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PERSPECTIVE

HOW MODI'S POLITICS CROSSED INDIA'S OLD BOUNDARIES

MPLADS REFORM FREEZE

EXCLUSIVE

SIKKIM'S UNSEEN BANK FILES

VOL. 01, NO. 02, MAY 2026, NEW DELHI, ₹50

NEW DELHI POST

MAMATA: Behind the Curtain

Recorded Testimonies Unmask Bengal's Chief Patron

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BECAUSE THE TRUTH MUST BE TOLD

New Face of Juvenile Crime

Rising adolescent violence in India signals a dangerous national failure

A growing number of Indian children are becoming criminals, and the nature of their crimes is becoming increasingly violent. The latest National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) figures show that more than 31,000 cases were registered against juveniles in 2023, while over 40,000 juveniles were apprehended across the country. Most belonged to the 16-18 age bracket. At first glance, the increase may appear statistically modest. But crime trends cannot be understood through numbers alone. What matters more is the changing character of juvenile involvement. Increasingly, adolescents are appearing in cases linked to murder, assault, robbery, narcotics and sexual violence. That transformation is the real crisis.

India is not simply witnessing juvenile delinquency. It is witnessing the hardening of juvenile criminality. The child offender of today is no longer confined to petty theft or survival-driven crime. He is often digitally connected, socially alienated and increasingly exposed to organised criminal ecosystems. Smartphones, encrypted messaging platforms, gambling applications and social media-driven gangster culture have altered the psychology of adolescent behaviour in ways Indian institutions barely understand. The implications are enormous.

A country that cannot protect its adolescents from criminal drift ultimately weakens its own social foundations. Juvenile crime is rarely born in isolation. It emerges from accumulated institutional failure. When schools collapse, families fragment, addiction spreads, unemployment deepens and communities weaken, children become the earliest casualties. Crime is often the final symptom of much deeper neglect.

The Covid years accelerated this breakdown with devastating force. Millions of children disappeared from classrooms, particularly from economically weaker households. Many never returned. For poorer families, schools are not merely centres of learning. They provide routine, supervision, emotional structure and social protection. Once that ecosystem disintegrated, large sections of vulnerable adolescents drifted into unregulated digital environments and dangerous peer networks. India is now confronting the consequences.

The rise of social media-driven criminal glamour is especially alarming. Across several states, gangster culture has become performative entertainment. Weapons, intimidation videos and displays of illicit wealth circulate endlessly through short-video platforms. For adolescents trapped in unemployment, weak schooling and social frustration, these images create a distorted aspiration structure. Violence begins to resemble status. Criminality begins to resemble power.

The state, meanwhile, continues to respond with predictable superficiality. Every horrific juvenile crime generates demands for harsher punishment. Yet punishment alone cannot repair social collapse. Most juveniles entering conflict with the law are not hardened criminals. They are vulnerable adolescents shaped by neglect, economic anxiety and institutional abandonment.

India's rehabilitation infrastructure remains painfully inadequate. Observation homes across several states suffer from shortages of counsellors, psychologists and trained personnel. Reintegration mechanisms remain weak. Many children return from institutions to precisely the same violent and unstable environments that pushed them towards crime in the first place. The system punishes the symptom while preserving the cause.

That is why the NCRB data should disturb policymakers far beyond the home ministry. This is as much a societal crisis as a policing issue. A nation aspiring to become a global power cannot afford to produce millions of socially disconnected adolescents vulnerable to violence, narcotics and organised crime. The tragedy is that India still does not appear to grasp the scale of the danger. The latest NCRB figures suggest India is failing that test with growing regularity.

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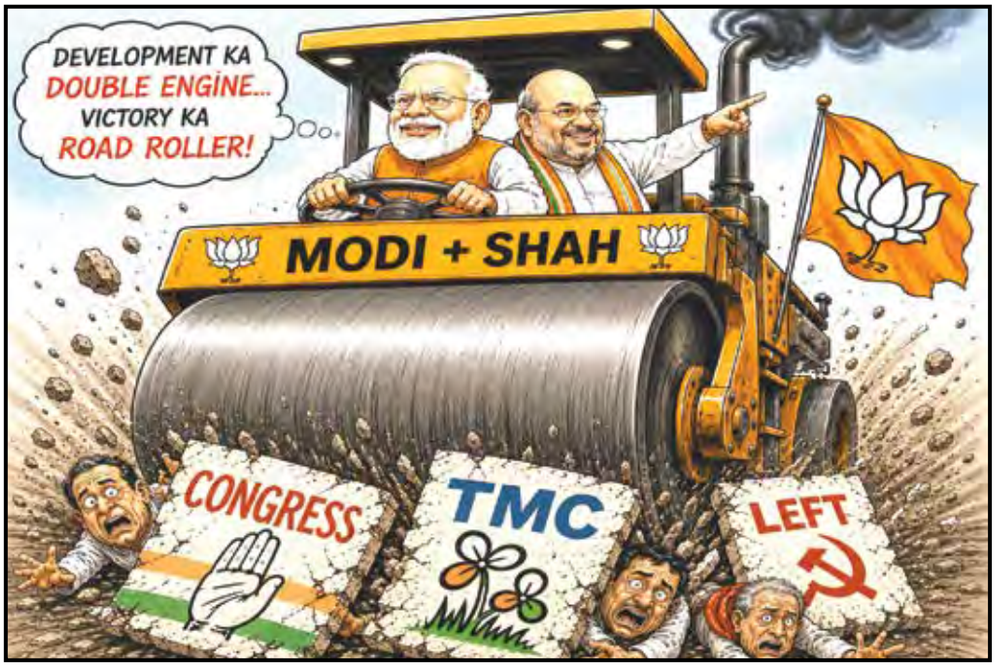

SAID UNSAID

"When I become prime minister, schools won't give so much homework. Children should also get time to play. Every day, children carry heavy bags, study till late night and then again go to tuition. Childhood should not be only about studies"

(An Indian child in a recent, candid viral video)

NOT ONLY NUMBERS

ONE DAY IN INDIA

24 Hours, 1.4 billion stories: How the country pans out every day

- **67,385** newborns
- **28,000** deaths
- **30,000–35,000** marriages
- **250 million** attend schools
- **290 million** UPI transactions
- **23 million** railway passengers
- **13,000** road accidents
- **5.3 billion** WhatsApp messages
- **70 million** urban bus trips
- **900 million** Indians online
- **4.5 lakh** domestic air passengers
- **8-10 million** app-based food deliveries

FORUM

'ONE COUNTRY ONE ELECTION'

India urgently needs simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and state assemblies. The present system of frequent elections throughout the year keeps political parties in a permanent campaign mode and severely affects governance. Governments become more focused on electoral calculations than on long-term policymaking. Administrative machinery, teachers and security personnel are repeatedly diverted for election duty. That disrupts public services and imposes a huge financial burden on the exchequer.

Simultaneous elections would reduce expenditure, improve administrative efficiency and provide policy stability. The Model Code of Conduct, which comes into force before every election, often delays development projects and investment decisions. Conducting elections together would minimise such disruptions and allow governments to function more effectively.

Many will argue that simultaneous polls may weaken federalism or overshadow regional issues. These concerns are valid but not insurmountable. India's voters are politically mature enough to distinguish between national and state issues, as several past elections have shown. With proper constitutional safeguards and political consensus, the system can be implemented without compromising democratic principles.

A nation aspiring to become a global economic power cannot afford to remain trapped in an endless election cycle. Simultaneous elections may not solve every political problem, but they can certainly make governance more stable, efficient and development-oriented.

Swapan Mondal, Kolkata

YOUR VOICE MATTERS

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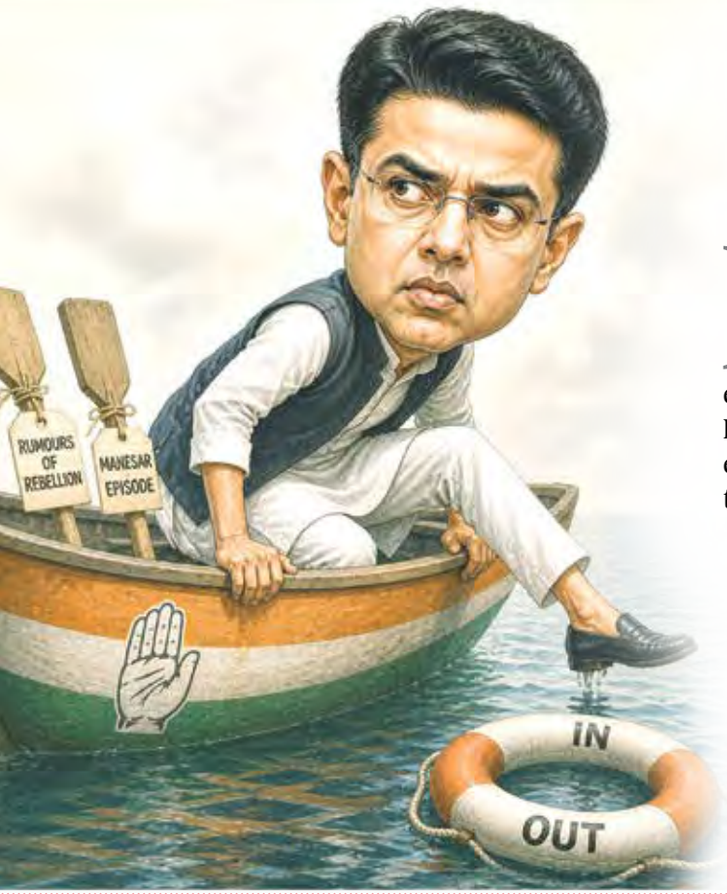


PILOT ON AICC RADAR

Gautam Lahiri

In Congress circles, Sachin Pilot is once again the man of the moment, and also suspicion. Rumours of rebellion have long trailed him, always denied, never quite buried. Then comes Ashok Gehlot, casually reopening old wounds, reminding everyone of the Manesar episode while insisting Pilot isn't leaving. Reassurance wrapped in doubt. The timing raised eyebrows, especially after BJP MP Radha Mohan Das Agarwal (IMP IMP) quipped that Pilot has one foot in and one foot out. Inside the Congress, the message is clear: Pilot may not be jumping ship—but no one's entirely convinced he isn't peeking overboard.

LINE OF CAUTION

Trust, it seems, doesn't travel on diplomatic visas. Despite the post-election bonhomie between New Delhi and Dhaka, India's security mandarins are still side-eyeing Tarique Rahaman. Even as Narendra Modi struck a conciliatory note after the Muhammad Yunus phase, the subtext remains: trust, but verify, and then verify again. So, when the inaugural Pragati military exercise convened in Meghalaya recently, Bangladesh was notably absent from the guest list. The reason isn't geography, but ambiguity. After Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahaman declared a firm "Bangladesh First" policy, South Block read it as strategic hedging. For now, India is offering patience, not participation, keeping the door ajar, but the parade is strictly invite-only.

CRIMINALS, BUT STILL 'OURS'

Politics, it seems, can turn even deportation into a homecoming spectacle. When 15 Indians with criminal records were sent back from Australia, it was Bhagwant Mann waiting at Delhi airport, rolling out a rather unexpected welcome. Eleven of them were from Punjab, charged with offences ranging from drugs to domestic violence. Mann didn't deny their records; he even endorsed the deportation. Yet, in the same breath, he called them "our children", a phrase that raised more eyebrows than sympathy. As for deportees from other states? That, he shrugged, was someone else's problem. Compassion, clearly, has a constituency and a boundary.

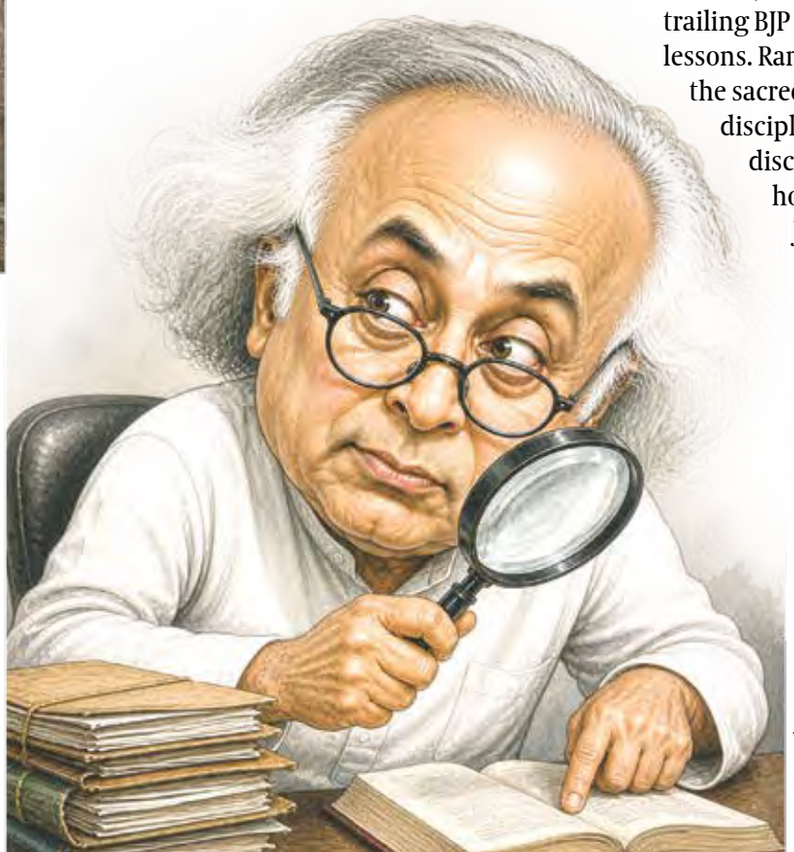
SPOILSPORT MAMATA

The INDIA bloc's unity is fast resembling a political mirage, with Mamata Banerjee at its most inconvenient centre. In Bengal, Congress has ditched alliance arithmetic altogether, contesting all 294 seats, while Rahul Gandhi went unusually blunt, accusing the TMC of enabling the BJP and indulging in corruption. The irony is thick: BJP leaders chose restraint, while the INDIA bloc partners quietly rallied behind Mamata, not Congress. Unity on paper, fragmentation on the ground. The signal is unmistakable: this coalition is running on borrowed time. Reading the drift, Congress is already recalibrating. After Bengal, it plans to go solo in Uttar Pradesh too with fewer alliances, more survival instinct and a long game ahead.

WHEN SILENCE SPEAKS LOUDER

With the departure of Mamata Banerjee in Bengal, one element emerges as most defining: silent voters. Two prominent pollsters chose discretion over data, refusing to predict results in the state altogether. Officially, voters weren't talking. Unofficially, whispers suggest something else: pressure not to project a possible win for Mamata. Some respondents, it seems, played along, telling surveyors what they thought they wanted to hear. Others simply shut up. In Bengal's political theatre, "silence" proved to be the best-kept secret of all.

JAIRAM TURNS HISTORY TRACKER



When Amit Shah waxed eloquent in Ladakh about ancient relics, Congress found its new fact-checker-in-chief. Enter Jairam Ramesh, now unofficially tasked with trailing BJP ministers and their history lessons. Ramesh swiftly reminded that the sacred relics of Buddha's disciples weren't a fresh discovery but a 1949 homecoming, led by Jawaharlal Nehru after retrieval from a British museum. He even dug up correspondence involving Shyama Prasad Mukherjee to underline the point. Message delivered: before rewriting history on tour, expect Congress to arrive—footnotes, files, and all.

Gautam Lahiri *is a Delhi-based veteran journalist. He is a former president, Press Club of India*

Images: *AI Generated*

Gyanendra Pandey
The author is a veteran journalist and also a political analyst

FOUR STATES, ONE MESSAGE

HOW MODI'S POLITICS CROSSED INDIA'S OLD BOUNDARIES

The results of the 2026 Assembly elections in West Bengal, Assam, Kerala and Tamil Nadu have done far more than change governments. They have altered the political grammar of contemporary India. These elections were not merely regional contests fought over local grievances, welfare promises or leadership personalities. Together, they have produced a larger national narrative — one that strengthens Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP's claim that they now represent the dominant political force across the Indian Union, while simultaneously exposing the deep structural weakness of the opposition and the uncertain future of regional parties.

