



Autumn of a socialist

The BJP has quietly outmanoeuvred Nitish Kumar in Bihar

Bihar Chief Minister and Janata Dal (United) chief Nitish Kumar is relinquishing his post and stepping aside from active politics. A nominee from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will likely succeed him as Chief Minister. Though the turn of events appears abrupt, it has been in the making for several years, and follows a pattern of the BJP's expansion into newer areas and social groups. Mr. Kumar has oscillated between the BJP and the Congress-led Opposition over the years, and still commands the loyalty of a considerable section of Other Backward Classes (OBC) in the State. At 75, old age had impaired him, and though his decline has been in full public view, he remained in the saddle – a testimony to his political indispensability. In the 2025 Bihar Assembly elections, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) swept 202 of 243 seats, with the BJP emerging as the single largest party with 89 seats against the JD(U)'s 85. The BJP was initially unwilling to declare Mr. Kumar as the NDA's chief ministerial candidate, even while calculating that the alliance could not afford to contest without him. Less than four months after taking oath as Chief Minister for a record tenth time, he filed his Rajya Sabha nomination on March 5, with Union Home Minister Amit Shah by his side. The BJP is navigating a very fine line, trying to gently push Mr. Kumar aside without toppling the apple cart of the social combination that holds various Hindu caste groups together. Any sense of insult to the OBCs can be politically costly; but the party is equally determined to formalise its primacy in Bihar politics, a fact on the ground since at least the 2020 Assembly election, when it won 74 seats to the JD(U)'s 43.

The transition in Bihar also aligns with the four-decade pattern of the BJP's growth. The Hindutva party finds a foothold in new areas and among new social groups through alliances with regional outfits first, then emerges on top, and finally replaces the former ally. In 2020, the BJP already outran the JD(U) in seat tally but swallowed its ambition to keep the coalition intact and Mr. Kumar in place. In 2025, it retained that lead – 89 to 85 – and the arithmetic of the Rajya Sabha vacancy provided the occasion, and a measure of cover, for the inevitable transition. Bihar is the latest instance in this pattern, following the template most recently visible in Maharashtra, where Assembly elections were fought under Eknath Shinde's name but Devendra Fadnavis of the BJP took the Chief Minister's chair after the Mahayuti victory. With the eclipse of Mr. Kumar, the social justice politics that Bihar has practised for the last half-century – rooted in Lohiaite assertion, OBC mobilisation, and a resistance to upper caste dominance – is turning a page. It has a certain finality about it.

New formula

F1 can meet climate targets without losing any of the thrill

Formula One (F1) is currently going through a golden period. It is a fact reflected through record race attendances, viewing figures, teams' healthy balance sheets, and soaring valuations. Even on track, the previous seasons have seen exciting battles. In 2025, the battle for the drivers' title went down to the last race with three drivers in contention. Eventually, McLaren's Lando Norris triumphed ahead of his teammate Oscar Piastri and Red Bull's Max Verstappen, the four-time champion. Now, on the eve of the season-opening Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne, F1 is embarking on a bold trajectory that could define its future. At a time when there is heightened focus on climate goals and a push towards sustainable living, F1, with its fuel-guzzling machines and a global circus criss-crossing five continents 24 times a year, can be seen as an anachronistic endeavour. In 2019, F1 laid out a plan to become net carbon zero by 2030, and starting this year, it will take its biggest leap towards achieving that goal. The governing body, the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), has introduced a new hybrid engine formula for 2026, split equally between conventional internal combustion engines and electric motors. More importantly, all cars will be powered by advanced sustainable fuels.

