NITISH KUMAR AND NIQAB

While Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's act of lifting a nikab from the face of an Ayush doctor while giving her a certificate at a function is highly inappropriate, some leaders are trying to use it to provoke Muslim youth and to push the victimhood narrative. To be fair to the aging, and yet charismatic chief Minister of Bihar, he, at times, is given to flouting protocols and modern day etiquettes. He does it in the spirit of being a desi and not choosing sophistication. His intentions are that of a wise and caring grandfather who has seen the world and would want to be himself at a certain age. However, nobody can take away his love for the people of Bihar, push for development and closing the chapter of caste dominating the politics of the state. All these qualities have made him the longest serving CM of Bihar.

The woman in question has indeed faced harassment and embarrassment even though chief minister did not intend it to be so. While this gives a good masala to political leaders to play around on both sides of the spectrum, it's unfortunate that they are not thinking about the doctor and also welfare of the youth, whom they are trying to provoke. On the other side, leaders like Giriraj Singh of BJP have no right to make the derogatory and angry comments they made on the issue. Yes, it's true that nikab which covers a woman's face and makes her unrecognizable, is an issue with security and identification. It seems Nitish Kumar also impulsively lifted the niqab from her face to make sure someone was not impersonating to take the certificate. Many Muslim leaders are making it a big issue. However, the most sensible suggestion has come from Omar Abdullah our chief minister who believes that CM should apologise to the woman to close the matter.

Towards a 'Naxal-free India' by 2026

Sarral Sharma

For decades, Left Wing Extremism (LWE) was one of India's most pressing internal security challenges. Over the past decade, however, a unified and sustained counter-insurgency strategy has fundamentally altered the trajectory of the Naxal insurgency. The Narendra Modi government has combined sustained security operations, improved intelligence coordination, advanced surveillance technologies, and targeted development interventions in tribal regions to weaken Naxalism in the country. As a result, the number of LWE-affected districts has sharply declined, pushing the insurgency into its final phase. With violence continuing to fall, the government has set the goal of achieving a "Naxal-free" India by March 2026. As this timeline approaches, the challenge lies in ensuring security, sustainable livelihoods, and better alternatives for communities affected by Naxal violence.

At its peak in 2010, the "Red Corridor" spanned nearly 17 per cent of India's landmass and had an estimated cadre strength of around 20,000. Today, the movement has been confined to a few forested pockets. Government data show a sharp decline in violence over the past two decades. Between 2004 and 2014, there were 16,463 Naxal incidents, compared to 7,744 between 2014 and 2024 — a drop of 53 per cent. By 2022, total casualties linked to Naxal violence fell below 100 for the first time in three decades. At the same time, the number of LWE-affected districts has reduced from 126 in 2014 to just 11 this year, primarily concentrated in parts of Chhattisgarh.

This decline reflects the Naxals' growing inability to operate under a tightening counter-insurgency grid. High-profile attacks such as the 2010 Dantewada massacre or the 2013 Chhattisgarh political ambush have become rare. While isolated incidents still occur, including the April 2023 IED blast in Chhattisgarh, they no longer signal a broader resurgence. This shift highlights a clear transformation in India's LWE strategy since 2014.

The earlier reactive and fragmented approach has been replaced by a coordinated and proactive model anchored in "Dialogue, Security, and Coordination". The strategy combines sustained pressure on armed cadres with parallel development initiatives. Home Minister Amit Shah has explained the government's "carrot-and-stick" policy against LWE: Naxals who surrender will receive "a red-carpet welcome", but those who continue with violence will face a resolute security response. This clarity of intent has reshaped both operational outcomes and the psychological balance between the state and insurgents.

Earlier counter-Naxal efforts produced limited gains due to coordination issues. The difference this time lies in the unified command and multi-agency approach led by the Union Home Ministry, which ensures coherence, intelligence integration, and sustained operational momentum. Shah confirmed in a speech that the Modi government has adopted a "unified and ruthless approach" against Naxalism rather than a scattered one. Special forces from states and central paramilitary units such as the CRPF and its elite CoBRA battalions now regularly train together and carry out joint anti-Naxal operations.

