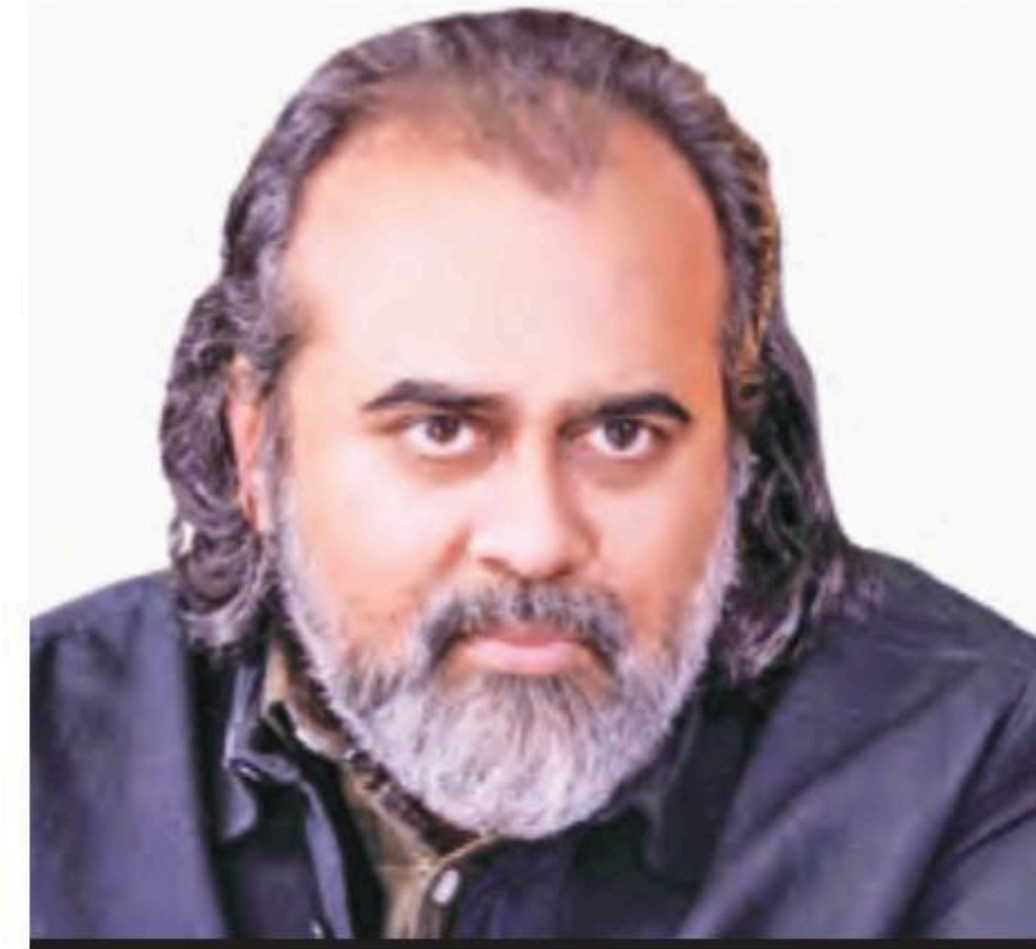




Counted, not weighed: What delimitation asks



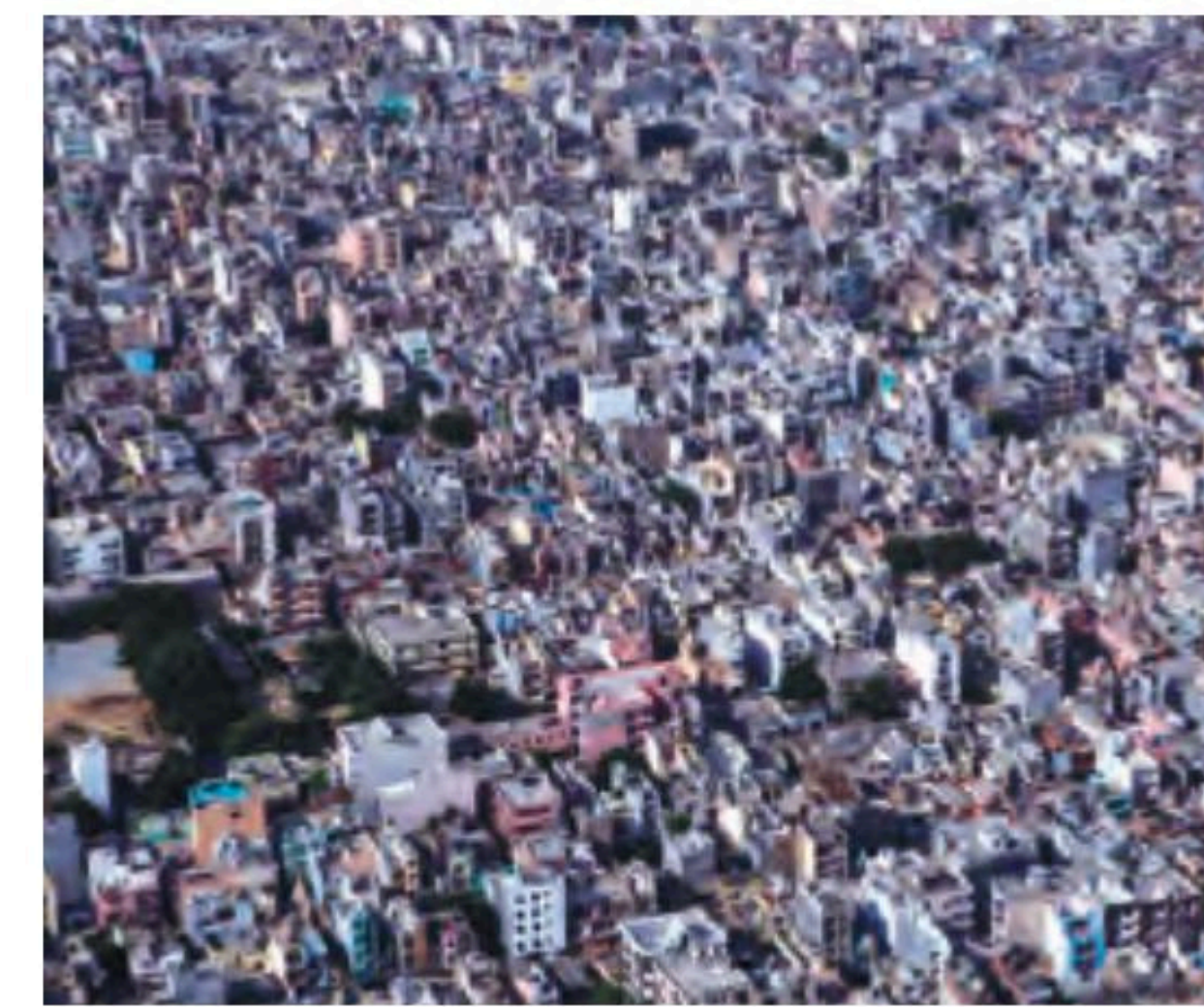
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Democracy, as a formal system, is indifferent to what produced the vote it counts. This indifference is usually a virtue, for it is what prevents the powerful from assigning themselves additional weight. But there are circumstances in which this same indifference becomes its own form of injustice: when the system's arithmetic rewards precisely the communities that declined to invest in their own people, and penalises precisely those that did. India is approaching one such circumstance, and the approach has acquired both urgency and a specific political shape.

On April 17, 2026, the Constitution (131st Amendment) Bill was defeated in the Lok Sabha. Opposition speakers framed the package as a backdoor rewrite of federal arithmetic; the government called it democratic correction. Neither characterisation resolves the harder question, which the bill's defeat has deferred but not answered: when the constitutional freeze on parliamentary seat allocation expires this year, what principles should govern the redrawing of India's political map? The 42nd Constitutional Amendment of 1976, passed during the Emergency, locked Lok Sabha seat allocation to the 1971 census. The 84th Amendment in 2001 extended this freeze to the first census after 2026: fifty years of grace. The implicit promise embedded in this arrangement was convergence. That kind of change is not commanded by constitutional amendment. It is chosen or refused, and across fifty years, the choice was predominantly refusal. If delimitation proceeds now on a purely population-based formula, the Carnegie Endowment's projection of a Lok Sabha expanded to approximately 848 seats on 2026 population figures shows Uttar Pradesh alone gaining 63 seats and Bihar 39, while the five southern states—Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana—would see their collective share of the House fall from roughly 24 per cent to under 20 per cent. States that lagged on every development metric would gain the most political weight. States that led on every metric would practically be penalised for having done so.

