



THE DESERVING INDIA

HINDU EDITORIAL

Compilation

WEEKLY

29 JULY TO 3 AUG

CRITIQUING COVAXIN STUDY



The editorial critiques the flawed design and publication delays of the Covaxin safety study conducted by BHU and Bharat Biotech.

The article discusses the significant gaps in the long-term safety study of Covaxin conducted by Banaras Hindu University (BHU), which was criticized by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) for its poor design. The study, published in *Drug Safety*, lacked a control arm and relied on participants' recall of adverse events a year after vaccination, introducing recall bias. This compromised the study's reliability in assessing Covaxin's adverse effects. The importance of including a control arm in vaccine safety studies is highlighted to provide reliable information on adverse effects. The article also points out the glaring publication failure by Bharat Biotech and ICMR in releasing the long-term safety data of Covaxin's phase-3 trial, despite having the data for over two and a half years. The phase-3 trial involved nearly 25,800 participants and was completed in November 2020, but only interim data has been published, leading to concerns over transparency and reliability.

Additionally, the article contrasts the ICMR's response to the Covaxin study with its handling of a similar study on Covishield, suggesting possible bias. The author criticizes ICMR for not demanding retraction of the Covishield study despite similar flaws. The article calls for the timely publication of the phase-3 safety data and urges ICMR and Bharat Biotech to address their publication shortcomings to maintain public trust in vaccine safety evaluations.

CENSUS DELAY CONCERNS

The delayed Census in India poses significant risks to welfare schemes, representation, and accurate data collection.



The postponement of the Census, initially slated for 2020 and now potentially delayed beyond 2024, raises critical concerns. With a significantly reduced budget allocation of ₹1,309.46 crore for 2024-25 compared to ₹3,768 crore in 2021-22, the likelihood of conducting the Census soon appears bleak. The delay hampers the implementation of essential welfare schemes and the women's Reservation Act, affecting a significant portion of the population. Preparations for the Census, such as pre-testing questionnaires, training field staff, and logistics planning, have been ongoing for years. However, officials indicate that only minimal refresher training is needed to proceed once a date is set. The article highlights the importance of updating the National Population Register (NPR) and clarifies that NPR data won't be used for the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

The Constitution (Eighty-fourth Amendment) Act of 2001 mandates no delimitation of constituencies until after the first Census conducted post-2026. The Centre must soon decide on the Census reference date to ensure accurate data collection and representation. There is also a debate on whether to include caste information, as an affidavit filed in 2021 deemed it unfeasible. The Centre's decision on contentious NPR questions and whether to collect caste data will shape the future Census operations.

DUALITY UNDERSTANDING THE INDIAN VOTER BEHAVIOUR

Abhishek Sharma is a candidate at the University of Delhi's Department of Political Science and a researcher at Lokniti-CSDS. He specializes on the digital side of elections.

On June 4, 2024, the results of the 18th Lok Sabha elections were declared, and they significantly changed the political landscape. Despite winning 240 seats, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was unable to secure a majority in the Lok Sabha. The general election revealed the complex behavior of Indian voters and the range of reasons influencing their electoral choices, even though it did not portend a significant change in the balance of power.

This article uses data from polls conducted by the Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) to examine this diversity through the prism of caution and the paradox present in election behavior. The study examines pre- and post-election surveys from 2024, with additional data from 2014, to demonstrate the complex and paradoxical process of voter decision-making in a dynamic democracy.

Decision-Making Dualities?

Evaluating the independence and content of voters' choices is crucial to comprehending their decisions. In 2024, 56% of respondents to Lokniti's pre-poll study make their voting decisions on their own. For 50.7% of voters, the two most important issues were unemployment and rising prices, much outweighing Hindutva ideology (2.3%) and the building of the Ram Temple (7.5%). This change suggests a preference for real socioeconomic problems over theoretical ones.

