

NATION

STATES 360°  
Kerala, Andhra Pradesh,  
Arunachal Pradesh

P2,4,6

HOME & ABROAD

THE HIDDEN AGENDA  
OF THE DPDP ACT  
If you can't kill the story, stifle  
those that report it

P5

Happy Diwali

National Herald wishes its readers  
a Happy Diwali. There will be no  
edition of the paper on 8 November

PEOPLE AGAINST SIR

# Making common cause against a common enemy

As protests mushroom, the crusade to protect voting rights spreads across India

Nandlal Sharma

On 2 October 2026, the day student and youth organisations called for a march to Jantar Mantar against the Special Intensive Revision (SIR), social activist Nikhil Dey was locked in a physical tussle with the police on the streets of central Delhi.

The Delhi police had deployed its full force to prevent protesters from reaching Jantar Mantar. Multiple layers of barricades were erected along every route, with personnel from the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and the Rapid Action Force (RAF) stationed at key points. Vehicles equipped to fire tear gas shells and water cannons were in position. All this muscle and might only to prevent the citizens of India from staging a sit-in against their disenfranchisement.

Even as protesters failed to breach police cordons, they kept pouring into the streets. Young and old, students, farmers, workers, citizens decided to claim every place as Jantar Mantar. The fight to protect voting rights was spreading lane by lane, location by location, state by state.

Sample this.

On 23 October 2026, afternoon: Kalibari Road, near Gole Market, **Delhi**. The same evening: Sonia Vihar, Delhi. **Uttar Pradesh**: Ballia. **Punjab**: Barnala, Mansa, Faridkot, Fatehgarh. **Karnataka**: Kalaburagi. **Telangana**: Hyderabad. **West Bengal**: Basirhat. **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**: Andaman Islands. **Andhra Pradesh**: Amalapuram. **Maharashtra**: Ahilyanagar. **Odisha**: Bhubaneswar. **Rajasthan**: Sri Ganganagar. **Madhya Pradesh**: Chhindwara.

One day, multiple locations. One banner, multiple organisations—the Students’ Federation of India (SFI), Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA), Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), All India Kisan Khet Mazdoor Sangathan (AIKKMS)—all making common cause against a common enemy.

As many as 145 organisations mobilised in more than 100 cities across 18 states under the banner ‘People Against SIR’. Ashlesh Biradar, a member of the People Against SIR coordination team, says protests were held across 150 sites on 23 October (their website currently records 103). When asked about their concentration in the south with relatively fewer protests in Gujarat and the northwest, Biradar says, “All the information isn’t in yet. Once it is, you’ll see hundreds of Jantar Mantars across the map of India!”

The fight isn’t merely to reclaim Jantar Mantar as a space for peaceful protest. It is to raise public awareness about the Modi government’s criminal conspiracy to deprive people of their voting rights. Alongside voter-rights groups, the coalition includes organisations working to defend the Constitution, democracy and electoral accountability. Concerns range from social justice to culture, civil liberties to education.

In effect, People Against SIR is united in its opposition to the Modi-Shah regime. Announced on 14 October 2026, following a meeting at Harkishan Singh Surjeet Bhawan in New Delhi, the ‘No SIR National Platform’ attracted prominent figures, including actor Prakash Raj, senior advocate Prashant Bhushan, Ganesh Devy, P. Parakala Prabhakar, Tara Rao, Nikhil Dey and Nadeem Khan.

A coordination committee was formed with representatives from participating organisations. Separate teams were set up to manage the secretariat, grassroots activities, media, legal assistance and public audits. A dedicated communications system included a central WhatsApp group, to inform people about protest sites in their neighbourhood.

The run-up to this moment can possibly be traced to 23 September 2026, when *The Indian Express* reported that two election commissioners had disagreed with or objected to ECI decisions as many as 14 times in ten months.

The disclosure sparked outrage over ECI-enabled vote theft under the guise of the SIR,



In black and white The list of names deleted in the Trilokpuri assembly constituency, displayed at the public hearing on 27 October

prompting protesters to head to Jantar Mantar on Gandhi Jayanti. The government turned the site into a fortress. This did not stop the follow-up protest of 10 October (where molestation added a disturbing layer to the now familiar pattern of detention and intimidation). On 13 October, Saurav Das and Ashutosh Ranka of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) were arrested for trying to unfurl the national flag at Jantar Mantar. Citizens realised that for the long haul ahead, solidarity would mean joining forces not just individually but organisationally.

Even as the steady stream of protests against the SIR shows no signs of slowing down, ‘Jan Sunwai’ or public hearings have become crucial.

In 2002-03, Shankar Singh of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) conducted public hearings to scrutinise voter rolls at the Election Commission’s behest. In 2026, he is conducting public hearings to scrutinise the Election Commission’s work. Aware of the irony, he says, “People are terrified. They fear deportation, access to essential services being cut off, even being put in jail.”

Singh, who hails from Rajasthan’s Rajsamand district, is both a grassroots social activist and a playwright. He helped establish MKSS along with social activists Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey. An organisation known for its efforts to secure the Right to Information law has now joined the People Against SIR.

On 27 October, a jan sunwai at Ramlila Park in Trilokpuri, east Delhi, was led by

MKSS, Voter Adhikar Manch, Jan Sarokar and the National Federation of Indian Women.

They found that 416 voters across four polling booths in the Trilokpuri assembly constituency—Indira Camp booths 42 and 43, and Block 34 booths 79 and 80—had been wrongly deleted.

Shankar Singh says, “Local residents from 300 households attended the hearing because members of all these organisations went door to door, informing people that a public hearing was being organised to help restore the names of those deleted.”

Nikhil Dey, who attended the Trilokpuri public hearing, says, “We have to fight. This is a huge issue. But it isn’t the job of citizens’ organisations; political parties must also engage. Only then will a way forward emerge. A public hearing is the democratic voice of the people. Those in power may suppress the Opposition—whose leaders are coming to the public hearings—but no one can suppress the people. No one can come to a jan sunwai and ask why you put up that poster or raised those slogans.”

Similar public hearings are being conducted at 100 polling booths in Karnataka, as well as in Telangana and Rajasthan.

More than 200 volunteers have signed up from different professional backgrounds, carving out time to defend democracy. Akshit Tyagi, a 22-year-old software engineer from Delhi, specialises in machine learning.

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# Why the ECINet needs an independent audit

When ECINet absorbed ERONet and amalgamated 40 other apps, the alarm bells hadn’t yet rung. When investigative reports revealed the extent of ECINet’s malfunctioning, the ECI responded with excuses, evasiveness, obfuscation. It’s only a technical glitch; it’s only a few errors; voters still have the right to appeal; mistakes can still be corrected... and so on, ad nauseum. When over 13 crore voters found they had been deleted from the electoral rolls under the auspices of the SIR, the ‘faults’ seemed designed to exclude. It will take more than the measures hurried out by the ECI, more than a stage-managed audit, to restore the people’s faith.



Photo: Getty Images

A.J. Prabal

Take our word for it: all is well. That, in a nutshell, is the stubborn defence of the Election Commission of India in the face of mounting evidence that the electoral system is broken, the commission has ceased to function independently, and the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has been an unmitigated horror show.

In its 250-page affidavit filed in the Supreme Court, the ECI did not deny the allegations raised in the investigative report by the *Indian Express* on 23 September 2026. It dismissed the petitions as ‘misconceived’ and said newspaper reports cannot count as evidence in court. The affidavit asserts that the ECINet cannot be manipulated and that only authorised officers—the electoral registration officer (ERO) and

assistant EROs (AEROs)—can add or delete voter names.

There are several reasons why this is unconvincing. The affidavit itself admits that 89 voters in Goa were indeed ‘left out’ of the voter roll by the SIR. Stating that most of the names have since been restored does not answer two key questions. Why were they deleted? And why was the ERO not able to restore them in the first place?

If ECINet is truly not being remote-controlled from ECI headquarters in New Delhi, the ERO should have been able to restore the wrongly deleted voters. In fact, he had repeatedly flagged his inability to do so and claimed to have sent eight

reminders in seven days to Nirvachan Sadan. He brought the ‘glitch’ to the notice of ECI IT chief Seema Khanna but received no response.

Even more troubling are the allegations surrounding West Bengal, where the ECI claims it was unaware or uninvolved in the 16 lakh voter appeals filed to exclude names cleared during judicial scrutiny. The affidavit swears that the state CEO was authorised to act as per provisions in the Representation of the People Act and that the issue was never escalated to the ECI. It fails to explain a file entry in August 2026 by election commissioner S.S. Sandhu, which records the same CEO telling him she had no information on this matter and no idea how so many appeals were filed on identical grounds.

Then there’s the deafening silence surrounding the technical audit conducted by Charchagram, a civic-tech group that exposed a software feature in ECINet that could bar EROs and AEROs from reviewing voter enumeration forms and viewing the notice-and-hearing dashboard. When this was detected by the audit team on 19 October, the restrictive feature applied only in West Bengal. While the findings were reported by multiple media outlets, the ECI stayed mum.

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The ECI withheld information on grounds of ‘trade secrets’. Seriously?



STATES 360° KERALA



# Dust-ups over recruitments and generic drugs

K.A. Shaji

Kerala governor Rajendra Arlekar's parting shot is more than a confrontation with the UDF government. On 15 October, just before leaving to take charge as governor of Tamil Nadu, Arlekar recommended the removal of Public Service Commission (PSC) chairman M.R. Baiju and all 15 members. The timing is significant. The crime branch was investigating recruitment-related complaints against the PSC leadership appointed under the previous Pinarayi Vijayan government. Allegations of examination irregularities, questionable selection procedures and appointments had seriously damaged the commission's credibility. By recommending the removal of the entire leadership without consulting or informing the elected government, a genuine crisis of confidence in a constitutional institution risks becoming an opportunity for the Sangh Parivar to expand its influence over public recruitment in Kerala. The Planning Board recruitment controversy illustrates the seriousness of the allegations. In an 228 answer scripts, Q. 9 was not evaluated in 177 papers, while Qs 10-18 were left unevaluated or not properly assigned for evaluation across all 228 papers. Rank lists were prepared and appointments made on the basis of these assessments. The irregularities came to light after a candidate obtained his answer sheet through the Right to Information Act. The investigation and complaints concerning other recruitments placed the PSC's functioning under a cloud. The previous government's nominees cannot escape accountability. Every substantiated allegation must be investigated, and



Former Kerala governor Rajendra Arlekar

those responsible must face appropriate action. But using these failures to justify a sweeping intervention without establishing its constitutional basis creates a dangerous precedent. A compromised commission does not give the governor unrestricted authority. Articles 315 and 316 provide for Public Service Commissions and govern their composition and appointments. Article 317 prescribes safeguards for removing a chairman or member, including a Supreme Court inquiry into alleged misbehaviour. Arlekar's recommendation alone is not enough. The President's response must comply with the Constitution. These safeguards exist to prevent public recruitment from becoming vulnerable to the political preferences of those occupying constitutional offices. The larger concern is the Sangh Parivar's expanding ambitions in Kerala. The PSC is not an ordinary government department. Access to public employment is a vital route to social mobility for working-class families and disadvantaged communities. Political influence over

recruitment can have consequences extending far beyond individual appointments. Replacing one compromised arrangement with another would not be reform; it would merely change the beneficiaries of political patronage. The Congress-led UDF government faces a difficult test. It must cooperate with legitimate investigations, expose entrenched malpractice and introduce transparent procedures to restore public confidence. It cannot defend the previous government's nominees simply to oppose the exiting governor. Equally, it must not allow previous failures to become a pretext for the Sangh Parivar to appropriate the commission. By using recruitment irregularities under the previous Pinarayi Vijayan government's nominees to justify a sweeping intervention, Rajendra Arlekar has opened a dangerous front in Kerala's struggle to protect public institutions from political appropriation. The UDF government must clean up the recruitment system without surrendering the PSC to a Sangh Parivar game plan.

## Politics mars a public health breakthrough

A medicine that costs more than Rs 5 lakh a bottle could be available to Kerala's public health system for around Rs 8,000. Switching to this affordable Indian generic could save the state crores of rupees and make treatment for children with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) more sustainable. Yet Kerala's CPI(M) leaders—the Left has a historic commitment to affordable medicines—have turned the decision by the Congress government into a controversy over drug safety. Risdipnam is used to treat SMA, a rare genetic disorder that progressively weakens muscles and can, in severe cases, be fatal. Swiss pharma major Roche's branded medicine, Evrysdi, is prohibitively expensive. Natco Pharma's Indian generic, Natsmart, contains the same active pharmaceutical ingredient and has received regulatory approval. Kerala's SMA technical committee estimates that switching to the generic could reduce the state's annual expenditure for 129 children from around Rs 25 crore to

Rs 25 lakh. The move can be replicated in other states. State health minister K. Muraleedharan has defended the decision, emphasising that it followed expert recommendations and regulatory clearance. The Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation clarified that separate bioequivalence studies and additional clinical trials were not required for this oral solution under the applicable regulatory guidance. The Delhi High Court rejected Roche's challenge to manufacturing the generic and the Supreme Court declined to overturn that outcome. The scientific and regulatory position is therefore clear on a crucial point: Natsmart is an approved generic formulation, not an experimental drug awaiting clinical trials. The Indian Medical Association has also weighed in, with its Kerala president, Dr N. Sulphi, describing the controversy as a fallout of competition between pharmaceutical companies rather than evidence that the generic is unsafe. While the head of Kerala's SMA technical committee, Dr K.V. Viswanathan, has defended the medicine's regulatory status and suitability, interventions by Dr B. Iqbal and Dr V. Ramankutty have given the debate an additional political dimension. Iqbal, a public health activist associated with the Left, has welcomed the move towards affordable generic treatment. Ramankutty, a paediatrician, epidemiologist and former professor at the Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, recalled his participation in Left-led campaigns for cheaper generic medicines in the 1980s. He expressed surprise at the Left questioning a regulator-approved generic. Their criticism carries weight because it comes from within the

progressive public health movement, not from the UDF government. They argue that the price of medicine cannot be divorced from the question of who gets access to treatment. The political contradiction is sharpened by the previous LDF government's own record. An expert committee constituted under former health minister Veena George initiated discussions on procuring Natco's generic medicine and subsequently recommended the switch after seeking regulatory clarification. The committee's minutes recorded that the drug had received marketing approval and separate studies were not required. Against this background, Leader of the Opposition Pinarayi Vijayan and former health ministers P.K. Sreemathy, K.K. Shailaja and George raised alarms over bottles labelled 'Physician Sample' and 'For Clinical Trials Only', suggesting that children might have been exposed to experimental medicine. The manufacturer has said the disputed bottles came from its patient assistance programme. Hospital authorities retrieved the stock after concerns emerged. The labels understandably caused concern, but they do not establish that the approved drug itself was undergoing clinical trials. The government must explain the labelling and ensure that families receive clear information. But political leaders also have a responsibility to verify regulatory facts and consult relevant experts before amplifying claims that could frighten parents away from an approved medicine. Kerala's generic SMA initiative deserves scrutiny, not misinformation. The real public health test is whether the state can protect children while breaking the grip of prohibitive drug prices. For families confronting a rare and devastating disease, affordable treatment is not a political slogan. It is a lifeline. ■

*Kerala needs a credible clean-up, not a political bargain over who controls the PSC*

## PEOPLE AGAINST SIR Making common cause against a common enemy



Might vs right Protesters hold their ground at the rally against CEC Gyanesh Kumar

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He designed the People Against SIR website and supports it both online and offline. Akshit was a regular at Jantar Mantar 1.0 this July. When the agitation against SIR began, he returned. Sagarika Rajora, an advocate, works for the rights of migrant workers. To help people navigate the SIR process, she and her colleagues established the Voter Adhikar Manch, which is now helping People Against SIR. Sagarika coordinates with other volunteers on social media, conducts field visits and attends working-group meetings. "It's a big fight, and people have become more aware. You can see that on the streets," she says. Vineet, 43, works for a tech company in Haryana, and is associated with the MKSS. He travelled at his own expense to New Delhi to participate in the Trilokpuri public hearing. He also went to Mangolpuri, where

he helped people fill out Form 6. After spending the entire day counselling residents and explaining next steps, he caught a bus back to Hisar. \* It is important to remember that citizens' organisations had already been protesting well before 23 October 2026, be it in Lucknow, Hyderabad or Mumbai. On 16 October, hundreds gathered in Connaught Place, New Delhi to take part in the *Lehra Do Tiranga* (Let's fly the tricolour) event. Saroj, a Delhi resident who participated in the Tebhaga and Telangana movements, says, "I have never seen such an incompetent government. The people who gave us the slogan '*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*' (To save your daughter, teach your daughter) organise tricolour marches to protect rapists while preventing the country's own citizens from unfurling the flag!" Virag, from Gujarat, was in

Connaught Place that day. He and his associates had organised a public book event in Ahmedabad, where they were assaulted by members of the VHP and Bajrang Dal. "Dictatorship prevails in this country," he says. "One day, the dictator will then be held accountable." Journalist and content creator Meghnad, who has declared himself an independent politician, says the movement has become decentralised. "We received a call from Deoghar. They wanted to organise a protest with just four or five people and asked whether we could add it to the People Against SIR website and map. People are stepping up on their own. The size of the crowd doesn't matter. This is about citizens. People Against SIR is becoming a platform through which they can connect. It won't be easy for the government to snuff us all out." ■

## Why the ECINet needs an independent audit

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Charchagram uncovered a feature to classify electors as 'VIP' voters and generate downloadable lists. Who counted as a VIP, and what were the implications? Answer there was none. The affidavit is also economical when it comes to ECs Sandhu and Vivek Joshi writing to the cabinet secretary to register their unease about work being redistributed without their knowledge or consent. They note that their request for an audit of ECINet was halted by Maneesh Garg, an officer whose order they questioned. The affidavit states that the order (in July 2026) was never implemented. But why was the order issued? How could Garg refuse to show a file to the election commissioners? What happened to Garg after his role was flagged? How and when was Garg posted to the ECI and at whose behest? The fact that an audit of ECINet is being carried out by a committee of experts from IIT and the Indian Institute of Science is less than reassuring. The decision was taken only after the *Indian Express* report came out. Joshi had proposed an audit in May, Sandhu endorsed it in July and then again in August. What we need is an independent audit, not a stage-managed one. \*

The concerns are legion: were notice requirements met, objections heard, reasons recorded and the right

to appeal honoured? Documented defects in ECINet, digital forms, automated workflows, backend software processes make a strong case for an independent technical and legal audit to determine manipulation, whether errors were accidental and whether statutory safeguards worked. The ECI's narrow brief on verifying role-based access, data security and operational flexibility is unlikely to investigate documented translation and transliteration absurdities like Ramhit Yadav (Ram Hit Yadav) becoming *Ram ne Yadav ko mara*, the largescale flagging of



Delhi residents registering as voters

'logical discrepancy' on trivial, frivolous and dubious grounds, or access-control mechanisms. Nor is it likely to seriously investigate the staggering security vulnerabilities pointed out by independent researchers like Nisarg Adhikary or the objections of serving commissioners. If, as the ECI would have us believe, the ECINet implemented every statutory procedure correctly, then every voter addition, deletion, restoration, discrepancy notice and access decision can potentially be reconstructed from logs and audit trails. If so, why object to an independent audit? The ECI invoked exemptions under the RTI Act to withhold information about ECINet's software (application, version and other

technical details) on the grounds of 'commercial confidence, trade secrets and intellectual property matters'. But critical public systems—banks, defence, aviation—regularly undergo rigorous security audits without public disclosure of proprietary code. Why exempt ECINet? Election-security doctrine worldwide begins with the assumption that software cannot be trusted absolutely. The US system requires 'software independence', meaning an undetected software error should not be capable of causing an undetectable error in election outcomes. Voting systems in several democracies are subjected to certification, penetration testing or independent review without surrendering intellectual property rights. Therefore, even if TCS, which was awarded the ECINet contract, legitimately retains intellectual property rights, this does not automatically preclude a confidential audit by CAG-appointed experts, CERT-In, a parliamentary committee, a court-appointed technical panel or an independent third-party assessor. A constitutional democracy requires citizens to be able to verify that electoral data are handled lawfully. An audit does not presume wrongdoing. It seeks to establish whether wrongdoing, software error, procedural failures did occur—or if all was indeed well. ■



# Why does growth not feel like prosperity?

The evidence of unease extends beyond anecdotes. **Ajit Ranade** elaborates

An Uber driver says he works longer hours than before, yet takes home less money. After fuel, maintenance, loan instalments and the platform’s deductions, little remains. His experience cannot establish how the entire economy is performing. But it brings to mind the title of Erma Bombeck’s book: *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?* If India is growing rapidly, why is making a living becoming harder?

