

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

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NATION


THE WAIVER RUNAROUND
Yet another farm loan waiver scheme in Maharashtra promises more than it can deliver



► P3

HOME & ABROAD

OF EMPTY NESTS AND AGEING PARENTS
A new elder care initiative in Kerala prompts a sober reflection



► P4

WORLD

SURVIVING NETANYAHU
Can Israel shake off 'Bibi', repair alliances and rebuild legitimacy?



► P6

Deepening the jobs market is hard work

There's more to India's unemployment crisis than meets the ordinary eye, writes **Ajit Ranade**

Chief Economic Advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran has done a great service articulating something many parents, students and policymakers do not want to hear: that the old premium attached to software degrees and MBAs is vanishing. The globalisation-era formula was simple. Get an engineering degree, learn coding, do an MBA if possible, and enter a white-collar growth track. That formula is no longer reliable. AI is changing the economics of routine cognitive work. One experienced employee, assisted by AI tools, can now do what earlier required dozens of freshers. The first impact may not be mass layoffs. It may be the silent closing of entry gates. Witness the recent drop in hiring by IT companies.

But his warning should not be read as an obituary for engineering or management education. India does not need fewer engineers. It needs different engineers. Civil engineering, for instance, will remain central to India's future. A country that is still building roads, bridges, ports, railways, water systems, housing, logistics parks and climate-resilient cities cannot say that engineering is finished. If anything, demand for good engineers will rise.

The real question is: what kind of engineering? A civil engineer of tomorrow cannot merely learn old formulae for concrete and surveying. She must understand climate risk, water stress, urban flooding, green materials, GIS mapping, project finance, procurement and lifecycle maintenance. Mechanical and electrical engineers must understand robotics, precision manufacturing, storage, grids and renewable integration. Computer engineers must move beyond routine coding to systems thinking, data architecture, cybersecurity and AI applications in real sectors.

The same applies to MBAs. India does not need fewer people with analytical and managerial skills. It needs many more, but in places where they are rarely found today. Every district needs people who can analyse data, prepare investment plans, evaluate projects, monitor outcomes, improve procurement, manage public assets and coordinate across departments. If India is serious about bottom-up planning, the district cannot remain merely an administrative unit. It must become a planning, data and execution unit.

Why not strengthen district planning offices with young professionals trained in economics, management, public finance, statistics, GIS, infrastructure planning and social sector delivery? Instead of producing

generic MBAs who chase the same corporate jobs, we could create district development analysts, municipal finance associates, procurement specialists, health systems managers, education data officers and climate adaptation officers. Such teams could transform local governance and create meaningful public-purpose jobs.

This is where curriculum reform and job design must go together. It is not enough to tell colleges to update syllabuses. The labour market must create roles that reward updated skills. If colleges teach climate-resilient construction but public works departments recruit on old criteria, nothing will change. If MBA students learn data analytics but district administrations have no posts for outcome monitoring or GIS mapping, the skill will be wasted. Education reform without job reform becomes another certificate factory.

The CEA is also right to ask India to take skilled trades seriously. Welding, plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, caregiving, nursing, hospitality and culinary skills involve human presence, judgement, dexterity and trust. These are not easily replaced by AI. But here too we need to be careful. You cannot change social attitudes just by exhortation. A middle-class parent who has spent two decades telling a child to become an engineer or MBA will not suddenly celebrate welding as an equally attractive option. In India, a degree is not merely a credential; it is prestige, marriage value, caste mobility, migration possibility and insurance against manual-labour precarity.

This is why comparisons with Germany, Switzerland, Japan or South Korea must be made carefully. Skilled trades are respected there because institutions made them respectable. Europe has had guilds, chambers, apprenticeships, licensing norms and wage-bargaining institutions for more than a century. A master electrician, machinist or carpenter has certification, progression, bargaining power and social identity. The guild did not merely teach the trade. It protected standards, restricted exploitation, shaped pride and helped secure decent wages.

India has no comparable ecosystem. We have excellent individual craftsmen, but no strong professional guilds for plumbers, electricians, welders, carpenters or repair technicians. We have ITIs and skilling schemes, but weak social prestige. We have certificates, but often not employer trust. Most importantly, India's labour force is still overwhelmingly informal or



Photo: Getty Images

Aspirants trying their luck at a recent job fair in the capital

The government job has become a lottery ticket; the coaching class has become a waiting room

unregistered. In such a market, a trade skill does not automatically translate into dignity or income security. It can just as easily mean casual work, arbitrary wages, no written contract, no insurance, no pension and unsafe work conditions. By contrast German law requires compulsory labour representation on company boards.

The recent unrest by industrial workers in the Noida and Gurugram-Manesar belt is a reminder. Many workers in automotive, garments and allied manufacturing reportedly protested for basic monthly wages of around Rs 20,000 or more. These were not software engineers complaining about appraisal cycles. These were factory workers saying wages were below survival level. The IT sector emerged as a relatively formal, globally linked labour market. Industrial and trade workers remain trapped between informality and contract labour and have a very weak collective voice.

The deeper problem is India's graduate unemployment crisis. Millions of young graduates are not working, earning or acquiring experience, but preparing for competitive exams. The government job has become a lottery ticket; the coaching class has become a waiting room. This is not

irrational behaviour. It is a rational response to a labour market where private entry-level jobs are poorly paid and insecure, while government jobs offer a decent salary, status, security and social insurance.

The same logic applies to universities. They have been declared dead attributed to the internet, MOOCs (massive open online courses), bootcamps, the pandemic and now AI tutors. Yet higher education has expanded massively. The real issue is whether universities will use AI as a partner in learning or merely treat it as a cheating device.

The CEA's warning is well taken. But the policy message must be to not bury the degree but redesign it. Trade skills need to be formalised and gain social dignity. India's jobs crisis will not be solved by replacing one social obsession with another. It will be solved when a young Indian can become a civil engineer, coder, nurse, chef, welder, district planner, technician, teacher, entrepreneur or civil servant—and each path carries dignity, income, security and mobility. ■

AJIT RANADE is a noted economist; Courtesy: The Billion Press

"We had to come, for the sake of the children"

As the NEET paper leak and the CBSE evaluation fiasco become focal points of Gen Z resistance, **Nandlal Sharma** reports from the Jantar Mantar protest site in Delhi

From Kota in Rajasthan to Jantar Mantar in Delhi, Gen Z is pushing back, demanding accountability from a government that is putting their youthful career dreams in jeopardy.

Aastha, a NEET aspirant, is from Bihar. On 17 June, just four days before the re-examination (following the paper leak), she felt compelled to join the 'Chhatron ki Gooni' campaign led by LoP Rahul Gandhi. "The NEET paper was leaked in 2024 as well. The government didn't even acknowledge it! After this year's leak, over a dozen students have committed suicide [21 at last count]. If the Modi government can't even conduct examinations properly, it must go!"

Paper leaks are so routine in our country that we are inured. It often doesn't even make headlines. But the NEET paper leak this year and the CBSE Class 12 online evaluation fiasco lit a fire that has caught

the government off guard. While youngsters like Sarthak Siddhant and Nisarg Adhikari used their technical smarts to expose the CBSE, others like Aastha and Khushi have hit the streets. All four represent a generation that came of age in the Modi years.

The people out on the streets protesting are not just school students. On 14 June, candidates for the BPSSC's (Bihar Police Subordinate Services Commission) Prohibition Department examination arrived at Patna railway station to find their train was delayed. Frustrated with a system that keeps letting them down, they pelted stones at the police.

In Prayagraj, students protested irregularities and paper leaks in the Uttar Pradesh Lekhpal recruitment examination and demanded a re-examination. On 12 June, a joint protest of competitive examination aspirants was held in

Lucknow's Eco Garden. While the NSUI and Youth Congress have organised demonstrations across various cities demanding the resignation of Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan and action against paper leaks, the newly minted Cockroach Janata Party (CJP), under the leadership of Abhijeet Dipke, has dug in at Jantar Mantar, Delhi. They will not leave, they say, until Pradhan resigns.

Addressing the crowd on 20 June, a student (preparing for NEET and CUET) said, "People ask what difference will Pradhan's resignation make? Let me tell you—if one minister resigns, the rest will feel afraid."

The protest at Jantar Mantar features student organisations from the Left, the Aam Aadmi Party's student wing, sundry labour outfits as well as farmer organisations like the Bharatiya Kisan Union (Chadhuni). This confluence is the

reason why you hear slogans on worker-student-farmer unity and opposition to the 'coming very soon' India-US trade deal.

I spoke to Raja from Rourkela, Odisha. He is here with his mother, who is a cancer patient.

"No one in my family has taken the NEET exam," Raja says. "But so many students have committed suicide because of the paper leak. That's why my mother and I are here. ... We study up to twelve hours a day! Dharmendra Pradhan has no idea how hard children work. At my hostel, teachers make me wash clothes and clean shoes. I have to do all this to stay in school."

"At one point my mother became seriously ill. Dipke and others helped us. We sleep here on the carpets, and we eat whatever food social workers bring."

There are many volunteers here. Purna, a resident of Delhi, is carrying bananas for hungry protesters. "I'm here to support the students—their demands are fair."

Mohammad Junaid has come from Ghaziabad. He is running a food-and-water stall here along with his Hindu and Sikh friends. "I brought whatever I had to Jantar Mantar," he says. "Then people here started helping. With a smile on his face, he quotes the poet-lyricist Majrooh on finding kindred spirit along the way: "बै अकेला ही चला या जानिब-ए-मज्रल मगर, लोग साथ आते गए और कारवाँ बनता गया"

Junaid, who completed his LL.B. this year, has stockpiled bottles of water. Visitors pitch in with whatever they have. Like Amitabh, a teacher by profession, has biscuits that he hands over to Junaid, who distributes them along with tea and pakora.



Photos: Vipin

Gen Z rising On Day 6 of protests at Delhi's Jantar Mantar, where students are demanding the resignation of education minister Dharmendra Pradhan and the overhaul of a broken education system

► Continued on page 2

For the last three years, women in the village of Premtura in Rajasthan's Sikar district have been protesting against illegal—and illegal—mining in their area. In the village of Deepawas, also in Sikar, the women are sitting round the clock, in determined relay groups. Frequent blasts from multiple mines nearby have caused huge cracks in their homes, endangering lives. Flying debris has frightened their children from going to school and injured their cattle. A pall of dust covers the vegetation around their houses and water levels have plunged to below 1,000 feet since mining began.

In 2024, Ojwasi Marbles Pvt Ltd cordoned off 180 acres, of which 140 acres is designated forest land. Environment activist Kailash Meena from Sikar says the villagers' prime concern is that mining will destroy the Girijan river, their sole source of water. Most of the rivers in the region have faced the same fate.

"There are forty villages with a population of over 60,000 people who are dependent on this river," Meena says. "The villagers filed a petition against Ojwasi in the Supreme Court, arguing that the area falls within the definition of the Aravalli hills as per the Forest Survey of India report of 2010. The SC ordered that mining be halted, but unfortunately, it has not."

In Rajasthan's Kotputli-Behrur district, another long-standing protest is on against the Aditya Birla-owned UltraTech cement company in Mohanpura-Jodhpura village. Their demand: closure of the plant and rehabilitation of hundreds of affected villagers.

Captain Vinod Singh (retd), a member of the Jodhpura Sangarsh Samiti, which has been spearheading this agitation for several years says, "Running-the-clock heavy blasting destroyed 150 of our houses and 80 tubewells. We complained to the NGT, and on 3 November last year, it ordered that no blasting should take place within a half-kilometre radius of our village."

The Rajasthan government was directed to constitute a committee to rehabilitate victims of pollution (caused by proximity to limestone mining with crushers) within three

How green was my Aravalli

Protests intensify in Rajasthan but there's no end to illegal mining, writes **Rashme Sehgal**



Save our hills This photograph taken on 19 May 2026 shows villagers protesting against mining at Bhagwanpura village in Rajasthan's Neem ka Thana

months, to pay compensation of Rs 50,000 to the villagers whose homes suffered structural damage and Rs 20,000 to the 109 villagers suffering from diseases caused by pollution. This, says Singh, is yet to be implemented.

For over 300 days, the residents of Ajitpura-Kujeta (Kotputli-Behrur district) have been protesting illegal limestone mining and deep-hole blasting by the National Limestone Company Pvt Ltd near residential settlements. On 29 May, the police forcibly removed the protesters' tents, claiming they blocked traffic. After locals gathered to submit a memorandum to resume their protest, a group of

armed assailants opened fire at them, demonstrating the violence.

Nagpur Rashtriya Loktantrik Party MP Hanuman Beniwal blames the BJP top brass for allowing the mining mafia to flourish across Rajasthan. He says, "These limestone mines were bought 40 years ago and left idle. Now that their value has gone up, goons are being brought in from different parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat to attack our local people."

The impunity with which the mining mafia is operating is evident. Last month, a group of gangsters landed up at Shatru ki Dhani village and beat up the women involved in anti-mining

demonstrations. Om Prakash, a villager, says, "Six women were injured. One had her teeth broken, the other her arm. The gangsters came in the morning, knowing the men would be away at work."

The Rajasthan Pollution Board has not issued any show cause notices to these mining companies since 2008. Identifying serious irregularities in quarry leases for metal mining in Dhansura block of Aravalli District in Gujarat, the Mines and Geology Department has imposed fines worth more than Rs 63 lakh on 54 quarries. The inspectors found irregularities under 12 criteria, with each infraction at each site bearing a

fine of Rs 10,000. This was the first such inspection since 2014, when the lease was issued.

Multiple hills with lush forests have been reduced to rubble. Entire rivers along with their ecosystems have dried up and an already water-scarce area has been left gasping. The recent corporate rush to claim vast stretches of land rich in minerals like copper, zinc, lead, iron ore, limestone, marble, gold and silver must be seen in this light.

Sujata, of the Adivasi Jan Adhikar Ekta Manch, points out that the Vedanta group, through its subsidiary Hindustan Zinc, operates some of the world's largest underground mines and smelting complexes near Jaipur.

The group operates Warar, Sindesar Khurd, Rajpura Dariba and the Kayad mines to extract zinc and iron ore. "Many of these are underground mines; our water sources have dried up completely," says Sujata.

The Adanis recently entered the fray, drilling for gold in the villages of Banswara, Ghatola and Jalora. Sujata adds: "In the villages of Phurara, there has been drilling for iron and copper. The tribals have received notices through the forest department, which has its own serious implications."

The 2023 CAG reports confirm the presence of illegal mining in 122 cases, using remote sensing data

and GIS techniques. Neelam Ahluwalia, founder of the People for Aravallis group, says, "It is shocking how compensatory afforestation for forests being cut in Nicobar are taking place in a 500-acre stretch in Jahandhar district of Rajasthan!"

The construction industry particularly covets the Aravalli's granite deposits. Though these comprise less than 3 per cent of the terrain, they are the real goldmine for material-hungry developers looking to cash in on the Delhi-NCR construction boom. Lawyer Hansraj observes, "The rush for green marble, and other marble, soapstone, zinc and other minerals is so intense in Dungarpur that our entire ecosystem has been affected. The Jhakham river, which originates in the Sita Mata Wildlife Sanctuary and is its largest water body, is no longer accessible to local Adivasis. But water is being given to those who are mining."

The Aravallis, one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world, estimated to be between two- to three billion years old, stretches from Gujarat to Haryana, acting as a climate regulator.

With unregulated mining now the norm across the Aravalli belt, the recent Supreme Court judgment permitting a narrow, elevation-based definition would have given a free hand to the very people who are destroying this mountain chain.

Massive protests erupted against the verdict that redefined these hills. Following the outcry, the court stayed its own order and directed the formation of a new committee. Sadly, this comprised only of government officials with no independent members. Activists and environmentalists have urged the Chief Justice of India to constitute a fresh independent committee to define the Aravalli hills. The deadline to submit a report on the definition of the hills is 31 August.

The Modi government seems perfectly immune to the destruction of ecosystems across three states and the exposure of millions to respiratory disease, silicosis and pollution-related illnesses. Anything to keep the mining and real estate lobby happy. ■

The impunity with which the mining mafia is operating is evident from the attack on women taking part in anti-mining protests



"We had to come, for the sake of the children"

► Continued from page 1

Amitabh tells me: "Whether it's a train accident or a paper leak, nobody is willing to take responsibility. I don't know whether the BJP will succeed or not, but I've come to support the students."

On 22 June, Khushi arrived at Jantar Mantar with her sister. Students of classes 11 and 12, they tell me: "We know how the BJP wins, our mother is a BJP leader. During the Delhi elections, money was sent to her so that people in the neighbourhood could be paid in exchange for votes."

Her sister interjects: "People shouldn't vote for the BJP!"

They are residents of Shadipur in west Delhi. They finished their household chores, argued with family members to land up in Jantar Mantar.

Pakhi and her friend came to Jantar Mantar for the first time on 23 June. Both are fresh graduates from Lady Sri Ram College, Delhi University. "If protests can bring change in countries across the world, why not in India?" Pakhi says.

Is she afraid of a backlash? "In April, a video of our college principal was shared on a BJP social media page. We launched a movement against it. If the principal has the right to express her views, so do we. Since then, we are no longer afraid."

Not everyone here is a sympathiser, though. There are troublemakers in the mix, who try to infiltrate, disturb and provoke. When Mike-wielding warriors of the media corps enter the crowd and ask provocative questions to inflame tensions, groups of young protesters respond with chants of "Godi Media Go Back!"

On the evening of 23 June,

Ambedkarite youth influencer Nishu's father was injured in a scuffle. Nishu runs the Instagram account 'Voice of Nishu' (300,000+ followers). She has been visiting Jantar Mantar with her father, covering the protest, and encouraging people to attend. She believes that's the reason she and her father were attacked. The protesters know that influencers like Nishu are real allies, helping them spread the message.

"The police have orders from above to end this movement by any means," says Danish, joint secretary of the JNU Students' Union. "Sometimes the water supply is cut off, sometimes electricity. Sometimes barricades are used to stop people from entering."

Neha Bora, national president of left-wing student union AISA, says this movement was inevitable. "The level of repression and violence this government has unleashed has crossed all limits. There is immense frustration over unemployment, a hollowed-out economy, the violence against Dalits, Muslims and women. The Opposition must think about how to channel the anger of the youth."

Jantar Mantar Day 4 of the student protest is smaller than on Day 1, but the enthusiasm is undiminished. People are still flocking to the protest site. Ramesh Meena is from Nagaur in Rajasthan, Ashu is from Ludhiana. Many others like them are camping, day and night, at Jantar Mantar.

A seventy-year-old grandmother from Loni, Ghaziabad caught my eye. When I asked if her granddaughters had brought her here, she promptly said: "No, I brought them. I insisted. We had to come, for the sake of the children." ■

What's on the plate?

Sourabh Sen decodes Bengal's new welfare paradigm

During his time as leader of the opposition and in the run-up to the 2026 assembly elections, Suvendu Adhikari frequently used the term 'sticker badal' (change of sticker) to ridicule Mamata Banerjee's welfare regime. Adhikari's contention was that Banerjee merely repackaged central schemes like Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana as Banglar Bari or Pathashree. Adhikari wouldn't tire of saying that the TMC was all about replacing the old sticker with a new one to claim ownership of the scheme.

