

# NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL

## Poor electoral participation of overseas Indian voters in Lok Sabh polls, 2024: EC

**NEW DELHI, DEC 29:** Overseas Indians showed great enthusiasm in registering as electors, with nearly 1.2 lakh enrolling in the voter list, but a minuscule turned up to exercise their franchise in the Lok Sabha elections this year.

According to the data released by the Election Commission, as many as 1,19,374 registered as overseas electors in 2024, with Kerala witnessing the highest registrations at 89,839. In 2019, as many as 99,844 had registered as overseas electors.

The poll authority said only 2,958 overseas electors flew down to India to participate in the largest democratic exercise in the world. Of these, an overwhelming 2,670 were from Kerala alone.

Several large states such as Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu saw zero turnout of overseas electors.

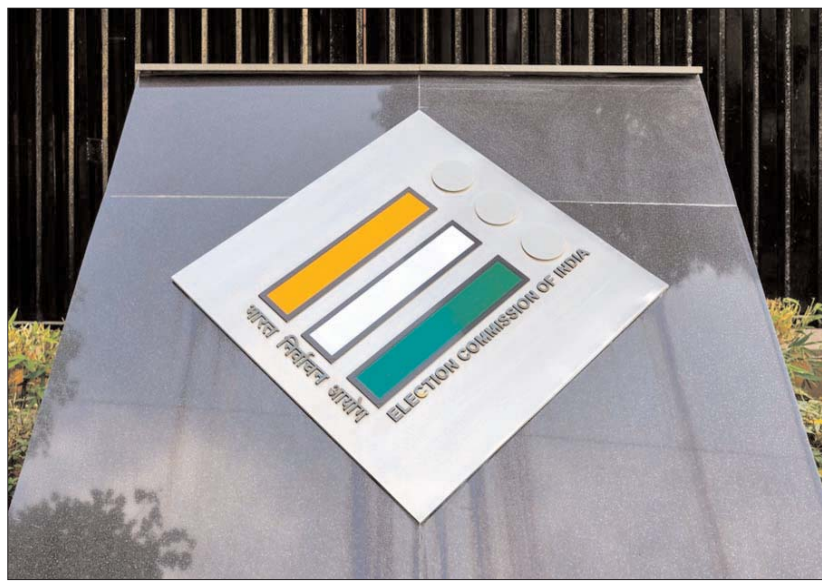
Gujarat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's home state, saw only two out of 885 overseas electors casting their votes in the Lok Sabha elections.

The same was the story in Maharashtra, where only 17 of the 5,097 NRI electors voted.

Despite an increase of little over 19,500 registered overseas electors since the 2019 general election, their participation in the latest polls was poor.

While NRI voters is a generic term, the EC describes them as overseas electors -- Indians living abroad for a variety of reasons and eligible to vote in the Lok Sabha, assembly and other direct elections.

According to the existing electoral



law, registered NRI voters have to come to their respective Lok Sabha and assembly constituencies to cast a vote. They have to show their original passport as proof of their identity.

Data show that while there were 7,927 registered NRI electors in Andhra Pradesh, only 195 flew down to vote.

According to EC, while eligible Indian citizens who enrol in electoral rolls are called electors, those who actually exercise their franchise are described as voters.

In Assam, none of the 19 registered electors voted. Similar was the case with Bihar where none of the 89 registered NRI electors exercised their franchise.

Goa too witnessed a similar scenario with none of its 84 voters casting their ballots. In August 2018, the 16th Lok Sabha passed a bill to allow proxy vot-

ing rights to eligible overseas Indians. The bill, however, could not be brought to the Rajya Sabha.

In 2020, the EC proposed to the Union Law Ministry to extend the Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS) facility, so far available only to service voters, to eligible overseas Indian voters as well.

It would require changes in the election rules. But the government has so far not taken a call on the issue.

The EC had then told the government that it had been receiving several representations from the Indian diaspora to facilitate voting through postal ballots.

The electors cited travel costs, compulsions of employment overseas, and education, among other things, as the reasons for their inability to cast their votes in person, the EC said.

