

# DAILY NEWSP APER ANALYSIS

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**CIVILS WITH AKASH  
SECTOR 25 CHANDIGARH**

# Discontent in Manipur over deaths of five since April 7, as violence continues unabated

Vijaita Singh  
NEW DELHI

Since April 7, Manipur has witnessed five killings, including that of two children, but there have been no arrests in any of the cases so far.

The Bishnupur-Churachandpur road has remained blocked for the past 12 days, hindering the National Investigation Agency (NIA)'s investigation into the April 7 killing of two children at Tronglaobi, Bishnupur, a senior

government official said.

As the attackers remain unidentified, local people have taken to the streets multiple times in the past week and have clashed with security forces demanding arrest of the attackers, leaving scores of people injured.

"No civil supplies are coming to Pherzawl and Churachandpur from Imphal side as the roads remain blocked. The essentials are being routed from Silchar in Assam and Aizawl in Mizoram. Even if

Kui-Zo groups are involved, due to the blockade, the NIA team has not been able to visit Churachandpur for the investigation," the government official said.

## Wave of violence

The Naga-dominated Litan area of Ukhrul has witnessed a wave of violence and arson between Nagas and Kukis since February 7, three days after Yumnam Khemchand Singh was installed as the new Chief Minister of the ethnic-vio-



Women holding torchlights take part in a protest rally in Imphal East on Sunday. ANI

lence affected State that remained under President's Rule for a year.

On Saturday, suspected

militants ambushed the vehicles of civilians on National Highway no. 202 in Ukhrul, killing two Tangk-

## Boycott BJP, says Manipur group

### GUWAHATI

Amid continued violence, an organisation in Manipur has announced a boycott of the BJP. It sought a statement from the CM explaining why the government has been unable to stop the attacks. » PAGE 4

hul Naga men, including a retired soldier.

A government source said that preliminary

probe into Saturday's killings had indicated the use of an automatic weapon, most likely an AK series rifle, which is used by hardened militant groups active in the region.

## 'Outreach appreciated'

According to Losli Dikho, Manipur's Deputy Chief Minister, the outreach by Mr. Singh is being appreciated by all communities and the recent incidents could be an attempt to instigate unrest in the State. "There is speculation

that the violence is being instigated. The Chief Minister visited Senapati district, a Naga-dominated area. To reach there, he crossed Kangpokpi, a Kuki-Zo area, probably one of the first from the Meitei community to do so. A day ago, he visited Ukhrul to meet members of Naga community and also stopped at a Kuki village. He may soon visit Churachandpur, I have been there thrice," the Deputy Chief Minister told *The Hindu*.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Renewed violence in Manipur since April 7, including five killings (two children among victims).
- No arrests so far, indicating gaps in policing and investigation.
- Prolonged blockade of the Bishnupur-Churachandpur road has restricted movement of security forces and investigators from National Investigation Agency.
- Ethnic clashes between Naga and Kuki groups in Ukhrul; use of automatic weapons suspected.
- Disruption of essential supplies to hill districts; rerouting through neighbouring states.
- Political outreach by the Chief Minister aimed at reconciliation amid fragile peace.

### Key Points

- Law & Order Crisis: Multiple killings without arrests → erosion of state authority.
- Ethnic Faultlines: Continued tensions among Meitei, Kuki-Zo, and Naga communities.
- Security Concerns: Use of sophisticated arms suggests militant involvement.
- Administrative Challenges: Road blockades affecting governance, logistics, and investigation.
- Centre-State Dynamics: NIA involvement highlights central intervention in internal security.
- Humanitarian Impact: Supply disruptions affecting livelihoods and essential services.

### Static Linkages

- Article 355: Duty of Union to protect States against internal disturbance.
- Seventh Schedule: "Public Order" and "Police" under State List.
- NIA Act, 2008: Central agency jurisdiction over scheduled offences.
- AFSPA: Special powers in disturbed areas (Northeast context).

- Historical roots of ethnic conflicts: identity, land, autonomy demands.
- Internal security framework: role of intelligence, coordination, and border management.

## Critical Analysis

### Key Issues

- Failure of Deterrence: No arrests despite repeated incidents → weak enforcement.
- Governance Deficit: Blockades indicate limited administrative reach.
- Ethnic Polarization: Risk of long-term fragmentation of society.
- Operational Constraints: Restricted access for NIA and security forces.
- Arms Proliferation: Increased lethality of conflicts.

### Broader Implications

- Undermines rule of law and constitutional governance.
- Threatens national security due to proximity to international borders.
- Hampers socio-economic development in already vulnerable regions.

## Way Forward

- Restore road connectivity through coordinated security operations.
- Time-bound investigation with accountability mechanisms.
- Strengthen intelligence and inter-agency coordination.
- Initiate structured peace dialogue among communities.
- Enhance development and state presence in remote areas.
- Curb illegal arms flow through stronger border control.
- Use constitutional provisions for better Centre-State cooperation.

# Waiting for another take-off

Over the past few years, several airports have been inaugurated across second- and third-tier cities in UP. However, operations at a number of these stopped within weeks of launch, prompting questions over planning, viability and the gap between infra expansion and sustained operations.



On a wing and a prayer: View outside Azamgarh and Moradabad airports. U.P. has reported a rise in Intra State air traffic. [www.kusaa.com](#)

Shortly after coming across a social media post about a flight service between Lucknow and Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Vaibhav Tripathi decided to fly with his mother, who had never travelled by air, to their home town. It was meant to be a birthday gift – a gesture of gratitude for the years she spent doing odd jobs, including working as a farm labourer, to fund his education at an Industrial Training Institute.

"Now that I earn ₹25,000 a month, I thought of flying her to our home in Azamgarh on her birthday as, according to the social media post, fares were between ₹1,500 and ₹2,000 per person," said the 32-year-old, who works as a refrigeration and air conditioner technician at a private firm in Lucknow.

However, when Tripathi started looking for tickets, he was surprised to find that there were no available flights – not just for that day or week, but the entire season.

**UDAN scheme**  
Azamgarh airport, developed under the Centre's Regional Connectivity Scheme (RCS) – UDAN (Uttar Desh Ka Aam Nagrik) scheme, was opened to the

public in early March 2024. Later that month, a company named FlyBig (which created operations in December 2025 following the expiry of the air operator licence) started Uttar Pradesh, Vaibhav Tripathi flights. However, it discontinued the service eight months later citing poor visibility.

Operations at many other airports in the State, also launched under the UDAN scheme to boost regional connectivity, have been closed shortly after commencement.

Currently, eight airports – located in Chitrakoot, Azamgarh, Moradabad, Shravasti, Kushinagar, Aligarh, Meerut and Saharanpur – of the 17 technically operational in Uttar Pradesh, are closed to traffic.

Aside from those in Meerut and Kushinagar, the remaining were started under the UDAN scheme to link key cities with Lucknow's Chaudhary Charan Singh International Airport, which offers connectivity to all major cities of the country and overseas.

Shashi Mohanta, a business man from Moradabad involved in brass manufacturing, frequently travels to Lucknow.

