



## Five Years of Governance and People's Manifesto 2024

This 'People's Manifesto' is based on the report 'Promises and Reality: Citizen Review of 4+ years of NDA II Government' which aims to reflect and amplify citizen perspectives on the status of governance while also drawing a special focus on the rights of marginalised communities.

The structure of this report is rooted in the aspiration to build upon our abiding focus on economic and social rights, while also expanding to review the status of civil rights - such as freedom of expression, freedom of life, and freedom of liberty - in the face of the shrinking civic space and the nature of challenges across sectors and communities.

The report is structured around four broad themes looking at the status of democracy, development, governance, and marginalised communities and a brief summary of the same is given below.

### Status of Democracy

A review of the parliamentary processes reveals many pressing concerns, such as the hurried passage of Bills without debate, limited engagement of parliamentary committees, reduced sitting days, limited budgetary deliberations, restricted access to data for Members of Parliament, and the growing presence of elected representatives with criminal records. In the 2023 Monsoon Session of the Indian Parliament, 22 Bills were passed, with 20 receiving less than an hour of discussion, and 9 Bills, including significant ones, passing within 20 minutes in Lok Sabha.<sup>i</sup> In the 2023 Budget Session, only 18 hours were dedicated to financial matters, with just 16 hours allotted for the Budget's general discussion, a significant reduction from past budget sessions, which averaged 55 hours of financial business discussion.<sup>ii</sup> Over the past seven years, an average of 79% of the budget has been approved without examination or debate.<sup>iii</sup> Proposed expenses of all Government Ministries in 2023, amounting to Rs 45 lakh crores, were passed without any discussion.<sup>iv</sup> Also in the 2023 Monsoon session, only 3 out of 25 Bills were referred to Parliamentary Committees, marking a meagre 17% referral rate, significantly lower than the previous three Lok Sabhas at 45%.<sup>v</sup>

A review of the state of media reflects how this pillar of democracy is struggling to stay up, in light of

increased capital investment from those with business-oriented interests, rising communalism, diminishing space to critique the establishment, and rising attacks on journalists/media organizations not towing 'the line'. Media outlets, rely heavily on government advertising contracts, blurring the line between business and editorial decisions and allowing the central government to invest over Rs. 180 crores (20.4 million euros) annually in print and online media ads to promote its own narrative<sup>vi</sup>. With an average of 4 journalists killed in connection with their work every year, India is one of the world's most dangerous countries for the media<sup>vii</sup>. The stark decline of people in the media and publishing industry from 10.3 lakhs in 2016 to 2.3 lakhs in 2021 clearly evidences these unhealthy trends<sup>viii</sup>.

Further, a chilling effect has encompassed not just traditional civil society groups but business, philanthropy, media, academia, and ordinary citizens alike. This has arisen after students, activists, academics, journalists, artists, actors, comedians, fact-checkers, publishers, and a range of other citizens have been charged under draconian laws for exercising their fundamental freedoms.

Instead of recognising the pivotal role domestic civil society organisations (CSOs) play in addressing issues of social justice and the climate crisis, CSOs in India have found themselves scrambling to cope with new, onerous regulatory compliance requirements, whereas governments worldwide provided fiscal support and/or tax incentives to their non-profit sectors through the pandemic. Along with this, the battle for authentic data has also been hindering the ability of CSOs to analyse policy, design programmes, advocate for the excluded or evaluate impact as the decadal census that was due in 2021 shows no sign of being conducted any time soon and other datasets being suppressed or discredited.

### Status of Development

India has lacked official poverty data for over a decade, but various studies indicate a significant increase in the number who have come under the bracket since the pandemic, especially among marginalised groups. Structural shifts in the labour market have led to income collapse, savings erosion, and mounting household debt - particularly affecting rural poverty and food insecurity. Despite robust GDP growth, India remains highly unequal, with the top 10% holding 57% of national income, out of which the top 1% accounts for 22% of it. Conversely, the bottom 50% share has gone down to 13%<sup>ix</sup>. The current growth paradigm is weak on inclusive democratic development, exacerbating inequality and excluding marginalised populations.

The country is facing economic challenges with a pre-pandemic low per capita GDP of INR 91,481 in 2021-22<sup>x</sup>, coupled with an unresponsive fiscal and monetary system, a 59% rise in debt to GDP, reduced public provisioning, and high inflation of nearly 13%. Private investment - a crucial growth pillar - has dwindled from 31% of GDP in 2011 to

22% in 2020, with a sharp decline in industrial investment proposals<sup>xi</sup>. Despite economic progress, India's workforce is moving toward agriculture, with the sector's share in GDP increasing, yet farmers not being able to access fair prices. The closure of 70% of MSMEs<sup>xii</sup>, which are key contributors to India's growth, also highlights the need for policy support.

