

**DIA, DEOGHAR IAS ACADEMY**

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# Big tech's AI ad tools rattle agencies

Yet again, the death knell has been sounded for ad agencies; but hang on, they still do have a role to play due to their understanding of clients; agencies will also play a significant part in the data that points AI in the right direction towards achieving a marketer's outcome.

## NEWS ANALYSIS

Vallari Sanzgiri

For the last few months, Swiggy, India's hyperlocal food delivery platform, had been involved in the beta testing of Google's advertising-focused AI solutions to boost its reach to audiences. One of these solutions was an improved version of Performance Max, which allows e-commerce users to re-engage with existing customers who are inactive.

"We've seen Performance Max help new user growth, creating an additional impact within the range of 15% to 25%. The bigger part is bringing down our costs. For different hyperlocals, we've seen the costs vary anywhere between 25% and 40%," said Arjun Choudhary, Vice President of Revenue and Growth at Swiggy, during the launch event of Google's new tools in July.

Incidentally, Swiggy reported an improvement in EBIT margins and attributed this to momentum in food delivery and the expansion of its quick commerce vertical last month.

At the Google event, not only did the tech major launch several tools such as AI Max Research Campaigns and Demand Chat but it also said it would soon roll out agentic AI capabilities across Google Ads and Google Analytics globally. With these AI assistants, advertisers could set up campaigns that



Top gear: Meta is rolling out solutions to automate ad creation as well as buy and deploy ads. REUTERS

drive higher performance, from onboarding and campaign creation to reporting and troubleshooting.

It's not just Google. Meta has been rolling out solutions to automate ad creation as well as buy and deploy ads. Traditional advertising agencies that play a huge role in the \$963 billion ad market have a reason to be nervous. The new AI solutions being rolled out by the tech majors are so disruptive they could well kill the agency model.

Industry observers are already commenting on how big a change is happening.

Take BoFA Securities, the corporate and investment banking division of Bank of America, which noted that Meta's AI assistant is an "underappreciated opportunity" with the potential to become a cen-



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**ARJUN CHOUDHARY**  
Vice President of Revenue and Growth at Swiggy

tral interface for content discovery, commerce, and productivity.

Sanchit Vir Gogia, CEO and Chief Analyst at Greyhound Research, said Meta's end-to-end advertising vision marks a "structural rupture" in how advertising is executed.

"This shift erodes the agency's historical domain of media planning and creative scale. However, this is a forced reinvention moment for agencies. The long-term value of creative strategy, brand steward-

ship, and ethical guardrails remains beyond the reach of today's AI," said Gogia, advising agencies to deliver value where AI falls short. These areas include cultural intelligence, creative originality, and campaign governance.

### What's changing

With big tech doubling down on the advertising market, analysts have been debating the future of the creative and marketing agencies.

According to Jay Pattisall, VP, Principal Analyst, Forrester, agencies will bifurcate into enterprise and SMB (small and medium-sized business) providers. Large agency networks have built AI technologies that are comparable to Meta and Google's tools in some respects and superior in others, he said, giving the example of agency

tools that are better at brand governance and cross-platform optimisation. "SMB providers will be more focused on executing for clients using Meta, Google and Amazon's tools. Since big ad tech's AI tools will likely produce creatives that lack differentiation, SMB agencies will be charged with building the brand into the campaigns that run on social platforms and through their DSPs (demand-side platforms)," said Pattisall.

Similarly, Manish Solanki, COO and Co-founder, TheSmallBigidea, said the world is moving in a direction where media buying becomes faster and more automated. This means that resources handling performance marketing might evolve into a more analytical role where the real win will be in creativity and cultural relevance.

"We have to ensure that we move up the value chain – we double down on what AI or platforms can't do, strong brand thinking and smart creatives. Be the advisor, don't just execute. Be the brand's unbiased partner, help them pick the right mix, not just one platform. Work with AI, not against it. If you know how to tell a story, you will stay relevant," said Solanki, pointing out that AI learns from what's available in the market while an agency will always be relevant when it comes to originality.

Solanki also estimated that running ads will get cheaper, but breaking through the noise will be

tougher. Regional content will grow finally, and there will be scale for Indian languages; but data privacy will be a big issue. Most people here aren't ready for what's coming, he opines.

Kartik Mehta, Head of Asia and CBO at Channel Factory ad-tech platform, said the maximisation of ad exposure is still in the hands of humans. "It's just going to enhance and expedite the time that it takes for campaigns to launch or produce the results that they need on these larger platforms. I would say [AI integration] would be a catalyst to expedite certain areas of work," said Mehta.

In fact, even Dan Taylor, Vice President, Global Ads, Google, said that advertising agencies will continue to have a huge role to play, despite the advent of AI, due to their understanding of clients. He said agencies will also play a significant part in the data that points AI in the right direction towards achieving a marketer's outcome.

"AI can generate options based on patterns, but the 'why' behind a campaign, the core strategic insight, the emotional resonance that truly connects with an audience, the ethical considerations, the final curatorial judgment, that remains fundamentally human," said Taylor.

Russhabh R Thakkar, Founder and CEO, Frodoh, says, "If platforms go direct to clients, agencies won't panic, they'll pivot."

(The writer is with The Hindu businessline)



# Why must India recognise its open ecosystems?

Why are lands classified as 'wastelands' important? Are pastoral communities dependent on them?

Abi Tamim Vanak  
Anuja Malhotra

## The story so far:

**D**eserts are often imagined as failures of nature, and barren wastelands in need of redemption. This worldview fuels grand ambitions to "green" the desert, through afforestation, irrigation schemes, or even climate engineering. This gives way to the idea that deserts are broken ecosystems. So pervasive is this vilification, that land degradation is also known as "desertification", and June 17 every year is celebrated as World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought.

## Are deserts important?

In truth, deserts are ancient, diverse, and resilient biomes, finely tuned to extremes. They occupy nearly one-third of the Earth's terrestrial surface, and are home to uniquely adapted plants, animals, and

human cultures. It is ironic that humans disregard deserts, when several early civilisations were set in desert climates, whether in early Mesopotamia, Egypt, or the Indus valley. Indeed, some historians argue that it is these very harsh desert conditions that prompted humans to develop complex societies and technologies that could invent ingenious ways of irrigation to survive in otherwise inhospitable conditions.

