

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

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New Delhi • 29 March 2026 • Pages: 20 • National • Vol. 9 Issue 23 • ₹20

NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

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Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu

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HOME & ABROAD

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...and the real agenda is to pry open its economy to American investments

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Modi's Iran policy is 'strategic surrender'

Gurdeep Singh Sappal explains how India has shot its 'strategic autonomy' in the foot by jettisoning Chabahar under US pressure

Long before diplomacy had a name, India and Iran were already in conversation. The Indus Valley traded lapis lazuli and ivory with ancient Persia. Sanskrit and Avestan share a common ancestor. Indian courts, land records, music and the Hindi language still carry Persian fingerprints. Which is why the Modi government's abrupt desertion of Iran is not just a foreign policy failure; it is a civilisational betrayal—unconsidered, unannounced and unexplained to either Tehran or the Indian people.

India and Iran have had their differences, but never before were relations reset so abruptly and surreptitiously, abandoning diplomatic channels.

India's independence in 1947 created a structural divide. Iran, which was an immediate neighbour, no longer shared a border with India; Pakistan separated the two countries.

The Shah's Iran was firmly in the Western camp, while Nehru's India was non-aligned. When India sided with Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, bilateral ties frayed further. Paradoxically, it was Khomeini's Islamic

Revolution of 1979 that reopened the door. Both countries were now outside America's strategic embrace and both had reasons to watch Pakistan's growing regional ambitions with alarm.

Afghanistan played a hand in the renewal of India-Iran ties. As the Taliban consolidated power in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, India and Iran found themselves ranged on the same side of the battle. Pakistan's military intelligence agency ISI was the Taliban's principal backer.

India and Iran, alongside Russia, provided political support, financing and arms to the Northern Alliance. This was not a partnership featuring the diplomatic confetti of joint communiqués; it rested on the hard solidarity of common enemies and shared interests.

In 1994, against the backdrop of the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992, Pakistan tried to mobilise the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) against India at the UN Human Rights Commission. Iran blocked the OIC consensus—an Islamic republic chose India over Pakistan. Tehran has shielded New Delhi at the OIC ever since.

Chabahar, CPEC and a strategic counter

Turmoil in Afghanistan gave India what the Partition had taken away—a route to Central Asia bypassing Pakistan.

In 2015, China embedded itself permanently on India's western flank with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It planned Pakistan's Gwadar port as its maritime anchor and designed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to build a China-centric economic architecture across Asia, locking in dependencies that would outlast governments.

India's answer was Chabahar, which gives India direct access to Afghanistan without crossing a single mile of Pakistani territory. More significantly, Chabahar is the entry point to a 7,200 kilometre multi-modal network, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) connecting Mumbai to Moscow via Tehran and Baku. India, Iran and Russia signed the INSTC agreement in 2000. Fully operationalised, this corridor would reduce cargo transit time from 40 days to 20 and cut transport costs by 30 per cent, providing India an arterial trade route to Central Asia, Russia and Europe, bypassing Pakistan and China's preferred chokepoints.

Chabahar is more than just a port—it's a critical element of India's foreign policy architecture to physically counter China's CPEC and BRI; it's a way for India to assert that it won't be landlocked by the China-Pakistan axis. Remove Chabahar from India's strategic inventory and India loses its western connectivity flank to Beijing and Islamabad forever; there is no substitute.

That's why successive governments supported the Chabahar project. The Manmohan Singh government committed \$100 million to its development after his visit to Tehran in 2012. Modi too visited Tehran in 2016 and signed the Shahid Beheshti Terminal agreement. India took operational control of the terminal in May 2024. Modi claimed it as a landmark achievement—and it was.

Abrupt capitulation, under US pressure, means India has lost its independent overland gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia

Photo: Getty Images

A masterclass in 'strategic autonomy'...

When the US and EU imposed sweeping sanctions on Iran in 2011-12, cutting Iranian banks from the global dollar system, Dr Manmohan Singh demonstrated what a sovereign foreign policy looks like. He declared publicly in a press conference that India would continue importing Iranian oil despite sanctions and then announced a trade delegation to Tehran.

In March 2012, Iranian banks were disconnected from the SWIFT financial messaging network, the global system for international banking transactions. Dr Singh challenged it by devising the 'rupee-rial payment mechanism' through UCO Bank, routing oil settlements entirely outside the dollar system and beyond Washington's

reach. The surplus accrued was used to clear billions in arrears owed to Indian exporters. That financial architecture was later adapted when India needed to trade with Russia after 2022.

Manmohan Singh's Iran policy built the infrastructure of India's sanctions-resistant trade system. At the peak of Western pressure, he sent then vice president Hamid Ansari, a former ambassador to Tehran, to attend President Rouhani's inauguration in August 2013. The message that India had not abandoned Iran needed no explicit words. That is what strategic autonomy looks like.

...and Modi's abject surrender

In 2019, bowing to Trump's pressure, India halted all crude imports from Iran, which had been India's second-largest oil supplier, at 16.5 per cent of its basket. Iranian oil came with freight discounts, favourable payment terms and non-dollar settlement; abandoning it cost India billions. Yet Chabahar remained on track and the friendship continued. Iran participated in India's Milan 2026 naval exercises at Visakhapatnam as recently as 25 February 2026.

Everything changed when Prime Minister Modi visited Israel on 26 February. Two days later, when the US-Israel war on Iran began, India made a visible shift. It did not condemn the violation of Iranian sovereignty. It did not condole the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader. When the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena was torpedoed by a US submarine in Sri Lanka's waters as it was returning from the Milan 2026 exercises, India's response focused on 'humanitarian search-and-rescue'. A guest in India had taken a hit at India's doorstep, but India looked away.

Under US pressure, the Modi government dropped funding for Chabahar to zero in the Union Budget 2026-27. India's bilateral trade with Iran has collapsed to \$1.68 billion. Its infrastructure investment in Chabahar is now at risk of becoming a stranded asset, which may be transferred to Chinese or Russian operators. The port India built to counter China may end up being operated by China.

Modi's abrupt capitulation means India loses its only independent overland gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The entire INSTC connectivity arc from the Arabian Sea to the Caspian is a casualty.

The US has publicly suggested that India requires its permission to buy Russian oil. This is not the foreign policy of a rising power; it is the foreign policy of a client state.

If India abandons Iran, it will lose the only geographical, infrastructural and strategic counter to China's Belt and Road. That would be a strategic self-goal and history will record it as such. ■

GURDEEP SINGH SAPPAL is a Permanent Invitee to the Congress Working Committee

They wage the war, we pay the price

Herjinder

March is usually the season when the first aroma of ripening Alphonso mangoes wafts through the orchards of the Konkan belt. In Maharashtra, Gujarat and parts of coastal Karnataka, the arrival of the mango season normally signals prosperity. Exporters begin to pack consignments for the Gulf, farmers anticipate good prices and traders prepare for the busiest weeks of the year.

This year, however, the mood in the mango belt is unusually gloomy. Growers and exporters say the war in West Asia has already begun to disrupt trade. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are the biggest buyers of Indian mangoes—in 2024, India exported nearly 12,000 metric tonnes of mangoes to the region. This year, orders have simply not come. A Surat-based fruit exporter summed up the situation bluntly: "Not a single order for mangoes has been received so far. And frankly, there is no hope at least for the next month."

The anxiety is spreading across the entire mango market. Farmers who grow mangoes mainly for domestic sale are equally worried. Once export demand collapses, they say, the domestic market is flooded with surplus fruit and prices crash.

The mango crisis is only the beginning. Even before the mango season has fully started, watermelon farmers have already been hit by the war's ripple effects. Export data from 2023 shows India shipped about 2.2 lakh kg watermelon to the Gulf region, particularly during the month of Ramadan,

when demand peaks. This year the numbers tell a different story. Up until March, exports were negligible. Ramadan came and went with virtually no shipments.

For farmers who depend on export-linked crops, the sudden disruption has come as a shock. A farmer leader told *National Herald* that the sector was already struggling to understand the implications of the new Indo-US trade agreement, when the war added another layer of uncertainty.

The Gulf region is not just a market for fruits. It is one of the largest buyers of Indian basmati rice, tea, spices and processed food products. A prolonged disruption in trade could therefore hurt millions of farmers and workers across the agricultural supply chain.

Agricultural produce is only one part of the picture. The Gulf region is also a major destination for India's gems and jewellery industry, which employs millions of workers in cities like Surat and Mumbai. If the conflict persists, exporters fear a sharp drop in orders. Pharmaceutical companies are also worried. Industry estimates suggest that bulk drug exports from India could fall by 20-30 per cent if trade routes remain disrupted and demand weakens.

Jobs will inevitably be affected. Export-oriented sectors typically support a large number of contract workers and small suppliers. When exports decline, the first response of businesses is often to cut costs through layoffs or reduced working hours.

The result could be rising unemployment for both full-time and part-time workers, particularly in rural areas and among informal workers who are already vulnerable.



The cascading effect of a long-drawn war will be felt across all sectors

The war is also triggering a less visible but potentially more dangerous crisis for Indian agriculture: fertilisers.

India imports a large share of its fertiliser requirements, especially phosphatic fertilisers such as Di-Ammonium Phosphate (DAP). In recent weeks, the international price of DAP has surged sharply, rising from around \$665 per tonne to more than \$730 per tonne within a fortnight. The spike is driven by supply disruptions and rising demand in the global market. For India, which must secure large

quantities before the kharif sowing season, the timing couldn't have been worse.

Although the government keeps the retail price of DAP fixed at Rs 1,350 per 50-kg bag through subsidies, the real problem is availability. If imports are delayed or insufficient, farmers may have to depend more heavily on urea, leading to nutrient imbalance in soils and lower crop productivity.

Energy imports are perhaps India's most serious vulnerability during a global conflict. The country imports about 85 per cent of its crude oil requirement, and any sharp rise in prices immediately affects inflation and the current account deficit. Economists estimate that every \$10 increase in crude oil prices can widen India's current account deficit by roughly \$9 billion.

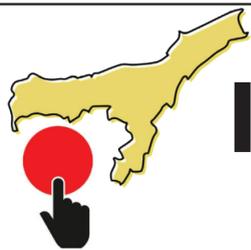
For now, the government has assured Parliament that India holds adequate petroleum reserves. However, the situation remains uncertain. A temporary waiver from the United States has allowed India to continue buying oil from Russia for a limited period, but such arrangements depend heavily on geopolitical decisions beyond India's control.

If the war drags on, energy costs could rise sharply, affecting transport, manufacturing and household expenses.

The most immediate crisis is natural gas. India depends heavily on imports of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and liquefied natural gas (LNG).

Prolonged disruption in trade due to the ongoing Gulf conflict will hurt millions of Indian farmers and workers

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Is Assam ready for change?

Sourabh Sen

Politics in Assam has never been so hateful," says state PCC chief and member of Parliament Gaurav Gogoi. The northeastern state, which has set new polarisation, is ready for change, he says.

Assam goes to polls on 9 April to elect a new 126-member assembly. Counting day is 4 May. In the 2021 assembly polls, the state had seen a voter turnout of 82.5 per cent.

Seemingly unfazed by high-profile defections on the eve of elections, Gogoi is addressing chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's toxic politics. Interestingly, defections are not one-way traffic this time. Upset with Biswa Sarma's decision to field even fresh defectors from the Congress—like Pradyut Bordoloi and Bhupen Bora—several BJP leaders have cast their lot with the Congress. Others have chosen to contest as Independents, complicating the poll arithmetic. With as many as 11 former Congressmen in the fray, dissatisfaction runs high among the BJP old guard.

BJP rebel Jayanta Das arrived surreptitiously to file his nomination as an independent candidate. Caution was necessary, he explained to media, as he was worried he'd be detained by the police, slapped with false cases and released only after the nominations were over. This will be the first time a constituency will have two Congress candidates, Das quipped (referring to recent defector Bordoloi and Mira Borthakur, the official Congress candidate).

In 2021, the BJP had secured 60 seats. The BJP-led NDA achieved 75 seats with a vote share of 44.5 per cent, narrowly ahead of the opposition Mahajot alliance which secured 43.7 per cent votes but won only 50 seats. The Congress tally of 29 pulled down the coalition. Wiser this time, the Congress has stitched a six-party alliance with Asom Sommilito Morcha (ASM), Rajjor Dal, Assam Jati Parishad (AJP), CPI(M), CPI(M-L) Liberation and the All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLIC). "This



Assam Congress president Gaurav Gogoi (left) is ready to take on the politics of polarisation unleashed by chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma



Photos: Getty Images

alliance will effectively prevent a split in opposition votes," claims Congress leader Hafiz Rashid Choudhury.

The 2026 elections, however, are taking place under vastly different conditions. The BJP rolled out a delimitation exercise in 2023, effectively gerrymandering Muslim-dominated constituencies. As per the 2011 census, Muslims account for 34 per cent of the population. While they have swung results in 35 seats, post-delimitation, this is expected to go down to 25 seats.

Two of the Congress's 2021 allies have moved on—the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), led by Badruddin Ajmal, and the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), led by Hagrama Mohilary. As part of the opposition alliance, the AIUDF had won nine per cent of the votes and the BPF three per cent.

The AIUDF's failure to oppose the BJP government's sustained attacks on Muslims has weakened it. A section of Muslim voters is moving towards the Congress to ensure a more viable 'national' challenge to the BJP. The BPF boycotted the NDA after winning the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) elections in 2025 September.

Following delimitation, the number of assembly seats in the Bodoland Territorial Region has gone up from 11 to 15 seats over which Mohilary and BPF have considerable influence.

Analysts are divided on the possible electoral impact of the Trinamool Congress going it alone in 22 constituencies and of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha fielding 21 candidates in upper tier.

*

In February, the BJP's Assam unit posted an animation video depicting the chief minister shooting at two Muslim men, with on-screen text declaring 'No mercy!' and 'foreigner-free Assam'.

The video provoked outrage and was deleted, but Sarma's anti-Muslim rhetoric continues. Boycott of Miyas, he has brazenly said he is all for "troubling Miyas" if that would free them out of Assam.

Days before the election was notified, the state government announced its decision to drop the name of former President of India Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, the first and the only Assamese to hold the

position, from the Barpeta medical college earlier known as Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed Medical College.

The government's 'anti-encroachment drive' openly targets Muslims, and continued during the month of Ramadan. Ahead of Eid, 566 families were evicted from Hasila Beel in Goalpara despite a high court order.

With the election notified and the model code of conduct in force, overtly bigoted messaging has taken a backseat, but there has been no let-up in attempts to polarise Assamese society. At a recent roadshow, Sarma was welcomed by BJP workers showering flowers on him from bulldozers lined up on both sides of the road.

Sarma's hate speech and polarising tactics do betray an anxiety about the likely verdict on his governance record. According to the state's own 2023-24 Economic Survey, nearly 10 lakh educated youth were jobless in Assam.

There's also growing discontent among the state's Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. In November, the Assam cabinet proposed the creation of 'ST (Valley)', a new ST category that would include the Ahoms, Sutias, Moran, Matak, Koch-Rajbongshis and Adivasis. Before this proposal, 10 per cent of reserved seats in public education and employment went to ST (Plains) communities and 5 per cent to ST (Hills) communities. The move to grant ST status to six more communities—especially Ahoms and Koch-Rajbongshis—has been strongly opposed by existing ST communities.

A recent wave of deadly violence between ethnic Karbi and Hindi-speaking Bihari communities in the Karbi Anglong district also exposed Assam's tricky ethnopolitical landscape. The Karbi tribes claimed that Biharis were encroaching on their grazing reserves; they burned down the ancestral home of a BJP leader and the Kheroni market, and looted shops of Bihari residents while the police stood by and watched.

People don't like what they see. The dissatisfaction with Himanta Biswa Sarma is real. A Guwahati-based social scientist said, on condition of anonymity, "there is a palpable undercurrent of inclusive sentiment in the state. But the question is can the opposition harvest that sentiment politically?" ■

SOURABH SEN is a Kolkata-based independent writer and commentator on politics, human rights and foreign affairs

"The dissatisfaction with Himanta is real and palpable. The question is whether the Opposition can exploit the sentiment"

...and we pay the price of war

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Much of this supply travels through the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic shipping route that handles a large share of global energy trade.

Any disruption there affects cooking gas, CNG transport fuel and industrial gas supply in India.

The shortage can already be seen in unexpected places. Several restaurants and catering businesses across cities have reportedly reduced operations or shut down temporarily due to no LPG supplies. This in turn affects workers ranging from cooks to delivery personnel in the gig economy.

If the conflict drags on for months rather than weeks, the consequences for the Indian economy could be profound. Export-oriented sectors may face prolonged demand shocks, forcing businesses to rethink supply chains and markets. Higher energy prices could push up inflation, forcing the central bank to maintain higher interest rates for longer. That would slow investment and economic growth. Disruptions in fertiliser supply and rising agricultural costs could intensify rural distress and affect food security. Finally, geopolitical instability in West Asia may threaten remittances from millions of Indian workers employed in the Gulf, which are a major source of foreign exchange for India.

The most alarming estimate comes from the US-based think tank SolAbility, whose report suggests that if the conflict in the Gulf persists, the long-term impact could reduce India's GDP by as much as 1.7 per cent, largely due to disruptions in LNG supplies and a deepening fertiliser crisis.

Wars may be fought thousands of kilometres away, but their economic consequences are felt closer home. From mango orchards in Konkan to restaurants in Delhi, from fertiliser imports to energy supplies, the ripple effects travel through trade routes, commodity markets and supply chains.

The fate of the Alphonso crop this season is a stark reminder that even the sweetness of mangoes can be overshadowed by the bitterness of a distant war. ■

Of online battles and a 'clerical error'

Kunal Chatterjee

The battle for Bengal is hotting up. As the state gears for assembly polls on 23 and 29 April, the two principal parties in the fray, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the BJP, are going all out—online.

While some are missing the humour and creativity of the sparring campaign songs from 2021—Trinamool's *Khela hobe* (the game is on) versus the BJP's *Pishi jao* (Goodbye aunty) set to the tune of 'Bella Ciao', the Italian folk song that became an anti-fascist hymn during WWII—this time the sting is sharper as the TMC fights fire with fire.

In 2026, the TMC has taken the BJP head on with its slogan *Jotoi koro hamla, abar jitbe Bangla* (Attack us all you like, abar win again). Framing the BJP as *Bangla bironahi zamindar* (anti-Bengali feudal lords), the lyrics refer to the BJP's assaults on religion, language, migrants, the SIR and the NRC, while positioning Mamata Banerjee as the one who will defend Bengal and Bengali pride. Released in January during the ED raid on the Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC), the three-minute track had garnered 12.8 crore views by March.

The BJP's four-and-a-half-minute song, which pumps up the narrative of fear, unemployment and black money, received over 216,000 YouTube views in two months. Their war cry *Paltano dorkar, chayi BJP Sarkar* (We cry Paltano dorkar, want a BJP government)—spectrally mouthed in the video by Modi—has unwittingly provided ammunition for the TMC. Some BJP supporters not conversant with Bangla have been dropping the word 'chayi', without which the slogan suggests that what needs changing is the BJP government!

Also in the BJP arsenal are *Bhaag Trinamool Bhaag* (Run Trinamool Run), *Baancho Chayi, BJP tai* (BJP because we want to live) and *Jonogon dicchhe daak, Trinamool nipaata jaak* (The people have spoken, Trinamool must be broken). To counter Mamata Banerjee's warning that a BJP government would shut down a meat and fish vendors during festivals, a BJP candidate from Bidhannagar constituency went viral campaigning with a *katla maach* (freshwater carp) in his hand. Other BJP candidates including former MP and columnist Swapan Dasgupta invited TV channels to join him for lunch and record evidence that fish is always on the table.

With the last dates for nomination being 8 and 12 April, these are early days yet and real fireworks are awaited. While official handles have refrained from personal attacks on Narendra Modi and Mamata Banerjee, BJP supporters are indulging in a



'Bring it on, BJP!' Mamata Banerjee with a list of TMC candidates for the assembly

Photo: Getty Images

free-for-all on social media with sexual slurs hurled at the chief minister along with death threats. TMC party general secretary Abhishek Banerjee has pointed to these slurs as revealing 'the BJP's true character', insulting to 'every woman' in Bengal.

In short, the battle being waged on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and AI-driven reels is as fierce as the campaigns on the ground. To take on the BJP's national IT cell and its state-level digital war-room, the Trinamool has quietly built a decentralised social media cell that functions as a crisis-management unit, mini-newsroom and campaign-planning cell rolled into one.

The TMC IT cell has been engaging with cadre and supporters through the mobile app *Didi's Doot* (Didi's messenger) which mobilises, engages, updates tasks, offers real-time updates as well as interactive quizzes and gamified features to keep users hooked and involved in campaign activities. Speaking to the *Indian Express*, Trinamool's IT cell chief Debangshu Bhattacharya said that the key strategy is to impress upon people that the BJP is spreading lies. It's the tit-for-tat: every time the BJP's IT cell mocks something in Bengal, Trinamool shows the reality in BJP-ruled states like UP and Gujarat.

The *Indian Express* reported (23 March 2026) that the TMC social media ecosystem has produced more than 10,000 reels and short videos, disseminated across platforms through a combination of official channels, volunteer networks and independent influencers aligned with the party.

Anand Chowrasia, formerly with I-PAC told *National Herald* that the TMC IT cell is entrusted with the task of shaping the daily story through short videos, reels, memes

and graphics. These are then pushed through Mamata Banerjee's own accounts, and by the MLAs, MPs and local workers.

To counter the BJP 'fake news factory', the TMC's IT cell swiftly produces rebuttals, fact-checks and counter-videos. During the 2021 assembly polls and 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the cell had worked with I-PAC to customise messages for each constituency in the local language, based on local issues and booth-level feedback.

I-PAC associate Sushmita Das recalls that during *Didi's 10 Ongikar* (Didi's 10 Pledges) in 2021, I-PAC had "turned the contest into a highly personalised, data-driven exercise. It ran a CM helpline that received over 23 lakh calls in 500 days, mapped voter feedback, and linked that with booth-level information to identify swing pockets." Dedicated hashtags, user-generated content and relentless reposting kept the ecosystem alive.

During *Didi's Shopoth* (Didi's Oath) in 2024, I-PAC's campaign—digital ads, SMS, robocalls, TV/radio spots and social media push—is said to have reached over nine crore people in Bengal. Insiders describe I-PAC as Trinamool's back-office brain and

With a dash of local flavour, the TMC's IT cell is outdoing the BJP with its reels, memes and swift rebuttals

the IT cell as its front-facing media house.

The BJP's centralised IT cell, led by Amit Malviya, supervises digital operations from Delhi. It works with in-house social media managers, graphic designers, short-video creators and a network of IT cell workers at state, district and block levels. In Bengal, the IT cell has been focusing on aggressive messaging that links the TMC to corruption, land grab and the breakdown of law-and-order. Its digital content in Bengal leans heavily on Modi and Amit Shah, with local faces struggling to acquire the same emotional pull.

Debdip Chakraborty of the BJP's IT cell says, "Ahead of the 2026 assembly polls, we have rolled out AI-style graphics and narratives using Bengali cultural icons, film characters and religious imagery to reframe the image of the 'outsider' as a Bengal-friendly, pro-development national party".

Senior state BJP leaders admit that the IT cell is now the hub of decision-making, not a message-making machine but a strategy-partner for selecting candidates, scheduling rallies and issues to focus on.

Consultant Ridhi Protim Neogi says, "The BJP's IT cell still relies more on Central directives and generic messaging; integration with local party machinery and booth-level feedback loops is not as smooth. I-PAC and the TMC IT cell have built a more seamless link between voter-level data and on-ground workers, booth-level agents, field teams and *Didi Ke Bolo* (Tell Didi) helplines, feeding real-time information into campaign tweaks."

Which IT cell will have the last laugh? For that we'll have to wait till 4 May.

Pardon me, your slip is showing

Meanwhile, 'Didi' slipped on the 'clerical error' that led the chief electoral officer of Kerala to distribute an ECI guideline bearing the BJP seal. If anyone still needs proof that the ECI and BJP are hand in glove, here it is, she said, waving a newspaper report.

When party MPs, MLAs and the social media cell amplified the controversy, cyber police headquarters moved in. MPs like Mahua Moitra were sent stern notices, demanding they take down posts mocking the ECI. Instead, they gleefully reposted the notice that charged them of insulting the Commission, undermining communal harmony and posing threats to public order by inciting division and hostility.

But how did the CEO's office have the BJP party seal? The best the ECI could manage by way of an explanation is that the BJP had shared a 2019 guideline, which was circulated due to a 'clerical error'. Ever heard anything more lame? ■



Congress-led UDF raring to make a comeback

With a clear political message of social harmony, the possibility of a return seems real

K.A. Shaji

Kerala does not change governments in a hurry. Its political shifts are rarely dramatic. They grow quietly, through fragments of doubt, conversations that question, loyalties that begin to fray at the edges. As the state heads into a high-stakes assembly election, that quiet churn is unmistakable.

The CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF), which made history in 2021 by breaking Kerala's four-decade pattern of alternating governments, now finds itself confronting not just anti-incumbency but a deeper erosion of political authority. The Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF), on the other hand, is no longer waiting for the Left to falter. It is actively building a case for return, with a clarity and discipline that has eluded it for years.

Leader of Opposition V.D. Satheesan has emerged as a sharp and consistent campaigner. Speaking to *National Herald*, Satheesan said, "This is not just about misgovernance. We are witnessing a situation where the CPI(M) is indirectly benefiting from the BJP's presence. That is the real political question before Kerala." He went further, accusing the LDF of drifting away from its ideological moorings. "Today, the Congress reflects the concerns of real Leftists as well. Many of them feel alienated by what the CPI(M) has become."

This charge goes to the heart of the Left's identity. In a state where the CPI(M) has long wielded ideological clarity against the BJP, any suggestion of political accommodation carries serious implications. The Congress has reframed the contest, not merely as a choice between two alliances but as a question of political integrity.

Rahul Gandhi has reinforced this line, and his exchanges with Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan have given the campaign an unconventional directness. Political commentator Joseph C. Mathew captures the shift clearly. "For a long time, the Congress was reactive in Kerala. Now it is setting the agenda. By raising the question of a CPI(M)-BJP equation, it is forcing the Left to defend its ideological position, not just its governance record."

The Congress has also recalibrated its strategy on the ground. Over the past year, the party has organised a series of thematic conclaves and consultations across Kerala, focusing on health, education, employment and the future of the state's economy. These were not symbolic exercises, they were designed to project a governing vision that goes beyond criticism of the LDF.



The Congress has reframed the contest not merely as a choice between two alliances but as a question of political integrity

On health, the Congress has promised to strengthen primary care networks while addressing emerging gaps in infrastructure and staffing. On education, it has emphasised quality, employability and global competitiveness, seeking to align Kerala's strong base with changing economic realities. On jobs, the focus has been on decentralised industrial growth, support for small enterprises and creating opportunities that reduce the compulsion for migration.

This imagining and articulation of policy has been accompanied by a clear political message: the Congress as custodian of Kerala's social harmony. At a time when national politics is marked by polarisation, the UDF is emphasising the protection of minority rights, constitutional values and social justice. The party has repeatedly underlined its commitment to safeguarding Kerala's plural fabric, arguing that development cannot be separated from inclusiveness. This emphasis is not incidental. It is central to the Congress's attempt to rebuild a broad social coalition that cuts across communities.

Equally significant has been the Congress's management of its own internal contradictions. Potential friction over candidate selection, including the ambitions of senior leaders and MPs such

as K. Sudhakaran, has been handled with relative discipline. The party has avoided public ruptures, signalling a level of organisational maturity that was previously missing. This has strengthened its credibility as a stable alternative.

In contrast, the LDF finds itself on complex and uncomfortable terrain. Pinarayi Vijayan remains the most powerful political figure in Kerala, but the nature of that power is under scrutiny. His leadership style, once seen as decisive and reassuring, is now increasingly described as centralised and distant. The space for dissent appears limited.

There are allegations that the LDF has invested heavily in projecting Vijayan through elaborate public relations, creating what opponents describe as a 'personality cult' that is, as the Congress points out, a departure from the collective ethos that once defined the Left.

These perceptions are echoed, cautiously but clearly, within sections of the Left itself. Veteran leader G. Sudhakaran, who walked out of the CPI(M) after four decades of public life that included stints as MLA and minister, has now entered the electoral fray in Ambalapuzha with UDF support. His departure has become a political marker of the unease within the party. "The party must return to its collective functioning," he

"By raising the question of a CPI(M)-BJP equation, the Congress is forcing the Left to defend its ideological position, not just its governance record"

It's Advantage Stalin in Tamil Nadu



K.A. Shaji

As Tamil Nadu approaches another assembly election, its political landscape reflects a paradox that has come to define the state. There is continuity in Dravidian dominance, welfare-driven governance and a political culture resistant to religious polarisation. At the same time, there is churn within the opposition, among emerging players and in the subtle recalibration of alliances. When read together, these currents point less towards upheaval than towards consolidation, particularly for the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) under chief minister M.K. Stalin.

Tamil Nadu's resistance to Hindutva politics remains its defining feature. The ideological foundations laid by E.V. Ramasamy continue to shape politics here, privileging social justice, linguistic identity and rationalism over religious mobilisation. This living framework continues to inform voter expectations and political strategy. As Chennai-based academic C. Lakshmanan observes, elections in Tamil Nadu are not fought on identity alone but on dignity, welfare and rights.

It is within this framework that the BJP has struggled to find its feet. Despite expanding its organisational base and investing heavily in leadership projection, its strategies have often appeared misaligned with the state's political sensibilities. Efforts to foreground religious

identity have found limited traction, while attempts to cobble alliances together have been constrained by regional parties unwilling to cede space. As journalist M. Satheesh Kumar puts it, the BJP's problem in TN is not the lack of ambition but the lack of a political language that resonates.

Its dependence on alliances has tied the BJP into a complicated relationship with the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), a party that is grappling with its own internal instability. Since the death of J. Jayalalitha, the AIADMK has struggled to reassert itself as a cohesive force. Leadership tussles have hardened into enduring factional divides. While Edappadi K. Palaniswami has brought a degree of organisational control, unity remains elusive. His consolidation has alienated factions aligned with O. Panneerselvam, even as the lingering shadow of V.K. Sasikala continues to cloud the party's future.

Singai Ramachandran, a senior AIADMK leader from Coimbatore, admits the scale of the problem with unusual candour: the party is still negotiating leadership when it should be negotiating votes. Critics say that Palaniswami has succeeded in building authority but not consensus. This imbalance weakens the party's ability to mount a credible challenge in an election that demands both.

The fragmentation extends beyond the AIADMK. The Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), with its strong Vanniyar base, remains influential but politically unsettled. Internal shifts, generational transitions and fluid alliance choices have made its positioning unpredictable. While it retains pockets of strength in northern Tamil Nadu, it lacks the coherence required to anchor a broader opposition narrative. As Lakshmanan points out, the PMK can mobilise votes, but it cannot unify them.

Onto this already crowded stage steps actor Vijay, whose political entry combines excitement and disruption. With cross-demographic mass appeal, Vijay represents a new political energy. His immediate impact is likely to be fragmentary. His support base overlaps significantly with segments of the anti-DMK electorate,



Chief minister M.K. Stalin knows that in the absence of a unified opposition even a stable vote share can deliver a comfortable victory

raising the possibility of a split in anti-incumbency votes across constituencies. As DMK spokesperson Salem Dharanidharan notes, even a modest vote share of 5 to 8 per cent for Vijay could alter outcomes in dozens of seats: he does not need a sweeping victory to make a dent. For now, analysts suggest that Vijay is less a threat to the DMK than a complication for its opponents.

The fragmentation within the opposition stands in sharp contrast to the relative cohesion of the ruling alliance. The DMK, along with the Congress and Left parties such as the CPI(M), has not only held its alliance together but strengthened it. Early differences over seat-sharing between the DMK and Congress, often a flashpoint in coalition politics, were resolved through dialogue, with both sides recognising the value of unity over maximalist demands. The CPI(M) also navigated negotiations

without public friction, reinforcing the image of a disciplined, coordinated front.

Congress leader Manickam Tagore acknowledges that differences existed, but also emphasises that there was a shared understanding that fragmentation would only benefit the opposition. The Left echoes this pragmatism, viewing seat-sharing as a process of accommodation anchored in a larger political objective.

The implications are clear. In a multi-cornered contest, a cohesive alliance can translate even a stable vote share into a comfortable victory if the opposition vote is divided. The DMK does not need dramatic expansion. It only needs to hold its ground while its opponents split the rest.

This brings the focus back to anti-incumbency. While there may be pockets of dissatisfaction with the government, the absence of a unified opposition prevents

said. "Centralisation cannot become the norm. That is not how the Left has worked."

At the grassroots, there are signs of drift. Local leaders, cooperative figures and community intermediaries who once formed the backbone of the Left's political machinery are no longer uniformly aligned. Some have withdrawn into silence. Others are quietly recalibrating their positions.

Writer and critic M.N. Karassery situates this within a broader cultural context. "The Left still has a strong base and ideological appeal," he says. "But elections are not won on legacy alone. They require renewal. The question is whether the LDF has been able to renew itself."

The memory of Sabarimala continues to cast a shadow over the political landscape. For many believers, the issue was not merely about a court verdict but about the state's response. The perception that the government acted with inflexibility, without adequate sensitivity to faith, has not entirely faded.

Karassery says, "Many felt the state was not listening. That sentiment still lingers." The BJP attempted to convert this sentiment into electoral gains but failed to sustain momentum. The Congress handled it by positioning itself as respectful of faith while remaining within a constitutional framework. This measured approach resonated particularly in central Kerala.

The LDF continues to defend its record with confidence. Senior leader K.K. Shailaja, contesting from Peravoor in Kannur, has dismissed the BJP's claims. "The LDF government has delivered in health, welfare and social security in ways that are nationally recognised," she said. "People will judge us on our work, not on allegations."

The electorate, though, is more sceptical. Welfare schemes continue, but they no longer generate the same political enthusiasm. Younger voters, shaped by migration and changing aspirations, are looking beyond welfare. BJP creation within the state has not kept pace with expectations. Educated youth continue to look outside Kerala for better prospects. Fiscal pressures limit the scope for expanding welfare.

These concerns do not always translate into immediate electoral shifts, but they shape the mood in ways that are politically consequential. Despite sustained efforts, the BJP's organisational expansion has not translated into electoral success. Kerala resists easy polarisation and attempts to consolidate votes along religious lines have faced structural limits.

What emerges is the kind of open contest not seen in years. The LDF's strengths are significant: its cadre base is disciplined, its ideological appeal remains relevant, Pinarayi Vijayan continues to command respect across sections. But the Congress has altered the terms of engagement. Organised, assertive and politically engaged, it is offering a framework for governance built around jobs, public services, social justice and communal harmony. For the first time in a decade, the possibility of a Congress-led return is real. ■

The fragmentation within the opposition stands in sharp contrast to the relative cohesion of the ruling alliance



Cuba next on Trump's imperial hitlist

Ashok Swain

Donald Trump has not been coy about Cuba. He has openly coveted the 'honour' of taking the island. He has also suggested he can do what he likes with it. These seemingly untinged remarks are not without political intention.

Trump's fixation with Cuba is not driven by ideological hostility towards Communism, even though that language is politically useful at home. Nor is it really about security concerns. It is a fusion of geopolitical ambition and a transactional worldview.

Cuba, already weakened by sustained economic pressure, may be seen as an opportunity to achieve the kind of quick outcome that has proven elusive in Iran. A decisive move against Havana could be presented domestically as a demonstration of strength and effectiveness, deflecting attention away from the frustrations and anger of a prolonged conflict in the Middle East.

His advisors, even this calculation would be risky. It underestimates the resilience of the Cuban state and the potential consequences of external intervention. Cuba's political system, while under strain, remains cohesive and supported by institutions that have weathered decades of pressure. Its security apparatus is experienced, and its leadership is unlikely to capitulate under threat. Any attempt to force change from the outside would likely provoke strong resistance, not only from the state but also from segments of the population for whom national sovereignty remains a powerful mobilising force.

The Trump administration's regime-change forays are not winning the US any friends in the world. And a move on Cuba is more likely to generate a broader diplomatic backlash and complicate relations with allies than isolating Cuba. In any case, efforts to impose political change from the outside often end up strengthening the very systems they aim to weaken. In Cuba's case, external pressure has historically reinforced a siege mentality that legitimises centralised control and limits space for internal reform. By intensifying pressure, Washington risks entrenching these dynamics rather than effecting a transformation to its own advantage.

Trump may believe that Cuba can deliver a quick and symbolic victory, especially in contrast to the drawn out and costly confrontation with Iran. But to believe this is to misread the island nation's internal dynamics and its history. Cuba is not an empty stage on which external powers can easily script political outcomes. It is a state with its own institutions, its own political logic and a long history of resisting precisely this kind of intervention. The danger lies not only in the possibility of conflict but in the assumptions that make such a conflict appear attractive. ■

The influence of hardline Cuban exile groups in the US and the longstanding hawkishness of secretary of state Marco Rubio has reinforced this policy direction vis-à-vis Cuba.

The bullying tactic is transparent: by tightening restrictions on external supplies and effectively cutting off external support, Washington has brought Cuba's economic crisis to breaking point. Cuba produces only 40 per cent of the oil it needs and the US has choked all possible imports. The resulting shortages have plunged the island nation into darkness and driven its citizens to desperation.

This is where the Venezuela parallel is revealing. The idea is not to dismantle the existing state apparatus but to replace some key figures in it so that Cuba's economic policy may be bent to America's advantage. The strategy, if it worked, would allow Trump to claim success without the risks, complexities or costs of attempting a fuller transformation.

The campaign will possibly be cloaked in the language of freedom and democracy, but nothing could be farther from the real agenda—to pry open the Cuban economy to American investments and commercial engagement on terms favourable to



'No you can't' Demonstrators gather outside the US embassy in London on 21 March, International Day of Solidarity with Cuba, to protest against Donald Trump's reported intention to have the "honour of taking Cuba in some form"

Photo: Getty Images

Trump's crony capitalists.

Yet Cuba presents a more complicated landscape than Trump can perhapsathom. Political authority in the island nation is not concentrated in a single individual but distributed across the Communist Party, the government and the military. This structure makes it more resilient to external pressure and less susceptible to abrupt internal reconfiguration. The Cuban leadership has firmly rejected any negotiation with its political system, framing such demands as a violation of its sovereignty.

The history of this pushback is crucial. Cuba's political identity has been forged in the fire of opposition to US intervention. The memory of pre-Castro periods of domination—when Washington exercised direct and indirect control over the island—is deeply embedded in both state narratives and the public consciousness. What is now being proposed echoes those dynamics,

For the moment, Cuba is on the backburner because the war in Iran has gone off-script. But the delay doesn't mean a change of direction

even if couched in transactional terms.

For the moment, Cuba is on the backburner because the war in Iran has gone off-script. It has dragged on longer than the aggressors had anticipated and extracted costs way beyond their calculations. The asymmetric war has not just stretched the mighty US militarily but has also imposed humongous economic costs on the world—and forced the Trump administration to hold off on its broader imperialist agenda.

Iran's refusal to yield to Trump's threats and the damage it has managed to inflict upon America's allies in the Gulf, on Israel and their sympathisers by weaponising the Strait of Hormuz has forced this recalibration of US priorities.

But the delay should not be mistaken for a change of direction. If anything, the difficulties encountered in Iran may increase the appeal of pursuing more immediate and visible success closer home.

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It's not really about reservation for women

...and the attempt to yoke the proposal to an expansion of the legislature is disingenuous, argues Radha Kumar

The ruling BJP is making a push for delimitation without waiting for the 2027 Census findings, on the grounds that it will enable implementation of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam of 2023, mandating 33 per cent reservation for women in the legislature in time for the 2029 general election. But is it really about implementing women's reservation? Or is women's reservation a pretext to push for an expansion of the Lok Sabha?

On 24 March, the media reported that home minister Amit Shah, in closed-door consultations with NDA allies and select opposition parties (i.e., minus the Congress, the principal opposition, the TMC and Left parties) had proposed a 50 per cent expansion of legislative seats so that a third could be reserved for women. The plan would allow sitting MPs and MLAs, 85 per cent of whom are male, to potentially retain their seats even while making room for women, who would have a third of the seats (273 of 816 in the expanded Lok Sabha).

To allay the concerns of southern states, each state's seat share would be retained at the current level. The six southern states (plus the Union Territory of Puducherry) account for 24 per cent of Lok Sabha seats. In order to implement these proposals, the Modi administration would bring two bills—one to freeze each state's seat share at its current level for the next 25-30 years and another to appoint a Delimitation Commission, which would use the 2011 Census figures as its base—not the 2027 Census—since the final figures of the new Census would be released too late to enable delimitation before 2029.

By the evening of 24 March, the same news outlets clarified that these were four stand-alone proposals:

- 1 Delinking 33 per cent quota for women from the 2027 Census
- 2 Expansion of Lok Sabha (and state assemblies)
- 3 Reserving ~273 seats for women (in the expanded Lok Sabha)
- 4 Conducting the delimitation using 2011 Census data, while maintaining

state-wise proportions

In other words, the proposed 50 per cent legislature expansion is not linked to the 33 per cent reservation for women. The real agenda, it seems, is to push for legislature expansion/delimitation ahead of the 2027 Census and in time for the 2029 general election while making it look like it's about reservation for women.

To foreground women's reservation when the real agenda is to expand the Lok Sabha is politically expedient, for women's reservation has the support of opposition parties and public influencers. Indeed, the Congress first piloted a bill for women's reservation, in the early 1990s under then prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao. Expansion of the legislature is a tangled objective: legislators want it—more seats, after all, equal more opportunities for them—but the southern states have legitimate worries and the public is suspicious given the disillusionment with elected representatives. To bundle women's reservation with legislature expansion cloaks the dual goal of expansion and protection of sitting male MPs.

The proposal to freeze states' seat shares at the current level is clearly intended to win the support of the southern states. Led by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, these states have opposed a population-based expansion of the Lok Sabha, which will reduce their share from a fourth now (~24 per cent) to less than a fifth of total seats.

Why the 2011 Census? Waiting for the 2027 Census findings, this argument goes, will delay women's reservation till the 2034 general election (at the earliest) because the findings of the new Census will likely be available by 2030. But why must women's reservation wait till the legislature is expanded? Why not carve it out of the current strength of the Lok Sabha and state assemblies? The only reason it is tied to said expansion is to protect sitting male MPs.

Could it also be that the Modi administration wants to avoid the 2027

Census because it is supposed to include a caste enumeration, and the ruling BJP is concerned how caste figures might impact public demands for representation? While the BJP's electoral and activist base includes substantial numbers of OBCs (Other Backward Classes), its use of these castes and their prominence has caused considerable dissatisfaction amongst the upper castes. The Scheduled Castes, too, appear to be turning away, as are several Denotified Tribes that have been omitted from the 2027 Census list.

Reportedly, Mr Shah wished to rush the two bills with these proposals in the ongoing parliamentary session ending 4 April. But under pressure from the Opposition, he agreed to postpone, possibly to the monsoon session. Opposition parties have asked for an all-party meeting after the upcoming state elections, so that they can study the proposals. Among the issues to consider, the uppermost are: a) delinking women's reservation from legislature expansion; b) ensuring that the new Delimitation Commission is headed by an impartial jurist well-versed in the norms of democratic representation, and includes legislators of all parties in equal numbers, including at least 33 per cent women; and, c) making it mandatory for the Commission to put its draft recommendations in the public domain for feedback.

They might raise another issue: whether the reserved women's seats should be allocated to constituencies from which no woman has won in the past four to six elections. Such a move, it is argued, would remove the taboo on women public figures in these constituencies and send a message to other constituencies seen as male fiefdoms. It might even indirectly spur action on the Prime Minister's 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' slogan, which has remained an empty call thus far.

There is also the question of the



United we stand Women MPs from the Opposition pose for a fun photo-op

methodology to be used in allocating women's seats. And while Mr. Shah and his party can propose an expansion of the legislature, it is the prerogative of a delimitation commission to decide on numbers. Also, reservation for women, as stated above, does not depend on this expansion, nor on population counts. The attempt to yoke reservation to expansion is not only unnecessary, it is deceitful. Question for Mr Shah: why should women's seats be additional seats? Did the male MPs who voted for the bill do so only because they were assured that their seats would not be allocated to women? What made the male MPs so sure they would be re-elected?

Finally, it's time opposition parties began in earnest to identify and nurture women candidates. The BJP started doing this some years ago, though none of their women legislators have been vocal about women's rights, content instead to be a shrill echo chamber for the Prime Minister and his administration.

Among the opposition parties, the Trinamool Congress stands out for having the largest proportion of women, who do their homework and are combative. The Opposition does have articulate women legislators, as the debate on Operation Sindoor showed. I hope they will take a joint lead in formulating opposition policy on the issues discussed here. ■

RADHA KUMAR is a historian and policy analyst

Why must women's reservation wait till the legislature is expanded? Why not carve it out of the current strength of the Lok Sabha?

KARNATAKA'S 11G MODEL: BUILDING A \$1 TRILLION ECONOMY WITH A SOCIAL SOUL

Siddaramaiah's 17th milestone: Charting a masterclass in compassionate economics

In the hallowed halls of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly on March 6, 2026, history was not merely recorded; it was authored with a flourish of fiscal wisdom and social empathy. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, stepping up to the lectern to present his record-breaking 17th state budget, did more than just balance books.

He unveiled a blueprint for a sub-continental powerhouse—a roadmap that powerfully blends the immediate needs of the vulnerable with the high-tech aspirations of a global innovation hub.

With a total expenditure estimated at a staggering Rs 4,48,004 crore for the 2026-27 fiscal year, the budget serves as a definitive testament to Karnataka's economic resilience and its unwavering commitment to the "Karnataka Model" of development.

The atmosphere was one of profound significance as the Chief Minister articulated a vision that he described as the "11G Model." This is not just a collection of administrative acronyms but a sophisticated, multi-dimensional framework designed to ensure that development is not confined to the high-rises of Bengaluru but reaches the furthest hamlets of Kalyana Karnataka.

As the speech progressed, it became clear that this budget is anchored in the belief that economic growth is most sustainable when it is inclusive.

By drawing upon the philosophy of the epic tradition, the Chief Minister likened the state to a cow that yields abundant milk, noting that such a resource requires proper care.

If the source becomes weak, the entire community suffers. This analogy underscored his appeal for a more sensitive response from the Union government, highlighting Karnataka's role as one of the highest tax contributors to the nation.

THE 11G FRAMEWORK: A NEW ERA OF GOVERNANCE

The centerpiece of the 2026-27 budget is undoubtedly the 11G policy framework. This comprehensive strategy covers every conceivable facet of modern governance, from the "Guarantee Economy" that promotes gender equality and financial security to the "Global Trade Economy" that aims to fortify the state's industrial and export sectors.

The model also introduces the "Gig Economy" initiatives for labor welfare, recognizing the shifting nature of work in the 21st century. By focusing on "Geographical Equality," the government is taking active steps to reduce regional disparities, ensuring that the prosperity of the "Silicon Valley of India" is mirrored in the development of Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities.