The statistics that explain this outcome are not the record of geographic fortune; they are the record of accumulated decisions. SRS 2021 data places Tamil Nadu's Total Fertility Rate at 1.5 and Uttar Pradesh's at 2.7. Kerala's literacy rate stands at 95.3 per cent against Bihar's 74.3 per cent. Kerala receives 852 education loan applications per lakh of population annually; Bihar receives 30. The South's advantage is not resource endowment but the decision, made repeatedly over generations, to invest in human beings rather than simply produce more of them.

CBDT data for 2021-22 shows Karnataka contributed approximately ₹1.26 lakh crore in direct tax collections, Tamil Nadu ₹86,000 crore. Uttar Pradesh contributed ₹23,000 crore and Bihar ₹6,000 crore. A population-based delimitation would add political dispossession to fiscal dispossession, completing a double penalty on the communities that built what everyone else spent.



Harder still is what the population data conceals about gender. The United Nations Population Fund estimates that nearly 4.6 crore women are missing from India's population, overwhelmingly from North and West India—the demographic residue of decades of sex-selective discrimination. A society that erases its daughters and then presents its headcount as a democratic credential is not demonstrating vitality; it is performing the oldest substitution: compensating through accumulation what is absent in quality.

The South was not born progressive. What changed it was reform: the Dravidian movement's social revolution, the temple-entry agitations in Kerala, radical public investment in education, and a political willingness to break from orthodoxy even at the cost of social friction. What the North refused was not resources but examination.

In this context, the "grow your population" narrative circulating with renewed intensity across parts of the Hindi heartland is not demographic strategy; it is the ego's oldest reflex dressed in civilisational language: when examination is declined, accumulation is offered in its place. At the Battle of Plassey in 1757, Siraj-ud-Daulah's army of fifty thousand outnumbered Clive's three-thousand-strong force seventeen to one, and lost. Numbers, without the education and institutional investment that transforms numbers into capability, do not constitute power; they constitute a census.

When a democracy counts a vote, what has it counted? A body. In such an arithmetic, the Buddha, who fathered one son before walking out of the palace to examine his life, is outvoted by any householder who fathered twelve without once pausing to examine anything. The Indian tradition itself, from the Upanishads forward, has insisted that a human being is not reducible to a body, that what makes a person a person is the capacity for self-examination, and that a life which has declined examination is barely a life at all. If that is even partly true, headcount is measuring the wrong variable. The question worth asking before the next map is redrawn is not which states have grown their population fastest but which states have grown their people.

India is not the only democracy to have grappled with this tension. The United States Senate gives every state two seats regardless of population, a design explicitly intended to prevent pure demographic weight from dissolving the federal compact. A federal union in which one category of states can permanently outvote another on every matter of national consequence—not because their governance record is stronger but because their numbers are larger—does not remain a genuine federation for long.

A workable alternative exists within the current constitutional framework. The more consequential reform is to attach Lok Sabha seat revision to measurable convergence rather than to the passage of time. A 2051 framework could set threshold benchmarks that northern states must demonstrably approach before their parliamentary weight is permitted to grow: total fertility rate at or below 2.1, female literacy above 85 per cent, sex ratio at birth above 940, and per capita income at least 60 per cent of the national average.

What the next Delimitation Commission decides will either honour fifty years of sacrifice by communities that chose the harder path, or confirm what they have begun to suspect: that in this democracy, the harder path was never worth the effort. What is at stake is not only the political standing of five southern states, but the question of whether the Indian republic intends to remain a country that rewards self-examination, or a country that rewards only its refusal.

This is not the design of a better India. It is a refusal to ratify a worse one.

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