For nearly a decade, Indian politics has revolved around one central question: can the opposition create a credible counterweight to the BJP's electoral machine and ideological narrative? The latest results suggest that the answer, at least for now, remains uncertain.

The BJP's most consequential victory has undoubtedly come in West Bengal. Bengal was not merely another state election. It was symbolic terrain. For decades, Bengal remained politically and culturally resistant to the BJP's brand of politics. The state represented a unique mix of Bengali regional identity, Left intellectual traditions, minority politics and sub-national pride. Yet the BJP has now broken that psychological barrier. The party's victory signals that it is no longer confined to the Hindi heartland. It has successfully entered one of India's most politically conscious and historically resistant regions.

Politically, the victory gives the BJP something even more important than state power, that is, legitimacy. The party can now argue that its appeal cuts across language, geography and culture. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's declaration that the BJP now stretches "from Gomukh to Gangasagar" was not merely rhetorical triumphalism. It reflected the party's belief that it is steadily becoming the default national political force in India.

The Bengal result also represents a personal and strategic setback for Mamata Banerjee. For years, she was projected as one of the few opposition leaders capable of confronting Modi politically and rhetorically. Her defeat weakens not only the Trinamool Congress but also the broader imagination of a federal anti-BJP coalition. The INDIA bloc was always dependent on strong regional satraps holding their respective fortresses. Bengal was among the most important of those fortresses. Its fall dramatically changes opposition morale.

In Assam, the BJP's third consecutive victory under Himanta Biswa Sarma demonstrates the consolidation of saffron politics in the Northeast.

4 May, New Delhi: PM Narendra Modi at the BJP headquarters after the poll results

PM Modi's declaration that the BJP now stretches "from Gomukh to Gangasagar" was not merely rhetorical triumphalism. It reflected the party's belief that it is steadily becoming the default national political force in India

Assam once witnessed fragmented mandates, unstable coalitions and identity-driven politics centred around ethnicity and migration. The BJP has managed to convert these anxieties into a durable political constituency.

More importantly, Assam confirms that the BJP's political dominance is no longer solely dependent on Narendra Modi's charisma. Regional leaders within the party are now capable of independently delivering victories. Sarma has emerged as perhaps the BJP's most effective regional strategist outside the Hindi belt. That matters enormously for the party's future because it indicates organisational depth beyond a single leader.

The Assam result also exposes one of the opposition's greatest vulnerabilities: fragmentation. Muslim votes, anti-incumbency sentiments and local dissatisfaction were insufficient to defeat the BJP because the opposition failed to remain united. This pattern is increasingly becoming a national phenomenon. The BJP benefits not merely from its own strength but from the inability of its rivals to create coherent political coalitions.

Yet the most politically intriguing result may have come from Tamil Nadu. Unlike Bengal and Assam, Tamil Nadu did not produce a BJP victory. But it still transformed the national political conversation. The rise of actor-turned-politician "Thalapathy Vijay" and his party TVK (Tamilaga Vetri Kazhagam) has destabilised the Dravidian political order that dominated the state for nearly six decades.

The weakening of both the DMK and AIADMK reveals a deeper churn within regional politics. Voters increasingly appear willing to abandon traditional loyalties in favour of personality-driven alternatives. Tamil Nadu's verdict suggests that even the most entrenched regional systems are no longer immune to political disruption.

For the INDIA bloc, this development creates another complication. The opposition alliance depends heavily on powerful regional parties such as the DMK, TMC and others to compensate for Congress's organisational decline. But if these regional parties themselves begin losing authority within their states, the anti-BJP national coalition becomes structurally weaker.

At the same time, Tamil Nadu also shows the limits of BJP expansion. Despite the party's national dominance, it still struggles to emerge as a principal force in parts of southern India where strong linguistic and regional identities continue to shape political behaviour. The BJP's challenge now is not merely electoral entry but emotional integration into southern political consciousness.

In Kerala, the Congress revival carries immense symbolic significance, yet it simultaneously exposes the deeper contradictions within the opposition camp. Congress's victory revives the party in one state even as the broader opposition ecosystem weakens nationally. Kerala's verdict was less a pro-Congress wave and more a verdict against Left fatigue, corruption allegations and anti-incumbency.

Still, the defeat of the Left Front has national implications. For the first time in decades, the organised Left has effectively disappeared from state power in India. This marks the end of an important ideological chapter in Indian politics. The decline of the Left has also created a vacuum in opposition discourse. Economic inequality, labour politics and class-centred mobilisation have steadily lost electoral centrality to identity politics, nationalism and welfare populism.

Collectively, these four elections reveal three major trends shaping India's political future.

First, the BJP has successfully transformed itself from a northern ideological party into a genuinely pan-Indian political machine. Even where it does not win, it increasingly shapes the narrative, polarisation and campaign agenda. The party's organisational discipline, welfare messaging, leadership projection and ability to merge nationalism with local politics continue to give it a decisive advantage.

Second, the opposition still lacks coherence. The INDIA alliance remains more a collection of anti-BJP sentiments than a unified political project. Its constituent parties often compete against one another regionally while attempting national cooperation simultaneously. That contradiction remains unresolved.

Third, regional politics itself is entering a period of instability. Leaders once considered electorally invincible now appear vulnerable. New personalities, new caste combinations, welfare promises and digital-era campaigning are rapidly reshaping state politics. The era of permanent regional bastions may be ending.

The broader national consequence of these elections is therefore unmistakable. Narendra Modi enters the next political phase not merely as the head of a ruling party but as the central axis around which Indian politics continues to rotate. The opposition's problem is no longer simply defeating the BJP electorally. Its larger challenge is intellectual and emotional: creating a national narrative powerful enough to compete with Modi and the BJP's idea of political inevitability. ■

The opposition still lacks coherence. The INDIA alliance remains more a collection of anti-BJP sentiments than a unified political project. Its constituent parties often compete against one another regionally while attempting national cooperation simultaneously. That contradiction remains unresolved

K. Ashish

MAMATA: Behind the Curtain

Recorded Testimonies Unmask Bengal's Chief Patron

For years, West Bengal's former Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee represented one of the most extraordinary political transformations in modern India. She emerged from the streets of Kolkata as a relentless anti-establishment agitator, challenged the seemingly immovable 34-year Left Front regime and ultimately dismantled one of the longest-serving Communist governments in democratic history. To millions across Bengal, she became far more than a chief minister. "Didi" was not merely a political identity. It was a moral construction. That moral authority became the foundation upon which her party, All India Trinamool Congress, built its political empire.

But over the years, as scandals multiplied, arrests intensified, corruption allegations widened, and financial investigations burrowed deeper into Bengal's power structure, another narrative slowly began to emerge - one shaped not merely by opposition attacks, but by voices from within the very system that had once fuelled her rise. Former police

officers, bureaucrats, journalists, ministers, political insiders and former associates--one after another, they began describing what they allege was not isolated corruption but a deeply embedded ecosystem of patronage and protection operating beneath Bengal's political machinery, much of it allegedly under the nose of the all-powerful leader, Mamata Banerjee.

A *New Delhi Post* investigation, based on recorded testimonies, paints a politically devastating portrait. A portrait of a government, critics allege gradually transformed corruption from episodic misconduct into an administrative culture.

1 FORTRESS AROUND POWER

Perhaps the most damaging testimony before *New Delhi Post* comes from Dr Upendra Nath Biswas, former additional director of the CBI and later minister under the Trinamool dispensation. Biswas was not an outsider peering into the administration from the opposition benches. He was part of the ecosystem itself. Mamata Banerjee personally brought him into the government after coming to power. That proximity, hence, gives his allegations unusual political weight.

According to Biswas, what he encountered inside the administration was not scattered corruption but an entrenched structure where wrongdoing allegedly survived because decisive intervention never came from the top. "She closed her eyes," he alleges while speaking about Mamata's response to corruption inside the government.

That allegation lies at the heart of the wider political narrative now surrounding the Trinamool Congress. Not merely that corruption existed. But it allegedly flourished because political protection enabled it.

When asked by *New Delhi Post* why he had not stopped the corruption despite being an insider, Biswas further claims that ministers could not interfere in departments controlled by others and that meaningful intervention could come only from the chief minister herself.

The implication is profound. If corruption spread across recruitment systems, financial networks, contracts and administrative structures, critics argue that such expansion could not continue without political shelter at the highest level.

The testimony also revisits the school recruitment scandal, one of the most explosive controversies to hit Bengal in recent memory. The SSC recruitment scandal did not merely expose allegations of bribery. It shattered faith. Thousands of educated young Bengalis who believed government jobs would reward merit suddenly found themselves confronting allegations that jobs themselves had become commodities. Raids, luxury apartments, mountains of seized cash and arrests transformed the scandal into a political nightmare for the Trinamool Congress.

But critics insist the scandal was never about one minister alone. They argue it reflected a deeper collapse in institutional accountability. A political culture where corruption allegedly evolved into a functioning ecosystem.

Biswas attempts to connect those dots. He also makes one especially controversial claim: that a high court judge privately told him Mamata Banerjee herself had allegedly accepted money in certain matters.

No documentary evidence supporting the claim has been publicly presented. Yet the allegation illustrates how deeply suspicion had allegedly travelled even within sections of the administrative establishment.

2 CORRUPTION BEFORE BECOMING CM

Former IPS officer Dr Nazrul Islam pushes the allegations further back to Mamata's tenure as Union railways minister. Islam alleges that while examining railways ministry files, he encountered a corruption-linked matter allegedly connected directly to Mamata.

More dramatically, he claims attempts were made to involve him in questionable financial dealings. Islam further alleges that he possesses recorded material linked to the episode. "I can release the video," he says.

The available material, however, does not establish whether such recordings were ever placed before any court or investigative agency. Yet politically, the testimony performs a critical function. It attempts to dismantle the long-standing defence that corruption allegations emerged only after Mamata consolidated power in Bengal. Instead, critics use such accounts to suggest that the roots of the alleged ecosystem predated her chief ministership itself.

3 PARALLEL STATE MACHINERY

No scandal scarred Bengal's political consciousness more deeply than the Saradha chit fund scandal collapse. For thousands of ordinary Bengalis, Saradha was not an abstract financial crime. Small investors lost life savings. Families collapsed under debt. Retired workers saw decades of earnings disappear overnight.

But as investigators began probing the financial empire behind the network, the scandal rapidly evolved into something larger. And this is where noted journalist Suman Chattopadhyay delivers some of the most explosive allegations in the testimonies. Once regarded as close to Mamata, Chattopadhyay directly alleges that the former CM and the Trinamool Congress benefited from the Saradha network. "Everybody knows that she is personally a beneficiary of Saradha. Her party is a beneficiary of Saradha," he claims.

Among the most controversial allegations repeatedly revisited over the years is the claim that a painting by Mamata was allegedly purchased for more than ₹1 crore by entities linked to the chit fund network. Critics argue that the transaction became symbolic of the alleged nexus between political authority and financial operators. Chattopadhyay

UPENDRA BISWAS

Former minister and former additional director, CBI

'Mamata Knew Everything'

- I personally advised Mamata Banerjee to act against corruption
- I also spoke to several leaders whose names were surfacing in multiple corruption cases. "One or two fellows" listened to me, but most continued operating in the same manner
- Mamata knew everything that was happening, but chose to "close her eyes" to corruption
- In several cases, individuals accused of corruption were allegedly shielded from legal action
- A high court judge once told me that Mamata Banerjee had "even taken money"
- Although I was a minister in her cabinet, my hands were institutionally tied. One minister cannot directly interfere in another minister's department; only the chief minister can intervene decisively. Despite being aware of wrongdoing, I felt constrained by the system

NAZRUL ISLAM

Former IPS officer who worked closely with Mamata

‘She Wanted Me to Collect Money’

- When Mamata Banerjee was Union railways minister, she sent several corruption-related files to me for examination. During the process, I found numerous loopholes and irregularities
- When I raised those concerns, I realised that the objective was not to expose corruption, but to secure something favourable
- “She tried to use me to collect more money. I can release the video.” The video remains in my possession as evidence
- I warned Mamata Banerjee that if the footage were released, she would have to answer publicly
- I possess concrete evidence and eyewitness testimony, which. according to me, establish her links to criminal conduct

HUMAYUN KABIR

Former minister in Mamata govt

‘Ticket for money common in Trinamool’

- There have long been serious allegations surrounding the distribution of party tickets within the Trinamool Congress. Money, clearly, played a major role in the process
- I possess documentary material relating to corruption allegations which, if made public, could “send shock waves through West Bengal politics”

further alleges that Mamata held secret meetings with Saradha and Rose Valley figures in the Darjeeling Hills. Still, politically, the allegations remain explosive because they attempt to establish not merely an indirect association, but personal proximity.

The testimony also revisits statements made by Trinamool Congress leader Kunal Ghosh during the Saradha investigation. Ghosh repeatedly alleged in court that Mamata was the “biggest beneficiary” of the scam. “Let CBI have a sitting organised between Mamata Banerjee and me,” Chattopadhyay recalls Ghosh as saying.

No court has convicted Mamata in connection with the Saradha case. That distinction remains legally important. But politically, Saradha fundamentally altered public perception. Because the scandal fused financial fraud with allegations of political patronage.

If Saradha symbolised the alleged overlap between political power and financial networks, the allegations surrounding political consultancy firm Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC) raised another disturbing question: Who was really running Bengal’s governance structure after 2021? According to Chattopadhyay, Bengal allegedly began functioning under what he describes as a “parallel state”. “Every inch of Bengal is under I-PAC their control,” he claims.

The allegation is extraordinary. Not because political consultants are unusual in modern elections. But because the testimonies suggest something far beyond campaign management. According to the allegations, government contracts above ₹3 crore allegedly required vetting through political strategists. Files from government departments

allegedly travelled to the offices or residences of consultants.

Bureaucrats who resisted allegedly found themselves sidelined. "What sports and youth welfare files of a government are doing in a political strategist's office or house?" Chattopadhyay asks.

Across India, political consultancy firms have become increasingly influential in electoral strategy. But the testimonies here allege something far more serious, that governance itself became intertwined with electoral management and political control. The allegations also intersect with broader concerns inside the Trinamool Congress over the concentration of influence around a shrinking inner circle and the growing prominence of Abhishek Banerjee, her nephew and an MP.

A political structure allegedly controlled not merely through party organisation, but through bureaucracy, contracts, strategy networks and administrative influence.

4 THE INSIDER REVOLT

Former minister and current MLA Humayun Kabir makes another deeply damaging allegation. According to the testimonies, Kabir claims that money allegedly influenced the distribution of election tickets within the Trinamool Congress.

The testimonies collectively seek to construct precisely that argument: that corruption under the Trinamool regime allegedly evolved beyond isolated scandals and became woven into the functioning of political power.

Among all the testimonies, few carry the symbolic significance of Jawhar Sircar. A retired IAS officer, former CEO of Prasar Bharati and former Rajya Sabha MP nominated by the Trinamool Congress, Sircar was once considered part of Mamata's intellectual and administrative inner circle. His allegations are sharp enough: Mamata was aware of many crimes and instances of corruption. She protected her party leaders despite huge public resentment.

What gives these allegations unusual political force is the profile of those making them: former insiders, bureaucrats and associates who once operated close to the centre of power. Their testimonies seek to challenge Mamata's carefully cultivated image as a leader untouched by corruption, portraying instead an allegedly centralised system where corruption was not incidental but protected and institutionalised.

None of the allegations establishes legal guilt, and many remain without a judicial conclusion. Yet in politics, perception often shapes reality as powerfully as court verdicts. The allegations seek to portray Mamata not as a distant leader allegedly surrounded by corrupt subordinates, but as the central authority presiding over an intensely centralised political system.

