

STATES 360°



WEST BENGAL

BJP missteps and Mamata's inner turmoil

Shikha Mukerjee

Justice Abhijit Gangopadhyay, once an eccentric and outspoken judge of the Calcutta High Court known for his politically incorrect courtroom comments—he was called an ‘unguided missile’—lashed out recently at his own party, the BJP, which he joined after quitting his judicial post to contest last year’s Lok Sabha elections.

Yet barely 18 months after winning the elections, Gangopadhyay has sharply criticised the BJP’s ‘north Indian’ leadership for their inability to understand Bengal’s political tapestry.

In a recent TV interview, Gangopadhyay condemned the BJP’s central leadership for lacking the cultural insight needed to win Bengal. He further alleged that the party had no real intention of unseating chief minister Mamata Banerjee, feeding speculation that even Modi and Mamata tacitly prefer the political status quo. He urged imposition of President’s Rule in the state, claiming that the administration was so compromised that fair elections were impossible. He also accused the Election Commission of treating the Mamata government with undue leniency.

His statements seemed to echo broader sentiments in political circles and the gossip at tea shops across West Bengal—that the BJP repeatedly sabotages its own progress in West Bengal through a tone-deaf approach to Bengali culture and policy missteps.

From vandalising Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar’s statue during the 2019 campaign to attempting to cover up the unclothed and ferocious idol of Goddess Kali—whose worship involves meat, alcohol and song—the BJP has consistently stumbled over Bengali sensitivities. BJP supporters mocking

Bengalis for eating fish and meat during Navratri, and Visva-Bharati’s harassment of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen over alleged land encroachment, further inflamed public opinion.

There were other unforced errors: BJP IT cell chief Amit Malviya’s comment that Bengal was “not a language”; a Delhi Police circular referring to Bengali as ‘Bangladeshi language’; and, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma’s taunt against a Congress leader for singing Tagore’s *Amar Sonar Bangla*, now the national anthem of Bangladesh. A BJP MP from Karnataka added fuel to the fire by saying that Tagore wrote *Jana Gana Mana* to honour a British monarch.

Each of these incidents reinforced what Gangopadhyay has now said publicly: that the BJP leadership remains out of touch with Bengal’s cultural and political psyche.

Add to this list the BJP’s unwavering support for the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls by the Election Commission—which aimed at identifying ‘illegal migrants’—which has backfired in parts of Bengal. Though the party presents the drive as a campaign against undocumented Muslim immigrants, the reality is more complex. After 1971, a large



Photo: Getty Images

number of Hindu refugees from Bangladesh settled in West Bengal. Many of these migrants, long naturalised and integrated, now fear being branded infiltrators.

For several families, the ensuing uncertainty has proven devastating, with suicides reported among those unable to prove their citizenship. The BJP’s propaganda machine insists that SIR targets Muslim infiltrators allegedly aided by the TMC for electoral gain. But in practice, the fear it spreads cuts across communities, alienating Hindu refugees who once formed a loyal vote base.

In an attempt to reassure them, the BJP announced Citizenship Amendment Act camps across border districts, promising to regularise the status of Hindu migrants. Yet, instead of restoring trust, the overlapping narratives of exclusion and selective inclusion have only deepened voter anxiety.

For the TMC, this misstep is a gift—it

allows Mamata Banerjee to frame the BJP as both communal and incompetent, reinforcing her image as Bengal’s defender against Delhi’s ‘outsiders’.

However, the BJP received an unexpected gift from an unusual quarter: Humayun Kabir, MLA from Murshidabad’s Bharatpur, quit the Trinamool Congress and announced plans to form a new party aimed to woo voters in the Muslim-majority districts. Kabir’s entry threatens to split the Muslim vote bank and narrow the gap between Trinamool’s 46.7 per cent vote share and BJP’s 38.7 per cent, introducing fresh unpredictability ahead of elections.

There are other problems piling up for Mamata. And this time it is from within her own party’s tainted past. The recent bail granted to former minister Partha Chatterjee, scarred in connection with the cash-for-jobs scam in teachers’ recruitment, has reopened old wounds.

Chatterjee was once among Mamata’s most trusted lieutenants. His arrest in 2022, following the ED’s recovery of Rs 50 crore in cash from properties linked to his associate Arpita Mukherjee, had forced the chief minister to sack him in a desperate bid to contain the damage.

His release raises difficult questions. Chatterjee “knows too much”, as many in Kolkata put it—about internal dealings, party finances, and the network of favours that kept the TMC machinery running. Ignoring him might provoke him into breaking his silence.

The timing could not be worse. The state government is already struggling to comply with Supreme Court orders mandating re-evaluation of teachers’ recruitment, with tens of thousands of affected candidates demanding justice. Chatterjee’s return threatens to reignite protests and revive opposition attacks on corruption within the TMC.

Mamata Banerjee has faced such crises before—from the Saradha chit fund and Narada sting scandals involving former minister Mukul Roy, to factional feuds within her party. But as fatigue sets in after years in power, her ability to manage these fires simultaneously may be waning.

West Bengal’s politics today mirrors a peculiar symmetry: both the BJP and the TMC are being undermined by their own members and misjudgments. Gangopadhyay’s revolt exposes the BJP’s cultural alienation and factional unease; Kabir’s defection and Chatterjee’s bail expose the TMC’s internal fragility and moral exhaustion.

With the next election cycle not far, both parties find themselves on uncertain ground. The people of Bengal, meanwhile, watch with weary amusement—accustomed as ever to the endless drama of politics, betrayal and survival. ■

Gangopadhyay’s statements echo a widely held belief in political circles that the BJP sabotages its own progress in West Bengal

Why are these women fleeing in Bihar?



» Continued from page 1

The ‘Bharat Microfinance Report’ prepared by the RBI’s self-regulatory body Sa-Dhan finds that Bihar leads other states in outstanding microfinance credit, which stood at Rs 57,712 crore as of March 2025. Shabnam estimates that 1.08 crore women share the liability and the total liability, including accumulated interest, is much higher.

Her first-person account confirms what leaders of Bihar’s opposition alliance, like CPI-ML general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya, have repeatedly said. The government’s own statistics reveal that over 94 lakh families in Bihar have a monthly income of less than Rs 6,000 or

Rs 200 a day, which is lower than base-level MNREGA wages and certainly not enough to support a family of four or five members. The microfinance companies have unleashed a reign of terror in the state, Bhattacharya has been saying in his election rallies, with as many as eight to ten active in a single village.

In the just-concluded election, he points out in interviews, women raised slogans of ‘*Dus hazaar mein dum nahin/ Karz maañi se kam nahin*’ (the Rs 10,000 handout is no solution, loan waiver is a must)’. The election-time cash transfers will not solve Bihar’s debt crisis and calls for comprehensive loan waivers reverberate across the state.

While the Mahagathbandhan had promised to waive interest on loans disbursed to women, it is not nearly enough, says Shabnam, making a case for at least partial write-off of principal amounts and revised repayment schedules. If loans to big business can be written off, why not these small loans to the most vulnerable, she asks.

The incoming government in Bihar faces a stark challenge: to dismantle the debt trap, restore the dignity of these women borrowers and rebuild trust through a systemic overhaul. These women need more than sympathy; they are owed justice.

(Names have been changed to protect identities.) ■

Bihar leads other states in outstanding microfinance credit, which stood at ₹57,712 crore as of March 2025

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PUNJAB

Floods, fake grain and failed support

Herjinder

This year’s paddy harvesting season in Punjab began under a cloud of despair. Floodwaters inundated nearly every district, inflicting widespread crop damage.

Neighbouring Haryana too faced similar devastation. With the monsoon stretching longer than usual, experts, including those at Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, warned of a 15 to 20 per cent paddy production.

Yet, defying expectations, a totally different picture emerged once procurement began. Record after record started tumbling. Paddy arrivals in mandis soon began to overwhelm the market infrastructure. Several mandis ran short of basic storage materials like gunny bags. Procurement targets were not only achieved but were exceeded and that too well ahead of schedule—only for the process to suddenly stall, leaving many farmers stranded outside the mandis with unsold produce.

To make sense of this paradox, one must look closely at Punjab’s three most flood-affected districts. In Amritsar, for instance, officials reported complete crop loss on 61,256 acres. Yet, by early November the Food Corporation of India had procured 3.02 lakh metric tonnes, up from last year’s 2.98 lakh metric tonnes.

A similar story unfolded in Fazilka and Tarn Taran. In Fazilka, floods destroyed standing paddy across 33,123 acres, but procurement matched last year’s 2.14 lakh metric tonnes. Tarn Taran saw 23,308 acres submerged, but procurement rose to 9.29 lakh metric tonnes against 9.02 lakh metric tonnes last year.

The same pattern extended across Haryana, where government agencies completed their procurement by the first week of November, procuring five lakh metric tonnes more than last year. The sudden halt left farmers still waiting in line with little choice but to sell to private traders at distress prices.

The contradictions in these numbers—and the stories they conceal—raise troubling questions about the opacity of the procurement system itself.

A plausible theory points to the illicit influx of cheap paddy from Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan where the paddy districts are underdeveloped compared to Punjab and Haryana and farmers often have to sell at lower prices. If this cross-border movement of grain indeed took place, it could not have happened without the active collusion of traders and middlemen at multiple levels.

To curb such malpractice, the Haryana government had set up an online system called ‘Meri Fasal, Mera Byora’, that required farmers to obtain a market gate pass linked to their cultivable land before selling their produce. Officially, no paddy could enter a

Procurement targets were exceeded—only for the process to suddenly stall, leaving many farmers stranded



Photo: Getty Images

mandi without this pass.

But loopholes soon appeared. Typically, one acre yields around 25 quintals of paddy, yet gate passes were being issued for up to 35 quintals per acre—an inflated figure that conveniently allowed room for the unloading of additional grain possibly from other states.

Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) president Gurnam Singh Chaduni claims that land unfit for paddy was registered on the portal to obtain fake passes for outside grain. Reports of forged gate passes surfaced as well. By the time the government tried to plug the loophole by replacing gate passes with QR-coded passes, the procurement season was nearly over.

The government was eventually compelled to ban the inflow of paddy from other states. But did this actually resolve the problem? The ban applied only to the import of paddy, not rice. Farmer leaders in Haryana allege that traders have exploited this loophole—buying rice from other states, showing it on paper as paddy, and immediately selling it in government mandis.

Local farmer organisations in Karnal first exposed the scam, triggering political outcry and formation of a Special Investigation Team. However, as the inquiry progressed, a similar pattern was detected across multiple districts. Chaduni has since demanded that the case be handed over to the CBI.

Leader of the Opposition and former chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda has called it a scam “worth thousands of crores” and alleged that “more paddy has been purchased than what the state actually produces, and yet many farmers have not been paid the Minimum Support Price”.

In Punjab, attempts by farmers to take matters into their hands triggered new friction. Incidents of local farmers intercepting and turning back paddy-laden trucks arriving from Rajasthan at the Rajpura–Patli border in Fazilka were met with Rajasthan’s farmers blocking cotton trucks coming from Punjab. Since cotton fetches better prices in Rajasthan’s markets, many Punjab farmers sell their produce there. What began as a procurement scam soon escalated into an inter-state conflict between farming communities.

Punjab has filed an FIR related to the scam, and announced measures to ensure that procurement benefits local farmers only. Yet with procurement targets met and the FCI winding down operations, the action is regrettably late.

Farmers in Punjab and Haryana—already reeling from floods and falling yields—have borne the heaviest losses at a time when they most needed support. ■



उलगुलान के महानायक

भगवान

बिरसा मुंडा

की 150वीं जयंती

पर 25 वर्ष का

युवा झारखण्ड धरती आबा
को नमन करता है

जोहार

झारखण्ड के खूंटी स्थित उलिहातू की पहाड़ियों और जंगलों में जन्मा एक ऐसा महानायक, जिसने अपने साहस और संघर्ष से ब्रिटिश शासन को चुनौती दी। वे बिरसा मुंडा थे, जिन्हें उनके अनुयायियों ने धरती आबा भगवान बिरसा मुंडा के रूप में पूजा।

बिरसा मुंडा ने आदिवासियों के अधिकारों के लिए संघर्ष का बिगुल बजाया, उनका उद्देश्य स्पष्ट था। लोगों को उनकी भूमि और अधिकार वापस दिलाना।

बिरसा मुंडा के क्रांतिकारी विचारों से विचलित हो कर ब्रिटिश शासकों ने उन्हें गिरफ्तार कर जेल में डाल दिया गया। जेल में ही 09 जून 1900 को धरती आबा भगवान बिरसा मुंडा शहीद हो गए।

लेकिन उनके उलगुलान का संदेश थमा नहीं। बिरसा मुंडा समेत वीर पुरखों के आदर्शों पर चल कर लंबे संघर्ष और बलिदान के बाद आंदोलनकारियों ने झारखण्ड अलग राज्य का सपना पूरा किया। आज धरती आबा का युवा झारखण्ड हम सभी के समक्ष है।



श्री संतोष कुमार गंगवार
माननीय राज्यपाल, झारखण्ड

श्री हेमन्त सोरेन
माननीय मुख्यमंत्री, झारखण्ड

सूचना एवं जनसंपर्क विभाग, झारखण्ड सरकार

Climate summit or ‘climate casino’?



Photo: Getty Images

Pankaj Chaturvedi

Not many are hopeful that the ongoing climate summit (COP30) at Belém, Brazil, will yield tangible results. The cynicism is not without reason. Critics and protestors have dismissively called the event a ‘climate casino’, accusing world leaders of making empty promises and doing nothing amid growing alarm over unchecked environmental degradation. A staggering 50,000 delegates will converge during the 12-day summit (10-21 November) being held at this ‘gateway to the Amazon rainforest’—the world’s largest tropical forest, also known as the lungs of the earth, which produces 20 per cent of the planet’s oxygen and plays a critical role in global carbon sequestration. The slightly wishful idea of holding it in Belém is to draw global attention to the risks of unchecked deforestation, which is greatly exacerbating the effects of climate change.

Despite decades of conferences and pious pledges, the climate crisis has only worsened. Natural forests are dwindling at an alarming rate as governments yield to ‘development’ pressures and make over vast tracts to mining and other companies with an appetite for forest resources. These leaders are all ‘pro-business’, the protestors argue, indifferent to the environmental costs borne by the world’s poorest. “We can’t eat money,” they say, as millions lose homes and livelihoods to fires, floods and droughts. Government leaders and big business couldn’t care less, possibly because they don’t yet feel the heat.