Now that he is chief minister, Adhikari is either renaming those very programmes or dismantling them. Where a new scheme (like Ayushman Bharat) is replacing an old one (Swasthya Sathi), the new administration's message is that they are not just changing the stickers but fundamentally altering how the welfare programme is targeted and funded. Vying for attention are 90-odd social welfare schemes of the Mamata Banerjee government at an annual outlay of nearly Rs 1.8 lakh crore, or 45 per cent of budgetary expenditure.

The BJP government has retained that expenditure envelope while replacing the TMC's Bengali nomenclature—*Lakshmi* (pronounced *Lokshir* in Bengal), *Swasthya Sathi*, *Banglar Yuwa* (with Hindu/Hindu-coded names like *Annappurna*) or PM-branded central schemes. The outlays have been retained but attributions and name associations redirected.

This makeover of welfare schemes became clear in the maiden budget of new state finance minister Swapan Dasgupta presented on 22 June. The budget pivoted significantly toward aligning with central policies, aggressive job creation and real estate and industrial deregulation. The major policy shift involves the 'double engine' integration, which officials estimate has unlocked nearly Rs 40,000 crore in previously withheld or paused central funds.

For example, the highly popular Lakshmi Bhandar women's cash transfer scheme has transitioned to Annapurna Yojana with the benefit

going up from Rs 1,000 to Rs 3,000 per month. But the beneficiary base has shrunk. A strict biometric/voter data verification exercise has removed nearly 30 lakh names, branding them 'fake' or 'ineligible'. There are eligibility hurdles as well, which have changed the no-strings-attached, universal nature of Lakshmi Bhandar. Development economist Abhiroop Sarkar says, "Direct benefit transfer schemes around the world work on the principle of universal coverage. The idea is to include everyone, even ineligible benefi-

ciaries, to ensure that nobody, not a single eligible beneficiary is left out." He cautions that tight and complicated eligibility criteria will keep a large number of genuine beneficiaries out of the welfare net. The exclusion of 30 lakh women validates Sarkar's apprehension. Simple arithmetic shows that with an outlay of Rs 36,000 crore, the Annapurna Yojana can provide the promised Rs 3,000 to one crore women—a sharp drop from the 2.4 crore beneficiaries under Lakshmi Bhandar.

Similarly, the transition from a fully state-funded Swasthya Sathi to the central Ayushman Bharat will shift nearly 1.43 crore low income families to the 60:40 central-state fund-sharing arrangement. More importantly, this will mean a shift from an insurance-based health system (Swasthya Sathi) to an assurance-based model. While each model has its own benefits and lacunae, managing the transition is going to be critical.

Among other welfare measures, West Bengal has now adopted the central PMAY-G (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana—Gramin) with an allocation of Rs 13,000 crore to construct 2.5 million rural homes. Rural jobs are being heavily backed by the rollout of the VB-GRAM with an allocation of Rs 14,000 crore, a managerial change since

Adhikari has set in motion his own version of 'sticker badal'. Or as the wit remarked: "The pot calling the kettle black"



It's mid-day meal time in a government primary school on the outskirts of Kolkata

suspended in 2021.

The most contentious change involves the mid-day meal for school children not just because of the enormity of the shift but also the inherent socio-political symbolism. The budget details a pilot project in partnership with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) to prepare, supply and manage mid-day meals in government-run schools in Kolkata municipal areas.

Historically, the state prioritised decentralised, localised setups, with meals prepared directly inside school kitchens by local women's self-help groups (SHGs) and individual cook-cum-helpers rather than oversized, centralised kitchens. "Managing a mid-day meal in rural Bengal will be a huge logistical challenge. Only big. The mid-day meal is a government obligation. NGOs like ISKCON should concentrate on their own work," Sarkar points out.

ISKCON's strict vegetarianism too has sparked controversy by replacing eggs with soyabean and rajma. State school education minister Dipak Barman supports vegetarian meals, and has said, "Egg is not the only source of protein for schoolchildren. Many people worldwide are vegetarians and they do not suffer any protein deficiency."

While BJP neo-converts welcome the initiative, Bengal sees this as a cultural invasion by Hindi-speaking north Indians and a ploy to change the dietary habits of a population where 99 per cent are non-vegetarians. "Imposing a vegetarian diet on primary schoolchildren can change their food habits. Problems can also crop up when what they eat in school is different from what they eat at home," says a government schoolteacher in Kolkata on condition of anonymity.

According to CPI-M state committee member Shatarup Ghosh, the introduction of vegetarian food in primary schools is part of the BJP's Hindutva project. Talking to *National Herald*, he says: "Wherever they are elected, the BJP tries to impose a particular kind of culture, a particular way of worship and cuisine. The issue is not about changing the menu. The BJP is trying to change the food habits of Bengal's children." ■

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

Jumping through hoops for debt relief

Jaideep Hardikar on yet another farm loan waiver scheme in Maharashtra that promises more than it can deliver

The farmer in Maharashtra has seen this before. The state government announces a farm loan waiver scheme and trumpets it as big relief. Then come the confusing terms and conditions. And then the digital rollout beyond his comprehension. It's no different this time.

The eligibility criteria of the 'Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar Shetkari Karjmuksi Yojana', announced with much fanfare earlier this month by Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis, has left the farmers befuddled. It has come after much delay, imperilling their chances of getting fresh crop loans from banks even as sowing operations commence for the kharif season.

Farmer organisations are up in arms against the scheme, which they say is more a stunt, and the government has now set up a sub-committee to rework conditions, further delaying its rollout. Maharashtra's latest 'Karjmuksi Yojana' is the handiwork of a committee constituted in November 2025 to recommend how farmers could be rid of their outstanding loans.

This is Maharashtra's fourth farm loan waiver since 2017—in itself an admission that despite three previous efforts, the state's farmers have been unable to escape the debt trap. "This waiver is more propaganda than anything else," veteran farmer leader Vijay Jawandhia told *National Herald*. The real issue is their paltry and sagging income, despite prime minister Narendra Modi's grandstanding about doubling farm incomes.

"Unless the Centre implements its promise to increase minimum support prices, the endless cycle of debt won't end," Jawandhia says. When fuel and fertiliser prices are skyrocketing and the price of farm produce stagnating, how will the farmer survive, he asks.

The immediate worry is: will farmers with unpaid loans get fresh crop loans if the scheme is delayed? If they are denied bank loans, more likely than not, their only recourse will be private lenders, who will charge usurious rates of interest.

"Banks still don't have clarity about the rules, because there are myriad eligibility conditions," says Nitin Khadse, a cotton

farmer in Jalka, Yavatmal. "Our worry is that unless old loans are settled, we won't get new loans for the coming season."

The latest Karjmuksi Yojana provides for a waiver of up to Rs 2 lakh per farmer for short-term crop loans. To qualify, the loan must have been disbursed between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2025, remained overdue on 30 September 2025, and not have been repaid by 31 March 2026. The waiver applies to the combined outstanding amount of principal and interest, irrespective of the farmer's landholding. The government has also included restructured and re-restructured crop loans that were converted into medium-term loans, acknowledging that many farmers had already undergone debt restructuring before slipping back into default.

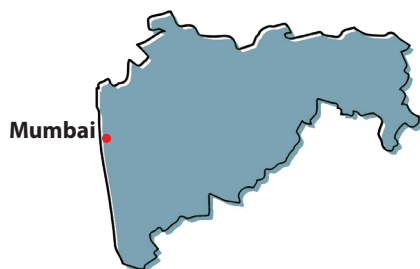
The most contentious provision concerns farmers who had already benefited under the 'Mahatma Jyotirao Phule Shetkari Karjmuksi Yojana' of 2019. Farmers who benefited under earlier waivers may not receive the full benefit this time. As per the government resolution: Such farmers will not receive another waiver of up to Rs 2 lakh. They are eligible for relief of only up to Rs 50,000. The government is apparently concerned about granting repeated waivers to the same borrowers, but it has caused great resentment in rainfed regions like Vidarbha and Marathwada, where repeated crop failures due to climate factors, pest attacks, lack of irrigation and the double whammy of declining incomes and much higher input costs have pushed farmers back into debt despite earlier relief.

The scheme contains another important limitation. Farmers whose overdue loans exceed Rs 2 lakh will not automatically receive the full benefit. They must first pay the amount due above Rs 2 lakh from their own resources to qualify for a one-time-settlement (OTS) benefit, with the government bearing the burden of Rs 2 lakh. The same principle applies to those eligible for the Rs 50,000 concession: they must first clear dues in excess of that amount before receiving government assistance.

Photo: Getty Images



A hurdle race for relief Maharashtra's new Karjmuksi Yojana is not really a loan waiver scheme; it's a debt-relief programme with strings attached



Maharashtra has seen four farm loan waivers since 2017, in itself an admission that the three earlier efforts didn't help its farmers escape the debt trap

The deadline for such settlements is 31 March 2027, as per current terms.

In other words, the scheme will not bring relief to the most indebted farmers. A cultivator who owes, say, Rs 3 to 4 lakh must find other means to repay a big chunk before qualifying for relief. Most will fail to do that and become ineligible for relief under the new scheme.

The OTS is a bizarre idea. Kerala did this far more efficiently in the 2007-2010 period. It set up a farmers' commission to negotiate case-to-case settlements with banks for far lower amounts, the way red-flagged corporate accounts do. Maharashtra has not done this.

Meanwhile, amid concerns over the state's growing fiscal deficit, with its debt crossing Rs 11 lakh crore, the state government on 22 June sought the legislature's nod for supplementary demands of Rs 97,706 crore. This, on the first day of the monsoon session, within months of tabling the budget. Fadnavis, who also holds the finance portfolio since the death of Ajit Pawar, told the House that Rs 20,552 crore out of the supplementary demands would be allocated to the farm loan waiver scheme.

The government estimates that the scheme will benefit 56 lakh farmers at a cost of Rs 36,000 crore. As stated above, this is not a farm loan waiver as much as a conditional debt-relief programme with various strings attached. An incentive structure has been built in to reward 'honest borrowers' as opposed to 'habitual defaulters': those who repaid their loans in

at least two of the agricultural years between 2022-23 and 2024-25 will receive an incentive of up to Rs 50,000. Small borrowers, whose loans were less than Rs 50,000, are assured a minimum incentive of Rs 5,000.

The scheme covers loans from private banks, nationalised banks, regional rural banks, district central cooperative banks and certain other cooperative credit institutions. But access to benefits is also tied to a new layer of digital verification. Apart from mandatory Aadhaar authentication, registration on the 'Agri Stack' farmer database is also mandatory. The scheme is to be implemented digitally, which is another reason farmers fear exclusion, their wariness stemming from experience.

The debt waiver programmes of 2017, 2019 and 2022 ran into problems due to digital verification processes. Quietly hidden within the government resolution is a proposal to build a 'Sahakar Stack' or Cooperative Stack. The stated objective is to integrate farmer records, credit histories and cooperative institutions in a common digital framework.

The longer-term ambition appears to be the creation of a database for agricultural credit and cooperative governance in Maharashtra. But this is rich coming from a government that doled out the Ladki Bahin Yojana—promising unconditional, monthly financial aid of Rs 2,000 to women, ahead of the 2024 assembly elections only to restructure the scheme later to eliminate over one crore beneficiaries. ■

The cloud that drains the ground

Is India ready to support its booming AI data centres, their 'rapacious appetite' for land, water and electricity?

Herjinder

India's digital revolution is often portrayed as clean, futuristic and almost weightless. Artificial intelligence, cloud computing and digital services appear to exist in an invisible world. Yet behind this image stands an enormous physical infrastructure of warehouses packed with servers, cooling systems, power stations and transmission lines.

Local communities across the United States, Europe and Southeast Asia have now begun resisting new data centre projects. Residents are protesting what they describe as the industry's 'rapacious need for water, electricity and land'. However, India is moving rapidly toward becoming one of the world's largest data centre hubs, raising an uncomfortable question: can digital ambitions coexist with ecological realities?

Driven by rising demand for artificial intelligence and cloud services India's data centre capacity is expected to expand dramatically, rising from ~1.4 gigawatts in 2025 to ~17 gigawatts by 2030.

Central and state governments have rolled out incentives to attract global technology giants such as Google, Amazon and Microsoft. These include long tax holidays, exemptions from electricity duties, concessional land allotments and subsidies on water and infrastructure, and in some cases, relaxation of environmental safeguards. Reports surrounding Google's proposed facility in Andhra Pradesh suggest that environmental impact assessment requirements were diluted or waived.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly described data centres as major employment generators, inviting "the whole world's data to reside in India". However, critics point out how this is an overstated promise. Once operational, hyperscale data centres usually require a small workforce consisting mainly of technicians, engineers and maintenance staff. Compared to manufacturing industries, they generate limited long-term employment despite occupying vast tracts of land and consuming enormous quantities of resources.

A water guzzler like no other

Data centres generate intense heat and



An AI-generated inside view of a data centre

require constant cooling to prevent equipment failure. A typical 100 megawatt facility using evaporative cooling can consume between 800,000 and two million litres of water daily—sufficient to meet the daily needs of thousands of households.

A number of these data centres are being built in regions already facing water stress. India's second largest data centre hub after Mumbai—with 42 operational or under-construction facilities—is coming up in Hyderabad, a city projected to face a water deficit of nearly 909 million litres per day within the next few years. Despite these concerns, major cloud companies continue expanding their presence there. Experts warn that during prolonged summers and heatwaves, data centres could increasingly compete for scarce water resources with residents, industries and agriculture.

A similar situation is emerging in Visakhapatnam, where investments by Google and Reliance are transforming the city into a major digital infrastructure hub. Groundwater levels in parts of the district have already fallen significantly, raising concerns about future sustainability.

Mumbai and Navi Mumbai together host the country's largest concentration of data centres, with approximately 84 facilities either operational or under development. Industry representatives often argue that coastal facilities can use seawater for

cooling, thereby reducing dependence on freshwater sources. However, the industry remains notably opaque regarding actual water consumption patterns.

They are also ignorant of the environmental costs of using seawater for cooling. Thermal pollution from discharged water can disrupt marine ecosystems, while chemical treatments and potential leakages pose additional risks to coastal habitats.

Perhaps the most revealing comparison comes from Gurgaon and Noida.

Gurgaon, widely known as north India's cyber city and home to numerous multinational technology companies, has only a handful of operational data centres. On the other hand Noida and Greater Noida, despite having a smaller information technology ecosystem, have emerged as major data centre destinations.

One only has to look beneath the ground for an explanation. In Gurgaon, groundwater levels have fallen to between 34 and 38 metres. In parts of Noida, groundwater remains available at much shallower depths of 20 metres. Water availability, not digital infrastructure alone, determines the geography of India's data economy.

The electricity challenge

Data centres require uninterrupted 24x7 power supply. Although companies frequently highlight renewable energy commitments, the reality is that these facilities create continuous baseload demand that renewable sources alone often struggle to meet.

In Mumbai, rising electricity demand from data centres contributed to decisions that extended the operations of ageing coal-fired power plants. The environmental burden falls disproportionately upon communities living near these facilities. Residents in areas such as Mahul have long complained of respiratory illness, cancer and other health problems linked to industrial pollution.

Companies also instal a large number of industrial diesel generators capable of running entire facilities during power outages. Environmental scientists have warned that these generators could worsen the already dangerous levels of urban air pollution.

The physical footprint of data centres also carries social consequences.

Agricultural land, orchards and even settlements are being acquired for these projects. In Telangana, concerns have emerged over the acquisition of land originally distributed to landless Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe families. As data infrastructure expands questions of livelihood security and displacement are becoming increasingly important.

Beyond water, land and energy lies another growing challenge: electronic waste.

Artificial intelligence hardware evolves rapidly, with processors often becoming obsolete within two to five years. According to researchers, generative AI technologies alone could produce an estimated millions of tonnes of electronic waste globally by 2030.

India's informal recycling sector already handles much of the country's electronic waste through unsafe dismantling and burning practices. Heavy metals, toxic chemicals and dioxins can contaminate soil, groundwater and air. As one researcher observed, the AI boom may eventually fade, but the waste it leaves behind could persist for decades.

India's digital future may be inevitable, but its environmental consequences are not. Mandatory use of treated wastewater, closed-loop cooling systems and non-potable water sources could significantly reduce pressure on freshwater reserves.

Greater transparency regarding resource consumption and stronger participation by local governments could ensure that communities have a voice in decisions affecting their land and resources.

Another important question raised by environmentalists deserves serious attention: Are these data centres genuinely enhancing national sovereignty, or are they merely hosting global corporate infrastructure within India?

The answer will shape India's digital future. The country's pursuit of artificial intelligence and cloud computing must not come at the cost of depleted aquifers, coal dependence and worsening environmental inequality. The choices made over the next decade will determine whether India's data centre boom becomes a sustainable foundation for digital growth or remains a silicon mirage built upon exhausted landscapes and disappearing water. ■

Of empty nests and ageing parents

Kerala's proposal of a dedicated department for senior citizens prompts a closer look at the psychological cost of changing demographics

K.A. Shaji

Rajesh Thiruvalla was abandoned long before he began caring for people abandoned by others. The founder of Mahatma Janasevana Kendram in Adoor in Kerala's Pathanamthitta district, Rajesh's childhood was marked by rejection, poverty and emotional neglect. His parents remarried, leaving him to survive on the generosity of distant relatives as he moved from one house to another. Hunger was a recurring reality. Formal education became a luxury. He dropped out of school and spent years doing menial jobs in different parts of India.

Life changed unexpectedly when he returned to Kerala and found work in an old-age home near his village. There, his empathy towards elderly residents who had been rejected by their own families drew attention. Visitors noticed his patience. Residents trusted him. Among those who recognised his commitment was a senior IAS officer who approached Rajesh with an unusual request: would he care for a 107-year-old relative who had no one to look after her? Rajesh agreed. What began as a simple act of compassion gradually evolved into a much larger humanitarian mission.

Today, Mahatma Janasevana Kendram is one of Kerala's largest shelters for abandoned senior citizens. Of its 370+ residents, many were thrown out by their own families. "Old age homes are mushrooming in Kerala, where senior citizens are increasingly turning into liabilities," says Rajesh.

His remark is uncomfortable because it challenges the cherished image of Kerala as a society where family bonds remain strong. What it points to is one of the most profound demographic transformations in India. The generation that contributed to the state's celebrated development model is now ageing rapidly, often in circumstances marked by loneliness, vulnerability and uncertainty.

The urgency of the situation has prompted the V.D. Satheesan government to announce a landmark intervention: a separate department exclusively for senior citizens. It proposes an integration

of healthcare, rehabilitation, social protection and community support within a single administrative framework.

According to data from the Kerala State Planning Board, in 1961, those aged sixty and above comprised only 5.1 per cent of the state's population, slightly below the national average of 5.6 per cent. Over the next decades, Kerala rapidly overtook the national average: 10.5 per cent against 7.5 per cent (2001); 12.6 per cent against 8.6 per cent (2011); 13.1 per cent against 8.3 per cent (2015).

