NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY

Freedom is in Peril, Defend it with all your might Jawaharlal Nehru

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NATION

NOT ALL MURDERS DESERVE THE SAME PUNISHMENT

Will the court allow Akhlaq's murderers to walk free?

▸P3



HOME & ABROAD

WHY INDIA HAS NO PLACE IN THE 'PAX SILICA' ORDER

Because India's 'strategic autonomy' is a patchwork of convenient relationships

▸P6



BACKPAGE

WHERE IS RIVALDO?

A beloved elephant vanishes, unsettling the fragile Nilgiris

▸P8



THE NATIONAL HERALD CASE

Political vendetta project hits a roadblock

Justice Gogne's intervention on 16 December shows that the independence of the judiciary has not yet been snuffed out, writes Prem Shankar Jha

In an era when even the Supreme Court of India has been bending to the will of the Modi government, it is heartening to see a lower court of India standing firm in defence of the laws of the land both in letter and in spirit. That is what Special Judge Vishal Gogne did at the Rouse Avenue trial court in Delhi on 16 December this year.

The case he dismissed was a charge filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in 2021, that the shareholders of Young Indian—the holding company of Associated Journals Ltd, which publishes this newspaper—had misappropriated funds to the tune of Rs 90.21 crore to gain control of AJL's substantial fixed assets. This, in the ED's framing, constituted money laundering.

Refusing to take cognisance of the ED complaint (chargesheet) against Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and others in the case, Justice Gogne ruled that the complaint was "not maintainable" under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), because an investigation and prosecution under PMLA cannot proceed without a prior FIR (First Information Report) for the underlying scheduled (predicate) offence.

Justice Gogne's reason for doing so was precise and irrefutable. The original accusation of 'money laundering' had been made by a private person—Subramanian Swamy. Swamy's charge should have been investigated by a government agency, i.e., the CBI. The CBI should then have filed an FIR (First Information Report) submitting its findings to the ED. The Enforcement Directorate would only then have had the authority to start investigating the charge of money laundering against the accused. But the Directorate had not received, nor waited to receive, a report from the CBI, or any other agency designated by it, and filed a case against the accused solely upon the basis of a complaint made by a private person. Rightly therefore, Justice Gogne saw no option but to throw out the case.



Photo: Getty Images

Setting the record straight Senior Congress leader and Rajya Sabha MP P. Chidambaram addressing the media on 21 April 2025

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Why did the ED not follow procedure before filing a case in court? The chronology is revealing.

It was in February 2013 that Swamy filed his private complaint with the Metropolitan Magistrate (trial court) in New Delhi, alleging that the shareholders and directors of Young Indian had committed fraud, misappropriated funds, and were in criminal breach of trust against the Congress Party, donors to the Congress Party, AJL and shareholders of AJL.

Without any verification based on documentary material, the Metropolitan Magistrate summoned the accused, who were obliged to appear and post bail—even before the complainant was required to establish before the court that he did, indeed, have grounds to make such allegations.

The trial court's hearings started in 2016 and went on till early 2021. During this time, Swamy was cross-examined by the lawyers of the accused—and was unable to back his allegations. In January 2021, he went so far as to ask the Delhi High Court to pause (i.e. stay) his own case.

It was at this stage, seeing that the case was no longer moving forward, that the ED stepped in. And decided to start its own investigation basis Swamy's private complaint, claiming that the underlying alleged crime involved money laundering.

Significantly, the ED director at the time, Rajan Katoch, had taken the view that a private criminal complaint could not form the basis of an ED investigation. An infuriated prime minister, not one to brook dissent, took his revenge within hours of receiving the news. Katoch was sacked the same night along with his chief investigating officer Himanshu Kumar.

The ED would almost certainly have known that its charges won't stick. But Katoch's expulsion as Director had made it clear that Modi wanted one and only one outcome

The ED would almost certainly have known that its charges won't stick. But Katoch's expulsion had made it clear that Modi wanted one, and only one outcome. So all the Directorate could hope for was a compliant judge who would overlook judicial irregularities and give the judgement that the government wanted. It did not find one in Justice Gogne.

There is, however, a darker explanation for the ED's repeated attempts to pursue a money laundering case against the Gandhis. This is Prime Minister Modi's determination to pull them off the pedestal of righteousness on which the Indian public has put them, and place himself upon it as the saviour of Hinduism, the harbinger of Hindu Rashtra.

But here too the Modi government's efforts are doomed to fail because neither the Congress nor Young Indian, the company it created to revive the *National Herald*, has taken even one, tiny step outside the law.

To fully appreciate this, it is necessary to go back 88 years to the founding of the paper and its parent company, Associated Journals Limited by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1937. The goal of the Congress was to publish the *National Herald* and its equivalents in Hindi and Urdu. To do this, the Congress had created a company with the express purpose of 'reflecting the policy and principles of the Indian National Congress'.

The *National Herald* had got off to a flying start in 1937, but never fully recovered from the blow it received when the British banned it in 1942 for supporting the Quit India Movement. By the time the ban was lifted in 1945, the British were on their way out and Pandit Nehru and other senior leaders, who used to write for it regularly before 1942, were in government and preoccupied with the transition.

What is more, during the interregnum, papers like the *Hindustan Times*, *The Tribune*, *Searchlight* in Bihar and *The Indian Express* had taken over the patriotic space in journalism. So the *National Herald* sank slowly into debt and near oblivion.

In order to survive, AJL was obliged to approach the Congress Party, its ideological parent, for support. During the period of acute financial distress, from 2002 to 2010, the All India Congress Committee gave AJL over a hundred loans so that it could continue to pay salaries and taxes. By 2011, these loans had ballooned to Rs. 90.21 crore, all of which were utilised by AJL to pay salaries, gratuity, provident fund, taxes, VRS and other dues including government dues.

A standard route to reviving such a company is to convert all or a part of its debt into equity shares and sell these at a discount to those willing to gamble on its recovery. This is the route the Congress took. To take over AJL's debt, it set up a company titled Young Indian, in which the Gandhis and their 'co-accused' were the principal shareholders.

Young Indian was set up in 2010 as a not-for-profit company under Section 25 (now section 8) of the Companies Act. That made it a legal requirement for the shareholders not to withdraw any share of the profits the company earned. All of these had to remain in the company and be used for purposes stated to obtain the Section 25 status.

That was why Rajan Katoch had thrown out Swamy's plea. And that is why an enraged and frustrated Modi government is still trying to punish the Gandhi family for a crime it has not committed. ■

PREM SHANKAR JHA *is a veteran journalist, writer and economist*

Far worse than trying to erase Gandhi

In trying to wash its hands off MGNREGA's employment guarantee, the Centre is also planning to kill the right to demand work

Yogendra Yadav

The Opposition was initially protesting the renaming of MGNREGA. Their question: why remove Gandhi's name from a scheme the country has long known as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act? Why scrub Gandhi out of it?

At first, even I felt a twinge of regret. The proposed new name—'Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill'—is clunky and reminiscent of an old habit of dreaming up an English acronym and then force-fitting Hindi words into it. But after reading the draft of the new law the government plans to bring in to replace MGNREGA, I thought it was just as well. What good would it serve to retain his name when the soul of the programme had been gouged out, when its foundational guarantees dismantled?

Let's try and understand why MGNREGA was not just any old piece of legislation, why it was historic. Nearly sixty years after Independence, the Indian state took a tentative step towards fulfilling a core constitutional obligation. Articles 39(a) and 41 of the Directive Principles of State Policy enjoin the government to secure for every citizen an adequate means of livelihood (Art. 39) and the right to work (Art. 41). Nearly six decades after this was written into the Constitution, the UPA government finally passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in Parliament in 2005, granting—for the first time—a legally enforceable right to work to the country's poorest citizens.

This was not a full-fledged guarantee of employment, but its provisions set it apart from other government employment schemes. The law gave every rural resident the *right* to demand work from the state, leaving little wiggle room for official excuses, evasions and bureaucratic stonewalling. There were no eligibility criteria. Any rural resident could obtain a job card and claim work. There were no conditions attached to demanding employment. Whenever work was sought, the government was obliged to provide it within two weeks—or pay compensation.



Photo: Getty Images

At a MNREGA work site in Nayagaon, Jaipur

A universal right to work is being replaced with a discretionary dole at the pleasure of the Centre

Most uniquely, there was no budgetary cap for this scheme. As many people as wanted work could demand it, and the Union government was legally bound to find the money. Imperfect it may have been, but MGNREGA marked the first serious attempt to give legal shape to the right to work, and it was for this reason that the scheme drew the attention of the world.

In practice, the law fell short of its promise. Wages under MGNREGA were meagre and it was hobbled by administrative restrictions. Even so, the Manmohan Singh government expanded it. After the UPA lost in 2014 and he took over the reins of power, Prime Minister Narendra Modi openly mocked the law, saying he would preserve it as "a living monument to [the UPA's] failures". In its early years, the Modi government actively tried to kill the scheme.

Then came the Covid pandemic, and even the Modi government was forced to lean on MGNREGA. Despite government apathy, bureaucratic bad faith and entrenched local corruption, MGNREGA has been a lifeline for the poorest in rural India. Over the past fifteen years, it has generated nearly 4,000 crore person-days of wage employment. An estimated 9.5 crore works have been completed under the scheme, benefitting roughly five crore families every year. It provided a higher baseline for rural wages, and during national crises like Covid, or disasters such as droughts, MGNREGA saved millions from hunger and prevented mass migration.

But the Modi government has now made up its mind to bury the programme.

Continued on page 2

STATES 360°  MADHYA PRADESH

Since when is the acquisition of public land a 'state secret?

Kashif Kakvi

The Land Acquisition Act has been bypassed. Tribal communities, protected forests and elephant corridors have not been spared. Over 570,000 trees have already been cut. These are just some of the things the Madhya Pradesh government would prefer to sweep under the carpet, even as concerns mount over its decision to hand over a vast coal block to Stratatech Mineral Resources Pvt Ltd, an Adani Group company.

At the heart of the controversy lies an alleged bypassing of the Land Acquisition Act, which mandates fair compensation, gram sabha consent and special rehabilitation provisions for Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC). Instead, the government invoked the Coal Bearing Areas (Acquisition and Development) Act of 1957—an outdated colonial-era law perceived as less protective of local rights. This manoeuvre allowed the government to circumvent critical safeguards for displaced communities.

The coal block, awarded in December 2020, spans 2,672 hectares, of which 54 per cent falls within reserved forests and elephant corridors, 25 per cent is government 'revenue' land and 21 per cent is privately held by 2,980 individuals. Nearly a third of the private owners come from ST and SC communities.

While the acquisition of private land was officially notified, acquisition of the remaining 79 per cent was kept a 'state secret' and never formally notified. Opposition leaders, notably Umang Singhar, have questioned this secrecy, emphasising that the Land Acquisition Act requires notification of *all* acquired lands as well as transparent rehabilitation plans.

Singhar, the leader of the opposition in the state and himself a tribal leader, highlighted that the state government's failure to provide adequate resettlement and rehabilitation schemes for displaced tribal populations not only disregards due process, but also threatens the rights and livelihoods of thousands, deepening grievances among local communities.

These charges were first raised by the Opposition. On 10 December, a fact-finding committee comprising Congress leaders and workers visited the Dhirauli coal block, 70 km from Singrauli. The police stopped them from entering the forest, but Singhar managed to break through the cordon on his motorcycle and reach the spot where trees were being felled. Local media reported it; the state government ignored it.

The environmental stakes in this project are high. The Dhirauli coal block lies in a 'very dense' forest classified as being of 'high conservation value'. Mature trees over 30 years old include species such as sal, teak, mahua, tendu, amla, harreda and baheda. These trees are deeply tied to the daily lives of communities like the Baiga tribe, who depend on them for food, medicine, livelihoods and cultural practices.

The forest is also the habitat of bears, hyenas, wolves, jackals, leopards and elephants. Critically, the area includes protected elephant and leopard corridors—natural pathways essential for the movement and survival of these wild animals. According to forest department rules, such lands cannot be diverted for mining unless no viable alternatives exist, and only after alternative corridors are established.

The Madhya Pradesh government has blithely permitted the largescale felling of over 570,000 trees in the first phase of the mining project. This massive deforestation will have drastic ecological consequences, disrupting wildlife habitats, threatening biodiversity and affecting the ecological balance in the region.

The Union government initially told Parliament that the coal block lay within a Fifth Schedule area, which carries constitutional protections for regions with significant tribal populations and distinct sociocultural contexts. However, during the recent winter session of the Madhya Pradesh Assembly, the state government claimed the area does not fall under the Fifth Schedule. The Opposition alleges that the government deliberately removed the area's protected status soon after the BJP's 2023 victory.



An open cast coal mine at Singrauli, Madhya Pradesh

Photo: ***Getty Images***

Patwari says the state government is hiding facts from the people and that at least 10 lakh trees will be felled for one coal mining project

Such contradictory claims have intensified controversy over the legality and legitimacy of the mining project

On 16 December, a day after Singhar and Madhya Pradesh Congress Committee president Jitu Patwari held a press conference in New Delhi, the Income Tax department raided the premises of a Congress leader (also with business interests in coal) in Chhatarpur. While Patwari alleged that more than a million trees were slated to be cut across roughly 4,000 hectares, the government is yet to place all facts in the public domain.

At the press conference, Singhar pointed out that the Adani Group had identified land for compulsory afforestation across four districts—Sagar, Raisen, Shivpuri and Agar Malwa. He said even the Union government had noted that some of this land fell within reserved forests and some within an existing elephant corridor. Why, asked Singhar, is the Group being allowed to conduct afforestation 300 to 700 km from the deforested area?

Patwari alleged that the state government is hiding facts from the people and at that at least 10 lakh trees will be felled for one coal mining project. Isn't it time for the MP government to set the record straight? ■

Far worse than trying to erase Gandhi

Continued from page 1

Mindful that scrapping it altogether would have political repercussions, the official line is that the programme is being 'restructured'. To sweeten the deception, the government claims that employment will now be guaranteed for 125 days instead of 100. But the truth is that the new Bill tabled in Parliament effectively abolishes the very idea of an employment guarantee—and a universal right to work is set to be replaced by a discretionary dole of daily wages for select beneficiaries.

According to the government's draft, every crucial provision of the scheme is being reversed. The Centre will now decide in which states—and in which regions in those states—employment opportunities will be offered. The Union government will impose spending caps for each state. State governments will decide which two months of the farm labour season the scheme will be suspended. Even the choice of works at the local level will be dictated from above.

Most dangerously, states are now being saddled with a much larger share of the financial burden. Earlier, the Centre bore 90 per cent of the cost; now it will pay only 60 per cent. In precisely those poor regions where employment guarantees are most desperately needed, impoverished state governments will not have the funds, and the Centre will wash its hands off the 'problem'.

Of course, if elections are at stake, funds for employment guarantees will materialise where none earlier existed. In states ruled by the Opposition, the scheme will either not be implemented at all or be crippled by punishing conditions.

So yes, it is just as well that such a scheme won't carry Mahatma Gandhi's name. But those who value Gandhi's ideas must now fight the Bill—not just inside Parliament but on the streets too, like the farmers did; they must carry the message to the people, who must find out how MGNREGA was killed, how their 'right to work' was snatched away. ■

STATES 360°  ODISHA

Should MPs and MLAs fix their own salaries?

Ashutosh Mishra

India's parliamentarians and state legislators are empowered to fix their own salaries and perks. Each assembly decides on it from time to time, but should they?

Unlike government employees, who have independent pay commissions, MPs and MLAs decide their own remuneration—an arrangement increasingly being questioned for the obvious conflict of interest. This issue has gained currency after Odisha MLAs raised their take-home salary to Rs 3.45 lakh per month, the highest in the country, followed by Telangana (Rs 2.7 lakh), Maharashtra (Rs 2.6 lakh), Manipur (Rs 2.5 lakh) and Uttar Pradesh (Rs 2.4 lakh). The lowest-paid MLAs are in Kerala at Rs 70,000 per month.

The Odisha Assembly unanimously passed four Bills approving a threefold pay hike on 9 December, the last day of the winter session. Additionally: emoluments have been enhanced with retrospective effect from June 2024. Aside: the current BJP government under Mohan Charan Majhi assumed office in June 2024.

The monthly pension payable to former MLAs has also been revised from Rs 30,000 to Rs 80,000, plus a travel allowance of Rs 12,500 and a revised medical allowance of Rs 25,000. In a state where nearly 16 per cent of the people still live below the poverty line, the move has triggered widespread public anger and criticism.

Odisha remains one of India's poorest states with malnutrition, high infant mortality rates, battered repeatedly by floods, cyclones and droughts. At Rs 1.83 lakh, the state's per capita income lags behind the national average of Rs 2 lakh. Against this backdrop, the self-serving pay hike seems insensitive and unjustified.



Odisha's MLAs have gifted themselves a threefold increase in salary

Seshdev Nanda of Nabnirman Krushak Sangathan highlights the disconnect: "Our minimum wage for unskilled workers is around Rs 12,000 per month. How can such a dramatic hike for MLAs be justified when ordinary workers earn a fraction of that amount? Our state is battling poverty accentuated by natural calamities and still grappling with poor health indicators."

Other social activists echo this sentiment. The highly regarded activist Jagannath Chatterjee commented on the irrational increase: "If legislators demand a hike, it must match their performance on the ground. Sadly, we lack mechanisms for real accountability, which fuels public frustration. Introducing recall provisions for non-performing representatives could empower voters and improve governance, but such reforms remain elusive."

Odisha Election Watch convenor and social activist Ranjan Mohanty said he was not against periodic enhancement in the salaries of public representatives but it must be commensurate with their needs and performance. "Public sentiments should be kept in mind while making such moves. After all, the representatives get their mandate from the people," said Mohanty.

Women's rights activist Tapsee Prahraj was blunt about the timing: "The government has failed to deliver on promises to empower women, raise old-age pensions or enhance welfare. How can they justify hiking their own salaries amidst such widespread unmet needs?"

Social media has amplified demands for greater transparency and accountability, with citizens urging lawmakers to publish periodic report cards on their work.

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Legislators cutting across party lines have defended the hike, saying it was long overdue—the last increase was in 2017. "A public representative needs money to help people financially in all kinds of situations, right from weddings to last rites. This step by the chief minister is certainly welcome," cooperation minister Pradeep Bal Samanta told a news channel.

Biju Janata Dal, the main opposition party, not only supported the Bills inside the House but was effusive in praising them outside. Party MLA Sarada Jena said, "The enhancement of MLAs salaries was a genuine need that has been taken care of." Similar sentiments were echoed by his party colleagues Pramila Mallick and Ganeswar Behera, as well as Congress MLA Dasrathi.

CPI(M) MLA Laxman Munda, the sole dissenting voice, condemned the hike as insensitive amid farmers' distress and other pressing issues: "Our farmers cannot sell their paddy and face numerous problems. Instead of addressing these, legislators focus on protecting their own interests."

Leader of Opposition Naveen Patnaik refused to accept his increased pay and urged the state to use the funds for poor people's welfare. His family had donated their ancestral property for public use in 2015—he was merely keeping that legacy alive, said he.

Patnaik's move was seen as a political stunt since his party supported the Bills. Deputy chief minister K.V. Singh Deo said, "He had the opportunity to put forward his views in the House. Why did he not do so?" ■

Legislators cutting across party lines have defended the salary hike, saying it was long overdue—the last increase was in 2017

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Not all murders deserve the same punishment


Mohammad Akhlaq was beaten to death in 2015 by a Hindu mob in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh for allegedly possessing beef

Apoorvanand

The family of Mohammad Akhlaq has challenged the Uttar Pradesh government's application seeking withdrawal of prosecution against the accused in Akhlaq's murder. A Noida court has accepted this application. Akhlaq's family has asked a simple question: is beating a man to death with sticks a less serious crime? They were forced to ask this because the government has downgraded the gravity of the offence by arguing that no weapons were recovered from the accused.

The government also argued, in defence of the murder accused, that the crime should not be treated as particularly serious because there was no personal enmity between the accused and Akhlaq. Its principal argument for withdrawing the case is that doing so would help maintain social harmony.

But beyond all this, the government has said something else that deserves closer scrutiny. It said the meat recovered from Akhlaq's house was beef. This 'fact' was introduced to suggest that the accused did not kill Akhlaq without a valid reason. They attacked him because they suspected there was beef in his house. In other words, he was killed in the service of faith.

Akhlaq had committed the gravest sin, and his Hindu neighbours awarded him the death penalty for it—a punishment that, in the government's eyes, is excusable. It should not even be counted as a crime. The government was not merely stating the cause of the murder—it was attempting to justify it.

At the previous hearing, the court asked the government whether there was any precedent for withdrawing a murder case. What it asks next remains to be seen. The court's final decision will also tell us whether Manusmriti has now been formally implemented in India or not.

While reviewing the government's outlook in the Akhlaq murder case, it wouldn't be amiss to compare its stance—and the court's—on another killing in a different part of Uttar Pradesh. A court in Bahraich recently sentenced a Muslim man, Sarfaraz, to death. He was accused of shooting dead a Hindu man named Ram Gopal Sharma. The incident took place a year ago.

In October 2024, during a Durga Puja procession, an aggressive Hindu mob was seen raising slogans outside Sarfaraz's house. From within that crowd, Ram Gopal Mishra suddenly entered Sarfaraz's house. Shouting slogans in a frenzy, he climbed onto the roof, started tearing down a flag tied to the railing, then broke the railing itself. A shot was now fired and he was killed.

If someone forcibly enters my house, vandalises it, and poses a threat to my safety, I should arguably have the right to self-defence—especially when the police are doing nothing to restrain the violent mob or to stop the intruder. The death is unfortunate, but how justified is it to describe firing at one's attacker as an act of terror?

Entering Muslim homes under the pretext of 'assessing the situation' may now be deemed legitimate, and Muslims will be told they should not obstruct this

In this case, justice was delivered within a year. The government sought the harshest punishment—the death penalty—and the court, citing Manusmriti and the need to instil fear among the people, awarded Sarfaraz the death sentence.

There is a striking similarity in the cases of Akhlaq and Sarfaraz. Both their homes were attacked. In Akhlaq's case, announcements were made from the village temple near his house to assemble the mob. Villagers gathered with the intent to attack Akhlaq in his house. They planned the assault, dragged him out of his house, and beat him to death in broad daylight.

This was not a killing committed in a moment of rage; it was no emotional outburst. It was a cold-blooded, premeditated attack. It was designed to strike terror in the hearts of Muslims—and it did. Muslims no longer feel certain about when their neighbours might barge into their homes, inspect their refrigerators and kitchens, accuse them of anything at all, and kill them. Since Akhlaq's murder, many Muslims have been beaten to death on similar pretexts. The pattern continues.

After Akhlaq's murder, all the accused were released on bail. Two of them later died of natural causes. Their bodies were draped in the national flag, as if they had died performing a national duty. The Hindu villagers expressed no remorse over Akhlaq's killing. On the contrary, they justified it. BJP leaders and ministers made statements in support of the accused.

