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NATION

THE YO-YOING CAREER OF AKASH ANAND

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‘Mapping’ them out in the national capital

Nandlal Sharma

The word ‘mapping’ did not appear in Phase 1 of the SIR, which was held in Bihar alone. It referred instead to ‘family grouping’: arranging members of the same family sequentially in the electoral roll. Every voter was asked to provide their part and serial number in the 2002-03 roll. ‘Family grouping’ became the lynchpin of SIR/Phase 2, held simultaneously in nine states and three Union Territories. Those born later or not listed in the 2002-03 rolls were asked to provide information on relatives. The emphasis was now on mapping each voter.

In Delhi, part of Phase 3, even this wasn’t enough to secure a place in the draft electoral roll.

Mantasha Afroz, a Delhi University student, is a voter from Okhla. She was born at the same address in Shaheen Bagh where she still lives with her parents and two sisters. Mantasha has been marked ‘permanently shifted’ in the ASDD (Absent-Shifted-Dead-Duplicate) schema, even after she provided her parents’ details. Her family has five members, who have had to deal with three different BLOs. Mantasha’s BLO says her work is done, and it’s now over to “senior Election Commission officials.”

In Patparganj, 24-year-old Kajal’s name was deleted (deemed ‘permanently shifted’). She filled out her SIR form online and voted in the 2025 assembly election. She still has her old voter I-card (EPIC), and provided her mother’s part/serial/EPIC numbers. Her mother’s name is on the draft list, hers isn’t. Both mother and daughter live at the same address. How’s that for ‘family grouping’?

Pushpa Devi, who has lived at the same address in Jagdamba Camp, Greater Kailash, for 40 years, has been declared ‘permanently shifted’. Despite voting in 2025, she was not issued an SIR enumeration form. Virma Devi, 71, also from Jagdamba Camp and very much alive, has been declared ‘dead’. Poonam, a resident of Yamuna Khadar in Mayur Vihar, was given a form, but her BLO never returned to collect it. Poonam has preserved the form; on the rolls she is marked ‘untraceable’. Photojournalist Sarvesh, 70, is also ‘untraceable’ despite living in the same building for 30 years. Her BLO claims he filled out her form himself!

According to Delhi’s chief electoral officer, the city had 1.45 crore voters before the SIR. The draft list has 97.5 lakh. The ASDD list has 43.2 lakh people in the absent/permanently shifted/other categories—29.8 per cent of the pre-SIR baseline. Another 2.8 lakh are ‘dead’ and 1.4 lakh ‘duplicate’, grouped under

‘uncollectable enumeration forms’.

As per the Election Commission, the BLOs either did not get the forms back or could not locate the voters. (BLOs have the option of using their app to check the 2002 SIR rolls. With a voter’s old part/serial/EPIC number combination, they can identify where/if the person has already been covered under the SIR, including which state the voter came from, if s/he has moved.)

A press statement issued on 31 August 2026 says all 1.45 crore voters in Delhi (100 per cent) *received* enumeration forms between 30 June and 17 August. Why were only 67 per cent forms collected, then? Or did voters disappear after receiving their forms?

There’s another complication: voter part numbers changed when the draft list was published. The ASDD list is based on new part numbers, which most voters don’t know. Documents relating to the minutes of BLO-BLA meetings require the old part number; searching for your name on the ASDD list requires the new part number. How are voters expected to navigate this?

The functioning of BLOs has been equally vexing. Okhla resident Adil Khan asked his BLO why the four members of his family, who live together, had been assigned different booths. The BLO replied that Adil’s



Photo: Getty Images

wife and children had received their voter cards later. If mapping was intended to establish voter identity through ‘family grouping’ and prior electoral records, why is verification of one family being split across multiple BLOs?

Delhi’s SIR was officially announced by the Election Commission on 14 May 2026. Voter mapping, however, had already begun. Jan Ahmed Chauhan, Congress BLA-2 in Okhla, says BLOs visited between January and April, asking for details and documents linked to the 2002 electoral roll. “If a voter was not present or couldn’t meet the BLO and show documents, their name was deleted,” he says.

Booth-level figures illustrate the scale. Pre-SIR, in Okhla’s old part number 172, there were 1,874 voters. Only 936 forms were returned; 827 voters were marked permanently shifted, 69 absent, 13 dead and 28 duplicate. One was placed in the ‘other’ category either because the house had been demolished or the voter refused to sign.

At part number 195 in Haddo Mohalla, Madanpur Khadar, there were 1,509 voters pre-SIR. Only 352 forms came back. While none were ‘absent’ or ‘duplicate’, 1,136 were marked ‘shifted’ and 30 marked ‘other’ because their names appeared on electoral

Is a month enough for BLOs to process and verify 47.5 lakh Form 6 applications that may be filed in Delhi?

In Bengal, Jalil Akhtar’s days in hell

Biplab Nayak

Rasakhowa is one of the oldest and largest weekly markets in north Bengal’s Uttar Dinajpur district. Sunday is *haat* day. Buyers and sellers come here from far and wide.

At the heart of this weekly market was *gorur haat* (cattle market), spread across an enormous tract of land. Farmers, householders, cattle-rearers, milkmen and butchers came here to buy and sell animals. Everyone had a different way of judging a cow or bullock: one man would inspect its teeth, another would slap and feel its flanks.

The tumult of the Sunday cattle market was a big feature of the agrarian economy of Karandighi’s villages. Around it flourished other sections of the market: for fruits and vegetables, for jute, paddy and rice, and for pulses, especially the roasted *mashkalai dal* (also known as urad). The buying and selling didn’t stop altogether on the other days of the week.

People from distant villages gathered here regularly, and for that reason, schools, madrasas,

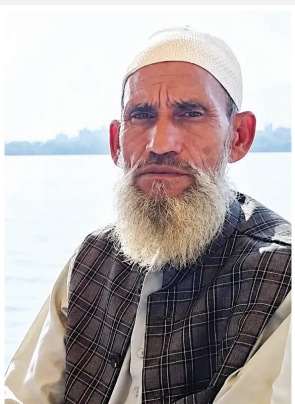
student hostels and government offices had also sprung up around the haat. Rasakhowa, built over centuries from the accumulated sediment of village life, was a mirror to the lives of these people.

29 July 2026. The government bus that left Raiganj bus depot at seven in the morning dropped us at Rasakhowa before nine. There were four of us. It was Wednesday, not haat day, but even so, its torpor seemed somehow unnatural.



Police picked up Jalil Akhtar in the dead of night on 29 June and took him to a holding centre. They say he is ‘Bangladeshi’, but his name is on the voter list

Photos: Sohram Mukhopadhyay and Susobhan Ghosh



The first thing that struck us was a vast emptiness. This was where the gorur haat used to sit.

No longer. A ban was enforced on the buying and selling of cattle just before Bakrid this year. Police and Hindutva musclemen came to Rasakhowa and smashed all the structures of the cattle haat. It has now been shut for more than two months.

We spoke to a few shopkeepers and ‘toto’ drivers. (*These are the*

battery-powered three-wheelers ubiquitous in Bengal.) Pointing out the boundaries with their fingers, they showed us how, in just these two months, portions of the cattle haat ground had already been encroached upon. New rooms had been built, but these folks had no clue what kind of new shops might come up there. As they spoke, one could sense the fear that had congealed inside them.

We went to a tea stall inside the haat and struck up a conversation with a middle-aged Muslim shopkeeper, who had opened his shop that morning and come over for tea. We were unfamiliar faces, so he asked where we’d come from.

The conversation turned to the closure of the cattle haat. He said it was not just Rasakhowa: all three major cattle haats in Karandighi block had been shut down.

He fell silent for a moment and then said: “How long can people who raise cattle to sell them keep feeding them at home? So they sell them, if they manage, at half-price or even a third, to the very people who put saffron tilaks on their foreheads and say they are gau-

rakshaks, who then sell them to *dalals* (middlemen) of meat-export companies. It is only when we Muslims buy and sell cattle that it becomes a crime. This Bakrid we Muslims decided we wouldn’t buy cattle, and we didn’t. But if this goes on, where will the cattle for the plough come from? Where will the milch cattle come from?”

I asked whether he thought this centuries-old cattle haat had now been closed for good. He fixed me with a fierce look. “Isn’t that what it looks like? Look at this SIR. Our names have been struck off. Can you tell me how they will ever get back on the rolls?”

Looking me straight in the eye, he went on: “In our Karandighi block, one and a half lakh people have had their names deleted from the voter list. Almost all are Muslims, most of them women. People rummaged through their belongings to find whatever papers they could find, belonging to their fathers/grandfathers/ancestors, stuffed the documents into bags and went to the election babus.

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In Bengal, Jalil Akhtar’s days in hell

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But nothing came in fear; they couldn’t vote. Now they live in it, wondering when they will hit another wall at a bank, a ration shop, a thana, a government office... They say tribunals will put all the names back. Three months have passed and only 151 people have had hearings at the district magistrate’s office. And now even the tribunal has stopped functioning. Nobody knows what will happen or when. Do you?” I lowered my head.

“And what good is having your name on the voter list anyway? Look at Jalil Akhtar of Bagroi village. The police picked him up and took him to a holding centre. His name was on the voter list. He even voted. And now they are calling him a ‘Bangladeshi’.”

*

It was after reading about Jalil Akhtar in a newspaper that we’d come to Rasakhowa. We took a toto to Bagroi village, where we were headed, some twenty-five kilometres away. The villages we crossed on the way were predominantly Muslim; there were brick-and-mortar structures too but mainly the dwellings were thatched huts. Jalil Akhtar’s was a kutcha home, which stood next to his maternal cousin Motiur Rahman’s pucca house.

Motiur said the police came quietly, woke Jalil and told him to come with them. When Jalil tried to call out to someone, a policeman pressed a gun to his head and told him that if he made a sound, they would shoot him.

That was how they took Jalil away. When his wife, she first assumed he had gone for Fajr namaz (*the first of the ritual five a day*). But when the morning wore on and he still did not return, Motiur and other neighbours began searching everywhere.

There was no trace of him. Finally, someone in the village said the police had entered the village at night. Could they have taken him?

There was a police camp within walking

distance. Everyone went there together. “*Baro-babu*, (the senior officer at the camp), is not a good man,” Motiur told us. “If somebody makes a complaint, he summons the complainant and the accused separately, and frightens and extracts money from them both.”

The police had information, Baro-babu said, that Jalil was a Bangladeshi. So, he was handed over to the BSF. The villagers were dumbfounded. They demanded to know who had said Jalil was Bangladeshi when his family had lived there for generations. Nobody in the family had even seen the Bangladesh border. Jalil’s name had remained on the voter list after the SIR. Jalil had voted in the election.

Baro-babu roared: “We have all the information. The days when you could raise your voice like this are over. The government has changed now.”

Still Motiur Rahman and the others did not curl up in fear. They resolved to try every possible way to bring Jalil back.

Motiur collected every document he could find: Jalil’s voter card, his Aadhaar card, ration card and panchayat papers. He even obtained proof that Jalil’s grandfather and grandmother had appeared on the electoral rolls in elections held in the 1950s.

The inspector-in-charge of Dalkhola thana in Uttar Dinajpur had been on leave since the day of the incident. On 9 July, the day after he returned to work, Motiur and several members of Jalil’s family went to Dalkhola thana with all the documents and met him.

Before this, with the help of Dulal Rajbanshi—an organiser in Islampur of the Vajrang Rights Protection Coordination Committee, formed to demand restoration of names deleted during the SIR—he had also met the SP at Islampur and shown him all the evidence. That’s when they learnt Jalil had been taken to the holding centre at Fulbari.

After examining the papers, the SP at Islampur assured them that if it was a mistake, it would be corrected. He told them to approach the Dalkhola IC (Inspector-in-Charge) because, apparently, the matter fell under him.

The Dalkhola IC too said Jalil might be released in a day or two. But as his anxious relatives kept pleading with him, he blurted: “You keep saying, release him, release him... do you know the pressure I am under? I have been handed a list of five hundred people to pick up. Just yesterday another fifty names arrived...”

Who was sending him these names?



Photos: Soham Mukhopadhyay and Susobhan Ghosh

Where and how were these lists being drawn up? Who was putting him under pressure?

Motiur and the others returned to the village suspended between hope and fear.

Jalil Akhtar has two daughters and two sons, all married. The family is poor, so both sons work outside the state as migrant labourers—one in Delhi, the other in Hyderabad.

When they heard their father had been taken away, both were beside themselves with anxiety. They called every day, often in tears. But they could neither get leave from work nor scrape together enough money to come home.

More than ten days had passed since the documents were submitted at Dalkhola

thana. Repeated entreaties drew the same answer: the police were so burdened with other important work that they hadn’t been able to verify the documents. But the family was told that Jalil had been shifted from the Fulbari holding centre to the one at Chakulia.

Tired of these stories, the villagers decided to mount a protest. On 20 July, over 300 villagers assembled at Rasakhowa haat to demand the release of Jalil Akhtar.

The police surrounded them. They couldn’t take out the procession, but their spontaneous protest broke through the pall of terror that had enveloped the villagers.

The next morning, Jalil Akhtar’s family went to the Chakulia holding centre. They were told Jalil was no longer there. Nobody would say where he had been sent.

With the help of the Voting Rights Protection Coordination Committee, they held a press conference at the Uttar Dinajpur Press Club in Raiganj. Jalil’s wife, Tofa Bibi, and daughter, Kulsum Khatun, were outspoken. The following morning the police informed them that Jalil Akhtar was being produced in Islampur court.

Motiur Rahman rushed there. He found the police had submitted a wholly fabricated report—not a word about Jalil’s detention, the police claimed he’d been arrested only the previous day. And Jalil had been declared a resident of Haripur in Thakurgaon district of Bangladesh. No evidence was produced for this outrageous claim; the court was simply told that ‘verification’ was under way and all the evidence would be produced once the process was complete.

On that basis they sought police custody. The court granted it.

“The police have still not submitted their report... Are they going to kill the man?”

STATES 360°



UTTAR PRADESH

Fast and furious: the yo-yoing political career of Akash Anand

Mini Bandopadhyay

On 10 September, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) chief Mayawati cut her nephew Akash Anand ‘completely loose’. She announced the decision on X, arguing in a long and petulant post that Akash’s failure to repost a recent tweet of hers was conclusive proof of his disloyalty. The news was greeted with bemusement as people wondered if Mayawati was serious. She was.

The post in question had called for Anand’s father-in-law Ashok Siddharth to resign from the party, which he did, declaring on X that her word was his command. He also denied the allegation that his son-in-law had acted under his influence.

Mayawati is known to be imperious and rude, but how will the public humiliation of her nephew and his father-in-law help the BSP in the 2027 election? Her

erratic behaviour and growing insecurity is making her own constituency, the Dalits, lose confidence in her.

The humiliation of Akash Anand began earlier this month when he was removed as the party’s national coordinator. The young man was just not mature enough, declared Mayawati on social media. Akash’s bio on X mutated from ‘chief national coordinator’ to ‘party worker’ to ‘party supporter BSP’. Since 15 August 2026, he does not appear to have posted anything at all on X.

Ishan Anand, Akash’s younger brother, was appointed as a ‘sector-in-charge’ of the party. (The BSP has three sectors: the one covering Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand is looked after directly by Mayawati.) Both Akash and Ishan schooled in Noida before going to the UK for further studies. Akash, by all accounts, is a sharp public speaker.

His rallies drew crowds and his social media presence was growing.

One explanation for his sudden fall from grace is that his belligerent speeches did not go down well with his aunt. He has attacked leaders by name, accused some of seeking an end to reservation, and was increasingly critical of the RSS. The last straw is said to have been a savage attack on both the BJP and the Union government. The second explanation doing the rounds is that BJP leadership did not want a younger, more popular Dalit leader to emerge in Uttar Pradesh from the BSP, and leaned on Mayawati.

“He was projected as the party’s future face and, at one stage, was formally declared Mayawati’s successor. His appeal among younger supporters and his attempts to assert himself within the organisation gave him a profile that went beyond that of a

conventional office-bearer,” points out Kamal Jayant, a long-time observer of Dalit politics.

Akash, he recalls, had criticised inactive party office-bearers and sought greater accountability from those holding organisational posts. He risked upsetting established leaders who had worked with Mayawati for years.

On 10 December 2023, Akash was announced as Mayawati’s political heir and appointed national coordinator. Within months, he was stripped of all responsibilities and kept away from the Lok Sabha election campaign in April 2024. On 23 June 2024, he was reinstated as national coordinator. In March 2025, he was expelled from the party, accused of arrogance and over-ambition under the influence of his father-in-law. On 13 April, he was forgiven. On 18 May, he was re-appointed national coordinator and on 29 August, given the newly minted post of chief national coordinator. What was that roller-coaster ride all about?

Mayawati herself has declared that community is more important to her than immediate family (recalling Kanshi Ram’s decision to devote his life to the Bahujan samaj movement). While asserting that she did not believe in dynastic politics, her brother is party vice-president, and her other nephew has taken Akash’s place. Ashok Siddharth too was sent to the Rajya Sabha.

What’s the next for Akash Anand? Will he split the BSP and chart his own course? Will he join another party or simply quit politics and go back to managing the family business? All eyes will be on him as Uttar Pradesh heads to one of the most consequential assembly elections in 2027.



Code blue Akhilesh Yadav with Samajwadi Chhatra Sabha workers in their new uniform

The all-important colour blue

The Samajwadi Chhatra Sabha has a new dress code: blue T-shirt and blue jeans. Of the previous uniform, only the red cap remains. Blue, explained Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, stood for Babasaheb Ambedkar and the ‘bahujan samaj’ (the people, not the party).

Addressing a press conference with a group of Chhatra Sabha members around him, the SP chief laboured to explain the switch to critics who felt he was trying to appropriate a colour long synonymous with Dalits, Mayawati and the BSP.

BJP ally Om Prakash Rajbhar said changing a dress code would not fetch Dalit votes. Commentators agreed. Dalits in Uttar Pradesh who abandoned the BSP over the past few decades have tended to move towards the BJP. This has partly to

do with the aggressive Hindutva promoted by the BJP—Dalits see a chance to identify with other caste Hindus and feel upwardly mobile—and partly to do with the lure of lucre (which the BJP has plenty to throw around).

Analysts say the BSP is not likely to lose out on the committed 12-13 per cent votes Mayawati secures. Sceptics say if Dalits decide to join the SP, they would have to be offered a far stronger incentive than a ‘blue uniform’.

Akhilesh Yadav, however, gets full marks for hard-selling the colour to party supporters—including blue artificial turf for hockey fields! Blue jeans, he added, have historically been associated with the working class in western countries. Claiming that blue was the colour of rebellion against injustice may not have convinced everyone, including the Chhatra Sabha. They agreed, though, that they looked smarter. And who are we to disagree? ■



Downsized again It’s been quite a roller-coaster rise for Akash Anand since December 2023 when Mayawati anointed him as her political heir

Who decides how Bengal celebrates Durga Puja?

Dwaipayan Banerjee

In early September, Dharendra Krishna Shastri, a.k.a. Bageshwar Baba, the 30-year-old priest who presides over the Bageshwar Dham in Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh and is closely linked to the BJP, visited West Bengal. The visit was a widely publicised affair. The chief minister and the chief secretary went to meet him, paid their obeisances, shared a meal and invited him to set up a temple in the state. Shastri created an uproar in the state when he said, during a Hanumant Katha programme in Howrah, that Hindus who eat fish and meat during Durga Puja are ‘*pakhandis*’ (hypocrites). “I am offended that during Navratri and Durga Puja, they make ‘*ganda khana*’ (dirty food) behind the pandals,” he said.