One of the most innovative components of this framework is the "Globe-Trotting Economy," a tourism-driven initiative aimed at showcasing Karnataka's rich heritage to the world. Alongside this, the "Green Economy" takes center stage, encouraging renewable energy and environmentally friendly activities.

This is perhaps best exemplified by the landmark launch of the Mukhya Mantri Saura Krishi Yojana. This ambitious scheme, mirroring national solarization efforts, seeks to accelerate solar adoption in the agricultural sector.

With an estimated investment of Rs 10,500 crore, the state plans to commission solar power plants with a total capacity of 3,000 MW at substations operated by KPTCL. This project, developed through the Renewable Energy Service Company (RESCO) model, will provide farmers with reliable daytime power, fundamentally transforming the rural economic landscape.



Photo: Gettyimages

One of the most innovative components of this framework is the "Globe-Trotting Economy," a tourism-driven initiative aimed at showcasing Karnataka's rich heritage to the world. Alongside this, the "Green Economy" takes center stage, encouraging renewable energy and environmentally friendly activities.

To support this green transition, the budget earmarks Rs 3,400 crore for Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) at key substations like Huliur, Pavagada, and Kushtagi.

By combining feeder-level solarization with advanced energy storage and grid upgrades, Karnataka is not just talking about a clean energy future; it is building the infrastructure to make it a reality. This strategic investment ensures grid stability while significantly increasing the share of clean energy in the state's electricity mix.

STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET

Despite the focus on futuristic technology, the 2026 budget remains deeply rooted in social justice. The Chief Minister reaffirmed the government's unwavering commitment to the flagship "Guarantee Schemes," which have become a hallmark of his administration since 2023.

These schemes, based on the concept of universal basic income, have been shown by major studies to improve the financial condition of millions of families and increase overall purchasing power.

The budget provides a massive allocation of Rs 28,608 crore for the Gruha Lakshmi scheme alone, ensuring that the women of Karnataka remain empowered financial pillars of their households.

In a thoughtful evolution of the Anna Bhagya scheme, the government is introducing the "Indira Food Kit." Instead of the additional 5 kg of rice previously provided, families will now receive a kit containing nutritious items such as tur dal, sugar, salt, and cooking oil.

This shift reflects a holistic understanding of food security that prioritizes nutrition alongside calorie intake. Furthermore, the Shakti scheme, which has revolutionized mobility for women across the state, receives an allocation of Rs 5,300 crore.

The Gruha Jyothi scheme continues

to lighten the burden on households with an allocation of Rs 10,578 crore, while the "Yuva Nidhi" scheme has already provided unemployment allowances worth Rs 913 crore to over three lakh eligible beneficiaries.

To further secure the future of the state's young citizens, the Chief Minister announced that 56,432 vacancies in various government departments will be filled this year, supported by a one-time age limit waiver to ensure that those who missed out due to legal hurdles can now participate in the state's growth story.

BENGALURU: THE GLOBAL HUB REDEFINED

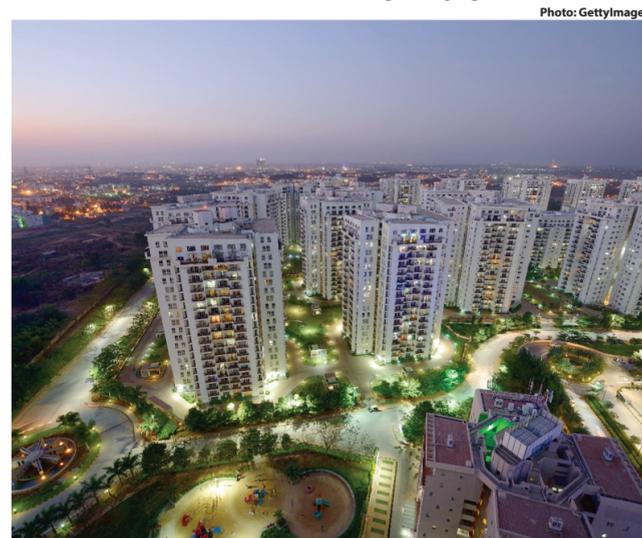


Photo: Gettyimages

As the capital city continues to grow as a global magnet for investment and talent, the budget addresses the challenges of urbanization with characteristic vigor.

A new "Revised Master Plan-2041" for Bengaluru will be implemented by the end of 2027, complemented by a "Comprehensive Mobility Plan" to be prepared within six months.

The city's infrastructure will see a major upgrade with the construction of a Tunnel Road and an Elevated Road

from Hebbal Junction to Mekhri Circle at a cost of Rs2,250 crore.

To further decongest the city, the Chief Minister announced the development of a second airport for Bengaluru. A feasibility report is already in the works, ensuring that the city's aviation infrastructure remains ahead of the curve.

Furthermore, 41 km of additional metro lines are proposed for completion during the current financial year, and an integrated digital platform will be developed to manage traffic congestion using real-time data analysis.

Environmental and social considerations are woven into the city's development plan as well. Disaster management programs worth Rs 5,000

crore will be taken up over five years to control flooding in the city, while a Leopard Rehabilitation Centre will be established in Bannerghatta to address man-animal conflict on the city's outskirts.

For the sports enthusiasts, the Karnataka Housing Board will construct an 80,000-seating capacity cricket stadium and international-standard sports complex in Anekal, aptly named the "KHB Surya Kreedha Grama."

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION AND HEALTH

Education and health remain the twin pillars of human development in the 11G model. Drawing inspiration from Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, the Chief Minister emphasized that economic development neglecting human development is both unstable and unethical.

To this end, 800 schools will be upgraded to "Karnataka Public Schools" at a cost of Rs 3,900 crore. In a visionary move, the state is collaborating with IIT Dharwad to provide a personal self-learning digital tutor facility for over 12 lakh students from Class 8 to 12, utilizing AI technology to personalize the learning process.

The health sector also sees a significant boost with an allocation of Rs 900 crore for infrastructure development. A particularly moving initiative is the provision of free insulin pens for diabetic patients under the age of 18, ensuring that no child's health is compromised by financial constraints.

Additionally, the government has



Photo: Gettyimages

signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Azim Premji Institute to set up a 1,000-bed charitable super-specialty hospital, and Victoria Hospital in Bengaluru will be renamed after the legendary socialist leader Shantaveri Gopala Gowda, honoring the state's rich political heritage.

In a bold move to protect the mental health and social well-being of the next generation, the budget proposes a ban on social media use for children under the age of 16.

This pioneering step acknowledges the complexities of the digital age and seeks to create a safer environment for the state's youth to grow and learn without the pressures of unregulated digital platforms.

A VISION FOR RURAL PROSPERITY AND REGIONAL BALANCE



Photo: Gettyimages

various schemes and the untimely rationalization of GST rates have placed an additional burden on the state exchequer.

He pointed out that rate restructuring resulted in a loss of Rs 10,000 crore this year, with an expected reduction of Rs 15,000 crore next year. In a call for unity across party lines, he urged the state to assert its rightful claims and implored the Union government to share cess and surcharge revenues with the states to offset these losses.

While Bengaluru thrives, the budget ensures that rural Karnataka is not left behind. The "Chief Minister's Agriculture Extension" scheme and the "Vasudha Amrit" programme will be implemented over the next three years to promote sustainable agricultural practices and increase farmer income.

The budget also provides for agricultural loans worth Rs30,000 crore at zero interest to 38 lakh farmers, a significant increase that highlights the government's pro-farmer stance.

To address regional disparities, the government is implementing the recommendations of the Govinda Rao Committee, focusing on the development of backward districts in the Kalyana Karnataka region.

The naming of all gram panchayats as "Mahatma Gandhi Gram Panchayats" serves as a tribute to the Father of the Nation and his vision of Gram Swaraj.

Furthermore, the commitment to the Mekedatu balancing reservoir project remains firm, following recent legal victories, ensuring the long-term water security of the state.

FISCAL RESILIENCE AND FEDERAL FAIRNESS

Throughout his speech, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah maintained a balance between ambitious spending and fiscal discipline. Despite structural challenges arising from changes in Central tax policies, Karnataka's own revenue collection has shown remarkable resilience.

The state's own tax revenue is estimated at Rs 2,20,000 crore, contributing to total revenue receipts of Rs 3,15,050 crore. The fiscal deficit is carefully pegged at 2.95 percent of the GSDP, well within the prudent limits of fiscal management.

However, the Chief Minister did not shy away from addressing the "injustice" faced by the state in the federal system. He noted that the reduction in the Central share for

The Chief Minister did, however, welcome the 16th Finance Commission's recommendation of a 4.131% share of taxes for Karnataka, noting that it recognizes and incentivizes states that contribute significantly to national GDP growth. This acknowledgement of Karnataka's role as an economic engine for India is a vital step toward a more equitable federalism.

A LEGACY OF PROGRESS

As the budget presentation concluded, broadcast live at 230 government bus stands across the state for the first time, it was clear that this was more than a financial document; it was a manifesto of hope.

Siddaramaiah's 17th budget is a masterclass in compassionate economics, proving that a state can be a leader in AI and robotics while simultaneously providing a safety net for its most vulnerable citizens.

The 11G model serves as a beacon for other states, demonstrating how to navigate the transition to a green, digital, and global economy without losing sight of the human element. From the "Raita Malls" of Kolar to the AI hubs of Bengaluru, the budget touches every life and every sector.

Siddaramaiah's 17th budget is a masterclass in compassionate economics, proving that a state can be a leader in AI and robotics while simultaneously providing a safety net for its most vulnerable citizens.

A Sangh takeover of our armed forces

The saffronisation of India has taken a dangerous new turn with Sainik Schools being handed over to Sangh affiliates

Rashme Sehgal

The Indian armed forces have traditionally been insulated from politics. Soon after India became independent, there was a demand that the Indian National Army (INA), founded by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, should be merged with the Indian Army. This was disallowed, and the INA was disbanded to keep the army apolitical. During communal riots it is the army, trusted as a neutral force, that is brought in to restore peace. These traditions are no longer inviolable.

While India does not have a quasi-religious police force like Saudi Arabia's Mutaween, the vigilantes of the RSS-Hindutva brigade act as extra-constitutional groups who take the law into their own hands, lynch, punishing, threatening and extorting large sums of money from Muslims.

In fact, India recently took a step towards creating a Mutaween-like force when policemen posted at the Kashi Vishwanath temple were made to wear saffron dhoti-kurtas, rudraksha beads and tripund tilaks, and told to greet pilgrims with the chant *Har Har Mahadev*.

The saffronisation of India has taken a new and dangerous turn with Sainik Schools being handed over to Sangh affiliates on a Public-Private Partnership model. The move threatens to bring Hindutva ideologies into military educational institutions. Since Sainik Schools help prepare a large number of students to join the armed forces, the ultimate outcome could well be the transformation of our secular armed forces into another arm of the Hindutva brigade.

Earlier, the autonomous Sainik Schools Society (SSS) functioned under the guidelines of the ministry of defence. The SSS ran 33 Sainik Schools for about 16,000 students and sent 25-30 per cent of them to various training academies of the Indian armed forces. Defence minister Rajnath Singh is on record stating that the Sainik Schools have

contributed more than 7,000 officers to the armed forces.

In 2021, the Union government unilaterally decided to open the doors to private players. Plans to set up 100 new Sainik Schools across India with a budgetary allocation of Rs 100 crore were announced. A list that was required to kickstart a new Sainik School was 'land, physical and IT infrastructure, financial resources and staff'. Selected schools would receive financial support of up to Rs 1.2 crore from the government and would be run 'as an exclusive vertical (model) which would be distinct and different from existing Sainik Schools of MoD'.

This simplified criteria, confirmed by the *Reporters' Collective* on the basis of RTI replies and government press releases, revealed that 'of the 40 Sainik School agreements so far, at least 62 per cent were awarded to schools linked to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its allied organisations, politicians of the BJP, its political allies and friends, Hindutva organisations, individuals, and other Hindu religious organisations' (3 April 2024). By May 2025, another 46 schools received approval.

Many of these allottees are extremely questionable. Sadhu Ritambhara, founder of the Durga Vahini, the militant women's wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, is one. Her Vrindavan school is called the Samvid Gurukulam Girls Sainik School. Ritambhara played a key role in whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment in the run up to



At the Bhonsala Military School, Nagpur, set up in 1937 by RSS ideologue B.S. Moonje

Photo courtesy: BMS, Nagpur

the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992. The Liberhan Commission, which investigated the demolition, named her among the 68 individuals responsible for bringing the country to the "brink of communal discord". She was booked by the police for provocative speeches in 1991 and was a key accused in the CBI chargesheet for criminal conspiracy.

Bhonsala Military School (BMS), Nagpur, established in 1937 by Hindu right-wing ideologue B.S. Moonje and run by the Central Hindu Military Education Society,

was another. During the probes into the 2006 Nanded bomb blast and the 2008 Malegaon blasts, the Maharashtra Anti-Terror Squad and other agencies revealed that individuals involved in the conspiracy received training in arms and explosives at BMS. In 2025, seventeen years after the Malegaon blast, all seven accused were acquitted by a special NIA court in Mumbai.

The Adani World School in Nellore, Andhra Pradesh—located near the Krishnapatnam deep-water port operated by the Adani Group—has also won a Sainik School affiliation. The Gautam Adani group stands indicted by the US government for orchestrating a multi-billion-dollar bribery and fraud scheme to secure solar power contracts. While the Adani group has denied the charges, several army officers are of the opinion that an allotment should have come only after the group is absolved.

Most of the new Sainik Schools have been handed over to BJP

leaders or are owned by trusts that they head. These schools are dotted across the length and breadth of the country. For example, the Tawang Sainik School in Arunachal Pradesh is owned by the state chief minister Pema Khandu. Khandu's brother Tsering Tashi, a BJP MLA, is the managing director.

In Mehana, Gujarat, Motibhai Chaudhary Sainik School is affiliated with Dudhsagar Dairy, which is chaired by Ashokkumar Bhavsangbhai Chaudhari, a former BJP general secretary for Mehana. Similarly, the Banas Sainik School in Banaskantha is managed by the Galabhai Nanjibhai Patel Charitable Trust under Banas Dairy, and is headed by Shankar Chaudhary, BJP MLA from Tharad and Speaker of the Gujarat assembly. This pattern is repeated in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

From 1977, the RSS has run its own network of schools under the Vidya Bharati banner. At present it runs 12,065 formal schools, with

3,158,658 students, making it one of the largest networks of private schools in India. On its website, Vidya Bharati announces its mission to 'build a younger generation which is committed to Hindutva and infused with patriotic fervour'.

"What is happening is completely unconstitutional," says a retired major general, under condition of anonymity. "Not only will these new Sainik Schools alter the apolitical character of the army, Indian democracy is also at risk. The government should have focused on strengthening the existing Rashtriya Indian Military College and Schools. By affiliating them to national institutions, particularly defence, the government is bringing unspeakable danger to the country. It's bound to infect the defence forces with a majoritarian, communal outlook."

Former deputy army chief Lt General Mehruddin Shah believes that the present government "wants to fill the army up with people who are indoctrinated. This is not to say that earlier we were indoctrinated. It was just that certain brigades were not crossed. The government seems to forget that by choosing this path, they are putting a noose around our necks. What will happen to soldiers from other communities who also want to serve their country?" asks Shah.

Equally critical of the Agniveer scheme, Shah said, "In my experience, the best soldiers are in the 25-35 age group. But when they join, Agniveer recruits are typically 18; by the time they are 22, they are out of the army."

Lt Gen Prakash Menon (retd), director of the Takshashila Institution's Strategic Studies Programme has warned against the nexus developing between the government and private parties to push an ideologically slanted version of education, far removed from the values enshrined in the Constitution. ■

Adani World School in Nellore near the deep-water port run by the Adani Group has also got a Sainik School affiliation

The deafening silence of 'Vishwaguru' India

Yogendra Yadav

Whatever else he may be, this wasn't the prime minister of a self-styled 'Vishwaguru' nation. Not the man who claims India's drumbeat echoes across the world—or so his usual swagger may lead you to think. This didn't even sound like a leader. Nor did a stage actor delivering punchlines.

If you heard the prime minister's statement in Parliament on the West Asia crisis, you'd struggle to recognise him. Gone was the bluster, the bravado, the theatrical flourishes. This was a dull recital, marked by the anxiety to not deviate from the script—lest a word slip, lest a call come in from Washington. No quips, no zingers. Even the ritual desk-thumping from the benches came in half-hearted taps, as if to tick a box. You could mistake this speech for a manager's report or an accountant's ledger. Or perhaps the backstage monologue of an actor written out of the script. It was not the address of a leader.

How could it be? The turn of events in West Asia has left the prime minister with very little to say. Despite all the eager deference to the United States, Donald Trump seems in no mood to indulge him. Even after bending the knee on a trade deal, India now finds itself under investigation. Word is that Washington has chosen Pakistan—not India—for mediation with Iran. Two days before the war, the prime minister wore an Israeli medal around his neck; yet Israel has not found it necessary to even name him. Back home, a constituency may have been cultivated to embrace Israel with open arms, but in Israel, there is no comparable wave of affection for India.

India has made no new friends, and old ones have slipped away. Iran, which counted India among its partners for decades, now sees India in the rival camp. The fault does not lie with Iran. In his parliamentary address, the prime minister directed his criticism on Tehran, without naming it, expressing concern over attacks on commercial vessels and energy infrastructure. But he uttered not a word, directly or indirectly, on the unprovoked, unlawful strikes by the United States and Israel.

It is hardly surprising, then, that India does not feature among the countries permitted to move ships through the Strait of Hormuz. When the prime minister called the Iranian president on this matter, he reportedly got an earful on how India had behaved in this hour of crisis. Russia, too, is cold-shouldering India, which had curtailed imports of Russian oil under US pressure. Now, when the Gulf crisis has forced India to turn to



The usual bluster was missing from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement in Parliament on West Asia

Photo: IANS

Russia once again, Moscow has ruled out 'friendship rates'. A seventy-year-old relationship has gone cold.

Even beyond the battlefield, on the diplomatic stage, India is nowhere. When the world confronts a crisis, it looks for leadership. When Britain and France attacked Egypt over the Suez Canal, an India that was far weaker, economically and militarily, still found its voice. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru spoke openly in support of Egypt, rallied global opinion against imperial aggression, and in doing so carved out a place for India as a moral leader. Today, the world listens instead to the prime minister of Spain, looks to Brazil and South Africa, even applauds the prime minister of Sri Lanka. No one is looking to India.

When speaking is imperative but there is nothing to say, one resorts to circumlocution. That was the prime minister's predicament too. Abstract invocations of humanity. Calls for peace without naming those who started the war. Hollow appeals to 'all sides' to de-escalate. Small claims about India's sensitivity and vigilance in a global crisis—as if the country's concerns now extend no further than the safety of oil.

Even in laying out these details, the truth was rationed. We were told how much India has in reserve, but not that it would last barely a week. We were not told that China has built reserves for three months, while India has not secured even three weeks. Credit was claimed for blending ethanol into fuel, but there was no mention of who ran India's public sector exploration giant ONGC into the ground.

When the world faces a grave crisis and a leader uses the nation's highest forum to present petty gains in petty detail, it does not just diminish him; it lowers the head of the entire country. ■

December in March spells doom

We are witnessing a climate emergency, writes **Pankaj Chaturvedi**

Fog in March is as unheard of as snow in summer. March is the month for *palash* (flame of the forest) to burst into bloom, for wheat to ripen as it soaks up the sun. This year though, March has been markedly different, even frightening.

In the first week, a dense fog descended on Delhi, Ghaziabad, Kanpur and Lucknow; a Delhi-Ranchi flight was diverted to Kolkata because of fog affecting visibility. Sweaters and woollens were brought out in some places in western Uttar Pradesh. When ground visibility became zero, it became clear that the balance of nature had been severely disrupted. Seasons were no longer following familiar patterns. To top it all, sudden rain and hailstorms destroyed standing crops.

Meteorologists described it as a climate emergency. Fog typically forms on winter nights when the earth rapidly releases heat and humidity levels are high. This year, the heatwave that began abruptly in the last week of February shattered all records. The Earth's surface overheated. When moisture-laden easterly winds from the Bay of Bengal came into contact with this overheated surface, and the night temperature suddenly dropped by six to seven degrees, a dense blanket was formed. In scientific terms, this is called 'radiation fog'.

The geographical features of north India and the sudden slowdown in wind speed made this situation more alarming. Stagnant air at the lower levels of the atmosphere allowed the mixture of smog and pollution—usually seen during winter—to condense.

The drastic difference in day and night temperatures after Holi is a serious indication of nature's changing mood. According to the Meteorological Department's data, daytime temperatures in many parts of north India have been recorded between 8 to 12 degrees Celsius above normal, while nights have remained comparatively cold. A major reason for this fluctuation is the extremely weak western disturbances. These disturbances typically bring rain and snowfall, which help regulate temperatures. Their absence results in a completely clear sky, allowing the sun's rays to directly heat the earth during the day.

Remember, rainfall decreased by about 60 per cent in January-February this year. The lack of moisture in the soil means heat isn't being dissipated through evaporation. At night, clear skies mean the earth's heat is being quickly radiated back into space,

leading to cooler nights. Additionally, high-pressure areas over western India are pushing winds downward. This compressed air heats up and prevents clouds from forming, creating a heatwave-like situation during the day.

The fog from these erratic temperatures has far-reaching consequences. Agriculture suffers the most. The rabi crop, especially wheat, is currently in its final stages of ripening. Wild temperature fluctuations have affected the quality of the wheat grains. Increased humidity caused by fog, followed by intense sunlight, has led to yellow rust and various fungal diseases.

Agricultural experts believe that this uncertainty continues, we could face a major challenge on the food security front. Not only grains, even horticultural crops such as mango blossoms have been adversely affected. Flowers fall off in sudden humidity and cold, leading to a significant drop in production.

Apart from ecological damage, there's a significant threat to human health. The March fog is not just water vapour, it contains tiny dust particles and trapped gases. This toxic smoke directly attacks the lungs, which can be fatal for respiratory patients and the elderly.

Traffic disruptions impact the economy. Flight cancellations and train delays are not only inconvenient, they also result in fuel wastage worth billions of rupees and increased carbon emissions. This creates a vicious cycle where climate change creates fog, and the measures taken to combat that fog further pollute the environment.

The December-like scenes in March call into question our lifestyles and development models, which have been built at the expense of nature. The changing frequency of western disturbances in the Himalayan regions and the burgeoning concrete networks in the plains are both responsible for this crisis.

We need to appreciate that weather forecasts are no longer limited to rain or sunshine—they are the key to our survival. If we do not take steps towards controlling pollution locally and reducing carbon emissions globally, this disappearance of seasons will plunge our lives into much greater uncertainty. ■



Congress Pledges “New Assam” Time for Change

Photo: Gettyimages



From the floodplains of Dhemaji and Lakhimpur to the tea gardens of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia, from the belts of Kokrajhar and Karbi Anglong to the bustling towns of Barak Valley — a quiet but powerful sentiment is rising across Assam. It is the feeling that despite tall promises and loud claims, everyday life has not

recurring losses, crops destroyed, homes washed away, and livelihoods shattered. While relief announcements are made, long-term flood management remains inadequate. Embankments collapse, erosion eats away land along the Brahmaputra, and families are forced to rebuild their lives repeatedly with little structural

prices. In the tea gardens, workers continue to struggle with low wages, healthcare gaps, and lack of proper housing. Despite being the backbone of Assam’s global tea identity, their living conditions remain far from dignified.

Unemployment has emerged as a defining crisis. In towns like Nagaon, Silchar, and Jorhat, educated youth are preparing for government exams year after year, often without clear recruitment timelines. Many are forced to migrate to cities like Bengaluru, Delhi, and Guwahati in search of work. The promise of local job creation has not translated into meaningful opportunities.

For small traders and local businesses in places like Fancy Bazaar and Silchar market, rising costs and inconsistent economic policies have made survival difficult. Inflation has affected both buyers and sellers. Essential commodities, fuel, and daily expenses have steadily increased, squeezing household budgets.

Land conflicts and eviction drives have added to the anxiety. In several parts of Assam, including areas along the Brahmaputra and forest-adjacent regions, families have faced displacement. While the need for regulation is understood, the lack of transparent processes and rehabilitation plans has created

fear among communities, tribal groups, and long-settled residents.

In the hill districts and Bodoland Territorial Region, there is a growing demand for more inclusive development. Infrastructure gaps, limited healthcare access, and lack of higher education institutions continue to hold back these regions. Many feel that development has remained concentrated in select urban pockets, leaving large parts of Assam behind.

Another concern increasingly voiced by citizens is the centralisation of governance. Decisions affecting local communities are often taken without adequate consultation. Panchayats, local bodies, and community leaders feel sidelined. This disconnection has led to a perception that governance is becoming distant and less responsive.

Across Assam, the question being asked is simple, where is the change that was promised? The answer, many believe, lies in a new direction — one that listens to the people of Majuli facing erosion, the youth of Barak Valley seeking jobs, the tea worker in Upper Assam demanding dignity, and the farmer in Lower Assam struggling to sustain his land.

Assam is not just ready for change — it is demanding it.

A Vision for the Future

Five Pillars for a New Assam

Photo: Gettyimages

The path forward for Assam must be rooted in its realities — its geography, its economy, and most importantly, its people. A renewed vision for the state is built on five key pillars designed to address both immediate concerns and long-term aspirations.

1. Education and Healthcare Transformation

In many government schools across districts like Dhubri, Goalpara, and Karimganj, infrastructure gaps, teacher shortages, and outdated resources continue to affect learning outcomes. Students in rural areas often travel long distances for higher education, while many drop out due to lack of facilities.

Healthcare access remains uneven. While Guwahati has seen expansion in medical infrastructure, districts like Haflong, Chirang, and Hailakandi still face shortages of doctors, specialists, and equipment. During floods, healthcare access becomes even more difficult, with many areas cut off.

The vision focuses on strengthening district hospitals, upgrading primary health centres, ensuring availability of medicines, and improving school infrastructure. The aim is simple quality education and healthcare should not depend on geography.

2. Governance Reform with Employee Inclusion

Government employees, from teachers to field officers, often face challenges due to top-down decision-making and lack of consultation. This affects implementation and morale. A more inclusive governance model seeks to involve employees in decision-making processes, streamline administrative systems, and ensure timely service delivery. Empowering local bodies like gaon panchayats and municipal boards will make governance more responsive and grounded.

3. A Rural-Focused Economy

Assam’s strength lies in its rural economy that comprises of agriculture, fisheries, handloom, and tea. However, farmers in districts like Nalbari and Sonitpur face issues such as lack of irrigation, storage facilities, and access to markets. Floods and erosion further worsen their situation.

The vision includes strengthening farmer cooperatives, improving irrigation, promoting agro-processing industries, and ensuring minimum support for key crops. Special focus is also given to the handloom sector in Sualkuchi and rural artisans across the state.



For tea garden areas, the emphasis is on better wages, healthcare, education, and housing for workers ensuring that growth reaches those who sustain the industry.

4. Law and Order Overhaul

While Assam has seen disturbed stability, concerns remain about fairness and trust in law enforcement. In several instances, people have raised questions about selective actions and lack of accountability.

A transparent and accountable law enforcement system is essential. The focus is on building trust between communities and institutions, ensuring equal treatment under the law, and addressing issues like drug abuse, especially in districts bordering other states and countries.

5. Youth Empowerment

In districts like Cachar, Darrang, and Golaghat, young people are looking for opportunities not just promises. Skill development centres, start-up support, and sports infrastructure remain limited.

The vision aims to create local employment opportunities, promote entrepreneurship, and invest in skill training aligned with market needs. Sports and cultural platforms will be expanded to engage youth positively and reduce social challenges like drug abuse.

These five pillars are not abstract ideas — they are rooted in the everyday experiences of Assam’s people. They represent a roadmap for a state that grows together, not in fragments.

In rural Assam, farmers growing paddy, mustard, and vegetables are grappling with rising input costs and unstable market prices. In the tea gardens, workers continue to struggle with low wages, healthcare gaps, and lack of proper housing. Despite being the backbone of Assam’s global tea identity, their living conditions remain far from dignified.

become easier. For many, it has become more uncertain. Year after year, floods continue to devastate large parts of Assam. Districts like Morigaon, Barpeta, and Cachar face

support. In rural Assam, farmers growing paddy, mustard, and vegetables are grappling with rising input costs and unstable market

Broken Promises The Gap Between Claims and Reality

In recent years, Assam has witnessed a steady stream of announcements of new projects, job promises, infrastructure plans. But across districts, the gap between announcements and actual impact is becoming increasingly evident. Infrastructure projects, including roads, bridges, and urban development, have been highlighted as major achievements. However, in many areas such as interior parts of Barpeta, Karimganj, and Hojai, road conditions remain poor and connectivity issues persist. Flood-damaged infrastructure often takes months, even years, to be restored.

Employment remains a major concern. Recruitment processes have been slow, irregular, and often delayed. Many young aspirants have spent years preparing for government jobs without clarity or timelines. The reliance on contractual hiring has further added to insecurity.

The financial health of the state is another area of concern. Rising debt levels have limited the ability to invest in critical sectors like healthcare, education, and rural development. While spending has increased, the benefits have not been

evenly distributed.

There is also growing concern about the pattern of development. Large projects and contracts often appear concentrated among select players, while small businesses and local entrepreneurs struggle to access opportunities. In markets across Assam, traders frequently speak about declining margins and increasing operational costs.

Flood management remains one of the clearest examples of unmet promises. Despite repeated assurances, long-term solutions such as river management, dredging, and scientific embankment construction have not been implemented effectively. Every year, the same districts face the same devastation.

For tea garden workers, despite policy announcements, improvements in wages, healthcare, and living conditions have been slow and inconsistent. Similarly, tribal areas and remote districts continue to lag behind in development indicators.

The narrative of progress, therefore, is being increasingly questioned. People are not just listening to promises anymore and they are measuring outcomes.

Congress’ Call- People First Governance

Photo: Gettyimages

At a time when many feel unheard, the call for a different model of governance is growing stronger. A model that is rooted in Assam’s diversity, respects its communities, and places people at the centre of every decision.

This approach moves away from centralised decision-making towards a more participatory system. It envisions a structure where local voices from village councils in Majuli to community leaders in Karbi Anglong are actively involved in shaping policies.

A “people-first” model means regular dialogue with farmers, tea workers, youth, traders, and women’s groups. It means listening before deciding, and consulting before implementing.

It also means respecting dissent. In a diverse state like Assam, differences of opinion are natural. Instead of suppressing them, they must be seen as part of a healthy democracy. This openness builds trust and strengthens institutions.

Transparency is another key pillar. Public funds must be used responsibly, and decisions must be open to scrutiny. This ensures that



development reaches those who need it most and not just a select few.

Most importantly, this vision seeks to restore the connection between the government and the people. Governance should not feel distant or imposed; it should feel accessible, responsive, and accountable.

For the people of Assam, the farmer rebuilding after floods, the

youth waiting for an opportunity, the tea worker seeking dignity, the small trader striving to survive this is more than a political choice. It is a choice about the future. A future where Assam’s growth is inclusive, its governance is fair, and its people are at the heart of every decision. The call is clear of a new government and a new Assam built together, with trust, dignity, and hope.

Most importantly, this vision seeks to restore the connection between the government and the people. Governance should not feel distant or imposed; it should feel accessible, responsive, and accountable.

Youth in Crisis

Jobs Lost, Dreams Delayed



Photo: Gettyimages

Assam's economic reality tells a troubling story marked by rising unemployment, shrinking opportunities, and a generation of youth forced to leave home in search of survival. Behind every statistic is a young Assamese whose dreams are being delayed, diverted, or denied altogether.

Unemployment in Assam is no longer just an economic issue it is a full-blown social crisis. Recent data shows that the state's unemployment rate has risen to 3.9%, higher than the national average of 3.2%, showing a structural weakness in job creation.

But the real concern lies deeper in the alarming rise of educated unemployment. According to official estimates, over 21 lakh educated job seekers are currently registered in Assam, highlighting a widening gap between education and employment.

This crisis is particularly acute among youth and women. Urban unemployment stands significantly higher, and young graduates armed with degrees but lacking opportunities are finding it difficult to work. The paradox is that as more young people are entering colleges and universities, the economy is failing to absorb them.

One of the core reasons behind this situation is the lack of industrial growth. Assam's economy remains heavily dependent on agriculture and traditional sectors like tea, which,

while vital, have limited capacity to generate new-age employment. Even

factory employment has reportedly declined by nearly 10% in recent

years, reflecting stagnation in industrial expansion.

Experts have repeatedly pointed out that Assam suffers from a low industrial base, forcing job seekers to rely on government employment or migrate elsewhere.

Skill development programs, which were meant to bridge this gap, have also failed to deliver desired results. Many training initiatives are poorly aligned with market needs, leaving youth with certificates but no employable skills. The result is a growing pool of frustrated, underutilized talent.

This is not just an economic failure it is a creature failure. A educated youth risks losing its most valuable asset.

In Assam today, migration is no longer a choice, it has become a compulsion.

Thousands of young men and women are leaving their homes every year, heading to cities like Bengaluru,

Delhi, Mumbai, and even overseas destinations in the Gulf. This silent exodus reflects the lack of opportunities within the state.

Recent reports indicate that tens of thousands are employed in plantations and low-wage sectors in other states, often under difficult conditions.

This migration has deep social and economic consequences. Families are being fragmented, villages are losing their working population, and local economies are weakening. In regions like Barak Valley, closure of industrial development and lack of key industries have accelerated this trend, leading to what many describe as a "brain drain."

The most concerning aspect is that migration is no longer limited to unskilled labour. Even engineers, graduates, and professionals are leaving Assam in search of better prospects. This outflow of talent deprives the state of innovation, entrepreneurship, and long-term growth.

For many families, migration brings economic relief through remittances but at a heavy emotional cost. Parents grow old without their children, communities weaken, and the social fabric begins to fray.

The question that arises is Why should Assam's youth be forced to build other states while their own remains underdeveloped?

Congress' Employment Blueprint

Recognizing the urgency of the crisis, the Congress party has presented a comprehensive employment vision aimed at transforming Assam's economic landscape.

At the heart of this vision is the promise of 5 lakh jobs, focusing not just on quantity but quality and sustainability.

The Congress strategy emphasizes reviving MSMEs (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises), which are key drivers of employment in any developing economy. By providing easier access to credit, infrastructure, and market linkages, the party aims to empower entrepreneurs and generate decentralized employment.

Another major focus area is agro-based industries. Assam's rich natural resources like tea, bamboo, handloom, fisheries, and agriculture offer immense potential for value addition and job creation. Instead of exporting raw materials, the Congress plan aims to build local industries that can create jobs within the state.

The tea sector, which already employs lakhs of workers, will be

modernized and diversified to generate additional employment opportunities.

A critical component of the blueprint is skill development aligned with local industries. Instead of generic training programs, Congress proposes region-specific skill centres that match industry needs—whether in tourism, agriculture, logistics, or technology.

The party has also promised to build a startup ecosystem for the

Northeast, encouraging young entrepreneurs through incubation centres, funding support, and mentorship programs. This approach aims to shift the narrative from job seekers to job creators.

Importantly, the Congress model focuses on inclusive growth ensuring that women, tribal communities, and marginalized groups are not left behind.

Photo: Gettyimages



Tea Garden Workers Neglected Backbone

No discussion about Assam's economy is complete without acknowledging the tea garden workers the backbone of the state's identity and economy.

Assam produces over 50% of India's tea, and nearly 10 lakh workers depend on this industry for their livelihood.

Yet, despite their immense contribution, tea workers continue to live in conditions marked by poverty, low wages, and limited access to basic services. The daily wage of a tea garden workers has long been a contentious issue. For years, workers have demanded fair wages, arguing that current pay levels do not meet even minimum standards.

Beyond wages, the challenges are deeper—poor housing, inadequate healthcare, lack of quality education, and limited social mobility. Studies have highlighted issues such as low sanitation standards, poor health access, and educational deficits among



Photo: Gettyimages

tea garden communities. The literacy rate among tea garden communities is significantly lower than the state average, especially among women, further perpetuating cycles of poverty.

Despite multiple government schemes, implementation gaps remain wide. Welfare measures often fail to reach those who need them the most.

The Congress has proposed a comprehensive plan for tea workers, including substantial wage revision to ensure dignified living, creation of Tea

Workers' Welfare Fund. Congress is committed to the housing schemes for better living conditions of the people of Assam along with improved healthcare and education infrastructure in tea garden communities. Assam's global reputation deserve a life of dignity and opportunity.

Assam's youth are not asking for opportunity. They want jobs, dignity, and a future in their own land.

Land, Power, and Accountability

"Deshotkoi Mami Dangor Nohoy"

In the heart of Assam, where land is more than just property it is identity, livelihood, and legacy a serious question is now echoing across districts, towns, and villages: who really owns Assam's land, and at what cost to the people?

A recent statewide protest campaign has brought this question into sharp focus. Demonstrations were held across multiple districts from Dibrugarh and Jorhat in Upper Assam to Goalpara and Dhubri in Lower Assam highlighting a growing concern over alleged large-scale land acquisition linked to those in positions of power. What makes this issue particularly significant is not just the scale of the allegations, nearly 12,000 bighas of land, but the deeper implications it holds for governance, transparency, and public trust.

Across Assam, ordinary citizens, farmers, and youth have begun to voice concern over reports suggesting

that vast tracts of land may have been accumulated through the misuse of political influence. The deshotkoi Mami Dangor Nohoy" (No one is bigger than the nation)—resonates deeply in a state where land disputes have historically shaped politics and society.

From Biswanath to Tinsukia, from Sonitpur to Kokrajhar, the spread of protests indicates that this is not an isolated political issue but one that has struck deep into the heart of Assam regions and communities. The participation of citizens in large numbers reflects a shared anxiety that the very system meant to protect public resources may be failing to do so. Land in Assam is not merely an economic asset—it is closely tied to identity, especially for indigenous communities, tea tribes, and farmers. For decades, the state has grappled with challenges such as encroachment, land rights for indigenous populations, and

displacement due to floods and erosion caused by the Brahmaputra.

In such a large-scale land acquisition by those in power raises serious concerns. It creates a perception of inequality where the common citizen struggles for land pattas, while influential individuals are able to accumulate vast holdings.

For the youth of Assam, already facing unemployment and migration pressures, such issues deepening disorientation. For farmers battling rising input costs and shrinking landholdings, it raises fears about their future. For indigenous communities, over land alienation. Congress has been raising some very important questions -How were such large tracts of land acquired? Were due processes followed? Were land laws and protections for vulnerable communities upheld? Is there a conflict of interest

when those in power are linked to such acquisitions? These are not partisan questions but issues fundamental to democracy. Public office must be held to the highest standards of integrity. The perception that power can be used for personal gain erodes trust in institutions and governance.

This issue also fits into a broader narrative that many in Assam are beginning to question whether governance today is becoming increasingly centralized and opaque. Over the past few years, concerns have been raised on various fronts, including land rights, eviction drives, and the allocation of resources.

When seen together, these concerns create a pattern that worries citizens, a system where decisions are taken without adequate consultation, where transparency is limited, and where accountability mechanisms appear weak. The land issue, therefore, is not

just about one allegation, it is about the direction in which governance is moving. Trust is the foundation of any government. When people believe that rules are applied equally, that institutions are fair, and that leaders are accountable, governance becomes effective. But when doubts arise, the consequences are far-reaching. The Congress has framed this issue as a fight for the people of Assam—a demand that no individual or family should be above the law. By taking the issue to every district, the party has sought to turn it into a people's movement, rather than limiting it to political discourse. The demand is for a comprehensive, impartial, and time-bound investigation into the allegations. Not just to establish facts, but to restore public confidence. More importantly, the party has emphasized the need for systemic reforms strengthening land records and digitization to prevent manipulation,

ensuring transparency in land transactions involving public officials and protecting the marginalized of indigenous and land rights communities. As Assam approaches another crucial electoral moment, this issue has the potential to shape public discourse in a significant way. Elections are not just about promises—they are about accountability for actions taken in the past. The land controversy has become more than a political issue, it is a test of Assam's democratic values. It is about whether transparency will prevail over opacity, whether accountability will triumph over impunity, and whether the voice of the people will be heard. In a state where every bigha of land carries the weight of history and hope, the demand is simple and just: truth, fairness, and justice. As the slogan from the protests reminds us—no one is bigger than the nation. And in Assam today, that message is resonating louder than ever.

'Save Land, Save Identity' Congress Campaign



Photo: Gettyimages

Committee regarding thousands of bighas of land being controlled by politically connected entities have further amplified public concern. While the government has denied wrongdoing, the lack of transparent investigations has deepened suspicion among the people.

For indigenous communities, land is not just an economic asset—it is the foundation of identity, culture, and history. From the Ahoms and Bodos to the Mishings and Karbis, land represents continuity and belonging. Congress leaders have argued that the current government's policies risk disrupting this delicate balance by prioritizing corporate interests over community rights.

The party has promised a comprehensive land protection framework if voted to power. This includes strengthening existing land laws, preventing illegal transfers, ensuring digitization with transparency, and restoring land rights where injustices have occurred. Congress has also pledged to introduce stricter safeguards against the transfer of tribal and protected lands to non-indigenous entities.

Another key aspect of the Congress campaign is the revival of land tribunals and fast-track mechanisms to resolve disputes. Thousands of land cases remain pending across Assam, leaving families in legal limbo. Congress argues that justice delayed in land matters is justice denied, particularly for vulnerable communities.

Importantly, the campaign is not just about criticism—it is about reclaiming trust. Congress is positioning itself as the protector of Assam's land and identity, promising governance that respects both constitutional provisions and the emotional connection people have with their land.

In a state where history has repeatedly been shaped by movements around land and identity, this issue could once again become the deciding factor. Assam's future cannot be built by weakening the very foundation on which its people stand.

For indigenous communities, land is not just an economic asset—it is the foundation of identity, culture, and history. From the Ahoms and Bodos to the Mishings and Karbis, land represents continuity and belonging.

Jameen, Jati aur Asmita is the Assam's Core Battle and this battle is no longer just political, it is deeply rooted in questions of land, identity, and survival. The Congress has placed this issue at the heart of its campaign with the powerful slogan: "Jameen Bachao, Asmita Bachao." This message is resonating across the Brahmaputra Valley, Barak Valley, and hill regions where people are increasingly anxious about the future of their land and identity. Over the past few years, concerns over land alienation have intensified under the

current Himanta Biswa Sarma-led government. Several reports, protests, and grassroots campaigns have pointed to large-scale land transfers, alleged encroachments, and policy decisions that many believe undermine the rights of indigenous communities. Farmers, tribal groups, and even small landholders are expressing fear that their ancestral lands are no longer secure.

Congress has consistently raised the issue of alleged misuse of power in land acquisition. The recent allegations by the Assam Pradesh Congress

Tribal Anger in BTR Region due to Neglect and Betrayal



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The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), once seen as a symbol of peace after decades of conflict, is today witnessing growing unrest and dissatisfaction. Tribal communities, especially the Bodos, are increasingly raising their voices against what they perceive as neglect and betrayal by the current state government.

At the center of this anger are allegations of large-scale land transfers in tribal areas. Various reports and claims by opposition parties suggest that between 13,000 to 30,000 acres of land in and around the BTR have been earmarked or transferred for corporate and industrial projects. While development is essential, the lack of consultation with local communities has sparked fears of displacement and marginalization.

For many tribal families, land is inseparable from identity and survival. Losing land is not just an economic setback it is a cultural and existential crisis. The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was designed to protect tribal autonomy and land rights in regions like BTR. However, many community leaders argue that these protections are being diluted in practice. Congress has actively taken up these issues, organizing protests

and outreach campaigns in Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri districts. The party has accused the BJP-led government of prioritizing corporate interests over tribal welfare, a charge

emphasizing community-led growth rather than top-down policies. Key proposals include strengthening Autonomous Council powers, ensuring prior consent for land use changes, and

For indigenous communities, land is not just an economic asset—it is the foundation of identity, culture, and history. From the Ahoms and Bodos to the Mishings and Karbis, land represents continuity and belonging.

that resonates with many local residents who feel excluded from decision-making processes. Another major concern in the BTR is unemployment and lack of sustainable development. Despite promises of economic growth, many youth in the region continue to struggle with limited job opportunities. This has created a sense of frustration, particularly among educated young people who feel their aspirations are being ignored.

Congress has promised a renewed focus on tribal development,

increasing investments in education, healthcare, and local industries.

The party has also committed to conducting an independent audit of all land transactions in tribal areas over the past decade. This, they argue, is essential to restore trust and ensure accountability.

The growing anger in BTR is not just about land it is about dignity, representation, and respect. As elections approach, the voices from these regions are becoming louder, demanding answers and accountability from those in power.

Indigenous Communities and Cultural Survival

Assam's rich cultural diversity is one of its greatest strengths. From the Bodos and Karbis to the Mishings, Rabhas, Tiwas, and Tea Tribes, each community contributes to the vibrant mosaic that defines the state. However, there is a growing sense of anxiety among these groups about the survival of their culture, language, and identity.

Rapid urbanization, migration pressures, and policy decisions have all contributed to this concern. Many indigenous languages are facing decline, with younger generations shifting towards more dominant languages for economic reasons. Cultural practices, festivals, and traditional knowledge systems are also under threat.

Land plays a crucial role in this context. Cultural identity is often tied to specific geographies—rivers, forests, and ancestral lands. When these are lost or altered, it directly impacts the cultural fabric of communities.

Congress has highlighted these concerns in its campaign, promising a comprehensive approach to cultural preservation. This includes promoting indigenous languages in education, supporting cultural institutions, and ensuring

representation of all communities in governance. The party has also emphasized the need for stronger autonomy mechanisms. Autonomous councils must be empowered not just administratively but also financially, enabling them to address local issues effectively.

Another key promise is the protection of traditional land rights. Congress has argued that without securing land, efforts to preserve culture will remain incomplete. Policies must therefore integrate land, culture, and development in a holistic manner.

Importantly, Congress has positioned itself as a party that values inclusivity and diversity. In contrast, it has accused the current government of pursuing policies that create divisions and marginalize smaller communities. The survival of Assam's indigenous cultures is not just a regional issue, it is a national concern. These cultures represent centuries of history, knowledge, and resilience. Protecting them is essential for preserving the identity of Assam itself.

As voters prepare to make their choice, the stakes could not be higher. The question is not just about governance it is about the kind of Assam people want to leave for future generations.

CAA-NRC Flawed and Inconsistent

Few issues have shaken Assam's socio-political landscape as deeply as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC). These policies have not only sparked protests but have also created a deep trust deficit between the government and the people.

Assam has a unique historical context when it comes to citizenship and migration. The Assam Accord of 1985 laid down a clear framework for identifying and addressing illegal immigration. However, many believe that the implementation of CAA contradicts this agreement by offering citizenship based on religious criteria, thereby altering the demographic balance.