For Akhlaq's family, it became impossible to continue living in the village. Their house has largely remained abandoned.

According to the Uttar Pradesh government, Akhlaq's murder is not a serious crime—indeed, not a crime at all. It argues that the prosecution's case is weak, testimony is taking too long and sufficient evidence is not forthcoming. So why waste time pursuing the case?

In a murder case, collecting evidence and securing testimony is the responsibility of the police. Here, the state is effectively admitting that it has failed to do so—and has no intention of strengthening the case against the accused. It is worried about the case continuing and the possibility of punishment. It claims this is creating social unrest. It is more concerned with 'peace' than with justice.

It does not specify that 'society' here means Hindu society, but it is not concerned what Muslims will make of withdrawing the case and letting Akhlaq's killers walk free. Perhaps it expects Muslims to grant Hindus the right to kill them—and then keep mum about the violence, because speaking up or demanding justice ruffles Hindu feathers.

Akhlaq's murder faced no resistance at the time. The mob killed him at leisure. According to the state, this was appropriate. Ram Gopal Mishra's violence, on the other hand, was met with resistance, and he was killed. The government and the court do not want to talk about Ram Gopal's violence. The government has nothing to say about Mishra's incitement or the Hindu mob's.

Even newspapers are now endorsing this narrative. While reporting the incident, the *Indian Express* wrote that Ram Gopal Mishra climbed onto Sarfaraz's roof to 'assess the situation'; no mention of violent intent or action. Entering Muslim homes under the pretext of 'assessing the situation' may now be deemed legitimate, and Muslims will be told they should not obstruct this.

The theoretical foundation of Manusmriti is that all people are not equal. Killing a Brahmin merits death, but if a Brahmin kills a Shudra, he need only atone. We have made progress. Now, if a Hindu kills a Muslim, never mind atonement, the act will be celebrated. In the reign of the RSS, the rape or murder of Muslims is worthy of public recognition and honour. Kathua, Jharkhand, Dadri, Kolkata… have set the pattern.

The question now is whether the Noida court will see Mohammad Akhlaq's murder through the lens of the Constitution or the Manusmriti. ■

APOORVANAND *is an author and academic*

The death of a lifeline for India's jobless millions

A.J. Prabal

- *The central government shall determine the state-wise normative allocation for each financial year, based on objective parameters as may be prescribed by the central government.* **Section 4(5)**
- *Save as otherwise provided, the state government shall in such rural areas in the state as may be notified by the Central Government, provide to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work, not less than 125 days of guaranteed employment in a financial year in accordance with the scheme made under this Act.* **Section 5(1)**
- *Any expenditure incurred by a state in excess of its normative allocation shall be borne by the state government in such manner and by such procedure as may be prescribed by the central government.* **Section 4(6)**
- *For the purposes of this Act, the fund sharing pattern between the central government and the state government shall be… 60:40. This is apart from the North-Eastern States, Hill States & Union Territories where the central government share will be 90:10.* **Section 22(2)**



MGNREGA work site in Sarguja, Chhattisgarh; (right) protest in the Parliament House Complex, 16 December 2025

Among the Modi government's many dubious talents is a knack for repackaging old schemes as new initiatives. That's right: old wine in new (misshapen) bottles. Except this time the old wine is being thrown out as well and replaced with a toxic new brew.

The newest victim of this government's 'rejig–rename–reclaim' enterprise is the historic UPA-era 'MGNREGA' (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), which came into force in 2005, when Manmohan Singh was India's prime minister.

Why historic? Because MGNREGA gave independent India its first law *guaranteeing* employment in rural India and gave that guarantee the sanctity and legal force of a *right* to demand work. (see '*Far worse than trying to erase Gandhi*', page 1). That 20-year-old law, a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of Indians ekeing out a precarious living in rural India, is set to be replaced by the Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin), or VBGRAMG or just 'G-RAM-G'—the contraction that will no doubt be seen as the USP of the new scheme.

The new Bill is being advertised as vastly superior for offering 125 days of 'guaranteed' employment instead of 100 days (under MGNREGA). But this 'guarantee' now lives only in the name of the bill, not its provisions. If the government really wished to guarantee an additional 25 days of work or even, as the bill claims, to ensure 'all round development' of villages, it was not necessary to repeal MGNREGA.

Over the last few years, the government has routinely failed to provide more than 50–55 days of work in a year, despite the mandate of providing 100 days of work on demand. This, against a backdrop of increased demand for jobs and rising rural distress. Farmer suicides continue unabated in several parts of the country, rural wages remain stagnant while rural inflation has surged. The budget allocation for MGNREGA has been steadily cut: from Rs 1.1 lakh crore during the pandemic years (2020–21) to Rs 98,000 crore in 2022 and Rs 90,000 crore in 2023.

Under MGNREGA, the Union government bore 90 per cent of the expenditure. The new bill proposes to cut this to 60 per cent, offloading 40 per cent onto the states. This is clearly not because the Union government is short of money. Nor are the states suddenly flush with internally generated funds; in fact, impoverished states will fail to implement the scheme simply because they can't bear the financial burden and the Centre has given itself the room to say: 'sorry, not our problem!'. Does that sound like a 'guarantee'? Economist Arun Kumar notes that the Union government's fiscal deficit, at 4.4 per cent, is under control. So, financial constraints do not justify the dilution of the Centre's financial commitment to MGNREGA nor the repeal of the scheme.

For the millions who drew hope from the MGNREGA job guarantee, something they could demand by right, the loss is immeasurable

Prosenjit Datta, former editor of *Business Today*, suggests the motives may be political. The architecture of the new Bill offers clues: it lets the Union government set the 'normative' budget for states, dictate how many days of guaranteed employment each state must provide and retain full control over implementation—shifting both burden and blame to the states. It also opens the door to direct doles, as in Bihar before elections, allowing the Centre to influence voters.

What's to stop the government from weaponising G-RAM-G to punish Opposition-ruled states by denying or delaying allocations? The Union government did hold back funds under MGNREGA too, forcing the government of West Bengal to approach the Supreme Court for relief. But the new law will effectively shut the door on legal remedies as well.

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Ever since the Modi government made Aadhaar mandatory to claim the benefits of government schemes, there have been countless complaints about MGNREGA job-card holders not being able to claim their dues. The Aadhaar Payment Bridge System (APBS), being used to directly transfer wages to workers' Aadhaar-linked bank accounts—a system made mandatory in January 2024, ostensibly for better targeting, faster payments and reduced leakages—has had the opposite effect.

In March 2025, Congress leader Sonia Gandhi accused the Centre of systematically undermining the scheme. MGNREGA wages had not kept up with inflation, she pointed out, demanding that it be raised to Rs 400 and the number of guaranteed workdays from 100 to 150. She also argued that the Aadhaar-based payment mode was exclusionary and the National Mobile Monitoring System flawed, leading to big delays in payments.

Between 10 October and 14 November 2025, the names of nearly 27 lakh workers were deleted from the MGNREGA database. This erasure coincided with the Union government's push for e-KYC verification for all rural workers. LibTech, a consortium of activists and academics, flagged the unusually high deletion rates, revealing that only 7 per cent of beneficiaries had received 100 days of work. The MGNREGA management information system (MIS) cited 12 reasons for removing workers or job cards, including 'duplicate applicant', 'fake applicant' and 'not willing to work'.

But the new bill is not simply an attempt to paper over the failures of MGNREGA's digital architecture, it is designed to give the Union government total control while shifting the financial burden onto states. For the millions of Indians who drew hope from the MGNREGA job guarantee, something they could demand by right, the loss is immeasurable, but what does this government care?' ■

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Modi's India more unequal than ever

The World Inequality Report 2026 highlights the extreme concentration of income and wealth at the very top

Herjinder

If there were an Olympic event for inequality, India would be a strong contender for gold. The World Inequality Report (WIR) 2026, published by the World Inequality Lab, confirms that India ranks among the countries with the highest concentration of income and wealth in the world. Its long-term analysis shows that India's growth has disproportionately benefited a tiny elite, giving rise to what the authors describe as the era of the 'Billionaire Raj'.

Economist Jean Drèze points out that the richest Indians are among the most pampered in the world today. They pay proportionately the lowest income tax, and pay neither wealth nor inheritance tax. The pandemic didn't loosen their purse-strings, either.

The report offers striking evidence of India being one of the most unequal countries in the world. By 2022–23, the disparities between the ultra-rich and the rest had exceeded even the yawning disparities seen during the colonial period.

Income distribution figures are particularly stark: 'The top 10 per cent of earners account for nearly 58 per cent of national income, while the bottom half of the population receives just about 15 per cent. Wealth inequality is even greater, with the richest 10 per cent holding around 65 per of total wealth and the top 1 per cent about 40 per cent.'

The report also highlights persistent gender disparities. At 15.7 per cent, female labour force participation remains far below the global average of 49 per cent and has shown almost no improvement between 2014 and 2024. Globally, women receive only about a quarter of total labour income, and this structural imbalance is far more severe in India.

According to the report, the extreme inequality we are seeing today is not accidental but the outcome of deliberate policy choices. In the decades following independence, up to the early 1980s, India had managed to keep income and wealth gaps within limits.

This relative containment was rooted in the political and economic framework of the post-Independence period, which broadly followed a socialist orientation. Measures such as the nationalisation of key sectors and sharply progressive taxation played a central role.

From the early 1980s onward, however, policy priorities began to change, culminating in wide-ranging economic liberalisation in the 1990s. This marked a decisive structural break. The surge in inequality since then is closely tied to the adoption of neo-liberal policies centred on market-led growth, deregulation and reduced state intervention.

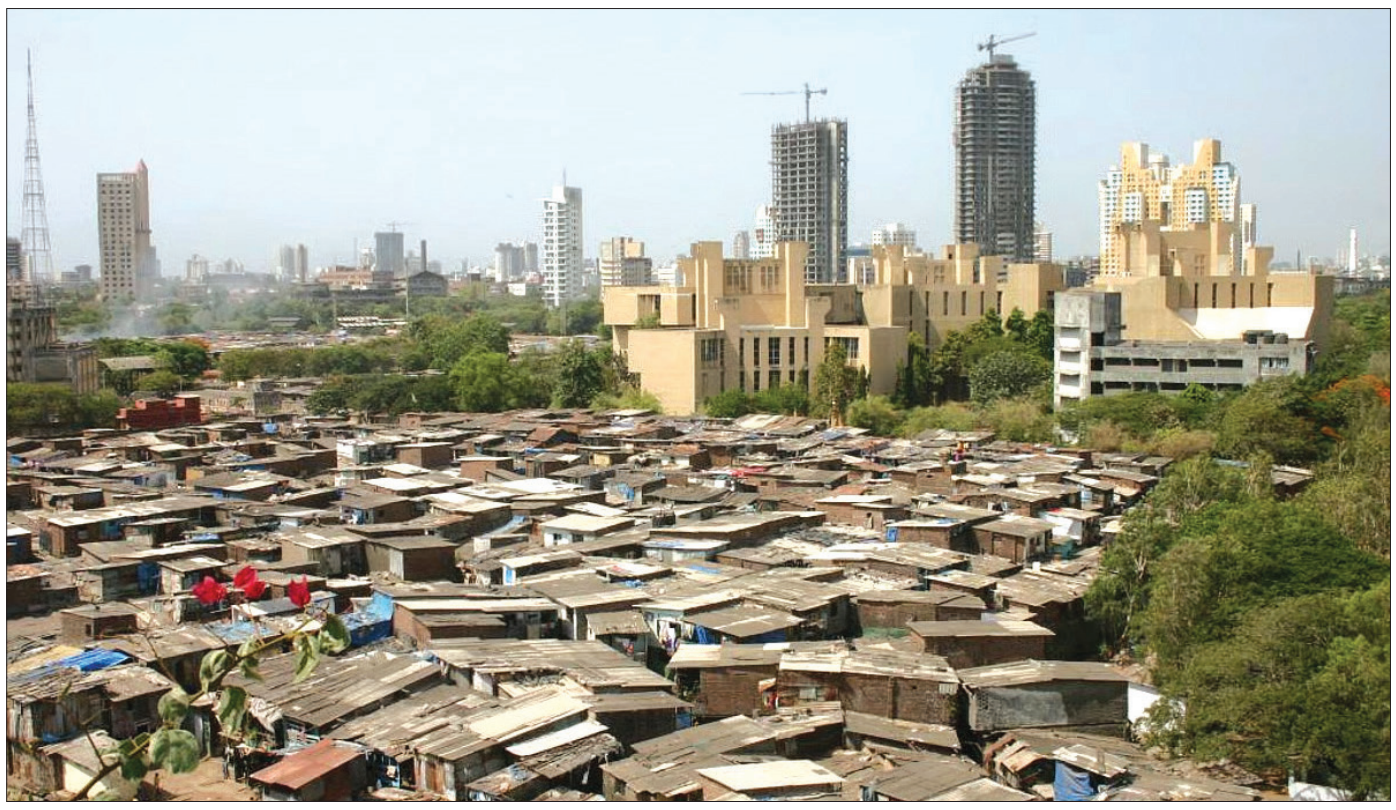
The period of economic liberalisation reversed the more egalitarian trajectory of the decades following Independence and sharply accelerated the concentration of wealth. Income and wealth at the top began to grow far faster than for the rest of the population. By 2022, the income share of the richest 10 per cent had almost doubled compared to its level in 1982. This process of extreme concentration meant that most of the gains from growth flowed to those who were already wealthy, producing what is often described as a 'K-shaped' economy.

The changing structure of India's growth further deepened these inequalities. As the economy became increasingly reliant on the services sector and capital-intensive growth, returns to capital rose sharply, pushing up income shares at the top. At the same time, India failed to shift its vast workforce out of low-productivity agriculture into large-scale, high-wage manufacturing, unlike its regional counterpart, China.

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This inability to generate broad-based, quality employment—combined with long-standing structural biases—has led to the gradual 'hollowing out' of the middle class. The middle 40 per cent of the population now accounts for only about 27–30 per cent of national income, far below the 40–45 per cent share seen in more equal economies. The result is a 'dual economy' in which a small, extremely affluent elite exists alongside a large and economically insecure majority.

The richest Indians are among the most pampered in the world today. They pay proportionately the lowest income tax, and pay neither wealth nor inheritance tax



Hidden in plain sight These chawls and highrises in the same frame hold a mirror to our growth model, by no means endemic to 'Maximum City'

The WIR 2026 argues that inequality has been reinforced by chronic under-investment in human capabilities. This rigidity is the outcome of sustained fiscal choices, particularly the stagnation of public spending on social sectors. Government expenditure on education has remained stuck at around 4 per cent of GDP for the past decade—well below the long-promised 6 per cent—while public healthcare spending has stayed limited at roughly 1.2–1.5 per cent of GDP. As a result, real per capita investment in human capital—the key driver of social mobility—has barely increased, leaving opportunities tightly rationed.

Evidence from local and micro-level studies support this assessment. While movement from agriculture to non-farm work has helped raise rural incomes and enabled some upward mobility within a generation, intergenerational mobility has weakened. Rural households are far less likely to have access to basic services such as piped water or clean cooking fuel even now. This infrastructure deficit imposes a heavy 'time tax' on the rural poor—especially women—and contributes directly to India's exceptionally low female labour force participation.

The central conclusion of WIR 2026 is that extreme inequality in India is the outcome of political choices. Reversing this trajectory requires conscious and sustained policy action. According to economist Jayati Ghosh, "These patterns are not accidents of markets. They reflect the legacy of history and the functioning of institutions, regulations and policies."

Changes in tax policy illustrate this dynamic. In 2019, corporate tax rates were cut to stimulate growth and encourage job creation. By 2023–24, personal income tax collections surpassed corporate tax revenues for the first time. During the same period, corporate profits nearly trebled—from Rs 2.5 trillion in 2020–21 to Rs 7.1 trillion in 2024–25, pushing the profit-to-GDP ratio to a 15-year high. Yet corporate loan write-offs were substantial, amounting to Rs 6.15 lakh crore over the past five years, underscoring how policy choices have continued to favour capital over labour.

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The report's most urgent recommendation is the introduction of progressive taxation aimed at the super-rich. It points out that effective income tax rates decline sharply at the top, with billionaires paying a smaller share of their income than lower- and middle-income households by exploiting loopholes and holding wealth in lightly taxed assets.

India currently has no wealth tax, having abolished it in 2016–17, reflecting a broader global retreat from wealth taxation across OECD countries from the mid-1990s to 2018. The report proposes reintroducing such measures in the form of an annual wealth tax and an inheritance tax focused on the richest households. Even a modest minimum levy of 2 per cent on the net wealth of a few hundred of the wealthiest families could raise revenues equivalent to about 0.5 per cent of national income. These funds are vital not only to improve tax equity but also to create fiscal space for essential public investment.

However, redistribution through taxation must go hand in hand with a major expansion of public spending on core services. The state needs to substantially increase investment in education, healthcare, and public infrastructure. The report recommends adopting the '4As' framework—available, affordable, approachable and appropriate public services—so they effectively reach the most marginalised sections of society, including rural populations and socially disadvantaged groups.

Finally, the report stresses the need to improve the quality, accessibility and transparency of government economic and tax data. Regular, reliable and publicly available data is crucial for independent research, public scrutiny and informed debate—key prerequisites for designing effective policies to reduce inequality. ■

Provoking a Million Mutinies?

Mushrooming farmer protests across the country suggest the State is once again playing with fire

Rashme Sehgal

On 10 December 2025, Tibbi tehsil in Rajasthan became the site of a face-off between protesting farmers and the police. Thousands of farmers had gathered from surrounding villages for a 'mahapanchayat', called in opposition to the construction of an ethanol plant in Hanumangarh district.

Following the 'mahapanchayat', the farmers left for the factory site on foot, accompanied by a convoy of tractors. The police used teargas, lathis and plastic bullets to stop the protestors—who had brought down the boundary wall—but fell back before the massive crowd. Several vehicles were subsequently torched and scores injured on both sides.

Unnerved by the clash, the administration informed Chandigarh-based Dune Ethanol that work must stop on what is being touted as Asia's biggest ethanol project. While the industrial house insists the plant will neither contaminate groundwater nor pollute the air, farmers know better from experience.

Balwan Poonia, former MLA and joint secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha is emphatic when he says that ethanol factories are more polluting than oil refineries. "Scientific data shows that ethanol factories release hazardous air pollutants, and consume huge quantities of water. To produce one kilo of ethanol you need 2,800 litres of water! We studied the impact of the ethanol plant in Ganganagar district and found that its toxic waste water also pollutes the groundwater," he added.

After one-and-a-half years of peaceful protests—which went unheeded by government and company alike—the farmers of Hanumangarh had clearly reached breaking point. At the time of writing, another 'mahapanchayat' had been scheduled for 17 December.

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A string of farmer protests from Rajasthan to Odisha have gone largely unnoticed. Local and regional media have been reporting what mainstream media has ignored. The same old issues are front and centre: distress sales, shortage of fertilisers, inability to sell produce even at MSP (minimum support price), dwindling groundwater, acquisition of agricultural land for mining and industry. Farmers have had enough and are taking to the streets, blocking roads and railway tracks, seeking action on their demands.

On 8 December, farmers in Punjab held protests across several cities over the 'anti-people, anti-consumer' Electricity Amendment Bill 2025, which will lead to a sharp increase in prices. They also burnt copies of the draft Seeds Bill 2025, which, if implemented, will destroy India's seed sovereignty and dilute the rights of states.

The farmers of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra are also on the warpath. In MP, where nine farmers were recently driven to suicide, thousands staged a mass protest on 1 December 2025. Under the banner of the Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Sangh, farmers from Barwani, Dhar, Khargone and Khandwa districts marched to Khalghat toll plaza and blocked NH-52 for eight hours. Their demand? Loan waivers, better prices, MSP for crops.

The shortage of fertilisers is another flashpoint. In August this year, we saw farmers in Uttar Pradesh queuing for hours under the blazing sun for urea, only to be turned away emptyhanded. Similar scenes were witnessed in Madhya Pradesh, from August through October. In MP's Tikamgarh district, 50-year-old farmer Jamuna Kushwaha died on 8 December, after three days in a fertiliser queue at the Badoraghat distribution centre. Just a week earlier, 50-year-old Bhruiya Bai died after waiting for 48 hours at a fertiliser centre in Guna district.

On 8 December, farmers staged a blockade in MP's Chhatarpur district to highlight this systemic collapse. Farmer leader Ramkripal Sharma says, "We believe this shortage is deliberate and stems from disputes between cooperative bank managers and committee workers."

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Maharashtra continues to top the grim roster of farmer suicides, with NCRB data confirming 781 in 2025 alone. Says Shivaji Gaikwad, a leader with the Kisan Mazdoor Parishad, "The cost of inputs has doubled since 2014, while farm product prices keep falling. What else can farmers do?"

Gaikwad's own farm in Nashik is a case in point. He has 500 sweet lime trees, ripe and ready to be plucked. But labour costs have become so prohibitive that small farmers like him cannot afford to hire workers. The fruit remains on the trees. "Middlemen offer me Rs 15 per kilo, which they will sell in cities for over Rs 100," he says. While the price of gold, silver and every other commodity spikes, farmers are still paid a pittance. "I have no choice but to sell my land," said Gaikwad.

The pattern, he says, repeats across crops. "Soyabean seeds cost Rs 10,000 per quintal but we are being forced to sell it for Rs 3,000 per quintal. It is the same with pulses, maize, cotton, mustard... Look at how high retail prices of mustard are in the market. Have we gained from it? Our earnings keep shrinking." Between the farmer and the mandi, the gains are systematically siphoned off.

In Gujarat, unseasonal rains have devastated crops across 16,000 villages, affecting 1.3 million farmers. They are now sitting in dharna, demanding compensation for crop damage, 100 per cent debt waivers and comprehensive crop insurance—given that fake seeds have been flooding the market unchecked. Farmer Shaktisinh Gohil from Limda village in Bhavnagar raises a question being repeated across the country, "If industrialists' debts can be waived, then why not farmers'?"

Meanwhile, in Odisha, intensified mining explorations are tightening the noose. Farmers and Adivasis around the Niyamgiri hills are once again on tenterhooks after Vedanta chief Anil Agarwal announced—following a meeting with the chief minister in October 2025—that he expects a second referendum to clear bauxite mining in the area. This comes despite the Supreme Court-mandated referendum of 2013, which saw the Dongria Kondh Adivasi tribe voting unanimously against the project.

The stakes are enormous. The Niyamgiri hills are estimated to hold 73 million tonnes of bauxite, used to make aluminium. For the Dongria Kondh, Agarwal's renewed push signals another attempt to overturn a settled democratic verdict. They are preparing for a long battle to save their sacred hills. According to Aflatoon, general secretary of the Samajdwadi Jan Parishad, the forest advisory committee had already granted Stage 1 clearance to Vedanta's Sijimali bauxite mines on 2 December, allowing the diversion of 708.2 hectares of forest land. Aflatoon says this largescale land acquisition is taking place in a Schedule V area without the prior consent of the Gram Sabhas. When farmers protested, they were harassed and jailed.