## What about other open spaces?

India's relationship with open spaces is full of contradictions. On the one hand, we fetishise them. Real estate ads routinely promise sweeping lawns with names like Savana or Utopia. But when it comes to the country's own vast open natural ecosystems such as grasslands, savannas, scrublands and open woodlands, we have done the opposite. These landscapes have been systematically ignored in policy or worse,

actively erased. On official maps, millions of hectares of these ecosystems are classified as wastelands, a term inherited from colonial land-use categories. In policy terms, a wasteland is land waiting to be fixed, often by planting trees, converting it for agriculture or paving it over for industry. What should be protected and stewarded has instead become a target for transformation. India's deserts, grasslands and savannas are home to species found nowhere else: the Great Indian Bustard, the caracal, the Indian wolf etc. These ecosystems also store carbon, not in big trees above ground but rather, deep in the soil.

Equally important are the communities dependent on them. Millions of pastoral groups such as the Dhangar, Rabari, Kuruba etc. depend on these ecosystems for grazing. When we fence off grasslands or plant "forests" on them, it's not just ecology we damage but also livelihoods, mobility, and local knowledge systems. In

many cases, pastoralist groups are also stewards of biodiversity and ecosystem health. However, Indian grasslands and pastoralist systems have not received the desired protection and management.

## What should be the road ahead?

Rather than trying to turn deserts into forests, we should study how life thrives without abundance. This is not to say that land degradation should not be addressed. Reversing degradation in drylands requires careful restoration that respects native vegetation, focuses on soil and moisture conservation, and draws from indigenous knowledge of land management. Low-tech solutions like water harvesting, rotational grazing, and protecting natural regrowth often outperform greenwashing projects that aim to plant millions of trees to "green" the desert. We need policies that recognise ecosystem diversity, reward soil carbon storage, and support pastoralist land use. A functioning desert or savanna, with its intricate food webs, seasonal rhythms, and cultural continuities, is far more alive than a failed monoculture plantation. Perhaps it is time to rename World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought to World Day to Combat Land Degradation, and give deserts their respectable name back.

*The authors are with the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment.*

## THE GIST

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# Who are qualified as 'ordinarily resident'?

What does Section 20 of the Representation of the People Act, 1950 state? Why are migrant workers vulnerable when it comes to classifying themselves as ordinarily resident in a particular constituency? Are NRIs allowed to vote? What does the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960 govern?

## EXPLAINER

Rangarajan R.

### The story so far:

The Election Commission of India (EC) has initiated a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls in Bihar. This has kindled the debate around the term 'ordinarily resident' for the purpose of being included in the electoral rolls of a constituency.

### Who is 'ordinarily resident'?

The electoral rolls are prepared by the EC as per the provisions of the Representation of the People Act, 1950 (RP Act). Section 19 of the RP Act requires that a person is 'ordinarily resident' in a constituency for inclusion in its electoral roll.

Section 20 provides the meaning of the term 'ordinarily resident'. It specifies that a person shall not be deemed to be 'ordinarily resident' in a constituency only because he/she owns or possesses a dwelling house therein. However, a person temporarily absent from his/her place of residence shall continue to be 'ordinarily resident' therein. Persons who are (a) members of armed forces of the Union, (b) armed police force of a State serving outside that State, (c) employed by the Government of India in a post outside India or (d) holding a constitutional office declared by the President in consultation with the EC are considered, along with their spouse, to be 'ordinarily resident' in the constituency where they would have been 'ordinarily resident' but for such posting. Section 20A was added in 2010 to enable non-resident Indians who have shifted out of India, even for long term, to register and vote in the constituency in which their address as per passport is located.

The Registration of Electors Rules, 1960 (RER), notified by the Central government in consultation with the EC, governs the preparation of, and



On a roll: An advertisement van for the SIR in Purnia, Bihar on July 9. SHASHI SUDHAR KASHAP

inclusion/exclusion of names in the electoral rolls as per the provisions of the RP Act.

### What are potential issues?

The requirement of being 'ordinarily resident' for inclusion in the electoral roll of a constituency is to ensure that the voter maintains real ties with the constituency that preserves representative accountability. It is also aimed at preventing fraudulent registrations.

The Gauhati High Court in the *Mamohan Singh* case (1999), indicated that the term 'ordinarily resident' shall mean a habitual resident of that place. It must be permanent in character and not temporary or casual. It must be a place where the person has the intention to

dwell permanently. A reasonable man must accept him/her as a resident of that place.

The issue arises when it comes to migrant labourers. The Periodic Labour Force Survey of 2020-21 estimated that around 11% of our population migrated due to employment related reasons. This translates to close to 15 crore voters being migrant labourers within or outside their States. Some of these migrations are seasonal in nature where the labourers return to their ordinary residence for some months of a year. Many migrant construction and security workers live in temporary shacks/residences at their place of work. They move from one location to another, within a State or even in different States, as part of their work. They return to the ordinary residence in

their home State at regular intervals. They exercise their right to vote in that place where their families and children live and where their properties exist. While they may not be residing permanently in such residence, the philosophy behind being 'ordinarily resident' as opined by the courts is broadly fulfilled with respect to that residence for such migrant workers.

Any migrant has the right to shift his/her vote to their new place of residence anywhere in India if they so desire. However, removal of migrant voters from the electoral roll of their original residence by following a strict interpretation of the term 'ordinarily resident' can vitiate the democratic process. It may result in their disenfranchisement as most of them would not be keen, and neither welcome, to register as voters in their temporary place of work.

### What can be the way forward?

The RP Act provides the option to service voters, persons holding a declared office and NRIs to retain the vote in their constituency even though they may not be permanently residing in such place. While it may not be an apple-to-apple comparison, it must be noted that most labourers, short-term or long-term, migrate on account of lack of opportunities in their region. They continue to have close connections with their original residence and choose to retain their right to vote in such constituency. The RP Act or the RER may be suitably amended to preserve the choice of migrant labourers. Suitable mechanisms, acceptable to all stakeholders, to enable participation of migrant labourers in the elections should be explored. The issue of migrants enrolling more than once in different constituencies should be addressed separately through Aadhaar seeding. Rangarajan, R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Courseware on Polity Simplified'. He currently trains at Officers IAS Academy. Views expressed are personal.