## 8 illegal Bangladeshi immigrants deported: Delhi Police

**NEW DELHI, DEC 29:** The Delhi Police has deported eight Bangladeshi nationals who were residing in the Rangpuri area of the national capital, an official said on Sunday.

Those deported are Jahangir, his wife and their six children, hailing from Kekerhat village in Madaripur district of Bangladesh, he said.

According to police, Jahangir admitted to entering India through unofficial routes and subsequently, bringing his family over. They had destroyed their Bangladeshi identification documents and were living in Delhi while concealing their original identities.

"A team from the Vasant Kunj South police station was tasked to identify illegal immigrants. As part of the intensified efforts to address concerns about unauthorised migrants, police conducted door-to-door verifications of 400 families in Rangpuri," Deputy Commissioner of Police (Southwest) Surendra Choudhary said.



He added that verification forms were sent to the addresses of suspected individuals in West Bengal and a special team was dispatched to manually verify their documents.

During the verification drive, the team identified Jahangir and his family, who confessed to their Bangladeshi origins during questioning, the DCP said, adding that the deportation process was carried out in coordination with the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO).

On Friday, the Delhi Police deported an illegal Bangladeshi migrant who unlawfully stayed in different areas for the last six years.

The 28-year-old woman stayed in Delhi and Mumbai in violation of the Foreigners Act, police had said.

The city police launched a drive to identify illegal Bangladeshi immigrants residing in the capital, after the LG Secretariat ordered a crackdown on such people this month.

Teams from various police stations are visiting slums and the Kalindi Kunj, Shaheen Bagh, Hazrat Nizamuddin and Jamia Nagar areas to check voter IDs and Aadhaar cards for identifying suspected Bangladeshi immigrants.

The LG Secretariat directed the Delhi chief secretary and police chief to launch a two-month special drive to identify and take strict action against illegal Bangladeshi immigrants residing in the city.

## Boat sinks after being hit by cargo ship off Mumbai's Madh coast, retrieved; no one hurt

**MUMBAI, DEC 29:** A fishing boat sank off the coast of Madh Koliwada in Mumbai's Malad area in the early hours of Sunday after it was hit by a cargo ship before being retrieved, though there were no reports of injuries to anyone, a police official said.

The boat was retrieved by a group of eight other vessels in the area and brought to the shore, the official added.

"The boat belonged to Madh Koliwada resident Hemdeep Harishchandra Tipri. It was hit by a cargo ship and sank. However, it was retrieved by a local rescue group called Savati. No one was injured. A sailor on the boat was rescued by those on the Savati boats," the official said.

Navy and Coast Guard personnel also helped in the retrieval and rescue operation, the police official informed. They fired at posts in Ghogzgarhi, Matha Sangar, Kot Raghya and Tari Mengal areas using both light and heavy weaponry, sources said. Pakistani forces retaliated, inflicting significant losses on the other side as seven to eight personnel of



the Afghan forces were killed in the exchange of fire, sources added.

However, in the fire exchange, a "Frontier Constabulary (FC) soldier was killed and 11 others were injured".

The incident of firing occurred days after Pakistan targeted terrorist positions in Paktika province of Afghanistan to punish the banned TTP militants, allegedly using Afghan soil to

train and attack Pakistan.

The Saturday attack came after militants made an infiltration attempt on Friday night, using the posts controlled by the Afghan Taliban to cross into Pakistani territory, but the attempt was thwarted. "The firing was effectively responded to and there are confirmed reports of heavy losses on the Afghan side with over 15 militants killed and many others

wounded," according to sources. Reportedly, the Afghan forces abandoned their posts and left the area after the incident. Relations between Pakistan and Taliban-led Afghanistan have deteriorated gradually since they came to power in 2021 because the latter allegedly failed to rein in the TTP rebels who have increased attacks on the Pakistani forces.

## Delhi University's new courses on Bhagavad Gita draw criticism for religious bias

**NEW DELHI, DEC 29:** Delhi University's academic council has approved four value-added courses on the greatness of the Bhagavad Gita, drawing flak for allegedly undermining the pluralistic ethos of a secular educational institution.

