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THE BIG SQUEEZE
Statistics belie the lived reality of Indian households

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NATION

BEND RULES, GRAB LAND
It's now the turn of Odisha's adivasis, who call its bauxite-rich hills home

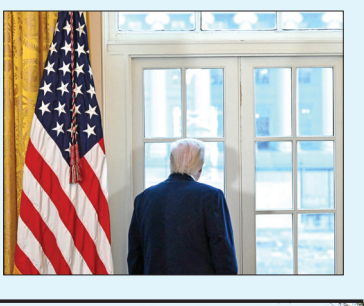
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A LONELY SUPERPOWER
Why Trump's America has no friends and no real allies

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The subterfuge of women's reservation

Yogendra Yadav

The suspense has finally been laid to rest. The 'revolutionary' step we were primed to expect, ostensibly to empower India's women, was suddenly so urgent that a special session of Parliament was convened bang in the middle of elections in four states. It had all the signs of a subterfuge and behind the veil of 'Nari Vandan' lay a bid to reshape Parliament in a way that makes the next election easier for the BJP. The text of the Constitution 131st Amendment Bill finally surfaced barely 36 hours before the special session (16-18 April) got under way. Wonder why this pathbreaking move was kept under wraps for so long, from the public and more importantly the women it sought to empower.

The amendment required a two-thirds majority in Parliament, which the government did not have. The bill wouldn't pass without Opposition support. The Prime Minister himself appealed to opposition parties to back it. But why weren't they given the text earlier, so that they had enough time to carefully assess its merit? Why was there no all-party meeting to build consensus, despite repeated demands? And what was the tearing hurry that required a special session in the midst of election campaigns in Bengal and Tamil Nadu, barely a week before polling?

The fog began to lift when the text was finally out. As suspected, the amendment was less about increasing women's representation and more about restructuring Parliament. On women's reservation, the change was modest: it amended Article 334A to remove the need to wait for fresh Census data before reserving seats. This meant that reservation for women could, in theory, be implemented by the 2029 Lok Sabha elections.

But we shouldn't forget who introduced the condition that tied women's reservation to a new Census and delimitation exercise. It was the Modi government, when it

brought in the one-third reservation amendment in 2023. That condition effectively pushed implementation by a decade. At the time, opposition leader Mallikarjun Kharge had demanded that the clause be scrapped and reservation implemented from the 2024 election. The Modi government had rejected the demand—and now, five years later, was trying to take credit for a historic breakthrough.

In any case, the real focus of the amendment was the proposed restructuring of the Lok Sabha and state assemblies. At first glance, increasing the maximum strength of the Lok Sabha from 547 now (with 543 elected members) to 815 may seem reasonable. After all, constituencies have ballooned in size, and more seats could mean better representation.

But that's not the crux of the matter. The most consequential—and potentially dangerous—change is the removal of the decades-old freeze on the redistribution of seats among states. For nearly fifty years, under Article 82, seats have been allocated based on the 1971 Census, with the freeze

Even as the BJP mouthed assurances that delimitation wouldn't alter the states' share of seats, the bill was silent



Congress party president Mallikarjun Kharge addresses the media on 15 April after INDIA bloc leaders met at his residence to thrash out a united strategy to oppose the women's reservation bill

intended to preserve a delicate federal balance. This freeze is set to expire in 2026.

For months, the Prime Minister and senior BJP leaders tried to reassure non-Hindi-speaking states that the proportional share of each state would remain unchanged when the total number of seats increased. So, if the Lok Sabha expanded by 50 per cent, the seat share of Uttar Pradesh would rise from 80 to around 140 and Kerala's from 20 to 30. But the amendment bill made no such promise.

Instead, it proposed changes to Articles 55, 81, 82, 170 and 332, removing the 1971 benchmark—without any provision to preserve the current proportions. If the amendment went through, Article 82 would require seats to be allocated strictly according to population.

Run the numbers. If delimitation is carried out using the 2011 Census and the Lok Sabha expands by 50 per cent, Kerala's seats will inch up from 20 to 23, while Uttar Pradesh's will surge from 80 to 132. In relative terms, states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Telangana, Odisha, West Bengal and Punjab will lose out, while Hindi-speaking states will gain significantly.

This will obviously unsettle the fragile federal equilibrium between Hindi and non-Hindi regions. The warning issued by the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister is not to be taken lightly. Ignoring it could come at a serious cost to national unity.

There is more. If this amendment passed, the allocation of seats among states would no longer be fixed in the Constitution—it

would be determined by ordinary legislation. Which means future governments could alter the basis of allocation—deciding which Census to use—without needing a constitutional amendment, and therefore without requiring Opposition consent. The power would effectively shift to the Delimitation Commission.

Alongside this amendment, the government also introduced a delimitation bill that proposes using the 2011 Census as the basis. But with a simple majority in Parliament, it could later switch to, say, the 2027 Census—whenever it suits its political calculus.

The BJP knew full well that such a sweeping, divisive amendment was not likely to get a two-thirds majority. Which brings up another question: if passage was improbable, what is the game? ■

Why Noida and Manesar were burning

Worker agitations in the industrial hubs of the NCR hold a mirror to India's economic health, writes **Gurdeep Singh Sappal**



When factory workers in Noida's industrial sectors protested on 13-14 April 2026, India's prime time TV anchors got to work on a plausible conspiracy theory. Who was stirring the pot? A foreign hand? The 9 p.m. theatre was familiar: split screens, hyperventilating talking heads and a likely whodunit candidate—Pakistan. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath warned darkly of 'anti-social elements' conspiring to destabilise the state's development.

If you didn't know better, the TV debates wouldn't lead you to the truth that in the past ten-odd years, wages have been nearly stagnant while rents have doubled and inflation has soared (Also read: *The Big Squeeze*, Page 3). Corporate profits are at a fifteen-year high while the purchasing power of the worker outside the factory gate is at a corresponding low. For those who see it, this is an inevitable consequence of Modinomics—built for the top, paid for by the bottom.

What really happened to wages
The story of wages (See tables: *Wages and Corporate Profits* and *Real Wage Growth*, Page 2) in India over the past two decades is revealing. In the UPA years (2004-2014), under Dr Manmohan Singh, real wages in India's informal

Wages and corporate profits

	2004	2014	2026
Unskilled factory worker, Noida	₹3,500-5,000 p.m.	₹8,000-10,000 p.m.	₹11,000-13,000 p.m.
IT Fresher (TCS/Infosys/Wipro)	₹8,000-10,000 p.m.	₹25,000-28,000 p.m.	₹25,000-28,000 p.m.
Customer care/BPO	₹3,000-4,500 p.m.	₹15,000-25,000 p.m.	₹10,000-28,000 p.m.
Engg Fresher (avg. B. Tech)	₹12,000-15,000 p.m.	₹20,000-25,000 p.m.	₹18,000-25,000 p.m.
1BHK rent, Noida industrial	₹2,500-3,500 p.m.	₹4,000-6,500 p.m.	₹8,000-14,000 p.m.
TCS + Infosys combined profits	Base period	~4-5x of 2004	~10-12x of 2004

sector grew at 5-7 per cent annually. This was the fastest sustained wage growth in the history of independent India, driven by a combination of genuine economic expansion, the NREGA wage floor—which forced an increase in informal sector pay—rising farm support prices and an IT sector competing for talent. Then came 2014, and the clock stopped. (See table above) Revealingly, where IT profits have grown tenfold since 2014, entry-level salaries are stagnant. The customer care worker, who

earned ₹15-25K in 2014 now earns less, in the lower tier, as the sector has fragmented into unregulated gig arrangements with no floor. And the wages of unskilled factory workers have risen by ₹3K in 12 years! Meanwhile, the Noida room rent has gone up from ₹4-6K in 2014 to ₹8-14K now. Inflation outpaced the wage worker's income but not the landlord's. That is the economic compact the Modi government has quietly enforced and that is the reason the streets of Noida erupted in protests last week.

Drawing on Labour Bureau and NSSO data, economists Jean Drèze and Arindam Das have documented a near-total collapse in real wage growth since 2014. (See table on page 2)

These findings have no interpretive bias and are not contested. They are drawn from official government data, the Wage Rates in Rural India (WRI) series of the Labour Bureau and the periodic National Sample Surveys. A plain reading of the data confirms that the annual growth rate of real wages over the past ten years has been near zero at the all-India level. For agricultural labour, the figure is even more alarming—a decline in real terms.

The workers who torched vehicles in Noida were not 'Pakistan assets' but people who can't make ends meet

►► Continued on page 2

Women's reservation and all that jazz

Herjinder

On Thursday, 16 April, Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K. Stalin burnt a copy of the proposed Constitution (131st) Amendment Bill 2026 and hoisted a black flag to signal state-wide rejection of what he called a "black law" that would turn Tamils into "refugees in their own land".

He was not alone. The southern states were united in their opposition, with Punjab's Sukbir Singh Badal calling the move "highly discriminatory." Sonia Gandhi publicly called out the government's real agenda, when she wrote in a sharply worded critique (*The Hindu*, 16 April 2026), that "delimitation, and not reservation for women, is the real issue... [and] the plan is extremely dangerous and an assault on the Constitution itself." Her intervention shifted the national conversation from so-called gender justice to democratic representation.

On Friday, 17 April, the Lok Sabha rejected the bill (278 voted for, 211 against). When the government knew it wouldn't have Opposition support and, therefore, the two-thirds majority needed to pass the bill, what was it playing at? How does anyone trust a government that says something and does the exact opposite? Even as the Delimitation and Union Territories bills were also withdrawn, the mystery is worth unpacking.

At first glance, the government's move to operationalise women's reservation ahead of the 2029 general elections appeared overdue, even welcome. A special sitting of Parliament was convened, urgency was invoked and a narrative framed around gender justice. But as the fine print of the Delimitation Bill began to be debated in Parliament, it became increasingly evident that the real story lay

elsewhere.

What was presented as 'progressive reform' quickly started looking like subterfuge, a surreptitious gaming of the Constitution, an exercise in political re-engineering.

The most striking departure from past practice lay in what the Bill does not say. In the earlier Delimitation framework, particularly the Act that followed previous exercises, Section 8 explicitly mandated that constituency boundaries would be redrawn on the basis of the 2001 Census. At the same time, it clearly protected the federal balance by stating that the total number of seats allocated to each state in the Lok Sabha would remain frozen, based on the 1971 Census.

That provision was not a mere technical clause. It was the political and moral anchor of India's federal compact. It ensured that states which had successfully implemented population control policies would not be penalised with reduced representation in Parliament.

That safeguard was conspicuously absent in the draft Bill that the government made available barely one-and-a-half days before introducing it. The prime minister, home minister and union ministers repeated that no state would lose its proportional share of



Rahul Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, addresses the special session on the women's reservation bill

seats, in fact the proportion would remain the same. Not true.

Section 8 of the current Bill was silent on any such protection. It did not commit to maintaining the existing distribution of seats among states. It did not reaffirm the 1971-based allocation. In effect, it removed the only statutory guarantee that had so far prevented a population-based redistribution of political power.

In legislative terms, often more significant than what is. Oral

assurances, however emphatic, do not carry the force of law. They cannot bind future governments, nor can they be enforced or reviewed. A statutory omission, on the other hand, creates space for interpretation—and, potentially, for drastic shifts in policy down the line.

This is precisely where the opposition's criticism gained traction. Several leaders argued that what was being presented as a women's reservation initiative was, in fact, a delimitation exercise in disguise. The charge stems from the structural sequencing embedded in the bill itself, where reservation is contingent upon delimitation, and delimitation is left open-ended by design, leaving the law open to interpretation by the government, the courts and in this case the Delimitation Commission, an opaque and arbitrary institution that the government is in no mood to change.

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi raised a pointed question in

Parliament: why the delay, and why the opacity? She also flagged the government's tendency to sidestep the issue of OBC representation by labelling it a "technical matter".

The critique was not limited to intent, it extended to drafting. A Congress MP from Chandigarh described the bill as poorly drafted, warning of serious constitutional complications if it was implemented in its current form. One of the most glaring examples concerned the absence of any clarity on the total number of seats.

There was widespread speculation that the number of seats in legislative bodies could be increased by as much as 50 per cent to accommodate women's reservation without displacing existing representatives. Yet, the bill itself contained no such provision. It neither committed to an expansion nor outlined a formula for it.

Take Uttar Pradesh as an example. If a 50 per cent increase were to be applied to its legislative assembly, the number of seats would exceed 500. However, Article

170 of the Constitution clearly stipulates that the size of a state assembly must be between 60 and 500 members.

The government did not propose any amendment to this constitutional limit. This created a legal contradiction: either the projected expansion was unrealistic, or the bill was incomplete. In either case, the lack of clarity raised serious concerns about legislative preparedness and constitutional compliance.

Beyond these technicalities lies a larger, more consequential issue—the potential reshaping of India's federal balance.

For decades, there existed a broad political consensus that delimitation, whenever undertaken, would not disturb the equilibrium between states. This understanding was critical in holding together a diverse union where demographic trends vary widely across regions.

Southern states, in particular, were justifiably worried that population-based redistribution would reduce their voice in national decision-making, despite their relative success in governance and social indicators.

Their anxiety was mirrored, albeit differently, in states like Odisha, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, which also faced the prospect of diminished representation.

The debate in Parliament, credited and forcefully argued by women MPs and the Leader of the Opposition, brought to the surface what was initially obscured by the rhetoric.

What's next? If the government is genuinely committed to preserving federal balance while advancing gender justice, the path is straightforward: incorporate explicit safeguards within the law, clarify the framework for seat expansion, and address constitutional inconsistencies before implementation. ■

When the BJP knew the bills wouldn't have Opposition support and, therefore, the two-thirds majority needed to pass them, what was it playing at?

Why Noida was burning

Continued from page 1

When education makes you poorer

Education has been touted to be a trusty ladder out of poverty, a reliable tool for upward mobility. But for the first time in the history of independent India, the return on investment in education is negative for a growing section of the population.

A family that mortgages a land, borrows from relatives, or takes an education loan of ₹15 lakh to send their child to a private engineering college is no longer investing in upward mobility; they are simply incurring debt, a millstone around their neck. Assuming there is a job after graduating, the starting salary will be ₹18-22K a month, and the next decade will go servicing the loan, if they are lucky enough to find stable employment. A simple B.A. degree in a private university costs upwards of ₹6 lakh, and most graduates join the ranks of gig workers or the semi-skilled labour market.

Outstanding education loans nearly doubled between 2020 and 2024, from ₹65,000 crore to ₹1.29 lakh crore. This boom is not evidence of educational aspiration; it is evidence of a population that is trapped between the imperative of educating their children and a labour market that offers nothing in return.

The coming reversion to caste

When education stops delivering returns, even rational families will hesitate to invest in it. When a B. Tech degree earns less than driving a Zomato delivery bike, the calculation changes. That calculation is already being made, quietly, in millions of Indian homes.

The consequence is predictable. The aspiring class of first-generation learners will find themselves driven towards semi-skilled gig work—delivery riders, mall customer service, warehouse sorters, supply chain labour... For those who cannot access even that, the oldest fallback will reassert itself: work defined not by merit or aspiration but by caste. The carpenter's son becomes a carpenter. The weaver's



Photo: Vipin

daughter remains a weaver. Not by choice or with pride but because alternatives have been shut out.

This is not alarmism. It is the endpoint of a system where education stagnates 11-12 per cent more every year, wages stagnant in real terms and the state has gutted every institution that once cushioned the impact. The reversion to a caste-based economic structure is round the corner. If people start believing that a degree will lead to debt and not to a better livelihood, the premium on education will simply evaporate.

The workers who set vehicles ablaze in Noida last week were not 'Pakistan assets'. They were not 'anti-nationals' nor 'urban Naxals'. They were people earning ₹11-13K a month in a city where the room rent is 45 per cent of their income, where prices have surged after war broke out in West Asia, where the last meaningful wage revision happened a decade ago. They are the victims of a new labour code that forces them to work 12-hour shifts and dresses it up as a 'voluntary' act!

They are people who have been told, for more than a decade now, that India is the world's fastest growing major economy, but they see no evidence of it in their wage slip.

The BJP governments of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh responded to the protests by deploying the Rapid Action Force, arresting workers for rioting and forming committees. The TV channels, their editorial courage long since traded for advertising and access, looked for signs of 'a foreign hand'. But the hand that wrote this story is Modi's. The Noida fire was lit by a welding torch and the fuel to keep it ablaze has been accumulating for a decade. It has a name too—Modinomics. ■

Real wage growth

	UPA era (2004-2014)	NDA era (2014-2024)
Real wage growth for farm labour	+ 6.8% p.a.	-1.3% p.a.
Real wage growth across informal sector	5-6% p.a.	~0%
Cumulative real wage increase	~90% (nominal)	~5-8% (nominal, below inflation)

No 'dalali' please, we are Indians

Our disdain for mediation harms us, writes Aakar Patel

I am not sure why but the Indian state finds the idea of international mediation distasteful. The distaste extends to both the mediator and the parties who need mediation. We know this because of our insistence—under all Indian governments, I should add—that outstanding issues between two nations must be resolved bilaterally.

This stance has particular relevance to one neighbour. Our contempt for that neighbour, currently mediating between the US and Iran, was recently expressed by our external affairs minister, who used the pejorative 'dalal' to describe them. So, we won't brook *dalali*, but what we will do, to solve a problem that involves us and affects us, is not clear at the moment. We might even be foolish enough to crow over the fact that Vance exited the 'Islamabad Talks', after making a 'best and final offer'. Despite suffering like the rest of the world, in terms of both prices and shortages, we are content to be onlookers, hoping that the crisis will resolve itself, or someone else will resolve it, so that things return to normalcy for us.

This is how India has decided to approach the ongoing war. We can agree or disagree on whether India could have done more or something different. But what I want to share is the approach India did not take. It's easy because the previous government left us a handy document.

On 4 November 2013, then prime minister Manmohan Singh spoke to over 120 heads of Indian missions and outlined the five principles that defined his foreign policy.

- 1 Recognition that India's relations with the world—the major powers and Asian neighbours—were shaped by its developmental priorities. Singh said 'the single most important objective of Indian foreign policy has to be to create a global environment conducive to the wellbeing of our great country'.
- 2 Recognition that greater integration with the world economy would benefit India and enable Indians to realise their creative potential.
- 3 To seek stable, mutually beneficial relations with all major powers, and work with the international community to create a global economic and security environment beneficial to all nations.
- 4 To recognise that the Indian



J.D. Vance (L) and Shehbaz Sharif at the Islamabad peace talks

Why is India besotted with Israel? Is it a shared hatred of minorities?

subcontinent's shared destiny required greater regional cooperation and connectivity.

5 A foreign policy defined not merely by interests but also by the values dear to Indians: 'India's experiment of pursuing economic development within the framework of a plural, inspired and liberal democracy has inspired people around the world and should continue to do so.'

In short, India would use foreign policy to advance its economic development; it would be friendly with global powers and neighbours; and it would be helped in doing this by continuing to be a pluralist and secular democracy.

This clear exposition allows us to see what we could do differently today.

If we agree 'the single most important objective of Indian foreign policy is to create a global environment conducive to India's wellbeing', then it's obvious we should ensure the environment is not vitiated. That means engaging with those who have the agency to hinder our growth.