The increasing poverty and inequality also create an emergent need for robust social security measures, but what currently exists is a patchwork of national and state schemes with a wide range of eligibility criteria (inclusions and exclusions), operational procedures and target groups administered by a labyrinth of departments, welfare boards and parastatals. The income inequality is also leading to a state of hunger and poor nutritional status with 70% population unable to afford a nutritious and healthy diet<sup>xiii</sup>. The proportion of the rural population not able to access 2,200 calories per person per day has risen sharply from 68% in 2011-12 to 77%, India now ranking a disastrously low 107 among 121 countries in the World Hunger Index.

Despite the need to direct public resources towards healthcare, a diversion of government funds to the private sector is happening with 75% of PM-JAY payments made to private entities<sup>xiv</sup>. While 46% population reported access to safely managed sanitation services in 2020<sup>xv</sup>, there are huge inequities in access to basic sanitation with 29% of the population with the lowest income levels had access to basic sanitation as compared to 96% for the group with highest income level<sup>xvi</sup>.

Only 25.5% of schools across the country are compliant with the Right to Education Act infrastructure norms, with compliance rates ranging between 63.6% (Punjab) and 1.3% (Meghalaya)<sup>xvii</sup>. Early timelines of implementation of the National Education Policy have been missed on the back of the pandemic and inadequate financial allocations, among other reasons. There has been a consistent reduction in state financial support for higher education with a mere Rs 750 rise in per student budget between 2014-15 to 2021-22<sup>xviii</sup>. Higher Education Institutes are also experiencing intellectual impoverishment resulting in prominent universities witnessing the appointment of teachers with subpar academic records. All this despite, government colleges catering to increasingly higher students per college.

While there has been improvement in India's climate ambition and diplomacy internationally, a lot more needs to be done domestically. There has been no systematic assessment of the National Action Plan on Climate Change even after almost 15 years since it was launched, while recently passed laws and notifications are set to remove protection from 28% of forest cover<sup>xix</sup>, among other changes that put the environment at risk. Additionally, high expenditure households (top 20%) in India produce almost seven times more carbon emissions than low expenditure households and climate change disproportionately affects marginalized SC and ST communities, particularly informal workers in urban areas and

poorer farmers from marginalized castes due to droughts<sup>xx</sup>.

### Status of Marginalised Communities

This period included the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath — both of which had a well-documented disproportionate impact on the most marginalised communities.

While there were unprecedented school dropouts recorded during the pandemic, the enrolment rates in the age group of 6-14 years in 2022 have returned to pre-pandemic figures. However, there is a need to invest more in children, with critical examinations of the challenges posed by learning loss, nutrition gaps, widespread violence against children, and continuing cases of child labour and child marriage.

These challenges along with rising unemployment have had an overlapping impact on the youth population and resulted in over 20% of them reporting having suicidal thoughts<sup>xxi</sup>. While there have been efforts to enable the significant population in this demographic, National Youth Policy 2021 suggests very few avenues of social engagement, and hardly any for political engagement, which are independent of a paternal gaze of institutions like universities or local governments or business associations.

There is a need to evolve the fundamental thought process behind development policies, as can also be argued for women because while there is a strong increase in the overall focus on "women's empowerment", there is a continuing need to define this empowerment in terms of wage parity, autonomy in decision-making, and addressing structural barriers for women across identities. That is the only way to move towards an equitable society that recognises women's unpaid care work that is potentially equivalent to almost 7.5% of India's total GDP<sup>xxii</sup> through public spending on care infrastructure, such as pre-primary education and childcare which is currently less than 1% of the GDP<sup>xxiii</sup>.

Despite recurring mentions from the government on the safety, protection, resilience and entitlements of Dalits and Tribals, the status of empowerment and systems of neglect have remained largely unchanged. Over the past five years, 347 deaths related to manual scavenging have been recorded<sup>xxiv</sup>.

Gaps in the implementation of constitutional provisions are also a reality for religious minorities. Consistent social exclusion of Muslims has caused constant economic backwardness - with 31% below the poverty line<sup>xxv</sup>. While there is a lack of any government policies directed to bring them out of this morass, the diminished sense of safety and security in the community, as evidenced by 206<sup>xxvi</sup> incidents of cow vigilantism since 2014 and 539 incidents of violence against Christians in just nine months of 2023<sup>xxvii</sup> further compounds this impact. The National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation

(NMDFC), the primary agency for minority community economic development, experienced a nearly 75% reduction in allocation for the year 2023-24<sup>xxviii</sup>.

