movement, affecting the delicate balance that sustains beaches and coastal ecosystems.

Environmentalist Sreedhar Radhakrishnan argues that discussions on mineral extraction cannot be separated from Kerala's larger coastal crisis.

"The coast functions as a connected ecological system. Beaches and dunes absorb wave energy, buffer storms and protect inland settlements. When these systems are disturbed, the consequences are rarely confined to one location. We are already witnessing the impacts of climate change, rising seas and largescale infrastructure projects. Adding further stress without understanding cumulative impact is dangerous."

A history of conflict

The battle over mineral sands is not new. It has shaped politics, environmental movements and community struggle across Kerala and Tamil Nadu for decades. Chavara in Kerala's Kollam district has been associated with mineral extraction for nearly a century. Across the border in Tamil Nadu, the mineral-rich belt extends through Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi districts. Together, these regions form one of the most valuable coastal mineral zones in the world.

Yet they have also been the site of some of India's most controversial mining disputes. The environmental impact of mineral sand extraction is a subject of intense debate. Mining involves excavation, separation and processing of large volumes of coastal sediment. The process alters dune systems, removes vegetation, affects groundwater dynamics, disturbs habitats used by birds, marine organisms and nesting turtles, and makes vulnerable communities living near mining areas.

Monazite introduces another layer of complexity because it contains thorium, a radioactive element. Although authorities maintain that operations are regulated and monitored, activists demand greater transparency in the handling and movement of radioactive minerals.

The demand for critical minerals is expected to rise sharply in the coming decades. The transition to renewable energy, electric mobility and advanced manufacturing will intensify pressure to extract these minerals, with all its attendant consequences.

The ED investigation involving T. Veena may dominate the headlines now, but the bigger question is whether extraction can occur without damaging fragile ecosystems? Can communities participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their future? Can governments effectively regulate powerful commercial interests? ■



For fisher families, beaches are not merely deposits of valuable minerals. They are workplaces, community spaces and protective barriers against the sea

"Every truck taking mineral sand away from the coast takes away a part of the protection that stands between our homes and the sea"

If the cow is sacred, shouldn't the law say so?

The demands by Muslim leaders for a national reason is forcing a new reckoning with India's constitutional ambiguities on the question

Aakar Patel

Prominent Muslim voices have asked the prime minister to declare the cow a national animal and ban its slaughter across India. The head of the largest body of clerics, Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind, Maulana Arshad Madani, said Muslims would have no objection to this, since it would stop mob lynchings.

Madani said, given that the majority of the country's population considers the cow sacred and accords it the status of 'mother', there should be no political compulsion for the government to avoid declaring the cow as the national animal. Former vice-president Hamid Ansari also weighed in on this and repeated Madani's ask.

Laws criminalising the possession of beef were first legislated in 2015, in Maharashtra, then Haryana, setting off a spate of violence ('beef lynchings'). Other BJP states followed and the lynchings continue.

Those who support a nationwide ban on cow slaughter say it is a constitutional requirement. So why has it not been implemented? Let us examine the matter.

Article 48 of India's Constitution is a directive principle, meaning that it is guidance not law. It reads: "The State shall endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter, of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle."

There is something unusual here. The reasoning is not religious but framed as an economic and scientific argument. Those pressing for a ban kept bringing up religious sentiment while also saying they

did not want to impose a cow slaughter ban on unwilling minorities.

Two members, Seth Govind Das and Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava, both of the Congress, had even wanted to introduce a ban on cow slaughter as a fundamental right of the cow. Others wanted buffaloes, bulls and other cattle of all ages to be included in the ban.

However, to retain the appearance that India's Constitution was secular, the legislators wanted a non-religious reason for the ban. Cows were needed to nourish children with milk, and slaughter was wrong since there was no such thing as unproductive cattle (because cows and bullocks were 'moving manure factories').

In a letter dated 7 August 1947, just a week before Independence, the soon-to-be president Rajendra Prasad wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru. It read: "There are two points which I had for consideration at my



meeting yesterday. I mentioned the agitation which is spreading with tremendous speed about the stopping of cow slaughter, but as everybody was in a hurry to go, the matter was not considered. I have been flooded with postcards, packets and telegrams making a demand that cow slaughter should be stopped by legislation... The Hindu sentiment in favour of the protection is old, widespread and deep-seated and it has taken no time to rouse at this moment to a pitch when it is difficult, if not impossible, to ignore it. I think that the matter does require consideration and we must take a decision, whatever it is, after due consideration."

In the Constituent Assembly, the

Muslims requested the Hindus to proceed with the ban but to lay out their religious reasons unequivocally. Zahir-ul-Hasan Lari from UP said, "If the House is of the opinion that slaughter of cows should be prohibited, let it be prohibited in clear, definite and unambiguous words."

If, he said, Hindus wanted a ban on cow slaughter for religious reason, "this is the proper occasion when the majority should express itself clearly and definitely" in the interest of goodwill and cordial relations between Hindus and Muslims. Lari added that Muslims were aware that their faith did not necessarily require them to sacrifice the cow—it permitted it.

The question was whether, given the

strong religious sentiments expressed by members of the Assembly, they would continue to extend to Muslims the permission and privilege they had at present. It was not so much interfering with religion, Lari said, as with liberty.

He also said he did not want to get in the way of Hindus protecting the cow but the economic argument was weak. Modern and scientific development of agriculture necessarily meant mechanisation rather than the continued use of draught animals. His plea was not heard and the amendment was adopted.

This state of affairs has continued. Madani has pointed out another problem: "In favour of the Uniform Civil Code, it is argued that when the country is one, the law should also be one, but the laws related to animal slaughter in the country are not equally applicable in all states."

On this issue, author Rasheed Kidwai writes: "[the] Muslim clergy's demand for a nationwide position should therefore be read not as submission, but as a challenge. It asks the state to stop dithering. It asks the political class to stop profiting from confusion. It asks the country to decide whether the cow is a matter of governance or merely an unfair instrument of polarisation."

We must also ask the government to tell us whether the Indian state is founded on secularism or religion. The prime minister, who has been vocal on the matter with his harangue against the 'pink revolution', can address the issue and resolve it by passing an honest law. It may or may not bring an end to the beef lynchings but it will certainly end the hypocrisy. ■

Views are personal

THE PAPERLESS FIELD: HOW 1,000 DAYS OF DIGITAL ARCHITECTURE REWROTE KARNATAKA'S LAND RECORDS

How billions of scanned legacy archives and automated mutation pipelines completely cut out arbitrary human delays and middlemen.

Photo: Gettyimages

For generations, rural India has held a foundational maxim: a farmer's security is tied directly to the ground beneath their feet, but their vulnerability is bound to the paper that proves it. In Karnataka, that reality is undergoing a profound structural shift. Over a landmark journey of 1,000 days, the state's Revenue Department has dismantled deep-seated operational bottlenecks, replacing human delays with systemic digital architecture to deliver critical governance straight to the doorsteps of ordinary citizens.

The quiet rooms of Vikas Soudha recently served as the backdrop for a detailed accountability review. Addressing the monthly progress meeting of all Deputy Commissioners, Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda did not just look back at institutional milestones; he mapped out an active administrative transformation.

"The work that had not happened for several decades has unfolded in just the last one thousand days," the Minister observed. "It is special that these words are coming from the mouths of the people themselves. The work we are doing is benefiting them directly. The perception that people earlier had about this department has now completely changed. As a result of our collective work over one thousand days, citizens are looking at the department with deep respect."

The "Nanna Bhoomi" Intervention: Redefining Land Rights

To understand the depth of this turnaround, one must look at the legacy frameworks that historically bound smallholder farmers. In previous decades, administrations routinely distributed lands to poor families but issued only the Record of Rights, Tenancy and Crops (RTC). Crucial structural records, complete boundary outlines, and land sketches remained locked deep inside government record rooms. This operational gap kept smallholders in an ongoing loop of vulnerability.

Without integrated sketches, establishing legal title boundaries was nearly impossible without launching a formal Podi Durasti (subdivision correction) process. Historically, navigating this meant running a gauntlet of regional offices, facing long systemic delays, and dealing with exploitative intermediaries.

To contextualize the historical inertia: over the entire preceding five-year administration, subdivision corrections were successfully resolved for a total of just 8,500 granted lands statewide. The process was purely reactive, moving only when a farmer possessed the resources and time to repeatedly follow up on an individual application.

"Governments that granted land earlier used to provide only the RTC and kept the farmers dependent on them. Therefore, without proper documents, the lives of farmers remained in an uncertain condition. When we resolved to fix this for our poorest citizens, opposition voices challenged it as an impossibility. We accepted that challenge." — Krishna Byre Gowda, Revenue Minister

The solution took shape as the "Nanna Bhoomi" (My Land) campaign—a fundamental operational shift. The department stopped waiting for applications. Instead, land officials proactively pulled legacy grant details online, built digital folders, cross-referenced spatial information, and went directly to the field.

Surveyors deployed to actual parcels, conducted physical measurements, built digital diagrams, and updated RTC and mutation ledgers simultaneously. This systemic approach effectively brought legal land clarity directly to the farmer's doorstep.

The e-PautiKhata Push: Resolving Generational Deadlocks

Few structural bottlenecks stall rural economic progress like dead-ancestor land locks. Across Karnataka, approximately 4.9 million properties legally remained in the names of deceased individuals. Because families routinely found the manual inheritance mutation process too cumbersome to navigate, generations of heirs were left without clear legal titles. This lack of updated records prevented them from securing bank loans, processing



"Governments that granted land earlier used to provide only the RTC and kept the farmers dependent on them. Therefore, without proper documents, the lives of farmers remained in an uncertain condition. When we resolved to fix this for our poorest citizens, opposition voices challenged it as an impossibility. We accepted that challenge."
-Krishna Byre Gowda, Revenue Minister

Addressing Backlogs: Data-Driven Timelines

The sheer scale of rural land management demands strict operational timelines over open-ended targets. The ministry backed its strategic vision with a series of sharp, aggressive deadlines to keep field teams moving at an unprecedented pace: **Accelerated Field Surveys:** Within the first year of this targeted push, official surveys for 205,757 farmers were set in motion. To maintain this momentum, Minister Byre Gowda

issued an explicit directive to regional administrators: surveys for 100,000 additional lands must be taken up within the next 90 days. **The Missing Record Committee:** For decades, files with missing structural documents sat in administrative limbo. The department systematically gathered these cases, sending the records of 107,217 farmers to the specialized Missing Record Committee. With 3,662 complex files already rectified and restored,

the ministry has set a firm three-month deadline to resolve 50,000 more backlogged files. **Correcting Acreage Mismatches:** Operational audits uncovered a major systemic issue: the records of 106,000 farmers showed that historical grant certificates recorded a total acreage that exceeded the actual real-world land available on-site. To fix this, field teams have been ordered to carry out rapid, on-site boundary checks to align formal records

with actual possession. **Clearing the Grant Pipeline:** With the preparation of original grant files for 350,000 farmers still pending processing, the Minister set a strict one-month deadline for completion. This multi-pronged, time-bound effort aims to secure documentation for approximately 1,174,226 farmers whose families received land grants between 20 and 50 years ago but lacked clear, legally binding titles.

lawful property splits, or executing transparent land sales.

To break this deadlock, the department rolled out the e-PautiKhata Campaign (Inheritance Mutation Campaign). Moving away from manual applications, Village Administrative Officers (VAOs) and field assistants now proactively verify local death registries, identify legal heirs, and process inheritance mutations via automated workflows. To date, 1.3 million land records have been successfully updated through direct doorstep outreach.

To accelerate this push, the Minister instructed administrators that, except for lands involved in active family lawsuits or disputes, every remaining matching property must be updated through this automated pipeline. Recognizing the intense effort required by field staff, the state announced an allocation of Rs 5.00 crore in performance incentives. This fund will directly reward VAOs and Village Assistants who achieve the highest mutation processing numbers, aligning field-level motivation with systemic state targets.

Bhoo Suraksha Abhiyan: Creating a Tamper-Proof Digital Archive

Historically, vulnerable citizens faced a

recurring administrative hurdle: the sudden loss or destruction of physical files in local offices. This vulnerability allowed bad actors to alter records or modify borders undetected, causing immense hardship to farmers.

The Bhoo Suraksha Abhiyan (Land Security Campaign) was launched to eliminate this risk by building an unalterable digital archive.

The scale of this digitization effort is massive: 7.119 billion legacy pages have already been scanned, indexed, and preserved in secure digital repositories.

Field units are processing the remaining 3 billion pages at a steady rate of 17.5 million pages every single day.

The impact of this archive is already actively changing lives. Over 5.27 million verified pages have already been distributed online to the general public.

Shortly, all land records will be made available through online distribution, allowing citizens to download authenticated records directly to their smartphones and removing the need to visit local government offices.

Operational Modernization: Advanced Survey Technology

Alongside comprehensive record cleanup, the department is modernizing its physical field

operations. Land Records and Survey Department Commissioner Venkataraju recently presented a new operational blueprint to fully digitize the state's surveying infrastructure and bring transformative changes to the cadre.

At the center of this modernization is satellite-linked rover technology. By moving away from traditional physical chains and manual plotting toward high-precision rovers, the department is modernizing how land boundaries are measured.

When surveys are completed using rover technology, digital copies of every single component—including the physical sketch, surveyor field notes, handwritten entries, and the Akar Bandh (original land survey records)—become instantly available in the cloud. This approach eliminates human error and manual drafting delays. The Minister left no room for ambiguity regarding its adoption:

"This technology should be used effectively. Through this, the entire department should become completely paperless and fully digitized from end to end by the end of this year," he instructed firmly.

The 1,000-Day Journey: Accountability via e-Office

This comprehensive shift in public service

required a complete overhaul of internal accountability. When the transformation began 1,000 days ago, senior leadership faced an immediate challenge: the department lacked basic data on exactly what work was pending and where it was stalled. Legacy paper files sat on local desks without any central oversight or digital tracking.

To fix this, the department developed a suite of online tracking dashboards. Today, leadership can monitor operational data across the state at a glance.

Core Strategic Milestones & Institutional Deadlines

Dharakasthu Podi Durasti (Subdivision Corrections): Focused on proactive survey execution and unalterable diagram updates for government-granted lands. Over 205,757 land surveys have been launched so far, with an additional target of 100,000 surveys set to be cleared within the next 3 months.

Missing Records Resolution: Dedicated to systematically reconstructing, verifying, and clearing lost or destroyed file archives. The specialized committee has completely resolved 3,662 complex files, and a strict directive has been issued to clear 50,000 more files within 3 months.

Excess Extent Alignment: Aimed at identifying and reconciling discrepancies where certificate records list an acreage larger than real-world limits. Over 106,000 files have been flagged for immediate audit and on-site physical checks of actual possession.

e-PautiKhata Campaign: Designed to eliminate generational deadlocks by registering legal heirs directly at their homes. 1.3 million land holdings have already been updated, with a current goal of universal coverage for all undisputed properties.

Bhoo Suraksha Abhiyan: A mass digitization push to preserve legacy land archives from tampering or physical decay. 7.119 billion historical pages have been digitized, with the final 3 billion pages scheduled to be completed shortly this year.

Survey Modernization: Driving complete end-to-end digital integration through satellite-linked rover units. With the core architecture deployed, the entire department faces an institutional deadline to transition to 100% paperless workflows by the end of the year.

