NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY

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

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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

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Of scapegoats, holy cows and the invisible hand

Shalini Sahay returns from self-imposed *vanvas* to ask a few questions about the scandal that has rocked the Hindutva establishment

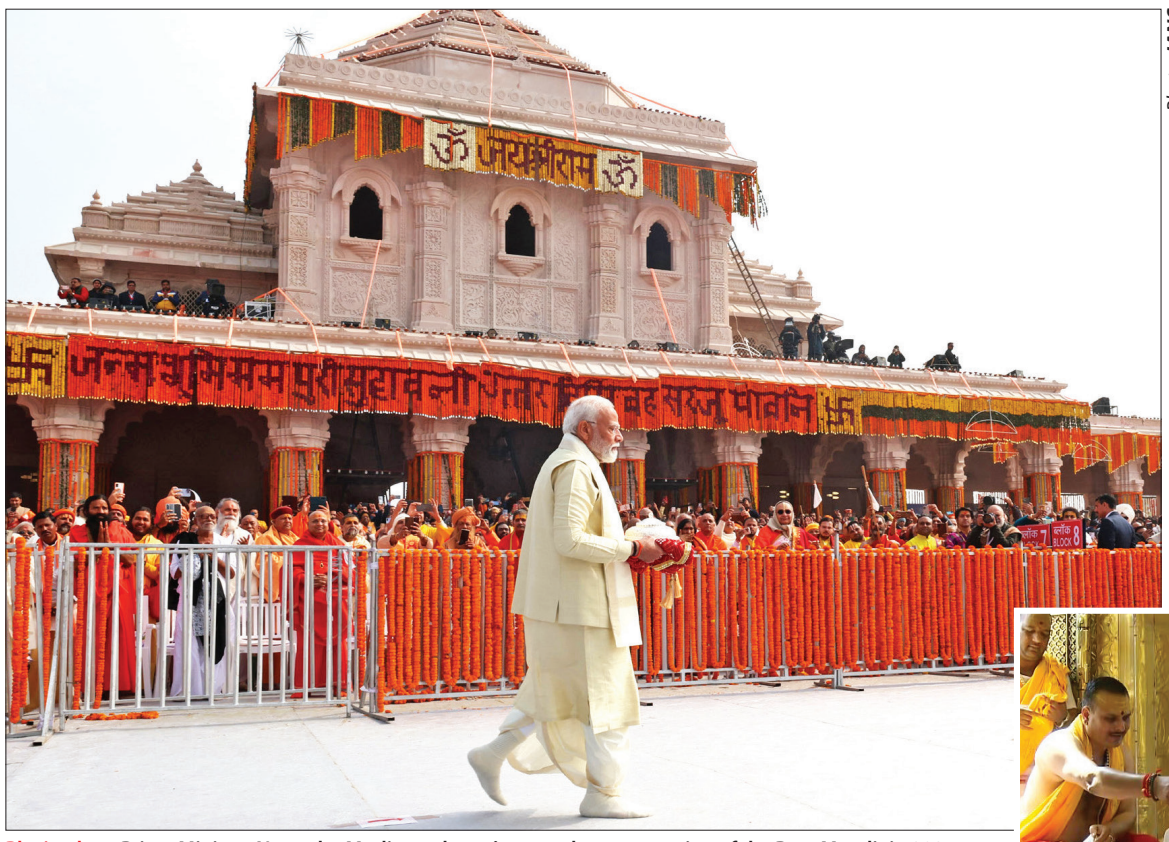

Photo: IANS

Playing host Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the ***yajman*** at the consecration of the Ram Mandir in 2024

Barely two-and-a-half years after it was thrown open to devotees in January 2024, the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya is at the centre of a financial scandal. Allegations surfaced in June 2026 of embezzlement of donations to the temple. Two founding trustees resigned, a Special Investigation Team (SIT) was formed by the Uttar Pradesh government, eight employees were arrested. A search committee was formed to find a 'professional' CEO to manage the affairs of the temple.

The SIT's interim report has been made public. Highlights include weak oversight of the handling of donations, ineffective security, revision of frisking rules and existing SOPs on pocketless uniforms, a cash-counting system that lacks traceability and surveillance that fell short.

The state government has fixed 15 July as the date when the SIT must submit its final report. We aren't exactly holding our breath. But in this flurry of activity that looks like action is being taken against the wrongdoers, some questions have still not been vigorously interrogated.

Does the Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra's status as a private trust ringfence it from public scrutiny?

In its controversial Ayodhya judgment of 2019, the Supreme Court of India directed the Union government to set up a trust to build the Ram Mandir and manage its affairs. The directive did not specify that the trust should be 'private', yet the deed drafted by the ministry of home affairs (MHA) in 2020 chose to form a private trust, nominating founding trustees from the VHP, RSS and its affiliates.

The MHA maintains and the Central Information Commission (CIC) has ruled that Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra operates as an independent, autonomous body that receives no financial or administrative upkeep from the government. This 'autonomy' is why the Delhi High Court and CIC have argued that it lies outside the purview of the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

While making a public show of "fully cooperating with the SIT", trust officials have sought to leverage its autonomous, independent status to ringfence information. They have even tried to deflect administrative blame, and are using the ongoing SIT probe to stonewall nosey journalists.

It is common knowledge that it's the long arm of the PMO that really controls the temple and who is on the board of trustees

In his statements to the SIT, trust general secretary Champat Rai (who has since resigned) has reportedly sought to distance the trust hierarchy from the theft by blaming the State Bank of India (SBI), arguing that the arrested counting agents were under the bank's operational chain of command, and that the theft occurred under 'private agency supervision' rather than trust oversight.

Backed by CIC rulings, the trust has consistently argued that because it is an independent body neither owned nor financed by the government, it is not a 'public authority' under the RTI Act. By maintaining this legal ringfence, they have successfully prevented citizens and journalists from filing RTI queries to inspect the temple's daily internal balance sheets, ledger entries and procurement contracts.

On the other hand, legal experts have argued that when a public-facing religious institution operates under a private trust structure, outside the usual framework of statutory oversight, it must remain open to scrutiny through credible audit mechanisms. Because faith may be 'private', but funds collected in its name come from the public.

Indian courts have in the past stepped in when public temple donations were mismanaged by autonomous or hereditary trustees:

- In the Chidambaram Nataraja temple case (2014), the hereditary trustees (Podu Dikshitars) of the famous Nataraja temple in Tamil Nadu claimed absolute autonomous management. The Supreme Court ruled that while the state cannot permanently take over a temple, it does have the right to step in, audit accounts and criminally prosecute trustees if there is proof of systemic financial embezzlement or mismanagement of public offerings.
- In the Sri Padmanabhaswamy temple case (2020), the royal family of Travancore claimed private management over the temple and its massive vaults. The Supreme Court upheld their traditional rights but explicitly ruled that a public religious institution cannot be treated as a private fiefdom. The court established an independent, administrative committee to oversee the treasures and enforce strict, transparent auditing standards.

Under standard Indian tax and property law, when property is dedicated to an open, unidentifiable body of religious devotees, it automatically inherits the legal definition of a 'public religious trust'.

Two trustees of the Teertha Kshetra—Champat Rai and member trustee Anil Mishra—resigned citing 'moral responsibility' while treasurer Govind Dev Giri didn't, pleading innocence because he sits in Pune. Is this legally tenable?

Treasurer Govind Dev Giri has said in his defence that he sits in Pune and only reviews audited balances at the end of each month. Legal experts point out that under the Indian Trusts Act, 1882, a designated treasurer carries a fiduciary duty to safeguard the trust property. They argue that treasurers cannot legally absolve themselves by citing geographical distance or a lack of personal involvement.

If the standard operating procedures for cash management were fundamentally broken—allowing counting staff to repeatedly stash bundles of cash into their pockets and shoes—the treasurer is arguably liable for culpable negligence. While not criminally complicit in the theft itself, failing to enforce a secure internal control or auditing system constitutes a breach of civil fiduciary duties.

The resignations of Champat Rai and Anil Mishra on 'moral grounds' have been analysed as a sophisticated legal stratagem rather than an act of piety. By stepping down, citing moral responsibility, Rai and Mishra have insulated themselves from a forced termination.

Under the trust's constitution, once a trustee tenders a resignation, it must be processed and accepted. This allows them to exit the administration cleanly without the trust technically declaring them 'guilty' of any administrative failure.

The trust's quick public defence of the duo—with some members publicly calling them 'untainted' and claiming they only committed 'errors of negligence'—has faced sharp legal pushback.

…and what explains Prime Minister Modi's stony silence, given that he even presided over the temple inauguration as *yajman*?

Prime Minister Modi has been given credit for everything, real and imagined, to do with the Ram Mandir, even marshalling arguments for the Supreme Court's Ayodhya verdict. It is common knowledge that it's the long arm of the PMO that really controls the temple and who is on the board of trustees, even if it stays out of daily operations and keeps its hands officially clean. Modi's trusted aide Nripendra Mishra, who was his principal secretary during his first term (2014–2019), is ex-officio member of the trust and chairman of the (Ram) Temple Construction Committee, and he surely keeps tabs for his boss.

It was Modi who announced the formation of the trust in Parliament, who performed the *bhoomi pujan* in the presence of RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat and acted as the *yajman* (patron, host) at the consecration of the temple in January 2024. He knows very well the political worth of this religious edifice and is still maintaining an inscrutable silence on the scandal. What gives? ■

Will a digital Census count everyone fairly?

Dilip Ghosh

Census 2027 has got underway six years late and is shadowed by an unusual level of public unease. It is India's first digital census, which the government frames as a leap of modernisation but it still involves nearly 33 lakh government schoolteachers and frontline workers fanning out across the nation in punishing summer heat, smartphones in hand, to complete a 33-question schedule, household by household. And this is still only Part 1 of the exercise.

The promises of a digital census are familiar: real-time data uploads, provisional results available in days, and final figures released in months rather than years. Built-in validation checks and geo-tagging are intended to reduce transcription errors and undercounting, while digital dashboards supposedly offer administrators better oversight of field staff. But we must still ask: can this digital census fairly count all Indians, given the horror stories we continue to hear about data-driven exclusion?

Lessons from the SIR

The push for a digital census has unfolded amid recent failures in other digital initiatives of the government. Most notable is the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, which in the first two phases has led to the deletion of more than 5.2 crore names across twelve states and Union territories.

Not only does the Census share the same exhausted pool of schoolteachers and the same fragile digital infrastructure as the SIR, it is being conducted amid suspicion that this counting exercise too will put citizens through eligibility tests, leading to exclusion. The mistrust is not unfounded. In West Bengal, the SIR's automated data-matching protocol introduced an all-new category of suspicion—named 'logical discrepancy' by the Election Commission of India, which red-flagged 91.46 lakh voters. The system was designed to cross-reference newer records with a digitised 2002 database to trace lineage, but because many historical records were in Bengali, automated translation frequently misread regional spellings and phonetics. Also, families were red-flagged over issues like a parent-child age gap of less than fifteen years, triggering mass automated alerts.

Even though the Calcutta High Court as well as the Supreme Court questioned the reliance on centralised algorithms over localised verification, and held that an algorithm cannot override document-backed reality, that an algorithmic flag should be viewed as an administrative prompt rather than a final verdict, the Supreme Court has validated the SIR exercise even before pending appeals against deletions could be heard and adjudicated.

Its tech-dependence makes Census 2027 similarly fraught, prone to errors at scale in ways that the older paper method was not. A manual census might fail at the margins with a smudged entry or a missed household, but a digital census might fail silently and at scale. An algorithmic flaw or error or a compromised server can distort or erase millions of records before the error is even noticed.

Photo: Getty Images

An algorithmic flaw or error can distort or erase millions before the error even gets noticed

The fragility of centralised servers

The security of the data being collected is another big concern. India has a history of breaches in centralised government servers, which casts a long shadow over the 2027 plan. The CoWIN portal leak of June 2023, where a Telegram bot allowed unauthorised access to sensitive records including Aadhaar and phone numbers, revealed how easily data could be siphoned from a centralised database.

This was not an isolated incident. The Aadhaar ecosystem has seen repeated leaks since 2018; the 2022 AIIMS Delhi cyberattack crippled hospital servers for weeks. Even centralised exam systems like NEET and CUET have faced failures.

These episodes share a common vulnerability: centralised repositories of sensitive information act as single points of failure, often enabled by weak encryption, insider collusion or inadequate oversight. For a digital census covering over a billion citizens, a breach would be catastrophic, undermining the legitimacy of the count and public trust in governance.

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The film they didn't want India to watch

Suppressing *Satluj* raises the question: who gets to decide which parts of our collective past we may revisit as citizens?

Herjinder

When the lights dim in a cinema hall, audiences prepare to willingly surrender to a story. The darkness invites us to enter a realm of imagination, argument, truth. But when the State imposes darkness on the film itself, we are denied both the experience and the argument.

The abrupt removal of *Satluj* from the ZEE5 OTT platform barely 48 hours after its release is a reminder of how fragile creative freedom has become in contemporary India. It raises a disturbing question: who gets to decide which parts of our collective past we, as citizens, are allowed to revisit?

Directed by Honey Trehan and starring Diljit Dosanjh, *Satluj* (earlier titled *Punjab '95*) is based on the life of Jaswant Singh Khalra, the human rights activist who investigated allegations of illegal killings and secret cremations during Punjab's violent insurgency. Khalra publicly referred to around 25,000 alleged illegal cremations, a figure that remains contested. Various official inquiries and independent researchers have cited significantly lower numbers, and the exact scale continues to be debated. The film reflects Khalra's claims, making them central to the storyline rather than presenting them as judicially established fact.

What is incontrovertible is Khalra's own fate. He was abducted and murdered in 1995, and several Punjab police personnel were eventually convicted for the crime. His killing became one of the most powerful symbols of the excesses committed during Punjab's troubled years.

During the legal proceedings over the film, one judge reportedly observed, "There's no point in running away from the past. Unless you counter your past, you'll never have a better future."

Unfortunately, the decision to takedown *Satluj* suggests exactly the opposite instinct—that difficult memories are better expunged than examined.

The film's journey is in itself a commentary on censorship. Submitted to the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) in 2022, it remained entangled in certification disputes for nearly 30 months. According to director Honey Trehan, the Board demanded more than 120 cuts over multiple rounds of review. These included objections to references to Punjab, the use of Jaswant Singh Khalra's name, the Indian flag appearing in the background, and even Gurbani, allegedly on grounds that such elements could 'provoke emotions'.

Whether one agrees with every statement made by the filmmaker or every objection raised by the authorities is almost beside the point. When a work of art is made to shed so many of its historical markers that even its geographical setting appears fictional, censorship smacks of erasure.

The Union government's explanation, however, deserves serious consideration. According to officials quoted by *PTI*, the producers never accepted the cuts suggested by the CBFC and instead quietly released the film directly on an OTT platform, where prior certification is not mandatory. Once the government became aware of the release, ZEE5 was directed to remove the film, citing security concerns and obligations under intermediary guidelines. Officials argued that if the makers wished to release the film in theatres or on OTT without controversy, they should have followed the established certification process.

Supporters of the government's position have advanced another rationale. Punjab continues to carry the scars of militancy, and with assembly elections approaching, a film revisiting one of the darkest periods in the state's history could potentially be exploited by separatist organisations seeking to revive old narratives.

Security concerns can never be dismissed casually. However, an instructive comparison can be found if we rewind to another film that dealt with the same historical landscape as *Satluj*. In 1996, Gulzar's *Maachis* portrayed how ordinary young Punjabis were drawn to militancy after police brutality. The wounds of terrorism were fresher then than today. Hundreds of police personnel, political leaders and innocent civilians had lost their lives. Yet neither the government nor the Censor Board sought to suppress the film. Instead, audiences engaged with it, debated it and ultimately accepted it as one of Indian cinema's finest political dramas.

Nearly three decades later, nobody can say that *Maachis* strengthened separatist sentiment in Punjab. If anything, it demonstrated cinema's capacity to humanise tragedy without endorsing violence.

The digital age has blunted the edge of censorship. Removed from a legal streaming platform, Satluj *was 'leaked' on X*

No serious account of Punjab in the late 1980s and early 1990s can ignore the courage and sacrifices of police officers who fought terrorism under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Many senior officers and thousands of policemen lost their lives combating heavily armed militants. That sacrifice deserves enduring recognition.

But history also records another reality.

During those years, extraordinary powers occasionally led to extraordinary abuses. Fake encounters, illegal detentions and custodial excesses became part of public discourse, prompting judicial interventions and investigations. Remembering those innocent victims does not diminish the sacrifices of security forces; it acknowledges that a democracy must remain capable of examining its own mistakes.

This is precisely where Jaswant Singh Khalra's contribution lay. Regardless of one's assessment of his personal political beliefs, he relied on painstaking documentation and grassroots investigation. Saluting such work because it is ideologically convenient is one thing; honouring the research (and the researcher) for bringing uncomfortable questions back into the public domain is quite another.

While filmmaker Ram Gopal Varma praised Diljit Dosanjh's restrained performance and the film's willingness to lay bare the "wound" of one of India's darkest chapters, *Satluj* is not without flaws.

A sequence that depicts the assassination of Punjab Chief Minister Beant Singh features the Gurbani line, "*Soora so pehchaniye jo lade deen ke het*" (Only those are heroes who fight for the faith), in the background. Many viewers may find this juxtaposition deeply inappropriate because it risks lending unintended moral resonance to an act of terrorism. If the authorities considered this sequence objectionable, a narrowly tailored intervention—such as removing or replacing the background audio—would have been understandable.

Instead, the entire film was removed. That decision may prove spectacularly counterproductive.

As filmmaker Anurag Kashyap remarked after the controversy erupted, "The more you ban something, the more people want to watch it." On 9 July, several media outlets reported that gurdwaras across Punjab, Delhi, Rajasthan, Haryana and Jammu have begun organising community screenings.

The digital age has also blunted the edge of censorship. Removed from a legal streaming platform, *Satluj* was 'leaked' on *X*, downloaded and shared by fans. Its second life through Telegram groups, Reddit discussions and social media has transformed the film into something far more potent than the version the State took down—a symbol of resistance against censorship itself.

The political timing has also intensified the debate. With Punjab heading for assembly elections, every party is attempting to calculate who gains, who loses from the controversy. Punjab's electoral history suggests, though, that voters rarely cast their ballots based solely on the memories of militancy three decades ago.

While the Union government is widely perceived as the force behind the film's disappearance, the issue is larger. History cannot be healed by taking a film off a platform. It can perhaps be understood better by letting citizens watch, question, argue, remember. ■

Is the BJP's honeymoon phase over in Bengal?

Sourabh Sen

Looks like the BJP has been quick to disappoint Bengalis, and it's barely two months since it came to power in West Bengal. If not the diehards then certainly the apologists, who thought voting in the BJP was the only way to show Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress the way out.

The horrific gangrape and murder of a minor girl in the suburb of Baruipur, the alleged involvement of BJP local leaders and the initial police inaction have brought back memories of the R.G. Kar Medical College incident of August 2024. Except this time, the key accused, Prabhas Mandal, was killed in a police encounter.

Another divergence is this: unlike the R.G. Kar incident, Baruipur triggered no 'Occupy the Night' or candlelight vigil. Though for pro-TMC social media influencers, 'R.G. Kar activism' was a BJP- and CPM-backed political action to corner Mamata Banerjee. They point out that the R.G. Kar victim's mother contested and won the assembly election on a BJP ticket.

Aloke Biswas earns a living painting houses. "I used to vote for the TMC. This time I voted for the BJP, but now I feel I made a mistake," he says. "All the corrupt leaders have now joined the BJP. After this Baruipur incident, I wonder how the BJP will run the state for five years."

Close on the heels of the Baruipur incident came BJP state president Samik Bhattacharya's inflammatory remarks on 'Netaji' Subhash Chandra Bose, a national hero and Bengal's great pride. Speaking at an event to commemorate the birth anniversary of Syama Prasad Mookerjee—who founded the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the political forerunner of the BJP—Bhattacharya recalled how Forward Bloc "*goondas*" had thrown stones at Syama Prasad and injured him. If the Forward Bloc, founded by Netaji, was a party of goondas, what does that make Bose himself?

Bhattacharya also invoked Bose's face-off with Syama Prasad in the run-up to the Calcutta Municipal Corporation elections of 1940, and then thought better than to go into that incident "as it could lead to controversies."

In its desperate search for Bengali icons the party can more legitimately claim than it ever could Netaji, the BJP has been peddling the narrative that Syama Prasad singlehandedly ensured West Bengal remained part of India—by pushing for the partition of Bengal in 1947. But contrary to the BJP's conception, most Bengalis see the Partition as a great tragedy and Syama Prasad as the villain who pushed for that outcome via his Bengali Hindu Homeland Movement.

The Netaji-bashing hasn't gone down well, nor has the state government's diktat to observe 'Syama Prasad fortnight' in schools—with proof of compliance.

A new violent street-sport for the party's rowdies is egg-pelting—and even while MPs Abhishek Banerjee and Mahua Moitra were targeted, the state police stood by and gleefully watched the spectacle. This has become so routine that even the 73-year-old general secretary of the Posta Bazaar Merchants' Association, Bishwanath Agarwal, was not spared. Ironically, the association is dominated by Marwari traders, who are known to be close to the BJP.

