

UNHEARD VOICES®



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WHAT'S IN SURNAME?



Manifestation of equality and unity

Maha Kumbh Mela, being held at Prayagraj in Uttar Pradesh, has turned out to be one of the most attractive events across the world. People, belonging to all the faiths, including two Abrahamic religions, are curious to know more about Maha Kumbh Mela. Several Muslim and Christians are seen participating in Maha Kumbh Mela while Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs are attending it. Few reports suggest that Maha Kumbh Mela, is the most searched event on Google and Islamic countries are no exception to it. Kumbh is taking place for ages and generations but unprecedented excitement and enthusiasm is seen this time. Many attribute this phenomenon to the new awakening or rise of Hindutva while critics are leaving no stone unturned to criticize it.

For us, Maha Kumbh Mela, has emerged as the most spectacular but a serious manifestation of unity and equality. One can find no discrimination on any ground as crores of devotees gather every day. According to an estimate around 50 crore devotees are expected to visit Maha Kumbh Mela, brushing aside their small identities. Devotees share all common amenities like food, shelter, water, residence, wash rooms and what not. Nobody asks about caste, language or region. This itself is one of the biggest achievements when a nation is facing serious challenges because of clashes among various identities. This conflict, many times, is fabricated but the reality cannot be denied that the conflict or clash of interest does exist. We need to look ahead whether Maha Kumbh Mela provides any solution to this unfortunate, undesirable, unacceptable and condemnable reality.

Unity and equality at Maha Kumbh Mela need to be seen against this backdrop. Critics of Maha Kumbh Mela mainly object because

of its religious nature, its origin in ancient Indian history or mythology and insist how religion is discriminatory. They, however, turn Nelson's eye towards the reality that India has changed itself during the course of time. We have several examples to show that caste discrimination is vehemently opposed by social reformers for a very long period. Bhakti movement in India is always described as 'renaissance' when Saints fight against all kinds of social ills. India is probably the only country, which has kept herself changing according to the needs of the time. This is the reason why other civilizations on earth vanished while Indian civilization continues to exist even after a series of encroachments, aggressions and invasions. This flexibility, liberal approach, accommodative nature and core value system makes India different from others in the world.

Prayagraj Kumbh Mela stands as the biggest example of the ancient Indian value system, which is based on equality and brotherhood. Critics should accept this reality with an open mind. Why should they have objection if equality, unity and brotherhood have origin in spiritualism, religion or ancient ideology? Any corrective step, initiated by a concerned person or group of persons, needs to be welcomed wholeheartedly. In Prayagraj, we saw consciousness being taken to engage and involve people from deprived communities, who were affected by discrimination. Such efforts ought to be encouraged for larger wellbeing of the society as such attempts are self-inspired and are not planted by outsiders. Self-inspired corrective steps have more sustainable value instead of outsourced remedies.

India has seen some positive signs of decline in the role of caste in the past few

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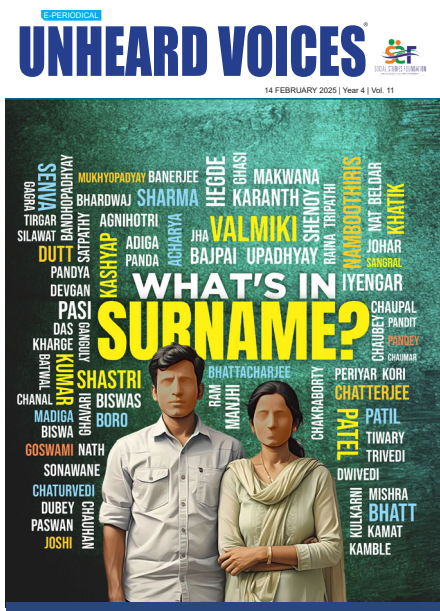
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decades. This has also been reflected in the past few elections with some exceptions. While problems arising out of caste discrimination are yet to be eliminated in to their intensity has marginalized, frequency has lowered. This has been happening despite attempts by some foreign forces to fuel identities and push India towards an anarchy like situation. Maha Kumbh Mela has emerged as a big lesson for ourselves to establish unity and equality.

Question arises whether Maha Kumbh Mela can be seen as a new source of energy to rejuvenate our society, which has been crippled by various social ills. One should not have hesitation if it has come up as a cementing bond, which generates unity and equality. At the same time, however, this expression of unity and equality is in public places and that has to be reflected in personal and family life as well.



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Appeal for financial assistance

SOCIAL STUDIES FOUNDATION
KNOWLEDGE FOR EMPOWERMENT

Social Studies Foundation (SSF) is working with the prime objective of conducting social studies and research of the society in a multi-disciplinary fashion. SSF focus, however, is on those people, who have been facing discrimination and are deprived of benefits of the development and democratic process. SSF logo, thus says, "Knowledge for Empowerment".

"UNHEARD VOICES" is a small step in this direction. It provides a platform to all those people, who have to be listened to by the Indian citizens to make this country united and integral. We will raise the voice of these people fearlessly. Social Studies Foundation has currently a small set-up to carry out its objectives. We, however, need financial support from our well-wishers, who agree with our objectives. We appeal to the readers and well-wishers to donate generously to the foundation.

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Tamil Nadu: Where surname matters in schools

Chandru Committee formed by Tamil Nadu government has recommended to drop the surname in the schools as they indicate the caste. This is not a new phenomenon in the southern state as it has a history of almost a century. However, the problem continues to prevail.

Prakash Raj



Tamil Nadu is projected by Dravidian parties as the land of Periyar. This year, 2025, marks the centenary year of Periyar's self-respect movement, which sought to eradicate the caste system and dismantle the Brahmanical hegemony. The motive behind the self-respect movement was to inculcate rational thinking, self-respect and self-confidence to the lower castes. The movement aimed to annihilate caste practices, superstitious beliefs, dead rituals and construct an egalitarian society free from all the social evils.

The DMK sees Periyar as the Dravidian ideological beacon and father of the modern architecture of Tamil Nadu. Over decades, the self-respect movement of Periyar traversed further into the oppressed castes social emancipation, struggle for political power and gender equality, and promoted social justice. During his onslaught on the Caste system, Periyar observed keeping caste surnames behind the name is one of the most regressive and barbaric practices, which strengthened the caste system by popular imagination.

In 1929, he dropped his surname 'Naciker' at the Self Respect Conference at Chengalpattu. Subsequently,



he asked his followers, supporters of the Dravidian movement and progressive forces to drop the Caste-based surnames. Despite the successful movement of removing caste surnames, the caste system and practices were found to operate in novel forms in Tamil Nadu. Outrageously, today, the schools in southern Tamil Nadu have become the den of casteism. This article sheds light on how casteism prevails in educational institutions to the recent Nanguneri incident, where a Dalit boy was attacked with a sickle by upper caste students. Moreover, the article also analyses the report of the one-man Committee headed by Justice K. Chandru, which was formed in the wake of the incident by Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin.