Today, Kerala is home to nearly 48 lakh senior citizens. Fifteen per cent of them are super-senior citizens (80-plus). Women outnumber men, with Census figures indicating that 23 per cent of women between 60-69 are



Restoring dignity Seniors at the Mahatma Janasevana Kendram in Adoor

above 70, the figure rises to 43.06 per cent. Remember that Kerala also enjoys the highest life expectancy in India—estimated at 72.5 years for men and 77.8 years for women—a reflection of improved healthcare and living conditions that now present new social challenges.

Professor S. Irudaya Rajan, former Professor at the Centre for Development Studies and chairman of the International Institute of Migration and Development, has spent decades studying the implications of these changes. Through the Kerala Ageing Surveys and other longitudinal research initiatives, he has documented a phenomenon more commonly associated with developed countries.

The departure of younger generations has transformed family structures and caregiving arrangements. The weakening of traditional support systems, the rise of nuclear families and increasing geographical distance between parents and children have produced new vulnerabilities among older people. Rajan's studies reveal that ageing is accompanied by high levels of morbidity, disability and psychological distress.

Few places illustrate these realities more vividly than Kumbanad in Pathanamthitta district. Unlike regions whose prosperity was primarily built on

being as integral to quality of life rather than treating it as a secondary concern. According to health department figures, at least 270 elderly patients who have fully recovered medically continue to remain in government hospitals because their relatives have abandoned them. Preliminary assessments identified dozens of such patients in the Government Medical College Hospital in Thiruvananthapuram alone. Health Minister K. Muraleedharan has described the situation as a serious challenge for hospitals with too many patients and too few beds.

Hospitals with rehabilitation facilities, old-age homes are increasingly catering to diverse social groups, both rich and poor. Among them is Janaseva Gandhibhavan in Pathanamthitta district. Founded by Dr. Punalur Somarajan in 2002. "Our mission has always been to restore dignity to people who have nowhere else to go," says

Dr Somarajan. Kerala's response to ageing has seen many programmes: Vayomithram, which provides healthcare services; Vayo Amrutham, which extends health insurance benefits; Sayamprabha homes; Vayoraksha initiatives; Mandahasam, which provides dentures; and Sallapam, a telephone friendship programme intended to reduce loneliness. Policymakers realised, however, that ageing cannot be addressed through isolated schemes.

Minister C.P. John, who is expected to lead the proposed department for senior citizens, says that Kerala's response must move beyond viewing older people solely as recipients of welfare. Civil service officer Adeela Abdulla, involved in the preliminary groundwork, believes policy responses must emerge from lived experiences. The needs of widows differ from bedridden patients requiring inpatient care. Affluent ageing couples separated from migrant children face different challenges from economically vulnerable senior citizens. Effective interventions must reflect these distinctions.

The elders are not 'inmates', they are individuals who raised children, cultivated land, taught classrooms, healed patients...

See the writing on the wall, Mr PM?

Realpolitik 101 Some more insincere words of praise to make up for another quiet betrayal



Aakar Patel

On 17 June, it was reported that the 'US has renamed the Indo-Pacific Command back to the Pacific Command'. This news was announced by America's Department of War, alongside an incorrect map of Kashmir.

The same day, America's president met our prime minister in France and said Modi is "a very tough negotiator... You look at this man. He's the most beautiful-looking man. He looks so nice, like an angel. But actually, he's as tough as a killer... But he looks so good. So he gets you by surprise. There are few people like this."

These two 17 June stories are somewhat related. Here is how. In February 2018, during Donald Trump's first term, America wrote its strategy for the region it began to call the Indo-Pacific. The aim was 'to maintain US strategic primacy... while preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence'. The Americans wanted India to 'act as a counterbalance to China'. This 'desired end state' the US sought was to be 'India's preferred partner on security issues', and 'the two cooperate to preserve maritime security and counter China's influence'.

Over a couple of pages, the US laid out the plan of how it would make India a 'major defence partner' and how 'a strong Indian military (would) effectively collaborate with the United States'. The document also laid out what was intended to be done with China: prevent it from 'harming US competitiveness' and 'prevent China's acquisition of military and strategic capabilities'.

Why was India signing up for this? It is not known. With no discussion in Parliament, no interviews to the media, no press conferences, and no reference to this in his manifestos, Modi took India into a strategic partnership



Narendra Modi and Donald Trump at the G7 summit

The question that begs an answer now is what did India gain from signing up for a casual adventure

and military alliance with the US against China. In February 2020, during Donald Trump's famous visit to India and days before the Galwan Valley crisis, Modi committed India to this agreement, essentially ranged against China, and began to execute it.

On 27 October 2020, during the visit of US secretary of state Mike Pompeo, India signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). It would help India access US intelligence to improve the accuracy of the Indian army's missiles and armed drones. Another agreement signed was the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). It allowed

the militaries of the two nations to replenish from each other's bases and access supplies, spare parts and services from each other's land facilities, air bases and ports.

Signing the BECA pact in Delhi, Pompeo attacked China directly: "I am glad to say that the United States and India are taking steps to strengthen cooperation against all manner of threats and not just those posed by the Chinese Communist Party."

Secretary of defence Mark Esper said: "We stand shoulder to shoulder, in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific for all, particularly in light of increasing aggression and destabilising activities by China."

Our defence minister Rajnath Singh, external affairs minister S. Jaishankar, standing next to Pompeo and Esper, did not name China. Rajnath Singh's prepared remarks (which were later changed) contained the line, later deleted: "Excellencies, in the area of defence we are challenged by reckless aggression on our northern borders." Exhibiting the usual incompetence, this change was not given to the Indian translator in English, who read out the original text, and the Americans released it.

When the paper on America's strategy was declassified three months later, China said 'its content only serves to expose the malign intention of the United States to use its Indo-Pacific strategy to suppress and contain China and undermine regional peace and stability'. It added: 'The US side is obsessed with ganging up, forming small cliques and resorting to despicable means such as wedge-driving, which fully exposed its true face as a troublemaker undermining regional peace,

stability, solidarity and cooperation'. India did not react to the release of the document.

Another pact, signed weeks after America's Indo-Pacific strategy was written, was the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). It allowed India access to encrypted communications equipment and systems so that Indian and US military commanders, and the aircraft and ships of the two countries, could communicate through secure networks. BECA, LEMOA and COMCASA completed a triad of 'foundational pacts' for deep military cooperation between the two nations.

COMCASA was signed in September 2018, five months after Modi travelled to Wuhan to meet President Xi Jinping. As per that agreement signed on 28 April 2018, India and China would not be rivals but cooperate with each other. They would 'push forward bilateral trade and investment'.

The problem, obvious to anyone, was that, whether he fully understood it or not, Modi was running with the hare and hunting with the hound. At the same time as he was holding hands with Xi, he was also winking at Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy to contain China. Xi's calculated response was to activate the Ladakh border so that India's military focus and resources would remain on land and not sea.

We have seen the effects of that in the past six years, with a border that remains tense and militarised and a trade balance so totally in China's favour that we cannot correct despite our efforts.

In his second term, Trump lost interest in his Indo-Pacific strategy. The headline announcing the dropping of the name was only the final, symbolic ending.

The question now is what did we gain from signing up for this casual adventure that was so expensive? The answer is, of course, the second story from 17 June: we got patted on the head and were praised.

Views are personal

93.71% YOY PROFIT SURGE: HOW HUTTI GOLD MINES SCRIPTED A HISTORIC RS 844-CRORE TRIUMPH

Modernizing India's ancient heritage while setting a new blueprint for public sector excellence.

For decades, the discourse around State Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) has been weighed down by scepticism. Critics frequently argue that government-run enterprises lack the agility to navigate volatile international markets or the technological foresight to overcome deep structural bottlenecks. However, the spectacular financial and the operational turnaround of the Hutti Gold Mines Company Limited (HGML) has completely upended this narrative. By posting a record-breaking net profit of Rs 844.71 crore for the Financial Year 2025–26—marking an astonishing ten-fold profit explosion compared to a decade ago—this Karnataka government undertaking has emerged as a shining beacon of self-reliance, strategic foresight, and fiscal discipline. In an era focused on optimizing domestic mineral wealth, HGML serves as a model for public sector efficiency, successfully navigating global macroeconomic trends while maintaining strict control over internal operational costs.

DEEP ROOTS: THE ANCIENT ORIGINS AND FIRE-SETTING

To understand the magnitude of Hutti's modern success, one must look back over 2,000 years to the pre-Ashokan era. The Hutti region, nestled within the Raichur district of Karnataka, holds the extraordinary distinction of being home to some of the oldest deep-level metal mining sites in human history.

Kolar Gold Fields (KGF) into a global powerhouse. John Taylor & Sons replaced fire-setting with dynamite blasting, introduced electrical hoisting winches, and sank formal vertical shafts deep into the earth.



Photo: AI generated image

Long before industrial drills or chemical reagents existed, ancient Indian miners possessed an astonishing understanding of structural geology. They identified the auriferous (gold-bearing) quartz veins running through the stubborn, dark amphibolite rocks of the Hutti-Maski greenstone belt. To break this incredibly dense host rock, these early pioneers engineered a sophisticated technique known as "fire-setting." Miners lit intense fires directly against the exposed underground rock walls.

Once the rock faces reached a blistering heat, they were suddenly doused with cold water. The resulting thermal shock caused the quartzite ore walls to crack and fracture. Using primitive iron chisels and stone hammers, workers chipped away the loosened ore, hauled it to the surface in woven baskets, and crushed it into fine powder.

To extract the gold, the crushed sediment was washed over greased goat skins, which trapped the heavy gold particles while allowing waste materials to float away. Remarkably, using these labor-intensive methods, ancient miners pushed their shafts to a staggering depth of nearly 600 feet—a feat unparalleled in the ancient world.

THE ERA OF EXPANSION: FROM THE NIZAM TO STATE OWNERSHIP

The dawn of industrialized mining at Hutti began in 1886 under the patronage of the Nizam of Hyderabad. The Nizam's government granted concession rights to the Hyderabad (Deccan)

Company, which handed management over to the legendary British mining engineering firm, John Taylor & Sons—the same firm that transformed the

Kolar Gold Fields (KGF) into a global powerhouse. John Taylor & Sons replaced fire-setting with dynamite blasting, introduced electrical hoisting winches, and sank formal vertical shafts deep into the earth.

Between 1886 and 1920, machinery pushed primary shafts down past 1,100 meters, yielding approximately 7,400 kg of gold. However, the economic fallout of World War I, technical challenges with underground flooding, and a shortage of working capital forced operations to grind to a halt in 1920.

The shafts lay dark and silent for over two decades until 1947, when the Nizam's government reactivated the asset as the Hyderabad Gold Mines Company. Following the linguistic reorganization of states in 1956, the Hutti region was integrated into Mysore State (later renamed Karnataka) and restructured as a state PSU: HGML. When the iconic Kolar Gold Fields closed permanently in 2001 due to depleted reserves, Hutti assumed the profound national responsibility of being India's primary operational pillar for domestic public sector gold production.

The anatomy of a modern masterpiece: Hutti's financial metamorphosis

To fully appreciate the scale of HGML's recent success, one must look at the corporate

trajectory of the last ten years. For a significant part of the past decade, Hutti's net profits remained modest, constrained by low international bullion prices and the steep costs of managing aging underground infrastructure.

In FY 2016–17, the company registered a net profit after tax of just over Rs 31.57 crore. By FY 2019–20, systematic governance reforms pushed profits to Rs 175.24 crore, before the COVID-19 pandemic introduced labor constraints and supply-chain shocks.

The subsequent rebound has been spectacular. Under proactive administrative stewardship, net profits surged from Rs 239.45 crore in FY 2023–24 to Rs 433.62 crore in FY 2024–25, culminating in the historic Rs 844.71 crore windfall in FY 2025–26—an extraordinary 93.71% year-on-year growth in profitability.

What makes this performance an elite industrial achievement is that it was paired with near-perfect production consistency. During FY 2025–26, HGML extracted 1,691.57 kg of primary gold, achieving 99.5% of its ambitious annual production target (1,700 kg).

RIDING THE MACROECONOMIC WAVE

In deep-level mining, the most challenging natural adversary is the "grade effect." Decades ago, the mine yielded 4 to 5 grams of gold per tonne of rock. Today, the average recovery grade hovers around 2.61 grams per tonne. Mechanically, the company must crush and treat significantly more rock just to yield the same kilogram of gold, which dramatically

escalates overheads.

HGML countered this geological reality by maximizing its "price capture" during an unprecedented global bullion rally. Driven by global economic uncertainties, HGML's average gold selling price soared to approximately Rs 11,603 per gram, compared to Rs 7,645 per gram in the previous fiscal year—a staggering 34.11% price appreciation.

Because HGML disposes of its unrefined Gold Dore Bars through pricing mechanisms linked directly to the weekly average rates of the India Bullion and Jewellers Association (IBJA), management successfully captured 100% of these premium margins.

Furthermore, the company expanded supplementary revenue streams by extracting 145.76 kg of high-purity silver as an industrial by-product, selling it at an average price exceeding Rs 1.58 lakh per kg.

THE INDIGENOUS R&D TRIUMPH

A core element of HGML's sustained profitability is its groundbreaking partnership with the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru. While gold bound within quartz matrices is readily extracted using conventional cyanide leaching, a significant portion of Hutti's deep-level reserves is composed of refractory-sulfide ores, where gold is chemically locked inside stubborn matrices of arsenopyrite and pyrite.

Instead of relying on expensive, imported chemical pre-treatments, HGML deployed an advanced bio-metallurgical process utilizing the bacteria *Thiobacillus ferrooxidans*. This bio-leaching framework pre-oxidizes the stubborn sulfides under regulated environmental conditions, allowing HGML to secure its highest recovery level in five years' time when international prices hit their peak.

BEYOND THE BALANCE SHEET: SUSTAINABLE GOVERNANCE

True to public sector ideology, HGML's record profits have been seamlessly funneled back into worker welfare, local infrastructure, and sustainable community advancement under the guidance of the State Government.

Employee housing: The company executed a monumental township project, constructing 1,000 modern residential quarters for its workforce at an investment of Rs 1,000 crore, while expanding comprehensive health insurance for all employees and contractual workers.

Civic infrastructure: To address long-standing ecological challenges in the Raichur district, a Rs 135-crore drinking water project was implemented, providing purified water to the mining township and peripheral villages.

CSR expansion: The company increased its localized CSR corpus by Rs 2.5 crore, funding rural schools, primary healthcare centers, and regional skill development facilities.

Green transitions: To decarbonize its heavy energy footprint, the enterprise operates an 11.2 MW wind power project in Chitradurga and has initiated the tendering process for large-scale solar power arrays directly at the Hutti site.

BRIDGING INDIA'S CRITICAL MACRO GAP

On a macroeconomic scale, HGML's hyper-efficiency addresses one of India's most critical structural vulnerabilities. India remains the world's second-largest consumer of gold, with an insulation-proof annual demand ranging between 700 to 900 metric tonnes.

Although domestic extraction currently accounts for less than 1% of the country's massive gold demand—forcing an import bill that crossed USD 72 billion in recent cycles—HGML's profitability serves as an undeniable proof of concept. It proves that deep-level metal extraction in India can be globally competitive, highly profitable, and safe when backed by strong state support.

As the nation opens new frontiers—including the recent emergence of private open-cast investments like the Jonnagiri Gold Fields in Andhra Pradesh—the state-owned Hutti Gold Mines continues to stand as the grand patriarch of Indian mining.

The HGML's extraordinary Rs 844.71 crore net profit in FY 2025–26 proves that with prudent financial discipline, bold technological interventions, and an unwavering commitment to worker welfare, state public sector undertakings can outperform global benchmarks.

INNOVATION DEEP UNDERGROUND: THE MODERNIZATION DRIVE

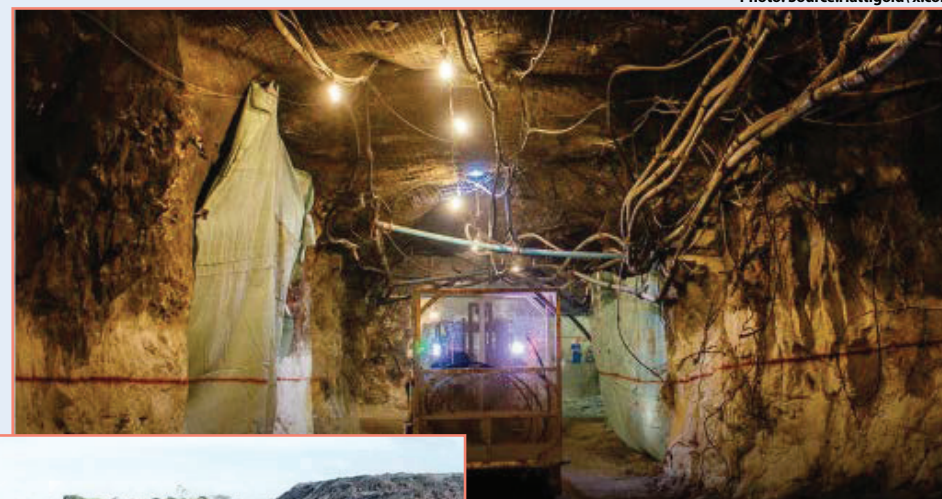
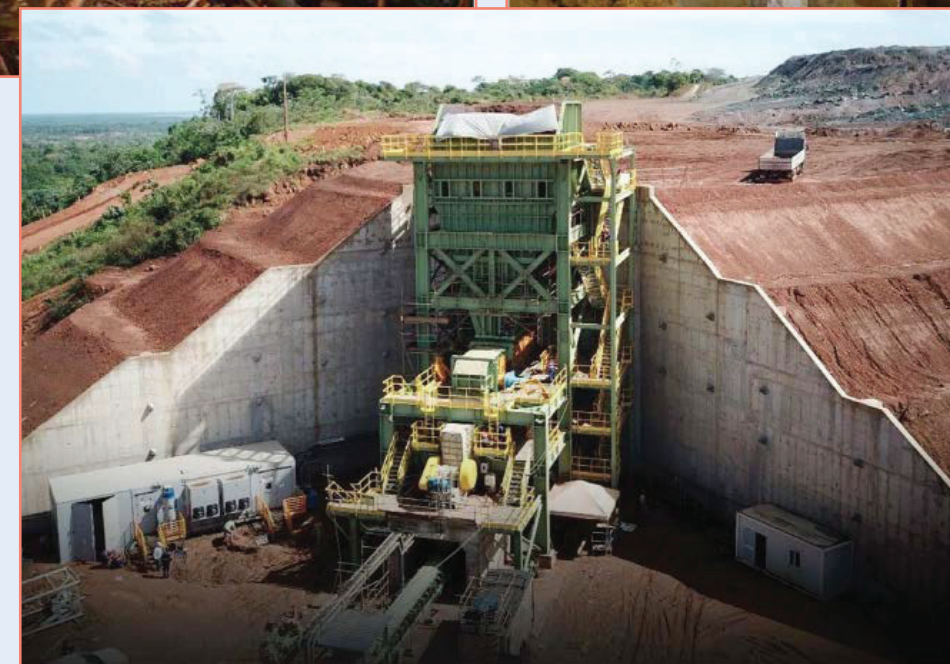


Photo: Source: Hattigoldl x.com

The true secret behind Hutti's longevity lies in its comprehensive, continuous modernization drive. Mining at depths exceeding 960 meters (stretching past the 31st mining level) requires high-tech, automated, and digitized engineering frameworks.

