

O HERALDO

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The struggle over electoral neutrality

The Supreme Court's recent adjournment of petitions challenging the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioner (EC) under the 2023 Act has reignited concerns over the fairness and transparency of India's electoral system. A bench comprising Justices Suryakant and N Kotishwar Singh deferred the matter beyond the Holi vacation, but no fixed date for the hearing has been announced. Meanwhile, the government moved swiftly, appointing Gyanesh Kumar as the next CEC on February 17, two days before the court was set to hear challenges to the selection process. This move has sparked strong opposition, particularly from Rahul Gandhi, who has voiced concerns about the independence of the Election Commission.

Gyanesh Kumar's appointment has drawn attention not just because of its timing but also due to his political and bureaucratic background. As a key figure in the Home Ministry, he played an instrumental role in executing the government's decision to abrogate certain provisions of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir. He was also a member of the Ayodhya Ram Mandir Construction Committee and represented the government in the 'Shri Ram Mandir Tirth Kshetra Trust', playing a role in the selection of the idol of Ram Lalla. His deep ties to politically significant projects have raised concerns about whether he can maintain the neutrality expected of a CEC.

Adding to the controversy, the central government's decision to exclude the Chief Justice of India (CJI) from the selection committee for appointing Election Commissioners has been a significant point of contention. Critics argue that removing the judiciary from the selection process undermines the impartiality of the Election Commission, allowing the executive unchecked power to appoint individuals of its choosing

This debate over the autonomy of the Election Commission is not new. The Congress party, now in opposition, has criticised the government's move as a dangerous step toward eroding democratic institutions. However, history reveals that successive governments, whether led by the BJP or Congress—have sought to exert influence over independent agencies.

The Supreme Court had earlier emphasized the need for a balanced and independent selection process, aligning with recommendations made by various committees and commissions over the years. The 1990 Goswami Committee, established to suggest electoral reforms, had advocated for a collegium system that included the Prime Minister, the Chief Justice of India, and the Leader of the Opposition in the selection of Election Commissioners. The Law Commission, in its 2015 report, reinforced this idea, stressing that keeping the Election Commission independent from executive interference was essential for upholding democracy.

However, in direct contradiction to these recommendations, the Modi government has pushed a new bill that excludes the Chief Justice from the selection panel. This move is not just a reversal of earlier expert recommendations but also a departure from BJP's own historical stance. A resurfaced letter from senior BJP leader and former Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani, written in 2012 to then-Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, had advocated for including the Chief Justice in the selection process to ensure neutrality. The stark contrast between the BJP's past and present positions highlights the party's shifting priorities when in power.

Dr B R Ambedkar, one of the chief architects of the Indian Constitution, had warned that the success of democracy depends not just on well-drafted laws but also on the integrity of those who implement them. Written rules alone cannot safeguard democracy; a commitment to democratic values and institutional independence is equally essential. The ongoing controversy over the selection of Election Commissioners reflects a deeper malaise—the growing centralization of power and the weakening of institutional checks and balances.

India's democratic resilience depends on strong institutions, not just strong leaders. The politicization of the Election Commission's appointments must be addressed through meaningful reforms that prioritize neutrality over political expediency. The ruling party, regardless of its identity, must recognize that institutional credibility is not just an electoral concern but a cornerstone of democratic governance.



ANN DE SOUZA

The overlooked epidemic of mental illness

Not long ago, I met a friend at a café. She looked perfectly fine, smiling as we exchanged pleasantries. But as our conversation deepened, she admitted that she had been struggling with anxiety for months. I was shocked. This was someone I had always seen as strong, confident, and cheerful. Her story made me realise how many people suffer in silence, afraid to ask for help.

Mental health is a topic we often push aside, even though it affects everyone. We talk openly about physical ailments like diabetes, heart disease or even a broken arm, but when it comes to depression or anxiety, silence takes over. It is an invisible battle, one that millions fight daily, yet so few are willing to discuss.

