



# DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

**25<sup>th</sup> FEBRUARY, 2025**

"Hardships often prepare ordinary people for an extraordinary destiny." — C.S. Lewis





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## THE RTI IS NOW THE 'RIGHT TO DENY INFORMATION

# The RTI is now the 'right to deny information'

**T**he introduction of the Right to Information (RTI) Act was a move that generated great hope among citizens since it recognised them to be the rulers of the nation. It empowered them to seek information from the government, with dignity and respect. It looked as if the 'swaraj' that they had missed would be delivered to them. The Act codified their fundamental right to information and was one of the best transparency laws in the world. It appeared that it would curb corruption and arbitrariness, with citizens being the vigilance monitors of their government. But, it must be conceded, it has fallen far short of our expectations and the state of our democracy is not better.

Within a few months, the government realised that this was a transfer of power from public servants to the citizens. In less than a year it moved to amend the law which would have weakened the RTI Act. But there were widespread protests by citizens across the nation. Sensing the mood of the nation, the government dropped the amendments.

### A gradual erosion

The RTI Act had created Information Commissions as the final appellate authorities to implement the law. Most of the posts of 'information commissioner' were taken up by retired bureaucrats. After working for decades as senior bureaucrats, it was difficult for them to hand over power to citizens and recognise that they were the rightful owners of the government. No attempt was made to select people with a record in transparency. Many of them looked at these jobs as post-retirement sinecures and worked only for a few hours. While the national average of the disposal of cases by High Court judges is over 2,500 in a year, the national average of disposal of cases by the commissioners was less than this. Given the fact that the complexity of cases before commissions is far less than the cases before the High Courts, each commissioner should have been clearing at least over 5,000 cases in a year. While the law mandated a period of 30 days for the information to be provided and the same period for the first appellate authorities, it did not specify any time limit for the commissioners. Many commissions began to have pendency of over a year. The right to information was being converted into a right to history. Many ordinary citizens could not pursue the issue of what was now a denial of information. The penal provisions of the RTI Act were the teeth of the Act, but most information commissioners were reluctant to use them. The governments delayed appointing commissioners, which only increased the backlogs.

The clear message of various High Court



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Citizens and the media must take up the responsibility to ensure that the original RTI Act is followed and not allow any distortions

judgments was that the exemptions listed under Section 8 of the RTI Act were restrictions on a citizen's fundamental right and had to be construed strictly as in the law. Parliament intended most information to be provided and crafted the exemptions carefully.

The entire approach to a citizen's right to information changed in August 2011 when the Supreme Court of India held in *Central Board of Secondary Education & Anr. vs Aditya Bandopadhyay & Ors.*, in paragraph 33: "Some High Courts have held that section 8 of RTI Act is in the nature of an exception to section 3 which empowers the citizens with the right to information, which is a derivative from the freedom of speech; and that therefore section 8 should be construed strictly, literally and narrowly. This may not be the correct approach."

In paragraph 37 it made a comment without any evidence: "Indiscriminate and impractical demands or directions under RTI Act for disclosure of all and sundry information (unrelated to transparency and accountability in the functioning of public authorities and eradication of corruption) would be counterproductive as it will adversely affect the efficiency of the administration and result in the executive getting bogged down with the non-productive work of collecting and furnishing information. The Act should not be allowed to be misused or abused, to become a tool to obstruct the national development and integration, or to destroy the peace, tranquility and harmony among its citizens. Nor should it be converted into a tool of oppression or intimidation of honest officials striving to do their duty."

This justified treating RTI as an undesirable activity and labelling RTI users as outcasts. It justified not giving information and attacks on RTI users.

### The subject of 'personal information'

The second major blow came with the judgment in *Girish Ramchandra Deshpande vs Cen. Information Commr. & Ors.*, in October 2012.

A RTI applicant, Girish Ramchandra Deshpande, had sought copies of all memos, show cause notices and censure/punishment awarded to a public servant. A.B. Lute. He had also sought other details such as his movable and immovable properties and details of his investments, lending and borrowing from banks and other financial institutions.