*

Describing a recent train journey to the port city of Haldia, 120 km southwest of Kolkata, the same Aloke Biswas quoted above, who wondered what the BJP might do to the state in five years, said: "I couldn't even get a bottle of water as the hawkers have all been evicted. I do not know how these people will survive."

Photo: Getty Images

Protestors hit the streets seeking justice for the Baruipur victim

"Bengal is ill at ease with the socio-political narrative the BJP is trying to foist on the state," says a veteran journalist, preferring not to be named.

"But the TMC lacks the wherewithal to strike back; it has neither the moral standing nor the ideological scaffolding to do so," the journo added.

TMC insiders say Mamata Banerjee decided not to go to Baruipur because the party couldn't muster enough people to go with her. Instead she went on a candle march in her own neighbourhood. "This is not the Mamata Banerjee of 2011, when a sea of people would join her every time she hit the streets," the journo said.

Are the state Congress or the CPM better placed to take on the BJP now that the TMC is out of power? The CPM has at least marked its presence again, and its leader Meenakshi Mukherjee was also pelted with eggs, but it would be a stretch to read it as a sign that the BJP has begun to see the CPM as the real opposition in the state.

The party hasn't even recovered from the embarrassment of getting into bed with the BJP in 2019, seeing it as a means to the coveted end of getting rid of Mamata Banerjee and her TMC. This was the time when its 'comrades' started being called 'Ram-rades'.

The slogan '*Aagey Ram, Porey Bam*' (First Ram, then Left)—the wishful rationale that once the TMC was removed, the political space would open up for the Left to reclaim its ground (*Porey Bam*)—must still echo in their ears.

The folly of that fantasy has begun to dawn on the CPM leadership. They have begun to see that facilitating the rise of the Right in Bengal does not pave the way for a Left resurgence.

Let's count that realisation as a new beginning. ■

Even Bengalis who wanted change had not bargained for the violent makeover the BJP is trying to effect, sparing not even their icons

SOURABH SEN *is a Kolkata-based independent writer*

Will a digital census count everyone?

Continued from page 1

The risk of exclusion

Perhaps the biggest risk of a digital census is the potential for statistical erasure. Analysts estimate that as many as 57.9 crore 'offline citizens' are at risk. The system relies on the Census Management and Monitoring System (CMMS), which assumes uniform connectivity for real-time syncing—an assumption that does not hold true across much of India.

In states like Bihar and Jharkhand, frequent power outages and network blackouts might disrupt syncing. If the app crashes or connectivity fails on an enumerator's phone, marginalised groups—like nomadic tribes, undocumented labourers and lower-caste rural households—are the most likely to be missed.

Even beyond concerns of connectivity, the design of the digital tools has a problematic rigidity. The self-enumeration portal and the enumerator app offer little to no room for correction. For instance, once a 'head of household' is designated, the choice is fixed. Similarly, language choices cannot be changed once selected.

Where household structures are fluid and many census questions require explanation and nuanced judgment, digital inflexibility carries real consequences. A wrong drop-down entry or a badly designed workflow can distort the entire dataset for a region.

The question of data integrity

There are allegations that enumerators are being pressured to alter findings to present a more flattering view of welfare schemes. Instances have been reported where households using firewood/cow-dung cakes were logged as LPG users, or untreated tap water marked as treated to align with government claims.

The stakes of an accurate count extend far beyond statistics. Census numbers feed directly into delimitation—the reallocation of Lok Sabha seats and the redrawing of constituency boundaries. It also determines which seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women. This has already stirred deep anxiety, particularly in southern states, regarding how a fresh redistribution of parliamentary seats will impact representation.

Compounding these anxieties is the new legal framework. While the Census Act of 1948 mandated strict confidentiality, the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act of 2023 creates concerning overlaps. Section 17 of the DPDP Act grants broad exemptions to 'state instrumentalities', allowing the government to bypass standard consent requirements for 'state functions'.

Furthermore, Section 39 channels all data breach and violation complaints to the Data Protection Board of India, barring individuals from approaching civil courts directly and barring courts from issuing injunctions against actions taken under the Act, thereby insulating the DPB from judicial intervention.

The case for a prudent fallback

Given these multifaceted risks, a conventional, paper-based enumeration—for all its perceived slowness—would have been the more prudent choice. Paper preserves what digital systems strip away: human judgment, local correction and an audit trail independent of servers. This is not an argument against technology per se, but against pressing ahead with technocratic solutions that rest on dodgy infrastructure or lack public trust.

For Census 2027 to be a credible database that informs and shapes enlightened government policy, several safeguards are necessary and non-negotiable:

1. Mandatory offline fallback protocols to ensure every citizen is counted regardless of connectivity
2. Independent audits of the CMMS and its exclusion algorithms
3. Whistleblower protections for enumerators to prevent the manipulation of data
4. A statutory confidentiality firewall, insulated from exemptions granted the state and its agencies under the DPDP Act
5. Restoration of civil court jurisdiction

India cannot afford to trade the reliability of the Census for the convenience of a digital dashboard. Even if this is about saving time and 'efficiency'—not to forget after a most egregious delay of six years—we mustn't make a casualty of the country's most vital dataset. ■

DILIP GHOSH *is a retired IAS officer*

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Looking for the Opposition in Maharashtra

Jaideep Hardikar on the existential crisis of the two major regional opposition parties in the state and the space for an alternative

On a humid Sunday morning, just before heavy rain drowned Mumbai, Uddhav Thackeray stood before his party workers and supporters, reciting the Ram Raksha *stotra*. This was not an election campaign. After yet another round of desertions by his party's Lok Sabha members, Thackeray was leading a 'Ram Raksha andolan' to protest the alleged embezzlement of donations by the BJP/RSS-backed trust managing the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

Standing amid saffron flags, he accused the BJP of exploiting the faith of millions of Hindus and declared that "Hindus are innocent, not foolish." The symbolism was unmistakable: a leader who has spent the last four years fighting politically and legally to retain his party's identity and control was returning to the ideological terrain that his father, late Bal Thackeray, had cultivated for decades. Yet beneath the chants and the verses lay a deeper anxiety.

The protest was less a confident assertion of ideology than a weak, almost desperate effort to reclaim political ground that has steadily slipped away since the rebellion of 2022 by his trusted aide-turned-bête noire Eknath Shinde. Shinde continues to eat into Sena (UBT), enticing its MLAs, MPs and foot soldiers to join his fold to enjoy the fruits of power. The latest defections—six of the nine members elected in 2024 on Sena (UBT) tickets and one MLC close to Aaditya Thackeray—underline the same trend.

Late last year, Sena (UBT) finally lost control over the prized Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) with the BJP–Shinde Sena–NCP (Ajit Pawar) combo sweeping the elections. Electoral losses aside, every defection or rumour that another legislator is switching sides chips away at the confidence of a party that has already lost its name, its election mascot, much of its legislative strength and a sizeable part of its organisation.

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The crisis, however, extends beyond one party. Maharashtra today finds itself with perhaps the weakest opposition it has had in its history. The fragmentation of its regional parties has produced a legislature where the ruling alliance has overwhelming dominance, while those expected to challenge it are preoccupied with just staying alive.

The opposition alliance has only 46 MLAs in a 288-member house if you count only the three MVA (Maha Vikas Aghadi) constituents. Neither the Sena (UBT) with its 20 MLAs nor the Congress (with 16) nor the NCP (Sharad Pawar) with 10 meets the one-tenth threshold (of 29 MLAs) required for a party to claim the statutory post of Leader of the Opposition. This is the first time in about six decades that the Maharashtra assembly has no Leader of the Opposition. It shows in the way legislature proceedings are conducted, with no serious discussion on any public issue.

The political vacuum may create an opening for the Congress, the only national party with a presence, however weak, across the state, but it'll be a long haul.

*

As his party continues to bleed MPs, MLAs, corporators and local office-bearers, driven by the allure of power and big contracts, the big challenge for Uddhav Thackeray is to convince loyalists and fence-sitters that his party still has a viable future. Politics ultimately rewards confidence. Cadres stay with organisations that appear capable of winning elections, protecting careers and distributing political opportunities.

The party's greatest asset today is Uddhav Thackeray's personal credibility. Son Aaditya is not yet ready to take on the mantle. Unlike many contemporary politicians, Uddhav is perceived as measured and dignified. His handling of the Covid-19 pandemic earned him goodwill beyond his traditional support base. Many sympathised with him after the Shinde rebellion, but sympathy cannot sustain a political organisation.

The Shiv Sena that Bal Thackeray built was not an electoral machine. It was an intricate network of *shakha*s, neighbourhood organisers, trade unions, municipal institutions and loyal Shiv Sainiks. That's the reason why when Raj Thackeray or leaders like Narayan Rane left the party in the 2000s, the Sena did not suffer the way it does today. Its strength lay in everyday presence rather than periodic election campaigns. Control over civic bodies, particularly in Mumbai and the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, buttressed this network for decades.

Much of that organisational architecture has been eroded beyond repair. And Uddhav Thackeray has not been able to seriously go back to the drawing board to resurrect his party's shakha system by infusing new blood. Rebuilding that structure demands patience, clarity of purpose and resources—all hard to find and sustain in the midst of an existential crisis.

Equally troubling is the question of identity. What exactly does the Shiv Sena (UBT) represent today? The politics of Hindutva has a first claimant and Uddhav's party has neglected its regional, 'Marathi *manoos*' plank. Under Bal Thackeray, the Sena had ideological clarity, however polarising its cocktail of Marathi regionalism plus Hindutva plus a distinctive street cred. Uddhav Thackeray tried to reposition the party after 2019 by joining hands with ideological rivals in the interest of governance. That decision may have been politically necessary at the time, but it also altered the party's image in ways that remain unresolved.

The politics of Hindutva has a first claimant and Uddhav's party has let go its 'Marathi manoos' plank. Crisis of identity?

Is the Sena (UBT) primarily a Marathi regional party? Is it a moderate Hindutva formation? Is it now a broader secular regional force? Or is it defined mainly by opposition to the BJP? Political workers require ideological direction as much as electoral strategy. Voters, too, seek clarity. A party constantly explaining what it is not will struggle to convince people about what it really is or stands for.

Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party (SP) confronts a quieter version of the same crisis. Pawar is one of India's most experienced politicians and continues to command great respect. But his personal stature cannot indefinitely compensate for organisational erosion. Like the Sena (UBT), his party too lost its recognised name and symbol after the split. Questions about succession persist. The organisation survives substantially because of the veteran's own authority rather than an institutional structure capable of renewing itself independent of him.

The combined effect is unprecedented. Maharashtra's two major regional opposition parties are simultaneously engaged in battles for organisational survival. Instead of challenging the government inside and outside the legislature, they are preoccupied with retaining their legislators, local leaders and workers.

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Their predicament has created space for the Congress, which has something its regional allies lack at this moment—organisational continuity. It has not suffered a major split. Its district committees remain intact. The party has, in fact, got fresh blood with newly appointed presidents of local units under its nationwide organisational revamp campaign—the Sangathan Srijan Abhiyan. Whether the campaign succeeds in rebuilding the Congress bottom-up is a different question, but its ideological identity is relatively stable. Most importantly, it is not burdened by questions like which faction represents 'the real party'.

This does not automatically translate into electoral revival. The Congress has organisational weaknesses of its own and has struggled to convert public discontent into political gain. Yet, if Maharashtra seeks a durable and recognisable Opposition, the Congress may increasingly find itself occupying that space, less so at this point because of any great resurgence and more because the other claimants to that role have steadily fragmented. ■

Photo: Getty Images

Bid to regain lost ground Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray addressing a 'Ram raksha andolan' in Mumbai

JAIDEEP HARDIKAR *is a senior Nagpur-based journalist and author of* Ramrao: The Story of India's Farm Crisis

MSMEs rhetoric, rules and reality

Ajit Ranade on how India's tax architecture and a compliance Catch-22 are devouring MSMEs

On 27 June, marked as National MSME Day, a wave of lavish tributes canonised small businesses as the 'backbone' of employment, industrial production and exports. On 1 July, the nation marked GST Day, commemorating the ninth anniversary of its rollout. Yet the sobering reality is that India's small entrepreneurs still do not see a viable pathway to formalisation, trapped in a policy-induced pincer movement, where large corporate customers weaponise time and a rigid, accrual-based tax architecture weaponises compliance.

This structural contradiction has created a devastating double whammy for MSMEs. On one side, small units are forced to act as interest-free credit lines for big corporate buyers and public sector undertakings (PSUs) who delay payments for months. On the other side, the GST demands immediate, non-negotiable tax payments on money that the MSME has not yet received. This can choke small businesses to death.

Under Section 15 of the MSMED Act, 2006, buyers are legally obliged to settle vendor bills within 45 days if there is a written contract, or 15 days in its absence. The statute also mandates a hefty penalty and a compound interest liability.

Yet these timelines are unreal. Large private entities and government bodies routinely stretch payment cycles to 90/120/180 days.

Institutional interventions to reduce this gap have crashed into corporate non-cooperation. Take the Trade Receivables Discounting System (TReDS). This RBI-regulated electronic platform is meant to let MSMEs auction invoices to banks for instant liquidity. It is called bill discounting on an electronic platform. But large corporates and central public sector enterprises refuse to onboard or approve invoices. Because TReDS binds buyers to an inflexible auto-debit system on maturity, any failure auto-reports them to credit bureaus. Rather than clean up their cash management to protect their credit scores, corporate giants simply block the platform entirely, leaving vendors out in the cold.

This chronic payment delay is made worse by the GST framework, which operates on the basis of accruals rather than cash flows. If an invoice is generated, the tax must be paid by the 20th of the next month, irrespective of when the payment is received. So, the MSME must pay 18 per cent soon after raising an invoice, but the corporate buyer can ignore the 45-day limit without paying a rupee.

This creates a terrible cash-flow inversion. Small vendors are forced to default on employee payrolls or secure high-interest market loans. Compounding this cash crunch is the reality of low digital literacy, lack of access to modern tech and complex portal architectures. In semi-urban industrial clusters, the problem is further exacerbated by internet connectivity problems.

NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) data from its Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE) reveals that India has an estimated 77 million non-agricultural, non-construction unincorporated establishments.

MSMEs face a chronic payments crisis, which is exacerbated by the GST framework

Yet, according to available data these enterprises are avoiding the State's formal mechanisms because systems are hostile. Just about one million micro-enterprises are registered under GST.

Furthermore, while GSTN records indicate that roughly seven million taxpayers report an annual topline below Rs 1 crore, the ground-level survey by ASUSE finds fewer than 1.2 million such GST-registered establishments. This massive shortfall is not a sign of widespread tax evasion but a desperate survival strategy. Small businesses realise that stepping into the GST system may lead to suffocation.

This double whammy means a profound existential paradox. Rather than face cash outlays for unpaid invoices, most small businesses choose to stay outside the GST ambit. But non-registration is commercial exile. Large corporate supply chains are built around maximising input tax credit. If an MSME is not registered under GST, big corporates won't do business with them.

For those who do register to survive, the legal remedies are rendered useless by power asymmetries. Policymakers point to the MSME Samadhaan portal to 'name and shame' errant buyers, but this betrays a lack of understanding of the supply chain. Most specialised MSMEs rely on a single, big corporate customer—going up to 80–100 per cent of their revenue. An MSME vendor cannot 'name and shame' its customer because that customer is too important to antagonise. To aggressively demand the 45-day rule, enforce Section 43B(h) of the Income Tax Act, or file a Samadhaan case is to invite immediate, quiet de-panelment. The corporate buyer will simply move to a different vendor.

Even the 180-day input tax credit reversal rule under GST exposes the State's self-interest. If a buyer defaults for 180 days, the law forces them to return the claimed tax credit to the government with an 18 per cent interest penalty. The State successfully collects its penalty from the large corporate, but the suffering MSME receives no tax refund and no capital relief. The government secures its revenue twice over, while the small business is left holding a toxic bad debt.

To align the tax law with real-life conditions, the state must consider three structural interventions:

1. Cash-based GST for micro-enterprises. Businesses up to a specific turnover threshold must be allowed to deposit GST only when the invoice amount reaches their bank account. Tax collection should trace actual capital, not paper invoices

2. Low-bandwidth portal architecture. Introduce a radically simplified, lightweight version of the tax portal optimised for micro-enterprises. It must function seamlessly even where internet connectivity is poor and cut the monthly filing burden down to bare minimum

3. GSTN-TReDS digital bridge. Large corporate buyers must not have veto power over invoice approval. The moment an e-invoice involving a large corporate (above the Rs 250 cr. threshold) is generated on the GST portal, the system must automatically create an unalterable, pre-approved trade receivable on TReDS. This will allow banks to instantly fund the vendor and cut the uncooperative buyer out of the financing loop.

MSMEs can truly be the backbone of the economy, but they must be offered a realistic pathway to formalisation. ■

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

Photos: Getty Images

Vicious cycle Without structural interventions, MSMEs will stay trapped in asymmetries that favour the big corporate

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What loot in Hindutva hotspots looks like

A common pattern is emerging—from Ayodhya to Varanasi to Ujjain, Vrindavan, Kedarnath, Badrinath...

Rashme Sehgal

Redevelopment' is the name of the game under which vast tracts of land around our ancient temples are being snapped up. Vested political interests are then selling them at inflated prices to the same trusts that manage these temples. Be it Kashi Vishwanath in Varanasi, Ram Janmabhoomi in Ayodhya, Mahakaleshwar in Ujjain or Banke Bihari in Vrindavan, the controversies extend far beyond isolated allegations. Opposition parties, religious leaders, social activists and even factions within the Hindutva establishment have accused influential political figures, temple trusts and bureaucrats of exploiting public faith for private gain. Land speculation, opaque financial deals, misappropriation of funds have become standard features of swindles coming to light across Hindutva hotspots.

The most damning charges concern the donations at Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra, the trust that runs the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. Conservative estimates peg the embezzlement at Rs 200 crore, but locals in Ayodhya believe the scam runs into more than Rs 5,000 crore. Opposition leaders allege that the money was siphoned off to influential leaders whose names have not yet been revealed.

The project has been mired in controversy from the start. The Nirmohi Akhara, one of the oldest and most powerful Ramanandi orders, had accused the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of misusing over Rs 1,400 crore received from devotees since the early 1990s. Instead of being spent on temple construction, this money was used to fund their own institutional buildings and enhance the political standing of their leaders.

It is well known that Modi-appointee Champat Rai, who resigned as general secretary of the trust, and Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath do not see eye to eye. Yogi was waiting to strike. On 13 June 2026, he ordered the setting up of a Special Investigation Team. On the same day, in a classic case of loot-and-scoot, Gopal Rao (who was in charge of construction at the Ram Mandir) reportedly caught a train with sacks stuffed with gold and silver bars. He was subsequently seen hobnobbing with senior RSS functionaries in Bengaluru. His nephew Somesh Anand is reportedly the 'mule' transporting bags of gold and silver from Ayodhya to Karnataka.

Meanwhile, Opposition parties have intensified their allegations of questionable land transactions. Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh has submitted documents related to 11 land deals to the Special Enquiry Team set up to probe the matter.

The team is now examining expenditure on Ram Mandir events, including Rs 113 crore spent on the consecration ceremony (presided over by Prime Minister Narendra Modi) and Rs 10.12 crore spent on the flag-hoisting ceremony in November 2025.

Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati, the Shankaracharya of Jyotirmath, pointed out that only lower-level functionaries have been arrested so far, while "those responsible for larger wrongdoings" are going scot-free.

Uttar Pradesh Congress chief Ajay Rai went a step further and accused the ruling BJP of undermining Hindu religious sites, notably in Varanasi, Vrindavan and Mirzapur, and transforming them into tourist attractions.

Rai argues that religious buildings have been demolished under the guise of development projects like the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, which was expanded from 3,000 sq. ft. to 500,000 sq. ft. The BJP-led government has, he says, prioritised commercialisation over preserving cultural heritage, destroying the livelihoods of communities that have long served these sacred locations.

A similar process is underway in Ujjain which is being primed as the next religio-tourist destination with the Simhastha Mahakumbh expected to be held here in 2028. Preparations have triggered a wave of land acquisition around the Mahakaleshwar Temple. Shops, homes and even a 200-year-old mosque have been demolished to make way for parking facilities and the Ujjain Mahakal Lok Corridor.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav's grandiose announcement that his government would acquire 2,378 hectares to build infrastructure for the Simhastha Kumbh provoked such strong resistance from farmers' organisations—including the RSS-led Bharatiya Kisan Sangh—that Yadav was forced to withdraw the notification on 17 November 2025.

Photo: Getty Images

Obsessed with corridors The Kashi Vishwanath temple (*above*) before the corridor project began; and (*left*) old buildings demolished to create a passage to the ghats in Varanasi

A public spat between Yadav and BJP MLA Chintamani Malviya has recently resurfaced. When Malviya reportedly bought 45,000 sq. ft. land (in the name of Utopia Bottle and Resort Pvt Ltd) next to the Mahakal temple, a complaint was made to the Lokayukta, the Economic Offenses Wing and the high court that what was at present a parking lot for the temple was going to be the site of a five-star hotel.

