



Within this moment, the only moment that exists, the past, present and future are contained.



~ Gautama Buddha

## Safe, Secure & Tamper-Proof

India, the world's largest democracy, has over the years built an electoral infrastructure that is not just robust and inclusive, but also technologically resilient. At the heart of this system are the Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs), which have revolutionised the way elections are conducted in the country. Once again, in the lead-up to the general elections, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Gyanesh Kumar has categorically asserted that India's EVMs are "safe" and "tamper-proof". This reaffirmation comes as a timely and essential reminder to dispel misinformation and restore public faith in the electoral process. The assertion is not new, but its reiteration is crucial. Time and again, the Election Commission of India (ECI) has stood its ground on the integrity of EVMs, and rightly so. EVMs used in India are completely standalone devices. They cannot be connected to the internet, Bluetooth, infrared, or any form of wireless or wired communication interface. The machines are designed to be air-gapped—meaning they operate in a closed, self-contained system with no external connectivity, which effectively rules out remote tampering. What further strengthens the credibility of this system is the existence of VVPATs—Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trails. Each time a vote is cast, a paper slip is generated and briefly shown to the voter before being sealed in a box. Over five crore VVPAT slips have been counted so far in various elections, and the CEC has pointed out that no discrepancy has ever been reported between these slips and the electronic count. This real-time paper audit mechanism leaves no room for manipulation, ensuring transparency and accountability in the voting process. Yet, a small but persistent section continues to raise doubts about EVMs, often without evidence or technical backing. These claims frequently surface around election time, adding noise to the democratic discourse. It is important to recognise that such assertions, unless backed by factual analysis, risk undermining public trust in the electoral process and the institutions that uphold it. Healthy scepticism is welcome in a democracy—but it must be based on reason, not rhetoric. The Election Commission has gone out of its way to invite critics, experts, and even international observers to inspect the EVMs. Hackathons and demonstrations have been held. Despite all this, no credible case of tampering has ever been proven. In fact, India's EVM system is regarded globally as a benchmark for secure, large-scale digital voting. The strength of Indian democracy lies not just in the act of voting, but in the fairness and transparency of the process. EVMs have played a key role in eliminating booth capturing, reducing invalid votes, and speeding up counting—all of which contribute to cleaner elections. CEC Gyanesh Kumar's latest declaration should settle the debate once and for all. The EVMs are not just machines; they are symbols of India's electoral integrity. Let us guard them from baseless suspicion and continue to strengthen the institutions that make our democracy thrive.

## Karnataka Caste Census

# POLITICS TURNED ON ITS HEAD

■ POONAM I KAUSHISH

The caste genie unleashed by our polity nearly three decades ago bared its poisonous fangs again in Karnataka whereby casteism is the cause célèbre. No matter its manifestations are complex — sometimes visceral, at other times insidious giving further impetus and widening caste divide. Who cares?

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah presented a copy of the caste census Socioeconomic Educational Survey (SES) 2015 by Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes (commissioned 2014 during his previous tenure) to his Cabinet which will discuss it Thursday. But a leaked copy is a hot potato if its' data is to be believed. Rub your eyes, Muslims are Karnataka's single largest community 12.87%, next Scheduled Castes 12% with politically and economically powerful Veerashaiva Lingayats 11.09% third, Vokkaligas 10.31% fourth, Kurubas 7.38%, ST 7.1%, ST Valmiki-Nayaka 30,31,656 (5.07%).

Brahmins are just 2.98%, Jains 0.70%, Christians 1.44%, OBC (others) 2.96%, Devangas 1.05% among 167 castes surveyed including Badagas with 32 members and 0.56% having 'no caste'. The survey covered 98% rural and 95% urban population, totaling 6.35 crore of which 37 lakhs were left out for unknown reasons.

Armed with this, the State Government's plans increasing OBC reservation from existing 32% to 51% and 'backward' Muslims from 4% to 8%, totaling 73.5% including 15% for SCs and 7.5% STs over 50% Supreme Court's capping, stirring a political controversy.

Even as Siddaramaiah promises to place census in the Assembly justifying it "essential as none had been conducted since 1931 despite Supreme and High Courts repeatedly asking State Government to provide empirical data to better understand socio-economic conditions of various communities."

Predictably, this has changed political equations, ruffled feathers of community leaders threatening their political dominance and divided Congress on caste lines with angry netas calling it "unscientific and bogus" urging Government to junk it. Lingayat leaders accused the Commission of "undercounting Lingayats." "We will not accept this report under any circumstances. We will appeal to Government to conduct a fresh caste census."

Vokkaligas yelled blue murder. If accurate, this data suggests Lingayats and Vokkaligas are significantly overrepresented in Constitutional bodies. Currently, over 50% MLAs belong to these two communities.