The poll shows a diverse voter base despite the BJP's ideological stance, which places a strong emphasis on the Ram Temple and Article 370. Although 22.4% of respondents expressed gratitude for the Ram Temple's completion, relatively few used it as justification for voting for the BJP. Alternatively, 21% linked their backing to the nation's general progress. Voters favor socioeconomic growth over ideological achievements, as seen by this.



The Topic of Leadership

The BJP's success, especially in 2014, can be ascribed to both Narendra Modi's charm and its ideological position. Modi's popularity frequently eclipsed that of the BJP, a testament to the electorate's thirst for capable leadership. 67% of voters supported having a strong leader in the 2024 post-election survey, but 57.5% underlined the need for checks and balances and 70% affirmed the right to hold leaders accountable. This is indicative of a cautious electorate that appreciates strong leadership but also expects responsibility.



Organizations for Change

The post-election analysis demonstrates how voters behaved in a way that balanced minoritarian rights with majoritarian viewpoints. While 49% believed that in a democracy, the will of the majority should rule, 48% were in favor of protecting the rights of minorities. Furthermore, 57% of Hindus agreed that Muslim Dalits should be included in the Scheduled Castes list, demonstrating a recognition of minority rights in addition to majoritarian tendencies.



In summary

According to the survey, democracy is dynamic since 42% of voters think that having free and fair elections to change the government is its most important feature, while 34% think that equal rights for all people should come first. While there hasn't been a significant change in power, these elections show that voters are progressive democratic in their capacity to balance change and stability, as well as their ideological inclinations and practical concerns.



AI AND CULTURAL POLICIES



The future of AI depends on cultural policies, not just regulations, to ensure equitable access to data and promote transparency.

The advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI) hinges not solely on regulation but also on cultural policies that ensure high-quality data is accessible to all, fostering transparency and public trust. Data, being the lifeblood of AI, is critical for the development of Large Language Models (LLMs). The issue arises from the insufficient production of digital content by humans, potentially leading to a 'peak data' scenario by 2030. This scarcity may prompt an 'AI winter,' where the relentless demand for data compromises quality and ethics. Current LLMs rely heavily on licensed content and social media interactions, which perpetuate existing biases in our predominantly Anglophone and presentist cyberspace. The absence of primary sources, such as archival documents and oral traditions, limits the cultural depth of AI's knowledge base. Examples from Italy and Canada highlight the potential benefits of digitizing and making cultural heritage accessible. Italy's digitization of archival documents and Canada's bilingual language policies have shown significant economic and technological benefits. Emphasizing the digitization of low-resource languages and harnessing this data could revolutionize our understanding of human culture, safeguarding and democratizing our cultural heritage while fostering innovation and economic growth.

AWAITED MONEY BILL VERDICT

The Supreme Court's decision on the Money Bill's classification will impact India's federal structure and legislative process.



A seven-judge Bench of the Supreme Court of India will soon address the classification of Money Bills, a ruling that will affect India's legislative balance, especially regarding the Rajya Sabha's role. The case arises from the 2017 Finance Act, which was certified as a Money Bill, significantly altering tribunal structures. Petitioners argue that these changes fail to meet the constitutional definition of a Money Bill, which should focus on financial matters as specified in Article 110 of the Constitution. The Finance Act's classification as a Money Bill is contentious because it included broader legislative changes not strictly related to financial issues. The Act granted the executive significant powers, including rule-making authority over tribunals, which typically wouldn't fall under a Money Bill's scope. The Supreme Court's decision will clarify the interpretation of Article 110 and the appropriate use of Money Bills, impacting the legislative power balance between the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha.

Justice Sikri's earlier ruling in the Aadhaar case highlighted the need for stricter adherence to the constitutional definition of a Money Bill. The Supreme Court's verdict is expected to provide crucial guidance on maintaining India's federal structure and ensuring that legislative processes adhere to constitutional requirements. The decision will also address concerns about bypassing the Rajya Sabha, thereby reinforcing the integrity of India's bicameral legislative system.

GM Crops VERDICT

Editorial 2

The Supreme Court's split verdict on GM mustard highlights India's ongoing debate over genetically modified crops.