## THE GIST

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# The changing landscape of employment

**E**ach year, lakhs of students graduate from universities, colleges, Industrial Training Institutes, and skill programmes in India. Yet the system continues to face challenges not only in accommodating them, but also effectively integrating them into meaningful employment.

The Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO) plays a central role in India's social security system by managing retirement savings for workers in the organised sector. With over 7 crore members, it remains one of the world's largest social security organisations. EPFO data serves as a valuable indicator of formal employment trends. The share decline in net new EPFO enrolments post-2019 reflected the pandemic effect on formal employment. However, the March 2025 data shows a steady increase in formal workforce participation. Young professionals, particularly fresh graduates, constitute a significant portion of new enrolments. The 18-25 age group consistently represents a large share with the 18-21 subgroup alone accounting for around 18%-22% of the total new subscribers in the recent months. The trend signals a push towards formalisation but demands a deeper analysis of job stability, wages and long-term financial security.

## Youth unemployment

According to the India Employment Report 2024, published by the International Labour Organization and the Institute for Human Development, the youth account for 83% of India's unemployed population. Alarming, the share of unemployed individuals with secondary or higher education has nearly doubled over two decades.

The issue goes beyond unemployment; this is a crisis of unemployability. The Economic Survey 2023-24 states that only about half of India's youth are deemed job-ready after graduation. One in two lacks the



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Urgent structural reforms are needed to address the growing disconnect between education and employment in India

digital and professional skills employers' demand, particularly in an economy undergoing rapid technological transformation. Moreover, the looming influence of AI threatens India's tech sector, putting several traditional job roles at the risk of displacement. Without adequate reskilling and upskilling efforts, the gap between graduate output and available opportunities will only widen.

Despite economic progress, India's workforce remains predominantly informal. The India Employment Report 2024 notes nearly 90% of employment is informal with the proportion of salaried, regular jobs declining since 2018. While contractual employment has grown, concerns about job security and social welfare remain unresolved.

Many young Indians struggle with technical skills. The report states that 75% of young people struggle with basic digital tasks such as sending an email with an attachment. Over 60% cannot perform simple file operations such as copy-pasting and 90% lack fundamental spreadsheet skills such as working with formulas.

These statistics are worrying given that the Future of Jobs Report 2025 by the World Economic Forum forecasts major shifts in employment dynamics.

The report states that by 2030, an estimated 170 million new jobs will be created representing 14% of total employment. However, 92 million existing jobs (8% of total employment) will be displaced. This means there will be a new growth of 78 million jobs, or a 7% increase in total employment. While these projections offer optimism, they also highlight the urgency of bridging the skill gap to ensure that India's workforce is adequately prepared for the evolving job landscape.

## What India must do

India stands at a critical crossroads. Without targeted policy interventions and expansive reskilling initiatives, millions of graduates will continue struggling to secure meaningful

employment. Investing in education, vocational training, and digital literacy is essential for aligning the workforce with future job demands.

Urgent structural reforms are needed. First, there should be stronger collaboration between industry and academia, if necessary, by law. Each higher education institution must ideally have at least one formal partnership with industry partners. Second, educational institutions need to be held accountable for placements and not just educational degrees. We need to create accreditation systems for educational institutions aligned with job placements for the outgoing students. Idea Labs and Tinker Labs should be made mandatory components of every high school and higher education institution. The integration of the humanities, foreign language learning, and soft skills should be made mandatory across all levels of education.

Third, India needs to extend its focus beyond national borders. Skilling and training programmes should be designed to meet the needs of ageing societies in many Western nations, where the demand for young professionals is expected to increase. This approach aligns with the Indian government's strategy for enhancing the international mobility of skilled workers. The International Institute of Migration and Development is currently working as the Indian partner in the European Union's Link4Skills project that utilises the migration corridor framework to evaluate the skill demands and labour shortages in various European countries and beyond. Fourth, to drive these transformations, an Indian Education Services, similar in stature to the Indian Administrative Services, should be established; it would attract the best minds into the education sector. Finally, the education system should open its doors to professionals from the industry. This would help bridge the gap between theory and application.



# Assessing India's carbon credit trading scheme targets

**T**he Indian government recently announced greenhouse gas emissions intensity of production targets for entities (such as a steel plant) operating within eight of the nine heavy industrial sectors covered in India's Carbon Credit Trading Scheme's (CCTS) compliance mechanism. The eight sectors are aluminium, cement, paper and pulp, chlor-alkali, iron and steel, textile, petrochemicals and petro refineries. So, is there a way to understand whether these are ambitious targets or not?

The first question one needs to ask is this: should we measure ambition at the entity level, or at the sector level or the level of the economy? Our analysis shows that the ambition of India's carbon market targets should be assessed at the aggregate economy-wide level, and not at the level of individual entities or sectors.

## An economy-wide lens is more important

We can look at the Perform, Achieve and Trade (PAT) scheme, which is India's flagship energy efficiency programme for large industries. Under PAT, energy-intensive industries are given targets to reduce their energy use; those which exceed their targets can trade the excess savings with others. We analysed performance data from four sectors under the PAT Cycle I (2012-14) and found a mixed but interesting picture. In some entities, the energy used per unit of production (energy intensity) increased but decreased in others. At the sector level, energy intensity rose in two sectors (paper and chlor alkali) and fell in the other two (aluminium and cement). However, when we combined emissions, output and price data from all four sectors and adjusted for inflation, less energy was used, overall, to produce the same amount of economic output.

This shows that even if energy efficiency rises or falls in some entities or sectors, India's overall energy use can still become more efficient. We



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The ambition of carbon market targets should be assessed at the aggregate economy-wide level, and not at the level of individual entities or sectors

found similar behaviour across other PAT cycles and sectors. These observations give us a useful insight – India's PAT scheme was able to effectively use market mechanisms to achieve energy intensity reduction at an aggregate level. The decrease in overall energy intensity, even as it rose for some entities, shows that the market mechanism worked; those companies were able to buy energy efficiency certificates instead of undertaking costly in-house changes.

But, this in itself does not tell us if the aggregate energy intensity reduction was aggressive or business-as-usual. This does, however, tell us that one should only analyse the aggregate target to infer whether it was aggressive or not. That is, for an externality-driven market, achieving reduction at an aggregate level is far more important than achieving the same at the entity level for 'all' entities. An emissions trading scheme does not bother about individual entities or sectors. It bothers about the economy-level aggregate effect, which is where, ideally, the ambition should be evaluated.

