

EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTS

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Reclaiming universities through trust, student voice

Indian students, particularly Gen Z, are increasingly asserting their freedom and autonomy and demanding accountability. Now, some of the brightest law students are in the news for the wrong reasons, but Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant deserves some credit for his timely intervention in staying the Bar Council of India (BCI)'s atrocious order about the NALSAR graduating batch; quashing all FIRs against the protesting students; declaring that the BCI has no disciplinary control over the students, and reducing the three-year practice condition to just one year to write the judicial services examination.

The question is not whether the students were right or wrong in seeking a say in their own convocation. The real question is why students are so upset with the governance model of universities that, at times, they not only lose hope but also cross the boundaries of decency and satire. To suggest that this happened simply because of an oral remark by the CJI, which was quickly clarified, is to oversimplify the deeper governance crisis in higher education. How should universities be governed? What is the role of free speech and academic autonomy? And why are Vice-Chancellors increasingly unable to command students' respect or resolve such issues internally?

At the core must lie academic freedom

Universities cannot function without academic freedom. The Indian Constitution does not explicitly mention academic freedom but there are number of Constitutions which do have such a provision such as Article 5(3) of German Basic Law specifically guarantees right to scientific freedom (Wissenschaftsfreiheit) as the constitutional right to everyone engaged in scholarly teaching and research. The Constitutions of Japan, South Africa, Portugal and Spain too contain such a freedom. Article 137 of Basic Law of Hong Kong says that educational institutions may retain autonomy and enjoy academic freedom. Ideally, government should not dictate universities what to teach, how to teach and what not to teach. Nor should universities deny this freedom to departments and faculties. Recently, the Delhi University dropped a paper on Delhi Sultanate along with some other papers. Gen Z is intelligent enough to see that such curriculum changes have ideological reasons. University curriculum should ideally be decided by the stakeholders including students.

Academic freedom and free speech on university campuses are extremely important as universities are supposed to provide a special place for reflection, inquiry and discussion. It is nobody's case that they have any right to defame people or indulge in anti-national activities. If an academic activity involves 'conduct' rather than free speech, the state would certainly be entitled



Faizan Mustafa

Vice-Chancellor of Chanakya National Law University, Patna, having previously served as Vice-Chancellor of NALSAR, Hyderabad, and the National Law University Odisha (NLUO), Cuttack

to regulate such 'conduct'. Today, even in the West, academic freedom is under serious strain. Federal funding in the U.S. has been weaponised to reshape campus culture, diversity programmes have been dismantled, and research funding in areas such as climate change has been reduced. Universities have also faced pressure for allowing student protests, including those over Gaza. Both right- and left-wing regimes have, at times, sought to control universities.

History offers many examples – from Arnold Toynbee's resignation from King's College London in 1924 over his writings on the Greek army's atrocities, to the persecution of professors during the McCarthy era. With declining public funding, research agendas are increasingly influenced by funders, corporations, and pharmaceutical companies, making a mockery of academic freedom.

The shadow of 'control'

We are witnessing student protests because universities are not governed well. Governments increasingly seek to control universities, and administrations have consequently adopted a 'control model' of governance. Most universities remain Vice-Chancellor-centric, while students – who are the very reason universities exist – have little say in their governance. When grievances are not addressed promptly, students feel ignored and suffocated; some take extreme steps. The government is often blamed, but much of the backlash could be avoided if university administrations engaged students in meaningful dialogue and provided timely relief.

Vice-Chancellors rarely hold open houses and are often inaccessible to ordinary students. Universities are communities of highly educated faculty and intelligent young people; they require dialogue, trust and openness – not excessive control and surveillance.

The object of universities is to innovate and create knowledge, but knowledge creation cannot happen in a controlled environment. It requires the freedom to question everything and challenge existing ideas. Despite the repeated reverence for ancient India, India's education system remains over-regulated and grossly underfunded. Its ancient Gurukul system was entirely autonomous, yet, today, India remains far from the National Education Policy 2020's promise of public investment of 6% of GDP in education. Public investment in education has steadily declined, hovering around 4%-4.1%, with higher education investment getting the smallest pie.