The protests against CAA in Assam were among the most intense in the country. Students, artists, civil society groups, and ordinary citizens took to the streets, expressing fear that the law would dilute Assamese identity. The response of the government, including arrests and restrictions, further widened the gap between the state and its people.

The NRC process, which was meant to bring clarity, has instead left many in uncertainty. Over 19 lakh people were excluded from the final list, including genuine citizens who now face an uncertain future. At the same time, concerns remain that the process was flawed and inconsistent. Congress has taken a clear stand



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on these issues, promising to protect the constitutional and cultural rights of the people of Assam. The party has opposed the implementation of CAA in the state and stood for a fair, transparent, and error-free NRC process.

Importantly, Congress has emphasized the need for humane solutions. The party argues that citizenship issues cannot be addressed through fear and division. Instead, there must be a balanced approach that respects both national security and human rights.

The trust deficit created by CAA and NRC is not just a political issue—it is a social challenge that affects families, communities, and the future of the state. Congress is positioning itself as the voice of reason, advocating policies that unite rather than divide.

Unanswered Questions Congress Demands Justice for Zubeen Garg

The untimely demise of Assam's cultural icon Zubeen Garg on September 19, 2025, in Singapore sent shockwaves across the state and among Assamese communities worldwide. Known not just for his music but for his deep emotional connection with the people of Assam, his passing has left a void that transcends art and culture. However, the role of Himanta government in the investigation following his death has remained questionable.

The Congress, has strongly criticised the handling of the probe by the state government headed by Himanta Biswa Sarma. Congress has alleged that the investigation has been "mishandled" and that the Special Investigation Team (SIT) constituted to examine the circumstances surrounding Garg's death failed to focus on the "main accused" or key aspects of the case. A central concern raised by Congress has been the pace and direction of the probe. According to Congress, while the matter is now in the court but since the formation of the SIT, there was little visible progress. This, the party argues, has only deepened public suspicion and anxiety, particularly among fans and well-wishers who are seeking clarity and closure.

The Congress has also alleged that the investigation may be influenced by political considerations. Congress has been raising the demand for straightforward investigation with accountability. Congress has called for a free, fair,



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and transparent investigation. Congress emphasised that justice must not only be done but must also be seen to be done for the sake of Zubeen Garg's family, his countless fans, and the people of Assam who continue to demand answers. The death of Zubeen Garg is not just a personal tragedy it is a moment of collective grief for Assam. But as the investigation continues, it has also become a test of institutional credibility. Congress maintains that only a transparent, unbiased, and time-bound probe can restore public confidence.

In a state where cultural figures like Zubeen Garg hold immense emotional significance, the demand for truth is not merely political it is deeply personal. Congress has reiterated that it will continue to press for accountability, ensuring that the legacy of one of Assam's most beloved voices is honoured with justice and integrity.

Declining Administrative Morale of Assam

In a state where governance efficiency depends heavily on a responsive and empowered administrative machinery, concerns are increasingly being raised about declining morale within Assam's government services. Over the past few years, multiple stakeholders including employee associations, retired bureaucrats, and policy observers—have pointed to a growing sense of centralisation and reduced autonomy in decision-making under the government led by Himanta Biswa Sarma.

A key issue flagged is the concentration of authority at the top, with decisions increasingly routed through a limited circle. Critics argue that this has led to a system where district-level officers and departmental heads often function with constrained independence. This not only delays implementation but also weakens accountability at the grassroots level, where governance truly impacts citizens.

Employee bodies in sectors such as education, health, and public works have periodically expressed concerns

The Congress has positioned this issue as central to its governance agenda. It argues that Assam needs a shift from command-style administration to participatory governance.

over service conditions, transfers, and lack of institutional consultation. Teachers' associations, for instance, have highlighted administrative bottlenecks and postings, while health workers have raised issues about uneven workload distribution and infrastructure gaps especially in rural areas.

Another dimension of the problem is the perceived sidelining of experienced officials. Governance, by its nature, requires

institutional memory and continuity. However, frequent reshuffling and top-down directives have, according to critics, disrupted this balance. The result is a system that appears efficient in announcements but struggles with consistent delivery on the ground.

The Congress has positioned this issue as central to its governance agenda. It argues that Assam needs a shift from command-style administration to participatory governance. The party has promised to restore institutional processes, ensure regular consultations with employee bodies, and empower local administrations to take context-specific decisions.

Congress leaders have emphasized that governance must be inclusive not just politically, but administratively. They propose mechanisms such as departmental reviews, transparent policies and decentralised planning at district and block levels.

At its core, the debate is about trust between the government and its own machinery. Without motivated and empowered administrators, even the best policies risk faltering. As Assam heads toward elections, the question remains whether the current model of governance can sustain long-term efficiency or whether course correction is needed.

Democracy Under Doubt: Congress Flags Deep Flaws in Assam's Electoral Revision Process

Photo: GettyImage

As Assam prepares for a crucial Assembly election, serious questions have emerged over the integrity of the electoral roll revision process. Across both the state and national levels, the Congress has raised sustained concerns regarding the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) and related electoral roll updates, alleging that procedural lapses and lack of transparency could undermine the very foundation of free and fair elections.

At the heart of the issue lies the draft electoral rolls published after the revision exercise, an exercise meant to ensure accuracy, inclusivity, and credibility. Instead, what has surfaced, according to Congress, is a pattern of discrepancies that demand urgent scrutiny.

A Process Under Question

The electoral roll revision is a constitutionally mandated exercise carried out under the supervision of the Election Commission to add eligible voters and remove ineligible entries. Election Commission of India has the authority to conduct such revisions under the Representation of the People Act.

However, Congress has the issue that the process in Assam deviates from the principles of transparency and accountability that such an exercise demands. The party questioned the Commission, demanding discrepancies to be thoroughly verified.

Allegations of "Unknown" and Unverified Voters

One of the most serious concerns flagged is the alleged inclusion of "unknown" and unauthorised voters in the electoral rolls. According to reports and documented complaints, instances have emerged where individuals were added to households without the knowledge of actual residents.

In specific cases cited in official representations, multiple individuals were reportedly enrolled at residential addresses without the consent or awareness of the families living there. There have also been instances of voter entries linked to non-existent households raising questions about verification protocols.

Congress has argued that such lapses are not minor clerical errors but indicators of systemic weaknesses that could compromise the integrity of the electoral process.

"Temporary Voters" and Questions of Legitimacy

Another major issue raised is the alleged



Congress has argued that such lapses are not minor clerical errors but indicators of systemic weaknesses that could compromise the integrity of the electoral process.

inclusion of "temporary voters" or individuals from outside the state in the draft rolls. Congress has described this as a potential attempt to influence electoral outcomes, warning that such practices could distort the democratic mandate.

These concerns are particularly sensitive in Assam, where questions of identity, citizenship, and voter legitimacy have historically shaped political discourse.

Any perceived irregularity in voter inclusion carries deep socio-political implications.

Deletions and Disenfranchisement Fears

Alongside concerns over inclusion, Congress has also flagged large-scale deletions from the voter list.

The party has questioned the criteria and transparency behind these deletions, arguing that affected citizens may not have been given adequate opportunity to challenge or correct the changes.

A key procedural concern raised by Congress relates to the limited scope for objections and corrections in the draft rolls. According to the party, the published draft lacks sufficient detail and clarity.

National-Level Concerns on Electoral Integrity

The issue has not remained confined to Assam. At the national level, Congress has repeatedly raised broader concerns about electoral roll revisions and alleged manipulation. It has pointed to patterns observed in multiple states, where opposition

parties have flagged irregularities in the SIR process.

These concerns echo wider debates around electoral transparency, including allegations that technological safeguards and verification mechanisms may not have been uniformly applied, potentially increasing the risk of errors or manipulation.

By linking the Assam issue to a broader national pattern, Congress has sought to frame the controversy as not just a regional administrative lapse, but a systemic challenge to democratic processes.

A Test for Democratic Institutions

The controversy surrounding the SIR process in Assam approaches a critical juncture. With elections approaching, the credibility of the voter list will play a decisive role in shaping public trust.

For Congress, the issue is not merely political but constitutional as it is centered on the right of every eligible citizen to vote and the responsibility of institutions to safeguard that right. Congress has reiterated that electoral integrity is non-negotiable.

Law & Order – Assam Under Selective Justice?

Law and order is often seen as the most immediate measure of governance. In Assam, the issue has become increasingly political, with the Congress alleging a pattern of "selective justice" in policing and enforcement under the present administration.

While official data points to efforts in curbing crime and improving surveillance, opposition leaders argue that the application of law appears uneven. Instances where political activists, student leaders, or dissenting voices face swift action have been contrasted with what Congress describes as slower or softer responses in cases involving individuals perceived to be close to the ruling establishment.

The Congress has raised concerns over the use of legal provisions during protests and public demonstrations. Assam has a long tradition of civic engagement, from student movements to cultural activism. However, recent years have seen tighter restrictions and quicker police interventions in certain cases, leading to debates over the balance between maintaining order and protecting democratic rights.

Another concern is public safety, particularly in urban centres like Guwahati. Reports of theft, cybercrime,



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and violence against women continue to surface, reflecting the evolving nature of crime in a rapidly changing state. While the government has highlighted technological upgrades and policing initiatives, these measures need to be accompanied by systemic reforms and greater accountability.

Congress has proposed a comprehensive police reform roadmap aimed at restoring public trust. This includes depoliticising the police force, strengthening community policing, and ensuring time-bound investigations. The party has also stressed the need for

independent oversight mechanisms to review sensitive cases and prevent misuse of authority.

Importantly, Congress leaders argue that law enforcement must not only be strong but also fair. The perception of bias can erode public confidence and deepen social divisions. In a diverse state like Assam, maintaining neutrality in policing is essential for harmony and stability. The debate over law and order, therefore, goes beyond crime statistics. It is about the credibility of institutions and the assurance that justice will be delivered without fear or favour.

Assam Needs Freedom from Drug Menace and Youth Crisis

One of the most pressing challenges facing Assam today is the growing menace of drug abuse, particularly among the youth. Due to its geographical location and proximity to international borders and Northeast corridors, the state has become vulnerable to trafficking networks.

Over the past few years, there have been numerous seizures of narcotics by law enforcement agencies, indicating both increased vigilance and the scale of the problem. However, experts caution that seizures alone do not capture the full extent of the crisis. Behind the numbers lies a deeper social issue of rising addiction, lack of awareness, and limited rehabilitation infrastructure.

Youth organisations and civil society groups have repeatedly highlighted the impact of drug abuse on families and communities. In several districts, addiction has emerged as a major concern, affecting education, employment, and social stability. The linkage between



drug abuse and substance abuse is also frequently cited, as frustrated and idle youth become more vulnerable to such influences.

The Congress has acknowledged the seriousness of the issue and proposed a multi-pronged strategy. While supporting strict enforcement against trafficking networks, the party has emphasised that policing alone cannot solve the problem. Rehabilitation, awareness, and prevention must form the core of any long-term solution.

Congress' plan includes expanding de-addiction centres across districts, integrating mental health services into primary healthcare, and launching statewide awareness campaigns targeting schools and colleges. The party has also proposed promoting sports

and youth engagement programmes as constructive alternatives.

Another key aspect is regional coordination. Given the cross-border nature of drug trafficking, Congress has called for stronger collaboration with neighbouring states and agencies. Intelligence sharing and joint operations, it argues, are essential to dismantle organised networks.

At a broader level, the drug crisis reflects the challenges facing Assam's youth—limited opportunities, social pressures, and a rapidly changing environment. Addressing these underlying issues is as important as tackling the supply chain.

As elections approach, the question is not whether the problem exists—it clearly does—but whether the response is comprehensive enough. Congress has sought to frame the issue as a test of governance priorities, urging a shift from reactive measures to sustained, community-driven solutions.

Misuse of Power and Constitutional Distress for Assam

Evictions & Humanitarian Concerns Development or Displacement?

The government led by CM Himanta Biswa Sarma reflects a pattern of excessive centralisation, misuse of authority, and growing social polarisation. One of the most politically sensitive issues in Assam today is the state government's eviction drive targeting alleged encroachments on government, forest, and religious lands. The ruling alliance has consistently maintained that these drives are necessary to reclaim public land, protect ecological zones, and restore the sanctity of satras and temples.

However, the Congress, has raised serious concerns over the manner and impact of these evictions. According to party leaders, a significant number of those displaced belong to economically vulnerable communities, many of whom have lived on the land for decades without formal documentation.

Congress has alleged that the eviction drives have disproportionately affected Muslims, turning what should be an administrative exercise into a politically charged issue. The party argues that while encroachment is a legitimate concern, the process must be humane, transparent, and non-discriminatory.

Ground reports from several districts have highlighted instances where families were rendered homeless overnight, with limited access to rehabilitation or compensation. Livelihoods dependent on agriculture and small businesses have also been disrupted, intensifying economic distress.

The Congress has framed the issue as a humanitarian crisis rather than merely a legal one. It has promised to implement a balanced land policy that combines protection of public land with rehabilitation and legal support for vulnerable families. The party insists that justice must prioritise dignity and justice, not just enforcement.

Congress has also accused the government of using the issue of infiltration to fuel polarisation during elections. According to the party, instead of focusing on administrative solutions and consensus-building, the narrative is often framed in a way that sharpens divisions between communities.



Photo: Gettyimages

Crackdown on Child Marriage- Reform or Selective Action?

The Assam government's crackdown on child marriage has been one of its most high-profile campaigns, with thousands of arrests made under laws including the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. The ruling dispensation has presented this as a bold step to eliminate a deeply entrenched social evil.

While acknowledging the seriousness of child marriage, the Congress has questioned the approach adopted by the government. Citing reports opposition leaders have alleged that the crackdown has disproportionately impacted certain communities, particularly Muslims.

Congress leaders argue that social reform cannot be achieved through what they describe as "selective enforcement" and large-scale arrests alone. They point out that child marriage is a socio-economic issue linked to poverty, lack of education, and limited awareness, requiring long-term interventions.

There have also been concerns about the impact of the crackdown on families, particularly women and children left behind after arrests. Critics argue that without parallel support systems such as education, financial assistance, and counselling, the measures risk creating further social instability.

Congress has proposed a more comprehensive approach, combining strict enforcement with community engagement, education, and economic empowerment programmes. The party maintains that reform must be inclusive and sensitive, rather than perceived as targeting specific groups.

Infiltration, NRC & Identity Politics

Illegal immigration remains one of the most enduring and emotionally charged issues in Assam's political history. From the Assam Agitation to the signing of the Assam Accord, the question of protecting indigenous identity has shaped the state's politics for decades.

Congress has highlighted that the promises of constitutional, legislative, and administrative safeguards for

indigenous communities remain unfulfilled.

Two major aspects of this debate the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) continue to generate political and social tensions. While the ruling alliance has defended the CAA and downplayed its impact, the opposition maintains that the law has deepened anxieties over identity and citizenship.

Congress has also accused the government of using the issue of infiltration to fuel polarisation during elections. According to the party, instead of focusing on administrative solutions and consensus-building, the narrative is often framed in a way that sharpens divisions between communities.

The party has reiterated its commitment to protecting the rights and identity of indigenous Assamese people while ensuring that the process remains fair, transparent, and free from political manipulation. It has called for a balanced approach that addresses genuine concerns without creating fear or mistrust among communities.

Development vs Displacement, Who Benefits?

The Assam government has been claiming a series of development initiatives, including investments in infrastructure, industrial projects, and business summits. Projects in roads, railways, airports, and waterways are being showcased as evidence of rapid progress.

The Congress has questioned the distribution and impact of this development. Congress leaders argue that growth has been concentrated in select areas, with limited benefits reaching rural and marginalised communities.

A key concern raised by the party is land acquisition for industrial and infrastructure projects. Congress has

alleged that in several cases, indigenous communities have lost land without adequate compensation or rehabilitation, leading to displacement and economic uncertainty.

The party has also pointed out that headline investments do not automatically translate into local employment. While the government claims to have created over 1.6 lakh jobs, Congress has called for greater transparency in recruitment data and highlighted ongoing concerns about unemployment among educated youth.

On welfare schemes, particularly those targeting women, the government has failed to deliver its promise. Congress, while acknowledging the importance of such initiatives, has raised concerns that implementation gaps and uneven distribution have limited their effectiveness.

The party has also raised concerns about crimes against women, stating that financial assistance alone cannot substitute for safety and justice. It has promised a more integrated approach combining welfare, security, and empowerment.

Tea Garden Workers and Changing Political Loyalties

Tea garden workers, a historically significant voting bloc, remain central to Assam's electoral politics. Congress leaders highlight that many structural issues such as low wages, healthcare access, and education remain inadequately addressed for the Tea garden workers.

The party has pledged to revisit wage structures, improve living conditions, and ensure that welfare schemes translate into tangible improvements on the ground. It has also emphasised the need to restore trust with communities that feel economically vulnerable despite policy announcements.

Polarisation-The Underlying Political Strategy?

Photo: Gettyimages



Across these issues evictions, immigration, law enforcement, and social reforms Congress has consistently raised the question of polarisation. The party alleges that the current political narrative in Assam is increasingly driven by identity-based divisions rather than inclusive development.

According to Congress, governance should unite rather than divide. It has accused the ruling establishment of framing issues in ways that deepen social fault lines, particularly along religious and ethnic lines.

The party has positioned itself as an advocate for inclusive politics,

emphasising harmony, constitutional values, and equal treatment for all communities. It argues that long-term stability and progress in Assam depend on bridging divides rather than amplifying them.

As Assam approaches the elections, the stakes go beyond political power. The debates around eviction, identity, justice, and development reflect deeper questions about the state's direction.

The government led by Himanta Biswa Sarma has failed to keep its promises of a welfare state for Assam. The Congress, has been raising the issues of centralisation, selective enforcement, and growing polarisation by the government in Assam.

Time to Rebuild Assam with Congress Vision of 'Naya Assam'

Photo: Gettyimages



After years of governance marked by allegations of corruption, unfulfilled promises, and deepening social divisions, the call for change is growing stronger. The Congress party has stepped forward with a clear message that Assam deserves better, and the time has come to build a "Naya Assam" rooted in justice, development, and unity.

Over the past few months, Congress has sharpened its campaign with a fact-based critique of the present government. In a major political move, the party released a 20-point chargesheet accusing the current administration of "rampant corruption" and systematic misgovernance. These allegations are not isolated political claims but are part of a larger narrative emerging from multiple incidents, controversies, and governance failures that have raised serious concerns among the people.

From questions surrounding alleged past scams to recent administrative irregularities, the credibility of the ruling leadership has repeatedly come under scrutiny. Even historically, the leadership has faced allegations linked to financial irregularities such as the Saradha chit fund case and other controversies, which continue to cast a shadow over its claims of clean governance. Congress leaders, in their press briefings and public outreach,

have consistently argued that such patterns reflect a deeper systemic problem rather than isolated lapses.

At the same time, governance failures on the ground have further amplified public dissatisfaction. The tragic illegal coal mining incident in 2025, which exposed the continued existence of banned rat-hole mining in the state, raised serious questions about regulatory failure and administrative accountability. Congress has pointed to such incidents as evidence that despite tall claims, enforcement remains weak and governance priorities misplaced.

Equally significant is the growing perception that the present government has relied heavily on polarisation rather

than performance. Political observers note that identity-based rhetoric and divisive narratives have been strategically used to deflect attention from core governance issues like unemployment, economic stagnation, and social welfare gaps. Congress, while carefully navigating Assam's sensitive socio-political fabric, has consistently highlighted the need to shift focus back to development, harmony, and inclusive growth.

The issue of unfulfilled promises has also become central to the electoral discourse. As the Congress campaign formally kicked off in key constituencies, party leaders directly accused the ruling establishment of failing to deliver on its development

commitments over the past decade. From job creation to infrastructure, from farmer welfare to youth opportunities the gap between promises and reality has become a recurring theme in Congress' outreach.

Through grassroots campaigns, public meetings, and coordinated national and state-level interventions, Congress is presenting a roadmap for rebuilding Assam.

"Naya Assam" is a vision that seeks to restore trust in governance while addressing the real issues faced by the people. This includes creating sustainable employment opportunities for youth, ensuring fair land and identity rights, strengthening public healthcare and education, and empowering women and marginalised communities. It also emphasises transparent governance, accountability, and the rule of law as non-negotiable principles.

Congress leaders have repeatedly underlined that Assam's future cannot be built on fear, division, or empty slogans. Instead, it requires a government that listens, delivers, and unites. As voters prepare to make their choice, the contrast could not be sharper. On one side stands a government facing serious allegations and criticism over its track record and on the other, a Congress promising renewal, accountability, and inclusive progress for a "New Assam".

For Iran to win, the US does not have to lose

It only has to choose a different course, writes **Aakar Patel**

I want Iran to win. What does 'win' mean? Iran defines it in the following way: the United States must lift its decades-old sanctions; it must dismantle the military bases in the Arab states; Israel must end its occupation of Lebanon; and Iran must be compensated for the damage it has suffered over the years and in this war. Though more than a thousand Iranians have already died in American and Israeli bombardment, and many more may die, securing these outcomes would amount, in Iran's view, to total victory.

Why do I want Iran to win? At the most basic level, it is the underdog in a confrontation with two nuclear-armed opponents, Israel and the United States. It is militarily weaker, yes, but not feeble, as the world has witnessed since 28 February. It has shown a level of resolve that many other states might not. Another instinctive reason for supporting Iran is that it is, like us, a nation that feels it has been trampled on by what is called the West. I feel solidarity with it for this reason.

At a deeper level, I see Israel and the



Photo: Getty Images

Iran is entitled to demand compensation for losses—running into hundreds of billions of dollars—in a war it didn't start or provoke

The US runs an empire in all but name. Its military shouldn't threaten the world but focus on its own homeland. Iran has begun to force this conversation

United States as colonising powers imposing themselves brutally on a region that does not want them. Their actions, therefore, should be resisted. American sanctions on Iran isolate it from the global banking system, making trade with the world difficult. They are designed not only to weaken the Iranian state but also to keep ordinary Iranians poor.

These are not United Nations sanctions but unilateral measures imposed by the United States, which uses its economic might to pressure countries it dislikes,

including Venezuela and Cuba. Iran's demand that such sanctions be lifted is therefore just; for that to happen, Iran must prevail.

The United States maintains military bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, the UAE, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Why does it need such an extensive presence of soldiers and weaponry in the region? In practice, the United States runs an empire in all but name. Its military should not threaten the world but focus on its own homeland. Iran, through this conflict, has begun forcing

that conversation.

Today Israel resembles what South Africa was 40 years ago, arguably even worse. It is described by many human rights organisations—including some within Israel itself—as an apartheid state, controlling millions of people who have neither a vote nor equal rights. It has used overwhelming military power, backed by extensive American funding and arms, to dominate West Asia. An Iranian victory, in this argument, could help change that dynamic.

Iran has suffered economic losses estimated at hundreds of billions of dollars over the years because of sanctions, and it has been further harmed by this war. Iran is entitled to compensation from the United States and its allies. These are the reasons I want Iran to win.

Why do I think such an outcome is possible, perhaps even likely? Because Iran appears to retain significant leverage in the conflict. The United States and Israel can inflict devastating punishment, and they have done so, targeting infrastructure and killing civilians. They have assassinated Iranian leaders and may attempt to eliminate more. Yet the primary objective of regime change has not been achieved. The Islamic Republic remains intact.

Iran's response has been narrow but strategic: it has sought to disrupt the movement of oil, gas and other supplies through key maritime routes in West Asia. Its influence over these waters rests both on the force it can deploy and on the threat of force, which has deterred commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. At the same time, Iran's own oil exports continue. It also retains the capacity to target American bases and the countries hosting them.

These factors matter because control over energy flows affects the global economy. As long as US President Donald Trump cannot guarantee safe passage for shipping in and out of the Persian Gulf, the price of crude oil and gas will likely continue to rise, as has already happened since the conflict began. Consumers in the United States are paying more for petrol and diesel, and costs will likely rise further if the war continues. Unfortunately, the global economy is also exposed to these pressures.

So far, much of the world has not openly pressed the United States and Israel to end the conflict. One explanation is that many countries fear confronting them directly. That imbalance of power is another reason I want Iran to win.

From this point, the United States will have to take significant steps to alter the trajectory of the conflict, which currently appears to favour Iran's strategic aims. Military escalation alone has not delivered regime change. A negotiated compromise—one that includes guarantees against future attacks and the lifting of sanctions—may be the most realistic path to ending the violence.

I want Iran to win. For that to happen, the United States does not necessarily have to lose. It only has to choose a different course. ■

Views are personal

The world according to Manmohan Singh

Edited excerpts of the inaugural Manmohan Singh Memorial Lecture by **Dr Angela Merkel**, former German chancellor, in New Delhi on 26 February

What interest can there be today in my speech in honour of Dr Manmohan Singh? After all, he became Prime Minister of India back in 2004, was in office till 2014, more than 11 years ago now, and I am a former Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany who ended her active political career more than four years ago. Why did I nonetheless find it appealing and rewarding to accept Upinder Singh's invitation on behalf of the Manmohan Singh Trust?

First and foremost: it was a great pleasure to work with Manmohan Singh for almost 10 years.

Manmohan Singh was a very special personality. I felt this immediately in our first encounter. I think everyone who knew him felt something similar: he could captivate people, even though he did not appear dominant in either his demeanour or his speech. He was more than 20 years older. We met for the first time in April 2006 in Germany for the opening of the Hannover Messe, the world's largest industrial fair at the time, at which India was invited as the partner country and Indian companies could thus present themselves to the global public.

What impressed me about Manmohan Singh was his alert and curious gaze, which radiated experience and openness in equal measure. He seemed both composed (*'in sich ruhend'*) and gentle as well as determined. As the first Prime Minister of India who was not a Hindu and belonged to the Sikh minority, he embodied the pride of a nation that seeks its equal in religious, ethnic and geographical diversity. He did this without losing many words over it. He radiated authority without seeming intimidating and gave me the courage to ask questions and conduct open conversations.

In our conversations, he pointed out again and again, not reproachfully but firmly, the reservations emerging countries like India have about rich industrialised nations, including Germany. From then on, I engaged more closely with the conditions in emerging countries, including India, and the challenges these countries faced. In my political memoir, I describe how my view of the world sharpened through conversations such as those I had with Manmohan Singh.

On my desk in the Chancellery stood a globe, which served as geographical orientation during my phone calls with heads of government. At some point, I began to think about the difference between a globe and a map. In doing so, it became

clear to me that my worldview, like many other Europeans', was Eurocentric. On a globe, the distance from every place in the world to the centre of the globe is the same; no place is highlighted. In a world map, there is a centre and there are margins. Where the centre lies is arbitrarily determined. I grew up with maps where the second smallest continent on earth, Europe, is always at the centre. This shaped my thinking from childhood. It became clear to me much later that Europe is not the nave of the world. But what for me was a late insight was for Manmohan Singh a truism from childhood.

The world has changed dramatically since the time Manmohan Singh was prime minister. The economic and political weight of the world has shifted from the G7 industrialised nations to emerging countries symbolised by the BRICS group. The shift was on the cards even during our time in office. What weighs more heavily today is that seemingly unshakable certainties have in recent years been shaken. Let me name three:

In Europe, the principle of the territorial integrity of states was violated by Russia's attack on Ukraine, throwing into turmoil the order established after World War II. The right to territorial integrity and the sovereignty of every member of the United Nations, underlined in the UN Charter, was trampled, enshrined.

Multilateralism is under pressure. The UN under President Donald Trump is leaving or weakening international organisations—WHO, WTO, the Paris Climate Agreement. They openly call into question the role of the UN and take unilateral action. The previous order of cooperation is being replaced by an order where, increasingly, the might of the strong will prevail over the strength of the law.

Add to this newer possibilities, courtesy social media and AI, which are capable of turning truths into lies and lies into truths. This has grave effects on our democracies and our coexistence in freedom.

Given these developments, we must wonder what principles should govern lives in the future—to coexist with other groups in society, in the education of children, in professional life. Also, whether it's still worthwhile to commit oneself to democratic rules.

What does all this have to do with Manmohan Singh? Well, I believe that his work can re-orient us.

On 19 July 2005, Manmohan Singh delivered a speech in Washington to both

houses of the US Congress. "The real test of a democracy," he said, "is not what is said in the Constitution but how it functions on the ground." The indispensable features of a democracy, he said, with particular reference to India, are: free and fair elections on the watch of an independent Election Commission; an independent judiciary as guarantor of the rule of law and defender of the Constitution; a fearless press; the protection of minorities; the space for civil society organisations to work unhindered. Each of these, he said, was equally important for a functioning democracy.

What applied then applies even more today. Democracy is under pressure, certainly in Germany. It's now up to individuals to make no compromises with what we regard as essential to (democratic) order. We must be prepared to take a stance publicly, to not back away from hate and incitement on the internet or from controversial discussions. On this will depend whether we can continue to live in freedom.

We can no longer take the democratic order as an unshakable truth, as a given.

Whatever important countries on our planet do, we must re-commit ourselves to multilateral cooperation. Manmohan Singh underlined this in various UNGA speeches. In one of these, in September 2013, he said member states are best served when they adhere to the letter and spirit of the UN charter. By which he meant striving for the broadest possible consensus of the international community and, in doing so,

"He [MMS] pointed out, not reproachfully but firmly, the reservations emerging countries like India have about rich industrialised nations"



Manmohan Singh with Angela Merkel in 2007

balancing fairly the needs and responsibilities of nations in different stages of development.

Global challenges such as man-made climate change and the protection of biodiversity imperatively require collective action by the world community. India and Germany are both signatories to the Paris Climate Agreement, and to the principle of the common but differentiated responsibility of various states. The latter principle was particularly important to Manmohan Singh as prime minister of an emerging country, but in underlining this, he was speaking for all developing countries. We agreed that a life of peace and security was possible only if growth was inclusive.

On the challenges of globalisation, manifest especially after the financial crisis of 2008—when economic recession hit industrialised countries and caused economic upheaval in emerging economies as well—[MMS] believed that difficulties can only be overcome with a cooperative approach, not a confrontational one.

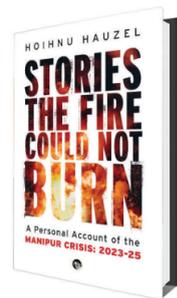
Today, as protectionist trade practices hinder the growth of the world economy, his warnings are of great importance—for it is the poorest countries and the poorest in the emerging countries that suffer the most.

Finally, if technological developments are fundamentally changing life everywhere, then these technologies must also be subject to multilateral agreements and regulations. This applies equally to the protection of personal and economic data, to the devolution of responsibilities in social media and to the regulation of the expanding sphere of AI. It may seem utopian in the present circumstances—when leaders in the field are either setting their own rules (China) or preventing any regulation (the US)—but multilateral cooperation is necessary in these areas as well.

In view of the challenges our societies face in a changing world, I think Manmohan Singh's maxims and his political work can still be a guiding light and inspiration. ■

BOOK EXTRACT

'Silenced, scapegoated and scarred'



Title **Stories the Fire Could Not Burn**
Author **Hoihnu Hauzel**
Publisher **Speaking Tiger**
Price **Rs 499 (paperback)**

Words often betray us when we need them most. They falter in the face of grief, lose their strength when asked to hold pain, and remain powerless before the scale of violence some communities are made to endure. No sentence, no matter how carefully crafted, can truly carry the weight of a people's suffering. They cannot resurrect the dead, nor can they console the displaced or erase the nightmares of the violated.

The events that have occurred in Manipur beginning on 3 May 2023 are more than a crisis. It is a wound that refuses to close—one that language alone cannot mend.

And yet, we must try. This book is my attempt—not as a historian or a journalist, but as a witness—to speak of the unbearable silence that has followed the storm. It is not a scholarly work. It does not pretend to be neutral. It is a personal account, rooted in lived experience: in the voices of my family, my friends and a community that has been repeatedly silenced, scapegoated and scarred.

[...]

I write this for the thousands who were displaced—those who fled with nothing but the clothes on their backs, and those who did not flee in time. I write for those who, despite having lost everything, still insist on the right to return, to rebuild, to be heard.

I think of the night we fled—how silence hung heavier than the air, how we carried not just our belongings but our memories, our dead, our dread. That night, we didn't just leave behind homes. We left behind parts of ourselves we may never be able to reclaim.

And still, there are those whose suffering eclipses even our flight.

[...]

Late at night on 11 April 2023, a loud knock shook Pastor Nengzahau V. Haupi and his family out of their sleep. 'Hou gat lo, hou gat lo.' Get up, get up. It was 2 a.m. 'Thok oh, thok ho' Come out, come out, the voices demanded. There was a group of men at the door confiscating their phones and asking them to vacate their house.

Nengzahau V. Haupi, fifty-four, had been serving as a pastor at the Evangelical Baptist Church in Tribal Colony, a colony in the West of Imphal, sandwiched by other colonies like Angom Colony, Soibam Leikai, Sanjenthong, Wahengbam Colony, Zomi Villa. Pastor Haupi had come to this church after dedicating twenty years in the Evangelical Baptist Convention Church in the interiors of Manipur. Tribal Colony is where

I think of the night we fled—how we carried not just our belongings but our memories, our dead, our dread

Photos: Getty Images



'The events that have occurred in Manipur beginning on 3 May 2023 are more than a crisis. It is a wound that refuses to close.'



the Kuki-Zomi/Mizo community had lived for decades. The land on which it stood had long been considered a marshy, uninhabitable area and was believed to have come into being in the late 1960s and early 1970s, developed by the government—possibly under the leadership of R.K. Dorendra or Yangmaso Saiza, both of whom later served as Chief Ministers of Manipur. The colony was set up on government land as transit quarters for hill government employees posted in the valley, a small but important effort to bridge the hills and the plains back then.

The church was established in 1974, the year I was born. From a small mud structure, it had evolved into a pucca building through the contributions and efforts of the Kuki-Zomi/Mizo community living around it. This was where the community residing in the vicinity came together. A sense of kinship pervaded the space; after all the community had nurtured the church like a baby, building and nourishing it brick by brick.

[...]

This particular church was

"They stood and watched as the bulldozer moved in. Their house and the church fell quickly under the machine's steady force"

constructed in 1974, long before the Supreme Court's 2009 directive (in *Union of India vs. State of Gujarat and Others*, after which the state government, in 2010, issued a notification prohibiting unauthorised construction of religious structures in streets, parks or other public spaces), and had stood peacefully for decades as part of the social and spiritual fabric of the locality. The demolition of such a long-established place of worship appeared difficult to reconcile with the intent of the government's own notification, which expressly allowed for relocation or regularisation in suitable cases.

[...]

'Hou gat lo, hou gat lo.'

A JCB was roaring outside, demolishing the church.

The family was given a fleeting five minutes to gather their belongings. Pastor Haupi and his son scrambled in the dark, using the dim light of their phones to gather essentials. The pastor packed his wife's garments, important documents and his record book. His son, overwhelmed and emotional, grabbed whatever he could.

Amidst the chaos, Pastor Haupi tried to remain calm, drawing strength from a passage he once read about how parental calmness affects children. He prayed for resilience and thanked God for allowing him to witness this trial, believing he was

chosen to endure it. At dawn, they stood and watched as the bulldozer moved in. Their house and the church fell quickly, stone by stone, under the machine's steady force. The destruction was fast and final. By the time daylight settled over the village, the church was gone.

Not a wall remained standing. Pastor Haupi stood apart, shoulders heavy, his heart aching with sorrow. He looked over the rubble, the splintered wood, the shattered glass, and felt the weight of it all press against his chest. Yet amid the devastation, there was something else—a flicker of gratitude. Bittersweet and strange, it came from the unshakable strength he found in his faith, even as everything around him crumbled. When I spoke to him months after this, he broke down.

Word spread quickly. By mid-morning, church members began arriving one by one, then in groups drawn not by obligation, but by something deeper. Grief, yes, but also love. They circled the ruins, their feet crunching over debris, their eyes red. Then, without cue or command, a hymn rose. Faint at first, then stronger.

Voices cracked with emotion sang in harmony, lifting a familiar melody into the heavy air for the last time in that place where they all stood. Others joined in, some barely whispering the words through tears.

'Hallelujah, amen.' ■

BOOK REVIEW

Life in the villages of a megalopolis

Puneet Singhal

Reading *Sheher Mein Gaon* as someone born and raised in an urban village of Delhi is a deeply personal experience. For me, Deoli is not a case study or a field site—it is home. It is where memory, land, caste, labour, faith and survival meet every day. Ekta Chauhan's book approaches Delhi's urban villages with a sensitivity that acknowledges this complexity without romanticising it or flattening it into easy narratives of loss or progress.

One of the book's greatest strengths lies in its refusal to treat urban villages as transitional leftovers, neither fully rural nor properly urban. Instead, Chauhan positions them as living, contested spaces where histories persist, power is unevenly distributed and identities are constantly negotiated. This framing resonates with the lived reality of Delhi's urban villages, with their village *devtas*, *kuldevis*, dried *johads* and fragile commons. Villages like Deoli in south Delhi, for example, which sits cheek by jowl with the posh Sainik Farms as also the working-class neighbourhood of Sangam

Vihar. Both these settlements are largely unauthorised, and have come up over what were originally the farm lands of Deoli and adjoining villages Tigri and Khanpur.

As someone who has been

interviewed in the book for my work through the 'Dilli Dehat Project', I read these chapters with both gratitude and attentiveness. Chauhan listens closely to residents, migrants, workers, students and allows their voices to

remain textured rather than illustrative. The presence of initiatives like 'Dilli Dehat' within the narrative signals an important shift: urban villages are not only sites of extraction or conflict, but also of knowledge-making and resistance, where communities are actively documenting and reclaiming their own histories.

The book is particularly effective in showing how urbanisation does not dissolve caste, gender or insider-outsider hierarchies but often reshapes and hardens them. Property, rental economies, compensation and 'development' emerge as new arenas where older inequalities are redrawn rather than erased. This insight is crucial, especially for policymakers and planners who

still assume that proximity to the city automatically equals social mobility.

At the same time, as someone deeply engaged in ground-level activism, I found myself wishing for a slightly longer pause on questions of agency beyond adaptation, especially around inter-caste solidarities and emerging youth leadership in these villages. These currents do exist, often quietly, and their fragility deserves attention alongside conflict.

What *Sheher Mein Gaon* does exceptionally well is open a conversation that Delhi has long avoided. It shifts the gaze away from the capital megalopolis and its curated heritage zones to the villages that have absorbed the



Title **Sheher Mein Gaon: Culture, Conflict and Change in the Urban Villages of Delhi**
Author **Ekta Chauhan**
Publisher **Penguin Vintage**
Price **Rs 399**



Urban villages are living, contested spaces where histories persist and identities are constantly negotiated

The book shifts the gaze away from the capital megalopolis to the villages that have absorbed the city's growth

city's growth, often without consent or recognition. It asks us to reconsider what constitutes the 'urban', whose memories are preserved and who bears the cost of development.

For readers unfamiliar with Delhi's villages, this book is an entry point: clear, grounded and humane. For those of us who come from these spaces, it is something rarer—a careful acknowledgment that our lives, histories and contradictions matter to the story of the city.

Delhi is often described as a city of migrants. *Sheher Mein Gaon* reminds us, quietly but firmly, that it is also a city of villages and that any honest understanding of its present or future must begin there. ■

After A Decade of Drift, Keralam Calls for

Delays, Deficits, and Discontent Impact Keralam's Welfare

As Keralam approaches the 2026 Assembly elections, the political discourse in the state is increasingly being shaped by a growing sentiment of fatigue with the incumbent government. After nearly a decade of uninterrupted rule by the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF), questions around governance, economic management, and delivery of promises have moved to the center of public debate.

While the ruling alliance continues to project its tenure as one of infrastructure and welfare consolidation, the Congress-led United Democratic Front is framing the election as a referendum on what it calls "missed opportunities and mounting failures."

Promise vs Performance: The Gap That Defines a Decade

When the LDF came to power in 2016, it did so on the back of an ambitious and detailed manifesto, promising transformative governance across sectors—from employment and housing to welfare and infrastructure. The scale of commitments was unprecedented, with the government later claiming that a majority of its promises had been fulfilled.

However, nearly ten years later,



Photo: Gettyimages

that narrative is being increasingly challenged.

The most striking example is employment. The LDF had promised to generate 40 lakh jobs within five years a commitment that raised expectations among

Keralam's educated youth. Yet, available data and official updates indicate that the target remains far from achieved. Data suggests that job creation has not kept pace with the promises made. The reports state that the programmes that were

launched did not meet the scale of employment generation required for the state. The issue has had real consequences. Keralam continues to witness high levels of outward migration, with thousands of young professionals seeking opportunities

outside the state or abroad.

Opposition leaders allege that instead of creating sustainable employment, the government relied on "announcements over outcomes," leaving a generation grappling with uncertainty.



Keralam's government has been wrongly projecting the welfare architecture that it has been strengthening people with extensive pension schemes and social security. The LDF has been repeatedly highlighting these false claims as its pro-people approach. However, the sustainability and delivery of this model are now under scrutiny.

Reports of delays in pension disbursement have become a recurring issue, raising concerns among beneficiaries who depend on these payments for their daily needs. Congress has been raising the issue and highlighting that the delays are symptomatic of a deeper fiscal crisis.

Critics argue that the government expanded welfare commitments without ensuring financial stability and the result is a system that is struggling to deliver consistently.

Rising prices and shortages in subsidised products have further compounded the problem, affecting both lower-income and middle-class households. For many voters, the question is no longer about the existence of welfare schemes, but about their reliability.

At the heart of the governance debate is Keralam's financial situation. Over the past decade, the state's debt levels have risen significantly, with borrowing becoming a key tool for sustaining expenditure.

The LDF has attributed much of the fiscal strain to restrictions imposed by the Union government, arguing that limitations on borrowing have constrained its ability to invest and deliver.

However, the financial crisis is largely self-inflicted according to the political analysts. They point to rising revenue expenditure, inefficient resource management, and a lack of long-term fiscal planning. The consequences of this financial crisis are visible across sectors from delayed welfare payments to stalled projects. The government's focus on large-scale infrastructure announcements has not been matched by prudent financial management.

Similarly the LDF claims of delusional as most of the infrastructure projects being claimed to be developed by the UDF were either initiated during previous governments or supported by central agencies. They also point to delays, cost escalations, and implementation challenges as indicators of governance gaps.

The government has prioritised visibility over viability as per the infrastructure policy observers. The question is not whether they were announced, but whether they have delivered tangible benefits.

Controversies such as the K-Rail semi-speed rail project have further highlighted tensions between development ambitions and public concerns, particularly

Governance & Accountability: Rising Concerns

Beyond economics and development, governance itself has emerged as a key issue in the election. The Congress has consistently raised concerns over law and order, citing instances of alleged custodial violence and police excesses. While the government maintains that such incidents are isolated, the reality is that they point to deeper systemic issues.

Healthcare, which is another area where Keralam has traditionally excelled, has also come under scrutiny. Reports of medical negligence in recent years have triggered debates about accountability and quality of care.

"Keralam's institutions are strong, but no system is immune to lapses," says a healthcare policy

expert. "The challenge is how these lapses are addressed."

Congress For Change with Credibility

Against this backdrop, Congress is the credible alternative for Keralam. Drawing on its governance record, the Congress is emphasising a model that combines welfare with fiscal discipline and inclusive growth.

Congress has raised concerns over current government's shortcomings whether in employment, financial management, or governance. Keralam after a decade of false promises underscore the need for a change.

Congress has highlighted that the Pinarayi government has been a



complete failure, pointing to issues such as price rise, supply shortages, and policy missteps. Party leaders have expressed confidence that the Congress led UDF could secure a decisive mandate, reflecting a broader belief within the alliance that the political tide may be turning.

Congress is seeking to broaden its appeal by focusing on youth, employment, and economic revival

Why 2026 Could Be a Defining Election

The 2026 Assembly elections are not merely about choosing a government, they are about deciding the direction of Keralam's future. After a decade of LDF rule, voters are being asked to assess whether the promises made have translated into meaningful change in their lives. The debate is no longer limited to ideological preferences; it is increasingly centred on governance outcomes. Elections in Keralam have always been about accountability. This time, the question is whether a decade of continuity has delivered enough to justify another term.

Congress promises to be a corrective force, one that can address fiscal challenges, generate

employment, and restore confidence in governance.

As campaigning intensifies, the central question before Keralam's voters is clear, continue with the present course or opt for change. The challenge for Keralam is to decide whether continuity offers that evolution, or whether change is needed to achieve it. The Congress believes that a fresh approach is necessary.

With economic pressures mounting, employment concerns persisting, and governance issues under scrutiny, the 2026 election could mark a turning point.

For many voters, the choice may ultimately come down to a simple question, has the past decade delivered enough, or is it time for Keralam to turn the page?

Broken Promises, Broken Trust-10 Big Assurances That Failed

If there is one thread that runs through the political scrutiny in Keralam today, it is the ruling LDF over the past decade and the gap between commitment and delivery. The most ambitious and politically significant promises remain largely unmet. A closer look at key commitments reveals why this issue has become central to the 2026 election narrative.

1. 40 Lakh Jobs Promise: The Biggest Gap

The highest ambitious promise was the creation of 40 lakh jobs within five years. This commitment was projected as a cornerstone of Keralam's transition to a "knowledge economy." However, available data indicates a significant shortfall. By the end of 2025, programmes such as Kudumbashree had mapped only around 2 lakh local jobs, with plans to broader target of 40 lakh jobs remained far from achieved. Data suggests that employment generation has not matched the scale of promises pointing to continued migration of Keralam's youth in search of

opportunities. Even government claims of job creation running into a few lakh across sectors fall short of the original projection, reinforcing Opposition allegations that the promise was "overstated from the start."

2. Pension Hike to ₹2,500: Promise vs Reality

The LDF had promised to increase social security pensions from ₹1,600 to ₹2,500 in phases. In reality, the increase did not follow the promised trajectory falling short of the commitment. Additionally, reports of delays in pension disbursement have further weakened the credibility of this promise. Welfare expansion without fiscal backing has led to irregular delivery.

3. Women's Financial Support: Late and Limited Rollout

The manifesto had also promised financial assistance for women not covered under pension schemes. While such a scheme was eventually introduced, it was rolled out much later, closer to elections, and at a limited scale

which indicates "reactive governance rather than planned delivery."

4. Startup Boom vs Employment Reality

The government claims the growth of startups and enterprises as a major success, citing thousands of new ventures and investments. However, the startup growth has not translated into large-scale employment, especially for the broader youth population.

5. Housing for All: Progress with Questions

The annual target of 1.5 lakh houses was not consistently met. Questions have been raised in the past over implementation efficiency. The scheme falls short of the "complete eradication of homelessness" promise.

6. Unmet Expectations of Farmers

The LDF had promised measures to significantly improve farmers' incomes, including support prices and subsidies.

However, farmer groups continue to raise concerns about rising input costs, delayed compensation, limited income growth.

The promise to substantially increase farmers' income has not materialised on the ground particularly in sectors like rubber and spices.