The foundation of this accountability push is the widespread adoption of the e-Office framework. In the beginning, when the ministry suggested that even the simplest applications received by the inward section of local government offices had to be logged electronically, the idea was met with widespread surprise among the staff.

Today, that skepticism has been replaced by a new standard of efficiency. This tracking capability extends directly to field operations. Public administration in Karnataka—from the village-level Village Accountant (VA) right up to the regional Surveyor—runs entirely through e-Office. Every inbound request, field report, and land file moves through an electronic tracking path, creating a clear, unchangeable history of accountability and eliminating the arbitrary delaying power of individual offices.

Wrapping up the review, Minister Krishna Byre Gowda commended the shared commitment of the department's workforce, celebrating the profound teamwork that defined this 1,000-day journey. He lauded the dedication of the Deputy Commissioners across districts and acknowledged the steady administrative stewardship of his core executive team: Rajendra Kumar Kataria (Principal Revenue Secretary), MaunishMudgil (Principal Secretary, Registration and Stamps), Meena Nagaraj (Revenue Commissioner), and Venkataraju (Land Records and Survey Commissioner). Together, their leadership has set a benchmark for public sector modernization in India.

By replacing slow, paper-heavy bureaucracy with accountable, transparent technology, Karnataka has done more than just update its archives. Over 1,000 transformative days, the state has built a modern model of land governance, moving completely past outdated bureaucratic structures and ensuring that the legal rights of citizens are secure, verifiable, and truly at their fingertips.

Who can(not) have a nuclear weapon

Ashok Swain on the uneven application of NPT standards to Iran and Israel and on the hypocrisy of the West

As US and Israeli bombs and missiles nuclear on facilities, the justification they offered was both familiar and revealing: Iran must never acquire a nuclear weapon. The military action, sanctions, assassinations and flagrant violation of international law were all 'necessary to prevent a future nuclear threat'.

The US claims to defend the global non-proliferation regime, yet it has spent decades shielding West Asia's only nuclear-armed state—Israel. The same Western governments that condemn Iran's nuclear ambitions have tolerated, financed and concealed Israel's clandestine nuclear arsenal. If Iran can't have nuclear weapons, how is it okay for Israel to have them?

Iran remains a threshold nuclear state. Despite decades of suspicion and hostility, US intelligence assessments have repeatedly concluded that Iran has not made a political decision to build a nuclear bomb. It possesses the technological capability to do so, but capability is not the same as possession. More recent US intelligence assessments have again concluded that Iran has still not embarked on the project to build nuclear weapons. Yet it is Iran that faces bombing campaigns, economic strangulation, cyber warfare, sabotage operations and targeted killings of scientists.

On the other hand, it is universally known and quietly acknowledged that Israel possesses nuclear weapons. Estimates place its nuclear arsenal at around 90 warheads, with sufficient fissile material to build many more.

Israel never signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). It does not permit international inspections of its nuclear facilities. It has never publicly admitted that it possesses nuclear weapons, yet it has built a sophisticated nuclear deterrent, capable of delivering nuclear strikes by air, land and sea. No international body or coalition has demanded disarmament. No sanctions have followed. No military threats have been issued. Instead, Israel enjoys extraordinary protection.

For decades, successive US administrations have sidestepped any

acknowledgement of the fact that Israel has nuclear weapons. The unquestioned despite overwhelming evidence, extensive intelligence assessments, and even admissions by former US officials. Investigative reports have revealed that presidents from Richard Nixon onward effectively agreed not to challenge Israel's nuclear status. The result is a remarkable exception to every principle the US proclaims.

The hypocrisy is not merely political but institutional as well. US law mandates sanctions against countries that acquire or test nuclear weapons outside the NPT framework. Those laws have been applied selectively against rivals and adversaries. Iraq was invaded on false claims of possessing weapons of mass destruction. Iran has endured decades of sanctions. North Korea remains internationally isolated. But these norms do not apply to Israel.

Evidence suggests that Washington ignored Israeli procurement of nuclear material from the US, overlooked illicit acquisition networks, and even buried evidence related to Israel's suspected nuclear test in the ocean near the southern end of South Africa. What would certainly have triggered sanctions against any other state produced a deafening silence when Israel was involved.

After India's nuclear tests in 1998, the US and its allies swiftly imposed economic, military and scientific sanctions in the name of non-proliferation, but Israel has never faced any of this despite its long standing clandestine programme and its refusal to join the NPT.

The contrast was staggering: India declared its nuclear capability and paid an economic and diplomatic price. Israel developed its arsenal in secrecy, remained outside the treaty system, and was rewarded with military aid, diplomatic protection and strategic partnership.

With 191 signatory states, the NPT rests on a simple bargain: states without nuclear weapons agree not to acquire them, while nuclear powers commit to eventual disarmament and equal application of the rules. That bargain becomes impossible to sustain when one state is allowed to operate

Photo: Getty Images



Double standard Foreign minister of France Jean-Noël Barrot at the 11th review conference of the NPT. Recent investigations have revealed that France provided technological assistance to Israel's nuclear weapons programme

The same Western governments that condemn Iran's nuclear ambitions have funded and concealed Israel's clandestine nuclear arsenal

outside the system with complete impunity. Europe's role is no less dubious. Recent investigations have revealed that a substantial portion of Israel's nuclear infrastructure was secretly financed by West Germany during the early years of the Israeli nuclear weapons programme—the Dimona project. Billions of euros in today's value were transferred through covert arrangements disguised as development assistance. France provided technological assistance. Germany provided crucial financial support. Together, they helped build the foundations of Israel's nuclear capability.

Today, many of these same European governments present themselves as guardians of non-proliferation norms. Germany, in particular, has been among Israel's most steadfast supporters while simultaneously demanding strict limits on Iran's nuclear activities. The double standard is jaw dropping.

The consequences of this hypocrisy extend beyond Iran. No state develops an interest in nuclear deterrence in a strategic vacuum. Nations seek nuclear weapons when they perceive existential threats and a security asymmetry.

Iran's nuclear ambitions cannot be understood separately from Israel's undeclared arsenal. Nor can the growing interest in nuclear capabilities across West Asia and Saudi Arabia's 'strategic mutual defence agreement' with Pakistan be

divorced from the reality that one state already possesses the ultimate weapon while facing no international pressure to disarm.

Proliferation engenders more proliferation. The logic is straightforward. If nuclear weapons guarantee security and immunity from external meddling in sovereign affairs, more states will inevitably seek them. The lesson many governments have drawn from recent history is not that nuclear weapons are dangerous; it is that states without them are vulnerable.

Ukraine surrendered the nuclear arsenal it inherited after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Iraq abandoned its nuclear ambitions and was invaded. Libya dismantled its weapons programme and later experienced regime change. North Korea acquired nuclear weapons and became practically untouchable. These realities shape strategic calculations far more than hollow speeches about international norms.

The US actions in/on Iran are sending a dangerous message across the world: that the NPT is and will be invoked selectively to protect US allies and punish its adversaries. As long as that asymmetry persists, so will the reasons for more states to seek the nuclear deterrent. ■

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A valuable tool that requires vigilance

Pope Leo XIV, a man of faith and a man of science, on safeguarding humanity in the time of AI. Extracted from '*Magnifica humanitas*', his first encyclical published on 25 May 2026

It is not my intention here to offer a comprehensive treatment of artificial intelligence, nor to give an overview of the extensive relevant literature, since authoritative contributions already exist, including within the ecclesial context. I limit myself to recalling a few essential elements for a moral and social discernment that safeguards the primacy of the human person, in order to ensure that it will always be human intelligence, with its conscience and freedom, that guides technical innovations and responsibly determines their use and limits.

It is appropriate to preface this discussion with two considerations. First, any statement regarding AI risks becoming quickly outdated, given the remarkable pace at which these systems are developing. Second, all of us, including those who design them, possess only a limited understanding of their actual functioning. Indeed, current AI systems are more 'cultivated' than 'built', for developers do not directly design every detail, but instead create a framework within which the intelligence 'grows'. As a result, fundamental scientific aspects—such as the internal representations and computational processes of these systems—remain, at present, unknown. There thus emerges an urgent need for a twofold commitment: on the one hand, a deepening of scientific research; on the other, the exercise of moral and spiritual discernment.

It is not possible to provide a single, comprehensive definition of AI. What can be stated, however, is that we must avoid the misconception of equating this type of 'intelligence' with that of human beings. These systems merely imitate certain functions of human intelligence. In doing so, they often surpass human intelligence in speed and computational capacity, offering tangible benefits across many fields. Yet this power remains entirely tied to data processing. So-called artificial intelligences do not undergo experiences, do not possess a body, do not feel joy or pain, do not mature through relationships

and do not know from within what love, work, friendship or responsibility mean. Nor do they have a moral conscience, since they do not judge good and evil, grasp the ultimate meaning of situations, or bear responsibility for consequences. They may imitate language, behaviour and analytical skills, or even simulate empathy and understanding, but they do not understand what they produce, for they lack the affective, relational and spiritual perspective through which human beings grow in wisdom. Even when these tools are described as capable of 'learning', their way of doing so is different from that of a human person. It is not the experience of those who allow themselves to be shaped by life and grow over time through choices, mistakes, forgiveness and fidelity. Rather, it is a form of statistical adaptation based on data and feedback, which can be very effective, but does not imply inner growth. [...]

A valuable tool that requires vigilance
The speed and simplicity with which information, complex analyses, media content and practical assistance can be accessed undoubtedly makes life easier. Yet they can also encourage excessive reliance and the search for readymade answers, and

weaken personal creativity and judgment. The apparent objectivity of the responses and suggestions these systems provide can lead us to overlook the fact that they reflect the cultural assumptions of those who designed and trained them, with all their strengths and limitations. The artificial imitation of positive human communication—words of advice, empathy, friendship and even love—can be engaging and at times genuinely helpful. However, for less discerning users, it can also be misleading, creating the illusion of a relationship with a real personal subject. When words are simulated, they do not build genuine relationships, but only their appearance. The artificial imitation of care or support can become particularly risky when it enters contexts where real relationships and emotional bonds are lacking. Here, the danger is not so much that a person may believe they are communicating with another person, but rather that they may gradually lose the very desire to form genuine human connections.

Broadening our perspective to the use of AI in society, we see that it is now embedded in decision-making processes across many sectors and at multiple levels: in communication, management and

control. The gains in efficiency and the potential to improve certain services are clear, yet rapidly and uncritically adopting them exposes us to a range of risks, including the tendency to overlook the environmental impact. Current AI systems require enormous amounts of energy and water, significantly influencing carbon dioxide emissions and placing heavy demands on natural resources. As their complexity increases, especially in the case of large language models, the need for computing power and storage capacity grows too, which requires an extensive network of machines, cables, data centres and energy-intensive infrastructure. For this reason, it is essential to develop more sustainable technological solutions that reduce environmental impact and help protect our common home.

Responsibility, transparency and the governance of AI

The use of AI is never a purely technical matter: when it enters processes that affect people's lives, it touches on rights, opportunities, status and freedom. Important and sensitive decisions—concerning employment, credit, access to public services or even a person's reputation—risk being fully delegated to automated systems that do not know 'compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and above all, the hope that people are able to change', and can therefore give rise to new forms of exclusion. There are clearly harmful uses, such as the manipulation of information or violations of privacy. Yet there is also a

subtler danger, for when AI systems present themselves as neutral and objective, they end up reflecting and reinforcing the stereotypes or ideological bias of their designers and developers.

Indeed, entrusting an algorithm in practice with the power to select who is worthy or not, without anyone bearing responsibility for that judgment, is to hand over the task of redefining the boundaries of human possibilities. In this process, political responsibility is also lost, not just empathy toward those excluded, which can, after all, be simulated. The exclusion of the vulnerable becomes cloaked in a veneer of neutrality and objectivity, against which it becomes difficult to raise objections. In this way, injustice goes unnoticed, and compassion, mercy and forgiveness—understood not as mere appearances but as real political actions—gradually disappear from view.

From this follows a simple but compelling consequence: we cannot consider AI to be morally neutral. In reality, every technical tool embodies choices and priorities through what it measures, ignores and optimises, and how it classifies people and situations. If a system is designed or used in a way that treats some lives as less worthy, or excludes them without the possibility of appeal, then it is not merely a tool 'to be used well', since it has already introduced criteria that contradict the inalienable dignity of the human person. For this reason, ethical discernment cannot be limited to asking whether we are using a system for good or bad purposes; it must also examine how that system is designed and what vision of the human person and society is embedded in the data and models that guide it.

For AI to respect human dignity and truly serve the common good, responsibility must be clearly defined at every stage: from those who design and develop these systems to those who use them and rely on them for decisions. In many cases, the internal processes leading to a result remain opaque, making it harder to assign responsibility and correct errors. This is where accountability becomes crucial: the possibility of identifying who must 'account' for decisions, justify them, monitor them and, when necessary, challenge them and remedy any harm caused. ■

(Part 2 of this reflection will be published next week)



Pope Leo XIV

Photo: Getty Images

Artificial intelligences do not feel joy or pain, nor do they have a moral conscience, since they do not judge good and evil

India lost combat aircraft in Op. Sindoor

...and other damning highlights from the Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment report released end-May

Ashis Ray

The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a leading London-based think-tank on military affairs, in its Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment (APRSA) reiterates that Indian combat aircraft were downed by Pakistan in Narendra Modi's Operation Sindoor last year.

The APRSA analysis reads: 'This new and third type of surgical strike (under Modi after 2016 and 2019) was an Indian Army and IAF (Indian Air Force) joint operation; the Indian Army struck targets close to the LoC or Indian border while the IAF struck more distant targets. Pakistan's attacks were also unprecedented, with missiles and UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) targeting four air bases and civilian sites in India's Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat states, in addition to downing Indian combat aircraft.'

The exposé regarding the Pakistani counter-attack on Indian air bases and in three Indian border states blows the lid off the concealment attempted by the Modi government.

In February, the IISS's 'Military Balance 2026' report affirmed: 'Open-source imagery has verified the loss of one Rafale EH (enhanced with advanced electronics).' It also disclosed there were 'Indian aircraft losses', thereby underlining that more than one plane fell victim to Pakistani air-to-air missiles.

Neither Modi nor defence minister Rajnath Singh has, till date, owned up to the debacle. If anything, the civilian establishment in India has strenuously tried to brush it under the carpet.

Regarding India's militarised borders with China and Pakistan, the APRSA summarises: 'India's conventional-threat perception in the Asia-Pacific will continue to centre on Pakistan and China. Any potential future "major conventional war" would remain local in nature... India's border conflicts with China have been traditional in nature and are unlikely to escalate to the same level of the Indo-Pakistan conflicts, given China's superior military capabilities in the border area and India's reluctance to provoke it.'

The assessment concludes: 'For India, the pacing challenge is a "hybrid" situation of "no war but also no peace" with China and Pakistan. Indian military doctrine continues to evolve...' It added, 'India is unlikely to play an active military role in

the wider Asia-Pacific and will likely seek to avoid being drawn into a US-China conflict over Taiwan, for example.'

