



THE CIVIL LENS

Zooming in on what matters

“

Democracy is an impossible thing until the power is shared by all, but let not democracy degenerate into monocracy.

Mahatma Gandhi

Father of Nation, India

GI-Tagged Food

GI-tagged foods aren't just products — they're living stories of our land, people, and traditions.

Ranveer Brar
Celebrity Chef, India

Every festival, every story, every song— culture is conversation.

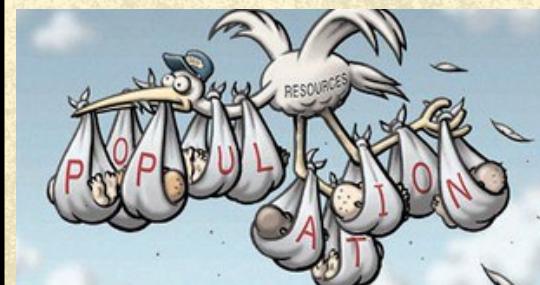
This Month's Exclusive Read



Special Coverage: SARAS Mela'25

Awaken, arise, and educate. Smash traditions, liberate minds, and transform society.

~Savitribai Phule



Food for Thought

More mouths, fewer means, are we listening to what the planet is whispering?

Breaking Democracy Down: A Contemporary Reality Check

SAHIL KUMAR

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Democracy, a term rooted in the Ancient Greek words "demos" (people) and "kratos" (rule), has long been upheld as the ideal form of governance. The iconic phrase, "*by the people, for the people, to the people*," loses its relevance. However, in contemporary times, particularly within a country like India with its formal systems of separation of powers and an independent judiciary, the true meaning of democracy appears to be eroding. The inner workings of politics often seem to contradict its foundational principles, fostering a sense of disillusionment among the populace.

As Jeremy Bentham's theory of utilitarianism suggests, many politicians seem to prioritise their own pleasure and promote nepotism rather than working for the greater good. The average citizen views democracy as a system that should guarantee essential rights such as employment, food, security, and personal safety, thereby enabling them to live with dignity and enjoy their natural rights. This perspective aligns with the ideas of philosophers like John Locke, often referred to as the father of liberalism, who argued that an individual's rights take precedence over the state. In the context of India's struggle for independence, this sentiment was powerfully echoed in Lokmanya Tilak's declaration: "Swaraj is my birthright, and I shall have it."

The "Iron Law of Oligarchy" and Political Interference

In modern democracies, there is growing evidence of what sociologist Robert Michels termed the "*iron law of Oligarchy*", where power inevitably consolidates in the hands of a few. This phenomenon is evident in cases of political corruption and interference in the work of bureaucratic officials. A notable example is the alleged interference by a deputy chief minister in a corruption case, which led to the resignation of a dedicated official. Such incidents underscore the urgent need for reforms that ensure officials can work without undue pressure and that the rule of law is upheld equally for all citizens.

The need for Free and Fair Practices

While free and fair elections are a cornerstone of democracy, their integrity is increasingly being questioned. The process is sometimes corrupted by the distribution of money and freebies, turning the sacred act of voting into a transaction. While freebies might seem beneficial, they can foster dependency on the state rather than encouraging individuals to become self-reliant, a lesson we learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Democracy: More Than Just Election

A healthy democracy is far more than just holding elections. It is built upon a foundation of interconnected pillars that ensure accountability, liberty, and justice. A free and fair press is essential for delivering information without bias, and an independent judiciary with a commitment to speedy trials is vital for protecting individual liberties.

The three main organs of government - the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary - must operate with a system of checks and balances to prevent any one branch from accumulating absolute power. This principle of constitutionalism is the bedrock of our fundamental rights, as upheld in landmark cases like the Kesavananda Bharti (1973) and Maneka Gandhi (1978) rulings. Furthermore, a government's responsibility to its people extends beyond election cycles; it must remain transparent and accountable to its citizens. Peaceful protests and agitations are crucial avenues for citizens to voice their concerns.

The Imperative of Active Citizenship

Active citizenship is the bedrock of a thriving democracy. It transforms citizens from passive observers into engaged participants in the governance of their nation. It goes beyond merely voting and encompasses a conscious effort to contribute to the civic and political life of one's community.

In an era of declining trust in political institutions, active citizens play a vital role in transparency and accountability from their representatives. Modern technology offers new platforms for civic engagement, from online petitions to social media campaigns, allowing individuals to mobilise communities and participate in policy-making.

In India, the Right to Information (RTI) Act has empowered citizens to seek information from public authorities, fostering transparency and exposing corruption. Examples of active citizenship are seen in the efforts of RTI activists and the widespread participation of volunteers in social causes and disaster relief efforts, such as the Punjab and Uttarakhand floods. These actions demonstrate a collective commitment to the well-being of society and prove that, despite the challenges, the democratic spirit of the Indian people remains strong.

The Worldwide Backsliding: Is Democracy Dying?

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“Democracy doesn’t always collapse in one dramatic event. Often the decay is informal, legal, gradual: harassment of opposition, press intimidation, expanding executive power.” ~ Maya Tudor

Today, democracy feels more like a paradox. With the current world events; Nepal's GenZ uprising, U.S. executive overreach stoking global alarm, Turkey's rival mayor being jailed, UK government undermining electoral body's independence, and a lot more incidents pointing towards the alarming situation worldwide. This is not random chance, but a global playbook of executive aggrandizement*: the systematic, and often perfectly legal, subversion of freedom by the very leaders elected to uphold it.