Meanwhile, public university infrastructure has deteriorated and there is an acute shortage of hostels leading to tragedies such as the one in New Delhi. Faculty positions remain vacant, and guest faculty are poorly paid. Faculty recruitment processes are faulty with an over-emphasis on ideological leanings rather than merit. Poor teaching frustrates students, while repeated

examination paper leaks add to their stress. Eventually, this frustration erupts – not against university administrations, but against the government itself.

We even over-look gross violations of natural justice principles in the appointment of Vice-Chancellors. In one case, a Vice-Chancellor not only changed the composition of the selection committee but also chaired it and voted in the selection of his wife. She was appointed as Vice-Chancellor, and the judiciary declined to follow its own precedents of quashing such appointments. Ultimately, the government received the brickbats for the actions of the Vice-Chancellor.

On the 'liberty model'

Over 16 years as a Vice-Chancellor, this writer implemented what can be described as the new 'liberty model of governance' across three universities. Such a model works when students are trusted and, they in turn, act more responsibly. Students have often felt comfortable in meeting the Vice-Chancellor without appointments, sometimes sharing personal concerns and difficulties. This trust has also made it easier to have frank conversations with them, including when difficult or unpopular decisions had to be taken.

Unlike the 'control' or top-down model, the 'liberty model' views universities as spaces where even the most unpopular ideas can be freely debated. Students should have a meaningful role in academic, administrative and financial decisions, including faculty appointments, procurement, curriculum design and drafting of university regulations. In older institutions such as Aligarh Muslim University, students even have a statutory role in selecting the Vice-Chancellor. We need to democratise our campuses if we want to address the growing problem of student protests.

Ideological governments may in a few cases prefer candidates who have particular ideological leanings, but merit should not be completely undermined. There have also been appointments of individuals with questionable records and adverse CVC reports, while some State universities face allegations of bribery. Paper leaks reflect a similar systemic failure. No examination system can be foolproof if paper setters, moderators or testing officials are appointed for reasons other than absolute merit and integrity.

If the government really wants to win back the confidence of students, universities must become student-centric rather than Vice-Chancellor-centric. Let us embrace the liberty model and reject the dated and regressive control model of university governance. India's students deserve nothing less than the best.

The views expressed are personal

Blame the failures of university governance, not students, for growing protests across Indian campuses

GS 2: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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India-Japan defence cooperation breaks new ground

The August 2026 visit of Japan's Defence Minister Shinjiro Koizumi to India marks an important moment in the evolution of a partnership that has often been more developed institutionally than operationally. The agreements that were announced suggest that New Delhi and Tokyo are now attempting to connect these disparate strands into a more coherent security relationship, having spent more than a decade building the institutional vocabulary of defence cooperation through annual dialogues, the 2+2 mechanism, exercises, logistics arrangements and defence technology discussions.

Convergence into operational capability

This matters because the India-Japan defence relationship has reached a stage where additional declarations of strategic convergence have diminishing returns. Both countries already share concerns about coercive attempts to alter the status quo, the security of maritime commons and the growing militarisation of the Indo-Pacific. The challenge has been translating these convergences into arrangements that improve their ability to operate together. The new maritime framework seeks to address this issue.

The emphasis on information sharing and Maritime Domain Awareness is significant as India and Japan occupy critical positions at opposite ends of the Indo-Pacific's principal maritime theatre. Japan's immediate security concerns are concentrated in the East China Sea and the waters surrounding Taiwan, while India's geographical position gives it a central role in the Indian Ocean maritime space. A closer information-sharing architecture could gradually create a more continuous strategic picture across these interconnected maritime spaces. The objective is to develop greater awareness, interoperability, and operational familiarity between the two major maritime powers.

The discussions on naval shipbuilding may prove equally important with an exploration of joint development in naval shipbuilding and



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design by combining Japanese technological expertise with Indian production capabilities. There was also agreement to deepen discussions on Japan's use of Indian production capabilities under the 'Make in India' framework and to move towards reciprocal arrangements for ship repair facilities. This could address a long-standing weakness in the bilateral relationship by giving a fillip to defence-industrial cooperation, which has consistently lagged behind strategic and political convergence.