The remark, predictably, provoked a storm. Social media filled with memes and gags, and opposition parties were strident in their condemnation. In Bengal, the consumption of fish and meat during the Puja is an old, living tradition. In many traditional homes, ancient temples and local community pujas, mutton and fish are offered to the goddess, within Shakta rituals, as *prasad*.

Most Bengali Brahmins from *Smarta* families, like their Maithil counterparts in neighbouring Bihar, have long been fish and meat eaters. (In north India, even Smarta families are mainly vegetarian.) The Ashtavimsatitattva (the 28 ritual digests) written by Raghunandan, a 16th century contemporary of Chaitanya, is a uniquely Bengali reading of the Smriti-shastras, whose text is still followed by traditional families. Raghunandan’s magnum opus makes space for ‘*deshachara*’ (regional custom/local tradition), which sanctions consumption and ritual offering of fish/meat in religious festivals including the Durgotsava, to which he dedicates one of his 28 digests, called the Durgotsava-tattva. Of course, in Vaishnava households it was customary not to offer fish, and in some Vaishnava Banik (merchant/trader) households, Durga came not as a demon-slayer but with her husband Shiva by her side and their children in tow. No one thought they had to change for the others; they coexisted rather peacefully.

Shastri was not alone in making these demands. A few days earlier, Nirgunananda Brahmachari of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad said something similar. He complained that people enter pandals carrying non-veg food and asked organisers to ban such items in the pandal area. The VHP also called on committees to adhere to shastric norms for



People throng the Puja pandals in their thousands, and for artists and artisans the festival is an opportunity like no other to showcase their work

Photo: Getty Images

idols rather than modern artistic interpretations, warning that pandals should not improvise in violation of the injunctions of the shastras. It insisted that organising committees should consist of Sanatani Hindus only, again targeting the popular local belief that religion is personal and festivals belong to everyone.

Book stalls and food stalls around the puja pandals are managed by committees of all faiths, especially in neighbourhoods with mixed populations.

Durga Puja is easily the biggest event on the socio-cultural calendar of West Bengal. People throng the pandals in their thousands, and for artists and artisans, this ‘*sarbojanin*’ (for all) festival is a showcase like no other. The idols, the pandals, the lighting are all their canvases, so to speak. In recent years, they have found more patrons and encouragement. Artists and art students labour over their puja projects for months. Often their work has political overtones. The themes are varied: it could be the CAA-NRC protests, the genocide in Palestine, the farmers’ movement... but with few exceptions, their political undertone is progressive and liberal. The

VHP call to refrain from taking artistic liberties is, then, likely a forewarning to ensure these art installations do not embarrass the current government.

When the backlash grew, the VHP backtracked, clarifying that it was not imposing a ban on non-vegetarian food but merely asking that food stalls be kept outside the pandals. The food stalls are *never* inside the pandals, in any case. The BJP tried to distance itself in both instances, but that didn’t fool anyone.

Are these teething problems for the Sangh Parivar or are we witnessing a more fundamental shift? Does Hindutva have the capacity to hegemonise societies that stand so far apart in their beliefs and everyday life than what the Parivar has known in its traditional strongholds? I pondered these questions when I was trying to map the rise of the Sangh Parivar in Bengal a few years ago.

*

The VHP office in Kolkata, not far from the five-point crossing in Shyambazar, has a quiet, old-fashioned charm. When I went there in 2019 to meet Sachindra Nath

What is happening in Bengal today is an attempt to force an alien culture

Sound Logic

Vidyanand Bapat’s crusade ahead of the Ganeshotsav against high-decibel celebrations has the Pune orthodoxy in a snit. Jaideep Hardikar reports

Ganeshotsav is upon us and the latest faceoff between Pune’s progressives and its orthodoxy is over the use of DJs and high-decibel sound systems during the festival, which gets under way on 14 September.

It all began with the humiliating expulsion of 37-year-old Vidyanand Bapat from a public meeting called by the municipal authorities on 25 August. Bapat is a resident of Narayan Peth in the heart of the city, and describes himself as an atheist and rationalist.

At the meeting, Bapat objected to DJs, high-decibel sound systems and *dhol-tasha* processions during Ganeshotsav, and demanded a ban on their use to restore sanity in public spaces. He made a point about the noise pollution and the traffic disruption and cited data to bolster his argument. The Ganesh mandals were not amused and their men got aggressive. The police had to escort Bapat out safely.

A video of the confrontation went viral and Bapat’s crusade quickly turned into a citywide debate. It was in the Marathi newspapers, on TV, on social media and people’s lips. Citizens who had long complained, albeit privately, about sleepless nights, blocked roads and the deafening festival music had found a spokesperson. Large numbers came out in support of Bapat, who works in a BPO and hails from the socially influential community of Kokanasth (or Chitpavan) Brahmins.

On 30 August, they gathered at Goodluck Chowk. On Sunday, 6 September, hundreds took out a silent protest rally, saying the festivities now strike fear in their hearts and minds. They weren’t against Ganeshotsav celebrations, they insisted, but they opposed the use of DJs and the excessive noise. Bapat’s stand is uncompromising. He says big sound systems and *dhol-tasha* should not be allowed at all, because decibel levels cannot be controlled if these giant boom boxes are allowed. “Everything cannot be allowed in the name of tradition,” he says, “...you can

then argue that sati and child marriage are also tradition and must continue.”

The city’s orthodoxy didn’t like this. On 3 September, Bapat was slapped in public by one Santosh Chavan, former president of a local Ganesh mandal. The FIR records that Chavan called him an atheist and ‘anti-Ganapati’. The incident has further incensed the Pune citizenry.

Audiologist Kalyani Mandke has been flagging this issue as a public health concern for years. In 2024, she moved the National Green Tribunal (NGT) for effective noise-control measures during Ganeshotsav. The numbers are startling. A study by the College of Engineering, Pune (COEP) found that average sound levels on the final day of the 2023 festival at Laxmi Road touched 105.2 decibels, far exceeding the permissible residential limit of 55 db during the day and 45 db at night.

In August 2024, before Ganeshotsav, the NGT ordered real-time monitoring at pandals and immersion processions, regulation of loudspeaker capacity, limits on *dhol-tasha-zanj* participants, seizure of sound systems for violations and a ban on DJs in immersion processions. The Bombay High Court also directed civic authorities to act against noise-level violations and illegal temporary structures on streets, warning that official inaction could be seen as an infringement on the fundamental rights of citizens under Article 21. But both the NGT order and the Bombay High Court observation fell on deaf ears.

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Pune has a history of bitter, often violent, confrontation between its progressives and so-called *sanatanis*.

In the 13th century, Dnyaneshwar brought the Bhagavad Gita into Marathi through the *Dnyaneshwari*. It is a religious text, not a rationalist manifesto, but it was a radical cultural act to take a Sanskrit work to the masses. Dnyaneshwar and his siblings faced the wrath of Pune’s elite Brahmin class.

The Varkari saints, including Tukaram,



were not modern secularists either. Their radicalism sat inside faith. Tukaram’s devotional *abhangas* challenged ritual pretension, caste pride and the monopoly of religious authority.

Later, Jyotirao Phule attacked caste hierarchy and Brahminical domination. Agarkar and Gokhale made reason and reform central. The Ganeshotsav in Pune—across Maharashtra, in fact—carries this tension.

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The modern public festival, popularised by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in the 1890s, emerged as a form of anti-colonial mobilisation, a radical act of assembly defying the writ of the Raj. So, while Ganesha worship is an ancient tradition, taking Ganapati to the street is not.

The public festival, too, has evolved over more than a century—and today, it carries a distinct political overtone, with leaders across the political spectrum funding extravagant, high-decibel showdowns, as it were, to mobilise vote banks. Bapat’s crusade is once again trying to flip this modern ‘tradition’. Where Tilak made Ganeshotsav a means of public mobilisation, Bapat is asking whether the festival



Loud, louder, loudest The decibel levels during Ganeshotsav exceed all permissible levels; (left) Pune’s Vidyanand Bapat was attacked for his vocal opposition

should have an unquestionable claim on the street, even when it becomes a public nuisance and affects other citizens’ rights on commons.

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The street is common. It is public property where several rights intersect and impinge on one another. One person/ community’s right to celebrate must accommodate another’s right to move and access without obstruction. Your celebration should respect my desire for peace. Conflicts arise when one right subordinates all others.

Bapat makes the point in chaste, free-flowing Marathi one moment and switches to English with ease while invoking social theory jargon. His delivery creates an aura; it brings to mind Maharashtra’s tradition for rational debate. The medium is new—where pamphlets and public debates were the battlegrounds earlier, today it is social media.

Bapat, however, underlines that he has no quarrel with anyone’s belief, that he is only making a civic argument. His call for a complete ban on loudspeakers and *dhol-tasha* in public places is perhaps maximalist. Even some Ganesh mandals have suggested that moderation may be the answer—fewer drums and speakers and adherence to mandated decibel limits. But for some legislators of the ruling BJP, giving in to his demands is to lose this currency of political assertion. ■

Bapat says he has no quarrel with anyone’s belief, that he is only making a civic argument

India braces for a diplomatic minefield at BRICS



Photo: Getty Images

Despite his government's open backing of Israel, Prime Minister Modi had reason to sign the Bishkek Declaration condemning US–Israel's military strikes on Iran

Ashis Ray

All eyes are on India right now,' wrote *The Diplomat*. The reference was to the BRICS summit in New Delhi (12-13 September). It went on to observe: 'Leading the group today is a diplomatic minefield'. Such a state of affairs is unfortunately as much a result of Narendra Modi's misguided foreign policy as developments beyond his control.

BRICS began in 2009 as BRIC—Brazil, Russia, India and China. South Africa joined the consortium in 2010 and attended its first meeting in 2011. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were admitted as full members in 2024—despite India's objections—and Indonesia in 2025. The same year, Belarus, Bolivia, Kazakhstan, Cuba, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand,

Uganda, Uzbekistan and Vietnam were designated partner countries. Together, BRICS accounts for 40 per cent of global GDP and 49.5 per cent of the world's population.

As long as India under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh maintained its post-Cold War position of multi-alignment, India commanded respect. This changed when Modi leapt into the lap of the US and turned India's foreign policy on its head by getting into bed with Israel—a pariah for other BRICS members.

On most international issues of note, 'Modi-fied' India was out of step with other BRICS states, most conspicuously on Israel's war crimes in Palestine and its unprovoked attacks on Iran. Far from condemning Israel in any forum, India has stayed in Israel's corner—even supplying it weapons—which makes it a conspicuous outlier in BRICS.

The BRICS foreign ministers' meeting in May, with India in the chair, dispersed without a joint statement and was deemed a failure. New Delhi has been worried about the BRICS summit going the same way, and Modi's presence at the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) summit in Kyrgyzstan at the beginning of September should be seen in this light. The SCO is really China's baby, and by taking himself there, Modi may have clinched President Xi Jinping's presence at the BRICS summit, though China kept India guessing till the eleventh hour. Xi hasn't visited India since 2019 and, in fact, skipped the G20 summit in Delhi in 2023.

As the host, India's objective was to ensure the presence of all member countries. But doubts linger if Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman will attend. In early August, Saudi Arabia signed the

Makkah Pact, a NATO-type military agreement with Pakistan and Turkey, with potential threats from Iran, Israel and India in mind.

The Bishkek Declaration at the end of the SCO summit saw member nations reiterating 'the SCO's previously stated position condemning military strikes on the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran'. Modi was among the 10 who signed the document. Neither Modi nor the Indian ministry of external affairs (MEA) had hitherto uttered a word to censure the patently unacceptable conduct of the US and Israel towards Iran since February.

Modi was also party to the SCO statement opposing 'unilateral coercive measures that are contrary to the UN Charter and other norms of international law, [and] the rules and principles of the World Trade Organization'—namely, America's anti-Iran 'Operation Economic Outcast'.

Modi met Iran President Masoud Pezeshkian on the sidelines of the summit. This was seen as another attempt to assuage Modi's feelings. Not only has the Iranian government sided with Israel in this war, it also buckled under US pressure and pulled out of its obligations vis-à-vis Iran's Chabahar port, in which India had made substantial investments.

Iran's official readout quoted Modi as telling Pezeshkian that 'during the difficult period we have recently experienced, we sought to maintain and preserve our cooperation and communications with Iran'. The 'difficult period' was of his own making, having submitted meekly to the diktats of 'my friend Dohland' and making no secret of his love for Netanyahu and his criminal regime.

Iran reported that Modi told his interlocutor, "I agree with you that there are those who see their interests in war..." Could this be interpreted as (guarded) criticism of the US and Israel? Pezeshkian, in turn, "expressed appreciation for New Delhi's support and cooperation". For India to indicate any form of 'support and cooperation' towards Iran is a departure from its posture since the beginning of the conflict.

The only reliable way to

conclude that Modi is pivoting away from the sphere of US-Israeli influence will be to see India's actions after the BRICS summit, when we might find out if Modi was merely trying to placate China and Iran at the SCO to try and ensure that the BRICS summit does not bomb. 'As New Delhi enters BRICS time,' wrote China's *Global Times*, 'the world will watch keenly what will come out of the meeting'.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told the media: "We have no doubt that the summit will be successful," which is an indication that Russia will once again assist India—as it did at the UN G20 in 2023—to work out a unanimous joint statement, possibly in lieu of a soft mention of Russia's war with Ukraine.

South Africa has confirmed Cyril Ramaphosa has confirmed his attendance, despite his country's open and vocal denunciation of Israel's war crimes and its genocidal war in Gaza. South Africa's high commissioner in Delhi Anil Sooklal has affirmed "India is going to have a fruitful summit on a number of fronts."

As for Brazil, it has stood with South Africa vis-à-vis Netanyahu's war crimes and lent its weight to South Africa's genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Both nations have reservations about Modi's majoritarianism and contempt for democracy and yet may help forge a consensus on West Asia.

The assessment in Indian foreign service circles is that the summit is a challenge, given the ongoing hostilities between Russia and Ukraine and the war in West Asia. Modi is gambling that the BRICS summit will not displease Trump, who would be delighted if the group loses its way. With Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the mix, the BRICS statement cannot be as pro-Iran as the one issued at the SCO, and yet the BRICS resolution will have to nod at the situation in West Asia.

The MEA catchline for the summit—"Building Resilience and Innovation for Cooperation and Sustainability"—is a known tic of the Modi government to find acronyms, but in the prevailing circumstances, it looks like an attempt to deflect attention from more intractable issues that could scupper the summit. ■

On most global issues of note, 'Modi-fied' India has been out of step with other BRICS nations

A river that binds and divides two neighbours

Sourabh Sen in Kolkata & Faisal Mahmud in Dhaka

The Ganga Water Treaty between India and Bangladesh, signed in 1996, is up for renewal in December 2026. It was signed in an atmosphere of goodwill and neighbourliness by then Indian prime minister H.D. Deve Gowda and his counterpart in Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina. Now, when the treaty must be re-negotiated, there is mistrust on both sides.

There is a BJP government at the Centre and in the upper riparian states of Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal—the state where the Ganga forks—at the Farakka Barrage, with one stem entering Bangladesh (the Padma) and another bending south towards Kolkata (the Bhagirathi-Hooghly). The political colour of the upper riparian states matters because the rhetoric and political moves of the ruling BJP have lately been hostile to Bangladesh and Muslims on both sides of the border. Understandably, then, the goodwill of the past has evaporated, which puts the treaty in jeopardy.

Sanjay Jha, Janata Dal (U) MP from Bihar, has urged the Union government to not renew the treaty in its current form, asserting that the treaty has impacted the state negatively. His press note states: 'Bihar is not seeking a favour. We are only asking for what our own scientific assessment establishes, so that 13 crore people are not left short of water for drinking, irrigation and industrial supply for another 30 years.'

Political parties in West Bengal agree on the need to renew the treaty but are divided on how to go about it. Silting, riverbank erosion and the navigability of Kolkata port are key concerns. While in power, Mamata Banerjee had strongly opposed the Centre's bilateral discussions that kept the state out of the loop.

The current BJP dispensation in the state has little choice but to support the Centre's stance on renewing the treaty while emphasising that national security and federal water management are central mandates. The opposition CPI(M) and Congress advocate a tripartite consensus model, featuring extensive parliamentary debate, multi-state consultations (including Bihar) and technical review by environmental scientists.

It is worth recalling that Deve Gowda's United Front government, which signed the 1996 treaty, was supported from outside by the Congress and the CPI(M), a detail that underlines the treaty's consensual character. The CPI(M) was also in power in West Bengal. While then chief minister Jyoti Basu and Pranab Mukherjee of the Congress, both with strong cross-border ties, provided political heft, West Bengal finance minister Asim Dasgupta was the lead Indian negotiator with Bangladesh. Despite the divergence in their politics, Gowda, Basu and Mukherjee were on the same page when it came to water sharing.

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From a technical perspective, the treaty has delivered what it was designed for—adequate water for both countries. For context, experts rate it way above the Indus Waters Treaty, which was controversial even before the terror attack in Pahalgam and Operation Sindoor thereafter worsened relations between India and Pakistan.

The reason for considering it the most successful mechanism in the history of transboundary water treaties is simple. Speaking to *National Herald*, river expert and ecological economist Nilanjan Ghosh said: "This treaty was maintained by both sides to a tee. It is a model of how a bilateral treaty (the Rhine or Danube treaties involve multiple players) should be drafted and adhered to."

The water allocation formula

applies to the five-month lean period from 1 January to 31 May, when the flow is measured and divided at 10-day intervals based on real-time data at Farakka Barrage. If the flow is above 75,000 cusecs, India receives a fixed 40,000 cusecs and the remaining flow goes to Bangladesh. For flow between 70,000 and 75,000 cusecs, Bangladesh receives 35,000 cusecs and India gets the balance. Below 70,000 cusecs, available water is split evenly.

If total water availability drops below 50,000 cusecs during a 10-day period, both governments initiate bilateral emergency consultations to adjust releases fairly. During the leanest period (11 March to 10 May), each country is guaranteed a minimum flow of 35,000 cusecs in alternating 10-day cycles to ensure equitable access during peak demand. The treaty has also mandated a joint committee with

representatives from both sides to monitor daily water levels at Farakka (India) and Hardinge Bridge (Bangladesh).

Ghosh pointed out that Bangladesh was receiving at least 20-25 per cent more water in the dry season at its first measuring station at Hardinge Bridge than what was released from Farakka. Both countries are aware of this excess flow in the lean season. Experts have advanced several arguments to explain this. These include recharged aquifers, upstream regulation mechanisms as well as excess flow through the Mahananda channel located upstream of Hardinge Bridge and downstream of Farakka.

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As a lower riparian state, Bangladesh is keen to renew the treaty with modifications it believes will protect its interests. Bangladesh president Mirza Fakhrul Islam made a pointed request when India's new high commissioner Dinesh Trivedi called on him on 8 September: settle the water disputes between the two countries, and give Bangladesh its fair share, specifically from the Ganga and Teesta rivers. Trivedi said India was taking "positive measures".

