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A humiliating, unacceptable deal

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According to US agricultural data, American farmers receive substantial government support. Direct and indirect subsidies, crop insurance, disaster payments and federal farm programmes together provide tens of billions of dollars annually. Reports suggest that average support per farm in the US runs into tens of thousands of dollars each year. An additional multi-billion-dollar farm assistance programme has been proposed for 2026 alone.

The deal allows tariff reduction or elimination on a range of products like soyabean oil, DDGS and red sorghum used for animal feed. Soyabean farmers in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telangana and Rajasthan are already facing a crisis. Market prices often hover 20-30 per cent below the minimum support price (MSP). Imports of cheaper soyabean oil—particularly from a country where over 90 per cent of soya production is genetically modified and highly mechanised—could further depress domestic prices.

Similarly, red sorghum and maize imports for animal feed can reduce demand for Indian-grown maize and soyabean meal. DDGS imports are being described as 'limited' under a quota system. But once a channel is opened, the long-term direction becomes difficult to reverse.

Nowhere is the anxiety more visible than in India's apple belt—in Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir. The minimum import price (MIP) for imported apples is fixed at Rs 80 per kg. With a 25 per cent tariff it costs importers around Rs 100 per kg. In contrast, in 2025, the Adani Group procured apples from HP farmers at Rs 85 per kg. Adding packaging, transportation and other costs (approx. Rs 35) brings the total to Rs 120 per kg. This makes importing apples cheaper for Adani.

Lokinder Singh Bisht of the Progressive Growers Association says, "Our interest has been surrendered." He told *National Herald* that the immediate impact will be on premium quality Indian

apples. Over time, the price pressure will trickle down to the entire apple market. Even before this US deal, India had trade arrangements with New Zealand. Increased competition in high-value horticulture can destabilise fragile mountain economies. As Bisht bluntly said: "We can compete with farmers in the US, Europe or New Zealand, but we cannot compete with the climate there."

When the three farm laws were introduced, farmers feared being abandoned to corporate-controlled markets without assured procurement. They protested and the



Photo: Getty Images

government eventually withdrew the laws. Critics argue that through this trade deal, farmers may once again be exposed—not to domestic corporations alone but to global agribusinesses backed by powerful governments.

Indian agriculture contributes roughly 16-18 per cent of GDP but supports nearly 45 per cent of the population. Trade decisions affecting agriculture do not just impact the economy but affects social and political conditions as well. Indian agriculture is already under strain from rising input costs, climate volatility, stagnant real incomes and indebtedness. Opening up segments of the market to subsidised imports without comprehensive domestic reforms—irrigation, storage, procurement, processing and farmer income support—risks deepening the rural distress.

India's trade negotiators failed to leverage the country's strengths to secure meaningful concessions. Instead, they appear to have bowed to US bullying. They meekly accepted monitoring by the US, sacrificed autonomy and exposed large swathes of Indian agriculture to US imports. ■

Daylight robbery of voting rights?

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A similar investigation by *Quint* in February 2026 revealed that even a month after thousands of Form 7 applications were filed to delete the names of Muslim voters in Alwar, Rajasthan, there was no move to check where the forms were printed, filled, signed and whether the signatures were fake or not.

Even as reports surface on the misuse of Form 7, the deadline for filing objections to the draft voter list in Uttar Pradesh has been extended to 6 March.

At booth number 126 in Amethi's Jagdishpur district, BLO Amar Bahadur received 126 forms for deleting the names of 167 voters, all Muslims. Ramkumar, tasked with supervising eight polling booths (122 to 129) claims he got the forms from Tej Bahadur, the election office in-charge.

National Herald accessed dozens of pre-filled forms. All bear the signature of the objectors but not their names nor other mandatory details (address, name of relative, mobile number). Voter details,

The pre-filled forms bear the signature of the objectors but not their names or other details

however, are typed/printed in capital letters. Muslims all, they were from Barsanda village in Musafirkhana tehsil.

Barsanda village head Sanjida Bano questioned four villagers in connection with their role in deletion of names. One of them, Pawan Kumar, admitted signing many forms; the other three denied any involvement. Pawan, a BJP worker, also admitted that because there so were many forms, he even got his daughter to sign some.

Many more incidents have been reported on social media. In a clip shared by Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, a party leader in Sant Kabir Nagar district can be seen talking to someone who says that 126 forms were given to him by Lakshmi Shankar Shukla who received them from MLA Anil Tiwari. In Siddharthnagar district, BLO Pujari Prasad Yadav admitted that Dharmendra Maurya visited him with 86 forms for deletions—handed over by the tehsil office to be submitted to the BLO. Yadav found all voters to be genuine and present, and said he planned to mention in his report.

Ashwini Kumar, an assistant teacher in a primary school working as a BLO in Etawah, claimed he was assaulted by Dhruv Katheria and Uday Pratap when he used took photos of the forms they wanted him to accept. Subhadra Maurya, a BLO from Amethi, said her husband was abused and assaulted when she refused to delete the names of Muslim voters. *NewsLaundry* reached out to former election commissioners for their comments. "How can Form 7 be pre-filled?" asked Ashok Lavasa. "It's happening around the country... We are nearing the collapse of democracy," fumed former CEC S.Y. Quraishi. ■

Can India, Bangla now do a reset?

Sourabh Sen

Late on Thursday evening, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leaders exuded confidence. "Ground reports from the districts and certificates issued by returning officers point to a two-thirds majority," a senior BNP leader told *National Herald*, as counting continued into the early hours of 13 February. The results proved his assessment to be correct. In comparison, the Jamaat was more evasive. "I am confident of winning in my constituency (Khulna-5) but wouldn't like to comment on the overall tally," Jamaat secretary general Mia Golam Parwar told *National Herald*. (Parwar eventually lost to the BNP's Mohammad Ali Asgar.)

The Jamaat-e-Islami and BNP were one-time allies countering the Awami League's dominance, with Jamaat's street mobilisation reinforcing BNP's campaigns. The Jamaat has questioned the results, accusing the BNP of using state apparatus to rig it. Recasting itself as the 'true' representative of the 2024 uprising, it argues the BNP has merely substituted one form of autocracy for another.

Testing times lie ahead for both. The BNP needs to prove quickly that it is a party of governance and has learnt from past mistakes. The Jamaat has to prove that it can be a responsible opposition.

While Jamaat has moderated its position and public image, it hasn't shaken off the tag of the Islamist conservatives who opposed the country's liberation in 1971. Its refusal to field women candidates and its public statements about women staying at home arguably lost both women and a large section of Gen Z voters. Much will depend on how amenable it is to change.

Observers say its defeat signals the victory of a progressive and secular Bangladesh.

The results also underscore that the Awami League—barred from participating in the election—cannot be written off, not yet. 'No boat, no vote' was scribbled on several ballot papers by AL supporters (the boat being the

symbol of the party). The no-show of being interpreted as Awami League voters choosing not to participate. Can a BNP government afford to keep the temporary ban alive? What might have been the outcome had the Awami League been in the fray? These are some of the questions being raised.

In what was one of the most consequential elections in South Asia (Nepal goes to the polls on 5 March), the BNP ended up securing a two-thirds majority in the 300-strong Jatiya Sangsad (parliament).

The result reflected the clear mandate of 127 million voters in a country of 170 million people, with 1,981 candidates contesting in 299 seats. The ECB put the final voter turnout at 60.69 per cent.

What the results also indicated was that Bangladesh's women, first-time voters and Gen Z voted decisively against Jamaat's Islamist narrative. Approximately 56 million, or 44 per cent, voters were between the ages of 18 and 37, and nearly 5 million were first-timers.

While 300 members to the Jatiya Sangsad have been elected, fifty more members—all women—will later join the Parliament, elected through a system of proportional allocation based on seat won by

The BNP will have to quickly prove that it is serious about governance and has learnt from past mistakes



The scene at a counting centre in Bangladesh

Photo: Getty Images

political parties. Voters in Bangladesh also said 'Yes' to a constitutional referendum on the provisions of the July Charter and related amendments to the Constitution of Bangladesh. The July Charter of 2025 was a political accord signed on 17 October 2025 by Bangladesh's interim government and major political parties to formalise reforms following the student-led uprising of 2024.

The charter will reshape Bangladesh into a Second Republic by implementing around 84 structural, constitutional and electoral changes to ensure democracy.

Despite the BNP's uneasy relationship with India in the past, there is an opportunity for both the countries to reset their relationship and make a fresh start. BNP chief Tarique Rahman has indicated his willingness for a more nuanced engagement with India as an equal and honourable partner.

In New Delhi, there appears to be two different lenses through which India views Bangladesh. In a recent interview, retired Indian bureaucrat and Bangladesh hand Veena Sikri said: "We do know that the regime change operation in Bangladesh was supported by Western powers, but it was done through Pakistan, whose biggest conduit in Bangladesh is the

Jamaat-e-Islami".

This bogey of a Jamaat-led Islamist Bangladesh cosying up to Pakistan and persecuting Hindus could have helped the BJP's election campaign in election-bound West Bengal and Assam. Jamaat's defeat will blunt this.

The outcome in Bangladesh will bolster New Delhi's second approach which is more broad-based and appears to be driven by the MEA with the external affairs minister S. Jaishankar and the two respective national security advisors—Ajit Doval and Khalilur Rahman—apparently on the same page on key bilateral and multilateral issues.

For instance, if Jaishankar's Dhaka visit to officially condole the death of former Prime Minister Khaled Zia (Tarique Rehman's mother) signalled a willingness to engage, a spanner was thrown in the works by BCCI's decision to drop Bangladesh cricketer Mustafizur Rahman from IPL in the wake of attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh.

The BNP's ascent to power with an unambiguous mandate provides a fresh opportunity for the two neighbours. ■

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STATES 360°



ASSAM

The first polls after delimitation

Dipra Sarmabarua

The assembly election in Assam this time will be the first after the controversial delimitation of constituencies in 2023. (The last election was five years ago, with polling held in three phases.) Delimitation affected around 40 constituencies out of 126, and led to considerable confusion.

While the number of constituencies is the same, the names of several have changed, boundaries have been redrawn and, in some cases, two independent constituencies have been merged (for instance, Hajo-Sualkuchi, Bhabanipur-Sorbagh).

As a result, many voters in Guwahati are uncertain of their constituency. The confusion extends to political parties as well. Party workers are busy scrutinising the final electoral roll issued by the election commission on 10 February 2026 after the Special Revision (SR) of electoral rolls. Political parties have an additional task—finding the right candidates in view of the changed character and demographics of the constituencies.

In 2022, Jammu and Kashmir underwent a similar delimitation exercise and six new constituencies were added. In Assam, the number of assembly seats was frozen. However, the Assam cabinet pre-emptively folded four districts back into the districts from which they had been separated, reducing the number of districts from 35 to 31. The merger led to the loss of several Muslim-majority constituencies—South Salmara, Nagaeta (two seats), Darrang, Nagan, Sibsagar, Hailakandi and Karimganj—while the number of seats dominated by Hindus and tribals increased.

As in J&K, the Assam delimitation also created constituencies of vastly different



Searching for their names at an election office in Assam

population sizes nestling against each other. The respective delimitation commissions have not hesitated to create small population constituencies alongside large population ones to further marginalise the minorities.

Before the delimitation, Muslim voters called the shots in 30 of the 126 constituencies in Assam, and substantially influenced the outcome in 10 more. The number of such constituencies is estimated to have gone down by half. (Paradoxically, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma says Hindus will be reduced to a minority in Assam in the next 10-15 years.) Muslims constituted 34 per cent of the population in the 2011 census and there are 31 Muslim MLAs in the outgoing House. The attempt is to reduce their number and representation to one-sixth of the assembly's strength.

This is significant because in the last election, the BJP-led coalition bagged 75 seats while the Congress-led coalition won 50. In a closely contested election, every seat counts. By all accounts, the BJP has used both the delimitation and the SR to its advantage.

Both coalitions, however, appear wobbly in the run-up to the election being notified. Despite the ultimatum of the

regional party Rajior Dal to finalise seat-sharing by the end of January, negotiations with the Congress spilled into February. Negotiations between the Congress and Lurinjyoti Gogoi's Asom Jatiyo Parishod are also ongoing. The Communist Party of India, meanwhile, has gone ahead and declared the names of seven candidates, signalling a lack of unity and dissonance.

Luckily for the Opposition, the ruling NDA has its own set of problems. Besides the growing infighting within the BJP and anti-Himanta forces sharpening their knives, allies Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) are demanding more seats.

There is little love lost between BPF and the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL)—the other Bodo indigenous party led by Pramod Boro—making seat-distribution more complicated. The BJP, on its part, is pushing the AGP to contest from Muslim-majority constituencies in Lower Assam.

Against this polarised backdrop, Assam BJP's official X handle circulated an animation in which the chief minister was depicted as a cowboy shooting point-blank at two men in

skullcap. 'Foreigner-free Assam' and 'No mercy' were the text overlays. The outrage that followed forced the party to delete the animation.

Having gotten away with hate speech so far, he clearly did not expect over 40 prominent members of civil society—led by intellectuals including author Hiren Gohain, former DGP Harekrishna Dekha, former archbishop Thomas Menamparampil, Rajya Sabha member Ajit Kumar Bhuyan and editor-in-chief of *Northeast Now* Paresh Malakar—to complain to the chief justice of the Gauhati High Court, seeking judicial intervention and action against him.

For several years now, Himanta has been targeting 'Miya Muslims', blaming them for everything.

Has he gone too far this time around? Has the attack on minorities started yielding diminishing returns?

Himanta's attempts to describe MP and state Congress president Gaurav Gogoi as a 'Pakistani agent' does not seem to have had the desired impact. The dramatic two-hour long press conference and release of the report by a SIT set up by the Assam Police highlighted two points: Gogoi's British wife had worked for a Pakistani NGO for a year; and Gogoi had visited Pakistan in 2013 (notably when he was not an MP). Repeated over the last one year, the allegations have lost much of their sting. Gogoi has justifiably raised the question: if he was truly a threat to national security, why had the SIT not interrogated him even once?

Rajior Dal chief Akhil Gogoi had the last word: "The chief minister has got people arrested for Facebook posts and for writing poems; but here he is unable to arrest a leader he accuses of being a security risk!" ■

The ‘Gujarat model’ of corruption

Gujarat Congress president **Amit Chavda** has been on the move with the party’s Jan Akrosh Yatra to get a sense of the issues that people in Modi–Shah’s home state are facing. Excerpts from his conversation with Vishwadeepak

What is the Jan Akrosh Yatra all about?

In Gujarat, the BJP has been in power for the past 35 years. When it won yet another term in 2022, people had hoped against hope that the state government, which had done little for the welfare of people in its previous terms, would finally deliver. That it would at the very least fulfil the promises it made on coming to power. After three years, those hopes too have been dashed.

When Messrs Modi and Shah moved to New Delhi in 2014, the BJP’s state leadership weakened. The bureaucrats started calling the shots, in cahoots with corrupt leaders. Corruption has become a BIG issue in the state.

The pattern is the same. The BJP government issues a tender. Bureaucrats approve it, a company owned by a BJP leader wins the bid. The bureaucrats get a cut. Everyone in power is happy and the cycle continues.

Earlier, as a Congress Legislature Party leader, I visited each and every block HQ and heard directly from the people. When I became PCC president in July 2025, I thought why not continue that programme? With that in mind, I decided to undertake a statewide tour. The ongoing Jan Akrosh Yatra is meant to reach out to the people, listen to their problems and find solutions, wherever possible.

The Yatra started on 4 November 2025 and covered 1,300 kilometre in north Gujarat over 13 days. It then moved to Kheda district in central Gujarat and ended in Dahod, covering 1,400 kilometre in 16 days. On 2 February, we started the third phase from Valsad district in south Gujarat, which will conclude on the 12th.

What are the issues agitating people in the state?

What stood out is how deeply troubled women are. They already bear the brunt of inflation but over the years, alcoholism and drug addiction have emerged as major issues. Police and administrative departments collect several crores every week. Despite prohibition, illegal liquor is available on every street. Drugs are being traded openly. The youth are ruining their lives due to drug addiction.

Children become addicted to alcohol very young, and die young. Young girls are becoming widows. The police collect extortion money for the alcohol sold in every village. This is the biggest issue for women.

Parliament was informed that 30,000 kg of drugs were seized at Mundra port over six years. The continued flow of drugs into the Mundra port means that Gujarat has become a drug-landing hub.

It’s also become a manufacturing hub. You’ll find that in Gujarat, several

pharmaceutical companies are actually manufacturing synthetic drugs in labs. The network within Gujarat is such that drugs are being sold in and around every college and university. Drug dealers specifically target campuses.

There are media reports about the now-defunct MGNREGA being mishandled in the state. Did you find any evidence of this?

There is rampant corruption in MGNREGA across Gujarat. We raised the issue and involvement of former minister Bachchu Bhai Khavad and his sons, who were subsequently jailed. Khavad was dismissed as minister.

Across the state, the material component in MGNREGA was increased to 80 per cent and the labour component reduced to 20 per cent. Little or no work was being done on the ground but payments continued to be released. We estimated that in 3-4 districts alone, more than Rs 1,000 crore would have been siphoned off.

We collected evidence from Dahod, Panchmahal, Chhota Udaipur and Mahisagar and presented them to the state government but no action was ever taken.

In Jambu Ghoda block in Panchmahal district, the total population is 42,000. There are 26 villages here. In 26 villages, apparently work worth Rs 300 crore was carried out under MGNREGA in three years. How is this even possible?

The kingpin was the supplier of materials, and four agencies were engaged. One of them was owned by the district BJP president, the second by his wife, the third by his nephew and the fourth by his driver!

Thus, in a single block, a single local BJP leader and his family carried out a scam of Rs 150-200 crore under MGNREGA.

I visited the site, gathered evidence and raised it in the assembly, but the BJP



government took no action because their own leaders and bureaucrats are implicated.

After VB–Grameen, the government’s arbitrariness will likely increase. How are you bringing this up?

We are telling people how Mahatma Gandhi, Gujarat’s greatest leader and the Father of the Nation, has been insulted. How the BJP has removed his name from MGNREGA. Most importantly, how Modi has changed the Act and made it just another scheme. The MGNREGA Act contained legal guarantees, but the scheme can be discontinued any time.

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) is a hot topic across the country. While news reports are coming in from other states, there hasn’t been an outcry from Gujarat. What’s the status of the SIR here?

Fake voters accounted for 12 per cent of the electoral roll in the state. C.R. Patil, a minister in the Modi government, represents Navsari, a Lok Sabha constituency. We took a sample from there and reported on the large number of fake voters. There is also evidence that the BJP had Form 7 (issued by the ECI) printed

centrally to get Dalit and minority voters dropped from the list.

Was there any complaint regarding the names of those deleted after the distribution of Form 7?

Under the rules, anyone with an objection can take a form and fill it up in his own handwriting. The forms distributed by BJP leaders and workers had the voter’s name already printed on them. This indicates an organised operation. BJP workers in every assembly submitted the forms and signed them. Many voters complained that their names and details were simply misused.

I personally visited the ECI office several times. Initially, officials told me that over 1.2 million such forms were received. Then, they claimed only 900,000 were received. Still later, they reduced the number to 200,000 forms. We are demanding that action be taken against those who submitted incorrect forms. We will strive to ensure that names of genuine voters are not deleted.

Our assembly session begins on 16 February. We will invite people from all over Gujarat to join a rally in Gandhinagar. Our struggle continues. ■

The Jan Akrosh Yatra is about reaching out to the people, listening to their problems and finding solutions, wherever possible

How Tamil Nadu fell into the freebie trap

K.A. Shaji

As Tamil Nadu moves towards another assembly election, a familiar script is being replayed. Former chief minister and AIADMK supreme Edappadi K. Palaniswami has announced the ‘first dose’ of the party manifesto: Rs 2,000 a month for women who head ration card-holding families and the extension of free bus travel to men. The ruling DMK has accused the AIADMK of being a copycat, and signalled that its own manifesto will top it.

These early promises underline how welfare politics in Tamil Nadu went from targeted social support to the prime currency of electoral competition. The AIADMK’s two announcements are likely to cost the exchequer close to Rs 40,000 crore annually—that’s around 11 per cent of the state’s projected revenue receipts for 2026-27. The expansion of free transport alone could potentially double an already Rs 3,600 crore subsidy bill.

“This is not welfare anymore in the classical sense,” says C. Lakshmanan, former faculty member at the Madras Institute of Development Studies. “It is a conversion of the budget into an electoral instrument.”

The roots of Tamil Nadu’s welfare culture lie in the ideological foundations of the Dravidian movement which framed the state as an active agent of social transformation. The expansion of public education, the introduction of reservations in government employment, and the strengthening of the public distribution system were all seen as instruments of social justice. The famous noon meal scheme, first introduced by AIADMK founder M.G. Ramachandran in 1982 was one of the largest such programmes in the world and helped to dramatically improve enrolment among children from poor families. The language was developmental and the idea was that public spending could generate long term social mobility.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a shift towards consumer-oriented welfare, but the turning point came in 2006, when the DMK returned to power under M. Karunanidhi. Their manifesto included a promise that would permanently alter the grammar of electoral politics: free colour televisions. Initially targeted at families below the poverty line, it cost the government Rs 3,600 crore in its first phase. Within a few years, it covered nearly 45 lakh households.

“That scheme changed everything,” says P.S. Sreenivasan, a political observer based in Chennai. “Parties realised that an object that sits inside the house is far more powerful than a policy.”

From that moment on, Tamil Nadu’s manifestos began to resemble shopping catalogues. Parties competed to offer material goods.

If Karunanidhi pioneered the consumer



With elections round the corner, there will be more promises and grander schemes. Competitive populism will heat up in Tamil Nadu

turn, Jayalalithaa perfected it. After returning to power in 2011, she embarked on an unprecedented expansion—free mixers, grinders, fans, gold for mangalsutras, free laptops, uniforms, textbooks for students, goats and cows for rural households, and free electricity up to a certain consumption limit.

What distinguished Jayalalithaa’s approach was not just variety but scale. Eligibility criteria was diluted or removed altogether.

“Welfare crossed a psychological threshold,” says K. Mohan Raj, a social observer from Coimbatore who has closely tracked rural political behaviour. “People stopped seeing schemes as help and started seeing them as entitlement.”

By the mid-2010s, the question was no longer whether the government should provide benefits, but what kind and in what quantity.

What makes this trajectory particularly striking is that both Dravidian parties had, at different points, experimented with fiscal discipline and market-oriented reforms. These episodes are now largely forgotten, but they hold the key to understanding why competitive populism became so deeply entrenched.