The proposed transfer of Japan's UNICORN integrated communications antenna system remains the most visible symbol of this effort. While the Japanese Ministry of Defence describes UNICORN as the first defence equipment transfer project between the two countries, the project itself is not new. A memorandum of understanding for the co-development of UNICORN masts, involving Bharat Electronics Limited, was signed in November 2024. The August meeting therefore represented a further step towards implementation rather than the initiation of a new project. New Delhi and Tokyo have struggled to convert their 2015 agreement on defence equipment and technology transfer into concrete outcomes. The commitment now to early implementation, alongside plans to deepen cooperation between India's Defence Research and Development Organisation and Japan's Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency, suggests a recognition that credibility today depends on delivering projects rather than solely identifying possibilities.

On exercises

Japan's fighter aircraft are participating in the Veer Guardian exercise in India (September 9-22, 2026) for the first time. The two sides have agreed to increase the complexity of bilateral exercises, integrate unmanned systems and explore exercises organised at short notice. They also discussed cooperation between special operations forces and India's future integrated theatre commands. These initiatives point

towards a defence relationship increasingly concerned with operational preparedness.

Before travelling to New Delhi, Mr. Koizumi visited the Western Naval Command in Mumbai and INS Chennai. His visit thus extended beyond the familiar strategic geography of the Bay of Bengal and the Strait of Malacca. The western seaboard is central to India's wider maritime interests, encompassing critical sea lanes, energy flows and India's growing responsibilities in the western Indian Ocean.

The broader regional context is impossible to ignore. The joint statement reiterated opposition to unilateral actions that impede freedom of navigation or seek to alter the status quo through force or coercion. Neither country needed to name China for the strategic message to be clear. Yet, the significance of India-Japan cooperation lies precisely in its ability to move beyond a China-centric agenda. Maritime security, resilient supply chains, defence industrial capacity, logistics and third-country cooperation are all becoming components of a wider regional security architecture.

Building a more resilient partnership

The visit also plugs into a broader moment of impetus in India-Japan relations. Coming soon after the July 2026 Annual Summit, which expanded cooperation across economic security, critical technologies and resilient supply chains, the defence ministerial engagement demonstrates that security is increasingly intertwined with the wider strategic partnership. Defence cooperation can provide the connective tissue between these agendas, linking India's industrial capabilities and Japan's technological strengths while reinforcing their shared interest in shaping a more resilient Indo-Pacific. The real test will now be implementation. India and Japan are building the strategic foundations, with Mr. Koizumi's visit suggesting that both are finally beginning to focus on the harder task, which is converting strategic convergence into usable capability.

India and Japan are advancing a broader Indo-Pacific partnership beyond China-centric security concerns

GS 2: GOVERNANCE

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Concerns over the Census questions

The questionnaire for the population enumeration phase of the 2027 Census comprises 40 questions and seek details such as nationality, number of bank accounts and mobile, Aadhaar and voter ID numbers, if available, raising concerns over its potential digression from the purpose of collecting data for policy and planning

FULL CONTEXT

K. Narayanan Unni

The questions to be asked to every individual during the population enumeration phase of the 2027 Census were notified by the Central government last month. In a significant departure from the past, a number of personal details, which cannot be used to generate any useful statistics, are being sought. This prompts a look at the individual questions, their possible uses and the implications of their inclusion in the Census.

The new questions in Census 2027 ask respondents to provide the details of the parents of every individual and spouses of the married persons in the household, nationality as declared, permanent residential address, place of COVID 19 vaccination, total number of bank accounts, mobile number, Aadhaar number and Voter ID number (if available), Passport number (if an Indian passport holder), and driving license availability.

The United Nations defines a population census as, "the total process of planning, collecting, processing, analysing, disseminating and evaluating demographic, economic and social data at the smallest geographic level pertaining, at a specified time, to all persons in a country or in a well-defined part of a country". It is evident from this definition that a census is viewed as an exercise to generate statistics for the use of the government in particular and the society in general.

One of the essential principles of official statistics is confidentiality of individual information. Principle 6 of the United Nations' Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics states, "the individual data collected by statistical agencies for statistical compilation, whether they refer to natural or legal persons, are to be strictly confidential and used exclusively for statistical purposes." India has adopted these principles.

Use of 'name' in the Census

As the Census is used to generate data useful for policy and planning purposes, information provided by an individual is used only for compiling the relevant statistics. The individual's name has no relevance in the exercise, except to identify them during enumeration. Names have merely been placeholders and have not been present in Census databases. In fact, there have been no attempts in the Indian Censuses to computerise names at all. There are countries that include the name and provide access to past Census data for genealogical studies. For example, past data from the U.S. Census can be accessed 72 years after the Census exercise. There is no such rule or policy in India.

