

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

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New Delhi • 10 November 2024 • Pages: 16 • National • Vol. 8 Issue 4 • ₹20

NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

WHAT'S THE HURRY TO AMEND THE WAQF ACT?

The devil is in the details of the amendments, which will legalise land grab by the government

► P3



POLITICS

PGV TAKES THE PLUNGE

How Priyanka Gandhi's electoral debut might reshape India's politics

► P5



DIPLOMACY

THE BORDER DEAL

Has India played into China's hands or has China pulled out of Indian territory?

► P15



Time to pull out that saffron rag again

The BJP will hope its new divisive chant—*batoge toh katoge*—will work in the coming round of elections

Sharad Gupta

Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath coined the slogan '*Batoge toh katoge*' (divided, you fall) in August 2024 while referring to attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh after a restive population overthrew the Awami League government and prime minister Sheikh Hasina fled the country, to find sanctuary in India. The attacks, mostly on Awami League supporters, were useful grist for the Hindutva hate mill; BJP leaders seized on the 'opportunity' to stoke fear that 'vulnerable' Hindus in India would suffer the same fate if they didn't unite. Eight per cent Hindus in Bangladesh versus 80 per cent in India—shouldn't the math alone reveal the idiocy of this claim?

Clearly not. The slogan has acquired a life of its own, appearing on posters in Mumbai ahead of crucial elections in Maharashtra, as well as in Jharkhand. Yogi Adityanath, undoubtedly chuffed by the response of his constituency, used the slogan extensively while campaigning in Haryana. Variations of the slogan—*Batoge toh katoge/ Ek rahoge toh nek rahoge* (Divided, you fall/ united, you thrive)—have been used by other BJP leaders including Prime Minister Modi who asserted, "*Batenge toh baatne wale mehfil sajayenge*" (If we divide, the people who divide us will make merry). Worth noting again, the loaded use of the word 'mehfil', inflected to invoke the 'other'.

With by-elections scheduled for 48 assembly seats and two parliamentary constituencies in November, the slogan has been instrumentalised to divide and flourish, BJP style. Himanta Biswa Sarma called for Hindu unity in Jharkhand lest Ansaris and Alams loot them. At an election rally the next day, PM Modi followed up with his own tirade against those "who will rob Jharkhand's *maati* (land) and *beti* (daughters)", amplifying the BJP's claim that Bangladeshi infiltrators in Jharkhand are waging 'love and land jihad'.

TV anchor and editor Rahul Shivshankar confirmed the political intent behind the slogan in his blog: 'UP CM Adityanath's remarks are a well thought-out political provocation. Yogi has only a few weeks to consolidate the Hindu vote that has noticeably fractured there. An unabashed invocation of well-worn Hindutva tropes, he hopes, will win back all the subordinate castes (read Dalits and OBCs) that have drifted away from the BJP. It is estimated that because of this drift, the BJP lost at

least 20 parliamentary seats in the recently concluded Lok Sabha polls in Uttar Pradesh.'

RSS sarkaryavah (general secretary) Dattatreya Hosabale, also told the media in Mathura, "If Hindu society does not stay united, then '*batenge toh katenge*' in the current parlance could become a reality." Yogi Adityanath, he argued, was calling for social unity, as divisions along caste lines would be bad for society. Hosabale emphasised that divisions along caste, language and forward-backward status would be detrimental to Hindus. "Certain powers are working to break Hindu society, so caution is necessary," he added.

Since when are Hindus in danger in this country? Since when did menacing and violently targeting an entire community count as 'caution'? Clearly, he's consulting a different dictionary.

Who is dividing the Hindus, and why, wondered RJD's fiery spokesperson Priyanka Bharti in a TV interview. Who has created divisions on the basis of caste? Who has divided Hindus into 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes? Who has been assaulting and killing Dalits for simply growing a moustache or riding a mare to a wedding? Why did Yogi not invite the Dalit MP from Ayodhya to this year's Diwali *deepotsava*? Is the UP chief minister a unifier or a divider? You decide.

The BJP knows from experience that communally surcharged poll campaigns yield rich dividends. Think Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. In a recent speech in Maharashtra, Yogi Adityanath bragged how Muslims in Uttar Pradesh had stopped offering namaaz (prayers) in public spaces, how loud-speakers had been removed from mosques, so people no longer have to hear (read: put up with) the sound of the azaan calling the faithful to prayer. Muslims are threatened all the time and yet Hindu *khatre mein hai*? It would be laughable if it weren't so horrific.

Nobody, points out Sanjay Singh of AAP, objects to unity. Indians should be united. The trouble with the BJP is that it wants the Hindus to gang up against the 'other'. Isn't it obvious the party is not really concerned about Hindus—all it cares for is electoral victory.

Isn't the aim of that polarising cry also to



Photo: Getty Images



"Who has created divisions on the basis of caste? Who has divided Hindus into 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes? Who has been killing Dalits for growing a moustache or riding a mare to a wedding?"

oppose the demand for a caste census? The BJP feels threatened as such a census may well expose the dominance of the numerically small upper castes in almost all spheres of life in the country. Increasingly, marginalised sections and backward communities are standing up to be counted. They want to know whether the job quotas and seats in educational institutions reserved for them are being filled by the rightful recipients or not. More so after the Justice Rohini Commission (constituted by the Modi government itself) revealed that the lion's share of OBC and SC/ ST quotas are cornered by a handful of powerful castes.

Wary of opposing the caste census outright, the BJP has instead spun it as an attempt to divide on caste lines rather than a demand for equality across castes. Simultaneously, it is trying to change its own image from a traditionally Brahmin-Bania party to one that embraces those that come under the larger Hindu umbrella.

A pronounced upper-caste bias defines both the BJP and its ideological fountainhead. All RSS chiefs so far have come from upper castes, with one exception (Rajendra Singh alias Rajju Bhaiyya). All sarsangchalaks have come from a single caste—the Chitpawan Brahmin community. BJP chiefs were predominantly Brahmins till L.K.

Advani's aide K.N. Govindacharya tried to integrate social justice with the Ram mandir narrative by attracting Dalits and OBCs. With OBC leaders like Kalyan Singh and Uma Bharti, the BJP made rapid strides across the Hindi heartland.

Narendra Modi saw the inclusion of Dalits and OBCs as the expedient move that it is. The past 10 years have witnessed the OBCs rise in the party—as cadre, office-bearer and elected representative. So much so that upper-caste leaders have been complaining. "These days only OBCs are getting plum positions in both the party setup and in government," said a BJP leader from Bihar.

Meanwhile, UP deputy chief minister and former state BJP president Keshav Prasad Maurya dissed the slogan in an interview to a Hindi daily. *Batoge to katoge* is not the BJP's official line, he said. "The BJP contests elections only on the basis of its developmental achievements. This false narrative is being propagated by the opposition and the media".

Is Maurya, a known Yogi-baiter close to Union home minister Amit Shah, saying this to deflect potential criticism and outrage? Or is he, in Machiavellian mode, distancing now, all the better to disown and discredit later, should the slogan fail to yield the desired dividends? ■

When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging!

India must be the only country in the world with two top public figures in direct communion with God, writes **Avay Shukla**

The first rule of excavation is that when you find yourself in a hole, you should stop digging. It appears, however, that our venerable chief justice, who has now seen the (saffron) light, has not heard of this truism, notwithstanding his vast knowledge and learning. He continues to excavate, somewhat like the Archaeological Survey of India, probably hoping to strike Hindutva bedrock.

With his 'legacy' already under the public scanner, one would have expected him to lie low and weather the storm. Instead, just last week, he has publicly gone on record to gloat that (a) he authored the Ayodhya Ram Mandir judgement and (b) that he had prayed to God for a solution to this thorny issue, and the 'solution' was promptly sent to him by the deity, presumably via Blinkit or Zepto.

Predictably, this confession has raised another fire storm, with eminent lawyers and even retired judges coming down on him like a tonne of the famed Ram Mandir bricks.

His revelation, as far as I know, is only the second judicial epiphany after Moses



Not a deal When CJI D.Y. Chandrachud hosted the prime minister on Ganapati Puja

was handed the Ten Commandments by a burning bush on Mount Sinai, with the difference that the directive principles of the commandments have now been replaced with the binding Ayodhya judgement; after all, it is a tenet of spirituality that divine revelation always precedes divine authorship.

And since the chief justice himself has implicitly attested to the authorship of this SC judgement, the epiphany itself must be acknowledged. But the fecundity of the implications of this spiritual communion is mind boggling; this piece attempts to unravel some of them.

Since the chief justice himself has implicitly attested to the authorship of the Ayodhya judgement, the epiphany itself must be acknowledged

India must be the only country in the world with two top public figures in direct communion with God—the prime minister (who is probably God incarnate) and the chief justice. We must consider ourselves exceptionally fortunate in this respect, though we still don't know with whom our third pillar of democracy—the presiding officers of the two houses of Parliament—communicates. The evidence points to either Johnny Walker or Alfred E. Neuman (of MAD magazine fame), but I could be wrong.

The Hindu pantheon reportedly has 330 million gods (not including our prime minister) so it would be interesting to know which particular deity the chief justice consulted. There is also a problematic dimension to this, as was raised by Karan Thapar in a question to retired justice Rekha Sharma of the Delhi High Court: if it was indeed Ram *lalla* (as most people suspect), then is not the whole Ayodhya judgement vitiated, since Ram *lalla*, through his 'next friend' is a party to the dispute?

► Continued on page 2

The battle for Kedarnath

Having lost the Badrinath and Ayodhya seats, the BJP is trying its best to avoid another red-face moment

Rashme Sehgal

The Bharatiya Janata Party is leaving nothing to chance. Having lost the Badrinath assembly seat in a by-election in 2022 and the Ayodhya Lok Sabha seat in the 2024 general election, it cannot afford to lose yet another holy site for devout Hindus.

Little Rohan then that chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami is personally overseeing the BJP's campaign in the temple town. He even accompanied BJP candidate Asha Nautiyal when she filed her nomination.

Recent electoral history favours the BJP. Four of the five previous elections in the last two decades have gone in favour of women candidates. Female voters (45,775) outnumber male voters (44,765) in this constituency. Not only are they as vocal, if not more, than the men, this year's contest between the BJP's Nautiyal and the Congress' Manoj Rawat is also likely to be determined by women. Rawat, a Rajput, and Nautiyal, a Brahmin, are both former MLAs from the constituency.

A paucity of job opportunities and the migration of men in search of work to the plains continue to be electoral issues in the Kedarnath assembly segment which includes Rudraprayag, Didihat, Pithoragarh and Dwarhat. The crucial by-election this month was necessitated by the death of BJP MLA Shaila Rani Rawat.

Asha Nautiyal had won this seat in 2002 and 2007 while Manoj Rawat won from here in 2017. Ironically, Rawat's victory was, in some measure, due to Nautiyal who contested as an independent, having been denied the BJP ticket in 2017. She cornered a large number of votes for herself, trumping her arch rival Shaila Rani Rawat, and ensuring Manoj Rawat's victory. While a chastened BJP has fallen back on Asha Nautiyal again, Rawat is seeking votes on the strength of his work as a legislator.

Kedarnath is a biggie for the BJP also because of prime minister Narendra Modi's all-out 'devotion' to the place. Since assuming office in 2014, the PM has made eight trips to Kedarnath. Who can forget the sight of him clad in saffron, playing at 24-hour meditation in a cave in Kedarnath in 2019, in the full glare of TV crews and cameras. Or his unveiling of the 12-foot statue of 8th-century seer Adi

Shankaracharya at Kedarnath in 2021. Our indefatigable prime minister is also known to be the driving force behind the gold plating of the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. It is a different matter that 228 kilogram of gold was donated and only 23 kg used. Who stole the rest? No one knows.

His personal zeal to 'develop' Kedarnath has made the Char Dham Yatra the high-fliers' delight. The rich jet in to Dehradun and then copter it to Kedarnath temple. For the less well-heeled, existing motorable roads have been widened. Hotels have mushroomed around Kedarnath. The PM has personally supervised the construction of a theatre, a pilgrim's ghat and a hospital, ignoring the warning of geologists that such construction was unsuitable for a temple town on a glacial moraine susceptible to land subsidence.

The ancient Shiva temple at Kedarnath in the Garhwal Himalayas is cradled by the Mandakini river. Over the last five years, this sacred space—with the snow-clad mountains providing a stunningly beautiful backdrop—has been converted into a shanty town. What was once a green meadow has been taken over by makeshift jhuggis with blue tarpaulin roofs that provide cheap accommodation to the thousands of Char Dham *yatris* during the summer months. The jhuggis are in sharp contrast to the umpteen multi-storey hotels and arcades being constructed to provide accommodation for those tourists who can afford them.

The Kedar Valley has undergone several devastating landslides and floods, the most disastrous in 2013. On 31 July 2024, the Valley once again witnessed unprecedented rainfall and landslides. Curiously, there are no official figures yet of the number of pilgrims present at Kedarnath on that day. With pilgrim registration mandatory at all four Dhams (Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri and Yamunotri) surely the state government should have had those figures at their fingertips?

But no. No figures on the number of pilgrims who died. On 1 August, the Rudraprayag district magistrate Saurabh Gaharwar claimed on X that about 200–300 people were present at Kedarnath Dham. Mysteriously, by the evening of 2 August, this figure had crossed 7,000. On 3 August, 1,865 pilgrims were said to have been

rescued and taken to safe places, bringing the total number of people rescued to a total of 9,099. By 4 August, officials claimed that a total of 10,374 persons had been rescued.

A local from Gaurikund recalled, "We were reminded of the Kedarnath disaster of 2013. It was raining heavily uphill in Kedarnath region when the water in the river started rising. We felt a vibration. Before we could understand what was going on, a lot of water came rushing downwards. We all ran outside to a safe place to save our lives but many people got washed away. The road was washed away at the same place during the 2013 tragedy. When the rain waters receded, many people came to my place to enquire about their loved ones."



The fact that Muslims comprise a mere 2 per cent of Uttarakhand's population hasn't stopped the BJP from raising non-issues of 'love jihad', 'mazaar jihad' and 'naukri jihad'



(Above) Congress candidate Manoj Rawat; while the Congress is focusing on the lack of development in and around Kedarnath town (left), the BJP is diverting attention from its government's shortcomings

number of deaths was suppressed. The rising incidence of landslides in the Garhwal Himalayas and the steady depletion of agricultural land to forest fires—which have reached the upper regions of the Himalayas—is a matter of concern for the local population. Rawat said, "The weather in these parts has become cold. Kedarji's doors closed on 3 November at 8.30 a.m. and will remain shut for the next six months. The by-election will take place in these cold conditions and we are trying our best to campaign and take the issues to the people." One of those issues is the theft of the gold crores to be worth several thousand crores.

While the Congress has been focusing on the lack of any real development in the area, the BJP has been countering local resentment by diverting attention from the government's shortcomings in their usual way—by steadily whipping up anti-Muslim frenzy across the entire Garhwal region. With Muslims comprising a mere two per cent of the population, raising non-issues of 'love jihad', 'mazaar jihad' and 'naukri jihad' is clearly the saffron party's pathetic default setting when it finds its own house in disorder. ■

When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging!

» Continued from page 1

Even by our dismal standards of jurisprudence, we can hardly have a judge consulting one of the petitioners in a case to what type of order he should write! Justice Sharma would not be pinned down on this question, but she was obviously uncomfortable with the point raised by Thapar. It would be interesting now, wouldn't it, if some lawyer were to file a curative petition in the SC on this point to challenge the judgement?

Justice Sharma was, however, emphatic that Justice Chandrachud's admission had lowered the image of the court. What if it had been a Muslim or Christian or Sikh judge claiming that he/ she had consulted his/ her God before writing a judgement?

There would have been majoritarian outrage, charges of 'judicial jihad' would have been bandied about by the likes of the Assam chief minister whose career is based on his study of jihads, and all manner of bhakts would have descended on Jantar Mantar like the proverbial 'Shivji ki barati'. In contrast, the present chief justice will, in all probability, be well rewarded for his epiphany. One good turn, or about-turn, deserves another.

Will every court now have a temple attached to it, for ease of doing judicial business? After reserving a judgement, the concerned judge could retire to the temple (the five-star hotel with the bar comes later), confer with the deity of choice, and then announce the order.

Or better still, why have these pesky and expensive courts at all, which are nothing but convenient venues for gangsters to shoot down their rivals? Replace them with temples and head priests who will function as the registry and convey divine orders.

We could adopt the Himalachal model for this, where *devtas* speak through their spokesmen or *gurs*, and tell the simple Himalachalis what to do. I would suggest that a committee of judges should go to the remote village of Malana in Kullu to study this model.

Right now, the *gur* of Jamblu *devta* has told the government that the *devta* does not approve

of the Kullu–Bijli Mahadev ropeway; in years past, it was the *gur* who also approved the tour programmes of officials who wished to visit Malana on duty!

The outcome of the Pandora's box opened by CJI Chandrachud is mind boggling. There are approximately 17,000 judges in India; what if each one of them decides to consult his or her family god before passing judgement? There is also a strict hierarchy of gods and goddesses in our religion, which you tamper with at your own peril.

This shall make the whole appellate process of our jurisprudence chaotic. What if the god of the trial judge is superior in the divine hierarchy to the god of the appellate judge? Whose judgement will prevail? And how will a bench ever come to a final conclusion on a matter if the respective gods of the member judges are unable to agree? What if the seniormost god (not judge) on that bench insists on exercising a veto, as the US does on Israel?

No, sir, this new jurisprudence will not work, not even in Naya Bharat. The Ayodhya judgement must be struck down as non est. A joint parliamentary committee should be immediately constituted to investigate whether the gods were also consulted while passing orders on a host of other cases—rejection of the EVMs petitions, denial of bail to Imran Khan, the abolishing of Article 370, multiple rejections of bail applications of the Bhima-Koregaon 'accused', junking the Rafale case on the basis of sealed covers and redacted statements, papering over the charges against Adani and SEBI in the Hindenburg exposé, giving the quietus to the Pegasus inquiry report, the disembowelling of the Places of Worship Act, the refusal to investigate the mysterious death of Judge Loya, and so on.

We must know whether we are still a democracy or have silently, through a judicial coup, become a theocracy.

And Justice Chandrachud, of course, should stop digging, for he will be sorely disappointed in his attempts to uncover a destroyed Hindu temple under the Supreme Court. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and the author of Disappearing Democracy: Dismantling of a Nation



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What’s the tearing hurry to amend the Waqf Act?

Afroz Alam Sahil

The BJP’s undying love for Muslims is no state secret, but in the Modi years, this community has been at the receiving end of some very special attention from the ruling party. A notable feature of this attention has been the various attempts to ‘reform’ Muslims, their personal laws and other legislation that impinges on their status as citizens. Take for instance the Citizenship Amendment Act, or the Uniform Civil Code, or the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, a.k.a. the triple talaq law. Or now the apparent haste to pass a Waqf (Amendment) Bill.

Of the many *jihads* Indian Muslims are supposedly waging against the hapless Hindus of India, ‘land jihad’ is one. There is more in that arsenal, of course: ‘love jihad’, ‘vote jihad’, ‘thook jihad’... The colourful vocabulary has been legitimised by the party’s brass and given a hyperreal dimension on social media.

On 8 August, when the Waqf (Amendment) Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha, minority affairs minister Kiren Rijiju shared a story that had been circulating widely. In 2022, Raj Gopal, a resident of Tiruchendur village in Tamil Nadu’s Trichy district, went to register the sale of his 1.2 acre plot of land. He was told this land was not his to sell in the first place, that it belonged to the Tamil Nadu Waqf Board. He was further informed that his entire village was Waqf property and that he would need an NOC from the Waqf Board’s Chennai office before he could proceed. What has gone largely unreported in media is the refutation of this story by the TN Waqf Board, which apparently even issued a press release with clarifications and supporting documents. “The land in question is recorded in waqf board records as ‘*Inaam waqf*’ (gift waqf),” clarified A.S. Fatima Muzaffar, member, Tamil Nadu Waqf Board. “When this issue came to light, the Tamil Nadu Waqf Board provided all the documents related to the village to the government and administration,” she added.

The Waqf (Amendment) Bill 2024 provides for the renaming of the Waqf Act, 1995, as the Unified Waqf Management, Empowerment, Efficiency and Development Act (UMEED). It is currently under review



Delhi Waqf Board office in Daryaganj

Photo: Getty Images

by a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC), but the disregard for objections from opposition MPs suggests the government wants to ride roughshod over dissent and make haste with the passage of the bill.

A smear campaign has been run over the past five or so years on social media, especially through WhatsApp forwards, to paint the waqf boards—there are 32 of them in India in various states—as scheming land sharks. It could be a house, a shop, a piece of land... the story goes that if the Waqf Board lays claim to a property, it is practically impossible to contest it.

Ironically, though, the waqf board itself struggles with illegal encroachment on its properties. An RTI filed with the Central Waqf Council on 20 July 2020 revealed that 18,259 waqf properties and 31,594 acres of land are under illegal occupation across the country. Government departments or agencies occupy 1,342 properties and 31,594 acres of land. These numbers exclude data from Gujarat, Telangana and the Shia Central Waqf Board in Uttar Pradesh.

While the stories of land grab by the waqf boards are hugely exaggerated and now have a life of their own, neutral observ-

ers do agree that all is not well with the functioning of the boards. Government officials and board members are accused of profiting from illegal/ impermissible sale and transfer of waqf properties. So, even well-meaning critics acknowledge the need for reforms, but the government is pushing for changes in the law because it has its own axe to grind.

For example, the narrative that the 30 waqf boards in the country are the third largest real estate owners after the Railways and Indian defence establishments is mischievous disinformation, says former chief election commissioner S.Y. Quraishi, who also served as a waqf commissioner for Punjab, Haryana and Chandigarh. Quoting official statistics in a conversation with lawyer and MP Kapil Sibal, Quraishi pointed out that temples in just the two states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh own 900,000 acres of land whereas waqf properties across the country occupy 600,000 acres.

Kamal Farooqui, a chartered accountant, said in the same discussion with Sibal that he had audited the accounts of several waqf boards and reported on discrepancies and irregularities. What prevents state governments from taking action against these waqf boards, he asked. After all, the chairmen of most of these boards and most members too continue to be appointed or nominated by the government. Illegal sales or transfers of tenancy are not possible, he argues, without complicity between government officials and board members.

Farooqui maintains that the law of the land, applied in good conscience, can bring offenders to justice. “But this government is not interested in ending corruption. The intention of the new Bill is to empower the government to grab waqf properties, humiliate Muslims and destroy institutions doing some good for the Muslim community.”

It is common knowledge that the government has made drastic cuts in scholarships and grants to Muslim students and institutions, which lend further credence to Farooqui’s allegations.

The government claims that the amendments aim to make the waqf management more transparent and ensure women’s representation on these bodies. It says the new bill is meant to benefit Muslims, especially poor Muslims and women. However, Muslims have never asked for amendments to the Waqf Act, 1995. In 2010, when the government proposed amendments, the Muslim community resisted. Eventually, the Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2013 was passed with provisions ensuring at least two female members on a waqf board. Currently, the Jammu and Kashmir Waqf Board has a female chairperson, and women have led or served as board members in other states, including Delhi.

What is ‘waqf’?

The concept of ‘waqf’ applies to movable or immovable assets donated by a follower of Islam for religious or charitable purposes. Such property is meant to serve society, and Allah is deemed the sole ‘owner’. Once designated as ‘waqf’, the property cannot be bought or sold.

Contrary to popular belief, the waqf boards are not exclusively Muslim institutions. State governments form these boards, which include government officials, lawyers and professionals from all communities. Waqf properties are not exclusively for Muslim use either. Schools, colleges, universities, orphanages and hospitals on waqf land benefit people of all backgrounds.

A waqf board cannot claim property from a non-Muslim, though Section 104 of the Waqf Act, 1995, allows even non-Muslims to donate property to mosques, dargahs, Eidgahs, imambaras, maqbaras, Muslim graveyards etc. Government-appointed waqf boards scrutinise the documents, and the property is registered as waqf with the revenue board only after the board has given its approval.

The proposed amendments

- Among the 40-odd amendments proposed in the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, are the following highlights:
- The Bill proposes to change the composition of the Central Waqf Council and waqf boards to include non-Muslim members
 - The survey commissioner has been replaced by the collector, granting him powers to conduct surveys of waqf properties
 - Government property identified as waqf will cease to be waqf; the collector will determine ownership of such properties
 - Sec. 40 of the Waqf Act, 1995/2013, which gives the waqf board the authority to determine the legality/ authenticity of waqf properties, has been removed; in effect, this amendment will make it easier to illegally occupy waqf properties
- The JPC deliberations on the amendment bill, introduced in the Lok Sabha on 8 August, have reportedly been acrimonious, with Opposition members questioning its constitutional validity, the government’s intention and the practical implications of the amendments. Their fears are not misplaced. ■



Friends turn foes and lines get blurred

Navin Kumar

MNS chief Raj Thackeray supported Eknath Shinde when he revolted against Uddhav Thackeray, splintered the Shiv Sena and toppled the government. He also campaigned for Shinde’s son in Kalyan during the recent Lok Sabha election. Politics, however, can turn friends into foes overnight. The provocation? Shinde refused to withdraw his party candidate from Mahim assembly constituency, where MNS has fielded Raj Thackeray’s son, Amit. Shinde’s grouse? Raj should have spoken to him first.

The Mahim seat is thus set to be a battle between all three Senas with UBT, SS (Shinde) and MNS (supported by the BJP) fielding candidates. The Mahim seat has always been an OG Sena stronghold, one of Balasaheb’s earliest bastions of support—hence the sharp edge to a contest that threatens to draw blood.

The MNS chief has, in fact, gone on the warpath against Shinde, declaring that the next chief minister of Maharashtra will be from the BJP. Criticising Shinde in an election rally, Raj said Bal Thackeray was the rightful claimant to the property and symbol of the Shiv Sena, just as Sharad Pawar is to the property and symbol of the

Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). The fact that Raj Thackeray is supporting Devendra Fadnavis as Mahayuti leader has further irked Shinde, who has dug his heels in.

The MNS is not part of the ruling coalition, which hasn’t stopped the BJP from supporting Amit Thackeray. It’s an open secret that the BJP proposes an MNS–Shiv Sena (Shinde) merger, with Raj as leader. The BJP’s Narayan Rane has been campaigning for Shinde in Mahim, partly because one of his sons is contesting on an SS (Shinde) ticket.

Political scientist Suhas Palshikar commented recently that there seem to be 288 different elections being held this time. A free-for-all in virtually all the seats, with few aware of who is contesting for which party and why.

In the midst of existential battles for the UBT and NCP alike, the BJP has opposed NCP (AP) fielding former minister Nawab Malik. Malik was wounded by the BJP for alleged connections with underworld don Dawood Ibrahim and arrested by the ED in a money laundering case. It hasn’t been that vociferous against Malik’s daughter Sana, also fielded by the NCP (AP).

In turn, Ajit Pawar said Devendra Fadnavis had shown him a file in 2015 in which the then home minister R.R. Patil had recommended an ‘open inquiry’

against him—thus accusing the BJP of attempting blackmail.

The Congress and BJP are pitted against each other in as many as 74 of the 288 constituencies (almost 25 per cent). In the 2019 elections, 42 of these seats were won by the BJP and 24 by the Congress. The Bahujan Vikas Aghadi had won two, the Prahar Janshakti Party two, the NCP one and independents three. The BJP contested in 163 seats and won 105 seats in the assembly in 2019. This time the BJP has fielded 143 candidates under its own symbol in addition to fielding 12 of its own as SS (Shinde) candidates and five as NCP (AP) candidates, adding to the confusion.

The withdrawal of Jarange Patil, who had emerged as a force advocating for Maratha reservation in Marathwada and Western Maharashtra, has further muddled the field. Although Sharad Pawar has welcomed his withdrawal which should help the MVA by preventing a split in Maratha votes—estimated to be 23 per cent in the state—the political grapevine is abuzz with rumours that Patil withdrew at the BJP’s behest. Patil has denied both rumours and links.

The fact that the BJP is supporting two MNS candidates in Mumbai, Amit Thackeray in Mahim and Bala Nandgaonkar in Shivdi—where the Mahayuti does not have a candidate and UBT’s sitting MLA Ajay Chaudhary is in the fray—reveals its weak position. While the NCP had fared well in western Maharashtra in 2019, the BJP had performed well in Marathwada (which has 46 assembly seats) and in Vidarbha, where the Congress is expected to do much better this time.



It’s the economy, stupid

A report that documents the decline of Maharashtra during the last 10 years has embarrassed the state BJP, authored as it is by two members of the Prime Minister’s Economic Advisory Council, Sanjeev Sanyal and Aakanksha Arora. Anecdotal evidence of projects meant for Maharashtra having been shifted to Gujarat—Tata-Airbus, Foxconn, Apple among them—finds credibility in the report titled ‘Relative Economic Performance of Indian states: 1960–61 to 2023–24’.

Released in September, the report reveals a steady decline, for the very first time in the last decade, in Maharashtra’s GDP growth rate and per capita income.

The report states: ‘Maharashtra has maintained the highest share of India’s GDP for almost all of the [study] period. Gujarat’s share remained at broadly the same levels until 2000–01, before beginning to increase rapidly from 6.4 per cent in 2000–01 to 8.1 per cent in 2022–23. Both Gujarat and Maharashtra have had per capita incomes exceeding the national average since the 1960s.

Initially, Gujarat lagged behind Maharashtra, with a relative per capita income of 118.3 per cent compared to Maharashtra’s 133.7 per cent in 1960–61. This disparity persisted until 2010–11, when Gujarat surpassed Maharashtra. By 2023–24, Gujarat’s per capita income has risen to 160.7 per cent of national average, as compared to 150 per cent for Maharashtra.’

Attempts to ‘downplay’ its findings unfold against radio silence in media about the report.

Meanwhile, Maharashtra Congress president Nana Patole has written to the PM, urging the Union government to ban

the import of cotton and pleading for the state’s four million cotton farmers to be given fair MSP prices for their produce.

Diary of a home minister

The book hasn’t yet been officially released but advance copies have reached journalists. At first glance, Anil Deshmukh’s *Diary of a Home Minister* appears to be a reiteration of what the MVA’s home minister had said in various interviews earlier. The crux of the book is Devendra Fadnavis pressurising Deshmukh to sign an affidavit implicating Uddhav Thackeray, Aaditya Thackeray, Parth Pawar and Anil Parab. (He refused.)

The affidavit had several items (and objectives). One, to state that Uddhav Thackeray had asked Deshmukh to collect Rs 300 crore for the municipal corporation (BMC) elections. Two, to implicate Aaditya Thackeray in the death of Disha Salian, late actor Sushant Singh Rajput’s manager. Three, to charge Ajit Pawar’s son Parth Pawar of extorting money from paan masala units, Four, to accuse minister Anil Parab of having invested in a resort.

The book reveals that Fadnavis had later asked Deshmukh to drop the reference to Ajit Pawar’s son.

The first chapter titled, ‘A for Ambani’, deals with the case of an explosives-laden SUV found parked outside Mukesh Ambani’s home Antilia in February 2021. Deshmukh claims that he had taken steps against the then Mumbai police commissioner Parambir Singh and encounter specialist Sachin Waze. He was, however, implicated in the case and arrested by central agencies. Deshmukh, who spent 14 months in jail, is currently out on bail.

ECI’s delayed action

After refusing to remove DGP Rashmi Shukla for weeks, the ECI has replaced her with Sanjay Kumar Verma. Shukla, the opposition claimed, had a role in the phone-tapping scandal and was closely linked with the BJP. While the ECI ordered the Jharkhand DGP to be kept away from election-related work, it delayed taking similar action against Shukla. ■



Happier days: MNS chief Raj Thackeray and Maharashtra CM Eknath Shinde in November 2022

Photo: Getty Images

It’s an open secret that the BJP proposes an MNS–Shiv Sena (Shinde) merger, with Raj Thackeray as leader

Does India have a real voice at the UN?

The world's largest democracy must be heard on the UN Security Council. But who will listen, given our human rights record?

Aakar Patel

The United Nations Security Council has 15 members: five permanent and 10 elected. India has been a non-permanent member of the UNSC eight times, its last term having been in 2021–22. It has now bid for the 2028–29 term.

As the world's largest nation and a democracy, we are entitled to having our voice heard in the global body.

In 2021, the then UN high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet, said, "Although it is the primary responsibility of the UN Human Rights Council, promoting and protecting human rights is one of the best ways for the UN Security Council to achieve its mandate of maintaining international peace and security." Bearing that in mind, let's take a look at India's engagement with the UN human rights system in the past few years.

The fact is that India has not been a strong leader at the UNHRC, willing to take difficult and principled stands with consistent application of human rights values; nor has it engaged particularly constructively with Council mechanisms.

India has been a member of the UN Human Rights Council for 16 of the Council's 18 years—most recently 2019–24. Resolution 60/251, which created the UNHRC, states that "members elected to the Council shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, shall fully cooperate with the Council, and be reviewed under the universal periodic review mechanism during their term of membership".

India has been the subject of 25 criticisms from UN human rights experts and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) since 2019—during its last two terms of membership. Both expressed concerns about its domestic human rights issues and its lack of compliance with international human rights obligations.

Between 24 January 2011 and 24 September 2024, the Indian government received over 200 communications from UN Special Procedures, a collection of independent experts created by the HRC and mandated to monitor and report on human rights across the globe. The Indian government has responded to less than a third of the communications it has received.

After 2014, India has facilitated the



The UN Security Council's emergency session on Ukraine in New York City, 30 October 2024

Photo: Getty Images

completion of only two visits by a UN special procedure to the country. It currently has 19 pending visit requests. Some have gone unanswered since 1999 (for example, from the special rapporteur on torture).