The Global Playbook: Neutralising the Security System

The modern autocrat understands that an *actual* coup is messy. A much cleaner solution is to simply buy or neutralize the existing security system: the Judiciary and the Legislature. A strong executive can weaken the legislature and bypass its authority and elected leaders can undermine the independence of the judiciary through various methods, as observed in countries experiencing democratic backsliding. It is vital to understand that all this cannot be achieved without breaking down societal checks and balances. Beyond formal government branches, the elected leaders can also attack the societal institutions that provide the people with information and hold power. Targeting social institutions provided them with external constraints on executive power.

Capturing the Courts

It is very interesting to see that the elected leaders do not typically abolish the courts. They colonise them by turning the highest body of law into a mere stamp for executive action. The irony that lies here is how law is used as the destroyer of law itself.

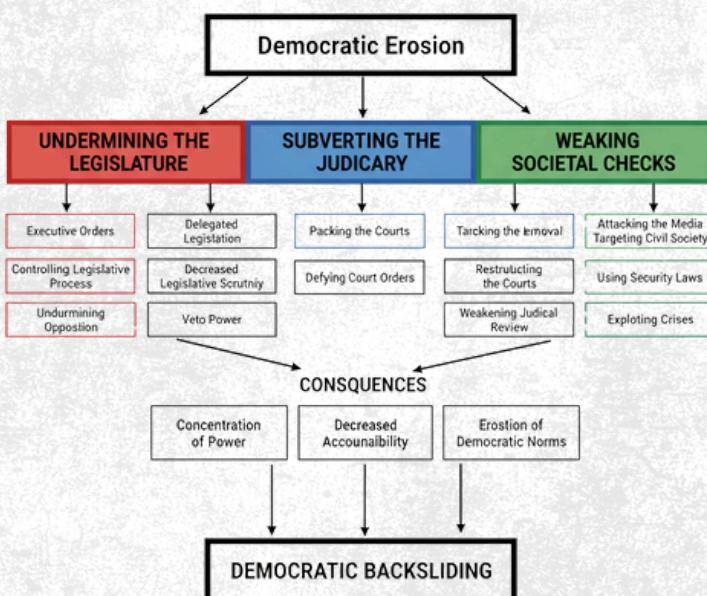
This strategy often works through subtle manipulation of judicial appointments and structure:

- **Mexico** recently demonstrated this tactic by passing judicial reforms that reduce the number of Supreme Court judges and introduce popular elections for judges. This is evidently a legislative tactic designed to purge the judiciary and replace expertise with political loyalty.
- In **Israel**, the ongoing efforts to reform the judiciary have centered on abandoning the tradition of appointing the Supreme Court President based on seniority, a direct, stealthy attack on judicial independence that seeks to politicize the court's leadership.
- Even in established democracies like **Australia**, parliament has developed mechanisms to systematically override High Court decisions by passing new laws that achieve identical outcomes while claiming technical compliance. This shows how easily the fusion of executive and legislative power can nullify the Judiciary's role as a check.

The Servile Legislature

While the legislative branch continues to meet, its power is often rendered irrelevant. The playbook here involves making the representative body subservient to the executive's party, allowing the leader to legislate through emergency measures or decree, bypassing debate and scrutiny.

- In **El Salvador**, President Nayib Bukele has used constitutional changes and repeated states of emergency to suspend civil rights and centralize power, effectively legislating without meaningful legislative oversight.
- This strategy also includes attacks on the systems that support the legislature. Across the globe, from the **UK** to emerging democracies, we see a decline in the credibility of elections, often stemming from the executive actively **undermining the independence of electoral bodies** and officials—the essential mechanism for accountability.



The Informal Decay: Eroding Societal Checks

All of these institutional attacks cannot be achieved without first dismantling **societal checks and balances**. Beyond formal government branches, the modern autocrat targets the non-state actors that provide the people with information and hold power to account. We can see the notable war on the free press and the callout of "Anti-Nationalism". In countries like **Turkey** and **Hungary**, media outlets are silenced through campaigns of legal pressure (tax disputes, libel suits) or bought out by government-friendly oligarchs. A similar shift of media voice from independent to dependent has been observed in **India**, too. More recently, tactics have become highly specific and technical, such as the use of **spyware against journalists and activists** in places like **Italy**, and the political interference that led to the 2024 closure of the public broadcaster in **Slovakia**.

It is also seen that it is one of the government's major tactics of framing criticism of the government as disloyalty to the nation. This strategy is very prominent in countries like **India**, which uses the label of "**anti-national**" to justify the legal harassment and repression of activists, students, and human rights defenders. When the opposition is redefined as "traitor," then their legal, economic, or political punishment is framed as a matter of **national security**.

Democracy's greatest weakness today is its perceived inability to solve major, tangible problems like economic

inequality, corruption, and climate change with the speed and decisiveness that people crave. When systems are seen as inefficient, distant, or corrupt, the strong, populist leader who promises decisive action and swift "order" becomes appealing, even if that order comes at the expense of civil liberties. The desire for effective governance can lead to what has been termed authoritarian nostalgia, a tendency to overlook the pain of past authoritarianism in favor of a promise of stability and economic performance. It is understood that executive aggrandizement thrives on deep social and political division. When citizens tend to believe that their political opponents are not just rivals but a threat to their existence. This toxic division ensures that the government is viewed purely as a tool to reward its supporters and punish its critics. The populist leader capitalizes on this by asserting that the procedural checks of democracy (courts, media, legislature) are merely obstructions put up by the "elite" or "enemies of the people" to thwart the popular will.

Democracy is no longer the world's uncontested model. Established autocracies like **Russia** and **China** are actively exporting their illiberal toolkit—from surveillance technology and sophisticated disinformation campaigns to models of centralized governance—to aspiring strongmen globally. This provides new autocrats with clear blueprints and technical assistance for repression, validating the idea that a centralized, high-tech illiberal state can deliver stability without messy accountability.

