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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

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A litmus test for the Opposition

It was effective 2018, four years into Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first term in office, that Sweden's V-Dem Institute marked India's descent into a state it describes as an 'electoral autocracy'. That dubious classification has stuck ever since, though the democratic backsliding is, in fact, far worse than the label might suggest. In the 2026 edition of V-Dem's *Democracy Report*, India is ranked #105 (out of 179 countries) on its 'Liberal Democracy Index'.

For citizens who have watched this erosion with concern, then alarm and now a sense of resignation, the 2024 Lok Sabha elections had briefly offered a ray of hope. That was two years ago in June 2024, when a more well-knit Opposition than you see today was able to make common cause, push back credibly and stop the BJP from securing a simple majority in the Lok Sabha.

Again, just two months ago in April 2026, the same Opposition was able to foil the BJP+ government's plans to push through a Delimitation Bill that threatened to dramatically undercut the representation of southern states in Parliament and undermine India's federal compact.

In its all-too-transparent bid to concentrate power at the Centre, the BJP has also been pushing 'One Nation, One Election' and many other unitary variants of the same driving impulse.

The primary unitary formulation advanced by the BJP-Sangh is their foundational ideological slogan 'Ek Desh, Ek Nishan, Ek Vidhan, Ek Pradhan' (One Country, One Flag, One Constitution, One Prime Minister). This historical formulation traces back to the BJP's predecessor, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, and its founder Syama Prasad Mookerjee.

It has grown new tentacles in the Modi era, in the shape of One Nation, One Election (ONOE); One Nation, One Tax; One Nation, One Ration Card; One Nation, One Grid; One Nation, One Uniform and so on.

Even though the BJP returned to power in 2024, it drew some lessons from a victory that still smelled like defeat. It hadn't managed to entirely steamroll the Opposition and had fallen way short of the crushing 400+ majority it was sloganeering about before the elections. In Uttar Pradesh, where it had just

inaugurated the new Ram Mandir to declare a great civilisational triumph, as it were, it dropped to 33 seats (out of 80) while the Samajwadi Party bagged 37. It even lost the prestigious seat of Faizabad, which includes the assembly segment of Ayodhya. That defeat stung.

After all its toolkit attempts to bribe, bully, break the Opposition, it still only managed to secure 36.6 per cent of the popular vote. Which tells you something about its real appeal with the population at large, though not enough about its disproportionate hold on the levers of power.

The big lesson the BJP drew from its 2024 performance was that it needed to do more to

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tighten its grip on power. It realised that after everything it had done so far, it was still not able to organically win enough support to secure the two-thirds majority needed to rewrite the Constitution. With the single-mindedness of a rampaging bull, it saw that the only way was to re-engineer the electorate itself, to do a comprehensive purge of the voter rolls, and ensure that this culling of voters was decisively net-positive for the BJP. Enter the S.I.R.

At its service in the project to reshape the electoral rolls, the BJP has the Election Commission of India (ECI), which presides over the SIR. Readers will know that the ECI is supposedly an autonomous, nonpartisan body, but the election commissioners are now (legally) chosen by a 2:1 ruling party majority, which turns the ECI into a government department, for all intents and purposes. The new law came into being via 'The CEC and Other Election Commissioners Bill, 2023', which was passed in December 2023, ahead of the Lok Sabha elections in April-May 2024.

Under the new law, the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and other election commissioners are appointed by the President upon the recommendation of a Selection Committee. The Selection Committee consists of the Prime Minister, a Union cabinet minister and the Leader of the



Photo: IANS
Twenty-five opposition parties got together for the 8 June convening of the INDIA bloc after two years, but there were some notable absentees

Opposition/leader of the largest opposition party in the Lok Sabha. The ECI has read the script and is duly reporting to its new master.

The state assembly elections in Bihar (in November 2025, after SIR, Phase 1) and in West Bengal (in April 2026 after SIR, Phase 2) are both excellent test cases to demonstrate the intention and the effect of the SIR. At the end of Bengal's SIR nightmare, the state's

For the Opposition, the INDIA bloc meeting on 8 June was another beginning. There's still a mountain to climb

count of eligible voters was ~90 lakh less than the pre-SIR baseline of 7.66 crore. In Bihar, 69 lakh voters were dropped.

Citizens who view these developments with alarm had hoped that the Supreme Court of India might step in to question all this and hold the ECI to account. But on 27 May 2026, the Supreme Court gave a clean chit to the SIR exercise. The bench of CJI Surya Kant and Justice Joydip Bagchi ruled that the SIR process was constitutional and well within the ECI's statutory powers. It held that the SIR process is necessary to protect the integrity, accuracy and credibility of electoral rolls.

Phase 3 of said SIR is currently under way in the remaining 16 states and three Union Territories. The first two phases, covering 10 states and 3 UTs, saw 7.2 crore deletions (and 2 crore additions, as per the ECI). This is down 10.2 per cent from pre-SIR baselines; in other words, the exercise has disenfranchised one in every 10 Indian voters.

Although mainstream media practically blacked out all the evidence of targeted deletions and more suspect tampering with the voter rolls, there were enough reports (in this paper and media outfits like *The Wire*, *NewsLaundry*, *Scroll*, *The News Minute*, *Reporters' Collective* and others) and other

exposés besides—like the ones by Rahul Gandhi on Mahadevpura and Aland in Karnataka—that demanded a thorough investigation. There was enough evidence to create reasonable doubt that the SIR was compromised—and yet, instead of demanding some answers from the ECI, demanding that it come clean on the SIR, and refute the evidence that had been presented, the Supreme Court has chosen to stamp its approval on the process.

This should tell the Opposition that the elections are no longer a fair battleground to take on the BJP. It needs to find other means to fight the capture of Indian democracy, the capture of India's democratic institutions, the capture of media and other means of communicating with the people. Opposition leaders should remember that to fight this assault on free and fair elections, on our democracy, on our Constitution, on India's pluralist character, they need to make common cause. They need to define a Common Threat Perception, much before they can formulate a Common Minimum Programme of governance. To even have another shot at governance, they must first learn to swim together, to recognise true allies and Trojan horses, and to keep true allies onside. The INDIA bloc meeting on 8 June was a beginning. There's still a mountain to climb. ■

When YouTube teachers did an autopsy of TV 'news'

Nandlal Sharma reports on the confrontation between a TV anchor and a new class of influential online educators

A video from 2016, when India's currency was demonetised overnight, is still being shared on social media. In it, a TV anchor claims that the newly issued currency notes contain nanochips that could be tracked by satellite, allowing authorities to detect hidden cash hoards. Similar claims were repeated by other prime-time anchors. The story was false, but it became emblematic of a media culture that spread misinformation instead of speaking truth to power.

Nearly a decade later, during Operation Sindoor in May 2025, mainstream TV channels sank to a new low. Several prominent anchors claimed on air that the Indian Navy had attacked Karachi Port. The fact-checking portal *AhNews* confirmed this was false, unverified and propagandist, like much of the 'reporting' across channels.

These two incidents confirm how television journalism has become a caricature of itself during the Modi era. They help explain why the younger generation are increasingly turning elsewhere for information, commentary, education, even advocacy.

The youth's distrust of mainstream media was in full public view in May 2026. Anger over the NEET paper leak scandal and the CBSE Class 12 online marking fiasco triggered nationwide outrage. Students demanded accountability from Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan. While neither the government nor mainstream media adequately addressed their concerns, a social

media war broke out between a well-known female anchor from a private television channel and coaching teachers, who she branded 'worthless nobodies'. The matter has now reached the Delhi High Court with the TV network and anchor filing a two-crore defamation suit on these 'tuppenny teachers'—'do kaudi ke teacher'—including 'Khan Sir', Abhinav Sharma, Babita Tyagi and others.

It all began on 31 May. In a post on X, Anjana Om Kashyap accused 'celebrity teachers' of being a 'coaching mafia' that exploited students and their parents while masquerading as public advocates.

The reaction from online educators was immediate. Among the most prominent critics was Abhinav Sharma, a mathematics teacher for SSC aspirants (with 3 million+ YouTube subscribers). In livestreams that collectively attracted millions of views, Sharma called out the 'godi media' for shielding those in power instead of demanding answers.

He was joined by Faizal Khan, better known as Khan Sir of Khan Global Studies in Patna (6.1 million+ subscribers), and Sonipat-based Babita Tyagi who helps students prepare for UPSC and other competitive

exams at ICS Coaching Centre (3.7+ million YouTube subscribers). In a video posted on 1 June, Tyagi said: "Our prime-time news consists of stories like what kind of oil is used in jhalmuri and how it smells."

Referring to other reports by the female anchor, Tyagi added: "She once compared a buffalo in Bangladesh to Donald Trump because the buffalo had been named Donald Trump. Someone bought it so it wouldn't be slaughtered. This is the level of journalism in our country."

Soon, teachers across India were publicly asking: Why wasn't the media talking about

the NEET paper leak? Why was it not demanding accountability from the Modi government?

Their criticism came at a politically charged moment. Opposition parties led by Rahul Gandhi were demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over the NEET controversy. Students were protesting in cities such as Prayagraj over paper leaks and irregularities in recruitment and entrance examinations. Instead of addressing these issues, why were teachers being targeted?

Why, Tyagi asked, were media personalities who claimed influence with policymakers not pressing for reforms in schools and examination systems? "If a paper leak happened once, shouldn't we have learned from it? Why does the same 'mistake' happen repeatedly?"

According to her, teachers were targeted when they became uncomfortably vocal on students' rights and institutional failures.

Aftab, a student of Khan Sir's, says, "Students preparing for competitive exams are politically aware. We study the Constitution, history, current affairs. We know that 'godi media' defends the BJP government at the Centre. But when our interests are affected, we realise the media is not speaking up for us. This affects us psychologically. We see no future."

He adds: "Teachers entered the fray only when their students' distress peaked. Their support is genuine."



Photo: Getty Images
'Khan Sir' at a protest in Patna demanding the cancellation of a BPS examination

Their coverage of the NEET leaks and the CBSE exam fiasco were good measures of the warring parties' 'news' credentials

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Why have vital indicators gone missing?

Data that spell bad news or expose the government's exaggerated claims have been omitted. Herjinder on what the NFHS-6 conceals

For more than three decades, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) has been the gold standard for understanding India's demographic and public health realities. Conducted periodically since the early 1990s, the survey has offered insights into how Indians live, eat, reproduce and access healthcare.

Its rich, district-level data has empowered policymakers, researchers, journalists and civil society groups to identify gaps in health services, monitor welfare programmes and fine-tune interventions. In a country as vast and diverse as India, such granular data often makes the difference between effective policy and administrative guesswork.

It is precisely because of this reputation that the release of the NFHS-6 (2023-24) fact-sheets has triggered an intense debate within the public health community. While the Union government has highlighted improvements in institutional deliveries, immunisation coverage and several other health indicators, critics argue that the most striking aspect of the latest survey is not what it reveals, but what it leaves out.

The omission of key indicators that featured prominently in earlier editions reduces transparency, weakens comparability with previous surveys and makes it harder to independently assess the performance of major government programmes, say public health experts.

Among the most glaring omissions are indicators directly linked to some of the Narendra Modi government's flagship welfare initiatives.

In NFHS-5, data on household access to clean cooking fuel and sanitation facilities played a crucial role in evaluating the effectiveness

of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana and the Swachh Bharat Mission. These allowed researchers to assess not merely whether LPG connections or toilets had been provided, but whether they were actually being used.

Their absence from NFHS-6 is conspicuous at a time when questions are being raised about the long-term sustainability of these schemes. The number of subsidised LPG cylinders available under the Ujjwala scheme has been cut from nine per year to four. According to the Petroleum Ministry, around 10.55 crore LPG connections have been provided under the programme. Without district-level data on fuel usage, independent researchers cannot accurately verify these figures or evaluate their benefits.

Equally significant is the exclusion of the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) and infant and child mortality indicators. The SRB has long been considered a crucial measure for tracking gender discrimination and assessing the impact of campaigns like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao.

While some information continues to be available through mechanisms such as the Sample Registration System (SRS), experts point out that the NFHS offered something unique: district-level granularity. National or state-level averages often conceal localised failures. Without district-wise data, policymakers lose an important tool for identifying areas where interventions are succeeding, or failing.

Perhaps no omission has generated more discussion than the complete removal of anaemia prevalence estimates.

The NFHS-5 had revealed that more than 50 per cent of Indian women and children were anaemic, raising uncomfortable questions



The NFHS-6 report has several glaring exclusions and blind spots

about the effectiveness of programmes such as Poshan Abhiyaan.

The government argues that the omission is driven by political concerns rather than scientific considerations. Experts had pointed out that the capillary blood sampling method used in earlier NFHS rounds—commonly known as the finger-prick test—could produce inaccurate estimates because tissue fluids sometimes dilute the blood sample.

Consequently, anaemia measurement shifted to the Diet and Biomarkers Survey in India (DABS-I), which relies on venous blood samples analysed in laboratories using auto analysers—the internationally accepted gold standard.

While scientists generally agree that venous sampling is more accurate, critics argue that accuracy has come at the cost of detail. Unlike the NFHS, DABS-I provides state and national-level estimates, not district-level data.

Health activist Dr A.K. Arun sees a broader pattern in the omissions: "All those indicators

that show deficiencies are being omitted, whether it is a deficiency in the health of society or a deficiency in the system."

For many public health experts, the concern is that the elimination of anaemia from NFHS-6 does not eliminate the crisis, it just makes it less visible.

The omissions are not limited to indicators alone. An entire state is absent from the survey.

NFHS-6 collected information from nearly 6.8 lakh households across India but excluded Manipur, where prolonged ethnic violence and instability disrupted fieldwork.

This deliberately creates a blind spot. Manipur has witnessed one of the most severe internal crises in recent Indian history, yet policymakers, researchers and humanitarian agencies now lack a comprehensive assessment of how the conflict has affected nutrition, maternal health, child health and healthcare access.

Another major casualty is disability data. Significant questions were introduced only in NFHS-5, offering researchers an opportunity to study the relationship between disability and various health outcomes, including maternal health, tuberculosis and access to services. Without updated data, policymakers have fewer tools to design and assess targeted interventions.

The NFHS-6 debate is also entangled with an earlier controversy involving the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), the Mumbai-based institution responsible for conducting the survey.

As preparations for NFHS-6 were underway in July 2023, the Union government suspended IIPS director K.S. James, citing alleged irregularities in recruitment procedures. Critics claimed that James had earlier been asked to

resign because of survey findings that questioned the effectiveness of certain government programmes. When he didn't, he was suspended.

Though the government maintains that the action was purely administrative, the episode contributed to growing concerns about institutional autonomy and the future independence of large-scale public data collection exercises.

Ironically, health trends

Ironically, even several indicators have disappeared, the data that remains reveals significant challenges.

India now faces what experts describe as the 'dual burden' of malnutrition. While roughly one-fifth of adults remain underweight, obesity is rising sharply across both urban and rural populations.

As per the survey, 30.7 per cent women and 27.3 per cent men are now classified as obese or overweight, marking a substantial increase from the previous round.

The trend is accompanied by rising prevalence of high blood sugar and hypertension, signalling a major shift in India's disease profile. Obesity, increasingly linked to a growing healthcare industry, has become one of the most discussed findings of the survey.

Other concerns include decline in exclusive breastfeeding rates, fall in modern contraceptive usage and rise in caesarean section deliveries. The national C-section rate is 27.2 per cent, soaring to 54 per cent in private healthcare facilities.

The NFHS has always been more than just a dataset. It is a tool of democratic accountability. By making health and welfare outcomes visible at the district level, it enables researchers, citizens and governments to ask difficult questions. Erasing data will not make those questions go away. ■

By making health and welfare outcomes visible, the NFHS enables scrutiny. Erasing the data won't end the problem

An autopsy of TV news

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Senior journalist Sidharth Kahlans notes that while online educators may not be professional reporters, their criticism cannot simply be dismissed. Some of them are public figures in their own right. If they question the conduct of TV anchors, those concerns deserve engagement rather than retaliation.

The rise of these educators has been enabled by the rapid spread of affordable internet across India, including small towns and rural areas. They are both teachers and influencers. Ankit Awasthi, known online as 'Awasthi Sir', is an IIT graduate. He reaches over 5.8 million students through his YouTube channel, where he explains current affairs, public policy and news events alongside educational content.

The growth of this eco-

system accelerated dramatically after COVID-19. Before the pandemic, India's coaching industry was dominated by physical classrooms. During the lockdown, teaching moved online, and educators who could communicate well on digital platforms acquired vast audiences. Many became trusted voices on issues beyond academics.

Khan Sir's trajectory exemplifies this shift. Initially an offline teacher, he rose to prominence during the pandemic. Students loved his teaching style—some describe it as rustic—and his audience grew rapidly as the algorithm amplified his content. His fees were low. (Membership to the Khan Global Studies YouTube channel costs only Rs 59 a month. He also teaches through a mobile app.) Naturally, lower-income families embraced him enthusiastically.

Aftab says that he prepared for the BPSC examination through Khan Sir's offline coaching programme, paying only Rs 2,600 (other coaching centres charge Rs 20,000). He studied for three months and received free access to the institute's test series. He says Khan Sir is largely responsible for reducing both online and offline coaching fees. Three years ago, coaching centres charged Rs 8,000-10,000 even for recorded lectures. Today, despite inflation, recorded courses are available for around Rs 2,000. The content is good, the fees are low and the teachers are effective.

"Khan Sir's teaching style is so simple that even a rickshaw puller can understand it," says Aftab. "For example, when explaining the Iran-Iraq War, he describes it as though two neighbours are fighting. He occasionally uses Bhojpur. When he comments on something, it feels like an elder brother speaking."

Today, he has private bodyguards, a devoted fan base and considerable media

attention. After the recent shooting incident outside his coaching institute, Khan Sir became Faizal Khan in mainstream headlines. His tendency to speak loose and fast, or crack jokes about women have justifiably drawn criticism.

Student Arun Pandey says: "All teachers do it, to lighten the atmosphere... Some people dislike it, while others ignore it. ... In a one-hour video, there may be only a couple of minutes of comments about social or political issues. But when you have 300 videos, even one such segment from each makes 300 separate clips."

Kajal Kumari, an offline student at Khan Global Studies, sees it differently: "There's nothing uncomfortable about it. He makes such comments from time to time so students don't get bored."

Kajal is preparing for the BPSC prelims, mains and interview for a fee of Rs 15,000. She has multiple options, having already been selected for the Bihar Police, paramedical and firefighting services, and a position at the Bihar Legislative Council.

Kajal adds, doing it: "If the media were doing its job properly, it wouldn't be ranked 157th in the World Press Freedom Index."

The real source of the backlash may be that for the first time, the failures of the Central government are reaching the homes of those affected through social media platforms, not mainstream media.

The question raised by this confrontation is simple: if mainstream media had fulfilled its watchdog role, would coaching teachers and YouTubers have become some of its most influential critics? Sure, students would still attend their classes and watch their lectures. But who would have imagined that one day they would remind mainstream media of its responsibilities—and perform an autopsy on its journalism? ■

The BJP tries a new political stunt in Punjab

Herjinder

By hook or by crook: that seems to sum up the BJP's Punjab strategy as it prepares for the 2027 state assembly elections. Desperate for a foothold in the state, its recent stunts have bemused political observers in Punjab.

On 6 June, senior BJP and Maharashtra minister Girish D. Mahajan attended the 42nd anniversary of Operation Blue Star observed at the Damdami Taksal headquarters in Amritsar. The event has always been sensitive. Even senior Akali Dal leaders, despite their deep roots in Sikh politics, tend to steer clear. An official BJP representative from Maharashtra to this gathering? That had to be a first.

Even more controversial than Mahajan's presence were his remarks from the podium: Operation Blue Star was a military attack, 6 June 1984 was a 'black day' in Indian history, those killed were martyrs. He accused then prime minister Indira Gandhi of forcibly sending the Army into the Golden Temple complex and likened the military action to the invasions of Ahmad Shah Abdali.

