

# FRONTLINE

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1 Nation + 1 Exam  
= 1 Fiasco

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# FRONTLINE

LEADING THE DEBATE SINCE 1984

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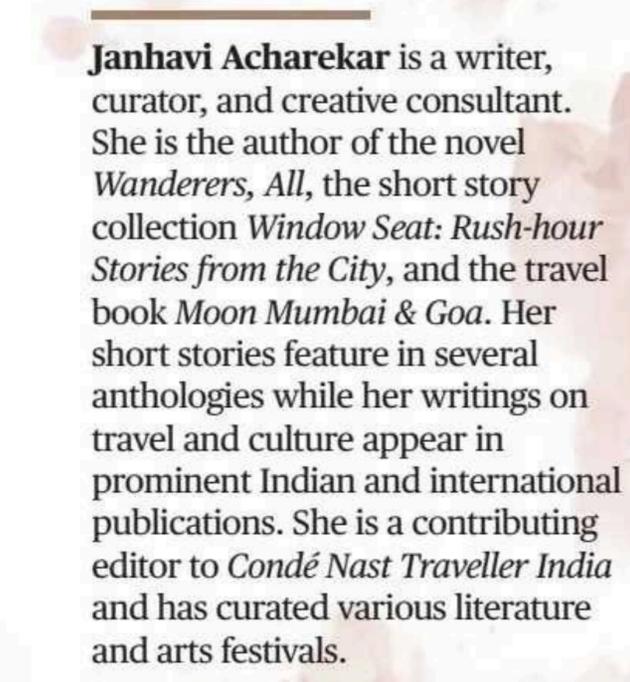
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**Furqan Qamar**, Professor of Management at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, has served as the secretary general of the Association of Indian Universities. He has also served as Vice Chancellor of the University of Rajasthan and the Central University of Himachal Pradesh. Dr Qamar was an Adviser for Education at the Planning Commission of India, now NITI Aayog. A prolific writer, he regularly publishes opinion pieces in prominent national dailies.



**Janhavi Acharekar** is a writer, curator, and creative consultant. She is the author of the novel *Wanderers, All*, the short story collection *Window Seat: Rush-hour Stories from the City*, and the travel book *Moon Mumbai & Goa*. Her short stories feature in several anthologies while her writings on travel and culture appear in prominent Indian and international publications. She is a contributing editor to *Condé Nast Traveller India* and has curated various literature and arts festivals.



**Dr Aditya Sondhi** is a senior advocate practising before the Supreme Court of India. His third book, *Poles Apart: The Military and Democracy in India and Pakistan*, is on the anvil. Aditya is a playwright and his debut play, *Famagusta*, was shortlisted for the Sultan Padamsee Playwriting Award 2020. He has been a winner at the *Deccan Herald* Short Story Competition. He grew up in Bengaluru and now lives in Delhi.



Illustration: P Muthuraj

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**I**t all began when perfect scores were handed out to an unnaturally large number of students in the NEET exam this year. As parents and other students raised a red flag, out tumbled so many dirty skeletons that the already tenuous structure of the grand “one nation, one examination” scheme is now threatening to buckle entirely.

The sheer size of the unfolding scam—the question paper leaks, the shady testing centres, the organised cheating squads—makes it clear not only that the National Testing Agency is an abysmal failure but that it does not seem to have even been conceived with student welfare or academic excellence in mind. Rather, it seems purposefully designed to privilege private institutions, and their offshoots, the dreaded coaching centres, now mushrooming under a well-oiled educator-politician mafia. It does not need the genius of Prof. S. Chandrasekhar to figure out that the higher education apparatus is in a black hole, and that in its breathtaking audacity alone the scam has breached the Chandrasekhar Limit in the corrupt space of the Indian polity.

The NTA is an autonomous institution set up in 2018 under the Societies Registration Act, a strangely slapdash underpinning for an institution that aims to control the entirety of higher education in India. It becomes less strange when one considers that the government’s focus is not on improving the quality of education as such but, as with all aspects of development and governance, only on putting a faux nationalist spin on everything. Hence, its abnormal obsession with the idea of “one examination” with scant regard for process and procedure.

The government’s other obsession is with size. Knowing that the NTA is now the world’s largest testing agency (testing roughly 14 million students in 2022-23) is considered enough. That it is also possibly the world’s worst equipped and most ill-qualified testing agency is not considered nearly as important.

These obsessions stem from an unhealthy need to put India’s young people into one mould and produce unquestioning

automatons for the imagined Hindu Rashtra of the future, as one sees from the slew of changes in educational syllabi that seek to erase inconvenient histories and figures and prop up straw men of the ruling regime with appropriate back stories and creation legends.

**T**HE ATTEMPTS TO SAFFRONISE history or science are of a piece with the “one nation, one examination” project and feed the government’s mania for centralisation and homogenisation. While the idea of a uniform testing mechanism is not in itself flawed and need not necessarily be maleficent or inefficient, it invariably becomes so when the motive behind it is tainted. Regardless, given India’s cultural diversity and federal structure (and with Education on the Concurrent List) a more decentralised and conterminous approach will always be preferable.

Along with question paper leaks and fake examinations, the last fortnight has also seen a steady stream of news about rail crashes and bridge and roof collapses that seem like ominous metaphors for the overall fragility of institutionalised governance today. This is evident in the Lok Sabha, where Speaker Om Birla continues to expunge opposition speeches with an alacrity proportional to the angle of his genuflection to Prime Minister Modi.

There has been a demand to discuss the education scandal in Parliament. If allowed, one could hear alternative ideas, such as the report of the Justice D. Murugesan Committee in Tamil Nadu that recommends scrapping entrance exams for higher education courses and banning coaching centres. *Frontline* examines the topic with professors Furqan Qamar, Apoorvanand, M. Suresh Babu, and our New Delhi bureau chief T.K. Rajalakshmi. The idea, especially in something as crucial as higher education, should be to generate debate, not shut it down.

Vaishna



6 **Letters**

**Rise of regionals**

THE culture of coalition governments is here to stay (Cover Story, July 12). The verdict delivered by India's voters in 2024 not only reflects the vibrancy of our democracy but also holds an important lesson for the national parties: never underestimate the power of regional parties.

After all the hype of *400 paar* and "Modi ki guarantee", the BJP is now at the mercy of the TDP and the JD(U). Modi himself appears to have mellowed enough to acknowledge that his government will take the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners into its confidence on all issues of importance. That the regional parties cannot be taken for granted and will have a bigger say in matters is a reality that neither the Congress nor the BJP can afford to ignore.

**K.R. Srinivasan**  
Secunderabad, Telangana

**RSS vs Modi**

IT is interesting that the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat chose to say what he did about Narendra Modi only after the BJP's moral defeat in the 2024 Lok Sabha election ("The RSS sends a message", July 12). The fact that the BJP has had to ride piggyback on partners in the NDA to return to power after a decade of riding solo is surely a bit of a setback to the RSS in its centenary year.

**M.Y. Shariff**  
Chennai

**Policy dilemma**

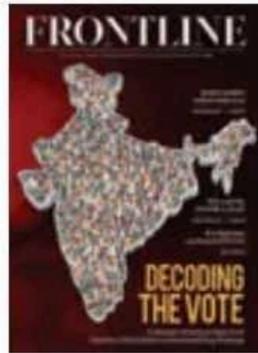
THE past decade witnessed a surge in capital expenditure ("Policy dilemma for Modi 3.0", July 12). This meant the expansion of highways, construction of expressways, replacement of diesel locomotives, and the introduction of Vande Bharat trains. On the trade front, India entered into several free trade agreements, and Forex reserves hit a new high.

And yet, India still ranks 107 in the Global Hunger Index. The National Family Health Survey 2019-21 shows the under-5 mortality rate at 42 per 1,000 live births. Measures such as the Centre's recent launch of supply of fortified rice through the public distribution system need a renewed focus.

**R.V. Baskaran**  
Chennai

**Karnataka and caste**

I wish to highlight certain omissions in the story on Karnataka ("The southern outlier", July 12). After the



fall of Vijayanagara in the late 16th century, many dynasties that were hitherto subordinates of Vijayanagara declared their political independence. Among them were the Wodeyars, the longest ruling dynasty in the history of Karnataka.

The writer has pointed to the influence of the Carnatic Wars as a change factor. More than these wars, the Anglo-Mysore Wars played a crucial role in determining the sociopolitical condition, especially in the Kannada-speaking regions. The article also does not mention the transitions that took place in the 19th century in the princely state of Mysore after the fall of Tipu Sultan. It was during this period that the seeds of the non-Brahmin movement were sown.

As the article points out, the people of Karnataka uphold cultural pluralism. But is it because of linguistic pluralism, as the article states, or is it because of the social and religious reform movements that carved out a niche as determinants?

There are many constraints to the rise of a regional political party in Karnataka. One of them is caste. It is difficult to understand politics in Karnataka without caste.

**S. Narendra Prasad**  
Mysuru, Karnataka

**Jan ki baat**

I WRITE to flag another change in *Frontline's* core values in the recent past. In the election special issue, the first story by Nirupama Subramanian begins with a Hindi headline: "Jan ki baat" (Cover Story, June 28).



As someone who does not speak or understand Hindi,

navigating this linguistic minefield without an English translation was a huge challenge. The article goes on to use two italicised slogans of the NDA, which are Hindi slogans, again without English translation. This is simply unacceptable to the reader who expects a magazine like *Frontline* to be sensitive to India's linguistic diversity.

*Frontline* is a magazine I love and have grown up reading. And I understand that it has changed. By all means change the magazine for the better, but in doing so, do not lose what it means to be *Frontline*.

**Arjun Cherian Kovoov**  
Kottayam, Kerala

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# The Fortnight



## ► A sweet victory

After a 17-year wait, the Indian men's cricket team lifted its second T20 World Cup title, defeating South Africa by seven runs at the Kensington Oval in Barbados on June 29. Rahul Dravid finished his tenure as the Indian coach on a high note. Virat Kohli and skipper Rohit Sharma announced their retirement from T20 internationals soon after the victory, and all-rounder Ravindra Jadeja followed suit the next day with a post on social media. ANI/ICC-X

► The WikiLeaks founder **Julian Assange** finally walked free on June 26, to return to his home in Australia, as part of a deal with the US Justice Department in which he admitted to violating the country's espionage law. Among the classified documents he released in 2010 were those relating to the US' war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. From 2012, the Australian whistle-blower spent seven years in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and five years in the UK's Belmarsh Prison. Press freedom and free speech campaigners and activists across the world celebrated his release.

RONI BINTANG/GETTY IMAGES

## ► 121

people were killed in a stampede at the congregation of the self-styled godman Suraj Pal, popularly called "Bhole Baba", at Phulrai village in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh. The State Police filed an FIR against the organisers of the event. Overcrowding was cited as the reason for the stampede. Reports claimed that 2.5 lakh people were crammed into a venue that could apparently accommodate only 80,000.

► Since June 16, floods have ravaged large parts of Assam. Fifty-two people have died so far, including those who died in the first wave of floods in May. Over 21 lakh people were forced to abandon their homes. Of all the districts, Dhubri in northern Assam is the worst hit, with 2.23 lakh people affected. About 31 animals have died to date due to drowning in the Kaziranga National Park. Other north-eastern States have also received heavy rainfall. Many districts in the central and eastern parts of Arunachal Pradesh were cut off by landslides caused by flash floods.



## ► Labour's return

The Labour Party won 412 seats in the 650-member House of Commons in the UK to end 14 years of Conservative rule. The returning of politics to public service is what Prime Minister Keir Starmer said he would strive for. Outgoing Prime Minister Rishi Sunak took responsibility for the Conservative Party's defeat. The expelled Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn kept his date with Islington North, winning yet again from the constituency he has represented since 1983. This also marked the end of a tradition—of Islington North voting Labour since 1937.

CHRISTOPHER FURLONG/GETTY IMAGES





**Students** protesting over the NEET-UG and UGC-NET examinations issue outside the Ministry of Education in New Delhi on June 20.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP



## Cover Story

# The fallacy of one nation, one examination

Instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, what is needed is an admissions system that combines the score of an aptitude test with the academic performance of students to make the merit list.

**Furqan Qamar**



► **Candidates appearing for NEET** outside the examination hall in Palakkad on May 5. K.K. MUSTAFAH

# T

he National Testing Agency's (NTA) fiasco this year has assumed such astronomical proportions that the Ministry of Education (MoE) had to look for a space scientist to lead a high-powered committee to inquire into it and suggest measures to avert such debacles in the future.

The controversies involving the NTA raise doubts about its ability to efficiently conduct the eligibility-cum-entrance examinations for admissions into higher education programmes in the country. What has surfaced so far seems to be only the tip of the iceberg.

It all began with a simple doubt about an abnormally high number of candidates getting a perfect score (720/720) in the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) for admission to undergraduate programmes in the medical stream: MBBS, BDS, BAMS, BUMS, and BHMS.

As many as 67 candidates, compared with 2 or 3 in the previous years, scored cent per cent marks in the NEET-UG. Getting a perfect score in one of the most competitive entrance examinations in the country ought to be a rarity. For reference, this year nearly 24 lakh individuals registered for the examination to compete for fewer than 1.25 lakh seats.

The mystery deepened with the discovery that some of those who had scored full marks had appeared in the test from the same centre,

and a few at centres a couple of thousand kilometres away from their place of residence.

A probe into the issue revealed that the NTA had granted grace marks to as many as 1,563 candidates, ostensibly to compensate them for the loss of their time, either due to delay in the commencement of the test at their centres or because they spent precious time solving a question that had an error. Interestingly, 44 of the 67 candidates secured the perfect score simply because of the grace marks awarded to them.

The NTA sought to justify its decision by citing a 2018 Supreme Court judgment relating to the Common Law Admission Test, which had evolved a normalisation formula to redress a similar exigency.

**H**EARING THE PETITIONS challenging the award of grace marks, the Supreme Court ordered the withdrawal of the grace marks and gave the students the option to either accept the actual marks scored by them or take a retest. Importantly, of the 1,563 grace marks recipients, only 813 (52 per cent) chose to appear for the retest held on June 23. When the result of the retest was announced on July 1, only one of them got full marks.

As if these were not enough to dent the credibility of the NTA, news of paper leaks started pouring in from Bihar and later from Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, and Maharashtra. Surprisingly, many of the candidates from these States chose to appear for the NEET-UG at far-flung centres in Gujarat. Apparently, some organised syndicates and examination mafia have been at work to breach the sanctity of the test.

Yet, the NEET-UG has not been cancelled as yet because the NTA and the MoE still feel that the paper leak was localised and limited to a few centres and that a retest would put millions of students to hardship and unnecessari-



▼  
**Assam Pradesh Youth Congress**

members demonstrate against the rigging in the NEET exam and paper leak issues, outside Rajiv Bhawan in Guwahati on July 4.

ABDUL SAJID/ANI

ly delay the academic session.

Since then the Supreme Court has warned that even an iota of error in the conduct of the test will not be tolerated. It has, though, declined to stay the counselling for admission to medical programmes on the basis of the 2024 NEET-UG score.

In the meantime, the CBI took over the cases relating to the NEET-UG, which led to several arrests from different locations.

The issue triggered nationwide protests demanding that the NEET-UG be cancelled, with students and parents calling for a “RE-NEET” and banning the NTA. The opposition parties raised the issue in Parliament.

Currently, a bunch of petitions is pending before the Supreme Court. The next hearing is slated for July 8. The aspirants hope that the 2024 NEET-UG will be cancelled and conducted again by a credible agency or organisation.

It is also expected that the Supreme Court will reconsider its 2013 and 2016 verdicts by which NEET scores became the sole basis for admission to medical programmes not only within the country but also anywhere else in the world.

The single common entrance test that came to be known as NEET was presented as a panacea to all that ailed the admissions process to medical programmes in the country. But the much-touted “cure” has proven to be worse than the “disease”. It is high time that policy planners, medical education regulators, administrative ministries, and the judiciary revisited the decision with an open mind.

The NTA’s notoriety for messing up its core activities of conducting entrance tests may not

**Of the 1,563 grace marks recipients in NEET-UG, only 813 (52 per cent) chose to appear for the retest held on June 23. In the retest, the result of which was announced on July 1, only one got full marks.**

have reached its zenith, but it has already reached a level where nothing appears surprising.

In 2024 alone, it cancelled or rescheduled many entrance tests. The University Grants Commission-National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) examination was cancelled a day after it was held because cybersecurity and intelligence agencies had sufficient evidence that the paper was out on the dark net and was freely shared on cloud-based instant messaging portals much before the scheduled date.

The Joint Council of Scientific and Industrial Research-NET examination was also cancelled probably as a precautionary measure. So was the National Common Entrance Test for admission to the four-year integrated teacher education programmes; it was postponed hours before it was scheduled to happen on June 12. The NEET-PG examination has also been put on hold.

**T**HE NTA HAS BEEN both a culprit and victim of repeated mismanagement since its beginning. Errors in scoring and the preparation of merit lists have been reported in the past. Technical glitches, postponement, and rescheduling of examinations have been rather frequent.

This year itself, the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) was postponed in Delhi centres from May 15 to 29, almost at the last minute, simply because the NTA suddenly realised that it would be difficult to get adequate staff and infrastructure because of the Lok Sabha election in Delhi on May 25.

Critically, the NTA is yet to upload the answer keys of CUETs held in the hybrid mode between May 15 and 29. Students are apprehensive that their results are likely to be delayed which may, in turn, cause the academic session to go awry in not just 46 Central universities but close to 250 universities that have so far joined the CUET.

But this is not the first time that students have been subjected to extreme anxiety. They have been seeing their career aspirations jeopardised since the NTA took over the CUET. The very first year of the CUET was nightmarish for students and their families.

The number of participating universities and programmes on offer kept changing even after the admission application process was

**The way the NEP 2020 was read, interpreted, and implemented could partly be responsible for the current catastrophe as it sowed the seed of the idea of one nation, one examination.**

closed. The test centres were cancelled and changed not only after the admit cards had been issued but even at the very last moment.

The NTA assumed that every aspirant had round-the-clock access to the Internet and the NTA website. It also assumed that the last-minute shifting of the examination centre from one part of a city to another would pose no difficulty to the examinees.

No less peeved were the participating universities in the CUET. They found their seats unfilled for months after the announcement of results. Many had to offer admissions on a first come, first served basis, thereby diluting the quality of their intake. There were inordinate delays in completing the admissions process and starting the academic sessions.

The CUET was dubbed an effective instrument to promote equitable access to quality higher education and reduce the hassles faced by students in getting a seat in the programmes and institutions of their choice. Ironically, over the past two years, it has ended up

▼ **A protest outside Calcutta University** over the alleged irregularities in NEET 2024 results, in Kolkata on July 4. SWAPAN MAHAPATRA/PTI



doing just the opposite.

The way the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) was read, interpreted, and implemented could partly be responsible for the current catastrophe as it sowed the seed of the idea of “One Nation, One Examination”.

Arguing for a common principle for entrance examinations “with due regard to diversity and university autonomy”, the NEP 2020 provided that the “NTA would conduct entrance for admission to undergraduate, postgraduate and fellowship in higher education”.

It had hoped that “the high quality, range and flexibility of NTA test would enable most universities in the country to use these common entrance exams, and, thereby, drastically reduce the burden on students, universities and colleges, and the entire education system”.

Even though the policy stressed that “it would be left to the individual universities and colleges to use NTA assessments for their admissions”, the UGC chose to make it obligatory for all Central universities to admit students solely on the basis of the scores of the Central University Entrance Test to be conducted by the NTA.

**The CUET was dubbed an effective instrument to promote equitable access to quality higher education and reduce the hassles faced by students in getting a seat in the programmes and institutions of their choice. It has ended up doing the opposite.**

*China's national undergraduate admission exam, it was first held in 1952. From 1958 it faced hurdles until it was cancelled in 1966 when colleges and universities were shut and the youth had to work in the countryside as part of the Cultural Revolution. It was revived in 1977 and continues to this day.*

Despite repeated glitches and goof-ups, many more universities were cajoled into joining, and the test was renamed the Common University Entrance Test, pushing forward the agenda of One Nation, One Examination.

The CUET was much more than adding just another test to the NTA kitty. It imposed the onerous burden of conducting entrance examinations in about 55,000 subject combinations from the very first year.

Since then, the NTA has been under visible strain. It had too little manpower and access to quality test centres to conduct so many examinations.

**I**T MAY NOT BE an exaggeration to suggest that the introduction of the CUET has proven to be the undoing of the NTA. What has happened this year was just waiting to happen.

The NTA was established in November 2017 by the Ministry of Human Resource Development and was registered as a society under the Societies Registration Act, 1860, on May 15, 2018. Established with the due approval of the Cabinet, it was envisaged to be a “premier, specialist, autonomous and self-sustained organisation to conduct entrance examinations for admission/fellowships in higher education institutions”. It conveyed commitment to overcoming the challenges in “assessing the competence of candidates for admission and recruitment... with research-based international standards, efficiency, transparency and error-free delivery”.

The NTA was supposed to address the challenges it faced by “using best in every field from test preparation, to test delivery and test marking”. By “test marking”, it presumably means evaluation, scoring, and preparation of the merit list.

In a span of five years, the NTA was entrusted with the responsibility of conducting 17 different examinations. Media reports indicate that in 2023 as many as 12.3 million candidates registered for different examinations conducted by the NTA. This makes it the second-largest testing agency in the world, next to China's **Gaokao**, which in the same year had 12.9 million registrations.

Going by the 2022-23 annual report of the





MoE, the NTA conducted 26 different examinations covering close to 13.16 million candidates. Additionally, 1.49 million candidates took the CUET-2022. These numbers make the NTA the single largest testing agency in the world.

**T**HE NTA SEEMS to have bitten off more than it can chew. It is still a fledgling organisation. Its website provides little about the organisation and its staff. What it proffers is the names of its chairperson, the director general, and one more member. All other board members are mentioned by their designations and affiliations without disclosing their names or identities, none being full-time members.

The NTA's website does not provide the names of any other officers of the agency but only a list of sections dealing with different tests and activities along with their email addresses. All offices share the same two landline phone numbers. The annual reports and audited accounts of the NTA too could not be retrieved.

Normally, a large-sized and well-staffed public organisation would want to disclose far more details about itself to win trust and gain transparency, particularly when it is entrusted with such demanding and sensitive responsibilities of conducting not only the entrance and eligibility examination for admission and fellowships for higher education but also for

▼ **Students being checked** and frisked before entering the examination centre for NEET in Visakhapatnam, a 2018 picture.

C.V. SUBRAHMANYAM

**According to the annual report of the MoE for 2022-23, the NTA conducted 26 different examinations covering close to 13.16 million candidates.**

admission and scholarships for school education as well as a few recruitment tests.

The NTA may seemingly have fewer senior permanent staff than the number of tests and examinations it conducts. In all probability, it may be relying heavily on consultants, outsourced manpower, and third-party service providers even for critical, confidential, and strategic tasks.

The absence of a sufficient number of full-time senior staff in an organisation puts its executive head under severe strain, increasing its vulnerability to vested interests. It becomes susceptible to different pulls and pressures.

It eventually reached a level where it simply lost its bearings. The NTA was supposed to be modelled on agencies that conduct the Scholastic Aptitude Test, American College Testing, Graduate Record Examination, Graduate Management Aptitude Test, Test of English as a Foreign Language, and International English Language Testing System.

They all do computer-based testing (CBT), not only once but many times a year. Some are even contemplating offering on-demand examinations. By doing so, they will be able to reduce digital and physical infrastructure requirements and logistical challenges.

The NTA has been moving in the reverse direction. It began with CBT but soon switched to the pen-and-paper mode for some large and crucial examinations. Even the CBT conducted by the NTA is administered in a convention-

al mode, with all applicants having to appear for the test at a designated centre on a single or, at the most, dual time slots. This poses serious logistical challenges, making the system susceptible to several compromises.

**M**OST CRITICALLY, GLOBAL testing agencies rely on aptitude-based testing and limit subject-based assessment to a maximum of five subject categories. The NTA, on the other hand, conducts subject-based assessments, with subject combinations often running into the thousands, particularly in examinations such as the CUET for admission into undergraduate and post-graduate programmes.

All these taken together have so contained the NTA to routine affairs and firefighting that it can hardly focus on what is important. Six years since it came into existence, many of the important activities that the agency had planned to undertake remain mere promises and assurances.

It has yet to develop any significant database of high-quality question/item banks, a sine qua non for any credible testing agency. Better ones would venture to start their operations only after developing reasonably large-sized question banks consisting of standardised items of varying difficulty levels.

Quality assurance of the testing and assessment process is considered crucial for ensuring the integrity and credibility of agencies. This objective is often achieved by regularly reporting the consistency, validity, and reliabili-

*It is not a test for which one can prepare for the simple reason that it tests an individual's inclination towards a specific area of study. It tests logic, felicity with numbers, communication skills, and critical thinking.*

ty statistics of all the assessments that a testing agency undertakes. No such statistics have so far been disclosed by the NTA.

These are some of the pointers of deficiencies in the structure and process of the NTA. Taking a symptomatic view of the situation may not lead to suggestions in making the system and process foolproof and rather robust. Unless the problem is thoroughly examined, the high-powered committee may end up identifying a few loopholes here and there and come up with a standard operating procedure that the testing agency must henceforth follow.

Difficulties in coping with logistical challenges or inability to foresee and prevent rigging of the examination system are procedural issues. So long as the problem is perceived to be emanating from procedural lapses, the focus of attention is likely to remain confined to improving the process.

There is every likelihood that the committee may end up prescribing additional checks and balances, a higher level of technology integration, and the use of some security features in the printing, distribution, administration, and overall conduct of examinations.

Such an approach would be tantamount to no more than symptomatic treatment. These may provide some reprieve but may not address the problem in its totality. Preventing malpractices and use of unfair means and safeguarding the sanctity of testing through increased vigil are only a part of the problem. The issues involved are much deeper and call for systemic reforms.

**T**HE INVENTION OF and dependence on entrance and eligibility tests as the only means of allotting seats and granting admission to further higher education programmes has given rise to many malpractices in the education system.

Entrance examinations, whether they are administered by a Central agency, a State organisation, or higher educational institutions, undermine the importance and significance of school boards and ignore the critical role that schooling plays in the learning and lives of children.

Over-reliance on the scores obtained in

## CBSE: A SNAPSHOT

### In 2022:

- There were **28,402** schools affiliated to the CBSE.
- **35,53,549** pupils had registered for board exams.
- Exams were held in **7,405** centres.
- The board deployed **4,05,944** staff for exam duty.
- The exams were held in **1,97,419** rooms and the papers evaluated in **1,857** centres.

**In all probability, the NTA may be relying heavily on consultants, outsourced manpower, and third-party service providers even for critical, confidential, and strategic tasks.**

# NEET & Controversies

**2010 December:** Medical Council of India (MCI) notifies NEET as a single admission test to MBBS and BDS courses across India.

**2011 July:** MCI informs the Supreme Court of its proposal to hold NEET for MBBS admissions from 2012-13.

**2013 May 5:** NEET held for the first time by CBSE.

**July:** Supreme Court quashes NEET, calling it unconstitutional. It said the exam had the effect of depriving States, State-run universities, and all medical colleges of their right to admit students to MBBS, BDS, and PG courses as per their own procedures. The court also said the MCI did not have powers to hold such an exam.

**August:** The NGO Sankalp files a petition in the Supreme Court seeking review of its order quashing NEET.

**2014 February:** NEET exam stopped. All-India Pre Medical Entrance Test (AIPMT) revived, to be conducted by CBSE.

**May:** CBSE holds AIPMT.

**2016 April:** Acted "hastily" in quashing NEET, says Supreme Court, and gives the green signal for CBSE to hold NEET 2016-17 in two phases.

**May 1:** CBSE conducts first phase of NEET, followed by second phase on July 24.

**May:** President approves NEET ordinance exempting State government medical colleges from the Supreme Court-mandated single all-India entrance exam for a year.

**July:** Supreme Court finds ordinance "quite disturbing and without taste". However, it refrains from staying it.

**2017 September 1:** Anita, 17, from Tamil Nadu, who impleaded herself in a case challenging NEET in the Supreme Court, dies by suicide over her poor scores in NEET despite scoring 1176/1200 in her class XII exam. Her death sparks strong reactions against NEET across the State.

the entrance examinations has led to a rampant rise in the number of coaching centres and institutes whose exclusive focus is on coaching their clients to crack multiple-choice questions quickly rather than thoughtfully.