Donald Trump, President of the United States, still one of the world’s biggest polluters, says climate change is a hoax. The heads of state of the world’s three largest polluters—China, the US and India—have all decided to stay away, underscoring their apathy. Which begs the question: have the COP summits—like the UN itself—lost their relevance? China, even leading in greenhouse gas emissions, has made impressive progress in renewable energy and electric vehicles, meeting 2030 targets ahead of schedule. On the other hand, India, Iran and the US remain heavily dependent on fossil fuels and show little interest in leading a global transition. They disregard the risks of small island countries in the Pacific Ocean (Marshall Islands, Samoa, Nauru and Fiji), the Caribbean (Barbados, Jamaica, Bahamas, Haiti, St Kitts and Nevis) and Indian

These leaders are all ‘pro-business’, the protestors argue, indifferent to the environmental costs borne by the world’s poorest

Ocean states (Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles)—all at risk of being swallowed by rising seas. The urgency for climate action is underlined by the increase in extreme weather events—floods, droughts, wildfires and heatwaves affect nearly every region in the world. Last year was the hottest on record, with average surface temperatures exceeding 1.5 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels—the threshold agreed upon for year 2100, under the 2015 Paris Agreement (COP21). So, this limit was crossed decades earlier than anticipated, and UN analyses hint that without sharp cuts in emissions, temperatures could rise 2.3–2.5 degree Celsius by the end of the century. The scorching heatwaves of 2023 and 2024 affected Europe, the Americas and India, underlining once again the urgent need for effective emission reduction targets—the so-called NDCs (Nationally Determined Contributions). Beyond all the rhetoric and pledges, what the world needs are actionable, near-term strategies across the energy, industry and transport sectors. Renewable energy is central to the discussions, with goals to treble global renewable capacity and improve energy efficiency by 2030. Yet there are doubts about the sustainability of solar power. A typical solar panel lasts 25–30 years, and many early installations require replacement soon. This will create a surge in electronic waste made of toxic materials—cadmium, lead, selenium—that could contaminate soil and water if improperly disposed. Recycling solar panels is technically challenging, costly and inefficient, raising environmental concerns about the long-term viability of massive solar deployment. Yet another reason for the scepticism is countries invoking ‘national security’ concerns all the time and waging wars that have a massive environmental footprint. The ongoing Russia–Ukraine war, the Gaza conflict, the recent US strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities have collectively generated carbon emissions on a staggering scale, comparable to the annual output of some countries. Military emissions, often exempt from disclosure, remain one of the least discussed but most damaging contributors to global warming. While the 2015 Paris Agreement removed exemptions originally granted under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, major polluters like China, Israel and India remain reluctant to disclose military greenhouse gas emissions. And yet the optimists see COP30 as the last chance to display the collective will to fight for a just, more equitable, environment-friendly future. ■



Photo: Getty Images

Is India jettisoning its climate goals?

Ashis Ray

The world leaders’ summit that opens COP climate conferences is a political spotlight moment. And when the attendance of heads of state is as low as reported at Belém, Brazil, on 11–12 November (50 or less out of 198), you wonder how serious world leaders are about the climate crisis. Among the most conspicuous absentees at COP30 are Donald Trump, Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi. But there is still a difference between Modi’s non-appearance and Xi’s or Trump’s—all leaders of large countries, all among the world’s biggest polluters. Despite Xi’s absence, China is the toast of COP30 for becoming a global leader in renewable energy, achieving its wind and solar power targets ahead of its 2030 commitment. It is also spearheading adoption of electric cars. Trump, on the other hand, pulled out of the Paris Agreement, has rolled back many environmental restraints at home, has promoted ‘clean coal’, and will be remembered for his ‘drill, baby, drill’ exhortations. Modi has been in power since 2014. He inherited India’s commitments in Kyoto (1997) and Copenhagen (2009) to save the environment, and he signed India up for the 2015 Paris treaty. Under him, India has pledged net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2070 and to meet 50 per cent of its energy needs from non-fossil fuel sources by 2030. India is on course to miss the second goal. Year 2024 was the hottest recorded in India. And for a quick test of India’s commitment to climate goals, look no farther than the AQI (Air Quality Index) readings of capital city Delhi. For whatever it’s worth, India’s environment minister Bhupender Yadav will possibly show up in Belém, but climate commitments aside, Modi’s decision to skip the summit and not stand by Brazil, a BRICS ally, is being seen in diplomatic circles as a move to appease Trump. (Readers will remember that Brazil, like India, is at the receiving end of Trump’s tariff bullying.)

Even as he tries to make nice with Trump from afar, Modi has been shying away from multilaterals to avoid meeting Trump. He pulled out of the ASEAN summit in October at a juncture when deeper engagement with the economically thriving bloc is essential for India to tackle headwinds from the US. Trump has not hesitated to embarrass Modi with repeated assertions about his mediating role in stopping the military confrontation with Pakistan in May. And Modi is likely scared that Trump will do this—again—at an international forum when/ if both are present. Concurrently, Trump has dined and feted Pakistan’s army chief and prime minister. And at a multilateral featuring all three, Trump might well spring a surprise that Modi does not want to risk. Trump knows he can’t bully Russia and China and has chosen to target the other three nations—India, Brazil, South Africa—in the BRICS grouping he despises. He has declared that no US official will attend the upcoming G20 summit in Johannesburg on 22–23 November. Trump wants BRICS disbanded and any de-dollarisation talk raises his hackles. His announcement to stay away from the G20 summit in South Africa could be a cue for Modi to emerge from hiding and show his face. Ironically, Modi craves the company of foreign leaders; he loves the photo-ops. He won’t give up the opportunity unless he fears getting a red face. So, if Modi is not certain he won’t be embarrassed in front of the cameras—which no US administration official can guarantee about their loose-cannon boss—he might avoid multilaterals where Trump is present. Trump is not a fan of big groupings for other reasons and has shown a tendency to prefer bilaterals. Two summits are being lined up with Xi over the next year while the Quad alliance—of the US, Japan, India and Australia—seems to have gone into cold storage. India was supposed to host the next Quad consultation featuring the heads of state, but it seems Modi is in no hurry to host a summit that will bring him face to face with Trump. ■

Our air, their privilege: Delhi’s choking reality

The mantra these days is: when you can’t fix the problem, ‘fix’ the data that exposes how bad it is

Rashme Sehgal

The air is free but why is it such a privilege to breathe? read one of the several placards at a protest in New Delhi last week, as residents vented anger over the capital’s worsening air. For years, Delhi’s toxic smog has been a familiar dark cloud—but reports indicating that the government was manipulating data to hide the true extent of the crisis, combined with a recent photo showing two air purifiers flanking the prime minister, seem to have snapped public patience. That image captured the deep divide between those who could afford Made in China air purifiers and sealed offices, and the millions who cannot. Reports that water sprinklers were being used around air quality monitors to suppress readings—and that several stations had been shut down altogether—brought citizens to the streets. The government forced the organisers to call off the protest at the last minute. Those who turned up at India Gate were taken into custody and left 50 kilometres away at the Haryana border. Delhi Aam Aadmi Party president Saurabh Bharadwaj told reporters: “As soon as pollution increases, the government shuts down AQI monitoring stations. Wherever AQI is found to be high, spraying of water is being done... the fraud is happening openly... the intention is not to reduce pollution but to show lower figures”. On 10 November, the AQI was in ‘very poor’ category in 26 of the 38 monitoring stations in the national capital. Bawana reported an AQI at 366, Jahangirpuri 348, Chandni Chowk 410, Burari 430—and at Anand Vihar, despite three trucks spraying jets of water outside the monitoring system set up by the Central Pollution Control Board, the AQI read 400. The same day, the US embassy in the green belt of Chanakyapuri showed an AQI

of 643 with PM 10 levels at 558 and PM 2.5 at 397, placing the air quality as hazardous. For over a decade the embassy has been independently monitoring air quality in Indian cities and its data frequently contradicts official Indian figures. Why this mismatch, one may ask. An AQI between 0–50 is considered good, 51–100 is satisfactory, 101–200 is moderate, 201–300 is poor, 301–400 is very poor, and 401–500 is severe, according to the CPCB. Delhi traders wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi claiming losses of Rs 300 crore since Diwali because concerned residents are avoiding stepping out and are ordering goods online. ‘Every third child in Delhi has damaged lungs and faces a life shortened by nearly 10 years compared to children in cleaner environments,’ they said. Long-term exposure to toxic air raises risks of heart disease, stroke and asthma. Sadly, even when the WHO says most of this is preventable, there is little action on the ground. Meanwhile, greenery in the capital continues to vanish, worsening the crisis. Public frustration also stems from the government’s lack of credible action. Half-hearted steps like smog towers and cloud-seeding have proved ineffective. But if Beijing, once the world’s most smog-choked city, can clean its air—with a jump from just 13 ‘good days’ in 2013 to over 300 annual ‘good days’ by 2023—why can’t New Delhi? Citizens argue, “There are ways to cut pollution. Rounding up protesters isn’t one of them.” Cities along the coastline like Mumbai and Chennai, which benefit from sea breeze, too have seen their air quality deteriorate. Official AQI averages hover around 250, but independent environmentalists suspect it to be far worse. The mismatch between official readings and ‘independent’ readings was exposed by a news channel which on 5 November



Photo: Getty Images

accompanied environmentalist Bhavreen Kandhari, co-founder of a network of Indian mothers demanding clean air for their children, carrying a portable monitoring set. Her meter recorded AQI levels at Anand Vihar nearing 500, while official CPCB readings showed only 300. At the ITO monitoring station, her device showed 312 against the official AQI of 145. Many monitoring stations, residents note, have quietly stopped functioning. Even the large display board outside the ministry of earth sciences near Lodhi Garden has been blank for weeks. “Could this be deliberate?” citizens ask. Environmentalist Reenu Paul conducted a similar exercise in Dehradun where she installed an air pollution meter at her Rajpur Road home. The government had set up its monitoring station inside the Doon University located near a forest. She found the gap between official and actual readings narrowing—but not because the air had improved. It was because pollution in residential zones had risen sharply, especially in traffic-heavy areas like ISBT and Ghantaghar. Experts say automobiles now account for more than 20 per cent of India’s carbon emissions

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growth in personal vehicles, rise in the number of SUVs and two-wheelers and a shift of freight transport from railways to roadways under the government’s Automotive Mission Plan have worsened the crisis. In Delhi-NCR, studies show automobile emissions account for 47 per cent of PM 2.5 emission during the winter—contradicting the Delhi government narrative that blames Punjab’s stubble burning. According to the Air Quality Life Index (AQLI) 2025, of the world’s 100 most polluted cities, 93 are in India. Children growing up in Delhi are likely to lose up to ten years of life expectancy due to toxic air. The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) reports that only 12 per cent of Indian cities have monitoring stations capable of tracking all six key pollutants. Of the CPCB’s 966 operational stations across 419 cities, many are manual and fail to meet the minimum requirement of 104 monitoring days annually. “A large number of India’s 252 cities have already crossed critically polluted levels,” warns Anusmita Roychowdhury, CSE’s deputy director-general. “The government must declare a national emergency and treat air pollution as a war-level crisis.” Instead, official denial persists. In Parliament, Union minister of state for health Anupriya Patel claimed there was no “conclusive data available to establish a direct correlation of death or disease exclusively due to air pollution”. Environmentalists say such statements betray the government’s unwillingness to act. They point out that pollution is not an act of nature but a result of bad policy. For citizens, the battle for clean air has become a fight for transparency and accountability. When monitors are manipulated and data is hidden, the poor pay the price with their lungs. As one protester summed it up: “If breathing clean air becomes a privilege, democracy itself is in danger.” ■



Plastic pellets from the cargo ship that spilled its load off Kochi have washed ashore in faraway Thiruvananthapuram; (below) a Greenpeace protest in Thiruvananthapuram

The sun rises over Kerala’s southern coast, casting a dull orange light across the Arabian Sea. But what was once a familiar scene of nets unfurling, boats gliding and fishermen shouting over the surf has turned eerily quiet. Nets lie stacked in courtyards, their threads hardened by salt and neglect. Engines rest on the sand, corroding in the brine. The sea, once a giver of life, has turned into a place of unease and despair.

Nearly six months have passed since the MSC Elsa 3, a Liberian-flagged container vessel owned by the Mediterranean Shipping Company, capsized off the Kochi coast. What began as a maritime accident has since turned into one of South Asia’s worst ecological and livelihood crises in recent memory.

The wreck released oil, chemicals and millions of plastic nurdles that have spread across India’s southern coast and beyond, leaving behind contaminated waters, dead fish and a scarred shoreline. The tragedy is silent yet palpable.

Like the oil that leaked into the sands, the aftereffects of the accident have seeped into daily life, breaking familiar rhythms that defined the life of Kerala’s coastal villages.

Along the stretch between Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram, fishers live in hesitation. In Anchuthengu near Varkala, 38-year-old Fazil Vettoor walks slowly towards his boat at dawn. This was a ritual that once filled him with purpose. “I used to earn more than thirty thousand rupees a week,” he says. “There was always something to take home. Now, even after going out for hours, the nets come up empty or tangled in plastic.”

Before the shipwreck, the sea was generous. Sardines, mackerel and prawns were plentiful. On good days, Fazil could earn enough not only to feed his family but also to save. His wife sold dried fish at the market, his children went to school, life followed the rhythm of the tides. Today, the tides bring a thin film of oil that shimmers in the sunlight, white plastic nurdles that look deceptively like fish eggs, and sharp metal fragments that rip through nets and even boat hulls.

He bends to pick up a handful of nurdles from the beach. They look harmless, like tiny pearls, but “they get stuck in everything”, he says. “Engines, nets, even fish bellies.” From Alappuzha to Vettucaud, Pulluvila to Kollam, stories like Fazil’s echo across the Kerala coast. Daily

earnings have dropped and the villagers’ confidence in the sea is badly shaken.

The day the sea changed

It was on 24 May 2025 that the MSC Elsa 3 capsized just 14.5 nautical miles off Kochi. The vessel was carrying 643 containers, including 60 filled with plastic nurdles and several others with hazardous chemicals such as hydrazine and calcium carbide. More than 450 tonnes of diesel and furnace oil were stored in its tanks. When it went down, a toxic cocktail of oil, chemicals and microplastics began to spread into the sea.

In the early hours that followed, some coastal residents saw black streaks floating towards the shore. At first, there was confusion. Officials called it a ‘manageable spill’. By the next day, a strong smell of oil spread across the coastal belt, and fishermen began bringing up nets soaked in dark sludge.

The company that owned the ship claimed it had acted promptly. It told the Kerala High Court that the oil sheen had been cleaned, containers recovered, and over a thousand tonnes of debris removed from beaches between Kochi and Rameswaram. But those living along the coast say otherwise.

“The sea never cleaned itself,” says Musthafa Hahsan, a fisherman from Varkala. “Even now, when we pull the nets, the slick sticks to our hands; fish smell of oil; buyers turn away.”

The hidden contaminants

Scientific evidence has since confirmed the fishers’ fears. The Centre for Marine Living Resources and Ecology, in the ministry of earth sciences, collected water and sediment samples from the sea between Kochi and Kanyakumari. The samples showed elevated levels of petroleum hydrocarbons such as naphthalene, anthracene and pyrene, all known carcinogens. They also revealed high concentrations of heavy metals including nickel, copper and lead.