The Ganga treaty is the only

Photo: Getty Images



In better times India and Bangladesh managed to sign a Ganga Water Treaty that experts cite as a model of how a bilateral treaty should be drafted and administered

comprehensive water-sharing agreement between Bangladesh and India even though the two countries share 54 transboundary rivers. There is no provision for automatic renewal, and barely three months before it lapses, the two governments have still not announced formal negotiations on what will replace it.

In a report tabled on 30 July 2026, the parliamentary standing committee on external affairs, chaired by Congress MP Shashi Tharoor, said failure to reach a new arrangement before the treaty expires 'could erode mutual confidence and further complicate bilateral ties'.

The consequences of letting the treaty simply lapse are significant. India will not be free to take as it pleases. Under international law, Bangladesh will continue to have rights as a downstream state, including the equitable and reasonable use of shared watercourses and the obligation to avoid significant transboundary harm. But those principles are less precise than a treaty that specifies volumes, monitors arrangements and outlines procedures for resolving disagreements.

Also at stake is the agreed arithmetic of water sharing under the treaty. There will no longer be a binding bilateral formula telling the

countries how to divide the water available at Farakka during each 10-day period of the dry season. Bangladesh will lose the treaty framework through which flows are jointly monitored and disputes over implementation addressed.

If the sides reconvene, the existing arrangement could either be renewed or the countries may negotiate a revised treaty incorporating stronger guarantees and modern river management provisions. Bangladesh won't mind if December 2026 does not bring some kind of new agreement. Water resource expert Ainun Nishat told *National Herald* that Dhaka is no longer asking merely "to preserve what it got in 1996." Its publicly stated negotiating position now includes "a higher water share, a guaranteed mechanism and an agreement better equipped to deal with the changing hydrology of the river [...] the difficulty is that India's negotiating position is moving in the other direction. New Delhi must first account for demands from Bihar and other domestic interests".

Bangladesh has been spelling out what it wants from the next treaty. India has said where the discussion should take place—the Joint Rivers Commission—but is yet to publicly spell out what it is prepared to offer. ■

TATHYAKOSH: KARNATAKA'S NEW DIGITAL PUBLIC GOOD FOR DATA DISCOVERY

Tathyakosh puts 1.5 million datasets- and seven decades of India- a search away



Photo: GettyImages

Though conceived with national ambition, Tathyakosh carries a distinctly Bengaluru signature. The platform already features more than 50,000 Karnataka-specific datasets, drawing from foundational state resources such as the Karnataka Open Government Data Portal, Mahiti Kanaja, KRSRAC/K-GIS, the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), and the Raman Research Institute.

A nation rich in data, poor in discovery

India has never lacked data. Every day, its ministries, universities, municipal bodies, and research institutions generate volumes of information vast enough to power an entire knowledge economy. Yet for years, this abundance has hidden a quiet paradox: the data exists, but finding it does not come easy.

A researcher chasing rainfall patterns in the Deccan plateau, a startup founder building a credit-scoring model, or a policymaker studying urban migration would each face the same maze — a scattered landscape of disconnected portals, ministry archives, and academic repositories, with no single door leading in.

At Vikas Soudha in Bengaluru, Shri Priyank Kharge, Hon'ble Minister for Home, Information Technology, Biotechnology, and E-Governance, Government of Karnataka, formally launched Tathyakosh (tathyakosh.in) on August 12 — India's first unified data discovery and cataloguing platform.

The launch reflects a deliberate and forward-looking push by Minister Kharge and the Government of Karnataka to position the state at the forefront of India's data and AI infrastructure, translating vision into a concrete public asset.

Built as an open, non-commercial Digital Public Good, Tathyakosh has been developed by the Centre of Excellence in Artificial Intelligence under the ACSEL Technology Forum, an initiative of the Government of Karnataka in partnership with the IIT Alumni Centre Bengaluru (IITACB).

The meaning behind the name

The platform's name is drawn from Sanskrit, and it is not incidental. Tathya means truth, or "that which is as it is." Kosh means a repository or storehouse.

Together, the name captures the platform's ambition: to become a trustworthy, centralised storehouse of truth about India's data — not the data itself, but a faithful map of where it lives, how reliable it is, and how it can be used.

This distinction matters. Tathyakosh does not host the datasets it catalogues. Instead, it functions as a sophisticated metadata catalogue, indexing enormous volumes of information and directing users straight back to the original source.

In doing so, it preserves the ownership and integrity of the underlying data while removing the burden of discovery from the user.

A platform born of necessity

Speaking at the launch, Minister Priyank Kharge placed the platform within the larger context of India's technological ambitions, underscoring the proactive role the Government of Karnataka has chosen to play in building the country's data infrastructure well ahead of demand.

He noted that the country's progress in artificial intelligence would depend not merely on talent and computing infrastructure, but equally on the ability to locate and responsibly use the data that already exists within its institutions.

Tathyakosh, he said, addresses this gap by making data discoverable, structured, and usable — built deliberately as an open, non-commercial public good so that researchers, startups, developers, and policymakers alike could build upon a shared foundation of Indian data.

In doing so, the Minister framed the platform not merely as a technological launch, but as a governance commitment: a signal that Karnataka intends to lead by building the infrastructure other states and institutions can draw upon.

The launch drew a distinguished gathering of institutional leadership, reflecting the scale of ambition behind the initiative. Among those present were Dr. N. Manjula (IAS), Secretary, Department of Electronics, IT and BT; Dr. Avinash Menon Rajendran (IAS), Managing Director, Karnataka Innovation and Technology Society (KITS); Mr. Ashok Kamath, Secretary, IITACB and Director, Centre of Excellence in

AI; Prof. Ashok Misra, President, IITACB; and Suman Dash, COO, ACSEL Technology Forum.

Ashok Kamath, who has steered the project from its conception, spoke to the everyday frustration that Tathyakosh was designed to resolve. He observed that the true challenge in India was never the absence of data, but the difficulty of knowing where it resides, whether it can be trusted, and whether it is fit for use. The platform, he explained, was built precisely so that a researcher, developer, policymaker, or entrepreneur could discover what already exists before expending time and resources searching elsewhere.

Dr. N. Manjula echoed this sentiment from a governance perspective, pointing out that while data is abundant, it remains fragmented across platforms and institutions. Tathyakosh, she noted, allows users to locate information without searching each source individually — and, just as importantly, helps them assess the quality and suitability of that data for their specific needs.

Beyond a search engine: the architecture of trust

What separates Tathyakosh from an ordinary search interface is the rigour of its metadata standardisation and quality-scoring framework. Every dataset indexed on the platform is evaluated against multiple dimensions — Findability, Accessibility, Machine-Readability, Freshness, Completeness, Granularity, and Coverage. This scoring system allows a developer or data scientist to assess, at a glance, whether a dataset is suitable for model training or analytical work, long before a single file is downloaded.

Navigating the platform reflects this same philosophy of clarity. A user begins with a unified search bar, or filters directly by sector — agriculture, health, or geospatial data, for instance — instantly narrowing down a repository of well over a million datasets without needing to visit a single ministry website.

Each entry carries standardised metadata: domain, geography, time period, format, and access type, allowing users to filter for open-access records, machine-readable formats such as CSV, JSON, or APIs, or historical material stretching back to 1947.

Quality scores then offer an objective signal of a dataset's fitness for a given purpose, whether that purpose is precision agriculture modelling or macroeconomic policy research. Clicking through any entry takes the user

directly to its original institutional source, preserving attribution and data integrity at every step.

Anchored in Karnataka, built for the nation

Though conceived with national ambition, Tathyakosh carries a distinctly Bengaluru signature. The platform already features more than 50,000 Karnataka-specific datasets, drawing from foundational state resources such as the Karnataka Open Government Data Portal, Mahiti Kanaja, KRSRAC/K-GIS, the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), and the Raman Research Institute.

This local-to-global design means that a regional policy researcher, a Bengaluru-based startup scaling a data-driven product, and a public administrator optimising citizen services can all draw from the same unified interface — one that scales seamlessly from the hyperlocal to the national.

A repository spanning the nation's concerns

Tathyakosh organises its expansive holdings across sixteen core domains, each addressing a sector central to India's development trajectory.

In agriculture and climate resilience, data on crop yields, soil health, weather patterns, and land use — long scattered across ministry archives, state agricultural universities, and meteorological departments — now sits within reach of agri-tech innovators and climate researchers, who can assess freshness and geographic coverage instantly while building precision farming tools or climate vulnerability models.

In healthcare and biomedical research, epidemiological trends, immunisation records, and hospital capacity data — historically locked within siloed municipal, state, and central databases — become discoverable in machine-readable form, with completeness and granularity scores helping medical teams judge whether a dataset can support predictive modelling or epidemiological mapping.

In financial inclusion and the economy, fintech entrepreneurs and policy analysts can cross-reference banking penetration, credit distribution, and macroeconomic indicators against demographic data without the days once lost mapping which department holds which survey. In urban infrastructure and governance, city planners and researchers gain standardised visibility into transport networks, public asset registries, and municipal governance data that had previously remained scattered across local bodies and specialised institutes — supporting more evidence-based planning of India's rapidly urbanising landscape.

Beyond these four, the platform's remaining domains span the full breadth of national life: education, spanning literacy rates and institutional enrolment data; environment and climate, integrating meteorological and pollution metrics with forest cover and vulnerability indicators; energy, covering power generation and renewable adoption; labour and employment; science and technology, including research outputs and patent records; law and justice; tourism and culture; social welfare; transport and logistics; and geospatial and GIS resources drawn from agencies such as KRSRAC and national mapping institutions.



Photo: GettyImages

By unifying these domains under one standardised framework of automated quality scoring, Tathyakosh allows a researcher, entrepreneur, or civil servant to bypass what was once a search across hundreds of disconnected portals — replacing fragmentation with a single point of departure.

The platform in numbers

At launch, Tathyakosh's scale places it among the most ambitious data-infrastructure efforts undertaken by any Indian state. The platform has systematically catalogued over 1.5 million datasets, drawn from 458 sources spanning central ministries, state portals, and GIS agencies, including at least 346 Indian repositories and 37 international repositories holding data relevant to India.

Its sixteen domains cover the full spectrum of governance and public life, and its historical reach extends as far back as 1947 — offering, for the first time, a single continuous thread through more than seven decades of India's public record.

Part of a wider national push

Tathyakosh does not emerge in isolation. Other states have, in recent years, taken their own steps toward open data infrastructure — Telangana, for instance, has built an Agricultural Data Exchange in partnership with the World Economic Forum and the Indian Institute of Science.

Set against this backdrop, Karnataka's initiative stands out for its scale and its scope, moving beyond a single sector to unify sixteen domains of public data under one roof.

It reflects a pattern increasingly visible across Indian states: governments choosing to get ahead of the country's data and AI needs rather than respond to them after the fact — and, in Karnataka's case, doing so under Minister Priyank Kharge's direct stewardship of the state's IT and e-governance portfolio.

Beyond its role in AI research and innovation, Tathyakosh also carries a civic dimension. By standardising and making public data more visible, the platform is intended to strengthen governmental transparency and enable more structured, evidence-based public analytics — extending its value beyond startups and researchers to citizens seeking a clearer view of how public data is collected and used.

Infrastructure for the future

The institution behind Tathyakosh, the ACSEL Technology Forum, operates as a Centre of Excellence in Artificial Intelligence under the joint aegis of the Government of Karnataka and the IIT Alumni Centre Bengaluru.

Its mandate extends beyond any single platform: to bridge academic research, industrial enterprise, and government execution through open data infrastructure, accelerator programmes, and a sustained commitment to responsible AI innovation.

Tathyakosh is, in this sense, both a product and a proof of concept — a demonstration of what becomes possible when public data is treated not as a scattered by-product of governance, but as a strategic national asset.

A door that was missing

For the researcher who once spent weeks locating a single agricultural dataset, for the startup founder who abandoned a promising idea for want of reliable health data, and for the policymaker who had to write to five departments simply to compare economic indicators, Tathyakosh represents something more than a technical achievement.

It represents a door that India's data ecosystem was always missing — one that does not create new data, but finally makes visible the data that has existed all along.

That this door now exists is, in large part, a reflection of the proactive leadership shown by Minister Priyank Kharge and the Government of Karnataka, who chose to invest in foundational digital infrastructure ahead of the curve rather than in response to it.

In doing so, the state has set a benchmark for what forward-looking governance in the age of artificial intelligence can look like — not merely enabling technology, but actively building the public groundwork on which the nation's innovators can stand.

Tathyakosh is live now and accessible to the public at www.tathyakosh.in.

Open sesame for corporates?

Rashme Sehgal on how the Centre took control of taxes on minerals, undermining the rights of states

Was the Mines and Minerals (Amendment) Act 2026 rushed through in Parliament to benefit a handful of corporates? Consider the speed with which such an important piece of legislation moved: introduced in the Lok Sabha on 10 August, passed by both Houses on 13 August and notified in the Gazette of India on 17 August. You only have to read between the lines to see that a law presented as ushering in a uniform taxation regime for mining has been designed to write off lakhs of crores owed by large industrial houses to mineral-rich states including Jharkhand, Odisha, Karnataka and Kerala.

The scale of these liabilities emerged during *Mineral Area Development Authority v. Steel Authority of India*, heard in July 2024 by a nine-judge Supreme Court bench headed by then Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud. The Federation of Indian Mineral Industries argued that the mining industry stood to lose Rs 1.5 to 2 lakh crore due to tax arrears. Independent analysts believe the figure runs into trillions.

Jharkhand alone claims that central PSUs such as Eastern Coalfields Ltd and private mining companies owe the state approx. Rs 1.36 lakh crores in outstanding mining dues, land compensation and tax arrears.

In its landmark ruling, the Supreme Court upheld the right of mineral-rich states to levy taxes and cesses on mineral-bearing lands retrospectively from 1 April 2005. These arrears could be paid in instalments. The judgment also settled a 35-year-old controversy by holding that royalty paid by a mining leaseholder is not a tax but a contractual consideration for the enjoyment of mineral rights.

Jharkhand aggressively pursued and recovered Rs 200 crore from Bharat Coking Coal Ltd earlier this year; while Tata Steel disclosed a contingent liability of Rs 17,347 crore in its financial statements. Other mining companies and public sector undertakings faced substantial exposure. Although state departments have not uniformly published company-wise liabilities for groups such as Adani, Aditya Birla and Vedanta, the amendment's implications for the industry are considerable. Vedanta Resources, for example, was identified by credit-rating agencies, including Moody's, as one of the

worst hit by the judgment. The scale of its mining operations is evident from the Rs 6,249 crore the Vedanta Group paid in royalties during 2023-24.

The 2026 amendment dramatically changes this position. It restricts state governments from independently levying fresh taxes, cesses or local duties on mineral rights and mineral-bearing lands, bringing such lands under the Centre's direct regulatory framework. A new 'Section D' prevents states from imposing separate local taxes or extra levies unless permitted by the Union government, and invalidates unpaid or uncollected tax demands that predate the amendment. Effectively it alters the balance of Centre-state fiscal relations and is incompatible with the federal structure envisaged by India's Constitution.

Ranchi-based advocate Rashmi Katyan, who specialises in revenue law and has represented the state of Jharkhand in several land-related cases, describes the Centre's approach as "neo-colonialist".

"They talk about following a trade equalisation policy, which means coal mined in Jharkhand will cost the same when sold in Kerala. Surely the state from where the minerals are extracted must remain the prime beneficiary?" he asks.

While the original mining Act empowered the Centre to regulate mines and mineral development, the amendment extends that authority to mineral-bearing lands. By taking away the states' taxation power, it not only deprives them of a key source of income but also reduces their autonomy in channelling mining revenue towards social welfare.

The financial stakes are enormous. The Jharkhand Mineral Bearing Land Cess Act generated Rs 13,442 crore in 2025-26 (that's 68 per cent of the state's non-tax revenue and 11 per cent of its total revenue receipts). Odisha's mining tax revenue is projected to reach Rs 53,000 crore in 2026-27, accounting for 75 per cent of its non-tax revenue. Over the last five years, Odisha has auctioned 79 mineral blocks, adding approx. Rs 87,000 crore to its kitty.

This revenue was intended for healthcare, education, social security, agriculture, sanitation and drinking water. The Orissa Rural Infrastructure and Socio-Economic Development Act, 2004, similarly imposed a tax of up to 20 per cent on the annual value of mineral-bearing lands to



Photo: Getty Images

The amendment rocks Centre-state fiscal relations and violates principles of federalism

fund rural welfare programmes. Supported by a strong monitoring framework, Chhattisgarh earned more than Rs 70,000 crore from minerals during the past five financial years. Karnataka earned around Rs 36,120 crore, Kerala Rs 550 crore and Uttarakhand Rs 4,600 crore from mineral royalties during the same period. These figures exclude minor minerals such as sand and boulders, which remain under state control.

The Department of Mines and Geology recorded a steady increase in revenue, from Rs 6,308 crore in 2021-22 to Rs 8,845 crore in 2025-26, aided by real-time tracking, digitisation and stricter e-auction

compliance. Goa, in contrast, faced extreme volatility, recording near-zero digit figures between 2021 and 2023 after the Supreme Court cancelled its iron-ore leases, although earnings recovered over the following two years.

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), an umbrella body of several farmers' organisations, has demanded that the amendment be repealed. It has urged state governments to defend their federal rights and use their mining revenue for agrarian development, tribal welfare and productive employment. SKM believes the law is designed to attract foreign investment to the mining sector, including rare-earth extraction, and facilitate largescale exploitation of domestic mineral resources.

Katyan points out that Jharkhand holds vast reserves of coal, iron ore, uranium, bauxite, mica and rare earths, spread across some of India's oldest geological formations, including the Gondwana rocks. "We pay some of the highest GST, but these minerals are exported to other states for processing," he said. "Local people are not the beneficiaries of this wealth."

The argument of mining corporates, echoed in this amendment, is that revenues will increase if mineral-bearing lands are acquired quickly, more mining blocks are auctioned, and successful bidders receive environmental, forest and wildlife clearances promptly. But environmentalists say this is already causing a steady erosion of protective safeguards.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas)

Act and environmental-impact assessments (EIAs) are frequently bypassed, with mandatory gram sabha consents acquired forcibly or simply faked. The disregard for regulatory norms has led to the displacement of lakhs of Adivasis, particularly in Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, where 70 per cent of India's mines are located.

Environmentalists warn that deprived of taxation powers, mineral-rich states may be pushed to maximise mineral production in pursuit of short-term fiscal gains, accelerating the destruction of our forests, farmland, water bodies and wildlife habitat.

Sandeep Patnaik, an independent Odisha-based researcher on mines and forests says both Union and state governments are guilty: "PESA had made gram sabha consent mandatory. That is not being followed and local bureaucrats are a party to this. With most PSUs having been taken over or working closely with large corporate houses, tribal rights will be further eroded."

Opposition is growing. The Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and India bloc parties have organised mass dharnas in Odisha, while local groups have threatened economic blockades. Jharkhand's Chief Minister Hemant Soren, along with the Congress and Left parties, has launched demonstrations across Dhanbad and Ramgarh.

Leaders from Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu have also voiced their objections, warning that this amendment sets a dangerous precedent that violates Indian federalism, while throwing open India's precious mineral wealth to private monopolies. ■

STATES 360°



PUNJAB

Punjab 2027: AAP under siege, Congress finds its Pilot

Harjeshwar Pal Singh

The crucial assembly election barely five months from now will decide whether the *jhaadu* sweeps Punjab a second time or gets swept out of the state. For Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, virtually every road seems barricaded with barbed wire.