Now, respondents will have to provide the names of every individual in the household, along with those of their parents. This will be a tall order for respondents from institutional households, such as wardens of hostels, old-age homes, jails etc. A large number of children are now studying away from home, living in hostels, as paying guests, etc. February, being towards the end of the academic year, means they may not be at home. So, they would not be eligible for enumeration at their normal households. Even in normal households, the respondent may not know the details regarding the grandparents who may be



Field days: Census enumerators at a house in Sathuvachan in Vellore, Tamil Nadu. C. VENKATACHALAPATHY

living with them.

COVID-19 vaccination is now an old story. After the pandemic subsided, people have not been taking any vaccination and there have been no suggestions from the government to the people to get vaccinated. In view of this, it is highly doubtful whether information on the place of vaccination, which could have been as much as five years ago, could be put to any meaningful use.

Personal details

Information on mobile number, Aadhaar number and voter ID number are being asked 'if available'. Also required is the passport number for those holding Indian passports. The meaning of the phrase 'if available' is not clear. A person may have one or more of these identifiers. However, it is possible that the respondent may not have these numbers, possibly with the exception of the mobile number.

The question is whether 'if available' refers to availability with the concerned member of the household or with the respondent. If the phrase is interpreted as availability with the respondent, then it will not be available to the Census as a large proportion of the respondents are likely to be the housewives or elderly parents who may not keep these details of every member of the household. A similar problem arises with institutional households.

These numbers are not data items that could be used for any useful tabulations, except to determine whether these numbers are available. It is impossible to visualise more than 30 lakh Census enumerators spending time with the households to correctly record these numbers. The enumerators may not have the time and patience to obtain the relevant records and collect the information. Respondents in institutional households would find it impossible to provide the information, as they may not have these records with them. Even the individuals living there may have left their records back home. In normal

households, visitors and domestic servants living for the entire duration of the Census enumeration period are to be enumerated. Would the respondent be able to obtain these details from them? If the respondents in domestic households with visitors/servants eligible for enumeration there and those in institutional households misuse the information, is there any protection for the individual, as the respondent is not a Census functionary?

Nationality as declared may also not serve any useful purpose. Illegal immigrants may declare that they are Indian nationals. After trying this question in the 1951 and 1961 censuses, it was discarded from 1971 onwards. It is worth noting here that after a lot of debates, the U.S. Census decided not to include the question on citizenship in the 2020 Census.

The total number of bank accounts held by each person is useful for preparing a distribution of persons by the number of bank accounts. For those with bank accounts, this information can probably be obtained by tabulating the number of accounts against each PAN, which is necessary to open a bank account. If the plan is only to determine the number of persons without any bank account, then it is enough to ask whether the person has a bank account. It is difficult for a simple schoolteacher appointed as an enumerator to ask the question on the number of bank accounts and get a correct answer from the upper-class respondents, who may not even be ready to answer the simpler questions.

Possible information for NPR

While preparing for the 2021 Census there were proposals for updating the National Population Register (NPR) during the Census exercise. However, several States objected to it. The Census is conducted by enumerators appointed by the State government under section 4(2) of the Census Act, 1948. Hence, the State

governments may have the right to refuse the use of their staff to do any work that is not part of the Census. The Citizenship Act does not mention anything about the State government's role in the preparation of the NPR.

The information on the parents of individuals, permanent address, nationality, etc is very useful for preparing/updating the NPR, which is to form the basis for preparing the National Register of Citizens. It appears that the collection of such information through the Census questionnaire, though it does not aid the generation of any additional statistics, is aimed at the preparation/updating of the NPR. However, including such information in the Census questionnaire and extracting it later to share it to another organisation within the government may violate the principle of confidentiality.

There is no objection to preparing a population register or a citizen register, and its importance and uses are well recognised. However, collecting information required for creating an NPR should be done through a process that is transparent and has legal basis, without jeopardising the Census.

The length of the questionnaire

With 40 questions, many requiring descriptive answers, the time taken for a household is likely to result in respondent fatigue. The respondent is required to answer similar questions for every individual in the household. This may result in the respondent becoming uninterested and potentially giving casual replies.

Furthermore, by adding questions that require recording the names and addresses, the workload of the enumerator has increased significantly.