“These pollutants enter the marine food chain through zooplankton,” says Dr A. Biju Kumar, vice chancellor of the Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies. “Zooplankton are the foundation of the marine ecosystem, the first food for larvae and small fish. When they are contaminated, the entire food web suffers.”

According to Dr Kumar, hydrocarbon-

degrading bacteria have multiplied near the wreck site, a sign that oil contamination remains active. “We are witnessing a slow ecological collapse,” he says. “Sensitive species are disappearing. Fish larvae have shown toxic responses. Seabirds have been found preening oil from their feathers. This is not a local event; it’s a regional environmental crisis.”

The contamination is not confined to Kerala. Currents have carried plastic nurdles into the Gulf of Mannar and even as far as Sri Lanka’s western and southern coasts. The Marine Environment Protection Authority of Sri Lanka has confirmed the presence of debris from the MSC Elsa 3, making this one of the few shipwrecks in South Asia with such widespread transboundary effects.

A crisis without relief

While scientists study the sea, coastal families are fighting a more immediate battle. Many have exhausted their savings. Boats lie damaged, engines rust in salt water, and nets, once their lifeline, now hang like symbols of despair.

In Pulluvila, 37-year-old fisherman Denson Joseph has not taken his own boat out in weeks. “I spent seventy thousand rupees repairing my engine and nets after they were shredded by floating debris,” he says. “Now I work on another man’s boat for less than half of what I used to earn. I have two children in school, and every day I think about giving up fishing.”



‘They used to run to the shore at dawn. Now they hesitate’

Six months after a ship capsized near Kochi, Kerala’s coastal communities are still reeling from the aftereffects, writes **K.A. Shaji**

The crisis has disrupted not just an ecosystem but a mini economy and entangled lives and livelihoods. Women who sold fish at the local markets have lost customers. Ice plant workers, boat mechanics and small traders dependent on fishing income now find themselves without work.

“It’s not just a loss of fish but a loss of faith,” says Fr Eugene Pereira, vicar general of the Latin Catholic Diocese of Thiruvananthapuram, who has long worked with coastal communities. “These people have known hardship for generations, but this disaster has taken away something deeper—the certainty that the sea will provide.”

The struggle for justice

In June, the Kerala government filed an admiralty suit before the High Court seeking Rs 9,531 crore as compensation from the Mediterranean Shipping Company. This figure included claims for environmental damage, loss of income and clean-up expenses. The company contested the claim, arguing that the ship sank outside India’s territorial waters and that its liability was limited under international maritime conventions.

After months of hearings, the court directed MSC to deposit Rs 1,227.6 crore as a security amount. The court also ordered the detention of its sister vessel, MSC Akiteta II, at Vizhinjam Port until payment was made. The company has yet to deposit the amount, and the ship remains under legal custody.

Kerala’s Advocate General K. Gopalakrishna Kurup told the court that the state had full jurisdiction because the environmental and economic impacts clearly extended into Indian waters and the Exclusive Economic Zone. “The ‘polluter pays’ principle is not a slogan,” he said in court. “It is a duty enshrined in our

environmental jurisprudence.”

The National Institute of Oceanography has since been commissioned to assess both short-term and long-term losses. The findings will determine if the state can revise its compensation claim upward in the coming months.

For fisherfolk, the language of the courts offers little comfort. Most do not even understand what ‘jurisdiction’ or ‘admiralty suit’ means. What they do understand is that their lives have been turned upside down.

“The government speaks of crores, but we are yet to see a single rupee,” says Jackson Pollayil, president of the Kerala Swatantra Matsya Thozhilali Federation, which represents around 10,000 artisanal fishers in the state. “When the court tells us to file claims, it expects us to produce documents that most of us do not have. We don’t keep receipts for nets or repairs. Everything is informal. How can we prove what we have lost?”

Under the current process, fishers must submit individual claims through the high court with supporting evidence. Deadlines are short, legal help is costly and paperwork is unfamiliar territory for communities that live hand to mouth. Many simply give up.

Greenpeace India, which investigated the aftermath of the wreck, has warned in its report titled ‘Wrecked Futures’ that the Elsa 3 disaster is creating a ‘cycle of debt and desperation’ in coastal Kerala. “The legal structure favours corporate entities that can hire lawyers and delay proceedings,” says Amruta S.N., a climate campaigner with the organisation. “Meanwhile, communities wait for justice that may take years.”

The road to recovery

Recovery, experts say, cannot rely on litigation alone. It requires a long-term, coordinated response that integrates ecological rehabilitation with livelihood restoration. The Kerala government has announced plans for a relief package, but its scale and timeline remain unclear.

Public health experts warn that communities exposed to chemical residues and microplastics could face health risks for years. Marine biologists are calling for sustained monitoring of water and sediment quality. Economists emphasise the need for direct income support to families who have lost their means of subsistence.

For now, many households survive on informal credit from local lenders. Women have taken up casual labour to fill the gaps, while children help mend nets or collect plastic from beaches for cleanup drives.

“It is painful to see the next generation growing up afraid of the sea,” says Fr Pereira. “They used to run to the shore at dawn. Now they hesitate.” ■

Lessons from Mamdani’s election campaign

Aakar Patel

The first amendment of the United States constitution reads as follows: ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.’

The language seems slightly archaic because it was written in 1789, but is clear enough for us to understand that freedom of speech cannot be curtailed. It can however be restricted, for example when related to threats of violence or pornography.

In 2010, the US Supreme Court eliminated restrictions on election funding, ruling that such limits violated the right to free speech under the First Amendment. Corporations and wealthy individuals were now free to influence elections by creating political action committees (PACs) that would spend money on advertising.

This was the outcome of the famous *Citizens United vs Federal Election Commission* (FEC) case which fatally damaged US democracy because both their major political parties are now permanently influenced by corporate interests.

If the reason you won your seat is your donors, then it is likely that your actions in office will also be influenced by them. This seems to have become inescapable in US politics. However, there is another way of doing politics, and though its formula is simple, its execution is very hard.

To attempt something with a high rate of failure takes a certain kind of determination



Photo: Getty Images

and outlook. To succeed in such a task is truly remarkable.

An example of this comes to us from the recent New York mayoral election. The two major candidates had two different approaches to contesting. The first approach is the one preferred by both major political parties and their candidates, which is to win by raising more money than the opponent. This money is then deployed chiefly on messaging: television advertising and mailers designed to overwhelm the voter with positive impressions about the candidate paying for the ad and negative ones about the opponent.

The more ads one can put out, the greater the chance of success. A report from 2018 headlined ‘How money affects elections’

If the reason you won your seat is your donors, then it is likely that your actions in office will also be influenced by them

found that more than 90 per cent of the time, the candidate who raised and spent more than their rival, won their race for a seat in Congress (their version of the Lok Sabha).

Andrew Cuomo, one of the two main candidates in New York, took this approach and raised more than five times the money his opponent had. He lost. Why? (Think about it.)

The second approach is to convince voters not through advertising but through personal conversations. This is effective but does not seem to be scalable. It seems especially absurd to attempt it in a general election where voters number in the millions. The number of people required on such a staggering scale would surely cost more than advertising. And it would be difficult for these people to open conversations with strangers, because many at home would either not answer the door or having answered it, would promptly ask the person to leave or, if accosted in the street, would simply not stop.

Even if they chose to speak, it would not be easy to convince them to vote for the candidate. After all these ifs and buts, the success rate is likely worse than 1 in 10. Meaning that for every person that is convinced into voting for the candidate, another 10 slam the door, say they will support the other side or just walk on.

How would one keep these workers motivated? What would prevent them from pretending they had been knocking on doors and stopping strangers on the street, when they’d actually stayed at home or whiled away time in a café? These are some of the reasons this second approach is not preferred and why candidates choose to just raise more money.

It can only succeed under certain conditions.

First, that the message is compelling to a large number of potential voters. Second, that the workers are highly motivated and not put off by the high rate of failure. The motivation of the workers here is not money but the cause. It is similar to propagation and proselytising. Third, that there is some mechanism that monitors the engagement and sees it through to voting day. Meaning to repeatedly stay in touch with people once contact is made.

This was the approach used by Zohran Mamdani, the Indian-origin socialist who won the election on 4 November and will be New York’s next mayor. Those who say he is inexperienced and knows little about leadership do not understand he has already displayed the highest level of leadership: by motivating people to throw themselves into something known to have a high rate of failure, and then succeed at it.

An army of over 1 lakh volunteers trained and led by 700 senior volunteers worked for Mamdani’s campaign. While most were young, there were also many middle-aged and old people who willingly gave hours, doing physical work over many months for the cause they believed in.

More than \$40 million was spent by corporates backing Andrew Cuomo to paint Zohran as a terrorist. They lost to the volunteers who were paid nothing.

This win will be studied for a long time because it reduces to bare essence the two approaches to winning elections and shows the limits of billionaire power.

As activists in America say: They have money, we have people. ■

Views are personal



The rise of Zohran Mamdani and what it means for the Hindutva project

Ashok Swain

The election of Zohran Mamdani as mayor of New York City is undeniably historic. His ascent signals big shifts in identity politics, diaspora mobilisation and progressive global linkages. His success has ripple effects, and Indians, whether they are aligned with his vision or opposed to it, know this. For the Modi regime, Mamdani's rise is a strategic headache.

That a high-visibility American leader of Indian descent, with global reach, openly criticises Modi, invokes India's pluralist past and identifies with an inclusive vision of citizenship means the Hindutva project is now facing a new kind of adversary: one whose notes of dissent will echo not just in New York but among diaspora communities, global progressive networks and India-outward foreign policy discourses.

Mamdani's platform blends socialist economic ideals—rent freezes, expanded public housing and an aggressive affordability agenda—with a proud and visible embrace of his Indian heritage. In his victory speech, he invoked Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of an inclusive India and closed with the Bollywood song *Dhoom Machale*, symbolically merging his political idealism with cultural pride.

Throughout his campaign, Mamdani frequently spoke about his Indian roots and drew a contrast between the pluralist India he grew up hearing about and the exclusionary one represented by Modi's BJP, "an India that only has room for certain kinds of Indians", as he put it. He has publicly described Modi as a "war criminal", linking his condemnation to the 2002 Gujarat riots and what he calls a broader pattern of political mobilisation through communal division.

From the perspective of the Hindutva camp, this matters at three levels.

First, Mamdani offers a counter-narrative to the aggressively advertised image of Modi in India as the globally celebrated 'strong leader' with broad diaspora appeal. For years, the BJP government has sought to project India as a globally resurgent nation under Modi, a confident India that Indian-origin leaders abroad can embrace. But Mamdani challenges that script. His open and eloquent rejection of Modi's divisive



Merging political idealism with cultural pride: in his victory speech, Zohran Mamdani invoked Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of an inclusive India and closed with *Dhoom Machale*

politics can easily become another template for Indian-origin leaders abroad, and Indian diplomats will likely have to grapple with this in days to come.

Second, Mamdani's brand of politics reinforces the notion that Hindutva's reach is not confined to India's borders. The Hindu-nationalist project has increasingly been embedded in global networks of political mobilisation, diaspora advocacy, transnational organisations and international media. Mamdani's election creates a mirror image: a Western politician of Indian origin who challenges the Hindutva narrative from outside, lending a fillip to opposition at home.

This is hardly a benign phenomenon for the BJP or its affiliated groups: as the diaspora becomes more assertive, the potential for external pressure and

transnational activist linkages against Hindutva will rise. Since Mamdani brings global visibility, a progressive profile and access to American political infrastructure, he becomes a symbol of global support for those who oppose Hindutva inside India. That makes his ascent more than symbolic—it converts diaspora dissent into a credible international voice.

Third, the optics and practical implications matter for India-US relations and for bilateral diplomacy. The Modi government has long positioned itself as a reliable partner to the US, emphasising strategic alignment, economic partnership and a 'diaspora bridge' that cements India's status as a global stakeholder. Meanwhile, the US has refrained from strong public criticism of India's internal politics in pursuit of strategic goals. But a figure like

Mamdani's open and eloquent rejection of Modi's divisive politics can easily become a template for Indian-origin leaders abroad

Mamdani complicates that calculus: his prominence means India cannot assume that Indian American voices will uniformly endorse its policies or that the diaspora will by default tilt in favour of New Delhi's narratives.

In other words, the Modi regime's diaspora strategy now faces a counter-current in which an Indian-origin leader in the US might engage with India not just in terms of strategic convenience or economic partnership but also India's outlook on pluralist values and human rights. It is, therefore, misguided to think of Mamdani's rise as an isolated event, for his success will empower diaspora communities critical of Modi, giving them a champion in high office and feeding their sense that criticism of India is not disloyalty. It will also signal to Western elites and media that the Indian government's narrative will now face challenge even from its global diaspora.

Hindutva groups assessing the fallout have an awkward choice: to engage or to ignore. They could try to ignore Mamdani, but the more he uses his platform to speak about India, the more Indian politics will become embedded in diaspora debates. They could attack, but doing so risks producing a backlash that Modi would prefer to avoid. They could try to engage, which would force the regime to open up spaces for critique and opposition at home and abroad.

All this is not to suggest that Mamdani is about to trigger the collapse of the Hindutva project or that his new stature will immediately produce a big shift in Indian politics. But Mamdani's rise certainly changes the battlefield. India's political trajectory will now feature more prominently in global diaspora discussions, in Western city halls and progressive networks.

Mamdani's ascent is bad news for Modi and the Hindutva crowd because it erodes their ability to monopolise the narrative of Indian-origin success in the West; it undercuts the assumption that diaspora leaders will align with their project, and it produces new vectors of critique that can connect the Opposition in India with pressure and support abroad. ■

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The national song and a history lesson

Hasnain Naqvi

When Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay wrote *Vande Mataram* in 1875, it was composed as a hymn longer than the two verses we know as the national song. An even longer version of the hymn later appeared in his novel *Anandamath* (1882), set during the Great Bengal Famine of the early 1770s.

On 7 November, while inaugurating a year-long commemoration of the 150th anniversary of *Vande Mataram*'s first appearance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi replayed an old RSS tune—that in dropping the later stanzas of the song, the Congress in 1937 had sown the seeds of Partition.

As if on cue from the master, Sangh ideologue Ram Madhav echoed the same claim in a column that appeared in the *Indian Express* the next day. The central thrust of the criticism is that by adopting only the first two stanzas—the ones that do not contain explicit Hindu religious imagery—the Congress 'mutilated' the song to appease Muslims—and this decision, the

specious argument goes, paved the way to Partition. This argument is, in fact, a wilful misreading of how and why the CWC took the decision to abridge the national song.

The most significant rebuttal of the Sangh retelling of this story comes from the documented exchange between Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru, leading up to the CWC resolution. Historian Sabyasachi Bhattacharya details this pivotal consultation in his authoritative work *Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song*. "Three days before the [CWC] meeting, on October 26, 1937, Tagore wrote to Nehru on this issue. It was Gurudev [as Tagore was widely known] himself, with his own special relationship to *Vande Mataram*, who suggested that the first two stanzas of the song be adopted... His letter, in fact, profoundly influenced the resolution in its entirety."