But are not entity or sector-level targets important to reduce emissions as well? A research paper by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) shows that entity or sector-level targets only determine financial transfers across entities and sectors, and not the overall emission intensity decline.

Comparing the new CCTS targets with historical sector-level performance under the PAT scheme also is not the most meaningful approach to assess ambition. Just because the reduction in emissions in the past has been modest at the industry level, it cannot be the case for the future. Our mitigation actions have to progressively become more ambitious than in the past. Therefore, only a comparison with a future trajectory aligned with a pathway towards India's stated Nationally Determined Contributions

(NDC) and a 2070 net-zero future is relevant. While the industry sector-specific CCTS targets cannot be directly compared with the economy-wide NDC target, economy-wide modelling assessments can give useful information in this regard.

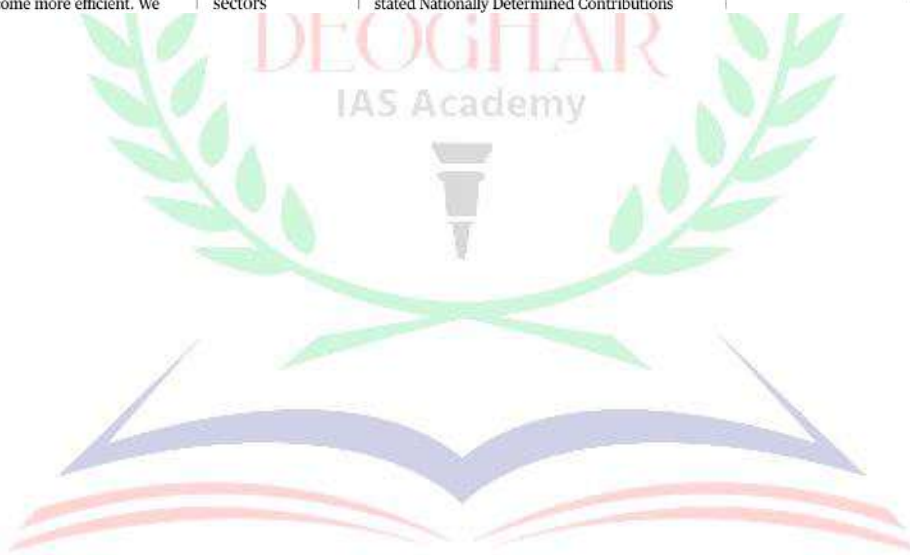
## Emissions intensity to decline

According to our recent modelling of a 2030 NDC-aligned emissions reduction scenario for India, the carbon dioxide emissions intensity of India's energy sector (per unit of GDP) is expected to decline at an average annual rate of 3.44% between 2025 and 2030. In comparison, the emissions intensity of value added (EIVA) in India's manufacturing sector is projected to decline by at least 2.53% annually over the same period. This suggests that in the near-term, industry may decarbonise at a slower pace than other sectors – particularly the power sector, which has more low-cost mitigation opportunities.

Against this backdrop, the combined average annual EIVA reduction for the eight sectors based on current CCTS targets – indicative of sector-specific commodity price data (a rough proxy for value added), and projected production growth rates – is estimated at 1.68% between 2023-24 and 2026-27. Early signs suggest that the industrial targets under CCTS may not be ambitious enough.

While this is not directly comparable since entities covered under the carbon trading scheme represent only a portion of India's overall manufacturing base, it is still the most relevant benchmark available until detailed modelling is done for all sectors. Ultimately, it is the aggregate decline that will determine whether India's effort is truly ambitious.

*The views expressed are personal*



# Smoke and sulphur

There cannot be different environmental standards within India

**T**he axe has dropped. The Environment Ministry has exempted the majority of India's coal-fired plants from mandatorily installing Flue Gas Desulphurisation (FGD) systems, which are designed to cut sulphur dioxide (SO<sub>2</sub>) emissions. In effect, this undermines its own mandate from 2015 that required all such plants – there are about 180 of them now, comprising 600 units – to install these systems. While these were expected to be in place by 2017, only about 8% of the units have actually installed FGD – nearly all by the public-sector National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC). SO<sub>2</sub> is among the gases monitored by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) as exposure beyond a degree can be harmful. Less appreciated is its propensity to form sulphates in the air and contributing to particulate matter pollution. In general, India's average ground-level SO<sub>2</sub> measurements have been below the permissible levels – one among several reasons that there has not been a sense of urgency in implementing FGD norms. The official reasons are the limited number of vendors in India, high installation costs, the potential rise in electricity bills, and disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the latest deadlines flew by in 2024, the Environment's Ministry's decision – it follows consultations with scientific institutions and new commissioned studies – is a sharp disavowal of the current policy. An expert appraisal committee says that Indian coal is low in sulphur; SO<sub>2</sub> levels in cities near plants with operational FGD units do not differ significantly from those without these units, and all of these were anyway well below permissible levels. The committee had said that concerns about sulphates are unfounded. It also argued, echoed by the Minister for Power, that sulphates had a beneficial side-effect in suppressing warming from greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, reducing sulphates would actually worsen warming and compromise India's climate goals. While IPCC assessments do account for the heat-suppressing action of sulphates, nowhere is it projected as an unalloyed good.

A minority of plants, about a fifth – those within a 10 km radius of the NCR; in cities with a population of over a million, or known to be in pollution hotspots – must install FGDs by 2028. This seems to suggest that what determines their installation is the location of a coal plant and not whether FGDs are effective or SO<sub>2</sub> is harmful. This is a rare instance when there are different environmental standards within India on controlling exposure to a pollutant. While it is not unscientific to revise understanding of the harms or benefits of substances, this needs debate in the public domain before a policy is changed. Otherwise it amounts to undermining India's commitment to scientifically informed public health.





# Secularism — implicit from day one, explicit in 1976

**“G**od is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. Yet his shadow still looms...”, said Friedrich Nietzsche. As many as 66 Constitutions make some reference to God in their Preamble. True, Nehru led from the front in India's adoption of secularism. He explicitly said in his autobiography of how what he called “organized religion” filled him “with horror... almost always it seemed to stand for a blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition and exploitation”. Nehru's strong views on religion did play a significant role in India's choice of secular polity. Unlike today's politicians, he did not need religion to succeed in politics.