For decades, BJP leaders have opposed attempts to glorify or memorialise Jarnal Singh Bhindranwale and his associates, maintaining that Operation Blue Star, however tragic, was carried out to restore law and order.

While several Sikh organisations objected to Sikhs being referred to as 'Sanatani Sikhs' at the event, most wondered how or why a resource minister from Maharashtra had landed up at this event. But those familiar with recent developments suggest the visit was not as random as it seemed.

The growing proximity between the Damdami Taksal and the BJP has been evident for some time. During the 2024 Maharashtra assembly elections, Baba Harnam Singh of the Taksal extended support to the BJP-led Mahayuti alliance. Earlier this year, the Taksal also participated in the Maharashtra government's commemoration of the 350th anniversary of the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, an event attended by Union Home Minister Amit Shah. Mahajan's visit, said BJP spokesperson Prof. Sarchand Singh, was a "reciprocal gesture". He was merely representing the Maharashtra chief minister at the event. If this explanation is accepted, it would



BJP leader and Maharashtra minister Girish Mahajan (second from left) at the 42nd anniversary of Operation Bluestar at the Damdami Taksal in Amritsar

Desperate for a toehold in the state, the BJP is playing with fire

appear that the BJP has been cultivating relationships with groups it once viewed with suspicion.

Interestingly, when Amit Shah was asked about Mahajan's remarks, he distanced the party from what he called Mahajan's "personal opinion". If the remarks were indeed personal, critics ask, why was a senior minister sent to the event in the first place?

The controversy has also generated debate in Maharashtra. Operation Blue Star was conducted under the leadership of General Arun Kumar Shridhar Vaidya, a distinguished Maharashtrian soldier who paid a steep price for his part in the operation. In 1986, after he had retired, General Vaidya was assassinated by Khalistani terrorists in Pune. Critics in Maharashtra are asking: how could a minister from the state overlook the

sacrifice of one of Maharashtra's most decorated military figures?

Pundits believe the BJP's 'evolving' approach is driven by electoral compulsions. According to political analyst Prof. Kuldip Singh, the party is attempting to overcome its limited appeal among Punjab's Sikh peasantry and rural voters. The scars left by the now-repealed farm laws continue to haunt the BJP in large parts of rural Punjab, and the party is looking for ways to soften resistance and expand its support base.

Dangerous opportunism, says Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee president Amarinder Singh Raja Warring. "Punjab has long rejected divisive and sectarian politics. Don't try to revive it for petty electoral gains. Don't play with fire. Punjabis will never accept such a divisive agenda," Warring warned.

He further argued that the BJP routinely brands its opponents 'anti-national' while taking political positions that suit its electoral calculations. For this, and more, "the BJP owes the people of Punjab an answer."

The BJP routinely brands its opponents 'anti-national' while taking political positions that suit its electoral calculations. For this, and more, "the BJP owes the people of Punjab an answer." The BJP routinely brands its opponents 'anti-national' while taking political positions that suit its electoral calculations. For this, and more, "the BJP owes the people of Punjab an answer." Last week, newly appointed Punjab BJP president Kewal Singh Dhillion declared that if voted to power, the party would usher in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's 'Sarkar-e-Khalsa', that model of equal treatment for all, irrespective of caste, class or creed. For a party whose ideological parent organisation has long championed a Hindu rashtra as its ultimate political vision, that's (more than) a bit rich. ■

PUBLIC NOTICE / COURT PROCLAMATION

UNDER ORDER V RULE 20 OF THE CODE OF CIVIL PROCEDURE

In the Court of Sh. Gurninder Pal Singh, Principal District & Sessions Judge, South District, Saket Court Complex, New Delhi. CNR No.: DLST01-019963-2025 Case No.: T.P. (Civ) No. 66/2025

Rajesh Kumar Gupta Versus Uma Kant Shukla & Anr.

To: 1. Uma Kant Shukla, S/o Sh. Brij Nandan Prasad Shukla, R/o 65/14, Rajpur Road, Dehradun, Uttarakhand. 2. Gurnveer Singh, S/o Sh. Surinder Pal Singh, Flat No. 1101, Maple Building, Saloon The Varanda, Golf Course Road, Sector-54, Gurugram, Haryana.

Whereas it has been proved to the satisfaction of the Hon'ble Court that the above-named respondents cannot be served in the ordinary way of service, hence this proclamation under Order V Rule 20 CPC is hereby issued against them.

The above-named respondents are hereby required to appear personally or through counsel before the Hon'ble Court on July 6th 2026 at 10:00 AM. Take notice that in default of their appearance on the above-mentioned date, the above-said case shall be heard and determined ex-parte. Given under the order of the Hon'ble Court.

Principal District & Sessions Judge South District, Saket Court Complex, New Delhi

Of vanishing lakes, concrete jungles and thirsty cities

From Mumbai's tanker strike to Bengaluru's drying lakes, urban water woes escalate amid a population explosion

Rashme Sehgal

On 7 May, private water tanker operators halted services in India's commercial capital, Mumbai. The strike was triggered by action initiated by the Central Ground Water Authority over groundwater extraction and regulatory compliance. Operators were to obtain a No Objection Certificate (NOC), prove ownership of at least 200 sq. m of land where the well is located, and ensure compliance with water quality standards set by the Bureau of Indian Standards. Operators said the regulations threatened both their livelihoods and the water supply of millions reliant on tankers. Mumbai's seven lakes, which supply the city's water, are nearly empty and residents of housing societies face growing water shortages caused by this impasse.

This is the story across urban India. Lakhs of residents across Delhi's colonies face erratic water supplies. Water levels in the Yamuna have dropped, leaving Delhi with a shortage of almost 80 million gallons per day. According to a senior Delhi Jal Board official, "The Yamuna is 6.5 ft below usual levels and the Haryana irrigation department says only 352 cusecs of water can be released. We are forced to rely on borewells and canned water."

In nearby Gurgaon, residents of premium luxury apartments worth crores are frustrated as water rationing persists. Despite paying as much as Rs 10,000 per tanker, supply is insufficient. The Gurugram Metropolitan Development Authority attributes this to shortage of raw water, with demand far outstripping current infrastructure capacity.

Take Pune, 150 km southeast of Mumbai. Despite having four dams on the Mutha river, water shortages worsen every summer. The Pune Municipal Corporation has sought permission to draw water from the Bhama Ashked dam to meet rising demand. In just four decades, the city's area has quadrupled—from 125 sq. km in 1987 to 508 sq. km today—and the population is up from 70 lakh in 2021 to an estimated 77.8 lakh in 2025-26.

In the south, Hyderabad faces acute shortages, with more than 20,000 tanker bookings a day. A delayed monsoon and growing dependence on tankers has forced the city's water board to operate in three shifts, adding night deliveries. Hyderabad-based expert Satyanarayana Bolisetty says, "Eighty per cent of Hyderabad's lakes have



The month-long strike of private water tanker operators in Mumbai drew attention to the city's worsening water crisis

been encroached upon. Earlier, the green spaces in Jubilee and Banjara Hills helped recharge groundwater. These hills have been built over, so the rain water runs off, causing localised flooding."

India's rapid urban population growth has compounded water stress. Metro cities—home to more than 50 crore people—face declining groundwater, erratic rain and polluted rivers. Poor planning, unchecked construction and outdated infrastructure make matters worse.

Water inequality deepens social disparities. A Greenpeace survey of 500 households in 12 of Delhi's informal settlements found that 34 per cent buy water from private suppliers, often spending up to 15 per cent of their monthly income. The government promised 3,000 water ATMs, but has managed to instal 20 between April and June.

According to the 2023 Aqueduct Water Risk Atlas released by the World Resources

Institute, India ranks #24 out of 25 nations facing 'extremely high' water stress. This means the country is using at least 80 per cent of its available supply.

Prof. T.V. Ramachandran of the Indian Institute of Science points out how urban planning failures have destroyed natural water recharge zones: "Bengaluru's green cover, at 68 per cent in the 1970s, is down to four per cent. Groundwater once available at 100 ft is now 800-8,000 ft deep. In some cases, reviving green cover around the remaining lakes has helped raise groundwater to 320 feet." He suggests adopting a 'Green GDP' metric that factors in environmental impact and promotes sustainable development.

Bengaluru, which had over 250 lakes in the 1970s, now has only 180, many degraded by sewage mismanagement.

Bolisetty says, "Seventy years ago, Vishakhapatnam had 104 natural tanks. Today, there are two."

Thirty of 100 cities facing 'grave water risk' by 2050 are in India, reveals the World Wide Fund for Nature's latest list

He is horrified by Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu's decision to allocate hundreds of acres, at prices way below market rates, to set up AI data centres knowing full well they need millions of gallons of water to function.

"For a water-scarce state like us, where will all this water come from?" he asks.

Dehradun, once known as the 'Venice of the East'—with 100 canals and 40 rivers that kept the city cool and provided ample water for its famous tea gardens, orchards and basmati rice fields—has been concretised beyond recognition.

"Our rivers have been reduced to dirty nullahs. We have become a water-scarce city. Our city planners forget that urban waterbodies play a vital role in maintaining ecological balance and supporting biodiversity," says city-based environmentalist Renu Paul.

The World Wide Fund for Nature listed 100 cities, including 30 in India, that face 'grave water risk' by 2050. The list includes Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Lucknow and Bhopal. A 2019 Niti Aayog report had warned that 21 Indian cities risk running dry by 2020.

Prime Minister Modi's Jal Jeevan Mission had promised household taps for 191 million homes by 2024. Claims of 60 per cent coverage are marred by corruption and unreliable data. Often, the taps are installed but there's no water, making the scheme a washout.

The quality of water remains a serious concern. Although India possesses four per cent of the planet's freshwater resources, it ranks 122 out of 124 countries on the 2024 World Water Quality Index. Industrial effluents and untreated sewage contaminate rivers, while harmful metals like cadmium, lead and arsenic pollute water supply.

Rivers are drying, aquifers vanish and groundwater extraction exceeds that of the US and China combined. Groundwater is being used to provide drinking water for about 85 per cent of people in rural areas and irrigation for more than 60 per cent, indicating severe overuse.

Hill stations like Shimla haven't been spared. In 2018, taps ran dry during the tourist season when demand is highest. This story is repeated across other popular tourist and hill stations.

Himanshu Thakkar, coordinator of the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People, highlights the vital role of slow rainwater absorption through forests: "Rapid runoff caused by urbanisation leads to poor water retention. Forests, wetlands, local waterbodies, and carbon-rich agricultural fields help absorb and then gradually release rainwater, supporting year-round river flow and protecting against both flood and drought."

On 9 June, Mumbai's tanker strike ended after Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis promised the withdrawal of notices to well-owners and operators. But over-dependence on tankers and other short-term fixes will end only if green cover is revived as the most cost-effective way of increasing water availability. ■

After Maoism, the mines

The mineral-rich forests of central and east India—think Gadchiroli, Bastar, Singbhum, Latehar, Koderma et cetera—await their plunder, writes Jaideep Hardikar

The guns have fallen silent in Gadchiroli with the end of Maoism. But a new battle is emerging over forests, land and the future of India's mineral frontier.

For three days this month, thousands of tribal farmers sat in protest near Chamorshi in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district. Their demand: stop acquiring our land.

On 12 May, the state government approved the acquisition of more than 311 hectares in four villages for a proposed airport, and sanctioned about Rs 77 crore as compensation to villagers. Meanwhile, the Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) is moving ahead with plans to acquire nearly 3,000 hectares across 14 villages in Chamorshi tehsil for a proposed Rs 1 lakh crore steel plant of the JSW Group.

Beyond the recent announcements of scattered land acquisition lies a far bigger plan involving thousands of hectares of forest and agricultural land in this unspoilt southeastern corner of the state for mining

infrastructure, steel manufacturing and other industrial projects.

Faced with growing resistance, the government has temporarily suspended some of the planned acquisition, but protesters' know from experience that the pause won't last.

The current, spontaneous agitation is not simply about compensation, though. It is about the future of this pristine forest district (nearly three-quarters of Gadchiroli is under forest cover), which has become the site of a gigantic resource-extraction enterprise.

Earlier this year, in the budget session of the state legislature, Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis announced that Gadchiroli would be transformed into a steel hub, promising over Rs 2.6 lakh crore worth of investments and the creation of 70,000 jobs. The district, long associated with Maoist insurgency, is being recast as the state's next big industrial hub. It doesn't seem to matter that this grand ambition will destroy thousands of acres of pristine forests,

perennial rivers and forest-based livelihoods. The iron ore deposits that lie under these forests will fuel steel plants, logistics corridors and a new manufacturing economy. Corporates close to this regime have long been eyeing these deposits.

A look at the ongoing road works reveals that the government wants to connect the ports on the east coast to those on the west. The BJP+ governments in the state and at the Centre present this as a story of development finally reaching one of Maharashtra's most neglected regions. But local residents, tribal rights activists and environmentalists foresee devastating consequences for their ecology, economy and cultural habitat.

Gadchiroli is not unique. Variations of the same story are playing out across central India. In Bastar, in the mineral-rich districts of western Odisha, and in the forested areas stretching across Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Maharashtra,

the decline of Maoist influence is rapidly opening up large swathes of land for mining and other industrial projects. For decades, security concerns and political instability cut off corporate access to the rich mineral deposits in these parts. But now that insurgency has been quelled and those Maoist barriers are breaking down, the pent-up appetite for mineral extraction is in full view.

Gadchiroli may be the clearest example of this transition.

It is one of the most densely forested districts of Maharashtra, with nearly 76 per cent of its area under forest cover. Beneath these forests lie substantial deposits of iron ore, particularly around the sacred hills of Surjagarh in central Gadchiroli. Mining in the area was discussed for years but remained constrained by a combination of local opposition, legal disputes and Maoist activity.

Today, vast stretches of this once-remote landscape witness a fever of mining activity, truck traffic, security deployments, new and expanding infrastructure and a marked inflow of non-tribal migrants into what used to be a quiet tribal landscape.

As the state pushes ahead with plans to turn Gadchiroli into a steel hub, many villagers see Surjagarh as a preview of what awaits the district's remaining forests. Tens of mining permits are in the queue for clearance.

The state's vision is quite straightforward. Iron ore will be extracted from the forests while steel and related industries will be set up outside the forests. Roads, rail links, the proposed airport, industrial estates and logistics infrastructure will connect the mines to processing centres and markets.

Officials argue that the new manufacturing infrastructure will generate employment, increase local incomes and integrate Gadchiroli into the broader economy. But this vision elides the crises that will ensue from the appropriation of land.

The annexation will likely employ the subterfuge of classifying some of these forest lands as wastelands, arbitrarily curtailing or denying community forest rights. That these acquisitions will flout the democratic consent and framework of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas), Act, 1996, is no kind of deterrent for the current dispensation.

Environment groups have repeatedly warned that mining in and around Surjagarh threatens a crucial wildlife

landscape connecting the forests of Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh. The Tadoba-Indravati corridor, which enables tiger movement between protected areas, passes through parts of this region. Even the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has raised questions about the approvals, but to no avail. All red flags have gone unheeded.

Gadchiroli is an ecologically sensitive and socially vulnerable district. Emerging from the shadows of four decades of armed conflict that claimed thousands of lives, it needs a cooling period. But the headlong rush to reclaim its land for 'development' will make no allowance for these niceties.

What happens to the tribal populations it will permanently displace?

What of the tiger corridor it will fragment and likely ruin? Can it ever be restored?

The irony is particularly striking in Gadchiroli because many of the forests now targeted for extraction have survived precisely because local tribal communities protected them. For years, villages in the district have been celebrated for community forest rights, for their gram-sabha-led forest management and innovative local governance. These experiments demonstrated that forests can be conserved even while supporting livelihoods. But these landscapes are no longer being seen as ecological assets that also sustain other ways of life but as mineral treasures awaiting plunder.

The proposed Shaktipeeth Expressway, from the tribal hinterland of Gadchiroli to Goa, illustrates the scale of this transformation. Its votaries in government and outside view it as a vital infrastructure project that will link regions and facilitate economic growth. But that spiel aside, it is a conveyor belt for minerals, industrial goods and capital. It is being designed as an artery of India's great extractive economy, stretching from the forests of central India to ports and export markets.

The story unfolding in Gadchiroli is much larger than Gadchiroli itself. For years, the district symbolised a conflict between the Indian state and Maoist insurgents. That conflict may finally be fading away, but the contest over competing visions of land, forests and the future is still alive. The guns may have fallen silent, but the struggle over who controls the forests has perhaps only just begun. ■



Relieve, not resolution Their protests may have won tribal farmers a victory that will be short-lived

The guns may have fallen silent in Gadchiroli, but the battle over control of its forests may have just begun

The battle over Mekedatu

It's more than a dispute over a dam; it's really a debate about how India intends to manage rivers in an increasingly uncertain future



Photo: K.A. Shaji

The site of the proposed Mekedatu Balancing Reservoir Project on the Cauvery, 90 km south of Bengaluru

K.A. Shaji

The renewed confrontation between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the proposed Mekedatu Balancing Reservoir Project is not just another episode in the long-running Cauvery dispute. It is a conflict that encapsulates some of the most pressing challenges confronting India in an era of climate uncertainty, rapid urbanisation and shrinking natural resources.

At the centre of the controversy is the fundamental question: who has the first claim over a river? An upstream state seeking drinking water security for a rapidly expanding metropolis, or downstream communities whose agriculture, livelihoods and survival depend on uninterrupted river flows?

The latest flashpoint came after the Supreme Court declined to entertain Tamil Nadu's review petition against the project, which emboldened Karnataka to push once again for clearances. Tamil Nadu fears Mekedatu could alter the delicate balance established after decades of litigation and negotiations over water-sharing.

A thirsty city and a narrow gorge

Over the past three decades, Bengaluru has expanded at a pace that far outstripped the capacity of its natural resources. Lakes have disappeared under real estate projects. Wetlands have been encroached upon. Groundwater extraction has reached alarming levels. The city has become increasingly dependent on pumping Cauvery water over long distances and

impractical elevations.

The water crisis that gripped Bengaluru in recent years exposed the vulnerability of this model. Tankers ran dry. Residential communities imposed restrictions on consumption. Experts pointed to decades of neglect of lakes, wetlands and groundwater recharge systems.

Against this backdrop, the Karnataka government argues, the Mekedatu project is indispensable.

About 90 kilometre south of Bengaluru, Mekedatu is a picturesque gorge where the Cauvery narrows dramatically between rocky cliffs before flowing into Tamil Nadu. The name, which means 'goat's leap' in Kannada, comes from a local legend that a goat once crossed the gorge in a single jump.

The proposed reservoir would store about 67 thousand million cubic feet (tmcf) of water and generate 400 MW of electricity. Karnataka says around 4.5 tmcf of water can be diverted annually to meet the drinking water needs of Bengaluru and neighbouring Kanakapura. State officials maintain that the project falls within Karnataka's allocated share of Cauvery waters and therefore does not violate any tribunal award or Supreme Court order.

The state government also argues that the reservoir would improve groundwater recharge, increase water availability during drought years and help secure drinking water requirements for a city under mounting water stress.

For many in Karnataka, especially industry groups and urban residents, the project is seen as a necessity. Go 300 km

downstream and the same project is viewed very differently.

The delta's dread

In Tamil Nadu's delta districts of Thanjavur, Tiruvarur, Nagapattinam and Tiruchirappalli, the Cauvery is the backbone of agriculture. Vast stretches of paddy fields depend on timely water releases from upstream reservoirs.

Farmers in the delta have endured years of uncertainty caused by erratic monsoons and prolonged interstate disputes. Many fear that Mekedatu would give the upstream state greater control over the timing and release of water; a fear substantiated by officials associated with the state's Cauvery management apparatus. Farmer organisations say that even temporary disruptions can have devastating consequences for the state's agricultural heartland.