By loading the Census with questions that are of no use for generating statistics, the quality of Census data may be seriously affected.

(K. Narayanan Unni is a retired officer from the Indian Statistical Service)

THE GIST

The new questions in Census 2027 ask respondents to provide the details of the parents of every individual and spouses of the married persons in the household, nationality, permanent address, place of COVID 19 vaccination, number of bank accounts, mobile number, Aadhaar number and Voter ID number (if available), among others.

This prompts a look at the individual questions, their possible uses and the implications of their inclusion in the Census.

With 40 questions, the time taken to enumerate a household is likely to result in respondent fatigue. Furthermore, it has also increased the workload of the enumerators.

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A possible G3 is casting a shadow over BRICS



RAJA MANDALA

BY C RAJA MOHAN

WHEN ITS leaders meet in Delhi this week, BRICS will add more layers of cooperation, ranging from agriculture and health to digitalisation. While BRICS moves slowly, the larger political world around it is changing fast. Even as the forum seeks to counter American domination of the world, its principal driving forces, Russia and China, are exploring separate and joint accommodations with the United States.

International interest in the BRICS summit is less about the lengthy declaration it will produce. The last summit, in Rio de Janeiro, issued a declaration of 126 paragraphs but did not set the world on fire. In Delhi, the focus will be on the presence of leaders such as China's Xi Jinping, Russia's Vladimir Putin and Iran's Masoud Pzeshkian.

The Indian media will focus on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's bilateral meetings. Expect particular attention to his potential meeting with Xi, who is visiting India for the first time since 2019. The two leaders are expected to stabilise the boundary situation and reset economic relations.

BRICS may be the god of small things, but its problems with big issues are becoming harder. Its expansion has made it less coherent. The Iran war has opened a sharp divide between Tehran and Abu Dhabi, now fellow members of BRICS. Iran wants the grouping to condemn American and Israeli military action. The UAE, which has suffered Iranian attacks and disruption to commerce through the Strait of Hormuz, stresses sovereignty, the protection of civilian infrastructure and freedom of navigation. Their differences prevented the BRICS foreign ministers from issuing a consensual joint statement in Delhi in May.

Meanwhile, engagement among the US, China and Russia is entering a new phase



ILLUSTRATION: C R SASKUMAR

and casting a shadow over BRICS. US President Donald Trump has long believed that good personal relations with Putin and Xi could reduce global strategic tensions and produce major political and economic deals.

That instinct has repeatedly encountered resistance from the American foreign-policy establishment, Congress and US allies. The Europeans worry that an accommodation with Moscow could be made at their expense. Asian allies fear that a bargain with Beijing could weaken American commitments to regional security. Trump has not yet transformed either relationship, but his preference for leader-driven diplomacy keeps the possibility of movement open.

Putin has reasons to explore a deal. Four-and-a-half years of war have not produced a decisive victory. The front remains costly and difficult to move. The latest shuttle diplomacy by American envoys between Moscow and Kyiv has reopened the diplomatic channel, but it is not clear whether the fundamental differences between Russia and Ukraine are narrowing. While supporting Trump's new peace initiative, both Moscow and Kyiv are also preparing for escalation.

The Europeans worry that an accommodation with Moscow could be made at their expense. Asian allies fear that a bargain with Beijing could weaken American commitments to regional security

Unlike Putin, Xi approaches Washington from a stronger position. His diplomatic journey from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Bishkek, through Cairo and Delhi, and then to the White House later this month will help present China simultaneously as the leader of the Global South and a co-equal manager of the international order.

At their second summit this year, Trump and Xi could emphasise an extension of the trade truce, additional Chinese purchases from the US and negotiations over technology restrictions. Yet their differences remain structural. Washington accuses China of relying on subsidised exports and industrial overcapacity. Beijing uses rare earths, market access and its control of important supply chains as leverage. Xi will continue to press Trump to reduce American support for Taiwan. Trump might be tempted to treat Asian security questions as part of a larger bargain with Xi.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin has confirmed that Putin and Xi discussed a possible trilateral meeting with Trump at the APEC summit in Shenzhen in November. For many,

the idea of a "G3" will seem outlandish. But Trump has shown interest in it and explored the possibility of such a meeting last summer, during the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II.