Between 1996 and 2001, the DMK focused on industrial infrastructure, information technology parks, urban renewal projects and public private partnerships. Chennai’s iconic TIDEL Park emerged as a symbol of the state’s IT ambitions. The finance department sought to align Tamil Nadu with the broader economic liberalisation agenda unfolding at the national level.

During her term (2002-2006), Jayalalithaa

followed a similar path. She attempted to close loss-making public-sector units, introduced user charges for certain services, curtailed rice subsidies under the public distribution system and invited private investment in the power sector.

Both experiments ended in political disaster. The DMK lost the 2001 election. Jayalalithaa suffered a massive defeat in 2006. The message was unambiguous. Fiscal prudence and market reforms did not translate into electoral rewards.

“That election killed reform politics in Tamil Nadu,” says Lakshmanan. “After 2006, every party understood that you cannot win here by talking about efficiency or fiscal responsibility. You win by expanding welfare and making it visible.”

From that point onwards, no major party seriously attempted subsidy rationalisation again.

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The most significant among the latest schemes is the DMK government’s free state-bus travel scheme for women, introduced in 2021. With around four to five crore trips recorded every month, the annual cost is now estimated at over ₹3,000 crore.

Unlike earlier freebies, free bus travel generated measurable social outcomes. Studies and transport data suggest a sharp increase in women’s mobility, especially among low-income workers, students and informal sector employees. It has reduced daily commuting expenses and expanded access to education and employment.

“This is one scheme where you can see real social impact,” says Sreenivasan. “The danger is that once it becomes politically sacred, nobody will even discuss how to finance it properly. It becomes immune from scrutiny.”

The AIADMK’s proposal for men removes the last remaining targeting principle from the scheme. “This is pure competitive populism,” says Mohan Raj. “One party introduces something useful. The other party makes it bigger just to outdo them. The question of sustainability never enters the conversation.”

“After 2006, every party understood that talking about efficiency or fiscal responsibility doesn’t win elections, expanding conspicuous ‘welfare’ does”



The extortion rackets of cow vigilantes

Anti-lynching laws that omit the word ‘lynching’ spell impunity for vigilante groups, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

Over the last decade, India has witnessed a disturbing rise in incidents where Hindu vigilante groups use extortion, blackmail and even murder to settle scores with Muslims. The so-called *gau rakshaks* (self-styled protectors of cows) menace Muslims, especially in the Hindi heartland, and do so secure in the knowledge that the state administration and the police will wink at their vigilantism.

In early 2024, Monu Bishnoi, Moradabad district president of the Bajrang Dal, along with associates Raman and Rajiv Chaudhury made one Shahabuddin dress in a burqa in order to implicate one Mullah Mohammad against whom Bishnoi harboured a personal grudge.

Shahabuddin later told the police that he had been paid Rs 30,000 to steal and slaughter a cow in order to frame Mullah Mohammad. A photo of Mohammad had been deliberately placed in a wallet at the scene of the crime. An investigation led by Moradabad senior superintendent of police Hemraj Meena resulted in the arrest of Bishnoi, his associates and Shahabuddin.

The latter confessed that the group had been involved in orchestrating multiple cow slaughter incidents between 16 to 28 January, within the Chhajlet police station area. All four were charged with criminal conspiracy (120B) and under sections of the Cow Slaughter Act. All four were released on bail within a few weeks.

This case is significant because it highlights how cow vigilantism has become an excuse for extortion and blackmail, with the police as mute spectators in most cases.

On 8 April 2023, Bajrang Dal and Hindu Mahasabha activists led by Jitendra Kushwaha filed a police complaint in Agra against Mohammed Rizwan and his three sons. The accusation (false) was that they had slaughtered a cow. Here too, the reason was personal—local Hindu leader Sanjay Jat held a grievance against Rizwan. On the eve of Ram Navami, demonstrations were held across the city to whip up communal tensions. Police investigations revealed that Rizwan and his sons were nowhere near the scene of the crime committed by Kushwaha’s followers. All the accused are out on bail.

Suraj Patel, a local Bajrang Dal leader had an axe to grind with the station house officer



Photo: Getty Images

Despite protests against vigilantism and lynching, the killings continue. The perpetrators know they have political patronage and they are never short of funds

(SHO) of Kemri thana in Rampur. On 10 January 2026, he entered the police station and dared the cops to arrest him—which of course they did not. Apparently, this was not the first time he had vented thus.

Although the new anti-lynching provisions under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita came into effect in July 2024, the omission of the word ‘lynching’ enables the police to register such cases under general murder charges instead.

The new law has been used only once—when 19-year-old Aryan Mishra was shot dead by cow vigilantes on 23 August 2024 in Faridabad. They had mistaken him for a cattle smuggler. The police were forced to use the anti-lynching law only because of pressure from the national media who were following the case carefully.

Accurate figures on convictions of Bajrang Dal activists are not maintained by central agencies like the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), which does not track ‘lynching’ as a separate offence. Short jail sentences invariably result in early release.

The 2018 Ramgarh lynching case in

Jharkhand stands out because it resulted in the first-ever conviction for cow-related lynching in India. Eleven Bajrang Dal activists and a local BJP leader were sentenced to life imprisonment for the hanging of Mazlum Ansari and twelve-year-old Imteyaz Khan. The mob responsible for the attack included Bajrang Dal activists and a local BJP leader.

In most cases, however, even when the evidence is unequivocal, Hindutva activists get away without so much as a reprimand. Consider the killing of Shahadeen Qureshi, a 37-year-old cart puller from Moradabad, who was lynched on 30 December 2024 by a Bajrang Dal mob led by Rakesh Saxena over allegations of cow slaughter.

The attackers filmed and uploaded a video of their assault. As they hurled abuses and beat Qureshi with sticks, a voice can be heard saying, “Arré, mar gaya (Oops, he died).” According to Shahadeen’s brother Guddu, every part of his body had been broken—wrists, fingers, ribs, skull, nothing was left intact.

But such is the clout of the Bajrang Dal that, immediately after the murder, the cops arrested Adnan, a 25-year-old from Moradabad. He was accused of murdering Shahadeen for allegedly having an affair with his wife. Adnan’s family however maintain that the cops concocted this story to avoid registering the case as a mob lynching.

When lynchings occur, the State often responds not by filing FIRs against the perpetrators, but by registering cases against the victims, primarily under Gauraksha Adhiniyam, or cattle protection laws.

A brutal incident occurred in Shahane, Maharashtra on 20 October 2024, when a group of cow vigilantes apprehended two Muslim cattle traders. The traders were stripped, brutally beaten and publicly humiliated before being handed over to the police. Their vehicle was vandalised, and the 52 cattle they were transporting were seized and sent to a local gaushala.

Most cow vigilante groups are known to operate as extortion rackets. Those who refuse to pay up are killed, often in the most gruesome manner. One such victim was Mohammed Bhura Habibullah, a 32-year-old meat trader from Mirzapur, Ahmedabad. The cow vigilantes demanded Rs 25,000, which he refused to pay. Five

days later, on 21 April 2025, his charred body was discovered inside his burnt vehicle. The Gandhinagar police filed a report of rash driving and overspeeding, but the post-mortem report revealed abrasions across his body and an ante-mortem skull fracture.

Few crimes can match the horror inflicted on SHO Subodh Kumar Singh of Bulandshahr, who was killed by cow vigilantes on 3 December 2018. His son Shrey Singh returned to Bulandshahr a few weeks later to collect his father’s belongings. In an exclusive interview with this journalist, Shrey said, “A 400-strong mob had gathered near the chowki, armed with axes, knives and stones. My father sustained 25 wounds from stone-pelting. He had a sharp knife wound on his back and an axe wound on his right hand. His right thumb had been cut off, which meant he could not use his revolver in self-defence.”

It is obvious that these groups are neither short of funds nor are they deterred by the threat of jail. When Yogesh Raj and his accomplices—the principal accused in the killing of Subodh Kumar Singh—were released on bail in September 2019, they were welcomed with garlands and taken on a triumphal procession. Yogesh Raj has since gone on to contest and win a local municipal election, and is now preparing to carve out a political career for himself.

As a senior BJP politician pointed out on condition of anonymity, “The VHP (Bajrang Dal’s parent organisation) is cash-rich and funds these vigilante groups with alacrity. They are provided with phones, cars and money. They are also promised police protection and patronage and are seen as non-state actors of the government, used to keep the communal agenda on the boil.”

As one successful Lucknow lawyer who handles cow vigilante cases pro bono has publicly boasted, he is being amply rewarded for all the services he has rendered to these vigilante groups. He has been empanelled to become a high court judge and is expecting the announcement to be made very soon. Other lawyers have been promised similar rewards.

If this trend continues unchecked, it will not only deepen the communal divide, it will completely undermine the rule of law across the country. ■

A matter of life and death

A 24x7 helpline offers mental health support to those struggling with agrarian distress in Maharashtra, writes **Jaideep Hardikar**

As his cell phone starts buzzing, 20-year-old Kirit quickly settles before a desktop, slides on his headphones, picks up a pen, and flips open his diary.

“*Namaskar*, Shivar Helpline,” he says, in a quiet and steady voice.

On the other end is Parvati, a middle-aged woman-farmer from a village in Maharashtra’s Nanded district.

“How may I help you?” Kirit asks in Marathi. A third year BA Psychology student in Pune, he is originally from a village in Parbhani.

Parvati hesitates. Her voice trembles. “Rains destroyed all our crops,” she manages to say. “Soybean, *tur...* the goats are gone too. There’s no work now.” She asks if Kirit can provide green-gram seeds for the upcoming rabi season. “If we get seeds, we will at least be able to see the summer through.”

Kirit diligently notes down her needs, asks about her family and village community, and tells her he will convey her family’s requirements to the head of the helpline.

“*Kahi tari jarur hoil, kalji karu nak* (Something will surely work out, don’t you worry),” he tells her gently. Parvati thanks him profusely, but before hanging up, she pleads: “*Ya bahini kade laksha theva, dada* (Keep this sister in your thoughts, brother).”

The conversation ends in 10 minutes. The pain lingers, on both sides.

A look at Shivar Helpline’s dashboard data from 23 September to 23 October 2025 tells a grim story: close to 10,000 calls were attended to. Shivar had to recruit more volunteers during that period to manage the rush. On the worst day, there were 894 calls. Among those, at least 180 people were contemplating serious self-harm.

“We just crumbled under the calls,” recalls Vinayak Hegana, the 31-year-old founder and CEO of Shivar. A trained psychologist and social worker, he is an itinerant observer of rural distress.

“The calls tell us the sorry state of people all over Maharashtra,” says this 2023 Chevening Fellow. “The crisis runs deep.”

For nearly three decades, Maharashtra—particularly Vidarbha and Marathwada regions—has been in the throes of deepening agrarian distress. The fallout is the continuing saga of farmers’ suicides—over 60,000 since the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) started keeping a log. The

flash-pur of 2025 was only the latest.

“Climate disaster is not just an economic crisis,” Hegana says, “it’s also a mental-health epidemic.”

On 24 September, the state’s agriculture, 42, made one last call to his wife Shivkanya from a nearby town where he had gone to buy groceries.

A marginal farmer, he doubled up as a labourer, doing any work he could get. His dream was to educate his daughter Vaishnavi (studying pharmacology in Solapur’s Barshi) and son Shivshankar (studying technical education in Dharashiv).

On 25 September, as the rain continued to pelt down, Gavsane was found dead amidst thickets of sugarcane. He left a note with an appeal to local leaders, requesting help for his children to finish their education.

Perhaps Gavsane had never heard of Shivar. If he had, might he still be alive?

The day Gavsane died, local newspapers reported four more deaths by suicide. Between 20 and 25 September, Solapur district received 365.8 mm of rain—1,253 per cent higher than the average for the month.

According to the state’s agriculture, kharif crops over 44 lakh hectares—a third of the net sown area in Marathwada’s eight districts—were irreparably damaged. State-wide, nearly 3,600 houses were damaged; 224 human lives and 600 livestock heads were lost in the floods.

Floods wash away riparian vegetation, degrade riverbanks and contaminate drinking water sources. They also disrupt groundwater recharge. Socially, floods deepen rural vulnerability: families lose crops, livestock, stored grain and essential documents. Repeated losses forced many into repeated cycles of debt and migration.

“Social, cultural, political and economic circumstances define the mental health of people during disasters,” says Dr Subhasis Bhadra, head of the department of psycho-social support in disaster management, National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences (NIMHANS). “How quickly people emerge from sudden shock is determined by the nature, scale and swiftness of support systems during, before and after the disaster,” he says. The stronger the community bonds, the higher the resilience, he adds.

A white paper by climate scientists, agrometeorologists and civil society groups

in October 2025 argues that Marathwada’s floods—and the mental health crisis they triggered—were not merely caused by rainfall, but by a systemic failure. September recorded 305 mm of rain, 204 per cent above normal, with districts like Beed, Parbhani, Latur, Hingoli and Nanded breaking new records.

June-July rainfall deficits stressed soils, followed by sudden surges in August that filled reservoirs while leaving the land unable to absorb water. By late September, silted rivers, undersized culverts, roads blocking drainage lines and poorly synchronised dam releases turned heavy rain into what the report calls ‘a preventable amplification of the flood.’

Marathwada, the report says, is no longer a uniform drought region but a patchwork of extremes—long dry spells intertwined with sudden bursts of extreme rainfall. The Mahapur Ahval (Flood Report, November 2025), a field-based study by the National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM), reinforced these conclusions. Both reports suggest that unless corrective measures are taken, Marathwada would continue to oscillate between two extremes—drought and floods—in the same season.

At Shivar Helpline, the phones didn’t stop ringing. For thirty-one days, Hegana did not go home. It was, he says, “a war-like situation.”

Every caller was on the edge of self-harm. “We could not afford to turn down any call; it might have resulted in loss of life,” he

Hegana designed the Farmers’ Distress Quotient Index (FDQI) to classify callers as low-, moderate- and high-risk. The high-risk ones he attends to personally



Photos: Jaideep Hardikar



At 80, Manohar Gite had to return to manual farm work; (left) Vinayak Hegana, founder and CEO of Shivar Helpline

that of the mental health epidemic. But the stressors that push individuals into a vortex of mental health issues need a long-term fix—from field-level interventions to policy-redressal. Hegana floated Shivar Foundation to collectivise farmers and youth and work on constructive interventions.

“For instance,” he says, “we have mobilised widows who need work in Dharashiv (one of Maharashtra’s most rain-deficient areas). We need to create livelihoods by tapping into private and public sectors to ease their financial stress.”

Hegana aims to build an agri-psycho-social model. Simultaneously, the foundation would try to build a replicable and easily accessible mental health support model for farmers. Having a phone line available round the clock helps avert extreme reactions, he says.

He liaises with respective district collectors and state line department officials wherever possible and connects farmers to the government to leverage state aid. Many officials are helpful. Yet, he says, the response is inadequate.

From 2023, as climate variability worsened, Hegana sensed that the crisis ahead would be far more complex than drought. In 2025, a generous donor helped make the move to Pune to a centralised system that will scale up for pan-Maharashtra.

Yet, mental-health care remains invisible in climate-policy responses. “The soil may not heal quickly,” Hegana adds, “but you may be able to save and rebuild lives.” ■

Courtesy: People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI)

The saga of the mystery book that was hushed

No ban yet but Naravane’s book is in limbo nevertheless for supposed ‘inaccuracies’ that could easily have been spelt out, writes **A.J. Prabal**

Did defence minister Rajnath Singh score a self-goal when he stopped Rahul Gandhi from reading out ‘five lines’ from former army chief General M.M. Naravane’s memoirs, citing an essay published in the *Caravan*? If the government wanted to hide the contents of *Four Stars of Destiny*, it couldn’t have chosen a worse way. Several thousand people have since shared the PDF files of this ‘unpublished’ book.

Exactly a week after the shush-down in Parliament, Penguin Random House India issued a statement on 9 February saying it held the sole publishing rights to the book, and that ‘No copies of the book, either in print or digital form, have been published, distributed, sold, or otherwise made available to the public by Penguin Random House India.’ Around 10 p.m. General Naravane shared this on X.

On 10 February, Rahul Gandhi arrived in Parliament with a hardbound copy of the book. Around 5 p.m., General Naravane posted the publisher’s statement again, this time with a cryptic comment: ‘This is the status of the book’. Also on 10 February, the special cell of Delhi Police registered an FIR against the book’s illegal circulation online.

‘Upon verification, it was found that a PDF copy of a typeset book with the same title and apparently prepared by Penguin Random House India Pvt Ltd is available on certain websites and some online marketing platforms have displayed the finished book cover as if it is available for purchase,’ said Delhi Police.

Media reports maintained that the FIR alleged an infringement of the Copyright Act and violation of the IT Act that prohibits online circulation of unauthorised, sensitive or obscene content.

Not only has every other officer of the Indian Army received multiple copies via WhatsApp forwards, by now the PDF would certainly have made its way to readers abroad, making the publishers the aggrieved party. They are entitled to sue those responsible for the circulation and demand compensation. In practice, however, it’s nigh impossible to prosecute an unknown number of ‘culprits’ and recover dues.

Two earlier posts by Naravane added to the ‘mystery of the unpublished memoir’. In one of them, dating back to December

2023, Naravane had posted the promotional details, the jacket cover and ISBN numbers of the book listed by Amazon, with the caption: ‘The book is now available’. In yet another post, not independently verified by *National Herald*, he appeared to be responding to a post by the publishers with the words, ‘The response is heartening’. Both posts suggest that the book was printed and available for distribution.

In an online report on the controversy, *India Today* claimed to have verified that physical copies of *Four Stars of Destiny* had indeed reached distributors and bookstores. The report was taken down within hours. Would the publishers have risked investing in a hardbound book without receiving clearance from the Ministry of Defence (MoD)? In multiple interviews, General Naravane maintained that the publishers had submitted it for clearance.

Significantly, the MoD had not objected to extracts released by news agency *PTI* in December 2023. Nor had the MoD communicated with author or publishers—at least till 2 February 2026—that clearance had been denied.

*

The government is yet to ban the book or invoke the Official Secrets Act, a colonial-era law. Neither has the defence minister or the MoD clarified what the ‘factual inaccuracies’ in the book are or why a discussion in Parliament on these alleged inaccuracies is not desirable.

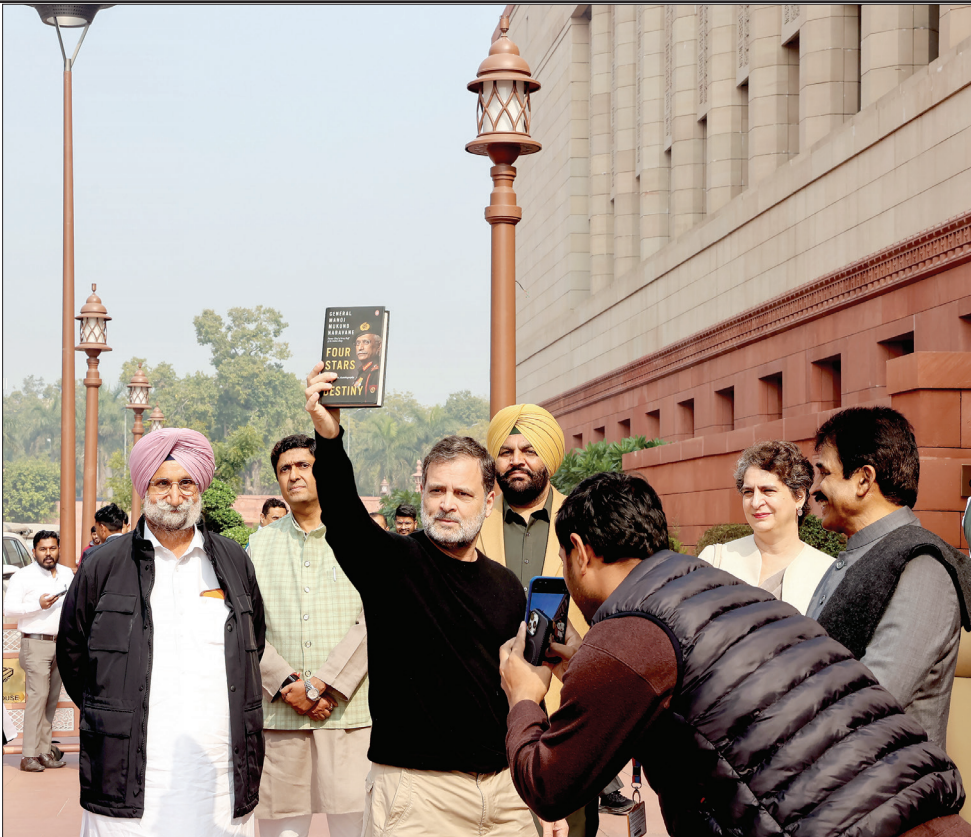
It should have been fairly straightforward to point out those inaccuracies and return the manuscript to the publishers for correction. With the ministry having cleared as many as 34 books written by retired army officers since 2024—often after editorial changes in conversation with the authors and publishers—it is not clear why Naravane’s book has been kept hanging since 2023 (when it was first submitted).

Army veterans who have read the book concur that the book actually showers fulsome praise on the current political leadership. Even the *Caravan* essay (February 2026) notes that General Naravane has been generous in praising prime minister Modi. Why then was clearance denied? Were people other than the PM offended?

Veterans point out a few references that might have been uncomfortable for the political establishment. Naravane writes that in his very first interaction with the media at Manekshaw Centre, after taking over as army chief, he made it clear that the Indian Army’s allegiance was to the Constitution of India. This to dispel the feeling that the Army was being politicised.

In his book, he also pulls up the local commanders in Ladakh for under-preparedness and poor communication. He points out that Chinese troops had pitched their tents in Indian territory a full month before the skirmish in Galwan on 15-16 June 2020 (in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed). The infringement was not taken seriously by the commanders who felt that as the ice melted the tents would be submerged by rising water levels.

The controversy has achieved exactly what the government wanted to avoid: it has stoked curiosity about the book and a raging discussion on India’s alleged timidity in countering China



Rahul Gandhi displays the book “no copies of which have been published, distributed or sold...”

Naravane was also critical of the MEA for not allowing army commanders negotiating with the Chinese in Ladakh to maintain minutes of the meetings. This led to avoidable misunderstandings with the Chinese often interpreting Indian ‘consent to consider’ proposals as agreement.