In its last Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a mechanism by which every state's human rights record is examined and recommendations for improvements made, 21 countries urged India to improve its protection of freedom of religion and rights of religious minorities, with several raising concerns over increasing violence and hate speech and the government's adoption of discriminatory policies such as anti-conversion laws.

In addition, 19 countries said that India should ratify the UN Convention against Torture, a treaty we signed in 1997 but never ratified. India said in both the 2012 and 2017

The fact is India has not been a strong leader at the UNHRC, willing to take difficult and principled stands with consistent application of human rights values

UPR cycles that it remained committed to ratifying the treaty. However, it hasn't taken steps to fulfil its commitment even as torture and other ill-treatment continue to be used routinely by police and other security forces to gather information or coerce 'confessions'.

As it stands, India is party to only six of the nine core human rights treaties.

India's reports under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child are also overdue. India has been the subject of two reports, in 2018 and 2019, from the OHCHR on the situation in Kashmir. Both reports called on Indian authorities to respect international human rights obligations in the region, repeal or amend repressive laws such as the

Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act and the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act, end restrictions on journalists and investigate all blanket bans or restrictions. Instead of engaging with the OHCHR, India called the reports "false, with a motivated narrative" and accused the human rights body of "legitimising terrorism".

India has consistently been included in the UN secretary general's report on reprisals, which sets out cases of alleged reprisals against individuals and organisations for cooperating with the UN in the field of human rights. In the 2020 report, the secretary general concluded that 'ongoing intimidation and reprisals have reportedly deterred some civil society representatives from cooperating with the United Nations for fear of further retribution'.

So why is credible engagement with the UNHRC critical in the context of India's UNSC bid?

Discussions about reforming the UNSC should not be done in isolation of candidates' performance and behaviour at other UN bodies, most importantly human rights ones. Membership of any of the UN organs should be used to shine a spotlight on and protect human rights, not to shield members or their allies from scrutiny of their human rights record.

This should be the case for all nations and the fact that others are as bad, or worse, on this issue should not matter. It is abundantly clear that India is falling short of its domestic and international human rights obligations and its commitments as a member and in its interactions with different UN bodies and mechanisms.

The discussion on reform of the Security Council may not end soon, but if India is serious about its intention to be a permanent member of the UNSC, it needs to demonstrate that it can engage responsibly with UN human rights entities, including the UNHRC. It must comply with the membership criteria to the UNHRC in a consistent and principled manner. It should commit to upholding the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights to fully cooperate with the UN human rights mechanisms.

We harm our chances when we choose deliberately to not do the right thing. ■

Views are personal

STATES 360°



TAMIL NADU

Shooting star or here to stay?



Kollywood star Vijay launches his new party Tamizhaga Vetri Kazhagam at Vikravandi, 27 Oct. 2024

Shiva Kumar S.

It made for an arresting image: Vijay, flanked by two hulking bodyguards, making his triumphant way to the stage to launch his new party with a rousing speech that met with the full-throated approval of thousands of his fans and admirers. A new champion entered the Tamil political arena: Kollywood star Vijay, a.k.a. Thalapathi (commander), with his Tamizhaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK, Tamil Victory Party), in the small town of Vikravandi in Villupuram district.

It was an unseasonably warm Sunday evening (27 October), but the milling crowd, an estimated 5–7 lakh strong, had been gathering all afternoon at the venue, which had an entrance modelled on Fort St. George, the seat of government in Chennai. All roads seemed to be leading to Vikravandi as thousands of cars, vans, buses and other vehicles made a beeline for the *maanaadu* or mega meet. Huge cutouts of Babasaheb Ambedkar, E.V.R. Periyar, K. Kamaraj, Rani Velu Nachiyar (TN's own 'Jhansi ki Rani') and freedom fighter Jhansi Ammal towered over the proceedings, carefully chosen to convey the ideological underpinnings of the party.

Joseph Vijay Chandrasekhar, a.k.a. Vijay, was making his political debut, following a long list of illustrious predecessors: the legendary MGR, the imperious J. Jayalalithaa (both former chief ministers) as well as the likes of superstar Rajnikanth, 'Captain' Vijayakanth, Kamal Haasan and 'Sarath' Kumar.

Indeed, TN has always had porous borders between the world of politics and film, a trait that sets it apart from its southern neighbours. The Telugu-speaking states are somewhat of an exception, producing one chief minister, the charismatic N.T. Rama Rao, who rode to power on the issue of Telugu pride, with Chiranjeevi and Pawan Kalyan being two other notables.

Vijay's plunge into politics made quite a splash, not only for the organisational effort that went into drumming up such a large crowd, but also for the things that he said and didn't say—and the sheer optics of his 46-minute speech. Unlike the usual rhetorical flourishes and high-flown Tamil oratory so beloved of the state's politicians, Vijay spoke in a more colloquial Tamil, peppered with English words. But for all that, it was an impassioned speech, with all the right references and embellishments.

The film star, without naming anyone, attacked both the BJP (the ideological enemy) and the state's ruling DMK, whom he called "divisive and corrupt". He was giving up a lucrative career in films, he said, because "I, your Vijay, want to serve you." Tamil Nationalism and Dravida ideology were like two eyes, he declared, while clearly distancing himself from Periyar's legacy by declaring he was not atheistic. Vijay went on to bat for secularism, socialism, progressivism, gender and caste equality, without offering any specifics.

He said he was confident that the party could come to power on its own in the assembly elections of 2026, but dangled the carrot of power-sharing to parties that were willing to ally with him. This is a first: coalition rule is foreign to Tamil Nadu. The AIADMK and Congress were guarded, but not hostile, in their response.

Political observers, while quick to offer a cynical take on the TVK's chances, agreed that Vijay had gotten off to an impressive start. Ever since the Congress lost power in 1967, the people of Tamil Nadu have alternated between the DMK and AIADMK. There is now a discernible sense of public fatigue with both these options, and a radical alternative may well appeal to the aspirational youth, in particular. For all its efforts, the BJP is still seen as a north Indian, Hindi–Hindu party at odds with the politics and culture of the state. As the *Hindu's* chief political correspondent T. Ramakrishnan rather succinctly wrote: 'No one is ignoring Mr. Vijay.'

It came as no surprise that the Carnatic world was outraged when Madras Music Academy announced Krishna as the Sangita Kalanidhi awardee 2024

T.M. Krishna faces the music

Thodur Madabusi Krishna is an artist who wears many hats—singer, author, activist. One thing cuts across: wherever he goes, controversy follows. He has managed to antagonise the Carnatic music orthodoxy with his many actions and statements. He has championed the cause of the downtrodden, the subaltern and the Dalits, weighed in on Brahmin domination of the arts and interpreted legends such as M.S. Subbulakshmi in his own inimitable style, suggesting that she distanced herself from her Devadasi origins in order to gain wider acceptance. He has talked about including Christian and Islamic songs in his Carnatic repertoire and introduced far-out innovations in the way concerts are performed. He is a fierce opponent of Modi and the BJP and has taken radical positions on most political issues.

Thus, it came as no surprise that the Carnatic world was outraged when that bastion of orthodoxy, the hallowed Madras Music Academy, announced Krishna as the Sangita Kalanidhi awardee 2024, a signal honour. Prominent artistes such as the sridhar act of Ranjani and Gayatri, Dushyanth Sridhar and Chitravina Ravikiran threatened to boycott the Academy. Their reasoning: T.M. Krishna has glorified E.V.R. Periyar, who demeaned the Brahmin community in his vitriolic speeches.

It is well-known that Krishna himself has made disparaging comments about the influence of the Academy. Now, however,

he is happy to accept the award, leading to accusations of double standards, which Krishna has denied. In October, a grandson of M.S. Subbulakshmi filed a petition in Madras High Court, challenging the award given in her name. Krishna filed a counter affidavit, denying the charges of having belittled MS; as has the Music Academy. The award ceremony is scheduled for December during Chennai's famed music season. Till then, the matter rests in court.

The dangerous business of making firecrackers

Sivakasi shines with Rs 6,000 crore sales this Deepavali season,' said the headline in a Chennai edition of a national newspaper. That was good news for the firecracker industry but not for its workers. Hidden away in plain sight, amid a welter of news on all manner of things under the sun, lies a story of neglect, exploitation and inhuman conditions. India's firecracker industry is the second largest in the world after China. It is dominated by one town, Sivakasi, in Tamil Nadu's Virudhunagar. This is where 90 per cent of the country's fireworks are made, with about 10 lakh workers employed in over a thousand units.

The underpaid workers are mainly women and Dalit. They work in the most unsafe conditions and often end up paying with their lives as safety regulations are flouted by the owners who are just looking to cash in on festive seasons. Official inspections and safety audits are rarely done—unsurprising given the handful of inspectors available—and the result is deadly. Yet the explosions and deaths don't seem to be 'big enough' to make the headlines, much like the 'death by asphyxiation' stories that occasionally remind mainstream readers of the dire plight of India's manual scavengers.

In 2024, there were 17 accidents and 50-plus deaths, according to the *Hindu*. Reasons cited were the excessive use of inflammable chemicals and overcrowding in factories. Sadly, the situation in other parts of India where fireworks are manufactured is no different. As one correspondent put it, if any other industry had reported similar fatalities, there would be public outrage. But given the poverty of the workers and their Dalit origins, there has been little pressure on the government to crack down. ■



T.M. Krishna

PGV takes the plunge

Priyanka Gandhi's electoral debut will do more than boost the fortunes of the Congress and the Opposition, it could reshape India's political landscape



Ashok Swain

Priyanka Gandhi's Vadra's entry into electoral politics is certainly a big moment for the Congress party, but it also bears significance for Indian politics at large. As she readies for the parliamentary arena, with her candidacy in the Wayanad by-election (scheduled on 13 November), there is an air of expectancy all around.

Her anticipated presence in the Lok Sabha alongside Rahul Gandhi, her personal charisma and her gift for carrying an audience of any description will be a renewed challenge to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). With strategic coordination, Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi, with their deep-rooted sense of political legacy, can reshape the national political discourse, both in Parliament and outside it, and strengthen the Opposition in some expected and other not-so-obvious ways.

The Wayanad seat was vacated by Rahul

Gandhi, and Priyanka's candidature will help the Congress grow its influence in south India, while reclaiming the Raebareilly seat in Lok Sabha 2024 can be the springboard for a revival of the party in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. The Congress obviously wants to sustain the momentum of its improved performance in the 2024 general election—where it nearly doubled its seat count from the previous Lok Sabha—and PGM's (likely) entry into Parliament is a well-considered move to convert those electoral gains into a longer term strategy.

The timing is important. The Congress knows that the electoral verdict of Lok Sabha 2024 belied the palpable anti-incumbency; it knows that many voters want a credible alternative to the BJP. The presence of another Gandhi in Parliament will not only add to the party's political heft in the lower house but also go a long way in sharpening its outreach to the political opposition and diverse segments of the population. PGM's presence in Kerala will

have spillover influence in the southern states, where the BJP, still seen as a Hindi-belt cultural pariah, has struggled to gain a firm foothold.

The close bond Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi share is a big plus for the Congress party. Their partnership is not simply about a family bond or a shared political lineage; it is a complementary approach to politics, forged by their personal experiences and public life. The personal tragedies they have endured—first the assassination of their grandmother Indira Gandhi and then father Rajiv Gandhi—has shaped and strengthened their commitment to public life and their sense of duty to a secular democratic India.

Rahul Gandhi is without a doubt the most fearless critic of the RSS (Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh) and the Modi government. He has taken on the Modi government on its cronyism, on policies that have exacerbated economic inequality, on the retreat of citizen freedoms and on social justice issues. He has called out the Sangh's equivocations and their desire to re-engineer

With her oratorical flair, Priyanka can potentially focus media attention on parliamentary proceedings, especially when challenging BJP leaders on critical issues

the Constitution and turn India into a Hindu majoritarian state. His role as Leader of the Opposition has given the Congress a stronger voice and the Opposition a leader they can count on to fearlessly challenge the BJP and everything it represents.

Priyanka, with her ability to connect at the grassroots level and her skills as a communicator, can really bolster the party's public outreach efforts.

Playing to their strengths, Rahul and Priyanka could perhaps focus on different aspects of the party's political engagement—Rahul on addressing broad national issues and Priyanka becoming the voice of regional concerns and social issues. This approach might allow the Congress to more effectively challenge the BJP and perhaps help voters envision a more full-bodied political alternative to the BJP. Priyanka's charisma and Rahul's experience and commitment can bring attention to critical issues that may otherwise be sidelined.

Another possible impact of the Gandhi siblings' joint presence in Parliament could be to reshape the lopsided media narrative surrounding Indian politics. In recent years, the BJP has practically colonised India's mainstream media, with much of the attention focused on PM Modi and the BJP's 'winning' electoral strategies. The space for alternative narratives has practically disappeared.

With Priyanka joining Rahul in Parliament, it will conceivably become harder for the media to ignore debates and other activities in the Lok Sabha. With her oratorical flair, Priyanka can potentially focus media attention on parliamentary proceedings, especially when challenging BJP leaders on critical issues. Her speeches and interactions with the press will bring Opposition arguments into the spotlight, offering a counter-narrative to balance the BJP's media dominance.

Their combined efforts could help shift the focus from the personality-driven politics of the past 10 years to substantive debates on policy and governance, and perhaps nudge media towards a more balanced coverage of political issues. Even as the fulcrum of a multipolar Opposition, as the focal point of coalition building, the Congress will be stronger with both Priyanka and Rahul in the mix.

The entry of Priyanka Gandhi Vadra into the electoral arena is more than just a personal milestone for her; it represents a strategic move by the Congress party to reshape the political landscape of India. With her charisma and deep sense of political legacy, Priyanka can play a transformative role in opposition politics.

Together, the sibling duo promises a new kind of political leadership—one that has a firm underpinning of empathy, social justice and commitment to democratic secular values while also being mindful of the benefits of strategic coordination. We have reason to hope their partnership will help the Congress mount a stronger challenge to the BJP's attempts to dominate the national discourse in Parliament, in the media and among the people. ■

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

Why GDP is a perverse index of wellbeing

This universally accepted measure of national production usually tracks human misery more closely than happiness

Aseem Shrivastava

I was trained as an economist. For the tribe of economists, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of a country is a sacrosanct measure of national production within the borders of the country. Not just economists and policy wonks, businessmen, politicians, the media and the universities constantly refer to it. Its textbook definition goes: 'The total value of all the goods and services produced in a country in one year.' 'Value' could be nominal or real (after adjusting for inflation). But it is always stated in monetary terms (in current or constant dollars or rupees or whichever currency you wish).

The classic textbook example used to be that if a man marries his housekeeper, the GDP of the country would fall. One can come up with a thousand similar stories. My grandmother used to knit sweaters not just for me but for the entire (joint) family. Her contribution to the GDP? Nil. If the same sweaters were sold for a profit in the export market, they would have warmed the hearts of GDP-conscious patriots!

The joy that my grandmother derived from making sweaters for everyone was incomparable. So was our happiness when we received such handmade gifts of love. But there is no room for such things in the economic calculus of today's experts. They know no other index of human wellbeing than the GDP. In the process, they usually track human misery more closely than human happiness. They forget what Einstein (to whom the quote is correctly or falsely attributed) might have meant when he said: "Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can

be counted."

Let us consider three other dimensions of GDP that economists rarely speak of. The first has to do with the fact that the origins of the GDP as an official measure of national production are as recent as 1937 when Simon Kuznets (who received a Nobel Prize for his immense labours) made a presentation to the US Congress on the subject. In a time of war, it facilitated a simple way to compare the relative military strengths of two different countries. This aspect of the GDP became ideologically very potent by the time the Cold War took hold of the world after 1945. Capitalist and communist ideologues would routinely try to prove the superiority of their respective systems by making crude GDP comparisons.

The United Nations was formed in 1945. It officially adopted the system of national accounts developed by Kuznets. By 1953, the first international data comparing GDP across countries was released. During the same period, after the famous 1944 conference at Bretton-Woods when the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were created, the idea of 'development' was hurled upon the world. In the aggressive climate generated by the Western powers (and the Soviet Union) the compulsion to 'develop' was felt by every government in the world, an artificial imperative that survives the last three generations.

As the idea of 'development' came of age in the



Photo: Getty Images

A second aspect of GDP as a measure of well-being deserves graver comment. If parents begin charging children retrospectively for having raised them to the age of reason, education and economic productivity, the country's GDP would rise dramatically. The same result will obtain if children begin charging parents for looking after them in old age. Given the global and national dispersion of families, homes for senior citizens already make sense.

The full monetisation of mammalian affections would constitute an economic miracle of global fame. However, society (or what remains of it after the virtual victory of dating apps over it) would stand defeated, if not destroyed. The economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi had pointed out in his prophetic 1944 volume *The Great Transformation* that the triumph of the market would eventually result in the destruction of 'the substance of society'. Now, with the speedy rise of the virtual sphere and the erosion of the family and the community across wealthier parts of the world, we have hard evidence of this.

Finally, consider the fact that every time an oil drill is installed anywhere, mother Earth heaves a sigh of crushing distress, an accumulating agony which is already turning the human adventure on this planet into a terminal ecological nightmare. Exhaustible resources are closer to complete exhaustion. Not to romanticise the past, but the air everywhere was immeasurably cleaner the world over before 'progress' had begun a few centuries ago, and species death through climate change or nuclear Armageddon was not even a dystopian fantasy.

When the stakes are such, the deployment of GDP as a measure of wellbeing presents to us an idea of organised human stupidity today. Perhaps it is the inevitable collateral damage of a 'smart world' exclusively devoted to the organisation of races among 'smart people'. Fashion parades, the original root of the spread of the word 'smart', are now glamorous metaphors for life itself. ■

After the famous 1944 conference at Bretton-Woods when the World Bank and IMF were created, the idea of 'development' was hurled upon the world

GDP Growth Projections				
As of July 2024				
Advanced Economies				
Country	2023	2024F	2025F	% change in real GDP
U.S.	+2.5%	+2.6%	+1.9%	
Germany	+0.2%	+0.2%	+1.3%	
France	+1.1%	+0.9%	+1.3%	
Italy	+0.9%	+0.7%	+0.9%	
Spain	+2.5%	+2.4%	+2.1%	
Japan	+1.9%	+0.7%	+1.0%	
UK	+0.1%	+0.7%	+1.5%	
Canada	+1.2%	+1.3%	+2.4%	
Emerging Market & Developing Economies				
Country	2023	2024F	2025F	
China	+5.2%	+5.0%	+4.5%	
India	+8.2%	+7.0%	+6.5%	
Russia	+3.6%	+3.2%	+1.5%	
Brazil	+2.9%	+2.1%	+2.4%	
Mexico	+3.2%	+2.2%	+1.6%	
Saudi Arabia	+0.8%	+1.7%	+4.7%	
Nigeria	+2.9%	+3.1%	+3.0%	
South Africa	+0.7%	+0.9%	+1.2%	

Source: IMF, World Economic Outlook Update, July 2024

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“Maharashtra Neglected by BJP: Congress Pledges to Bring Prosperity, Growth, and Justice to Every Citizen”

Photo: GettyImages



Over the past several years, Maharashtra’s economy has been crippled by policies that prioritise politics over progress. As major industrial projects have been pulled away from the state under the BJP-led administration, Maharashtra has seen potential growth, job creation, and investment slip through its fingers. According to Maharashtra Congress President Nana Patole, the state is being left behind due to actions from the central government, which continues to relocate promising projects to other regions. “Maharashtra has always been a powerhouse of industry and development. But under the BJP government, this potential has been systematically dismantled,” Patole recently remarked.

Key examples of this pattern include the Tata-Airbus and Vedanta Foxconn projects. Originally proposed to bring Maharashtra thousands of jobs and substantial investments, both projects were transferred to Gujarat under unclear circumstances. The Tata-Airbus deal, valued at ₹22,000 crore, promised 10,000 new jobs for skilled workers, engineers, and local businesses. Similarly, the Vedanta Foxconn project, an investment worth over ₹1.5 lakh crore, would have made Maharashtra a central hub for semiconductor manufacturing in India. Instead, these opportunities have gone to Gujarat, leading to outrage and concern among citizens who feel Maharashtra’s future is being sacrificed.

In the lead-up to the assembly elections, Congress has made it clear that their place as an industrial leader in the country. Their promise is rooted in a transparent and fair investment policy that will retain projects within the state and attract new investments from both domestic and international firms. “For Maharashtra’s youth, for its workers, for its industries, Congress will prioritise this state above political gamesmanship,” Patole added. The party has assured citizens that under Congress, Maharashtra’s industries would thrive without fear of central interference, paving the way for a future of sustainable growth and local prosperity.

Maharashtra Deserves Better Congress’ Vision for a Prosperous and Inclusive Future

As Maharashtra prepares for the upcoming Assembly elections, the Congress Party offers a comprehensive vision of growth, accountability, and social justice. Congress is committed to addressing the pressing issues facing the state—from unemployment and farmer distress to inadequate healthcare and rising costs of living. With the motto “Maharashtra Deserves Better,” Congress promises a future of transparency, empowerment, and prosperity for every citizen.

Addressing Core Issues

The Congress manifesto outlines a strong focus on job creation, agriculture, education, and healthcare. The unemployment crisis has left millions of youth struggling for sustainable livelihoods. Congress pledges a youth-focused employment plan, with an emphasis on creating jobs through public and private partnerships.

Maharashtra’s farmers continue to face challenges due to fluctuating crop prices, debt burdens, and erratic climate patterns. Congress aims to strengthen the Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanism, provide interest-free loans, and implement insurance reforms to protect farmers. In recent statements, the leaders of the party have reiterated the vision of the Congress. “Our farmers deserve a system that works for them, not against them,” said Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge, stressing the need for comprehensive agricultural reform.

Education and Healthcare for All

The Congress vision includes accessible, quality healthcare and education as essential pillars of the state’s future. With rising healthcare costs, Congress proposes a free public healthcare program that ensures every citizen can access essential treatments

without financial strain. “Healthcare should be a right, not a privilege. We will work to make hospitals and medicines affordable and accessible to all,” said Rahul Gandhi, emphasising the need to prioritise public health.

In education, Congress plans to boost funding for government schools, vocational training, and scholarships to build a skilled, employable youth population. Priyanka Gandhi, advocating for women’s education and empowerment, said, “Educating our girls means empowering our families. Congress will ensure that every child, especially every girl, has a right to quality education.”

Women’s Empowerment and Social Justice

Maharashtra’s women are at the heart of Congress’ vision, with initiatives focusing on economic independence, safety, and representation. Congress has pledged to introduce financial aid programs for female entrepreneurs,

provide free skill-training centers, and ensure equal opportunities in government jobs. “Empowering women empowers the state,” said Priyanka Gandhi, advocating for stronger policies that support women-led businesses and equal workplace participation.

A Vision of Accountability

A vital part of Congress’ platform is accountability and transparency. The party promises to create mechanisms to track public funds and ensure they reach the people. “Maharashtra deserves leaders who are accountable to its citizens,” said Rahul Gandhi. “Congress will ensure that every rupee of public money is spent with integrity.” With a clear vision, concrete promises, and a commitment to democratic values, Congress presents itself as a party that understands Maharashtra’s aspirations. The people of Maharashtra deserve a government that prioritises their needs, respects their rights, and provides a future they can believe in.

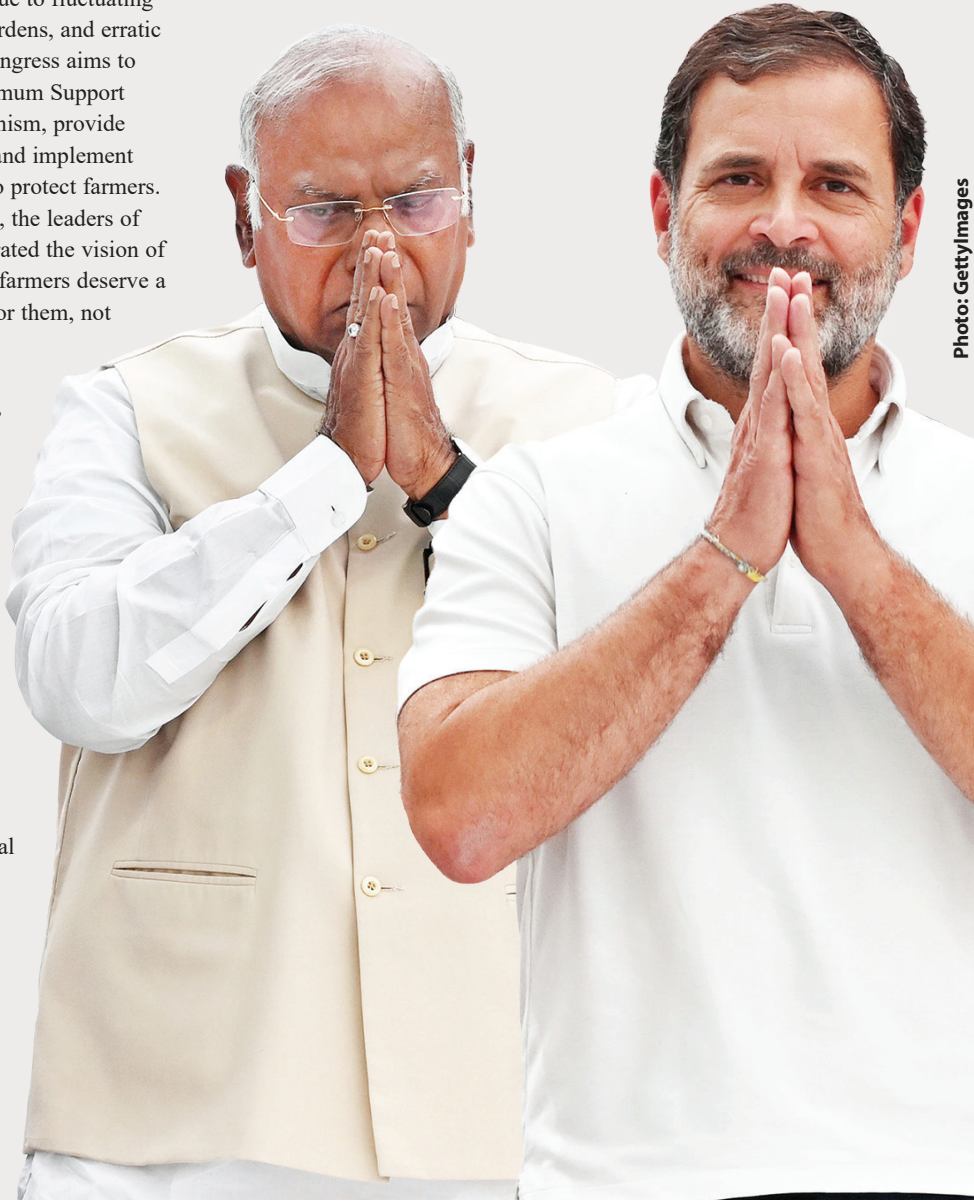


Photo: GettyImages

Congress Stands with Farmers and Workers: A Plan to Tackle Inflation and Rising Costs

Photo: GettyImages



As inflation continues to impact households across Maharashtra, the burden falls heavily on the state’s most vulnerable – farmers, labourers, and low-income families. Maharashtra’s agricultural communities, in particular, have faced rising costs for essentials, forcing them into mounting debt and uncertainty about their future. Under the BJP government, basic items such as fertilizers, seeds, and transportation have become increasingly expensive, cutting deeply into the livelihoods of small-scale farmers who make up the backbone of Maharashtra’s economy. Recognising this, the Congress Party is stepping forward with a detailed plan to tackle inflation and provide much-needed relief to Maharashtra’s citizens.

Congress promises to introduce a series of reforms aimed at controlling inflation, supporting farmers, and reducing daily expenses for all. By setting fair minimum support prices (MSP) and strengthening crop insurance policies, Congress aims to create a safety net for farmers, ensuring they are no longer vulnerable to volatile market prices. Additionally, the party pledges to improve the distribution of farming subsidies so that resources reach even the most remote areas, allowing small and medium farmers access to affordable inputs.

But the Congress plan goes beyond agricultural support. For urban workers and daily-wage labourers who are hit hardest by price hikes, Congress has a vision to reduce essential costs and boost purchasing power. Initiatives to provide food subsidies, introduce affordable public transport options, and improve access to healthcare are central to their mission. “Inflation should not determine the quality of life for Maharashtra’s citizens,” stated Nana Patole. “Congress is committed to making every day life more affordable so that every person, from our farmers to our workers, can thrive.” Through these comprehensive measures, Congress aims to provide immediate relief from inflation while addressing the root causes of rising costs. With a targeted approach that considers both rural and urban needs, Congress pledges to restore stability and security to Maharashtra’s economy, one community at a time.

Reviving Maharashtra’s Education and Healthcare

Congress’ Commitment to Welfare

In recent years, Maharashtra’s public healthcare system has suffered severe shortages of medicines, staff, and essential equipment.

Maharashtra’s education and healthcare sectors, once pillars of the state’s development, have deteriorated significantly under the current government. From under-resourced hospitals to schools lacking teachers and basic facilities, the impact of neglect has been devastating for citizens, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas. Congress, recognising these critical issues, is committed to reviving these essential services to ensure that every Maharashtrian has access to quality education and healthcare.

In recent years, Maharashtra’s public healthcare system has suffered severe shortages of medicines, staff, and essential equipment. Patients, especially in rural areas, are often forced to travel long distances for



Photo: GettyImages

treatment, with little assurance that they’ll receive adequate care upon arrival. The Congress Party’s healthcare policy focuses on reversing these deficiencies by increasing healthcare funding, expanding hospital facilities, and ensuring a steady supply of medicines and equipment. Congress plans to establish a network of mobile health units to serve remote villages, providing essential care directly to communities with limited access. Additionally, by hiring more doctors and nurses, Congress aims to address the staffing shortfalls that have plagued Maharashtra’s healthcare facilities.

Similarly, Congress has set out an ambitious plan to overhaul Maharashtra’s education system. With a focus on making quality education accessible to all, Congress pledges to improve school infrastructure, provide

scholarships to students from marginalised communities, and increase teacher training and recruitment. They also plan to introduce vocational training programs aimed at giving young people practical skills and better job prospects. “Education is the foundation of opportunity,” stated a Congress spokesperson. “By investing in schools and educators, we are investing in Maharashtra’s future.”

Through this dual approach to healthcare and education, Congress hopes to restore dignity, health, and opportunity to the people of Maharashtra. “Maharashtra deserves leaders who put people first,” Nana Patole said. “With Congress, every citizen can trust that their basic needs for education and health will be met and that they have a future filled with potential.”



Maharashtra Demands Accountability

How the BJP’s Mismanagement and Broken Promises Have Led to Discontent Across the State

As Maharashtra approaches the upcoming assembly elections, the Congress Party has intensified its critique of the BJP-led administration, focusing on the ruling government’s perceived failures on several critical fronts. From economic stagnation and unemployment to the neglect of farmers, healthcare, and rising costs of living, Congress leaders are highlighting issues they say have resulted from the BJP’s ineffective policies and broken promises.

In a state with a rich legacy of industry, agriculture, and cultural vibrancy, these unmet promises and abandoned responsi-

bilities have left citizens across Maharashtra questioning the government’s priorities. Congress argues that BJP has not only failed to

foster growth but has actively hindered it, allowing political interests to undermine the well-being of the people. Here, we take a closer

look at four major areas where Congress says BJP’s policies have failed Maharashtra, leaving the people frustrated and searching for change.

Photo: GettyImages



1. Jobs Lost, Promises Broken- BJP’s Failure on Employment

Employment has been one of the most pressing concerns for the people of Maharashtra. The BJP government came into power with the promise of creating job opportunities and boosting economic growth. However, the reality has been quite the opposite, with the state witnessing a noticeable decline in job creation over the past few years. The BJP government’s inability to retain key industrial projects has had a ripple effect, resulting in massive job losses and missed opportunities for Maharashtra’s youth.

Two notable examples are the Tata-Airbus and Vedanta Foxconn projects, which would have injected thousands of jobs and brought significant investments to Maharashtra. Originally planned for the state, these major projects were instead shifted to Gujarat, depriving Maharashtra of an estimated ₹1.5 lakh crore in investment and more than 10,000 jobs. This reallocation of projects not only weakened Maharashtra’s industrial landscape but also exposed the government’s failure to uphold its commitments to economic progress.

Congress leaders argue that the BJP’s policies have prioritised political alliances and special interests over the needs of the people. Maharashtra Congress President Nana Patole has been vocal about the missed opportunities, stating, “BJP’s policies have stolen opportunities from Maharashtra’s youth, pushing them to the brink of hopelessness. Our state has always been an industrial powerhouse, but the BJP has systematically dismantled that foundation for political convenience.” Congress is proposing a series of measures to restore job

growth and attract investments back to Maharashtra. The party pledges to create a pro-business environment that encourages local industries, supports entrepreneurship, and creates more job opportunities for Maharashtra’s youth. Congress leaders are confident that, with the right policies in place, Maharashtra can reclaim its status as a leading industrial hub in India.