A G3 global directorate is not imminent. Russia and China are closer than ever and share concerns about the US. But both also seek a reasonable relationship with Washington. For all their anti-Western rhetoric, both claim a place at the high table with the US.

Russia was once part of the G8, the group of Western industrial states, and engaged directly with NATO. China now sees itself as America's peer. Both Russia and China lay claim to shaping the global order established after 1945. A Trump-Xi-Putin summit could mark the beginning of triangular global leadership as a successor to the Yalta System that produced the UN Security Council and the five-power concert.

For an Indian strategic community that jumps at the thought of a G2, the idea of a G3 will generate even greater political anxiety. Despite promoting BRICS and celebrating multipolarity in partnership with Moscow and Beijing, Delhi might find itself excluded from the new three-cornered table.

There are three answers to a potential G3 world for India. The first is internal reform and accelerated economic development.

Second, Delhi should stop confusing multipolarity with anti-American bloc politics. Russia and China use BRICS to expand their diplomatic options while preserving the freedom to negotiate with Washington. India must approach the emerging order with the same realism.

Third, India must intensify its bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the Anglo-sphere, Brazil, Europe, Japan, Korea, and other middle powers that have no enthusiasm for a G3 world. As India's work in BRICS continues, its place in the changing global architecture will depend on how rapidly it builds national power and how deeply it develops partnerships beyond BRICS.

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GS 1: GEOGRAPHY

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 12

• SCIENCE

Why a flat map fails to accurately depict Earth



BHASKAR SARMA

THE UNITED Nations has adopted a resolution to shift away from the 16th-century Mercator map of the world towards one that more accurately depicts Africa's vast size.

At a recent UN General Assembly session, 164 countries (including India) voted to adopt the 2018 Equal Earth design — with the US voting against the Togo-led resolution, and six countries abstaining. Since UN resolutions are not binding, it remains to be seen if or when governments, organisations and classrooms adopt it.

The Mercator layout has been the world's most widely used projection for centuries. But it has also long been criticised for exaggerating the size of regions towards the poles relative to those closer to the equator. The most infamous example of these distortions is the depiction of the African continent, which appears similar to Greenland — an island 14 times smaller and about the size of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The 2018 Equal Earth design, developed by an international team of cartographers, has its own limitations. But its supporters say it will help reverse "colonial" perceptions of Africa.

No flat map can accurately portray the three-dimensional Earth. Every projection involves trade-offs, depending on its purpose.

The Earth is not a sphere

Earth is not a sphere, though it is sometimes treated as one to make mathematical calculations easier. It bulges in the middle due to its spin, the Moon's gravity warps it, and the continents and oceans distort the shape, Maj Gen (Dr) Siva Kumar Rachapudi (retd), a scientist who has served in the Department for Science and Technology, told *The Indian Express*.

Projection refers to the transformation of a three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional map. There are many different types of projections, including conformal projections (which preserve angles); equal-area projections (which preserve areas, such as the newly adopted map); equidistant projections (which maintain distance); and compromise projections (balance distortions in area, shape, distance and direction rather

• WHICH PROJECTION TO PICK?

Choosing a projection depends entirely on the purpose of the map. According to Dr Siva Kumar, these are the ideal use-cases of different projections:



Equal Earth

THEMATIC AND STATISTICAL DATA

Use equal-area projections (like the Equal Earth map) which show correct relative sizes of landmasses, making them ideal for population density, climate, or land-cover maps.



Robinson

GENERAL REFERENCE AND WORLD MAPS

Use compromise projections, such as the Robinson projection or Winkel Triplet. They do not perfectly preserve any single dimension, but they balance shape and area distortion to create a visually natural view of the whole Earth.



angles and local shapes, allowing pilots and sailors to plot straight-line compass courses, though they severely distort high-latitude sizes.

NAVIGATION AND DIRECTION

Use conformal projections (like the Mercator projection). They preserve true



POLAR OR SINGLE-POINT STUDIES

Use Azimuthal/Planar projections. They project the earth onto a flat plane from a central point, making them best for polar regions or flight-distance routes.

than preserving any one of them exactly). The Mercator layout is a conformal projection.

Origins of the Mercator projection

The Mercator layout was introduced by the Flemish (present-day Belgium) geographer and mapmaker Gerardus Mercator in 1569 to help sailors navigate the world.