Caste in classrooms

A study by the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (UEF) found that 30% of the schools surveyed in Tamil Nadu had some form of caste discrimination. The study report reveals that most of the Dalit students encounter caste-based discrimination; only the degree of harshness varies from the school ecosystem. For instance, Southern Tamil Nadu, especially from Madurai to the deep south districts like Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi, and Tenkasis known as the bastion of caste conflicts and honour killings. The simmering caste animosity is between the dominant OBCs and the asserting Dalit community. In these districts, the parents send their children to schools with coloured wristbands as coded markers of caste identity.

Various vernacular leading dailies report that socially and politically powerful OBC Castes like Nadar use yellow, Thevars use red and yellow and Yadavs use saffron. The Dalit caste students like Parayars wear blue, Pallars wear green and red and Arundhathiyars wear green, black and white. The caste markers among the students reflect the prevailing schism in the society. Besides colours, wearing attire with the image of caste icons and playing songs or keeping a ringtone belonging to the particular community is the manifestation of novel caste practices.

Nanguneri caste crime

On August 09, 2023, around 10 pm, six boys from the government higher secondary school in Nanguneri town in Tirunelveli district who belong to the Thevar Caste, the dominant OBC community, attacked a Dalit boy, Chinnadurai, and his 13-year-old sister using a sharp sickle (machetes) by barging the home. Both of them suffered serious injuries, leaving them lying in a pool of blood. The attack was conspired to

take revenge on the Dalit boy as he repeatedly gave complaints to the school authorities against his classmates for using derogatory caste slurs and relentlessly harassing him as being a 'lower-caste'. The police found out that it was not 'merely a clash between two sets of students', but it was a caste-based violence unleashed on the Scheduled Caste boy and his family members, which originated from the classrooms to showcase the pride and power of the caste.

Such a brutal and barbaric caste-based attack of upper-caste students on fellow lower-caste students without any provocation sends shockwaves through the Tamil Community. On the other hand, the present CM, MK Stalin, proclaims that the much-touted Dravidian Model government inspired by the social justice ideals of the Periyar is in profound




crisis because of such inhumane incidents. Due to the pressure from various quarters, Chief Minister M.K. Stalin formed a one-man Committee headed by Justice K. Chandru, a retired judge of the Madras High Court, to study the incident and suggest how caste-based violence could be prevented in schools.

Curtail caste: Recommendations of Justice K. Chandru Committee

The committee submitted its 600-page report to the Tamil Nadu government on June 18, 2024. In his report, Justice Chandru remarked the heinous attack was the "darkest day in the annals of Tamil Nadu school education." The committee pointed out that there is deep-rooted casteism "beyond the confines of educational settings and permeating society at large."

Further, he argued that presently, the panacea for caste problems in schools is in a precarious situation as it lacks the teeth to encounter historical discrimination. He



prescribes a holistic approach, which is required to attain “a lasting solution and a casteless society. “The committee has recommended the state government should ban students from wearing wristbands, rings, or bindis, and forehead marks (tilaka), which serve to project caste identities.

Apart from that, the students must be instructed to refrain from painting bicycles or motorbikes with any caste names or symbols or any sign of caste references. It has also asked the school administration to abstain from keeping the caste of students with the utmost confidentiality. The classroom seating arrangement must be followed in alphabetical order, and the attendance register should remove caste columns. Moreover, teachers, principals or any non-teaching staff should not call students by their caste names. Any violation of this principle would be met with stringent disciplinary action. However, such recommendations are not new. A couple of decades back, in the volatile southern districts after the series of caste violence, the government dropped the caste names of the community leaders, which was given to transport corporations, districts and street signboards. A few years ago, the caste surnames of popular leaders were also erased from textbooks.

The report demands the government to appoint School Welfare Officers in secondary schools to monitor and conduct sensitization programmes on caste, gender, sexual, or ragging offences. There must be specific guidelines for the ceasing of a person belonging to a dominant caste of that area as the head of the institution. Moreover, the committee suggests periodic transfers of high school and higher secondary school teachers to dismantle the caste nexus. Most importantly, the attitude towards social justice issues must be ascertained and tested before the recruitment of the teachers by Tamil Nadu’s Teachers Recruitment Board (TRB).

The Chandru Committee has highly recommended that the government appoint a Social Justice Monitoring Committee comprising renowned academicians and social activists to scrutinize the curriculum related to social issues, which should disseminate inclusive topics like social justice, equality and non-discrimination. In addition, there is a suggestion to the B. Ed and Diploma in Elementary Education syllabuses to inculcate orientation towards oneness and inclusiveness as a praxis in academic spaces. As a multitude of incidents emerged regarding the social

boycotts of Dalit cooks in schools, the committee for a centralized kitchen in every block or panchayat union to conceal the caste identity of the cooks.

Another suggestion to the government is to establish a uniformed Social Justice Students Force, which should operate independently of the union government”, on the line of Kerala’s Student Police Cadet Scheme. Under this volunteer force, the government should conduct regular drills and exercises to inculcate social cohesion and mutual respect among students.

Even the existing functional NCC, NSS and Scouts and Guides are enough or complemented to provide students with such a space, but it must be handled cautiously. Particularly, the government must ensure to safeguard the premise of schools where the students interact and co-habit from playgrounds, washing areas, drinking spaces, and bus stops from displaying any type of caste-identifiable colours or metaphors.

The responses and way forward

The report met with mixed responses from different political parties and communities. The Tamil Nadu BJP protested the blanket ban on religious markers on foreheads and wrists would infringe on the secular credentials and constitutional rights of the Hindus. In fact, they abstained from answering the discourse of unveiling a uniform colour of wristbands or bindis to signify the Hindus.

The Southern District administration started a comprehensive consultation process with teachers, students, and parents to annihilate caste differences. It has commenced a special project named ‘Anbadum Mundril’ to provide counselling sessions to parents and students to sensitize the social evils in 45 schools. A few NGOs also joined hands in this pilot project to aid the district administration. Constitutionalist and architect of Modern India, Dr B. R. Ambedkar, articulated, ‘Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire, which prevents the Hindus from comingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind. You cannot build anything on the foundation of caste’. The Tamil Nadu government’s step in bringing a social democracy into the classrooms is applaudable, but it will require consistent efforts and collective will from civil society.