The appraisal of the India-China circumstances is this: 'India and China fought in 1962 and 1967 (the latter was a success for India in Nathu La under the leadership of the Congress party Prime Minister Indira Gandhi) and engaged in conflicts or border stand-offs along the LAC (Line of Actual Control) in 1975 and 1986-87. They also partook in a stand-off in the Depsang Plains along the LAC (when Chinese troops withdrew within a fortnight under combined diplomatic and military pressure applied by the Congress-led government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh) and even in 2014 during Xi's first visit to India (when Narendra Modi was carelessly swaying on a swing with the Chinese president and signing security-breaching memoranda of understanding). In 2017, security forces from both countries made a series of localised, low-level tactical moves in the high-altitude area of Doklam at the 'tri-junction' with Bhutan and India's Sikkim state, escalating into a stand-off.'

It goes on to say: 'June 2020 saw escalation, when four Chinese and over 20 Indian soldiers died during violent clashes in the Galwan Valley on their un-demarcated, unresolved Himalayan border. This resulted in relations between Asia's two largest nuclear-armed countries deteriorating to their lowest point since their 1962 war... Since then, China has joined Pakistan as India's primary and long-term strategic and military challenge.'

China poses a heightened threat not only because of its increasingly assertive behaviour towards India and its military build-up along the shared LAC; but because of its solid commitment to Pakistan, as evidenced in the collaboration to blunt Modi's Operation Sindoor. 'India is also focused on securing the Indian Ocean region against threats from these two neighbours, as well as countering various non-traditional maritime-security challenges,' the APRSA observes.

'The Indian government has not publicly released or formally articulated a national-security policy or strategy, although some such documents have been circulating among policymakers. It reportedly has a "Union War Book", for example, which remains highly classified.'

The report continues: 'One important, though not comprehensive, nor the only signpost of how the military possibly

intends to fight a future conventional war is the 2017 "Joint Doctrine: Indian Armed Forces". While each armed force has its own doctrine, this document encompasses India's approach to wars in the land, air and sea domains and is the most recently released public document covering all three services. The document emphasises the growing focus on jointness with the Indian Armed Forces and best encapsulates its potential modern war-fighting plans.'

But 'jointness'—which envisaged integrated theatre commands and an integration of the army, navy and air force—has, the APRSA notes, been hindered by 'reservations among specific armed forces.'

India's primary military objective as spelled out in the document is: '[to] prevent war through strategic and conventional deterrence across the full spectrum of military conflict, to ensure the defence of India, our national interests and sovereignty.'

For India's defence forces, 'strategic interests in regions along our northern, western and western borders and sensitivities along the Line of Control (with Pakistan) and Line of Actual Control are to be protected with effective deterrent capabilities... our land borders and the Indian Ocean region (IOR) remain central to India's growth and security.'

The 2017 doctrine states: 'India has moved to a proactive and pragmatic philosophy to counter various conflict situations. The response to terror provocations could be in the form of



Sreengrab from a video showing the impact of strikes during Operation Sindoor

"surgical strikes" and these could be subsumed in the sub-conventional portion of the spectrum of armed conflict... Conflict will be determined or prevented through a process of credible deterrence, coercive diplomacy and conclusively by punitive destruction, disruption and constraint in a nuclear environment across the Spectrum of Conflict. Therefore, undertaking "Integrated Theatre Battle" with an operationally adaptable force, to ensure decisive victory in a network centric environment across the entire spectrum of conflict in varied geographical domains, will be the guiding philosophy for evolution of force application and war fighting strategies.'

The document also stresses that future wars would be fought in 'the space, cyber and special operation domains'. It notes that 'the fast pace of technological advancement precludes military modernisation process implying that, a constant endeavour in this direction needs to be sustained to maintain a right balance between obsolescence and new technology.'

Before Modi's bombastic approach, significant Indian military strikes across the LoC occurred without publicity. This is confirmed by the APRSA report: 'During the 1999 Kargil conflict with Pakistan, the

Indian military was ordered (by BJP Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee) not to cross the LoC, even though such punitive strikes had taken place before. But in 2016, the Indian government acknowledged a previously covert operation which did cross the LoC for the first time.'

The APRSA comments that cyber-security elements were evident in last year's Indo-Pak hostilities. 'These included disinformation campaigns, hacktivist groups launching retaliatory campaigns and reports claiming that Pakistan's military cyber wing disrupted a communications network in India.'

It elaborates: 'The military-on-military direct cyber operations may have been limited, at least as publicly reported. But India also used the space domain for ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) as well as C2 (command and control).'

As per the APRSA, 'India used UAVs and missiles extensively in the 2025 conflict, employing them in a way not substantially covered in its 2017 doctrine. However, this does not necessarily mean that India's future warfare will feature them in similar ways: how India will fight next is a difficult question to answer for those outside the government.'

The IISS security assessment report reveals that Pak counter-hits targeted Indian air bases and border states. Will the govt now fess up?



Plans to redo a 200-year-old mansion by Sonam Kapoor and Anand Ahuja under scrutiny

Sonam Kapoor and hubby in Notting Hill property redevelopment row

London has long been the favourite hunting ground for Indian-origin tycoons—Lakshmi Mittal, Anil Agarwal, the Hinduja brothers, to name a few—to snap up some of its most expensive properties amid allegations of destroying the character of neighbourhoods by making tacky additions to their homes.

The latest to join the growing list of 'nasty neighbours' are Bollywood star Sonam Kapoor and her industrialist husband Anand Ahuja. They have acquired a 200-year-old mansion in fashionable Notting Hill for a cool £21 million.

However, their plans to gut the property—leaving only its four outer walls intact—have raised hackles. The redevelopments include a basement swimming pool and a subterranean basketball court.

Even as these plans were being scrutinised by the local council, a company linked to the couple is said to have spent £4.7 million buying flats in a nearby block over the past three years, allegedly to turn them into 'servants' quarters', a concept alien to modern Britain.

These moves have provoked angry backlash from local residents, with the company accused of threatening anyone who 'opposes' their plans.

A representative of the couple was quoted saying they had no direct connection to the company that bought the flats, which were acquired for investment purposes.



LONDON DIARY

HASAN SUROOR

the proposed reforms.

Meanwhile, at least one boss used to taking his staff for granted finds himself in hot water for showing disrespect towards a employee.

A gym worker has been awarded nearly £150,000 after her boss ordered her to drive overnight from Germany back to Wales for a meeting he did not turn up at.

Bethan Littlewood, 29, was competing at the Canoe Polo European Championships in 2023 when she received the summons from the manager of the gym where she worked. An employment tribunal heard she arrived on time, only to discover her boss had 'double booked' and was elsewhere.



Bethan Littlewood's boss ordered her to drive overnight, from Germany back to Wales, for a meeting and then didn't show up. She sued him and was awarded approx. £150,000

She told the tribunal it was the "last straw" in a string of similar incidents, including bullying.

The tribunal judge, Samantha Moore, ruled that the company's conduct had "fundamentally breached the implied term of mutual trust and confidence" between the employer and its staff.

What Brits think of 'broken Britain'

Oxford University and Britain's Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion have launched a new project: The National Conversation. They are asking the public to "take a minute" to share their vision for their community and country in a voice note, which will then be analysed using AI.

The aim is to conduct what is claimed to be the most comprehensive mapping of what might bring people together in a time of "converging crises of social disconnection and division".



Sajid Javid, former home secretary

Its chairman Sajid Javid, former home secretary, said: "Our country is in real peril. Unless we can regain a shared sense of what unites us, of what we have in common, we risk being torn apart by our differences. That vision won't come from politicians, it can only come from the public."

Polling shows that three-quarters of adults believe Britain is divided. Almost as many think the country has become more divided in the past five years.

Melinda Mills, professor of demography at Nuffield College, Oxford, said, "We hope that this National Conversation will build a new kind of national evidence base about what might hold us together."

It would be interesting to know what a similar survey in India might reveal.



Calls grow to ban kirpans in public

The conviction of a Sikh teenager for murdering a white university student with a kirpan has reignited an old debate over religious exemptions that allow the carrying of sharp instruments in public.

Right-wing political parties are calling for the repeal of exemptions that legally allow Sikhs to carry kirpans in public spaces.

Last week, 23-year-old Vickrum Singh Digwa was convicted of killing 18-year-old Henry Nowak. Digwa's mother, Kiran Kaur, was convicted of helping him remove the weapon from the scene.

The verdict by a jury at Southampton Crown Court has been welcomed, but police have been criticised for its treatment of the victim on the basis of Digwa's unsubstantiated claim that he acted after being racially abused.

Shadow home secretary Chris Philp said it was "shameful" that the cops handcuffed Henry as he lay dying. The police have since apologised, but calls for a ban on carrying kirpans in public are growing.

Sikh groups have opposed penalising an entire faith and its religious freedoms due to the actions of one individual.



And, finally, British Airways' habit of losing luggage has reminded old-timers of its catchy slogan to promote the now-defunct Concorde flight: 'Breakfast in London, lunch in New York'. A wag has tweaked this to 'Breakfast in London, lunch in New York... and baggage in Bermuda'.



Jaya Jayahe Telangana ! Janani Jayaketanam !!



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NATION

MOVE OVER FCI, ADANI IS HERE
Privatising foodgrain storage and logistics could prove fatal for India's PDS and food security


► P3



NATION

OF BLACK GOLD AND BROKEN SHORES
The lust for heavy mineral sands is opening up yet another frontier of dispossession


► P4



WORLD

WHO CAN(NOT) HAVE A NUCLEAR WEAPON
The uneven application of NPT standards and the hypocrisy of the West

► P6



CBSE 2026 TEST RESULTS

Put students ahead of political theatre

Transferring the CBSE chairman and other worthies doesn't validate the results. A full offline re-evaluation may be the answer, writes **A.J. Prabal**

On 2 June 2026, hours after 17-year-old Sarthak Sidhant, a schoolboy from Ranchi, made a presentation to the parliamentary standing committee on education, the government transferred the chairman and secretary of the CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education), both IAS officers. It also announced a departmental inquiry committee to look into the hurried introduction of a digital evaluation system that led to this fiasco.

Since the CBSE Class 12 results were announced on 13 May, lakhs of harried students have reported totalling errors, unmarked questions, mismatched answer sheets, blurred scans and missing supplementary sheets. Lakhs have applied for verification. In a tweet on 26 May, the CBSE acknowledged receiving 4.04 lakh 'applications for scanned copies of answer books'. The same tweet claimed to have received '11.31 lakh requests for answer books'. The distinction was not clear to this reporter.

For students waiting for re-evaluation, this is no longer a technical glitch. The results are now suspect and at risk are college admissions that are often provisional pending proof that candidates have secured the necessary cut-off marks in their board exams.

Transferring a few worthies and demanding that the education minister resign does not solve the students' problems nor secure their future. Even now, after its hurriedly introduced on-screen marking (OSM) web domain has been conclusively proven to be hackable, the CBSE's response is to accept re-evaluation requests—for a fee! It has even managed to come up with a graded fee structure for this re-evaluation. And, believe it or not, will conduct the re-evaluation on the same compromised web domain. If the CBSE has alternative plans, there have been no public announcements to that effect.

Sarthak Sidhant and 19-year-old Nisarga Adhikary from Siliguri have thoroughly exposed the OSM platform used to evaluate the CBSE Class 12 board papers of 18 lakh students. Sarthak went a step further and exposed how the CBSE tweaked conditions to favour Hyderabad-based Coempt Edudeck over Tata Consultancy Services (TCS).

Quick aside: TCS with 600,000 employees, an annual revenue of \$29 billion (Rs 2.40 lakh crore) and 57 years of experience lost out to a company with 51 employees and an average annual turnover of Rs 50 crore.

Sure, size doesn't bestow credibility but 'CBSE did not just pick a bad software vendor by accident. They lowered financial baselines. They dropped software security certifications. They cut the corrupt practices cooling-off period by half. They removed the physical server isolation requirement. They erased the



Photo: Vipin

word 'blacklisting' from their penalty matrix via a last-minute corrigendum, before bidding; and they bypassed their own mandatory CERT-In production audits,' Sarthak points out in a blog post.

Why did TCS lose the contract? CBSE floated the tender thrice in 2025—in February, May and August—each time diluting some of the conditions, lowering the bar and making it easier for Coempt Edudeck to bid. On paper, TCS with its vast network, expertise and collaborators abroad, did look qualified to roll out India's first online evaluation platform. But it became clear that the CBSE was doing everything possible to keep it out. It even decided that the vendor needn't have its own 'data centre and disaster recovery centre', that it would do if the vendor relied on a 'MeitY-empowered data and disaster recovery centre'.

There were other tweaks in the OSM tender that Sarthak Sidhant prised open and laid bare. 'They gambled with our data security, our marks, our mental health; the institution failed us,' Sarthak writes in his blog.

Nisarga, who had discovered how vulnerable the platform was back in February 2026, three months before the Class 12 Board examination began (on 17 May), was equally scathing. He could have sold the data

The CBSE needs to answer some questions. For instance, was it under pressure to award the contract to Coempt Edudeck?

and made a lot of money, he said. But he didn't. He could have also kept quiet and used the loopholes to manipulate the marks for whoever was willing to pay. He didn't. If access to the evaluators' platform was as easy as Nisarga had demonstrated, what is the guarantee that bad actors did not?

Nisarga, the ethical hacker, promptly informed India's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-In) what he had found and shared what needed to be done to plug the loopholes. CBSE and CERT-In were both casual and callous. Coempt Edudeck, presumably alerted by the CBSE and CERT-In, ignored the warning from the student. What would a Class 12 student possibly do? The company, the 19-year-old flagged, had 'not only kept the door to the evaluators' platform open but kept the key hanging in the lock.' The password to access the platform was in full public view and he could easily retrieve data and details of schools and examiners, Nisarga said. Anyone could take over any examiner's account, view answer sheets and edit marks.

Nisarga reported this to CERT-In on 25 February. He was asked for a screen recording and he promptly shared the 'full walkthrough', retracing the steps he took to gain access. He received an acknowledgment and a case reference number:

CERTIn-16590126. He was assured that CERT-In was in touch with the agencies concerned. However, the loopholes remained till the results were declared on 13 May.

Another examinee, Vedant Srivastava, demanded to see his marked Physics answer sheet, which was emailed to him by the CBSE. Vedant was horrified to find that while the first page of the answer sheet, where roll number, school code etc. had to be filled, was in his own handwriting, the rest of the answer sheet was in somebody else's handwriting. After the CBSE stonewalled him, he took to X on 22 May to complain. He was trolled as a 'Pakistani', an 'anti-national'. By a hostile TV anchor, among others.

The same day Nisarga made his blogpost public amplifying how the platform was an invitation to manipulate marks. The CBSE claimed it was a test portal, but quietly deleted its tweet after a friend of Nisarga bought the domain for Rs 99. On 25 May, Nisarga detected another vulnerability, and again reported it to CERT-In. Four hours later, the CBSE took the whole portal down. On 31 May, he managed to access another CBSE portal with details of 45,074 failed payments for re-evaluation including emails, phone numbers, payment IDs and order IDs. The CBSE doubled down to say there was nothing wrong, that the system was robust.

There are questions that the CBSE needs to answer. Was it under any pressure to award the contract to the Hyderabad-based company? Why did it fail to heed warnings given by its own governing body members and evaluators? Why were tender conditions tweaked? Who demanded these tweaks and who approved them? Why was Coempt Edudeck picked despite its dubious track?

Most importantly, how will the CBSE restore faith in the sanctity of these results short of a full re-evaluation of all papers, by means that are considered fair and above board by independent auditors.