A reservoir within a wildlife sanctuary

Mekedatu lies within the Cauvery wildlife sanctuary, one of south India's most important forest ecosystems. Forest officials note that the area is home to several vulnerable and endangered species, including the grizzled giant squirrel, smooth-coated otter, honey badger and Deccan mahseer fish.

If implemented, the project would submerge approximately 7,862 acres of the sanctuary and another 4,619 acres of adjoining reserve forests. More than 12,000 acres of ecologically sensitive forest land would be inundated.

The sanctuary serves as a crucial corridor connecting the Eastern and Western Ghats, linking the Biligiri Ranganatha Hills and the forests of Male Mahadeshwara Hills. The loss of forest cover and migratory routes could have consequences extending far beyond the immediate project area.

Conservation biologist Sanjay Gubbi, who has studied the region extensively, points out that the sanctuary provides dispersal space for elephants and tigers and helps reduce human-animal conflict.

The project would require large-scale blasting, excavation and extraction of construction materials. These activities will have long-term impacts on local ecosystems even before the reservoir begins to fill.

An ecological contradiction

Perhaps the greatest irony of the proposal is that it seeks to solve one environmental crisis by creating another.

Bengaluru's water shortage is largely the outcome of decades of unsustainable urban planning. The city once possessed an intricate network of lakes and tanks that stored rainwater and replenished groundwater reserves. Much of that network has either disappeared or become severely degraded.

Environmental groups point out that Bengaluru continues to lose substantial quantities of treated water through leakages. Rainwater harvesting remains uneven. Wastewater recycling is far below its potential. Restoration of lakes and wetlands has progressed slowly despite repeated warnings from experts.

A 15-member expert appraisal committee is understood to have raised concerns regarding environmental impacts and alternative options. The findings have never been made fully public.

The human cost

If the reservoir becomes a reality, several tribal settlements and forest-dependent communities face displacement. Villages such as Bommasundra, Galebore, Makivala, Kogge Doddi, Nelluru Doddi and

Sampatagere Doddi are likely to be affected.

For these communities, displacement means far more than relocation. It involves the loss of access to forests, grazing lands, fishing resources and cultural landscapes that have sustained generations.

Tourism-dependent livelihoods could also be affected. Sangama, one of Karnataka's most popular eco-tourism destinations, will be submerged.

The climate change conundrum

Large reservoirs have traditionally been justified on the assumption that river flows remain reasonably predictable. Climate change challenges that assumption.

Both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are experiencing increasingly erratic rainfall patterns. Droughts, extreme rainfall events and seasonal variability are now common across the Cauvery basin.

Water policy analysts have argued that investing thousands of crores in large storage structures may not be the most effective strategy in an era of hydrological uncertainty. Rather, water security may depend on restoring ecosystems, improving efficiency and managing demand.

The Cauvery itself has become more vulnerable to climatic fluctuations. During years of deficient rainfall, tensions between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu often intensify, revealing the limits of existing water-sharing arrangements.

The crisis of water management

The Mekedatu controversy exposes the weaknesses in India's approach to river governance. Rivers do not recognise political boundaries. Yet water management in India continues to be shaped largely by state-level interests.

As water scarcity increases, interstate disputes are likely to become more frequent and more contentious. The Cauvery conflict has already generated decades of litigation, protests and political mobilisation.

Mekedatu threatens to open another protracted chapter in that history. India lacks robust river-basin governance mechanisms capable of balancing ecological concerns, climate risks, urban needs and downstream rights within a common framework. As a result, debates are often reduced to competing claims over water allocation.

The river itself receives little consideration. Neither do the forests, wildlife populations and vulnerable communities whose futures are tied to it.

Bengaluru undoubtedly needs water security. Tamil Nadu's farmers need assured river flows. The Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary deserves protection. Climate change demands caution.

Reconciling these competing realities will require imagination, cooperation and a willingness to move beyond the politics that have long defined interstate river disputes. ■

The project will have a devastating impact on the Cauvery wildlife sanctuary and forest-dependent people

ESIC Don't sell it, fix it

Privatising the only healthcare system designed for workers will not make it well again

Ajit Ranade

The latest Sample Registration System data should worry every policymaker. In 2024, nearly half of all recorded deaths in India occurred without medical attention from a trained professional. This is up from 18 per cent in 2020. The proportion was even higher in rural India, and in states such as Bihar it was close to two-thirds. These are not merely mortality statistics. They are a measure of how distant formal healthcare remains from the reach of ordinary Indians.

This is the background against which we must examine the Employees' State Insurance Corporation, or ESIC. There is growing discussion about 'reforming' it. Reform is overdue. But reform must not become a code word for privatisation, outsourcing or handing over a valuable social security institution to private insurers and hospital chains.

ESIC is often misunderstood as just another health insurance scheme. It is much more than that. It is a social insurance system for low-income workers in the formal economy. It combines medical care with income protection. It covers sickness, maternity, disability, workplace injury, dependants' benefit, unemployment support and lifelong pension in cases of permanent disablement. For a worker earning Rs 15,000 a month, the total annual contribution is about Rs 7,200, split between employer and employee. This sum entitles the worker (and family) to medical care without monetary ceilings, plus cash benefits that no ordinary private insurance product provides.

This matters not only for social

justice, but also for India's industrial future. India is among the world's largest manufacturing economies, yet workplace injuries remain seriously under-reported and under-addressed. A properly functional ESIC system that ensures quick treatment, wage compensation, rehabilitation and disability support prevents injured workers from falling into poverty. It also helps them return to productive work sooner. Worker health is productive capital. ESIC reform is therefore not merely welfare reform; it is productivity reform and should be seen as essential to sustaining industrial growth.

The scale is large. ESIC covers about 3.84 crore insured persons and, with their families, nearly 14.91 crore beneficiaries—roughly one-tenth of India. It has a large hospital network, medical colleges, land assets and a reported corpus exceeding Rs 1 lakh crore. By any measure, this is one of India's most under-used public social infrastructure assets.

Its intellectual history is also worth recalling. Britain's National Health Service (NHS) emerged from the Beveridge vision of social security. In India, Prof. B.P. Adarkar designed a similar framework for industrial workers in the 1940s. The ESIC Act of 1948 came from that vision. The NHS became a globally respected public institution (currently facing severe challenges like funding cuts and staff shortages). It is true that ESIC has been suffering from neglect, weak governance and poor user experience. That is a failure of execution, not principle.

The flaws are real. Workers complain of queues, poor information, lack of medicines,



At the ESIC headquarters, New Delhi

slow referrals, indifferent staff and long delays in cash benefits. Safe in India (SII) Foundation's work with injured workers in Haryana and Maharashtra shows how serious the problem is. Of the 8,000+ injured workers it assisted, 73 per cent waited more than six months for temporary disability benefits and 78 per cent waited more than a year for permanent disability benefits. In Manesar, many workers had to pay out of pocket for even basic diagnostics such as ultrasounds.

This is exactly why ESIC needs to be repaired, not surrendered.

The case for privatisation rests on attractive words: choice, efficiency, competition, scale. But for low-wage workers, 'choice' is often illusory. Many workers are migrants, on short contracts, poorly informed and dependent on employers for registration. SII's experience shows that 16 per cent of assisted injured workers were registered with ESIC only after an accident, and 64 per cent received ESI cards only after injury. If

mandatory registration itself is not properly enforced, 'choice' will not empower workers.

Nor can private insurance replicate ESIC's benefit basket. A private family floater of Rs 5 lakh may cost Rs 15,000 to Rs 30,000 a year and usually covers only hospitalisation, with exclusions, waiting periods and sub-limits. It does not cover outpatient care, wage loss, maternity wage replacement, disability pension or occupational disease. A worker disabled at 28 may need support for 40 years. A disease like silicosis may appear decades after exposure. These are not risks that private insurers will carry at affordable premiums. They require a statutory, mandatory, pooled system.

India's own experience with private healthcare should also caution us. Even under publicly funded schemes, private providers can cherry-pick profitable cases, induce unnecessary procedures, dispute reimbursement rates and leave patients with out-of-pocket costs despite 'cashless' promises. Private capacity has a role to play in diagnostics, specialist care and underserved geographies, but not as a replacement for ESIC's public core.

The reform agenda should be practical. First, simplify every worker-facing process. Accident reporting, claims, referrals, disability assessment and benefit tracking must be redesigned around the worker, not the file. Second, publish enforceable service standards: claim-to-payment timelines, medicine availability, waiting time, referral turnaround and facility-wise performance.

Third, strengthen primary care in every major industrial cluster so workers do not bypass the system out of frustration. Fourth, fix human resources: doctors, specialists, nurses, technicians and hospital managers must be available where workers actually live and work. Fifth, deploy digital tools for appointments, health records, telemedicine and real-time

claim tracking. Digital literacy, however, should not become a new barrier.

Governance reform is equally important. ESIC must become more accountable to workers, and also employers, especially MSMEs. Its boards and state bodies need stronger representation of workers, including contract workers, along with employers, government and independent health experts. There should be independent performance audits, social audits, actuarial reviews and public dashboards. Employer compliance must be enforced: every eligible worker should be registered, receive an e-Pehchaan card and have accidents reported on time.

The wage ceiling also needs revision. It should be raised and indexed periodically to inflation. Coverage should gradually extend to construction, gig and platform workers. ESIC's corpus must be used for workers' promised benefits and to upgrade the institution—not diverted elsewhere.

ESIC has a distinct function. It is not merely a hospitalisation scheme. It links healthcare with workplace injury, wage loss, maternity protection, disability pensions and occupational disease tracking. That institutional capability took decades to build, and cannot be tossed aside.

India's healthcare crisis is not caused by too much public provision. It is caused by too little effective public provision. When nearly half of all deaths occur without trained medical attention, the answer cannot be to deny workers one of the few statutory systems designed for them. The answer is to fix it.

Fix ESIC. Professionalise it. Make it transparent. Use private expertise where necessary, but on ESIC's terms. Preserve the public character of the scheme. A revitalised ESIC can become a model for broader social health protection in India. ■

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

A NEW ERA OF DIGNITY: KARNATAKA'S HISTORIC 60% WAGE REFORM PUTS WORKERS AT THE HEART OF GROWTH

“Covering over 1,00,00,000 workers across 81 scheduled employments”

In a landmark move that is redefining labour welfare and social justice in Karnataka, the State Government has implemented a historic average 60% increase in minimum wages across 81 scheduled employments, benefiting more than one crore workers across diverse sectors of the economy.

The comprehensive wage revision, notified on May 22, 2026, represents one of the most significant labour reforms undertaken by any state in recent years and reflects Karnataka's commitment to ensuring that economic growth translates into tangible improvements in the lives of working people.

At a time when rising living costs continue to challenge household budgets, the reform offers meaningful relief by substantially raising the wage floor across skill categories and geographical regions. For lakhs of families employed in manufacturing, construction, logistics, services, education, sanitation and numerous other sectors, the revised framework promises not only higher incomes but also greater financial security, social dignity and economic opportunity.

Implemented under the leadership of Labour Minister Santhosh Lad, the initiative embodies the State Government's vision of inclusive development—one that balances industrial growth with social equity.

By delivering an average 60% increase in baseline minimum wages, Karnataka has established a progressive and forward-looking framework that places worker welfare, dignity and economic resilience at the heart of public policy.

More than a routine revision of wage schedules, the notification represents a transformative shift in labour governance. It acknowledges the invaluable contribution of workers to Karnataka's economic success and reinforces the principle that sustainable development must be accompanied by fair and equitable compensation for those whose labour drives the state's industries, services and infrastructure.

A REFORM BUILT ON CONSULTATION AND CONSENSUS

The journey towards this historic wage revision was neither sudden nor simplistic. It emerged through extensive deliberations involving the Karnataka Minimum Wages Advisory Board, labour unions, employer associations, industry representatives, legal experts and other stakeholders.

The Government undertook a careful assessment of changing economic realities, inflationary pressures and the evolving nature of employment in the post-pandemic economy. At the same time, it sought to address concerns that had persisted following legal scrutiny of earlier wage notifications.

Through a transparent and consultative approach, the Labour Department successfully crafted a framework that balances worker welfare with industrial sustainability. The result is a policy that seeks to strengthen livelihoods while providing businesses with greater regulatory clarity and long-term predictability.

The reform has therefore been widely viewed not merely as a wage adjustment, but as the outcome of a collaborative process that reflects the interests of worker, employee and the broader economy.



Photo: Gettyimages

A SCIENTIFIC FOUNDATION FOR FAIR WAGES

One of the most notable features of the revised framework is its scientific methodology. Rather than relying on incremental increases, the Government anchored the new wage structure in principles established by the Supreme Court of India in the landmark Reptakos Brett judgment.

These principles recognize that minimum wages should enable workers to meet not only basic survival needs but also broader household requirements relating to nutrition, healthcare, housing, education and social well-being.

By adopting this approach, Karnataka has shifted the convention from subsistence wages towards living wages and economic resilience. The revised framework acknowledges the realities faced by working families in a rapidly changing economy and seeks to provide a stronger foundation for household stability.

BUILDING A UNIFIED FRAMEWORK FOR A MODERN ECONOMY

A major innovation introduced through the notification is the creation of a unified wage structure under Schedule 4. Previously, different industries operated under separate classifications and multiple wage schedules, often resulting in complexity and inconsistencies.

The new framework replaces this fragmented system with a common wage architecture covering 65 existing scheduled employments while extending statutory protection to 18 additional sectors for the fit time.

The expansion reflects Karnataka's recognition of changing employment patterns and emerging occupations in the modern economy.

Workers in sectors such as private educational institutions, e-commerce delivery services, courier operations, mobile tower maintenance, cyber centres, amusement parks and several other service-sector occupations are now covered under formal wage protection laws.

This broader coverage demonstrates the Government's proactive approach to ensuring that labour welfare frameworks keep pace with technological change and evolving workforce realities.

SIMPLIFYING REGIONAL CLASSIFICATION

To improve administrative efficiency and better reflect present-day economic conditions, the State has also simplified its geographical wage classification system.

The earlier four-zone structure has been replaced by a practical three-zone model. **Zone 1** covers areas falling under the Greater Bengaluru Authority, recognizing the higher cost of living associated with the metropolitan region.

Zone 2 includes other municipal corporations and district headquarters across Karnataka.

Zone 3 encompasses rural areas, taluk centres and emerging economic regions.

The streamlined classification provides greater clarity for employees while ensuring that wage rates continue to reflect regional economic realities.

Protecting Workers Against Inflation

Recognizing that wage security cannot depend solely on periodic revisions, the Government has modernized the Variable Dearness Allowance (VDA) mechanism.

The revised framework directly links wage protection to movements in the Consumer Price Index (CPI), ensuring that workers' earnings remain responsive to inflationary pressures.

Based on the notified formula, the current CPI differential translates into an additional monthly VDA support of approximately Rs1,031 across all categories.

Equally significant is the decision to institutionalize annual revisions effective from April 1 each year.

This mechanism offers a dual benefit. Workers receive protection against the erosion of purchasing power, while employees gain predictability through a clearly defined and transparent revision schedule.

The result is a more stable industrial environment that benefits both labour and industry.

ADVANCING EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

Beyond financial considerations, the notification carries a powerful social message.

The revised framework explicitly reinforces the principle of equal pay for equal work and extends protections across gender identities. It includes specific recognition of men, women, transgender persons and persons with disabilities, helping to address longstanding inequities in segments of the labour market.

The notification reflects Karnataka's commitment to building a labour ecosystem that is fair, inclusive and respectful of human dignity.

It sends a clear message that economic opportunity must be available to all workers regardless of gender, identity or physical ability.

RECOGNIZING ESSENTIAL AND HIGH-RISK OCCUPATIONS

The reform also acknowledges the contributions of workers engaged in demanding and socially essential occupations.

Enhanced wage structures have been designed for sanitation workers, foundry employees and personnel working in thermal, solar and hydroelectric power generation facilities.

Mechanized sanitation workers, particularly those operating in urban centres such as Bengaluru, stand to benefit significantly from the revised framework.

These provisions underscore the Government's recognition that workers performing physically demanding, hazardous or socially critical functions deserve stronger economic protections and greater occupational dignity.

STRENGTHENING TRANSPARENCY AND COMPLIANCE

The notification introduces measures aimed at ensuring that wage benefits reach workers efficiently and transparently.

Employees are encouraged to make payments through bank transfer and approved electronic systems, reducing delays and improving accountability.

The framework also reinforces provisions relating to overtime work and weekly holidays, requiring compensation at enhanced rates for additional work beyond prescribed schedules.

These measures contribute to the formalization of employment practices and strengthen trust between employees and employers.

EXPANDING THE SOCIAL SECURITY CONVENTION

The wage revision has also opened a broader discussion on social security coverage.

With revised earnings pushing many workers beyond existing eligibility thresholds under certain welfare schemes, the State Government has initiated dialogue with the Union Government regarding the enhancement of limits under the Employees' State Insurance (ESI) framework.

The objective is to ensure that workers who benefit from higher wages do not lose access to vital healthcare and social security protections.

The proactive approach reflects Karnataka's broader vision of integrating wage reforms with comprehensive worker welfare.

GROWTH WITH HUMAN DIGNITY

Higher incomes often translate into stronger consumer spending, increased household stability, improved productivity and reduced workforce turnover. As workers gain greater purchasing power, local businesses, neighborhood markets and service providers also benefit from increased economic activity.

Latest initiatives demonstrate that industrial competitiveness and labour welfare are not opposing goals. Instead, they can reinforce one another through thoughtful policy design and collaborative governance.

The reform represents an investment in human capital—an acknowledgment that sustainable economic growth depends on the well-being of the people who power it.

As Karnataka continues to lead the nation in innovation, investment and industrial growth, this landmark wage revision serves as a powerful reminder that economic success is most meaningful when it improves the quality of life of ordinary citizens.

A DEFINING MOMENT IN KARNATAKA'S DEVELOPMENT JOURNEY

May 22, 2026 notification represents far more than a revision of wage schedules. It is a statement of intent about the kind of development Karnataka seeks to pursue—development that places people at its centre.

By modernizing wage structures, expanding coverage to emerging sectors, protecting incomes from inflation, promoting social inclusion and strengthening labour protections, the State has laid the foundation for a more equitable and resilient future.

More than one crore workers and their families, the reform offers not merely higher earnings but also greater security, dignity and opportunity.

As Karnataka continues to lead the nation in innovation, investment and industrial growth, this landmark wage revision serves as a powerful reminder that economic success is most meaningful when it improves the quality of life of ordinary citizens.

Therefore, much more than a financial adjustment, it is a declaration that workers deserve not only employment but fair wages, social dignity and a rightful share in the state's prosperity.

Through this transformative initiative, Karnataka has set a new benchmark for labour welfare and reaffirmed its belief that economic progress and human development can advance together—creating a future where growth is not only strong, but also inclusive, compassionate and just.

FAST FACTS

- 60% — Average wage increase
- 81 — Scheduled employments covered
- 18 — New sectors added
- 3 — Simplified wage zones
- 1 Crore+ — Workers benefited
- Rs1,031 — Monthly VDA support
- 22 May 2026 — Notification date
- Annual — Inflation adjustment cycle

WHO BENEFITS?

For the fit time, statutory wage protection extends to workers in:

- E-commerce delivery services
- Courier and logistics operations
- Private educational institutions
- Mobile tower maintenance
- Cyber centres
- Amusement parks
- Emerging service-sector occupations

KARNATAKA'S WAGE REVOLUTION

Before Revision:

- Multiple fragmented wage schedules
- Four-zone classification
- Limited coverage of emerging sectors

After Revision:

- Unified Schedule-4 wage framework
- Simplified Three-Zone System
- Coverage expanded to 81 employments
- 18 new sectors brought under protection
- Annual inflation-linked revision mechanism

Stronger Wages, Stronger Karnataka

The revised framework establishes a transparent wage matrix linked to skill levels and geographical location. Under the new structure, monthly minimum wages range from approximately Rs19,319 for unskilled workers in rural areas to over Rs31,114 for highly skilled workers in the Bengaluru metropolitan region.