The menace of coaching has distorted the education system in many ways. They distract students from their schools. They have given rise to what is known as ghost schools, which enrol students, give them attendance, and allow them to appear in board examinations as their students, but they do no teaching. Students are left free to attend their coaching classes.

Outside the formal education system, coaching centres and institutes, whether they are run offline, online, or by edtech, operate as for-profit entities charging as much as their clientele can afford, thus putting a heavy financial burden on students. This makes the highly competitive and economically rewarding higher education system quite exclusionary.

**T**HE IDEA OF a centralised system of admission based solely on the merit and scores of entrance tests is inherently flawed. It simply raises the premium for and increases the likelihood of unscrupulous elements to exploit and manipulate the system. Entrance examinations conducted by States or even by individual universities are yet another kind of centralisation and suffer from the same or similar deficiencies as the national-level testing does.

Fixing the responsibility, catching the culprits involved in the paper leaks by circumventing the system, and subjecting them to the strictest possible exemplary punishment may act only as a temporary deterrent.

The most workable and sustainable solution, therefore, lies in going back to the basics but with some fundamental reform. That is, to admit students to higher education programmes on the merit of their past academic records, that is, the percentage of marks or grades obtained in the board or qualifying examination.

Considering the fact that India has more than 48 school boards and over a thousand

**2018 July:** Madurai bench of Madras High Court orders CBSE to grant 196 marks—four marks each for 49 questions—to all students who appeared for NEET in Tamil due to erroneous translation of questions.

\* Supreme Court stays High Court order. CBSE blames translators provided by State government for the errors.

**2019 May:** National Testing Agency conducts NEET for the first time.

**2020 April:** Supreme Court upholds NEET for graduate and postgraduate programmes, saying it does not violate rights of minorities under the Constitution.

**2021 October:** Supreme Court dismisses plea for cancelling NEET-UG 2021 exam because of paper leak and malpractices.

**2023 February:** Tamil Nadu moves the Supreme Court challenging validity of NEET, alleging that the exam is violative of the principle of federalism.

**2024 May 5:** NTA conducts NEET-UG.

**June 4:** Results announced. In a first for the NTA, 67 students secure All India Rank 1. Allegations of large-scale paper leaks and irregularities surface.

**June 22:** The National Board of Examinations in Medical Sciences postpones NEET-PG exam scheduled for June 23 amid allegations of irregularities.

**June 23:** Union Education Ministry hands over matter of alleged malpractices in NEET-UG 2024 to the CBI.

\* NEET-UG retest held for 1,563 students after a controversy erupted regarding the awarding of grace marks.

**June 28:** Tamil Nadu Assembly passes resolution urging the Union government to approve the State's NEET exemption Bill and scrap NEET at the national level.

**July 1:** NTA announces results of NEET-UG retest.

**July 5:** Centre submits an affidavit before the Supreme Court saying that retest of NEET-UG 2024 is not needed as there is no evidence of widespread irregularities.

Compiled by Siddarth Muralidharan

universities, it will be necessary to find some way to minimise or normalise inter-board variations in the system of education, examination, evaluations, and marks awarded. Statistical tools are readily available for the normalisation of scores, but they may involve a tedious and time-consuming process of collecting and collating pan-India data.

But we can get around the problem by admitting students on the combined merit of their past academic records and their scores in an aptitude-based test. Such an aptitude-based test could be organised by a reformed national testing agency at the central level.

The relative weightage of the aptitude test and previous academic records could be determined with due deliberations in the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), which is headed by the Union Education Minister and is represented by the Ministers of Education of all States and Union Territories with legislature. The idea is that the scores obtained in the aptitude-based test effectively modify and moderate the inter-board or inter-varsity variations in marks.

An admissions system like this would bring the focus back on school education and restore the importance of board examinations. It may save students a lot of the hassles they currently undergo because of a single common entrance examination.

This would easily emerge as a truly decentralised system of admission and may save the nation from the fallacious idea of One Nation, One Examination. India is simply too large and too diverse for such a highly centralised system of admissions.

Besides, for an idea to work, it must be kept in mind that India is a Union of States and that education, being in the Concurrent List of the Constitution, the Central and State governments have shared power and responsibilities on all matters relating to education. The fact that the coordination and maintenance of standards in higher education has been put in the Union List must not be used to undermine the role of States in providing education. ■

Furqan Qamar, Professor at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, has served as the Secretary General of AIU, Vice Chancellor of the University of Rajasthan and the Central University of Himachal Pradesh, and as Adviser for Education in the erstwhile Planning Commission of India.



► **Students who appeared** for NEET 2024 from Haryana's Jind district. They all scored over 630 out of 720 and could have easily obtained admission in any government college but are now worried about their future. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

# DANGEROUS OBSESSION

The NTA's incompetence has a lot to do with the government's fetish with centralisation, and it could jeopardise the future of lakhs of students. **APOORVANAND**

**I**live on the main campus of the University of Delhi, popularly known as Delhi University (DU). In the month of June, one finds it difficult to negotiate the roads because young girls and boys with their parents are milling outside the gates of Daulat Ram College, Ramjas College, Shri Ram College of Commerce, or Hindu College, waiting for the call for admission to undergraduate (UG) courses. This is the first indication of the advent of a new session, which usually begins on July 21.

This year the streets were empty in June and continue to be, like last

year. DU has not yet published any schedule for UG admissions for the 2024-25 academic year. Last year, this process started on August 1, 2023, which delayed the session. The academic session could start only in mid-August.

The same is true for admissions to postgraduate (PG) courses. The story is the same in universities such as Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU).

Admission to UG and PG courses has been stalled because universities have handed over their admission process to the National Testing Agency (NTA). They have accepted the plan to admit students through a combined national examination called the Common University Entrance Test (CUET).

The NTA has not been able to declare the answer key for the CUET as yet. After releasing the answer key, a few days are given to challenge it, and

only after that can final results be declared. Last year, the CUET results were announced in mid-July. It delayed the whole admissions process, thereby disrupting the session. This year is likely to be a repeat of last year.

Meanwhile, private universities have started their admissions process; they have control over their academic calendars, unlike old and established universities such as DU and JNU, which have made themselves helpless by willingly discarding their time-tested admissions procedures just to benefit the NTA.

The NTA is in disarray following the exposé of a massive scam in the recently conducted National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET). Soon after that, it was found that the University Grants Commission-National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) examination was also compromised. The test was cancelled on the very day it was held. This was followed by the Ministry of Education asking the NTA to postpone the CSIR (Council of Scientific and Industrial Research) UGC-NET exam, scheduled to be held from June 25 to 27.

The NTA's incompetence and possible corruption in it has jeopardised the schedule of hundreds of educational institutions and created uncertainty for lakhs of students. The government is trying to brazen it out. But now, students and others have started checking the NTA's credentials and asking why the Central government is hell-bent on imposing the NTA on the entire education system of the country.

**T**HE NTA IS THE creation of the BJP-led government, but the idea behind it is old. It is the result of an obsession with centralising everything and making everything uniform, from curriculums and syllabuses to admissions processes. The general assumption is that diversity creates confusion and also inequality. Everything needs to be flattened into one shape and form. One can also think about the idea of one nation, one election.

What is the NTA, though, which is being

► **Outside a CUET centre** in Delhi in May 2023.

CUET is the route for admission into Central universities and many other State universities and autonomous institutions that choose to participate in it. R.V. MOORTHY

*In 2024, the CBSE conducted class X and class XII board exams for over 38 lakh students. It was also in charge of conducting the all-India medical entrance exam from 1988 for 25 years.*

tasked with conducting numerous examinations? Teachers of JNU had raised this issue when the university authorities trashed the decades-old admissions process to tie up with the NTA. They went to court, arguing for the autonomy of their institution, but the court could not appreciate the point.

Now, the nation has discovered that the NTA is only a society. It has not been established through an Act of Parliament. It is registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. It has only a governing body and no general body. The rules that govern the conduct of government employees do not apply to it.

Ayesha Kidwai, academic and linguist, questioned the logic behind this arrangement and asked why it was not created as an autonomous council under the Ministry of Education, like the **CBSE** (Central Board of Secondary Education). "Was this route chosen to evade the financial scrutiny and accountability that arises from being a government institution, by virtue of being subject to the Comptroller and Auditor General [CAG]?"

Others have been wondering, like her, why the CBSE's capacity was not enhanced, especially when the board has a long record of holding large-scale examinations and had in place all the necessary protocols. They wonder why it was not deemed necessary for the



NTA to have mandatory guidelines for accountability from the government about paper leaks, selection of experts as paper setters, modalities about conducting the examination, and the fees it can charge, apart from being accountable for issues such as breaches, wrong keys, and delays.

The educationist Prof. Krishna Kumar said that he visited the NTA website after the NEET fiasco, hoping to find a senior faculty member's number to call and find out what was going on. "I discovered that it is one of those new-age institutions that follow the dictum 'permanence mars efficiency'. That permanence may also jeopardise confidentiality must be another concern."

**E**VERYTHING IN THE NTA is outsourced. Prof. Kumar rightly says that even if the NTA's objectives look impressive, it is daunting to achieve them as the agency is asking people from other institutions or independents to spare time for it. (The agency's purported objectives are to improve equity and quality in education by administering research-based, valid, reliable, efficient, transparent, fair and international-level assessments.) A small body like the NTA, an upstart with no intellectual resources, is conducting entrance examinations for very different disciplines and

**Educationists have also been arguing that the CUET will negatively affect school education as students' marks in board examinations will be of little relevance.**

courses. It conducts entrance exams for the three main UG admissions: JEE-Main for engineering, NEET-UG for medicine, and CUET-UG for admissions to several other UG courses. Over 50 lakh candidates appear for these three exams every year. Besides these, it conducts CUET-PG for PG admissions, UGC-NET, and CSIR UGC-NET.

UGC-NET is a test to determine the eligibility for junior research fellowships, for appointment as assistant professor, and for admission to PhD in universities and colleges.

CSIR UGC-NET is accepted for PhD admissions in chemical sciences; earth, atmospheric, ocean, and planetary sciences; life sciences; mathematical sciences; and physical sciences.

The Common Management Admission Test, Hotel Management Joint Entrance Examination, Graduate Pharmacy Aptitude Test, and entrance tests for DU, JNU, the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade, and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research are among the various other tests conducted by the NTA.

To conduct such a large number of examinations, and that too of such diversity, the NTA has less than 25 regular staff members. It has no research capability, no domain experts, and no experts on testing. It is too fragile a body to handle the burden of so many examinations being imposed on it, which require very different kinds of expertise, skill, and preparation. Many are perplexed about the eagerness of the government to depend on such a weak structure to do a job that was done by scores of very competent institutions with a long and dependable record.

Several observers have been raising questions about the extraordinary interest that the present UGC Chairman is showing in pushing all universities to hand over all their entrance examinations, from UG to PhD level, to the NTA.

The teachers of JNU had resisted the attempt of their Vice Chancellor, now the NTA chairman, to force the university to join the CUET conducted by the NTA. They pointed out that the NTA is a private body. One needs to verify its assets and liabilities before doing any business with it.

The JNU Teachers' Association (JNUTA) has been asking for the memorandum of under-



# THE NTA'S EXAM LIST

FOR UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

- Joint Entrance Examination (Main) (JEE-Main)
- National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (Undergraduate) (NEET-UG)
- Common Management Admission Test (CMAT)
- Common University Entrance Test (CUET)
- Graduate Pharmacy Aptitude Test (GPAT)
- Indian Institute of Foreign Trade Entrance Test
- Jawaharlal Nehru University Entrance Examination
- Indian Council of Agricultural Research Entrance Examination
- National Council for Hotel Management Joint Entrance Examination (NCHMJEE)
- Delhi University Entrance Test (DUET)
- National Institute of Fashion Technology Entrance Examination
- All India Ayush Post Graduate Entrance Test (AIAPGET)
- Joint Integrated Programme in Management Admission Test (JIPMAT)
- Graduate Aptitude Test – Biotechnology (GAT-B)
- Biotechnology Eligibility Test (BET)
- SWAYAM

FOR RECRUITMENT

- University Grants Commission National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET)
- Council of Scientific and Industrial Research National Eligibility Test (CSIR-NET)
- Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti Recruitment Exam
- Biomedical Research Eligibility Test (BRET)
- Military Nursing Service Recruitment Exam
- Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade Recruitment Exam
- National Horticulture Board Recruitment Exam
- Uttarakhand High Court Recruitment Exam
- Gujarat High Court Recruitment Exam
- EPFO Limited Departmental Competitive Examination (EPFO-LDCE)
- Central Universities Recruitment (CUREC)

FOR SCHOOLS

- Scheme for Residential Education for Students in High Classes in Targeted Areas (SRESHTA)
- Navyug School Sarojini Nagar Entrance Test (NSSNET)
- All India Sainik Schools Entrance Exam (AISSEE)

standing signed between the university and the NTA and the terms on which the deal was signed. It wants to know how much the NTA is charging JNU to conduct its entrance examinations and why a process being ably handled by the university with its own resources was outsourced to the NTA.

The haste with which the UGC Chairman directed all universities to take the CUET route to admit students is also being questioned. Kidwai, a former president of JNUTA, said that she was shocked to find that there was no discussion in the meetings of the UGC about the CUET or UGC-NET, let alone its decision to ask universities to go to the NTA.

The entry of the NTA in the admissions process of DU has unnecessarily complicated it. I am told that apart from coaching centres for the CUET, now you have admission guides for admission to universities like DU who charge Rs.1,500-2,000 just to fill the admission form. Rural students find the whole process very cumbersome and incomprehensible and have to depend on these admission guides.

**B**Y IMPOSING A CENTRALISED examination on all universities, the Central government has undermined the federal character of the country. Educationists have also been arguing that the CUET will negatively affect school education as the marks students get in the board examination will be of little relevance. What was predicted two years back has turned into reality. Thousands of coaching centres have emerged across the country to train students to crack the CUET.

One wonders then about the design of the government when it insists that all entrance examinations be conducted by the NTA. Is it to weaken the education system itself by destroying the trust in the examination? Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a political scientist, has said that in a system affected by extreme scarcity, examinations remain the only validating ideology. If the trust in examinations goes, everything collapses. And that is what the NTA is doing: sowing permanent distrust in the system. What purpose will be served by disrupting the system without having put in place a new and more credible one? ■

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► An optical mark recognition answer sheet.  
GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

# MCOQ not the answer

The exclusive use of the multiple-choice question format in entrance examinations is not conducive to judging the analytical and critical faculties of aspirants. **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**

**T**he controversies surrounding the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) examination, the cancellation of the UGC-NET examination, and the postponement of several others call into question the ability of the National Testing Agency (NTA) to conduct large-scale examinations. While there are several issues relating to these examinations, one that has been of great concern to academics is the exclusive use of the multiple-choice question (MCQ) format.

Following a Cabinet approval in November 2017, the Union Ministry of Education created the NTA in 2018 as a registered society. It was provided a one-time grant of Rs.25 crore to begin its operations “as an auto-

nomous and self-sustained premier testing organisation” in higher education. In the order notifying the NTA, the government said it would give policy directions that the NTA was bound to follow. The restraint on the NTA’s autonomy was underscored by the government’s role in the recent cancellation of examinations.

The responsibility for conducting various all-India entrance examinations was transferred to the NTA from bodies such as the Central Board of Secondary Education, the All-India Council for Technical Education, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research, the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Indian Council for Agricultural Re-

**When the truth is a matter of interpretation and where there are contending interpretations, as in several fields of knowledge, it is not easy to formulate purely “objective” questions.**

search, and the National Council for Hotel Management. This was done so that “these agencies are relieved of the responsibility of conducting these examinations and can focus on their core activities”. Subsequently, Central universities—JNU, Delhi University, and Indira Gandhi National Open University—were made to transfer their entrance examinations to the NTA. The Common University Entrance Test (CUET) was floated as the single point for admission to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in universities and colleges. In 2024, at the UGC’s behest, Central universities replaced their own written examinations for admissions to PhD programmes with a system of using the scores secured by candidates in the NTA-conducted National Eligibility Test (NET) examination.

**T**HE NTA’S MISSION statement aims to “improve equity and quality in education by administering research-based valid, reliable, efficient, transparent, fair and international level assessments”. It is unclear how the NTA, which as a financially self-sustaining organisation must generate its resources from the fees paid by those appearing in examinations, can develop the institutional capabilities this mission requires. The NTA’s RTI disclosures also show that six years after it was created, it has fewer than 15 regular employees, from the level of Director General to Senior Superintendent, and most of its staff are non-academic.

There is little evidence of the NTA having actually done any serious exercise or undertaken any wide consultation to determine assessment methods and procedures that would be most suitable to achieve the twin goals of equity and quality across the wide range of examinations it is supposed to conduct.

▼  
**Student members of the Krantikari Yuva Sangathan**

protesting against Delhi University’s admission process through the CUET Merit List outside the university’s arts faculty in October 2022.

R.V. MOORTHY

The exclusive use of MCQs has become the norm in the NTA examinations. Teachers familiar with this format say that each question is supposed to have a single, unambiguously correct answer that must be picked by the examinee from among the choices given. This is supposed to eliminate “subjectivity” from the process of evaluating ability, aptitude, and learning levels of students. Additionally, the checking of answer scripts and awarding of marks can be transferred to machines, through optical mark recognition sheets in the pen-and-paper mode or computer-based tests (CBTs). The need for qualified human examiners and a process to standardise evaluations done by multiple examiners is thus eliminated. There is also no need for a system of re-evaluation as part of a grievance redress process: this can be reduced to simply checking objections raised by candidates, or claims of errors in the questions, before the declaration of final results.

MCQ tests, therefore, offer an easy option to handle the huge administrative challenges



that inevitably accompany any alternative mode of assessment in large-scale examinations. This is perhaps the single most important reason why it is used so extensively. The “MCQ syndrome”, as one eminent academic described it, is thus an automatic fallout of the “one nation, one test” approach. All the more so because the responsibility for several tests has been thrust on a thinly staffed organisation with a very short history.

**E**XCESSIVE RELIANCE on the MCQ format has been controversial the world over, including the US where it originated and came to be used extensively. It is well recognised among educators that preparing a good multiple-choice test is not a simple exercise. Academics contacted by *Frontline* said that when the truth is a matter of interpretation and where there are contending interpretations, as is the case in several fields of knowledge, it is not easy to formulate purely “objective” questions that do not reflect in any way the perspective of whoever sets the ques-

**That the MCQ format can be more amenable to the use of unfair means was brought home by the recent case of the NEET examination. Answers to leaked questions were memorised overnight.**

tions. In the current Indian context, this can even lead to a solution worse than the problem, namely, the imposition of a particular version of the truth as correct if examinations are conducted under the control of a government with its own ideological agenda.

Constructing questions that are free of bias is even harder if they are to have a single correct answer and yet test the examinee’s abilities of reasoning and deduction. Testing the ability to reason is different from merely testing the ability to remember facts. Even the ability to recall the correct answer can be imperfectly tested in an MCQ test because right answers can be “recognised” in the options given, which is not the same as remembering them. Since the MCQ format also opens up the possibility of “guessing” the answer or arriving at it by elimination, the incorrect choices also have to be appropriately framed to serve as effective “distractors”. Getting a correct answer by pure chance also has a high probability in



the MCQ format, but this can be reduced by methods such as negative marking for incorrect answers. These are all well-known challenges of using MCQs. How the NTA has fared so far in meeting these challenges has never been systematically examined. It is doubtful if the organisation has developed appropriate mechanisms to ensure that its MCQ tests are of the highest quality.

**T**HE SECOND widely accepted problem with the exclusive use of the MCQ format consists in its limits as a method of assessment. Questions that cannot have a single correct answer have to be excluded. Several fields of knowledge, however, involve a scientific approach—a combination of reasoning and assessment of evidence to arrive at conclusions—without single and unambiguous answers being the norm. This is not simply the case in the social sciences and can hold true in fields like medicine. The MCQ format also renders invisible to the assessment process the steps through which the correct answer is arrived at by the student. This has implications for assessment across all fields, including the natural sciences and even mathematics where a single correct answer to every question may actually be the norm.

Nandita Narain, former president of the Delhi University Teachers' Association, and for several decades a celebrated teacher of mathematics at Delhi's St Stephens College, describes the MCQ format as a shallow and unsatisfactory method of testing. She says that "what is most important in higher mathematics is the process of reasoning and logic applied in arriving at a solution to a mathematical problem, and it is entirely possible for the answer to be correct even when the logic used is flawed. This reasoning ability is not tested in the MCQ format." She also asserts that performance in MCQ-based CUET does not reveal to teachers "how solid are the school basics of students admitted to undergraduate programmes".

Ira Bhaskar, a retired professor of cinema studies at JNU's School of Arts and Aesthetics and for many years previously a teacher of English literature at a Delhi University college, was extremely concerned when JNU made the shift in 2018 from its own entrance examination to the MCQ-format CBT conducted by the



▼ **Students being checked** before entering the NEET examination hall in Mangaluru's Canara College.

MANJUNATH H.S.

NTA. She became the lead petitioner, along with several other JNU faculty members, in a case in the Delhi High Court challenging that shift. "Writing skills, the ability to synthesise material and concepts, and the capacity to develop arguments and articulate them cannot be tested in the MCQ format. These are, however, the most important abilities needed in fields that study creative expressions—like literature, cinema, the arts, and performance," says Bhaskar.

**I**NTERNATIONAL STUDIES have highlighted the fact that evaluation formats tend to have an effect on a student's approach to learning. Excessive weightage to the MCQ format tends to incentivise a focus on acquisition of a narrower range of abilities and to promote surface rather than "deep" learning. This becomes a serious issue even if the method is used only for entrance examinations and not to evaluate performance in the academic programmes to which students are admitted. A broad-based learning in such programmes, in fact, gets relatively devalued when all admissions from the undergraduate stage to research programmes, and the securing of fellowships and eligibility to be teachers in



higher education institutions, depend critically on performance in MCQ-based competitive examinations. Such limited learning can have a cumulative effect through successive stages of higher education.

On the other hand, the abilities that may not be tested in the MCQ mode—the ability to think independently and critically, to be innovative and creative—become more and more important in every step of the transition from the final years of schooling to PhD. This is true for all areas of knowledge. Even the current Vice Chancellor of JNU appointed by the Modi government has made several public statements questioning the appropriateness of this format for admissions to postgraduate and research programmes.

The exclusive use of MCQ-based testing for judging abilities has implications for equity and fairness of those examinations. That they can be more amenable to the use of unfair means was brought home by the case of the NEET examination, where candidates were able to memorise overnight the correct answers to leaked questions.

The petition by the JNU teachers also highlighted how differences in access to computers and the Internet and consequent differences

in computer literacy can work to the disadvantage of those from less privileged backgrounds in a diverse country like India. The narrowness of the abilities tested and the greater role that access to expensive coaching can play in developing those are also aspects that have been flagged as inimical to equity considerations. Narain describes coaching centres as “hotbeds of corruption whose success can depend more on their ability to access question papers”.

On the other side, however, it has also been argued that the MCQ format is relatively advantageous to underprivileged students as it removes the handicap of less developed language and writing skills that are the result of their circumstances and unequal access to education. The counter-argument to this has been that equity and quality are not incompatible with each other, and there are other methods of “equalising” performances of students with diverse backgrounds in examinations. In addition to reservation of seats for designated disadvantaged groups, the system of “deprivation points” pioneered by JNU, which involves criteria-based award of such points over and above the marks secured in the examinations, has been referred to in this regard.

The JNU Teachers’ Association has highlighted the correlation between the shift of the entrance examinations to the MCQ-based CBT and the marked decline in the proportion of women students in the university, reversing the previous trend. The JNUTA has also highlighted how the examination fees that students had to pay increased significantly when the shift was made from its own entrance examination to one conducted by the NTA. Narain pointed to her experience of a significant reduction in the regional and cultural diversity of the classroom after Delhi University’s shift to the MCQ format and the CUET. This, she argues, has adverse consequences for learning for students by narrowing exposure to diversity.

The qualitative implications of the MCQ format in higher education are many, as are the challenges of equity and diversity. These, which academics say are an integral part of the process of acquiring an education, deserve greater attention than they may yet have got. ■



**“Writing skills, the ability to synthesise material and concepts... cannot be tested in the MCQ format.”**

**Ira Bhaskar**

Retired professor,  
JNU

# Designed for exclusion?

Among the exclusionary aspects of NEET are the dilution of entry standards in the form of low cut-off scores—which allows non-meritorious candidates to qualify and, also, strangely, acts as a barrier for the entry of women—and economic exclusion in terms of expenses for coaching and admission fees. **M. SURESH BABU**

**C**entral examinations are a way of measuring performance, usually against certain predefined standards, and are intended to provide information on how individual students perform relative to the national or regional student population. Given that education itself is fraught with agency problems in developing economies, the role performed by central examinations may be pivotal to how the education system works. The information they generate is used by many stakeholders in, and even beyond, the education system.

Central examinations are considered an important element of meritocratic educational systems. There are two ways, broadly speaking, that one might conceive of meritocratic education. The standard narrow conception distributes certain educational goods and opportunities on merit. This conception is based on the premise that scarce educational goods such as admissions into universities are allocated in such a way that students with greater merit are prioritised. This version of meritocracy is typically invoked when demands for affirmative action or other non-merit-based policies arise.

The other is the broader view, where “meritocracy” refers to the

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**In India’s federal system, centralised examinations such as NEET, conducted in order to admit students into undergraduate medical courses, generate both horizontal and vertical imbalances.**



► **At a student protest** against the alleged irregularities in the conduct of the NEET examination, at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on July 1.

SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP



**SCRAP  
NTA!**

practice of distributive justice, according to which certain economic goods (such as jobs and income) must be distributed in accordance with merit, and in order to do so one's merit must satisfy certain other constraints. Merit is developed against a background of equality of opportunity. Given that education is one of the primary vehicles through which we develop merit, an education system rooted in meritocracy would need to adhere to a principle of equality of opportunity as well. This requires a commitment to embrace decidedly unmeritocratic, egalitarian approaches to allocate educational goods that would permit certain forms of "levelling down".

**A** COMMITMENT TO a meritocratic view involving distributive justice requires rejecting the narrow meritocratic conception of education. An understanding of the connections between meritocracy and equality of opportunity is vital to shed light on disagreements about the role and value of equality of opportunity in education. Central examinations in India, and the National Eligibility cum Entrance Test (NEET) in particular, are designed with the narrow conception of meritocracy and therefore manufacture exclusion.

In India's federal system, centralised examinations such as NEET, conducted in order to admit students into undergraduate medical courses, generate both horizontal and vertical imbalances. The health of its citizens is the de facto responsibility of States. Article 21 of the Constitution protects the "right to life", which presupposes a right to access reasonable healthcare. Public health is a subject on which State governments can legislate almost exclusively. State public health departments offer preventive and curative services to elevate the quality of life of their citizens. The majority of medical colleges are run by State governments; they play a critical role in producing healthcare professionals, who form the backbone of States' health infrastructure for timely delivery of public health.

Medical education thus needs to be conceptualised from a broader perspective than just institutions of higher education as it generates and maintains an important public service, namely, the healthcare system. This highlights the need for a



“systems thinking” approach to deliver quality public healthcare, which has faced challenges, especially after the COVID pandemic.

As State governments run the public health system, they require greater autonomy in deciding inputs to ensure better outcomes, and entry into medical colleges is a critical input on which States require freedom to sustain their health systems. A centralised process would curb the autonomy of States and result in arbitrary allocation of inputs, skewing their healthcare systems and leading to inter-State and intra-State imbalances in terms of both inputs and outcomes. Further, a unilateral change in the selection of healthcare professionals through NEET without a consultative mechanism to assess its impact on a State’s healthcare system, while also ignoring the social and economic implications of such a process, leads to the exacerbation of inequalities, which gets perpetuated owing to the lack of autonomy.

