



AND WE CLAPPED ??

News, Views, and perspectives on governance in Post-Pandemic India

01

Is the State Counting Ghosts?

The Delimitation Bill, COVID and the Uncounted Dead

The Delimitation Bill 2026, introduced on April 16 in a special parliamentary session, proposes to redraw Lok Sabha seats based on the 2011 Census. The seat allocation logic is simple: more people means more representatives.

SEAT REALLOCATION, 2026 BILL		
Uttar Pradesh	80 →	89 seats
Bihar	40 →	46 seats
Rajasthan	25 →	30 seats
Kerala	20 →	15 seats
Tamil Nadu	39 →	32 seats
<i>Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Odisha also lose seats.</i>		

SOURCE: PRS INDIA, APRIL 2026

| The Punishment Logic of Population

This logic means that states are punished for being able to control population growth and update the records of their citizens, while accolades are given to states that underreport or manufacture data.

The punishment logic is not incidental. It sits at the heart of how counting is converted into political representation.

| The Pandemic as Explanation, or Excuse?

For the first time in 76 years of Indian history, the Census was not

conducted. On September 16, 2020, Parliament was informed that the Census had been postponed “until further orders.” The reason given was COVID-19.

The 2021 Census was scheduled and planned in two phases — April to September 2020, and February 2021. But 143 countries managed to conduct their census during or after the pandemic.

India is the only BRICS nation that has not. The company India keeps is telling: conflict-affected nations such as Ukraine, Yemen, Syria and Myanmar.

The Lancet put it plainly: the government’s decision to delay the Census raises suspicions. A Census might have revealed the true toll of the pandemic, reinforcing the widely held belief that the government was under-reporting COVID-19 deaths.

Now, without a 2021 Census, delimitation proceeds on 2011 data: 15-year-old figures, collected before a pandemic that killed millions of uncounted people.

| What the Death Data Revealed

India released the 2021 Civil Registration System data only in May 2025, after a four-year delay.



WHO estimated India’s COVID deaths at 47,40,894 for 2020 to 2021, nearly ten times the government’s official count of 481,486.

The Indian government strongly rejected the WHO estimate. It said WHO had “conveniently chosen to ignore” CRS data submitted by India, and insisted that India’s death registration was “robust” and governed by a “decades-old statutory legal framework.”

This is the same CRS that took four years to release. This is also the same system now being used as the basis for delimitation.

Those who tried to document what the state would not were also targeted. At least 55 journalists faced arrest, FIRs, summons, physical assault and threats for COVID reporting between March 25 and May 31, 2020. Uttar Pradesh topped the list, with 11 journalists targeted, the highest of any state.

| Uttar Pradesh and the Anomalous Count

In 2021, Uttar Pradesh recorded 478,682 additional deaths over the previous year — officially attributed to COVID: 23,743. Undercount ratio: 56.9x.

Twenty-four districts in Uttar Pradesh alone recorded 1,97,000 excess deaths between July 2020 and March 2021. This was a mortality rate 110 percent higher than the same period in the previous year. It was 43 times the official COVID toll — and this was before the second wave

peak in April and May 2021.

UP's RTI-sourced mortality data had multiple districts reporting zero deaths for consecutive months. Researchers flagged this as too anomalous to include in excess mortality models.

SOURCES: THE SOUTH FIRST, MAY 2025; SCROLL/ARTICLE 14, JUNE 2021; MEDRXIV, AUGUST 2021

What Does a Crematorium Site Reveal: A Darkness of Data?

In Varanasi, Harishchandra Ghat and Manikarnika Ghat have, for generations, been worked by the descendants of Kallu Dom — the families of Late Chhotelal Chaudhary, Gupteshwar Chaudhary, Dom Raja Jagdishwar Chaudhary, Dom Raja Kailash Chaudhary and Dom Raja Shatrudhan Chaudhary. Today, more than 35 family members continue to perform cremations across both ghats on a rotational system.

The family is not unknown to the state. Dom Raja Jagdishwar Chaudhary, who died in 2020, gained national attention during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections when he served as a proposer for Narendra Modi's candidature. The media widely covered the association, emphasizing that the Prime Minister considered the Dom community close to his heart and wished to include them in his political journey. Anil Chaudhary represented the family at the Ayodhya Ram Temple consecration in 2024.