Tagore, who had himself set the tune for *Vande Mataram* and first sang it at the 1896 Congress session, made a distinction between the song's political power and its religious source. In his view, the first two stanzas, which invoked the motherland in terms of its natural beauty, bounty and secular

power ('rich with thy hurrying streams, bright with thy orchard gleams' etc.) were a truly national expression.

The Great Bengal Famine, referenced in *Anandamath*, was one of the deadliest in recorded history, killing millions. It devastated the Bengal Presidency (modern-day West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and parts of Bangladesh), killing about a third of the population, according to some estimates.

The effects of the crop failure due to drought were greatly exacerbated by the exploitative taxation, hoarding and export policies of the East India Company that prioritised British profits over local relief.

In the religious-nationalist context of *Anandamath*, where the sanyasis rally to fight starvation and oppression, raid grain stores and attack tax collectors—actions mirroring the 1770s Sanyasi Rebellion, triggered by famine-induced desperation—the song *Vande Mataram* (Hail Motherland) is a war cry.

But unlike the historical Sanyasi Rebellion (between 1763 and 1800), which featured armed uprisings against the British East India Company by both Hindu sanyasis and Muslim fakirs, Bankim's novel reimagines this slice of history with a communal overtone, where Hindu sanyasis, living in the eponymous Anandamath (Abode of Bliss) vow to liberate Mother India, personified as a starving, enslaved goddess, from the local Muslim



Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay

nawabs (seen as tyrannical tax collectors) and the East India Company (symbolised as the root evil).

Tagore's advice to Nehru was clear: 'I freely concede that the whole of Bankim's *Vande Mataram* poem, read together with its context, is liable to be interpreted in ways that might wound Moslem susceptibilities, but a national song, though derived from it, which has spontaneously come to consist only of the first two stanzas of the original poem, need not suffer from that disadvantage.'

Context of the 1937 CWC Resolution

The Congress Working Committee (CWC) met in Calcutta (now Kolkata) from 26 October to 1 November 1937, under the presidency of Jawaharlal Nehru. The resolution adopted on 29 October limited the singing of *Vande Mataram* at national gatherings to its first two stanzas, acknowledging that while these evoked 'the beauty and abundance of the motherland' with 'nothing objectionable from the religious or any other point of view', the later stanzas contained 'certain allusions and a religious ideology which may not be in keeping with the ideology of other religious groups in India.'

The resolution was an attempt to be inclusive amid rising communal tensions post-1937 provincial elections, where the Congress had formed governments but faced protests from Muslim League members in legislatures against mandatory singing of the full song.

While Muslim nationalist leaders in the Congress—notably Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who served as Congress president (1933–1934) and was a key voice for Hindu-Muslim unity—viewed the resolution positively, as a

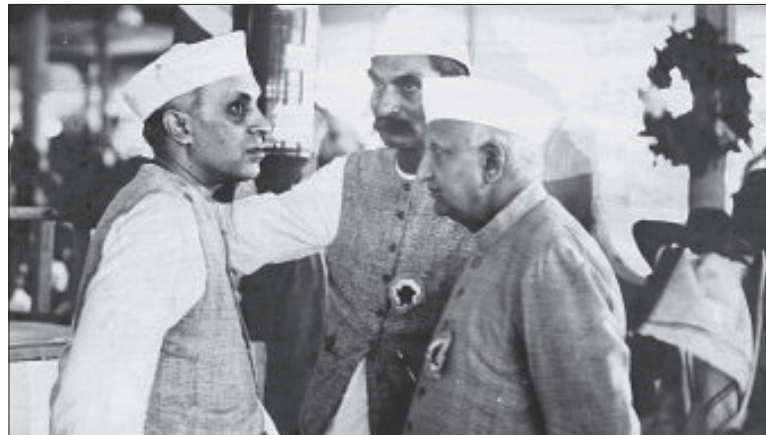
compromise fostering unity, separatist voices like Jinnah in the Muslim League were opposed to the adoption of the song even in its abridged form.

The CWC resolution was, therefore, a consensus-building move, steered by secular-minded nationalist leaders of the Congress—the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Subhas Bose, Rajendra Prasad and Sarojini Naidu. In accepting the concerns [of the League separatists] as valid, the CWC was signalling empathy for Muslim objections without compulsion.

This stand was echoed in Gandhi's 1939 clarification: "The Congress... has retained as national song only those stanzas to which no objection could be taken on religious or other grounds."

To, then, dress a 'unity front' resolution as a move that sowed the seeds of division, of Partition, as Prime Minister Modi and his minions would have us believe, is not just a lie, it's also a mockery of the very song they wish to exalt and commemorate. ■

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The CWC resolution was a consensus-building move, steered by secular-minded leaders of the Congress, including Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and Rajendra Prasad

The most significant rebuttal of the Sangh retelling of this story is a documented exchange between Tagore and Nehru, leading up to the CWC resolution of 1937

Karnataka’s Menstrual Leave Policy 2025- a pioneering step toward dignity, wellness, and inclusion at work

“Progress with Purpose” — Karnataka’s new gold standard in gender-sensitive governance.



Representative Image

Stories of Change: Voices from the Ground

The policy’s impact is best understood not through statistics, but through the voices of the women it touches.

Priya Sharma, 28, Senior Software Engineer, Bengaluru

“Before this policy, those first two days were the hardest. I’d sit at my desk, pushing through the pain, afraid to exhaust my sick leave. When the announcement came, I felt something shift — like the system finally saw me. Now, when I take that day, I rest without guilt. I come back more focused, more at peace. It’s not just a leave; it’s trust.”

Lalita Devi, 45, Quality Controller, Peenya Industrial Area

“In the factory, we’re on our feet for hours. Missing a day meant losing wages, so we’d just take painkillers and keep going. Now, with this law, I can rest when I need to. I don’t have to choose between my health and my family’s food. It feels like dignity — like the government understands us.” Their words reflect a quiet revolution — one that begins with policy but blossoms in everyday lives. It’s the kind of change that reshapes not just work culture, but social consciousness.

economic sense — a model of empathetic efficiency where well-being fuels productivity.

Cultural Shift: Breaking Taboos, Building Respect

Beyond its legal and economic dimensions, the Menstrual Leave Policy 2025 represents a cultural revolution.

For centuries, menstruation in India has been burdened with taboos and misinformation. Many women grew up being told to hide their pain, to stay silent, to carry on as if nothing were happening. This silence bred shame — and shame bred stigma.

Karnataka’s decision to legislate menstrual leave does more than provide a benefit; it legitimises conversation. It tells every girl, every woman, and every man that menstruation is natural — and deserves respect, not secrecy.

By normalising menstrual health in workplaces, the policy chips away at generations of stigma. It empowers open discussion about menstrual hygiene, emotional well-being, and workplace empathy.

This transformation is especially significant for the informal workforce — women in garment factories, sanitation work, and small-scale industries. For them, a single paid day off can mean the difference between unbearable pain and dignified rest, between silence and self-care.

It says to every worker: You are seen. You are valued. You matter.

A Holistic Approach to Women’s Health and Empowerment

The Menstrual Leave Policy is not an isolated reform — it forms part of Karnataka’s larger vision of comprehensive women’s health and empowerment.

The state has already taken major strides in ensuring affordable menstrual hygiene products, particularly for students and rural communities. Through partnerships with local self-help groups and NGOs, Karnataka has distributed low-cost sanitary products, built awareness around menstrual hygiene, and launched school-based education programmes to normalise menstrual conversations from an early age.

This holistic approach — combining access, awareness, and accommodation — ensures that women’s health is supported at every stage of life.

Access ensures that menstrual hygiene products are available and affordable.

Awareness breaks myths, encouraging open dialogue about periods. Accommodation — through policies like menstrual leave — ensures that workplaces align with women’s real needs.

Together, these initiatives weave a fabric of inclusion — one that views women’s health not as a side issue, but

as a pillar of social and economic progress.

Setting a National Benchmark: Karnataka’s Call to the Nation

Karnataka’s leadership has never been about following trends; it has always been about setting them.

By enacting the Menstrual Leave Policy 2025, the state has raised the standard for what equitable governance can achieve. It provides a blueprint for the rest of India — a model that other states and private enterprises can emulate in the pursuit of workplace equality.

In an age where nations are rethinking the future of work, Karnataka has taken a bold step toward a future of care — where policy is not just efficient but empathetic, where economic ambition coexists with social justice.

This is the kind of leadership that doesn’t just build economies — it builds societies.

A Call to Action: Beyond Compliance to Culture

The government has done its part by setting the framework. Now, the onus rests with every employer, every HR manager, and every team leader to carry forward the spirit of the policy.

Workplaces must move beyond mere compliance. They must build cultures where taking menstrual leave is not whispered about, questioned, or judged — but accepted with respect.

Training managers to respond with empathy, encouraging open dialogue, and normalising menstrual wellness in workplace discussions are essential next steps. Every organisation in Karnataka now has the opportunity to become a model of inclusion — to prove that compassion and productivity can thrive together.

When Humanity Defines Progress

Karnataka’s Menstrual Leave Policy 2025 is more than legislation; it is a statement of values. It reaffirms that true progress lies not in how fast we grow, but in how fairly we grow — in how deeply we care for those who make that growth possible.

By recognising menstrual health as a legitimate workplace need, the state has given voice to millions who were unseen. It has redefined innovation itself — proving that the most transformative ideas are not always technological, but human.

In the story of modern India, Karnataka’s vision will stand out as a chapter of courage, empathy, and foresight — a reminder that leadership begins where understanding meets action. Because when a society chooses dignity, it chooses strength.

And when a government chooses empathy, it chooses the future. Karnataka has chosen both.

Karnataka’s Menstrual Leave Policy 2025 is more than legislation; it is a statement of values. It reaffirms that true progress lies not in how fast we grow, but in how fairly we grow — in how deeply we care for those who make that growth possible.

The Spirit of Progress: Innovation Meets Compassion Karnataka has always been a state that defines India’s forward march. From the buzzing technology corridors of Bengaluru to the manufacturing clusters of Mysuru and Peenya, it has powered the nation’s modern economy through vision, enterprise, and relentless innovation.

But Karnataka’s true distinction lies not just in its machines or markets — it lies in its humanity. Progress, after all, is not measured only in GDP or productivity. It is also measured in empathy — in the courage to recognise and respond to the everyday realities that shape people’s lives.

And once again, Karnataka has proven that leadership and compassion are not opposites — they are partners in progress.

With the introduction of the Karnataka Menstrual Leave Policy 2025, the state has made history. It has become the first in India to mandate one day of paid menstrual leave per month across both public and private sectors. In doing so, it has transformed a deeply personal experience — often hidden, often misunderstood — into a matter of public dignity and professional fairness.

This is not simply a reform in labour law. It is a cultural evolution — a declaration that progress is truly inclusive only when it respects the physical and emotional realities of

everyone who contributes to it.

From Silence to Support: A Change Long Overdue

For generations, menstruation — a natural, recurring biological process experienced by half the population — has existed in silence. In workplaces across India, women navigated this monthly cycle with quiet endurance. They worked through pain, discomfort, and fatigue, balancing professional expectations with an unspoken pressure to conceal their experience.

In offices and factories alike, the lack of understanding around menstrual health meant that many women had to use their limited sick leave to manage severe cramps or exhaustion. For daily wage earners, a missed day often meant a lost income. In this silence, productivity dropped, morale suffered, and well-being was compromised.

The traditional workplace — built around male norms and assumptions — never accounted for this biological reality. It was as if half the workforce was expected to adapt to an environment that wasn’t designed for them.

Now, Karnataka has broken that silence.

The Menstrual Leave Policy 2025 recognises what countless women have always known: menstruation is not a sickness, but it can demand rest. By introducing a separate, paid leave specifically for menstrual health, the

state has institutionalised care, trust, and equality in one stroke.

It is a correction of history — a moment when policy meets compassion.

The Policy: A Framework of Trust and Dignity

The strength of the Karnataka Menstrual Leave Policy lies in its simplicity — and its trust in people.

The policy guarantees one paid day of leave per month, in addition to existing casual or sick leave. No medical certificate is required. No questions are asked. The system believes women when they say they need rest.

That act of trust is revolutionary. It shifts the focus from justification to understanding, from suspicion to respect.

The leave applies equally to employees in both public and private sectors, ensuring that compassion is not confined to government offices but extended to the full spectrum of the state’s workforce — from high-rise tech parks to garment factories, from schools to service industries.

By codifying menstrual leave as a legal right, Karnataka has declared a clear message: health and dignity are not privileges — they are entitlements.

Empathy as Smart Economics

While the policy stems from compassion, its economic logic is

equally powerful.

Some may initially view paid menstrual leave as a cost to employers. But Karnataka’s visionary leadership understands that this is, in fact, an investment in human capital — a prosperity dividend that pays back through improved morale, loyalty, and performance.

When employees are supported, they thrive. When they are trusted, they give their best.

In a world where top talent chooses workplaces that value well-being and inclusion, this policy gives Karnataka companies a distinct competitive edge.

Attracting and Retaining Talent

The state’s dynamic industries — from IT and biotechnology to aerospace and manufacturing — depend on skilled professionals. For women in these sectors, a workplace that recognises their biological needs is not just appealing; it is empowering.

A company in Karnataka now sends a clear message to prospective employees across India and abroad: We respect you. We understand you. We value you.

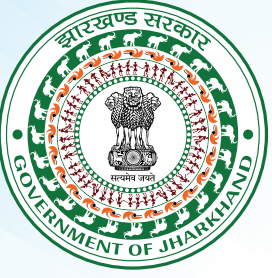
Such respect translates into retention. Employees who feel seen and supported remain more committed to their organizations. They invest their creativity and loyalty into their work — reducing costly turnover and building resilient corporate cultures rooted in trust.

Reducing Presenteeism, Boosting Productivity

There is a quiet crisis in many workplaces called presenteeism — when employees work despite illness or discomfort, leading to lower focus and quality of output. By allowing women to take a day of menstrual rest without fear or stigma, the policy ensures that they return rejuvenated, focused, and more productive.

This isn’t about fewer workdays. It’s about better workdays. In the long run, this makes





झारखण्ड

25

अनंत संभावनाओं की ओर



स्कैन करें और झारखण्ड राज्य के रजत पर्व उत्सव के सहभागी बनें!