Strategic affairs analyst Sushant Singh is scathing in his *Caravan* essay about the prime minister, the defence minister and the national security advisor passing the buck to the army chief. At a tense moment when Chinese tanks were rapidly advancing, General Naravane was told to do whatever he deemed fit (*Jo uchiit samjho, woh karo*). Some army veterans believe the instruction rightly gave the army chief a free hand. Singh however explains that the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) had bound the army chief against opening fire at the LAC without explicit approval from the very top.

In his book, Gen. Naravane writes: ‘Artillery duels were a routine feature on the LOC with Pakistan. On any given day or night, perhaps hundreds of rounds would get fired as per authority delegated to the divisional and corps commanders. If the situation warranted (for instance in case of suspicious movements) or even to counter Pakistani artillery fire, they were free to open up without having to ask anyone higher up in the chain of command. But this was a totally different ball game. My position was critical, caught between the Command who wanted to open fire with all possible means and the CCS, which had yet to give me clear-cut executive orders.’

Another passage from the ‘unpublished’ book, quoted by multiple sources, reads: ‘We were ready in all respects, but did I really want to start a war? The country was in bad shape, reeling under the Covid pandemic. The economy was faltering, global supply chains had broken down. Would we be able to ensure a steady supply of spares, etc. under these conditions, in case of a long-drawn-out action? Who were our supporters in the global arena, and what about the collusive threat from China and Pakistan?’

As Singh points out in his essay, starting a war is not a decision that the military takes. It is for the political leadership and the CCS, which in this case, apparently chickened out, handing the army chief a ‘hot potato’.

Is that enough to stall the book, though? Has the government blundered by not allowing the book to be published? And did it perhaps make it worse for itself by stopping the Leader of the Opposition from quoting from the book?

The controversy has achieved exactly what the government wanted to avoid. It has stoked curiosity about the book, led to mass circulation of the PDF and started a raging discussion on India’s alleged timidity in countering the Chinese.

It was on 18 June 2020 that Modi told an all-party meeting, “*Na koi ghusa tha, na koi ghusa hai* (No one entered [Indian territory])”. This, too, has been questioned in Naravane’s book.

Is that the reason why clearance to publish was denied? ■

“Speaker sir, uphold the dignity of your office”

Krishna Pratap Singh

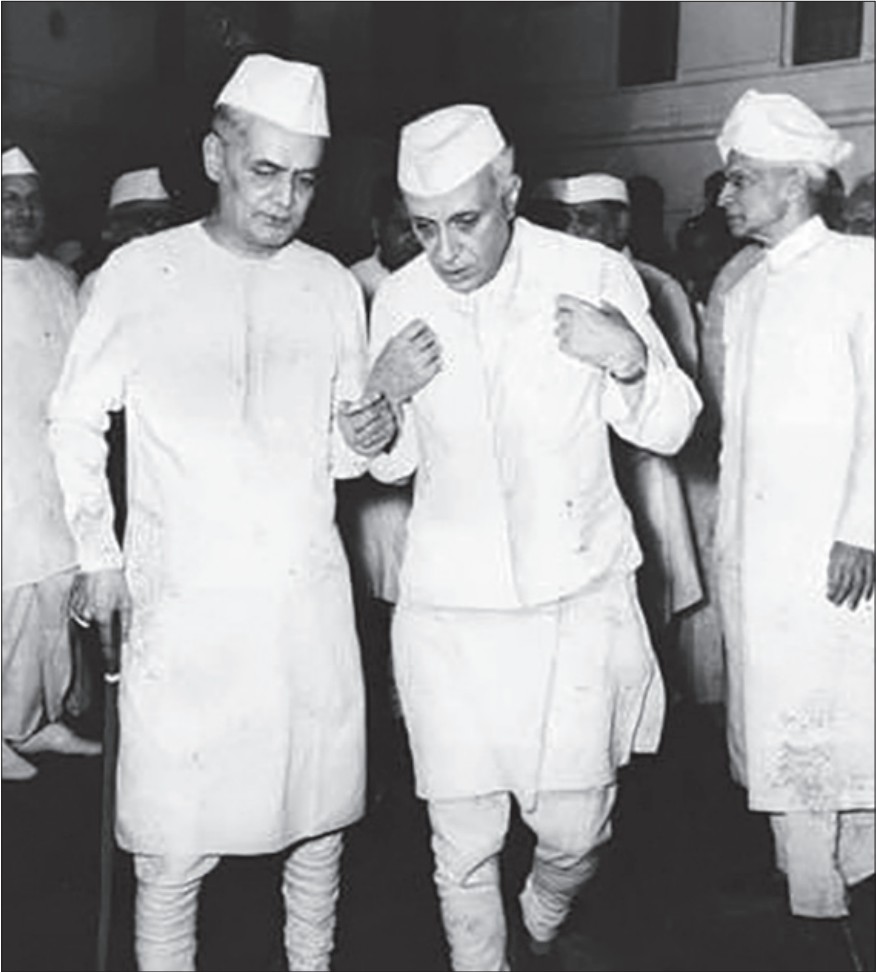
When the country’s first Lok Sabha convened in 1952, Ganesh Vasudev Mavalankar was elected its Speaker. Many addressed G.V. Mavalankar with affection and respect as ‘Dadasaheb’; prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru called him the ‘Father of the Lok Sabha’.

Mavalankar was a Congressman and had, no doubt, a soft corner for the party. But never once did that association intrude upon his rulings from the Speaker’s chair, the directions he issued, or the way he conducted proceedings. So, when he passed away on 27 February 1956, he was remembered as the man who laid the foundations of integrity and high moral standards in India’s parliamentary system.

Mavalankar believed that as Speaker, his most sacred duty was to apply the same yardstick of justice to every member of the House—whether from the treasury benches or the Opposition. On one occasion, when he felt that the Nehru government’s tendency of promulgating ordinances was unhealthy for parliamentary democracy, he did not hesitate to write to Nehru himself. Issuing ordinances merely for lack of time, he warned, was to set the wrong precedent; Parliament must not be reduced to a ‘rubber stamp’.

His moral commitment to parliamentary sovereignty also led him to press for the establishment of an independent secretariat for the Lok Sabha. It is another matter that on 18 December 1954, the Opposition brought a no-confidence motion against him. Even while describing it as ‘frivolous’ and ‘motivated’, Nehru argued that Opposition leaders be given ample time to debate it.

If we turn back to the pre-Independence years, Purushottam Das Tandon—later honoured with the title ‘Rajrishi’—was elected unopposed on 31 July 1937 as the first Speaker of the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) assembly, and continued in that office from 1946 to 1950. His impartiality was such that when the Opposition questioned his participation in meetings of the Indian National Congress while serving as Speaker, he stood on the floor of the House and declared that the day even a single member expressed distrust in his decisions or neutrality, he would resign. No MLA raised the issue again. It was his steadfast commitment to this



‘Father of the Lok Sabha’ G.V. Mavalankar with Jawaharlal Nehru

principle that earned him the sobriquet ‘Rajrishi’.

It’s apt in this context to also recall Dhaniklal Mandal, who served as Speaker of the Bihar assembly between 1967 and 1969—years of intense political instability in the state. The first non-Congress Samyukta Vidhayak Dal government, led by Mahamaya Prasad Sinha, rested on a fragile arithmetic. In January 1968, amid defections and manoeuvres, it faced a no-confidence motion and plunged into crisis.

Unable to muster a majority, Sinha quietly visited Mandal at his residence, requesting him to use his powers as Speaker to defer consideration of the

motion. That would give him time to secure the numbers he currently lacked.

Mandal’s response was blunt: since Sinha had effectively admitted before him—the Speaker—that he did not command a majority, the proper course was to go to the Governor and resign. Sinha did not resign. His government fell on 28 January 1968 through the no-confidence motion.

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These instances of Speakers safeguarding democratic probity, integrity and moral discipline in the Houses they ran stand in sharp contrast to the conduct of the current Lok Sabha Speaker, Om Birla, raising serious concerns

for our democracy.

Recall that in an earlier session, Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi remarked that while shaking hands with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Speaker had bowed while standing upright when he was greeting the LoP. The charge was discrimination between the treasury and Opposition benches, a recurring pattern that has been on display even in the ongoing Budget session.

When Rahul Gandhi rose to speak on the ‘motion of thanks to the President’s address’, he sought to refer to former Army chief Manoj Mukund Naravane’s book *Four Stars of Destiny*, quoting a passage that suggested that during China’s aggression at the border in 2020, timely and appropriate directions were not given to Naravane by the defence minister or the prime minister. He was stopped on the ground that he should confine himself to the President’s address.

Gandhi argued that an issue as vital as national security could not be divorced from the address. In brushing this aside,

Birla appeared to forget his own earlier ruling in a previous session that during the debate on the motion of thanks, members may also raise issues not mentioned in the address but which they believe ought to have found place in it.

The double standard became starker when the LoP was not allowed to quote from Naravane’s book, yet BJP MP Nishikant Dubey was given a free rein to quote freely from books that cast aspersions on Nehru and the Gandhi family.

It did not stop there. The day after Prime Minister Modi did not attend the House to reply to the debate on the motion of thanks, Birla shielded him by claiming that he himself had advised the prime minister not to come, as there could be an “unexpected incident”.

Several questions arising from this claim remain unanswered. Which agency alerted him? How did he receive this information? What steps did he take after receiving it? Was an FIR registered? If not, why not? Having apprehended a threat to the prime minister inside the House, why did he allow proceedings to continue as though nothing had happened? Was it his duty to ensure that the House functioned in a manner that enabled the prime minister to reply—or to prevent him from attending? As the Opposition has suggested, if this was a tactic to shield the prime minister from questioning, then there can be little doubt where the Speaker’s sympathies lie.

There are numerous instances of Opposition members being interrupted or restrained without cause. On 24 July 2024, during the Budget debate, Trinamool Congress MP Abhishek Banerjee referred to demonetisation. Birla interjected: “demonetisation is old news; speak on the Budget.” Banerjee shot back that when the ruling party invokes the Emergency imposed fifty years ago—or goes further back to criticise Nehru—no such objection is raised. But when he mentions demonetisation, he is told that since two Lok Sabha elections have taken place since then, he must stick to the Budget. “This bias will not do, sir. Uphold the dignity of your office,” Banerjee said.

Birla has upheld that dignity in a very distinctive way: his tenure is now marked by the record suspension of Opposition MPs. Which is why Abhishek Banerjee’s words of 24 July 2024 bear repeating today: “Speaker sir, uphold the dignity of your office.” ■

Speaker Om Birla has some very worthy predecessors to turn to if he has any doubts on how to be scrupulously fair in his high office



When a 56 inch chest wins us an 18 per cent tariff

In the face of a real adversary, our bravado withers away, writes **Aakar Patel**

Violation of sovereignty is defined as infringement of a nation's territorial integrity or interference with government functions. Arm-twisting is pressuring someone to do something they are unwilling to do. Surrender comes when one stops resisting and submits to the other side's authority. What has happened between the United States of America and Bharat is a model of clarity and understanding—it requires no more than reading the statements put out. In his executive order #14329 of 6 August 2025, Donald Trump writes: 'I determined that it was necessary and appropriate to impose an additional ad valorem rate of duty of 25 per cent on imports of articles of India, which, at that time, was directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil.'

On 6 February 2026, his executive order tells us: 'Specifically, India has committed to stop directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil, has represented that it will purchase United States energy products from the United States, and has recently committed to a framework with the United States to expand defence cooperation over the next 10 years.'

Having found that India is now behaving the way America wants, Trump says: 'Accordingly, I have determined to eliminate the additional ad valorem rate of duty imposed on India.'

This additional duty imposed on India was removed for good behaviour, or, to speak more diplomatically, for compliance. However, Trump has warned us, America 'shall monitor whether India resumes directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil'. If this happens: 'I should reimpose the additional ad valorem rate of duty of 25 per cent on imports of articles of India.'

That's not all. The submitting nation has to do more. The statement put out by Bharat says: 'India intends to purchase \$500 billion' of US products over the next five years. That's \$100 billion a year. In 2024, it was \$40 billion. India has committed to buy more than double the products it has bought from the US in the past.

What has it got in return? A 'reduced' tariff of 18 per cent where none previously

Our trade toffee is a 'reduced' tariff of 18% where none existed. And Big Brother US will monitor our moves. Violation of sovereignty? Check. Arm-twisting? Check. Surrender?



Photos: Getty Images



A protest in Delhi demanding a rollback of US trade tariffs; (left) Commerce minister Piyush Goyal

existed. This is our reward. Violation of sovereignty? Check. Arm-twisting? Check. Surrender? Unfortunately, check. As I said, the agreement is a model of clarity. One does not need to listen to what S. Jaishankar and the Indian government says; one only needs to read the document we have signed.

The question is why we capitulated. My friend the economist Ashok Bardhan sent out a message before the deal was signed, in which he anticipated what would happen and tried to explain it.

He writes that there are two reasons for yielding on the Indian side: 'First, the so-called nationalist credentials of this government and its support base are grossly exaggerated. The nationalist card is transactional and mostly meant for domestic purposes, to be whipped out in the context of elections and to enervate the base with the Pakistan spectre, but not to be resorted to when it comes to dealing with the big boys. Even the shocked reaction to the concessions on the agricultural front ignore the fact that, above all else, the ruling party is a party of the urban elite, regardless of what they say about the farmers' interests being paramount in their

scheme of things.'

Further, Bardhan writes, among the few dynamic sectors in India's economy, the two that play the greatest role are the technology sector and finance, and 'both are intricately joined at the hip to US markets and heavily dependent on linkages to US firms and funding.'

Some 70 per cent of the total output of India's information technology-related sectors are exports to the United States. India exported some \$40 billion in services to America in 2024. America is the primary source of portfolio inflows into India through its hedge funds, pension funds and mutual funds. 'Literally every aspect and structure of Indian financial markets is linked primarily to the US, from venture funding to financial research to financial news outlets, and so forth,' writes Bardhan.

And there we have it. Our nationalism, our bravado, our 56-inch chest is meant to bully and threaten other Indians (though even this will need to be reconsidered given how afraid we have become of female parliamentarians). In the face of a real adversary, our bravado withers away. It should be accepted that Trump understands us. This is not the first time he has bent us to his will.

In May 2019, India was forced to stop buying oil from Iran after Trump disallowed a waiver. Trump's former national security advisor, John Bolton, wrote in his book *The Room Where it Happened* that Trump dismissed Modi's concerns, telling his team that "he'll be okay" with the decision. The decision meant denying India the oil that had come with concessions such as free transport and insurance, and 60 days of credit. India tried to explain that many of its refineries had been calibrated to process crude oil from Iran and couldn't suddenly shift, and also that stopping supply from Iran would affect prices and inflation.

Trump would have none of it and we complied then, as we complied again with reference to Russian oil, and then again with the purchasing of Venezuelan and American oil.

We must return to where we started, because it is important that Indians know what has been done in their name. Sovereignty is violated by foreign interference in governmental functions. Surrender comes when one stops resisting and submits to the other side's authority. ■

Views are personal

Socialism and the Indian Republic

Yogendra Yadav

In the first essay of this series on the *swadharma* or inner life of the Indian Republic, we reflected on *sarva dharmasambhava* or secularism. We now turn to the second strand of said *swadharma*—*samata* (equality) and the idea of socialism. Equality as a social ideal is a modern concept, but the idea that all human beings are equal is not new. The proposition that because human beings are equal, they are entitled to equal resources and equal dignity is new. And the idea that society itself must be reorganised around this principle is very modern. There is no denying that the vision of building a new social order with equality as its organising axis came to India via Europe in the nineteenth century and the Bolshevik Revolution in the twentieth. So, it is often

assumed that the idea of equality is alien to the Indian mind, that it's an imported doctrine grafted onto a reluctant civilisation.

A serious interrogation of India's *swadharma* must test this assumption. In one sense, the history of the world is a history of inequality and injustice. Yet India's civilisation stands apart in one crucial respect—the caste system, which does not merely reflect inequality, it institutionalises and embeds it in social structure. Hindu religious texts clothe this hierarchy in theological legitimacy.

But it would be hasty to conclude that inequality is India's *swadharma*. The existence of a system does not prove that it was society's highest ideal. India's civilisational ethos has never been hostage to scriptures or emperors. Its clearest articulations have emerged through

movements—Buddhist thought, the Sufi-Bhakti tradition and the national movement, each in its own register rejecting caste hierarchy. The spread of socialist thought in India and the Indian understanding of egalitarianism cannot simply be taken as a foreign import. It may not have been set down as a doctrine here but it registered its presence through dialogue—and conflict—with earlier traditions. It was through this churn that the egalitarian ideal found its place in the Indian imagination.

At the base of this trajectory lies the idea of *karuna* (compassion), the tremor we feel in the heart when we encounter another's suffering. In its earliest articulation, this appears as *daya*—mercy. The *Anushasana Parva* of the *Mahabharata*

names compassion as the root of *dharma*. But in Buddhist philosophy, this idea undergoes a transformation. Compassion is not merely pity. It is the deep and active desire to alleviate suffering. Buddhism links this ethical impulse to action, and such action to *prajna*, wisdom. In this form, compassion contains within it the seed of what later came to be called socialism.

If compassion is genuine, it cannot limit itself to individuals; it will confront the structural causes of suffering in society. It will demand institutional transformation. By linking compassion with insight and 'right action', Buddhist philosophy anticipates—and arguably surpasses—modern doctrines of equality.

The Sufi and Bhakti movements gave equality a new resonance. In the Sufi idiom, compassion takes the form of *reham*—mercy. The invocation *Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim* echoes the Islamic belief that creation itself is an expression of divine mercy. Indian Sufi traditions drew from this theological core a social ethic: if the world arises from divine compassion, then humans must embody mercy towards all creation. Mercy mustn't remain a divine attribute, it must also become a human quality. In social terms, this translates into service (*khidmat*) and love for all. Justice

(*adl*) is rooted in mercy.

Bhakti saints, sometimes in dialogue with Sufis, deepened this egalitarian sensibility. Many did not directly confront social or economic inequality, but they struck at its philosophical and spiritual foundations. Figures such as Kabir, Ravidas, Tukaram and Basavanna openly challenged caste hierarchy. Others, even when less confrontational, cultivated an ethical imagination in which all souls were equal.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, two parallel efforts sought to redefine this strand of *swadharma*. One drew inspiration from Western socialist thought and the Bolshevik Revolution, aiming to establish economic equality.

The other utilised the openings created by colonial modernity and education to challenge caste hierarchy and patriarchy, striving for social equality. These were not ruptures with India's *swadharma* but expansions of the idea, with three additional dimensions:

- First, equality moved from being a spiritual principle to becoming a principle of social philosophy. The focus shifted from equality before God to equality in the material world.
- Second, equality ceased to be one virtue among many. It became central to the imagination of an ideal society—a value that could not be dismissed without moral cost.
- Third, it was no longer a matter of individual virtue but a mandate for the State to build an egalitarian society.

The Constitution of India internalised these ideals of equality. As with 'secularism', debates over when and why the word 'socialism' entered the Preamble miss the larger point that in its architecture, spirit and normative commitments, the Constitution is saturated with the idea of equality. In a distinctively Indian idiom, *samata* helps define the *swadharma* of the Republic. ■

Edited and translated excerpts (part 2) from the author's forthcoming book, Ganrajya ka Swadharma, Setu Prakashan



Photo: Getty Images

As with 'secularism', debates on why the word 'socialism' entered the Preamble miss the point that the Constitution is saturated with the idea of equality

Not just AQI, what we need is a BSI

The bullshit emitted on a regular basis by those who decide the nation’s destiny merits an index of its own

Avay Shukla

One has always had the highest admiration and respect for Meryl Streep’s acting qualities, graceful beauty and composure. To these qualities, I should now add her strong moral conviction and the courage to speak out: her takedown of Trump at the 2017 Golden Globe awards function was something to watch, and won her a standing ovation. (Hopefully our Bollywood marionettes watched it too).

I find that she is also relevant to the India of today. As proof, here’s another of her statements: “Funny thing about getting older, your eyesight starts getting weaker but your ability to see through people’s bullshit gets much better.”

Never was a truer word spoken. At three score and fifteen, I take quite a few wrong turns on the road as the traffic signs have become as blurred as Mr Modi’s vision for 2047, but give me a piece of bullshit and I can spot it for what it is instantly, through the layers of grandstanding, hypocrisy and ignorance that are the hallmark of our government and ruling classes.

IIT-Kanpur got it all wrong when it diagnosed NCR smog as consisting mainly of vehicle emissions, construction dust and paddy burning. It failed to detect a major ingredient: bullshit (BS), whose particles—BS 2.5 by lesser politicians and BS 10 by ministers—have seen a major increase since 2014.

These emissions are usually disguised as droplets of nationalism, religious revivalism or Viksit Bharat slogans. They affect, not the lungs, but the IQ of the residents here, which explains why the BJP keeps winning elections. In fact, I have a theory about this: the lower the IQ of a particular place, the higher its AQI readings. To test this thesis, I am now looking for a nerd who can build a Bullshit Index (BSI).

Readers would be well aware of the blasts of BS sprayed on a regular basis by those who decide the nation’s destiny: there is no connection between air pollution and lung diseases, 2025 was the cleanest year in Delhi’s history, AQI and temperature are one and the same, the EU trade deal is the ‘mother of all deals’ (which presumably would make the trade deal with the USA the ‘mother-in-law’ of all deals), mountains should be defined by height, not ecological

importance, those who feed stray dogs should keep them at home (the largest adoption programme in world history, considering there are 70 million of these community dogs)...

We can go on: the US SEC’s summons could not be served on Adani because it did not have an official stamp, the globally acclaimed climate activist Sonam Wangchuk is a security threat to India, we need to take ‘revenge’ for centuries of occupation by outside forces, it is one chief minister’s personal mission to hound a minority community and expel six lakh of them from the state’s voter list, trade unions are responsible for the country’s lack of progress...

It’s a long list, folks, and getting longer with each BJP election victory, which is why the smog keeps getting thicker.

But the mother of all BS 10s was discharged recently by our suave, foreign university-educated (MBA, University of Pennsylvania) bureaucrat-turned-billionaire railway minister, who announced that he was banning the wearing of *bandhgala*s in the Railways because it was a (British) ‘colonial legacy’.

Now, generations of IAS officers will agree that a bandhgala is the nearest they’ve got to a hangman’s noose, that it is an instrument of torture, especially during the summer months. It needs to go, for climatic reasons. But to banish it because it



The ‘bandhgala’, the formal attire of the Mughal court and ruling families of Mewar and Rajasthan, is on its way out

is a colonial vestige reeks of ignorance and hypocrisy posturing as nationalism and *desh bhakti*. It also indicates that the hon’ble minister suffers from both long- and short-term memory loss.