2. Farmers in Crisis: How BJP’s Policies Deepened Rural Hardships

Photo: GettyImages



Maharashtra has long been one of India’s most agriculturally productive states, but the challenges facing farmers have worsened significantly under the BJP government. Rising costs of inputs such as fertilizers, seeds, and fuel, combined with insufficient government support, have placed a heavy burden on Maharashtra’s farmers. Many farmers, particularly those in Vidarbha and Marathwada, have fallen into a cycle of debt and despair, struggling to sustain their livelihoods in the face of

economic hardship and an indifferent administration. Despite this crisis, the BJP government has done little to provide a robust safety net or financial relief to farmers. Crop prices remain unpredictable, leaving farmers vulnerable to market volatility. The situation has grown so dire that incidents of farmer suicides have tragically increased, a sombre indicator of the level of distress in rural Maharashtra. The BJP’s promises to support farmers have largely gone unfulfilled, leaving them to fend for themselves in a

challenging economic landscape. Congress, by contrast, has put forth a plan to alleviate the burden on farmers through targeted measures designed to improve their financial stability. Among these initiatives, Congress has committed to setting fair minimum support prices (MSP) for major crops, ensuring that farmers receive a stable and fair income for their produce. Additionally, Congress aims to strengthen crop insurance policies to protect farmers from unpredictable weather and market fluctuations. The party also

plans to streamline the distribution of subsidies and resources to reach even the most remote farming communities, so small and medium-scale farmers can access the support they need. “Congress believes that Maharashtra’s farmers deserve dignity and hope,” said a Congress spokesperson. “Under the BJP, they’ve been ignored and neglected. Our policies will restore security and prosperity to our agricultural sector, ensuring that Maharashtra’s farmers can thrive.”

4. Rising Prices and Inflation: Maharashtra’s Cost of Living Crisis

Under the current BJP government, inflation has become a major concern for citizens across Maharashtra. The rising costs of essential goods and services have placed immense pressure on household budgets, forcing many families to make difficult choices between meeting basic needs and paying for healthcare, education, and other necessities. Congress argues that rather than addressing this crisis, the BJP government has allowed prices to rise unchecked, creating a cost-of-living crisis that has impacted every segment of society.

From groceries to transportation, the cost of living has surged in Maharashtra, affecting families, small businesses, and workers alike. Congress leaders have pointed out that the BJP government’s failure to tackle inflation and support low-income families has exacerbated poverty and financial insecurity throughout the state. The party has pledged to implement a range of relief measures to make life more affordable for Maharashtra’s citizens, particularly those hit hardest by rising prices.

Among these initiatives, Congress has proposed food subsidies, affordable public transportation, and price controls on essential goods. By targeting these critical areas, Congress hopes to reduce the financial burden on Maharashtra’s citizens, ensuring that every family can afford the basics without compromising their quality of life. “We will bring back affordability and support for Maharashtra’s families,” stated Nana Patole. “BJP’s neglect has gone on long enough. It’s time to give Maharashtra’s citizens a government that prioritises their welfare over political games.”

The Need for Change

The Congress Party’s critique of the BJP administration highlights a series of policy failures that have left Maharashtra struggling with job losses, a deepening agricultural crisis, neglected healthcare, and a cost-of-living surge. According to Congress leaders, these issues stem from a government more interested in retaining power than in addressing the needs of the people. As Maharashtra heads to the polls, Congress urges voters to hold the BJP accountable for these missteps and to support a party committed to the well-being and prosperity of every citizen.

Congress’ vision for Maharashtra includes a robust plan to revive the state’s economy, empower farmers, strengthen healthcare and education, and control inflation. Their approach focuses on restoring dignity, security, and opportunity for every Maharashtrian, ensuring that the state’s resources and potential benefit all its people rather than serving a select few.

With Maharashtra’s future at stake, Congress leaders call for an end to the BJP’s neglect and failed policies. They argue that the people of Maharashtra deserve a government that puts their interests first and that Congress is prepared to deliver on that promise. As the assembly elections approach, Congress appeals to citizens to support their vision for a Maharashtra that values growth, justice, and the welfare of all its people.

3. Healthcare Neglected: BJP’s Inaction Endangers Lives

The healthcare sector in Maharashtra, once a source of pride, has suffered severe setbacks under the BJP government. Hospitals, especially in rural and underprivileged areas, face chronic shortages of essential supplies, including medicines, staff, and equipment. Patients in these regions often have to travel considerable distances to access healthcare, only to find under-resourced facilities and long waiting times. These issues have

intensified in recent years, leaving countless families struggling to receive the medical care they need. Maharashtra’s rural and urban healthcare systems are strained by staffing shortages, lack of medicines, and a crumbling infrastructure that hampers the effective delivery of services. Congress leaders have pointed out that these shortcomings reflect a deeper neglect of public health by the BJP administration. “Every Maharashtrian

deserves access to quality healthcare, yet under the BJP, this right has been compromised,” said a Congress representative. Congress has made it clear that if given the opportunity, they would prioritise healthcare, expanding access to essential services and rebuilding the state’s healthcare infrastructure. Congress has proposed a detailed plan to tackle these challenges, including increased healthcare funding, enhanced rural healthcare

facilities, and a streamlined system for the consistent supply of essential medicines. Additionally, the party intends to establish mobile health units to reach remote areas, bringing medical services directly to communities with limited access. By hiring more doctors and nurses, Congress aims to fill the staffing gaps that have crippled Maharashtra’s healthcare services, ensuring that quality healthcare is accessible to every citizen.

Photo: GettyImages

“BJP’s Neglect of Farmers and Marginalised Communities in Maharashtra”



As Maharashtra approaches the crucial upcoming assembly elections, the Congress Party is shedding light on the incumbent BJP-led government’s failures, specifically highlighting its neglect of farmers and social justice. Congress leaders have been vocal about the detrimental impact that the current administration’s policies have had on Maharashtra’s agrarian community, marginalised groups, and social fabric. With a consistent message of delivering on promises and restoring prosperity, Congress presents itself as the answer to these neglected issues. This page covers two major areas in which the BJP’s governance has been lacking: farmers’ welfare and social justice.

For generations, Maharashtra’s farmers have been the backbone of the state’s economy, but today they face a crisis of unprecedented proportions. The Congress Party has raised alarm over the BJP-led government’s failure to provide essential support to the farming community, leaving them vulnerable to a cycle of debt, low crop prices, and worsening living conditions.

Since taking office, the BJP government has promised various schemes and initiatives to help farmers, yet many of these promises remain unfulfilled. Rising input costs, including those for seeds, fertilizers, and fuel, continue to eat into farmers’ already meagre earnings, while crop prices have remained volatile. This instability has created a perfect storm, leading to an alarming rate of farmer suicides, particularly in regions like Vidarbha and Marathwada. A lack of sustainable policies from the BJP

administration has further compounded the issue, pushing farmers deeper into poverty and despair.

Crop Losses Due to Recent Rain: BJP’s Inadequate Response

In the past month, Maharashtra experienced unseasonal rains that devastated crops across several districts, especially in Marathwada, Vidarbha, and Northern Maharashtra. Thousands of farmers watched helplessly as their fields were damaged or destroyed, leading to estimated losses worth hundreds of crores. The BJP government promised quick relief, but farmers in affected areas have voiced frustration with the inadequate compensation and delayed distribution of aid. Farmers across the state feel neglected, as relief packages remain insufficient, leaving them with little hope for recovery.

Local farmer organisations and the Congress have rallied to highlight the plight of those affected. Congress spokespersons have repeatedly stressed the need for timely compensation, efficient disaster relief, and a long-term agricultural support strategy. Congress leader Nana Patole noted, “The BJP government makes promises on farmers’ welfare, but when disaster strikes, their response is sluggish and ineffective. Our farmers deserve better.”

BJP’s Policies on MSP: Falling Short on Promises

The Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanism, intended to protect farmers from price volatility, has been another area where the BJP’s policies have failed Maharashtra’s

agrarian community. Many farmers argue that the MSP rates are either too low or inconsistently enforced, with several key crops not receiving fair market prices. This forces farmers to sell their produce at losses, often falling into debt cycles.

Congress has emphasised its commitment to stabilising MSP and ensuring that farmers can sell their crops at profitable rates. In addition to fair MSP, Congress has proposed comprehensive crop insurance schemes that would protect farmers from the risks of natural calamities and market fluctuations. By bolstering such safety nets, Congress aims to break the cycle of debt and distress that has burdened Maharashtra’s farmers for far too long.

The Congress Plan: Empowering Farmers for a Stable Future

In its manifesto, Congress promises to bring real change to Maharashtra’s farmers by introducing sustainable policies, offering fair MSP, and improving crop insurance schemes. Congress plans to focus on irrigation infrastructure, efficient subsidy delivery, and access to affordable agricultural resources. These steps are designed to ensure that every farmer in Maharashtra can sustain a dignified livelihood.

“Maharashtra’s farmers deserve more than empty promises,” said a Congress representative. “Congress is committed to transforming their lives by addressing the root causes of their struggles and bringing security and prosperity back to Maharashtra’s agricultural sector.”

Social Justice: BJP’s Failure to Uplift Marginalised Communities

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Social justice has been a cornerstone of Maharashtra’s political ethos, yet under the BJP-led government, marginalised communities have seen a decline in opportunities and support. The Congress Party accuses the BJP of eroding the social fabric by scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other under-represented communities. The ongoing lack of resources for education, health, and employment initiatives for these groups has left many struggling to access basic rights and opportunities.

Education and Employment: Barriers to Progress for Marginalised Groups



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young people from these communities to secure quality jobs or advance in society.

The BJP government has repeatedly promised reforms in the education sector, yet significant gaps remain, particularly in regions with a high population of tribal and backward communities. Congress argues that education reform should be prioritised, with emphasis on creating equal opportunities for students in marginalised communities. Congress leader Nana Patole has emphasised, “Without quality education, the cycle of poverty continues. The BJP government has failed to deliver meaningful education reform, leaving a generation behind.”

In terms of employment, the BJP has failed to offer concrete policies to create job

access to growth opportunities.

Healthcare for All: BJP’s Neglect of Rural and Tribal Health Needs

Healthcare is another critical area where the BJP government’s neglect has had severe repercussions for Maharashtra’s marginalised communities. Rural and tribal areas lack access to basic healthcare services, with few government hospitals, inadequate medical staff, and frequent medicine shortages. As a result, preventable diseases continue to affect communities that cannot afford private healthcare.

In the recent past, there have been reports of healthcare crises in tribal regions where patients have died due to the lack of basic facilities and medicines. For instance, in the tribal areas of Palghar, inadequate healthcare infrastructure led to tragic outcomes when several young children suffered from malnutrition and disease. Congress leaders have emphasised that these incidents reflect the BJP’s failure to provide basic health services to Maharashtra’s most vulnerable populations.

Congress has pledged to address these healthcare gaps by increasing the number of government hospitals, enhancing rural healthcare infrastructure, and ensuring a consistent supply of medicines. The party also plans to focus on preventive healthcare, which includes regular health check-ups and public health awareness programs, particularly in underserved areas. “Every citizen deserves access to healthcare, regardless of their location or income,” a Congress spokesperson stated. “BJP has ignored this responsibility. Congress will prioritise healthcare and provide resources where they are needed most.”

Congress’ Vision for Social Justice: Building an Inclusive Maharashtra

For Congress, social justice goes beyond political rhetoric; it is a commitment to equality and empowerment. The party’s manifesto outlines a vision for an inclusive Maharashtra, where marginalised communities have equal access to education, employment, and healthcare. By providing scholarships, vocational training programs, and anti-discrimination policies, Congress aims to level the playing field for Maharashtra’s most vulnerable citizens.

As part of its strategy, Congress has also promised to address caste-based discrimination in workplaces, schools, and communities. The party will strengthen policies that protect the rights of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other disadvantaged groups, empowering them



to participate fully in Maharashtra’s progress.

Recent Protests and Congress’ Commitment to Social Justice

Over recent months, several protests have erupted across Maharashtra, with citizens demanding social justice reforms and criticising the BJP government’s inaction on key issues. In response, Congress leaders have shown solidarity with the protesters, vowing to tackle these injustices head-on. Congress spokesperson Jairam Ramesh commented, “Maharashtra’s citizens have spoken. They demand social justice, equality, and dignity. Congress will ensure that no one is left behind in our journey towards an inclusive and fair Maharashtra.”

Through its emphasis on farmers’ welfare and social justice, the Congress Party is challenging the BJP-led government’s record

and its impact on the lives of everyday citizens. From neglected farmers struggling to survive to marginalised communities lacking basic rights and services, Congress leaders argue that the BJP has consistently failed Maharashtra’s people.

The Congress manifesto offers a new direction—one that prioritises empowerment, fairness, and prosperity for all. Congress promises to bring meaningful change by addressing the root causes of Maharashtra’s issues, restoring dignity to farmers, and ensuring equal opportunities for every citizen.

As the election draws near, Maharashtra’s future hangs in the balance. Congress urges the people of Maharashtra to hold the BJP accountable for its failures and to choose a government that will prioritise their welfare, growth, and justice.



Healthcare Crisis and Soaring Unemployment

Maharashtra's Struggles Under the BJP's Ineffective Policies



Photo: GettyImages

The people of Maharashtra are confronting pressing issues that the BJP government has repeatedly failed to address. The state's healthcare system, especially in rural and underserved regions, has been plagued by poor infrastructure, lack of staff, and chronic

Maharashtra's healthcare sector, once a robust system serving millions, is now in a dire state due to underfunding, inadequate facilities, and a lack of accessible care, particularly in rural and tribal regions.

medicine shortages. Simultaneously, unemployment has reached new heights, leaving many young people without stable jobs or growth opportunities. On this page, we

focus on these critical issues—the healthcare crisis and the spike in unemployment—and Congress's solutions to turn the tide in Maharashtra.

Maharashtra's healthcare sector, once a robust system serving millions, is now in a dire state due to underfunding, inadequate facilities, and a lack of accessible care, particularly in rural and tribal regions. The Congress Party has called out the BJP-led government for its failure to provide quality healthcare services across the state, leaving many citizens without essential medical resources. The Congress aims to revitalise Maharashtra's healthcare infrastructure and address these urgent issues that the current government has long ignored.

Rural Healthcare: A Case of Neglect

In rural districts like Palghar, Gadchiroli, and Nandurbar, medical facilities remain

critically underserved. Basic amenities are unavailable in many areas, with healthcare centres either severely understaffed or entirely non-functional. Citizens often must travel long distances to receive treatment, a journey that many simply cannot afford. Recent reports highlighted incidents in Palghar where children died due to malnutrition and preventable diseases, underscoring the severity of the crisis.

Doctors and healthcare workers from these regions have been vocal about the issues they face daily. Inadequate funding has led to shortages in life-saving medicines, diagnostic tools, and staff, making it impossible for rural centres to provide even primary care services. The Congress has emphasised that healthcare in rural Maharashtra needs to be reformed from the ground up, beginning with better funding, infrastructure development, and incentives to

attract skilled medical staff to underserved regions.

Lack of Medicines in Government Hospitals: A Growing Problem

Government hospitals throughout Maharashtra are facing a persistent shortage of medicines, making it difficult for them to serve patients effectively. In some recent cases, patients reported being turned away from hospitals due to a lack of even the most basic medicines like antibiotics, pain relievers, and vaccines. This shortage is especially acute in government hospitals serving low-income communities, where private healthcare is unaffordable. The Congress Party has pointed out that this reflects the BJP's apathy towards public health, particularly for vulnerable sections of society.

A Congress spokesperson recently commented, "In a state as developed as Maharashtra, it is

shocking that people are denied essential medicines in government hospitals. This is not just a healthcare issue; it is a matter of dignity and basic human rights."

Congress is pledging to

address this problem by implementing robust supply chain management for government hospitals and creating a reserve fund to ensure no hospital runs out of essential medicines.

Congress Exposes the Failures

Photo: GettyImages



Last month, Congress launched a campaign to draw attention to Maharashtra's healthcare crisis, citing cases where patients lost their lives due to inadequate facilities and lack of timely treatment. Leaders from the Congress, including spokespersons and medical experts, visited several rural health centres and recorded testimonies from patients who had been affected. The findings highlighted a widespread systemic failure that Congress is committed to addressing if given the mandate in the upcoming elections.

The Congress manifesto includes plans to significantly increase healthcare funding, with a focus on rural and tribal areas. Key initiatives include mobile healthcare units, an expanded primary healthcare network, improved training and retention programs for doctors in rural areas, and the introduction of telemedicine to extend reach in remote locations.

Congress's Vision for Healthcare in Maharashtra

The Congress Party envisions a Maharashtra where every citizen, regardless of their location or economic status, has access to quality healthcare. To achieve this, Congress plans to increase healthcare spending, create a system for accountability in healthcare delivery, and establish quality standards for government hospitals and rural healthcare centres. Their healthcare vision is centered on inclusivity, accessibility, and responsiveness to the needs of Maharashtra's citizens, ensuring that the current healthcare crisis is a thing of the past.

Rising Unemployment in Maharashtra

A Generation Without Opportunities Under BJP Rule

Unemployment is a growing issue in Maharashtra, and the youth of the state are facing a tough reality with limited job opportunities and uncertain futures. The Congress Party has raised concerns over the BJP government's inability to generate stable employment, despite several promises. In fact, recent data reveals that Maharashtra's unemployment rate has spiked, particularly among young people, due to a lack of investment and coherent job creation policies by the BJP-led administration.

Brain Drain: Maharashtra Losing Talent to Other States

One of the most pressing issues related to unemployment is Maharashtra's "brain drain," where young professionals, especially in fields like engineering and IT, are leaving the state for better opportunities elsewhere. Several major projects, like the Tata-Airbus and Vedanta Foxconn, which could have brought thousands of jobs to Maharashtra, were shifted to Gujarat, drawing public criticism and fuelling resentment among Maharashtra's youth.

Congress leader Nana Patole noted, "Our young people are our future, yet they are forced to leave their homes because this government has no vision or plan to retain talent in Maharashtra. These projects were not just about investment but about giving our young citizens the future they deserve."

The Congress Party has strongly condemned the BJP government for "snatching" away these job opportunities and warned that unless there is a change, Maharashtra risks losing an entire generation of talented professionals. Congress has pledged to

prioritise bringing investment back to Maharashtra, ensuring that key projects and industries are retained within the state, and developing policies to provide incentives for companies to set up operations in Maharashtra.

Skill Development and Vocational Training: Congress's Solution for the Youth

The lack of skill development initiatives is another factor contributing to Maharashtra's high unemployment rate. While the BJP government introduced some skill development schemes, Congress leaders argue that these programs were inadequately implemented and reached only a small percentage of the population. As a result, many young people lack the skills needed to compete in today's job market.

To address this issue, Congress plans to implement a comprehensive skill development and vocational training program. Congress's vision includes creating partnerships with private industries, expanding technical training institutions, and providing state-backed certification courses that align with current job market demands. The Congress Party believes that skill development should be a top priority to create a skilled workforce that can attract both national and international companies to invest in Maharashtra.

Recent Developments: Youth Unemployment Protests

In recent months, Maharashtra witnessed protests led by youth groups demanding more job opportunities and accountability from the government. These protests highlighted the



Photo: GettyImages

desperation among young people for meaningful work, with several protesters sharing stories of having pursued higher education only to remain unemployed or underemployed. Congress leaders have joined hands with these protesters, vowing to create sustainable employment solutions and work towards a Maharashtra where every young person has the opportunity to succeed.

Nana Patole, speaking at a recent youth rally, said, "Our youth are the strength of Maharashtra, and it is unacceptable that they are denied their future. Congress is here to

change this narrative. We believe in creating opportunities, not empty promises."

Congress's Employment Agenda: A Roadmap for the Future

In its manifesto, Congress promises a multi-faceted approach to tackle unemployment. The Congress Party's roadmap includes creating new industrial zones, providing incentives for local entrepreneurs, and fostering an environment conducive to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that can provide employment in regional centres beyond

Mumbai and Pune. By decentralising job creation and investing in rural and semi-urban areas, Congress aims to create job opportunities across the state.

Furthermore, Congress intends to set up "Employment Hubs" in districts, offering career counselling, training, and job placement services for young people entering the workforce. By bridging the gap between education and employment, Congress's employment hubs will ensure that Maharashtra's youth are job-ready and able to find fulfilling careers within the state.

Congress's Commitment to Employment and Prosperity

The BJP-led government's failure to generate jobs has been felt across Maharashtra, especially among its youth, who are forced to look beyond the state for better opportunities. Congress is positioning itself as the solution to this growing crisis, promising real and effective job creation strategies. By addressing both unemployment and underemployment, Congress aims to transform Maharashtra into a state where every citizen has the chance to thrive and contribute to a prosperous society.

Congress has questioned the healthcare crisis and rising unemployment—that have gone unaddressed by the BJP government. Congress's vision provides solutions that prioritise the welfare of Maharashtra's citizens, addressing systemic issues in healthcare while ensuring that youth have access to quality jobs within the state.

Through their manifesto and recent outreach, Congress aims to restore Maharashtra's prosperity and improve the quality of life for all its residents.

A Vision of Equality

Congress Pledges Social Justice and Education Reform to Empower Maharashtra



Photo: GettyImages

Speaking on this issue, Maharashtra Congress President Nana Patole remarked, “Social justice is the foundation of our state’s progress, and any attempt to weaken it is a threat to Maharashtra’s unity and prosperity.”

In Maharashtra, deep-seated issues related to social justice and education remain unaddressed under the current government, creating barriers to equitable progress. The Congress Party is committed to resolving these challenges by providing greater access to quality education and ensuring social justice for marginalised communities. With a clear vision for an inclusive and prosperous Maharashtra, Congress aims to bridge the gaps that have long divided the state’s communities.

Bridging the Divide: Congress’s Vision for Social Justice in Maharashtra

The promise of social justice has long been a cornerstone of Maharashtra’s identity, yet under the current BJP-led government, the state’s marginalised communities continue to struggle for equality. The Congress Party is focusing on a platform of social justice that seeks to address issues of caste-based discrimination, economic disparity, and access to opportunities for Dalits, OBCs, Adivasis, and other historically disadvantaged groups. This article

sheds light on Congress’s commitment to providing equitable opportunities for all of Maharashtra’s citizens and highlights recent events that underscore the urgency of these reforms.

Marginalised Communities Facing Injustice

In recent years, there has been a troubling rise in incidents of discrimination and violence targeting marginalised communities. Cases of Dalit atrocities, for example, have been reported across the state, with data showing an increase in caste-based violence, particularly in rural Maharashtra. According to social activists, this rise is a direct result of inadequate protections and lack of enforcement by the current government. Congress has strongly condemned the BJP’s inaction in these cases, pointing out that Maharashtra’s social fabric cannot thrive if significant portions of the population continue to feel marginalised and vulnerable.

Speaking on this issue, Maharashtra Congress President Nana Patole remarked, “Social justice, and the protection of our state’s progress, is any attempt to weaken it is a threat to

Maharashtra’s unity and prosperity. Congress will ensure that every citizen is protected, valued, and empowered, regardless of their background.”

Dalit Rights and Anti-Discrimination Laws

One of Congress’s primary goals is to ensure the strict enforcement of anti-discrimination laws to protect the rights of Dalits and other marginalised communities. Despite existing legal frameworks, cases of discrimination and violence often go unpunished due to systemic biases and inadequate oversight. Congress has pledged to strengthen these legal protections, streamline the justice process for victims, and hold perpetrators accountable through fast-track courts.

In addition, Congress is committed to implementing affirmative action programs that support marginalised communities in accessing education, employment, and social services. Congress’s vision for social justice also includes economic support programs and vocational training for disadvantaged groups, ensuring that social upliftment extends beyond mere policy to create meaningful progress in people’s lives.

Congress’s Outreach to Marginalised Communities

In recent months, Congress leaders have embarked on a statewide outreach initiative to engage directly with marginalised communities and understand their needs and grievances. Leaders like Nana Patole and Prithviraj Chavan have held public meetings in various districts, from Marathwada to Vidarbha, addressing issues of caste violence, lack of access to resources, and economic disparity. This initiative has resonated strongly with local communities, who feel that Congress understands their struggles and is willing to take meaningful action.

Through these interactions, Congress has been able to identify specific policies and programs that would benefit marginalised communities, such as increased scholarships for students from underprivileged backgrounds, land rights for Adivasi communities, and healthcare programs specifically for rural areas.



Photo: GettyImages

Congress’s Social Justice Agenda

At the heart of Congress’s social justice agenda is a vision of inclusivity and equality. Congress aims to create a state where every citizen feels secure and supported, with access to equal opportunities and resources. Their proposed initiatives include the creation of an independent Social Justice Commission to oversee policies, an expansion of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, and increased state funding for housing, healthcare, and education programs targeted at disadvantaged communities. For Congress, social justice is not just a campaign issue but a fundamental responsibility, and they are determined to uphold Maharashtra’s legacy of social unity and progress.

Reviving Education: Congress’s Plan for an Equitable and Accessible Education System in Maharashtra



Photo: GettyImages

Education is the foundation of a prosperous society, yet Maharashtra’s education system has suffered under the BJP-led government, with public schools and colleges experiencing chronic underfunding, low enrolment, and poor learning outcomes. The Congress Party is committed to transforming the education landscape by implementing policies that enhance accessibility, improve infrastructure, and promote quality education for every child in Maharashtra.

The State of Education: Current Challenges

Under the BJP government, Maharashtra’s public education system has been plagued by insufficient funding, deteriorating facilities, and a shortage of qualified teachers. Reports show that several rural schools in districts like Nandurbar, Osmanabad, and Beed lack basic amenities, such as clean drinking water, electricity, and functioning toilets. These issues have led to a significant decline in student enrolment and an increase in dropout rates, particularly among

girls. Further exacerbating the situation, there has been a lack of emphasis on modernising the curriculum to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century. Students from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly affected, as they lack access to quality education that would allow them to compete with peers from more affluent areas. In a recent address, Congress spokesperson Supriya Sule stated, “Education is a right, not a privilege. The BJP government’s

neglect of public education has created a generation of youth without the skills or opportunities they need to succeed. Congress will reverse this neglect and ensure that Maharashtra’s education system is one of opportunity, equality, and excellence.”

Ensuring Quality Education for Rural and Tribal Regions

One of Congress’s primary goals is to ensure that every child in Maharashtra, regardless of location, has access to quality education. The Congress manifesto includes plans to improve rural schools by improving infrastructure, providing digital learning tools, and training teachers. Special attention will be given to schools in tribal regions and other underserved areas, where educational resources are often limited or absent.

To address teacher shortages, Congress plans to launch a state-level recruitment drive, with an emphasis on hiring educators for rural areas. Additionally, Congress is committed to providing higher salaries and benefits for teachers in these regions, ensuring that experienced professionals are motivated to work in remote communities.

Free Education and Scholarship Programs



To make education truly accessible, Congress has pledged to implement free and compulsory education up to the higher secondary level, with additional scholarships and financial assistance for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Congress has also emphasised its commitment to supporting higher education by expanding scholarships for college students and creating vocational training programs that cater to the job market’s demands.

In addition, Congress has proposed increasing funding for state-run colleges and universities, ensuring they are equipped with modern facilities and qualified faculty. This focus on higher education is aimed at building a skilled workforce that will drive Maharashtra’s economic growth in the future.

Congress’s Education Outreach Program

Recognising the urgent need for educational reform, Congress

has launched an education outreach program, visiting schools and colleges across Maharashtra to interact with students, parents, and teachers. These meetings have highlighted critical issues such as a lack of resources, outdated curriculum, and the need for skill-based training programs.

Through this outreach, Congress has also identified a significant gap in digital literacy among students, particularly in rural areas. To bridge this gap, Congress has proposed a Digital Education Initiative, which includes providing schools with smart classrooms, expanding internet connectivity in remote areas, and offering digital training for teachers.

Congress’s Education Reform Agenda

At the core of Congress’s education reform agenda is a commitment to inclusivity and quality. Congress envisions a

Maharashtra where every child has access to an education that prepares them for success, both academically and professionally. Their plans include expanding the state education budget, implementing accountability mechanisms for school performance, and encouraging partnerships with the private sector to improve vocational training programs.

By focusing on equitable education reform, Congress aims to create a future where Maharashtra’s youth have the tools they need to thrive, innovate, and contribute to the state’s progress. Congress is determined to foster an environment where education is the foundation of opportunity and empowerment for all.

Congress’s commitment to social justice and education reform are pillars of its vision for Maharashtra’s development. Through targeted initiatives aimed at marginalised communities and a robust educational reform agenda, Congress is setting the stage for a more equitable and prosperous Maharashtra. By addressing the current administration’s neglect of these critical issues, Congress is determined to create a state where every citizen has the chance to succeed and contribute to a brighter future for Maharashtra.

Easing the Burden of Inflation

Congress's Plan for Economic Relief

The rising cost of living and healthcare access issues are pressing concerns for the people of Maharashtra. Under the BJP-led government, inflation has soared, making basic necessities increasingly unaffordable, while public healthcare services are in disarray. Congress is committed to tackling these critical issues with policies aimed at controlling prices and revamping the state's healthcare

much-needed relief.

Rising Costs and Wages: A Growing Disparity

Under the current administration, inflation has surged, with prices of basic items such as vegetables, cooking oil, and grains seeing double-digit hikes. According to recent reports, the cost of vegetables alone has increased by over 20% in the last year. Fuel prices, too, have risen

Recognising the impact of high fuel prices on household budgets and transportation costs, Congress has proposed reducing the state tax on petrol and diesel.

system to ensure that quality medical care is accessible to all.

With inflation driving up the cost of essential goods and services, the financial pressure on ordinary households in Maharashtra has reached a breaking point. From escalating food prices to surging fuel costs, families are struggling to make ends meet. Congress has pledged to address these challenges through a comprehensive economic strategy that will prioritise the needs of the common people. Here's a closer look at how Congress plans to combat inflation and provide

steadily, impacting not only household budgets but also transportation costs for goods, further contributing to inflation.

Congress has highlighted the widening gap between wages and the cost of living as a direct outcome of what they term "mismanagement" by the BJP-led government. "Inflation is not just a statistical problem; it's a daily hardship for millions," said Congress spokesperson Sachin Sawant. "We are committed to controlling prices and ensuring that the people of Maharashtra can live with dignity."



Photo: GettyImages

Immediate Relief Through Subsidies and Price Controls

One of Congress's primary measures to tackle inflation is to reintroduce targeted subsidies on essential items such as cooking oil, pulses, and rice. Congress plans to roll back the recently reduced subsidies on essential commodities and strengthen Public Distribution Systems (PDS) to ensure that staple goods are affordable and accessible.

To further curb inflation, Congress has proposed creating a state-controlled Price Stability Fund that would

help regulate prices during periods of market volatility. This fund would be used to stabilise prices of basic food items and other essentials when market fluctuations lead to sudden spikes. Congress has also suggested that price controls be enforced more rigorously at local levels to prevent price gouging.

Fuel Price Relief and Transportation Subsidies

Recognising the impact of high fuel prices on household budgets and transportation costs, Congress has proposed reducing the state tax on

petrol and diesel. This reduction, according to Congress's economic advisors, would ease transportation costs for businesses and lead to a decrease in the cost of goods. Congress also plans to introduce subsidies for essential transportation services, which will help reduce logistical costs and make goods more affordable for consumers.

Recent Developments: Congress Launches "Inflation Truth Campaign"

To shed light on the impact of

inflation under the current government, Congress recently launched the "Inflation Truth Campaign," aimed at raising awareness about the root causes of the inflation crisis. Through this campaign, Congress leaders are engaging directly with citizens across Maharashtra, gathering their stories and highlighting the challenges faced by households as a result of unchecked price hikes.

As part of this initiative, Congress has set up information booths in key cities where experts explain Congress's proposed economic reforms and offer support in navigating local resources. This effort has resonated with citizens who feel that the BJP government has failed to address the everyday struggles brought about by inflation.

Long-Term Economic Reforms to Stabilise Prices

In addition to immediate relief measures, Congress's plan includes long-term economic reforms aimed at creating price stability and enhancing Maharashtra's economic resilience. These reforms include strengthening state regulatory mechanisms for key commodities, enhancing support for local agriculture to increase food production, and promoting sustainable energy to reduce dependency on fossil fuels. Congress's approach is designed to create a sustainable economic environment that will protect Maharashtra from future inflationary shocks.

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Congress's Commitment to Revamp Maharashtra's Ailing Healthcare System

Maharashtra's public healthcare system is in crisis. Reports from across the state reveal that government hospitals are struggling with inadequate supplies, staffing shortages, and deteriorating infrastructure. The BJP-led government's failure to address these issues has left citizens, especially in rural and underserved areas, without access to quality medical care. Congress is determined to overhaul Maharashtra's healthcare system, making it more accessible, affordable, and efficient.

Healthcare Infrastructure in Distress

The state's public healthcare facilities, particularly in rural areas, have been plagued by a lack of resources and poor infrastructure. Many hospitals are experiencing chronic shortages of medicines and essential supplies. Recent data from the Maharashtra State Health Department indicates that approximately 30% of government healthcare facilities have significant deficiencies in both medical staff and essential resources.

In a recent incident that gained widespread attention, a rural hospital in Yavatmal reported shortages of life-saving medicines, leading to tragic consequences for patients who could not afford to seek treatment at private hospitals. This incident has highlighted the critical need for a comprehensive restructuring of Maharashtra's healthcare system.

Congress leader Prithviraj Chavan condemned the government's negligence, saying, "It is unacceptable that people are suffering and even losing lives due to a lack of basic healthcare resources. Congress is committed to ensuring that every citizen has access to quality medical care, regardless of their income or location."

Congress's Vision: Accessible Healthcare for All

Congress's healthcare reform agenda focuses on creating an inclusive system that serves all citizens, regardless of socioeconomic status.



Photo: GettyImages

Key elements of Congress's plan include the expansion of public healthcare facilities, increased funding for essential supplies, and targeted hiring to address staff shortages in rural and underserved areas.

The Congress manifesto also emphasises the need to improve rural healthcare infrastructure. Congress aims to establish additional rural health centres equipped with modern diagnostic tools, increase the number of mobile medical units, and develop a referral system to ensure that patients have access to specialised care when needed.

Affordable Medicines and Healthcare Facilities

Congress's plan includes introducing a state-run scheme to make essential medicines available at affordable prices through government pharmacies. This initiative is designed to alleviate the financial burden on patients and ensure that all citizens can access necessary medications. Congress also plans to

set up a system for monitoring and controlling medicine prices to prevent unfair markups and make treatments affordable for everyone.