"Air travel is an easy option as it cuts down the travel time and road commu-

penditures, such as hiring a driver. However, flight operations here ceased within months of launch. It is painful," he said.

Services at the Moradabad airport were discontinued in November 2024 due to poor visibility and daytime runway closures at the Lucknow airport.

**Commercial viability**  
In Saharanpur, the airport was developed at a cost of ₹46.86 crore. In October 2024, Union Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated the airport. However, flight operations are yet to begin.

"Basic infrastructure needs to be strengthened. We have to assess the area's commercial viability and provide incentives to smaller airlines to start operations, otherwise the money will be wasted," said Saharanpur MP Imran Masood of the Congress.

At the airport in Meerut, a runway, taxiway, guest house, and a maintenance, repair and overhaul facility are available. Mauldhar Moha, the Union Minister of State for Civil Aviation,

said Parliament in February this year.

**Lok Sabha statement**  
However, he added, the Uttar Pradesh government "has indicated its preference to restrict the airport operations, at present, to Flying Training Organisation activities".

The service was discontinued in December 2024 due to operational challenges such as poor visibility and daytime closure of the Lucknow airport for runway resurfacing works, the Minister told the Lok

Sabha on December 4, 2025.

The issue of underutilised airports in Uttar Pradesh has sparked a public debate, with Opposition parties calling for a factual assessment, given the involvement of public money and long-term regional development.

The issue of underutilised airports in Uttar Pradesh deserves a measured, fact-based and non-political assessment, because public money and long-term regional development are involved," said Nasser Salim, the Samajwa-

di Party (SP) spokesperson. Salim said the State does not suffer from a lack of airports. "It suffers from a lack of realistic planning, route-viability analysis, and airline engagement at smaller locations."

Opposition leaders have also raised questions about the "abrupt" start and closure of FlyBig. "It's a fraud on the people of Uttar Pradesh. FlyBig had a fleet of a few aircraft at its peak in 2024. It operated from Azamgarh airport for a few days in 2024, as it did at other smaller airports, just for a few days," said Anil Yadav, an Azamgarh native and U.P. Congress leader.

He added, "FlyBig came into existence just to give the impression that these airports are operational. It is a case of planned malpractice and corruption for misleading optics," said Yadav.

The Hindu tried to reach out to FlyBig, but its website and other communication channels were not functional.

**Operational, yet shut**  
The Kushinagar International Airport, built at a cost of over ₹300 crore and inaugurated in October 2021, was considered a milestone given the town's Buddhist heritage. Operations at its airport were suspended on November 5,

2023, even as all facilities remained operational.

The airport saw a flurry of activity during campaigning for the 2025 Bihar election. "Fifty-two flight operations were recorded in 10 days. Chief Ministers of multiple States flew in and out of the airport," said Prashant Kumar, director of Kushinagar International Airport.

He added that there is no hindrance to flight operations as far as ground facilities are concerned.

**'Robust growth'**  
Refuting the criticism over its alleged lack of focus on boosting air connectivity, the Uttar Pradesh government has reported a rise in passenger traffic, with 60 lakh passengers reported to have travelled within the State between April and August 2025.

"Compared to traffic over the same period in 2024, passenger volume rose by 14.6%. Moreover, domestic traffic grew 5.7% (50.47 lakh). International traffic rose 4.3% (5.32 lakh). Airport wise, Gorakhpur (63.0%) and Agra (63.2%) recorded the highest growth," said an official.

For the April-August 2025 period, the State's share in the country's total air traffic was roughly 3.52%, the official added.

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## Static Linkages

- Concept of Viability Gap Funding (VGF) in infrastructure
- Public expenditure efficiency and outcome budgeting
- Infrastructure as a driver of regional development
- Transport geography and locational viability
- Public-Private Partnership (PPP) risks in low-demand sectors

## Critical Analysis

- Positives**
- Improves regional connectivity and accessibility
  - Promotes tourism and local economic activity
  - Reduces travel time and logistics costs
  - Supports balanced regional development
- Concerns**
- Weak demand estimation leading to unviable routes
  - High dependence on subsidies → fiscal sustainability concerns
  - Airline exits causing discontinuity in services
  - Infrastructure creation without demand ecosystem
  - Risk of "white elephant" assets and sunk costs
  - Political signalling vs economic rationality

## Way Forward

- Undertake rigorous techno-economic feasibility studies before project approval
- Shift to demand-driven and cluster-based connectivity planning
- Develop supporting ecosystems (tourism circuits, industrial hubs)
- Strengthen multimodal integration (road, rail connectivity)
- Introduce performance-based incentives and accountability for airlines
- Upgrade infrastructure (navigation aids, night landing facilities)
- Institutionalise periodic review and rationalisation of routes

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Several airports developed under the UDAN (Uttar Desh Ka Aam Nagrik) in Uttar Pradesh have become non-operational soon after their launch.
- Airports such as Azamgarh, Moradabad, Chitrakoot, Shravasti and Saharanpur are either closed or yet to see regular commercial operations.
- Private airline FlyBig, which operated initial regional routes, ceased operations in 2025, disrupting connectivity.
- Around 8 out of 17 technically operational airports in the State are currently not handling flights.
- The issue has triggered debate on planning efficiency and utilisation of public funds.

### Key Points

- UDAN launched in 2016 under the Ministry of Civil Aviation to promote affordable regional air connectivity.
- Objective: operationalise unserved and underserved airports.
- Financial mechanism:
  - Viability Gap Funding (VGF) to airlines
  - Fare caps for passengers (affordability)
- State government support:
  - Reduced VAT on ATF (≈1%)
  - Free/low-cost land and security support
- Key issues observed:
  - Low passenger load factors → poor commercial viability
  - Inadequate route planning and demand assessment
  - Airline financial instability and exit
  - Infrastructure constraints (visibility, runway timing, maintenance)
- Outcome: Several airports remain "operational on paper" but inactive in reality

# Nuclear plants require lifetime commitment'

Jacob Koshy  
NEW DELHI

As India opens its nuclear power sector to private participation under the newly enacted SHANTI Act, former regulators of the nuclear energy establishment and policy veterans said that nuclear power required "lifetime commitment," and maintaining "financial security" to account for "waste management, settlement of claims (caused by radiation), and decommissioning (nuclear power plants).

The Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act, 2025, as the government has articulated repeatedly, is to help India raise its installed nuclear power capacity from the existing 8.7 gigawatt (GW) to 100 GW by 2047. Unlike the previous half-century, it hopes to achieve this by allowing, in theory, private companies to run nuclear power plants and harness foreign



The SHANTI Act reflects the effort to modernise the laws governing the nuclear sector.

funds for the purpose. Ravi Grover, member, Atomic Energy Commission and veteran nuclear engineer, at a talk in New Delhi on Saturday, said the SHANTI Act clearly prescribed duties and liabilities that power plant operators must adhere to, whether in the private or public sector.

"The prime responsibility for safety, security and safeguards lies with the licensee...Section 10 of the Act clearly and transparently spells out what a

newcomer to the sector should know...there is no place for indulging in regulatory tricks. No one can fudge the half life of a radioisotope. If it is 30 years, it remains 30 years," he said.