As there was hue and cry about the repackaging of proving citizenship through the SIR, delimitation and a census process being rammed into the same political frame, Rajesh Singh, researcher with PC-PIC, was on the ground. He was looking not only at the crematorium sites, but at the crematorium workers themselves: what they had done, what they had endured and where they stand now.

As the fieldwork carried on around the question of who took care of the dead, we stumbled upon something even more telling: who was counting the dead?

Five years on, the crematorium site tells its own story. The government could claim its success in enumerating citizens, without proving who counted the living and the dead.

Rajesh reported that nearly 180 to 200 bodies were being burned every day. Imagine, then, the numbers piling up in just a couple of days to begin with.

Upon asking whether anyone collected data from them, the crematorium worker responded: "We keep the data for our management, but no one asked any data from us."

The crematorium workers recalled that most families left the bodies behind and departed. Workers had no information on whether the dead were COVID cases or not. No PPE was provided, no masks,

sanitisers, medical kits, testing, or safety measures of any kind from the government. Neither police, local officials, nor families followed any COVID protocol at the ghats.

The Dom workers once maintained records of all bodies brought to the ghats — a parallel death registration system. In 1995, Commissioner Hardev Singh reportedly ordered this process discontinued. Since then, they can no longer maintain records or issue death certificates, work that had also provided them additional income.

“What choice did we have? This is our livelihood. If we did not perform these duties, who would? Our survival depended on it. We worked as though we were already dead ourselves.”

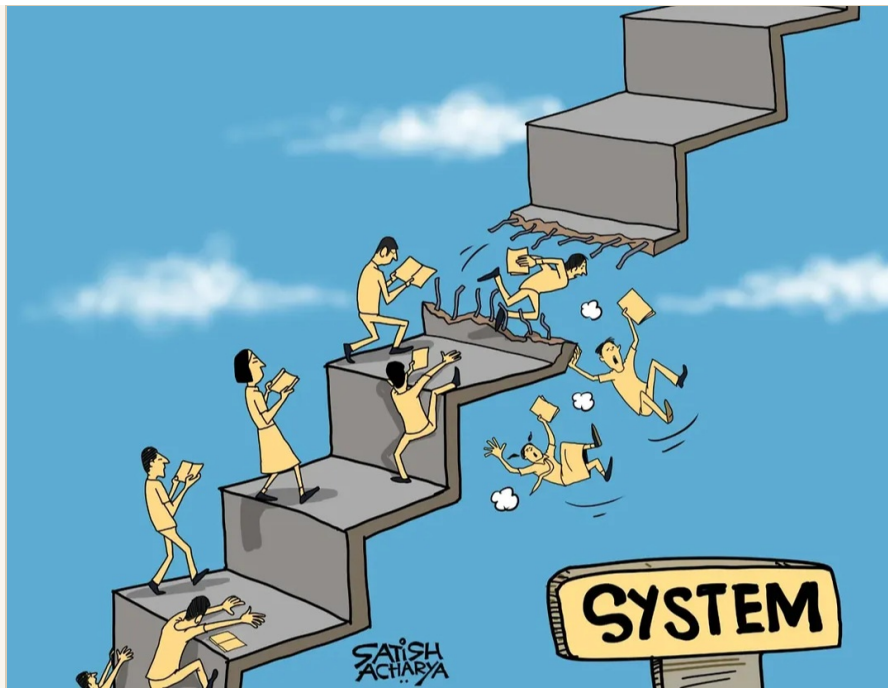
— CREMATION WORKER, HARISHCHANDRA GHAT, VARANASI

The crematorium site here becomes a bastion to indicate the disingenuous move of counting citizens. If the process was to be held true to the idea of equal representation, the dead would have been counted, and so would the living.

Across India, the states with weaker vital registration systems are precisely the states that stand to gain political weight under the logic of population-based delimitation. Uttar Pradesh is one such state, receiving accolades for anomalous yields of governance.

Meanwhile, the states being penalised in the federal bargain — Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Goa — have among the most complete death registration systems in the country. Kerala and Goa had excess-to-COVID death ratios of under 2x. Their counts were accurate. They are made to pay for it.

SIR asks the living to prove themselves to the state. The crematorium site asks: do the dead need to prove themselves too? Or are the dead made into ballast through which uneven counting is converted into political representation?