Malviya retaliated by pointing out that after Yadav assumed office in December 2013, his family and their real estate companies had bought at least 137 plots—adding up to over 168 acres in two years. He warned of a powerful cartel trying to monopolise all the land deals in Ujjain.

A Bhopal-based political observer pointed out, "The Mahakal Lok Corridor is being built at a cost of Rs 1,200 crore. Another Rs 400 crore has been allotted from government funds for 'development' work. The commission for politi-cians and bureaucrats at 35 per cent works out to Rs 350 crore. The work done is so substandard that the statues and murals that were installed in the temple complex last year collapsed after one heavy shower."

The government's obsession with corridors has now been extended to the Banke Bihari temple in Vrindavan. The Supreme Court has green-signalled both the construction of the Banke Bihari corridor and the use of temple funds to the tune of Rs 500 crore to acquire land. The state government's own budgetary allotment for land acquisition and initial construction is Rs 762 crore.

Authorities are surveying properties (300+) and negotiating compensation amounts with affected residents and shopkeepers (100+) whose shops will be demolished. Neeraj Gautam, head of the Banke Bihari Market Association, believes this corridor will be a repeat of what happened in Varanasi: "Braj's culture will be erased."

While the government claims the corridor will help pilgrims and improve safety, locals fear it will damage Vrindavan's spiritual and cultural heritage. Their fears are not unfounded given the kind of makeovers our religious dhams are receiving. The 'face lifts' given to Kedarnath and Badrinath have resulted in the mushrooming of multi-storeyed concrete buildings totally inappropriate for an ecologically fragile region.

Both have also seen variations of the same loot-and-scoot script. In 2023, the 100-crore gold plating on the walls of the sanctum sanctorum of the Shiva temple in Kedarnath was stolen overnight. The culprits haven't yet been brought to book. Swami Avimukteshwaranand and local priests publicly claimed that up to 228 kg of gold had gone missing. The first week of July 2026 brought another exposé—temple donations had gone missing from the Badrinath shrine. A temple employee has since been suspended, and the amount is believed to run into crores.

Largescale violations of land use regulation are being witnessed across Vrindavan. Commercial buildings and luxury hotels have sprung up on hundreds of acres designated for ashrams and temples. All under the nose of the Mathura-Vrindavan Development Authority which has taken no steps to end this blatant misuse. Social activists contend that the easiest way to grab land is to claim it will be used for 'religious purposes'. By doing so, the government ensures their Hindu vote bank does not get alienated.

The situation at the Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi temple in Mathura is no better. Local seer Dinesh 'Phalahari' Maharaj publicly alleged massive embezzlements of donations on a scale comparable to the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya and demanded an immediate CBI enquiry.

For the devout this is the ultimate betrayal: a government claiming to champion Hindu interests has instead been converting sacred spaces into high-value real estate projects. The rhetoric is that of religious renaissance; the reality is commercialisation and corruption that benefits those in power. ■

A government that champions Hindu interests is changing sacred spaces into high-value real estate projects to enrich the powerful

Pilgrimage in the time of climate change

The rapidly melting *shivling* of Amarnath is a reminder that faith must respect nature

Photo: Getty Images

Pilgrims' progress Increased footfall has hastened the melting of the ice lingam in the Amarnath cave temple, shrinking it to barely a foot (*right*) in the first four days since it was opened to devotees this year

Pankaj Chaturvedi

The annual Amarnath Yatra is more than a religious pilgrimage. For millions of Hindus, it is one of the holiest spiritual journeys in India. It is also the economic lifeline for thousands of families in Kashmir and an important indicator of the health of the fragile Himalayan ecosystem.

The 57-day pilgrimage began on 3 July 2026. By the end of the fifth day, more than 113,800 pilgrims had already visited the sacred cave. Almost simultaneously, reports emerged that the naturally formed ice lingam had melted by nearly 90 per cent, shrinking to barely a foot in height.

What devotees witnessed was not merely the premature melting away of a sacred marker. It was an unmistakable warning that climate change, coupled with untenable human pressure (and presence), is altering one of India's most sensitive mountain ecosystems.

Natural wonder under climate stress

The ice lingam inside the Amarnath cave is not carved or sculpted. It is a naturally occurring ice stalagmite formed through a delicate process in which water droplets falling from the cave roof freeze under sustained sub-zero temperatures. This remarkable phenomenon depends on an exceptionally stable microclimate within the cave. When that microclimate is disturbed, the natural process is disrupted.

This year, Kashmir experienced unusually high temperatures during May and June, with heat levels breaking several previous records. Reduced snowfall during the preceding winter also meant that natural cooling around the cave was significantly weaker than normal. Without sufficient accumulation of snow, the cave loses the thermal conditions necessary to sustain the ice formation throughout the pilgrimage season.

The result was evident within days of the Yatra's commencement.

A pattern, not an exception

The events of 2026 are not isolated. They fit into a worrying climatic trend.

During the summer of 2024, Kashmir witnessed an intense heat wave in June and July, which experts linked to the unusually rapid melting of the ice lingam. In 2025, erratic weather patterns became equally evident. Following snowfall, minimum temperatures reportedly rose by nearly six degrees Celsius within a short period—another sign of increasing climatic instability in the Himalayan region.

These recurring anomalies reinforce what scientists have long warned: the Himalayas are among the world's most climate-sensitive mountain systems. Rising temperatures are accelerating glacier retreat, altering snowfall patterns and destabilising ecosystems that have evolved over thousands of years.

Missing climate data

One of the biggest challenges in understanding the phenomenon is the absence of long-term environmental data from the cave itself.

Although the Amarnath cave lies in an ecologically sensitive zone, publicly available observations from permanent automated weather stations remain limited. The India Meteorological Department primarily provides district-level forecasts and short-term weather updates rather than long-term cave-specific climate records.

Consequently, researchers often rely on observations from nearby stations such as Srinagar, Pahalgam and Anantnag, supplementing them with local information on humidity, wind and snowfall to assess conditions inside the cave. This gap highlights the urgent need for continuous scientific monitoring of one of India's most environmentally vulnerable pilgrimage sites.

The pressure of human activity

Climate change is not the entire story. The cave's fragile microclimate is increasingly affected by the sheer scale of human activity during the pilgrimage. Studies suggest that every person inside the cave emits roughly 100 watts of body heat. When tens of thousands of pilgrims pass through the confined space over a short period, the cumulative heat and humidity inevitably rise.

The consequences are predictable. Higher temperatures accelerate the melting of the ice formation.

The problem is compounded by mechanised activity, vehicle movement, construction, power generation and infrastructure built to accommodate more pilgrims. While these facilities undoubtedly improve accessibility, they also increase the ecological footprint of the pilgrimage, placing additional stress on a fragile environment.

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The shrinking ice lingam raises an uncomfortable but unavoidable question: are we prepared to modify our practices in order to preserve what we revere?

Pilgrimages should not be measured merely by the number of people who reach a sacred spot. They should also reflect respect for ecological balance.

Environmental experts have repeatedly recommended limiting the daily number of pilgrims to help maintain stable conditions inside the cave. Mechanised activity in the immediate vicinity should be minimised, and future infrastructure development must be guided by ecological rather than logistical considerations. Climate adaptation should become an integral part of pilgrimage management, particularly in the Himalayas, where environmental thresholds are very delicate.

Religious faith and environmental conservation cannot be viewed as competing priorities. One depends upon the other. If future generations are to experience the Amarnath ice lingam in its natural form, India must embrace a model of pilgrimage that is both spiritually fulfilling and environmentally sustainable.

The Amarnath cave reminds us of a profound truth. We are not masters of nature but its custodians. Devotion should not unintentionally destroy the very phenomenon it seeks to celebrate. Managing the annual pilgrimage can no longer remain merely an administrative exercise. It must become part of a broader national strategy for climate resilience and ecological stewardship in the Himalayas. Only then can this extraordinary symbol of faith continue to inspire pilgrims for generations to come. ■

Studies suggest that every person inside the cave emits roughly 100 watts of body heat. The cumulative effect is imaginable

From oath to outcome in a single evening: Karnataka's new chapter begins

A first cabinet meeting held the same evening as D.K. Shivakumar's oath- and a slew of welfare measures to show for it, starting with the state's youth

Photo: GettyImages

The cabinet's decisions reflected a determination to not let that potential go untapped, addressing youth from three distinct but connected angles.

Hours after taking oath as Chief Minister of Karnataka on the afternoon of June 3, 2026, D.K. Shivakumar was back at work — convening his first cabinet meeting that very evening. There was no pause between oath and office, no gap between promise and practice.

By nightfall, a slew of welfare measures, anchored in youth recruitment and student welfare, had already been rolled out — a signal, delivered on day one, that this administration intended to govern from the outset rather than ease into it.

For a government, the first cabinet meeting is often treated as symbolic — a photograph for the archives, a promise wrapped in ceremony and set aside for later.

This one chose a different path. From the very first hour, the new administration made clear that its priority was outcomes, not optics.

It was governance with its sleeves rolled up, and the message was unmistakable: the work would begin immediately, not after the applause had faded.

There is a particular kind of courage in choosing substance over spectacle at the outset of a term. It would have been easy to use the occasion for broad declarations of intent that commit to little.

Instead, the cabinet arrived with specifics — numbers, timelines, named initiatives — setting a standard for itself that it would now have to live up to.

A VISION ROOTED IN THE PEOPLE

Every government speaks of the people. Few begin by proving it on day one. As the cabinet took its seats, the conversation moved swiftly toward the everyday lives of Karnataka's citizens — its students, its job seekers, its urban residents, its homeowners waiting years for a piece of paper that would finally make their homes legitimate.

There was a shared understanding in the room: a state's progress cannot be measured only in economic indicators.

It must be felt in classrooms, in job interviews, in daily commutes, and in the quiet relief of a family finally receiving a document that secures their home.

This was the spirit that shaped the decisions taken that evening — a blend of compassion and pragmatism, of big vision and small, tangible relief.

Few administrations commit numbers, deadlines, and resources to their priorities on the very first day in office.

Karnataka's new cabinet chose to do exactly that — signalling that the vision articulated in speeches was not meant to remain aspirational, but was to be immediately anchored in policy.

Opening Doors for the Next Generation

If one theme ran like a thread through the meeting, it was youth. Karnataka has long taken pride in its young, energetic population — a demographic dividend that, if nurtured well, could power the state's ambitions for decades.

The cabinet's decisions reflected a determination to not let that potential go untapped, addressing youth from three distinct but connected angles.

The first was deceptively simple, yet profound: extending free bus travel to male students across the state. On the surface, it reads as a transport policy.

In truth, it is an investment in access — a recognition that for many families, the cost of a daily commute can be the invisible wall between a child and their education.

By removing that wall, the government sent a clear message that no student should have to choose between affordability and aspiration.

But access to education is only half the promise. The other half is what comes after — a livelihood, a place in the workforce.

The cabinet addressed this with equal seriousness, approving a sweeping employment initiative aimed at generating 50,000 new job opportunities for the state's youth. Paired with a renewed focus on skill development and employability, the initiative signals a government thinking not just about jobs today, but about a workforce equipped for tomorrow.

And then came a decision that looked beyond degrees and desks altogether — the approval of 10,000 Bharat Jodo Clubs across Karnataka. These are spaces where young citizens can gather, engage, lead, and build bonds of community.

In a world increasingly divided by noise and distraction, the initiative reflects a belief that harmony and leadership are skills too — ones that must be nurtured just as deliberately as literacy or technical training. It is a wager that a generation raised in unity will build a state defined by cooperation rather than conflict.

Taken together, mobility, employment, and community form a deliberate architecture of youth empowerment — one that treats young citizens not as a single problem to be solved with a single scheme, but as individuals whose needs span the practical, the professional, and the personal.

A GOVERNMENT THAT CHOSE ACTION OVER CEREMONY

What stands out, looking back at this first cabinet meeting, is not any single decision but the pattern they form together. Free travel for students. Fifty thousand jobs. Ten thousand community clubs. Crores committed to city infrastructure.

Relief for homeowners waiting years for paperwork. Firm rules against unchecked construction. Each addresses a distinct concern; together, they sketch a governing philosophy that sees no contradiction between compassion and discipline, between immediate relief and long-term planning.

There is a quiet confidence in choosing to spend a first cabinet meeting this way — treating governance not as a performance, but as a continuous act of service.

LOOKING AHEAD

Every long journey is remembered, eventually, for its first step. For Karnataka, the evening of June 3, 2026, may well be recalled as such a moment — not because it solved every challenge the state faces, but because it set a tone: urgency without haste, ambition without excess, care extended to citizens without losing sight of order and accountability.

The road ahead is, undoubtedly, a long one. Fifty thousand jobs must be created and filled. Ten thousand clubs must find their footing. Roads must be repaired, and repaired well. Families waiting for certificates must see that wait finally end.

These are not small undertakings, and their true success will be measured not in this first meeting, but in the months and years of follow-through that lie ahead.

Yet there is something reassuring in how the journey began. A government's character often reveals itself most clearly in its earliest choices — before the pressures of routine administration set in, before the initial energy settles into the steady rhythm of governance.

In choosing to open its term, within hours of taking oath, with decisions that touch students, job seekers, city commuters, and anxious homeowners alike, Karnataka's new administration has offered its citizens a glimpse of its priorities.

As the state moves forward from this milestone, there is a sense of quiet optimism in the air — not the loud optimism of promises yet to be tested, but the steadier kind that comes from watching a government choose to act before it chooses to speak.

Karnataka begins this chapter with its feet firmly on the ground and its eyes fixed on the horizon: a state working, deliberately and diligently, toward a future where opportunity, order, and inclusion walk hand in hand.

GROWTH WITH GUARDRAILS

A government that only gives without setting standards risks disorder; one that only regulates without extending relief risks alienation. Karnataka's new cabinet appeared conscious of this balance.

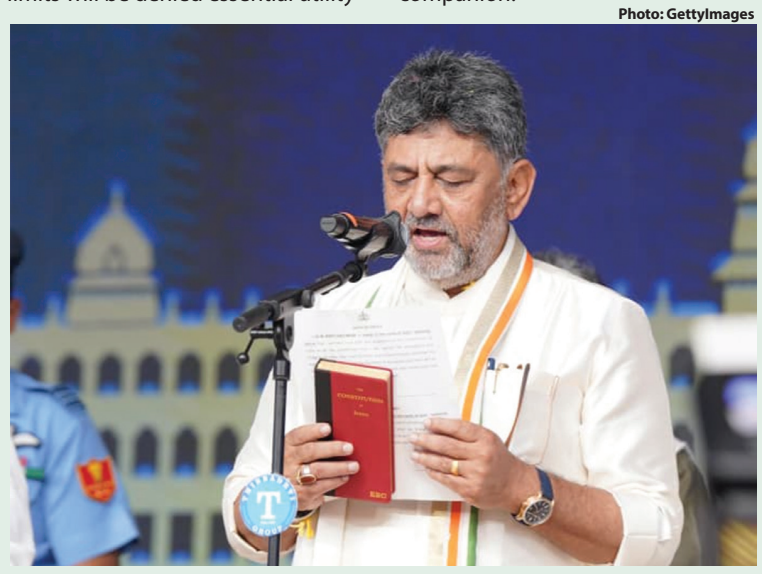
Even as it extended support to law-abiding citizens through the settlement scheme, it reaffirmed that Bengaluru's growth must remain within the bounds of order and safety.

In line with directives from the Supreme Court, the cabinet approved firm measures against unauthorized construction. Buildings that violate sanctioned plans or exceed prescribed height limits will be denied essential utility connections — electricity and water — until compliance is ensured.

It is a measure that draws a clear boundary: support for those who follow the rules, no shortcuts for those who bypass them. In a city expanding as rapidly as Bengaluru, this insistence on planned, accountable growth may prove just as important as any single infrastructure project.

Read together, the settlement scheme and the construction crackdown reveal a coherent philosophy rather than two isolated decisions. Compassion, in this framing, is not the opposite of discipline — it is its natural companion.

Photo: GettyImages



BENGALURU: BETWEEN AMBITION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

No conversation about Karnataka's future can avoid Bengaluru — a city celebrated globally as a beacon of technology and innovation, yet one whose residents know all too well the frustrations of traffic snarls, crumbling roads, and infrastructure straining under rapid growth. The cabinet did not shy away from this contradiction. It addressed it directly.

An infrastructure investment of Rs 2,000 crore was approved with a clear purpose: fixing roads, eliminating potholes, and reinforcing the city's transport network.

This was framed not as a distant plan but as an urgent response to a problem residents face every day. For a commuter stuck in traffic or navigating a pothole-riddled stretch, such an announcement is the promise of a smoother, safer journey home.

Yet perhaps the most human decision concerned something less visible than roads: paperwork. For thousands of families living in "unplanned residential layouts," the absence of proper documentation has long cast a shadow of uncertainty over their homes.

The cabinet's approval of a One-Time Settlement scheme for residential properties up to 2,500 square feet offers these families a long-awaited pathway to legal clarity.

Alongside this, the government committed to expediting Completion Certificates and Occupancy Certificates across 30 to 40 identified residential areas — a process that translates directly into peace of mind for homeowners who have waited years for formal recognition of the roofs over their heads.

Photo: GettyImages

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What the *Chauhaan* teaser tells us

The film calls pellet guns 'limited force'. The numbers from Kashmir tell a different story

Aakar Patel

The teaser for *Chauhaan*—the latest in a line of films selling majoritarian propaganda—is out. It opens in the sort of place the Indian government prefers its stories set: a street in Pulwama, stones in the air, security forces in formation.

The voiceover calls tear gas ineffective because protective masks are easily accessible online. Water cannons are dismissed as temporary solutions. What is required, the film insinuates, is something harsher: 12-gauge shotguns firing birdshot into crowds.

We should pause here.

Narrative-building for majoritarianism in India now runs on the confidence that such claims are never checked. So let us check.

In 2017, Amnesty International India documented 88 people whose eyesight was damaged by shotguns fired by the Jammu & Kashmir Police and the Central Reserve Police Force between 2014 and 2017. Some recovered; many did not.

A single cartridge scatters between 360 and 600 metal pellets—there's no way to control where they land. The injuries caused by pellet guns are indiscriminate by design: shotgun barrels are not rifled, and there is no control over their projectiles.

That is evident from the fact that 14 of the 88 people we spoke to were not protesters but women hit inside their own homes. Security personnel themselves have been treated for injuries caused by weapons fired by their colleagues, so dangerous is their use.

And then there was Insha Mushtaq, a 14-year-old girl who, on the evening of 11 July 2016, opened a window in her village in Kashmir to look at the street. She never saw the street—or anything else—again. A pellet gun blinded her, completely. Her doctors called it the worst case they had ever seen.

The state's official data says 6,221 people were injured between July 2016 and February 2017, with 782 sustaining eye injuries.

The government has assembled a working dictionary: the dissenter is 'anti-national', the activist an 'urban Naxal', the boy at the funeral a 'stone-pelter'

The United Nations human rights office called the pellet shotgun "one of the most dangerous weapons used in Kashmir" and recommended its removal from India's arsenal for crowd control. When the Indian government was asked why it fired into the faces of children, it declined to answer, citing national security.

Clearly, 'limited damage' is not a description the evidence can bear.

The *Chauhaan* teaser's complaint that limited force produces no results is equally untrue because, in Kashmir, there has never been restraint by the government or any shortage of force. The region's condition today reflects what more than three decades of force have wrought.

A government that answers one violation with another, graver violation does not earn trust; it forfeits it.

Protesters take to the streets because the doors of Parliament have been shut to them. And this is not just in Kashmir.

The Indian government's Pre-Legislative Consultation Policy adopted in 2014 requires all draft laws to be opened for public consultation for 30 days. Yet, according to PRS Legislative Research, of the 301 Bills introduced since 2014, as many as 227 underwent no public consultation at all. Of the 74 that were published, at least 40 fell short of the prescribed 30-day consultation period.

The 'mother of democracy' will not discuss family matters with the family.

There is further evidence that we are a parliamentary democracy only in name. The share of Bills referred to standing committees has fallen from 71 per cent before 2014 to less than 20 per cent since.

In December 2025, when asked whether the government monitored implementation of the consultation policy, it replied that it had never evaluated the policy and kept no record of who complied with it.

Increasingly, this regime's most problematic directives do not arrive as laws but as rules and advisories drafted by the executive without legislative scrutiny, let alone public consultation.

The State needs reminding that a country cannot keep calling itself a democracy while hollowing out the word one law, one rule and one advisory at a time.

In the process, the government has assembled a working dictionary: the dissenter is 'anti-national', the activist an 'urban Naxal', the protester an '*andolanjeevi*', the reporter a 'presstitute', and the boy at a funeral a 'stone-pelter'.

A film teaser that recasts a maiming weapon as an example of heroic restraint is quoting from a new dictionary, in a medium built to manufacture assent

Once these words seep into the public consciousness through propaganda, the state's actions no longer require a defence.

A film teaser that recasts a maiming weapon as an example of heroic restraint is not breaking with that dictionary. It is reading fluently from it, in a medium built to manufacture assent.