To supporters, the claims may appear politically motivated or unproven. To critics, they reinforce a deeper suspicion: that under the Trinamool Congress, corruption allegedly evolved from isolated scandal into a governance culture. At the core of the allegations lies one recurring charge that corruption survived because political authority allowed it to survive. And that accusation strikes directly at the moral foundation upon which Mamata built her political rise.■

SUMAN CHATTOPADHYAY

Veteran journalist and author

'Mamata was biggest beneficiary'

- Mamata Banerjee was, according to me, among the biggest political beneficiaries of the chit fund scandal. Her party, too, benefited enormously
- Mamata allegedly held secret meetings with the promoters of tainted chit fund companies such as Rose Valley Group and Saradha Group
- Key evidence had allegedly already been "hushed up" before the CBI formally took over the probe
- In West Bengal, I-PAC operated like a "parallel state", exercising extraordinary influence over governance after 2021
- Government contracts worth more than ₹3 crore allegedly required I-PAC's approval
- Bureaucrats who resisted this parallel structure were sidelined or removed
- Sensitive government files were allegedly routed to a private political consultancy office
- Mamata's relationship with Abhishek has, in my view, remained unstable and transactional — a continuing "roller-coaster ride"

K. Ashish *is an investigative journalist. He is editor-in-chief of New Delhi Post*

Bikash C Paul
The author is a Delhi-based journalist. He is executive editor, New Delhi Post

FALL OF 'BHADRALOK SECULARISM'

BENGAL'S JOURNEY FROM 'JAI MAA KALI' TO 'JAI SHRI RAM'

Bengal's religious imagination carries a distinctly feminine force. The Bengali Hindu psyche has been shaped not by the warrior prince of Ayodhya, Ram, but by the fierce mother goddess. Bengal bows before Kali, weeps before Durga, sings to Shyama, and surrenders itself to the maternal divine. Religion here is emotional, poetic and intimate. The cry of "Jai Maa Kali" or "Bolo Durga Mai Ki Jai" emerges not as slogans of conquest, but as invocations of protection, suffering and spiritual belonging.

That Bengal now increasingly echoes with "Jai Shri Ram" is not merely a political shift. It is a civilisational and sociological transformation. It marks a profound reconfiguration of Bengali Hindu identity, one that is inseparable from anxiety, nationalism, electoral politics, demographic fears, and the collapse of older cultural certainties.

For generations, Bengal's Hinduism was fundamentally different from the Hindi heartland's Hinduism. North Indian religiosity often revolved around Ram, Hanuman and martial symbolism. Bengal's spiritual universe, however, was soaked in Tantra, Shaktism and Bhakti infused with melancholy. Kali was not simply a goddess of destruction; she represented suffering, rage, maternal protection and cosmic truth. Durga was not merely a deity defeating evil; she was the daughter returning home every autumn. Bengali Hinduism was culturally softer, intellectually layered and deeply intertwined with art, literature and mysticism.

Even Bengal's nationalism drew from this feminine symbolism. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay imagined the nation as "Vande Mataram". Abanindranath Tagore painted Bharat Mata. Revolutionary nationalism in Bengal frequently invoked Kali. The goddess became both motherland and resistance. Ram, though respected, never occupied the emotional centre of Bengali Hindu consciousness in the way he did in Uttar Pradesh or Bihar.

That is why the rise of "Jai Shri Ram" in Bengal feels so culturally disruptive. It is not merely the arrival of a slogan; it is the arrival of a new political vocabulary.

This transformation did not happen overnight. It emerged from several overlapping currents. First came the long decline of Bengali exceptionalism.

For decades, Bengal viewed itself as intellectually superior to the cow-belt politics of North India. Bengali bhadralok culture prided itself on rationalism, literature, secularism and political sophistication. Religion existed, but often privately. Public religiosity was treated with suspicion by the Left-liberal establishment that dominated Bengal for nearly half a century.

Hindu nationalism has penetrated the psyche of even educated Bengalis

The Left Front years institutionalised a certain cultural discomfort with overt Hindu assertion. Religious identity among Hindus was tolerated only when wrapped in cultural aesthetics. Durga Puja was acceptable because it was "culture". Kali Puja was acceptable because it was "tradition". But explicit Hindu political identity was often dismissed as communalism.

This created a peculiar imbalance. Minority identity politics continued to deepen quietly through electoral patronage, clerical influence and localised communal consolidation, while Hindu assertion remained socially delegitimised among Bengal's elite circles. Over

> The question is not whether Ram belongs to Bengal. Of course he does. Ram belongs to all of India's civilisational memory. The real question is why Bengal suddenly needs Ram politically in a way it did not earlier. The answer lies in insecurity

time, many Bengali Hindus began feeling that their religious identity was culturally tolerated but politically unrepresented.

That vacuum became fertile ground for the Bharatiya Janata Party. The BJP understood something crucial about Bengal: religion alone would not work unless tied to wounded identity. "Jai Shri Ram" entered Bengal not primarily as theology, but as political resistance. The slogan became a declaration against the perceived Muslim appeasement politics of the ruling establishment. It evolved into a protest cry against the Trinamool Congress as much as an invocation of Ram.

This is why the slogan acquired such explosive power in recent times in Bengal. When groups of young Bengali men began shouting "Jai Shri Ram" during political rallies or even at the sight of the outgoing Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, they were not suddenly transformed into devotees shaped by the Ramcharitmanas tradition. Most had never belonged to the North Indian Ram bhakti culture. The slogan instead became shorthand for anger, assertion and political rebellion.

Ironically, the resistance of the Trinamool Congress amplified the slogan further. Every visible irritation against it made it more attractive to BJP supporters. The slogan became rebellious. Provocative. Defiant. A cultural weapon. The more it was condemned, the more it spread. But beneath electoral politics lies a deeper sociological shift: Bengal's Hindu identity is becoming more homogenised with pan-Indian Hindu nationalism.

The resistance of TMC amplified the slogan further. Every visible irritation against it made it more attractive to BJP supporters. The slogan became rebellious. But beneath electoral politics lies a deeper sociological shift: Bengal's Hindu identity is becoming more homogenised with pan-Indian Hindu nationalism

Historically, Bengali Hindu identity was region-first and religion-second. A Bengali Hindu often saw himself first as Bengali. Today, for many sections, especially younger urban and semi-urban Hindus, religious identity is increasingly overtaking linguistic-cultural identity. The rise of social media, Hindi television, nationalistic political messaging and digital homogenisation has eroded Bengal's old cultural insulation.

A generation raised on WhatsApp forwards, YouTube political content and national television consumes religion differently from their grandparents. Their Hinduism is less literary and more slogan-driven. Less philosophical and more political. Less Tagore and more televised nationalism.

The Ram Mandir movement played a psychological role here as well. The consecration of the Ram Mandir transformed Ram from a regional deity into the central symbol of triumphant Hindu nationalism across India. Bengal could not remain untouched by that emotional wave.

At the same time, demographic anxieties have also influenced this shift. Border districts in Bengal have experienced intense debates around illegal immigration, identity insecurity and communal polarisation. For many Bengali Hindus, especially in regions with sharp demographic changes, "Jai Shri Ram" functions not merely as faith but as civilisational reassurance. Whether these fears are exaggerated or grounded is secondary. Politically, perceptions matter more than statistics.

Another crucial factor is the collapse of ideological alternatives. The Left once gave Bengal a class-based vocabulary. That framework has largely disintegrated. Economic frustration, unemployment and political violence created a vacuum that identity politics naturally filled. When class politics weakens, societies often return to civilisational identities. Bengal is no exception. aYet this transformation carries profound contradictions. Bengal's embrace of "Jai Shri Ram" also reflects a subtle surrender of cultural distinctiveness. The Bengal that once exported intellectual currents to the rest of India is now increasingly absorbing political idioms from elsewhere. The fear among many cultural observers is not about Ram himself, but about homogenisation. They fear that Bengal's uniquely layered Hindu civilisation, shaped by Shaktism, mysticism and cultural nuance, may slowly be subsumed by a homogenised, North Indian majoritarian model of Hindu politics.

The question, therefore, is not whether Ram belongs to Bengal. Of course he does. Ram belongs to all of India's civilisational memory. The real question is why Bengal suddenly needs Ram politically in a way it did not earlier. The answer lies in insecurity.

Societies turn towards muscular slogans when they feel culturally cornered, politically unheard or psychologically uncertain. "Jai Shri Ram" in Bengal is less a rejection of Kali and Durga than a symptom of deeper anxieties about identity, power and belonging in a rapidly changing political landscape.

And yet, something remarkable is happening simultaneously. Durga Puja pandals still dominate Bengal's emotional life. Kali remains spiritually central to millions. The old Bengal has not disappeared. Rather, two identities are now coexisting uneasily: the original cultural Bengali Hindu and the newer politically assertive Hindu nationalist.

The tension between them will shape Bengal's future. Will Bengal retain its syncretic and culturally nuanced Hinduism while participating in broader Hindu nationalism? Or will it gradually dissolve into a more uniform national political culture? That remains uncertain.

But one thing is undeniable: the rise of "Jai Shri Ram" in Bengal is not just about religion. It is about a civilisation renegotiating itself under the pressures of modern politics, demographic anxieties, national integration, wounded pride and ideological exhaustion. In many ways, the slogan is not merely changing Bengal's politics. It is changing Bengal's idea of itself. ■

EXCLUSIVE

Unkept, incomplete and poor-quality work has become the hallmark of MPLADS projects

MPLADS REFORM FREEZE

HOW MODI GOVERNMENT RESISTED REPEATED ATTEMPTS TO FIX FLAWS IN THE SCHEME OVER THE PAST DECADE

Akshay Deshmane

Despite frequent news reports of several loopholes in the Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS), a *New Delhi Post* investigation, based on previously undisclosed official documents, reveals how the Union government repeatedly resisted, diluted or legally challenged multiple attempts to reform the scheme over the past decade, even as parliamentarians across party lines continued to complain about poor implementation, lack of transparency and inadequate funding. Three reform bids in five years, by a deputy chairman of the Rajya Sabha, a constitutional oversight body and sitting MPs, were each blocked, challenged or quietly buried.

Over the past eight months alone, nearly a dozen MPs from different political parties have raised a similar alarm in Parliament: the annual

allocation of ₹5 crore under MPLADS is no longer sufficient to meet developmental needs in their constituencies. Among the latest to flag the issue were BJP MPs Vijay Baghel from Chhattisgarh and Sumitra Balmik from Madhya Pradesh. Baghel questioned whether the present allocation had become insufficient, particularly for large, predominantly rural constituencies spanning multiple Assembly segments, and whether the funding shortfall was depriving people of essential development works.

A review of parliamentary records shows that at least 11 MPs have asked similar questions since July 2025, all seeking to know whether the Union government plans to revise MPLADS allocations. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), which administers the scheme, has consistently maintained that MPLADS is designed only to supplement local infrastructure and must not substitute existing government programmes.

But official documents accessed by *New Delhi Post* show that this resistance to change goes far beyond recent demands for increased allocations. Over the past decade, at least three concerted efforts to make MPLADS more transparent, accountable and effective ran into the same wall: a government unwilling to act.

First ATTEMPT, 2018

The first major reform attempt originated not in Parliament but in a citizen's RTI application. Ram Gopal Dixit had filed requests seeking details of MPLADS works recommended by Hathras MP Rajesh Diwakar in areas under the North Eastern Railway, specifically the list of projects, their implementation status and the agencies responsible for executing them. The railways ministry could not provide the information. Neither could MoSPI. Most of the relevant data was held at the district level and had never been centralised.

The government's inability to furnish basic project details drew sharp criticism from then Central Information Commissioner M Sridhar Acharyulu. In two separate orders issued in September and October 2018, Acharyulu proposed sweeping reforms to bring MPLADS under genuine public accountability.

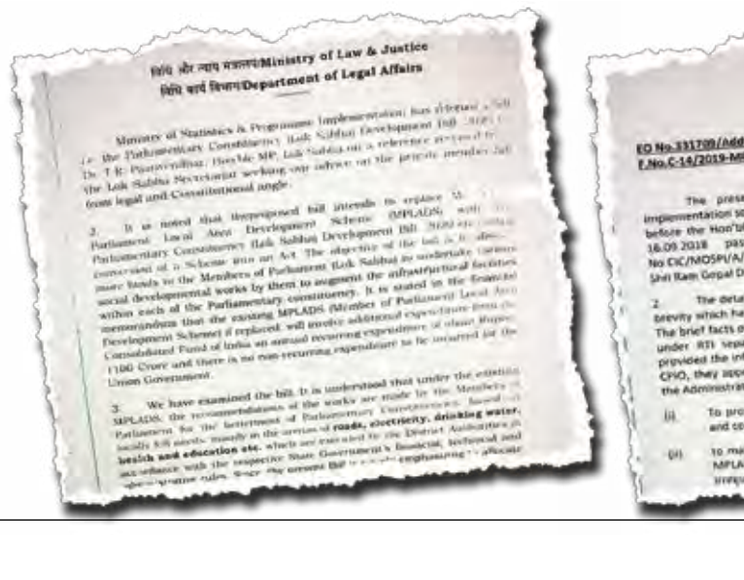
M Sridhar Acharyulu

He recommended the creation of a formal legal framework governing the scheme. He argued that MPs and all agencies implementing MPLADS works should be brought under the RTI Act as public authorities, enabling citizens to seek information directly from them. The CIC further directed that comprehensive project-level data, including beneficiary details, implementation status and reasons for any delays, should be published online and accessible to the public.

Acharyulu's observations went further still. He accused some MPs of "abusing" the scheme by recommending expenditures close to elections for political gain, a charge that created significant alarm within the government.

Documents accessed by *New Delhi Post* show that MoSPI immediately sought legal opinions from the Law Ministry and the Department of Personnel and Training, which oversees RTI implementation. The Law Ministry advised that the CIC directions were legally problematic and potentially violated the constitutional division of powers between the Centre and states, since many MPLADS-related subjects fall under the State List of the Constitution.

Armed with this opinion, the government challenged the CIC orders before the Delhi High Court. The litigation



विधि और न्याय मंत्रालय/Ministry of Law & Justice
विधि कार्य विभाग/Department of Legal Affairs

Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation has requested vide ... the Parliamentary Constituency Link Sabha Development Bill, 2020 ... Dr. T.R. Paarivendhar, Hon'ble MP, Link Sabha on a reference received ... the Lok Sabha Secretariat seeking our advice on the ... from legal and Constitutional angle.

2. It is noted that the proposed bill intends to replace ... Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS), with ... Parliamentary Constituency Link Sabha Development Bill, 2020 ... conversion of a Scheme into an Act. The objective of the bill is to allo... more funds to the Members of Parliament Link Sabha to undertake various social developmental works by them to augment the infrastructural facilities within each of the Parliamentary constituency. It is stated in the Statement memorandum that the existing MPLADS (Member of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme) if replaced, will involve additional expenditure from the Consolidated Fund of India an annual recurring expenditure to be incurred for the 1100 Crore and there is no non-recurring expenditure to be incurred for the Union Government.

3. We have examined the bill. It is understood that under the existing MPLADS, the recommendations of the works are made by the Members of Parliament for the betterment of Parliamentary Constituencies, based on locally felt needs mainly in the sectors of **roads, electricity, drinking water, health and education etc.** which are executed by the District Authorities in accordance with the respective State Government's financial, technical and ... guidelines. Since the present Bill ... engineering ... allocate ...

EO No. 331709/Add
F.No.C-14/2019-M
The ... implementation ... before the Hon'ble ... 16.09.2018 ... No CIC/MOSPI/A/ ... Shri Ram Gopal D ...
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(i) To pro ... and co ...
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dragged on for years. In 2024, the high court ordered that the CIC's harsh remarks accusing MPs of abusing MPLADS be expunged from the record. However, it retained one key direction: the government must publish MP-wise, constituency-wise and work-wise details of MPLADS funds.

The government had launched a revamped MPLADS dashboard in March 2023, even before the court's ruling. But as of April 2026, much of what the CIC originally sought, including comprehensive implementation details and reasons for project delays, remains unavailable in the public domain.