Start with the *sant-sipahi* confrontation that no sitting Punjab chief minister has faced in living memory. On 15 June 2026, the Akal Takht declared Mann *Guru Dokhi* and *Khalsa Panth Virodhi* (anti-Guru, anti-Panth)—over a video allegedly showing him sprinkling liquor on images of the Sikh Gurus and Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale—and directed the *sangat* to cut ties with him. The Takht's word still carries the force of scripture for lakhs of Punjabis. For a party that built its brand as a clean alternative to VIP culture and communal politics, being excommunicated by the highest temporal seat of the Sikhs struck at the heart of Mann's legitimacy.

The AAP camp, meanwhile, is restless. Ministerial staff, computer teachers and an alphabet soup of employee unions have been on and off dharna for months over unhonoured pay promises. Farmer bodies under the Samyukt Kisan Morcha banner have twice gathered at the Chandigarh-Mohali border, reminding Mann that '*sarkar badlo*' cuts both ways.

The political has also turned personal. A retired Punjab and Haryana High Court judge has accused the chief minister's wife, Gurpreet Kaur, of taking a Rs 5-crore bribe to bury a rape case. The NHRC has sought action-taken reports, and the SAD has demanded a CBI probe into what it calls an institutionalised 'loot model' running out of the CMO.

Mann, for his part, embraced Gurpreet Singh Sekhon—prime accused in the 2016 Nabha jailbreak that sprang Khalistan Liberation Force chief Harmander Mintoo—into the AAP fold at a Zira rally, only a decade after Kejriwal called that very jailbreak proof of the "complete breakdown of law and order" in Punjab.



Photo: Getty Images

Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown

Two further episodes bear mentioning. A Sikh youth, Mohanjit Singh, waved a black flag at Mann's convoy in Sangrur to protest the drug menace. He was allegedly given electric shocks and had his *kakaars* (the five articles that Sikhs wear at all times) desecrated in custody. The Akal Takht Jathedar compared the state government to Zakariya Khan. Days later, Gulzar Singh, a Dalit daily-wager from Sangrur, questioned Finance Minister Harpal Cheema about *chitta* (drugs) in his own village. Subsequently hounded by the local sarpanch and police to apologise publicly, Gulzar took poison. The National Commission for Scheduled Castes has since issued notices to Punjab's top officials; Rahul Gandhi has called it nothing less than "crushing those who question".

Layer onto this the perennial chargesheet—drugs, gangsterism, corruption, a chief minister widely seen (fairly or not) as answerable more to Kejriwal's durbar in Delhi than to Chandigarh—and it is clear that AAP is fraying across too many battlelines. While its opponents are, for once, organising rather than merely complaining.

Sukhbir Badal is crisscrossing the state with 'Punjab Bachao' rallies focusing on

drugs, healthcare, drinking water, roads, education. Akali Dal (Waris Punjab De) has pitched jailed MP Amritpal Singh as its 2027 chief-ministerial face and is fielding candidates from families of Sikh 'martyrs'. Their bet is that the drug issue and Amritpal as a 'millenarian' solution will help them reap rich political dividends. Even the BJP, a bit player in rural Punjab, senses an opening in the very same drug and law-and-order narrative Mann once tried to own. The saffron party has started a 12-day anti-drug campaign and picked its Rs 2,100 per month Haryana Lado Lakshmi Yojana against the AAP's Rs 1,000 Mawan Dhiyan Satkar Yojana for Punjab's women.

Against this backdrop, the Congress high command's decision to remove Bhupesh Baghel as Punjab in-charge and hand the state to Sachin Pilot looks like a routine reshuffle. Read closely, it's a course correction.

Bhupesh Baghel, former chief minister of Chhattisgarh, was appointed in February 2025 to try and unite the party's Punjab unit, which was split at least three ways—Charanjit Channi and Sukhjinder Randhawa in one camp, Paktap Bajwa's LoP camp in another and PPCC president Amarinder Singh Raja Warring (backed by

the district presidents he had appointed) in the third. Instead of uniting them, Baghel became a faction unto himself, seen (fairly or not) as too close to Warring. Even Rahul Gandhi's July reorganisation, which retained Warring but made Channi campaign-committee chief and Randhawa core-committee chief, did not bring peace to the party ranks.

Eighteen months on, the Punjab Congress was no closer to a single chain-of-command than the day Baghel arrived—a costly stagnation for a party that is seen as the AAP's prime challenger.

Pilot's appointment indicates that the Channi camp (comprising most senior Congress leaders) needed accommodating before Rahul Gandhi's proposed statewide yatra (expected to open at the Golden Temple and cover all 117 constituencies).

Channi, Randhawa and Warring have all publicly welcomed Pilot's appointment—a rare moment on unanimity for a triad that has agreed on virtually nothing since 2022. Whether Warring survives as PPCC chief is the question now being asked in Chandigarh's corridors. There is talk the high command may summon him to Delhi for 'another responsibility'—Congress-speak for a graceful exit.

There is a lesson here. The Congress high command, whatever its faults, is at least willing to course-correct—listen, reshuffle, accommodate—where the BJP's

central leadership simply imposes. It is a democratic instinct the party can be proud of. It has also cost the Grand Old Party dearly—three to four crucial months of an election year were lost to infighting it could scarcely afford.

Pilot is, on paper, an ideal choice. He carries no baggage from Punjab's factional wars, enjoys acceptability (by most accounts) across camps, and comes from Rajasthan, which geographically and temperamentally sits closer to Punjab than Chhattisgarh ever did. Pilot's formal, deliberative and consultative style is a relief to Punjab leaders exhausted by Baghel's abrasiveness.

Former bureaucrat and senior Punjab Congress leader Hardip Singh Kinra finds that the young and energetic Pilot "connects well with party rank and file". His political creed, road-tested over a decade, is instructive. "There are many leaders and many views," Pilot told Congress workers once, "but there are no factions". He has already begun one-on-one consultations with state leaders ahead of Rahul's visit, and colleagues say Pilot's message to Punjab is much the same: every faction must become a stakeholder, and discipline is non-negotiable.

Baghel, Punjab hands say, never struck that balance. He arrived a first-time in-charge with a small team and never quite learned the state's grammar. His disconnect and communication gap with senior leaders outside the Warring camp was attributed to cultural ignorance, temperamental shortcomings and the lack of a ground network.

Whether Pilot can accomplish in five months what Baghel could not in 18 will decide whether Congress emerges as a genuine challenger to AAP or remains trapped in a familiar cycle of self-sabotage. In politics, as in a multi-cornered election, the party that spends too long setting its own house in order often discovers that the voters have already moved on. ■

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It’s time to #CorrectTheMap

Ashok Swain on why the UN resolution to abandon the Mercator projection and adopt an ‘Equal Earth’ model matters

The United Nations General Assembly has taken a long-overdue step towards geographical honesty. On 4 September, 164 countries voted for a resolution calling for wider use of world maps that show continents and countries in their true relative sizes. Only the United States voted against it, while six countries abstained. The resolution does not ban the existing Mercator projection or force every country to use one official map. It encourages governments, schools, international organisations, media outlets and technology companies to use equal-area maps, particularly the ‘Equal Earth’ projection, when comparing the size of different parts of the world.

This should not be controversial. A map used to teach world geography should represent the world as accurately as possible. Yet defenders of the existing map have treated even this simple principle as a political attack. Their reaction reveals how deeply people can become attached to a familiar distortion, especially when that distortion places their own countries at the visual centre of the world.

The Mercator projection was created by Gerardus Mercator in 1569 for maritime navigation. This Mercator map was important for navigation because it showed a ship’s constant compass direction as a straight line. Sailors could draw a straight line between two points, read the required bearing from their compass and follow that course across the sea. In the UN-endorsed Equal Earth map, a constant compass direction may appear as a curved line, making it less convenient for traditional navigation. But a useful navigation chart is not necessarily a suitable map for classrooms, newsrooms or international organisations.

Mercator greatly enlarges places far from the Equator. As a result, Europe, North America, Greenland and Russia appear much larger than they really are in relation to Africa, South America and large parts of Asia. The farther a territory is from the Equator, the more its size is exaggerated. A technical feature intended to help

16th century sailors became, over time, the world’s dominant geographical image.

The most striking example is the comparison between Africa and Greenland. On a Mercator map, they can appear almost equal in size. In reality, Africa is about fourteen times larger than Greenland. Africa covers more than 30 million sq. km. It is large enough to contain the United States, China, India and much of Europe together. But on the map shown to generations of schoolchildren, it looks only moderately larger than Europe.

This is not a minor mistake in design. It is a false picture of the planet, repeated so often that most people no longer notice it. What is familiar begins to look natural, while an accurate map can appear strange simply because people have been trained to expect the wrong proportions.

Defenders of the status quo usually argue that all flat maps distort the globe. That is true, but it does not excuse the continued misuse of Mercator. All measuring tools have limitations, but we do not knowingly use a badly suited tool when a better one is available. A subway map distorts distance to make routes easier to follow. No serious planner would, therefore, use it to calculate the area of a city. In the same way, a navigation projection should not be used as the standard picture of world geography.

Equal Earth provides a clear alternative. Developed in 2018, it is an equal-area projection. It preserves the correct size relationships among continents and countries while keeping their shapes recognisable. As the Earth is curved, like a sphere, no flat map can show area, shape, distance and direction perfectly at the same time. But when the purpose is to show how large one region is compared with another, it tells the truth that Mercator hides.

The opposition to this correction cannot be separated from questions of history and power. Maps are more than just drawings of coastlines and borders. They shape how people imagine the world. Large spaces attract attention and

suggest importance. Smaller spaces appear weaker, more distant and less significant. When Europe and North America are enlarged while Africa and other equatorial regions are reduced, the map quietly coaxes a visual ranking of nations.

Mercator did not create his projection as a colonial conspiracy. But its later dominance suited a colonial world centred on European power. European empires controlled much of Africa, Asia and the Americas, and the most widely circulated map made imperial centres look larger and colonised regions smaller. The projection survived the formal end of colonial rule. The political map changed but

Photo: Getty Images



Size matters The old and new maps projected at the UNGA meeting; (left) Robert Dussey, the foreign minister of Togo, who led the push to adopt the ‘Correct the Map’ resolution

the old visual prejudice remained on classroom walls.

The US objection in the UN General Assembly was especially revealing. Its representative dismissed the resolution as part of a radical ideological project and suggested that discussing a 16th century map was beneath the UN. The response suggests that the debate strikes a nerve because it challenges a world view.

Of course, replacing a map will not end poverty, cancel debt or reform an unequal international system. It will not by itself overcome the political and economic problems facing African countries. But that is a false standard. No one argues that a fairer map can substitute for

material justice. But the apparent size of a continent affects public perception—of its land, resources, population, environmental significance and strategic value.

The reform matters beyond Africa. Mercator also diminishes South America and misrepresents many countries in South and Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and Oceania. Equal-area maps offer a clearer understanding of land use, population density, ecosystems, food production and climate vulnerability.

The cost of the advocated switch to Equal Earth cannot be a serious excuse. We live in an age when satellites can observe remote landscapes in extraordinary detail and digital services can map almost every road, building and business. Technology companies can change a global display through a software update. Publishers regularly issue new

editions of textbooks. Schools replace teaching material. It’s not quite tenable that we can map every street but cannot correct the world map.

The UN must now lead by example. Its agencies should use equal-area projections whenever relative size matters. Governments should revise school curriculums and official publications. Media organisations should review the maps used in news coverage. Technology companies should display a globe or an equal-area projection at the global level while keeping Mercator where navigation requires it. Teachers should also explain why projections differ, so students learn to question maps rather than accept them as an unassailable truth. ■

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From dhabas to dimagi Naxals

Avay Shukla toasts the crusader and roasts the bhakt

One doesn’t eat out often, partly because I haven’t yet received the last six instalments of my dearness allowance, but mainly because I can never find parking in Noida. But once in a while one has to be adventurous, so my wife Neerja and I decided to have a night out.

The question, however, prompted by recent FDA revelations about what is actually dished out as food in restaurants, was: how do we ensure that we are not served plastic granules as rice, palm oil as paneer, crow meat as chicken, shampoo and emulsifier as milk?

“I know,” said Neerja. “Let’s invite Tukaram Mundhe to

accompany us for dinner!”

She was right. Mr Mundhe is the foodies’ new toast. When he walks into a restaurant, the rats and cockroaches (the real ones) leave by the back door, the analogue paneer is dumped into the sewer line, and managers start counting the flies in their kitchens instead of their profits.

I’m told the most sought-after rating in Bombay eateries these days is not the Michelin star, but a certificate which proudly identifies a ‘Mundhe-approved eatery’. A close second (or even better) is a board announcing: ‘Tukaram Mundhe eats here’.

But I’m afraid he may be Khemka-ed very soon: institutions

nowadays are not expected to follow the law but to find ways around them, for a consideration, of course. Opposition to him has started organising itself. The Bombay High Court has already conveyed its royal displeasure.

A newspaper report revealed that footfalls in restaurants have fallen by 20 per cent, as folks no longer want to pay through their noses for dining on worms (not to mention service charge). I wouldn’t be surprised if corporate hospital boardrooms are worrying about plummeting revenues due to declining patient numbers admitted to their emergency wards for food poisoning, vomiting, loose motions, nausea and all the other compli-

mentary gifts of five-star eateries.

Very soon, this will affect our GST collections and our GDP, and Mundhe shall be declared a ‘dimagi Naxal’ and Pakistani collaborator. He will then be sent on deportation to the external affairs ministry where any damage he does will be nothing as compared to the destruction Messrs Jaishankar and Misri have already wrought and will therefore not be noticed.

Coming back to my dinner date, Mr Mundhe was not available on the phone: he was on his seventh interview of the day for a TV channel, after which he was scheduled to raid the Raj Bhavan kitchen.

So Neerja and I decided to play it safe and have *aloo parathas* and *kheer* at Murthal—a dhaba still being the safest place to eat in India, and with plenty of parking too.

The cockroaches, dimagi Naxals and *kuttas* are barking up the wrong tree. The changes and reforms they want—in the examination systems, condition of schools, accountability *et al*—will not happen unless this unresponsive government in Delhi departs.

And it will never depart as long as future elections (general and state) are based on SIR and EVMs. It now appears increasingly plausible that both have been so structured as to deliver victories for the BJP/NDA when and where it matters. The anecdotal evidence is mounting. Established political parties appear to be finally realising this, and the new kids on the block should, too.

They will achieve their ultimate goal only when the elections are

rendered fair and transparent, when the Election Commission of India is compelled to cancel SIR, revert to the paper ballot system, and impartially enforce the model code of conduct; when the force of public pressure persuades the Supreme Court to quash the appointments of the three election commissioners as violative of an earlier SC judgment.

These are the foundational changes the times demand. They should be taken up by the CJP and once achieved with the help of all those youngsters out there, the rest will follow as surely as spring follows winter. Fail here, and the winter of discontent will continue for a very, very long time, with no spring to follow.

I’ve reached the time of life when I can expect Doctors Dementia, Parkinson and Alzheimer queuing up outside my door. They haven’t yet, which makes me suspicious that either my name has been deleted from their lists in a Gyanesh Kumar-type exercise, or they think I am too far gone for their ministrations to make a difference.

Which suits me fine, because these days I am afflicted by another condition—schizophrenia. Split, or to be more precise, splintered personalities. Let me explain.

The symptoms first evinced

themselves in 2014 but have now metastasised on an impressive scale, especially after the July student protests in Delhi. I have always considered myself a dissident, a conscientious objector to the Modi government and was fairly comfortable with this personality trait, never mind that it cost me most of my relatives and friends.

Not anymore. For I am now informed, on the authority of a dozen ministers and Kangana Runout, that I am also a cockroach, a *kutta*, an *andolanjevi*, a member of both the Khan Market and *tukde-tukde* gangs, a gutter-generation type, an anti-national, an urban Naxal and a *dimagi* Naxal.

Whew! That’s a lot for any one individual to handle: I cannot for the life of me figure out to which of the above genera I belong. It has caused an identity crisis for me: who the hell am I? I probably need to see a shrink, but I don’t think my CGHS card will cover that.

Neerja, the only other intelligent member of my family other than Brutus, my doggo, says there’s only one solution to my problem—stop disagreeing with Mr Modi on everything and become his supporter.

With this change, my splintered personality will coalesce into just one—that of a bhakt—and the schizophrenia will vanish in an instant. A bhakt has no nuances, doubts or questions, he is self-confident in his stupidity, and proud of his incompleteness.

I considered the idea for a couple of days but then decided to dump it. For I discovered that the bhakt has his own mental condition which is far more severe than any I suffer from: delusional psychosis. Whereby he regards the non-biological one as a god, is completely disconnected from reality, ready to kill those who think, pray, eat or speak differently and stone-deaf to reason.

I can live with my splintered personality but this bhakti is a pain in the traditional place I can do without.

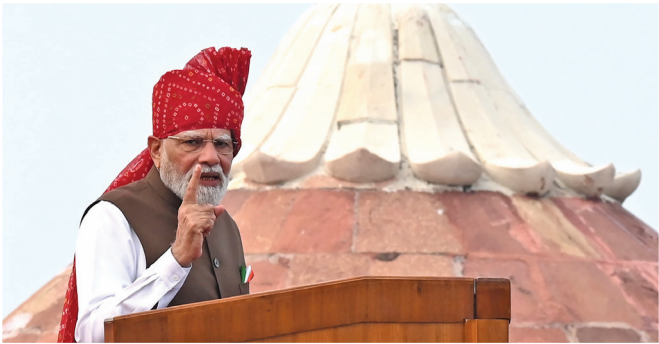
Maybe I’ll just go to Sadhguru to discover the real me. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



Photos: Getty Images

The BJP-led protest in July (above) was a defining pushback moment by youngsters; it rattled the establishment enough for Prime Minister Narendra Modi (inset) to come up with the ‘dimagi Naxal’ remark in his Independence Day speech this year



Dimagi Naxals, listen up! You won’t get to your goal till this ECI is forced to scrap the SIR







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‘Mapping’ them out in the national capital

Nandlal Sharma

The word ‘mapping’ did not appear in Phase 1 of the SIR, which was held in Bihar alone. It referred instead to ‘family grouping’: arranging members of the same family sequentially in the electoral roll. Every voter was asked to provide their part and serial number in the 2002-03 roll. ‘Family grouping’ became the lynchpin of SIR/Phase 2, held simultaneously in nine states and three Union Territories. Those born later or not listed in the 2002-03 rolls were asked to provide information on relatives. The emphasis was now on mapping each voter.

In Delhi, part of Phase 3, even this wasn’t enough to secure a place in the draft electoral roll.

Mantasha Afroz, a Delhi University student, is a voter from Okhla. She was born at the same address in Shaheen Bagh where she still lives with her parents and two sisters. Mantasha has been marked ‘permanently shifted’ in the ASDD (Absent-Shifted-Dead-Duplicate) schema, even after she provided her parents’ details. Her family has five members, who have had to deal with three different BLOs. Mantasha’s BLO says her work is done, and it’s now over to “senior Election Commission officials.”

In Patparganj, 24-year-old Kajal’s name was deleted (deemed ‘permanently shifted’). She filled out her SIR form online and voted in the 2025 assembly election. She still has her old voter I-card (EPIC), and provided her mother’s part/serial/EPIC numbers. Her mother’s name is on the draft list, hers isn’t. Both mother and daughter live at the same address. How’s that for ‘family grouping’?