This was denied claiming exemption under Section 8(i)(j). This section exempts "information which relates to personal information the disclosure of which has no relationship to any public activity or interest, or which would cause unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual unless the Central Public Information

Officer ... is satisfied that the larger public interest justifies the disclosure of such information: Provided that the information, which cannot be denied to the Parliament or a State Legislature shall not be denied to any person."

A simple reading shows that under this clause, 'personal' can be denied if it has apparently no relationship to any public activity or interest; or the disclosure of the said information would cause unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual.

The Court did not rule on whether the information was an outcome of a public activity or if its disclosure would amount to an unwarranted invasion of the privacy of the individual. It denied the information by reading only the first seven words of the provision and saying it was 'personal information'. Most information can be linked to some person. Realising that it may be difficult for public information officers and other appellate authorities to decide on what constitutes privacy, Parliament gave a simple test in the proviso – that information which would not be denied to Parliament or legislature would not be denied to any person. This can only have one meaning. That anyone claiming that information would be denied to the citizen would make a subjective statement that he would deny the information to Parliament.

It is well settled that literal interpretation should be given to a statute if the same does not lead to absurdity. In *Nasiruddin and others vs Sita Ram Agarwal* (2003) 2 SCC 577, the Court has stated: "37. The court's jurisdiction to interpret a statute can be invoked when the same is ambiguous... It cannot re-write or recast legislation. It is also necessary to determine that there exists a presumption that the legislature has not used any superfluous words. It is well settled that the real intention of the legislation must be gathered from the language used."

*Girish Ramchandra Deshpande* amends the RTI Act and has been used as a precedent in six subsequent Court judgments and has become the gold standard to convert RTI into an RDI, or Right to Deny Information. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act takes a cue from this and amends the RTI Act itself. There are other cases in which words in the law have not been accorded their usual meanings.

### A call to citizens

To ensure that the RTI fulfils its original promise we should go by the original Act and not allow any distortions. Citizens and the media must take up the responsibility to discuss and defend it. Otherwise, we will have a dilution of our fundamental right under Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution of India.





## Context

- The RTI Act (2005) was a landmark law empowering citizens with access to government information to ensure transparency and accountability. It was seen as a tool to curb corruption and enhance participatory democracy. However, over the years, judicial rulings and legislative amendments have weakened its effectiveness.

## Challenges & Erosion

- **Bureaucratic Control:** Many Information Commissioners are retired bureaucrats, reluctant to enforce transparency.
- **Delays & Backlogs:** Cases pile up, with some pending for over a year, undermining timely access.
- Judicial Restrictions:**
  - *CBSE vs Aditya Bandopadhyay (2011):* Warned against "indiscriminate" RTI requests, reducing scope.
  - *Girish Ramchandra Deshpande (2012):* Expanded the exemption on "personal information," restricting disclosures.
- **Legislative Amendments:**
  - *RTI Amendment (2019):* Gave govt control over Information Commissioners' tenure & salaries.
  - *Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023):* Further limits access under the guise of privacy.

## Impact & Consequences

- **Reduced Transparency:** More denials, citing privacy and national interest.
- **Weakened Public Oversight:** Citizens struggle to hold officials accountable.
- **Erosion of Trust:** Government secrecy increases public distrust.
- **Positives & Way Forward**
  - Civil society and media advocacy have helped resist complete dilution.
  - Courts have sometimes reinforced RTI's importance.
  - Strengthen **Information Commissions' autonomy** and ensure swift case disposal.
  - Balance **privacy vs transparency**, ensuring public interest prevails.
  - Citizens must **actively defend RTI** to safeguard democracy.
- RTI remains a powerful tool—but only if citizens fight to preserve it.

## SOLVE MCQ

Q.1 With reference to the **Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005**, consider the following statements:

1. The RTI (Amendment) Act, 2019 gave the government control over the tenure and salaries of Information Commissioners, affecting their independence.
2. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 has expanded access to government-held personal





data, strengthening transparency.