He forgot that the bandhgala is not a British invention—it (or a close variant)—was the formal dress of the Mughal court and the ruling families of Mewar and Rajasthan; the showier *achkan* or *sherwani* also belong to this family of couture. Worse, by landing up in Davos just a week later in a three-piece suit—an indisputably British attire—he not only displayed short-term memory loss but also his lack of sincerity about banishing colonialism.

Did he also forget that the whole system of railways in India was built by the British, replacing the humble bullock-cart and changing the face of the country? Would he also like to ban (with a little help from the RSS, no doubt) the English language, the university system of

education, allopathy, nuclear technology and the watch, sunglasses and pens that adorn our prime minister’s personage, all products of coloninising nations?

Perhaps he would like to rethink his passion for all things ‘colonial’, be a bit more discriminatory and focus on those things and practices that truly reflect the worst of our colonial past and have no place in a modern India. Here is a short list:

Unelected (and usually unelectable) governors who behave like viceroys and lord it over elected governments; Raj Bhavans that function as opulent embassies of the Centre in the states (and sometimes as dens of conspiracy); summer vacations by Supreme Court judges (even though tens of thousands of cases are pending in that court and no other institution enjoys this facility); the humiliating practice of addressing judges as ‘Milords’ in a free country; the royal trappings of just about

everything in Rashtrapati Bhavan, including a cavalry regiment exclusively dedicated to escorting the President, on the lines of the Praetorian Guard of Roman emperors, the Garde Imperial of Napoleon, or the Gardes Suisses (Swiss Guards) and the Gardes Françaises of the Pope and the French king, respectively.

The President is no monarch, or so we hope, and there is no need to display such in-your-face-pomp to the citizens of a democracy, especially when it comes at such cost.

There are plenty of colonial practices which need to be jettisoned, but we can surely do better than begin with the bandhgala! When bullshit becomes state policy, one has to agree with the dude who redefined *pranayam* thus: inhale the good shit, exhale the bullshit. And that is why we need a BSI, folks. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

Rebuilding Gaza must begin with the environment

Ignoring environmental concerns for political expediency can only entrench long-term instability, writes **Ashok Swain**

As diplomats negotiate ceasefires, donor conferences pledge billions for reconstruction and security strategists sketch out stabilisation plans, there is a danger that one of the most consequential dimensions of Gaza’s catastrophe will be overlooked. Conversations about money, governance and geopolitics may dominate headlines and policy briefs, but without confronting the environmental wreckage that underlies the territory’s shattered infrastructure under the occupation and wars, any reconstruction will be superficial and ultimately unsustainable.

Gaza’s environmental crisis is not a peripheral issue but a foundational one that affects water, soil, air, health, livelihoods, agriculture and, ultimately, the ability of communities to rebuild their lives with dignity and resilience. The scale of the environmental challenge in the Gaza Strip is immense and intertwined with the human suffering that has made daily survival extraordinarily difficult and costly. Much of Gaza has been physically destroyed, with estimates indicating tens of millions of tonnes of rubble littering cities and towns, creating an unprecedented obstacle to recovery that could take years to clear even under favourable conditions and generate significant emissions simply from debris processing and transport.

Environmental degradation in Gaza extends far beyond debris. Water and sanitation systems have been crippled by repeated attacks and prolonged electricity shortages, forcing residents to rely on limited and often unsafe sources of drinking water while untreated sewage contaminates neighbourhoods, agricultural land and coastal waters. Even before the most recent escalations, Gaza’s water infrastructure was under severe strain. Now, with damaged pipelines, destroyed pumping stations and inoperative treatment facilities, the risk of waterborne disease and long-term contamination has intensified. Agricultural land and orchards that once supported local food production have been flattened, compacted by heavy machinery or contaminated by explosive residues and waste. Air quality has deteriorated due to dust from destruction,



Reconstruction cannot be meaningful without restoring the land, water and air to health

burning debris and reliance on diesel generators and low-grade fuels for cooking and electricity. The environmental crisis is therefore multidimensional, affecting every basic system that sustains life.

Much of the current discourse on Gaza’s future assumes that rebuilding homes, schools, clinics and government buildings is the central task. But reconstruction cannot meaningfully begin until the land, water and air on which these buildings depend are restored and protected. The sheer scale of war debris forms a physical and environmental barrier that must be addressed before new infrastructure can safely take root. If rubble is treated merely as an engineering inconvenience rather than a public health and ecological risk, toxic dust and hazardous materials will continue to seep into soil and groundwater, compounding the damage. Debris is not just broken concrete. It often contains asbestos, heavy metals, fuel residues and other contaminants that pose long-term health threats if left unmanaged.

Restoring water and sanitation infrastructure must therefore be among the first pillars of any reconstruction plan. Clean water is not only essential for drinking and hygiene but also for economic recovery, agricultural viability and disease prevention.

Water that is safe to drink, soil that can produce food, air that does not carry toxic dust and neighbourhoods free of hazardous debris will be the true foundations of recovery in Gaza

Rehabilitating these systems means more than repairing pipes. It requires modernising treatment facilities, ensuring reliable power supply, reducing leakage and establishing transparent water quality monitoring. Homes rebuilt without safe water and sanitation are uninhabitable in any meaningful sense. If water systems fail, reconstruction efforts will quickly unravel under the weight of public health crises.

Agriculture presents another urgent environmental dimension. Farmland damaged by carpet bombardment and building of illegal settlements cannot simply be returned to production without systematic rehabilitation. Clearing unexploded ordnance and other war remnants is an essential first step, as fields that remain contaminated by explosive devices are inaccessible and dangerous. Free and secure access to land is equally critical. Farmers must be able to reach and cultivate their fields without restrictions or fear, otherwise land rehabilitation plans remain theoretical. Soil testing should identify contamination and salinity levels, followed by removal of toxic debris, restoration of irrigation systems and rebuilding of soil fertility through organic matter and careful management. Without addressing land and water quality, agricultural revival will be slow, deepening food insecurity and economic dependency.

The political context surrounding reconstruction adds another layer of complexity. Competing visions for Gaza’s future range from externally driven redevelopment schemes to proposals that fundamentally reshape land use and population distribution. There are growing concerns that reconstruction processes themselves could be used as instruments of political pressure or demographic engineering, where control over materials, permits and planning determines who can return, rebuild or remain. In such a context, environmental considerations risk being sidelined in favour of strategic calculations. Ignoring environmental repair for political expediency would entrench long-term instability. Environmental sustainability must be safeguarded through transparent planning, inclusive decision-making and independent oversight, ensuring that reconstruction serves the population rather than geopolitical agendas.

Waste management is one of the most urgent and visible environmental challenges. Mountains of rubble mixed with household waste and hazardous materials create immediate health risks and long-term contamination pathways. A sustainable reconstruction strategy must prioritise systematic debris mapping, safe sorting and recycling where feasible, and the establishment of controlled disposal sites. Independent monitoring mechanisms should verify compliance with

environmental standards. This may appear less dramatic than building new housing blocks, but it is foundational to protecting public health and restoring trust.

Energy systems also intersect with environmental sustainability. In crisis settings, reliance on diesel generators and improvised fuel sources increases air pollution and operational costs while undermining reliability. Reconstruction offers an opportunity to invest in more resilient and cleaner energy systems that can power water treatment, health facilities and homes without exacerbating environmental harm. Integrating renewable energy and energy efficient design can enhance resilience and reduce future vulnerability, especially in a territory where supply chains are frequently disrupted.

International organisations, universities and technical experts have an important role to play in supporting environmentally sustainable reconstruction. They can provide independent environmental assessments, contamination mapping and risk analysis. They can assist in designing low-cost water treatment technologies and waste recycling systems adapted to local conditions. However, external involvement must strengthen local capacity rather than replace it. Gaza’s professionals and institutions should lead long-term environmental governance, supported by training and transparent data systems. Funding mechanisms should require environmental impact assessments and resilience planning as core conditions rather than optional components.

Ultimately, reconstruction in Gaza will be judged not only by the number of buildings erected but by whether daily life becomes safer, healthier and more sustainable. Water that is safe to drink, soil that can produce food, air that does not carry toxic dust and neighbourhoods free from hazardous debris are the true foundations of recovery. Ignoring these environmental dimensions in favour of short-term political or financial gains would repeat past mistakes and lock Gaza into a cycle of repeated crisis.

Rebuilding Gaza is often framed as a diplomatic and security challenge. It is that, but it is also an environmental challenge of historic scale. If sustainability is embedded at the core of reconstruction, Gaza’s recovery can strengthen resilience and improve human security. If it is neglected, reconstruction will rest on unstable ground, vulnerable to collapse under the weight of pollution, scarcity and renewed instability. The choice is not between speed and sustainability. The choice is between rebuilding for appearance and rebuilding for sustaining life. ■

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FROM WELFARE TO EMPOWERMENT: KARNATAKA'S MODEL OF PEOPLE-CENTRIC DEVELOPMENT

Guarantee schemes and beyond: Building a resilient and empowered Karnataka

On the twin occasions of the Joint Legislature Session and the 77th Republic Day, Hon'ble Governor Shri Thaaawar Chand Gehlot presented Karnataka's compelling story of transformation — a journey shaped by constitutional ideals and driven by inclusive development. His address was not merely a presentation of achievements; it was a reaffirmation of governance anchored in moral clarity, democratic responsibility and measurable progress.

Rooted in the vision of Bharat Ratna Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the values of liberty, equality and fraternity are treated not as ceremonial affirmations but as living commitments. These principles guide legislative priorities, administrative reforms and welfare interventions across the State. Dr. Ambedkar envisioned democracy not merely as a political system, but as a social order sustained by justice and dignity. Political democracy, he cautioned, must be complemented by social and economic democracy. It is this constitutional understanding that informs Karnataka's governance philosophy. Today, Karnataka's development trajectory stands firmly grounded in constitutional morality. The State has consciously translated foundational values into measurable outcomes — strengthening social security, expanding economic opportunity and empowering citizens at every level. Governance has evolved beyond conventional welfare delivery into a rights-based, empowerment-driven framework designed to ensure that development reaches the last mile, benefits are transferred transparently and citizens gain not merely assistance, but agency.

The State's governance model

Today, Karnataka's development trajectory stands firmly grounded in constitutional morality. The State has consciously translated foundational values into measurable outcomes — strengthening social security, expanding economic opportunity and empowering citizens at every level.

rests on five interlinked pillars: comprehensive welfare, economic prudence, infrastructure expansion, institutional reform and social transformation. Together, they create a balanced architecture of development — addressing immediate needs while building long-term resilience. By integrating fiscal responsibility with expansive public investment, Karnataka has strengthened purchasing power, expanded opportunity and stimulated growth without compromising equity. At a time when global and national economies face volatility, Karnataka has sustained economic dynamism while prioritising social justice. Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), targeted welfare schemes and inclusive public expenditure

have enhanced household financial stability. Simultaneously, strategic investments in infrastructure, technology and advanced industries position the State as a leading engine of national progress.

Guarantee Schemes: A revolutionary model inspired by Universal Basic Income

The five flagship Guarantee Schemes — GrihaJyothi, Griha Lakshmi, Anna Bhagya, Shakti and YuvaNidhi — represent a transformative approach to welfare policy. Inspired by the broader principle of Universal Basic Income, these schemes move beyond fragmented subsidies toward integrated, direct economic empowerment.

According to Consumer Price Index trends, while purchasing power in many states has remained below expected benchmarks, Karnataka's purchasing power aligns with prescribed economic standards — a stability attributed significantly to the Guarantee Schemes.

An allocation of Rs 1,16,706 crore has been made for these initiatives, with more than Rs 1.13 lakh crore already disbursed. The State is spending Rs 1.12 lakh



crore annually exclusively on public welfare — a reflection of both fiscal commitment and strategic foresight.

To scientifically assess impact, agreements have been entered into through FPI with reputed institutions including King's College London, Just Jobs Network, XKDR Forum, Azim Premji University, Indus Action

and Lokniti/CSDS. Their studies confirm significant improvements in food security, poverty alleviation and women's empowerment.

Beneficiaries are utilising funds responsibly — prioritising nutritious food, medicines and children's education. The proportion of families receiving direct cash transfers into bank

accounts has risen from 9.3 per cent in 2022 to 72.7 per cent in 2024.

According to Family Survey data for 2024–25, 1.37 crore families have received direct intermediaries and strengthening DBT systems, the Government has reinforced transparency and public trust.

Women at the centre of transformation

Women's empowerment stands at the heart of Karnataka's development model.



The Shakti scheme has transformed mobility patterns. A study by Azim Premji University shows that on several routes, including major commuter areas in Bengaluru, women now outnumber men commuters — reflecting enhanced participation in public and economic life. Each woman saves Rs 1,500 to Rs 2,000 per month. Statewide, 19 per cent of women — and 34 per cent in Bengaluru — have secured better-paying jobs due to improved mobility. Additionally, 83 per cent report improved access to healthcare services.

The Anna Bhagya scheme advances the vision of a "Hunger-free Karnataka." As many as 83 per cent of women beneficiaries report enhanced family nutrition through the purchase of quality food items such as pulses, vegetables, fruits, eggs and meat.

Under Griha Lakshmi, 80 per cent of women report increased financial independence and a stronger role in household decision-making. Around 37 per cent are repaying old debts, moving toward debt-free living. Significantly, 89 per cent report improved family relationships.

Institutional support further strengthens empowerment. The Griha Lakshmi Credit Co-operative Society promotes financial self-reliance. The Akkape scheme provides protection to women and children in distress, supported by five 'Akka' task forces implementing more than 25 initiatives. Karnataka has also introduced 12 days of paid menstrual leave annually — among the most progressive labour measures in the country.

Surveys indicate that Bengaluru ranks first nationally in women's safety — a Bengaluru for the State.

Youth empowerment and economic expansion

The YuvaNidhi scheme provides structured support to youth transitioning into employment. As a result, 28 per cent of beneficiaries have pursued skill development, and 20 per cent have become financially self-reliant.

Skill-based education is being prioritised through new GTTCs, polytechnic colleges, skill parks and MSDCs. Integration of vocational education in schools and colleges strengthens employability.

Capital expenditure of Rs 83,200 crore in the 2025–26 Budget underscores Karnataka's commitment to growth-oriented development. Projects worth Rs 1.5 lakh crore are underway in Bengaluru.

The State prioritises industries such as semiconductors, aerospace, communication equipment and quantum technology. Global investment continues to reinforce Karnataka's status as an innovation powerhouse.

Dairy, Fisheries and allied sectors

Under Ksheeradhare, 9.07 lakh milk producers receive Rs 5 per litre incentives, with Rs 4,130 crore transferred directly to farmers. The Anugraha scheme has disbursed Rs 95.41 crore for livestock loss compensation.

Karnataka leads nationally in foot-and-mouth disease vaccination. Infrastructure upgrades include 200 veterinary institutions and 381 contract veterinarians.

For inland fishermen, subsidised diesel (Rs 35 per litre for 300 litres), Rs 440 crore for fishing harbours and vehicle assistance strengthen livelihoods. Karnataka remains the national leader in raw silk production, with fully digital, cashless market systems.

Education, Health and Social Infrastructure

Karnataka continues to emerge as a major education hub. LKG and UKG classes are being introduced in government schools. Around 8.5 lakh children study in residential institutions. The Prof. Sukhadeo Thorat Committee recommendations are being implemented.

Under Akshara Aavishkara, 300 Karnataka Public Schools are being established in Kalyana

Karnataka. The Dr. Chaya Degaonkar Committee report addresses regional disparities.

In healthcare, Karnataka maintains one of the highest ratios of PHCs, hospitals and medical colleges. Cities across the State are evolving as health hubs. Preventive care initiatives, malnutrition elimination drives and action against food adulteration strengthen public health outcomes.

Infrastructure, Revenue Reforms and Power Security

More than 80 per cent of long-pending revenue cases have been resolved. Revenue courts function online. 91,163 podis have been completed. 4,050 unrecorded villages have been declared revenue

villages. Over 1,11,111 beneficiaries have received title deeds, with one lakh more ready. Land records are being digitised.

Under GrihaJyothi, free electricity up to 200 units reduces household burdens. In ten months, 28,000 million

units of electricity were generated. Infrastructure includes 41,208 transformers and extensive transmission lines.

Agreements for 3,704 MW and plans for 4,794 MW additional capacity strengthen energy security.

Agriculture and farmers' welfare

Agriculture remains central to rural resilience. The revived Krushi Bhagya scheme, with Rs 200 crore allocated, has enabled construction of 3,735 farm ponds at Rs 49 crore. The Hi-tech Harvester Hub has supported 1.31 lakh beneficiaries with Rs 286 crore. Micro-irrigation units covering 1.50 lakh hectares have been installed at Rs 252 crore.

In response to floods affecting 14.21 lakh hectares, Rs 2,250 crore was credited directly to 14,21,615 farmers. The State provided an additional Rs 8,500 per hectare beyond Central norms. Compensation of Rs 46.5 crore addressed damage to homes, lives and livestock.

Under SDMF, works worth Rs 235.31 crore are underway. An action plan of Rs 966.93 crore has been approved for 2025–26 disaster mitigation. Memoranda seeking Rs 615 crore for crop loss and Rs 1,522 crore for infrastructure restoration have been submitted to the Centre.

Six Horticulture Kisan Malls and cold storage units (14,000 MT capacity) strengthen agricultural marketing. A Rs 40 crore horticulture college at Alamel enhances research and training.



Constitutional morality and democratic spirit

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasised that political democracy must evolve into social democracy rooted in liberty, equality and fraternity. He reminded the nation that the working of a Constitution depends on those entrusted with its operation.

Karnataka has treated these principles as guiding priorities — listening to communities, constituting commissions, implementing recommendations and addressing regional imbalances. The true strength of the Republic lies in unity in diversity, institutional dynamism and unwavering commitment to constitutional values.

As Karnataka marks the 77th Republic Day, it stands as a model where liberty fuels opportunity, equality shapes policy, fraternity strengthens society and economic dynamism transforms lives.

This is not merely administration — it is transformation.

This is governance grounded in constitutional morality.

This is Karnataka — advancing with clarity of vision, building a Republic where justice is tangible, opportunity is universal and development is shared by all.

HOME & ABROAD

CAN INDIA, BANGLA NOW DO A RESET?
The BNP victory is another opportunity for neighbours to mend fences

► P2



NATION

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH
How a 24x7 helpline is proving to be a lifeline for Maharashtra's farmers

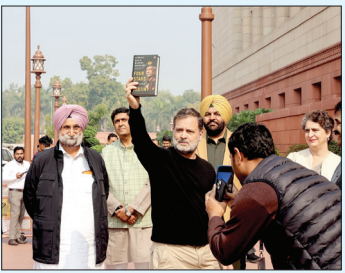
► P4



NATION

THE BOOK THAT MISSES THE LIGHT OF DAY
No ban yet but Naravane's book is still in limbo

► P5



INDIA-US TRADE AGREEMENT

One-sided, humiliating and unacceptable

Herjinder

He had heard of ‘frameworks’ for an agreement. And he’d heard of ‘interim agreements’. But would someone please explain what a ‘framework to an interim agreement’ was? Economist Rathin Roy’s scathing reaction to the India-US joint statement summed up the absurdities of the ‘major deal’ hailed by prime minister Narendra Modi and tom-tommed by his underlings in government. The announcement, the timing and the language used left no doubt that India had, as former finance secretary Subhash Chandra Garg put it, capitulated.

On 2 February, four days before the joint statement was issued, US President Donald Trump posted on Truth Social that the Indian prime minister had agreed to the long-awaited trade deal, that India had agreed to stop buying Russian oil, that India would buy American products ‘at a much higher level’ and purchase much more from the US and Venezuela. In return, the US would reduce ‘reciprocal tariffs’ from 25 to 18 per cent.

This was followed by PM Modi’s tweet welcoming the tariff reduction, stressing his friendship with Trump and declaring that the partnership would unlock ‘immense potential’ for both countries.

The euphoria lasted all of four days. On 6 February, the one-page joint statement (a.k.a. ‘framework to an interim agreement’) was issued from Washington D.C. while India was still asleep. This was most unusual. The Press Information Bureau (PIB) released the statement at 4.20 a.m. IST. Bereft of details as it was, there was enough there to shock trade experts.

While the final trade agreement—a legal document—would take up several thousand pages, the one-pager clearly stated that India had agreed to stop buying Russian oil, had agreed to the US *monitoring* (emphasis added) its oil purchases and had agreed to reduce import duty on most US products to zero.

‘This disastrous deal will hurt and haunt India for decades to come,’ wrote Garg in the *Deccan Herald*. There was nothing ‘reciprocal’ about the US imposing 18 per cent tariff on imports from India and India imposing zero tariff on US imports.

Ajay Srivastava, international trade negotiator and founder of the Global Trade Research Initiative, New Delhi, wonders



There is nothing ‘reciprocal’ about the US imposing 18 per cent tariff on imports from India and India imposing zero tariff on US imports



Photos: Getty Images

what India could import from the US—it produces little of the industrial and consumer goods India needs. The wording of the joint statement, he says, is worrying. While India has committed to ease non-tariff barriers, the US has made no commitment to dilute laws and regulations to facilitate the entry of goods from India.

While India has surrendered to monitoring by the US, the 18 per cent tariff is conditional—on India not buying Russian oil directly or indirectly. The asymmetry in the joint statement was glaring enough for author and commentator Dr Bramha Chellaney to underline that ‘India’s obligations are immediate, quantified and subject to formal monitoring, while American ‘concessions’ are largely conditional, reversible or simply corrective... the US Trade Representative and the White House frame India as a ‘market’ to be unlocked rather than a strategic partner, emphasising gains for American workers and exporters by opening a massive consumer base for [the] US.’

Most Indians saw the statement for the bullying it was. A cartoon by Sorit in *Down to Earth* shows a farmer asking why the trade deal is being called ‘historic’. A worker carrying a loaded basket replies: ‘Because Indian farming will become history after the deal’. A wit posted on social media: ‘Did a historic trade deal with my bar. According to the deal, I will drink only from that bar and not buy drinks from any other bar. In return, he will continue to sell me highly priced drinks.’

Another commentator said: “The US has done to India what the Indian government is used to doing to its citizens—taken away

rights and imposed penalties, only to ease them as a great favour.”