The Paradox of Human Will

We are presented with a system that is complex, slow, and often frustrating, and we are offered a seductive alternative: the simple certainty of order. The autocrat asks us to trade the messy, tiring work of accountability for a promised relief from complexity.

So, as the global backsliding continues, the deepest inquiry shifts from the political arena to the individual soul. The great democratic challenge of our time is not simply to save institutions, but to save the will to sustain them.

The institutions may be durable, but are we? How much of the democratic decline is simply a reflection of our own collective exhaustion—our willingness to delegate our moral responsibility to a powerful figure who promises to handle the complexity for us? And if we surrender freedom legally, gradually, and by our own silent consent, what right do we have to claim its loss was an injustice?

*Executive Aggrandizement- It is the process by which an elected executive gradually and systemically expands their power by weakening or dismantling a country's democratic institutions and checks and balances.

Democracy & Development: Essential Parallels for Growth

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It's not only about economic growth. Development is a complex term that includes social progress, poverty reduction, inequality reduction, creating opportunities, and improving the overall quality of life. In a democracy like India, where policy is meant to serve the people, development cannot be separated from participation and empowerment.

The government and policymakers have consistently emphasized development in India. India launched several initiatives after independence to facilitate swift expansion and integration. Examples of this initiative are the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) for 2030 and NITI Aayog's "Strategy for New India@75" document index, which have acted as the cornerstones of contemporary development policy.

A Policy Viewpoint

The National Sustainable Development Goal, which is in line with the SDGs, has been one of the most significant regulatory frameworks in recent years. As a member of the UN, India has implemented the Sustainable Development Goals through local policy. The government is pursuing both financial and social development through initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) for financial empowerment, the Skill India Mission for skill development, and the Ayushman Bharat Mission for health security. Moreover, significant programs such as 'Digital India' and 'Make in India' seek to motivate individuals through digitization and improve the industry.

For rural women, these policies are more than abstract frameworks—they create direct avenues for participation in democracy and development. For instance, PMJDY has allowed millions of women to open bank accounts and exercise financial agency, while Skill India has expanded training opportunities in non-traditional fields.

Challenges and Issues

- Although India's plans are ambitious, the country still faces several structural and implementation challenges in its development. Why?
- While poverty has decreased, financial and social inequality have increased. Wealthier groups and urban areas often reap the benefits of development.
- Unemployment and underemployment remain unaddressed by Skill India and other programs. Numerous young individuals work in informal, low-wage positions or are job hunting.

- Even though Ayushman Bharat and other such policies prioritize medical coverage, issues such as insufficient facilities and a lack of qualified individuals persist. In the same way, enrollment numbers have increased, but so has the standard of education and graduates' ability to secure jobs.
- Policy development is often dominated by fast industrial growth, which goes against the principles of environmental sustainability. Long-term development is at risk due to air pollution, water scarcity, and climate change.
- Lack of implementation: Many programs appear sturdy on the page, but they are plagued by local corruption, bureaucratic delays, and a lack of cooperation between state and federal governments.

Analysis of Policies

NITI Aayog's Strategy for New India@75 emphasizes the importance of environment, infrastructure improvements, inclusive growth, and job creation. Stronger institutional processes and effective surveillance systems are necessary for the successful implementation. 'Make in India' has not created the expected number of jobs or boosted manufacturing's share of global GDP, but it has certainly increased industrial morale.

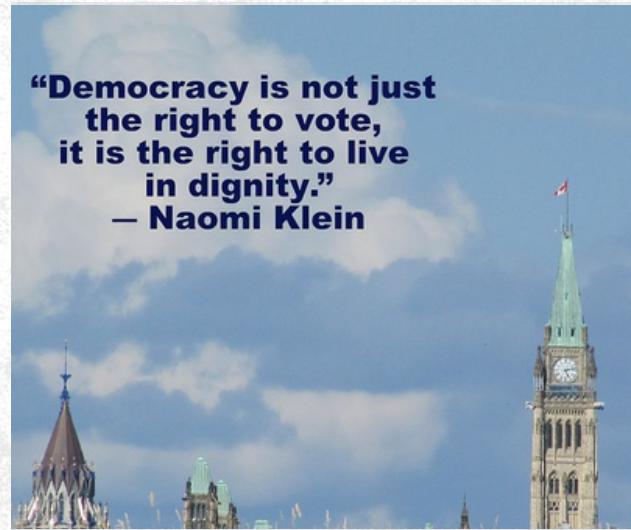
Despite the success of social aid programs like PMJDY in promoting financial inclusion, there is still a long way to go before open accounts are actively utilized. The gap between India's policy direction and its actual implementation limits the progress that is achieved, despite its being progressive and meeting international development standards.

The Ideas and Futuristic Route

- Develop development policies with improved implementation mechanisms, including district-level leadership, independent decision-making, and transparent tracking systems.
- Give More Focus on Human Capital: To create a sustainable workforce, we need more funding for healthcare and education, as well as skills training.
- In order to achieve equitable growth, policies must prioritize women's rights, rural development, and support for those who are marginalized.
- Balancing environmental conservation and industrial expansion is crucial for sustainable development.

- PPPs can facilitate the implementation of policies by bringing together the public, private, and civil society sectors, providing resources, efficiency, or innovation.
- The use of accurate data collection and analysis can enhance policy-making by ensuring timely evaluation and evidence-based action.

Development in a democracy is not a one-time event, but rather an ongoing process that requires strong governance, flexible policies, and active citizen participation. For true democratic development, policies must translate into empowerment on the ground, particularly for rural women, whose participation is vital for building an inclusive and sustainable future.



Protecting Public Information In India's Digital Transformation

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The Digital India Initiative was to transform India into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. Digilocker, APAAR ID, Aadhar Card, Umang, My Bharat, Karmyogi Bharat, Diksha, and many more initiatives fall under the Digital India initiative to make life easier and simpler. While the main aim of this initiative was to make life convenient, they have raised concerns about data privacy and security.