India’s GDP grew at 7.8 per cent during the April–June quarter, which is impressive. The International Monetary Fund, Reserve Bank of India and other agencies have revised growth estimates upwards for the whole year. Sustaining rapid growth amid international uncertainty is an achievement. This column is not about the controversy regarding the 7.8 per cent figure, which we can take as acceptable.

Does the disappointment therefore reflect excessive pessimism? Expectations rise with prosperity. Every expanding economy contains struggling businesses and disappointed job seekers. A few conversations cannot provide a representative assessment of a country as large and diverse as India.

Yet the evidence of unease extends beyond anecdotes. The RBI’s September urban consumer confidence survey recorded a Current Situation Index of 87.9, the lowest since March 2023, below the neutral level of 100. About 54.5 per cent of respondents believed the general economic situation had worsened over the preceding year; only 25.3 per cent thought it had improved.

Rural responses were also revealing. Only 20.6 per cent reported higher income than a year earlier, while 30.5 per cent reported a decline. Such findings give

household discomfort a firmer basis than casual impressions or political commentary.

There is however no sweeping pessimism in the RBI surveys. Urban households remained optimistic about the year ahead. Present dissatisfaction thus coexists with expectations of improvement. Describing the economy as uniformly distressed would overlook this evidence.

There is no necessary contradiction between rapid GDP growth and household anxiety. GDP measures production across the economy. It does not establish how widely additional income is distributed, whether employment is secure, or how much harder someone must work to maintain the same living standard.

Suppose a millionaire enters a room. Average wealth rises immediately, although nobody there becomes richer. Even per capita GDP, which adjusts output for population, cannot reveal what has happened to the typical household.

The composition of growth matters. Capital-intensive activities and specialised services can generate substantial output and income while directly employing relatively few people. Corporate profits can rise much faster than wages, which has indeed happened. Growth concentrated in these activities will feel different from an expansion that creates plentiful jobs across occupations and skill levels.

Former RBI governor Duvvuri Subbarao has drawn attention to precisely these structural concerns, including weak real rural wages and inadequate creation of good jobs. They coexist with achievements in infrastructure, banking and digital payments. Recognising the achievements strengthens the case for examining where their benefits remain

insufficient. It points to the fact that growth is not sufficiently inclusive.

Employment figures need careful study. Someone driving a cab, doing occasional construction work or helping on a family farm is now counted as employed. But it says little about earnings, volatility, predictable hours or protection against illness. Working fourteen hours instead of ten for the same income represents a deterioration that an employment count will miss. Employment stats don’t capture precarity.

*If India is indeed growing faster, why has making a living become harder?*



Endless queues, limited vacancies Employment statistics may count the employed, but they say little about earnings

Long queues for limited government vacancies reveal this problem. They reflect unemployment, but also the appeal of predictable salaries, benefits and security. Some applicants already have work. Their willingness to spend years preparing for recruitment examinations indicates how unattractive the available alternatives can be.

Youth restlessness must be understood against this background. Families have invested in education, often through much sacrifice. Qualifications raise expectations of economic mobility. When stable employment remains elusive, disappointment is understandable. Examination delays and paper leaks compound it. These experiences identify a gap between expanding production and opportunities for young people.

Household purchasing power provides another explanation. Families judge their circumstances through food bills, rent, school fees, healthcare expenses and transport costs. Low inflation numbers do not reverse earlier price increases. If earnings have failed to keep pace with accumulated costs, even a period of moderate inflation offers limited comfort.

For farmers, local conditions can

overwhelm national growth. Drought in Maharashtra threatens harvests and earnings while cultivation expenses and repayment obligations remain. Expansion in other sectors provides little protection against a failed crop.

The stock market adds another dimension. Foreign investors have relentlessly pulled out funds for the past two years, even as domestic investors systematically invest more than Rs 30,000 crores every month. There is much talk of the government considering capital-gains tax relief because the index has given very poor returns. These poor returns have compounded poor wage growth. With retail participation having expanded, disappointing investment returns now affect the confidence of a wider section of the middle class.

Tax reductions are being discussed mainly to induce foreign investors to come back. Whether the tax cut happens or not, it suggests that the absence of financial comfort is being recognised within government.

Large foreign withdrawals have meant that regular domestic investment did not lead to rising share prices. The returns on India’s stock market have been affected by

other factors too, such as rupee weakness and higher interest rates globally. Moreover, India’s stock market is an incomplete measure of the economic health of India. But its weakness matters for investors, and indirectly to the wider population too.

The pessimism is compounded by stagnant wages, joblessness, rising inflation, rising household indebtedness, and deteriorating essential public services such as roads, schools and drinking water. Better public healthcare, education and transport would improve living standards by reducing the expenses that families must meet privately. Growth of good quality jobs is anaemic.

India’s growth performance warrants recognition. The discomfort evident in household surveys also warrants attention. An economy can be resilient in aggregate while leaving many people financially insecure. Sustained growth creates the resources to address that insecurity. Its success will become more widely felt when earnings, opportunities and everyday living conditions improve alongside national output. ■

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

# Niyamgiri: tribals rights vs mining rights

Fresh protests over jailed activists as Vedanta pushes to reopen bauxite mining in the region

Rashme Sehgal

On 26 October, hundreds of villagers, including many Adivasi women, marched through Muniguda at the foothills of Odisha’s Niyamgiri demanding the release of Lada Sikaka and Dr Randall Sequeira. Sikaka, president of the Niyamgiri Surakhya Samiti (NSS) and Sequeira, member of the Medico Friends Circle, had been arrested 10 days earlier. Their crime? Participating in protests against bauxite mining by Vedanta and the Adani group. Dr Sequeira is a familiar face among the rural Adivasi and Dalit communities in Odisha and Jharkhand, working for the last seven years as part of a network of doctors who practise in remote areas across the country.

In September, Anil Agarwal, the corporate head of Vedanta met Odisha chief minister Mohan Charan Majhi to renew his demand to start bauxite mining in Niyamgiri. Calling a presser from the CM’s official residence, Agarwal said they had discussed

reopening Niyamgiri “immediately”. This, he said, would “provide the tribal population with employment opportunities and help bring them into the development process.”

Agarwal went on to announce a planned Rs 1 lakh crore investment in the state across the mining, refining and downstream manufacturing sectors. Claiming support from the local Adivasi population, he said that gram sabha meetings had been conducted across Niyamgiri and resulted in unanimous approval.

As the protests reveal, and as Sikaka told this reporter (prior to his arrest), this was “a blatant lie”. What the villagers are unanimous about is their opposition to mining in this region.

“Niyamgiri comprises a small area of just around 660 hectares. We are the Niyam Kondh, meaning protector of streams. We have been entrusted with the care of our forests, mountains and streams. Niyamgiri literally means ‘mountain of law’. It is the abode of Niyam raja, our supreme law-giver.

Every year, we go to the Niyamgiri hills to pray and offer thanks. Why would we give our god up for bauxite mining?” asked Sikaka.

Aflatoon heads the Samajwadi Jan Parishad (SJP) which also took part in the 26 October demonstration under the banner of the NSS. He says, “The matter of fake gram sabha meets where signatures had allegedly been forged went up to the Cuttack High Court. But the district magistrate of Rayagada informed the court that he had been present during these meetings and vouched for their veracity.”

Vedanta’s Niyamgiri project has been in limbo since 2013 after a dozen gram sabhas rejected the proposal to divert forestland for bauxite mining. The landmark Supreme Court judgement in April 2013 called for a referendum, empowering local communities to have a final say on whether their forestland should be cleared or not. Those gram sabhas were held under the direct supervision of the Cuttack High Court, which had ordered judicial officers to supervise them. Unfortunately, the

present gram sabhas are organised under the executive which is known to follow the orders of its political masters.

Binati Kadraka lives in the village Damon Ponga and is a member of the NSS. She is outspoken in her critique of the government’s tactics to subdue them. “The forcible takeover of our traditional land concerns our livelihood, our culture and our faith. Everything we stand for is at stake. We are fighting to save our civilisation.”

Instead of protecting its tribal people, the state government—led by a tribal chief minister—is working in the opposite direction. Krushna Sikaka, SJP district secretary, asks why activists are being arrested without their names even being listed in the FIR. “Ever since the anti-mining resistance began in 2023, over a hundred Dalit and Adivasis have been arrested by the police.”

Lingaraj Azad, SJP president and advisor with the NSS, is one of them. “On 25 March,” Krushna said, “Azad was arrested and eight charges were levied against him.

When he got bail on all charges, the police levied yet another charge. He is still in jail.” As is Hiramal Naik, a member of the Maa Mati Mali Suraksha Mancha, another grassroots organisation opposed to Vedanta’s Sijimali bauxite mining project. “Naik has been in jail since his arrest on 28 August,” said Krushna.

When Akhilesh Singh, DIG (south Odisha), was asked by local journalists why the jail terms of activists were being extended indefinitely, he replied that he would not allow the likes of Azad to be released.

There’s another reason for Agarwal’s hurry to push through the mining project. On 1 October, the Cuttack High Court dismissed a petition filed by Vedanta against Odisha Mining Corporation (OMC).

Vedanta had sought the supply of 150 million tonnes of bauxite at older, cost-linked rates under a 2004 agreement for its aluminium refinery in Lanjigarh, Kalahandi district. However, a division bench comprising Chief Justice Harish Tandon and Justice Murahari Sri Raman ruled that the company could neither revive nor enforce agreements terminated in September 2015, after amendments to the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act. The court held that Vedanta had failed to challenge the terminations in time, thereby rendering them final.

This has forced Vedanta to purchase market-rate bauxite, costing Vedanta Aluminium an additional Rs 5,600 crore.

Activists believe that the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act 2026 was rushed through in Parliament to benefit corporates like Vedanta, who could now write off lakhs of crores of rupees owed to mineral-rich states. (States have been allocating revenues generated from mining for public welfare programmes like healthcare,

education, social security, agriculture, sanitation and drinking water.) Opposing such write-offs, the Federation of Indian Mining Industries had argued that the mining industry stood to lose Rs 1.5-2 lakh crore due to tax arrears. Vedanta alone is liable to pay royalties worth Rs 6,249 crore for 2023-24.

Activists like Aflatoon are asking whether the dilution of the state’s role in granting mining leases and collecting revenue could save Vedanta from coughing up what they owe.

While mining corporates rejoice in the law easing the acquisition of auctioned mining blocks by speeding up environmental, forest and wildlife clearances, critics note that the acceleration comes at a terrible cost.

Legal experts maintain that any attempt to reopen the Niyamgiri hills to mining would violate the fundamental rights of tribal communities. The Supreme Court’s 2013 endorsement of the gram sabhas’ decision against mining established a binding precedent that cannot easily be overturned. Doing so would violate a community’s religious beliefs which goes against our Constitution and therefore amounts to a constitutional challenge.

Meanwhile, the protests for the release of arrested activists continue. As Dr Sequeira’s mother Nancy wrote in her letter to the powers that be: ‘Randall has stood beside the Adivasi people because he is deeply concerned about their lives, their health, their ancestral lands and their future. He fears that mining activities could expose these vulnerable communities to serious health problems and deprive them of the environment and livelihoods on which they depend. The poor and oppressed need Randall. They need their doctor, their compassionate healer, someone who cares about their suffering.’ ■



In Muniguda, Adivasis, Dalits, farmers and leaders of various people’s movements stand united in their opposition

“We go to the Niyamgiri hills to pray and offer thanks. Why would we give our god up for bauxite mining?”





# ‘We will become refugees in our own land’

Sourabh Sen

Tensions across the Siang river belt reached a flashpoint as long-simmering anti-dam protests spilled over from the rural heartland into the major urban centres of Arunachal Pradesh. At the heart of the turmoil is the proposed 11,200-megawatt Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP).

The last week of October saw east Siang, upper Siang and Siang districts wracked by clashes between security forces and local demonstrators, the torching of government assets and mass arrests of indigenous youth leaders. The state administration imposed prohibitory orders and shutdowns and deployed 30 companies of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) in Pasighat to enforce a curfew.

On 20 October, around 700-800 youths, students and residents gathered in Pasighat to oppose ongoing surveys for pre-feasibility reports (PFR). Their demands included the release of activists previously detained under the Arunachal Pradesh Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, the withdrawal of central security forces from the Siang belt and suspension of all project-related activities.

On 22 October, the demonstrators began their peaceful 24-hour sit-in at Miracle Ground. On 23-24 October, a 12-hour bandh, called by Adi Bane Kebang United

(ABKU) and associated groups turned violent.

Protesters threw stones and ransacked offices belonging to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) and local administrative bodies. The police responded with tear gas shelling and lathi charges. Several vehicles were set on fire, leaving a trail of burnt debris in the streets of Pasighat.

State authorities initiated a crackdown and arrested prominent faces of the movement, including Gen Z youth leaders and representatives from the Siang Indigenous Farmers’ Forum (SIFF). Several activists launched a hunger strike in police custody, further galvanising support among locals.

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New Delhi sees SUMP not only as a power-generation asset, but as a geopolitical buffer. Upstream in Tibet’s Medog County, China has reportedly commenced constructing a massive 60-gigawatt dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo river (which becomes the Siang upon entering India). Security strategists argue that India requires a large reservoir downstream to absorb sudden release—or intentional withholding—of water by an aggressive China upstream.

“It is a project of national interest,” said Ninong Ering, MLA (Pasighat west). “What if China releases water and uses its upstream infrastructure as a water bomb? We need checks and



A rally in Itanagar on 29 October in support of those protesting against the proposed Siang project

balances in place, which is why the Centre is keen to complete this project.”

Arunachal chief minister Pema Khandu insists that public anxieties stem from “misinformation and misconceptions” circulated by “interest groups”. Khandu has urged residents to allow pre-feasibility surveys so that transparent data can be generated and shared.

For the indigenous Adi and Galo communities, who have inhabited the Siang valley for generations, the dam poses an existential threat. The proposed structure would submerge 27 ancestral villages, displace nearly 1.5 lakh indigenous people and inundate agricultural land and historic settlements such

*The dam poses an existential threat to the indigenous Adi and Galo communities*

as Yingkiong and Geku.

“We will become refugees in our own land,” says Tajom Ejing of SIFF, a resident of Geku village. “Even if the PFR is completed, we will not allow the construction of the dam. The state government should speak directly with the people instead of deploying military forces.”

Locals emphasise that the Siang is deeply intertwined with their identity, folklore and agrarian legacy. Other than displacement, geologists and environmentalists have warned about high seismic risks in the eastern Himalaya, pointing out that such a large-scale storage reservoir could heighten earthquake vulnerability and ecological disruption in downstream Assam.

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At the time of writing, the stalemate continues, even as the situation across the Siang belt remains fragile. On cue from the state government, district magistrates of east and upper Siang have signalled their readiness to facilitate talks between village elders and government representatives, provided law and order is maintained. However, no dialogue leaders maintain that central paramilitary forces occupy local villages and activists remain behind bars.

A section of Arunachal Pradesh’s political leadership blames the state government for the stalemate.

“Anti-SUMP activists are committed; they are going about their campaign with missionary zeal. As a result, they were able to convince villagers about the project’s devastating effects on their habitat, livelihood and future,” a senior leader told *National Herald* on condition of anonymity.

He believes the state government’s enthusiasm to push the project through has backfired. “Although we are still at the PFR stage, the government behaved as if the project is already a done deal. PFR is just a preliminary study. Unless it is completed, we cannot say if the project should go ahead or be abandoned,” he added.

Rather than suppressing the agitation through brute force, the state government has to find a way to break the prevailing stalemate. This will involve listening to community leaders, engaging credibly with gram sabhas and the young people agitating on the streets of Pasighat and elsewhere in the northeast.

As India seeks to fortify its eastern border and secure water rights against its upstream adversaries (read China), the continuing resistance in the Siang valley underscores the challenges of balancing national strategic interests with indigenous self-determination and ecological preservation. ■

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

# Protection and persecution: a tale of two pujas

What was different about Durga Puja on both sides of the border and why that matters

Faisal Mahmud/Dhaka  
Sourabh Sen/Kolkata

Bangladesh’s Hindus need no particular party to protect them: that seems to be the takeaway from the first Durga Puja in Bangladesh under an elected government since Sheikh Hasina’s fall. The country’s largest Hindu religious festival concluded peacefully, with record participation, extensive government support and an unusual degree of political attention.