Upgrading the Hub-and-Spoke system: To counteract declining ore grades at the main Hutti unit, the company optimized a localized hub-and-spoke production system. Lower-grade surface ore from satellite open-cast units—such as Uti and Hira-Buddinni in Raichur, alongside exploration sites in Chitradurga (Ajjanahalli and G.R.Halli)—is transported to the centralized processing infrastructure at Hutti. This maximizes metallurgical plant utilization and ensures steady processing volumes.

Deep shaft automation: HGML replaced



older, manual hoisting equipment with high-speed, automated winding systems. These modern hoists drastically reduce the cycle time required to transport miners down and haul thousands of tonnes of blasted ore to the surface.

Advanced ventilation architecture: Operating nearly a kilometer beneath the surface generates extreme ambient rock temperatures. HGML installed high-capacity, energy-efficient ventilation fans and cooling networks to maintain safe working conditions.

Exploration precision: The company deployed modern diamond core drilling equipment and state-of-the-art 3D geological mapping software, allowing engineers to track the continuity of nine parallel reefs past a 3 km depth trajectory.



Can Israel survive Netanyahu?

Ashok Swain

As Israel approaches what could be the most consequential election in its 78-year history, a question once unthinkable is now being openly discussed: can Israel survive Netanyahu?

The question is no longer the political future of Israel's longest serving prime minister, but the future of Israel itself. Under Netanyahu, Israel has become more isolated internationally than ever before. An ICC (International Criminal Court) arrest warrant hangs over his head. Public opinion across much of the world, more importantly in countries that have been steadfast allies, has turned sharply against Netanyahu and the Zionist state of Israel. Even the United States, Israel's indispensable ally and principal benefactor, is showing signs of growing impatience.

Netanyahu is easily the most reviled, most despised political leader in the world today. Even Donald Trump, once his closest international partner and ally in confronting Iran, is now publicly rebuking him. Their recent disagreements over Israel's provocative strikes in Lebanon, which threatened belated US efforts to secure a deal with Iran, have created fissures in a relationship now increasingly defined by frustration more than trust. Among high-visibility world leaders, Narendra Modi appears to be the only one in support of his other 'good friend'.

Netanyahu is by far the most reviled leader in the world today. And Modi the only leader of note who still stands in his support

An Israeli television poll released this month reflects growing public exhaustion with Netanyahu's leadership. A majority of Israelis believe his conduct has harmed Israel's interests by jeopardising the peace talks.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu has concluded his testimony in an 18-month-long corruption trial, where he faces charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. The larger, extend well beyond his personal reputation or legal entanglements. In his desperation to stay alive politically, Netanyahu has inflicted unimaginable damage to Israel's global standing. He has undermined its long-term security and greatly weakened, if not fully destroyed, strategic partnerships.

The latest Pew Research survey should alarm every Israeli policymaker. Across 36 countries, a median of 67 per cent now hold unfavourable views of Israel. In many countries, including some of Israel's closest traditional partners, negative perceptions have reached record levels. Confidence in Netanyahu is even lower. Majorities across Europe, North America, Latin America and Asia express little or no confidence in him. Around the world, Netanyahu has become the face of Israel and the face of evil—and the blowback is inevitably singing Israel's reputation.

The reputational damage is not just a PR disaster. Israel's security is not just a PR disaster; it depends on legitimacy, alliances and international goodwill, all of which Netanyahu's leadership has thoroughly eroded.

Israel remains heavily dependent on American military assistance, diplomatic protection at the United Nations, intelligence cooperation and economic support. For decades, support for Israel was one of the few genuinely bipartisan issues in American politics. That consensus is now collapsing. Younger Americans view Israel more negatively than earlier generations. Support for Israel among Democrats has fallen sharply. Prominent American politicians are questioning the scale of US military assistance and diplomatic backing given to Israel.

No Israeli leader should be comfortable with this trajectory. Yet Netanyahu is risking Israel's most important strategic relationship to cling to power and the political immunity that comes with it. That is because the greatest threat facing him personally is not Iran nor Hamas and Hezbollah but peace.

For Netanyahu, peace is politically dangerous because peace will set in motion

the wheels of accountability. Peace will expose failures. Peace will redirect attention away from external enemies to the man who has dominated Israeli politics for nearly two decades.

It is this reality that is making Netanyahu dare and defy Trump. For years, Netanyahu pushed successive American administrations towards confrontation with Iran. He opposed diplomacy, attacked negotiations and portrayed any accommodation with Tehran as a threat to Israel's survival. When Trump returned to office, Netanyahu believed he had finally found an American president willing to embrace his vision of maximum pressure and military escalation.

The subsequent war with Iran appeared to validate Netanyahu's long-standing approach. But as the costs and risks of further escalation started dawning on him, Trump started looking for an exit strategy. Dreams of a peace agreement with Tehran, of restoring some stability to the region, of the possibility that he may still be able to claim credit for ending a dangerous conflict seem to have re-entered the Trump mindscapes.

For Netanyahu, on the other hand, a US peace deal with Iran will undermine the central political narrative he has spun for decades. It will diffuse the sense of permanent emergency on which his political relevance depends. Importantly, it will make Israelis focus on Netanyahu

Netanyahu dreads peace because peace in the region will mean a sharper focus at home on his role in making Israel a global pariah

in the region will mean a change of focus at home, and the spotlight will turn on the deadliest attack in Israel's history and on the leadership of a man who built his reputation on security. Israelis will question the strategy that allowed the attacks of 7 October 2023. They will ask why the hostages couldn't be brought home sooner, why no political solution is in sight even after the genocide in Gaza. And they will know who presided over Israel's global isolation.

A political career built on projecting unmatched credentials to protect Israel at all costs and on the Zionist geopolitical dream of creating a Greater Israel—envisioning a Jewish state with borders extending far beyond Israel's current territory—is coming unstuck.

What we are witnessing are the desperate attempts of the man in charge of that project to make the fantasy endure in the Israeli popular imagination.

When Israel votes later this year, its people will weigh the costs of nurturing this dream. They will probably worry how the country can rebuild legitimacy, repair alliances and reclaim a place in the world. The future of Israel might depend on whether the country can move beyond the man who has led them to their current predicament. ■

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



A global pariah A recent Global Attitudes Survey by Pew Research shows a median of 67% across 36 countries holding unfavourable views of Israel; a clear majority in 34 of the 36 nations surveyed lack confidence in Netanyahu

Why the UK premiership is such a hotseat

Ashis Ray on the political churn in the UK that has now seen the exit of six prime ministers in 10 years



Keir Starmer announces his resignation as UK Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party outside 10 Downing Street

Seven prime ministers in a decade, as the UK is about to witness, is quite a testimony to political instability. Britain is wrestling with itself and consequently, short-lived governments.

Since the Second World War, Clement Attlee, Winston Churchill, Harold Wilson (for six years with a snap election in between), Margaret Thatcher (for 11 years), John Major (for seven years with an election in the middle), Tony Blair (for a decade before he voluntarily stepped down) and David Cameron have completed five years or more as prime minister.

After being re-elected in 2015, Cameron proceeded with an election manifesto promise of a referendum on Britain's continued membership of the European Union. This had been a very fractious issue in his Conservative party since the 1980s. A

pro-Europe politician among sceptics, he was sanguine his popularity would put the matter at rest once and for all. But he was in for a shock.

The vote not only divided his party and government but the country as a whole. Cameron had underestimated the challenge posed by party colleague Boris Johnson and the ultra-nationalist brigade and joint forces with him. He did not take into account the fact that the leader of the opposition Labour party, Jeremy Corbyn, belonged to the 1970s era of left-wingers opposed to the European Common Market, as the EU was then known. Corbyn officially supported the 'Remain' campaign but half-heartedly at best. The verdict: Brexit!

In June 2016, Cameron quit as prime minister. Theresa May succeeded him, but time and again her party MPs blocked

Starmer was a safe pair of hands but he lacked charisma and communication skills and failed to transmit his achievements

passage of Brexit bills in the House of Commons. Johnson was behind the machinations to thwart her. May was compelled to step down.

Having engineered a coup d'état, Johnson took over as prime minister in the summer of 2019. In December, he called a midterm election on the slogan of 'Get Brexit Done'. An exasperated British electorate lapped this up and extended a resounding endorsement. Johnson did get Brexit done, but his rushed deal was more unfavourable to the UK than anything May had proposed or negotiated.

His successor Liz Truss lasted 49 days, ousted after piloting a terrible budget. This so destabilised the bond markets in Britain that it almost brought the British economy crashing down, notwithstanding its sovereign AA rating for the S&P and Fitch.

With no takers for the premiership, Rishi Sunak, a rookie, who had been an MP for just seven years filled the void. He had been Johnson's chancellor, but resigned in the rebellion that ousted him.

Sunak steadied the boat and was at the helm for 20 months, but made no impression with the British people. He and the Conservatives were predictably wiped out when he called a vote in July 2024.

During the musical chairs—five prime ministers in six years—Labour recovered from its worst defeat under Corbyn in 2019 to a landslide victory, returning a tally of over 400 MPs in a House of 650, next only to the record set under Blair in 1997. Keir Starmer, a barrister and a former head of Britain's Crown Prosecution Service, made it happen, but he too came unstuck in less than two years.

Britain's right-wing news media went for his throat from Day 1. Starmer did not help matters by implementing some unpopular policies, which affected the elderly and children. The decision to increase employer contributions to National Insurance was also unpopular. His choice of Peter Mandelson—a controversial Labour grandee with links to convicted child sex offender Jeffrey Epstein—as the British ambassador to the United States

became one of the most serious political crises of Starmer's premiership.

Under Starmer, state school education and the National Health Service—important yardsticks of government performance in Britain—improved significantly. There was a record drop in immigration, a vexatious issue among white-working class Britons as also some Indian extraction immigrants, and a trigger for the rise of the far right Reform UK party.

Inflation eased but the economy didn't take off. Unemployment increased and wages didn't. The cost of living crisis persisted and became a theme.

Starmer was on the verge of pulling off a potential game-changer—a UK-EU summit, scheduled in July, to discuss a single market on goods trade. The British economy has suffered a devastating loss in trade turnover since Brexit that cannot be compensated by any free trade agreement with other countries or blocs.

Starmer was a safe pair of hands, but he lacked charisma and communication skills. His government failed to transmit its achievements to the British public. After the outcome of last month's local and regional elections, the writing was on the wall. A YouGov poll in May 2026 showed 69 per cent viewing Starmer unfavourably.

His MPs realised that with such ratings, Labour was not going to overcome the serious threat from Reform, nor from the Green Party (who had taken away hard left and Muslim votes) with its nextedly pro-Palestine stance, to win the next election in 2029, if Starmer was retained as prime minister.

So, Andy Burnham, until last week a popular mayor of Greater Manchester in northwest England and now elected to the Commons in a by-election, is odds-on favourite to step into Starmer's shoes, making him Britain's seventh prime minister in 10 years.

We'll learn in due course if the procession of UK prime ministers lengthens before the next general election—watch this space. ■

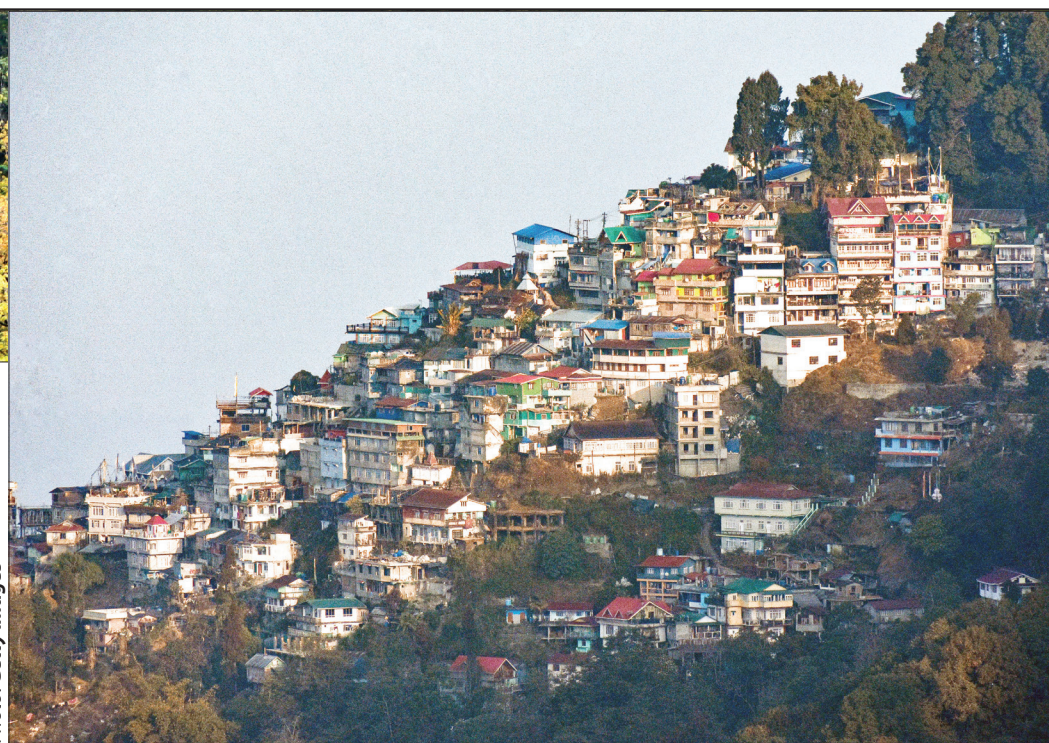
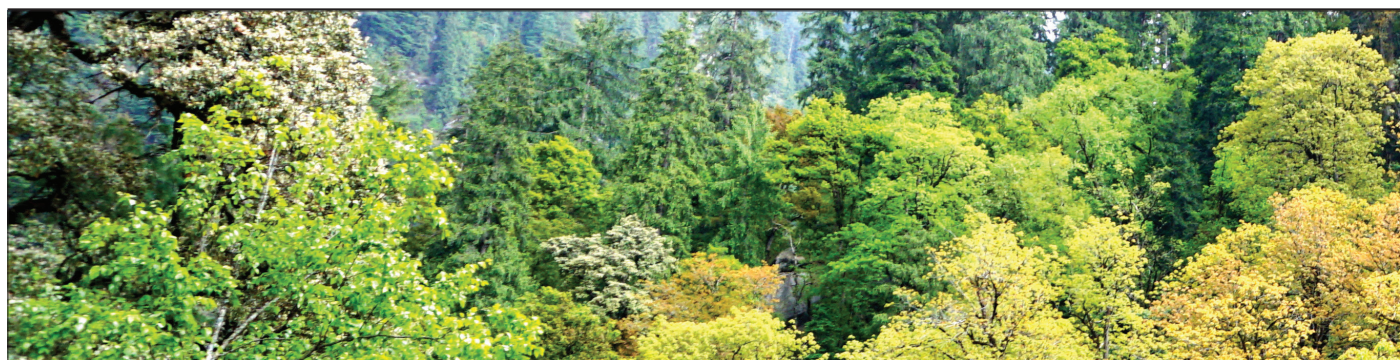


Photo: Getty Images

Where have all the dragonflies gone?

Avay Shukla on the alarming loss of biodiversity in the Himalayas

Biodiversity is perhaps the most unacknowledged component of the natural environment, and the attention of policymakers rarely goes beyond trees and animals, if even that. But biodiversity is much more than just trees and animals. It is the building block of nature, without which there would be no nature, or an inhabitable planet.

Biodiversity is the extraordinary variety of all living things on Earth. It encompasses plants, animals, micro-organisms, fungi and even pathogens, the genetic information they carry, and the complex ecosystems they create. I've learnt this the hard way, and am just beginning to understand it.

When I acquired my half acre land in Purani Koti village in 2002, there were only two houses here; the landscape comprised rolling, grassy hillsides with a few apple trees and some deodars and blue pines. My own plot was carpeted with wild daisies, buttercups, lilies and primroses. The place was practically overrun with bees, butterflies, cicadas and dragonflies, and there was a continuous buzzing on sunny days. The birds formed the next level on the food chain, and were in turn subordinate to feral cats and pine martins. Purani Koti was a biodiversity hotspot!

Not any more. Most of the land in the village has been built over, the trees felled, the buzzing of dragonflies replaced with the rasping of jackhammers and saws. To compensate, I have planted more than 200 trees on my land, of the fruit and jungle

varieties. But it has been of no avail, for trees alone on just one plot cannot create biodiversity.

The lowest tier of natural growth in the area—the grasses, bushes, ferns, wild flowers, creepers—have all gone, and the soil has lost its capacity to store rain and snow or to retain moisture.

With the disappearance of this living building block of nature, the insects that depended on it have also started vanishing. A few, very few, butterflies and bees still delight us, but I have not seen any dragonflies this year: I fear their niche has disappeared and they are gone for ever.

In a year or two, the bees and butterflies will also abandon this biodiverse wasteland. Which, along with global warming, probably explains why we can no longer grow the fruits—apples, pears, apricots, cherries—that we used to: with the biodiversity gone, there are no insects left to pollinate their flowers or birds to spread the seeds.

This loss of precious biodiversity is rarely factored into our planning and developmental processes. What is reluctantly considered (at most) is forest or green cover—i.e. the number of trees to be felled. These are quantified and valued, the amount paid by the project proponent and twice that number planted as compensatory afforestation. The loss of biodiversity is completely ignored, never compensated for.

Some figures from Himachal Pradesh

may better illustrate the point: the state's forest area is 37,000 sq. km (37 lakh hectares), and a 2024 study by the Bhopal Institute of Forest Management quantifies its annual biodiversity value at Rs 33,000 cr.

In other words, the biodiversity contribution value of every hectare is Rs 89,000 per annum. Working out its NPV over a typical 25- to 30-year life cycle of any project, the state should be charging at least Rs 30 lakh for every hectare of forest diverted for non-forest use. But this is not done because no value is attached to biodiversity.

This may, however, be changing globally, even as we in India continue to fell millions of trees every year for grand schemes that will displace the livelihoods of thousands of forest-dependent communities but enrich crony oligarchs by a few trillion dollars more.

Peru, for example, has become the first country to give legal protection to insects (in this case its famous stingless bees). Recognising the ecological importance of these tiny pollinators of the Amazon forests, which pollinate 80 per cent of the Amazon's tropical fruits, just this month it enacted a law that recognises their right to exist, to a clean and intact habitat, to regenerate, and to receive legal representation if pollution, deforestation and projects threaten their survival. Anyone, company or individual, who threatens these rights can be sued and prosecuted.

Similarly, in Wales, the River Wye has

received legal protection of its 'rights of nature' from its catchment to the sea. The new charter recognises the river as a living ecosystem with the intrinsic right to exist, i.e. the right to flow, the right to its biodiversity, the right to be free from pollution, the right to regenerate and to a healthy catchment. Any citizen can now go to court to enforce these rights.