Other brazenly said "increase reservation even if it leads to Government fall." Resentment is rife even amongst Brahmins which could outweigh political benefits Congress might gain from OBCs as they are not a cohesive group. Besides, if the report is released, it will need to be backed by strong political,



administrative, and welfare measures, which would be a major challenge. "The census has become a political dilemma for Siddaramaiah. It is hot ghee, he can neither spit it out nor swallow it," said another leader. Thereby, turning Karnataka's caste-ridden politics on its head. The beleaguered Chief Minister feels he is untouchable, safer in his chair till the decision on census implementation which might take a year or two. Also, he is supported by Kurubas as he is one and it would reconsolidate his AHINDA (minorities, backward classes, SC/STs) alliance, further giving Congress a strong political platform to stop BJP-JD(S) in their tracks.

The BJP retaliated accusing Congress of minority appeasement trying to leverage caste for political gains. Calling Siddaramaiah "villain who has stooped low, it seems he has dictated the report. No way are Muslims majority community." Gowda's JD(S) is cautiously following developments while OBCs are upbeat as it would completely change Karnataka's socio-political scene in their favour. Not a few feel Government has thrown a stone at a bee-hive.

Congress's central leadership avers caste census goal is OBCs welfare. Sic. It's a ploy to divide Hindu votes on caste lines to weaken BJP. Said a senior leader, "Caste census would open another flank and create problems for BJP. The axis would be pro-Modi vs anti-Modi and we will try to mobilise OBCs. This will be Mandal 2.0, different from Mandal 1.0 which involved aggressive OBC mobilization."

Fueled by Mandalisation, politics, is now polarised on caste basis with elections being fought on caste considerations. Voters are regressively but decisively voting along caste lines. After all, why should Brahmins and Thakurs, only 15% of vote-bank, rule the roost? Plainly, political consciousness terminates at

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Plainly, political consciousness terminates at the caste level today. Besides, a caste census would help address historical injustices and discrimination, be useful in formulating appropriate policies to target Government welfare schemes and policies ensuring they reach intended beneficiaries. Thereby, giving the rootless down-trodden a new identity and attitudinal changes. Sadly to gain vote-banks none have paid heed to the Frankenstein they have unleashed. Failing to realize politicisation of caste is a double-edged sword. Caste needs politics as much as politics need caste. When caste groupings make politics their sphere of activities they get a chance to assert their identity and strive for power and position. True, none can fault granting equal opportunities to all. But whether this would translate into equal outcome is debatable. Questionably, will not caste further fractionalize national politics. BJP hasn't taken any position as it could pose a big challenge to its Hindutva campaign which would cause its vote-share to fragment, even as it tries to consolidate different castes in under Hindutva. Further, conducting a caste census could lead to political risks.

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Further, conducting a caste census could lead to political risks. An enumeration of OBCs in a census would provide not only hard data about their numerical strength in different States but also help examine OBC share in State institutions specially judiciary, educational establishments which are controlled and monopolized by social elites giving Dalits and Bahujan groups minuscule presence.

It could lead to demands for increased representation and reservation for these groups potentially disrupting the existing power dynamics and political representation. Resulting, in new political consciousness among socially marginalized groups, consequently initiating a new movement for social justice which could marginalize BJP. Conversely, the more de-

mands for caste surveys are raised, there is an equally greater opportunity for BJP to package it as 'divisive agenda' against their 'national unification call' centred around Hindutva. Any wonder UP Chief Minister Yogi has declared Sanatana Dharma as the only religion to counter caste survey. No matter this could open a Pandora's box.

Currently, BJP sees OBCs as two blocks --- dominant and non-dominant, upper and lower. It intends to woo dominant castes like Yadavs, Kurmis, and Kushwahas in Bihar and UP and Vokkaligas in Karnataka. Any sub-categorisation will close doors on these sub-castes and make Mandal 1 progenies Akhilesh, Lalu and Nitish stronger in their communities.

Anti-caste thinkers assert a census is important to understand the granular effect of caste on education, employment, economic attainment levels and inter-generational mobility. Arguing as caste is a socio-economic reality having hard data on its impact is the only way to frame policies. Eliding the effect of caste skews scales even more against marginalized groups.

Clearly, in the Kafkaesque world where caste identity is sticky baggage, difficult to dislodge in social settings and where caste vs caste fight and decide one's fate, no Party wants to jeopardise its caste vote-banks.

Wherein, the fight for getting the upper hand and votes has been reduced to politics of optics and perception, underscoring present reality and exposes the socio-political undercurrents at play.

Undoubtedly, the caste Frankenstein must be stopped. This is no time for mindless populism of social group politics as it will only further divide people on caste lines and increase the chasm between haves and have-nots. If Bharat has to reach its pinnacle of success it cannot revel in petty politricks. --- INFA

# WAVES Bazaar: India's Lagaan Moment on the Global Stage of Media & Entertainment

WAVES Bazaar is a one-of-a-kind e-marketplace that brings together stakeholders from across the Media & Entertainment spectrum—including film, television, animation, gaming, advertising, XR, music, sound design, radio, and more. The platform will act as a bridge between buyers and sellers, ensuring that industry professionals can easily showcase their expertise, connect with potential clients, and secure meaningful collaborations. Whether you're a filmmaker searching for a production partner, an advertiser seeking the right platform, a game developer looking for investors, or an artist wanting to showcase your work to global audiences, WAVES Bazaar hopes to provide a dynamic space for industry professionals to network, collaborate, and grow their businesses.