As African countries clamp down on Vedanta's mining operations, getting the Sijimali project operational has become Agarwal's top priority, Aflatoon says. Kartika Naik from Banteji village in Rayagada district warns that once these mines become operational, 50 villages will be hit—not 18 as claimed by Vedanta. "Mining on this scale will require 725,000 litres a day of freshwater, which will result in water scarcity, crippling our agricultural production, not to mention worsening air pollution."

Across states and sectors, farmers are being asked to absorb the shocks of climate volatility, market manipulation and extractive policies—while the State looks the other way. But the State may be playing with fire. ■



The farmer protest in Tibbi tehsil in Rajasthan's Hanumangarh district, 10 December 2025

Farmers are being asked to absorb the shocks of extractive policies while the State looks the other way. But how long before they revolt?



TELANGANA MEANS BUSINESS

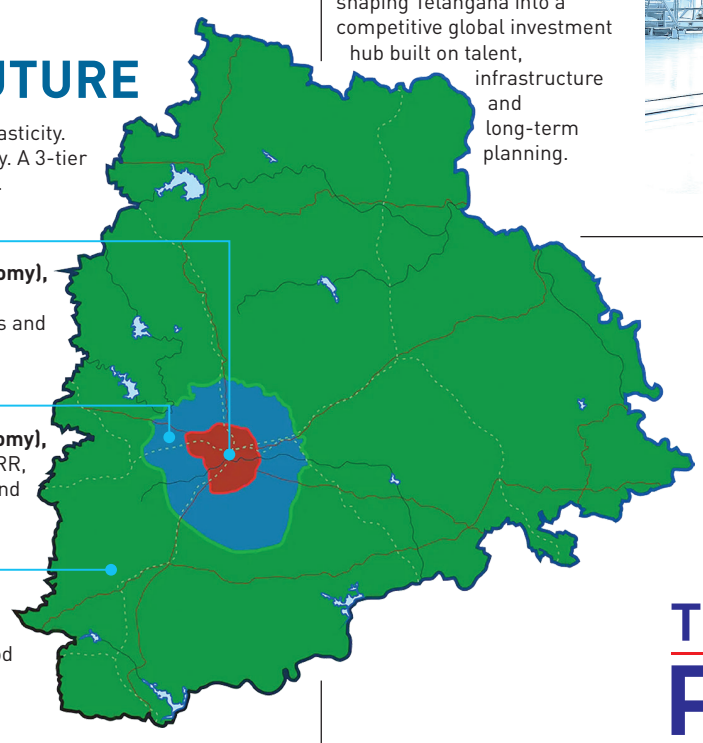
There is a massive transformation underway across India, and Telangana sits at the centre of it. As the country accelerates its next wave of economic expansion, the state is emerging as a decisive force, a centre of investment and innovation. With a government focused on clarity, reform and competitiveness, Telangana is reshaping its policies, infrastructure and investment landscape, scaling into the most compelling destination.

A STATE OF GREAT GOVERNANCE

With a clear path to becoming a $3-trillion economy by 2047, the government's approach prioritises ease of doing business, transparent approvals, and a regulatory framework aligned with global expectations. Policy direction now focuses on strengthening industrial land frameworks, improving investor facilitation, and building long-term competitiveness across high-growth sectors.

INFRASTRUCTURE DESIGNED FOR THE FUTURE

Hyderabad, the city built for elasticity. Scaling rapidly, and sustainably. A 3-tier growth vision drives it forward.



CURE
(The Core Urban Region Economy), between the city and the ORR, anchored by high-tech services and advanced urban systems

PURE
(The Peri-Urban Region Economy), a belt between the ORR and RRR, for manufacturing, industies and MSMEs

RARE
(Rural Agri Region Economy), beyond the RRR, focused on smart agriculture, forestry, food systems and handlooms





A major driver within this plan is the Future City. A 30,000-acre urban and enterprise hub for global businesses, research institutes, innovation clusters and sustainable living spaces. Combined with rail, road and logistics expansion, the state is building the backbone required for multi-sectoral growth.

A MATURE INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPE

Telangana's industrial ecosystem spans pharma, life sciences, aerospace, defence, IT/ITeS, AI, food processing, and more. Reflection of the confidence global firms place in the state's direction. Pharma City, upcoming AI and Innovation Hubs, and support for GCCs and start-ups, are shaping Telangana into a competitive global investment hub built on talent, infrastructure and long-term planning.



TELANGANA RISING
CURE - PURE - RARE

THE RISE HAS BEGUN. THIS WAS DAY ONE.





"We want to become $1 trillion economy by 2034, and $3 trillion economy by 2047. We comprise around 2.9% of India's population, but contribute around 5% of the national GDP. By 2047, I want to contribute 10% of India's GDP. The vision may look hard but we can do it.

Today, I am more confident than yesterday. Yesterday was a dream, a plan. Today, all of you have joined us. Telangana Rising is unstoppable. Come, join the rise."

A. REVANTH REDDY
CM, TELANGANA



FOR TELANGANA, THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING.

VISION 2047 TAKES THE NEXT LEAP FORWARD.

The government's **8-point plan** outlines a transformation grounded in growth and inclusion.

1	3-zone state	Core Urban Region Economy (CURE), Hyderabad, for high-tech hubs; Peri-Urban Region Economy (PURE), between the ORR and RRR, for MSMEs and industry; Rural Agri Region Economy (RARE), beyond the RRR, for smart agriculture, forests and handlooms.
2	$3 trillion economy	5x growth driving 10% of national GDP through innovation, entrepreneurship, manufacturing, tourism, and global competitiveness.
3	Investment magnet	Strong infrastructure, progressive policy, talent and logistics, enabling innovation and high-growth clusters.
4	Youth developement and empowerment	Integrate education with skill development, to equip them for tech, industry and advanced manufacturing, for global opportunities, and start-ups.
5	Women-led development and social inclusion	Create 1 crore women millionaires, through life-cycle support of policies and entrepreneurship.
6	Farmer empowerment	Double incomes, promote crop diversification, agri-tech, irrigation, FPOs, market access.
7	Healthcare and human development	Strengthen primary & preventive healthcare, digital health, biobanks, skilled workers, and affordable and elderly care.
8	Net-zero development target	Focus on renewables, green infrastructure, circular economy, nature-based solutions.

KEY ENABLERS

Tech & Innovation • Efficient Financing • Digital Governance

Issued by: I&PR Department, Govt. of Telangana

As India accelerates its growth trajectory, Telangana is aligning its governance, infrastructure and economic vision to match the moment. For investors and enterprises seeking clarity, stability, and opportunity, the state offers a landscape built for the future. A path that's never been more promising, and this is the moment to be a part of it. Join the rise.

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Why India has no place in the 'Pax Silica' order



At the first convening of the Pax Silica Summit in Washington DC, 12 December 2025 *Photo:* ***Getty Images***

Ashok Swain

Pax Silica' has emerged in late 2025 as a pillar of President Donald Trump's new national security strategy, designed to restructure global supply chains in critical minerals, semiconductors and advanced technologies around a tightly knit circle of trusted allies. Its founding members are a new group of seven—the US, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, UK, Israel and Australia, a grouping selected for their technological depth, policy alignment and strategic reliability.

The inaugural Pax Silica Summit was held in Washington DC on 12 December, where the US also hosted additional participants—Taiwan, Canada, the EU, Netherlands, the UAE and others. Guest participants were present to provide advisory inputs, technical expertise and policy guidance while the core members signed the Pax Silica Declaration to cooperate on securing supply chains for semiconductors, critical minerals, AI infrastructure and allied technologies.

India's absence from the Pax Silica grouping is not accidental; it indicates how the Trump administration assesses India, how peripheral India now is to Washington's strategic calculus. India's marginalisation is reinforced by President Trump's national security strategy released in November 2025, in which India appears only in passing, treated as a secondary regional actor rather than a central strategic partner in shaping the future global order.

The Pax Silica initiative goes well beyond the logic of a mini-lateral partnership. It represents a bid by the US to define the economic architecture of the 21st century by anchoring control over minerals, chips, AI infrastructure and advanced manufacturing within a trusted bloc. Exclusion from such a project at the time of its creation has lasting consequences. It places India on the margins of US strategic planning at a point when technological power is becoming the main currency of global influence. It also exposes the yawning hiatus between years of Prime Minister Modi's diplomatic rhetoric about special ties with the US and the reality of India's diminished standing.

The Modi government has so far responded by not responding. That silence itself is revealing. It reflects the difficulty of reconciling domestic triumphalism about India's global rise with the reality of how India is now perceived in key Western capitals. Pax Silica includes countries smaller than India in both population and market size, some far more dependent on US security guarantees, and some with no pretence to 'strategic autonomy'. Manifestly, the US is looking at them as reliable, predictable partners, who are aligned with US priorities in technology and supply chains and share its political values.

The decision to keep India at arm's length is less about its technical capability and more about (dis)trust. India does have strengths in chip design, software and a growing interest in semiconductor manufacturing. But Pax Silica is not about potential; it is about policy coherence and alignment. Washington is drawing towards countries willing to embed their industrial strategies within a US-led coalition. That requires regulatory stability, openness to foreign capital, clarity on export controls and a willingness to accept US partnership without constant hedging. India under Modi has moved in the opposite direction.

For years Modi has projected himself as a global statesman who can befriend everyone while offending no one. The emphasis on personal chemistry, grand diaspora events and photo-ops has substituted hard institutional work that forms the bedrock of foreign policy. This personality-driven approach seemed to work for a while, when Washington was eager to court India as a counterweight to China. But with India not looking like a counterweight anymore—not economically, nor technologically nor even in soft-power terms—the US is narrowing its circle and prioritising partners who can be integrated quickly into tightly coordinated technology ecosystems.

At a point when tech prowess is the main currency of global influence, India is on the margins of US strategic planning

The Pax Silica coalition is explicitly designed to reduce dependence on China. Yet India's own China policy has been marked by contradictions. After the border clashes in Ladakh in 2020, the Modi government not only failed to confront China but also quietly restored economic ties. Chinese imports reached record levels even as China-bashing was amped up for Modi's domestic audience. Washington can see that India wants the best of both worlds: the benefits of a strategic partnership and the leeway of 'strategic autonomy' to pursue other ties and treaties in self-interest.

The oil deal with Russia was exactly such a sticking point. When India continues to expand energy trade with Moscow and signals interest in advanced Russian military systems, it reinforces doubts about where India would stand in a major geopolitical crisis.

Strategic autonomy may be a cherished slogan in New Delhi, but for a coalition built on controlled technologies and sensitive supply chains, ambiguity is a liability. Trade policy is another self-inflicted wound, with the Modi government's positions sounding like a hodgepodge of protectionist rhetoric, cronyism and unpredictable regulatory twists and turns.

India's exclusion from the Pax Silica alliance also exposes the limits of Modi's belief that ideological affinity with right-wing forces in the West would compensate for policy divergence. The assumption that shared ethno-nationalistic beliefs and manufactured personal rapport with leaders like Donald Trump would translate into structural advantages has proven naïve. The Pax Silica pact reflects a cold assessment of who will play ball when it matters.

India's domestic political trajectory, marked by democratic backsliding and attacks on minorities, has further complicated its image. While Washington is clearly not averse to working with illiberal partners, when necessary, it also assesses their indispensability. India has not made itself indispensable in the critical technologies that Pax Silica prioritises.

Modi has repeatedly claimed that India is indispensable to any global solution, whether on climate, supply chains or security. Pax Silica demonstrates the hollowness of that claim as well. When the US moved to design the architecture of a future technology economy, India was not at the table. This is not because India lacks potential, but because potential alone does not shape coalitions.

Some right-wing commentators think India may be invited later. But entering a club after the rules have been written is not the same as shaping them. Founding members set norms, standards and power hierarchies. Latecomers adapt or remain marginal. Modi's foreign policy has repeatedly produced this pattern. India joins initiatives after the strategic momentum has shifted elsewhere, then claims success simply by being present.

At the very least, Pax Silica is a reality check for India's insistence on 'strategic autonomy'. India cannot be part of the Western technological core without making hard choices. It cannot demand strategic trust from the US while insisting on maximal flexibility.

It bears repetition that India's exclusion is not the result of Western hostility, but rather because India's so-called 'strategic autonomy' has neither a moral core nor policy coherence; it is simply a patchwork of convenient relationships, which give no indication of which way Modi's government will turn when push comes to shove. ■

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

The fake history juggernaut trundles on

Hasnain Naqvi breaks down the politically motivated retelling of the 'Ghaznavid Invasions' in a new NCERT textbook

The BJP–Sangh project to rewrite medieval Indian history has turned NCERT textbooks into an ideological battlefield. The most recent focus of this bigoted enterprise is the 'Ghaznavid Invasions', most famously under Mahmud of Ghazni. And its chosen first victim the newly released Class 7 NCERT social science textbook, titled *Exploring Society, India and Beyond*.

Introduced with a cautionary preface on history's 'darker periods', the book expands its treatment of said invasions, casting Mahmud of Ghazni foremost as a religious zealot. Mahmud, in this characterisation, is seen as a ruthless iconoclast determined to 'spread his version of Islam to non-Muslim parts of the world'. The retelling relies on court chroniclers like Al-Utbi and Al-Biruni to underline Mahmud's alleged obsession with slaughtering 'infidels' and storming temples—especially Somnath.

This is a dramatic departure from the earlier NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) edition, which covered Mahmud of Ghazni in a brief paragraph (remember this is a Class 7 textbook), noting that his raids in the subcontinent were primarily aimed at looting the wealth of these temples.

Confronting uncomfortable histories is a legitimate pedagogical aim. But this project is not pedagogical; it's political—and the aim, once again, is to reduce the complexity of underlying motivations to a Hindu–Muslim binary that serious historiography has long rejected. Eminent scholars like Mohammad Habib, Satish Chandra and Romila Thapar have repeatedly demonstrated that Mahmud's incursions were driven less by religious piety than by the fiscal imperatives of sustaining a volatile Central Asian empire.

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While making all these new additions and foregrounding a different set of motivations for the raids, what the textbook fails to register is that the plundering of temples and their 'desecration' was not always religiously motivated, and the practice long predated the arrival of Turks from Central Asia.

In early medieval India, temples were not merely religious centres but repositories of royal wealth, land grants and markers of political legitimacy—making them prime targets in inter-dynastic warfare. Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* records that Harsha of Kashmir (11th century) systematically destroyed temples and melted their images to replenish the royal treasury.

Harsha, a Hindu ruler, appointed a special officer, the 'Devotpatana Nayaka' (literally: leader/officer for uprooting/destroying deities), not out of religious zealotry but for political consolidation and wealth extraction in times of fiscal stress.

A similar logic operated in peninsular India. The celebrated Rajendra Chola I, whose naval expeditions reached Bengal and Southeast Asia in the 11th century, carried off immense wealth—including temple treasures—from defeated kingdoms. Inscriptions proudly record the seizure of sacred icons and ritual wealth as symbols of imperial triumph.

Cutting across swathes of early and medieval India—from the Rashtrakutas to the Chalukyas—rulers attacked rival shrines because temples embodied sovereignty, not because the faith of the raiders demanded iconoclasm. These facts underscore a pattern: sacred places of worship were repeatedly violated by rulers to assert their domination and to extract wealth. To recognise this pattern and to accommodate this complexity does not absolve Mahmud of the violence; it places his incursions in the correct historical perspective, and corrects the misconception that the political culture of plunder was somehow a uniquely Islamic perversion.

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In its dramatic retelling of Mahmud's seventeen campaigns between 1001 and 1027 CE, culminating in the sack of Somnath, the textbook privileges Al-Utbi's triumphalist account of temple destruction and Al-Biruni's report of the shattered Shivalinga being transported to Ghazni. Truth is these accounts were directed at a courtly audience and have flourishes that exaggerate details for that audience.

As Romila Thapar argues in *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History* (2004), the rhetoric of jihad in such chronicles was often hyperbolic, deployed to enhance Mahmud's standing with the Abbasid Caliphate and to legitimise his rule at home.

Drawing on Persian, Sanskrit and Jain sources, Thapar explains that temples were attacked not as religious targets but as symbols of political authority and centres of wealth. Somnath represented Chalukya sovereignty as much as Shaivite devotion. Its destruction was a calculated geopolitical strike rather than a civilisational war.

Thapar further notes that contemporary Indian responses to Somnath were notably muted; the idea of a cataclysmic Hindu–Muslim rupture emerged much later, shaped by colonial historiography eager to frame Indian history as an unbroken saga of religious conflict.

Mohammad Habib's *Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznin* (1951) remains decisive in rejecting the caricature of Mahmud as a religious fanatic. Habib argues that Islam sanctions neither indiscriminate plunder nor vandalism, and that Mahmud lacked the doctrinal zeal associated with later rulers. His overriding concern was funding his army, appeasing Turkic chiefs and defending his empire against Central Asian rivals. Habib's meticulous accounting of loot—from Nagarkot to Kannauj—demonstrates how Indian wealth underwrote Ghazni's monuments and military power. Numismatic evidence further confirms the circulation of Indian gold in Ghaznavid mints.

Satish Chandra, in *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals*, offers a balanced synthesis. Mahmud's raids combined plunder with political spectacle, but economics remained paramount. Unlike Muhammad Ghori, Mahmud neither sought nor established durable rule in India. His expeditions were calculated strikes into a politically fragmented landscape where temples—like forts and treasuries—offered accessible resources.

Together, these scholarly interventions expose the dangers of NCERT's selective reliance on Al-Utbi and Al-Biruni. Utbi exaggerated casualty figures to glorify his patron; Biruni, despite his admiration for Indian learning, wrote under Ghaznavid patronage. Missing from the textbook are countervailing voices such as the *Ekalinga Mahatmya*, which laments Somnath's fall in economic rather than metaphysical terms. By framing Mahmud primarily as a proselytising butcher, the NCERT echoes colonial tropes that Romila Thapar identifies as 'communal dogma'.

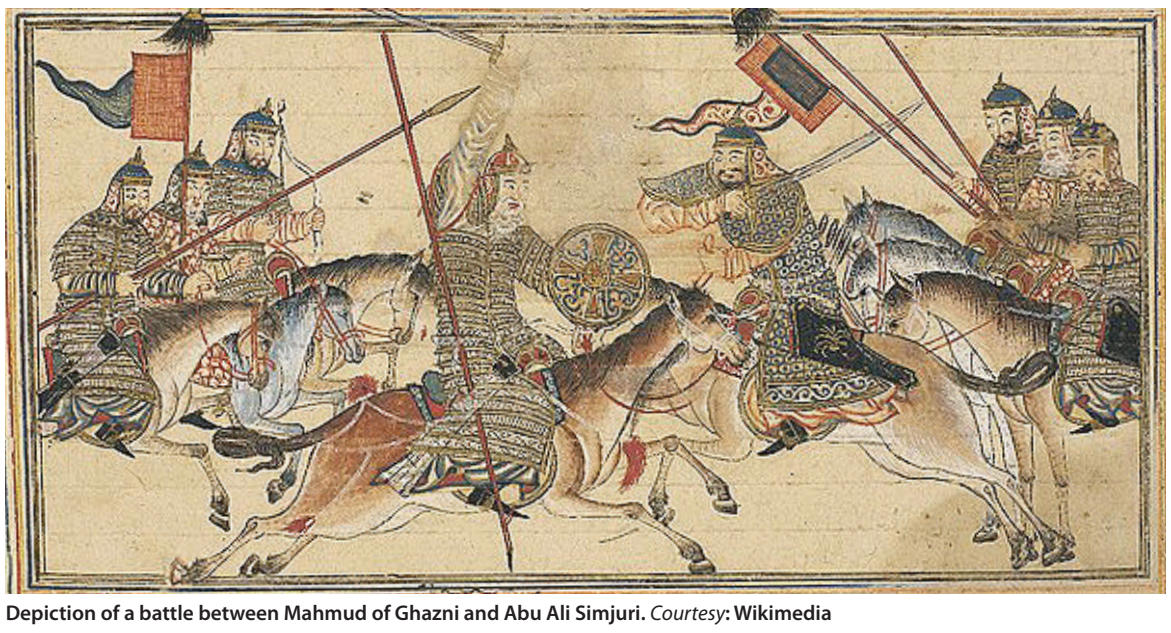
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Earlier NCERT textbooks explicitly noted that temples were targeted because rulers endowed them as markers of sovereignty. To deliberately distort this history in middle school textbooks is to plant a bigoted worldview in young minds. It obscures the reality that Indian polities—from the Cholas to the Rashtrakutas—had a shared political grammar, where wealth extraction—not religious conversion—was the primary motive driving warfare.

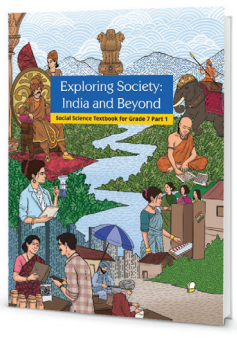
In this politically motivated reconstruction of history, students will learn to view the medieval past as a perpetual clash of faiths rather than a contest between political economies. Across centuries, rulers have couched resource extraction in the moralising idiom of divine sanction, civilisational duty, national security and suchlike. But that shouldn't obscure our understanding of what really happened and why.

Teaching history is neither about sanitising violence nor about weaponising memory for political ends. It is about cultivating critical engagement with sources, context, complexity. A balanced pedagogy introduces multiplicity, encourages scepticism of triumphalist narratives and situates events in broader political and economic frameworks. Such an approach equips students not with inherited resentments, but with historical literacy—the most enduring gift a history curriculum can offer. ■

HASNAIN NAQVI *is a former member of the history faculty of St. Xavier's College, Mumbai*



Depiction of a battle between Mahmud of Ghazni and Abu Ali Simjuri. *Courtesy*: **Wikimedia**



Mahmud's attacks on India's temples were opportunistic strikes to get at their great wealth

DECENTRALIZING TECH GROWTH: KeO AS THE CORE PILLAR OF KARNATAKA'S DIGITAL MISSION

DESIGNED, DEVELOPED, AND DELIVERED: KeO PUTS KARNATAKA AT THE FOREFRONT OF INDIGENOUS AI HARDWARE

The narrative of technological progress in India has long been one of profound paradoxes. On one hand, the nation stands as a global superpower in software and IT services; on the other, a fundamental lack of hardware access persists at the grassroots level.

This reality is most keenly felt in the very beating heart of India's technological future—Bengaluru—where, despite the immense wealth of innovation, a critical challenge lingered: a persistent digital divide that threatened to leave millions behind, effectively denying them access to 21st-century opportunities.