Since data breaches are occurring in every sphere, data privacy is a major worry in the age of digitalization. What exactly is data breaching, then? A data breach can be defined as the unlawful and unauthorized acquisition of personal information that compromises the security, confidentiality, or integrity of personal information. What is considered personal information depends on state law, but typically includes an individual's first name (or initial) and last name, plus one or more of the following:

- Social Security Number
- Driver's license number or state-issued ID card number
- Account number, credit or debit card number, combined with any security code, access code, PIN, or password needed to access an account.

India's government is now the biggest keeper of citizens' personal information. Every day, vast amounts of data are gathered, saved, and processed through platforms like Aadhaar, CoWIN, DigiLocker, e-Government portals, and welfare scheme databases.

This information is extremely delicate and includes biometric information, health data, and financial information.

Have you ever wondered how banks, insurance companies, or even hospitals get your personal contact details? This is often the result of data breaches. We unknowingly share our information while paying bills or signing up online, making our sensitive data vulnerable. Such breaches increase the risk of identity theft, financial fraud, and cybercrimes, while also raising concerns about India's digital sovereignty and national security.

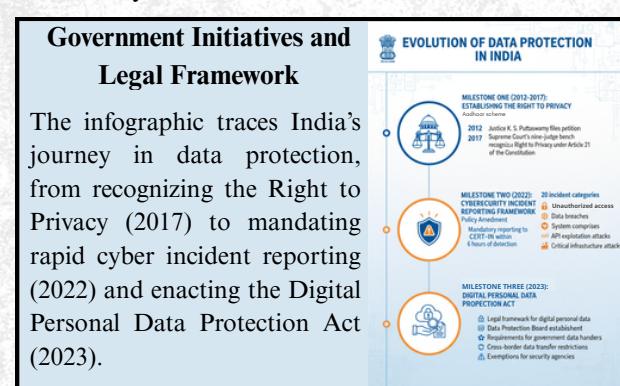
To address this, the following policy measures are essential:

- Bharat Cyber Swachh: Regular checks of passwords and security systems.
- Routine audits of government websites.
- One Nation, One Data Officer: Each ministry should appoint a Data Protection Officer (DPO) to ensure accountability, enforce zero breach tolerance, and follow a strict 6-hour investigation rule.

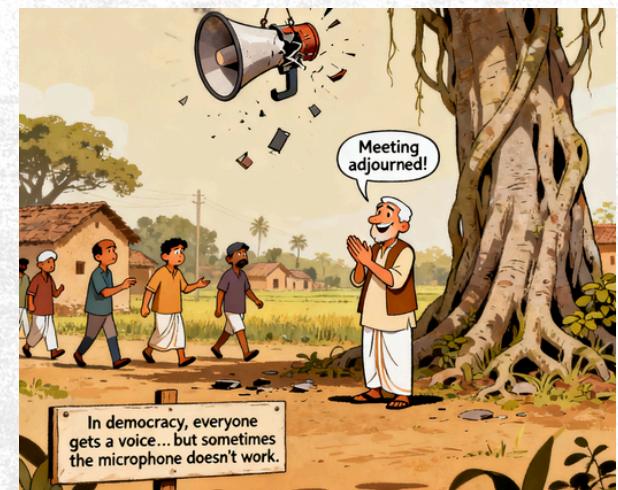
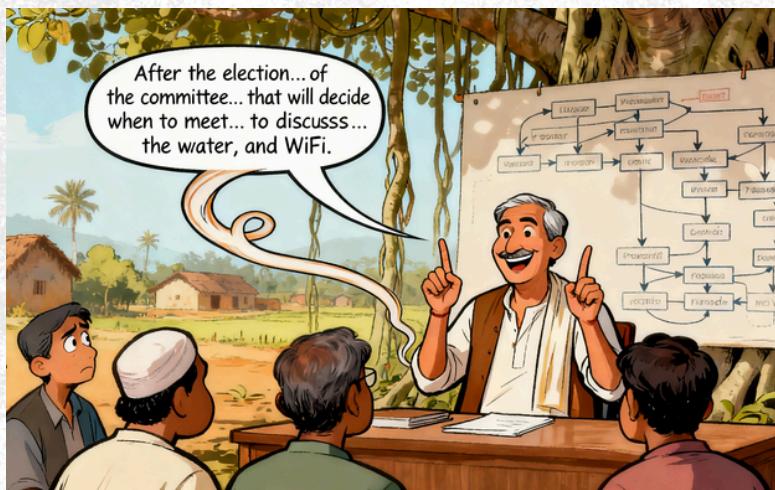
Protecting citizens' data is now a constitutional, moral, and democratic imperative. As India advances through initiatives like Digital India, innovation must go hand in hand with strong cybersecurity, legal safeguards, and accountability.

Government Initiatives and Legal Framework

The infographic traces India's journey in data protection, from recognizing the Right to Privacy (2017) to mandating rapid cyber incident reporting (2022) and enacting the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023).



When Ballots Become Banter



An illustration by Ipsita Sachdev

Is Saras Mela Empowering or Disheartening Women?

“As women achieve power, the barriers will fall. As society sees what women can do, as women see what women can do, there will be more women out there doing things, and we’ll all be better off for it.”

~ Ruth Bader Ginsburg, American Lawyer and Jurist

Each year, a unique marketplace emerges – one where handicrafts meet enterprise and where the spirit of rural India takes centre stage. This is SARAS (Sale of Articles by Rural Artisans Society) Aajeevika Mela, a national initiative that combines cultural preservation with economic empowerment. Launched by the Ministry of Rural Development, this initiative aims to showcase the creativity of women artisans from Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Conceived under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY–NRLM), the mela was envisioned as a platform for self-help groups, especially women, to showcase their skills, access wider markets, and keep traditional crafts alive.