**T**HE EXCLUSIONARY ASPECTS of NEET surface at multiple levels. First, an examination rooted in meritocracy dilutes the entry standards to open the floodgates of medical education to non-meritorious candidates, which is evident in the low cut-off scores for qualifying. The cut-off score this year is 164 out of 720, which is 22.78 per cent. In 2022, it was 16.36 and in 2023 19.03 per cent. The qualifying percentile of NEET-PG (postgraduate) and NEET-SS (super speciality) courses was slashed to zero percentile in 2023 under instructions from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

Reducing the qualifying percentile only allows private medical colleges to make money and facilitates large-scale corruption by the blocking of seats. As a result, students with high merit are not able to get admission, while those with low scores and more money secure admission. So much for meritocracy that a test with questions in physics, chemistry, botany and zoology makes it possible for students who score



▼ **Members** of the Indian Youth Congress protest against the rigging of the NEET examination at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on June 27. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

in single digits in any one subject to qualify and become medical professionals by virtue of marks in other subjects.

The second striking form of exclusion emanating from NEET is economic exclusion. This manifests at two levels. At the first level, there is the exorbitant cost of coaching, which students have to undergo in order to prepare for the examination. The annual revenue of coaching institutes was a whopping Rs.24,000 crore, according to a 2015 estimate by an expert committee set up by the Education Ministry. In 2022, the market revenue of the coaching industry in India was Rs.58,088 crore, according to the Pune-based consultancy firm Infinium Global Research. The coaching industry’s growth is projected to reach Rs.1,33,995 crore by 2028. The size of the industry reveals the expenditure borne by households and the heavy financial burden they face so that their children can prepare for the examination. Households that cannot afford the expense of coaching classes are left out of the system.

**A**FTER THIS INITIAL heavy expenditure comes the next big expense: the fees charged by institutions. The cost of education varies according to the institution. There are four categories of institutions, based on the type of management: Central universities, government colleges in the public sector, private

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**The qualifying percentile of NEET for Post Graduate and Super Speciality courses was slashed to zero percentile in 2023 under instructions from the Ministry of Health.**



colleges, and deemed universities in the private sector. Out of the total number of seats, 51.67 per cent are in public institutions and the rest in the private sector. The fees charged for the entire course ranges from Rs.3.64 lakh to Rs.6.2 lakh in public institutions and Rs.78.2 lakh to Rs.1.22 crore in private institutions. Government institutions are affordable for a large section of the population, while private institutions can be afforded by a small fraction of high-income households. The distribution of seats and low cut-off marks clearly reveal the exclusionary design of NEET in an economy characterised by rising inequalities.

The third form of exclusion is based on gender. Unlike other competitive examinations, such as the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE) for engineering courses, a higher number of female candidates appear for NEET. Out of the total number of candidates who appeared for NEET in 2024, 57 per cent were female and 43 per cent male; for JEE, it was 67 per cent male and 33 per cent female. The system of lowering the cut-off marks is to be interpreted as an intention to erect barriers for the entry of women into the medical profession. To elaborate, the household expenditure towards education is skewed in favour of boys in patriarchal societies; hence, households would be willing to fund the educational expenses of a male student with a low NEET score than that of a female student with relative-

**Out of the total number of candidates who appeared for NEET in 2024, 57 per cent were female.**

ly higher score. The logic of meritocracy would assume it to be the other way, but social realities tell us the opposite. Female students face a double disadvantage in this scenario. First, they face difficulties in convincing parents to fund the expensive coaching programmes, which often do not match the convenient timings of parents and students and lead to anxieties about the safety of girl students. Second, if the scores are not high in NEET, they fail to get family funding for fees of medical colleges. This generates a scenario where girl students after much toil end up as losers due to a peculiar system of low cut-off marks in the qualifying exams.

**T**HE RECENT NEET fiasco raises doubts about the capacity of the state to create robust institutions that deliver consistently good outcomes. The fragilities associated with state capacity in India fall largely into three categories: planning, process, and personnel. A closer look reveals that the state is actually understaffed in several key areas. The National Testing Agency (NTA), a registered society, is an example of this. Understaffing has been a feature of India's public administration for many years now as successive governments have been going slow on recruitments in the name of efficiency. Further, "state capacity", or the ability of the state to effectively design and implement public policies, varies greatly across India.

Multiple issues require attention in this context while focussing on the manifold shortcomings of agencies such as the NTA. First, there needs to be focussed attention on the levels of corruption and venality these agencies generate. Second, the lack of competence is a severe limitation both at the policy design and at the policy formulation levels. The third and most crucial challenge is the effective implementation of policies.

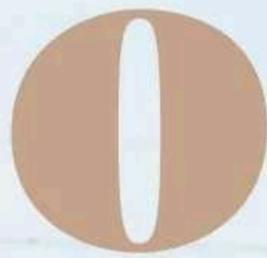
The NEET fiasco shows that instead of expanding the coverage of "pockets of efficiency", hastily planned transformations through weak institutions are spreading incompetence in India's governance institutions. Unfortunately, the core of India's public educational apparatus has not enjoyed the same kind of rejuvenation that has embraced some other domains. If this is left unaddressed, it will undermine human welfare in the long run. ■

M. Suresh Babu is Director, Madras Institute of Development Studies. The views expressed are personal.

# ON THE WRONG TRACK

The recent incidents in the Railways involving accidents and passenger safety point to a decade of muddled priorities.

**R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN**



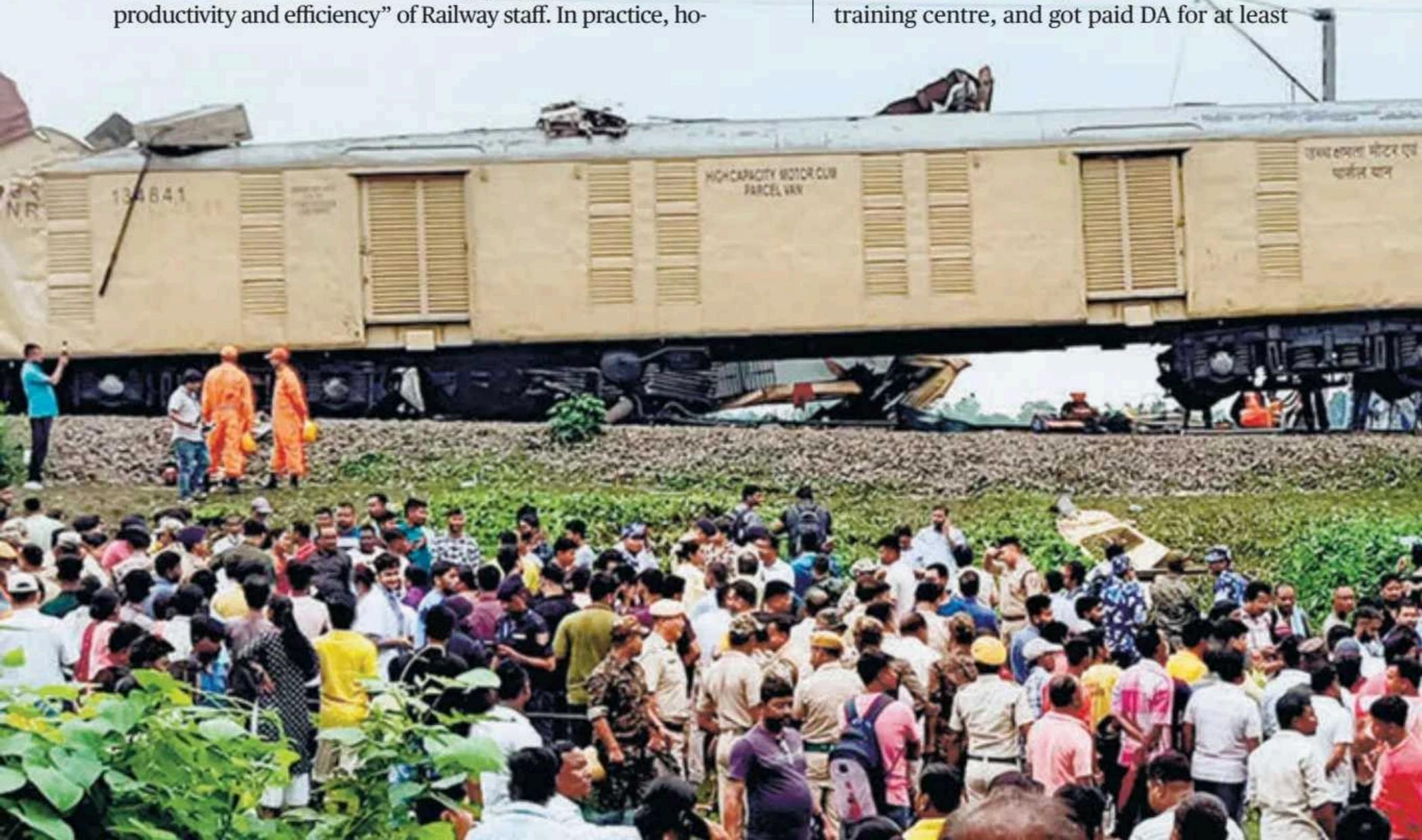
On paper, Indian Railways' training and safety modules for its employees are awesome. For instance, Project Saksham, to train 13 lakh employees, is dubbed the country's "largest, time-bound, comprehensive training programme to boost productivity and efficiency" of Railway staff. In practice, ho-

wever, it is, at best, an ineffective approach to training to "create a mindset to deliver new challenges".

The Indian Railways' rationale for the project when it was launched in 2017 was this: "With growing rail network, new trains, different high quality services designed by the railways and the promise of the government to deliver superior and safe rail services and growing expectation of our passengers and commuters for better amenities and services, it is imperative that the railway employees rise to the occasion to deliver on the promise. Employees can and do deliver only when they have the right skills, knowledge and the mindset to deliver to the new standards of excellence that the organization hold from them all. This training will help achieve these objectives."

In a 2017 letter, Ashwani Lohani, Chairman, Railway Board, the apex Railway body in New Delhi, described the training as one that would "make a difference to the job performance of all departments and employees and thus, Indian Railways".

The training proved to be a paid vacation for non-critical staff. Recalling an instance from the time it was launched, one senior employee said: "Many from divisional offices and zonal offices got to go to the zonal training centre, and got paid DA for at least



office days.”

But it was not so for the front-line staff of whom there is an acute shortage. Anecdotal evidence across zones and divisions indicates that given the number of vacancies in the front-line cadres (loco running staff, station staff, and yard staff), some divisions decided to hold a day-long training programme at a nearby major station. But even this was not available for at least 40 per cent of the front-line staff in several divisions.

But the “results” had to be shown. Every staffer was asked to sign an undertaking to the effect that they underwent training in certain techniques. “Many signed and sent back the undertaking without any training. A few resisted. Officials in the rank of Section Traffic Inspector or equivalent went across the divisions collecting signatures,” the employee said.

No doubt, the Railways declared the training a huge success and began Phase-2 of the training

**A CAG report says that “the deficiencies in setting up a foolproof system of learning from past mistakes are a serious impediment to... preventing recurrences of incidents of derailments”.**

in 2019. S.N. Agarwal, Member (Staff), Railway Board, wrote to Zonal General Managers on March 20: “Approximately 13 lakh Railway employees had been given 5-day on the job training...” and that the Railway staff need the “right skill, knowledge and mindset to deliver to the new standards of excellence”.

This training too was completed “successfully” in 2019, according to senior Railway officials. On the ground, the same story was repeated, according to anecdotal evidence from a few divisions.

This approach holds a mirror to the critical issues that afflict Indian Railways today. There is a massive disconnect of the zonal and Railway Board officials with the reality of the operations on the ground.

This is evident each time there is an incident: ▶

▶ **At the site** of a collision between an express passenger train and a goods train in Nirmaljote, near Rangapani station, in West Bengal on June 17.

DIPTENDU DUTTA/AFP



a berth collapsing fatally on a passenger on June 15; a locomotive detaching itself from a moving passenger train between Ernakulam and Shoranur in Kerala on June 28; the decision to reduce the speed of the Vande Bharat and Gatiman Express from 160 kmph to 130 kmph; and the many averted collisions, including a major near-miss in 2023 involving the Sampark Kranti Express and an empty freight train near Mysuru.

The berth collapse has two versions: one, that the upper berth fell on the passenger on board the Ernakulam-Hazrat Nizamuddin Express, and another that says that a middle berth fell on the passenger because another passenger had not secured the chain properly.

**R**EFUTING MEDIA REPORTS that the middle berth collapsed because it was damaged, Southern Railway's Chief Public Relations Officer, M. Senthamil Selvan, claimed on June 26 that "a thorough scrutiny of the reported middle berth seat was conducted in H. Nizamuddin and it was found to be in good condition".

Selvan left out three facts: one, in more than half a century of middle berths being used in the Indian Railways, no passenger had died because a berth fell on a passenger below; two, the time of the accident, 6:34 p.m., is hardly the time that passengers go to sleep, and it is closer to dinner time when most berths are secured so that all three passengers can occupy the seat; and three, more than a day had passed after the accident near Ramagundam in Telangana until the "thorough examination" was conducted. Neither was the compartment detached at Ramagundam for a forensic examination, nor was an immediate examination of the seat carried out.

This shocking accident is actually yet another indicator of the state of rolling stock (coaches) in the Railways. Operation staff across multiple terminus stations that this correspondent interacted with highlighted the poor state of maintenance of coaches that are run to north India. Added to this is the overcrowding of reserved coaches, which makes it impossible to conduct any effective cleaning in any ordinary express train, said one staffer, who had been a Train Superintendent. In almost every incident, the Railways has tried to curtail the media fallout rather than actually work on the issues that affect rail safety. In fact, this was evident after the accident involving the Kanchanjungha Express and a con-



▼ **The wreckage** of the Kanchanjungha Express train at Rangapani in West Bengal on June 18. DIBYANGSHU SARKAR/AFP

tainer train that killed 10 people and injured over 40 on June 17. By June 19, most of the Indian media, with a few exceptions, had forgotten the issue.

One newspaper went to extent of praising Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw, "the multifaceted Minister [who] has a one-track mind with multitasking mastery".

Vaishnaw's record in the Railway Ministry is pathetic: multiple consequential Railway accidents in less than a year; zero progress in the installation of Kavach, an indigenously developed anti-collision train protection device; over a lakh vacancies that have not been filled across critical Railway departments; and overcrowded trains where passengers without tickets routinely spill over to the reserved and premium air-conditioned compartments.

A consequential train accident is one in which there is loss of human life, injury, loss of Railway property, and/or interruption to traffic. In just under a year, besides the Kanchanjungha Express accident, a collision of two passenger trains in Andhra Pradesh in October 2023 killed 17 people, and a triple train accident on June 2, 2023, involving the Shalimar Express and the Coromandel Express killed nearly 300 and injured over 900. In each of these, there was a problem with the automatic signalling system.

In the June 17 accident, a goods train rammed into the Kanchanjungha Express almost a full three hours after a signal failure was reported. This can only happen because of failure at multiple levels of the Railway hierarchy, from the



▼ **Railway workers** and National Disaster Response Force personnel inspect the accident site of the Kanchanjunga Express.

DIBYANGSHU SARKAR/AFP

Railway Board to the level of loco pilots. The failure occurred at 05:50 am on June 17. This was communicated to the Signal Department at 06:05 am. The Signal Department did not declare it a prolonged failure since it expected the problem to be rectified soon. Hence, the section continued to follow the existing Automatic Block System. In the event of signal failures in the Automatic Block System, to operate the trains, a paper authority is given to each train to pass the signals.

The accident led to many knee-jerk reactions. One Railway zone banned the practice of issuing the prescribed T/A 912 form (authorising drivers to proceed), only to withdraw the ban 24 hours later. This incident highlights how well the top brass of the Eastern Railway understands the General and Subsidiary Rules (which includes operational guidelines).

*The Hindu* reported on June 26 that the speed of Vande Bharat trains in the fastest route, Delhi-Agra-Jhansi, had been decreased to 130 kmph from 160 kmph because of faulty safety equipment. Of Indian Railways' nearly 68,000 km of track, this is the only sector where a few trains were being run at 160 kmph.

Soon after the accident involving the Kanchanjunga Express, it is learnt that both Northern Railway and North Central Railway approached the Railway Board for a reduction in the speed of premium trains. This calls for a major modification of the railway timetable in the entire section, where the track utilisation is over 100 per cent. This means inordinate delays of su-

**At the current pace of installation of Kavach, it will take 46 years to cover the 68,000 km of track in Indian Railways and 100 years to install it in the 15,200 locomotives.**

perfast trains and "lesser" trains since the priority is only for Vande Bharat.

All premium trains across India will now run only at 130 kmph, a speed limit that was achieved more than 30 years ago. So, despite all the publicity surrounding Vande Bharat trains, there has been absolutely no improvement in the speed of trains.

**A** **COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR** General (CAG) report of 2022, which examined derailment in the Indian Railways between April 2017 and March 2021, noted that "there was increasing trend on IR towards expenditure on non-priority works against the guiding principles of Rashtriya Rail Sanraksha Kosh (RRSK) deployment framework. The sole purpose of creating a separate dedicated fund for financing safety related works was defeated, as safety related works were held up due to fund constraints. Further, incorrect bookings denoting misclassification of expenditure led to reduced RRSK fund availability for priority works."

More importantly, the CAG found that the Railways "failed to act in accordance with the observation of the Standing Committee on Railways (2016-17) wherein it was observed that the physical as well as financial targets in respect of track renewals need to be enhanced as per the annual requirement for track renewals for safety".

One of the most critical recommendations of

the Anil Kakodkar Committee (2012) to review the safety of Indian Railways has also not been acted upon. It says: “Three vital functions (rule-making, operations, and regulation) are all vested in the Railway Board. There is need for an independent mechanism for safety regulation. The Committee recommends the creation of a statutory Railway Safety Authority with enough powers to have a safety oversight on the operational mode of Railways.”

Given the fact that accident reports are not submitted on time (nearly 50 per cent overshoot the time allocated), the CAG recorded that “the deficiencies in setting up a foolproof system of learning from past mistakes are a serious impediment to fulfillment of one of the main objectives of the accident inquiry reports of preventing recurrences of incidents of derailments”.

The reports of committees, the Railways’ own official recommendations, and the CAG reports indicate that there are enough measures for the Railways to ensure passenger safety. For example, Vaishnaw had posted a series of tweets on the Kavach system when it was being tested in 2022. There was nothing from him or the Railway Ministry’s handle after the recent accidents.

In fact, one official said that not a single km of Kavach was added after the Balasore accident of June 2023. In response to a question in the Lok Sabha in December 2023, the Railway Minister said that Kavach had been deployed in 1,465 km and in 139 locomotives, including electrical multiple unit rakes in South Central Railway. Kavach was approved in 2020, and there were three original equipment manufacturers.

According to a report in *The Hindu*, at the current pace of installation of Kavach, it will take 46 years to cover the 68,000 km of track in Indian Railways and 100 years to install it in the 15,200 locomotives. If the pace of installation is increased to 6,800 km of track each year (and to 1,500 locomotives), it will still take 10 years to cover the entire inventory. The other major problem is unfilled vacancies in the Railways. The opposition parties highlighted the issue even during the 2024 Lok Sabha election campaign. They have also questioned the excessive focus on the bullet train and the Prime Minister’s pet project, Vande Bharat trains.

“Why are the nearly 3 lakh posts vacant in the Railways not filled in the last 10 years,” asked Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge after the June 17 accident. A few days after the accident,



► **The site of the collision** involving three trains, in Balasore, Odisha, in June 2023. ADNAN ABIDI/REUTERS



▼ **Railway Minister** Ashwini Vaishnaw inspecting a Vande Bharat sleeper version at BEML in Bengaluru. HANDOUT

however, the Railways announced that it would fill 18,799 vacancies of assistant loco pilots in 16 zones in India.

Meanwhile, the opposition has been distracted by another high-profile issue: that of examination paper leaks, involving the National Testing Agency. As of now, it appears that the heat is off the Railways. ■



[ FROM THE SIDELINES ]

**SABA NAQVI** is a Delhi-based journalist and author of four books, who writes on politics and identity issues.

# Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan

The most important challenge for the BJP and the RSS after the results of the Lok Sabha election is their social project coming undone.

**T**he first session of the 18th Lok Sabha saw a resurgent opposition confronting an authoritarian figure who is determined to indicate that nothing has changed. One has to give it to the BJP for its commitment to Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan (or Bharat). Although the One Man/One Election vision must have evaporated as the party lost a simple majority in Parliament, ideological inclinations showed most egregiously in the manner in which Sansad TV, which belongs to Parliament and not the government per se, functioned in the first session of the 18th Lok Sabha. The two Sansad TV channels are mandated to show live proceedings of both Houses of Parliament, and so they did. But while Hindi speeches (such as those by Prime Minister Narendra Modi) were shown without a voice-over, speeches made in English were mutilated with a Hindi voice-over.

This means members were not given the option of being heard in the language of their choice. It is clearly discriminatory towards MPs from non-Hindi States. Some of the liveliest (and critical of the BJP/Modi) speeches were therefore mutilated by the Hindi voice-over in the Sansad TV broadcast.

Next, we come to the question of Hindus that was so fiercely debated in the Lok Sabha after Leader of the Opposition (LoP) Rahul Gandhi held up an image of Siva and said that the BJP, the RSS, and Narendra Modi do not speak for all Hindus, but they do instigate violence and hatred. One consequence was that Modi accused Rahul Gandhi of insulting Hin-

dus and also said that Hindu society must “reflect” as sinister conspiracies are afoot.

Ideologically, it was par for the course for the Prime Minister to say so besides the usual incantation of “appeasement” having destroyed India. This was also the core of many controversial election speeches made by him during the campaign; the basic psychological thought behind them was to suggest that Hindus were in danger (after a decade of Modi rule!).

The only extraordinary thing about Modi’s address to the Lok Sabha was its length, at nearly two and a half hours. There was also the fact that someone who expects to be treated like a demigod was throughout heckled and interrupted by opposition MPs raising slogans about Manipur. Other than that, there was nothing new that the Prime Minister said or offered as a vision. He did find original ways of lashing out at the Congress and Rahul Gandhi, however, as if they were the only members of the opposition contingent that had compelled him to sit and hear taunts and critiques for two days.

Part of the delusion is to suggest that it is Modi vs Congress/Rahul Gandhi and not Modi vs an alliance that delivered humbling routs, from West Bengal in the east to Maharashtra in the west and from Uttar Pradesh in the north to Tamil Nadu in the south. In the Rajya Sabha, the Prime Minister said that the government had 20 more years to go and that efforts were being made to black out the decision of the people of the country. He spoke as if he were still the “Absolute” ruler of Bharat/Hindustan.

**T**HE DILEMMA OF the Supreme Leader who is not arithmetically supreme is something India has not dealt with in the past. From the BJP itself, Atal Bihari Vajpayee accepted defeat when his National Democratic Alliance (NDA) got fewer seats than the United Progressive Alliance led by the Congress in 2004. Indira Gandhi, being remembered these days by the BJP for the 1975 Emergency,



accepted the mandate that followed in 1977 and returned to power with a big majority in 1980.

Modi is a figure who first dominated his own party and ideological family, then sought to be a parasite on traditional alliance partners of the BJP (many of whom, such as the undivided Shiv Sena, would leave). He is therefore not inclined to behave as if he is heading an alliance but prefers the delusion of “my way, all the way”. In maintaining continuity by retaining his top Ministers and the Speaker, and the refusal to have a Deputy Speaker, besides the allocation of insignificant portfolios to alliance partners, the Prime Minister has made it clear that he will give no quarter to anyone except those who live in his reflected shadow.

There is a media ecosystem with a client-patron relationship around Modi, and one of the arguments being offered now is that since he will always be called dictatorial, he may as well do things his way. Still, it is a sign of the changing times that almost all the pro-BJP/Modi news channels broadcast live Rahul Gandhi’s speech as LoP when he opened the opposition charge. This would not have happened before June 4.

**T**HE WORLD HAS therefore changed, although the Prime Minister has not. For all the amplification of the “Hindu in danger” line inside Parliament and outside by BJP protesters, the real churn that knocked the BJP/Modi off the perch came from caste mobilisation. Dalit voters increasingly believe that the BJP/RSS is surreptitiously reducing reserved jobs and subverting the idea of reservation through policies in States such as Uttar Pradesh. There is data to back this, and Akhilesh Yadav, the Samajwadi Party (SP) chief, whose party won 37 seats, smashing through Uttar Pradesh, said so in his

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**Part of the delusion is to suggest that it is Modi vs Congress/Rahul Gandhi and not Modi vs an alliance that delivered humbling routs.**

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speech in the Lok Sabha. Post result, Anupriya Patel, a member of the Modi regime, whose small Uttar Pradesh-based party has support among the OBC Kurmi caste, also flagged the issue of reserved category vacancies being filled by general category candidates. The BJP really has no answers.

Contrast the Uttar Pradesh result with that in Bihar, where the NDA won 30 of 40 seats. The BJP should be eternally grateful to OBC Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and partners representing the State’s Dalits: the Lok Janshakti Party, led by Chirag Paswan, which won five seats, and the Hindustani Awam Party (Secular), led by former Chief Minister Jitan Ram Manjhi, which won one seat. Unlike Uttar Pradesh, the BJP by itself has never been at the helm in Bihar.

For all the pre-election and post-result shouting over Hindu identity, the real challenge before the BJP and the RSS, therefore, is the social project coming undone. Against this backdrop, one of the most substantive speeches in Parliament that captured the importance of caste assertion was made by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam’s A. Raja. So far, the BJP has been unable to show even symbolic change beyond shouting that the opposition lied that the party’s intention was to change the Constitution. It is possible that the BJP may be unable to self-correct on this front as it is strongly supported by dominant castes across India, and the social engineering story has faltered.

Meanwhile, the opposition scored symbolic points: the candidate whom the Congress posited as Speaker, eight-term MP Kodikunnil Suresh, is a Dalit. As expected, he lost to the outgoing Speaker, Om Birla, in a voice vote, but it was a Dalit vs a Baniya/Vaishya contest as a Scheduled Caste MP saw it. The LoP in the Rajya Sabha is Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge, a Dalit from Karnataka. There was a volatile exchange between him and Vice President Jagdeep Dhankar, which Kharge interpreted as a caste putdown, and said so.

The very next day, Kharge tried to speak when the Prime Minister was making his reply in the Upper House to the Motion of Thanks on the President’s Address. He was not allowed to do so, eventually leading to the walkout of the entire opposition. Besides, the most important signalling by the opposition has been the pride of place given to Awadhesh Prasad, the Dalit SP MP who won from the general category seat of Faizabad that includes Ayodhya. Should the BJP agree to having a Deputy Speaker, he is the front-runner for it. The Modi establishment is unlikely to agree as the Faizabad MP represents the unravelling of their Hindutva project and the assertion of subaltern power.

To add to the loss of control over the narrative, the Modi regime is getting prickly about any critique of the Agnipath scheme as it has in the past gained from the national security card. But a poorly conceived scheme undermining the armed forces destroys that pitch even as there is loss of credibility with the young over the NEET fiasco and examination paper leaks and delays. ■



▼ **Members of the Musahar community**

in Gaya district of Bihar, a 2015 picture.

According to the caste survey, nearly 85 per cent of the State's population are from the OBC, EBC, and SC/ST communities.

RANJEET KUMAR

# Uneasy lies the cap

A Patna High Court decision overturning the Bihar government's decision to increase the percentage of reservation has stirred a political row, with the Congress demanding that the Modi government amend the law to remove the 50 per cent cap imposed by the Supreme Court. **ANAND MISHRA**

**T**he reservation issue is back to the fore in Bihar, with the Patna High Court striking down the State government's decision to increase the percentage of reservation for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), the Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs), the Scheduled Castes (SCs), and the Scheduled Tribes (STs) in government jobs and educational institutions to 65 from 50. The verdict could not have come at a worse time for the BJP, which is doing a tight-rope walk wooing the OBCs and the SCs, as it prepares for the Assembly election due next year, while trying to maintain its core privileged-caste vote.

Acting on a public interest litigation (PIL) peti-

tion, the court on June 20 set aside the Bihar Reservation of Vacancies in Posts and Services (for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes) Amendment Act, 2023, and the Bihar Reservation (in Admission to Educational Institutions) Amendment Act, 2023, as "ultra vires the Constitution" and "violative of the equality clause" under Articles 14, 15, and 16. In its 87-page judgment, the court cited the well-known Indra Sawhney case, which put a 50 per cent cap on reservation, and a number of other judgments.