To look at a girl who was blinded simply for looking out of a window and call it 'limited damage' is not strength. Quite the opposite.

When the Amnesty report was published, I went with my colleague Raghu to meet the then head of Kashmir Police, S.P. Vaid, who is quite active on *X* these days.

The police headquarters in Srinagar—and the ethnicity of the officials manning it—was revealing. I will write about that another time.

Vaid was hospitable as he accepted a copy of our report. He listened as we presented our findings on the damage caused by police firing pellet shotguns at protesters. He did not dispute the findings, but he could not see why the weapon should be discontinued.

"It is a weapon that is not used for crowd control anywhere else in India," I said to him. "It should be," he replied. ■

Views are personal

Takes more than two to make a market economy

Amal Chandra on the risks India faces from its monopolistic business environment

Photo: **Getty Images**

The Adani Group's presence has been widening alarmingly across key infrastructure sectors. (*above*) Residents protest the handing over of Dharavi's redevelopment project to the group

There was a time when Indian capitalism was narrated as a story of liberalisation. The 1991 reforms dismantled the old licence/permit raj and promised a more competitive marketplace. Three decades later, a new question shadows India's economic growth story—do a handful of big business groups command disproportionate influence over our markets, infrastructure and public policy?

It's a no-brainer to identify the two corporate giants that control some of the most strategic sectors of the Indian economy today—ports, airports, telecom, digital services, data infrastructure, petrochemicals, power, logistics, green energy, retail, media... Their scale, reach and speed of expansion have no parallels in India's business history—and for many, they are our national champions who have made India globally competitive. But their rise has also raised concerns about the concentration of economic power, barriers to real competition and the role of state policy in private accumulation.

Crony capitalism is not merely about corruption in the narrow legal sense. It describes a political economy where access to power becomes a decisive business advantage, where regulation, licensing, state financing and public assets disproportionately favour those closest to the governing establishment. The concern is not that successful businesses become large; scale is often a natural consequence of efficiency. The concern arises when scale becomes self-reinforcing through privileged access to capital, policy and state resources, making markets less competitive.

The rise of Gautam Adani has become emblematic of this anxiety. The Adani Group's expansion from ports into airports, power transmission, data centres, renewable energy, media, cement and defence has been strikingly rapid. From handling roughly a quarter of India's cargo through Adani Ports & SEZ Ltd, it became India's largest private airport operator. It owns/controls key international airports in Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Mangaluru, Jaipur, Guwahati, Thiruvananthapuram and Mumbai. In Mumbai, India's financial capital, it owns both Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport and the under-development Navi Mumbai International Airport. It has a major presence in power and renewables through Adani Energy Solutions and Adani Green Energy, has forayed into cement manufacture by acquiring ACC and Ambuja Cements, and expanded into media via NDTV—creating an extraordinary strategic footprint across trade, energy, infrastructure and information.

The strategic nature of assets acquired is as noteworthy as the speed of this growth. Airports are not simply commercial properties but gateways of national infrastructure. Ports shape trade flows. Power transmission influences energy distribution. Media ownership shapes public discourse. The concentration of such assets in a single group naturally raises questions about overwhelming influence in policymaking.

In the wake of the 2023 Hindenburg exposé about 'brazen stock market manipulation and accounting fraud' by the Adani Group—which wiped out over $100 billion in market value at one stage—other damning details came to light, such as the substantial exposure of public sector institutions like LIC and State Bank of India to Adani-linked assets. Critics warned that such exposure had scary implications for financial stability and for crores of Indians whose savings are managed by these institutions. But those warnings fell on deaf ears.

Reliance Industries, the Mukesh Ambani group flagship, represents another form of concentration. Unlike Adani's expansion led by infrastructure, Reliance built dominance through petrochemicals before moving into telecom, retail, digital commerce, media and platform infrastructure. The launch of Jio Platforms fundamentally reshaped India's telecom market. Consumers benefited enormously from cheap data, accelerating India's digital transformation, but the telecom sector shrank to a few big players, effectively weakening competition.

Reliance's retail and digital ambitions similarly reveal how great scale can also create unfair advantage. In network industries, size is power. The more users a platform acquires, the harder it becomes for competitors to challenge it. It creates a feedback loop of market dominance that conventional antitrust/anti-monopoly frameworks often struggle to address.

The issue, then, is not simply whether Adani and Ambani run efficient businesses. Both have executed large projects on an extraordinary scale, but the question here is whether India's institutional architecture nurtures competition.

Indian economists and public intellectuals have long warned against the dangers of excessive concentration of economic power. As former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan cautioned: "Crony capitalism is about the misuse of public office for private gain," a warning perhaps especially relevant in emerging economies.

The monetisation of public assets further complicates the picture. As the government accelerates privatisation and infrastructure leasing, large conglomerates with deep pockets enjoy an enormous advantage. Smaller firms simply cannot bid at comparable scale. This creates a structural bias towards concentration, with strategic assets gravitating towards a few dominant players.

In the absence of competition, scale can suppress innovation and create systemic fragility, where the failure of a single giant player becomes a national risk

Large conglomerates often secure financing at more favourable terms because lenders perceive them as systemically important or politically insulated. This lowers their cost of capital relative to smaller competitors. Over time, cheap capital becomes a competitive moat. When public banks and insurers are involved, the stakes become even higher because losses, if they occur, are socialised.

This dynamic is not unique to India. The United States confronted similar concerns during the Gilded Age of the 1870s to the 1890s, an era of rapid economic growth and industrialisation marked by flashy materialism, great wealth inequality and political corruption. It was in this period that industrial titans like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie amassed extraordinary wealth and market power. The policy response was antitrust law, a.k.a. as anti-monopoly law. The lesson was clear: capitalism requires competition and competition requires guardrails.

India today faces its own version of the same economic conundrum.

Defenders of the current model argue that India needs large conglomerates to rapidly build capital-intensive infrastructure, much like scale and state coordination helped accelerate China's industrial rise. Yet scale without competition also suppresses innovation and creates systemic fragility, where the failure of a single giant player becomes a national risk. The issue goes beyond the current stranglehold of the Adanis and Ambanis; a larger concern is whether India's institutions can preserve transparency, competition and regulatory independence as this concentration deepens. ■

AMAL CHANDRA *is a policy analyst and columnist*

One reserve forest, three governments

Photos: **Ratheesh S.R.**

Living in fear (*Clockwise from left*) **Women from the Mavinhalla tribal hamlet near Ooty; Chandroth colony near Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary; B.R. Sivanand holds a photo of his father, Rajasekharappa, who was killed by a tiger**

The Niligiri Biosphere Reserve is divided by administrative boundaries that wildlife neither recognises nor respects

K.A. Shaji

Rugmini still cannot bear to look in the direction of the small field where her husband was killed. On the morning of 7 November 2025, Dhan Nayaka, 49, a marginal farmer from Eggudu village in Karnataka's Mysuru district, left home with his pair of bulls to plough his land. This was his routine for decades. Around noon, Rugmini brought lunch. The bulls were wandering around. Her husband had disappeared. Hours later, villagers and forest officials found his remains in a neighbouring field. He had been dragged away by a tiger.

Around 120 km away, across the Tamil Nadu border, another family was mourning another tiger attack. In the Niligiri's Sigur, Nagi, a Kurumba tribal woman from Mavinhalla Adivasi village, had taken her goats to graze near the forest, exactly as her family had done for generations. She never returned.

Cross into Kerala, to Chekadi village near Pulpally in Wayanad. Basavi, 65, and Kali Nooran, 80, are neighbours. Survivors of elephant attacks, both remain confined to their homes with broken legs.

These tragedies unfolded under three state governments. But they belong to one extended forest territory.

Stretching across more than 5,500 sq. km, the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR) links Kerala's Silent Valley National Park and the Wayanad, Aralam and Karimpuzha wildlife sanctuaries with Karnataka's Bandipur and Nagarhole Tiger Reserves and Brahmagiri Wildlife Sanctuary, and Tamil Nadu's Mudumalai and Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserves and Mukurthi Wildlife Sanctuary.

Recognised by UNESCO as India's first biosphere reserve, NBR supports the country's largest population of Asian elephants and one of the world's highest tiger densities apart from a rich and rare list of flora and fauna. Every day, elephants, tigers, leopards and gaurs move freely across Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Yet each state manages conflict through separate bureaucracies, compensation policies, monitoring systems and political priorities. The result is an ecological landscape divided by administrative boundaries that wildlife neither recognises nor respects.

"Human-animal conflict is no longer a wildlife issue alone," says N. Badusha, president of Wayanad Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithy. "It has become a governance issue. Until there is a common strategy for habitat restoration, wildlife monitoring, compensation and community participation, these tragedies will continue."

Weeks after Dhan Nayaka's death, Rajasekharappa, a 56-year-old farmer from nearby Bennigere village, was killed by a tiger while grazing cattle. In Badagulapura near Nanjangud, Madheva Gowda survived a tiger attack while harvesting cotton. The Karnataka government spent nearly Rs 20 lakh on treatment. Doctors saved his life but not his eyesight.

Across the Moyar Valley in Nigiri in Tamil Nadu, similar stories unfold with disturbing regularity. At Pakkana village near Gudalur, autorickshaw driver Abdul Ali recalls how a tiger killed his father four years ago. In adjacent Kariasholai, elephant attacks claimed the lives of Poonkodi, Alagaratnam and Sivalingam, all tea plantation workers on duty.

Human-animal conflict is a governance conundrum, with interlocking issues that affect both wildlife and forest communities

In Kerala's Noolpuzha village, K. Pradeep Kumar now works as a temporary forest watcher. His father Bhaskaran was killed by a tiger doing the same job.

The victims are overwhelmingly Adivasis, marginal farmers, plantation workers and cattle grazers. Each attack frightens entire villages. Farmers avoid working alone. Women hesitate to collect firewood. Children wait for adults to walk home. Why has fear become part of the landscape?

Dhan Nayaka's family insists nothing has changed in the way they cultivate their land. His daughters lament: Since when did routine agricultural work become a death sentence? The same question echoes across villages bordering the reserve. What changed?

Scientists argue there is no single factor that explains the escalation. A combination of habitat fragmentation, changing rainfall patterns, shrinking wildlife corridors, expanding plantations, roads, tourism infrastructure and cultivation of crops that attract elephants has reshaped the relationship.

"The NBR cannot be managed through isolated administrative decisions," observes Dr C.K. Vishnudas, wildlife biology expert. "Wildlife populations have recovered because conservation has succeeded, but coexistence has not received the same attention."

Scientists increasingly argue that the next phase of conservation in South India cannot be confined to protecting wildlife inside national parks and tiger reserves. The challenge now lies outside protected areas, where forests merge with villages, plantations and agricultural land.

Strengthening rapid response teams, ensuring timely compensation and recognising the ecological knowledge of tribal communities who have lived with these forests for centuries is crucial. None of these measures can succeed in isolation.

Kerala is now experimenting with removing jackfruits from forest-fringe homesteads to discourage elephants. Tamil Nadu has focused on removing lantana to restore grasslands inside forests. Karnataka has revived ecotourism even as anxiety rises in villages bordering Nagarhole and Bandipur. Each state is addressing one part of the problem. They are not managing the landscape together.

Researchers have repeatedly recommended a permanent inter-state authority bringing together Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and the Union government to coordinate measures.

"The Nilgiri is a single ecological unit. Elephants and tigers move across the three states irrespective of political boundaries. Conservation and conflict mitigation therefore have to be planned at the landscape level rather than through isolated state-level interventions," says Dr. P. S. Easa, former Director, Kerala Forest Research Institute.

Meanwhile, survivors receive emergency treatment but little long-term rehabilitation, livelihood support or psychological care.

Wildlife also pays the price. Retaliatory killings—including the recent case of a radio-collared elephant in Kerala's Malayattur forest region who died after eating fruit with explosives hidden inside—reflect the growing frustration in conflict-hit villages.

The greatest irony is impossible to ignore. The NBR stands among India's finest conservation achievements. Yet the people living closest to its forests increasingly feel excluded from conservation.

Bettakurubas around Nagarhole, Kurumbas in Sigur and the Kattunaika and Paniya communities of Wayanad possess generations of ecological knowledge, but remain marginal to policy making even as they bear the greatest risks. Their anger is rarely directed at elephants or tigers. It is directed at a system that arrives only after someone dies.

Until the three states and the Centre begin managing this extraordinary landscape as a shared ecological responsibility rather than three separate administrative territories, the next such death in Wayanad, Mysuru or Gudalur cannot be considered an accident. ■

The 'right to walk' and the 'right to belong'

The Supreme Court judgement cannot be interpreted only through the reality of the able-bodied pedestrian, argues **Puneet Singh Singhal**

The Supreme Court's recognition of the right to walk on safe, demarcated footpaths as a fundamental right is a landmark ruling on the safety of pedestrians. It is also an invitation to rethink the Indian street itself: who it is built for, who it excludes, and what kind of citizenship begins at the edge of the road.

On 19 June 2026, the court held that the right to walk is protected under Articles 19 and 21 of the Constitution and that pedestrian movement must have priority over motorised vehicles. The judgment arose from a tragic motor accident case in which a five-year-old child was killed while being taken to school, reportedly because there was no safe pedestrian space. The court also noted that authorities have a duty to demarcate, construct, maintain and safeguard footpaths.

But if this right is interpreted only through the figure of the able-bodied pedestrian, India will miss a historic opportunity.

For persons with disabilities, older persons, neurodivergent people, caregivers, chronically ill citizens, children, pregnant people and anyone using mobility aids, the issue is not only the right to walk. It is the right to move through the city with safety, predictability, dignity and autonomy.

A wheelchair user may not 'walk' in the conventional sense, but they have an equal claim to the footpath. A blind person using a cane is not asking for sympathy when they need tactile paving and obstruction-free routes. A person with dyspraxia may find uneven surfaces, sudden level changes and chaotic crossings deeply unsafe. A caregiver pushing a child or supporting an older parent is negotiating a city that rarely treats care as part of mobility.

The court has opened the constitutional door. The question now is whether India can walk through it inclusively.

In most Indian cities, footpaths exist only in theory. They are frequently broken, or may have potholes, open drains, construction debris, exposed wires, uneven slabs and often suddenly disappear. Sometimes they are too high. Sometimes they are too narrow. They are built, dug up, rebuilt and forgotten.

What most see as poor maintenance can be, for disabled citizens, a daily mechanism of exclusion. A footpath can be the line between access and isolation. An inaccessible footpath can influence whether someone reaches school, office, a clinic, a bus stop, a polling booth... It can determine whether a person participates in the city and the community or remains confined at home. It can turn a short journey into a risk assessment.

This is why the 'right to walk' must be read alongside India's disability rights framework. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 places legal duties on governments to ensure accessibility, non-discrimination and full participation for persons with disabilities. India also has Harmonised Guidelines and Standards for Universal Accessibility to make built environments, transport, information and public services more accessible.

*

A common response to accessibility demands is that Indian cities are too complex, too crowded, too informal, too resource-constrained. There is some truth in that. But complexity cannot be an excuse to not address an issue.

The way forward is not an all-or-nothing approach, but a time-bound accessibility roadmap.

Phase 1 Low-cost safety fixes Municipal bodies can start by clearing dangerous obstructions, repairing broken slabs, covering open drains, removing construction debris, preventing two-wheelers from using footpaths, and stopping illegal parking on pedestrian space. These are not expensive design interventions. They are basic governance duties.

Phase 2 Priority accessible corridors Cities should first make routes around hospitals, schools, colleges, bus stops, metro stations, courts, government offices, markets, parks, public toilets, disability service centres and shelters fully accessible. These corridors must include curb cuts, ramps, tactile paths, safe crossings, adequate lighting, resting points, shade and continuous surfaces.

Phase 3 Universal design of all future roadworks No new road, flyover, metro station, smart city project, market redevelopment or street-scaping plan should be approved unless accessibility is embedded in design, tendering, budgeting and maintenance contracts.

When footpaths are inaccessible, disabled people are wordlessly told that the city does not expect them to be outdoors

Photo: **Getty Images**

Street vendors too have rights, and a rights-based policy must avoid the false binaries of pedestrian versus vendor or accessibility versus livelihood

Phase 4 Accountability Every ward should have public footpath audits, disability-led accessibility inspections, grievance redressal mechanisms, timelines for repair and penalties for non-compliance. If the right is fundamental, its violation must carry consequences.

The question is not whether inclusion is difficult. The question is whether we are willing to plan it seriously and budget for it.

*

There is another nuance India must confront. Footpaths are often occupied by vendors, informal workers, parked vehicles, religious structures, shops, utilities and state infrastructure. Enforcement of the right to walk cannot become a selective weapon against the poor.

Street vendors are also rights-bearing citizens. The Street Vendors Act, 2014 was enacted to protect vendors' livelihoods while regulating vending through surveys, certificates, vending zones and town vending committees.

A rights-based footpath policy must therefore avoid false binaries: pedestrian versus vendor, disabled person versus informal worker, accessibility versus livelihood. The answer is not indiscriminate eviction. The answer is planned vending zones, clear walking widths, accessible circulation paths, transparent licensing and participatory local governance.

Pedestrian justice cannot mean evicting the poor while allowing the powerful to occupy public spaces without consequence.

*

Through my ongoing work with Green Disability, I have learned that accessible mobility is inseparable from climate resilience. In a warming city, a footpath is climate infrastructure.

During heatwaves, disabled and chronically ill people often need shaded, predictable, low-effort routes to reach clinics, transport, water points, cooling spaces and community support. A footpath without shade can become unusable. A broken pavement after flooding can become dangerous. Poor drainage can trap wheelchair users and older pedestrians. Air pollution, noise, traffic stress and heat exposure compound existing health conditions.

The World Health Organization estimates that 1.3 billion people, ~16 per cent of the global population, experience significant disability. In India's cities, this reality intersects with ageing, poverty, informal work, caregiving, chronic illness and climate vulnerability.

So, when we discuss the right to walk, we must also discuss the right to reach safety during climate stress. Footpaths connect people not only to markets and offices, but also to hospitals, public transport, water, shade, toilets, shelters and schools.

Urban planning cannot treat accessibility and climate resilience as separate issues. A usable footpath must be continuous, barrier-free, shaded wherever possible, well-drained and safe during extreme weather.

Beyond its legal significance, the SC ruling highlights a larger issue of implementation. The right to walk has little meaning if public streets remain unsafe or unusable for large sections of the population.

When footpaths are inaccessible, disabled people are wordlessly told that the city does not expect them to be outdoors. The right to walk is part of a broader right to accessible mobility. This means footpaths and crossings must also be usable by people who need wheelchairs, canes, walkers, crutches, prosthetics, or require assistance from another person.