By bringing SHGs from across the country under the ‘SARAS’ brand, it helps them break the cycle of poverty and move towards economic self-reliance. Since its inception in 1999, it has nurtured the spirit of rural enterprise, creating a bridge between tradition and aspiration. Over time, its multiple editions have evolved into a well-established annual event. It has enabled rural women to emerge as ‘Lakhpatti Didis’.

Recently, it was held in Delhi, the SARAS Aajeevika Mela 2025, from September 5 to 22 at the Major Dhyan Chand National Stadium.



The fair carried forward its inspiring motto of ‘Making of the Lakhpatti Didis’.

The event celebrates India’s rich cultural heritage through vibrant handlooms, intricate handicrafts, and diverse regional cuisines. Visitors experience an extraordinary cultural exchange, exploring stalls that showcase Kalamkari handloom, Madhubani paintings, Kanjivaram sarees, terracotta and wooden crafts, crochet items, and many more, along with food stalls from 25 states of India – bringing the artistic and culinary diversity of India together in one place.



There’s a specific emphasis on Lakhpatti Didi, SHG women who are earning more than ₹1 lakh per annum. The goal is to turn “housewives” into “entrepreneurs”, said Dr. Chandra Sekhar Pemmasani, Rural Development Minister. For skill development, market access, and export potential, the government provides training in design, packaging, business planning, and digital marketing through workshops and sessions. A dedicated export promotion pavilion was established to facilitate SHGs’ connection with international markets. From the reports and data available, several of the goals have seen good progress, while others are at early stages or have mixed results.

Think...

Despite such high numbers, how many of them get orders beyond it, and how many are consistent buyers?

One particularly striking aspect of the mela was the presence of multiple selfie booths displaying the slogan “Breaking Language Barriers Across India”. These booths promoted BHASHINI, an AI-powered platform equipped with speech-to-speech translation technology and multilingual AI models. This innovative tool aimed to let artisans share their stories in their native languages and enable visitors to interact in their own, bridging linguistic gaps and connecting rural entrepreneurs with wider audiences.

However, during our fieldwork, we experienced a contrasting reality. At a Telangana stall, we tried speaking with a couple who spoke only Telugu, while we knew only Hindi and English. Despite the available technology, we couldn't communicate, learn their story, or appreciate their craft. This highlighted that while tools like BHASHINI hold promises, their effect on ground implementation is vital for truly inclusive communication.

Another thing that struck me was that several participants declined to speak with us, asking us to wait for their owner to arrive. This reflected a degree of hierarchical dependence and a lack of independent agency among some artisans, indicating that while platforms like SARAS aim to empower rural entrepreneurs, on-ground dynamics sometimes limit their direct engagement with visitors. So, now we are curious to know if this is leading to rural women's empowerment or merely the creation of entrepreneurial hierarchies at different levels.



No one denies SARAS being a great initiative. But we cannot turn a blind eye to the problem of a lack of awareness among people. In 2023, when a similar mela was organised in Itanagar, many rural women were disheartened due to poor attendance. On top of that, SARAS mela is known to have a very heavy aftereffect. In Punjab, in 2023, this mela left the Punjab Agricultural University seeming like a dumping ground. The people complained that, though officials claimed that the Saras Mela would be a plastic-free event, plastic was seen dumped everywhere. The students and teachers were affected for many days.

Even though SARAS Mela 2025 has brought artisans, SHGs, and rural women to the forefront, some gaps remain. The government needs to create a permanent online SARAS marketplace linked to e-commerce platforms and retail networks. Providing financial literacy, packaging, and marketing support leading to long-term income growth. In addition, GI-tagging, quality certification, and product innovation can complement and preserve the traditional crafts at the same time. In this way, SARAS Mela will evolve from a short-term showcase to a sustainable platform for rural entrepreneurship over time.

This piece is the result of our field visit to the SARAS Mela — where Mehak, Ekta, and I spent the day listening to stories of resilience, creativity, and entrepreneurship. Written by Mehak and me, this editorial reflects the realities we witnessed and the conversations that shaped our understanding of rural women's empowerment.

~Ipsita



Ekta Grover, Ipsita Sachdev, Mehak Bansal, Students of MA Public Policy, IILM University, Greater Noida

Culinary Cultures as Democratic Narratives: Linking Food, Identity, and Rural Development

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India's culinary cultures are just as diverse as its people, ranging from the millets of tribals in Odisha to the spices of Kerala, the fish of Bengal, and the dairy traditions of Gujarat. What we eat is not only about taste or nutrition; it reflects who we are. Indian cuisine is not just about sustenance, as "food is an essential part of Indian culture and deeply rooted to the country's history, traditions, lifestyles, and customs" (Samaddar et al., 2020). In this sense, the Indian thali is not just another plate of food - it is a symbolic democratic representation of diversity, inclusion, and sometimes, exclusion.

Food and Identity in Indian History

Food in India is infused with identity, shaped by geography, caste, religion, and community. It's not just a source of sustenance but a cultural language where, through food, one defines who they are, where they are from, and what they believe.

India has a remarkable culinary landscape. From wheat, rice, and a variety of lentils in northern plains, to fish and seafood in coastal regions, to dairy products of Gujarat, to the stews and meat in the Himalayas, the availability of local ingredients dictates the staples of a region's cuisine.

Beyond geography, culinary practices are heavily influenced by social and religious values. For instance, the caste system controlled dietary rules; Brahmins followed a strict vegetarian diet as a form of purity, while lower castes' diet included meat, reflecting their need for more calories for manual labour, and they were typically considered polluters.