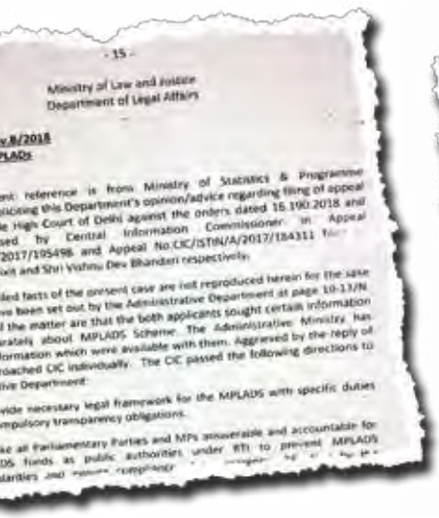
Second ATTEMPT, 2019

The second significant push for reform came from within Parliament's own leadership. In late 2018, Harivansh Narayan Singh, then deputy chairman of the Rajya Sabha and chairman of the parliamentary committee on MPLADS, visited northeastern states and West Bengal with the committee to assess how the scheme was functioning on the ground. What he found was troubling enough to warrant a formal intervention.

Harivansh Narayan Singh

On January 7, 2019, Harivansh wrote a detailed letter to then Statistics Minister D V Sadanand Gowda, cataloguing serious failures in the scheme's implementation: persistent delays in sanctioning and executing projects, poor coordination between state and district authorities, and large sums of public money lying unspent. He argued that MPs were routinely blamed for poor fund utilisation, even though their role under MPLADS was limited solely to recommending projects; the execution lay entirely with district and state machinery.

Harivansh also cited findings from Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) audits, third-party evaluations, and directions previously issued by both the Supreme Court



- 15 -

Ministry of Law and Justice
Department of Legal Affairs

v.8/2018
PLADs

ent reference is from Ministry of Statistics & Programme
soliciting this Department's opinion/advice regarding filing of appeal
e High Court of Delhi against the orders dated 16.10.2018 and
sed by Central Information Commissioner in Appeal
2017/195498 and Appeal No.CIC/ISTIN/A/2017/184311 fi
vat and Shri Vishnu Dev Bhandari respectively.

ded facts of the present case are not reproduced herein for the sake
ve been set out by the Administrative Department at page 10-13/N
f the matter are that the both applicants sought certain information
erately about MPLADS Scheme. The Administrative Ministry has
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roached CIC individually. The CIC passed the following directions to
tive Department:

vide necessary legal framework for the MPLADS with specific duties
mpulsory transparency obligations.

ke all Parliamentary Parties and MPs answerable and accountable for
DS funds as public authorities under RTI to prevent MPLADS
ularities and misuse, compliance

भारत शासन

सांख्यिकी एवं कार्यक्रम कार्यान्वयन मंत्रालय और रसायन एवं उर्वरक मंत्रालय भारत सरकार, नई दिल्ली

Minister
Statistics & Programme Implementation and Chemicals & Fertilizers
Government of India, New Delhi

D.O. No. C-48/2015-MPLADS

Honourable Shri Harivansh ji,

Kindly refer to your D.O. letter no. RS 87/2018-MPLADS dated 07th Jan, 2019 regarding various issues and concerns on implementation of the MPLAD Scheme. These have been examined as follows:

(a) CAG/ PEO report and Third Party Monitoring

On the shortcomings pointed out by CAG and Programme Evaluation Organization of the erstwhile Planning Commission, this Ministry has already initiated the process of undertaking Third Party Physical Monitoring of MPLADS works for thirty districts in FY 2018-19 and it is proposed to replicate the process on a wider scale in next financial year i.e. FY 2019-20.

(b) Observation of CIC

The orders of CIC dated 16.09.2018 and 16.10.2018 has called on the Ministry to establish a legal framework for regulating MPLAD Scheme, procure information from State Government authorities and treat Hon'ble Members of Parliament as "Public Authority" under the RTI Act, 2005. As such, MPLAD Scheme is implemented as per the Guidelines on MPLADS and in accordance with the administrative, financial and technical rules of the State Government which obviates the need for establishment of legal framework. Further, the direction to procure information from State Government

32, संसद भवन, नई दिल्ली
32, Parliament House, New Delhi
दूरभाष/Tel : 23017371, 23034
फैक्स/Fax : 23012559

उप सभापति, राज्य सभा
Deputy Chairman, Rajya Sabha

D.O. No. RS. 87/2018-MPLADS

Dated the 7th January, 2019

Hon'ble D.V. Sadanandaji Gowda ji,

You may appreciate that the MPLAD Scheme is the only scheme at all India level with the involvement of the local communities, groups and sections of the people for the identification of works and facilities required as per the "felt needs and wish list" of the local people. It, however, remains today one of the most criticized scheme for various reasons.

After I assumed the charge of the Chairman of the Committee on MPLADS, Rajya Sabha, I have noticed many problems plaguing such a useful Scheme at every level. During the Committee's visit to North Eastern States and West Bengal in November, 2018, several issues such as lack of communication and coordination between the State and District authorities, delay in sanction and execution of MPLADS works, etc. were brought to the notice of the Committee. You will appreciate that most of the time the MPs are singularly blamed for poor utilization of their MPLADS funds, although their role under the Scheme is limited to merely recommending the works.

In this backdrop I feel that we need to reflect upon the huge amount of public money being held up without being spent properly on the works under this Scheme, which otherwise could have been put to public use.

To substantiate my concern on the issues hampering the MPLAD Scheme and

and the Central Information Commission (CIC). He urged the government to undertake substantive reforms to improve the scheme's functioning. *The Indian Express* wrote an article about this letter in 2019.

Previously unreported correspondence accessed by *New Delhi Post* shows how the government responded internally. In a reply dated February 12, 2019, Gowda acknowledged many of the concerns and claimed that the ministry had already directed state governments and nodal departments to address delays and improve fund utilisation. He also referred to third-party physical audits being conducted in select districts, with plans to expand the process.

When it came to structural reform, however, the government drew a hard line. Harivansh had specifically referenced CIC recommendations calling for a legal framework to govern MPLADS and for stronger transparency obligations under the RTI Act. Gowda rejected both. He argued that since the scheme already operated through administrative guidelines and state-level financial and technical rules, a separate legal framework was unnecessary. He also dismissed the proposal to treat MPs as "public authorities" under the RTI Act, arguing it would not align with the law's provisions. Seven years on, many of the concerns Harivansh raised in 2019 remain unresolved. The same complaints echo through Parliament: delayed projects, funds lying unspent, and no way for the public to track where the money has gone.

> Despite the growing footprint, India still lacks a transparent national database documenting the exact number of operational kiosks across states. Estimates remain fragmented because deployments are spread across government schemes, district administrations, CSR-funded projects and private initiatives

Third ATTEMPT, 2020

The third effort to reform MPLADS took the most direct route: converting the scheme itself into a law. In 2020, Lok Sabha MP **T R Paarivendhar**, then affiliated with the DMK, though he later contested the 2024 general elections on a BJP ticket, introduced a private member's bill called The Parliamentary Constituency (Lok Sabha) Development Bill, 2020.

The proposal had two core objectives. First, it sought to give MPLADS a statutory legal foundation, the same reform that the CIC had recommended and the government had spent years resisting in court. Second, it proposed increasing the annual allocation available to MPs from ₹5 crore to ₹7 crore, a change that dozens of MPs across parties had been seeking.

T R Paarivendhar

Both the law ministry and MoSPI moved to block it. An internal legal note from the Department of Legal Affairs argued that Parliament may lack the constitutional competence to legislate on many MPLADS-related subjects because they fall under the State List, the same argument the government had used against the CIC two years earlier.

MoSPI added a financial objection. An internal ministry brief contended that revisiting MPLADS allocations was not feasible given the economic and fiscal pressures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The ministry also pointed out that MPLADS had itself been suspended for two full financial years during the pandemic, further complicating any argument for enhanced funding. The bill never progressed.

A DECADE OF RESISTANCE

Taken together, the three episodes reveal a consistent and deliberate pattern in the Union government's handling of reform proposals for MPLADS. Parliamentarians across party lines repeatedly demanded greater funding, improved implementation and enhanced transparency. Constitutional oversight bodies pushed for stronger accountability mechanisms and statutory backing. Yet each time, the government either rejected the proposals outright, challenged them before the courts, or absorbed them only partially through cosmetic administrative adjustments.

The outcome is a scheme that commands substantial political attention and public resources, but remains burdened by the same structural problems flagged years ago: delays in project execution, opaque implementation, inadequate monitoring and insufficient transparency.

There is a particular irony in the story. Even MPs from the ruling BJP now openly question in Parliament whether the existing ₹5 crore annual allocation is adequate for meaningful constituency development. The demands being raised today are, in substance, the same demands that were raised in 2018, 2019 and 2020, and turned away each time.

Official records suggest that while the calls for reform have grown steadily louder across a decade and across party lines, the government has remained firmly reluctant to fundamentally restructure a scheme that has operated largely unchanged since its launch in 1993.■

Akshay Deshmane *is an environmental journalist*

THE FIRST DOCTOR

HEALTH ATMs ARE RESHAPING RURAL MEDICAL ACCESS ACROSS INDIA

Anish Desai

In a remote village in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district, an elderly diabetic farmer once spent nearly an entire day travelling 18 kilometres for a routine medical consultation, only to discover that the doctor at the government facility was unavailable. Today, he walks to a small digital kiosk installed near the village centre, where a health worker checks his blood sugar, blood pressure and ECG before connecting him to a doctor through video consultation. Within minutes, he leaves with a prescription and follow-up advice.

Scenes like this are beginning to redefine healthcare access across rural India.

From Uttar Pradesh to Karnataka, from Telangana to Mizoram, Health ATMs or digital health kiosks are rapidly emerging as one of the most visible attempts to repair India's deeply unequal healthcare system. Installed inside primary health centres, gram panchayat offices, railway stations and village clinics, these machines are being projected as the bridge between India's crumbling rural health infrastructure and its ambitious digital-health future.

The speed of expansion reflects the scale of the crisis they are attempting to solve.

India's healthcare problem is no longer merely about the number of doctors the country possesses. It is increasingly about where those doctors are located. Officially, India's doctor-population ratio stands at roughly 1:811, close to the World Health Organization benchmark. But the national average conceals a massive rural-urban imbalance. In many parts of rural India, there is barely one doctor for 20,000 to 30,000 people. Around 70 per cent of specialist posts at Community Health Centres remain vacant.

For millions of villagers, the nearest functional doctor, pathology laboratory or ECG machine often lies several hours away. Basic illnesses become medical emergencies simply because the diagnosis comes too late. A diabetic patient may ignore symptoms for months because routine tests require expensive travel. Pregnant women often depend on overstretched primary health centres lacking specialists. Elderly patients with hypertension or heart disease frequently abandon treatment altogether because follow-up visits consume an entire day's wages. It is within this healthcare vacuum that Health ATMs are flourishing.

These kiosks are essentially compact digital diagnostic centres equipped with touchscreen systems, telemedicine connectivity and medical devices capable of conducting multiple health tests. Depending on the model, they can measure blood sugar, blood pressure, oxygen saturation, BMI, haemoglobin and ECG readings, while some advanced systems claim the capacity to conduct over 100 diagnostic assessments. The patient's data is digitally recorded and, when required, linked to remote consultations with doctors through telemedicine platforms integrated with the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission and eSanjeevani services.

> Rise of Health ATMs also reflects an uncomfortable reality: India is turning to technology partly because its traditional rural healthcare model is struggling to survive. Primary health centres continue to suffer from doctor absenteeism, specialist shortages and weak diagnostics

The appeal of the model lies in its simplicity. Instead of building a full hospital network in every remote district, an enormously expensive and slow process, governments can establish decentralised diagnostic access points at a fraction of the cost. That logic is now driving rapid state-backed expansion.

Uttar Pradesh has emerged as one of the largest adopters, with more than 1,000 Health ATMs reportedly installed across Primary Health Centres and Community Health Centres. The state is also developing a central monitoring system in Lucknow to supervise kiosk operations. Karnataka's Kalaburagi district installed 25 Health ATMs to improve rural diagnostic access, and local reports noted significant public uptake, with one kiosk reportedly serving more than 200 people within a month.

Telangana has piloted advanced kiosks in government hospitals capable of conducting over 130 tests linked to telemedicine systems. Mizoram has introduced Health ATMs under its "Healthy Lunglei Initiative", while Punjab and Maharashtra are increasingly integrating kiosk-based healthcare into rural outreach programmes.

Yet despite the growing footprint, India still lacks a transparent national database documenting the exact number of operational kiosks across states. Estimates remain fragmented because deployments are spread across government schemes, district administrations, CSR-funded projects and private initiatives. What is clear, however, is that this is no longer a purely private-sector experiment.

The Health ATM boom is increasingly being fuelled through public-private partnerships. Governments typically provide space inside public-health facilities, electricity, internet connectivity and procurement funding, while private health-tech companies supply the machines, software infrastructure and maintenance services.

The arrangement has created a rapidly expanding ecosystem of digital-health companies competing for government contracts. Firms such as Clinics on Cloud, YoloHealth, HealthATM India and Onyx Health Plus are aggressively marketing kiosks as the future of affordable healthcare delivery. Clinics on Cloud claims deployment of more than 3,000 Health ATMs across India and overseas markets.

For governments, the attraction is obvious. Health kiosks provide visible, technology-driven healthcare infrastructure

without the enormous costs involved in constructing and staffing fully equipped hospitals in remote areas. They also align perfectly with the Centre's larger digital-health ambitions.

By the end of 2025, more than 1.82 lakh Ayushman Arogya Mandirs had become operational, while eSanjeevani telemedicine consultations crossed 43 crore. Government health expenditure rose to 1.84 per cent of GDP in 2021-22, and out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure fell to 39.4 per cent of total health expenditure.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has repeatedly championed digital-health expansion, saying he dreams of "a Digital India where quality healthcare percolates right up to the remotest regions powered by e-Healthcare." Union Minister Jitendra Singh has similarly described telemedicine as "the main pillar of India's future healthcare system."

But the rise of Health ATMs also reflects a more uncomfortable reality: India is turning to technology partly because its traditional rural healthcare model is struggling to survive. In many districts, primary health centres continue to suffer from doctor absenteeism, specialist shortages, weak diagnostics and poor referral systems. Health kiosks are effectively becoming substitutes for infrastructure that the state has failed to adequately build over decades.

Public-health experts say the machines are succeeding because villagers often have little alternative. For a labourer earning daily wages, losing an entire day to travel for a routine blood-pressure check can mean sacrificing household income. A village kiosk offering immediate screening and teleconsultation therefore becomes enormously attractive, even if it cannot provide comprehensive treatment.

"In rural India, access itself is healthcare," says a public-health specialist working in tribal regions of Chhattisgarh. "People are using these kiosks because they reduce delay, distance and uncertainty."

Health workers say chronic disease patients form the largest group of regular users. Diabetes, hypertension and heart disease require frequent monitoring, but rural patients often discontinue treatment because repeated travel to towns becomes financially unsustainable. Health ATMs are changing that equation by decentralising routine diagnostics.

Still, the technology is far from a perfect solution. Ground-level reports from several states reveal recurring operational problems. Internet connectivity failures frequently disrupt teleconsultations. Maintenance delays render diagnostic equipment unreliable. In some centres, ECG sensors malfunction or consumables run out within months. Elderly villagers unfamiliar with digital systems often require assistance from frontline health workers to navigate the process.

Critics warn that the enthusiasm surrounding Health ATMs should not obscure the larger structural crisis confronting India's healthcare system. "A touchscreen machine cannot replace doctors, nurses, ambulances or district hospitals," says a senior rural physician in Maharashtra. "Diagnostics alone do not constitute healthcare."

> **Despite the growing footprint, India still lacks a transparent national database documenting the exact number of operational kiosks across states. Estimates remain fragmented because deployments are spread across government schemes, district administrations, CSR-funded projects and private initiatives**

Yet even sceptics concede that Health ATMs are addressing a genuine and urgent gap in access. They are not flourishing because India's healthcare system is strong, they are flourishing because the system remains deeply unequal.