Though the Supreme Court has said more than once that the term secular in India does not connote either strict separation between religion and state like in France or the non-establishment of religion like in the United States, the debate on the artificial imposition of secularism during the Emergency and the urgent need for its deletion continues though Indian secularism is rooted in Emperor Ashoka's Dhamma and is consistent with noble ideals of India's freedom struggle. Article 51A(b) makes it a fundamental duty of every citizen “to cherish and uphold noble ideals which inspired our national struggle for freedom”. Secularism was one such ideal.

## Secularism spells autonomy

The advocates of Hindutva think that minorities have got some special privileges through secularism and that the time has come to bring an end to neutrality of the state in religious matters. Unfortunately, supporters of a theocratic state do not understand that secularism is basically good for religions as it protects religions from state domination and interference. Religions remain independent and autonomous under secularism. If a religion becomes state religion, the state takes over the control of such religion.

Our secularism ensures autonomy of the Hindu religion and the proponents of Hindutva must understand this. Has not Islam been destroyed through various so-called Islamic states? Mahmud Ghazni and Iltutmish defied the caliph and assumed the title of king. Zawabit or state-made laws prevailed over Shariah during medieval India. Did not Henry VIII defy Papal authority just to marry Anne Boleyn and create the Anglican Church with the King as its head. In the consecration of the Ram temple in January 2024, the state's decision prevailed over the theological view of the Shankaracharyas. The state, not religion, decided what is auspicious.

Is the salvation of souls really the mandate of a modern state? British Political theorist John Locke in his famous ‘A Letter Concerning Toleration’ (1689) forcefully said no because the state was brought into existence only for ‘procuring, preserving, and advancing’ citizens’ civil interests. Care of souls, he argued, was not given to the state because the state consists of only outward force while religion consists of the inward persuasion of mind. Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, favoured separation of the church from the state to protect the garden of the church from the ‘wilderness of secular order’.

Secularism could triumph in the 18th century



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because reason triumphed over religions. While secularism is nothing but an idea of modernity, a non-secular theocratic state is the relic of the past. Even if we are fed up with modernity, the moot question is this: should we become a Saudi Arabia, an Iran or a Pakistan? An overwhelming majority of Hindus do not want to emulate these regressive countries.

## The importance of the Ashokan edicts

Should we reject secularism because this term was not used in the original Constitution? To say that India's Constitution became secular in 1976 is a blatant lie. Like several other things borrowed from Ashoka the Great who ruled from 268-232 BC, the seeds of Indian secularism too can be traced back to Ashokan edicts. Rajeev Bhargava has written extensively on the significance of these edicts. Rejecting the idea of one particular religion as a state religion, Rock Edict 7 said that all religions should reside everywhere, for all of them desire self-control and purity of heart. One of the biggest problems of today's India is hate speech. Rock Edict 12 prohibited glorification of one's religion and condemnation of others' religions. Ashoka's dhamma was not religion but the principles of governance, i.e., constitutional morality and ethics that a king must follow. He favoured the acceptance and co-existence of different religions and went beyond mere toleration.

The Motilal Nehru Committee's constitution (1928) which was the first attempt to draft the Constitution clearly stated in Clause 4(1) that “there shall be no state religion for the Commonwealth of India or for any province in the Commonwealth, nor shall the state either directly or indirectly endow any religion or give any preference or impose any disability on account of religious belief or religious status”.

The Karachi Resolution of the Congress in 1931 which presented the blueprint of a future Swaraj in Resolution no 2(9), specifically declared that the “state shall maintain neutrality in regard to all religions”. Even the Hindu Mahasabha's draft constitution of 1944 with V.D. Savarkar's blessings too declared in explicit terms in Article 7(15) that ‘there shall be no state religion or either centre or provinces’. Why do we refuse to follow even Savarkar?

On October 17, 1949 when the Preamble of the Constitution was under discussion in the Constituent Assembly, H.V. Kamath proposed that the Preamble should begin with the words ‘in the name of God’. We should thank god that in an overwhelmingly religious country, god lost by 17 votes in a tally of 68 to 41. Similarly, the word ‘secular’ was not specifically included; yet, members, in one voice, spoke of it being a fait accompli of a liberal democratic constitution and consistent with the ideals of our freedom struggle. No member of the Constituent Assembly ever proposed a Hindu Rashtra including Syama Prasad Mookerjee.

Three years prior to the insertion of the word secular, the Supreme Court had held secularism to be the basic structure in the Kesavananda Bharati case (1973). Silences of the Constitution are equally important. For instance, the words federal, judicial review, rule of law too have not been used in the Constitution. But these ideas

have rightly been held as part of the basic structure.

## On the jurisdiction model

If we are really fed up with the separation model of secularism, we should consider the jurisdiction model. We have several options from modern democracies. Certainly, we may declare in the Constitution that Hinduism (not Hindutva) is the dominant spiritual heritage of India – just like in England where the Anglican Church is the official Church of England and the king is the defender of faith but recognises equal rights to all citizens ensuring freedom of religion and prohibiting all discriminations on the basis of religion. The Irish Constitution is another model. Its Preamble begins with the name of the Most Holy Trinity, but the state cannot endow any religion or discriminate on religious grounds. Article 3 of the Greek Constitution declares the Greek Orthodox Church as the dominant religion. The opening words of the Preamble are – ‘In the name of Holy, Consubstantial and Undivided Trinity’. But Article 4 talks of the right to equality. Article 5(2) guarantees the right to life, liberty and honour without any discrimination based on religion and gives freedom of religion to all faiths. Muslims of Western Thrace in fact have the right to elect their own Mufti (religious and judicial officer) and their disputes are resolved in accordance with Islamic law. They have an option of either using civil courts or sharia courts.

Article 2 of Pakistan's Constitution declares Islam as the state religion. Only a Muslim can occupy high constitutional office. But even the Preamble itself explicitly lays down that the ‘adequate provision shall be made for the minorities freely to profess, practice freedom of religion and develop their culture’. Moreover Article 36 again says that the state shall safeguard the legitimate rights and the interests of minorities including their due representation in the federal and provincial services. Accordingly, the Constitution makes a provision of reservation for them.