India is one of the few nations—perhaps the only nation—that has good relations with America, Israel and Iran. Pakistan is friendly with two of them. Knowing that a

war in the Gulf would damage our economy, disrupt the supply of fertilisers and fuel and cause general chaos, we should have tried to ensure this war did not begin. We chose not to do that.

We chose not to enter the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership that included about 15 Asia Pacific nations. Economists, including those who adore the prime minister, think India has become unnecessarily protectionist.

The third point on seeking mutually beneficial long-term relations with 'all powers' was its agency in relation to China. How much agency we have exercised on this since 2020 and where things stand is clear and need not detain us here.

To my mind, the maximum departure since 2014 has been from points four and five. Borders in free Asia remain either rigid or closed, free movement is impossible and this is so because we, as the only power that shares boundaries with the rest, want it this way.

Finally, for the first time since 1947, we are faced with a large and popular political movement that is hostile to the idea of India as plural, secular and liberal. Our newfound deep friendship with Israel is to be understood in this light. Israel ranks 49th among our export partners and 48th among our import partners, placing it among the lowest in both categories. Why are we so besotted with Israel? It is because we ache to do to our minorities what Israel is doing to Palestinians.

This is what we stand and this is what we have chosen to do. If we think we need a course correction, Manmohan Singh's wise, kind and measured counsel from a decade-and-a-half ago is a fine place to start. ■

Views are personal

The Big Squeeze

Official inflation indicators, **Ajit Ranade** points out, understate the lived reality of Indian households

The Reserve Bank of India's Inflation Expectations Survey of Households (March 2026 round) shows perceived inflation to be 7.2 per cent. This is more than double the official Consumer Price Index (CPI)-based reading of 3.2 per cent for February. The CPI was revamped recently to better represent true inflation. The RBI survey also shows households expect prices to rise 8.5 per cent over the next three months and 8.8 per cent over the year. The gap between official data and ground-level perception of reality has rarely been more politically charged.

Meanwhile India is caught in a double oil squeeze. The first is fuel, which was at \$115 per barrel in March, driven by the West Asia conflict. Likewise, transport and power costs are up, as are prices of practically all manufactured goods. The RBI itself acknowledges that its baseline assumption of \$85 per barrel for the year could easily be breached if hostilities resume. The ceasefire between the US and Iran, announced earlier this month, is fragile. Peace talks have failed. If the conflict heats up again, the price of crude oil will surge and so will inflation.

The second oil is what Indians use for cooking. India imports nearly 90 per cent of its edible oils—palm from Indonesia and Malaysia, soya from Argentina and Brazil, sunflower from Russia and Ukraine. The West Asia crisis has rattled global commodities markets and sent vegetable oil prices surging alongside crude. Retail edible oil prices rose by Rs 1-4 per kg in just one week. India's palm oil imports fell 19 per cent in March to a three-month low as price-wary refiners held back. This will tighten domestic availability in the months ahead. Both oils singe the

household budget.

The lived experience of inflation—as seen in healthcare, education, transportation, house rents—has been high for several years. *Breakpoint: The Crisis of the Middle Class and the Future of Work*, a 2026 book by Saurabh Mukherjea, Nandita Rajhansa and Sapana Bhavsar, examines its impact on the Indian middle class.

India's recently revised CPI basket still has a structural blind spot. It captures the rents paid by sitting tenants, whose lease rentals escalate annually by a formulaic 5-10 per cent, rather than the rents new entrants have to pay. Brokers and tenants across Indian cities routinely report double-digit rent increases even as official housing inflation remains subdued. The index is measuring the wrong price. The official thermometer is taking the temperature at the wrong site.

All of this is happening against the backdrop of stagnant real wages, especially in rural India. When everything costs more and wages do not keep pace, households

cut nutrition, defer medical care and pull children from private schools. The violent protests for wage hikes in Haryana's Manesar and Noida's industrial clusters are not just labour disputes, they are a social manifestation of inflation.

In Manesar, factory workers boycotted work, clashed with police and drew the government into a dramatic concession. The government announced a 35 per cent hike in minimum wages for unskilled workers. Not nearly enough because inflation has outpaced wage growth for years.

In Noida, workers in garment and hosiery factories pelted stones, turned to arson and vandalism. They too are asking for an increase in minimum wages. India has around 400 million internal migrant workers, a demographic that is acutely sensitive to food and fuel costs. When the price of a meal

doubles and LPG becomes scarce, many just return to their villages. And as the India SME Forum iterates: 'Once labour leaves, it is very difficult to get them back'. The threat to India's manufacturing competitiveness, already under pressure from global supply chain disruptions, is real.

On the macro front, the rupee fell 10 per cent against the dollar in the last fiscal year. The fall in March was sharp, and the exchange rate crossed 95. The RBI response was a crackdown, practically banning domestic bank

participation in offshore betting in the rupee-dollar rate. This is the non-deliverable forward (NDF) market, which is technically outside the regulatory ambit of the RBI. This offshore market, worth \$149 billion a day, offers opportunities to hedge against a falling rupee. It is also a signal for

onshore people to gauge which way the rupee will move. While the RBI's sudden crackdown made the rupee bounce, it is not clear whether this will last if the war with Iran continues. In March alone, the RBI's interventions to prop up the rupee cost India \$30.5 billion in precious foreign exchange reserves.

The RBI has expressed deep displeasure with banks using the offshore-onshore gap to profit from the rupee's weakness. But as any careful observer will note, the offshore NDF market is a symptom, not the disease. The disease is India's current account deficit, which high oil import bills have widened, combined with portfolio outflows of \$26 billion over two years and net FDI that has turned negative. These are real economy vulnerabilities that no amount of policing of the derivatives market

can fix.

At the IMF and World Bank spring meetings (13-18 April), global growth forecasts were revised downward. The RBI has held the repo rate at 5.25 per cent and projects inflation to average 4.6 per cent in 2026-27. These are carefully calibrated projections that will be hard to defend if oil prices stay high, if the West Asia ceasefire breaks down and if the monsoon disappoints—none of which can be dismissed as unlikely.

A typical Indian household may not engage with CPI press releases but it knows the price of cooking oil and LPG refills, it is sensitive to increases in school fees and medical bills. And it is feeling the RBI survey that prices are rising at more than double the official rate. ■

AJIT RANADE is an economist, Courtesy: The Billion Press



Official statistics belie the pinch most Indians feel while balancing their household budgets

Photo: Getty Images

A typical Indian household may not engage with CPI press releases but it knows the price of cooking oil and LPG refills

What are the factory workers fighting for?

Nandlal Sharma reports on the spontaneous combustion of labour agitations across the country

Poster boys, no leaders, no unions. Yet, a wave of protests spread systematically across the country, with millions of workers agitating for higher wages.

The beginning of this uprising can be traced to early February 2026, when contract workers at Indian Oil's refinery in Barauni (Bihar) demanded their wages be increased, working hours be fixed at eight hours per day, and they be provided benefits such as Provident Fund (PF) and Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC).

On 23 February 2026, more than 30,000 contract workers at Indian Oil's refinery in Panipat, Haryana, went on strike. On 27 February, 5,000 contract workers employed by Larsen & Toubro at the ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel project in Hazira, Surat (Gujarat) went on strike. Between January and March 2026, more than two dozen worker strikes were reported at major power plants and key energy hubs: NTPC Patratu (Jharkhand), NTPC Nabinagar (Bihar), Adani Thermal Power Plant Korba (Chhattisgarh), Vedanta Power Plant Sighetarai (Chhattisgarh), Hindustan Zinc Limited Chittorgarh (Rajasthan), Indian Oil Vadodara (Gujarat), and the Obra Thermal Power Plant in Sonbhadra (Uttar Pradesh).

The first strike in this wave took place on 1 January 2026, when gig workers protested for better working conditions and rights.

In March-April, protests gathered rapid momentum in Haryana, particularly in several companies located in IMT Manesar. These included Honda, Munjal Showa, Satyam Auto Components, Roop Polymers Limited, Richa Global and Modelama Exports. Compelled to concede, management raised salaries from Rs 11,000 to Rs 16,000. While an extra Rs 5,000 may not seem like much, other workers took heart.

Jharkhand AITUC-affiliated trade union leader Anand Kumar says that the protestors are contract labourers from the organised industrial sector (petroleum, energy, automobile, electronics, cement, hosiery). He notes that while the movement is primarily driven by these workers, domestic workers are also joining in.

In this movement, the workers'

biggest weapon has been the mobile phone on which they create and share videos and reels. Their growing awareness stems from their own precarious lives. Labour rights activist Sunand says, "Wherever workers protested, they raised their voices through social media. In this way, workers from one factory inspired those in another to speak up for their rights. They gained confidence: if they can fight, so can we. The fuel crisis that emerged after the Iran war acted as a catalyst with workers forced to migrate."

Bharti Kumari, who works as a checker at Shahi Exports in Noida Phase 2, says, "We work 12 hours and earn around Rs 12,000. Room rent is Rs 6,000. Petrol is nearing Rs 100 per litre. Gas costs Rs 400 per kg. Electricity costs Rs 10-12 per unit. On top of that, there's children's education. Schools ask for both semesters' fees at once. What are we supposed to eat? Our salary should be Rs 20,000 per month."

It's not as if state governments didn't attempt to suppress the protests. On 7 April, the Haryana

government imposed Section 144 across the Manesar-Gurgaon region, banning gatherings of workers. The workers didn't back down. On 8 April, even larger numbers went on strike. As their struggle intensified, the government began its crackdown. On 8 April, workers in Manesar were lathi-charged. On 9 April, Haryana police arrested more than 50 workers, including over 20 women.

Meanwhile, on 11 April, the Uttar Pradesh police arrested four labour activists from the Botanical Garden metro station in Noida. On 12 April, lawyers Prateek Kumar and Mohammad Tanveer Ali, along with two other activists who had gone to secure their bail, were also detained. Dozens of workers were injured in police lathi charges at various locations.

In Haryana, workers' wages were last revised in 2015. Ideally, they should have been revised again in 2020, but the state government delayed it for six years. As a result, minimum wages stayed the same. The government formed a committee in May 2025 under

pressure. Nine meetings were held, but no notification was issued. Is it any wonder that a workers' movement should have erupted spontaneously in April 2026?

The strikes forced the Haryana government to issue a wage revision notification on 9 April, setting minimum monthly wages at Rs 15,220 (unskilled) and Rs 19,425 (skilled). Still way below the workers' justifiable demand for Rs 25,000-30,000 per month. Following the Haryana government's announcement, demonstrations escalated in Noida.

After four days, the workers' patience ran out. On the morning of 13 April, the protest flared into violence. The very next day, the Uttar Pradesh government announced a minimal wage increase. Under this interim decision, unskilled workers' wages in UP will rise from Rs 13,313 to Rs 13,690. Semi-skilled workers will earn Rs 15,059, and skilled workers Rs 16,868 per month. A press release by the Uttar Pradesh government stated that the industrial sector is currently facing global and economic challenges, with rising

input costs and declining exports.

On its heels came a statement from Medha Roopam, the district magistrate of Gautam Buddha Nagar, saying that if outsourcing agencies (read: contractors) and their workers engage in disruptive or violent behaviour, the agency will be blacklisted and its licence cancelled.

Renowned economist Prof. Arun Kumar points out some important details: "In our country, unemployment is extremely high, and 94 per cent of people work in the unorganised sector. On top of that, real inflation is very high, and the 'real income' of workers is falling very rapidly. If your salary remains the same while inflation rises, your real income falls—that is, your purchasing power declines. That is exactly what is happening today. Workers' wages are not increasing, but inflation is rising, so they are unable to meet their needs. Due to weak bargaining power, workers cannot demand that their wages be increased in line with inflation. Another issue is that even the organised sector is increasingly hiring contract

workers instead of permanent ones. Contract workers are not unionised, so they cannot fight collectively. That is why sudden protests are being seen in places like Gurugram and Noida—indeed across the country—because everyone's problems are similar."

A significant point is that the definition of a factory has been changed under the new labour codes. Earlier, the law applied to factories with 10 workers (with electricity) and 20 workers (without electricity). Now, these thresholds have been increased to 20 and 40 respectively. This means many small factories will fall outside the scope of the law. Once a factory is outside the legal framework, no one will monitor whether workers are working 8, 12 or 14 hours. A similar situation exists with contract labour. Earlier, contractors supplying 20 or more workers had to obtain a license. Now, this limit has been raised to 50. If a contractor supplies 48 workers, no license is needed. Without a license, the law does not apply—there is no guarantee of minimum wages, no EPF, no safety responsibility and no fixed working hours.

General secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) Amarjeet Kaur says, "The government claims it wanted to end 'inspector raj' and replace it with 'facilitators'; while trade unions argue that the new labour codes push workers towards near-slavery. This can only increase industrial unrest."

Since November 2025, the BJP and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh have consistently promoted the idea that the four new labour codes passed by Parliament under the Modi government are in the workers' interests. Jaybhagwan, Haryana general secretary of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), says, "This was the official propaganda. The unofficial propaganda was that from 1 April, everyone's salary would increase, everyone would become permanent, and everyone would receive full benefits. Unskilled workers expected their lives to change from 1 April—that did not happen. Workers may not be talking about the labour codes now, but ultimately that's what they'll be fighting against." ■



Driven to desperation, workers across India have hit the streets. A protest in the industrial hub of Noida, bordering Delhi

Photo: Vipin

Not only are their wages not keeping up with inflation, workers do not have the bargaining power to demand any better

Targeting 'logical discrepancy'?

Sabir Ahamad and Ashin Chakraborty of SABAR Institute in conversation with **Sourabh Sen** on the SIR in West Bengal

A narrow staircase leads to a room on the third floor of an old, decrepit building opposite St Thomas School in Kolkata's Khidirpur area. An A4-size printout pasted on the door confirms that the staircase leads to the SABAR Institute, a registered trust. 'Data for better lives' reads the tagline, spelling out the motto of the organisation. While SABAR has been engaged in data-driven research for the past decade and more, what has drawn national attention is its work during the last six months on the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) conducted in West Bengal by the Election Commission of India (ECI).

Founded by 48-year-old data researcher Sabir Ahamad, the team at SABAR is young. They recall with some amusement the call they received from the office of the chief electoral officer, West Bengal. Was it an invitation or a summons, they joked. Were they going to be arrested?

The team had just released its analysis of the draft list of voters issued by the ECI in December 2025, in which 58 lakh voters were deleted under 'ASDD' (Absent, Severely Duplicated and Duplicate) categories. They were cordially received by ECI officials and its consultants and asked if they would like to collaborate. Officials were also most keen to know how such a young and small team had cracked so much data in such a short time.

It was a fairly simple task, says Ashin Chakraborty, an associate with a master's degree in economics, though it's painstaking work. The draft list was in a machine-readable format, and contained all the relevant details including reasons for deletion. Subsequent lists, they found, had firewalls, making it much more difficult for researchers to crunch the data.

Sabir Ahamad, founder of SABAR and RTI activist with 20 years of experience, describes himself as a "barefoot researcher". Between them, his team members bring expertise in economics, statistics, computer science, AI, machine learning and large language models. Some are associates, others are interns. A few students and several voluntary researchers round off the team he leads.



Ashin Chakraborty (left) and Sabir Ahamad



When did you notice that the SIR had selectively targeted Muslims?

The draft list of December 2025 with 7.04 crore voters was not suspicious. It had deleted roughly seven per cent of the electorate from the July 2025 list, which is consistent with other states and West Bengal's population. In Kolkata's Bhabanipur—Mamata Banerjee's constituency—around 22 per cent of the electorate were deleted under the ASDD category, including both Hindus and Muslims, who constitute 20 per cent of voters in the constituency. It was also consistent in Muslim-dominated border districts. In rural Bengal, though, women formed the overwhelming majority among the deleted, showing up as 'shifted'. The ECI's software could not map a large number of women after their surnames changed post-marriage. This consistent pattern flipped after the ECI introduced the 'logical discrepancy' category, which flagged 1.32 crore voters who had made it to the draft list after filing enumeration forms, producing documents and mapping them-selves to the 2002 voters' list.

So, Muslims in bordering districts like Murshidabad and Malda were able to map themselves successfully?

Yes. In fact, the unmapped rate in these districts was below the

state average and much less—one or two per cent—than in Kolkata and even North 24 Parganas, a Matua belt, where the unmapped constituted 12 to 14 per cent. In Kaliachak (Malda), where a mob protesting deletions detained seven judicial officers for nine hours on 1 April, the unmapped rate was 0.58 per cent. Deletions under the ASDD category were possibly higher in Kolkata and its suburbs where blue-collar migrant workers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh live.

The ASDD data after the first round also did not validate the BJP's claim about West Bengal's changing demography due to infiltration from Bangladesh or, for that matter, the state being a hub for issuing fake Aadhaar, PAN and voter cards. Union government data on new and active PAN, Aadhaar and voter cards were also consistent with the trend value of around seven per cent, which is West Bengal's share in India's population.

What happened after 'logical inconsistency' was introduced?

This led to 60 lakh additional names—over and above those deleted under the ASDD category—being flagged as suspects and put 'under adjudication'. Our study found that 'logical discrepancy' disproportionately affected Muslims. It is possible, though it is admittedly mere speculation until

the ECI furnishes details, that a bias was introduced into the AI software by embedded consultants. We suspect this as most of the ECI officers we interacted with appeared to be digitally illiterate.

The percentage of Muslims deleted jumped to 52 per cent due to 'logical discrepancy'. In constituencies like Kolkata Port, Metiaburuz and Ballygunge, Muslims make up 80 to 90 per cent of the 'logical discrepancy' list. So far, we haven't found any constituency in West Bengal where the percentage of 'logical discrepancy' of Muslim names is less than the percentage of Muslim voters.

Is it possible to cite some examples?

State government employee Mohammad Ayub, for example, possessed all the necessary documents—birth certificate, passport, PAN and Aadhaar card. He was marked for adjudication because in 2002, he was listed as Ayub Mohammad. He now has to appear before the appellate tribunal since his name was not restored at the hearing stage. The problem is, even on 14 April, less than 10 days before the first phase of polling, these tribunals are not functional.

Do you have reason to suspect that the ECI's actions are politically coloured?

We deal with data and will not get into politics or psychology. Having said that, several things surprised us, including the level of the ECI's distrust of state government officers. We were surprised to see the ECI engage thousands of micro-observers.

Also, why would the ECI make it difficult for researchers to access data? The ASDD list could be searched and analysed. For subsequent lists, the ECI resorted to releasing data in scanned PDF format, with 'Under Adjudication' stamped across the names. We had to download 8,000-10,000 PDF pages per constituency and manually clean up the overriding stamps before making the data workable. There also seems to be an unending number of supplementary lists, running up to 17 lists in some constituencies, for deletion as well as addition.