3. In Girish Ramchandra Deshpande (2012), the Supreme Court ruled that personal information can be exempted from RTI disclosures unless there is an overriding public interest.

**Which of the statements given above is/are correct?**

- (a) 1 and 3 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 2 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Answer:** (a) 1 and 3 only

**Explanation:**

- **Statement 1 is correct:** The RTI (Amendment) Act, 2019 gave the central government control over the tenure, salaries, and service conditions of the Chief Information Commissioner (CIC) and State Information Commissioners (SICs). This undermined their independence, making them more vulnerable to government influence.
- **Statement 2 is incorrect:** The Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA), 2023, instead of expanding access, restricts certain types of government data from RTI disclosures, citing privacy concerns. This has been seen as a dilution of RTI's effectiveness.
- **Statement 3 is correct:** In Girish Ramchandra Deshpande (2012), the Supreme Court ruled that personal information held by public authorities can be denied under RTI unless there is an overriding public interest. This broadened the scope of Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act, which exempts personal information from disclosure.





## FENCING OUT INTERFAITH RELATIONSHIPS IN THE NEW INDIA

# Fencing out interfaith relationships in the new India

**I**n January 27, 2025, Uttarakhand became the first Indian State to implement the Uniform Civil Code (UCC), placing private relationships under state surveillance. The official claim is that it would restore gender justice, create “uniformity”, and address administrative oversight. However, when taken along with existing anti-conversion laws, this marks a coordinated legal push to segregate communities – not just in faith, but also in love and daily life. The UCC is the final blow, ensuring that all forms of interfaith relationships are regulated in the ‘New India’.

### The introduction of more hurdles

Interfaith marriages already face immense social barriers. A survey (2014) of over 70,000 respondents found that fewer than 10% of urban Indians had a family member who married outside their caste. Interfaith unions were even rarer – barely 5% of urban respondents reported any marriages in their family outside their religion. The secular Special Marriage Act, 1954, has administrative hurdles, including a mandatory 30-day notice period, subjecting couples to scrutiny. Meanwhile, rigid anti-conversion laws, now enforced in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Rajasthan, among several other States, have further criminalised religious conversion for marriage.

These laws create bureaucratic traps – as mandatory declarations, waiting periods, and district magistrate approvals – that deter conversions for marriage. Worse, they embolden vigilante groups, often linked to right-wing organisations, to justify harassment, policing, and violence against interfaith couples, particularly Hindu-Muslim. A news portal found that at least 63 of 101 police complaints invoking the U.P. anti-conversion law against Christians, were filed by third-party vigilante groups. Instead of protecting individuals, these laws provide legal cover for extrajudicial interventions, often with police complicity.

Against this background, the UCC’s provisions on live-in relationships take state scrutiny to a new extreme – even informal relationships are



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The enactment of a Uniform Civil Code, in addition to existing anti-conversion laws, is eroding individual rights and the fabric of India’s pluralistic society

subject to surveillance. Live-in relationships are now legally required to be registered with district authorities. This includes a 16-page application with official documentation (Aadhaar cards, residential proof), seeking approval from “religious leaders or community heads,” and notifying family members. The registrar must inform the couple’s parents or guardians about their relationship. Failure to register is punishable with up to six months of imprisonment and a fine of ₹25,000.

These rules make it nearly impossible for couples, particularly interfaith ones, to live without oversight. It is no surprise, then, that only one live-in couple has successfully registered its relationship in Uttarakhand. Others have sought legal protection from the High Court, even as a Bajrang Dal leader claims to have sourced details on live-in applications. The ability of such vigilantes to interfere in private relationships underscores how the UCC and anti-conversion laws work in tandem to suppress interfaith unions.

### A form of apartheid

The result is a complex legal machinery that is actively working to segregate communities, entrench religious divisions, and institutionalise a form of social apartheid: individuals cannot marry or even be in a relationship with the so-called ‘other’ without prior legal approval. These laws create barriers for interfaith couples at every stage whether in marriage or informal cohabitation.