The academic council, chaired by vice-chancellor Yogesh Singh, has also greenlighted a value-added course on the government's vision of Viksit Bharat, a PhD programme in Hindu Studies and a twinning arrangement with foreign universities that will allow students to spend one semester abroad. The courses approved on Friday are The Gita for a Holistic Life, Leadership Excellence Through the Gita, The Gita for a Sustainable Universe, and The

Gita: Navigating Life Challenges and Envisaging Viksit Bharat: Perspectives and Challenges. They are part of the list of courses that the university has already prepared for the colleges to take their pick from based on the availability of resources. Students of the four-year UG programme have to pursue four value-added courses in the first two years. Academic council members Maya John, Monami Sinha, Mithuraaj Dhusiya and Biswajit Mohanty have submitted dissent notes on the selection of courses and the tone of the topics.

John said the formulation of numerous value-added courses solely on the Gita minimised, if not foreclosed, students' engagement with the diverse and divergent

traditions of India. "Indeed, an engagement with a diversity of value traditions is crucial for young students before they decide their religious-moral endowment. Further, Article 51A (h) of the Constitution of India amply underlines the need 'to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform'. However, contrary to the Constitution, these value-added courses seek to promote mystical thinking, which is amply evident in the papers," John said in her dissent note.

Sinha's note said a university established under the secular principles of the Constitution should incorporate religious texts into the curriculum only for the purpose of critical analysis or as part of

mythological studies, not as a means to propagate religious doctrines or prescribe a particular way of life.

"While the Gita is undeniably a profound philosophical text that individuals may seek for personal guidance, promoting one religious scripture over the diverse array of belief systems risks undermining the pluralistic and inclusive ethos essential to a secular educational institution. This approach could inadvertently privilege one religious worldview at the expense of others, thereby challenging the foundational principles of equality and neutrality in academia," Sinha said in her note.

Last year, the university had introduced value-added courses on vedic mathematics.

## Manmohan Singh cremated, BJP-Congress slugfest over 'disrespect' to former PM continues

**NEW DELHI, DEC 29:** The nation on Saturday bade farewell to Manmohan Singh with a state funeral, which was partly clouded by a slugfest between the BJP and the Congress over the government "disrespecting" the late Prime Minister by organising his last rites at a public crematorium.

Singh, who died on Thursday aged 92, was cremated with full state honours on a rain-drenched morning in the presence of President Droupadi Murmu, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, several Union ministers, foreign dignitaries, the Congress leadership and the chief ministers of Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Telangana and Delhi.

Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck and the foreign minister of Mauritius, Ritesh Ramful, had travelled to New Delhi to attend the funeral. The Prime Minister of Mauritius ordered the country's flag to be flown at half-mast on all government buildings till sunset on Saturday.

However, the Congress slammed the Modi government for failing to hold the cremation at a separate place that could have been turned into a memorial, an honour accorded to Singh's BJP pre-



decessor Atal Bihari Vajpayee and many earlier Prime Ministers.

The BJP hit back by accusing the Congress of having "disrespected" and undermined Singh during his tenure as Prime Minister by allegedly forcing him to play second fiddle to Sonia Gandhi.

Late in the evening, the Congress alleged "mismanagement" of the funeral, complaining of inadequate sitting arrangements for Singh's family and excessive focus by the public broadcaster on Modi and home minister Amit Shah, among other grousers.

Singh's family have maintained a stoic silence amid

the verbal battle of the past 24 hours over his cremation, remaining true to the quiet dignity with which the former Prime Minister lived his life.

Early in the morning, Singh's mortal remains were taken in a military cortège from his residence on Motilal Nehru Marg to the Congress headquarters on Akbar Road, where party workers and leaders, including party president Mallikarjun Kharge and his predecessor Sonia, paid their respects.

The Gandhi siblings, Rahul and Priyanka, oversaw the arrangements.

From 24 Akbar Road, the cortège moved to the Nigambodh Ghat with Congress

workers running alongside, occasionally chanting "Manmohan Singh amar rahein". Demands for honouring Singh with the Bharat Ratna, the country's highest civilian award, were raised during the procession.

Rahul, leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, travelled in the military convoy that escorted Singh's body to the cremation ground on the Yamuna's banks. Rahul was among those who later carried the body to the pyre.