In recent years, security forces have targeted the top Maoist leadership, supply lines, and forest bases with increasing precision. A major breakthrough came this year with the killing of CPI (Maoist) general secretary Nambala Keshava Rao, alias Basavaraju, along with 27 others in Chhattisgarh's Abujmarh forest. Another senior leader, Madvi Hidma, was killed in Andhra Pradesh in November. These losses have severely disrupted Maoist command structures and regrouping efforts. Official data indicate that this year alone, 317 Naxals were killed, 862 arrested, and 1,973 surrendered. The scale of arrests and surrenders underscores the effectiveness of coordinated security operations and the steady dismantling of LWE.

Furthermore, advanced technology has become a key force multiplier in counter-insurgency efforts. Security agencies now rely on forensic laboratories, modern surveillance tools, and real-time intelligence to track and disrupt Naxal activities. This includes monitoring social media to counter information warfare, using drones and satellite reconnaissance to map movements, and applying AI-driven data analysis to identify patterns and predict threats.

At the same time, financial crackdowns have severely weakened the insurgent movement. Central and state agencies have seized assets, frozen accounts, and targeted Maoist financiers, with nearly INR100 crore reportedly seized. These measures have crippled logistical and financial support networks, making sustained insurgency increasingly unviable.

Alongside security operations, the central government has prioritised Centre-State coordination to strengthen local security infrastructure and improve governance in LWE-affected areas through schemes such as Security Related Expenditure, the Special Infrastructure Scheme, and Special Central Assistance.

India's counter-insurgency successes are not measured solely by the number of casualties or arrests of Naxal leaders and cadres. A central pillar of the strategy has been addressing structural neglect by extending governance and development to long-isolated regions. Roads, electricity, schools, healthcare facilities, and access to banking have expanded across former Naxal strongholds. For example, under the Road Connectivity Project for LWE districts, nearly 12,000 km of roads have been constructed over the last decade, even through dense forests, to link remote villages. Where travelling 50 km once took days of walking through Naxal-held jungles, villagers can now drive on new roads. Telecommunications infrastructure has expanded rapidly, with near-complete 4G coverage expected soon. This means people can now access information, banking, and emergency services where there was once complete network darkness. A cornerstone of the Modi government's approach is pairing hard security with a softer hand for those willing to abandon violence. The surrender policy has prompted thousands of Naxalites to leave the jungles, join the mainstream, and take advantage of rehabilitation schemes. Thousands of cadres have laid down arms in exchange for financial assistance, vocational training, housing, and employment support. In Chhattisgarh alone, over 2,100 Naxals surrendered in the past two years. Nationally, surrenders now exceed fatalities among insurgents, reflecting declining morale and faith in the Naxal cause.

As violence recedes, democratic participation has returned to areas once considered "no-go zones". In November 2024, Gadchiroli (Maharashtra) recorded a historic 74 per cent turnout in village polls after years of Naxal threats. Similarly, in February 2025, Kerlapenda village in Sukma district, Chhattisgarh, witnessed a historic moment when residents cast their first votes in 75 years since India's independence.

A LAMP, A VERDICT, AND AN IMPEACHMENT THREAT

Rahul Kaushik

Pseudo-secularism is often spoken of as a vague political tendency, a rhetorical label tossed about in partisan clashes. But what unfolded at Thiruparankundram this Karthigai Deepam season forces the country to confront it not as theory but as lived reality, a reality which is sharp, deliberate, and institutional. A lamp atop a sacred hill could not be lit without two clear judicial orders, resistance from an ideologically allergic bureaucracy, and finally, an extraordinary threat of impeachment against the very judge who upheld a centuries-old Hindu ritual. If this is secularism, it is time we stopped dignifying it with the prefix. The DMK-Congress axis has perfected a model that deserves its rightful name: pseudo-secularism.

The episode in Madurai is revealing not because it is surprising, but because it is so consistent with the deeper instincts of the parties involved. A tradition older than every political formation in the state, older even than the Dargah that now sits on the hill, suddenly became an object of administrative hostility. The DMK-run HR&CE did not merely express discomfort; it actively blocked the lighting of the Deepam at the traditional Deepathoon, forcing devotees to approach the High Court, not once, but twice. Both times, the court affirmed the legitimacy of the ritual. Both times, the state responded with a studied refusal to comply. Police blockades, bureaucratic stalling, and invented anxieties about 'communal disturbance' were deployed to shut down a lamp whose light had never threatened anyone. Only in Tamil Nadu does a court have to supply Central security forces to ensure that devotees can perform an ancient ritual without the state's interference.