The new wage structure is as follows:

Skill Category	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3
Highly Skilled	Rs 31,114	Rs 28,285	Rs 25,714
Skilled	Rs 28,285	Rs 25,714	Rs 23,376
Semi-Skilled	Rs 25,714	Rs 23,376	Rs 21,251
Unskilled	Rs 23,376	Rs 21,251	Rs 19,319

Certain specialized occupations, including sanitation services, foundries and power generation facilities, receive enhanced protections through sector-specific wage provisions.

For thousands of workers and their families, these increases are expected to improve access to quality education, healthcare, housing and other essential services while strengthening overall financial resilience.



Why 'Indian' is becoming a bad word in the West

There is a rising tide of anti-Indian sentiment in the West, writes **Ashok Swain**, but "it's not 'Hinduphobia'"

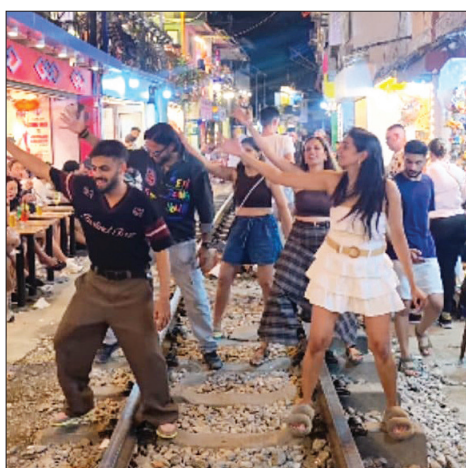
Five years ago, I wrote a piece debunking the myth of 'Hinduphobia'. This was the time that several Hindutva organisations in North America and Europe were trying to popularise the term as a political counterweight to Islamophobia. The strategy was clear: if Muslims could rally around discrimination, prejudice and violence directed at them, so could Hindus fan threat perceptions to shield Hindutva politics in India. Criticism of majoritarian nationalism in India was repackaged as hatred of Hindus.

Five years on, this enterprise is still alive and kicking, even though the world has changed a lot since 2021. Donald Trump's return to the White House has emboldened far right movements across much of the Western world. Anti-immigrant rhetoric has become mainstream. White nationalist groups that once operated on the political margins now enjoy much greater visibility and influence. In this new environment, Indians living abroad are increasingly finding themselves at the receiving end of racism and xenophobia.

This reality must be acknowledged. Anti-India(n) sentiment is real. It is ugly and growing. Reports of attacks on Indians in Ireland, Italy, Australia, Canada, the UK and US have become more frequent. Online spaces have witnessed a surge in openly racist language directed at Indians.

In the US, even successful Indian Americans like Vivek Ramaswamy—who enthusiastically aligned themselves with Trump—have discovered that their loyalty offers little protection from racial prejudice. For white supremacists, Indians are outsiders, regardless of their wealth, education, political beliefs or professional standing.

But this anti-Indian racism is still not 'Hinduphobia'. The hostility directed at Indians is not rooted in their Hindu identity. It is part racial prejudice, part economic anxiety, part broad anti-immigrant sentiment and politics—but also a reaction to progressively bolder assertions of Hindu nationalism and cultural arrogance from some sections of



From New York to Vietnam, the Indian diaspora is giving itself a bad name with displays of aggressive nationalism and disregard for local mores

the Indian diaspora.

For decades, Indians abroad enjoyed an enviable reputation. They were seen as hardworking, educated, entrepreneurial and law abiding. They were the ideal immigrants and the subjects of many immigrant success stories. Their achievements in medicine, engineering, academia, technology and business earned them respect and admiration. But the default perception of Indians is changing.

Diaspora nationalism is a key ingredient of this change. Over the past ten or so years, the Modi government has tried to cultivate a sense of civilisational pride among overseas Indians. Taking pride in one's heritage or cultural roots is one thing, but when pride turns into arrogance, it is likely to provoke.

Many affluent Indians abroad, particularly upper caste Hindus, have begun to see themselves not simply as successful immigrants but as representatives of a rising global power. They have absorbed the delusional narrative that India under Modi has become a superpower, a great civilisation-state that is reclaiming its rightful place at the centre of world affairs. This delusion has spawned an exaggerated sense of entitlement.

In some diaspora circles, there is a

growing tendency to look down on other migrant communities while simultaneously expecting special treatment from host societies. Professional success has produced an expectation that Indians deserve greater recognition and influence. This inflated sense of self-worth and entitlement has not gone unnoticed.

The Indian diaspora's cultural arrogance, aggressive nationalism and lack of respect for local social norms has become a theme of public debates in the West. Attention is drawn to the fundamental mismatch between societies that discriminate on the basis of caste and those that regard equality as a foundational value. Universities, workplaces and community organisations have reported tensions linked to caste identities that people in the West had never encountered earlier.

Indian tourists are also contributing to this adverse perception of the Indian diaspora. A growing appetite for 'foreign holidays' in India's upwardly mobile middle class has produced millions of first-time international travellers. Social media is filled with videos of Indian tourists ignoring regulations, disturbing public spaces, disrespecting local customs or engaging in reckless behaviour. This is possibly a tiny minority but we live in an

era where virality trumps statistics.

One standout feature is a sense of entitlement that flows from a sense of India's standing in the world and Modi's global stature. Sustained exposure to the Modi government's nationalist propaganda has convinced this rambunctious lot that India is already a superpower; that Modi is the world's most popular leader; that 'Indian culture' is universally admired; that Indians

command special respect wherever they go. When this imagined status collides with reality, it often produces behaviour that local populations find hard to stomach.

None of this makes racism acceptable. Never. The responsibility for racist actions lies with the perpetrators. Yet understanding why negative perceptions are spreading requires more than condemnation. It requires a close reading of the social and political context in which these perceptions take hold.

Another uncomfortable reality concerns racism within sections of the Indian community itself. Anti-Muslim prejudice, anti-Black stereotypes, hostility towards refugees and support for exclusionary nationalist politics are becoming defining attributes of the Indian diaspora. The contradiction is striking: some of the most strident critics of racism against Indians simultaneously support political movements that demonise migrants, Muslims and other minorities in India and elsewhere.

This contradiction is most evident among Indian supporters of Trump and other far-right movements. Many believed that economic success and political loyalty would secure acceptance within conservative nationalist circles. They eagerly embraced anti-immigrant rhetoric directed at others while imagining themselves exempt from its consequences.

But White nationalism does not distinguish between Hindus and Muslims, Sikhs or Christians, nor between rich and poor, nor even between conservative and liberal. When racial anxieties intensify, every 'foreigner' is a target.

While anti-Indian racism is real, Indians abroad must resist the temptation to package all criticism as racism. All complaints about social behaviour are not xenophobic. Discussions about caste discrimination are not anti-Indian. Nor is criticism of majoritarian nationalism in India an attack on Hinduism.

The hostility Indians are facing in parts of the Western world is a product of two parallel developments. As much as it stems from a resurgent far right eager to scapegoat immigrants, it also flows from their own racial and caste prejudices, cultural arrogance and support of toxic Hindutva, which has eroded the goodwill accumulated over generations.

The future of the Indian diaspora in the West depends not only on resisting racism but also on rediscovering the virtues of civic responsibility, on whether they can be respectful of the societies they now inhabit, the countries they now call home. ■

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

A false reading of India's global stature has led a section of the diaspora to misjudge their place in the local societies they inhabit

झारखण्ड कृषि व्यापार मेला 2026



- कृषि यंत्रों का प्रदर्शन
- कृषि उत्पाद
- कृषि विशेषज्ञों से सीधी बात
- कृषि व्यावहारिक कार्यशालाएँ
- स्वरोच्चार-विक्रेता के बीच व्यापारिक संवाद
- कृषि तकनीकी प्रदर्शनी
- सांस्कृतिक कार्यक्रम
- खेती और ग्रामीण व्यवसाय के नए आयाम जानना

हेमन्त सोरेन
मुख्यमंत्री, झारखण्ड

दिनांक: 16 से 18 जून 2026 | स्थान: मोरहाबादी मैदान, रांची



अधिक जानकारी के लिए स्कैन करें

सूचना एवं जनसम्पर्क विभाग, झारखण्ड

What is Modi's great gift to India?

Other than the number of days he has already been in office

Aakar Patel

BJP leader Ram Madhav has written a fine piece on Prime Minister Narendra Modi reaching an important milestone: on 10 June, he completed 4,399 uninterrupted days in office as prime minister, overtaking Jawaharlal Nehru's record of 4,398 days.

The awkward word 'uninterrupted' is used because Indra Gandhi was in office for almost 6,000 days. No doubt our leader will cross that number in time as well.

What is more interesting is Madhav's assertion that 'Modi, undoubtedly, will be remembered as the most effective and successful prime minister of India'. His reason for this? Modi 'is midway through his third term as the prime minister. Yet, his dominance over Indian political

Why are Madhav and other fans of this prime minister still exhuming Nehru? Because of what he left behind



landscape remains towering and unchallenged. He is certain to break more records as he continues to lead the country for many more years to come'.

Yes, longevity is important and staying at the crease for an extended period is also important to some people. But from the audience's perspective, what is relevant is what's on the scoreboard.

The problem is that, unlike longevity, the data is unclear. Madhav says that among Modi's achievements is the doubling of India's GDP in the last decade. But it has doubled in each decade since Independence! It certainly has since 1960, which is when we have World Bank data from.

What else? Madhav says: 'in foreign policy, Modi scripted a glorious history'. How? That we do not know. Looking around at what is happening in the world today, it would be difficult not to conclude that India is irrelevant. In fact, the accusation can be accurately made that it is often servile, especially to US President Donald Trump. However, we need not go there today.

The question to ask is this: How will Modi be remembered six decades after he is gone? In the India of 2086, what will people be saying of Modi compared to the way we write of Nehru today, 62 years after his passing?

Those of us who are still around then and those who are born hereon may not be referring to Modi at all.

One reason for me to think so is that things and people and events that are current fade very quickly with time. Sunil Gavaskar gives way to Sachin Tendulkar, who gives way to Virat Kohli, who gives way to Vaibhav Sooryavanshi. There is always a

shiny new thing on offer, and the relationship that the present generation has with the current stars is always fresher and more intense than it is with the things of the past.

But if this is true, then why has Nehru not faded? And why are Madhav and those of us who are fans of this prime minister still exhuming the old Jawaharlal so long after he has gone into the ether?

The reason why Nehru is still with us in spirit is because of what he left behind.

First, he conceived and built institutions of every sort: educational, scientific, cultural and medical. A rare achievement anywhere in the world, and even more so in our parts.

Compare the legion of things Nehru built with what Modi has conceived and executed. One is hard-pressed to come up with any. Perhaps the hapless NITI Aayog (is it still around?) might be one thing Modi gifts to the India of the future. What else? Hard to say.

Second, Nehru left behind the 'idea of India': a pluralist society that has a pathway to modernity. Here, we can concede that Modi has made a difference and parted ways with the past in a manner that may prove longer-lasting than his non-existent institutions.

Madhav concludes by writing: 'it is not just the numbers that distinguish Modi from others. It is the quality of governance, ideological vision and effective development agenda that he brought to the table as the leader of the world's largest democracy that makes him the shining star of Indian politics'.

This India around us that has made him the 'shining star' is one dominated by laws and policies of exclusion and persecution. Bulldozers, lynchings, special intensive revisions and so on. And on. Much of it is not new, of course, but the intensity is new, and that is Modi's gift to India.

One is not sure whether what we have experienced will last until 2086. One hopes it does not.

My guess, based on the evidence of what Modi has left behind in the last dozen years, is that if this continues for another decade or so—let alone another six decades—Narendra Modi will indeed be remembered, but not for the reasons Madhav would like him to be. ■

Views are personal

Delhi Gymkhana and the power of myths

Avay Shukla

Delhi's chatterati, who always need something more than just fried peanuts with their gin and tonic, are abuzz these days with the latest canapés: the Modi government's hostile takeover of Gymkhana Club. It's not a done deal yet, but rest assured that our higher judiciary, with credits like Ram Mandir, SIR, Umar Khalid, Aravalli, Hindenburg/SEBI, Pegasus, etc. under its belt, will ultimately approve non-passive euthanasia for this last watering hole for the drones of south Delhi.

No one, of course, believes the reason cited by the government, that the 27 acres are needed for security/defence purposes: this is the default position of the government for all decisions that push the boundaries of legality and/or good sense.

Hence, there is much feverish speculation about its real motives for this surgical strike: the club's administrative and financial mess, non-payment of dues to the government, turning the entire area into a semi-militarised zone so that a Bangladesh, Nepal or 6 January type of incident never happens, fear of the Cockroach Janta Party, a real-estate operation that will ultimately benefit the Melody-loving leader's cronies.

But all of the above is on the assumption that this government acts rationally, which past decisions do not bear out. I have, therefore, a different take that matches the leopard's spots, as it were.

The BJP is a party founded on myths past, present and future. It originates from the myths of ancient India—our epics, 'Akhand Bharat', the existence of plastic surgery, aeroplanes, nuclear missiles thousands of years ago, etc.

In the present, it rules on the strength of other myths—Vishwaguru, fastest growing economy, leader of the Global South, 'ghar mein ghus ke maareng', developed country by 2047, net zero emissions by 2075, and so on.

None of these myths have a rational basis, but constant reiteration has converted them into legal fiction and kept the BJP in power for more than a decade.

The Gymkhana Club is a victim of two such myths—Lutyens' Delhi/'Khan Market gang' (which works actively against the BJP) and 'colonial mindset' (which diminishes our own glorious culture).



The BJP believes that the privileged residents of Lutyens' Delhi are inimical to the party and the Gymkhana is its hub. Wrong. There is no such thing as Lutyens' Delhi and the Khan Market gang became the Khanna Market gang in 2014.

The 2,800 hectares known as Lutyens' Delhi is occupied by politicians—mostly of saffron hue, who subsist on subsidies many times those enjoyed by members of the Gymkhana: serving bureaucrats who cannot even take a toilet break without written approval from their political masters—and industrialists fully house-trained by the ED, CBI and Income Tax. They are the BJP!

The retired bureaucrats and defence forces officers who haunt the Gymkhana bar also did a 'ghar wapas' years ago. I am a member of various groups of retired officers, and can confidently state that the vast majority of my brethren (75-80 per cent) support the BJP; 10-15 per cent may not, but do not open their mouths for fear of jeopardising their pensions. The rest are so soaked in gin-and-tonic

I was not a member of the Gymkhana—my application was rejected. But I'll miss its nonpareil mutton cutlets

they can't press their own doorbell, let alone an EVM button.

Lutyens' Delhi (and the Gymkhana) are, therefore, de facto BJP territory. So why take over the club? Pause that question for the nonce, dear reader, we shall come to it later.

The colonial mindset myth is used to divert attention from this government's failures, and find a convenient whipping boy to rally the troops, or voters. The Gymkhana is the whipping boy this time, to burnish the BJP's non-existent credentials as the champion of the poor, and to divert voters' attention away from the goodies being gifted daily to crony oligarchs.

How can this bunch of effete elites and their colonial-era club (so goes the specious argument built on a myth) be allowed to grab valuable government land and live a subsidised life when 800 million have to be fed on doles?

The Gymkhana Club is a victim of these two myths. But it is just the beginning. This narrative will be rolled out across the country—the Maharashtra government has already served notices to 16 prominent clubs in Mumbai.

For what an authoritarian or fascist government needs at all times is an 'enemy' to rally the nation behind it. Voltaire had said, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him". Replace 'God' with 'enemy' and you have the reason why colonial-era clubs are the new enemy.

Am I sad? I don't know. I was not a member of the Gymkhana—my application was rejected after a waiting period of 10 years without assigning any reason. But I shall miss its nonpareil mutton cutlets—they were probably a colonial hand-down, but then not all legacies are bad, are they? ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

A valuable tool that requires vigilance

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

Calling for prudence, rigorous evaluation and even, at times, a slower pace in adopting AI does not mean opposing progress; instead, it is an exercise of responsible care for the human family. This need is all the more urgent given the frequent imbalance between the speed of technological growth and the slower development of awareness, norms, safeguards and institutions capable of governing its effects.

It is not enough to invoke ethics in the abstract; robust legal frameworks, independent oversight, informed users and a political system that does not abdicate its responsibility are required. Otherwise, change will be governed only by technocratic thinking and presented as necessary and inevitable, ultimately imposing rules shaped by those who control data, infrastructure and computing power.

We cannot be satisfied with merely calling for the moralisation of machines—the so-called 'alignment' of AI with human values—without also having the courage to insist on a further condition: the possibility of openly discussing the ethical frameworks involved and subjecting them to shared standards of social justice. Otherwise, those who control AI will impose their own moral vision, which will become the invisible infrastructure of these systems. A more moral AI is not enough if that morality is determined by a few. What is needed is a more active political involvement that is capable of slowing things down when everything is accelerating, and of

protecting the opportunities for communities still to be able to participate and ask questions.

In fact, as with every major technological shift, AI tends to amplify the power of those who already possess economic resources, expertise and access to data. In light of the common good and the universal destination of goods, this raises serious concerns, since small but highly influential groups can shape information and consumption patterns, influence democratic processes and steer economic dynamics to their own advantage, undermining social justice and solidarity among peoples.

[...]

In a world where data, computational resources and regulatory influence remain in the hands of a few, to speak of the common good means exposing this new form of epistemic, economic and political asymmetry and naming the new monopolies of AI.

To speak of the universal destination of goods means finding ways of ensuring universal access to both technologies and the education needed to use them. To speak of subsidiarity calls for protecting the ability of communities to make choices and corrections, rather than confining their role to mere oversight after the standards have been set elsewhere. To speak of solidarity obliges us to recognise the hidden, often exploited workers, who sustain algorithmic systems. To speak of justice requires questioning the global distribution of power that decides who in fact can train these models and who is merely subjected to them. Likewise, it means acknowledging that social justice is not only a goal to be safeguarded after technologies are deployed, but a condition that must shape their very design from the outset.



Pope Leo XIV

Developers bear an ethical and spiritual responsibility, for every design choice reflects a vision of humanity

Finally, I would like to employ the expression 'to disarm', which is close to my heart. Disarming AI means freeing it from the mentality of 'armed' competition, which today is not limited simply to the military context but is also an economic and cognitive phenomenon. This entails a race for ever more powerful algorithms and larger datasets, driven by the desire to secure geopolitical or commercial dominance. To disarm means discrediting the assumption that technical power automatically confers the right to govern. To disarm does not mean rejecting technology but preventing it from dominating humanity. It means freeing technology from monopolistic control. [...] Our task today is not only ethical or technical. It is ecological in the deepest sense, for it concerns a new dimension of our common home. AI is already an

environment in which we are immersed, as well as a force with which we must engage. For this reason, merely regulating it is insufficient; it must be disarmed, welcoming and accessible.

I wish to address a special appeal to those who develop artificial intelligence. In one sense, technological innovation can represent human participation in the divine act of creation. Developers, therefore, bear a particular ethical and spiritual responsibility, for every design choice reflects a vision of humanity. Just as the creator of an artistic or literary work must consider the values it conveys, so developers are called to embed values in their projects with due seriousness: with transparency, responsibility toward affected communities and careful attention to ensuring that what is being cultivated is a genuine good.

What must not be lost

[...]