The government's decision to increase reservation was taken on the basis of a caste survey initiated in January 23 when Nitish Kumar was

**Proceeding merely on the proportion of population of different categories as against their numerical representation in government services and educational institutions worked against the core principles of Articles 15(4) & 16(4), the court said.**

the Chief Minister in the Janata Dal (United)-Rashtriya Janata Dal-Congress (JD(U)-RJD-Congress) government; he deserted the alliance to join hands with the BJP ahead of the Lok Sabha election this year but remains Chief Minister. According to the caste survey, nearly 85 per cent of the State's population are from the OBC, EBC, and SC/ST communities. The EBCs alone account to 36.1 per cent.

The government raised the quota for EBCs to 25 per cent (from 18 per cent), for Backward Classes to 18 per cent (12 per cent), for the SCs to 20 per cent (16 per cent), and for the STs to 2 per cent (1 per cent). In addition to this is the 10 per cent reservation for the Economically Weaker Sections (EWS), taking the total reservation in Bihar to 75 per cent.

The High Court said the State had done no in-depth study or analysis before increasing the reservation percentage. It said that proceeding merely on the proportion of population of different categories as against their numerical representation in government services and educational institutions worked against the core principles of Articles 15(4) & 16(4). "In our judgment hence, the enhancement of reservation beyond the 50 per cent limit is bad in law based on the principles of equality emanating from the Constitution," the court observed.

The Congress went on an offensive against Nitish Kumar, saying that he should ask the BJP to amend the Constitution to remove the 50 per cent cap on reservation.

**J**D(U) CHIEF SPOKESPERSON K.C. Tyagi asserted on June 29 that the party would move the Supreme Court against the High Court decision. The next day, Jairam Ramesh, Congress general secretary incharge for communication, said that the Constitution should be amended to remove the 50 per cent cap and States should be given the right to

enact laws regarding reservation. "The Congress party demands this cap of 50 per cent should be removed through a parliamentary amendment. Will Nitish Kumar put pressure on the BJP to do this?"

"This is a policy matter that should be decided by the Assembly and Parliament," said Udit Raj, former MP and president of the Dalit, OBC and Minorities (DOM) Parisangh. "The judgment shows that the Nitish Kumar government could not present the case properly in court. No judgment was made about breaching the 50 per cent reservation cap when the Central government decided on the 10 per cent quota for the Economically Weaker Sections [in the general category]. This judgment needs to be challenged before the Supreme Court."

Raj, who was a BJP MP before joining the Congress, said that the Assembly should pass the Bill again. "There is no assertion on this count, which means Nitish Kumar is under pressure from the BJP. The NDA has a majority in Parliament. They should find a way through Parliament. The 50 per cent cap has been imposed through court orders. This has to go," he said.

While the BJP central leadership remained silent on the issue, the party's State unit chief, Samrat Chaudhary, who is also the Deputy Chief Minister, reiterated the State government's decision to move the Supreme Court. On July 2, the State government appealed to the Supreme Court against the Patna High Court's directive.

N. Sukumar, Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Delhi, and author of *Caste Discrimination and Exclusion in Indian Universities: A Critical Reflection*, told *Frontline*: "The issue of social justice was one of the key concerns on which the mandate of 2024 was based. Nitish Kumar has always been a strong advocate for greater representation for Dalits and EBCs. He has also demanded a special status for Bihar. Now that Nitish is part of the Modi-led NDA, will he have the courage to go against the Patna Court judgment? Instead of acknowledging the reality of the caste census, the court has revealed its own prejudices. A report revealed that 79 per cent of High Court judges are from the upper castes, which reflects the Brahmanical nature of the judiciary."

Sukumar further said that in order to dilute the reservation policy, the Modi government had brought in the EWS category, which was problematic in two ways. One, it disregarded the



► **Prime Minister** Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Nitish Kumar during the inauguration of a new campus of Nalanda University on June 19. The Congress has asked Nitish Kumar to ask the BJP to amend the Constitution to remove the 50 per cent cap on reservation. PTI

social and economic backwardness that served as the criteria for reservation. Two, it breached the Supreme Court restrictions as most States had already reached the 50 per cent limit. This made many political parties argue for a caste census so as to get the actual numbers in order to ensure proportional representation/ opportunities. He said that it had come to light that 34 per cent of the population in Bihar earned less than Rs.6,000 a month and that marginalised groups lagged behind the upper castes in all socio-economic indices.

**T**HE PETITIONERS ARGUED that the entire edifice of the amendment Act and the increase in reservation percentage was built on the caste survey without much analysis. They also said the Bill was tabled “hastily” in the Assembly on November 9, 2023, two days after the caste-wise socio-economic report was released.

On behalf of the government, the Advocate General argued that the constitutional validity of a law can be challenged only on two grounds: lack of legislative competence, and on infraction

**“The issue of social justice was one of the key concerns on which the mandate of 2024 was based. Nitish Kumar has always been a strong advocate for greater representation for Dalits and EBCs.”**

**N. Sukumar**

Professor, Delhi University

of any of the fundamental rights or the provisions of the Constitution. “No arguments were addressed on these two aspects. The present litigation is not with respect to inclusion or exclusion of any caste or community in the reservation net. The reference to the Mandal Commission and the parameters reckoned are not at all relevant since the Mandal Commission was with respect to identification of backward communities. The caste survey has reckoned the entire population within the State of Bihar and assessed their social, educational, and economic status,” he said.

There has been a long-standing demand from various leaders, including the late Ram Vilas Pawan, for reservation in States to be included in the **Ninth Schedule** of the Constitution (containing a list of Central and State laws that, until recently, could not be challenged in courts). Chhattisgarh’s former Congress Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel had written to the Modi government on the same after his government increased the reservation to 76 per cent. A Tamil Nadu law increasing the reservation to 69 per cent was included in the Ninth Schedule in 1994. However, in 2007, the Supreme Court said that even laws under the Ninth Schedule were subject to review.

Immediately after the verdict, RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav alleged that it was no surprise that such a verdict had come within days of the party’s return to power at the Centre since the BJP had tried to scuttle the caste survey. “The RJD will move the Supreme Court against the High Court order if the State government fails to rise to the occasion,” he said.

When the caste survey was carried out, it was seen as a bulwark against the BJP-led NDA, which was in the opposition in the State. Now that the tables have turned, will the JD(U) remain as firm to the cause as it was a year ago? ■

*The Constitution (First Amendment) Act, 1951, introduced Article 31B, which says that no judicial review is possible in Acts placed in the Ninth Schedule of the Constitution. The Schedule initially contained 13 laws but now has 284 Acts.*

# THE ROAR IS NOW A LOW GROWL

With the NDA government now at the mercy of others, the Prime Minister must watch his tongue for the first time, and he appears to be observing a little restraint, which goes against his grain.

**MILIND GHATWAI**

**O**ne of the reasons for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rise to power was his oratory. The aggression, decisiveness, and muscular nationalism in his speeches resonated with supporters. His detractors found the same words divisive, offensive, and riddled with dog whistles.

After the June 4 verdict brought a scowl to his normally impassive visage, his oratory is now on test. Modi finds himself in uncharted territory. He ruled with a clear mandate for a decade, a period when he did not have to consult any ally or even party seniors and veterans and enjoyed absolute power, which in turn was reflected in his confident tone. Even as Gujarat Chief Minister, he enjoyed more freedom than any other Chief Minister from the BJP. With the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government now at the mercy of others, the Prime Minister must watch his tongue for the first time, and he appears to be observing a little caution and restraint, which goes much against his grain. The transition from "Modi government" to "NDA government" has not been easy, and when the Prime Minister found his voice in Parliament, it came nearly a month after the verdict.

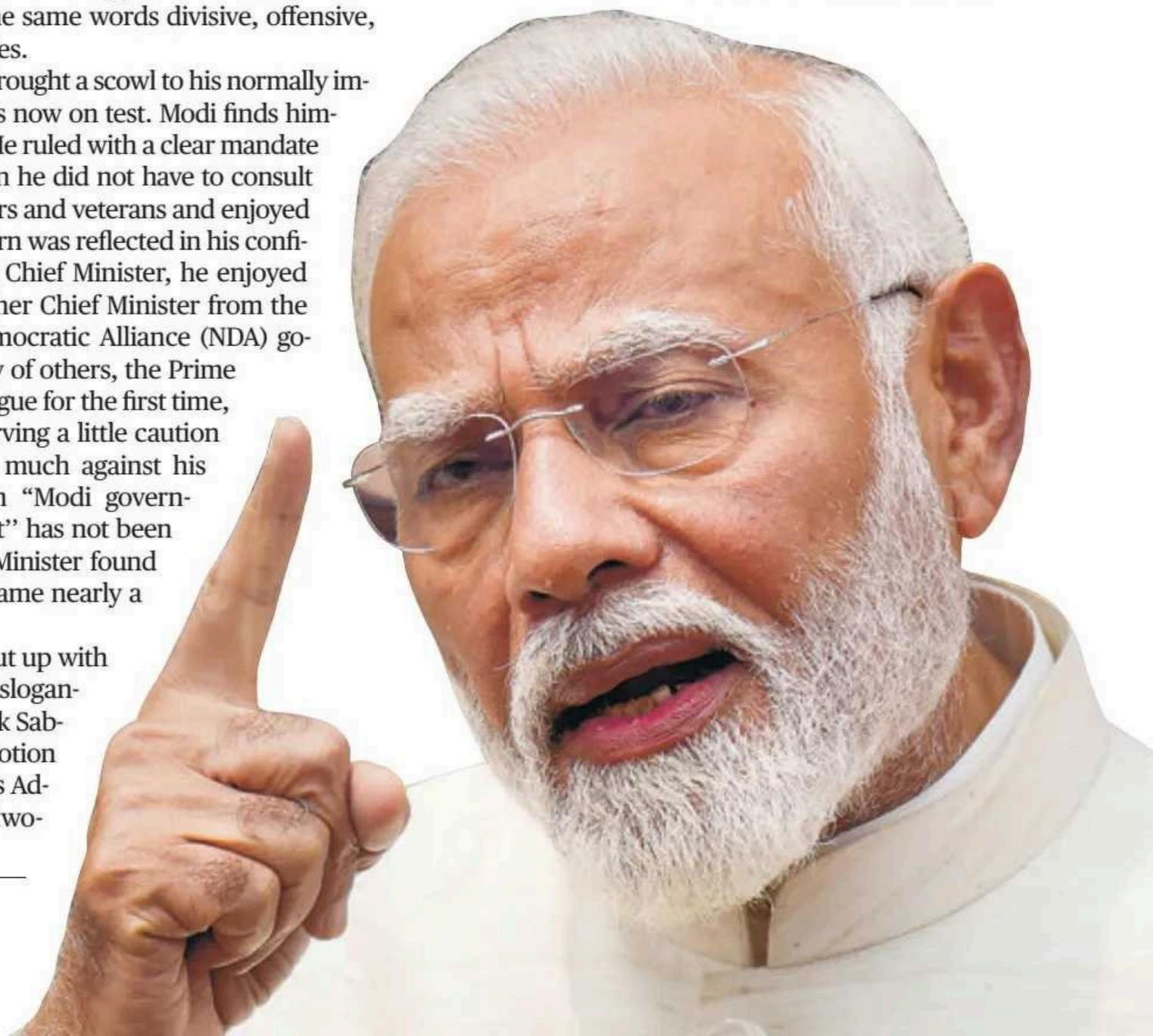
Never has Modi had to put up with the kind of heckling and slogan-shouting as he did in the Lok Sabha when he replied to the Motion of Thanks on the President's Address. During the over-two-

hour speech, most of his ministerial colleagues appeared listless, coming to life only when Modi called Rahul Gandhi "infantile" and when he tried his hand at humour by tweaking a scene from the film *Sholay*. Modi did not refer to himself even once in the third person, as was his wont before June 4. When he finished, he appeared to celebrate only that he had held on despite the opposition's attempt to unnerve him. His Rajya Sabha reply too went along the same lines, until the opposition walked out.

**T**HE USUAL PUNCHLINES were missing, there were no long pauses waiting for the clapping to stop, and no new acronyms or neologisms. While he appeared more relaxed in the Upper House, his usual flourish had deserted him. Interestingly, he appropriated the Constitution and its main architect, Babasaheb Ambedkar, charging the Congress with disregarding both.

Given the adversarial nature of his oratory, Modi has always needed an enemy to sound more effective. But after 22 years in office, he

► PHOTOGRAPH: KAMAL KISHORE\PTI



has started to sound monotonous. His opponents have always found his pitch shrill and polarising, but now even his admirers are beginning to wear expressions of ennui. The compulsions of coalition politics have also forced him to choose his words carefully. In trying to be conciliatory, he has to walk a tightrope that will not be music to his hardcore followers.

No doubt Modi is still more popular than any other leader. But the boredom that comes from having heard something on a loop was already visible during the campaign. When the camera moved to the crowds, it was obvious that not everyone was listening. The spontaneous “Modi, Modi” chants were missing. Compare the laboured chants at his dispirited victory speech on result day with the response to his victory speeches in 2014 and 2019.

It is easy to understand why. Modi is no longer the challenger, a role he first took on in late 2013 when his words as an anti-corruption crusader worked magic on crowds. But in 2024, the opposition succeeded in bringing bread-and-butter issues to the forefront, and Modi’s rhetoric sounded flat and out of place, especially in the absence of emotive issues like nationalism. He tried to engage in the rhetoric of the past, but the audience was less responsive.

**E**ARLY IN HIS chief ministerial innings, it was not uncommon for Modi to cite fictitious surveys to claim that Gujarat’s voters found Rahul Gandhi too unskilled to be employed even as a peon or a driver. As the polemist in him used such fabricated tropes to spice up the speech, crowds in smaller towns like Nadiad would lap up the public ridicule of political rivals. But during this campaign, similar inventions such as the Congress razing down the Ram temple if it came to power or taking away *mangalsutras* and buffaloes did not have the same traction.

When Modi, as Chief Minister, preyed on the Gandhi-Nehru family, the crowds loved his diatribes. Then after the Godhra incident and the Gujarat riots, he found enemies in “pseudo-secularists”, the media, NGOs, and Pakistan, among others. His speeches became more polarising and earned him admirers and detractors in equal measure. What started as “Arre Miyan Musharraf” would soon become only “Arre Miyan”. “When Muslims in Indonesia don’t mind having Ganesh on their currency notes, why do

**When people Modi had accused of corruption were seen on the stage with him just days later, even his most ardent supporters gave a knowing wink when he held forth on corruption.**

Muslims in India get disappointed when Abu Salem is arrested and attack Ganesh processions in Vadodara?” he would ask, leaving the crowds in a frenzy. He turned every attack on him into an attack on Gujarat and reminded the media that 70 per cent of their revenues came from advertisements placed by Gujaratis.

He would allege that India’s population for 5,000 years until Independence was only 30 crore but rose to 100 crore during the Congress regime. “When so many children are produced, they grow up to work in cycle-repair shops or become pick-pockets,” he would say in his usual dog whistle. Statements like these would endear him to the crowds in Gujarat. Added to these was his penchant for coining acronyms and neologisms, expansive hand gestures, and a mocking tone, all of which added up into a verbal assault. Soon, such was the force of his oratory that even BJP seniors avoided sharing the stage with him in Gujarat.

There is no doubt that his presence in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections helped the BJP score the kind of victories that had begun to appear like a thing of the past. But it was not the same in 2024. The “400 paar” boast did enthuse the crowds when they heard it the first time, but it soon boomeranged when the opposition said the BJP would take away reservation after changing the Constitution, and Modi was forced to make defensive speeches.

On nationalism and corruption, Modi’s speeches have always had an edge. But when people he had accused of corruption were seen on the stage with him just days later, even his most ardent supporters gave a knowing wink when he held forth on corruption.

Modi’s oratory will be under minute scrutiny in the forthcoming Assembly elections, especially in Maharashtra. It was here that his anti-corruption rhetoric was the biggest flop when he embraced the same Ajit Pawar whom he had accused of corruption just weeks earlier.

Modi is not used to making speeches when he is not the issue or when he is short on confidence. His oratory sounded effective when people responded to a man in charge, someone they thought could deliver. Now, not just his words but his body language, too, has changed. It will be interesting to see what comes next. ■

Milind Ghatwai is an independent journalist with more than three decades experience. He is based in Bhopal.



► **Jharkhand Governor** C.P. Radhakrishnan inviting JMM chief Hemant Soren to form the government, on July 4. Soren took oath as Chief Minister later that day. ANI

# Battle for the tribal vote

Out on bail, JMM leader Hemant Soren seeks to ride the sympathy wave for the upcoming Assembly election, but a determined BJP and new aspirants will make it a keenly contested affair. **ANAND MISHRA**

**U**lgulan, Ulgulan, Ulgulan” was the war cry on the X account of former Jharkhand Chief Minister Hemant Soren on June 29, the day after he got bail in a money laundering case linked to a land scam and walked out of Birsa Munda Central jail in Ranchi. The Enforcement Directorate (ED) had arrested him on January 31. Ulgulan, meaning “great revolt”, was a movement against the British led by the iconic tribal freedom fighter Birsa Munda.

Addressing a gathering of party supporters in Ranchi on June 29, Soren likened his arrest to an attack on the State’s tribal identity, saying that Jharkhand had never bowed down, nor would it ever bow down. “The results of the Lok Sabha election have given strength to the natives and tribals of Jharkhand. I have received information that the Assembly election may be held earlier in the State, and we are ready for it,” he announced.

Emboldened by the Jharkhand High Court’s order stating that there was “reason to believe” he was not guilty of money laundering, Soren said he was the victim of a conspiracy and added that the pe-

ople would give a befitting reply. The court order said: “The over-all conspectus of the case based on broad probabilities does not specifically or indirectly assign the petitioner [Hemant Soren] to be involved in the acquisition and possession as well as concealment of 8.8 acres of land at.... None of the registers/revenue records bear imprint of the direct involvement of the petitioner in the acquisition and possession of the said land.... the claim of the Enforcement Directorate that its timely action had prevented the illegal acquisition of the land by forging and manipulating the records seems to be an ambiguous statement...”

The prosecution had earlier claimed that 11 trunks of property documents, along with 17 original registers, seized from a Revenue Sub-Inspector in Ranchi contained references to several properties, including an 8.86 acre plot, acquired in an illegal manner by Soren. The ED said that during a search on January 29 at his Delhi residence, it seized cash amounting to Rs.36,34,500, incriminating documents, and a BMW car.

In court, Soren’s lawyer Kapil Sibal suggested that forgery and interpolation of some of the recovered documents had been activated by the prosecuting agency itself.

The court’s observations and its decision to grant bail to Soren have come as a shot in the arm for Soren’s party, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM).

**O**N JULY 3, within a week of Hemant Soren’s release, the incumbent Champai Soren, who had become Chief Minister on February 2, resigned, paving the way for the former to take over the mantle again for the third time. This followed fast-paced developments that saw a meeting of the INDIA bloc in Ranchi on July 3 pitching for fighting the next Assembly election in the State under his leadership to perform better.

Hemant Soren took the oath as Chief Minister on July 4. Jharkhand has seen 13 Chief Ministers in the past 24 years since the State came into being in 2000, and only one government has even managed to

complete its full term of 5 years. That was the government of BJP Chief Minister Raghubar Das, a non-tribal, between 2014 and 2019.

The 48-year-old Hemant Soren, a second-generation politician, realises well the upcoming challenge before him to stay relevant in the now competitive tribal politics of the State, with another Santhal leader, Babulal Marandi, back in the BJP and the JMM's need to retain power in the Assembly election that is less than six months away.

**A** REALIGNMENT OF THE 16 per cent Kurmi vote is also on the cards as the traditional player that the community supports, the All Jharkhand Students Union (AJSU), a BJP ally led by Sudesh Mahto, is on the decline and a new party, the Jharkhandi Bhasha-Khatiyani Sangharsh Samiti (JBKSS) led by Jairam Mahto, is emerging on the horizon. Besides, the third Narendra Modi Cabinet has not inducted any Kurmi leader from Jharkhand, which has deepened the sense of alienation in the community.

The fight for the tribal vote saw major developments in the government and in Hemant Soren's family between January and June, even after Soren resigned as Chief Minister hours before his arrest. The veteran Champai Soren took over as Chief Minister after a dispute erupted within the family on who would replace Hemant Soren. Hemant's sister-in-law Sita Soren resigned from the JMM.

She later contested from the Dumka Lok Sabha seat on the BJP ticket but lost. Meanwhile, in May, Hemant's wife, Kalpana Soren, won the Gandey Assembly byelection. The victory of JMM veteran Nalin Soren from Dumka against Sita Soren has virtually settled the issue of leadership in the family in favour of Hemant Soren, and he begins from a position of strength. Besides Sita Soren, another tribal leader, Gita Koda, who left the Congress to join the BJP, also lost, in Singhbhum. It is said in party circles that the cadre disapproved of defectors and did not work for both candidates.

In the Lok Sabha election, the BJP lost in all five tribal seats, and its overall tally came down from 11 in 2019 to 8 out of the total of 14, while the JMM's tally rose from 1 in 2019 to 3, and the Congress doubled its tally to 2.

The BJP has put Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma in charge of the Jharkhand

### Addressing party supporters on June 29, Soren likened his arrest to an attack on the State's tribal identity.

*The Kurmis have been demanding ST status for a long time, which has created a rift between them and the tribal population of Jharkhand.*

election. After losing the 2019 Assembly election, the BJP made a course correction by replacing Raghubar Das with Babulal Marandi, but another senior leader, Arjun Munda, lost the Lok Sabha election from Khunti in 2024.

Reacting to the change of guard in Jharkhand, Sarma said on X: "The removal of a senior tribal leader from the post of Chief Minister in Jharkhand by the JMM and Congress party is deeply distressing. I am certain that the people of Jharkhand will strongly condemn this action and firmly reject it." State BJP chief Babu Lal Marandi said that there was no scope for the rise for any tribal leader other than the Soren family in JMM. Clearly, the BJP will try to play on the issue of regional pride in the Kolhan region, where Champai hails from.

Meanwhile, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi and party president Mallikarjun Kharge met leaders from Jharkhand on June 24. After the meeting, Kharge said that the Congress had to go to every worker and be with the people for the upcoming Assembly election and that the Congress was fully committed to "Jal, Jangal, Jameen" and the rights of all sections of people, including tribal people.

**T**HE JMM'S SEAT SHARE in the Assembly has been rising since 2009. It won 18 seats in 2009, 19 in 2014, and 30 in 2019. However, the BJP's tally has not declined much. It won 25 seats in 2019. What made government formation by the JMM possible was the Congress clocking a rise from 6 seats to 16 and the Rashtriya Janata Dal winning 6.

The JBKSS, which got nearly 3.5 lakh votes in Giridih and more than 1 lakh votes in Hazaribagh and Ranchi in the Lok Sabha election, is likely to cut into the votes of the JMM and the BJP equally as it takes away the AJSU's hold over the Kurmi vote and also puts paid to the JMM's efforts to work out tribal-Kurmi unity. While the tribal people constitute 26 per cent of the population, Kurmis account for 16 per cent, and Kurmi votes are crucial in nearly 30 of the 81 Assembly constituencies.

All indications are that the Assembly election is going to be a keenly contested affair, with the sympathy wave for Hemant Soren likely to subside somewhat in the coming months and the BJP seeking to put up a serious challenge with course correction on the tribal and Kurmi leadership fronts. ■

## Politics

# MAMATA READS PARTY MEN THE RIOT ACT

In a clear move to win back urban voters for the 2026 Assembly election, the West Bengal Chief Minister launches an attack on corruption within the party and in the administration.

**SUHRID SANKAR CHATTOPADHYAY**

**O**n June 24, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee sprang a surprise, when, in an open meeting with Ministers, elected heads of municipalities, bureaucrats, and the police, she launched a scathing attack against her own party and administration on the rampant corruption and mismanagement in the municipalities and urban centres.

While this was the first time that the Trinamool leader practically admitted to systemic corruption in the running of municipal bodies, her outburst, which took place less than three weeks after her massive victory in the Lok Sabha election, is seen as a calculated move to not just address the long-standing issue of corruption but also win back urban voters, while distancing herself from various allegations against her party.

It was not simply a stern rebuke or harsh criticism; the Chief Minister's lengthy tirade against her own party members and her administration was something that one might expect from her political opponents. She addressed every aspect of corruption and malpractice in the municipal bodies across the State, sparing neither her party leaders and

# NABANNA SABHAGHAR

27<sup>th</sup> Jun 2024

► **West Bengal** Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee addresses a review meeting regarding hawkers and encroachment, at Nabanna in Howrah district on June 27. PTI



Ministers nor the bureaucrats and the police.

One after another she took up issues that have been plaguing the people, including land grab, illegal construction, extortion, the land mafia menace, harassment of people in obtaining basic municipal facilities, encroachments on public spaces, illegal occupation of government land, inefficiency of departments in dealing with urban matters, the deplorable condition of roads, wastage of electricity and water, and improper waste management.

Even MLAs and Ministers were not spared. “Howrah has no municipality; it is under the SDO [Sub-Divisional Officer]. As a result, four MLAs are taking full advantage of this.... MLAs are taking advantage of the absence of councillors. I do not need to spell out what I mean by advantage,” the Chief Minister said.

She accused Bidhannagar MLA Sujit Bose, who is also the Fire and Emergency Services Minister, of facilitating encroachments, much to the discomfort of the Minister, who attended the meeting. “Sujit Bose is allowing encroachers to set up shop. Why should that happen? If I show you the pictures, you will feel ashamed. How much money was paid for this? Who took the money?” she said.

**S**HE ALSO DIRECTED HER anger at the elected councillors, saying they did not work. “Do I need to go and sweep the streets now? These people do not look after roads, lights, water supply, people’s problems. I had made this city so beautiful.... How much more can I fight?” she said.

Accusing the administration and the police of making money during their tenures in particular posts, she said: “Enough is enough. Now it is glaring to the eye.” She condemned the administration and the police for turning a blind eye to the rise in the number of hawkers and encroachments into public spaces.

Talking of illegal construction and a nexus between the land mafia and members of her own party, Mamata Banerjee said: “They are doing as they please, filling up canals and ponds, grabbing land and building houses. There is a mafia jungle: a promoter-contractor raj, which started during the time of the CPI(M). Those who are doing this within the party will not be spared.”

She drew attention to a “land mafia group” in the Dabgram-Phulbari Assembly constituency in

**Following Mamata’s outburst, the police and local leaders went into overdrive, clearing the pavements of hawkers and encroachers using bulldozers.**

Jalpaiguri district, which was seizing government land and selling it. “The police and the land department are also involved in this,” she said.

The issue of corruption has been a thorn in the side of the Trinamool ever since it came to power in 2011. A number of its top leaders, Ministers, MPs, and MLAs have been put behind bars for their alleged involvement in various scams. The latest School Service Commission recruitment scam and the ration scam have further damaged the party’s reputation and credibility.

Although the party’s welfare schemes won it 29 of the State’s 42 Lok Sabha seats, the victory could not remove the stain of corruption, and Mamata, once hailed as the most honest Chief Minister in the country, became the target of the opposition’s attacks. For a long time, she appeared to be in a state of denial. “In a big party one or two people may be corrupt, but that does not make the whole party bad,” was a statement often heard over the years.

Mamata’s crackdown on corruption at this point in time may be a timely step to protect her own image and distance herself from the corruption within her party. “I don’t want masters of extortion. I want those who can serve the people,” she said at the meeting. She also took away the right of municipalities to float tenders or increase taxes independently.

The public rebuke of her party leaders and public servants also served to address a specific political fallout because of the issue of corruption, namely, the disenchantment of urban voters, as evident in the Lok Sabha election.

While rural West Bengal voted overwhelmingly for Mamata in the Lok Sabha, the urban electorate, considered one of Trinamool’s strongest support bases, showed clear signs of drifting away from the party.

According to the psephologist Biswanath Chakraborty, the Trinamool was trailing in as many as 77 of the 128 municipal bodies in the State. The BJP also made inroads into north and south Kolkata, where the Trinamool is supposed to be the strongest, securing a lead in more than 44 of 119 wards.

Speaking to *Frontline*, the veteran political observer Biswajit Bhattacharya said: “This is a point of concern for Mamata. This is the first





► **At an eviction drive** in Birbhum on June 27 after Mamata Banerjee issued a stern warning against encroachments. SHYAMAL MAITRA/ANI

time the Trinamool is trailing in the wards in Kolkata after winning the Kolkata municipal election in 2010. Today we see the Trinamool trailing in the very wards of the Mayor and Deputy Mayor, mainly due to corruption and misrule.”