This is not neutrality. It is an instinctive suspicion of Hindu practice that masquerades as administrative caution. And the pattern is too consistent to dismiss as coincidence. The same government that facilitates political rallies, ideological conventions, and mass gatherings suddenly rediscovers its concern for public order when the matter involves a Hindu ritual. The same political class that invokes the Constitution selectively for its beneficiaries instantly abandons constitutional morality the moment a court affirms the rights of Hindu devotees.

When the High Court delivered a clear and reasoned order twice, the administration did not introspect. It retaliated. It rushed to appeal, not as a matter of legal principle, but to avoid compliance. It fought a contempt petition with the zeal of someone trying to evade accountability rather than fulfil a judicial mandate. The bureaucracy behaved not as an arm of the state, but as a political extension of party ideology.

And then came the most telling moment of all. INDI alliance MPs, including those from Congress, SP, DMK and even self-declared custodians of Hindutva, the Shiv Sena (UBT), submitting a proposal to move an impeachment motion against Justice GR Swaminathan. This single act tears apart whatever thin veil remained over their political motivations. Impeachment is not a tool for policy disagreement. It is not a pressure valve for ideological discomfort. It is an extraordinary mechanism reserved for grave misconduct. Yet here it was being dangled as punishment for the 'crime' of upholding a Hindu ritual and insisting that the state obey its constitutional obligations.

No political alliance rooted in genuine secularism would ever contemplate such an assault on judicial independence. But the DMK-Congress partnership and the larger INDI alliance is not burdened by such constraints. It inherits, and proudly extends, a legacy of disciplining judges who refuse to play along. This is the same tradition that superseded judges after Kesavananda Bharati, punished Justice HR Khanna for defending civil liberties during the Emergency, transferred judges without consent, and attempted to impeach CJI Dipak Misra when he delivered an inconvenient verdict. The doctrine of a 'committed judiciary,' articulated unabashedly by Mohan Kumaramangalam in the 1970s, never truly died. It merely reappeared under new management.

What binds these episodes is a single underlying impulse: judiciary should restrain itself when Hindu traditions are under assault, but judiciary must restrain the public when those traditions assert themselves. This is the essence of pseudo-secular politics, which is a selective, opportunistic commitment to constitutionalism shaped by ideological hostility to one community's practices.

The larger cultural climate in Tamil Nadu only reinforces this. From Udhayanidhi Stalin comparing Sanatan Dharma to diseases, to A. Raja's degrading metaphors, to routine mockery of Hindu symbols, mantras, and practices by DMK ministers, to the UPA affidavit proclaiming Ram didn't exist, the rhetoric is not the fringe. It is the centre.

Democracy's hardest question: Who may vote, and why it matters

Jagmohan Singh Raju

Every democracy instinctively celebrates the right to vote. It is upheld as a moral triumph, a symbol of equality, inclusion, and popular sovereignty. From civic textbooks to political speeches, voting is projected as the purest expression of democratic will. Yet beneath this near-universal reverence lies a more demanding and often uncomfortable question-one that democracies must confront from time to time if they are to remain credible: who is legitimately entitled to exercise this right? This question is neither ideological nor partisan. It is constitutional.

And it is precisely this foundational issue that the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls brings into sharp focus. In recent months, SIR has largely been framed as a political controversy. Administrative scrutiny has been interpreted as political intent, and institutional processes have been read through partisan lenses. Such framing may sharpen rhetoric and mobilise opinion, but it obscures the real democratic problem. Electoral rolls are not a peripheral bureaucratic detail; they are the gateway to democratic legitimacy. To examine SIR without politics is not to deny disagreement, but to return the discussion to the first principles that underpin representative government itself.

Voting is widely perceived as an unconditional and universal right. Constitutionally, however, it is a conditional right conferred upon citizens who meet clearly defined legal criteria. This distinction is not semantic; it is fundamental. Democracies do not merely aggregate preferences; they legitimise power through lawful participation. When eligibility is treated as symbolic or incidental, representation itself becomes fragile. Electoral legitimacy depends not only on how votes are counted, but also on who is entitled to cast them. An accurate electoral roll is therefore not administrative housekeeping; it is the foundation on which the credibility of elections rests.