New Zealand, too, has given legal status to the Whanganui river. Mount Taranaki has been given legal guardianship through an eight-member Guardian Council consisting of four government experts and four tribal representatives: no project, government or private, can be sanctioned without the approval of this council.

In India, the Uttarakhand high court in 2017 had recognised the Ganga as 'a living entity' with legal rights, but the ruling was inexplicably stayed by the Supreme Court, and the matter continues in limbo.

The Peru and Wales laws are small beginnings in realising the importance of protecting ecosystems and biodiversity as a whole, not just trees and forests in isolation. One hopes our governments, courts and the NGT take note of these developments, dispel their sense of omniscience, and rouse themselves from their slumber, sloth and lack of understanding of ecological issues.

Then—and only then—will the dragonflies perhaps return to Purani Koti and reclaim what is rightfully theirs. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

The potential loss of biodiversity gets no consideration in our development push. The best we manage is to pay lip service to green cover



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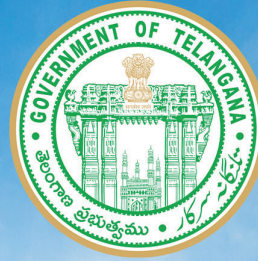


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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

THE WAIVER RUNAROUND

Yet another farm loan waiver scheme in Maharashtra promises more than it can deliver

► P3



HOME & ABROAD

OF EMPTY NESTS AND AGEING PARENTS

A new elder care initiative in Kerala prompts a sober reflection

► P4



WORLD

SURVIVING NETANYAHU

Can Israel shake off 'Bibi', repair alliances and rebuild legitimacy?

► P6



Deepening the jobs market is hard work

There's more to India's unemployment crisis than meets the ordinary eye, writes **Ajit Ranade**

Chief Economic Advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran has done a great service articulating something many parents, students and policymakers do not want to hear: that the old premium attached to software degrees and MBAs is vanishing. The globalisation-era formula was simple. Get an engineering degree, learn coding, do an MBA if possible, and enter a white-collar growth track. That formula is no longer reliable. AI is changing the economics of routine cognitive work. One experienced employee, assisted by AI tools, can now do what earlier required dozens of freshers. The first impact may not be mass layoffs. It may be the silent closing of entry gates. Witness the recent drop in hiring by IT companies.

But his warning should not be read as an obituary for engineering or management education. India does not need fewer engineers. It needs different engineers. Civil engineering, for instance, will remain central to India's future. A country that is still building roads, bridges, ports, railways, water systems, housing, logistics parks and climate-resilient cities cannot say that engineering is finished. If anything, demand for good engineers will rise.

The real question is: what kind of engineering? A civil engineer of tomorrow cannot merely learn old formulae for concrete and surveying. She must understand climate risk, water stress, urban flooding, green materials, GIS mapping, project finance, procurement and lifecycle maintenance. Mechanical and electrical engineers must understand robotics, precision manufacturing, storage, grids and renewable integration. Computer engineers must move beyond routine coding to systems thinking, data architecture, cybersecurity and AI applications in real sectors.

The same applies to MBAs. India does not need fewer people with analytical and managerial skills. It needs many more, but in places where they are rarely found today. Every district needs people who can analyse data, prepare investment plans, evaluate projects, monitor outcomes, improve procurement, manage public assets and coordinate across departments. If India is serious about bottom-up planning, the district cannot remain merely an administrative unit. It must become a planning, data and execution unit.

Why not strengthen district planning offices with young professionals trained in economics, management, public finance, statistics, GIS, infrastructure planning and social sector delivery? Instead of producing

generic MBAs who chase the same corporate jobs, we could create district development analysts, municipal finance associates, procurement specialists, health systems managers, education data officers and climate adaptation officers. Such teams could transform local governance and create meaningful public-purpose jobs.

This is where curriculum reform and job design must go together. It is not enough to tell colleges to update syllabuses. The labour market must create roles that reward updated skills. If colleges teach climate-resilient construction but public works departments recruit on old criteria, nothing will change. If MBA students learn data analytics but district administrations have no posts for outcome monitoring or GIS mapping, the skill will be wasted. Education reform without job reform becomes another certificate factory.

The CEA is also right to ask India to take skilled trades seriously. Welding, plumbing, carpentry, electrical work, caregiving, nursing, hospitality and culinary skills involve human presence, judgement, dexterity and trust. These are not easily replaced by AI. But here too we need to be careful. You cannot change social attitudes just by exhortation. A middle-class parent who has spent two decades telling a child to become an engineer or MBA will not suddenly celebrate welding as an equally attractive option. In India, a degree is not merely a credential; it is prestige, marriage value, caste mobility, migration possibility and insurance against manual-labour precarity.

This is why comparisons with Germany, Switzerland, Japan or South Korea must be made carefully. Skilled trades are respected there because institutions made them respectable. Europe has had guilds, chambers, apprenticeships, licensing norms and wage-bargaining institutions for more than a century. A master electrician, machinist or carpenter has certification, progression, bargaining power and social identity. The guild did not merely teach the trade. It protected standards, restricted exploitation, shaped pride and helped secure decent wages.

India has no comparable ecosystem. We have excellent individual craftsmen, but no strong professional guilds for plumbers, electricians, welders, carpenters or repair technicians. We have ITIs and skilling schemes, but weak social prestige. We have certificates, but often not employer trust. Most importantly, India's labour force is still overwhelmingly informal or



Photo: Getty Images

Aspirants trying their luck at a recent job fair in the capital

The government job has become a lottery ticket; the coaching class has become a waiting room

unregistered. In such a market, a trade skill does not automatically translate into dignity or income security. It can just as easily mean casual work, arbitrary wages, no written contract, no insurance, no pension and unsafe work conditions. By contrast German law requires compulsory labour representation on company boards.

The recent unrest by industrial workers in the Noida and Gurugram-Manesar belt is a reminder. Many workers in automotive, garments and allied manufacturing reportedly protested for basic monthly wages of around Rs 20,000 or more. These were not software engineers complaining about appraisal cycles. These were factory workers saying wages were below survival level. The IT sector emerged as a relatively formal, globally linked labour market. Industrial and trade workers remain trapped between informality and contract labour and have a very weak collective voice.

The deeper problem is India's graduate unemployment crisis. Millions of young graduates are not working, earning or acquiring experience, but preparing for competitive exams. The government job has become a lottery ticket; the coaching class has become a waiting room. This is not

irrational behaviour. It is a rational response to a labour market where private entry-level jobs are poorly paid and insecure, while government jobs offer a decent salary, status, security and social insurance.

The same logic applies to universities. They have been declared dead attributed to the internet, MOOCs (massive open online courses), bootcamps, the pandemic and now AI tutors. Yet higher education has expanded massively. The real issue is whether universities will use AI as a partner in learning or merely treat it as a cheating device.

The CEA's warning is well taken. But the policy message must be to not bury the degree but redesign it. Trade skills need to be formalised and gain social dignity. India's jobs crisis will not be solved by replacing one social obsession with another. It will be solved when a young Indian can become a civil engineer, coder, nurse, chef, welder, district planner, technician, teacher, entrepreneur or civil servant—and each path carries dignity, income, security and mobility. ■

AJIT RANADE is a noted economist; Courtesy: The Billion Press

"We had to come, for the sake of the children"

As the NEET paper leak and the CBSE evaluation fiasco become focal points of Gen Z resistance, **Nandlal Sharma** reports from the Jantar Mantar protest site in Delhi

From Kota in Rajasthan to Jantar Mantar in Delhi, Gen Z is pushing back, demanding accountability from a government that is putting their youthful career dreams in jeopardy.

Aastha, a NEET aspirant, is from Bihar. On 17 June, just four days before the re-examination (following the paper leak), she felt compelled to join the 'Chhatron ki Gooni' campaign led by LoP Rahul Gandhi. "The NEET paper was leaked in 2024 as well. The government didn't even acknowledge it! After this year's leak, over a dozen students have committed suicide [21 at last count]. If the Modi government can't even conduct examinations properly, it must go!"

Paper leaks are so routine in our country that we are inured. It often doesn't even make headlines. But the NEET paper leak this year and the CBSE Class 12 online evaluation fiasco lit a fire that has caught

the government off guard. While youngsters like Sarthak Siddhant and Nisarg Adhikari used their technical smarts to expose the CBSE, others like Aastha and Khushi have hit the streets. All four represent a generation that came of age in the Modi years.

The people out on the streets protesting are not just school students. On 14 June, candidates for the BPSSC's (Bihar Police Subordinate Services Commission) Prohibition Department examination arrived at Patna railway station to find their train was delayed. Frustrated with a system that keeps letting them down, they pelted stones at the police.

In Prayagraj, students protested irregularities and paper leaks in the Uttar Pradesh Lekhpal recruitment examination and demanded a re-examination. On 12 June, a joint protest of competitive examination aspirants was held in

Lucknow's Eco Garden. While the NSUI and Youth Congress have organised demonstrations across various cities demanding the resignation of Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan and action against paper leaks, the newly minted Cockroach Janata Party (CJP), under the leadership of Abhijeet Dipke, has dug in at Jantar Mantar, Delhi. They will not leave, they say, until Pradhan resigns.

Addressing the crowd on 20 June, a student (preparing for NEET and CUET) said, "People ask what difference will Pradhan's resignation make? Let me tell you—if one minister resigns, the rest will feel afraid."

The protest at Jantar Mantar features student organisations from the Left, the Aam Aadmi Party's student wing, sundry labour outfits as well as farmer organisations like the Bharatiya Kisan Union (Chadhuni). This confluence is the

reason why you hear slogans on worker-student-farmer unity and opposition to the 'coming very soon' India-US trade deal.

I spoke to Raja from Rourkela, Odisha. He is here with his mother, who is a cancer patient.

"No one in my family has taken the NEET exam," Raja says. "But so many students have committed suicide because of the paper leak. That's why my mother and I are here. ... We study up to twelve hours a day! Dharmendra Pradhan has no idea how hard children work. At my hostel, teachers make me wash clothes and clean shoes. I have to do all this to stay in school."

"At one point my mother became seriously ill. Dipke and others helped us. We sleep here on the carpets, and we eat whatever food social workers bring."

There are many volunteers here. Purna, a resident of Delhi, is carrying bananas for hungry protesters. "I'm here to support the students—their demands are fair."

Mohammad Junaid has come from Ghaziabad. He is running a food-and-water stall here along with his Hindu and Sikh friends. "I brought whatever I had to Jantar Mantar," he says. "Then people here started helping. With a smile on his face, he quotes the poet-lyricist Majrooh on finding kindred spirit along the way: "बै अकेला ही चला या जानिब-ए-मज्रल मगर, लोग साथ आते गए और कारवाँ बनता गया"

Junaid, who completed his LL.B. this year, has stockpiled bottles of water. Visitors pitch in with whatever they have. Like Amitabh, a teacher by profession, has biscuits that he hands over to Junaid, who distributes them along with tea and pakora.



Gen Z rising On Day 6 of protests at Delhi's Jantar Mantar, where students are demanding the resignation of education minister Dharmendra Pradhan and the overhaul of a broken education system

Photos: Vipin

► Continued on page 2

For the last three years, women in the village of Premtura in Rajasthan's Sikar district have been protesting against illegal—and illegal—mining in their area. In the village of Deepawas, also in Sikar, the women are sitting round the clock, in determined relay groups. Frequent blasts from multiple mines nearby have caused huge cracks in their homes, endangering lives. Flying debris has frightened their children from going to school and injured their cattle. A pall of dust covers the vegetation around their houses and water levels have plunged to below 1,000 feet since mining began.

In 2024, Ojwasi Marbles Pvt Ltd cordoned off 180 acres, of which 140 acres is designated forest land. Environment activist Kailash Meena from Sikar says the villagers' prime concern is that mining will destroy the Girijan river, their sole source of water. Most of the rivers in the region have faced the same fate.

"There are forty villages with a population of over 60,000 people who are dependent on this river," Meena says. "The villagers filed a petition against Ojwasi in the Supreme Court, arguing that the area falls within the definition of the Aravalli hills as per the Forest Survey of India report of 2010. The SC ordered that mining be halted, but unfortunately, it has not."

In Rajasthan's Kotputli-Behrur district, another long-standing protest is on against the Aditya Birla-owned UltraTech cement company in Mohanpura-Jodhpura village. Their demand: closure of the plant and rehabilitation of hundreds of affected villagers.

Captain Vinod Singh (ret'd), a member of the Jodhpura Sangarsh Samiti, which has been spearheading this agitation for several years says, "Running-the-clock heavy blasting destroyed 150 of our houses and 80 tubewells. We complained to the NGT, and on 3 November last year, it ordered that no blasting should take place within a half-kilometre radius of our village."

The Rajasthan government was directed to constitute a committee to rehabilitate victims of pollution (caused by proximity to limestone mining with crushers) within three

How green was my Aravalli

Protests intensify in Rajasthan but there's no end to illegal mining, writes **Rashme Sehgal**



Save our hills This photograph taken on 19 May 2026 shows villagers protesting against mining at Bhagwanpura village in Rajasthan's Neem ka Thana

months, to pay compensation of Rs 50,000 to the villagers whose homes suffered structural damage and Rs 20,000 to the 109 villagers suffering from diseases due to pollution. This, says Singh, is yet to be implemented.

For over 300 days, the residents of Ajitpura-Kujeta (Kotputli-Behrur district) have been protesting illegal limestone mining and deep-hole blasting by the National Limestone Company Pvt Ltd near residential settlements. On 29 May, the police forcibly removed the protesters' tents, claiming they blocked traffic. After locals gathered to submit a memorandum to resume their protest, a group of

armed assailants opened fire at them, wounding several villagers.

Nagpur Rashtriya Loktantrik Party MP Hanuman Beniwal blames the BJP top brass for allowing the mining mafia to flourish across Rajasthan. He says, "These limestone mines were bought 40 years ago and left idle. Now that their value has gone up, goons are being brought in from different parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat to attack our local people."

The impunity with which the mining mafia is operating is evident. Last month, a group of gangsters landed up at Shatru ki Dhani village and beat up the women involved in anti-mining

demonstrations. Om Prakash, a villager, says, "Six women were injured. One had her teeth broken, the other her arm. The gangsters came in the morning, knowing the men would be away at work."

The Rajasthan Pollution Board has not issued any show cause notices to these mining companies since 2008. Identifying serious irregularities in quarry leases for metal mining in Dhansura block of Aravalli District in Gujarat, the Mines and Geology Department has imposed fines worth more than Rs 63 lakh on 54 quarries. The inspectors found irregularities under 12 criteria, with each infraction at each site bearing a

fine of Rs 10,000. This was the first such inspection since 2014, when the lease was issued.

Multiple hills with lush forests have been reduced to rubble. Entire rivers along with their ecosystems have dried up and an already water-scarce area has been left gasping. The recent corporate rush to claim vast stretches of land rich in minerals like copper, zinc, lead, iron ore, limestone, marble, gold and silver must be seen in this light.

Sujata, of the Adivasi Jan Adhikar Ekta Manch, points out that the Vedanta group, through its subsidiary Hindustan Zinc, operates some of the world's largest underground mines and smelting complexes near Jaipur.

The group operates Warar, Sindesar Khurd, Rajpura Dariba and the Kayad mines to extract zinc and iron ore. "Many of these are underground mines; our water sources have dried up completely," says Sujata.

The Adanis recently entered the fray, drilling for gold in the villages of Banswara, Ghatola and Jalora. Phajara adds: "In the villages of Puhara, there has been drilling for iron and copper. The tribals have received notices through the forest department, which has its own serious implications."

The 2023 CAG reports confirm the presence of illegal mining in 122 cases, using remote sensing data

and GIS techniques. Neelam Ahluwalia, founder of the People for Aravallis group, says, "It is shocking how compensatory afforestation for forests being cut in Nicobar are taking place in a 500-acre stretch in Mahendragarh district of Rajasthan!"

The construction industry particularly covets the Aravalli's granite deposits. Though these comprise less than 3 per cent of the terrain, they are the real goldmine for material-hungry developers looking to cash in on the Delhi-NCR construction boom. Lawyer Hansraj observes, "The rush for green marble, white marble, soapstone, zinc and other minerals is so intense in Dungarpur that our entire ecosystem has been affected. The Jhokham river, which originates in the Sita Mata Wildlife Sanctuary and is its largest water body, is no longer accessible to local Adivasis. But water is being given to those who are mining."

The Aravallis, one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world, estimated to be between two- to three billion years old, stretches from Gujarat to Haryana, acting as a climate regulator.

With unregulated mining now the norm across the Aravalli belt, the recent Supreme Court judgment permitting a narrow, elevation-based definition would have given a free hand to the very people who are destroying this mountain chain.

Massive protests erupted against the verdict that redefined these hills. Following the outcry, the court stayed its own order and directed the formation of a new committee. Sadly, this comprised only of government officials with no independent members. Activists and environmentalists have urged the Chief Justice of India to constitute a fresh independent committee to define the Aravalli hills. The deadline to submit a report on the definition of the hills is 31 August.

The Modi government seems perfectly immune to the destruction of ecosystems across three states and the exposure of millions to respiratory disease, silicosis and pollution-related illnesses. Anything to keep the mining and real estate lobby happy. ■

The impunity with which the mining mafia is operating is evident from the attack on women taking part in anti-mining protests



"We had to come, for the sake of the children"

► Continued from page 1

Amitabh tells me: "Whether it's a train accident or a paper leak, nobody is willing to take responsibility. I don't know whether the BJP will succeed or not, but I've come to support the students."

On 22 June, Khushi arrived at Jantar Mantar with her sister. Students of classes 11 and 12, they tell me: "We know how the BJP wins, our mother is a BJP leader. During the Delhi elections, money was sent to her so that people in the neighbourhood could be paid in exchange for votes."

Her sister interjects: "People shouldn't vote for the BJP!"

They are residents of Shadipur in west Delhi. They finished their household chores, argued with family members to land up in Jantar Mantar.

Pakhi and her friend came to Jantar Mantar for the first time on 23 June. Both are fresh graduates from Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University. "If protests can bring change in countries across the world, why not in India?" Pakhi says.

Is she afraid of a backlash? "In April, a video of our college principal was shared on a BJP social media page. We launched a movement against it. If the principal has the right to express her views, so do we. Since then, we are no longer afraid."

Not everyone here is a sympathiser, though. There are troublemakers in the mix, who try to infiltrate, disturb and provoke. When mike-wielding warriors of the media corps enter the crowd and ask provocative questions to inflame tensions, groups of young protesters respond with chants of "Godi Media Go Back!"

On the evening of 23 June,

Ambedkarite youth influencer Nishu's father was injured in a scuffle. Nishu runs the Instagram account 'Voice of Nishu' (300,000+ followers). She has been visiting Jantar Mantar with her father, covering the protest, and encouraging people to attend. She believes that's the reason she and her father were attacked. The protesters know that influencers like Nishu are real allies, helping them spread the message.