The COVID-19 pandemic should have opened our eyes to the fragility of mental well-being. Everyone is aware that isolation, financial stress and uncertainty pushed millions into emotional turmoil. But instead of making mental health a priority, we quickly slipped back into old habits; ignoring it once again.

As a Toastmaster, I have heard first-hand from corporate professionals struggling with stress. One member, who once loved his job, began suffering panic attacks due to relentless deadlines and the pressure to always be available. But he hid them, fearing he'd seem weak.

Schools must teach students not just maths and science, but also emotional intelligence and coping strategies. Learning how to manage stress should be as important as learning how to solve equations



And it's not just adults. Schools, too, have become pressure cookers. I see parents, completely exhausted, finishing their child's homework late at night or paying tutors to ensure their kids get top grades. This pressure is producing a generation of children who are burned out before they even enter adulthood. Many of them lack the emotional resilience to handle setbacks because they were never given the space to develop it.

Public figures have helped break the stigma by sharing their struggles. Bollywood actress Deepika Padukone, at the height of her career, opened up about her battle with depression. In Hollywood, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson also opened up about his struggle.

Move to sports and there's the story of Simone Biles, who took a brave step by stepping away from the Tokyo Olympics. As the world watched, she opened up about her mental health struggles and the immense pressure she faced as one of the most decorated gymnasts in history. Her decision to prioritise her mental well-being sent a powerful message to millions.

In the music industry, Adele, known for her powerful voice and emotional music, publicly shared how she struggled with anxiety and self-image issues. She once admitted to feeling overwhelmed by the expectations placed on her after her early success and often found herself retreating from the public eye.

There are many women like Sarah, a mother and businesswoman, who struggle with postnatal depression after delivery. They suffer from overwhelming guilt and fatigue worrying about not being good mothers. Today, Sarah's an advocate for mental health awareness.

As an advocate, I've seen the legal side of mental health struggles too. Many people, especially those involved in long-running litigation, often find the stress of their cases overwhelming. The legal field is often perceived as emotionless; focused solely on facts, arguments and verdicts. But behind every legal dispute, there are real people struggling with anxiety, stress, and uncertainty.

I've had clients who, at first, appeared fine, confident and composed; but over time, the toll of the legal process, the uncertainty of outcomes, and the emotional strain of navigating personal issues through the courts have affected their mental well-being. The drawn-out nature of litigation, especially in family disputes and property cases, can leave individuals feeling drained, helpless, and trapped in an endless cycle of legal battles.

Take, for instance, a client who had been in a drawn-out property dispute. The case had

dragged on for years, with each court hearing bringing fresh anxiety and disappointment. I saw how the case was eating away at him emotionally. He confided in me that he was experiencing constant sleepless nights and panic attacks. Recognizing the signs, I referred him to a mental health professional. He later told me how helpful it was to have someone listen to him and guide him through his struggles. It made me realise that advocacy is not just about representing clients; it's also about recognizing their humanity and mental health needs.

Lawyers themselves are not immune to the pressures of the profession. The high-stakes nature of legal work, coupled with long hours and the emotional burden of handling difficult cases, takes a toll. Many legal professionals silently battle stress, anxiety and even depression. Law firms and courts must create support systems that help both clients and legal professionals cope with the stress that comes with the territory.

Mental health issues don't just affect individuals; they impact families, workplaces and entire communities. We need to create spaces where people feel safe to talk about mental health. Workplaces must prioritize mental well-being, offering flexible schedules, counselling resources, and fostering a culture where employees don't feel ashamed to ask for help.

Schools must teach students not just maths and science, but also emotional intelligence and coping strategies. Learning how to manage stress should be as important as learning how to solve equations.

On an individual level, we all have a role to play. Check in on your friends. Ask, "How are you really doing?" Listen without judgment. Small acts of kindness, like sending a message or making time for a chat, can mean the world to someone struggling.