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DELHI ASSEMBLY ELECTION 2025



Dalits in Delhi detached from AAP

The 2025 Delhi Assembly elections have highlighted a significant shift in Dalit voter preferences, marking a major setback for AAP. The party's declining vote share and loss of SC-reserved seats indicate that Dalit voters no longer see AAP as their sole champion.

Vijendra



Shift in Dalit voter preferences in Delhi's Assembly elections: a setback for AAP

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has historically enjoyed strong support from Dalits living in the slum areas of Delhi. This backing was largely due to AAP's focus on public welfare policies that directly impacted the daily lives of these communities. However, the results of the 2025 Delhi Assembly elections indicate a

significant shift in Dalit voter preferences, with a noticeable decline in AAP's vote share and a rise in support for the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC). Several factors contributed to this change, including political dynamics, leadership crisis, and emerging caste and identity considerations.

AAP's past stronghold among Dalit voters
Dalit voters, particularly those residing in

slum areas, had overwhelmingly supported AAP in previous elections. The party's policies, such as free electricity, water supply, quality education, and accessible healthcare, resonated with the economically weaker sections. Initiatives like Mohalla clinics, free bus rides for women, and improved government school infrastructure further strengthened their trust in AAP.

In previous elections, AAP had successfully positioned itself as a party of the common people, offering a corruption-free governance model. This narrative resonated with Dalit voters, who had grown disillusioned with the traditional political parties, such as Congress and BJP, which had failed to address their concerns adequately over the years. AAP's promise of transparency and accountability attracted those who had previously been marginalized and underrepresented in the political landscape.



Rahul Gandhi to Arvind Kejariwal



In the 2020 Delhi Assembly elections, this support translated into significant electoral gains for AAP, with the party securing all 12 seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (SC). These 12 seats were considered AAP's stronghold in Delhi, and its victory in these constituencies was largely attributed to Dalit support. However, by 2025, this stronghold had begun to weaken, signalling a shift in voter allegiance.

Political shift in 2025 elections

In the 2025 Delhi Assembly elections, AAP faced a major setback as its vote share dropped from 53.57% in 2020 to 43.55%. This

sharp decline led to a substantial loss in the number of seats, with AAP securing only 22 seats, compared to 62 in the previous election. In contrast, the BJP capitalized on this shift, increasing its vote share from 38.51% in 2020 to 45.76% in 2025. This translated into a gain of 40 seats, securing a total of 48 in the assembly.

Although the Congress did not win any seats, it managed to increase its overall vote share compared to the last election. This indicates a growing disillusionment among AAP voters, many of whom switched allegiances either to BJP or Congress, seeking a viable alternative.

A closer look at the 12 SC-reserved constituencies reveals the extent of AAP's losses among Dalit voters. While AAP had won all these seats in 2020, the BJP made significant inroads in 2025, securing four of these reserved seats, three of which had over a 25% Dalit population. This shift clearly indicated a growing disillusionment with AAP among Dalit voters, prompting them to explore alternatives.

Factors leading to Dalit discontent with AAP

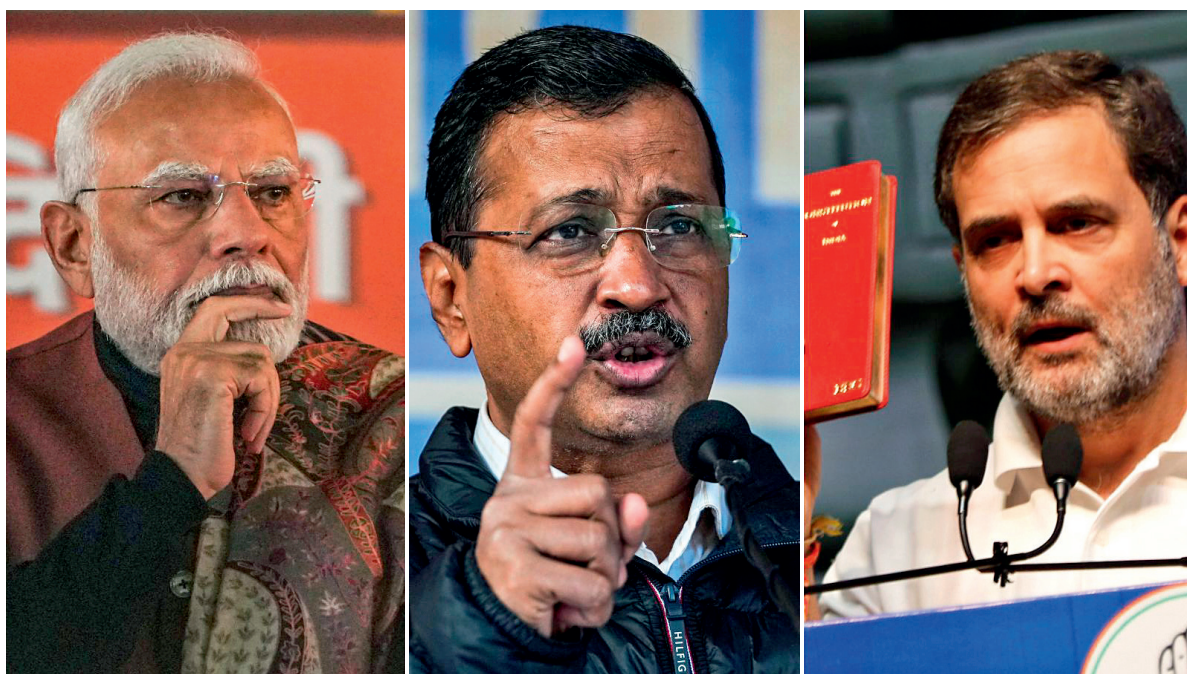
Several key factors contributed to the decline in AAP's Dalit support base, including leadership issues, internal conflicts, and perceived neglect of Dalit interests.

1. Resignation of Key Dalit Leaders and Open Criticism of AAP Leadership

One of the most damaging blows to AAP's Dalit support came from the resignation of prominent Dalit leaders, who later joined the opposition and openly criticized AAP's leadership. These leaders accused the party of sidelining Dalit representation and failing to address their concerns effectively. Their departure not only weakened AAP's credibility but also sent a strong message of discontent to the Dalit community.

The resignation of leaders like Rajendra Pal Gautam, a prominent Dalit leader, was particularly significant. Gautam had been a vocal advocate for Ambedkarite ideology and had played a crucial role in mobilizing Dalit communities in Delhi. His departure from AAP, following the controversy over his participation in a mass conversion event, sent a strong signal to Dalit voters that AAP was no longer committed to its earlier promises of Dalit empowerment.