It was an early test of whether the new administration could protect religious minorities without turning that protection into partisan bargaining or ‘appeasement’. By the government’s count, celebrations took place at 33,851 mandaps across Bangladesh. Authorities allocated taka five crore as festival assistance, increased rice allocations to 600 kg per mandap and declared five consecutive days of holidays, including three public holidays.

Security was equally important. Nearly 6,500 special reserve battalion personnel were deployed daily, supported by hundreds of patrol vehicles, intelligence monitoring and specialised units. Home minister Salahuddin Ahmed said the government had emphasised preventive action, including identifying potential threats before they materialised.

The streets—and across social media—as thousands of men, women and children smeared with traditional vermilion danced on the streets of Dhaka, Chittagong and other cities and towns.

During Hasina’s tenure, Hindu homes, businesses and temples were repeatedly attacked. In 2021, allegations of the Quran being desecrated in Cumilla during Durga Puja triggered attacks across several districts and demonstrated the limits of the Awami League’s claims to have made minority communities feel safe.

The BNP doesn’t have an unblemished record, either. The attacks on Hindus following the 2001 election, when a BNP-led coalition came to power, is one of the most disturbing episodes in Bangladesh’s recent political history.

That history makes this year’s celebrations significant. They suggest that the security of minorities need not be determined by a party’s historical reputation or

its claims to secular credentials. Government decisions, administrative preparation and political leadership can produce different outcomes.

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman’s personal involvement added another dimension. Rather than limiting his participation to a single ceremonial appearance in Dhaka, the prime minister travelled to puja venues in Rangpur, Rajshahi and Chattogram. When the head of state comes into direct contact with religious minorities outside the capital (where they usually have less political visibility) the message is clear: citizenship, rather than religious identity, can and should determine an individual’s place in Bangladesh.

A peaceful Durga Puja does not lead to the conclusion that the BNP has resolved the country’s longstanding problems of religious discrimination. Nor validate allegations that the Awami League had deliberately manufactured communal violence. What it does is undermine the proposition that Hindu security is impossible without Hasina in power.

Bangladesh has certainly not overcome religious prejudice. Online hostility persists. Minority communities continue to face concerns involving property and access to justice. A peaceful five-day festival cannot settle those questions.

The government’s achievement should therefore be assessed carefully. It demonstrated that sustained political attention and coordinated policing can protect a vulnerable minority community during a major religious event. Whether those protections persist when the bandobast is gone remains to be seen.

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Durga Puja in BJP-ruled West Bengal provided a sharp contrast. The government led by Suvenud Adhikari had already cracked down on Eid and stopped the tradition of morning prayers on Red Road. Police were instructed to arrest suspected Bangladeshis and put them in detention centres. While Muslims in Bangladesh appeared to participate en masse in the Puja celebrations, the Muslims of West Bengal dared not venture out for fear of vigilante attacks.

In Bangladesh, the exuberance was evident. In neighbouring West Bengal, crowds lacked their usual *joie de vivre*. Makeshift stalls around major pandals continued to



In West Bengal (above) the five-day festival was marred from preparation to immersion; (left) Tarique Rahman’s personal involvement ensured a peaceful celebration in Bangladesh



*Bangladesh encouraged people to come together. In West Bengal, the BJP encouraged divisiveness*

sell biryani, rolls and finger food (egg devils, fish chops) but business was slow.

“This year our bookings were down to half our usual Puja bookings,” said the owner of a car rental agency. He blamed the sombre mood on the 17 October Chorbagan puja pandal stampede where 19 people died, adding that people also “lack money to spend”.

While tragic incidents and economic hardships are factors beyond one’s control, West Bengal’s real party poopers were Sangh-affiliated outfits backed by the state administration. In the run-up to the pujas, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal, along with a brigade of obscure religious leaders, campaigned to restrict the sale and consumption of non-vegetarian food around puja pandals. It was a ham-handed attempt by the Sangh Parivar to impose north Indian socio-cultural mores on the Bengali way of life.

The BJP’s rise to power in West Bengal resulted in the takeover of community pujas by leaders who are patently clueless about the local language and customs (like food and books being vital elements of this five-day carnival). Depicting the goddess with eleven arms in

official communication deepened the disconnect.

Cultural invasion soon turned into political persecution. A hoarding put out by BJP leader Suraj Kumar Singh on behalf of a puja committee in Kolkata’s Pottery Road announced *Baam Vadh* (death to the Left). In short, Left parties were not to set up bookstalls near its pandal!

Chief minister Suvenud Adhikari took the book ban further by saying any literature that is ‘anti-national’, ‘anti-Sanatan’ and ‘hurtful to religious sentiments’ would not be permitted on West Bengal’s soil. He objected to the Left calling Durga Puja ‘*Sharadotsav*’ (autumn festival) and turned Suraj Singh’s local diktat into a statewide fatwa. When the Left set up their bookstalls anyway, the administration descended with all its might. Police, municipal workers, bulldozers were despatched to demolish the stalls, books were torn and carted away in garbage trucks.

If they thought West Bengal’s book-loving public would curl up and die—the Sangh was in for a surprise. Newspapers reported that sales at Left books stalls in 12 districts crossed a record Rs 1 crore

this Durga Puja!)

While a few BJP-RSS leaders tried to play good cop by criticising the government crackdown on books, Suvenud Adhikari continued his divide-and-rule tactics. “Only those who believe in sanatan dharma should touch the idols,” he said, prior to immersion. “I have told the commissioner of police to record the names of those who come here; they must be identified.” Such a remark was unprecedented, going completely against the grain of this most syncretic of festivals. Newspapers reported idols breaking into pieces before immersion—as Muslims who specialise in the work had been kept away.

In Bangladesh, the government encouraged people to come together to celebrate *Bangaliana*. State support during Durga Puja was an important step towards the erasure of sectarian divisions. In West Bengal, the government encouraged divisiveness along linguistic, social, religious and political lines.

Compare the scenes from both sides of the border. And ask yourself: just how specious is the BJP’s argument about the repression of Hindus in new Bangladesh? ■

Photos: Getty Images



# ‘How will news be reported?’

## Herjinder

On Tuesday, 27 October, the Supreme Court issued a notice to the Centre on a petition from 21 news publishers, including companies owned by Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani. The petitioners contend that the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act and its Rules will ‘maim journalism’.

Senior advocate Madhavi Divan, appearing for the Digital News Publishers Association, put the problem plainly: “If I am left to the mercy of the data principal as to whether he or she will give consent, how will news be reported?”

It is unusual to see India’s largest media houses, rarely natural allies in the fight for freedom of the press, going to court together. That they have done so should tell us how serious the problem is.

Start with the design. The Act asks anyone who processes personal data to obtain consent. Journalism, however, is a trade built on information that someone would rather keep hidden. No minister has ever consented to a story about his undeclared assets. No contractor has signed a form approving a report on a rigged tender.

Unlike the European Union’s GDPR, which carves out space for journalistic work, the Indian law offers no such exemption. A reporter who gathers and publishes information about a person risks



Photo: Getty Images

The DPDP Act puts journalists at a disadvantage, especially freelancers and citizen reporters

being treated as a ‘data fiduciary’, answerable to a data protection board that is not independent of the government, with penalties of up to Rs 250 crore.

Lawyer-activist Prashant Bhushan makes a fair point: while the law may not have been explicitly designed to target journalists, its broad and ambiguous language makes it a potential tool for doing so should the ‘need’ arise. (No prizes for guessing who decides that.)

Laws are not judged by the intentions of their authors. They are judged by what they allow their enforcers to do. A statute that is vague enough to catch anyone and everyone gives the state the power to choose their targets. Selective enforcement rarely needs a ban on reporting. A notice, a compliance demand or the threat of a fine is enough to make an editor think twice about a story.

Anyone who has worked in a newsroom knows that the story most likely to be killed is not the one that is banned but the one

that lawyers advise against.

The newsroom is not the only place where this will hurt. Investigative journalism often depends on documents obtained under the Right to Information Act, and the DPDP regime also amends Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act, which handles personal information.

Details once open to scrutiny, such as the educational qualifications of an official or the particulars of a public contract, can now be refused in the name of privacy. As social activist Aruna Roy puts it, this is a lateral attack, and lateral attacks are often more dangerous than direct ones. Two rights that should reinforce each other have been set against each other.

The petition raises a graver worry still: the Centre’s power to requisition information. If the state can demand ‘any information’ from data holders, without telling the people affected, then the confidentiality of a journalist’s sources is as compromised as the government’s

discretion in using this power.

A source speaks to a reporter based on trust. With trust gone, the whistleblower goes silent, and the story never gets written. Press freedom does not only die in dramatic raids. It dies quietly, when people with something of burning importance to say decide not to, for fear of their safety.

There’s also the question of a new breed of journalist: the citizen reporter. The publishers’ lawyer was careful to say her clients are ‘legacy media’, adding that “there has been some debate over citizen journalists”. That debate matters.

According to the Act, if a journalist collects and publishes any information about an individual, they must obtain that person’s consent. Delhi-based journalist Pragya Singh highlights the impracticality of this requirement. “I regularly interview people and gather information on the ground. It’s unrealistic to expect me to carry consent forms and get them signed before every interaction,” she says.

*A notice, a compliance demand or the threat of a fine is enough to make an editor think twice about a story*

India’s independent YouTubers, blog writers, podcasters and X-based fact-checkers have no legal department, no insurance and no Ambani-sized balance sheet. They also do much of the work that large newsrooms are reluctant to. If a company with a compliance team finds the law unworkable, a lone reporter with a phone will not even try to comply. The most likely outcome is that they will simply stop. A law that only the rich can take on risks making journalism a rich man’s game.

The government’s own conduct sharpens the worry. Private actors must give notice and take consent, while the state’s exemptions, for purposes such as the ‘security of the State’, are wide and need not be disclosed to the citizen. When the rules for the watched are strict and the rules for the watcher are lax, it cannot be dignified as ‘protection of privacy’. What it is, is the asymmetry of power.

None of this means data protection is unnecessary. Indians do need protection from data leaks, profiling and the casual sale of personal information. But a good privacy law protects the individual from the powerful. It must not become a tool for the powerful to hide from the public.

The remedy is not complicated: a clear, enforceable exemption for journalism, one that covers freelancers and citizen reporters as well as large newsrooms, protection for the confidentiality of sources, and a restoration of the public-interest test in the RTI Act.

The court has listed the matter for hearing on 17 November. A democracy can protect both privacy and the freedom of the press. Will it? ■

# Modi’s roar-turned-whimper at China border

## Ashok Swain

Narendra Modi’s nationalism comes with skewed sonic boom: louder towards Pakistan and Bangladesh; quieter towards China. Chest-thumping with Pakistan and belittling Bangladesh have become public flexing of power-patriotism, while troubling developments involving China are wrapped in outright lies and reassuring diplomatic niceties. The recent disclosure by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police chief that confrontations with Chinese troops continue in Arunachal Pradesh has, once again, exposed the distance between the government’s presentation of bilateral relations and the conditions that India’s border forces face.

The Pakistan comparison needs a qualification. Modi’s posture towards Pakistan has become somewhat quieter since the May 2025 ceasefire, which Trump claimed to have brokered through the threat of high trade tariffs. Modi has yet to convincingly counter Trump’s repeated claims of external mediation, which punctures the media-manufactured image of a leader in control of

outcomes. The comparison with China comes clearest in the preceding decade, when Pakistan and, to some extent, Bangladesh, particularly after Sheikh Hasina’s departure, dominated the government’s public displays of toughness.

ITBP director-general Shatruijeet Kapur has confirmed continuing face-offs at multiple locations. Tensions were reported around Asaphila in the Taksing Circle of Arunachal Pradesh since July, and went unacknowledged by the government. In a vaguely worded statement, the foreign ministry has now (finally) acknowledged that friction occurs when Chinese troops depart from established patrolling patterns. These admissions hardly describe a settled frontier. Yet, the political leadership insists Indians celebrate improved relations with no clear explanation of what remains unsettled, what China is doing, and what India has secured or surrendered.

The soldiers’ courage in exceptionally difficult terrain makes the government’s evasiveness harder to defend. Indians should not have to cobble together an understanding of national security

from scattered remarks by border security officers and complaints from locals in the border villages of Arunachal Pradesh. A prime minister who boasts so frequently about the nation’s might often the country an account of the challenges it faces, including those that might shatter his impregnable image even more than the Gen Z protests already have.

The warning signs did not begin in October 2026. In 2017, the Doklam confrontation, involving territory disputed between Bhutan and China near the tri-junction with India, demonstrated Beijing’s willingness to press territorial claims through construction backed by military force. The far graver crisis came in 2020, in eastern Ladakh.

On 15 June, twenty Indian soldiers, including Colonel B. Santosh Babu, died in the Galwan Valley clash. Their deaths came after decades free of war fatalities along the frontier. On 19 June, Modi declared that nobody had intruded into Indian territory and no Indian post had been captured.

At a moment when India needed an unambiguous account of Chinese aggression, its prime minister chose deception. If there had been

no Chinese intrusion, what precisely had the Indian soldiers laid down their lives for? Modi’s formulation lent credibility to Beijing’s version of events while weakening India’s position.

There is an uncomfortable historical echo here. During Kargil, Pakistan’s military leadership under Pervez Musharraf denied its soldiers’ involvement, leaving India to bury Pakistani dead. In Kargil and in Galwan, Musharraf and Modi chose to protect their political positions through denial, leaving soldiers to bear the consequences. Given how readily he and his party invoke Pakistan as the measure of everything India must reject, Modi should find the resemblance disturbing.

On the basis of a Ladakhi delegation’s estimate, Rahul Gandhi has raised concerns that China might have taken control of roughly 2,000 sq. km. of India-controlled territory in Ladakh. The government disputes this, and a former chief of the government’s Border Roads Organisation challenged the LoP’s remarks in the Supreme Court. Dismissing the Opposition does not answer substantive questions: where can Indian troops patrol today and what

restrictions remain?

Negotiations have been on for the last six years, but the government has not demonstrated that India has recovered the territorial control and patrolling access it had before the 2020 crisis. The 21 October 2024 agreement addressed, to some extent, patrolling in Depsang and Demchok, and military talks have continued beyond the 21st round, but this does not establish that all previous arrangements have been restored across eastern Ladakh.

The Modi government’s handling of former army chief General M.M. Naravane’s memoir reinforces the concern. His *Four Stars of Destiny*, remains unpublished pending defence ministry clearance. In the name of protecting operational secrets, the government prevented the memoir from seeing the light of day. Indefinitely preventing public access to an important account of decisions during a national security crisis deserves a better explanation. Citizens are entitled to ask whether this secrecy protects military capabilities or protects the people who made political decisions. The controversy surrounding the film *Battle of Galwan*, renamed *Maatrubhumi: May War Rest in Peace*, raises similar questions. Reports suggested pressure on the filmmaker to soften its portrayal of China. Should soldiers’ sacrifices become material for diplomatic makeovers?

Meanwhile, Beijing presses its claims over Arunachal Pradesh, calls it South Tibet and assigns Chinese names to its locations. Its border village programme strengthens its presence and capacity to support military operations. China’s huge hydropower dam construction on the Yarlung Tsangpo, upstream of the Brahmaputra, adds another trial to existing tribulations. India and China have no water-sharing treaty. Downstream concerns include sedimentation, ecological disruption, dam safety and timely information about flood water releases. India needs enforceable cooperation and credible

assessment, rather than vague assurances that its interests are being safeguarded.

Economic dependence also limits room for manoeuvre. India imported about \$131.6 billion in goods from China in 2025-26, against exports of about \$19.5 billion. Foreign minister Jaishankar’s admission of ‘surrender’ because China is the bigger economy explains the defeatist mindset of the Modi government. It raises question of what twelve years of Modi’s rule have done to fortify India’s bargaining power. Manu-facturing capacity, technological competence and dependable foreign policy cannot be replaced by speeches about national greatness.

Modi’s 2025 visit to China for the SCO summit and Xi Jinping’s attendance at the 2026 BRICS summit in Delhi are defensible diplomatic engagements. However, while confrontations persist, sunny summit photo-ops cannot prove that India’s position has improved. Our government should be able to pursue dialogue while naming Chinese actions clearly and accounting for the results of its negotiations.

Modi’s reluctance is understandable if one sees it through the lens of his brand of politics. An honest discussion would reveal the yawning chasm between branded braggadocio and grim ground reality. Pakistan and Bangladesh have offered familiar opportunities for religion-based political mobilisation at home; China exposes the limits of our ‘huglomacy’ and raises difficult questions about our military preparedness and economic dependence. How much easier it is to sway citizens into accepting a fake normal and let soldiers face the heat. India needs peace with China. It also needs a prime minister willing to tell Indians what that peace costs, what remains unresolved, and why his promises have fallen way short of the 56-inch mark. ■



What India, and Indians, need is an unambiguous account of Chinese aggression. What we get, instead, is deception

*It’s so much easier to sway citizens into accepting a fake normal and let soldiers face the heat*





# Lawlessness the new law of the land?

Suresh Dharur

On 1 November, 103 urban local bodies—130 municipal corporations and 87 municipalities and nagar panchayats—and rural seats in the zilla parishad territorial constituencies (ZPTCs) and mandal parishads territorial constituencies (MPTCs) go to polls. The electoral contest will cover 659 of the 663 ZPTCs and 9,829 of the 9,858 MPTCs. If all goes well, nearly 2.81 crore voters will exercise their democratic right across 28 zilla praja parishads.

The nomination process, however, was marred by prevention and intimidation. The deployment of central forces and installation of CCTV cameras at polling stations, nomination and counting centres turned the state into a bitter political battleground.

Allegations backed by video

clips showed vandals snatching nomination papers and assaulting opposition candidates as men in uniform looked on passively. In one video, a policewoman is seen pushing a former minister, also a woman, to the ground, preventing her from leaving her own home. A scandalised citizen exclaimed: “This isn’t Bihar, we are in Andhra Pradesh!”

SEC Anil Chandra Punetha was questioned for blatantly flouting the directions of the Supreme Court regarding the conduct of municipal elections. The opposition YSR Congress Party claimed Punetha acted like a puppet of the NDA government headed by chief minister N. Chandrababu Naidu. YSRCP president and former chief minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy and his party colleagues accused Punetha of trying to undermine the democratic rights of opposition leaders at the behest of the ruling

dispensation. “We have no faith in the SEC. Nor can we trust DGP Harish Kumar Gupta and his team,” said Jagan.

Supported by the Left, the YSRCP demanded that polls be held under the supervision of the apex court, with an appointed amicus curiae. “We don’t believe that free and fair elections are possible in the present environment of coercion, targeted violence and blatant violation of the Supreme Court’s orders,” Jagan said, amid reports of clashes between the workers of the ruling Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the YSRCP.