The numbers were stark, painting a picture of profound and unacceptable disparity: Data showed that fewer than 10 per cent of Indian households own a computer, a staggering figure that reveals the depth of the hardware penetration problem.



BUDDH is designed to function as an always-available academic assistant for students, providing crucial support even in low-connectivity regions. The Minister explained the depth and power of its capability: "The AI agent will answer any queries almost in real time with respect to the syllabus. And if they want to go beyond that syllabus, they can do that also."

Even within the economically advanced state of Karnataka, the figure was only 15 per cent, a meager penetration rate far, far below what is genuinely required for modern education, digital-first jobs, and comprehensive civic participation.

This lack of a suitable, affordable device had tangible, painful consequences for the most vulnerable: it meant over 60 per cent of Indian students reported being unable to participate in online learning, a factor directly contributing to higher dropout rates and widening the gap between the privileged and the underserved.

This colossal gap demanded not just a simple fix—a mere temporary subsidy or a recycled device—but a fundamental revolution in how technology is conceived, manufactured, and ultimately distributed to the last mile.

The challenge was willingly taken up and embraced by the Department of Electronics, IT & BT, Government of Karnataka, in powerful and decisive collaboration with the state-run Karnataka State Electronics Development Corporation Limited (KEONICS).

They collectively refused to accept this status quo of technological exclusion. They embarked on a bold mission, dedicating nearly a year to intensive work, research, and development, striving to conceive a robust and equitable solution that could truly democratize high-power computing. Their inquiry was pointed, strategic, and profoundly transformative: What if every student, every small business, every household could access powerful, intelligent computing, not at the top of the pyramid, where costs are prohibitive, but at the grassroots, where the need is most urgent?

The answer—a profound declaration of inclusion and national innovation—was unveiled with immense pride at the prestigious Bengaluru Tech Summit: KeO, a compact, affordable, AI-ready personal computer, poised to redefine accessibility.

The Birth of KeO: Knowledge, Economy, Openness

The very identity of the device is rooted deeply in its mission, a purpose powerfully encapsulated in its three-letter acronym. KeO is an acronym that defines its very essence and purpose: Knowledge-driven, Economical, and Open-source.

This unwavering philosophy was the primary driving force behind the entire project's execution. Priyank Kharge, the Hon'ble Minister for Electronics, IT & BT, and Rural Development & Panchayat Raj, articulated the driving philosophy with utmost clarity: "KEO is Karnataka's practical answer to the digital divide. It is not a luxury device; it is an inclusion device. Affordable mass computing will allow every student, every small business and every household to participate fully in the digital economy."

This explicit and intentional commitment positioned the project immediately as a humanitarian undertaking supported by a technological solution. It bears noting, and is a source of great state pride, that the project was the first time anywhere in the world that a State has taken such a bold and disruptive step to integrate open-source hardware and Artificial Intelligence for the purpose of achieving mass market affordability and inclusion.

An Open-Source Mind: The RISC-V Revolution

To achieve true, lasting affordability and strategically guarantee the device's longevity, the KeO team knew instinctively that they had to decisively break free from the prohibitive costs and inherent restrictions of proprietary systems. Their strategic choice was clear and definitive: a fully open-source hardware and software stack.

At its very core, KeO runs on a sophisticated and modern Quad-Core RISC-V 64-bit Processor. Sharath Kumar Bache Gowda, Chairman of KEONICS, explained the monumental and strategic choice with foresight: "By adopting an open-source RISC-V stack, KEO strengthens Karnataka's commitment to accessible, locally adaptable, home-grown computing solutions."

His insight was drawn directly from research that showed a major, frustrating issue with older, proprietary devices was planned obsolescence, a calculated design flaw where devices became functionally unusable in just 3-4 years.

"Open-source architectures like RISC-V offer much longer life. That's why we moved to open-source hardware and software," he stressed. This crucial strategic decision eliminates costly licensing fees and strategically ensures the device remains viable and usable for many years.

Crucially, this is an indigenous triumph. The processor itself was proudly designed and developed in Bengaluru by the semiconductor fabless manufacturer Exaleap, standing as a powerful and visible testament to the state's indigenous design capabilities in the complex and demanding deep-tech domain.

Though the fabrication (manufacturing) of the silicon is currently done in Taiwan, this profound commitment to local design makes KeO a truly 'Designed and developed in Karnataka' milestone, solidifying the state's reputation as an innovation hub.

Unbeatable Value: Performance Meets Affordability

The direct and tangible result of this strategic, open-source design approach is an AI-ready PC priced at an unprecedented ₹18,999. The Minister proudly stated, "Nowhere in the world can you build such a device for ₹18,999."

This pricing makes it accessible to a massive new market segment. While it must be explicitly noted that the device is a standalone computing unit—meaning accessories like a monitor, keyboard, and mouse have to be bought separately by the end-user—its core value proposition remains undeniable and profoundly disruptive to the traditional computing market.

The device boasts robust specifications that deliver a genuine, modern computing experience. It includes a substantial 8 GB of RAM and 32 GB of internal memory, along with the impressive capability to handle 1 TB of external storage for massive data and media needs.

For its stable and secure operating environment, it runs on the Linux-based Ubuntu operating system, a platform renowned for being stable, resource-efficient, and secure. Furthermore, it comes comprehensively pre-installed with essential open-source software like the widely used Mozilla Firefox browser and the universally accessible free LibreOffice software applications, collectively delivering a comprehensive, full computing experience immediately upon setup.

The Intelligence Within: BUDDH, the Offline Tutor

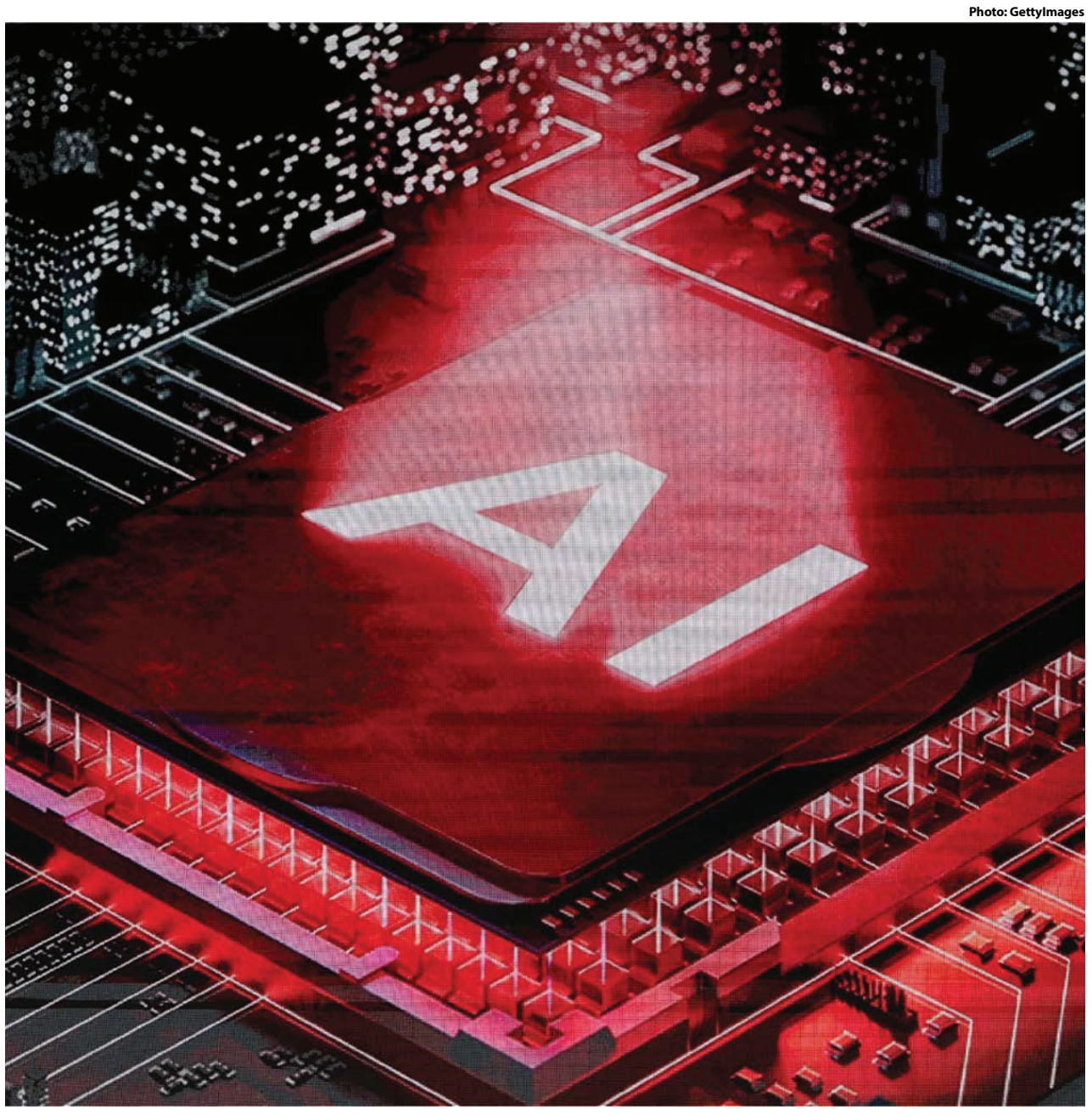
What truly sets KeO apart from virtually every other low-cost computer available on the market is its integrated intelligence: the dedicated on-device AI core which allows sophisticated AI applications to run locally and efficiently without requiring any internet access.

This powerful, life-changing capability is driven by BUDDH, the intelligent AI agent trained specifically on the Karnataka DSERT (Department of State Educational Research and Training) syllabus.

BUDDH is designed to function as an always-available academic assistant for students, providing crucial support even in low-connectivity regions. The Minister explained the depth and power of its capability: "The AI agent will answer any queries almost in real time with respect to the syllabus. And if they want to go beyond that syllabus, they can do that also."

While the agent currently works proficiently in English, the department has concrete and active plans to support Kannada over time, ensuring wider linguistic inclusion and deeper understanding for all students across the state. This highly sophisticated, syllabus-aligned functionality makes KeO not just a conventional computer, but an integrated digital learning platform.

Photo: GettyImages



Connectivity and Deployment: Reaching the Last Mile

Housed in a compact, small-form-factor box that appears akin to a workstation computer, KeO is deliberately built for versatile connectivity, ensuring it functions seamlessly across diverse environments, from rural schools to urban government offices.

It includes comprehensive connectivity options such as 4G, Wi-Fi, Ethernet, USB-A and USB-C ports, HDMI, and an audio jack support. Crucially, the provision for a SIM card slot ensures essential mobile data access, which is absolutely vital for guaranteeing internet connectivity in the vast majority of areas where no fixed Wi-Fi network exists or where broadband penetration is low.

The deployment plan is robust, comprehensive, and wide-ranging, deliberately designed to maximize public benefit and accelerate digital inclusion. KeO will be rolled out strategically across all key sectors:

- Schools, colleges, and universities
- Small businesses and micro-entrepreneurs
- Government offices and health centers

Individual households

The market has immediately embraced the vision, recognizing its immense transformative power. Highly respected business personalities like Infosys co-founder Kris Gopalakrishnan and Biocon chief Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw were highly impressed with the device's potential, and have already placed an order to procure and sponsor 1,000 units to be distributed in schools under their essential CSR initiatives. As a tangible mark of its immediate commercial appeal and necessity, KEONICS has already received substantial pre-orders for 1,500 units overall.

The Road Ahead: Scaling and Future Promise

The development of this assembled device was an intense, collaborative effort that took around a year of dedicated work, involving a diverse group of experts from industry, academia, and researchers specializing in RISC-V and microsystems. An eight-member advisory committee, including experts from IISc and IIIT, have tested the device thoroughly, ensuring its academic rigor and technical soundness before its public release.

KeO powerfully embodies the spirit of Karnataka—it is designed, developed and assembled here by local startups and Kannadigas. Looking ahead, KEONICS is already actively looking at various options for assembling KeOs within India, specifically mentioning Mysuru as a potential location, with the dual goal of creating local jobs and securing the domestic supply chain.

While global geopolitics did push up memory costs initially, making the project transition from a 'low-cost' to an 'affordable' one, the Minister has confidently confirmed that the market is stabilizing, and the government's steadfast aim is to further reduce the cost once stability returns.

The path to mass adoption is clearly defined and scheduled: Pre-orders can be placed immediately on the official portal, and the device will be available for delivery within 60 days of pre-order.KeO is more than a technological achievement; it is a powerful, affirmative, and strategic declaration that every citizen of Karnataka deserves access to the essential tools that will define the future. It stands as the core pillar of the state's mission to build decentralised tech growth and ensure equal digital opportunities for every citizen across all regions and demographics.

This is Karnataka's promise delivered: powerful, intelligent, and affordable computing for all, ushering in an era of true digital inclusion.

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21 DECEMBER 2025

Where is Rivaldo?

An elephant vanishes, unsettling the Nilgiris where forests and people tangle over a fragile ecosystem

K.A. Shaji

There are landscapes that carry silence like an inheritance. The Nilgiris is one such. It is a land whose quietness does not imply absence but an older, deeper fullness, the murmur of age-old forests, the patient drift of light across grasslands and the steady, almost ceremonial, movements of elephants who have travelled the same pathways for centuries. Over the past month, a different kind of stillness has settled across the Sigur plateau, one that feels like a missing note in a familiar composition.

For weeks now, people who know this landscape intimately—Irula trackers, forest guards, conservationists, plantation workers, resort staff, villagers and even police patrols assigned to volatile forest fringes—have been asking the same question with a mixture of worry and reverence. Where is Rivaldo?

The fifty-four-year-old tusker, whose slow, stately presence once provided a strange reassurance to both forest and settlement, has not been seen for more than a month. Known for the regularity of his wanderings, his composure around humans and his recurring appearances in familiar haunts, Rivaldo's absence has begun to weigh heavily on the region's collective imagination.

Elephants do disappear—it's the nature of that ecology. They walk long distances, shift ranges, vanish into ravines and valleys that the ordinary human eye is not able to track. But Rivaldo's disappearance feels more like a rupture than an ecological event.

Somewhere, perhaps in a valley too deep for human eyes, a tusker may still be moving slowly, carrying memories of a house that welcomed him without fear

To trace why his absence feels so profound, it helps to begin with a house beside the Sigurhalla stream and the man whose vision shaped his relationship with the forest.

In 1964, E.R.C. Davidar, writer, naturalist and early conservation thinker, built a modest home along the Sigurhalla stream. It would come to be known as Cheetal Walk. With its tiled roof, its veranda and stone steps leading into a clearing, it looked like any other dwelling of the Nilgiri foothills. But the house was conceived as something far more radical: a place where humans would not impose themselves on the forest but would inhabit it gently, leaving pathways open for the creatures who had walked there long before any human arrived.

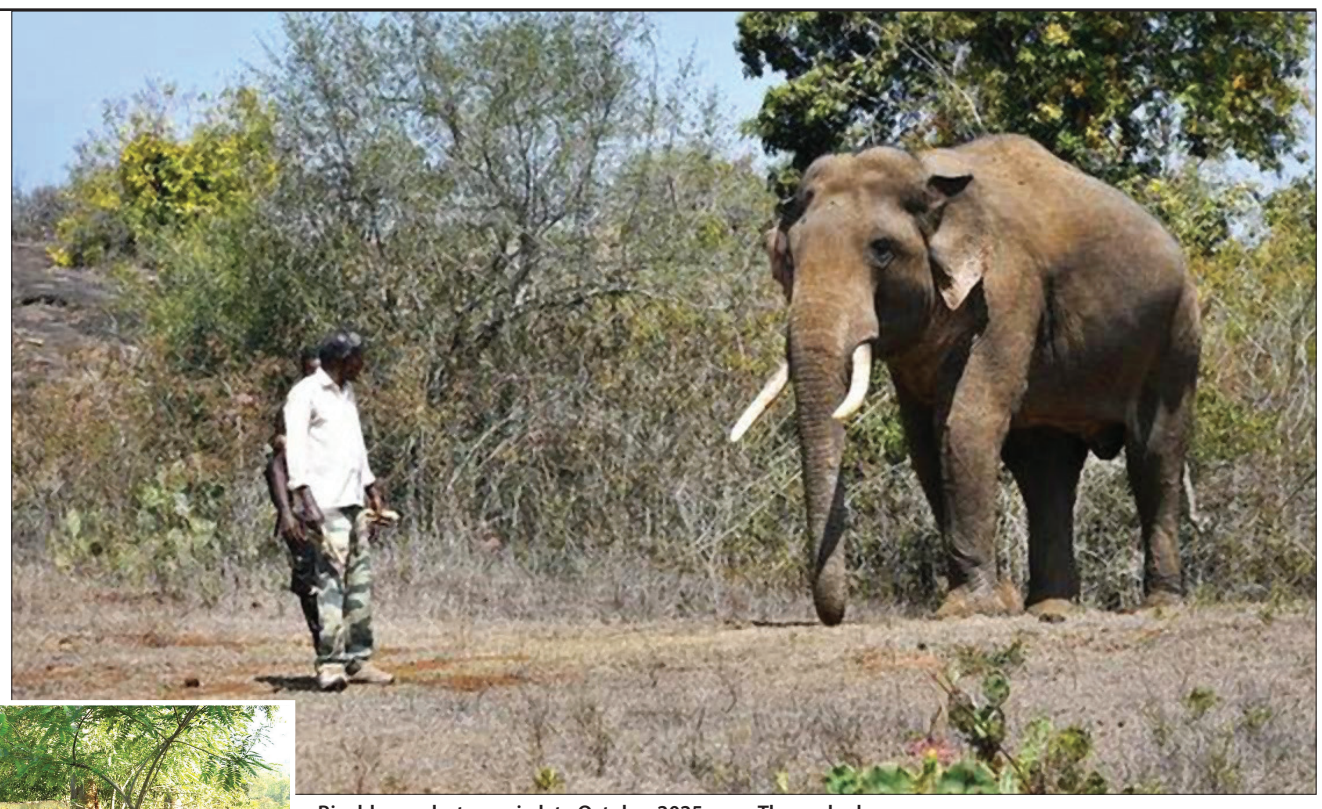
Davidar believed that if humans did not behave as aggressors, wildlife would not respond as victims or adversaries. He allowed elephants, deer and even predators to move through his property with as little hindrance as possible. He refused to fence off the land. He avoided the reflexive fears that govern so much of human interaction with the wild. Slowly, as if in recognition of this unusual hospitality, the forest accepted him. Elephants wandered across the grounds without alarm. Deer grazed near the veranda. Leopards passed by as though the house were simply another feature of their terrain.

It was in this atmosphere that a young tusker began appearing regularly. Over the years, he became one of the most recognisable elephants in the region. He was dignified and noticeably calm despite living in an area increasingly marked by conflict. He would eventually be named Rivaldo by Davidar's son Mark.

Rivaldo's early years near Cheetal Walk shaped his temperament. He learned, through repeated encounters, that humans were not necessarily beings to fear.

When Mark Davidar died on 19 October 2013, it was not only a personal tragedy for a small community of conservationists but a snapping of the link between Cheetal Walk and the elephants of the Sigur plateau. Mark—who had inherited his father's patience and his quiet powers of observation—was the last steward of that space.

Despite the lack of familiar human presence, Rivaldo continued to return to Cheetal Walk, often lingering at its edges, as if expecting Mark to emerge. Locals still speak of the poignant sight of a large tusker standing near a gate that no longer opened, of the persistence of memory in a creature whose world was already beginning to fray.



Rivaldo was last seen in late October 2025, near Theppakadu



Around the time of Mark's death, Rivaldo suffered an injury that altered his life. The tip of his trunk was severed, either in a poacher's snare or by a crude explosive meant for wild boar. The injury made feeding laborious, often painful. Large fruits became hard to grip, branches harder to break and water strenuous to draw. For an elephant, whose trunk is essential for almost every aspect of survival, this was a profound impairment.

In the years that followed, perhaps missing the quiet reassurance of Cheetal Walk, Rivaldo began approaching human settlements. He displayed none of the aggression typical of elephants repeatedly harassed by human activity. Instead, he approached with the cautious dignity of an animal seeking no more than necessary.

Villagers left vegetables and fruit. Tourists offered food from passing jeeps. Resort workers fed him as guests took photos. Unwittingly, humans reconfigured the boundaries between forest and settlement. The habituation that developed was not a product of malice but misplaced compassion.

By 2021, Rivaldo was so visible near human habitations that the forest department confined him to a kraal, claiming they wished to retrain him.

The decision ignited fierce debate. Conservationists argued that Rivaldo was being punished for the behaviour of humans. Local communities felt betrayed. Resorts, that had once viewed him as an asset, quietly pushed for his removal.

Davidar believed that if humans did not behave like aggressors, wildlife would not respond as victim or adversary. He refused to fence off his land

Eventually, Rivaldo was released. His recovery was remarkable. He adjusted his routes, avoided settlements, rejoined wild herds. His story became a reference point for the possibility of rewilding.

Rivaldo was last seen in late October 2025, near Theppakadu. Forest staff had spotted him walking slowly, accompanied at times by younger tuskers. Then, without warning, he disappeared.

The first week, people shrugged. The second, they asked questions. By the third week, the drone flights began. By the fourth, trackers studied the forest floor with growing tension.

It wasn't just about a missing elephant anymore. It was about the state of the Nilgiris.

The Nilgiris are a landscape under siege. Resorts have spilled over forest margins. Estates have fenced traditional elephant paths. Traffic has increased, at all hours. Waterholes are unreliable due to changing rainfall. Illegal structures crowd the edges of Mudumalai. Ecological buffers have collapsed under the weight of unregulated tourism and speculative real estate.

The elephants that once walked this land with the confidence of ancient ownership now navigate a landscape that has shifted beyond recognition. An older elephant like Rivaldo is especially vulnerable. He may have reclaimed his wildness, but the wild is no longer what it used to be.

Officials say that no carcass has been found. No disturbed herds or confirmed distress. They note that elephants can disappear for weeks. They remind people that radio collars fail. Yet the undertone of worry persists.

The forest holds its silences closely, and this silence has a weight that is difficult to dismiss. A host of difficult questions occupy the emptiness left by Rivaldo's going. How can one 'protect' elephants while destroying their habitats? Where is the room for conservation within unrestrained 'development'? How is coexistence possible when the very land that enables it is vanishing?

Meanwhile, the region waits. Foresters walk their routes before dawn. Tribal trackers examine the ground. In tea shops, men speak of Rivaldo in the present tense. Hope persists.