Dalit voters, who had previously seen AAP as a vehicle for their political empowerment, began questioning the party's commitment to their welfare. The BJP and Congress took advantage of this situation, offering platforms for discontented Dalit leaders and using their



narratives to attract Dalit voters. By doing so, they successfully made inroads into AAP's traditional base.

AAP's failure to send a Dalit representative to the Rajya Sabha, despite claiming to champion Dalit rights and welfare, was seen as a major betrayal by the Dalit community. This decision highlighted a perceived disconnect between the party's rhetoric and actions, which has further disillusioned Dalit voters. They felt sidelined, particularly when their support helped AAP secure power in previous elections. This loss of trust in AAP's commitment to Dalit representation has played a significant role in the decline of Dalit votes in the 2025 Delhi Assembly elections, contributing to the party's electoral defeat.

The lack of visible Dalit leaders in key positions within the party also contributed to the shift in allegiance. As Dalit voters sought alternatives, the BJP and Congress, who were more vocal in their outreach to Dalits and had begun prioritizing their concerns, made significant electoral gains.

2. Kejriwal's use of Dr. Ambedkar's legacy without concrete actions

Arvind Kejriwal and AAP have consistently invoked Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's name in their campaigns, positioning themselves as defenders of Dalit rights. However, their actions in recent years have raised doubts about their sincerity.

One significant instance was the removal of Rajendra Pal Gautam from his ministerial

position in 2022, after he attended a mass conversion event where Dalits embraced Buddhism. AAP distanced itself from the controversy, and Kejriwal failed to defend Gautam, which many Dalit voters saw as a betrayal of Dr. Ambedkar's principles.

Additionally, AAP's reaction to the vandalism of a statue of Dr. Ambedkar in Punjab further alienated Dalit voters. Despite the outrage within Dalit communities, AAP leaders remained largely silent, failing to condemn the act in a strong and decisive manner. This lack of support for Dalit causes at crucial moments led many to believe that AAP was using Dr. Ambedkar's legacy for electoral gains, without actually implementing policies that would benefit the Dalit community in a tangible way.

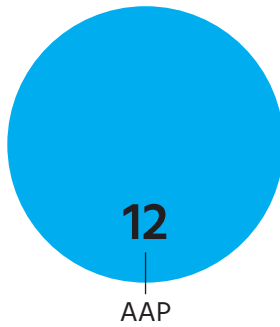
3. Shifting political dynamics and welfare promises by other parties

While AAP had previously held a monopoly on pro-poor welfare politics, the BJP and Congress made significant efforts to woo Dalit voters ahead of the 2025 elections. Both parties introduced new welfare schemes and emphasized Dalit representation in their leadership structures.

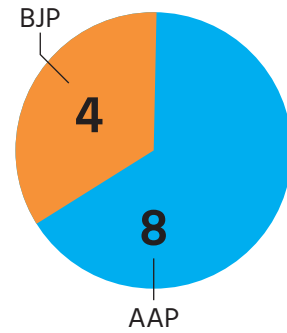
The BJP, in particular, strategically targeted Dalit voters through its outreach programs and promises of economic upliftment. The party's narrative of nationalism, combined with welfare policies like affordable housing and skill development programs, resonated with a section of Dalit voters who had begun to feel neglected by AAP. Additionally, BJP's



In the 2020 Delhi Assembly election, 12 seats were reserved for Scheduled Castes. The Aam Aadmi Party secured victory in all of these constituencies, winning 100% of the reserved seats.



In the 2025 Delhi Assembly election, 12 seats were reserved for Scheduled Castes. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) emerged victorious in 8 of these constituencies, while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 4. AAP secured 67% of the reserved seats, while BJP claimed 33%.



strong push for the inclusion of Dalit leaders in prominent positions within the party further enhanced its appeal among Dalit voters.

Congress, though not successful in winning seats, managed to regain some of its lost support among Dalits by emphasizing its historical role in Dalit empowerment. The party's increased vote share indicated that a segment of disenchanted AAP voters turned to Congress as an alternative, as they were able to tap into the party's historical connection with Dalit welfare.

Urban vs. Rural voting patterns

Delhi is primarily an urban state, but it has a significant number of rural constituencies that played a critical role in shaping the election outcome. At least 18 Assembly seats have substantial rural pockets, where AAP's losses were particularly pronounced.

In the 52 urban seats, the BJP won 35 with an average lead of 13,668 votes, while AAP secured the remaining 17 seats but with a higher average margin of 16,176 votes. However, it was in the rural constituencies where AAP's declining influence became more apparent. These constituencies, which have a substantial Dalit population, played a critical role in determining the election outcome. AAP's losses in these areas further reinforced the narrative that the party was losing its grip on its traditional voter base, particularly among Dalits.

Failure of welfare schemes

AAP's failure to implement welfare schemes effectively also contributed significantly to its decline in Dalit support. One of the most glaring examples was the delay in executing the Centre's Post-Matric Scholarship Scheme for Scheduled Castes (SCs) in Punjab, which affected thousands of Dalit students who were seeking financial assistance for higher

education. The delay in disbursing funds led to severe hardships for these students, who relied on the scholarship to cover tuition, accommodation, and other academic expenses.

This failure to support Dalit students in their pursuit of education reinforced perceptions that AAP was neglecting the welfare of marginalized communities. The bureaucracy behind the mismanagement of this initiative, combined with other perceived shortcomings in the delivery of welfare schemes, further alienated Dalit voters. Many Dalit voters felt betrayed by AAP's inability to deliver on its promises of social mobility through education, which had previously been one of the party's key selling points.

Conclusion: AAP's challenge in regaining Dalit support

The 2025 Delhi Assembly elections have highlighted a significant shift in Dalit voter preferences, marking a major setback for AAP. The party's declining vote share and loss of SC-reserved seats indicate that Dalit voters no longer see AAP as their sole champion. The resignation of key Dalit leaders, the party's failure to address Dalit concerns effectively, and its perceived inaction on issues like the Dr. Ambedkar statue vandalism have all contributed to this erosion of trust.

Meanwhile, the BJP has successfully capitalized on AAP's missteps, gaining ground in Dalit-dominated areas, while the Congress has also managed to increase its vote share. For AAP to regain its lost support, it will need to take concrete steps to rebuild its relationship with Dalit voters. This includes ensuring greater Dalit representation within the party, addressing grievances raised by Dalit leaders, and taking decisive action on issues affecting the community.

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Ending manual scavenging – more than legal obligation



Ending manual scavenging is not just a legal obligation but a moral imperative— one that reflects India’s commitment to equality, justice, and human dignity. It is time to ensure that no individual is forced to risk their life for a livelihood, making manual scavenging a thing of the past and paving the way for a safer, more humane future for all.