Rajan Raghavan, vice-president, Tata Consulting Engineers Ltd., who represented Indian private sector companies interested in expanding their presence in India's nuclear power sector, said four priorities shaped investment decisions: site selection, affordable technology, government hand-holding, and tariff viability.

The 700 MW indigenous pressurised heavy-water reactor, Mr. Raghavan said, which the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd. (NPCIL) – a public sector company which is the sole operator of nuclear plants – plans to deploy in fleet mode over the next 10 to 12 years, was the "natural choice".

The 220 MW design, though indigenous, was fi-

nanced 15 years ago and would need substantial rework to meet current regulatory and safety benchmarks.

Foreign reactors, he cautioned, came with prohibitive costs and lengthy design-validation timelines for Indian conditions – "two to three years" before construction could even begin.

## Legal framework

Former Atomic Energy Regulatory Board Chairman. D.K. Shukla offered the regulator's view, arguing that the SHANTI Act finally provided a "unified legal framework" that separated control regulation from safety regulation – a clarity that was implicit earlier only because every player sat within the Department of Atomic Energy.

With private entities entering, he warned that issues previously considered minor would now become major. A central concern Mr. Shukla flagged was the lifetime commitment of

nuclear operation demands. The Act, he noted, now required licensees to "maintain design support throughout the lifetime of the facility" – a requirement far weightier for nuclear than for other power plants, given the longer operating life. Every 10 years, operators must undertake a periodic safety review to demonstrate compliance with current safety standards.

"How do you modify or incorporate the new safety upgrade if you do not have the full-fledged design information and capability?" he said, pointing out that changes to one system can cascade adversely through others.

Design integrity must be preserved throughout the plant's life, he stressed, "whether technology is developed within the country or it is imported" – a pointed caution for private players contemplating foreign reactor imports without securing long-term design support arrangements.

- Regulatory Clarity:
  - Separation of operational control and safety regulation.
- Investment Drivers:
  - Site suitability, technology cost, government support, tariff viability.

## Static Linkages

- Atomic Energy Act, 1962 → Central government control over nuclear energy.
- Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010:
  - Operator liability + limited supplier liability (right of recourse).
- India's Three-Stage Nuclear Programme:
  - Stage 1: PHWRs (Natural Uranium)
  - Stage 2: Fast Breeder Reactors
  - Stage 3: Thorium-based reactors
- Nuclear energy → low carbon, high energy density source.
- Half-life principle → determines radioactive hazard duration.
- India under IAEA safeguards (select civilian facilities).
- Nuclear waste → requires deep geological disposal.

## Critical Analysis

### Advantages

- Boosts energy security and reduces fossil fuel dependence.
- Supports net-zero targets and climate commitments.
- Brings private capital, efficiency, and innovation.
- Reduces burden on Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd. monopoly.

### Challenges

- High capital cost & long gestation period.
- Ensuring nuclear safety with private players.
- Liability and insurance complexities.
- Dependence on foreign technology risks design continuity.
- Long-term radioactive waste management burden.

### Concerns Raised

- "Lifetime commitment" nature of nuclear sector.
- Need for continuous design capability for upgrades.
- Risk of profit vs safety trade-offs.

## Way Forward

- Establish independent statutory nuclear regulator.
- Strengthen liability regime clarity for investors.
- Promote indigenous technologies (PHWRs, SMRs).
- Develop long-term nuclear waste disposal policy.
- Ensure PPP models with risk-sharing frameworks.
- Enhance human resource and R&D ecosystem.
- Build public trust through transparency.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Parliament enacted the SHANTI Act, 2025 to reform India's nuclear energy sector.
- Aim: Increase nuclear power capacity from ~8.7 GW to 100 GW by 2047 (aligned with long-term energy transition goals).
- Major shift: Opening nuclear power generation to private sector participation and enabling foreign investment.
- Trigger: Need for clean, reliable baseload power and meeting climate commitments (NDCs).

### Key Points

- Private Sector Entry:
  - Private entities can own/operate nuclear plants under licensing framework.
- Liability & Responsibility:
  - Licensee bears primary responsibility for:
    - Safety, security, safeguards
    - Waste management
    - Radiation damage compensation
    - Decommissioning
- Lifetime Commitment Clause:
  - Mandatory design support throughout plant life cycle.
- Periodic Safety Review:
  - Every 10 years, plants must meet updated safety standards.
- Technology Choice:
  - Indigenous 700 MW PHWRs preferred (fleet deployment model).
  - Foreign reactors → high cost + long validation period.

# Delimitation — a case of to be or not to be

A special session of Parliament to consider the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026 – and also the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2026, and the Delimitation Bill, 2026 – for readjustment of Lok Sabha and Legislative Assembly seats across the country and implementation of reservation of seats for women in Lok Sabha and Legislative Assemblies (linking it to proposed fresh delimitation for which there was a separate Delimitation Bill) ended in a spectacular way. The proposed delimitation was to reallocate the number of Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly seats among States (and Union Territories with legislatures), and determine the territorial boundaries of each constituency, based on data from the 2011 Census. The total number of Lok Sabha seats was proposed to be increased to 850. The special session was convened at a time when electioneering for the ongoing Legislative Assembly elections is at its peak in West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, which did not go down well at all with several Opposition parties.

**Law and practice**  
Articles 82 and 170 (3) of the Constitution require a readjustment of the number of Lok Sabha and Assembly seats in each State and the extent/boundary of every constituency, after each Census. The first delimitation exercise in independent India was carried out in 1950-51 by the Election Commission of India, in consultation with Parliamentary Advisory Committees established for various States. As the delimitation exercise could not await the completion of the 1951 Census, given the urgency of conducting elections at the earliest, the first delimitation was based on estimated population figures, as of March 1, 1950, as provided by the Census Commissioner.

After the completion of the first general election, a fresh delimitation did take place based on the 1951 Census as per the mandate of Articles 82 and 170. Subsequently, readjustment of constituencies, both in terms of number and boundary, was carried out after the Census in 1961 and 1971. The delimitation based on the 1971 Census was completed in 1976. Subsequently, the Forty-Second Amendment of the Constitution of India froze further delimitation until the Census



**K.F. Wilfred**  
Former Senior  
Principal Secretary  
of the Election  
Commission of India

The delimitation debate raises questions on representation and equity

of 2001. The temporary freeze on delimitation was introduced in the context of population control measures actively promoted by the Indira Gandhi government. It was intended to ensure that States successfully curbing population growth were not disadvantaged in terms of representation in Parliament and State Legislative Assemblies due to lower population figures, while States with higher population growth did not gain a corresponding increase in seats.

### The issue of population growth

The temporary freeze on delimitation ended in 2001. However, the government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee at the time decided that it was necessary to continue the freeze on the number of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies. The government decided to redraw the territories of constituencies to ensure *inter se* parity in terms of population across them, as this balance had been disrupted/disturbed due to large-scale internal migration of people in search of employment and livelihood since 1971. To this end, the Constitutional provisions were amended in order to provide that territories of the constituencies would be readjusted on the basis of the 2001 Census figures without altering the number of Lok Sabha or Assembly seats.