*

The Indian government, argues Srivastava, might like to think that the war in Ukraine will end soon and sanctions on Russia will be lifted; that the US Supreme Court will strike down President Trump’s reciprocal tariffs as illegal and that the US president will become a lame duck after mid-term elections in November. Nothing else can explain India’s acceptance of such humiliating terms. “Are you not ashamed of what you have done?” asked Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi, while addressing the treasury bench on the Union budget.

Within hours of Union commerce minister Piyush Goyal gloating that the US tariff of 18 per cent gave India an advantage over countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam, the US signed a trade deal with Bangladesh. Bangladesh—which does not grow any cotton but is a major exporter of textile and garments—agreed to import cotton from the US. In return, the US offered to impose zero tariff on textile and garments manufactured in Bangladesh using US-produced cotton or man-made fibres. Which may be curtains for textiles and garments made in India, which is also the second largest grower of cotton

Instead of leveraging India’s strengths to extract concessions, Modi’s negotiators capitulated, even accepting bullying terms like ‘monitoring’ by the US

Daylight robbery of voting rights?

Pre-filled Form 7s are being submitted in bulk to erase Muslim voters. **Nandlal Sharma** reports

On 29 January, Congress general secretary (organisation) K.C. Venugopal drew the Election Commission of India’s attention to the ‘massive misuse of Form 7 by the BJP’ to eliminate voters suspected of supporting the Opposition. In his letter, Venugopal calls the misuse extensive and systematic, adding that the BJP appears to have asked its workers to submit objections in bulk, particularly in poll-bound states. A key element of the centralised fraud, he says, is to ensure that notices informing legitimate voters of the objections never reach them.

Reports from Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Assam, Kerala, West Bengal and Chhattisgarh do indicate a similar pattern. The bulk-printed Form 7s have some remarkable common features: 1. the names to be deleted are pre-printed (indicating a mass operation with access to the voter database) and 2. the names of objector-applicants are missing and yet the forms carry the applicant’s signature at the bottom. When the ECI quietly altered the

rules governing Form 7 in 2023, nobody seemed to notice. Form 7 allows a voter to challenge the inclusion of another individual in the electoral rolls and request their removal. Earlier, only neighbours or voters registered at the same polling station were eligible to submit Form 7; the new rule allows any voter in the same assembly constituency to do so. Another big change is to allow an unlimited number of submissions per applicant.

According to an update posted on the official X handle of the chief electoral officer, Uttar Pradesh (@ceoup) on 11 February, 1.1 lakh Form 7 applications have been received in Uttar Pradesh. The ECI itself has not put out any such figures on X or its website for UP or the remaining states and UTs featuring in this round of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls.

As noted above, the submitted Form 7s show a disturbing pattern across the states: the name, address and EPIC number of voter names to be deleted are *printed* on the forms. The name of the (objector)-

applicant—a field that appears right on top of the form—was blank in *all* instances this reporter found with the BLOs (booth-level officers) he was in touch with. Even EPIC numbers, not a mandatory field, are *printed*—not hand-written—on these forms, indicating an operation involving access to the ECI’s database.

Even the 2023 manual of the ECI—featuring amended Form 7 rules—restricts bulk submission of applications

Sharafat Hussain, a supplier of building materials in Amethi’s Jagdishpur recalls that all 19 members of his extended family figured in the SIR draft list. When BLO Amar Bahadur informed him that Form 7 applications had been received for the deletion of 16 names, he was taken aback. The Samajwadi Party has accused Savitri Devi, a BJP mandal president in Fatehpur district, of filing 72 objections. Attempts by *National Herald* to reach Savitri Devi proved futile.

Even the 2023 manual of the ECI—featuring amended Form 7 rules—restricts bulk submission of Form 7 applications. Even a booth level agent (BLA) can file only up to 10 forms a day. If a BLA submits more than 30 applications while revision of rolls is ongoing, the ERO and AERO are required to personally verify all applications.

A *Newslandry* investigation in Gujarat’s Somnath constituency revealed that in January 2026, 269 objectors submitted pre-filled forms in bulk to delete 15,663 voters. Voters’ details were printed in English while objectors’ details were handwritten in Gujarati.

Each of the 269 objectors were found to have submitted 50 or more Form 7 applications. Among the objectors were Manjulaben Suyani, the Somnath BJP women’s wing president, and 29 BJP councillors from the towns of Veraval and Patan. At least six denied having signed the forms.

►► Continued on page 2

A humiliating, unacceptable deal

» Continued from page 1

According to US agricultural data, American farmers receive substantial government support. Direct and indirect subsidies, crop insurance, disaster payments and federal farm programmes together provide tens of billions of dollars annually. Reports suggest that average support per farm in the US runs into tens of thousands of dollars each year. An additional multi-billion-dollar farm assistance programme has been proposed for 2026 alone.

The deal allows tariff reduction or elimination on a range of products like soyabean oil, DDGS and red sorghum used for animal feed. Soyabean farmers in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Telangana and Rajasthan are already facing a crisis. Market prices often hover 20-30 per cent below the minimum support price (MSP). Imports of cheaper soyabean oil—particularly from a country where over 90 per cent of soya production is genetically modified and highly mechanised—could further depress domestic prices.

Similarly, red sorghum and maize imports for animal feed can reduce demand for Indian-grown maize and soyabean meal. DDGS imports are being described as 'limited' under a quota system. But once a channel is opened, the long-term direction becomes difficult to reverse.

Nowhere is the anxiety more visible than in India's apple belt—in Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir. The minimum import price (MIP) for imported apples is fixed at Rs 80 per kg. With a 25 per cent tariff it costs importers around Rs 100 per kg. In contrast, in 2025, the Adani Group procured apples from HP farmers at Rs 85 per kg. Adding packaging, transportation and other costs (approx. Rs 35) brings the total to Rs 120 per kg. This makes importing apples cheaper for Adani.

Lokinder Singh Bisht of the Progressive Growers Association says, "Our interest has been surrendered." He told *National Herald* that the immediate impact will be on premium quality Indian

apples. Over time, the price pressure will trickle down to the entire apple market. Even before this US deal, India had trade arrangements with New Zealand. Increased competition in high-value horticulture can destabilise fragile mountain economies. As Bisht bluntly said: "We can compete with farmers in the US, Europe or New Zealand, but we cannot compete with the climate there."

When the three farm laws were introduced, farmers feared being abandoned to corporate-controlled markets without assured procurement. They protested and the



Photo: Getty Images

government eventually withdrew the laws. Critics argue that through this trade deal, farmers may once again be exposed—not to domestic corporations alone but to global agribusinesses backed by powerful governments.

Indian agriculture contributes roughly 16-18 per cent of GDP but supports nearly 45 per cent of the population. Trade decisions affecting agriculture do not just impact the economy but affects social and political conditions as well. Indian agriculture is already under strain from rising input costs, climate volatility, stagnant real incomes and indebtedness. Opening up segments of the market to subsidised imports without comprehensive domestic reforms—irrigation, storage, procurement, processing and farmer income support—risks deepening the rural distress.

India's trade negotiators failed to leverage the country's strengths to secure meaningful concessions. Instead, they appear to have bowed to US bullying. They meekly accepted monitoring by the US, sacrificed autonomy and exposed large swathes of Indian agriculture to US imports. ■

Daylight robbery of voting rights?

» Continued from page 1

A similar investigation by *Quint* in February 2026 revealed that even a month after thousands of Form 7 applications were filed to delete the names of Muslim voters in Alwar, Rajasthan, there was no move to check where the forms were printed, signed and whether the signatures were fake or not.

Even as reports surface on the misuse of Form 7, the deadline for filing objections to the draft voter list in Uttar Pradesh has been extended to 6 March.

At booth number 126 in Amethi's Jagdishpur district, BLO Amar Bahadur received 126 forms for deleting the names of 167 voters, all Muslims. Ramkumar, tasked with supervising eight polling booths (122 to 129) claims he got the forms from Tej Bahadur, the election office in-charge.

National Herald accessed dozens of pre-filled forms. All bear the signature of the objectors but not their names nor other mandatory details (address, name of relative, mobile number). Voter details,

The pre-filled forms bear the signature of the objectors but not their names or other details

however, are typed/printed in capital letters. Muslims all, they were from Barsanda village in Musafirkhana tehsil.

Barsanda village head Sanjida Bano questioned four villagers in connection with their role in deletion of names. One of them, Pawan Kumar, admitted signing many forms; the other three denied any involvement. Pawan, a BJP worker, also admitted that because there so were many forms, he even got his daughter to sign some.

Many more incidents have been reported on social media. In a clip shared by Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, a party leader in Sant Kabir Nagar district can be seen talking to someone who says that 126 forms were given to him by Lakshmi Shankar Shukla who received them from MLA Anil Tiwari. In Siddharthnagar district, BLO Pujari Prasad Yadav admitted that Dharmendra Maurya visited him with 86 forms for deletions—handed over by the tehsil office to be submitted to the BLO. Yadav found all voters to be genuine and present, and said he planned to mention in his report.

Ashwini Kumar, an assistant teacher in a primary school working as a BLO in Etawah, claimed he was assaulted by Dhruv Katheria and Uday Pratap when he used took photos of the forms they wanted him to accept. Subhadra Maurya, a BLO from Amethi, said her husband was abused and assaulted when she refused to delete the names of Muslim voters. *NewsLaundry* reached out to former election commissioners for their comments. "How can Form 7 be pre-filled?" asked Ashok Lavasa. "It's happening around the country... We are nearing the collapse of democracy," fumed former CEC S.Y. Quraishi. ■

Can India, Bangla now do a reset?

Sourabh Sen

Late on Thursday evening, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leaders exuded confidence. "Ground reports from the districts and certificates issued by returning officers point to a two-thirds majority," a senior BNP leader told *National Herald*, as counting continued into the early hours of 13 February. The results proved his assessment to be correct. In comparison, the Jamaat was more evasive. "I am confident of winning in my constituency (Khulna-5) but wouldn't like to comment on the overall tally," Jamaat secretary general Mia Golam Parwar told *National Herald*. (Parwar eventually lost to the BNP's Mohammad Ali Asgar.)

The Jamaat-e-Islami and BNP were one-time allies countering the Awami League's dominance, with Jamaat's street mobilisation reinforcing BNP's campaigns. The Jamaat has questioned the results, accusing the BNP of using state apparatus to rig it. Recasting itself as the 'true' representative of the 2024 uprising, it argues the BNP has merely substituted one form of autocracy for another.

Testing times lie ahead for both. The BNP needs to prove quickly that it is a party of governance and has learnt from past mistakes. The Jamaat has to prove that it can be a responsible opposition.

While Jamaat has moderated its position and public image, it hasn't shaken off the tag of the Islamist conservatives who opposed the country's liberation in 1971. Its refusal to field women candidates and its public statements about women staying at home arguably lost both women and a large section of Gen Z voters. Much will depend on how amenable it is to change.

Observers say its defeat signals the victory of a progressive and secular Bangladesh.

The results also underscore that the Awami League—barred from participating in the election—cannot be written off, not yet. 'No boat, no vote' was scribbled on several ballot papers by AL supporters (the boat being the

symbol of the party). The no-show of being interpreted as Awami League voters choosing not to participate. Can a BNP government afford to keep the temporary ban alive? What might have been the outcome had the Awami League been in the fray? These are some of the questions being raised.

In what was one of the most consequential elections in South Asia (Nepal goes to the polls on 5 March), the BNP ended up securing a two-thirds majority in the 300-strong Jatiya Sangsad (parliament).

The result reflected the clear mandate of 127 million voters in a country of 170 million people, with 1,981 candidates contesting in 299 seats. The ECB put the final voter turnout at 60.69 per cent.

What the results also indicated was that Bangladesh's women, first-time voters and Gen Z voted decisively against Jamaat's Islamist narrative. Approximately 56 million, or 44 per cent, voters were between the ages of 18 and 37, and nearly 5 million were first-timers.

While 300 members to the Jatiya Sangsad have been elected, fifty more members—all women—will later join the Parliament, elected through a system of proportional allocation based on seats won by

The BNP will have to quickly prove that it is serious about governance and has learnt from past mistakes



The scene at a counting centre in Bangladesh

Photo: Getty Images

political parties. Voters in Bangladesh also said 'Yes' to a constitutional referendum on the provisions of the July Charter and related amendments to the Constitution of Bangladesh. The July Charter of 2025 was a political accord signed on 17 October 2025 by Bangladesh's interim government and major political parties to formalise reforms following the student-led uprising of 2024.

The charter will reshape Bangladesh into a Second Republic by implementing around 84 structural, constitutional and electoral changes to ensure democracy.

Despite the BNP's uneasy relationship with India in the past, there is an opportunity for both the countries to reset their relationship and make a fresh start. BNP chief Tarique Rahman has indicated his willingness for a more nuanced engagement with India as an equal and honourable partner.

In New Delhi, there appears to be two different lenses through which India views Bangladesh. In a recent interview, retired Indian bureaucrat and Bangladesh hand Veena Sikri said: "We do know that the regime change operation in Bangladesh was supported by Western powers, but it was done through Pakistan, whose biggest conduit in Bangladesh is the

Jamaat-e-Islami".

This bogey of a Jamaat-led Islamist Bangladesh cosying up to Pakistan and persecuting Hindus could have helped the BJP's election campaign in election-bound West Bengal and Assam. Jamaat's defeat will blunt this.

The outcome in Bangladesh will bolster New Delhi's second approach which is more broad-based and appears to be driven by the MEA with the external affairs minister S. Jaishankar and the two respective national security advisors—Ajit Doval and Khalilur Rahman—apparently on the same page on key bilateral and multilateral issues.

For instance, if Jaishankar's Dhaka visit to officially condole the death of former Prime Minister Khaled Zia (Tarique Rehman's mother) signalled a willingness to engage, a spanner was thrown in the works by BCCI's decision to drop Bangladesh cricketer Mustafizur Rahman from IPL in the wake of attacks on Hindus in Bangladesh.

The BNP's ascent to power with an unambiguous mandate provides a fresh opportunity for the two neighbours. ■

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STATES 360°



ASSAM

The first polls after delimitation

Dipra Sarmabarua

The assembly election in Assam this time will be the first after the controversial delimitation of constituencies in 2023. (The last election was five years ago, with polling held in three phases.) Delimitation affected around 40 constituencies out of 126, and led to considerable confusion.

While the number of constituencies is the same, the names of several have changed, boundaries have been redrawn and, in some cases, two independent constituencies have been merged (for instance, Hajo-Sualkuchi, Bhabanipur-Sorbagh).

As a result, many voters in Guwahati are uncertain of their constituency. The confusion extends to political parties as well. Party workers are busy scrutinising the final electoral roll issued by the election commission on 10 February 2026 after the Special Revision (SR) of electoral rolls. Political parties have an additional task—finding the right candidates in view of the changed character and demographics of the constituencies.

In 2022, Jammu and Kashmir underwent a similar delimitation exercise and six new constituencies were added. In Assam, the number of assembly seats was frozen. However, the Assam cabinet pre-emptively folded four districts back into the districts from which they had been separated, reducing the number of districts from 35 to 31. The merger led to the loss of several Muslim-majority constituencies—South Salmara, Nagaeta (two seats), Darrang, Nagan, Sibsagar, Hailakandi and Karimganj—while the number of seats dominated by Hindus and tribals increased.

As in J&K, the Assam delimitation also created constituencies of vastly different



Searching for their names at an election office in Assam

population sizes nestling against each other. The respective delimitation commissions have not hesitated to create small population constituencies alongside large population ones to further marginalise the minorities.

Before the delimitation, Muslim voters called the shots in 30 of the 126 constituencies in Assam, and substantially influenced the outcome in 10 more. The number of such constituencies is estimated to have gone down by half. (Paradoxically, chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma says Hindus will be reduced to a minority in Assam in the next 10-15 years.) Muslims constituted 34 per cent of the population in the 2011 census and there are 31 Muslim MLAs in the outgoing House. The attempt is to reduce their number and representation to one-sixth of the assembly's strength.

This is significant because in the last election, the BJP-led coalition bagged 75 seats while the Congress-led coalition won 50. In a closely contested election, every seat counts. By all accounts, the BJP has used both the delimitation and the SR to its advantage.

Both coalitions, however, appear wobbly in the run-up to the election being notified. Despite the ultimatum of the

regional party Rajior Dal to finalise seat-sharing by the end of January, negotiations with the Congress spilled into February. Negotiations between the Congress and Lurinjyoti Gogoi's Asom Jatiyo Parishod are also ongoing. The Communist Party of India, meanwhile, has gone ahead and declared the names of seven candidates, signalling a lack of unity and dissonance.

Luckily for the Opposition, the ruling NDA has its own set of problems. Besides the growing infighting within the BJP and anti-Himanta forces sharpening their knives, allies Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) are demanding more seats.

There is little love lost between BPF and the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL)—the other Bodo indigenous party led by Pramod Boro—making seat-distribution more complicated. The BJP, on its part, is pushing the AGP to contest from Muslim-majority constituencies in Lower Assam.

Against this polarised backdrop, Assam BJP's official X handle circulated an animation in which the chief minister was depicted as a cowboy shooting point-blank at two men in

skullcaps. 'Foreigner-free Assam' and 'No mercy' were the text overlays. The outrage that followed forced the party to delete the animation.

Having gotten away with hate speech so far, he clearly did not expect over 40 prominent members of civil society—led by intellectuals including author Hiren Gohain, former DGP Harekrishna Dekha, former archbishop Thomas Menamparampil, Rajya Sabha member Ajit Kumar Bhuyan and editor-in-chief of *Northeast Now* Paresh Malakar—to complain to the chief justice of the Gauhati High Court, seeking judicial intervention and action against him.

For several years now, Himanta has been targeting 'Miya Muslims', blaming them for everything.

Has he gone too far this time around? Has the attack on minorities started yielding diminishing returns?

Himanta's attempts to describe MP and state Congress president Gaurav Gogoi as a 'Pakistani agent' does not seem to have had the desired impact. The dramatic two-hour long press conference and release of the report by a SIT set up by the Assam Police highlighted the two points: Gogoi's British wife had worked for a Pakistani NGO for a year; and Gogoi had visited Pakistan in 2013 (notably when he was not an MP). Repeated over the last one year, the allegations have lost much of their sting. Gogoi has justifiably raised the question: if he was truly a threat to national security, why had the SIT not interrogated him even once?

Rajior Dal chief Akhil Gogoi had the last word: "The chief minister has got people arrested for Facebook posts and for writing poems; but here he is unable to arrest a leader he accuses of being a security risk!" ■

The ‘Gujarat model’ of corruption

Gujarat Congress president **Amit Chavda** has been on the move with the party’s Jan Akrosh Yatra to get a sense of the issues that people in Modi–Shah’s home state are facing. Excerpts from his conversation with Vishwadeepak

What is the Jan Akrosh Yatra all about?

In Gujarat, the BJP has been in power for the past 35 years. When it won yet another term in 2022, people had hoped against hope that the state government, which had done little for the welfare of people in its previous terms, would finally deliver. That it would at the very least fulfil the promises it made on coming to power. After three years, those hopes too have been dashed.

When Messrs Modi and Shah moved to New Delhi in 2014, the BJP’s state leadership weakened. The bureaucrats started calling the shots, in cahoots with corrupt leaders. Corruption has become a BIG issue in the state.

The pattern is the same. The BJP government issues a tender. Bureaucrats approve it, a company owned by a BJP leader wins the bid. The bureaucrats get a cut. Everyone in power is happy and the cycle continues.

Earlier, as a Congress Legislature Party leader, I visited each and every block HQ and heard directly from the people. When I became PCC president in July 2025, I thought why not continue that programme? With that in mind, I decided to undertake a statewide tour. The ongoing Jan Akrosh Yatra is meant to reach out to the people, listen to their problems and find solutions, wherever possible.

The Yatra started on 4 November 2025 and covered 1,300 kilometre in north Gujarat over 13 days. It then moved to Kheda district in central Gujarat and ended in Dahod, covering 1,400 kilometre in 16 days. On 2 February, we started the third phase from Valsad district in south Gujarat, which will conclude on the 12th.

What are the issues agitating people in the state?

What stood out is how deeply troubled women are. They already bear the brunt of inflation but over the years, alcoholism and drug addiction have emerged as major issues. Police and administrative departments collect several crores every week. Despite prohibition, illegal liquor is available on every street. Drugs are being traded openly. The youth are ruining their lives due to drug addiction.

Children become addicted to alcohol very young, and die young. Young girls are becoming widows. The police collect extortion money for the alcohol sold in every village. This is the biggest issue for women.

Parliament was informed that 30,000 kg of drugs were seized at Mundra port over six years. The continued flow of drugs into the Mundra port means that Gujarat has become a drug-landing hub.

It’s also become a manufacturing hub. You’ll find that in Gujarat, several

pharmaceutical companies are actually manufacturing synthetic drugs in labs. The network within Gujarat is such that drugs are being sold in and around every college and university. Drug dealers specifically target campuses.

There are media reports about the now-defunct MGNREGA being mishandled in the state. Did you find any evidence of this?

There is rampant corruption in MGNREGA across Gujarat. We raised the issue and involvement of former minister Bachchu Bhai Khavad and his sons, who were subsequently jailed. Khavad was dismissed as minister.

Across the state, the material component in MGNREGA was increased to 80 per cent and the labour component reduced to 20 per cent. Little or no work was being done on the ground but payments continued to be released. We estimated that in 3-4 districts alone, more than Rs 1,000 crore would have been siphoned off.

We collected evidence from Dahod, Panchmahal, Chhota Udaipur and Mahisagar and presented them to the state government but no action was ever taken.

In Jambu Ghoda block in Panchmahal district, the total population is 42,000. There are 26 villages here. In 26 villages, apparently work worth Rs 300 crore was carried out under MGNREGA in three years. How is this even possible?

The kingpin was the supplier of materials, and four agencies were engaged. One of them was owned by the district BJP president, the second by his wife, the third by his nephew and the fourth by his driver!

Thus, in a single block, a single local BJP leader and his family carried out a scam of Rs 150-200 crore under MGNREGA.

I visited the site, gathered evidence and raised it in the assembly, but the BJP



government took no action because their own leaders and bureaucrats are implicated.

After VB–Grameen, the government’s arbitrariness will likely increase. How are you bringing this up?

We are telling people how Mahatma Gandhi, Gujarat’s greatest leader and the Father of the Nation, has been insulted. How the BJP has removed his name from MGNREGA. Most importantly, how Modi has changed the Act and made it just another scheme. The MGNREGA Act contained legal guarantees, but the scheme can be discontinued any time.

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) is a hot topic across the country. While news reports are coming in from other states, there hasn’t been an outcry from Gujarat. What’s the status of the SIR here?