7. Welfare Expansion vs Fiscal Stress

The government expanded welfare schemes significantly, including pensions and subsidies, with annual outlays running into thousands of crores. However, critics warn that this expansion has contributed to mounting fiscal pressure, raising concerns about sustainability.

"Data suggests that welfare commitments have outpaced revenue growth," leading to delays and cutbacks in execution.

8. Infrastructure Push Claim

The infrastructure claims are mostly of projects that were initiated under previous governments or central agencies. Some of these projects still remain incomplete or delayed. Financial models relying on borrowings and off-budget funding have raised long-term concerns.

9. Digital Governance Promises Fall Flat

The claims of digital Benefits are uneven across regions. Digital initiatives have not improved core governance challenges such as employment and service delivery efficiency

10. Governance & Accountability: The Missing Link

Beyond individual promises, the larger failure lies in governance itself. Issues frequently highlighted include allegations of backdoor appointments, concerns over law and order and administrative transparency, delays and inconsistencies in policy implementation, Governance has become increasingly centralised, with reduced accountability mechanisms.

DEMOCRACY UNDER THREAT

CONGRESS RAISES ALARM ON ELECTORAL MANIPULATION & SIR

Photo: Gettyimages



At a time when democratic institutions are expected to remain neutral, the Congress has consistently raised serious concerns about alleged manipulation of electoral processes, including the controversial issue of Selective Inclusion & Removal (SIR) of voters. The

party has questioned whether voter rolls are being selectively altered to benefit the ruling establishment, thereby undermining the very foundation of free and fair elections.

Across multiple states, Congress leaders have flagged instances where names of genuine voters particularly from marginalized communities were allegedly deleted, while duplicate or questionable entries remained untouched. The party not only demanded transparency, independent audits, and accountability from the Election Commission but also took the issue to the legal level.

On the national stage, Congress has repeatedly asserted that democracy is not merely about elections, but about trust in institutions. The erosion of this trust, it argues, is a dangerous trend that threatens the voice of ordinary citizens.

The issue of SIR is not isolated. It ties into a broader narrative that Congress has been pushing that institutions are being weakened, dissent is being stifled, and democratic checks and balances are under strain.

Through protests, parliamentary interventions, and public campaigns, Congress has positioned itself as a defender of constitutional values, calling for electoral reforms that ensure every vote counts, and every voice is heard. As Kerala goes to polls Congress is committed to restore the constitutional rights for all citizens of the state.

On the national stage, Congress has repeatedly asserted that democracy is not merely about elections, but about trust in institutions. The erosion of this trust, it argues, is a dangerous trend that threatens the voice of ordinary citizens.

LAW & ORDER IN KERALAM

A STATE IN DISTRESS, A GOVERNMENT IN DENIAL

Photo: Gettyimages



The Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) has sharpened its attack on the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), alleging that Kerala is witnessing a steady and dangerous decline in law and order. Once projected as a model state for governance and social harmony, Kerala today is slipping into a cycle of violence, politicisation, and institutional breakdown.

At the centre of this political confrontation is Rahul Gandhi and the Congress leadership, who have repeatedly flagged what they describe as a systemic collapse of policing standards and accountability under the LDF regime.

RISING CRIME & DISTURBING TRENDS

According to data from the National Crime Records Bureau, Kerala continues to report one of the highest crime rates in the country. Congress has raised concerns that the nature and frequency of violent crimes point to deeper governance failures. Recent years have seen a spike in assault and murder cases, including politically motivated killings. Rising crimes against women, with several high-profile incidents sparking public outrage and increased drug-related offences, especially among youth are a matter of concern for the state. Growing reports of organized gang activity, particularly in urban clusters has been a result of the deteriorating law and order in Kerala. Congress leaders have pointed out that beyond statistics, the public perception of safety has eroded, with incidents of daylight violence and repeat offenders becoming more common.

POLITICISATION OF POLICE-A SERIOUS CHARGE

One of the most serious issues raised by the Congress is the politicisation of the police force. Senior UDF leaders claim that sections of the police are functioning under the influence of ruling party interests, leading to selective action and biased investigations.

The Congress alleges that cases involving ruling party workers are either diluted or delayed. Opposition activists are subjected to swift and often harsh police action while investigations into sensitive cases lack independence and transparency. This, Congress argues, has led to a crisis of credibility, where law enforcement seems to be partial.

CUSTODIAL TORTURE-SHOCKING REVELATIONS

The recent issue of custodial violence in Kerala exposed the politicised policing further

intensified the debate. Congress leaders have cited RTI-based revelations and visual evidence suggesting brutal custodial torture of Youth Congress workers, triggering outrage across the state. These incidents raised fundamental questions about human rights violations, lack of accountability within police stations and failure of internal oversight mechanisms. Congress demanded judicial inquiries and strict action against those responsible, stating that "rule of law cannot exist where custodial brutality becomes routine."

"GOONDA RAJ"- GANGS, DRUGS & FEAR

The Congress has also accused the government of allowing Kerala to become a "corridor of goondas", where criminal gangs operate with increasing confidence. Congress leaders point to the rise of quotation gangs and organised criminal networks with political patronage protecting certain offenders. Congress has also raised issues of expansion of the drug mafia, especially in coastal and urban regions. According to the

Congress the failure to crack down decisively on such elements has emboldened criminals, creating an environment where fear is replacing faith in governance.

MISUSE OF LAW TO SUPPRESS DISSENT

Another major concern raised by Congress is the alleged misuse of legal provisions to target political opponents. The party claims that police action is often guided by political considerations rather than legal merit. Several instances have been cited where Congress workers were preventively detained or arrested during protests. Cases were registered under stringent sections to discourage dissent. Student and youth activists faced police action for political mobilisation. According to the Congress this reflects a disturbing trend of shrinking democratic space in the state.

THRISSUR POORAM CONTROVERSY- QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

The controversy surrounding the iconic Thirissur Pooram is another instance how Kerala government added a political dimension to the law-and-order debate.

Congress has alleged that the police deliberately disrupted the festival proceedings, raising suspicions of a "clandestine understanding" between the LDF government and the BJP for political gains. While the government has denied these claims, the incident triggered widespread debate about administrative intent and competence.

For many, the episode symbolised a deeper issue whether governance decisions are being influenced by political calculations at the cost of public trust.

The Congress alleges that cases involving ruling party workers are either diluted or delayed. Opposition activists are subjected to swift and often harsh police action while investigations into sensitive cases lack independence and transparency.

CONGRESS DEMANDS ACCOUNTABILITY, REFORM, JUSTICE

Photo: Gettyimages



In the face of what it describes as a deepening crisis in governance, the Congress has articulated a comprehensive framework aimed at restoring faith in Kerala's law-and-order machinery. According to the party, isolated actions and reactive measures are no longer sufficient. What is needed instead is a systemic overhaul grounded in accountability, transparency, and constitutional values.

At the heart of Congress' demands is the call for depoliticisation of the police force. The party has repeatedly alleged that policing in the state is increasingly influenced by political considerations, which undermines its neutrality and effectiveness. Congress leaders argue that the police must function as an independent institution committed solely to upholding the law, rather than acting under pressure from those in power. Ensuring fixed tenures for senior officers, insulating investigations from political interference, and strengthening internal oversight mechanisms are among the steps the party believes are critical.

Equally important is the demand for independent and time-bound probes into custodial torture and major criminal incidents. The Congress has pointed to recent allegations and visual evidence of custodial violence as a matter of grave concern, stating that such incidents erode public trust and violate fundamental human rights. The

party has called for judicial or court-monitored investigations in such cases to ensure impartiality and credibility. It also advocates stricter implementation of guidelines laid down by courts and human rights bodies to prevent custodial abuse.

Another key pillar of the Congress' position is the need for decisive action against organised criminal networks. The party has warned that the growing presence of quotation gangs, drug syndicates, and repeat offenders points to a failure of deterrence. Congress leaders have argued that without a coordinated crackdown—combining

intelligence gathering, policing reforms, and judicial efficiency—such networks will continue to expand their influence. They have also emphasised the importance of targeting the financial and political links that allegedly enable these groups to operate with impunity.

The Congress has also underscored the urgent need to protect democratic rights and political freedoms. It has raised concerns over what it describes as the misuse of police powers to suppress dissent, including the arrest and detention of opposition workers, students, and activists. The party

insists that a healthy democracy depends on the ability of citizens to express disagreement without fear of reprisal. It has called for clear safeguards to prevent the misuse of legal provisions and to ensure that law enforcement agencies do not become instruments of political control.

Beyond immediate interventions, the Congress has advocated for long-term institutional reforms to restore public confidence. This includes modernising police infrastructure, improving training and capacity building, addressing vacancies, and ensuring better

community policing. The party believes that rebuilding trust requires not only efficiency but also empathy and accountability in the way law enforcement interacts with citizens.

Underlying all these demands is a broader concern: that Kerala's long-standing reputation for strong institutions and social cohesion is under threat. The Congress maintains that the state's progress has historically been anchored in a robust rule of law and a sense of collective security. Any erosion of these foundations, it warns, could have far-reaching consequences.

For the Congress, the current law-and-order situation in Kerala represents more than just an administrative challenge it is a defining moment for the state's democratic ethos. The party argues that the choices made today will determine whether Kerala continues to be seen as a model of governance or slides into a pattern of institutional decline.

The opposition has cautioned that failure to act decisively could normalise a range of troubling trends: politicised policing, unchecked criminal activity, and shrinking democratic space. Over time, such patterns risk creating an environment where citizens feel increasingly insecure and disconnected from the system meant to protect them.

At the same time, Congress leaders have emphasised that the situation is

not beyond repair. They point out that Kerala possesses strong civic traditions, an aware citizenry, and a history of progressive reforms—all of which can serve as the foundation for course correction. What is required, they argue, is political will and administrative integrity.

The party has also framed the issue as one of governance priorities. It contends that ensuring public safety and upholding the rule of law must take precedence over political considerations or image management. In its view, governance cannot be reduced to narratives; it must be judged by outcomes that directly impact people's lives.

Importantly, the Congress has sought to position its critique not merely as opposition politics but as a broader appeal to safeguard Kerala's identity. The state has long been associated with communal harmony, high human development indicators, and a responsive administrative system. Preserving these achievements, the party argues, requires vigilance and a willingness to confront uncomfortable realities.

The message from the Congress is therefore both a warning and a call to action. It stresses that restoring law and order is not just about policing—it is about reaffirming the principles of justice, equality, and accountability that underpin a democratic society.

WAYANAD - A RELATIONSHIP BEYOND POLITICS

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people has remained strong. His frequent visits, interactions with local communities, and continued engagement with grassroots issues reflect a bond that goes beyond electoral politics.

This connection was most visible during the devastating 2024 Wayanad landslides, one of the deadliest natural disasters in Kerala's history, which claimed hundreds of lives and displaced thousands. In the immediate aftermath, Rahul Gandhi, along with senior Congress leaders, visited the affected areas, met grieving families, and assessed the scale of destruction firsthand. Calling the tragedy a "national disaster," he demanded a comprehensive rehabilitation package and long-term support for the victims.

But the Congress response did not stop at symbolism.

FROM RELIEF TO REHABILITATION — CONGRESS STANDS WITH WAYANAD

While disasters often trigger short-term responses, Congress has sought to ensure long-term rehabilitation for the people of Wayanad.

Recognizing the scale of devastation with entire villages wiped out and thousands left homeless the party launched initiatives aimed at rebuilding lives, not just providing temporary relief. The tragedy had destroyed over a thousand homes and displaced large populations, underscoring the need for sustained intervention.

One of the most significant steps was the announcement and initiation of



housing support for affected families. Congress leaders committed to building homes for survivors, ensuring that those who lost everything could rebuild with dignity.

This effort reflects a broader philosophy that politics must translate into action on the ground. Beyond housing, Congress workers were actively involved in relief distribution, supporting rehabilitation camps and

providing financial assistance to affected families. Congress has always advocated for stronger disaster response mechanisms. The party has also raised questions about environmental mismanagement and unplanned development, which many experts believe contributed to the scale of the disaster. For Congress, Wayanad is not just about responding to a tragedy it is about learning from it,

ensuring accountability, and building resilience for the future. In the upcoming elections too Congress reiterates the commitment to the rehabilitation of Wayanad as it still struggles with the wounds of the devastating landslides.

From defending democracy and raising concerns over electoral integrity, to highlighting law-and-order failures and standing firmly with

disaster-affected communities, Congress continues to position itself as a party rooted in people's issues.

Whether it is on the streets, in Parliament or in disaster-hit regions like Wayanad, the party's narrative remains consistent: fight for justice, stand with the people, and hold power accountable. This is not just politics.

This is a commitment to the idea of India.

One of the most significant steps was the announcement and initiation of housing support for affected families. Congress leaders committed to building homes for survivors, ensuring that those who lost everything could rebuild with dignity.

For Rahul Gandhi, Wayanad has never been just a constituency it has been a relationship built on trust, empathy, and shared struggles. Even after stepping down as MP following the 2024 elections, his connection with the

AGRICULTURAL CRISIS IN KERALAM

TRADITIONAL CROPS UNDER THREAT

Keralam's agrarian economy, once the backbone of its rural prosperity, is facing a deep and prolonged crisis. Farmers cultivating traditional crops such as rubber, coconut, and spices are increasingly finding it difficult to sustain their livelihoods amid rising input costs and volatile market prices. The most immediate concern is the sharp fluctuation in crop prices, particularly coconut. Recent market trends show a steep decline, with prices falling below ₹50 per kilogram after a period of relative stability. Copra prices, have now dropped significantly, eroding farmer incomes. This volatility comes at a time when costs including labour, fertilizers, and transportation have risen substantially. Farmers argue that while prices fall rapidly, input costs rarely follow, creating a widening gap between investment and returns. Rubber farmers too continue to struggle with inconsistent pricing and competition from imports, while spice growers face unpredictable weather patterns and pest-related losses. The combined effect is a growing sense of uncertainty in Keralam's rural economy. The Congress has consistently raised these concerns, arguing that the absence of effective price stabilisation mechanisms and inadequate procurement support has left farmers exposed to market shocks.



Photo: Gettyimages

Official data indicates that crop destruction, property damage, and even fatalities are recurring outcomes of such conflicts. Elephants alone are responsible for multiple deaths every year, with over 50 attack incidents reported in recent periods.

Wild boars have emerged as a major threat to agriculture. In the past three years, nearly 4,700 wild boars have been culled in Kerala due to increasing conflict, highlighting the scale of the crisis and the desperation among affected communities.

Farmers complain that entire harvests are lost overnight, pushing families into debt. In many areas, people are afraid to even step out after dusk due to the threat posed by wildlife. Every election, agrarian issues dominate the political discourse in Kerala, and this time it is no different, with farmers flagging persistent concerns ranging

from human-wildlife conflict in the high ranges to paddy procurement issues in Palakkad and Kuttanad.

Farmers say many of their long-standing issues remain unresolved, particularly the increasing number of wild-animal crop raids that have caused severe distress in high-altitude regions.

The coffee crop is also impacted by monkeys that come in large numbers and destroy the coffee. With stringent wildlife laws, the farmers cannot take preventive measures. Almost 20-30 per cent of the crop is lost due to wild animal raids, farmers complain.

Farmers also say that living near forest areas has become increasingly unsafe as the movement of wild animals into human settlements has become regular. This year alone, five tigers have been reported near residential areas, causing severe distress for residents. Other than promises during elections,

no concrete steps are being taken to protect farmers, one of the farmers in Keralam complains.

The Keralam Keralam Independent Farmers Association (KIFA), which represents farmers in high-range areas, has submitted a 15-point charter of demands ahead of the elections, seeking concrete action once a new government assumes power.

The Congress has termed the situation a "livelihood emergency", demanding urgent and coordinated intervention that balances ecological concerns with human survival.

COMPENSATION DELAYS & POLICY GAPS — FARMERS LEFT WAITING

While the state government has acknowledged the human-animal conflict as a serious issue even declaring it a state-specific disaster — farmers say relief mechanisms remain inadequate and slow.

Data shows that Keralam has spent over ₹79 crore in compensation over six years for deaths, injuries, crop loss, and property damage caused by wildlife. However, the ground reality paints a different picture with compensation for deaths remains relatively low compared to other states. Crop damage compensation between ₹1,000 and ₹7,000 far below actual losses. Delays in disbursement have affected families struggling for months. Even as thousands of cases are reported, many farmers claim that bureaucratic hurdles and verification processes delay timely relief. In cases of repeated crop loss, the compensation mechanism fails to provide long-term support. Congress leaders have raised the issue and said that these gaps reflect a lack of policy urgency.

They have called for faster compensation disbursement systems, higher and realistic compensation rates and comprehensive insurance mechanism for farmers in conflict-prone areas. Without these reforms, the party warns, rural distress will only deepen.

THE CONGRESS ROADMAP

MSP BOOST, INSURANCE & RURAL REVIVAL

Photo: Gettyimages



In response to the ongoing crisis, the Congress has proposed a multi-pronged strategy aimed at reviving Kerala's rural economy and restoring dignity to its farmers. A key demand is the strengthening of Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanisms for crops like coconut, rubber, and spices. The party says that MSP must act as a real safety net, ensuring that farmers are protected from sudden price crashes. Additionally, Congress has emphasized the need for a universal crop insurance framework that covers not just natural disasters but also losses due to wildlife attacks a major gap in existing schemes. To address human-animal conflict, the party has proposed scientific and humane mitigation strategies like strengthening of fencing, early warning systems, and rapid response teams. Congress also proposes greater involvement of local communities in planning and implementation. Beyond immediate relief, Congress has called for a broader rural economic revival plan, including investment in agro-processing and value addition and strengthening farmer cooperatives. Congress also promises expanding employment opportunities along with affordable credit and debt relief. The party's approach is rooted in the belief that agriculture is not just an economic activity, but a way of life that sustains millions.

A CALL FOR URGENT ACTION

Keralam's farmers today stand at a difficult crossroads caught between rising costs, falling incomes, and growing external threats. From market volatility to wildlife conflict, the challenges are complex and deeply interconnected. For the Congress, the message is clear that without urgent intervention, rural distress could turn into a full-blown agrarian crisis. The party asserts that farmers deserve not just sympathy, but strong policy support, fair prices, timely relief, and a secure future.



Keralam's Health Model Under Scrutiny

Medical Negligence Cases Raise Questions

Keralam's healthcare system has long been celebrated as one of India's best. But recent incidents have shaken public confidence and exposed worrying cracks in governance and accountability. One of the most shocking cases emerged from Alappuzha, where a surgical instrument was found inside a woman's abdomen years after her operation. The incident sparked statewide outrage and protests, raising serious concerns about patient safety in government hospitals.

In another tragic case, a 22-year-old youth died after a routine surgery in a private hospital, with the family alleging negligence following complications from anesthesia. These are not isolated events. Reports of newborn deaths, alleged lapses in treatment, and rising complaints have become disturbingly frequent. Even the medical fraternity has

acknowledged systemic issues. Doctors themselves have pointed to staff shortages, excessive workload, and institutional lapses as key reasons behind such incidents.

The growing number of negligence allegations has led to a climate of fear and "defensive medicine," where doctors focus more on legal protection than patient care. This reflects a deeper crisis when both patients and providers lose trust in the system, the very foundation of public healthcare is weakened.

The Congress has consistently raised these issues, questioning why accountability mechanisms remain weak despite repeated incidents. The lack of transparent investigations and delayed justice for victims' families further aggravate public anger.

Keralam's health model cannot survive on past reputation alone. Without strict protocols, independent



Representative Image

audits, and real accountability, such tragedies risk becoming normalized rather than exceptional.

Keralam's public health infrastructure has historically been its pride built on strong primary care, high

literacy, and community participation. However, today that system is under unprecedented stress.

Recent protests and strikes by doctors and nurses have exposed deep-rooted problems. Healthcare workers have complained of delayed salaries, poor career progression, and unbearable workloads. The prolonged strikes disrupted outpatient services and highlighted how fragile the system has become.

Government medical college doctors have also accused the administration of failing to address chronic vacancies and unsafe working conditions. When frontline workers—who were once hailed as heroes during COVID feel neglected, it shows systemic failure.

The crisis extends beyond human resources. Shortages of essential supplies have also surfaced. Recently, even hospitals in Thiruvananthapuram

faced LPG shortages, requiring emergency intervention to maintain operations. Such disruptions point to poor planning and crisis management.

At the same time, Keralam continues to show pockets of excellence such as progress in antimicrobial resistance control in public health centers. But these successes cannot mask the broader reality the system is overstretched and underfunded.

The Congress has argued that the current government has failed to match rising healthcare demands with adequate investment and management reforms. Financial mismanagement and misplaced priorities have left hospitals struggling to maintain even basic standards.

A strong system cannot run on the goodwill of overworked doctors and nurses alone. Without systemic reforms, Keralam risks eroding

Educated but Unemployed

Keralam's Youth Forced to Leave



Representative Image

Rising unemployment and mass migration expose the failure of the present government.

Keralam has long been celebrated as India's most literate and socially progressive state. But behind this success story lies a growing crisis of a generation of educated youth without jobs, and a state increasingly dependent on migration for survival.

Today, unemployment is no longer just an economic issue in Keralam but a social emergency.

According to the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), Keralam's youth unemployment rate stands at a staggering 29.9%, nearly three times the national average. Among young women, the situation is even more alarming, with unemployment rising to 47.1%, highlighting a deep gender gap in opportunities.

Keralam produces some of India's most educated youth. Cities like Kochi rank among the top talent hubs in the country. Yet, this talent is not being absorbed within the state.

There is a structural mismatch between education and employment opportunities, along with lack of industrial growth and private sector expansion. Even more worrying is the rise in educated unemployment, which remains significantly high

despite increasing literacy and skill levels. With limited opportunities at home, Keralam's youth are increasingly looking outward—towards the Gulf, Europe, and other Indian states. Migration, once seen as an opportunity, has now become a compulsion for survival.

Studies and government data highlight that outmigration for employment continues to be a defining feature of Keralam's economy.

Ironically, while Keralam's youth leave in search of jobs, the state increasingly depends on migrant labour from other states to sustain sectors like construction, fisheries, and services. Despite repeated promises, the current government has failed to create a robust employment ecosystem. Keralam continues to lag in attracting large-scale industries compared to neighbouring states with weak job creation in the private sector, over-dependence on remittances instead of local economic growth and failure to address skill-job mismatch. Behind every statistic is a personal story of a graduate preparing endlessly for government exams, a nurse forced to migrate abroad, an engineer working below their qualification and a young woman dropping out of the workforce due to lack of

opportunities. Keralam's youth are not lacking talent but they are lacking opportunity.

Congress For Jobs, Dignity, and Opportunity

The Congress Party believes that Keralam's future lies in empowering its youth within the state, not forcing them to leave. Congress vision includes Job-Centric economic growth to attract large-scale industries and startups, promote MSMEs and local entrepreneurship and create employment zones across districts. Congress is committed to bridge the skill gap by aligning education with industry needs and expanding skill development missions. The vision of Congress includes state campus-to-career pipelines. The Congress also looks at women centric growth in Keralam with special incentives for women-led enterprises with safe and inclusive workplaces, targeted employment schemes for young women.

Keralam needs reverse migration strategy by creating high-value jobs to bring back Keralam's global talent. Supporting returnee entrepreneurs and strengthening IT, Tourism & Services is required to expand IT corridors beyond major cities. Tourism linked employment and investment in emerging sectors like AI,

Post-COVID Challenges & Infrastructure Gaps

The COVID-19 pandemic tested healthcare systems across the world and Keralam was initially praised for its response. However, the post-pandemic phase has revealed significant gaps that remain unaddressed.

The burden on healthcare workers has not eased. Instead, it has intensified due to rising patient loads, mental fatigue, and lack of institutional support. The after-effects of the pandemic delayed treatments, chronic disease burden, and mental health challenges have increased pressure on hospitals.

Keralam has also faced recurring public health threats. The state has witnessed outbreaks of diseases like Nipah virus and the alarming rise of rare infections such as amoebic meningoencephalitis, which recorded over 170 cases and dozens of deaths in 2025. These outbreaks highlight the need for stronger surveillance, infrastructure, and rapid response systems.

Infrastructure gaps remain evident in government hospitals ranging from equipment shortages to inadequate staffing. The negligence cases themselves often stem from these systemic deficiencies.

Moreover, social sector challenges intersect with healthcare. Issues like mental health crises, rising substance abuse, and the vulnerability of marginalized communities continue to strain the system. Cases involving unexplained deaths of children and social distress further underline the need for integrated healthcare and social support systems. Even as Keralam's population ages, healthcare demands are becoming more complex. Yet, policies and infrastructure have not kept pace with these changing needs. The Congress has pointed out that post-COVID recovery requires a comprehensive overhaul not just incremental fixes. Without addressing infrastructure deficits and workforce shortages, Keralam's healthcare system risks being overwhelmed in the years ahead.

Congress Vision: Upgrade Primary Healthcare with Accountability

Congress, has outlined a clear roadmap to restore confidence in Keralam's healthcare system and strengthen its future.

1. Strengthening Primary Healthcare

Congress plans to upgrade primary health centres into fully equipped family health hubs, ensuring early diagnosis and reducing the burden on tertiary hospitals. This includes better staffing, modern equipment, and digital health integration.

2. Zero Tolerance for Negligence

A robust accountability framework will be introduced. Independent medical audit bodies will investigate negligence cases transparently, ensuring timely justice for victims and systemic corrections.

3. Healthcare Workforce Reforms

The Congress promises to address long-pending demands of doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff ensuring fair salaries, better working conditions, and career growth opportunities. This will help restore morale and improve service quality.

4. Infrastructure Investment

The Congress aims to significantly increase budgetary allocation for healthcare infrastructure—modernizing government hospitals, ensuring availability of essential supplies, and improving emergency response systems.

5. Public Health Preparedness

Learning from recent outbreaks, the Congress proposes a stronger disease surveillance system, rapid response teams, and community awareness programmes to tackle future health crises effectively.

6. Focus on Social Health

The Congress emphasises integrating healthcare with social welfare, addressing mental health, elderly care, and support for vulnerable communities. Special programmes will target marginalized groups to ensure equitable access.

7. Transparency & Governance

The Congress has committed to making healthcare governance transparent, with real-time monitoring of hospital performance and public dashboards to track outcomes.

Keralam's healthcare model was once a benchmark for the country but today it stands at a crossroads. Rising negligence cases, overburdened staff, infrastructure gaps, and governance failures have put the system under strain. While the current government continues to defend its record, ground realities tell a different story of a system struggling to cope with growing challenges.

The Congress believes that Keralam deserves better. By focusing on accountability, investment, and people-centric reforms, the Congress aims to rebuild trust and restore the state's healthcare system to its former strength.



Photo: Gettyimages

“Team UDF is Team Keralamm”

Rahul Gandhi’s Call for Change, a New Political Momentum

As Kerala approaches a crucial electoral moment, a powerful and emotionally resonant message from Rahul Gandhi has injected fresh energy into the United Democratic Front (UDF) campaign. His recent statement, “Team UDF is Team Keralamm” is more than a political endorsement, it is a reaffirmation of a deep, personal bond with the people of the state and a clear signal that the Congress leadership is fully invested in Kerala’s future.

At a time when voters are weighing governance, accountability, and development outcomes, Rahul Gandhi’s words strike a chord by placing people and

challenges are closely understood at the national leadership level of Congress.

Rahul Gandhi’s emphasis on “a collective of experienced leaders and young change-makers” highlights a key strength of the UDF, its balanced leadership. In a rapidly evolving socio-economic landscape, Kerala requires governance that combines institutional memory with fresh ideas.

The UDF’s candidate selection reflects this philosophy bringing together seasoned administrators who understand governance complexities and younger leaders who represent emerging aspirations. This blend is particularly important in Kerala, where high literacy and political awareness



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Kerala, once celebrated for its robust public systems, is now witnessing increased scrutiny in sectors like healthcare, infrastructure, and employment generation. Youth migration, in particular, has emerged as a pressing issue, with many seeking opportunities outside the state due to limited local prospects.

politics at the center of the conversation.

A Personal Bond Beyond Politics
“For me, Keralamm is home and the people of Keralamm are family.” This line from Rahul Gandhi’s message reflects a relationship that goes beyond electoral calculations. Having represented Wayanad in Parliament, he has consistently emphasized his emotional and political commitment to Kerala. His outreach, regular engagement with citizens, and vocal support on local issues from farmers’ distress to environmental concerns have reinforced this connection.

Unlike distant political messaging, this articulation carries authenticity. It shows that Kerala is not just another battleground, but a state whose aspirations

demand nuanced policymaking.

By calling UDF “Team Keralamm,” Rahul Gandhi reframes the alliance as a people’s platform rather than a conventional political front. It signals inclusivity, diversity, and a shared vision.

A Clear Message From Congress-People Want Change

“The message from Keralamm is clear—the people are ready for change.” This assertion aligns with growing public discourse in the state. Concerns around unemployment, rising cost of living, governance responsiveness, and administrative responsiveness have become central to political debate.

Kerala, once celebrated for its robust public systems, is now witnessing increased

scrutiny in sectors like healthcare, infrastructure, and employment generation. Youth migration, in particular, has emerged as a pressing issue, with many seeking opportunities outside the state due to limited local prospects.

Rahul Gandhi’s message taps into this sentiment positioning the UDF as the vehicle for a government that “listens, understands, and delivers with honesty.” It is a direct appeal to voters who feel unheard or underserved.

Active Involvement, Not Symbolic Support

One of the most significant aspects of Rahul Gandhi’s statement is his commitment: “I will do everything to help build a better future for this beautiful state.”

This is not a passive endorsement but a promise of active involvement.

His track record suggests that this commitment is credible. Whether raising issues in Parliament, engaging with civil society, or supporting grassroots movements, Rahul Gandhi has demonstrated a willingness to be hands-on. His involvement provides UDF with both strategic guidance and national visibility.

In an era where state politics often intersects with national policy frameworks, be it economic planning, federal funding, or welfare schemes, this alignment becomes crucial. Kerala stands to benefit from a leadership that can effectively bridge state and national priorities.

A Vision Rooted in Trust and Accountability

Rahul Gandhi’s message repeatedly emphasizes trust—“Each candidate reflects the voice, the aspirations

and the trust of the people.” This focus is particularly relevant in a political climate where credibility and transparency are key

Photo: Gettyimages



voter concerns.

The UDF’s vision is built around restoring faith in governance, ensuring that public institutions function efficiently, decisions are transparent, and policies deliver tangible benefits. From job creation and industrial growth to strengthening healthcare and education, the alliance aims to present a comprehensive roadmap.

Importantly, this vision is not framed as a critique alone but as a constructive alternative, one that prioritizes people-centric governance.

Women and Youth at the Core

By highlighting “a strong team of men and women,” Rahul Gandhi also underscores gender inclusivity in leadership. Kerala, despite its social indicators, continues to grapple with gender disparities in workforce participation and leadership roles.

The UDF’s emphasis on women’s empowerment through economic opportunities, safety measures, and representation aligns with this recognition. Similarly, its focus on youth reflects an understanding that Kerala’s future depends on harnessing the potential of its educated, ambitious population. Rahul Gandhi’s outreach resonates strongly with these groups, positioning the UDF as a progressive and forward-looking alliance.

From Sentiment to Strategy

While the emotional appeal of Rahul Gandhi’s message is evident, it also serves a strategic purpose. By framing the election as a collective movement—“Team Keralamm”—he transforms it into a participatory exercise.

This approach encourages voter participation, making the elector feel like stakeholders in the state’s future rather than passive observers. It also strengthens grassroots mobilization, a critical factor in Kerala’s highly competitive political landscape.

“Keralamm will win. UDF will lead.” This closing line encapsulates the optimism and determination driving the campaign. It reflects confidence not just in electoral success but in the possibility of meaningful change.

For the UDF, the challenge lies in translating this momentum into votes—by effectively communicating its vision, addressing local concerns, and maintaining organizational cohesion. Rahul Gandhi’s active involvement provides a significant boost in this effort, offering both leadership and narrative. Rahul Gandhi’s message is ultimately a call for renewal of governance, of trust, and of hope. By positioning the UDF as “Team Keralamm,” he aligns the alliance with the aspirations of the people, emphasizing unity, inclusivity, and accountability.

As Kerala stands at a crossroads, this vision offers a compelling alternative—one that promises to listen, understand, and deliver. The coming election is not just about choosing a government; it is about shaping the future of a state known for its resilience, intellect, and progressive spirit.

With renewed energy, clear messaging, and committed leadership, the UDF backed by Rahul Gandhi’s unwavering support seeks to lead Kerala into its next chapter of growth and good governance.

Why Congress For Keralam’s Future?

Kerala stands today at a defining crossroads. A state celebrated for its literacy, human development, and progressive social indicators is now grappling with deep economic anxieties, rising unemployment, and a growing sense of uncertainty among its youth. Beneath the achievements lies a silent crisis, one that demands honest governance, bold reforms, and a leadership that listens. The Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) presents not just an alternative, but a comprehensive roadmap to restore confidence, create opportunities, and build a future that matches Kerala’s immense potential.

One of the most pressing challenges confronting Kerala is unemployment, especially among the youth. According to the latest Periodic Labour Survey (2023–24), nearly 29% of young people aged 15–29 in Kerala are unemployed, one of the highest rates in India. Even more concerning is the gender disparity, with female youth unemployment soaring to 47.1%, highlighting a systemic failure to create inclusive opportunities. This is not just a statistic—it affects lakhs of educated young men and women struggling to find meaningful work despite years of education and skill-building.

Kerala’s paradox is stark as it produces some of India’s mismatched youth, yet fails to provide them with jobs. The mismatch between education and industry needs, limited industrial growth, and lack of large-scale private investment have created a structural imbalance. Studies show that even employable youth are unable to find jobs within the state, forcing many to look elsewhere. This has led to migration both to other Indian states and abroad draining Kerala of its talent and weakening its long-term economic prospects. Increasingly, young people are leaving not by choice, but by compulsion.

This outsourcing is not just an economic issue but it is a social crisis. Families are being separated, aspirations are being exported, and Kerala’s economy continues to depend heavily on remittances rather than sustainable local growth. Experts warn that without reform, the impact of high unemployment would be even more severe. At the same time, the state paradoxically depends on migrant labour from other parts of India to sustain key sectors, pointing to a deeper structural imbalance in the labour market.

Rural unemployment is adding to these concerns. Recent data shows that rural unemployment in Kerala has been rising again, with joblessness significantly higher than the national average. Women in rural areas are particularly affected, with unemployment rates more than double that of men. This reflects not just economic stagnation, but also a lack of targeted policies to empower women and generate local employment opportunities.

Despite claims of welfare success, serious gaps remain on the ground. Sections of society including tribal communities, coastal populations, and informal workers continue to face poverty, landlessness, and inadequate access to basic services. Even as headline indicators improve, inequality and exclusion persist. Governance has become increasingly centralized, and many citizens feel disconnected from decision-making processes that directly impact their lives.

The Congress-led UDF believes that Kerala deserves better governance, better opportunities, and a better future. Our vision is rooted in restoring economic dynamism while protecting Kerala’s social achievements. We recognize that the state’s greatest strength is its people, and our policies are designed to empower them.

First and foremost, the UDF is committed to creating jobs at scale. This includes attracting investment through transparent and industry-friendly policies, promoting MSMEs, and building sector-specific hubs in IT, tourism, healthcare, and green industries. By fostering entrepreneurship and supporting startups, we aim to transform Kerala into a hub of innovation and employment. Secondly, we will bridge the gap between education and employment. Curriculum reforms, industry partnerships, and skill development programs will ensure that Kerala’s youth are not just educated, but employable. Special focus will be given to emerging sectors like artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and digital services, ensuring that Kerala remains competitive in a rapidly changing global economy.

Thirdly, the UDF will address the crisis of migration by creating opportunities within Kerala. Congress’ goal is to make migration a choice, not a necessity. By strengthening local economies, supporting small businesses, and investing in infrastructure, we will ensure that young Keralites can build their futures at home. Women’s empowerment will be at the core of our agenda. With female unemployment at alarming levels, the UDF will introduce targeted employment programs, support women-led enterprises, and ensure safe and inclusive workplaces. Empowering women is not just a social imperative it is essential for economic growth.

In rural Kerala, Congress will focus on revitalizing agriculture and allied sectors, promoting value addition, and ensuring fair prices for farmers. Investments in rural infrastructure, digital connectivity, and local industries will create sustainable livelihoods and reduce regional disparities.

Equally important is restoring trust in governance. The UDF promises a government that listens one that is transparent, accountable, and responsive. Decision-making will be decentralized, giving greater voice to local communities and ensuring that policies reflect ground realities.

Kerala’s story has always been one of resilience and progress. But today, it needs a new direction one that combines its social strengths with economic vitality. The Congress-led UDF offers that direction, a vision of inclusive growth, honest governance, and opportunities for all.

The message from the people is clear—they want change. And the Congress led UDF is ready to deliver it.

Low on oil, but high on gas

Ever wondered why politicians live so long? The answer, says **Avay Shukla**, is blowin' in the wind

I can't be sure, but I'm fairly positive that the most Googled word this fortnight was 'gas', thanks to the Gulf conflict and the shortages of said element in India. Now, one would have expected that, given how full of gas our rulers—politicians, bureaucrats, judges—are, there would never be a shortage of it here. But apparently there was, notwithstanding the denials by Epstein's buddy. This led to a veritable explosion of memes and wisecracks on social media on the subject, sparing not even our revered prime minister's enviable grasp of science. And when one speaks of gas in India, can the malodorous subject of flatulence be left unaddressed?

So, this week I've decided to develop further the spark of scientific genius ignited by our PM and explore more deeply the subject of gas or, to be precise, its by-product: flatulence. And I'm amazed at how well researched this subject is! Did you know, for example, that research has established that farting is a natural and healthy process, a voiding of the by-products of digestion, just like the gas flares in a petroleum refinery? That one should fart at least 32 times a day? Less, and your gut microbes are not functioning at optimum levels; more, and your digestive system is being asked to process more than it can handle. Overload, much to the discomfort of those sitting next to you, as Trump's advisors frequently discover.

But here's the interesting thought: can you even imagine the volume of gas Indians produce? 1,400 million of us expelling gas 32 times a day! Why, if we could only tap it, we could forget about the Straits of Hormuz or even the need for the strategic reserve Mani Shankar Aiyer's critical of. We could become *Atmanirbhar* on a colossal scale. All we have to do now is to make use of Mr Modi's untapped scientific potential, and leave the rest to Nutty Aayog. In fact, I believe the government is already moving in this direction. According to WhatsApp university, it has banned the production/sale of digestive tablets and syrups in order to increase the production of HPG (human



The strategic Strait of Hormuz

Graphic: Getty Images

Imagine the volume of gas 1,400 million Indians, expelling it 32 times a day, produce! If only we could tap it, we could forget about the Strait of Hormuz



Photo: Getty Images

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz (left) and the LPG crisis in its wake resulted in long queues outside gas agencies. But India, the author suggests, has abundant supply of an untapped resource—HPG!

produced gas). Anyone who refuses to produce HPG can now be arrested under the Essential Commodities Act. Way to go, Mr Puri, I always had a gut feeling you could do it when it came to the crunch, or gripe.

Wait, there's more. Studies by John Hopkins University indicate two important benefits of flatulence. One, passing gas frequently is good for your circulatory system as it releases pressure on it. Two, HPG contains hydrogen sulphide, produced by the action of gut bacteria. This gas plays a vital role in maintaining normal blood pressure; it causes the arteries to dilate, letting blood circulate more freely, reducing pressure on the arteries and providing protection against hypertension, strokes, heart attacks and kidney diseases. Now I realise why some of the healthiest people I know are ones who pass gas with the frequency of an AK47, and just as loudly!

Ever wondered why our politicians enjoy such longevity, how they keep going on and on, rivalling the life spans of tortoises? Well, the answer to that too lies in gas—specifically in the 'padayatra's' they regularly perform. ('Pad', with the longer vowel, has a distinctly gaseous meaning in Hindi, but

we'll stick to its literal English translation: a walking tour.) These can be categorised as 'Fart Walks'. No kidding. According to an article by Kirtika Katira in the *WION* (6 July 2024), Fart Walks is the latest fitness trend which has taken TikTok by storm. Essentially a post-prandial walk of about 30 minutes, it is the panacea for bloating, indigestion, gas, heartburn, diabetes and blood pressure. It works by helping food motility—the process of moving food from the stomach to the intestines where it is quickly digested and absorbed. Walking accelerates the process, releasing a lot of the gas which needs to be expelled. As the name suggests, Fart Walks are not meant for conversation but for some serious farting. So now you know.

The next time you take an after-dinner stroll, read reader, and pass an old gentleman sputtering along, emitting subdued explosive sounds like the misfiring piston of an old scooter, don't be alarmed. Doff your cap politely and walk on with your nostrils shut. That old geezer might be me! ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



Members of the Commission on Interfaith Relations outside Parliament House in London



LONDON DIARY HASAN SUROOR

goalposts" for those migrants who arrived in the UK legally and now face an uncertain future. "Enforcing a fair deal is not the same as ripping up a deal halfway through," she said, while acknowledging the government's frustration over illegal migration.

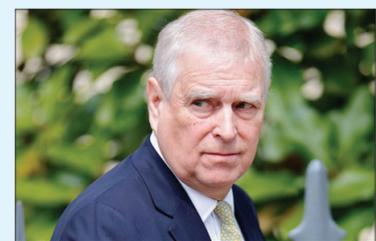
"Many people came here to Britain on the understanding that if they worked in the sectors where we needed them, obeyed the law and paid their taxes, they could stay. If we suddenly change that, it pulls the rug from under those who have planned their lives and commitments and are contributing to our economy and to our society. That would not just be bad policy, but a breach of trust."

Mahmood, herself a child of Pakistani immigrants, has sought to justify the change on the ground that it would ease a "£10 billion drain on our public finances" due to demand for housing and healthcare.

While she's right about the economic cost of illegal immigration, she's wrong to apply the new rules retrospectively. It's not only unfair but undermines Britain's credibility.

warned that the changes were "not sufficient to deal with risks of corruption, foreign interference and undue influence in British politics".

While both Conservatives and Labour parties have traditionally received foreign donations, the proposed change has been prompted by concerns over foreign-linked donations to the right-wing populist Reform UK party led by Nigel Farage of Brexit fame whose racist agenda and proximity to controversial MAGA figures threaten Britain's largely centrist polity.



Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor who?

In a historic first, *London Times* decided not to mark the birthday of a member of the royal family in its 'Birthdays Today' column: namely, Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor.

In a note to readers, it said: 'Eagle-eyed readers might notice an absence from our latest Birthdays Today column a man called Andrew, who has turned 66. He's been stripped of his "Royal Highness" style, lost the titles of Prince and Duke, kissed goodbye to his other honours and been kicked out of his home... We have acted because it would be wrong for the custodians of the most celebrated collection of personal milestones to ignore facts when one has so seriously fallen in public esteem. But also, frankly, his surname takes up too much space.'



And, finally, bestselling author of spy-thrillers Len Deighton, who passed away on 15 March at the age of 97, had a rather optimistic view of ageing. He reportedly told a friend: "The first 80 years are tough. Life gets better after that." ■

West Asian politics fuelling Muslim-Jews polarisation

There's a standing joke that when West Asia sneezes Britain's Jewish and Muslim groups catch a cold, triggering allegations and counter allegations of antisemitism and Islamophobia.

Even as the government is under pressure from Muslims to come up with an official definition of Islamophobia (a move seen by critics as 'blasphemy through the backdoor'), Jews have stepped up their campaign seeking action against the 'normalisation' of antisemitism.

They say they no longer feel safe in Britain—facing abuse not only from Muslims but also from significant sections of Brits in general.

One in five university students in Britain are reluctant to share a house with a Jewish student, claims a new report from the Union of Jewish Students (UJS). It warns that antisemitism has become 'normalised' on campuses with Jewish students facing physical and verbal abuse and social ostracisation.

At the same time, Muslims have reported a significant surge in Islamophobia, particularly the targeting of women and girls wearing the hijab.

"Rising polarisation has been acutely felt on university campuses in the UK," said Louis Danker, president of UJS.

This has prompted the government to announce new measures to support universities in keeping students safe from extremism, harassment and intimidation on campus.

A virtual civil war over new residency rules

A virtual civil war has broken out in the ruling Labour Party over a proposal by home secretary Shabana Mahmood—the party's 'star' performer and right-wing darling—to make it harder for legal migrants to gain permanent residency.

She proposes doubling the qualifying period for permission to stay in Britain

indefinitely from five to ten years and, most controversially, applying the change retrospectively to those already in Britain under the old system.

The move has split the party down the middle between left and right wings. The opposition is led by former deputy prime minister and fiery rebel Angela Rayner who says the move is "un-British" and "a breach of trust" for hardworking migrant families.

Rayner accused Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Mahmood of "moving the



Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer with home secretary Shabana Mahmood

Photo: Getty Images



No outside interference please, we're Brits

Concerns over outside interference in British politics have led the government to propose a ban on foreign donations to political parties in Britain unless the donors make enough money here.

Although direct foreign donations to UK political parties are illegal, loopholes allow foreign donations through UK-registered companies. The government wants to plug this loophole.

New laws will mean that a company will have to be based in the UK and registered on the electoral roll to be able to make political donations.

It would make it more difficult for foreign billionaires like Elon Musk to influence British politics. The government claims that it would "usher in a new era for our democracy—one that protects against foreign interference and empowers young people," as one minister put it. Transparency campaigners, however,



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Release of Rythu Bharosa Financial Assistance

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Sri A. Revanth Reddy**

Rythu Bharosa financial assistance is directly credited
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With resolve that farmers should live with dignity and
prosperity, financial assistance of ₹9,000 crores provided
in three phases

PEOPLE'S GOVERNMENT: PATH TO PROGRESS AND WELFARE FOR ALL

Issued by Information and Public Relations Department, Govt. of Telangana

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Mumbai • 29 March 2026 • Pages: 20 • Vol. 5 Issue 20 • ₹20

NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

POLL-BOUND STATES

Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu

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HOME & ABROAD

CUBA NEXT ON TRUMP'S IMPERIAL HITLIST

...and the real agenda is to pry open its economy to American investments

► P4



ADVERTORIAL

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Assam & Kerala

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Modi's Iran policy is 'strategic surrender'

Gurdeep Singh Sappal explains how India has shot its 'strategic autonomy' in the foot by jettisoning Chabahar under US pressure

Long before diplomacy had a name, India and Iran were already in conversation. The Indus Valley traded lapis lazuli and ivory with ancient Persia. Sanskrit and Avestan share a common ancestor. Indian courts, land records, music and the Hindi language still carry Persian fingerprints. Which is why the Modi government's abrupt desertion of Iran is not just a foreign policy failure; it is a civilisational betrayal—unconsidered, unannounced and unexplained to either Tehran or the Indian people.

India and Iran have had their differences, but never before were relations reset so abruptly and surreptitiously, abandoning diplomatic channels.

India's independence in 1947 created a structural divide. Iran, which was an immediate neighbour, no longer shared a border with India; Pakistan separated the two countries.