India's complex journey with genetically modified (GM) food crops took another turn as a two-judge Bench of the Supreme Court delivered a split verdict on allowing GM mustard in fields. Currently, only GM cotton is permitted in India, which spurred efforts to develop GM seeds for other crops. The focus is on DMH-11, a GM mustard developed at Delhi University's biotechnology department, designed to be lucrative for seed companies. For approval, crops must outperform existing varieties over three seasons in different agro-climatic zones, and DMH-11 met these criteria according to the Indian Council of Agricultural Research.

The Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) approved DMH-11 in October 2022, subject to tests. However, environmental groups claim DMH-11 is a 'herbicide tolerant' crop, forcing farmers to use specific pesticides, potentially causing environmental harm. These concerns led to court challenges by activist Aruna Rodrigues and Gene Campaign.

The Supreme Court judges differed on GEAC's decision. Justice Nagarathna argued that GEAC violated the 'precautionary principle,' which mandates cautious handling of new organisms. Conversely, Justice Karol found the process satisfactory, passing the case to a larger Bench led by the Chief Justice. The Court also directed the Centre to establish a GM crop policy. The debate over GM crops in India is more ideological than economic, reflecting concerns from past agricultural practices that, despite improving yields, caused environmental issues. The Court's decision emphasizes the need for balanced considerations in adopting GM technology.



Sub-Quota JUSTIFICATION

The editorial discusses the Supreme Court's endorsement of sub-quotas among Scheduled Castes to promote substantive equality.



The jurisprudence of affirmative action has progressed from formal equality to substantive equality, focusing on non-discrimination. The recent Supreme Court judgment allows States to categorize Scheduled Castes (SCs) into groups, granting preferential treatment to the most backward among them. This decision marks a shift towards deeper equality by recognizing diversity and accommodating historical and social disabilities. The ruling overturns a 2005 verdict (E.V. Chinnaiah vs AP) that deemed sub-classification within SCs unconstitutional. The majority opinion, supported by six judges against one, acknowledges that SCs are not a homogenous group and have varying levels of social and economic advancement. The court's decision enables States to identify and support the weakest sections within SCs, aligning with the principle that affirmative action should benefit the most disadvantaged. The introduction of the "creamy layer" concept, previously applied only to Other Backward Classes (OBCs), is discussed. Justice B.R. Gavai highlights that the creamy layer norms for SCs should differ from those for OBCs. While excluding the advanced sections among Dalits was not a core issue in this judgment, the opinions suggest it might become relevant in future discussions. The focus remains on preventing marginalization within Dalit communities by ensuring the weakest benefit from affirmative action policies.

Development RISKS

The editorial highlights the environmental risks associated with unchecked development in Kerala's Wayanad region, stressing the need for sustainable practices.

The Wayanad tragedy, where heavy rains triggered landslides and flooding, emphasizes the dangers of unsustainable development in ecologically sensitive areas. Kerala, known for its high literacy and healthcare standards, faces the perils of ignoring its environment's carrying capacity. The region's unique topography and rich biodiversity make it particularly vulnerable to such disasters. The editorial points out that unregulated construction, deforestation, and inappropriate land use exacerbate the impact of natural calamities. In Wayanad, poorly planned tourism infrastructure, along with roads and buildings encroaching on forested lands, has led to severe soil erosion and landslides. This situation is further aggravated by climate change, with unpredictable weather patterns and intensified monsoons becoming the new norm.

The article underscores the importance of respecting ecological balance in developmental planning. Sustainable development should integrate environmental concerns, ensuring that economic growth does not come at the cost of ecological degradation. The writer advocates for stricter regulations on land use and construction in sensitive areas, along with promoting afforestation and soil conservation efforts. Community involvement and awareness are crucial in implementing these measures effectively.

By drawing lessons from Wayanad, the editorial calls for a broader rethinking of development strategies across Kerala and similar regions. Emphasizing the interconnectedness of human activities and natural systems, it argues for a harmonious approach that balances development needs with environmental sustainability to prevent future tragedies.