Fake voters accounted for 12 per cent of the electoral roll in the state. C.R. Patil, a minister in the Modi government, represents Navsari, a Lok Sabha constituency. We took a sample from there and reported on the large number of fake voters. There is also evidence that the BJP had Form 7 (issued by the ECI) printed

centrally to get Dalit and minority voters dropped from the list.

Was there any complaint regarding the names of those deleted after the distribution of Form 7?

Under the rules, anyone with an objection can take a form and fill it up in his own handwriting. The forms distributed by BJP leaders and workers had the voter’s name already printed on them. This indicates an organised operation. BJP workers in every assembly submitted the forms and signed them. Many voters complained that their names and details were simply misused.

I personally visited the ECI office several times. Initially, officials told me that over 1.2 million such forms were received. Then, they claimed only 900,000 were received. Still later, they reduced the number to 200,000 forms. We are demanding that action be taken against those who submitted incorrect forms. We will strive to ensure that names of genuine voters are not deleted.

Our assembly session begins on 16 February. We will invite people from all over Gujarat to join a rally in Gandhinagar. Our struggle continues. ■

The Jan Akrosh Yatra is about reaching out to the people, listening to their problems and finding solutions, wherever possible

How Tamil Nadu fell into the freebie trap

K.A. Shaji

As Tamil Nadu moves towards another assembly election, a familiar script is being replayed. Former chief minister and AIADMK supreme Edappadi K. Palaniswami has announced the ‘first dose’ of the party manifesto: Rs 2,000 a month for women who head ration card-holding families and the extension of free bus travel to men. The ruling DMK has accused the AIADMK of being a copycat, and signalled that its own manifesto will top it.

These early promises underline how welfare politics in Tamil Nadu went from targeted social support to the prime currency of electoral competition. The AIADMK’s two announcements are likely to cost the exchequer close to Rs 40,000 crore annually—that’s around 11 per cent of the state’s projected revenue receipts for 2026-27. The expansion of free transport alone could potentially double an already Rs 3,600 crore subsidy bill.

“This is not welfare anymore in the classical sense,” says C. Lakshmanan, former faculty member at the Madras Institute of Development Studies. “It is a conversion of the budget into an electoral instrument.”

The roots of Tamil Nadu’s welfare culture lie in the ideological foundations of the Dravidian movement which framed the state as an active agent of social transformation. The expansion of public education, the introduction of reservations in government employment, and the strengthening of the public distribution system were all seen as instruments of social justice. The famous noon meal scheme, first introduced by AIADMK founder M.G. Ramachandran in 1982 was one of the largest such programmes in the world and helped to dramatically improve enrolment among children from poor families. The language was developmental and the idea was that public spending could generate long term social mobility.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a shift towards consumer-oriented welfare, but the turning point came in 2006, when the DMK returned to power under M. Karunanidhi. Their manifesto included a promise that would permanently alter the grammar of electoral politics: free colour televisions. Initially targeted at families below the poverty line, it cost the government Rs 3,600 crore in its first phase. Within a few years, it covered nearly 45 lakh households.

“That scheme changed everything,” says P.S. Sreenivasan, a political observer based in Chennai. “Parties realised that an object that sits inside the house is far more powerful than a policy.”

From that moment on, Tamil Nadu’s manifestos began to resemble shopping catalogues. Parties competed to offer material goods.

If Karunanidhi pioneered the consumer



With elections round the corner, there will be more promises and grander schemes. Competitive populism will heat up in Tamil Nadu

turn, Jayalalithaa perfected it. After returning to power in 2011, she embarked on an unprecedented expansion—free mixers, grinders, fans, gold for mangalsutras, free laptops, uniforms, textbooks for students, goats and cows for rural households, and free electricity up to a certain consumption limit.

What distinguished Jayalalithaa’s approach was not just variety but scale. Eligibility criteria was diluted or removed altogether.

“Welfare crossed a psychological threshold,” says K. Mohan Raj, a social observer from Coimbatore who has closely tracked rural political behaviour. “People stopped seeing schemes as help and started seeing them as entitlement.”

By the mid-2010s, the question was no longer whether the government should provide benefits, but what kind and in what quantity.

What makes this trajectory particularly striking is that both Dravidian parties had, at different points, experimented with fiscal discipline and market-oriented reforms. These episodes are now largely forgotten, but they hold the key to understanding why competitive populism became so deeply entrenched.

Between 1996 and 2001, the DMK focused on industrial infrastructure, information technology parks, urban renewal projects and public private partnerships. Chennai’s iconic TIDEL Park emerged as a symbol of the state’s IT ambitions. The finance department sought to align Tamil Nadu with the broader economic liberalisation agenda unfolding at the national level.

During her term (2002-2006), Jayalalithaa

followed a similar path. She attempted to close loss-making public-sector units, introduced user charges for certain services, curtailed rice subsidies under the public distribution system and invited private investment in the power sector.

Both experiments ended in political disaster. The DMK lost the 2001 election. Jayalalithaa suffered a massive defeat in 2006. The message was unambiguous. Fiscal prudence and market reforms did not translate into electoral rewards.

“That election killed reform politics in Tamil Nadu,” says Lakshmanan. “After 2006, every party understood that you cannot win here by talking about efficiency or fiscal responsibility. You win by expanding welfare and making it visible.”

From that point onwards, no major party seriously attempted subsidy rationalisation again.

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The most significant among the latest schemes is the DMK government’s free state-bus travel scheme for women, introduced in 2021. With around four to five crore trips recorded every month, the annual cost is now estimated at over ₹3,000 crore.

Unlike earlier freebies, free bus travel generated measurable social outcomes. Studies and transport data suggest a sharp increase in women’s mobility, especially among low-income workers, students and informal sector employees. It has reduced daily commuting expenses and expanded access to education and employment.

“This is one scheme where you can see real social impact,” says Sreenivasan. “The danger is that once it becomes politically sacred, nobody will even discuss how to finance it properly. It becomes immune from scrutiny.”

The AIADMK’s proposal for men removes the last remaining targeting principle from the scheme. “This is pure competitive populism,” says Mohan Raj. “One party introduces something useful. The other party makes it bigger just to outdo them. The question of sustainability never enters the conversation.”

“After 2006, every party understood that talking about efficiency or fiscal responsibility doesn’t win elections, expanding conspicuous ‘welfare’ does”



The extortion rackets of cow vigilantes

Anti-lynching laws that omit the word ‘lynching’ spell impunity for vigilante groups, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

Over the last decade, India has witnessed a disturbing rise in incidents where Hindu vigilante groups use extortion, blackmail and even murder to settle scores with Muslims. The so-called *gau rakshaks* (self-styled protectors of cows) menace Muslims, especially in the Hindi heartland, and do so secure in the knowledge that the state administration and the police will wink at their vigilantism.

In early 2024, Monu Bishnoi, Moradabad district president of the Bajrang Dal, along with associates Raman and Rajiv Chaudhury made one Shahabuddin dress in a burqa in order to implicate one Mullah Mohammad against whom Bishnoi harboured a personal grudge.

Shahabuddin later told the police that he had been paid Rs 30,000 to steal and slaughter a cow in order to frame Mullah Mohammad. A photo of Mohammad had been deliberately placed in a wallet at the scene of the crime. An investigation led by Moradabad senior superintendent of police Hemraj Meena resulted in the arrest of Bishnoi, his associates and Shahabuddin.

The latter confessed that the group had been involved in orchestrating multiple cow slaughter incidents between 16 to 28 January, within the Chhajlet police station area. All four were charged with criminal conspiracy (120B) and under sections of the Cow Slaughter Act. All four were released on bail within a few weeks.

This case is significant because it highlights how cow vigilantism has become an excuse for extortion and blackmail, with the police as mute spectators in most cases.

On 8 April 2023, Bajrang Dal and Hindu Mahasabha activists led by Jitendra Kushwaha filed a police complaint in Agra against Mohammed Rizwan and his three sons. The accusation (false) was that they had slaughtered a cow. Here too, the reason was personal—local Hindu leader Sanjay Jat held a grievance against Rizwan. On the eve of Ram Navami, demonstrations were held across the city to whip up communal tensions. Police investigations revealed that Rizwan and his sons were nowhere near the scene of the crime committed by Kushwaha’s followers. All the accused are out on bail.

Suraj Patel, a local Bajrang Dal leader had an axe to grind with the station house officer



Photo: Getty Images

Despite protests against vigilantism and lynching, the killings continue. The perpetrators know they have political patronage and they are never short of funds

(SHO) of Kemri thana in Rampur. On 10 January 2026, he entered the police station and dared the cops to arrest him—which of course they did not. Apparently, this was not the first time he had vented thus.

Although the new anti-lynching provisions under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita came into effect in July 2024, the omission of the word ‘lynching’ enables the police to register such cases under general murder charges instead.

The new law has been used only once—when 19-year-old Aryan Mishra was shot dead by cow vigilantes on 23 August 2024 in Faridabad. They had mistaken him for a cattle smuggler. The police were forced to use the anti-lynching law only because of pressure from the national media who were following the case carefully.

Accurate figures on convictions of Bajrang Dal activists are not maintained by central agencies like the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), which does not track ‘lynching’ as a separate offence. Short jail sentences invariably result in early release.

The 2018 Ramgarh lynching case in

Jharkhand stands out because it resulted in the first-ever conviction for cow-related lynching in India. Eleven Bajrang Dal activists and a local BJP leader were sentenced to life imprisonment for the hanging of Mazlum Ansari and twelve-year-old Imteyaz Khan. The mob responsible for the attack included Bajrang Dal activists and a local BJP leader.

In most cases, however, even when the evidence is unequivocal, Hindutva activists get away without so much as a reprimand. Consider the killing of Shahadeen Qureshi, a 37-year-old cart puller from Moradabad, who was lynched on 30 December 2024 by a Bajrang Dal mob led by Rakesh Saxena over allegations of cow slaughter.

The attackers filmed and uploaded a video of their assault. As they hurled abuses and beat Qureshi with sticks, a voice can be heard saying, “Arré, mar gaya (Oops, he died).” According to Shahadeen’s brother Guddu, every part of his body had been broken—wrists, fingers, ribs, skull, nothing was left intact.

But such is the clout of the Bajrang Dal that, immediately after the murder, the cops arrested Adnan, a 25-year-old from Moradabad. He was accused of murdering Shahadeen for allegedly having an affair with his wife. Adnan’s family however maintain that the cops concocted this story to avoid registering the case as a mob lynching.

When lynchings occur, the State often responds not by filing FIRs against the perpetrators, but by registering cases against the victims, primarily under Gauraksha Adhiniyam, or cattle protection laws.

A brutal incident occurred in Shahane, Maharashtra on 20 October 2024, when a group of cow vigilantes apprehended two Muslim cattle traders. The traders were stripped, brutally beaten and publicly humiliated before being handed over to the police. Their vehicle was vandalised, and the 52 cattle they were transporting were seized and sent to a local gaushala.

Most cow vigilante groups are known to operate as extortion rackets. Those who refuse to pay up are killed, often in the most gruesome manner. One such victim was Mohammed Bhura Habibullah, a 32-year-old meat trader from Mirzapur, Ahmedabad. The cow vigilantes demanded Rs 25,000, which he refused to pay. Five

days later, on 21 April 2025, his charred body was discovered inside his burnt vehicle. The Gandhinagar police filed a report of rash driving and overspeeding, but the post-mortem report revealed abrasions across his body and an ante-mortem skull fracture.

Few crimes can match the horror inflicted on SHO Subodh Kumar Singh of Bulandshahr, who was killed by cow vigilantes on 3 December 2018. His son Shrey Singh returned to Bulandshahr a few weeks later to collect his father’s belongings. In an exclusive interview with this journalist, Shrey said, “A 400-strong mob had gathered near the chowki, armed with axes, knives and stones. My father sustained 25 wounds from stone-pelting. He had a sharp knife wound on his back and an axe wound on his right hand. His right thumb had been cut off, which meant he could not use his revolver in self-defence.”

It is obvious that these groups are neither short of funds nor are they deterred by the threat of jail. When Yogesh Raj and his accomplices—the principal accused in the killing of Subodh Kumar Singh—were released on bail in September 2019, they were welcomed with garlands and taken on a triumphal procession. Yogesh Raj has since gone on to contest and win a local municipal election, and is now preparing to carve out a political career for himself.

As a senior BJP politician pointed out on condition of anonymity, “The VHP (Bajrang Dal’s parent organisation) is cash-rich and funds these vigilante groups with alacrity. They are provided with phones, cars and money. They are also promised police protection and patronage and are seen as non-state actors of the government, used to keep the communal agenda on the boil.”

As one successful Lucknow lawyer who handles cow vigilante cases pro bono has publicly boasted, he is being amply rewarded for all the services he has rendered to these vigilante groups. He has been empanelled to become a high court judge and is expecting the announcement to be made very soon. Other lawyers have been promised similar rewards.

If this trend continues unchecked, it will not only deepen the communal divide, it will completely undermine the rule of law across the country. ■

A matter of life and death

A 24x7 helpline offers mental health support to those struggling with agrarian distress in Maharashtra, writes **Jaideep Hardikar**

As his cell phone starts buzzing, 20-year-old Kirit quickly settles before a desktop, slides on his headphones, picks up a pen, and flips open his diary.

“*Namaskar*, Shivar Helpline,” he says, in a quiet and steady voice.

On the other end is Parvati, a middle-aged woman-farmer from a village in Maharashtra’s Nanded district.

“How may I help you?” Kirit asks in Marathi. A third year BA Psychology student in Pune, he is originally from a village in Parbhani.

Parvati hesitates. Her voice trembles. “Rains destroyed all our crops,” she manages to say. “Soybean, *tur...* the goats are gone too. There’s no work now.” She asks if Kirit can provide green-gram seeds for the upcoming rabi season. “If we get seeds, we will at least be able to see the summer through.”

Kirit diligently notes down her needs, asks about her family and village community, and tells her he will convey her family’s requirements to the head of the helpline.

“*Kahi tari jarur hoil, kalji karu nak* (Something will surely work out, don’t you worry),” he tells her gently. Parvati thanks him profusely, but before hanging up, she pleads: “*Ya bahini kade laksha theva, dada* (Keep this sister in your thoughts, brother).”

The conversation ends in 10 minutes. The pain lingers, on both sides.

A look at Shivar Helpline’s dashboard data from 23 September to 23 October 2025 tells a grim story: close to 10,000 calls were attended to. Shivar had to recruit more volunteers during that period to manage the rush. On the worst day, there were 894 calls. Among those, at least 180 people were contemplating serious self-harm.

“We just crumbled under the calls,” recalls Vinayak Hegana, the 31-year-old founder and CEO of Shivar. A trained psychologist and social worker, he is an itinerant observer of rural distress.

“The calls tell us the sorry state of people all over Maharashtra,” says this 2023 Chevening Fellow. “The crisis runs deep.”

For nearly three decades, Maharashtra—particularly Vidarbha and Marathwada regions—has been in the throes of deepening agrarian distress. The fallout is the continuing saga of farmers’ suicides—over 60,000 since the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) started keeping a log. The

flash-pur of 2025 was only the latest.

“Climate disaster is not just an economic crisis,” Hegana says, “it’s also a mental-health epidemic.”

On 24 September, the state’s agriculture, 42, made one last call to his wife Shivkanya from a nearby town where he had gone to buy groceries.

A marginal farmer, he doubled up as a labourer, doing any work he could get. His dream was to educate his daughter Vaishnavi (studying pharmacology in Solapur’s Barshi) and son Shivshankar (studying technical education in Dharashiv).

On 25 September, as the rain continued to pelt down, Gavsane was found dead amidst thickets of sugarcane. He left a note with an appeal to local leaders, requesting help for his children to finish their education.

Perhaps Gavsane had never heard of Shivar. If he had, might he still be alive?

The day Gavsane died, local newspapers reported four more deaths by suicide. Between 20 and 25 September, Solapur district received 365.8 mm of rain—1,253 per cent higher than the average for the month.

According to the state’s agriculture, kharif crops over 44 lakh hectares—a third of the net sown area in Marathwada’s eight districts—were irreparably damaged. State-wide, nearly 3,600 houses were damaged; 224 human lives and 600 livestock heads were lost in the floods.

Floods wash away riparian vegetation, degrade riverbanks and contaminate drinking water sources. They also disrupt groundwater recharge. Socially, floods deepen rural vulnerability: families lose crops, livestock, stored grain and essential documents. Repeated losses forced many into repeated cycles of debt and migration.

“Social, cultural, political and economic circumstances define the mental health of people during disasters,” says Dr Subhasis Bhadra, head of the department of psycho-social support in disaster management, National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences (NIMHANS). “How quickly people emerge from sudden shock is determined by the nature, scale and swiftness of support systems during, before and after the disaster,” he says. The stronger the community bonds, the higher the resilience, he adds.

A white paper by climate scientists, agrometeorologists and civil society groups

in October 2025 argues that Marathwada’s floods—and the mental health crisis they triggered—were not merely caused by rainfall, but by a systemic failure. September recorded 305 mm of rain, 204 per cent above normal, with districts like Beed, Parbhani, Latur, Hingoli and Nanded breaking new records.

June-July rainfall deficits stressed soils, followed by sudden surges in August that filled reservoirs while leaving the land unable to absorb water. By late September, silted rivers, undersized culverts, roads blocking drainage lines and poorly synchronised dam releases turned heavy rain into what the report calls ‘a preventable amplification of the flood.’

Marathwada, the report says, is no longer a uniform drought region but a patchwork of extremes—long dry spells intertwined with sudden bursts of extreme rainfall. The Mahapur Ahval (Flood Report, November 2025), a field-based study by the National Alliance of People’s Movements (NAPM), reinforced these conclusions. Both reports suggest that unless corrective measures are taken, Marathwada would continue to oscillate between two extremes—drought and floods—in the same season.

At Shivar Helpline, the phones didn’t stop ringing. For thirty-one days, Hegana did not go home. It was, he says, “a war-like situation.”

Every caller was on the edge of self-harm. “We could not afford to turn down any call; it might have resulted in loss of life,” he

Hegana designed the Farmers’ Distress Quotient Index (FDQI) to classify callers as low-, moderate- and high-risk. The high-risk ones he attends to personally



Photos: Jaideep Hardikar



At 80, Manohar Gite had to return to manual farm work; (left) Vinayak Hegana, founder and CEO of Shivar Helpline

that of the mental health epidemic. But the stressors that push individuals into a vortex of mental health issues need a long-term fix—from field-level interventions to policy-redressal. Hegana floated Shivar Foundation to collectivise farmers and youth and work on constructive interventions.

“For instance,” he says, “we have mobilised widows who need work in Dharashiv (one of Maharashtra’s most rain-deficient areas). We need to create livelihoods by tapping into private and public sectors to ease their financial stress.”

Hegana aims to build an agri-psycho-social model. Simultaneously, the foundation would try to build a replicable and easily accessible mental health support model for farmers. Having a phone line available round the clock helps avert extreme reactions, he says.

He liaises with respective district collectors and state line department officials wherever possible and connects farmers to the government to leverage state aid. Many officials are helpful. Yet, he says, the response is inadequate.

From 2023, as climate variability worsened, Hegana sensed that the crisis ahead would be far more complex than drought. In 2025, a generous donor helped make the move to Pune to a centralised system that will scale up for pan-Maharashtra.

Yet, mental-health care remains invisible in climate-policy responses. “The soil may not heal quickly,” Hegana adds, “but you may be able to save and rebuild lives.” ■

Courtesy: People’s Archive of Rural India (PARI)

The saga of the mystery book that was hushed

No ban yet but Naravane’s book is in limbo nevertheless for supposed ‘inaccuracies’ that could easily have been spelt out, writes **A.J. Prabal**

Did defence minister Rajnath Singh score a self-goal when he stopped Rahul Gandhi from reading out ‘five lines’ from former army chief General M.M. Naravane’s memoirs, citing an essay published in the *Caravan*? If the government wanted to hide the contents of *Four Stars of Destiny*, it couldn’t have chosen a worse way. Several thousand people have since shared the PDF files of this ‘unpublished’ book.

Exactly a week after the shush-down in Parliament, Penguin Random House India issued a statement on 9 February saying it held the sole publishing rights to the book, and that ‘No copies of the book, either in print or digital form, have been published, distributed, sold, or otherwise made available to the public by Penguin Random House India.’ Around 10 p.m. General Naravane shared this on X.

On 10 February, Rahul Gandhi arrived in Parliament with a hardbound copy of the book. Around 5 p.m., General Naravane posted the publisher’s statement again, this time with a cryptic comment: ‘This is the status of the book’. Also on 10 February, the special cell of Delhi Police registered an FIR against the book’s illegal circulation online.

‘Upon verification, it was found that a PDF copy of a typeset book with the same title and apparently prepared by Penguin Random House India Pvt Ltd is available on certain websites and some online marketing platforms have displayed the finished book cover as if it is available for purchase,’ said Delhi Police.

Media reports maintained that the FIR alleged an infringement of the Copyright Act and violation of the IT Act that prohibits online circulation of unauthorised, sensitive or obscene content.

Not only has every other officer of the Indian Army received multiple copies via WhatsApp forwards, by now the PDF would certainly have made its way to readers abroad, making the publishers the aggrieved party. They are entitled to sue those responsible for the circulation and demand compensation. In practice, however, it’s nigh impossible to prosecute an unknown number of ‘culprits’ and recover dues.

Two earlier posts by Naravane added to the ‘mystery of the unpublished memoir’. In one of them, dating back to December

2023, Naravane had posted the promotional details, the jacket cover and ISBN numbers of the book listed by Amazon, with the caption: ‘The book is now available’. In yet another post, not independently verified by *National Herald*, he appeared to be responding to a post by the publishers with the words, ‘The response is heartening’. Both posts suggest that the book was printed and available for distribution.

In an online report on the controversy, *India Today* claimed to have verified that physical copies of *Four Stars of Destiny* had indeed reached distributors and bookstores. The report was taken down within hours. Would the publishers have risked investing in a hardbound book without receiving clearance from the Ministry of Defence (MoD)? In multiple interviews, General Naravane maintained that the publishers had submitted it for clearance.

Significantly, the MoD had not objected to extracts released by news agency *PTI* in December 2023. Nor had the MoD communicated with author or publishers—at least till 2 February 2026—that clearance had been denied.

The government is yet to ban the book or invoke the Official Secrets Act, a colonial-era law. Neither has the defence minister or the MoD clarified what the ‘factual inaccuracies’ in the book are or why a discussion in Parliament on these alleged inaccuracies is not desirable.