The Opposition also identified 54 police officials for their alleged involvement in electoral irregularities and demanded their removal for colluding with the ruling party in engineering attacks on rival candidates.

On 21 October, the Supreme Court directed the SEC to examine

the evidence of candidates being prevented from filing nominations, provide a minimum 48-hour window wherever grievances were substantiated and defer publication of the final list of contesting candidates until 25 October. On 23 October, YSRCP again moved the apex court alleging that the state government was flouting the court’s directives. Originally scheduled for 28 October, the SEC was forced to postpone the polls to 1 November and reopen nominations for 72 wards in four urban local bodies. The chief minister accused the Opposition of misleading the courts. “The opposition party is indulging in violence and filing petitions in the courts. By approaching courts with fake litigations, they have become criminal litigants. They gave wrong information to the high court and the Supreme Court,” he claimed.



## Sibling rivalry gets an ‘epic’ twist

The ongoing sibling rivalry between Andhra Pradesh Congress president Y.S. Sharmila and her brother and former chief minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy just got an ‘epic’ touch, thanks to Chandrababu Naidu invoking the *Mahabharat* to target his *bête noire*. Naidu sought to garner political mileage out of a family drama when he likened Jagan to Kansa mama, Lord Krishna’s maternal uncle, the tyrannical king of Mathura.

It all started with wedding plans. Sharmila sent out invitations to her daughter’s wedding in November. Yelahanka Palace, the family property in Bengaluru, was detailed as the venue. This infuriated Jagan who has a running feud with his sister over the property. He shot off a letter to his sister, refusing to allow the wedding in the palace which he claimed was his ‘sole property’.

‘Hosting an event of this scale would involve several service providers, including catering staff,

decorators, event managers, videographers and photographers, besides guests entering and leaving the premises. This will raise security concerns. The circulation of photographs and videos of the property and surrounding areas could also pose serious security risks,’ he wrote. “This came as a big shock to Sharmila,” said her aide. “Wedding invitations have already gone out to relatives and prominent personalities. Now, she will be compelled to look for an alternative venue.”

Wading into the row, Chandrababu Naidu attacked Jagan for his “meanness and lack of respect for family values”. The chief minister added, “He is treating his own mother and sister unfairly over property disputes. Sharmila also has a share in the family property but he is obstructing [his] niece’s wedding. He is behaving like Kansa.”

Continuing the personal attack, Naidu alleged that Jagan had failed as a chief minister, a party leader, a son, an elder brother and, ultimately, as a citizen. Phew. ■



(Top) A video grab from Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh, shows a man attempting to snatch nomination papers; (right) Former minister Vidadala Rajini being pushed by a woman police officer as she attempts to leave her home



*The Opposition has identified 54 police personnel for their alleged role in electoral irregularities*

# Ageing gracefully, with a little help from the state

The passing of the Keralam Senior Citizens (Care and Protection of Rights) Bill, 2026 is a milestone, writes **K.A. Shaji**

In Thiruvilwamala, Thrissur district, 86-year-old Dhanalakshmi lives in a room where the rain comes in. Parts of her house have been demolished for structural repairs. Her daughter has not yet sent the monthly maintenance of Rs 6,500, ordered by a district-level tribunal. Dhanalakshmi had transferred the property to her daughter on the understanding that she would be cared for in her old age. Instead, she finds herself bereft of both financial cover and a proper roof over her head.

Nationally, the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, provides a mechanism for eligible parents to seek support from their children. But an order can neither guarantee payment nor make an unsafe home habitable. For elderly persons dependent on family, the consequences can be devastating. Dhanalakshmi’s experience demonstrates why the security of senior citizens cannot rest solely on private arrangements.

Against this background, the Keralam Senior Citizens (Care and Protection of Rights) Bill, 2026, gains significance. Introduced by chief minister V. D. Satheesan on 13 October, the bill was unanimously passed by the Kerala legislative assembly’s subject committee on 26 October.

It promises to be the strongest legislation for elders in the country, with a wider framework and safeguards against neglect and exploitation. These include imprisonment and fines for offences including abuse, illegal possession of senior citizens’ property and unregistered elderly care centres.

Kerala has seen its population grow older, thanks to longer life expectancy and declining birth rates. The proportion of 60-plus citizens rose from 12.7 per cent in 2011 to around 15 per cent in 2021. It is projected to double by 2051. Migration has changed the structure of families and care-giving. Children working overseas may send money and arrange medical consultations, but

immediate assistance in emergencies remains a problem, as does loneliness. While elders living alone struggle to manage medication, access hospitals and protect themselves from financial fraud, children have their own pressures.

The challenge therefore is to build public services that support both generations without assuming that filial duty can replace professional care.

\*

A case from Varkala in Thiruvananthapuram district illustrates what can happen when financial arrangements between parents and children collapse. Sadasivan, 79, a cancer patient, and his wife Sushama, 72, were locked out of their home by their daughter and son-in-law in February 2025. The couple allegedly gave their daughter Rs 35 lakh after selling their immovable properties. The arrangement was that the money would be returned in two years.

*Legislation can’t enforce affection or eliminate loneliness. It can, however, prevent abuse and punish neglect*



Photo: Getty Images

When the money remained unpaid after five years, the police intervened, a case was registered and the couple eventually regained access to their home.

In Thrissur, Thomas Plakkan, 80, and his wife Rosly, 77, were moved to separate care homes in November 2024 following allegations of abuse by their son and daughter-in-law. The social justice department intervened, and a maintenance tribunal directed their children to deposit money towards their care and provide monthly support.

When Thomas died in July 2025, his body was brought home from the care facility. The house was locked. Relatives, neighbours and officials helped arrange his last rites outside the locked house.

These cases illustrate the limits of intervention after a family crisis has escalated. Financial orders may provide relief, but they cannot automatically restore housing security or prevent intimidation. Accessible complaint mechanisms

and timely response are essential, particularly when older people have lost control over their assets.

\*

The bill’s emphasis on regulating institutions is equally important as more families turn to commercial care providers. In Ernakulam, an elderly woman lost Rs 35 lakh after approaching an old-age home she found through social media (her children live abroad). She handed over her bank documents and moved into the facility, only to be kept in a small room without the promised amenities. After the operators refused to return her money, her family approached the social justice department.

Families may find it difficult to assess the reliability of care providers. Senior citizens who have paid large sums or surrendered financial documents can find they have little or no bargaining power. Mandatory registration, regular

inspections, transparent contracts and independent grievance mechanisms could reduce exploitation, provided authorities have sufficient staff and resources to enforce the rules.

The bill also emphasises the importance of ageing in familiar surroundings with appropriate assistance. Affordable home-care services, trained caregivers, legal aid and access to assistive products will, said Satheesan, reduce the pressure on families while helping older people retain their independence.

\*

Welfare, however, cannot be measured by infrastructure alone. By 2016-17, around 2,000 Pakal Veedu daycare centres had been established across the state. They struggled to attract users because their facilities did not adequately reflect older people’s needs. A centre needs to provide companionship, community activities, transport and practical

assistance.

Civil service officer Adeela Abdulla, who worked on the Act, elaborates: “A proposed baseline survey using 50 indicators formed part of the legislation to assess elderly people’s socioeconomic circumstances, vulnerabilities and [gaps in] access to welfare schemes.” Its findings would, she said, “guide local services and budgets, with success measured by improvements in people’s lives rather than the number of centres established.”

K.S. Shaji, director of the State Resource Centre for Older People at Kerala University of Health Sciences, has highlighted the difficulties elderly patients face: long hospital waits, fragmented services and repeated trips. Better coordination between primary and secondary healthcare and home-based support would make treatment more accessible to people with chronic illnesses or restricted mobility, he says.

Former additional state public prosecutor P. Narayanan has stressed that implementation matters as much as enactment, while director general of prosecution T. Asaf Ali has welcomed the broader approach to protection and enforcement embodied in the bill.

“Effective implementation will require functioning district-level mechanisms, trained personnel, adequate funding and clear responsibility for following up on complaints and orders. Older people must be able to report neglect without fear of retaliation, and authorities must intervene before financial or physical insecurity becomes entrenched,” says Ali.

Observes, “Ageing should not be equated with dependency. Older people possess professional experience, practical knowledge and social memory that can strengthen communities. A properly organised caregiving workforce could create employment while supporting families. Opportunities for older people to mentor younger generations and participate in community life should remain open to those who want them.”

Kerala has spent decades extending life expectancy and improving its human development index. Ensuring that longer lives are secure and dignified is the state’s next challenge. Legislation cannot enforce affection or eliminate loneliness. It can establish minimum standards, regulate care providers and make neglect punishable. ■



# A manifesto of the ignorant

Avay Shukla on the bureaucrats’ obsequious defence of the ECI’s voter purge

When I read the recent open letter issued by 124 retired civil servants defending Gyanesh Kumar and his nefarious doings, I was reminded of the sage words of Maurice Switzer: “It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.”

I was not surprised by this epistle, however, for my WhatsApp groups have a dense population of such bureaucrats, closet members of Mr Modi’s tribe. What did surprise me, however, is that, for once, they chose to speak out—on the wrong side of history, yes, but they did come out of their burrows. Such people are more comfortable in the security of the woodwork and like to hedge their bets.

They do not rock boats, they never take a stand, they always worship the rising sun, and they know which side their bread is buttered on. I suspect they were persuaded to say ‘aye’ by Mr Modi’s gentle persuaders—a few crumbs, loaves and charge-sheets might have been traded—to sign on the dotted line (not hard, considering that’s what they’ve done for most of their careers).

A word about the signatories to the letter would not be out of place. Most of them are faceless wonders,



Photo: Getty Images

ghuspaiithye or termites (Gyanesh Kumar’s oft-stated reason for the SIR) among the 130 million deleted voters.

This is as comprehensive a guilty plea as any ever submitted by any accused to any court. These actions and pieces of information were precisely what the entire Opposition and civil society activists had been demanding for months. The imperious Gyanesh Kumar had refused, ordering the LoP to furnish an affidavit first! His U-turn strengthens the belief that all this was done (for the BJP) to win the elections in Bengal and Bihar. As the noose around the ECI tightens, one waits for that admission too.

Finally, the G-124 letter is not a legitimate expression of differing views or free speech, as its apologists may claim. It is an

*The G-124 letter expresses support for electoral cleansing. It is dangerous for democracy and the rule of law*

*Gyanesh’s U-turn is an admission of guilt: all his doings helped the BJP win in Bihar and Bengal*

which is as it should be, since their faces have egg—or worse—on them. A couple have been accused of embezzlement and corruption; one displayed his bigotry and misogyny brazenly at an event in a ladies’ college some time back; yet another, now a chancellor of a central university, has been a BJP acolyte for a long time; some are working with right-wing organisations like the Vivekanand Foundation and ORG; one is on record stating he has issued orders under political pressure!

Not exactly the kind of ‘concerned’ citizens who can be trusted to comment objectively on the doings of this regime and its puppets like the Election Commission of India. In short, their credentials are highly suspect.

The letter itself is a charter of obsequiousness, a manifesto of the ignorant. It praises the ECI for its ‘historical’ achievements (which, needless to say, belong to the past

and not the present dispensation), supports the SIR as a much-needed exercise, condemns those who are asking for Gyanesh Kumar’s resignation, and backs Modi’s regime to the hilt. (It has to be the hilt, because they have impaled themselves upon this sacerdotal sword in true hara-kiri style.)

The windmill this G-124 is tilting at is clearly the epistles issued earlier by another group of civil servants: the CCG (Constitutional Conduct Group) which has, over the last ten years, established a sterling reputation for taking a principled stand on many issues where it felt the government had violated constitutional values, rights and provisions. Maybe the heat was getting to someone?

I shall not try to counter and expose the fallacies, downright untruths, lack of logic and distortion of facts in the G-124 letter: that has already been done very ably and comprehensively by

M.G. Devasahayam, a senior retired IAS officer, with facts and figures (*The Wire*, 16 October).

Nothing proves how wrong these letter-writers are more than the conduct of the ECI since the second round of protests in Delhi. It has practically admitted its guilt and culpability in the SIR fiasco. By gradually (and quietly) rolling back and reversing some of the draconian and illegal provisions of this exercise of exclusion, it has validated the charges against it. Just to recapitulate, in the last couple of weeks, it has taken the following decisions:

- The mischievous declaration attached to Form 6 has been removed.
- Access to ECINET has been restored for the EROs (but not yet, strangely, for the tribunal judges in Bengal!).
- A technical committee has been set up to audit the suspect ECINET software.
- It has admitted that the two election commissioners had indeed written to the cabinet secretary about the irregularities in the body.
- A cap has now been imposed on the number of infamous Forms 7 that can be submitted by one person.
- A special drive has been started to include voters who were left out or deleted in the states where SIR has concluded.
- In the 17 such states, an SSR (Special Summary Revision) has been initiated to enrol voters who have turned 18 and were left out of the SIR.
- Machine-readable voter rolls in PDF format shall now be provided to all candidates.
- Lists of deletions and additions shall be provided to all political parties.
- The ECI has implicitly admitted that it does not have any list or details of Amit Shah’s

expression of support and encouragement for authoritarianism, intolerance, electoral cleansing, denial of fundamental rights and exclusion, and no civilised nation can countenance this kind of rhetoric.

It is dangerous for democracy and the rule of law. It has tarnished the reputation of the civil services. At the end of the day, anyone who supports wrongdoing is just as guilty of it as the prime mover himself. In the words of Nelson Mandela, in an appeal to his people issued from a prison cell: “Will you come along with us, or are you going to cooperate with the government in its efforts to suppress the claims and aspirations of your own people?”

The people of India deserve an answer from this rump of civil servants. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

# Will voters punish Trump for his war on Iran?

The US mid-terms will test whether Americans put partisan loyalty above economic pain

**Aakar Patel**

On 3 November, America will hold its midterm elections. They are so called because they are held in the middle of a president’s four-year term. American parliamentarians, called Congressmen, face elections every two years. A lame-duck president is a term used to describe a leader in his last two years in office, as Trump will be after 3 November. A lame duck is a leader whom the party recognises is riding into the sunset and who therefore finds it difficult to enforce his agenda.

Donald Trump will be especially lame if his party, the Republicans, loses control of one or both chambers of Congress. He will not be able to get the legislation he wants passed, secure the appointment of judges or get officials confirmed. Equally importantly, the Opposition can go after him and his family by opening investigations and then holding impeachment and other types of hearings.

The reason this election is interesting is that it will reveal something about human nature. The assumption of democratic systems is that individuals vote rationally and do not vote in tribal fashion. This means voters cast ballots in support of policies and not fantasies, particularly if the person they elect produces negative outcomes while in office.

Opinion polls suggest that Trump is one of the most unpopular US presidents in recent history. The majority of Americans, including those who voted him into office, think he is doing a poor job. This is revealed through something called an approval rating, conducted regularly by several

reputable polling organisations. A question is asked, such as: ‘Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Trump is doing his job?’ Respondents say yes, no, or unable to say.

Trump’s approval rating is below 40 per cent, meaning that a significant majority of Americans disapprove of his performance. On his performance on the economy, which merits a separate question, the numbers are worse.

This is not difficult to accept as true because with the war on Iran, the price of fuel has gone up and made things expensive since February. Petrol in the US was Rs 75 per litre before the war and is today Rs 107. Diesel has jumped from Rs 90 to Rs 160. Inflation is higher than the Federal Reserve (their version of the RBI) wants it to be. Part of the reason is the tariff war that Trump began gratuitously on returning to power. Interest rates on home loans have gone up by a full percentage point.

Now, given that he has been in office since January 2025, given that his party controls both houses of Congress and also has a conservative majority in the Supreme Court, whose judges are nominated by the president, there is nobody else to blame but Donald Trump if voters feel things haven’t turned out as they expected.

Trump has endorsed the current candidates over their Republican opponents, and therefore a vote for them is a vote for him and his policies. For this reason, the result of the 3 November election will be interesting and give us some insight into how people vote.

If most of Trump’s candidates carry the day despite the manifest harm he has wrought on their everyday lives, it will be a vote for tribalism. This means a vote for

considerations that defy material interests.

The other most interesting thing these elections will show is the unpopularity of Israel among Americans translating into an end of unconditional support. Many of the Democrats running in this cycle are staunchly anti-Israel, in keeping with the mood in America, which has turned sharply against Zionism.

In large part, this is due to last year’s brave campaign run by New York mayor Zohran Mamdani, who was the first major American politician to support Palestinians and still win. AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby group in America, which had



Vote for change? Early voting underway at a polling centre at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

the ability to destroy anti-Israel candidates, has since been so thoroughly discredited it has stopped endorsing candidates.

Assuming the Democrats carry the day, will they be able to end the structural support that Israel has long enjoyed? We will see. One hopes the answer is yes. Far too much damage has been done to humanity by Israelis; stopping or slowing the transfer of weaponry and diplomatic support to them would make the world a better place.

Another reason for hoping that

Trump’s team loses is, of course, this mad war that is affecting all of us, especially the one crore Indians in the Gulf and their families here. How insane all of it is can be judged by the fact that, with oil at over \$115 a barrel (it was at \$60 before the war), there is talk in Washington and Tel Aviv about restarting bombing and further damaging infrastructure in Iran and the Gulf.

A Republican Party trounced next week will not back the Iran war as enthusiastically as it has done so far.

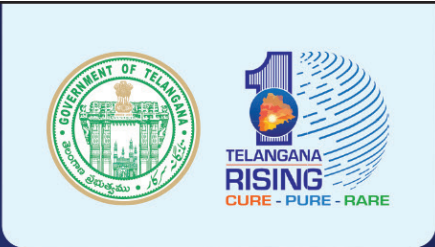
The last thing to say here is that

the two-year Congressional term is often criticised, and rightly so, because it means candidates are forever campaigning. But it is also true that the short cycle gives American voters a more frequent opportunity to correct the course of government when politicians do things that harm them.