Given that these ethical hackers have repeatedly and conclusively demonstrated that the OSM domain is compromised, that it can be hacked and marks altered at will, what is the guarantee that this hasn't happened? Is the CBSE in a position to vouch that bad actors were not involved to game the results for a price?

'You study day and night for two full years. You sacrifice sleep, fun, family time, everything, just to score well in your Class 12 boards. You dream of JEE, NEET, a good future. Then the results come... and everything is destroyed. This is not a story. This is what lakhs of CBSE students are living right now,' Tanmay Kashyap, a CBSE Class 12 student from Patna wrote on social media, echoing the sentiment of lakhs of students. ■

Is India running on empty?

Herjinder

The LPG crisis is already an old story. In metropolitan cities such as Mumbai, Delhi and Bengaluru, cooking gas cylinders can be obtained, despite delays and repeat trips to distribution centres. In smaller cities and towns, long queues outside LPG depots have become a familiar sight. Yet, it's the larger picture that's even more troubling. Across India, households are being forced to tighten their belts, businesses are cutting back operations, and policymakers are scrambling to prevent a supply shock from turning into a full-blown economic crisis.

The first warning signs emerged in March. LPG and fuel shortages began affecting businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises. Industry associations reported that nearly 20 per cent of hotels and restaurants in parts of Mumbai had either shut down or drastically curtailed operations due to soaring energy costs and unreliable fuel supplies. In Gujarat's industrial hub of Morbi, around 170 factories reportedly ceased operations, affecting close to one lakh workers.

For many small food vendors, survival meant adaptation. Many shifted from LPG to

electric cooking systems. Sales of induction and infrared cooktops exploded. Daily sales that once averaged around 2,000 units surged to between one and two lakh units across the country.

But that 'solution' created a new problem.

With demand for electricity surging and fuel shortages affecting power generation,

many cities and semi-urban areas are now experiencing prolonged power cuts in addition to routine load shedding. The shift from gas to electricity has merely transferred pressure from one stressed system to another.

Recognising the severity of the crisis, the Government of India invoked provisions of the Essential Commodities Act, 1955, allowing authorities to divert natural gas supplies to designated priority sectors. Whether this intervention will prove sufficient remains uncertain. Shortages are now spreading beyond kitchens and factories.

In mid-May, reports from Pune indicated that several fuel stations had begun rationing supplies. A report in *The New Indian Express* described the way a strict fuel-rationing mechanism imposed by oil marketing companies affected Andhra Pradesh. Under the policy, long-haul trucks and interstate buses were reportedly restricted to purchasing only 200 litres of fuel in a single transaction. Fleet operators responded by refuelling in neighbouring states, causing delays in supply chains while simultaneously depriving Andhra Pradesh of valuable fuel tax revenue.

A video uploaded on X from Maharajganj



Chaos and crisis (From top left) Hoteliers seek relief; restaurants shut down; daily wage labourers wait in vain for work; small workshops down shutters

The supply shock triggered by the war in West Asia is at risk of becoming a full-blown economic crisis

Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most important energy corridors. A significant share of India's crude oil and nearly one-third of its natural gas imports transit through this narrow maritime route.

Reduced or no shipments at all from major suppliers such as Qatar and Abu Dhabi have already forced companies, including Petronet LNG, to invoke force majeure clauses. The result has been a combination of supply shortages, price volatility and growing uncertainty.

► Continued on page 2

Is India running on empty?

► Continued from page 1

Compounding the problem is India's limited strategic petroleum reserve (SPR) capacity of 5.33 million tonnes of crude. Reserves reportedly stand at 3.37 million tonnes—roughly 64 per cent of capacity. Even at 100 per cent, our reserves are worth national requirements for about two weeks.

The implications extend far beyond transport and cooking fuel. A farmer leader from western Uttar Pradesh warns that if the monsoon underperforms, diesel demand for irrigation could rise dramatically. Any rationing of diesel during the kharif season would directly threaten agricultural production. For millions of farmers already struggling with rising input costs, the coming months could prove exceptionally difficult.

Three months into the conflict, the shortage of crude is threatening to become a shortage of almost everything. Petroleum is not just fuel but the foundation of modern manufacturing. Household goods, plastics bags, caps, crates, synthetic textiles, packaging material, adhesives used in footwear and furniture, industrial lubricants and solvents—all depend on petroleum derivatives.

Yet perhaps the most serious threat lies in agriculture. As the kharif sowing season approaches, fertiliser availability is a major concern. India imports substantial quantities of phosphates, potash and natural gas required for fertiliser production. Roughly one-third of these supplies originate from or transit through routes linked to the Strait of Hormuz.

West Asia is a big supplier of ammonia, sulphur and phosphoric acid—key raw materials for fertiliser production. At the peak of the Hormuz disruption, international urea prices reportedly surged towards \$950 per tonne. Higher insurance premiums and vessel diversions have further extended delivery timelines.

A complex web of spillover effects from the conflict in West Asia threaten world economies

Agriculture, however, abides by an unforgiving calendar. Fertilisers are needed at specific stages of crop growth. Delayed delivery cannot be compensated for later. If fertilisers arrive late, yields decline.

After water, fertiliser is the farmer's most critical requirement, says Dr Sunilam of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha. He fears prolonged shortages could trigger widespread unrest, even riots. During the previous rabi season, farmers in several regions already faced shortages and were reportedly forced to buy supplies at inflated prices through unofficial channels. That crisis could become much worse.

The government's promotion of nano urea and nano DAP (diammonium phosphate) as alternatives has found little acceptance among farmers, many of whom argue that these products cannot adequately replace conventional fertilisers.

Nor are fertilisers the only concern. Supplies of key ingredients used in insecticides, pesticides and herbicides are also affected. Every disruption raises production costs and threatens agricultural output. India may possess sizeable foodgrain stocks today, but a decline in future production would inevitably affect food security and intensify rural distress.

The broader economic outlook is equally worrying. In a recent blog post, the International Monetary Fund observed that the world faces a complex web of spillover effects from the conflict at a time when many economies have limited capacity to absorb additional shocks. The conclusion was sobering: Higher prices, slower growth.

India is already grappling with inflationary pressures driven largely by supply-side constraints. The West Asia crisis threatens to add a powerful new layer to these challenges. Any substantial increase in fuel prices would quickly ripple through transport, manufacturing and agriculture.

Credit rating agency CRISIL has already warned that the impact will extend far beyond energy markets. Higher transportation costs are expected to push up both food inflation and core inflation, affecting virtually every household.

Yet, at precisely the moment when inflation is becoming a central economic concern, the government has chosen to overhaul the statistical framework used to measure it. This will do little to ease the burden on ordinary citizens struggling with rising prices and shrinking availability of goods. ■

Quit writing our obituaries, we aren't dead yet

“The revival of the Left and the survival of democracy are now two sides of the same coin”

Dipankar Bhattacharya

The results of the assembly elections in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry have reinforced the myth of the BJP's invincibility in the age of Modi. And we are being offered this myth bundled with a whole set of obituaries as free gifts: an obituary for Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu, an epitaph for regional parties and for the INDIA coalition as a whole, and of course a eulogy for the good old legacy of the Left.

The myth of invincibility was almost (but not quite) demolished in 2024 when the BJP's own tally stopped at 240, thirty-three short of a simple majority. Modi 3.0 was made possible only with the backing of two regional parties, the JD(U) and the TDP. Since that partial setback, the regime has perfected the art of insulating elections from anti-incumbency shocks and manufacturing magical majorities by combining brazen systemic manipulation with meticulous social engineering. From Maharashtra, Haryana and Delhi to Bihar and, most recently, Assam and West Bengal, we have seen this strategy at work in election after election.

While the Sangh's post-2024 election strategy awaits an effective counter, the obituaries that are being written for regional parties. The DMK-led coalition has surely suffered a big defeat, but it is not the BJP nor its ally AIADMK that replaced it. Instead, we witnessed the rise of yet another regional party in Tamil Nadu, the TVK, which seemed to live up to the meaning of its name (the Victory Party of Tamilakam). The

BJP may now be in power in 22 states and Union Territories, but in six of them it still shares power with regional parties.

If the defeat of the DMK and TMC is being presented as the beginning of the end of regional parties, the LDF's defeat in Kerala is being exaggerated as a sign of the Left's marginalisation in India's political landscape. It is true that since 1977, the Left has always been in power in at least one of three states (West Bengal, Tripura and Kerala). West Bengal witnessed uninterrupted Left rule for 34 years (1977-2011), Tripura for 25 years (1993-2018) and Kerala for 10 years (2016-2026). But unlike West Bengal and Tripura, Kerala always had an alternating pattern where governments changed every five years (the 2021 election being an

exception).

The defeat of the LDF was therefore an expected outcome, and any talk of the Left's 'irrelevance' or 'obsolescence' simply because no state has a Left government is absurd. Communists were the first non-Congress trend to come to power in any state but, until 1977, the Left was essentially seen as a movement-based oppositional current.

In electoral terms, the concern for the Left should therefore be not so much the loss of power in a state, but its decline in vote share in states where it hitherto commanded a sizeable base. In this sense, the CPI(M)-led Left Front has suffered the biggest decline in West Bengal—from a little above 41 per cent in 2011 to just around 5 per cent in the recent elections.

The 2011 defeat of the Left Front was perfectly understandable after a prolonged stint of 34 years, especially in the wake of a major rupture and erosion in the Left's rural base following the unpopular land acquisition drive in the name of industrialisation. It is the dramatic rise of the BJP from a vote share of just around 10 per cent and three seats in 2016 to nearly 46 per cent and 208 seats in 2026 that should be the greatest concern not just for the CPI(M) but the entire Left.

Over a period of just ten years, the BJP has moved from the fringe of West Bengal politics to stage centre. For all the elements of electoral purge and electoral fraud which massively inflated the BJP's scale of victory in the 2026 elections, it is the underlying organic spread of the Sangh's toxic ideology of communal hate, bigotry and divisiveness in West Bengal that should worry not just the Left but every rational, progressive Indian.

A quick look at the unfolding scene in West Bengal in the first month since the BJP's ascent to power in Kolkata will tell us that the Sangh is in a great hurry to enforce its aggressive agenda. From the cow-slaughter ban that delivered a massive blow to the rural economy to the indiscriminate eviction of street vendors and railway hawkers without any rehabilitation; from attacks on Opposition leaders and offices to the demolition of shops, memorials and statues and the herding of helpless people into detention camps benignly christened 'holding centres'. What West Bengal has ushered in is not 'paribartan' (change) but a reign of chaos and violent siege.



A CPI(M) protest march in Dum Dum against the illegal eviction of hawkers

The idea is clearly to overturn everything that defined Bengal's progressive heritage, liberal ethos and syncretic culture. For the new 'conquerors' of West Bengal, power implies insatiable vengeance and aggression, not responsibility and accountability. History reminds us that it was the East India Company's conquest of Bengal that heralded the period of colonial rule through a 'permanent settlement' with feudal power. The BJP's conquest of Bengal is analogous: signifying not just heightened politico-cultural aggression, but also the quest for a new 'permanent settlement' for today's 'West India Company'. Amidst the livelihood on small businesses and livelihoods, the waves of disenfranchisement and dispossession, it is not difficult to hear the boots of corporate acquisition and accumulation marching in.

For the Sangh brigade, West Bengal was a long-awaited 'last frontier'. The BJP's victory in

Bengal closes the chain of BJP-ruled states around Bangladesh from Tripura and Meghalaya to Assam and West Bengal. It also completes the 'Anga-Banga-Kalinga' circuit with BJP chief ministers in the three states of Bihar, West Bengal and Odisha. Emboldened, the BJP will now accelerate its 'one nation one party' expedition. Delimitation and 'one nation, one election' are intended to put India's electoral system firmly within the BJP's vicious grip. Yet, if we look at the economy, governance or international relations, the Modi government has hit rock-bottom. Not even the regime's smoothest apologists can deny it any more.

So, how does the government tackle multiple crises? It presses the bulldozer button harder. It puts workers demanding better wages in jail. It dubs students demanding re-evaluation of exam results 'Pakistani'.

Activists are called cockroaches by the Chief Justice of India. And when the angry youth hit back digitally by launching a Cockroach Janata Party, a rattled government blocks their social media handles.

For the last one hundred years, communists have been one of the most vibrant, committed and consistent voices of freedom, justice and people's rights in India. Today more than ever before, Indian democracy needs Indian communists to rise to the occasion and build a second freedom struggle from the ground up. The revival of the Left and the survival of democracy are now two sides of the same coin. ■

DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA is the general secretary of the CPI-ML (Liberation)

“More than ever before, India today needs communists to build a second freedom movement from the ground up”

Opposition, on the streets and in the House

Sourabh Sen

After a staggering defeat at the hands of the BJP-ECI in the recently concluded state assembly elections, Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress, which lorded over West Bengal for 15 years, is bleeding. So heavily that political observers are wondering whether it'll live to fight another election. The party has begun to cannibalise itself, albeit with some help from the cash-and-investigative-agencies-rich BJP. A big breakaway faction of the party, led by an expelled leader, has been anointed as 'the real TMC' in the state assembly, and it looks like the ruling BJP will face no real challenge in the House. The streets, though, present a different picture: the first stirrings of life in a down-and-out Left; and something akin to a revival of the Congress that was last in power five decades ago, between 1972 and 1977. The current churn in the Opposition space in West Bengal has all the ingredients of a textbook case study. We conclude our two-part series.

It's like an e-bomb was dropped on Bengal. The distribution of seats in the new House makes it look like a near rout (BJP: 207, AITC: 80), but it's worth remembering that the TMC still polled 41 per cent of the vote (against the BJP's 46 per cent). The psychological impact of the defeat and the witch-hunt that followed in its wake is far greater. In Kolkata's famous *addas*, the discussion is no longer whether the TMC can recover but whether it will survive.

Distrust and dejection were apparent when only 20 of 80 newly elected TMC legislators turned up at a meeting convened by LoP-designate Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay on 31 May. On 3 June, the party split as 58 rebel MLAs seized control of its legislative wing and named expelled legislator Ritabrata Banerjee as their leader. Almost on cue, Speaker Rathindra Bose granted the faction legitimacy as the real TMC, lending credence to doubts that they were 'sponsored' by the BJP, which will no doubt want a pliant Opposition.

Meanwhile, the state CID is looking into an allegation of forgery against Abhishek Banerjee. According to media reports, Banerjee, as party general secretary, had written a covering memo to the Speaker of the West Bengal assembly, endorsing the signatures of two TMC legislators (Ritabrata Banerjee and Sandipan Saha) who were part of the legislature party that elected Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay as LoP. The expelled MLAs, in their formal



Hitting the streets Former chief minister Mamata Banerjee at a protest against the 'rigged' elections in West Bengal

complaint to the Speaker on 27 May, claimed that no resolution selecting the LoP was adopted on 6 May, as claimed, and further that they had signed the legislature party meeting resolution book on 19 May.

The all-too-obvious meltdown of the TMC may not, however, automatically translate into a popular consolidation that favours the BJP. The director of a leading NGO with decades of experience working in rural West Bengal says, "The TMC's problem is that 'floating voters' made up almost 80 per cent of its support base, people who weren't ideologically or organisationally tied to the party.

“We voted for the BJP, hoping to teach the TMC a lesson. Now we realise we made a mistake”

This kind of vote dissipation as fast as it consolidates. But the BJP-RSS are mistaken if they believe that Bengal has overnight dumped its Left-leaning tradition and switched en masse to the Right."