**T**HE CHIEF MINISTER’S CRACKDOWN may indicate that she has already set off on a path of rectification, with an eye on the Assembly election due in 2026. Chakraborty said: “We can see urban voters moving away from the Trinamool. This is clearly a move to win back those votes. Almost immediately after the results, we see her analysing where her party failed to perform and going about repairing the damage, with the 2026 Assembly election in mind.”

Interestingly, Mamata also talked about West Bengal losing its identity. She said: “Every State has its own identity and culture. We respect other cultures, but I am warning those who are trying to destroy Bengal’s culture.”

It was a subtle reiteration of the 2021 election campaign that the BJP’s culture was alien to West Bengal and that the State “wanted its own daughter”. The fact that the BJP secured more seats than the Trinamool in the municipal regions is being projected as a threat to the very identity of West Bengal. “Bengal’s identity is be-

**Although the Trinamool won 29 Lok Sabha seats, the victory could not remove the stain of corruption, and Mamata became the target of the opposition’s attacks.**

ing sold for money,” she said at the meeting.

Following her outburst, the police, administration, and local leaders went into overdrive, clearing the pavements of hawkers and encroachers, using force and bulldozers. As the plight of the poor hawkers (who have already paid for their place on the streets) led to a public outcry, Mamata Banerjee held another meeting, on June 27, announcing a pause in the operation for a month. Once again, coming down heavily on her own party and the police, she said: “Politicians and the police think they can give away roads and collect bribes. This will not do. Control your greed. Local politicians and the police are the most to blame.”

Even as she was cracking down on corruption and misrule in urban areas, reports of terror perpetrated by a section of her party in rural areas continue to surface and shock.

On July 1, a video surfaced of influential Trinamool leader Tajimul Islam, aka JCB, brutally beating up a man and a woman for being in an extramarital relationship, in a kangaroo court at Chopra, a town in Uttar Dinajpur district. To make matters worse, the local Trinamool MLA, Hamidul Islam, tried to justify the action.

It now remains to be seen whether the Chief Minister, after addressing the problems in urban areas, will turn her attention to rural areas. ■



## [ POLITICAL THEATRE ]

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# The imagined secular utopia of the south

Is south India truly a bastion of secularism? The steady rise of the RSS there, with its communal polarisation agenda, which has apparently benefited the BJP in the recent Lok Sabha election in terms of increased vote share and a seat or two in States where it had little presence, seems to suggest otherwise.

**U**nderstanding south India in the past few decades has been guided by the imagined utopia of its political progressiveness. A comparison with north India notwithstanding, which is faulty considering how the regions are culturally very different, the argument still pits the north to be a better example of representative government, as the 1990s will show. A coalition of lowered castes steered by Ambedkarite ideology resulted in the first Dalit woman Chief Minister in the country, a feat none of the southern States can boast of yet. A similar feat was accomplished in 2024, when the BJP was ousted in five out of nine Lok Sabha seats in the Ayodhya region of Uttar Pradesh, the very site of the communal theatrics that defines the BJP today. If this has to be read as a rejection of the BJP and its communal politics, then it brings us to the crucial question of what the response of the south has been to the BJP's methods, primary to which is keeping communal polarisation in the foreground and caste assimilation in the background.

While evaluating the electoral shifts in Telangana, placing Karnataka on a parallel track

would be a good exercise.

Many believe the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has been active in Karnataka for longer than in the other southern States to carry out its experimentation, but this is not completely true. The RSS has been trying to gain a foothold in all regions, a strategy envisioned by its founder, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar. Although people associate Hedgewar with Maharashtra where he grew up, few know that he is actually a Telugu Brahmin. In the archives where one can find the instructions that he gave his cadre working on expanding the RSS, foremost is to learn the language of the region, which includes languages spoken in the south. The RSS workers were sent in all directions with the intention of gaining access to communities—especially the Brahmin communities—who would find quick common ground with the ideas espoused by the RSS founder.

In the case of Karnataka, one of the routes the RSS took was via the former Madras Presidency. An RSS worker by the name of Dadarao Parmarth was deputed there in the 1930s. Sanjeeva Kamath, a Gaud Saraswat Brahmin lawyer from coastal Karnataka who had moved to Madras, then approached him and suggested that the Sangh travel to coastal Karnataka, which eventually happened in 1940, where it is now an established force. By then, the leaders of the All India Hindu Mahasabha were making inflammatory speeches across the country, including in Karnataka and Kerala. They created a





small space for anti-Muslim sentiment in advance, which the RSS tapped into. In Tamil Nadu, however, the primarily Brahmin locus of the RSS did not immediately catch on as the State was at the peak of its anti-Brahmin movement, with organisations ranging from the Justice Party to the Dravidar Kazhagam at work.

**B**UT, FOR THE RSS, building a presence has little to do with immediate gains as is evident from how it functions. The work it did from the 1940s onwards in certain pockets of the southern States peaked during the Emergency. Similarly, its consistent push towards instilling an anti-Muslim sentiment and appealing to numerically higher communities such as the Lingayats eventually helped it win Karnataka, something most people did not consider possible, considering Karnataka had been a Congress stronghold.

While decades of work went into Karnataka, Telangana has seen a far quicker shift towards Hindu nationalism. This might have many reasons; for one, sharing a border with Maharashtra through which the Hindutva influx has been constant. Likewise with Karnataka, from where tried-and-tested methods come in, from making loaded movies to using cultural symbols to polarise. One such symbol is Shivaji, whose statues are now found across

► **Members of the RSS** training before a rally at Korattur in Chennai in April 2023. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

northern Telangana, as detailed by the journalist Charan Theja. In his reports over the past few years, he has documented how RSS-affiliated organisations have been slowly garnering support from “aspirational landholding peasant BC communities like Munnuru Kapu, Yadav, Mudhiraj, Goud, and dominant castes like Reddy”.

In a town called Bodhan, a Shivaji statue was erected illegally in a public space by RSS- and Shiv Sena-affiliated organisations, which groups such as the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen and the Bharat Rashtra Samithi opposed. Bodhan falls in Nizamabad district, which borders Maharashtra and has the second-highest population of Muslims in the State. As an aside, this is also Hedgewar’s native region, from where his family migrated to Maharashtra.

The modus operandi is to bank on what happens later: the opposition to the illegal structure is positioned by the RSS groups as anti-Hindu sentiment, thus in one go bringing about a commonality among backward castes that would otherwise not have come about easily. Charan has also detailed in his report that these Shivaji statues are invariably positioned diagonally adjacent to and bigger than Ambedkar statues. This is another way to bring about commonality since anti-Dalit sentiment is anyway organic among these groups. A similar template in Karnataka is to bring up Tipu Sultan’s name, which immediately pits you as pro- or anti-Muslim depending on the context.

Anybody following the RSS closely knows that anti-Muslim polarisation is not its only tactic. The RSS has been more active than most other parties in accumulating support from the largest to the smallest of the oppressed castes. In Telangana, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been posturing with Madiga leaders such as Manda Krishna Madiga for years now even though what such support translates into for the community is yet to be seen.

**T**HAT THE RSS has been on track with its slow-cook programmes is seen from the rise in the BJP's vote share in Tamil Nadu and in the party's win in Thrissur in Kerala. This calls into question what local parties in these States are doing. More importantly, the role of the Congress in the States it rules must be critically reviewed.

In Telangana, Dalits and tribal people seem to have voted en masse for the Congress, but in Chief Minister Revanth Reddy's list of probable MP candidates from his State, the majority were from the Reddy community. This contradiction did not go unnoticed, especially among the OBC leaders of the BJP, who promptly relayed it as a point to be conveniently used at a later time. Revanth Reddy, a turncoat politician and former Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (a student organisation affiliated to the RSS) leader, seems more intent on strengthening the Reddy lobby than addressing communal polarisation. Just days after the BJP won as many seats as the Congress in Telangana in the Lok Sabha election, he was seen performing a ritual with activists of the Desi Gau Vamsa Rakshana Samithi in Medak in west Telangana. The BJP won the Medak seat for the first time after the formation of Telan-

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**The very idea of an IT cell and what it can do to project a Narendra Modi as the prime ministerial candidate was imagined in Bengaluru, now referred to as the "original cow-belt city" of India.**

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► **Meenakshi Lekhi**, former Union Minister of State for External Affairs, at a rally in support of M.T. Ramesh, the BJP's candidate in Kozhikode, on April 11. K. RAGESH

gana, and the place saw unprecedented anti-Muslim mobilisation within weeks of the party's win. A right-wing mob went on the rampage, attacking Muslim establishments and shops and even a hospital to which people had flocked after they were assaulted on the eve of Eid. Infact, the newly elected MP, the advocate Raghunandan Rao, has on many occasions legally represented BJP and Bajrang Dal cadre accused of inciting communal violence in Medak.

**I**N KARNATAKA, WHEN the Ram Mandir mobilisation was at its height, many Congress leaders largely looked away. The end of that decade saw the BJP peak in Karnataka, mainly benefiting from the alliance with the Lok Shakti of Ramakrishna Hegde, whose core supporters were Lingayats. The very idea of an IT cell and what it can do to project a Narendra Modi as the prime ministerial candidate was imagined in Bengaluru, now referred to as the "original cow-belt city" of India. It was here that Modi was first projected as a pro-development, tech-friendly, neoliberal politician, as opposed to his image of a genocide-enabler after the 2002 Gujarat pogrom.

Karnataka has since seen many smaller Hindutva programmes, some even going to the extent of targeting Muslim schoolgirls for covering their head with a hijab. This tactic has ensured that even when the Congress is in power, the polarising techniques of high-ranking BJP leaders remain constantly in the news, even displacing the news of a leader from a BJP-alliance party indulging in mass sexual assault.

Silence on communal polarisation will only serve the interests of the RSS in the long run, as the success of the BJP in two southern States has already shown. Whether this silence stems from ignorance or wanton indulgence remains a question. And whether the south is truly a bastion of secularism remains far from proven. ■

► **Samajwadi**

**Party MP** Iqra

Hasan at the Parliament House complex for the first session of the 18th Lok Sabha, in New Delhi on June 25.

MANVENDER VASHIST

LAV/PTI



# WOMIEN'S OWN

The Samajwadi Party MP Iqra Hasan, who won from Uttar Pradesh's Kairana, wants to be judged on the basis of her work alone rather than for her gender, family, or religious affiliation. **ISMAT ARA**

**O**n June 24, a day before she was set to take oath in the 18th Lok Sabha, Iqra Hasan, the Samajwadi Party (SP) candidate who won from Uttar Pradesh's Kairana in the general election, told *Frontline* with disarming candour: "It's been 20 days since the results, but I haven't fully come to terms with it."

Kairana is a key constituency in Uttar Pradesh that went to the BJP's Pradeep Chaudhary in the 2019 general election. Chaudhary had defeated Iqra's mother, Begum Tabassum Hasan of the SP. This time, in 2024, Iqra defeated Chaudhary by over 69,000 votes. For Iqra, the win was not just about securing a seat—coming from a political family, she is no stranger to such victories—but also about defeating the BJP, which, in recent years, has targeted her family for its political affiliation.

However, Iqra's victory in Kairana is important from a broader perspective too. This town in Uttar Pradesh was the focal point of an alleged exodus of Hindus between 2014 and 2016; in 2013, it was affected deeply by the communal riots in neighbouring Muzaffarnagar and nearby districts; this region, with a mixed population of Sainis, Rajputs, Gujjars, Jats, Dalits, and Muslims, is deeply patriarchal even now.

Reclining on a sofa, 28-year-old Iqra adjusted

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**"I cover my head because it is a cultural practice in our area; Gujjar or Jat women do the same. My friends jokingly call my way of covering the head an extremely secular gesture."**

the dupatta around her head as she spoke to *Frontline*. The London-educated MP insisted that her headwear was not a traditional hijab: "I cover my head because it is a cultural practice in our area; Gujjar or Jat women do the same. My friends jokingly call my way of covering the head an extremely secular gesture," she said.

For Iqra, who is a feminist at heart, the head cover is also a way of deflecting attention from her gender and a plea for being judged by the merit of her work as a politician alone. "Covering my head helps me concentrate on my duties and ensures that I am judged by my actions, not by my appearance," she said. "I don't want conversations about my clothes to hamper real talks about progress and what really needs to be done," she added.

Navigating the patriarchal set-up of western Uttar Pradesh that still has tokenistic representation of women in politics, Iqra draws inspiration from influential female figures like her mother, Anuradha Chaudhary, and Gayatri Devi, all of whom have represented Kairana in the past. "It's a pity that women are often depicted as *bechari* [helpless] to gain acceptance in politics in our region," she said, referring to sympathy waves that have helped women win in Kairana. She hopes to rise above such stereotypical depictions of women in the future.

**I**QRA'S DEBUT in politics, as it were, was through a viral video of her participating in protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in London in 2019. Recalling the video interview she gave at the time, she said that it garnered a lot of attention because she is from a political family.

Iqra is a third-generation politician with an illustrious lineage. Her grandfather Akhtar Hasan; her father, Chaudhary Munawwar Hasan; and mother, Tabassum, are all former MPs. Her brother, Nahid Hasan, is an MLA representing the Kairana constituency. In 2021, Iqra returned to India from London after getting an MSc degree from the School of Oriental and African Studies and with the intention of going back for a PhD. "This was the time when my mother and brother were falsely implicated in gangster cases. I came back 10 days before everything fell apart. It was fortuitous that I was here to take charge of our home and handle my family's pol-



itical legacy,” she said. Iqra let go of her plans to pursue further studies to help the family fight the criminal cases pending against her brother at all three levels of the judiciary: district courts, the High Court, and the Supreme Court.

Nahid Hasan’s arrest just before the 2022 Assembly election compelled Iqra to manage his campaign, an enormous task, given that she had never done it before. Then she fought for almost a year to secure his release from jail. “For about a year, I also had to oversee my brother’s MLA term as he was still in jail. He couldn’t be available to the people, so I was. That gave me a lot of experience and the confidence to do this,” she says, her face reflecting her unease.

**D**URING THIS PERIOD, the family’s properties were seized and their bank accounts frozen. Reflecting on this time, Iqra said: “That’s when I thought, since we’re fighting the BJP anyway, why not fight against them openly in an election?”

“There were several fabricated charges against my brother, including those involving Section 324 of the Indian Penal Code [voluntarily causing hurt by dangerous weapon or means], all filed during the tenure of Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. Despite these challenges, my brother has continued his political journey to keep our father’s legacy alive,” she said.

Munawwar Hasan, was an MP and political activist in Mulayam Singh Yadav’s government in Uttar Pradesh between 2003 and 2007. In 2008, when Iqra was only 13, he was killed in a road accident in Haryana.

During the 2022 Assembly election, she turned to her mother for guidance on how to campaign for her brother. Drawing on Tabasum’s experience, Iqra learnt how to give speeches and handle public meetings. “My mother told me that responsibilities teach you everything you need to know. Politics was never in my plans though I come from a political family. As a shy student, I avoided public speaking.”

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▼  
**Iqra Hasan**  
speaks to PTI in  
Kairana in April. PTI

She credits her brother for her growth as a politician. “My brother does not mind stepping back to give me more space,” she said. “The biggest challenge was to fight a party with huge resources, administrative support, and money. We tried to be consistent with our efforts on the ground,” she added.

In his first campaign rally for the BJP in Uttar Pradesh ahead of the 2024 general election, Union Home Minister Amit Shah had asked the people to “wipe out Samajwadi Party” from the 14 Lok Sabha seats in western Uttar Pradesh. Highlighting the alleged Hindu exodus from Kairana after the 2013 riots, he claimed that ever since the BJP came to power in Uttar Pradesh in 2017, “criminals and mafia elements”, rather than “innocent citizens”, were leaving the State. Shah had credited Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the Ram temple construction in Ayodhya and accused the SP and the Congress of trying to hinder it. He had emphasised the BJP’s projects in favour of sugarcane farmers in the region.

Much of this rhetoric failed to move the voters in the State, going by the results: the SP won 37 seats and the BJP 33 in the general election. Muslims and Hindus of different communities, including Rajputs, Sainis, Jats, and Gujjars, voted for Iqra. “Anti-incumbency sentiment worked against the sitting MP. He was not accessible to



the people and did not deliver on his promises. People were tired of him. Perhaps that's why they overlooked the fact that they were voting for a Muslim woman," said Iqra.

While the BJP relied on the Modi factor to win the election, the SP in its campaigns highlighted local issues like Rajput-Gujjar tensions and agrarian crises and block-specific concerns. Iqra, too, focussed on these topics, and won the election. However, the journey has not been smooth.

On February 10, 2024, just ahead of the election, the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) in Uttar Pradesh ended its partnership with the SP and the Congress to join the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance. This last-minute shift changed the political dynamics in the State and left Iqra confused. She feared losing the Jat vote, the traditional support base of the RLD. But ultimately it all turned out right for her. "When I look back, I think the breaking of the SP-RLD alliance worked in my favour since it made me try even harder," said Iqra.

In the 2024 election, the SP was accused of having only four Muslim candidates in Uttar Pradesh's 80 seats despite Muslims being traditional supporters of the party. Iqra is not averse to discussing such delicate matters relating to her party. She said: "Currently, the Lok Sabha

**Iqra has many plans for her constituency, where dropout rates among women in educational institutions are alarmingly high.**

has very few Muslim MPs. The SP might not seem to prioritise Muslim interests overtly, but it does not oppose them either. The PDA coalition [an alliance of those who are *Pichhda* (backward), *Dalit*, and *Alpasankhyak* (minority)] has proved to be effective. The SP's socialist and secular character cannot be debated."

**I**QRA RECALLED a turning point in her campaign: "In the final month, I felt a significant shift as many BJP supporters began to join our side. This was encouraging." Iqra said that she owed her victory also to the farmers' agitation, which resonated deeply across western Uttar Pradesh, which is famed for its sugarcane production. "In Kairana, farmers from all religions and caste groups have similar and recurring issues," she said. The 14-day payment cycle in sugar mills has irked farmers for long as have unpaid dues, unimplemented interest payments on delays, and the lack of a minimum support price.

Local caste dynamics, too, influenced the result. Before the election, the Rajput community of Kairana held a mahapanchayat where it decided to back the candidate with the best chance of defeating the BJP. This move gave Iqra's campaign a boost. Although the Bahujan Samaj Party candidate, Sripal, is a Rajput, the community did not rally behind him as he lacked the strength to challenge the BJP effectively.

Victory has not left Iqra complacent: she is acutely aware of her privileges. "Despite my privileged background, I have experienced significant hardships. My father used to say that ground-level politics is crucial. While I love Delhi, I understand the everyday responsibilities in small towns, such as attending weddings and funerals," she said.

Iqra has many plans for her constituency, where dropout rates among women in educational institutions are alarmingly high. "A major personal focus will be on women's education. Many girls are forced to drop out because their parents are uncomfortable with co-educational settings in schools. I plan to establish dedicated higher education facilities for women since I believe that when a woman is educated an entire family benefits," she said. Iqra also wants to improve the healthcare infrastructure of Kairana.

With the SP experiencing a resurgence in Uttar Pradesh, Iqra's prospects are looking good. But she has to live up to her promises to retain the trust of the people. ■

# On borrowed time?

India's large foreign exchange reserve speaks not of balance of payments strength but of processes that simultaneously increase external and domestic vulnerability. Either of those can give, leading to a scenario in which reserves shrink and the rupee depreciates with economy-wide implications.

**C.P. Chandrasekhar**

**F**igures on India's balance of payments in financial year 2023-24, released by the Reserve Bank of India recently, have added to the hype on India's growth story. India's current account deficit, or the surplus of current foreign exchange expenditures and outflows over current foreign exchange earnings and receipts, fell to \$23.2 billion from a much higher \$67 billion in 2022-23. A lower merchandise trade deficit and higher receipts from export of services and transfers, especially of remittances from workers abroad, explains that improvement.

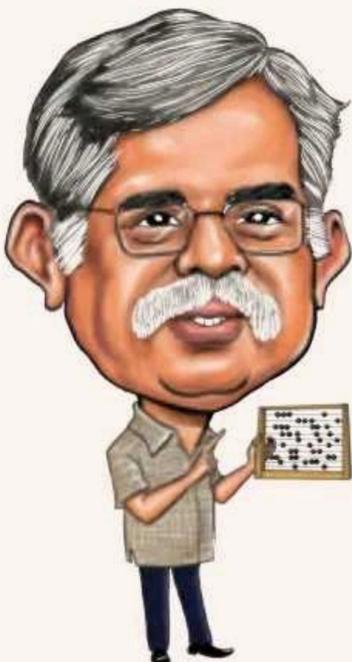
In the same financial year, net foreign direct investment inflows totalled \$9.8 billion, net portfolio inflows \$44.1 billion, and net inflows of banking capital (including NRI deposits of \$14.7 billion) \$40.5 billion. These capital receipts were well in excess of sums needed to finance the deficit in the current account. In the event, India accumulated the surplus inflow as foreign exchange reserves, which rose by around \$64 billion after adjusting for valuation changes. This "vote of confidence" on the part of foreign investors and the resulting rise in reserves are seen as signalling that things are bright on the external front.

However, underlying these figures are trends that should give cause for concern. The first is that, as reported above, an overwhelmingly

large share of net capital inflows was on account of inflows of portfolio capital and banking capital. Foreign portfolio investors who appeared to be exiting from India's markets in the run-up to the Lok Sabha election are now rushing in. The Sensex has risen from just below 74,000 at the end of May to close to 79,500 at the beginning of July. The Press Trust of India reports that market capitalisation of BSE-listed companies has touched an all-time high of Rs.443 lakh crore. And the price-earnings ratio of the 30 companies included in the Sensex fluctuates between 24 and 25. But this is not all good news. These are at unsustainable levels, and the market could unwind at any time, led by foreign institutional investors who have repeatedly shown themselves to be fickle-minded and footloose. If that happens, NRI depositors and other banking capital sources will retreat as well.

The full implication of such an exit can be gauged from the fact that in 2023-24 alone net inflows of foreign institutional investment and banking capital totalled \$85 billion. This meant that capital inflows not only helped finance the \$23 billion current account deficit but contributed an additional \$62 billion, which almost equalled the increase in India's reserves. Reserves accumulate because of the entry of footloose capital. These capital inflows are also liabilities, with different kinds of future payment commitments associated with them. Foreign exchange reserves are being shored up with resources that are not assets as media reporting often implicitly suggests.

Evidence on India's international investment position indicates that assets held abroad by resident agents rose from \$918.5 billion in March 2023 to \$1,028.3 billion in March 2024, or by around \$110 billion over that year. Of that increase, the contribution of reserve assets, consisting of foreign currency and investment in low re-



turn and liquid securities was as much as \$68 billion. Since those reserve assets are being built by contracting liabilities, the latter rose from \$1,285.7 billion to \$1,390 billion, or by \$104 billion. The yields on these liabilities for foreign investors are bound to be high, implying that India is accessing costly capital to hold much of that money in low- or no-return assets. It incurs that cost by playing host to a kind of capital that is footloose and can leave at any time. This is not true just of last year but for the many years over which India has been building a stock of legacy foreign financial capital. The nature of that capital and the reserves it contributes gives no cause for celebration whatsoever.

**U**NDERLYING THE celebratory responses to these balance of payments trends is the expectation that the inflows will never stop and reverse themselves and the viewpoint that the inflows are good for India's growth. The expectation of persistence is belied not just by the experience across low- and middle-income countries over time but also by the Indian experience since the 1991 balance of payments crisis. And the view that these flows are good for growth ignores the fact that these investments are not in productive assets and are not long term in nature but yield-thirsty capital looking for speculative gains.

If there is any way in which these flows contribute to growth, it is by injecting liquidity into the system and providing the basis for a credit boom that can prove to be a bubble. The large volumes of liquidity infused into the system as a result of a surge in capital turn up as deposits in the banking system, which needs to lend or invest that money. In the high-growth years after 2004, such lending was to infrastructure: areas like power generation and distribution, roads, ports, and civil aviation. Many of those projects failed to take off or did not earn the



► **Stock prices on display** at the Bombay Stock Exchange building in Mumbai on June 27. KUNAL PATIL/PTI

expected returns, leading to loan defaults and a spike in non-performing assets. Banks soon held back on lending to infrastructure.

But with large capital inflows into bond and equity markets persisting, the pressure of enhanced liquidity in the banking system has not eased. In response, the banks have diversified away from lending to infrastructure into lending to the retail sector. In recent times the credit surge in India has been focussed on areas varying from housing investments and automobile purchases to accumulation of credit card receivables. Non-banking financial companies have added their share to such lending.

The consequence of this credit surge is that borrowers who were earlier excluded from access to retail lending are now being wooed by banks, increasing the number of weaker borrowers in whose case the probability of default is higher. Fears that a significant share of those loans

could turn bad are being expressed even in official circles. That, if and when it happens, could be the trigger for an exodus of capital.

Thus, India's large foreign exchange reserve speaks not of balance of payments strength but of processes that simultaneously increase external and domestic vulnerability. Either of those vulnerabilities can give, leading to a scenario in which reserves shrink and the rupee depreciates with economy-wide implications. If that happens, many wizards of the financial world will also pay a price. But that does not deter those players or the government that backs them from ignoring the true nature of the foreign reserve bonanza. ■

#### Also read



Personal loans disbursed via digital apps have the highest share of overdue accounts: Data

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**Underlying the celebratory responses to these balance of payments trends is the expectation that the inflows will never stop and reverse themselves and the viewpoint that the inflows are good for India's growth.**

## Controversy



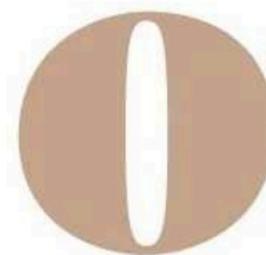
# BULLDOZER INJUSTICE

The massive yellow machine that can force its way through brick walls is now being used extensively against people who live in hutments and are branded as encroachers. With the courts offering little relief, human rights violations are occurring on an unprecedented scale across the country.

**ANUJ BEHAL**

▼ **At an eviction drive** in Lucknow's Akbarnagar on June 10, 2024. More than a thousand residential properties and a hundred commercial properties were demolished in the drive.

NAEEM ANSARI/ANI



On June 19, in a massive eviction drive in Lucknow's Akbarnagar, the State government demolished around 1,800 structures, including 1,169 houses and 101 commercial establishments. The BJP government plans to develop this area into the Kukrail Riverfront, transforming it into an ecotourism hub. Many residents have lived there for decades, with some claiming that they had been living there even before the development authority was formed.

Vishnu Kashyap, a resident, speaking to a news website, said: "Our houses will be demolished, and now the government will make a riverfront here. You tell me what is more important, a poor person's house or a riverfront?"

The government claims that the structures are encroachments. A spokesperson said the



area was encroached on, covering the river, “which has led to the river being ridden with illegal constructions by land mafias as well as Rohingya and Bangladeshi infiltrators”.

This is not the only instance of demolition that has occurred in recent times, even as recently as after the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance under Narendra Modi won a third term. Both Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh have witnessed similar “bulldozer justice” in recent times. In Madhya Pradesh’s Mandla district, 11 homes belonging to Muslims were de-

**Both the Supreme Court and various High Courts have consistently recognised the right to housing/shelter as an integral aspect of the fundamental right to life.**

molished on June 15 after police claimed they found beef in their refrigerators.

On May 6, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation demolished around 600 makeshift settlements in Jai Bhim Nagar, a Dalit *basti* (settlement) in Mumbai’s Powai, leaving 3,500 people homeless. The demolished site, now a rubble of roofing sheets, remains inaccessible to residents, who are forced to live on footpaths.

**M**ANOJ (44) HAS LIVED IN Delhi his entire life, born and raised in Shahdara. His family first settled in Mansarovar Park, where they lived until the government constructed a flyover, forcing them to relocate near Shyam Lal College. Subsequently, their lives were upended again in 2011 when their homes were demolished to make way for an underpass. Recent years have brought even more challenges. Their settlement has been demolished twice in two years, affecting over 32 families. The reasons cited were “removal of encroachments” and “plans to develop a park”.

“When they first demolished our settlement in September 2022, we had nowhere else to go. This place has always been our home,” said Manoj, reflecting the sentiment of many facing similar hardships.

Manoj and his community are constantly uprooted, forced to relocate across different parts of an area when their dwellings are demolished in the name of development. This repeated relocation has left them restless, struggling to even find a place to set up a simple makeshift arrangement.