For decades, healthcare infrastructure in India has been concentrated in cities while rural populations have struggled with chronic neglect. Health kiosks are now emerging as the state's attempt to digitally compress that inequality to place at least a basic diagnostic gateway within reach of villages long excluded from dependable medical care.

Whether this experiment ultimately transforms rural healthcare or merely creates a technologically sophisticated patchwork over deeper institutional failures remains uncertain. But one reality is already clear: in large parts of India, the first doctor a villager now encounters may no longer sit inside a hospital chamber. It may stand inside a machine. The crucial question remains: Can Health Kiosks Solve India's Last-Mile Care Crisis? ■

Dr Anish Desai *is a medical practitioner. He is the founder of IntelliMed Healthcare Solutions*

DEAR MOMS...

A mother's love does not retreat before fear, chaos or even death. From a recent image of a mother in Jabalpur clutching her child until her final breath to countless untold moments across history, motherhood has remained humanity's safest refuge. In hardship and peace alike, mothers endure as protectors, healers and silent warriors. They carry pain so their children may carry hope. Their sacrifices ask for nothing in return, yet give everything. This Mother's Day, celebrated on May 10, we honour not only mothers themselves, but the extraordinary bond that outlives tragedy and remains life's purest expression of trust, warmth and unconditional love.

FINAL EMBRACE

On April 30, in the waters of Bargi Dam, Jabalpur, a cruise tragedy froze into one unbearable image: a mother holding her young son until her final breath after the accident. Even in death, her arms refused to let go. Amid chaos, fear and darkness, a mother's instinct endured longer than life itself

HIDDEN MOTHER

Behind the ghostly silhouettes of Victorian "hidden mother" portraits lay profound maternal devotion. Mothers concealed themselves beneath blankets or curtains to keep children still during long photographic exposures. Unseen yet ever-present, they surrendered their own visibility so their children alone would remain immortalised, a haunting, tender testament to motherhood itself

FLIGHT FROM WAR

A Vietnamese mother carries her wounded child while fleeing fierce fighting near Dau Tieng during the Vietnam War. Amid panic, smoke and advancing forces, millions of civilians were uprooted by violence. The photograph captures a mother's desperate attempt to shield her child from the brutal realities of war

LAST EMBRACE LOST

At the Holocaust's Auschwitz II-Birkenau in 1944, a mother wrapped her child in a thin blanket against the bitter cold while waiting in line. Moments later, they were separated during selection. The child disappeared into the crowd. She remained clutching only the empty cloth — the last trace of the son she never saw again

MOTHERHOOD UNBROKEN

Autumn, 1941. In the ruins of wartime Moscow, Tatiana Onishchenko cradles her dying daughter after a Nazi airstrike. The photograph immortalises motherhood in its rawest form: a mother's embrace becoming the final shelter her child would ever know. As war shattered cities and lives, her love endured stronger than fear, deeper than grief

CHILDHOOD AMONG RUBBLE

In the shattered landscape of Jabalia refugee camp, a displaced Palestinian mother plays with her child beside a tent pitched amid ruins left by years of conflict. Even as diplomatic efforts for postwar Gaza Strip gather pace, survival, loss and resilience continue to define daily life for countless families

Ayush Joshi Paranjoy Guha Thakurta

SIKKIM'S UNSEEN BANK FILES

THE STORY OF INDIA'S MOST UNUSUAL BANK THAT OPERATED OUTSIDE RBI REGULATION FOR OVER FIVE DECADES BEING TOLD FOR THE FIRST TIME

In India's intricate and highly-regulated financial system, virtually every bank, large or small, a scheduled commercial bank or an NBFC (non-banking financial company), has to perforce answer to a single, omnipotent referee: the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the country's central bank and apex monetary authority. Among other things, the RBI regulates banks' capital reserves and supervises how audit ledgers should be prepared, to ensure that the savings of ordinary citizens are shielded from institutional collapses. Yet, for over half a century, a glaring anomaly persisted in the country's financial system in the form of a bank tucked away in the Himalayas, an entity that appeared insulated from the RBI's rulebooks

and regulatory ambit.

This is the story of the State Bank of Sikkim (SBS) that has not been told yet.

For years, the country's financial press occasionally whispered about this "rogue" institution. More than five years ago, in early 2021, leading pink dailies published brief, almost perfunctory, reports indicating that the RBI had finally managed to wrest supervisory control over the bank. For many, the tale seemed to have ended there, a bureaucratic quirk quietly resolved.

The story, however, was not that simple. A newly surfaced trove of documents of confidential government correspondence, the draft of a piece of legislation, together with an ongoing legal battle in the Bombay High Court, has blown the lid off the official narrative. These internal documents reveal that integrating the SBS was not a simple bureaucratic handshake. Instead, it was a chaotic, decades-long struggle marked by Constitutional stalemates, desperate pleas to the prime minister of India during the November 2016 demonetisation, and the secret drafting of surgical federal laws designed to bypass a sovereign royal decree.

Here is the previously undisclosed account of how the Indian government finally plugged a leak in its financial ecosystem in the form of the SBS.

Sovereign Birth

Before Sikkim merged with the Indian Union in 1975, it was an independent kingdom ruled by the Chogyal dynasty. In 1968, the Chogyal issued a Royal Proclamation that established the State Bank of Sikkim. It was created to act as the state's treasury and manage its public debt.

When Sikkim became India's 22nd state, Article 371F of the Constitution of India was enacted to protect its heritage. Article 371F guaranteed that all pre-merger laws would remain active until formally repealed by a competent legislature. Because SBS was born out of a royal decree and not promoted through standard corporate legal procedures, the Banking Regulation Act of 1949 simply did not apply to it. SBS was essentially an "onshore-offshore" bank, operating within India but outside the purview of the country's banking laws. That is, until a few years ago.

Newly revealed documents highlight how confusion prevailed at the highest levels of the Indian government. In a letter dated September 20, 2012, Shashank Saksena, a director in the Union Ministry of Finance, wrote to the RBI confidently asserting that SBS was "registered as a company under the Sikkim Companies Act" and should therefore be regulated by the RBI.

It took the central bank two years to officially correct this fundamental misunderstanding. In a letter dated December 19, 2014, the then Deputy Governor of the RBI, R Gandhi, wrote to the secretary, financial services, in the Ministry of Finance to set

the record straight. SBS was not a company under the Companies Act of 1956 nor the newer Companies Act of 2013. It was a constitutionally protected corporate body that rendered standard regulatory enforcement applicable to other banks impossible.

Banking Without a Safety Net

A 2014 RBI memorandum exposes the sheer panic of RBI officials about this anomalous situation. Gandhi explicitly warned that SBS's financial position posed "serious regulatory concerns". The bank was carrying on the business of banking entirely outside the purview of the RBI.

For the layperson, the danger of an unregulated bank cannot be overstated. Indian banks are compelled by the RBI to maintain strict capital reserves to ensure they can survive economic downturns or, worse, a collapse. The SBS had no such federal oversight. Even more frightening was the revelation about the absence of insurance for the bank's deposits.

WHY SBS WAS DIFFERENT

Ordinary Indian Banks	State Bank of Sikkim
Regulated by RBI	Outside RBI framework
Deposits insured by DICGC	No deposit insurance
Governed by Banking Regulation Act	Protected by royal proclamation
Subject to RBI audits	No federal oversight for decades
Standard banking compliance	Constitutional exemption under Article 371F

In India, the Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation (DICGC) guarantees that if a bank collapses, every depositor is insured up to a certain amount (currently ₹5 lakh). Because SBS was not a recognised bank under the Banking Regulation Act, Gandhi noted that the deposits of residents of Sikkim were "not covered by the insurance of DICGC." What did this imply? If, for whatever reason, the SBS made poor lending decisions and collapsed as an institution, its customers' life savings would deplete or even evaporate and they would have no recourse to any compensation or redress of their grievances.

Chaos of Demonetisation

The theoretical risks of isolating the SBS from India's banking ecosystem violently collided with reality on November 8, 2016, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi suddenly announced the demonetisation of high-value currency notes. The overnight withdrawal of 86 per cent of the country's currency in circulation plunged India and its most vulnerable citizens into chaos. In Sikkim, demonetisation led to an unprecedented liquidity crisis, an impending systemic collapse.

On November 25, Pawan Chamling, the then chief minister of Sikkim, sent an urgent, desperate letter to Prime Minister Modi. His letter revealed the sheer scale of the crisis: approximately 50,000 individuals, almost all of them residents of Sikkim, had deposited a total of ₹530 crore in the bank, which also had 1,800 pension accounts of senior citizens.

Because SBS was unregulated, the RBI initially choked access to its currency chests during the cash swap. Chamling warned that depositors were "not able to access their SBS accounts, even for limited withdrawals". He stressed that many residents in rural areas of Sikkim banked exclusively with SBS, had no alternative financial lifelines and were in dire straits.

The language used by Chamling was stark. He warned that the lack of cash was "creating a panic-like situation" and that the public was "already in an agitational frame of mind". If cash was not provided on an emergency basis, "there is potential of imminent unrest in a sensitive border region of the country," the former chief minister stated.

> The 2021 regulatory embrace meant that while the Government of Sikkim retained ownership of the SBS, the RBI finally had the power to audit the bank's books, enforce capital adequacy ratios and other regulatory norms, and bring the bank's thousands of account holders under the protective umbrella of the DICGC

Buried at the end of Chamling's desperate plea was a historic political concession. For decades, the Sikkim government had fiercely protected the "autonomy" of the SBS to preserve its "independent identity". Pushed to the corner, Chamling formally conceded: "On our part, we are more than willing to work with (the) GoI (Government of India) and (the) RBI to draw up a transition path for SBS to come within the ambit of the BR (Banking Regulation) Act, 1949."

Secret Legal Blueprint

The RBI then got down to work. But how could it regulate an entity protected by a royal decree and an article in the Indian Constitution?

Recently released documents show that the RBI had explored a "nuclear" option. An obscure 1982 federal law, the State Bank of Sikkim (Acquisition of Shares) and Miscellaneous Provisions Act, technically gave the Union government the power to simply seize the bank and convert it into a state co-operative bank. However, executing this move could be a long, drawn-out process and perhaps, politically explosive.

Instead, the RBI opted for a carefully calibrated legal offensive. An April 2017, a letter from Mohan Yadav, chief general manager, RBI, to the Ministry of Finance forwarded "secret" draft legislation aimed at quietly dismantling the anomaly.

The draft bills proposed amending the Banking Regulation Act of 1949 itself. They sought to insert a new clause into Section 5, explicitly defining the "Sikkim Bank" as the entity "constituted under the State Bank of Sikkim Proclamation, 1968". The "masterstroke" was a proposed new "Section 51A", which declared that "Notwithstanding anything to the contrary contained in the State Bank of Sikkim Proclamation... the provisions of this Act... shall apply to (the) Sikkim Bank."

The draft bills mandated that the SBS formally apply to the RBI for a banking licence within six months of the amendment to the law. Crucially, the RBI also drafted amendments to the DICGC Act of 1961, legally compelling the corporation to "register Sikkim Bank as an insured bank" to guarantee the safety of depositors' money.

SBS'S DEMONETISATION SHOCK

50,000 depositors affected

₹530 cr deposited in SBS

1,800 pension accounts impacted

'Panic-like situation' warning by Pawan Chamling

Rural residents had 'no alternative financial lifelines'

Pawan Chamling

2026 Courtroom Reckoning

It took years of behind-the-scenes manoeuvring following the drafting of the bills in 2017 to set the wheels in motion on Mumbai's "Mint Street", where the RBI is headquartered. This brings us back to news reports from 2021. When publications reported that the RBI had assumed supervisory control of SBS, it was treated as a standard regulatory update. The public remained entirely unaware that this seemingly routine "update" was, in fact, the culmination of years of panic within official circles, Constitutional manoeuvring, and repeated warnings of a potential institutional collapse stretching back more than

a decade.

The 2021 regulatory embrace meant that while the Government of Sikkim retained ownership of the SBS, the RBI finally had the power to audit the bank's books, enforce capital adequacy ratios and other regulatory norms, and bring the bank's thousands of account holders under the protective umbrella of the DICGC.

Despite the apparent resolution in 2021, the ghosts of SBS's unregulated past continue to haunt the Indian establishment. The story has now culminated in an ongoing case before the Bombay High Court in the form of Writ Petition No. 2588 of 2017, Ashok Kumar Jain versus Reserve Bank of India & Others.

To understand why this courtroom showdown matters, one must look at exactly why Jain filed this Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in 2017, and what he specifically demanded. Jain is an anti-corruption and Right to Information (RTI) activist, and a former employee of the Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), a central government-owned authority established by the DVC Act of 1948.

Jain alleged to these writers that he decided to file a PIL in Mumbai after learning from "reliable sources" that certain past and present employees of the DVC had obtained illegal gratifications and had parked their black money in the SBS to evade regulatory scrutiny. When asked, he did not elaborate on the evidence he had to substantiate his claims. "Details will be disclosed at the appropriate time," he said.

> The draft bills proposed amending the Banking Regulation Act of 1949 itself. They sought to insert a new clause into Section 5, explicitly defining the "Sikkim Bank" as the entity "constituted under the State Bank of Sikkim Proclamation, 1968"

Nevertheless, in his petition, Jain had made a series of what he believes are more substantive allegations: the State Bank of Sikkim was operating like a domestic tax haven, akin to a "Swiss Bank", offering absolute secrecy and refusing to disclose the identities of its depositors to federal authorities. Jain alleged that because SBS operated entirely outside the RBI's disclosure laws and the Banking Regulation Act, it had become a "safe haven for ill-gotten wealth" and potentially even terrorist funds.

Jain's demands before the Bombay High Court were clear and sweeping. First, he demanded that the court force the Union government to bring the SBS under strict regulatory scrutiny by the RBI. Second, he demanded the stripping of the bank's "Swiss Bank-style" secret ways of working, legally compelling SBS to open its ledgers and disclose the identities of its depositors to federal investigators. Finally, Jain demanded that all the black money stashed by corrupt officials in these accounts be legally seized by the government and utilised to revive sick and struggling Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) across the country.

THE PIL CLAIMS

- SBS functioned like a 'Swiss Bank'
- Secrecy about depositors
- Claims of black money parking
- Demand for disclosure of account holders
- Demand for seizure of illicit funds

During a hearing on February 3, 2026, before Justices Manish Pitale and Shreeram V Shirsat, Jain's counsel directly confronted the RBI with the 2021 media reports. The petitioner argued that if the RBI had indeed taken supervisory control, it must formally answer to the court regarding the historical and current regulatory framework of the bank.

Caught under the spotlight, the RBI's counsel, Aditi Phatak, sought time from the judges to take official instructions from the central bank. Recognising the gravity of a constitutional banking anomaly, the bench granted the delay but firmly ordered the matter to be listed "high on board" for further consideration. Jain told the writers of this article that he is hopeful that his PIL will be heard "soon" and that the court order would be "favourable" in the sense that past records of the SBS would be made public.

Why Sikkim Fought RBI

To understand why this anomaly persisted for fifty years, one must look beyond the central government's perception of "systemic risk" and examine the counter-narrative emanating from Gangtok. For the architects of Sikkim's modern statehood, keeping

the SBS independent was not an exercise in harbouring illicit wealth or evading transparency, even if that was an unintended consequence. It was a calculated defence of what they considered their Constitutional rights, financial federalism, and their cultural identity. As has been reported, the resistance to RBI's control over the SBS was rooted in several deeply held principles.

The primary consideration in this regard was the "absolute" sanctity of Article 371F of the Constitution of India. When the kingdom of Sikkim merged with the Indian Union in 1975, the Sikkimese viewed it not as an unconditional surrender, but as a negotiated integration. Article 371F, specifically clause (k), was the ultimate guarantee from New Delhi that the state's unique institutions would not be immediately bulldozed or captured by extant Indian laws. The 1968 Royal Proclamation of the Chogyal was a valid, protected law. By "forcing" the Banking Regulation Act of 1949 onto the bank was a direct violation of the spirit of the merger and a breach of the Constitutional promises made to the Sikkimese people, it was argued.