The Statement of Objects and Reasons in the Bill for the Constitution (Eighty-fourth Amendment) Act, 2001, *inter alia*, stated that, in view of the progress of family planning programmes across different parts of the country, the government – under the National Population Policy strategy – decided to extend the freeze on undertaking fresh delimitation up to the year 2026. This was intended as a motivational measure to enable State governments to continue pursuing the goal of population stabilisation.

Therefore, the apparent thinking at that point of time was that population growth would stabilise across all States within the next 25 years. As per the provisions of Articles 82 and 170(3), as amended in 2001 by the Eighty-Fourth Amendment Act, the freeze on further delimitation is to be in place until the population figures of the first Census to be taken after 2026 are published. In fact, a new national Census (against the delayed 2021 Census) is under way.

The Statement of Objects and Reasons of the current Delimitation Bill, 2026, *inter alia*, noted

that the growth of population across different constituencies along with migration from one place to another – especially rural to urban migration – “have resulted in varying density of population in electoral constituencies”; the Bill sought to address this issue. Ironically, for bringing about parity in population among constituencies, both intra-State and inter-States, the population figures of the 2011 Census were to be adopted – this means that the base data to be used for course correction or updating would have been 15-year-old population figures.

### Looking ahead

There is nothing to suggest that migration has either stopped or slowed since 2011, or that population growth has stabilised uniformly across all regions. Against this backdrop, there is no assurance/guarantee that constituencies based on the 2011 Census would stand the test of parity or uniformity in terms of population – and, by extension, in the electorate – at the point when the delimitation exercise would have been completed.

It was quite likely that when constituencies are finally carved out a couple of years down the line, many of them would exhibit clear and evident real-time disparities when compared with the principles set out in the Statement of Objects and Reasons of the present Bill.

Article 81(2) of the Constitution provides that each State shall be allotted Lok Sabha seats in such a manner that the ratio of seats to population, as far as practicable, remains the same across all States.

There is no dispute that the letter of this Article only refers to population as a criterion. However, if we take a broader view, there would be inherent provisions in the Constitution to support the States to retain their scale of parliamentary representation. There may also be scope to incorporate additional parameters/markers alongside population, especially since the number of seats is expected to increase significantly this time, unlike the relatively modest/nominal increases in earlier exercises. After all, States are the component units forming the Union. Strong components will only strengthen the Union.

*The views expressed are personal*

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Special session of Parliament discussed:
  - Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill, 2026
  - Delimitation Bill, 2026
- Proposal included:
  - Increasing Lok Sabha seats to ~850
  - Linking women’s reservation with fresh delimitation
  - Redrawing constituencies based on 2011 Census
- The Constitutional Amendment Bill failed to secure 2/3rd majority → reform stalled.

### Key Points

- Delimitation: Redrawing of electoral constituencies.
- Articles Involved:
  - Article 82 – Lok Sabha delimitation
  - Article 170(3) – State Assemblies
  - Article 81 – Seat allocation principle
- Amendments:
  - 42nd Amendment (1976) → Freeze till 2001
  - 84th Amendment (2001) → Freeze extended till 2026
- Basis of Current Proposal:
  - 2011 Census (not latest)
- Reason for Freeze:
  - Encourage population control
- Delimitation Commission:
  - Independent, quasi-judicial body
  - Orders final and not challengeable in court
- Core Issue:
  - Conflict between population-based representation vs federal balance

### Static Linkages

- “One person, one vote, one value” principle
- Federalism – balance between states
- Constitutional amendment procedure (special majority)
- Census and its governance role
- Population stabilisation policy (NPP 2000)
- Representation in democracy

### Critical Analysis

#### Positives:

- Corrects unequal population representation
- Reflects demographic changes
- Enables women’s reservation implementation

#### Concerns:

- Use of outdated Census data (2011)
- Penalises states with low population growth
- Risk of regional imbalance (North vs South)
- Weakens cooperative federalism
- Political timing affects legitimacy

### Way Forward

- Conduct delimitation after latest Census
- Use composite criteria (population + development indicators)
- Ensure federal consultation & consensus
- Strengthen independent Delimitation Commission
- Decouple women’s reservation from delimitation delays

## Deceptively benign

India must move from fossil fuel to avoid amplifying imported inflation

While India's March retail inflation, at 3.4%, rose marginally from February's 3.2%, this increase is deceptively benign. This is evident from the upward pressure on the Wholesale Price Index (WPI), which climbed to a 38-month high of 3.88% in March. It is important to note that while the Consumer Price Index (CPI) has transitioned to a new base year of 2024, the WPI continues to use the 2011-12 base year, a divergence that must be kept in mind when interpreting the latest inflation data. While the March CPI appears comfortably within the RBI's 4%-6% tolerance band, the reading masks a far more complex build-up of pressures driven primarily by rising input costs, especially fuel prices. WPI inflation rose from about 2.4% in February to 3.88% in March, indicating a sharp month-on-month acceleration in wholesale price pressures. This has found only muted reflection in food prices, with the Consumer Food Price Index (CFPI) rising moderately from roughly 3.4% in February to about 3.8% in March.

Several factors are driving this divergence, chief among them the rupee's precipitous depreciation of about 2.5%-3% against the U.S. dollar. Given that crude oil and gas are globally traded in dollars, this has amplified imported inflation. The U.S.-Israeli war on Iran has disrupted supply chains for these critical fuels, pushing up global prices and transmitting inflationary pressures across economies. The rupee's depreciation has also raised the cost of imports, including fertilizers, plastics, and petrochemical products, which are key to pharmaceuticals, textiles and automobiles. While many firms have absorbed these costs, this may not be sustainable. At the same time, the contraction in exports (down about 3%-4% year-on-year) and imports (down about 5%-6% YoY) in March is not indicative of weakening demand alone, but of war-induced supply disruptions. In response, exporters – particularly MSMEs – are redirecting output to the domestic market, aided by policy relaxations that allow greater domestic sales from export-oriented units. This is creating localised supply gluts, delaying price pass-through even as producer margins compress due to rising input costs. The result is a temporary suppression of CPI. As these pressures unwind, inflation is likely to rise even as growth slows – pointing not to stability but to emerging stagflationary risks. The IMF's latest World Economic Outlook flags rising global recession risks and trims India's FY27 growth forecast to around 6.2%. The RBI, too, has echoed these concerns. This complex challenge underscores the vulnerability of oil-import-dependent economies. It also presents an opportunity for India to accelerate its shift to renewable energy.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- India's CPI inflation increased marginally to 3.4% in March, remaining within the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) tolerance band (4% ± 2%).
- In contrast, WPI inflation surged to 3.88%, a 38-month high, indicating rising producer-side price pressures.
- Divergence due to different base years: CPI (2024) vs WPI (2011-12).
- Rupee depreciation (~2.5-3%) and global disruptions (West Asia tensions) have increased imported inflation, especially fuel.
- The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has flagged global slowdown risks and moderated India's growth outlook.