"We voted for the BJP, hoping to teach the TMC a lesson. Now we realise we made a mistake," said Pabitra Mandal, from South 24 Parganas, who works as a family retainer in Kolkata. "Back in my village, schools have no teachers. The young people have no work. Let the government address those issues. Instead, they are evicting hawkers, snatching away livelihoods and wasting time on who gets Annapurna assistance. We didn't survive on doles! We were quite accustomed to buying essentials from ration shops."

Mandal's remarks validate the argument that the election results, to the extent that they reflect popular sentiment, were more anti-incumbency than pro-BJP. They also indicate the opening up of a new space for opposition forces to move in. The CPI(M) and other Left parties realise this and have hit the streets. They are currently fronting demonstrations on issues like hawker eviction, the plight of cattle farmers and the gag order on government employees.

"We'll pick up these issues in a bigger way, working towards a Left consolidation that strengthens our organisation," said Palas Das, CPI(M) state secretary. Das showed no aversion to sharing opposition space with the Congress.

The Congress is ambivalent about TMC workers and MLAs who have reportedly approached the party. "The PCC will repeat past mistakes if they agree to let in TMC discards," veteran Congress leader Abdul Mannan told *National Herald*.

Call it the real or rump TMC, but that faction, led by the doughty Mamata Banerjee, has also hit the streets. On 2 June, she addressed a rally, surrounded by the TMC old guard, many of whom had been shunted out by the Abhishek-led cotierie. The party has dissolved all its organisational committees, from block to state level, for 'a comprehensive introspection, performance review and organisational assessment'.

"It's barely a month since the BJP seized power and the shadows of fascism have already engulfed the state. A united front with the TMC, Congress and the Left has to be the answer," says Pratikur Rehman, a former CPI-M crowd-puller who switched to the TMC before the elections.

"A reinvented TMC and the Congress are likely to come closer," says Dipankar Bhattacharya, general secretary of the CPI-ML (Liberation). "The Left will dominate the opposition space by leading the agitations at the street level. If Bengal's civil society up their game, they can emerge as the third force." ■

With inputs from Kunal Chatterjee and Gautam Bhattacharyya

Sarna, ORP and the assertion of 'Adivasiyat'

Kumar Rana on why the BJP-Sangh are bent upon abolishing the 'Other Religions and Persuasions' classification from the Census exercise

Be very careful! The Census operation has begun. The enumerators may insist that you mention your religion as Hindu. Never do that. Mention Sarna as your religion. Sarna is the identity of the Adivasis. We must not lose that. Even the most casual observer can hear the campaign's resonance across Jharkhand.

The longstanding demand of Adivasis in Jharkhand and neighbouring states for a separate Sarna code in the Census has acquired renewed urgency with the Union government's proposal to abolish the 'Other Religions and Persuasions' (ORP) category (Code 7). Many Adivasi organisations view this proposal as an extension of demands advanced by the RSS and allied organisations to 'delist' Adivasi Christians from the Scheduled Tribe category.

As an Adivasi activist remarked at a street corner meeting in Dumka in mid-May, the move is "an attack on Adivasis who have increasingly been asserting their distinct identity." In his view, the government is not only rejecting the demand for recognition of Sarna but also eliminating the limited space for indigenous religious self-identification available under the ORP category.

Coupled with the campaign for delisting, the proposal is widely seen as an attempt to weaken both Adivasi identity and constitutional protections. Consequently, the demand for a separate Sarna code has become a broader assertion of 'Adivasiyat', or Adivasi peoplehood. The campaign has found support beyond Jharkhand. A massive rally held on 23 May in Jashpur, Chhattisgarh, against delisting echoed the demand.

In contrast, organisations aligned with the government have intensified efforts to push Adivasis to join the broader Hindu fold. On 24 May, the Janjati Suraksha Manch (JSM) organised a rally in New Delhi under the slogan: 'Tu main ek rakt, vanvasi-gramvasi-nagarvasi, hum sab Bharatvasi (You and I are one blood, forest-dwellers, villagers, city-dwellers, we are all Indians).' The use of 'vanvasi'—long promoted by Hindu nationalist organisations—instead of Adivasi is significant, as it rejects the indigenous status implied by Adivasi. Home Minister Amit Shah, the principal speaker at the event, also consistently used the term vanvasi.

Adivasi apprehensions are, therefore, not unfounded. The proposal to abolish ORP, combined with the campaign to delist and the refusal to recognise a Sarna code, is a deliberate attempt to reshape the politics of identity, representation and power.

Let us look at the demographic background. According to the 2011 Census, about 79.4 lakh Indians—0.66 per cent of the



The demand for a separate Sarna code has become a broader assertion of 'Adivasiyat'

national population—were enumerated under ORP. The largest concentrations were in Jharkhand (42.4 lakh), Madhya Pradesh (6 lakh), Chhattisgarh (4.9 lakh), Odisha (4.8 lakh) and Arunachal Pradesh (3.6 lakh).

Nationally, Sarna constitutes the largest indigenous religion within the ORP category. Nearly 62.5 per cent of all ORP adherents identified as Sarna followers in 2011. If followers of Sari Dharam, who share the same broad community base (specifically Santal), are included, the proportion is even higher. The next largest categories—Gond/Gondi and Sari Dharam (considered separately)—accounted for only 12.9 per cent and 6.4 per cent, respectively.

The political import of these figures is most evident in Jharkhand. The state recorded 42.4 lakh persons under ORP, representing 12.8 per cent of its population. More than 41.3 lakh identified as Sarna, constituting 97.5 per cent of the state's ORP population. Among Jharkhand's Adivasis, Sarna followers substantially outnumber those who identify as Hindu.

This demographic reality has major political implications. Regional parties such as the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) have derived much of their legitimacy from questions of identity and self-determination. The demand for a separate Sarna code has emerged as one of the most visible expressions of this assertion. Indeed, identifying with Sarna in Jharkhand is a feature well reflected in the 1991 and 2001 Census.

The continuing electoral success of the

Abolishing ORP won't just eliminate a census category; it will bolster the ideological claim that all Adivasis are Hindu

JMM-led coalition, despite the broader expansion of the BJP across eastern and central India, demonstrates the enduring political strength of Adivasi identity. In this context, abolishing ORP would do far more than eliminate a census category. If Sarna followers are compelled to identify as Hindus or any other recognised religion, their collective visibility in official statistics will disappear. Such a move would strengthen the claim that Adivasis are part of the Hindu fold while weakening the demographic basis of political

mobilisation around a distinct indigenous identity. In electoral terms, this will work to the BJP's advantage.

The implications extend beyond Jharkhand. West Bengal—where the BJP has made significant gains among the Adivasis, who share a common cultural, linguistic and clan membership with Jharkhand's Adivasis—also has a substantial ORP population. According to the 2011 Census, nearly ten lakh people in the state were enumerated under ORP, with Sarna and Sari Dharam followers comprising the majority.

This points to a contradiction in the BJP's tribal strategy. While the party has expanded its electoral support among Adivasis, many of these communities continue to maintain religious identities outside Hinduism. The Jharkhand experience demonstrates how demands for religious recognition can evolve into broader claims for cultural autonomy, political representation and indigenous rights, thereby challenging projects of cultural assimilation and political absolutism.

Their diversity also creates a potential faultline in Adivasi politics. A movement centred on Sarna can be perceived and presented as just one regional stream of indigenous assertion rather than representing the collective aspirations of all tribal peoples. While Sarna has become the principal symbol of indigenous religious assertion in Jharkhand, Odisha,

West Bengal, Bihar and parts of Chhattisgarh, it is not the only indigenous faith tradition. The northeast presents a very different landscape.

In Arunachal Pradesh, nearly 90 per cent of the ORP population identifies with Doni Polo. In Manipur, more than 95 per cent identify as Sanamahi followers. Indigenous communities in Meghalaya follow the Khasi, Niamtre and Songsarek traditions, while Nagaland's ORP population is dominated by the Heraka tradition. In Sikkim, many indigenous communities identify with Yumasam and related traditions.

These religions are rooted in distinct linguistic, cultural and historical contexts and have evolved independently of the Sarna movement. Consequently, Sarna may not automatically serve as a common religious identity for indigenous peoples across India.

The JSM gathering in New Delhi saw substantial participation from northeast tribal groups. While publicly presented as a celebration of 'one tribal culture' and 'national unity', it also demonstrated that different tribal communities can be mobilised through frameworks other than indigenous religious assertion.

The strategic significance of such mobilisation is its capacity to accentuate regional distinctions within India's tribal population. If Sarna is portrayed (and seen) as primarily a Jharkhand-centric project, with communities from the northeast pursuing their own separate trajectories, the prospects for a unified indigenous political platform become considerably weaker. A broad movement for indigenous religious recognition, stretching from Jharkhand to Arunachal Pradesh, would pose a powerful challenge to projects of cultural homogenisation.

The debate over ORP, therefore, concerns much more than census enumeration. It is fundamentally a struggle over how Adivasis will be seen and counted in the Indian nation state. The proposed abolition of ORP advances two interconnected objectives: the absorption of indigenous communities into the Hindu fold and the fragmentation of a possible pan-Adivasi political identity by accentuating regional, ethnic and religious differences among India's tribal communities.

Irrespective of whether diverse Adivasi traditions can (or should) be brought together within a broader framework of indigenous solidarity, the issue of the religious identity of Adivasis cannot be seen as an exclusive Adivasi concern. It should concern all practitioners of democracy. ■

KUMAR RANA is a research activist

Move over FCI, Adani is here

In the garb of modernising our food chain, is the Modi government enabling a takeover by another 'dear friend'?

Rashme Sehgal

The concentration of grain storage in the hands of Adani Agri Logistics and Leap India Food & Logistics Private Ltd heralds an alarming shift for Indian agriculture, transforming it from a decentralised, largely state-run model into a corporate-run entity.

By cleverly removing the anti-monopoly clause that formed an integral part of the Food Corporation of India's (FCI) silo modernisation programme, the government has awarded 110 of 134 contracts to the two companies to store and manage Rs 16,500 crore worth of grain.

The enormity of this allocation can be understood from the fact that 46.5 lakh metric tonnes (LMT) out of the total planned storage of 60 LMT will now be handled by Adani and Leap India (known to be financed by powerful private equity funds including the UK-backed Neev Fund and the Danish SGD Fund).

The partnership involves the construction of 200 new steel silos, the bigger hubs connected to railway lines and the smaller ones at procurement centres near farms. The estimated cost of land is between Rs 6,000-8,000 crore; the cost of building the silos between Rs 15,000-20,000 crore. While in the short run, the government 'saves money' on the price of land acquisition and construction, in the long-term, the PPP model costs the public dearly. The FCI and the government could have completed the project at a cost of Rs 45,000 crore. Under the PPP model, at the rate of Rs 4,000 crore per annum for storage and handling over a 30-year period, the damages are Rs 1.2 lakh crore.

As critics point out, under the garb of 'modernising' our food chain, the Modi government is now practically underwriting private profit.

What makes it all the more alarming is that FCI had initially proposed an anti-monopoly clause as a safeguard against precisely such concentration. A crucial document from the PPP Appraisal Committee (PPPAC) files shows the NITI Aayog and the department of economic

affairs altered the tender architecture. The most important change was not just the deletion of the anti-monopoly clause, it was the deliberate move towards bundled bidding. The larger the bundle, the greater the financing requirement. The practical effect of this arrangement is that a Rs 3,000-4,000 crore bundle cuts out mid-sized warehousing firms.

"This signals the end of India's food security and the annihilation of our public distribution system (PDS) which will now be dependent on this duopoly," warns Aflatoon, social activist and member of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha. (Under the National Food Security Act, India's public distribution system reaches around 81.35 crore people every month, making it the largest welfare programme in the world.)

By taking this 'momentous' decision, the government has reintroduced the three contentious farm laws to privatise agricultural marketing. While the government officially claims it will continue to procure rice and wheat under Minimum Support Prices (MSP), doubts prevail.

Farmers are more than worried. They point out that controlling the storage

network would enable the Adani Group—already engaged in the procurement, import and export of foodgrains—to control the supply chain. This could depress the MSP to the advantage of private players.

Farmers see this as a step toward privatising food security, echoing their earlier protests against the farm laws. With Adani and Leap India controlling nearly 80 per cent of silo capacity, farmers will have fewer options, making them vulnerable to any terms set by the duopoly.

Traditionally, the FCI procures rice and wheat directly from farmers at MSP. With private players running silos, procurement is likely to shift to them. Corporates are likely to influence procurement terms, potentially squeezing margins. Farmer unions argue that once storage and logistics are privatised, the state's bargaining power will weaken and may reduce FCI's own procurement footprint, indirectly undermining MSP. FCI has a regulated system for timely payments. Private players may not be bound by the same strict rules, raising concerns about delays, disputes and dispute redressal.

Corporate control of Indian



Farmers worry that controlling the storage network will give Adani control of the supply chain

agriculture—driven by agribusinesses monopolising inputs, supply chains and land—poses a severe threat to food security by endangering its four pillars: availability, access, utilisation and stability. Farm leaders contend that the shift from diverse, staple-based cultivation to cash crops (like broccoli, gherkins and other 'exotics') combined with volatile pricing will destroy the livelihood of over 160 million farmers.

Prominent farm leader, Dr Ashish Mittal, general secretary of the All India Kisan Mazdoor Sabha believes there are two objectives behind the 2023 amendment to the Biological Diversity Act, 2002 and the awarding of storage contracts to corporates in 2026. "One, to allow Americans to dump heavily subsidised foodstuff such as soy and corn at rates our farmers cannot compete with, and to capture agricultural land at throwaway rates and hand it over to the builders' lobby for urbanisation."

Dr Darshan Pal, anaesthetist by profession, social activist by choice and president of Krantikari Kisan Union in Punjab, believes the entire purpose of the recent move is to ease the way for big landlords to take over agricultural land.

"Already, over the last decade, we have lost four million hectares of farm land (of the 143 million hectares under cultivation). This has caused massive displacement, with peasantry forced to migrate to urban pockets. The government seems to forget that 68.5 per cent of our population lives in villages. The Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) accounts for only those workers who have actively applied for jobs. But there is a multitude who have not applied and are therefore not included in the PLFS. Even

our PDS system is based on the last Census. I believe one-third of the requirement for subsidised grain is not being met," said Dr Darshan Pal. (Rural households consume about 14.5 kg of cereals and pulses per month, but pulse intake remains far below nutritional requirements. While a minimally nutritious diet recommends 85 g of pulses per person per day, rural households consume only 0.46 kg per month in Rajasthan and 0.35 kg per month in Manipur.)

It is obvious this government has no interest in sustaining our agricultural sector. India's corporate debt has grown to \$645 billion which works out to almost 17 per cent of our GDP. But the cost of urea is something the government has done little about (apart from claiming to provide a 90 per cent subsidy for every bag of urea sold in the country.) "Buying oil from Iran would bring down the cost of urea," maintains Dr Darshan Pal. "The price of 45 kilos of urea is Rs 265 per bag but it is not available at even Rs 400 per bag."

Yudhvir Singh, general secretary, Bharatiya Kisan Union, says that once corporates are allowed to buy directly from farmers, the mandi system and the support farmers received from *arthiyas* (traditional commission agents) will be destroyed: "Mandis have supported farmers through centuries. Now they will have no role."