Despite passing some progressive laws in recent years, India abstained from voting on the resolution that renewed the mandate for an independent expert to monitor the protection of LGBTQ rights at the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2019 and 2022, casting doubts on the government's commitment to welfare and empowerment of the community. The government's commitment to the inclusion of people with disabilities is also under scrutiny with the recent decision to omit the collection of disability-related data from the sixth round of the National Family Health Survey.

The real wages of male agricultural labourers grew by less than 1% between 2014-15 and 2021-22<sup>xxix</sup>; the number of persons engaged in the farming sector to have committed suicide was nearly 53,000 between 2017-2022<sup>xxx</sup>. Around 100 small farmers are losing their land hourly, while inadequate protection against natural disasters and mismanaged insurance schemes exacerbate the impact of climate change.

In urban areas, struck by a lack of housing and necessities like access to water and sanitation, health services, education infrastructure and social security, multidimensional poverty continues to rise in urban areas, where over 30% population resides. The Affordable Rental Housing Complex (ARHC) component of PM Awas Yojana created fewer than 6000 residential units in two and a half years for a total recognised migrant population of 450 million, and the constant increasing influx of migrant workers in major cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Bengaluru, and Chennai<sup>xxxi</sup>.

### Status of Governance

While the last five Union Budgets were presented in the wake of rising unemployment, high inflation, low consumption demand and growing inequality in the country, specific emphasis has been on major infrastructure projects and education, health, and investments for marginalised groups like scheduled castes, tribal communities, religious minorities, women, children, and persons with disabilities have been neglected.

Despite about 80% of NGOs in India focusing their efforts on promoting quality education, ensuring good health, and working towards eradicating poverty, contributing 2% of India's GDP and offering livelihoods to millions<sup>xxxii</sup>, the government often perceives the development sector as a hindrance to development.

Even as India pioneers e-governance initiatives like UPI, it still leads the world in internet shutdowns. In 2023, internet services were suspended 44 times and resulted in a loss of over Rs. 2000 crores (\$255.2 million) and impacted 4.32 crore users over 2,353 hours of downtime<sup>xxxiii</sup>. Balancing technological

progress with preserving democratic principles and individual rights in the evolving data governance landscape is a challenge seeing very slow progress. Concerns about increased surveillance and hollow protection for data users loomed large in the new Data Protection Bill 2023 and the Digital India Act, while India's Freedom House rating also changed from 'free' to 'partly free' due to government authoritarian actions in 2021.

Twelve CAG reports tabled in the parliament in August 2023 revealed corruption and irregularities in the functioning of several Union government ministries and departments. The only effective way to fight corruption in a democracy as vast as India is to empower citizens with appropriate tools and institutions to hold the government and its functionaries accountable. However, unfortunately, the track record of the current dispensation has been marked by a consistent undermining of legislations and institutions of transparency and accountability.

With continued multi-pronged attacks on basic human rights for all, especially for the most marginalised, the last five years stand out for an intentional redefinition and abuse of human rights on the ground and obscurantist chicanery. This gesture in no way expands the scope of peoples' power to seek accountability from the State to uphold their fundamental rights - which should ideally be the core premise for a democratically elected government.

### Conclusion

These critical insights are coming from members of the civil society, including organisations, rights-based campaigns and coalitions, academics, and individuals who all have decades of experience working on the subject they've written about. The report is a collaborative work representative of a people-centric view of governance and the challenges faced. The collective body of work merits attention and reflection towards a greater inclusive dialogue for a way forward aiming towards a just and inclusive nation. We hope to draw the government's attention to these challenges and hope that the policy-making processes are duly informed of the citizen's perspectives, and are carried out in the quest for equity with dignity.