Though Article 9 of the Sri Lankan Constitution falls short of declaring Buddhism as state religion, it does give “Buddhism” the ‘foremost place’ and places an obligation on the state to protect and foster Buddha Sasna. Of course, it not only guarantees freedom of religion but (unlike India) in Article 10, explicitly gives ‘freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief of his choice’. Minorities are governed by their personal laws and sharia courts function within the premises of regular courts and High Courts.

Our secularism based on Ashoka's Dhamma was designed to allow people to live together in civility and promote equal respect for all religions. The state must remain religion neutral. India's opposition to Pakistan was based on the separation of religion and state. The framers of the Constitution too intended a secular state, and not a theocratic state. Even the Bharatiya Janata Party has been insisting on its opposition to the Congress's negative secularism and used to promise positive secularism. If what was implicit from day one was merely made explicit in 1976, ‘Humgama Hai Ku barpa (what is the fuss about)?

*The views expressed are personal*

The supporters of a theocratic state fail to understand that religions remain independent and autonomous under secularism





A snapshot of the orbit of 3I/ATLAS (light blue) through the solar system. The concentric rings at the centre depict the orbits of the solar system's inner planets. The orange ring is Jupiter's orbit. CSS, D. HANSEN (CC BY-SA)

## Possibly oldest known comet streaks through solar system

The Hindu Bureau

On July 1, scientists using the ATLAS survey telescope in Chile reported they had discovered an object in space they called 3I/ATLAS, after tracking it since June 14. They quickly recognised the object was interstellar: its highly elliptical orbit around the sun and how quickly it was moving through space, at about 57-68 km/s relative to the sun, were clear giveaways. In fact, its path was found to trace back to the direction of the constellation Sagittarius.

NASA has already said 3I/ATLAS won't pose any threat to the earth. Its closest approach to our planet will be about 270 million km. Its closest approach to the sun itself will be on October 29-30, 2025, at about 210 million km, just inside Mars's orbit. After it swings past the sun in its hyperbolic orbit, it will exit the solar system never to return.

Early observations have confirmed that 3I/ATLAS is an active comet, exhibiting a visible coma – the cloud of ice particles and dust that enshrouds the nucleus as it nears a star – and likely developing a tail as it approaches the sun. Photometric measurements have revealed it has a reddish hue. Its spectral slope of about 1.3% per 100 nm suggested its surface is rich in complex organic compounds or water ice.

**NASA has said 3I/ATLAS won't pose any threat to earth. Its closest approach will be about 270 million km. After it swings past the sun in its hyperbolic orbit, it will exit the solar system, never to return**

The size of the nucleus of 3I/ATLAS itself is still uncertain thanks to the dust surrounding it. Current estimates nonetheless suggest it's about 10-30 km wide, which would make it larger than either of its interstellar predecessors, 1I/Oumuamua in 2017 and 2I/Borisov in 2019. Its composition and rotation period are under active investigation by multiple international teams using ground-based telescopes.

Indeed 3I/ATLAS is likely to be the oldest comet scientists have ever observed, possibly predating the solar system itself by more than 3 billion years. Computer simulations that physicists have run have indicated that it may have originated in the thin disk of the Milky Way, or even from an older, thick-disk star.

This means studying 3I/ATLAS could reveal unique details from the Milky Way's galactic history.

Its rich water ice content and ancient origin also offer a rare chance to study primordial material from another star system, providing insights into the building blocks of planets and the processes of star formation across the galaxy.

A global campaign is currently underway to monitor 3I/ATLAS as it passes through the inner solar system. Astronomers at observatories are collecting data on its composition, activity, and trajectory, with the aim of learning as much as possible before it fades from view.

The comet should be visible to amateur astronomers with modest telescopes in late 2025 and early 2026.

In sum, the discovery of 3I/ATLAS has opened a new window into the study of interstellar objects, offering a wealth of data for planetary scientists and astronomers eager to learn about the distant origins of such cosmic wanderers.



# Climate change is deciding where and how rural Indians are living

Climate migration, which is the movement of people forced to leave their homes due to climate-related disasters, has led to widespread and often involuntary migration to urban areas and other regions, eroding social structures and worsening living and working conditions for migrants

Sayantan Datta

**T**wo features mark the geography of Bundelkhand, the region in Central India spread over 13 districts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh: the steep hills of the Vindhyas and progressively scanty rainfall and increasingly frequent droughts.

Consider Panna district in Madhya Pradesh. According to data from the India Meteorological Department, Panna has been receiving progressively less rainfall even as temperatures have been rising. According to one estimate, the average temperature in Bundelkhand is expected to rise by 2.3-5°C by 2100.

The region has thus become a hotbed of droughts. Datta in Madhya Pradesh, for instance, faced nine droughts between 1998 and 2009. In the same period, Lalitpur and Mahoba districts in Uttar Pradesh suffered eight.

The region's farmers have been the worst affected. As their crops have failed more often, they have struggled to make ends meet and slipped deeper into debt. Agricultural workers have taken up other jobs, such as working in the region's diamond mines. When that too hasn't sufficed, the men have left their families behind and migrated. Surendra Singh Jais, assistant professor of economics at the Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University (BRU), Lucknow, said. Their destinations are "Surat, Ahmedabad, Delhi, Bangalore, and Chennai".

Jais has studied the impact of climate change on farmers' lives in Bundelkhand since 2012. The most significant change, he said, is in the social fabric of Bundelkhand's villages.

## Climate migration

A little more than 1,500 km away from Bundelkhand is Charpauli village in Bangladesh. Located along the banks of the Jamuna river, Charpauli has a starkly different problem. Every year during the monsoons, the Jamuna swells and devours the land on its banks. Large chunks of the land break off and are washed away, taking the homes of people with them.

According to some media reports in Bangladesh, in one week in May 2022, riverbank erosion in Jamuna destroyed around 500 houses in Charpauli, leaving thousands homeless. In a 2023 study, researchers at the Uthaka University of Engineering and Technology used satellite images to find that between 1990 and 2020, the river's left bank had dwindled by roughly 12 m every year and the right bank by about 52 m every year.

Scientists have suggested that climate change leads to a greater volume of water flowing through a particular river channel at a particular time, in turn increasing the risk of flooding and erosion.