At the Nigambodh Ghat, the flower-decked casket was placed on a raised platform for leaders and people to pay their last respects. The body was then handed back to the family for the last rites to be performed according to Sikh traditions.

Singh's funeral pyre was lit by his eldest daughter, Upinder Singh. The former Prime Minister's wife Gursharan Kaur and two other daughters — Daman Singh and Amrit Singh — were present along with other relatives.

Priests and family members recited religious hymns from the holy Gurbani, and there were chants of "Satnam waheguru".

The security forces gave a salute with three volleys from small arms and the buglers sounded The Last Post.

## Ayodhya model' for Sambhal: 'Bhumi Pujan' for police outpost near Jama Masjid

**NEW DELHI, DEC 29:** The Sambhal district authorities on Saturday performed a ceremonial "bhumi puja" for a police outpost near the Shahi Jama Masjid, a day after they surveyed an open ground in front of the mosque which had been at the epicentre of a clash that claimed four lives on November 24.

The move underscores Sambhal's importance to what appears chief minister Yogi Adityanath's latest Hindutva experiment, replete with parallels to the way the Sangh Parivar built political momentum against the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in the '80s and '90s, political observers said.

A team led by additional superintendent of police Sri Chandra measured the "government land" near the Jama Masjid and found it appropriate for a police station — conducting the exercise while Friday prayers were on at the mosque. Later, some local people met Chandra and showed him papers they claimed proved their ownership of the surveyed plots.

Ayodhya too had witnessed the establishment of a Ram Jambhoomi police chowki (outpost) in the late

1940s when Digvijaynath, mahant of the Gorakhnath temple, was spearheading the movement to replace the Babri Masjid with a Ram temple. His successor Avaidyanath later led the movement for a while.

Sambhal is rapidly becoming the centre of a similar controversy under Adityanath, successor to Avaidyanath as mahant of the Gorakhnath temple.

The mob-police clash that killed four people on November 24 occurred during a court-ordered survey of the Jama Masjid, following a petition that claimed Mughal emperor Babar had the mosque built after razing a temple that stood at the site.

This too carries shades of the Ayodhya movement, which was fuelled by the allegation that Babar had got the Babri Masjid built after destroying a Ram temple. Eventually, a Hindutva mob destroyed the mosque in 1992, and the Supreme Court handed the site over to Hindu petitioners in 2019.

The outpost near the mosque will function under the Sambhal police station and was planned in the wake of the November 24 violence.

"The bhumi puja (land worship) and foundation

stone-laying ceremony were carried out following all prescribed rituals. Additionally, measures were taken to ensure the absence of vastu dosh (architectural defects) in the construction," said Shobhit Shastri, the priest conducting the ritual.

Additional superintendent of police Shirish Chandra told reporters: "The bhumi puja for the new police outpost near the Shahi Jama Masjid has been completed. This outpost is being established from a security perspective. Sufficient police personnel are already deployed here and there was a long-standing demand from locals for a permanent outpost."

In another controversial move, the Adityanath government has got the Archaeological Survey of India deployed at two spots close to the Jama Masjid in Sambhal, tasked to dig up proof of the existence of old buildings of (Hindu) religious significance.

The excavation began early this week. "We have found some structures of religious importance. We will clean the place, build approach roads, renovate them and open them to the people," district magistrate Ra-

jendra Pensiya said.

Recently, Adityanath publicly alleged that mosques in Sambhal were stealing power from the state utility and threatened action, appearing to try and build public opinion against these Muslim religious places.

"We have identified government land and will build a police station here," Chandra told reporters in Sambhal. "We'll verify the (ownership) claims by the local people. The (new) police station will be known as Satyavrat Thana."

The Jama Masjid now falls in the area of the Sambhal Kotwali police station.

According to certain religious scriptures, Sambhal was known as Satyavrat during the Satya Yuga, as Mahadgiri during the Treta Yuga and as Pinhal during the Dwapara Yuga. These scriptures say the next and last incarnation of Vishnu will be born in Sambhal during the (ongoing) Kali Yuga.

Mosque secretary Zafar Ali said: "The land the administration identified today to build a police station belongs partially to local people and partially to the waqf board. They can't raise any structure here without securing ownership rights."