If implemented narrowly, the judgment may become another well-intentioned ruling trapped in files, tenders and municipal excuses. But if implemented with accessibility at its heart, it can become a turning point in how India imagines citizenship. ■

PUNEET SINGH SINGHAL *is a disability inclusion advocate and founder/curator of* Green Disability *and* Dilli Dehat Project

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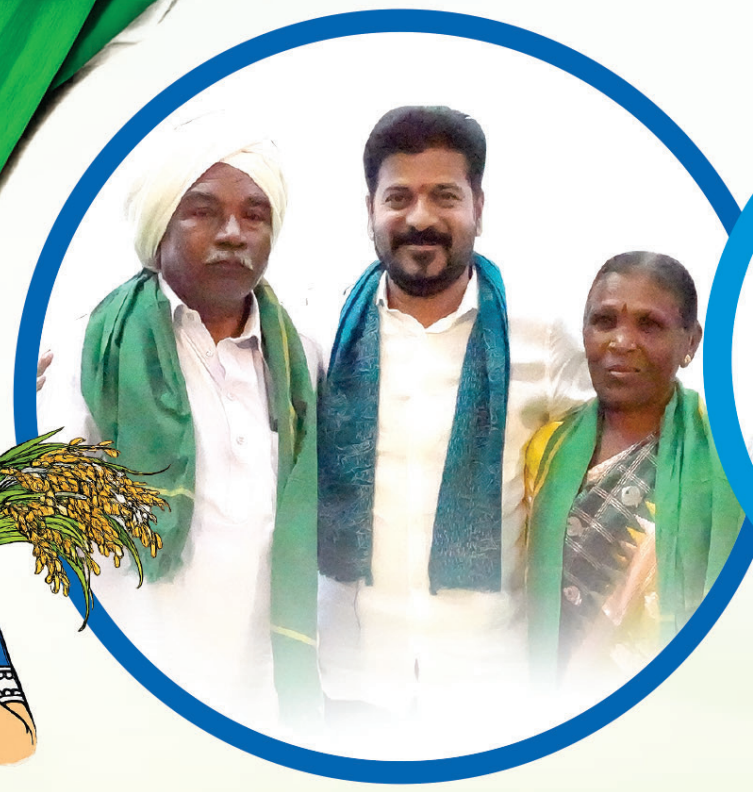

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NATION

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NATION

AN EXISTENTIAL PARADOX FOR MSMEs

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▸P3

FAITH

PILGRIMAGE IN THE TIME OF CLIMATE CHANGE

The melting ice *shivling* at Amarnath shows why faith must respect nature

▸P4

Of scapegoats, holy cows and the invisible hand

Shalini Sahay returns from self-imposed *vanvas* to ask a few questions about the scandal that has rocked the Hindutva establishment

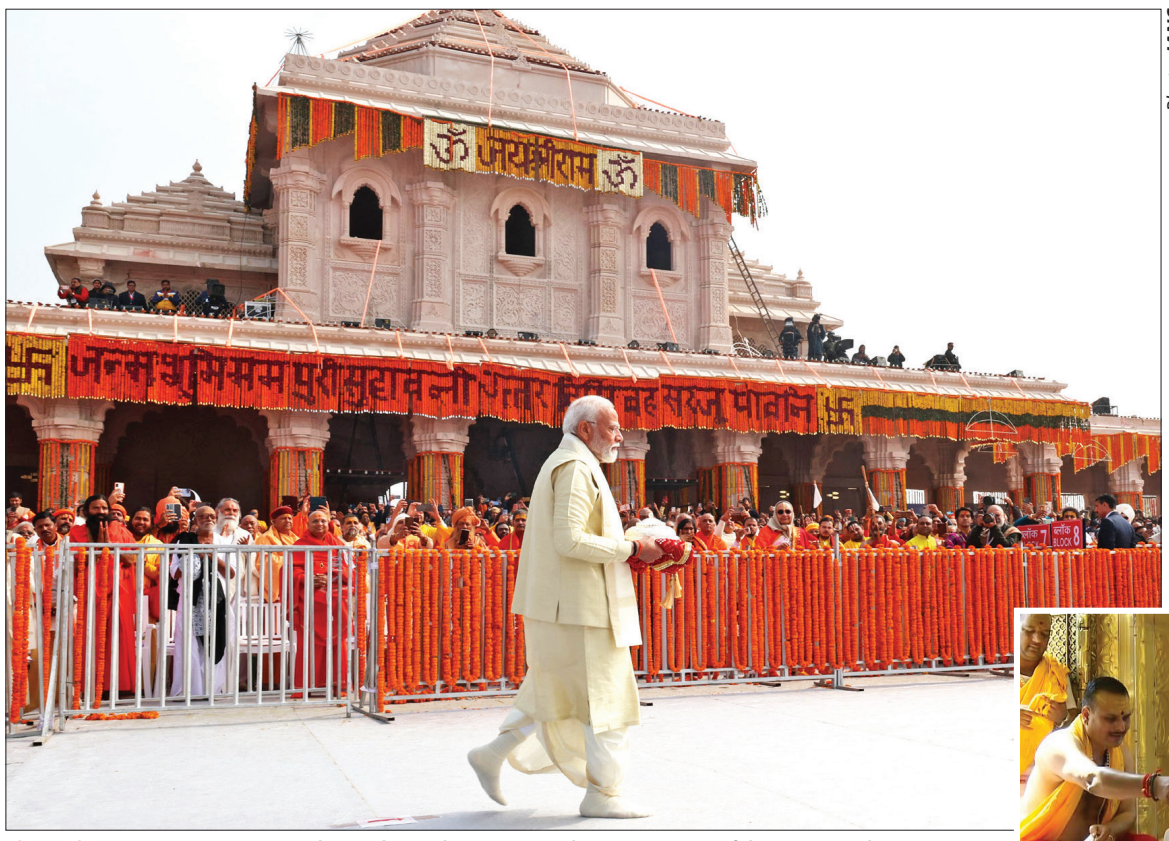

Photo: IANS

Playing host Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the ***yajman*** at the consecration of the Ram Mandir in 2024

Barely two-and-a-half years after it was thrown open to devotees in January 2024, the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya is at the centre of a financial scandal. Allegations surfaced in June 2026 of embezzlement of donations to the temple. Two founding trustees resigned, a Special Investigation Team (SIT) was formed by the Uttar Pradesh government, eight employees were arrested. A search committee was formed to find a 'professional' CEO to manage the affairs of the temple.

The SIT's interim report has been made public. Highlights include weak oversight of the handling of donations, ineffective security, revision of frisking rules and existing SOPs on pocketless uniforms, a cash-counting system that lacks traceability and surveillance that fell short.

The state government has fixed 15 July as the date when the SIT must submit its final report. We aren't exactly holding our breath. But in this flurry of activity that looks like action is being taken against the wrongdoers, some questions have still not been vigorously interrogated.

Does the Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra's status as a private trust ringfence it from public scrutiny?

In its controversial Ayodhya judgment of 2019, the Supreme Court of India directed the Union government to set up a trust to build the Ram Mandir and manage its affairs. The directive did not specify that the trust should be 'private', yet the deed drafted by the ministry of home affairs (MHA) in 2020 chose to form a private trust, nominating founding trustees from the VHP, RSS and its affiliates.

The MHA maintains and the Central Information Commission (CIC) has ruled that Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra operates as an independent, autonomous body that receives no financial or administrative upkeep from the government. This 'autonomy' is why the Delhi High Court and CIC have argued that it lies outside the purview of the Right to Information (RTI) Act.

While making a public show of "fully cooperating with the SIT", trust officials have sought to leverage its autonomous, independent status to ringfence information. They have even tried to deflect administrative blame, and are using the ongoing SIT probe to stonewall nosey journalists.

It is common knowledge that it's the long arm of the PMO that really controls the temple and who is on the board of trustees

In his statements to the SIT, trust general secretary Champat Rai (who has since resigned) has reportedly sought to distance the trust hierarchy from the theft by blaming the State Bank of India (SBI), arguing that the arrested counting agents were under the bank's operational chain of command, and that the theft occurred under 'private agency supervision' rather than trust oversight.

Backed by CIC rulings, the trust has consistently argued that because it is an independent body neither owned nor financed by the government, it is not a 'public authority' under the RTI Act. By maintaining this legal ringfence, they have successfully prevented citizens and journalists from filing RTI queries to inspect the temple's daily internal balance sheets, ledger entries and procurement contracts.

On the other hand, legal experts have argued that when a public-facing religious institution operates under a private trust structure, outside the usual framework of statutory oversight, it must remain open to scrutiny through credible audit mechanisms. Because faith may be 'private', but funds collected in its name come from the public.

Indian courts have in the past stepped in when public temple donations were mismanaged by autonomous or hereditary trustees:

- In the Chidambaram Nataraja temple case (2014), the hereditary trustees (Podu Dikshitars) of the famous Nataraja temple in Tamil Nadu claimed absolute autonomous management. The Supreme Court ruled that while the state cannot permanently take over a temple, it does have the right to step in, audit accounts and criminally prosecute trustees if there is proof of systemic financial embezzlement or mismanagement of public offerings.
- In the Sri Padmanabhaswamy temple case (2020), the royal family of Travancore claimed private management over the temple and its massive vaults. The Supreme Court upheld their traditional rights but explicitly ruled that a public religious institution cannot be treated as a private fiefdom. The court established an independent, administrative committee to oversee the treasures and enforce strict, transparent auditing standards.

Under standard Indian tax and property law, when property is dedicated to an open, unidentifiable body of religious devotees, it automatically inherits the legal definition of a 'public religious trust'.

Two trustees of the Teertha Kshetra—Champat Rai and member trustee Anil Mishra—resigned citing 'moral responsibility' while treasurer Govind Dev Giri didn't, pleading innocence because he sits in Pune. Is this legally tenable?

Treasurer Govind Dev Giri has said in his defence that he sits in Pune and only reviews audited balances at the end of each month. Legal experts point out that under the Indian Trusts Act, 1882, a designated treasurer carries a fiduciary duty to safeguard the trust property. They argue that treasurers cannot legally absolve themselves by citing geographical distance or a lack of personal involvement.

If the standard operating procedures for cash management were fundamentally broken—allowing counting staff to repeatedly stash bundles of cash into their pockets and shoes—the treasurer is arguably liable for culpable negligence. While not criminally complicit in the theft itself, failing to enforce a secure internal control or auditing system constitutes a breach of civil fiduciary duties.

The resignations of Champat Rai and Anil Mishra on 'moral grounds' have been analysed as a sophisticated legal stratagem rather than an act of piety. By stepping down, citing moral responsibility, Rai and Mishra have insulated themselves from a forced termination.

Under the trust's constitution, once a trustee tenders a resignation, it must be processed and accepted. This allows them to exit the administration cleanly without the trust technically declaring them 'guilty' of any administrative failure.

The trust's quick public defence of the duo—with some members publicly calling them 'untainted' and claiming they only committed 'errors of negligence'—has faced sharp legal pushback.

…and what explains Prime Minister Modi's stony silence, given that he even presided over the temple inauguration as *yajman*?

Prime Minister Modi has been given credit for everything, real and imagined, to do with the Ram Mandir, even marshalling arguments for the Supreme Court's Ayodhya verdict. It is common knowledge that it's the long arm of the PMO that really controls the temple and who is on the board of trustees, even if it stays out of daily operations and keeps its hands officially clean. Modi's trusted aide Nripendra Mishra, who was his principal secretary during his first term (2014–2019), is ex-officio member of the trust and chairman of the (Ram) Temple Construction Committee, and he surely keeps tabs for his boss.

It was Modi who announced the formation of the trust in Parliament, who performed the *bhoomi pujan* in the presence of RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat and acted as the *yajman* (patron, host) at the consecration of the temple in January 2024. He knows very well the political worth of this religious edifice and is still maintaining an inscrutable silence on the scandal. What gives? ■

Will a digital Census count everyone fairly?

Dilip Ghosh

Census 2027 has got underway six years late and is shadowed by an unusual level of public unease. It is India's first digital census, which the government frames as a leap of modernisation but it still involves nearly 33 lakh government schoolteachers and frontline workers fanning out across the nation in punishing summer heat, smartphones in hand, to complete a 33-question schedule, household by household. And this is still only Part 1 of the exercise.

The promises of a digital census are familiar: real-time data uploads, provisional results available in days, and final figures released in months rather than years. Built-in validation checks and geo-tagging are intended to reduce transcription errors and undercounting, while digital dashboards supposedly offer administrators better oversight of field staff. But we must still ask: can this digital census fairly count all Indians, given the horror stories we continue to hear about data-driven exclusion?

Lessons from the SIR

The push for a digital census has unfolded amid recent failures in other digital initiatives of the government. Most notable is the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, which in the first two phases has led to the deletion of more than 5.2 crore names across twelve states and Union territories.

Not only does the Census share the same exhausted pool of schoolteachers and the same fragile digital infrastructure as the SIR, it is being conducted amid suspicion that this counting exercise too will put citizens through eligibility tests, leading to exclusion. The mistrust is not unfounded. In West Bengal, the SIR's automated data-matching protocol introduced an all-new category of suspicion—named 'logical discrepancy' by the Election Commission of India, which red-flagged 91.46 lakh voters. The system was designed to cross-reference newer records with a digitised 2002 database to trace lineage, but because many historical records were in Bengali, automated translation frequently misread regional spellings and phonetics. Also, families were red-flagged over issues like a parent-child age gap of less than fifteen years, triggering mass automated alerts.

Even though the Calcutta High Court as well as the Supreme Court questioned the reliance on centralised algorithms over localised verification, and held that an algorithm cannot override document-backed reality, that an algorithmic flag should be viewed as an administrative prompt rather than a final verdict, the Supreme Court has validated the SIR exercise even before pending appeals against deletions could be heard and adjudicated.

Its tech-dependence makes Census 2027 similarly fraught, prone to errors at scale in ways that the older paper method was not. A manual census might fail at the margins with a smudged entry or a missed household, but a digital census might fail silently and at scale. An algorithmic flaw or error or a compromised server can distort or erase millions of records before the error is even noticed.

Photo: Getty Images

An algorithmic flaw or error can distort or erase millions before the error even gets noticed

The fragility of centralised servers

The security of the data being collected is another big concern. India has a history of breaches in centralised government servers, which casts a long shadow over the 2027 plan. The CoWIN portal leak of June 2023, where a Telegram bot allowed unauthorised access to sensitive records including Aadhaar and phone numbers, revealed how easily data could be siphoned from a centralised database.

This was not an isolated incident. The Aadhaar ecosystem has seen repeated leaks since 2018; the 2022 AIIMS Delhi cyberattack crippled hospital servers for weeks. Even centralised exam systems like NEET and CUET have faced failures.

These episodes share a common vulnerability: centralised repositories of sensitive information act as single points of failure, often enabled by weak encryption, insider collusion or inadequate oversight. For a digital census covering over a billion citizens, a breach would be catastrophic, undermining the legitimacy of the count and public trust in governance.

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The film they didn't want India to watch

Suppressing *Satluj* raises the question: who gets to decide which parts of our collective past we may revisit as citizens?

Herjinder

When the lights dim in a cinema hall, audiences prepare to willingly surrender to a story. The darkness invites us to enter a realm of imagination, argument, truth. But when the State imposes darkness on the film itself, we are denied both the experience and the argument.

The abrupt removal of *Satluj* from the ZEE5 OTT platform barely 48 hours after its release is a reminder of how fragile creative freedom has become in contemporary India. It raises a disturbing question: who gets to decide which parts of our collective past we, as citizens, are allowed to revisit?

Directed by Honey Trehan and starring Diljit Dosanjh, *Satluj* (earlier titled *Punjab '95*) is based on the life of Jaswant Singh Khalra, the human rights activist who investigated allegations of illegal killings and secret cremations during Punjab's violent insurgency. Khalra publicly referred to around 25,000 alleged illegal cremations, a figure that remains contested. Various official inquiries and independent researchers have cited significantly lower numbers, and the exact scale continues to be debated. The film reflects Khalra's claims, making them central to the storyline rather than presenting them as judicially established fact.

What is incontrovertible is Khalra's own fate. He was abducted and murdered in 1995, and several Punjab police personnel were eventually convicted for the crime. His killing became one of the most powerful symbols of the excesses committed during Punjab's troubled years.

During the legal proceedings over the film, one judge reportedly observed, "There's no point in running away from the past. Unless you counter your past, you'll never have a better future."

Unfortunately, the decision to takedown *Satluj* suggests exactly the opposite instinct—that difficult memories are better expunged than examined.

The film's journey is in itself a commentary on censorship. Submitted to the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) in 2022, it remained entangled in certification disputes for nearly 30 months. According to director Honey Trehan, the Board demanded more than 120 cuts over multiple rounds of review. These included objections to references to Punjab, the use of Jaswant Singh Khalra's name, the Indian flag appearing in the background, and even Gurbani, allegedly on grounds that such elements could 'provoke emotions'.

Whether one agrees with every statement made by the filmmaker or every objection raised by the authorities is almost beside the point. When a work of art is made to shed so many of its historical markers that even its geographical setting appears fictional, censorship smacks of erasure.

The Union government's explanation, however, deserves serious consideration. According to officials quoted by *PTI*, the producers never accepted the cuts suggested by the CBFC and instead quietly released the film directly on an OTT platform, where prior certification is not mandatory. Once the government became aware of the release, ZEE5 was directed to remove the film, citing security concerns and obligations under intermediary guidelines. Officials argued that if the makers wished to release the film in theatres or on OTT without controversy, they should have followed the established certification process.

Supporters of the government's position have advanced another rationale. Punjab continues to carry the scars of militancy, and with assembly elections approaching, a film revisiting one of the darkest periods in the state's history could potentially be exploited by separatist organisations seeking to revive old narratives.

Security concerns can never be dismissed casually. However, an instructive comparison can be found if we rewind to another film that dealt with the same historical landscape as *Satluj*. In 1996, Gulzar's *Maachis* portrayed how ordinary young Punjabis were drawn to militancy after police brutality. The wounds of terrorism were fresher then than today. Hundreds of police personnel, political leaders and innocent civilians had lost their lives. Yet neither the government nor the Censor Board sought to suppress the film. Instead, audiences engaged with it, debated it and ultimately accepted it as one of Indian cinema's finest political dramas.

Nearly three decades later, nobody can say that *Maachis* strengthened separatist sentiment in Punjab. If anything, it demonstrated cinema's capacity to humanise tragedy without endorsing violence.

The digital age has blunted the edge of censorship. Removed from a legal streaming platform, Satluj *was 'leaked' on X*

No serious account of Punjab in the late 1980s and early 1990s can ignore the courage and sacrifices of police officers who fought terrorism under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Many senior officers and thousands of policemen lost their lives combating heavily armed militants. That sacrifice deserves enduring recognition.

But history also records another reality.

During those years, extraordinary powers occasionally led to extraordinary abuses. Fake encounters, illegal detentions and custodial excesses became part of public discourse, prompting judicial interventions and investigations. Remembering those innocent victims does not diminish the sacrifices of security forces; it acknowledges that a democracy must remain capable of examining its own mistakes.

This is precisely where Jaswant Singh Khalra's contribution lay. Regardless of one's assessment of his personal political beliefs, he relied on painstaking documentation and grassroots investigation. Saluting such work because it is ideologically convenient is one thing; honouring the research (and the researcher) for bringing uncomfortable questions back into the public domain is quite another.

While filmmaker Ram Gopal Varma praised Diljit Dosanjh's restrained performance and the film's willingness to lay bare the "wound" of one of India's darkest chapters, *Satluj* is not without flaws.

A sequence that depicts the assassination of Punjab Chief Minister Beant Singh features the Gurbani line, "*Soora so pehchaniye jo lade deen ke het*" (Only those are heroes who fight for the faith), in the background. Many viewers may find this juxtaposition deeply inappropriate because it risks lending unintended moral resonance to an act of terrorism. If the authorities considered this sequence objectionable, a narrowly tailored intervention—such as removing or replacing the background audio—would have been understandable.

Instead, the entire film was removed. That decision may prove spectacularly counterproductive.

As filmmaker Anurag Kashyap remarked after the controversy erupted, "The more you ban something, the more people want to watch it." On 9 July, several media outlets reported that gurdwaras across Punjab, Delhi, Rajasthan, Haryana and Jammu have begun organising community screenings.

The digital age has also blunted the edge of censorship. Removed from a legal streaming platform, *Satluj* was 'leaked' on *X*, downloaded and shared by fans. Its second life through Telegram groups, Reddit discussions and social media has transformed the film into something far more potent than the version the State took down—a symbol of resistance against censorship itself.

The political timing has also intensified the debate. With Punjab heading for assembly elections, every party is attempting to calculate who gains, who loses from the controversy. Punjab's electoral history suggests, though, that voters rarely cast their ballots based solely on the memories of militancy three decades ago.

While the Union government is widely perceived as the force behind the film's disappearance, the issue is larger. History cannot be healed by taking a film off a platform. It can perhaps be understood better by letting citizens watch, question, argue, remember. ■

Is the BJP's honeymoon phase over in Bengal?

Sourabh Sen

Looks like the BJP has been quick to disappoint Bengalis, and it's barely two months since it came to power in West Bengal. If not the diehards then certainly the apologists, who thought voting in the BJP was the only way to show Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress the way out.

The horrific gangrape and murder of a minor girl in the suburb of Baruipur, the alleged involvement of BJP local leaders and the initial police inaction have brought back memories of the R.G. Kar Medical College incident of August 2024. Except this time, the key accused, Prabhas Mandal, was killed in a police encounter.

Another divergence is this: unlike the R.G. Kar incident, Baruipur triggered no 'Occupy the Night' or candlelight vigil. Though for pro-TMC social media influencers, 'R.G. Kar activism' was a BJP- and CPM-backed political action to corner Mamata Banerjee. They point out that the R.G. Kar victim's mother contested and won the assembly election on a BJP ticket.

Aloke Biswas earns a living painting houses. "I used to vote for the TMC. This time I voted for the BJP, but now I feel I made a mistake," he says. "All the corrupt leaders have now joined the BJP. After this Baruipur incident, I wonder how the BJP will run the state for five years."

Close on the heels of the Baruipur incident came BJP state president Samik Bhattacharya's inflammatory remarks on 'Netaji' Subhash Chandra Bose, a national hero and Bengal's great pride. Speaking at an event to commemorate the birth anniversary of Syama Prasad Mookerjee—who founded the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, the political forerunner of the BJP—Bhattacharya recalled how Forward Bloc "*goondas*" had thrown stones at Syama Prasad and injured him. If the Forward Bloc, founded by Netaji, was a party of goondas, what does that make Bose himself?

Bhattacharya also invoked Bose's face-off with Syama Prasad in the run-up to the Calcutta Municipal Corporation elections of 1940, and then thought better than to go into that incident "as it could lead to controversies."

In its desperate search for Bengali icons the party can more legitimately claim than it ever could Netaji, the BJP has been peddling the narrative that Syama Prasad singlehandedly ensured West Bengal remained part of India—by pushing for the partition of Bengal in 1947. But contrary to the BJP's conception, most Bengalis see the Partition as a great tragedy and Syama Prasad as the villain who pushed for that outcome via his Bengali Hindu Homeland Movement.

The Netaji-bashing hasn't gone down well, nor has the state government's diktat to observe 'Syama Prasad fortnight' in schools—with proof of compliance.