### Key Points

- CPI-WPI Divergence:
  - CPI reflects consumer prices, WPI reflects input/producer costs.
  - Rising WPI with stable CPI indicates lagged transmission of inflation.
- Nature of Inflation:
  - Predominantly cost-push inflation driven by fuel and input costs.

- Imported inflation due to rupee depreciation (higher cost of dollar-denominated imports).
- Sectoral Impact:
  - Higher costs of crude oil, fertilizers, petrochemicals affect:
    - Manufacturing (automobiles, textiles)
    - Pharmaceuticals
    - Agriculture (input costs)
- Temporary Suppression of CPI:
  - Export slowdown → MSMEs divert goods to domestic markets → local supply glut.
  - Firms absorbing costs → delayed pass-through to consumers.
- Macroeconomic Risk:
  - Emerging stagflation risk (rising inflation + slowing growth).

### Static Linkages

- Inflation types: Demand-pull vs Cost-push
- Inflation Targeting Framework (RBI Act, 1934 amended in 2016)
- Exchange rate depreciation → imported inflation
- Stagflation (1970s oil crisis example)
- India's crude oil import dependence (~85%)
- Monetary policy tools: Repo rate, CRR, SLR

### Critical Analysis

#### Positives

- CPI within RBI band → short-term macroeconomic stability
- Domestic supply increase → temporary inflation control

#### Concerns

- Rising WPI → future CPI escalation (pipeline inflation)
- High external dependence → vulnerability to global shocks
- Rupee depreciation → amplifies imported inflation
- MSME margin compression → investment and employment risks
- Possibility of stagflation complicates policy response

### Way Forward

- Accelerate renewable energy transition to reduce oil dependence
- Strengthen domestic manufacturing and supply chains
- Calibrated monetary policy balancing growth and inflation
- Build strategic reserves (oil, fertilizers)
- Provide targeted support to MSMEs
- Improve data consistency (harmonisation of base years)

# Costs and wages

## Governments must not view labour unrest as a law-and-order problem

The ongoing factory workers' protests in Noida's industrial belt are one of the largest industrial labour mobilisations in recent times. Violence has been documented as well: stone-pelting and attempts to breach police barricades, as well as a brutal police lathicharge. After Haryana hiked wages for workers by 35% following protests in Faridabad, Gurugram, and Manesar, workers in Noida realised that their own wages were lower, a situation exacerbated by the pinch in LPG supplies. Trade unions have demanded ₹18,000 to ₹25,000 a month – which the Uttar Pradesh government's interim hike of around 21% did not meet – and fixed working hours and holidays and overtime pay. The new Labour Codes that the Union government enforced from late 2025 allow a 12-hour single workday and specify wage floors but not actual wages, leaving them to the States. As a result, the Codes have allowed employers in certain States to extract more work from the longer workday at or near the statutory minimum pay. The share of contract labour in the formal manufacturing sector in India is the highest since 1997-98. Ironically, the provisions of the Labour Codes encourage the sector to persist with contract labour rather than appreciate job security, while also imposing limits on worker strikes. These, together with the energy crisis and increasing food prices, precipitated the protests.

In 2024, the Samsung workers' strike in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu, was similarly over low wages, unpaid overtime, and the company's refusal to recognise unions. More recently, workers at the IOCL Panipat refinery went on strike demanding an eight-hour workday, better wages, and safer working conditions, as did workers at the NTPC plant in Patratu, and Adani's Raikheola plant in Raipur. This is practically a wave in the Labour Codes regime, showing that labour rights are paper tigers – exacerbated by Yogi Adityanath's claim that the protests were a conspiracy, followed by the interim hike. A worker who spends one-sixth of his monthly income on cooking costs alone does not need to be radicalised to understand that his wage is insufficient. Further, neither the State nor the Centre responded substantively to residential societies barring domestic workers who had joined the protests by displaying their photographs at the gates – a serious civil rights infraction. The Indian Labour Conference has not convened since 2015, and the Codes were passed without the tripartite consultation that it would have facilitated. The solution to the agitation, in sum, is simple: institute humane working hours and wages, and institute genuine labour reform that is well enforced. The problem only looks complicated because the government is dragging its feet.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Large-scale industrial labour protests in Noida demanding higher wages, better working conditions, and job security.
- Triggered by inter-state wage disparity after wage hike in Haryana and rising cost of living (food, LPG).
- Linked to implementation concerns of new Labour Codes (operationalised from 2025).
- Similar labour unrest seen across industrial centres (electronics, energy, manufacturing sectors).

### Key Points

- Workers demanded ₹18,000–₹25,000/month; state hike (~21%) inadequate.
- Demand for 8-hour workday, overtime pay, and paid leave.
- Labour Codes allow flexible work hours (up to 12 hours/day) with weekly cap.
- Centre fixes wage floor, States determine actual minimum wages.
- Increased thresholds for layoffs/closures → reduces job security.
- Mandatory notice period restricts immediate strikes.

- Rising share of contract labour in formal manufacturing (PLFS, Economic Survey trends).
- Inflation (CPI) eroding real wages → key trigger of unrest.
- Lack of tripartite consultation; Indian Labour Conference inactive since 2015.

### Static Linkages

- Article 19(1)(c): Right to form associations/unions
- Article 21: Right to livelihood (judicial interpretation)
- Article 43: Living wage, decent standard of life
- Article 42: Just and humane working conditions
- Minimum Wages Act, Factories Act, Industrial Disputes Act → subsumed into Labour Codes
- Real vs Nominal Wages (NCERT Macroeconomics)
- Informalisation of labour (Economic Survey, PLFS)

### Critical Analysis

#### Positives

- Simplification of labour laws into 4 codes (PRs India).
- Flexibility may boost investment and manufacturing competitiveness.
- Wage floor ensures minimum protection.

#### Concerns

- Longer work hours risk exploitation.
- Weakening of collective bargaining (strike restrictions).
- Growth of contract labour → job insecurity.
- Inter-state wage competition → downward pressure on wages.
- Implementation and enforcement gaps.

### Way Forward

- Revive tripartite consultation (Indian Labour Conference).
- Shift from minimum wage → living wage framework.
- Strict enforcement of 8-hour work norm with overtime compliance.
- Regulate contract labour; promote formalisation.
- Index wages to inflation (CPI-linked revision).
- Strengthen labour inspection using digital tools.
- Ensure balance between ease of doing business and labour welfare.

# In BJP's bills, federalism & nationalism, not naari shakti, were at stake

WITH THE defeat of the government over the proposed constitutional amendment, there will now be sound and fury over the "anti-women" Opposition. Or, perhaps, badges for a midterm election may be sounded. Clever manipulation is part of politics. Even then, it is said that the enhanced representation of women was weaponised as a smokescreen. When policies serve as a smokescreen, they neither benefit society nor strengthen democracy.

While a 33 per cent reservation, with rotation, is not the best way to ensure fair representation of women, there has been a reasonable amount of formal agreement on the issue by now. It's another matter that most parties still fail to give more tickets to women voluntarily. If the government had truly been keen on women's reservation, this measure could have been implemented for the 2024 Lok Sabha election.

