

Delhi Declaration

We, participants of the Democracy Convention 2024, express our deep distress at the erosion of Indian democracy. Over the past decade, we have seen rising levels of unemployment, especially amongst youth and women, horrifying attacks on minorities, especially Muslims, appalling curbs on dissent and the freedom of expression, insidious encroachment on individual rights through what is misnamed a uniform civil code, tolerance of rape and sexual harassment of women and children, including medal-winning wrestlers, and the misuse of constitutional or statutory institutions such as the CBI and ED to persecute opposition politicians. Autonomous bodies such as the Election Commission have become blatantly partisan, as the open rigging of ballots in the Chandigarh mayoral election shows. Independent watchdogs such as the media, civil organizations such as universities, NGOs and think tanks, are under sustained pressure. Parliamentary debate has been stifled and the people's right to information and consultation has been negated. Opposition-ruled states are starved of funds and India's federal structure is being dismantled in myriad ways. Mutilating great epics such as the Ramayana, Indian society is being deliberately polarized along religious and regional lines. The country is fragmenting in front of our eyes.

In these conditions, we urge the democratic opposition parties to work together to strengthen constitutional rights, stem the onslaught on values of knowledge, compassion and ahimsa, and offer them our wholehearted support. We welcome the Congress' attempt to restore fraternity through the Bharat Jodo and Nyaya Yatras, the DMK's fierce defence of federal rights and support for independent media (e.g., the award to fact-checker Muhammad Zubair), the Trinamool Congress' inter-faith dialogue and championship of states cultural identities, the AAP's persistence with health and education programs despite ministerial arrests, the CPI and CPI-M's protection of fundamental rights and the courage of regional parties such as the JMM, RJD, SP, NC and PDP and several others.

This conference has prepared a list of proposals on safeguarding constitutional rights and statutory institutions, reviving the federal contract, promoting equality and social justice, prioritizing employment along with a social safety net protecting the independence of the media and peace-building in Jammu and Kashmir and Manipur.

Key convention proposals include:

- Seek a review of the new Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita and the Bharatiya Sakshya bill, which allow arrest on mere suspicion and expand the definition of terrorism to include even peaceful protests. Repeal draconian legislation such as the UAPA, including Jammu and Kashmir's PSA. Refrain from deploying the armed forces in internal conflicts. Adopt the 1951 recommendation that preventive detention should only apply during a state of war; re-affirm that bail must be a norm.
- Seek a complete overhaul of the Prevention of Money Laundering Act, 2002 (PMLA) which is used for targeting critics of the government and its politics. Roll-back regressive amendments made to the Prevention of Corruption Act. Seek enactment of the 2011 Political Parties (Registration and Regulation of Affairs) Bill.
- Support a legal guarantee of MSP and implementation of the Swaminathan commission recommendations. Expand MSP to a range of crops (pulses, oilseeds, millets) for assured income, encouraging crop diversification and procurement of diverse local food baskets for PDS/MDMS/ICDS.

- Seek strict adherence to the 1992 Places of Worship Act with the cut-off date of 1947.
- Pilot an anti-discrimination law to protect citizens against discrimination on grounds of sex, caste, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability, in employment, education, housing, health care. Establish a Diversity Commission. Repeal the CAA 2019.
- Seek inclusion of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 and its amendment in 2015 in the Ninth Schedule of the constitution. Robustly enforce the 1995 rules under the act, specifically the rights of victims and witnesses. Establish mandatory exclusive special courts under section 14 of the SCST (PoA) act and implement rule 4(5) to appoint public prosecutors of the victim's choice. Conduct an open and transparent investigation under the act and prosecute government and police officials found to have aided and abetted atrocities or neglected implementation of the act, plans and schemes for Dalits.
- Support independent fact-checkers. Remove access-related restrictions on the media for parliament coverage and the reporting of government ministries.
- Seek restoration of the autonomy of the ECI, CBI, ED and an independent appointment process for oversight institutions such as the human rights, minorities, scheduled caste, scheduled tribes and women's commissions; work towards creation of an all-India judicial service.
- Seek repeal of The Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023, and replacement of the government appointee on the selection committee with the chief justice of India.
- Strengthen the RTI regime and undo the regressive amendments made to the RTI Act in 2019 and 2023.
- Amend the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act to include the leader of the single largest party in the selection committee; provide for setting up of Lokayuktas in states with the same framework as the Lokpal at the centre; vest administrative control of the anti-corruption wing of the CBI in the Lokpal.
- Seek disbandment of the Ramnath Kovind committee. Measures such as One Nation, One Election undermine India's federal structure.
- Seek adherence to Article 3: no alteration to states borders without consultation of the state's people; immediately restore Jammu and Kashmir's statehood and hold assembly elections. Repeal the National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amdt) Act, 2023.
- Push for appointment of governors only in consultation with chief ministers and their removal only by assembly resolution (1988 Sarkaria and 2010 M.M. Punchhi).
- Reconsider The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) limit. Amend Article 293(3) of the Indian Constitution to remove the requirement of Central Government permission to borrow. Consider Tamil Nadu's 1969 Rajamannar committee's recommendation that states have residuary fiscal powers.
- Depute a fact-finding mission composed of parliamentarians and civil society representatives to propose peace-building mechanisms in the legislature and to the

Manipur administration, such as a halt to violence, initiation of dialogue, control over the proliferation of arms and ammunition.

- Oppose the fencing of the border with Myanmar, which is locally unpopular. Consult with the chief ministers of the north-eastern states, as suggested by the Nagaland CM.
- Review all changes in textbooks and curriculum introduced over the past decade and remove anything introduced which is not supported by evidence or argument.
- Promote cultural activities that encourage fraternity between religious and language-based communities. (eg Ganga-Jamuna Tehzeeb, the commonality of several Indian languages, etc.). Revive the Sahitya Akademi's principle of encouraging regional and local language literature and exchange.
- Conduct State-wide surveys of DNTs, NTs and SNTs; create skilling and re-skilling programs for DNT youth; implement the 2008 Renake Commission recommendations and The Scheduled Tribes and other traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.
- Seek repeal of the 2023 amendment of the Forest Conservation Act. Reverse the decision to clear hundreds of hectares of forest in the pristine island of Great Nicobar to build a container terminal. End indiscriminate construction, particularly in the fragile Himalayas.
- Improve, expand and strengthen the MNREGA. Increase wages to Rs 500 per day; revoke the Aadhaar-based Mandatory Payment System; ensure timely payment of wages and transfer of funds from the centre to states.
- Create an Urban Employment Guarantee, specifically for women workers. Provide policy packages tailored to MSMEs with special incentives for employment of youth. Enact a Comprehensive Law for informal workers, extending core labour standards to all segments of working people. Ensure tripartite agreements with aggregators, government and workers to ensure social security and basic working conditions of gig workers.
- Provide a Life-Cycle Social Protection Floor (Sampoorn Samajik Suraksha) that gives universal access to social protection (with minimal exclusion criteria). Legislate a public health bill making health a human right and incorporating safeguards against discrimination and denial of care on account of caste, gender, ailments like HIV, sexual preferences (MSM and LGBT) or lifestyle choices (sex workers).

The full list of proposals is attached. We hope that some, at least, will be adopted by the democratic political parties. For our part, we plan to continue this initiative through forming networks of citizens' groups and holding similar democracy conventions in other cities, beginning with state capitals.

Signed:

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