A new violent street-sport for the party's rowdies is egg-pelting—and even while MPs Abhishek Banerjee and Mahua Moitra were targeted, the state police stood by and gleefully watched the spectacle. This has become so routine that even the 73-year-old general secretary of the Posta Bazaar Merchants' Association, Bishwanath Agarwal, was not spared. Ironically, the association is dominated by Marwari traders, who are known to be close to the BJP.

*

Describing a recent train journey to the port city of Haldia, 120 km southwest of Kolkata, the same Aloke Biswas quoted above, who wondered what the BJP might do to the state in five years, said: "I couldn't even get a bottle of water as the hawkers have all been evicted. I do not know how these people will survive."

Photo: Getty Images

Protestors hit the streets seeking justice for the Baruipur victim

"Bengal is ill at ease with the socio-political narrative the BJP is trying to foist on the state," says a veteran journalist, preferring not to be named.

"But the TMC lacks the wherewithal to strike back; it has neither the moral standing nor the ideological scaffolding to do so," the journo added.

TMC insiders say Mamata Banerjee decided not to go to Baruipur because the party couldn't muster enough people to go with her. Instead she went on a candle march in her own neighbourhood. "This is not the Mamata Banerjee of 2011, when a sea of people would join her every time she hit the streets," the journo said.

Are the state Congress or the CPM better placed to take on the BJP now that the TMC is out of power? The CPM has at least marked its presence again, and its leader Meenakshi Mukherjee was also pelted with eggs, but it would be a stretch to read it as a sign that the BJP has begun to see the CPM as the real opposition in the state.

The party hasn't even recovered from the embarrassment of getting into bed with the BJP in 2019, seeing it as a means to the coveted end of getting rid of Mamata Banerjee and her TMC. This was the time when its 'comrades' started being called 'Ram-rades'.

The slogan '*Aagey Ram, Porey Bam*' (First Ram, then Left)—the wishful rationale that once the TMC was removed, the political space would open up for the Left to reclaim its ground (*Porey Bam*)—must still echo in their ears.

The folly of that fantasy has begun to dawn on the CPM leadership. They have begun to see that facilitating the rise of the Right in Bengal does not pave the way for a Left resurgence.

Let's count that realisation as a new beginning. ■

Even Bengalis who wanted change had not bargained for the violent makeover the BJP is trying to effect, sparing not even their icons

SOURABH SEN *is a Kolkata-based independent writer*

Will a digital census count everyone?

Continued from page 1

The risk of exclusion

Perhaps the biggest risk of a digital census is the potential for statistical erasure. Analysts estimate that as many as 57.9 crore 'offline citizens' are at risk. The system relies on the Census Management and Monitoring System (CMMS), which assumes uniform connectivity for real-time syncing—an assumption that does not hold true across much of India.

In states like Bihar and Jharkhand, frequent power outages and network blackouts might disrupt syncing. If the app crashes or connectivity fails on an enumerator's phone, marginalised groups—like nomadic tribes, undocumented labourers and lower-caste rural households—are the most likely to be missed.

Even beyond concerns of connectivity, the design of the digital tools has a problematic rigidity. The self-enumeration portal and the enumerator app offer little to no room for correction. For instance, once a 'head of household' is designated, the choice is fixed. Similarly, language choices cannot be changed once selected.

Where household structures are fluid and many census questions require explanation and nuanced judgment, digital inflexibility carries real consequences. A wrong drop-down entry or a badly designed workflow can distort the entire dataset for a region.

The question of data integrity

There are allegations that enumerators are being pressured to alter findings to present a more flattering view of welfare schemes. Instances have been reported where households using firewood/cow-dung cakes were logged as LPG users, or untreated tap water marked as treated to align with government claims.

The stakes of an accurate count extend far beyond statistics. Census numbers feed directly into delimitation—the reallocation of Lok Sabha seats and the redrawing of constituency boundaries. It also determines which seats are reserved for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and women. This has already stirred deep anxiety, particularly in southern states, regarding how a fresh redistribution of parliamentary seats will impact representation.

Compounding these anxieties is the new legal framework. While the Census Act of 1948 mandated strict confidentiality, the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act of 2023 creates concerning overlaps. Section 17 of the DPDP Act grants broad exemptions to 'state instrumentalities', allowing the government to bypass standard consent requirements for 'state functions'.

Furthermore, Section 39 channels all data breach and violation complaints to the Data Protection Board of India, barring individuals from approaching civil courts directly and barring courts from issuing injunctions against actions taken under the Act, thereby insulating the DPB from judicial intervention.

The case for a prudent fallback

Given these multifaceted risks, a conventional, paper-based enumeration—for all its perceived slowness—would have been the more prudent choice. Paper preserves what digital systems strip away: human judgment, local correction and an audit trail independent of servers. This is not an argument against technology per se, but against pressing ahead with technocratic solutions that rest on dodgy infrastructure or lack public trust.

For Census 2027 to be a credible database that informs and shapes enlightened government policy, several safeguards are necessary and non-negotiable:

1. Mandatory offline fallback protocols to ensure every citizen is counted regardless of connectivity
2. Independent audits of the CMMS and its exclusion algorithms
3. Whistleblower protections for enumerators to prevent the manipulation of data
4. A statutory confidentiality firewall, insulated from exemptions granted the state and its agencies under the DPDP Act
5. Restoration of civil court jurisdiction

India cannot afford to trade the reliability of the Census for the convenience of a digital dashboard. Even if this is about saving time and 'efficiency'—not to forget after a most egregious delay of six years—we mustn't make a casualty of the country's most vital dataset. ■

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Looking for the Opposition in Maharashtra

Jaideep Hardikar on the existential crisis of the two major regional opposition parties in the state and the space for an alternative

On a humid Sunday morning, just before heavy rain drowned Mumbai, Uddhav Thackeray stood before his party workers and supporters, reciting the Ram Raksha *stotra*. This was not an election campaign. After yet another round of desertions by his party's Lok Sabha members, Thackeray was leading a 'Ram Raksha andolan' to protest the alleged embezzlement of donations by the BJP/RSS-backed trust managing the Ram temple in Ayodhya.

Standing amid saffron flags, he accused the BJP of exploiting the faith of millions of Hindus and declared that "Hindus are innocent, not foolish." The symbolism was unmistakable: a leader who has spent the last four years fighting politically and legally to retain his party's identity and control was returning to the ideological terrain that his father, late Bal Thackeray, had cultivated for decades. Yet beneath the chants and the verses lay a deeper anxiety.

The protest was less a confident assertion of ideology than a weak, almost desperate effort to reclaim political ground that has steadily slipped away since the rebellion of 2022 by his trusted aide-turned-bête noire Eknath Shinde. Shinde continues to eat into Sena (UBT), enticing its MLAs, MPs and foot soldiers to join his fold to enjoy the fruits of power. The latest defections—six of the nine members elected in 2024 on Sena (UBT) tickets and one MLC close to Aaditya Thackeray—underline the same trend.

Late last year, Sena (UBT) finally lost control over the prized Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) with the BJP–Shinde Sena–NCP (Ajit Pawar) combo sweeping the elections. Electoral losses aside, every defection or rumour that another legislator is switching sides chips away at the confidence of a party that has already lost its name, its election mascot, much of its legislative strength and a sizeable part of its organisation.

*

The crisis, however, extends beyond one party. Maharashtra today finds itself with perhaps the weakest opposition it has had in its history. The fragmentation of its regional parties has produced a legislature where the ruling alliance has overwhelming dominance, while those expected to challenge it are preoccupied with just staying alive.

The opposition alliance has only 46 MLAs in a 288-member house if you count only the three MVA (Maha Vikas Aghadi) constituents. Neither the Sena (UBT) with its 20 MLAs nor the Congress (with 16) nor the NCP (Sharad Pawar) with 10 meets the one-tenth threshold (of 29 MLAs) required for a party to claim the statutory post of Leader of the Opposition. This is the first time in about six decades that the Maharashtra assembly has no Leader of the Opposition. It shows in the way legislature proceedings are conducted, with no serious discussion on any public issue.

The political vacuum may create an opening for the Congress, the only national party with a presence, however weak, across the state, but it'll be a long haul.

*

As his party continues to bleed MPs, MLAs, corporators and local office-bearers, driven by the allure of power and big contracts, the big challenge for Uddhav Thackeray is to convince loyalists and fence-sitters that his party still has a viable future. Politics ultimately rewards confidence. Cadres stay with organisations that appear capable of winning elections, protecting careers and distributing political opportunities.

The party's greatest asset today is Uddhav Thackeray's personal credibility. Son Aaditya is not yet ready to take on the mantle. Unlike many contemporary politicians, Uddhav is perceived as measured and dignified. His handling of the Covid-19 pandemic earned him goodwill beyond his traditional support base. Many sympathised with him after the Shinde rebellion, but sympathy cannot sustain a political organisation.

The Shiv Sena that Bal Thackeray built was not an electoral machine. It was an intricate network of *shakha*s, neighbourhood organisers, trade unions, municipal institutions and loyal Shiv Sainiks. That's the reason why when Raj Thackeray or leaders like Narayan Rane left the party in the 2000s, the Sena did not suffer the way it does today. Its strength lay in everyday presence rather than periodic election campaigns. Control over civic bodies, particularly in Mumbai and the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, buttressed this network for decades.

Much of that organisational architecture has been eroded beyond repair. And Uddhav Thackeray has not been able to seriously go back to the drawing board to resurrect his party's shakha system by infusing new blood. Rebuilding that structure demands patience, clarity of purpose and resources—all hard to find and sustain in the midst of an existential crisis.

Equally troubling is the question of identity. What exactly does the Shiv Sena (UBT) represent today? The politics of Hindutva has a first claimant and Uddhav's party has neglected its regional, 'Marathi *manoos*' plank. Under Bal Thackeray, the Sena had ideological clarity, however polarising its cocktail of Marathi regionalism plus Hindutva plus a distinctive street cred. Uddhav Thackeray tried to reposition the party after 2019 by joining hands with ideological rivals in the interest of governance. That decision may have been politically necessary at the time, but it also altered the party's image in ways that remain unresolved.

The politics of Hindutva has a first claimant and Uddhav's party has let go its 'Marathi manoos' plank. Crisis of identity?

Is the Sena (UBT) primarily a Marathi regional party? Is it a moderate Hindutva formation? Is it now a broader secular regional force? Or is it defined mainly by opposition to the BJP? Political workers require ideological direction as much as electoral strategy. Voters, too, seek clarity. A party constantly explaining what it is not will struggle to convince people about what it really is or stands for.

Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party (SP) confronts a quieter version of the same crisis. Pawar is one of India's most experienced politicians and continues to command great respect. But his personal stature cannot indefinitely compensate for organisational erosion. Like the Sena (UBT), his party too lost its recognised name and symbol after the split. Questions about succession persist. The organisation survives substantially because of the veteran's own authority rather than an institutional structure capable of renewing itself independent of him.

The combined effect is unprecedented. Maharashtra's two major regional opposition parties are simultaneously engaged in battles for organisational survival. Instead of challenging the government inside and outside the legislature, they are preoccupied with retaining their legislators, local leaders and workers.

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Their predicament has created space for the Congress, which has something its regional allies lack at this moment—organisational continuity. It has not suffered a major split. Its district committees remain intact. The party has, in fact, got fresh blood with newly appointed presidents of local units under its nationwide organisational revamp campaign—the Sangathan Srijan Abhiyan. Whether the campaign succeeds in rebuilding the Congress bottom-up is a different question, but its ideological identity is relatively stable. Most importantly, it is not burdened by questions like which faction represents 'the real party'.

This does not automatically translate into electoral revival. The Congress has organisational weaknesses of its own and has struggled to convert public discontent into political gain. Yet, if Maharashtra seeks a durable and recognisable Opposition, the Congress may increasingly find itself occupying that space, less so at this point because of any great resurgence and more because the other claimants to that role have steadily fragmented. ■

Photo: Getty Images

Bid to regain lost ground Shiv Sena (UBT) chief Uddhav Thackeray addressing a 'Ram raksha andolan' in Mumbai

JAIDEEP HARDIKAR *is a senior Nagpur-based journalist and author of* Ramrao: The Story of India's Farm Crisis

MSMEs rhetoric, rules and reality

Ajit Ranade on how India's tax architecture and a compliance Catch-22 are devouring MSMEs

On 27 June, marked as National MSME Day, a wave of lavish tributes canonised small businesses as the 'backbone' of employment, industrial production and exports. On 1 July, the nation marked GST Day, commemorating the ninth anniversary of its rollout. Yet the sobering reality is that India's small entrepreneurs still do not see a viable pathway to formalisation, trapped in a policy-induced pincer movement, where large corporate customers weaponise time and a rigid, accrual-based tax architecture weaponises compliance.

This structural contradiction has created a devastating double whammy for MSMEs. On one side, small units are forced to act as interest-free credit lines for big corporate buyers and public sector undertakings (PSUs) who delay payments for months. On the other side, the GST demands immediate, non-negotiable tax payments on money that the MSME has not yet received. This can choke small businesses to death.

Under Section 15 of the MSMED Act, 2006, buyers are legally obliged to settle vendor bills within 45 days if there is a written contract, or 15 days in its absence. The statute also mandates a hefty penalty and a compound interest liability.

Yet these timelines are unreal. Large private entities and government bodies routinely stretch payment cycles to 90/120/180 days.

Institutional interventions to reduce this gap have crashed into corporate non-cooperation. Take the Trade Receivables Discounting System (TReDS). This RBI-regulated electronic platform is meant to let MSMEs auction invoices to banks for instant liquidity. It is called bill discounting on an electronic platform. But large corporates and central public sector enterprises refuse to onboard or approve invoices. Because TReDS binds buyers to an inflexible auto-debit system on maturity, any failure auto-reports them to credit bureaus. Rather than clean up their cash management to protect their credit scores, corporate giants simply block the platform entirely, leaving vendors out in the cold.

This chronic payment delay is made worse by the GST framework, which operates on the basis of accruals rather than cash flows. If an invoice is generated, the tax must be paid by the 20th of the next month, irrespective of when the payment is received. So, the MSME must pay 18 per cent soon after raising an invoice, but the corporate buyer can ignore the 45-day limit without paying a rupee.

This creates a terrible cash-flow inversion. Small vendors are forced to default on employee payrolls or secure high-interest market loans. Compounding this cash crunch is the reality of low digital literacy, lack of access to modern tech and complex portal architectures. In semi-urban industrial clusters, the problem is further exacerbated by internet connectivity problems.

NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) data from its Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE) reveals that India has an estimated 77 million non-agricultural, non-construction unincorporated establishments.

MSMEs face a chronic payments crisis, which is exacerbated by the GST framework

Yet, according to available data these enterprises are avoiding the State's formal mechanisms because systems are hostile. Just about one million micro-enterprises are registered under GST.

Furthermore, while GSTN records indicate that roughly seven million taxpayers report an annual topline below Rs 1 crore, the ground-level survey by ASUSE finds fewer than 1.2 million such GST-registered establishments. This massive shortfall is not a sign of widespread tax evasion but a desperate survival strategy. Small businesses realise that stepping into the GST system may lead to suffocation.

This double whammy means a profound existential paradox. Rather than face cash outlays for unpaid invoices, most small businesses choose to stay outside the GST ambit. But non-registration is commercial exile. Large corporate supply chains are built around maximising input tax credit. If an MSME is not registered under GST, big corporates won't do business with them.

For those who do register to survive, the legal remedies are rendered useless by power asymmetries. Policymakers point to the MSME Samadhaan portal to 'name and shame' errant buyers, but this betrays a lack of understanding of the supply chain. Most specialised MSMEs rely on a single, big corporate customer—going up to 80–100 per cent of their revenue. An MSME vendor cannot 'name and shame' its customer because that customer is too important to antagonise. To aggressively demand the 45-day rule, enforce Section 43B(h) of the Income Tax Act, or file a Samadhaan case is to invite immediate, quiet de-panelment. The corporate buyer will simply move to a different vendor.

Even the 180-day input tax credit reversal rule under GST exposes the State's self-interest. If a buyer defaults for 180 days, the law forces them to return the claimed tax credit to the government with an 18 per cent interest penalty. The State successfully collects its penalty from the large corporate, but the suffering MSME receives no tax refund and no capital relief. The government secures its revenue twice over, while the small business is left holding a toxic bad debt.

To align the tax law with real-life conditions, the state must consider three structural interventions:

1. Cash-based GST for micro-enterprises. Businesses up to a specific turnover threshold must be allowed to deposit GST only when the invoice amount reaches their bank account. Tax collection should trace actual capital, not paper invoices

2. Low-bandwidth portal architecture. Introduce a radically simplified, lightweight version of the tax portal optimised for micro-enterprises. It must function seamlessly even where internet connectivity is poor and cut the monthly filing burden down to bare minimum

3. GSTN-TReDS digital bridge. Large corporate buyers must not have veto power over invoice approval. The moment an e-invoice involving a large corporate (above the Rs 250 cr. threshold) is generated on the GST portal, the system must automatically create an unalterable, pre-approved trade receivable on TReDS. This will allow banks to instantly fund the vendor and cut the uncooperative buyer out of the financing loop.

MSMEs can truly be the backbone of the economy, but they must be offered a realistic pathway to formalisation. ■

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

Photos: Getty Images

Vicious cycle Without structural interventions, MSMEs will stay trapped in asymmetries that favour the big corporate

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What loot in Hindutva hotspots looks like

A common pattern is emerging—from Ayodhya to Varanasi to Ujjain, Vrindavan, Kedarnath, Badrinath...

Rashme Sehgal

Redevelopment' is the name of the game under which vast tracts of land around our ancient temples are being snapped up. Vested political interests are then selling them at inflated prices to the same trusts that manage these temples. Be it Kashi Vishwanath in Varanasi, Ram Janmabhoomi in Ayodhya, Mahakaleshwar in Ujjain or Banke Bihari in Vrindavan, the controversies extend far beyond isolated allegations. Opposition parties, religious leaders, social activists and even factions within the Hindutva establishment have accused influential political figures, temple trusts and bureaucrats of exploiting public faith for private gain. Land speculation, opaque financial deals, misappropriation of funds have become standard features of swindles coming to light across Hindutva hotspots.

The most damning charges concern the donations at Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra, the trust that runs the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. Conservative estimates peg the embezzlement at Rs 200 crore, but locals in Ayodhya believe the scam runs into more than Rs 5,000 crore. Opposition leaders allege that the money was siphoned off to influential leaders whose names have not yet been revealed.

The project has been mired in controversy from the start. The Nirmohi Akhara, one of the oldest and most powerful Ramanandi orders, had accused the Vishwa Hindu Parishad of misusing over Rs 1,400 crore received from devotees since the early 1990s. Instead of being spent on temple construction, this money was used to fund their own institutional buildings and enhance the political standing of their leaders.

It is well known that Modi-appointee Champat Rai, who resigned as general secretary of the trust, and Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath do not see eye to eye. Yogi was waiting to strike. On 13 June 2026, he ordered the setting up of a Special Investigation Team. On the same day, in a classic case of loot-and-scoot, Gopal Rao (who was in charge of construction at the Ram Mandir) reportedly caught a train with sacks stuffed with gold and silver bars. He was subsequently seen hobnobbing with senior RSS functionaries in Bengaluru. His nephew Somesh Anand is reportedly the 'mule' transporting bags of gold and silver from Ayodhya to Karnataka.

Meanwhile, Opposition parties have intensified their allegations of questionable land transactions. Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Singh has submitted documents related to 11 land deals to the Special Enquiry Team set up to probe the matter.

The team is now examining expenditure on Ram Mandir events, including Rs 113 crore spent on the consecration ceremony (presided over by Prime Minister Narendra Modi) and Rs 10.12 crore spent on the flag-hoisting ceremony in November 2025.

Swami Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati, the Shankaracharya of Jyotirmath, pointed out that only lower-level functionaries have been arrested so far, while "those responsible for larger wrongdoings" are going scot-free.

Uttar Pradesh Congress chief Ajay Rai went a step further and accused the ruling BJP of undermining Hindu religious sites, notably in Varanasi, Vrindavan and Mirzapur, and transforming them into tourist attractions.

Rai argues that religious buildings have been demolished under the guise of development projects like the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor, which was expanded from 3,000 sq. ft. to 500,000 sq. ft. The BJP-led government has, he says, prioritised commercialisation over preserving cultural heritage, destroying the livelihoods of communities that have long served these sacred locations.

A similar process is underway in Ujjain which is being primed as the next religio-tourist destination with the Simhastha Mahakumbh expected to be held here in 2028. Preparations have triggered a wave of land acquisition around the Mahakaleshwar Temple. Shops, homes and even a 200-year-old mosque have been demolished to make way for parking facilities and the Ujjain Mahakal Lok Corridor.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Mohan Yadav's grandiose announcement that his government would acquire 2,378 hectares to build infrastructure for the Simhastha Kumbh provoked such strong resistance from farmers' organisations—including the RSS-led Bharatiya Kisan Sangh—that Yadav was forced to withdraw the notification on 17 November 2025.