According to a 2024 estimate by the Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN), authorities at the local, State, and Central levels have demolished 1,53,820 homes in 2022 and 2023, resulting in the forced eviction of more than 7,38,438 individuals across rural and urban areas in the country. The statistics collated by the HLRN from 2017 to 2023 showed a rising trend of evictions, with over 1.68 million people being affected. Looking at the year-wise breakdown of evictions across the country, the numbers have steadily risen, from 1,07,625 in 2019 to 2,22,686 in 2022 to a staggering 5,15,752 in 2023.



## An Amnesty International report in February said that in 128 instances, demolitions were predominantly carried out in areas with a high concentration of Muslims.

The reasons for eviction have changed significantly with the increase in the number of instances. “The rhetoric surrounding displacement has evolved notably, transitioning from subtle pretexts like urban redevelopment to more direct terms such as encroachment removal drives,” said Aakanksha Badkur, a human rights lawyer. “In the last six-seven years, we have observed a significant increase in the regime’s strictness towards the poor.”

Over the past two years, 59 per cent of evictions occurred under the guise of slum or land clearance, encroachment removal, or city beautification initiatives, resulting in the forced displacement of at least 2,90,330 people in 2023 and over 1,43,034 people in 2022.

Forced evictions have also been carried out for infrastructure and purported development projects such as smart city initiatives, environmental and forest protection endeavours, wildlife conservation efforts, and disaster management.

**I**N CASES WHERE justifications are vague, such as “clearing encroachments” or “city beautification”, the state often resorts to the pretext of sanitisation.

Indeed, another reason that has emerged in the discourse surrounding demolitions is punitive demolition. In 2023, several cases of eviction appeared to be linked to such demolition in places such as Jirapur village in Madhya Pradesh’s Khargone; Prayagraj, Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh; Nuh in Haryana; and Jahangirpuri in Delhi, among others. Although government agencies claimed to be clearing encroachments and removing illegal structures from public land, a closer study would show that specific groups were the targets of such action.

For example, in the aftermath of clashes during a Hanuman Jayanti procession on April

20, 2022, officials from the North Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) accompanied by 12 companies of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) demolished around 25 shops, vending carts, and houses primarily belonging to Muslims in Jahangirpuri, all under the guise of removing encroachments.

Similarly, in Khargone, following communal violence during Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti celebrations in April 2022, 16 houses and 29 shops belonging to Muslims, including a house constructed under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, were demolished.

Although the law does not contain provisions for demolishing property as a punitive measure, this practice has become increasingly common in States governed by the BJP.

Badkur said: “These are inferences we can draw, suggesting that these evictions were communal, based on observable patterns to an outsider. However, the legal process oper-

▼ **Hundreds of people** were left homeless after the PWD demolished shanties at Dhaula Kuan in New Delhi on May 14, 2023.  
SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR



ates differently, focussing on the facts and circumstances of legality and illegality. It's undeniable that most of these houses have some degree of unauthorised construction, common in non-compliance with laws and construction norms across India."

She added: "Because the courts and the law operate solely within the legal framework, which may not necessarily consider surrounding social realities, this creates an opportunity for political parties to exploit such frameworks and perpetuate violence and discrimination."

An Amnesty International report in February said that Muslims were targeted in 128 demolitions that affected 617 people. It discovered that demolitions were predominantly carried out in areas with a high concentration of Muslims, specifically targeting Muslim-owned properties in diverse neighbourhoods. In contrast, nearby Hindu-owned properties, especially in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh,

**"From court's justice we have moved into times of bulldozer justice."**

**Anand Lakhan**  
Housing rights  
activist

were not affected. In the report, Agnes Callamard, secretary general of Amnesty International, said: "The unlawful demolition of Muslim properties by the Indian authorities, peddled as 'bulldozer justice', is cruel and appalling. Such displacement and dispossession are deeply unjust, unlawful, and discriminatory."

**T**HE DEMOLITIONS WERE frequently initiated at the highest levels of government, with numerous officials directly or indirectly advocating for the use of bulldozers against Muslims. These punitive demolitions have been aggressively used as a form of extrajudicial punishment across several States. In particular, Uttar Pradesh's Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath, has been dubbed "Bulldozer Baba" by the media.

At a rally in Uttar Pradesh's Barabanki district as part of his campaign for the recently concluded Lok Sabha election, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said: "If the SP and the Congress come to power, Ram Lalla will be in a tent again and they will run a bulldozer on the Ram temple. They should take tuition from Yogiji, where to run a bulldozer and where you shouldn't." This statement perhaps best highlights the political rhetoric surrounding such action.

As per the HLRN's data, Muslims emerged as the most affected group in 44 per cent of instances. This underscores their particular vulnerability in the context of forced evictions and displacement.

Broadening the focus beyond the Muslim community, people belonging to the Scheduled Tribes and to Adivasi and tribal communities were affected in at least 23 per cent of instances, followed by those belonging to the Other Backward Classes (17 per cent) and the Scheduled Castes (5 per cent).

The demolition drives conducted lately have displayed a heightened level of severity and brutality, surpassing those witnessed in previous years. One notable trend is the large presence of force at the sites, making it difficult for individuals to resist these actions.

Suman (36), a woman evicted under an encroachment removal drive in Nanakpura in Delhi in 2023, said: "During the demolition, a





large contingent of around 200 CRPF personnel and an equal number of Delhi Police officers were stationed. Their presence barred us from accessing our possessions inside. To make matters worse, they confiscated our tin roofs, loading them onto a truck while the demolition was still in progress.”

Further, in several sites, including Priyanka Gandhi Camp, Tughlakabad, and Nanakpura, the rubble after the demolition was removed immediately, and families were prevented from salvaging the remnants of their home.

Ashok, who lives near Shyam Lal College in Delhi, said: “They are not just trying to remove us from this site but ensuring that the place is no longer habitable. Where will we go from here? The last time they came to demolish our *jhuggis*, they dug a pit 5-6 feet deep so that we could not rebuild our houses at the site. However, we will not leave until the government resettles us.” Rekha, a farmer residing in Bela Estate near the Yamuna floodplains, echoed these sentiments. Bela Estate has faced repeated demolitions in recent years as the government seeks to reclaim land following an order from the National Green Tribunal (NGT). Rekha said: “They have attempted to displace us multiple times. They dig pits and throw our essential belongings, including basic necessities

▼ **During an eviction drive** at the Jai Bhim Nagar *basti* in Mumbai’s Powai area, on June 6, 2024. PTI

*The ASI has been sending eviction notices in many States. Some of its main actions have been inside the Gulbarga Fort in Karnataka, in 2019, and at Haryana’s Rakhigarhi, home to Harappan-era mounds, in 2018.*

like rations, into them before filling them with sand.” Sheikh Akbar Ali, a housing rights activist who has been working in Delhi’s informal settlements for nearly two decades, said: “The authorities know that after demolitions, people will try to rebuild at the same spot, so they confiscate materials. Earlier, we never saw bulldozers coming after 5 pm or early in the morning, but now that is also common.”

Jayshree Satpute, a human rights lawyer, said: “As housing rights activists and lawyers have managed to secure court orders to halt illegal actions, the administration has been adopting adversarial strategies.”

She added: “Previously, when we presented a stay order, the police would halt the demolition. Now, they require a copy of the stay order, and often a certified one, before complying. The authorities are finding ways to bypass the legal processes activists rely on.”

The Delhi High Court in a landmark judgment in *Ajay Maken v. Union of India* (2019) emphasised that eviction of settlement dwellers without adequate notice or adherence to the due process established in *Sudama Singh v. Government of Delhi* (2010), and without adequate rehabilitation, would be deemed illegal.

However, over the past two years, many of the evictions conducted have failed to adhere to due process. These incidents include evictions carried out without sufficient notice and demolitions occurring in adverse weather conditions and even during school examinations, often involving the use of disproportionate force.

**O**N APRIL 30 AND May 1, 2023, Tughlakabad’s Bengali *basti* in Chhuriya Mohalla was the site of one of the largest eviction episodes in the past seven years. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) issued notices to over a thousand families there three months earlier, on January 11, asking them to vacate their homes within 15 days.

The residents, contrary to the claims of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) and the police, said that they did not know about the impending demolition until the ASI issued its notice. The notice was affixed on their doors and did not specify a date for the demolition nor did it provide any information regarding rehabilitation or temporary shelter. A woman who had been displaced said: “We weren’t

**In the discourse surrounding evictions, punitive demolition has emerged as a reason behind the action, with several cases of eviction in 2023 linked to it.**

even given time to retrieve our valuables and belongings. My children's books and uniforms were all gone. It was raining heavily on the day of the demolition. We pleaded with them to at least grant us one day to salvage our belongings. However, with our houses, our dreams also crumbled."

**I**N THE PAST, THE COURTS, in the absence of specific legislation, have creatively interpreted legal principles to address housing rights violations. Both the Supreme Court and various High Courts have consistently recognised the right to housing/shelter as an integral aspect of the fundamental right to life. Key judgments such as those in *Sudama Singh* and *Ajay Maken* imposed a duty on state authorities to conduct surveys and provide rehabilitation before resorting to evictions.

Satpute, also a key lawyer in *Sudama Singh*, said: "Progressive judgments and cases have established due procedures, but these processes are not being followed.... The courts upheld people's rights more robustly 10 years ago. Recently, we have struggled to secure favourable decisions or timely redress."

This departure has had tangible effects, evident from the fact that in 2023 alone, court orders and tribunal rulings led to at least 13 instances of eviction, displacing over 2,59,845 individuals across the country. Notably, about half of those evicted in 2023 lost their homes due to court-ordered enforcement. The demolition of houses in Akbarnagar, Lucknow, is

**Many evictions failed to adhere to due process and were carried out without sufficient notice, in adverse weather conditions and even during school exams.**

▼ **After a demolition drive** in Dehi's Tughlakabad area on May 15, 2023. This was one of the largest eviction episodes in the past seven years.

SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

another example of a court-led eviction. In December, residents resisted through litigation in both the Allahabad High Court and the Supreme Court. However, the Supreme Court ultimately allowed the government to proceed with clearing the area.

**A**NAND LAKHAN, a housing rights activist from Madhya Pradesh and leader of Madhya Pradesh Nav Nirman Manch, expressed his concerns about the current state of judicial processes and government actions. He said: "From court's justice we have moved into times of bulldozer justice. Initially, we believed that we could rely on presenting solid evidence in court rather than appealing for mercy. However, the government often disregards this evidence entirely."

He added: "Even when we obtain a stay order, government authorities often ignore it and proceed with demolitions. When we file for contempt of court, these applications are rarely entertained."

Referring to an eviction in June at Pipliyahana in Indore, for road development, Lakhan said: "A similar case of contempt occurred. When we filed for a stay order, it was not upheld, and the contempt case eventually fizzled out. Meanwhile, an entire settlement was erased." Evicted people encounter many obstacles in accessing justice, exacerbated by the courts' reluctance to offer protection and relief. For instance, in 2022 the Delhi High Court declined to halt the demolition of 100 homes belonging to low-income families in Gyaspur despite reports indicating their long-standing residency in the area. The court justified its decision by stating that the settlement was not included in the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board's list of recognised *bastis*.

There are more than 17 million people in the country who live under the threat of having their homes bulldozed. "If the police and various departments continue to take action by demolishing homes without proper legal proceedings", said Lakhan, that would amount to "a blatant violation of people's constitutional rights, as they are not given adequate time for a proper hearing". ■

Anuj Behal is an independent journalist and urban researcher primarily focussing on issues of housing rights, urban justice, gender, and sexuality.





# A trade war and global security

The US-China trade war can be traced to the rise of China in the present-day global economic, political, and military order, and its affiliation with Russia (as also with Iran and North Korea) that enables it to challenge the US-dominated world order with the alternative vision of multipolarity. **TALMIZ AHMAD**

**O**n May 14, US President Joe Biden dramatically announced tariff increases on several items imported from China. These new duties will affect electric vehicles, batteries, computer chips, medical products, steel and aluminium, critical minerals, solar panels, and cranes. Under the new orders, duties on electric vehicles have been quadrupled to over 100 per cent, while duties on semiconductors have been doubled to 50 per cent, and tripled for lithium-ion EV batteries.

The US administration has justified these tariffs by referring to “unacceptable risks” to US economic security posed by what it sees as unfair Chinese trade practices that, in its

view, have led to China flooding the US market with cheap goods, thus harming domestic manufacturers and contributing to the trade deficit. In 2023, the US imported goods worth \$427 billion from China, while its exports to that country were worth \$148 billion.

China’s electric vehicles have been viewed with particular concern as an “existential threat” to the US automobile industry. Biden’s tariffs are meant to appeal to blue-collar workers and promote US manufacturing in the run-up to the presidential election.

The roots of the ongoing trade war lie in



China's emergence as a global economic power. China's trade took off significantly after it joined the World Trade Organization in 2001: exports began to expand by 20 per cent annually, while GDP growth reached 14 per cent in 2007. But even then, China was still a minor presence in the global economy: the US GDP was 400 per cent larger than that of China in 2006. This began to change quickly: in 2006, China's GDP in current dollars was \$2.8 trillion; by 2017, it had become \$12.2 trillion, with the US GDP now only 58 per cent larger than that of China.

Throughout his campaign for the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump focussed on the US-China trade deficit as having caused the loss of American manufacturing jobs and its intellectual property. He said that China was responsible for "the greatest theft of the world" and described the trade deficit as the "rape of our country".

In office, Trump began the trade war in July 2018 with tariffs on select Chinese exports to the US so that by August 2019 more than \$450 billion of Chinese products were subjected to tariffs. The President said that China was costing the US economy hundreds of billions of dollars a year due to unfair trade practices.

The items on which tariffs were imposed were solar panels, washing machines, steel and aluminium, and various consumer goods. These expanded to embrace the full gamut of China's exports to the US.

**I**N RESPONSE, CHINA asserted that the US' real intention was to retard China's economic growth and that US' criticisms were speculative and without evidence. China imposed tariffs on more than \$185 billion of US goods, including soya beans and other agriculture products, pork, and automobiles.

This trade war has been described as "the largest commercial conflict in modern history". However, its impact on the US has generally been negative. A report in September 2019 found that the US economy had lost 3,00,000

▼ **The trade war** has been described as "the largest commercial conflict in modern history".

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IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

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**China's trade took off significantly after it joined the World Trade Organization in 2001: exports began to expand by 20 per cent annually, while GDP growth reached 14 per cent in 2007.**

jobs and suffered a drop in GDP of 0.3 per cent to 0.7 per cent. The agriculture sector was particularly hit hard as US exporters lost access to the \$24 billion Chinese market, with numerous job losses and housing foreclosures in rural areas.

The relocation of manufacturing production to its home territories to minimise economic and geopolitical risks is also something the US could not achieve. A survey by the American Chamber of Commerce in China found that China remained a top business destination for most of its members. The European Union Chamber of Commerce in China found that, despite supply chain disruptions due to the trade war and the pandemic, European companies remained committed to the Chinese market; two-thirds said that they ranked China among the top three investment destinations, especially in sectors such as petrochemicals, chemicals, and refining.

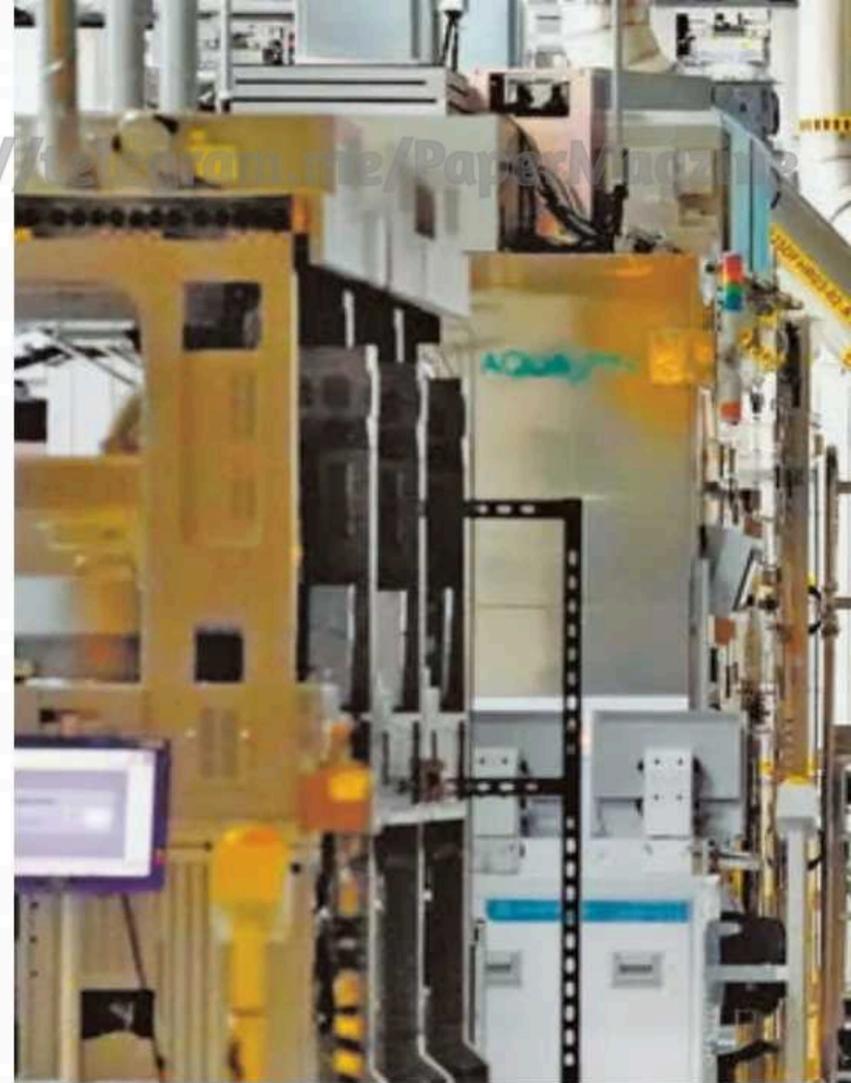
**G**REAT POWER RIVALRY is now at the heart of contemporary US-China ties, with trade issues joining geopolitical competition as areas of bilateral contention. In terms of the size of the economy, China's GDP at current prices in 2021 was \$16.4 trillion, while that of the US was \$22 trillion; in 2030, China is expected to surpass the US, when its GDP will be \$33.7 trillion, while that of the US will be \$30.4 trillion.

China's rise to great power status is the most significant political and economic development of the present century, with implications for global security and global governance; it in fact poses a challenge to the US-led world order. This is reflected in China's high-profile global geopolitical presence and its more assertive posture in projecting its interests; this is particularly evident across the west Pacific and its expanding footprint in the Indian Ocean. But China's ambitions go beyond this: in the *Foreign Affairs* issue dated May-June 2024, the political scientist Elizabeth Economy asserted that President Xi Jinping's ambition "to remake the world is undeniable".

Elizabeth Economy also correctly points out that China is not alone in wielding this challenge; she notes that "China's proposals would give power to the many countries that have been frustrated and sidelined by the present order, but it would still afford the states

**Over the past decade, India has also noted with concern China's expanding presence and influence in areas of crucial importance to its strategic concerns: South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and Eurasia.**

*During his two-day visit to China in May, Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasised the two countries' flourishing strategic ties and his own relationship with Chinese President Xi Jinping as they sought to present an alternative to US hegemony.*



Washington currently favours with valuable international roles". Thus, what China and several other like-minded states are seeking is not to replace one hegemon with another or set up a new global binary of states in contention. They are seeking a new multipolar order in which diverse states assert their interests and seek to influence issues being discussed at global fora, besides forming new alignments among themselves to pursue their interests.

But this encroachment on its pedestal is not acceptable to the Western alliance; it views with serious concern the political and economic challenges it faces from states that it had dominated and ruthlessly exploited for two centuries. From the Western perspective, the threat of a **new world order** is the principal narrative of contemporary international politics.

As the US shapes its coalition to confront the challenge from China and its allies, it views India as a valuable partner and is making every effort to lure India into its alliance.

Over the past 20 years, India has been a robust advocate of a new multipolar world order in which international institutions, shaped by the West in the aftermath of the Second World War, are thoroughly reformed and countries of the "Global South" are given an influential voice in articulating and pursuing their interests. The approach that India adopted after the Cold War was that of "strategic autonomy", that is, pursuing a wide variety of bilateral and multilateral engagements that would serve its interests and enable it to voice the concerns of the developing world.



Over the past decade, India has also noted with concern China's expanding presence and influence in areas of crucial importance to its strategic concerns: South Asia, the Indian Ocean, and Eurasia. But of immediate concern for India is what it sees as steady Chinese encroachments along its 4,000 km undemarcated border. The most serious confrontation in recent times has been the massing of Chinese troops in Ladakh from April 2020. A confrontation between Indian and Chinese soldiers in June that year left 20 Indians, including a colonel, dead, along with an unknown number of Chinese soldiers. Since then, the two countries have massed about 50,000 troops each, facing each other at the frontier.

This cross-border confrontation, coupled with increasing Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean, has encouraged greater Indo-US strategic cooperation. The two countries have signed four agreements providing for the interoperability of their armed forces; these cover the areas of security, logistics, communications, and compatibility. India has also increased its purchase of US defence equipment, enhanced intelligence cooperation, and institutionalised these relations through the annual 2+2 dialogue platform that brings together the Foreign and Defence Ministers of the two countries, even while holding regular interactions at the summit level.

Despite this dramatic progress in bilateral ties, India has retained its strategic autonomy: it has refused to join the Western countries in imposing sanctions on Russia for the war in Ukraine. It has maintained a high-level of bilat-

▼ **The Automated Material Handling Systems**

robots moving along tracks on the ceiling inside the GlobalFoundries semiconductor manufacturing facility in Malta, New York, US, on June 18, 2024.

CINDY SCHULTZ/  
BLOOMBERG

eral cooperation with Russia in defence and economic areas and, following the energy embargo on Russia by Western nations, has become a major buyer of Russian oil. It also actively participates in fora such as the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation that include China. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has categorically stated that multipolarity is "the natural state of the world".

The US, on its part, does not seem to be deterred; it sees the cultivation of ties with India as a long-term process. Part of this process is to draw India into regional US-led organisations which would deepen India's engagements with the US and its allies and encourage the habit of working together.

**T**HE FIRST OF these regional organisations is the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, that brings together the US, Japan, Australia, and India as a maritime coalition in the Indo-Pacific. From early 2021, amidst the ongoing Sino-Indian confrontation, Indian and American commentators began to highlight the Quad's security agenda vis-a-vis China. But this enthusiasm did not last. A conscious course correction was affected at the in-person summit in Washington, DC, in September 2021. The security element in the Quad was diluted and replaced with a focus on cooperation in areas of long-term interest such as the COVID-19 vaccine initiative, the Quad STEM fellowship, a cybersecurity initiative, green shipping, a clean-hydrogen partnership, 5G deployment, and a semiconductor supply chain initiative.

Besides the Quad, the US has initiated two other regional organisations that are principally aimed at affirming the US' continued interest in West Asia, gradually integrating Israel into the West Asian political and economic dynamics while pulling India deeper into the Western alliance.

The first one is the so-called I2U2 that includes the US, Israel, the UAE, and India. This new partnership has been described as an "ad hoc, informal, issue-specific and geo-economic initiative", highlighting that the partners have no shared strategic vision and, hence, have no agenda in the area of regional security. While building on close political and eco-

conomic ties among the partners, the grouping is focussing on non-security areas such as energy, food security, health, space, transport, and water.

The second entity sponsored by the US is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, or IMEC. This logistical connectivity project links India with the Arabian Peninsula and, further, connects the peninsula with Europe through railway links from the UAE and Saudi ports with the Israeli port of Haifa. This proposal was agreed to on the sidelines of the G20 summit in New Delhi in September 2023.

However, the project has serious limitations. India is already well-connected with the Arabian Peninsula; in fact, these ties go back nearly five millennia. Again, India and all Asian countries are closely linked with Europe through the Red Sea, with the Suez Canal providing the East-West passageway for global shipping. This is a bizarre proposal given that we now have direct shipping links from Asian markets to Europe and vice versa. A far better way to integrate Israel with its neighbours in West Asia would be for Israel to accept and implement the Arab Peace Initiative and facilitate the realisation of a sovereign Palestinian state.

Both India and the US have found technology as a substantial and mutually beneficial area for bilateral cooperation. The commentators Hemant Taneja and Fareed Zakaria wrote in April last year that as US concerns relating to China grow, “India shines as a promising alternative in supply chains, innovation hubs, and joint ventures”.

In November 2022, visiting US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen affirmed that the US was placing India at the centre of its efforts to detach global supply chains from its adversaries and cement ties with one of the world’s fastest growing economies and trusted trading partners—India. The areas of cooperation identified were semiconductors, electric vehicles, artifi-



▼ **Chinese President**

Xi Jinping and US President Joe Biden at Filoli estate on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, in Woodside, California, in November 2023.

KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

cial intelligence, quantum computing, and drones.

In March 2023, US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo was in India for a “Strategic Trade Dialogue” on a matter of vital strategic importance to the two countries in their competition with China—semiconductors. The two countries are also looking at jointly developing defence technologies, including jet engines, artillery systems, and armoured infantry vehicles.

**A**LTHOUGH MUCH PROGRESS has been made in exploring areas for bilateral cooperation in the technology sector, both the US and India have some way to go in building strategic trust: India complains that it is still being denied access to some advanced US defence-related technologies. Taneja and Zakaria have recommended that the US should see India as a genuine hub of innovation and work towards reforming trade policies and creating a transparent system for technology transfer and innovation. India, on its part, needs to become more business-friendly by reforming its laws and easing barriers to foreign investment.

Despite these diverse and substantial engagements with the US, India remains wedded to strategic autonomy. The latest evidence of this is the signing by India and Iran of a 10-year contract for India to provide funding of \$120 million and a further credit line of \$250 million to develop the Chabahar port project. The project envisages the construction of 32 jetties that, when completed, will handle 82 million tonnes of cargo annually.

The origins of the US-China trade war, which has evolved into ongoing zero-sum Sino-US technological and geopolitical competitions, lie in the rise of China and its second place, just after the US, in the present-day global economic, political, and military order and

**In November 2022, visiting US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen affirmed that the US was placing India at the centre of its efforts to detach global supply chains from its adversaries.**



its affiliation with Russia (as also Iran and North Korea) that enables it to challenge the US-dominated world order with the alternative vision of multipolarity.

Western states, however, view their hegemony over world affairs as natural and, possibly, eternal; hence, threats have to be confronted unitedly and vigorously, with diverse instruments: trade war, economic sanctions, subversion, and direct military interventions, where required. Undermining foes through carefully calibrated and implemented divide-and-rule policies is an important part of this confrontation.

The West has shaped itself and its enemies as two collective binaries in contention, with its understanding of “us” and “them” being founded on the simple view that if you are not with us, you are against us. But this under-

▼ **Former US President** Donald Trump began the trade war in July 2018 with tariffs on select Chinese exports to the US, a 2021 photograph. JIM BOURG/REUTERS

standing is erroneous since those who challenge Western hegemony are not and do not see themselves as a monolithic collective; they are numerous and diverse nations that today are seeking an autonomous role for themselves in world affairs so that they can, either on their own or in tandem with like-minded allies, assert their interests in specific geographies or on specific issues. Thus, what they are seeking is a multipolar order, not another global binary divide.

**I**NDIA SEEKS TO safeguard its interests, enhance its capabilities, and voice the concerns of the Global South through exercising strategic autonomy and joining diverse alignments, bilateral and multilateral, ensuring always that it does not function at the behest of another authority or subordinate its interests to serve another power. India sees itself as a player, even influencer, in the emerging multipolar order. ■

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### AT A GLANCE



#### US unemployment

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics announced in June that the country added 2,72,000 jobs in May while the unemployment rate increased to 4% for the first time since May 2022. The number of jobless people stood at 6.6 million, against 6.1 million last year.



#### Flood of Chinese EVs

According to the World Economic Forum, Chinese automakers account for more than half of the electric vehicles (EVs) produced worldwide. It has also said that “while Chinese EVs aren’t prevalent on European or American roads, they are increasingly on the radar”.



#### Debate debacle

In the first of the presidential debates in the run-up to the election in November, President Joe Biden, 81, came up with a below par performance against his Republican Party contender, Donald Trump, leading to calls for him to quit the presidential race.