Somewhere, perhaps in a valley too deep for human eyes, a tusker may still be moving slowly, carrying memories of a house that welcomed him without fear. Or perhaps he has gone the way old elephants often do—quietly, without drama. ■

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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

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NOT ALL MURDERS DESERVE THE SAME PUNISHMENT
Will the court allow Akhlaq's murderers to walk free?
▸P3



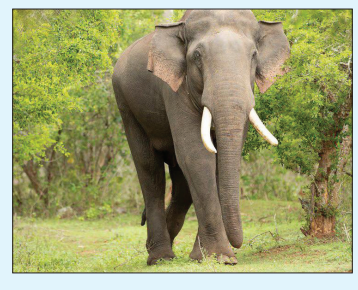
HOME & ABROAD

WHY INDIA HAS NO PLACE IN THE 'PAX SILICA' ORDER
Because India's 'strategic autonomy' is a patchwork of convenient relationships
▸P6



BACKPAGE

WHERE IS RIVALDO?
A beloved elephant vanishes, unsettling the fragile Nilgiris
▸P8



THE NATIONAL HERALD CASE

Political vendetta project hits a roadblock

Justice Gogne's intervention on 16 December shows that the independence of the judiciary has not yet been snuffed out, writes Prem Shankar Jha

In an era when even the Supreme Court of India has been bending to the will of the Modi government, it is heartening to see a lower court of India standing firm in defence of the laws of the land both in letter and in spirit. That is what Special Judge Vishal Gogne did at the Rouse Avenue trial court in Delhi on 16 December this year.

The case he dismissed was a charge filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in 2021, that the shareholders of Young Indian—the holding company of Associated Journals Ltd, which publishes this newspaper—had misappropriated funds to the tune of Rs 90.21 crore to gain control of AJL's substantial fixed assets. This, in the ED's framing, constituted money laundering.

Refusing to take cognisance of the ED complaint (chargesheet) against Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and others in the case, Justice Gogne ruled that the complaint was "not maintainable" under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), because an investigation and prosecution under PMLA cannot proceed without a prior FIR (First Information Report) for the underlying scheduled (predicate) offence.

Justice Gogne's reason for doing so was precise and irrefutable. The original accusation of 'money laundering' had been made by a private person—Subramanian Swamy. Swamy's charge should have been investigated by a government agency, i.e., the CBI. The CBI should then have filed an FIR (First Information Report) submitting its findings to the ED. The Enforcement Directorate would only then have had the authority to start investigating the charge of money laundering against the accused. But the Directorate had not received, nor waited to receive, a report from the CBI, or any other agency designated by it, and filed a case against the accused solely upon the basis of a complaint made by a private person. Rightly therefore, Justice Gogne saw no option but to throw out the case.



Photo: Getty Images

Setting the record straight Senior Congress leader and Rajya Sabha MP P. Chidambaram addressing the media on 21 April 2025

*

Why did the ED not follow procedure before filing a case in court? The chronology is revealing.

It was in February 2013 that Swamy filed his private complaint with the Metropolitan Magistrate (trial court) in New Delhi, alleging that the shareholders and directors of Young Indian had committed fraud, misappropriated funds, and were in criminal breach of trust against the Congress Party, donors to the Congress Party, AJL and shareholders of AJL.

Without any verification based on documentary material, the Metropolitan Magistrate summoned the accused, who were obliged to appear and post bail—even before the complainant was required to establish before the court that he did, indeed, have grounds to make such allegations.

The trial court's hearings started in 2016 and went on till early 2021. During this time, Swamy was cross-examined by the lawyers of the accused—and was unable to back his allegations. In January 2021, he went so far as to ask the Delhi High Court to pause (i.e. stay) his own case.

It was at this stage, seeing that the case was no longer moving forward, that the ED stepped in. And decided to start its own investigation basis Swamy's private complaint, claiming that the underlying alleged crime involved money laundering.

Significantly, the ED director at the time, Rajan Katoch, had taken the view that a private criminal complaint could not form the basis of an ED investigation. An infuriated prime minister, not one to brook dissent, took his revenge within hours of receiving the news. Katoch was sacked the same night along with his chief investigating officer Himanshu Kumar.

The ED would almost certainly have known that its charges won't stick. But Katoch's expulsion as Director had made it clear that Modi wanted one and only one outcome

The ED would almost certainly have known that its charges won't stick. But Katoch's expulsion had made it clear that Modi wanted one, and only one outcome. So all the Directorate could hope for was a compliant judge who would overlook judicial irregularities and give the judgement that the government wanted. It did not find one in Justice Gogne.

There is, however, a darker explanation for the ED's repeated attempts to pursue a money laundering case against the Gandhis. This is Prime Minister Modi's determination to pull them off the pedestal of righteousness on which the Indian public has put them, and place himself upon it as the saviour of Hinduism, the harbinger of Hindu Rashtra.

But here too the Modi government's efforts are doomed to fail because neither the Congress nor Young Indian, the company it created to revive the *National Herald*, has taken even one, tiny step outside the law.

To fully appreciate this, it is necessary to go back 88 years to the founding of the paper and its parent company, Associated Journals Limited by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in 1937. The goal of the Congress was to publish the *National Herald* and its equivalents in Hindi and Urdu. To do this, the Congress had created a company with the express purpose of 'reflecting the policy and principles of the Indian National Congress'.

The *National Herald* had got off to a flying start in 1937, but never fully recovered from the blow it received when the British banned it in 1942 for supporting the Quit India Movement. By the time the ban was lifted in 1945, the British were on their way out and Pandit Nehru and other senior leaders, who used to write for it regularly before 1942, were in government and preoccupied with the transition.

What is more, during the interregnum, papers like the *Hindustan Times*, *The Tribune*, *Searchlight* in Bihar and *The Indian Express* had taken over the patriotic space in journalism. So the *National Herald* sank slowly into debt and near oblivion.

In order to survive, AJL was obliged to approach the Congress Party, its ideological parent, for support. During the period of acute financial distress, from 2002 to 2010, the All India Congress Committee gave AJL over a hundred loans so that it could continue to pay salaries and taxes. By 2011, these loans had ballooned to Rs. 90.21 crore, all of which were utilised by AJL to pay salaries, gratuity, provident fund, taxes, VRS and other dues including government dues.

A standard route to reviving such a company is to convert all or a part of its debt into equity shares and sell these at a discount to those willing to gamble on its recovery. This is the route the Congress took. To take over AJL's debt, it set up a company titled Young Indian, in which the Gandhis and their 'co-accused' were the principal shareholders.

Young Indian was set up in 2010 as a not-for-profit company under Section 25 (now section 8) of the Companies Act. That made it a legal requirement for the shareholders not to withdraw any share of the profits the company earned. All of these had to remain in the company and be used for purposes stated to obtain the Section 25 status.

That was why Rajan Katoch had thrown out Swamy's plea. And that is why an enraged and frustrated Modi government is still trying to punish the Gandhi family for a crime it has not committed. ■

PREM SHANKAR JHA *is a veteran journalist, writer and economist*

Far worse than trying to erase Gandhi

In trying to wash its hands off MGNREGA's employment guarantee, the Centre is also planning to kill the right to demand work

Yogendra Yadav

The Opposition was initially protesting the renaming of MGNREGA. Their question: why remove Gandhi's name from a scheme the country has long known as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act? Why scrub Gandhi out of it?

At first, even I felt a twinge of regret. The proposed new name—'Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill'—is clunky and reminiscent of an old habit of dreaming up an English acronym and then force-fitting Hindi words into it. But after reading the draft of the new law the government plans to bring in to replace MGNREGA, I thought it was just as well. What good would it serve to retain his name when the soul of the programme had been gouged out, when its foundational guarantees dismantled?

Let's try and understand why MGNREGA was not just any old piece of legislation, why it was historic. Nearly sixty years after Independence, the Indian state took a tentative step towards fulfilling a core constitutional obligation. Articles 39(a) and 41 of the Directive Principles of State Policy enjoin the government to secure for every citizen an adequate means of livelihood (Art. 39) and the right to work (Art. 41). Nearly six decades after this was written into the Constitution, the UPA government finally passed the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act in Parliament in 2005, granting—for the first time—a legally enforceable right to work to the country's poorest citizens.

This was not a full-fledged guarantee of employment, but its provisions set it apart from other government employment schemes. The law gave every rural resident the *right* to demand work from the state, leaving little wiggle room for official excuses, evasions and bureaucratic stonewalling. There were no eligibility criteria. Any rural resident could obtain a job card and claim work. There were no conditions attached to demanding employment. Whenever work was sought, the government was obliged to provide it within two weeks—or pay compensation.



Photo: Getty Images

At a MNREGA work site in Nayagaon, Jaipur

A universal right to work is being replaced with a discretionary dole at the pleasure of the Centre

Most uniquely, there was no budgetary cap for this scheme. As many people as wanted work could demand it, and the Union government was legally bound to find the money. Imperfect it may have been, but MGNREGA marked the first serious attempt to give legal shape to the right to work, and it was for this reason that the scheme drew the attention of the world.

In practice, the law fell short of its promise. Wages under MGNREGA were meagre and it was hobbled by administrative restrictions. Even so, the Manmohan Singh government expanded it. After the UPA lost in 2014 and he took over the reins of power, Prime Minister Narendra Modi openly mocked the law, saying he would preserve it as "a living monument to [the UPA's] failures". In its early years, the Modi government actively tried to kill the scheme.

Then came the Covid pandemic, and even the Modi government was forced to lean on MGNREGA. Despite government apathy, bureaucratic bad faith and entrenched local corruption, MGNREGA has been a lifeline for the poorest in rural India. Over the past fifteen years, it has generated nearly 4,000 crore person-days of wage employment. An estimated 9.5 crore works have been completed under the scheme, benefitting roughly five crore families every year. It provided a higher baseline for rural wages, and during national crises like Covid, or disasters such as droughts, MGNREGA saved millions from hunger and prevented mass migration.

But the Modi government has now made up its mind to bury the programme.

Continued on page 2

STATES 360°  MADHYA PRADESH

Since when is the acquisition of public land a 'state secret?

Kashif Kakvi

The Land Acquisition Act has been bypassed. Tribal communities, protected forests and elephant corridors have not been spared. Over 570,000 trees have already been cut. These are just some of the things the Madhya Pradesh government would prefer to sweep under the carpet, even as concerns mount over its decision to hand over a vast coal block to Stratatech Mineral Resources Pvt Ltd, an Adani Group company.

At the heart of the controversy lies an alleged bypassing of the Land Acquisition Act, which mandates fair compensation, gram sabha consent and special rehabilitation provisions for Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC). Instead, the government invoked the Coal Bearing Areas (Acquisition and Development) Act of 1957—an outdated colonial-era law perceived as less protective of local rights. This manoeuvre allowed the government to circumvent critical safeguards for displaced communities.

The coal block, awarded in December 2020, spans 2,672 hectares, of which 54 per cent falls within reserved forests and elephant corridors, 25 per cent is government 'revenue' land and 21 per cent is privately held by 2,980 individuals. Nearly a third of the private owners come from ST and SC communities.

While the acquisition of private land was officially notified, acquisition of the remaining 79 per cent was kept a 'state secret' and never formally notified. Opposition leaders, notably Umang Singhar, have questioned this secrecy, emphasising that the Land Acquisition Act requires notification of *all* acquired lands as well as transparent rehabilitation plans.

Singhar, the leader of the opposition in the state and himself a tribal leader, highlighted that the state government's failure to provide adequate resettlement and rehabilitation schemes for displaced tribal populations not only disregards due process, but also threatens the rights and livelihoods of thousands, deepening grievances among local communities.

These charges were first raised by the Opposition. On 10 December, a fact-finding committee comprising Congress leaders and workers visited the Dhirauli coal block, 70 km from Singrauli. The police stopped them from entering the forest, but Singhar managed to break through the cordon on his motorcycle and reach the spot where trees were being felled. Local media reported it; the state government ignored it.

The environmental stakes in this project are high. The Dhirauli coal block lies in a 'very dense' forest classified as being of 'high conservation value'. Mature trees over 30 years old include species such as sal, teak, mahua, tendu, amla, harreda and baheda. These trees are deeply tied to the daily lives of communities like the Baiga tribe, who depend on them for food, medicine, livelihoods and cultural practices.

The forest is also the habitat of bears, hyenas, wolves, jackals, leopards and elephants. Critically, the area includes protected elephant and leopard corridors—natural pathways essential for the movement and survival of these wild animals. According to forest department rules, such lands cannot be diverted for mining unless no viable alternatives exist, and only after alternative corridors are established.

The Madhya Pradesh government has blithely permitted the largescale felling of over 570,000 trees in the first phase of the mining project. This massive deforestation will have drastic ecological consequences, disrupting wildlife habitats, threatening biodiversity and affecting the ecological balance in the region.

The Union government initially told Parliament that the coal block lay within a Fifth Schedule area, which carries constitutional protections for regions with significant tribal populations and distinct sociocultural contexts. However, during the recent winter session of the Madhya Pradesh Assembly, the state government claimed the area does not fall under the Fifth Schedule. The Opposition alleges that the government deliberately removed the area's protected status soon after the BJP's 2023 victory.



An open cast coal mine at Singrauli, Madhya Pradesh

Photo: ***Getty Images***

Patwari says the state government is hiding facts from the people and that at least 10 lakh trees will be felled for one coal mining project

Such contradictory claims have intensified controversy over the legality and legitimacy of the mining project

On 16 December, a day after Singhar and Madhya Pradesh Congress Committee president Jitu Patwari held a press conference in New Delhi, the Income Tax department raided the premises of a Congress leader (also with business interests in coal) in Chhatarpur. While Patwari alleged that more than a million trees were slated to be cut across roughly 4,000 hectares, the government is yet to place all facts in the public domain.

At the press conference, Singhar pointed out that the Adani Group had identified land for compulsory afforestation across four districts—Sagar, Raisen, Shivpuri and Agar Malwa. He said even the Union government had noted that some of this land fell within reserved forests and some within an existing elephant corridor. Why, asked Singhar, is the Group being allowed to conduct afforestation 300 to 700 km from the deforested area?

Patwari alleged that the state government is hiding facts from the people and at that at least 10 lakh trees will be felled for one coal mining project. Isn't it time for the MP government to set the record straight? ■

Far worse than trying to erase Gandhi

Continued from page 1

Mindful that scrapping it altogether would have political repercussions, the official line is that the programme is being 'restructured'. To sweeten the deception, the government claims that employment will now be guaranteed for 125 days instead of 100. But the truth is that the new Bill tabled in Parliament effectively abolishes the very idea of an employment guarantee—and a universal right to work is set to be replaced by a discretionary dole of daily wages for select beneficiaries.

According to the government's draft, every crucial provision of the scheme is being reversed. The Centre will now decide in which states—and in which regions in those states—employment opportunities will be offered. The Union government will impose spending caps for each state. State governments will decide which two months of the farm labour season the scheme will be suspended. Even the choice of works at the local level will be dictated from above.

Most dangerously, states are now being saddled with a much larger share of the financial burden. Earlier, the Centre bore 90 per cent of the cost; now it will pay only 60 per cent. In precisely those poor regions where employment guarantees are most desperately needed, impoverished state governments will not have the funds, and the Centre will wash its hands off the 'problem'.

Of course, if elections are at stake, funds for employment guarantees will materialise where none earlier existed. In states ruled by the Opposition, the scheme will either not be implemented at all or be crippled by punishing conditions.

So yes, it is just as well that such a scheme won't carry Mahatma Gandhi's name. But those who value Gandhi's ideas must now fight the Bill—not just inside Parliament but on the streets too, like the farmers did; they must carry the message to the people, who must find out how MGNREGA was killed, how their 'right to work' was snatched away. ■

STATES 360°  ODISHA

Should MPs and MLAs fix their own salaries?

Ashutosh Mishra

India's parliamentarians and state legislators are empowered to fix their own salaries and perks. Each assembly decides on it from time to time, but should they?

Unlike government employees, who have independent pay commissions, MPs and MLAs decide their own remuneration—an arrangement increasingly being questioned for the obvious conflict of interest. This issue has gained currency after Odisha MLAs raised their take-home salary to Rs 3.45 lakh per month, the highest in the country, followed by Telangana (Rs 2.7 lakh), Maharashtra (Rs 2.6 lakh), Manipur (Rs 2.5 lakh) and Uttar Pradesh (Rs 2.4 lakh). The lowest-paid MLAs are in Kerala at Rs 70,000 per month.

The Odisha Assembly unanimously passed four Bills approving a threefold pay hike on 9 December, the last day of the winter session. Additionally: emoluments have been enhanced with retrospective effect from June 2024. Aside: the current BJP government under Mohan Charan Majhi assumed office in June 2024.

The monthly pension payable to former MLAs has also been revised from Rs 30,000 to Rs 80,000, plus a travel allowance of Rs 12,500 and a revised medical allowance of Rs 25,000. In a state where nearly 16 per cent of the people still live below the poverty line, the move has triggered widespread public anger and criticism.

Odisha remains one of India's poorest states with malnutrition, high infant mortality rates, battered repeatedly by floods, cyclones and droughts. At Rs 1.83 lakh, the state's per capita income lags behind the national average of Rs 2 lakh. Against this backdrop, the self-serving pay hike seems insensitive and unjustified.

Seshdev Nanda of Nabnirman Krushak Sangathan highlights the disconnect: "Our minimum wage for unskilled workers is around Rs 12,000 per month. How can such a dramatic hike for MLAs be justified when ordinary workers earn a fraction of that amount? Our state is battling poverty accentuated by natural calamities and still grappling with poor health indicators."



Odisha's MLAs have gifted themselves a threefold increase in salary

Other social activists echo this sentiment. The highly regarded activist Jagannath Chatterjee commented on the irrational increase: "If legislators demand a hike, it must match their performance on the ground. Sadly, we lack mechanisms for real accountability, which fuels public frustration. Introducing recall provisions for non-performing representatives could empower voters and improve governance, but such reforms remain elusive."

Odisha Election Watch convenor and social activist Ranjan Mohanty said he was not against periodic enhancement in the salaries of public representatives but it must be commensurate with their needs and performance. "Public sentiments should be kept in mind while making such moves. After all, the representatives get their mandate from the people," said Mohanty.

Women's rights activist Tapsee Prahraj was blunt about the timing: "The government has failed to deliver on promises to empower women, raise old-age pensions or enhance welfare. How can they justify hiking their own salaries amidst such widespread unmet needs?"

Social media has amplified demands for greater transparency and accountability, with citizens urging lawmakers to publish periodic report cards on their work.

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Legislators cutting across party lines have defended the hike, saying it was long overdue—the last increase was in 2017. "A public representative needs money to help people financially in all kinds of situations, right from weddings to last rites. This step by the chief minister is certainly welcome," cooperation minister Pradeep Bal Samanta told a news channel.

Biju Janata Dal, the main opposition party, not only supported the Bills inside the House but was effusive in praising them outside. Party MLA Sarada Jena said, "The enhancement of MLAs salaries was a genuine need that has been taken care of." Similar sentiments were echoed by his party colleagues Pramila Mallick and Ganeswar Behera, as well as Congress MLA Dasrathi.

CPI(M) MLA Laxman Munda, the sole dissenting voice, condemned the hike as insensitive amid farmers' distress and other pressing issues: "Our farmers cannot sell their paddy and face numerous problems. Instead of addressing these, legislators focus on protecting their own interests."

Leader of Opposition Naveen Patnaik refused to accept his increased pay and urged the state to use the funds for poor people's welfare. His family had donated their ancestral property for public use in 2015—he was merely keeping that legacy alive, said he.

Patnaik's move was seen as a political stunt since his party supported the Bills. Deputy chief minister K.V. Singh Deo said, "He had the opportunity to put forward his views in the House. Why did he not do so?" ■

Legislators cutting across party lines have defended the salary hike, saying it was long overdue—the last increase was in 2017

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Not all murders deserve the same punishment


Mohammad Akhlaq was beaten to death in 2015 by a Hindu mob in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh for allegedly possessing beef

Apoorvanand

The family of Mohammad Akhlaq has challenged the Uttar Pradesh government's application seeking withdrawal of prosecution against the accused in Akhlaq's murder. A Noida court has accepted this application. Akhlaq's family has asked a simple question: is beating a man to death with sticks a less serious crime? They were forced to ask this because the government has downgraded the gravity of the offence by arguing that no weapons were recovered from the accused.

The government also argued, in defence of the murder accused, that the crime should not be treated as particularly serious because there was no personal enmity between the accused and Akhlaq. Its principal argument for withdrawing the case is that doing so would help maintain social harmony.

But beyond all this, the government has said something else that deserves closer scrutiny. It said the meat recovered from Akhlaq's house was beef. This 'fact' was introduced to suggest that the accused did not kill Akhlaq without a valid reason. They attacked him because they suspected there was beef in his house. In other words, he was killed in the service of faith.

Akhlaq had committed the gravest sin, and his Hindu neighbours awarded him the death penalty for it—a punishment that, in the government's eyes, is excusable. It should not even be counted as a crime. The government was not merely stating the cause of the murder—it was attempting to justify it.

At the previous hearing, the court asked the government whether there was any precedent for withdrawing a murder case. What it asks next remains to be seen. The court's final decision will also tell us whether Manusmriti has now been formally implemented in India or not.

While reviewing the government's outlook in the Akhlaq murder case, it wouldn't be amiss to compare its stance—and the court's—on another killing in a different part of Uttar Pradesh. A court in Bahraich recently sentenced a Muslim man, Sarfaraz, to death. He was accused of shooting dead a Hindu man named Ram Gopal Sharma. The incident took place a year ago.

In October 2024, during a Durga Puja procession, an aggressive Hindu mob was seen raising slogans outside Sarfaraz's house. From within that crowd, Ram Gopal Mishra suddenly entered Sarfaraz's house. Shouting slogans in a frenzy, he climbed onto the roof, started tearing down a flag tied to the railing, then broke the railing itself. A shot was now fired and he was killed.

If someone forcibly enters my house, vandalises it, and poses a threat to my safety, I should arguably have the right to self-defence—especially when the police are doing nothing to restrain the violent mob or to stop the intruder. The death is unfortunate, but how justified is it to describe firing at one's attacker as an act of terror?

Entering Muslim homes under the pretext of 'assessing the situation' may now be deemed legitimate, and Muslims will be told they should not obstruct this

In this case, justice was delivered within a year. The government sought the harshest punishment—the death penalty—and the court, citing Manusmriti and the need to instil fear among the people, awarded Sarfaraz the death sentence.

There is a striking similarity in the cases of Akhlaq and Sarfaraz. Both their homes were attacked. In Akhlaq's case, announcements were made from the village temple near his house to assemble the mob. Villagers gathered with the intent to attack Akhlaq in his house. They planned the assault, dragged him out of his house, and beat him to death in broad daylight.

This was not a killing committed in a moment of rage; it was no emotional outburst. It was a cold-blooded, premeditated attack. It was designed to strike terror in the hearts of Muslims—and it did. Muslims no longer feel certain about when their neighbours might barge into their homes, inspect their refrigerators and kitchens, accuse them of anything at all, and kill them. Since Akhlaq's murder, many Muslims have been beaten to death on similar pretexts. The pattern continues.