It is a conformal, cylindrical map. This means Mercator projected the Earth's surface as if unwrapped from a cylinder around the globe.

So, if you drew a straight line from Mumbai to Muscat on a Mercator map, you could point your ship in the same compass direction throughout the journey and reach your destination. This was a major advantage over other map projections, where a constant-direction route would appear curved.

The Mercator's colonial lens

The Mercator projection has a grid pattern with longitudes and latitudes at 90-degree angles. The longitudes (vertical lines) are evenly spaced, but the distances between the latitudes (horizontal lines) increase as one moves away from the equator towards the poles.

This is deliberate. "To preserve shapes, the ratio of increase in the length of the parallels is kept exactly the same with respect to the increase in the length of the mer-

Mercator problem

The Mercator layout, the world's most widely used projection for centuries, has long been criticised for exaggerating the size of regions towards the poles relative to those closer to the equator.

For instance, the African continent appears similar in size to Greenland, an island 14 times smaller.

idians," said Dr Bimal Kumar Kar, president of the Indian National Cartographic Association and former head of Gauhati University's geography department.

The result is that Mercator projection inflates the size of lands the farther they are from the equator. "Therefore, landmasses such as Greenland and Antarctica appear far larger than they actually are relative to landmasses near the equator," said Siva Kumar.

Mercator's projection helped Western cartographers easily mark towns, cities, and roads in their part of the world. "Its popularity also lies in its ease of construction, since all parallels and meridians are straight lines," said Kar.

This Western-centric view has come in for criticism.

"...if you're a humanist well versed in European imperialism's harsh imprint on the Third World, the traditional Greenwich-anchored world map becomes a clear example of Western cultural hegemony..." wrote cartography professor Mark Monmonier in his 2004 book *Rhumb Lines and Map Wars: A Social History of the Mercator Projection*.

The search for a better map

Every flat representation of the Earth distorts at least one property: area (how large a landmass is relative to others), shape (the true outline and appearance of a country), distance (the actual space between two points) and direction (the correct compass

There are many ways of portraying a 3-D shape on a 2-D surface, and each comes with tradeoffs. The new map adopted by the UN is no different

bearing from one location to another).

The one you pick depends on your purpose: representing data, navigation or general reference. This is why, as Kar cautions, one should not directly compare one type of map with another.

Attempts to create other projections began centuries ago.

In 1855, Scottish clergyman James Gall presented a new projection. In 1973, German historian Arno Peters unveiled a map that gained widespread attention. While it preserves area accurately, it makes landmasses look stretched or squashed. In 2017, schools in Boston introduced it.

In 1963, geographer Arthur H Robinson devised the Robinson projection which tried to better balance the sizes and shapes of land masses and sought to solve the "Greenland problem". It's a compromise projection, with meridians curving gently towards the poles.

In 1921, German cartographer Oswald Winkel devised the similar Winkel Triplet projection, seeking to reduce distortion across area, distance and direction. In 1998, it replaced the Robinson projection in world maps made by the National Geographic Society. Schools and textbooks followed, as did the World Bank. This is also a compromise projection.

The Equal Earth map

The Equal Earth map, developed in 2018, is an equal area projection that seeks to preserve the relative areas of landmasses. It, too, somewhat distorts shapes and distances, with meridians curving gently towards the poles.

"The Mercator projection heavily exaggerates regions closer to the poles, which visually diminishes the perceived scale of developing regions in the Global South, including South Asia. Equal Earth fixes this imbalance," said Siva Kumar.

But is the new map an improvement over previous maps such as the Robinson and Winkel Triplet? Kar said: "To me, it's nothing special. It has simply drawn attention by comparing itself with Mercator's projection, which was designed for a different purpose." But since it is an equal area map projection with limited shape distortion, it can be used by all categories of users, he said.

According to Siva Kumar, the Equal Earth map is best used to represent thematic and statistical data. "For classrooms and research, it provides a mathematically accurate depiction of area, which is vital for visualising population density, climate impacts, and resource distribution across the Indian subcontinent," he said.

GS 1: HISTORY AND ART AND CULTURE

INDIAN EXPRESS PAGE: 12

• CULTURE

Roots and rise of Gujarat's BAPS sect, at the centre of Eiffel Tower controversy

Leena Misra
Ahmedabad, September 8

THE GUJARAT-based Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) ran into controversy in Paris on Monday after the Eiffel Tower was closed following a staff protest. It stemmed from allegations that women employees were asked to step away from their posts during a visit by the sect's delegation. After the staff union said the women felt "humiliated", BAPS issued an apology.