Pushpa Devi, who has lived at the same address in Jagdamba Camp, Greater Kailash, for 40 years, has been declared ‘permanently shifted’. Despite voting in 2025, she was not issued an SIR enumeration form. Virma Devi, 71, also from Jagdamba Camp and very much alive, has been declared ‘dead’. Poonam, a resident of Yamuna Khadar in Mayur Vihar, was given a form, but her BLO never returned to collect it. Poonam has preserved the form; on the rolls she is marked ‘untraceable’. Photojournalist Sarvesh, 70, is also ‘untraceable’ despite living in the same building for 30 years. Her BLO claims he filled out her form himself!

According to Delhi’s chief electoral officer, the city had 1.45 crore voters before the SIR. The draft list has 97.5 lakh. The ASDD list has 43.2 lakh people in the absent/permanently shifted/other categories—29.8 per cent of the pre-SIR baseline. Another 2.8 lakh are ‘dead’ and 1.4 lakh ‘duplicate’, grouped under

‘uncollectable enumeration forms’.

As per the Election Commission, the BLOs either did not get the forms back or could not locate the voters. (BLOs have the option of using their app to check the 2002 SIR rolls. With a voter’s old part/serial/EPIC number combination, they can identify where/if the person has already been covered under the SIR, including which state the voter came from, if s/he has moved.)

A press statement issued on 31 August 2026 says all 1.45 crore voters in Delhi (100 per cent) *received* enumeration forms between 30 June and 17 August. Why were only 67 per cent forms collected, then? Or did voters disappear after receiving their forms?

There’s another complication: voter part numbers changed when the draft list was published. The ASDD list is based on new part numbers, which most voters don’t know. Documents relating to the minutes of BLO-BLA meetings require the old part number; searching for your name on the ASDD list requires the new part number. How are voters expected to navigate this?

The functioning of BLOs has been equally vexing. Okhla resident Adil Khan asked his BLO why the four members of his family, who live together, had been assigned different booths. The BLO replied that Adil’s



Photo: Getty Images

Is a month enough for BLOs to process and verify 47.5 lakh Form 6 applications that may be filed in Delhi?

wife and children had received their voter cards later. If mapping was intended to establish voter identity through ‘family grouping’ and prior electoral records, why is verification of one family being split across multiple BLOs?

Delhi’s SIR was officially announced by the Election Commission on 14 May 2026. Voter mapping, however, had already begun. Jan Ahmed Chauhan, Congress BLA-2 in Okhla, says BLOs visited between January and April, asking for details and documents linked to the 2002 electoral roll. “If a voter was not present or couldn’t meet the BLO and show documents, their name was deleted,” he says.

Booth-level figures illustrate the scale. Pre-SIR, in Okhla’s old part number 172, there were 1,874 voters. Only 936 forms were returned; 827 voters were marked permanently shifted, 69 absent, 13 dead and 28 duplicate. One was placed in the ‘other’ category either because the house had been demolished or the voter refused to sign.

At part number 195 in Haddo Mohalla, Madanpur Khadar, there were 1,509 voters pre-SIR. Only 352 forms came back. While none were ‘absent’ or ‘duplicate’, 1,136 were marked ‘shifted’ and 30 marked ‘other’ because their names appeared on electoral

In Bengal, Jalil Akhtar’s days in hell

Biplab Nayak

Rasakhowa is one of the oldest and largest weekly markets in north Bengal’s Uttar Dinajpur district. Sunday is *haat* day. Buyers and sellers come here from far and wide.

At the heart of this weekly market was *gorur haat* (cattle market), spread across an enormous tract of land. Farmers, householders, cattle-rearers, milkmen and butchers came here to buy and sell animals. Everyone had a different way of judging a cow or bullock: one man would inspect its teeth, another would slap and feel its flanks.

The tumult of the Sunday cattle market was a big feature of the agrarian economy of Karandighi’s villages. Around it flourished other sections of the market: for fruits and vegetables, for jute, paddy and rice, and for pulses, especially the roasted *mashkalai dal* (also known as urad). The buying and selling didn’t stop altogether on the other days of the week.

People from distant villages gathered here regularly, and for that reason, schools, madrasas,

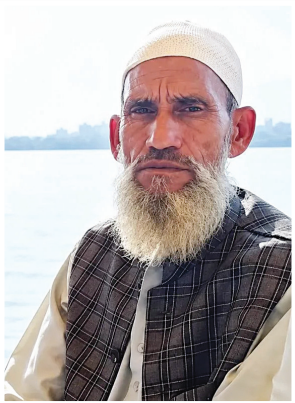
student hostels and government offices had also sprung up around the haat. Rasakhowa, built over centuries from the accumulated sediment of village life, was a mirror to the lives of these people.

29 July 2026. The government bus that left Raiganj bus depot at seven in the morning dropped us at Rasakhowa before nine. There were four of us. It was Wednesday, not haat day, but even so, its torpor seemed somehow unnatural.



Police picked up Jalil Akhtar in the dead of night on 29 June and took him to a holding centre. They say he is ‘Bangladeshi’, but his name is on the voter list

Photos: Sohram Mukhopadhyay and Susobhan Ghosh



The first thing that struck us was a vast emptiness. This was where the gorur haat used to sit.

No longer. A ban was enforced on the buying and selling of cattle just before Bakrid this year. Police and Hindutva musclemen came to Rasakhowa and smashed all the structures of the cattle haat. It has now been shut for more than two months.

We spoke to a few shopkeepers and ‘toto’ drivers. (*These are the*

battery-powered three-wheelers ubiquitous in Bengal.) Pointing out the boundaries with their fingers, they showed us how, in just these two months, portions of the cattle haat ground had already been encroached upon. New rooms had been built, but these folks had no clue what kind of new shops might come up there. As they spoke, one could sense the fear that had congealed inside them.

We went to a tea stall inside the haat and struck up a conversation with a middle-aged Muslim shopkeeper, who had opened his shop that morning and come over for tea. We were unfamiliar faces, so he asked where we’d come from.

The conversation turned to the closure of the cattle haat. He said it was not just Rasakhowa: all three major cattle haats in Karandighi block had been shut down.

He fell silent for a moment and then said: “How long can people who raise cattle to sell them keep feeding them at home? So they sell them, if they manage, at half-price or even a third, to the very people who put saffron tilaks on their foreheads and say they are gau-

rakshaks, who then sell them to *dalals* (middlemen) of meat-export companies. It is only when we Muslims buy and sell cattle that it becomes a crime. This Bakrid we Muslims decided we wouldn’t buy cattle, and we didn’t. But if this goes on, where will the cattle for the plough come from? Where will the milch cattle come from?”

I asked whether he thought this centuries-old cattle haat had now been closed for good. He fixed me with a fierce look. “Isn’t that what it looks like? Look at this SIR. Our names have been struck off. Can you tell me how they will ever get back on the rolls?”

Looking me straight in the eye, he went on: “In our Karandighi block, one and a half lakh people have had their names deleted from the voter list. Almost all are Muslims, most of them women. People rummaged through their belongings to find whatever papers they could find, belonging to their fathers/grandfathers/ancestors, stuffed the documents into bags and went to the election babus.

► Continued on page 2

In Bengal, Jalil Akhtar’s days in hell

» Continued from page 1

But nothing came in fear; they couldn’t vote. Now they live in it, wondering when they will hit another wall at a bank, a ration shop, a thana, a government office... They say tribunals will put all the names back. Three months have passed and only 151 people have had hearings at the district magistrate’s office. And now even the tribunal has stopped functioning. Nobody knows what will happen or when. Do you?” I lowered my head.

“And what good is having your name on the voter list anyway? Look at Jalil Akhtar of Bagroi village. The police picked him up and took him to a holding centre. His name was on the voter list. He even voted. And now they are calling him a ‘Bangladeshi’.”

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It was after reading about Jalil Akhtar in a newspaper that we’d come to Rasakhowa. We took a toto to Bagroi village, where we were headed, some twenty-five kilometres away. The villages we crossed on the way were predominantly Muslim; there were brick-and-mortar structures too but mainly the dwellings were thatched huts. Jalil Akhtar’s was a kutcha home, which stood next to his maternal cousin Motiur Rahman’s pucca house.

Motiur said the police came quietly, woke Jalil and told him to come with them. When Jalil tried to call out to someone, a policeman pressed a gun to his head and told him that if he made a sound, they would shoot him.

That was how they took Jalil away. When his wife, she first assumed he had gone for Fajr namaz (*the first of the ritual five a day*). But when the morning wore on and he still did not return, Motiur and other neighbours began searching everywhere.

There was no trace of him. Finally, someone in the village said the police had entered the village at night. Could they have taken him?

There was a police camp within walking

distance. Everyone went there together. “*Baro-babu*, (the senior officer at the camp), is not a good man,” Motiur told us. “If somebody makes a complaint, he summons the complainant and the accused separately, and frightens and extracts money from them both.”

The police had information, Baro-babu said, that Jalil was a Bangladeshi. So, he was handed over to the BSF. The villagers were dumbfounded. They demanded to know who had said Jalil was Bangladeshi when his family had lived there for generations. Nobody in the family had even seen the Bangladesh border. Jalil’s name had remained on the voter list after the SIR. Jalil had voted in the election.

Baro-babu roared: “We have all the information. The days when you could raise your voice like this are over. The government has changed now.”

Still Motiur Rahman and the others did not curl up in fear. They resolved to try every possible way to bring Jalil back.

Motiur collected every document he could find: Jalil’s voter card, his Aadhaar card, ration card and panchayat papers. He even obtained proof that Jalil’s grandfather and grandmother had appeared on the electoral rolls in elections held in the 1950s.

The inspector-in-charge of Dalkhola thana in Uttar Dinajpur had been on leave since the day of the incident. On 9 July, the day after he returned to work, Motiur and several members of Jalil’s family went to Dalkhola thana with all the documents and met him.

Before this, with the help of Dulal Rajbanshi—an organiser in Islampur of the Voting Rights Protection Coordination Committee, formed to demand restoration of names deleted during the SIR—he had also met the SP at Islampur and shown him all the evidence. That’s when they learnt Jalil had been taken to the holding centre at Fulbari.

After examining the papers, the SP at Islampur assured them that if it was a mistake, it would be corrected. He told them to approach the Dalkhola IC (Inspector-in-Charge) because, apparently, the matter fell under him.

The Dalkhola IC too said Jalil might be released in a day or two. But as his anxious relatives kept pleading with him, he blurted: “You keep saying, release him, release him... do you know the pressure I am under? I have been handed a list of five hundred people to pick up. Just yesterday another fifty names arrived...”

Who was sending him these names?



Photos: Soham Mukhopadhyay and Susobhan Ghosh

Where and how were these lists being drawn up? Who was putting him under pressure?

Motiur and the others returned to the village suspended between hope and fear.

Jalil Akhtar has two daughters and two sons, all married. The family is poor, so both sons work outside the state as migrant labourers—one in Delhi, the other in Hyderabad.

When they heard their father had been taken away, both were beside themselves with anxiety. They called every day, often in tears. But they could neither get leave from work nor scrape together enough money to come home.

More than ten days had passed since the documents were submitted at Dalkhola

thana. Repeated entreaties drew the same answer: the police were so burdened with other important work that they hadn’t been able to verify the documents. But the family was told that Jalil had been shifted from the Fulbari holding centre to the one at Chakulia.

Tired of these stories, the villagers decided to mount a protest. On 20 July, over 300 villagers assembled at Rasakhowa haat to demand the release of Jalil Akhtar.

The police surrounded them. They couldn’t take out the procession, but their spontaneous protest broke through the pall of terror that had enveloped the villagers.

The next morning, Jalil Akhtar’s family went to the Chakulia holding centre. They were told Jalil was no longer there. Nobody would say where he had been sent.

With the help of the Voting Rights Protection Coordination Committee, they held a press conference at the Uttar Dinajpur Press Club in Raiganj. Jalil’s wife, Tofa Bibi, and daughter, Kulsum Khatun, were outspoken. The following morning the police informed them that Jalil Akhtar was being produced in Islampur court.

Motiur Rahman rushed there. He found the police had submitted a wholly fabricated report—not a word about Jalil’s detention, the police claimed he’d been arrested only the previous day. And Jalil had been declared a resident of Haripur in Thakurgaon district of Bangladesh. No evidence was produced for this outrageous claim; the court was simply told that ‘verification’ was under way and all the evidence would be produced once the process was complete.

On that basis they sought police custody. The court granted it.

“The police have still not submitted their report... Are they going to kill the man?”

As we sat in Motiur Rahman’s house that day, and villagers trooped in and gathered inside the front room where we sat and around its doorway, everyone seemed to be silently searching for a way out. At some point, tea and biscuits arrived for everyone.

A middle-aged man spoke, almost to himself: “They won’t listen to appeals and petitions. Maybe if everyone takes to the streets, the way they did in Delhi, they will be forced to budge...”

I was startled. The Jantar Mantar protests had come to a head just days earlier. And its echoes had reached even this village where nobody has the money or connections or even the dream of sitting a NEET examination or becoming a doctor.

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The toto driver had initially said he wouldn’t wait for us. But after reaching Bagroi, he readily agreed to stay—and watched and listened with keen interest. It was mid-afternoon when we climbed back into his toto and set out for Rasakhowa.

Whenever Jalil Akhtar’s case comes up for hearing in the Islampur court, I telephone Motiur Rahman. “The police still haven’t submitted their report... They have got another (court) date... I don’t know what will happen... Are they going to kill the man?”

What am I supposed to say? ■

This is a much-abridged translated version of the story that first appeared in the Bangla webzine Guruchandali

STATES 360° UTTAR PRADESH



Fast and furious: the yo-yoing political career of Akash Anand

Mini Bandopadhyay

On 10 September, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) chief Mayawati cut her nephew Akash Anand ‘completely loose’. She announced the decision on X, arguing in a long and petulant post that Akash’s failure to repost a recent tweet of hers was conclusive proof of his disloyalty. The news was greeted with bemusement as people wondered if Mayawati was serious. She was.

The post in question had called for Anand’s father-in-law Ashok Siddharth to resign from the party, which he did, declaring on X that her word was his command. He also denied the allegation that his son-in-law had acted under his influence.

Mayawati is known to be imperious and rude, but how will the public humiliation of her nephew and his father-in-law help the BSP in the 2027 election? Her

erratic behaviour and growing insecurity is making her own constituency, the Dalits, lose confidence in her.

The humiliation of Akash Anand began earlier this month when he was removed as the party’s national coordinator. The young man was just not mature enough, declared Mayawati on social media. Akash’s bio on X mutated from ‘chief national coordinator’ to ‘party worker’ to ‘party supporter BSP’. Since 15 August 2026, he does not appear to have posted anything at all on X.

Ishan Anand, Akash’s younger brother, was appointed as a ‘sector-in-charge’ of the party. (The BSP has three sectors: the one covering Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand is looked after directly by Mayawati.) Both Akash and Ishan schooled in Noida before going to the UK for further studies. Akash, by all accounts, is a sharp public speaker.

His rallies drew crowds and his social media presence was growing.

One explanation for his sudden fall from grace is that his belligerent speeches did not go down well with his aunt. He has attacked leaders by name, accused some of seeking an end to reservation, and was increasingly critical of the RSS. The last straw is said to have been a savage attack on both the BJP and the Union government. The second explanation doing the rounds is that BJP leadership did not want a younger, more popular Dalit leader to emerge in Uttar Pradesh from the BSP, and leaned on Mayawati.

“He was projected as the party’s future face and, at one stage, was formally declared Mayawati’s successor. His appeal among younger supporters and his attempts to assert himself within the organisation gave him a profile that went beyond that of a

conventional office-bearer,” points out Kamal Jayant, a long-time observer of Dalit politics.

Akash, he recalls, had criticised inactive party office-bearers and sought greater accountability from those holding organisational posts. He risked upsetting established leaders who had worked with Mayawati for years.

On 10 December 2023, Akash was announced as Mayawati’s political heir and appointed national coordinator. Within months, he was stripped of all responsibilities and kept away from the Lok Sabha election campaign in April 2024. On 23 June 2024, he was reinstated as national coordinator. In March 2025, he was expelled from the party, accused of arrogance and over-ambition under the influence of his father-in-law. On 13 April, he was forgiven. On 18 May, he was re-appointed national coordinator and on 29 August, given the newly minted post of chief national coordinator. What was that roller-coaster ride all about?

Mayawati herself has declared that community is more important to her than immediate family (recalling Kanshi Ram’s decision to devote his life to the Bahujan samaj movement). While asserting that she did not believe in dynastic politics, her brother is party vice-president, and her other nephew has taken Akash’s place. Ashok Siddharth too was sent to the Rajya Sabha.

What’s the next for Akash Anand? Will he split the BSP and chart his own course? Will he join another party or simply quit politics and go back to managing the family business? All eyes will be on him as Uttar Pradesh heads to one of the most consequential assembly elections in 2027.



Code blue Akhilesh Yadav with Samajwadi Chhatra Sabha workers in their new uniform

The all-important colour blue

The Samajwadi Chhatra Sabha has a new dress code: blue T-shirt and blue jeans. Of the previous uniform, only the red cap remains. Blue, explained Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, stood for Babasaheb Ambedkar and the ‘bahujan samaj’ (the people, not the party).

Addressing a press conference with a group of Chhatra Sabha members around him, the SP chief laboured to explain the switch to critics who felt he was trying to appropriate a colour long synonymous with Dalits, Mayawati and the BSP.

BJP ally Om Prakash Rajbhar said changing a dress code would not fetch Dalit votes. Commentators agreed. Dalits in Uttar Pradesh who abandoned the BSP over the past few decades have tended to move towards the BJP. This has partly to

do with the aggressive Hindutva promoted by the BJP—Dalits see a chance to identify with other caste Hindus and feel upwardly mobile—and partly to do with the lure of lucre (which the BJP has plenty to throw around).

Analysts say the BSP is not likely to lose out on the committed 12-13 per cent votes Mayawati secures. Sceptics say if Dalits decide to join the SP, they would have to be offered a far stronger incentive than a ‘blue uniform’.

Akhilesh Yadav, however, gets full marks for hard-selling the colour to party supporters—including blue artificial turf for hockey fields! Blue jeans, he added, have historically been associated with the working class in western countries. Claiming that blue was the colour of rebellion against injustice may not have convinced everyone, including the Chhatra Sabha. They agreed, though, that they looked smarter. And who are we to disagree? ■



Downsized again It’s been quite a roller-coaster rise for Akash Anand since December 2023 when Mayawati anointed him as her political heir

Who decides how Bengal celebrates Durga Puja?

Dwaipayan Banerjee

In early September, Dharendra Krishna Shastri, a.k.a. Bageshwar Baba, the 30-year-old priest who presides over the Bageshwar Dham in Chhatarpur, Madhya Pradesh and is closely linked to the BJP, visited West Bengal. The visit was a widely publicised affair. The chief minister and the chief secretary went to meet him, paid their obeisances, shared a meal and invited him to set up a temple in the state. Shastri created an uproar in the state when he said, during a Hanumant Katha programme in Howrah, that Hindus who eat fish and meat during Durga Puja are ‘*pakhandis*’ (hypocrites). “I am offended that during Navratri and Durga Puja, they make ‘*ganda khana*’ (dirty food) behind the pandals,” he said.