The following demands are based on the insights of this report and reflect the eminent need for re-establishing values of the Constitution of India while upholding a rights-based language across sectors and broadly make calls across the following political parties and the future government to

- Ensure Inclusion of the marginalised communities
- Ensure State and business accountability through a transparent mechanism
- Ensure protection from human rights violations of all
- Ensure independence and autonomy of other pillars of democracy: judiciary, media and other allied institutions



## Education

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- Make adequate allocation for education by ensuring that it does not fall below 6% of the GDP
- Extend the purview of the RTE Act from birth to 18 years in line with the internationally recognized definition of childhood by including ECCE, pre-primary and higher secondary education as a legal entitlement.
- Stop the increase of commercialization and privatisation of education and enforce accountability of private schools and ECCE Centres by drafting, implementing and enforcing a national regulatory framework including regulation of fees, compliance with quality norms and addressing social segregation through the growth of private provision
- Review and revise the National Education Policy to realise the right to education
- Increase budgets for direct benefit schemes like Post-Matric Scholarships, National Overseas Scheme, Hostels, and Skill Development schemes, and timely disbursement of cash to the recipients

## Food Security and Nutrition

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- Quotas under the National Food Security Act should be immediately expanded on the basis of the population projections for 2023 to cover 67% of population
- Truly universalise the Public Distribution System to include all vulnerable persons
- Ensure decentralized grievance redressal mechanisms under NFSA
- Reinstate eggs/equally protein-packed substitutes in meals, incorporating dal etc. instead of just cereals to combat undernutrition and malnutrition

## Health

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- Immediately initiate legislation on “Right to Health and Healthcare” in larger context of major expansion and strengthening of Public health services.
- Increase public allocations on health care to at least 3% of GDP
- Scrap schemes like PM-JAY that are directing government funds to private health systems and instead use these resources to strengthen the public health system
- Strengthen death reporting system; ensuring rights of records and certificates; and, ensuring public dissemination of gender, caste disaggregated data on morbidity, mortality and utilisation

## Agriculture and Farmer Welfare

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- Farmers’ incomes must be enhanced by guaranteeing MSP for all crops which gives the farmers at least 50 per cent returns after covering all input costs of capital and the rent on the land.
- Address farm debt by regulating input prices, strengthening state support and curbing extortionary private moneylending practices
- Land reforms must be re-initiated and excess of ceiling land must be given to landless farmers
- Stagnating rural minimum wages must be raised and employment opportunities must expand

## Employment

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- Combat rising inequalities and income disparity at all economic and extra-economic levels for all marginalised communities
- Substantially increase allocations to MGNREGA to increase employment opportunities in rural areas

- Develop and build institutional mechanisms to promote entrepreneurial education along with affordable and inclusive access to financial and capacity building institutions towards promoting entrepreneurship and self-employment among youth in the growing market opportunities.
- Horizontal reservations for transgender persons with 1% of seats from the general OBC, SC and ST categories would be reserved for trans\* people coming from socially marginalised communities
- Realise women's empowerment in terms of wage parity, autonomy in decision-making, and addressing structural barriers for women across identities
- Given that sexual harassment at the workplace and the burden of unpaid care work are deterrents to women's workforce participation, urgent implementation of preventive and protective measures such as maternity benefits, creche facilities at the workplace and sensitization and awareness-raising on the POSH Act are required to ensure an increase in women's economic participation.
- Appropriate schemes should be adopted and implemented for the economic development of minorities for skilling their youths and providing them easy bank loans for promoting entrepreneurship
- Ensure rightful wages for Anganwadi workers, Sathins, Sahyoginis, etc. and their labour

## Economy

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- Raise corporate taxes to 65% by adding 1% rise in surcharges for the richest 7% of Indians and increase direct taxes to combat revenue losses and uncollected taxes and fund universal healthcare, education, social security, and welfare for all citizens
- Dedicate policy support towards enabling Micro, Small and Medium

Enterprises with regular and stable employment generation and formal social security given to all

- Design and revise policies centrally focusing on the urgency to prioritise equitable and inclusive gendersensitive sustainable and sustained livelihood opportunities

## Social Security

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- Strengthen existing schemes such as Employees' Provident Fund (EPF), Employees' State Insurance Scheme (ESI) and National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) with budgetary support and expansion of coverage
- Ensure 'Social Protection Floor' including ESI benefits, EPF benefits, maternity benefits, and all other essential human wellbeing benefits
- Revise Code on Social Security 2020 to lay down a clear map for moving towards an integrated, universal and adaptive social protection system encompassing the whole life-cycle of a citizen
- Revise Code on Social Security, 2020 to address implementation obstacles due to overlapping authority between central and state administrative and financial structures
- Procedural Safeguards Against Internet Shutdowns and ensuring access to social security programmes under the NREGA and Food Security Act, irrespective of internet availability

## Livelihood

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- Recognizing the multidimensionality of urban poverty: Apart from employment and incomes, urban poverty is closely linked with various other forms of deprivation – lack of housing, basic services (water, sanitation), basic infrastructure (health, education) and social security. Thus, all these dimensions of urban poverty need to be tackled simultaneously.