मुख्य अतिथि

श्री संतोष कुमार गंगवार
माननीय राज्यपाल, झारखण्ड

अध्यक्षता

श्री हेमन्त सोरेन
माननीय मुख्यमंत्री, झारखण्ड

विशिष्ट अतिथि

श्री के. राजू
ए.आई.सी.सी. के सी. डब्ल्यू.सी. के स्थायी आमंत्रित सदस्य एवं झारखण्ड प्रभारी

सम्मानित अतिथि

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श्री प्रदीप कुमार वर्मा माननीय संसद सदस्य, राज्य सभा	श्री चन्द्रेश्वर प्रसाद सिंह माननीय सदस्य, झारखण्ड विधान सभा



श्री संतोष कुमार गंगवार
माननीय राज्यपाल, झारखण्ड

श्री हेमन्त सोरेन
माननीय मुख्यमंत्री, झारखण्ड

सूचना एवं जनसंपर्क विभाग, झारखण्ड सरकार



STATES 360°



WEST BENGAL

BJP missteps and Mamata's inner turmoil

Shikha Mukerjee

Justice Abhijit Gangopadhyay, once an eccentric and outspoken judge of the Calcutta High Court known for his politically incorrect courtroom comments—he was called an ‘unguided missile’—lashed out recently at his own party, the BJP, which he joined after quitting his judicial post to contest last year’s Lok Sabha elections.

Yet barely 18 months after winning the elections, Gangopadhyay has sharply criticised the BJP’s ‘north Indian’ leadership for their inability to understand Bengal’s political tapestry.

In a recent TV interview, Gangopadhyay condemned the BJP’s central leadership for lacking the cultural insight needed to win Bengal. He further alleged that the party had no real intention of unseating chief minister Mamata Banerjee, feeding speculation that even Modi and Mamata tacitly prefer the political status quo. He urged imposition of President’s Rule in the state, claiming that the administration was so compromised that fair elections were impossible. He also accused the Election Commission of treating the Mamata government with undue leniency.

His statements seemed to echo broader sentiments in political circles and the gossip at tea shops across West Bengal—that the BJP repeatedly sabotages its own progress in West Bengal through a tone-deaf approach to Bengali culture and policy missteps.

From vandalising Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar’s statue during the 2019 campaign to attempting to cover up the unclothed and ferocious idol of Goddess Kali—whose worship involves meat, alcohol and song—the BJP has consistently stumbled over Bengali sensitivities. BJP supporters mocking

Bengalis for eating fish and meat during Navratri, and Visva-Bharati’s harassment of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen over alleged land encroachment, further inflamed public opinion.

There were other unforced errors: BJP IT cell chief Amit Malviya’s comment that Bengali was “not a language”; a Delhi Police circular referring to Bengali as ‘Bangladeshi language’; and, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma’s taunt against a Congress leader for singing Tagore’s *Amar Sonar Bangla*, now the national anthem of Bangladesh. A BJP MP from Karnataka added fuel to the fire by saying that Tagore wrote *Jana Gana Mana* to honour a British monarch.

Each of these incidents reinforced what Gangopadhyay has now said publicly: that the BJP leadership remains out of touch with Bengal’s cultural and political psyche.

Add to this list the BJP’s unwavering support for the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls by the Election Commission—which aimed at identifying ‘illegal migrants’—which has backfired in parts of Bengal. Though the party presents the drive as a campaign against undocumented Muslim immigrants, the reality is more complex. After 1971, a large



Photo: Getty Images

number of Hindu refugees from Bangladesh settled in West Bengal. Many of these migrants, long naturalised and integrated, now fear being branded infiltrators.

For several families, the ensuing uncertainty has proven devastating, with suicides reported among those unable to prove their citizenship. The BJP’s propaganda machine insists that SIR targets Muslim infiltrators allegedly aided by the TMC for electoral gain. But in practice, the fear it spreads cuts across communities, alienating Hindu refugees who once formed a loyal vote base.

In an attempt to reassure them, the BJP announced Citizenship Amendment Act camps across border districts, promising to regularise the status of Hindu migrants. Yet, instead of restoring trust, the overlapping narratives of exclusion and selective inclusion have only deepened voter anxiety.

For the TMC, this misstep is a gift—it

allows Mamata Banerjee to frame the BJP as both communal and incompetent, reinforcing her image as Bengal’s defender against Delhi’s ‘outsiders’.

However, the BJP received an unexpected gift from an unusual quarter: Humayun Kabir, MLA from Murshidabad’s Bharatpur, quit the Trinamool Congress and announced plans to form a new party aimed to woo voters in the Muslim-majority districts. Kabir’s entry threatens to split the Muslim vote bank and narrow the gap between Trinamool’s 46.7 per cent vote share and BJP’s 38.7 per cent, introducing fresh unpredictability ahead of elections.

There are other problems piling up for Mamata. And this time it is from within her own party’s tainted past. The recent bail granted to former minister Partha Chatterjee, scarred in connection with the cash-for-jobs scam in teachers’ recruitment, has reopened old wounds.

Chatterjee was once among Mamata’s most trusted lieutenants. His arrest in 2022, following the ED’s recovery of Rs 50 crore in cash from properties linked to his associate Arpita Mukherjee, had forced the chief minister to sack him in a desperate bid to contain the damage.

His release raises difficult questions. Chatterjee “knows too much”, as many in Kolkata put it—about internal dealings, party finances, and the network of favours that kept the TMC machinery running. Ignoring him might provoke him into breaking his silence.

The timing could not be worse. The state government is already struggling to comply with Supreme Court orders mandating re-evaluation of teachers’ recruitment, with tens of thousands of affected candidates demanding justice. Chatterjee’s return threatens to reignite protests and revive opposition attacks on corruption within the TMC.

Mamata Banerjee has faced such crises before—from the Saradha chit fund and Narada sting scandals involving former minister Mukul Roy, to factional feuds within her party. But as fatigue sets in after years in power, her ability to manage these fires simultaneously may be waning.

West Bengal’s politics today mirrors a peculiar symmetry: both the BJP and the TMC are being undermined by their own members and misjudgments. Gangopadhyay’s revolt exposes the BJP’s cultural alienation and factional unease; Kabir’s defection and Chatterjee’s bail expose the TMC’s internal fragility and moral exhaustion.

With the next election cycle not far, both parties find themselves on uncertain ground. The people of Bengal, meanwhile, watch with weary amusement—accustomed as ever to the endless drama of politics, betrayal and survival. ■

Gangopadhyay’s statements echo a widely held belief in political circles that the BJP sabotages its own progress in West Bengal

Why are these women fleeing in Bihar?



» Continued from page 1

The ‘Bharat Microfinance Report’ prepared by the RBI’s self-regulatory body Sa-Dhan finds that Bihar leads other states in outstanding microfinance credit, which stood at Rs 57,712 crore as of March 2025. Shabnam estimates that 1.08 crore women share the liability and the total liability, including accumulated interest, is much higher.

Her first-person account confirms what leaders of Bihar’s opposition alliance, like CPI-ML general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya, have repeatedly said. The government’s own statistics reveal that over 94 lakh families in Bihar have a monthly income of less than Rs 6,000 or

Rs 200 a day, which is lower than base-level MNREGA wages and certainly not enough to support a family of four or five members. The microfinance companies have unleashed a reign of terror in the state, Bhattacharya has been saying in his election rallies, with as many as eight to ten active in a single village.

In the just-concluded election, he points out in interviews, women raised slogans of ‘*Dus hazaar mein dum nahin/ Karz maañi se kam nahin*’ (the Rs 10,000 handout is no solution, loan waiver is a must)’. The election-time cash transfers will not solve Bihar’s debt crisis and calls for comprehensive loan waivers reverberate across the state.

While the Mahagathbandhan had promised to waive interest on loans disbursed to women, it is not nearly enough, says Shabnam, making a case for at least partial write-off of principal amounts and revised repayment schedules. If loans to big business can be written off, why not these small loans to the most vulnerable, she asks.

The incoming government in Bihar faces a stark challenge: to dismantle the debt trap, restore the dignity of these women borrowers and rebuild trust through a systemic overhaul. These women need more than sympathy; they are owed justice.

(Names have been changed to protect identities.) ■

Bihar leads other states in outstanding microfinance credit, which stood at ₹57,712 crore as of March 2025

STATES 360°



PUNJAB

Floods, fake grain and failed support

Herjinder

This year’s paddy harvesting season in Punjab began under a cloud of despair. Floodwaters inundated nearly every district, inflicting widespread crop damage.

Neighbouring Haryana too faced similar devastation. With the monsoon stretching longer than usual, experts, including those at Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, warned of a 15 to 20 per cent paddy production.

Yet, defying expectations, a totally different picture emerged once procurement began. Record after record started tumbling. Paddy arrivals in mandis soon began to overwhelm the market infrastructure. Several mandis ran short of basic storage materials like gunny bags. Procurement targets were not only achieved but were exceeded and that too well ahead of schedule—only for the process to suddenly stall, leaving many farmers stranded outside the mandis with unsold produce.

To make sense of this paradox, one must look closely at Punjab’s three most flood-affected districts. In Amritsar, for instance, officials reported complete crop loss on 61,256 acres. Yet, by early November the Food Corporation of India had procured 3.02 lakh metric tonnes, up from last year’s 2.98 lakh metric tonnes.

A similar story unfolded in Fazilka and Tarn Taran. In Fazilka, floods destroyed standing paddy across 33,123 acres, but procurement matched last year’s 2.14 lakh metric tonnes. Tarn Taran saw 23,308 acres submerged, but procurement rose to 9.29 lakh metric tonnes against 9.02 lakh metric tonnes last year.

The same pattern extended across Haryana, where government agencies completed their procurement by the first week of November, procuring five lakh metric tonnes more than last year. The sudden halt left farmers still waiting in line with little choice but to sell to private traders at distress prices.

The contradictions in these numbers—and the stories they conceal—raise troubling questions about the opacity of the procurement system itself.

A plausible theory points to the illicit influx of cheap paddy from Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan where the paddy districts are underdeveloped compared to Punjab and Haryana and farmers often have to sell at lower prices. If this cross-border movement of grain indeed took place, it could not have happened without the active collusion of traders and middlemen at multiple levels.

To curb such malpractice, the Haryana government had set up an online system called ‘Meri Fasal, Mera Byora’, that required farmers to obtain a market gate pass linked to their cultivable land before selling their produce. Officially, no paddy could enter a

Procurement targets were exceeded—only for the process to suddenly stall, leaving many farmers stranded



Photo: Getty Images

mandi without this pass.

But loopholes soon appeared. Typically, one acre yields around 25 quintals of paddy, yet gate passes were being issued for up to 35 quintals per acre—an inflated figure that conveniently allowed room for the unloading of additional grain possibly from other states.

Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) president Gurnam Singh Chaduni claims that land unfit for paddy was registered on the portal to obtain fake passes for outside grain. Reports of forged gate passes surfaced as well. By the time the government tried to plug the loophole by replacing gate passes with QR-coded passes, the procurement season was nearly over.

The government was eventually compelled to ban the inflow of paddy from other states. But did this actually resolve the problem? The ban applied only to the import of paddy, not rice. Farmer leaders in Haryana allege that traders have exploited this loophole—buying rice from other states, showing it on paper as paddy, and immediately selling it in government mandis.

Local farmer organisations in Karnal first exposed the scam, triggering political outcry and formation of a Special Investigation Team. However, as the inquiry progressed, a similar pattern was detected across multiple districts. Chaduni has since demanded that the case be handed over to the CBI.

Leader of the Opposition and former chief minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda has called it a scam “worth thousands of crores” and alleged that “more paddy has been purchased than what the state actually produces, and yet many farmers have not been paid the Minimum Support Price”.

In Punjab, attempts by farmers to take matters into their hands triggered new friction. Incidents of local farmers intercepting and turning back paddy-laden trucks arriving from Rajasthan at the Rajpura–Patli border in Fazilka were met with Rajasthan’s farmers blocking cotton trucks coming from Punjab. Since cotton fetches better prices in Rajasthan’s markets, many Punjab farmers sell their produce there. What began as a procurement scam soon escalated into an inter-state conflict between farming communities.

Punjab has filed an FIR related to the scam, and announced measures to ensure that procurement benefits local farmers only. Yet with procurement targets met and the FCI winding down operations, the action is regrettably late.

Farmers in Punjab and Haryana—already reeling from floods and falling yields—have borne the heaviest losses at a time when they most needed support. ■



उलगुलान के महानायक

भगवान

बिरसा मुंडा

की 150वीं जयंती

पर 25 वर्ष का

युवा झारखण्ड धरती आबा
को नमन करता है

जोहार

झारखण्ड के खूंटी स्थित उलिहातू की पहाड़ियों और जंगलों में जन्मा एक ऐसा महानायक, जिसने अपने साहस और संघर्ष से ब्रिटिश शासन को चुनौती दी। वे बिरसा मुंडा थे, जिन्हें उनके अनुयायियों ने धरती आबा भगवान बिरसा मुंडा के रूप में पूजा।

बिरसा मुंडा ने आदिवासियों के अधिकारों के लिए संघर्ष का बिगुल बजाया, उनका उद्देश्य स्पष्ट था। लोगों को उनकी भूमि और अधिकार वापस दिलाना।

बिरसा मुंडा के क्रांतिकारी विचारों से विचलित हो कर ब्रिटिश शासकों ने उन्हें गिरफ्तार कर जेल में डाल दिया गया। जेल में ही 09 जून 1900 को धरती आबा भगवान बिरसा मुंडा शहीद हो गए।

लेकिन उनके उलगुलान का संदेश थमा नहीं। बिरसा मुंडा समेत वीर पुरखों के आदर्शों पर चल कर लंबे संघर्ष और बलिदान के बाद आंदोलनकारियों ने झारखण्ड अलग राज्य का सपना पूरा किया। आज धरती आबा का युवा झारखण्ड हम सभी के समक्ष है।



श्री संतोष कुमार गंगवार
माननीय राज्यपाल, झारखण्ड

श्री हेमन्त सोरेन
माननीय मुख्यमंत्री, झारखण्ड

सूचना एवं जनसंपर्क विभाग, झारखण्ड सरकार

Climate summit or ‘climate casino’?



Photo: Getty Images

Pankaj Chaturvedi

Not many are hopeful that the ongoing climate summit (COP30) at Belém, Brazil, will yield tangible results. The cynicism is not without reason. Critics and protestors have dismissively called the event a ‘climate casino’, accusing world leaders of making empty promises and doing nothing amid growing alarm over unchecked environmental degradation. A staggering 50,000 delegates will converge during the 12-day summit (10-21 November) being held at this ‘gateway to the Amazon rainforest’—the world’s largest tropical forest, also known as the lungs of the earth, which produces 20 per cent of the planet’s oxygen and plays a critical role in global carbon sequestration. The slightly wishful idea of holding it in Belém is to draw global attention to the risks of unchecked deforestation, which is greatly exacerbating the effects of climate change.

Despite decades of conferences and pious pledges, the climate crisis has only worsened. Natural forests are dwindling at an alarming rate as governments yield to ‘development’ pressures and make over vast tracts to mining and other companies with an appetite for forest resources. These leaders are all ‘pro-business’, the protestors argue, indifferent to the environmental costs borne by the world’s poorest. “We can’t eat money,” they say, as millions lose homes and livelihoods to fires, floods and droughts. Government leaders and big business couldn’t care less, possibly because they don’t yet feel the heat.