This combined system functions in three ways.

First, by strengthening traditional religious institutions. The requirement for religious certification in both UCC and anti-conversion laws formalises the power of religious leaders over personal relationships in a secular democracy. This contradicts the constitutional guarantee of individual freedom, reinforcing the idea that relationships must adhere to religious and community norms rather than personal choice.

Second, by enabling families to exercise greater control over women. Both laws

disproportionately impact women, who often face pressure, coercion, or even violent punishment for engaging in interfaith and inter-caste relationships. By notifying families of live-in relationships, the UCC makes women more vulnerable to honour-based violence and familial control. Women in interfaith relationships are often framed as victims of manipulation, stripping them of agency and reinforcing patriarchal control over their choices.

Third, by providing legal cover for vigilantism. Right-wing vigilantes now have a legal framework to monitor, report, and harass interfaith couples, married and unmarried, under the guise of preserving tradition and the law. When an interfaith couple attempts to register a live-in relationship or convert for marriage, vigilante groups are often the first to know, due to the legal requirement of public notices and family notifications.

Amid rising hate speech and polarisation, these laws effectively legalise and entrench the separation of religious communities, preventing interfaith interaction at all levels. Similar to the apartheid-era South Africa or Nazi Germany, which banned inter-racial unions, the effect of the UCC and anti-conversion laws is to institutionalise segregation by making interfaith relationships, whether marital or informal, almost impossible.

### It could be catching on

Looking ahead, Uttarakhand’s UCC could be a blueprint for other States. Rajasthan’s High Court recently considered mandatory registration of live-in relationships, closely following Uttarakhand’s model. The Rajasthan Assembly enacted an anti-conversion law. Gujarat is also contemplating a draft UCC modelled on similar lines. These legal trends point toward a broader movement toward a systematic regulation of personal relationships.

In India, love and faith are deeply personal and subjective experiences that each individual defines on their own terms. These legal developments not only threaten individual rights but also undermine the very fabric of India’s pluralistic society.

## Context & Background

- **UCC (2025):** Standardizes personal laws across religions, regulating marriage, inheritance, and adoption.
- **Anti-Conversion Laws:** Enforced in multiple states, requiring official approval for religious conversions.

## Key Provisions

- **Marriage & Live-in Relationships:**
  - Mandatory marriage registration within 6 months.
  - Live-in relationships require registration, family notification, and approval from religious/community leaders.
  - **Ban on Polygamy, Halala & Iddat.**
  - **Equal Inheritance Rights for sons and daughters.**





## Impact on Interfaith Relationships

- **Increased Scrutiny:** More legal and bureaucratic hurdles.
- **Empowerment of Vigilantes:** Public notices allow intervention from right-wing groups.
- **Potential Social Segregation:** Legal restrictions could deepen religious divisions.
- **POSITIVES**
  - **Gender Equality:** Equal rights in marriage and inheritance.
  - **Legal Uniformity:** Reduces complexities in personal laws.

## Concerns & Way Forward

- **Threat to Individual Freedom:** Limits personal choice in relationships. **Balance Needed:** Laws should respect diversity while promoting justice. **Public Dialogue Essential:** Inclusive policymaking can prevent social fragmentation.

## Conclusion

- While UCC aims for uniformity and gender justice, its intersection with anti-conversion laws raises concerns about individual rights and social harmony. A more balanced, inclusive approach is crucial.

## SOLVE MCQ

Q.2 With reference to the **Uniform Civil Code (UCC)** and its impact on interfaith relationships in India, consider the following statements:

1. The UCC (2025) seeks to standardize personal laws across all religions, covering areas such as marriage, inheritance, and adoption.
2. Under the new provisions, live-in relationships must be registered and require approval from religious/community leaders.
3. The anti-conversion laws in multiple states mandate official approval before any individual changes their religion.