The remark, predictably, provoked a storm. Social media filled with memes and gags, and opposition parties were strident in their condemnation. In Bengal, the consumption of fish and meat during the Puja is an old, living tradition. In many traditional homes, ancient temples and local community pujas, mutton and fish are offered to the goddess, within Shakta rituals, as *prasad*.

Most Bengali Brahmins from *Smarta* families, like their Maithil counterparts in neighbouring Bihar, have long been fish and meat eaters. (In north India, even Smarta families are mainly vegetarian.) The Ashtavimsatitattva (the 28 ritual digests) written by Raghunandan, a 16th century contemporary of Chaitanya, is a uniquely Bengali reading of the Smriti-shastras, whose text is still followed by traditional families. Raghunandan’s magnum opus makes space for ‘*deshachara*’ (regional custom/local tradition), which sanctions consumption and ritual offering of fish/meat in religious festivals including the Durgotsava, to which he dedicates one of his 28 digests, called the Durgotsava-tattva. Of course, in Vaishnava households it was customary not to offer fish, and in some Vaishnava Banik (merchant/trader) households, Durga came not as a demon-slayer but with her husband Shiva by her side and their children in tow. No one thought they had to change for the others; they coexisted rather peacefully.

Shastri was not alone in making these demands. A few days earlier, Nirgunananda Brahmachari of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad said something similar. He complained that people enter pandals carrying non-veg food and asked organisers to ban such items in the pandal area. The VHP also called on committees to adhere to shastric norms for



People throng the Puja pandals in their thousands, and for artists and artisans the festival is an opportunity like no other to showcase their work

Photo: Getty Images

idols rather than modern artistic interpretations, warning that pandals should not improvise in violation of the injunctions of the shastras. It insisted that organising committees should consist of Sanatani Hindus only, again targeting the popular local belief that religion is personal and festivals belong to everyone.

Book stalls and food stalls around the puja pandals are managed by committees of all faiths, especially in neighbourhoods with mixed populations.

Durga Puja is easily the biggest event on the socio-cultural calendar of West Bengal. People throng the pandals in their thousands, and for artists and artisans, this ‘*sarbojanin*’ (for all) festival is a showcase like no other. The idols, the pandals, the lighting are all their canvases, so to speak. In recent years, they have found more patrons and encouragement. Artists and art students labour over their puja projects for months. Often their work has political overtones. The themes are varied: it could be the CAA-NRC protests, the genocide in Palestine, the farmers’ movement... but with few exceptions, their political undertone is progressive and liberal. The

VHP call to refrain from taking artistic liberties is, then, likely a forewarning to ensure these art installations do not embarrass the current government.

When the backlash grew, the VHP backtracked, clarifying that it was not imposing a ban on non-vegetarian food but merely asking that food stalls be kept outside the pandals. The food stalls are *never* inside the pandals, in any case. The BJP tried to distance itself in both instances, but that didn’t fool anyone.

Are these teething problems for the Sangh Parivar or are we witnessing a more fundamental shift? Does Hindutva have the capacity to hegemonise societies that stand so far apart in their beliefs and everyday life than what the Parivar has known in its traditional strongholds? I pondered these questions when I was trying to map the rise of the Sangh Parivar in Bengal a few years ago.

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The VHP office in Kolkata, not far from the five-point crossing in Shyambazar, has a quiet, old-fashioned charm. When I went there in 2019 to meet Sachindra Nath

What is happening in Bengal today is an attempt to force an alien culture

Sound Logic

Vidyanand Bapat’s crusade ahead of the Ganeshotsav against high-decibel celebrations has the Pune orthodoxy in a snit. Jaideep Hardikar reports

Ganeshotsav is upon us and the latest faceoff between Pune’s progressives and its orthodoxy is over the use of DJs and high-decibel sound systems during the festival, which gets under way on 14 September.

It all began with the humiliating expulsion of 37-year-old Vidyanand Bapat from a public meeting called by the municipal authorities on 25 August. Bapat is a resident of Narayan Peth in the heart of the city, and describes himself as an atheist and rationalist.

At the meeting, Bapat objected to DJs, high-decibel sound systems and *dhol-tasha* processions during Ganeshotsav, and demanded a ban on their use to restore sanity in public spaces. He made a point about the noise pollution and the traffic disruption and cited data to bolster his argument. The Ganesh mandals were not amused and their men got aggressive. The police had to escort Bapat out safely.

A video of the confrontation went viral and Bapat’s crusade quickly turned into a citywide debate. It was in the Marathi newspapers, on TV, on social media and people’s lips. Citizens who had long complained, albeit privately, about sleepless nights, blocked roads and the deafening festival music had found a spokesperson. Large numbers came out in support of Bapat, who works in a BPO and hails from the socially influential community of Kokanasth (or Chitpavan) Brahmins.

On 30 August, they gathered at Goodluck Chowk. On Sunday, 6 September, hundreds took out a silent protest rally, saying the festivities now strike fear in their hearts and minds. They weren’t against Ganeshotsav celebrations, they insisted, but they opposed the use of DJs and the excessive noise. Bapat’s stand is uncompromising. He says big sound systems and *dhol-tasha* should not be allowed at all, because decibel levels cannot be controlled if these giant boom boxes are allowed. “Everything cannot be allowed in the name of tradition,” he says, “...you can

then argue that sati and child marriage are also tradition and must continue.”

The city’s orthodoxy didn’t like this. On 3 September, Bapat was slapped in public by one Santosh Chavan, former president of a local Ganesh mandal. The FIR records that Chavan called him an atheist and ‘anti-Ganapati’. The incident has further incensed the Pune citizenry.

Audiologist Kalyani Mandke has been flagging this issue as a public health concern for years. In 2024, she moved the National Green Tribunal (NGT) for effective noise-control measures during Ganeshotsav. The numbers are startling. A study by the College of Engineering, Pune (COEP) found that average sound levels on the final day of the 2023 festival at Laxmi Road touched 105.2 decibels, far exceeding the permissible residential limit of 55 db during the day and 45 db at night.

In August 2024, before Ganeshotsav, the NGT ordered real-time monitoring at pandals and immersion processions, regulation of loudspeaker capacity, limits on *dhol-tasha-zanj* participants, seizure of sound systems for violations and a ban on DJs in immersion processions. The Bombay High Court also directed civic authorities to act against noise-level violations and illegal temporary structures on streets, warning that official inaction could be seen as an infringement on the fundamental rights of citizens under Article 21. But both the NGT order and the Bombay High Court observation fell on deaf ears.

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Pune has a history of bitter, often violent, confrontation between its progressives and so-called *sanatanis*.

In the 13th century, Dnyaneshwar brought the Bhagavad Gita into Marathi through the *Dnyaneshwari*. It is a religious text, not a rationalist manifesto, but it was a radical cultural act to take a Sanskrit work to the masses. Dnyaneshwar and his siblings faced the wrath of Pune’s elite Brahmin class.

The Varkari saints, including Tukaram,



were not modern secularists either. Their radicalism sat inside faith. Tukaram’s devotional *abhangas* challenged ritual pretension, caste pride and the monopoly of religious authority.

Later, Jyotirao Phule attacked caste hierarchy and Brahminical domination. Agarkar and Gokhale made reason and reform central. The Ganeshotsav in Pune—across Maharashtra, in fact—carries this tension.

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The modern public festival, popularised by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in the 1890s, emerged as a form of anti-colonial mobilisation, a radical act of assembly defying the writ of the Raj. So, while Ganesha worship is an ancient tradition, taking Ganapati to the street is not.

The public festival, too, has evolved over more than a century—and today, it carries a distinct political overtone, with leaders across the political spectrum funding extravagant, high-decibel showdowns, as it were, to mobilise vote banks. Bapat’s crusade is once again trying to flip this modern ‘tradition’. Where Tilak made Ganeshotsav a means of public mobilisation, Bapat is asking whether the festival



Loud, louder, loudest The decibel levels during Ganeshotsav exceed all permissible levels; (left) Pune’s Vidyanand Bapat was attacked for his vocal opposition

should have an unquestionable claim on the street, even when it becomes a public nuisance and affects other citizens’ rights on commons.

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The street is common. It is public property where several rights intersect and impinge on one another. One person/ community’s right to celebrate must accommodate another’s right to move and access without obstruction. Your celebration should respect my desire for peace. Conflicts arise when one right subordinates all others.

Bapat makes the point in chaste, free-flowing Marathi one moment and switches to English with ease while invoking social theory jargon. His delivery creates an aura; it brings to mind Maharashtra’s tradition for rational debate. The medium is new—where pamphlets and public debates were the battlegrounds earlier, today it is social media.

Bapat, however, underlines that he has no quarrel with anyone’s belief, that he is only making a civic argument. His call for a complete ban on loudspeakers and *dhol-tasha* in public places is perhaps maximalist. Even some Ganesh mandals have suggested that moderation may be the answer—fewer drums and speakers and adherence to mandated decibel limits. But for some legislators of the ruling BJP, giving in to his demands is to lose this currency of political assertion. ■

Bapat says he has no quarrel with anyone’s belief, that he is only making a civic argument

India braces for a diplomatic minefield at BRICS



Photo: Getty Images

Despite his government's open backing of Israel, Prime Minister Modi had reason to sign the Bishkek Declaration condemning US–Israel's military strikes on Iran

Ashis Ray

All eyes are on India right now,' wrote *The Diplomat*. The reference was to the BRICS summit in New Delhi (12-13 September). It went on to observe: 'Leading the group today is a diplomatic minefield'. Such a state of affairs is unfortunately as much a result of Narendra Modi's misguided foreign policy as developments beyond his control.

BRICS began in 2009 as BRIC—Brazil, Russia, India and China. South Africa joined the consortium in 2010 and attended its first meeting in 2011. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were admitted as full members in 2024—despite India's objections—and Indonesia in 2025. The same year, Belarus, Bolivia, Kazakhstan, Cuba, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand,

Uganda, Uzbekistan and Vietnam were designated partner countries. Together, BRICS accounts for 40 per cent of global GDP and 49.5 per cent of the world's population.

As long as India under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh maintained its post-Cold War position of multi-alignment, India commanded respect. This changed when Modi leapt into the lap of the US and turned India's foreign policy on its head by getting into bed with Israel—a pariah for other BRICS members.

On most international issues of note, 'Modi-fied' India was out of step with other BRICS states, most conspicuously on Israel's war crimes in Palestine and its unprovoked attacks on Iran. Far from condemning Israel in any forum, India has stayed in Israel's corner—even supplying it weapons—which makes it a conspicuous outlier in BRICS.

The BRICS foreign ministers' meeting in May, with India in the chair, dispersed without a joint statement and was deemed a failure. New Delhi has been worried about the BRICS summit going the same way, and Modi's presence at the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation) summit in Kyrgyzstan at the beginning of September should be seen in this light. The SCO is really China's baby, and by taking himself there, Modi may have clinched President Xi Jinping's presence at the BRICS summit, though China kept India guessing till the eleventh hour. Xi hasn't visited India since 2019 and, in fact, skipped the G20 summit in Delhi in 2023.

As the host, India's objective was to ensure the presence of all member countries. But doubts linger if Saudi Arabia's Mohammed bin Salman will attend. In early August, Saudi Arabia signed the

Makkah Pact, a NATO-type military agreement with Pakistan and Turkey, with potential threats from Iran, Israel and India in mind.

The Bishkek Declaration at the end of the SCO summit saw member nations reiterating 'the SCO's previously stated position condemning military strikes on the territory of the Islamic Republic of Iran'. Modi was among the 10 who signed the document. Neither Modi nor the Indian ministry of external affairs (MEA) had hitherto uttered a word to censure the patently unacceptable conduct of the US and Israel towards Iran since February.

Modi was also party to the SCO statement opposing 'unilateral coercive measures that are contrary to the UN Charter and other norms of international law, [and] the rules and principles of the World Trade Organization'—namely, America's anti-Iran 'Operation Economic Outcast'.

Modi met Iran President Masoud Pezeshkian on the sidelines of the summit. This was seen as another attempt to assuage Modi's feelings. Not only has the Iranian government sided with Israel in this war, it also buckled under US pressure and pulled out of its obligations vis-à-vis Iran's Chabahar port, in which India had made substantial investments.

Iran's official readout quoted Modi as telling Pezeshkian that 'during the difficult period we have recently experienced, we sought to maintain and preserve our cooperation and communications with Iran'. The 'difficult period' was of his own making, having submitted meekly to the diktats of 'my friend Dohland' and making no secret of his love for Netanyahu and his criminal regime.

Iran reported that Modi told his interlocutor, "I agree with you that there are those who see their interests in war..." Could this be interpreted as (guarded) criticism of the US and Israel? Pezeshkian, in turn, "expressed appreciation for New Delhi's support and cooperation". For India to indicate any form of 'support and cooperation' towards Iran is a departure from its posture since the beginning of the conflict.

The only reliable way to

conclude that Modi is pivoting away from the sphere of US-Israeli influence will be to see India's actions after the BRICS summit, when we might find out if Modi was merely trying to placate China and Iran at the SCO to try and ensure that the BRICS summit does not bomb. 'As New Delhi enters BRICS time,' wrote China's *Global Times*, 'the world will watch keenly what will come out of the meeting'.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told the media: "We have no doubt that the summit will be successful," which is an indication that Russia will once again assist India—as it did at the UN G20 in 2023—to work out a unanimous joint statement, possibly in lieu of a soft mention of Russia's war with Ukraine.

South Africa has confirmed Cyril Ramaphosa has confirmed his attendance, despite his country's open and vocal denunciation of Israel's war crimes and its genocidal war in Gaza. South Africa's high commissioner in Delhi Anil Sooklal has affirmed "India is going to have a fruitful summit on a number of fronts."

As for Brazil, it has stood with South Africa vis-à-vis Netanyahu's war crimes and lent its weight to South Africa's genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Both nations have reservations about Modi's majoritarianism and contempt for democracy and yet may help forge a consensus on West Asia.

The assessment in Indian foreign service circles is that the summit is a challenge, given the ongoing hostilities between Russia and Ukraine and the war in West Asia. Modi is gambling that the BRICS summit will not displease Trump, who would be delighted if the group loses its way. With Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the mix, the BRICS statement cannot be as pro-Iran as the one issued at the SCO, and yet the BRICS resolution will have to nod at the situation in West Asia.

The MEA catchline for the summit—"Building Resilience and Innovation for Cooperation and Sustainability"—is a known tic of the Modi government to find acronyms, but in the prevailing circumstances, it looks like an attempt to deflect attention from more intractable issues that could scupper the summit. ■

On most global issues of note, 'Modi-fied' India has been out of step with other BRICS nations

A river that binds and divides two neighbours

Sourabh Sen in Kolkata & Faisal Mahmud in Dhaka

The Ganga Water Treaty between India and Bangladesh, signed in 1996, is up for renewal in December 2026. It was signed in an atmosphere of goodwill and neighbourliness by then Indian prime minister H.D. Deve Gowda and his counterpart in Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina. Now, when the treaty must be renegotiated, there is mistrust on both sides.

There is a BJP government at the Centre and in the upper riparian states of Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal—the state where the Ganga forks—at the Farakka Barrage, with one stem entering Bangladesh (the Padma) and another bending south towards Kolkata (the Bhagirathi-Hooghly). The political colour of the upper riparian states matters because the rhetoric and political moves of the ruling BJP have lately been hostile to Bangladesh and Muslims on both sides of the border. Understandably, then, the goodwill of the past has evaporated, which puts the treaty in jeopardy.

Sanjay Jha, Janata Dal (U) MP from Bihar, has urged the Union government to not renew the treaty in its current form, asserting that the treaty has impacted the state negatively. His press note states: 'Bihar is not seeking a favour. We are only asking for what our own scientific assessment establishes, so that 13 crore people are not left short of water for drinking, irrigation and industrial supply for another 30 years.'

Political parties in West Bengal agree on the need to renew the treaty but are divided on how to go about it. Silting, riverbank erosion and the navigability of Kolkata port are key concerns. While in power, Mamata Banerjee had strongly opposed the Centre's bilateral discussions that kept the state out of the loop.

The current BJP dispensation in the state has little choice but to support the Centre's stance on renewing the treaty while emphasising that national security and federal water management are central mandates. The opposition CPI(M) and Congress advocate a tripartite consensus model, featuring extensive parliamentary debate, multi-state consultations (including Bihar) and technical review by environmental scientists.

It is worth recalling that Deve Gowda's United Front government, which signed the 1996 treaty, was supported from outside by the Congress and the CPI(M), a detail that underlines the treaty's consensual character. The CPI(M) was also in power in West Bengal. While then chief minister Jyoti Basu and Pranab Mukherjee of the Congress, both with strong cross-border ties, provided political heft, West Bengal finance minister Asim Dasgupta was the lead Indian negotiator with Bangladesh. Despite the divergence in their politics, Gowda, Basu and Mukherjee were on the same page when it came to water sharing.

*

From a technical perspective, the treaty has delivered what it was designed for—adequate water for both countries. For context, experts rate it way above the Indus Waters Treaty, which was controversial even before the terror attack in Pahalgam and Operation Sindoor thereafter worsened relations between India and Pakistan.

The reason for considering it the most successful mechanism in the history of transboundary water treaties is simple. Speaking to *National Herald*, river expert and ecological economist Nilanjan Ghosh said: "This treaty was maintained by both sides to a tee. It is a model of how a bilateral treaty (the Rhine or Danube treaties involve multiple players) should be drafted and adhered to."

The water allocation formula

applies to the five-month lean period from 1 January to 31 May, when the flow is measured and divided at 10-day intervals based on real-time data at Farakka Barrage. If the flow is above 75,000 cusecs, India receives a fixed 40,000 cusecs and the remaining flow goes to Bangladesh. For flow between 70,000 and 75,000 cusecs, Bangladesh receives 35,000 cusecs and India gets the balance. Below 70,000 cusecs, available water is split evenly.

If total water availability drops below 50,000 cusecs during a 10-day period, both governments initiate bilateral emergency consultations to adjust releases fairly. During the leanest period (11 March to 10 May), each country is guaranteed a minimum flow of 35,000 cusecs in alternating 10-day cycles to ensure equitable access during peak demand. The treaty has also mandated a joint committee with

representatives from both sides to monitor daily water levels at Farakka (India) and Hardinge Bridge (Bangladesh).

Ghosh pointed out that Bangladesh was receiving at least 20-25 per cent more water in the dry season at its first measuring station at Hardinge Bridge than what was released from Farakka. Both countries are aware of this excess flow in the lean season. Experts have advanced several arguments to explain this. These include recharged aquifers, upstream regulation mechanisms as well as excess flow through the Mahananda channel located upstream of Hardinge Bridge and downstream of Farakka.

*

As a lower riparian state, Bangladesh is keen to renew the treaty with modifications it believes will protect its interests. Bangladesh president Mirza Fakhrul Islam made a pointed request when India's new high commissioner Dinesh Trivedi called on him on 8 September: settle the water disputes between the two countries, and give Bangladesh its fair share, specifically from the Ganga and Teesta rivers. Trivedi said India was taking "positive measures".

The Ganga treaty is the only

Photo: Getty Images



In better times India and Bangladesh managed to sign a Ganga Water Treaty that experts cite as a model of how a bilateral treaty should be drafted and administered

comprehensive water-sharing agreement between Bangladesh and India even though the two countries share 54 transboundary rivers. There is no provision for automatic renewal, and barely three months before it lapses, the two governments have still not announced formal negotiations on what will replace it.