Singh cites the example of Adani Agri Fresh practically taking over the apple market in Himachal Pradesh by forcing smaller orchard owners to accept lower rates. These apple farmers have protested against the government's free trade pacts with countries like New Zealand and the US. If imported apples flood the domestic market, the livelihoods of over 15 lakh farming families in the state will be threatened.

"We have no choice but to fight. We are planning to meet in mid-June to see what strategy we can evolve to take on the government," Singh added.

Vijoo Krishnan, general secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) has demanded an immediate reinstatement of the 'anti-monopoly' clause and a cap on any single corporate group's share of silo capacity.

The AIKS has also demanded an inquiry by a joint parliamentary committee into the role of the PPPAC in eliminating the anti-monopoly and other clauses that would have prevented market concentration. Strengthening the FCI's own storage capacity through public investment, rather than wholesale handover to corporate monopolies is, he says, the need of the hour. ■

"Dependence on the Adani-Leap India duopoly will mean the end of India's food security"

Photo: Getty Images

Of black gold and broken shores

Photos: K.A. Shaji



For governments and corporations, these black sands spell enormous wealth and strategic opportunity

The demand for heavy mineral sands is opening up yet another frontier of dispossession, writes **K.A. Shaji**

An Enforcement Directorate investigation into alleged financial transactions involving Cochin Minerals and Rutile Ltd (CMRL) and Exalog Solutions, the IT company owned by T. Veena, daughter of former two-term Kerala chief minister and current Leader of the Opposition in the state assembly Pinarayi Vijayan, has once again thrust a relatively obscure industry into the national spotlight.

The controversy has largely been framed as a politico-legal issue. Yet beyond the allegations and courtroom battles lies a larger story about one of India's most strategic natural resources and the intense battles surrounding its extraction. CMRL operates in a sector that sits at the intersection of geopolitics, national security, industrial policy, environmental conflict and corporate power.

The renewed attention on the company has revived questions about the vast deposits of heavy mineral sands buried under the beaches of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, resources that have become extremely valuable in a world driven by electric vehicles, renewable energy,

advanced electronics, aerospace manufacturing and defence technologies.

For governments and corporations, these black sands spell enormous wealth and strategic opportunity. For coastal communities, though, they present an entirely different reality—of eroding shorelines, shrinking livelihoods and a protracted battle against extraction projects.

The sands of power

The dark sands that line stretches of Kerala's coast contain some of the world's most valuable mineral deposits. Mixed with ordinary beach sand are ilmenite, rutile, zircon, garnet, sillimanite and monazite, minerals that have become indispensable to modern industry.

Ilmenite and rutile are the principal ores of titanium, a metal prized for its strength, corrosion resistance and low weight. Titanium is used extensively in aircraft, spacecraft, missiles, naval vessels and medical implants. Zircon is vital for ceramics, electronics and specialised industrial applications. Monazite, perhaps the most strategically important mineral found in these deposits, contains thorium

and rare earth elements. Thorium has long occupied a central place in India's three-stage nuclear programme, while rare earth elements are essential for electric vehicles, wind turbines, semiconductors, missile systems and a range of advanced technologies that increasingly define economic and military power.

India possesses one of the world's largest monazite reserves. The Chavara belt in Kollam district and the adjoining Tamil Nadu coastline constitute one of the richest heavy mineral sand (HMS) provinces in the world. The significance of these deposits has grown dramatically as countries scramble to secure critical minerals needed for clean energy technologies and advanced manufacturing.

China currently dominates global rare earth processing and refining, giving it enormous leverage over international supply chains. Governments in the US, Europe, Japan and India are seeking alternative sources and building new supply networks. In this emerging contest, India's coastal mineral wealth has acquired unprecedented strategic value. What lies under the beaches of Kerala and Tamil

Nadu is now linked to electric vehicle factories in Europe, semiconductor industries in East Asia, renewable energy projects across continents and defence establishments around the world.

The enormous value of these resources inevitably attracts political and commercial interest. Control over mining leases, processing facilities, transportation networks and export channels translates into economic influence. For the very same reason, the mineral sands sector is also mired in controversies. Questions of regulatory oversight, political patronage and corporate influence have surfaced repeatedly over the years. The current controversy involving CMRL is only the latest reminder of how closely mineral wealth and political power are intertwined.

The coast that pays the price

While governments speak about strategic minerals and industrial development, coastal communities tell a very different story. For fisher families, beaches are not merely deposits of valuable minerals. They are workplaces, community spaces and protective barriers against the sea.

Fishing boats are anchored there. Nets are repaired there. Fish are landed, sorted, processed and sold there. The beach is not barren landscape; it's an extension of everyday life. Any change in its nature has direct consequences for livelihoods and survival.

B. Bhadrans, leader of the Alappuzha-based Anti Mineral Sand Mining Action Committee (a.k.a. Samiti), says coastal communities are always ignored in discussions about 'development'.

"Governments see minerals. Corporations see profits. We see our future disappearing. Every truck carrying mineral sand away from the coast takes away part of the protection that stands between our homes and the sea. The benefits go elsewhere; the risks remain here. Fishing communities are expected to pay the environmental price for the creation of wealth they'll never enjoy."

According to Bhadrans, local residents

have repeatedly demanded independent environmental assessments, transparent public consultations and real participation in decision-making. But they find themselves confronting institutions far more powerful than themselves.

Kerala's coastline is already facing a profound ecological crisis. Large stretches of the state's 590 kilometre coast are affected by erosion. Villages have watched the sea move closer over the past two decades. Houses have collapsed, roads have disappeared and public infrastructure has been damaged. Thousands of families have experienced repeated displacement.

Climate change and sea-level rise are major drivers of this crisis. But scientists point to the impact of human interventions along the coast. Ports, breakwaters, seawalls, dredging projects and sand extraction have altered natural sediment movement, affecting the delicate balance that sustains beaches and coastal ecosystems.

Environmentalist Sreedhar Radhakrishnan argues that discussions on mineral extraction cannot be separated from Kerala's larger coastal crisis.

"The coast functions as a connected ecological system. Beaches and dunes absorb wave energy, buffer storms and protect inland settlements. When these systems are disturbed, the consequences are rarely confined to one location. We are already witnessing the impacts of climate change, rising seas and largescale infrastructure projects. Adding further stress without understanding cumulative impact is dangerous."

A history of conflict

The battle over mineral sands is not new. It has shaped politics, environmental movements and community struggle across Kerala and Tamil Nadu for decades. Chavara in Kerala's Kollam district has been associated with mineral extraction for nearly a century. Across the border in Tamil Nadu, the mineral-rich belt extends through Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli and Thoothukudi districts. Together, these regions form one of the most valuable coastal mineral zones in the world.

Yet they have also been the site of some of India's most controversial mining disputes. The environmental impact of mineral sand extraction is a subject of intense debate. Mining involves excavation, separation and processing of large volumes of coastal sediment. The process alters dune systems, removes vegetation, affects groundwater dynamics, disturbs habitats used by birds, marine organisms and nesting turtles, and makes vulnerable communities living near mining areas.

Monazite introduces another layer of complexity because it contains thorium, a radioactive element. Although authorities maintain that operations are regulated and monitored, activists demand greater transparency in the handling and movement of radioactive minerals.

The demand for critical minerals is expected to rise sharply in the coming decades. The transition to renewable energy, electric mobility and advanced manufacturing will intensify pressure to extract these minerals, with all its attendant consequences.

The ED investigation involving T. Veena may dominate the headlines now, but the bigger question is whether extraction can occur without damaging fragile ecosystems? Can communities participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their future? Can governments effectively regulate powerful commercial interests? ■



For fisher families, beaches are not merely deposits of valuable minerals. They are workplaces, community spaces and protective barriers against the sea

"Every truck taking mineral sand away from the coast takes away a part of the protection that stands between our homes and the sea"

If the cow is sacred, shouldn't the law say so?

The demands by Muslim leaders for a national reason is forcing a new reckoning with India's constitutional ambiguities on the question

Aakar Patel

Prominent Muslim voices have asked the prime minister to declare the cow a national animal and ban its slaughter across India. The head of the largest body of clerics, Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind, Maulana Arshad Madani, said Muslims would have no objection to this, since it would stop mob lynchings.

Madani said, given that the majority of the country's population considers the cow sacred and accords it the status of 'mother', there should be no political compulsion for the government to avoid declaring the cow as the national animal. Former vice-president Hamid Ansari also weighed in on this and repeated Madani's ask.

Laws criminalising the possession of beef were first legislated in 2015, in Maharashtra, then Haryana, setting off a spate of violence ('beef lynchings'). Other BJP states followed and the lynchings continue.

Those who support a nationwide ban on cow slaughter say it is a constitutional requirement. So why has it not been implemented? Let us examine the matter.

Article 48 of India's Constitution is a directive principle, meaning that it is guidance not law. It reads: "The State shall endeavour to organise agriculture and animal husbandry on modern and scientific lines and shall, in particular, take steps for preserving and improving the breeds, and prohibiting the slaughter, of cows and calves and other milch and draught cattle."

There is something unusual here. The reasoning is not religious but framed as an economic and scientific argument. Those pressing for a ban kept bringing up religious sentiment while also saying they

did not want to impose a cow slaughter ban on unwilling minorities.

Two members, Seth Govind Das and Pandit Thakur Das Bhargava, both of the Congress, had even wanted to introduce a ban on cow slaughter as a fundamental right of the cow. Others wanted buffaloes, bulls and other cattle of all ages to be included in the ban.

However, to retain the appearance that India's Constitution was secular, the legislators wanted a non-religious reason for the ban. Cows were needed to nourish children with milk, and slaughter was wrong since there was no such thing as unproductive cattle (because cows and bullocks were 'moving manure factories').

In a letter dated 7 August 1947, just a week before Independence, the soon-to-be president Rajendra Prasad wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru. It read: "There are two points which I had for consideration at my



meeting yesterday. I mentioned the agitation which is spreading with tremendous speed about the stopping of cow slaughter, but as everybody was in a hurry to go, the matter was not considered. I have been flooded with postcards, packets and telegrams making a demand that cow slaughter should be stopped by legislation... The Hindu sentiment in favour of the protection is old, widespread and deep-seated and it has taken no time to rouse at this moment to a pitch when it is difficult, if not impossible, to ignore it. I think that the matter does require consideration and we must take a decision, whatever it is, after due consideration."

In the Constituent Assembly, the

Muslims requested the Hindus to proceed with the ban but to lay out their religious reasons unequivocally. Zahir-ul-Hasan Lari from UP said, "If the House is of the opinion that slaughter of cows should be prohibited, let it be prohibited in clear, definite and unambiguous words."

If, he said, Hindus wanted a ban on cow slaughter for religious reason, "this is the proper occasion when the majority should express itself clearly and definitely" in the interest of goodwill and cordial relations between Hindus and Muslims. Lari added that Muslims were aware that their faith did not necessarily require them to sacrifice the cow—it permitted it.

The question was whether, given the

strong religious sentiments expressed by members of the Assembly, they would continue to extend to Muslims the permission and privilege they had at present. It was not so much interfering with religion, Lari said, as with liberty.

He also said he did not want to get in the way of Hindus protecting the cow but the economic argument was weak. Modern and scientific development of agriculture necessarily meant mechanisation rather than the continued use of draught animals. His plea was not heard and the amendment was adopted.

This state of affairs has continued. Madani has pointed out another problem: "In favour of the Uniform Civil Code, it is argued that when the country is one, the law should also be one, but the laws related to animal slaughter in the country are not equally applicable in all states."

On this issue, author Rasheed Kidwai writes: "[the] Muslim clergy's demand for a nationwide position should therefore be read not as submission, but as a challenge. It asks the state to stop dithering. It asks the political class to stop profiting from confusion. It asks the country to decide whether the cow is a matter of governance or merely an unfair instrument of polarisation."

We must also ask the government to tell us whether the Indian state is founded on secularism or religion. The prime minister, who has been vocal on the matter with his harangue against the 'pink revolution', can address the issue and resolve it by passing an honest law. It may or may not bring an end to the beef lynchings but it will certainly end the hypocrisy. ■

Views are personal

THE PAPERLESS FIELD: HOW 1,000 DAYS OF DIGITAL ARCHITECTURE REWROTE KARNATAKA'S LAND RECORDS

How billions of scanned legacy archives and automated mutation pipelines completely cut out arbitrary human delays and middlemen.

Photo: Gettyimages

For generations, rural India has held a foundational maxim: a farmer's security is tied directly to the ground beneath their feet, but their vulnerability is bound to the paper that proves it. In Karnataka, that reality is undergoing a profound structural shift. Over a landmark journey of 1,000 days, the state's Revenue Department has dismantled deep-seated operational bottlenecks, replacing human delays with systemic digital architecture to deliver critical governance straight to the doorsteps of ordinary citizens.

The quiet rooms of Vikas Soudha recently served as the backdrop for a detailed accountability review. Addressing the monthly progress meeting of all Deputy Commissioners, Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda did not just look back at institutional milestones; he mapped out an active administrative transformation.

"The work that had not happened for several decades has unfolded in just the last one thousand days," the Minister observed. "It is special that these words are coming from the mouths of the people themselves. The work we are doing is benefiting them directly. The perception that people earlier had about this department has now completely changed. As a result of our collective work over one thousand days, citizens are looking at the department with deep respect."

The "Nanna Bhoomi" Intervention: Redefining Land Rights

To understand the depth of this turnaround, one must look at the legacy frameworks that historically bound smallholder farmers. In previous decades, administrations routinely distributed lands to poor families but issued only the Record of Rights, Tenancy and Crops (RTC). Crucial structural records, complete boundary outlines, and land sketches remained locked deep inside government record rooms. This operational gap kept smallholders in an ongoing loop of vulnerability.

Without integrated sketches, establishing legal title boundaries was nearly impossible without launching a formal Podi Durasti (subdivision correction) process. Historically, navigating this meant running a gauntlet of regional offices, facing long systemic delays, and dealing with exploitative intermediaries.

To contextualize the historical inertia: over the entire preceding five-year administration, subdivision corrections were successfully resolved for a total of just 8,500 granted lands statewide. The process was purely reactive, moving only when a farmer possessed the resources and time to repeatedly follow up on an individual application.

"Governments that granted land earlier used to provide only the RTC and kept the farmers dependent on them. Therefore, without proper documents, the lives of farmers remained in an uncertain condition. When we resolved to fix this for our poorest citizens, opposition voices challenged it as an impossibility. We accepted that challenge." — Krishna Byre Gowda, Revenue Minister

The solution took shape as the "Nanna Bhoomi" (My Land) campaign—a fundamental operational shift. The department stopped waiting for applications. Instead, land officials proactively pulled legacy grant details online, built digital folders, cross-referenced spatial information, and went directly to the field.

Surveyors deployed to actual parcels, conducted physical measurements, built digital diagrams, and updated RTC and mutation ledgers simultaneously. This systemic approach effectively brought legal land clarity directly to the farmer's doorstep.