For their sake, and for the sake of all of us, one hopes that is what they will do this time and not simply show up to vote for their preferred ideology. ■

Views are personal





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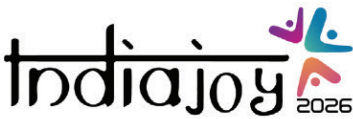
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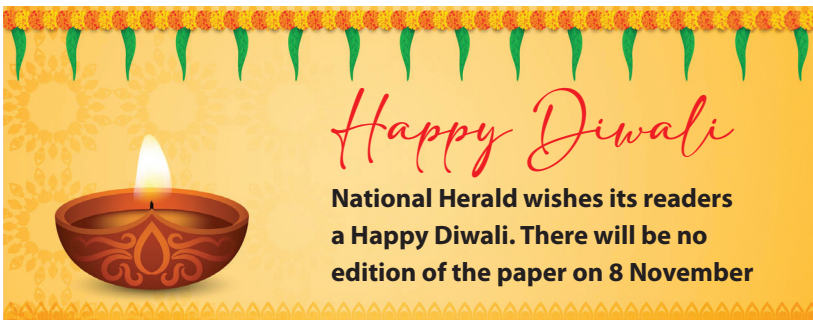
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HOME & ABROAD

THE HIDDEN AGENDA  
OF THE DPDP ACT  
If you can't kill the story, stifle  
those that report it

► P5



PEOPLE AGAINST SIR

# Making common cause against a common enemy

As protests mushroom, the crusade to protect voting rights spreads across India

Nandlal Sharma

On 2 October 2026, the day student and youth organisations called for a march to Jantar Mantar against the Special Intensive Revision (SIR), social activist Nikhil Dey was locked in a physical tussle with the police on the streets of central Delhi.

The Delhi police had deployed its full force to prevent protesters from reaching Jantar Mantar. Multiple layers of barricades were erected along every route, with personnel from the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and the Rapid Action Force (RAF) stationed at key points. Vehicles equipped to fire tear gas shells and water cannons were in position. All this muscle and might only to prevent the citizens of India from staging a sit-in against their disenfranchisement.

Even as protesters failed to breach police cordons, they kept pouring into the streets. Young and old, students, farmers, workers, citizens decided to claim every place as Jantar Mantar. The fight to protect voting rights was spreading lane by lane, location by location, state by state.

Sample this.

On 23 October 2026, afternoon: Kalibari Road, near Gole Market, **Delhi**. The same evening: Sonia Vihar, Delhi. **Uttar Pradesh**: Ballia. **Punjab**: Barnala, Mansa, Faridkot, Fatehgarh. **Karnataka**: Kalaburagi. **Telangana**: Hyderabad. **West Bengal**: Basirhat. **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**: Andaman Islands. **Andhra Pradesh**: Amalapuram. **Maharashtra**: Ahilyanagar. **Odisha**: Bhubaneswar. **Rajasthan**: Sri Ganganagar. **Madhya Pradesh**: Chhindwara.

One day, multiple locations. One banner, multiple organisations—the Students’ Federation of India (SFI), Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA), Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), All India Kisan Khet Mazdoor Sangathan (AIKKMS)—all making common cause against a common enemy.

As many as 145 organisations mobilised in more than 100 cities across 18 states under the banner ‘People Against SIR’. Ashlesh Biradar, a member of the People Against SIR coordination team, says protests were held across 150 sites on 23 October (their website currently records 103). When asked about their concentration in the south with relatively fewer protests in Gujarat and the northwest, Biradar says, “All the information isn’t in yet. Once it is, you’ll see hundreds of Jantar Mantars across the map of India!”

The fight isn’t merely to reclaim Jantar Mantar as a space for peaceful protest. It is to raise public awareness about the Modi government’s criminal conspiracy to deprive people of their voting rights. Alongside voter-rights groups, the coalition includes organisations working to defend the Constitution, democracy and electoral accountability. Concerns range from social justice to culture, civil liberties to education.

In effect, People Against SIR is united in its opposition to the Modi-Shah regime. Announced on 14 October 2026, following a meeting at Harkishan Singh Surjeet Bhawan in New Delhi, the ‘No SIR National Platform’ attracted prominent figures, including actor Prakash Raj, senior advocate Prashant Bhushan, Ganesh Devy, P. Parakala Prabhakar, Tara Rao, Nikhil Dey and Nadeem Khan.

A coordination committee was formed with representatives from participating organisations. Separate teams were set up to manage the secretariat, grassroots activities, media, legal assistance and public audits. A dedicated communications system included a central WhatsApp group, to inform people about protest sites in their neighbourhood.

The run-up to this moment can possibly be traced to 23 September 2026, when *The Indian Express* reported that two election commissioners had disagreed with or objected to ECI decisions as many as 14 times in ten months.

The disclosure sparked outrage over ECI-enabled vote theft under the guise of the SIR,



In black and white The list of names deleted in the Trilokpuri assembly constituency, displayed at the public hearing on 27 October

prompting protesters to head to Jantar Mantar on Gandhi Jayanti. The government turned the site into a fortress. This did not stop the follow-up protest of 10 October (where molestation added a disturbing layer to the now familiar pattern of detention and intimidation). On 13 October, Saurav Das and Ashutosh Ranka of the Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) were arrested for trying to unfurl the national flag at Jantar Mantar. Citizens realised that for the long haul ahead, solidarity would mean joining forces not just individually but organisationally.

Even as the steady stream of protests against the SIR shows no signs of slowing down, ‘Jan Sunwai’ or public hearings have become crucial.

In 2002-03, Shankar Singh of the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) conducted public hearings to scrutinise voter rolls at the Election Commission’s behest. In 2026, he is conducting public hearings to scrutinise the Election Commission’s work. Aware of the irony, he says, “People are terrified. They fear deportation, access to essential services being cut off, even being put in jail.”

Singh, who hails from Rajasthan’s Rajsamand district, is both a grassroots social activist and a playwright. He helped establish MKSS along with social activists Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey. An organisation known for its efforts to secure the Right to Information law has now joined the People Against SIR.

On 27 October, a jan sunwai at Ramlila Park in Trilokpuri, east Delhi, was led by

MKSS, Voter Adhikar Manch, Jan Sarokar and the National Federation of Indian Women.

They found that 416 voters across four polling booths in the Trilokpuri assembly constituency—Indira Camp booths 42 and 43, and Block 34 booths 79 and 80—had been wrongly deleted.

Shankar Singh says, “Local residents from 300 households attended the hearing because members of all these organisations went door to door, informing people that a public hearing was being organised to help restore the names of those deleted.”

Nikhil Dey, who attended the Trilokpuri public hearing, says, “We have to fight. This is a huge issue. But it isn’t the job of citizens’ organisations; political parties must also engage. Only then will a way forward emerge. A public hearing is the democratic voice of the people. Those in power may suppress the Opposition—whose leaders are coming to the public hearings—but no one can suppress the people. No one can come to a jan sunwai and ask why you put up that poster or raised those slogans.”

Similar public hearings are being conducted at 100 polling booths in Karnataka, as well as in Telangana and Rajasthan.

More than 200 volunteers have signed up from different professional backgrounds, carving out time to defend democracy. Akshit Tyagi, a 22-year-old software engineer from Delhi, specialises in machine learning.

► Continued on page 2

# Why the ECINet needs an independent audit

*When ECINet absorbed ERONet and amalgamated 40 other apps, the alarm bells hadn’t yet rung. When investigative reports revealed the extent of ECINet’s malfunctioning, the ECI responded with excuses, evasiveness, obfuscation. It’s only a technical glitch; it’s only a few errors; voters still have the right to appeal; mistakes can still be corrected... and so on, ad nauseum. When over 13 crore voters found they had been deleted from the electoral rolls under the auspices of the SIR, the ‘faults’ seemed designed to exclude. It will take more than the measures hurried out by the ECI, more than a stage-managed audit, to restore the people’s faith.*



Photo: Getty Images

A.J. Prabal

Take our word for it: all is well. That, in a nutshell, is the stubborn defence of the Election Commission of India in the face of mounting evidence that the electoral system is broken, the commission has ceased to function independently, and the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has been an unmitigated horror show.

In its 250-page affidavit filed in the Supreme Court, the ECI did not deny the allegations raised in the investigative report by the *Indian Express* on 23 September 2026. It dismissed the petitions as ‘misconceived’ and said newspaper reports cannot count as evidence in court. The affidavit asserts that the ECINet cannot be manipulated and that only authorised officers—the electoral registration officer (ERO) and

assistant EROs (AEROs)—can add or delete voter names.

There are several reasons why this is unconvincing. The affidavit itself admits that 89 voters in Goa were indeed ‘left out’ of the voter roll by the SIR. Stating that most of the names have since been restored does not answer two key questions. Why were they deleted? And why was the ERO not able to restore them in the first place?

If ECINet is truly not being remote-controlled from ECI headquarters in New Delhi, the ERO should have been able to restore the wrongly deleted voters. In fact, he had repeatedly flagged his inability to do so and claimed to have sent eight

*The ECI withheld information on grounds of ‘trade secrets’. Seriously?*

reminders in seven days to Nirvachan Sadan. He brought the ‘glitch’ to the notice of ECI IT chief Seema Khanna but received no response.

Even more troubling are the allegations surrounding West Bengal, where the ECI claims it was unaware or uninvolved in the 16 lakh voter appeals filed to exclude names cleared during judicial scrutiny. The affidavit swears that the state CEO was authorised to act as per provisions in the Representation of the People Act and that the issue was never escalated to the ECI. It fails to explain a file entry in August 2026 by election commissioner S.S. Sandhu, which records the same CEO telling him she had no information on this matter and no idea how so many appeals were filed on identical grounds.

Then there’s the deafening silence surrounding the technical audit conducted by Charchagram, a civic-tech group that exposed a software feature in ECINet that could bar EROs and AEROs from reviewing voter enumeration forms and viewing the notice-and-hearing dashboard. When this was detected by the audit team on 19 October, the restrictive feature applied *only in West Bengal*. While the findings were reported by multiple media outlets, the ECI stayed mum.

► Continued on page 2



STATES 360° KERALA



# Dust-ups over recruitments and generic drugs

K.A. Shaji

Kerala governor Rajendra Arlekar's parting shot is more than a confrontation with the UDF government. On 15 October, just before leaving to take charge as governor of Tamil Nadu, Arlekar recommended the removal of Public Service Commission (PSC) chairman M.R. Baiju and all 15 members. The timing is significant. The crime branch was investigating recruitment-related complaints against the PSC leadership appointed under the previous Pinarayi Vijayan government. Allegations of examination irregularities, questionable selection procedures and appointments had seriously damaged the commission's credibility. By recommending the removal of the entire leadership without consulting or informing the elected government, a genuine crisis of confidence in a constitutional institution risks becoming an opportunity for the Sangh Parivar to expand its influence over public recruitment in Kerala. The Planning Board recruitment controversy illustrates the seriousness of the allegations. In an 228 answer scripts, Q. 9 was not evaluated in 177 papers, while Qs 10-18 were left unevaluated or not properly assigned for evaluation across all 228 papers. Rank lists were prepared and appointments made on the basis of these assessments. The irregularities came to light after a candidate obtained his answer sheet through the Right to Information Act. The investigation and complaints concerning other recruitments placed the PSC's functioning under a cloud. The previous government's nominees cannot escape accountability. Every substantiated allegation must be investigated, and



Former Kerala governor Rajendra Arlekar

those responsible must face appropriate action. But using these failures to justify a sweeping intervention without establishing its constitutional basis creates a dangerous precedent. A compromised commission does not give the governor unrestricted authority. Articles 315 and 316 provide for Public Service Commissions and govern their composition and appointments. Article 317 prescribes safeguards for removing a chairman or member, including a Supreme Court inquiry into alleged misbehaviour. Arlekar's recommendation alone is not enough. The President's response must comply with the Constitution. These safeguards exist to prevent public recruitment from becoming vulnerable to the political preferences of those occupying constitutional offices. The larger concern is the Sangh Parivar's expanding ambitions in Kerala. The PSC is not an ordinary government department. Access to public employment is a vital route to social mobility for working-class families and disadvantaged communities. Political influence over

recruitment can have consequences extending far beyond individual appointments. Replacing one compromised arrangement with another would not be reform; it would merely change the beneficiaries of political patronage. The Congress-led UDF government faces a difficult test. It must cooperate with legitimate investigations, expose entrenched malpractice and introduce transparent procedures to restore public confidence. It cannot defend the previous government's nominees simply to oppose the exiting governor. Equally, it must not allow previous failures to become a pretext for the Sangh Parivar to appropriate the commission. By using recruitment irregularities under the previous Pinarayi Vijayan government's nominees to justify a sweeping intervention, Rajendra Arlekar has opened a dangerous front in Kerala's struggle to protect public institutions from political appropriation. The UDF government must clean up the recruitment system without surrendering the PSC to a Sangh Parivar game plan.

## Politics mars a public health breakthrough

A medicine that costs more than Rs 5 lakh a bottle could be available to Kerala's public health system for around Rs 8,000. Switching to this affordable Indian generic could save the state crores of rupees and make treatment for children with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) more sustainable. Yet Kerala's CPI(M) leaders—the Left has a historic commitment to affordable medicines—have turned the decision by the Congress government into a controversy over drug safety. Risdipnam is used to treat SMA, a rare genetic disorder that progressively weakens muscles and can, in severe cases, be fatal. Swiss pharma major Roche's branded medicine, Evrysdi, is prohibitively expensive. Natco Pharma's Indian generic, Natsmart, contains the same active pharmaceutical ingredient and has received regulatory approval. Kerala's SMA technical committee estimates that switching to the generic could reduce the state's annual expenditure for 129 children from around Rs 25 crore to

Rs 25 lakh. The move can be replicated in other states. State health minister K. Muraleedharan has defended the decision, emphasising that it followed expert recommendations and regulatory clearance. The Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation clarified that separate bioequivalence studies and additional clinical trials were not required for this oral solution under the applicable regulatory guidance. The Delhi High Court rejected Roche's challenge to manufacturing the generic and the Supreme Court declined to overturn that outcome. The scientific and regulatory position is therefore clear on a crucial point: Natsmart is an approved generic formulation, not an experimental drug awaiting clinical trials. The Indian Medical Association has also weighed in, with its Kerala president, Dr N. Sulphi, describing the controversy as a fallout of competition between pharmaceutical companies rather than evidence that the generic is unsafe. While the head of Kerala's SMA technical committee, Dr K.V. Viswanathan, has defended the medicine's regulatory status and suitability, interventions by Dr B. Iqbal and Dr V. Ramankutty have given the debate an additional political dimension. Iqbal, a public health activist associated with the Left, has welcomed the move towards affordable generic treatment. Ramankutty, a paediatrician, epidemiologist and former professor at the Achutha Menon Centre for Health Science Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, recalled his participation in Left-led campaigns for cheaper generic medicines in the 1980s. He expressed surprise at the Left questioning a regulator-approved generic. Their criticism carries weight because it comes from within the

progressive public health movement, not from the UDF government. They argue that the price of medicine cannot be divorced from the question of who gets access to treatment. The political contradiction is sharpened by the previous LDF government's own record. An expert committee constituted under former health minister Veena George initiated discussions on procuring Natco's generic medicine and subsequently recommended the switch after seeking regulatory clarification. The committee's minutes recorded that the drug had received marketing approval and separate studies were not required. Against this background, Leader of the Opposition Pinarayi Vijayan and former health ministers P.K. Sreemathy, K.K. Shailaja and George raised questions over bottles labelled 'Physician Sample' and 'For Clinical Trials Only', suggesting that children might have been exposed to experimental medicine. The manufacturer has said the disputed bottles came from its patient assistance programme. Hospital authorities retrieved the stock after concerns emerged. The labels understandably caused concern, but they do not establish that the approved drug itself was undergoing clinical trials. The government must explain the labelling and ensure that families receive clear information. But political leaders also have a responsibility to verify regulatory facts and consult relevant experts before amplifying claims that could frighten parents away from an approved medicine. Kerala's generic SMA initiative deserves scrutiny, not misinformation. The real public health test is whether the state can protect children while breaking the grip of prohibitive drug prices. For families confronting a rare and devastating disease, affordable treatment is not a political slogan. It is a lifeline. ■

*Kerala needs a credible clean-up, not a political bargain over who controls the PSC*

## PEOPLE AGAINST SIR Making common cause against a common enemy



Might vs right Protesters hold their ground at the rally against CEC Gyanesh Kumar

Continued from page 1

He designed the People Against SIR website and supports it both online and offline. Akshit was a regular at Jantar Mantar 1.0 this July. When the agitation against SIR began, he returned. Sagarika Rajora, an advocate, works for the rights of migrant workers. To help people navigate the SIR process, she and her colleagues established the Voter Adhikar Manch, which is now helping People Against SIR. Sagarika coordinates with other volunteers on social media, conducts field visits and attends working-group meetings. "It's a big fight, and people have become more aware. You can see that on the streets," she says. Vineet, 43, works for a tech company in Haryana, and is associated with the MKSS. He travelled at his own expense to New Delhi to participate in the Trilokpur public hearing. He also went to Mangolpuri, where

he helped people fill out Form 6. After spending the entire day counselling residents and explaining next steps, he caught a bus back to Hisar. \* It is important to remember that citizens' organisations had already been protesting well before 23 October 2026, be it in Lucknow, Hyderabad or Mumbai. On 16 October, hundreds gathered in Connaught Place, New Delhi to take part in the *Lehra Do Tiranga* (Let's fly the tricolour) event. Saroj, a Delhi resident who participated in the Tebhaga and Telangana movements, says, "I have never seen such an incompetent government. The people who gave us the slogan '*Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*' (To save your daughter, teach your daughter) organise tricolour marches to protect rapists while preventing the country's own citizens from unfurling the flag!" Virag, from Gujarat, was in

Connaught Place that day. He and his associates had organised a public book event in Ahmedabad, where they were assaulted by members of the VHP and Bajrang Dal. "Dictatorship prevails in this country," he says. "One day, the dictator will quake, everyone will then be held accountable." Journalist and content creator Meghnad, who has declared himself an independent politician, says the movement has become decentralised. "We received a call from Deoghar. They wanted to organise a protest with just four or five people and asked whether we could add it to the People Against SIR website and map. People are stepping up on their own. The size of the crowd doesn't matter. This is about citizens. People Against SIR is becoming a platform through which they can connect. It won't be easy for the government to snuff us all out." ■

## Why the ECINet needs an independent audit

Continued from page 1

Charchagram uncovered a feature to classify electors as 'VIP' voters and generate downloadable lists. Who counted as a VIP, and what were the implications? Answer there was none. The affidavit is also economical when it comes to ECs Sandhu and Vivek Joshi writing to the cabinet secretary to register their unease about work being redistributed without their knowledge or consent. They note that their request for an audit of ECINet was halted by Maneesh Garg, an officer whose order they questioned. The affidavit states that the order (in July 2026) was never implemented. But why was the order issued? How could Garg refuse to show a file to the election commissioners? What happened to Garg after his role was flagged? How and when was Garg posted to the ECI and at whose behest? The fact that an audit of ECINet is being carried out by a committee of experts from IIT and the Indian Institute of Science is less than reassuring. The decision was taken only after the *Indian Express* report came out. Joshi had proposed an audit in May, Sandhu endorsed it in July and then again in August. What we need is an independent audit, not a stage-managed one. \*

The concerns are legion: were notice requirements met, objections heard, reasons recorded and the right

to appeal honoured? Documented defects in ECINet, digital forms, automated workflows, backend software processes make a strong case for an independent technical and legal audit to determine manipulation, whether errors were accidental and whether statutory safeguards worked. The ECI's narrow brief on verifying role-based access, data security and operational flexibility is unlikely to investigate documented translation and transliteration absurdities like Ramhit Yadav (Ram Hit Yadav) becoming *Ram ne Yadav ko mara*, the largescale flagging of

technical details) on the grounds of 'commercial confidence, trade secrets and intellectual property matters'. But critical public systems—banks, defence, aviation—regularly undergo rigorous security audits without public disclosure of proprietary code. Why exempt ECINet? Election-security doctrine worldwide begins with the assumption that software cannot be trusted absolutely. The US system requires 'software independence', meaning an undetected software error should not be capable of causing an undetectable error in election outcomes.