Donald Trump, President of the United States, still one of the world’s biggest polluters, says climate change is a hoax. The heads of state of the world’s three largest polluters—China, the US and India—have all decided to stay away, underscoring their apathy. Which begs the question: have the COP summits—like the UN itself—lost their relevance? China, even leading in greenhouse gas emissions, has made impressive progress in renewable energy and electric vehicles, meeting 2030 targets ahead of schedule. On the other hand, India, Iran and the US remain heavily dependent on fossil fuels and show little interest in leading a global transition. They disregard the risks of small island countries in the Pacific Ocean (Marshall Islands, Samoa, Nauru and Fiji), the Caribbean (Barbados, Jamaica, Bahamas, Haiti, St Kitts and Nevis) and Indian

These leaders are all ‘pro-business’, the protestors argue, indifferent to the environmental costs borne by the world’s poorest

Ocean states (Maldives, Mauritius and Seychelles)—all at risk of being swallowed by rising seas. The urgency for climate action is underlined by the increase in extreme weather events—floods, droughts, wildfires and heatwaves affect nearly every region in the world. Last year was the hottest on record, with average surface temperatures exceeding 1.5 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels—the threshold agreed upon for year 2100, under the 2015 Paris Agreement (COP21). So, this limit was crossed decades earlier than anticipated, and UN analyses hint that without sharp cuts in emissions, temperatures could rise 2.3–2.5 degree Celsius by the end of the century. The scorching heatwaves of 2023 and 2024 affected Europe, the Americas and India, underlining once again the urgent need for effective emission reduction targets—the so-called NDCs (Nationally Determined Contributions). Beyond all the rhetoric and pledges, what the world needs are actionable, near-term strategies across the energy, industry and transport sectors. Renewable energy is central to the discussions, with goals to treble global renewable capacity and improve energy efficiency by 2030. Yet there are doubts about the sustainability of solar power. A typical solar panel lasts 25–30 years, and many early installations require replacement soon. This will create a surge in electronic waste made of toxic materials—cadmium, lead, selenium—that could contaminate soil and water if improperly disposed. Recycling solar panels is technically challenging, costly and inefficient, raising environmental concerns about the long-term viability of massive solar deployment. Yet another reason for the scepticism is countries invoking ‘national security’ concerns all the time and waging wars that have a massive environmental footprint. The ongoing Russia–Ukraine war, the Gaza conflict, the recent US strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities have collectively generated carbon emissions on a staggering scale, comparable to the annual output of some countries. Military emissions, often exempt from disclosure, remain one of the least discussed but most damaging contributors to global warming. While the 2015 Paris Agreement removed exemptions originally granted under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, major polluters like China, Israel and India remain reluctant to disclose military greenhouse gas emissions. And yet the optimists see COP30 as the last chance to display the collective will to fight for a just, more equitable, environment-friendly future. ■



Photo: Getty Images

Is India jettisoning its climate goals?

Ashis Ray

The world leaders’ summit that opens COP climate conferences is a political spotlight moment. And when the attendance of heads of state is as low as reported at Belém, Brazil, on 11–12 November (50 or less out of 198), you wonder how serious world leaders are about the climate crisis. Among the most conspicuous absentees at COP30 are Donald Trump, Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi. But there is still a difference between Modi’s non-appearance and Xi’s or Trump’s—all leaders of large countries, all among the world’s biggest polluters. Despite Xi’s absence, China is the toast of COP30 for becoming a global leader in renewable energy, achieving its wind and solar power targets ahead of its 2030 commitment. It is also spearheading adoption of electric cars. Trump, on the other hand, pulled out of the Paris Agreement, has rolled back many environmental restraints at home, has promoted ‘clean coal’, and will be remembered for his ‘drill, baby, drill’ exhortations. Modi has been in power since 2014. He inherited India’s commitments in Kyoto (1997) and Copenhagen (2009) to save the environment, and he signed India up for the 2015 Paris treaty. Under him, India has pledged net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2070 and to meet 50 per cent of its energy needs from non-fossil fuel sources by 2030. India is on course to miss the second goal. Year 2024 was the hottest recorded in India. And for a quick test of India’s commitment to climate goals, look no farther than the AQI (Air Quality Index) readings of capital city Delhi. For whatever it’s worth, India’s environment minister Bhupender Yadav will possibly show up in Belém, but climate commitments aside, Modi’s decision to skip the summit and not stand by Brazil, a BRICS ally, is being seen in diplomatic circles as a move to appease Trump. (Readers will remember that Brazil, like India, is at the receiving end of Trump’s tariff bullying.)

Even as he tries to make nice with Trump from afar, Modi has been shying away from multilaterals to avoid meeting Trump. He pulled out of the ASEAN summit in October at a juncture when deeper engagement with the economically thriving bloc is essential for India to tackle headwinds from the US. Trump has not hesitated to embarrass Modi with repeated assertions about his mediating role in stopping the military confrontation with Pakistan in May. And Modi is likely scared that Trump will do this—again—at an international forum when/ if both are present. Concurrently, Trump has dined and feted Pakistan’s army chief and prime minister. And at a multilateral featuring all three, Trump might well spring a surprise that Modi does not want to risk. Trump knows he can’t bully Russia and China and has chosen to target the other three nations—India, Brazil, South Africa—in the BRICS grouping he despises. He has declared that no US official will attend the upcoming G20 summit in Johannesburg on 22–23 November. Trump wants BRICS disbanded and any de-dollarisation talk raises his hackles. His announcement to stay away from the G20 summit in South Africa could be a cue for Modi to emerge from hiding and show his face. Ironically, Modi craves the company of foreign leaders; he loves the photo-ops. He won’t give up the opportunity unless he fears getting a red face. So, if Modi is not certain he won’t be embarrassed in front of the cameras—which no US administration official can guarantee about their loose-cannon boss—he might avoid multilaterals where Trump is present. Trump is not a fan of big groupings for other reasons and has shown a tendency to prefer bilaterals. Two summits are being lined up with Xi over the next year while the Quad alliance—of the US, Japan, India and Australia—seems to have gone into cold storage. India was supposed to host the next Quad consultation featuring the heads of state, but it seems Modi is in no hurry to host a summit that will bring him face to face with Trump. ■

Our air, their privilege: Delhi’s choking reality

The mantra these days is: when you can’t fix the problem, ‘fix’ the data that exposes how bad it is

Rashme Sehgal

The air is free but why is it such a privilege to breathe? read one of the several placards at a protest in New Delhi last week, as residents vented anger over the capital’s worsening air. For years, Delhi’s toxic smog has been a familiar dark cloud—but reports indicating that the government was manipulating data to hide the true extent of the crisis, combined with a recent photo showing two air purifiers flanking the prime minister, seem to have snapped public patience. That image captured the deep divide between those who could afford Made in China air purifiers and sealed offices, and the millions who cannot. Reports that water sprinklers were being used around air quality monitors to suppress readings—and that several stations had been shut down altogether—brought citizens to the streets. The government forced the organisers to call off the protest at the last minute. Those who turned up at India Gate were taken into custody and left 50 kilometres away at the Haryana border. Delhi Aam Aadmi Party president Saurabh Bharadwaj told reporters: “As soon as pollution increases, the government shuts down AQI monitoring stations. Wherever AQI is found to be high, spraying of water is being done... the fraud is happening openly... the intention is not to reduce pollution but to show lower figures”. On 10 November, the AQI was in ‘very poor’ category in 26 of the 38 monitoring stations in the national capital. Bawana reported an AQI at 366, Jahangirpuri 348, Chandni Chowk 410, Burari 430—and at Anand Vihar, despite three trucks spraying jets of water outside the monitoring system set up by the Central Pollution Control Board, the AQI read 400. The same day, the US embassy in the green belt of Chanakyapuri showed an AQI

of 643 with PM 10 levels at 558 and PM 2.5 at 397, placing the air quality as hazardous. For over a decade the embassy has been independently monitoring air quality in Indian cities and its data frequently contradicts official Indian figures. Why this mismatch, one may ask. An AQI between 0–50 is considered good, 51–100 is satisfactory, 101–200 is moderate, 201–300 is poor, 301–400 is very poor, and 401–500 is severe, according to the CPCB. Delhi traders wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi claiming losses of Rs 300 crore since Diwali because concerned residents are avoiding stepping out and are ordering goods online. ‘Every third child in Delhi has damaged lungs and faces a life shortened by nearly 10 years compared to children in cleaner environments,’ they said. Long-term exposure to toxic air raises risks of heart disease, stroke and asthma. Sadly, even when the WHO says most of this is preventable, there is little action on the ground. Meanwhile, greenery in the capital continues to vanish, worsening the crisis. Public frustration also stems from the government’s lack of credible action. Half-hearted steps like smog towers and cloud-seeding have proved ineffective. But if Beijing, once the world’s most smog-choked city, can clean its air—with a jump from just 13 ‘good days’ in 2013 to over 300 annual ‘good days’ by 2023—why can’t New Delhi? Citizens argue, “There are ways to cut pollution. Rounding up protesters isn’t one of them.” Cities along the coastline like Mumbai and Chennai, which benefit from sea breeze, too have seen their air quality deteriorate. Official AQI averages hover around 250, but independent environmentalists suspect it to be far worse. The mismatch between official readings and ‘independent’ readings was exposed by a news channel which on 5 November



Photo: Getty Images

accompanied environmentalist Bhavreen Kandhari, co-founder of a network of Indian mothers demanding clean air for their children, carrying a portable monitoring set. Her meter recorded AQI levels at Anand Vihar nearing 500, while official CPCB readings showed only 300. At the ITO monitoring station, her device showed 312 against the official AQI of 145. Many monitoring stations, residents note, have quietly stopped functioning. Even the large display board outside the ministry of earth sciences near Lodhi Garden has been blank for weeks. “Could this be deliberate?” citizens ask. Environmentalist Reenu Paul conducted a similar exercise in Dehradun where she installed an air pollution meter at her Rajpur Road home. The government had set up its monitoring station inside the Doon University located near a forest. She found the gap between official and actual readings narrowing—but not because the air had improved. It was because pollution in residential zones had risen sharply, especially in traffic-heavy areas like ISBT and Ghantaghar. **Experts say automobiles now account for more than 20 per cent of India’s carbon emissions**

Vehicles, the main culprits Experts say automobiles now account for over 20 per cent of India’s carbon emissions. Automobile-centric policies, explosive

growth in personal vehicles, rise in the number of SUVs and two-wheelers and a shift of freight transport from railways to roadways under the government’s Automotive Mission Plan have worsened the crisis. In Delhi-NCR, studies show automobile emissions account for 47 per cent of PM 2.5 emission during the winter—contradicting the Delhi government narrative that blames Punjab’s stubble burning. According to the Air Quality Life Index (AQLI) 2025, of the world’s 100 most polluted cities, 93 are in India. Children growing up in Delhi are likely to lose up to ten years of life expectancy due to toxic air. The Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) reports that only 12 per cent of Indian cities have monitoring stations capable of tracking all six key pollutants. Of the CPCB’s 966 operational stations across 419 cities, many are manual and fail to meet the minimum requirement of 104 monitoring days annually. “A large number of India’s 252 cities have already crossed critically polluted levels,” warns Anusmita Roychowdhury, CSE’s deputy director-general. “The government must declare a national emergency and treat air pollution as a war-level crisis.” Instead, official denial persists. In Parliament, Union minister of state for health Anupriya Patel claimed there was no “conclusive data available to establish a direct correlation of death or disease exclusively due to air pollution”. Environmentalists say such statements betray the government’s unwillingness to act. They point out that pollution is not an act of nature but a result of bad policy. For citizens, the battle for clean air has become a fight for transparency and accountability. When monitors are manipulated and data is hidden, the poor pay the price with their lungs. As one protester summed it up: “If breathing clean air becomes a privilege, democracy itself is in danger.” ■



Plastic pellets from the cargo ship that spilled its load off Kochi have washed ashore in faraway Thiruvananthapuram; (below) a Greenpeace protest in Thiruvananthapuram

The sun rises over Kerala’s southern coast, casting a dull orange light across the Arabian Sea. But what was once a familiar scene of nets unfurling, boats gliding and fishermen shouting over the surf has turned eerily quiet. Nets lie stacked in courtyards, their threads hardened by salt and neglect. Engines rest on the sand, corroding in the brine. The sea, once a giver of life, has turned into a place of unease and despair.

Nearly six months have passed since the MSC Elsa 3, a Liberian-flagged container vessel owned by the Mediterranean Shipping Company, capsized off the Kochi coast. What began as a maritime accident has since turned into one of South Asia’s worst ecological and livelihood crises in recent memory.

The wreck released oil, chemicals and millions of plastic nurdles that have spread across India’s southern coast and beyond, leaving behind contaminated waters, dead fish and a scarred shoreline. The tragedy is silent yet palpable.

Like the oil that leaked into the sands, the aftereffects of the accident have seeped into daily life, breaking familiar rhythms that defined the life of Kerala’s coastal villages.

Along the stretch between Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram, fishers live in hesitation. In Anchuthengu near Varkala, 38-year-old Fazil Vettoor walks slowly towards his boat at dawn. This was a ritual that once filled him with purpose. “I used to earn more than thirty thousand rupees a week,” he says. “There was always something to take home. Now, even after going out for hours, the nets come up empty or tangled in plastic.”

Before the shipwreck, the sea was generous. Sardines, mackerel and prawns were plentiful. On good days, Fazil could earn enough not only to feed his family but also to save. His wife sold dried fish at the market, his children went to school, life followed the rhythm of the tides. Today, the tides bring a thin film of oil that shimmers in the sunlight, white plastic nurdles that look deceptively like fish eggs, and sharp metal fragments that rip through nets and even boat hulls.

He bends to pick up a handful of nurdles from the beach. They look harmless, like tiny pearls, but “they get stuck in everything”, he says. “Engines, nets, even fish bellies.” From Alappuzha to Vettucaud, Pulluvila to Kollam, stories like Fazil’s echo across the Kerala coast. Daily

earnings have dropped and the villagers’ confidence in the sea is badly shaken.

The day the sea changed

It was on 24 May 2025 that the MSC Elsa 3 capsized just 14.5 nautical miles off Kochi. The vessel was carrying 643 containers, including 60 filled with plastic nurdles and several others with hazardous chemicals such as hydrazine and calcium carbide. More than 450 tonnes of diesel and furnace oil were stored in its tanks. When it went down, a toxic cocktail of oil, chemicals and microplastics began to spread into the sea.

In the early hours that followed, some coastal residents saw black streaks floating towards the shore. At first, there was confusion. Officials called it a ‘manageable spill’. By the next day, a strong smell of oil spread across the coastal belt, and fishermen began bringing up nets soaked in dark sludge.

The company that owned the ship claimed it had acted promptly. It told the Kerala High Court that the oil sheen had been cleaned, containers recovered, and over a thousand tonnes of debris removed from beaches between Kochi and Rameswaram. But those living along the coast say otherwise.