The e-PautiKhata Push: Resolving Generational Deadlocks

Few structural bottlenecks stall rural economic progress like dead-ancestor land locks. Across Karnataka, approximately 4.9 million properties legally remained in the names of deceased individuals. Because families routinely found the manual inheritance mutation process too cumbersome to navigate, generations of heirs were left without clear legal titles. This lack of updated records prevented them from securing bank loans, processing



"Governments that granted land earlier used to provide only the RTC and kept the farmers dependent on them. Therefore, without proper documents, the lives of farmers remained in an uncertain condition. When we resolved to fix this for our poorest citizens, opposition voices challenged it as an impossibility. We accepted that challenge."
-Krishna Byre Gowda, Revenue Minister

Addressing Backlogs: Data-Driven Timelines

The sheer scale of rural land management demands strict operational timelines over open-ended targets. The ministry backed its strategic vision with a series of sharp, aggressive deadlines to keep field teams moving at an unprecedented pace: **Accelerated Field Surveys:** Within the first year of this targeted push, official surveys for 205,757 farmers were set in motion. To maintain this momentum, Minister Byre Gowda

issued an explicit directive to regional administrators: surveys for 100,000 additional lands must be taken up within the next 90 days. **The Missing Record Committee:** For decades, files with missing structural documents sat in administrative limbo. The department systematically gathered these cases, sending the records of 107,217 farmers to the specialized Missing Record Committee. With 3,662 complex files already rectified and restored,

the ministry has set a firm three-month deadline to resolve 50,000 more backlogged files. **Correcting Acreage Mismatches:** Operational audits uncovered a major systemic issue: the records of 106,000 farmers showed that historical grant certificates recorded a total acreage that exceeded the actual real-world land available on-site. To fix this, field teams have been ordered to carry out rapid, on-site boundary checks to align formal records

with actual possession. **Clearing the Grant Pipeline:** With the preparation of original grant files for 350,000 farmers still pending processing, the Minister set a strict one-month deadline for completion. This multi-pronged, time-bound effort aims to secure documentation for approximately 1,174,226 farmers whose families received land grants between 20 and 50 years ago but lacked clear, legally binding titles.

lawful property splits, or executing transparent land sales.

To break this deadlock, the department rolled out the e-PautiKhata Campaign (Inheritance Mutation Campaign). Moving away from manual applications, Village Administrative Officers (VAOs) and field assistants now proactively verify local death registries, identify legal heirs, and process inheritance mutations via automated workflows. To date, 1.3 million land records have been successfully updated through direct doorstep outreach.

To accelerate this push, the Minister instructed administrators that, except for lands involved in active family lawsuits or disputes, every remaining matching property must be updated through this automated pipeline. Recognizing the intense effort required by field staff, the state announced an allocation of Rs 5.00 crore in performance incentives. This fund will directly reward VAOs and Village Assistants who achieve the highest mutation processing numbers, aligning field-level motivation with systemic state targets.

Bhoo Suraksha Abhiyan: Creating a Tamper-Proof Digital Archive

Historically, vulnerable citizens faced a

recurring administrative hurdle: the sudden loss or destruction of physical files in local offices. This vulnerability allowed bad actors to alter records or modify borders undetected, causing immense hardship to farmers.

The Bhoo Suraksha Abhiyan (Land Security Campaign) was launched to eliminate this risk by building an unalterable digital archive.

The scale of this digitization effort is massive: 7.119 billion legacy pages have already been scanned, indexed, and preserved in secure digital repositories.

Field units are processing the remaining 3 billion pages at a steady rate of 17.5 million pages every single day.

The impact of this archive is already actively changing lives. Over 5.27 million verified pages have already been distributed online to the general public.

Shortly, all land records will be made available through online distribution, allowing citizens to download authenticated records directly to their smartphones and removing the need to visit local government offices.

Operational Modernization: Advanced Survey Technology

Alongside comprehensive record cleanup, the department is modernizing its physical field

operations. Land Records and Survey Department Commissioner Venkataraju recently presented a new operational blueprint to fully digitize the state's surveying infrastructure and bring transformative changes to the cadre.

At the center of this modernization is satellite-linked rover technology. By moving away from traditional physical chains and manual plotting toward high-precision rovers, the department is modernizing how land boundaries are measured.

When surveys are completed using rover technology, digital copies of every single component—including the physical sketch, surveyor field notes, handwritten entries, and the Akar Bandh (original land survey records)—become instantly available in the cloud. This approach eliminates human error and manual drafting delays. The Minister left no room for ambiguity regarding its adoption:

"This technology should be used effectively. Through this, the entire department should become completely paperless and fully digitized from end to end by the end of this year," he instructed firmly.

The 1,000-Day Journey: Accountability via e-Office

This comprehensive shift in public service

required a complete overhaul of internal accountability. When the transformation began 1,000 days ago, senior leadership faced an immediate challenge: the department lacked basic data on exactly what work was pending and where it was stalled. Legacy paper files sat on local desks without any central oversight or digital tracking.

To fix this, the department developed a suite of online tracking dashboards. Today, leadership can monitor operational data across the state at a glance.

Core Strategic Milestones & Institutional Deadlines

Dharakasthu Podi Durasti (Subdivision Corrections): Focused on proactive survey execution and unalterable diagram updates for government-granted lands. Over 205,757 land surveys have been launched so far, with an additional target of 100,000 surveys set to be cleared within the next 3 months.

Missing Records Resolution: Dedicated to systematically reconstructing, verifying, and clearing lost or destroyed file archives. The specialized committee has completely resolved 3,662 complex files, and a strict directive has been issued to clear 50,000 more files within 3 months.

Excess Extent Alignment: Aimed at identifying and reconciling discrepancies where certificate records list an acreage larger than real-world limits. Over 106,000 files have been flagged for immediate audit and on-site physical checks of actual possession.

e-PautiKhata Campaign: Designed to eliminate generational deadlocks by registering legal heirs directly at their homes. 1.3 million land holdings have already been updated, with a current goal of universal coverage for all undisputed properties.

Bhoo Suraksha Abhiyan: A mass digitization push to preserve legacy land archives from tampering or physical decay. 7.119 billion historical pages have been digitized, with the final 3 billion pages scheduled to be completed shortly this year.

Survey Modernization: Driving complete end-to-end digital integration through satellite-linked rover units. With the core architecture deployed, the entire department faces an institutional deadline to transition to 100% paperless workflows by the end of the year.

The foundation of this accountability push is the widespread adoption of the e-Office framework. In the beginning, when the ministry suggested that even the simplest applications received by the inward section of local government offices had to be logged electronically, the idea was met with widespread surprise among the staff.

Today, that skepticism has been replaced by a new standard of efficiency. This tracking capability extends directly to field operations. Public administration in Karnataka—from the village-level Village Accountant (VA) right up to the regional Surveyor—runs entirely through e-Office. Every inbound request, field report, and land file moves through an electronic tracking path, creating a clear, unchangeable history of accountability and eliminating the arbitrary delaying power of individual offices.

Wrapping up the review, Minister Krishna Byre Gowda commended the shared commitment of the department's workforce, celebrating the profound teamwork that defined this 1,000-day journey. He lauded the dedication of the Deputy Commissioners across districts and acknowledged the steady administrative stewardship of his core executive team: Rajendra Kumar Kataria (Principal Revenue Secretary), MaunishMudgil (Principal Secretary, Registration and Stamps), Meena Nagaraj (Revenue Commissioner), and Venkataraju (Land Records and Survey Commissioner). Together, their leadership has set a benchmark for public sector modernization in India.

By replacing slow, paper-heavy bureaucracy with accountable, transparent technology, Karnataka has done more than just update its archives. Over 1,000 transformative days, the state has built a modern model of land governance, moving completely past outdated bureaucratic structures and ensuring that the legal rights of citizens are secure, verifiable, and truly at their fingertips.

Who can(not) have a nuclear weapon

Ashok Swain on the uneven application of NPT standards to Iran and Israel and on the hypocrisy of the West

As US and Israeli bombs and missiles nuclear on facilities, the justification they offered was both familiar and revealing: Iran must never acquire a nuclear weapon. The military action, sanctions, assassinations and flagrant violation of international law were all 'necessary to prevent a future nuclear threat'.

The US claims to defend the global non-proliferation regime, yet it has spent decades shielding West Asia's only nuclear-armed state—Israel. The same Western governments that condemn Iran's nuclear ambitions have tolerated, financed and concealed Israel's clandestine nuclear arsenal. If Iran can't have nuclear weapons, how is it okay for Israel to have them?

Iran remains a threshold nuclear state. Despite decades of suspicion and hostility, US intelligence assessments have repeatedly concluded that Iran has not made a political decision to build a nuclear bomb. It possesses the technological capability to do so, but capability is not the same as possession. More recent US intelligence assessments have again concluded that Iran has still not embarked on the project to build nuclear weapons. Yet it is Iran that faces bombing campaigns, economic strangulation, cyber warfare, sabotage operations and targeted killings of scientists.

On the other hand, it is universally known and quietly acknowledged that Israel possesses nuclear weapons. Estimates place its nuclear arsenal at around 90 warheads, with sufficient fissile material to build many more.

Israel never signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). It does not permit international inspections of its nuclear facilities. It has never publicly admitted that it possesses nuclear weapons, yet it has built a sophisticated nuclear deterrent, capable of delivering nuclear strikes by air, land and sea. No international body or coalition has demanded disarmament. No sanctions have followed. No military threats have been issued. Instead, Israel enjoys extraordinary protection.

For decades, successive US administrations have sidestepped any

acknowledgement of the fact that Israel has nuclear weapons. The unquestioned despite overwhelming evidence, extensive intelligence assessments, and even admissions by former US officials. Investigative reports have revealed that presidents from Richard Nixon onward effectively agreed not to challenge Israel's nuclear status. The result is a remarkable exception to every principle the US proclaims.

The hypocrisy is not merely political but institutional as well. US law mandates sanctions against countries that acquire or test nuclear weapons outside the NPT framework. Those laws have been applied selectively against rivals and adversaries. Iraq was invaded on false claims of possessing weapons of mass destruction. Iran has endured decades of sanctions. North Korea remains internationally isolated. But these norms do not apply to Israel.

Evidence suggests that Washington ignored Israeli procurement of nuclear material from the US, overlooked illicit acquisition networks, and even buried evidence related to Israel's suspected nuclear test in the ocean near the southern end of South Africa. What would certainly have triggered sanctions against any other state produced a deafening silence when Israel was involved.

After India's nuclear tests in 1998, the US and its allies swiftly imposed economic, military and scientific sanctions in the name of non-proliferation, but Israel has never faced any of this despite its long standing clandestine programme and its refusal to join the NPT.

The contrast was staggering: India declared its nuclear capability and paid an economic and diplomatic price. Israel developed its arsenal in secrecy, remained outside the treaty system, and was rewarded with military aid, diplomatic protection and strategic partnership.

With 191 signatory states, the NPT rests on a simple bargain: states without nuclear weapons agree not to acquire them, while nuclear powers commit to eventual disarmament and equal application of the rules. That bargain becomes impossible to sustain when one state is allowed to operate

The same Western governments that condemn Iran's nuclear ambitions have funded and concealed Israel's clandestine nuclear arsenal



Photo: Getty Images
Double standard Foreign minister of France Jean-Noël Barrot at the 11th review conference of the NPT. Recent investigations have revealed that France provided technological assistance to Israel's nuclear weapons programme

outside the system with complete impunity. Europe's role is no less dubious. Recent investigations have revealed that a substantial portion of Israel's nuclear infrastructure was secretly financed by West Germany during the early years of the Israeli nuclear weapons programme—the Dimona project. Billions of euros in today's value were transferred through covert arrangements disguised as development assistance. France provided technological assistance. Germany provided crucial financial support. Together, they helped build the foundations of Israel's nuclear capability.

Today, many of these same European governments present themselves as guardians of non-proliferation norms. Germany, in particular, has been among Israel's most steadfast supporters while simultaneously demanding strict limits on Iran's nuclear activities. The double standard is jaw dropping.

The consequences of this hypocrisy extend beyond Iran. No state develops an interest in nuclear deterrence in a strategic vacuum. Nations seek nuclear weapons when they perceive existential threats and a security asymmetry.

Iran's nuclear ambitions cannot be understood separately from Israel's undeclared arsenal. Nor can the growing interest in nuclear capabilities across West Asia and Saudi Arabia's 'strategic mutual defence agreement' with Pakistan be

divorced from the reality that one state already possesses the ultimate weapon while facing no international pressure to disarm.

Proliferation engenders more proliferation. The logic is straightforward. If nuclear weapons guarantee security and immunity from external meddling in sovereign affairs, more states will inevitably seek them. The lesson many governments have drawn from recent history is not that nuclear weapons are dangerous; it is that states without them are vulnerable.

Ukraine surrendered the nuclear arsenal it inherited after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Iraq abandoned its nuclear ambitions and was invaded. Libya dismantled its weapons programme and later experienced regime change. North Korea acquired nuclear weapons and became practically untouchable. These realities shape strategic calculations far more than hollow speeches about international norms.

The US actions in/on Iran are sending a dangerous message across the world: that the NPT is and will be invoked selectively to protect US allies and punish its adversaries. As long as that asymmetry persists, so will the reasons for more states to seek the nuclear deterrent. ■

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A valuable tool that requires vigilance

Pope Leo XIV, a man of faith and a man of science, on safeguarding humanity in the time of AI. Extracted from 'Magnifica humanitas', his first encyclical published on 25 May 2026

It is not my intention here to offer a comprehensive treatment of artificial intelligence, nor to give an overview of the extensive relevant literature, since authoritative contributions already exist, including within the ecclesial context. I limit myself to recalling a few essential elements for a moral and social discernment that safeguards the primacy of the human person, in order to ensure that it will always be human intelligence, with its conscience and freedom, that guides technical innovations and responsibly determines their use and limits.

It is appropriate to preface this discussion with two considerations. First, any statement regarding AI risks becoming quickly outdated, given the remarkable pace at which these systems are developing. Second, all of us, including those who design them, possess only a limited understanding of their actual functioning. Indeed, current AI systems are more 'cultivated' than 'built', for developers do not directly design every detail, but instead create a framework within which the intelligence 'grows'. As a result, fundamental scientific aspects—such as the internal representations and computational processes of these systems—remain, at present, unknown. There thus emerges an urgent need for a twofold commitment: on the one hand, a deepening of scientific research; on the other, the exercise of moral and spiritual discernment.

It is not possible to provide a single, comprehensive definition of AI. What can be stated, however, is that we must avoid the misconception of equating this type of 'intelligence' with that of human beings. These systems merely imitate certain functions of human intelligence. In doing so, they often surpass human intelligence in speed and computational capacity, offering tangible benefits across many fields. Yet this power remains entirely tied to data processing. So-called artificial intelligences do not undergo experiences, do not possess a body, do not feel joy or pain, do not mature through relationships

and do not know from within what love, work, friendship or responsibility mean. Nor do they have a moral conscience, since they do not judge good and evil, grasp the ultimate meaning of situations, or bear responsibility for consequences. They may imitate language, behaviour and analytical skills, or even simulate empathy and understanding, but they do not understand what they produce, for they lack the affective, relational and spiritual perspective through which human beings grow in wisdom. Even when these tools are described as capable of 'learning', their way of doing so is different from that of a human person. It is not the experience of those who allow themselves to be shaped by life and grow over time through choices, mistakes, forgiveness and fidelity. Rather, it is a form of statistical adaptation based on data and feedback, which can be very effective, but does not imply inner growth. [...]