Secondly, the state government had argued for "true" financial federalism. The SBS was not merely any other commercial bank; it functioned as the exclusive treasury of the Government of Sikkim. Allowing a federal body based in Mumbai (the RBI) to "dictate" the terms of operations, capital reserves, and lending policies of a state treasury was seen as a massive dilution of the Sikkim government's financial sovereignty. By retaining 100 per cent ownership and keeping the RBI at bay, the state government sought to control how the bank's capital was deployed, tailor its credit policies, structure interest rates, and expedite loan approvals to specifically benefit local contractors, rural entrepreneurs, and infrastructure projects without having to clear the rigid, one-size-fits-all regulatory hurdles mandated by the RBI. This was how the argument was sought to be framed in Gangtok.

Moreover, Sikkim has its distinct financial ecosystem. The Supreme Court recently expanded the definition of Sikkimese individuals to include descendants of original subjects as well as old Indian settlers domiciled in the state before 1975, all of whom are exempt from paying tax on income generated within Sikkim. An autonomous, wholly state government-regulated bank complemented this ecosystem. It allowed the state to manage the wealth of its citizens internally, shielding local enterprises from external economic forces.

It may be recalled that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, manufacturers of highly-taxed products such as cigarettes had descended on Sikkim to exploit the Himalayan state's no-tax and low-tax regime. The Ministry of Finance eventually moved to plug the loophole, following which cigarette companies such as ITC (earlier India Tobacco Company) and Godfrey Phillips shut down their operations almost as swiftly as they had established them.

To return to the SBS, many local enterprises and contractors found it convenient to use the bank.

Last but not least, there was a psychological angle. Following the 1975 merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union, several private and public institutions entered the state, creating an anxiety among residents that their Sikkimese identity would be swamped by the influx of "outsiders." The State Bank of Sikkim, born out of a royal decree, was one of the last surviving institutional symbols of the state's past.

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End of an Era

For all practical purposes, the operational era of the "Himalayan loophole" has now come to an end. But history has an uncanny habit of catching up with the present. As Jain's PIL winds its way through the Bombay High Court, will the RBI and the Union government be able to sweep aside half a century of bookkeeping under the rug and call it a resolved bureaucratic quirk? The courts will decide if an autopsy of the historical accounts of the SBS is still required before the federal guardrails were installed, and if there are any secrets still left hidden in vaults in Gangtok.

On May 9, we emailed questionnaires to the following individuals: the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India, Sanjay Malhotra; the chairman and the managing director of the State Bank of Sikkim, Dal Bahadur Gurung and Phurba Wangdi Bhutia, respectively; the former Chief Minister of Sikkim, Pawan Chamling; and the head of the Damodar Valley Corporation, S Suresh Kumar. This article will be updated as and when we receive responses from them. ■

Ayush Joshi and **Paranjoy Guha Thakurta** *are independent journalists*

Arindam Mukherjee

AI JOBQUAKE

INDIA'S EMPLOYMENT MODEL FACES ITS BIGGEST TECHNOLOGICAL DISRUPTION

The conversation around an AI "meltdown" is shifting from a science-fiction fear to a documented economic reality. By mid-2026, we are seeing a "silent disruption" characterised more by a decline in labour force participation and entry-level "hiring freezes" than by a sudden, singular mass layoff event.

We are probably not heading toward a single dramatic "all jobs disappear" meltdown. What's more likely is a long, uneven restructuring of the labour market, but with some sectors experiencing very sharp pain, especially white-collar entry-level work.

This is not a single sudden crash, but a 5-8 year structural shock. White-collar, middle-skill, process-heavy jobs are hit harder than factory work. India is more exposed than most countries because of its IT services and BPO model. Net jobs will be created globally, but not for the same people, in the same places, or fast enough. The biggest pain is career ladder collapse, not just layoffs.

The above paragraphs were written entirely by three different Artificial Intelligence (AI) engines on the same subject: the likely job meltdown triggered by AI. As is evident, each has approached the issue in a markedly different manner. Even the timelines they project vary considerably, despite broadly conveying the same underlying concern.

While considerable buzz and fear are being generated around AI's potential impact on employment, the responses themselves reveal a striking lack of certainty. AI, at least for now, appears unable to clearly predict what lies ahead, relying instead on broad estimates, probabilistic forecasts, and, at times, rather casual assumptions.

So how real is the Sword of AI hanging over workers' heads?

Everyone is convinced that jobs will be affected. Some

bold and optimistic ones are turning the argument around, saying new jobs will be created and new skills will be in demand, which will even out the loose ends. Yet some remain optimistic, arguing that, in the end, human intelligence will prevail because AI is only as effective as the input it receives.

You ask a CEO this "tricky and sensitive" question, and he says jobs will not be "lost", they will be "restructured", and roles and profiles, processes and paradigms will change. What about the salaries of "restructured" employees? No one has a definite idea. And legacy hierarchies? Those lines will definitely blur.

Has the meltdown started already? Probably yes, even though no one has started counting yet. According to rough market calculations, as of mid-2026, there is a clear trend of displacement, particularly in the tech and service sectors. Unfortunately, India appears to be bearing the brunt more acutely, as these were the sectors that generated the largest share of jobs over the past 10-15 years, and are now showing the first clear signs of decline.

India's famed back-office prowess appears to be losing its edge. BPO and KPO firms engaged in medical transcription, legal research and Tier-1 customer support are witnessing a sharp decline, both in workforce strength and business volumes.

And that is because 25 per cent of job categories in India are now managed by AI, according to rough industry estimates. The immediate fallout across sectors has been a hiring freeze, as founders and company boards assess the scale of the disruption and the extent of the potential damage. Even in software companies, the once-vaunted Indian "bench strength" is rapidly beginning to look like a fading myth.

And it is not smaller companies or start-ups that are unable to stand the pressure. Larger companies with huge legacy systems, which helped them achieve their gargantuan stature earlier, are also mostly clueless. And that is because the Leviathan is shrinking and shrinking fast. Only last month, software

BIG TECH JOB CUTS

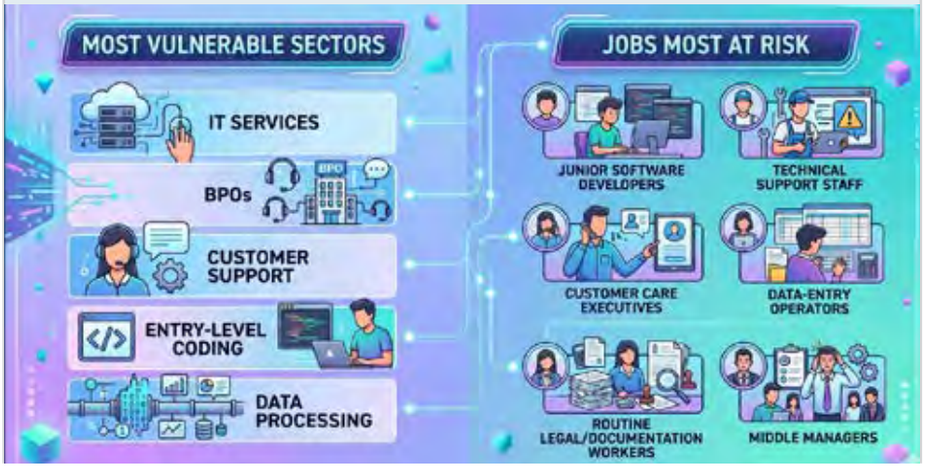
128,000+ Estimated tech layoffs globally in 2026 alone

ORACLE	AMAZON	MICROSOFT	META	GOOGLE	COINBASE
20,000-30,000	16,000-30,000	8,750	8000+	1,500+	700

INDIA UNDER PRESSURE?

NITI AAYOG WARNING

Up to 2 million Indian tech-service jobs could face disruption by 2031

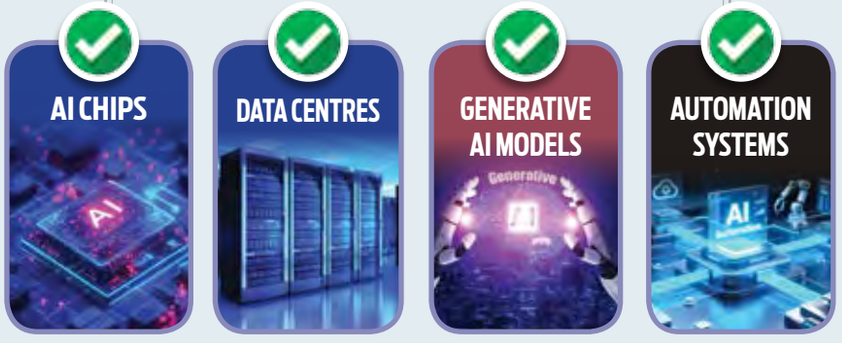


WHERE IS THE MONEY GOING?

$600–650 billion

Projected combined AI infrastructure spending by Meta, Microsoft, Amazon, Google

Spending on:



behemoth Oracle snipped 12,000 jobs in India, which is roughly 20 per cent of its Indian workforce. The reason? The company was progressively shifting to an AI infrastructure.

On the flipside, shooing off the naysayers are experts who strongly believe that the end is nowhere near. They are talking more of a transition into a new paradigm at the workplace with new processes and new skills.

Says Atal Upadhyay, an AI veteran and former software expert at Microsoft, IBM and Mahindra, "People are scared of AI and so are just looking at the negatives. But AI is going to be much bigger than the coming of computers and digital technologies in India. We already have a software advantage. AI will pick up from there and create India as a major force globally. Jobs are not likely to be lost. Instead, new jobs will be created, creating demand for newer skills. India is at an inflecion point from where it will only be better." The best part of this new wave, he says, is that it will be age agnostic, allowing people of any age to be part of the growth run.

Other experts, too, believe that predictions of a job-market bloodbath are being driven more by anxiety than by hard evidence. Companies are likely to shift from a degree-driven hiring model to one centred on specialised skills and demonstrable expertise. The transition, therefore, may prove to be more about realignment and redefinition than outright job displacement. AI is expected to enhance workers' capabilities, accelerate the demand for new skill sets, and generate entirely new categories of employment. India, for its part, has already stepped up its focus on skilling in emerging technologies, steadily building a technically trained workforce. This new workforce will be AI-ready and cement India's place as a global supplier of AI-ready talent.

In fact, India's demographic dividend of more than 60 per cent of its population being under 35 years of age will help it stand out globally, where countries are facing mostly an ageing population. Plus, digital and AI-enabled talent will increasingly emerge from Tier-II and Tier-III cities where, thanks to the government's skilling push, youngsters are being trained on AI, Machine Learning (ML), automation and data science, all of which will create a circular environment for AI's forward march.

So, to conclude, where does the human intervention stand in the AI age, now and 10 years later? Says Upadhyay, "You shifted from manual telephone exchange or switchboard exchange to copper lines, which eliminated the job of the operator. But there were no job losses because the new system demanded someone to run it. The advent of computers and laptops created different kinds of jobs that were not possible earlier. The AI era will be the same, probably better, considering the vast possibilities of AI in every industry, every sphere."

One thing, however, appears certain: the future of workplaces and employment is likely to be hybrid, with AI complementing human capabilities and human intelligence remaining central to handling complex tasks. Humans will be more like the Conductor in an orchestra, who neither sings nor plays an instrument. Yet, without the wave of his baton, there is no music.■

Arindam Mukherjee *is a Delhi-based veteran journalist and communication professional. He was the editor of Outlook Money magazine*

WHY INDIA IS THE WORLD'S BIGGEST AI BATTLEGROUND

GIDEON ASHWOOD
The author is a geopolitical commentator and macro-risk analyst. His work focuses on the intersection of geopolitics, markets and emerging global risks

The global artificial intelligence race is no longer centred only around Silicon Valley or China. Increasingly, the spotlight is shifting towards India, a country rapidly transforming itself into one of the world's most important AI markets and infrastructure hubs. The numbers explain why.

India today has more than 750 million internet users, most of them connected through low-cost smartphones. It also records some of the world's highest mobile data consumption levels, more than 36 GB per user every month on average while internet prices remain among the cheapest globally. That combination of massive scale and low-cost connectivity has created the perfect environment for AI adoption.

What makes India particularly significant is the speed at which ordinary people are embracing artificial intelligence tools. Reports indicate that India has emerged as one of the world's largest user bases for generative AI platforms such as ChatGPT and Gemini. AI is no longer limited to corporate offices. Students are using AI tutors, telecom companies are integrating chatbots into mobile services, and developers are building AI tools in Hindi, Bengali, Tamil and several regional languages.

This explosion in digital usage has triggered a global investment rush. In late 2025, three of the world's biggest technology companies unveiled staggering investment plans for India's AI infrastructure. Amazon announced a proposed investment of nearly $35 billion by 2030. Microsoft committed about $17.5 billion, its largest India-focused technology investment to date while Google earmarked another $15 billion for data centres and cloud expansion. Together, the combined commitment crossed $67 billion.

The message was unmistakable. India is no longer merely a back-office destination for global technology companies. It is becoming central to the future of artificial intelligence. The country's advantages are difficult to ignore. India produces nearly 1.5 million engineering graduates annually and possesses one of the world's largest English-speaking technology workforces. Operational costs remain far lower than in Western economies, making India attractive both as a market and as a development base.

At the same time, India's biggest conglomerates are investing aggressively in digital infrastructure. Reliance Industries, Tata Group and Adani Group are building data parks, cloud systems and AI-linked infrastructure in partnership with international firms.

Geopolitics is adding another layer to India's rise. As tensions between the United States and China deepen, Western firms are increasingly looking for alternative technology hubs that offer both scale and political stability. India fits that requirement better than most emerging economies.

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From Bengaluru to Hyderabad and New Delhi, India is steadily positioning itself at the centre of the global AI transformation. The race is still unfolding. But one thing is already becoming clear: the next major chapter of artificial intelligence may well be written in India.■

Amal Narayan Patowary
The author is a writer based in Assam. He is president of the Writers Forum, Assam

AFTER THE MANDATE

DANGEROUS SIMPLICITY OF HINDU VS MUSLIM POLITICS IN ASSAM

The 2026 Assam Assembly election has delivered more than a sweeping victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party-led NDA. It has produced a new political reality with implications that stretch far beyond seat arithmetic. The central question now is no longer who governs Assam. That question has been settled decisively. The more important question is what kind of Assam will emerge from this political consolidation.

For the first time in decades, Assam has moved towards a political order where one party dominates almost every axis of governance, narrative and electoral mobilisation. Such dominance brings stability and decisiveness, but it also raises uncomfortable democratic questions. The road ahead for Assam will therefore not merely be about development projects or election management. It will be about whether political consolidation can coexist with social balance in one of India's most ethnically and religiously sensitive states.

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The BJP under Himanta Biswa Sarma has undeniably altered Assam's political landscape. The party has succeeded in constructing a broad coalition of Assamese nationalism, Hindu consolidation, welfare politics and administrative visibility. Unlike earlier governments that often appeared reactive and fragmented, the present dispensation has projected clarity with relentless political messaging. But large mandates carry large burdens.

The first and most immediate challenge before the government is economic credibility. Assam's political discourse has increasingly shifted from agitation to aspiration. Young Assamese voters today are less interested in ideological rhetoric alone. They want jobs, industry, infrastructure and economic mobility. The BJP has carefully cultivated this aspiration through highways, bridges, semiconductor investments, urban projects and welfare expansion. Yet beneath the optics lies a difficult reality in which unemployment remains stubborn, private investment remains confined to select corridors, and the migration of educated youth continues unabated.

Assam cannot indefinitely survive on symbolic development. The next phase requires structural transformation. Industrial projects must translate into actual employment. Tea garden regions need economic diversification. Flood-prone districts require long-term ecological planning rather than seasonal relief politics. Guwahati's urban expansion must not deepen inequalities between the capital and the rest of the state.

This is where the government's third term becomes more difficult than its first two. Expectations are now far higher than before. Voters have rewarded delivery. They will now demand outcomes.