Despite the Supreme Court's clear instructions, the ECI is yet to release the 'logically inconsistent' list. The lists on the CEO's website seem random, some in English and some in Bengali. Is there a particular reason why the list for Behala in Kolkata is in English but the list for Jadavpur, also in Kolkata, is in Bangla? Why are the lists published in the dead of night? Why do ECI servers shut down the moment the lists are uploaded? ■

Bend rules > grab land > evict residents

That seems to be the order of play in BJP-ruled states. Odisha's bauxite-rich hills are just the latest on the hitlist, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

Bending rules to acquire land is no longer an exception—it's the default setting across BJP-ruled states. And those taking the brunt of this tribal facer are the Adivasi communities, ancestral inhabitants of forests rich in bauxite, iron ore and coal. The latest flashpoint is in Odisha's Sijimali, located between Kalahandi and Rayagada districts. On 7 April, tribal villagers resisting Vedanta Ltd's proposed bauxite mining in these biodiverse hills were injured in police action. On 25 March, activist leaders Lingaraj Azad and Suresh Sangram—long-time defenders of Adivasi rights over their *jal, jangal, Jameen*—were arrested and booked under the draconian UAPA, alongside charges of conspiracy and sedition under the BNS.

Instead of trying to have a dialogue with his people, Odisha's first tribal chief minister Mohan Charan Manjhi is following a script that has by now been enacted in several BJP-ruled states: arrest the leaders and target the dissenting villagers. Activist Saranaya Nayak, from the Asia Pacific Forum on Women's Work and Development, has been working in this region for several years. "Five villages are getting the dissent," Nayak says. "The situation is so bad in Sajabari and Kantamal that women are not allowed to step out, not even to collect drinking water or buy provisions. The police have been using terror tactics across this entire region lately. Several RTIs show that gram panchayat signatures of consent were forged. The local administration is behaving like the minions of the East India Company."

Varanasi, the prime minister's Lok Sabha constituency in Uttar Pradesh, saw a similar crackdown in August 2023, when a large police contingent, backed by the Rapid Action Force, stormed the premises of the Sarva Seva Sangh at Rajghat, a 12.5-acre historic property on the banks of the Ganga. The land had been transferred in



Baba Ramdev's Patanjali Group has been one of the biggest beneficiaries of land largesse in BJP-ruled states

1960 under then railway minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, with the original sale deed preserved onsite. For decades, the complex functioned as the nerve centre of Seva Sangh's publication wing, spreading Gandhian thought. All of that was gone in a single demolarious drive and its residents summarily evicted.

For the past two years, farmers have been on the warpath in 11 villages across Varanasi district, resisting the forcible acquisition of 800 acres of prime agricultural land under the Krishi Dwar Yojana scheme. Their land—part of a farmers' co-operative established in 1952 by then MLA from Varanasi Raj Narain—is being handed over to private builders. Their leaders have been arrested, but the farmers are defiant: "We will give up our lives, but not our land."

In nearby Ayodhya, reports indicate that over 4,000 houses and shops were demolished to facilitate the Ram temple complex, displacing over 50,000 people. Many of these long-term residents and traders have received little or no compensation. Residents of areas like Barhata Manjhi accuse the

administration of seizing their land with token payouts. Nandlal Gupta, president of a local traders' body, says, "It's shocking: many shopkeepers are now working as labourers or autorickshaw drivers to make ends meet."

Meanwhile, the BJP-backed Time City Multi State Cooperative Housing Society has bought land around the Sarayu river and sold it at three to five times the price to the Adani and Lodha groups. Farmers here say they were arm-twisted into selling their land.

When the issue of forcible acquisition was raised, the Time City group claimed these people were 'illegal occupiers'. Opposition leaders have alleged that a plot bought for Rs 2 crore was resold to the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust for Rs 18.5 crore within ten minutes. Socialist activist Aflatoon of the Samajwadi Jan Parishad points out, "New zamindars led by Adani, Ambani and Patanjali have replaced the zamindars of yore."

In neighbouring Madhya Pradesh, while the BJP makes a big production of the Janjati Gaurav Diwas (Tribal Pride Day), former

Congress MLA Bala Bachchan says, "They are busy grabbing tribal lands. That's the BJP's real face."

Bachchan was speaking on behalf of Gond tribal Mahkam Singh who, along with his brother, filed a case in a sub-divisional magistrate court in 2021. He accused four-time BJP MLA Kedarnath Shukla and his brother Markande Shukla of forging documents to snatch a 17 acre plot in Harbaro village of Sidhi district.

Reports from 2025 indicate that BJP leaders encroached upon nearly 15,000 acres of government land in Chhatrapur and Vidisha—land that had earlier been cleared under an anti-mafia drive. The area is now reportedly being diverted for private plantations and sold to developers for residential colonies.

Assam is even worse. After systematically shutting down nearly two dozen public sector industries, the Himanta Biswa Sarma government is openly partnering with a few favoured corporate houses at the expense of tribal communities.

Political patronage was on full display when the Ambani group was allocated a 1,000 MW power project requiring 6,000 acres in Karbi Anglong, to be funded by the Asian Development Bank. Faced with stiff opposition, the ADB ultimately withdrew its \$434.25 million loan. The project is now on hold.

Equally controversial is the allotment of 1,134 acres in the Parbatjhora sub-division of Kokrajhar district to the Adani Group for a 3,200 MW thermal power plant. This too has been met with resistance from tribal groups.

Undeterred, the Sarma government has allocated 3,000 bighas in the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (Dima Hasao district) to Kolkata-based Mahabal Cement. The extraordinary scale of the allotment prompted a Gauhati High Court judge to ask if handing over an entire district to a private firm was "some kind of joke".

All three allotments violate the Sixth Schedule, which mandates prior consultation with tribal communities.

In Rajasthan, deputy chief minister Diya Kumari stands accused of occupying government land in Jaipur, including historical public land and properties in the Jalebali Chowk area. A petition filed in the Rajasthan high court accuses Union minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat of forging land records to usurp public land worth Rs 50 crore in Jodhpur. Records show that Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla and his family bought land in the Suthala sanctuary area in violation of the Wildlife Protection Act.

Gujarat has its own share of fraudulent acquisitions. A particularly shocking case involves former BJP MLA Rajendrasinh Chavda, who nabbed an entire government-owned wasteland hill in Himmatnagar, Sabarkantha and got it registered in the names of five people, including his daughter Payal and sister-in-law Dikshitaben.

In neighbouring Maharashtra, the Mahayuti alliance of the BJP, Shiv Sena (Shinde) and NCP (Ajit Pawar) has gained notoriety for a series of high-profile land grabs. The most prominent case involves Parth Pawar, son of the late deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar, who allegedly tried to grab 40 acres of prime government land reserved for the Maharm community in Pune. The land he was eyeing had a market value of Rs 1,800 crore. Pawar formed a company that registered the land transaction for Rs 300 crore. The stamp duty was Rs 21 crore but he deposited only Rs 500. The shady deal was later cancelled.

The small hill state of Uttarakhand has all sorts of land-grab scandals, but leading the pack is Baba Ramdev's Patanjali group, which has not only been given land at throwaway rates in Uttarakhand but also 1,200 acres in Assam—free of cost. In Himachal Pradesh, the earlier BJP state government granted Patanjali a 30-acre plot in Solan district for a token payment of one rupee; the Madhya Pradesh government gifted the group a 40-acre plot at an 88 per cent discount and Maharashtra gave away 600 acres in Nagpur at a discount of 75 per cent. ■

Those who speak up for the rights of Adivasis over their 'jal, jangal, Jameen' face the wrath of the state

DATA-LED & CONFIDENT 5TH IN THE WORLD. 1ST IN INTENT. KARNATAKA'S BLUEPRINT FOR THE AI CENTURY

Karnataka's AI Moment: When Technology Finally Works for Everyone

Picture a farmer in northern Karnataka, standing at the edge of his field at dawn, receiving a precise advisory on his phone — not a generic weather update, but a hyper-local alert about his specific soil conditions, the pest risk in his district, and the best mandi price for his crop that morning.

Or a Class 10 student in a government school in a Tier-3 town, working through a mathematics problem with an AI tutor that has identified exactly where her understanding breaks down and adapted its explanation accordingly.

Or a first-generation homeowner completing her property registration

Decentralisation is the budget's other educational priority. AI data labs will be established in 50 government colleges in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities, supported by a Rs 10 crore allocation in collaboration with the Government of India's AI mission.



Photo: Gettyimages

from her living room, without a single visit to a government office, without a middleman, without fear. These are not visions of a distant future.

They are the practical ambitions of Karnataka's Budget 2026–27 — a budget that places artificial intelligence not in the hands of the privileged few, but in the everyday lives of millions of ordinary citizens across the state.

That such ambitions are credible owes everything to the foundation Karnataka has already built. When Bengaluru secured 5th place among the world's top 50 cities for artificial intelligence and big data, it confirmed what observers of India's innovation economy had long suspected — that Karnataka had graduated from being a technology hub to being a technology force.

The state has risen from 21st to 14th position in the global startup ecosystem and is now home to more than 18,000 active startups. The Budget 2026–27 is the formal recognition of that graduation.

It is a budget that thinks at the scale of the state's ambition rather than the caution of convention, channelling AI not merely into government dashboards and pilot schemes but into the soil a farmer tills, the lesson a rural student struggles with, and the land record a citizen needs to trust. Karnataka is no longer building, and it intends to bring everyone with it.

Putting Intelligence in the Farmer's Hands

Agriculture has always been Karnataka's backbone, and this budget treats it accordingly — not with sentiment, but with the most advanced tools available.

The transformation begins with the Raitha Kare Kendra, an AI-powered reimagining of the existing Farmer Contact Centre. Where once a farmer might have called a helpline and received generic advice, the Kendra

will process satellite and sensor data to deliver hyper-local advisories tailored to individual farms and soil conditions.

Real-time tracking of crop prices across mandis will help farmers decide with precision when and where to sell, placing market intelligence that was previously the preserve of traders directly into the hands of those who grow the food.

Two new schemes deepen this commitment further. Sasya Sanjeevini uses AI to detect pests and diseases at the earliest possible stage, providing instant recommendations for eco-friendly bio-control measures that protect both crops and the environment.

The Vasudhamruta Programme, a three-year initiative, will use AI to monitor and enhance organic carbon content in soil, addressing the long-term health of Karnataka's agricultural land with the same rigour that urban planners apply to infrastructure.

And recognising that good data is only useful when it can be acted upon, the government is piloting Raitha Malls in Kolar district — one-stop facilities providing high-quality, verified seeds and fertilizers under one roof. The entire chain, from insight to implementation, has been thought through.

An Education Revolution Built for Every Child

If the agricultural initiatives speak to Karnataka's present, its education vision speaks to its future — and it is a future imagined without compromise. The budget does not merely digitise existing classrooms.

In collaboration with IIT Dharwad, it introduces AI-based personalized digital tutors for students from Classes 8 to 12, benefiting around 12.28 lakh learners.

Each tutor assesses the student's current knowledge level and identifies specific struggle points, tailoring lessons accordingly. This is not the one-size-fits-all pedagogy of the past.

It is responsive, adaptive, and genuinely personal — the kind of individualised academic support that was once available only to those who could afford private coaching, now extended to every government school student in the state.

The equity at the heart of this initiative is its most powerful feature. A student in a village in Bidar will have access to the same quality of learning support as one attending a premium school in Bengaluru, and that closing of the gap represents a profound act of social justice as much as an educational one. The total education allocation of Rs 72,386 crore — up from Rs 65,000 crore the previous year — underscores the seriousness of this commitment with the weight of numbers.

Decentralisation is the budget's other educational priority. AI data labs will be established in 50 government colleges in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities,

Building the Deep-Tech Ecosystem of Tomorrow

Karnataka's ambitions extend well beyond the present generation of AI applications. The budget's Quantum and Deep-Tech Road Map places the state at the frontier of technologies that will define the global economy of the 2030s.

Karnataka becomes the first state in India to treat Quantum Computing as a commercial priority rather than purely an academic one, with a dedicated Deep-Tech Campus established for commercialising Quantum Computing, space-tech, and climate-tech.

An Innovation Fund of Rs 100 crore has been set aside to de-risk research and development, encouraging multinational companies and startups to conduct high-stakes quantum research in Karnataka by co-funding experimental projects that

the private sector alone would hesitate to attempt.

The institutional architecture supporting this vision is broad and deliberately distributed. The Bengaluru Robotics and AI Innovation Zone — BRAINS — established through a partnership between ART-Park at IISc, ISRO, and KEONICS, will be a major hub for research, innovation, and entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on hardware-software integration.

A Centre of Excellence for AI at IIIT Raichur, funded at Rs 5 crore, deliberately plants world-class research capacity in North Karnataka, while two more AI Centres of Excellence in Bengaluru at Rs 16 crore will drive next-generation AI applications.

The Rs 4 crore medical robotics

COBOT project with NIMHANS and IIIT-Bangalore, focused on developing surgical-assisted robots for neurosurgery, demonstrates that deep-tech ambition in Karnataka is ultimately measured in human outcomes.

The Nipuna Karnataka programme ties the talent strategy together, aiming to train 20,000 graduates annually in emerging technologies and facilitating 100,000 internships, with the government paying 50% of the stipend up to ₹5,000 per month.

The Global Capability Centres policy reinforces the ecosystem further, offering incentives of up to Rs 50 crore for R&D infrastructure and 100% electricity duty reimbursement for companies setting up AI and quantum labs in the state.

supported by a Rs 10 crore allocation in collaboration with the Government of India's AI mission.

New courses in AI, machine learning, cloud computing, and automation engineering will be introduced across polytechnic and engineering institutions.

And in a gesture that speaks directly to the budget's philosophy of inclusive growth, 250 engineering graduates from backward classes will receive advanced AI training at premier institutions including IITs, NITs, and IIMs — expanding the circle of technological opportunity in a manner that is consistent with Karnataka's deepest values.

A social media ban for children under 16 completes the picture, reflecting a determination that the state's young people engage with digital tools as creators and learners, not passive consumers.

Governance That Works for the Citizen

The budget's commitment to transparent, accountable governance finds its most dramatic expression in Kaveri 3.0, a Rs 65 crore investment that fundamentally transforms how property is registered across Karnataka.

Remote registration, made legally possible by a 2025 amendment to the Registration Act, eliminates the need for physical visits to sub-registrar offices entirely.

AI document verification integrates rural land records from Bhoomi and urban records from E-Swathu into a single source of truth, automatically scanning and verifying title deeds and flagging discrepancies before a transaction proceeds.

The entire lifecycle — from document drafting to electronic stamp duty payment to digital authentication

— is paperless, removing the conditions that have historically allowed corruption to take root.

Smart Annavani brings the same intelligence to citizen grievances. The Food and Civil Supplies Department's helpline is being upgraded into an AI-powered platform featuring voice chatbots in local dialects, making government services genuinely accessible to citizens who are more comfortable speaking Kannada or other regional languages than navigating formal written interfaces.

AI-based facial recognition attendance systems in anganwadis, schools, colleges, and hostels will further strengthen accountability, ensuring that every child receives the nutrition and education to which they are entitled, and that public resources reach those for whom they are intended.

The Numbers That Make the Vision Real

Grand ambitions require sound foundations, and Karnataka's fiscal story is as impressive as its technological one. The budget size for 2026–27 stands at Rs 4,48,004 crore, representing a growth of 9.4% over the previous year — nearly double the central government's budget growth of 5.6%.

Karnataka's GSDP has expanded at 8.1%, outpacing the national GDP growth of 7.4%, reflecting the compound returns of sustained investment in capital projects and human development. Yet the fiscal deficit remains at 2.95% and total debt at 24.94% of GSDP — both comfortably within the standards of the Fiscal Responsibility Act, and a sharp contrast to the central government's fiscal deficit of 4.3% and liabilities of 55.6% of GDP.

This is not the false choice between

ambition and discipline that sceptics often pose. It is the proof that when government spends well — on education, on infrastructure, on technology that genuinely reaches people — it grows the economic base that makes further investment possible.

The Rs 10,600 crore allocated for social security schemes and the Rs 20,200 crore provided to BBMP over four years reflect a government that understands social investment and economic growth as complementary, not competing.

A State That Leads by Serving

Karnataka's Budget 2026–27 is, at its core, a statement about what technology is actually for. Not for showcasing innovation awards or attracting international rankings — though it achieves both — but for ensuring that a farmer in Kolar has the best agronomic intelligence available at sunrise, that a student in a government school in Raichur has the same learning support as one in a premium urban institution, and that a citizen registering property does so without paperwork, without corruption, and without losing a day's wages standing in a queue.

When Bengaluru was ranked 5th in the world for AI and big data, it marked Karnataka's arrival as a global technology force.

This budget marks something equally significant: the moment Karnataka decided that global leadership and grassroots impact are not separate ambitions, but the same one.

In that integration of technological excellence with human compassion — built, as its architects describe it, on the wisdom of Buddha and the justice of Ambedkar — lies the full measure of what Karnataka is building for its people.

Photo: AI representative image



Why Trump's America is a lonely superpower



Photo: Getty Images

Isolated through unilateralism? US president Donald Trump finds himself with no friends and no real allies

Ashok Swain

Great powers sometimes isolate themselves through overreach. The United States under Donald Trump is in that zone. By aligning reflexively with Benjamin Netanyahu on almost everything—from Palestine to Lebanon to Iran—Trump has really damaged America's pre-eminence in world affairs. As a superpower on the wane, Trump's America is still able to project force but it no longer commands respect, it cannot build consensus and will possibly, after the Iran debacle, not even instil fear as it once did.

Recent developments in the Persian Gulf capture this shift quite starkly. After failed negotiations in Islamabad, Washington has

lurched towards measures that threaten to disrupt one of the world's most vital oil, gas and nitrogen corridors and escalate the conflict far beyond its current boundaries. The message to the world is unmistakable: the United States is prepared to act alone, even when the consequences are global and there is widespread opposition.

The more fundamental concern is not one single decision, but the general drift of US policy. Trump's Middle East policy has fused American decision-making with Israel's war objectives to an unprecedented degree, the kind of convergence that leaves little room for independent judgment. And it is precisely this convergence that is driving Washington's isolation.

The damage was visible even before the war with Iran, and what started the rupture

was America's open backing of Israel's genocidal, ethnic cleansing project in Gaza. The war with Iran has further strained alliances across Europe, Asia and the Middle East, weakening partnerships that took decades to build while opening space for rivals like China and Russia to expand their influence. As Washington increasingly prioritises military solutions, it weakens the very networks that have historically extended its influence.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the Gulf. For years, the Gulf states relied on the US as a guarantor of their security, even when they disagreed with its policies. That relationship is now fraying. The war has left them exposed, economically vulnerable and strategically uncertain. Instead of stabilising the region, US actions have

heightened their sense of insecurity. Even as Trump claims success, Iran has emerged more powerful, with significant leverage over the Strait of Hormuz, the artery that controls at least 20 per cent of the world's trade of crude oil and LNG and about a third of global seaborne trade in fertilisers and key feedstocks.

Washington appears to be reacting to the concerns of its allies. The Gulf states are worried about being dragged further into a confrontation they didn't start nor can control and will certainly not benefit from. The perception that Netanyahu is leading Trump by the nose, that US policy is driven primarily by Israeli priorities and Netanyahu's obsessions rather than any concern for regional stability has deepened that unease. It is one thing to support an ally, quite another to be a captive to its agenda.