Cartoon credit: Satish Acharya

0 2

The Greatest Democracy in the World Would Appreciate Your Cooperation. Again.

Few countries trust their citizens as much as India does.

Every generation is called upon to make sacrifices. Ours has been asked to use less cooking oil. Amongst others.

This May, Indians were presented with a fresh opportunity to demonstrate their patriotism. Faced with economic pressures and rising global uncertainty amidst the US-Israel-Iran war, citizens were encouraged to consume a little less, travel a little less, spend a little less, and generally become smaller versions of themselves. If that's even possible. The message being, the country needs sacrifice. Again. Sigh.

A conflict involving Iran, Israel, the United States, global shipping routes, oil markets, currency reserves, and international diplomacy has been carefully analysed, and the conclusion appears to be that the average Indian household should use less oil while cooking. You cannot help but admire the confidence.

The People's Commission and Public Inquiry Committee (PC-PIC) has spent the last five years documenting what happened during and after the pandemic. Across testimonies from street vendors, forest-dependent communities, and waste pickers, one pattern seems to be recurring. Whenever institutions and governance fail, ordinary people are asked to take on the pressure.

We do, after all, have experience. Ehm. We survived (?) demonetisation, a four-hour notice lockdown, a deadly oxygen shortage, inflation, unemployment, heatwaves (courtesy of climate

change and AI data centres), floods, and the disappearance of accountability. If anyone can absorb another shock, it is us.

The oxygen shortage of 2021 required families to search desperately for cylinders. Later, Parliament was informed that no deaths due to oxygen shortages had been reported. This was a masterclass in governance, truly. You see, you cannot have oxygen deaths if oxygen shortages themselves cease to exist administratively. The matter was thus marked resolved.

The latest advisory follows a familiar logic. The government would like us to believe this is austerity. Let us be clear. It is not!

Austerity implies those responsible for managing resources are also tightening their belts. What we are witnessing is something rather different. A downward transfer of crisis. The adjustment always travels in one direction. Downward. To be borne by the citizens.

The irony is that this advice arrives after years of inflation, unemployment, wage stagnation, informalisation, debt, and declining purchasing power. Households and citizens are not being asked to sacrifice from abundance. They are being asked to sacrifice after already sacrificing.

Farmers have been advised to reduce fertiliser consumption. A fascinating suggestion for a sector already dealing with rising input costs, erratic weather, debt, uncertain prices, and shrinking state support.

Then comes the geopolitical dimension.

India today wishes to be strategically autonomous, closely aligned with the United States, maintain relations with Israel, preserve ties with Gulf countries, continue buying Russian oil, project itself as a global power, and remain everyone's friend simultaneously.

Elsewhere, governments concern themselves with what citizens need. In India, citizens are encouraged to need less. Masterstroke, to be honest.

The tightening of belt is not expected from everyone. That would be unreasonable. No appeal has been issued asking billionaires to reduce wealth accumulation. No advisory recommends limiting luxury consumption. No discussion has emerged regarding corporate concentration, crony capitalism, or the extraordinary fortunes accumulated at the very top while millions continue struggling with debt and insecurity. Patriotism remains a middle-class and working-class responsibility.

This is perhaps the most important lesson PC-PIC has documented since the pandemic.

The crisis did not end when the virus receded. It took new shape. The

deeper legacy was the normalisation of a particular relationship between state and citizen. Institutions fail, people cope. Governance weakens, communities adapt. Rights become schemes. Accountability becomes avoidable.

Five years later, we are once again being asked to adjust. And once again, we are encouraged not to question.

Perhaps it is time people asked the government to conserve something far more endangered. Truth. Accountability. Governance. Transparency. Justice.



Cartoon credit: Satish Acharya

03

A PARALLEL TIMELINE

AI Governance & the Pandemic Years, 2020-2026

2020 *The First Wave — the first COVID-19 case is confirmed in India, followed by a sudden lockdown with no prior notice. Marginalised citizens, especially migrants, are pushed into precarity and exodus toward their native villages. The loss still continues.*

- **January 2020** — Launch of the National AI Portal of India (indiaai.gov.in), a one-stop digital platform for AI developments, research and news, developed by MeitY and NASSCOM.
- **January 2020** — India becomes a founding member of GPAI (Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence), the only Global South nation at inception.
- **January 2020** — Tamil Nadu releases the Safe and Ethical Artificial Intelligence Policy, one of the earliest state-level AI policy documents in India.
- **2020** — Protests erupt over the government's use of facial recognition

technology at anti-CAA protests; Delhi Police and other agencies reportedly used it to identify protesters and civilians, with no public legal framework governing this use.