The quality of a civilisation is measured not by the power of its means, but by the care it is able to offer, by its ability to recognise the other as a face not merely as a function. The ability to care for one another is a fundamental dimension of our humanity, one that is learned and mastered through lived experience. Reading stories to a child, offering company to an elderly person and arranging a home so that it is welcoming are simple gestures often rooted in family life. They teach us to value care at a societal level and train us to recognise others as persons worthy of attention. Technology can also support this mutual care between people, for example, by providing tools that help us anticipate and organise things, without undermining human freedom and judgment. ■

Part I of this reflection appeared in the National Herald last week, dated 7 June



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- **First time in the country, with international standards**
- **Estimated Cost is ₹2,284 Crores**



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With the insurgency quelled, the mineral-rich forests of Gadchiroli are now in the line of fire

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THE BATTLE OVER MEKEDATU

More than a dispute over a dam, a debate about how India intends to manage its rivers

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DIASPORA

WHY 'INDIAN' IS BECOMING A BAD WORD IN THE WEST

It's down to hypernationalism and disregard of local mores

► P6



A litmus test for the Opposition

It was effective 2018, four years into Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first term in office, that Sweden's V-Dem Institute marked India's descent into a state it describes as an 'electoral autocracy'. That dubious classification has stuck ever since, though the democratic backsliding is, in fact, far worse than the label might suggest. In the 2026 edition of V-Dem's *Democracy Report*, India is ranked #105 (out of 179 countries) on its 'Liberal Democracy Index'.

For citizens who have watched this erosion with concern, then alarm and now a sense of resignation, the 2024 Lok Sabha elections had briefly offered a ray of hope. That was two years ago in June 2024, when a more well-knit Opposition than you see today was able to make common cause, push back credibly and stop the BJP from securing a simple majority in the Lok Sabha.

Again, just two months ago in April 2026, the same Opposition was able to foil the BJP+ government's plans to push through a Delimitation Bill that threatened to dramatically undercut the representation of southern states in Parliament and undermine India's federal compact.

In its all-too-transparent bid to concentrate power at the Centre, the BJP has also been pushing 'One Nation, One Election' and many other unitary variants of the same driving impulse.

The primary unitary formulation advanced by the BJP—Sangh is their foundational ideological slogan 'Ek Desh, Ek Nishan, Ek Vidhan, Ek Pradhan' (One Country, One Flag, One Constitution, One Prime Minister). This historical formulation traces back to the BJP's predecessor, the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, and its founder Syama Prasad Mookerjee.

It has grown new tentacles in the Modi era, in the shape of One Nation, One Election (ONOE); One Nation, One Tax; One Nation, One Ration Card; One Nation, One Grid; One Nation, One Uniform and so on.

Even though the BJP returned to power in 2024, it drew some lessons from a victory that still smelled like defeat. It hadn't managed to entirely steamroll the Opposition and had fallen way short of the crushing 400+ majority it was sloganeering about before the elections. In Uttar Pradesh, where it had just

inaugurated the new Ram Mandir to declare a great civilisational triumph, as it were, it dropped to 33 seats (out of 80) while the Samajwadi Party bagged 37. It even lost the prestige seat of Faizabad, which includes the assembly segment of Ayodhya. That defeat stung.

After all its toolkit attempts to bribe, bully, break the Opposition, it still only managed to secure 36.6 per cent of the popular vote. Which tells you something about its real appeal with the population at large, though not enough about its disproportionate hold on the levers of power.

The big lesson the BJP drew from its 2024 performance was that it needed to do more to

HERALD VIEW

tighten its grip on power. It realised that after everything it had done so far, it was still not able to organically win enough support to secure the two-thirds majority needed to rewrite the Constitution. With the singlemindedness of a rampaging bull, it saw that the only way was to re-engineer the electorate itself, to do a comprehensive purge of the voter rolls, and ensure that this culling of voters was decisively net-positive for the BJP. Enter the S.I.R.

At its service in the project to reshape the electoral rolls, the BJP has the Election Commission of India (ECI), which presides over the SIR. Readers will know that the ECI is supposedly an autonomous, nonpartisan body, but the election commissioners are now (legally) chosen by a 2:1 ruling party majority, which turns the ECI into a government department, for all intents and purposes. The new law came into being via 'The CEC and Other Election Commissioners Bill, 2023', which was passed in December 2023, ahead of the Lok Sabha elections in April–May 2024.

Under the new law, the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and other election commissioners are appointed by the President upon the recommendation of a Selection Committee. The Selection Committee consists of the Prime Minister, a Union cabinet minister and the Leader of the



Photo: IANS
Twenty-five opposition parties got together for the 8 June convening of the INDIA bloc after two years, but there were some notable absentees

Opposition/leader of the largest opposition party in the Lok Sabha. The ECI has read the script and is duly reporting to its new master.

The state assembly elections in Bihar (in November 2025, after SIR, Phase 1) and in West Bengal (in April 2026 after SIR, Phase 2) are both excellent test cases to demonstrate the intention and the effect of the SIR. At the end of Bengal's SIR nightmare, the state's

For the Opposition, the INDIA bloc meeting on 8 June was another beginning. There's still a mountain to climb

count of eligible voters was ~90 lakh less than the pre-SIR baseline of 7.66 crore. In Bihar, 69 lakh voters were dropped.

Citizens who view these developments with alarm had hoped that the Supreme Court of India might step in to question all this and hold the ECI to account. But on 27 May 2026, the Supreme Court gave a clean chit to the SIR exercise. The bench of CJI Surya Kant and Justice Joyimalya Bagchi ruled that the SIR process was constitutional and well within the ECI's statutory powers. It held that the SIR process is necessary to protect the integrity, accuracy and credibility of electoral rolls.

Phase 3 of said SIR is currently under way in the remaining 16 states and three Union Territories. The first two phases, covering 10 states and 3 UTs, saw 7.2 crore deletions (and 2 crore additions, as per the ECI). This is down 10.2 per cent from pre-SIR baselines; in other words, the exercise has disenfranchised one in every 10 Indian voters.

Although mainstream media practically blacked out all the evidence of targeted deletions and more suspect tampering with the voter rolls, there were enough reports (in this paper and media outfits like *The Wire*, *NewsLaundry*, *Scroll*, *The News Minute*, *Reporters' Collective* and others) and other

exposés besides—like the ones by Rahul Gandhi on Mahadevpura and Aland in Karnataka—that demanded a thorough investigation. There was enough evidence to create reasonable doubt that the SIR was compromised—and yet, instead of demanding some answers from the ECI, demanding that it come clean on the SIR, and refute the evidence that had been presented, the Supreme Court has chosen to stamp its approval on the process.

This should tell the Opposition that the elections are no longer a fair battleground to take on the BJP. It needs to find other means to fight the capture of Indian democracy, the capture of India's democratic institutions, the capture of media and other means of communicating with the people. Opposition leaders should remember that to fight this assault on free and fair elections, on our democracy, on our Constitution, on India's pluralist character, they need to make common cause. They need to define a Common Threat Perception, much before they can formulate a Common Minimum Programme of governance. To even have another shot at governance, they must first learn to swim together, to recognise true allies and Trojan horses, and to keep true allies onside. The INDIA bloc meeting on 8 June was a beginning. There's still a mountain to climb. ■

When YouTube teachers did an autopsy of TV 'news'

Nandlal Sharma reports on the confrontation between a TV anchor and a new class of influential online educators

A video from 2016, when India's currency was demonetised overnight, is still being shared on social media. In it, a TV anchor claims that the newly issued currency notes contain nanochips that could be tracked by satellite, allowing authorities to detect hidden cash hoards. Similar claims were repeated by other prime-time anchors. The story was false, but it became emblematic of a media culture that spread misinformation instead of speaking truth to power.

Nearly a decade later, during Operation Sindoor in May 2025, mainstream TV channels sank to a new low. Several prominent anchors claimed on air that the Indian Navy had attacked Karachi Port. The fact-checking portal *AltNews* confirmed this was false, unverified and propagandist, like much of the 'reporting' across channels.

These two incidents confirm how television journalism has become a caricature of itself during the Modi era. They help explain why the younger generation are increasingly turning elsewhere for information, commentary, education, even advocacy.

The youth's distrust of mainstream media was in full public view in May 2026. Anger over the NEET paper leak scandal and the CBSE Class 12 online marking fiasco triggered nationwide outrage. Students demanded accountability from Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan. While neither the government nor mainstream media adequately addressed their concerns, a social

media war broke out between a well-known female anchor from a private television channel and coaching teachers, who she branded 'worthless nobodies'. The matter has now reached the Delhi High Court with the TV network and anchor filing a two-crore defamation suit on these 'tuppenny teachers'—'do kaudi ke teacher'—including 'Khan Sir', Abhinav Sharma, Babita Tyagi and others.

It all began on 31 May. In a post on X, Anjana Om Kashyap accused 'celebrity teachers' of being a 'coaching mafia' that exploited students and their parents while masquerading as public advocates.

The reaction from online educators was immediate. Among the most prominent critics was Abhinav Sharma, a mathematics teacher for SSC aspirants (with 3 million+ YouTube subscribers). In livestreams that collectively attracted millions of views, Sharma called out the 'godi media' for shielding those in power instead of demanding answers.

He was joined by Faizal Khan, better known as Khan Sir of Khan Global Studies in Patna (6.1 million+ subscribers), and Sonipat-based Babita Tyagi who helps students prepare for UPSC and other competitive

exams at ICS Coaching Centre (3.7+ million YouTube subscribers). In a video posted on 1 June, Tyagi said: "Our prime-time news consists of stories like what kind of oil is used in jhalmuri and how it smells."

Referring to other reports by the female anchor, Tyagi added: "She once compared a buffalo in Bangladesh to Donald Trump because the buffalo had been named Donald Trump. Someone bought it so it wouldn't be slaughtered. This is the level of journalism in our country."

Soon, teachers across India were publicly asking: Why wasn't the media talking about

the NEET paper leak? Why was it not demanding accountability from the Modi government?

Their criticism came at a politically charged moment. Opposition parties led by Rahul Gandhi were demanding the resignation of Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan over the NEET controversy. Students were protesting in cities such as Prayagraj over paper leaks and irregularities in recruitment and entrance examinations. Instead of addressing these issues, why were teachers being targeted?

Why, Tyagi asked, were media personalities who claimed influence with policymakers not pressing for reforms in schools and examination systems? "If a paper leak happened once, shouldn't we have learned from it? Why does the same 'mistake' happen repeatedly?"

According to her, teachers were targeted when they became uncomfortably vocal on students' rights and institutional failures.

Aftab, a student of Khan Sir's, says, "Students preparing for competitive exams are politically aware. We study the Constitution, history, current affairs. We know that 'godi media' defends the BJP government at the Centre. But when our interests are affected, we realise the media is not speaking up for us. This affects us psychologically. We see no future."

He adds: "Teachers entered the fray only when their students' distress peaked. Their support is genuine."



Photo: Getty Images
'Khan Sir' at a protest in Patna demanding the cancellation of a BPS examination

Their coverage of the NEET leaks and the CBSE exam fiasco were good measures of the warring parties' 'news' credentials

► Continued on page 2

Why have vital indicators gone missing?

Data that spell bad news or expose the government's exaggerated claims have been omitted. Herjinder on what the NFHS-6 conceals

For more than three decades, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) has been the gold standard for understanding India's demographic and public health realities. Conducted periodically since the early 1990s, the survey has offered insights into how Indians live, eat, reproduce and access healthcare.

Its rich, district-level data has empowered policymakers, researchers, journalists and civil society groups to identify gaps in health services, monitor welfare programmes and fine-tune interventions. In a country as vast and diverse as India, such granular data often makes the difference between effective policy and administrative guesswork.

It is precisely because of this reputation that the release of the NFHS-6 (2023-24) fact-sheets has triggered an intense debate within the public health community. While the Union government has highlighted improvements in institutional deliveries, immunisation coverage and several other health indicators, critics argue that the most striking aspect of the latest survey is not what it reveals, but what it leaves out.

The omission of key indicators that featured prominently in earlier editions reduces transparency, weakens comparability with previous surveys and makes it harder to independently assess the performance of major government programmes, say public health experts.

Among the most glaring omissions are indicators directly linked to some of the Narendra Modi government's flagship welfare initiatives.

In NFHS-5, data on household access to clean cooking fuel and sanitation facilities played a crucial role in evaluating the effectiveness

of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana and the Swachh Bharat Mission. These allowed researchers to assess not merely whether LPG connections or toilets had been provided, but whether they were actually being used.

Their absence from NFHS-6 is conspicuous at a time when questions are being raised about the long-term sustainability of these schemes. The number of subsidised LPG cylinders available under the Ujjwala scheme has been cut from nine per year to four. According to the Petroleum Ministry, around 10.55 crore LPG connections have been provided under the programme. Without district-level data on fuel usage, independent researchers cannot accurately verify these figures or evaluate their benefits.

Equally significant is the exclusion of the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) and infant and child mortality indicators. The SRB has long been considered a crucial measure for gender discrimination and assessing the impact of campaigns like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao.

While some information continues to be available through mechanisms such as the Sample Registration System (SRS), experts point out that the NFHS offered something unique: district-level granularity. National or state-level averages often conceal localised failures. Without district-wise data, policymakers lose an important tool for identifying areas where interventions are succeeding, or failing.

Perhaps no omission has generated more discussion than the complete removal of anaemia prevalence estimates.

The NFHS-5 had revealed that more than 50 per cent of Indian women and children were anaemic, raising uncomfortable questions



The NFHS-6 report has several glaring exclusions and blind spots

about the effectiveness of programmes such as Poshan Abhiyaan.

The government argues that the omission is driven by political considerations. Experts had pointed out that the capillary blood sampling method used in earlier NFHS rounds—commonly known as the finger-prick test—could produce inaccurate estimates because tissue fluids sometimes dilute the blood sample.

Consequently, anaemia measurement shifted to the India and Biomarkers Survey in India (DABS-I), which relies on venous blood samples analysed in laboratories using auto analysers—the internationally accepted gold standard.

While scientists generally agree that venous sampling is more accurate, critics argue that accuracy has come at the cost of detail. Unlike the NFHS, DABS-I provides state and national-level estimates, not district-level data.

Health activist Dr A.K. Arun sees a broader pattern in the omissions: "All those indicators

that show deficiencies are being omitted, whether it is a deficiency in the health of society or a deficiency in the system."

For many public health experts, the concern is that the elimination of anaemia from NFHS-6 does not eliminate the crisis, it just makes it less visible.

The omissions are not limited to indicators alone. An entire state is absent from the survey.

NFHS-6 collected information from nearly 6.8 lakh households across India but excluded Manipur, where prolonged ethnic violence and instability disrupted fieldwork.

This deliberately creates a blind spot. Manipur has witnessed one of the most severe internal crises in recent Indian history, yet policymakers, researchers and humanitarian agencies now lack a comprehensive assessment of how the conflict has affected nutrition, maternal health, child health and healthcare access.

Another major casualty is disability data. Disability questions were introduced only in NFHS-5, offering researchers an opportunity to study the relationship between disability and various health outcomes, including maternal health, tuberculosis and access to services. Without updated data, policymakers have fewer tools to design and assess targeted interventions.

The NFHS-6 debate is also entangled with an earlier controversy involving the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), the Mumbai-based institution responsible for conducting the survey.

As preparations for NFHS-6 were underway in July 2023, the Union government suspended IIPS director K.S. James, citing alleged irregularities in recruitment procedures. Critics claimed that James had earlier been asked to

resign because of survey findings that questioned the effectiveness of certain government programmes. When he didn't, he was suspended.

Though the government maintains that the action was purely administrative, the episode contributed to growing concerns about institutional autonomy and the future independence of large-scale public data collection exercises.

Ironically, even several indicators have disappeared, the data that remains reveals significant challenges.

India now faces what experts describe as the 'dual burden' of malnutrition. While roughly one-fifth of adults remain underweight, obesity is rising sharply across both urban and rural populations.

As per the survey, 30.7 per cent women and 27.3 per cent men are now classified as obese or overweight, marking a substantial increase from the previous round.

The trend is accompanied by rising prevalence of high blood sugar and hypertension, signalling a major shift in India's disease profile. Obesity, increasingly linked to a growing healthcare industry, has become one of the most discussed findings of the survey.

Other concerns include decline in exclusive breastfeeding rates, fall in modern contraceptive usage and rise in caesarean section deliveries. The national C-section rate is 27.2 per cent, soaring to 54 per cent in private healthcare facilities.

The NFHS has always been more than just a dataset. It is a tool of democratic accountability. By making health and welfare outcomes visible at the district level, it enables researchers, citizens and governments to ask difficult questions. Erasing data will not make those questions go away. ■

By making health and welfare outcomes visible, the NFHS enables scrutiny. Erasing the data won't end the problem

An autopsy of TV news

Continued from page 1

Senior journalist Sidharth Kalhans notes that while online educators may not be professional reporters, their criticism cannot simply be dismissed. Some of them are public figures in their own right. If they question the conduct of TV anchors, those concerns deserve engagement rather than retaliation.

The rise of these educators has been enabled by the rapid spread of affordable internet across India, including small towns and rural areas. They are both teachers and influencers. Ankit Awasthi, known online as 'Awasthi Sir', is an IIT graduate. He reaches over 5.8 million students through his YouTube channel, where he explains current affairs, public policy and news events alongside educational content.

The growth of this eco-

system accelerated dramatically after COVID-19. Before the pandemic, India's coaching industry was dominated by physical classrooms. During the lockdown, teaching moved online, and educators who could communicate well on digital platforms acquired vast audiences. Many became trusted voices on issues beyond academics.

Khan Sir's trajectory exemplifies this shift. Initially an offline teacher, he rose to prominence during the pandemic. Students loved his teaching style—some describe it as rustic—and his audience grew rapidly as the algorithm amplified his content. His fees were low. (Membership to the Khan Global Studies YouTube channel costs only Rs 59 a month. He also teaches through a mobile app.) Naturally, lower-income families embraced him enthusiastically.

Aftab says that he prepared for the BPSC examination through Khan Sir's offline coaching programme, paying only Rs 2,600 (other coaching centres charge Rs 20,000). He studied for three months and received free access to the institute's test series. He says Khan Sir is largely responsible for reducing both online and offline coaching fees. Three years ago, coaching centres charged Rs 8,000-10,000 even for recorded lectures. Today, despite inflation, recorded courses are available for around Rs 2,000. The content is good, the fees are low and the teachers are effective.

"Khan Sir's teaching style is so simple that even a rickshaw puller can understand it," says Aftab. "For example, when explaining the Iran-Iraq War, he describes it as though two neighbours are fighting. He occasionally uses Bhojpuri. When he comments on something, it feels like an elder brother speaking."

Today, he has private bodyguards, a devoted fan base and considerable media

attention. After the recent shooting incident outside his coaching institute, Khan Sir became Faizal Khan in mainstream headlines. His tendency to speak loose and fast, or crack jokes about women have justifiably drawn criticism.

Student Arun Pandey says: "All teachers do it, to lighten the atmosphere... Some people dislike it, while others ignore it. ... In a one-hour video, there may be only a couple of minutes of comments about social or political issues. But when you have 300 videos, even one such segment from each makes 300 separate clips."

Kajal Kumari, an offline student at Khan Global Studies, sees it differently: "There's nothing uncomfortable about it. He makes such comments from time to time so students don't get bored."

Kajal is preparing for the BPSC prelims, mains and interview for a fee of Rs 15,000. She has multiple options, having already been selected for the Bihar Police, paramedical and firefighting services, and a position at the Bihar Legislative Council.

Kajal adds, doing its job properly, it wouldn't be ranked 157th in the World Press Freedom Index."

The real source of the backlash may be that for the first time, the failures of the Central government are reaching the homes of those affected through social media platforms, not mainstream media.

The question raised by this confrontation is simple: if mainstream media had fulfilled its watchdog role, would coaching teachers and YouTubers have become some of its most influential critics? Sure, students would still attend their classes and watch their lectures. But who would have imagined that one day they would remind mainstream media of its responsibilities—and perform an autopsy on its journalism? ■

The BJP tries a new political stunt in Punjab

Herjinder

By hook or by crook: that seems to sum up the BJP's Punjab strategy as it prepares for the 2027 state assembly elections. Desperate for a foothold in the state, its recent stunts have bemused political observers in Punjab.