The war with Iran has reinforced this perception. The strikes did not follow failed negotiations, reinforcing longstanding global suspicion that the US treats diplomacy as a ruse rather than a commitment. That matters. When negotiations are repeatedly undercut by military action, trust collapses. And without base-level trust, diplomacy becomes impossible.

Across the Global South, the war with Iran is seen as a 'war of choice'; some observers have even called it a 'war of whim', a military superpower trying to bully a weaker adversary. This perception

feeds into a broader narrative that the so-called rules-based order is selective and self-serving. When Washington invokes international law or nuclear non-proliferation against its adversaries but ignores it when convenient, it carries no moral authority.

That loss of authority is already reshaping global alignments. Countries that once looked up to the US as a stabilising force are hedging their bets. Some are moving closer to China, which presents itself as a more predictable partner. Others are simply stepping back, choosing not to align too closely with any major power. Even close allies such as the UK, France, Japan, Germany and South Korea are increasingly diverging from the US in their voting patterns at the United Nations.

Trump's defenders argue that strength, not consensus, is what matters. But this argument confuses coercive power in the short term with long-term influence. Military superiority can win some battles but it cannot sustain an international order or superpower status. That requires legitimacy, cooperation and a willingness to respect rules and norms.

The contradictions in US policy are now impossible to ignore. Washington may not have fully abandoned the language of ceasefire—it still calls for its actions, fly in the opposite direction.

This has consequences. It becomes harder for the US to act as an honest broker in any conflict, or rally allies around shared goals or indeed convey that American leadership can think beyond narrow, immediate self-interest.

The cracks are widening even in the West. European governments, even NATO countries, may not have openly broken with Washington, but their discomfort is evident in calls for restraint and renewed diplomacy. Trump has even managed to pick a fight with the Pope, which will likely antagonise sections of his Christian base at home.

Despite the Senate vote in his favour, popular support is low for a prolonged war in the Middle East. The war has not delivered the decisive outcomes it promised. Iran's regime is intact, possibly stronger than it was before the war. Its regional influence is undiminished and it has successfully exercised leverage over a key strategic chokepoint in seaborne trade.

Instead of coordinating with allies and testing the path of diplomacy with Iran, Trump took the path of maximal pressure and no consultation and backed a rogue regional actor without question. The result is a superpower with no friends and no real allies. Trump's America is a military superpower alright but its diplomatic cachet has all but evaporated. ■

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

Countries that saw the US as a stabilising force are hedging their bets. Some are moving closer to China. Others are simply stepping back

Electoral storm gathering over Trump

Ashis Ray

Ever since US president Donald Trump realised that bombarding Iran would not result in the Islamic regime in Tehran caving in, he began looking for a face-saving exit. Six weeks into the conflict, he agreed to a ceasefire. The first round of talks between the US and Iran in Islamabad was inconclusive; but a truce wasn't beyond reach. Moreover, it was imperative for Trump to arrest the economic hardships the hostilities had created at home.

State-by-state primaries for the US midterm elections began on 3 March and will conclude on 15 September, determining the final Democratic and Republican candidates. The mid-term elections—for state governorships, senators and lawmakers in the House of Representatives—will be held on 3 November.

The landslide victory of November 2024 that returned Trump to the White House after an interval of four years reflected a wave of popularity that has since steadily receded. Indeed, despite his Republican party enjoying majorities in the Senate and the House—normally a boon for an American president—he has failed to pass a number of legislations through the two chambers because of a pushback from Republicans themselves, who have been concerned about such enactments upsetting their constituents and consequently injuring their chances of election or re-election. Thus, Trump has resorted to a plethora of executive orders, which have finite validity spans and, in some cases, limited acceptability.

Majorities in the House and Senate have, though, enabled him to bypass Congress on military operations abroad. These include the unlawful kidnapping of Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro and his wife and renditioning them to New York in January 2026, and the unprovoked attack—with Israel—on Iran. Since the first strikes on 28 February 2026, at least 3,300 people have been killed, many of them innocent civilians, nearly 25,000 injured and over 3 million displaced.

The US saw mass mobilisations as part of a nationwide 'No Kings Day of Action'—signalling Americans want democratic checks in the presidency. On Saturday, 28 March 2026, more than 9 million people rallied across America against Trump, his administration and his war on Iran.

According to a YouGov opinion poll carried out on 8-10 April and published by *The New York Times*, Trump's approval rating was down to 39 per cent, with 61 per cent of Americans disapproving of him. Few citizens were taken in by his daily rants on Truth Social claiming triumph over Iran. Most were increasingly frustrated by rising inflation pinching their pockets.

GDP growth in the US has slowed in 2026, consumer prices have risen sharply, job creation is at its weakest since the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of energy has gone through the roof. From February to March, petrol prices soared by 21.2 per cent, the highest monthly increase since figures started being tracked in 1967. According to the American Automobile Association, in California a gallon of gasoline cost \$5.93—up from around \$3.

Analysts quoted by the *BBC* forecast food prices may rise in the months ahead, as the impact of higher transportation and agricultural input costs begin to bite. The Strait of Hormuz, choked by Iran as a counter strategy to the US-Israeli assault, provides passage to vital supplies of crude oil, natural gas, fertiliser, aluminium and helium for all continents.

Trump maintains energy inflation will be short-lived and dismisses any risks to the wider economy. Price stabilisation through the international supply chain may not happen, though, for another 4-5 months. This has Republican aspirants to public office worried about their prospects in November.

Furthermore, Trump's run-in with US-born Pope Leo XIV, the elected head of the influential Catholic church, has been completely off the wall. He accused the pontiff of being 'terrified for foreign policy', adding, 'I'm not a fan of Pope Leo.' The pope responded, "I have no fear of the Trump administration... I do believe in the message of the Gospel, as a peacemaker."

Such a standoff is unlikely to be taken lightly by America's Catholics, who constitute 20 per cent of the country's population, and won't be lost on Protestants, either. Besides, 36 per cent of Catholics are Hispanic, who may have noted that Spain and other Spanish-speaking nations have unequivocally condemned the US and Israel's aggression.

What this means is that Republicans could lose control of the House and perhaps even the Senate. A Democratic majority in



Photo: Getty Images

the House will almost certainly result in Trump's impeachment, although a conviction in the Senate—which unseats a president and requires a two-thirds majority—is likely to be harder to achieve.

A legislature ranged against a president can, unless skillfully handled, render him a 'lame duck'. Yet, Trump could still embark on forays overseas. The only way to curb such excesses would be for the Democrats to amend the 1973 War Powers Act. As of now, this law requires a president to notify Congress within 48 hours of deploying forces and mandates their withdrawal within 60-90 days unless Congress authorises the action. So far, Trump has conspicuously complied with both.

British prime minister Keir Starmer ruled out joining the US in a blockade of Iranian ports, another sign of the special relationship between Washington and London fraying. Instead, on 17 April, the United Kingdom and France co-hosted a summit of more than 40 nations to discuss a defensive naval mission to reopen traffic in Hormuz and restore 'freedom of navigation'. Europe is now more united after far-right Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán's crushing defeat in the general election following a controversial 16-year reign. Iran meanwhile has resumed

According to a YouGov opinion poll, Trump's approval rating is now down to 39 per cent

energy supplies to Spain and France through the Strait in an attempt to diplomatically divide the West and isolate the US.

If agreed to by the international community, Iran's desire to impose a toll on vessels sailing through the Strait on a long-term basis would set a slippery precedent. It would also violate the universally accepted United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which defines territorial waters as no more than 12 nautical miles from a country's coast. At least nine other straits in other parts of the world could then voice similar demands. These include the Strait of Malacca in south-east Asia, which is 1.7 miles at its narrowest point near Singapore and handles 25 per cent of the global seaborne trade; the Strait of Gibraltar which connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea; and the Bab-el-Mandeb which joins the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and serves as a gateway to the Suez Canal.

Opinion aired on media about the first face-to-face talks between the US and Iran in 48 years—held in Pakistan last weekend—ranged from doubt (about the dialogue taking place at all) to optimism to writing it off as a 'failure'. Given the decades-long distrust between the parties, exacerbated by Trump's bellicosity, it was ridiculous to expect a breakthrough after a solitary round of negotiations, even if they were a marathon 21 hours long.

There was reason to believe that agreement in principle had been reached on a number of issues, though not on the *modus operandi* of Iran abandoning its nuclear programme. This was underscored by Omani foreign minister Sayyid Badr Albusaidi, who mediated in indirect talks between US and Iranian representatives in Geneva on 26 February, and spoke of "significant progress". *Le Monde* reported, "The Gulf nation (Oman) says Iran has agreed to zero stockpiling of uranium and to convert existing enriched material into fuel, calling it an unprecedented breakthrough in nuclear negotiations." For Trump to unleash bombs and missiles on Iran just two days later was in awfully bad faith.

So, a deal, as Trump likes to put it, will undoubtedly be a relief for Republicans; but it may not be enough to wholly overcome the electoral challenges ahead. And meanwhile, who know what Trump will do next? ■

Himachal on path to self-reliance and prosperity through a strong rural economy

Dear people of Himachal Pradesh, on the proud occasion of the 79th Himachal Day, I extend warm greetings to all of you. On this day in 1948, our beautiful hilly state came into being through the merger of 30 hill princely states. I pay my respects to the first Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh Dr. Yashwant Singh Parmar, who was also the architect of this hilly state, besides to all those who contributed immensely for this cause. I also pay my tributes to our brave freedom fighters and soldiers and express my deep gratitude to the hardworking and peace-loving people of our state for their tireless efforts in taking Himachal Pradesh to new heights of development.

Since assuming the office of Chief Minister on 11th December 2022, our government has been committed for bringing systematic change as we are marching ahead on our goal of transforming Himachal into a self-reliant state by 2027 and the most prosperous state in India by 2032.

We have fulfilled all 10 guarantees made during the Assembly elections. In our very first Cabinet meeting, we restored the Old Pension Scheme for 1.36 lakh employees. Despite facing major challenges on the fronts of economic and political crises and natural disasters during past three years, our government has been moving forward constantly to achieve our targets. We inherited a debt burden of Rs. 76,633 crore from the previous BJP government who also left behind additional liabilities of nearly Rs. 10,000 crore owed to the government's employees.

Amid this financial burden, the discontinuation of the Revenue Deficit Grant (RDG) has emerged as another major challenge for the people of the State. The 16th Finance Commission has stopped the RDG to our State, which was being provided since 1952 and was scheduled to continue from 2026-31. With the discontinuation of the RDG, the State is expected to incur an average annual loss of Rs. 8000 to 10,000 crore, amounting to approximately Rs. 50,000 crore over five years.

If we look at the previous BJP government's regime, it received Rs. 47,000 crore as the RDG and Rs. 13,000 crore as GST compensation over five years. While the previous government received a total of Rs. 60,000 crore, our government has received only Rs. 17,000 crore. Due to the discontinuation of the RDG, we had to cut our annual budget by Rs. 3,000 crore as compared to previous year. Today, the challenges before us are significant, but we are firmly committed to overcoming them. Through the creation of new resources, we will continue to move the State forward on the path of development and prosperity.

This year's budget places no burden on the

common people or the middle class. For the first time, it focuses directly on farmers, horticulturists, livestock rearers, shepherds and fishermen. We have ensured that financial support reaches rural households. We are now offering the highest support prices in the country for milk procurement. The MSP is Rs. 61 per litre for cow milk and Rs. 71 for buffalo milk. Himachal has also become the first state to provide support prices for naturally grown wheat, maize and turmeric. Prices for key crops, including wheat, maize, turmeric, barley and ginger, have been significantly increased to benefit farmers.

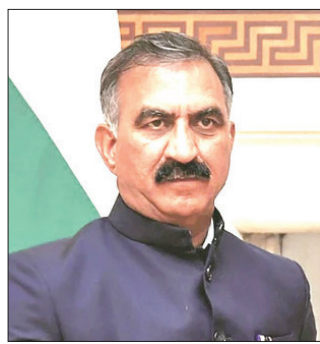
The State Government has decided to provide a Minimum Support Price (MSP) for fish harvested from reservoirs this year to benefit fish farmers. We have also resolved to grant a one-time honorarium of Rs. 3,500 per year to fishermen during the monsoon season, when fishing activities remain prohibited, to help them sustain their livelihood more effectively.

In addition, the royalty rate on fish caught from reservoirs was earlier reduced from 15 percent to 7.5 percent and now it has been decided to further reduce it to just 1 percent, providing significant financial relief to the fishermen. Our new horticulture policy is the first of its kind in India which will create over 82,500 jobs. Apple growers will benefit from the mandatory use of universal cartons ensuring them better returns.

We are continuously making efforts to provide world-class healthcare services. An amount of Rs. 3,000 crore is being spent to replace 15-20 year-old machines and equipment and to ensure high-quality medical services on par with those at AIIMS Delhi. For the first time in the State, the introduction of robotic surgery marks a revolutionary step in the healthcare sector. This facility has already been started in four medical colleges of the State and will soon be available at Hamirpur Medical College as well. We are also going to introduce advanced automated laboratory facilities, through which multiple tests can be conducted from a single blood sample, ensuring accurate and reliable reports.

To provide better healthcare services closer to homes, our government has established Adarsh Health Institutions, where six specialist doctors are providing services. PET scan facilities have already been started at IGMCI Shimla, while the same will soon be made available at Tanda Medical College. This is a major achievement in the healthcare sector, as people of the State will no longer need to travel outside for tests related to serious diseases like cancer.

The process to fill 314 additional postgraduate



THAKUR SUKHVINDER SINGH SUKHU
Chief Minister, Himachal Pradesh

(PG) seats in all medical colleges has already been initiated. Besides this, vacant posts of doctors, paramedical staff, and technicians are also being filled on a mission mode. In education, we have made significant progress.

To rationalize the education sector and provide quality education to students, our government has taken several historic steps. As a result, the State's ranking in education has improved to 5th place nationwide, whereas it had slipped to 21st position during the previous BJP government. It is a matter of pride for us that Himachal Pradesh has now become a fully literate state.

Fulfilling our electoral promise, we have introduced English-medium education from Class 1 in all government schools so that students studying in these schools do not lack confidence and are well-prepared to face future challenges. A decision has also been taken to affiliate 151 government schools with CBSE, which has led to an increase in student enrollment. Furthermore, we have decided that all CBSE-affiliated schools will offer Medical, Non-Medical and Commerce streams. We have also ensured that a uniform fee structure is implemented within each school so that no discrimination takes place among students.

The State Government has also initiated the establishment of Rajiv Gandhi Government Model Day-Boarding Schools equipped with modern facilities in every assembly constituency. Under the Dr. Y.S. Parmar Vidyarthi Rin Yojna, financial assistance of up to Rs. 20 lakh is being provided to youth for higher and professional education at an interest rate of just 1 percent, with the State Government acting as guarantor. To widen the reach of this scheme, the family income eligibility limit has been increased from Rs. 4 lakh to Rs. 12 lakh.

We have also expanded the Indira Gandhi Sukh Shiksha Yojana. Under this, for eligible

beneficiaries whose children secure admission in reputed government professional institutions outside the State, the State Government will bear their hostel fees and educational expenses.

Additionally, under the Mukhya Mantri Sukh-Aashray Yojana, around 6,000 orphaned children have been granted the status of 'Children of the State' and the government is taking responsibility for their education, startup support, land for housing, financial assistance and other essential facilities.

In Luthan, Kangra district, a Model Village Sukh-Aashray Complex is being constructed at a cost of approximately Rs. 93 crore. It will provide modern residential facilities for 400 dependents. Additionally, in Kandaghat, Solan district, a Centre of Excellence for persons with disabilities is being developed, where around 300 children and adults up to the age of 27 will receive accommodation, higher education opportunities and skill development support.

Under the Rajiv Gandhi Van Samvardhan Yojna, financial assistance of Rs. 1.20 lakh per hectare will be provided this year to women's groups, youth groups and self-help groups. We are also launching the Mission 32 percent Scheme, which aims to increase the state's green cover from 29.5 percent to 32 percent by 2030.

Our government has set a target to establish 500 MW of solar power projects over the next two years.

We have amended the compassionate employment policy by increasing the annual family income eligibility from Rs. 2.5 lakh to Rs. 3 lakh, enabling more eligible youth to benefit. Over the past three years, we have also been approved under the social security pension scheme. To ensure that our specially abled brothers and sisters can live with dignity, the monthly pension of 100 percent disabled person has been increased from Rs. 1,700 to Rs. 3,000.

Providing major relief to electricity consumers, we have decided to continue the zero electricity bill scheme for domestic users up to 125 units per month. For consumption between 126 to 300 units, a subsidy of Rs. 1.72 per unit will be provided.

Without altering the existing BPL list, we have launched the 'Apna Parivar, Sukhi Parivar' Scheme to support one lakh extremely poor families, providing them with up to 300 units of free electricity. Women in these families will also receive Rs. 1,500 per month under the Indira Gandhi Pyari Behna Sukh Samman Nidhi Yojna.

The survey of BPL families is ongoing and so far, 1,10,367 families have been officially recognized as BPL. Additionally, the social security pension for 2.82 lakh women above the age of 59 has been increased to Rs. 1,500 per

month from April 2024.

While the central government has disintegrated the spirit of the MGNREGA scheme, our government has taken a historic step by increasing daily wages from Rs. 247 to Rs. 320.

Recognizing the immense potential of tourism, we are promoting natural, religious, adventure, spiritual and health tourism on a large scale. Kangra district is being developed as the tourism capital of Himachal Pradesh. Land acquisition for the expansion of Kangra Airport has begun and a zoological park is being developed at Bankhandi in Dehra. Additionally, Rs. 150 crore each has been approved to develop infrastructure and promote religious tourism at Jwalamukhi and Naina Devi.

The development of tribal areas remains a top priority. Under the Indira Gandhi Pyari Behna Sukh-Samman Nidhi Scheme, eligible women in the Spiti sub-division of Lahaul-Spiti are receiving Rs. 1,500 per month. We have also introduced a 5 percent interest subsidy for renewable energy projects ranging from 100 kW to 1 MW in tribal areas. Special initiatives to promote tourism in border regions, including Kinnaur are already showing encouraging results, with an increase in tourist footfall.

Our government remains fully committed to the dignity and security of its employees. All pending payments will be cleared systematically. We have decided to release arrears for all pensioners and family pensioners who retired before 2016 within this financial year. Similarly, gratuity and leave encashment arrears for Class IV employees retired between January 2016 and December 2021 will also be cleared. Contract employees who completed two years of continuous service by 31 March, 2026 will be regularized. Despite financial challenges, daily wages have been increased by Rs. 25, and outsourced workers will receive a minimum monthly salary of Rs. 13,070.

Concerned about the rising issue of drug abuse among youth, we have taken strict measures and introduced stronger legal provisions with harsher penalties. A statewide 'Drug-Free Himachal' campaign has been launched with strong public support. Soon, we will also begin the 'Khelo India-Drug-Free Campaign', aimed at keeping youth away from drugs, especially chitta.

I am confident that with the continued support of the people, we will succeed in making Himachal Pradesh self-reliant and the most prosperous state in the country.

Once again, on the occasion of Himachal Day, I extend my greetings and best wishes to all of you and pray for your bright future

Jai Hind! Jai Himachal!