Photo: Getty Images

Obsessed with corridors The Kashi Vishwanath temple (*above*) before the corridor project began; and (*left*) old buildings demolished to create a passage to the ghats in Varanasi

A public spat between Yadav and BJP MLA Chintamani Malviya has recently resurfaced. When Malviya reportedly bought 45,000 sq. ft. land (in the name of Utopia Bottle and Resort Pvt Ltd) next to the Mahakal temple, a complaint was made to the Lokayukta, the Economic Offenses Wing and the high court that what was at present a parking lot for the temple was going to be the site of a five-star hotel.

Malviya retaliated by pointing out that after Yadav assumed office in December 2013, his family and their real estate companies had bought at least 137 plots—adding up to over 168 acres in two years. He warned of a powerful cartel trying to monopolise all the land deals in Ujjain.

A Bhopal-based political observer pointed out, "The Mahakal Lok Corridor is being built at a cost of Rs 1,200 crore. Another Rs 400 crore has been allotted from government funds for 'development' work. The commission for politi-cians and bureaucrats at 35 per cent works out to Rs 350 crore. The work done is so substandard that the statues and murals that were installed in the temple complex last year collapsed after one heavy shower."

The government's obsession with corridors has now been extended to the Banke Bihari temple in Vrindavan. The Supreme Court has green-signalled both the construction of the Banke Bihari corridor and the use of temple funds to the tune of Rs 500 crore to acquire land. The state government's own budgetary allotment for land acquisition and initial construction is Rs 762 crore.

Authorities are surveying properties (300+) and negotiating compensation amounts with affected residents and shopkeepers (100+) whose shops will be demolished. Neeraj Gautam, head of the Banke Bihari Market Association, believes this corridor will be a repeat of what happened in Varanasi: "Braj's culture will be erased."

While the government claims the corridor will help pilgrims and improve safety, locals fear it will damage Vrindavan's spiritual and cultural heritage. Their fears are not unfounded given the kind of makeovers our religious dhams are receiving. The 'face lifts' given to Kedarnath and Badrinath have resulted in the mushrooming of multi-storeyed concrete buildings totally inappropriate for an ecologically fragile region.

Both have also seen variations of the same loot-and-scoot script. In 2023, the 100-crore gold plating on the walls of the sanctum sanctorum of the Shiva temple in Kedarnath was stolen overnight. The culprits haven't yet been brought to book. Swami Avimukteshwaranand and local priests publicly claimed that up to 228 kg of gold had gone missing. The first week of July 2026 brought another exposé—temple donations had gone missing from the Badrinath shrine. A temple employee has since been suspended, and the amount is believed to run into crores.

Largescale violations of land use regulation are being witnessed across Vrindavan. Commercial buildings and luxury hotels have sprung up on hundreds of acres designated for ashrams and temples. All under the nose of the Mathura-Vrindavan Development Authority which has taken no steps to end this blatant misuse. Social activists contend that the easiest way to grab land is to claim it will be used for 'religious purposes'. By doing so, the government ensures their Hindu vote bank does not get alienated.

The situation at the Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi temple in Mathura is no better. Local seer Dinesh 'Phalahari' Maharaj publicly alleged massive embezzlements of donations on a scale comparable to the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya and demanded an immediate CBI enquiry.

For the devout this is the ultimate betrayal: a government claiming to champion Hindu interests has instead been converting sacred spaces into high-value real estate projects. The rhetoric is that of religious renaissance; the reality is commercialisation and corruption that benefits those in power. ■

A government that champions Hindu interests is changing sacred spaces into high-value real estate projects to enrich the powerful

Pilgrimage in the time of climate change

The rapidly melting *shivling* of Amarnath is a reminder that faith must respect nature

Photo: Getty Images

Pilgrims' progress Increased footfall has hastened the melting of the ice lingam in the Amarnath cave temple, shrinking it to barely a foot (*right*) in the first four days since it was opened to devotees this year

Pankaj Chaturvedi

The annual Amarnath Yatra is more than a religious pilgrimage. For millions of Hindus, it is one of the holiest spiritual journeys in India. It is also the economic lifeline for thousands of families in Kashmir and an important indicator of the health of the fragile Himalayan ecosystem.

The 57-day pilgrimage began on 3 July 2026. By the end of the fifth day, more than 113,800 pilgrims had already visited the sacred cave. Almost simultaneously, reports emerged that the naturally formed ice lingam had melted by nearly 90 per cent, shrinking to barely a foot in height.

What devotees witnessed was not merely the premature melting away of a sacred marker. It was an unmistakable warning that climate change, coupled with untenable human pressure (and presence), is altering one of India's most sensitive mountain ecosystems.

Natural wonder under climate stress

The ice lingam inside the Amarnath cave is not carved or sculpted. It is a naturally occurring ice stalagmite formed through a delicate process in which water droplets falling from the cave roof freeze under sustained sub-zero temperatures. This remarkable phenomenon depends on an exceptionally stable microclimate within the cave. When that microclimate is disturbed, the natural process is disrupted.

This year, Kashmir experienced unusually high temperatures during May and June, with heat levels breaking several previous records. Reduced snowfall during the preceding winter also meant that natural cooling around the cave was significantly weaker than normal. Without sufficient accumulation of snow, the cave loses the thermal conditions necessary to sustain the ice formation throughout the pilgrimage season.

The result was evident within days of the Yatra's commencement.

A pattern, not an exception

The events of 2026 are not isolated. They fit into a worrying climatic trend.

During the summer of 2024, Kashmir witnessed an intense heat wave in June and July, which experts linked to the unusually rapid melting of the ice lingam. In 2025, erratic weather patterns became equally evident. Following snowfall, minimum temperatures reportedly rose by nearly six degrees Celsius within a short period—another sign of increasing climatic instability in the Himalayan region.

These recurring anomalies reinforce what scientists have long warned: the Himalayas are among the world's most climate-sensitive mountain systems. Rising temperatures are accelerating glacier retreat, altering snowfall patterns and destabilising ecosystems that have evolved over thousands of years.

Missing climate data

One of the biggest challenges in understanding the phenomenon is the absence of long-term environmental data from the cave itself.

Although the Amarnath cave lies in an ecologically sensitive zone, publicly available observations from permanent automated weather stations remain limited. The India Meteorological Department primarily provides district-level forecasts and short-term weather updates rather than long-term cave-specific climate records.

Consequently, researchers often rely on observations from nearby stations such as Srinagar, Pahalgam and Anantnag, supplementing them with local information on humidity, wind and snowfall to assess conditions inside the cave. This gap highlights the urgent need for continuous scientific monitoring of one of India's most environmentally vulnerable pilgrimage sites.

The pressure of human activity

Climate change is not the entire story. The cave's fragile microclimate is increasingly affected by the sheer scale of human activity during the pilgrimage. Studies suggest that every person inside the cave emits roughly 100 watts of body heat. When tens of thousands of pilgrims pass through the confined space over a short period, the cumulative heat and humidity inevitably rise.

The consequences are predictable. Higher temperatures accelerate the melting of the ice formation.

The problem is compounded by mechanised activity, vehicle movement, construction, power generation and infrastructure built to accommodate more pilgrims. While these facilities undoubtedly improve accessibility, they also increase the ecological footprint of the pilgrimage, placing additional stress on a fragile environment.

*

The shrinking ice lingam raises an uncomfortable but unavoidable question: are we prepared to modify our practices in order to preserve what we revere?

Pilgrimages should not be measured merely by the number of people who reach a sacred spot. They should also reflect respect for ecological balance.

Environmental experts have repeatedly recommended limiting the daily number of pilgrims to help maintain stable conditions inside the cave. Mechanised activity in the immediate vicinity should be minimised, and future infrastructure development must be guided by ecological rather than logistical considerations. Climate adaptation should become an integral part of pilgrimage management, particularly in the Himalayas, where environmental thresholds are very delicate.

Religious faith and environmental conservation cannot be viewed as competing priorities. One depends upon the other. If future generations are to experience the Amarnath ice lingam in its natural form, India must embrace a model of pilgrimage that is both spiritually fulfilling and environmentally sustainable.

The Amarnath cave reminds us of a profound truth. We are not masters of nature but its custodians. Devotion should not unintentionally destroy the very phenomenon it seeks to celebrate. Managing the annual pilgrimage can no longer remain merely an administrative exercise. It must become part of a broader national strategy for climate resilience and ecological stewardship in the Himalayas. Only then can this extraordinary symbol of faith continue to inspire pilgrims for generations to come. ■

Studies suggest that every person inside the cave emits roughly 100 watts of body heat. The cumulative effect is imaginable

From oath to outcome in a single evening: Karnataka's new chapter begins

A first cabinet meeting held the same evening as D.K. Shivakumar's oath- and a slew of welfare measures to show for it, starting with the state's youth

Photo: GettyImages

The cabinet's decisions reflected a determination to not let that potential go untapped, addressing youth from three distinct but connected angles.

Hours after taking oath as Chief Minister of Karnataka on the afternoon of June 3, 2026, D.K. Shivakumar was back at work — convening his first cabinet meeting that very evening. There was no pause between oath and office, no gap between promise and practice.

By nightfall, a slew of welfare measures, anchored in youth recruitment and student welfare, had already been rolled out — a signal, delivered on day one, that this administration intended to govern from the outset rather than ease into it.

For a government, the first cabinet meeting is often treated as symbolic — a photograph for the archives, a promise wrapped in ceremony and set aside for later.

This one chose a different path. From the very first hour, the new administration made clear that its priority was outcomes, not optics.

It was governance with its sleeves rolled up, and the message was unmistakable: the work would begin immediately, not after the applause had faded.

There is a particular kind of courage in choosing substance over spectacle at the outset of a term. It would have been easy to use the occasion for broad declarations of intent that commit to little.

Instead, the cabinet arrived with specifics — numbers, timelines, named initiatives — setting a standard for itself that it would now have to live up to.

A VISION ROOTED IN THE PEOPLE

Every government speaks of the people. Few begin by proving it on day one. As the cabinet took its seats, the conversation moved swiftly toward the everyday lives of Karnataka's citizens — its students, its job seekers, its urban residents, its homeowners waiting years for a piece of paper that would finally make their homes legitimate.

There was a shared understanding in the room: a state's progress cannot be measured only in economic indicators.

It must be felt in classrooms, in job interviews, in daily commutes, and in the quiet relief of a family finally receiving a document that secures their home.

This was the spirit that shaped the decisions taken that evening — a blend of compassion and pragmatism, of big vision and small, tangible relief.

Few administrations commit numbers, deadlines, and resources to their priorities on the very first day in office.

Karnataka's new cabinet chose to do exactly that — signalling that the vision articulated in speeches was not meant to remain aspirational, but was to be immediately anchored in policy.

Opening Doors for the Next Generation

If one theme ran like a thread through the meeting, it was youth. Karnataka has long taken pride in its young, energetic population — a demographic dividend that, if nurtured well, could power the state's ambitions for decades.

The cabinet's decisions reflected a determination to not let that potential go untapped, addressing youth from three distinct but connected angles.

The first was deceptively simple, yet profound: extending free bus travel to male students across the state. On the surface, it reads as a transport policy.

In truth, it is an investment in access — a recognition that for many families, the cost of a daily commute can be the invisible wall between a child and their education.

By removing that wall, the government sent a clear message that no student should have to choose between affordability and aspiration.

But access to education is only half the promise. The other half is what comes after — a livelihood, a place in the workforce.

The cabinet addressed this with equal seriousness, approving a sweeping employment initiative aimed at generating 50,000 new job opportunities for the state's youth. Paired with a renewed focus on skill development and employability, the initiative signals a government thinking not just about jobs today, but about a workforce equipped for tomorrow.

And then came a decision that looked beyond degrees and desks altogether — the approval of 10,000 Bharat Jodo Clubs across Karnataka. These are spaces where young citizens can gather, engage, lead, and build bonds of community.

In a world increasingly divided by noise and distraction, the initiative reflects a belief that harmony and leadership are skills too — ones that must be nurtured just as deliberately as literacy or technical training. It is a wager that a generation raised in unity will build a state defined by cooperation rather than conflict.

Taken together, mobility, employment, and community form a deliberate architecture of youth empowerment — one that treats young citizens not as a single problem to be solved with a single scheme, but as individuals whose needs span the practical, the professional, and the personal.

A GOVERNMENT THAT CHOSE ACTION OVER CEREMONY

What stands out, looking back at this first cabinet meeting, is not any single decision but the pattern they form together. Free travel for students. Fifty thousand jobs. Ten thousand community clubs. Crores committed to city infrastructure.

Relief for homeowners waiting years for paperwork. Firm rules against unchecked construction. Each addresses a distinct concern; together, they sketch a governing philosophy that sees no contradiction between compassion and discipline, between immediate relief and long-term planning.

There is a quiet confidence in choosing to spend a first cabinet meeting this way — treating governance not as a performance, but as a continuous act of service.

LOOKING AHEAD

Every long journey is remembered, eventually, for its first step. For Karnataka, the evening of June 3, 2026, may well be recalled as such a moment — not because it solved every challenge the state faces, but because it set a tone: urgency without haste, ambition without excess, care extended to citizens without losing sight of order and accountability.

The road ahead is, undoubtedly, a long one. Fifty thousand jobs must be created and filled. Ten thousand clubs must find their footing. Roads must be repaired, and repaired well. Families waiting for certificates must see that wait finally end.

These are not small undertakings, and their true success will be measured not in this first meeting, but in the months and years of follow-through that lie ahead.

Yet there is something reassuring in how the journey began. A government's character often reveals itself most clearly in its earliest choices — before the pressures of routine administration set in, before the initial energy settles into the steady rhythm of governance.

In choosing to open its term, within hours of taking oath, with decisions that touch students, job seekers, city commuters, and anxious homeowners alike, Karnataka's new administration has offered its citizens a glimpse of its priorities.

As the state moves forward from this milestone, there is a sense of quiet optimism in the air — not the loud optimism of promises yet to be tested, but the steadier kind that comes from watching a government choose to act before it chooses to speak.

Karnataka begins this chapter with its feet firmly on the ground and its eyes fixed on the horizon: a state working, deliberately and diligently, toward a future where opportunity, order, and inclusion walk hand in hand.

GROWTH WITH GUARDRAILS

A government that only gives without setting standards risks disorder; one that only regulates without extending relief risks alienation. Karnataka's new cabinet appeared conscious of this balance.

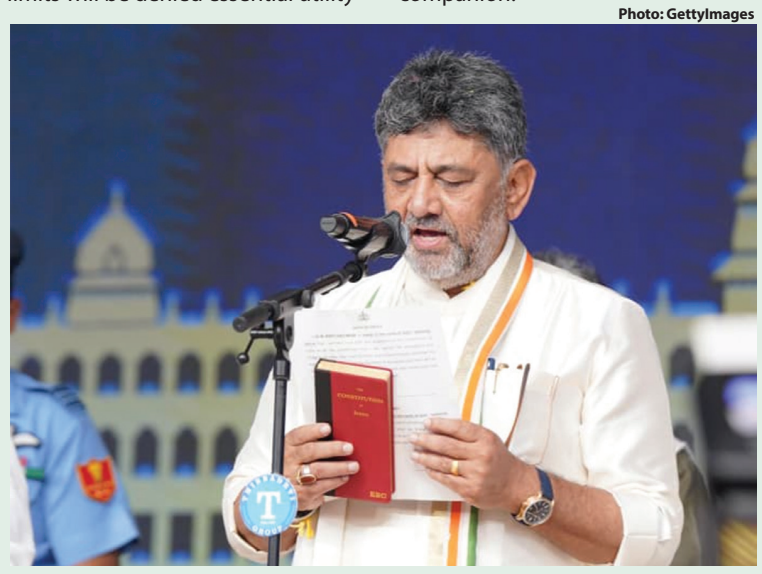
Even as it extended support to law-abiding citizens through the settlement scheme, it reaffirmed that Bengaluru's growth must remain within the bounds of order and safety.

In line with directives from the Supreme Court, the cabinet approved firm measures against unauthorized construction. Buildings that violate sanctioned plans or exceed prescribed height limits will be denied essential utility connections — electricity and water — until compliance is ensured.

It is a measure that draws a clear boundary: support for those who follow the rules, no shortcuts for those who bypass them. In a city expanding as rapidly as Bengaluru, this insistence on planned, accountable growth may prove just as important as any single infrastructure project.

Read together, the settlement scheme and the construction crackdown reveal a coherent philosophy rather than two isolated decisions. Compassion, in this framing, is not the opposite of discipline — it is its natural companion.

Photo: GettyImages



BENGALURU: BETWEEN AMBITION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

No conversation about Karnataka's future can avoid Bengaluru — a city celebrated globally as a beacon of technology and innovation, yet one whose residents know all too well the frustrations of traffic snarls, crumbling roads, and infrastructure straining under rapid growth. The cabinet did not shy away from this contradiction. It addressed it directly.

An infrastructure investment of Rs 2,000 crore was approved with a clear purpose: fixing roads, eliminating potholes, and reinforcing the city's transport network.

This was framed not as a distant plan but as an urgent response to a problem residents face every day. For a commuter stuck in traffic or navigating a pothole-riddled stretch, such an announcement is the promise of a smoother, safer journey home.

Yet perhaps the most human decision concerned something less visible than roads: paperwork. For thousands of families living in "unplanned residential layouts," the absence of proper documentation has long cast a shadow of uncertainty over their homes.

The cabinet's approval of a One-Time Settlement scheme for residential properties up to 2,500 square feet offers these families a long-awaited pathway to legal clarity.

Alongside this, the government committed to expediting Completion Certificates and Occupancy Certificates across 30 to 40 identified residential areas — a process that translates directly into peace of mind for homeowners who have waited years for formal recognition of the roofs over their heads.

Photo: GettyImages

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What the *Chauhaan* teaser tells us

The film calls pellet guns 'limited force'. The numbers from Kashmir tell a different story

Aakar Patel

The teaser for *Chauhaan*—the latest in a line of films selling majoritarian propaganda—is out. It opens in the sort of place the Indian government prefers its stories set: a street in Pulwama, stones in the air, security forces in formation.

The voiceover calls tear gas ineffective because protective masks are easily accessible online. Water cannons are dismissed as temporary solutions. What is required, the film insinuates, is something harsher: 12-gauge shotguns firing birdshot into crowds.

We should pause here.

Narrative-building for majoritarianism in India now runs on the confidence that such claims are never checked. So let us check.

In 2017, Amnesty International India documented 88 people whose eyesight was damaged by shotguns fired by the Jammu & Kashmir Police and the Central Reserve Police Force between 2014 and 2017. Some recovered; many did not.

A single cartridge scatters between 360 and 600 metal pellets—there's no way to control where they land. The injuries caused by pellet guns are indiscriminate by design: shotgun barrels are not rifled, and there is no control over their projectiles.

That is evident from the fact that 14 of the 88 people we spoke to were not protesters but women hit inside their own homes. Security personnel themselves have been treated for injuries caused by weapons fired by their colleagues, so dangerous is their use.

And then there was Insha Mushtaq, a 14-year-old girl who, on the evening of 11 July 2016, opened a window in her village in Kashmir to look at the street. She never saw the street—or anything else—again. A pellet gun blinded her, completely. Her doctors called it the worst case they had ever seen.

The state's official data says 6,221 people were injured between July 2016 and February 2017, with 782 sustaining eye injuries.

The government has assembled a working dictionary: the dissenter is 'anti-national', the activist an 'urban Naxal', the boy at the funeral a 'stone-pelter'

The United Nations human rights office called the pellet shotgun "one of the most dangerous weapons used in Kashmir" and recommended its removal from India's arsenal for crowd control. When the Indian government was asked why it fired into the faces of children, it declined to answer, citing national security.

Clearly, 'limited damage' is not a description the evidence can bear.

The *Chauhaan* teaser's complaint that limited force produces no results is equally untrue because, in Kashmir, there has never been restraint by the government or any shortage of force. The region's condition today reflects what more than three decades of force have wrought.

A government that answers one violation with another, graver violation does not earn trust; it forfeits it.

Protesters take to the streets because the doors of Parliament have been shut to them. And this is not just in Kashmir.

The Indian government's Pre-Legislative Consultation Policy adopted in 2014 requires all draft laws to be opened for public consultation for 30 days. Yet, according to PRS Legislative Research, of the 301 Bills introduced since 2014, as many as 227 underwent no public consultation at all. Of the 74 that were published, at least 40 fell short of the prescribed 30-day consultation period.

The 'mother of democracy' will not discuss family matters with the family.

There is further evidence that we are a parliamentary democracy only in name. The share of Bills referred to standing committees has fallen from 71 per cent before 2014 to less than 20 per cent since.

In December 2025, when asked whether the government monitored implementation of the consultation policy, it replied that it had never evaluated the policy and kept no record of who complied with it.

Increasingly, this regime's most problematic directives do not arrive as laws but as rules and advisories drafted by the executive without legislative scrutiny, let alone public consultation.

The State needs reminding that a country cannot keep calling itself a democracy while hollowing out the word one law, one rule and one advisory at a time.

In the process, the government has assembled a working dictionary: the dissenter is 'anti-national', the activist an 'urban Naxal', the protester an '*andolanjeevi*', the reporter a 'presstitute', and the boy at a funeral a 'stone-pelter'.

