

Whose Life Counts? Anjel Chakma's Death and the Idea of India Today

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Swarati Sabhapandit

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The death of Anjel Chakma, a 24-year-old student from Tripura, in Dehradun, confronts the Indian republic with a disturbing constitutional reckoning. Attacked by a group of men after objecting to a racial slur, Anjel succumbed to his injuries days later. What should have prompted swift action instead unfolded through delay and institutional inertia. The first information report (FIR) was [registered two days after the assault](#), allowing the main accused to remain absconding. This delay once again exposes how the urgency of justice continues to be unevenly distributed within the republic.

Describing the killing as a [“horrific hate crime,”](#) [leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi](#) located Anjel Chakma's death within a wider political climate in which hate is not accidental but cultivated and normalised. Whether one accepts this diagnosis or not, the intervention underscores a deeper truth that racialised violence against citizens from the Northeast is neither new nor episodic. It reflects a longstanding crisis of belonging, where constitutional citizenship exists formally but remains fragile in everyday life. Anjel Chakma died not only as an individual victim of violence, but as a constitutional subject whose vulnerability exposes the fault lines between rights on paper and protection in practice.

While assessing the relationship between free speech and constitutional democracy, legal scholar [Ernest Freund](#) (in 1919) placed some faith in the free flow of discussion on matters affecting the nation. For Freund, democratic vitality depended on the coexistence of heterogeneous and opposing viewpoints. A similar faith animated the moment of Indian independence, when access to political

space was imagined as a collective achievement rather than a selectively conferred entitlement. The Indian constitution, adopted in 1950 in the name of the people, sought to institutionalise this faith by recognising citizens as equal right-bearers capable of participating in shaping the nation.

Yet, the persistence of racialised violence, particularly against people from the Northeast, reveals how conditional this equality remains. Anjel Chakma's death forces us to ask a fundamental question: who is protected by the constitution, and whose vulnerability is routinely normalised? When crimes rooted in racial slurs are met with administrative delay, they signal not only a failure of law enforcement but a deeper erosion of constitutional commitment.

Writing in 1997, Sunil Khilnani had described India's history as a curiously unmappable terrain, full of fissures and unsuspected linkages. That terrain feels acutely unsettled today. Communal polarisation, institutional erosion, and the narrowing of dissent have transformed the phrase "the idea of India" into a site of intense political contestation. Anjel Chakma's killing, followed by protests in Tripura and demands for a trial outside Uttarakhand, reveals how far the republic remains from securing equal dignity across its territorial and cultural margins.

To ask what the idea of India entails today is therefore not an abstract exercise. It is a political and constitutional necessity. It requires returning to the foundational commitments of the republic – the anti-colonial struggle, the debates in the Constituent Assembly, and the constitutional imagination that sought to hold together extraordinary diversity through rights rather than hierarchy. It also requires acknowledging that the idea of India is fragile and contested project, sustained through democratic negotiation rather than cultural conformity.

Also read: [In Memory of Anjel Chakma, a Candlelight Vigil in Delhi](#)

The constitution as a site of interaction

The framers of the constitution were acutely aware of this fragility. They were drafting a document for a deeply hierarchical society structured by caste, patriarchy, religious difference, and economic inequality. B.R. Ambedkar repeatedly warned that democracy in India could not be reduced to mere periodic elections. Drawing on the concept of constitutional morality, he insisted that democracy required an ethic of restraint, public reasoning, and mutual respect and that these are values that would have to be consciously cultivated. His caution against the tyranny of the majority resonates sharply today, when racial slurs, hate crimes, and judicial delays are increasingly absorbed into the background noise of public life rather than treated as constitutional emergencies.

As India embarked on its independent journey, the constitution emerged as a site of everyday interaction between citizens, the state, and existing social authorities – caste, religion, class, and patriarchy. This marked a decisive departure from colonial governance structured primarily around the relationship between ruler and ruled. Over time, ordinary citizens came to understand that the Constitution mattered not only in courtrooms but in daily negotiations with power. When that shared understanding fades, and violations no longer disturb the public conscience, it marks a deeper democratic malaise.

The ambition behind the constitution was transformative. It sought not merely to establish representative government but to democratise society itself. [Granville Austin famously described this as a “seamless web”](#) connecting democracy, social revolution, and national unity. Yet India's political history reminds us that the social hierarchies the constitution sought to dismantle did not disappear. They persisted, often reasserting themselves within modern institutions in subtler forms. Anjel Chakma's death reflects precisely this tension.