A valuable tool that requires vigilance
The speed and simplicity with which information, complex analyses, media content and practical assistance can be accessed undoubtedly makes life easier. Yet they can also encourage excessive reliance and the search for readymade answers, and

weaken personal creativity and judgment. The apparent objectivity of the responses and suggestions these systems provide can lead us to overlook the fact that they reflect the cultural assumptions of those who designed and trained them, with all their strengths and limitations. The artificial imitation of positive human communication—words of advice, empathy, friendship and even love—can be engaging and at times genuinely helpful. However, for less discerning users, it can also be misleading, creating the illusion of a relationship with a real personal subject. When words are simulated, they do not build genuine relationships, but only their appearance. The artificial imitation of care or support can become particularly risky when it enters contexts where real relationships and emotional bonds are lacking. Here, the danger is not so much that a person may believe they are communicating with another person, but rather that they may gradually lose the very desire to form genuine human connections.

Broadening our perspective to the use of AI in society, we see that it is now embedded in decision-making processes across many sectors and at multiple levels: in communication, management and

control. The gains in efficiency and the potential to improve certain services are clear, yet rapidly and uncritically adopting them exposes us to a range of risks, including the tendency to overlook the environmental impact. Current AI systems require enormous amounts of energy and water, significantly influencing carbon dioxide emissions and placing heavy demands on natural resources. As their complexity increases, especially in the case of large language models, the need for computing power and storage capacity grows too, which requires an extensive network of machines, cables, data centres and energy-intensive infrastructure. For this reason, it is essential to develop more sustainable technological solutions that reduce environmental impact and help protect our common home.

Responsibility, transparency and the governance of AI

The use of AI is never a purely technical matter: when it enters processes that affect people's lives, it touches on rights, opportunities, status and freedom. Important and sensitive decisions—concerning employment, credit, access to public services or even a person's reputation—risk being fully delegated to automated systems that do not know 'compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and above all, the hope that people are able to change', and can therefore give rise to new forms of exclusion. There are clearly harmful uses, such as the manipulation of information or violations of privacy. Yet there is also a

subtler danger, for when AI systems present themselves as neutral and objective, they end up reflecting and reinforcing the stereotypes or ideological bias of their designers and developers.

Indeed, entrusting an algorithm in practice with the power to select who is worthy or not, without anyone bearing responsibility for that judgment, is to hand over the task of redefining the boundaries of human possibilities. In this process, political responsibility is also lost, not just empathy toward those excluded, which can, after all, be simulated. The exclusion of the vulnerable becomes cloaked in a veneer of neutrality and objectivity, against which it becomes difficult to raise objections. In this way, injustice goes unnoticed, and compassion, mercy and forgiveness—understood not as mere appearances but as real political actions—gradually disappear from view.

From this follows a simple but compelling consequence: we cannot consider AI to be morally neutral. In reality, every technical tool embodies choices and priorities through what it measures, ignores and optimises, and how it classifies people and situations. If a system is designed or used in a way that treats some lives as less worthy, or excludes them without the possibility of appeal, then it is not merely a tool 'to be used well', since it has already introduced criteria that contradict the inalienable dignity of the human person. For this reason, ethical discernment cannot be limited to asking whether we are using a system for good or bad purposes; it must also examine how that system is designed and what vision of the human person and society is embedded in the data and models that guide it.

For AI to respect human dignity and truly serve the common good, responsibility must be clearly defined at every stage: from those who design and develop these systems to those who use them and rely on them for decisions. In many cases, the internal processes leading to a result remain opaque, making it harder to assign responsibility and correct errors. This is where accountability becomes crucial: the possibility of identifying who must 'account' for decisions, justify them, monitor them and, when necessary, challenge them and remedy any harm caused. ■

(Part 2 of this reflection will be published next week)



Pope Leo XIV
Photo: Getty Images

Artificial intelligences do not feel joy or pain, nor do they have a moral conscience, since they do not judge good and evil

India lost combat aircraft in Op. Sindoor

...and other damning highlights from the Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment report released end-May

Ashis Ray

The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), a leading London-based think-tank on military affairs, in its Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment (APRSA) reiterates that Indian combat aircraft were downed by Pakistan in Narendra Modi's Operation Sindoor last year.

The APRSA analysis reads: 'This new and third type of surgical strike (under Modi after 2016 and 2019) was an Indian Army and IAF (Indian Air Force) joint operation; the Indian Army struck targets close to the LoC or Indian border while the IAF struck more distant targets. Pakistan's attacks were also unprecedented, with missiles and UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) targeting four air bases and civilian sites in India's Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat states, in addition to downing Indian combat aircraft.'

The exposé regarding the Pakistani counter-attack on Indian air bases and in three Indian border states blows the lid off the concealment attempted by the Modi government.

In February, the IISS's 'Military Balance 2026' report affirmed: 'Open-source imagery has verified the loss of one Rafale EH (enhanced with advanced electronics).' It also disclosed there were 'Indian aircraft losses', thereby underlining that more than one plane fell victim to Pakistani air-to-air missiles.

Neither Modi nor defence minister Rajnath Singh has, till date, owned up to the debacle. If anything, the civilian establishment in India has strenuously tried to brush it under the carpet.

Regarding India's militarised borders with China and Pakistan, the APRSA summarises: 'India's conventional-threat perception in the Asia-Pacific will continue to centre on Pakistan and China. Any potential future "major conventional war" would remain local in nature... India's border conflicts with China have been traditional in nature and are unlikely to escalate to the same level of the Indo-Pakistan conflicts, given China's superior military capabilities in the border area and India's reluctance to provoke it.'

The assessment concludes: 'For India, the pacing challenge is a "hybrid" situation of "no war but also no peace" with China and Pakistan. Indian military doctrine continues to evolve...' It added, 'India is unlikely to play an active military role in

the wider Asia-Pacific and will likely seek to avoid being drawn into a US-China conflict over Taiwan, for example.'

The appraisal of the India-China circumstances is this: 'India and China fought in 1962 and 1967 (the latter was a success for India in Nathu La under the leadership of the Congress party Prime Minister Indira Gandhi) and engaged in conflicts or border stand-offs along the LAC (Line of Actual Control) in 1975 and 1986-87. They also partook in a stand-off in the Depsang Plains along the LAC (when Chinese troops withdrew within a fortnight under combined diplomatic and military pressure applied by the Congress-led government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh) and even in 2014 during Xi's first visit to India (when Narendra Modi was carelessly swaying on a swing with the Chinese president and signing security-breaching memoranda of understanding). In 2017, security forces from both countries made a series of localised, low-level tactical moves in the high-altitude area of Doklam at the 'tri-junction' with Bhutan and India's Sikkim state, escalating into a stand-off.'

It goes on to say: 'June 2020 saw escalation, when four Chinese and over 20 Indian soldiers died during violent clashes in the Galwan Valley on their un-demarcated, unresolved Himalayan border. This resulted in relations between Asia's two largest nuclear-armed countries deteriorating to their lowest point since their 1962 war... Since then, China has joined Pakistan as India's primary and long-term strategic and military challenge.'

China poses a heightened threat not only because of its increasingly assertive behaviour towards India and its military build-up along the shared LAC; but because of its solid commitment to Pakistan, as evidenced in the collaboration to blunt Modi's Operation Sindoor. 'India is also focused on securing the Indian Ocean region against threats from these two neighbours, as well as countering various non-traditional maritime-security challenges,' the APRSA observes.

'The Indian government has not publicly released or formally articulated a national-security policy or strategy, although some such documents have been circulating among policymakers. It reportedly has a "Union War Book", for example, which remains highly classified.'

The report continues: 'One important, though not comprehensive, nor the only signpost of how the military possibly

intends to fight a future conventional war is the 2017 "Joint Doctrine: Indian Armed Forces". While each armed force has its own doctrine, this document encompasses India's approach to wars in the land, air and sea domains and is the most recently released public document covering all three services. The document emphasises the growing focus on jointness with the Indian Armed Forces and best encapsulates its potential modern war-fighting plans.'

But 'jointness'—which envisaged integrated theatre commands and an integration of the army, navy and air force—has, the APRSA notes, been hindered by 'reservations among specific armed forces.'

India's primary military objective as spelled out in the document is: '[to] prevent war through strategic and conventional deterrence across the full spectrum of military conflict, to ensure the defence of India, our national interests and sovereignty.'

For India's defence forces, 'strategic interests in regions along our northern, western and western borders and sensitivities along the Line of Control (with Pakistan) and Line of Actual Control are to be protected with effective deterrent capabilities... our land borders and the Indian Ocean region (IOR) remain central to India's growth and security.'

The 2017 doctrine states: 'India has moved to a proactive and pragmatic philosophy to counter various conflict situations. The response to terror provocations could be in the form of



Sreengrab from a video showing the impact of strikes during Operation Sindoor

"surgical strikes" and these could be subsumed in the sub-conventional portion of the spectrum of armed conflict... Conflict will be determined or prevented through a process of credible deterrence, coercive diplomacy and conclusively by punitive destruction, disruption and constraint in a nuclear environment across the Spectrum of Conflict. Therefore, undertaking "Integrated Theatre Battle" with an operationally adaptable force, to ensure decisive victory in a network centric environment across the entire spectrum of conflict in varied geographical domains, will be the guiding philosophy for evolution of force application and war fighting strategies.'

The document also stresses that future wars would be fought in 'the space, cyber and special operation domains'. It notes that 'the fast pace of technological advancement precludes military modernisation process implying that, a constant endeavour in this direction needs to be sustained to maintain a right balance between obsolescence and new technology.'

Before Modi's bombastic approach, significant Indian military strikes across the LoC occurred without publicity. This is confirmed by the APRSA report: 'During the 1999 Kargil conflict with Pakistan, the

Indian military was ordered (by BJP Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee) not to cross the LoC, even though such punitive strikes had taken place before. But in 2016, the Indian government acknowledged a previously covert operation which did cross the LoC for the first time.'

The APRSA comments that cyber-security elements were evident in last year's Indo-Pak hostilities. 'These included disinformation campaigns, hacktivist groups launching retaliatory campaigns and reports claiming that Pakistan's military cyber wing disrupted a communications network in India.'

It elaborates: 'The military-on-military direct cyber operations may have been limited, at least as publicly reported. But India also used the space domain for ISR (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) as well as C2 (command and control).'

As per the APRSA, 'India used UAVs and missiles extensively in the 2025 conflict, employing them in a way not substantially covered in its 2017 doctrine. However, this does not necessarily mean that India's future warfare will feature them in similar ways: how India will fight next is a difficult question to answer for those outside the government.'

The IISS security assessment report reveals that Pak counter-hits targeted Indian air bases and border states. Will the govt now fess up?



Plans to redo a 200-year-old mansion by Sonam Kapoor and Anand Ahuja under scrutiny

Sonam Kapoor and hubby in Notting Hill property redevelopment row

London has long been the favourite hunting ground for Indian-origin tycoons—Lakshmi Mittal, Anil Agarwal, the Hinduja brothers, to name a few—to snap up some of its most expensive properties amid allegations of destroying the character of neighbourhoods by making tacky additions to their homes.

The latest to join the growing list of 'nasty neighbours' are Bollywood star Sonam Kapoor and her industrialist husband Anand Ahuja. They have acquired a 200-year-old mansion in fashionable Notting Hill for a cool £21 million.

However, their plans to gut the property—leaving only its four outer walls intact—have raised hackles. The redevelopments include a basement swimming pool and a subterranean basketball court.

Even as these plans were being scrutinised by the local council, a company linked to the couple is said to have spent £4.7 million buying flats in a nearby block over the past three years, allegedly to turn them into 'servants' quarters', a concept alien to modern Britain.

These moves have provoked angry backlash from local residents, with the company accused of threatening anyone who 'opposes' their plans.

A representative of the couple was quoted saying they had no direct connection to the company that bought the flats, which were acquired for investment purposes.

No bullying bosses, please. We're British

For all its sins, the Keir Starmer government has got at least one thing right: securing workers' rights in an increasingly exploitative gig economy.

Not surprisingly though, its new law guaranteeing job security and fair wages is facing opposition from businesses who have warned that it would lead to a drop in new hires. There's already talk of the government considering diluting some of



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HASAN SUROOR

the proposed reforms.

Meanwhile, at least one boss used to taking his staff for granted finds himself in hot water for showing disrespect towards a employee.

A gym worker has been awarded nearly £150,000 after her boss ordered her to drive overnight from Germany back to Wales for a meeting he did not turn up at.

Bethan Littlewood, 29, was competing at the Canoe Polo European Championships in 2023 when she received the summons from the manager of the gym where she worked. An employment tribunal heard she arrived on time, only to discover her boss had 'double booked' and was elsewhere.



Bethan Littlewood's boss ordered her to drive overnight, from Germany back to Wales, for a meeting and then didn't show up. She sued him and was awarded approx. £150,000

She told the tribunal it was the "last straw" in a string of similar incidents, including bullying.

The tribunal judge, Samantha Moore, ruled that the company's conduct had "fundamentally breached the implied term of mutual trust and confidence" between the employer and its staff.

What Brits think of 'broken Britain'

Oxford University and Britain's Independent Commission on Community and Cohesion have launched a new project: The National Conversation. They are asking the public to "take a minute" to share their vision for their community and country in a voice note, which will then be analysed using AI.

The aim is to conduct what is claimed to be the most comprehensive mapping of what might bring people together in a time of "converging crises of social disconnection and division".



Sajid Javid, former home secretary

Its chairman Sajid Javid, former home secretary, said: "Our country is in real peril. Unless we can regain a shared sense of what unites us, of what we have in common, we risk being torn apart by our differences. That vision won't come from politicians, it can only come from the public."

Polling shows that three-quarters of adults believe Britain is divided. Almost as many think the country has become more divided in the past five years.

Melinda Mills, professor of demography at Nuffield College, Oxford, said, "We hope that this National Conversation will build a new kind of national evidence base about what might hold us together."

It would be interesting to know what a similar survey in India might reveal.



Calls grow to ban kirpans in public

The conviction of a Sikh teenager for murdering a white university student with a kirpan has reignited an old debate over religious exemptions that allow the carrying of sharp instruments in public.

Right-wing political parties are calling for the repeal of exemptions that legally allow Sikhs to carry kirpans in public spaces.

Last week, 23-year-old Vickrum Singh Digwa was convicted of killing 18-year-old Henry Nowak. Digwa's mother, Kiran Kaur, was convicted of helping him remove the weapon from the scene.

The verdict by a jury at Southampton Crown Court has been welcomed, but police have been criticised for its treatment of the victim on the basis of Digwa's unsubstantiated claim that he acted after being racially abused.

Shadow home secretary Chris Philp said it was "shameful" that the cops handcuffed Henry as he lay dying. The police have since apologised, but calls for a ban on carrying kirpans in public are growing.

Sikh groups have opposed penalising an entire faith and its religious freedoms due to the actions of one individual.



And, finally, British Airways' habit of losing luggage has reminded old-timers of its catchy slogan to promote the now-defunct Concorde flight: 'Breakfast in London, lunch in New York'. A wag has tweaked this to 'Breakfast in London, lunch in New York... and baggage in Bermuda'.



Jaya Jayahe Telangana ! Janani Jayaketanam !!



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Special Action Plan Implemented in 10 Themes

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April 06 to 11

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3 Arrive.. Alive



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4 Welfare



April 27 to May 02

5 Child Safety & Curbing Drugs



May 04 to 09

6 Farmer Welfare, Agriculture, Revenue, Power, & Irrigation



May 11 to 16

7 Education



May 18 to 23

8 Youth & Sports



May 25 to 30

9 Women



June 01 to 12

10 Environment



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