The Shah's Iran was firmly in the Western camp, while Nehru's India was non-aligned. When India sided with Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, bilateral ties frayed further. Paradoxically, it was Khomeini's Islamic

Revolution of 1979 that reopened the door. Both countries were now outside America's strategic embrace and both had reasons to watch Pakistan's growing regional ambitions with alarm.

Afghanistan played a hand in the renewal of India-Iran ties. As the Taliban consolidated power in Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, India and Iran found themselves ranged on the same side of the battle. Pakistan's military intelligence agency ISI was the Taliban's principal backer.

India and Iran, alongside Russia, provided political support, financing and arms to the Northern Alliance. This was not a partnership featuring the diplomatic confetti of joint communiqués; it rested on the hard solidarity of common enemies and shared interests.

In 1994, against the backdrop of the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992, Pakistan tried to mobilise the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) against India at the UN Human Rights Commission. Iran blocked the OIC consensus—an Islamic republic chose India over Pakistan. Tehran has shielded New Delhi at the OIC ever since.

Abrupt capitulation, under US pressure, means India has lost its independent overland gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia

Photo: Getty Images

Chabahar, CPEC and a strategic counter

Turmoil in Afghanistan gave India what the Partition had taken away—a route to Central Asia bypassing Pakistan.

In 2015, China embedded itself permanently on India's western flank with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It planned Pakistan's Gwadar port as its maritime anchor and designed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to build a China-centric economic architecture across Asia, locking in dependencies that would outlast governments.

India's answer was Chabahar, which gives India direct access to Afghanistan without crossing a single mile of Pakistani territory. More significantly, Chabahar is the entry point to a 7,200 kilometre multi-modal network, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) connecting Mumbai to Moscow via Tehran and Baku. India, Iran and Russia signed the INSTC agreement in 2000. Fully operationalised, this corridor would reduce cargo transit time from 40 days to 20 and cut transport costs by 30 per cent, providing India an arterial trade route to Central Asia, Russia and Europe, bypassing Pakistan and China's preferred chokepoints.

Chabahar is more than just a port—it's a critical element of India's foreign policy architecture to physically counter China's CPEC and BRI; it's a way for India to assert that it won't be landlocked by the China-Pakistan axis. Remove Chabahar from India's strategic inventory and India loses its western connectivity flank to Beijing and Islamabad forever; there is no substitute.

That's why successive governments supported the Chabahar project. The Manmohan Singh government committed \$100 million to its development after his visit to Tehran in 2012. Modi too visited Tehran in 2016 and signed the Shahid Beheshti Terminal agreement. India took operational control of the terminal in May 2024. Modi claimed it as a landmark achievement—and it was.

A masterclass in 'strategic autonomy'...

When the US and EU imposed sweeping sanctions on Iran in 2011-12, cutting Iranian banks from the global dollar system, Dr Manmohan Singh demonstrated what a sovereign foreign policy looks like. He declared publicly in a press conference that India would continue importing Iranian oil despite sanctions and then announced a trade delegation to Tehran.

In March 2012, Iranian banks were disconnected from the SWIFT financial messaging network, the global system for international banking transactions. Dr Singh challenged it by devising the 'rupee-rial payment mechanism' through UCO Bank, routing oil settlements entirely outside the dollar system and beyond Washington's

reach. The surplus accrued was used to clear billions in arrears owed to Indian exporters. That financial architecture was later adapted when India needed to trade with Russia after 2022.

Manmohan Singh's Iran policy built the infrastructure of India's sanctions-resistant trade system. At the peak of Western pressure, he sent then vice president Hamid Ansari, a former ambassador to Tehran, to attend President Rouhani's inauguration in August 2013. The message that India had not abandoned Iran needed no explicit words. That is what strategic autonomy looks like.

...and Modi's abject surrender

In 2019, bowing to Trump's pressure, India halted all crude imports from Iran, which had been India's second-largest oil supplier, at 16.5 per cent of its basket. Iranian oil came with freight discounts, favourable payment terms and non-dollar settlement; abandoning it cost India billions. Yet Chabahar remained on track and the friendship continued. Iran participated in India's Milan 2026 naval exercises at Visakhapatnam as recently as 25 February 2026.

Everything changed when Prime Minister Modi visited Israel on 26 February. Two days later, when the US-Israel war on Iran began, India made a visible shift. It did not condemn the violation of Iranian sovereignty. It did not condole the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader. When the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena was torpedoed by a US submarine in Sri Lanka's waters as it was returning from the Milan 2026 exercises, India's response focused on 'humanitarian search-and-rescue'. A guest in India had taken a hit at India's doorstep, but India looked away.

Under US pressure, the Modi government dropped funding for Chabahar to zero in the Union Budget 2026-27. India's bilateral trade with Iran has collapsed to \$1.68 billion. Its infrastructure investment in Chabahar is now at risk of becoming a stranded asset, which may be transferred to Chinese or Russian operators. The port India built to counter China may end up being operated by China.

Modi's abrupt capitulation means India loses its only independent overland gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The entire INSTC connectivity arc from the Arabian Sea to the Caspian is a casualty.

The US has publicly suggested that India requires its permission to buy Russian oil. This is not the foreign policy of a rising power; it is the foreign policy of a client state.

If India abandons Iran, it will lose the only geographical, infrastructural and strategic counter to China's Belt and Road. That would be a strategic self-goal and history will record it as such. ■

GURDEEP SINGH SAPPAL is a Permanent Invitee to the Congress Working Committee

They wage the war, we pay the price

Herjinder

March is usually the season when the first aroma of ripening Alphonso mangoes wafts through the orchards of the Konkan belt. In Maharashtra, Gujarat and parts of coastal Karnataka, the arrival of the mango season normally signals prosperity. Exporters begin to pack consignments for the Gulf, farmers anticipate good prices and traders prepare for the busiest weeks of the year.

This year, however, the mood in the mango belt is unusually gloomy. Growers and exporters say the war in West Asia has already begun to disrupt trade. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are the biggest buyers of Indian mangoes—in 2024, India exported nearly 12,000 metric tonnes of mangoes to the region. This year, orders have simply not come. A Surat-based fruit exporter summed up the situation bluntly: "Not a single order for mangoes has been received so far. And frankly, there is no hope at least for the next month."

The anxiety is spreading across the entire mango market. Farmers who grow mangoes mainly for domestic sale are equally worried. Once export demand collapses, they say, the domestic market is flooded with surplus fruit and prices crash.

The mango crisis is only the beginning. Even before the mango season has fully started, watermelon farmers have already been hit by the war's ripple effects. Export data from 2023 shows India shipped about 2.2 lakh kg watermelon to the Gulf region, particularly during the month of Ramadan,

when demand peaks. This year the numbers tell a different story. Up until March, exports were negligible. Ramadan came and went with virtually no shipments.

For farmers who depend on export-linked crops, the sudden disruption has come as a shock. A farmer leader told *National Herald* that the sector was already struggling to understand the implications of the new Indo-US trade agreement, when the war added another layer of uncertainty.

The Gulf region is not just a market for fruits. It is one of the largest buyers of Indian basmati rice, tea, spices and processed food products. A prolonged disruption in trade could therefore hurt millions of farmers and workers across the agricultural supply chain.

Agricultural produce is only one part of the picture. The Gulf region is also a major destination for India's gems and jewellery industry, which employs millions of workers in cities like Surat and Mumbai. If the conflict persists, exporters fear a sharp drop in orders. Pharmaceutical companies are also worried. Industry estimates suggest that bulk drug exports from India could fall by 20-30 per cent if trade routes remain disrupted and demand weakens.

Jobs will inevitably be affected. Export-oriented sectors typically support a large number of contract workers and small suppliers. When exports decline, the first response of businesses is often to cut costs through layoffs or reduced working hours.

The result could be rising unemployment for both full-time and part-time workers, particularly in rural areas and among informal workers who are already vulnerable.



The cascading effect of a long-drawn war will be felt across all sectors

The war is also triggering a less visible but potentially more dangerous crisis for Indian agriculture: fertilisers.

India imports a large share of its fertiliser requirements, especially phosphatic fertilisers such as Di-Ammonium Phosphate (DAP). In recent weeks, the international price of DAP has surged sharply, rising from around \$665 per tonne to more than \$730 per tonne within a fortnight. The spike is driven by supply disruptions and rising demand in the global market. For India, which must secure large

Prolonged disruption in trade due to the ongoing Gulf conflict will hurt millions of Indian farmers and workers

Photo: Getty Images

quantities before the kharif sowing season, the timing couldn't have been worse.

Although the government keeps the retail price of DAP fixed at Rs 1,350 per 50-kg bag through subsidies, the real problem is availability. If imports are delayed or insufficient, farmers may have to depend more heavily on urea, leading to nutrient imbalance in soils and lower crop productivity.

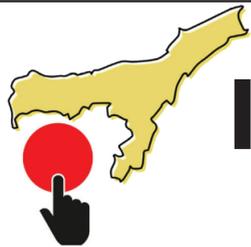
Energy imports are perhaps India's most serious vulnerability during a global conflict. The country imports about 85 per cent of its crude oil requirement, and any sharp rise in prices immediately affects inflation and the current account deficit. Economists estimate that every \$10 increase in crude oil prices can widen India's current account deficit by roughly \$9 billion.

For now, the government has assured Parliament that India holds adequate petroleum reserves. However, the situation remains uncertain. A temporary waiver from the United States has allowed India to continue buying oil from Russia for a limited period, but such arrangements depend heavily on geopolitical decisions beyond India's control.

If the war drags on, energy costs could rise sharply, affecting transport, manufacturing and household expenses.

The most immediate crisis is natural gas. India depends heavily on imports of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) and liquefied natural gas (LNG).

► Continued on page 2



Is Assam ready for change?

Sourabh Sen

Politics in Assam has never been so hateful," says state PCC chief and member of Parliament Gaurav Gogoi. The northeastern state, which has set new polarisation, is ready for change, he says.

Assam goes to polls on 9 April to elect a new 126-member assembly. Counting day is 4 May. In the 2021 assembly polls, the state had seen a voter turnout of 82.5 per cent.

Seemingly unfazed by high-profile defections on the eve of elections, Gogoi is addressing chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma's toxic politics. Interestingly, defections are not one-way traffic this time. Upset with Biswa Sarma's decision to field even fresh defectors from the Congress—like Pradyut Bordoloi and Bhupen Bora—several BJP leaders have cast their lot with the Congress. Others have chosen to contest as Independents, complicating the poll arithmetic. With as many as 11 former Congressmen in the fray, dissatisfaction runs high among the BJP old guard.

BJP rebel Jayanta Das arrived surreptitiously to file his nomination as an independent candidate. Caution was necessary, he explained to media, as he was worried he'd be detained by the police, slapped with false cases and released only after the nominations were over. This will be the first time a constituency will have two Congress candidates, Das quipped (referring to recent defector Bordoloi and Mira Borthakur, the official Congress candidate).

In 2021, the BJP had secured 60 seats. The BJP-led NDA achieved 75 seats with a vote share of 44.5 per cent, narrowly ahead of the opposition Mahajot alliance which secured 43.7 per cent votes but won only 50 seats. The Congress tally of 29 pulled down the coalition. Wiser this time, the Congress has stitched a six-party alliance with Asom Sommlito Morcha (ASM), Rajjor Dal, Assam Jati Parishad (AJP), CPI(M), CPI(M-L) Liberation and the All-Party Hill Leaders' Conference (APHLIC). "This



Assam Congress president Gaurav Gogoi (left) is ready to take on the politics of polarisation unleashed by chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma



Photos: Getty Images

alliance will effectively prevent a split in opposition votes," claims Congress leader Hafiz Rashid Choudhury.

The 2026 elections, however, are taking place under vastly different conditions. The BJP rolled out a delimitation exercise in 2023, effectively gerrymandering Muslim-dominated constituencies. As per the 2011 census, Muslims account for 34 per cent of the population. While they have swung results in 35 seats, post-delimitation, this is expected to go down to 25 seats.

Two of the Congress's 2021 allies have moved on—the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), led by Badruddin Ajmal, and the Bodoland People's Front (BPF), led by Hagrama Mohilary. As part of the opposition alliance, the AIUDF had won nine per cent of the votes and the BPF three per cent.

The AIUDF's failure to oppose the BJP government's sustained attacks on Muslims has weakened it. A section of Muslim voters is moving towards the Congress to ensure a more viable 'national' challenge to the BJP. The BPF boycotted the NDA after winning the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) elections in 2025 September.

Following delimitation, the number of assembly seats in the Bodoland Territorial Region has gone up from 11 to 15 seats over which Mohilary and BPF have considerable influence.

Analysts are divided on the possible electoral impact of the Trinamool Congress going it alone in 22 constituencies and of the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha fielding 21 candidates in upper tier.

*

In February, the BJP's Assam unit posted an animation video depicting the chief minister shooting at two Muslim men, with on-screen text declaring 'No mercy!' and 'foreigner-free Assam'.

The video provoked outrage and was deleted, but Sarma's anti-Muslim rhetoric continues. Boycott for the social and economic of Miyas, he has brazenly said he is all for "troubling Miyas" if that would free them out of Assam.

Days before the election was notified, the state government announced its decision to drop the name of former President of India Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, the first and the only Assamese to hold the

position, from the Barpeta medical college earlier known as Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed Medical College.

The government's 'anti-encroachment drive' openly targets Muslims, and continued during the month of Ramadan. Ahead of Eid, 566 families were evicted from Hasila Beel in Goalpara despite a high court order.

With the election notified and the model code of conduct in force, overtly bigoted messaging has taken a backseat, but there has been no let-up in attempts to polarise Assamese society. At a recent roadshow, Sarma was welcomed by BJP workers showering flowers on him from bulldozers lined up on both sides of the road.

Sarma's hate speech and polarising tactics do betray an anxiety about the likely verdict on his governance record. According to the state's own 2023 Economic Survey, nearly 10 lakh educated youth were jobless in Assam.

There's also growing discontent among the state's Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. In November, the Assam cabinet proposed the creation of 'ST (Valley)', a new ST category that would include the Ahoms, Sutias, Moran, Matak, Koch-Rajbongshis and Adivasis. Before this proposal, 10 per cent of reserved seats in public education and employment went to ST (Plains) communities and 5 per cent to ST (Hills) communities. The move to grant ST status to six more communities—especially Ahoms and Koch-Rajbongshis—has been strongly opposed by existing ST communities.

A recent wave of deadly violence between ethnic Karbi and Hindi-speaking Bihari communities in the Karbi Anglong district also exposed Assam's tricky ethnopolitical landscape. The Karbi tribes claimed that Biharis were encroaching on their grazing reserves; they burned down the ancestral home of a BJP leader and the Kheroni market, and looted shops of Bihari residents while the police stood by and watched.

People don't like what they see. The dissatisfaction with Himanta Biswa Sarma is real. A Guwahati-based social scientist said, on condition of anonymity, "there is a palpable undercurrent of inclusive sentiment in the state. But the question is can the opposition harvest that sentiment politically?" ■

SOURABH SEN is a Kolkata-based independent writer and commentator on politics, human rights and foreign affairs

"The dissatisfaction with Himanta is real and palpable. The question is whether the Opposition can exploit the sentiment"

...and we pay the price of war

► Continued from page 1

Much of this supply travels through the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic shipping route that handles a large share of global energy trade.

Any disruption there affects cooking gas, CNG transport fuel and industrial gas supply in India.

The shortage can already be seen in unexpected places. Several restaurants and catering businesses across cities have reportedly reduced operations or shut down temporarily due to no LPG supplies. This in turn affects workers ranging from cooks to delivery personnel in the gig economy.

If the conflict drags on for months rather than weeks, the consequences for the Indian economy could be profound. Export-oriented sectors may face prolonged demand shocks, forcing businesses to rethink supply chains and markets. Higher energy prices could push up inflation, forcing the central bank to maintain higher interest rates for longer. That would slow investment and economic growth. Disruptions in fertiliser supply and rising agricultural costs could intensify rural distress and affect food security. Finally, geopolitical instability in West Asia may threaten remittances from millions of Indian workers employed in the Gulf, which are a major source of foreign exchange for India.

The most alarming estimate comes from the US-based think tank SolAbility, whose report suggests that if the conflict in the Gulf persists, the long-term impact could reduce India's GDP by as much as 1.7 per cent, largely due to disruptions in LNG supplies and a deepening fertiliser crisis.

Wars may be fought thousands of kilometres away, but their economic consequences are felt closer home. From mango orchards in Konkan to restaurants in Delhi, from fertiliser imports to energy supplies, the ripple effects travel through trade routes, commodity markets and supply chains.

The fate of the Alphonso crop this season is a stark reminder that even the sweetness of mangoes can be overshadowed by the bitterness of a distant war. ■

Of online battles and a 'clerical error'

Kunal Chatterjee

The battle for Bengal is heating up. As the state gears for assembly polls on 23 and 29 April, the two principal parties in the fray, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the BJP, are going all out—online.

While some are missing the humour and creativity of the sparring campaign songs from 2021—Trinamool's *Khela hobe* (the game is on) versus the BJP's *Pishi jao* (Goodbye aunty) set to the tune of 'Bella Ciao', the Italian folk song that became an anti-fascist hymn during WWII—this time the sting is sharper as the TMC fights fire with fire.

In 2026, the TMC has taken the BJP head on with its slogan *Jotoi koro hamla, abar jitbe Bangla* (Attack us all you like, abar win again). Framing the BJP as *Bangla birodhi zamindar* (anti-Bengali feudal lords), the lyrics refer to the BJP's assaults on religion, language, migrants, the SIR and the NRC, while positioning Mamata Banerjee as the one who will defend Bengal and Bengali pride. Released in January during the ED raid on the Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC), the three-minute track had garnered 12.8 crore views by March.

The BJP's four-and-a-half-minute song, which pumps up the narrative of fear, unemployment and black money, received over 216,000 YouTube views in two months. Their war cry *Paltano dorkar, chayi BJP Sarkar* (We cry Paltano dorkar, want a BJP government)—spectrally mouthed in the video by Modi—has unwittingly provided ammunition for the TMC. Some BJP supporters not conversant with Bangla have been dropping the word 'chayi', without which the slogan suggests that what needs changing is the BJP government!

Also in the BJP arsenal are *Bhaag Trinamool Bhaag* (Run Trinamool Run), *Baancho Chayi, BJP tai* (BJP because we want to live) and *Jonogon dicchhe daak, Trinamool nipaata jaak* (The people have spoken, Trinamool must be broken). To counter Mamata Banerjee's warning that a BJP government would shut down meat and fish vendors during festivals, a BJP candidate from Bidhannagar constituency went viral campaigning with a *katla maach* (freshwater carp) in his hand. Other BJP candidates including former MP and columnist Swapan Dasgupta invited TV channels to join him for lunch and record evidence that fish is always on the table.

With the last dates for nomination being 8 and 12 April, these are early days yet and real fireworks are awaited. While official handles have refrained from personal attacks on Narendra Modi and Mamata Banerjee, BJP supporters are indulging in a



'Bring it on, BJP!' Mamata Banerjee with a list of TMC candidates for the assembly election

Photo: Getty Images

free-for-all on social media with sexual slurs hurled at the chief minister along with death threats. TMC party general secretary Abhishek Banerjee has pointed to these slurs as revealing "the BJP's true character", insulting to 'every woman' in Bengal.

In short, the battle being waged on WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and AI-driven reels is as fierce as the campaigns on the ground. To take on the BJP's national IT cell and its state-level digital war-room, the Trinamool has quietly built a decentralised social media cell that functions as a crisis-management unit, mini-newsroom and campaign-planning cell rolled into one.

The TMC IT cell has been engaging with cadre and supporters through the mobile app *Didi's Doot* (Didi's messenger) which mobilises, engages, assigns tasks, offers real-time updates as well as interactive quizzes and gamified features to keep users hooked and involved in campaign activities. Speaking to the *Indian Express*, Trinamool's IT cell chief Debangshu Bhattacharya said that the key strategy is to impress upon people that the BJP is spreading lies. It's the tit-for-tat: every time the BJP's IT cell mocks something in Bengal, Trinamool shows the reality in BJP-ruled states like UP and Gujarat.

The *Indian Express* reported (23 March 2026) that the TMC social media ecosystem has produced more than 10,000 reels and short videos, disseminated across platforms through a combination of official channels, volunteer networks and independent influencers aligned with the party.

Anand Chowrasia, formerly with I-PAC told *National Herald* that the TMC IT cell is entrusted with the task of shaping the daily story through short videos, reels, memes

and graphics. These are then pushed through Mamata Banerjee's own accounts, and by the MLAs, MPs and local workers.

To counter the BJP 'fake news factory', the TMC's IT cell swiftly produces rebuttals, fact-checks and counter-videos. During the 2021 assembly polls and 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the cell had worked with I-PAC to customise messages for each constituency in the local language, based on local issues and booth-level feedback.

I-PAC associate Sushmita Das recalls that during *Didi's 10 Ongikar* (Didi's 10 Pledges) in 2021, I-PAC had "turned the contest into a highly personalised, data-driven exercise. It ran a CM helpline that received over 23 lakh calls in 500 days, mapped voter feedback, and linked that with booth-level information to identify swing pockets." Dedicated hashtags, user-generated content and relentless reposting kept the ecosystem alive.

During *Didi's Shopoth* (Didi's Oath) in 2024, I-PAC's campaign—digital ads, SMS, robocalls, TV/radio spots and social media push—is said to have reached over nine crore people in Bengal. Insiders describe I-PAC as Trinamool's back-office brain and

With a dash of local flavour, the TMC's IT cell is outdoing the BJP with its reels, memes and swift rebuttals

the IT cell as its front-facing media house.

The BJP's centralised IT cell, led by Amit Malviya, supervises digital operations from Delhi. It works with in-house social media managers, graphic designers, short-video creators and a network of IT, call workers at state, district and block levels. In Bengal, the IT cell has been focusing on aggressive messaging that links the TMC to corruption, land grab and the breakdown of laws-and-order. Its digital content in Bengal leans heavily on Modi and Amit Shah, with local faces struggling to acquire the same emotional pull.

Debdeep Chakraborty of the BJP's IT cell says, "Ahead of the 2026 assembly polls, we have rolled out AI-style graphics and narratives using Bengali cultural icons, film characters and religious imagery to reframe the image of the 'outsider' as a Bengal-friendly, pro-development national party".

Senior state BJP leaders admit that the IT cell is now the hub of decision-making, not a message-making machine but a strategy-partner for selecting candidates, scheduling rallies and issues to focus on.

Consultant Ridhi Protim Neogi says, "The BJP's IT cell still relies more on Central directives and generic messaging; integration with local party machinery and booth-level feedback loops is not as smooth. I-PAC and the TMC IT cell have built a more seamless link between booth-level data and on-ground workers, voter level agents, field teams and *Didi Ke Bolo* (Tell Didi) helplines, feeding real-time information into campaign tweaks."

Which IT cell will have the last laugh? For that we'll have to wait till 4 May.

Pardon me, your slip is showing

Meanwhile, 'Didi' slipped on the 'clerical error' that led the chief electoral officer of Kerala to distribute an ECI guideline bearing the BJP seal. If anyone still needs proof that the ECI and BJP are hand in glove, here it is, she said, waving a newspaper report.

When party MPs, MLAs and the social media cell amplified the controversy, cyber police headquarters moved in. MPs like Mahua Moitra were sent stern notices, demanding they take down posts mocking the ECI. Instead, they gleefully reposted the notice that charged them of insulting the Commission, undermining communal harmony and posing threats to public order by inciting division and hostility.

But how did the CEO's office have the BJP party seal? The best the ECI could manage by way of an explanation is that the BJP had shared a 2019 guideline, which was circulated due to a 'clerical error'. Ever heard anything more lame? ■



Congress-led UDF raring to make a comeback

With a clear political message of social harmony, the possibility of a return seems real

K.A. Shaji

Kerala does not change governments in a hurry. Its political shifts are rarely dramatic. They grow quietly, through fragments of doubt, conversations that question, loyalties that begin to fray at the edges. As the state heads into a high-stakes assembly election, that quiet churn is unmistakable.

The CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF), which made history in 2021 by breaking Kerala's four-decade pattern of alternating governments, now finds itself confronting not just anti-incumbency but a deeper erosion of political authority. The Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF), on the other hand, is no longer waiting for the Left to falter. It is actively building a case for return, with a clarity and discipline that has eluded it for years.

Leader of Opposition V.D. Satheesan has emerged as a sharp and consistent campaigner. Speaking to *National Herald*, Satheesan said, "This is not just about misgovernance. We are witnessing a situation where the CPI(M) is indirectly benefiting from the BJP's presence. That is the real political question before Kerala." He went further, accusing the LDF of drifting away from its ideological moorings. "Today, the Congress reflects the concerns of real Leftists as well. Many of them feel alienated by what the CPI(M) has become."

This charge goes to the heart of the Left's identity. In a state where the CPI(M) has long wielded ideological clarity against the BJP, any suggestion of political accommodation carries serious implications. The Congress has reframed the contest, not merely as a choice between two alliances but as a question of political integrity.

Rahul Gandhi has reinforced this line, and his exchanges with Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan have given the campaign an unconventional directness. Political commentator Joseph C. Mathew captures the shift clearly. "For a long time, the Congress was reactive in Kerala. Now it is setting the agenda. By raising the question of a CPI(M)-BJP equation, it is forcing the Left to defend its ideological position, not just its governance record."

The Congress has also recalibrated its strategy on the ground. Over the past year, the party has organised a series of thematic conclaves and consultations across Kerala, focusing on health, education, employment and the future of the state's economy. These were not symbolic exercises, they were designed to project a governing vision that goes beyond criticism of the LDF.



The Congress has reframed the contest not merely as a choice between two alliances but as a question of political integrity

On health, the Congress has promised to strengthen primary care networks while addressing emerging gaps in infrastructure and staffing. On education, it has emphasised quality, employability and global competitiveness, seeking to align Kerala's strong base with changing economic realities. On jobs, the focus has been on decentralised industrial growth, support for small enterprises and creating opportunities that reduce the compulsion for migration.

This imagining and articulation of policy has been accompanied by a clear political message: the Congress as custodian of Kerala's social harmony. At a time when national politics is marked by polarisation, the UDF is emphasising the protection of minority rights, constitutional values and social justice. The party has repeatedly underlined its commitment to safeguarding Kerala's plural fabric, arguing that development cannot be separated from inclusiveness. This emphasis is not incidental. It is central to the Congress's attempt to rebuild a broad social coalition that cuts across communities.

Equally significant has been the Congress's management of its own internal contradictions. Potential friction over candidate selection, including the ambitions of senior leaders and MPs such

as K. Sudhakaran, has been handled with relative discipline. The party has avoided public ruptures, signalling a level of organisational maturity that was previously missing. This has strengthened its credibility as a stable alternative.

In contrast, the LDF finds itself on complex and uncomfortable terrain. Pinarayi Vijayan remains the most powerful political figure in Kerala, but the nature of that power is under scrutiny. His leadership style, once seen as decisive and reassuring, is now increasingly described as centralised and distant. The space for dissent appears limited.

There are allegations that the LDF has invested heavily in projecting Vijayan through elaborate public relations, creating what opponents describe as a 'personality cult' that is, as the Congress points out, a departure from the collective ethos that once defined the Left.

These perceptions are echoed, cautiously but clearly, within sections of the Left itself. Veteran leader G. Sudhakaran, who walked out of the CPI(M) after four decades of public life that included stints as MLA and minister, has now entered the electoral fray in Ambalapuzha with UDF support. His departure has become a political marker of the unease within the party. "The party must return to its collective functioning," he

"By raising the question of a CPI(M)-BJP equation, the Congress is forcing the Left to defend its ideological position, not just its governance record"

It's Advantage Stalin in Tamil Nadu



K.A. Shaji

As Tamil Nadu approaches another assembly election, its political landscape reflects a paradox that has come to define the state. There is continuity in Dravidian dominance, welfare-driven governance and a political culture resistant to religious polarisation. At the same time, there is churn within the opposition, among emerging players and in the subtle recalibration of alliances. When read together, these currents point less towards upheaval than towards consolidation, particularly for the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) under chief minister M.K. Stalin.

Tamil Nadu's resistance to Hindutva politics remains its defining feature. The ideological foundations laid by E.V. Ramasamy continue to shape politics here, privileging social justice, linguistic identity and rationalism over religious mobilisation. This living framework continues to inform voter expectations and political strategy. As Chennai-based academic C. Lakshmanan observes, elections in Tamil Nadu are not fought on identity alone but on dignity, welfare and rights.

It is within this framework that the BJP has struggled to find its feet. Despite expanding its organisational base and investing heavily in leadership projection, its strategies have often appeared misaligned with the state's political sensibilities. Efforts to foreground religious

identity have found limited traction, while attempts to cobble alliances together have been constrained by regional parties unwilling to cede space. As journalist M. Satheesh Kumar puts it, the BJP's problem in TN is not the lack of ambition but the lack of a political language that resonates.

Its dependence on alliances has tied the BJP into a complicated relationship with the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), a party that is grappling with its own internal instability. Since the death of J. Jayalalitha, the AIADMK has struggled to reassert itself as a cohesive force. Leadership tussles have hardened into enduring factional divides. While Edappadi K. Palaniswami has brought a degree of organisational control, unity remains elusive. His consolidation has alienated factions aligned with O. Panneerselvam, even as the lingering shadow of V.K. Sasikala continues to cloud the party's future.

Singai Ramachandran, a senior AIADMK leader from Coimbatore, admits the scale of the problem with unusual candour: the party is still negotiating leadership when it should be negotiating votes. Critics say that Palaniswami has succeeded in building authority but not consensus. This imbalance weakens the party's ability to mount a credible challenge in an election that demands both.

The fragmentation extends beyond the AIADMK. The Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK), with its strong Vanniyar base, remains influential but politically unsettled. Internal shifts, generational transitions and fluid alliance choices have made its positioning unpredictable. While it retains pockets of strength in northern Tamil Nadu, it lacks the coherence required to anchor a broader opposition narrative. As Lakshmanan points out, the PMK can mobilise votes, but it cannot unify them.

Onto this already crowded stage steps actor Vijay, whose political entry combines excitement and disruption. With cross-demographic mass appeal, Vijay represents a new political energy. His immediate impact is likely to be fragmentary. His support base overlaps significantly with segments of the anti-DMK electorate,



Chief minister M.K. Stalin knows that in the absence of a unified opposition even a stable vote share can deliver a comfortable victory

raising the possibility of a split in anti-incumbency votes across constituencies. As DMK spokesperson Salem Dharanidharan notes, even a modest vote share of 5 to 8 per cent for Vijay could alter outcomes in dozens of seats: he does not need a sweeping victory to make a dent. For now, analysts suggest that Vijay is less a threat to the DMK than a complication for its opponents.

The fragmentation within the opposition stands in sharp contrast to the relative cohesion of the ruling alliance. The DMK, along with the Congress and Left parties such as the CPI(M), has not only held its alliance together but strengthened it. Early differences over seat-sharing between the DMK and Congress, often a flashpoint in coalition politics, were resolved through dialogue, with both sides recognising the value of unity over maximalist demands. The CPI(M) also navigated negotiations

without public friction, reinforcing the image of a disciplined, coordinated front.

Congress leader Manickam Tagore acknowledges that differences existed, but also emphasises that there was a shared understanding that fragmentation would only benefit the opposition. The Left echoes this pragmatism, viewing seat-sharing as a process of accommodation anchored in a larger political objective.

The implications are clear. In a multi-cornered contest, a cohesive alliance can translate even a stable vote share into a comfortable victory if the opposition vote is divided. The DMK does not need dramatic expansion. It only needs to hold its ground while its opponents split the rest.

This brings the focus back to anti-incumbency. While there may be pockets of dissatisfaction with the government, the absence of a unified opposition prevents

said. "Centralisation cannot become the norm. That is not how the Left has worked."

At the grassroots, there are signs of drift. Local leaders, cooperative figures and community intermediaries who once formed the backbone of the Left's political machinery are no longer uniformly aligned. Some have withdrawn into silence. Others are quietly recalibrating their positions.

Writer and critic M.N. Karassery situates this within a broader cultural context. "The Left still has a strong base and ideological appeal," he says. "But elections are not won on legacy alone. They require renewal. The question is whether the LDF has been able to renew itself."

The memory of Sabarimala continues to cast a shadow over the political landscape. For many believers, the issue was not merely about a court verdict but about the state's response. The perception that the government acted with inflexibility, without adequate sensitivity to faith, has not entirely faded.

Karassery says, "Many felt the state was not listening. That sentiment still lingers." The BJP attempted to convert this sentiment into electoral gains but failed to sustain momentum. The Congress handled it by positioning itself as respectful of faith while remaining within a constitutional framework. This measured approach resonated particularly in central Kerala.

The LDF continues to defend its record with confidence. Senior leader K.K. Shailaja, contesting from Peravoor in Kannur, has dismissed the BJP's claims. "The LDF government has delivered in health, welfare and social security in ways that are nationally recognised," she said. "People will judge us on our work, not on allegations."

The electorate, though, is more sceptical. Welfare schemes continue, but they no longer generate the same political enthusiasm. Younger voters, shaped by migration and changing aspirations, are looking beyond welfare. BJP creation within the state has not kept pace with expectations. Educated youth continue to look outside Kerala for better prospects. Fiscal pressures limit the scope for expanding welfare.

These concerns do not always translate into immediate electoral shifts, but they shape the mood in ways that are politically consequential. Despite sustained efforts, the BJP's organisational expansion has not translated into electoral success. Kerala resists easy polarisation and attempts to consolidate votes along religious lines have faced structural limits.

What emerges is the kind of open contest not seen in years. The LDF's strengths are significant: its cadre base is disciplined, its ideological appeal remains relevant, Pinarayi Vijayan continues to command respect across sections. But the Congress has altered the terms of engagement. Organised, assertive and politically engaged, it is offering a framework for governance built around jobs, public services, social justice and communal harmony. For the first time in a decade, the possibility of a Congress-led return is real. ■

The fragmentation within the opposition stands in sharp contrast to the relative cohesion of the ruling alliance



Cuba next on Trump's imperial hitlist

Ashok Swain

Donald Trump has not been coy about Cuba. He has openly coveted the 'honour' of taking the island. He has also suggested he can do what he likes with it. These seemingly untinged remarks are not without political intention.

Trump's fixation with Cuba is not driven by ideological hostility towards Communism, even though that language is politically useful at home. Nor is it really about security concerns. It is a fusion of geopolitical ambition and a transactional worldview.

Cuba, already weakened by sustained economic pressure, may be seen as an opportunity to achieve the kind of quick outcome that has proven elusive in Iran. A decisive move against Havana could be presented domestically as a demonstration of strength and effectiveness, deflecting attention away from the frustrations and anger of a prolonged conflict in the Middle East.

His advisors, even this calculation would be risky. It underestimates the resilience of the Cuban state and the potential consequences of external intervention. Cuba's political system, while under strain, remains cohesive and supported by institutions that have weathered decades of pressure. Its security apparatus is experienced, and its leadership is unlikely to capitulate under threat. Any attempt to force change from the outside would likely provoke strong resistance, not only from the state but also from segments of the population for whom national sovereignty remains a powerful mobilising force.

The Trump administration's regime-change forays are not winning the US any friends in the world. And a move on Cuba is more likely to generate a broader diplomatic backlash and complicate relations with allies than isolating Cuba. In any case, efforts to impose political change from the outside often end up strengthening the very systems they aim to weaken. In Cuba's case, external pressure has historically reinforced a siege mentality that legitimises centralised control and limits space for internal reform. By intensifying pressure, Washington risks entrenching these dynamics rather than effecting a transformation to its own advantage.

Trump may believe that Cuba can deliver a quick and symbolic victory, especially in contrast to the drawn out and costly confrontation with Iran. But to believe this is to misread the island nation's internal dynamics and its history. Cuba is not an empty stage on which external powers can easily script political outcomes. It is a state with its own institutions, its own political logic and a long history of resisting precisely this kind of intervention. The danger lies not only in the possibility of conflict but in the assumptions that make such a conflict appear attractive. ■

The influence of hardline Cuban exile groups in the US and the longstanding hawkishness of secretary of state Marco Rubio has reinforced this policy direction vis-à-vis Cuba.

The bullying tactic is transparent: by tightening restrictions on external supplies and effectively cutting off external support, Washington has brought Cuba's economic crisis to breaking point. Cuba produces only 40 per cent of the oil it needs and the US has choked all possible imports. The resulting shortages have plunged the island nation into darkness and driven its citizens to desperation.

This is where the Venezuela parallel is revealing. The idea is not to dismantle the existing state apparatus but to replace some key figures in it so that Cuba's economic policy may be bent to America's advantage. The strategy, if it worked, would allow Trump to claim success without the risks, complexities or costs of attempting a fuller transformation.

The campaign will possibly be cloaked in the language of freedom and democracy, but nothing could be farther from the real agenda—to pry open the Cuban economy to American investments and commercial engagement on terms favourable to



'No you can't' Demonstrators gather outside the US embassy in London on 21 March, International Day of Solidarity with Cuba, to protest against Donald Trump's reported intention to have the "honour of taking Cuba in some form"

Photo: Getty Images

Trump's crony capitalists.

Yet Cuba presents a more complicated landscape than Trump can perhapsathom. Political authority in the island nation is not concentrated in a single individual but distributed across the Communist Party, the government and the military. This structure makes it more resilient to external pressure and less susceptible to abrupt internal reconfiguration. The Cuban leadership has firmly rejected any negotiation with its political system, framing such demands as a violation of its sovereignty.

The history of this pushback is crucial. Cuba's political identity has been forged in the fire of opposition to US intervention. The memory of pre-Castro periods of domination—when Washington exercised direct and indirect control over the island—is deeply embedded in both state narratives and the public consciousness. What is now being proposed echoes those dynamics,

For the moment, Cuba is on the backburner because the war in Iran has gone off-script. But the delay doesn't mean a change of direction

even if couched in transactional terms.

For the moment, Cuba is on the backburner because the war in Iran has gone off-script. It has dragged on longer than the aggressors had anticipated and extracted costs way beyond their calculations. The asymmetric war has not just stretched the mighty US militarily but has also imposed humongous economic costs on the world—and forced the Trump administration to hold off on its broader imperialist agenda.

Iran's refusal to yield to Trump's threats and the damage it has managed to inflict upon America's allies in the Gulf, on Israel and their sympathisers by weaponising the Strait of Hormuz has forced this recalibration of US priorities.

But the delay should not be mistaken for a change of direction. If anything, the difficulties encountered in Iran may increase the appeal of pursuing more immediate and visible success closer home.

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It's not really about reservation for women

...and the attempt to yoke the proposal to an expansion of the legislature is disingenuous, argues Radha Kumar

The ruling BJP is making a push for delimitation without waiting for the 2027 Census findings, on the grounds that it will enable implementation of the Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam of 2023, mandating 33 per cent reservation for women in the legislature in time for the 2029 general election. But is it really about implementing women's reservation? Or is women's reservation a pretext to push for an expansion of the Lok Sabha?

On 24 March, the media reported that home minister Amit Shah, in closed-door consultations with NDA allies and select opposition parties (i.e., minus the Congress, the principal opposition, the TMC and Left parties) had proposed a 50 per cent expansion of legislative seats so that a third could be reserved for women. The plan would allow sitting MPs and MLAs, 85 per cent of whom are male, to potentially retain their seats even while making room for women, who would have a third of the seats (273 of 816 in the expanded Lok Sabha).

To allay the concerns of southern states, each state's seat share would be retained at the current level. The six southern states (plus the Union Territory of Puducherry) account for 24 per cent of Lok Sabha seats. In order to implement these proposals, the Modi administration would bring two bills—one to freeze each state's seat share at its current level for the next 25-30 years and another to appoint a Delimitation Commission, which would use the 2011 Census figures as its base—not the 2027 Census—since the final figures of the new Census would be released too late to enable delimitation before 2029.

By the evening of 24 March, the same news outlets clarified that these were four stand-alone proposals:

- 1 Delinking 33 per cent quota for women from the 2027 Census
- 2 Expansion of Lok Sabha (and state assemblies)
- 3 Reserving ~273 seats for women (in the expanded Lok Sabha)
- 4 Conducting the delimitation using 2011 Census data, while maintaining

state-wise proportions

In other words, the proposed 50 per cent legislature expansion is not linked to the 33 per cent reservation for women. The real agenda, it seems, is to push for legislature expansion/delimitation ahead of the 2027 Census and in time for the 2029 general election while making it look like it's about reservation for women.

To foreground women's reservation when the real agenda is to expand the Lok Sabha is politically expedient, for women's reservation has the support of opposition parties and public influencers. Indeed, the Congress first piloted a bill for women's reservation, in the early 1990s under then prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao. Expansion of the legislature is a tangled objective: legislators want it—more seats, after all, equal more opportunities for them—but the southern states have legitimate worries and the public is suspicious given the disillusionment with elected representatives. To bundle women's reservation with legislature expansion cloaks the dual goal of expansion and protection of sitting male MPs.

The proposal to freeze states' seat shares at the current level is clearly intended to win the support of the southern states. Led by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin, these states have opposed a population-based expansion of the Lok Sabha, which will reduce their share from a fourth now (~24 per cent) to less than a fifth of total seats.

Why the 2011 Census? Waiting for the 2027 Census findings, this argument goes, will delay women's reservation till the 2034 general election (at the earliest) because the findings of the new Census will likely be available by 2030. But why must women's reservation wait till the legislature is expanded? Why not carve it out of the current strength of the Lok Sabha and state assemblies? The only reason it is tied to said expansion is to protect sitting male MPs.

Could it also be that the Modi administration wants to avoid the 2027

Census because it is supposed to include a caste enumeration, and the ruling BJP is concerned how caste figures might impact public demands for representation? While the BJP's electoral and activist base includes substantial numbers of OBCs (Other Backward Classes), its use of these castes and their prominence has caused considerable dissatisfaction amongst the upper castes. The Scheduled Castes, too, appear to be turning away, as are several Denotified Tribes that have been omitted from the 2027 Census list.

Reportedly, Mr Shah wished to rush the two bills with these proposals in the ongoing parliamentary session ending 4 April. But under pressure from the Opposition, he agreed to postpone, possibly to the monsoon session. Opposition parties have asked for an all-party meeting after the upcoming state elections, so that they can study the proposals. Among the issues to consider, the uppermost are: a) delinking women's reservation from legislature expansion; b) ensuring that the new Delimitation Commission is headed by an impartial jurist well-versed in the norms of democratic representation, and includes legislators of all parties in equal numbers, including at least 33 per cent women; and, c) making it mandatory for the Commission to put its draft recommendations in the public domain for feedback.

They might raise another issue: whether the reserved women's seats should be allocated to constituencies from which no woman has won in the past four to six elections. Such a move, it is argued, would remove the taboo on women public figures in these constituencies and send a message to other constituencies seen as male fiefdoms. It might even indirectly spur action on the Prime Minister's 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' slogan, which has remained an empty call thus far.

There is also the question of the



United we stand Women MPs from the Opposition pose for a fun photo-op

methodology to be used in allocating women's seats. And while Mr. Shah and his party can propose an expansion of the legislature, it is the prerogative of a delimitation commission to decide on numbers. Also, reservation for women, as stated above, does not depend on this expansion, nor on population counts. The attempt to yoke reservation to expansion is not only unnecessary, it is deceitful. Question for Mr Shah: why should women's seats be additional seats? Did the male MPs who voted for the bill do so only because they were assured that their seats would not be allocated to women? What made the male MPs so sure they would be re-elected?

Finally, it's time opposition parties began in earnest to identify and nurture women candidates. The BJP started doing this some years ago, though none of their women legislators have been vocal about women's rights, content instead to be a shrill echo chamber for the Prime Minister and his administration.

Among the opposition parties, the Trinamool Congress stands out for having the largest proportion of women, who do their homework and are combative. The Opposition does have articulate women legislators, as the debate on Operation Sindoor showed. I hope they will take a joint lead in formulating opposition policy on the issues discussed here. ■

RADHA KUMAR is a historian and policy analyst

Why must women's reservation wait till the legislature is expanded? Why not carve it out of the current strength of the Lok Sabha?

KARNATAKA'S 11G MODEL: BUILDING A \$1 TRILLION ECONOMY WITH A SOCIAL SOUL

Siddaramaiah's 17th milestone: Charting a masterclass in compassionate economics

In the hallowed halls of the Karnataka Legislative Assembly on March 6, 2026, history was not merely recorded; it was authored with a flourish of fiscal wisdom and social empathy. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, stepping up to the lectern to present his record-breaking 17th state budget, did more than just balance books.

He unveiled a blueprint for a sub-continental powerhouse—a roadmap that powerfully blends the immediate needs of the vulnerable with the high-tech aspirations of a global innovation hub.

With a total expenditure estimated at a staggering Rs 4,48,004 crore for the 2026-27 fiscal year, the budget serves as a definitive testament to Karnataka's economic resilience and its unwavering commitment to the "Karnataka Model" of development.

The atmosphere was one of profound significance as the Chief Minister articulated a vision that he described as the "11G Model." This is not just a collection of administrative acronyms but a sophisticated, multi-dimensional framework designed to ensure that development is not confined to the high-rises of Bengaluru but reaches the furthest hamlets of Kalyana Karnataka.

As the speech progressed, it became clear that this budget is anchored in the belief that economic growth is most sustainable when it is inclusive.

By drawing upon the philosophy of the epic tradition, the Chief Minister likened the state to a cow that yields abundant milk, noting that such a resource requires proper care.

If the source becomes weak, the entire community suffers. This analogy underscored his appeal for a more sensitive response from the Union government, highlighting Karnataka's role as one of the highest tax contributors to the nation.

THE 11G FRAMEWORK: A NEW ERA OF GOVERNANCE

The centerpiece of the 2026-27 budget is undoubtedly the 11G policy framework. This comprehensive strategy covers every conceivable facet of modern governance, from the "Guarantee Economy" that promotes gender equality and financial security to the "Global Trade Economy" that aims to fortify the state's industrial and export sectors.

The model also introduces the "Gig Economy" initiatives for labor welfare, recognizing the shifting nature of work in the 21st century. By focusing on "Geographical Equality," the government is taking active steps to reduce regional disparities, ensuring that the prosperity of the "Silicon Valley of India" is mirrored in the development of Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities.

One of the most innovative components of this framework is the "Globe-Trotting Economy," a tourism-driven initiative aimed at showcasing Karnataka's rich heritage to the world. Alongside this, the "Green Economy" takes center stage, encouraging renewable energy and environmentally friendly activities.

This is perhaps best exemplified by the landmark launch of the Mukhya Mantri Saura Krishi Yojana. This ambitious scheme, mirroring national solarization efforts, seeks to accelerate solar adoption in the agricultural sector.

With an estimated investment of Rs 10,500 crore, the state plans to commission solar power plants with a total capacity of 3,000 MW at substations operated by KPTCL. This project, developed through the Renewable Energy Service Company (RESCO) model, will provide farmers with reliable daytime power, fundamentally transforming the rural economic landscape.



Photo: Gettyimages

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To support this green transition, the budget earmarks Rs 3,400 crore for Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS) at key substations like Huliur, Pavagada, and Kushtagi.