Adv. Girender Nath



The origins of manual scavenging can be traced back to India’s caste-based social structure, where certain communities were relegated to “unclean” tasks, including the removal of human waste. Despite legal efforts over the decades, the practice persisted due to deeply entrenched social and economic factors. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, was the first law aimed at curbing the practice but lacked effective implementation. In response to the continued exploitation, health risks, and violations of human dignity, the 2013 Act was introduced as a more comprehensive legal framework. The Manual Scavenging Prohibition Act, 2013 aimed to eliminate manual scavenging by prohibiting the employment of people for cleaning septic tanks, sewers, and dry latrines, and by ensuring the rehabilitation of those previously engaged in this work.

The Act made provisions for the identification of manual scavengers, the rehabilitation of affected persons, and the provision of alternative employment opportunities. It also mandated the construction of sanitary latrines and the use of mechanized technologies for waste cleaning to replace human labour. Despite the legal framework, the implementation has been slow, with challenges in enforcement and social stigma remaining significant barriers to the full eradication of manual scavenging in India.

The Manual Scavenging Act, 2013 includes a provision that if cases of manual scavenging are found in any district, the concerned authorities of that district will be held accountable. Therefore, it seems that all states and districts have issued affidavits stating that such practices do not exist in their respective regions. When the Supreme Court took cognizance of the



ongoing sewer deaths, it ordered all state governments in 2024 to conduct a re-survey of manual scavengers and submit a report by March 2025. It appears that once again, state governments will provide false affidavits to prove them guilt-free. If all states are supposedly manual scavenging-free, why are sewer deaths still occurring? This is a serious issue.

January 29, 2025 reported sewer deaths due to manual scavenging were as follows: 119 in Delhi, 89 in Maharashtra, 258 in Tamil Nadu, 93 in Karnataka, 27 in West Bengal, and 26 in Telangana. Additionally, there are other states where manual scavenging is still practiced, leading to further sewer deaths being reported.

Supreme Court of India issued a decisive order to put an immediate end to manual scavenging and manual sewer cleaning in six of the country's largest metropolitan cities—Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Bengaluru, and Hyderabad. The ruling reflects the judiciary's growing concern over the persistence of this inhumane and hazardous practice despite legal prohibitions and previous directives.

Affidavit Submission and Accountability Measures

The Supreme Court directed the municipal commissioners or chief executive officers of these cities to submit detailed affidavits by February 13, 2025. These affidavits must outline the specific measures that have been implemented to eradicate manual scavenging and ensure that mechanized and safe alternatives are in place. This order signals the court's intent to hold local administrations accountable for continued violations and the failure to implement past directives effectively.

Union Government's Position: An Incomplete Picture

During the hearing, Additional Solicitor General Aishwarya Bhati, representing the Union government, presented a progress report stating that :

1) Out of 775 districts in India, 465 have been declared manual scavenging-free.

2) Data from the remaining 310 districts is still pending submission or verification.

While the numbers suggest progress, the Supreme Court was not convinced and expressed concern over the lack of clarity, particularly regarding metro cities. The ambiguous nature of the report led the court to demand explicit details and transparent documentation to validate the claim that manual scavenging had been eradicated in these areas.

Judicial Scrutiny and Emphasis on Concrete

Action

The Supreme Court's skepticism towards the government's report reflects a broader concern:

- The lack of real-time data and verification mechanisms.
- Ambiguity surrounding how districts were assessed and Certified as "manual scavenging-free."
- The contrast between official reports and ground realities, as incidents of manual scavenging-related deaths continue to be reported.

The Court's directive for affidavit submissions indicates a push for more concrete, verifiable evidence rather than relying on broad or potentially misleading statistics. It aims to ensure accountability at the municipal level, where implementation gaps often persist despite national-level policies.

This ruling marks a pivotal moment in the fight against manual scavenging, reinforcing that mere declarations are insufficient and that strict enforcement, monitoring, and mechanization are crucial to eliminating the practice permanently.

Systemic failures leading to continued manual scavenging

While laws exist, their enforcement is often lax. Authorities may overlook violations, and penalties for non-compliance are seldom imposed. Many individuals engaged in manual scavenging belong to marginalized communities. Economic hardships and limited access to education and alternative employment opportunities compel them to continue this hazardous work. The outsourcing of sanitation services to private contractors can lead to exploitation. Contractors may prioritize cost-cutting over safety, employing untrained workers without proper safety equipment. Despite technological advancements, many municipalities still rely on manual methods for cleaning sewers and septic tanks. Investment in mechanized cleaning equipment remains inadequate.

India has enacted several laws to prohibit manual scavenging:

1. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993: This act aimed to eliminate manual scavenging by prohibiting the construction of dry latrines and the employment of manual scavengers.

2. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013: This comprehensive legislation not only banned manual scavenging but also provided for the rehabilitation of those engaged in the practice.



Despite these laws, manual scavenging persists. The Supreme Court's recent directive underscores the judiciary's frustration with the lack of compliance, stating, 'We are fed up of orders that remain academic'.

Tragically, on February 2, 2025, three workers lost their lives while cleaning an underground sewer at the Kolkata Leather Complex, located in Bantala on the city's eastern fringes. Preliminary investigations suggest that a contractor had engaged these workers to clear clogged underground sewers.

This incident starkly highlights the systemic failures in eradicating manual scavenging, despite legal prohibitions and judicial directives.

Kolkata incident: A Case Study in Systemic Failure

The deaths at the Kolkata Leather Complex exemplify the systemic issues plaguing the eradication of manual scavenging:

- **Negligence by Contractors:** The preliminary inquiry indicates that a contractor engaged the workers for sewer cleaning without ensuring safety protocols.
- **Lack of Safety Equipment:** Reports suggest that the workers were not provided with necessary safety gear, exposing them to toxic gases and hazardous conditions.
- **Absence of Training:** The workers lacked proper training to handle the dangers associated with sewer cleaning, leading to fatal consequences.

Regulatory Oversight: There appears to be a failure in monitoring and regulating the activities of contractors, allowing such hazardous practices to continue unchecked.

The Way forward: Addressing systemic

failures

To effectively eliminate manual scavenging, a multifaceted approach is necessary. Authorities must ensure rigorous enforcement of existing laws, holding violators accountable through penalties and legal action. Providing alternative livelihood opportunities, skill development, and education to individuals engaged in manual scavenging can help them transition to safer and more dignified employment.