There was no need to go through a controversial exercise and complicate the issue. But perhaps the ruling party — like other parties too — did not want to unsettle the interests of male representatives. To assuage their apprehensions, the solution of expanding the available pool of seats is a must to have seemed attractive, leading the government to combine women's reservation with expansion of the strength of legislature.

Again, like women's reservation, this expansion too is an attractive and perhaps welcome proposal. It is welcome in a theoretical sense — each representative will represent fewer voters if legislatures are ex-

panded. Cynics may wonder what real advantage will accrue to voters as a result. It will lead, on the contrary, to more bosses over citizens because our representatives have long ceased to be representative, much less public servants. Our politics and the behaviour of representatives often breed this cynicism. But even if one were not to take this cynical view and welcome the expansion of legislatures, it was bound to be mired in complication if it were to be tied to a new delimitation exercise.

If the government simply proposed increasing the number of seats in legislatures and ensured that delimitation will be carried out only within the states to adjust for the extra seats, then perhaps the Opposition and southern states may have been tempted to agree to this move. In other words, the current impasse needs to be seen as the government's effort to force a new delimitation by hiding behind a women's cause and breaching the 56-year-old consensus on freezing the current strength of states in the Lok Sabha.

This begs the question: Did Narendra Modi do all this only to expose the Opposition? Did he do it only to ensure his name remains in the history of gender justice? Or, did the government seek to sugarcoat the bitter capsule of delimitation by wrapping it with the less controversial measures of women's reservation and expansion of legislative seats? If the latter is the case, the government has only tied itself into a knot. The issue of delimitation has now be-



SUHAIL PALSHIKAR

come even more intractable.

The forthcoming delimitation was going to be a risky political challenge with the states of the south complaining against the possible reduction of their representation in Lok Sabha and the northern states expecting a bounty. That challenge required statesmanship and a spirit of compromise. The attempt to smuggle in a new delimitation through the women's reservation issue has only added to suspicion and distrust between the Opposition and the government on the one hand and the Union government and the states of south India. In addition to this adding to the politics of distrust, and in tune with the prevailing ethos of high-handedness, the proposed amendments sought to make all decision-making more pro-executive, arbitrary and bordering on the authoritarian.

But more than its authoritarian tilt, the latest exercise should alert citizens to two other serious issues involved in this episode. The ease with which the BJP sought to dispense with the concerns of the southern states indicates a weakening of the goal and practice of federalism. This is not surprising because Hindutva has always been wary of federalism. This stems from the unitary idea of nationalism and therefore, it is qualitatively different from the cynical and power-oriented neglect of the federal principle by earlier governments. The emphasis on "double-engine sarkar" is not merely for party political gain, but for a larger purpose which many

have failed to comprehend.

Secondly, central to this current development is the politics of imposing a different meaning of India and the Indian nation. There is an unarticulated feeling among many sections that the idea of India is best understood, practised and shaped through a certain north Indian (read Hindi heartland) imagination. This feeling is sometimes expressed through an insistence on Hindi, more often through a belief that there is no difference between north and south — by implication, the north represents India.

Therefore, today, when we debate the nuances of certain constitutional amendments, it is not sufficient to focus on legal-constitutional arguments and the fine print of the Bills, nor to be carried away by the democratic romance of gender justice, or bogged down by the nit-picky gritty of delimitation and the democratic-seeming argument that representation in Lok Sabha is only about numbers. Beyond all these, and beyond questions about the legitimacy of procedures, are far more substantial questions of federalism, nationalism and the meaning of India.

In this sense, for the BJP far more than *naari shakti* was at stake. The lesson is that when an acceptable measure is pushed in bad faith, it doesn't sanitise bad faith. It betrays the real motives and could well help the Opposition intellectually grasp the nature of the contest that lies ahead.

The writer, based in Pune, taught Political Science

## Static Linkages

- Article 81 – Composition of Lok Sabha
- Article 82 – Readjustment after Census (Delimitation)
- Article 170 – State Legislative Assemblies
- 42nd Amendment Act (1976) – Freeze on delimitation
- 84th Amendment Act (2001) – Freeze extended till 2026
- Basic Structure Doctrine – Federalism (Kesavananda Bharati case)
- 73rd & 74th Amendments – Women's reservation in local bodies

## Critical Analysis

### Advantages

- Enhances women's political participation.
- Legislative expansion may improve accessibility of representatives.
- Long-pending reform towards inclusive democracy.

### Issues

- Linking with delimitation complicates implementation.
- Potential North-South divide in political representation.
- Rotation system weakens accountability and continuity.
- Perceived politicisation of constitutional reform.
- Risk to cooperative federalism.

### Stakeholder Viewpoints

- Women groups: Support reservation but oppose delay.
- Southern states: Seek protection of representation.
- Political parties: Divided due to electoral implications.

## Way Forward

- Decouple women's reservation from delimitation.
- Build political consensus via parliamentary mechanisms.
- Ensure federal consultation before major structural reforms.
- Consider alternatives:
  - Party-level reservation in tickets
  - Gradual implementation without rotation
- Maintain balance between representation and federal equity.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- A Constitution Amendment Bill proposing 33% reservation for women in legislatures, along with expansion of seats and fresh delimitation, failed to secure the required special majority in Parliament.
- The proposal triggered political contestation as it linked women's reservation with delimitation, raising concerns of regional imbalance and federal tensions.
- Southern states expressed apprehension about a possible decline in representation due to population-based seat redistribution.

### Key Points

- Women's Reservation
  - 33% reservation in Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.
  - Rotation of constituencies proposed.
- Delimitation Issue
  - To be conducted after census → linked with population changes.
  - Likely to benefit states with higher population growth.
- Legislative Expansion
  - Increase in total seats to improve representation.
  - May reduce constituency size but not necessarily improve governance.
- Federal Concerns
  - Southern states penalised despite better population control.
  - Raises issues of equity vs equality in representation.
- Political Dimension
  - Lack of consensus despite broad support for women's reservation.
  - Accusations of using gender justice for political objectives.

# Meghalaya's response to crisis in classroom is worth learning from



SWATI SAXENA  
AND SAMPATH  
KUMAR

**A** CRISIS IS unfolding in classrooms worldwide. The World Bank states that nearly 70 per cent of children in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) cannot read a simple text by age 10, pointing to deeper failures beyond schooling. Literacy is not built in classrooms alone but is shaped in early years, reflecting a shift from education to governance. In India, this is reflected in efforts to strengthen platforms such as Anganwadis. Initiatives like Early Childhood Care and Education kits in Uttar Pradesh signal a move to embed early learning within frontline systems, recognising that foundational skills must be built well before children enter school.

Within this broader context, Meghalaya's Early Childhood Development (ECD) model offers an instructive example. The state faces intersecting risks like high maternal mortality, widespread anaemia among women and children, low rural institutional deliveries, and gaps in antenatal care, compounded by poverty, remoteness, and low trust in health systems. Critically, with nearly one-fifth of its population under six, early childhood becomes central to its development trajectory. Recognising the interlinked nature of nutrition, health, and developmental delays, it has adopted a systems-based ECD Mission that integrates services and prioritises early, coordinated action to improve long-term human-capital outcomes.