After Akhlaq's murder, all the accused were released on bail. Two of them later died of natural causes. Their bodies were draped in the national flag, as if they had died performing a national duty. The Hindu villagers expressed no remorse over Akhlaq's killing. On the contrary, they justified it. BJP leaders and ministers made statements in support of the accused.

For Akhlaq's family, it became impossible to continue living in the village. Their house has largely remained abandoned.

According to the Uttar Pradesh government, Akhlaq's murder is not a serious crime—indeed, not a crime at all. It argues that the prosecution's case is weak, testimony is taking too long and sufficient evidence is not forthcoming. So why waste time pursuing the case?

In a murder case, collecting evidence and securing testimony is the responsibility of the police. Here, the state is effectively admitting that it has failed to do so—and has no intention of strengthening the case against the accused. It is worried about the case continuing and the possibility of punishment. It claims this is creating social unrest. It is more concerned with 'peace' than with justice.

It does not specify that 'society' here means Hindu society, but it is not concerned what Muslims will make of withdrawing the case and letting Akhlaq's killers walk free. Perhaps it expects Muslims to grant Hindus the right to kill them—and then keep mum about the violence, because speaking up or demanding justice ruffles Hindu feathers.

Akhlaq's murder faced no resistance at the time. The mob killed him at leisure. According to the state, this was appropriate. Ram Gopal Mishra's violence, on the other hand, was met with resistance, and he was killed. The government and the court do not want to talk about Ram Gopal's violence. The government has nothing to say about Mishra's incitement or the Hindu mob's.

Even newspapers are now endorsing this narrative. While reporting the incident, the *Indian Express* wrote that Ram Gopal Mishra climbed onto Sarfaraz's roof to 'assess the situation'; no mention of violent intent or action. Entering Muslim homes under the pretext of 'assessing the situation' may now be deemed legitimate, and Muslims will be told they should not obstruct this.

The theoretical foundation of Manusmriti is that all people are not equal. Killing a Brahmin merits death, but if a Brahmin kills a Shudra, he need only atone. We have made progress. Now, if a Hindu kills a Muslim, never mind atonement, the act will be celebrated. In the reign of the RSS, the rape or murder of Muslims is worthy of public recognition and honour. Kathua, Jharkhand, Dadri, Kolkata… have set the pattern.

The question now is whether the Noida court will see Mohammad Akhlaq's murder through the lens of the Constitution or the Manusmriti. ■

APOORVANAND *is an author and academic*

The death of a lifeline for India's jobless millions

A.J. Prabal

- *The central government shall determine the state-wise normative allocation for each financial year, based on objective parameters as may be prescribed by the central government.* **Section 4(5)**
- *Save as otherwise provided, the state government shall in such rural areas in the state as may be notified by the Central Government, provide to every household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work, not less than 125 days of guaranteed employment in a financial year in accordance with the scheme made under this Act.* **Section 5(1)**
- *Any expenditure incurred by a state in excess of its normative allocation shall be borne by the state government in such manner and by such procedure as may be prescribed by the central government.* **Section 4(6)**
- *For the purposes of this Act, the fund sharing pattern between the central government and the state government shall be… 60:40. This is apart from the North-Eastern States, Hill States & Union Territories where the central government share will be 90:10.* **Section 22(2)**



MGNREGA work site in Sarguja, Chhattisgarh; (right) protest in the Parliament House Complex, 16 December 2025

Among the Modi government's many dubious talents is a knack for repackaging old schemes as new initiatives. That's right: old wine in new (misshapen) bottles. Except this time the old wine is being thrown out as well and replaced with a toxic new brew.

The newest victim of this government's 'rejig–rename–reclaim' enterprise is the historic UPA-era 'MGNREGA' (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), which came into force in 2005, when Manmohan Singh was India's prime minister.

Why historic? Because MGNREGA gave independent India its first law *guaranteeing* employment in rural India and gave that guarantee the sanctity and legal force of a *right* to demand work. (see '*Far worse than trying to erase Gandhi*', page 1). That 20-year-old law, a lifeline for hundreds of thousands of Indians ekeing out a precarious living in rural India, is set to be replaced by the Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin), or VBGRAMG or just 'G-RAM-G'—the contraction that will no doubt be seen as the USP of the new scheme.

The new Bill is being advertised as vastly superior for offering 125 days of 'guaranteed' employment instead of 100 days (under MGNREGA). But this 'guarantee' now lives only in the name of the bill, not its provisions. If the government really wished to guarantee an additional 25 days of work or even, as the bill claims, to ensure 'all round development' of villages, it was not necessary to repeal MGNREGA.

Over the last few years, the government has routinely failed to provide more than 50–55 days of work in a year, despite the mandate of providing 100 days of work on demand. This, against a backdrop of increased demand for jobs and rising rural distress. Farmer suicides continue unabated in several parts of the country, rural wages remain stagnant while rural inflation has surged. The budget allocation for MGNREGA has been steadily cut: from Rs 1.1 lakh crore during the pandemic years (2020–21) to Rs 98,000 crore in 2022 and Rs 90,000 crore in 2023.

Under MGNREGA, the Union government bore 90 per cent of the expenditure. The new bill proposes to cut this to 60 per cent, offloading 40 per cent onto the states. This is clearly not because the Union government is short of money. Nor are the states suddenly flush with internally generated funds; in fact, impoverished states will fail to implement the scheme simply because they can't bear the financial burden and the Centre has given itself the room to say: 'sorry, not our problem!'. Does that sound like a 'guarantee'? Economist Arun Kumar notes that the Union government's fiscal deficit, at 4.4 per cent, is under control. So, financial constraints do not justify the dilution of the Centre's financial commitment to MGNREGA nor the repeal of the scheme.

For the millions who drew hope from the MGNREGA job guarantee, something they could demand by right, the loss is immeasurable

Prosenjit Datta, former editor of *Business Today*, suggests the motives may be political. The architecture of the new Bill offers clues: it lets the Union government set the 'normative' budget for states, dictate how many days of guaranteed employment each state must provide and retain full control over implementation—shifting both burden and blame to the states. It also opens the door to direct doles, as in Bihar before elections, allowing the Centre to influence voters.

What's to stop the government from weaponising G-RAM-G to punish Opposition-ruled states by denying or delaying allocations? The Union government did hold back funds under MGNREGA too, forcing the government of West Bengal to approach the Supreme Court for relief. But the new law will effectively shut the door on legal remedies as well.

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Ever since the Modi government made Aadhaar mandatory to claim the benefits of government schemes, there have been countless complaints about MGNREGA job-card holders not being able to claim their dues. The Aadhaar Payment Bridge System (APBS), being used to directly transfer wages to workers' Aadhaar-linked bank accounts—a system made mandatory in January 2024, ostensibly for better targeting, faster payments and reduced leakages—has had the opposite effect.

In March 2025, Congress leader Sonia Gandhi accused the Centre of systematically undermining the scheme. MGNREGA wages had not kept up with inflation, she pointed out, demanding that it be raised to Rs 400 and the number of guaranteed workdays from 100 to 150. She also argued that the Aadhaar-based payment mode was exclusionary and the National Mobile Monitoring System flawed, leading to big delays in payments.

Between 10 October and 14 November 2025, the names of nearly 27 lakh workers were deleted from the MGNREGA database. This erasure coincided with the Union government's push for e-KYC verification for all rural workers. LibTech, a consortium of activists and academics, flagged the unusually high deletion rates, revealing that only 7 per cent of beneficiaries had received 100 days of work. The MGNREGA management information system (MIS) cited 12 reasons for removing workers or job cards, including 'duplicate applicant', 'fake applicant' and 'not willing to work'.

But the new bill is not simply an attempt to paper over the failures of MGNREGA's digital architecture, it is designed to give the Union government total control while shifting the financial burden onto states. For the millions of Indians who drew hope from the MGNREGA job guarantee, something they could demand by right, the loss is immeasurable, but what does this government care?' ■

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Modi's India more unequal than ever

The World Inequality Report 2026 highlights the extreme concentration of income and wealth at the very top

Herjinder

If there were an Olympic event for inequality, India would be a strong contender for gold. The World Inequality Report (WIR) 2026, published by the World Inequality Lab, confirms that India ranks among the countries with the highest concentration of income and wealth in the world. Its long-term analysis shows that India's growth has disproportionately benefited a tiny elite, giving rise to what the authors describe as the era of the 'Billionaire Raj'.

Economist Jean Drèze points out that the richest Indians are among the most pampered in the world today. They pay proportionately the lowest income tax, and pay neither wealth nor inheritance tax. The pandemic didn't loosen their purse-strings, either.

The report offers striking evidence of India being one of the most unequal countries in the world. By 2022–23, the disparities between the ultra-rich and the rest had exceeded even the yawning disparities seen during the colonial period.

Income distribution figures are particularly stark: 'The top 10 per cent of earners account for nearly 58 per cent of national income, while the bottom half of the population receives just about 15 per cent. Wealth inequality is even greater, with the richest 10 per cent holding around 65 per of total wealth and the top 1 per cent about 40 per cent.'

The report also highlights persistent gender disparities. At 15.7 per cent, female labour force participation remains far below the global average of 49 per cent and has shown almost no improvement between 2014 and 2024. Globally, women receive only about a quarter of total labour income, and this structural imbalance is far more severe in India.

According to the report, the extreme inequality we are seeing today is not accidental but the outcome of deliberate policy choices. In the decades following independence, up to the early 1980s, India had managed to keep income and wealth gaps within limits.

This relative containment was rooted in the political and economic framework of the post-Independence period, which broadly followed a socialist orientation. Measures such as the nationalisation of key sectors and sharply progressive taxation played a central role.

From the early 1980s onward, however, policy priorities began to change, culminating in wide-ranging economic liberalisation in the 1990s. This marked a decisive structural break. The surge in inequality since then is closely tied to the adoption of neo-liberal policies centred on market-led growth, deregulation and reduced state intervention.

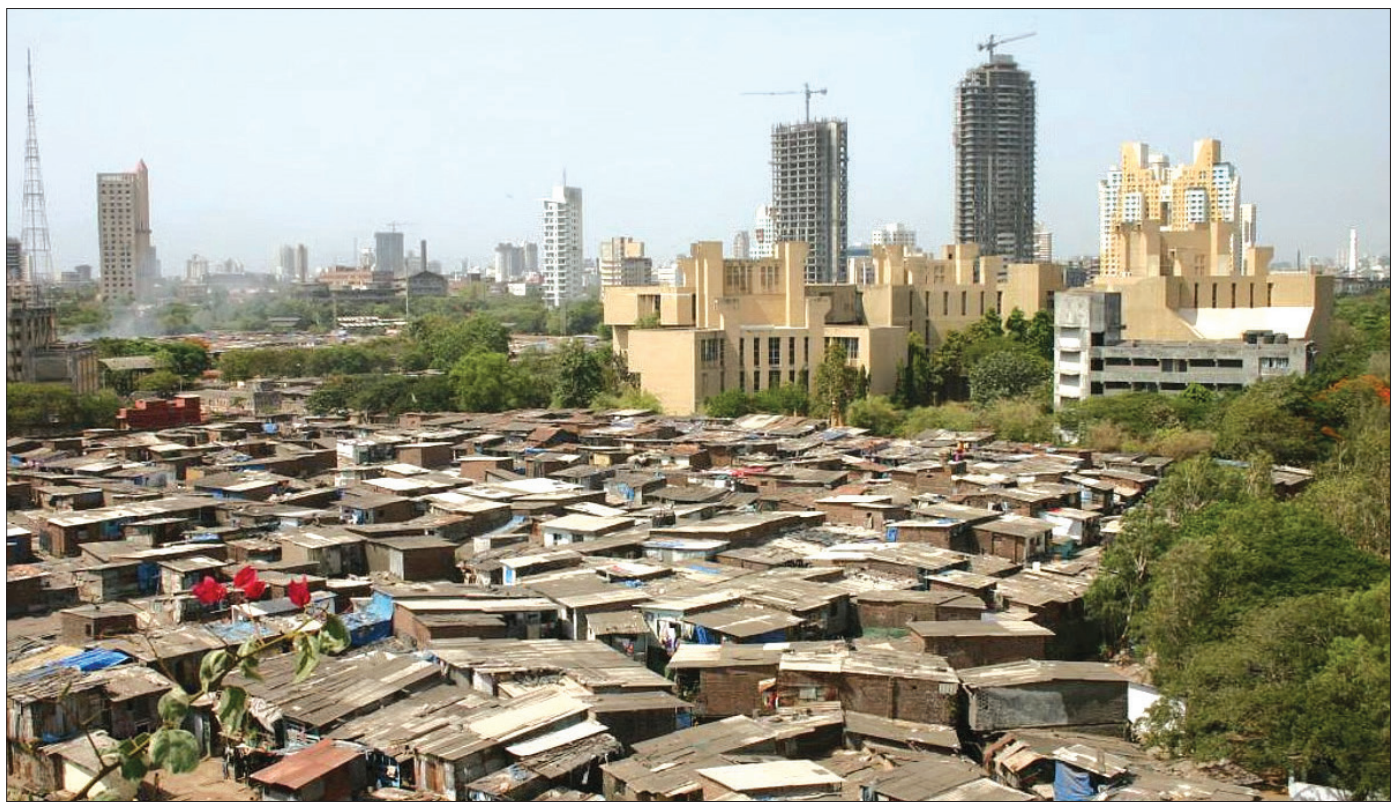
The period of economic liberalisation reversed the more egalitarian trajectory of the decades following Independence and sharply accelerated the concentration of wealth. Income and wealth at the top began to grow far faster than for the rest of the population. By 2022, the income share of the richest 10 per cent had almost doubled compared to its level in 1982. This process of extreme concentration meant that most of the gains from growth flowed to those who were already wealthy, producing what is often described as a 'K-shaped' economy.

The changing structure of India's growth further deepened these inequalities. As the economy became increasingly reliant on the services sector and capital-intensive growth, returns to capital rose sharply, pushing up income shares at the top. At the same time, India failed to shift its vast workforce out of low-productivity agriculture into large-scale, high-wage manufacturing, unlike its regional counterpart, China.

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This inability to generate broad-based, quality employment—combined with long-standing structural biases—has led to the gradual 'hollowing out' of the middle class. The middle 40 per cent of the population now accounts for only about 27–30 per cent of national income, far below the 40–45 per cent share seen in more equal economies. The result is a 'dual economy' in which a small, extremely affluent elite exists alongside a large and economically insecure majority.

The richest Indians are among the most pampered in the world today. They pay proportionately the lowest income tax, and pay neither wealth nor inheritance tax



Hidden in plain sight These chawls and highrises in the same frame hold a mirror to our growth model, by no means endemic to 'Maximum City'

The WIR 2026 argues that inequality has been reinforced by chronic under-investment in human capabilities. This rigidity is the outcome of sustained fiscal choices, particularly the stagnation of public spending on social sectors. Government expenditure on education has remained stuck at around 4 per cent of GDP for the past decade—well below the long-promised 6 per cent—while public healthcare spending has stayed limited at roughly 1.2–1.5 per cent of GDP. As a result, real per capita investment in human capital—the key driver of social mobility—has barely increased, leaving opportunities tightly rationed.

Evidence from local and micro-level studies support this assessment. While movement from agriculture to non-farm work has helped raise rural incomes and enabled some upward mobility within a generation, intergenerational mobility has weakened. Rural households are far less likely to have access to basic services such as piped water or clean cooking fuel even now. This infrastructure deficit imposes a heavy 'time tax' on the rural poor—especially women—and contributes directly to India's exceptionally low female labour force participation.

The central conclusion of WIR 2026 is that extreme inequality in India is the outcome of political choices. Reversing this trajectory requires conscious and sustained policy action. According to economist Jayati Ghosh, "These patterns are not accidents of markets. They reflect the legacy of history and the functioning of institutions, regulations and policies."

Changes in tax policy illustrate this dynamic. In 2019, corporate tax rates were cut to stimulate growth and encourage job creation. By 2023–24, personal income tax collections surpassed corporate tax revenues for the first time. During the same period, corporate profits nearly trebled—from Rs 2.5 trillion in 2020–21 to Rs 7.1 trillion in 2024–25, pushing the profit-to-GDP ratio to a 15-year high. Yet corporate loan write-offs were substantial, amounting to Rs 6.15 lakh crore over the past five years, underscoring how policy choices have continued to favour capital over labour.

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The report's most urgent recommendation is the introduction of progressive taxation aimed at the super-rich. It points out that effective income tax rates decline sharply at the top, with billionaires paying a smaller share of their income than lower- and middle-income households by exploiting loopholes and holding wealth in lightly taxed assets.

India currently has no wealth tax, having abolished it in 2016–17, reflecting a broader global retreat from wealth taxation across OECD countries from the mid-1990s to 2018. The report proposes reintroducing such measures in the form of an annual wealth tax and an inheritance tax focused on the richest households. Even a modest minimum levy of 2 per cent on the net wealth of a few hundred of the wealthiest families could raise revenues equivalent to about 0.5 per cent of national income. These funds are vital not only to improve tax equity but also to create fiscal space for essential public investment.

However, redistribution through taxation must go hand in hand with a major expansion of public spending on core services. The state needs to substantially increase investment in education, healthcare, and public infrastructure. The report recommends adopting the '4As' framework—available, affordable, approachable and appropriate public services—so they effectively reach the most marginalised sections of society, including rural populations and socially disadvantaged groups.

Finally, the report stresses the need to improve the quality, accessibility and transparency of government economic and tax data. Regular, reliable and publicly available data is crucial for independent research, public scrutiny and informed debate—key prerequisites for designing effective policies to reduce inequality. ■

Provoking a Million Mutinies?

Mushrooming farmer protests across the country suggest the State is once again playing with fire

Rashme Sehgal

On 10 December 2025, Tibbi tehsil in Rajasthan became the site of a face-off between protesting farmers and the police. Thousands of farmers had gathered from surrounding villages for a 'mahapanchayat', called in opposition to the construction of an ethanol plant in Hanumangarh district.

Following the 'mahapanchayat', the farmers left for the factory site on foot, accompanied by a convoy of tractors. The police used teargas, lathis and plastic bullets to stop the protestors—who had brought down the boundary wall—but fell back before the massive crowd. Several vehicles were subsequently torched and scores injured on both sides.

Unnerved by the clash, the administration informed Chandigarh-based Dune Ethanol that work must stop on what is being touted as Asia's biggest ethanol project. While the industrial house insists the plant will neither contaminate groundwater nor pollute the air, farmers know better from experience.

Balwan Poonia, former MLA and joint secretary of the All India Kisan Sabha is emphatic when he says that ethanol factories are more polluting than oil refineries. "Scientific data shows that ethanol factories release hazardous air pollutants, and consume huge quantities of water. To produce one kilo of ethanol you need 2,800 litres of water! We studied the impact of the ethanol plant in Ganganagar district and found that its toxic waste water also pollutes the groundwater," he added.

After one-and-a-half years of peaceful protests—which went unheeded by government and company alike—the farmers of Hanumangarh had clearly reached breaking point. At the time of writing, another 'mahapanchayat' had been scheduled for 17 December.

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A string of farmer protests from Rajasthan to Odisha have gone largely unnoticed. Local and regional media have been reporting what mainstream media has ignored. The same old issues are front and centre: distress sales, shortage of fertilisers, inability to sell produce even at MSP (minimum support price), dwindling groundwater, acquisition of agricultural land for mining and industry. Farmers have had enough and are taking to the streets, blocking roads and railway tracks, seeking action on their demands.

On 8 December, farmers in Punjab held protests across several cities over the 'anti-people, anti-consumer' Electricity Amendment Bill 2025, which will lead to a sharp increase in prices. They also burnt copies of the draft Seeds Bill 2025, which, if implemented, will destroy India's seed sovereignty and dilute the rights of states.

The farmers of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra are also on the warpath. In MP, where nine farmers were recently driven to suicide, thousands staged a mass protest on 1 December 2025. Under the banner of the Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Sangh, farmers from Barwani, Dhar, Khargone and Khandwa districts marched to Khalghat toll plaza and blocked NH-52 for eight hours. Their demand? Loan waivers, better prices, MSP for crops.

The shortage of fertilisers is another flashpoint. In August this year, we saw farmers in Uttar Pradesh queuing for hours under the blazing sun for urea, only to be turned away emptyhanded. Similar scenes were witnessed in Madhya Pradesh, from August through October. In MP's Tikamgarh district, 50-year-old farmer Jamuna Kushwaha died on 8 December, after three days in a fertiliser queue at the Badoraghat distribution centre. Just a week earlier, 50-year-old Bhruiya Bai died after waiting for 48 hours at a fertiliser centre in Guna district.

On 8 December, farmers staged a blockade in MP's Chhatarpur district to highlight this systemic collapse. Farmer leader Ramkripal Sharma says, "We believe this shortage is deliberate and stems from disputes between cooperative bank managers and committee workers."

*

Maharashtra continues to top the grim roster of farmer suicides, with NCRB data confirming 781 in 2025 alone. Says Shivaji Gaikwad, a leader with the Kisan Mazdoor Parishad, "The cost of inputs has doubled since 2014, while farm product prices keep falling. What else can farmers do?"

Gaikwad's own farm in Nashik is a case in point. He has 500 sweet lime trees, ripe and ready to be plucked. But labour costs have become so prohibitive that small farmers like him cannot afford to hire workers. The fruit remains on the trees. "Middlemen offer me Rs 15 per kilo, which they will sell in cities for over Rs 100," he says. While the price of gold, silver and every other commodity spikes, farmers are still paid a pittance. "I have no choice but to sell my land," said Gaikwad.

The pattern, he says, repeats across crops. "Soyabean seeds cost Rs 10,000 per quintal but we are being forced to sell it for Rs 3,000 per quintal. It is the same with pulses, maize, cotton, mustard... Look at how high retail prices of mustard are in the market. Have we gained from it? Our earnings keep shrinking." Between the farmer and the mandi, the gains are systematically siphoned off.

In Gujarat, unseasonal rains have devastated crops across 16,000 villages, affecting 1.3 million farmers. They are now sitting in dharna, demanding compensation for crop damage, 100 per cent debt waivers and comprehensive crop insurance—given that fake seeds have been flooding the market unchecked. Farmer Shaktisinh Gohil from Limda village in Bhavnagar raises a question being repeated across the country, "If industrialists' debts can be waived, then why not farmers'?"

Meanwhile, in Odisha, intensified mining explorations are tightening the noose. Farmers and Adivasis around the Niyamgiri hills are once again on tenterhooks after Vedanta chief Anil Agarwal announced—following a meeting with the chief minister in October 2025—that he expects a second referendum to clear bauxite mining in the area. This comes despite the Supreme Court-mandated referendum of 2013, which saw the Dongria Kondh Adivasi tribe voting unanimously against the project.