सुदृढ़ ग्रामीण अर्थव्यवस्था

- » हिमाचल प्रदेश दूध पर न्यूनतम समर्थन मूल्य (MSP) देने वाला पहला राज्य।
- » गाय के दूध पर समर्थन मूल्य 61 रुपये और भैंस के दूध पर 71 रुपये प्रति लीटर।
- » प्राकृतिक रूप से उगाए गए गेहूं का MSP 80 रुपये, मक्की का 50 रुपये और कच्ची हल्दी का 150 रुपये प्रति किलो।
- » पांगी घाटी के किसानों द्वारा प्राकृतिक रूप से उगाए गए जौ का MSP 80 रुपये प्रति किलो।
- » अदरक के लिए 30 रुपये प्रति किलो MSP तय।
- » दूध उत्पादकों को प्रति माह मिल रहा 34 करोड़ रुपये का लाभ।
- » एक वर्ष के भीतर दूध खरीद हुई दोगुनी, 2.70 लाख लीटर प्रतिदिन।

शिक्षा के क्षेत्र में गुणात्मक सुधार

- » 151 सरकारी स्कूलों में सीबीएसई पाठ्यक्रम शुरू, छात्र नामांकन में उल्लेखनीय वृद्धि।
- » 99.30 प्रतिशत साक्षरता दर के साथ हिमाचल प्रदेश पूर्ण साक्षर राज्य बना।

वंचित वर्गों को सर्वोच्च प्राथमिकता

- » मुख्यमंत्री सुख-आश्रय योजना ने 6 हजार अनाथ बच्चों के जीवन में भरे उम्मीदों के रंग।
- » 'चिल्ड्रन ऑफ द स्टेट' को विभिन्न सुविधाएं प्रदान करने पर लगभग 86 करोड़ रुपये व्यय।
- » शत-प्रतिशत दिव्यांगजनों को अब प्रतिमाह 3 हजार रुपये पेंशन।

विश्व-स्तरीय स्वास्थ्य सेवाएं

- » AIMSS चमियाणा, मेडिकल कॉलेज टांडा, आईजीएमसी, शिमला और नेरचौक मेडिकल कॉलेज में रोबोटिक सर्जरी शुरू।
- » आईजीएमसी, शिमला में पेट-स्कैन और अत्याधुनिक 3 टेस्ला एमआरआई मशीन स्थापित।

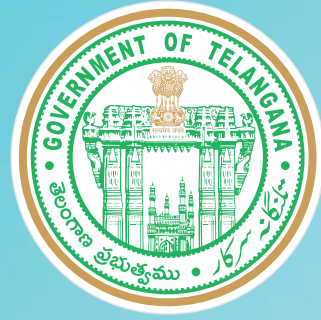
मछुआरों को सम्मान

- » मछुआरों को 3,500 रुपये प्रति वर्ष की एकमुश्त सम्मान निधि।
- » जलाशयों से प्राप्त मछलियों का MSP 100 रुपये प्रति किलो, रॉयल्टी घटाकर 1 प्रतिशत।
- » 6,000 से अधिक जलाशय मछुआरों को सीधा लाभ।

व्यवस्था परिवर्तन से **आत्मनिर्भर होता हिमाचल**

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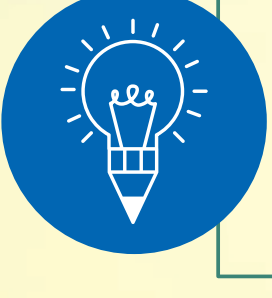
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Freedom is in Peril. Defend it with all you might. *Jawaharlal Nehru*

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A LONELY SUPERPOWER
Why Trump's America has no friends and no real allies



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The subterfuge of women's reservation

Yogendra Yadav

The suspense has finally been laid to rest. The 'revolutionary' step we were primed to expect, ostensibly to empower India's women, was suddenly so urgent that a special session of Parliament was convened bang in the middle of elections in four states. It had all the signs of a subterfuge and behind the veil of 'Nari Vandan' lay a bid to reshape Parliament in a way that makes the next election easier for the BJP. The text of the Constitution 131st Amendment Bill finally surfaced barely 36 hours before the special session (16-18 April) got under way. Wonder why this pathbreaking move was kept under wraps for so long, from the public and more importantly the women it sought to empower.

The amendment required a two-thirds majority in Parliament, which the government did not have. The bill wouldn't pass without Opposition support. The Prime Minister himself appealed to opposition parties to back it. But why weren't they given the text earlier, so that they had enough time to carefully assess its merit? Why was there no all-party meeting to build consensus, despite repeated demands? And what was the tearing hurry that required a special session in the midst of election campaigns in Bengal and Tamil Nadu, barely a week before polling?

The fog began to lift when the text was finally out. As suspected, the amendment was less about increasing women's representation and more about restructuring Parliament. On women's reservation, the change was modest: it amended Article 334A to remove the need to wait for fresh Census data before reserving seats. This meant that reservation for women could, in theory, be implemented by the 2029 Lok Sabha elections.

But we shouldn't forget who introduced the condition that tied women's reservation to a new Census and delimitation exercise. It was the Modi government, when it

brought in the one-third reservation amendment in 2023. That condition effectively pushed implementation by a decade. At the time, opposition leader Mallikarjun Kharge had demanded that the clause be scrapped and reservation implemented from the 2024 election. The Modi government had rejected the demand—and now, five years later, was trying to take credit for a historic breakthrough.

In any case, the real focus of the amendment was the proposed restructuring of the Lok Sabha and state assemblies. At first glance, increasing the maximum strength of the Lok Sabha from 547 now (with 543 elected members) to 815 may seem reasonable. After all, constituencies have ballooned in size, and more seats could mean better representation.

But that's not the crux of the matter. The most consequential—and potentially dangerous—change is the removal of the decades-old freeze on the redistribution of seats among states. For nearly fifty years, under Article 82, seats have been allocated based on the 1971 Census, with the freeze

Even as the BJP mouthed assurances that delimitation wouldn't alter the states' share of seats, the bill was silent



Congress party president Mallikarjun Kharge addresses the media on 15 April after INDIA bloc leaders met at his residence to thrash out a united strategy to oppose the women's reservation bill

intended to preserve a delicate federal balance. This freeze is set to expire in 2026.

For months, the Prime Minister and senior BJP leaders tried to reassure non-Hindi-speaking states that the proportional share of each state would remain unchanged when the total number of seats increased. So, if the Lok Sabha expanded by 50 per cent, the seat share of Uttar Pradesh would rise from 80 to around 140 and Kerala's from 20 to 30. But the amendment bill made no such promise.

Instead, it proposed changes to Articles 55, 81, 82, 170 and 332, removing the 1971 benchmark—without any provision to preserve the current proportions. If the amendment went through, Article 82 would require seats to be allocated strictly according to population.

Run the numbers. If delimitation is carried out using the 2011 Census and the Lok Sabha expands by 50 per cent, Kerala's seats will inch up from 20 to 23, while Uttar Pradesh's will surge from 80 to 132. In relative terms, states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Telangana, Odisha, West Bengal and Punjab will lose out, while Hindi-speaking states will gain significantly.

This will obviously unsettle the fragile federal equilibrium between Hindi and non-Hindi regions. The warning issued by the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister is not to be taken lightly. Ignoring it could come at a serious cost to national unity.

There is more. If this amendment passed, the allocation of seats among states would no longer be fixed in the Constitution—it

would be determined by ordinary legislation. Which means future governments could alter the basis of allocation—deciding which Census to use—without needing a constitutional amendment, and therefore without requiring Opposition consent. The power would effectively shift to the Delimitation Commission.

Alongside this amendment, the government also introduced a delimitation bill that proposes using the 2011 Census as the basis. But with a simple majority in Parliament, it could later switch to, say, the 2027 Census—whenever it suits its political calculus.

The BJP knew full well that such a sweeping, divisive amendment was not likely to get a two-thirds majority. Which brings up another question: if passage was improbable, what is the game? ■

Why Noida and Manesar were burning

Worker agitations in the industrial hubs of the NCR hold a mirror to India's economic health, writes **Gurdeep Singh Sappal**



When factory workers in Noida's industrial sectors protested on 13-14 April 2026, India's prime time TV anchors got to work on a plausible conspiracy theory. Who was stirring the pot? A foreign hand? The 9 p.m. theatre was familiar: split screens, hyperventilating talking heads and a likely whodunit candidate—Pakistan. Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath warned darkly of 'anti-social elements' conspiring to destabilise the state's development.

If you didn't know better, the TV debates wouldn't lead you to the truth that in the past ten-odd years, wages have been nearly stagnant while rents have doubled and inflation has soared (Also read: *The Big Squeeze*, Page 3). Corporate profits are at a fifteen-year high while the purchasing power of the worker outside the factory gate is at a corresponding low. For those who see it, this is an inevitable consequence of Modinomics—built for the top, paid for by the bottom.

What really happened to wages
The story of wages (See tables: *Wages and Corporate Profits* and *Real Wage Growth*, Page 2) in India over the past two decades is revealing. In the UPA years (2004-2014), under Dr Manmohan Singh, real wages in India's informal

Wages and corporate profits

	2004	2014	2026
Unskilled factory worker, Noida	₹3,500-5,000 p.m.	₹8,000-10,000 p.m.	₹11,000-13,000 p.m.
IT Fresher (TCS/Infosys/Wipro)	₹8,000-10,000 p.m.	₹25,000-28,000 p.m.	₹25,000-28,000 p.m.
Customer care/BPO	₹3,000-4,500 p.m.	₹15,000-25,000 p.m.	₹10,000-28,000 p.m.
Engg Fresher (avg. B. Tech)	₹12,000-15,000 p.m.	₹20,000-25,000 p.m.	₹18,000-25,000 p.m.
1BHK rent, Noida industrial	₹2,500-3,500 p.m.	₹4,000-6,500 p.m.	₹8,000-14,000 p.m.
TCS + Infosys combined profits	Base period	~4-5x of 2004	~10-12x of 2004

sector grew at 5-7 per cent annually. This was the fastest sustained wage growth in the history of independent India, driven by a combination of genuine economic expansion, the NREGA wage floor—which forced an increase in informal sector pay—rising farm support prices and an IT sector competing for talent. Then came 2014, and the clock stopped. (See table above) Revealingly, where IT profits have grown tenfold since 2014, entry-level salaries are stagnant. The customer care worker, who

earned ₹15-25K in 2014 now earns less, in the lower tier, as the sector has fragmented into unregulated gig arrangements with no floor. And the wages of unskilled factory workers have risen by ₹3K in 12 years! Meanwhile, the Noida room rent has gone up from ₹4-6K in 2014 to ₹8-14K now. Inflation outpaced the wage worker's income but not the landlord's. That is the economic compact the Modi government has quietly enforced and that is the reason the streets of Noida erupted in protests last week.

Drawing on Labour Bureau and NSSO data, economists Jean Drèze and Arindam Das have documented a near-total collapse in real wage growth since 2014. (See table on page 2)

These findings have no interpretive bias and are not contested. They are drawn from official government data, the Wage Rates in Rural India (WRR) series of the Labour Bureau and the periodic National Sample Surveys. A plain reading of the data confirms that the annual growth rate of real wages over the past ten years has been near zero at the all-India level. For agricultural labour, the figure is even more alarming—a decline in real terms.

The workers who torched vehicles in Noida were not 'Pakistan assets' but people who can't make ends meet

►► Continued on page 2

Women's reservation and all that jazz

Herjinder

On Thursday, 16 April, Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K. Stalin burnt a copy of the proposed Constitution (131st) Amendment Bill 2026 and hoisted a black flag to signal state-wide rejection of what he called a "black law" that would turn Tamils into "refugees in their own land".

He was not alone. The southern states were united in their opposition, with Punjab's Sukbir Singh Badal calling the move "highly discriminatory." Sonia Gandhi publicly called out the government's real agenda, when she wrote in a sharply worded critique (*The Hindu*, 16 April 2026), that "delimitation, and not reservation for women, is the real issue... [and] the plan is extremely dangerous and an assault on the Constitution itself." Her intervention shifted the national conversation from so-called gender justice to democratic representation.

On Friday, 17 April, the Lok Sabha rejected the bill (278 voted for, 211 against). When the government knew it wouldn't have Opposition support and, therefore, the two-thirds majority needed to pass the bill, what was it playing at? How does anyone trust a government that says something and does the exact opposite? Even as the Delimitation and Union Territories bills were also withdrawn, the mystery is worth unpacking.

At first glance, the government's move to operationalise women's reservation ahead of the 2029 general elections appeared overdue, even welcome. A special sitting of Parliament was convened, urgency was invoked and a narrative framed around gender justice. But as the fine print of the Delimitation Bill began to be debated in Parliament, it became increasingly evident that the real story lay

elsewhere.

What was presented as 'progressive reform' quickly started looking like subterfuge, a surreptitious gaming of the Constitution, an exercise in political re-engineering.

The most striking departure from past practice lay in what the Bill does not say. In the earlier Delimitation framework, particularly the Act that followed previous exercises, Section 8 explicitly mandated that constituency boundaries would be redrawn on the basis of the 2001 Census. At the same time, it clearly protected the federal balance by stating that the total number of seats allocated to each state in the Lok Sabha would remain frozen, based on the 1971 Census.

That provision was not a mere technical clause. It was the political and moral anchor of India's federal compact. It ensured that states which had successfully implemented population control policies would not be penalised with reduced representation in Parliament.

That safeguard was conspicuously absent in the draft Bill that the government made available barely one-and-a-half days before introducing it. The prime minister, home minister and union ministers repeated that no state would lose its proportional share of



Rahul Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, addresses the special session on the women's reservation bill

seats, in fact the proportion would remain the same. Not true.

Section 8 of the current Bill was silent on any such protection. It did not commit to maintaining the existing distribution of seats among states. It did not reaffirm the 1971-based allocation. In effect, it removed the only statutory guarantee that had so far prevented a population-based redistribution of political power.

In legislative terms, often more significant than what is. Oral

assurances, however emphatic, do not carry the force of law. They cannot bind future governments, nor can they be enforced or reviewed. A statutory omission, on the other hand, creates space for interpretation—and, potentially, for drastic shifts in policy down the line.

This is precisely where the opposition's criticism gained traction. Several leaders argued that what was being presented as a women's reservation initiative was, in fact, a delimitation exercise in disguise. The charge stems from the structural sequencing embedded in the bill itself, where reservation is contingent upon delimitation, and delimitation is left open-ended by design, leaving the law open to interpretation by the government, the courts and in this case the Delimitation Commission, an opaque and arbitrary institution that the government is in no mood to change.

Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi raised a pointed question in

Parliament: why the delay, and why the opacity? She also flagged the government's tendency to sidestep the issue of OBC representation by labelling it a "technical matter".

The critique was not limited to intent, it extended to drafting. A Congress MP from Chandigarh described the bill as poorly drafted, warning of serious constitutional complications if it was implemented in its current form. One of the most glaring examples concerned the absence of any clarity on the total number of seats.

There was widespread speculation that the number of seats in legislative bodies could be increased by as much as 50 per cent to accommodate women's reservation without displacing existing representatives. Yet, the bill itself contained no such provision. It neither committed to an expansion nor outlined a formula for it.

Take Uttar Pradesh as an example. If a 50 per cent increase were to be applied to its legislative assembly, the number of seats would exceed 500. However, Article

170 of the Constitution clearly stipulates that the size of a state assembly must be between 60 and 500 members.

The government did not propose any amendment to this constitutional limit. This created a legal contradiction: either the projected expansion was unrealistic, or the bill was incomplete. In either case, the lack of clarity raised serious concerns about legislative preparedness and constitutional compliance.

Beyond these technicalities lies a larger, more consequential issue—the potential reshaping of India's federal balance.

For decades, there existed a broad political consensus that delimitation, whenever undertaken, would not disturb the equilibrium between states. This understanding was critical in holding together a diverse union where demographic trends vary widely across regions.

Southern states, in particular, were justifiably worried that population-based redistribution would reduce their voice in national decision-making, despite their relative success in governance and social indicators.

Their anxiety was mirrored, albeit differently, in states like Odisha, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab, which also faced the prospect of diminished representation.

The debate in Parliament, credible and forcefully argued by women MPs and the Leader of the Opposition, brought to the surface what was initially obscured by the rhetoric.

What's next? If the government is genuinely committed to preserving federal balance while advancing gender justice, the path is straightforward: incorporate explicit safeguards within the law, clarify the framework for seat expansion, and address constitutional inconsistencies before implementation. ■

When the BJP knew the bills wouldn't have Opposition support and, therefore, the two-thirds majority needed to pass them, what was it playing at?

Why Noida was burning

Continued from page 1

When education makes you poorer

Education has been touted to be a trusty ladder out of poverty, a reliable tool for upward mobility. But for the first time in the history of independent India, the return on investment in education is negative for a growing section of the population.

A family that mortgages a land, borrows from relatives, or takes an education loan of ₹15 lakh to send their child to a private engineering college is no longer investing in upward mobility; they are simply incurring debt, a millstone around their neck. Assuming there is a job after graduating, the starting salary will be ₹18-22K a month, and the next decade will go servicing the loan, if they are lucky enough to find stable employment. A simple B.A. degree in a private university costs upwards of ₹6 lakh, and most graduates join the ranks of gig workers or the semi-skilled labour market.

Outstanding education loans nearly doubled between 2020 and 2024, from ₹65,000 crore to ₹1.29 lakh crore. This boom is not evidence of educational aspiration; it is evidence of a population that is trapped between the imperative of educating their children and a labour market that offers nothing in return.

The coming reversion to caste

When education stops delivering returns, even rational families will hesitate to invest in it. When a B. Tech degree earns less than driving a Zomato delivery bike, the calculation changes. That calculation is already being made, quietly, in millions of Indian homes.

The consequence is predictable. The aspiring class of first-generation learners will find themselves driven towards semi-skilled gig work—delivery riders, mall customer service, warehouse sorters, supply chain labour... For those who cannot access even that, the oldest fallback will reassert itself: work defined not by merit or aspiration but by caste. The carpenter's son becomes a carpenter. The weaver's



Photo: Vipin

daughter remains a weaver. Not by choice or with pride but because alternatives have been shut out.

This is not alarmism. It is the endpoint of a system where education stagnates 11-12 per cent more every year, wages stagnant in real terms and the state has gutted every institution that once cushioned the impact. The reversion to a caste-based economic structure is round the corner. If people start believing that a degree will lead to debt and not to a better livelihood, the premium on education will simply evaporate.

The workers who set vehicles ablaze in Noida last week were not 'Pakistan assets'. They were not 'anti-nationals' nor 'urban Naxals'. They were people earning ₹11-13K a month in a city where the room rent is 45 per cent of their income, where prices have surged after war broke out in West Asia, where the last meaningful wage revision happened a decade ago. They are the victims of a new labour code that forces them to work 12-hour shifts and dresses it up as a 'voluntary' act!

They are people who have been told, for more than a decade now, that India is the world's fastest growing major economy, but they see no evidence of it in their wage slip.