In societies marked by high mobility, internal migration, urbanisation, and shifting demographics, this foundation cannot remain static. Special Intensive Revision forces a necessary democratic reckoning: legitimacy requires periodic verification. To ignore this reality is to allow electoral processes to drift away from the constitutional idea of citizenship-based representation.

India's constitutional framework anticipated this challenge. Article 324 vests the Election Commission of India with plenary authority over the conduct of elections. This authority is not symbolic; it is operational and comprehensive, extending explicitly to the preparation, revision, and correction of electoral rolls. Articles 325 and 326 further define the franchise, making clear that the right to vote flows from citizenship and age, not from mere residence, convenience, or political sentiment. Citizenship is not incidental to voting; it is foundational. Article 327 empowers Parliament to legislate on electoral processes, reinforcing a constitutional design that places electoral integrity in the hands of independent institutions rather than transient political majorities.

Seen through this lens, Special Intensive Revision is not an administrative overreach; it is constitutional maintenance. Electoral rolls that accumulate duplications, retain deceased voters, or include ineligible entries gradually erode representative legitimacy. The greater democratic risk lies not in scrutiny, but in neglect. A democracy that refuses to periodically examine its own voter lists risks normalising inaccuracy in the very mechanism that confers authority on governments. Much of the anxiety surrounding SIR stems from misunderstanding its scope and purpose. SIR is neither a blanket purge nor an exclusionary exercise. It is a corrective process aimed at addressing accumulated distortions-removing names where eligibility has ceased, adding newly eligible voters, and verifying entries where discrepancies exist. Routine updates alone cannot correct these structural pressures. Periodic intensive revision becomes necessary precisely because democratic societies are dynamic rather than static.It is also important to recognise that voter-roll revision is not unique to moments of political contestation. In India's own electoral history, intensive revisions have often followed periods of demographic change rather than electoral volatility. Comparative democratic practice supports this approach. Mature democracies such as the United Kingdom and Canada routinely revise electoral rolls through verification mechanisms that are sometimes more stringent than India's. One apprehension, however, deserves serious engagement: the fear that voter verification becomes disenfranchisement in disguise. This concern cannot be dismissed lightly.

Any democratic process that temporarily disrupts participation must justify itself rigorously. Here, a principled distinction is essential. Disenfranchisement is systemic, targeted, and irreversible — the denial of a lawful right. Verification, by contrast, is procedural, uniform, and subject to correction. A voter whose eligibility is questioned and subsequently restored through due process has not been disenfranchised; the franchise has been reaffirmed through law. Administrative fallibility is real. Large-scale exercises inevitably generate errors, delays, and inconvenience. Individuals may temporarily find their names missing or receive notices that feel unsettling. These experiences merit empathy rather than dismissal. But fallibility must not be conflated with malice. The existence of notice requirements, correction windows, appeal mechanisms, and judicial oversight is precisely what separates verification from exclusion. The answer to administrative error is procedural refinement, not abandonment of verification itself.

Much of the criticism of SIR rests on assumptions that are emotionally compelling but institutionally unsustainable. One assumption is that deletions are arbitrary or final. In reality, deletions follow a defined legal process involving notice and the opportunity to respond. Another assumption is that verification disproportionately targets specific social or regional groups. Electoral law permits no demographic filters; eligibility criteria are uniform and constitutionally grounded. Without evidence of systematic bias, such claims risk undermining institutional trust without strengthening democratic safeguards.

Underlying the entire debate is a false binary: that inclusion and integrity are competing democratic values. They are not. Inclusion without integrity dilutes lawful participation; integrity without inclusion corrodes legitimacy. Democracy survives only when both are pursued together. Verification is not an act of distrust towards citizens; it is an act of responsibility towards the franchise itself. A democracy that refuses to verify its electoral rolls in the name of comfort risks reducing citizenship from a legal status to a rhetorical slogan. It is also worth recognising that distrust of institutions has grown globally, fuelled by polarised politics and instantaneous information cycles.

In such an environment, every administrative act is viewed with suspicion. Yet democracies cannot function if institutions are paralysed by the fear of being misunderstood.