**Which of the statements given above is/are correct?**

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Answer:** (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Explanation:**

- **Statement 1 is correct:** The UCC (2025) aims to standardize personal laws across different religions, particularly in matters related to marriage, inheritance, and adoption. The objective is to ensure gender justice and legal uniformity, but concerns remain about religious freedom.





- **Statement 2 is correct:** As per the new provisions, live-in relationships require registration, and in some cases, family notification and approval from religious/community leaders. This introduces bureaucratic and social hurdles, potentially limiting personal freedom.
- **Statement 3 is correct:** Anti-conversion laws enforced in multiple states require individuals to seek official approval before converting to another religion. The stated objective is to prevent forced conversions, but critics argue that these laws infringe on personal choice and religious freedom.

TATHASTUICS





## *The UGC's mandate is to elevate, not strangulate*

**T**he University Grants Commission (UGC) has been in the news again, with the States pushing back on its directive on the procedure for appointment of vice chancellors. It is unusual for chief ministers to concern themselves so closely with minutiae of this kind, but those of Kerala and Tamil Nadu have campaigned against it, terming the directive unconstitutional as it impinges upon matters that are the prerogative of the States. They are particularly unhappy that the UGC may be cementing the practice of Governors choosing vice chancellors. As the States shoulder much of the burden of financing universities, and have a deciding role in instituting them, their insistence that the elected State government rather than the Governor appointed by the Centre have the final say has validity.

### **A meaningful innovation**

However, the substantive part of the UGC's recent directive was an amended guideline for the qualifications for a vice chancellor. The requirement that the vice chancellor must be an academic has been rescinded, and eligibility has been extended to persons who have distinguished themselves in other fields, including industry. This is actually a rare instance in recent times of a meaningful and potentially gainful innovation by the UGC. Globally, heads of academic institutions have not always been professional academics. In the U.S., former secretaries of state are invited to serve as faculty in the best universities of that country. The colleges of Oxford and Cambridge have distinguished themselves by choosing as their heads ex-parliamentarians, writers, and journalists, and no one has thought the practice odd. The public very likely see such appointments as adding value, as most of these individuals would have had exceptional careers.

India is not a stranger to this practice. Over 50 years ago, Prime



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Micro management by the UGC and excessive social engineering imposed by political parties have resulted in the persistent under-performance of our universities

Minister Indira Gandhi appointed G. Parthasarathy as the first vice chancellor of JNU. He had played many roles in a distinguished career of public service and went on to launch JNU as a premier university of India. So the suggestion that inducting persons from outside to assume leadership of the university is likely to be damaging is unwarranted.

### **How the UGC should be judged**

Not only is it far fetched to decry the UGC recommendation on the qualifications for a vice chancellor as "unconstitutional" and against the spirit of federalism, but such complaints detract from a scrutiny of the UGC's record on the parameter by which it ought to be judged. The UGC was established, by an Act of Parliament, in 1956, with the express intention that it maintains acceptable standards of higher education across the country. What it has instead succeeded in achieving is to have imposed a uniformity of rules and regulations across universities while achieving next to nothing in elevating them to global standards in the dissemination and production of knowledge. The poor preparedness of India's graduates has been flagged in public. Recently, a judge of the Supreme Court lamented the quality of young lawyers practising in India's courts. Some years ago, the head of a leading company of the Tata Group spoke of the quality of engineers India is producing. Note that this only points to the standard of instruction in the higher education system. We have not even begun to talk of the quality of research, including that of the PhDs being awarded.

Curiously, the UGC seems to have nothing to say on the quality of education in universities. Instead, it deploys all its resources and energies to procedural matters that are best left to the educational institutions themselves. Its interventions encompass rules on an attendance requirement for students, the

regulation of faculty time, the maintenance of records on examinations conducted, and procedure by which the curriculum is chosen. Some of these requirements were part of the apparatus of generalised surveillance of the natives in colonial times. It is unfortunate that they have not been junked. Much of it has no bearing on learning, apart from undermining faculty performance, the lifeblood of the university. Having managed to tie down a university's functioning to the last detail, the UGC has succeeded in expunging all agency from faculty, who once took responsibility for learning outcomes but consider themselves no longer accountable for them, as their wings have been clipped. Fifty years ago, the university was a freer space and with greater faculty presence. It is difficult to make sense of the development that the 1991 reforms have been accompanied by more intrusive regulation of India's universities. It is also difficult to make sense of the fact that as the country's per capita income has risen, the stature of its public university has measurably declined. Work at the cutting edge of science by Satyen Bose in Dacca and S. Chandrashekar in Madras in the early part of the last century took place in public universities at a time when India was far poorer.