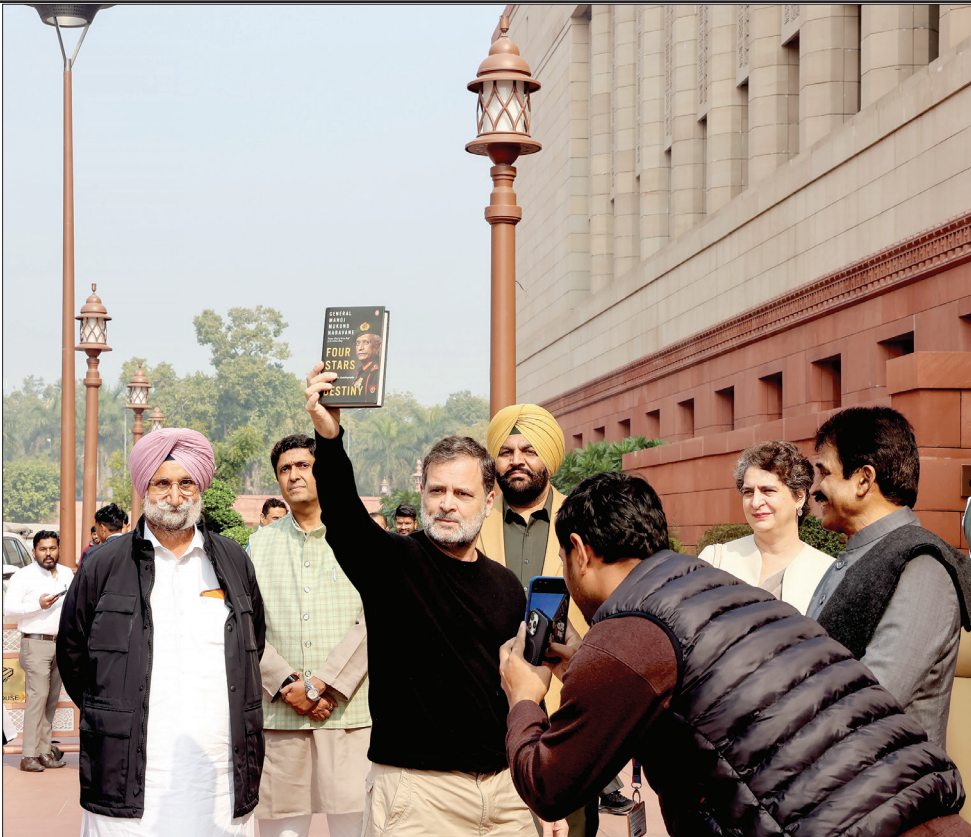
It should have been fairly straightforward to point out those inaccuracies and return the manuscript to the publishers for correction. With the ministry having cleared as many as 34 books written by retired army officers since 2024—often after editorial changes in conversation with the authors and publishers—it is not clear why Naravane’s book has been kept hanging since 2023 (when it was first submitted).

Army veterans who have read the book concur that the book actually showers fulsome praise on the current political leadership. Even the *Caravan* essay (February 2026) notes that General Naravane has been generous in praising prime minister Modi. Why then was clearance denied? Were people other than the PM offended?

Veterans point out a few references that might have been uncomfortable for the political establishment. Naravane writes that in his very first interaction with the media at Manekshaw Centre, after taking over as army chief, he made it clear that the Indian Army’s allegiance was to the Constitution of India. This to dispel the feeling that the Army was being politicised.

In his book, he also pulls up the local commanders in Ladakh for under-preparedness and poor communication. He points out that Chinese troops had pitched their tents in Indian territory a full month before the skirmish in Galwan on 15-16 June 2020 (in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed). The infringement was not taken seriously by the commanders who felt that as the ice melted the tents would be submerged by rising water levels.

The controversy has achieved exactly what the government wanted to avoid: it has stoked curiosity about the book and a raging discussion on India’s alleged timidity in countering China



Rahul Gandhi displays the book “no copies of which have been published, distributed or sold...”

Naravane was also critical of the MEA for not allowing army commanders negotiating with the Chinese in Ladakh to maintain minutes of the meetings. This led to avoidable misunderstandings with the Chinese often interpreting Indian ‘consent to consider’ proposals as agreement.

Strategic affairs analyst Sushant Singh is scathing in his *Caravan* essay about the prime minister, the defence minister and the national security advisor passing the buck to the army chief. At a tense moment when Chinese tanks were rapidly advancing, General Naravane was told to do whatever he deemed fit (*Jo uchiit samjho, woh karo*). Some army veterans believe the instruction rightly gave the army chief a free hand. Singh however explains that the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) had bound the army chief against opening fire at the LAC without explicit approval from the very top.

In his book, Gen. Naravane writes: ‘Artillery duels were a routine feature on the LOC with Pakistan. On any given day or night, perhaps hundreds of rounds would get fired as per authority delegated to the divisional and corps commanders. If the situation warranted (for instance in case of suspicious movements) or even to counter Pakistani artillery fire, they were free to open up without having to ask anyone higher up in the chain of command. But this was a totally different ball game. My position was critical, caught between the Command who wanted to open fire with all possible means and the CCS, which had yet to give me clear-cut executive orders.’

Another passage from the ‘unpublished’ book, quoted by multiple sources, reads: ‘We were ready in all respects, but did I really want to start a war? The country was in bad shape, reeling under the Covid pandemic. The economy was faltering, global supply chains had broken down. Would we be able to ensure a steady supply of spares, etc. under these conditions, in case of a long-drawn-out action? Who were our supporters in the global arena, and what about the collusive threat from China and Pakistan?’

As Singh points out in his essay, starting a war is not a decision that the military takes. It is for the political leadership and the CCS, which in this case, apparently chickened out, handing the army chief a ‘hot potato’.

Is that enough to stall the book, though? Has the government blundered by not allowing the book to be published? And did it perhaps make it worse for itself by stopping the Leader of the Opposition from quoting from the book?

The controversy has achieved exactly what the government wanted to avoid. It has stoked curiosity about the book, led to mass circulation of the PDF and started a raging discussion on India’s alleged timidity in countering the Chinese.

It was on 18 June 2020 that Modi told an all-party meeting, “*Na koi ghusa tha, na koi ghusa hai* (No one entered [Indian territory])”. This, too, has been questioned in Naravane’s book.

Is that the reason why clearance to publish was denied? ■

“Speaker sir, uphold the dignity of your office”

Krishna Pratap Singh

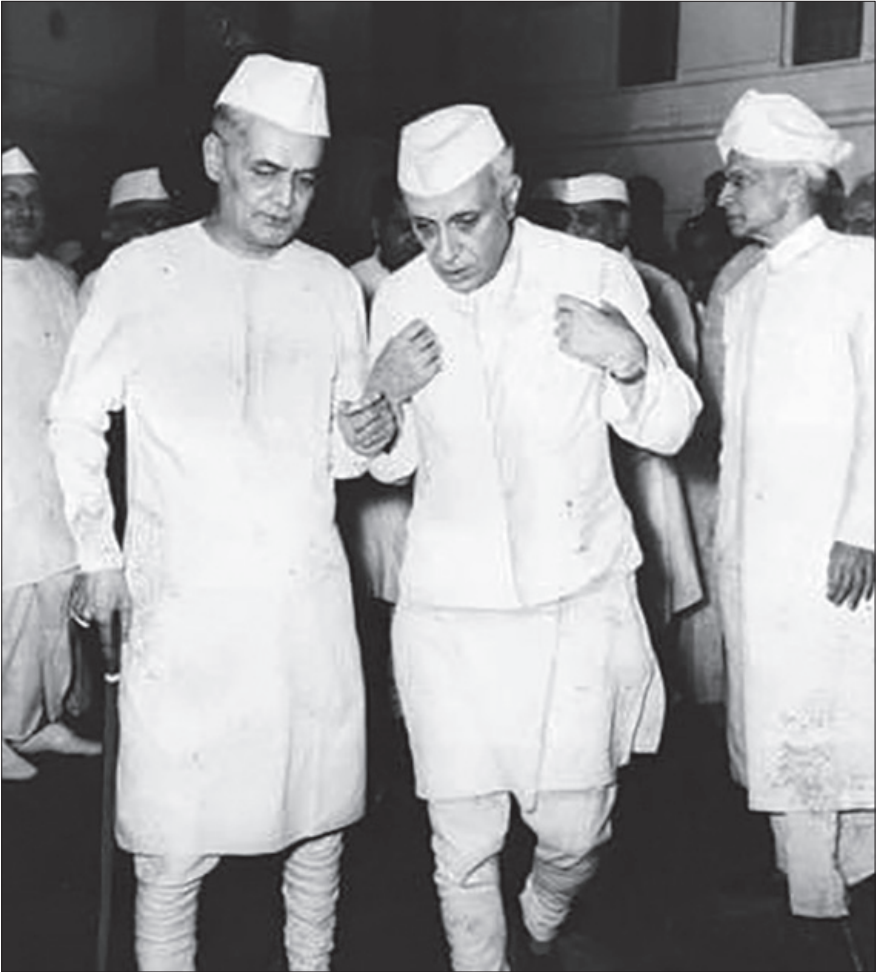
When the country’s first Lok Sabha convened in 1952, Ganesh Vasudev Mavalankar was elected its Speaker. Many addressed G.V. Mavalankar with affection and respect as ‘Dadasaheb’; prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru called him the ‘Father of the Lok Sabha’.

Mavalankar was a Congressman and had, no doubt, a soft corner for the party. But never once did that association intrude upon his rulings from the Speaker’s chair, the directions he issued, or the way he conducted proceedings. So, when he passed away on 27 February 1956, he was remembered as the man who laid the foundations of integrity and high moral standards in India’s parliamentary system.

Mavalankar believed that as Speaker, his most sacred duty was to apply the same yardstick of justice to every member of the House—whether from the treasury benches or the Opposition. On one occasion, when he felt that the Nehru government’s tendency of promulgating ordinances was unhealthy for parliamentary democracy, he did not hesitate to write to Nehru himself. Issuing ordinances merely for lack of time, he warned, was to set the wrong precedent; Parliament must not be reduced to a ‘rubber stamp’.

His moral commitment to parliamentary sovereignty also led him to press for the establishment of an independent secretariat for the Lok Sabha. It is another matter that on 18 December 1954, the Opposition brought a no-confidence motion against him. Even while describing it as ‘frivolous’ and ‘motivated’, Nehru argued that Opposition leaders be given ample time to debate it.

If we turn back to the pre-Independence years, Purushottam Das Tandon—later honoured with the title ‘Rajrishi’—was elected unopposed on 31 July 1937 as the first Speaker of the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) assembly, and continued in that office from 1946 to 1950. His impartiality was such that when the Opposition questioned his participation in meetings of the Indian National Congress while serving as Speaker, he stood on the floor of the House and declared that the day even a single member expressed distrust in his decisions or neutrality, he would resign. No MLA raised the issue again. It was his steadfast commitment to this



‘Father of the Lok Sabha’ G.V. Mavalankar with Jawaharlal Nehru

principle that earned him the sobriquet ‘Rajrishi’.

It’s apt in this context to also recall Dhaniklal Mandal, who served as Speaker of the Bihar assembly between 1967 and 1969—years of intense political instability in the state. The first non-Congress Samyukta Vidhayak Dal government, led by Mahamaya Prasad Sinha, rested on a fragile arithmetic. In January 1968, amid defections and manoeuvres, it faced a no-confidence motion and plunged into crisis.

Unable to muster a majority, Sinha quietly visited Mandal at his residence, requesting him to use his powers as Speaker to defer consideration of the

motion. That would give him time to secure the numbers he currently lacked.

Mandal’s response was blunt: since Sinha had effectively admitted before him—the Speaker—that he did not command a majority, the proper course was to go to the Governor and resign. Sinha did not resign. His government fell on 28 January 1968 through the no-confidence motion.

These instances of Speakers safeguarding democratic probity, integrity and moral discipline in the Houses they ran stand in sharp contrast to the conduct of the current Lok Sabha Speaker, Om Birla, raising serious concerns

for our democracy.

Recall that in an earlier session, Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi remarked that while shaking hands with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Speaker had bowed while standing upright when he was greeting the LoP. The charge was discrimination between the treasury and Opposition benches, a recurring pattern that has been on display even in the ongoing Budget session.

When Rahul Gandhi rose to speak on the ‘motion of thanks to the President’s address’, he sought to refer to former Army chief Manoj Mukund Naravane’s book *Four Stars of Destiny*, quoting a passage that suggested that during China’s aggression at the border in 2020, timely and appropriate directions were not given to Naravane by the defence minister or the prime minister. He was stopped on the ground that he should confine himself to the President’s address.

Gandhi argued that an issue as vital as national security could not be divorced from the address. In brushing this aside,

Birla appeared to forget his own earlier ruling in a previous session that during the debate on the motion of thanks, members may also raise issues not mentioned in the address but which they believe ought to have found place in it.

The double standard became starker when the LoP was not allowed to quote from Naravane’s book, yet BJP MP Nishikant Dubey was given a free rein to quote freely from books that cast aspersions on Nehru and the Gandhi family.

It did not stop there. The day after Prime Minister Modi did not attend the House to reply to the debate on the motion of thanks, Birla shielded him by claiming that he himself had advised the prime minister not to come, as there could be an “unexpected incident”.

Several questions arising from this claim remain unanswered. Which agency alerted him? How did he receive this information? What steps did he take after receiving it? Was an FIR registered? If not, why not? Having apprehended a threat to the prime minister inside the House, why did he allow proceedings to continue as though nothing had happened? Was it his duty to ensure that the House functioned in a manner that enabled the prime minister to reply—or to prevent him from attending? As the Opposition has suggested, if this was a tactic to shield the prime minister from questioning, then there can be little doubt where the Speaker’s sympathies lie.

There are numerous instances of Opposition members being interrupted or restrained without cause. On 24 July 2024, during the Budget debate, Trinamool Congress MP Abhishek Banerjee referred to demonetisation. Birla interjected: “demonetisation is old news; speak on the Budget.” Banerjee shot back that when the ruling party invokes the Emergency imposed fifty years ago—or goes further back to criticise Nehru—no such objection is raised. But when he mentions demonetisation, he is told that since two Lok Sabha elections have taken place since then, he must stick to the Budget. “This bias will not do, sir. Uphold the dignity of your office,” Banerjee said.

Birla has upheld that dignity in a very distinctive way: his tenure is now marked by the record suspension of Opposition MPs. Which is why Abhishek Banerjee’s words of 24 July 2024 bear repeating today: “Speaker sir, uphold the dignity of your office.” ■

Speaker Om Birla has some very worthy predecessors to turn to if he has any doubts on how to be scrupulously fair in his high office

When a 56 inch chest wins us an 18 per cent tariff

In the face of a real adversary, our bravado withers away, writes **Aakar Patel**

Violation of sovereignty is defined as infringement of a nation's territorial integrity or interference with government functions. Arm-twisting is pressuring someone to do something they are unwilling to do. Surrender comes when one stops resisting and submits to the other side's authority. What has happened between the United States of America and Bharat is a model of clarity and understanding—it requires no more than reading the statements put out. In his executive order #14329 of 6 August 2025, Donald Trump writes: 'I determined that it was necessary and appropriate to impose an additional ad valorem rate of duty of 25 per cent on imports of articles of India, which, at that time, was directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil.'

On 6 February 2026, his executive order tells us: 'Specifically, India has committed to stop directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil, has represented that it will purchase United States energy products from the United States, and has recently committed to a framework with the United States to expand defence cooperation over the next 10 years.'

Having found that India is now behaving the way America wants, Trump says: 'Accordingly, I have determined to eliminate the additional ad valorem rate of duty imposed on India.'

This additional duty imposed on India was removed for good behaviour, or, to speak more diplomatically, for compliance. However, Trump has warned us, America 'shall monitor whether India resumes directly or indirectly importing Russian Federation oil'. If this happens: 'I should reimpose the additional ad valorem rate of duty of 25 per cent on imports of articles of India.'

That's not all. The submitting nation has to do more. The statement put out by Bharat says: 'India intends to purchase \$500 billion' of US products over the next five years. That's \$100 billion a year. In 2024, it was \$40 billion. India has committed to buy more than double the products it has bought from the US in the past.

What has it got in return? A 'reduced' tariff of 18 per cent where none previously

Our trade toffee is a 'reduced' tariff of 18% where none existed. And Big Brother US will monitor our moves. Violation of sovereignty? Check. Arm-twisting? Check. Surrender?



A protest in Delhi demanding a rollback of US trade tariffs; (left) Commerce minister Piyush Goyal

existed. This is our reward. Violation of sovereignty? Check. Arm-twisting? Check. Surrender? Unfortunatly, check. As I said, the agreement is a model of clarity. One does not need to listen to what S. Jaishankar and the Indian government says; one only needs to read the document we have signed.

The question is why we capitulated. My friend the economist Ashok Bardhan sent out a message before the deal was signed, in which he anticipated what would happen and tried to explain it.

He writes that there are two reasons for yielding on the Indian side: 'First, the so-called nationalist credentials of this government and its support base are grossly exaggerated. The nationalist card is transactional and mostly meant for domestic purposes, to be whipped out in the context of elections and to enervise the base with the Pakistan spectre, but not to be resorted to when it comes to dealing with the big boys. Even the shocked reaction to the concessions on the agricultural front ignore the fact that, above all else, the ruling party is a party of the urban elite, regardless of what they say about the farmers' interests being paramount in their

scheme of things.'

Further, Bardhan writes, among the few dynamic sectors in India's economy, the two that play the greatest role are the technology sector and finance, and 'both are intricately joined at the hip to US markets and heavily dependent on linkages to US firms and funding.'

Some 70 per cent of the total output of India's information technology-related sectors are exports to the United States. India exported some \$40 billion in services to America in 2024. America is the primary source of portfolio inflows into India through its hedge funds, pension funds and mutual funds. 'Literally every aspect and structure of Indian financial markets is linked primarily to the US, from venture funding to financial research to financial news outlets, and so forth,' writes Bardhan.

And there we have it. Our nationalism, our bravado, our 56-inch chest is meant to bully and threaten other Indians (though even this will need to be reconsidered given how afraid we have become of female parliamentarians). In the face of a real adversary, our bravado withers away. It should be accepted that Trump understands us. This is not the first time he has bent us to his will.

In May 2019, India was forced to stop buying oil from Iran after Trump disallowed a waiver. Trump's former national security advisor, John Bolton, wrote in his book *The Room Where it Happened* that Trump dismissed Modi's concerns, telling his team that "he'll be okay" with the decision. The decision meant denying India the oil that had come with concessions such as free transport and insurance, and 60 days of credit. India tried to explain that many of its refineries had been calibrated to process crude oil from Iran and couldn't suddenly shift, and also that stopping supply from Iran would affect prices and inflation.

Trump would have none of it and we complied then, as we complied again with reference to Russian oil, and then again with the purchasing of Venezuelan and American oil.

We must return to where we started, because it is important that Indians know what has been done in their name. Sovereignty is violated by foreign interference in governmental functions. Surrender comes when one stops resisting and submits to the other side's authority. ■

Views are personal

Socialism and the Indian Republic

Yogendra Yadav

In the first essay of this series on the *swadharma* or inner life of the Indian Republic, we reflected on *sarva dharm sambhava* or secularism. We now turn to the second strand of said *swadharma*—*samata* (equality) and the idea of socialism. Equality as a social ideal is a modern concept, but the idea that all human beings are equal is not new. The proposition that because human beings are equal, they are entitled to equal resources and equal dignity is new. And the idea that society itself must be reorganised around this principle is very modern. There is no denying that the vision of building a new social order with equality as its organising axis came to India via Europe in the nineteenth century and the Bolshevik Revolution in the twentieth. So, it is often

assumed that the idea of equality is alien to the Indian mind, that it's an imported doctrine grafted onto a reluctant civilisation.

A serious interrogation of India's *swadharma* must test this assumption. In one sense, the history of the world is a history of inequality and injustice. Yet India's civilisation stands apart in one crucial respect—the caste system, which does not merely reflect inequality, it institutionalises and embeds it in social structure. Hindu religious texts clothe this hierarchy in theological legitimacy.

But it would be hasty to conclude that inequality is India's *swadharma*. The existence of a system does not prove that it was society's highest ideal. India's civilisational ethos has never been hostage to scriptures or emperors. Its clearest articulations have emerged through

movements—Buddhist thought, the Sufi-Bhakti tradition and the national movement, each in its own register rejecting caste hierarchy. The spread of socialist thought in India and the Indian understanding of egalitarianism cannot simply be taken as a foreign import. It may not have been set down as a doctrine here but it registered its presence through dialogue—and conflict—with earlier traditions. It was through this churn that the egalitarian ideal found its place in the Indian imagination.

At the base of this trajectory lies the idea of *karuna* (compassion), the tremor we feel in the heart when we encounter another's suffering. In its earliest articulation, this appears as *daya*—mercy. The *Anushasana Parva* of the *Mahabharata*

names compassion as the root of *dharma*. But in Buddhist philosophy, this idea undergoes a transformation. Compassion is not merely pity. It is the deep and active desire to alleviate suffering. Buddhism links this ethical impulse to action, and such action to *prajna*, wisdom. In this form, compassion contains within it the seed of what later came to be called socialism.

If compassion is genuine, it cannot limit itself to individuals; it will confront the structural causes of suffering in society. It will demand institutional transformation. By linking compassion with insight and 'right action', Buddhist philosophy anticipates—and arguably surpasses—modern doctrines of equality.

The Sufi and Bhakti movements gave equality a new resonance. In the Sufi idiom, compassion takes the form of *reham*—mercy. The invocation *Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim* echoes the Islamic belief that creation itself is an expression of divine mercy. Indian Sufi traditions drew from this theological core a social ethic: if the world arises from divine compassion, then humans must embody mercy towards all creation. Mercy mustn't remain a divine attribute, it must also become a human quality. In social terms, this translates into service (*khidmat*) and love for all. Justice

(*adl*) is rooted in mercy.

Bhakti saints, sometimes in dialogue with Sufis, deepened this egalitarian sensibility. Many did not directly confront social or economic inequality, but they struck at its philosophical and spiritual foundations. Figures such as Kabir, Ravidas, Tukaram and Basavanna openly challenged caste hierarchy. Others, even when less confrontational, cultivated an ethical imagination in which all souls were equal.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, two parallel efforts sought to redefine this strand of *swadharma*. One drew inspiration from Western socialist thought and the Bolshevik Revolution, aiming to establish economic equality.