■ AAMIR KHAN

India is a key player in the entertainment and media industry, which is growing at a rapid pace and is thriving in the constantly evolving landscape. We are witnessing a boom in content creation across diverse platforms fueled by the rise of digital streaming services, regional language productions, and a tech-savvy audience that demands fresh, engaging, and inclusive narratives. It is important to realize the immense potential that this sector holds for India, not just as a source of entertainment but as a powerful medium for cultural expression, economic growth, and global influence. World Audio Visual & Entertainment Summit, known by the acronym WAVES, hosted by the Government of India in Mumbai, Maharashtra, from May 1 to 4, 2025, promises to be a testimony to India's growing stature, and WAVES Bazaar is a key component of the event. As someone who has spent decades in the industry, I believe that storytelling has the power to unite, inspire, and transform. With WAVES and WAVES Bazaar, we are taking a bold step towards creating a more collaborative and inclusive future for the global entertainment community.

WAVES Bazaar attempts to be a revolutionary online marketplace designed to connect professionals, businesses, and creators across the global entertainment ecosystem. With its mission to foster seamless collaboration, WAVES Bazaar attempts to serve as the

ultimate business hub for the Media & Entertainment industry, enabling professionals to expand their reach, discover new opportunities, and engage in high-value partnerships. Officially launched on January 27, 2025, by Shri Ashwini Vaishnaw, Union Minister of Information & Broadcasting, Railways, and Electronics & Information Technology, WAVES Bazaar is a key instrument in realizing the Hon'ble Prime Minister's vision of transforming the WAVES Summit into a flagship event in the Media & Entertainment sector, akin to the Davos Summit for the finance and economy sectors.

Since the launch, I believe 5500 buyers, more than 2000 sellers and approximately 1000 projects have been registered on the portal from different verticals of M&E sector. In the long term, the portal hopes to evolve into a comprehensive content marketplace and networking hub for the M&E industry, featuring AI-powered profiling and matchmaking tools. It will also host online pitching sessions, virtual B2B meetings, webinars, and more, all within the platform.

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WAVES Bazaar is an integrated B2B marketplace revolutionizing how the global entertainment industry connects, collaborates, and grows. Bringing together professionals from film, television, music, gaming, animation, advertising, and immersive tech like XR, AR, and VR, the platform provides a comprehensive space for listing, discovering, and transacting across diverse creative sectors. Whether you're a producer seeking distribution, a game developer pitching new IPs, or a sound designer looking for licensing opportunities, WAVES Bazaar streamlines the entire process with category-specific listings, secure viewing rooms, and curated networking features.

Designed for seamless business interactions, WAVES Bazaar empowers both sellers and buyers to find the right partners and opportunities without geographical limitations. Sellers—from film studios and animation houses to podcast creators and marketing agencies—can showcase their services and content to a global audience of investors, distributors, and collaborators. At the same time, buyers gain access to high-quality, cutting-edge projects, while investors discover co-production deals and scalable ventures. The plat-

form also integrates exclusive access to industry events, viewing rooms, investor meet-ups, and live screenings, ensuring that meaningful deals go beyond virtual interactions.

The highlight of WAVES Bazaar will be its physical presence at the WAVES Summit at the Jio Convention Centre, BKC, Mumbai from 1st to 4th May 2025. Selected participants from the digital marketplace will gain the opportunity to pitch, network, and close deals in person with top-tier stakeholders. From curated screenings to live discussions and collaboration forums, this summit merges the digital and physical to shape the future of entertainment networking. With its innovative approach, WAVES Bazaar is not just a platform—it's a movement towards a smarter, more connected, and globally inclusive entertainment industry.

As artists, we constantly seek spaces that challenge us, inspire us, and push us to think beyond the conventional. WAVES attempts to be such a space—a movement that encourages collaboration across languages, cultures, and mediums. I'm proud to be a part of this visionary journey, and I look forward to seeing how WAVES will redefine the way we connect, create, and celebrate stories—not just in India, but around the world. I believe we are witnessing India's Lagaan moment in the media and entertainment world—a moment of unity, courage, and vision that will echo far beyond our borders. Let us come together to imagine, to share, and to build a future where every voice has a chance to be heard.

**THE EARTH NEWS**

Owner, Printer, Publisher and Editor in Chief:  
**Shivang Satya Gupta**

**Sahil Rasgotra**  
Executive Editor  
9596740777 | mailsahilr@gmail.com

**Devender Padha**  
Ladakh Resident Editor 94196-50048

**Yash Khajuria**  
Senior Correspondent. 98584-08896

**Abishkar Upadhaya**  
Ladakh Bureau Chief. 88991-61232

**Neeraj Singh**  
Advt. Manager. 99062-19474

**Akhil Mahajan**  
Udhampur Bureau Chief

**Nikhil**  
Columnist

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**Phone No:** 0191-2950849  
**e-mails:** earthnewsladakh@gmail.com, editor.earthnews@gmail.com, shivangsatyapal@gmail.com

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Editor