#### Jump in tariffs

Some of the increases in tariffs on imports from China under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 are as follows: steel and aluminium products, up from 0–7.5% to 25% in 2024; semiconductors, from 25% to 50% by 2025; and electric vehicles from 25% to 100% in 2024.

# CHINA WOOS EUROPE

Xi Jinping's six-day visit to Europe seemed to be aimed at embedding China deeper into the European economy and in shoring up support for China's emerging vision in an increasingly fractured world. However, the EU's protectionist instinct seems to have outweighed the lure of China. **V. ANAND**

**C**hinese President Xi Jinping's six-day visit to Europe in May, when he returned after five years for his first post-pandemic visit, covered France, Serbia, and Hungary, that is, western, central, and eastern Europe. China is commemorating 75 years of the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), so this diplomatic outreach by Xi has special significance for the country's foreign policy. In addition to his wife, Peng Liyuan, Xi was accompanied by Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Cai Qi, Director of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) General Office. The three countries were selected for geopolitical and geo-economic reasons, and the visit was also timed to coincide with other strategic considerations.

First, Xi's visit to France is emblematic of his outreach to the European Union as a whole. Although France and Germany are two of the most consequential countries in the EU, Germany was not included since the German Chancellor had already visited China in April with a large and diverse business delegation. France and China are celebrating the 60th anniversary of bilateral relations, and Xi had previously visited France in 2014 and 2019, coinciding with his third year in office as General Secretary of the CPC and his second year in of-



ice as President, in his first and second terms respectively. The current visit continues the tradition in Xi's third term.

Unlike China's ties with other major Western powers, there is a unique history of sustained friendship with France, with certain historical congruencies and linkages. In fact, Xi, during his visit, characterised the two countries as "representatives of Eastern and Western civilisations" with "a long history of mutual appreciation and admiration". Both were empires that transformed into modern republics after a revolution. Some leading revolutionary leaders of Communist China such as Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping not just studied and worked but also built their ideological foundations in France. When the Cold War was raging, France acted as a bridge between Maoist China and the capitalist West. France, in 1964, was the first major Western power to establish official diplomatic ties with China, 15 years before the US. Currently, the two are permanent members of the UN Security Council, and their bilateral relations carry immense weight in the contemporary world.

Xi's visit to Hungary was his second as President. The visit was timed to coincide with the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties. Hungary is China's top investment destination in central and eastern Europe, and one of the first countries to recognise the PRC. By 2017, China and Hungary had established a comprehensive strategic part-



nership. Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is seen in the EU as a rebellious leader who has charted his country on a path towards an illiberal democracy; he has been at odds with the EU over Brussels' punitive actions on Russia against which Xi's China offers Orbán a diversified partnership. There is significant convergence between China's Belt and Road Initiative and Hungary's Eastern Opening strategy, which Xi highlighted during the visit. Moreover, Hungary took over the rotating EU Council presidency in July.

This is Xi's second visit to Serbia as President, the first being in 2016 when China-Serbia ties were transformed into a strategic partnership. Serbia is China's first comprehensive strategic partner in central and eastern Europe. Xi called Serbia's ties with China "a model for state-to-state and people-to-people interactions", quite a unique characterisation of a European country. In fact, China is the largest investor and the second largest trading partner for Serbia. Xi's visit was timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. China and Russia had supported Serbia while the West backed Kosovar independence. The bombing soured China's ties with the US, hence, Serbia's special significance. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, like Orbán, has been facing criticism from the EU for attempting to undermine the growth of liberal democracy in Serbia and for his friendly relations

with the Russia. Moreover, both China and Serbia have ambitions of territorial revanchism, reflected in their push to reunify Taiwan and Kosovo, respectively.

**D**URING XI'S VISIT, China and France signed 18 agreements on aviation, agriculture, people-to-people exchange, green development, and SME (small and medium-sized enterprise) cooperation. Also, both countries issued four joint statements on the situation in West Asia, on AI and global governance, on biodiversity and oceans, and on agricultural exchanges and cooperation. Xi also supported Emmanuel Macron's call for an "Olympic truce", as France is hosting this year's summer Olympics. Xi also attended the China-France-EU trilateral meeting where he had talks with Macron and with the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen. This format was used in 2023 when Macron visited

▼ **A screen showing** Chinese President Xi Jinping and French President Emmanuel Macron at the Beijing International Automotive Exhibition in Beijing on April 25. During his visit to Europe, Xi noted that China's advanced capacity could augment the global response to climate change and accelerate the march towards a green future.

TINGSHU WANG/REUTERS

**Xi's visit to Hungary was his second as President. Hungary is China's top investment destination in central and eastern Europe, and one of the countries first to recognise the PRC.**

China. The trilateral was aimed to achieve some headway on Russia and the electric vehicle (EV) issue, although it ended with all sides reiterating their respective positions.

Serbia became the first European country to sign on to China's new initiative of a "Global community with a shared future in the new era". A total of 29 agreements were signed with Serbia, including one to join the **International Lunar Research Station** to be set up by China in the 2030s. It is important to note that Serbia is the only country in Europe outside the post-Soviet states to join the initiative, which is pitted against the US-led Artemis Accords on outer space exploration. As for Hungary, ties were elevated to an "All-Weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for the New Era". China and Hungary signed around 18 agreements, including on trade, investment, agriculture, healthcare, science and technology, atomic energy, tourism, and media.

On issues concerning Europe, Xi reiterated at the trilateral that "China did not start the Ukraine crisis, nor is it a party to or a participant in it". Rather, he reiterated, China is playing a constructive role in the peaceful resolution of it. Nevertheless, Xi clearly underlined that any attempt at resolution needed to consider the "security concerns of all sides". Xi also called for a conference to end the conflict, with "equal participation of all parties and fair discussions on all peace plans".

Xi stressed the need to solve the root of the Israel-Palestine issue and its spillover into the Red Sea and West Asia, which is the realisation of the two-state solution with full Palestinian statehood. While Europe put its weight behind Israel in the wake of the Hamas attacks, it has become increasingly wary of Israel's massive retaliation on Gaza.

Perhaps the most important agenda for Xi was to highlight the need for France in general

*China's National Space Administration has partnered with the Russian space agency, Roscosmos, to establish the ILRS, which will conduct scientific research, including moon exploration and utilisation. The facilities will be available to other nations.*

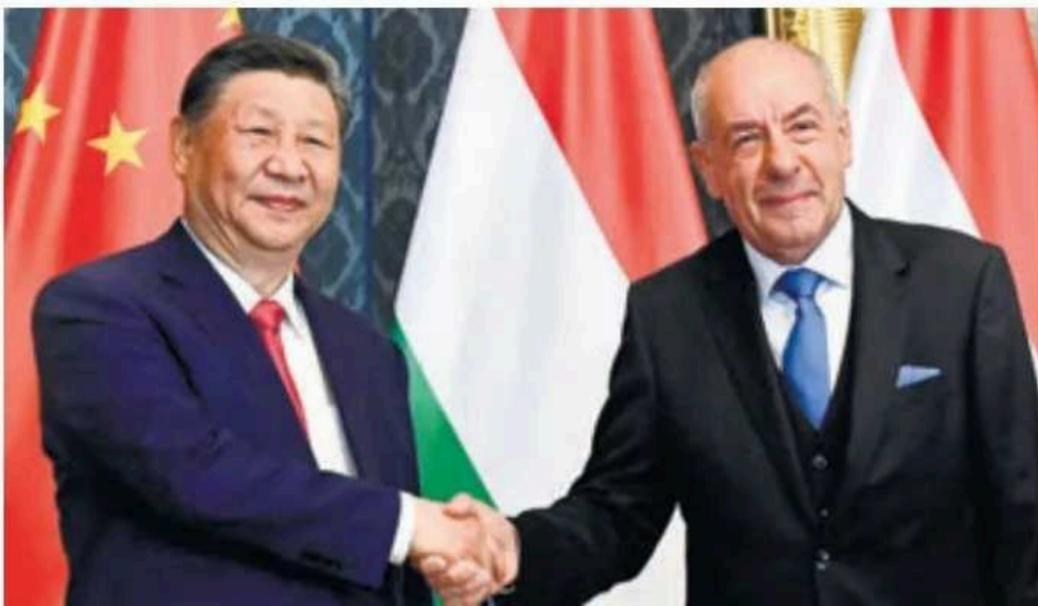
▼ **Xi with Hungarian President** Tamas Sulyok in Budapest on May 9. China and Hungary signed 18 agreements, including on trade, investment, agriculture, healthcare, science and technology, atomic energy, tourism, and media. NOEMI BRUZAK/AP

and Europe in particular to chart an independent course on issues of regional and global significance rather than be led blindly by the US. Xi referred in particular to the importance that both countries give to independent thinking on the world stage. France has many times raised the issue of strategic autonomy for itself and Europe even though it is a NATO member. In fact, Macron has been pushing for a European security architecture and nuclear deterrent distinct from NATO as well as for brokering peace with Russia. In this context, Xi remarked that "the two sides should uphold independence and jointly prevent a new cold war or bloc confrontation... they should... work together for an equal and orderly multi-polar world".

Another major issue covered was that of the overcapacity problem in China's new energy industry and its impact on industrial competitiveness and market space in Europe. The EU has started a probe into subsidies provided by the Chinese government to its electric vehicle and solar panel sector and is threatening tariffs to offset these. Xi denied the existence of overcapacity and said that China's high manufacturing capacity could cater to the growing global demand and address inflation. Moreover, Xi noted that China's advanced capacity can greatly augment the global response to climate change and accelerate the march towards a green future.

During his visit, Xi spent considerable time conveying the message that China would further open up its market and expand opportunities for Europe's businesses as it stepped up its pursuit of "high quality development". Xi's remarks were clearly meant for Europe as a whole. Xi attempted to offer more market access for French agricultural products in return for France moving away from discriminatory policies on Chinese exports and investments. This offer seems tailor-made for Macron, who has been facing incessant agricultural protests within his country.

Xi's visit was aimed at embedding China deeper into the European economy and, on a larger level, at shoring up support for China's vision in an increasingly fractured world. China has come a long way from its period of sustained double-digit growth and is projecting only 5 per cent growth this year. In fact, it is set to decline to 3.5 per cent by 2028, as per the





IMF. The stagnation of economic reforms in the past few decades, the return of party-state interventionism in the Xi era, and the rising political risks associated with the Chinese economy, compounded by a decline in demographic dividend, are dragging down China's economic trajectory. At this time, China requires a big boost to its economy, and it sees Europe as an advanced market for its "new quality productive forces" and as a source of technological collaboration to climb the global value chain.

**SOME ANALYSTS HAVE** argued that Xi's visit was aimed at breaking EU unity. However, China's intent seems much broader: to sow dissension in the Western camp. The EU in total is a market of 450 million people, indispensable for China. Xi's messaging in France was as much aimed at his host as at the EU, and he discussed regional and global issues with both Macron and von der Leyen. Through France, Xi was reaching out to the rest of the EU to prod it away from a potentially confrontational course with China. The EU has been reluctant to pursue a path of decoupling ever since the Donald Trump administration started the trade war with China. Rather, it has, over time, chosen a more diluted approach of derisking wherein the overdependence on perilous supply chains passing through China is reduced while still allowing bilateral trade and investment to expand. That way, Europe in general is much less hawkish than the US whose economic engagement with China is extremely securitised, even under the Joe Biden administration.

China's efforts to refashion the US-dominated global order will not be possible if Europe remains completely in concert with the US, as in the case of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. To

effect any transformation, China requires Europe to be on its side in the coming years. With this in mind, Xi throughout the visit called on his host countries to "jointly reject hegemonism and power politics and oppose bloc politics or bloc confrontation", and to "uphold the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, practice true multilateralism, and promote international fairness and justice". In short, partner with China to contest the US-led world order.

However, within a month of the visit, Xi's charm offensive on Europe seems to have hit a wall. Just a few days after Xi's visit, the US announced the imposition of tariffs on new energy imports from China, including Chinese EVs. Within a month from this, the EU firmed up its mind on Chinese EVs by announcing the conclusion of investigations and the preliminary imposition of tariffs. Xi's visit clearly did not reap the dividends, at least in the short term, as EU's protectionist instinct seems to have outweighed the lure of China. Moreover, at a larger level, it also signals that the EU will continue to follow the US lead, especially on strategic matters relating to China. ■

*The views expressed in the article are personal.*

Dr Anand V. is an Assistant Professor (Senior Scale) and Coordinator of the China Study Centre at the Department of Geopolitics and International Relations, Manipal Academy of Higher Education.

▼ **At a sun protection clothing factory** in Fuyang in eastern China's Anhui province. China requires a big boost to its economy, and it sees Europe as an advanced market for its "new quality productive forces" and as a source of technological collaboration to climb the global value chain.

AFP

**Just a few days after Xi's visit, the US announced the imposition of tariffs on new energy imports from China, including Chinese EVs.**

# A crusader for Tamils

Sampanthan (1933-2024) was a visionary leader who worked tirelessly for a just solution for Sri Lankan Tamils.

**R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN**

**R**. Sampanthan, the last of the tall leaders of the Tamils in Sri Lanka, who worked tirelessly for an amicable and just solution for the Tamils within the framework of a united Sri Lanka for over half a century, died on June 30. He was 91 and had been ailing for some time.

Sampanthan, the second Tamil who was Leader of the Opposition in Sri Lanka's parliament, was a powerful voice inside and outside the House. His leadership provided the best opportunity for a practical political solution to the lingering Tamil/national question.

A leader who was pragmatic enough to work with the Sinhala majority in a bid to actualise the hopes and aspirations of the Tamil people, Sampanthan was always viewed with suspicion in the south.

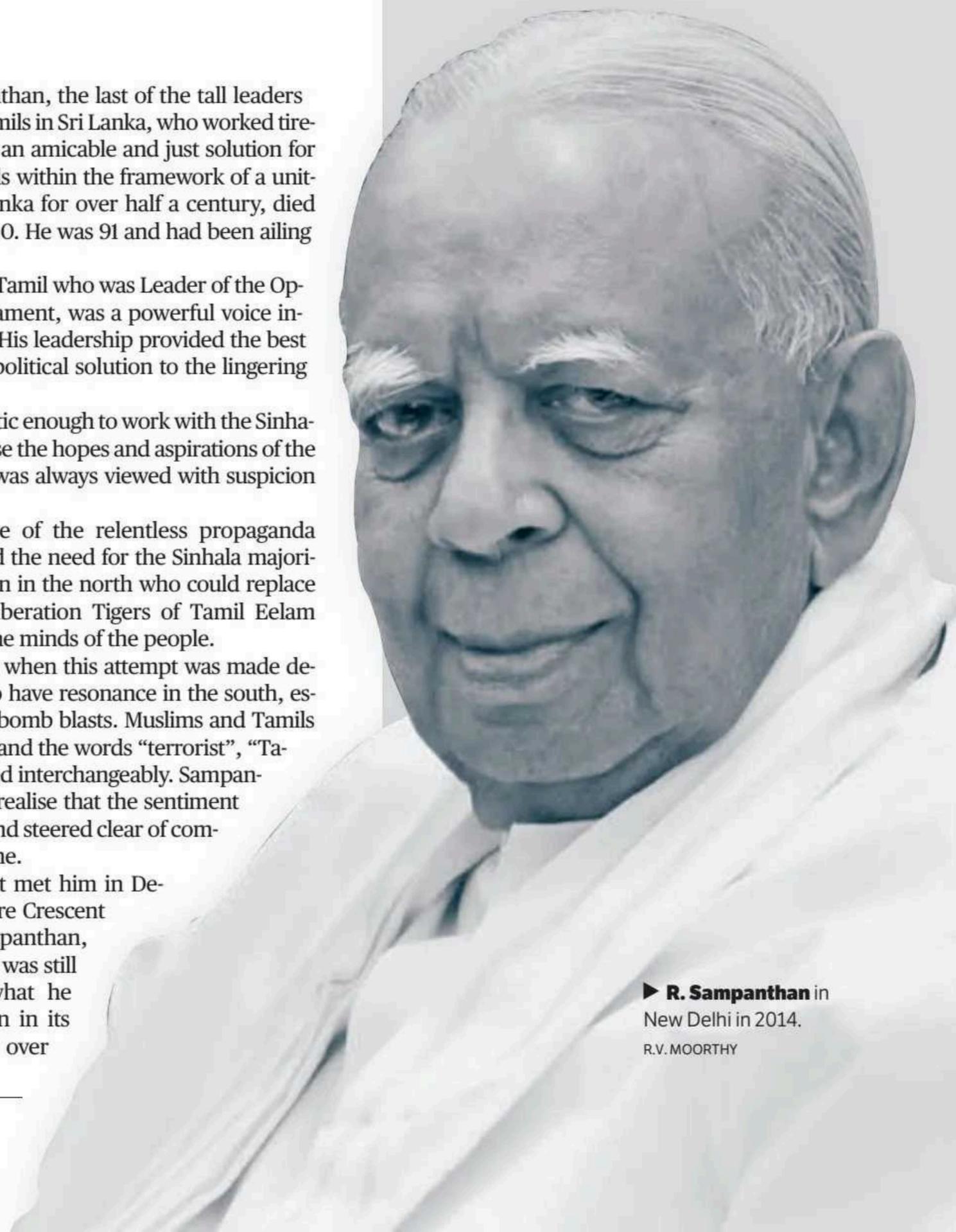
This was largely because of the relentless propaganda against the Tamil leader, and the need for the Sinhala majoritarian parties to have a villain in the north who could replace the feared leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), V. Prabhakaran, in the minds of the people.

Sampanthan was over 80 when this attempt was made deliberately, and it appeared to have resonance in the south, especially after the April 2019 bomb blasts. Muslims and Tamils were put in the same basket and the words "terrorist", "Tamil", and "Muslim" were used interchangeably. Sampanthan was patient enough to realise that the sentiment was a reaction to the blasts and steered clear of combative politics during that time.

When this correspondent met him in December 2023, in his Stanmore Crescent residence in Colombo, Sampanthan, who had difficulty speaking, was still exceedingly coherent in what he said: "Sri Lanka is going on in its usual way. They have got over

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The struggle for Tamils' rights will certainly yield results.



► **R. Sampanthan** in New Delhi in 2014.

R.V. MOORTHY

their fears and apprehensions, and there seems to be no urgency to change.” He added that the struggle for Tamil rights would “certainly yield results” and that India had a “big role to play” in the process.

Sampanthan insisted that it was not too late to solve the Tamil question and that President Ranil Wickremesinghe could do so, with the support of India and the saner elements in Sri Lankan politics. Acutely aware of the Sinhala/Buddhist majoritarianism that rears its head every time there is talk of a possible pact with the Tamils, Sampanthan was always at pains to add the rider to the political solution: within the framework of a united Sri Lanka.

In fact, Sampanthan was making notes and preparing for a meeting with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar when the latter visited Colombo in June. But his deteriorating health meant that he could not meet Jaishankar.

**E**ARLIER, ON ONE OCCASION when Mahinda Rajapaksa’s party was whipping up anti-Tamil sentiment claiming that Sri Lanka would be divided by the Tamils, Sampanthan told the parliament: “I would like to put this on record because I want everybody in this country to know that it was a malicious, vicious, fallacious, false propaganda on the part of President Rajapaksa and the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, and if you proceed with this agenda, I want to tell you, [Tamil] Eelam will bloom, not on account of us but on account of your Lotus Bud. Your Lotus Bud [the SLPP’s symbol] will bloom into an Eelam. That is what will happen. Therefore, please resist your temptation to achieve cheap political gain by carrying on such false propaganda.”

Although Sampanthan was elected to the parliament in 1977 from Trincomalee as a Tamil United Liberation Front MP, it was his stint since 2001 as part of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) that cast him as the leader with a mission. (The TNA is a political alliance representing Sri Lankan Tamils.) He never changed the seat and was instrumental in Trincomalee retaining its distinct Tamil identity despite the many onslaughts of Sinhalisation of the district.

In his tribute, M.A. Sumanthiran, who helmed the TNA in the parliament in the absence of the ailing Sampanthan, said: “Sampanthan was a bold and relentless voice. He tirelessly demanded equal rights for Tamils, within a

**Although Sampanthan was pragmatic enough to work with the Sinhala majority in a bid to actualise the hopes of the Tamils, he was always viewed with suspicion in the south.**

‘united, undivided, indivisible’ country. He based his arguments for a political solution on the many promises that the Sinhalese establishment made in the past but failed to keep.”

Sajith Premadasa, the Leader of the Opposition in Sri Lanka and leader of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, a political alliance, noted that Sampanthan’s “dedication to equal rights for all Sri Lankans is a beacon of hope. His fair and just leadership will continue to inspire me and many others. Truly, it is the end of an era.”

Mahinda Rajapaksa, former Sri Lankan President, who Sampanthan hoped would have the foresight to bring about lasting peace, recalled his association with the departed leader: “He was an old friend and colleague, and we shared many a day discussing various issues. His demise is a loss to Sri Lanka political fraternity.”

Mourning the loss, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a tweet: “Will always cherish fond memories of meetings with him. He relentlessly pursued a life of peace, security, justice and dignity of the Tamil nations in Sri Lanka. He will be deeply missed by his friends and followers in Sri Lanka and India.”

P. Chidambaram, Congress leader who was the Home Minister during the fateful days when the LTTE was wiped out in 2009, said that “pages can be written on his contribution to the Tamil people. Suffice to say that it was a life devoted to the freedom, security, welfare and development of the Tamil people and indeed of all the people of Sri Lanka.”

Ashok Kantha, former High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, who often met Sampanthan and Mahinda Rajapaksa in 2010-13 to push for a larger political say for Tamils, described Sampanthan in a tweet as a “towering personality and voice of sanity and moderation in [the] fractured polity of Sri Lanka. Worked tirelessly for settlement of ethnic issue. Fondly recall our association while serving in Colombo. End of an era!”

He added: “I recall telling President Rajapaksa and other Sri Lankan leaders that they should resolve ethnic issue while Sampanthan was around. Sri Lanka couldn’t avail of peace dividend after civil war as process of reconciliation was ignored and challenges of economic restructuring neglected. Sampanthan was a man of unusually high intellect, fully committed to the Tamil cause, pragmatic, optimistic and passionate in his approach despite heavy odds, and a good friend of India.” ■



**Photo Essay**

# UNQUIET RIVER

The Yamuna might be on the verge of dying, but it leads parallel lives in the beliefs, legends, and historical structures it birthed.



▼  
**Dark, unfathomable, murky,** the Yamuna is still “our river” for the people living on its floodplains. It continues to nourish and nurture the ungrateful city of Delhi, through which it flows.

Text and photographs by  
**Siddharth Behl**

**T**he Yamuna flows through some of India’s most densely populated urban and peri-urban areas spread across Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR). Originating in the high Himalaya, this river has the spiritual aura of the Ganges with which merges. However, this has not stopped people from dumping sewage and plastic and chemical waste into it, so much so that many sections of the river in Delhi are now considered ecologically dead. Waste dumping and encroachment coupled with the effects of global



warming have made the river highly unpredictable. Almost every monsoon, it causes devastating floods that wipe away buildings and lives.

Through this photo essay, I map the river not just in its present state but also in its past forms, through historical facts connected to the Yamuna, legends and beliefs, and architectural landmarks that have either resisted the fury of the waters or vanished in its tides. It is the river that gives life to these stories and structures, and the river, in turn, lives through them.

One of the most historical remarkable structures connected to the Yamuna is the Satpula (literally, Seven Bridges) dam, a medieval weir built on one of its streams to provide water for irrigation as well as to defend the old city's boundaries. It dates back to the time of Muhammad bin Tughluq (1325-51), when the region was ravaged by constant warfare, drought, and famine. The reservoir was meant to conserve water for this parched land, enabling crop cultivation and settlement.

Satpula was probably connected to a network of *baolis*, or stepwells, which catered to the population of the ancient city. The water collected in the weir was thought to have healing properties since the Sufi saint Nasiru'd-Din Mahmud is said to have used it for his daily ablutions. The Yamuna is a sacred presence for Hindus too, who hold that it belongs to the gods. The families that live on the floodplains worship the river in spite of having to face its rampage each monsoon. Of course, imposing divinity on the river is also a way of ensuring that this valued resource stays protected.

That has not worked very well as a strategy, given the degraded state of the Yamuna today. However, pollution is killing not just the Yamuna but several other rivers all over the world; dying rivers are a distinguishing feature of the present epoch, the Anthropocene, where human activity has changed the face of the planet. Besides, pollution is just one aspect of the Yamuna's epic story—the river leads parallel lives in legends and architecture.

Tracing the course of the Yamuna in Delhi, I found active *baolis*, ancient ghats, and communities living on the floodplains whose social and religious lives are shaped by the river. It is these stories that make up my larger photo project titled "The river ghosts": the name suggests that while the Yamuna is a ghost of its former self, it is still a haunting presence for the communities nurtured by its waters. ■

Siddharth Behl is a documentary photojournalist and a National Geographic explorer based out of New Delhi. His works are chiefly social documentaries focussed on climate change, migration, refugees, and historical research.



► **Villagers** living on the Yamuna plains have to move with all their belongings each time a flood alert is raised. The months of August and September bode danger for the families as the rains and rising water levels play havoc with their daily lives.



► **Farmers** in Uttar Pradesh's sugar bowl, Lakhimpur Kheri, sometimes protect their crops by playing scarecrow themselves. As light falls on a scarecrow in the cultivated fields around the Okhla barrage on the Yamuna, it looks remarkably lifelike.



► **When idols are worshipped** on the riverbanks, devotees often leave behind plastic offerings, which eventually land up in the waters and add to the pollution. An enormous amount of plastic waste enters the river on a daily basis this way.



▼ **Fish diversity** is a good indicator of river health. With waste clogging the river, the Delhi stretch of the Yamuna is biologically dead as is much of the riverine ecosystem. According to the local fisherfolk, fish variety has drastically come down over the years. Puthi fish (belonging to the genus *Puntius*), which can survive adverse environment, is the most commonly found fish these days. Surprisingly, while fishing activities in the Yamuna are threatened by pollution and mining, many farmers are taking up fish farming by filling up ponds with groundwater.



▼ **Chhath Puja** celebrates divine feminine energy, often represented as Chhathi Maiya. Women, as the embodiment of this energy, are deeply involved in the festivities.