“The sea never cleaned itself,” says Musthafa Hahsan, a fisherman from Varkala. “Even now, when we pull the nets, the slick sticks to our hands; fish smell of oil; buyers turn away.”

The hidden contaminants

Scientific evidence has since confirmed the fishers’ fears. The Centre for Marine Living Resources and Ecology, in the ministry of earth sciences, collected water and sediment samples from the sea between Kochi and Kanyakumari. The samples showed elevated levels of petroleum hydrocarbons such as naphthalene, anthracene and pyrene, all known carcinogens. They also revealed high concentrations of heavy metals including nickel, copper and lead.

“These pollutants enter the marine food chain through zooplankton,” says Dr A. Biju Kumar, vice chancellor of the Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies. “Zooplankton are the foundation of the marine ecosystem, the first food for larvae and small fish. When they are contaminated, the entire food web suffers.”

According to Dr Kumar, hydrocarbon-

degrading bacteria have multiplied near the wreck site, a sign that oil contamination remains active. “We are witnessing a slow ecological collapse,” he says. “Sensitive species are disappearing. Fish larvae have shown toxic responses. Seabirds have been found preening oil from their feathers. This is not a local event; it’s a regional environmental crisis.”

The contamination is not confined to Kerala. Currents have carried plastic nurdles into the Gulf of Mannar and even as far as Sri Lanka’s western and southern coasts. The Marine Environment Protection Authority of Sri Lanka has confirmed the presence of debris from the MSC Elsa 3, making this one of the few shipwrecks in South Asia with such widespread transboundary effects.

A crisis without relief

While scientists study the sea, coastal families are fighting a more immediate battle. Many have exhausted their savings. Boats lie damaged, engines rust in salt water, and nets, once their lifeline, now hang like symbols of despair.

In Pulluvila, 37-year-old fisherman Denson Joseph has not taken his own boat out in weeks. “I spent seventy thousand rupees repairing my engine and nets after they were shredded by floating debris,” he says. “Now I work on another man’s boat for less than half of what I used to earn. I have two children in school, and every day I think about giving up fishing.”



‘They used to run to the shore at dawn. Now they hesitate’

Six months after a ship capsized near Kochi, Kerala’s coastal communities are still reeling from the aftereffects, writes **K.A. Shaji**

The crisis has disrupted not just an ecosystem but a mini economy and entangled lives and livelihoods. Women who sold fish at the local markets have lost customers. Ice plant workers, boat mechanics and small traders dependent on fishing income now find themselves without work.

“It’s not just a loss of fish but a loss of faith,” says Fr Eugene Pereira, vicar general of the Latin Catholic Diocese of Thiruvananthapuram, who has long worked with coastal communities. “These people have known hardship for generations, but this disaster has taken away something deeper—the certainty that the sea will provide.”

The struggle for justice

In June, the Kerala government filed an admiralty suit before the High Court seeking Rs 9,531 crore as compensation from the Mediterranean Shipping Company. This figure included claims for environmental damage, loss of income and clean-up expenses. The company contested the claim, arguing that the ship sank outside India’s territorial waters and that its liability was limited under international maritime conventions.

After months of hearings, the court directed MSC to deposit Rs 1,227.6 crore as a security amount. The court also ordered the detention of its sister vessel, MSC Akiteta II, at Vizhinjam Port until payment was made. The company has yet to deposit the amount, and the ship remains under legal custody.

Kerala’s Advocate General K. Gopalakrishna Kurup told the court that the state had full jurisdiction because the environmental and economic impacts clearly extended into Indian waters and the Exclusive Economic Zone. “The ‘polluter pays’ principle is not a slogan,” he said in court. “It is a duty enshrined in our

environmental jurisprudence.”

The National Institute of Oceanography has since been commissioned to assess both short-term and long-term losses. The findings will determine if the state can revise its compensation claim upward in the coming months.

For fisherfolk, the language of the courts offers little comfort. Most do not even understand what ‘jurisdiction’ or ‘admiralty suit’ means. What they do understand is that their lives have been turned upside down.

“The government speaks of crores, but we are yet to see a single rupee,” says Jackson Polayil, president of the Kerala Swatantra Matsya Thozhilali Federation, which represents around 10,000 artisanal fishers in the state. “When the court tells us to file claims, it expects us to produce documents that most of us do not have. We don’t keep receipts for nets or repairs. Everything is informal. How can we prove what we have lost?”

Under the current process, fishers must submit individual claims through the high court with supporting evidence. Deadlines are short, legal help is costly and paperwork is unfamiliar territory for communities that live hand to mouth. Many simply give up.

Greenpeace India, which investigated the aftermath of the wreck, has warned in its report titled ‘Wrecked Futures’ that the Elsa 3 disaster is creating a ‘cycle of debt and desperation’ in coastal Kerala. “The legal structure favours corporate entities that can hire lawyers and delay proceedings,” says Amruta S.N., a climate campaigner with the organisation. “Meanwhile, communities wait for justice that may take years.”

The road to recovery

Recovery, experts say, cannot rely on litigation alone. It requires a long-term, coordinated response that integrates ecological rehabilitation with livelihood restoration. The Kerala government has announced plans for a relief package, but its scale and timeline remain unclear.

Public health experts warn that communities exposed to chemical residues and microplastics could face health risks for years. Marine biologists are calling for sustained monitoring of water and sediment quality. Economists emphasise the need for direct income support to families who have lost their means of subsistence.

For now, many households survive on informal credit from local lenders. Women have taken up casual labour to fill the gaps, while children help mend nets or collect plastic from beaches for cleanup drives.

“It is painful to see the next generation growing up afraid of the sea,” says Fr Pereira. “They used to run to the shore at dawn. Now they hesitate.” ■

Lessons from Mamdani’s election campaign

Aakar Patel

The first amendment of the United States constitution reads as follows: ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.’

The language seems slightly archaic because it was written in 1789, but is clear enough for us to understand that freedom of speech cannot be curtailed. It can however be restricted, for example when related to threats of violence or pornography.

In 2010, the US Supreme Court eliminated restrictions on election funding, ruling that such limits violated the right to free speech under the First Amendment. Corporations and wealthy individuals were now free to influence elections by creating political action committees (PACs) that would spend money on advertising.

This was the outcome of the famous *Citizens United vs Federal Election Commission* (FEC) case which fatally damaged US democracy because both their major political parties are now permanently influenced by corporate interests.

If the reason you won your seat is your donors, then it is likely that your actions in office will also be influenced by them. This seems to have become inescapable in US politics. However, there is another way of doing politics, and though its formula is simple, its execution is very hard.

To attempt something with a high rate of failure takes a certain kind of determination



Photo: Getty Images

and outlook. To succeed in such a task is truly remarkable.

An example of this comes to us from the recent New York mayoral election. The two major candidates had two different approaches to contesting. The first approach is the one preferred by both major political parties and their candidates, which is to win by raising more money than the opponent. This money is then deployed chiefly on messaging: television advertising and mailers designed to overwhelm the voter with positive impressions about the candidate paying for the ad and negative ones about the opponent.

The more ads one can put out, the greater the chance of success. A report from 2018 headlined ‘How money affects elections’

If the reason you won your seat is your donors, then it is likely that your actions in office will also be influenced by them

found that more than 90 per cent of the time, the candidate who raised and spent more than their rival, won their race for a seat in Congress (their version of the Lok Sabha).

Andrew Cuomo, one of the two main candidates in New York, took this approach and raised more than five times the money his opponent had. He lost. Why? (Think about it.)

The second approach is to convince voters not through advertising but through personal conversations. This is effective but does not seem to be scalable. It seems especially absurd to attempt it in a general election where voters number in the millions. The number of people required on such a staggering scale would surely cost more than advertising. And it would be difficult for these people to open conversations with strangers, because many at home would either not answer the door or having answered it, would promptly ask the person to leave or, if accosted in the street, would simply not stop.

Even if they chose to speak, it would not be easy to convince them to vote for the candidate. After all these ifs and buts, the success rate is likely worse than 1 in 10. Meaning that for every person that is convinced into voting for the candidate, another 10 slam the door, say they will support the other side or just walk on.

How would one keep these workers motivated? What would prevent them from pretending they had been knocking on doors and stopping strangers on the street, when they’d actually stayed at home or whiled away time in a café? These are some of the reasons this second approach is not preferred and why candidates choose to just raise more money.

It can only succeed under certain conditions. First, that the message is compelling to a large number of potential voters. Second, that the workers are highly motivated and not put off by the high rate of failure. The motivation of the workers here is not money but the cause. It is similar to propagation and proselytising. Third, that there is some mechanism that monitors the engagement and sees it through to voting day. Meaning to repeatedly stay in touch with people once contact is made.

This was the approach used by Zohran Mamdani, the Indian-origin socialist who won the election on 4 November and will be New York’s next mayor. Those who say he is inexperienced and knows little about leadership do not understand he has already displayed the highest level of leadership: by motivating people to throw themselves into something known to have a high rate of failure, and then succeed at it.

An army of over 1 lakh volunteers trained and led by 700 senior volunteers worked for Mamdani’s campaign. While most were young, there were also many middle-aged and old people who willingly gave hours, doing physical work over many months for the cause they believed in.

More than \$40 million was spent by corporates backing Andrew Cuomo to paint Zohran as a terrorist. They lost to the volunteers who were paid nothing.

This win will be studied for a long time because it reduces to bare essence the two approaches to winning elections and shows the limits of billionaire power.

As activists in America say: They have money, we have people. ■

Views are personal



The rise of Zohran Mamdani and what it means for the Hindutva project

Ashok Swain

The election of Zohran Mamdani as mayor of New York City is undeniably historic. His ascent signals big shifts in identity politics, diaspora mobilisation and progressive global linkages. His success has ripple effects, and Indians, whether they are aligned with his vision or opposed to it, know this. For the Modi regime, Mamdani's rise is a strategic headache.

That a high-visibility American leader of Indian descent, with global reach, openly criticises Modi, invokes India's pluralist past and identifies with an inclusive vision of citizenship means the Hindutva project is now facing a new kind of adversary: one whose notes of dissent will echo not just in New York but among diaspora communities, global progressive networks and India-outward foreign policy discourses.

Mamdani's platform blends socialist economic ideals—rent freezes, expanded public housing and an aggressive affordability agenda—with a proud and visible embrace of his Indian heritage. In his victory speech, he invoked Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of an inclusive India and closed with the Bollywood song *Dhoom Machale*, symbolically merging his political idealism with cultural pride.

Throughout his campaign, Mamdani frequently spoke about his Indian roots and drew a contrast between the pluralist India he grew up hearing about and the exclusionary one represented by Modi's BJP, "an India that only has room for certain kinds of Indians", as he put it. He has publicly described Modi as a "war criminal", linking his condemnation to the 2002 Gujarat riots and what he calls a broader pattern of political mobilisation through communal division.

From the perspective of the Hindutva camp, this matters at three levels.

First, Mamdani offers a counter-narrative to the aggressively advertised image of Modi in India as the globally celebrated 'strong leader' with broad diaspora appeal. For years, the BJP government has sought to project India as a globally resurgent nation under Modi, a confident India that Indian-origin leaders abroad can embrace. But Mamdani challenges that script. His open and eloquent rejection of Modi's divisive



Merging political idealism with cultural pride: in his victory speech, Zohran Mamdani invoked Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of an inclusive India and closed with *Dhoom Machale*

politics can easily become another template for Indian-origin leaders abroad, and Indian diplomats will likely have to grapple with this in days to come.

Second, Mamdani's brand of politics reinforces the notion that Hindutva's reach is not confined to India's borders. The Hindu-nationalist project has increasingly been embedded in global networks of political mobilisation, diaspora advocacy, transnational organisations and international media. Mamdani's election creates a mirror image: a Western politician of Indian origin who challenges the Hindutva narrative from outside, lending a fillip to opposition at home.

This is hardly a benign phenomenon for the BJP or its affiliated groups: as the diaspora becomes more assertive, the potential for external pressure and

transnational activist linkages against Hindutva will rise. Since Mamdani brings global visibility, a progressive profile and access to American political infrastructure, he becomes a symbol of global support for those who oppose Hindutva inside India. That makes his ascent more than symbolic—it converts diaspora dissent into a credible international voice.

Third, the optics and practical implications matter for India-US relations and for bilateral diplomacy. The Modi government has long positioned itself as a reliable partner to the US, emphasising strategic alignment, economic partnership and a 'diaspora bridge' that cements India's status as a global stakeholder. Meanwhile, the US has refrained from strong public criticism of India's internal politics in pursuit of strategic goals. But a figure like

Mamdani's open and eloquent rejection of Modi's divisive politics can easily become a template for Indian-origin leaders abroad

Mamdani complicates that calculus: his prominence means India cannot assume that Indian American voices will uniformly endorse its policies or that the diaspora will by default tilt in favour of New Delhi's narratives.

In other words, the Modi regime's diaspora strategy now faces a counter-current in which an Indian-origin leader in the US might engage with India not just in terms of strategic convenience or economic partnership but also India's outlook on pluralist values and human rights. It is, therefore, misguided to think of Mamdani's rise as an isolated event, for his success will empower diaspora communities critical of Modi, giving them a champion in high office and feeding their sense that criticism of India is not disloyalty. It will also signal to Western elites and media that the Indian government's narrative will now face challenge even from its global diaspora.

Hindutva groups assessing the fallout have an awkward choice: to engage or to ignore. They could try to ignore Mamdani, but the more he uses his platform to speak about India, the more Indian politics will become embedded in diaspora debates. They could attack, but doing so risks producing a backlash that Modi would prefer to avoid. They could try to engage, which would force the regime to open up spaces for critique and opposition at home and abroad.

All this is not to suggest that Mamdani is about to trigger the collapse of the Hindutva project or that his new stature will immediately produce a big shift in Indian politics. But Mamdani's rise certainly changes the battlefield. India's political trajectory will now feature more prominently in global diaspora discussions, in Western city halls and progressive networks.

Mamdani's ascent is bad news for Modi and the Hindutva crowd because it erodes their ability to monopolise the narrative of Indian-origin success in the West; it undercuts the assumption that diaspora leaders will align with their project, and it produces new vectors of critique that can connect the Opposition in India with pressure and support abroad. ■

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The national song and a history lesson

Hasnain Naqvi

When Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay wrote *Vande Mataram* in 1875, it was composed as a hymn longer than the two verses we know as the national song. An even longer version of the hymn later appeared in his novel *Anandamath* (1882), set during the Great Bengal Famine of the early 1770s.

On 7 November, while inaugurating a year-long commemoration of the 150th anniversary of *Vande Mataram*'s first appearance, Prime Minister Narendra Modi replayed an old RSS tune—that in dropping the later stanzas of the song, the Congress in 1937 had sown the seeds of Partition.

As if on cue from the master, Sangh ideologue Ram Madhav echoed the same claim in a column that appeared in the *Indian Express* the next day. The central thrust of the criticism is that by adopting only the first two stanzas—the ones that do not contain explicit Hindu religious imagery—the Congress 'mutilated' the song to appease Muslims—and this decision, the

specious argument goes, paved the way to Partition. This argument is, in fact, a wilful misreading of how and why the CWC took the decision to abridge the national song.