"The police have orders from above to end this movement by any means," says Danish, joint secretary of the JNU Students' Union. "Sometimes the water supply is cut off, sometimes electricity. Sometimes barricades are used to stop people from entering."

Neha Bora, national president of left-wing student union AISA, says this was inevitable. "The level of repression and violence this government has unleashed has crossed all limits. There is immense frustration over unemployment, a hollowed-out economy, the violence against Dalits, Muslims and women. The opposition must think about how to channel the anger of the youth."

Jantar Mantar Day 4 of the smaller principal was the first time on Day 1, but the enthusiasm is undiminished. People are still flocking to the protest site. Ramesh Meena is from Nagaur in Rajasthan, Ashu is from Ludhiana. Many others like them are camping, day and night, at Jantar Mantar.

A seventy-year-old grandmother from Loni, Ghaziabad caught my eye. When I asked if her granddaughters had brought her here, she promptly said: "No, I brought them. I insisted. We had to come, for the sake of the children." ■

What's on the plate?

Sourabh Sen decodes Bengal's new welfare paradigm

During his time as leader of the opposition and in the run-up to the 2026 assembly elections, Suvendu Adhikari frequently used the term 'sticker badal' (change of sticker) to ridicule Mamata Banerjee's welfare regime. Adhikari's contention was that Banerjee merely repackaged central schemes like Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana as Banglar Bari or Pathashree. Adhikari wouldn't tire of saying that the TMC was all about replacing the old sticker with a new one to claim ownership of the scheme.

Now that he is chief minister, Adhikari is either renaming those very programmes or dismantling them. Where a new scheme (like Ayushman Bharat) is replacing an old one (Swasthya Sathi), the new administration's message is that they are not just changing the stickers but fundamentally altering how the welfare programme is targeted and funded. Vying for attention are 90-odd social welfare schemes of the Mamata Banerjee government at an annual outlay of nearly Rs 1.8 lakh crore, or 45 per cent of budgetary expenditure.

The BJP government has retained that expenditure envelope while replacing the TMC's Bengali nomenclature—*Lakshmi* (pronounced *Lokshir* in Bengal), *Swasthya Sathi*, *Banglar Yuwa* (with Hindu/Hindu-coded names like *Annappurna*) or PM-branded central schemes. The outlays have been retained but attributions and name associations redirected.

This makeover of welfare schemes became clear in the maiden budget of new state finance minister Swapan Dasgupta presented on 22 June. The budget pivoted significantly toward aligning with central policies, aggressive job creation and real estate and industrial deregulation. The major policy involves the 'double engine' integration, which officials estimate has unlocked nearly Rs 40,000 crore in previously withheld or paused central funds.

For example, the highly popular Lakshmi Bhandar women's cash transfer scheme has transitioned to Annapurna Yojana with the benefit

going up from Rs 1,000 to Rs 3,000 per month. But the beneficiary base has shrunk. A strict biometric/voter data verification exercise has removed nearly 30 lakh names, branding them 'fake' or 'ineligible'. There are eligibility hurdles as well, which have changed the no-strings-attached, universal nature of Lakshmi Bhandar. Development economist Abhiroop Sarkar says, "Direct benefit transfer schemes around the world work on the principle of universal coverage. The idea is to include everyone, even ineligible benefi-

ciaries, to ensure that nobody, not a single eligible beneficiary is left out." He cautions that tight and complicated eligibility criteria will keep a large number of genuine beneficiaries out of the welfare net. The exclusion of 30 lakh women validates Sarkar's apprehension. Simple arithmetic shows that with an outlay of Rs 36,000 crore, the Annapurna Yojana can provide the promised Rs 3,000 to one crore women—a sharp drop from the 2.4 crore beneficiaries under Lakshmi Bhandar.

Similarly, the transition from a fully state-funded Swasthya Sathi to the central Ayushman Bharat will shift nearly 1.43 crore low income families to the 60:40 central-state fund-sharing arrangement. More importantly, this will mean a shift from an insurance-based health system (Swasthya Sathi) to an assurance-based model. While each model has its own benefits and lacunae, managing the transition is going to be critical.

Among other welfare measures, West Bengal has now adopted the central PMAY-G (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana—Gramin) with an allocation of Rs 13,000 crore to construct 2.5 million rural homes. Rural jobs are being heavily backed by the rollout of the VB-GRAM with an allocation of Rs 14,000 crore, a massive change since central MGNREGA funds were

Adhikari has set in motion his own version of 'sticker badal'. Or as the wit remarked: "The pot calling the kettle black"



It's mid-day meal time in a government primary school on the outskirts of Kolkata

suspended in 2021.

The most contentious change involves the mid-day meal for school children not just because of the enormity of the shift but also the inherent socio-political symbolism. The budget details a pilot project in partnership with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) to prepare, supply and manage mid-day meals in government-run schools in Kolkata municipal areas.

Historically, the state prioritised decentralised, localised setups, with meals prepared directly inside school kitchens by local women's self-help groups (SHGs) and individual cook-cum-helpers rather than oversized, centralised kitchens. "Managing a mid-day meal in rural Bengal will be a huge logistical challenge. Only big. The mid-day meal is a government obligation. NGOs like ISKCON should concentrate on their own work," Sarkar points out.

ISKCON's strict vegetarianism too has sparked controversy by replacing eggs with soyabean and rajma. State school education minister Dipak Barman supports vegetarian meals, and has said, "Egg is not the only source of protein for schoolchildren. Many people worldwide are vegetarians and they do not suffer any protein deficiency."

While BJP neo-converts welcome the initiative, Bengalis see this as a cultural invasion by Hindi-speaking north Indians and a ploy to change the dietary habits of a population where 99 per cent are non-vegetarians. "Imposing a vegetarian diet on primary schoolchildren can change their food habits. Problems can also crop up when what they eat in school is different from what they eat at home," says a government schoolteacher in Kolkata on condition of anonymity.

According to CPI-M state committee member Shatarup Ghosh, the introduction of vegetarian food in primary schools is part of the BJP's Hindutva project. Talking to *National Herald*, he says: "Wherever they are elected, the BJP tries to impose a particular kind of culture, a particular way of worship and cuisine. The issue is not about changing the menu. The BJP is trying to change the food habits of Bengal's children." ■

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

Jumping through hoops for debt relief

Jaideep Hardikar on yet another farm loan waiver scheme in Maharashtra that promises more than it can deliver

The farmer in Maharashtra has seen this before. The state government announces a farm loan waiver scheme and trumpets it as big relief. Then come the confusing terms and conditions. And then the digital rollout beyond his comprehension. It's no different this time.

The eligibility criteria of the 'Punyashlok Ahilyadevi Holkar Shetkari Karjukti Yojana', announced with much fanfare earlier this month by Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis, has left the farmers befuddled. It has come after much delay, imperilling their chances of getting fresh crop loans from banks even as sowing operations commence for the kharif season.

Farmer organisations are up in arms against the scheme, which they say is more a stunt, and the government has now set up a sub-committee to rework conditions, further delaying its rollout. Maharashtra's latest 'Karjukti Yojana' is the handiwork of a committee constituted in November 2025 to recommend how farmers could be rid of their outstanding loans.

This is Maharashtra's fourth farm loan waiver since 2017—in itself an admission that despite three previous efforts, the state's farmers have been unable to escape the debt trap. "This waiver is more propaganda than anything else," veteran farmer leader Vijay Jawandhia told *National Herald*. The real issue is their paltry and sagging income, despite prime minister Narendra Modi's grandstanding about doubling farm incomes.

"Unless the Centre implements its promise to increase minimum support prices, the endless cycle of debt won't end," Jawandhia says. When fuel and fertiliser prices are skyrocketing and the price of farm produce stagnating, how will the farmer survive, he asks.

The immediate worry is: will farmers with unpaid loans get fresh crop loans if the scheme is delayed? If they are denied bank loans, more likely than not, their only recourse will be private lenders, who will charge usurious rates of interest.

"Banks still don't have clarity about the rules, because there are myriad eligibility conditions," says Nitin Khadse, a cotton

farmer in Jalka, Yavatmal. "Our worry is that unless old loans are settled, we won't get new loans for the coming season."

The latest Karjukti Yojana provides for a waiver of up to Rs 2 lakh per farmer for short-term crop loans. To qualify, the loan must have been disbursed between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2025, remained overdue on 30 September 2025, and not have been repaid by 31 March 2026. The waiver applies to the combined outstanding amount of principal and interest, irrespective of the farmer's landholding. The government has also included restructured and re-restructured crop loans that were converted into medium-term loans, acknowledging that many farmers had already undergone debt restructuring before slipping back into default.

The most contentious provision concerns farmers who had already benefited under the 'Mahatma Jyotirao Phule Shetkari Karjukti Yojana' of 2019. Farmers who benefited under earlier waivers may not receive the full benefit this time. As per the government resolution: Such farmers will not receive another waiver of up to Rs 2 lakh. They are eligible for relief of only up to Rs 50,000. The government is apparently concerned about granting repeated waivers to the same borrowers, but it has caused great resentment in rainfed regions like Vidarbha and Marathwada, where repeated crop failures due to climate factors, pest attacks, lack of irrigation and the double whammy of declining incomes and much higher input costs have pushed farmers back into debt despite earlier relief.

The scheme contains another important limitation. Farmers whose overdue loans exceed Rs 2 lakh will not automatically receive the full benefit. They must first pay the amount due above Rs 2 lakh from their own resources to qualify for a one-time-settlement (OTS) benefit, with the government bearing the burden of Rs 2 lakh. The same principle applies to those eligible for the Rs 50,000 concession: they must first clear dues in excess of that amount before receiving government assistance.

Photo: Getty Images



A hurdle race for relief Maharashtra's new Karjukti Yojana is not really a loan waiver scheme; it's a debt-relief programme with strings attached



Maharashtra has seen four farm loan waivers since 2017, in itself an admission that the three earlier efforts didn't help its farmers escape the debt trap

The deadline for such settlements is 31 March 2027, as per current terms.

In other words, the scheme will not bring relief to the most indebted farmers. A cultivator who owes, say, Rs 3 to 4 lakh must find other means to repay a big chunk before qualifying for relief. Most will fail to do that and become ineligible for relief under the new scheme.

The OTS is a bizarre idea. Kerala did this far more efficiently in the 2007-2010 period. It set up a farmers' commission to negotiate case-to-case settlements with banks for far lower amounts, the way red-flagged corporate accounts do. Maharashtra has not done this.

Meanwhile, amid concerns over the state's growing fiscal deficit, with its debt crossing Rs 11 lakh crore, the state government on 22 June sought the legislature's nod for supplementary demands of Rs 97,706 crore. This, on the first day of the monsoon session, within months of tabling the budget. Fadnavis, who also holds the finance portfolio since the death of Ajit Pawar, told the House that Rs 20,552 crore out of the supplementary demands would be allocated to the farm loan waiver scheme.

The government estimates that the scheme will benefit 56 lakh farmers at a cost of Rs 36,000 crore. As stated above, this is not a farm loan waiver as much as a conditional debt-relief programme with various strings attached. An incentive structure has been built in to reward 'honest borrowers' as opposed to 'habitual defaulters': those who repaid their loans in

at least two of the agricultural years between 2022-23 and 2024-25 will receive an incentive of up to Rs 50,000. Small borrowers, whose loans were less than Rs 50,000, are assured a minimum incentive of Rs 5,000.

The scheme covers loans from private banks, nationalised banks, regional rural banks, district central cooperative banks and certain other cooperative credit institutions. But access to benefits is also tied to a new layer of digital verification. Apart from mandatory Aadhaar authentication, registration on the 'Agri Stack' farmer database is also mandatory. The scheme is to be implemented digitally, which is another reason farmers fear exclusion, their wariness stemming from experience.

The debt waiver programmes of 2017, 2019 and 2022 ran into problems due to digital verification processes. Quietly hidden within the government resolution is a proposal to build a 'Sahakar Stack' or Cooperative Stack. The stated objective is to integrate farmer records, credit histories and cooperative institutions in a common digital framework.

The longer-term ambition appears to be the creation of a database for agricultural credit and cooperative governance in Maharashtra. But this is rich coming from a government that doled out the Ladki Bahin Yojana—promising unconditional, monthly financial aid of Rs 2,000 to women, ahead of the 2024 assembly elections only to restructure the scheme later to eliminate over one crore beneficiaries. ■

The cloud that drains the ground

Is India ready to support its booming AI data centres, their 'rapacious appetite' for land, water and electricity?

Herjinder

India's digital revolution is often portrayed as clean, futuristic and almost weightless. Artificial intelligence, cloud computing and digital services appear to exist in an invisible world. Yet behind this image stands an enormous physical infrastructure of warehouses packed with servers, cooling systems, power stations and transmission lines.

Local communities across the United States, Europe and Southeast Asia have now begun resisting new data centre projects. Residents are protesting what they describe as the industry's 'rapacious need for water, electricity and land'. However, India is moving rapidly toward becoming one of the world's largest data centre hubs, raising an uncomfortable question: can digital ambitions coexist with ecological realities?

Driven by rising demand for artificial intelligence and cloud services India's data centre capacity is expected to expand dramatically, rising from ~1.4 gigawatts in 2025 to ~17 gigawatts by 2030.

Central and state governments have rolled out incentives to attract global technology giants such as Google, Amazon and Microsoft. These include long tax holidays, exemptions from electricity duties, concessional land allotments and subsidies on water and infrastructure, and in some cases, relaxation of environmental safeguards. Reports surrounding Google's proposed facility in Andhra Pradesh suggest that environmental impact assessment requirements were diluted or waived.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly described data centres as major employment generators, inviting "the whole world's data to reside in India". However, critics point out how this is an overstated promise. Once operational, hyperscale data centres usually require a small workforce consisting mainly of technicians, engineers and maintenance staff. Compared to manufacturing industries, they generate limited long-term employment despite occupying vast tracts of land and consuming enormous quantities of resources.

A water guzzler like no other

Data centres generate intense heat and



An AI-generated inside view of a data centre

require constant cooling to prevent equipment failure. A typical 100 megawatt facility using evaporative cooling can consume between 800,000 and two million litres of water daily—sufficient to meet the daily needs of thousands of households.

A number of these data centres are being built in regions already facing water stress. India's second largest data centre hub after Mumbai—with 42 operational or under-construction facilities—is coming up in Hyderabad, a city projected to face a water deficit of nearly 909 million litres per day within the next few years. Despite these concerns, major cloud companies continue expanding their presence there. Experts warn that during prolonged summers and heatwaves, data centres could increasingly compete for scarce water resources with residents, industries and agriculture.

A similar situation is emerging in Visakhapatnam, where investments by Google and Reliance are transforming the city into a major digital infrastructure hub. Groundwater levels in parts of the district have already fallen significantly, raising concerns about future sustainability.

Mumbai and Navi Mumbai together host the country's largest concentration of data centres, with approximately 84 facilities either operational or under development. Industry representatives often argue that coastal facilities can use seawater for

cooling, thereby reducing dependence on freshwater sources. However, the industry remains notably opaque regarding actual water consumption patterns.

They are also ignorant of the environmental costs of using seawater for cooling. Thermal pollution from discharged water can disrupt marine ecosystems, while chemical treatments and potential leakages pose additional risks to coastal habitats.

Perhaps the most revealing comparison comes from Gurgaon and Noida.

Gurgaon, widely known as north India's cyber city and home to numerous multinational technology companies, has only a handful of operational data centres. On the other hand Noida and Greater Noida, despite having a smaller information technology ecosystem, have emerged as major data centre destinations.

One only has to look beneath the ground for an explanation. In Gurgaon, groundwater levels have fallen to between 34 and 38 metres. In parts of Noida, groundwater remains available at much shallower depths of 20 metres. Water availability, not digital infrastructure alone, determines the geography of India's data economy.

The electricity challenge

Data centres require uninterrupted 24x7 power supply. Although companies frequently highlight renewable energy commitments, the reality is that these facilities create continuous baseload demand that renewable sources alone often struggle to meet.

In Mumbai, rising electricity demand from data centres contributed to decisions that extended the operations of ageing coal-fired power plants. The environmental burden falls disproportionately upon communities living near these facilities. Residents in areas such as Mahul have long complained of respiratory illness, cancer and other health problems linked to industrial pollution.

Companies also instal a large number of industrial diesel generators capable of running entire facilities during power outages. Environmental scientists have warned that these generators could worsen the already dangerous levels of urban air pollution.

The physical footprint of data centres also carries social consequences.

Agricultural land, orchards and even settlements are being acquired for these projects. In Telangana, concerns have emerged over the acquisition of land originally distributed to landless Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe families. As data infrastructure expands questions of livelihood security and displacement are becoming increasingly important.

Beyond water, land and energy lies another growing challenge: electronic waste.

Artificial intelligence hardware evolves rapidly, with processors often becoming obsolete within two to five years. According to researchers, generative AI technologies alone could produce an estimated millions of tonnes of electronic waste globally by 2030.

India's informal recycling sector already handles much of the country's electronic waste through unsafe dismantling and burning practices. Heavy metals, toxic chemicals and dioxins can contaminate soil, groundwater and air. As one researcher observed, the AI boom may eventually fade, but the waste it leaves behind could persist for decades.

India's digital future may be inevitable, but its environmental consequences are not. Mandatory use of treated wastewater, closed-loop cooling systems and non-potable water sources could significantly reduce pressure on freshwater reserves.

Greater transparency regarding resource consumption and stronger participation by local governments could ensure that communities have a voice in decisions affecting their land and resources.

Another important question raised by environmentalists deserves serious attention: Are these data centres genuinely enhancing national sovereignty, or are they merely hosting global corporate infrastructure within India?

The answer will shape India's digital future. The country's pursuit of artificial intelligence and cloud computing must not come at the cost of depleted aquifers, coal dependence and worsening environmental inequality. The choices made over the next decade will determine whether India's data centre boom becomes a sustainable foundation for digital growth or remains a silicon mirage built upon exhausted landscapes and disappearing water. ■

Of empty nests and ageing parents

Kerala's proposal of a dedicated department for senior citizens prompts a closer look at the psychological cost of changing demographics

K.A. Shaji

Rajesh Thiruvalla was abandoned long before he began caring for people abandoned by others. The founder of Mahatma Janasevana Kendram in Adoor in Kerala's Pathanamthitta district, Rajesh's childhood was marked by rejection, poverty and emotional neglect. His parents remarried, leaving him to survive on the generosity of distant relatives as he moved from one house to another. Hunger was a recurring reality. Formal education became a luxury. He dropped out of school and spent years doing menial jobs in different parts of India.

Life changed unexpectedly when he returned to Kerala and found work in an old-age home near his village. There, his empathy towards elderly residents who had been rejected by their own families drew attention. Visitors noticed his patience. Residents trusted him. Among those who recognised his commitment was a senior IAS officer who approached Rajesh with an unusual request: would he care for a 107-year-old relative who had no one to look after her? Rajesh agreed. What began as a simple act of compassion gradually evolved into a much larger humanitarian mission.

Today, Mahatma Janasevana Kendram is one of Kerala's largest shelters for abandoned senior citizens. Of its 370+ residents, many were thrown out by their own families. "Old age homes are mushrooming in Kerala, where senior citizens are increasingly turning into liabilities," says Rajesh.