These fuels are derived from carbon capture, municipal waste, and non-food biomass rather than from crude oil. The battery for the electric motor will be charged by harvesting energy lost during braking. Historically, major automotive manufacturers have used motorsport as a platform for research and development and have transferred technology from track vehicles to traditional cars. The new rules have attracted big firms back to the series. Audi has entered its own team; Honda and Ford have returned to the sport as engine partners to Aston Martin and Red Bull Racing, respectively. While these are lofty ambitions, in the end, F1 is still a sport, and the main aim is to produce an exciting championship. The charm of racing is seeing drivers push cars to their absolute limits and enthrall viewers. During pre-season testing, the new cars received a lukewarm response from the drivers, who felt the new formula did not allow them to push the cars to their limits at all times, as they were energy-starved. Though these are early days yet, it will be interesting to see how quickly the teams overcome these challenges or how the rule-makers step in to ensure that the spirit of the sport is not lost. If F1 can deliver close racing and a competitive championship by this season's end, the gamble may prove worthwhile.

On March 8, 2026, women and girls around the world will demand equal rights, and equal justice to enforce, exercise, and enjoy them, to mark International Women's Day. The theme aligns closely with 2026 also being observed as the International Year of the Woman Farmer.

Legal reforms, including equal inheritance rights for daughters, have not translated into matching gains on the ground. In most rural households, land and property remain registered in men's names. Social norms, patrilineal inheritance practices, limited legal awareness and administrative hurdles keep women's names off land records. The woman who manages daily farm operations and negotiates with input dealers and labourers often does so without the legal standing that a land title would confer.

Without titles or formal recognition as farmers, women face systemic barriers to accessing institutional credit, crop insurance, irrigation schemes, agricultural extension services, climate-resilient technologies and many flagship programmes that hinge on documentation. When eligibility is linked to assets they do not own, exclusion is built into the design.

Given that women's access to and control over cultivable land remains abysmally low due to a combination of social, legal and cultural factors, their labour and contributions remain invisible and undervalued. This disparity between the substantial contributions by women to agri-food systems and their lack of formal recognition as "farmers" underscores a structural disconnect at the core of their systemic exclusion.

Feminisation of agriculture without security

As migration by men accelerates, agriculture is increasingly being "feminised": women take on greater responsibility for cultivation, risk management and household food provisioning. While, in theory, the expanded role of women in agriculture could improve women's nutritional outcomes, in practice, heavy agricultural workloads, poor access to drudgery-reduction technologies, and the absence of a supportive care ecosystem place immense pressure on them to balance both productive and reproductive responsibilities.

Studies show that resource-poor women who experience huge work burdens, especially during peak agricultural seasons, experience severe health issues and micronutrient deficiency. India still carries an unacceptably high burden of malnutrition among women and girls. Persistently high anaemia rates among women of reproductive age, combined with widespread micronutrient deficiencies, amount to a silent emergency.

These nutritional deficits in women have intergenerational consequences. Maternal undernutrition and anaemia contribute to low birth weight, stunting and impaired development



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As farming in India feminises, empowering women farmers can drive climate-resilient, biodiversity-rich and nutrition-sensitive agriculture

in children. Diets in many rural households remain cereal-heavy and low in pulses, fruits, vegetables and animal-source foods. The paradox is stark: women who help feed the nation are unable to secure a diverse, nutritious diet for themselves and their children.

Over the last decade, India has put in place an ambitious right-to-food framework, anchored in the National Food Security Act. The law guarantees subsidised cereals, supplementary nutrition for pregnant and lactating women and young children, and maternity entitlements. Several States have added local foods, millets and fortified staples to their diets. Yet, improvements in women's nutrition have been uneven, and anaemia trends are deeply worrying.

Entitlements halt at the threshold

Progress toward bridging the gap between law and lived reality requires gender-transformative approaches. The status of women in agri-food systems depends on addressing systemic inequalities.

Secure land rights, access to inputs, labour-saving technologies, credit, resources, extension services and decision-making empower women to influence agricultural practices, enhance diets and food security, and strengthen their agency. Improving women's agricultural entitlements promotes equity, health, and nutrition.