In a report tabled on 30 July 2026, the parliamentary standing committee on external affairs, chaired by Congress MP Shashi Tharoor, said failure to reach a new arrangement before the treaty expires 'could erode mutual confidence and further complicate bilateral ties'.

The consequences of letting the treaty simply lapse are significant. India will not be free to take as it pleases. Under international law, Bangladesh will continue to have rights as a downstream state, including the equitable and reasonable use of shared watercourses and the obligation to avoid significant transboundary harm. But those principles are less precise than a treaty that specifies volumes, monitors arrangements and outlines procedures for resolving disagreements.

Also at stake is the agreed arithmetic of water sharing under the treaty. There will no longer be a binding bilateral formula telling the

countries how to divide the water available at Farakka during each 10-day period of the dry season. Bangladesh will lose the treaty framework through which flows are jointly monitored and disputes over implementation addressed.

If the sides reconvene, the existing arrangement could either be renewed or the countries may negotiate a revised treaty incorporating stronger guarantees and modern river management provisions. Bangladesh won't mind if December 2026 does not bring some kind of new agreement. Water resource expert Ainun Nishat told *National Herald* that Dhaka is no longer asking merely "to preserve what it got in 1996." Its publicly stated negotiating position now includes "a higher water share, a guaranteed mechanism and an agreement better equipped to deal with the changing hydrology of the river [...] the difficulty is that India's negotiating position is moving in the other direction. New Delhi must first account for demands from Bihar and other domestic interests".

Bangladesh has been spelling out what it wants from the next treaty. India has said where the discussion should take place—the Joint Rivers Commission—but is yet to publicly spell out what it is prepared to offer. ■

TATHYAKOSH: KARNATAKA'S NEW DIGITAL PUBLIC GOOD FOR DATA DISCOVERY

Tathyakosh puts 1.5 million datasets- and seven decades of India- a search away



Photo: GettyImages

Though conceived with national ambition, Tathyakosh carries a distinctly Bengaluru signature. The platform already features more than 50,000 Karnataka-specific datasets, drawing from foundational state resources such as the Karnataka Open Government Data Portal, Mahiti Kanaja, KRSRAC/K-GIS, the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), and the Raman Research Institute.

A nation rich in data, poor in discovery

India has never lacked data. Every day, its ministries, universities, municipal bodies, and research institutions generate volumes of information vast enough to power an entire knowledge economy. Yet for years, this abundance has hidden a quiet paradox: the data exists, but finding it does not come easy.

A researcher chasing rainfall patterns in the Deccan plateau, a startup founder building a credit-scoring model, or a policymaker studying urban migration would each face the same maze — a scattered landscape of disconnected portals, ministry archives, and academic repositories, with no single door leading in.

At Vikas Soudha in Bengaluru, Shri Priyank Kharge, Hon'ble Minister for Home, Information Technology, Biotechnology, and E-Governance, Government of Karnataka, formally launched Tathyakosh (tathyakosh.in) on August 12 — India's first unified data discovery and cataloguing platform.

The launch reflects a deliberate and forward-looking push by Minister Kharge and the Government of Karnataka to position the state at the forefront of India's data and AI infrastructure, translating vision into a concrete public asset.

Built as an open, non-commercial Digital Public Good, Tathyakosh has been developed by the Centre of Excellence in Artificial Intelligence under the ACSEL Technology Forum, an initiative of the Government of Karnataka in partnership with the IIT Alumni Centre Bengaluru (IITACB).

The meaning behind the name

The platform's name is drawn from Sanskrit, and it is not incidental. Tathya means truth, or "that which is as it is." Kosh means a repository or storehouse.

Together, the name captures the platform's ambition: to become a trustworthy, centralised storehouse of truth about India's data — not the data itself, but a faithful map of where it lives, how reliable it is, and how it can be used.

This distinction matters. Tathyakosh does not host the datasets it catalogues. Instead, it functions as a sophisticated metadata catalogue, indexing enormous volumes of information and directing users straight back to the original source.

In doing so, it preserves the ownership and integrity of the underlying data while removing the burden of discovery from the user.

A platform born of necessity

Speaking at the launch, Minister Priyank Kharge placed the platform within the larger context of India's technological ambitions, underscoring the proactive role the Government of Karnataka has chosen to play in building the country's data infrastructure well ahead of demand.

He noted that the country's progress in artificial intelligence would depend not merely on talent and computing infrastructure, but equally on the ability to locate and responsibly use the data that already exists within its institutions.

Tathyakosh, he said, addresses this gap by making data discoverable, structured, and usable — built deliberately as an open, non-commercial public good so that researchers, startups, developers, and policymakers alike could build upon a shared foundation of Indian data.

In doing so, the Minister framed the platform not merely as a technological launch, but as a governance commitment: a signal that Karnataka intends to lead by building the infrastructure other states and institutions can draw upon.

The launch drew a distinguished gathering of institutional leadership, reflecting the scale of ambition behind the initiative. Among those present were Dr. N. Manjula (IAS), Secretary, Department of Electronics, IT and BT; Dr. Avinash Menon Rajendran (IAS), Managing Director, Karnataka Innovation and Technology Society (KITS); Mr. Ashok Kamath, Secretary, IITACB and Director, Centre of Excellence in

AI; Prof. Ashok Misra, President, IITACB; and Suman Dash, COO, ACSEL Technology Forum.

Ashok Kamath, who has steered the project from its conception, spoke to the everyday frustration that Tathyakosh was designed to resolve. He observed that the true challenge in India was never the absence of data, but the difficulty of knowing where it resides, whether it can be trusted, and whether it is fit for use. The platform, he explained, was built precisely so that a researcher, developer, policymaker, or entrepreneur could discover what already exists before expending time and resources searching elsewhere.

Dr. N. Manjula echoed this sentiment from a governance perspective, pointing out that while data is abundant, it remains fragmented across platforms and institutions. Tathyakosh, she noted, allows users to locate information without searching each source individually — and, just as importantly, helps them assess the quality and suitability of that data for their specific needs.

Beyond a search engine: the architecture of trust

What separates Tathyakosh from an ordinary search interface is the rigour of its metadata standardisation and quality-scoring framework. Every dataset indexed on the platform is evaluated against multiple dimensions — Findability, Accessibility, Machine-Readability, Freshness, Completeness, Granularity, and Coverage. This scoring system allows a developer or data scientist to assess, at a glance, whether a dataset is suitable for model training or analytical work, long before a single file is downloaded.

Navigating the platform reflects this same philosophy of clarity. A user begins with a unified search bar, or filters directly by sector — agriculture, health, or geospatial data, for instance — instantly narrowing down a repository of well over a million datasets without needing to visit a single ministry website.

Each entry carries standardised metadata: domain, geography, time period, format, and access type, allowing users to filter for open-access records, machine-readable formats such as CSV, JSON, or APIs, or historical material stretching back to 1947.

Quality scores then offer an objective signal of a dataset's fitness for a given purpose, whether that purpose is precision agriculture modelling or macroeconomic policy research. Clicking through any entry takes the user

directly to its original institutional source, preserving attribution and data integrity at every step.

Anchored in Karnataka, built for the nation

Though conceived with national ambition, Tathyakosh carries a distinctly Bengaluru signature. The platform already features more than 50,000 Karnataka-specific datasets, drawing from foundational state resources such as the Karnataka Open Government Data Portal, Mahiti Kanaja, KRSRAC/K-GIS, the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), and the Raman Research Institute.

This local-to-global design means that a regional policy researcher, a Bengaluru-based startup scaling a data-driven product, and a public administrator optimising citizen services can all draw from the same unified interface — one that scales seamlessly from the hyperlocal to the national.

A repository spanning the nation's concerns

Tathyakosh organises its expansive holdings across sixteen core domains, each addressing a sector central to India's development trajectory.

In agriculture and climate resilience, data on crop yields, soil health, weather patterns, and land use — long scattered across ministry archives, state agricultural universities, and meteorological departments — now sits within reach of agri-tech innovators and climate researchers, who can assess freshness and geographic coverage instantly while building precision farming tools or climate vulnerability models.

In healthcare and biomedical research, epidemiological trends, immunisation records, and hospital capacity data — historically locked within siloed municipal, state, and central databases — become discoverable in machine-readable form, with completeness and granularity scores helping medical teams judge whether a dataset can support predictive modelling or epidemiological mapping.

In financial inclusion and the economy, fintech entrepreneurs and policy analysts can cross-reference banking penetration, credit distribution, and macroeconomic indicators against demographic data without the days once lost mapping which department holds which survey. In urban infrastructure and governance, city planners and researchers gain standardised visibility into transport networks, public asset registries, and municipal governance data that had previously remained scattered across local bodies and specialised institutes — supporting more evidence-based planning of India's rapidly urbanising landscape.

Beyond these four, the platform's remaining domains span the full breadth of national life: education, spanning literacy rates and institutional enrolment data; environment and climate, integrating meteorological and pollution metrics with forest cover and vulnerability indicators; energy, covering power generation and renewable adoption; labour and employment; science and technology, including research outputs and patent records; law and justice; tourism and culture; social welfare; transport and logistics; and geospatial and GIS resources drawn from agencies such as KRSRAC and national mapping institutions.

By unifying these domains under one standardised framework of automated quality scoring, Tathyakosh allows a researcher, entrepreneur, or civil servant to bypass what was once a search across hundreds of disconnected portals — replacing fragmentation with a single point of departure.

The platform in numbers

At launch, Tathyakosh's scale places it among the most ambitious data-infrastructure efforts undertaken by any Indian state. The platform has systematically catalogued over 1.5 million datasets, drawn from 458 sources spanning central ministries, state portals, and GIS agencies, including at least 346 Indian repositories and 37 international repositories holding data relevant to India.

Its sixteen domains cover the full spectrum of governance and public life, and its historical reach extends as far back as 1947 — offering, for the first time, a single continuous thread through more than seven decades of India's public record.

Part of a wider national push

Tathyakosh does not emerge in isolation. Other states have, in recent years, taken their own steps toward open data infrastructure — Telangana, for instance, has built an Agricultural Data Exchange in partnership with the World Economic Forum and the Indian Institute of Science.

Set against this backdrop, Karnataka's initiative stands out for its scale and its scope, moving beyond a single sector to unify sixteen domains of public data under one roof.

It reflects a pattern increasingly visible across Indian states: governments choosing to get ahead of the country's data and AI needs rather than respond to them after the fact — and, in Karnataka's case, doing so under Minister Priyank Kharge's direct stewardship of the state's IT and e-governance portfolio.

Beyond its role in AI research and innovation, Tathyakosh also carries a civic dimension. By standardising and making public data more visible, the platform is intended to strengthen governmental transparency and enable more structured, evidence-based public analytics — extending its value beyond startups and researchers to citizens seeking a clearer view of how public data is collected and used.

Infrastructure for the future

The institution behind Tathyakosh, the ACSEL Technology Forum, operates as a Centre of Excellence in Artificial Intelligence under the joint aegis of the Government of Karnataka and the IIT Alumni Centre Bengaluru.

Its mandate extends beyond any single platform: to bridge academic research, industrial enterprise, and government execution through open data infrastructure, accelerator programmes, and a sustained commitment to responsible AI innovation.

Tathyakosh is, in this sense, both a product and a proof of concept — a demonstration of what becomes possible when public data is treated not as a scattered by-product of governance, but as a strategic national asset.

A door that was missing

For the researcher who once spent weeks locating a single agricultural dataset, for the startup founder who abandoned a promising idea for want of reliable health data, and for the policymaker who had to write to five departments simply to compare economic indicators, Tathyakosh represents something more than a technical achievement.

It represents a door that India's data ecosystem was always missing — one that does not create new data, but finally makes visible the data that has existed all along.

That this door now exists is, in large part, a reflection of the proactive leadership shown by Minister Priyank Kharge and the Government of Karnataka, who chose to invest in foundational digital infrastructure ahead of the curve rather than in response to it.

In doing so, the state has set a benchmark for what forward-looking governance in the age of artificial intelligence can look like — not merely enabling technology, but actively building the public groundwork on which the nation's innovators can stand.

Tathyakosh is live now and accessible to the public at www.tathyakosh.in.

Photo: GettyImages



Open sesame for corporates?

Rashme Sehgal on how the Centre took control of taxes on minerals, undermining the rights of states

Was the Mines and Minerals (Amendment) Act 2026 rushed through in Parliament to benefit a handful of corporates? Consider the speed with which such an important piece of legislation moved: introduced in the Lok Sabha on 10 August, passed by both Houses on 13 August and notified in the Gazette of India on 17 August. You only have to read between the lines to see that a law presented as ushering in a uniform taxation regime for mining has been designed to write off lakhs of crores owed by large industrial houses to mineral-rich states including Jharkhand, Odisha, Karnataka and Kerala.

The scale of these liabilities emerged during *Mineral Area Development Authority v. Steel Authority of India*, heard in July 2024 by a nine-judge Supreme Court bench headed by then Chief Justice D.Y. Chandrachud. The Federation of Indian Mineral Industries argued that the mining industry stood to lose Rs 1.5 to 2 lakh crore due to tax arrears. Independent analysts believe the figure runs into trillions.

Jharkhand alone claims that central PSUs such as Eastern Coalfields Ltd and private mining companies owe the state approx. Rs 1.36 lakh crore in outstanding mining dues, land compensation and tax arrears.

In its landmark ruling, the Supreme Court upheld the right of mineral-rich states to levy taxes and cesses on mineral-bearing lands retrospectively from 1 April 2005. These arrears could be paid in instalments. The judgment also settled a 35-year-old controversy by holding that royalty paid by a mining leaseholder is not a tax but a contractual consideration for the enjoyment of mineral rights.

Jharkhand aggressively pursued and recovered Rs 200 crore from Bharat Coking Coal Ltd earlier this year; while Tata Steel disclosed a contingent liability of Rs 17,347 crore in its financial statements. Other mining companies and public sector undertakings faced substantial exposure. Although state departments have not uniformly published company-wise liabilities for groups such as Adani, Aditya Birla and Vedanta, the amendment's implications for the industry are considerable. Vedanta Resources, for example, was identified by credit-rating agencies, including Moody's, as one of the

worst hit by the judgment. The scale of its mining operations is evident from the Rs 6,249 crore the Vedanta Group paid in royalties during 2023-24.

The 2026 amendment dramatically changes this position. It restricts state governments from independently levying fresh taxes, cesses or local duties on mineral rights and mineral-bearing lands, bringing such lands under the Centre's direct regulatory framework. A new 'Section D' prevents states from imposing separate local taxes or extra levies unless permitted by the Union government, and invalidates unpaid or uncollected tax demands that predate the amendment. Effectively it alters the balance of Centre-state fiscal relations and is incompatible with the federal structure envisaged by India's Constitution.

Ranchi-based advocate Rashmi Katyan, who specialises in revenue law and has represented the state of Jharkhand in several land-related cases, describes the Centre's approach as "neo-colonialist".

"They talk about following a trade equalisation policy, which means coal mined in Jharkhand will cost the same when sold in Kerala. Surely the state from where the minerals are extracted must remain the prime beneficiary?" he asks.

While the original mining Act empowered the Centre to regulate mines and mineral development, the amendment extends that authority to mineral-bearing lands. By taking away the states' taxation power, it not only deprives them of a key source of income but also reduces their autonomy in channelling mining revenue towards social welfare.

The financial stakes are enormous. The Jharkhand Mineral Bearing Land Cess Act generated Rs 13,442 crore in 2025-26 (that's 68 per cent of the state's non-tax revenue and 11 per cent of its total revenue receipts). Odisha's mining tax revenue is projected to reach Rs 53,000 crore in 2026-27, accounting for 75 per cent of its non-tax revenue. Over the last five years, Odisha has auctioned 79 mineral blocks, adding approx. Rs 87,000 crore to its kitty.

This revenue was intended for healthcare, education, social security, agriculture, sanitation and drinking water. The Orissa Rural Infrastructure and Socio-Economic Development Act, 2004, similarly imposed a tax of up to 20 per cent on the annual value of mineral-bearing lands to



Photo: Getty Images

The amendment rocks Centre-state fiscal relations and violates principles of federalism

fund rural welfare programmes.

Supported by a strong monitoring framework, Chhattisgarh earned more than Rs 70,000 crore from minerals during the past five financial years. Karnataka earned around Rs 36,120 crore, Kerala Rs 550 crore and Uttarakhand Rs 4,600 crore from mineral royalties during the same period. These figures exclude minor minerals such as sand and boulders, which remain under state control.

The Department of Mines and Geology recorded a steady increase in revenue, from Rs 6,308 crore in 2021-22 to Rs 8,845 crore in 2025-26, aided by real-time tracking, digitisation and stricter e-auction

compliance. Goa, in contrast, faced extreme volatility, recording near-zero digit figures between 2021 and 2023 after the Supreme Court cancelled its iron-ore leases, although earnings recovered over the following two years.

The Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), an umbrella body of several farmers' organisations, has demanded that the amendment be repealed. It has urged state governments to defend their federal rights and use their mining revenue for agrarian development, tribal welfare and productive employment. SKM believes the law is designed to attract foreign investment to the mining sector, including rare-earth extraction, and facilitate largescale exploitation of domestic mineral resources.

Katyan points out that Jharkhand holds vast reserves of coal, iron ore, uranium, bauxite, mica and rare earths, spread across some of India's oldest geological formations, including the Gondwana rocks. "We pay some of the highest GST, but these minerals are exported to other states for processing," he said. "Local people are not the beneficiaries of this wealth."

The argument of mining corporates, echoed in this amendment, is that revenues will increase if mineral-bearing lands are acquired quickly, more mining blocks are auctioned, and successful bidders receive environmental, forest and wildlife clearances promptly. But environmentalists say this is already causing a steady erosion of protective safeguards.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006, the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas)

Act and environmental-impact assessments (EIAs) are frequently bypassed, with mandatory gram sabha consents acquired forcibly or simply faked. The disregard for regulatory norms has led to the displacement of lakhs of Adivasis, particularly in Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, where 70 per cent of India's mines are located.

Environmentalists warn that deprived of taxation powers, mineral-rich states may be pushed to maximise mineral production in pursuit of short-term fiscal gains, accelerating the destruction of our forests, farmland, water bodies and wildlife habitat.

Sandeep Patnaik, an independent Odisha-based researcher on mines and forests says both Union and state governments are guilty: "PESA had made gram sabha consent mandatory. That is not being followed and local bureaucrats are a party to this. With most PSUs having been taken over or working closely with large corporate houses, tribal rights will be further eroded."

Opposition is growing. The Biju Janata Dal (BJD) and India bloc parties have organised mass dharnas in Odisha, while local groups have threatened economic blockades. Jharkhand's Chief Minister Hemant Soren, along with the Congress and Left parties, has launched demonstrations across Dhanbad and Ramgarh.

Leaders from Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu have also voiced their objections, warning that this amendment sets a dangerous precedent that violates Indian federalism, while throwing open India's precious mineral wealth to private monopolies. ■

STATES 360°



PUNJAB

Punjab 2027: AAP under siege, Congress finds its Pilot

Harjeshwar Pal Singh

The crucial assembly election barely five months from now will decide whether the *jhaadu* sweeps Punjab a second time or gets swept out of the state. For Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann, virtually every road seems barricaded with barbed wire.