Mental health is not a luxury; it's a necessity. It's time we stop treating it as an afterthought and start giving it the attention it deserves. Behind every smiling face, there could be someone fighting a battle we cannot see. And it's on all of us to make sure they don't fight it alone.

(The writer is an advocate by profession and a passionate YouTuber)

people's edit

HINDI AS COMPULSORY SUBJECT

ANTÓNIO LOBO

How many people in Goa are aware that Hindi is not the national language of India? Most Goans and many others assume that it is, and the government does nothing to correct that belief, fearing perhaps, that it could provoke a reaction from parents of school-going children, whose wards are obliged to study that language.

From the time that education upto SSC was first placed under the Maharashtra (Pune) Education Board in 1962, the study of Hindi language in schools was made compulsory. Earlier, those students, such as myself, who had shifted from Portuguese to English education, were offered the option of not taking Hindi as a subject, but they would suffer the consequence of not being ranked when the exam results were declared.

Many, especially within the Catholic community, opted for this exemption, as the parents found it impossible to help their wards with the language, and the script, as they themselves knew nothing of Hindi. However, at that time, and even today, nobody questioned or questions the rationale behind making Hindi a compulsory subject, even though there are multiple examples of students failing or, at best, securing a poor overall percentage in the SSC exams, due to Hindi. This absence of protest can only be explained, in the fact, that most people assumed and still assume, that it is the "national language" and that nothing could be done about it.

This belief is reinforced by the fact that the Central Government, has been pushing for Hindi being taught as a subject, for "national integration", without ever explaining why the teaching of Hindi, in preference to any other Indian language, was necessary for that purpose. The region that has consistently opposed this policy, has been the South of India, especially by such states as Tamil Nadu and Kerala, that have steadfastly refused to kowtow to the dictates of the Central Government to that effect. The recent threat by the Education Minister of the Central Government Dharmendra Pradhan, that Tamil Nadu would not receive any education funds unless it accepted the three language formula (English, local language and Hindi) under the National Education Policy (NEP) is a case in point, of the push by the North to impose its culture on the rest of India.

This accords well with the BJP policy of one country, one election (and one language?). This declaration by the minister evoked a quick riposte from M K Stalin who accused the Minister of blackmail and to state that the people of Tamil Nadu would not tolerate it. It's time for Goa, which now has its own Board of Education to stop making the study of Hindi compulsory. Education is included in the Concurrent List of the Constitution of India and each state has the power to frame its own policy and decide which subject will be taught in schools as a compulsory or optional subject. It's time, that the interest of students which should be the paramount consideration in any education plan, is given its due place.

Violent behaviour unacceptable

A motorist from Mapusa has reportedly been booked for threatening a Mapusa Traffic Police Inspector and obstructing him from carrying out his duty at Peddem junction on Monday. The alleged accused was stopped for not wearing a seat belt and asked to produce his driving licence. He reportedly argued with the officers, refused to provide the licence and threatened the inspector thereby obstructing the officer in carrying out his duties. The video has since gone viral. Be that as it may, there have been several incidents in the recent past of vehicular drivers picking up fights with the traffic police and even threatening them of dire consequences.

There is a strong possibility of violators of traffic rules having political connections which emboldens them. It is observed that not only tourists are involved in such incidents but also Goan road users. According to Section 186 of IPC, whoever voluntarily obstructs any public servant in the discharge of his public functions, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to three months, or with fine which may extend to five hundred rupees, or with both. There should be zero tolerance towards threats to traffic cops. Unlike in other countries there seems to be no fear of the law enforcing agency in the state. This could result in complete breakdown in law-and-order in the state.

The body-cam worn by traffic cops can come in handy as

proof of the violent behavior of the motorist.

Adelmo Fernandes, Vasco

Social justice gaps need to be bridged

Though the world has tremendously taken off in all spheres of life, there are some races, classes and religions who feel deprived of equal chances to education, healthcare and employment among others. Social justice aims at correcting this and a robust social justice system encompasses social integration, equal employment opportunities and poverty eradication.