The production of knowledge is an enterprise without borders. Nothing demonstrates this better than the spectacular emergence of DeepSeek, the AI App from China. We must reflect deeply on why India is not a player in this game. Globally, universities are one of the sites of production of knowledge but those in India are not governed with a view to attaining this goal. A high compliance burden due to micro management by the regulator and excessive social engineering imposed by political parties have resulted in their persistent underperformance. The UGC's original mandate behoves it to address the situation.





## Context & Background

- UGC mandates a uniform procedure for appointing Vice Chancellors (VCs), requiring a search-cum-selection committee with a UGC nominee.
- States like Tamil Nadu and Kerala oppose it, citing federalism concerns and loss of autonomy.

## Key Issues

- **Governor's Role:** UGC's move strengthens Governors' involvement, reducing states' say in appointments.
- **Expanded Eligibility:** VCs no longer need to be academicians; professionals from industry and public service are now eligible.

## Positives

- **Diverse Leadership:** New perspectives can enhance university management.
- **Standardized Process:** Ensures uniform academic standards across institutions.

## Concerns

- **Autonomy vs. Centralization:** States see it as an overreach into their jurisdiction.
- **Implementation Challenges:** Aligning state laws with UGC norms requires legislative changes.

## Way Forward

- **Dialogue & Consensus:** UGC and states must collaborate to balance standardization with autonomy.
- **Clearer Guidelines:** Transparency in policy implementation is needed.

## Conclusion

- While UGC aims to elevate higher education standards, imposing rigid regulations risks stifling state autonomy. A middle path ensuring both quality and decentralization is essential.



**SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM: THE POWER TO CONTROL PERSONAL DATA**

# Surveillance capitalism: the power to control personal data

A look at how surveillance capitalism relies on the commodification of personal data; its impact on privacy and autonomy; and its deep ties to state surveillance

Rebecca Rose Varghese

**A** was chatting with B and C in a social media group about an upcoming wedding she was attending. She casually mentioned needing a new dress and some accessories. Later that evening, as she scrolled through her social media feed, she was bombarded with advertisements for dresses, shoes, and jewellery – precisely like the ones she had described. Have you ever experienced this? And if you have, do you wonder how and why this happens, and whether your private conversations can be accessed by some other entity?

In simple terms, this is exactly what happens under surveillance capitalism. Surveillance capitalism is an economic system in which personal data is collected, analysed, and sold by tech conglomerates to predict and manipulate human behaviour. This system is so integral to the digital economy that it has reshaped capitalism itself, as American author and professor Shoshana Zuboff argues in her 2018 book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. She describes surveillance capitalism as a new economic order that expropriates human experience for data-driven profit, and compares it to earlier exploitative systems like colonialism and industrial capitalism.

## The concept

Unlike traditional capitalism, which revolves around goods and services, surveillance capitalism extracts human experience as raw material to mine data, predict behaviour, and influence decisions. This data is sold to advertisers, political campaigns, and other entities. Companies like Google, Meta, and Amazon have turned the internet into a vast surveillance machine, tracking and monetising every click, search, purchase, and in some cases even offline movements.

Zuboff describes the power from extensive data collection as instrumentarian power – control that does not rely on coercion but which subtly shapes behaviour. This is achieved through predictive analytics, recommendation algorithms, and targeted content, nudging individuals towards actions that benefit corporations. Alex Pentland's concept of social physics further illustrates how analysing vast datasets of human interactions reveals patterns, allowing corporations and policymakers to model, predict, and influence collective behaviour. This makes individuals more predictable economic actors, reinforcing surveillance capitalism's role in shaping consumer choices and social trends while prioritising profit over autonomy.