The BJP governments of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh responded to the protests by deploying the Rapid Action Force, arresting workers for rioting and forming committees. The TV channels, their editorial courage long since traded for advertising and access, looked for signs of 'a foreign hand'. But the hand that wrote this story is Modi's. The Noida fire was lit by a welding torch and the fuel to keep it ablaze has been accumulating for a decade. It has a name too—Modinomics. ■

Real wage growth

	UPA era (2004-2014)	NDA era (2014-2024)
Real wage growth for farm labour	+ 6.8% p.a.	-1.3% p.a.
Real wage growth across informal sector	5-6% p.a.	~0%
Cumulative real wage increase	~90% (nominal)	~5-8% (nominal, below inflation)

No 'dalali' please, we are Indians

Our disdain for mediation harms us, writes Aakar Patel

I am not sure why but the Indian state finds the idea of international mediation distasteful. The distaste extends to both the mediator and the parties who need mediation. We know this because of our insistence—under all Indian governments, I should add—that outstanding issues between two nations must be resolved bilaterally.

This stance has particular relevance to one neighbour. Our contempt for that neighbour, currently mediating between the US and Iran, was recently expressed by our external affairs minister, who used the pejorative 'dalal' to describe them. So, we won't brook *dalali*, but what we will do, to solve a problem that involves us and affects us, is not clear at the moment. We might even be foolish enough to crow over the fact that Vance exited the 'Islamabad Talks', after making a 'best and final offer'. Despite suffering like the rest of the world, in terms of both prices and shortages, we are content to be onlookers, hoping that the crisis will resolve itself, or someone else will resolve it, so that things return to normalcy for us.

This is how India has decided to approach the ongoing war. We can agree or disagree on whether India could have done more or something different. But what I want to share is the approach India did not take. It's easy because the previous government left us a handy document.

On 4 November 2013, then prime minister Manmohan Singh spoke to over 120 heads of Indian missions and outlined the five principles that defined his foreign policy.

- 1 Recognition that India's relations with the world—the major powers and Asian neighbours—were shaped by its developmental priorities. Singh said 'the single most important objective of Indian foreign policy has to be to create a global environment conducive to the wellbeing of our great country'.
- 2 Recognition that greater integration with the world economy would benefit India and enable Indians to realise their creative potential.
- 3 To seek stable, mutually beneficial relations with all major powers, and work with the international community to create a global economic and security environment beneficial to all nations.
- 4 To recognise that the Indian



J.D. Vance (L) and Shehbaz Sharif at the Islamabad peace talks

Why is India besotted with Israel? Is it a shared hatred of minorities?

subcontinent's shared destiny required greater regional cooperation and connectivity.

5 A foreign policy defined not merely by interests but also by the values dear to Indians: 'India's experiment of pursuing economic development within the framework of a plural, inspired and liberal democracy has inspired people around the world and should continue to do so.'

In short, India would use foreign policy to advance its economic development; it would be friendly with global powers and neighbours; and it would be helped in doing this by continuing to be a pluralist and secular democracy.

This clear exposition allows us to see what we could do differently today.

If we agree 'the single most important objective of Indian foreign policy is to create a global environment conducive to India's wellbeing', then it's obvious we should ensure the environment is not vitiated. That means engaging with those who have the agency to hinder our growth.

India is one of the few nations—perhaps the only nation—that has good relations with America, Israel and Iran. Pakistan is friendly with two of them. Knowing that a

war in the Gulf would damage our economy, disrupt the supply of fertilisers and fuel and cause general chaos, we should have tried to ensure this war did not begin. We chose not to do that.

We chose not to enter the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership that included about 15 Asia Pacific nations. Economists, including those who adore the prime minister, think India has become unnecessarily protectionist.

The third point on seeking mutually beneficial long-term relations with 'all powers' has meaning in relation to China. How much agency we have exercised on this since 2020 and where things stand is clear and need not detain us here.

To my mind, the maximum departure since 2014 has been from points four and five. Borders in free Asia remain either rigid or closed, free movement is impossible and this is so because we, as the only power that shares boundaries with the rest, want it this way.

Finally, for the first time since 1947, we are faced with a large and popular political movement that is hostile to the idea of India as plural, secular and liberal. Our newfound deep friendship with Israel is to be understood in this light. Israel ranks 49th among our export partners and 48th among our import partners, placing it among the lowest in both categories. Why are we so besotted with Israel? It is because we ache to do to our minorities what Israel is doing to Palestinians.

This is what we stand and this is what we have chosen to do. If we think we need a course correction, Manmohan Singh's wise, kind and measured counsel from a decade-and-a-half ago is a fine place to start. ■

Views are personal

The Big Squeeze

Official inflation indicators, **Ajit Ranade** points out, understate the lived reality of Indian households

The Reserve Bank of India's Inflation Expectations Survey of Households (March 2026 round) shows perceived inflation to be 7.2 per cent. This is more than double the official Consumer Price Index (CPI)-based reading of 3.2 per cent for February. The CPI was revamped recently to better represent true inflation. The RBI survey also shows households expect prices to rise 8.5 per cent over the next three months and 8.8 per cent over the year. The gap between official data and ground-level perception of reality has rarely been more politically charged.

Meanwhile India is caught in a double oil squeeze. The first is fuel, which was at \$115 per barrel in March, driven by the West Asia conflict. Likewise, transport and power costs are up, as are prices of practically all manufactured goods. The RBI itself acknowledges that its baseline assumption of \$85 per barrel for the year could easily be breached if hostilities resume. The ceasefire between the US and Iran, announced earlier this month, is fragile. Peace talks have failed. If the conflict heats up again, the price of crude oil will surge and so will inflation.

The second oil is what Indians use for cooking. India imports nearly 90 per cent of its edible oils—palm from Indonesia and Malaysia, soya from Argentina and Brazil, sunflower from Russia and Ukraine. The West Asia crisis has rattled global commodities markets and sent vegetable oil prices surging alongside crude. Retail edible oil prices rose by Rs 1-4 per kg in just one week. India's palm oil imports fell 19 per cent in March to a three-month low as price-wary refiners held back. This will tighten domestic availability in the months ahead. Both oils singe the

household budget.

The lived experience of inflation—as seen in healthcare, education, transportation, house rents—has been high for several years. *Breakpoint: The Crisis of the Middle Class and the Future of Work*, a 2026 book by Saurabh Mukherjee, Nandita Rajhansa and Sapana Bhavsar, examines its impact on the Indian middle class.

India's recently revised CPI basket still has a structural blind spot. It captures the rents paid by sitting tenants, whose lease rentals escalate annually by a formulaic 5-10 per cent, rather than the rents new entrants have to pay. Brokers and tenants across Indian cities routinely report double-digit rent increases even as official housing inflation remains subdued. The index is measuring the wrong price. The official thermometer is taking the temperature at the wrong site.

All of this is happening against the backdrop of stagnant real wages, especially in rural India. When everything costs more and wages do not keep pace, households

cut nutrition, defer medical care and pull children from private schools. The violent protests for wage hikes in Haryana's Manesar and Noida's industrial clusters are not just labour disputes, they are a social manifestation of inflation.

In Manesar, factory workers boycotted work, clashed with police and drew the government into a dramatic concession. The government announced a 35 per cent hike in minimum wages for unskilled workers. Not nearly enough because inflation has outpaced wage growth for years.

In Noida, workers in garment and hosiery factories pelted stones, turned to arson and vandalism. They too are asking for an increase in minimum wages. India has around 400 million internal migrant workers, a demographic that is acutely sensitive to food and fuel costs. When the price of a meal

doubles and LPG becomes scarce, many just return to their villages. And as the India SME Forum iterates: 'Once labour leaves, it is very difficult to get them back'. The threat to India's manufacturing competitiveness, already under pressure from global supply chain disruptions, is real.

On the macro front, the rupee fell 10 per cent against the dollar in the last fiscal year. The fall in March was sharp, and the exchange rate crossed 95. The RBI response was a crackdown, practically banning domestic bank

participation in offshore betting in the rupee-dollar rate. This is the non-deliverable forward (NDF) market, which is technically outside the regulatory ambit of the RBI. This offshore market, worth \$149 billion a day, offers opportunities to hedge against a falling rupee. It is also a signal for

onshore people to gauge which way the rupee will move. While the RBI's sudden crackdown made the rupee bounce, it is not clear whether this will last if the war with Iran continues. In March alone, the RBI's interventions to prop up the rupee cost India \$30.5 billion in precious foreign exchange reserves.

The RBI has expressed deep displeasure with banks using the offshore-onshore gap to profit from the rupee's weakness. But as any careful observer will note, the offshore NDF market is a symptom, not the disease. The disease is India's current account deficit, which high oil import bills have widened, combined with portfolio outflows of \$26 billion over two years and net FDI that has turned negative. These are real economy vulnerabilities that no amount of policing of the derivatives market

can fix.

At the IMF and World Bank spring meetings (13-18 April), global growth forecasts were revised downward. The RBI has held the repo rate at 5.25 per cent and projects inflation to average 4.6 per cent in 2026-27. These are carefully calibrated projections that will be hard to defend if oil prices stay high, if the West Asia ceasefire breaks down and if the monsoon disappoints—none of which can be dismissed as unlikely.

A typical Indian household may not engage with CPI press releases but it knows the price of cooking oil and LPG refills, it is sensitive to increases in school fees and medical bills. And it is feeling the RBI survey that prices are rising at more than double the official rate. ■

AJIT RANADE is an economist, Courtesy: The Billion Press



Official statistics belie the pinch most Indians feel while balancing their household budgets

Photo: Getty Images

A typical Indian household may not engage with CPI press releases but it knows the price of cooking oil and LPG refills

What are the factory workers fighting for?

Nandlal Sharma reports on the spontaneous combustion of labour agitations across the country

Poster boys, no leaders, no unions. Yet, a wave of protests spread systematically across the country, with millions of workers agitating for higher wages.

The beginning of this uprising can be traced to early February 2026, when contract workers at Indian Oil's refinery in Barauni (Bihar) demanded their wages be increased, working hours be fixed at eight hours per day, and they be provided benefits such as Provident Fund (PF) and Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC).

On 23 February 2026, more than 30,000 contract workers at Indian Oil's refinery in Panipat, Haryana, went on strike. On 27 February, 5,000 contract workers employed by Larsen & Toubro at the ArcelorMittal Nippon Steel project in Hazira, Surat (Gujarat) went on strike. Between January and March 2026, more than two dozen worker strikes were reported at major power plants and key energy hubs: NTPC Patratu (Jharkhand), NTPC Nabinagar (Bihar), Adani Thermal Power Plant Korba (Chhattisgarh), Vedanta Power Plant Sighitarai (Chhattisgarh), Hindustan Zinc Limited Chittorgarh (Rajasthan), Indian Oil Vadodara (Gujarat), and the Obra Thermal Power Plant in Sonbhadra (Uttar Pradesh).

The first strike in this wave took place on 1 January 2026, when gig workers protested for better working conditions and rights.

In March-April, protests gathered rapid momentum in Haryana, particularly in several companies located in IMT Manesar. These included Honda, Munjal Showa, Satyam Auto Components, Roop Polymers Limited, Richa Global and Modelama Exports. Compelled to concede, management raised salaries from Rs 11,000 to Rs 16,000. While an extra Rs 5,000 may not seem like much, other workers took heart.

Jharkhand AITUC-affiliated trade union leader Anand Kumar says that the protestors are contract labourers from the organised industrial sector (petroleum, energy, automobile, electronics, cement, hosiery). He notes that while the movement is primarily driven by these workers, domestic workers are also joining in.

In this movement, the workers'

biggest weapon has been the mobile phone on which they create and share videos and reels. Their growing awareness stems from their own precarious lives. Labour rights activist Sunand says, "Wherever workers protested, they raised their voices through social media. In this way, workers from one factory inspired those in another to speak up for their rights. They gained confidence: if they can fight, so can we. The fuel crisis that emerged after the Iran war acted as a catalyst with workers forced to migrate."

Bharti Kumari, who works as a checker at Shahi Exports in Noida Phase 2, says, "We work 12 hours and earn around Rs 12,000. Room rent is Rs 6,000. Petrol is nearing Rs 100 per litre. Gas costs Rs 400 per kg. Electricity costs Rs 10-12 per unit. On top of that, there's children's education. Schools ask for both semesters' fees at once. What are we supposed to eat? Our salary should be Rs 20,000 per month."

It's not as if state governments didn't attempt to suppress the protests. On 7 April, the Haryana

government imposed Section 144 across the Manesar-Gurgaon region, banning gatherings of workers. The workers didn't back down. On 8 April, even larger numbers went on strike. As their struggle intensified, the government began its crackdown. On 8 April, workers in Manesar were lathi-charged. On 9 April, Haryana police arrested more than 50 workers, including over 20 women.

Meanwhile, on 11 April, the Uttar Pradesh police arrested four labour activists from the Botanical Garden metro station in Noida. On 12 April, lawyers Prateek Kumar and Mohammad Tanveer Ali, along with two other activists who had gone to secure their bail, were also detained. Dozens of workers were injured in police lathi charges at various locations.

In Haryana, workers' wages were last revised in 2015. Ideally, they should have been revised again in 2020, but the state government delayed it for six years. As a result, minimum wages stayed the same. The government formed a committee in May 2025 under

pressure. Nine meetings were held, but no notification was issued. Is it any wonder that a workers' movement should have erupted spontaneously in April 2026?

The strikes forced the Haryana government to issue a wage revision notification on 9 April, setting minimum monthly wages at Rs 15,220 (unskilled) and Rs 19,425 (skilled). Still way below the workers' justifiable demand for Rs 25,000-30,000 per month. Following the Haryana government's announcement, demonstrations escalated in Noida.

After four days, the workers' patience ran out. On the morning of 13 April, the protest flared into violence. The very next day, the Uttar Pradesh government announced a minimal wage increase. Under this interim decision, unskilled workers' wages in UP will rise from Rs 13,313 to Rs 13,690. Semi-skilled workers will earn Rs 15,059, and skilled workers Rs 16,868 per month. A press release by the Uttar Pradesh government stated that the industrial sector is currently facing global and economic challenges, with rising

input costs and declining exports.

On its heels came a statement from Medha Roopam, the district magistrate of Gautam Buddha Nagar, saying that if outsourcing agencies (read: contractors) and their workers engage in disruptive or violent behaviour, the agency will be blacklisted and its licence cancelled.

Renowned economist Prof. Arun Kumar points out some important details: "In our country, unemployment is extremely high, and 94 per cent of people work in the unorganised sector. On top of that, retail inflation is very high, and the 'real income' of workers is falling very rapidly. If your salary remains the same while inflation rises, your real income falls—that is, your purchasing power declines. That is exactly what is happening today. Workers' wages are not increasing, but inflation is rising, so they are unable to meet their needs. Due to weak bargaining power, workers cannot demand that their wages be increased in line with inflation. Another issue is that even the organised sector is increasingly hiring contract

workers instead of permanent ones. Contract workers are not unionised, so they cannot fight collectively. That is why sudden protests are being seen in places like Gurugram and Noida—indeed across the country—because everyone's problems are similar."

A significant point is that the definition of a factory has been changed under the new labour codes. Earlier, the law applied to factories with 10 workers (with electricity) and 20 workers (without electricity). Now, these thresholds have been increased to 20 and 40 respectively. This means many small factories will fall outside the scope of the law. Once a factory is outside the legal framework, no one will monitor whether workers are working 8, 12 or 14 hours. A similar situation exists with contract labour. Earlier, contractors supplying 20 or more workers had to obtain a license. Now, this limit has been raised to 50. If a contractor supplies 48 workers, no license is needed. Without a license, the law does not apply—there is no guarantee of minimum wages, no EPF, no safety responsibility and no fixed working hours.

General secretary of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) Amarjeet Kaur says, "The government claims it wanted to end 'inspector raj' and replace it with 'facilitators'; while trade unions argue that the new labour codes push workers towards near-slavery. This can only increase industrial unrest."

Since November 2025, the BJP and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh have consistently promoted the idea that the four new labour codes passed by Parliament under the Modi government are in the workers' interests. Jaybhagwan, Haryana general secretary of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), says, "This was the official propaganda. The unofficial propaganda was that from 1 April, everyone's salary would increase, everyone would become permanent, and everyone would receive full benefits. Unskilled workers expected their lives to change from 1 April—that did not happen. Workers may not be talking about the labour codes now, but ultimately that's what they'll be fighting against." ■



Driven to desperation, workers across India have hit the streets. A protest in the industrial hub of Noida, bordering Delhi

Photo: Vipin

Not only are their wages not keeping up with inflation, workers do not have the bargaining power to demand any better

Targeting 'logical discrepancy'?

Sabir Ahamad and Ashin Chakraborty of SABAR Institute in conversation with **Sourabh Sen** on the SIR in West Bengal

A narrow staircase leads to a room on the third floor of an old, decrepit building opposite St Thomas School in Kolkata's Khidirpur area. An A4-size printout pasted on the door confirms that the staircase leads to the SABAR Institute, a registered trust. 'Data for better lives' reads the tagline, spelling out the motto of the organisation. While SABAR has been engaged in data-driven research for the past decade and more, what has drawn national attention is its work during the last six months on the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) conducted in West Bengal by the Election Commission of India (ECI).

Founded by 48-year-old data researcher Sabir Ahamad, the team at SABAR is young. They recall with some amusement the call they received from the office of the chief electoral officer, West Bengal. Was it an invitation or a summons, they joked. Were they going to be arrested?

The team had just released its analysis of the draft list of voters issued by the ECI in December 2025, in which 58 lakh voters were deleted under 'ASDD' (Absent, Severely Duplicated and Duplicate) categories. They were cordially received by ECI officials and its consultants and asked if they would like to collaborate. Officials were also most keen to know how such a young and small team had cracked so much data in such a short time.

It was a fairly simple task, says Ashin Chakraborty, an associate with a master's degree in economics, though it's painstaking work. The draft list was in a machine-readable format, and contained all the relevant details including reasons for deletion. Subsequent lists, they found, had firewalls, making it much more difficult for researchers to crunch the data.

Sabir Ahamad, founder of SABAR and RTI activist with 20 years of experience, describes himself as a "barefoot researcher". Between them, his team members bring expertise in economics, statistics, computer science, AI, machine learning and large language models. Some are associates, others are interns. A few students and several voluntary researchers round off the team he leads.



Ashin Chakraborty (left) and Sabir Ahamad



When did you notice that the SIR had selectively targeted Muslims?

The draft list of December 2025 with 7.04 crore voters was not suspicious. It had deleted roughly seven per cent of the electorate from the July 2025 list, which is consistent with other states and West Bengal's population. In Kolkata's Bhabanipur—Mamata Banerjee's constituency—around 22 per cent of the electorate were deleted under the ASDD category, including both Hindus and Muslims, who constitute 20 per cent of voters in the constituency. It was also consistent in Muslim-dominated border districts. In rural Bengal, though, women formed the overwhelming majority among the deleted, showing up as 'shifted'. The ECI's software could not map a large number of women after their surnames changed post-marriage. This consistent pattern flipped after the ECI introduced the 'logical discrepancy' category, which flagged 1.32 crore voters who had made it to the draft list after filing enumeration forms, producing documents and mapping them-selves to the 2002 voters' list.

So, Muslims in bordering districts like Murshidabad and Malda were able to map themselves successfully?