Children's skills are best observed in natural, relational contexts, not sterile clinical settings. Early identification allows for low-cost, home-based interventions that can significantly alter developmental trajectories

Early childhood development is no longer viewed as a narrow social-sector concern but as a cornerstone of human capital formation, equity, and long-term economic growth. Research from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child has shown that brain development is a cumulative, experiential process that begins before birth and is most rapid in the first five years of life. Neural circuits governing language, cognition, emotional regulation, and executive function are built sequentially, simple connections first, followed by more complex ones, creating either a strong or fragile foundation for life-long learning, health, and productivity.

Adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, protection from toxic stress, and opportunities for early learning strengthen this foundation. Conversely, deprivation and chronic stress disrupt early development. Intervening late in this trajectory is inefficient and inequitable. Global frameworks like the WHO-UNICEF-World Bank's Nurturing

Care Framework also emphasise five integrated pillars: Good health, adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, security and safety, and opportunities for early learning.

Despite early interventions yielding the highest returns of any investment across the life course, in LMICs this remains fragmented, reactive, and poorly integrated. Meghalaya's Guide for Monitoring Child Development (GMCD) is designed to support early identification of developmental delays among children aged 1-42 months. Instead of relying on testing or rigid checklists, trained frontline workers, ASHAs, ANMs, Anganwadi workers, nurses, or paediatricians, engage caregivers in open-ended dialogue about how children play, communicate, move, relate, and manage simple self-care tasks. Caregivers are treated as co-observers and experts on their own children. This approach reflects a critical insight from developmental science: Children's skills are best observed in natural, relational contexts, not sterile clinical settings. Early identification allows for low-cost, home-based interventions that can significantly alter developmental trajectories.

Preliminary data from Meghalaya's GMCD rollout is promising. More than 80 per cent of assessed children showed no visible developmental delay, while around 12 per cent were identified as needing follow-up support, and a small proportion reflected uncertainty requiring closer monitoring.

This approach also involves a shift from top-down service delivery to decentralised leadership and grassroots agency. Frontline workers are empowered and communities are engaged through Village Health Councils and Self-Help Groups, building sustainable pathways to improved child outcomes.

This model is effective because it brings together three mutually reinforcing elements within a single governance framework. First, it embeds robust evidence from neuroscience and developmental research into routine service delivery. Second, it integrates health, nutrition, and early learning systems. Third, it decentralises implementation. This ensures that early interventions are timely, culturally sensitive, and scalable.

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- Health
- Nutrition
- Responsive caregiving
- Safety and security
- Early learning opportunities

## Meghalaya Model

- Targets children aged 1-42 months
- Uses non-clinical, caregiver-based assessment approach
- Involves frontline workers: ASHA, ANM, Anganwadi workers
- Promotes community participation and decentralisation

## Outcomes

- ~80% children: No developmental delay
- ~12%: Require follow-up intervention
- Focus on early detection + low-cost home-based intervention

## Significance

- Enhances human capital formation
- Reduces intergenerational poverty
- Improves education outcomes (FLN)
- Aligns with NEP 2020 and SDG 4 (Quality Education)

## Static Linkages

- Article 21A – Right to Education
- Article 45 – Early childhood care and education
- Directive Principles – Article 39(f)
- Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)
- National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 – Foundational Literacy & Numeracy
- Poshan Abhiyaan
- Human Capital Formation (Economics – NCERT)
- Demographic Dividend
- 73rd Constitutional Amendment – Decentralisation
- Behavioural aspects of development (NCERT Psychology)

## Critical Analysis

### Strengths

- Holistic governance approach integrating health, nutrition, and education
- Evidence-based policymaking using neuroscience
- Early intervention → high returns (Economic Survey, Heckman Curve)
- Decentralised implementation improves outreach
- Strengthens community participation and accountability

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- The World Bank (Learning Poverty Report) highlights that nearly 70% of children in LMICs cannot read a simple text by age 10, indicating a foundational learning crisis.
- Shift in policy discourse from school-based learning to early childhood development (ECD).
- India is strengthening early childhood platforms like Anganwadis under schemes such as ICDS and Poshan Abhiyaan.
- Meghalaya has implemented an integrated Early Childhood Development (ECD) Mission with a focus on convergence of services.
- Introduction of Guide for Monitoring Child Development (GMCD) for early identification of developmental delays.

### Key Points

- Early childhood (0-6 years) is critical for cognitive, emotional, and physical development.
- Scientific evidence (Harvard Center on the Developing Child):
  - Brain development is cumulative and sequential, with maximum growth in early years.
- Learning poverty linked to early deficits in nutrition, caregiving, and stimulation.
- Nurturing Care Framework (WHO-UNICEF-World Bank) identifies 5 pillars:

## Challenges

- Capacity constraints of Anganwadi and frontline workers
- Uneven inter-state implementation
- Persistent malnutrition, anaemia, and health gaps
- Weak data monitoring and evaluation systems
- Limited budgetary allocation to early childhood sector

## Issues

- Fragmentation across ministries (Health, WCD, Education)
- Urban-rural and regional disparities
- Low awareness among caregivers
- Trust deficit in public health systems

## Way Forward

- Universalise ECCE under NEP 2020 with strong institutional support
- Strengthen Anganwadi infrastructure, training, and incentives
- Ensure convergence across ministries and schemes
- Scale up best practices like Meghalaya ECD model
- Increase public expenditure on health and nutrition
- Integrate digital monitoring systems (real-time tracking)
- Promote community-based behavioural change communication (BCC)
- Focus on maternal health and nutrition as foundation

# Public communication must not become political messaging



RAMESH  
CHENNITHALA

INDIA'S DEMOCRACY rests on a simple principle: Elections must be fought on a level playing field. Governments may command the machinery of the state, but that machinery must remain politically neutral. When the resources of governance begin to influence electoral competition, the fairness of democracy itself comes into question.

In recent years, digital governance has dramatically expanded governments' communication power. Welfare beneficiary databases, SMS gateways, and mass messaging platforms were designed to improve service delivery. However, this very infrastructure has created a new democratic dilemma. Across the country, official communication systems are increasingly being used in ways that resemble political messaging. On March 7, the Kerala High Court examined the Chief Minister's Office sending bulk WhatsApp messages through external agencies using official databases. Last month, the Supreme Court heard challenges regarding a door-to-door welfare feedback programme ahead of the Kerala elections. Similar questions have arisen at the national level. In March 2024, the Election Commission of India directed the Union government to halt bulk WhatsApp messages under the "Vishit Bharat Sampark" campaign after citizens received letters from the Prime Minister highlighting central schemes even after the election schedule was announced. Data from Google's Ads Transparency Centre shows, between January and April 2024, the BJP spent about Rs 39 crore on political ads, while the government's Central Bureau of Communication spent roughly Rs 32 crore promoting official programmes.

This reflects a broader transformation in the relationship between technology and politics. Governments today possess an unprecedented ability to reach millions instantly and repeatedly at minimal cost — an advantage no opposition party or independent formation can match. This creates a structural imbalance. Democracies are not weakened only by illegal actions; they are also weakened when institutional advantages tilt the playing field. The concern is most serious when communication infrastructure is combined with large-scale publicity campaigns funded by taxpayer resources. While informing citizens about public programmes is legitimate, publicity that resembles political promotion, particularly close to elections, raises troubling questions.