The parched lands of Bundelkhand and the flooded banks of the Jamuna share one similarity. As their houses are consumed by the ever-swelling river, people first try to move away from the banks, at times building fresh houses on arable land. Then, when it is no longer possible to survive in the village, according to ETH Zürich researcher Jan Freihardt, entire households migrate to nearby cities like Dhaka as a last resort.

Freihardt, a postdoctoral researcher, has studied climate migration in Charpauli and other villages.

Climate migration refers to the movement of people resulting from climate change-related disasters, which may be sudden floods, cyclones, etc.) or gradual (increasing temperatures, sea-level rise, etc.). According to a 2022 report by the International Refugee Assistance Project, climate and weather-related incidents force about 20 million people to migrate every year to other areas in their own countries. This is called internal migration.

While migration away from the Jamuna's banks is permanent, climate change can also exacerbate seasonal migration in many areas. One such case is that of migration from Vidarbha and Marathwada, two infamous drought-prone regions of Maharashtra.

## Sugar cane and bitter endings

The Vidarbha and Marathwada regions lie in the rain shadow of the Western Ghats. A rain shadow forms when a region is located on the side of mountains facing away from the sea. As water evaporates from the sea, the warm, moist air rises up. When it reaches the top of the mountains, it condenses to form clouds, which eventually rain down on the side facing the sea. By the time the air crosses over the mountains to the other side, almost all the moisture has been



A woman draws water from a well at Mahoba in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh. SURESH KUMAR KUSHWAHA

exhausted, thus the side facing away from the sea receives little to no rainfall, aridifying over time. This has happened with Vidarbha and Marathwada.

Climate change is worsening this situation. Both regions have been recording erratic rainfall of late.

"The number of rainy days are coming down and rain on a particular day is increasing. But the gap between two rainy days is long," Ramanjaneyulu G.V., executive director of the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, said in September 2024. Satellite data has also revealed that temperatures in the two regions already surpass the 50°C mark in May.

Those who live here pack their belongings on bullock carts and travel for hundreds of kilometres to sugar cane plantations in Western Maharashtra and Karnataka. There, they stay for four to six months, working as "cane cutters" in these fields. Ananta Bhatkhande, head of communications at a social-impact consultancy named Asar, said.

Bhatkhande has been involved in research projects that study the extent and impact of droughts in Maharashtra. India is the world's largest producer and consumer of sugar cane. The Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution reported that in 2023, the country produced 50 crore tonnes of sugar cane, generating a revenue of more than ₹20,000 crore.

This flattering number does not reflect the reality of the migrant labourers who harvest the country's sugar cane fields.

According to Bhatkhande, cane cutters are hired typically as a couple: the husband cuts the sugar cane and the wife stacks them. Together, the couple is called a *koria* – a Marathi word for the sickle used to cut the sugar cane. These

Migration may be the most effective way to allow people to diversify income and build resilience where environmental change threatens livelihoods

labourers are hired by a contractor known as the *mukadami*, who pays the couple an advance: a sum that can range anywhere between ₹50,000 to ₹8.5 lakh depending on the couple's financial requirements, the size of the sugar cane plantations, and the quantity of sugar cane expected to be harvested that year.

"The precarity and conditions of this migration and the wages that they get have worsened year on year," Bhatkhande added.

Because they are paid an advance, the labourers are required to work until they have cut enough sugar cane to match the payment. For example, if a couple has been paid ₹50,000 at the rate of ₹367 per tonne of sugar cane harvested, they must cut 136 tonnes of sugar cane in the harvesting season. However, erratic rainfall and dry spells have brought down the production of sugar cane, which is a water-intensive crop. This means the labourers have to return the next season with no extra payment to make up for the deficit, creating a cycle of debt bondage.

The worsening precarity also reflects on who is migrating: "Earlier, people in their 30s and 20s were the ones who were migrating. Now, people who are nearing their 70s and 80s are also migrating for work," Bhatkhande said.

The younger people cut the sugar cane and load stacks of it onto tractors while the elders are hired to remove weeds

from the farm and sort and stack the cane before it is loaded.

When the migrants reach the sugar cane fields, they are given "an extremely dirty and shabby patch of land where they can set up their homes," she added. These, according to her, typically take the shape of plastic sheet tents with no electricity, toilets, or water.

## Adaptation v. displacement

The conditions are no better for migrants from Bundelkhand. Jais, the BRU economist, said that in the metropolitan cities to which they migrate, they work as daily-wage construction workers, security guards, and at *dhabas* (roadside restaurants). Only those who are highly skilled get jobs that pay them enough money to rent a room. Others accommodate themselves in slums, where poor sanitation leads to a deterioration of their health, Jais added.

Back home, the struggle is different. As the migrant's family waits for its remittances to arrive – which can take around six months after a person has migrated and set up shop in the city, per Jais's estimate – they struggle to make ends meet. The worst hit are the women and the children. With the women left to manage "everything on their own," they are unable to effectively monitor even whether their children are going to school, according to Jais. He added that women also become increasingly vulnerable to sexual assault.

For the migrants from Charpauli and other villages on the banks of Jamuna, what they do after migration depends on where they migrate to. Some villagers migrate to other villages, Freihardt said. There, they insert themselves into jobs that are reminiscent of their life in their previous homes, which now lie underwater: "agricultural work for other people's lands". Those who migrate to cities take up more informal jobs, such as rickshaw pulling, construction work, and daily wage work in brick kilns.

In a 2011 commentary in *Nature*, researchers from the University of Sussex and the UK government, argued that migration "may be the most effective way to allow people to diversify income and build resilience where environmental change threatens livelihoods." That is, they suggested, migration could be a form of adaptation against climate change-induced loss of livelihoods.

Jais disagreed, however: at least in the context of Bundelkhand, he explained, migration is a form of "forced displacement" that lowers the "social security of the migrants and their family." "Migration is not an adaptation. It is a crisis."

(Sayantan Datta is an independent journalist and a faculty member at Krea University. They tweet @queersprings. The author thanks Annu Jais, Chirag Dhar, and Jaideep Handilkar for their inputs. dattasayantan95@gmail.com)



Farmers load harvested sugar cane to be transported to a sugar mill, at a village in Karad, India





## Cabinet appoints Abhijat Sheth NMC Chairperson

The Union Cabinet has appointed Abhijat Sheth as the new Chairperson of the National Medical Commission (NMC), replacing Suresh Gangadhar, who stepped down due to health concerns. Dr. Sheth, a cardiothoracic surgeon, said that his priority would be to improve quality of medical education, promote good governance, and foster teamwork to achieve governmental objectives. Dr. Gangadhar, former Chairperson, NMC, had submitted his resignation last October. "As there had been no suitable candidate available, his tenure was continued," official sources said. Dr. Sheth is also the President of the National Board of Examinations in Sciences.