By combining feeder-level solarization with advanced energy storage and grid upgrades, Karnataka is not just talking about a clean energy future; it is building the infrastructure to make it a reality. This strategic investment ensures grid stability while significantly increasing the share of clean energy in the state's electricity mix.

STRENGTHENING THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET

Despite the focus on futuristic technology, the 2026 budget remains deeply rooted in social justice. The Chief Minister reaffirmed the government's unwavering commitment to the flagship "Guarantee Schemes," which have become a hallmark of his administration since 2023.

These schemes, based on the concept of universal basic income, have been shown by major studies to improve the financial condition of millions of families and increase overall purchasing power.

The budget provides a massive allocation of Rs 28,608 crore for the Gruha Lakshmi scheme alone, ensuring that the women of Karnataka remain empowered financial pillars of their households.

In a thoughtful evolution of the Anna Bhagya scheme, the government is introducing the "Indira Food Kit." Instead of the additional 5 kg of rice previously provided, families will now receive a kit containing nutritious items such as tur dal, sugar, salt, and cooking oil.

This shift reflects a holistic understanding of food security that prioritizes nutrition alongside calorie intake. Furthermore, the Shakti scheme, which has revolutionized mobility for women across the state, receives an allocation of Rs 5,300 crore.

The Gruha Jyothi scheme continues

to lighten the burden on households with an allocation of Rs 10,578 crore, while the "Yuva Nidhi" scheme has already provided unemployment allowances worth Rs 913 crore to over three lakh eligible beneficiaries.

To further secure the future of the state's young citizens, the Chief Minister announced that 56,432 vacancies in various government departments will be filled this year, supported by a one-time age limit waiver to ensure that those who missed out due to legal hurdles can now participate in the state's growth story.

BENGALURU: THE GLOBAL HUB REDEFINED



Photo: Gettyimages

As the capital city continues to grow as a global magnet for investment and talent, the budget addresses the challenges of urbanization with characteristic vigor.

A new "Revised Master Plan-2041" for Bengaluru will be implemented by the end of 2027, complemented by a "Comprehensive Mobility Plan" to be prepared within six months.

The city's infrastructure will see a major upgrade with the construction of a Tunnel Road and an Elevated Road

from Hebbal Junction to Mekhri Circle at a cost of Rs2,250 crore.

To further decongest the city, the Chief Minister announced the development of a second airport for Bengaluru. A feasibility report is already in the works, ensuring that the city's aviation infrastructure remains ahead of the curve.

Furthermore, 41 km of additional metro lines are proposed for completion during the current financial year, and an integrated digital platform will be developed to manage traffic congestion using real-time data analysis.

Environmental and social considerations are woven into the city's development plan as well. Disaster management programs worth Rs 5,000

crore will be taken up over five years to control flooding in the city, while a Leopard Rehabilitation Centre will be established in Bannerghatta to address man-animal conflict on the city's outskirts.

For the sports enthusiasts, the Karnataka Housing Board will construct an 80,000-seating capacity cricket stadium and international-standard sports complex in Anekal, aptly named the "KHB Surya Kreedha Grama."

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION AND HEALTH

Education and health remain the twin pillars of human development in the 11G model. Drawing inspiration from Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, the Chief Minister emphasized that economic development neglecting human development is both unstable and unethical.

To this end, 800 schools will be upgraded to "Karnataka Public Schools" at a cost of Rs 3,900 crore. In a visionary move, the state is collaborating with IIT Dharwad to provide a personal self-learning digital tutor facility for over 12 lakh students from Class 8 to 12, utilizing AI technology to personalize the learning process.

The health sector also sees a significant boost with an allocation of Rs 900 crore for infrastructure development. A particularly moving initiative is the provision of free insulin pens for diabetic patients under the age of 18, ensuring that no child's health is compromised by financial constraints.

Additionally, the government has



Photo: Gettyimages

signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Azim Premji Institute to set up a 1,000-bed charitable super-specialty hospital, and Victoria Hospital in Bengaluru will be renamed after the legendary socialist leader Shantaveri Gopala Gowda, honoring the state's rich political heritage.

In a bold move to protect the mental health and social well-being of the next generation, the budget proposes a ban on social media use for children under the age of 16.

This pioneering step acknowledges the complexities of the digital age and seeks to create a safer environment for the state's youth to grow and learn without the pressures of unregulated digital platforms.

A VISION FOR RURAL PROSPERITY AND REGIONAL BALANCE



Photo: Gettyimages

various schemes and the untimely rationalization of GST rates have placed an additional burden on the state exchequer.

He pointed out that rate restructuring resulted in a loss of Rs 10,000 crore this year, with an expected reduction of Rs 15,000 crore next year. In a call for unity across party lines, he urged the state to assert its rightful claims and implored the Union government to share cess and surcharge revenues with the states to offset these losses.

The Chief Minister did, however, welcome the 16th Finance Commission's recommendation of a 4.131% share of taxes for Karnataka, noting that it recognizes and incentivizes states that contribute significantly to national GDP growth. This acknowledgement of Karnataka's role as an economic engine for India is a vital step toward a more equitable federalism.

A LEGACY OF PROGRESS

As the budget presentation concluded, broadcast live at 230 government bus stands across the state for the first time, it was clear that this was more than a financial document; it was a manifesto of hope.

Siddaramaiah's 17th budget is a masterclass in compassionate economics, proving that a state can be a leader in AI and robotics while simultaneously providing a safety net for its most vulnerable citizens.

The 11G model serves as a beacon for other states, demonstrating how to navigate the transition to a green, digital, and global economy without losing sight of the human element. From the "Raita Malls" of Kolar to the AI hubs of Bengaluru, the budget touches every life and every sector.

Siddaramaiah's 17th budget is a masterclass in compassionate economics, proving that a state can be a leader in AI and robotics while simultaneously providing a safety net for its most vulnerable citizens.

While Bengaluru thrives, the budget ensures that rural Karnataka is not left behind. The "Chief Minister's Agriculture Extension" scheme and the "Vasudha Amrit" programme will be implemented over the next three years to promote sustainable agricultural practices and increase farmer income.

The budget also provides for agricultural loans worth Rs30,000 crore at zero interest to 38 lakh farmers, a significant increase that highlights the government's pro-farmer stance.

To address regional disparities, the government is implementing the recommendations of the Govinda Rao Committee, focusing on the development of backward districts in the Kalyana Karnataka region.

The naming of all gram panchayats as "Mahatma Gandhi Gram Panchayats" serves as a tribute to the Father of the Nation and his vision of Gram Swaraj.

Furthermore, the commitment to the Mekedatu balancing reservoir project remains firm, following recent legal victories, ensuring the long-term water security of the state.

FISCAL RESILIENCE AND FEDERAL FAIRNESS

Throughout his speech, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah maintained a balance between ambitious spending and fiscal discipline. Despite structural challenges arising from changes in Central tax policies, Karnataka's own revenue collection has shown remarkable resilience.

The state's own tax revenue is estimated at Rs 2,20,000 crore, contributing to total revenue receipts of Rs 3,15,050 crore. The fiscal deficit is carefully pegged at 2.95 percent of the GSDP, well within the prudent limits of fiscal management.

However, the Chief Minister did not shy away from addressing the "injustice" faced by the state in the federal system. He noted that the reduction in the Central share for

A Sangh takeover of our armed forces

The saffronisation of India has taken a dangerous new turn with Sainik Schools being handed over to Sangh affiliates

Rashme Sehgal

The Indian armed forces have traditionally been insulated from politics. Soon after India became independent, there was a demand that the Indian National Army (INA), founded by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, should be merged with the Indian Army. This was disallowed, and the INA was disbanded to keep the army apolitical. During communal riots it is the army, trusted as a neutral force, that is brought in to restore peace. These traditions are no longer inviolable.

While India does not have a quasi-religious police force like Saudi Arabia's Mutaween, the vigilantes of the RSS-Hindutva brigade act as extra-constitutional groups who take the law into their own hands, lynch, punishing, threatening and extorting large sums of money from Muslims.

In fact, India recently took a step towards creating a Mutaween-like force when policemen posted at the Kashi Vishwanath temple were made to wear saffron dhoti-kurtas, rudraksha beads and tripund tilaks, and told to greet pilgrims with the chant *Har Har Mahadev*.

The saffronisation of India has taken a new and dangerous turn with Sainik Schools being handed over to Sangh affiliates on a Public-Private Partnership model. The move threatens to bring Hindutva ideologies into military educational institutions. Since Sainik Schools help prepare a large number of students to join the armed forces, the ultimate outcome could well be the transformation of our secular armed forces into another arm of the Hindutva brigade.

Earlier, the autonomous Sainik Schools Society (SSS) functioned under the guidelines of the ministry of defence. The SSS ran 33 Sainik Schools for about 16,000 students and sent 25-30 per cent of them to various training academies of the Indian armed forces. Defence minister Rajnath Singh is on record stating that the Sainik Schools have

contributed more than 7,000 officers to the armed forces.

In 2021, the Union government unilaterally decided to open the doors to private players. Plans to set up 100 new Sainik Schools across India with a budgetary allocation of Rs 100 crore were announced. A list that was required to kickstart a new Sainik School was 'land, physical and IT infrastructure, financial resources and staff'. Selected schools would receive financial support of up to Rs 1.2 crore from the government and would be run 'as an exclusive vertical (model) which would be distinct and different from existing Sainik Schools of MoD'.

This simplified criteria, confirmed by the *Reporters' Collective* on the basis of RTI replies and government press releases, revealed that 'of the 40 Sainik School agreements so far, at least 62 per cent were awarded to schools linked to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its allied organisations, politicians of the BJP, its political allies and friends, Hindutva organisations, individuals, and other Hindu religious organisations' (3 April 2024). By May 2025, another 46 schools received approval.

Many of these allottees are extremely questionable. Sadhu Ritambhara, founder of the Durga Vahini, the militant women's wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, is one. Her Vrindavan school is called the Samvid Gurukulam Girls Sainik School. Ritambhara played a key role in whipping up anti-Muslim sentiment in the run up to



At the Bhonsala Military School, Nagpur, set up in 1937 by RSS ideologue B.S. Moonje

Photo courtesy: BMS, Nagpur

the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992. The Liberhan Commission, which investigated the demolition, named her among the 68 individuals responsible for bringing the country to the "brink of communal discord". She was booked by the police for provocative speeches in 1991 and was a key accused in the CBI chargesheet for criminal conspiracy.

Bhonsala Military School (BMS), Nagpur, established in 1937 by Hindu right-wing ideologue B.S. Moonje and run by the Central Hindu Military Education Society,

was another. During the probes into the 2006 Nanded bomb blast and the 2008 Malegaon blasts, the Maharashtra Anti-Terror Squad and other agencies revealed that individuals involved in the conspiracy received training in arms and explosives at BMS. In 2025, seventeen years after the Malegaon blast, all seven accused were acquitted by a special NIA court in Mumbai.

The Adani World School in Nellore, Andhra Pradesh—located near the Krishnapatnam deep-water port operated by the Adani Group—has also won a Sainik School affiliation. The Gautam Adani group stands indicted by the US government for orchestrating a multi-billion-dollar bribery and fraud scheme to secure solar power contracts. While the Adani group has denied the charges, several army officers are of the opinion that an allotment should have come only after the group is absolved.

Most of the new Sainik Schools have been handed over to BJP

leaders or are owned by trusts that they head. These schools are dotted across the length and breadth of the country. For example, the Tawang Sainik School in Arunachal Pradesh is owned by the state chief minister Pema Khandu. Khandu's brother Tsering Tashi, a BJP MLA, is the managing director.

In Mehana, Gujarat, Motibhai Chaudhary Sainik School is affiliated with Dudhsagar Dairy, which is chaired by Ashokkumar Bhavsangbhai Chaudhari, a former BJP general secretary for Mehana. Similarly, the Banas Sainik School in Banaskantha is managed by the Galabhai Nanjibhai Patel Charitable Trust under Banas Dairy, and is headed by Shankar Chaudhary, BJP MLA from Tharad and Speaker of the Gujarat assembly. This pattern is repeated in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

From 1977, the RSS has run its own network of schools under the Vidya Bharati banner. At present it runs 12,065 formal schools, with

3,158,658 students, making it one of the largest networks of private schools in India. On its website, Vidya Bharati announces its mission to 'build a younger generation which is committed to Hindutva and infused with patriotic fervour'.

"What is happening is completely unconstitutional," says a retired major general, under condition of anonymity. "Not only will these new Sainik Schools alter the political character of the army, Indian democracy is also at risk. The government should have focused on strengthening the existing Rashtriya Indian Military College and Schools. By affiliating them to national institutions, particularly defence, the government is bringing unspeakable danger to the country. It's bound to infect the defence forces with a majoritarian, communal outlook."

Former deputy army chief Lt General Mehruddin Shah believes that the present government "wants to fill the army up with people who are indoctrinated. This is not to say that earlier we were indoctrinated. It was just that certain brigades were not crossed. The government seems to forget that by choosing this path, they are putting a noose around our necks. What will happen to soldiers from other communities who also want to serve their country?" asks Shah.

Equally critical of the Agniveer scheme, Shah said, "In my experience, the best soldiers are in the 25-35 age group. But when they join, Agniveer recruits are typically 18; by the time they are 22, they are out of the army."

Lt Gen Prakash Menon (retd), director of the Takshashila Institution's Strategic Studies Programme has warned against the nexus developing between the government and private parties to push an ideologically slanted version of education, far removed from the values enshrined in the Constitution. ■

Adani World School in Nellore near the deep-water port run by the Adani Group has also got a Sainik School affiliation

The deafening silence of 'Vishwaguru' India

Yogendra Yadav

Whatever else he may be, this wasn't the prime minister of a self-styled 'Vishwaguru' nation. Not the man who claims India's drumbeat echoes across the world—or so his usual swagger may lead you to think. This didn't even sound like a leader. Nor did a stage actor delivering punchlines.

If you heard the prime minister's statement in Parliament on the West Asia crisis, you'd struggle to recognise him. Gone was the bluster, the bravado, the theatrical flourishes. This was a dull recital, marked by the anxiety to not deviate from the script—lest a word slip, lest a call come in from Washington. No quips, no zingers. Even the ritual desk-thumping from the benches came in half-hearted taps, as if to tick a box. You could mistake this speech for a manager's report or an accountant's ledger. Or perhaps the backstage monologue of an actor written out of the script. It was not the address of a leader.

How could it be? The turn of events in West Asia has left the prime minister with very little to say. Despite all the eager deference to the United States, Donald Trump seems in no mood to indulge him. Even after bending the knee on a trade deal, India now finds itself under investigation. Word is that Washington has chosen Pakistan—not India—for mediation with Iran. Two days before the war, the prime minister wore an Israeli medal around his neck; yet Israel has not found it necessary to even name him. Back home, a constituency may have been cultivated to embrace Israel with open arms, but in Israel, there is no comparable wave of affection for India.

India has made no new friends, and old ones have slipped away. Iran, which counted India among its partners for decades, now sees India in the rival camp. The fault does not lie with Iran. In his parliamentary address, the prime minister directed his criticism on Tehran, without naming it, expressing concern over attacks on commercial vessels and energy infrastructure. But he uttered not a word, directly or indirectly, on the unprovoked, unlawful strikes by the United States and Israel.

It is hardly surprising, then, that India does not feature among the countries permitted to move ships through the Strait of Hormuz. When the prime minister called the Iranian president on this matter, he reportedly got an earful on how India had behaved in this hour of crisis. Russia, too, is cold-shouldering India, which had curtailed imports of Russian oil under US pressure. Now, when the Gulf crisis has forced India to turn to



The usual bluster was missing from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement in Parliament on West Asia

Photo: IANS

Russia once again, Moscow has ruled out 'friendship rates'. A seventy-year-old relationship has gone cold.

Even beyond the battlefield, on the diplomatic stage, India is nowhere. When the world confronts a crisis, it looks for leadership. When Britain and France attacked Egypt over the Suez Canal, an India that was far weaker, economically and militarily, still found its voice. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru spoke openly in support of Egypt, rallied global opinion against imperial aggression, and in doing so carved out a place for India as a moral leader. Today, the world listens instead to the prime minister of Spain, looks to Brazil and South Africa, even applauds the prime minister of Sri Lanka. No one is looking to India.

When speaking is imperative but there is nothing to say, one resorts to circumlocution. That was the prime minister's predicament too. Abstract invocations of humanity. Calls for peace without naming those who started the war. Hollow appeals to 'all sides' to de-escalate. Small claims about India's sensitivity and vigilance in a global crisis—as if the country's concerns now extend no further than the safety of oil.

Even in laying out these details, the truth was rationed. We were told how much India has in reserve, but not that it would last barely a week. We were not told that China has built reserves for three months, while India has not secured even three weeks. Credit was claimed for blending ethanol into fuel, but there was no mention of who ran India's public sector exploration giant ONGC into the ground.

When the world faces a grave crisis and a leader uses the nation's highest forum to present petty gains in petty detail, it does not just diminish him; it lowers the head of the entire country. ■

December in March spells doom

We are witnessing a climate emergency, writes Pankaj Chaturvedi

Fog in March is as unheard of as snow in summer. March is the month for *palash* (flame of the forest) to burst into bloom, for wheat to ripen as it soaks up the sun. This year though, March has been markedly different, even frightening.

In the first week, a dense fog descended on Delhi, Ghaziabad, Kanpur and Lucknow; a Delhi-Ranchi flight was diverted to Kolkata because of fog affecting visibility. Sweaters and woollens were brought out in some places in western Uttar Pradesh. When ground visibility became zero, it became clear that the balance of nature had been severely disrupted. Seasons were no longer following familiar patterns. To top it all, sudden rain and hailstorms destroyed standing crops.

Meteorologists described it as a climate emergency. Fog typically forms on winter nights when the earth rapidly releases heat and humidity levels are high. This year, the heatwave that began abruptly in the last week of February shattered all records. The Earth's surface overheated. When moisture-laden easterly winds from the Bay of Bengal came into contact with this overheated surface, and the night temperature suddenly dropped by six to seven degrees, a dense blanket was formed. In scientific terms, this is called 'radiation fog'.

The geographical features of north India and the sudden slowdown in wind speed made this situation more alarming. Stagnant air at the lower levels of the atmosphere allowed the mixture of smog and pollution—usually seen during winter—to condense.

The drastic difference in day and night temperatures after Holi is a serious indication of nature's changing mood. According to the Meteorological Department's data, daytime temperatures in many parts of north India have been recorded between 8 to 12 degrees Celsius above normal, while nights have remained comparatively cold. A major reason for this fluctuation is the extremely weak western disturbances. These disturbances typically bring rain and snowfall, which help regulate temperatures. Their absence results in a completely clear sky, allowing the sun's rays to directly heat the earth during the day.

Remember, rainfall decreased by about 60 per cent in January-February this year. The lack of moisture in the soil means heat isn't being dissipated through evaporation. At night, clear skies mean the earth's heat is being quickly radiated back into space,

leading to cooler nights. Additionally, high-pressure areas over western India are pushing winds downward. This compressed air heats up and prevents clouds from forming, creating a heatwave-like situation during the day.

The fog from these erratic temperatures has far-reaching consequences. Agriculture suffers the most. The rabi crop, especially wheat, is currently in its final stages of ripening. Wild temperature fluctuations have affected the quality of the wheat grains. Increased humidity caused by fog, followed by intense sunlight, has led to yellow rust and various fungal diseases.

Agricultural experts believe that this uncertainty continues, we could face a major challenge on the food security front. Not only grains, even horticultural crops such as mango blossoms have been adversely affected. Flowers fall off in sudden humidity and cold, leading to a significant drop in production.

Apart from ecological damage, there's a significant threat to human health. The March fog is not just water vapour, it contains tiny dust particles and trapped gases. This toxic smoke directly attacks the lungs, which can be fatal for respiratory patients and the elderly.

Traffic disruptions impact the economy. Flight cancellations and train delays are not only inconvenient, they also result in fuel wastage worth billions of rupees and increased carbon emissions. This creates a vicious cycle where climate change creates fog, and the measures taken to combat that fog further pollute the environment.

The December-like scenes in March call into question our lifestyles and development models, which have been built at the expense of nature. The changing frequency of western disturbances in the Himalayan regions and the burgeoning concrete networks in the plains are both responsible for this crisis.

We need to appreciate that weather forecasts are no longer limited to rain or sunshine—they are the key to our survival. If we do not take steps towards controlling pollution locally and reducing carbon emissions globally, this disappearance of seasons will plunge our lives into much greater uncertainty. ■



Congress Pledges “New Assam” Time for Change

Photo: Gettyimages



From the floodplains of Dhemaji and Lakhimpur to the tea gardens of Dibrugarh and Tinsukia, from the tribal belts of Kokrajhar and Karbi Anglong to the bustling towns of Barak Valley — a quiet but powerful sentiment is rising across Assam. It is the feeling that despite tall promises and loud claims, everyday life has not

recurring losses, crops destroyed, homes washed away, and livelihoods shattered. While relief announcements are made, long-term flood management remains inadequate. Embankments collapse, erosion eats away land along the Brahmaputra, and families are forced to rebuild their lives repeatedly with little structural

prices. In the tea gardens, workers continue to struggle with low wages, healthcare gaps, and lack of proper housing. Despite being the backbone of Assam’s global tea identity, their living conditions remain far from dignified.

Unemployment has emerged as a defining crisis. In towns like Nagaon, Silchar, and Jorhat, educated youth are preparing for government exams year after year, often without clear recruitment timelines. Many are forced to migrate to cities like Bengaluru, Delhi, and Guwahati in search of work. The promise of local job creation has not translated into meaningful opportunities.

For small traders and local businesses in places like Fancy Bazaar and Silchar market, rising costs and inconsistent economic policies have made survival difficult. Inflation has affected both buyers and sellers. Essential commodities, fuel, and daily expenses have steadily increased, squeezing household budgets.

Land conflicts and eviction drives have added to the anxiety. In several parts of Assam, including areas along the Brahmaputra and forest-adjacent regions, families have faced displacement. While the need for regulation is understood, the lack of transparent processes and rehabilitation plans has created

fear among communities, tribal groups, and long-settled residents.

In the hill districts and Bodoland Territorial Region, there is a growing demand for more inclusive development. Infrastructure gaps, limited healthcare access, and lack of higher education institutions continue to hold back these regions. Many feel that development has remained concentrated in select urban pockets, leaving large parts of Assam behind.

Another concern increasingly voiced by citizens is the centralisation of governance. Decisions affecting local communities are often taken without adequate consultation. Panchayats, local bodies, and community leaders feel sidelined. This disconnection has led to a perception that governance is becoming distant and less responsive.

Across Assam, the question being asked is simple, where is the change that was promised? The answer, many believe, lies in a new direction — one that listens to the people of Majuli facing erosion, the youth of Barak Valley seeking jobs, the tea worker in Upper Assam demanding dignity, and the farmer in Lower Assam struggling to sustain his land.

Assam is not just ready for change — it is demanding it.

A Vision for the Future

Five Pillars for a New Assam

Photo: Gettyimages

The path forward for Assam must be rooted in its realities — its geography, its economy, and most importantly, its people. A renewed vision for the state is built on five key pillars designed to address both immediate concerns and long-term aspirations.

1. Education and Healthcare Transformation

In many government schools across districts like Dhubri, Goalpara, and Karimganj, infrastructure gaps, teacher shortages, and outdated resources continue to affect learning outcomes. Students in rural areas often travel long distances for higher education, while many drop out due to lack of facilities.

Healthcare access remains uneven. While Guwahati has seen expansion in medical infrastructure, districts like Haflong, Chirang, and Hailakandi still face shortages of doctors, specialists, and equipment. During floods, healthcare access becomes even more difficult, with many areas cut off.

The vision focuses on strengthening district hospitals, upgrading primary health centres, ensuring availability of medicines, and improving school infrastructure. The aim is simple quality education and healthcare should not depend on geography.

2. Governance Reform with Employee Inclusion

Government employees, from teachers to field officers, often face challenges due to top-down decision-making and lack of consultation. This affects implementation and morale. A more inclusive governance model seeks to involve employees in decision-making processes, streamline administrative systems, and ensure timely service delivery. Empowering local bodies like gaon panchayats and municipal boards will make governance more responsive and grounded.

3. A Rural-Focused Economy

Assam’s strength lies in its rural economy that comprises of agriculture, fisheries, handloom, and tea. However, farmers in districts like Nalbari and Sonitpur face issues such as lack of irrigation, storage facilities, and access to markets. Floods and erosion further worsen their situation.

The vision includes strengthening farmer cooperatives, improving irrigation, promoting agro-processing industries, and ensuring minimum support for key crops. Special focus is also given to the handloom sector in Sualkuchi and rural artisans across the state.



For tea garden areas, the emphasis is on better wages, healthcare, education, and housing for workers ensuring that growth reaches those who sustain the industry.

4. Law and Order Overhaul

While Assam has seen disturbed stability, concerns remain about fairness and trust in law enforcement. In several instances, people have raised questions about selective actions and lack of accountability.

A transparent and accountable law enforcement system is essential. The focus is on building trust between communities and institutions, ensuring equal treatment under the law, and addressing issues like drug abuse, especially in districts bordering other states and countries.

5. Youth Empowerment

In districts like Cachar, Darrang, and Golaghat, young people are looking for opportunities not just promises. Skill development centres, start-up support, and sports infrastructure remain limited.

The vision aims to create local employment opportunities, promote entrepreneurship, and invest in skill training aligned with market needs. Sports and cultural platforms will be expanded to engage youth positively and reduce social challenges like drug abuse.

These five pillars are not abstract ideas — they are rooted in the everyday experiences of Assam’s people. They represent a roadmap for a state that grows together, not in fragments.

In rural Assam, farmers growing paddy, mustard, and vegetables are grappling with rising input costs and unstable market prices. In the tea gardens, workers continue to struggle with low wages, healthcare gaps, and lack of proper housing. Despite being the backbone of Assam’s global tea identity, their living conditions remain far from dignified.

become easier. For many, it has become more uncertain. Year after year, floods continue to devastate large parts of Assam. Districts like Morigaon, Barpeta, and Cachar face

support. In rural Assam, farmers growing paddy, mustard, and vegetables are grappling with rising input costs and unstable market

Broken Promises The Gap Between Claims and Reality

In recent years, Assam has witnessed a steady stream of announcements of new projects, job promises, infrastructure plans. But across districts, the gap between announcements and actual impact is becoming increasingly evident. Infrastructure projects, including roads, bridges, and urban development, have been highlighted as major achievements. However, in many areas such as interior parts of Barpeta, Karimganj, and Hojai, road conditions remain poor and connectivity issues persist. Flood-damaged infrastructure often takes months, even years, to be restored.

Employment remains a major concern. Recruitment processes have been slow, irregular, and often delayed. Many young aspirants have spent years preparing for government jobs without clarity or timelines. The reliance on contractual hiring has further added to insecurity.

The financial health of the state is another area of concern. Rising debt levels have limited the ability to invest in critical sectors like healthcare, education, and rural development. While spending has increased, the benefits have not been

evenly distributed.

There is also growing concern about the pattern of development. Large projects and contracts often appear concentrated among select players, while small businesses and local entrepreneurs struggle to access opportunities. In markets across Assam, traders frequently speak about declining margins and increasing operational costs.

Flood management remains one of the clearest examples of unmet promises. Despite repeated assurances, long-term solutions such as river management, dredging, and scientific embankment construction have not been implemented effectively. Every year, the same districts face the same devastation.

For tea garden workers, despite policy announcements, improvements in wages, healthcare, and living conditions have been slow and inconsistent. Similarly, tribal areas and remote districts continue to lag behind in development indicators.

The narrative of progress, therefore, is being increasingly questioned. People are not just listening to promises anymore and they are measuring outcomes.

Congress’ Call- People First Governance

Photo: Gettyimages

At a time when many feel unheard, the call for a different model of governance is growing stronger. A model that is rooted in Assam’s diversity, respects its communities, and places people at the centre of every decision.

This approach moves away from centralised decision-making towards a more participatory system. It envisions a structure where local voices from village councils in Majuli to community leaders in Karbi Anglong are actively involved in shaping policies.

A “people-first” model means regular dialogue with farmers, tea workers, youth, traders, and women’s groups. It means listening before deciding, and consulting before implementing.

It also means respecting dissent. In a diverse state like Assam, differences of opinion are natural. Instead of suppressing them, they must be seen as part of a healthy democracy. This openness builds trust and strengthens institutions.

Transparency is another key pillar. Public funds must be used responsibly, and decisions must be open to scrutiny. This ensures that



development reaches those who need it most and not just a select few.

Most importantly, this vision seeks to restore the connection between the government and the people. Governance should not feel distant or imposed; it should feel accessible, responsive, and accountable.

For the people of Assam, the farmer rebuilding after floods, the

youth waiting for an opportunity, the tea worker seeking dignity, the small trader striving to survive this is more than a political choice. It is a choice about the future. A future where Assam’s growth is inclusive, its governance is fair, and its people are at the heart of every decision. The call is clear of a new government and a new Assam built together, with trust, dignity, and hope.

Most importantly, this vision seeks to restore the connection between the government and the people. Governance should not feel distant or imposed; it should feel accessible, responsive, and accountable.

Youth in Crisis

Jobs Lost, Dreams Delayed



Photo: Gettyimages

Assam's economic reality tells a troubling story marked by rising unemployment, shrinking opportunities, and a generation of youth forced to leave home in search of survival. Behind every statistic is a young Assamese whose dreams are being delayed, diverted, or denied altogether.

Unemployment in Assam is no longer just an economic issue it is a full-blown social crisis. Recent data shows that the state's unemployment rate has risen to 3.9%, higher than the national average of 3.2%, showing a structural weakness in job creation.

But the real concern lies deeper in the alarming rise of educated unemployment. According to official estimates, over 21 lakh educated job seekers are currently registered in Assam, highlighting a widening gap between education and employment.

This crisis is particularly acute among youth and women. Urban unemployment stands significantly higher, and young graduates armed with degrees but lacking opportunities are finding it difficult to find meaningful work. The paradox is that as more young people are entering colleges and universities, the economy is failing to absorb them.

One of the core reasons behind this situation is the lack of industrial growth. Assam's economy remains heavily dependent on agriculture and traditional sectors like tea, which,

while vital, have limited capacity to generate new-age employment. Even

factory employment has reportedly declined by nearly 10% in recent

years, reflecting stagnation in industrial expansion.

Experts have repeatedly pointed out that Assam suffers from a low industrial base, forcing job seekers to rely on government employment or migrate elsewhere.

Skill development programs, which were meant to bridge this gap, have also failed to deliver desired results. Many training initiatives are poorly aligned with market needs, leaving youth with certificates but no employable skills. The result is a growing pool of frustrated, underutilized talent.

This is not just an economic failure it is a creature failure. A educated youth risks losing its most valuable asset.

In Assam today, migration is no longer a choice, it has become a compulsion.

Thousands of young men and women are leaving their homes every year, heading to cities like Bengaluru,

Delhi, Mumbai, and even overseas destinations in the Gulf. This silent exodus reflects the lack of opportunities within the state.

Recent reports indicate that tens of thousands are employed in plantations and low-wage sectors in other states, often under difficult conditions.

This migration has deep social and economic consequences. Families are being fragmented, villages are losing their working population, and local economies are weakening. In regions like Barak Valley, closure of industrial development and lack of key industries have accelerated this trend, leading to what many describe as a "brain drain."

The most concerning aspect is that migration is no longer limited to unskilled labour. Even engineers, graduates, and professionals are leaving Assam in search of better prospects. This outflow of talent deprives the state of innovation, entrepreneurship, and long-term growth.

For many families, migration brings economic relief through remittances but at a heavy emotional cost. Parents grow old without their children, communities weaken, and the social fabric begins to fray.

The question that arises is Why should Assam's youth be forced to build other states while their own remains underdeveloped?

Congress' Employment Blueprint

Recognizing the urgency of the crisis, the Congress party has presented a comprehensive employment vision aimed at transforming Assam's economic landscape.

At the heart of this vision is the promise of 5 lakh jobs, focusing not just on quantity but quality and sustainability.

The Congress strategy emphasizes reviving MSMEs (Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises), which are key drivers of employment in any developing economy. By providing easier access to credit, infrastructure, and market linkages, the party aims to empower entrepreneurs and generate decentralized employment.

Another major focus area is agro-based industries. Assam's rich natural resources like tea, bamboo, handloom, fisheries, and agriculture offer immense potential for value addition and job creation. Instead of exporting raw materials, the Congress plan aims to build local industries that can create jobs within the state.

The tea sector, which already employs lakhs of workers, will be

modernized and diversified to generate additional employment opportunities.

A critical component of the blueprint is skill development aligned with local industries. Instead of generic training programs, Congress proposes region-specific skill centres that match industry needs—whether in tourism, agriculture, logistics, or technology.

The party has also promised to build a startup ecosystem for the

Northeast, encouraging young entrepreneurs through incubation centres, funding support, and mentorship programs. This approach aims to shift the narrative from job seekers to job creators.

Importantly, the Congress model focuses on inclusive growth ensuring that women, tribal communities, and marginalized groups are not left behind.

Photo: Gettyimages



Tea Garden Workers Neglected Backbone

No discussion about Assam's economy is complete without acknowledging the tea garden workers the backbone of the state's identity and economy.

Assam produces over 50% of India's tea, and nearly 10 lakh workers depend on this industry for their livelihood.

Yet, despite their immense contribution, tea workers continue to live in conditions marked by poverty, low wages, and limited access to basic services. The daily wage of a tea garden workers has long been a contentious issue. For years, workers have demanded fair wages, arguing that current pay levels do not meet even minimum standards.

Beyond wages, the challenges are deeper—poor housing, inadequate healthcare, lack of quality education, and limited social mobility. Studies have highlighted issues such as low sanitation standards, poor health access, and educational deficits among



Photo: Gettyimages

tea garden communities. The literacy rate among tea garden communities is significantly lower than the state average, especially among women, further perpetuating cycles of poverty.

Despite multiple government schemes, implementation gaps remain wide. Welfare measures often fail to reach those who need them the most.

The Congress has proposed a comprehensive plan for tea workers, including substantial wage revision to ensure dignified living, creation of Tea

Workers' Welfare Fund. Congress is committed to the housing schemes for better living conditions of the people of Assam along with improved healthcare and education infrastructure in tea garden communities. Assam's global reputation deserve a life of dignity and opportunity.

Assam's youth are not asking for opportunity. They want jobs, dignity, and a future in their own land.

Land, Power, and Accountability

"Deshotkoi Mami Dangor Nohoy"

In the heart of Assam, where land is more than just property it is identity, livelihood, and legacy a serious question is now echoing across districts, towns, and villages: who really owns Assam's land, and at what cost to the people?

A recent statewide protest campaign has brought this question into sharp focus. Demonstrations were held across multiple districts from Dibrugarh and Jorhat in Upper Assam to Goalpara and Dhubri in Lower Assam highlighting a growing concern over alleged large-scale land acquisition linked to those in positions of power. What makes this issue particularly significant is not just the scale of the allegations, nearly 12,000 bighas of land, but the deeper implications it holds for governance, transparency, and public trust.

Across Assam, ordinary citizens, farmers, and youth have begun to voice concern over reports suggesting

that vast tracts of land may have been accumulated through the misuse of political influence. The deshotkoi Mami Dangor Nohoy" (No one is bigger than the nation)—resonates deeply in a state where land disputes have historically shaped politics and society.

From Biswanath to Tinsukia, from Sonitpur to Kokrajhar, the spread of protests indicates that this is not an isolated political issue but one that has struck deep into the heart of Assam regions and communities. The participation of citizens in large numbers reflects a shared anxiety that the very system meant to protect public resources may be failing to do so. Land in Assam is not merely an economic asset—it is closely tied to identity, especially for indigenous communities, tea tribes, and farmers. For decades, the state has grappled with challenges such as encroachment, land rights for indigenous populations, and

displacement due to floods and erosion caused by the Brahmaputra.

In such a large-scale land acquisition by those in power raises serious concerns. It creates a perception of inequality where the common citizen struggles for land pattas, while influential individuals are able to accumulate vast holdings.

For the youth of Assam, already facing unemployment and migration pressures, such issues deepening disempowerment. For farmers battling rising input costs and shrinking landholdings, it raises fears about their future. For indigenous communities, over land alienation. Congress has been raising some very important questions -How were such large tracts of land acquired? Were due processes followed? Were land laws and protections for vulnerable communities upheld? Is there a conflict of interest

when those in power are linked to such acquisitions? These are not partisan questions but issues fundamental to democracy. In any functioning democracy, public office must be held to the highest standards of integrity. The perception that power can be used for personal gain erodes trust in institutions and governance.

This issue also fits into a broader narrative that many in Assam are beginning to question whether governance today is becoming increasingly centralized and opaque. Over the past few years, concerns have been raised on various fronts, including land rights, eviction drives, and the allocation of resources.

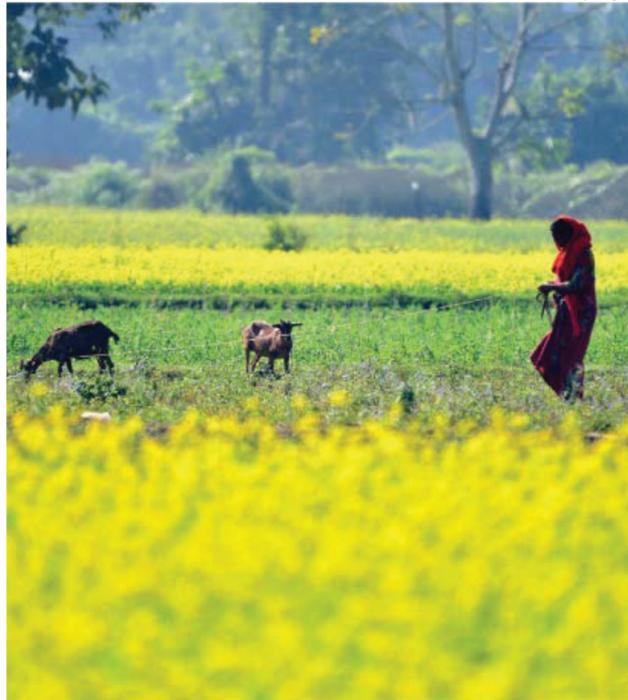
When seen together, these concerns create a pattern that worries citizens, a system where decisions are taken without adequate consultation, where transparency is limited, and where accountability mechanisms appear weak. The land issue, therefore, is not

just about one allegation, it is about the direction in which governance is moving. Trust is the foundation of any government. When people believe that rules are applied equally, that institutions are fair, and that leaders are accountable, governance becomes effective. But when doubts arise, the consequences are far-reaching. The Congress has framed this issue as a fight for the people of Assam—a demand that no individual or family should be above the law. By taking the issue to every district, the party has sought to turn it into a people's movement, rather than limiting it to political discourse. The demand is for a comprehensive, impartial, and time-bound investigation into the allegations. Not just to establish facts, but to restore public confidence. More importantly, the party has emphasized the need for systemic reforms strengthening land records and digitization to prevent manipulation,

ensuring transparency in land transactions involving public officials and protecting the marginalized of indigenous and land rights communities. As Assam approaches another crucial electoral moment, this issue has the potential to shape public discourse in a significant way. Elections are not just about promises—they are about accountability for actions taken in the past. The land controversy has become more than a political issue, it is a test of Assam's democratic values. It is about whether transparency will prevail over opacity, whether accountability will triumph over impunity, and whether the voice of the people will be heard. In a state where every bigha of land carries the weight of history and hope, the demand is simple and just: truth, fairness, and justice. As the slogan from the protests reminds us—no one is bigger than the nation. And in Assam today, that message is resonating louder than ever.

'Save Land, Save Identity' Congress Campaign

Photo: Gettyimages



Committee regarding thousands of bighas of land being controlled by politically connected entities have further amplified public concern. While the government has denied wrongdoing, the lack of transparent investigations has deepened suspicion among the people.

For indigenous communities, land is not just an economic asset—it is the foundation of identity, culture, and history. From the Ahoms and Bodos to the Mishings and Karbis, land represents continuity and belonging. Congress leaders have argued that the current government's policies risk disrupting this delicate balance by prioritizing corporate interests over community rights.

The party has promised a comprehensive land protection framework if voted to power. This includes strengthening existing land laws, preventing illegal transfers, ensuring digitization with transparency, and restoring land rights where injustices have occurred. Congress has also pledged to introduce stricter safeguards against the transfer of tribal and protected lands to non-indigenous entities.

Another key aspect of the Congress campaign is the revival of land tribunals and fast-track mechanisms to resolve disputes. Thousands of land cases remain pending across Assam, leaving families in legal limbo. Congress argues that justice delayed in land matters is justice denied, particularly for vulnerable communities.

Importantly, the campaign is not just about criticism—it is about reclaiming trust. Congress is positioning itself as the protector of Assam's land and identity, promising governance that respects both constitutional provisions and the emotional connection people have with their land.

In a state where history has repeatedly been shaped by movements around land and identity, this issue could once again become the deciding factor. Assam's future cannot be built by weakening the very foundation on which its people stand.

For indigenous communities, land is not just an economic asset—it is the foundation of identity, culture, and history. From the Ahoms and Bodos to the Mishings and Karbis, land represents continuity and belonging.

Jameen, Jati aur Asmita is the Assam's Core Battle and this battle is no longer just political, it is deeply rooted in questions of land, identity, and survival. The Congress has placed this issue at the heart of its campaign with the powerful slogan: "Jameen Bachao, Asmita Bachao." This message is resonating across the Brahmaputra Valley, Barak Valley, and hill regions where people are increasingly anxious about the future of their land and identity. Over the past few years, concerns over land alienation have intensified under the

current Himanta Biswa Sarma-led government. Several reports, protests, and grassroots campaigns have pointed to large-scale land transfers, alleged encroachments, and policy decisions that many believe undermine the rights of indigenous communities. Farmers, tribal groups, and even small landholders are expressing fear that their ancestral lands are no longer secure.

Congress has consistently raised the issue of alleged misuse of power in land acquisition. The recent allegations by the Assam Pradesh Congress

Tribal Anger in BTR Region due to Neglect and Betrayal

Photo: Gettyimages



The Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR), once seen as a symbol of peace after decades of conflict, is today witnessing growing unrest and dissatisfaction. Tribal communities, especially the Bodos, are increasingly raising their voices against what they perceive as neglect and betrayal by the current state government.

At the center of this anger are allegations of large-scale land transfers in tribal areas. Various reports and claims by opposition parties suggest that between 13,000 to 30,000 acres of land in and around the BTR have been earmarked or transferred for corporate and industrial projects. While development is essential, the lack of consultation with local communities has sparked fears of displacement and marginalization.

For many tribal families, land is inseparable from identity and survival. Losing land is not just an economic setback but a cultural and existential crisis. The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution was designed to protect tribal autonomy and land rights in regions like BTR. However, many community leaders argue that these protections are being diluted in practice. Congress has actively taken up these issues, organizing protests

and outreach campaigns in Kokrajhar, Chirang, Baksa, and Udalguri districts. The party has accused the BJP-led government of prioritizing corporate interests over tribal welfare, a charge

emphasizing community-led growth rather than top-down policies. Key proposals include strengthening Autonomous Council powers, ensuring prior consent for land use changes, and

For indigenous communities, land is not just an economic asset—it is the foundation of identity, culture, and history. From the Ahoms and Bodos to the Mishings and Karbis, land represents continuity and belonging.

that resonates with many local residents who feel excluded from decision-making processes. Another major concern in the BTR is unemployment and lack of sustainable development. Despite promises of economic growth, many youth in the region continue to struggle with limited job opportunities. This has created a sense of frustration, particularly among educated young people who feel their aspirations are being ignored.

Congress has promised a renewed focus on tribal development,

increasing investments in education, healthcare, and local industries.

The party has also committed to conducting an independent audit of all land transactions in tribal areas over the past decade. This, they argue, is essential to restore trust and ensure accountability.

The growing anger in BTR is not just about land it is about dignity, representation, and respect. As elections approach, the voices from these regions are becoming louder, demanding answers and accountability from those in power.

Indigenous Communities and Cultural Survival

Assam's rich cultural diversity is one of its greatest strengths. From the Bodos and Karbis to the Mishings, Rabhas, Tiwas, and Tea Tribes, each community contributes to the vibrant mosaic that defines the state. However, there is a growing sense of anxiety among these groups about the survival of their culture, language, and identity.

Rapid urbanization, migration pressures, and policy decisions have all contributed to this concern. Many indigenous languages are facing decline, with younger generations shifting towards more dominant languages for economic reasons. Cultural practices, festivals, and traditional knowledge systems are also under threat.

Land plays a crucial role in this context. Cultural identity is often tied to specific geographies—rivers, forests, and ancestral lands. When these are lost or altered, it directly impacts the cultural fabric of communities.

Congress has highlighted these concerns in its campaign, promising a comprehensive approach to cultural preservation. This includes promoting indigenous languages in education, supporting cultural institutions, and ensuring

representation of all communities in governance. The party has also emphasized the need for stronger autonomy mechanisms. Autonomous councils must be empowered not just administratively but also financially, enabling them to address local issues effectively.

Another key promise is the protection of traditional land rights. Congress has argued that without securing land, efforts to preserve culture will remain incomplete. Policies must therefore integrate land, culture, and development in a holistic manner.

Importantly, Congress has positioned itself as a party that values inclusivity and diversity. In contrast, it has accused the current government of pursuing policies that create divisions and marginalize smaller communities. The survival of Assam's indigenous cultures is not just a regional issue, it is a national concern. These cultures represent centuries of history, knowledge, and resilience. Protecting them is essential for preserving the identity of Assam itself.

As voters prepare to make their choice, the stakes could not be higher. The question is not just about governance it is about the kind of Assam people want to leave for future generations.

CAA-NRC Flawed and Inconsistent

Few issues have shaken Assam's socio-political landscape as deeply as the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC). These policies have not only sparked protests but have also created a deep trust deficit between the government and the people.

Assam has a unique historical context when it comes to citizenship and migration. The Assam Accord of 1985 laid down a clear framework for identifying and addressing illegal immigration. However, many believe that the implementation of CAA contradicts this agreement by offering citizenship based on religious criteria, thereby altering the demographic balance.

The protests against CAA in Assam were among the most intense in the country. Students, artists, civil society groups, and ordinary citizens took to the streets, expressing fear that the law would dilute Assamese identity. The response of the government, including arrests and restrictions, further widened the gap between the state and its people.

The NRC process, which was meant to bring clarity, has instead left many in uncertainty. Over 19 lakh people were excluded from the final list, including genuine citizens who now face an uncertain future. At the same time, concerns remain that the process was flawed and inconsistent. Congress has taken a clear stand



Photo: Gettyimages

on these issues, promising to protect the constitutional and cultural rights of the people of Assam. The party has opposed the implementation of CAA in the state and stood for a fair, transparent, and error-free NRC process.