His remark is uncomfortable because it challenges the cherished image of Kerala as a society where family bonds remain strong. What it points to is one of the most profound demographic transformations in India. The generation that contributed to the state's celebrated development model is now ageing rapidly, often in circumstances marked by loneliness, vulnerability and uncertainty.

The urgency of the situation has prompted the V.D. Satheesan government to announce a landmark intervention: a separate department exclusively for senior citizens. It proposes an integration

of healthcare, rehabilitation, social protection and community support within a single administrative framework.

According to data from the Kerala State Planning Board, in 1961, those aged sixty and above comprised only 5.1 per cent of the state's population, slightly below the national average of 5.6 per cent. Over the next decades, Kerala rapidly overtook the national average: 10.5 per cent against 7.5 per cent (2001); 12.6 per cent against 8.6 per cent (2011); 13.1 per cent against 8.3 per cent (2015).

Today, Kerala is home to nearly 48 lakh senior citizens. Fifteen per cent of them are super-senior citizens (80-plus). Women outnumber men, with Census figures indicating that 23 per cent of women between 60-69 are



Restoring dignity Seniors at the Mahatma Janasevana Kendram in Adoor

above 70, the figure rises to 43.06 per cent. Remember that Kerala also enjoys the highest life expectancy in India—estimated at 72.5 years for men and 77.8 years for women—a reflection of improved healthcare and living conditions that now present new social challenges.

Professor S. Irudaya Rajan, former Professor at the Centre for Development Studies and chairman of the International Institute of Migration and Development, has spent decades studying the implications of these changes. Through the Kerala Ageing Surveys and other longitudinal research initiatives, he has documented a phenomenon more commonly associated with developed countries.

The departure of younger generations has transformed family structures and caregiving arrangements. The weakening of traditional support systems, the rise of nuclear families and increasing geographical distance between parents and children have produced new vulnerabilities among older people. Rajan's studies reveal that ageing is accompanied by high levels of morbidity, disability and psychological distress.

Few places illustrate these realities more vividly than Kumbanad in Pathanamthitta district. Unlike regions whose prosperity was primarily built on

being as integral to quality of life rather than treating it as a secondary concern. According to health department figures, at least 270 elderly patients who have fully recovered medically continue to remain in government hospitals because their relatives have abandoned them. Preliminary assessments identified dozens of such patients in the Government Medical College Hospital in Thiruvananthapuram alone. Health Minister K. Muraleedharan has described the situation as a serious challenge for hospitals with too many patients and too few beds.

Hospitals with rehabilitation facilities, old-age homes are increasingly catering to diverse social groups, both rich and poor. Among them is Janaseva Gandhibhavan in Pathanamthitta district. Founded by Dr. Punalur Somarajan in 2002. "Our mission has always been to restore dignity to people who have nowhere else to go," says

Dr Somarajan. Kerala's response to ageing has seen many programmes: Vayomithram, which provides healthcare services; Vayo Amrutham, which extends health insurance benefits; Sayamprabha homes; Vayoraksha initiatives; Mandahasam, which provides dentures; and Sallapam, a telephone friendship programme intended to reduce loneliness. Policymakers realised, however, that ageing cannot be addressed through isolated schemes.

Minister C.P. John, who is expected to lead the proposed department for senior citizens, says that Kerala's response must move beyond viewing older people solely as recipients of welfare. Civil service officer Adeela Abdulla, involved in the preliminary groundwork, believes policy responses must emerge from lived experiences. The needs of widows differ from bedridden patients requiring inpatient care. Affluent ageing couples separated from migrant children face different challenges from economically vulnerable senior citizens. Effective interventions must reflect these distinctions. There are lessons here for the rest of India. Studies suggest that Kerala's population could rise from 3.34 crore in 2023 to 3.69 crore in 2036, with life expectancy increasing apace. By 2050, one in every three Keralaite could be a senior citizen. Rajesh Thiruvalla's journey raises questions that cannot be ignored. Who cares for the elderly when families fail? What responsibilities do communities bear? How should governments respond when traditional support systems become inadequate? For Rajesh, the answer remains deeply personal. The elders who arrive at Mahatma Janasevana Kendram are not 'inmates' or 'beneficiaries'. They are individuals who once raised children, cultivated land, taught classrooms, healed patients...

The elders are not 'inmates', they are individuals who raised children, cultivated land, taught classrooms, healed patients...

See the writing on the wall, Mr PM?

Realpolitik 101 Some more insincere words of praise to make up for another quiet betrayal



Aakar Patel

On 17 June, it was reported that the 'US has renamed the Indo-Pacific Command back to the Pacific Command'. This news was announced by America's Department of War, alongside an incorrect map of Kashmir.

The same day, America's president met our prime minister in France and said Modi is "a very tough negotiator... You look at this man. He's the most beautiful-looking man. He looks so nice, like an angel. But actually, he's as tough as a killer... But he looks so good. So he gets you by surprise. There are few people like this."

These two 17 June stories are somewhat related. Here is how. In February 2018, during Donald Trump's first term, America wrote its strategy for the region it began to call the Indo-Pacific. The aim was 'to maintain US strategic primacy... while preventing China from establishing new, illiberal spheres of influence'. The Americans wanted India to 'act as a counterbalance to China'. This 'desired end state' the US sought was to be 'India's preferred partner on security issues', and 'the two cooperate to preserve maritime security and counter China's influence'.



Narendra Modi and Donald Trump at the G7 summit

Over a couple of pages, the US laid out the plan of how it would make India a 'major defence partner' and how 'a strong Indian military (would) effectively collaborate with the United States'. The document also laid out what was intended to be done with China: prevent it from 'harming US competitiveness' and 'prevent China's acquisition of military and strategic capabilities'.

Why was India signing up for this? It is not known. With no discussion in Parliament, no interviews to the media, no press conferences, and no reference to this in his manifestos, Modi took India into a strategic partnership

The question that begs an answer now is what did India gain from signing up for a casual adventure

and military alliance with the US against China. In February 2020, during Donald Trump's famous visit to India and days before the Galwan Valley crisis, Modi committed India to this agreement, essentially ranged against China, and began to execute it.

On 27 October 2020, during the visit of US secretary of state Mike Pompeo, India signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA). It would help India access US intelligence to improve the accuracy of the Indian army's missiles and armed drones. Another agreement signed was the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA). It allowed

the militaries of the two nations to replenish from each other's bases and access supplies, spare parts and services from each other's land facilities, air bases and ports.

Signing the BECA pact in Delhi, Pompeo attacked China directly: "I am glad to say that the United States and India are taking steps to strengthen cooperation against all manner of threats and not just those posed by the Chinese Communist Party."

Secretary of defence Mark Esper said: "We stand shoulder to shoulder, in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific for all, particularly in light of increasing aggression and destabilising activities by China."

Our defence minister Rajnath Singh, external affairs minister S. Jaishankar, standing next to Pompeo and Esper, did not name China. Rajnath Singh's prepared remarks (which were later changed) contained the line, later deleted: "Excellencies, in the area of defence we are challenged by reckless aggression on our northern borders." Exhibiting the usual incompetence, this change was not given to the Indian translator in English, who read out the original text, and the Americans released it.

When the paper on America's strategy was declassified three months later, China said 'its content only serves to expose the malign intention of the United States to use its Indo-Pacific strategy to suppress and contain China and undermine regional peace and stability'. It added: 'The US side is obsessed with ganging up, forming small cliques and resorting to despicable means such as wedge-driving, which fully exposed its true face as a troublemaker undermining regional peace,

stability, solidarity and cooperation'. India did not react to the release of the document.

Another pact, signed weeks after America's Indo-Pacific strategy was written, was the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA). It allowed India access to encrypted communications equipment and systems so that Indian and US military commanders, and the aircraft and ships of the two countries, could communicate through secure networks. BECA, LEMOA and COMCASA completed a triad of 'foundational pacts' for deep military cooperation between the two nations.

COMCASA was signed in September 2018, five months after Modi travelled to Wuhan to meet President Xi Jinping. As per that agreement signed on 28 April 2018, India and China would not be rivals but cooperate with each other. They would 'push forward bilateral trade and investment'.

The problem, obvious to anyone, was that, whether he fully understood it or not, Modi was running with the hare and hunting with the hound. At the same time as he was holding hands with Xi, he was also winking at Trump's Indo-Pacific strategy to contain China. Xi's calculated response was to activate the Ladakh border so that India's military focus and resources would remain on land and not sea.

We have seen the effects of that in the past six years, with a border that remains tense and militarised and a trade balance so totally in China's favour that we cannot correct despite our efforts.

In his second term, Trump lost interest in his Indo-Pacific strategy. The headline announcing the dropping of the name was only the final, symbolic ending.

The question now is what did we gain from signing up for this casual adventure that was so expensive? The answer is, of course, the second story from 17 June: we got patted on the head and were praised.

Views are personal

93.71% YOY PROFIT SURGE: HOW HUTTI GOLD MINES SCRIPTED A HISTORIC RS 844-CRORE TRIUMPH

Modernizing India's ancient heritage while setting a new blueprint for public sector excellence.

For decades, the discourse around State Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) has been weighed down by scepticism. Critics frequently argue that government-run enterprises lack the agility to navigate volatile international markets or the technological foresight to overcome deep structural bottlenecks. However, the spectacular financial and the operational turnaround of the Hutti Gold Mines Company Limited (HGML) has completely upended this narrative. By posting a record-breaking net profit of Rs 844.71 crore for the Financial Year 2025–26—marking an astonishing ten-fold profit explosion compared to a decade ago—this Karnataka government undertaking has emerged as a shining beacon of self-reliance, strategic foresight, and fiscal discipline. In an era focused on optimizing domestic mineral wealth, HGML serves as a model for public sector efficiency, successfully navigating global macroeconomic trends while maintaining strict control over internal operational costs.

DEEP ROOTS: THE ANCIENT ORIGINS AND FIRE-SETTING

To understand the magnitude of Hutti's modern success, one must look back over 2,000 years to the pre-Ashokan era. The Hutti region, nestled within the Raichur district of Karnataka, holds the extraordinary distinction of being home to some of the oldest deep-level metal mining sites in human history.

Kolar Gold Fields (KGF) into a global powerhouse. John Taylor & Sons replaced fire-setting with dynamite blasting, introduced electrical hoisting winches, and sank formal vertical shafts deep into the earth.



Photo: AI generated image

Long before industrial drills or chemical reagents existed, ancient Indian miners possessed an astonishing understanding of structural geology. They identified the auriferous (gold-bearing) quartz veins running through the stubborn, dark amphibolite rocks of the Hutti-Maski greenstone belt. To break this incredibly dense host rock, these early pioneers engineered a sophisticated technique known as "fire-setting." Miners lit intense fires directly against the exposed underground rock walls.

Once the rock faces reached a blistering heat, they were suddenly doused with cold water. The resulting thermal shock caused the quartzite ore walls to crack and fracture. Using primitive iron chisels and stone hammers, workers chipped away the loosened ore, hauled it to the surface in woven baskets, and crushed it into fine powder.

To extract the gold, the crushed sediment was washed over greased goat skins, which trapped the heavy gold particles while allowing waste materials to float away. Remarkably, using these labor-intensive methods, ancient miners pushed their shafts to a staggering depth of nearly 600 feet—a feat unparalleled in the ancient world.

THE ERA OF EXPANSION: FROM THE NIZAM TO STATE OWNERSHIP

The dawn of industrialized mining at Hutti began in 1886 under the patronage of the Nizam of Hyderabad. The Nizam's government granted concession rights to the Hyderabad (Deccan)

Company, which handed management over to the legendary British mining engineering firm, John Taylor & Sons—the same firm that transformed the

Kolar Gold Fields (KGF) into a global powerhouse. John Taylor & Sons replaced fire-setting with dynamite blasting, introduced electrical hoisting winches, and sank formal vertical shafts deep into the earth.

Between 1886 and 1920, machinery pushed primary shafts down past 1,100 meters, yielding approximately 7,400 kg of gold. However, the economic fallout of World War I, technical challenges with underground flooding, and a shortage of working capital forced operations to grind to a halt in 1920.

The shafts lay dark and silent for over two decades until 1947, when the Nizam's government reactivated the asset as the Hyderabad Gold Mines Company. Following the linguistic reorganization of states in 1956, the Hutti region was integrated into Mysore State (later renamed Karnataka) and restructured as a state PSU: HGML. When the iconic Kolar Gold Fields closed permanently in 2001 due to depleted reserves, Hutti assumed the profound national responsibility of being India's primary operational pillar for domestic public sector gold production.

The anatomy of a modern masterpiece: Hutti's financial metamorphosis

To fully appreciate the scale of HGML's recent success, one must look at the corporate

trajectory of the last ten years. For a significant part of the past decade, Hutti's net profits remained modest, constrained by low international bullion prices and the steep costs of managing aging underground infrastructure.

In FY 2016–17, the company registered a net profit after tax of just over Rs 31.57 crore. By FY 2019–20, systematic governance reforms pushed profits to Rs 175.24 crore, before the COVID-19 pandemic introduced labor constraints and supply-chain shocks.

The subsequent rebound has been spectacular. Under proactive administrative stewardship, net profits surged from Rs 239.45 crore in FY 2023–24 to Rs 433.62 crore in FY 2024–25, culminating in the historic Rs 844.71 crore windfall in FY 2025–26—an extraordinary 93.71% year-on-year growth in profitability.

What makes this performance an elite industrial achievement is that it was paired with near-perfect production consistency. During FY 2025–26, HGML extracted 1,691.57 kg of primary gold, achieving 99.5% of its ambitious annual production target (1,700 kg).

RIDING THE MACROECONOMIC WAVE

In deep-level mining, the most challenging natural adversary is the "grade effect." Decades ago, the mine yielded 4 to 5 grams of gold per tonne of rock. Today, the average recovery grade hovers around 2.61 grams per tonne. Mechanically, the company must crush and treat significantly more rock just to yield the same kilogram of gold, which dramatically

escalates overheads.

HGML countered this geological reality by maximizing its "price capture" during an unprecedented global bullion rally. Driven by global economic uncertainties, HGML's average gold selling price soared to approximately Rs 11,603 per gram, compared to Rs 7,645 per gram in the previous fiscal year—a staggering 34.11% price appreciation.

Because HGML disposes of its unrefined Gold Dore Bars through pricing mechanisms linked directly to the weekly average rates of the India Bullion and Jewellers Association (IBJA), management successfully captured 100% of these premium margins.

Furthermore, the company expanded supplementary revenue streams by extracting 145.76 kg of high-purity silver as an industrial by-product, selling it at an average price exceeding Rs 1.58 lakh per kg.

THE INDIGENOUS R&D TRIUMPH

A core element of HGML's sustained profitability is its groundbreaking partnership with the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru. While gold bound within quartz matrices is readily extracted using conventional cyanide leaching, a significant portion of Hutti's deep-level reserves is composed of refractory-sulfide ores, where gold is chemically locked inside stubborn matrices of arsenopyrite and pyrite.

Instead of relying on expensive, imported chemical pre-treatments, HGML deployed an advanced bio-metallurgical process utilizing the bacteria *Thiobacillus ferrooxidans*. This bio-leaching framework pre-oxidizes the stubborn sulfides under regulated environmental conditions, allowing HGML to secure its highest recovery level in five years' time when international prices hit their peak.

BEYOND THE BALANCE SHEET: SUSTAINABLE GOVERNANCE

True to public sector ideology, HGML's record profits have been seamlessly funneled back into worker welfare, local infrastructure, and sustainable community advancement under the guidance of the State Government.

Employee housing: The company executed a monumental township project, constructing 1,000 modern residential quarters for its workforce at an investment of Rs 1,000 crore, while expanding comprehensive health insurance for all employees and contractual workers.

Civic infrastructure: To address long-standing ecological challenges in the Raichur district, a Rs 135-crore drinking water project was implemented, providing purified water to the mining township and peripheral villages.

CSR expansion: The company increased its localized CSR corpus by Rs 2.5 crore, funding rural schools, primary healthcare centers, and regional skill development facilities.

Green transitions: To decarbonize its heavy energy footprint, the enterprise operates an 11.2 MW wind power project in Chitradurga and has initiated the tendering process for large-scale solar power arrays directly at the Hutti site.

BRIDGING INDIA'S CRITICAL MACRO GAP

On a macroeconomic scale, HGML's hyper-efficiency addresses one of India's most critical structural vulnerabilities. India remains the world's second-largest consumer of gold, with an insulation-proof annual demand ranging between 700 to 900 metric tonnes.

Although domestic extraction currently accounts for less than 1% of the country's massive gold demand—forcing an import bill that crossed USD 72 billion in recent cycles—HGML's profitability serves as an undeniable proof of concept. It proves that deep-level metal extraction in India can be globally competitive, highly profitable, and safe when backed by strong state support.

As the nation opens new frontiers—including the recent emergence of private open-cast investments like the Jonnagiri Gold Fields in Andhra Pradesh—the state-owned Hutti Gold Mines continues to stand as the grand patriarch of Indian mining.

The HGML's extraordinary Rs 844.71 crore net profit in FY 2025–26 proves that with prudent financial discipline, bold technological interventions, and an unwavering commitment to worker welfare, state public sector undertakings can outperform global benchmarks.

INNOVATION DEEP UNDERGROUND: THE MODERNIZATION DRIVE



Photo: Source: Hattigoldl x.com

The true secret behind Hutti's longevity lies in its comprehensive, continuous modernization drive. Mining at depths exceeding 960 meters (stretching past the 31st mining level) requires high-tech, automated, and digitized engineering frameworks.

Upgrading the Hub-and-Spoke system: To counteract declining ore grades at the main Hutti unit, the company optimized a localized hub-and-spoke production system. Lower-grade surface ore from satellite open-cast units—such as Uti and Hira-Buddinni in Raichur, alongside exploration sites in Chitradurga (Ajjanahalli and G.R.Halli)—is transported to the centralized processing infrastructure at Hutti. This maximizes metallurgical plant utilization and ensures steady processing volumes.

Deep shaft automation: HGML replaced



older, manual hoisting equipment with high-speed, automated winding systems. These modern hoists drastically reduce the cycle time required to transport miners down and haul thousands of tonnes of blasted ore to the surface.

Advanced ventilation architecture: Operating nearly a kilometer beneath the surface generates extreme ambient rock temperatures. HGML installed high-capacity, energy-efficient ventilation fans and cooling networks to maintain safe working conditions.

Exploration precision: The company deployed modern diamond core drilling equipment and state-of-the-art 3D geological mapping software, allowing engineers to track the continuity of nine parallel reefs past a 3 km depth trajectory.



Can Israel survive Netanyahu?

Ashok Swain

As Israel approaches what could be the most consequential election in its 78-year history, a question once unthinkable is now being openly discussed: can Israel survive Netanyahu?

The question is no longer the political future of Israel's longest serving prime minister, but the future of Israel itself. Under Netanyahu, Israel has become more isolated internationally than ever before. An ICC (International Criminal Court) arrest warrant hangs over his head. Public opinion across much of the world, more importantly in countries that have been steadfast allies, has turned sharply against Netanyahu and the Zionist state of Israel. Even the United States, Israel's indispensable ally and principal benefactor, is showing signs of growing impatience.