Prof. M.S. Swaminathan emphasised women's control over conservation, cultivation, consumption, and commercialisation in agri-food chains. However, programme designs often remain piecemeal: food transfers through Public Distribution Systems are cereal-centric, with uneven integration of pulses, millets, and nutrient-dense foods. Frontline workers, overburdened, impact programme quality and community literacy. Digitalisation offers benefits but can exclude those with poor connectivity, documentation or digital skills. The result is a limited right to food. Many women, especially women farmers, cannot fully claim, control, or benefit from them.

From the vantage points of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) and the World Food Programme (WFP) in India, four priorities merit urgent attention if the 2026 theme is to have substantive content.

First, the visibility of women farmers in law, data, and policy. This can be achieved only if granular, gender-disaggregated data are collected and made available. All agricultural policies and schemes must draw on the definition of a farmer set out in the National Policy for Farmers, which delinks a farmer's identity from land ownership and emphasises the activities they perform. This acknowledges the contributions of women landowners, landless cultivators, tenants,

agricultural labourers, sharecroppers, tribal and forest gatherers, and those involved in related agricultural work. Second, women's rights to land and to productive resources such as water and credit must be strengthened. This requires accelerating the implementation of equal inheritance provisions, promoting joint spousal titles, providing incentives to register land and housing in women's names, ensuring gender-sensitive revenue registration processes, and strengthening their role in the management of common lands and water resources. Embedding land and asset questions within women's collectives – can enhance collective bargaining power.

Keeping nutritional objectives in focus

Third, it is essential to ensure that food systems and safety nets are closely aligned with nutritional objectives. Public procurement policies and agricultural support measures should promote the cultivation of nutri-cereals, pulses, fruits, and vegetables by small-scale and women farmers, and effectively distribute these products through public distribution channels, Anganwadis, and school meal programmes.

Community-driven approaches such as kitchen gardens, women's seed banks, and localised food planning, can significantly enhance women's roles in transforming dietary patterns and production practices.

Fourth, women farmers must have access to technologies and extension services to strengthen their agency and decision-making. Labour-saving tools ease drudgery, reduce time poverty,

and protect women's health. Equitable access to extension services ensures that women receive timely information, training and market insights tailored to their needs. When equipped with knowledge and appropriate technologies, women can make informed choices about crop selection, sustainable farming practices, and resource management, enhancing productivity, resilience, and household nutrition outcomes.

The MSSRF's experience shows that when women gain knowledge, rights and institutional backing, they become the drivers of climate-resilient, biodiversity-rich and nutrition-sensitive agriculture. The WFP's work in India and globally demonstrates that placing women at the centre of food security and social protection programmes improves outcomes not only for them but also for entire communities.

On this International Women's Day, the call for "Rights. Justice. Action. For All women and girls" should go beyond mere symbolism. Recognising women as farmers, ensuring their rights to land and productive resources, and allowing them to claim their right to food and nutrition are crucial steps toward creating a more equitable, resilient, and nourished India.



Balancing innovation with women's digital safety

The conversation around artificial intelligence (AI) has taken centre stage, and after the India AI Impact Summit 2026, in February, India's engagement with AI has heightened. While there is enough to appreciate how the world has transformed in terms of technology and innovation, on the occasion of International Women's Day 2026 (March 8), the need is to focus on "ethical AI" and women's digital safety.

With a steady rise in accessible Internet, women are continuously bearing the brunt of digital threats and humiliation. About 16%-58% of women have faced online harassment and abuse, a number that could rise further. Even as one in three women face physical or sexual violence, abuse against women has now crossed physical boundaries and geographies.

In the physical world, women can take a "degree of precaution", though never foolproof, to protect themselves. But in the digital world, protecting oneself from harm, doxing and abuse is significantly difficult. This is driven by technology's deep integration into daily life and the anonymity that the digital world affords the perpetrators of abuse.

This is the deepfake era

The rise of deepfakes and the recent Grok AI issue are a case in point. Deepfakes are digitally altered images, audio, or videos created using AI that appear as though someone has said or done something they never actually did. Grok AI, an AI chatbot developed by xAI, is being used to generate non-consensual sexualised images of women.