Municipalities should establish strict guidelines for contractors, mandating adherence to safety protocols and regular audits to ensure compliance. Allocating resources for mechanized cleaning equipment can reduce reliance on manual methods, enhancing efficiency and safety in sanitation operations. Public awareness campaigns can help destigmatize sanitation work and encourage community participation in reporting violations and advocating for safer practices. Implementing robust rehabilitation schemes that offer financial assistance, housing, education, and healthcare can facilitate the reintegration of former manual scavengers into society.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court's directive to ban manual scavenging in six metropolitan cities is a crucial milestone in India's long battle against this dehumanizing practice. However, legislation alone is not enough—its true impact will be measured by effective enforcement, sustained vigilance, and collective action at all levels of governance. The tragic loss of lives in Kolkata is a stark reminder that systemic failures continue to endanger sanitation workers, despite legal safeguards. To achieve real and lasting change, India must move beyond symbolic commitments and ensure strict accountability, robust rehabilitation programs, and the widespread adoption of mechanized cleaning methods. By addressing deep-rooted socio-economic disparities, strengthening institutional oversight, and fostering greater public awareness, the nation can break free from this cycle of exploitation and indignity. Ending manual scavenging is not just a legal obligation but a moral imperative— one that reflects India's commitment to equality, justice, and human dignity. It is time to ensure that no individual is forced to risk their life for a livelihood, making manual scavenging a thing of the past and paving the way for a safer, more humane future for all.

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Prominent honoured with top civilian awards

The Union government has once again chosen a few prominent personalities from deprived communities to recognise their contribution to the nation. Awardees are from various walks of life including arts, literature, science, and social work. Even a person fighting a legal battle for reservation has also been honoured this year. Unheard Voices provides readers contribution of these awardees.

Team UV



1. Bhim Singh Bhavesh (SC)

A beacon of hope for the Musahar community

Bhim Singh Bhavesh, a dedicated social reformer, has been honoured with the prestigious Padma Shri for his relentless efforts in uplifting the Musahar community, one of the most marginalized Dalit groups in India. For over 22 years, he has worked tirelessly through his foundation - Nayee



Asha, to bring education, healthcare, and sustainable livelihoods to the Musahar people in Bhojpur and Buxar districts.

His mission has transformed lives, enrolling more than 8,000 children in schools and organizing over 100 health camps, ensuring better medical access for those, who had long been neglected. His commitment goes beyond grassroots activism — he has also used his literary voice to shed light on the struggles of marginalized communities. His books, Name Plate and from Kolkata to Kolkata, capture the harsh realities faced by the oppressed while inspiring societal change. His recognition with the Padma Shri is not just an honour for him but a historic moment for the Musahar community, bringing their struggles and



triumphs into the national consciousness. His journey continues to inspire a more inclusive and just society.

2. Anil Kumar Boro (ST)

Anil Kumar Boro is a scholar honoured with Padma Shri 2025 for literature and education in 2025. Anil Kumar Boro, a distinguished scholar from Assam's Boro community, belonging to the Scheduled Tribe (ST) category,



was awarded the prestigious Padma Shri for his immense contribution to literature and education. A lifelong advocate for the preservation of Bodo language, folklore, and tribal traditions, Prof. Boro has dedicated his career to documenting and

promoting the rich literary and cultural heritage of Assam's indigenous communities. Through his pioneering research and academic work, he has not only strengthened Bodo linguistic studies but also played a crucial role in safeguarding tribal traditions that have been passed down through generations. Anil Kumar Boro's unwavering dedication continues to inspire, ensuring that Assam's vibrant tribal heritage remains alive for future generations.

3. Pandi Ram Mandavi (ST)

Pandi Ram Mandavi, hailing from the Gond Muriya community of Bastar, has been a dedicated advocate for the preservation and promotion of his region's rich cultural heritage for over four decades.



His tireless efforts in safeguarding traditional art forms, folklore, music, and indigenous practices have made a significant impact on Bastar's cultural landscape. Through

his work, Mandavi has played a key role in ensuring that the unique traditions of the Gond Muriya community are passed down to future generations. In recognition of his lifelong commitment to cultural preservation, he was honoured with the prestigious Padma

Award in 2025.

4. Parmar Lavjibhai Nagjibhai (SC)

Parmar Lavjibhai Nagjibhai, a skilled Tangaliya weaver from Gujarat's Dangasia community, has been a champion of the



700-year-old textile craft, which is a testament to the region's rich weaving traditions. Through his relentless dedication, Lavjibhai has worked to preserve and promote the intricate art of Tangaliya weaving, known for its distinctive patterns and vibrant colors.

His efforts have ensured that this ancient craft continues to thrive, even in the face of modernization. For his invaluable contribution to safeguarding this cultural heritage, Parmar Lavjibhai was honoured with the Padma Award, recognizing his commitment to the preservation of Gujarat's textile legacy.

5. Renthlei Lalrawna (ST)

A distinguished Mizo writer and scholar, has made remarkable contributions to literature and education,



particularly in the development and preservation of the Mizo language. Through his extensive work, Lalrawna has played a crucial role in enriching Mizo literature, ensuring its growth and relevance in modern times. His

scholarly efforts have significantly advanced the understanding and appreciation of Mizo culture and heritage. In recognition of his outstanding contributions, he was honoured with the Padma Shri. Additionally, Lalrawna's dedication to the language earned him the prestigious Bhasha Samman Award from the Sahitya Akademi, celebrating his legacy as a cultural torchbearer.

6. Velu Aasan (SC)

A veteran Parai artist, has dedicated his life to preserving and promoting the ancient Tamil folk art form of Parai drumming, one of the oldest percussion traditions in India. Hailing from Tamil Nadu, he has spent decades



reviving this culturally significant art, which was historically marginalized. Through his performances, teachings, and advocacy, Velu Aasan has played a crucial role in restoring Parai to its rightful place in Tamil heritage. His legacy continues to

inspire new generations of Parai artists.

Velu Aasan went on to establish the Alanganallur Thappisai Kuzhu, Tamil Nadu's largest Parai music ensemble. Today, their electrifying performances have become a highlight at festivals and special events, captivating audiences with their rhythmic energy. A quick search for Alanganallur Thappisai Kuzhu on YouTube is sure to get you moving to their vibrant beats.

7. Venkappa Ambaji Sugatekar (NT)

Known as the Bhisma of Gondhali, 81-year-old Gondhali folk singer from Bagalkot, has dedicated his life to preserving and promoting the ancient Gondhali tradition, a devotional storytelling art form rooted in Maharashtra and Karnataka. With a vast repertoire of over 1,000 folk songs and 150 story narrations, he has kept this fading heritage alive through



mesmerizing performances. His commitment extends beyond the stage—having trained more than 1,000 students, he ensures that future generations carry forward this rich cultural legacy.