- **2020** — The government's RAISE 2020 summit is held in New Delhi, a major international AI summit on AI for social good, climate, health and education. Mukesh Ambani calls it a civilisational shift, framing AI as the new form of national capital.

2021

Second Wave hits, devastating the entire country. "Social media feeds are full with videos of Covid funerals at crowded cemeteries, wailing relatives of the dead outside hospitals, long queues of ambulances carrying gasping patients, mortuaries overflowing with the dead." (BBC, 2021)

- **February 2021** — NITI Aayog releases Part 1 of its Responsible AI paper, "Principles for Responsible AI," identifying seven core ethical considerations including safety, equality, inclusivity, privacy, transparency and accountability.
- **March 2021** — The US-India AI Initiative is launched by IUSSTF, bringing together researchers, innovators and policymakers from both countries.
- **August 2021** — NITI Aayog releases Part 2, "Operationalising Principles for Responsible AI," outlining concrete regulatory and capacity-building steps, with emphasis on AI in health and agriculture.
- **2021** — The National Programme on Artificial Intelligence (NPAI) is launched, an umbrella government initiative to leverage AI for social impact and inclusion.

2022

The Omicron wave rises. The WHO global excess death report is released, confirming massive Indian underreporting. The government disputes the findings, calling them "statistically unsound," and refuses to release complete CRS data.

- **2022** — The Draft National Data Governance Framework Policy is released by MeitY, aimed at building shareable, non-personal government datasets for AI training. Aadhaar datasets covering 1.3 billion people have been proposed as AI training data.
- **2022** — The National AI Mission is formally announced, with a budget outlay of ₹10,371.92 crore.
- **June 2022** — The Digital India Act is first announced, a proposed replacement to the IT Act of 2000 covering AI, cybercrime, data protection and platform accountability.
- **2022** — State-level AI activity accelerates as Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka begin exploring AI-powered governance tools.

2023

The fourth wave? The pandemic takes the form of technological extraction. Under cover of emergency, the state extracted what it could not have taken otherwise: biometric data, movement, compliance, access to survival itself. When the crisis passed, the infrastructure stayed. The accountability never came.

- **August 2023** — India's Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023 is passed and assented to by the President, mandating explicit, freely given, revocable consent for data processing — governing, though not exclusively targeting, AI systems.
- **2023** — MeitY releases a report outlining seven pillars for India's AI

strategy: Centers of Excellence, Data Centres, Future Skills, Startup Ecosystem, Safe and Trusted AI, Compute Infrastructure, and the IndiaAI Innovation Centre. Mumbai now hosts data centres with over 4 GW combined capacity, ranking third in Asia Pacific after Shanghai and Tokyo — straining the city's power and water supply as low-income Dalit families report eviction pressure and ageing coal plants are kept running to meet demand.

- **October 2023** — MeitY constitutes a committee of policymakers and AI experts to draft recommendations for an AI governance framework.
- **November 2023** — MeitY issues an Advisory on Deepfakes, directing platforms to combat AI-generated misinformation following viral deepfakes of Bollywood actors and political figures during state elections.
- **2023** — Reports emerge of AI-powered facial recognition surveillance deployed in Indian cities without a legal framework, public transparency or redress mechanisms.