- Rehabilitation entitlements to be provided under the 2013 scheme, including alternate livelihood options, financial assistance, housing, and education support to the children of the persons engaged in manual scavenging
- Build incentives for usages of latrines and keeping them functional rather than construction of toilets
- Continue to reinforce further campaigns like Community Led Total Sanitation under SBM 2.0 for ODF and ODF + and finally ODF ++ to bring in sustainable behaviour change.

## Justice

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- Undertake review and repeal anti-terror laws including UAPA that restrict freedom of speech and expression.
- Repeal the offence of sedition in Section 124A of the IPC as undemocratic and unconstitutional.
- Laws for controlling the communal discrimination and violence should be passed by the Parliament and enacted. A separate law should be enacted against the mob lynching as advised by the Supreme Court of India.
- Enact the Prevention of Communal and Targeted Violence Bill and review and repeal the following anti-minority laws within one year:  
CAA 2019;  
All “anti-conversion” laws which target religious minorities

## Climate Change

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- Enhance the budget for climate actions under the DAPSC-DAPST proportionate to SC and ST population, Gender budget and Child budget, considering regional and socio-economic vulnerabilities and exposure to climate risks
- Establish a strong institutional mechanism solely focused on climate action and policy

- Update the National Action Plan on Climate Change and reconstitute the Prime Minister’s Council on Climate Change
- Give proper directions and financial backing to all State Action Plans on Climate Change
- Support for environment-based livelihoods such as fishing, forest produce, through measures to enhance production and marketing with fair pricing

## Governance

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- Mandate specific timeframes and deadlines for the comprehensive discussion and review of each Bill
- Refer complex Bills promptly to the parliamentary committees headed by opposition members for thorough scrutiny
- Make regulatory regime easier for NGOs in terms of annual registration
- Roll back the restrictive measures imposed on NGOs regarding sub-granting, administration expense cap and others
- Recognise Voluntary organisations contribution to nation building
- Have a strict political drive to implement PESA and give adequate power to the gram Sabhas through a transparent grievance redressal mechanism while also organising a large scale awareness campaigns round rights under PESA and other state level laws in forest areas.

## Transparency

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- Re-introduce the ‘Right of Citizens for Time Bound Delivery of Goods and Services and Redressal of their Grievances Bill, 2011’ (GR Bill)
- Implement the Whistle Blowers Act passed in 2014
- Provide autonomy to the Lokpal and Lokayktas with regards to scope of

operations and tenure and type of appointments

- Reconsider Rule 22 of the RTI Act, which effectively allows the government to fix different tenures for different information commissioners.
- Reconsider amendments to the RTI Act introduced in Parliament in 2019 that empowers the central government to decide the tenure and salaries of all commissioners in the country.
- Meaningful Public Consultation on the Data Protection Act (DPDPA) 2023
- Inclusion of the “public trust doctrine” in the new Digital Indian Act

## Inclusion

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- Utilise demographic data on human development and deprivations for the SC and ST populations from government data points to inform livelihood, climate etc. missions and schemes
- Ensure rights of adivasi communities on ancestral land, and not displacing them for mining and other activities without consent
- There needs to be strict collection of data along with focus on disaggregated data on disability for targeted policy reforms.
- Elimination of all direct human contact with faecal matter during sanitation work
- Re-energisation of the redress system for gender-based violence through optimal utilization of the Nirbhaya fund. A fund to be included under Mission Shakti for gender sensitisation of all personnel who provide first-responder services.
- Recognise violence against women as a public health issue and build synergies with the Health and Social Justice and other ministries of the government
- Significantly increase allocation of Union Budgets (up to 6 per cent of the total Budget) and state level public investments on children to address the

impacts of COVID-19, especially on the marginalised children, improve the rate of undernourished and anaemic children in the country, implement the new NEP 2020 in its full spirit, and create safer environments and spaces for all children to grow up in a healthy manner free from crime and violence.

- Youth should be seen as equal partners as opposed to junior partners in national building, and they should be given representation in governance structures, beginning with the third tier of government - Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies.
- The budget of scholarship schemes for minorities should be made at par with the SCs who almost match with the former in the demographic attributes
- The left-out recommendations of Sachar Committee should be approved for implementation such as the establishment of a databank on minorities and promotion of diversity in the country.
- The schemes undertaken for the welfare and development of minorities should be strengthened by conducive policies and due fiscal support.

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*Wada Na Todo Abhiyan is a campaign, formed by 3000+ Civil Society Organisations in 2004, to promote governance accountability while reflecting the needs and voices of marginalized communities.*  
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