Start with the *sant-sipahi* confrontation that no sitting Punjab chief minister has faced in living memory. On 15 June 2026, the Akal Takht declared Mann *Guru Dokhi* and *Khalsa Panth Virodhi* (anti-Guru, anti-Panth)—over a video allegedly showing him sprinkling liquor on images of the Sikh Gurus and Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale—and directed the *sangat* to cut ties with him. The Takht's word still carries the force of scripture for lakhs of Punjabis. For a party that built its brand as a clean alternative to VIP culture and communal politics, being excommunicated by the highest temporal seat of the Sikhs struck at the heart of Mann's legitimacy.

The AAP camp, meanwhile, is restless. Ministerial staff, computer teachers and an alphabet soup of employee unions have been on and off dharna for months over unhonoured pay promises. Farmer bodies under the Samyukt Kisan Morcha banner have twice gathered at the Chandigarh-Mohali border, reminding Mann that '*sarkar badlo*' cuts both ways.

The political has also become personal. A retired Punjab and Haryana High Court judge has accused the chief minister's wife, Gurpreet Kaur, of taking a Rs 5-crore bribe to bury a rape case. The NHRC has sought action-taken reports, and the SAD has demanded a CBI probe into what it calls an institutionalised 'loot model' running out of the CMO.

Mann, for his part, embraced Gurpreet Singh Sekhon—prime accused in the 2016 Nabha jailbreak that sprang Khalistan Liberation Force chief Harmandir Mintoo—into the AAP fold at a Zira rally, only a decade after Kejriwal called that very jailbreak proof of the "complete breakdown of law and order" in Punjab.



Photo: Getty Images

Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown

Two further episodes bear mentioning. A Sikh youth, Mohanjit Singh, waved a black flag at Mann's convoy in Sangrur to protest the drug menace. He was allegedly given electric shocks and had his *kakaars* (the five articles that Sikhs wear at all times) desecrated in custody. The Akal Takht Jathedar compared the state government to Zakariya Khan. Days later, Gulzar Singh, a Dalit daily-wager from Sangrur, questioned Finance Minister Harpal Cheema about *chitta* (drugs) in his own village. Subsequently hounded by the local sarpanch and police to apologise publicly, Gulzar took poison. The National Commission for Scheduled Castes has since issued notices to Punjab's top officials; Rahul Gandhi has called it nothing less than "crushing those who question".

Layer onto this the perennial chargesheet—drugs, gangsterism, corruption, a chief minister widely seen (fairly or not) as answerable more to Kejriwal's durbar in Delhi than to Chandigarh—and it is clear that AAP is fraying across too many battlelines. While its opponents are, for once, organising rather than merely complaining.

Sukhbir Badal is crisscrossing the state with 'Punjab Bachao' rallies focusing on

drugs, healthcare, drinking water, roads, education. Akali Dal (Waris Punjab De) has pitched jailed MP Amritpal Singh as its 2027 chief-ministerial face and is fielding candidates from families of Sikh 'martyrs'. Their bet is that the drug issue and Amritpal as a 'millenarian' solution will help them reap political dividends. Even the BJP, a bit player in rural Punjab, senses an opening in the very same drug and law-and-order narrative Mann once tried to own. The saffron party has started a 12-day anti-drug campaign and picked its Rs 2,100 per month Haryana Lado Lakshmi Yojana against the AAP's Rs 1,000 Mawan Dhiyan Satkar Yojana for Punjab's women.

Against this backdrop, the Congress high command's decision to remove Bhupesh Baghel as Punjab in-charge and hand the state to Sachin Pilot looks like a routine reshuffle. Read closely, it's a course correction.

Bhupesh Baghel, former chief minister of Chhattisgarh, was appointed in February 2025 to try and unite the party's Punjab unit, which was split at least three ways—Charanjit Channi and Sukhjinder Randhawa in one camp, Paktap Bajwa's LoP camp in another and PPCC president Amarinder Singh Raja Warring (backed by

the district presidents he had appointed) in the third. Instead of uniting them, Baghel became a faction unto himself, seen (fairly or not) as too close to Warring. Even Rahul Gandhi's July reorganisation, which retained Warring but made Channi campaign-committee chief and Randhawa core-committee chief, did not bring peace to the party ranks.

Eighteen months on, the Punjab Congress was no closer to a single chain-of-command than the day Baghel arrived—a costly stagnation for a party that is seen as the AAP's prime challenger.

Pilot's appointment indicates that the Channi camp (comprising most senior Congress leaders) needed accommodating before Rahul Gandhi's proposed statewide yatra (expected to open at the Golden Temple and cover all 117 constituencies).

Channi, Randhawa and Warring have all publicly welcomed Pilot's appointment—a rare moment on unanimity for a triad that has agreed on virtually nothing since 2022. Whether Warring survives as PPCC chief is the question now being asked in Chandigarh's corridors. There is talk the high command may summon him to Delhi for 'another responsibility'—Congress-speak for a graceful exit.

There is a lesson here. The Congress high command, whatever its faults, is at least willing to course-correct—listen, reshuffle, accommodate—where the BJP's

central leadership simply imposes. It is a democratic instinct the party can be proud of. It has also cost the Grand Old Party dearly—three to four crucial months of an election year were lost to infighting it could scarcely afford.

Pilot is, on paper, an ideal choice. He carries no baggage from Punjab's factional wars, enjoys acceptability (by most accounts) across camps, and comes from Rajasthan, which geographically and temperamentally sits closer to Punjab than Chhattisgarh ever did. Pilot's formal, deliberative and consultative style is a relief to Punjab leaders exhausted by Baghel's abrasiveness.

Former bureaucrat and senior Punjab Congress leader Hardip Singh Kinra finds that the young and energetic Pilot "connects well with party rank and file". His political creed, road-tested over a decade, is instructive. "There are many leaders and many views," Pilot told Congress workers once, "but there are no factions". He has already begun one-on-one consultations with state leaders ahead of Rahul's visit, and colleagues say Pilot's message to Punjab is much the same: every faction must become a stakeholder, and discipline is non-negotiable.

Baghel, Punjab hands say, never struck that balance. He arrived a first-time in-charge with a small team and never quite learned the state's grammar. His disconnect and communication gap with senior leaders outside the Warring camp was attributed to cultural ignorance, temperamental shortcomings and the lack of a ground network.

Whether Pilot can accomplish in five months what Baghel could not in 18 will decide whether Congress emerges as a genuine challenger to AAP or remains trapped in a familiar cycle of self-sabotage. In politics, as in a multi-cornered election, the party that spends too long setting its own house in order often discovers that the voters have already moved on. ■

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It’s time to #CorrectTheMap

Ashok Swain on why the UN resolution to abandon the Mercator projection and adopt an ‘Equal Earth’ model matters

The United Nations General Assembly has taken a long-overdue step towards geographical honesty. On 4 September, 164 countries voted for a resolution calling for wider use of world maps that show continents and countries in their true relative sizes. Only the United States voted against it, while six countries abstained. The resolution does not ban the existing Mercator projection or force every country to use one official map. It encourages governments, schools, international organisations, media outlets and technology companies to use equal-area maps, particularly the ‘Equal Earth’ projection, when comparing the size of different parts of the world.

This should not be controversial. A map used to teach world geography should represent the world as accurately as possible. Yet defenders of the existing map have treated even this simple principle as a political attack. Their reaction reveals how deeply people can become attached to a familiar distortion, especially when that distortion places their own countries at the visual centre of the world.

The Mercator projection was created by Gerardus Mercator in 1569 for maritime navigation. This Mercator map was important for navigation because it showed a ship’s constant compass direction as a straight line. Sailors could draw a straight line between two points, read the required bearing from their compass and follow that course across the sea. In the UN-endorsed Equal Earth map, a constant compass direction may appear as a curved line, making it less convenient for traditional navigation. But a useful navigation chart is not necessarily a suitable map for classrooms, newsrooms or international organisations.

Mercator greatly enlarges places far from the Equator. As a result, Europe, North America, Greenland and Russia appear much larger than they really are in relation to Africa, South America and large parts of Asia. The farther a territory is from the Equator, the more its size is exaggerated. A technical feature intended to help

16th century sailors became, over time, the world’s dominant geographical image.

The most striking example is the comparison between Africa and Greenland. On a Mercator map, they can appear almost equal in size. In reality, Africa is about fourteen times larger than Greenland. Africa covers more than 30 million sq. km. It is large enough to contain the United States, China, India and much of Europe together. But on the map shown to generations of schoolchildren, it looks only moderately larger than Europe.

This is not a minor mistake in design. It is a false picture of the planet, repeated so often that most people no longer notice it. What is familiar begins to look natural, while an accurate map can appear strange simply because people have been trained to expect the wrong proportions.

Defenders of the status quo usually argue that all flat maps distort the globe. That is true, but it does not excuse the continued misuse of Mercator. All measuring tools have limitations, but we do not knowingly use a badly suited tool when a better one is available. A subway map distorts distance to make routes easier to follow. No serious planner would, therefore, use it to calculate the area of a city. In the same way, a navigation projection should not be used as the standard picture of world geography.

Equal Earth provides a clear alternative. Developed in 2018, it is an equal-area projection. It preserves the correct size relationships among continents and countries while keeping their shapes recognisable. As the Earth is curved, like a sphere, no flat map can show area, shape, distance and direction perfectly at the same time. But when the purpose is to show how large one region is compared with another, it tells the truth that Mercator hides.

The opposition to this correction cannot be separated from questions of history and power. Maps are more than just drawings of coastlines and borders. They shape how people imagine the world. Large spaces attract attention and

suggest importance. Smaller spaces appear weaker, more distant and less significant. When Europe and North America are enlarged while Africa and other equatorial regions are reduced, the map quietly coaxes a visual ranking of nations.

Mercator did not create his projection as a colonial conspiracy. But its later dominance suited a colonial world centred on European power. European empires controlled much of Africa, Asia and the Americas, and the most widely circulated map made imperial centres look larger and colonised regions smaller. The projection survived the formal end of colonial rule. The political map changed but

Photo: Getty Images



Size matters The old and new maps projected at the UNGA meeting; (left) Robert Dussey, the foreign minister of Togo, who led the push to adopt the ‘Correct the Map’ resolution

the old visual prejudice remained on classroom walls.

The US objection in the UN General Assembly was especially revealing. Its representative dismissed the resolution as part of a radical ideological project and suggested that discussing a 16th century map was beneath the UN. The response suggests that the debate strikes a nerve because it challenges a world view.

Of course, replacing a map will not end poverty, cancel debt or reform an unequal international system. It will not by itself overcome the political and economic problems facing African countries. But that is a false standard. No one argues that a fairer map can substitute for

material justice. But the apparent size of a continent affects public perception—of its land, resources, population, environmental significance and strategic value.

The reform matters beyond Africa. Mercator also diminishes South America and misrepresents many countries in South and Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and Oceania. Equal-area maps offer a clearer understanding of land use, population density, ecosystems, food production and climate vulnerability.

The cost of the advocated switch to Equal Earth cannot be a serious excuse. We live in an age when satellites can observe remote landscapes in extraordinary detail and digital services can map almost every road, building and business. Technology companies can change a global display through a software update. Publishers regularly issue new

editions of textbooks. Schools replace teaching material. It’s not quite tenable that we can map every street but cannot correct the world map.

The UN must now lead by example. Its agencies should use equal-area projections whenever relative size matters. Governments should revise school curriculums and official publications. Media organisations should review the maps used in news coverage. Technology companies should display a globe or an equal-area projection at the global level while keeping Mercator where navigation requires it. Teachers should also explain why projections differ, so students learn to question maps rather than accept them as an unassailable truth. ■

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From dhabas to dimagi Naxals

Avay Shukla toasts the crusader and roasts the bhakt

One doesn’t eat out often, partly because I haven’t yet received the last six instalments of my dearness allowance, but mainly because I can never find parking in Noida. But once in a while one has to be adventurous, so my wife Neerja and I decided to have a night out.

The question, however, prompted by recent FDA revelations about what is actually dished out as food in restaurants, was: how do we ensure that we are not served plastic granules as rice, palm oil as paneer, crow meat as chicken, shampoo and emulsifier as milk?

“I know,” said Neerja. “Let’s invite Tukaram Mundhe to

accompany us for dinner!”

She was right. Mr Mundhe is the foodies’ new toast. When he walks into a restaurant, the rats and cockroaches (the real ones) leave by the back door, the analogue paneer is dumped into the sewer line, and managers start counting the flies in their kitchens instead of their profits.

I’m told the most sought-after rating in Bombay eateries these days is not the Michelin star, but a certificate which proudly identifies a ‘Mundhe-approved eatery’. A close second (or even better) is a board announcing: ‘Tukaram Mundhe eats here’.

But I’m afraid he may be Khemka-ed very soon: institutions

nowadays are not expected to follow the law but to find ways around them, for a consideration, of course. Opposition to him has started organising itself. The Bombay High Court has already conveyed its royal displeasure.

A newspaper report revealed that footfalls in restaurants have fallen by 20 per cent, as folks no longer want to pay through their noses for dining on worms (not to mention service charge). I wouldn’t be surprised if corporate hospital boardrooms are worrying about plummeting revenues due to declining patient numbers admitted to their emergency wards for food poisoning, vomiting, loose motions, nausea and all the other compli-

mentary gifts of five-star eateries.

Very soon, this will affect our GST collections and our GDP, and Mundhe shall be declared a ‘dimagi Naxal’ and Pakistani collaborator. He will then be sent on deportation to the external affairs ministry where any damage he does will be nothing as compared to the destruction Messrs Jaishankar and Misri have already wrought and will therefore not be noticed.

Coming back to my dinner date, Mr Mundhe was not available on the phone: he was on his seventh interview of the day for a TV channel, after which he was scheduled to raid the Raj Bhavan kitchen.

So Neerja and I decided to play it safe and have *aloo parathas* and *kheer* at Murthal—a dhaba still being the safest place to eat in India, and with plenty of parking too.

The cockroaches, dimagi Naxals and *kuttas* are barking up the wrong tree. The changes and reforms they want—in the examination systems, condition of schools, accountability *et al*—will not happen unless this unresponsive government in Delhi departs.

And it will never depart as long as future elections (general and state) are based on SIR and EVMs. It now appears increasingly plausible that both have been so structured as to deliver victories for the BJP/NDA when and where it matters. The anecdotal evidence is mounting. Established political parties appear to be finally realising this, and the new kids on the block should, too.

They will achieve their ultimate goal only when the elections are

rendered fair and transparent, when the Election Commission of India is compelled to cancel SIR, revert to the paper ballot system, and impartially enforce the model code of conduct; when the force of public pressure persuades the Supreme Court to quash the appointments of the three election commissioners as violative of an earlier SC judgment.

These are the foundational changes the times demand. They should be taken up by the CJP and once achieved with the help of all those youngsters out there, the rest will follow as surely as spring follows winter. Fail here, and the winter of discontent will continue for a very, very long time, with no spring to follow.

I’ve reached the time of life when I can expect Doctors Dementia, Parkinson and Alzheimer queuing up outside my door. They haven’t yet, which makes me suspicious that either my name has been deleted from their lists in a Gyanesh Kumar-type exercise, or they think I am too far gone for their ministrations to make a difference.

Which suits me fine, because these days I am afflicted by another condition—schizophrenia. Split, or to be more precise, splintered personalities. Let me explain.

The symptoms first evinced

themselves in 2014 but have now metastasised on an impressive scale, especially after the July student protests in Delhi. I have always considered myself a dissident, a conscientious objector to the Modi government and was fairly comfortable with this personality trait, never mind that it cost me most of my relatives and friends.

Not anymore. For I am now informed, on the authority of a dozen ministers and Kangana Runout, that I am also a cockroach, a *kutta*, an *andolanjevi*, a member of both the Khan Market and *tukde-tukde* gangs, a gutter-generation type, an anti-national, an urban Naxal and a *dimagi* Naxal.

Whew! That’s a lot for any one individual to handle: I cannot for the life of me figure out to which of the above genera I belong. It has caused an identity crisis for me: who the hell am I? I probably need to see a shrink, but I don’t think my CGHS card will cover that.

Neerja, the only other intelligent member of my family other than Brutus, my doggo, says there’s only one solution to my problem—stop disagreeing with Mr Modi on everything and become his supporter.

With this change, my splintered personality will coalesce into just one—that of a bhakt—and the schizophrenia will vanish in an instant. A bhakt has no nuances, doubts or questions, he is self-confident in his stupidity, and proud of his incompleteness.

I considered the idea for a couple of days but then decided to dump it. For I discovered that the bhakt has his own mental condition which is far more severe than any I suffer from: delusional psychosis. Whereby he regards the non-biological one as a god, is completely disconnected from reality, ready to kill those who think, pray, eat or speak differently and stone-deaf to reason.

I can live with my splintered personality but this bhakti is a pain in the traditional place I can do without.

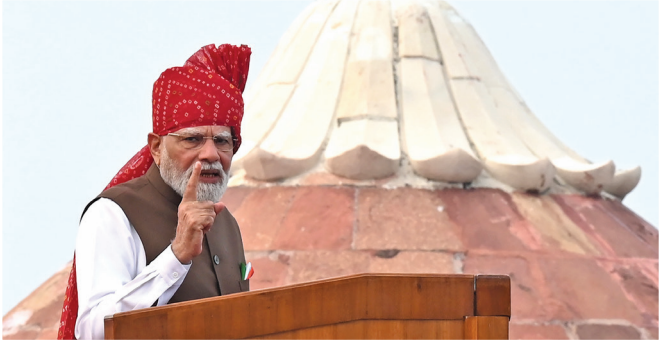
Maybe I’ll just go to Sadhguru to discover the real me. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

Photos: Getty Images



The BJP-led protest in July (above) was a defining pushback moment by youngsters; it rattled the establishment enough for Prime Minister Narendra Modi (inset) to come up with the ‘dimagi Naxal’ remark in his Independence Day speech this year



Dimagi Naxals, listen up! You won’t get to your goal till this ECI is forced to scrap the SIR







1000 Days of the People's Government

Festival of Progress Driving Progress, Inspiring Change

Under the leadership of Chief Minister Revanth Reddy, the People's Government that will successfully reach the milestone of 1000 days by September 1st.

- 

Loan waiver up to **Rs. 2 lakh** for more than 25 lakh farmer families.
- 

Investment support of more than **Rs. 36,000 crores** under Rythu Bharosa.
- 

Nearly **Rs. 1.68 lakh crores** spent for farmer welfare in 32 months.
- 

Free travel worth nearly **Rs. 11,000 crores** saved for women through the Mahalakshmi scheme.
- 

Free electricity up to 200 units for more than **53 lakh** families under Gruha Jyothi.
- 

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- 

Bank linkage loans of **Rs. 60,487 crores** to **4.54 lakh** women's groups. **Rs. 1900 crores** interest waiver.
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Construction of **4.50 lakh** Indiramma houses in the first phase. **Rs. 5 lakhs** assistance for house construction.
- 

LOCs worth **₹ 798.41 crore** for 139,712 people.
- 

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- 

Expanding social security further with new pensions for **2.25 lakh** people.
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Breakfast, milk and nutritious food worth **Rs.720 crores** allocated for over **22 lakh** students.
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Rs. 2526.12 crores assistance to 5,18,186 people through the CM Relief Fund.
- 

Rs. 600 crores paid in 100 days to clear pending dues of retired employees that had accumulated for years.
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In 2025-26, Telangana IT exports are **Rs. 3.97 lakh crores**. **12.14 lakh** direct IT jobs.
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