Delhi residents registering as voters

'logical discrepancy' on trivial, frivolous and dubious grounds, or access-control mechanisms. Nor is it likely to seriously investigate the staggering security vulnerabilities pointed out by independent researchers like Nisarga Adhikary or the objections of serving commissioners. If, as the ECI would have us believe, the ECINet implemented every statutory procedure correctly, then every voter addition, deletion, restoration, discrepancy notice and access decision can potentially be reconstructed from logs and audit trails. If so, why object to an independent audit? The ECI invoked exemptions under the RTI Act to withhold information about ECINet's software (application, version and other

Voting systems in several democracies are subjected to certification, penetration testing or independent review without surrendering intellectual property rights. Therefore, even if TCS, which was awarded the ECINet contract, legitimately retains intellectual property rights, this does not automatically preclude a confidential audit by CAG-appointed experts, CERT-In, a parliamentary committee, a court-appointed technical panel or an independent third-party assessor. A constitutional democracy requires citizens to be able to verify that electoral data are handled lawfully. An audit does not presume wrongdoing. It seeks to establish whether wrongdoing, software error, procedural failures did occur—or if all was indeed well. ■

*Critical public systems undergo audits. Why exempt ECINet?*



# Why does growth not feel like prosperity?

The evidence of unease extends beyond anecdotes. **Ajit Ranade** elaborates

An Uber driver says he works longer hours than before, yet takes home less money. After fuel, maintenance, loan instalments and the platform’s deductions, little remains. His experience cannot establish how the entire economy is performing. But it brings to mind the title of Erma Bombeck’s book: *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?* If India is growing rapidly, why is making a living becoming harder?

India’s GDP grew at 7.8 per cent during the April–June quarter, which is impressive. The International Monetary Fund, Reserve Bank of India and other agencies have revised growth estimates upwards for the whole year. Sustaining rapid growth amid international uncertainty is an achievement. This column is not about the controversy regarding the 7.8 per cent figure, which we can take as acceptable.

Does the disappointment therefore reflect excessive pessimism? Expectations rise with prosperity. Every expanding economy contains struggling businesses and disappointed job seekers. A few conversations cannot provide a representative assessment of a country as large and diverse as India.

Yet the evidence of unease extends beyond anecdotes. The RBI’s September urban consumer confidence survey recorded a Current Situation Index of 87.9, the lowest since March 2023, below the neutral level of 100. About 54.5 per cent of respondents believed the general economic situation had worsened over the preceding year; only 25.3 per cent thought it had improved.

Rural responses were also revealing. Only 20.6 per cent reported higher income than a year earlier, while 30.5 per cent reported a decline. Such findings give

household discomfort a firmer basis than casual impressions or political commentary.

There is however no sweeping pessimism in the RBI surveys. Urban households remained optimistic about the year ahead. Present dissatisfaction thus coexists with expectations of improvement. Describing the economy as uniformly distressed would overlook this evidence.

There is no necessary contradiction between rapid GDP growth and household anxiety. GDP measures production across the economy. It does not establish how widely additional income is distributed, whether employment is secure, or how much harder someone must work to maintain the same living standard.

Suppose a millionaire enters a room. Average wealth rises immediately, although nobody there becomes richer. Even per capita GDP, which adjusts output for population, cannot reveal what has happened to the typical household.

The composition of growth matters. Capital-intensive activities and specialised services can generate substantial output and income while directly employing relatively few people. Corporate profits can rise much faster than wages, which has indeed happened. Growth concentrated in these activities will feel different from an expansion that creates plentiful jobs across occupations and skill levels.

Former RBI governor Duvvuri Subbarao has drawn attention to precisely these structural concerns, including weak real rural wages and inadequate creation of good jobs. They coexist with achievements in infrastructure, banking and digital payments. Recognising the achievements strengthens the case for examining where their benefits remain

insufficient. It points to the fact that growth is not sufficiently inclusive.

Employment figures need careful study. Someone driving a cab, doing occasional construction work or helping on a family farm is now counted as employed. But it says little about earnings, volatility, predictable hours or protection against illness. Working fourteen hours instead of ten for the same income represents a deterioration that an employment count will miss. Employment stats don’t capture precarity.

*If India is indeed growing faster, why has making a living become harder?*



Photo: Getty Images  
Endless queues, limited vacancies Employment statistics may count the employed, but they say little about earnings

Long queues for limited government vacancies reveal this problem. They reflect unemployment, but also the appeal of predictable salaries, benefits and security. Some applicants already have work. Their willingness to spend years preparing for recruitment examinations indicates how unattractive the available alternatives can be.

Youth restlessness must be understood against this background. Families have invested in education, often through much sacrifice. Qualifications raise expectations of economic mobility. When stable employment remains elusive, disappointment is understandable. Examination delays and paper leaks compound it. These experiences identify a gap between expanding production and opportunities for young people.

Household purchasing power provides another explanation. Families judge their circumstances through food bills, rent, school fees, healthcare expenses and transport costs. Low inflation numbers do not reverse earlier price increases. If earnings have failed to keep pace with accumulated costs, even a period of moderate inflation offers limited comfort.

For farmers, local conditions can

overwhelm national growth. Drought in Maharashtra threatens harvests and earnings while cultivation expenses and repayment obligations remain. Expansion in other sectors provides little protection against a failed crop.

The stock market adds another dimension. Foreign investors have relentlessly pulled out funds for the past two years, even as domestic investors systematically invest more than Rs 30,000 crores every month. There is much talk of the government considering capital-gains tax relief because the index has given very poor returns. These poor returns have compounded poor wage growth. With retail participation having expanded, disappointing investment returns now affect the confidence of a wider section of the middle class.

Tax reductions are being discussed mainly to induce foreign investors to come back. Whether the tax cut happens or not, it suggests that the absence of financial comfort is being recognised within government.

Large foreign withdrawals have meant that regular domestic investment did not lead to rising share prices. The returns on India’s stock market have been affected by

other factors too, such as rupee weakness and higher interest rates globally. Moreover, India’s stock market is an incomplete measure of the economic health of India. But its weakness matters for investors, and indirectly to the wider population too.

The pessimism is compounded by stagnant wages, joblessness, rising inflation, rising household indebtedness, and deteriorating essential public services such as roads, schools and drinking water. Better public healthcare, education and transport would improve living standards by reducing the expenses that families must meet privately. Growth of good quality jobs is anaemic.

India’s growth performance warrants recognition. The discomfort evident in household surveys also warrants attention. An economy can be resilient in aggregate while leaving many people financially insecure. Sustained growth creates the resources to address that insecurity. Its success will become more widely felt when earnings, opportunities and everyday living conditions improve alongside national output. ■

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

# Niyamgiri: tribals rights vs mining rights

Fresh protests over jailed activists as Vedanta pushes to reopen bauxite mining in the region

**Rashme Sehgal**

On 26 October, hundreds of villagers, including many Adivasi women, marched through Muniguda at the foothills of Odisha’s Niyamgiri demanding the release of Lada Sikaka and Dr Randall Sequeira. Sikaka, president of the Niyamgiri Surakhya Samiti (NSS) and Sequeira, member of the Medico Friends Circle, had been arrested 10 days earlier. Their crime? Participating in protests against bauxite mining by Vedanta and the Adani group. Dr Sequeira is a familiar face among the rural Adivasi and Dalit communities in Odisha and Jharkhand, working for the last seven years as part of a network of doctors who practise in remote areas across the country.

In September, Anil Agarwal, the corporate head of Vedanta met Odisha chief minister Mohan Charan Majhi to renew his demand to start bauxite mining in Niyamgiri. Calling a presser from the CM’s official residence, Agarwal said they had discussed

reopening Niyamgiri “immediately”. This, he said, would “provide the tribal population with employment opportunities and help bring them into the development process.”

Agarwal went on to announce a planned Rs 1 lakh crore investment in the state across the mining, refining and downstream manufacturing sectors. Claiming support from the local Adivasi population, he said that gram sabha meetings had been conducted across Niyamgiri and resulted in unanimous approval.

As the protests reveal, and as Sikaka told this reporter (prior to his arrest), this was “a blatant lie”. What the villagers *are* unanimous about is their opposition to mining in this region.

“Niyamgiri comprises a small area of just around 660 hectares. We are the Niyam Kondh, meaning protector of streams. We have been entrusted with the care of our forests, mountains and streams. Niyamgiri literally means ‘mountain of law’. It is the abode of Niyam raja, our supreme law-giver.

Every year, we go to the Niyamgiri hills to pray and offer thanks. Why would we give our god up for bauxite mining?” asked Sikaka.

Aflatoon heads the Samajwadi Jan Parishad (SJP) which also took part in the 26 October demonstration under the banner of the NSS. He says, “The matter of fake gram sabha meets where signatures had allegedly been forged went up to the Cuttack High Court. But the district magistrate of Rayagada informed the court that he had been present during these meetings and vouched for their veracity.”

Vedanta’s Niyamgiri project has been in limbo since 2013 after a dozen gram sabhas rejected the proposal to divert forestland for bauxite mining. The landmark Supreme Court judgement in April 2013 called for a referendum, empowering local communities to have a final say on whether their forestland should be cleared or not. Those gram sabhas were held under the direct supervision of the Cuttack High Court, which had ordered judicial officers to supervise them. Unfortunately, the

present gram sabhas are organised under the executive which is known to follow the orders of its political masters.

Binati Kadraka lives in the village Damon Ponga and is a member of the NSS. She is outspoken in her critique of the government’s tactics to subdue them. “The forcible takeover of our traditional land concerns our livelihood, our culture and our faith. Everything we stand for is at stake. We are fighting to save our civilisation.”

Instead of protecting its tribal people, the state government—led by a tribal chief minister—is working in the opposite direction. Krushna Sikaka, SJP district secretary, asks why activists are being arrested without their names even being listed in the FIR. “Ever since the anti-mining resistance began in 2023, over a hundred Dalit and Adivasis have been arrested by the police.”

Lingaraj Azad, SJP president and advisor with the NSS, is one of them. “On 25 March,” Krushna said, “Azad was arrested and eight charges were levied against him.

When he got bail on all charges, the police levied yet another charge. He is still in jail.” As is Hiramal Naik, a member of the Maa Mati Mali Surakhya Mancha, another grassroots organisation opposed to Vedanta’s Sijimali bauxite mining project. “Naik has been in jail since his arrest on 28 August,” said Krushna.

When Akhilesh Singh, DIG (south Odisha), was asked by local journalists why the jail terms of activists were being extended indefinitely, he replied that he would not allow the likes of Azad to be released.

There’s another reason for Agarwal’s hurry to push through the mining project. On 1 October, the Cuttack High Court dismissed a petition filed by Vedanta against Odisha Mining Corporation (OMC).

Vedanta had sought the supply of 150 million tonnes of bauxite at older, cost-linked rates under a 2004 agreement for its aluminium refinery in Lanjigarh, Kalahandi district. However, a division bench comprising Chief Justice Harish Tandon and Justice Murahari Sri Raman ruled that the company could neither revive nor enforce agreements terminated in September 2015, after amendments to the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act. The court held that Vedanta had failed to challenge the terminations in time, thereby rendering them final.

This has forced Vedanta to purchase market-rate bauxite, costing Vedanta Aluminium an additional Rs 5,600 crore.

Activists believe that the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act 2026 was rushed through in Parliament to benefit corporates like Vedanta, who could now write off lakhs of crores of rupees owed to mineral-rich states. (States have been allocating revenues generated from mining for public welfare programmes like healthcare,

education, social security, agriculture, sanitation and drinking water.) Opposing such write-offs, the Federation of Indian Mining Industries had argued that the mining industry stood to lose Rs 1.5-2 lakh crore due to tax arrears. Vedanta alone is liable to pay royalties worth Rs 6,249 crore for 2023-24.

Activists like Aflatoon are asking whether the dilution of the state’s role in granting mining leases and collecting revenue could save Vedanta from coughing up what they owe.

While mining corporates rejoice in the law easing the acquisition of auctioned mining blocks by speeding up environmental, forest and wildlife clearances, critics note that the acceleration comes at a terrible cost.

Legal experts maintain that any attempt to reopen the Niyamgiri hills to mining would violate the fundamental rights of tribal communities. The Supreme Court’s 2013 endorsement of the gram sabhas’ decision against mining established a binding precedent that cannot easily be overturned. Doing so would violate a community’s religious beliefs which goes against our Constitution and therefore amounts to a constitutional challenge.

Meanwhile, the protests for the release of arrested activists continue. As Dr Sequeira’s mother Nancy wrote in her letter to the powers that be: ‘Randall has stood beside the Adivasi people because he is deeply concerned about their lives, their health, their ancestral lands and their future. He fears that mining activities could expose these vulnerable communities to serious health problems and deprive them of the environment and livelihoods on which they depend. The poor and oppressed need Randall. They need their doctor, their compassionate healer, someone who cares about their suffering.’ ■



In Muniguda, Adivasis, Dalits, farmers and leaders of various people’s movements stand united in their opposition

“We go to the Niyamgiri hills to pray and offer thanks. Why would we give our god up for bauxite mining?”





# ‘We will become refugees in our own land’

Sourabh Sen

Tensions across the Siang river belt reached a flashpoint as long-simmering anti-dam protests spilled over from the rural heartland into the major urban centres of Arunachal Pradesh. At the heart of the turmoil is the proposed 11,200-megawatt Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP).

The last week of October saw east Siang, upper Siang and Siang districts wracked by clashes between security forces and local demonstrators, the torching of government assets and mass arrests of indigenous youth leaders. The state administration imposed prohibitory orders and shutdowns and deployed 30 companies of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) in Pasighat to enforce a curfew.

On 20 October, around 700-800 youths, students and residents gathered in Pasighat to oppose ongoing surveys for pre-feasibility reports (PFR). Their demands included the release of activists previously detained under the Arunachal Pradesh Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, the withdrawal of central security forces from the Siang belt and suspension of all project-related activities.

On 22 October, the demonstrators began their peaceful 24-hour sit-in at Miracle Ground. On 23-24 October, a 12-hour bandh, called by Adi Bane Kebang United

(ABKU) and associated groups turned violent.

Protesters threw stones and ransacked offices belonging to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) and local administrative bodies. The police responded with tear gas shelling and lathi charges. Several vehicles were set on fire, leaving a trail of burnt debris in the streets of Pasighat.

State authorities initiated a crackdown and arrested prominent faces of the movement, including Gen Z youth leaders and representatives from the Siang Indigenous Farmers’ Forum (SIFF). Several activists launched a hunger strike in police custody, further galvanising support among locals.

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New Delhi sees SUMP not only as a power-generation asset, but as a geopolitical buffer. Upstream in Tibet’s Medog County, China has reportedly commenced constructing a massive 60-gigawatt dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo river (which becomes the Siang upon entering India). Security strategists argue that India requires a large reservoir downstream to absorb sudden release—or intentional withholding—of water by an aggressive China upstream.

“It is a project of national interest,” said Ninong Ering, MLA (Pasighat west). “What if China releases water and uses its upstream infrastructure as a water bomb? We need checks and



A rally in Itanagar on 29 October in support of those protesting against the proposed Siang project

balances in place, which is why the Centre is keen to complete this project.”

Arunachal chief minister Pema Khandu insists that public anxieties stem from “misinformation and misconceptions” circulated by “interest groups”. Khandu has urged residents to allow pre-feasibility surveys so that transparent data can be generated and shared.

For the indigenous Adi and Galo communities, who have inhabited the Siang valley for generations, the dam poses an existential threat. The proposed structure would submerge 27 ancestral villages, displace nearly 1.5 lakh indigenous people and inundate agricultural land and historic settlements such

*The dam poses an existential threat to the indigenous Adi and Galo communities*

as Yingkiang and Geku. “We will become refugees in our own land,” says Tajom Ejing of SIFF, a resident of Geku village. “Even if the PFR is completed, we will not allow the construction of the dam. The state government should speak directly with the people instead of deploying military forces.”

Locals emphasise that the Siang is deeply intertwined with their identity, folklore and agrarian legacy. Other than displacement, geologists and environmentalists have warned about high seismic risks in the eastern Himalaya, pointing out that such a large-scale storage reservoir could heighten earthquake vulnerability and ecological disruption in downstream Assam.

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At the time of writing, the stalemate continues, even as the situation across the Siang belt remains fragile. On cue from the state government, district magistrates of east and upper Siang have signalled their readiness to facilitate talks between village elders and government representatives, provided law and order is maintained. However, no dialogue leaders maintain that central paramilitary forces occupy local villages and activists remain behind bars.

A section of Arunachal Pradesh’s political leadership blames the state government for the stalemate.

“Anti-SUMP activists are committed; they are going about their campaign with missionary zeal. As a result, they were able to convince villagers about the project’s devastating effects on their habitat, livelihood and future,” a senior leader told *National Herald* on condition of anonymity.

He believes the state government’s enthusiasm to push the project through has backfired. “Although we are still at the PFR stage, the government behaved as if the project is already a done deal. PFR is just a preliminary study. Unless it is completed, we cannot say if the project should go ahead or be abandoned,” he added.

Rather than suppressing the agitation through brute force, the state government has to find a way to break the prevailing stalemate. This will involve listening to community leaders, engaging credibly with gram sabhas and the young people agitating on the streets of Pasighat and elsewhere in the northeast.