Netanyahu is easily the most reviled, most despised political leader in the world today. Even Donald Trump, once his closest international partner and ally in confronting Iran, is now publicly rebuking him. Their recent disagreements over Israel's provocative strikes in Lebanon, which threatened belated US efforts to secure a deal with Iran, have created fissures in a relationship now increasingly defined by frustration more than trust. Among high-visibility world leaders, Narendra Modi appears to be the only one in support of his other 'good friend'.

Netanyahu is by far the most reviled leader in the world today. And Modi the only leader of note who still stands in his support

An Israeli television poll released this month reflects growing public exhaustion with Netanyahu's leadership. A majority of Israelis believe his conduct has harmed Israel's interests by jeopardising the peace talks.

Meanwhile, Netanyahu has concluded his testimony in an 18-month-long corruption trial, where he faces charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. The larger, extend well beyond his personal reputation or legal entanglements. In his desperation to stay alive politically, Netanyahu has inflicted unimaginable damage to Israel's global standing. He has undermined its long-term security and greatly weakened, if not fully destroyed, strategic partnerships.

The latest Pew Research survey should alarm every Israeli policymaker. Across 36 countries, a median of 67 per cent now hold unfavourable views of Israel. In many countries, including some of Israel's closest traditional partners, negative perceptions have reached record levels. Confidence in Netanyahu is even lower. Majorities across Europe, North America, Latin America and Asia express little or no confidence in him. Around the world, Netanyahu has become the face of Israel and the face of evil—and the blowback is inevitably singing Israel's reputation.

The reputational damage is not just a PR disaster. Israel's security is not just a PR matter; it depends on legitimacy, alliances and international goodwill, all of which Netanyahu's leadership has thoroughly eroded.

Israel remains heavily dependent on American military assistance, diplomatic protection at the United Nations, intelligence cooperation and economic support. For decades, support for Israel was one of the few genuinely bipartisan issues in American politics. That consensus is now collapsing. Younger Americans view Israel more negatively than earlier generations. Support for Israel among Democrats has fallen sharply. Prominent American politicians are questioning the scale of US military assistance and diplomatic backing given to Israel.

No Israeli leader should be comfortable with this trajectory. Yet Netanyahu is risking Israel's most important strategic relationship to cling to power and the political immunity that comes with it. That is because the greatest threat facing him personally is not Iran nor Hamas and Hezbollah but peace.

For Netanyahu, peace is politically dangerous because peace will set in motion

the wheels of accountability. Peace will expose failures. Peace will redirect attention away from external enemies to the man who has dominated Israeli politics for nearly two decades.

It is this reality that is making Netanyahu dare and defy Trump. For years, Netanyahu pushed successive American administrations towards confrontation with Iran. He opposed diplomacy, attacked negotiations and portrayed any accommodation with Tehran as a threat to Israel's survival. When Trump returned to office, Netanyahu believed he had finally found an American president willing to embrace his vision of maximum pressure and military escalation.

The subsequent war with Iran appeared to validate Netanyahu's long-standing approach. But as the costs and risks of further escalation started dawning on him, Trump started looking for an exit strategy. Dreams of a peace agreement with Tehran, of restoring some stability to the region, of the possibility that he may still be able to claim credit for ending a dangerous conflict seem to have re-entered the Trump mindscapes.

For Netanyahu, on the other hand, a US peace deal with Iran will undermine the central political narrative he has spun for decades. It will diffuse the sense of permanent emergency on which his political relevance depends. Importantly, it will make Israelis focus on Netanyahu

Netanyahu dreads peace because peace in the region will mean a sharper focus at home on his role in making Israel a global pariah

in the region will mean a change of focus at home, and the spotlight will turn on the deadliest attack in Israel's history and on the leadership of a man who built his reputation on security. Israelis will question the strategy that allowed the attacks of 7 October 2023. They will ask why the hostages couldn't be brought home sooner, why no political solution is in sight even after the genocide in Gaza. And they will know who presided over Israel's global isolation.

A political career built on projecting unmatched credentials to protect Israel at all costs and on the Zionist geopolitical dream of creating a Greater Israel—envisioning a Jewish state with borders extending far beyond Israel's current territory—is coming unstuck.

What we are witnessing are the desperate attempts of the man in charge of that project to make the fantasy endure in the Israeli popular imagination.

When Israel votes later this year, its people will weigh the costs of nurturing this dream. They will probably worry how the country can rebuild legitimacy, repair alliances and reclaim a place in the world. The future of Israel might depend on whether the country can move beyond the man who has led them to their current predicament. ■

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



A global pariah A recent Global Attitudes Survey by Pew Research shows a median of 67% across 36 countries holding unfavourable views of Israel; a clear majority in 34 of the 36 nations surveyed lack confidence in Netanyahu

Why the UK premiership is such a hotseat

Ashis Ray on the political churn in the UK that has now seen the exit of six prime ministers in 10 years



Keir Starmer announces his resignation as UK Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party outside 10 Downing Street

Seven prime ministers in a decade, as the UK is about to witness, is quite a testimony to political instability. Britain is wrestling with itself and consequently, short-lived governments.

Since the Second World War, Clement Attlee, Winston Churchill, Harold Wilson (for six years with a snap election in between), Margaret Thatcher (for 11 years), John Major (for seven years with an election in the middle), Tony Blair (for a decade before he voluntarily stepped down) and David Cameron have completed five years or more as prime minister.

After being re-elected in 2015, Cameron proceeded with an election manifesto promise of a referendum on Britain's continued membership of the European Union. This had been a very fractious issue in his Conservative party since the 1980s. A

pro-Europe politician among sceptics, he was sanguine his popularity would put the matter at rest once and for all. But he was in for a shock.

The vote not only divided his party and government but the country as a whole. Cameron had underestimated the challenge posed by party colleague Boris Johnson and the ultra-nationalist brigade and joint forces with him. He did not take into account the fact that the leader of the opposition Labour party, Jeremy Corbyn, belonged to the 1970s era of left-wingers opposed to the European Common Market, as the EU was then known. Corbyn officially supported the 'Remain' campaign but half-heartedly at best. The verdict: Brexit!

In June 2016, Cameron quit as prime minister. Theresa May succeeded him, but time and again her party MPs blocked

Starmer was a safe pair of hands but he lacked charisma and communication skills and failed to transmit his achievements

passage of Brexit bills in the House of Commons. Johnson was behind the machinations to thwart her. May was compelled to step down.

Having engineered a coup d'état, Johnson took over as prime minister in the summer of 2019. In December, he called a midterm election on the slogan of 'Get Brexit Done'. An exasperated British electorate lapped this up and extended a resounding endorsement. Johnson did get Brexit done, but his rushed deal was more unfavourable to the UK than anything May had proposed or negotiated.

His successor Liz Truss lasted 49 days, ousted after piloting a terrible budget. This so destabilised the bond markets in Britain that it almost brought the British economy crashing down, notwithstanding its sovereign AA rating for the S&P and Fitch.

With no takers for the premiership, Rishi Sunak, a rookie, who had been an MP for just seven years filled the void. He had been Johnson's chancellor, but resigned in the rebellion that ousted him.

Sunak steadied the boat and was at the helm for 20 months, but made no impression with the British people. He and the Conservatives were predictably wiped out when he called a vote in July 2024.

During the musical chairs—five prime ministers in six years—Labour recovered from its worst defeat under Corbyn in 2019 to a landslide victory, returning a tally of over 400 MPs in a House of 650, next only to the record set under Blair in 1997. Keir Starmer, a barrister and a former head of Britain's Crown Prosecution Service, made it happen, but he too came unstuck in less than two years.

Britain's right-wing news media went for his throat from Day 1. Starmer did not help matters by implementing some unpopular policies, which affected the elderly and children. The decision to increase employer contributions to National Insurance was also unpopular. His choice of Peter Mandelson—a controversial Labour grandee with links to convicted child sex offender Jeffrey Epstein—as the British ambassador to the United States

became one of the most serious political crises of Starmer's premiership.

Under Starmer, state school education and the National Health Service—important yardsticks of government performance in Britain—improved significantly. There was a record drop in immigration, a vexatious issue among white-working class Britons as also some Indian extraction immigrants, and a trigger for the rise of the far right Reform UK party.

Inflation eased but the economy didn't take off. Unemployment increased and wages didn't. The cost of living crisis persisted and became a theme.

Starmer was on the verge of pulling off a potential game-changer—a UK-EU summit, scheduled in July, to discuss a single market on goods trade. The British economy has suffered a devastating loss in trade turnover since Brexit that cannot be compensated by any free trade agreement with other countries or blocs.

Starmer was a safe pair of hands, but he lacked charisma and communication skills. His government failed to transmit its achievements to the British public. After the outcome of last month's local and regional elections, the writing was on the wall. A YouGov poll in May 2026 showed 69 per cent viewing Starmer unfavourably.

His MPs realised that with such ratings, Labour was not going to overcome the serious threat from Reform, nor from the Green Party (who had taken away hard left and Muslim votes) with its nextedly pro-Palestine stance, to win the next election in 2029, if Starmer was retained as prime minister.

So, Andy Burnham, until last week a popular mayor of Greater Manchester in northwest England and now elected to the Commons in a by-election, is odds-on favourite to step into Starmer's shoes, making him Britain's seventh prime minister in 10 years.

We'll learn in due course if the procession of UK prime ministers lengthens before the next general election—watch this space. ■

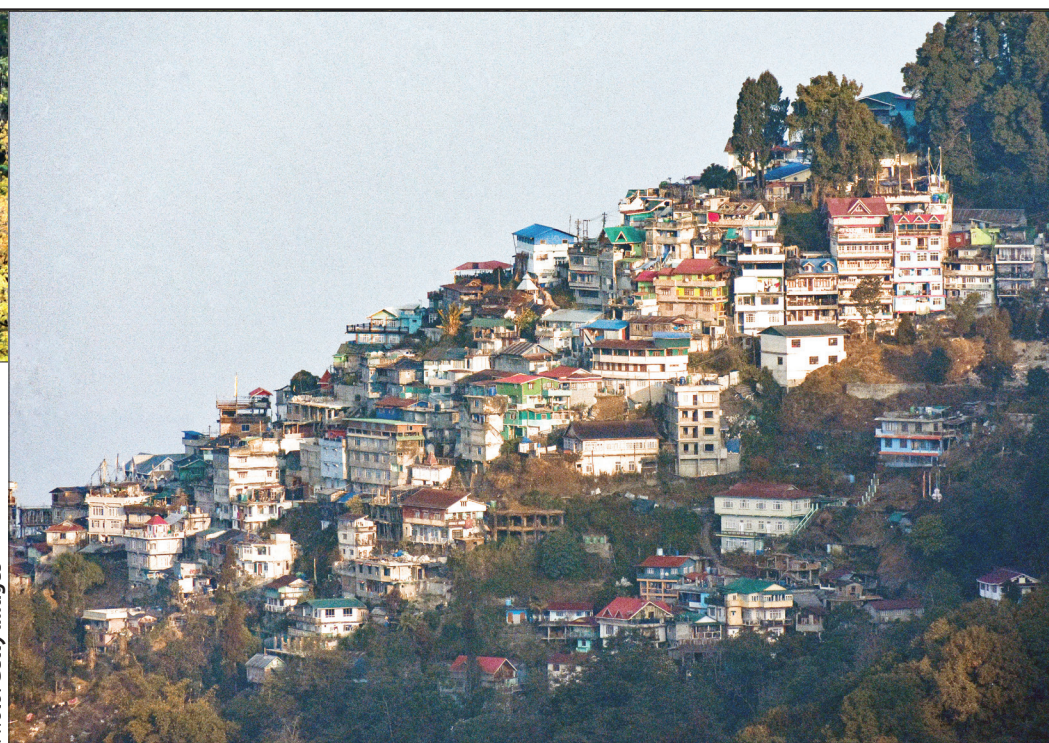
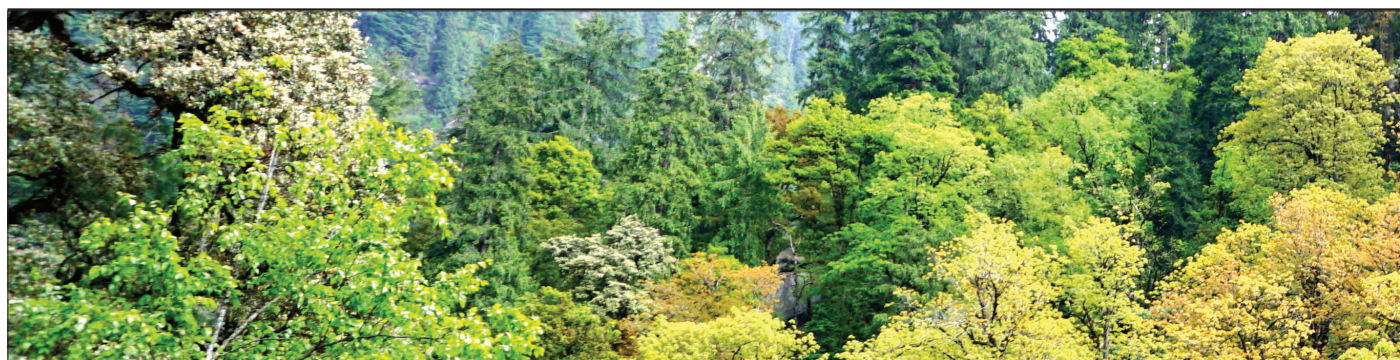


Photo: Getty Images

Where have all the dragonflies gone?

Avay Shukla on the alarming loss of biodiversity in the Himalayas

Biodiversity is perhaps the most unacknowledged component of the natural environment, and the attention of policymakers rarely goes beyond trees and animals, if even that. But biodiversity is much more than just trees and animals. It is the building block of nature, without which there would be no nature, or an inhabitable planet.

Biodiversity is the extraordinary variety of all living things on Earth. It encompasses plants, animals, micro-organisms, fungi and even pathogens, the genetic information they carry, and the complex ecosystems they create. I've learnt this the hard way, and am just beginning to understand it.

When I acquired my half acre land in Purani Koti village in 2002, there were only two houses here; the landscape comprised rolling, grassy hillsides with a few apple trees and some deodars and blue pines. My own plot was carpeted with wild daisies, buttercups, lilies and primroses. The place was practically overrun with bees, butterflies, cicadas and dragonflies, and there was a continuous buzzing on sunny days. The birds formed the next level on the food chain, and were in turn subordinate to feral cats and pine martins. Purani Koti was a biodiversity hotspot!

Not any more. Most of the land in the village has been built over, the trees felled, the buzzing of dragonflies replaced with the rasping of jackhammers and saws. To compensate, I have planted more than 200 trees on my land, of the fruit and jungle

varieties. But it has been of no avail, for trees alone on just one plot cannot create biodiversity.

The lowest tier of natural growth in the area—the grasses, bushes, ferns, wild flowers, creepers—have all gone, and the soil has lost its capacity to store rain and snow or to retain moisture.

With the disappearance of this living building block of nature, the insects that depended on it have also started vanishing. A few, very few, butterflies and bees still delight us, but I have not seen any dragonflies this year: I fear their niche has disappeared and they are gone for ever.

In a year or two, the bees and butterflies will also abandon this biodiverse wasteland. Which, along with global warming, probably explains why we can no longer grow the fruits—apples, pears, apricots, cherries—that we used to: with the biodiversity gone, there are no insects left to pollinate their flowers or birds to spread the seeds.

This loss of precious biodiversity is rarely factored into our planning and developmental processes. What is reluctantly considered (at most) is forest or green cover—i.e. the number of trees to be felled. These are quantified and valued, the amount paid by the project proponent and twice that number planted as compensatory afforestation. The loss of biodiversity is completely ignored, never compensated for.

Some figures from Himachal Pradesh

may better illustrate the point: the state's forest area is 37,000 sq. km (37 lakh hectares), and a 2024 study by the Bhopal Institute of Forest Management quantifies its annual biodiversity value at Rs 33,000 cr.

In other words, the biodiversity contribution value of every hectare is Rs 89,000 per annum. Working out its NPV over a typical 25- to 30-year life cycle of any project, the state should be charging at least Rs 30 lakh for every hectare of forest diverted for non-forest use. But this is not done because no value is attached to biodiversity.

This may, however, be changing globally, even as we in India continue to fell millions of trees every year for grand schemes that will displace the livelihoods of thousands of forest-dependent communities but enrich crony oligarchs by a few trillion dollars more.

Peru, for example, has become the first country to give legal protection to insects (in this case its famous stingless bees). Recognising the ecological importance of these tiny pollinators of the Amazon forests, which pollinate 80 per cent of the Amazon's tropical fruits, just this month it enacted a law that recognises their right to exist, to a clean and intact habitat, to regenerate, and to receive legal representation if pollution, deforestation and projects threaten their survival. Anyone, company or individual, who threatens these rights can be sued and prosecuted.

Similarly, in Wales, the River Wye has

received legal protection of its 'rights of nature' from its catchment to the sea. The new charter recognises the river as a living ecosystem with the intrinsic right to exist, i.e. the right to flow, the right to its biodiversity, the right to be free from pollution, the right to regenerate and to a healthy catchment. Any citizen can now go to court to enforce these rights.

New Zealand, too, has given legal status to the Whanganui river. Mount Taranaki has been given legal guardianship through an eight-member Guardian Council consisting of four government experts and four tribal representatives: no project, government or private, can be sanctioned without the approval of this council.

In India, the Uttarakhand high court in 2017 had recognised the Ganga as 'a living entity' with legal rights, but the ruling was inexplicably stayed by the Supreme Court, and the matter continues in limbo.

The Peru and Wales laws are small beginnings in realising the importance of protecting ecosystems and biodiversity as a whole, not just trees and forests in isolation. One hopes our governments, courts and the NGT take note of these developments, dispel their sense of omniscience, and rouse themselves from their slumber, sloth and lack of understanding of ecological issues.

Then—and only then—will the dragonflies perhaps return to Purani Koti and reclaim what is rightfully theirs. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

The potential loss of biodiversity gets no consideration in our development push. The best we manage is to pay lip service to green cover



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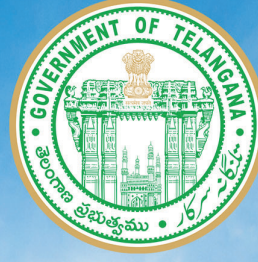
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Total Paddy Procured In 2025-26

150

LAKH TONNES



**150 LAKH
TONNES**
OF PADDY PROCURED
IN 2025-26



INR **35,537**
CRORES
DISBURSED TO
FARMERS' ACCOUNTS



26.43
LAKH
FARMERS' PAYMENT
TRANSACTIONS

- This achievement is the result of Government intent, and a foolproof procurement ecosystem - of 8575 centres spread across the State - designed to serve farmers at scale.
- From procurement and logistics to storage, milling and direct payments, every part of the system worked in coordination to ensure that farmers received the value of their produce efficiently and transparently, within 48 to 72 hours.
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