The stakes are enormous. The Niyamgiri hills are estimated to hold 73 million tonnes of bauxite, used to make aluminium. For the Dongria Kondh, Agarwal's renewed push signals another attempt to overturn a settled democratic verdict. They are preparing for a long battle to save their sacred hills. According to Aflatoon, general secretary of the Samajdwadi Jan Parishad, the forest advisory committee had already granted Stage 1 clearance to Vedanta's Sijimali bauxite mines on 2 December, allowing the diversion of 708.2 hectares of forest land. Aflatoon says this largescale land acquisition is taking place in a Schedule V area without the prior consent of the Gram Sabhas. When farmers protested, they were harassed and jailed.

As African countries clamp down on Vedanta's mining operations, getting the Sijimali project operational has become Agarwal's top priority, Aflatoon says. Kartika Naik from Banteji village in Rayagada district warns that once these mines become operational, 50 villages will be hit—not 18 as claimed by Vedanta. "Mining on this scale will require 725,000 litres a day of freshwater, which will result in water scarcity, crippling our agricultural production, not to mention worsening air pollution."

Across states and sectors, farmers are being asked to absorb the shocks of climate volatility, market manipulation and extractive policies—while the State looks the other way. But the State may be playing with fire. ■



The farmer protest in Tibbi tehsil in Rajasthan's Hanumangarh district, 10 December 2025

Farmers are being asked to absorb the shocks of extractive policies while the State looks the other way. But how long before they revolt?



TELANGANA MEANS BUSINESS

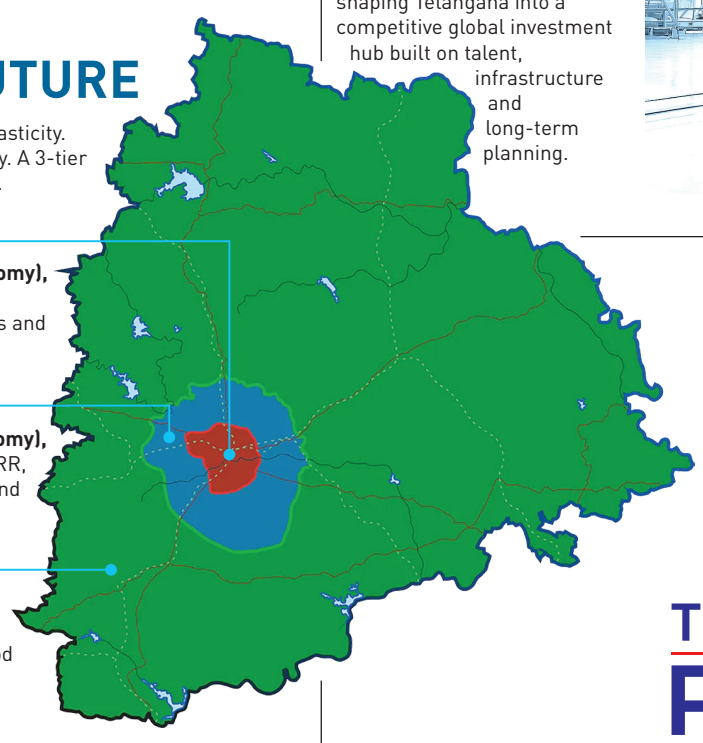
There is a massive transformation underway across India, and Telangana sits at the centre of it. As the country accelerates its next wave of economic expansion, the state is emerging as a decisive force, a centre of investment and innovation. With a government focused on clarity, reform and competitiveness, Telangana is reshaping its policies, infrastructure and investment landscape, scaling into the most compelling destination.

A STATE OF GREAT GOVERNANCE

With a clear path to becoming a $3-trillion economy by 2047, the government's approach prioritises ease of doing business, transparent approvals, and a regulatory framework aligned with global expectations. Policy direction now focuses on strengthening industrial land frameworks, improving investor facilitation, and building long-term competitiveness across high-growth sectors.

INFRASTRUCTURE DESIGNED FOR THE FUTURE

Hyderabad, the city built for elasticity. Scaling rapidly, and sustainably. A 3-tier growth vision drives it forward.



CURE
(The Core Urban Region Economy), between the city and the ORR, anchored by high-tech services and advanced urban systems

PURE
(The Peri-Urban Region Economy), a belt between the ORR and RRR, for manufacturing, industies and MSMEs

RARE
(Rural Agri Region Economy), beyond the RRR, focused on smart agriculture, forestry, food systems and handlooms





A major driver within this plan is the Future City. A 30,000-acre urban and enterprise hub for global businesses, research institutes, innovation clusters and sustainable living spaces. Combined with rail, road and logistics expansion, the state is building the backbone required for multi-sectoral growth.

A MATURE INDUSTRIAL LANDSCAPE

Telangana's industrial ecosystem spans pharma, life sciences, aerospace, defence, IT/ITeS, AI, food processing, and more. Reflection of the confidence global firms place in the state's direction. Pharma City, upcoming AI and Innovation Hubs, and support for GCCs and start-ups, are shaping Telangana into a competitive global investment hub built on talent, infrastructure and long-term planning.



TELANGANA RISING
CURE - PURE - RARE

THE RISE HAS BEGUN. THIS WAS DAY ONE.





"We want to become $1 trillion economy by 2034, and $3 trillion economy by 2047. We comprise around 2.9% of India's population, but contribute around 5% of the national GDP. By 2047, I want to contribute 10% of India's GDP. The vision may look hard but we can do it.

Today, I am more confident than yesterday. Yesterday was a dream, a plan. Today, all of you have joined us. Telangana Rising is unstoppable. Come, join the rise."

A. REVANTH REDDY
CM, TELANGANA



FOR TELANGANA, THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING.

VISION 2047 TAKES THE NEXT LEAP FORWARD.

The government's **8-point plan** outlines a transformation grounded in growth and inclusion.

1	3-zone state	Core Urban Region Economy (CURE), Hyderabad, for high-tech hubs; Peri-Urban Region Economy (PURE), between the ORR and RRR, for MSMEs and industry; Rural Agri Region Economy (RARE), beyond the RRR, for smart agriculture, forests and handlooms.
2	$3 trillion economy	5x growth driving 10% of national GDP through innovation, entrepreneurship, manufacturing, tourism, and global competitiveness.
3	Investment magnet	Strong infrastructure, progressive policy, talent and logistics, enabling innovation and high-growth clusters.
4	Youth developement and empowerment	Integrate education with skill development, to equip them for tech, industry and advanced manufacturing, for global opportunities, and start-ups.
5	Women-led development and social inclusion	Create 1 crore women millionaires, through life-cycle support of policies and entrepreneurship.
6	Farmer empowerment	Double incomes, promote crop diversification, agri-tech, irrigation, FPOs, market access.
7	Healthcare and human development	Strengthen primary & preventive healthcare, digital health, biobanks, skilled workers, and affordable and elderly care.
8	Net-zero development target	Focus on renewables, green infrastructure, circular economy, nature-based solutions.

KEY ENABLERS

Tech & Innovation • Efficient Financing • Digital Governance

Issued by: I&PR Department, Govt. of Telangana

As India accelerates its growth trajectory, Telangana is aligning its governance, infrastructure and economic vision to match the moment. For investors and enterprises seeking clarity, stability, and opportunity, the state offers a landscape built for the future. A path that's never been more promising, and this is the moment to be a part of it. Join the rise.

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21 DECEMBER 2025

Why India has no place in the 'Pax Silica' order



At the first convening of the Pax Silica Summit in Washington DC, 12 December 2025 *Photo:* ***Getty Images***

Ashok Swain

Pax Silica' has emerged in late 2025 as a pillar of President Donald Trump's new national security strategy, designed to restructure global supply chains in critical minerals, semiconductors and advanced technologies around a tightly knit circle of trusted allies. Its founding members are a new group of seven—the US, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, UK, Israel and Australia, a grouping selected for their technological depth, policy alignment and strategic reliability.

The inaugural Pax Silica Summit was held in Washington DC on 12 December, where the US also hosted additional participants—Taiwan, Canada, the EU, Netherlands, the UAE and others. Guest participants were present to provide advisory inputs, technical expertise and policy guidance while the core members signed the Pax Silica Declaration to cooperate on securing supply chains for semiconductors, critical minerals, AI infrastructure and allied technologies.

India's absence from the Pax Silica grouping is not accidental; it indicates how the Trump administration assesses India, how peripheral India now is to Washington's strategic calculus. India's marginalisation is reinforced by President Trump's national security strategy released in November 2025, in which India appears only in passing, treated as a secondary regional actor rather than a central strategic partner in shaping the future global order.

The Pax Silica initiative goes well beyond the logic of a mini-lateral partnership. It represents a bid by the US to define the economic architecture of the 21st century by anchoring control over minerals, chips, AI infrastructure and advanced manufacturing within a trusted bloc. Exclusion from such a project at the time of its creation has lasting consequences. It places India on the margins of US strategic planning at a point when technological power is becoming the main currency of global influence. It also exposes the yawning hiatus between years of Prime Minister Modi's diplomatic rhetoric about special ties with the US and the reality of India's diminished standing.

The Modi government has so far responded by not responding. That silence itself is revealing. It reflects the difficulty of reconciling domestic triumphalism about India's global rise with the reality of how India is now perceived in key Western capitals. Pax Silica includes countries smaller than India in both population and market size, some far more dependent on US security guarantees, and some with no pretence to 'strategic autonomy'. Manifestly, the US is looking at them as reliable, predictable partners, who are aligned with US priorities in technology and supply chains and share its political values.

The decision to keep India at arm's length is less about its technical capability and more about (dis)trust. India does have strengths in chip design, software and a growing interest in semiconductor manufacturing. But Pax Silica is not about potential; it is about policy coherence and alignment. Washington is drawing towards countries willing to embed their industrial strategies within a US-led coalition. That requires regulatory stability, openness to foreign capital, clarity on export controls and a willingness to accept US partnership without constant hedging. India under Modi has moved in the opposite direction.

For years Modi has projected himself as a global statesman who can befriend everyone while offending no one. The emphasis on personal chemistry, grand diaspora events and photo-ops has substituted hard institutional work that forms the bedrock of foreign policy. This personality-driven approach seemed to work for a while, when Washington was eager to court India as a counterweight to China. But with India not looking like a counterweight anymore—not economically, nor technologically nor even in soft-power terms—the US is narrowing its circle and prioritising partners who can be integrated quickly into tightly coordinated technology ecosystems.

At a point when tech prowess is the main currency of global influence, India is on the margins of US strategic planning

The Pax Silica coalition is explicitly designed to reduce dependence on China. Yet India's own China policy has been marked by contradictions. After the border clashes in Ladakh in 2020, the Modi government not only failed to confront China but also quietly restored economic ties. Chinese imports reached record levels even as China-bashing was amped up for Modi's domestic audience. Washington can see that India wants the best of both worlds: the benefits of a strategic partnership and the leeway of 'strategic autonomy' to pursue other ties and treaties in self-interest.

The oil deal with Russia was exactly such a sticking point. When India continues to expand energy trade with Moscow and signals interest in advanced Russian military systems, it reinforces doubts about where India would stand in a major geopolitical crisis.

Strategic autonomy may be a cherished slogan in New Delhi, but for a coalition built on controlled technologies and sensitive supply chains, ambiguity is a liability. Trade policy is another self-inflicted wound, with the Modi government's positions sounding like a hodgepodge of protectionist rhetoric, cronyism and unpredictable regulatory twists and turns.

India's exclusion from the Pax Silica alliance also exposes the limits of Modi's belief that ideological affinity with right-wing forces in the West would compensate for policy divergence. The assumption that shared ethno-nationalistic beliefs and manufactured personal rapport with leaders like Donald Trump would translate into structural advantages has proven naïve. The Pax Silica pact reflects a cold assessment of who will play ball when it matters.

India's domestic political trajectory, marked by democratic backsliding and attacks on minorities, has further complicated its image. While Washington is clearly not averse to working with illiberal partners, when necessary, it also assesses their indispensability. India has not made itself indispensable in the critical technologies that Pax Silica prioritises.

Modi has repeatedly claimed that India is indispensable to any global solution, whether on climate, supply chains or security. Pax Silica demonstrates the hollowness of that claim as well. When the US moved to design the architecture of a future technology economy, India was not at the table. This is not because India lacks potential, but because potential alone does not shape coalitions.

Some right-wing commentators think India may be invited later. But entering a club after the rules have been written is not the same as shaping them. Founding members set norms, standards and power hierarchies. Latecomers adapt or remain marginal. Modi's foreign policy has repeatedly produced this pattern. India joins initiatives after the strategic momentum has shifted elsewhere, then claims success simply by being present.

At the very least, Pax Silica is a reality check for India's insistence on 'strategic autonomy'. India cannot be part of the Western technological core without making hard choices. It cannot demand strategic trust from the US while insisting on maximal flexibility.

It bears repetition that India's exclusion is not the result of Western hostility, but rather because India's so-called 'strategic autonomy' has neither a moral core nor policy coherence; it is simply a patchwork of convenient relationships, which give no indication of which way Modi's government will turn when push comes to shove. ■

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

The fake history juggernaut trundles on

Hasnain Naqvi breaks down the politically motivated retelling of the 'Ghaznavid Invasions' in a new NCERT textbook

The BJP–Sangh project to rewrite medieval Indian history has turned NCERT textbooks into an ideological battlefield. The most recent focus of this bigoted enterprise is the 'Ghaznavid Invasions', most famously under Mahmud of Ghazni. And its chosen first victim the newly released Class 7 NCERT social science textbook, titled *Exploring Society, India and Beyond*.

Introduced with a cautionary preface on history's 'darker periods', the book expands its treatment of said invasions, casting Mahmud of Ghazni foremost as a religious zealot. Mahmud, in this characterisation, is seen as a ruthless iconoclast determined to 'spread his version of Islam to non-Muslim parts of the world'. The retelling relies on court chroniclers like Al-Utbi and Al-Biruni to underline Mahmud's alleged obsession with slaughtering 'infidels' and storming temples—especially Somnath.

This is a dramatic departure from the earlier NCERT (National Council of Educational Research and Training) edition, which covered Mahmud of Ghazni in a brief paragraph (remember this is a Class 7 textbook), noting that his raids in the subcontinent were primarily aimed at looting the wealth of these temples.

Confronting uncomfortable histories is a legitimate pedagogical aim. But this project is not pedagogical; it's political—and the aim, once again, is to reduce the complexity of underlying motivations to a Hindu–Muslim binary that serious historiography has long rejected. Eminent scholars like Mohammad Habib, Satish Chandra and Romila Thapar have repeatedly demonstrated that Mahmud's incursions were driven less by religious piety than by the fiscal imperatives of sustaining a volatile Central Asian empire.

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While making all these new additions and foregrounding a different set of motivations for the raids, what the textbook fails to register is that the plundering of temples and their 'desecration' was not always religiously motivated, and the practice long predated the arrival of Turks from Central Asia.

In early medieval India, temples were not merely religious centres but repositories of royal wealth, land grants and markers of political legitimacy—making them prime targets in inter-dynastic warfare. Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* records that Harsha of Kashmir (11th century) systematically destroyed temples and melted their images to replenish the royal treasury.

Harsha, a Hindu ruler, appointed a special officer, the 'Devotpatana Nayaka' (literally: leader/officer for uprooting/destroying deities), not out of religious zealotry but for political consolidation and wealth extraction in times of fiscal stress.

A similar logic operated in peninsular India. The celebrated Rajendra Chola I, whose naval expeditions reached Bengal and Southeast Asia in the 11th century, carried off immense wealth—including temple treasures—from defeated kingdoms. Inscriptions proudly record the seizure of sacred icons and ritual wealth as symbols of imperial triumph.

Cutting across swathes of early and medieval India—from the Rashtrakutas to the Chalukyas—rulers attacked rival shrines because temples embodied sovereignty, not because the faith of the raiders demanded iconoclasm. These facts underscore a pattern: sacred places of worship were repeatedly violated by rulers to assert their domination and to extract wealth. To recognise this pattern and to accommodate this complexity does not absolve Mahmud of the violence; it places his incursions in the correct historical perspective, and corrects the misconception that the political culture of plunder was somehow a uniquely Islamic perversion.

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In its dramatic retelling of Mahmud's seventeen campaigns between 1001 and 1027 CE, culminating in the sack of Somnath, the textbook privileges Al-Utbi's triumphalist account of temple destruction and Al-Biruni's report of the shattered Shivalinga being transported to Ghazni. Truth is these accounts were directed at a courtly audience and have flourishes that exaggerate details for that audience.

As Romila Thapar argues in *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History* (2004), the rhetoric of jihad in such chronicles was often hyperbolic, deployed to enhance Mahmud's standing with the Abbasid Caliphate and to legitimise his rule at home.

Drawing on Persian, Sanskrit and Jain sources, Thapar explains that temples were attacked not as religious targets but as symbols of political authority and centres of wealth. Somnath represented Chalukya sovereignty as much as Shaivite devotion. Its destruction was a calculated geopolitical strike rather than a civilisational war.

Thapar further notes that contemporary Indian responses to Somnath were notably muted; the idea of a cataclysmic Hindu–Muslim rupture emerged much later, shaped by colonial historiography eager to frame Indian history as an unbroken saga of religious conflict.

Mohammad Habib's *Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznin* (1951) remains decisive in rejecting the caricature of Mahmud as a religious fanatic. Habib argues that Islam sanctions neither indiscriminate plunder nor vandalism, and that Mahmud lacked the doctrinal zeal associated with later rulers. His overriding concern was funding his army, appeasing Turkic chiefs and defending his empire against Central Asian rivals. Habib's meticulous accounting of loot—from Nagarkot to Kannauj—demonstrates how Indian wealth underwrote Ghazni's monuments and military power. Numismatic evidence further confirms the circulation of Indian gold in Ghaznavid mints.

Satish Chandra, in *Medieval India: From Sultanat to the Mughals*, offers a balanced synthesis. Mahmud's raids combined plunder with political spectacle, but economics remained paramount. Unlike Muhammad Ghori, Mahmud neither sought nor established durable rule in India. His expeditions were calculated strikes into a politically fragmented landscape where temples—like forts and treasuries—offered accessible resources.

Together, these scholarly interventions expose the dangers of NCERT's selective reliance on Al-Utbi and Al-Biruni. Utbi exaggerated casualty figures to glorify his patron; Biruni, despite his admiration for Indian learning, wrote under Ghaznavid patronage. Missing from the textbook are countervailing voices such as the *Ekalinga Mahatmya*, which laments Somnath's fall in economic rather than metaphysical terms. By framing Mahmud primarily as a proselytising butcher, the NCERT echoes colonial tropes that Romila Thapar identifies as 'communal dogma'.

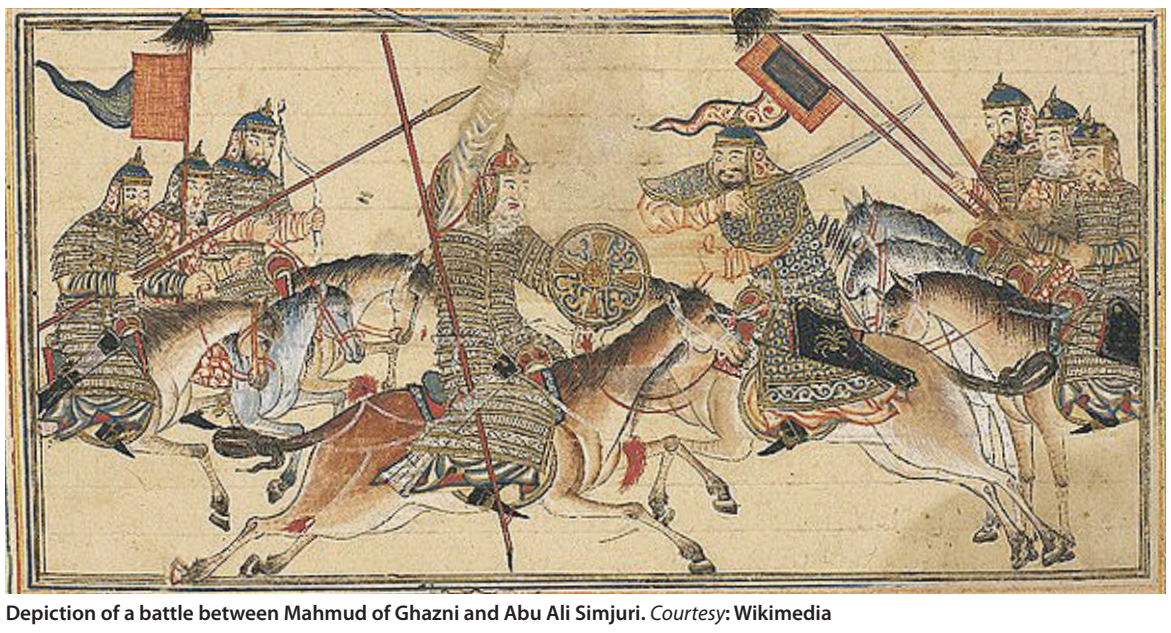
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Earlier NCERT textbooks explicitly noted that temples were targeted because rulers endowed them as markers of sovereignty. To deliberately distort this history in middle school textbooks is to plant a bigoted worldview in young minds. It obscures the reality that Indian polities—from the Cholas to the Rashtrakutas—had a shared political grammar, where wealth extraction—not religious conversion—was the primary motive driving warfare.

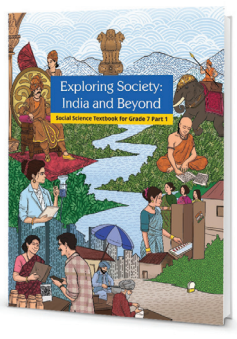
In this politically motivated reconstruction of history, students will learn to view the medieval past as a perpetual clash of faiths rather than a contest between political economies. Across centuries, rulers have couched resource extraction in the moralising idiom of divine sanction, civilisational duty, national security and suchlike. But that shouldn't obscure our understanding of what really happened and why.

Teaching history is neither about sanitising violence nor about weaponising memory for political ends. It is about cultivating critical engagement with sources, context, complexity. A balanced pedagogy introduces multiplicity, encourages scepticism of triumphalist narratives and situates events in broader political and economic frameworks. Such an approach equips students not with inherited resentments, but with historical literacy—the most enduring gift a history curriculum can offer. ■

HASNAIN NAQVI *is a former member of the history faculty of St. Xavier's College, Mumbai*



Depiction of a battle between Mahmud of Ghazni and Abu Ali Simjuri. *Courtesy*: **Wikimedia**



Mahmud's attacks on India's temples were opportunistic strikes to get at their great wealth

DECENTRALIZING TECH GROWTH: KeO AS THE CORE PILLAR OF KARNATAKA'S DIGITAL MISSION

DESIGNED, DEVELOPED, AND DELIVERED: KeO PUTS KARNATAKA AT THE FOREFRONT OF INDIGENOUS AI HARDWARE

The narrative of technological progress in India has long been one of profound paradoxes. On one hand, the nation stands as a global superpower in software and IT services; on the other, a fundamental lack of hardware access persists at the grassroots level.