Even major religions have specific dietary principles. Hinduism promotes vegetarianism, and cows are considered sacred, so beef consumption is taboo for them. While Islam prohibits the consumption of pork, meat is often prepared according to halal guidelines.

Moreover, food serves as a marker of communal identity also. The Jain community follows a very strict vegetarian diet that avoids root vegetables like potatoes, onions, and garlic since their cultivation harms microorganisms. A person's community can often be identified by the food they eat. For example, Nawabi cuisine is famous for its kebabs and biryanis. Similarly, the Parsi community has a distinct cuisine that blends Iranian and Gujarati flavours, with dishes like dhansak being central to their identity.

Food is a powerful tool for cultural heritage, passed down through generations. Recipes are not just instructions; they are the narratives of family, history, and tradition. They are the unforgettable links to our ancestors. The act of preparing and sharing food at family gatherings reinforces community bonds and preserves a unique cultural legacy, which is termed commensalism (Weber, 1922).

Food and Democracy: diversity on the plate

As we discussed, India is unique in its culinary diversity; it reflects pluralism in action: just as multiple voices coexist in democracy, multiple foodways coexist on the plate. The freedom to choose what one eats aligns with democratic values of liberty, autonomy, and dignity. Article 21 (Right to Life) and Article 25 (Freedom of Religion) intersect when food practices are debated in courts. For marginalised communities, food is not only about sustenance but also about cultural rights.

Mid-Day Meal Scheme - India's largest school feeding program symbolises democratic ideals of equality, inclusion, and social justice. Children from different castes sit and eat together, thus breaking age-old social barriers.

Democracy is not just elections and institutions, but lived experiences like eating together, respecting diversity, and ensuring equity. India's food culture teaches us that democracy survives when multiple tastes, traditions, and choices coexist. The plate becomes a metaphor for democracy itself: varied, diverse, sometimes contradictory, but ideally shared.

Food, Rural Development & Livelihoods

Local Indian cuisines thrive because of small farmers, self-help groups (SHGs), and rural women entrepreneurs. These communities are the keepers of traditional food systems, preserving indigenous crops and age-old recipes. Government policies like the One District, One Product (ODOP) scheme, which promotes items like Sitabhog from Bardhaman or Nagpur oranges, and GI tagging for products like Basmati rice and Darjeeling tea, provide legal and economic protection. The recent push to revive millets, now called "Shree Anna", isn't just about nutrition or climate resilience.

It's a movement to elevate rural economies by giving these culturally significant grains global recognition. Events like the Saras Mela and various food festivals create a direct link between producers and urban consumers, allowing these cherished traditions and products to be shared on a wider scale, ensuring both their survival and their economic value.

Challenges to Food Democracy

While India's food landscape reflects diversity and inclusivity, several challenges threaten the ideal of "food democracy." Rising food insecurity and malnutrition highlight persistent inequalities in access, where millions struggle to secure even basic nutrition despite constitutional assurances. Social hierarchies further complicate the picture: instances of resistance to Dalit cooks in school mid-day meals expose how caste discrimination continues to shape food practices, undermining equality at the dining table.

Thus, the challenges to food democracy are not only about what we eat but also about who gets to eat, how, and at what cost.

Food as Democratic Bridge

Food, then, is not just what sustains the body but also what sustains democracy.

As Bergamini et al. (2013) argue, Millets, once neglected, are re-emerging as climate-resilient crops that support smallholder farmers and revive cultural food traditions. In times where globalization threatens homogenisation, honouring local cuisines and food identities is a way of affirming India's pluralism. A democracy that respects the right to eat, the right to choose, and the right to preserve cultural foodways is a democracy that nourishes not only its citizens but also its soul.

Food in Contemporary Times: Globalization V. Local Roots

This split-screen visual contrasts the standardized, fast-paced world of global fast food (left) with the diverse, community-oriented local food movement (right). The image captures the tension between:

Mass production vs. artisanal preparation

Corporate uniformity vs. cultural diversity

Convenience-focused consumption vs. mindful, traditional eating practices

Global homogenization vs. local identity preservation



"When I look at these contrasting food spaces, I am reminded that food is never just about eating. It carries the memory of traditions, the dignity of livelihoods, and the possibility of inclusion. For me, food is democracy lived daily—quietly yet powerfully—on every plate."

~ Mehak Bansal

The Judiciary on Trial: Democratic Reform or Regress?

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From the very birth of the Republic, India's judiciary was entrusted with a special role — to act as the guardian of the Constitution and a check on the powers of Parliament and the Executive. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had once described the Supreme Court as the “sentinel on the qui vive,” standing watch over the democratic order. Yet, the framers were equally aware that such a powerful institution must not be above scrutiny. The Constitution, under Articles 124(4) and 217, created the rare and difficult process of judicial removal for “proved misbehaviour or incapacity.”

Over the decades, however, this high threshold has meant that accountability has remained elusive. The failed impeachment of Justice V. Ramaswami in 1993 showed how political divisions can shield judges despite evidence of misconduct. Attempts at codifying judicial ethics and accountability such as the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968 and the lapsed Judicial Standards and Accountability Bill of 2010 have all highlighted the same dilemma: how to balance judicial independence with meaningful oversight.

It is in this long constitutional struggle that the present proposal must be placed. The Judicial Standards and Accountability Bill seeks to establish a credible, transparent, and citizen-accessible system for addressing misconduct within the higher judiciary.

It proposes clear codes of ethics, financial disclosures, and complaint mechanisms, while safeguarding the independence of judges from political interference.

The Bill seeks to enhance transparency and integrity in the Indian judiciary by establishing clear codes of ethics and guidelines for judges. It requires judges of the Supreme Court and the High Courts to declare their personal assets, and the personal assets of their spouses and dependent children, to establish financial transparency.