On 6 June, senior BJP and Maharashtra minister Girish D. Mahajan attended the 42nd anniversary of Operation Blue Star observed at the Damdami Taksal headquarters in Amritsar. The event has always been politically sensitive. Even senior Akali Dal leaders, despite their deep roots in Sikh politics, tend to steer clear. An official BJP representative from Maharashtra to this gathering? That had to be a first.

Even more controversial than Mahajan's presence were his remarks from the podium: Operation Blue Star was a military attack, 6 June 1984 was a 'black day' in Indian history, those killed were martyrs. He accused then prime minister Indira Gandhi of forcibly sending the Army into the Golden Temple complex and likened the military action to the invasions of Ahmad Shah Abdali.

For decades, BJP leaders have opposed attempts to glorify or memorialise Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale and his associates, maintaining that Operation Blue Star, however tragic, was carried out to restore law and order.

While several Sikh organisations objected to Sikhs being referred to as 'Sanatani Sikhs' at the event, most wondered how or why a resource minister from Maharashtra had landed up at this event. But those familiar with recent developments suggest the visit was not as random as it seemed.

The growing proximity between the Damdami Taksal and the BJP has been evident for some time. During the 2024 Maharashtra assembly elections, Baba Harnam Singh of the Taksal extended support to the BJP-led Mahayuti alliance. Earlier this year, the Taksal also participated in the Maharashtra government's commemoration of the 350th anniversary of the martyrdom of Guru Tegh Bahadur, an event attended by Union Home Minister Amit Shah. Mahajan's visit, said BJP spokesman Prof. Sarchand Singh, was a "reciprocal gesture". He was merely representing the Maharashtra chief minister at the event. If this explanation is accepted, it would



BJP leader and Maharashtra minister Girish Mahajan (second from left) at the 42nd anniversary of Operation Blue Star at the Damdami Taksal in Amritsar

Desperate for a toehold in the state, the BJP is playing with fire

appear that the BJP has been cultivating relationships with groups it once viewed with suspicion.

Interestingly, when Amit Shah was asked about Mahajan's remarks, he distanced the party from what he called Mahajan's "personal opinion". If the remarks were indeed personal, critics ask, why was a senior minister sent to the event in the first place?

The controversy has also generated debate in Maharashtra. Operation Blue Star was conducted under the leadership of General Arun Kumar Shridhar Vaidya, a distinguished Maharashtrian soldier who paid a steep price for his part in the operation. In 1986, after he had retired, General Vaidya was assassinated by Khalistani terrorists in Pune. Critics in Maharashtra are asking: how could a minister from the state overlook the

sacrifice of one of Maharashtra's most decorated military figures?

Pundits believe the BJP's 'evolving' approach is driven by electoral compulsions. According to political analyst Prof. Kuldip Singh, the party is attempting to overcome its limited appeal among Punjab's Sikh peasantry and rural voters. The scars left by the now-repealed farm laws continue to haunt the BJP in large parts of rural Punjab, and the party is looking for ways to soften resistance and expand its social base.

Dangerous opportunism, says Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee president Amarinder Singh Warring. "Punjab has long rejected divisive and sectarian politics. Don't try to revive it for petty electoral gains. Don't play with fire. Punjabis will never accept such a divisive agenda," Warring warned.

He further argued that the BJP routinely brands its opponents 'anti-national' while taking political positions that suit its electoral calculations. For this, and more, "the BJP owes the people of Punjab an answer."

The ideological gymnastics did not end at Mehta Chowk.

Last week, newly appointed Punjab BJP president Kewal Singh Dhillion declared that if voted to power, the party would usher in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's 'Sarkar-e-Khalsa', that model of equal treatment for all, irrespective of caste, class or creed. For a party whose ideological parent organisation has long championed a Hindu rashtira as its ultimate political vision, that's (more than) a bit rich. ■

Of vanishing lakes, concrete jungles and thirsty cities

From Mumbai's tanker strike to Bengaluru's drying lakes, urban water woes escalate amid a population explosion

Rashme Sehgal

On 7 May, private water tanker operators halted services in India's commercial capital, Mumbai. The strike was triggered by action initiated by the Central Ground Water Authority over groundwater extraction and regulatory compliance. Operators were to obtain a No Objection Certificate (NOC), prove ownership of at least 200 sq. m of land where the well is located, and ensure compliance with water quality standards set by the Bureau of Indian Standards. Operators said the regulations threatened both their livelihoods and the water supply of millions reliant on tankers. Mumbai's seven lakes, which supply the city's water, are nearly empty and residents of housing societies face growing water shortages caused by this impasse.

This is the story across urban India. Lakhs of residents across Delhi's colonies face erratic water supplies. Water levels in the Yamuna have dropped, leaving Delhi with a shortage of almost 80 million gallons per day. According to a senior Delhi Jal Board official, "The Yamuna is 6.5 ft below usual levels and the Haryana irrigation department says only 352 cusecs of water can be released. We are forced to rely on borewells and canned water."

In nearby Gurgaon, residents of premium luxury apartments worth crores are frustrated as water rationing persists. Despite paying as much as Rs 10,000 per tanker, supply is insufficient. The Gurugram Metropolitan Development Authority attributes this to shortage of raw water, with demand far outstripping current infrastructure capacity.

Take Pune, 150 km southeast of Mumbai. Despite having four dams on the Mutha river, water shortages worsen every summer. The Pune Municipal Corporation has sought permission to draw water from the Bhama Ashked dam to meet rising demand. In just four decades, the city's area has quadrupled—from 125 sq. km in 1987 to 508 sq. km today—and the population is up from 70 lakh in 2021 to an estimated 77.8 lakh in 2025-26.

In the south, Hyderabad faces acute shortages, with more than 20,000 tanker bookings a day. A delayed monsoon and growing dependence on tankers has forced the city's water board to operate in three shifts, adding night deliveries. Hyderabad-based expert Satyanarayana Bolisetty says, "Eighty per cent of Hyderabad's lakes have



The month-long strike of private water tanker operators in Mumbai drew attention to the city's worsening water crisis

Photo: IANS

been encroached upon. Earlier, the green spaces in Jubilee and Banjara Hills helped recharge groundwater. These hills have been built over, so the rain water runs off, causing localised flooding."

India's rapid urban population growth has compounded water stress. Metro cities—home to more than 50 crore people—face declining groundwater, erratic rain and polluted rivers. Poor planning, unchecked construction and outdated infrastructure make matters worse.

Water inequality deepens social disparities. A Greenpeace survey of 500 households in 12 of Delhi's informal settlements found that 34 per cent buy water from private suppliers, often spending up to 15 per cent of their monthly income. The government promised 3,000 water ATMs, but has managed to instal 20 between April and June.

According to the 2023 Aqueduct Water Risk Atlas released by the World Resources

Institute, India ranks #24 out of 25 nations facing 'extremely high' water stress. This means the country is using at least 80 per cent of its available supply.

Prof. T.V. Ramachandran of the Indian Institute of Science points out how urban planning failures have destroyed natural water recharge zones: "Bengaluru's green cover, at 68 per cent in the 1970s, is down to four per cent. Groundwater once available at 100 ft is now 800-8,000 ft deep. In some cases, reviving green cover around the remaining lakes has helped raise groundwater to 320 feet." He suggests adopting a 'Green GDP' metric that factors in environmental impact and promotes sustainable development.

Bengaluru, which had over 250 lakes in the 1970s, now has only 180, many degraded by sewage mismanagement.

Bolisetty says, "Seventy years ago, Vishakhapatnam had 104 natural tanks. Today, there are two."

Thirty of 100 cities facing 'grave water risk' by 2050 are in India, reveals the World Wide Fund for Nature's latest list

He is horrified by Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu's decision to allocate hundreds of acres, at prices way below market rates, to set up AI data centres knowing full well they need millions of gallons of water to function.

"For a water-scarce state like us, where will all this water come from?" he asks.

Dehradun, once known as the 'Venice of the East'—with 100 canals and 40 rivers that kept the city cool and provided ample water for its famous tea gardens, orchards and basmati rice fields—has been concretised beyond recognition.

"Our rivers have been reduced to dirty nullahs. We have become a water-scarce city. Our city planners forget that urban waterbodies play a vital role in maintaining ecological balance and supporting biodiversity," says city-based environmentalist Renu Paul.

The World Wide Fund for Nature listed 100 cities, including 30 in India, that face 'grave water risk' by 2050. The list includes Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Lucknow and Bhopal. A 2019 Niti Aayog report had warned that 21 Indian cities risk running dry by 2020.

Prime Minister Modi's Jal Jeevan Mission had promised household taps for 191 million homes by 2024. Claims of 60 per cent coverage are marred by corruption and unreliable data. Often, the taps are installed but there's no water, making the scheme a washout.

The quality of water remains a serious concern. Although India possesses four per cent of the planet's freshwater resources, it ranks 122 out of 124 countries on the 2024 World Water Quality Index. Industrial effluents and untreated sewage contaminate rivers, while harmful metals like cadmium, lead and arsenic pollute water supply.

Rivers are drying, aquifers vanish and groundwater extraction exceeds that of the US and China combined. Groundwater is being used to provide drinking water for about 85 per cent of people in rural areas and irrigation for more than 60 per cent, indicating severe overuse.

Hill stations like Shimla haven't been spared. In 2018, taps ran dry during the tourist season when demand is highest. This story is repeated across other popular tourist and hill stations.

Himanshu Thakkar, coordinator of the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People, highlights the vital role of slow rainwater absorption through forests: "Rapid runoff caused by urbanisation leads to poor water retention. Forests, wetlands, local waterbodies, and carbon-rich agricultural fields help absorb and then gradually release rainwater, supporting year-round river flow and protecting against both flood and drought."

On 9 June, Mumbai's tanker strike ended after Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis promised the withdrawal of notices to well-owners and operators. But over-dependence on tankers and other short-term fixes will end only if green cover is revived as the most cost-effective way of increasing water availability. ■

After Maoism, the mines

The mineral-rich forests of central and east India—think Gadchiroli, Bastar, Singbhum, Latehar, Koderma et cetera—await their plunder, writes Jaideep Hardikar

The guns have fallen silent in Gadchiroli with the end of Maoism. But a new battle is emerging over forests, land and the future of India's mineral frontier.

For three days this month, thousands of tribal farmers sat in protest near Chamorshi in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district. Their demand: stop acquiring our land.

On 12 May, the state government approved the acquisition of more than 311 hectares in four villages for a proposed airport, and sanctioned about Rs 77 crore as compensation to villagers. Meanwhile, the Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) is moving ahead with plans to acquire nearly 3,000 hectares across 14 villages in Chamorshi tehsil for a proposed Rs 1 lakh crore steel plant of the JSW Group.

Beyond the recent announcements of scattered land acquisition lies a far bigger plan involving thousands of hectares of forest and agricultural land in this unspoilt southeastern corner of the state for mining

infrastructure, steel manufacturing and other industrial projects.

Faced with growing resistance, the government has temporarily suspended some of the planned acquisition, but protesters' know from experience that the pause won't last.

The current, spontaneous agitation is not simply about compensation, though. It is about the future of this pristine forest district (nearly three-quarters of Gadchiroli is under forest cover), which has become the site of a gigantic resource-extraction enterprise.

Earlier this year, in the budget session of the state legislature, Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis announced that Gadchiroli would be transformed into a steel hub, promising over Rs 2.6 lakh crore worth of investments and the creation of 70,000 jobs. The district, long associated with Maoist insurgency, is being recast as the state's next big industrial hub. It doesn't seem to matter that this grand ambition will destroy thousands of acres of pristine forests,

perennial rivers and forest-based livelihoods. The iron ore deposits that lie under these forests will fuel steel plants, logistics corridors and a new manufacturing economy. Corporates close to this regime have long been eyeing these deposits.

A look at the ongoing road works reveals that the government wants to connect the ports on the east coast to those on the west. The BJP+ governments in the state and at the Centre present this as a story of development finally reaching one of Maharashtra's most neglected regions. But local residents, tribal rights activists and environmentalists foresee devastating consequences for their ecology, economy and cultural habitat.

Gadchiroli is not unique. Variations of the same story are playing out across central India. In Bastar, in the mineral-rich districts of western Odisha, and in the forested areas stretching across Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Maharashtra,

the decline of Maoist influence is rapidly opening up large swathes of land for mining and other industrial projects. For decades, security concerns and political instability cut off corporate access to the rich mineral deposits in these parts. But now that insurgency has been quelled and those Maoist barriers are breaking down, the pent-up appetite for mineral extraction is in full view.

Gadchiroli may be the clearest example of this transition.

It is one of the most densely forested districts of Maharashtra, with nearly 76 per cent of its area under forest cover. Beneath these forests lie substantial deposits of iron ore, particularly around the sacred hills of Surjagarh in central Gadchiroli. Mining in the area was discussed for years but remained constrained by a combination of local opposition, legal disputes and Maoist activity.

Today, vast stretches of this once-remote landscape witness a fever of mining activity, truck traffic, security deployments, new and expanding infrastructure and a marked inflow of non-tribal migrants into what used to be a quiet tribal landscape.

As the state pushes ahead with plans to turn Gadchiroli into a steel hub, many villagers see Surjagarh as a preview of what awaits the district's remaining forests. Tens of mining permits are in the queue for clearance.

The state's vision is quite straightforward. Iron ore will be extracted from the forests while steel and related industries will be set up outside the forests. Roads, rail links, the proposed airport, industrial estates and logistics infrastructure will connect the mines to processing centres and markets.

Officials argue that the new manufacturing infrastructure will generate employment, increase local incomes and integrate Gadchiroli into the broader economy. But this vision elides the crises that will ensue from the appropriation of land.

The annexation will likely employ the subterfuge of classifying some of these forest lands as wastelands, arbitrarily curtailing or denying community forest rights. That these acquisitions will flout the democratic consent and framework of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas), Act, 1996, is no kind of deterrent for the current dispensation.

Environment groups have repeatedly warned that mining in and around Surjagarh threatens a crucial wildlife

landscape connecting the forests of Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh. The Tadoba-Indravati corridor, which enables tiger movement between protected areas, passes through parts of this region. Even the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has raised questions about the approvals, but to no avail. All red flags have gone unheeded.

Gadchiroli is an ecologically sensitive and socially vulnerable district. Emerging from the shadows of four decades of armed conflict that claimed thousands of lives, it needs a cooling period. But the headlong rush to reclaim its land for 'development' will make no allowance for these niceties.

What happens to the tribal populations it will permanently displace?

What of the tiger corridor it will fragment and likely ruin? Can it ever be restored?

The irony is particularly striking in Gadchiroli because many of the forests now targeted for extraction have survived precisely because local tribal communities protected them. For years, villages in the district have been celebrated for community forest rights, for their gram-sabha-led forest management and innovative local governance. These experiments demonstrated that forests can be conserved even while supporting livelihoods. But these landscapes are no longer being seen as ecological assets that also sustain other ways of life but as mineral treasures awaiting plunder.

The proposed Shaktipeeth Expressway, from the tribal hinterland of Gadchiroli to Goa, illustrates the scale of this transformation. Its votaries in government and outside view it as a vital infrastructure project that will link regions and facilitate economic growth. But that spiel aside, it is a conveyor belt for minerals, industrial goods and capital. It is being designed as an artery of India's great extractive economy, stretching from the forests of central India to ports and export markets.

The story unfolding in Gadchiroli is much larger than Gadchiroli itself. For years, the district symbolised a conflict between the Indian state and Maoist insurgents. That conflict may finally be fading away, but the contest over competing visions of land, forests and the future is still alive. The guns may have fallen silent, but the struggle over who controls the forests has perhaps only just begun. ■



Relieve, not resolution Their protests may have won tribal farmers a victory that will be short-lived

The guns may have fallen silent in Gadchiroli, but the battle over control of its forests may have just begun

The battle over Mekedatu

It's more than a dispute over a dam; it's really a debate about how India intends to manage rivers in an increasingly uncertain future



Photo: K.A. Shaji

The site of the proposed Mekedatu Balancing Reservoir Project on the Cauvery, 90 km south of Bengaluru

K.A. Shaji

The renewed confrontation between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the proposed Mekedatu Balancing Reservoir Project is not just another episode in the long-running Cauvery dispute. It is a conflict that encapsulates some of the most pressing challenges confronting India in an era of climate uncertainty, rapid urbanisation and shrinking natural resources.

At the centre of the controversy is the fundamental question: who has the first claim over a river? An upstream state seeking drinking water security for a rapidly expanding metropolis, or downstream communities whose agriculture, livelihoods and survival depend on uninterrupted river flows?

The latest flashpoint came after the Supreme Court declined to entertain Tamil Nadu's review petition against the project, which emboldened Karnataka to push once again for clearances. Tamil Nadu fears Mekedatu could alter the delicate balance established after decades of litigation and negotiations over water-sharing.

A thirsty city and a narrow gorge

Over the past three decades, Bengaluru has expanded at a pace that far outstripped the capacity of its natural resources. Lakes have disappeared under real estate projects. Wetlands have been encroached upon. Groundwater extraction has reached alarming levels. The city has become increasingly dependent on pumping Cauvery water over long distances and

impractical elevations.

The water crisis that gripped Bengaluru in recent years exposed the vulnerability of this model. Tankers ran dry. Residential communities imposed restrictions on consumption. Experts pointed to decades of neglect of lakes, wetlands and groundwater recharge systems.

Against this backdrop, the Karnataka government argues, the Mekedatu project is indispensable.

About 90 kilometre south of Bengaluru, Mekedatu is a picturesque gorge where the Cauvery narrows dramatically between rocky cliffs before flowing into Tamil Nadu. The name, which means 'goat's leap' in Kannada, comes from a local legend that a goat once crossed the gorge in a single jump.

The proposed reservoir would store about 67 thousand million cubic feet (tmcf) of water and generate 400 MW of electricity. Karnataka says around 4.5 tmcf of water can be diverted annually to meet the drinking water needs of Bengaluru and neighbouring Kanakapura. State officials maintain that the project falls within Karnataka's allocated share of Cauvery waters and therefore does not violate any tribunal award or Supreme Court order.

The state government also argues that the reservoir would improve groundwater recharge, increase water availability during drought years and help secure drinking water requirements for a city under mounting water stress.

For many in Karnataka, especially industry groups and urban residents, the project is seen as a necessity. Go 300 km

downstream and the same project is viewed very differently.

The delta's dread

In Tamil Nadu's delta districts of Thanjavur, Tiruvarur, Nagapattinam and Tiruchirappalli, the Cauvery is the backbone of agriculture. Vast stretches of paddy fields depend on timely water releases from upstream reservoirs.

Farmers in the delta have endured years of uncertainty caused by erratic monsoons and prolonged interstate disputes. Many fear that Mekedatu would give the upstream state greater control over the timing and release of water; a fear substantiated by officials associated with the state's Cauvery management apparatus. Farmer organisations say that even temporary disruptions can have devastating consequences for the state's agricultural heartland.

A reservoir within a wildlife sanctuary

Mekedatu lies within the Cauvery wildlife sanctuary, one of south India's most important forest ecosystems. Forest officials note that the area is home to several vulnerable and endangered species, including the grizzled giant squirrel, smooth-coated otter, honey badger and Deccan mahseer fish.

If implemented, the project would submerge approximately 7,862 acres of the sanctuary and another 4,619 acres of adjoining reserve forests. More than 12,000 acres of ecologically sensitive forest land would be inundated.

The sanctuary serves as a crucial corridor connecting the Eastern and Western Ghats, linking the Biligiri Ranganatha Hills and the forests of Male Mahadeshwara Hills. The loss of forest cover and migratory routes could have consequences extending far beyond the immediate project area.