Another significant aspect of Congress's healthcare agenda is improving access to specialised care. Congress has committed to increasing the number of specialised healthcare facilities, particularly in districts where the availability of such services is limited. This

expansion includes opening dedicated cancer treatment centres, mental health clinics, and maternal health facilities.

Congress's "Health for Maharashtra" Campaign

In response to the healthcare crisis, Congress has launched the "Health for Maharashtra" campaign, a statewide initiative aimed at

advocating for better healthcare policies and educating citizens about the resources available to them. Through this campaign, Congress leaders are visiting hospitals across Maharashtra to understand the specific needs of each region and to demonstrate Congress's commitment to healthcare reform.

Congress has also partnered with local healthcare organisations to provide free check-ups and essential medical services as part of this campaign. The initiative has been well-received, with citizens expressing appreciation for Congress's efforts to bring attention to healthcare issues that have been overlooked by the current administration.

Digital Health Initiatives and Modernisation

To make Maharashtra's healthcare system more efficient and responsive, Congress is introducing digital health initiatives, including electronic health records and telemedicine services, especially in rural areas. By digitising patient records and implementing telemedicine, Congress aims to improve diagnosis accuracy, reduce waiting times, and enhance the overall patient experience. These technologies are expected to connect patients in remote areas with specialist doctors in urban centres, reducing the need for travel and expanding access to quality healthcare.

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Congress's Healthcare Policy: A Holistic Approach

In addition to infrastructure and access, Congress's healthcare policy emphasises preventive care and wellness programs to reduce the incidence of lifestyle-related diseases. Congress plans to invest in public health campaigns that promote awareness about diseases

such as diabetes, hypertension, and respiratory illnesses. By adopting a holistic approach that includes both treatment and prevention, Congress aims to create a healthier and more resilient Maharashtra. Congress focuses on the vision for addressing two critical issues

facing Maharashtra's people – inflation and healthcare. Through targeted measures, Congress aims to control rising prices and provide immediate relief to citizens struggling with the high cost of living. Simultaneously, Congress is determined to overhaul the

healthcare system, ensuring that every citizen has access to affordable and quality medical services. With these initiatives, Congress is demonstrating its commitment to creating a prosperous, healthy, and inclusive Maharashtra for all.



*Maharashtra
has a rich history as one of India's
economic powerhouses. Yet, under recent governance, the state's
economy has been plagued by missed opportunities, high unemployment rates,
and deepening agrarian distress.*

Congress believes it is time to redirect Maharashtra toward a more prosperous and inclusive future, with a clear commitment to job creation, agricultural reform, and economic rejuvenation. Congress' vision centres on policies that address the immediate needs of Maharashtra's citizens while paving the way for sustainable growth.

Job Creation and Youth Empowerment

Unemployment in Maharashtra has spiked, especially among young people. Recent data revealed that the state's youth are struggling with a lack of stable employment opportunities, pushing many to relocate or settle for temporary, low-paying jobs. Congress' roadmap to combat this involves a multipronged strategy focused on skill development, local industry growth, and digital empowerment.

Congress has committed to establishing skill development centres in every district, particularly targeting

emerging sectors like technology, healthcare, and renewable energy. These centres will provide training aligned with industry needs, ensuring Maharashtra's youth have the skills needed for modern job markets. Additionally, Congress has pledged to support the growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which are vital to Maharashtra's economy and can create jobs locally, reducing the dependency on large corporations.

A key recent event that underscores Congress' focus on job creation is the party's stance on the loss of the Tata-Airbus and Vedanta Foxconn projects to Gujarat. Congress leaders, including N. Chandrababu Naidu, have condemned the state government's failure to secure these investments, arguing that

Maharashtra's youth lost out on thousands of potential jobs. Congress promises to prioritise Maharashtra's interests and avoid such losses in the future by establishing a state-level investment board that will attract and retain high-value projects.

Agricultural Reform and Support for Farmers

Maharashtra's agricultural sector, essential to both its economy and identity, has faced a crisis of rising input costs, water shortages, and limited access to fair markets. Congress aims to restore stability and dignity to Maharashtra's farmers through a robust package that includes debt relief, minimum support prices (MSP), and a comprehensive crop insurance program.

Congress recently underscored its commitment to farmers during the Kharif season, as unseasonal rains damaged crops across the state. Congress leaders called for immediate relief measures, emphasising the need for a reliable crop insurance system to compensate farmers promptly and fully.

Congress plans to implement such a system, which will allow farmers to receive compensation quickly in case of crop failures due to weather or other unforeseen challenges.

Additionally, Congress promises to improve irrigation infrastructure and promote sustainable farming practices,

ensuring Maharashtra's farmers can rely on consistent water supplies and less expensive inputs.

By reducing the burden on farmers, Congress aims to create a more stable agricultural sector, lifting rural communities out of poverty and ensuring food security for the state.

A Vision for Economic Growth

Beyond job creation and agricultural reform, Congress envisions an economic revival driven by infrastructural investments and local entrepreneurship. Congress plans to launch initiatives that will expand

Maharashtra's transport, digital, and energy infrastructure, making the state a more attractive place for investors and a better home for its people. This commitment includes fostering a start-up culture within Maharashtra

and offering funding and mentoring for budding entrepreneurs. Congress envisions Maharashtra as a hub of innovation, where local businesses not only create jobs but also contribute to a more resilient economy.

Empowering Maharashtra Through Healthcare, Education, and Women's Rights



Photo: GettyImages

Congress believes that Maharashtra's progress depends not just on economic strength but also on the well-being and empowerment of its citizens. Accessible healthcare, quality education, and gender equality are cornerstones of this vision. Congress has pledged to build a Maharashtra that cares for its people,

lifts them through education, and upholds women's rights and safety.

Healthcare Access for All

Maharashtra's healthcare system, particularly in rural and underserved regions, remains underresourced and overstretched. Many families struggle to afford basic healthcare, while

hospitals face shortages of staff, equipment, and medicines. Congress has vowed to prioritise healthcare, especially after seeing the strain on resources during recent public health challenges.

Congress leaders have called out the current administration for failing to provide adequate healthcare

infrastructure. Congress plans to address this by expanding the number of healthcare facilities across the state and investing in healthcare personnel and essential medicines. The goal is to make healthcare not only more accessible but also more affordable, ensuring that no one in Maharashtra is denied medical attention due to

financial constraints.

A notable development in Congress' healthcare strategy is its commitment to set up a state-funded insurance scheme that will cover essential healthcare services for families across Maharashtra. This initiative will prevent families from being plunged into poverty by medical expenses and improve the overall health standards of the state.

Improving Education Quality and Access

Maharashtra's educational system has seen progress, but significant disparities remain, particularly in rural and tribal areas. Congress is determined to close this gap by increasing funding for schools, enhancing teacher training, and providing scholarships for underprivileged students. Congress leaders recently announced plans to build new schools in remote areas, ensuring children in every corner of the state have access to quality education.

Education is a crucial stepping stone to upward mobility, and Congress believes that investing in schools and scholarships will empower Maharashtra's youth. By focusing on inclusive education, Congress aims to create an equitable future where every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to thrive.

Women's Rights and Empowerment

Congress recognises the vital role of women in Maharashtra's development and is committed to ensuring their safety, equality, and economic independence. Recent incidents of violence against women have highlighted the urgent need for more robust safety measures and legal support. Congress has pledged to establish women's support centres across Maharashtra, offering legal aid, job training, and safe spaces for women in crisis.

In addition, Congress will expand financial support and employment programs for women. By empowering women economically and providing protection against discrimination and violence, Congress envisions a Maharashtra where women can participate fully and safely in society.

"A better Maharashtra is possible, and Congress has the roadmap to make it happen."

This collection of promises and plans encapsulates Congress' vision for a Maharashtra that truly serves its people. By addressing the core issues of job creation, healthcare, education, and women's empowerment, Congress offers a comprehensive path forward for a stronger and more inclusive state.



Congress's Five Transformative Guarantees for Maharashtra's Future



Photo: GettyImages

As Maharashtra heads toward the Assembly elections, the Congress Party has announced five key guarantees, designed to address the state's pressing issues for an inclusive and progressive Maharashtra, these guarantees aim to support women, empower youth, uplift farmers, secure health for all, and ensure social justice. Here's an in-depth look at these transformative promises:

1. Mahalakshmi Yojana – Financial Empowerment for Women

Under the Mahalakshmi Yojana, Congress is committed to empowering the women of Maharashtra, recognizing them as the backbone of families and communities. If elected, the Congress government will provide monthly financial assistance of Rs. 3,000 to women, enabling greater economic independence and security. This initiative will address the needs of women in low-income households, providing them with a reliable source of income to support daily expenses, education, and other household needs.

In addition, women will enjoy free transportation in government buses across Maharashtra, making commuting easier and safer for women across rural and urban areas. This guarantee aims to eliminate one of the barriers many women face in accessing education, employment, and essential services. Together, these measures symbolize Congress's commitment to the social and economic upliftment of Maharashtra's women, encouraging their active participation in the workforce and society.

2. Krushi Samruddhi Yojana – Prosperity for Farmers

Agriculture has always been the backbone of Maharashtra, and supporting the state's farmers is at the heart of Congress's vision. Through the Krushi Samruddhi Yojana, Congress aims to address the critical issue of farm debt, which has impacted thousands of farmers across Maharashtra. Under this scheme, farm loans up to Rs. 3 lakh will be waived off, providing immediate relief to farmers burdened by debt. This waiver is a necessary intervention, especially in light of the agrarian

crisis and unpredictable climate challenges affecting farmers' incomes. In addition, Congress will provide an incentive payment of Rs. 50,000 to farmers who consistently repay their loans, encouraging financial discipline and acknowledging the resilience of these farmers. With these measures, Congress aims to bring prosperity to rural Maharashtra, empowering farmers to invest in modern farming techniques, improve productivity, and ultimately secure a better livelihood for their families. Youth unemployment is one of Maharashtra's biggest challenges, and Congress recognizes the need to support young people as they strive for a better future. Under the Yuvakanna Shabd scheme, Congress guarantees monthly financial assistance of Rs. 4,000 to every unemployed youth in Maharashtra. This support will help young people manage their daily expenses, focus on skill development, and pursue their career ambitions without financial

3. Yuvakanna Shabd–Support for Unemployed Youth

strain. By providing a safety net, Congress aims to enable youth to seek quality employment and contribute to Maharashtra's economy. This guarantee reflects the party's commitment to creating an environment where young people have the resources and opportunities to succeed.

4. Kutumb Rakshan Yojana – Health and Well-being for Every Household

The Kutumb Rakshan Yojana addresses one of Maharashtra's most pressing needs: affordable healthcare for all. Congress understands that medical expenses can push families into poverty, especially when health emergencies arise. To protect families from the financial burden

of healthcare, Congress promises affordable health insurance of Rs. 25 lakh for every household in Maharashtra. This insurance coverage will provide families with access to quality healthcare without the fear of overwhelming expenses. Furthermore, Congress will ensure that essential medicines are provided free of cost in government hospitals, ensuring that healthcare is accessible to all. By removing the financial barriers to essential medicines and treatments, the party aims to create a healthier Maharashtra, where every family can access the care they need.

5. Samantechi Hami – Guarantee for Social Justice

Congress has long been committed to social justice, and under Samantechi Hami, the party aims to uphold the rights of marginalized communities in Maharashtra. A socio-economic caste census will be conducted to gain an accurate picture of Maharashtra's diverse communities and their specific needs. This comprehensive caste census will allow the Congress government to better understand and address the challenges faced by marginalized communities. Following this, Congress is committed to removing the 50% ceiling on reservations, ensuring fair representation and equal opportunities for all. By taking these steps, Congress aims to build a more equitable society in Maharashtra, where everyone has the chance to thrive.

Congress's Vision for a Progressive Maharashtra

These five guarantees form the cornerstone of Congress's vision for Maharashtra. Together, they address critical social, economic, and developmental issues, promising a Maharashtra that supports its people and prioritizes progress for all. Congress believes that by uplifting every section of society — from women and youth to farmers and marginalized communities — Maharashtra can become a model of prosperity, inclusivity, and resilience.

Key Events and Milestones in Our Campaign

Photo: GettyImages



Throughout this campaign, Congress leaders have met with families, students, farmers, labourers, and small business owners to understand the core issues affecting everyday lives. Here are a few highlights from our journey across Maharashtra:

Farmers' Rights Rally in Vidarbha

Addressing the farmers' crisis, Congress organised a major rally in Vidarbha, where Nana Patole emphasised Congress' plan for debt waivers, fair crop prices, and increased subsidies. The event garnered overwhelming support from the farming community, signalling a strong trust in Congress' commitment.

Healthcare Initiative in Marathwada

Congress leaders launched a pilot healthcare initiative in Marathwada, providing free medical check-ups and consultations. This event underscored the urgent need for affordable healthcare in rural areas and highlighted Congress' plan to bring quality health services to every district in Maharashtra.

Women's Empowerment Summit in Mumbai

Recognising the power of Maharashtra's women, Congress held a summit in Mumbai dedicated to women's empowerment. The event was attended by activists, businesswomen, and young women leaders, who discussed Congress' vision for gender equality, financial support programs, and skill development.

Youth Empowerment Drive in Pune

Addressing the concerns of Maharashtra's youth, Congress organised a youth-focused event in Pune, where the importance of skill training and job creation was discussed. Leaders assured young voters that Congress is dedicated to opening doors of opportunity and addressing the state's rising unemployment.

Education Reform Forum in Nagpur

Congress hosted an educational forum in Nagpur to highlight the importance of equitable education. Key Congress leaders emphasised the party's commitment to revamping Maharashtra's educational infrastructure, making it accessible and affordable for all.

Each event was a testament to the Congress Party's commitment to Maharashtra's future, a future where no one is left behind, where transparency is valued, and where every citizen has a say in shaping the state's destiny.

A Call to Action for Maharashtra's Future A Message from Congress Leadership

In recent months, Congress leaders have traveled the length and breadth of Maharashtra, listening to your voices, understanding your struggles, and committing themselves to a renewed vision.

Maharashtra, it's time for change. After years of struggles, broken promises, and neglect from the current administration, Congress stands with you, ready to pave the way for a brighter, stronger future. From the vibrant cities to the rural heartland, Maharashtra's soul is resilient, and its people deserve a government that reflects their strength and values. The Congress Party, under the leadership of Nana Patole, is committed to transforming our state into one that truly prioritises growth, justice, and the well-being of every citizen. In recent months, Congress leaders have traveled the length and breadth of Maharashtra, listening to your voices, understanding your struggles, and committing themselves to a renewed vision. At each rally, every town hall, and every gathering, Congress has heard the call for a government that acts not in self-interest but in the interest of Maharashtra's diverse communities.



Photo: GettyImages

DELHI RIOTS

A post-mortem after five years

Court proceedings have laid bare the shoddy investigation by Delhi Police. Who should be held responsible?

Pankaj Chaturvedi

Does the name Khalid Saifi ring any bells? Unlikely. After all, he was just a social worker, one of those accused of plotting the riots in north-east Delhi in February 2020. The Delhi High Court has not yet been able to decide on his bail plea. Three different judges have heard his case, but were transferred each time a verdict was due. Each time, the case was argued afresh before a new judge after months of waiting. Saifi has been granted bail on two charges. It is clear from the bail order that he was not in the rioting crowd. Yet, Delhi police invoked the UAPA to make it difficult for him to get bail. This ensured his prolonged incarceration without a chargesheet being filed. Similar to the plight of most other people accused in the case, including Umar Khalid.

Public memory being short, it is worth recalling that in February 2020, 53 people were killed, several hundred injured and over a thousand houses burnt down in north-east Delhi. Disturbances were allowed to continue for four days. Court proceedings are now making it clear that not only did the Delhi Police fail to prevent the violence, the investigating police officers did a shoddy job. Several accused have been acquitted due to allegedly incomplete or biased investigation, lack of sufficient evidence and credible witnesses.

The police had registered 758 cases related to the rioting. Of these, one is registered in Special Cell, 62 in Crime Branch and 695 in various police stations of north-east Delhi. Out of the 2,619 people arrested, 2,094 are on bail. The courts have acquitted 183 people, struck down cases against 75 people and found 47 people guilty so far.

Despite four-and-a-half years having passed, the investigation in 268 cases remains incomplete. The police requested the court to close 57 cases registered in various police stations, of which the court has accepted the closure report for 43. As many as 11 out of the 12 accused in the Dilbar Negi murder case were acquitted. There was no concrete evidence against them or witnesses identifying them as rioters.

WhatsApp chats: transcripts reveal all—to no avail

A 'Kattar Hindu Ekta' (hardcore Hindu unity) WhatsApp group was created at 12:49 p.m. on 24 February 2020. As many as 125 people were associated with this group. The Delhi Police submitted transcripts in the court of all the chats between 24 February and 8 March. The conversations revolved around the RSS, BJP's Kapil Mishra, the urgency of setting mosques on fire and installing idols, arranging guns, pistols and bullets, elaborate plans to target and kill Muslims and misbehave with their women. Delhi Police have failed to establish that this group engineered the riot.

This was a glaring omission as the transcripts appeared to confirm the involvement

of the RSS which reached the spot in support of the mob.

Between 25 February 2020 and 26 February 2020, chilling messages confirmed that Mursaleen was assaulted by the mob, his scooter burnt and his body thrown in the Bhagirathi Vihar drain near Johripur puliya. Aas Mohammad, who was coming on foot from Loni, was stabbed and thrown in the same drain. Electricity supply in the area was cut off. Musharrarf was dragged out of his house and cut to pieces and his body, too, was thrown in the drain, as were Amin and Bhure Ali alias Salman. At 9:15 pm, Hamza's hands and legs were broken and he was thrown in the drain, half-dead. Aqeel Ahmed was killed and thrown in the drain. Hashim Ali and his brother Aamir were killed and their bodies were thrown in the drain.

The messages were explicit: I am in Ganga Vihar. If any Hindu needs me, please let me know. We are fully prepared. We have all the weapons. Can we get .315 bore cartridges? Do you have an extra pistol? Your brother just killed two mullahs...

The chargesheet says that this mob caught people, made them chant 'Jai Shri Ram', checked their Aadhaar cards and then killed them. As many as eight of the nine young men arrested in this case are just 19–23 years old. They confessed to committing nine murders in about 30 hours. However, they have not been charged with any organised crime or conspiracy to incite riots. Why?

RSS links: established and ignored

One of the FIRs lodged by the Delhi



Remains of the day: Muslim-owned shops were burnt down by rioters in Gokulpuri area of north-east Delhi, 7 March 2020

Photo: Getty Images

Convent School), two parking spaces and Anil Sweets. On 20 June 2020, Judge Vinod Yadav, who granted bail to Faisal, pointed out discrepancies in witness statements and that the investigating officer had recorded a supplementary statement in order to fill in the blanks.

'The investigating officer did not talk to any of these people... apart from allegations, there is no concrete evidence on the basis of which it can be proved that Faisal had spoken to these people about the Delhi riots,' recorded the court order. Earlier, on 29 May 2020, while granting bail to Feroz Khan, Delhi High Court asked the police: how could they identify only Feroz and one other accused when the FIR mentioned an unlawful crowd of 250–300 people? Feroz Khan was granted bail.

The Delhi Police is also guilty of ignoring the findings of the Delhi Minority Commission and a citizens' commission headed by retired Supreme Court judge Madan V. Lokur. Findings recorded by two other organisations were also not taken seriously.

Compensation: discriminatory, delayed or denied

The Delhi Minority Commission under the Delhi government had constituted a nine-member committee to inquire into the riots. The chairman of this committee was Supreme Court lawyer M.R. Shamshad. The committee studied 700 applications for compensation and found that in most cases, the site of damage was not even visited. In those cases where loss of life and property was found to be true a meagre amount was given as interim assistance. Many people who had fled from their homes could not apply for compensation.

The amounts were discriminatory. The death of a government official merited a compensation of Rs 1 crore, whereas the death of ordinary mortals merited only Rs 10 lakh. The responsibility of maintaining law and order in Delhi lies with the central government, yet the victims of the riots were not given any help by the central government.

The role of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government of Delhi has been disappointing. Despite constituting the North-East Delhi Riots Claims Commission (NEDRCC) in April 2020, as many as 2,790 claims still remain unresolved. On 25 August 2022, the Lieutenant Governor Vinay Kumar Saxena appointed 40 new loss assessors to expedite the settlement of claims. They were asked to compile reports assessing the extent of financial losses and submit them to the Delhi High Court. LG Saxena also directed the existing 14 assessors to submit their reports within three weeks.

It seems some of the 40 new assessors were not aware of their assignments. Many did not even start work. Commission officials say they could contact only five out of the 40 members appointed by the LG.

Who should be held responsible for these acts of omission and commission? ■

Police relate to the involvement of people associated with the RSS. On 25 February, around 7 p.m., after namaaz, Sahil Parvez's father was kicked, pickpocketed and murdered in front of him. Sahil Parvez's complaint mentions Devesh Mishra whose name is not even mentioned in the chargesheet. Mishra, who recently joined the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, has been associated with the Sangh since 1996, and has been the RSS Yamuna Vihar district in-charge for the past eight years.

Among the other people who have been arrested, Uttam has been a Sangh *pracharak* for the longest time. His brother Naresh Tyagi is a regular and active member of the Sangh. Accused Hari Om Mishra organised *shakhas* every morning in North Ghonda. Maths teacher Rajpal Tyagi is known to attend *shakha* every morning at Shaheed Bhagat Singh Park.

Other names include Atul and Virendra Chauhan, Deepak Kumar and Sushil, all of whom have been going to RSS *shakhas*. But the Delhi Police failed to press serious charges against the group, allowing courts to let them off, dismissing charges of any organised or pre-planned crime.

Delhi Police: guilty as charged

In several cases, the police failed to establish the involvement of the accused. Instead, Faisal Farooq, director of Rajdhani Public School, which was set on fire, was sent to jail by the police. Apparently it was at Farooq's behest that the rioters had deliberately vandalised the school next to it (D.R.P.

The messages were explicit: "We're fully prepared". "Can we get .315 cartridges?" "Do you have an extra pistol?" "Your brother just killed two mullahs..."

“

Evil unchecked grows, evil tolerated poisons the whole system

— Jawaharlal Nehru

Remembering JAWAHARLAL NEHRU JJ ON HIS BIRTH ANNIVERSARY

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For all practical purposes, Sid Meghani is Elvis, hip shakin' and all

Turns out that Elvis hasn't left the building. He's alive and singing in the buzzing suburb of Bandra, Mumbai. Where else in India can a Presley impersonator actually thrive? As Christmas descends, dances, parties and social dos cram people's calendars. At least two or three events showcase iconic rock impersonators giving live performances at gigs across the neighbourhood. Think Dolly Parton, Bonny M and the like. At one such event, there he was—Elvis Presley, glittery jumpsuit and all. Of course, his real name is Siddharth Meghani. But don't let that waylay you. For all practical purposes, Sid is Elvis, hip shakin' and all.

Elvis wasn't just a singer, he had a bad-boy appeal that made women go weak in the knees. With beautiful blue eyes that pierced right through you, slick hair, killer dance moves and a smile that could melt anyone in a second, he was handsome *and* talented. The 'King of Rock' was, and still is, a phenomenon, judging by the numerous tribute shows Las Vegas has of the King. What sets these shows apart is that they aren't cinematic tributes, they're live acts.

Elvis Presley is perhaps the most impersonated singer of all time. His impersonators are an industry unto themselves, worth thousands of dollars, with shows, contests, singing marathons and more. Professionally known as ETAs or Elvis Tribute Artists, they number in the hundreds.

How so many men can imitate one legend so well baffles me. Even more baffling are the legions of fans across generations who throng these tribute shows, swooning and swaying as enthusiastically as the crowds at Elvis's actual shows in the 1950s and 1960s. In America, this "mass hysteria" shows no signs of abating, four decades after Elvis Presley was laid to rest.

Forget America, do Indians love Elvis? Yes they do, judging by the turnout at Bandra's very own ETA, Sid Meghani's shows. From 80-somethings to teenagers, he has women of all ages screaming with excitement as he belts out classic Elvis songs and grooves to the music. I recently met up with Sid to find out more about his fascinating obsession.

He was a teenager when he started doing the Elvis act, and in his 20s when he realised that music was his first love and Elvis his ultimate hero. It's not hard to understand why he was bitten by the bug. His mother and her seven sisters were all die-hard fans of the King. The songs made a lasting impression on his young mind and were the catalyst for a lifetime.

Every time he hears those ‘nuggets of gold’, as he calls the songs, he falls in love. (His current favourite is ‘Stranger in the Crowd’.) When I ask him about his ‘day

job', he comes back with a smart retort: "People get Elvis-approved photographs from me, if they're ready to shake, rattle and pose!"—alluding to his 'other life' as a professional photographer for weddings, e-commerce and events.

While photography is his mainstay, Sid is booked well in advance for his Elvis act. His upcoming tribute show is in Thailand for a 60th birthday bash. Is it mainly women, I ask him, who are excited by Elvis? No, he says. The men want a piece of Elvis's charisma too. As for age, that's no limit, either.

Sid takes his act seriously, and practices with diligence, studying old footage, documentaries, even books. His carefully choreographed and studied routine is very entertaining to watch. From the impeccably stitched jumpsuits (which his better half, a fashion designer helps him with) to the trademark sideburns, Sid gets into character quite effortlessly. You can see that he enjoys what he does and once on stage, he turns on the charm.

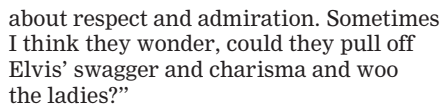
So when did this half Mallu Catholic, half Gujju boy leap into Bandra's own 'Graceland'? Sid's first brush with fame happened when he was about 17. A sweet lady named Auntie Heather invited him on stage to perform with her choir, 'The chanters of Jesus'. Sid was new to performance. But one encouraging word was all it took for him to take the mic and sing 'Don't leave me now', with Auntie Heather on the piano and the choir singing background vocals.

In a matter of days, Auntie made him a suit which he teamed up with a pair of blue sneakers. That's it. He never took part in the Bandra zonals, an annual talent show, so this stage was his only way to get noticed. The crowd was mesmerised and asked for an encore. It was the first time Sid had heard the word 'encore'. When he went backstage, Auntie Heather told him that if the crowd wanted an encore, they should get one. They knew only one other Elvis song, 'Teddy Bear', and that's what they sang.

The rest, as they say, is history.

According to Sid, Bandra has always been open to talent. It doesn't matter what religion or caste you belong to, here it is always about acceptance. Most families had at least one member working abroad and it was common to hear the latest rock and pop hits streaming out of bungalows. Trading music cassettes was the norm. It was this convivial, musically charged atmosphere that Sid grew up in.

When I ask him about audience reactions, he says, "The reactions are just amazing. I think people look at me the way they might at a superhero in costume. Boom! Out come the camera phones, and both men and women are equally smitten. For the women, I think it's nostalgia, memories associated with Elvis's music or their first crush. For the guys, it's more



Sid believes Elvis is still relevant and always will be. He recounts how one of his neighbours brought his son to see one of his shows. The 6-year-old was so taken in by Sid's rendition of 'Hound Dog' that his father had to play the song every morning for months to get his son ready for school.

I've seen Sid on stage, and from the gyrations to the foot-tapping to the iconic high notes and drawl, he's got it all down pat. It's hard not to be swept away.

Sid has heard about the annual international Elvis Impersonator Contest in America, and it's on his bucket-list to compete and win. Will a brown Elvis stand a chance? With his moves, hell yeah!

If he ever met Elvis, I ask him, what would he say to him? “Am I doing you proud?” comes Sid’s quick reply. He shares an anecdote with me. Apparently,

Whitney Houston, whose aunt Cissy Houston was a background singer for Elvis, once came face-to-face with him and said, "You don't actually *meet* Elvis, you just *look* at Elvis!"

I got a glimpse of what he meant while shooting with Sid acrossandra. The double takes people did when they saw this tall, glittering jumpsuited figure, belting out catchy Elvis numbers as he walked through the streets crammed with rickshaws, *bhajiwalas* and wayside crosses. From their smiles and wide eyes, it was evident: Elvis is still loved. In a suburb that's bursting with many secrets, did I mention I have one too? Elvis Presley was the photographer at my wedding! ■

DENISE D'SILVA is co-founder and creative head of Hyphen Brands. Follow her on Insta @eatwander.repeat



From 80-somethings to teenagers, he has women of all ages screaming with excitement as he belts out classic Elvis songs and grooves to the music

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Mumbai • 10 November 2024 • Pages: 16 • Vol. 4 Issue 1 • ₹20

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NATION

WHAT'S THE HURRY TO AMEND THE WAQF ACT?

The devil is in the details of the amendments, which will legalise land grab by the government

► P3



POLITICS

PGV TAKES THE PLUNGE

How Priyanka Gandhi's electoral debut might reshape India's politics

► P5



DIPLOMACY

THE BORDER DEAL

Has India played into China's hands or has China pulled out of Indian territory?

► P15



Time to pull out that saffron rag again

The BJP will hope its new divisive chant—*batoge toh katoge*—will work in the coming round of elections

Sharad Gupta

Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath coined the slogan '*Batoge toh katoge*' (divided, you fall) in August 2024 while referring to attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh after a restive population overthrew the Awami League government and prime minister Sheikh Hasina fled the country, to find sanctuary in India. The attacks, mostly on Awami League supporters, were useful grist for the Hindutva hate mill; BJP leaders seized on the 'opportunity' to stoke fear that 'vulnerable' Hindus in India would suffer the same fate if they didn't unite. Eight per cent Hindus in Bangladesh versus 80 per cent in India—shouldn't the math alone reveal the idiocy of this claim?

Clearly not. The slogan has acquired a life of its own, appearing on posters in Mumbai ahead of crucial elections in Maharashtra, as well as in Jharkhand. Yogi Adityanath, undoubtedly chuffed by the response of his constituency, used the slogan extensively while campaigning in Haryana. Variations of the slogan—*Batoge toh katoge/ Ek rahoge toh nek rahoge* (Divided, you fall/ united, you thrive)—have been used by other BJP leaders including Prime Minister Modi who asserted, "*Batenge toh baatne wale mehfil sajayenge*" (If we divide, the people who divide us will make merry). Worth noting again, the loaded use of the word 'mehfil', inflected to invoke the 'other'.

With by-elections scheduled for 48 assembly seats and two parliamentary constituencies in November, the slogan has been instrumentalised to divide and flourish, BJP style. Himanta Biswa Sarma called for Hindu unity in Jharkhand lest Ansaris and Alams loot them. At an election rally the next day, PM Modi followed up with his own tirade against those "who will rob Jharkhand's *maati* (land) and *beti* (daughters)", amplifying the BJP's claim that Bangladeshi infiltrators in Jharkhand are waging 'love and land jihad'.

TV anchor and editor Rahul Shivshankar confirmed the political intent behind the slogan in his blog: 'UP CM Adityanath's remarks are a well thought-out political provocation. Yogi has only a few weeks to consolidate the Hindu vote that has noticeably fractured there. An unabashed invocation of well-worn Hindutva tropes, he hopes, will win back all the subordinate castes (read Dalits and OBCs) that have drifted away from the BJP. It is estimated that because of this drift, the BJP lost at

least 20 parliamentary seats in the recently concluded Lok Sabha polls in Uttar Pradesh.'

RSS sarkaryavah (general secretary) Dattatreya Hosabale, also told the media in Mathura, "If Hindu society does not stay united, then '*batenge toh katenge*' in the current parlance could become a reality." Yogi Adityanath, he argued, was calling for social unity, as divisions along caste lines would be bad for society. Hosabale emphasised that divisions along caste, language and forward-backward status would be detrimental to Hindus. "Certain powers are working to break Hindu society, so caution is necessary," he added.

Since when are Hindus in danger in this country? Since when did menacing and violently targeting an entire community count as 'caution'? Clearly, he's consulting a different dictionary.

Who is dividing the Hindus, and why, wondered RJD's fiery spokesperson Priyanka Bharti in a TV interview. Who has created divisions on the basis of caste? Who has divided Hindus into 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes? Who has been assaulting and killing Dalits for simply growing a moustache or riding a mare to a wedding? Why did Yogi not invite the Dalit MP from Ayodhya to this year's Diwali *deepotsava*? Is the UP chief minister a unifier or a divider? You decide.

The BJP knows from experience that communally surcharged poll campaigns yield rich dividends. Think Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. In a recent speech in Maharashtra, Yogi Adityanath bragged how Muslims in Uttar Pradesh had stopped offering namaaz (prayers) in public spaces, how loud-speakers had been removed from mosques, so people no longer have to hear (read: put up with) the sound of the azaan calling the faithful to prayer. Muslims are threatened all the time and yet Hindu *khatre mein hai*? It would be laughable if it weren't so horrific.

Nobody, points out Sanjay Singh of AAP, objects to unity. Indians should be united. The trouble with the BJP is that it wants the Hindus to gang up against the 'other'. Isn't it obvious the party is not really concerned about Hindus—all it cares for is electoral victory.

Isn't the aim of that polarising cry also to



Photo: Getty Images



"Who has created divisions on the basis of caste? Who has divided Hindus into 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes? Who has been killing Dalits for growing a moustache or riding a mare to a wedding?"

oppose the demand for a caste census? The BJP feels threatened as such a census may well expose the dominance of the numerically small upper castes in almost all spheres of life in the country. Increasingly, marginalised sections and backward communities are standing up to be counted. They want to know whether the job quotas and seats in educational institutions reserved for them are being filled by the rightful recipients or not. More so after the Justice Rohini Commission (constituted by the Modi government itself) revealed that the lion's share of OBC and SC/ ST quotas are cornered by a handful of powerful castes.