8. Dr. Vijayalaxmi Deshamane(SC)



A veteran oncologist surgeon from Kalaburagi, has devoted over four decades to serving cancer patients, with a special focus on providing free treatment and counselling to economically disadvantaged

communities. Rising from humble beginnings in the marginalized Madiga community, she overcame numerous challenges to make significant contributions to breast cancer research and treatment. Her compassionate approach and unwavering dedication have transformed countless lives, making quality cancer care accessible to those in need. In recognition of her remarkable service in the field of medicine. She plays key role at the Kidwai Memorial Institute of Oncology, she spearheaded advancements in cancer treatment, research, and public awareness, making a lasting impact on the field of oncology.

9. Naren Gurung (ST)

Naren Gurung, a renowned folk artist from Gangtok, Sikkim, has been honoured with the Padma award in 2025 for his significant



contributions to art. Over the past 60 years, he has dedicated himself to preserving and promoting Sikkimese Nepali folk music and dance, ensuring the vibrancy of this cultural heritage. At 70, Gurung is affectionately known as the Nepali Geet ke

Guru Gurung and has been instrumental in safeguarding the rich traditions of Sikkimese and Nepali folk arts. Gurung's recognition with the Padma Shri highlights his unwavering commitment to cultural preservation and his significant impact on the artistic landscape of Sikkim and the broader Nepali community.

10. Late Venerable Lama Lobzang

A Legacy of Service and Spirituality

Late Venerable Lama Lobzang, a revered Tibetan Buddhist leader, is one of the Padma awardees for 2025, posthumously honoured for his profound contributions to Buddhism, humanitarian service, and the welfare of Ladakh. Born in Leh, Lama Lobzang dedicated his life to both spiritual growth and social service, leaving an enduring impact on countless lives.

As the President of Asoka Mission, Delhi, he was pivotal in providing healthcare to Ladakh's remote communities, ensuring that thousands of people received vital medical assistance in areas often cut off from basic services. His dedication to improving the lives of the



underprivileged in Ladakh will continue to inspire future generations.

A passionate advocate for Buddhism, Lama Lobzang worked tirelessly to preserve and promote Buddhist heritage.

He engaged in dialogue and cultural exchange across several countries, including India, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, and Korea, helping to strengthen Buddhist unity and mutual understanding. As the Founding Secretary General of the International Buddhist Confederation (IBC), he worked to bring global attention to the teachings of Buddhism, advocating for peace, wisdom, and global harmony.

Lama Lobzang's selfless service and devotion to humanity will continue to be a beacon of compassion and wisdom. His posthumous selection for the Padma Shri honours his extraordinary legacy of service, cultural preservation, and global Buddhist engagement.

11. Manda Krishna Madiga (SC)

Manda Krishna Madiga's selection for the Padma Shri is a remarkable achievement, highlighting his pivotal role in advocating for the Madiga community and Dalit's. As the founder of the Madiga Reservation Porata Samiti (MRPS), Madiga led a tireless fight for the categorization of reservations within the Scheduled Castes (SC)



to ensure better opportunities for his people. His work began in 1999 and became a powerful force in Telangana politics, representing the struggles of thousands of Madiga families.

Though he didn't succeed in electoral politics, Madiga's influence grew through his leadership and dedication. His movement gained national attention, and his relentless efforts ultimately led the

Supreme Court to clear the path for SC categorization with important conditions. This victory was not just a legal win but a symbol of hope for the marginalized. The Padma Shri award

recognizes Madiga's unwavering commitment to social justice and his role in reshaping the narrative around Dalit empowerment. His journey from a marginalized community to a national leader showcases how determination can lead to significant change. Madiga's story is a powerful reminder of the impact one person can have in challenging the status quo and inspiring an entire community to strive for a better future.

12. Nagendranath Roy (SC)

Nagendranath Roy, affectionately known as the Valmiki of the Rajbongshi community of North Bengal, is among the distinguished Padma Shri awardees, honoured for his remarkable contribution to preserving and promoting cultural heritage. As a member of the Scheduled Castes (SC), Roy's achievements resonate deeply, not just for his literary prowess, but for his dedication to uplifting his community through the power of language and literature.



Roy made history by translating the Ramayana into Rajbongshi, a first-of-its-kind endeavour that bridges a significant cultural gap. Though his seven-volume translation is not yet published, the work represents an invaluable cultural

treasure. His translation of such an epic directly from Sanskrit into Rajbongshi is a labour of love and devotion, aimed at preserving the cultural identity of his people.

Alongside the Ramayana, Roy has also translated other pivotal texts like the Chandi, Gita, and Chandalika into Rajbongshi, further enriching the literary heritage of his community. His life's mission is to make classical works such as the Mahabharata and the Upanishads accessible to Rajbongshi speakers, ensuring that they too can engage with these timeless texts in their own language. Despite facing many challenges, Roy's tireless work continues to inspire. His recent Padma Shri recognition is a moment of immense pride for his family and community. Roy's story serves as a powerful reminder of how one individual's dedication to language and culture can profoundly impact an entire community, especially one coming from an SC background, breaking barriers and creating pathways for others.

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Exploitation to Empowerment: The Struggle for Workers' Rights

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, was a staunch advocate for labor rights and social justice. Born into the “lower” caste, he faced discrimination and inequality from an early age, which fueled his determination to uplift India’s marginalized communities, especially the working class. As the Labour Member of the Viceroy’s Executive Council from 1942 to 1946, Dr. Ambedkar played a pivotal role in introducing labor reforms that significantly improved the conditions of Indian workers.

One of Dr. Ambedkar’s most notable achievements was reducing the daily working hours from 14 to 8, ensuring humane labor conditions. He also introduced crucial amendments to the Factories Act of 1934, mandating provisions for essential amenities like water and washing



facilities, fire safety measures, and regulated working hours, particularly for women and children. Recognizing the importance of rest and recovery, he pioneered the concept of paid leave, granting adult workers ten days and child workers fourteen days of annual leave. Additionally, he championed overtime pay, ensuring that workers received fair compensation for extra hours.

Dr. Ambedkar also worked towards establishing labor welfare funds for different industries, providing financial support for education, healthcare, and housing for workers and their families. His efforts in strengthening labor unions were instrumental in securing workers’ rights. He moved the Indian Trade Unions (Amendment) Bill in the Legislative Assembly, which mandated the compulsory recognition of trade unions. Through these initiatives, he sought not just legal safeguards but also a broader social transformation aimed at eradicating historical injustices and creating a society where everyone could live with dignity.

Despite Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s contributions, labor exploitation persists in India, particularly in the unorganized sector. This sector, comprising nearly 90 percent of India’s workforce, remains a significant yet vulnerable part of the economy. It accounts for more than 99 percent of

establishments and employs around 80 percent of the manufacturing workforce. However, this segment is often characterized by low wages, unstable employment, and a lack of legislative protection or trade union representation. Many laborers work without formal contracts, social security schemes, or minimum wage guarantees, making them extremely vulnerable in times of economic downturns or crises.