Conservation biologist Sanjay Gubbi, who has studied the region extensively, points out that the sanctuary provides dispersal space for elephants and tigers and helps reduce human-animal conflict.

The project would require large-scale blasting, excavation and extraction of construction materials. These activities will have long-term impacts on local ecosystems even before the reservoir begins to fill.

An ecological contradiction

Perhaps the greatest irony of the proposal is that it seeks to solve one environmental crisis by creating another.

Bengaluru's water shortage is largely the outcome of decades of unsustainable urban planning. The city once possessed an intricate network of lakes and tanks that stored rainwater and replenished groundwater reserves. Much of that network has either disappeared or become severely degraded.

Environmental groups point out that Bengaluru continues to lose substantial quantities of treated water through leakages. Rainwater harvesting remains uneven. Wastewater recycling is far below its potential. Restoration of lakes and wetlands has progressed slowly despite repeated warnings from experts.

A 15-member expert appraisal committee is understood to have raised concerns regarding environmental impacts and alternative options. The findings have never been made fully public.

The human cost

If the reservoir becomes a reality, several tribal settlements and forest-dependent communities face displacement. Villages such as Bommasundra, Galebore, Makivala, Kogge Doddi, Nelluru Doddi and

Sampatagere Doddi are likely to be affected.

For these communities, displacement means far more than relocation. It involves the loss of access to forests, grazing lands, fishing resources and cultural landscapes that have sustained generations.

Tourism-dependent livelihoods could also be affected. Sangama, one of Karnataka's most popular eco-tourism destinations, will be submerged.

The climate change conundrum

Large reservoirs have traditionally been justified on the assumption that river flows remain reasonably predictable. Climate change challenges that assumption.

Both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu are experiencing increasingly erratic rainfall patterns. Droughts, extreme rainfall events and seasonal variability are now common across the Cauvery basin.

Water policy analysts have argued that investing thousands of crores in large storage structures may not be the most effective strategy in an era of hydrological uncertainty. Rather, water security may depend on restoring ecosystems, improving efficiency and managing demand.

The Cauvery itself has become more vulnerable to climatic fluctuations. During years of deficient rainfall, tensions between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu often intensify, revealing the limits of existing water-sharing arrangements.

The crisis of water management

The Mekedatu controversy exposes the weaknesses in India's approach to river governance. Rivers do not recognise political boundaries. Yet water management in India continues to be shaped largely by state-level interests.

As water scarcity increases, interstate disputes are likely to become more frequent and more contentious. The Cauvery conflict has already generated decades of litigation, protests and political mobilisation.

Mekedatu threatens to open another protracted chapter in that history. India lacks robust river-basin governance mechanisms capable of balancing ecological concerns, climate risks, urban needs and downstream rights within a common framework. As a result, debates are often reduced to competing claims over water allocation.

The river itself receives little consideration. Neither do the forests, wildlife populations and vulnerable communities whose futures are tied to it.

Bengaluru undoubtedly needs water security. Tamil Nadu's farmers need assured river flows. The Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary deserves protection. Climate change demands caution.

Reconciling these competing realities will require imagination, cooperation and a willingness to move beyond the politics that have long defined interstate river disputes. ■

The project will have a devastating impact on the Cauvery wildlife sanctuary and forest-dependent people

ESIC Don't sell it, fix it

Privatising the only healthcare system designed for workers will not make it well again

Ajit Ranade

The latest Sample Registration System data should worry every policymaker. In 2024, nearly half of all recorded deaths in India occurred without medical attention from a trained professional. This is up from 18 per cent in 2020. The proportion was even higher in rural India, and in states such as Bihar it was close to two-thirds. These are not merely mortality statistics. They are a measure of how distant formal healthcare remains from the reach of ordinary Indians.

This is the background against which we must examine the Employees' State Insurance Corporation, or ESIC. There is growing discussion about 'reforming' it. Reform is overdue. But reform must not become a code word for privatisation, outsourcing or handing over a valuable social security institution to private insurers and hospital chains.

ESIC is often misunderstood as just another health insurance scheme. It is much more than that. It is a social insurance system for low-income workers in the formal economy. It combines medical care with income protection. It covers sickness, maternity, disability, workplace injury, dependants' benefit, unemployment support and lifelong pension in cases of permanent disablement. For a worker earning Rs 15,000 a month, the total annual contribution is about Rs 7,200, split between employer and employee. This sum entitles the worker (and family) to medical care without monetary ceilings, plus cash benefits that no ordinary private insurance product provides.

This matters not only for social

justice, but also for India's industrial future. India is among the world's largest manufacturing economies, yet workplace injuries remain seriously under-reported and under-addressed. A properly functional ESIC system that ensures quick treatment, wage compensation, rehabilitation and disability support prevents injured workers from falling into poverty. It also helps them return to productive work sooner. Worker health is productive capital. ESIC reform is therefore not merely welfare reform; it is productivity reform and should be seen as essential to sustaining industrial growth.

The scale is large. ESIC covers about 3.84 crore insured persons and, with their families—roughly one-tenth of India. It has a large hospital network, medical colleges, land assets and a reported corpus exceeding Rs 1 lakh crore. By any measure, this is one of India's most under-used public social infrastructure assets.

Its intellectual history is also worth recalling. Britain's National Health Service (NHS) emerged from the Beveridge vision of social security. In India, Prof. B.P. Adarkar designed a similar framework for industrial workers in the 1940s. The ESIC Act of 1948 came from that vision. The NHS became a globally respected public institution (currently facing severe challenges like funding cuts and staff shortages). It is true that ESIC has been suffering from neglect, weak governance and poor user experience. That is a failure of execution, not principle.

The flaws are real. Workers complain of queues, poor information, lack of medicines,



At the ESIC headquarters, New Delhi

slow referrals, indifferent staff and long delays in cash benefits. Safe in India (SII) Foundation's work with injured workers in Haryana and Maharashtra shows how serious the problem is. Of the 8,000+ injured workers it assisted, 73 per cent waited more than six months for temporary disability benefits and 78 per cent waited more than a year for permanent disability benefits. In Manesar, many workers had to pay out of pocket for even basic diagnostics such as ultrasounds.

This is exactly why ESIC needs to be repaired, not surrendered.

The case for privatisation rests on attractive words: choice, efficiency, competition, scale. But for low-wage workers, 'choice' is often illusory. Many workers are migrants, on short contracts, poorly informed and dependent on employers for registration. SII's experience shows that 16 per cent of assisted injured workers were registered with ESIC only after an accident, and 64 per cent received ESI cards only after injury. If

mandatory registration itself is not properly enforced, 'choice' will not empower workers.

Nor can private insurance replicate ESIC's benefit basket. A private family floater of Rs 5 lakh may cost Rs 15,000 to Rs 30,000 a year and usually covers only hospitalisation, with exclusions, waiting periods and sub-limits. It does not cover outpatient care, wage loss, maternity wage replacement, disability pension or occupational disease. A worker disabled at 28 may need support for 40 years. A disease like silicosis may appear decades after exposure. These are not risks that private insurers will carry at affordable premiums. They require a statutory, mandatory, pooled system.

India's own experience with private healthcare should also caution us. Even under publicly funded schemes, private providers can cherry-pick profitable cases, induce unnecessary procedures, dispute reimbursement rates and leave patients with out-of-pocket costs despite 'cashless' promises. Private capacity has a role to play in diagnostics, specialist care and underserved geographies, but not as a replacement for ESIC's public core.

The reform agenda should be practical. First, simplify every worker-facing process. Accident reporting, claims, referrals, disability assessment and benefit tracking must be redesigned around the worker, not the file. Second, publish enforceable service standards: claim-to-payment timelines, medicine availability, waiting time, referral turnaround and facility-wise performance.

Third, strengthen primary care in every major industrial cluster so workers do not bypass the system out of frustration. Fourth, fix human resources: doctors, specialists, nurses, technicians and hospital managers must be available where workers actually live and work. Fifth, deploy digital tools for appointments, health records, telemedicine and real-time

claim tracking. Digital literacy, however, should not become a new barrier.

Governance reform is equally important. ESIC must become more accountable to workers, and also employers, especially MSMEs. Its boards and state bodies need stronger representation of workers, including contract workers, along with employers, government and independent health experts. There should be independent performance audits, social audits, actuarial reviews and public dashboards. Employer compliance must be enforced: every eligible worker should be registered, receive an e-Pehchaan card and have accidents reported on time.

The wage ceiling also needs revision. It should be raised and indexed periodically to inflation. Coverage should gradually extend to construction, gig and platform workers. ESIC's corpus must be used for workers' promised benefits and to upgrade the institution—not diverted elsewhere.

ESIC has a distinct function. It is not merely a hospitalisation scheme. It links healthcare with workplace injury, wage loss, maternity protection, disability pensions and occupational disease tracking. That institutional capability took decades to build, and cannot be tossed aside.

India's healthcare crisis is not caused by too much public provision. It is caused by too little effective public provision. When nearly half of all deaths occur without trained medical attention, the answer cannot be to deny workers one of the few statutory systems designed for them. The answer is to fix it.

Fix ESIC. Professionalise it. Make it transparent. Use private expertise where necessary, but on ESIC's terms. Preserve the public character of the scheme. A revitalised ESIC can become a model for broader social health protection in India. ■

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

A NEW ERA OF DIGNITY: KARNATAKA'S HISTORIC 60% WAGE REFORM PUTS WORKERS AT THE HEART OF GROWTH

“Covering over 1,00,00,000 workers across 81 scheduled employments”

In a landmark move that is redefining labour welfare and social justice in Karnataka, the State Government has implemented a historic average 60% increase in minimum wages across 81 scheduled employments, benefiting more than one crore workers across diverse sectors of the economy.

The comprehensive wage revision, notified on May 22, 2026, represents one of the most significant labour reforms undertaken by any state in recent years and reflects Karnataka's commitment to ensuring that economic growth translates into tangible improvements in the lives of working people.

At a time when rising living costs continue to challenge household budgets, the reform offers meaningful relief by substantially raising the wage floor across skill categories and geographical regions. For lakhs of families employed in manufacturing, construction, logistics, services, education, sanitation and numerous other sectors, the revised framework promises not only higher incomes but also greater financial security, social dignity and economic opportunity.

Implemented under the leadership of Labour Minister Santhosh Lad, the initiative embodies the State Government's vision of inclusive development—one that balances industrial growth with social equity.

By delivering an average 60% increase in baseline minimum wages, Karnataka has established a progressive and forward-looking framework that places worker welfare, dignity and economic resilience at the heart of public policy.

More than a routine revision of wage schedules, the notification represents a transformative shift in labour governance. It acknowledges the invaluable contribution of workers to Karnataka's economic success and reinforces the principle that sustainable development must be accompanied by fair and equitable compensation for those whose labour drives the state's industries, services and infrastructure.

A REFORM BUILT ON CONSULTATION AND CONSENSUS

The journey towards this historic wage revision was neither sudden nor simplistic. It emerged through extensive deliberations involving the Karnataka Minimum Wages Advisory Board, labour unions, employer associations, industry representatives, legal experts and other stakeholders.

The Government undertook a careful assessment of changing economic realities, inflationary pressures and the evolving nature of employment in the post-pandemic economy. At the same time, it sought to address concerns that had persisted following legal scrutiny of earlier wage notifications.

Through a transparent and consultative approach, the Labour Department successfully crafted a framework that balances worker welfare with industrial sustainability. The result is a policy that seeks to strengthen livelihoods while providing businesses with greater regulatory clarity and long-term predictability.

The reform has therefore been widely viewed not merely as a wage adjustment, but as the outcome of a collaborative process that reflects the interests of worker, employee and the broader economy.



Photo: Gettyimages

A SCIENTIFIC FOUNDATION FOR FAIR WAGES

One of the most notable features of the revised framework is its scientific methodology. Rather than relying on incremental increases, the Government anchored the new wage structure in principles established by the Supreme Court of India in the landmark Reptakos Brett judgment.

These principles recognize that minimum wages should enable workers to meet not only basic survival needs but also broader household requirements relating to nutrition, healthcare, housing, education and social well-being.

By adopting this approach, Karnataka has shifted the convention from subsistence wages towards living wages and economic resilience. The revised framework acknowledges the realities faced by working families in a rapidly changing economy and seeks to provide a stronger foundation for household stability.

BUILDING A UNIFIED FRAMEWORK FOR A MODERN ECONOMY

A major innovation introduced through the notification is the creation of a unified wage structure under Schedule 4. Previously, different industries operated under separate classifications and multiple wage schedules, often resulting in complexity and inconsistencies.

The new framework replaces this fragmented system with a common wage architecture covering 65 existing scheduled employments while extending statutory protection to 18 additional sectors for the fit time.

The expansion reflects Karnataka's recognition of changing employment patterns and emerging occupations in the modern economy.

Workers in sectors such as private educational institutions, e-commerce delivery services, courier operations, mobile tower maintenance, cyber centres, amusement parks and several other service-sector occupations are now covered under formal wage protection laws.

This broader coverage demonstrates the Government's proactive approach to ensuring that labour welfare frameworks keep pace with technological change and evolving workforce realities.

SIMPLIFYING REGIONAL CLASSIFICATION

To improve administrative efficiency and better reflect present-day economic conditions, the State has also simplified its geographical wage classification system.

The earlier four-zone structure has been replaced by a practical three-zone model. **Zone 1** covers areas falling under the Greater Bengaluru Authority, recognizing the higher cost of living associated with the metropolitan region.

Zone 2 includes other municipal corporations and district headquarters across Karnataka.

Zone 3 encompasses rural areas, taluk centres and emerging economic regions.

The streamlined classification provides greater clarity for employees while ensuring that wage rates continue to reflect regional economic realities.

Protecting Workers Against Inflation

Recognizing that wage security cannot depend solely on periodic revisions, the Government has modernized the Variable Dearness Allowance (VDA) mechanism.

The revised framework directly links wage protection to movements in the Consumer Price Index (CPI), ensuring that workers' earnings remain responsive to inflationary pressures.

Based on the notified formula, the current CPI differential translates into an additional monthly VDA support of approximately Rs1,031 across all categories.

Equally significant is the decision to institutionalize annual revisions effective from April 1 each year.

This mechanism offers a dual benefit. Workers receive protection against the erosion of purchasing power, while employees gain predictability through a clearly defined and transparent revision schedule.

The result is a more stable industrial environment that benefits both labour and industry.

ADVANCING EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

Beyond financial considerations, the notification carries a powerful social message.

The revised framework explicitly reinforces the principle of equal pay for equal work and extends protections across gender identities. It includes specific recognition of men, women, transgender persons and persons with disabilities, helping to address longstanding inequities in segments of the labour market.

The notification reflects Karnataka's commitment to building a labour ecosystem that is fair, inclusive and respectful of human dignity.

It sends a clear message that economic opportunity must be available to all workers regardless of gender, identity or physical ability.

RECOGNIZING ESSENTIAL AND HIGH-RISK OCCUPATIONS

The reform also acknowledges the contributions of workers engaged in demanding and socially essential occupations.

Enhanced wage structures have been designed for sanitation workers, foundry employees and personnel working in thermal, solar and hydroelectric power generation facilities.

Mechanized sanitation workers, particularly those operating in urban centres such as Bengaluru, stand to benefit significantly from the revised framework.

These provisions underscore the Government's recognition that workers performing physically demanding, hazardous or socially critical functions deserve stronger economic protections and greater occupational dignity.

STRENGTHENING TRANSPARENCY AND COMPLIANCE

The notification introduces measures aimed at ensuring that wage benefits reach workers efficiently and transparently.

Employees are encouraged to make payments through bank transfer and approved electronic systems, reducing delays and improving accountability.

The framework also reinforces provisions relating to overtime work and weekly holidays, requiring compensation at enhanced rates for additional work beyond prescribed schedules.

These measures contribute to the formalization of employment practices and strengthen trust between employees and employers.

EXPANDING THE SOCIAL SECURITY CONVENTION

The wage revision has also opened a broader discussion on social security coverage.

With revised earnings pushing many workers beyond existing eligibility thresholds under certain welfare schemes, the State Government has initiated dialogue with the Union Government regarding the enhancement of limits under the Employees' State Insurance (ESI) framework.

The objective is to ensure that workers who benefit from higher wages do not lose access to vital healthcare and social security protections.

The proactive approach reflects Karnataka's broader vision of integrating wage reforms with comprehensive worker welfare.

GROWTH WITH HUMAN DIGNITY

Higher incomes often translate into stronger consumer spending, increased household stability, improved productivity and reduced workforce turnover. As workers gain greater purchasing power, local businesses, neighborhood markets and service providers also benefit from increased economic activity.

Latest initiatives demonstrate that industrial competitiveness and labour welfare are not opposing goals. Instead, they can reinforce one another through thoughtful policy design and collaborative governance.

The reform represents an investment in human capital—an acknowledgment that sustainable economic growth depends on the well-being of the people who power it.

As Karnataka continues to lead the nation in innovation, investment and industrial growth, this landmark wage revision serves as a powerful reminder that economic success is most meaningful when it improves the quality of life of ordinary citizens.

A DEFINING MOMENT IN KARNATAKA'S DEVELOPMENT JOURNEY

May 22, 2026 notification represents far more than a revision of wage schedules. It is a statement of intent about the kind of development Karnataka seeks to pursue—development that places people at its centre.

By modernizing wage structures, expanding coverage to emerging sectors, protecting incomes from inflation, promoting social inclusion and strengthening labour protections, the State has laid the foundation for a more equitable and resilient future.

More than one crore workers and their families, the reform offers not merely higher earnings but also greater security, dignity and opportunity.

As Karnataka continues to lead the nation in innovation, investment and industrial growth, this landmark wage revision serves as a powerful reminder that economic success is most meaningful when it improves the quality of life of ordinary citizens.

Therefore, much more than a financial adjustment, it is a declaration that workers deserve not only employment but fair wages, social dignity and a rightful share in the state's prosperity.

Through this transformative initiative, Karnataka has set a new benchmark for labour welfare and reaffirmed its belief that economic progress and human development can advance together—creating a future where growth is not only strong, but also inclusive, compassionate and just.

FAST FACTS

- 60% — Average wage increase
- 81 — Scheduled employments covered
- 18 — New sectors added
- 3 — Simplified wage zones
- 1 Crore+ — Workers benefited
- Rs1,031 — Monthly VDA support
- 22 May 2026 — Notification date
- Annual — Inflation adjustment cycle

WHO BENEFITS?

For the fit time, statutory wage protection extends to workers in:

- E-commerce delivery services
- Courier and logistics operations
- Private educational institutions
- Mobile tower maintenance
- Cyber centres
- Amusement parks
- Emerging service-sector occupations

KARNATAKA'S WAGE REVOLUTION

Before Revision:

- Multiple fragmented wage schedules
- Four-zone classification
- Limited coverage of emerging sectors

After Revision:

- Unified Schedule-4 wage framework
- Simplified Three-Zone System
- Coverage expanded to 81 employments
- 18 new sectors brought under protection
- Annual inflation-linked revision mechanism

Stronger Wages, Stronger Karnataka

The revised framework establishes a transparent wage matrix linked to skill levels and geographical location. Under the new structure, monthly minimum wages range from approximately Rs19,319 for unskilled workers in rural areas to over Rs 31,114 for highly skilled workers in the Bengaluru metropolitan region.

The new wage structure is as follows:

Skill Category	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3
Highly Skilled	Rs 31,114	Rs 28,285	Rs 25,714
Skilled	Rs 28,285	Rs 25,714	Rs 23,376
Semi-Skilled	Rs 25,714	Rs 23,376	Rs 21,251
Unskilled	Rs 23,376	Rs 21,251	Rs 19,319

Certain specialized occupations, including sanitation services, foundries and power generation facilities, receive enhanced protections through sector-specific wage provisions.

For thousands of workers and their families, these increases are expected to improve access to quality education, healthcare, housing and other essential services while strengthening overall financial resilience.