Wary of opposing the caste census outright, the BJP has instead spun it as an attempt to divide on caste lines rather than a demand for equality across castes. Simultaneously, it is trying to change its own image from a traditionally Brahmin-Bania party to one that embraces those that come under the larger Hindu umbrella.

A pronounced upper-caste bias defines both the BJP and its ideological fountainhead. All RSS chiefs so far have come from upper castes, with one exception (Rajendra Singh alias Rajju Bhaiyya). All sarsangchalaks have come from a single caste—the Chitpawan Brahmin community. BJP chiefs were predominantly Brahmins till L.K.

Advani's aide K.N. Govindacharya tried to integrate social justice with the Ram mandir narrative by attracting Dalits and OBCs. With OBC leaders like Kalyan Singh and Uma Bharti, the BJP made rapid strides across the Hindi heartland.

Narendra Modi saw the inclusion of Dalits and OBCs as the expedient move that it is. The past 10 years have witnessed the OBCs rise in the party—as cadre, office-bearer and elected representative. So much so that upper-caste leaders have been complaining. "These days only OBCs are getting plum positions in both the party setup and in government," said a BJP leader from Bihar.

Meanwhile, UP deputy chief minister and former state BJP president Keshav Prasad Maurya dissed the slogan in an interview to a Hindi daily. *Batoge to katoge* is not the BJP's official line, he said. "The BJP contests elections only on the basis of its developmental achievements. This false narrative is being propagated by the opposition and the media".

Is Maurya, a known Yogi-baiter close to Union home minister Amit Shah, saying this to deflect potential criticism and outrage? Or is he, in Machiavellian mode, distancing now, all the better to disown and discredit later, should the slogan fail to yield the desired dividends? ■

When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging!

India must be the only country in the world with two top public figures in direct communion with God, writes Avay Shukla

The first rule of excavation is that when you find yourself in a hole, you should stop digging. It appears, however, that our venerable chief justice, who has now seen the (saffron) light, has not heard of this truism, notwithstanding his vast knowledge and learning. He continues to excavate, somewhat like the Archaeological Survey of India, probably hoping to strike Hindutva bedrock.

With his 'legacy' already under the public scanner, one would have expected him to lie low and weather the storm. Instead, just last week, he has publicly gone on record to gloat that (a) he authored the Ayodhya Ram Mandir judgement and (b) that he had prayed to God for a solution to this thorny issue, and the 'solution' was promptly sent to him by the deity, presumably via Blinkit or Zepto.

Predictably, this confession has raised another fire storm, with eminent lawyers and even retired judges coming down on him like a tonne of the famed Ram Mandir bricks.

His revelation, as far as I know, is only the second judicial epiphany after Moses



Not a deal When CJI D.Y. Chandrachud hosted the prime minister on Ganapati Puja

was handed the Ten Commandments by a burning bush on Mount Sinai, with the difference that the directive principles of the commandments have now been replaced with the binding Ayodhya judgement; after all, it is a tenet of spirituality that divine revelation always precedes divine authorship.

And since the chief justice himself has implicitly attested to the authorship of this SC judgement, the epiphany itself must be acknowledged. But the fecundity of the implications of this spiritual communion is mind boggling; this piece attempts to unravel some of them.

Since the chief justice himself has implicitly attested to the authorship of the Ayodhya judgement, the epiphany itself must be acknowledged

India must be the only country in the world with two top public figures in direct communion with God—the prime minister (who is probably God incarnate) and the chief justice. We must consider ourselves exceptionally fortunate in this respect, though we still don't know with whom our third pillar of democracy—the presiding officers of the two houses of Parliament—communicates. The evidence points to either Johnny Walker or Alfred E. Neuman (of MAD magazine fame), but I could be wrong.

The Hindu pantheon reportedly has 330 million gods (not including our prime minister) so it would be interesting to know which particular deity the chief justice consulted. There is also a problematic dimension to this, as was raised by Karan Thapar in a question to retired justice Rekha Sharma of the Delhi High Court: if it was indeed Ram *lalla* (as most people suspect), then is not the whole Ayodhya judgement vitiated, since Ram *lalla*, through his 'next friend' is a party to the dispute?

► Continued on page 2

The battle for Kedarnath

Having lost the Badrinath and Ayodhya seats, the BJP is trying its best to avoid another red-face moment

Rashme Sehgal

The Bharatiya Janata Party is leaving nothing to chance. Having lost the Badrinath assembly seat in a by-election in 2022 and the Ayodhya Lok Sabha seat in the 2024 general election, it cannot afford to lose yet another holy site for devout Hindus.

Little Rohan then that chief minister Pushkar Singh Dhami is personally overseeing the BJP's campaign in the temple town. He even accompanied BJP candidate Asha Nautiyal when she filed her nomination.

Recent electoral history favours the BJP. Four of the five previous elections in the last two decades have gone in favour of women candidates. Female voters (45,775) outnumber male voters (44,765) in this constituency. Not only are they as vocal, if not more, than the men, this year's contest between the BJP's Nautiyal and the Congress' Manoj Rawat is also likely to be determined by women. Rawat, a Rajput, and Nautiyal, a Brahmin, are both former MLAs from the constituency.

A paucity of job opportunities and the migration of men in search of work to the plains continue to be electoral issues in the Kedarnath assembly segment which includes Rudraprayag, Didihat, Pithoragarh and Dwarhat. The crucial by-election this month was necessitated by the death of BJP MLA Shaila Rani Rawat.

Asha Nautiyal had won this seat in 2002 and 2007 while Manoj Rawat won from here in 2017. Ironically, Rawat's victory was, in some measure, due to Nautiyal who contested as an independent, having been denied the BJP ticket in 2017. She cornered a large number of votes for herself, trumping her arch rival Shaila Rani Rawat, and ensuring Manoj Rawat's victory. While a chastened BJP has fallen back on Asha Nautiyal again, Rawat is seeking votes on the strength of his work as a legislator.

Kedarnath is a biggie for the BJP also because of prime minister Narendra Modi's all-out 'devotion' to the place. Since assuming office in 2014, the PM has made eight trips to Kedarnath. Who can forget the sight of him clad in saffron, playing at 24-hour meditation in a cave in Kedarnath in 2019, in the full glare of TV crews and cameras. Or his unveiling of the 12-foot statue of 8th-century seer Adi

Shankaracharya at Kedarnath in 2021. Our indefatigable prime minister is also known to be the driving force behind the gold plating of the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. It is a different matter that 228 kilogram of gold was donated and only 23 kg used. Who stole the rest? No one knows.

His personal zeal to 'develop' Kedarnath has made the Char Dham Yatra the high-fliers' delight. The rich jet in to Dehradun and then copter it to Kedarnath temple. For the less well-heeled, existing motorable roads have been widened. Hotels have mushroomed around Kedarnath. The PM has personally supervised the construction of a theatre, a pilgrim's ghat and a hospital, ignoring the warning of geologists that such construction was unsuitable for a temple town on a glacial moraine susceptible to land subsidence.

The ancient Shiva temple at Kedarnath in the Garhwal Himalayas is cradled by the Mandakini river. Over the last five years, this sacred space—with the snow-clad mountains providing a stunningly beautiful backdrop—has been converted into a shanty town. What was once a green meadow has been taken over by makeshift jhuggis with blue tarpaulin roofs that provide cheap accommodation to the thousands of Char Dham yatis during the summer months. The jhuggis are in sharp contrast to the umpteen multi-storey hotels and arcades being constructed to provide accommodation for those tourists who can afford them.

The Kedar Valley has undergone several devastating landslides and floods, the most disastrous in 2013. On 31 July 2024, the Valley once again witnessed unprecedented rainfall and landslides. Curiously, there are no official figures yet of the number of pilgrims present at Kedarnath on that day. With pilgrim registration mandatory at all four Dhams (Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri and Yamunotri) surely the state government should have had those figures at their fingertips?

But no. No figures on the number of pilgrims who died. On 1 August, the Rudraprayag district magistrate Saurabh Gaharwar claimed on X that about 200–300 people were present at Kedarnath Dham. Mysteriously, by the evening of 2 August, this figure had crossed 7,000. On 3 August, 1,865 pilgrims were said to have been

rescued and taken to safe places, bringing the total number of people rescued to a total of 9,099. By 4 August, officials claimed that a total of 10,374 persons had been rescued.

A local from Gaurikund recalled, "We were reminded of the Kedarnath disaster of 2013. It was raining heavily uphill in Kedarnath region when the water in the river started rising. We felt a vibration. Before we could understand what was going on, a lot of water came rushing downwards. We all ran outside to a safe place to save our lives but many people got washed away. The road was washed away at the same place during the 2013 tragedy. When the rain waters receded, many people came to my place to enquire about their loved ones."



The fact that Muslims comprise a mere 2 per cent of Uttarakhand's population hasn't stopped the BJP from raising non-issues of 'love jihad', 'mazaar jihad' and 'naukri jihad'



(Above) Congress candidate Manoj Rawat; while the Congress is focusing on the lack of development in and around Kedarnath town (left), the BJP is diverting attention from its government's shortcomings

number of deaths was suppressed. The rising incidence of landslides in the Garhwal Himalayas and the steady depletion of agricultural land to forest fires—which have reached the upper regions of the Himalayas—is a matter of concern for the local population. Rawat said, "The weather in these parts has become cold. Kedarji's doors closed on 3 November at 8.30 a.m. and will remain shut for the next six months. The by-election will take place in these cold conditions and we are trying our best to campaign and take the issues to the people." One of those issues is the theft of the gold crores to be worth several thousand crores.

While the Congress has been focusing on the lack of any real development in the area, the BJP has been countering local resentment by diverting attention from the government's shortcomings in their usual way—by steadily whipping up anti-Muslim frenzy across the entire Garhwal region. With Muslims comprising a mere two per cent of the population, raising non-issues of 'love jihad', 'mazaar jihad' and 'naukri jihad' is clearly the saffron party's pathetic default setting when it finds its own house in disorder. ■

When you find yourself in a hole, stop digging!

» Continued from page 1

Even by our dismal standards of jurisprudence, we can hardly have a judge consulting one of the petitioners in a case to what type of order he should write! Justice Sharma would not be pinned down on this question, but she was obviously uncomfortable with the point raised by Thapar. It would be interesting now, wouldn't it, if some lawyer were to file a curative petition in the SC on this point to challenge the judgement?

Justice Sharma was, however, emphatic that Justice Chandrachud's admission had lowered the image of the court. What if it had been a Muslim or Christian or Sikh judge claiming that he/ she had consulted his/ her God before writing a judgement?

There would have been majoritarian outrage, charges of 'judicial jihad' would have been bandied about by the likes of the Assam chief minister whose career is based on his study of jihads, and all manner of bhakts would have descended on Jantar Mantar like the proverbial 'Shivji ki barat'. In contrast, the present chief justice will, in all probability, be well rewarded for his epiphany. One good turn, or about-turn, deserves another.

Will every court now have a temple attached to it, for ease of doing judicial business? After reserving a judgement, the concerned deity must retire to the temple (the five-star hotel with the bar comes later), and announce the order.

Or better still, why have these pesky and expensive courts at all, which are nothing but convenient venues for gangsters to shoot down their rivals? Replace them with temples and head priests who will function as the registry and convey divine orders.

We could adopt the Himalachal model for this, where devtas speak through their spokesmen or gurs, and tell the simple Himalachalis what to do. I would suggest that a committee of judges should go to the remote village of Malana in Kullu to study this model.

Right now, the gur of Jamblu devta has told the government that the devta does not approve

of the Kullu-Bijli Mahadev ropeway; in years past, it was the gur who also approved the tour programmes of officials who wished to visit Malana on duty!

The outcome of the Pandora's box opened by CJI Chandrachud is mind boggling. There are approximately 17,000 judges in India; what if each one of them decides to consult his or her family god before passing judgement? There is also a strict hierarchy of gods and goddesses in our religion, which you tamper with at your own peril.

This shall make the whole appellate process of our jurisprudence chaotic. What if the god of the trial judge is superior in the divine hierarchy to the god of the appellate judge? Whose judgement will prevail? And how will a bench ever come to a final conclusion on a matter if the respective gods of the member judges are unable to agree? What if the seniormost god (not judge) on that bench insists on exercising a veto, as the US does on Israel?

No, sir, this new jurisprudence will not work, not even in Naya Bharat. The Ayodhya judgement must be struck down as non est. A joint parliamentary committee should be immediately constituted to investigate whether the gods were also consulted while passing orders on a host of other cases—rejection of the EVMs petitions, denial of bail to Umar Khalid, upholding the abolition of Article 370, multiple rejections of bail applications of the Bhima-Koregaon 'accused', junking the Rafale case on the basis of sealed covers and redacted statements, papering over the charges against Adani and SEBI in the Hindenburg exposé, giving the quietus to the Pegasus inquiry report, the disembowelling of the Places of Worship Act, the refusal to investigate the mysterious death of Judge Loya, and so on.

We must know whether we are still a democracy or have silently, through a judicial coup, become a theocracy.

And Justice Chandrachud, of course, should stop digging, for he will be sorely disappointed in his attempts to uncover a destroyed Hindu temple under the Supreme Court. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and the author of Disappearing Democracy: Dismantling of a Nation



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What’s the tearing hurry to amend the Waqf Act?

Afroz Alam Sahil

The BJP’s undying love for Muslims is no state secret, but in the Modi years, this community has been at the receiving end of some very special attention from the ruling party. A notable feature of this attention has been the various attempts to ‘reform’ Muslims, their personal laws and other legislation that impinges on their status as citizens. Take for instance the Citizenship Amendment Act, or the Uniform Civil Code, or the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Act, a.k.a. the triple talaq law. Or now the apparent haste to pass a Waqf (Amendment) Bill.

Of the many *jihads* Indian Muslims are supposedly waging against the hapless Hindus of India, ‘land jihad’ is one. There is more in that arsenal, of course: ‘love jihad’, ‘vote jihad’, ‘thook jihad’... The colourful vocabulary has been legitimised by the party’s brass and given a hyperreal dimension on social media.

On 8 August, when the Waqf (Amendment) Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha, minority affairs minister Kiren Rijiju shared a story that had been circulating widely. In 2022, Raj Gopal, a resident of Tiruchendurai village in Tamil Nadu’s Trichy district, went to register the sale of his 1.2 acre plot of land. He was told this land was not his to sell in the first place, that it belonged to the Tamil Nadu Waqf Board. He was further informed that his entire village was Waqf property and that he would need an NOC from the Waqf Board’s Chennai office before he could proceed. What has gone largely unreported in media is the refutation of this story by the TN Waqf Board, which apparently even issued a press release with clarifications and supporting documents. “The land in question is recorded in waqf board records as ‘*Inaam waqf*’ (gift waqf),” clarified A.S. Fatima Muzaffar, member, Tamil Nadu Waqf Board. “When this issue came to light, the Tamil Nadu Waqf Board provided all the documents related to the village to the government and administration,” she added.

The Waqf (Amendment) Bill 2024 provides for the renaming of the Waqf Act, 1995, as the Unified Waqf Management, Empowerment, Efficiency and Development Act (UMEED). It is currently under review



Delhi Waqf Board office in Daryaganj

Photo: Getty Images

by a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC), but the disregard for objections from opposition MPs suggests the government wants to ride roughshod over dissent and make haste with the passage of the bill.

A smear campaign has been run over the past five or so years on social media, especially through WhatsApp forwards, to paint the waqf boards—there are 32 of them in India in various states—as scheming land sharks. It could be a house, a shop, a piece of land... the story goes that if the Waqf Board lays claim to a property, it is practically impossible to contest it.

Ironically, though, the waqf board itself struggles with illegal encroachment on its properties. An RTI filed with the Central Waqf Council on 20 July 2020 revealed that 18,259 waqf properties and 31,594 acres of land are under illegal occupation across the country. Government departments or agencies occupy 1,342 properties and 31,594 acres of land. These numbers exclude data from Gujarat, Telangana and the Shia Central Waqf Board in Uttar Pradesh.

While the stories of land grab by the waqf boards are hugely exaggerated and now have a life of their own, neutral observ-

ers do agree that all is not well with the functioning of the boards. Government officials and board members are accused of profiting from illegal/ impermissible sale and transfer of waqf properties. So, even well-meaning critics acknowledge the need for reforms, but the government is pushing for changes in the law because it has its own axe to grind.

For example, the narrative that the 30 waqf boards in the country are the third largest real estate owners after the Railways and Indian defence establishments is mischievous disinformation, says former chief election commissioner S.Y. Quraishi, who also served as a waqf commissioner for Punjab, Haryana and Chandigarh. Quoting official statistics in a conversation with lawyer and MP Kapil Sibal, Quraishi pointed out that temples in just the two states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh own 900,000 acres of land whereas waqf properties across the country occupy 600,000 acres.

Kamal Farooqui, a chartered accountant, said in the same discussion with Sibal that he had audited the accounts of several waqf boards and reported on discrepancies and irregularities. What prevents state governments from taking action against these waqf boards, he asked. After all, the chairmen of most of these boards and most members too continue to be appointed or nominated by the government. Illegal sales or transfers of tenancy are not possible, he argues, without complicity between government officials and board members.

Farooqui maintains that the law of the land, applied in good conscience, can bring offenders to justice. “But this government is not interested in ending corruption. The intention of the new Bill is to empower the government to grab waqf properties, humiliate Muslims and destroy institutions doing some good for the Muslim community.”

It is common knowledge that the government has made drastic cuts in scholarships and grants to Muslim students and institutions, which lend further credence to Farooqui’s allegations.

The government claims that the amendments aim to make the waqf management more transparent and ensure women’s representation on these bodies. It says the new bill is meant to benefit Muslims, especially poor Muslims and women. However, Muslims have never asked for amendments to the Waqf Act, 1995. In 2010, when the government proposed amendments, the Muslim community resisted. Eventually, the Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2013 was passed with provisions ensuring at least two female members on a waqf board. Currently, the Jammu and Kashmir Waqf Board has a female chairperson, and women have led or served as board members in other states, including Delhi.

What is ‘waqf’?

The concept of ‘waqf’ applies to movable or immovable assets donated by a follower of Islam for religious or charitable purposes. Such property is meant to serve society, and Allah is deemed the sole ‘owner’. Once designated as ‘waqf’, the property cannot be bought or sold.

Contrary to popular belief, the waqf boards are not exclusively Muslim institutions. State governments form these boards, which include government officials, lawyers and professionals from all communities. Waqf properties are not exclusively for Muslim use either. Schools, colleges, universities, orphanages and hospitals on waqf land benefit people of all backgrounds.

A waqf board cannot claim property from a non-Muslim, though Section 104 of the Waqf Act, 1995, allows even non-Muslims to donate property to mosques, dargahs, Eidgahs, imambaras, maqbaras, Muslim graveyards etc. Government-appointed waqf boards scrutinise the documents, and the property is registered as waqf with the revenue board only after the board has given its approval.

The proposed amendments

- Among the 40-odd amendments proposed in the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, 2024, are the following highlights:
- The Bill proposes to change the composition of the Central Waqf Council and waqf boards to include non-Muslim members
 - The survey commissioner has been replaced by the collector, granting him powers to conduct surveys of waqf properties
 - Government property identified as waqf will cease to be waqf; the collector will determine ownership of such properties
 - Sec. 40 of the Waqf Act, 1995/2013, which gives the waqf board the authority to determine the legality/ authenticity of waqf properties, has been removed; in effect, this amendment will make it easier to illegally occupy waqf properties
- The JPC deliberations on the amendment bill, introduced in the Lok Sabha on 8 August, have reportedly been acrimonious, with Opposition members questioning its constitutional validity, the government’s intention and the practical implications of the amendments. Their fears are not misplaced. ■



Friends turn foes and lines get blurred

Navin Kumar

MNS chief Raj Thackeray supported Eknath Shinde when he revolted against Uddhav Thackeray, splintered the Shiv Sena and toppled the government. He also campaigned for Shinde’s son in Kalyan during the recent Lok Sabha election. Politics, however, can turn friends into foes overnight. The provocation? Shinde refused to withdraw his party candidate from Mahim assembly constituency, where MNS has fielded Raj Thackeray’s son, Amit. Shinde’s grouse? Raj should have spoken to him first.

The Mahim seat is thus set to be a battle between all three Senas with UBT, SS (Shinde) and MNS (supported by the BJP) fielding candidates. The Mahim seat has always been an OG Sena stronghold, one of Balasaheb’s earliest bastions of support—hence the sharp edge to a contest that threatens to draw blood.

The MNS chief has, in fact, gone on the warpath against Shinde, declaring that the next chief minister of Maharashtra will be from the BJP. Criticising Shinde in an election rally, Raj said Bal Thackeray was the rightful claimant to the property and symbol of the Shiv Sena, just as Sharad Pawar is to the property and symbol of the

Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). The fact that Raj Thackeray is supporting Devendra Fadnavis as Mahayuti leader has further irked Shinde, who has dug his heels in.

The MNS is not part of the ruling coalition, which hasn’t stopped the BJP from supporting Amit Thackeray. It’s an open secret that the BJP proposes an MNS–Shiv Sena (Shinde) merger, with Raj as leader. The BJP’s Narayan Rane has been campaigning for Shinde in Mahim, partly because one of his sons is contesting on an SS (Shinde) ticket.

Political scientist Suhas Palshikar commented recently that there seem to be 288 different elections being held this time. A free-for-all in virtually all the seats, with few aware of who is contesting for which party and why.

In the midst of existential battles for the UBT and NCP alike, the BJP has opposed NCP (AP) fielding former minister Nawab Malik. Malik was wounded by the BJP for alleged connections with underworld don Dawood Ibrahim and arrested by the ED in a money laundering case. It hasn’t been that vociferous against Malik’s daughter Sana, also fielded by the NCP (AP).

In turn, Ajit Pawar said Devendra Fadnavis had shown him a file in 2015 in which the then home minister R.R. Patil had recommended an ‘open inquiry’

against him—thus accusing the BJP of attempting blackmail.

The Congress and BJP are pitted against each other in as many as 74 of the 288 constituencies (almost 25 per cent). In the 2019 elections, 42 of these seats were won by the BJP and 24 by the Congress. The Bahujan Vikas Aghadi had won two, the Prahar Janshakti Party two, the NCP one and independents three. The BJP contested in 163 seats and won 105 seats in the assembly in 2019. This time the BJP has fielded 143 candidates under its own symbol in addition to fielding 12 of its own as SS (Shinde) candidates and five as NCP (AP) candidates, adding to the confusion.

The withdrawal of Jarange Patil, who had emerged as a force advocating for Maratha reservation in Marathwada and Western Maharashtra, has further muddled the field. Although Sharad Pawar has welcomed his withdrawal which should help the MVA by preventing a split in Maratha votes—estimated to be 23 per cent in the state—the political grapevine is abuzz with rumours that Patil withdrew at the BJP’s behest. Patil has denied both rumours and links.

The fact that the BJP is supporting two MNS candidates in Mumbai, Amit Thackeray in Mahim and Bala Nandgaonkar in Shivdi—where the Mahayuti does not have a candidate and UBT’s sitting MLA Ajay Chaudhary is in the fray—reveals its weak position. While the NCP had fared well in western Maharashtra in 2019, the BJP had performed well in Marathwada (which has 46 assembly seats) and in Vidarbha, where the Congress is expected to do much better this time.



It’s the economy, stupid

A report that documents the decline of Maharashtra during the last 10 years has embarrassed the state BJP, authored as it is by two members of the Prime Minister’s Economic Advisory Council, Sanjeev Sanyal and Aakanksha Arora. Anecdotal evidence of projects meant for Maharashtra having been shifted to Gujarat—Tata-Airbus, Foxconn, Apple among them—finds credibility in the report titled ‘Relative Economic Performance of Indian states: 1960–61 to 2023–24’.

Released in September, the report reveals a steady decline, for the very first time in the last decade, in Maharashtra’s GDP growth rate and per capita income.

The report states: ‘Maharashtra has maintained the highest share of India’s GDP for almost all of the [study] period. Gujarat’s share remained at broadly the same levels until 2000–01, before beginning to increase rapidly from 6.4 per cent in 2000–01 to 8.1 per cent in 2022–23. Both Gujarat and Maharashtra have had per capita incomes exceeding the national average since the 1960s.

Initially, Gujarat lagged behind Maharashtra, with a relative per capita income of 118.3 per cent compared to Maharashtra’s 133.7 per cent in 1960–61. This disparity persisted until 2010–11, when Gujarat surpassed Maharashtra. By 2023–24, Gujarat’s per capita income has risen to 160.7 per cent of national average, as compared to 150 per cent for Maharashtra.’

Attempts to ‘downplay’ its findings unfold against radio silence in media about the report.

Meanwhile, Maharashtra Congress president Nana Patole has written to the PM, urging the Union government to ban

the import of cotton and pleading for the state’s four million cotton farmers to be given fair MSP prices for their produce.

Diary of a home minister

The book hasn’t yet been officially released but advance copies have reached journalists. At first glance, Anil Deshmukh’s *Diary of a Home Minister* appears to be a reiteration of what the MVA’s home minister had said in various interviews earlier. The crux of the book is Devendra Fadnavis pressurising Deshmukh to sign an affidavit implicating Uddhav Thackeray, Aaditya Thackeray, Parth Pawar and Anil Parab. (He refused.)

The affidavit had several items (and objectives). One, to state that Uddhav Thackeray had asked Deshmukh to collect Rs 300 crore for the municipal corporation (BMC) elections. Two, to implicate Aaditya Thackeray in the death of Disha Salian, late actor Sushant Singh Rajput’s manager. Three, to charge Ajit Pawar’s son Parth Pawar of extorting money from paan masala units, Four, to accuse minister Anil Parab of having invested in a resort.

The book reveals that Fadnavis had later asked Deshmukh to drop the reference to Ajit Pawar’s son.

The first chapter titled, ‘A for Ambani’, deals with the case of an explosives-laden SUV found parked outside Mukesh Ambani’s home Antilia in February 2021. Deshmukh claims that he had taken steps against the then Mumbai police commissioner Parambir Singh and encounter specialist Sachin Waze. He was, however, implicated in the case and arrested by central agencies. Deshmukh, who spent 14 months in jail, is currently out on bail.

ECI’s delayed action

After refusing to remove DGP Rashmi Shukla for weeks, the ECI has replaced her with Sanjay Kumar Verma. Shukla, the opposition claimed, had a role in the phone-tapping scandal and was closely linked with the BJP. While the ECI ordered the Jharkhand DGP to be kept away from election-related work, it delayed taking similar action against Shukla. ■



Happier days: MNS chief Raj Thackeray and Maharashtra CM Eknath Shinde in November 2022

Photo: Getty Images

It’s an open secret that the BJP proposes an MNS–Shiv Sena (Shinde) merger, with Raj Thackeray as leader

Does India have a real voice at the UN?

The world's largest democracy must be heard on the UN Security Council. But who will listen, given our human rights record?

Aakar Patel

The United Nations Security Council has 15 members: five permanent and 10 elected. India has been a non-permanent member of the UNSC eight times, its last term having been in 2021–22. It has now bid for the 2028–29 term.

As the world's largest nation and a democracy, we are entitled to having our voice heard in the global body.

In 2021, the then UN high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet, said, "Although it is the primary responsibility of the UN Human Rights Council, promoting and protecting human rights is one of the best ways for the UN Security Council to achieve its mandate of maintaining international peace and security." Bearing that in mind, let's take a look at India's engagement with the UN human rights system in the past few years.

The fact is that India has not been a strong leader at the UNHRC, willing to take difficult and principled stands with consistent application of human rights values; nor has it engaged particularly constructively with Council mechanisms.

India has been a member of the UN Human Rights Council for 16 of the Council's 18 years—most recently 2019–24. Resolution 60/251, which created the UNHRC, states that "members elected to the Council shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, shall fully cooperate with the Council, and be reviewed under the universal periodic review mechanism during their term of membership".

India has been the subject of 25 criticisms from UN human rights experts and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) since 2019—during its last two terms of membership. Both expressed concerns about its domestic human rights issues and its lack of compliance with international human rights obligations.

Between 24 January 2011 and 24 September 2024, the Indian government received over 200 communications from UN Special Procedures, a collection of independent experts created by the HRC and mandated to monitor and report on human rights across the globe. The Indian government has responded to less than a third of the communications it has received.

After 2014, India has facilitated the



The UN Security Council's emergency session on Ukraine in New York City, 30 October 2024

Photo: Getty Images

completion of only two visits by a UN special procedure to the country. It currently has 19 pending visit requests. Some have gone unanswered since 1999 (for example, from the special rapporteur on torture).

In its last Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a mechanism by which every state's human rights record is examined and recommendations for improvements made, 21 countries urged India to improve its protection of freedom of religion and rights of religious minorities, with several raising concerns over increasing violence and hate speech and the government's adoption of discriminatory policies such as anti-conversion laws.

In addition, 19 countries said that India should ratify the UN Convention against Torture, a treaty we signed in 1997 but never ratified. India said in both the 2012 and 2017

The fact is India has not been a strong leader at the UNHRC, willing to take difficult and principled stands with consistent application of human rights values

UPR cycles that it remained committed to ratifying the treaty. However, it hasn't taken steps to fulfil its commitment even as torture and other ill-treatment continue to be used routinely by police and other security forces to gather information or coerce 'confessions'.

As it stands, India is party to only six of the nine core human rights treaties.

India's reports under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child are also overdue. India has been the subject of two reports, in 2018 and 2019, from the OHCHR on the situation in Kashmir. Both reports called on Indian authorities to respect international human rights obligations in the region, repeal or amend repressive laws such as the

Armed Forces (Jammu and Kashmir) Special Powers Act and the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act, end restrictions on journalists and investigate all blanket bans or restrictions. Instead of engaging with the OHCHR, India called the reports "false, with a motivated narrative" and accused the human rights body of "legitimising terrorism".

India has consistently been included in the UN secretary general's report on reprisals, which sets out cases of alleged reprisals against individuals and organisations for cooperating with the UN in the field of human rights. In the 2020 report, the secretary general concluded that 'ongoing intimidation and reprisals have reportedly deterred some civil society representatives from cooperating with the United Nations for fear of further retribution'.

So why is credible engagement with the UNHRC critical in the context of India's UNSC bid?

Discussions about reforming the UNSC should not be done in isolation of candidates' performance and behaviour at other UN bodies, most importantly human rights ones. Membership of any of the UN organs should be used to shine a spotlight on and protect human rights, not to shield members or their allies from scrutiny of their human rights record.

This should be the case for all nations and the fact that others are as bad, or worse, on this issue should not matter. It is abundantly clear that India is falling short of its domestic and international human rights obligations and its commitments as a member and in its interactions with different UN bodies and mechanisms.

The discussion on reform of the Security Council may not end soon, but if India is serious about its intention to be a permanent member of the UNSC, it needs to demonstrate that it can engage responsibly with UN human rights entities, including the UNHRC. It must comply with the membership criteria to the UNHRC in a consistent and principled manner. It should commit to upholding the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights to fully cooperate with the UN human rights mechanisms.

We harm our chances when we choose deliberately to not do the right thing. ■

Views are personal

STATES 360°



TAMIL NADU

Shooting star or here to stay?



Kollywood star Vijay launches his new party Tamizhaga Vetri Kazhagam at Vikravandi, 27 Oct. 2024

Shiva Kumar S.

It made for an arresting image: Vijay, flanked by two hulking bodyguards, making his triumphant way to the stage to launch his new party with a rousing speech that met with the full-throated approval of thousands of his fans and admirers. A new champion entered the Tamil political arena: Kollywood star Vijay, a.k.a. Thalapathi (commander), with his Tamizhaga Vetri Kazhagam (TVK, Tamil Victory Party), in the small town of Vikravandi in Villupuram district.

It was an unseasonably warm Sunday evening (27 October), but the milling crowd, an estimated 5–7 lakh strong, had been gathering all afternoon at the venue, which had an entrance modelled on Fort St. George, the seat of government in Chennai. All roads seemed to be leading to Vikravandi as thousands of cars, vans, buses and other vehicles made a beeline for the *baanadu* or mega meet. Huge cutouts of Babasaheb Ambedkar, E.V.R. Periyar, K. Kamaraj, Rani Velu Nachiyar (TN's own 'Jhansi ki Rani') and freedom fighter Jhansi Ammal towered over the proceedings, carefully chosen to convey the ideological underpinnings of the party.

Joseph Vijay Chandrasekhar, a.k.a. Vijay, was making his political debut, following a long list of illustrious predecessors: the legendary MGR, the imperious J. Jayalalithaa (both former chief ministers) as well as the likes of superstar Rajnikanth, 'Captain' Vijayakanth, Kamal Haasan and 'Sarath' Kumar.

Indeed, TN has always had porous borders between the world of politics and film, a trait that sets it apart from its southern neighbours. The Telugu-speaking states are somewhat of an exception, producing one chief minister, the charismatic N.T. Rama Rao, who rode to power on the issue of Telugu pride, with Chiranjeevi and Pawan Kalyan being two other notables.

Vijay's plunge into politics made quite a splash, not only for the organisational effort that went into drumming up such a large crowd, but also for the things that he said and didn't say—and the sheer optics of his 46-minute speech. Unlike the usual rhetorical flourishes and high-flown Tamil oratory so beloved of the state's politicians, Vijay spoke in a more colloquial Tamil, peppered with English words. But for all that, it was an impassioned speech, with all the right references and embellishments.

The film star, without naming anyone, attacked both the BJP (the ideological enemy) and the state's ruling DMK, whom he called "divisive and corrupt". He was giving up a lucrative career in films, he said, because "I, your Vijay, want to serve you." Tamil Nationalism and Dravida ideology were like two eyes, he declared, while clearly distancing himself from Periyar's legacy by declaring he was not atheistic. Vijay went on to bat for secularism, socialism, progressivism, gender and caste equality, without offering any specifics.