Nations around the world are interlinked socially and economically. Social development and social justice are indispensable to each other and are crucial for fostering peace and security among the nations. On the corollary, social justice and social development cannot be attained in the absence of peace and security or in the absence of human rights.

"Empowering inclusion: Bridging gaps for social justice" global coalition for social justice" is a natural theme for the World Social Justice Day on February 20. Global prosperity has a big stumbling block: injustice and insecurity faced by sections of the society.

Inclusive governments bat for social justice and, consequently, national progress. Institutional reforms and better labour market outcomes are offshoots of effective governance.

Ganapathi Bhat, Akola

letterstotheeditor

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All letters must contain correct postal address and telephone number. Letters are liable to be edited for brevity.

AI could wipe out 50% of jobs soon

Sophisticated AI solutions that is likely to emerge due to competition say at the moment between OpenAI and DEEPSEEK which are locked in a fierce battle for supremacy through competitive pricing could in a few years sound the death knell for the employment sector that is already a cause for concern and which is likely to replace the availability of youth due to the population decrease in China, South Korea and Japan where the birth rates are plummeting.

So vast is the availability of the volume of data in almost all the fields that with the advent of mathematical models, the permutations and combinations of various calibrated versions could lead to almost unlimited choices that would be available in all fields especially science, technology, engineering, banking and information technology. With the astronomical development which is without borders, research work could be done by AI in several fields which could be faster and better if the data fed into the systems are of the most advanced quality that could beat the capacity of the human brain to be able to keep pace with. Unending possibilities are in the offing and sophisticated controls should be devised so as to prevent rogue elements from exploiting the situation.

Elvio Miranda, Panjim

Centre, TN embroiled on 'language war'

Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan's comments that central funds for Education will not be released for Tamil Nadu unless the state government agreed to implement the National Education Policy (NEP) including the three language policy exhibit not only the arrogance but also the crude and blatant arm-twisting tactics of the autocratic BJP-ruled government at the centre.

It is heartening that all the opposition leaders except those from the saffron party and G K Vasan of the Tamil Manila Congress, have opposed this black mailing of the union government and their intention to impose the RSS ideologies through the NEP and Hindi on non-Hindi speaking people. While none of the Hindi speaking states learn any other language and not even one such state learns Tamil, why should the BJP government impose Hindi on us?

Having failed to make non-Hindi speaking states like Tamil Nadu accept imposition of Hindi, the central government is trying to enforce the same dictatorially by refusing to allot funds rightfully due to the state. The central government has no right to deny the eligible funds linking it to accepting new policies floated by them like the NEP with ulterior motive. Their move should be opposed tooth and nail by all the people of the state and de-

feat the language - chauvinism of the imposters.

Tharcus S Fernando, Chennai

Passenger safety needs to be prioritised

The recent stampede at New Delhi Railway Station, which tragically claimed the lives of 18 people and injured many more, serves as a grim reminder of the pressing need for Indian Railways to prioritise passenger safety.

While the incident occurred due to a sudden surge of passengers heading to Prayagraj for the Maha Kumbh Mela, it highlights systemic issues that must be addressed to prevent future tragedies. This surge in passenger volume overwhelmed the existing infrastructure and crowd management systems. The railway authorities appeared ill-prepared to handle the massive influx of passengers.

There was a lack of adequate crowd control measures, such as proper barricading, clear signage, and sufficient personnel to guide and manage the crowd. The New Delhi Railway Station stampede offers several crucial lessons for Indian Railways, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive overhaul of passenger safety protocols and infrastructure. An independent safety regulator should be established to oversee safety protocols and ensure accountability. This regulator should have the authority to investigate accidents, conduct audits, and impose penalties for safety violations.

Ranganathan Sivakumar, Chennai