Why 'Indian' is becoming a bad word in the West

There is a rising tide of anti-Indian sentiment in the West, writes **Ashok Swain**, but "it's not 'Hinduphobia'"

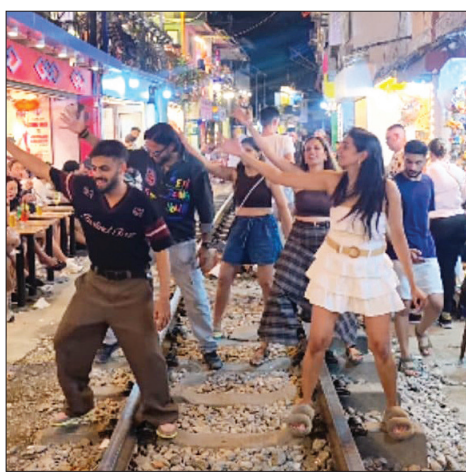
Five years ago, I wrote a piece debunking the myth of 'Hinduphobia'. This was the time that several Hindutva organisations in North America and Europe were trying to popularise the term as a political counterweight to Islamophobia. The strategy was clear: if Muslims could rally around discrimination, prejudice and violence directed at them, so could Hindus fan threat perceptions to shield Hindutva politics in India. Criticism of majoritarian nationalism in India was repackaged as hatred of Hindus.

Five years on, this enterprise is still alive and kicking, even though the world has changed a lot since 2021. Donald Trump's return to the White House has emboldened far right movements across much of the Western world. Anti-immigrant rhetoric has become mainstream. White nationalist groups that once operated on the political margins now enjoy much greater visibility and influence. In this new environment, Indians living abroad are increasingly finding themselves at the receiving end of racism and xenophobia.

This reality must be acknowledged. Anti-India(n) sentiment is real. It is ugly and growing. Reports of attacks on Indians in Ireland, Italy, Australia, Canada, the UK and US have become more frequent. Online spaces have witnessed a surge in openly racist language directed at Indians.

In the US, even successful Indian Americans like Vivek Ramaswamy—who enthusiastically aligned themselves with Trump—have discovered that their loyalty offers little protection from racial prejudice. For white supremacists, Indians are outsiders, regardless of their wealth, education, political beliefs or professional standing.

But this anti-Indian racism is still not 'Hinduphobia'. The hostility directed at Indians is not rooted in their Hindu identity. It is part racial prejudice, part economic anxiety, part broad anti-immigrant sentiment and politics—but also a reaction to progressively bolder assertions of Hindu nationalism and cultural arrogance from some sections of



From New York to Vietnam, the Indian diaspora is giving itself a bad name with displays of aggressive nationalism and disregard for local mores

the Indian diaspora.

For decades, Indians abroad enjoyed an enviable reputation. They were seen as hardworking, educated, entrepreneurial and law abiding. They were the ideal immigrants and the subjects of many immigrant success stories. Their achievements in medicine, engineering, academia, technology and business earned them respect and admiration. But the default perception of Indians is changing.

Diaspora nationalism is a key ingredient of this change. Over the past ten or so years, the Modi government has tried to cultivate a sense of civilisational pride among overseas Indians. Taking pride in one's heritage or cultural roots is one thing, but when pride turns into arrogance, it is likely to provoke.

Many affluent Indians abroad, particularly upper caste Hindus, have begun to see themselves not simply as successful immigrants but as representatives of a rising global power. They have absorbed the delusional narrative that India under Modi has become a superpower, a great civilisation-state that is reclaiming its rightful place at the centre of world affairs. This delusion has spawned an exaggerated sense of entitlement.

In some diaspora circles, there is a

growing tendency to look down on other migrant communities while simultaneously expecting special treatment from host societies. Professional success has produced an expectation that Indians deserve greater recognition and influence. This inflated sense of self-worth and entitlement has not gone unnoticed.

The Indian diaspora's cultural arrogance, aggressive nationalism and lack of respect for local social norms has become a theme of public debates in the West. Attention is drawn to the fundamental mismatch between societies that discriminate on the basis of caste and those that regard equality as a foundational value. Universities, workplaces and community organisations have reported tensions linked to caste identities that people in the West had never encountered earlier.

Indian tourists are also contributing to this adverse perception of the Indian diaspora. A growing appetite for 'foreign holidays' in India's upwardly mobile middle class has produced millions of first-time international travellers. Social media is filled with videos of Indian tourists ignoring regulations, disturbing public spaces, disrespecting local customs or engaging in reckless behaviour. This is possibly a tiny minority but we live in an

era where virality trumps statistics.

One standout feature is a sense of entitlement that flows from a inflated sense of India's standing in the world and Modi's global stature. Sustained exposure to the Modi government's nationalist propaganda has convinced this rambunctious lot that India is already a superpower; that Modi is the world's most popular leader; that 'Indian culture' is universally admired; that Indians

command special respect wherever they go. When this imagined status collides with reality, it often produces behaviour that local populations find hard to stomach.

None of this makes racism acceptable. Never. The responsibility for racist actions lies with the perpetrators. Yet understanding why negative perceptions are spreading requires more than condemnation. It requires a close reading of the social and political context in which these perceptions take hold.

Another uncomfortable reality concerns racism within sections of the Indian community itself. Anti-Muslim prejudice, anti-Black stereotypes, hostility towards refugees and support for exclusionary nationalist politics are becoming defining attributes of the Indian diaspora. The contradiction is striking: some of the most strident critics of racism against Indians simultaneously support political movements that demonise migrants, Muslims and other minorities in India and elsewhere.

This contradiction is most evident among Indian supporters of Trump and other far-right movements. Many believed that economic success and political loyalty would secure acceptance within conservative nationalist circles. They eagerly embraced anti-immigrant rhetoric directed at others while imagining themselves exempt from its consequences.

But White nationalism does not distinguish between Hindus and Muslims, Sikhs or Christians, nor between rich and poor, nor even between conservative and liberal. When racial anxieties intensify, every 'foreigner' is a target.

While anti-Indian racism is real, Indians abroad must resist the temptation to package all criticism as racism. All complaints about social behaviour are not xenophobic. Discussions about caste discrimination are not anti-Indian. Nor is criticism of majoritarian nationalism in India an attack on Hinduism.

The hostility Indians are facing in parts of the Western world is a product of two parallel developments. As much as it stems from a resurgent far right eager to scapegoat immigrants, it also flows from their own racial and caste prejudices, cultural arrogance and support of toxic Hindutva, which has eroded the goodwill accumulated over generations.

The future of the Indian diaspora in the West depends not only on resisting racism but also on rediscovering the virtues of civic responsibility, on whether they can be respectful of the societies they now inhabit, the countries they now call home. ■

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

A false reading of India's global stature has led a section of the diaspora to misjudge their place in the local societies they inhabit

झारखण्ड

कृषि व्यापार मेला 2026



- कृषि उत्सव
- कृषि यंत्रों का प्रदर्शन
- कृषि विशेषज्ञों से सीधी बात
- कृषि व्यावहारिक कार्यशालाएँ
- स्वरोच्चार-विक्रेता के बीच व्यापारिक संवाद
- कृषि तकनीकी प्रदर्शनी
- सांस्कृतिक कार्यक्रम
- खेती और ग्रामीण व्यवसाय के नए आयाम जानना

हेमन्त सोरेन
मुख्यमंत्री, झारखण्ड

दिनांक: 16 से 18 जून 2026 | स्थान: मोरहाबादी मैदान, रांची



अधिक जानकारी के लिए स्कैन करें

सूचना एवं जनसम्पर्क विभाग, झारखण्ड

What is Modi's great gift to India?

Other than the number of days he has already been in office

Aakar Patel

BJP leader Ram Madhav has written a fine piece on Prime Minister Narendra Modi reaching an important milestone: on 10 June, he completed 4,399 uninterrupted days in office as prime minister, overtaking Jawaharlal Nehru's record of 4,398 days.

The awkward word 'uninterrupted' is used because Indra Gandhi was in office for almost 6,000 days. No doubt our leader will cross that number in time as well.

What is more interesting is Madhav's assertion that 'Modi, undoubtedly, will be remembered as the most effective and successful prime minister of India'. His reason for this? Modi 'is midway through his third term as the prime minister. Yet, his dominance over Indian political

Why are Madhav and other fans of this prime minister still exhuming Nehru? Because of what he left behind



landscape remains towering and unchallenged. He is certain to break more records as he continues to lead the country for many more years to come'.

Yes, longevity is important and staying at the crease for an extended period is also important to some people. But from the audience's perspective, what is relevant is what's on the scoreboard.

The problem is that, unlike longevity, the data is unclear. Madhav says that among Modi's achievements is the doubling of India's GDP in the last decade. But it has doubled in each decade since Independence! It certainly has since 1960, which is when we have World Bank data from.

What else? Madhav says: 'in foreign policy, Modi scripted a glorious history'. How? That we do not know. Looking around at what is happening in the world today, it would be difficult not to conclude that India is irrelevant. In fact, the accusation can be accurately made that it is often servile, especially to US President Donald Trump. However, we need not go there today.

The question to ask is this: How will Modi be remembered six decades after he is gone? In the India of 2086, what will people be saying of Modi compared to the way we write of Nehru today, 62 years after his passing?

Those of us who are still around then and those who are born hereon may not be referring to Modi at all.

One reason for me to think so is that things and people and events that are current fade very quickly with time. Sunil Gavaskar gives way to Sachin Tendulkar, who gives way to Virat Kohli, who gives way to Vaibhav Sooryavanshi. There is always a

shiny new thing on offer, and the relationship that the present generation has with the current stars is always fresher and more intense than it is with the things of the past.

But if this is true, then why has Nehru not faded? And why are Madhav and those of us who are fans of this prime minister still exhuming the old Jawaharlal so long after he has gone into the ether?

The reason why Nehru is still with us in spirit is because of what he left behind.

First, he conceived and built institutions of every sort: educational, scientific, cultural and medical. A rare achievement anywhere in the world, and even more so in our parts.

Compare the legion of things Nehru built with what Modi has conceived and executed. One is hard-pressed to come up with any. Perhaps the hapless NITI Aayog (is it still around?) might be one thing Modi gifts to the India of the future. What else? Hard to say.

Second, Nehru left behind the 'idea of India': a pluralist society that has a pathway to modernity. Here, we can concede that Modi has made a difference and parted ways with the past in a manner that may prove longer-lasting than his non-existent institutions.

Madhav concludes by writing: 'it is not just the numbers that distinguish Modi from others. It is the quality of governance, ideological vision and effective development agenda that he brought to the table as the leader of the world's largest democracy that makes him the shining star of Indian politics'.

This India around us that has made him the 'shining star' is one dominated by laws and policies of exclusion and persecution. Bulldozers, lynchings, special intensive revisions and so on. And on. Much of it is not new, of course, but the intensity is new, and that is Modi's gift to India.

One is not sure whether what we have experienced will last until 2086. One hopes it does not.

My guess, based on the evidence of what Modi has left behind in the last dozen years, is that if this continues for another decade or so—let alone another six decades—Narendra Modi will indeed be remembered, but not for the reasons Madhav would like him to be. ■

Views are personal

Delhi Gymkhana and the power of myths

Avay Shukla

Delhi's chatterati, who always need something more than just fried peanuts with their gin and tonic, are abuzz these days with the latest canapés: the Modi government's hostile takeover of Gymkhana Club. It's not a done deal yet, but rest assured that our higher judiciary, with credits like Ram Mandir, SIR, Umar Khalid, Aravalli, Hindenburg/SEBI, Pegasus, etc. under its belt, will ultimately approve non-passive euthanasia for this last watering hole for the drones of south Delhi.

No one, of course, believes the reason cited by the government, that the 27 acres are needed for security/defence purposes: this is the default position of the government for all decisions that push the boundaries of legality and/or good sense.

Hence, there is much feverish speculation about the real motives for this surgical strike: the club's administrative and financial mess, non-payment of dues to the government, turning the entire area into a semi-militarised zone so that a Bangladesh, Nepal or 6 January type of incident never happens, fear of the Cockroach Janta Party, a real-estate operation that will ultimately benefit the Melody-loving leader's cronies.

But all of the above is on the assumption that this government acts rationally, which past decisions do not bear out. I have, therefore, a different take that matches the leopard's spots, as it were.

The BJP is a party founded on myths past, present and future. It originates from the myths of ancient India—our epics, 'Akhand Bharat', the existence of plastic surgery, aeroplanes, nuclear missiles thousands of years ago, etc.

In the present, it rules on the strength of other myths—Vishwaguru, fastest growing economy, leader of the Global South, 'ghar mein ghus ke maareng', developed country by 2047, net zero emissions by 2075, and so on.

None of these myths have a rational basis, but constant reiteration has converted them into legal fiction and kept the BJP in power for more than a decade.

The Gymkhana Club is a victim of two such myths—Lutyens' Delhi/'Khan Market gang' (which works actively against the BJP) and 'colonial mindset' (which diminishes our own glorious culture).



The BJP believes that the privileged residents of Lutyens' Delhi are inimical to the party and the Gymkhana is its hub. Wrong. There is no such thing as Lutyens' Delhi and the Khan Market gang became the Khanna Market gang in 2014.

The 2,800 hectares known as Lutyens' Delhi is occupied by politicians—mostly of saffron hue, who subsist on subsidies many times those enjoyed by members of the Gymkhana: serving bureaucrats who cannot even take a toilet break without written approval from their political masters—and industrialists fully house-trained by the ED, CBI and Income Tax. They are the BJP!

The retired bureaucrats and defence forces officers who haunt the Gymkhana bar also did a 'ghar wapas' years ago. I am a member of various groups of retired officers, and can confidently state that the vast majority of my brethren (75-80 per cent) support the BJP; 10-15 per cent may not, but do not open their mouths for fear of jeopardising their pensions. The rest are so soaked in gin-and-tonic

I was not a member of the Gymkhana—my application was rejected. But I'll miss its nonpareil mutton cutlets

they can't press their own doorbell, let alone an EVM button.

Lutyens' Delhi (and the Gymkhana) are, therefore, de facto BJP territory. So why take over the club? Pause that question for the nonce, dear reader, we shall come to it later.

The colonial mindset myth is used to divert attention from this government's failures, and find a convenient whipping boy to rally the troops, or voters. The Gymkhana is the whipping boy this time, to burnish the BJP's non-existent credentials as the champion of the poor, and to divert voters' attention away from the goodies being gifted daily to crony oligarchs.

How can this bunch of effete elites and their colonial-era club (so goes the specious argument built on a myth) be allowed to grab valuable government land and live a subsidised life when 800 million have to be fed on doles?

The Gymkhana Club is a victim of these two myths. But it is just the beginning. This narrative will be rolled out across the country—the Maharashtra government has already served notices to 16 prominent clubs in Mumbai.

For what an authoritarian or fascist government needs at all times is an 'enemy' to rally the nation behind it. Voltaire had said, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him". Replace 'God' with 'enemy' and you have the reason why colonial-era clubs are the new enemy.

Am I sad? I don't know. I was not a member of the Gymkhana—my application was rejected after a waiting period of 10 years without assigning any reason. But I shall miss its nonpareil mutton cutlets—they were probably a colonial hand-down, but then not all legacies are bad, are they? ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

A valuable tool that requires vigilance

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

Calling for prudence, rigorous evaluation and even, at times, a slower pace in adopting AI does not mean opposing progress; instead, it is an exercise of responsible care for the human family. This need is all the more urgent given the frequent imbalance between the speed of technological growth and the slower development of awareness, norms, safeguards and institutions capable of governing its effects.

It is not enough to invoke ethics in the abstract; robust legal frameworks, independent oversight, informed users and a political system that does not abdicate its responsibility are required. Otherwise, change will be governed only by technocratic thinking and presented as necessary and inevitable, ultimately imposing rules shaped by those who control data, infrastructure and computing power.

We cannot be satisfied with merely calling for the moralisation of machines—the so-called 'alignment' of AI with human values—without also having the courage to insist on a further condition: the possibility of openly discussing the ethical frameworks involved and subjecting them to shared standards of social justice. Otherwise, those who control AI will impose their own moral vision, which will become the invisible infrastructure of these systems. A more moral AI is not enough if that morality is determined by a few. What is needed is a more active political involvement that is capable of slowing things down when everything is accelerating, and of

protecting the opportunities for communities still to be able to participate and ask questions.

In fact, as with every major technological shift, AI tends to amplify the power of those who already possess economic resources, expertise and access to data. In light of the common good and the universal destination of goods, this raises serious concerns, since small but highly influential groups can shape information and consumption patterns, influence democratic processes and steer economic dynamics to their own advantage, undermining social justice and solidarity among peoples.

[...]

In a world where data, computational resources and regulatory influence remain in the hands of a few, to speak of the common good means exposing this new form of epistemic, economic and political asymmetry and naming the new monopolies of AI.

To speak of the universal destination of goods means finding ways of ensuring universal access to both technologies and the education needed to use them. To speak of subsidiarity calls for protecting the ability of communities to make choices and corrections, rather than confining their role to mere oversight after the standards have been set elsewhere. To speak of solidarity obliges us to recognise the hidden, often exploited workers, who sustain algorithmic systems. To speak of justice requires questioning the global distribution of power that decides who in fact can train these models and who is merely subjected to them. Likewise, it means acknowledging that social justice is not only a goal to be safeguarded after technologies are deployed, but a condition that must shape their very design from the outset.



Pope Leo XIV

Developers bear an ethical and spiritual responsibility, for every design choice reflects a vision of humanity

Finally, I would like to employ the expression 'to disarm', which is close to my heart. Disarming AI means freeing it from the mentality of 'armed' competition, which today is not limited simply to the military context but is also an economic and cognitive phenomenon. This entails a race for ever more powerful algorithms and larger datasets, driven by the desire to secure geopolitical or commercial dominance. To disarm means discrediting the assumption that technical power automatically confers the right to govern. To disarm does not mean rejecting technology but preventing it from dominating humanity. It means freeing technology from monopolistic control. [...] Our task today is not only ethical or technical. It is ecological in the deepest sense, for it concerns a new dimension of our common home. AI is already an

environment in which we are immersed, as well as a force with which we must engage. For this reason, merely regulating it is insufficient; it must be disarmed, welcoming and accessible.

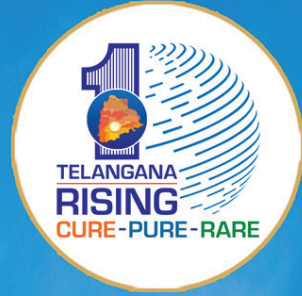
I wish to address a special appeal to those who develop artificial intelligence. In one sense, technological innovation can represent human participation in the divine act of creation. Developers, therefore, bear a particular ethical and spiritual responsibility, for every design choice reflects a vision of humanity. Just as the creator of an artistic or literary work must consider the values it conveys, so developers are called to embed values in their projects with due seriousness: with transparency, responsibility toward affected communities and careful attention to ensuring that what is being cultivated is a genuine good.

What must not be lost

[...]

The quality of a civilisation is measured not by the power of its means, but by the care it is able to offer, by its ability to recognise the other as a face not merely as a function. The ability to care for one another is a fundamental dimension of our humanity, one that is learned and mastered through lived experience. Reading stories to a child, offering company to an elderly person and arranging a home so that it is welcoming are simple gestures often rooted in family life. They teach us to value care at a societal level and train us to recognise others as persons worthy of attention. Technology can also support this mutual care between people, for example, by providing tools that help us anticipate and organise things, without undermining human freedom and judgment. ■

Part I of this reflection appeared in the National Herald last week, dated 7 June



- **Foundation Stone has been successfully laid for the construction of the **International Integrated Fruit Market at Koheda (Village), Abdullapurmet (Mandal), Rangareddy (District) By the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Telangana Sri A. Revanth Reddy Garu****
- **First time in the country, with international standards**
- **Estimated Cost is ₹2,284 Crores**



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