‘An unfortunate incident’

Today, however, this tension has hardened into a political fault line. A resurgent majoritarianism seeks to anchor national identity in a singular civilisational narrative, redefining citizenship in terms of cultural conformity rather than constitutional values. This shift normalises suspicion towards minorities, legitimises surveillance of dissent, and renders some lives more lamentable than others. In such a climate, the death of a young tribal student does not register as a constitutional crisis but as an unfortunate incident—quickly politicised, selectively mourned, and soon forgotten.

The erosion of institutional autonomy deepens this crisis. Parliament's deliberative role has substantially weakened, with legislation often passed with minimal debate. The judiciary presents a troubling paradox today: expanding its power while simultaneously delivering justice unevenly. Selective listing of cases, prolonged incarceration of undertrial prisoners, and delays in bail hearings have transformed what was designed as a system of protection into a system of attrition – especially for the poor and politically marginalised. The [delayed registration of Anjel Chakma's FIR](#) fits squarely within this pattern of institutional indifference.

India's universities, once imagined as spaces of critical inquiry, are increasingly policed for ideological non-conformity. Student activism, long recognised as a form of democratic engagement, is frequently criminalised. The media ecosystem, rather than facilitating public reasoning, often amplifies polarisation. Together, these developments weaken what John Rawls described as the “public culture” of reasonableness, without which democratic legitimacy cannot be sustained.

The crisis of democratic reasoning is compounded by entrenched caste and gender hierarchies. Despite constitutional guarantees, caste continues to structure access to dignity, safety, knowledge, and institutional protection. Racialised violence against citizens from the Northeast reflects a similar logic of exclusion, where bodies are marked as foreign and belonging becomes conditional. As several political interventions following Anjel Chakma's death noted, citizens from the Northeast are repeatedly forced to assert their Indianness – an indignity that reveals the republic's unresolved anxieties about race, region, and national identity.

A narrowing horizon

Gender norms further intensify this vulnerability. Narratives of protection and respectability, often shaped by ‘upper’-caste patriarchal norms are routinely deployed to police bodies and relationships. Rather than dismantling these hierarchies, contemporary political discourse often repackages them under the guise of cultural revival. The bitter public reaction to the Delhi high court order suspending

the life sentence of Kuldeep Singh Sengar, the convicted rapist in the 2017 Unnao case, revealed how deeply fraught judgments about sexual violence and accountability have become. The order sparked protests and sharp criticism precisely because it struck many as eroding collective trust in justice. Although the [Supreme Court subsequently stayed that suspension](#) and kept the sentence in effect while the legal battle continues, the episode itself underscored how fragile the promise of equal protection can be when institutions falter or send mixed signals about accountability and safety. The constitution's promise of equality has yet to fully unsettle the conventions that define women, particularly from marginalised communities through honour, control, and uneven access to justice.

Yet, it would be a mistake to conclude that the idea of India has collapsed today. What we are witnessing instead is a struggle over its meaning. Historically, competing visions of India have always coexisted, clashing in public discourse, courtrooms, streets, and everyday life. The present moment, however, marks a more exclusionary imagination, where dissent is recast as disloyalty, pluralism as weakness, and rights as obstacles to national unity.

Against this narrowing horizon, alternative constitutional imaginations continue to persist. They surface in protests against hate crimes, in collective demands for accountability and access to rights, in movements defending ecological futures, and in the pursuit of scientific knowledge despite enduring vulnerability. These acts reaffirm a vision of India that understands democracy not merely as institutional design but as public reasoning and collective responsibility.

Constitutional values endure not because they are written down, but because citizens insist on enacting them. Anjel Chakma's death demands such insistence, not only as mourning, but as constitutional vigilance. To defend the idea of India today is to insist that citizenship cannot be contingent on race or region, that institutions must respond with urgency rather than indifference, and that equality must be lived rather than proclaimed.

The future of the idea of India will not be shaped by proclamations from above, but by contestations from below. Its survival depends on whether the republic can sustain a constitutional imagination capacious enough to recognise whose lives matter, whose deaths demand justice, and whose belonging is non-negotiable. For all its contradictions, India's democratic project remains unfinished. Its endurance lies not in silence or conformity, but in persistence – in the refusal to look away while fellow citizens are rendered expendable.