He said he was confident that the party could come to power on its own in the assembly elections of 2026, but dangled the carrot of power-sharing to parties that were willing to ally with him. This is a first: coalition rule is foreign to Tamil Nadu. The AIADMK and Congress were guarded, but not hostile, in their response.

Political observers, while quick to offer a cynical take on the TVK's chances, agreed that Vijay had gotten off to an impressive start. Ever since the Congress lost power in 1967, the people of Tamil Nadu have alternated between the DMK and AIADMK. There is now a discernible sense of public fatigue with both these options, and a radical alternative may well appeal to the aspirational youth, in particular. For all its efforts, the BJP is still seen as a north Indian, Hindi-Hindu party at odds with the politics and culture of the state. As the *Hindu's* chief political correspondent T. Ramakrishnan rather succinctly wrote: 'No one is ignoring Mr. Vijay.'

It came as no surprise that the Carnatic world was outraged when Madras Music Academy announced Krishna as the Sangita Kalanidhi awardee 2024

T.M. Krishna faces the music

Thodur Madabusi Krishna is an artist who wears many hats—singer, author, activist. One thing cuts across: wherever he goes, controversy follows. He has managed to antagonise the Carnatic music orthodoxy with his many actions and statements. He has championed the cause of the downtrodden, the subaltern and the Dalits, weighed in on Brahmin domination of the arts and interpreted legends such as M.S. Subbulakshmi in his own inimitable style, suggesting that she distanced herself from her Devadasi origins in order to gain wider acceptance. He has talked about including Christian and Islamic songs in his Carnatic repertoire and introduced far-out innovations in the way concerts are performed. He is a fierce opponent of Modi and the BJP and has taken radical positions on most political issues.

Thus, it came as no surprise that the Carnatic world was outraged when that bastion of orthodoxy, the hallowed Madras Music Academy, announced Krishna as the Sangita Kalanidhi awardee 2024, a signal honour. Prominent artistes such as the sridhar act of Ranjani and Gayatri, Dushyanth Sridhar and Chitravina Ravikiran threatened to boycott the Academy. Their reasoning: T.M. Krishna has glorified E.V.R. Periyar, who demeaned the Brahmin community in his vitriolic speeches.

It is well-known that Krishna himself has made disparaging comments about the influence of the Academy. Now, however,

he is happy to accept the award, leading to accusations of double standards, which Krishna has denied. In October, a grandson of M.S. Subbulakshmi filed a petition in Madras High Court, challenging the award given in her name. Krishna filed a counter affidavit, denying the charges of having belittled MS; as has the Music Academy. The award ceremony is scheduled for December during Chennai's famed music season. Till then, the matter rests in court.

The dangerous business of making firecrackers

Sivakasi shines with Rs 6,000 crore sales this Deepavali season,' said the headline in a Chennai edition of a national newspaper. That was good news for the firecracker industry but not for its workers. Hidden away in plain sight, amid a welter of news on all manner of things under the sun, lies a story of neglect, exploitation and inhuman conditions. India's firecracker industry is the second largest in the world after China. It is dominated by one town, Sivakasi, in Tamil Nadu's Virudhunagar. This is where 90 per cent of the country's fireworks are made, with about 10 lakh workers employed in over a thousand units.

The underpaid workers are mainly women and Dalit. They work in the most unsafe conditions and often end up paying with their lives as safety regulations are flouted by the owners who are just looking to cash in on festive seasons. Official inspections and safety audits are rarely done—unsurprising given the handful of inspectors available—and the result is deadly. Yet the explosions and deaths don't seem to be 'big enough' to make the headlines, much like the 'death by asphyxiation' stories that occasionally remind mainstream readers of the dire plight of India's manual scavengers.

In 2024, there were 17 accidents and 50-plus deaths, according to the *Hindu*. Reasons cited were the excessive use of inflammable chemicals and overcrowding in factories. Sadly, the situation in other parts of India where fireworks are manufactured is no different. As one correspondent put it, if any other industry had reported similar fatalities, there would be public outrage. But given the poverty of the workers and their Dalit origins, there has been little pressure on the government to crack down. ■



T.M. Krishna

PGV takes the plunge

Priyanka Gandhi's electoral debut will do more than boost the fortunes of the Congress and the Opposition, it could reshape India's political landscape



Ashok Swain

Priyanka Gandhi's Vadra's entry into electoral politics is certainly a big moment for the Congress party, but it also bears significance for Indian politics at large. As she readies for the parliamentary arena, with her candidacy in the Wayanad by-election (scheduled on 13 November), there is an air of expectancy all around.

Her anticipated presence in the Lok Sabha alongside Rahul Gandhi, her personal charisma and her gift for carrying an audience of any description will be a renewed challenge to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). With strategic coordination, Priyanka and Rahul Gandhi, with their deep-rooted sense of political legacy, can reshape the national political discourse, both in Parliament and outside it, and strengthen the Opposition in some expected and other not-so-obvious ways.

The Wayanad seat was vacated by Rahul

Gandhi, and Priyanka's candidature will help the Congress grow its influence in south India, while reclaiming the Raebareli seat in Lok Sabha 2024 can be the springboard for a revival of the party in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. The Congress obviously wants to sustain the momentum of its improved performance in the 2024 general election—where it nearly doubled its seat count from the previous Lok Sabha—and PGV's (likely) entry into Parliament is a well-considered move to convert those electoral gains into a longer term strategy.

The timing is important. The Congress knows that the electoral verdict of Lok Sabha 2024 belied the palpable anti-incumbency; it knows that many voters want a credible alternative to the BJP. The presence of another Gandhi in Parliament will not only add to the party's political heft in the lower house but also go a long way in sharpening its outreach to the political opposition and diverse segments of the population. PGV's presence in Kerala will

have spillover influence in the southern states, where the BJP, still seen as a Hindi-belt cultural pariah, has struggled to gain a firm foothold.

The close bond Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi share is a big plus for the Congress party. Their partnership is not simply about a family bond or a shared political lineage; it is a complementary approach to politics, forged by their personal experiences and public life. The personal tragedies they have endured—first the assassination of their grandmother Indira Gandhi and then father Rajiv Gandhi—has shaped and strengthened their commitment to public life and their sense of duty to a secular democratic India.

Rahul Gandhi is without a doubt the most fearless critic of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) and the Modi government. He has taken on the Modi government on its cronyism, on policies that have exacerbated economic inequality, on the retreat of citizen freedoms and on social justice issues. He has called out the Sangh's equivocations and their desire to re-engineer

With her oratorical flair, Priyanka can potentially focus media attention on parliamentary proceedings, especially when challenging BJP leaders on critical issues

the Constitution and turn India into a Hindu majoritarian state. His role as Leader of the Opposition has given the Congress a stronger voice and the Opposition a leader they can count on to fearlessly challenge the BJP and everything it represents.

Priyanka, with her ability to connect at the grassroots level and her skills as a communicator, can really bolster the party's public outreach efforts.

Playing to their strengths, Rahul and Priyanka could perhaps focus on different aspects of the party's political engagement—Rahul on addressing broad national issues and Priyanka becoming the voice of regional concerns and social issues. This approach might allow the Congress to more effectively challenge the BJP and perhaps help voters envision a more full-bodied political alternative to the BJP. Priyanka's charisma and Rahul's experience and commitment can bring attention to critical issues that may otherwise be sidelined.

Another possible impact of the Gandhi siblings' joint presence in Parliament could be to reshape the lopsided media narrative surrounding Indian politics. In recent years, the BJP has practically colonised India's mainstream media, with much of the attention focused on PM Modi and the BJP's 'winning' electoral strategies. The space for alternative narratives has practically disappeared.

With Priyanka joining Rahul in Parliament, it will conceivably become harder for the media to ignore debates and other activities in the Lok Sabha. With her oratorical flair, Priyanka can potentially focus media attention on parliamentary proceedings, especially when challenging BJP leaders on critical issues. Her speeches and interactions with the press will bring Opposition arguments into the spotlight, offering a counter-narrative to balance the BJP's media dominance.

Their combined efforts could help shift the focus from the personality-driven politics of the past 10 years to substantive debates on policy and governance, and perhaps nudge media towards a more balanced coverage of political issues. Even as the fulcrum of a multipolar Opposition, as the focal point of coalition building, the Congress will be stronger with both Priyanka and Rahul in the mix.

The entry of Priyanka Gandhi Vadra into the electoral arena is more than just a personal milestone for her; it represents a strategic move by the Congress party to reshape the political landscape of India. With her charisma and deep sense of political legacy, Priyanka can play a transformative role in opposition politics.

Together, the sibling duo promises a new kind of political leadership—one that has a firm underpinning of empathy, social justice and commitment to democratic secular values while also being mindful of the benefits of strategic coordination. We have reason to hope their partnership will help the Congress mount a stronger challenge to the BJP's attempts to dominate the national discourse in Parliament, in the media and among the people. ■

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Why GDP is a perverse index of wellbeing

This universally accepted measure of national production usually tracks human misery more closely than happiness

Aseem Shrivastava

I was trained as an economist. For the tribe of economists, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of a country is a sacrosanct measure of national production within the borders of the country. Not just economists and policy wonks, businessmen, politicians, the media and the universities constantly refer to it. Its textbook definition goes: 'The total value of all the goods and services produced in a country in one year.' 'Value' could be nominal or real (after adjusting for inflation). But it is always stated in monetary terms (in current or constant dollars or rupees or whichever currency you wish).

The classic textbook example used to be that if a man marries his housekeeper, the GDP of the country would fall. One can come up with a thousand similar stories. My grandmother used to knit sweaters not just for me but for the entire (joint) family. Her contribution to the GDP? Nil. If the same sweaters were sold for a profit in the export market, they would have warmed the hearts of GDP-conscious patriots!

The joy that my grandmother derived from making sweaters for everyone was incomparable. So was our happiness when we received such handmade gifts of love. But there is no room for such things in the economic calculus of today's experts. They know no other index of human wellbeing than the GDP. In the process, they usually track human misery more closely than human happiness. They forget what Einstein (to whom the quote is correctly or falsely attributed) might have meant when he said: "Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted."

Let us consider three other dimensions of GDP that economists rarely speak of. The first has to do with the fact that the origins of the GDP as an official measure of national production are as recent as 1937 when Simon Kuznets (who received a Nobel Prize for his immense labours) made a presentation to the US Congress on the subject. In a time of war, it facilitated a simple way to compare the relative military strengths of two different countries. This aspect of the GDP became ideologically very potent by the time the Cold War took hold of the world after 1945. Capitalist and communist ideologues would routinely try to prove the superiority of their respective systems by making crude GDP comparisons.

The United Nations was formed in 1945. It officially adopted the system of national accounts developed by Kuznets. By 1953, the first international data comparing GDP across countries was released. During the same period, after the famous 1944 conference at Bretton-Woods when the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were created, the idea of 'development' was hurled upon the world. In the aggressive climate generated by the Western powers (and the Soviet Union) the compulsion to 'develop' was felt by every government in the world, an artificial imperative that survives the last three generations.

As the idea of 'development' came of age in the



Photo: Getty Images

A second aspect of GDP as a measure of well-being deserves graver comment. If parents begin charging children retrospectively for having raised them to the age of reason, education and economic productivity, the country's GDP would rise dramatically. The same result will obtain if children begin charging parents for looking after them in old age. Given the global and national dispersion of families, homes for senior citizens already make sense.

The full monetisation of mammalian affections would constitute an economic miracle of global fame. However, society (or what remains of it after the virtual victory of dating apps over it) would stand defeated, if not destroyed. The economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi had pointed out in his prophetic 1944 volume *The Great Transformation* that the triumph of the market would eventually result in the destruction of 'the substance of society'. Now, with the speedy rise of the virtual sphere and the erosion of the family and the community across wealthier parts of the world, we have hard evidence of this.

Finally, consider the fact that every time an oil drill is installed anywhere, mother Earth heaves a sigh of crushing distress, an accumulating agony which is already turning the human adventure on this planet into a terminal ecological nightmare. Exhaustible resources are closer to complete exhaustion. Not to romanticise the past, but the air everywhere was immeasurably cleaner the world over before 'progress' had begun a few centuries ago, and species death through climate change or nuclear Armageddon was not even a dystopian fantasy.

When the stakes are such, the deployment of GDP as a measure of wellbeing presents to us an idea of organised human stupidity today. Perhaps it is the inevitable collateral damage of a 'smart world' exclusively devoted to the organisation of races among 'smart people'. Fashion parades, the original root of the spread of the word 'smart', are now glamorous metaphors for life itself. ■

ASEEM SHRIVASTAVA is an economist. He now teaches ecosophy. Courtesy: The Billion Press

After the famous 1944 conference at Bretton-Woods when the World Bank and IMF were created, the idea of 'development' was hurled upon the world

GDP Growth Projections				
As of July 2024				
Advanced Economies				
Country	2023	2024F	2025F	% change in real GDP
U.S.	+2.5%	+2.6%	+1.9%	
Germany	+0.2%	+0.2%	+1.3%	
France	+1.1%	+0.9%	+1.3%	
Italy	+0.9%	+0.7%	+0.9%	
Spain	+2.5%	+2.4%	+2.1%	
Japan	+1.9%	+0.7%	+1.0%	
UK	+0.1%	+0.7%	+1.5%	
Canada	+1.2%	+1.3%	+2.4%	
Emerging Market & Developing Economies				
Country	2023	2024F	2025F	
China	+5.2%	+5.0%	+4.5%	
India	+8.2%	+7.0%	+6.5%	
Russia	+3.6%	+3.2%	+1.5%	
Brazil	+2.9%	+2.1%	+2.4%	
Mexico	+3.2%	+2.2%	+1.6%	
Saudi Arabia	+0.8%	+1.7%	+4.7%	
Nigeria	+2.9%	+3.1%	+3.0%	
South Africa	+0.7%	+0.9%	+1.2%	

“Maharashtra Neglected by BJP: Congress Pledges to Bring Prosperity, Growth, and Justice to Every Citizen”

Photo: GettyImages



Over the past several years, Maharashtra's economy has been crippled by policies that prioritise politics over progress. As major industrial projects have been pulled away from the state under the BJP-led administration, Maharashtra has seen potential growth, job creation, and investment slip through its fingers. According to Maharashtra Congress President Nana Patole, the state is being left behind due to actions from the central government, which continues to relocate promising projects to other regions. “Maharashtra has always been a powerhouse of industry and development. But under the BJP government, this potential has been systematically dismantled,” Patole recently remarked.

Key examples of this pattern include the Tata-Airbus and Vedanta Foxconn projects. Originally proposed to bring Maharashtra thousands of jobs and substantial investments, both projects were transferred to Gujarat under unclear circumstances. The Tata-Airbus deal, valued at ₹22,000 crore, promised 10,000 new jobs for skilled workers, engineers, and local businesses. Similarly, the Vedanta Foxconn project, an investment worth over ₹1.5 lakh crore, would have made Maharashtra a central hub for semiconductor manufacturing in India. Instead, these opportunities have gone to Gujarat, leading to outrage and concern among citizens who feel Maharashtra's future is being sacrificed.

In the lead-up to the assembly elections, Congress has made it clear that their place as an industrial leader in the country. Their promise is rooted in a transparent and fair investment policy that will retain projects within the state and attract new investments from both domestic and international firms. “For Maharashtra's youth, for its workers, for its industries, Congress will prioritise this state above political gamesmanship,” Patole added. The party has assured citizens that under Congress, Maharashtra's industries would thrive without fear of central interference, paving the way for a future of sustainable growth and local prosperity.

Maharashtra Deserves Better Congress' Vision for a Prosperous and Inclusive Future

As Maharashtra prepares for the upcoming Assembly elections, the Congress Party offers a comprehensive vision of growth, accountability, and social justice. Congress is committed to addressing the pressing issues facing the state—from unemployment and farmer distress to inadequate healthcare and rising costs of living. With the motto “Maharashtra Deserves Better,” Congress promises a future of transparency, empowerment, and prosperity for every citizen.

Addressing Core Issues

The Congress manifesto outlines a strong focus on job creation, agriculture, education, and healthcare. The unemployment crisis has left millions of youth struggling for sustainable livelihoods. Congress pledges a youth-focused employment plan, with an emphasis on creating jobs through public and private partnerships.

Maharashtra's farmers continue to face challenges due to fluctuating crop prices, debt burdens, and erratic climate patterns. Congress aims to strengthen the Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanism, provide interest-free loans, and implement insurance reforms to protect farmers. In recent statements, the leaders of the party have reiterated the vision of the Congress. “Our farmers deserve a system that works for them, not against them,” said Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge, stressing the need for comprehensive agricultural reform.

Education and Healthcare for All

The Congress vision includes accessible, quality healthcare and education as essential pillars of the state's future. With rising healthcare costs, Congress proposes a free public healthcare program that ensures every citizen can access essential treatments

without financial strain. “Healthcare should be a right, not a privilege. We will work to make hospitals and medicines affordable and accessible to all,” said Rahul Gandhi, emphasising the need to prioritise public health.

In education, Congress plans to boost funding for government schools, vocational training, and scholarships to build a skilled, employable youth population. Priyanka Gandhi, advocating for women's education and empowerment, said, “Educating our girls means empowering our families. Congress will ensure that every child, especially every girl, has a right to quality education.”

Women's Empowerment and Social Justice

Maharashtra's women are at the heart of Congress' vision, with initiatives focusing on economic independence, safety, and representation. Congress has pledged to introduce financial aid programs for female entrepreneurs,

provide free skill-training centers, and ensure equal opportunities in government jobs. “Empowering women empowers the state,” said Priyanka Gandhi, advocating for stronger policies that support women-led businesses and equal workplace participation.

A Vision of Accountability

A vital part of Congress' platform is accountability and transparency. The party promises to create mechanisms to track public funds and ensure they reach the people. “Maharashtra deserves leaders who are accountable to its citizens,” said Rahul Gandhi. “Congress will ensure that every rupee of public money is spent with integrity.” With a clear vision, concrete promises, and a commitment to democratic values, Congress presents itself as a party that understands Maharashtra's aspirations. The people of Maharashtra deserve a government that prioritises their needs, respects their rights, and provides a future they can believe in.

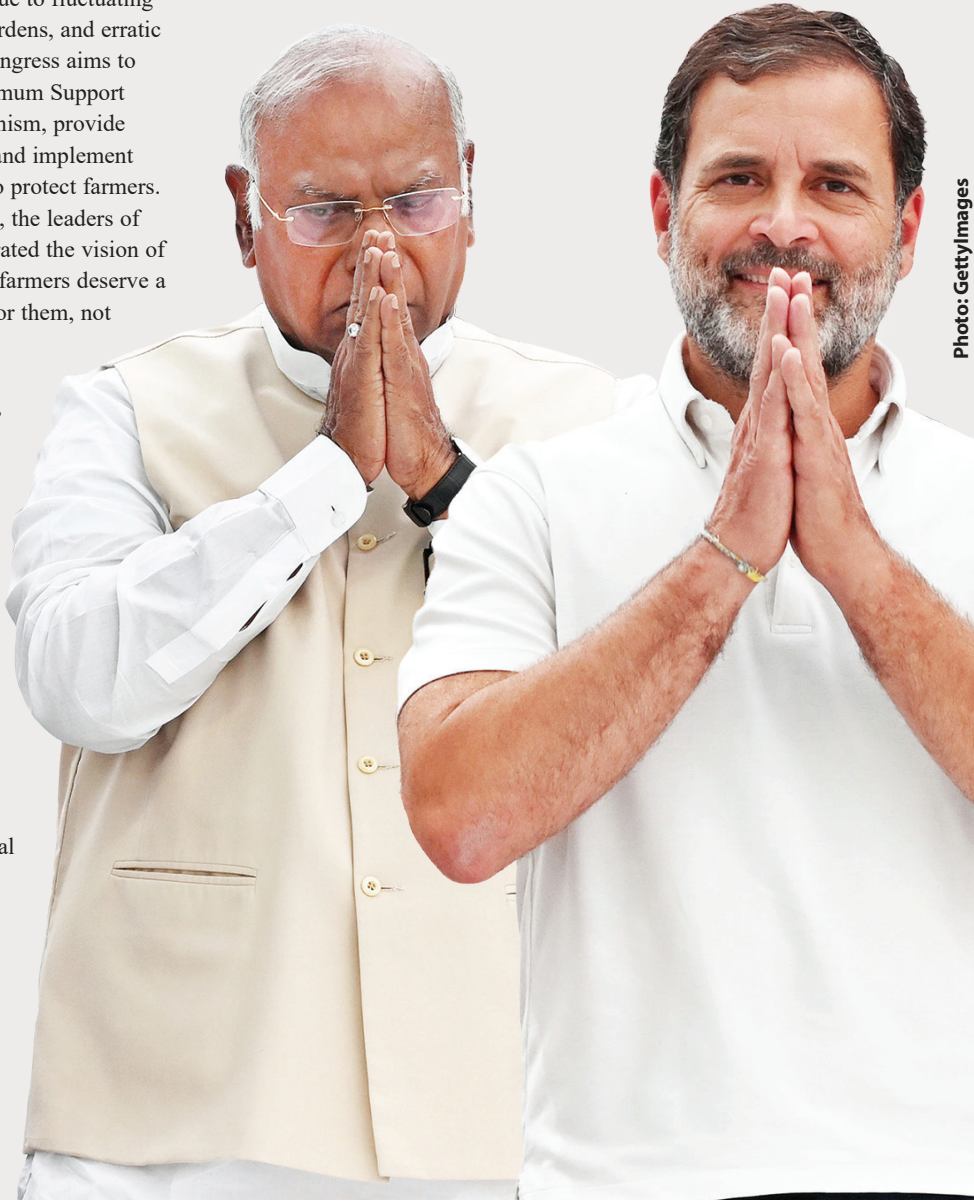


Photo: GettyImages

Congress Stands with Farmers and Workers: A Plan to Tackle Inflation and Rising Costs

Photo: GettyImages



As inflation continues to impact households across Maharashtra, the burden falls heavily on the state's most vulnerable – farmers, labourers, and low-income families. Maharashtra's agricultural communities, in particular, have faced rising costs for essentials, forcing them into mounting debt and uncertainty about their future. Under the BJP government, basic items such as fertilizers, seeds, and transportation have become increasingly expensive, cutting deeply into the livelihoods of small-scale farmers who make up the backbone of Maharashtra's economy. Recognising this, the Congress Party is stepping forward with a detailed plan to tackle inflation and provide much-needed relief to Maharashtra's citizens.

Congress promises to introduce a series of reforms aimed at controlling inflation, supporting farmers, and reducing daily expenses for all. By setting fair minimum support prices (MSP) and strengthening crop insurance policies, Congress aims to create a safety net for farmers, ensuring they are no longer vulnerable to volatile market prices. Additionally, the party pledges to improve the distribution of farming subsidies so that resources reach even the most remote areas, allowing small and medium farmers access to affordable inputs.

But the Congress plan goes beyond agricultural support. For urban workers and daily-wage labourers who are hit hardest by price hikes, Congress has a vision to reduce essential costs and boost purchasing power. Initiatives to provide food subsidies, introduce affordable public transport options, and improve access to healthcare are central to their mission. “Inflation should not determine the quality of life for Maharashtra's citizens,” stated Nana Patole. “Congress is committed to making every day life more affordable so that every person, from our farmers to our workers, can thrive.” Through these comprehensive measures, Congress aims to provide immediate relief from inflation while addressing the root causes of rising costs. With a targeted approach that considers both rural and urban needs, Congress pledges to restore stability and security to Maharashtra's economy, one community at a time.

Reviving Maharashtra's Education and Healthcare

Congress' Commitment to Welfare

In recent years, Maharashtra's public healthcare system has suffered severe shortages of medicines, staff, and essential equipment.

Maharashtra's education and healthcare sectors, once pillars of the state's development, have deteriorated significantly under the current government. From under-resourced hospitals to schools lacking teachers and basic facilities, the impact of neglect has been devastating for citizens, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas. Congress, recognising these critical issues, is committed to reviving these essential services to ensure that every Maharashtrian has access to quality education and healthcare.

In recent years, Maharashtra's public healthcare system has suffered severe shortages of medicines, staff, and essential equipment. Patients, especially in rural areas, are often forced to travel long distances for



Photo: GettyImages

treatment, with little assurance that they'll receive adequate care upon arrival. The Congress Party's healthcare policy focuses on reversing these deficiencies by increasing healthcare funding, expanding hospital facilities, and ensuring a steady supply of medicines and equipment. Congress plans to establish a network of mobile health units to serve remote villages, providing essential care directly to communities with limited access. Additionally, by hiring more doctors and nurses, Congress aims to address the staffing shortfalls that have plagued Maharashtra's healthcare facilities.

Similarly, Congress has set out an ambitious plan to overhaul Maharashtra's education system. With a focus on making quality education accessible to all, Congress pledges to improve school infrastructure, provide

scholarships to students from marginalised communities, and increase teacher training and recruitment. They also plan to introduce vocational training programs aimed at giving young people practical skills and better job prospects. “Education is the foundation of opportunity,” stated a Congress spokesperson. “By investing in schools and educators, we are investing in Maharashtra's future.”

Through this dual approach to healthcare and education, Congress hopes to restore dignity, health, and opportunity to the people of Maharashtra. “Maharashtra deserves leaders who put people first,” Nana Patole said. “With Congress, every citizen can trust that their basic needs for education and health will be met and that they have a future filled with potential.”



Maharashtra Demands Accountability

How the BJP’s Mismanagement and Broken Promises Have Led to Discontent Across the State

As Maharashtra approaches the upcoming assembly elections, the Congress Party has intensified its critique of the BJP-led administration, focusing on the ruling government’s perceived failures on several critical fronts. From economic stagnation and unemployment to the neglect of farmers, healthcare, and rising costs of living, Congress leaders are highlighting issues they say have resulted from the BJP’s ineffective policies and broken promises.

In a state with a rich legacy of industry, agriculture, and cultural vibrancy, these unmet promises and abandoned responsi-

bilities have left citizens across Maharashtra questioning the government’s priorities. Congress argues that BJP has not only failed to

foster growth but has actively hindered it, allowing political interests to undermine the well-being of the people. Here, we take a closer

look at four major areas where Congress says BJP’s policies have failed Maharashtra, leaving the people frustrated and searching for change.

Photo: GettyImages



1. Jobs Lost, Promises Broken- BJP’s Failure on Employment

Employment has been one of the most pressing concerns for the people of Maharashtra. The BJP government came into power with the promise of creating job opportunities and boosting economic growth. However, the reality has been quite the opposite, with the state witnessing a noticeable decline in job creation over the past few years. The BJP government’s inability to retain key industrial projects has had a ripple effect, resulting in massive job losses and missed opportunities for Maharashtra’s youth.

Two notable examples are the Tata-Airbus and Vedanta Foxconn projects, which would have injected thousands of jobs and brought significant investments to Maharashtra. Originally planned for the state, these major projects were instead shifted to Gujarat, depriving Maharashtra of an estimated ₹1.5 lakh crore in investment and more than 10,000 jobs. This reallocation of projects not only weakened Maharashtra’s industrial landscape but also exposed the government’s failure to uphold its commitments to economic progress.

Congress leaders argue that the BJP’s policies have prioritised political alliances and special interests over the needs of the people. Maharashtra Congress President Nana Patole has been vocal about the missed opportunities, stating, “BJP’s policies have stolen opportunities from Maharashtra’s youth, pushing them to the brink of hopelessness. Our state has always been an industrial powerhouse, but the BJP has systematically dismantled that foundation for political convenience.” Congress is proposing a series of measures to restore job

growth and attract investments back to Maharashtra. The party pledges to create a pro-business environment that encourages local industries, supports entrepreneurship, and creates more job opportunities for Maharashtra’s youth. Congress leaders are confident that, with the right policies in place, Maharashtra can reclaim its status as a leading industrial hub in India.

2. Farmers in Crisis: How BJP’s Policies Deepened Rural Hardships

Photo: GettyImages



Maharashtra has long been one of India’s most agriculturally productive states, but the challenges facing farmers have worsened significantly under the BJP government. Rising costs of inputs such as fertilizers, seeds, and fuel, combined with insufficient government support, have placed a heavy burden on Maharashtra’s farmers. Many farmers, particularly those in Vidarbha and Marathwada, have fallen into a cycle of debt and despair, struggling to sustain their livelihoods in the face of

economic hardship and an indifferent administration. Despite this crisis, the BJP government has done little to provide a robust safety net or financial relief to farmers. Crop prices remain unpredictable, leaving farmers vulnerable to market volatility. The situation has grown so dire that incidents of farmer suicides have tragically increased, a sombre indicator of the level of distress in rural Maharashtra. The BJP’s promises to support farmers have largely gone unfulfilled, leaving them to fend for themselves in a

challenging economic landscape. Congress, by contrast, has put forth a plan to alleviate the burden on farmers through targeted measures designed to improve their financial stability. Among these initiatives, Congress has committed to setting fair minimum support prices (MSP) for major crops, ensuring that farmers receive a stable and fair income for their produce. Additionally, Congress aims to strengthen crop insurance policies to protect farmers from unpredictable weather and market fluctuations. The party also

plans to streamline the distribution of subsidies and resources to reach even the most remote farming communities, so small and medium-scale farmers can access the support they need. “Congress believes that Maharashtra’s farmers deserve dignity and hope,” said a Congress spokesperson. “Under the BJP, they’ve been ignored and neglected. Our policies will restore security and prosperity to our agricultural sector, ensuring that Maharashtra’s farmers can thrive.”

4. Rising Prices and Inflation: Maharashtra’s Cost of Living Crisis

Under the current BJP government, inflation has become a major concern for citizens across Maharashtra. The rising costs of essential goods and services have placed immense pressure on household budgets, forcing many families to make difficult choices between meeting basic needs and paying for healthcare, education, and other necessities. Congress argues that rather than addressing this crisis, the BJP government has allowed prices to rise unchecked, creating a cost-of-living crisis that has impacted every segment of society.

From groceries to transportation, the cost of living has surged in Maharashtra, affecting families, small businesses, and workers alike. Congress leaders have pointed out that the BJP government’s failure to tackle inflation and support low-income families has exacerbated poverty and financial insecurity throughout the state. The party has pledged to implement a range of relief measures to make life more affordable for Maharashtra’s citizens, particularly those hit hardest by rising prices.

Among these initiatives, Congress has proposed food subsidies, affordable public transportation, and price controls on essential goods. By targeting these critical areas, Congress hopes to reduce the financial burden on Maharashtra’s citizens, ensuring that every family can afford the basics without compromising their quality of life. “We will bring back affordability and support for Maharashtra’s families,” stated Nana Patole. “BJP’s neglect has gone on long enough. It’s time to give Maharashtra’s citizens a government that prioritises their welfare over political games.”

The Need for Change

The Congress Party’s critique of the BJP administration highlights a series of policy failures that have left Maharashtra struggling with job losses, a deepening agricultural crisis, neglected healthcare, and a cost-of-living surge. According to Congress leaders, these issues stem from a government more interested in retaining power than in addressing the needs of the people. As Maharashtra heads to the polls, Congress urges voters to hold the BJP accountable for these missteps and to support a party committed to the well-being and prosperity of every citizen.

Congress’ vision for Maharashtra includes a robust plan to revive the state’s economy, empower farmers, strengthen healthcare and education, and control inflation. Their approach focuses on restoring dignity, security, and opportunity for every Maharashtrian, ensuring that the state’s resources and potential benefit all its people rather than serving a select few.

With Maharashtra’s future at stake, Congress leaders call for an end to the BJP’s neglect and failed policies. They argue that the people of Maharashtra deserve a government that puts their interests first and that Congress is prepared to deliver on that promise. As the assembly elections approach, Congress appeals to citizens to support their vision for a Maharashtra that values growth, justice, and the welfare of all its people.

3. Healthcare Neglected: BJP’s Inaction Endangers Lives

The healthcare sector in Maharashtra, once a source of pride, has suffered severe setbacks under the BJP government. Hospitals, especially in rural and underprivileged areas, face chronic shortages of essential supplies, including medicines, staff, and equipment. Patients in these regions often have to travel considerable distances to access healthcare, only to find under-resourced facilities and long waiting times. These issues have

intensified in recent years, leaving countless families struggling to receive the medical care they need. Maharashtra’s rural and urban healthcare systems are strained by staffing shortages, lack of medicines, and a crumbling infrastructure that hampers the effective delivery of services. Congress leaders have pointed out that these shortcomings reflect a deeper neglect of public health by the BJP administration. “Every Maharashtrian

deserves access to quality healthcare, yet under the BJP, this right has been compromised,” said a Congress representative. Congress has made it clear that if given the opportunity, they would prioritise healthcare, expanding access to essential services and rebuilding the state’s healthcare infrastructure. Congress has proposed a detailed plan to tackle these challenges, including increased healthcare funding, enhanced rural healthcare

facilities, and a streamlined system for the consistent supply of essential medicines. Additionally, the party intends to establish mobile health units to reach remote areas, bringing medical services directly to communities with limited access. By hiring more doctors and nurses, Congress aims to fill the staffing gaps that have crippled Maharashtra’s healthcare services, ensuring that quality healthcare is accessible to every citizen.

Photo: GettyImages

“BJP’s Neglect of Farmers and Marginalised Communities in Maharashtra”



As Maharashtra approaches the crucial upcoming assembly elections, the Congress Party is shedding light on the incumbent BJP-led government’s failures, specifically highlighting its neglect of farmers and social justice. Congress leaders have been vocal about the detrimental impact that the current administration’s policies have had on Maharashtra’s agrarian community, marginalised groups, and social fabric. With a consistent message of delivering on promises and restoring prosperity, Congress presents itself as the answer to these neglected issues. This page covers two major areas in which the BJP’s governance has been lacking: farmers’ welfare and social justice.