The most significant rebuttal of the Sangh retelling of this story comes from the documented exchange between Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru, leading up to the CWC resolution. Historian Sabyasachi Bhattacharya details this pivotal consultation in his authoritative work *Vande Mataram: The Biography of a Song*. "Three days before the [CWC] meeting, on October 26, 1937, Tagore wrote to Nehru on this issue. It was Gurudev [as Tagore was widely known] himself, with his own special relationship to *Vande Mataram*, who suggested that the first two stanzas of the song be adopted... His letter, in fact, profoundly influenced the resolution in its entirety."

Tagore, who had himself set the tune for *Vande Mataram* and first sang it at the 1896 Congress session, made a distinction between the song's political power and its religious source. In his view, the first two stanzas, which invoked the motherland in terms of its natural beauty, bounty and secular

power ('rich with thy hurrying streams, bright with thy orchard gleams' etc.) were a truly national expression.

The Great Bengal Famine, referenced in *Anandamath*, was one of the deadliest in recorded history, killing millions. It devastated the Bengal Presidency (modern-day West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and parts of Bangladesh), killing about a third of the population, according to some estimates.

The effects of the crop failure due to drought were greatly exacerbated by the exploitative taxation, hoarding and export policies of the East India Company that prioritised British profits over local relief.

In the religious-nationalist context of *Anandamath*, where the sanyasis rally to fight starvation and oppression, raid grain stores and attack tax collectors—actions mirroring the 1770s Sanyasi Rebellion, triggered by famine-induced desperation—the song *Vande Mataram* (Hail Motherland) is a war cry.

But unlike the historical Sanyasi Rebellion (between 1763 and 1800), which featured armed uprisings against the British East India Company by both Hindu sanyasis and Muslim fakirs, Bankim's novel reimagines this slice of history with a communal overtone, where Hindu sanyasis, living in the eponymous Anandamath (Abode of Bliss) vow to liberate Mother India, personified as a starving, enslaved goddess, from the local Muslim



Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay

nawabs (seen as tyrannical tax collectors) and the East India Company (symbolised as the root evil).

Tagore's advice to Nehru was clear: 'I freely concede that the whole of Bankim's *Vande Mataram* poem, read together with its context, is liable to be interpreted in ways that might wound Moslem susceptibilities, but a national song, though derived from it, which has spontaneously come to consist only of the first two stanzas of the original poem, need not suffer from that disadvantage.'

Context of the 1937 CWC Resolution

The Congress Working Committee (CWC) met in Calcutta (now Kolkata) from 26 October to 1 November 1937, under the presidency of Jawaharlal Nehru. The resolution adopted on 29 October limited the singing of *Vande Mataram* at national gatherings to its first two stanzas, acknowledging that while these evoked 'the beauty and abundance of the motherland' with 'nothing objectionable from the religious or any other point of view', the later stanzas contained 'certain allusions and a religious ideology which may not be in keeping with the ideology of other religious groups in India.'

The resolution was an attempt to be inclusive amid rising communal tensions post-1937 provincial elections, where the Congress had formed governments but faced protests from Muslim League members in legislatures against mandatory singing of the full song.

While Muslim nationalist leaders in the Congress—notably Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who served as Congress president (1933–1934) and was a key voice for Hindu-Muslim unity—viewed the resolution positively, as a

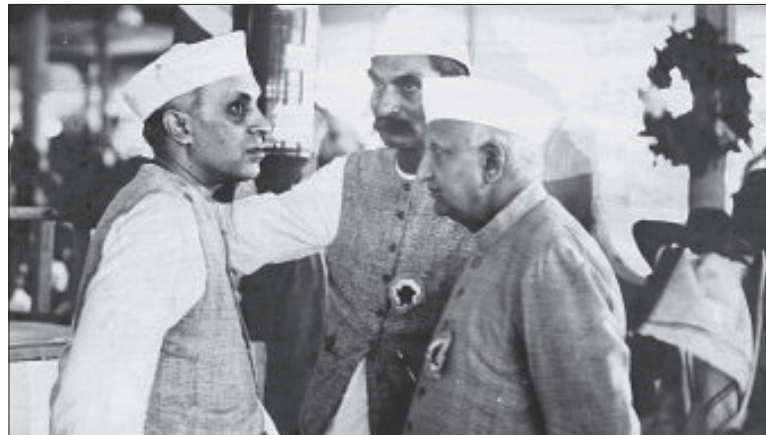
compromise fostering unity, separatist voices like Jinnah in the Muslim League were opposed to the adoption of the song even in its abridged form.

The CWC resolution was, therefore, a consensus-building move, steered by secular-minded nationalist leaders of the Congress—the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Subhas Bose, Rajendra Prasad and Sarojini Naidu. In accepting the concerns [of the League separatists] as valid, the CWC was signalling empathy for Muslim objections without compulsion.

This stand was echoed in Gandhi's 1939 clarification: "The Congress... has retained as national song only those stanzas to which no objection could be taken on religious or other grounds."

To, then, dress a 'unity front' resolution as a move that sowed the seeds of division, of Partition, as Prime Minister Modi and his minions would have us believe, is not just a lie, it's also a mockery of the very song they wish to exalt and commemorate. ■

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The CWC resolution was a consensus-building move, steered by secular-minded leaders of the Congress, including Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and Rajendra Prasad

The most significant rebuttal of the Sangh retelling of this story is a documented exchange between Tagore and Nehru, leading up to the CWC resolution of 1937

Karnataka’s Menstrual Leave Policy 2025- a pioneering step toward dignity, wellness, and inclusion at work

“Progress with Purpose” — Karnataka’s new gold standard in gender-sensitive governance.



Representative Image

Stories of Change: Voices from the Ground

The policy’s impact is best understood not through statistics, but through the voices of the women it touches.

Priya Sharma, 28, Senior Software Engineer, Bengaluru

“Before this policy, those first two days were the hardest. I’d sit at my desk, pushing through the pain, afraid to exhaust my sick leave. When the announcement came, I felt something shift — like the system finally saw me. Now, when I take that day, I rest without guilt. I come back more focused, more at peace. It’s not just a leave; it’s trust.”

Lalita Devi, 45, Quality Controller, Peenya Industrial Area

“In the factory, we’re on our feet for hours. Missing a day meant losing wages, so we’d just take painkillers and keep going. Now, with this law, I can rest when I need to. I don’t have to choose between my health and my family’s food. It feels like dignity — like the government understands us.” Their words reflect a quiet revolution — one that begins with policy but blossoms in everyday lives. It’s the kind of change that reshapes not just work culture, but social consciousness.

economic sense — a model of empathetic efficiency where well-being fuels productivity.

Cultural Shift: Breaking Taboos, Building Respect

Beyond its legal and economic dimensions, the Menstrual Leave Policy 2025 represents a cultural revolution.

For centuries, menstruation in India has been burdened with taboos and misinformation. Many women grew up being told to hide their pain, to stay silent, to carry on as if nothing were happening. This silence bred shame — and shame bred stigma.

Karnataka’s decision to legislate menstrual leave does more than provide a benefit; it legitimises conversation. It tells every girl, every woman, and every man that menstruation is natural — and deserves respect, not secrecy.

By normalising menstrual health in workplaces, the policy chips away at generations of stigma. It empowers open discussion about menstrual hygiene, emotional well-being, and workplace empathy.

This transformation is especially significant for the informal workforce — women in garment factories, sanitation work, and small-scale industries. For them, a single paid day off can mean the difference between unbearable pain and dignified rest, between silence and self-care.

It says to every worker: You are seen. You are valued. You matter.

A Holistic Approach to Women’s Health and Empowerment

The Menstrual Leave Policy is not an isolated reform — it forms part of Karnataka’s larger vision of comprehensive women’s health and empowerment.

The state has already taken major strides in ensuring affordable menstrual hygiene products, particularly for students and rural communities. Through partnerships with local self-help groups and NGOs, Karnataka has distributed low-cost sanitary products, built awareness around menstrual hygiene, and launched school-based education programmes to normalise menstrual conversations from an early age.

This holistic approach — combining access, awareness, and accommodation — ensures that women’s health is supported at every stage of life.

Access ensures that menstrual hygiene products are available and affordable.

Awareness breaks myths, encouraging open dialogue about periods. Accommodation — through policies like menstrual leave — ensures that workplaces align with women’s real needs.

Together, these initiatives weave a fabric of inclusion — one that views women’s health not as a side issue, but

as a pillar of social and economic progress.

Setting a National Benchmark: Karnataka’s Call to the Nation

Karnataka’s leadership has never been about following trends; it has always been about setting them.

By enacting the Menstrual Leave Policy 2025, the state has raised the standard for what equitable governance can achieve. It provides a blueprint for the rest of India — a model that other states and private enterprises can emulate in the pursuit of workplace equality.

In an age where nations are rethinking the future of work, Karnataka has taken a bold step toward a future of care — where policy is not just efficient but empathetic, where economic ambition coexists with social justice.

This is the kind of leadership that doesn’t just build economies — it builds societies.

A Call to Action: Beyond Compliance to Culture

The government has done its part by setting the framework. Now, the onus rests with every employer, every HR manager, and every team leader to carry forward the spirit of the policy.

Workplaces must move beyond mere compliance. They must build cultures where taking menstrual leave is not whispered about, questioned, or judged — but accepted with respect.

Training managers to respond with empathy, encouraging open dialogue, and normalising menstrual wellness in workplace discussions are essential next steps. Every organisation in Karnataka now has the opportunity to become a model of inclusion — to prove that compassion and productivity can thrive together.

When Humanity Defines Progress

Karnataka’s Menstrual Leave Policy 2025 is more than legislation; it is a statement of values. It reaffirms that true progress lies not in how fast we grow, but in how fairly we grow — in how deeply we care for those who make that growth possible.

By recognising menstrual health as a legitimate workplace need, the state has given voice to millions who were unseen. It has redefined innovation itself — proving that the most transformative ideas are not always technological, but human.

In the story of modern India, Karnataka’s vision will stand out as a chapter of courage, empathy, and foresight — a reminder that leadership begins where understanding meets action. Because when a society chooses dignity, it chooses strength.

And when a government chooses empathy, it chooses the future. Karnataka has chosen both.

Karnataka’s Menstrual Leave Policy 2025 is more than legislation; it is a statement of values. It reaffirms that true progress lies not in how fast we grow, but in how fairly we grow — in how deeply we care for those who make that growth possible.

The Spirit of Progress: Innovation Meets Compassion Karnataka has always been a state that defines India’s forward march. From the buzzing technology corridors of Bengaluru to the manufacturing clusters of Mysuru and Peenya, it has powered the nation’s modern economy through vision, enterprise, and relentless innovation.

But Karnataka’s true distinction lies not just in its machines or markets — it lies in its humanity. Progress, after all, is not measured only in GDP or productivity. It is also measured in empathy — in the courage to recognise and respond to the everyday realities that shape people’s lives.

And once again, Karnataka has proven that leadership and compassion are not opposites — they are partners in progress.

With the introduction of the Karnataka Menstrual Leave Policy 2025, the state has made history. It has become the first in India to mandate one day of paid menstrual leave per month across both public and private sectors. In doing so, it has transformed a deeply personal experience — often hidden, often misunderstood — into a matter of public dignity and professional fairness.

This is not simply a reform in labour law. It is a cultural evolution — a declaration that progress is truly inclusive only when it respects the physical and emotional realities of

everyone who contributes to it.

From Silence to Support: A Change Long Overdue

For generations, menstruation — a natural, recurring biological process experienced by half the population — has existed in silence. In workplaces across India, women navigated this monthly cycle with quiet endurance. They worked through pain, discomfort, and fatigue, balancing professional expectations with an unspoken pressure to conceal their experience.

In offices and factories alike, the lack of understanding around menstrual health meant that many women had to use their limited sick leave to manage severe cramps or exhaustion. For daily wage earners, a missed day often meant a lost income. In this silence, productivity dropped, morale suffered, and well-being was compromised.

The traditional workplace — built around male norms and assumptions — never accounted for this biological reality. It was as if half the workforce was expected to adapt to an environment that wasn’t designed for them.

Now, Karnataka has broken that silence.

The Menstrual Leave Policy 2025 recognises what countless women have always known: menstruation is not a sickness, but it can demand rest. By introducing a separate, paid leave specifically for menstrual health, the

state has institutionalised care, trust, and equality in one stroke.

It is a correction of history — a moment when policy meets compassion.

The Policy: A Framework of Trust and Dignity

The strength of the Karnataka Menstrual Leave Policy lies in its simplicity — and its trust in people.

The policy guarantees one paid day of leave per month, in addition to existing casual or sick leave. No medical certificate is required. No questions are asked. The system believes women when they say they need rest.

That act of trust is revolutionary. It shifts the focus from justification to understanding, from suspicion to respect.

The leave applies equally to employees in both public and private sectors, ensuring that compassion is not confined to government offices but extended to the full spectrum of the state’s workforce — from high-rise tech parks to garment factories, from schools to service industries.

By codifying menstrual leave as a legal right, Karnataka has declared a clear message: health and dignity are not privileges — they are entitlements.

Empathy as Smart Economics

While the policy stems from compassion, its economic logic is

equally powerful.

Some may initially view paid menstrual leave as a cost to employers. But Karnataka’s visionary leadership understands that this is, in fact, an investment in human capital — a prosperity dividend that pays back through improved morale, loyalty, and performance.

When employees are supported, they thrive. When they are trusted, they give their best.

In a world where top talent chooses workplaces that value well-being and inclusion, this policy gives Karnataka companies a distinct competitive edge.

Attracting and Retaining Talent

The state’s dynamic industries — from IT and biotechnology to aerospace and manufacturing — depend on skilled professionals. For women in these sectors, a workplace that recognises their biological needs is not just appealing; it is empowering.

A company in Karnataka now sends a clear message to prospective employees across India and abroad: We respect you. We understand you. We value you.

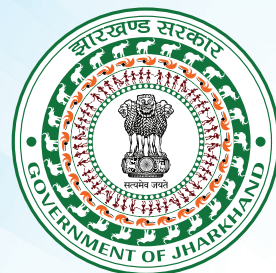
Such respect translates into retention. Employees who feel seen and supported remain more committed to their organizations. They invest their creativity and loyalty into their work — reducing costly turnover and building resilient corporate cultures rooted in trust.

Reducing Presenteeism, Boosting Productivity

There is a quiet crisis in many workplaces called presenteeism — when employees work despite illness or discomfort, leading to lower focus and quality of output. By allowing women to take a day of menstrual rest without fear or stigma, the policy ensures that they return rejuvenated, focused, and more productive.

This isn’t about fewer workdays. It’s about better workdays. In the long run, this makes





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सूचना एवं जनसंपर्क विभाग, झारखण्ड सरकार