Importantly, Congress has emphasized the need for humane solutions. The party argues that citizenship issues cannot be addressed through fear and division. Instead, there must be a balanced approach that respects both national security and human rights.

The trust deficit created by CAA and NRC is not just a political issue—it is a social challenge that affects families, communities, and the future of the state. Congress is positioning itself as the voice of reason, advocating policies that unite rather than divide.

Unanswered Questions Congress Demands Justice for Zubeen Garg

The untimely demise of Assam's cultural icon Zubeen Garg on September 19, 2025, in Singapore sent shockwaves across the state and among Assamese communities worldwide. Known not just for his music but for his deep emotional connection with the people of Assam, his passing has left a void that transcends art and culture. However, the role of Himanta Sarma in the investigation following his death has remained questionable.

The Congress, has strongly criticised the handling of the probe by the state government headed by Himanta Biswa Sarma. Congress has alleged that the investigation has been "mishandled" and that the Special Investigation Team (SIT) constituted to examine the circumstances surrounding Garg's death failed to focus on the "main accused" or key aspects of the case. A central concern raised by Congress has been the pace and direction of the probe. According to Congress, while the matter is now in the court but since the formation of the SIT, there was little visible progress. This, the party argues, has only deepened public suspicion and anxiety, particularly among fans and well-wishers who are seeking clarity and closure.

The Congress has also alleged that the investigation may be influenced by political considerations. Congress has been raising the demand for straightforward investigation with accountability. Congress has called for a free, fair,



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and transparent investigation. Congress emphasised that justice must not only be done but must also be seen to be done for the sake of Zubeen Garg's family, his countless fans, and the people of Assam who continue to demand answers. The death of Zubeen Garg is not just a personal tragedy it is a moment of collective grief for Assam. But as the investigation continues, it has also become a test of institutional credibility. Congress maintains that only a transparent, unbiased, and time-bound probe can restore public confidence.

In a state where cultural figures like Zubeen Garg hold immense emotional significance, the demand for truth is not merely political it is deeply personal. Congress has reiterated that it will continue to press for accountability, ensuring that the legacy of one of Assam's most beloved voices is honoured with justice and integrity.

Declining Administrative Morale of Assam

In a state where governance efficiency depends heavily on a responsive and empowered administrative machinery, concerns are increasingly being raised about declining morale within Assam's government services. Over the past few years, multiple stakeholders including employee associations, retired bureaucrats, and policy observers—have pointed to a growing sense of centralisation and reduced autonomy in decision-making under the government led by Himanta Biswa Sarma.

A key issue flagged is the concentration of authority at the top, with decisions increasingly routed through a limited circle. Critics argue that this has led to a system where district-level officers and departmental heads often function with constrained independence. This not only delays implementation but also weakens accountability at the grassroots level, where governance truly impacts citizens.

Employee bodies in sectors such as education, health, and public works have periodically expressed concerns

The Congress has positioned this issue as central to its governance agenda. It argues that Assam needs a shift from command-style administration to participatory governance.

over service conditions, transfers, and lack of institutional consultation. Teachers' associations, for instance, have highlighted administrative bottlenecks and postings, while health workers have raised issues about uneven workload distribution and infrastructure gaps especially in rural areas.

Another dimension of the problem is the perceived sidelining of experienced officials. Governance, by its nature, requires

institutional memory and continuity. However, frequent reshuffling and top-down directives have, according to critics, disrupted this balance. The result is a system that appears efficient in announcements but struggles with consistent delivery on the ground.

The Congress has positioned this issue as central to its governance agenda. It argues that Assam needs a shift from command-style administration to participatory governance. The party has promised to restore institutional processes, ensure regular consultations with employee bodies, and empower local administrations to take context-specific decisions.

Congress leaders have emphasized that governance must be inclusive not just politically, but administratively. They propose mechanisms such as departmental review councils, transparent policies and decentralised planning at district and block levels.

At its core, the debate is about trust between the government and its own machinery. Without motivated and empowered administrators, even the best policies risk faltering. As Assam heads toward elections, the question remains whether the current model of governance can sustain long-term efficiency or whether course correction is needed.

Democracy Under Doubt: Congress Flags Deep Flaws in Assam's Electoral Revision Process

Photo: GettyImage

As Assam prepares for a crucial Assembly election, serious questions have emerged over the integrity of the electoral roll revision process. Across both the state and national levels, the Congress has raised sustained concerns regarding the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) and related electoral roll updates, alleging that procedural lapses and lack of transparency could undermine the very foundation of free and fair elections.

At the heart of the issue lies the draft electoral rolls published after the revision exercise, an exercise meant to ensure accuracy, inclusivity, and credibility. Instead, what has surfaced, according to Congress, is a pattern of discrepancies that demand urgent scrutiny.

A Process Under Question

The electoral roll revision is a constitutionally mandated exercise carried out under the supervision of the Election Commission to add eligible voters and remove ineligible entries. Election Commission of India has the authority to conduct such revisions under the Representation of the People Act.

However, Congress has the issue that the process in Assam deviates from the principles of transparency and accountability that such an exercise demands. The party questioned the Commission, demanding discrepancies to be thoroughly verified.

Allegations of "Unknown" and Unverified Voters

One of the most serious concerns flagged is the alleged inclusion of "unknown" and unauthorised voters in the electoral rolls. According to reports and documented complaints, instances have emerged where individuals were added to households without the knowledge of actual residents.

In specific cases cited in official representations, multiple individuals were reportedly enrolled at residential addresses without the consent or awareness of the families living there. There have also been instances of voter entries linked to non-existent households raising fundamental questions about verification protocols.

Congress has argued that such lapses are not minor clerical errors but indicators of systemic weaknesses that could compromise the integrity of the electoral process.

"Temporary Voters" and Questions of Legitimacy

Another major issue raised is the alleged



Congress has argued that such lapses are not minor clerical errors but indicators of systemic weaknesses that could compromise the integrity of the electoral process.

inclusion of "temporary voters" or individuals from outside the state in the draft rolls. Congress has described this as a potential attempt to influence electoral outcomes, warning that such practices could distort the democratic mandate.

These concerns are particularly sensitive in Assam, where questions of identity, citizenship, and voter legitimacy have historically shaped political discourse.

Any perceived irregularity in voter inclusion carries deep socio-political implications.

Deletions and Disenfranchisement Fears

Alongside concerns over inclusion, Congress has also flagged large-scale deletions from the voter list.

The party has questioned the criteria and transparency behind these deletions, arguing that affected citizens may not have been given adequate opportunity to challenge or correct the changes.

A key procedural concern raised by Congress relates to the limited scope for objections and corrections in the draft rolls. According to the party, the published draft lacks sufficient detail and clarity.

National-Level Concerns on Electoral Integrity

The issue has not remained confined to Assam. At the national level, Congress has repeatedly raised broader concerns about electoral roll revisions and alleged manipulation. It has pointed to patterns observed in multiple states, where opposition

parties have flagged irregularities in the SIR process.

These concerns echo wider debates around electoral transparency, including allegations that technological safeguards and verification mechanisms may not have been uniformly applied, potentially increasing the risk of errors or manipulation.

By linking the Assam issue to a broader national pattern, Congress has sought to frame the controversy as not just a regional administrative lapse, but a systemic challenge to democratic processes.

A Test for Democratic Institutions

The controversy surrounding the SIR process in Assam approaches a critical juncture. With elections approaching, the credibility of the voter list will play a decisive role in shaping public trust.

For Congress, the issue is not merely political but national in pattern, Congress has sought to frame the controversy as not just a regional administrative lapse, but a systemic challenge to democratic processes. The responsibility of institutions to safeguard that right, Congress has reiterated that electoral integrity is non-negotiable.

Law & Order – Assam Under Selective Justice?

Law and order is often seen as the most immediate measure of governance. In Assam, the issue has become increasingly political, with the Congress alleging a pattern of "selective justice" in policing and enforcement under the present administration.

While official data points to efforts in curbing crime and improving surveillance, opposition leaders argue that the application of law appears uneven. Instances where political activists, student leaders, or dissenting voices face swift action have been contrasted with what Congress describes as slower or softer responses in cases involving individuals perceived to be close to the ruling establishment.

The Congress has raised concerns over the use of legal provisions during protests and public demonstrations. Assam has a long tradition of civic engagement, from student movements to cultural activism. However, recent years have seen tighter restrictions and quicker police interventions in certain cases, leading to debates over the balance between maintaining order and protecting democratic rights.

Another concern is public safety, particularly in urban centres like Guwahati. Reports of theft, cybercrime,



Photo: GettyImages

and violence against women continue to surface, reflecting the evolving nature of crime in a rapidly changing state. While the government has highlighted technological upgrades and policing initiatives, these measures need to be accompanied by systemic reforms and greater accountability.

Congress has proposed a comprehensive police reform roadmap aimed at restoring public trust. This includes depoliticising the police force, strengthening community policing, and ensuring time-bound investigations. The party has also stressed the need for

independent oversight mechanisms to review sensitive cases and prevent misuse of authority.

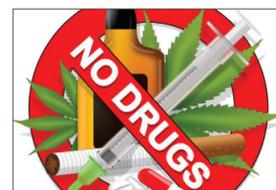
Importantly, Congress leaders argue that law enforcement must not only be strong but also fair. The perception of bias can erode public confidence and deepen social divisions. In a diverse state like Assam, maintaining neutrality in policing is essential for harmony and stability. The debate over law and order, therefore, goes beyond crime statistics. It is about the credibility of institutions and the assurance that justice will be delivered without fear or favour.

Assam Needs Freedom from Drug Menace and Youth Crisis

One of the most pressing challenges facing Assam today is the growing menace of drug abuse, particularly among the youth. Due to its geographical location and proximity to international borders and Northeast corridors, the state has become vulnerable to trafficking networks.

Over the past few years, there have been numerous seizures of narcotics by law enforcement agencies, indicating both increased vigilance and the scale of the problem. However, experts caution that seizures alone do not capture the full extent of the crisis. Behind the numbers lies a deeper social issue of rising addiction, lack of awareness, and limited rehabilitation infrastructure.

Youth organisations and civil society groups have repeatedly highlighted the impact of drug abuse on families and communities. In several districts, addiction has emerged as a major concern, affecting education, employment, and social stability. The linkage between



drug abuse and substance abuse is also frequently cited, as frustrated and idle youth become more vulnerable to such influences.

The Congress has acknowledged the seriousness of the issue and proposed a multi-pronged strategy. While supporting strict enforcement against trafficking networks, the party has emphasised that policing alone cannot solve the problem. Rehabilitation, awareness, and prevention must form the core of any long-term solution.

Congress' plan includes expanding de-addiction centres across districts, integrating mental health services into primary healthcare, and launching statewide awareness campaigns targeting schools and colleges. The party has also proposed promoting sports

and youth engagement programmes as constructive alternatives.

Another key aspect is regional coordination. Given the cross-border nature of drug trafficking, Congress has called for stronger collaboration with neighbouring states and agencies. Intelligence sharing and joint operations, it argues, are essential to dismantle organised networks.

At a broader level, the drug crisis reflects the challenges facing Assam's youth—limited opportunities, social pressures, and a rapidly changing environment. Addressing these underlying issues is as important as tackling the supply chain.

As elections approach, the question is not whether the problem exists—it clearly does—but whether the response is comprehensive enough. Congress has sought to frame the issue as a test of governance priorities, urging a shift from reactive measures to sustained, community-driven solutions.

Misuse of Power and Constitutional Distress for Assam

Evictions & Humanitarian Concerns Development or Displacement?

The government led by CM Himanta Biswa Sarma reflects a pattern of excessive centralisation, misuse of authority, and growing social polarisation. One of the most politically sensitive issues in Assam today is the state government's eviction drive targeting alleged encroachments on government, forest, and religious lands. The ruling alliance has consistently maintained that these drives are necessary to reclaim public land, protect ecological zones, and restore the sanctity of satras and temples.

However, the Congress, has raised serious concerns over the manner and impact of these evictions. According to party leaders, a significant number of those displaced belong to economically vulnerable communities, many of whom have lived on the land for decades without formal documentation.

Congress has alleged that the eviction drives have disproportionately affected Muslims, turning what should be an administrative exercise into a politically charged issue. The party argues that while encroachment is a legitimate concern, the process must be humane, transparent, and non-discriminatory.

Ground reports from several districts have highlighted instances where families were rendered homeless overnight, with limited access to rehabilitation or compensation. Livelihoods dependent on agriculture and small businesses have also been disrupted, intensifying economic distress.

The Congress has framed the issue as a humanitarian crisis rather than merely a legal one. It has promised to implement a balanced land policy that combines protection of public land with rehabilitation and legal support for vulnerable families. The party insists that justice must prioritise dignity and justice, not just enforcement.



Photo: Gettyimages

Crackdown on Child Marriage- Reform or Selective Action?

The Assam government's crackdown on child marriage has been one of its most high-profile campaigns, with thousands of arrests made under laws including the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act. The ruling dispensation has presented this as a bold step to eliminate a deeply entrenched social evil.

While acknowledging the seriousness of child marriage, the Congress has questioned the approach adopted by the government. Citing reports opposition leaders have alleged that the crackdown has disproportionately impacted certain communities, particularly Muslims.

Congress leaders argue that social reform cannot be achieved through what they describe as "selective enforcement" and large-scale arrests alone. They point out that child marriage is a socio-economic issue linked to poverty, lack of education, and limited awareness, requiring long-term interventions.

indigenous communities remain unfulfilled.

Two major aspects of this debate the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) continue to generate political and social tensions. While the ruling alliance has defended the CAA and downplayed its impact, the opposition maintains that the law has deepened anxieties over identity and citizenship.

Congress has also accused the government of using the issue of infiltration to fuel polarisation during elections. According to the party, instead of focusing on administrative solutions and consensus-building, the narrative is often framed in a way that sharpens divisions between communities.

The party has reiterated its commitment to protecting the rights and identity of indigenous Assamese people while ensuring that the process remains fair, transparent, and free from political manipulation. It has called for a balanced approach that addresses genuine concerns without creating fear or mistrust among communities.

Development vs Displacement, Who Benefits?

The Assam government has been claiming a series of development initiatives, including investments in infrastructure, industrial projects, and business summits. Projects in roads, railways, airports, and waterways are being showcased as evidence of rapid progress.

The Congress has questioned the distribution and impact of this development. Congress leaders argue that growth has been concentrated in select areas, with limited benefits reaching rural and marginalised communities.

A key concern raised by the party is land acquisition for industrial and infrastructure projects. Congress has

alleged that in several cases, indigenous communities have lost land without adequate compensation or rehabilitation, leading to displacement and economic uncertainty.

The party has also pointed out that headline investments do not automatically translate into local employment. While the government claims to have created over 1.6 lakh jobs, Congress has called for greater transparency in recruitment data and highlighted ongoing concerns about unemployment among educated youth.

On welfare schemes, particularly those targeting women, the government has failed to deliver its promise. Congress, while acknowledging the importance of such initiatives, has raised concerns that implementation gaps and uneven distribution have limited their effectiveness.

The party has also raised concerns about crimes against women, stating that financial assistance alone cannot substitute for safety and justice. It has promised a more integrated approach combining welfare, security, and empowerment.

Tea Garden Workers and Changing Political Loyalties

Tea garden workers, a historically significant voting bloc, remain central to Assam's electoral politics. Congress leaders highlight that many structural issues such as low wages, healthcare access, and education remain inadequately addressed for the Tea garden workers.

The party has pledged to revisit wage structures, improve living conditions, and ensure that welfare schemes translate into tangible improvements on the ground. It has also emphasised the need to restore trust with communities that feel economically vulnerable despite policy announcements.

Congress has also accused the government of using the issue of infiltration to fuel polarisation during elections. According to the party, instead of focusing on administrative solutions and consensus-building, the narrative is often framed in a way that sharpens divisions between communities.

Polarisation-The Underlying Political Strategy?

Photo: Gettyimages



Across these issues evictions, immigration, law enforcement, and social reforms Congress has consistently raised the question of polarisation. The party alleges that the current political narrative in Assam is increasingly driven by identity-based divisions rather than inclusive development.

According to Congress, governance should unite rather than divide. It has accused the ruling establishment of framing issues in ways that deepen social fault lines, particularly along religious and ethnic lines.

The party has positioned itself as an advocate for inclusive politics,

emphasising harmony, constitutional values, and equal treatment for all communities. It argues that long-term stability and progress in Assam depend on bridging divides rather than amplifying them.

As Assam approaches the elections, the stakes go beyond political power. The debates around eviction, identity, justice, and development reflect deeper questions about the state's direction.

The government led by Himanta Biswa Sarma has failed to keep its promises of a welfare state for Assam. The Congress, has been raising the issues of centralisation, selective enforcement, and growing polarisation by the government in Assam.

Time to Rebuild Assam with Congress Vision of 'Naya Assam'

Photo: Gettyimages



After years of governance marked by allegations of corruption, unfulfilled promises, and deepening social divisions, the call for change is growing stronger. The Congress party has stepped forward with a clear message that Assam deserves better, and the time has come to build a "Naya Assam" rooted in justice, development, and unity.

Over the past few months, Congress has sharpened its campaign with a fact-based critique of the present government. In a major political move, the party released a 20-point chargesheet accusing the current administration of "rampant corruption" and systematic misgovernance. These allegations are not isolated political claims but are part of a larger narrative emerging from multiple incidents, controversies, and governance failures that have raised serious concerns among the people.

From questions surrounding alleged past scams to recent administrative irregularities, the credibility of the ruling leadership has repeatedly come under scrutiny. Even historically, the leadership has faced allegations linked to financial irregularities such as the Saradha chit fund case and other controversies, which continue to cast a shadow over its claims of clean governance. Congress leaders, in their press briefings and public outreach,

have consistently argued that such patterns reflect a deeper systemic problem rather than isolated lapses.

At the same time, governance failures on the ground have further amplified public dissatisfaction. The tragic illegal coal mining incident in 2025, which exposed the continued existence of banned rat-hole mining in the state, raised serious questions about regulatory failure and administrative accountability. Congress has pointed to such incidents as evidence that despite tall claims, enforcement remains weak and governance priorities misplaced.

Equally significant is the growing perception that the present government has relied heavily on polarisation rather

than performance. Political observers note that identity-based rhetoric and divisive narratives have been strategically used to deflect attention from core governance issues like unemployment, economic stagnation, and social welfare gaps. Congress, while carefully navigating Assam's sensitive socio-political fabric, has consistently highlighted the need to shift focus back to development, harmony, and inclusive growth.

The issue of unfulfilled promises has also become central to the electoral discourse. As the Congress campaign formally kicked off in key constituencies, party leaders directly accused the ruling establishment of failing to deliver on its development

commitments over the past decade. From job creation to infrastructure, from farmer welfare to youth opportunities the gap between promises and reality has become a recurring theme in Congress' outreach.

Through grassroots campaigns, public meetings, and coordinated national and state-level interventions, Congress is presenting a roadmap for rebuilding Assam.

"Naya Assam" is a vision that seeks to restore trust in governance while addressing the real issues faced by the people. This includes creating sustainable employment opportunities for youth, ensuring fair land and identity rights, strengthening public healthcare and education, and empowering women and marginalised communities. It also emphasises transparent governance, accountability, and the rule of law as non-negotiable principles.

Congress leaders have repeatedly underlined that Assam's future cannot be built on fear, division, or empty slogans. Instead, it requires a government that listens, delivers, and unites. As voters prepare to make their choice, the contrast could not be sharper. On one side stands a government facing serious allegations and criticism over its track record and on the other, a Congress promising renewal, accountability, and inclusive progress for a "New Assam".

For Iran to win, the US does not have to lose

It only has to choose a different course, writes **Aakar Patel**

I want Iran to win. What does 'win' mean? Iran defines it in the following way: the United States must lift its decades-old sanctions; it must dismantle the military bases in the Arab states; Israel must end its occupation of Lebanon; and Iran must be compensated for the damage it has suffered over the years and in this war. Though more than a thousand Iranians have already died in American and Israeli bombardment, and many more may die, securing these outcomes would amount, in Iran's view, to total victory.

Why do I want Iran to win? At the most basic level, it is the underdog in a confrontation with two nuclear-armed opponents, Israel and the United States. It is militarily weaker, yes, but not feeble, as the world has witnessed since 28 February. It has shown a level of resolve that many other states might not. Another instinctive reason for supporting Iran is that it is, like us, a nation that feels it has been trampled on by what is called the West. I feel solidarity with it for this reason.

At a deeper level, I see Israel and the



Photo: Getty Images

Iran is entitled to demand compensation for losses—running into hundreds of billions of dollars—in a war it didn't start or provoke

The US runs an empire in all but name. Its military shouldn't threaten the world but focus on its own homeland. Iran has begun to force this conversation

United States as colonising powers imposing themselves brutally on a region that does not want them. Their actions, therefore, should be resisted. American sanctions on Iran isolate it from the global banking system, making trade with the world difficult. They are designed not only to weaken the Iranian state but also to keep ordinary Iranians poor.

These are not United Nations sanctions but unilateral measures imposed by the United States, which uses its economic might to pressure countries it dislikes,

including Venezuela and Cuba. Iran's demand that such sanctions be lifted is therefore just; for that to happen, Iran must prevail.

The United States maintains military bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, the UAE, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Why does it need such an extensive presence of soldiers and weaponry in the region? In practice, the United States runs an empire in all but name. Its military should not threaten the world but focus on its own homeland. Iran, through this conflict, has begun forcing

that conversation.

Today Israel resembles what South Africa was 40 years ago, arguably even worse. It is described by many human rights organisations—including some within Israel itself—as an apartheid state, controlling millions of people who have neither a vote nor equal rights. It has used overwhelming military power, backed by extensive American funding and arms, to dominate West Asia. An Iranian victory, in this argument, could help change that dynamic.

Iran has suffered economic losses estimated at hundreds of billions of dollars over the years because of sanctions, and it has been further harmed by this war. Iran is entitled to compensation from the United States and its allies. These are the reasons I want Iran to win.

Why do I think such an outcome is possible, perhaps even likely? Because Iran appears to retain significant leverage in the conflict. The United States and Israel can inflict devastating punishment, and they have done so, targeting infrastructure and killing civilians. They have assassinated Iranian leaders and may attempt to eliminate more. Yet the primary objective of regime change has not been achieved. The Islamic Republic remains intact.

Iran's response has been narrow but strategic: it has sought to disrupt the movement of oil, gas and other supplies through key maritime routes in West Asia. Its influence over these waters rests both on the force it can deploy and on the threat of force, which has deterred commercial shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. At the same time, Iran's own oil exports continue. It also retains the capacity to target American bases and the countries hosting them.

These factors matter because control over energy flows affects the global economy. As long as US President Donald Trump cannot guarantee safe passage for shipping in and out of the Persian Gulf, the price of crude oil and gas will likely continue to rise, as has already happened since the conflict began. Consumers in the United States are paying more for petrol and diesel, and costs will likely rise further if the war continues. Unfortunately, the global economy is also exposed to these pressures.

So far, much of the world has not openly pressed the United States and Israel to end the conflict. One explanation is that many countries fear confronting them directly. That imbalance of power is another reason I want Iran to win.

From this point, the United States will have to take significant steps to alter the trajectory of the conflict, which currently appears to favour Iran's strategic aims. Military escalation alone has not delivered regime change. A negotiated compromise—one that includes guarantees against future attacks and the lifting of sanctions—may be the most realistic path to ending the violence.

I want Iran to win. For that to happen, the United States does not necessarily have to lose. It only has to choose a different course. ■

Views are personal

The world according to Manmohan Singh

Edited excerpts of the inaugural Manmohan Singh Memorial Lecture by **Dr Angela Merkel**, former German chancellor, in New Delhi on 26 February

What interest can there be today in my speech in honour of Dr Manmohan Singh? After all, he became Prime Minister of India back in 2004, was in office till 2014, more than 11 years ago now, and I am a former Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany who ended her active political career more than four years ago. Why did I nonetheless find it appealing and rewarding to accept Upinder Singh's invitation on behalf of the Manmohan Singh Trust?

First and foremost: it was a great pleasure to work with Manmohan Singh for almost 10 years.

Manmohan Singh was a very special personality. I felt this immediately in our first encounter. I think everyone who knew him felt something similar: he could captivate people, even though he did not appear dominant in either his demeanour or his speech. He was more than 20 years older. We met for the first time in April 2006 in Germany for the opening of the Hannover Messe, the world's largest industrial fair at the time, at which India was invited as the partner country and Indian companies could thus present themselves to the global public.

What impressed me about Manmohan Singh was his alert and curious gaze, which radiated experience and openness in equal measure. He seemed both composed (*'in sich ruhend'*) and gentle as well as determined. As the first Prime Minister of India who was not a Hindu and belonged to the Sikh minority, he embodied the pride of a nation that seeks its equal in religious, ethnic and geographical diversity. He did this without losing many words over it. He radiated authority without seeming intimidating and gave me the courage to ask questions and conduct open conversations.

In our conversations, he pointed out again and again, not reproachfully but firmly, the reservations emerging countries like India have about rich industrialised nations, including Germany. From then on, I engaged more closely with the conditions in emerging countries, including India, and the challenges these countries faced. In my political memoir, I describe how my view of the world sharpened through conversations such as those I had with Manmohan Singh.

On my desk in the Chancellery stood a globe, which served as geographical orientation during my phone calls with heads of government. At some point, I began to think about the difference between a globe and a map. In doing so, it became

clear to me that my worldview, like many other Europeans', was Eurocentric. On a globe, the distance from every place in the world to the centre of the globe is the same; no place is highlighted. In a world map, there is a centre and there are margins. Where the centre lies is arbitrarily determined. I grew up with maps where the second smallest continent on earth, Europe, is always at the centre. This shaped my thinking from childhood. It became clear to me much later that Europe is not the nave of the world. But what for me was a late insight was for Manmohan Singh a truism from childhood.

The world has changed dramatically since the time Manmohan Singh was prime minister. The economic and political weight of the world has shifted from the G7 industrialised nations to emerging countries symbolised by the BRICS group. The shift was on the cards even during our time in office. What weighs more heavily today is that seemingly unshakable certainties have in recent years been shaken. Let me name three:

In Europe, the principle of the territorial integrity of states was violated by Russia's attack on Ukraine, throwing into turmoil the order established after World War II. The right to territorial integrity and the sovereignty of every member of the United Nations, enshrined in the UN Charter, was trampled, underfoot.

Multilateralism is under pressure. The UN under President Donald Trump is leaving or weakening international organisations—WHO, WTO, the Paris Climate Agreement. They openly call into question the role of the UN and take unilateral action. The previous order of cooperation is being replaced by an order where, increasingly, the might of the strong will prevail over the strength of the law.

Add to this newer possibilities, courtesy social media and AI, which are capable of turning truths into lies and lies into truths. This has grave effects on our democracies and our coexistence in freedom.

Given these developments, we must wonder what principles should govern lives in the future—to coexist with other groups in society, in the education of children, in professional life. Also, whether it's still worthwhile to commit oneself to democratic rules.

What does all this have to do with Manmohan Singh? Well, I believe that his work can re-orient us.

houses of the US Congress. "The real test of a democracy," he said, "is not what is said in the Constitution but how it functions on the ground." The indispensable features of a democracy, he said, with particular reference to India, are: free and fair elections on the watch of an independent Election Commission; an independent judiciary as guarantor of the rule of law and defender of the Constitution; a fearless press; the protection of minorities; the space for civil society organisations to work unhindered. Each of these, he said, was equally important for a functioning democracy.

What applied then applies even more today. Democracy is under pressure, certainly in Germany. It's now up to individuals to make no compromises with what we regard as essential to (democratic) order. We must be prepared to take a stance publicly, to not back away from hate and incitement on the internet or from controversial discussions. On this will depend whether we can continue to live in freedom.

We can no longer take the democratic order as an unshakable truth, as a given.

Whatever important countries on our planet do, we must re-commit ourselves to multilateral cooperation. Manmohan Singh underlined this in various UNGA speeches. In one of these, in September 2013, he said member states are best served when they adhere to the letter and spirit of the UN charter. By which he meant striving for the broadest possible consensus of the international community and, in doing so,

"He [MMS] pointed out, not reproachfully but firmly, the reservations emerging countries like India have about rich industrialised nations"



Manmohan Singh with Angela Merkel in 2007

balancing fairly the needs and responsibilities of nations in different stages of development.

Global challenges such as man-made climate change and the protection of biodiversity imperatively require collective action by the world community. India and Germany are both signatories to the Paris Climate Agreement, and to the principle of the common but differentiated responsibility of various states. The latter principle was particularly important to Manmohan Singh as prime minister of an emerging country, but in underlining this, he was speaking for all developing countries. We agreed that a life of peace and security was possible only if growth was inclusive.

On the challenges of globalisation, manifest especially after the financial crisis of 2008—when economic recession hit industrialised countries and caused economic upheaval in emerging economies as well—[MMS] believed that difficulties can only be overcome with a cooperative approach, not a confrontational one.

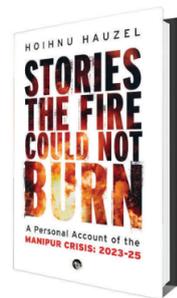
Today, as protectionist trade practices hinder the growth of the world economy, his warnings are of great importance—for it is the poorest countries and the poorest in the emerging countries that suffer the most.

Finally, if technological developments are fundamentally changing life everywhere, then these technologies must also be subject to multilateral agreements and regulations. This applies equally to the protection of personal and economic data, to the devolution of responsibilities in social media and to the regulation of the expanding sphere of AI. It may seem utopian in the present circumstances—when leaders in the field are either setting their own rules (China) or preventing any regulation (the US)—but multilateral cooperation is necessary in these areas as well.

In view of the challenges our societies face in a changing world, I think Manmohan Singh's maxims and his political work can still be a guiding light and inspiration. ■

BOOK EXTRACT

'Silenced, scapegoated and scarred'



Title **Stories the Fire Could Not Burn**
Author **Hoihnu Hauzel**
Publisher **Speaking Tiger**
Price **Rs 499 (paperback)**

Words often betray us when we need them most. They falter in the face of grief, lose their strength when asked to hold pain, and remain powerless before the scale of violence some communities are made to endure. No sentence, no matter how carefully crafted, can truly carry the weight of a people's suffering. They cannot resurrect the dead, nor can they console the displaced or erase the nightmares of the violated.

The events that have occurred in Manipur beginning on 3 May 2023 are more than a crisis. It is a wound that refuses to close—one that language alone cannot mend.

And yet, we must try. This book is my attempt—not as a historian or a journalist, but as a witness—to speak of the unbearable silence that has followed the storm. It is not a scholarly work. It does not pretend to be neutral. It is a personal account, rooted in lived experience: in the voices of my family, my friends and a community that has been repeatedly silenced, scapegoated and scarred.

[...]

I write this for the thousands who were displaced—those who fled with nothing but the clothes on their backs, and those who did not flee in time. I write for those who, despite having lost everything, still insist on the right to return, to rebuild, to be heard.

I think of the night we fled—how silence hung heavier than the air, how we carried not just our belongings but our memories, our dead, our dread. That night, we didn't just leave behind homes. We left behind parts of ourselves we may never be able to reclaim.

And still, there are those whose suffering eclipses even our flight.

[...]

Late at night on 11 April 2023, a loud knock shook Pastor Nengzahau V. Haupi and his family out of their sleep. 'Hou gat lo, hou gat lo.' Get up, get up. It was 2 a.m. 'Thok oh, thok ho' Come out, come out, the voices demanded. There was a group of men at the door confiscating their phones and asking them to vacate their house.

Nengzahau V. Haupi, fifty-four, had been serving as a pastor at the Evangelical Baptist Church in Tribal Colony, a colony in the West of Imphal, sandwiched by other colonies like Angom Colony, Soibam Leikai, Sanjenthong, Wahengbam Colony, Zomi Villa. Pastor Haupi had come to this church after dedicating twenty years in the Evangelical Baptist Convention Church in the interiors of Manipur. Tribal Colony is where

I think of the night we fled—how we carried not just our belongings but our memories, our dead, our dread

Photos: Getty Images



'The events that have occurred in Manipur beginning on 3 May 2023 are more than a crisis. It is a wound that refuses to close.'



the Kuki-Zomi/Mizo community had lived for decades. The land on which it stood had long been considered a marshy, uninhabitable area and was believed to have come into being in the late 1960s and early 1970s, developed by the government—possibly under the leadership of R.K. Dorendra or Yangmaso Saiza, both of whom later served as Chief Ministers of Manipur. The colony was set up on government land as transit quarters for hill government employees posted in the valley, a small but important effort to bridge the hills and the plains back then.

The church was established in 1974, the year I was born. From a small mud structure, it had evolved into a pucca building through the contributions and efforts of the Kuki-Zomi/Mizo community living around it. This was where the community residing in the vicinity came together. A sense of kinship pervaded the space; after all the community had nurtured the church like a baby, building and nourishing it brick by brick.

[...]

This particular church was

"They stood and watched as the bulldozer moved in. Their house and the church fell quickly under the machine's steady force"

constructed in 1974, long before the Supreme Court's 2009 directive (in *Union of India vs. State of Gujarat and Others*, after which the state government, in 2010, issued a notification prohibiting unauthorised construction of religious structures in streets, parks or other public spaces), and had stood peacefully for decades as part of the social and spiritual fabric of the locality. The demolition of such a long-established place of worship appeared difficult to reconcile with the intent of the government's own notification, which expressly allowed for relocation or regularisation in suitable cases.

[...]

'Hou gat lo, hou gat lo.'

A JCB was roaring outside, demolishing the church.

The family was given a fleeting five minutes to gather their belongings. Pastor Haupi and his son scrambled in the dark, using the dim light of their phones to gather essentials. The pastor packed his wife's garments, important documents and his record book. His son, overwhelmed and emotional, grabbed whatever he could.

Amidst the chaos, Pastor Haupi tried to remain calm, drawing strength from a passage he once read about how parental calmness affects children. He prayed for resilience and thanked God for allowing him to witness this trial, believing he was

chosen to endure it. At dawn, they stood and watched as the bulldozer moved in. Their house and the church fell quickly, stone by stone, under the machine's steady force. The destruction was fast and final. By the time daylight settled over the village, the church was gone.

Not a wall remained standing. Pastor Haupi stood apart, shoulders heavy, his heart aching with sorrow. He looked over the rubble, the splintered wood, the shattered glass, and felt the weight of it all press against his chest. Yet amid the devastation, there was something else—a flicker of gratitude. Bittersweet and strange, it came from the unshakable strength he found in his faith, even as everything around him crumbled. When I spoke to him months after this, he broke down.

Word spread quickly. By mid-morning, church members began arriving one by one, then in groups drawn not by obligation, but by something deeper. Grief, yes, but also love. They circled the ruins, their feet crunching over debris, their eyes red. Then, without cue or command, a hymn rose. Faint at first, then stronger.

Voices cracked with emotion sang in harmony, lifting a familiar melody into the heavy air for the last time in that place where they all stood. Others joined in, some barely whispering the words through tears.

'Hallelujah, amen.' ■

BOOK REVIEW

Life in the villages of a megalopolis

Puneet Singhal

Reading *Sheher Mein Gaon* as someone born and raised in an urban village of Delhi is a deeply personal experience. For me, Deoli is not a case study or a field site—it is home. It is where memory, land, caste, labour, faith and survival meet every day. Ekta Chauhan's book approaches Delhi's urban villages with a sensitivity that acknowledges this complexity without romanticising it or flattening it into easy narratives of loss or progress.

One of the book's greatest strengths lies in its refusal to treat urban villages as transitional leftovers, neither fully rural nor properly urban. Instead, Chauhan positions them as living, contested spaces where histories persist, power is unevenly distributed and identities are constantly negotiated. This framing resonates with the lived reality of Delhi's urban villages, with their village *devtas*, *kuldevis*, dried *johads* and fragile commons. Villages like Deoli in south Delhi, for example, which sits cheek by jowl with the posh Sainik Farms as also the working-class neighbourhood of Sangam

Vihar. Both these settlements are largely unauthorised, and have come up over what were originally the farm lands of Deoli and adjoining villages Tigri and Khanpur.

As someone who has been

interviewed in the book for my work through the 'Dilli Dehat Project', I read these chapters with both gratitude and attentiveness. Chauhan listens closely to residents, migrants, workers, students and allows their voices to

remain textured rather than illustrative. The presence of initiatives like 'Dilli Dehat' within the narrative signals an important shift: urban villages are not only sites of extraction or conflict, but also of knowledge-making and resistance, where communities are actively documenting and reclaiming their own histories.

The book is particularly effective in showing how urbanisation does not dissolve caste, gender or insider-outsider hierarchies but often reshapes and hardens them. Property, rental economies, compensation and 'development' emerge as new arenas where older inequalities are redrawn rather than erased. This insight is crucial, especially for policymakers and planners who

still assume that proximity to the city automatically equals social mobility.

At the same time, as someone deeply engaged in ground-level activism, I found myself wishing for a slightly longer pause on questions of agency beyond adaptation, especially around inter-caste solidarities and emerging youth leadership in these villages. These currents do exist, often quietly, and their fragility deserves attention alongside conflict.

What *Sheher Mein Gaon* does exceptionally well is open a conversation that Delhi has long avoided. It shifts the gaze away from the capital megalopolis and its curated heritage zones to the villages that have absorbed the



Title **Sheher Mein Gaon: Culture, Conflict and Change in the Urban Villages of Delhi**
Author **Ekta Chauhan**
Publisher **Penguin Vintage**
Price **Rs 399**



Urban villages are living, contested spaces where histories persist and identities are constantly negotiated

The book shifts the gaze away from the capital megalopolis to the villages that have absorbed the city's growth

city's growth, often without consent or recognition. It asks us to reconsider what constitutes the 'urban', whose memories are preserved and who bears the cost of development.

For readers unfamiliar with Delhi's villages, this book is an entry point: clear, grounded and humane. For those of us who come from these spaces, it is something rarer—a careful acknowledgment that our lives, histories and contradictions matter to the story of the city.

Delhi is often described as a city of migrants. *Sheher Mein Gaon* reminds us, quietly but firmly, that it is also a city of villages and that any honest understanding of its present or future must begin there. ■

After A Decade of Drift, Keralam Calls for

Delays, Deficits, and Discontent Impact Keralam's Welfare

As Keralam approaches the 2026 Assembly elections, the political discourse in the state is increasingly being shaped by a growing sentiment of fatigue with the incumbent government. After nearly a decade of uninterrupted rule by the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF), questions around governance, economic management, and delivery of promises have moved to the center of public debate.

While the ruling alliance continues to project its tenure as one of infrastructure and welfare consolidation, the Congress-led United Democratic Front is framing the election as a referendum on what it calls "missed opportunities and mounting failures."

Promise vs Performance: The Gap That Defines a Decade

When the LDF came to power in 2016, it did so on the back of an ambitious and detailed manifesto, promising transformative governance across sectors—from employment and housing to welfare and infrastructure. The scale of commitments was unprecedented, with the government later claiming that a majority of its promises had been fulfilled.

However, nearly ten years later,



Photo: Gettyimages

that narrative is being increasingly challenged.

The most striking example is employment. The LDF had promised to generate 40 lakh jobs within five years a commitment that raised expectations among

Keralam's educated youth. Yet, available data and official updates indicate that the target remains far from achieved. Data suggests that job creation has not kept pace with the promises made. The reports state that the programmes that were

launched did not meet the scale of employment generation required for the state. The issue has had real consequences. Keralam continues to witness high levels of outward migration, with thousands of young professionals seeking opportunities

outside the state or abroad.

Opposition leaders allege that instead of creating sustainable employment, the government relied on "announcements over outcomes," leaving a generation grappling with uncertainty.



Keralam's government has been wrongly projecting the welfare architecture that it has been strengthening people with extensive pension schemes and social security. The LDF has been repeatedly highlighting these false claims as its pro-people approach. However, the sustainability and delivery of this model are now under scrutiny.

Reports of delays in pension disbursement have become a recurring issue, raising concerns among beneficiaries who depend on these payments for their daily needs. Congress has been raising the issue and highlighting that the delays are symptomatic of a deeper fiscal crisis.

Critics argue that the government expanded welfare commitments without ensuring financial stability and the result is a system that is struggling to deliver consistently.

Rising prices and shortages in subsidised products have further compounded the problem, affecting both lower-income and middle-class households. For many voters, the question is no longer about the existence of welfare schemes, but about their reliability.

At the heart of the governance debate is Keralam's financial situation. Over the past decade, the state's debt levels have risen significantly, with borrowing becoming a key tool for sustaining expenditure.

The LDF has attributed much of the fiscal strain to restrictions imposed by the Union government, arguing that limitations on borrowing have constrained its ability to invest and deliver.

However, the financial crisis is largely self-inflicted according to the political analysts. They point to rising revenue expenditure, inefficient resource management, and a lack of long-term fiscal planning. The consequences of this financial strain are visible across sectors from delayed welfare payments to stalled projects. The government's focus on large-scale infrastructure announcements has not been matched by prudent financial management.

Similarly the LDF claims of delusional as most of the infrastructure projects being claimed to be developed by the UDF were either initiated during previous governments or supported by central agencies. They also point to delays, cost escalations, and implementation challenges as indicators of governance gaps.

The government has prioritised visibility over viability as per the infrastructure policy observers. The question is not whether they have delivered tangible benefits.

Controversies such as the K-Rail semi-speed rail project have further highlighted tensions between development ambitions and public concerns, particularly

Governance & Accountability: Rising Concerns

Beyond economics and development, governance itself has emerged as a key issue in the election. The Congress has consistently raised concerns over law and order, citing instances of alleged custodial violence and police excesses. While the government maintains that such incidents are isolated, the reality is that they point to deeper systemic issues.

Healthcare, which is another area where Keralam has traditionally excelled, has also come under scrutiny. Reports of medical negligence in recent years have triggered debates about accountability and quality of care.

"Keralam's institutions are strong, but no system is immune to lapses," says a healthcare policy

expert. "The challenge is how these lapses are addressed."

Congress For Change with Credibility

Against this backdrop, Congress is the credible alternative for Keralam. Drawing on its governance record, the Congress is emphasising a model that combines welfare with fiscal discipline and inclusive growth.

Congress has raised concerns over current government's shortcomings whether in employment, financial management, or governance. Keralam after a decade of false promises underscore the need for a change.

Congress has highlighted that the Pinarayi government has been a



complete failure, pointing to issues such as price rise, supply shortages, and policy missteps. Party leaders have expressed confidence that the Congress led UDF could secure a decisive mandate, reflecting a broader belief within the alliance that the political tide may be turning.

Congress is seeking to broaden its appeal by focusing on youth, employment, and economic revival

Why 2026 Could Be a Defining Election

The 2026 Assembly elections are not merely about choosing a government, they are about deciding the direction of Keralam's future. After a decade of LDF rule, voters are being asked to assess whether the promises made have translated into meaningful change in their lives. The debate is no longer limited to ideological preferences; it is increasingly centred on governance outcomes. Elections in Keralam have always been about accountability. This time, the question is whether a decade of continuity has delivered enough to justify another term.

Congress promises to be a corrective force, one that can address fiscal challenges, generate

employment, and restore confidence in governance.

As campaigning intensifies, the central question before Keralam's voters is clear, continue with the present course or opt for change. The challenge for Keralam is to decide whether continuity offers that evolution, or whether change is needed to achieve it. The Congress believes that a fresh approach is necessary.

With economic pressures mounting, employment concerns persisting, and governance issues under scrutiny, the 2026 election could mark a turning point.

For many voters, the choice may ultimately come down to a simple question, has the past decade delivered enough, or is it time for Keralam to turn the page?

Broken Promises, Broken Trust-10 Big Assurances That Failed

If there is one thread that runs through the political scrutiny in Keralam today, it is the ruling LDF over the past decade and the gap between commitment and delivery. The most ambitious and politically significant promises remain largely unmet. A closer look at key commitments reveals why this issue has become central to the 2026 election narrative.

1. 40 Lakh Jobs Promise: The Biggest Gap

The highest ambitious promise was the creation of 40 lakh jobs within five years. This commitment was projected as a cornerstone of Keralam's transition to a "knowledge economy." However, available data indicates a significant shortfall. By the end of 2025, programmes such as Kudumbashree had mapped only around 2 lakh local jobs, with plans to broader target of 40 lakh jobs remained far from achieved. Data suggests that employment generation has not matched the scale of promises pointing to continued migration of Keralam's youth in search of

opportunities. Even government claims of job creation running into a few lakh across sectors fall short of the original projection, reinforcing Opposition allegations that the promise was "overstated from the start."

2. Pension Hike to ₹2,500: Promise vs Reality

The LDF had promised to increase social security pensions from ₹1,600 to ₹2,500 in phases. In reality, the increase did not follow the promised trajectory falling short of the commitment. Additionally, reports of delays in pension disbursement have further weakened the credibility of this promise. Welfare expansion without fiscal backing has led to irregular delivery.

3. Women's Financial Support: Late and Limited Rollout

The manifesto had also promised financial assistance for women not covered under pension schemes. While such a scheme was eventually introduced, it was rolled out much later, closer to elections, and at a limited scale

which indicates "reactive governance rather than planned delivery."

4. Startup Boom vs Employment Reality

The government claims the growth of startups and enterprises as a major success, citing thousands of new ventures and investments. However, the startup growth has not translated into large-scale employment, especially for the broader youth population.

5. Housing for All: Progress with Questions

The annual target of 1.5 lakh houses was not consistently met. Questions have been raised in the past over implementation efficiency. The scheme falls short of the "complete eradication of homelessness" promise.

6. Unmet Expectations of Farmers

The LDF had promised measures to significantly improve farmers' incomes, including support prices and subsidies.

However, farmer groups continue to raise concerns about rising input costs, delayed compensation, limited income growth.

The promise to substantially increase farmers' income has not materialised on the ground particularly in sectors like rubber and spices.

7. Welfare Expansion vs Fiscal Stress

The government expanded welfare schemes significantly, including pensions and subsidies, with annual outlays running into thousands of crores. However, critics warn that this expansion has contributed to mounting fiscal pressure, raising concerns about sustainability.

"Data suggests that welfare commitments have outpaced revenue growth," leading to delays and cutbacks in execution.

8. Infrastructure Push Claim

The infrastructure claims are mostly of projects that were initiated under previous governments or central agencies. Some of these projects still remain incomplete or delayed. Financial models relying on borrowings and off-budget funding have raised long-term concerns.

9. Digital Governance Promises Fall Flat

The claims of digital Benefits are uneven across regions. Digital initiatives have not improved core governance challenges such as employment and service delivery efficiency

10. Governance & Accountability: The Missing Link

Beyond individual promises, the larger failure lies in governance itself. Issues frequently highlighted include allegations of backdoor appointments, concerns over law and order and administrative transparency, delays and inconsistencies in policy implementation, Governance has become increasingly centralised, with reduced accountability mechanisms.

DEMOCRACY UNDER THREAT

CONGRESS RAISES ALARM ON ELECTORAL MANIPULATION & SIR

Photo: Gettyimages



At a time when democratic institutions are expected to remain neutral, the Congress has consistently raised serious concerns about alleged manipulation of electoral processes, including the controversial issue of Selective Inclusion & Removal (SIR) of voters. The

party has questioned whether voter rolls are being selectively altered to benefit the ruling establishment, thereby undermining the very foundation of free and fair elections.