The other utilised the openings created by colonial modernity and education to challenge caste hierarchy and patriarchy, striving for social equality. These were not ruptures with India's *swadharma* but expansions of the idea, with three additional dimensions:

- First, equality moved from being a spiritual principle to becoming a principle of social philosophy. The focus shifted from equality before God to equality in the material world.
- Second, equality ceased to be one virtue among many. It became central to the imagination of an ideal society—a value that could not be dismissed without moral cost.
- Third, it was no longer a matter of individual virtue but a mandate for the State to build an egalitarian society.

The Constitution of India internalised these ideals of equality. As with 'secularism', debates over when and why the word 'socialism' entered the Preamble miss the larger point that in its architecture, spirit and normative commitments, the Constitution is saturated with the idea of equality. In a distinctively Indian idiom, *samata* helps define the *swadharma* of the Republic. ■

Edited and translated excerpts (part 2) from the author's forthcoming book, Ganrajya ka Swadharma, Setu Prakashan



Photo: Getty Images

As with 'secularism', debates on why the word 'socialism' entered the Preamble miss the point that the Constitution is saturated with the idea of equality

Not just AQI, what we need is a BSI

The bullshit emitted on a regular basis by those who decide the nation’s destiny merits an index of its own

Avay Shukla

One has always had the highest admiration and respect for Meryl Streep’s acting qualities, graceful beauty and composure. To these qualities, I should now add her strong moral conviction and the courage to speak out: her takedown of Trump at the 2017 Golden Globe awards function was something to watch, and won her a standing ovation. (Hopefully our Bollywood marionettes watched it too).

I find that she is also relevant to the India of today. As proof, here’s another of her statements: “Funny thing about getting older, your eyesight starts getting weaker but your ability to see through people’s bullshit gets much better.”

Never was a truer word spoken. At three score and fifteen, I take quite a few wrong turns on the road as the traffic signs have become as blurred as Mr Modi’s vision for 2047, but give me a piece of bullshit and I can spot it for what it is instantly, through the layers of grandstanding, hypocrisy and ignorance that are the hallmark of our government and ruling classes.

IIT-Kanpur got it all wrong when it diagnosed NCR smog as consisting mainly of vehicle emissions, construction dust and paddy burning. It failed to detect a major ingredient: bullshit (BS), whose particles—BS 2.5 by lesser politicians and BS 10 by ministers—have seen a major increase since 2014.

These emissions are usually disguised as droplets of nationalism, religious revivalism or Viksit Bharat slogans. They affect, not the lungs, but the IQ of the residents here, which explains why the BJP keeps winning elections. In fact, I have a theory about this: the lower the IQ of a particular place, the higher its AQI readings. To test this thesis, I am now looking for a nerd who can build a Bullshit Index (BSI).

Readers would be well aware of the blasts of BS sprayed on a regular basis by those who decide the nation’s destiny: there is no connection between air pollution and lung diseases, 2025 was the cleanest year in Delhi’s history, AQI and temperature are one and the same, the EU trade deal is the ‘mother of all deals’ (which presumably would make the trade deal with the USA the ‘mother-in-law’ of all deals), mountains should be defined by height, not ecological

importance, those who feed stray dogs should keep them at home (the largest adoption programme in world history, considering there are 70 million of these community dogs)...

We can go on: the US SEC’s summons could not be served on Adani because it did not have an official stamp, the globally acclaimed climate activist Sonam Wangchuk is a security threat to India, we need to take ‘revenge’ for centuries of occupation by outside forces, it is one chief minister’s personal mission to hound a minority community and expel six lakh of them from the state’s voter list, trade unions are responsible for the country’s lack of progress...

It’s a long list, folks, and getting longer with each BJP election victory, which is why the smog keeps getting thicker.

But the mother of all BS 10s was discharged recently by our suave, foreign university-educated (MBA, University of Pennsylvania) bureaucrat-turned-billionaire railway minister, who announced that he was banning the wearing of *bandhgala*s in the Railways because it was a (British) ‘colonial legacy’.

Now, generations of IAS officers will agree that a bandhgala is the nearest they’ve got to a hangman’s noose, that it is an instrument of torture, especially during the summer months. It needs to go, for climatic reasons. But to banish it because it



The ‘bandhgala’, the formal attire of the Mughal court and ruling families of Mewar and Rajasthan, is on its way out

is a colonial vestige reeks of ignorance and hypocrisy posturing as nationalism and *desh bhakti*. It also indicates that the hon’ble minister suffers from both long- and short-term memory loss.

He forgot that the bandhgala is not a British invention—it (or a close variant)—was the formal dress of the Mughal court and the ruling families of Mewar and Rajasthan; the showier *achkan* or *sherwani* also belong to this family of couture. Worse, by landing up in Davos just a week later in a three-piece suit—an indisputably British attire—he not only displayed short-term memory loss but also his lack of sincerity about banishing colonialism.

Did he also forget that the whole system of railways in India was built by the British, replacing the humble bullock-cart and changing the face of the country? Would he also like to ban (with a little help from the RSS, no doubt) the English language, the university system of

education, allopathy, nuclear technology and the watch, sunglasses and pens that adorn our prime minister’s personage, all products of coloninising nations?

Perhaps he would like to rethink his passion for all things ‘colonial’, be a bit more discriminatory and focus on those things and practices that truly reflect the worst of our colonial past and have no place in a modern India. Here is a short list:

Unelected (and usually unelectable) governors who behave like viceroys and lord it over elected governments; Raj Bhavans that function as opulent embassies of the Centre in the states (and sometimes as dens of conspiracy); summer vacations by Supreme Court judges (even though tens of thousands of cases are pending in that court and no other institution enjoys this facility); the humiliating practice of addressing judges as ‘Milords’ in a free country; the royal trappings of just about

everything in Rashtrapati Bhavan, including a cavalry regiment exclusively dedicated to escorting the President, on the lines of the Praetorian Guard of Roman emperors, the Garde Imperial of Napoleon, or the Gardes Suisses (Swiss Guards) and the Gardes Françaises of the Pope and the French king, respectively.

The President is no monarch, or so we hope, and there is no need to display such in-your-face-pomp to the citizens of a democracy, especially when it comes at such cost.

There are plenty of colonial practices which need to be jettisoned, but we can surely do better than begin with the bandhgala! When bullshit becomes state policy, one has to agree with the dude who redefined *pranayam* thus: inhale the good shit, exhale the bullshit. And that is why we need a BSI, folks. ■

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Rebuilding Gaza must begin with the environment

Ignoring environmental concerns for political expediency can only entrench long-term instability, writes Ashok Swain

As diplomats negotiate ceasefires, donor conferences pledge billions for reconstruction and security strategists sketch out stabilisation plans, there is a danger that one of the most consequential dimensions of Gaza’s catastrophe will be overlooked. Conversations about money, governance and geopolitics may dominate headlines and policy briefs, but without confronting the environmental wreckage that underlies the territory’s shattered infrastructure under the occupation and wars, any reconstruction will be superficial and ultimately unsustainable.

Gaza’s environmental crisis is not a peripheral issue but a foundational one that affects water, soil, air, health, livelihoods, agriculture and, ultimately, the ability of communities to rebuild their lives with dignity and resilience. The scale of the environmental challenge in the Gaza Strip is immense and intertwined with the human suffering that has made daily survival extraordinarily difficult and costly. Much of Gaza has been physically destroyed, with estimates indicating tens of millions of tonnes of rubble littering cities and towns, creating an unprecedented obstacle to recovery that could take years to clear even under favourable conditions and generate significant emissions simply from debris processing and transport.

Environmental degradation in Gaza extends far beyond debris. Water and sanitation systems have been crippled by repeated attacks and prolonged electricity shortages, forcing residents to rely on limited and often unsafe sources of drinking water while untreated sewage contaminates neighbourhoods, agricultural land and coastal waters. Even before the most recent escalations, Gaza’s water infrastructure was under severe strain. Now, with damaged pipelines, destroyed pumping stations and inoperative treatment facilities, the risk of waterborne disease and long-term contamination has intensified. Agricultural land and orchards that once supported local food production have been flattened, compacted by heavy machinery or contaminated by explosive residues and waste. Air quality has deteriorated due to dust from destruction,



Reconstruction cannot be meaningful without restoring the land, water and air to health

burning debris and reliance on diesel generators and low-grade fuels for cooking and electricity. The environmental crisis is therefore multidimensional, affecting every basic system that sustains life.

Much of the current discourse on Gaza’s future assumes that rebuilding homes, schools, clinics and government buildings is the central task. But reconstruction cannot meaningfully begin until the land, water and air on which these buildings depend are restored and protected. The sheer scale of war debris forms a physical and environmental barrier that must be addressed before new infrastructure can safely take root. If rubble is treated merely as an engineering inconvenience rather than a public health and ecological risk, toxic dust and hazardous materials will continue to seep into soil and groundwater, compounding the damage. Debris is not just broken concrete. It often contains asbestos, heavy metals, fuel residues and other contaminants that pose long-term health threats if left unmanaged.

Restoring water and sanitation infrastructure must therefore be among the first pillars of any reconstruction plan. Clean water is not only essential for drinking and hygiene but also for economic recovery, agricultural viability and disease prevention.

Water that is safe to drink, soil that can produce food, air that does not carry toxic dust and neighbourhoods free of hazardous debris will be the true foundations of recovery in Gaza

Rehabilitating these systems means more than repairing pipes. It requires modernising treatment facilities, ensuring reliable power supply, reducing leakage and establishing transparent water quality monitoring. Homes rebuilt without safe water and sanitation are uninhabitable in any meaningful sense. If water systems fail, reconstruction efforts will quickly unravel under the weight of public health crises.

Agriculture presents another urgent environmental dimension. Farmland damaged by carpet bombardment and building of illegal settlements cannot simply be returned to production without systematic rehabilitation. Clearing unexploded ordnance and other war remnants is an essential first step, as fields that remain contaminated by explosive devices are inaccessible and dangerous. Free and secure access to land is equally critical. Farmers must be able to reach and cultivate their fields without restrictions or fear, otherwise land rehabilitation plans remain theoretical. Soil testing should identify contamination and salinity levels, followed by removal of toxic debris, restoration of irrigation systems and rebuilding of soil fertility through organic matter and careful management. Without addressing land and water quality, agricultural revival will be slow, deepening food insecurity and economic dependency.

The political context surrounding reconstruction adds another layer of complexity. Competing visions for Gaza’s future range from externally driven redevelopment schemes to proposals that fundamentally reshape land use and population distribution. There are growing concerns that reconstruction processes themselves could be used as instruments of political pressure or demographic engineering, where control over materials, permits and planning determines who can return, rebuild or remain. In such a context, environmental considerations risk being sidelined in favour of strategic calculations. Ignoring environmental repair for political expediency would entrench long-term instability.

Environmental sustainability must be safeguarded through transparent planning, inclusive decision-making and independent oversight, ensuring that reconstruction serves the population rather than geopolitical agendas.

Waste management is one of the most urgent and visible environmental challenges. Mountains of rubble mixed with household waste and hazardous materials create immediate health risks and long-term contamination pathways. A sustainable reconstruction strategy must prioritise systematic debris mapping, safe sorting and recycling where feasible, and the establishment of controlled disposal sites. Independent monitoring mechanisms should verify compliance with

environmental standards. This may appear less dramatic than building new housing blocks, but it is foundational to protecting public health and restoring trust.

Energy systems also intersect with environmental sustainability. In crisis settings, reliance on diesel generators and improvised fuel sources increases air pollution and operational costs while undermining reliability. Reconstruction offers an opportunity to invest in more resilient and cleaner energy systems that can power water treatment, health facilities and homes without exacerbating environmental harm. Integrating renewable energy and energy efficient design can enhance resilience and reduce future vulnerability, especially in a territory where supply chains are frequently disrupted.

International organisations, universities and technical experts have an important role to play in supporting environmentally sustainable reconstruction. They can provide independent environmental assessments, contamination mapping and risk analysis. They can assist in designing low-cost water treatment technologies and waste recycling systems adapted to local conditions. However, external involvement must strengthen local capacity rather than replace it. Gaza’s professionals and institutions should lead long-term environmental governance, supported by training and transparent data systems. Funding mechanisms should require environmental impact assessments and resilience planning as core conditions rather than optional components.

Ultimately, reconstruction in Gaza will be judged not only by the number of buildings erected but by whether daily life becomes safer, healthier and more sustainable. Water that is safe to drink, soil that can produce food, air that does not carry toxic dust and neighbourhoods free from hazardous debris are the true foundations of recovery. Ignoring these environmental dimensions in favour of short-term political or financial gains would repeat past mistakes and lock Gaza into a cycle of repeated crisis.

Rebuilding Gaza is often framed as a diplomatic and security challenge. It is that, but it is also an environmental challenge of historic scale. If sustainability is embedded at the core of reconstruction, Gaza’s recovery can strengthen resilience and improve human security. If it is neglected, reconstruction will rest on unstable ground, vulnerable to collapse under the weight of pollution, scarcity and renewed instability. The choice is not between speed and sustainability. The choice is between rebuilding for appearance and rebuilding for sustaining life. ■

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FROM WELFARE TO EMPOWERMENT: KARNATAKA'S MODEL OF PEOPLE-CENTRIC DEVELOPMENT

Guarantee schemes and beyond: Building a resilient and empowered Karnataka

On the twin occasions of the Joint Legislature Session and the 77th Republic Day, Hon'ble Governor Shri Thaaawar Chand Gehlot presented Karnataka's compelling story of transformation — a journey shaped by constitutional ideals and driven by inclusive development. His address was not merely a presentation of achievements; it was a reaffirmation of governance anchored in moral clarity, democratic responsibility and measurable progress.

Rooted in the vision of Bharat Ratna Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the values of liberty, equality and fraternity are treated not as ceremonial affirmations but as living commitments. These principles guide legislative priorities, administrative reforms and welfare interventions across the State. Dr. Ambedkar envisioned democracy not merely as a political system, but as a social order sustained by justice and dignity. Political democracy, he cautioned, must be complemented by social and economic democracy. It is this constitutional understanding that informs Karnataka's governance philosophy. Today, Karnataka's development trajectory stands firmly grounded in constitutional morality. The State has consciously translated foundational values into measurable outcomes — strengthening social security, expanding economic opportunity and empowering citizens at every level. Governance has evolved beyond conventional welfare delivery into a rights-based, empowerment-driven framework designed to ensure that benefits reach the last mile, beneficiaries are transferred transparently and citizens gain not merely assistance, but agency.

The State's governance model

Today, Karnataka's development trajectory stands firmly grounded in constitutional morality. The State has consciously translated foundational values into measurable outcomes — strengthening social security, expanding economic opportunity and empowering citizens at every level.

rests on five interlinked pillars: comprehensive welfare, economic prudence, infrastructure expansion, institutional reform and social transformation. Together, they create a balanced architecture of development — addressing

immediate needs while building long-term resilience. By integrating fiscal responsibility with expansive public investment, Karnataka has strengthened purchasing power, expanded opportunity and stimulated growth without compromising

equity. At a time when global and national economies face volatility, Karnataka has sustained economic dynamism while prioritising social justice. Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT), targeted welfare schemes and inclusive public expenditure

have enhanced household financial stability. Simultaneously, strategic investments in infrastructure, technology and advanced industries position the State as a leading engine of national progress.

Guarantee Schemes: A revolutionary model inspired by Universal Basic Income

The five flagship Guarantee Schemes — GrihaJyothi, Griha Lakshmi, Anna Bhagya, Shakti and YuvaNidhi — represent a transformative approach to welfare policy. Inspired by the broader principle of Universal Basic Income, these schemes move beyond fragmented subsidies toward integrated, direct economic empowerment.

According to Consumer Price Index trends, while purchasing power in many states has remained below expected benchmarks, Karnataka's purchasing power aligns with prescribed economic standards — a stability attributed significantly to the Guarantee Schemes.

An allocation of Rs 1,16,706 crore has been made for these initiatives, with more than Rs 1.13 lakh crore already disbursed. The State is spending Rs 1.12 lakh



crore annually exclusively on public welfare — a reflection of both fiscal commitment and strategic foresight.

To scientifically assess impact, agreements have been entered into through FPI with reputed institutions including King's College London, Just Jobs Network, XKDR Forum, Azim Premji University, Indus Action

and Lokniti/CSDS. Their studies confirm significant improvements in food security, poverty alleviation and women's empowerment.

Beneficiaries are utilising funds responsibly — prioritising nutritious food, medicines and children's education. The proportion of families receiving direct cash transfers into bank

accounts has risen from 9.3 per cent in 2022 to 72.7 per cent in 2024.

According to Family Survey data for 2024–25, 1.37 crore families have received direct intermediaries and strengthening DBT systems, the Government has reinforced transparency and public trust.

Women at the centre of transformation

Women's empowerment stands at the heart of Karnataka's development model.



The Shakti scheme has transformed mobility patterns. A study by Azim Premji University shows that on several routes, including major commercial areas in Bengaluru, women now outnumber men commuters — reflecting enhanced participation in public and economic life. Each woman saves Rs 1,500 to Rs 2,000 per month. Statewide, 19 per cent of women — and 34 per cent in Bengaluru — have secured better-paying jobs due to improved mobility. Additionally, 83 per cent report improved access to healthcare services.

The Anna Bhagya scheme advances the vision of a "Hunger-free Karnataka." As many as 83 per cent of women beneficiaries report enhanced family nutrition through the purchase of quality food items such as pulses, vegetables, fruits, eggs and meat.

Under Griha Lakshmi, 80 per cent of women report increased financial independence and a stronger role in household decision-making. Around 37 per cent are repaying old debts, moving toward debt-free living. Significantly, 89 per cent report improved family relationships.

Institutional support further strengthens empowerment. The Griha Lakshmi Credit Co-operative Society promotes financial self-reliance. The Akkape scheme provides protection to women and children in distress, supported by five 'Akka' task forces implementing more than 25 initiatives. Karnataka has also introduced 12 days of paid menstrual leave annually — among the most progressive labour measures in the country.

Surveys indicate that Bengaluru ranks first nationally in women's safety — a Bengaluru for the State.

Youth empowerment and economic expansion

The YuvaNidhi scheme provides structured support to youth transitioning into employment. As a result, 28 per cent of beneficiaries have pursued skill development, and 20 per cent have become financially self-reliant.

Skill-based education is being prioritised through new GTTCs, polytechnic colleges, skill parks and MSDCs. Integration of vocational education in schools and colleges strengthens employability.

Capital expenditure of Rs 83,200 crore in the 2025–26 Budget underscores Karnataka's commitment to growth-oriented development. Projects worth Rs 1.5 lakh crore are underway in Bengaluru.

The State prioritises industries such as semiconductors, aerospace, communication equipment and quantum technology. Global investment continues to reinforce Karnataka's status as an innovation powerhouse.

Dairy, Fisheries and allied sectors

Under Ksheeradhare, 9.07 lakh milk producers receive Rs 5 per litre incentives, with Rs 4,130 crore transferred directly to farmers. The Anugraha scheme has disbursed Rs 95.41 crore for livestock loss compensation.

Karnataka leads nationally in foot-and-mouth disease vaccination. Infrastructure upgrades include 200 veterinary institutions and 381 contract veterinarians.

For inland fishermen, subsidised diesel (Rs 35 per litre for 300 litres), Rs 440 crore for fishing harbours and vehicle assistance strengthen livelihoods. Karnataka remains the national leader in raw silk production, with fully digital, cashless market systems.

Education, Health and Social Infrastructure

Karnataka continues to emerge as a major education hub. LKG and UKG classes are being introduced in government schools. Around 8.5 lakh children study in residential institutions. The Prof. Sukhadeo Thorat Committee recommendations are being implemented.

Under Akshara Aavishkara, 300 Karnataka Public Schools are being established in Kalyana

Karnataka. The Dr. Chaya Degaonkar Committee report addresses regional disparities.

In healthcare, Karnataka maintains one of the highest ratios of PHCs, hospitals and medical colleges. Cities across the State are evolving as health hubs. Preventive care initiatives, malnutrition elimination drives and action against food adulteration strengthen public health outcomes.

Infrastructure, Revenue Reforms and Power Security

More than 80 per cent of long-pending revenue cases have been resolved. Revenue courts function online. 91,163 podis have been completed. 4,050 unrecorded villages have been declared revenue

villages. Over 1,11,111 beneficiaries have received title deeds, with one lakh more ready. Land records are being digitised.

Under GrihaJyothi, free electricity up to 200 units reduces household burdens. In ten months, 28,000 million

units of electricity were generated. Infrastructure includes 41,208 transformers and extensive transmission lines.

Agreements for 3,704 MW and plans for 4,794 MW additional capacity strengthen energy security.

Agriculture and farmers' welfare

Agriculture remains central to rural resilience. The revived Krushi Bhagya scheme, with Rs 200 crore allocated, has enabled construction of 3,735 farm ponds at Rs 49 crore. The Hi-tech Harvester Hub has supported 1.31 lakh beneficiaries with Rs 286 crore. Micro-irrigation units covering 1.50 lakh hectares have been installed at Rs 252 crore.

In response to floods affecting 14.21 lakh hectares, Rs 2,250 crore was credited directly to 14,21,615 farmers. The State provided an additional Rs 8,500 per hectare beyond Central norms. Compensation of Rs 46.5 crore addressed damage to homes, lives and livestock.

Under SDMF, works worth Rs 235.31 crore are underway. An action plan of Rs 966.93 crore has been approved for 2025–26 disaster mitigation. Memoranda seeking Rs 615 crore for crop loss and Rs 1,522 crore for infrastructure restoration have been submitted to the Centre.

Six Horticulture Kisan Malls and cold storage units (14,000 MT capacity) strengthen agricultural marketing. A Rs 40 crore horticulture college at Alamel enhances research and training.



Constitutional morality and democratic spirit

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasised that political democracy must evolve into social democracy rooted in liberty, equality and fraternity. He reminded the nation that the working of a Constitution depends on those entrusted with its operation.

Karnataka has treated these principles as guiding priorities — listening to communities, constituting commissions, implementing recommendations and addressing regional imbalances. The true strength of the Republic lies in unity in diversity, institutional dynamism and unwavering commitment to constitutional values.

As Karnataka marks the 77th Republic Day, it stands as a model where liberty fuels opportunity, equality shapes policy, fraternity strengthens society and economic dynamism transforms lives.

This is not merely administration — it is transformation.

This is governance grounded in constitutional morality.

This is Karnataka — advancing with clarity of vision, building a Republic where justice is tangible, opportunity is universal and development is shared by all.