Assam's re-elected CM Himanta Biswa Sarma has emerged as a 'Hindu messiah'

The second challenge concerns identity, the most volatile component of Assam's politics. The BJP's rise in the state has been built substantially on issues of demographic anxiety, illegal infiltration and indigenous insecurity. These themes have deep resonance in Assam because they are rooted in historical memory, particularly the trauma of migration and fears of cultural dilution.

However, identity politics is inherently unstable because it constantly creates new anxieties. Once one set of insecurities is politically addressed, another emerges. Tribal groups seek stronger constitutional

safeguards. Indigenous communities demand land protection. Linguistic concerns remain alive in both Upper Assam and the Barak Valley. Citizenship politics continues to simmer beneath the surface despite the temporary exhaustion of the NRC debate.

The government, therefore, faces a paradox. The very political framework that helped consolidate support could also generate sharper expectations and deeper social fragmentation if not carefully managed.

This is where the composition of the new opposition acquires enormous significance.

One of the most striking and politically consequential outcomes of the election is the near-total Muslim character of the Congress legislative presence. A substantial number of Congress MLAs elected to the Assembly are Muslims, particularly from minority-dominated constituencies. Whether accidental or structural, the optics are politically explosive.

It allows the BJP to sharpen its long-standing argument that the Congress in Assam has effectively transformed into a minority-concentrated party with shrinking acceptability among larger Assamese communities, including Hindus and tribals. This perception, whether fully accurate or not, could fundamentally reshape Assam's political discourse over the next five years.

The danger here is not merely electoral, it is civilisational too. If Assam's ruling party increasingly becomes identified with Hindu consolidation, while the principal opposition becomes identified primarily with Muslim representation, the state risks sliding into a binary political framework unprecedented in post-Independence Assam. Such a transition would fundamentally alter the nature of Assamese politics, which historically revolved around language, ethnicity, regional identity and federal anxieties rather than overt Hindu-Muslim polarisation alone.

That shift could have long-term consequences, as Assam's social fabric is uniquely fragile, with identities that overlap and intersect. A Bengali-speaking Muslim in Lower Assam, an Assamese Hindu in Upper Assam, a Bodo in Kokrajhar, and a Bengali Hindu in the Barak Valley all inhabit different political realities. Any political reduction of Assam into a simplistic Hindu-versus-Muslim binary would inevitably deepen mistrust between communities and weaken the broader Assamese civic identity that earlier movements tried to construct.

For the Congress, this represents an existential crisis. The party's collapse is not merely organisational; it is sociological. It has steadily lost credibility among large sections of Assamese Hindus, tea tribes, urban middle classes and indigenous youth. Many of these groups now view the Congress not as a broad-based centrist force but as a party excessively dependent on minority arithmetic for survival.

This perception may help the Congress retain pockets of electoral relevance in minority-dominated belts, but it severely limits its ability to emerge as a statewide alternative. No opposition party can seriously challenge the BJP in Assam unless it reconstructs a wider social coalition cutting across ethnicity, language and religion.

The Congress, therefore, faces a historic dilemma. Should it continue relying on demographic consolidation in minority-heavy regions, or should it attempt the far harder task of rebuilding trust among Assamese nationalist and indigenous constituencies? The first path may preserve survival. The second alone offers the possibility of revival.

Yet the BJP too must exercise caution. A weak opposition can become politically convenient but democratically unhealthy. If the opposition space becomes overwhelmingly identified with one religious community, it may inadvertently strengthen hardline political instincts on both sides. Electoral polarisation can yield short-term gains, but prolonged polarisation often corrodes administrative neutrality and social cohesion.

Assam's history offers enough warnings. The Nellie massacre, the Assam Movement, Bodo-Muslim tensions and repeated ethnic clashes all demonstrate how quickly identity politics can spiral beyond electoral control. Stability in Assam has always depended upon maintaining a delicate balance between assertion and accommodation.

The road ahead, therefore, is not simply about governance. It is about political maturity.

Can the BJP resist the temptation of permanent polarisation and evolve into a genuinely broad-based governing force? Can the Congress escape communal compartmentalisation and rediscover wider Assamese legitimacy? Can Assam preserve its composite regional identity while navigating intense demographic and political anxieties?

These questions matter because Assam today stands at an inflection point. The state has moved beyond the instability of earlier decades and entered an era of concentrated political power. But concentrated power can either stabilise society or deepen divisions, depending on how it is exercised.

The election verdict has given the BJP authority. It has not given any political force ownership over Assam's future. That future will ultimately depend on whether the state chooses competitive development over competitive communalism. ■

Identity politics is inherently unstable because it constantly creates new anxieties. Once one set of insecurities is politically addressed, another emerges. Tribal groups seek stronger constitutional safeguards

Functional Metro rail in Indore

Deshdeep Saxena

THE METRO NOBODY RIDES

EMPTY COACHES PUSH BHOPAL AND INDORE PROJECTS TO HOST PARTIES FOR SURVIVAL

The ambitious Metro projects in Bhopal and Indore are in serious crisis even before becoming fully operational. With poor ridership and rising operational costs draining revenues, authorities have now turned Metro coaches and station spaces into venues for birthday parties, pre-wedding shoots, film and web-series shoots, advertisements, kitty parties, and photoshoots under a new initiative titled "Celebration on Wheels".

What was once sold as a transformative public transport revolution is now desperately searching for customers beyond commuters. Officials describe the "Celebration on Wheels" as an "innovative attempt" to familiarise people with the Metro and increase public engagement and ridership. Critics, however, see it as a glaring sign of a deeper structural failure, with a taxpayer-funded transport system struggling to attract enough passengers to justify its enormous costs and ambitious promises.

The controversy has reignited uncomfortable questions over flawed planning, ballooning project costs, repeated delays, and the social and environmental disruptions imposed on residents in the name of urban transformation. Today, however, even with limited commercial operations, the bigger reality remains difficult to ignore: it is a Metro project that hardly anyone rides.

Coaches Become Event Venues

Under the "Celebration on Wheels" initiative introduced by the Madhya Pradesh Metro Rail Corporation Limited (MPMRCL), Metro coaches and select station areas can now be booked as event venues.

The scheme permits:

- Film shoots and web series
- Advertisements and promotional events
- Birthday parties
- Kitty parties
- Pre-wedding shoots
- General photoshoots

Bookings will be accepted on a first-come, first-served basis, with applications required at least 15 days in advance. Under the pricing structure introduced to monetise underutilised assets, a stationary coach will cost Rs 5,000 per hour, while a moving coach will be available for Rs 7,000 per hour. Each coach can accommodate a maximum of 50 people, and applicants will also have to pay a refundable security deposit of Rs 20,000.

Metro officials insist the initiative is not unusual and follows similar experiments conducted in other Indian cities. MPMRCL Managing Director S. Krishna Chaitanya defended the move, arguing that the Metro remains in its early stages and needs public familiarity before evolving into a fully utilised transit system. "We are trying to attract more and more audiences, making people realise that there is a new public transport system," Chaitanya said. "Any public transport can only be utilised to its fullest when end-to-end connectivity gets established."

> In both Bhopal and Indore, Metro construction altered traffic patterns, reduced commercial accessibility, and triggered environmental concerns over tree felling and shrinking green cover. Residents and activists repeatedly questioned whether the eventual public utility of the Metro would justify such extensive social and ecological costs

At present, operational stretches remain limited, covering around six kilometres in Indore and seven kilometres in Bhopal. "Naturally, nobody will be interested in travelling in the Metro for two or three kilometres," he said. "By introducing 'Celebration on Wheels', we are bringing the Metro closer to the people." Chaitanya also pointed to the experience of Delhi Metro, noting that even India's most successful urban rail system took years to achieve sustainable ridership levels. "Delhi Metro did not have passengers for five years. There are definitely losses. Bhopal and Indore are not exceptions. Every Metro incurs losses," he said.

The "Celebration on Wheels" programme is not the first unconventional idea explored by the Metro corporation. At one stage, MPMRCL examined the possibility of allowing coaching institutes to operate from Metro stations to generate non-fare revenue. The proposal reflected both commercial necessity and the changing economics of urban infrastructure. Madhya Pradesh has a thriving coaching industry, with thousands of students preparing every year for engineering, medical, civil services, banking, and other competitive examinations. Metro stations, equipped with air-conditioned infrastructure, surveillance systems, and central locations, were viewed as a potentially attractive alternative. Larger station halls could have been converted into classrooms, while smaller booths could function as counselling or registration offices. Though the proposal has yet to materialise, it has revealed the extent to which Metro authorities have been seeking supplementary sources of income.

Urban transport systems worldwide rely heavily on non-fare revenue from retail spaces, advertising, real estate development, and commercial partnerships. Yet experts argue that the aggressive search for alternative revenue in Bhopal and Indore reflects concerns over passenger volumes even before the projects are fully complete.

Delays and Rising Costs

At launch, the Bhopal Metro project was sanctioned at Rs 941 crore, while the Indore Metro project was pegged at nearly Rs 7,500 crore. Both projects are being implemented under MPMRCL, a special-purpose vehicle jointly owned by the Centre and the Madhya Pradesh government. But the projects have witnessed significant delays and steep cost escalations.

According to officials, the original completion target was 2023-24. That timeline has now shifted substantially. In Bhopal, the revised completion deadline is projected around 2028-29, while in Indore it stretches to 2030-31 after one elevated station was redesigned as an underground structure. Officials say delays in finalising tenders, some of which were completed only in 2024-25, contributed to the rising costs. The total project cost has now climbed from approximately Rs 14,400 crore to nearly Rs 23,000 crore.

Chaitanya attributed the escalation not only to delays but also to policy changes and construction modifications introduced during execution. Even as work continues, Phase One remains incomplete, with around 31 kilometres of Metro corridors still under development across both cities. For critics, the repeated timeline slippages raise difficult questions about planning accuracy, financial discipline, and long-term sustainability.

Original Promise

The current scramble for revenue stands in sharp contrast to the original mandate attached to the Metro projects. Government documents prepared during the planning stage framed the projects as large-scale public welfare infrastructure designed to improve the quality of life and reshape urban growth.

The Bhopal Metro Project's Social Impact Assessment (SIA) and Resettlement Action Plan (RAP), finalised in 2024, stated that the Madhya Pradesh government envisioned "a highly efficient and comfortable state-of-the-art urban rail system" aimed at upgrading urban living standards. But the same report also revealed the enormous social footprint of the project.

According to the assessment:

- 1,342 properties are likely to be affected
- 496 residential properties face impact
- 514 commercial properties are affected
- 133 mixed residential-commercial structures are impacted
- 195 community property resources are affected

The report further estimated that:

- 1,563 households would be affect
- 373 are titleholders
- 1,190 are non-titleholders
- 1,218 structures would face full impact
- 124 structures would be partially affected

The rehabilitation and resettlement implementation plan alone was estimated to cost Rs 446.87 crore. Behind those figures are families, businesses, roadside vendors, and entire communities forced to adapt to years of disruption and uncertainty.

In both Bhopal and Indore, Metro construction altered traffic patterns, reduced commercial accessibility, and triggered environmental concerns over tree felling and shrinking green cover. Residents and activists repeatedly questioned whether the eventual public utility of the Metro would justify such extensive social and ecological costs.

Critics argue that the increasing push towards private event-based usage risks normalising a hierarchy within public infrastructure itself, where access and experience are increasingly shaped by purchasing power.

Merely a Public Attraction?

Urban planners caution against dismissing the Metro's commercial initiatives too quickly. Around the world, transport systems increasingly function as mixed-use urban spaces rather than purely transit corridors. Yet the optics of hosting birthday parties and pre-wedding shoots inside Metro coaches while ridership remains modest have triggered public unease.

The concern is not merely symbolic. Transport economists note that Metro systems become financially viable only when supported by high commuter density, integrated feeder services, and long operational corridors. Limited operational stretches often struggle to attract consistent passenger traffic.

In Bhopal and Indore, connectivity remains fragmented. Many commuters still rely on private vehicles, auto-rickshaws, and conventional buses for daily travel. Experts say this has created a difficult transition phase in which infrastructure exists, but behavioural adoption remains slow.

For Metro authorities, "Celebration on Wheels" may simply be an interim strategy to increase visibility and public interaction. For critics, however, it reflects a mismatch between aspiration and execution.

"The issue is not whether non-fare revenue is acceptable," said an urban mobility researcher based in Delhi. "Every Metro system in the world seeks alternative income. The issue is whether a project sold primarily as essential urban mobility infrastructure is now being publicly marketed as an event venue before its transport goals are fully realised."

In Madhya Pradesh, the Metro story is increasingly becoming one of tension between ambition and reality. For now, Metro coaches in Bhopal and Indore are preparing not just for commuters, but also for celebrations, advertisements, and film shoots. It is a striking contrast to projects once introduced as transformative engines of public transport. Whether "Celebration on Wheels" becomes a clever transitional strategy or a lasting symbol of misplaced priorities may ultimately depend on one question. When the full networks finally arrive, will the cities truly ride the Metro? ■

Deshdeep Saxena *is a Madhya Pradesh-based senior journalist. He has extensive experience in both print and broadcast journalism*

Fahed Al Merhebi

BEHIND PEACE SPECTACLE

A MUMBAI EVENT DRAWS INTELLIGENCE SCRUTINY OVER CONTROVERSIAL GLOBAL PARTICIPANTS

Dharmesh Thakkar

An otherwise innocuous international peace conclave in Mumbai has quietly come under the scrutiny of Indian intelligence agencies after officials flagged the presence of certain participants and organisations allegedly linked to controversial international financial and criminal networks. The event, Billionaires for Peace, scheduled to be held later this month at Mumbai's Grand Hyatt hotel, is expected to bring together prominent business leaders, international delegates, peace activists, and personalities associated with the Nobel Peace Prize.

What has triggered concern within sections of the Indian security establishment is not the event itself, but the background of some of the individuals and organisations associated with it. According to highly-placed intelligence sources, agencies have been examining whether certain international entities participating in the conclave have links to networks previously flagged in global investigations, involving money laundering, organised crime and questionable diplomatic operations.

At the centre of the intelligence scrutiny is IIMSAM (Intergovernmental Institution for the Use of Microalgae Spirulina Against Malnutrition). Particular attention has been drawn to the strategic partnership signed last month between the conclave organiser, the I Am Peacekeeper Movement (IAPM), and IIMSAM UN Asia. To formalise the partnership, an MoU was signed between IIMSAM UN Asia's Dr Sahil Singh and IAPM's Dr Huzaifa Khorakiwala, who is also the CEO of pharma major Wockhardt. Intelligence officials say the alliance brought IIMSAM directly into focus because the organisation does not enjoy formal diplomatic recognition from India's Ministry of External Affairs, despite presenting itself internationally as an intergovernmental institution.

IIMSAM is an organisation that presents itself internationally as a humanitarian and intergovernmental body. Indian intelligence officials say concerns have emerged because several individuals associated with IIMSAM over the years have figured in criminal investigations, financial fraud cases or international controversies across multiple countries. The matter acquired greater sensitivity after Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) reportedly alleged that Gulf-based businessman Umer Farooq Zahoor, who was appointed an ambassador of IIMSAM last year, had links with fugitive gangster and designated global terrorist Dawood Ibrahim's network. According to the intelligence inputs reviewed by this publication, Pakistan FIA chief Sanaullah Abbasi allegedly described Zahoor as "a partner of Dawood" in an official report.

Zahoor has also reportedly been investigated in Norway in connection with financial crime allegations. FIA records cited in the dossier claim he travelled to Pakistan more than 60 times between 2006 and 2019 and attended high-level meetings during the Imran Khan government. The records further state that an Interpol Red Notice issued against him was later cancelled after Norwegian authorities allegedly failed to respond to Interpol queries within the stipulated period.

Khaled Shaheen (left in black coat), Umer Farooq Zahoor (right in grey coat), Sulaiman Al Fahim (below)

Intelligence officials say the concern is not based on the presence of any one individual alone, but on what they describe as a broader pattern involving controversial international figures finding association with certain organisations now connected to the Mumbai conclave. One official familiar with the assessment said agencies are examining whether humanitarian and diplomatic platforms are being used by dubious networks to build legitimacy, access and influence in India.