Earlier on Sunday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described BAPS' first major temple opening in France as a "new milestone in the cultural relations between India and France". A grand three-hour-long procession through central Paris preceded the temple's opening, with BAPS stating that nearly 6,000 participants attended.

History of celibacy practice

According to the book *Swaminarayan Hinduism*, edited by academics Raymond

Brady Williams and Yogi Trivedi, the "enforcement of strict separation of men and women, especially during temple worship", is described as one of the "distinctive features of Swaminarayan Hinduism".

"These practices are followed differently by various orders and they are a part of the monk's personal spiritual journey. They are not meant to inconvenience or be imposed upon society, at least in practice", Trivedi, a New York-based scholar of religion, told *The Indian Express*.

He added that within the sect, only the swamis practice celibacy. "The community has also historically been known for practising the universal Hindu values of bhakti, seva and equality. Shri Swaminarayan and his community were known to advocate for women's equality and rights," he said. More than 50% of the fellowship consists of women devotees, his research shows.

Global influence

BAPS has built 1,300 temples worldwide, including the Akshardham temple



An idol consecration ceremony was held at France's first major BAPS temple in Paris.

complexes in Gandhinagar and Delhi. The BAPS Hindu Mandir in Abu Dhabi was inaugurated in 2024 by Mahant Swami Maharaj along with PM Modi and UAE Minister Sheikh Nahayan Mubarak Al Nahyan.

Believed to have five million followers among Gujaratis alone, the sect has a huge following in East Africa, the UK and the US. Gujarat Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel visited the Robbinsville Akshardham temple in New Jersey last month.

In 2022, PM Modi inaugurated the month-long centenary celebrations of Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the fifth spiritual successor. The celebrations were so grand that an entire "city" was built on 600 acres of land on Ahmedabad's outskirts. The sect's influence is also evident in the Paris temple, which involved collaboration with French firms, including stone specialists H Chevalier, who worked on the restoration of the Notre-Dame Cathedral.

According to a chapter in *Swaminarayan Hinduism* co-authored by Swami Vivekivandas, a prominent BAPS monk, "BAPS followers were part of the migration from Gujarat to East Africa". Patidars, among the first migrants from Gujarat, thus constitute a large following of the sect. BAPS is known for its involvement in

disaster relief, including the 2001 Kutch earthquake. In September 2002, the Akshardham temple in Gandhinagar saw a terror attack that killed 33 people.

Splits in sect

Founder of the Swaminarayan Sampraday, Sahajanand Swami was born Ghanashyam Pande in Chhapaiya village near Ayodhya in 1781. He founded the Swaminarayan sect in Gujarat after being initiated in 1802 as a disciple of Swami Ramanand. The late historian Makrand Mehta once observed that Gujarat, being "comparatively prosperous and religion-oriented, attracted a large number of aspiring saints to establish their careers."

Seen as one of Hinduism's many bhakti traditions and as reestablishing "Sanatan dharma", the sampraday then branched out into the Vadtal (Nadiad) and Ahmedabad sects (Gadi), founded by two of Sahajanand Swami's nephews. Sahajanand Swami was celibate, but the Acharyas of the Ahmedabad Gadi marry and follow a dy-

nastic leadership tradition, while their sadhus practice celibacy.

In his book *A New Face of Hinduism: The Swaminarayan Religion* (1984), Williams calls Sahajanand Swami "a reformer" who "forged a new form of Hinduism well suited for the modern period."

Shastri Maharaj founded BAPS in 1907 after breaking away from the Vadtal diocese. It takes its name from Bochasan village in Anand district and is said to be the largest sect. The Vadtal diocese believes it is the parent body from which at least six splinter groups were formed, most of which believe in Sahajanand's supremacy.

In the late 1960s, the sect split again when a group of disciples, led by Hariprasad Swami, wished to initiate women disciples into the fold, going against tradition. The then-BAPS guru, Yojiji Maharaj, refused, and Hariprasad went on to form the Sankha sect in 1966.

The 92-year-old Mahant Swami Maharaj is the sixth spiritual successor of Swaminarayan and the present guru of BAPS.