As of January 2025, over 159 million unorganized workers in India were employed in the agricultural sector, while domestic and household workers accounted for more than 28 million. Women in this sector face additional challenges, including gender discrimination, unequal pay, and limited mobility, making their economic participation even more precarious.

The COVID-19 pandemic further highlighted the systemic vulnerabilities of migrant workers, exposing their lack of social security, poor working conditions, and economic insecurity. While the unemployment rate in India dropped from 6 percent in 2017-18 to 3.2 percent in 2023-24, many migrant workers still struggle to access government welfare programs due to the absence of necessary documentation. The government’s e-Shram portal was introduced to integrate social security schemes and provide benefits to unorganized workers. As of January 28, 2025, over 30.58 crore workers had registered on the e-Shram portal, with twelve schemes of various central ministries and departments mapped under it. However, challenges related to interstate portability and efficient welfare distribution still need to be addressed.

The Economic Survey 2024-25 emphasizes the need for labor regulations that balance worker welfare with business growth. A flexible work environment, reduced restrictions on overtime, and increased job opportunities are seen as crucial for economic progress. As India moves towards its ‘Viksit Bharat’ goal, ensuring the dignity, safety, and inclusion of its workforce, particularly migrant laborers, will be critical for equitable development and social justice.

India is also planning a major shift in its labor policies by replacing the minimum wage system with a living wage by 2025. The government is working with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to ensure that workers receive fair compensation that meets their basic needs. Furthermore, all 36 states and Union Territories are expected to complete the harmonization and



pre-publication of draft rules under the four labor codes by March 31, 2025.

The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) has made significant recommendations to the 57th Regular Session of the Human Rights Council, focusing on caste-based discrimination and labor exploitation. Special Rapporteur Mr. Surya Deva emphasized the right to development, particularly for children and future generations, highlighting the struggles of marginalized groups, including Dalits. He noted that children are not a homogeneous group and face disproportionate impacts from policies related to migration, environmental pollution, climate change, and conflicts.

IDSN's report on caste discrimination in global supply chains has documented how Dalits form the majority of workers subjected to forced labor in South Asia, including child labor. Harvard Center for Human Rights Policy researcher Siddharth Kara has also pointed out that every child laborer he documented in India belonged to a low-caste or minority community. Reports indicate that nearly half a million children in India, primarily Dalits and Adivasis, are engaged in hazardous work in the cottonseed production industry, where they are

exposed to harmful chemicals and exploitative conditions.

In addition to legal reforms, initiatives such as Mudra Yojana, Skill India, Start-Up India, and Stand-Up India have been instrumental in fostering entrepreneurship, providing skill training, and promoting self-reliant and sustainable livelihoods. These programs aim to empower individuals by offering financial support and skill development opportunities, enabling them to break free from the cycle of poverty and economic dependence.

Dr. Ambedkar's legacy in labor rights remains relevant today as India continues to navigate the challenges of globalization, technological advancements, and economic inequality. His vision for a just and equitable society can serve as a guiding force in shaping modern labor policies, ensuring that the rights and dignity of every worker are upheld. By building upon Dr. Ambedkar's pioneering efforts and implementing forward-thinking labor policies, India can create a workforce that is protected and empowered and contributes meaningfully to the nation's progress.

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Maha Kumbh Mela: Rise of Naga Sadhus from Dalit, tribal communities

In a historic shift, over 20% of newly initiated Naga sadhus at Maha Kumbh 2025 came from Dalit and tribal backgrounds, breaking centuries-old caste barriers. Of the 8,715 seekers, who embraced the ascetic path, 1,850 belonged to marginalized communities. Additionally, around 250 women renounced worldly life to become Naga sadhvis, marking another milestone in



the religious order's evolution. Following the final Amrit Snan on Basant Panchami, the 13 akharas began their departure, lowering their flags and holding the traditional kadhi pakoda meal. The Naga sanyasis of Juna Akhara left on February 7, first heading to Kashi for Mahashivaratri celebrations before dispersing

to their monasteries. Meanwhile, Bairagi akharas moved towards Ayodhya and Vrindavan, while Udasin and Nirmal akharas traveled to Anandpur Sahib in Punjab. With the seers' departure, the remaining Maghi Purnima and Mahashivaratri dips were primarily for devotees.

Mamta Devi becomes first SC woman president of Devprayag municipality

Mamta Devi of the BJP has been elected unopposed as the President of Devprayag municipality, becoming the first woman from a Scheduled Caste (SC) to hold the post. Her victory came after the Congress candidate's nomination was rejected during scrutiny, leaving her as the sole contender.

Mamta Devi's unopposed election marks a significant milestone in Uttarakhand's civic politics, reflecting increased representation for marginalized communities. Her win was part of the BJP's early gains in the Uttarakhand municipal elections, with the party also securing the Nanakmatta Nagar Panchayat president's post unopposed. The elections are set for January 23, with results to be declared on January 25.

*Compiled by Prajvalant.
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DIN VISHESH

Remembering Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad

11th March

Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad Birth Anniversary

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III shared a significant relationship based on mutual respect and a common vision for social reform. Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad, the progressive ruler of Baroda State, played a crucial role in shaping Dr Ambedkar's early career by providing him with a scholarship to pursue higher education abroad. This support allowed Dr Ambedkar to study at Columbia University in the U.S. and later at the London School of Economics, which laid the foundation for his intellectual and political journey.



Dr Ambedkar deeply respected Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad for his progressive policies, particularly his efforts to promote education among the underprivileged and eradicate caste discrimination. After completing his education, Dr Ambedkar was appointed as the Military Secretary in Baroda under the Maharaja's administration. However, he faced severe caste-based discrimination from his colleagues, which forced him to leave the job. Despite this experience, Dr Ambedkar always acknowledged Maharaja Sayajirao's role in his academic and professional growth.

Maharaja Sayajirao's support for Dr Ambedkar was not just financial but also ideological. Both believed in equality, education, and social justice. Their relationship symbolized the coming together of social reformers from different backgrounds to challenge the rigid caste system and uplift the oppressed in Indian society.



15th February
Sant Narhari Sonar
Death Anniversary



17th February
Lahuji Salve
Death Anniversary



19th February
Chhatrapati
Shivaji Maharaj
Birth Anniversary



23rd February
Sant Gadgebaba
Birth Anniversary



26th February
V. D. Savarkar
Death Anniversary



10th March
Savitribai Phule
Death Anniversary

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