The Bill would establish a process for citizens to register complaints against judges for misconduct in an orderly manner, while ensuring confidentiality to curtail frivolous complaints. It authorizes a Judicial Oversight Committee to manage the complaint process, oversee initial screening, and investigate complaints. The Committee is assisted by a Scrutiny Panel for initial screening.

It is also assisted by an Investigation Committee able to review complaints, hear witnesses, and recommend disciplinary action ranging from advisories to the removal of a judge. The Bill seeks to include provisions that promote the independence of judges in the performance of their duties and protect judges from undue political pressure.

Case Study

Justice Yashwant Varma (Delhi / Allahabad High Courts):

A March 2025 fire at his official residence in Delhi led to the discovery of very substantial amounts of unaccounted cash in a store-room. The Supreme Court collegium moved him back to his former High Court (Allahabad) and started an in-house inquiry. A three-judge fact-finding committee report stated Varma and his family had 'covert or active control' of the storeroom, which amounted to misuse of official position and serious misconduct warranting a recommendation for removal. The Supreme Court's final observation was that Varma's conduct does not inspire confidence to hold this position.

Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav (Allahabad High Court):

In December 2024, he made public comments at a Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) gathering. He is reported to have said that India should function based on the desires of its majority population. He allegedly compared Hindus who are reforming practices in Hindu family law with Muslims who had no reforms and used derogatory language, like 'kathmullah'. The Campaign for Judicial Accountability and Reforms filed complaints asking for an inquiry. The Supreme Court Collegium summoned him to explain and inquired about whether his conduct breached any codes of conduct. The Supreme Court Collegium summoned him to explain them, solicited reports from the High Court, and inquired about whether his conduct breached any codes of conduct for judges like the Restatement of Values of Judicial Life. While he has nevertheless maintained that his comments were consistent with social commentary that continues to align with constitutional values.

Strengthening Public Confidence

The provisions of the Bill go beyond legal formalities; they demonstrate a commitment to rehabilitating public confidence in the court. By mandating the disclosure of the judges' estates, the Bill supports the proposition that transparency starts at the top. The complaint provision allows the average citizen to exercise their rights without fear of reprisal, thus enhancing access and responsiveness in the system. Oversight entities—such as the Judicial Oversight Committee—to ensure that accountability is built into the system and does not occur by accident. Disciplinary actions demonstrate that no one is beyond accountability or above questioning—not even the interpreters of the law. The Bill strikes a delicate balance of assuring accountability against independence so that justice remains both fair and fearless.

Concerns & Critiques

Allowing non-judicial members in oversight bodies could expose judges to external or political influence, potentially affecting their independence. The complaint system, though meant to empower citizens, might be misused to unfairly target judges, especially in high-stakes or politically sensitive cases. The Bill does not clearly define whether judges have the right to appeal disciplinary decisions, which raises concerns about fairness and due process.

Without a strong and impartial investigation mechanism, complaints may not be handled effectively, weakening the Bill's credibility. There's a risk that the Bill may remain a symbolic reform unless backed by institutional capacity and genuine enforcement. Striking the right balance between accountability and judicial autonomy remains a challenge, and the current draft may not fully resolve that tension.

The Judicial Standards and Accountability Bill reflects a good-faith effort to improve accountability and transparency of the judiciary to the public. However, good faith is not enough. The concerns raised about constitutional fairness, the independence of the judiciary, and the risks of misuse highlight that a powerful institution such as the judiciary requires more than a simple codification of rules on paper. It needs public trust, cooperation, and, importantly, a system that respects the accountability of judges but also the dignity of individuals who uphold the law. If those concerns are addressed with deliberate care and consultation among stakeholders, the Bill could not only improve the acclaimed reputation of the judiciary but also build public faith in justice. Any new accountability law must be supported by continuous legal education for the judges and constant awareness programs for the public; moreover, committees should include retired judges, independent experts, and most importantly members of the civil society without any hierarchy between these sectors to prevent any internal bias within this process.

Aftersun Review

PAARTH GROVER, *Associate Editor*
BA Political Science, IILM University, Greater Noida

Charlotte Wells' debut is a deep introspective piece that explores memory, loss, and the relationship between a father and daughter, set against the illusion of an ordinary summer holiday. Told through the fragments of Sophie's recollections, VHS tapes, and imagination, *Aftersun* slowly builds a picture of her late father, Callum — tender yet troubled, loving yet haunted.

The film pulls us into its 90s nostalgia with warm tones, grainy textures, and writing that lingers in quiet conversations and unspoken emotions. Subtle details — like Sophie and Callum separated by a wall of light and shadow — reveal how memory both illuminates and obscures. Everything culminates in the final dance sequence, a moment of joy that Sophie clings to as her lasting image of him.

With Oliver Coates' haunting score and raw performances from Paul Mescal and Frankie Corio, *Aftersun* becomes more than a vacation film: it is a meditation on love, memory, and the fleeting nature of time. A quiet masterpiece that lingers long after it ends.

Is ‘Democracy’ Our Responsibility?

What is happening to my country, is it collapsing or merely redefining?

I know how democracy doesn’t break overnight
It wilts quietly...

between conversations that never happened
and opinions that never changed.

It doesn’t always begin with censorship;
Sometimes, it begins with silence.
The kind that creeps into living rooms,
when voices grow softer than convenience,
and listening becomes harder than shouting.

Once upon a time, we believed democracy was built in parliaments,
born from ballots, and kept alive by the men in suits.
It felt easier to imagine my nation in hands of the leaders
Because accountability and responsibility of the citizen isn’t simple.

But somewhere between noise and neglect,
we forgot that democracy breathes
through contesting opinions, sharing dialogues,
agreeing-disagreeing and often voicing.