For generations, Maharashtra’s farmers have been the backbone of the state’s economy, but today they face a crisis of unprecedented proportions. The Congress Party has raised alarm over the BJP-led government’s failure to provide essential support to the farming community, leaving them vulnerable to a cycle of debt, low crop prices, and worsening living conditions.

Since taking office, the BJP government has promised various schemes and initiatives to help farmers, yet many of these promises remain unfulfilled. Rising input costs, including those for seeds, fertilizers, and fuel, continue to eat into farmers’ already meagre earnings, while crop prices have remained volatile. This instability has created a perfect storm, leading to an alarming rate of farmer suicides, particularly in regions like Vidarbha and Marathwada. A lack of sustainable policies from the BJP

administration has further compounded the issue, pushing farmers deeper into poverty and despair.

Crop Losses Due to Recent Rain: BJP’s Inadequate Response

In the past month, Maharashtra experienced unseasonal rains that devastated crops across several districts, especially in Marathwada, Vidarbha, and Northern Maharashtra. Thousands of farmers watched helplessly as their fields were damaged or destroyed, leading to estimated losses worth hundreds of crores. The BJP government promised quick relief, but farmers in affected areas have voiced frustration with the inadequate compensation and delayed distribution of aid. Farmers across the state feel neglected, as relief packages remain insufficient, leaving them with little hope for recovery.

Local farmer organisations and the Congress have rallied to highlight the plight of those affected. Congress spokespersons have repeatedly stressed the need for timely compensation, efficient disaster relief, and a long-term agricultural support strategy. Congress leader Nana Patole noted, “The BJP government makes promises on farmers’ welfare, but when disaster strikes, their response is sluggish and ineffective. Our farmers deserve better.”

BJP’s Policies on MSP: Falling Short on Promises

The Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanism, intended to protect farmers from price volatility, has been another area where the BJP’s policies have failed Maharashtra’s

agrarian community. Many farmers argue that the MSP rates are either too low or inconsistently enforced, with several key crops not receiving fair market prices. This forces farmers to sell their produce at losses, often falling into debt cycles.

Congress has emphasised its commitment to stabilising MSP and ensuring that farmers can sell their crops at profitable rates. In addition to fair MSP, Congress has proposed comprehensive crop insurance schemes that would protect farmers from the risks of natural calamities and market fluctuations. By bolstering such safety nets, Congress aims to break the cycle of debt and distress that has burdened Maharashtra’s farmers for far too long.

The Congress Plan: Empowering Farmers for a Stable Future

In its manifesto, Congress promises to bring real change to Maharashtra’s farmers by introducing sustainable policies, offering fair MSP, and improving crop insurance schemes. Congress plans to focus on irrigation infrastructure, efficient subsidy delivery, and access to affordable agricultural resources. These steps are designed to ensure that every farmer in Maharashtra can sustain a dignified livelihood.

“Maharashtra’s farmers deserve more than empty promises,” said a Congress representative. “Congress is committed to transforming their lives by addressing the root causes of their struggles and bringing security and prosperity back to Maharashtra’s agricultural sector.”

Social Justice: BJP’s Failure to Uplift Marginalised Communities

Photo: GettyImages

Social justice has been a cornerstone of Maharashtra’s political ethos, yet under the BJP-led government, marginalised communities have seen a decline in opportunities and support. The Congress Party accuses the BJP of eroding the social fabric by scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other under-represented communities. The ongoing lack of resources for education, health, and employment initiatives for these groups has left many struggling to access basic rights and opportunities.

Education and Employment: Barriers to Progress for Marginalised Groups



Photo: GettyImages

young people from these communities to secure quality jobs or advance in society.

The BJP government has repeatedly promised reforms in the education sector, yet significant gaps remain, particularly in regions with a high population of tribal and backward communities. Congress argues that education reform should be prioritised, with emphasis on creating equal opportunities for students in marginalised communities. Congress leader Nana Patole has emphasised, “Without quality education, the cycle of poverty continues. The BJP government has failed to deliver meaningful education reform, leaving a generation behind.”

In terms of employment, the BJP has failed to offer concrete policies to create job

access to growth opportunities.

Healthcare for All: BJP’s Neglect of Rural and Tribal Health Needs

Healthcare is another critical area where the BJP government’s neglect has had severe repercussions for Maharashtra’s marginalised communities. Rural and tribal areas lack access to basic healthcare services, with few government hospitals, inadequate medical staff, and frequent medicine shortages. As a result, preventable diseases continue to affect communities that cannot afford private healthcare.

In the recent past, there have been reports of healthcare crises in tribal regions where patients have died due to the lack of basic facilities and medicines. For instance, in the tribal areas of Palghar, inadequate healthcare infrastructure led to tragic outcomes when several young children suffered from malnutrition and disease. Congress leaders have emphasised that these incidents reflect the BJP’s failure to provide basic health services to Maharashtra’s most vulnerable populations.

Congress has pledged to address these healthcare gaps by increasing the number of government hospitals, enhancing rural healthcare infrastructure, and ensuring a consistent supply of medicines. The party also plans to focus on preventive healthcare, which includes regular health check-ups and public health awareness programs, particularly in underserved areas. “Every citizen deserves access to healthcare, regardless of their location or income,” a Congress spokesperson stated. “BJP has ignored this responsibility. Congress will prioritise healthcare and provide resources where they are needed most.”

Congress’ Vision for Social Justice: Building an Inclusive Maharashtra

For Congress, social justice goes beyond political rhetoric; it is a commitment to equality and empowerment. The party’s manifesto outlines a vision for an inclusive Maharashtra, where marginalised communities have equal access to education, employment, and healthcare. By providing scholarships, vocational training programs, and anti-discrimination policies, Congress aims to level the playing field for Maharashtra’s most vulnerable citizens.

As part of its strategy, Congress has also promised to address caste-based discrimination in workplaces, schools, and communities. The party will strengthen policies that protect the rights of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and other disadvantaged groups, empowering them



to participate fully in Maharashtra’s progress.

Recent Protests and Congress’ Commitment to Social Justice

Over recent months, several protests have erupted across Maharashtra, with citizens demanding social justice reforms and criticising the BJP government’s inaction on key issues. In response, Congress leaders have shown solidarity with the protesters, vowing to tackle these injustices head-on. Congress spokesperson Jairam Ramesh commented, “Maharashtra’s citizens have spoken. They demand social justice, equality, and dignity. Congress will ensure that no one is left behind in our journey towards an inclusive and fair Maharashtra.”

Through its emphasis on farmers’ welfare and social justice, the Congress Party is challenging the BJP-led government’s record

and its impact on the lives of everyday citizens. From neglected farmers struggling to survive to marginalised communities lacking basic rights and services, Congress leaders argue that the BJP has consistently failed Maharashtra’s people.

The Congress manifesto offers a new direction—one that prioritises empowerment, fairness, and prosperity for all. Congress promises to bring meaningful change by addressing the root causes of Maharashtra’s issues, restoring dignity to farmers, and ensuring equal opportunities for every citizen.

As the election draws near, Maharashtra’s future hangs in the balance. Congress urges the people of Maharashtra to hold the BJP accountable for its failures and to choose a government that will prioritise their welfare, growth, and justice.



Healthcare Crisis and Soaring Unemployment

Maharashtra's Struggles Under the BJP's Ineffective Policies



Photo: GettyImages

The people of Maharashtra are confronting pressing issues that the BJP government has repeatedly failed to address. The state's healthcare system, especially in rural and underserved regions, has been plagued by poor infrastructure, lack of staff, and chronic

Maharashtra's healthcare sector, once a robust system serving millions, is now in a dire state due to underfunding, inadequate facilities, and a lack of accessible care, particularly in rural and tribal regions.

medicine shortages. Simultaneously, unemployment has reached new heights, leaving many young people without stable jobs or growth opportunities. On this page, we

focus on these critical issues—the healthcare crisis and the spike in unemployment—and Congress's solutions to turn the tide in Maharashtra.

Maharashtra's healthcare sector, once a robust system serving millions, is now in a dire state due to underfunding, inadequate facilities, and a lack of accessible care, particularly in rural and tribal regions. The Congress Party has called out the BJP-led government for its failure to provide quality healthcare services across the state, leaving many citizens without essential medical resources. The Congress aims to revitalise Maharashtra's healthcare infrastructure and address these urgent issues that the current government has long ignored.

Rural Healthcare: A Case of Neglect

In rural districts like Palghar, Gadchiroli, and Nandurbar, medical facilities remain

critically underserved. Basic amenities are unavailable in many areas, with healthcare centres either severely understaffed or entirely non-functional. Citizens often must travel long distances to receive treatment, a journey that many simply cannot afford. Recent reports highlighted incidents in Palghar where children died due to malnutrition and preventable diseases, underscoring the severity of the crisis.

Doctors and healthcare workers from these regions have been vocal about the issues they face daily. Inadequate funding has led to shortages in life-saving medicines, diagnostic tools, and staff, making it impossible for rural centres to provide even primary care services. The Congress has emphasised that healthcare in rural Maharashtra needs to be reformed from the ground up, beginning with better funding, infrastructure development, and incentives to

attract skilled medical staff to underserved regions.

Lack of Medicines in Government Hospitals: A Growing Problem

Government hospitals throughout Maharashtra are facing a persistent shortage of medicines, making it difficult for them to serve patients effectively. In some recent cases, patients reported being turned away from hospitals due to a lack of even the most basic medicines like antibiotics, pain relievers, and vaccines. This shortage is especially acute in government hospitals serving low-income communities, where private healthcare is unaffordable. The Congress Party has pointed out that this reflects the BJP's apathy towards public health, particularly for vulnerable sections of society.

A Congress spokesperson recently commented, "In a state as developed as Maharashtra, it is

shocking that people are denied essential medicines in government hospitals. This is not just a healthcare issue; it is a matter of dignity and basic human rights."

Congress is pledging to

address this problem by implementing robust supply chain management for government hospitals and creating a reserve fund to ensure no hospital runs out of essential medicines.

Congress Exposes the Failures

Photo: GettyImages



Last month, Congress launched a campaign to draw attention to Maharashtra's healthcare crisis, citing cases where patients lost their lives due to inadequate facilities and lack of timely treatment. Leaders from the Congress, including spokespersons and medical experts, visited several rural health centres and recorded testimonies from patients who had been affected. The findings highlighted a widespread systemic failure that Congress is committed to addressing if given the mandate in the upcoming elections.

The Congress manifesto includes plans to significantly increase healthcare funding, with a focus on rural and tribal areas. Key initiatives include mobile healthcare units, an expanded primary healthcare network, improved training and retention programs for doctors in rural areas, and the introduction of telemedicine to extend reach in remote locations.

Congress's Vision for Healthcare in Maharashtra

The Congress Party envisions a Maharashtra where every citizen, regardless of their location or economic status, has access to quality healthcare. To achieve this, Congress plans to increase healthcare spending, create a system for accountability in healthcare delivery, and establish quality standards for government hospitals and rural healthcare centres. Their healthcare vision is centered on inclusivity, accessibility, and responsiveness to the needs of Maharashtra's citizens, ensuring that the current healthcare crisis is a thing of the past.

Rising Unemployment in Maharashtra

A Generation Without Opportunities Under BJP Rule

Unemployment is a growing issue in Maharashtra, and the youth of the state are facing a tough reality with limited job opportunities and uncertain futures. The Congress Party has raised concerns over the BJP government's inability to generate stable employment, despite several promises. In fact, recent data reveals that Maharashtra's unemployment rate has spiked, particularly among young people, due to a lack of investment and coherent job creation policies by the BJP-led administration.

Brain Drain: Maharashtra Losing Talent to Other States

One of the most pressing issues related to unemployment is Maharashtra's "brain drain," where young professionals, especially in fields like engineering and IT, are leaving the state for better opportunities elsewhere. Several major projects, like the Tata-Airbus and Vedanta Foxconn, which could have brought thousands of jobs to Maharashtra, were shifted to Gujarat, drawing public criticism and fuelling resentment among Maharashtra's youth.

Congress leader Nana Patole noted, "Our young people are our future, yet they are forced to leave their homes because this government has no vision or plan to retain talent in Maharashtra. These projects were not just about investment but about giving our young citizens the future they deserve."

The Congress Party has strongly condemned the BJP government for "snatching" away these job opportunities and warned that unless there is a change, Maharashtra risks losing an entire generation of talented professionals. Congress has pledged to

prioritise bringing investment back to Maharashtra, ensuring that key projects and industries are retained within the state, and developing policies to provide incentives for companies to set up operations in Maharashtra.

Skill Development and Vocational Training: Congress's Solution for the Youth

The lack of skill development initiatives is another factor contributing to Maharashtra's high unemployment rate. While the BJP government introduced some skill development schemes, Congress leaders argue that these programs were inadequately implemented and reached only a small percentage of the population. As a result, many young people lack the skills needed to compete in today's job market.

To address this issue, Congress plans to implement a comprehensive skill development and vocational training program. Congress's vision includes creating partnerships with private industries, expanding technical training institutions, and providing state-backed certification courses that align with current job market demands. The Congress Party believes that skill development should be a top priority to create a skilled workforce that can attract both national and international companies to invest in Maharashtra.

Recent Developments: Youth Unemployment Protests

In recent months, Maharashtra witnessed protests led by youth groups demanding more job opportunities and accountability from the government. These protests highlighted the



Photo: GettyImages

desperation among young people for meaningful work, with several protesters sharing stories of having pursued higher education only to remain unemployed or underemployed. Congress leaders have joined hands with these protesters, vowing to create sustainable employment solutions and work towards a Maharashtra where every young person has the opportunity to succeed.

Nana Patole, speaking at a recent youth rally, said, "Our youth are the strength of Maharashtra, and it is unacceptable that they are denied their future. Congress is here to

change this narrative. We believe in creating opportunities, not empty promises."

Congress's Employment Agenda: A Roadmap for the Future

In its manifesto, Congress promises a multi-faceted approach to tackle unemployment. The Congress Party's roadmap includes creating new industrial zones, providing incentives for local entrepreneurs, and fostering an environment conducive to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that can provide employment in regional centres beyond

Mumbai and Pune. By decentralising job creation and investing in rural and semi-urban areas, Congress aims to create job opportunities across the state.

Furthermore, Congress intends to set up "Employment Hubs" in districts, offering career counselling, training, and job placement services for young people entering the workforce. By bridging the gap between education and employment, Congress's employment hubs will ensure that Maharashtra's youth are job-ready and able to find fulfilling careers within the state.

Congress's Commitment to Employment and Prosperity

The BJP-led government's failure to generate jobs has been felt across Maharashtra, especially among its youth, who are forced to look beyond the state for better opportunities. Congress is positioning itself as the solution to this growing crisis, promising real and effective job creation strategies. By addressing both unemployment and underemployment, Congress aims to transform Maharashtra into a state where every citizen has the chance to thrive and contribute to a prosperous society.

Congress has questioned the healthcare crisis and rising unemployment—that have gone unaddressed by the BJP government. Congress's vision provides solutions that prioritise the welfare of Maharashtra's citizens, addressing systemic issues in healthcare while ensuring that youth have access to quality jobs within the state.

Through their manifesto and recent outreach, Congress aims to restore Maharashtra's prosperity and improve the quality of life for all its residents.

A Vision of Equality

Congress Pledges Social Justice and Education Reform to Empower Maharashtra

Speaking on this issue, Maharashtra Congress President Nana Patole remarked, “Social justice is the foundation of our state’s progress, and any attempt to weaken it is a threat to Maharashtra’s unity and prosperity.”



Photo: GettyImages

In Maharashtra, deep-seated issues related to social justice and education remain unaddressed under the current government, creating barriers to equitable progress. The Congress Party is committed to resolving these challenges by providing greater access to quality education and ensuring social justice for marginalised communities. With a clear vision for an inclusive and prosperous Maharashtra, Congress aims to bridge the gaps that have long divided the state’s communities.

Bridging the Divide: Congress’s Vision for Social Justice in Maharashtra

The promise of social justice has long been a cornerstone of Maharashtra’s identity, yet under the current BJP-led government, the state’s marginalised communities continue to struggle for equality. The Congress Party is focusing on a platform of social justice that seeks to address issues of caste-based discrimination, economic disparity, and access to opportunities for Dalits, OBCs, Adivasis, and other historically disadvantaged groups. This article

sheds light on Congress’s commitment to providing equitable opportunities for all of Maharashtra’s citizens and highlights recent events that underscore the urgency of these reforms.

Marginalised Communities Facing Injustice

In recent years, there has been a troubling rise in incidents of discrimination and violence targeting marginalised communities. Cases of Dalit atrocities, for example, have been reported across the state, with data showing an increase in caste-based violence, particularly in rural Maharashtra. According to social activists, this rise is a direct result of inadequate protections and lack of enforcement by the current government. Congress has strongly condemned the BJP’s inaction in these cases, pointing out that Maharashtra’s social fabric cannot thrive if significant portions of the population continue to feel marginalised and vulnerable.

Speaking on this issue, Maharashtra Congress President Nana Patole remarked, “Social justice, and any attempt to weaken it is a threat to

Maharashtra’s unity and prosperity. Congress will ensure that every citizen is protected, valued, and empowered, regardless of their background.”

Dalit Rights and Anti-Discrimination Laws

One of Congress’s primary goals is to ensure the strict enforcement of anti-discrimination laws to protect the rights of Dalits and other marginalised communities. Despite existing legal frameworks, cases of discrimination and violence often go unpunished due to systemic biases and inadequate oversight. Congress has pledged to strengthen these legal protections, streamline the justice process for victims, and hold perpetrators accountable through fast-track courts.

In addition, Congress is committed to implementing affirmative action programs that support marginalised communities in accessing education, employment, and social services. Congress’s vision for social justice also includes economic support programs and vocational training for disadvantaged groups, ensuring that social upliftment extends beyond mere policy to create meaningful progress in people’s lives.

Congress’s Outreach to Marginalised Communities

In recent months, Congress leaders have embarked on a statewide outreach initiative to engage directly with marginalised communities and understand their needs and grievances. Leaders like Nana Patole and Prithviraj Chavan have held public meetings in various districts, from Marathwada to Vidarbha, addressing issues of caste violence, lack of access to resources, and economic disparity. This initiative has resonated strongly with local communities, who feel that Congress understands their struggles and is willing to take meaningful action.

Through these interactions, Congress has been able to identify specific policies and programs that would benefit marginalised communities, such as increased scholarships for students from underprivileged backgrounds, land rights for Adivasi communities, and healthcare programs specifically for rural areas.



Photo: GettyImages

Congress’s Social Justice Agenda

At the heart of Congress’s social justice agenda is a vision of inclusivity and equality. Congress aims to create a state where every citizen feels secure and supported, with access to equal opportunities and resources. Their proposed initiatives include the creation of an independent Social Justice Commission to oversee policies, an expansion of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, and increased state funding for housing, healthcare, and education programs targeted at disadvantaged communities. For Congress, social justice is not just a campaign issue but a fundamental responsibility, and they are determined to uphold Maharashtra’s legacy of social unity and progress.

Reviving Education: Congress’s Plan for an Equitable and Accessible Education System in Maharashtra



Photo: GettyImages

Education is the foundation of a prosperous society, yet Maharashtra’s education system has suffered under the BJP-led government, with public schools and colleges experiencing chronic underfunding, low enrolment, and poor learning outcomes. The Congress Party is committed to transforming the education landscape by implementing policies that enhance accessibility, improve infrastructure, and promote quality education for every child in Maharashtra.

The State of Education: Current Challenges

Under the BJP government, Maharashtra’s public education system has been plagued by insufficient funding, deteriorating facilities, and a shortage of qualified teachers. Reports show that several rural schools in districts like Nandurbar, Osmanabad, and Beed lack basic amenities, such as clean drinking water, electricity, and functioning toilets. These issues have led to a significant decline in student enrolment and an increase in dropout rates, particularly among

girls. Further exacerbating the situation, there has been a lack of emphasis on modernising the curriculum to prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century. Students from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly affected, as they lack access to quality education that would allow them to compete with peers from more affluent areas. In a recent address, Congress spokesperson Supriya Sule stated, “Education is a right, not a privilege. The BJP government’s

neglect of public education has created a generation of youth without the skills or opportunities they need to succeed. Congress will reverse this neglect and ensure that Maharashtra’s education system is one of opportunity, equality, and excellence.”

Ensuring Quality Education for Rural and Tribal Regions

One of Congress’s primary goals is to ensure that every child in Maharashtra, regardless of location, has access to quality education. The Congress manifesto includes plans to improve rural schools by improving infrastructure, providing digital learning tools, and training teachers. Special attention will be given to schools in tribal regions and other underserved areas, where educational resources are often limited or absent.

To address teacher shortages, Congress plans to launch a state-level recruitment drive, with an emphasis on hiring educators for rural areas. Additionally, Congress is committed to providing higher salaries and benefits for teachers in these regions, ensuring that experienced professionals are motivated to work in remote communities.

Free Education and Scholarship Programs



Recognising the urgent need for educational reform, Congress

To make education truly accessible, Congress has pledged to implement free and compulsory education up to the higher secondary level, with additional scholarships and financial assistance for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Congress has also emphasised its commitment to supporting higher education by expanding scholarships for college students and creating vocational training programs that cater to the job market’s demands.

In addition, Congress has proposed increasing funding for state-run colleges and universities, ensuring they are equipped with modern facilities and qualified faculty. This focus on higher education is aimed at building a skilled workforce that will drive Maharashtra’s economic growth in the future.

Congress’s Education Outreach Program

has launched an education outreach program, visiting schools and colleges across Maharashtra to interact with students, parents, and teachers. These meetings have highlighted critical issues such as a lack of resources, outdated curriculum, and the need for skill-based training programs.

Through this outreach, Congress has also identified a significant gap in digital literacy among students, particularly in rural areas. To bridge this gap, Congress has proposed a Digital Education Initiative, which includes providing schools with smart classrooms, expanding internet connectivity in remote areas, and offering digital training for teachers.

Congress’s Education Reform Agenda

At the core of Congress’s education reform agenda is a commitment to inclusivity and quality. Congress envisions a

Maharashtra where every child has access to an education that prepares them for success, both academically and professionally. Their plans include expanding the state education budget, implementing accountability mechanisms for school performance, and encouraging partnerships with the private sector to improve vocational training programs.

By focusing on equitable education reform, Congress aims to create a future where Maharashtra’s youth have the tools they need to thrive, innovate, and contribute to the state’s progress. Congress is determined to foster an environment where education is the foundation of opportunity and empowerment for all.

Congress’s commitment to social justice and education reform are pillars of its vision for Maharashtra’s development. Through targeted initiatives aimed at marginalised communities and a robust educational reform agenda, Congress is setting the stage for a more equitable and prosperous Maharashtra. By addressing the current administration’s neglect of these critical issues, Congress is determined to create a state where every citizen has the chance to succeed and contribute to a brighter future for Maharashtra.

Easing the Burden of Inflation

Congress's Plan for Economic Relief

The rising cost of living and healthcare access issues are pressing concerns for the people of Maharashtra. Under the BJP-led government, inflation has soared, making basic necessities increasingly unaffordable, while public healthcare services are in disarray. Congress is committed to tackling these critical issues with policies aimed at controlling prices and revamping the state's healthcare

much-needed relief.

Rising Costs and Wages: A Growing Disparity

Under the current administration, inflation has surged, with prices of basic items such as vegetables, cooking oil, and grains seeing double-digit hikes. According to recent reports, the cost of vegetables alone has increased by over 20% in the last year. Fuel prices, too, have risen

Recognising the impact of high fuel prices on household budgets and transportation costs, Congress has proposed reducing the state tax on petrol and diesel.

system to ensure that quality medical care is accessible to all.

With inflation driving up the cost of essential goods and services, the financial pressure on ordinary households in Maharashtra has reached a breaking point. From escalating food prices to surging fuel costs, families are struggling to make ends meet. Congress has pledged to address these challenges through a comprehensive economic strategy that will prioritise the needs of the common people. Here's a closer look at how Congress plans to combat inflation and provide

steadily, impacting not only household budgets but also transportation costs for goods, further contributing to inflation.

Congress has highlighted the widening gap between wages and the cost of living as a direct outcome of what they term "mismanagement" by the BJP-led government. "Inflation is not just a statistical problem; it's a daily hardship for millions," said Congress spokesperson Sachin Sawant. "We are committed to controlling prices and ensuring that the people of Maharashtra can live with dignity."



Photo: GettyImages

Immediate Relief Through Subsidies and Price Controls

One of Congress's primary measures to tackle inflation is to reintroduce targeted subsidies on essential items such as cooking oil, pulses, and rice. Congress plans to roll back the recently reduced subsidies on essential commodities and strengthen Public Distribution Systems (PDS) to ensure that staple goods are affordable and accessible.

To further curb inflation, Congress has proposed creating a state-controlled Price Stability Fund that would

help regulate prices during periods of market volatility. This fund would be used to stabilise prices of basic food items and other essentials when market fluctuations lead to sudden spikes. Congress has also suggested that price controls be enforced more rigorously at local levels to prevent price gouging.

Fuel Price Relief and Transportation Subsidies

Recognising the impact of high fuel prices on household budgets and transportation costs, Congress has proposed reducing the state tax on

petrol and diesel. This reduction, according to Congress's economic advisors, would ease transportation costs for businesses and lead to a decrease in the cost of goods. Congress also plans to introduce subsidies for essential transportation services, which will help reduce logistical costs and make goods more affordable for consumers.

Recent Developments: Congress Launches "Inflation Truth Campaign"

To shed light on the impact of

inflation under the current government, Congress recently launched the "Inflation Truth Campaign," aimed at raising awareness about the root causes of the inflation crisis. Through this campaign, Congress leaders are engaging directly with citizens across Maharashtra, gathering their stories and highlighting the challenges faced by households as a result of unchecked price hikes.

As part of this initiative, Congress has set up information booths in key cities where experts explain Congress's proposed economic reforms and offer support in navigating local resources. This effort has resonated with citizens who feel that the BJP government has failed to address the everyday struggles brought about by inflation.

Long-Term Economic Reforms to Stabilise Prices

In addition to immediate relief measures, Congress's plan includes long-term economic reforms aimed at creating price stability and enhancing Maharashtra's economic resilience. These reforms include strengthening state regulatory mechanisms for key commodities, enhancing support for local agriculture to increase food production, and promoting sustainable energy to reduce dependency on fossil fuels. Congress's approach is designed to create a sustainable economic environment that will protect Maharashtra from future inflationary shocks.

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Congress's Commitment to Revamp Maharashtra's Ailing Healthcare System

Maharashtra's public healthcare system is in crisis. Reports from across the state reveal that government hospitals are struggling with inadequate supplies, staffing shortages, and deteriorating infrastructure. The BJP-led government's failure to address these issues has left citizens, especially in rural and underserved areas, without access to quality medical care. Congress is determined to overhaul Maharashtra's healthcare system, making it more accessible, affordable, and efficient.

Healthcare Infrastructure in Distress

The state's public healthcare facilities, particularly in rural areas, have been plagued by a lack of resources and poor infrastructure. Many hospitals are experiencing chronic shortages of medicines and essential supplies. Recent data from the Maharashtra State Health Department indicates that approximately 30% of government healthcare facilities have significant deficiencies in both medical staff and essential resources.

In a recent incident that gained widespread attention, a rural hospital in Yavatmal reported shortages of life-saving medicines, leading to tragic consequences for patients who could not afford to seek treatment at private hospitals. This incident has highlighted the critical need for a comprehensive restructuring of Maharashtra's healthcare system.

Congress leader Prithviraj Chavan condemned the government's negligence, saying, "It is unacceptable that people are suffering and even losing lives due to a lack of basic healthcare resources. Congress is committed to ensuring that every citizen has access to quality medical care, regardless of their income or location."

Congress's Vision: Accessible Healthcare for All

Congress's healthcare reform agenda focuses on creating an inclusive system that serves all citizens, regardless of socioeconomic status.



Photo: GettyImages

Key elements of Congress's plan include the expansion of public healthcare facilities, increased funding for essential supplies, and targeted hiring to address staff shortages in rural and underserved areas.

The Congress manifesto also emphasises the need to improve rural healthcare infrastructure. Congress aims to establish additional rural health centres equipped with modern diagnostic tools, increase the number of mobile medical units, and develop a referral system to ensure that patients have access to specialised care when needed.

Affordable Medicines and Healthcare Facilities

Congress's plan includes introducing a state-run scheme to make essential medicines available at affordable prices through government pharmacies. This initiative is designed to alleviate the financial burden on patients and ensure that all citizens can access necessary medications. Congress also plans to

set up a system for monitoring and controlling medicine prices to prevent unfair markups and make treatments affordable for everyone.

Another significant aspect of Congress's healthcare agenda is improving access to specialised care. Congress has committed to increasing the number of specialised healthcare facilities, particularly in districts where the availability of such services is limited. This

expansion includes opening dedicated cancer treatment centres, mental health clinics, and maternal health facilities.

Congress's "Health for Maharashtra" Campaign

In response to the healthcare crisis, Congress has launched the "Health for Maharashtra" campaign, a statewide initiative aimed at

advocating for better healthcare policies and educating citizens about the resources available to them. Through this campaign, Congress leaders are visiting hospitals across Maharashtra to understand the specific needs of each region and to demonstrate Congress's commitment to healthcare reform.

Congress has also partnered with local healthcare organisations to provide free check-ups and essential medical services as part of this campaign. The initiative has been well-received, with citizens expressing appreciation for Congress's efforts to bring attention to healthcare issues that have been overlooked by the current administration.

Digital Health Initiatives and Modernisation

To make Maharashtra's healthcare system more efficient and responsive, Congress is introducing digital health initiatives, including electronic health records and telemedicine services, especially in rural areas. By digitising patient records and implementing telemedicine, Congress aims to improve diagnosis accuracy, reduce waiting times, and enhance the overall patient experience. These technologies are expected to connect patients in remote areas with specialist doctors in urban centres, reducing the need for travel and expanding access to quality healthcare.

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Congress's Healthcare Policy: A Holistic Approach

In addition to infrastructure and access, Congress's healthcare policy emphasises preventive care and wellness programs to reduce the incidence of lifestyle-related diseases. Congress plans to invest in public health campaigns that promote awareness about diseases

such as diabetes, hypertension, and respiratory illnesses. By adopting a holistic approach that includes both treatment and prevention, Congress aims to create a healthier and more resilient Maharashtra. Congress focuses on the vision for addressing two critical issues

facing Maharashtra's people – inflation and healthcare. Through targeted measures, Congress aims to control rising prices and provide immediate relief to citizens struggling with the high cost of living. Simultaneously, Congress is determined to overhaul the

healthcare system, ensuring that every citizen has access to affordable and quality medical services. With these initiatives, Congress is demonstrating its commitment to creating a prosperous, healthy, and inclusive Maharashtra for all.



*Maharashtra
has a rich history as one of India's
economic powerhouses. Yet, under recent governance, the state's
economy has been plagued by missed opportunities, high unemployment rates,
and deepening agrarian distress.*

Congress believes it is time to redirect Maharashtra toward a more prosperous and inclusive future, with a clear commitment to job creation, agricultural reform, and economic rejuvenation. Congress' vision centres on policies that address the immediate needs of Maharashtra's citizens while paving the way for sustainable growth.

Job Creation and Youth Empowerment

Unemployment in Maharashtra has spiked, especially among young people. Recent data revealed that the state's youth are struggling with a lack of stable employment opportunities, pushing many to relocate or settle for temporary, low-paying jobs. Congress' roadmap to combat this involves a multipronged strategy focused on skill development, local industry growth, and digital empowerment.

Congress has committed to establishing skill development centres in every district, particularly targeting

emerging sectors like technology, healthcare, and renewable energy. These centres will provide training aligned with industry needs, ensuring Maharashtra's youth have the skills needed for modern job markets. Additionally, Congress has pledged to support the growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which are vital to Maharashtra's economy and can create jobs locally, reducing the dependency on large corporations.

A key recent event that underscores Congress' focus on job creation is the party's stance on the loss of the Tata-Airbus and Vedanta Foxconn projects to Gujarat. Congress leaders, including Nana Patole, have condemned the state government's failure to secure these investments, arguing that

Maharashtra's youth lost out on thousands of potential jobs. Congress promises to prioritise Maharashtra's interests and avoid such losses in the future by establishing a state-level investment board that will attract and retain high-value projects.

Agricultural Reform and Support for Farmers

Maharashtra's agricultural sector, essential to both its economy and identity, has faced a crisis of rising input costs, water shortages, and limited access to fair markets. Congress aims to restore stability and dignity to Maharashtra's farmers through a robust package that includes debt relief, minimum support prices (MSP), and a comprehensive crop insurance program.

Congress recently underscored its commitment to farmers during the Kharif season, as unseasonal rains damaged crops across the state. Congress leaders called for immediate relief measures, emphasising the need for a reliable crop insurance system to compensate farmers promptly and fully.

Congress plans to implement such a system, which will allow farmers to receive compensation quickly in case of crop failures due to weather or other unforeseen challenges.

Additionally, Congress promises to improve irrigation infrastructure and promote sustainable farming practices,

ensuring Maharashtra's farmers can rely on consistent water supplies and less expensive inputs.

By reducing the burden on farmers, Congress aims to create a more stable agricultural sector, lifting rural communities out of poverty and ensuring food security for the state.