Security agencies are also revisiting several earlier controversies linked to IIMSAM. According to intelligence documents, the European Union had previously categorised IIMSAM-linked passports under "Fantasy and Camouflage Passports", meaning they were not considered valid for Schengen travel. One security official quoted in the dossier described this as a "major security concern", particularly because the documents were allegedly manufactured by a German company that also prints Indian passports.

The intelligence inputs further note that several former ambassadors or associates linked to IIMSAM have, over the years, faced criminal allegations or investigations in different jurisdictions. Among them is Jordanian businessman Khaled Shaheen, who was convicted in a bribery scandal and later arrested in Germany following an Interpol notice. Another former ambassador and UAE businessman, Sulaiman al Fahim, part of IIMSAM, was jailed in 2018 in a financial fraud case. The dossier also mentions Cristian Eduardo Tietze of Mexico, against whom the Vatican and Philippine authorities reportedly issued warnings in 2020 after he allegedly misrepresented links with Pope Francis and the Holy See while soliciting donations during the Covid period. According to the intelligence inputs, Tietze currently figures on the IIMSAM website as an under-secretary-general for institutional development.

Indian agencies are additionally examining the activities of another IIMSAM-linked figure, filmmaker Amjad Khan, who participated in anti-CAA protests at Jamia Millia Islamia and JNU in 2020 and had publicly criticised the Citizenship Amendment Act.

Officials emphasise that the intelligence assessment at this stage is precautionary in nature. The concern, they say, is that internationally branded humanitarian or diplomatic platforms may potentially be exploited by individuals seeking credibility or institutional access despite facing scrutiny elsewhere. Given Dawood Ibrahim's continuing relevance in India's national security framework decades after the 1993 Mumbai serial blasts, even indirect associations with individuals allegedly linked to his network are treated seriously by Indian agencies.

No official statement has yet been issued by the organisers of the Billionaires for Peace conclave, IIMSAM, or the individuals named in the intelligence inputs regarding the concerns raised by officials. Many of the claims referred to in the intelligence dossiers remain allegations or assessments cited by agencies and have not been tested in Indian courts. Nevertheless, the presence of controversial international associations around the high-profile peace conclave has made the even a matter of significant interest for Indian intelligence agencies. ■

Dharmesh Thakkar *is a Mumbai-based investigative journalist*

TOP OF THE MONTH

MICHAEL

THE LEGEND, THE STRUGGLE, THE SOUND

Making a biopic is an art, and the film Michael demonstrates this effectively. Written by John Logan and directed by Antoine Fuqua, it brings to life the early years of pop icon Michael Jackson.

The story spans the 1960s to the 1980s, depicting his family life, upbringing, talent, and rise in music. It also captures the emotional struggles within the family, his bond with his parents, his ambitions, and his deep sense of compassion.

Jaafar Jackson plays the adult Michael, while Juliano Valdi portrays him as a child. Valdi is charming as young Michael, portraying his love for animals, which he treats as friends. As he grows older, this innocence remains. Jaafar Jackson delivers a strong and convincing performance.

Michael's father, Joseph Jackson, forms the Jackson 5 and drives their success, but often claims full credit. His mother, Katherine Jackson, supports Michael and protects his individuality. Eventually, Michael parts ways with his father professionally and works with entertainment lawyer John Branca.

Despite resistance, Michael goes solo and succeeds. With support from Branca, his music reaches wider audiences, breaking barriers. His album Thriller becomes a landmark, with meticulous attention to detail in performance shaping its impact.

The film is a delight for fans and also a compelling introduction for those who may not be familiar with Michael Jackson's life.

Praveen Nagda

LOOK AHEAD

June 2026 brings a strong mix of Hollywood releases, including *Toy Story 5, Supergirl, Masters of the Universe, Scary Movie 6, and Disclosure Day.*

Masters of the Universe brings back a classic universe, while *Scary Movie 6* adds comedy and parody, opening the month with franchise revivals.

Directed by Steven Spielberg, *Disclosure Day* introduces a sci-fi edge with suspense-driven storytelling.

As the month progresses, *Toy Story* 5 emerges as a major family entertainer, while Supergirl stands out as a big superhero spectacle.

June 2026 offers a balanced mix of nostalgia, action, humour, and large-scale cinematic experiences.

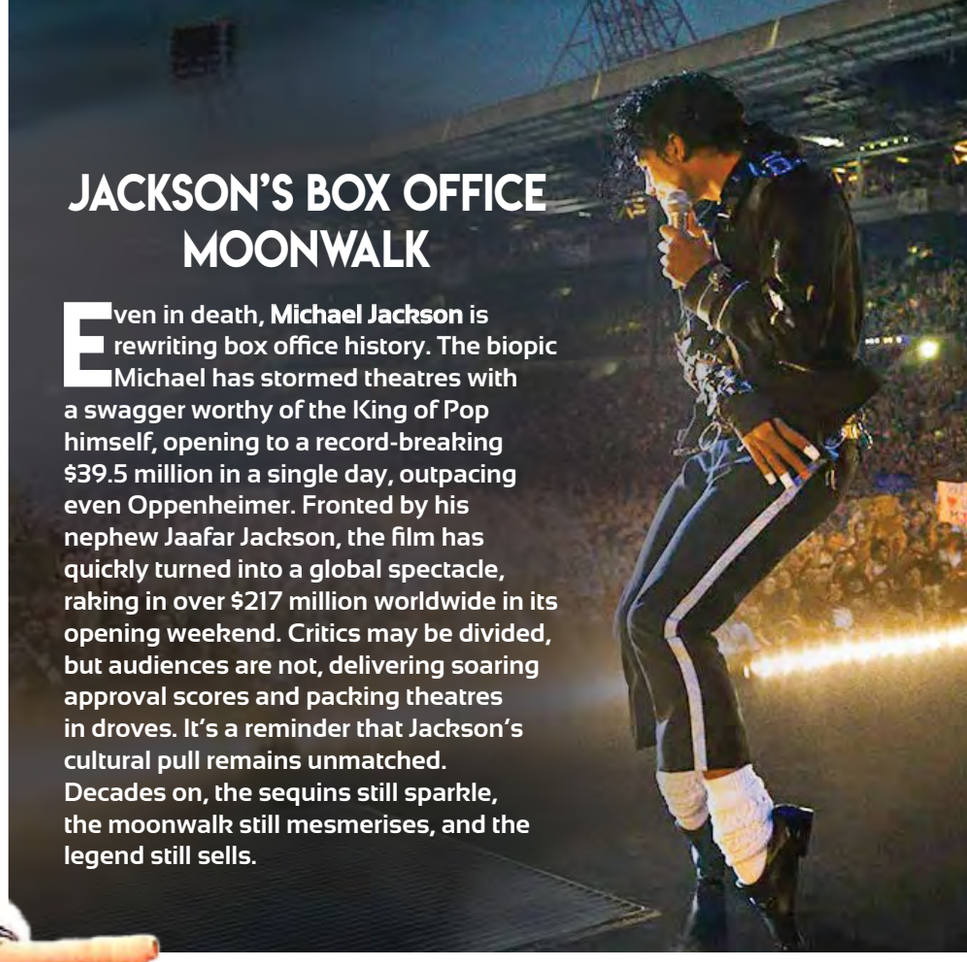
Praveen Nagda
is festival director,
KidzCINEMA and Culture
Cinema Film Festivals

NEWSmaker

BuZZ

A STAR AHEAD OF SCHEDULE

The conversation around **Vaibhav Suryavanshi** has moved on. It's no longer about talent, it's about timing. How soon does the India cap arrive, and can he threaten the benchmark set by Sachin Tendulkar, who debuted at 16 years and 205 days? On paper, the case for haste is irresistible. Big runs, a fearless streak, and the kind of composure that usually arrives years later, Suryavanshi looks less like a prospect and more like a problem for selectors. But this is not the India that rushed Tendulkar. Since Virat Kohli, the system has leaned towards patience over poetry. So yes, he could be the youngest, or he may not be. The cricket fraternity is divided.



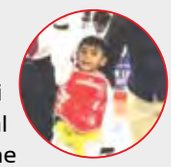
JACKSON'S BOX OFFICE MOONWALK

Even in death, Michael Jackson is rewriting box office history. The biopic Michael has stormed theatres with a swagger worthy of the King of Pop himself, opening to a record-breaking $39.5 million in a single day, outpacing even Oppenheimer. Fronted by his nephew Jaafar Jackson, the film has quickly turned into a global spectacle, raking in over $217 million worldwide in its opening weekend. Critics may be divided, but audiences are not, delivering soaring approval scores and packing theatres in droves. It's a reminder that Jackson's cultural pull remains unmatched. Decades on, the sequins still sparkle, the moonwalk still mesmerises, and the legend still sells.

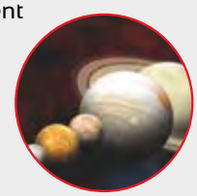
BENGAL'S BACKROOM BOYS

Away from the roar of rallies and headline-hogging leaders, two low-profile strategists quietly shaped West Bengal's electoral churn: **Manoj Agarwal** and **Subrata Gupta.** Agarwal's forte is numbers. He tightened booth-level data mapping and micro-targeting, turning sweeping slogans into pinpoint, constituency-specific messaging. Gupta, meanwhile, worked the ground, rebuilding local networks, energising cadre lines, and ensuring last-mile voter mobilisation. They didn't trend; they delivered. Their influence showed up in spikes in unprecedented turnout and organisational cohesion. In a state obsessed with political personalities, the two veteran bureaucrats' rise signalled a positive shift in India's electoral strategy.

UP & DOWN



Five-year-old Shaurya Maheshwari clinched international taekwondo gold at the 2026 World Wide Super League Championship, spotlighting India's firepower on the world stage.



A rare alignment of Mercury, Mars, Saturn and Neptune dazzled early risers worldwide, a fleeting celestial spectacle that turned dawn into a planet parade.

Shri Ram College of Commerce marks its centenary, celebrating a century of giving birth to many top economic minds of national recognition.

Arvind Kejriwal faces a setback as seven Rajya Sabha MPs from his party defect to the BJP, denting AAP's parliamentary leverage.

Fallout of ongoing Iran crisis: oil prices spiked, the Strait of Hormuz choked, and global supply chains shuddered.

DROWNED IN TIME

Extreme weather is often seen as a modern crisis, but history tells a deeper story. Long before industrialisation, shifts in climate were already shaping the rise and fall of human societies. A new study by the University of Oxford, in collaboration with leading Chinese institutions, brings fresh clarity to this idea. By studying rock formations (stalagmites) in caves in central China, researchers reconstructed climate patterns stretching back thousands of years. They found evidence of prolonged, intense rainfall around 4,000 years ago, when the Yangtze River basin endured decades of flooding. This sustained pressure is believed to have contributed to the decline of the Shijiahe civilisation. Rather than myths of sudden global disasters, scientists suggest these were powerful regional events, dramatic enough to disrupt societies and echo through cultural memory for generations.

A WORLD OF EMPTY HOUSES

Are more countries confronting a stark demographic imbalance: empty homes? The trend is becoming harder to ignore. Japan, among the world's fastest-ageing societies, offers the clearest signal: about 9 million vacant homes in 2023, 13.8 per cent of its housing stock, an all-time high. Across Europe, ageing and depopulation have hollowed out rural housing markets, particularly in Italy and Spain. In China, a property glut combined with slowing population growth has left tens of millions of homes surplus. Even South Korea is now grappling with shrinking households and rising vacancies. What emerges is not a local anomaly but a structural shift in the demographic transition: fewer people, more houses and a growing mismatch between the two.

LAST ELEPHANT IN DAMPA

A remote forest in Dampa Tiger Reserve in Mizoram has come into sharp focus after officials confirmed a stark reality: only one elephant, a lone female, remains in the reserve. Although India still holds over 27,000 wild elephants, nearly 60 per cent of the global population, recent estimates show a decline to about 22,446, driven largely by habitat fragmentation. In Dampa, that crisis has reached its extreme. Once part of a connected landscape, the reserve is now cut off by border fencing along Bangladesh, jhum cultivation and expanding settlements, severing ancient migration routes. For elephants, deeply social and migratory, this isolation signals a slow ecological breakdown.

THE SCIENCE OF NEVER FORGETTING

What if your memory refused to forget? A rare condition called Hyperthymesia (HSAM) does exactly that, allowing a tiny group of people to recall almost every day of their lives with striking precision. First identified in a 2006 study by the University of California, Irvine, fewer than 100 cases have been confirmed worldwide. The most

DID YOU KNOW

famous case, Jill Price, described her memory as "relentless," while actress Marilu Henner can summon decades-old experiences instantly. Scientists are still uncovering why HSAM occurs, but studies suggest structural and functional differences in brain regions linked to memory and obsessive recall, particularly the temporal lobe and caudate nucleus. Some researchers also point to compulsive rehearsal of memories as a contributing factor. Yet this is no superpower. HSAM is limited to personal memories, and often comes with a cost: an inability to forget even the most painful moments.

Bhavani Sundaram

Donors By Design

Why women dominate India's organ donation statistics, and what it says about society

According to National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organization (NOTTO) study, between 2019 and 2023, 63.8 per cent of living organ donors in India were women, while nearly 70 per cent of recipients were men. More than 36,000 women donated organs, but fewer than 18,000 received transplants. Men, in contrast, received nearly 40,000 organs.

On paper, this is a dataset. In reality, it is a stark reflection of who gives, and who gets to live.

At its simplest, the story is this: in India, women are conditioned to be givers at every stage of life. That expectation does not end at emotional labour or caregiving. It extends, quite literally, to their bodies.

India's transplant ecosystem relies heavily on living donors, which means these decisions are rarely abstract or institutional. They are made at home—across dining tables, in quiet conversations, within families. And in those moments, medicine recedes while social conditioning takes over.

"The majority of living donors are women. They are wives, mothers, daughters," says Dr Sunil Shroff, a pioneer in organ donation awareness.

Why is it so? When a serious illness strikes, families do not begin with neutrality. They begin with an unspoken hierarchy of roles. Who will step forward? More tellingly, who is expected to? A wife donating a kidney to her husband is seen as natural. A mother to her child is unquestioned. A daughter to her parents is expected. The language used to describe these decisions reinforces the illusion of choice: she wanted to help, she chose to give, anyone would have done the same.

But these choices are shaped within a framework of expectation. The reverse—men donating to women—exists, but without the same inevitability. It is less assumed, less socially encoded. And when families face financial or emotional strain, priorities emerge. Men, still widely viewed as primary earners, are often treated as more "urgent" to save.

As nephrologist Dr Vivekanand Jha notes, access to transplantation in India is deeply influenced by "socio-economic and gender factors". In practice, that means a man's illness can trigger immediate mobilisation, while a woman's illness may be met with hesitation, delay, or compromise.

This is where the imbalance becomes impossible to ignore. The system draws disproportionately from women as donors, yet invests less in their survival. Women are less likely to be referred for transplants, less likely to be waitlisted, and less likely to receive organs—even within their own families.

The disparity is not dramatic or visible. It is quiet, routine, normalised. Bioethicist Dr Anant Bhan describes such decisions as being shaped by "expectations, obligations, and power imbalances." In other words, they are presented as free choices, but rarely exist outside social pressure. This is how inequality operates most effectively, not through coercion, but through internalisation.

India's transplant infrastructure has expanded. Awareness has improved. Policies have evolved. But the deeper question remains largely unaddressed: not how many organs are donated, but whose bodies are expected to give, and whose lives are prioritised to receive.

Because beneath the statistics lies an uncomfortable truth. In this system, women are not just caregivers. They are givers by design. And when survival itself becomes a question, it is still being quietly decided along the fault lines of patriarchy.■

Bhavani Sundaram *is an author, blogger and animal lover. He is the author of several motivational and inspirational books*

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India's former high commissioner to Bangladesh

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