We scroll through opinions, mindlessly
We’ve mistaken reaction for participation,
and trends for truth.

How can I not be in despair?

Now, in every confusion,
the citizen, the real one...
Has gone missing.

No longer one asks,
“What can I do?”

No longer one believes,
“My voice matters.”
We’ve all become spectators
in a play we once promised to perform.

Democracy, then, doesn’t die by force.

It dies from fatigue...
from the slow erosion of empathy,
from the comfort of conformity,
from the quietness that follows
when courage leaves the room,
Making us merely hollow

So, listen.

Listen, even when it’s uncomfortable and not easy
It is our responsibility, to hear and to speak.
Because for a nation to survive,
at the end it is us who have to strive

Democracy isn’t just a system.
It is all our responsibility.

Author’s Note

This piece was written in a moment of quiet frustration and hope.

Democracy often feels distant—discussed in speeches and headlines—but I wanted to remind myself, and all of us, that it begins much closer: in how we listen, how we speak, and how we care.

With so many events unfolding around us, I realised there’s a part inside me that feels scared and confused. It’s difficult to clearly understand the path we’re heading on as a nation when it comes to our internal dynamics. It’s mind-boggling how negativity often overshadows everything.

Yet, there is hope—and much we can change together.

This piece is a reminder not to surrender to the noise or the numbness.

Silence, too, is political. But we must use our voice, for the good.

Ipsita Sachdev, *Editor-in-Chief*

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EMPOWERMENT IN ACTION



It is one of the most impactful initiatives for women's empowerment at the grassroots. Organizing rural poor women into Self-Help Groups provides them with access to credit and financial literacy and instills confidence, unity, and decision-making power.

What I find most significant is how the mission goes beyond financial assistance—it builds skills, encourages entrepreneurship, and fosters solidarity among women from marginalized communities. This image reflects how women are taking charge of their own growth, managing resources collectively, and supporting each other.

In my view, such programs are crucial for sustainable rural development. Empowering women with financial independence creates a ripple effect, strengthening families, communities, and local economies. For India's vision of inclusive growth, expanding and deepening the reach of this mission is not just important—it is essential.

MEHAK BANSAL, *Managing Editor*
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This initiative, now continued as the Hub for Empowerment of Women under Mission Shakti, is a meaningful step towards overall women's empowerment in rural India. What stands out to me is its emphasis not only on skill development and digital literacy but also on health, nutrition, and access to government schemes—ensuring that empowerment is both economic and social.

This image reflects how women, when provided with training, resources, and community platforms, can transform their lives while uplifting those around them. Such initiatives encourage collective strength, bridge gaps in awareness, and open new avenues of opportunity for women in backward districts.

When I visited the Saras Mela in Delhi, I met a woman who spoke about this scheme with great joy. She shared how it had made a real difference in her life, and her happiness was a powerful reminder of the positive change such initiatives can bring at the grassroots level.

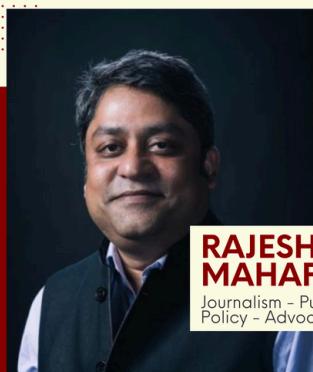
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Marking the launch



SPECIAL APPEARANCE



RAJESH MAHAPATRA
Journalism - Public Policy - Advocacy

We're proud to introduce The Civil Lens, the student-led newsletter of the IILM University MA Public Policy batch (2025–27). This initiative is more than publication; it is a platform where policy meets people, and where we collectively reflect, question, and reimagine the world around us.

When we began this journey, The Civil Lens was just an idea on paper. On 24th September 2025, it has grown into a newsletter that carries the voices, questions, and perspectives of our Public Policy community.

We've learned that creating something meaningful requires not just writing, but collaboration, patience, and persistence. There were moments when we felt unsure, when the path ahead seemed unclear. But it was the shared spirit of "we can do this" that kept us moving forward.

At that time, it wasn't easy to even imagine what the outcome would look like. And now, after the launch, we feel proud of what we've built together... not just a newsletter, but a collective voice.

This has been an experience of learning, unlearning, and growing. And I cannot wait to see what the future holds, what challenges will come, and what lessons we will continue to discover along the way.

At the launch, we had the privilege of hosting Mr. Rajesh Mahapatra, senior journalist and policy commentator, whose words set the tone for what we hope The Civil Lens will stand for. He reminded us:

"AI may take away desk jobs, but it cannot replace human stories and human connection. That is where true thought leadership lies."

His reflections on constant learning, knowledge, innovation, and people-to-people connection deeply resonate with me, because that is exactly the spirit in which The Civil Lens was born.

For us, this is not just a newsletter; it is an exercise in thought leadership. A reminder that while technology will keep evolving, the essence of policy, dialogue, and change will always be rooted in human connection.

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BE A VOICE IN OUR NEXT ISSUE!

*Got a story that deserves to be told?
A thought that refuses to stay silent?*

**An Article or a Cartoon that reflects your world?
We want to hear from YOU!**

The Civil Lens belongs to you, where policy meets people, and words meet impact. Whether it's your opinion on a burning social issue, your personal experiences, your art, or even a quirky doodle —your contribution can spark a conversation, inspire a reader, or simply bring a smile.

What You Can Send:

- Articles & Opinion Pieces
- Short Stories / Poetry
- Photography & Artwork
- Cartoons / Doodles
- Reflections & Experiences



Scan this QR Code to submit your entries through the Google form.

How to Contribute:

Send your entries via Google Form. For any query, contact us at:

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Let your creativity travel beyond your notebooks and canvases. Let it reach every reader.