As India seeks to fortify its eastern border and secure water rights against its upstream adversaries (read China), the continuing resistance in the Siang valley underscores the challenges of balancing national strategic interests with indigenous self-determination and ecological preservation. ■

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

# Protection and persecution: a tale of two pujas

What was different about Durga Puja on both sides of the border and why that matters

Faisal Mahmud/Dhaka  
Sourabh Sen/Kolkata

Bangladesh’s Hindus need no particular party to protect them: that seems to be the takeaway from the first Durga Puja in Bangladesh under an elected government since Sheikh Hasina’s fall. The country’s largest Hindu religious festival concluded peacefully, with record participation, extensive government support and an unusual degree of political attention.

It was an early test of whether the new administration could protect religious minorities without turning that protection into partisan bargaining or ‘appeasement’. By the government’s count, celebrations took place at 33,851 mandaps across Bangladesh. Authorities allocated taka five crore as festival assistance, increased rice allocations to 600 kg per mandap and declared five consecutive days of holidays, including three public holidays.

Security was equally important. Nearly 6,500 special reserve battalion personnel were deployed daily, supported by hundreds of patrol vehicles, intelligence monitoring and specialised units. Home minister Salahuddin Ahmed said the government had emphasised preventive action, including identifying potential threats before they materialised.

The streets—and across social media—as thousands of men, women and children smeared with traditional vermilion danced on the streets of Dhaka, Chittagong and other cities and towns.

During Hasina’s tenure, Hindu homes, businesses and temples were repeatedly attacked. In 2021, allegations of the Quran being desecrated in Cumilla during Durga Puja triggered attacks across several districts and demonstrated the limits of the Awami League’s claims to have made minority communities feel safe.

The BNP doesn’t have an unblemished record, either. The attacks on Hindus following the 2001 election, when a BNP-led coalition came to power, is one of the most disturbing episodes in Bangladesh’s recent political history.

That history makes this year’s celebrations significant. They suggest that the security of minorities need not be determined by a party’s historical reputation or

its claims to secular credentials. Government decisions, administrative preparation and political leadership can produce different outcomes.

Prime Minister Tarique Rahaman’s personal involvement added another dimension. Rather than limiting his participation to a single ceremonial appearance in Dhaka, the prime minister travelled to puja venues in Rangpur, Rajshahi and Chattogram. When the head of state comes into direct contact with religious minorities outside the capital (where they usually have less political visibility) the message is clear: citizenship, rather than religious identity, can and should determine an individual’s place in Bangladesh.

A peaceful Durga Puja does not lead to the conclusion that the BNP has resolved the country’s longstanding problems of religious discrimination. Nor validate allegations that the Awami League had deliberately manufactured communal violence. What it does is undermine the proposition that Hindu security is impossible without Hasina in power.

Bangladesh has certainly not overcome religious prejudice. Online hostility persists. Minority communities continue to face concerns involving property and access to justice. A peaceful five-day festival cannot settle those questions.

The government’s achievement should therefore be assessed carefully. It demonstrated that sustained political attention and coordinated policing can protect a vulnerable minority community during a major religious event. Whether those protections persist when the bandobast is gone remains to be seen.

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Durga Puja in BJP-ruled West Bengal provided a sharp contrast. The government led by Suvenud Adhikari had already cracked down on Eid and stopped the tradition of morning prayers on Red Road. Police were instructed to arrest suspected Bangladeshis and put them in detention centres. While Muslims in Bangladesh appeared to participate en masse in the Puja celebrations, the Muslims of West Bengal dared not venture out for fear of vigilante attacks.

In Bangladesh, the exuberance was evident. In neighbouring West Bengal, crowds lacked their usual *joie de vivre*. Makeshift stalls around major pandals continued to



In West Bengal (above) the five-day festival was marred from preparation to immersion; (left) Tarique Rahman’s personal involvement ensured a peaceful celebration in Bangladesh



*Bangladesh encouraged people to come together. In West Bengal, the BJP encouraged divisiveness*

sell biryani, rolls and finger food (egg devils, fish chops) but business was slow.

“This year our bookings were down to half our usual Puja bookings,” said the owner of a car rental agency. He blamed the sombre mood on the 17 October Chorbagan puja pandal stampede where 19 people died, adding that people also “lack money to spend”.

While tragic incidents and economic hardships are factors beyond one’s control, West Bengal’s real party poopers were Sangh-affiliated outfits backed by the state administration. In the run-up to the pujas, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal, along with a brigade of obscure religious leaders, campaigned to restrict the sale and consumption of non-vegetarian food around puja pandals. It was a ham-handed attempt by the Sangh Parivar to impose north Indian socio-cultural mores on the Bengali way of life.

The BJP’s rise to power in West Bengal resulted in the takeover of community pujas by leaders who are patently clueless about the local language and customs (like food and books being vital elements of this five-day carnival). Depicting the goddess with eleven arms in

official communication deepened the disconnect.

Cultural invasion soon turned into political persecution. A hoarding put out by BJP leader Suraj Kumar Singh on behalf of a puja committee in Kolkata’s Pottery Road announced *Baam Vadh* (death to the Left). In short, Left parties were not to set up bookstalls near its pandal!

Chief minister Suvenud Adhikari took the book ban further by saying any literature that is ‘anti-national’, ‘anti-Sanatan’ and ‘hurtful to religious sentiments’ would not be permitted on West Bengal’s soil. He objected to the Left calling Durga Puja ‘*Sharadotsav*’ (autumn festival) and turned Suraj Singh’s local diktat into a statewide fatwa. When the Left set up their bookstalls anyway, the administration descended with all its might. Police, municipal workers, bulldozers were despatched to demolish the stalls, books were torn and carted away in garbage trucks.

If they thought West Bengal’s book-loving public would curl up and die—the Sangh was in for a surprise. Newspapers reported that sales at Left books stalls in 12 districts crossed a record Rs 1 crore

this Durga Puja!)

While a few BJP-RSS leaders tried to play good cop by criticising the government crackdown on books, Suvenud Adhikari continued his divide-and-rule tactics. “Only those who believe in sanatan dharma should touch the idols,” he said, prior to immersion. “I have told the commissioner of police to record the names of those who come here; they must be identified.” Such a remark was unprecedented, going completely against the grain of this most syncretic of festivals. Newspapers reported idols breaking into pieces before immersion—as Muslims who specialise in the work had been kept away.

In Bangladesh, the government encouraged people to come together to celebrate *Bangaliana*. State support during Durga Puja was an important step towards the erasure of sectarian divisions. In West Bengal, the government encouraged divisiveness along linguistic, social, religious and political lines.

Compare the scenes from both sides of the border. And ask yourself: just how specious is the BJP’s argument about the repression of Hindus in new Bangladesh? ■

Photos: Getty Images



# ‘How will news be reported?’

## Herjinder

On Tuesday, 27 October, the Supreme Court issued a notice to the Centre on a petition from 21 news publishers, including companies owned by Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani. The petitioners contend that the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act and its Rules will ‘maim journalism’.

Senior advocate Madhavi Divan, appearing for the Digital News Publishers Association, put the problem plainly: “If I am left to the mercy of the data principal as to whether he or she will give consent, how will news be reported?”

It is unusual to see India’s largest media houses, rarely natural allies in the fight for freedom of the press, going to court together. That they have done so should tell us how serious the problem is.

Start with the design. The Act asks anyone who processes personal data to obtain consent. Journalism, however, is a trade built on information that someone would rather keep hidden. No minister has ever consented to a story about his undeclared assets. No contractor has signed a form approving a report on a rigged tender.

Unlike the European Union’s GDPR, which carves out space for journalistic work, the Indian law offers no such exemption. A reporter who gathers and publishes information about a person risks



Photo: Getty Images

The DPDP Act puts journalists at a disadvantage, especially freelancers and citizen reporters

being treated as a ‘data fiduciary’, answerable to a data protection board that is not independent of the government, with penalties of up to Rs 250 crore.

Lawyer-activist Prashant Bhushan makes a fair point: while the law may not have been explicitly designed to target journalists, its broad and ambiguous language makes it a potential tool for doing so should the ‘need’ arise. (No prizes for guessing who decides that.)

Laws are not judged by the intentions of their authors. They are judged by what they allow their enforcers to do. A statute that is vague enough to catch anyone and everyone gives the state the power to choose their targets. Selective enforcement rarely needs a ban on reporting. A notice, a compliance demand or the threat of a fine is enough to make an editor think twice about a story.

Anyone who has worked in a newsroom knows that the story most likely to be killed is not the one that is banned but the one

that lawyers advise against.

The newsroom is not the only place where this will hurt. Investigative journalism often depends on documents obtained under the Right to Information Act, and the DPDP regime also amends Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act, which handles personal information.

Details once open to scrutiny, such as the educational qualifications of an official or the particulars of a public contract, can now be refused in the name of privacy. As social activist Aruna Roy puts it, this is a lateral attack, and lateral attacks are often more dangerous than direct ones. Two rights that should reinforce each other have been set against each other.

The petition raises a graver worry still: the Centre’s power to requisition information. If the state can demand ‘any information’ from data holders, without telling the people affected, then the confidentiality of a journalist’s sources is as compromised as the government’s

discretion in using this power.

A source speaks to a reporter based on trust. With trust gone, the whistleblower goes silent, and the story never gets written. Press freedom does not only die in dramatic raids. It dies quietly, when people with something of burning importance to say decide not to, for fear of their safety.

There’s also the question of a new breed of journalist: the citizen reporter. The publishers’ lawyer was careful to say her clients are ‘legacy media’, adding that “there has been some debate over citizen journalists”. That debate matters.

According to the Act, if a journalist collects and publishes any information about an individual, they must obtain that person’s consent. Delhi-based journalist Pragya Singh highlights the impracticality of this requirement. “I regularly interview people and gather information on the ground. It’s unrealistic to expect me to carry consent forms and get them signed before every interaction,” she says.

*A notice, a compliance demand or the threat of a fine is enough to make an editor think twice about a story*

India’s independent YouTubers, blog writers, podcasters and X-based fact-checkers have no legal department, no insurance and no Ambani-sized balance sheet. They also do much of the work that large newsrooms are reluctant to. If a company with a compliance team finds the law unworkable, a lone reporter with a phone will not even try to comply. The most likely outcome is that they will simply stop. A law that only the rich can take on risks making journalism a rich man’s game.

The government’s own conduct sharpens the worry. Private actors must give notice and take consent, while the state’s exemptions, for purposes such as the ‘security of the State’, are wide and need not be disclosed to the citizen. When the rules for the watched are strict and the rules for the watcher are lax, it cannot be dignified as ‘protection of privacy’. What it is, is the asymmetry of power.

None of this means data protection is unnecessary. Indians do need protection from data leaks, profiling and the casual sale of personal information. But a good privacy law protects the individual from the powerful. It must not become a tool for the powerful to hide from the public.

The remedy is not complicated: a clear, enforceable exemption for journalism, one that covers freelancers and citizen reporters as well as large newsrooms, protection for the confidentiality of sources, and a restoration of the public-interest test in the RTI Act.

The court has listed the matter for hearing on 17 November. A democracy can protect both privacy and the freedom of the press. Will it? ■

# Modi’s roar-turned-whimper at China border

## Ashok Swain

Narendra Modi’s nationalism comes with skewed sonic boom: louder towards Pakistan and Bangladesh; quieter towards China. Chest-thumping with Pakistan and belittling Bangladesh have become public flexing of power-patriotism, while troubling developments involving China are wrapped in outright lies and reassuring diplomatic niceties. The recent disclosure by the Indo-Tibetan Border Police chief that confrontations with Chinese troops continue in Arunachal Pradesh has, once again, exposed the distance between the government’s presentation of bilateral relations and the conditions that India’s border forces face.

The Pakistan comparison needs a qualification. Modi’s posture towards Pakistan has become somewhat quieter since the May 2025 ceasefire, which Trump claimed to have brokered through the threat of high trade tariffs. Modi has yet to convincingly counter Trump’s repeated claims of external mediation, which punctures the media-manufactured image of a leader in control of

outcomes. The comparison with China comes clearest in the preceding decade, when Pakistan and, to some extent, Bangladesh, particularly after Sheikh Hasina’s departure, dominated the government’s public displays of toughness.

ITBP director-general Shatruijeet Kapur has confirmed continuing face-offs at multiple locations. Tensions were reported around Asaphila in the Taksing Circle of Arunachal Pradesh since July, and went unacknowledged by the government. In a vaguely worded statement, the foreign ministry has now (finally) acknowledged that friction occurs when Chinese troops depart from established patrolling patterns. These admissions hardly describe a settled frontier. Yet, the political leadership insists Indians celebrate improved relations with no clear explanation of what remains unsettled, what China is doing, and what India has secured or surrendered.

The soldiers’ courage in exceptionally difficult terrain makes the government’s evasiveness harder to defend. Indians should not have to cobble together an understanding of national security

from scattered remarks by border security officers and complaints from locals in the border villages of Arunachal Pradesh. A prime minister who boasts so frequently about the nation’s might owes the country an account of the challenges it faces, including those that might shatter his impregnable image even more than the Gen Z protests already have.

The warning signs did not begin in October 2026. In 2017, the Doklam confrontation, involving territory disputed between Bhutan and China near the tri-junction with India, demonstrated Beijing’s willingness to press territorial claims through construction backed by military force. The far graver crisis came in 2020, in eastern Ladakh.

On 15 June, twenty Indian soldiers, including Colonel B. Santosh Babu, died in the Galwan Valley clash. Their deaths came after decades free of war fatalities along the frontier. On 19 June, Modi declared that nobody had intruded into Indian territory and no Indian post had been captured.

At a moment when India needed an unambiguous account of Chinese aggression, its prime minister chose deception. If there had been

no Chinese intrusion, what precisely had the Indian soldiers laid down their lives for? Modi’s formulation lent credibility to Beijing’s version of events while weakening India’s position.

There is an uncomfortable historical echo here. During Kargil, Pakistan’s military leadership under Pervez Musharraf denied its soldiers’ involvement, leaving India to bury Pakistani dead. In Kargil and in Galwan, Musharraf and Modi chose to protect their political positions through denial, leaving soldiers to bear the consequences. Given how readily he and his party invoke Pakistan as the measure of everything India must reject, Modi should find the resemblance disturbing.

On the basis of a Ladakhi delegation’s estimate, Rahul Gandhi has raised concerns that China might have taken control of roughly 2,000 sq. km. of India-controlled territory in Ladakh. The government disputes this, and a former chief of the government’s Border Roads Organisation challenged the LoP’s remarks in the Supreme Court. Dismissing the Opposition does not answer substantive questions: where can Indian troops patrol today and what

restrictions remain?

Negotiations have been on for the last six years, but the government has not demonstrated that India has recovered the territorial control and patrolling access it had before the 2020 crisis. The 21 October 2024 agreement addressed, to some extent, patrolling in Depsang and Demchok, and military talks have continued beyond the 21st round, but this does not establish that all previous arrangements have been restored across eastern Ladakh.

The Modi government’s handling of former army chief General M.M. Naravane’s memoir reinforces the concern. His *Four Stars of Destiny*, remains unpublished pending defence ministry clearance. In the name of protecting operational secrets, the government prevented the memoir from seeing the light of day. Indefinitely preventing public access to an important account of decisions during a national security crisis deserves a better explanation. Citizens are entitled to ask whether this secrecy protects military capabilities or protects the people who made political decisions. The controversy surrounding the film *Battle of Galwan*, renamed *Maatrubhumi: May War Rest in Peace*, raises similar questions. Reports suggested pressure on the filmmaker to soften its portrayal of China. Should soldiers’ sacrifices become material for diplomatic makeovers?

Meanwhile, Beijing presses its claims over Arunachal Pradesh, calls it South Tibet and assigns Chinese names to its locations. Its border village programme strengthens its presence and capacity to support military operations. China’s huge hydropower dam construction on the Yarlung Tsangpo, upstream of the Brahmaputra, adds another trial to existing tribulations. India and China have no water-sharing treaty. Downstream concerns include sedimentation, ecological disruption, dam safety and timely information about flood water releases. India needs enforceable cooperation and credible

assessment, rather than vague assurances that its interests are being safeguarded.

Economic dependence also limits room for manoeuvre. India imported about \$131.6 billion in goods from China in 2025-26, against exports of about \$19.5 billion. Foreign minister Jaishankar’s admission of ‘surrender’ because China is the bigger economy explains the defeatist mindset of the Modi government. It raises question of what twelve years of Modi’s rule have done to fortify India’s bargaining power. Manu-facturing capacity, technological competence and dependable foreign policy cannot be replaced by speeches about national greatness.

Modi’s 2025 visit to China for the SCO summit and Xi Jinping’s attendance at the 2026 BRICS summit in Delhi are defensible diplomatic engagements. However, while confrontations persist, sunny summit photo-ops cannot prove that India’s position has improved. Our government should be able to pursue dialogue while naming Chinese actions clearly and accounting for the results of its negotiations.

Modi’s reluctance is understandable if one sees it through the lens of his brand of politics. An honest discussion would reveal the yawning chasm between branded braggadocio and grim ground reality. Pakistan and Bangladesh have offered familiar opportunities for religion-based political mobilisation at home; China exposes the limits of our ‘huglomacy’ and raises difficult questions about our military preparedness and economic dependence. How much easier it is to sway citizens into accepting a fake normal and let soldiers face the heat. India needs peace with China. It also needs a prime minister willing to tell Indians what that peace costs, what remains unresolved, and why his promises have fallen way short of the 56-inch mark. ■

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

*It’s so much easier to sway citizens into accepting a fake normal and let soldiers face the heat*



What India, and Indians, need is an unambiguous account of Chinese aggression. What we get, instead, is deception





# Lawlessness the new law of the land?

Suresh Dharur

On 1 November, 100 urban local bodies—133 municipal corporations and 87 municipalities and nagar panchayats—and rural seats in the zilla parishad territorial constituencies (ZPTCs) and mandal parishads territorial constituencies (MPTCs) go to polls. The electoral contest will cover 659 of the 663 ZPTCs and 9,829 of the 9,858 MPTCs. If all goes well, nearly 2.81 crore voters will exercise their democratic right across 28 zilla praja parishads.

The nomination process, however, was marred by prevention and intimidation. The deployment of central forces and installation of CCTV cameras at polling stations, nomination and counting centres turned the state into a bitter political battleground.

Allegations backed by video

clips showed vandals snatching nomination papers and assaulting opposition candidates as men in uniform looked on passively. In one video, a policewoman is seen pushing a former minister, also a woman, to the ground, preventing her from leaving her own home. A scandalised citizen exclaimed: “This isn’t Bihar, we are in Andhra Pradesh!”