Yes. In fact, the unmapped rate in these districts was below the

state average and much less—one or two per cent—than in Kolkata and even North 24 Parganas, a Matua belt, where the unmapped constituted 12 to 14 per cent. In Kaliachak (Malda), where a mob protesting deletions detained seven judicial officers for nine hours on 1 April, the unmapped rate was 0.58 per cent. Deletions under the ASDD category were possibly higher in Kolkata and its suburbs where blue-collar migrant workers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh live.

The ASDD data after the first round also did not validate the BJP's claim about West Bengal's changing demography due to infiltration from Bangladesh or, for that matter, the state being a hub for issuing fake Aadhaar, PAN and voter cards. Union government data on new and active PAN, Aadhaar and voter cards were also consistent with the trend value of around seven per cent, which is West Bengal's share in India's population.

What happened after 'logical inconsistency' was introduced?

This led to 60 lakh additional names—over and above those deleted under the ASDD category—being flagged as suspects and put 'under adjudication'. Our study found that 'logical discrepancy' disproportionately affected Muslims. It is possible, though it is admittedly mere speculation until

the ECI furnishes details, that a bias was introduced into the AI software by embedded consultants. We suspect this as most of the ECI officers we interacted with appeared to be digitally illiterate.

The percentage of Muslims deleted jumped to 52 per cent due to 'logical discrepancy'. In constituencies like Kolkata Port, Metiaburuz and Ballygunge, Muslims make up 80 to 90 per cent of the 'logical discrepancy' list. So far, we haven't found any constituency in West Bengal where the percentage of 'logical discrepancy' of Muslim names is less than the percentage of Muslim voters.

Is it possible to cite some examples?

State government employee Mohammad Ayub, for example, possessed all the necessary documents—birth certificate, passport, PAN and Aadhaar card. He was marked for adjudication because in 2002, he was listed as Ayub Mohammad. He now has to appear before the appellate tribunal since his name was not restored at the hearing stage. The problem is, even on 14 April, less than 10 days before the first phase of polling, these tribunals are not functional.

Do you have reason to suspect that the ECI's actions are politically coloured?

politically coloured?

We deal with data and will not get into politics or psychology. Having said that, several things surprised us, including the level of the ECI's distrust of state government officers. We were surprised to see the ECI engage thousands of micro-observers.

Also, why would the ECI make it difficult for researchers to access data? The ASDD list could be searched and analysed. For subsequent lists, the ECI resorted to releasing data in scanned PDF format, with 'Under Adjudication' stamped across the names. We had to download 8,000–10,000 PDF pages per constituency and manually clean up the overriding stamps before making the data workable. There also seems to be an unending number of supplementary lists, running up to 17 lists in some constituencies, for deletion as well as addition.

Despite the Supreme Court's clear instructions, the ECI is yet to release the 'logically inconsistent' list. The lists on the CEO's website seem random, some in English and some in Bengali. Is there a particular reason why the list for Behala in Kolkata is in English but the list for Jadavpur, also in Kolkata, is in Bangla? Why are the lists published in the dead of night? Why do ECI servers shut down the moment the lists are uploaded? ■

Bend rules > grab land > evict residents

That seems to be the order of play in BJP-ruled states. Odisha's bauxite-rich hills are just the latest on the hitlist, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

Bending rules to acquire land is no longer an exception—it's the default setting across BJP-ruled states. And those taking the brunt of this tribal favour are the Adivasi communities, ancestral inhabitants of forests rich in bauxite, iron ore and coal. The latest flashpoint is in Odisha's Sijimali, located between Kalahandi and Rayagada districts. On 7 April, tribal villagers resisting Vedanta Ltd's proposed bauxite mining in these biodiverse hills were injured in police action. On 25 March, activist leaders Lingaraj Azad and Suresh Sangram—long-time defenders of Adivasi rights over their *jal, jangal, jameen*—were arrested and booked under the draconian UAPA, alongside charges of conspiracy and sedition under the BNS.

Instead of trying to have a dialogue with his people, Odisha's first tribal chief minister Mohan Charan Manjhi is following a script that has by now been enacted in several BJP-ruled states: arrest the leaders and target the dissenting villagers. Activist Saranaya Nayak, from the Asia Pacific Forum on Women's Work and Development, has been working in this region for several years. "Five villages are getting the dissent," Nayak says. "The situation is so bad in Sajabari and Kantamal that women are not allowed to step out, not even to collect drinking water or buy provisions. The police have been using terror tactics across this entire region lately. Several RTIs show that gram panchayat signatures of consent were forged. The local administration is behaving like the minions of the East India Company."

Varanasi, the prime minister's Lok Sabha constituency in Uttar Pradesh, saw a similar crackdown in August 2023, when a large police contingent, backed by the Rapid Action Force, stormed the premises of the Sarva Seva Sangh at Rajghat, a 12.5-acre historic property on the banks of the Ganga.

The land had been transferred in



Baba Ramdev's Patanjali Group has been one of the biggest beneficiaries of land largesse in BJP-ruled states

1960 under then railway minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, with the original sale deed preserved onsite. For decades, the complex functioned as the nerve centre of Seva Sangh's publication wing, spreading Gandhian thought. All of that was gone in a single demolarious drive and its residents summarily evicted.

For the past two years, farmers have been on the warpath in 11 villages across Varanasi district, resisting the forcible acquisition of 800 acres of prime agricultural land under the Krishi Dwar Yojana scheme. Their land—part of a farmers' co-operative established in 1952 by then MLA from Varanasi Raj Narain—is being handed over to private builders. Their leaders have been arrested, but the farmers are defiant: "We will give up our lives, but not our land."

In nearby Ayodhya, reports indicate that over 4,000 houses and shops were demolished to facilitate the Ram temple complex, displacing over 50,000 people. Many of these long-term residents and traders have received little or no compensation. Residents of areas like Barhata Manjhi accuse the

administration of seizing their land with token payouts. Nandlal Gupta, president of a local traders' body, says, "It's shocking: many shopkeepers are now working as labourers or autorickshaw drivers to make ends meet."

Meanwhile, the BJP-backed Time City Multi State Cooperative Housing Society has bought land around the Sarayu river and sold it at three to five times the price to the Adani and Lodha groups. Farmers here say they were arm-twisted into selling their land.

When the issue of forcible acquisition was raised, the Time City group claimed these people were 'illegal occupiers'. Opposition leaders have alleged that a plot bought for Rs 2 crore was resold to the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust for Rs 18.5 crore within ten minutes. Socialist activist Aflatoon of the Samajwadi Jan Parishad points out, "New zamindars led by Adani, Ambani and Patanjali have replaced the zamindars of yore."

In neighbouring Madhya Pradesh, while the BJP makes a big production of the Janjati Gaurav Diwas (Tribal Pride Day), former

Congress MLA Bala Bachchan says, "They are busy grabbing tribal lands. That's the BJP's real face."

Bachchan was speaking on behalf of Gond tribal Mahkam Singh who, along with his brother, filed a case in a sub-divisional magistrate court in 2021. He accused four-time BJP MLA Kedarnath Shukla and his brother Markande Shukla of forging documents to snatch a 17 acre plot in Harbaro village of Sidhi district.

Reports from 2025 indicate that BJP leaders encroached upon nearly 15,000 acres of government land in Chhatrapur and Vidisha—land that had earlier been cleared under an anti-mafia drive. The area is now reportedly being diverted for private plantations and sold to developers for residential colonies.

Assam is even worse. After systematically shutting down nearly two dozen public sector industries, the Himanta Biswa Sarma government is openly partnering with a few favoured corporate houses at the expense of tribal communities.

Political patronage was on full display when the Ambani group was allocated a 1,000 MW power project requiring 6,000 acres in Karbi Anglong, to be funded by the Asian Development Bank. Faced with stiff opposition, the ADB ultimately withdrew its \$434.25 million loan. The project is now on hold.

Equally controversial is the allotment of 1,134 acres in the Parbatjhora sub-division of Kokrajhar district to the Adani Group for a 3,200 MW thermal power plant. This too has been met with resistance from tribal groups.

Undeterred, the Sarma government has allocated 3,000 bighas in the North Cachar Hills Autonomous Council (Dima Hasao district) to Kolkata-based Mahabal Cement. The extraordinary scale of the allotment prompted a Gauhati High Court judge to ask if handing over an entire district to a private firm was "some kind of joke".

All three allotments violate the Sixth Schedule, which mandates prior consultation with tribal communities.

In Rajasthan, deputy chief minister Diya Kumari stands accused of occupying government land in Jaipur, including historical public land and properties in the Jalebali Chowk area. A petition filed in the Rajasthan high court accuses Union minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat of forging land records to usurp public land worth Rs 50 crore in Jodhpur. Records show that Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla and his family bought land in the Suthala sanctuary area in violation of the Wildlife Protection Act.

Gujarat has its own share of fraudulent acquisitions. A particularly shocking case involves former BJP MLA Rajendrasinh Chavda, who nabbed an entire government-owned wasteland hill in Himmatnagar, Sabarkantha and got it registered in the names of five people, including his daughter Payal and sister-in-law Dikshitaben.

In neighbouring Maharashtra, the Mahayuti alliance of the BJP, Shiv Sena (Shinde) and NCP (Ajit Pawar) has gained notoriety for a series of high-profile land grabs. The most prominent case involves Parth Pawar, son of the late deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar, who allegedly tried to grab 40 acres of prime government land reserved for the Maharm community in Pune. The land he was eyeing had a market value of Rs 1,800 crore. Pawar formed a company that registered the land transaction for Rs 300 crore. The stamp duty was Rs 21 crore but he deposited only Rs 500. The shady deal was later cancelled.

The small hill state of Uttarakhand has all sorts of land-grab scandals, but leading the pack is Baba Ramdev's Patanjali group, which has not only been given land at throwaway rates in Uttarakhand but also 1,200 acres in Assam—free of cost. In Himachal Pradesh, the earlier BJP state government granted Patanjali a 30-acre plot in Solan district for a token payment of one rupee; the Madhya Pradesh government gifted the group a 40-acre plot at an 88 per cent discount and Maharashtra gave away 600 acres in Nagpur at a discount of 75 per cent. ■

Those who speak up for the rights of Adivasis over their 'jal, jangal, jameen' face the wrath of the state

DATA-LED & CONFIDENT 5TH IN THE WORLD. 1ST IN INTENT. KARNATAKA'S BLUEPRINT FOR THE AI CENTURY

Karnataka's AI Moment: When Technology Finally Works for Everyone

Picture a farmer in northern Karnataka, standing at the edge of his field at dawn, receiving a precise advisory on his phone — not a generic weather update, but a hyper-local alert about his specific soil conditions, the pest risk in his district, and the best mandi price for his crop that morning.

Or a Class 10 student in a government school in a Tier-3 town, working through a mathematics problem with an AI tutor that has identified exactly where her understanding breaks down and adapted its explanation accordingly.

Or a first-generation homeowner completing her property registration

Decentralisation is the budget's other educational priority. AI data labs will be established in 50 government colleges in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities, supported by a Rs 10 crore allocation in collaboration with the Government of India's AI mission.



Photo: Gettyimages

from her living room, without a single visit to a government office, without a middleman, without fear. These are not visions of a distant future.

They are the practical ambitions of Karnataka's Budget 2026–27 — a budget that places artificial intelligence not in the hands of the privileged few, but in the everyday lives of millions of ordinary citizens across the state.

That such ambitions are credible owes everything to the foundation Karnataka has already built. When Bengaluru secured 5th place among the world's top 50 cities for artificial intelligence and big data, it confirmed what observers of India's innovation economy had long suspected — that Karnataka had graduated from being a technology hub to being a technology force.

The state has risen from 21st to 14th position in the global startup ecosystem and is now home to more than 18,000 active startups. The Budget 2026–27 is the formal recognition of that graduation.

It is a budget that thinks at the scale of the state's ambition rather than the caution of convention, channelling AI not merely into government dashboards and pilot schemes but into the soil a farmer tills, the lesson a rural student struggles with, and the land record a citizen needs to trust. Karnataka is no longer building, and it intends to bring everyone with it.

Putting Intelligence in the Farmer's Hands

Agriculture has always been Karnataka's backbone, and this budget treats it accordingly — not with sentiment, but with the most advanced tools available.

The transformation begins with the Raitha Kare Kendra, an AI-powered reimagining of the existing Farmer Contact Centre. Where once a farmer might have called a helpline and received generic advice, the Kendra

will process satellite and sensor data to deliver hyper-local advisories tailored to individual farms and soil conditions.

Real-time tracking of crop prices across mandis will help farmers decide with precision when and where to sell, placing market intelligence that was previously the preserve of traders directly into the hands of those who grow the food.

Two new schemes deepen this commitment further. Sasya Sanjeevini uses AI to detect pests and diseases at the earliest possible stage, providing instant recommendations for eco-friendly bio-control measures that protect both crops and the environment.

The Vasudhamruta Programme, a three-year initiative, will use AI to monitor and enhance organic carbon content in soil, addressing the long-term health of Karnataka's agricultural land with the same rigour that urban planners apply to infrastructure.

And recognising that good data is only useful when it can be acted upon, the government is piloting Raitha Malls in Kolar district — one-stop facilities providing high-quality, verified seeds and fertilizers under one roof. The entire chain, from insight to implementation, has been thought through.

An Education Revolution Built for Every Child

If the agricultural initiatives speak to Karnataka's present, its education vision speaks to its future — and it is a future imagined without compromise. The budget does not merely digitise existing classrooms.

In collaboration with IIT Dharwad, it introduces AI-based personalized digital tutors for students from Classes 8 to 12, benefiting around 12.28 lakh learners.

Each tutor assesses the student's current knowledge level and identifies specific struggle points, tailoring lessons accordingly. This is not the one-size-fits-all pedagogy of the past.

It is responsive, adaptive, and genuinely personal — the kind of individualised academic support that was once available only to those who could afford private coaching, now extended to every government school student in the state.

The equity at the heart of this initiative is its most powerful feature. A student in a village in Bidar will have access to the same quality of learning support as one attending a premium school in Bengaluru, and that closing of the gap represents a profound act of social justice as much as an educational one. The total education allocation of Rs 72,386 crore — up from Rs 65,000 crore the previous year — underscores the seriousness of this commitment with the weight of numbers.

Decentralisation is the budget's other educational priority. AI data labs will be established in 50 government colleges in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities,

Building the Deep-Tech Ecosystem of Tomorrow

Karnataka's ambitions extend well beyond the present generation of AI applications. The budget's Quantum and Deep-Tech Road Map places the state at the frontier of technologies that will define the global economy of the 2030s.

Karnataka becomes the first state in India to treat Quantum Computing as a commercial priority rather than purely an academic one, with a dedicated Deep-Tech Campus established for commercialising Quantum Computing, space-tech, and climate-tech.

An Innovation Fund of Rs 100 crore has been set aside to de-risk research and development, encouraging multinational companies and startups to conduct high-stakes quantum research in Karnataka by co-funding experimental projects that

the private sector alone would hesitate to attempt.

The institutional architecture supporting this vision is broad and deliberately distributed. The Bengaluru Robotics and AI Innovation Zone — BRAINS — established through a partnership between ART-Park at IISc, ISRO, and KEONICS, will be a major hub for research, innovation, and entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on hardware-software integration.

A Centre of Excellence for AI at IIIT Raichur, funded at Rs 5 crore, deliberately plants world-class research capacity in North Karnataka, while two more AI Centres of Excellence in Bengaluru at Rs 16 crore will drive next-generation AI applications.

The Rs 4 crore medical robotics

COBOT project with NIMHANS and IIIT-Bangalore, focused on developing surgical-assisted robots for neurosurgery, demonstrates that deep-tech ambition in Karnataka is ultimately measured in human outcomes.

The Nipuna Karnataka programme ties the talent strategy together, aiming to train 20,000 graduates annually in emerging technologies and facilitating 100,000 internships, with the government paying 50% of the stipend up to ₹5,000 per month.

The Global Capability Centres policy reinforces the ecosystem further, offering incentives of up to Rs 50 crore for R&D infrastructure and 100% electricity duty reimbursement for companies setting up AI and quantum labs in the state.

supported by a Rs 10 crore allocation in collaboration with the Government of India's AI mission.

New courses in AI, machine learning, cloud computing, and automation engineering will be introduced across polytechnic and engineering institutions.

And in a gesture that speaks directly to the budget's philosophy of inclusive growth, 250 engineering graduates from backward classes will receive advanced AI training at premier institutions including IITs, NITs, and IIMs — expanding the circle of technological opportunity in a manner that is consistent with Karnataka's deepest values.

A social media ban for children under 16 completes the picture, reflecting a determination that the state's young people engage with digital tools as creators and learners, not passive consumers.

Governance That Works for the Citizen

The budget's commitment to transparent, accountable governance finds its most dramatic expression in Kaveri 3.0, a Rs 65 crore investment that fundamentally transforms how property is registered across Karnataka.

Remote registration, made legally possible by a 2025 amendment to the Registration Act, eliminates the need for physical visits to sub-registrar offices entirely.

AI document verification integrates rural land records from Bhoomi and urban records from E-Swathu into a single source of truth, automatically scanning and verifying title deeds and flagging discrepancies before a transaction proceeds.

The entire lifecycle — from document drafting to electronic stamp duty payment to digital authentication

— is paperless, removing the conditions that have historically allowed corruption to take root.

Smart Annavani brings the same intelligence to citizen grievances. The Food and Civil Supplies Department's helpline is being upgraded into an AI-powered platform featuring voice chatbots in local dialects, making government services genuinely accessible to citizens who are more comfortable speaking Kannada or other regional languages than navigating formal written interfaces.

AI-based facial recognition attendance systems in anganwadis, schools, colleges, and hostels will further strengthen accountability, ensuring that every child receives the nutrition and education to which they are entitled, and that public resources reach those for whom they are intended.

The Numbers That Make the Vision Real

Grand ambitions require sound foundations, and Karnataka's fiscal story is as impressive as its technological one. The budget size for 2026–27 stands at Rs 4,48,004 crore, representing a growth of 9.4% over the previous year — nearly double the central government's budget growth of 5.6%.

Karnataka's GSDP has expanded at 8.1%, outpacing the national GDP growth of 7.4%, reflecting the compound returns of sustained investment in capital projects and human development. Yet the fiscal deficit remains at 2.95% and total debt at 24.94% of GSDP — both comfortably within the standards of the Fiscal Responsibility Act, and a sharp contrast to the central government's fiscal deficit of 4.3% and liabilities of 55.6% of GDP.

This is not the false choice between

ambition and discipline that sceptics often pose. It is the proof that when government spends well — on education, on infrastructure, on technology that genuinely reaches people — it grows the economic base that makes further investment possible.

The Rs 10,600 crore allocated for social security schemes and the Rs 20,200 crore provided to BBMP over four years reflect a government that understands social investment and economic growth as complementary, not competing.

A State That Leads by Serving

Karnataka's Budget 2026–27 is, at its core, a statement about what technology is actually for. Not for showcasing innovation awards or attracting international rankings — though it achieves both — but for ensuring that a farmer in Kolar has the best agronomic intelligence available at sunrise, that a student in a government school in Raichur has the same learning support as one in a premium urban institution, and that a citizen registering property does so without paperwork, without corruption, and without losing a day's wages standing in a queue.