Across multiple states, Congress leaders have flagged instances where names of genuine voters particularly from marginalized communities were allegedly deleted, while duplicate or questionable entries remained untouched. The party not only demanded transparency, independent audits, and accountability from the Election Commission but also took the issue to the legal level.

On the national stage, Congress has repeatedly asserted that democracy is not merely about elections, but about trust in institutions. The erosion of this trust, it argues, is a dangerous trend that threatens the voice of ordinary citizens.

The issue of SIR is not isolated. It ties into a broader narrative that Congress has been pushing that institutions are being weakened, dissent is being stifled, and democratic checks and balances are under strain.

Through protests, parliamentary interventions, and public campaigns, Congress has positioned itself as a defender of constitutional values, calling for electoral reforms that ensure every vote counts, and every voice is heard. As Kerala goes to polls Congress is committed to restore the constitutional rights for all citizens of the state.

On the national stage, Congress has repeatedly asserted that democracy is not merely about elections, but about trust in institutions. The erosion of this trust, it argues, is a dangerous trend that threatens the voice of ordinary citizens.

LAW & ORDER IN KERALAM

A STATE IN DISTRESS, A GOVERNMENT IN DENIAL

Photo: Gettyimages



The Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) has sharpened its attack on the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF), alleging that Kerala is witnessing a steady and dangerous decline in law and order. Once projected as a model state for governance and social harmony, Kerala today is slipping into a cycle of violence, politicisation, and institutional breakdown.

At the centre of this political confrontation is Rahul Gandhi and the Congress leadership, who have repeatedly flagged what they describe as a systemic collapse of policing standards and accountability under the LDF regime.

RISING CRIME & DISTURBING TRENDS

According to data from the National Crime Records Bureau, Kerala continues to report one of the highest crime rates in the country. Congress has raised concerns that the nature and frequency of violent crimes point to deeper governance failures. Recent years have seen a spike in assault and murder cases, including politically motivated killings. Rising crimes against women, with several high-profile incidents sparking public outrage and increased drug-related offences, especially among youth are a matter of concern for the state. Growing reports of organized gang activity, particularly in urban clusters has been a result of the deteriorating law and order in Kerala. Congress leaders have pointed out that beyond statistics, the public perception of safety has eroded, with incidents of daylight violence and repeat offenders becoming more common.

POLITICISATION OF POLICE-A SERIOUS CHARGE

One of the most serious issues raised by the Congress is the politicisation of the police force. Senior UDF leaders claim that sections of the police are functioning under the influence of ruling party interests, leading to selective action and biased investigations.

The Congress alleges that cases involving ruling party workers are either diluted or delayed. Opposition activists are subjected to swift and often harsh police action while investigations into sensitive cases lack independence and transparency. This, Congress argues, has led to a crisis of credibility, where law enforcement seems to be partial.

CUSTODIAL TORTURE-SHOCKING REVELATIONS

The recent issue of custodial violence in Kerala exposed the politicised policing further

intensified the debate. Congress leaders have cited RTI-based revelations and visual evidence suggesting brutal custodial torture of Youth Congress workers, triggering outrage across the state. These incidents raised fundamental questions about human rights violations, lack of accountability within police stations and failure of internal oversight mechanisms. Congress demanded judicial inquiries and strict action against those responsible, stating that "rule of law cannot exist where custodial brutality becomes routine."

"GOONDA RAJ"- GANGS, DRUGS & FEAR

The Congress has also accused the government of allowing Kerala to become a "corridor of goondas", where criminal gangs operate with increasing confidence. Congress leaders point to the rise of quotation gangs and organised criminal networks with political patronage protecting certain offenders. Congress has also raised issues of expansion of the drug mafia, especially in coastal and urban regions. According to the

Congress the failure to crack down decisively on such elements has emboldened criminals, creating an environment where fear is replacing faith in governance.

MISUSE OF LAW TO SUPPRESS DISSENT

Another major concern raised by Congress is the alleged misuse of legal provisions to target political opponents. The party claims that police action is often guided by political considerations rather than legal merit. Several instances have been cited where Congress workers were preventively detained or arrested during protests. Cases were registered under stringent sections to discourage dissent. Student and youth activists faced police action for political mobilisation. According to the Congress this reflects a disturbing trend of shrinking democratic space in the state.

THRISSUR POORAM CONTROVERSY- QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

The controversy surrounding the iconic Thrissur Pooram is another instance how Kerala government added a political dimension to the law-and-order debate.

Congress has alleged that the police deliberately disrupted the festival proceedings, raising suspicions of a "clandestine understanding" between the LDF government and the BJP for political gains. While the government has denied these claims, the incident triggered widespread debate about administrative intent and competence.

For many, the episode symbolised a deeper issue whether governance decisions are being influenced by political calculations at the cost of public trust.

The Congress alleges that cases involving ruling party workers are either diluted or delayed. Opposition activists are subjected to swift and often harsh police action while investigations into sensitive cases lack independence and transparency.

CONGRESS DEMANDS ACCOUNTABILITY, REFORM, JUSTICE

In the face of what it describes as a deepening crisis in governance, the Congress has articulated a comprehensive framework aimed at restoring faith in Kerala's law-and-order machinery. According to the party, isolated actions and reactive measures are no longer sufficient. What is needed instead is a systemic overhaul grounded in accountability, transparency, and constitutional values.

At the heart of Congress' demands is the call for depoliticisation of the police force. The party has repeatedly alleged that policing in the state is increasingly influenced by political considerations, which undermines its neutrality and effectiveness. Congress leaders argue that the police must function as an independent institution committed solely to upholding the law, rather than acting under pressure from those in power. Ensuring fixed tenures for senior officers, insulating investigations from political interference, and strengthening internal oversight mechanisms are among the steps the party believes are critical.

Equally important is the demand for independent and time-bound probes into custodial torture and major criminal incidents. The Congress has pointed to recent allegations and visual evidence of custodial violence as a matter of grave concern, stating that such incidents erode public trust and violate fundamental human rights. The



Photo: Gettyimages

party has called for judicial or court-monitored investigations in such cases to ensure impartiality and credibility. It also advocates stricter implementation of guidelines laid down by courts and human rights bodies to prevent custodial abuse.

Another key pillar of the Congress' position is the need for decisive action against organised criminal networks. The party has warned that the growing presence of quotation gangs, drug syndicates, and repeat offenders points to a failure of deterrence. Congress leaders have argued that without a coordinated crackdown—combining

intelligence gathering, policing reforms, and judicial efficiency—such networks will continue to expand their influence. They have also emphasised the importance of targeting the financial and political links that allegedly enable these groups to operate with impunity.

The Congress has also underscored the urgent need to protect democratic rights and political freedoms. It has raised concerns over what it describes as the misuse of police powers to suppress dissent, including the arrest and detention of opposition workers, students, and activists. The party

insists that a healthy democracy depends on the ability of citizens to express disagreement without fear of reprisal. It has called for clear safeguards to prevent the misuse of legal provisions and to ensure that law enforcement agencies do not become instruments of political control.

Beyond immediate interventions, the Congress has advocated for long-term institutional reforms to restore public confidence. This includes modernising police infrastructure, improving training and capacity building, addressing vacancies, and ensuring better

community policing. The party believes that rebuilding trust requires not only efficiency but also empathy and accountability in the way law enforcement interacts with citizens.

Underlying all these demands is a broader concern: that Kerala's long-standing reputation for strong institutions and social cohesion is under threat. The Congress maintains that the state's progress has historically been anchored in a robust rule of law and a sense of collective security. Any erosion of these foundations, it warns, could have far-reaching consequences.

For the Congress, the current law-and-order situation in Kerala represents more than just an administrative challenge—it is a defining moment for the state's democratic ethos. The party argues that the choices made today will determine whether Kerala continues to be seen as a model of governance or slides into a pattern of institutional decline.

The opposition has cautioned that failure to act decisively could normalise a range of troubling trends: politicised policing, unchecked criminal activity, and shrinking democratic space. Over time, such patterns risk creating an environment where citizens feel increasingly insecure and disconnected from the system meant to protect them.

At the same time, Congress leaders have emphasised that the situation is

not beyond repair. They point out that Kerala possesses strong civic traditions, an aware citizenry, and a history of progressive reforms—all of which can serve as the foundation for course correction. What is required, they argue, is political will and administrative integrity.

The party has also framed the issue as one of governance priorities. It contends that ensuring public safety and upholding the rule of law must take precedence over political considerations or image management. In its view, governance cannot be reduced to narratives; it must be judged by outcomes that directly impact people's lives.

Importantly, the Congress has sought to position its critique not merely as opposition politics but as a broader appeal to safeguard Kerala's identity. The state has long been associated with communal harmony, high human development indicators, and a responsive administrative system. Preserving these achievements, the party argues, requires vigilance and a willingness to confront uncomfortable realities.

The message from the Congress is therefore both a warning and a call to action. It stresses that restoring law and order is not just about policing—it is about reaffirming the principles of justice, equality, and accountability that underpin a democratic society.

WAYANAD - A RELATIONSHIP BEYOND POLITICS

Photo: Gettyimages

people has remained strong. His frequent visits, interactions with local communities, and continued engagement with grassroots issues reflect a bond that goes beyond electoral politics.

This connection was most visible during the devastating 2024 Wayanad landslides, one of the deadliest natural disasters in Kerala's history, which claimed hundreds of lives and displaced thousands. In the immediate aftermath, Rahul Gandhi, along with senior Congress leaders, visited the affected areas, met grieving families, and assessed the scale of destruction firsthand. Calling the tragedy a "national disaster," he demanded a comprehensive rehabilitation package and long-term support for the victims.

But the Congress response did not stop at symbolism.

FROM RELIEF TO REHABILITATION — CONGRESS STANDS WITH WAYANAD

While disasters often trigger short-term responses, Congress has sought to ensure long-term rehabilitation for the people of Wayanad.

Recognizing the scale of devastation with entire villages wiped out and thousands left homeless the party launched initiatives aimed at rebuilding lives, not just providing temporary relief. The tragedy had destroyed over a thousand homes and displaced large populations, underscoring the need for sustained intervention.

One of the most significant steps was the announcement and initiation of



housing support for affected families. Congress leaders committed to building homes for survivors, ensuring that those who lost everything could rebuild with dignity.

This effort reflects a broader philosophy that politics must translate into action on the ground. Beyond housing, Congress workers were actively involved in relief distribution, supporting rehabilitation camps and

providing financial assistance to affected families. Congress has always advocated for stronger disaster response mechanisms. The party has also raised questions about environmental mismanagement and unplanned development, which many experts believe contributed to the scale of the disaster. For Congress, Wayanad is not just about responding to a tragedy it is about learning from it,

ensuring accountability, and building resilience for the future. In the upcoming elections too Congress reiterates the commitment to the rehabilitation of Wayanad as it still struggles with the wounds of the devastating landslides.

From defending democracy and raising concerns over electoral integrity, to highlighting law-and-order failures and standing firmly with

disaster-affected communities, Congress continues to position itself as a party rooted in people's issues.

Whether it is on the streets, in Parliament or in disaster-hit regions like Wayanad, the party's narrative remains consistent fight for justice, stand with the people, and hold power accountable. This is not just politics.

This is a commitment to the idea of India.

One of the most significant steps was the announcement and initiation of housing support for affected families. Congress leaders committed to building homes for survivors, ensuring that those who lost everything could rebuild with dignity.

For Rahul Gandhi, Wayanad has never been just a constituency it has been a relationship built on trust, empathy, and shared struggles. Even after stepping down as MP following the 2024 elections, his connection with the

AGRICULTURAL CRISIS IN KERALAM

TRADITIONAL CROPS UNDER THREAT

Keralam's agrarian economy, once the backbone of its rural prosperity, is facing a deep and prolonged crisis. Farmers cultivating traditional crops such as rubber, coconut, and spices are increasingly finding it difficult to sustain their livelihoods amid rising input costs and volatile market prices. The most immediate concern is the sharp fluctuation in crop prices, particularly coconut. Recent market trends show a steep decline, with prices falling over ₹50 per kilogram after a period of relative stability. Copra prices, have now dropped significantly, eroding farmer incomes. This volatility comes at a time when costs including labour, fertilizers, and transportation have risen substantially. Farmers argue that while prices fall rapidly, input costs rarely follow, creating a widening gap between investment and returns. Rubber farmers too continue to struggle with inconsistent pricing and competition from imports, while spice growers face unpredictable weather patterns and pest-related losses. The combined effect is a growing sense of uncertainty in Keralam's rural economy. The Congress has consistently raised these concerns, arguing that the absence of effective price stabilisation mechanisms and inadequate procurement support has left farmers exposed to market shocks.



Photo: Gettyimages

Official data indicates that crop destruction, property damage, and even fatalities are recurring outcomes of such conflicts. Elephants alone are responsible for multiple deaths every year, with over 50 attack incidents reported in recent periods.

Wild boars have emerged as a major threat to agriculture. In the past three years, nearly 4,700 wild boars have been culled in Keralam due to increasing conflict, highlighting the scale of the crisis and the desperation among affected communities.

Farmers complain that entire harvests are lost overnight, pushing families into debt. In many areas, people are afraid to even step out after dusk due to the threat posed by wildlife. Every election, agrarian issues dominate the political discourse in Keralam, and this time it is no different, with farmers flagging persistent concerns ranging

from human-wildlife conflict in the high ranges to paddy procurement issues in Palakkad and Kuttanad.

Farmers say many of their long-standing issues remain unresolved, particularly the increasing number of wild-animal crop raids that have caused severe distress in high-altitude regions.

The coffee crop is also impacted by monkeys that come in large numbers and destroy the coffee. With stringent wildlife laws, the farmers cannot take preventive measures. Almost 20-30 per cent of the crop is lost due to wild animal raids, farmers complain.

Farmers also say that living near forest areas has become increasingly unsafe as the movement of wild animals into human settlements has become regular. This year alone, five tigers have been reported near residential areas, causing severe distress for residents. Other than promises during elections,

no concrete steps are being taken to protect farmers, one of the farmers in Keralam complains.

The Keralam Kisan Independent Farmers Association (KIFA), which represents farmers in high-range areas, has submitted a 15-point charter of demands ahead of the elections, seeking concrete action once a new government assumes power.

The Congress has termed the situation a "livelihood emergency", demanding urgent and coordinated intervention that balances ecological concerns with human survival.

COMPENSATION DELAYS & POLICY GAPS — FARMERS LEFT WAITING

While the state government has acknowledged the human-animal conflict as a serious issue even declaring it a state-specific disaster — farmers say relief mechanisms remain inadequate and slow.

Data shows that Keralam has spent over ₹79 crore in compensation over six years for deaths, injuries, crop loss, and property damage caused by wildlife. However, the ground reality paints a different picture with compensation for deaths remains relatively low compared to other states. Crop damage compensation between ₹1,000 and ₹7,000 far below actual losses. Delays in disbursement have affected families struggling for months. Even as thousands of cases are reported, many farmers claim that bureaucratic hurdles and verification processes delay timely relief. In cases of repeated crop loss, the compensation mechanism fails to provide long-term support. Congress leaders have raised the issue and said that these gaps reflect a lack of policy urgency.

They have called for faster compensation disbursement systems, higher and realistic compensation rates and comprehensive insurance mechanism for farmers in conflict-prone areas. Without these reforms, the party warns, rural distress will only deepen.

THE CONGRESS ROADMAP

MSP BOOST, INSURANCE & RURAL REVIVAL

Photo: Gettyimages



In response to the ongoing crisis, the Congress has proposed a multi-pronged strategy aimed at reviving Keralam's rural economy and restoring dignity to its farmers. A key demand is the strengthening of Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanisms for crops like coconut, rubber, and spices. The party says that MSP must act as a real safety net, ensuring that farmers are protected from sudden price crashes. Additionally, Congress has emphasized the need for a universal crop insurance framework that covers not just natural disasters but also losses due to wildlife attacks a major gap in existing schemes. To address human-animal conflict, the party has proposed scientific and humane mitigation strategies like strengthening of fencing, early warning systems, and rapid response teams. Congress also proposes greater involvement of local communities in planning and implementation. Beyond immediate relief, Congress has called for a broader rural economic revival plan, including investment in agro-processing and value addition and strengthening farmer cooperatives. Congress also promises expanding employment opportunities along with ensuring affordable credit and debt relief. The party's approach is rooted in the belief that agriculture is not just an economic activity, but a way of life that sustains millions.

A CALL FOR URGENT ACTION

Keralam's farmers today stand at a difficult crossroads caught between rising costs, falling incomes, and growing external threats. From market volatility to wildlife conflict, the challenges are complex and deeply interconnected. For the Congress, the message is clear that without urgent intervention, rural distress could turn into a full-blown agrarian crisis. The party asserts that farmers deserve not just sympathy, but strong policy support, fair prices, timely relief, and a secure future.



Keralam's Health Model Under Scrutiny

Medical Negligence Cases Raise Questions

Keralam's healthcare system has long been celebrated as one of India's best. But recent incidents have shaken public confidence and exposed worrying cracks in governance and accountability. One of the most shocking cases emerged from Alappuzha, where a surgical instrument was found inside a woman's abdomen years after her operation. The incident sparked statewide outrage and protests, raising serious concerns about patient safety in government hospitals.

In another tragic case, a 22-year-old youth died after a routine surgery in a private hospital, with the family alleging negligence following complications from anesthesia. These are not isolated events. Reports of newborn deaths, alleged lapses in treatment, and rising complaints have become disturbingly frequent. Even the medical fraternity has

acknowledged systemic issues. Doctors themselves have pointed to staff shortages, excessive workload, and institutional lapses as key reasons behind such incidents.

The growing number of negligence allegations has led to a climate of fear and "defensive medicine," where doctors focus more on legal protection than patient care. This reflects a deeper crisis when both patients and providers lose trust in the system, the very foundation of public healthcare is weakened.

The Congress has consistently raised these issues, questioning why accountability mechanisms remain weak despite repeated incidents. The lack of transparent investigations and delayed justice for victims' families further aggravate public anger.

Keralam's health model cannot survive on past reputation alone. Without strict protocols, independent



audits, and real accountability, such tragedies risk becoming normalized rather than exceptional.

Keralam's public health infrastructure has historically been its pride built on strong primary care, high

literacy, and community participation. However, today that system is under unprecedented stress.

Recent protests and strikes by doctors and nurses have exposed deep-rooted problems. Healthcare workers have complained of delayed salaries, poor career progression, and unbearable workloads. The prolonged strikes disrupted outpatient services and highlighted how fragile the system has become.

Government medical college doctors have also accused the administration of failing to address chronic vacancies and unsafe working conditions. When frontline workers—who were once hailed as heroes during COVID feel neglected, it shows systemic failure.

The crisis extends beyond human resources. Shortages of essential supplies have also surfaced. Recently, even hospitals in Thiruvananthapuram

faced LPG shortages, requiring emergency intervention to maintain operations. Such disruptions point to poor planning and crisis management.

At the same time, Keralam continues to show pockets of excellence such as progress in antimicrobial resistance control in public health centers. But these successes cannot mask the broader reality the system is overstretched and underfunded.

The Congress has argued that the current government has failed to match rising healthcare demands with adequate investment and management reforms. Financial mismanagement and misplaced priorities have left hospitals struggling to maintain even basic standards.

A strong system cannot run on the goodwill of overworked doctors and nurses alone. Without systemic reforms, Keralam risks eroding

Educated but Unemployed

Keralam's Youth Forced to Leave



Rising unemployment and mass migration expose the failure of the present government.

Keralam has long been celebrated as India's most literate and socially progressive state. But behind this success story lies a growing crisis of a generation of educated youth without jobs, and a state increasingly dependent on migration for survival.

Today, unemployment is no longer just an economic issue in Keralam but a social emergency.

According to the latest Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), Keralam's youth unemployment rate stands at a staggering 29.9%, nearly three times the national average. Among young women, the situation is even more alarming, with unemployment rising to 47.1%, highlighting a deep gender gap in opportunities.

Keralam produces some of India's most educated youth. Cities like Kochi rank among the top talent hubs in the country. Yet, this talent is not being absorbed within the state.

There is a structural mismatch between education and employment opportunities, along with lack of industrial growth and private sector expansion. Even more worrying is the rise in educated unemployment, which remains significantly high

despite increasing literacy and skill levels. With limited opportunities at home, Keralam's youth are increasingly looking outward—towards the Gulf, Europe, and other Indian states. Migration, once seen as an opportunity, has now become a compulsion for survival.

Studies and government data highlight that outmigration for employment continues to be a defining feature of Keralam's economy.

Ironically, while Keralam's youth leave in search of jobs, the state increasingly depends on migrant labour from other states to sustain sectors like construction, fisheries, and services. Despite repeated promises, the current government has failed to create a robust employment ecosystem. Keralam continues to lag in attracting large-scale industries compared to neighbouring states with weak job creation in the private sector, over-dependence on remittances instead of local economic growth and failure to address skill-job mismatch. Behind every statistic is a personal story of a graduate preparing endlessly for government exams, a nurse forced to migrate abroad, an engineer working below their qualification and a young woman dropping out of the workforce due to lack of

opportunities. Keralam's youth are not lacking talent but they are lacking opportunity.

Congress For Jobs, Dignity, and Opportunity

The Congress Party believes that Keralam's future lies in empowering its youth within the state, not forcing them to leave. Congress vision includes Job-Centric economic growth to attract large-scale industries and startups, promote MSMEs and local entrepreneurship and create employment zones across districts. Congress is committed to bridge the skill gap by aligning education with industry needs and expanding skill development missions. The vision of Congress includes state campus-to-career pipelines. The Congress also looks at women centric growth in Keralam with special incentives for women-led enterprises with safe and inclusive workplaces, targeted employment schemes for young women.

Keralam needs reverse migration strategy by creating high-value jobs to bring back Keralam's global talent. Supporting returnee entrepreneurs and strengthening IT, Tourism & Services is required to expand IT corridors beyond major cities. Tourism linked employment and investment in emerging sectors like AI,

Post-COVID Challenges & Infrastructure Gaps

The COVID-19 pandemic tested healthcare systems across the world and Keralam was initially praised for its response. However, the post-pandemic phase has revealed significant gaps that remain unaddressed.

The burden on healthcare workers has not eased. Instead, it has intensified due to rising patient loads, mental fatigue, and lack of institutional support. The after-effects of the pandemic delayed treatments, chronic disease burden, and mental health challenges have increased pressure on hospitals.

Keralam has also faced recurring public health threats. The state has witnessed outbreaks of diseases like Nipah virus and the alarming rise of rare infections such as amoebic meningoencephalitis, which recorded over 170 cases and dozens of deaths in 2025. These outbreaks highlight the need for stronger surveillance, infrastructure, and rapid response systems.

Infrastructure gaps remain evident in government hospitals ranging from equipment shortages to inadequate staffing. The negligence cases themselves often stem from these systemic deficiencies.

Moreover, social sector challenges intersect with healthcare. Issues like mental health crises, rising substance abuse, and the vulnerability of marginalized communities continue to strain the system. Cases involving unexplained deaths of children and social distress further underline the need for integrated healthcare and social support systems. Even as Keralam's population ages, healthcare demands are becoming more complex. Yet, policies and infrastructure have not kept pace with these changing needs. The Congress has pointed out that post-COVID recovery requires a comprehensive overhaul not just incremental fixes. Without addressing infrastructure deficits and workforce shortages, Keralam's healthcare system risks being overwhelmed in the years ahead.

Congress Vision: Upgrade Primary Healthcare with Accountability

Congress, has outlined a clear roadmap to restore confidence in Keralam's healthcare system and strengthen its future.

1. Strengthening Primary Healthcare

Congress plans to upgrade primary health centres into fully equipped family health hubs, ensuring early diagnosis and reducing the burden on tertiary hospitals. This includes better staffing, modern equipment, and digital health integration.

2. Zero Tolerance for Negligence

A robust accountability framework will be introduced. Independent medical audit bodies will investigate negligence cases transparently, ensuring timely justice for victims and systemic corrections.

3. Healthcare Workforce Reforms

The Congress promises to address long-pending demands of doctors, nurses, and paramedical staff ensuring fair salaries, better working conditions, and career growth opportunities. This will help restore morale and improve service quality.

4. Infrastructure Investment

The Congress aims to significantly increase budgetary allocation for healthcare infrastructure—modernizing government hospitals, ensuring availability of essential supplies, and improving emergency response systems.

5. Public Health Preparedness

Learning from recent outbreaks, the Congress proposes a stronger disease surveillance system, rapid response teams, and community awareness programmes to tackle future health crises effectively.

6. Focus on Social Health

The Congress emphasises integrating healthcare with social welfare, addressing mental health, elderly care, and support for vulnerable communities. Special programmes will target marginalized groups to ensure equitable access.

7. Transparency & Governance

The Congress has committed to making healthcare governance transparent, with real-time monitoring of hospital performance and public dashboards to track outcomes.

Keralam's healthcare model was once a benchmark for the country but today it stands at a crossroads. Rising negligence cases, overburdened staff, infrastructure gaps, and governance failures have put the system under strain. While the current government continues to defend its record, ground realities tell a different story of a system struggling to cope with growing challenges.

The Congress believes that Keralam deserves better. By focusing on accountability, investment, and people-centric reforms, the Congress aims to rebuild trust and restore the state's healthcare system to its former strength.



“Team UDF is Team Keralamm”

Rahul Gandhi’s Call for Change, a New Political Momentum

As Kerala approaches a crucial electoral moment, a powerful and emotionally resonant message from Rahul Gandhi has injected fresh energy into the United Democratic Front (UDF) campaign. His recent statement, “Team UDF is Team Keralamm” is more than a political endorsement, it is a reaffirmation of a deep, personal bond with the people of the state and a clear signal that the Congress leadership is fully invested in Kerala’s future.

At a time when voters are weighing governance, accountability, and development outcomes, Rahul Gandhi’s words strike a chord by placing people and

challenges are closely understood at the national leadership level of Congress.

Rahul Gandhi’s emphasis on “a collective of experienced leaders and young change-makers” highlights a key strength of the UDF, its balanced leadership. In a rapidly evolving socio-economic landscape, Kerala requires governance that combines institutional memory with fresh ideas.

The UDF’s candidate selection reflects this philosophy bringing together seasoned administrators who understand governance complexities and younger leaders who represent emerging aspirations. This blend is particularly important in Kerala, where high literacy and political awareness



Photo: Gettyimages

Kerala, once celebrated for its robust public systems, is now witnessing increased scrutiny in sectors like healthcare, infrastructure, and employment generation. Youth migration, in particular, has emerged as a pressing issue, with many seeking opportunities outside the state due to limited local prospects.

politics at the center of the conversation.

A Personal Bond Beyond Politics
“For me, Keralamm is home and the people of Keralamm are family.” This line from Rahul Gandhi’s message reflects a relationship that goes beyond electoral calculations. Having represented Wayanad in Parliament, he has consistently emphasized his emotional and political commitment to Kerala. His outreach, regular engagement with citizens, and vocal support on local issues from farmers’ distress to environmental concerns have reinforced this connection.

Unlike distant political messaging, this articulation carries authenticity. It shows that Kerala is not just another battleground, but a state whose aspirations

demand nuanced policymaking.

By calling UDF “Team Keralamm,” Rahul Gandhi reframes the alliance as a people’s platform rather than a conventional political front. It signals inclusivity, diversity, and a shared vision.

A Clear Message From Congress-People Want Change

“The message from Keralamm is clear—the people are ready for change.” This assertion aligns with growing public discourse in the state. Concerns around unemployment, rising cost of living, governance responsiveness, and administrative responsiveness have become central to political debate.

Kerala, once celebrated for its robust public systems, is now witnessing increased

scrutiny in sectors like healthcare, infrastructure, and employment generation. Youth migration, in particular, has emerged as a pressing issue, with many seeking opportunities outside the state due to limited local prospects.

Rahul Gandhi’s message taps into this sentiment positioning the UDF as the vehicle for a government that “listens, understands, and delivers with honesty.” It is a direct appeal to voters who feel unheard or underserved.

Active Involvement, Not Symbolic Support

One of the most significant aspects of Rahul Gandhi’s statement is his commitment: “I will do everything to help build a better future for this beautiful state.”

This is not a passive endorsement but a promise of active involvement.

His track record suggests that this commitment is credible. Whether raising issues in Parliament, engaging with civil society, or supporting grassroots movements, Rahul Gandhi has demonstrated a willingness to be hands-on. His involvement provides UDF with both strategic guidance and national visibility.

In an era where state politics often intersects with national policy frameworks, be it economic planning, federal funding, or welfare schemes, this alignment becomes crucial. Kerala stands to benefit from a leadership that can effectively bridge state and national priorities.

A Vision Rooted in Trust and Accountability

Rahul Gandhi’s message repeatedly emphasizes trust—“Each candidate reflects the voice, the aspirations

and the trust of the people.” This focus is particularly relevant in a political climate where credibility and transparency are key

Photo: Gettyimages



voter concerns.

The UDF’s campaign is built around restoring faith in governance, ensuring that public institutions function efficiently, decisions are transparent, and policies deliver tangible benefits. From job creation and industrial growth to strengthening healthcare and education, the alliance aims to present a comprehensive roadmap.

Importantly, this vision is not framed as a critique alone but as a constructive alternative, one that prioritizes people-centric governance.

Women and Youth at the Core

By highlighting “a strong team of men and women,” Rahul Gandhi also underscores gender inclusivity in leadership. Kerala, despite its social indicators, continues to grapple with gender disparities in workforce participation and leadership roles.

The UDF’s emphasis on women’s empowerment through economic opportunities, safety measures, and representation aligns with this recognition. Similarly, its focus on youth reflects an understanding that Kerala’s future depends on harnessing the potential of its educated, ambitious population. Rahul Gandhi’s outreach resonates strongly with these groups, positioning the UDF as a progressive and forward-looking alliance.

From Sentiment to Strategy

While the emotional appeal of Rahul Gandhi’s message is evident, it also serves a strategic purpose. By framing the election as a collective movement—“Team Keralamm”—he transforms it into a participatory exercise.

This approach encourages voter participation, making the elector feel like stakeholders in the state’s future rather than passive observers. It also strengthens grassroots mobilization, a critical factor in Kerala’s highly competitive political landscape.

“Keralamm will win. UDF will lead.” This closing line encapsulates the optimism and determination driving the campaign. It reflects confidence not just in electoral success but in the possibility of meaningful change.

For the UDF, the challenge lies in translating this momentum into votes—by effectively communicating its vision, addressing local concerns, and maintaining organizational cohesion. Rahul Gandhi’s active involvement provides a significant boost in this effort, offering both leadership and narrative. Rahul Gandhi’s message is ultimately a call for renewal of governance, of trust, and of hope. By positioning the UDF as “Team Keralamm,” he aligns the alliance with the aspirations of the people, emphasizing unity, inclusivity, and accountability.

As Kerala stands at a crossroads, this vision offers a compelling alternative—one that promises to listen, understand, and deliver. The coming election is not just about choosing a government; it is about shaping the future of a state known for its resilience, intellect, and progressive spirit.

With renewed energy, clear messaging, and committed leadership, the UDF backed by Rahul Gandhi’s unwavering support seeks to lead Kerala into its next chapter of growth and good governance.

Why Congress For Keralam’s Future?

Kerala stands today at a defining crossroads. A state celebrated for its literacy, human development, and progressive social indicators is now grappling with deep economic anxieties, rising unemployment, and a growing sense of uncertainty among its youth. Beneath the achievements lies a silent crisis, one that demands honest governance, bold reforms, and a leadership that listens. The Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) presents not just an alternative, but a comprehensive roadmap to restore confidence, create opportunities, and build a future that matches Kerala’s immense potential.

One of the most pressing challenges confronting Kerala is unemployment, especially among the youth. According to the latest Periodic Labour Survey (2023–24), nearly 29% of young people aged 15–29 in Kerala are unemployed, one of the highest rates in India. Even more concerning is the gender disparity, with female youth unemployment soaring to 47.1%, highlighting a systemic failure to create inclusive opportunities. This is not just a statistic—it reflects lakhs of educated young men and women struggling to find meaningful work despite years of education and skill-building.

Kerala’s paradox is stark as it produces some of India’s most educated youth, yet fails to provide them with jobs. The mismatch between education and industry needs, limited industrial growth, and lack of large-scale private investment have created a structural imbalance. Studies show that even employable youth are unable to find jobs within the state, forcing many to look elsewhere. This has led to a brain drain of Kerala’s talent and weakening its long-term economic prospects. Increasingly, young people are leaving not by choice, but by compulsion.

This, our migration is not just an economic issue but it is a social crisis. Families are being separated, aspirations are being exported, and Kerala’s economy continues to depend heavily on remittances rather than sustainable local growth. Experts warn that without reform, the impact of high unemployment would be even more severe. At the same time, the state paradoxically depends on migrant labour from other parts of India to sustain key sectors, pointing to a deeper structural imbalance in the labour market.

Rural unemployment is adding to these concerns. Recent data shows that rural unemployment in Kerala has been rising again, with joblessness significantly higher than the national average. Women in rural areas are particularly affected, with unemployment rates more than double that of men. This reflects not just economic stagnation, but also a lack of targeted policies to empower women and generate local employment opportunities.

Despite claims of welfare success, serious gaps remain on the ground. Sections of society including tribal communities, coastal populations, and informal workers continue to face poverty, landlessness, and inadequate access to basic services. Even as headline indicators improve, inequality and exclusion persist. Governance has become increasingly centralized, and many citizens feel disconnected from decision-making processes that directly impact their lives.

The Congress-led UDF believes that Kerala deserves better governance, better opportunities, and a better future. Our vision is rooted in restoring economic dynamism while protecting Kerala’s social achievements. We recognize that the state’s greatest strength is its people, and our policies are designed to empower them.

First and foremost, the UDF is committed to creating jobs at scale. This includes attracting investment through transparent and industry-friendly policies, promoting MSMEs, and building sector-specific hubs in IT, tourism, healthcare, and green industries. By fostering entrepreneurship and supporting startups, we aim to transform Kerala into a hub of innovation and employment. Secondly, we will bridge the gap between education and employment. Curriculum reforms, industry partnerships, and skill development programs will ensure that Kerala’s youth are not just educated, but employable. Special focus will be given to emerging sectors like artificial intelligence, renewable energy, and digital services, ensuring that Kerala remains competitive in a rapidly changing global economy.

Thirdly, the UDF will address the crisis of migration by creating opportunities within Kerala. Congress’ goal is to make migration a choice, not a necessity. By strengthening local economies, supporting small businesses, and investing in infrastructure, we will ensure that young Keralites can build their futures at home. Women’s empowerment will be at the core of our UDF. With female unemployment at alarming levels, the UDF will introduce targeted employment programs, support women-led enterprises, and ensure safe and inclusive workplaces. Empowering women is not just a social imperative it is essential for economic growth.

In rural Kerala, Congress will focus on revitalizing agriculture and allied sectors, promoting value addition, and ensuring fair prices for farmers. Investments in rural infrastructure, digital connectivity, and local industries will create sustainable livelihoods and reduce regional disparities.

Equally important is restoring trust in governance. The UDF promises a government that listens one that is transparent, accountable, and responsive. Decision-making will be decentralized, giving greater voice to local communities and ensuring that policies reflect ground realities.

Kerala’s story has always been one of resilience and progress. But today, it needs a new direction one that combines its social strengths with economic vitality. The Congress-led UDF offers that direction, a vision of inclusive growth, honest governance, and opportunities for all.

The message from the people is clear—they want change. And the Congress led UDF is ready to deliver it.

Low on oil, but high on gas

Ever wondered why politicians live so long? The answer, says **Avay Shukla**, is blowin' in the wind

I can't be sure, but I'm fairly positive that the most Googled word this fortnight was 'gas', thanks to the Gulf conflict and the shortages of said element in India. Now, one would have expected that, given how full of gas our rulers—politicians, bureaucrats, judges—are, there would never be a shortage of it here. But apparently there was, notwithstanding the denials by Epstein's buddy. This led to a veritable explosion of memes and wisecracks on social media on the subject, sparing not even our revered prime minister's enviable grasp of science. And when one speaks of gas in India, can the malodorous subject of flatulence be left unaddressed?

So, this week I've decided to develop further the spark of scientific genius ignited by our PM and explore more deeply the subject of gas or, to be precise, its by-product: flatulence. And I'm amazed at how well researched this subject is! Did you know, for example, that research has established that farting is a natural and healthy process, a voiding of the by-products of digestion, just like the gas flares in a petroleum refinery? That one should fart at least 32 times a day? Less, and your gut microbes are not functioning at optimum levels; more, and your digestive system is being asked to process more than it can handle. Overload, much to the discomfort of those sitting next to you, as Trump's advisors frequently discover.

But here's the interesting thought: can you even imagine the volume of gas Indians produce? 1,400 million of us expelling gas 32 times a day! Why, if we could only tap it, we could forget about the Straits of Hormuz or even the need for the strategic reserve Mani Shankar Aiyer's critical of. We could become *Atmanirbhar* on a colossal scale. All we have to do now is to make use of Mr Modi's untapped scientific potential, and leave the rest to Nutty Aayog. In fact, I believe the government is already moving in this direction. According to WhatsApp university, it has banned the production/sale of digestive tablets and syrups in order to increase the production of HPG (human



The strategic Strait of Hormuz

Imagine the volume of gas 1,400 million Indians, expelling it 32 times a day, produce! If only we could tap it, we could forget about the Strait of Hormuz



Photo: Getty Images

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz (left) and the LPG crisis in its wake resulted in long queues outside gas agencies. But India, the author suggests, has abundant supply of an untapped resource—HPG!

produced gas). Anyone who refuses to produce HPG can now be arrested under the Essential Commodities Act. Way to go, Mr Puri, I always had a gut feeling you could do it when it came to the crunch, or gripe.

Wait, there's more. Studies by John Hopkins University indicate two important benefits of flatulence. One, passing gas frequently is good for your circulatory system as it releases pressure on it. Two, HPG contains hydrogen sulphide, produced by the action of gut bacteria. This gas plays a vital role in maintaining normal blood pressure; it causes the arteries to dilate, letting blood circulate more freely, reducing pressure on the arteries and providing protection against hypertension, strokes, heart attacks and kidney diseases. Now I realise why some of the healthiest people I know are ones who pass gas with the frequency of an AK47, and just as loudly!

Ever wondered why our politicians enjoy such longevity, how they keep going on and on, rivalling the life spans of tortoises? Well, the answer to that too lies in gas—specifically in the '*padayatra*' they regularly perform. ('*Pad*', with the longer vowel, has a distinctly gaseous meaning in Hindi, but

we'll stick to its literal English translation: a walking tour.) These can be categorised as 'Fart Walks'. No kidding. According to an article by Kirtika Katira in the *WION* (6 July 2024), Fart Walks is the latest fitness trend which has taken TikTok by storm. Essentially a post-prandial walk of about 30 minutes, it is the panacea for bloating, indigestion, gas, heartburn, diabetes and blood pressure. It works by helping food motility—the process of moving food from the stomach to the intestines where it is quickly digested and absorbed. Walking accelerates the process, releasing a lot of the gas which needs to be expelled. As the name suggests, Fart Walks are not meant for conversation but for some serious farting. So now you know.

The next time you take an after-dinner stroll, read reader, and pass an old gentleman sputtering along, emitting subdued explosive sounds like the misfiring piston of an old scooter, don't be alarmed. Doff your cap politely and walk on with your nostrils shut. That old geezer might be me! ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



Members of the Commission on Interfaith Relations outside Parliament House in London

West Asian politics fuelling Muslim-Jews polarisation

There's a standing joke that when West Asia sneezes Britain's Jewish and Muslim groups catch a cold, triggering allegations and counter allegations of antisemitism and Islamophobia.

Even as the government is under pressure from Muslims to come up with an official definition of Islamophobia (a move seen by critics as 'blasphemy through the backdoor'), Jews have stepped up their campaign seeking action against the 'normalisation' of antisemitism.

They say they no longer feel safe in Britain—facing abuse not only from Muslims but also from significant sections of Brits in general.

One in five university students in Britain are reluctant to share a house with a Jewish student, claims a new report from the Union of Jewish Students (UJS). It warns that antisemitism has become 'normalised' on campuses with Jewish students facing physical and verbal abuse and social ostracisation.

At the same time, Muslims have reported a significant surge in Islamophobia, particularly the targeting of women and girls wearing the hijab.

"Rising polarisation has been acutely felt on university campuses in the UK," said Louis Danker, president of UJS.

This has prompted the government to announce new measures to support universities in keeping students safe from extremism, harassment and intimidation on campus.

A virtual civil war over new residency rules

A virtual civil war has broken out in the ruling Labour Party over a proposal by home secretary Shabana Mahmood—the party's 'star' performer and right-wing darling—to make it harder for legal migrants to gain permanent residency.

She proposes doubling the qualifying period for permission to stay in Britain

indefinitely from five to ten years and, most controversially, applying the change retrospectively to those already in Britain under the old system.

The move has split the party down the middle between left and right wings. The opposition is led by former deputy prime minister and fiery rebel Angela Rayner who says the move is "un-British" and "a breach of trust" for hardworking migrant families.

Rayner accused Prime Minister Keir Starmer and Mahmood of "moving the



Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer with home secretary Shabana Mahmood

Photo: Getty Images



LONDON DIARY
HASAN SUROOR

goalposts" for those migrants who arrived in the UK legally and now face an uncertain future. "Enforcing a fair deal is not the same as ripping up a deal halfway through," she said, while acknowledging the government's frustration over illegal migration.

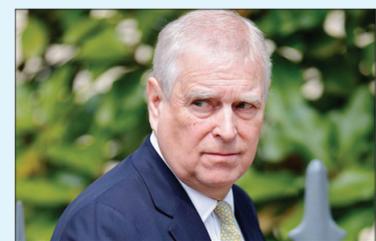
"Many people came here to Britain on the understanding that if they worked in the sectors where we needed them, obeyed the law and paid their taxes, they could stay. If we suddenly change that, it pulls the rug from under those who have planned their lives and commitments and are contributing to our economy and to our society. That would not just be bad policy, but a breach of trust."

Mahmood, herself a child of Pakistani immigrants, has sought to justify the change on the ground that it would ease a "£10 billion drain on our public finances" due to demand for housing and healthcare.

While she's right about the economic cost of illegal immigration, she's wrong to apply the new rules retrospectively. It's not only unfair but undermines Britain's credibility.

warned that the changes were "not sufficient to deal with risks of corruption, foreign interference and undue influence in British politics".

While both Conservatives and Labour parties have traditionally received foreign donations, the proposed change has been prompted by concerns over foreign-linked donations to the right-wing populist Reform UK party led by Nigel Farage of Brexit fame whose racist agenda and proximity to controversial MAGA figures threaten Britain's largely centrist polity.



Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor who?

In a historic first, *London Times* decided not to mark the birthday of a member of the royal family in its 'Birthdays Today' column: namely, Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor.

In a note to readers, it said: 'Eagle-eyed readers might notice an absence from our latest Birthdays Today column a man called Andrew, who has turned 66. He's been stripped of his "Royal Highness" style, lost the titles of Prince and Duke, kissed goodbye to his other honours and been kicked out of his home... We have acted because it would be wrong for the custodians of the most celebrated collection of personal milestones to ignore facts when one has so seriously fallen in public esteem. But also, frankly, his surname takes up too much space.'



And, finally, bestselling author of spy-thrillers Len Deighton, who passed away on 15 March at the age of 97, had a rather optimistic view of ageing. He reportedly told a friend: "The first 80 years are tough. Life gets better after that." ■



No outside interference please, we're Brits

Concerns over outside interference in British politics have led the government to propose a ban on foreign donations to political parties in Britain unless the donors make enough money here.

Although direct foreign donations to UK political parties are illegal, loopholes allow foreign donations through UK-registered companies. The government wants to plug this loophole.

New laws will mean that a company will have to be based in the UK and registered on the electoral roll to be able to make political donations.

It would make it more difficult for foreign billionaires like Elon Musk to influence British politics. The government claims that it would "usher in a new era for our democracy—one that protects against foreign interference and empowers young people," as one minister put it.

Transparency campaigners, however,



RYTHU UTSAVALU

under Praja Palana Government

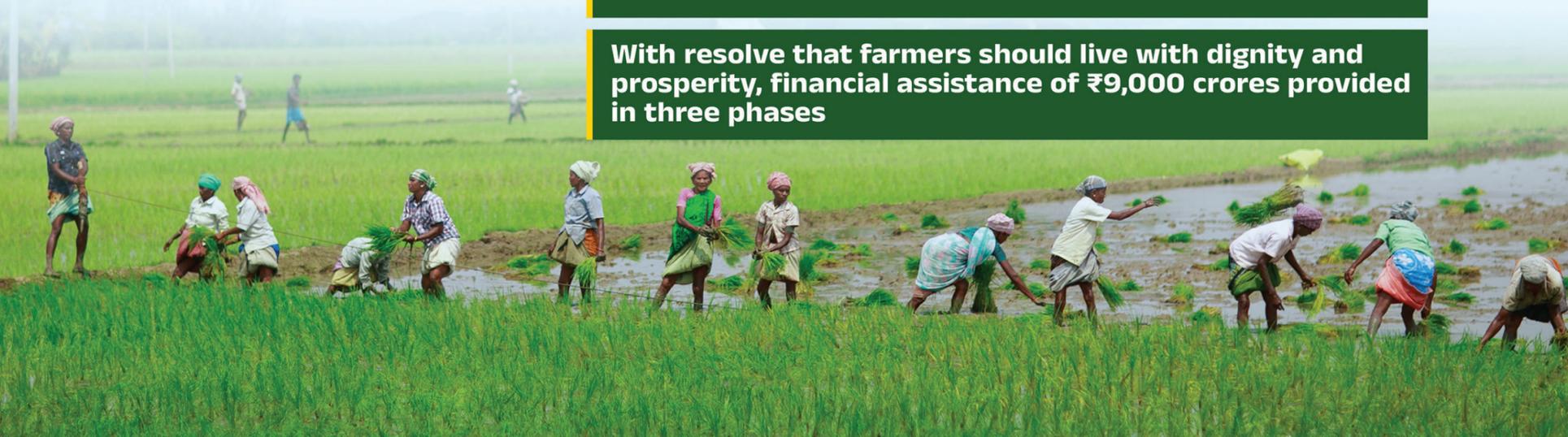
Release of Rythu Bharosa Financial Assistance

For the farmers of Telangana who are redefining the future of Indian Agriculture

Good News from Hon'ble Chief Minister Sri A. Revanth Reddy

Rythu Bharosa financial assistance is directly credited to the bank accounts of 70 lakh farmers across the state

With resolve that farmers should live with dignity and prosperity, financial assistance of ₹9,000 crores provided in three phases



PEOPLE'S GOVERNMENT: PATH TO PROGRESS AND WELFARE FOR ALL

Issued by Information and Public Relations Department, Govt. of Telangana