2024 *Governance at scale.*

- **March 1, 2024** — MeitY issues an Advisory requiring intermediaries to seek government permission before deploying “under-tested” or “unreliable” AI models. After the startup community reacts with alarm, the permission requirement is dropped within fourteen days — signalling the government's anxiety about ungoverned AI deployment.
- **March 2024** — The IndiaAI Mission is formally launched, a ₹10,372-crore initiative covering compute infrastructure (10,000+ GPUs), the India Datasets Platform, AI Excellence Centres, an Application Development Initiative, future skills, and a Safe and Trusted AI pillar.
- **July 2024** — India hosts the Global IndiaAI Summit 2024 as GPAI's Lead Chair, convening global leaders on AI governance for the Global South.
- **October 2024** — IndiaAI selects eight projects under its first Safe and Trusted AI “Expression of Interest” round, from over 2,000 proposals, including deepfake detection tools and indigenous AI standards.
- **2024** — The Telangana AI Roadmap proposes a state AI Advisory Council to guide R&D, policy, talent and ethical adoption.
- **2024** — Debate intensifies around facial recognition: the Aadhaar-linked biometric ecosystem, police deployments and smart-city surveillance operate across major cities with minimal legal accountability. The FRT India project documents over 112 separate government procurement or deployment cases.
- **2024** — The Indian military commits roughly \$50 million annually to AI development and deployment for defence and public safety, per Delhi Policy Group estimates. Technologies launched at the 2022 AI in Defence symposium, developed with the US and Israel, continue to expand into operational use — their civilian applications and data-sharing arrangements remain largely undisclosed.

2025 *Surveillance takes over.*

- **January 2025** — The IndiaAI Safety Institute is formally launched under MeitY to promote ethical, safe and responsible AI deployment.
- **February 2025** — India participates in the Paris AI Action Summit, with PM Modi advocating a global compact on human oversight and safety-by-design. Separately, IIT Bombay, with the Maharashtra government, develops an AI tool to detect and identify so-called

“illegal” Bangladeshi nationals and Rohingya refugees — mechanising suspicion by converting language into an instrument for exclusion, comparable to systems used by the US ICE and Israel. (Frontline, 2026)

- **November 2025** — DPDP Rules 2025 are notified, bringing about 800 million internet users under a data protection law for the first time, with phased compliance through May 2027.
- **November 5, 2025** — MeitY releases the India AI Governance Guidelines, structured around six policy pillars and seven “AI Sutras”: Trust, People-first, Innovation, Fairness, Accountability, Transparency and Safety.
- **December 2025** — The Artificial Intelligence (Ethics and Accountability) Bill, 2025, India’s first dedicated AI bill, is introduced as a Private Member’s Bill proposing a statutory Ethics Committee, mandatory ethical reviews for high-risk AI, bias audits and penalties up to ₹5 crore. It does not pass, but marks the start of parliamentary engagement with AI law.
- **2025** — Reports on AI deepfake harms intensify, with synthetic videos of politicians, Bollywood actors and ordinary women circulating widely. The trend to sexualise images of Muslim women unfolds alongside India’s growing engagement in global AI governance conversations (Al Jazeera, 2026) — echoing the 2021 “Sulli Deals” campaign, in which photos and personal information of over 80 Indian Muslim women were uploaded to an open-source app and labelled as “deals of the day” in a fake auction meant to degrade and silence them. (BBC, 2021)

2026 *Governing the AI that already exists.*

- **2026** — India continues to develop the Digital India Act, expected to include AI and algorithm accountability provisions, risk-based platform classification and enforceable deepfake rules. Proposed amendments to the IT Rules, open for public consultation, would let authorities take down content without a complaint, classify and prohibit broad content categories, and expand powers over users’ personal data. (Amnesty International, 2026)
- **2026** — The IndiaAI Mission continues building compute infrastructure, dataset platforms and Centres of Excellence, aiming to make India a significant AI producer rather than merely a consumer.
- **2026** — The India AI Impact Summit in New Delhi catalyses over US\$200 billion in anticipated investment and a non-binding New Delhi Declaration. Amnesty International notes the rhetoric stood in stark contrast to the realities of harmful AI deployment in India, where such systems power a state-led agenda entrenching state and corporate control, as civic space shrinks and marginalised communities face constant harm.

Why This Work Needs Your Support

PC-PIC continues this work because the answer to the question of who India is being governed for cannot emerge from television studios. It must emerge from public testimony.

Over the last four years, these collective processes have helped organise and document public hearings among forest peoples, Adivasi communities, fishworkers, hawkers, ragpickers,

sanitation workers, informal labourers, displaced communities and urban working classes across India. These testimonies are not charity archives. They are political memory.

This work needs support because official history often erases the voices of those who suffer the most. Independent people's documentation, public hearings, field investigations, legal follow-up, political education and citizen outreach require resources.

Supporting this work means supporting the right of ordinary people to speak, remember, question and organise. And if India deserves citizens, not obedient beneficiaries, then this work must be sustained.

SUPPORT THE WORK →

People's Commission & Public Inquiry Committee (PC-PIC)

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