When Bengaluru was ranked 5th in the world for AI and big data, it marked Karnataka's arrival as a global technology force.

This budget marks something equally significant: the moment Karnataka decided that global leadership and grassroots impact are not separate ambitions, but the same one.

In that integration of technological excellence with human compassion — built, as its architects describe it, on the wisdom of Buddha and the justice of Ambedkar — lies the full measure of what Karnataka is building for its people.

Photo: AI representative image



Why Trump's America is a lonely superpower



Photo: Getty Images

Isolated through unilateralism? US president Donald Trump finds himself with no friends and no real allies

Ashok Swain

Great powers sometimes isolate themselves through overreach. The United States under Donald Trump is in that zone. By aligning reflexively with Benjamin Netanyahu on almost everything—from Palestine to Lebanon to Iran—Trump has really damaged America's pre-eminence in world affairs. As a superpower on the wane, Trump's America is still able to project force but it no longer commands respect, it cannot build consensus and will possibly, after the Iran debacle, not even instil fear as it once did.

Recent developments in the Persian Gulf capture this shift quite starkly. After failed negotiations in Islamabad, Washington has

lurched towards measures that threaten to disrupt one of the world's most vital oil, gas and nitrogen corridors and escalate the conflict far beyond its current boundaries. The message to the world is unmistakable: the United States is prepared to act alone, even when the consequences are global and there is widespread opposition.

The more fundamental concern is not one single decision, but the general drift of US policy. Trump's Middle East policy has fused American decision-making with Israel's war objectives to an unprecedented degree, the kind of convergence that leaves little room for independent judgment. And it is precisely this convergence that is driving Washington's isolation.

The damage was visible even before the war with Iran, and what started the rupture

was America's open backing of Israel's genocidal, ethnic cleansing project in Gaza. The war with Iran has further strained alliances across Europe, Asia and the Middle East, weakening partnerships that took decades to build while opening space for rivals like China and Russia to expand their influence. As Washington increasingly prioritises military solutions, it weakens the very networks that have historically extended its influence.

Nowhere is this more clear than in the Gulf. For years, the Gulf states relied on the US as a guarantor of their security, even when they disagreed with its policies. That relationship is now fraying. The war has left them exposed, economically vulnerable and strategically uncertain. Instead of stabilising the region, US actions have

heightened their sense of insecurity. Even as Trump claims success, Iran has emerged more powerful, with significant leverage over the Strait of Hormuz, the artery that controls at least 20 per cent of the world's trade of crude oil and LNG and about a third of global seaborne trade in fertilisers and key feedstocks.

Washington appears to be reacting to the concerns of its allies. The Gulf states are worried about being dragged further into a confrontation they didn't start nor can control and will certainly not benefit from. The perception that Netanyahu is leading Trump by the nose, that US policy is driven primarily by Israeli priorities and Netanyahu's obsessions rather than any concern for regional stability has deepened that unease. It is one thing to support an ally, quite another to be a captive to its agenda.

The war with Iran has reinforced this perception. The strikes did not follow failed negotiations, reinforcing longstanding global suspicion that the US treats diplomacy as a ruse rather than a commitment. That matters. When negotiations are repeatedly undercut by military action, trust collapses. And without base-level trust, diplomacy becomes impossible.

Across the Global South, the war with Iran is seen as a 'war of choice'; some observers have even called it a 'war of whim', a military superpower trying to bully a weaker adversary. This perception

feeds into a broader narrative that the so-called rules-based order is selective and self-serving. When Washington invokes international law or nuclear non-proliferation against its adversaries but ignores it when convenient, it carries no moral authority.

That loss of authority is already reshaping global alignments. Countries that once looked up to the US as a stabilising force are hedging their bets. Some are moving closer to China, which presents itself as a more predictable partner. Others are simply stepping back, choosing not to align too closely with any major power. Even close allies such as the UK, France, Japan, Germany and South Korea are increasingly diverging from the US in their voting patterns at the United Nations.

Trump's defenders argue that strength, not consensus, is what matters. But this argument confuses coercive power in the short term with long-term influence. Military superiority can win some battles but it cannot sustain an international order or superpower status. That requires legitimacy, cooperation and a willingness to respect rules and norms.

The contradictions in US policy are now impossible to ignore. Washington may not have fully abandoned the language of ceasefire—it still calls for its actions, fly in the opposite direction.

This has consequences. It becomes harder for the US to act as an honest broker in any conflict, or rally allies around shared goals or indeed convey that American leadership can think beyond narrow, immediate self-interest.

The cracks are widening even in the West. European governments, even NATO countries, may not have openly broken with Washington, but their discomfort is evident in calls for restraint and renewed diplomacy. Trump has even managed to pick a fight with the Pope, which will likely antagonise sections of his Christian base at home.

Despite the Senate vote in his favour, popular support is low for a prolonged war in the Middle East. The war has not delivered the decisive outcomes it promised. Iran's regime is intact, possibly stronger than it was before the war. Its regional influence is undiminished and it has successfully exercised leverage over a key strategic chokepoint in seaborne trade.

Instead of coordinating with allies and testing the path of diplomacy with Iran, Trump took the path of maximal pressure and no consultation and backed a rogue regional actor without question. The result is a superpower with no friends and no real allies. Trump's America is a military superpower alright but its diplomatic cachet has all but evaporated. ■

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

Countries that saw the US as a stabilising force are hedging their bets. Some are moving closer to China. Others are simply stepping back

Electoral storm gathering over Trump

Ashis Ray

Ever since US president Donald Trump realised that bombarding Iran would not result in the Islamic regime in Tehran caving in, he began looking for a face-saving exit. Six weeks into the conflict, he agreed to a ceasefire. The first round of talks between the US and Iran in Islamabad was inconclusive; but a truce wasn't beyond reach. Moreover, it was imperative for Trump to arrest the economic hardships the hostilities had created at home.

State-by-state primaries for the US midterm elections began on 3 March and will conclude on 15 September, determining the final Democratic and Republican candidates. The mid-term elections—for state governorships, senators and lawmakers in the House of Representatives—will be held on 3 November.

The landslide victory of November 2024 that returned Trump to the White House after an interval of four years reflected a wave of popularity that has since steadily receded. Indeed, despite his Republican party enjoying majorities in the Senate and the House—normally a boon for an American president—he has failed to pass a number of legislations through the two chambers because of a pushback from Republicans themselves, who have been concerned about such enactments upsetting their constituents and consequently injuring their chances of election or re-election. Thus, Trump has resorted to a plethora of executive orders, which have finite validity spans and, in some cases, limited acceptability.

Majorities in the House and Senate have, though, enabled him to bypass Congress on military operations abroad. These include the unlawful kidnapping of Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro and his wife and renditioning them to New York in January 2026, and the unprovoked attack—with Israel—on Iran. Since the first strikes on 28 February 2026, at least 3,300 people have been killed, many of them innocent civilians, nearly 25,000 injured and over 3 million displaced.

The US saw mass mobilisations as part of a nationwide 'No Kings Day of Action'—signalling Americans want democratic checks in the presidency. On Saturday, 28 March 2026, more than 9 million people rallied across America against Trump, his administration and his war on Iran.

According to a YouGov opinion poll carried out on 8-10 April and published by *The New York Times*, Trump's approval rating was down to 39 per cent, with 61 per cent of Americans disapproving of him. Few citizens were taken in by his daily rants on Truth Social claiming triumph over Iran. Most were increasingly frustrated by rising inflation pinching their pockets.

GDP growth in the US has slowed in 2026, consumer prices have risen sharply, job creation is at its weakest since the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost of energy has gone through the roof. From February to March, petrol prices soared by 21.2 per cent, the highest monthly increase since figures started being tracked in 1967. According to the American Automobile Association, in California a gallon of gasoline cost \$5.93—up from around \$3.

Analysts quoted by the *BBC* forecast food prices may rise in the months ahead, as the impact of higher transportation and agricultural input costs begin to bite. The Strait of Hormuz, choked by Iran as a counter strategy to the US-Israeli assault, provides passage to vital supplies of crude oil, natural gas, fertiliser, aluminium and helium for all continents.

Trump maintains energy inflation will be short-lived and dismisses any risks to the wider economy. Price stabilisation through the international supply chain may not happen, though, for another 4-5 months. This has Republican aspirants to public office worried about their prospects in November.

Furthermore, Trump's run-in with US-born Pope Leo XIV, the elected head of the influential Catholic church, has been completely off the wall. He accused the pontiff of being 'terrified for foreign policy', adding, 'I'm not a fan of Pope Leo.' The pope responded, "I have no fear of the Trump administration... I do believe in the message of the Gospel, as a peacemaker."

Such a standoff is unlikely to be taken lightly by America's Catholics, who constitute 20 per cent of the country's population, and won't be lost on Protestants, either. Besides, 36 per cent of Catholics are Hispanic, who may have noted that Spain and other Spanish-speaking nations have unequivocally condemned the US and Israel's aggression.

What this means is that Republicans could lose control of the House and perhaps even the Senate. A Democratic majority in



Photo: Getty Images

energy supplies to Spain and France through the Strait in an attempt to diplomatically divide the West and isolate the US.

If agreed to by the international community, Iran's desire to impose a toll on vessels sailing through the Strait on a long-term basis would set a slippery precedent. It would also violate the universally accepted United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which defines territorial waters as no more than 12 nautical miles from a country's coast. At least nine other straits in other parts of the world could then voice similar demands. These include the Strait of Malacca in south-east Asia, which is 1.7 miles at its narrowest point near Singapore and handles 25 per cent of the global seaborne trade; the Strait of Gibraltar which connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea; and the Bab-el-Mandeb which joins the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and serves as a gateway to the Suez Canal.

Opinion aired on media about the first face-to-face talks between the US and Iran in 48 years—held in Pakistan last weekend—ranged from doubt (about the dialogue taking place at all) to optimism to writing it off as a 'failure'. Given the decades-long distrust between the parties, exacerbated by Trump's bellicosity, it was ridiculous to expect a breakthrough after a solitary round of negotiations, even if they were a marathon 21 hours long.

There was reason to believe that agreement in principle had been reached on a number of issues, though not on the *modus operandi* of Iran abandoning its nuclear programme. This was underscored by Omani foreign minister Sayyid Badr Albusaidi, who mediated in indirect talks between US and Iranian representatives in Geneva on 26 February, and spoke of "significant progress". *Le Monde* reported, "The Gulf nation (Oman) says Iran has agreed to zero stockpiling of uranium and to convert existing enriched material into fuel, calling it an unprecedented breakthrough in nuclear negotiations." For Trump to unleash bombs and missiles on Iran just two days later was in awfully bad faith.

So, a deal, as Trump likes to put it, will undoubtedly be a relief for Republicans; but it may not be enough to wholly overcome the electoral challenges ahead. And meanwhile, who know what Trump will do next? ■

the House will almost certainly result in Trump's impeachment, although a conviction in the Senate—which unseats a president and requires a two-thirds majority—is likely to be harder to achieve.

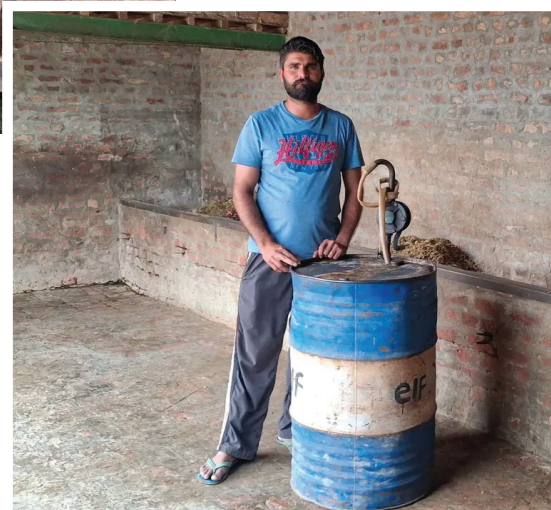
A legislature ranged against a president can, unless skillfully handled, render him a 'lame duck'. Yet, Trump could still embark on forays overseas. The only way to curb such excesses would be for the Democrats to amend the 1973 War Powers Act. As of now, this law requires a president to notify Congress within 48 hours of deploying forces and mandates their withdrawal within 60-90 days unless Congress authorises the action. So far, Trump has conspicuously complied with both.

British prime minister Keir Starmer ruled out joining the US in a blockade of Iranian ports, another sign of the special relationship between Washington and London fraying. Instead, on 17 April, the United Kingdom and France co-hosted a summit of more than 40 nations to discuss a defensive naval mission to reopen traffic in Hormuz and restore 'freedom of navigation'. Europe is now more united after far-right Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban's crushing defeat in the general election following a controversial 16-year reign. Iran meanwhile has resumed

According to a YouGov opinion poll, Trump's approval rating is now down to 39 per cent



Dalbara Singh, a landless Dalit farmer, has borrowed money to stock some diesel amidst the growing fuel shortage across the country; (below) Another small farmer, Lakhwinder Singh, from Barnala district will have to borrow money to store several drums of diesel as the harvest season nears



Photos: Navkiran Singh

War in Iran, debt in Punjab

The war in West Asia is driving farmers in Barnala deeper into a debt trap, finds **Vishav Bharti**

As the lush green wheat fields turn to gold, Dalbara Singh's worries ripen. Soon, it'll be harvest time. Soon, diesel may run out. That's why this landless Dalit farmer from Barnala district's Patti village unhesitatingly borrows money at an annual interest rate of 18 per cent to make sure his diesel drums remain full.

Dalbara Singh is 55. Along with his three brothers, he tills the 20 acres he has taken on lease from an NRI. During harvesting season, he also works on other people's land as a 'custom harvester' reaping wheat for dairy farmers. He points to his tractor and reaper. "These are guzzlers. If run on full capacity, this drum of diesel will last just two days."

But borrowing money at such a high rate? "What other option did I have? What if I don't find diesel a week later? My entire crop will rot. I have raised it like a child," he says. Calculating Dalbara's income seems hard when he hasn't had any for over a year. Meanwhile, his losses and debts keep mounting.

For farmers in Punjab, the US-Israel war on Iran means more debt. But it's an even bigger crisis for Dalbara Singh and many others like him, whose children

work in the Gulf countries as labourers and semi-skilled workers. The war threatens their future, too. Only last month, he borrowed Rs 4 lakh to send his son to Cyprus. Geopolitically considered part of Europe, this West Asian country is dependent on tourism and shipping. The ongoing war has hit both these sectors. "My son is not happy as he couldn't find work. So now he's restless, wanting to return," says Dalbara, who blames his own destiny and doesn't mention the war even once in our entire conversation.

With the wheat harvesting season approaching, and the uncertainty created by the war mounting, many farmers began buying diesel in advance. You can see long lines of tractors with

empty diesel drums placed on their rear jacks queuing up at filling stations. "They are all borrowing money at a hefty interest rate," says Raghbir Singh Dakala, a leader of the Bharti Kisan Union (Dakaunda) in Patiala district.

The custom harvesters face a bigger challenge. Lakhwinder Singh, 31, who owns five acres of land in Patti village, found that his own farm is not able to sustain him. Last year, he bought a combine harvester—100 per cent loan-financed—for Rs 12 lakh. A great risk for one who earned just Rs 1.5 lakh from both harvests the previous year. Additionally, he owes Rs 3 lakh to the village cooperative bank. Every six months, he has to pay an instalment of Rs 1 lakh to the

financer. Now, he has sought Rs 20,000 from his *arhtiya* (commission agent-cum-moneylender) to buy diesel. "The harvesting season lasts just about 20 days. I can't afford to have the machine remain idle for a single day during those three weeks. If I fail to pay the instalment, I'll end up losing the harvester," he says.

Loan-burdened rural Punjab is getting sucked further into the debt trap. A December 2025 study by the Punjab State Farmers' & Farm Workers' Commission found that the state's cultivators owe around Rs 1.04 lakh crore to banks and around Rs 20,000 crore to moneylenders. Rural debt has seen a fivefold increase in the past two decades. The war is set to push these already unimaginable figures even higher.

Even if his diesel drum is full (paid for by crushing debt), even if his son returns from Cyprus, Dalbara Singh knows there are more uncertainties ahead. If the harvest goes smoothly, it will be followed by sowing. "I've heard fertilisers also come through the same route, just like diesel?" he asks. What will happen to him, and many others? The government owes them an answer. ■

Rural debt has seen a fivefold increase in 20 years. The state's farmers owe ~ ₹1.04 lakh crore to banks and ~ ₹20,000 crore to moneylenders

Courtesy: People's Archive of Rural India

BOOK EXTRACT

Two roads before Hindus

Rajmohan Gandhi urges an ethical enquiry in his new book

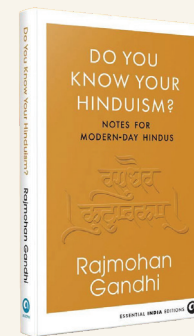
Long ago, in his *Experiments with Truth*, Gandhi recalled an incident from the year 1894, when he was a twenty-four-year-old lawyer in Durban, South Africa. After being beaten roughly by his white master, a Tamil-speaking indentured labourer named Balasundaram had sought young Gandhi's help. The latter was able to obtain Balasundaram's transfer to another master. After relating the story, Gandhi wrote:

'It has always been a mystery to me how men feel themselves honoured by the humiliation of their fellow beings.'

It is a fact that noticeable numbers of vocal Hindus in contemporary India feel themselves temporarily elated and energised by the humiliation of helpless Muslims. Hindus who feel let down and embarrassed are more numerous. However, most of us remain silent, for speaking out can invite trouble.

Hindus, therefore, have work to do. Not coming to the aid of the weak or the endangered is not a value that Hindus were taught to prize.

On the night of 28 November 2023, relief was felt across India when, one by one, forty-one men, who were trapped in a tunnel in Uttarakhand, came out alive after



Title **Do You Know Your Hinduism: Notes for modern-day Hindus**
Author **Rajmohan Gandhi**
Publisher **Aleph**
Price **Rs 499 (hardcover)**

seventeen days of suspense.

What were the names of the twelve toilers who, after giant machines failed, had dug with their hands, fingers and nails the hole through which the trapped men surfaced? Monu, Naseer, Ankur, Jatin, Saurabh, Feroz, Munna Quereshi, Rashid, Irshad, Naseem, Wakeel Hassan, and Devender. Some of them Hindus, some of them Muslims, all humble diggers and labourers.

Bound together by the precariousness of their lives.

And by their Hindu value, the Muslim value, the human value of *insaniyat*.

Perhaps the question is of where our minds travel. We can climb vertically into our imagined past and savour the presumed glory there. Or we can enter horizontally into the lives of our compatriots, our neighbours of different castes and creeds, and see if we can lower the pain we may find there.

To both exercises we seem to give the name Hinduism. May we choose the benevolent one. ■

Vocal Hindus in India today feel temporarily elated and energised by the humiliation of helpless Muslims



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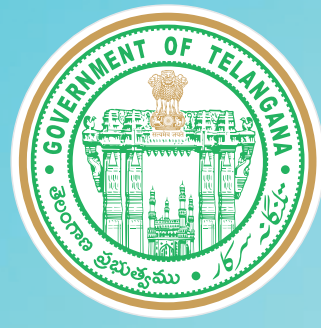
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