## Different from past forms

Surveillance capitalism differs fundamentally from industrial capitalism. While industrial capitalism relies on labour and material production, surveillance capitalism profits from behavioural data extraction. Instead of tangible goods, companies commodify human experience, making users both consumers and raw material for



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data-driven predictions.

Under industrial capitalism, companies focus on efficiency, productivity, and the exploitation and control of labour in manufacturing. Surveillance capitalism, however, is about controlling behaviour. Algorithms keep users engaged and guide them toward choices that benefit tech giants. This system prioritises data collection over autonomy, making every interaction a chance for monetisation.

One of the most concerning aspects of surveillance capitalism is its entanglement with state surveillance. Governments increasingly rely on private tech companies for intelligence gathering, policing, and social control. Instead of developing independent surveillance infrastructures, states now have access to

vast amounts of privately collected data, which they can obtain through legal means such as data-sharing agreements or extra-legal methods. The collaboration between corporations and states creates a system where the private sector's profit motives and public security interests align, at the expense of individual privacy and civil liberties. This reduces democratic accountability, as much of this surveillance happens within private corporations, beyond public scrutiny. Policies that favour deregulation and corporate autonomy allow this model to persist with minimal oversight, reinforcing a structure where both states and corporations benefit from mass surveillance while individuals face increasing risks of data exploitation and

loss of autonomy.

## Eroding autonomy

Surveillance capitalism's reliance on extensive data collection has created a fragile and interconnected digital network. The sheer volume of data flowing through corporate and state surveillance systems mean that disruptions in one area can lead to cascading failures across multiple sectors. This systemic fragility becomes evident during major data breaches and algorithmic failures, which have led to real-world consequences such as financial instability and misinformation crises.

A notable example is the Cambridge Analytica scandal, where vast amounts of Facebook user data were harvested without consent in 2014, and used to build a system that could target voters in the U.S. with personalised political advertisements. This demonstrated how personal data, when exploited, can influence democratic processes, reinforcing concerns over the unchecked power of surveillance capitalism.

The pervasive data monitoring and predictive analytics employed by corporations further erode personal autonomy. Every action online is recorded, analysed, and used to refine behavioural predictions. Over time, users are subtly conditioned by algorithmic content, influencing their preferences and decisions in ways that serve the interests of advertisers and tech corporations rather than their own. While this seems harmless, it slowly erodes autonomy, allowing those in power to shape individual thinking for their benefit.

## Challenges in regulation

Despite growing awareness of the dangers of surveillance capitalism, regulatory frameworks struggle to keep pace with technological advancements. Laws such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA) attempt to give users more control over their data. However, these regulations fail to address the core issue – the commodification of personal information. This is largely because existing legal frameworks are designed to manage data privacy within traditional capitalist models rather than protect individuals from the structural impact of surveillance capitalism.

Moreover, corporate lobbying and political interests, particularly those in power, bungle these efforts as surveillance capitalism is highly beneficial for them. The rise of tech leaders as politicians is also an example of the interplay between surveillance capitalism and the surveillance state. When tech giants gain increasing influence over policymaking, they ensure that regulations remain favourable to their business interests. This dynamic makes it difficult to implement meaningful restrictions on data collection and behavioural manipulation. The blurred lines between political authority and corporate power reinforce the dominance of surveillance capitalism, limiting accountability and individual autonomy.

The concept of surveillance capitalism is crucial as our lives become increasingly entangled with technology. It serves as a warning of the potential dangers if we are not cautious and if states fail to implement proper regulations and restrictions on what private companies can access and use. This is an academic concept that must be widely discussed to bring about meaningful policy changes. Recognising its impact enables individuals to critically engage with digital platforms and demand stronger protections for their privacy and autonomy.

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## What is Surveillance Capitalism?