SEC Anil Chandra Punetha was questioned for blatantly flouting the directions of the Supreme Court regarding the conduct of municipal elections. The opposition YSR Congress Party claimed Punetha acted like a puppet of the NDA government headed by chief minister N. Chandrababu Naidu. YSRCP president and former chief minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy and his party colleagues accused Punetha of trying to undermine the democratic rights of opposition leaders at the behest of the ruling

dispensation. “We have no faith in the SEC. Nor can we trust DGP Harish Kumar Gupta and his team,” said Jagan.

Supported by the Left, the YSRCP demanded that polls be held under the supervision of the apex court, with an appointed amicus curiae. “We don’t believe that free and fair elections are possible in the present environment of coercion, targeted violence and blatant violation of the Supreme Court’s orders,” Jagan said, amid reports of clashes between the workers of the ruling Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the YSRCP.

The Opposition also identified 54 police officials for their alleged involvement in electoral irregularities and demanded their removal for colluding with the ruling party in engineering attacks on rival candidates.

On 21 October, the Supreme Court directed the SEC to examine

the evidence of candidates being prevented from filing nominations, provide a minimum 48-hour window wherever grievances were substantiated and defer publication of the final list of contesting candidates until 25 October. On 23 October, YSRCP again moved the apex court alleging that the state government was flouting the court’s directives. Originally scheduled for 28 October, the SEC was forced to postpone the polls to 1 November and reopen nominations for 72 wards in four urban local bodies. The chief minister accused the Opposition of misleading the courts. “The opposition party is indulging in violence and filing petitions in the courts. By approaching courts with fake litigations, they have become criminal litigants. They gave wrong information to the high court and the Supreme Court,” he claimed.



## Sibling rivalry gets an ‘epic’ twist

The ongoing sibling rivalry between Andhra Pradesh Congress president Y.S. Sharmila and her brother and former chief minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy just got an ‘epic’ touch, thanks to Chandrababu Naidu invoking the *Mahabharat* to target his *bête noire*. Naidu sought to garner political mileage out of a family drama when he likened Jagan to Kansa mama, Lord Krishna’s maternal uncle, the tyrannical king of Mathura.

It all started with wedding plans. Sharmila sent out invitations to her daughter’s wedding in November. Yelahanka Palace, the family property in Bengaluru, was detailed as the venue. This infuriated Jagan who has a running feud with his sister over the property. He shot off a letter to his sister, refusing to allow the wedding in the palace which he claimed was his ‘sole property’.

‘Hosting an event of this scale would involve several service providers, including catering staff,

decorators, event managers, videographers and photographers, besides guests entering and leaving the premises. This will raise security concerns. The circulation of photographs and videos of the property and surrounding areas could also pose serious security risks,’ he wrote. “This came as a big shock to Sharmila,” said her aide. “Wedding invitations have already gone out to relatives and prominent personalities. Now, she will be compelled to look for an alternative venue.”

Wading into the row, Chandrababu Naidu attacked Jagan for his “meanness and lack of respect for family values”. The chief minister added, “He is treating his own mother and sister unfairly over property disputes. Sharmila also has a share in the family property but he is obstructing [his] niece’s wedding. He is behaving like Kansa.”

Continuing the personal attack, Naidu alleged that Jagan had failed as a chief minister, a party leader, a son, an elder brother and, ultimately, as a citizen. Phew. ■



(Top) A video grab from Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh, shows a man attempting to snatch nomination papers; (right) Former minister Vidadala Rajini being pushed by a woman police officer as she attempts to leave her home



*The Opposition has identified 54 police personnel for their alleged role in electoral irregularities*

# Ageing gracefully, with a little help from the state

The passing of the Keralam Senior Citizens (Care and Protection of Rights) Bill, 2026 is a milestone, writes **K.A. Shaji**

In Thiruvilwamala, Thrissur district, 86-year-old Dhanalakshmi lives in a room where the rain comes in. Parts of her house have been demolished for structural repairs. Her daughter has not yet sent the monthly maintenance of Rs 6,500, ordered by a district-level tribunal. Dhanalakshmi had transferred the property to her daughter on the understanding that she would be cared for in her old age. Instead, she finds herself bereft of both financial cover and a proper roof over her head.

Nationally, the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007, provides a mechanism for eligible parents to seek support from their children. But an order can neither guarantee payment nor make an unsafe home habitable. For elderly persons dependent on family, the consequences can be devastating. Dhanalakshmi’s experience demonstrates why the security of senior citizens cannot rest solely on private arrangements.

Against this background, the Keralam Senior Citizens (Care and Protection of Rights) Bill, 2026, gains significance. Introduced by chief minister V. D. Satheesan on 13 October, the bill was unanimously passed by the Kerala legislative assembly’s subject committee on 26 October.

It promises to be the strongest legislation for elders in the country, with a wider framework and safeguards against neglect and exploitation. These include imprisonment and fines for offences including abuse, illegal possession of senior citizens’ property and unregistered elderly care centres.

Kerala has seen its population grow older, thanks to longer life expectancy and declining birth rates. The proportion of 60-plus citizens rose from 12.7 per cent in 2011 to around 15 per cent in 2021. It is projected to double by 2051. Migration has changed the structure of families and care-giving. Children working overseas may send money and arrange medical consultations, but

immediate assistance in emergencies remains a problem, as does loneliness. While elders living alone struggle to manage medication, access hospitals and protect themselves from financial fraud, children have their own pressures.

The challenge therefore is to build public services that support both generations without assuming that filial duty can replace professional care.

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A case from Varkala in Thiruvananthapuram district illustrates what can happen when financial arrangements between parents and children collapse. Sadasivan, 79, a cancer patient, and his wife Sushama, 72, were locked out of their home by their daughter and son-in-law in February 2025. The couple allegedly gave their daughter Rs 35 lakh after selling their immovable properties. The arrangement was that the money would be returned in two years.

*Legislation can’t enforce affection or eliminate loneliness. It can, however, prevent abuse and punish neglect*



Photo: Getty Images

When the money remained unpaid after five years, the police intervened, a case was registered and the couple eventually regained access to their home.

In Thrissur, Thomas Plakkan, 80, and his wife Rosly, 77, were moved to separate care homes in November 2024 following allegations of abuse by their son and daughter-in-law. The social justice department intervened, and a maintenance tribunal directed their children to deposit money towards their care and provide monthly support.

When Thomas died in July 2025, his body was brought home from the care facility. The house was locked. Relatives, neighbours and officials helped arrange his last rites outside the locked house.

These cases illustrate the limits of intervention after a family crisis has escalated. Financial orders may provide relief, but they cannot automatically restore housing security or prevent intimidation. Accessible complaint mechanisms

and timely response are essential, particularly when older people have lost control over their assets.

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The bill’s emphasis on regulating institutions is equally important as more families turn to commercial care providers. In Ernakulam, an elderly woman lost Rs 35 lakh after approaching an old-age home she found through social media (her children live abroad). She handed over her bank documents and moved into the facility, only to be kept in a small room without the promised amenities. After the operators refused to return her money, her family approached the social justice department.

Families may find it difficult to assess the reliability of care providers. Senior citizens who have paid large sums or surrendered financial documents can find they have little or no bargaining power. Mandatory registration, regular

inspections, transparent contracts and independent grievance mechanisms could reduce exploitation, provided authorities have sufficient staff and resources to enforce the rules.

The bill also emphasises the importance of ageing in familiar surroundings with appropriate assistance. Affordable home-care services, trained caregivers, legal aid and access to assistive products will, said Satheesan, reduce the pressure on families while helping older people retain their independence.

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Welfare, however, cannot be measured by infrastructure alone. By 2016-17, around 2,000 Pakal Veedu daycare centres had been established across the state. They struggled to attract users because their facilities did not adequately reflect older people’s needs. A centre needs to provide companionship, community activities, transport and practical

assistance.

Civil service officer Adeela Abdulla, who worked on the Act, elaborates: “A proposed baseline survey using 50 indicators formed part of the legislation to assess elderly people’s socioeconomic circumstances, vulnerabilities and [gaps in] access to welfare schemes.” Its findings would, she said, “guide local services and budgets, with success measured by improvements in people’s lives rather than the number of centres established.”

K.S. Shaji, director of the State Resource Centre for Older People at Kerala University of Health Sciences, has highlighted the difficulties elderly patients face: long hospital waits, fragmented services and repeated trips. Better coordination between primary and secondary healthcare and home-based support would make treatment more accessible to people with chronic illnesses or restricted mobility, he says.

Former additional state public prosecutor P. Narayanan has stressed that implementation matters as much as enactment, while director general of prosecution T. Asaf Ali has welcomed the broader approach to protection and enforcement embodied in the bill.

“Effective implementation will require functioning district-level mechanisms, trained personnel, adequate funding and clear responsibility for following up on complaints and orders. Older people must be able to report neglect without fear of retaliation, and authorities must intervene before financial or physical insecurity becomes entrenched,” says Ali.

Observes, “Ageing should not be equated with dependency. Older people possess professional experience, practical knowledge and social memory that can strengthen communities. A properly organised caregiving workforce could create employment while supporting families. Opportunities for older people to mentor younger generations and participate in community life should remain open to those who want them.”

Kerala has spent decades extending life expectancy and improving its human development index. Ensuring that longer lives are secure and dignified is the state’s next challenge. Legislation cannot enforce affection or eliminate loneliness. It can establish minimum standards, regulate care providers and make neglect punishable. ■



# A manifesto of the ignorant

Avay Shukla on the bureaucrats’ obsequious defence of the ECI’s voter purge

When I read the recent open letter issued by 124 retired civil servants defending Gyanesh Kumar and his nefarious doings, I was reminded of the sage words of Maurice Switzer: “It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt.”

I was not surprised by this epistle, however, for my WhatsApp groups have a dense population of such bureaucrats, closet members of Mr Modi’s tribe. What did surprise me, however, is that, for once, they chose to speak out—on the wrong side of history, yes, but they did come out of their burrows. Such people are more comfortable in the security of the woodwork and like to hedge their bets.

They do not rock boats, they never take a stand, they always worship the rising sun, and they know which side their bread is buttered on. I suspect they were persuaded to say ‘aye’ by Mr Modi’s gentle persuaders—a few crumbs, loaves and charge-sheets might have been traded—to sign on the dotted line (not hard, considering that’s what they’ve done for most of their careers).

A word about the signatories to the letter would not be out of place. Most of them are faceless wonders,



Photo: Getty Images

ghuspaiithye or termites (Gyanesh Kumar’s oft-stated reason for the SIR) among the 130 million deleted voters.

This is as comprehensive a guilty plea as any ever submitted by any accused to any court. These actions and pieces of information were precisely what the entire Opposition and civil society activists had been demanding for months. The imperious Gyanesh Kumar had refused, ordering the LoP to furnish an affidavit first! His U-turn strengthens the belief that all this was done (for the BJP) to win the elections in Bengal and Bihar. As the noose around the ECI tightens, one waits for that admission too.

Finally, the G-124 letter is not a legitimate expression of differing views or free speech, as its apologists may claim. It is an

*The G-124 letter expresses support for electoral cleansing. It is dangerous for democracy and the rule of law*

*Gyanesh’s U-turn is an admission of guilt: all his doings helped the BJP win in Bihar and Bengal*

which is as it should be, since their faces have egg—or worse—on them. A couple have been accused of embezzlement and corruption; one displayed his bigotry and misogyny brazenly at an event in a ladies’ college some time back; yet another, now a chancellor of a central university, has been a BJP acolyte for a long time; some are working with right-wing organisations like the Vivekanand Foundation and ORG; one is on record stating he has issued orders under political pressure!

Not exactly the kind of ‘concerned’ citizens who can be trusted to comment objectively on the doings of this regime and its puppets like the Election Commission of India. In short, their credentials are highly suspect.

The letter itself is a charter of obsequiousness, a manifesto of the ignorant. It praises the ECI for its ‘historical’ achievements (which, needless to say, belong to the past

and not the present dispensation), supports the SIR as a much-needed exercise, condemns those who are asking for Gyanesh Kumar’s resignation, and backs Modi’s regime to the hilt. (It has to be the hilt, because they have impaled themselves upon this sacerdotal sword in true hara-kiri style.)

The windmill this G-124 is tilting at is clearly the epistles issued earlier by another group of civil servants: the CCG (Constitutional Conduct Group) which has, over the last ten years, established a sterling reputation for taking a principled stand on many issues where it felt the government had violated constitutional values, rights and provisions. Maybe the heat was getting to someone?

I shall not try to counter and expose the fallacies, downright untruths, lack of logic and distortion of facts in the G-124 letter: that has already been done very ably and comprehensively by

M.G. Devasahayam, a senior retired IAS officer, with facts and figures (*The Wire*, 16 October).

Nothing proves how wrong these letter-writers are more than the conduct of the ECI since the second round of protests in Delhi. It has practically admitted its guilt and culpability in the SIR fiasco. By gradually (and quietly) rolling back and reversing some of the draconian and illegal provisions of this exercise of exclusion, it has validated the charges against it. Just to recapitulate, in the last couple of weeks, it has taken the following decisions:

- The mischievous declaration attached to Form 6 has been removed.
- Access to ECINET has been restored for the EROs (but not yet, strangely, for the tribunal judges in Bengal!).
- A technical committee has been set up to audit the suspect ECINET software.

- It has admitted that the two election commissioners had indeed written to the cabinet secretary about the irregularities in the body.
- A cap has now been imposed on the number of infamous Forms 7 that can be submitted by one person.
- A special drive has been started to include voters who were left out or deleted in the states where SIR has concluded.
- In the 17 such states, an SSR (Special Summary Revision) has been initiated to enrol voters who have turned 18 and were left out of the SIR.
- Machine-readable voter rolls in PDF format shall now be provided to all candidates.
- Lists of deletions and additions shall be provided to all political parties.
- The ECI has implicitly admitted that it does not have any list or details of Amit Shah’s

expression of support and encouragement for authoritarianism, intolerance, electoral cleansing, denial of fundamental rights and exclusion, and no civilised nation can countenance this kind of rhetoric.

It is dangerous for democracy and the rule of law. It has tarnished the reputation of the civil services. At the end of the day, anyone who supports wrongdoing is just as guilty of it as the prime mover himself. In the words of Nelson Mandela, in an appeal to his people issued from a prison cell: “Will you come along with us, or are you going to cooperate with the government in its efforts to suppress the claims and aspirations of your own people?”

The people of India deserve an answer from this rump of civil servants. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

# Will voters punish Trump for his war on Iran?

The US mid-terms will test whether Americans put partisan loyalty above economic pain

Aakar Patel

On 3 November, America will hold its midterm elections. They are so called because they are held in the middle of a president’s four-year term. American parliamentarians, called Congressmen, face elections every two years. A lame-duck president is a term used to describe a leader in his last two years in office, as Trump will be after 3 November. A lame duck is a leader whom the party recognises is riding into the sunset and who therefore finds it difficult to enforce his agenda.

Donald Trump will be especially lame if his party, the Republicans, loses control of one or both chambers of Congress. He will not be able to get the legislation he wants passed, secure the appointment of judges or get officials confirmed. Equally importantly, the Opposition can go after him and his family by opening investigations and then holding impeachment and other types of hearings.

The reason this election is interesting is that it will reveal something about human nature. The assumption of democratic systems is that individuals vote rationally and do not vote in tribal fashion. This means voters cast ballots in support of policies and not fantasies, particularly if the person they elect produces negative outcomes while in office.

Opinion polls suggest that Trump is one of the most unpopular US presidents in recent history. The majority of Americans, including those who voted him into office, think he is doing a poor job. This is revealed through something called an approval rating, conducted regularly by several

reputable polling organisations. A question is asked, such as: ‘Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Trump is doing his job?’ Respondents say yes, no, or unable to say.

Trump’s approval rating is below 40 per cent, meaning that a significant majority of Americans disapprove of his performance. On his performance on the economy, which merits a separate question, the numbers are worse.

This is not difficult to accept as true because with the war on Iran, the price of fuel has gone up and made things expensive since February. Petrol in the US was Rs 75 per litre before the war and is today Rs 107. Diesel has jumped from Rs 90 to Rs 160. Inflation is higher than the Federal Reserve (their version of the RBI) wants it to be. Part of the reason is the tariff war that Trump began gratuitously on returning to power. Interest rates on home loans have gone up by a full percentage point.

Now, given that he has been in office since January 2025, given that his party controls both houses of Congress and also has a conservative majority in the Supreme Court, whose judges are nominated by the president, there is nobody else to blame but Donald Trump if voters feel things haven’t turned out as they expected.

Trump has endorsed the current candidates over their Republican opponents, and therefore a vote for them is a vote for him and his policies. For this reason, the result of the 3 November election will be interesting and give us some insight into how people vote.

If most of Trump’s candidates carry the day despite the manifest harm he has wrought on their everyday lives, it will be a vote for tribalism. This means a vote for

considerations that defy material interests.

The other most interesting thing these elections will show is the unpopularity of Israel among Americans translating into an end of unconditional support. Many of the Democrats running in this cycle are staunchly anti-Israel, in keeping with the mood in America, which has turned sharply against Zionism.

In large part, this is due to last year’s brave campaign run by New York mayor Zohran Mamdani, who was the first major American politician to support Palestinians and still win. AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby group in America, which had

Photo: Getty Images



Vote for change? Early voting underway at a polling centre at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

the ability to destroy anti-Israel candidates, has since been so thoroughly discredited it has stopped endorsing candidates.

Assuming the Democrats carry the day, will they be able to end the structural support that Israel has long enjoyed? We will see. One hopes the answer is yes. Far too much damage has been done to humanity by Israelis; stopping or slowing the transfer of weaponry and diplomatic support to them would make the world a better place.

Another reason for hoping that

Trump’s team loses is, of course, this mad war that is affecting all of us, especially the one crore Indians in the Gulf and their families here. How insane all of it is can be judged by the fact that, with oil at over \$115 a barrel (it was at \$60 before the war), there is talk in Washington and Tel Aviv about restarting bombing and further damaging infrastructure in Iran and the Gulf.

A Republican Party trounced next week will not back the Iran war as enthusiastically as it has done so far.

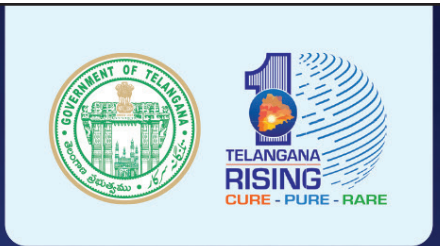
The last thing to say here is that

the two-year Congressional term is often criticised, and rightly so, because it means candidates are forever campaigning. But it is also true that the short cycle gives American voters a more frequent opportunity to correct the course of government when politicians do things that harm them.

For their sake, and for the sake of all of us, one hopes that is what they will do this time and not simply show up to vote for their preferred ideology. ■

Views are personal





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