A film teaser that recasts a maiming weapon as an example of heroic restraint is quoting from a new dictionary, in a medium built to manufacture assent

Once these words seep into the public consciousness through propaganda, the state's actions no longer require a defence.

A film teaser that recasts a maiming weapon as an example of heroic restraint is not breaking with that dictionary. It is reading fluently from it, in a medium built to manufacture assent.

To look at a girl who was blinded simply for looking out of a window and call it 'limited damage' is not strength. Quite the opposite.

When the Amnesty report was published, I went with my colleague Raghu to meet the then head of Kashmir Police, S.P. Vaid, who is quite active on *X* these days.

The police headquarters in Srinagar—and the ethnicity of the officials manning it—was revealing. I will write about that another time.

Vaid was hospitable as he accepted a copy of our report. He listened as we presented our findings on the damage caused by police firing pellet shotguns at protesters. He did not dispute the findings, but he could not see why the weapon should be discontinued.

"It is a weapon that is not used for crowd control anywhere else in India," I said to him. "It should be," he replied. ■

Views are personal

Takes more than two to make a market economy

Amal Chandra on the risks India faces from its monopolistic business environment

Photo: **Getty Images**

The Adani Group's presence has been widening alarmingly across key infrastructure sectors. (*above*) Residents protest the handing over of Dharavi's redevelopment project to the group

There was a time when Indian capitalism was narrated as a story of liberalisation. The 1991 reforms dismantled the old licence/permit raj and promised a more competitive marketplace. Three decades later, a new question shadows India's economic growth story—do a handful of big business groups command disproportionate influence over our markets, infrastructure and public policy?

It's a no-brainer to identify the two corporate giants that control some of the most strategic sectors of the Indian economy today—ports, airports, telecom, digital services, data infrastructure, petrochemicals, power, logistics, green energy, retail, media... Their scale, reach and speed of expansion have no parallels in India's business history—and for many, they are our national champions who have made India globally competitive. But their rise has also raised concerns about the concentration of economic power, barriers to real competition and the role of state policy in private accumulation.

Crony capitalism is not merely about corruption in the narrow legal sense. It describes a political economy where access to power becomes a decisive business advantage, where regulation, licensing, state financing and public assets disproportionately favour those closest to the governing establishment. The concern is not that successful businesses become large; scale is often a natural consequence of efficiency. The concern arises when scale becomes self-reinforcing through privileged access to capital, policy and state resources, making markets less competitive.

The rise of Gautam Adani has become emblematic of this anxiety. The Adani Group's expansion from ports into airports, power transmission, data centres, renewable energy, media, cement and defence has been strikingly rapid. From handling roughly a quarter of India's cargo through Adani Ports & SEZ Ltd, it became India's largest private airport operator. It owns/controls key international airports in Ahmedabad, Lucknow, Mangaluru, Jaipur, Guwahati, Thiruvananthapuram and Mumbai. In Mumbai, India's financial capital, it owns both Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport and the under-development Navi Mumbai International Airport. It has a major presence in power and renewables through Adani Energy Solutions and Adani Green Energy, has forayed into cement manufacture by acquiring ACC and Ambuja Cements, and expanded into media via NDTV—creating an extraordinary strategic footprint across trade, energy, infrastructure and information.

The strategic nature of assets acquired is as noteworthy as the speed of this growth. Airports are not simply commercial properties but gateways of national infrastructure. Ports shape trade flows. Power transmission influences energy distribution. Media ownership shapes public discourse. The concentration of such assets in a single group naturally raises questions about overwhelming influence in policymaking.

In the wake of the 2023 Hindenburg exposé about 'brazen stock market manipulation and accounting fraud' by the Adani Group—which wiped out over $100 billion in market value at one stage—other damning details came to light, such as the substantial exposure of public sector institutions like LIC and State Bank of India to Adani-linked assets. Critics warned that such exposure had scary implications for financial stability and for crores of Indians whose savings are managed by these institutions. But those warnings fell on deaf ears.

Reliance Industries, the Mukesh Ambani group flagship, represents another form of concentration. Unlike Adani's expansion led by infrastructure, Reliance built dominance through petrochemicals before moving into telecom, retail, digital commerce, media and platform infrastructure. The launch of Jio Platforms fundamentally reshaped India's telecom market. Consumers benefited enormously from cheap data, accelerating India's digital transformation, but the telecom sector shrank to a few big players, effectively weakening competition.

Reliance's retail and digital ambitions similarly reveal how great scale can also create unfair advantage. In network industries, size is power. The more users a platform acquires, the harder it becomes for competitors to challenge it. It creates a feedback loop of market dominance that conventional antitrust/anti-monopoly frameworks often struggle to address.

The issue, then, is not simply whether Adani and Ambani run efficient businesses. Both have executed large projects on an extraordinary scale, but the question here is whether India's institutional architecture nurtures competition.

Indian economists and public intellectuals have long warned against the dangers of excessive concentration of economic power. As former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan cautioned: "Crony capitalism is about the misuse of public office for private gain," a warning perhaps especially relevant in emerging economies.

The monetisation of public assets further complicates the picture. As the government accelerates privatisation and infrastructure leasing, large conglomerates with deep pockets enjoy an enormous advantage. Smaller firms simply cannot bid at comparable scale. This creates a structural bias towards concentration, with strategic assets gravitating towards a few dominant players.

In the absence of competition, scale can suppress innovation and create systemic fragility, where the failure of a single giant player becomes a national risk

Large conglomerates often secure financing at more favourable terms because lenders perceive them as systemically important or politically insulated. This lowers their cost of capital relative to smaller competitors. Over time, cheap capital becomes a competitive moat. When public banks and insurers are involved, the stakes become even higher because losses, if they occur, are socialised.

This dynamic is not unique to India. The United States confronted similar concerns during the Gilded Age of the 1870s to the 1890s, an era of rapid economic growth and industrialisation marked by flashy materialism, great wealth inequality and political corruption. It was in this period that industrial titans like John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie amassed extraordinary wealth and market power. The policy response was antitrust law, a.k.a. as anti-monopoly law. The lesson was clear: capitalism requires competition and competition requires guardrails.

India today faces its own version of the same economic conundrum.

Defenders of the current model argue that India needs large conglomerates to rapidly build capital-intensive infrastructure, much like scale and state coordination helped accelerate China's industrial rise. Yet scale without competition also suppresses innovation and creates systemic fragility, where the failure of a single giant player becomes a national risk. The issue goes beyond the current stranglehold of the Adanis and Ambanis; a larger concern is whether India's institutions can preserve transparency, competition and regulatory independence as this concentration deepens. ■

AMAL CHANDRA *is a policy analyst and columnist*

One reserve forest, three governments

Photos: **Ratheesh S.R.**

Living in fear (*Clockwise from left*) **Women from the Mavinhalla tribal hamlet near Ooty; Chandroth colony near Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary; B.R. Sivanand holds a photo of his father, Rajasekharappa, who was killed by a tiger**

The Niligiri Biosphere Reserve is divided by administrative boundaries that wildlife neither recognises nor respects

K.A. Shaji

Rugmini still cannot bear to look in the direction of the small field where her husband was killed. On the morning of 7 November 2025, Dhan Nayaka, 49, a marginal farmer from Eggudu village in Karnataka's Mysuru district, left home with his pair of bulls to plough his land. This was his routine for decades. Around noon, Rugmini brought lunch. The bulls were wandering around. Her husband had disappeared. Hours later, villagers and forest officials found his remains in a neighbouring field. He had been dragged away by a tiger.

Around 120 km away, across the Tamil Nadu border, another family was mourning another tiger attack. In the Niligiri's Sigur, Nagi, a Kurumba tribal woman from Mavinhalla Adivasi village, had taken her goats to graze near the forest, exactly as her family had done for generations. She never returned.

Cross into Kerala, to Chekadi village near Pulpally in Wayanad. Basavi, 65, and Kali Nooran, 80, are neighbours. Survivors of elephant attacks, both remain confined to their homes with broken legs.

These tragedies unfolded under three state governments. But they belong to one extended forest territory.

Stretching across more than 5,500 sq. km, the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR) links Kerala's Silent Valley National Park and the Wayanad, Aralam and Karimpuzha wildlife sanctuaries with Karnataka's Bandipur and Nagarhole Tiger Reserves and Brahmagiri Wildlife Sanctuary, and Tamil Nadu's Mudumalai and Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserves and Mukurthi Wildlife Sanctuary.

Recognised by UNESCO as India's first biosphere reserve, NBR supports the country's largest population of Asian elephants and one of the world's highest tiger densities apart from a rich and rare list of flora and fauna. Every day, elephants, tigers, leopards and gaurs move freely across Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Yet each state manages conflict through separate bureaucracies, compensation policies, monitoring systems and political priorities. The result is an ecological landscape divided by administrative boundaries that wildlife neither recognises nor respects.

"Human-animal conflict is no longer a wildlife issue alone," says N. Badusha, president of Wayanad Prakrithi Samrakshana Samithy. "It has become a governance issue. Until there is a common strategy for habitat restoration, wildlife monitoring, compensation and community participation, these tragedies will continue."

Weeks after Dhan Nayaka's death, Rajasekharappa, a 56-year-old farmer from nearby Bennigere village, was killed by a tiger while grazing cattle. In Badagulapura near Nanjangud, Madheva Gowda survived a tiger attack while harvesting cotton. The Karnataka government spent nearly Rs 20 lakh on treatment. Doctors saved his life but not his eyesight.

Across the Moyar Valley in Nigiri in Tamil Nadu, similar stories unfold with disturbing regularity. At Pakkana village near Gudalur, autorickshaw driver Abdul Ali recalls how a tiger killed his father four years ago. In adjacent Kariasholai, elephant attacks claimed the lives of Poonkodi, Alagaratnam and Sivalingam, all tea plantation workers on duty.

Human-animal conflict is a governance conundrum, with interlocking issues that affect both wildlife and forest communities

In Kerala's Noolpuzha village, K. Pradeep Kumar now works as a temporary forest watcher. His father Bhaskaran was killed by a tiger doing the same job.

The victims are overwhelmingly Adivasis, marginal farmers, plantation workers and cattle grazers. Each attack frightens entire villages. Farmers avoid working alone. Women hesitate to collect firewood. Children wait for adults to walk home. Why has fear become part of the landscape?

Dhan Nayaka's family insists nothing has changed in the way they cultivate their land. His daughters lament: Since when did routine agricultural work become a death sentence? The same question echoes across villages bordering the reserve. What changed?

Scientists argue there is no single factor that explains the escalation. A combination of habitat fragmentation, changing rainfall patterns, shrinking wildlife corridors, expanding plantations, roads, tourism infrastructure and cultivation of crops that attract elephants has reshaped the relationship.

"The NBR cannot be managed through isolated administrative decisions," observes Dr C.K. Vishnudas, wildlife biology expert. "Wildlife populations have recovered because conservation has succeeded, but coexistence has not received the same attention."

Scientists increasingly argue that the next phase of conservation in South India cannot be confined to protecting wildlife inside national parks and tiger reserves. The challenge now lies outside protected areas, where forests merge with villages, plantations and agricultural land.

Strengthening rapid response teams, ensuring timely compensation and recognising the ecological knowledge of tribal communities who have lived with these forests for centuries is crucial. None of these measures can succeed in isolation.

Kerala is now experimenting with removing jackfruits from forest-fringe homesteads to discourage elephants. Tamil Nadu has focused on removing lantana to restore grasslands inside forests. Karnataka has revived ecotourism even as anxiety rises in villages bordering Nagarhole and Bandipur. Each state is addressing one part of the problem. They are not managing the landscape together.

Researchers have repeatedly recommended a permanent inter-state authority bringing together Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and the Union government to coordinate measures.

"The Nilgiri is a single ecological unit. Elephants and tigers move across the three states irrespective of political boundaries. Conservation and conflict mitigation therefore have to be planned at the landscape level rather than through isolated state-level interventions," says Dr. P. S. Easa, former Director, Kerala Forest Research Institute.

Meanwhile, survivors receive emergency treatment but little long-term rehabilitation, livelihood support or psychological care.

Wildlife also pays the price. Retaliatory killings—including the recent case of a radio-collared elephant in Kerala's Malayattur forest region who died after eating fruit with explosives hidden inside—reflect the growing frustration in conflict-hit villages.

The greatest irony is impossible to ignore. The NBR stands among India's finest conservation achievements. Yet the people living closest to its forests increasingly feel excluded from conservation.

Bettakurubas around Nagarhole, Kurumbas in Sigur and the Kattunaika and Paniya communities of Wayanad possess generations of ecological knowledge, but remain marginal to policy making even as they bear the greatest risks. Their anger is rarely directed at elephants or tigers. It is directed at a system that arrives only after someone dies.

Until the three states and the Centre begin managing this extraordinary landscape as a shared ecological responsibility rather than three separate administrative territories, the next such death in Wayanad, Mysuru or Gudalur cannot be considered an accident. ■

The 'right to walk' and the 'right to belong'

The Supreme Court judgement cannot be interpreted only through the reality of the able-bodied pedestrian, argues **Puneet Singh Singhal**

The Supreme Court's recognition of the right to walk on safe, demarcated footpaths as a fundamental right is a landmark ruling on the safety of pedestrians. It is also an invitation to rethink the Indian street itself: who it is built for, who it excludes, and what kind of citizenship begins at the edge of the road.

On 19 June 2026, the court held that the right to walk is protected under Articles 19 and 21 of the Constitution and that pedestrian movement must have priority over motorised vehicles. The judgment arose from a tragic motor accident case in which a five-year-old child was killed while being taken to school, reportedly because there was no safe pedestrian space. The court also noted that authorities have a duty to demarcate, construct, maintain and safeguard footpaths.

But if this right is interpreted only through the figure of the able-bodied pedestrian, India will miss a historic opportunity.

For persons with disabilities, older persons, neurodivergent people, caregivers, chronically ill citizens, children, pregnant people and anyone using mobility aids, the issue is not only the right to walk. It is the right to move through the city with safety, predictability, dignity and autonomy.

A wheelchair user may not 'walk' in the conventional sense, but they have an equal claim to the footpath. A blind person using a cane is not asking for sympathy when they need tactile paving and obstruction-free routes. A person with dyspraxia may find uneven surfaces, sudden level changes and chaotic crossings deeply unsafe. A caregiver pushing a child or supporting an older parent is negotiating a city that rarely treats care as part of mobility.

The court has opened the constitutional door. The question now is whether India can walk through it inclusively.

In most Indian cities, footpaths exist only in theory. They are frequently broken, or may have potholes, open drains, construction debris, exposed wires, uneven slabs and often suddenly disappear. Sometimes they are too high. Sometimes they are too narrow. They are built, dug up, rebuilt and forgotten.

What most see as poor maintenance can be, for disabled citizens, a daily mechanism of exclusion. A footpath can be the line between access and isolation. An inaccessible footpath can influence whether someone reaches school, office, a clinic, a bus stop, a polling booth... It can determine whether a person participates in the city and the community or remains confined at home. It can turn a short journey into a risk assessment.

This is why the 'right to walk' must be read alongside India's disability rights framework. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 places legal duties on governments to ensure accessibility, non-discrimination and full participation for persons with disabilities. India also has Harmonised Guidelines and Standards for Universal Accessibility to make built environments, transport, information and public services more accessible.

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A common response to accessibility demands is that Indian cities are too complex, too crowded, too informal, too resource-constrained. There is some truth in that. But complexity cannot be an excuse to not address an issue.

The way forward is not an all-or-nothing approach, but a time-bound accessibility roadmap.

Phase 1 Low-cost safety fixes Municipal bodies can start by clearing dangerous obstructions, repairing broken slabs, covering open drains, removing construction debris, preventing two-wheelers from using footpaths, and stopping illegal parking on pedestrian space. These are not expensive design interventions. They are basic governance duties.

Phase 2 Priority accessible corridors Cities should first make routes around hospitals, schools, colleges, bus stops, metro stations, courts, government offices, markets, parks, public toilets, disability service centres and shelters fully accessible. These corridors must include curb cuts, ramps, tactile paths, safe crossings, adequate lighting, resting points, shade and continuous surfaces.

Phase 3 Universal design of all future roadworks No new road, flyover, metro station, smart city project, market redevelopment or street-scaping plan should be approved unless accessibility is embedded in design, tendering, budgeting and maintenance contracts.

When footpaths are inaccessible, disabled people are wordlessly told that the city does not expect them to be outdoors

Photo: **Getty Images**

Street vendors too have rights, and a rights-based policy must avoid the false binaries of pedestrian versus vendor or accessibility versus livelihood

Phase 4 Accountability Every ward should have public footpath audits, disability-led accessibility inspections, grievance redressal mechanisms, timelines for repair and penalties for non-compliance. If the right is fundamental, its violation must carry consequences.

The question is not whether inclusion is difficult. The question is whether we are willing to plan it seriously and budget for it.

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There is another nuance India must confront. Footpaths are often occupied by vendors, informal workers, parked vehicles, religious structures, shops, utilities and state infrastructure. Enforcement of the right to walk cannot become a selective weapon against the poor.

Street vendors are also rights-bearing citizens. The Street Vendors Act, 2014 was enacted to protect vendors' livelihoods while regulating vending through surveys, certificates, vending zones and town vending committees.

A rights-based footpath policy must therefore avoid false binaries: pedestrian versus vendor, disabled person versus informal worker, accessibility versus livelihood. The answer is not indiscriminate eviction. The answer is planned vending zones, clear walking widths, accessible circulation paths, transparent licensing and participatory local governance.

Pedestrian justice cannot mean evicting the poor while allowing the powerful to occupy public spaces without consequence.

*

Through my ongoing work with Green Disability, I have learned that accessible mobility is inseparable from climate resilience. In a warming city, a footpath is climate infrastructure.

During heatwaves, disabled and chronically ill people often need shaded, predictable, low-effort routes to reach clinics, transport, water points, cooling spaces and community support. A footpath without shade can become unusable. A broken pavement after flooding can become dangerous. Poor drainage can trap wheelchair users and older pedestrians. Air pollution, noise, traffic stress and heat exposure compound existing health conditions.

The World Health Organization estimates that 1.3 billion people, ~16 per cent of the global population, experience significant disability. In India's cities, this reality intersects with ageing, poverty, informal work, caregiving, chronic illness and climate vulnerability.

So, when we discuss the right to walk, we must also discuss the right to reach safety during climate stress. Footpaths connect people not only to markets and offices, but also to hospitals, public transport, water, shade, toilets, shelters and schools.

Urban planning cannot treat accessibility and climate resilience as separate issues. A usable footpath must be continuous, barrier-free, shaded wherever possible, well-drained and safe during extreme weather.

Beyond its legal significance, the SC ruling highlights a larger issue of implementation. The right to walk has little meaning if public streets remain unsafe or unusable for large sections of the population.

When footpaths are inaccessible, disabled people are wordlessly told that the city does not expect them to be outdoors. The right to walk is part of a broader right to accessible mobility. This means footpaths and crossings must also be usable by people who need wheelchairs, canes, walkers, crutches, prosthetics, or require assistance from another person.

If implemented narrowly, the judgment may become another well-intentioned ruling trapped in files, tenders and municipal excuses. But if implemented with accessibility at its heart, it can become a turning point in how India imagines citizenship. ■

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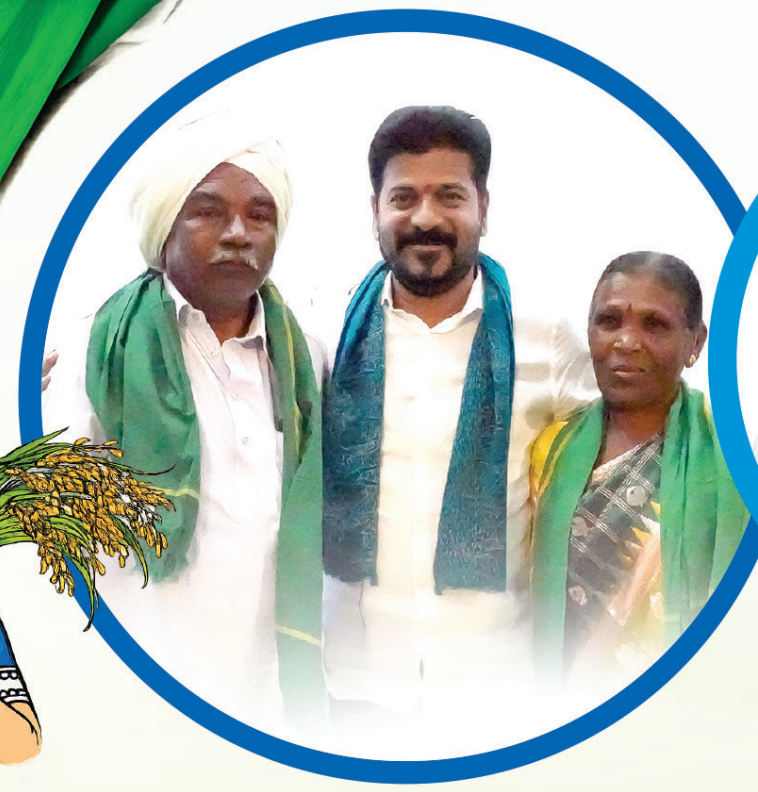

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