In India, women endure deep inequalities and widespread violence. With the use of AI and



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Ensuring the digital safety of women must guide AI development and its ethical use

access to deepfake technologies, the traditional and societal restraints of unacceptable behaviour melt away due to online anonymity. While one is not denouncing the use of AI and technology, the dialogue around the ethical use of AI is paramount now more than ever.

No women developers

One of the major concerns about AI and a lack of women's digital safety is the lack of representation of women at the stage of designing AI tools. According to a report by UN Women, many deepfake tools – mostly built by men – rarely work on images of men. According to the United Nations Development Programme, women make up only 22% of AI professionals and below 14% work at senior levels.

This lack of women's representation at the stage of AI development leads to fewer diverse viewpoints shaping innovation. Research suggests that with more women and diversity in AI development teams, the overall effectiveness and applicability of AI increases. It has been proposed by UN Women that if there are more women researchers in AI, then the unique lived experiences of women can "profoundly shape the theoretical foundations of technology" and open new applications of the technology". When this is achieved and diverse expertise is integrated in AI development, the hope is that AI supports and weaves in women as equal stakeholders in the digital world. This should help in creating safer online spaces and technologies, including swiftly removing harmful content and responding effectively to abuse at the source.

Stronger laws to ensure prompt investigations into the unethical use of AI are key to ethical AI use. While Indian legislation attempts to do its bit to address online abuse, implementation is far from prompt.

The new notification introduced by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology directs that online intermediaries must take down reports of deepfakes within three hours of receiving a takedown notice. Notwithstanding the criticism of the new guidelines and the strong review process, the hope is that these guidelines are a step towards strengthening legislation to protect women from irreparable harm caused by unethical AI-like deepfakes.

Start young

A third way to address the unethical use of AI is to address the issue at the ground level. As one in three Internet users are children, one must accept that they are "digital natives" who are dependent on the web. Therefore, the emphasis on digital safety being taught

at an elementary level to children is more crucial than ever. Children and young adults must be sensitised to the issue of digital abuse and AI misuse as seriously as the issue of sexual and physical abuse.

Resisting technological change, especially to AI, is futile and is not a sustainable solution as its integration into daily life is inevitable. However, on the occasion of International Women's Day 2026, prioritising women's digital safety and ethical AI use is essential so that women are not left bearing the brunt of advancement and technology.



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India's authority

News that a foreign superpower has 'granted India a 30-day waiver to purchase oil from Russia' raises serious questions about the self-respect of independent India. This development is deeply concerning. Where exactly is India's 'high command' placed when it comes to taking diplomatic decisions? As a sovereign democratic republic, it is very alarming

to see India's authority to decide trade relations based on its own national needs being surrendered to another nation. One must question whether those who rose to power by exploiting religious hatred and communalism are now selling the nation's supreme authority – rightfully belonging to the people – to imperialist forces. Today, the country appears to be capitulating to the same

imperialist powers that leaders such as Gandhiji and Nehru fought for decades to expel through historic struggles. The administration owes the nation an explanation. **S. Padmanabhan,** Kochi

The U.S. attack on an Iranian warship in the Indian Ocean sends a stark message to New Delhi and regional players. It reflects

Washington's hegemonic attempt to pressure India into curtailing ties with Iran and toeing U.S.-dictated terms. By targeting a vessel that had recently participated in a peaceful exercise with India, this unprovoked military action signals both economic and military coercion. India should see it as an indirect challenge to its sovereign decision-making. Even as Canada and Finland praise

India's long-standing strategic autonomy, the question remains: will India yield to yet another attempt at subordination by the U.S.? **Arush Upasani,** Pune

Change in Lok Bhavan
It is welcome news that the Tamil Nadu Governor will leave Lok Bhavan, Chennai. Throughout his tenure, he repeatedly undermined the

elected government of the State, acted like a political operative rather than a constitutional head, and promoted ideologies alien to the State's culture. His exit is a relief for Tamil Nadu, though West Bengal now faces the challenge of dealing with him. **Tharcius S. Fernando,** Chennai

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