# 'Reaching Jarawa tribe of Andaman Islands for Census will not be tough'

**Bindu Shajan Perappadan**  
**Abhinav Lakshman**  
NEW DELHI

Conducting the 2027 Census among the six main indigenous tribes in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands will not be tough as the Union government has already made contact and is running several welfare measures for these tribes, says physician Ratan Chandra Kar, speaking to *The Hindu*.

The government has announced that the 16th Census will take place in two phases, with the reference date of October 1, 2026 in snow-bound areas such as Ladakh, and March 1, 2027 in the rest of the country.

Dr. Kar, who played an important role in providing healthcare to the Jarawa tribe of the Andaman Islands, began his work with the tribes in 1998, combating a devastating measles outbreak in 1999 that threatened the tribe's existence.

The Jarawas are one of the world's oldest surviving tribes and are mostly hunter-gatherers, living in nomadic bands of 40 to 50 individuals.

Explaining the population growth trajectory of the tribe, he says the Jarawas met the local population in September 1998.

The 2011 Census recorded 380 Jarawa individuals out of the 28,530 Scheduled Tribe individuals across Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The communities counted under the ST population also included Andamanese, Nicobarese, Shompen, Onge, and Sentinelese. Except the Nicobarese, all communities have been classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

With the next Census yet to be conducted, the Tribal Affairs Ministry has found it challenging to estimate the population of PVTGs, including in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, while implementing targeted scheme-delivery programmes like the PM-JANMAN for PVTG households. According to this scheme's progress, the government has been able to identify 191 PVTG individuals in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

"At that time, their population was 260 and as of today, their population has increased to 647. This increase has been possible and achieved on account



The Jarawas, one of the world's oldest surviving tribes, are mostly hunter-gatherers.

of the Central government's successful attempt to establish meaningful contact with them, winning their trust and developing friendly relations," Dr. Kar says.

He explains that in 1998, the population count was more of a "guess or estimate" based on limited contact but that the population count as of 2025 is "far more accurate" given the extent of contact made since then and the use of satellite imagery for this purpose.

Dr. Kar adds that the government has been able to provide sustained, targeted, and proactive medical care as and when required and because of this "we have successfully countered all such occurrences of new diseases/infections (measles, malaria, conjunctivitis, mumps, hepatitis, and others) without any significant mortality. The policy decision taken to provide proactive and preventive medical coverage without interfering in their own medicinal practices has led to this achievement of increase in population," he says, adding that this trust will ensure that officials get full access during the upcoming Census activity.

## Andaman Trunk Road

Speaking about the impact of the Andaman Trunk Road (ATR) in terms of access and intrusion in the tribal settlement, he says the best chance of survival for the Jarawas is "we leave them alone with minimal intervention".

"The tribe doesn't suffer from any lifestyle disease including heart problems, diabetes, hypertension etc, deliveries are almost always normal and normal life span is up to 50 plus now. We only need to offer modern medical care as a supplement to their own system of natural medicine and immunity," he says.





# Shringla, Nikam, two others nominated to the Rajya Sabha

The nominees include C. Sadanandan, BJP leader from Kerala, and the Delhi-based historian Meenakshi Jain; Prime Minister Modi welcomes the move and praises each nominee's contributions to diplomacy, law, history, and social work

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

**P**resident Droupadi Murmu on Sunday nominated former Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla; Ujjwal Nikam, Special Public Prosecutor in the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks case; C. Sadanandan, BJP leader from Kerala; and the Delhi-based historian Meenakshi Jain to the Rajya Sabha.

The Union Home Ministry notified the nomination. "In exercise of the powers conferred by Sub-Clause (a) of Clause (1) of Article 80 of the Constitution of India, read with Clause (3) of that Article, the President is pleased to nominate to the Council of States the following persons to fill the vacancies caused due to retirement of nominated members: Shri Ujjwal Deorao Nikam, Shri C. Sadanandan Master, Shri Harsh Vardhan Shringla and Dr. Meenakshi Jain," the notification said.

Prime Minister Naren-



**To Upper House:** (from left) Former Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla; Ujjwal Nikam, Special Public Prosecutor in the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks case; C. Sadanandan, BJP leader from Kerala; and Delhi-based historian Meenakshi Jain.

dra Modi welcomed the nominations, posting individual messages for the four nominees.

Mr. Shringla joined the BJP after demitting office and served as the Chief Coordinator for the G20 summit held in New Delhi in 2023, with Mr. Modi praising his work as a diplomat. One of Mr. Shringla's predecessors is the incumbent External Affairs Minister, S. Jaishankar.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha election, Mr. Nikam was the BJP's candidate for the Mumbai North Central seat, which he lost. De-

scribing Mr. Nikam's contributions to the legal field and to the Constitution as "exemplary", the Prime Minister said that Mr. Nikam had been at the forefront of seeking justice in important cases.

Historian Meenakshi Jain, who was earlier accorded the Padma Shri, is among the Rajya Sabha nominees.

She has served as an academic at the University of Delhi, and authored several books on Indian history and civilisation, and indigenous education and languages during the Brit-

ish rule.

Mr. Sadanandan, a former teacher, lost both his legs in 1994 to violent assault by political rivals who resented his joining the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh despite hailing from a Left background. He was the BJP candidate from Koothuparamba in an Assembly election. The Assembly election in Kerala is due early next year.

Mr. Sadanandan's life is "the epitome of courage and refusal to bow to injustice", the Prime Minister said. "Violence and intimidation couldn't deter his

spirit towards national development. His efforts as a teacher and social worker are also commendable. He is extremely passionate towards youth empowerment. Congratulations to him for being nominated to the Rajya Sabha by Rashtraapati Ji. Best wishes for his role as MP," Mr. Modi said.

## **Vacancy filled**

The President nominates 12 people of eminence from various fields to the Rajya Sabha. Four such seats had fallen vacant and have now been filled.