This reality is most keenly felt in the very beating heart of India's technological future—Bengaluru—where, despite the immense wealth of innovation, a critical challenge lingered: a persistent digital divide that threatened to leave millions behind, effectively denying them access to 21st-century opportunities.

The numbers were stark, painting a picture of profound and unacceptable disparity: Data showed that fewer than 10 per cent of Indian households own a computer, a staggering figure that reveals the depth of the hardware penetration problem.



BUDDH is designed to function as an always-available academic assistant for students, providing crucial support even in low-connectivity regions. The Minister explained the depth and power of its capability: "The AI agent will answer any queries almost in real time with respect to the syllabus. And if they want to go beyond that syllabus, they can do that also."

Even within the economically advanced state of Karnataka, the figure was only 15 per cent, a meager penetration rate far, far below what is genuinely required for modern education, digital-first jobs, and comprehensive civic participation.

This lack of a suitable, affordable device had tangible, painful consequences for the most vulnerable: it meant over 60 per cent of Indian students reported being unable to participate in online learning, a factor directly contributing to higher dropout rates and widening the gap between the privileged and the underserved.

This colossal gap demanded not just a simple fix—a mere temporary subsidy or a recycled device—but a fundamental revolution in how technology is conceived, manufactured, and ultimately distributed to the last mile.

The challenge was willingly taken up and embraced by the Department of Electronics, IT & BT, Government of Karnataka, in powerful and decisive collaboration with the state-run Karnataka State Electronics Development Corporation Limited (KEONICS).

They collectively refused to accept this status quo of technological exclusion. They embarked on a bold mission, dedicating nearly a year to intensive work, research, and development, striving to conceive a robust and equitable solution that could truly democratize high-power computing. Their inquiry was pointed, strategic, and profoundly transformative: What if every student, every small business, every household could access powerful, intelligent computing, not at the top of the pyramid, where costs are prohibitive, but at the grassroots, where the need is most urgent?

The answer—a profound declaration of inclusion and national innovation—was unveiled with immense pride at the prestigious Bengaluru Tech Summit: KeO, a compact, affordable, AI-ready personal computer, poised to redefine accessibility.

The Birth of KeO: Knowledge, Economy, Openness

The very identity of the device is rooted deeply in its mission, a purpose powerfully encapsulated in its three-letter acronym. KeO is an acronym that defines its very essence and purpose: Knowledge-driven, Economical, and Open-source.

This unwavering philosophy was the primary driving force behind the entire project's execution. Priyank Kharge, the Hon'ble Minister for Electronics, IT & BT, and Rural Development & Panchayat Raj, articulated the driving philosophy with utmost clarity: "KEO is Karnataka's practical answer to the digital divide. It is not a luxury device; it is an inclusion device. Affordable mass computing will allow every student, every small business and every household to participate fully in the digital economy."

This explicit and intentional commitment positioned the project immediately as a humanitarian undertaking supported by a technological solution. It bears noting, and is a source of great state pride, that the project was the first time anywhere in the world that a State has taken such a bold and disruptive step to integrate open-source hardware and Artificial Intelligence for the purpose of achieving mass market affordability and inclusion.

An Open-Source Mind: The RISC-V Revolution

To achieve true, lasting affordability and strategically guarantee the device's longevity, the KeO team knew instinctively that they had to decisively break free from the prohibitive costs and inherent restrictions of proprietary systems. Their strategic choice was clear and definitive: a fully open-source hardware and software stack.

At its very core, KeO runs on a sophisticated and modern Quad-Core RISC-V 64-bit Processor. Sharath Kumar Bache Gowda, Chairman of KEONICS, explained the monumental and strategic choice with foresight: "By adopting an open-source RISC-V stack, KEO strengthens Karnataka's commitment to accessible, locally adaptable, home-grown computing solutions."

His insight was drawn directly from research that showed a major, frustrating issue with older, proprietary devices was planned obsolescence, a calculated design flaw where devices became functionally unusable in just 3-4 years.

"Open-source architectures like RISC-V offer much longer life. That's why we moved to open-source hardware and software," he stressed. This crucial strategic decision eliminates costly licensing fees and strategically ensures the device remains viable and usable for many years.

Crucially, this is an indigenous triumph. The processor itself was proudly designed and developed in Bengaluru by the semiconductor fabless manufacturer Exaleap, standing as a powerful and visible testament to the state's indigenous design capabilities in the complex and demanding deep-tech domain.

Though the fabrication (manufacturing) of the silicon is currently done in Taiwan, this profound commitment to local design makes KeO a truly 'Designed and developed in Karnataka' milestone, solidifying the state's reputation as an innovation hub.

Unbeatable Value: Performance Meets Affordability

The direct and tangible result of this strategic, open-source design approach is an AI-ready PC priced at an unprecedented ₹18,999. The Minister proudly stated, "Nowhere in the world can you build such a device for ₹18,999."

This pricing makes it accessible to a massive new market segment. While it must be explicitly noted that the device is a standalone computing unit—meaning accessories like a monitor, keyboard, and mouse have to be bought separately by the end-user—its core value proposition remains undeniable and profoundly disruptive to the traditional computing market.

The device boasts robust specifications that deliver a genuine, modern computing experience. It includes a substantial 8 GB of RAM and 32 GB of internal memory, along with the impressive capability to handle 1 TB of external storage for massive data and media needs.

For its stable and secure operating environment, it runs on the Linux-based Ubuntu operating system, a platform renowned for being stable, resource-efficient, and secure. Furthermore, it comes comprehensively pre-installed with essential open-source software like the widely used Mozilla Firefox browser and the universally accessible free LibreOffice software applications, collectively delivering a comprehensive, full computing experience immediately upon setup.

The Intelligence Within: BUDDH, the Offline Tutor

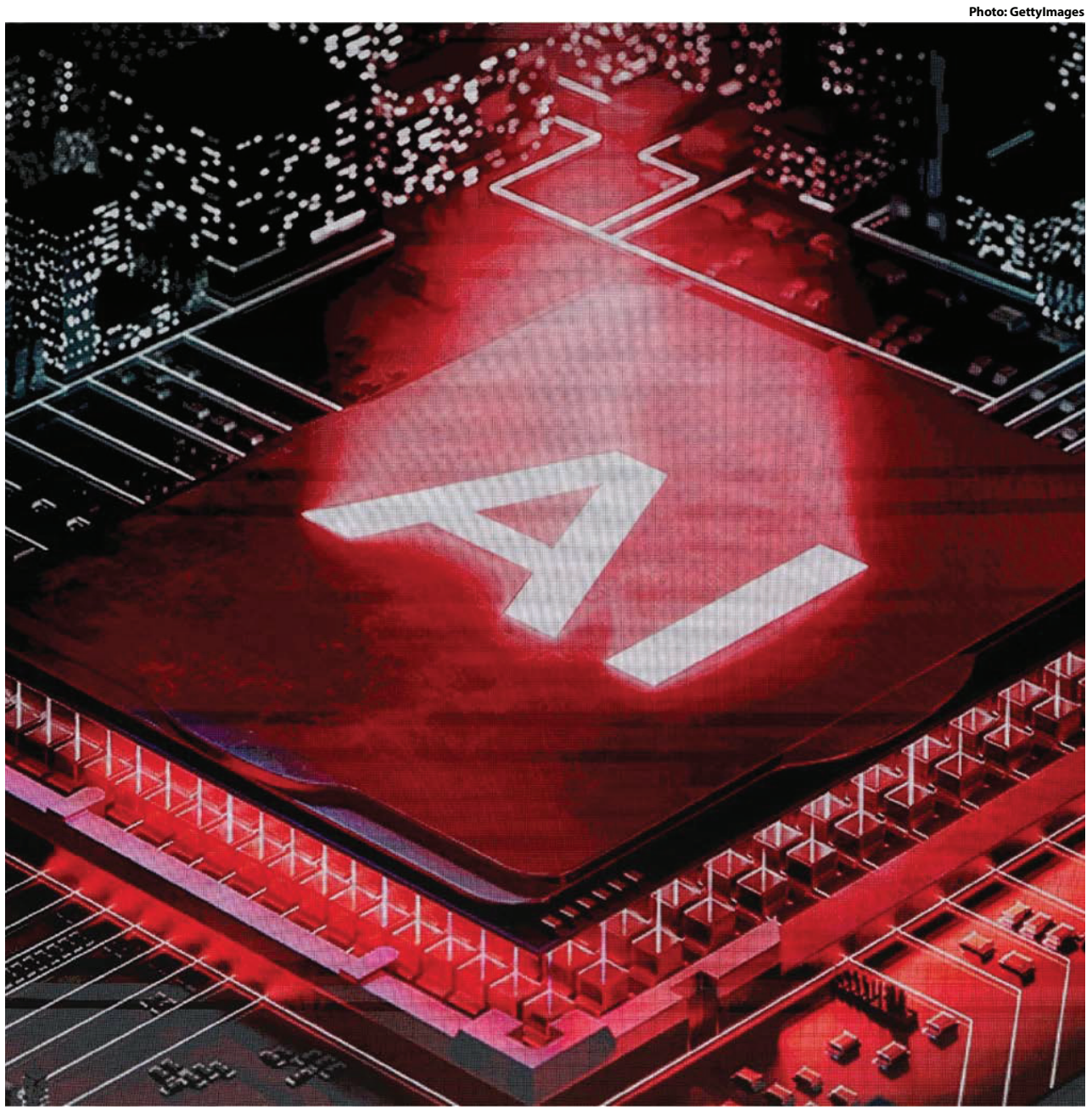
What truly sets KeO apart from virtually every other low-cost computer available on the market is its integrated intelligence: the dedicated on-device AI core which allows sophisticated AI applications to run locally and efficiently without requiring any internet access.

This powerful, life-changing capability is driven by BUDDH, the intelligent AI agent trained specifically on the Karnataka DSERT (Department of State Educational Research and Training) syllabus.

BUDDH is designed to function as an always-available academic assistant for students, providing crucial support even in low-connectivity regions. The Minister explained the depth and power of its capability: "The AI agent will answer any queries almost in real time with respect to the syllabus. And if they want to go beyond that syllabus, they can do that also."

While the agent currently works proficiently in English, the department has concrete and active plans to support Kannada over time, ensuring wider linguistic inclusion and deeper understanding for all students across the state. This highly sophisticated, syllabus-aligned functionality makes KeO not just a conventional computer, but an integrated digital learning platform.

Photo: GettyImages



Connectivity and Deployment: Reaching the Last Mile

Housed in a compact, small-form-factor box that appears akin to a workstation computer, KeO is deliberately built for versatile connectivity, ensuring it functions seamlessly across diverse environments, from rural schools to urban government offices.

It includes comprehensive connectivity options such as 4G, Wi-Fi, Ethernet, USB-A and USB-C ports, HDMI, and an audio jack support. Crucially, the provision for a SIM card slot ensures essential mobile data access, which is absolutely vital for guaranteeing internet connectivity in the vast majority of areas where no fixed Wi-Fi network exists or where broadband penetration is low.

The deployment plan is robust, comprehensive, and wide-ranging, deliberately designed to maximize public benefit and accelerate digital inclusion. KeO will be rolled out strategically across all key sectors:

- Schools, colleges, and universities
- Small businesses and micro-entrepreneurs
- Government offices and health centers

Individual households

The market has immediately embraced the vision, recognizing its immense transformative power. Highly respected business personalities like Infosys co-founder Kris Gopalakrishnan and Biocon chief Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw were highly impressed with the device's potential, and have already placed an order to procure and sponsor 1,000 units to be distributed in schools under their essential CSR initiatives. As a tangible mark of its immediate commercial appeal and necessity, KEONICS has already received substantial pre-orders for 1,500 units overall.

The Road Ahead: Scaling and Future Promise

The development of this assembled device was an intense, collaborative effort that took around a year of dedicated work, involving a diverse group of experts from industry, academia, and researchers specializing in RISC-V and microsystems. An eight-member advisory committee, including experts from IISc and IIIT, have tested the device thoroughly, ensuring its academic rigor and technical soundness before its public release.

KeO powerfully embodies the spirit of Karnataka—it is designed, developed and assembled here by local startups and Kannadigas. Looking ahead, KEONICS is already actively looking at various options for assembling KeOs within India, specifically mentioning Mysuru as a potential location, with the dual goal of creating local jobs and securing the domestic supply chain.

While global geopolitics did push up memory costs initially, making the project transition from a 'low-cost' to an 'affordable' one, the Minister has confidently confirmed that the market is stabilizing, and the government's steadfast aim is to further reduce the cost once stability returns.

The path to mass adoption is clearly defined and scheduled: Pre-orders can be placed immediately on the official portal, and the device will be available for delivery within 60 days of pre-order.KeO is more than a technological achievement; it is a powerful, affirmative, and strategic declaration that every citizen of Karnataka deserves access to the essential tools that will define the future. It stands as the core pillar of the state's mission to build decentralised tech growth and ensure equal digital opportunities for every citizen across all regions and demographics.

This is Karnataka's promise delivered: powerful, intelligent, and affordable computing for all, ushering in an era of true digital inclusion.

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Where is Rivaldo?

An elephant vanishes, unsettling the Nilgiris where forests and people tangle over a fragile ecosystem

K.A. Shaji

There are landscapes that carry silence like an inheritance. The Nilgiris is one such. It is a land whose quietness does not imply absence but an older, deeper fullness, the murmur of age-old forests, the patient drift of light across grasslands and the steady, almost ceremonial, movements of elephants who have travelled the same pathways for centuries. Over the past month, a different kind of stillness has settled across the Sigur plateau, one that feels like a missing note in a familiar composition.

For weeks now, people who know this landscape intimately—Irula trackers, forest guards, conservationists, plantation workers, resort staff, villagers and even police patrols assigned to volatile forest fringes—have been asking the same question with a mixture of worry and reverence. Where is Rivaldo?

The fifty-four-year-old tusker, whose slow, stately presence once provided a strange reassurance to both forest and settlement, has not been seen for more than a month. Known for the regularity of his wanderings, his composure around humans and his recurring appearances in familiar haunts, Rivaldo's absence has begun to weigh heavily on the region's collective imagination.

Elephants do disappear—it's the nature of that ecology. They walk long distances, shift ranges, vanish into ravines and valleys that the ordinary human eye is not able to track. But Rivaldo's disappearance feels more like a rupture than an ecological event.

Somewhere, perhaps in a valley too deep for human eyes, a tusker may still be moving slowly, carrying memories of a house that welcomed him without fear

To trace why his absence feels so profound, it helps to begin with a house beside the Sigurhalla stream and the man whose vision shaped his relationship with the forest.

In 1964, E.R.C. Davidar, writer, naturalist and early conservation thinker, built a modest home along the Sigurhalla stream. It would come to be known as Cheetal Walk. With its tiled roof, its veranda and stone steps leading into a clearing, it looked like any other dwelling of the Nilgiri foothills. But the house was conceived as something far more radical: a place where humans would not impose themselves on the forest but would inhabit it gently, leaving pathways open for the creatures who had walked there long before any human arrived.

Davidar believed that if humans did not behave as aggressors, wildlife would not respond as victims or adversaries. He allowed elephants, deer and even predators to move through his property with as little hindrance as possible. He refused to fence off the land. He avoided the reflexive fears that govern so much of human interaction with the wild. Slowly, as if in recognition of this unusual hospitality, the forest accepted him. Elephants wandered across the grounds without alarm. Deer grazed near the veranda. Leopards passed by as though the house were simply another feature of their terrain.

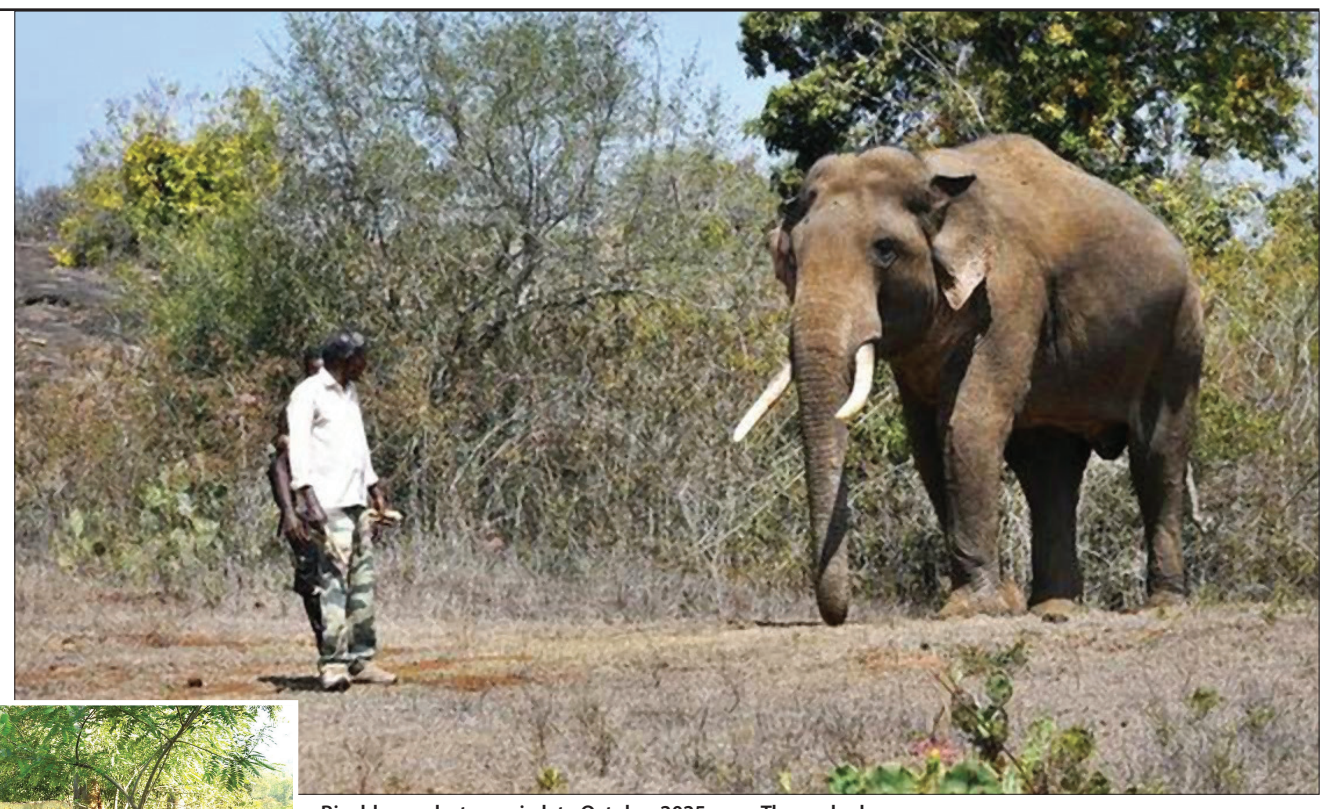
It was in this atmosphere that a young tusker began appearing regularly. Over the years, he became one of the most recognisable elephants in the region. He was dignified and noticeably calm despite living in an area increasingly marked by conflict. He would eventually be named Rivaldo by Davidar's son Mark.

Rivaldo's early years near Cheetal Walk shaped his temperament. He learned, through repeated encounters, that humans were not necessarily beings to fear.

When Mark Davidar died on 19 October 2013, it was not only a personal tragedy for a small community of conservationists but a snapping of the link between Cheetal Walk and the elephants of the Sigur plateau. Mark—who had inherited his father's patience and his quiet powers of observation—was the last steward of that space.

Despite the lack of familiar human presence, Rivaldo continued to return to Cheetal Walk, often lingering at its edges, as if expecting Mark to emerge. Locals still speak of the poignant sight of a large tusker standing near a gate that no longer opened, of the persistence of memory in a creature whose world was already beginning to fray.




Rivaldo was last seen in late October 2025, near Theppakadu

Around the time of Mark's death, Rivaldo suffered an injury that altered his life. The tip of his trunk was severed, either in a poacher's snare or by a crude explosive meant for wild boar. The injury made feeding laborious, often painful. Large fruits became hard to grip, branches harder to break and water strenuous to draw. For an elephant, whose trunk is essential for almost every aspect of survival, this was a profound impairment.

In the years that followed, perhaps missing the quiet reassurance of Cheetal Walk, Rivaldo began approaching human settlements. He displayed none of the aggression typical of elephants repeatedly harassed by human activity. Instead, he approached with the cautious dignity of an animal seeking no more than necessary.

Villagers left vegetables and fruit. Tourists offered food from passing jeeps. Resort workers fed him as guests took photos. Unwittingly, humans reconfigured the boundaries between forest and settlement. The habituation that developed was not a product of malice but misplaced compassion.

By 2021, Rivaldo was so visible near human habitations that the forest department confined him to a kraal, claiming they wished to retrain him.

The decision ignited fierce debate. Conservationists argued that Rivaldo was being punished for the behaviour of humans. Local communities felt betrayed. Resorts, that had once viewed him as an asset, quietly pushed for his removal.

Davidar believed that if humans did not behave like aggressors, wildlife would not respond as victim or adversary. He refused to fence off his land

Eventually, Rivaldo was released. His recovery was remarkable. He adjusted his routes, avoided settlements, rejoined wild herds. His story became a reference point for the possibility of rewilding.

Rivaldo was last seen in late October 2025, near Theppakadu. Forest staff had spotted him walking slowly, accompanied at times by younger tuskers. Then, without warning, he disappeared.

The first week, people shrugged. The second, they asked questions. By the third week, the drone flights began. By the fourth, trackers studied the forest floor with growing tension.

It wasn't just about a missing elephant anymore. It was about the state of the Nilgiris.

The Nilgiris are a landscape under siege. Resorts have spilled over forest margins. Estates have fenced traditional elephant paths. Traffic has increased, at all hours. Waterholes are unreliable due to changing rainfall. Illegal structures crowd the edges of Mudumalai. Ecological buffers have collapsed under the weight of unregulated tourism and speculative real estate.

The elephants that once walked this land with the confidence of ancient ownership now navigate a landscape that has shifted beyond recognition. An older elephant like Rivaldo is especially vulnerable. He may have reclaimed his wildness, but the wild is no longer what it used to be.

Officials say that no carcass has been found. No disturbed herds or confirmed distress. They note that elephants can disappear for weeks. They remind people that radio collars fail. Yet the undertone of worry persists.

The forest holds its silences closely, and this silence has a weight that is difficult to dismiss. A host of difficult questions occupy the emptiness left by Rivaldo's going. How can one 'protect' elephants while destroying their habitats? Where is the room for conservation within unrestrained 'development'? How is coexistence possible when the very land that enables it is vanishing?

Meanwhile, the region waits. Foresters walk their routes before dawn. Tribal trackers examine the ground. In tea shops, men speak of Rivaldo in the present tense. Hope persists.

Somewhere, perhaps in a valley too deep for human eyes, a tusker may still be moving slowly, carrying memories of a house that welcomed him without fear. Or perhaps he has gone the way old elephants often do—quietly, without drama. ■

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