India has faced these concerns before. In the 2015 *Common Cause vs Union of India* case, SC laid down guidelines to prevent taxpayer-funded government advertisements from becoming instruments of political promotion. The digital era now presents a more complex version of the same challenge. This is not simply a question of legality but of democratic fairness. When governments possess overwhelming communication advantages through state-controlled systems, the balance of electoral competition can be distorted, even if no explicit rule is violated. India's rapid expansion of digital governance has transformed service delivery, but for it to remain a democratic success, one principle must remain non-negotiable: Public communication systems must serve citizens, not political messaging. India needs clearer norms to ensure that instruments of governance do not become instruments of electoral advantage.

The author is chairman, Kerala Election Campaign Committee for INC, and former Leader of Opposition, Kerala Legislative Assembly

Governments today possess an unprecedented ability to reach millions instantly and repeatedly at minimal cost — an advantage no opposition party or independent formation can match

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- Concerns over the use of government digital communication platforms (SMS, WhatsApp, beneficiary databases) for messaging that resembles political campaigning.
- Election Commission of India directed the Union government to halt bulk messaging during the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) period (March 2024).
- Supreme Court of India is examining welfare outreach/feedback programmes close to elections.
- Kerala High Court scrutinised use of official databases for bulk messaging.
- Rising expenditure on government publicity alongside political ads highlights concerns of unfair electoral advantage.

### Key Points

- Digital Governance Expansion: DBT, Aadhaar-linked databases, mass messaging systems enhance outreach.
- Core Issue: Blurring of governance communication and political promotion.
- MCC Relevance: Restricts use of official machinery for electoral advantage after election announcement.
- Judicial Precedent: *Common Cause vs Union of India* (2015)—guidelines on government advertisements.

- Structural Imbalance: Ruling governments have disproportionate communication power.
- Democratic Principle: Level playing field is essential for free and fair elections.

### Static Linkages

- Free and fair elections → Basic Structure Doctrine
- Article 324 → Powers of Election Commission
- Model Code of Conduct (nature: non-statutory)
- Public funds accountability
- Separation between State and political party
- Role of judiciary in electoral reforms

### Critical Analysis

#### Pros

- Improves welfare delivery and citizen awareness
- Enhances administrative efficiency
- Strengthens direct communication with beneficiaries

#### Cons

- Misuse of state resources for political gains
- Distortion of electoral competition
- Weak regulatory framework for digital campaigning
- Data privacy concerns (use of beneficiary databases)
- Ethical violation: governance vs propaganda

### Way Forward

- Clear MCC guidelines for digital platforms
- Independent audit of government publicity expenditure
- Strict separation of governance and political communication
- Strengthening legal backing of advertisement guidelines
- Ensure data protection and consent-based communication
- Greater transparency in state-funded campaigns

# Build resilience, account for costs

**T**HE INDIA Meteorological Department has forecast a "below normal" southwest monsoon, with the country expected to receive only 92 per cent of the long period average rainfall for the four-month season (June-September). The prognosis—based on the high probability of El Niño conditions emerging by the second half of the season—comes on top of the energy supply shock from the conflict in West Asia. However, the consolation here is the ample stocks of wheat and rice in government godowns. At 60.4 million tonnes (mt) on April 1, these are above the 50 mt a year ago and the minimum required buffer of 21 mt for this date. With a bumper wheat crop, whose harvesting and procurement has just begun, the stocks are likely to rise, cushioning the impact of any monsoon failure.

Food stocks do what foreign exchange reserves are meant for—act as a shield against external shocks. Such shocks could be due to weather (losses from drought or excess rain), pandemics (free foodgrains were the most effective social safety net during Covid), global financial meltdowns and wars (both geoeconomic, like Donald Trump's tariff actions, and actual ones like in Iran and Ukraine). India, in recent times, has built not only massive food and forex chests, but even strategic petroleum reserve capacity of some 5.3 mt. Together, they point to greater reliance on "just-in-case" as against the conventional "just-in-time" strategy. The latter focused on efficiency, minimising waste by producing goods only when needed and stocking just enough to align with current supply-demand dynamics. With just-in-case, governments and firms prioritise long-term resilience over short-term efficiency to withstand unexpected supply chain disruptions.

Building resilience, whether grain warehouses or underground crude oil caverns, costs money. That includes fixed capital costs as well as inventory holding and other operational charges. Stored goods, notably grains, are also prone to quality and value loss over time. There is a cost even to maintaining forex reserves that are typically invested in low-yielding safe assets. While challenges from climate change and geopolitical instabilities make resilience-building necessary, the key is to recognise the costs involved. While firms may pass on the additional costs to consumers, a significant part of national resilience budgets would have to be funded using taxpayer money. All the more reason why that money ought to be well spent and fully accounted for.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

### Context of the News

- India Meteorological Department forecasts below-normal monsoon (~92% of LPA) for June–September.
- Likely emergence of El Niño conditions in the latter half of the monsoon season.
- Concurrent global energy supply risks due to geopolitical tensions (West Asia).
- India holds high foodgrain stocks (~60.4 mt), above buffer norms, providing a safety cushion.
- Reflects policy shift toward resilience-based ("just-in-case") approach in economic management.

### Key Points

- Monsoon & Climate
  - 92% of LPA → classified as below normal rainfall.
  - El Niño linked with weakened monsoon circulation.
- Food Security
  - Stocks significantly above buffer norm (~21 mt).
  - Managed by Food Corporation of India.
  - Acts as shock absorber against drought and inflation.
- Macroeconomic Resilience Tools
  - Foodgrain stocks → food security
  - Forex reserves → external stability
  - Strategic Petroleum Reserves (~5.3 mt) → energy security

- Policy Approach
  - Shift from Just-in-Time (efficiency) to Just-in-Case (resilience, redundancy)
- Economic Implications
  - Increased fiscal cost (storage, maintenance)
  - Potential inflation management tool
  - Trade-off between efficiency vs security

### Static Linkages

- ENSO–Monsoon relationship (NCERT Geography).
- Buffer stock policy & PDS (Economic Survey, Food Security framework).
- Balance of Payments & Forex reserves (NCERT Economics).
- Energy security & strategic reserves (NITI Aayog).
- Supply chain concepts (post-COVID Economic Survey insights).

### Critical Analysis

- Advantages
  - Enhances disaster preparedness
  - Ensures food & energy security
  - Stabilises inflation during shocks
- Concerns
  - High fiscal burden on exchequer
  - Storage inefficiencies → wastage risk
  - Market distortions in agriculture
  - Opportunity cost of holding large reserves
- Core Issue
  - Balancing resilience vs economic efficiency

### Way Forward

- Modernise storage (silos, digitisation)
- Rationalise buffer norms dynamically
- Invest in climate-resilient agriculture
- Diversify energy sources (renewables)
- Improve PDS targeting efficiency
- Adopt hybrid supply chain model