- A system where companies collect, analyze, and sell personal data to predict and manipulate behavior, pioneered by tech giants like Google, Meta, and Amazon.

### How it works

- **Data Extraction:** Tracking online & offline activities.
- **Behavioral Prediction:** Algorithms analyze patterns.
- **Manipulation:** Targeted ads & content influence decisions.

### Key Concerns

- **Privacy Erosion:** Users unknowingly generate valuable data.
- **Autonomy Loss:** AI subtly nudges consumer behavior.
- **State Surveillance:** Governments access corporate data, risking civil liberties.

### Challenges in Regulation

- **Big Tech Influence:** Companies lobby against strict laws.
- **Legal Gaps:** Existing frameworks don't curb data commodification.
- **Cross-Border Issues:** Global data flow complicates enforcement.

## Way Forward

- **Stronger Data Laws:** Stricter privacy protections.
- **Transparency:** Users should know how data is used.
- **Public Awareness:** Educating people on digital rights.

## Conclusion

- Surveillance capitalism threatens privacy and democracy.
- Addressing it requires robust regulations, ethical tech practices, and informed users.



**EMISSION INTENSITY TARGETS TO BE RELEASED BY MONTH-END**

# Emission intensity targets to be released by month-end

Industries will have a year to set up compliance measures; trading in carbon credits likely to begin by October 2026; Indian carbon market establishes framework to reduce, remove, or avoid GHGs

**Jacob Koshy**  
NEW DELHI

**T**he Union government is expected to announce emissions intensity targets for nine industrial sectors by February-end – a crucial step to operationalise India's carbon trading scheme. Following this, these industries will have a year to put in place compliance measures to cut emissions, and trading in carbon credits is likely to begin by October 2026, Saurabh Diddi, Director, Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE) under the Union Ministry of Power, told *The Hindu* on the sidelines of a conclave here on India's carbon markets.

Despite a notification by the BEE in June 2023 announcing a carbon credit trading scheme, and follow-up notifications in March 2024 on the industrial sectors that would have to mandatorily comply, emissions intensity targets have not been specified. Without these, it will not be possible to generate or trade carbon credits.

The Indian carbon market establishes a framework to reduce, remove, or



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avoid greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from the Indian economy. It achieves this by pricing the greenhouse gases emission reduction through trading of carbon credit certificates.

Different types of carbon markets exist globally. In European emission trading markets, every carbon credit represents a tonne of carbon dioxide prevented from getting into the atmosphere. Its price fluctuates and is determined by whether companies, which must comply with government-mandated emission caps, manage to meet them or choose to buy credits from compa-

nies that have cut more emissions than they were required to. These carbon credits can then be traded like shares.

In the case of India, industries will not be required to cut carbon emissions. Rather, they must produce their goods – for example, a kilogram of steel – more efficiently. This can mean implementing technology that will burn, say, in this instance, less coal to produce that same kilogram of steel. Or recover the heat from burning a kg of steel and reusing it.

Emissions intensity refers to the amount of greenhouse gases emitted per

unit of activity. The nine sectors that must comply with emission intensity targets in India are iron and steel, aluminium, chlor-alkali, cement, fertilizers, pulp and paper, petrochemicals, petroleum refineries, and textiles.

“We have been having multiple consultations with industry in these past months and we are almost ready with the targets. Along with the compliance scheme (of emission intensity) there is also a market emerging of voluntary offsets. We are hoping that these offset markets can begin trading even this year, provided certain criteria are met,” Mr. Diddi said.

Voluntary offsets refer to measures undertaken by private individuals, including afforestation, that can trap carbon dioxide as commercial projects. These too generate carbon credits and companies sell them, internationally as of now, to those that require them to meet the compliance regulations. As part of its climate commitments, India has said it will reduce the emissions intensity of its GDP at 45% of 2005 levels by 2030.

## Context

- The Indian government will announce emission intensity targets for nine industrial sectors by February 2025.
- Carbon credit trading is expected to start by October 2026.