Building Maharashtra's Future Job Creation, Agricultural Reform, and Economic Growth

A Vision for Economic Growth

Beyond job creation and agricultural reform, Congress envisions an economic revival driven by infrastructural investments and local entrepreneurship. Congress plans to launch initiatives that will expand

Maharashtra's transport, digital, and energy infrastructure, making the state a more attractive place for investors and a better home for its people. This commitment includes fostering a start-up culture within Maharashtra

and offering funding and mentoring for budding entrepreneurs. Congress envisions Maharashtra as a hub of innovation, where local businesses not only create jobs but also contribute to a more resilient economy.

Empowering Maharashtra Through Healthcare, Education, and Women's Rights



Photo: GettyImages

Congress believes that Maharashtra's progress depends not just on economic strength but also on the well-being and empowerment of its citizens. Accessible healthcare, quality education, and gender equality are cornerstones of this vision. Congress has pledged to build a Maharashtra that cares for its people,

lifts them through education, and upholds women's rights and safety.

Healthcare Access for All

Maharashtra's healthcare system, particularly in rural and underserved regions, remains underresourced and overstretched. Many families struggle to afford basic healthcare, while

hospitals face shortages of staff, equipment, and medicines. Congress has vowed to prioritise healthcare, especially after seeing the strain on resources during recent public health challenges.

Congress leaders have called out the current administration for failing to provide adequate healthcare

infrastructure. Congress plans to address this by expanding the number of healthcare facilities across the state and investing in healthcare personnel and essential medicines. The goal is to make healthcare not only more accessible but also more affordable, ensuring that no one in Maharashtra is denied medical attention due to

financial constraints.

A notable development in Congress' healthcare strategy is its commitment to set up a state-funded insurance scheme that will cover essential healthcare services for families across Maharashtra. This initiative will prevent families from being plunged into poverty by medical expenses and improve the overall health standards of the state.

Improving Education Quality and Access

Maharashtra's educational system has seen progress, but significant disparities remain, particularly in rural and tribal areas. Congress is determined to close this gap by increasing funding for schools, enhancing teacher training, and providing scholarships for underprivileged students. Congress leaders recently announced plans to build new schools in remote areas, ensuring children in every corner of the state have access to quality education.

Education is a crucial stepping stone to upward mobility, and Congress believes that investing in schools and scholarships will empower Maharashtra's youth. By focusing on inclusive education, Congress aims to create an equitable future where every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to thrive.

Women's Rights and Empowerment

Congress recognises the vital role of women in Maharashtra's development and is committed to ensuring their safety, equality, and economic independence. Recent incidents of violence against women have highlighted the urgent need for more robust safety measures and legal support. Congress has pledged to establish women's support centres across Maharashtra, offering legal aid, job training, and safe spaces for women in crisis.

In addition, Congress will expand financial support and employment programs for women. By empowering women economically and providing protection against discrimination and violence, Congress envisions a Maharashtra where women can participate fully and safely in society.

"A better Maharashtra is possible, and Congress has the roadmap to make it happen."

This collection of promises and plans encapsulates Congress' vision for a Maharashtra that truly serves its people. By addressing the core issues of job creation, healthcare, education, and women's empowerment, Congress offers a comprehensive path forward for a stronger and more inclusive state.



Congress's Five Transformative Guarantees for Maharashtra's Future



Photo: GettyImages

As Maharashtra heads toward the Assembly elections, the Congress Party has announced five key guarantees, designed to address the state's pressing issues for an inclusive and progressive Maharashtra, these guarantees aim to support women, empower youth, uplift farmers, secure health for all, and ensure social justice. Here's an in-depth look at these transformative promises:

1. Mahalakshmi Yojana – Financial Empowerment for Women

Under the Mahalakshmi Yojana, Congress is committed to empowering the women of Maharashtra, recognizing them as the backbone of families and communities. If elected, the Congress government will provide monthly financial assistance of Rs. 3,000 to women, enabling greater economic independence and security. This initiative will address the needs of women in low-income households, providing them with a reliable source of income to support daily expenses, education, and other household needs.

In addition, women will enjoy free transportation in government buses across Maharashtra, making commuting easier and safer for women across rural and urban areas. This guarantee aims to eliminate one of the barriers many women face in accessing education, employment, and essential services. Together, these measures symbolize Congress's commitment to the social and economic upliftment of Maharashtra's women, encouraging their active participation in the workforce and society.

2. Krushi Samruddhi Yojana – Prosperity for Farmers

Agriculture has always been the backbone of Maharashtra, and supporting the state's farmers is at the heart of Congress's vision. Through the Krushi Samruddhi Yojana, Congress aims to address the critical issue of farm debt, which has impacted thousands of farmers across Maharashtra. Under this scheme, farm loans up to Rs. 3 lakh will be waived off, providing immediate relief to farmers burdened by debt. This waiver is a necessary intervention, especially in light of the agrarian

crisis and unpredictable climate challenges affecting farmers' incomes. In addition, Congress will provide an incentive payment of Rs. 50,000 to farmers who consistently repay their loans, encouraging financial discipline and acknowledging the resilience of these farmers. With these measures, Congress aims to bring prosperity to rural Maharashtra, empowering farmers to invest in modern farming techniques, improve productivity, and ultimately secure a better livelihood for their families. Youth unemployment is one of Maharashtra's biggest challenges, and Congress recognizes the need to support young people as they strive for a better future. Under the Yuvakanna Shabd scheme, Congress guarantees monthly financial assistance of Rs. 4,000 to every unemployed youth in Maharashtra. This support will help young people manage their daily expenses, focus on skill development, and pursue their career ambitions without financial

strain. By providing a safety net, Congress aims to enable youth to seek quality employment and contribute to Maharashtra's economy. This guarantee reflects the party's commitment to creating an environment where young people have the resources and opportunities to succeed.

4. Kutumb Rakshan Yojana – Health and Well-being for Every Household

The Kutumb Rakshan Yojana addresses one of Maharashtra's most pressing needs: affordable healthcare for all. Congress understands that medical expenses can push families into poverty, especially when health emergencies arise. To protect families from the financial burden

of healthcare, Congress promises affordable health insurance of Rs. 25 lakh for every household in Maharashtra. This insurance coverage will provide families with access to quality healthcare without the fear of overwhelming expenses. Furthermore, Congress will ensure that essential medicines are provided free of cost in government hospitals, ensuring that healthcare is accessible to all. By removing the financial barriers to essential medicines and treatments, the party aims to create a healthier Maharashtra, where every family can access the care they need.

5. Samantechi Hami – Guarantee for Social Justice

Congress has long been committed to social justice, and under Samantechi Hami, the party aims to uphold the rights of marginalized communities in Maharashtra. A socio-economic caste census will be conducted to gain an accurate picture of Maharashtra's diverse communities and their specific needs. This comprehensive caste census will allow the Congress government to better understand and address the challenges faced by marginalized communities. Following this, Congress is committed to removing the 50% ceiling on reservations, ensuring fair representation and equal opportunities for all. By taking these steps, Congress aims to build a more equitable society in Maharashtra, where everyone has the chance to thrive.

Congress's Vision for a Progressive Maharashtra

These five guarantees form the cornerstone of Congress's vision for Maharashtra. Together, they address critical social, economic, and developmental issues, promising a Maharashtra that supports its people and prioritizes progress for all. Congress believes that by uplifting every section of society — from women and youth to farmers and marginalized communities — Maharashtra can become a model of prosperity, inclusivity, and resilience.

Key Events and Milestones in Our Campaign

Photo: GettyImages



Throughout this campaign, Congress leaders have met with families, students, farmers, labourers, and small business owners to understand the core issues affecting everyday lives. Here are a few highlights from our journey across Maharashtra:

Farmers' Rights Rally in Vidarbha

Addressing the farmers' crisis, Congress organised a major rally in Vidarbha, where Nana Patole emphasised Congress' plan for debt waivers, fair crop prices, and increased subsidies. The event garnered overwhelming support from the farming community, signalling a strong trust in Congress' commitment.

Healthcare Initiative in Marathwada

Congress leaders launched a pilot healthcare initiative in Marathwada, providing free medical check-ups and consultations. This event underscored the urgent need for affordable healthcare in rural areas and highlighted Congress' plan to bring quality health services to every district in Maharashtra.

Women's Empowerment Summit in Mumbai

Recognising the power of Maharashtra's women, Congress held a summit in Mumbai dedicated to women's empowerment. The event was attended by activists, businesswomen, and young women leaders, who discussed Congress' vision for gender equality, financial support programs, and skill development.

Youth Empowerment Drive in Pune

Addressing the concerns of Maharashtra's youth, Congress organised a youth-focused event in Pune, where the importance of skill training and job creation was discussed. Leaders assured young voters that Congress is dedicated to opening doors of opportunity and addressing the state's rising unemployment.

Education Reform Forum in Nagpur

Congress hosted an educational forum in Nagpur to highlight the importance of equitable education. Key Congress leaders emphasised the party's commitment to revamping Maharashtra's educational infrastructure, making it accessible and affordable for all. Each event was a testament to the Congress Party's commitment to Maharashtra's future, a future where no one is left behind, where transparency is valued, and where every citizen has a say in shaping the state's destiny.

A Call to Action for Maharashtra's Future A Message from Congress Leadership

In recent months, Congress leaders have traveled the length and breadth of Maharashtra, listening to your voices, understanding your struggles, and committing themselves to a renewed vision.

Maharashtra, it's time for change. After years of struggles, broken promises, and neglect from the current administration, Congress stands with you, ready to pave the way for a brighter, stronger future. From the vibrant cities to the rural heartland, Maharashtra's soul is resilient, and its people deserve a government that reflects their strength and values. The Congress Party, under the leadership of Nana Patole, is committed to transforming our state into one that truly prioritises growth, justice, and the well-being of every citizen. In recent months, Congress leaders have traveled the length and breadth of Maharashtra, listening to your voices, understanding your struggles, and committing themselves to a renewed vision. At each rally, every town hall, and every gathering, Congress has heard the call for a government that acts not in self-interest but in the interest of Maharashtra's diverse communities.



Photo: GettyImages

DELHI RIOTS

A post-mortem after five years

Court proceedings have laid bare the shoddy investigation by Delhi Police. Who should be held responsible?

Pankaj Chaturvedi

Does the name Khalid Saifi ring any bells? Unlikely. After all, he was just a social worker, one of those accused of plotting the riots in north-east Delhi in February 2020. The Delhi High Court has not yet been able to decide on his bail plea. Three different judges have heard his case, but were transferred each time a verdict was due. Each time, the case was argued afresh before a new judge after months of waiting. Saifi has been granted bail on two charges. It is clear from the bail order that he was not in the rioting crowd. Yet, Delhi police invoked the UAPA to make it difficult for him to get bail. This ensured his prolonged incarceration without a chargesheet being filed. Similar to the plight of most other people accused in the case, including Umar Khalid.

Public memory being short, it is worth recalling that in February 2020, 53 people were killed, several hundred injured and over a thousand houses burnt down in north-east Delhi. Disturbances were allowed to continue for four days. Court proceedings are now making it clear that not only did the Delhi Police fail to prevent the violence, the investigating police officers did a shoddy job. Several accused have been acquitted due to allegedly incomplete or biased investigation, lack of sufficient evidence and credible witnesses.

The police had registered 758 cases related to the rioting. Of these, one is registered in Special Cell, 62 in Crime Branch and 695 in various police stations of north-east Delhi. Out of the 2,619 people arrested, 2,094 are on bail. The courts have acquitted 183 people, struck down cases against 75 people and found 47 people guilty so far.

Despite four-and-a-half years having passed, the investigation in 268 cases remains incomplete. The police requested the court to close 57 cases registered in various police stations, of which the court has accepted the closure report for 43. As many as 11 out of the 12 accused in the Dilbar Negi murder case were acquitted. There was no concrete evidence against them or witnesses identifying them as rioters.

WhatsApp chats: transcripts reveal all—to no avail

A 'Kattar Hindu Ekta' (hardcore Hindu unity) WhatsApp group was created at 12:49 p.m. on 24 February 2020. As many as 125 people were associated with this group. The Delhi Police submitted transcripts in the court of all the chats between 24 February and 8 March. The conversations revolved around the RSS, BJP's Kapil Mishra, the urgency of setting mosques on fire and installing idols, arranging guns, pistols and bullets, elaborate plans to target and kill Muslims and misbehave with their women. Delhi Police have failed to establish that this group engineered the riot.

This was a glaring omission as the transcripts appeared to confirm the involvement

of the RSS which reached the spot in support of the mob.

Between 25 February 2020 and 26 February 2020, chilling messages confirmed that Mursaleen was assaulted by the mob, his scooter burnt and his body thrown in the Bhagirathi Vihar drain near Johripur puliya. Aas Mohammad, who was coming on foot from Loni, was stabbed and thrown in the same drain. Electricity supply in the area was cut off. Musharrarf was dragged out of his house and cut to pieces and his body, too, was thrown in the drain, as were Amin and Bhure Ali alias Salman. At 9:15 pm, Hamza's hands and legs were broken and he was thrown in the drain, half-dead. Aqeel Ahmed was killed and thrown in the drain. Hashim Ali and his brother Aamir were killed and their bodies were thrown in the drain.

The messages were explicit: I am in Ganga Vihar. If any Hindu needs me, please let me know. We are fully prepared. We have all the weapons. Can we get .315 bore cartridges? Do you have an extra pistol? Your brother just killed two mullahs...

The chargesheet says that this mob caught people, made them chant 'Jai Shri Ram', checked their Aadhaar cards and then killed them. As many as eight of the nine young men arrested in this case are just 19–23 years old. They confessed to committing nine murders in about 30 hours. However, they have not been charged with any organised crime or conspiracy to incite riots. Why?

RSS links: established and ignored

One of the FIRs lodged by the Delhi



Remains of the day: Muslim-owned shops were burnt down by rioters in Gokulpuri area of north-east Delhi, 7 March 2020

Photo: Getty Images

Convent School), two parking spaces and Anil Sweets. On 20 June 2020, Judge Vinod Yadav, who granted bail to Faisal, pointed out discrepancies in witness statements and that the investigating officer had recorded a supplementary statement in order to fill in the blanks.

'The investigating officer did not talk to any of these people... apart from allegations, there is no concrete evidence on the basis of which it can be proved that Faisal had spoken to these people about the Delhi riots,' recorded the court order. Earlier, on 29 May 2020, while granting bail to Feroz Khan, Delhi High Court asked the police: how could they identify only Feroz and one other accused when the FIR mentioned an unlawful crowd of 250–300 people? Feroz Khan was granted bail.

The Delhi Police is also guilty of ignoring the findings of the Delhi Minority Commission and a citizens' commission headed by retired Supreme Court judge Madan V. Lokur. Findings recorded by two other organisations were also not taken seriously.

Compensation: discriminatory, delayed or denied

The Delhi Minority Commission under the Delhi government had constituted a nine-member committee to inquire into the riots. The chairman of this committee was Supreme Court lawyer M.R. Shamshad. The committee studied 700 applications for compensation and found that in most cases, the site of damage was not even visited. In those cases where loss of life and property was found to be true a meagre amount was given as interim assistance. Many people who had fled from their homes could not apply for compensation.

The amounts were discriminatory. The death of a government official merited a compensation of Rs 1 crore, whereas the death of ordinary mortals merited only Rs 10 lakh. The responsibility of maintaining law and order in Delhi lies with the central government, yet the victims of the riots were not given any help by the central government.

The role of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government of Delhi has been disappointing. Despite constituting the North-East Delhi Riots Claims Commission (NEDRCC) in April 2020, as many as 2,790 claims still remain unresolved. On 25 August 2022, the Lieutenant Governor Vinay Kumar Saxena appointed 40 new loss assessors to expedite the settlement of claims. They were asked to compile reports assessing the extent of financial losses and submit them to the Delhi High Court. LG Saxena also directed the existing 14 assessors to submit their reports within three weeks.

It seems some of the 40 new assessors were not aware of their assignments. Many did not even start work. Commission officials say they could contact only five out of the 40 members appointed by the LG.

Who should be held responsible for these acts of omission and commission? ■

Police relate to the involvement of people associated with the RSS. On 25 February, around 7 p.m., after namaaz, Sahil Parvez's father was kicked, pickpocketed and murdered in front of him. Sahil Parvez's complaint mentions Devesh Mishra whose name is not even mentioned in the chargesheet. Mishra, who recently joined the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, has been associated with the Sangh since 1996, and has been the RSS Yamuna Vihar district in-charge for the past eight years.

Among the other people who have been arrested, Uttam has been a Sangh *pracharak* for the longest time. His brother Naresh Tyagi is a regular and active member of the Sangh. Accused Hari Om Mishra organised *shakhas* every morning in North Ghonda. Maths teacher Rajpal Tyagi is known to attend *shakha* every morning at Shaheed Bhagat Singh Park.

Other names include Atul and Virendra Chauhan, Deepak Kumar and Sushil, all of whom have been going to RSS *shakhas*. But the Delhi Police failed to press serious charges against the group, allowing courts to let them off, dismissing charges of any organised or pre-planned crime.

Delhi Police: guilty as charged

In several cases, the police failed to establish the involvement of the accused. Instead, Faisal Farooq, director of Rajdhani Public School, which was set on fire, was sent to jail by the police. Apparently it was at Farooq's behest that the rioters had deliberately vandalised the school next to it (D.R.P.

The messages were explicit: "We're fully prepared". "Can we get .315 cartridges?" "Do you have an extra pistol?" "Your brother just killed two mullahs..."

“

Evil unchecked grows, evil tolerated poisons the whole system

— Jawaharlal Nehru

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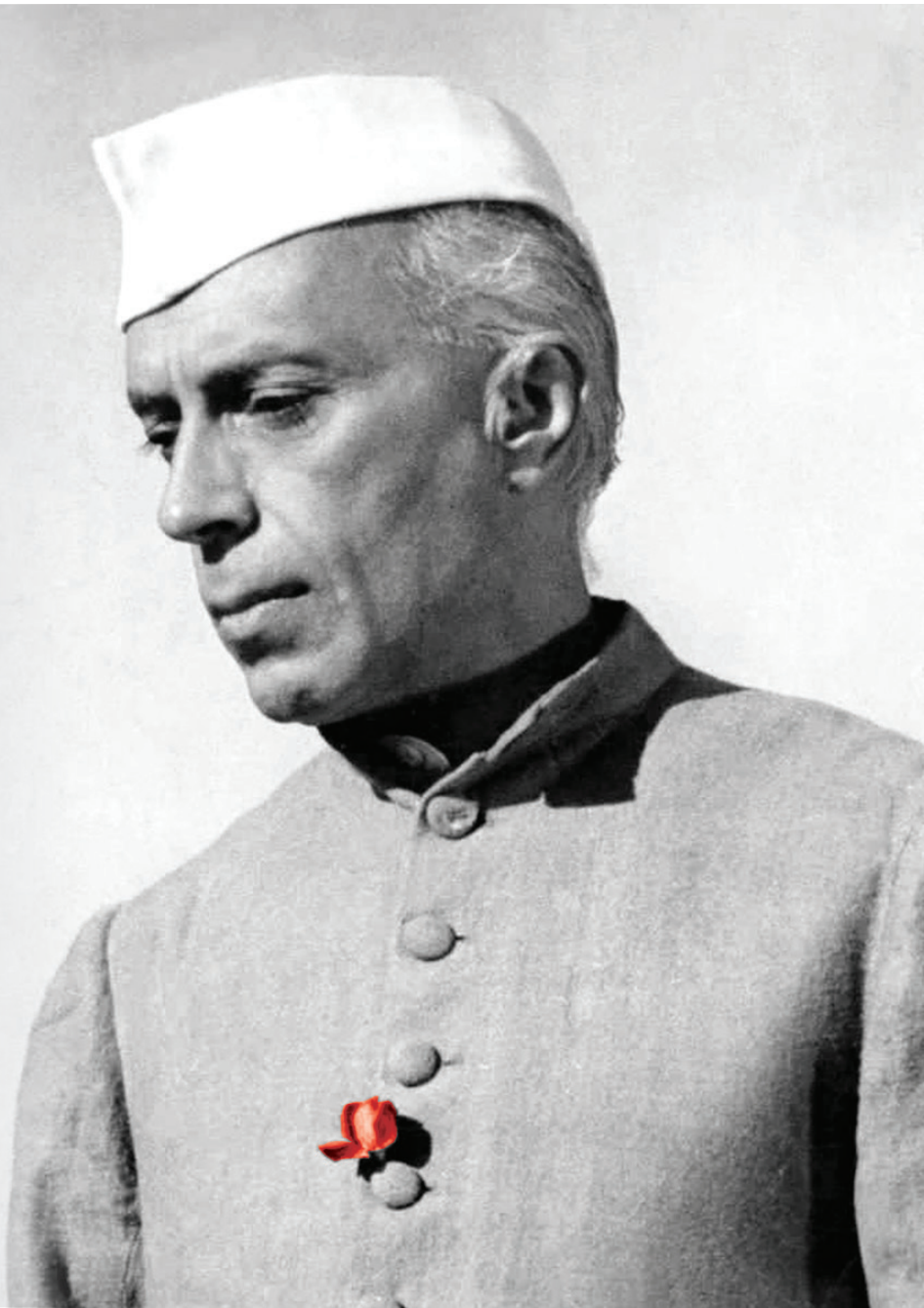
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Has India played into China’s hands?

A closer look at the India–China agreement on eastern Ladakh raises some uncomfortable questions

Sarosh Bana

As the Narendra Modi government credits itself for its breakthrough agreement with Beijing that has led to troop disengagement by both sides along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh, a closer look reveals that unwittingly, or otherwise, New Delhi has played into China's hands, if not negotiated a complete sell-out.

On the backfoot since April 2020 when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) swept across the LAC into eastern Ladakh, the Indian government is now vastly relieved by the completion of troop disengagement by both sides on 30 October 2024 in the last two remaining friction points of Depsang Plains and Demchok village.

However, both these militarily strategic spots are well within what India considers its territory. Demchok located some 600 metres from the LAC, while Depsang is part of the 37,244 sq. km. high-altitude desert of Aksai Chin that China had appropriated in its only war with India, in 1962, but which India claims is part of Ladakh.

Indian Army sources mentioned that both sides would soon start coordinated patrolling in their respective areas as part of the landmark bilateral agreement arrived at on 21 October.

They left unsaid that the “respective areas” are Indian territory, so essentially New Delhi is implicitly accepting foreign armed presence on Indian soil and is simultaneously satisfied that the Chinese side is granting Indian soldiers access to their own areas.

China, in turn, has always considered vast stretches of the 3,488-km LAC, which stretches along five Indian states, from Jammu and Kashmir in the north-west to Arunachal Pradesh in the north-east, as disputed. Indeed, it has historically claimed the entire 83,743 sq. km Arunachal Pradesh, which it calls Zangnan, or South Tibet. China extended itself to India's frontiers ever since it annexed Tibet in 1950.



Indian and Chinese forces at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh

India's home ministry too has acknowledged that “the border is not fully demarcated and the process of clarifying and confirming the LAC is in progress”. It adds that the area is characterised by high altitude terrain and thick habitation that has resulted in inadequate development of infrastructure in these regions.

Indian Army sources pointed out that ground commanders—brigadiers and below—have been meeting to work out the modalities of patrolling. “The coordinated patrolling from the two sides, with prior intimation to each other to avoid face-offs, will then begin after mutual verification,” they added. “Talks are also underway on other issues like the ‘buffer zones’ created earlier in the high-altitude region.”

There is, however, no mention that the agreement with Beijing concerns Chinese presence on what New Delhi considers its inalienable territory. The Indian authorities are drawing comfort from the agreement that the PLA “will not block Indian troops” from the ‘bottleneck area’ 18 km inside Indian territory and they can now patrol up to their tradi-

tional patrolling points (PPs) 10, 11, 12 and 13 at the strategically located Depsang Plains.

They are encouraged by the agreement enabling the Indian Army to gain access to two crucial PPs in the Charding Ninglung Nallah track junction near Demchok. Indian shepherds will also not be obstructed from taking their animals to the traditional grazing grounds there. The PLA had hitherto resisted restoring patrolling rights to the Indian side in Depsang and Demchok.

The present agreement, however, does not include no-patrol buffer zones set up in the earlier rounds of disengagement till September 2022. Besides, India's efforts towards de-escalation by the PLA along the

entire LAC and de-induction of the over 100,000 troops forward-deployed by each side are still ongoing.

Though the new agreement and the bilateral summit have been important steps in defusing tensions between the two countries and in finally bringing the two leaders face-to-face since the 2020 PLA incursion, New Delhi should tread with caution as Beijing has proved to be an inscrutable and unpredictable neighbour.

A day after the latest India–China agreement, Indian Army chief, General Upendra Dwivedi, pointed to ‘trust’ issues with China, saying, “We want to go back to the status quo of April 2020; thereafter we will be looking at disengagement, de-escalation and normal management of

New Delhi has implicitly accepted Chinese presence on Indian soil, and is drawing comfort from the concession that the PLA “will not block Indian troops” from the ‘bottleneck area’

LAC... this has been our stand since April 2020.”

Dwivedi added: “As of now, we are trying to restore the trust. That will happen once we are able to... reassure each other that we are not creeping into buffer zones that have been created.” He and other observers do not find anything confirming China's willingness on the ground, which will only be clear after the troops move back and permanent structures are removed.

His predecessor, General Manoj Pande, had in January 2023 spoken of China's increased troop deployments in eastern Ladakh. The PLA had reportedly crossed the LAC in July 2021 to reoccupy certain positions that they had vacated following a demilitarisation agreement five months earlier, and others had moved to points near the Galwan river and Pangong Tso.

Any misgivings on the present demilitarisation agreement are hence not misplaced. After all, the Chinese have created a more formidable presence in eastern Ladakh than mere patrolling. Satellite imagery obtained from the US's Maxar Technologies and analysed by international geo-intelligence experts has revealed construction by Chinese forces of reinforced tunnels and shelters into a hillside along a gorge in the contested Aksai Chin region.

Surveillance and satellite imagery have also indicated China's three-layer projection of force along the LAC, with a border regiment forming the first layer, two divisions of Xinjiang and Tibet Military district troops the second, and reserve troops in the form of four light to medium combined armed brigades, or CABs, forming the third. Each CAB has around 4,500 troops, with mechanised elements and armour as per terrain requirement.

Though Modi and Xi have met 18 times between 2014 and 2019, the prime minister surprisingly failed to take up the eastern Ladakh issue even telephonically with the Chinese president. Indeed, Modi not only avoided identifying China as the aggressor while insisting that “no

intruder is present inside India's borders, nor is any post under anyone's custody”, he had also urged Washington not to bring up China's border transgressions, according to former US ambassador Kenneth Juster when asked by an Indian TV channel in 2022 why the United States had not made any statement about Beijing's aggression.

His reticence in identifying Beijing as the aggressor had, in fact, emboldened it to question the need for military negotiations on any such transgression. China moreover launched a series of unprovoked cross-border intrusions, opening up additional fronts at India's other border states of Uttarakhand in the north and Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim in the north-east, even as it amassed additional troops across the border, armed with artillery, air defenses, combat drones and heavy vehicles.

Debunking the 2023 edition of China's ‘standard map’ that claims ownership of both Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin, India's external affairs minister S. Jaishankar huffed: “China has put out maps with territories [that are] not theirs. [It is an] old habit. Just by putting out maps with parts of India... doesn't change anything. Our government is very clear about our territory. Making absurd claims does not make other people's territories yours.”

Significantly, Xi had never broached the LAC intrusion subject at any stage, lending grist to the belief that China's military offensives against India have not been merely tactical, but have a strategic intent aimed at realising specific long-term objectives. The PLA's moves have, after all, been directed by China's seniormost leadership, namely, the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which Xi chairs.

India has portrayed its 21 October agreement as a major triumph in negotiations with China, while never acknowledging the failure of military intelligence if indeed the Indian side was caught unawares while China was brazenly breaching the LAC with its foot soldiers. ■

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For all practical purposes, Sid Meghna is Elvis, hip shakin' and all

Denise D'Silva

Turns out that Elvis hasn't left the building. He's alive and singing in the buzzing suburb of Bandra, Mumbai. Where else in India can a Presley impersonator actually thrive? As Christmas descends, dances, parties and social dos cram people's calendars. At least two or three events showcase iconic rock impersonators giving live performances at gigs across the neighbourhood. Think Dolly Parton, Bonny M and the like. At one such event, there he was—Elvis Presley, glittery jumpsuit and all. Of course, his real name is Siddharth Meghani. But don't let that waylay you. For all practical purposes, Sid is Elvis, hip shakin' and all.

Elvis wasn't just a singer, he had a bad-boy appeal that made women go weak in the knees. With beautiful blue eyes that pierced right through you, slick hair, killer dance moves and a smile that could melt anyone in a second, he was handsome and talented. The 'King of Rock' was, and still is, a phenomenon, judging by the numerous tribute shows Las Vegas has of the King. What sets these shows apart is that they aren't cinematic tributes, they're live acts.

Elvis Presley is perhaps the most impersonated singer of all time. His impersonators are an industry unto themselves, worth thousands of dollars, with shows, contests, singing marathons and more. Professionally known as ETAs or Elvis Tribute Artists, they number in the hundreds.

How so many men can imitate one legend so well baffles me. Even more baffling are the legions of fans across generations who throng these tribute shows, swooning and swaying as enthusiastically as the crowds at Elvis's actual shows in the 1950s and 1960s. In America, this 'mass hysteria' shows no signs of abating, four decades after Elvis Presley was laid to rest.

Forget America, do Indians love Elvis? Yes they do, judging by the turnout at Bandra's very own ETA, Sid Meghani's shows. From 80-somethings to teenagers, he has women of all ages screaming with excitement as he belts out classic Elvis songs and grooves to the music. I recently met up with Sid to find out more about his fascinating obsession.

He was a teenager when he started doing the Elvis act, and in his 20s he realised that music was his first love and Elvis his ultimate hero. It's not hard to understand why he was bitten by the bug. His mother and her seven sisters were all die-hard fans of the King. The songs made a lasting impression on his young mind and were the catalyst for a lifetime.

Every time he hears those 'nuggets of gold', as he calls the songs, he falls in love. (His current favourite is 'Stranger in the Crowd'.) When I ask him about his 'day

job', he comes back with a smart retort: "People get Elvis-approved photographs from me, if they're ready to shake, rattle and pose!"—alluding to his 'other life' as a professional photographer for weddings, e-commerce and events.

While photography is his mainstay, Sid is booked well in advance for his Elvis act. His upcoming tribute show is in Thailand for a 60th birthday bash. Is it mainly women, I ask him, who are excited by Elvis? No, he says. The men want a piece of Elvis's charisma too. As for age, that's no limit, either.

Sid takes his act seriously, and practices with diligence, studying old footage, documentaries, even books. His carefully choreographed and studied routine is very entertaining to watch. From the impeccably stitched jumpsuits (which his better half, a fashion designer helps him with) to the trademark sideburns, Sid gets into character quite effortlessly. You can see that he enjoys what he does and once on stage, he turns on the charm.

So when did this half Mallu Catholic, half Gujju boy leap from Bandra's own 'Graceland'? Sid's first brush with fame happened when he was about 17. A sweet lady named Auntie Heather invited him on stage to perform with her choir, 'The chanters of Jesus'. Sid was new to performance. But one encouraging word was all it took for him to take the mic and sing 'Don't leave me now', with Auntie Heather on the piano and the choir singing background vocals.



Photos: Sameer Zagade/ Denise D'Silva

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In a matter of days, Auntie made him a suit which he teamed up with a pair of blue sneakers. That's it. He never took part in the Bandra zonals, an annual talent show, so this stage was his only way to get noticed. The crowd was mesmerised and asked for an encore. It was the first time Sid had heard the word 'encore'. When he went backstage, Auntie Heather told him that if the crowd wanted an encore, they should get one. They knew only one other Elvis song, 'Teddy Bear', and that's what they sang.

The rest, as they say, is history.

According to Sid, Bandra has always been open to talent. It doesn't matter what religion or caste you belong to, here it is always about acceptance. Most families had at least one member working abroad and it was common to hear the latest rock and pop hits streaming out of bungalows. Trading music cassettes was the norm. It was this convivial, musically charged atmosphere that Sid grew up in.

When I ask him about audience reactions, he says, "The reactions are just amazing. I think people look at me the way they might at a superhero in costume. Boom! Out come the camera phones, and both men and women are equally smitten. For the women, I think it's nostalgia, memories associated with Elvis's music or their first crush. For the guys, it's more

about respect and admiration. Sometimes I think they wonder, could they pull off Elvis' swagger and charisma and woo the ladies?"

Sid believes Elvis is still relevant and always will be. He recounts how one of his neighbours brought his son to see one of his shows. The 6-year-old was so taken in by Sid's rendition of 'Hound Dog' that his father had to play the song every morning for months to get his son ready for school.

I've seen Sid on stage, and from the gyrations to the foot-tapping to the iconic high notes and drawl, he's got it all down pat. It's hard not to be swept away.

Sid has heard about the annual international Elvis Impersonator Contest in America, and it's on his bucket-list to compete and win. Will a brown Elvis stand a chance? With his moves, hell yeah!

If he ever met Elvis, I ask him, what would he say to him? "Am I doing you proud?" comes Sid's quick reply. He shares an anecdote with me. Apparently,

Whitney Houston, whose aunt Cissy Houston was a background singer for Elvis, once came face-to-face with him and said, "You don't actually meet Elvis, you just look at Elvis!"

I got a glimpse of what he meant while shooting with Sid across Bandra. The double takes people did when they saw this tall, glittering jumpsuited figure, belting out catchy Elvis numbers as he walked through the streets crammed with rickshaws, *bhajiwalas* and wayside crosses. From their smiles and wide eyes, it was evident: Elvis is still loved. In a suburb that's bursting with many secrets, did I mention I have one too? Elvis Presley was the photographer at my wedding! ■

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