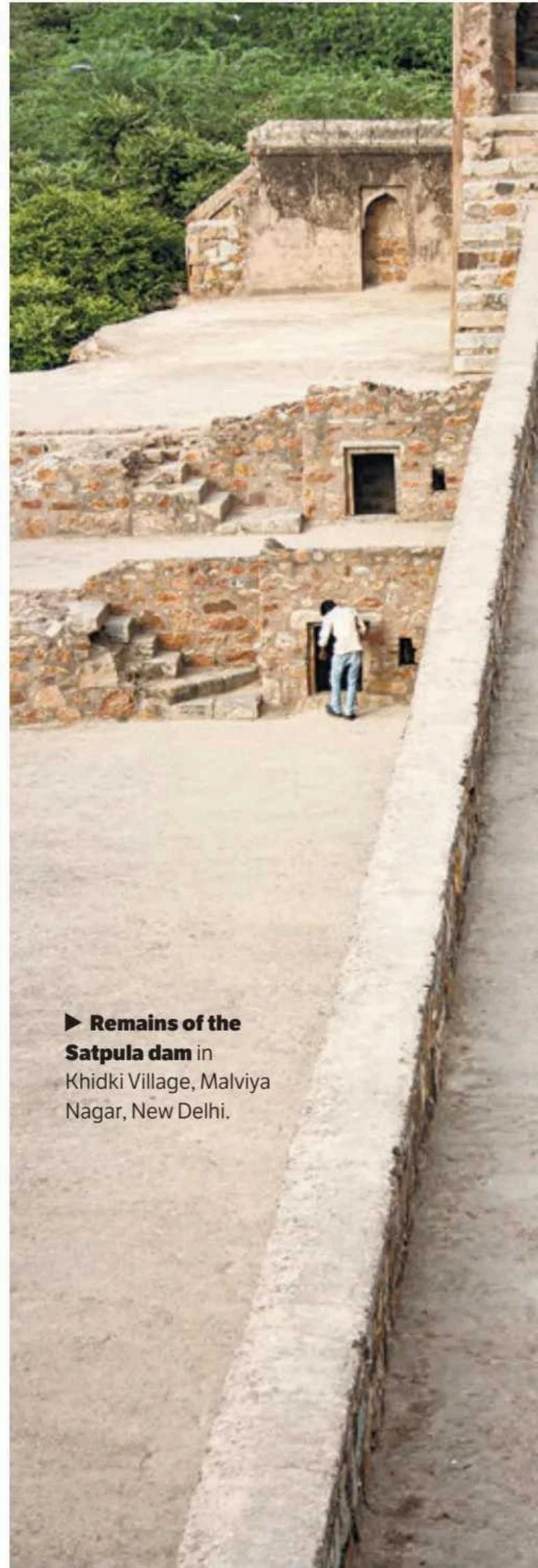
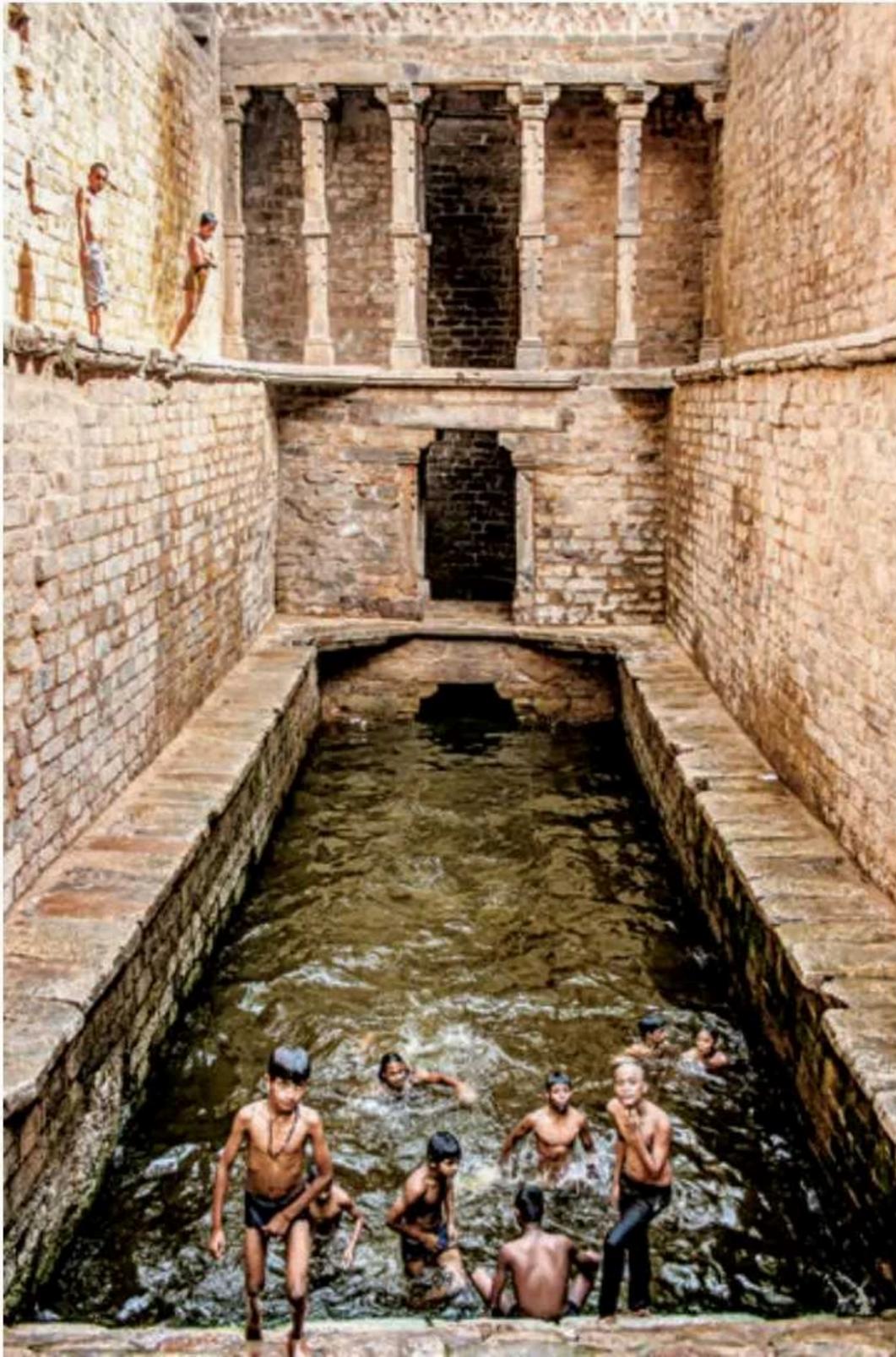


► **Bhudani Devi**, 45 (right), alights from her boat at her doorstep. Her home is in the middle of the Yamuna riverbelt in Delhi. Bhudani and her family of 10 use boats to commute for work, fetch food, and to escape the rising waters. For nine years in a row, the family has been displaced by floods. Their condition worsened during the pandemic. With one of their boats broken, they are now trying to make another with wood from the scrap market. If that fails, they will borrow the river guard's discarded boat.



► **The free-floating** plastic waste is making the water more toxic.

► **Once baolis** served not only as a sustainable means of conserving water but also as public spaces. But the British rulers of colonial India viewed them as fertile breeding grounds for waterborne diseases, and stopped their use. Some *baolis* have survived the neglect. This one, in Mehrauli in south Delhi, is called Gandhak ki Baoli. It was built by Sultan Iltutmish in the early 13th century.



► **Remains of the Satpula dam** in Khidki Village, Malviya Nagar, New Delhi.



► **The Yamuna** might be choked with industrial waste and sewage, but it is still visited by Siberian birds each winter. Their numbers, however, have come down over the years.

► **Households close** to the river do not get electricity since the land is disputed. They use solar lights or oil lamps. Some of them purchase second-hand generators. The darkness makes these places dangerous for women.



Art



► Souza in his apartment in New York, 1970-71.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

# Master of the grotesque

Francis Newton Souza, often called the *enfant terrible* of modern Indian art, went against all the aesthetic norms of his day to confront poverty, religion, and sexuality in his paintings. Four exhibitions in India and the UK pay tribute to the groundbreaking artist in his centenary year. **JANHAVI ACHAREKAR**

**T**he Artist Keren Souza Kohn, daughter of the legendary artist Francis Newton Souza (1924-2002), narrated an anecdote her father had once shared with her at his New York apartment. It was about his days in his home State, Goa, where he would often sketch outdoors and small crowds of onlookers would gather to watch him. On one such occasion, he overheard a man in the group reassuring

another: “Don’t worry. He’s going to take it [the sketch] home and make it better.”

“Dad laughed his head off while slapping his thighs. We both did!” recalled Souza Kohn, who was in Goa in April with her family—her son Solomon is an artist, too—for the 100th birthday celebrations of her father. The exhibition “In/Of Goa: Souza at 100” (April 12 to May 11, 2024) at the Sunaparanta Goa Centre for the Arts on the

works of Souza from a private collection kicked off the celebrations of the artist's centenary year that are taking place all over India and in the UK. The next was "Souza in Hampstead" (June 18-23) at Grosvenor Gallery, London. This will be followed by two more shows, one at Saffronart, Mumbai, from November 14 to 17 and the other at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art in Delhi, in January 2025. HarperCollins India will launch an illustrated book of essays on Souza in January next year.

**S**OUZA, ONE OF the most important and influential painters of the 20th century, is often described as the *enfant terrible* of modern Indian art. "Souza wrote the progressive manifesto, Souza created the visual language of modern India, Souza crushed and opened all the doors for all the following artists of India. He is by far the most significant artist of 20th century Indian art, and for the UK he is one of the most significant post-war artists living and working in London—an expressive, once-in-a-generation type of artist," said Conor Macklin, owner and director of Grosvenor Gallery. Macklin was in Sunaparanta in April for his lecture, "Souza: An Introduction to the life of F.N. Souza", at the end of

**One of the founders of the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group, Souza was one of independent India's first artists to be viewed as a global figure.**

► **Portrait of John Coplans**, 1958, by F.N. Souza. "IN/OF GOA: SOUZA AT 100", SUNAPARANTA, GOA



► **The Burial**, 1989, by F.N. Souza. "IN/OF GOA: SOUZA AT 100", SUNAPARANTA, GOA

which he took the audience on a guided walk-through of the works on display.

**O**NE OF THE FOUNDERS of the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group, comprising M.F. Husain and S.H. Raza among other luminaries, Souza was one of independent India's first artists to be viewed as a global figure. Born in Goa's Saligao and raised in Bombay—where he was expelled from school for his pornographic drawings in the school toilet and, later again, from Sir J.J. School of Art for joining the Quit India Movement—Souza had a tumultuous early life. It set the tone for his avant-garde art, which now occupies a permanent place in prominent galleries and museums around the world.

Rejecting the traditional and prevalent aesthetic norms of his time, Souza forged a revolutionary art of the realistic and the grotesque. The art critic John Berger had famously said of Souza: "How much Souza's pictures derive from Western art and how much from the hieratic temple traditions of his country, I cannot say... because he straddles several traditions but serves none."

His art confronted poverty, religion, and sexuality; his *Crucifixion* (1959), painted during his time in the UK and now housed in Tate Britain, depicts Christ as a Black person.

In his presentation, Macklin directed attention to Souza's socialist painting *The Family* (1947) (previously called *After Working in the Field All Day We Have No Rice to Eat* and *The Proletariat and the Plutocrat's Dinner*), which

Souza 87



portrays a poor Indian family in a style that breaks away from the colonial aesthetics of the time.

“It was the difference between the haves and the have-nots that got his goat. Which is why he joined, idealistically, the Communist Party although that didn’t last very long,” said Souza Kohn. However, her father was more than the *enfant terrible* he was made out to be:

▼  
**Supper at Emmaus**, 1987, by F.N. Souza.  
BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

“He was also very gentle, refined, and courteous,” she added.

The works exhibited at Sunaparanta were from various periods in Souza’s life. His early works with their vibrant, colourful depictions of village life and Goan landscapes were arresting against the starkness of the later nudes and portraits that he came to be known for. “Although an Indian artist, Souza was foremost a



Goan artist,” said Macklin, reminding us that as a Portuguese colony Goa in Souza’s early years was vastly different in character from the rest of the country.

**S**OUZA’S GRAND WORK, *The Burial* (1989), called for a pause as did his striking *Nude Goan Girl with Necklace and Girdle* (1960), among other works on dis-

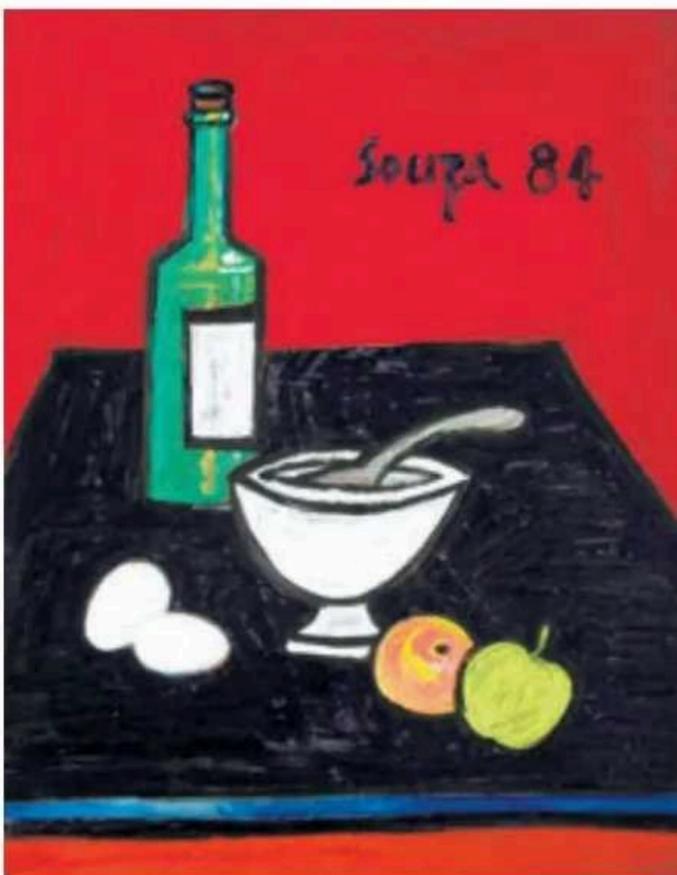
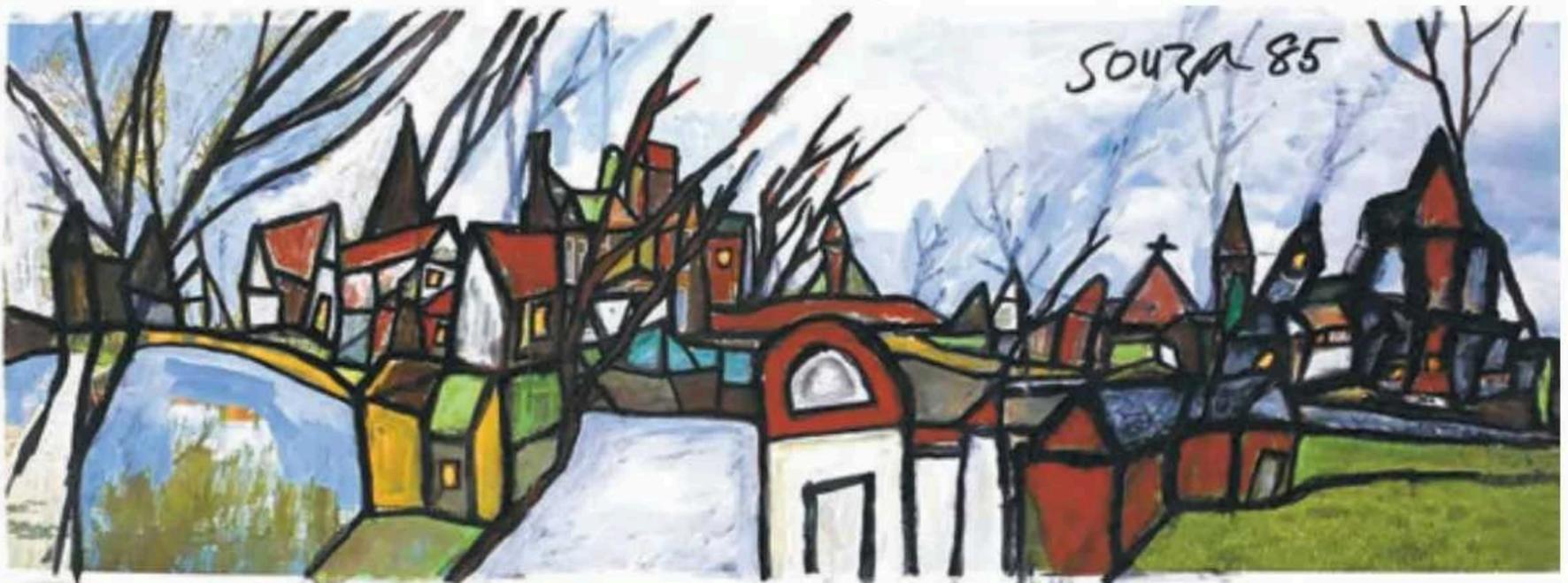
**In London, Souza worked alongside artists like Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon, breaking all rules of art to create a style that spoke to the social and psychological breakdown of the post-war years.**

play. The most unusual, however, were the Kafkaesque sketches that accompanied “Nirvana of a Maggot”, an essay Souza wrote in 1955 for *Encounter*, a literary magazine founded by the English poet and novelist Stephen Spender. The essay traced the journey of a maggot—a metaphor for himself—in a dung heap, speaking of how it grows and changes shape as it comes into its own. It would prove to be prophetic. The post 1955 years were immensely productive for Souza as he left India in 1949 for the UK.

In his lecture, Macklin threw light on the cultural, political, and social milieu of London in the 1950s and 1960s, mentioning the poet and curator Victor Musgrave, whose Gallery One exhibited all the notable South Asian artists of the day. Macklin’s account was echoed in the introduction to the “Souza in Hampstead” show, which said: “Although he had exhibitions in Paris, his major breakthrough came in 1955 when Victor Musgrave’s Gallery One began to represent him. Musgrave, a visionary dealer, showcased some of the most exciting artists of the day, and Souza quickly became his most successful artist, with several sell-out shows.” In London, Souza worked alongside artists like Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon, breaking all rules of art to create a style that spoke to the social and psychological breakdown of the post-war years.

Musgrave’s partner, Ida Kar, is famous for her striking black-and-white portraits of artists and authors. She photographed Souza, too, and some of these images were displayed at Sunaparanta. In one of them, an immaculately dressed Souza posed cigarette in hand, his eyes ablaze with the defiance his art is asso-





► **Still Life with Eggs**, 1984, by F.N. Souza.  
BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

ciated with. “I remember my dad dressed in an incredibly smart suit that day as he was to meet the Queen at the Commonwealth Institute, where he had been chosen to represent India,” said Souza Kohn of one of Kar’s portraits featured in the exhibition. “As a wonderful artist herself, Kar has left behind a fabulous collection of photos of artists in their studios and enriched our family albums with her domestic documentary photos of our lives,” she added.

**T**HE EXHIBITION was interesting in its many juxtapositions, of Souza’s early works with his later pieces, his painted portraits with Kar’s photographic portraits of him. Macklin also presented Souza’s work

▼  
**An abstract landscape** by F.N. SOUZA. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

against that of Picasso, whom Souza had met and looked up to: “*Young Ladies of Belsize Park* is a homage to Picasso’s *Demaiselles d’Avignon*, which is now at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art] in New York,” said Macklin. This painting was one of the major works displayed at Grosvenor Gallery’s “Souza in Hampstead” show, which focussed on the paintings Souza made in this London neighbourhood, where he lived from the mid-1950s until 1968.

Sunaparanta paid tribute to Souza through an exhibition of works by Goan students and artists. Renditions of Souza’s works from a workshop series, “After F.N. Souza”, conducted by the artist Viraj Naik at various educational institutes in April 2024 lined the walls of the central courtyard and café. The series also included sketches, etchings, woodcuts, and lithographs by notable artists like Walter D’Souza, Ryan Abreu, Vijay Bhandare, Swapnesh Vaigankar, and Shripad Gurav, all of whom have their roots in Goa.

The Ahmedabad-based D’Souza, whose family, like Souza’s, has lived out of Goa but retains strong ties with the State, said that he is fascinated by “the randomness with which Souza captured familiar imagery—the way in which he addressed local images and used Western art as an influence”.

Souza’s revolutionary art is more relevant than ever in the conflict-ridden world of today. “Souza in Hampstead” featured works like *The Apocalypse* and *Mad Prophet in New York* that, Macklin said, were painted in reaction to the resumption of nuclear testing in 1962. And Souza Kohn spoke of Souza’s book, *The White Flag Revolution*: “It is a collection of essays which says that if all men and women flew white flags, there would be no war.” ■

Janhavi Acharekar is an author, a curator, and creative consultant.

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**Souza’s revolutionary art is more relevant than ever in the conflict-ridden world of today**

# Looking sin in the eye

Each of the three stories in Dibakar Banerjee's film *Love, Sex aur Dhokha 2* invokes the horror of being online and being present in the cross-currents of our attention economy without a hint of judgment, incitement, or sympathy.

Prathyush Parasuraman

**W**hat does it mean, as an artist, to understand, *truly* understand, being online? I ask this question because over the past

few years we have had a few novels trying to replicate the fractured thought, armoured irony, and bleary eyes of being online as a storytelling device—think Patricia Lockwood, Lauren Oyler. At the heart of these endeavours is the troubling question of how to mimic the Internet, to replicate its affect, and to compete, in the same vein, for our attention. There was something experimental and searching because the posture of being online, the way we let our bodies decay willingly even as we crave eternal progress, requires rethinking the very form of art.

The director Dibakar Banerjee seems to be buzzing asymptotically in this direction in his triptych film *Love, Sex aur Dhokha 2*, streaming on Netflix. Three stories—a trans reality show contestant who invites her mother on the game show; a trans metro employee who registers a complaint of rape under the patronising kindness of her employer; and a young teenage game-fluencer boy who loses sight of what is real—each invokes the horror of being online, what it means to “ha[ve] to register yourself digitally to exist” as Jia Tolentino writes in her essay “The I in the Internet”.

Not just being online but being present in the cross-currents of our attention economy. Characters are framed in unflattering video calls,

their pores glaring under the harsh light of reality television, their faces lit by the stale breath of light emanating from a computer screen.

Banerjee, however, warps and wefts his threesome without a hint of judgment, or incitement, or even sympathy. The film never settles for any reaction to clot in your mind. It flits restlessly. It is a cold, airless storytelling, with no respite except its ceasing—it has a relentless rhythm, adopting the shooting style of reality television, the post-ironic chaos of news television, and the dystopian chase of being a content creator. A friend walked out of the theatre during the interval. Another wondered if, by watching, they were participating in a social experiment. I experienced a suffocation unlike anything I have felt, as though my whole body were tongue-tied.

Banerjee understands that we have gone beyond the early years where the Internet was a place that reflected our world. Today, it also helps create our world, determine its barbed blunders, and in the case of one of his characters—who disappears into the metaverse—even replace it.

**B**ANERJEE SPENT A year cheating his YouTube algorithm to know what it is that the right-wing consumes. He knows that if you search for “soft porn” on YouTube, nothing shows up. You need to search “Getting Ready Videos” or “Make-up Videos” or “Sari Videos”. It is the kind of observation of the Internet he offers without provocation or disgust. “*Paap ko glorify nahin, apnaate hain* [I do not glorify sin but embrace it],” he notes in an interview with the journalist and critic Sucharita Tyagi.

This might sound lofty. What does it mean to embrace sin without glorifying it? It means to, perhaps, first suspend judgment because judgment cannot coexist with discernment. As Shubham, a co-writer of the film, noted in an interview: “The nature of so-





► A still from *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha 2*. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

cial media is such that even while being critical of it, you're still scrolling." Judgment in this context can easily feel like hypocrisy. This lets the film float without congealing on a conclusion, on a hope, or even a hazy rendering of one.

But it also means to look sin in the eye, and this means to dispense with irony because irony *requires* you to look down. The context and situations may be ironic, but the tone with which the context is expressed never is. Banerjee disagrees with me, but I felt that if there was irony it was difficult to hold on to because the characters are so slippery, their identity constantly getting constructed and reconstructed, that nothing sticks to them, neither irony nor sympathy nor disgust. The distinction between irony and sincerity, cynicism and thoughtfulness completely disappears. They are all true creatures of the Internet, amputated viscera.

This is what gave the film its suffocating appeal, its breathless rush, as though you were inside, *truly* inside the film, a grotesque realism. The camera suddenly turning into a first-

person viewpoint when the reality show contestant is "off-stage" makes the very concept of "stage" redundant. The "I" does not recede. Neither does it express itself singularly. It is simply, plainly, everywhere. When a mother rushes to her son's school because of an emergency, the camera trails her the way it would a soldier in a game; at any moment now, the penny will drop.

**W**HEN I ASK Banerjee about release or narrative catharsis, if it interests him as a storyteller at all—the way it does most commercial film directors—he cleanly tells me he cares little for "false catharsis". Is not all narrative catharsis false since it is, after all, a forceful, conscious construction?

Banerjee responds with a stylised example: "Suppose you have abused somebody, and having put them captive in a room, you go to see a Bollywood film about the victory of a poor beggar who tops IIT. You see that film, and you heave with emotion, you go through your catharsis, and you come back to the person you were abusing.... I don't stand for this catharsis."

Instead, what Banerjee is after, what he wants us as spectators to confront, and what he meticulously constructs his worlds in service of, is "cruel confusion"—to not know, and to perhaps never know, to only live, and that too, barely. ■

Prathyush Parasuraman is a writer and critic who writes across publications, both print and online.

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**What does it mean to embrace sin without glorifying it? It means to, perhaps, first suspend judgment because judgment cannot coexist with discernment.**



► BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

# ‘I feel India is not a democratic country’

Interview with Alpa Shah, Professor of Anthropology, whose latest book, *The Incarcerations: Bhima Koregaon and the Search for Democracy in India*, is creating ripples among liberal thinkers and activists. **JYOTI PUNWANI**

**T**he violence that broke out at Bhima Koregaon in Maharashtra on January 1, 2018, on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Bhima Koregaon, has largely been forgotten. It makes news only when bail is rejected or, more uncommonly, granted to any of the 16 accused human rights defenders who were arrested under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967, on the charge of instigating caste violence. Alpa Shah’s book *The Incarcerations: Bhima Koregaon and the Search for Democracy in India* is a welcome jolt to the public memory, reminding us of the fact that 16 intellectuals from across India were targeted in an unprecedented manner and charged under an anti-terror law designed to keep them behind bars without bail. So far, only seven of them are out on bail, the most recent being the 72-year-old writer Gautam Navlakha and the 66-year-old professor Shoma Sen.

One of the accused, Father Stan Swamy, died in custody less than a year after his arrest on October 8, 2020. Shah’s book explains why the 84-year-old Jesuit priest and his 15 co-accused were considered such a grave threat to the state. The book also sheds light on the methods employed in cyberwarfare and cyber espionage: international experts have concluded that “evidence” was planted on the computers of some of the accused.

Alpa Shah, who is a professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, discussed her book in this interview with *Frontline*. Excerpts:

**What convinced you to write this book?**

The Bhima Koregaon case is a bellwether for the collapse of democracy in India. I was moved by the incarceration of brilliant and diverse intellectuals, lawyers, journalists, poets, activists, who



**“The chilling and shocking story of their incarcerations seemed to be a way to frighten, silence, and curtail the actions of all dissenters anywhere in the country with the message, ‘It could be you next.’”**

had devoted their lives to fighting for justice for some of the most marginalised people in the hidden corners of the country. To me their fight was for the essence of democracy: the sharing of economic, political, and cultural power. The chilling and shocking story of their incarcerations seemed to be a way to frighten, silence, and curtail the actions of all dissenters anywhere in the country with the message, “It could be you next.” Importantly, this case was a window into the wider capture of the various important pillars of democracy, including the mainstream media; the compromises of the judiciary; and the excesses of the police force with the rise of new weapons of policing, including vigilante street mobs and cyberwarfare used to attack dissenters. It was an important story to tell not only for justice for the Bhima Koregaon-16 (BK-16) but also for the protection of democratic rights anywhere in the world.

**Did you hear of the Bhima Koregaon case before you started writing the book?**

Many scholars of India, like me, who work in universities across the world, knew about the case from the time of the first police raids on the homes of the BK-16 back in 2018, which led to their eventual incarceration. This is because several of the BK-16 were intellectuals whose work we had either read, heard of, or whom we had even met. In my case, I had met several of the BK-16 and had followed the work of almost all of them over the course of the last 15 years or so.

► **Police personnel** try to disrupt the crowd at IIT Market in Powai, Mumbai, during a *bandh* called in protest against the attack on the Bhima Koregaon memorial, on January 3, 2018.

PRASHANT WAYDANDE

**How did you go about researching the material? What was the most essential aspect, and what was the most difficult data to access?**

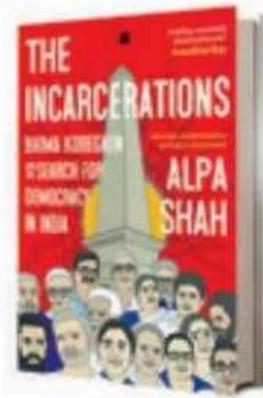
The research for this book took place across many different temporal and spatial scales. First, it was dependent on my long-term research over the last 25 years on Adivasi and Dalit rights and resistance, on democracy and the state, inequalities and capitalism in India. I drew on my deep, immersive field-based research, living for many years in the Adivasi areas of India. I also drew on my long-term acquaintance with many of the BK-16 and their work. I conducted more than a hundred interviews across three continents, lasting from a few hours to a few days, including one which was over two weeks. Interviews with the BK-16 [those it was possible to interview],



their family, friends, and colleagues, and the lawyers were, of course, crucial.

I also conducted interviews with many others who were wrapped up in this case in some way: whether it was those who found themselves in the middle of the Bhima Koregaon riots, like Anita Sawale (the Dalit activist who filed the first FIR against the rioters), those who conducted digital forensics of the clone copies of the electronic devices the Pune Police seized from some of the BK-16, or the Pune Police itself.

In the book I show exactly how I did my research in 83 pages of extensive endnotes. In these endnotes, I also credit the work of the courageous journalists who covered many aspects of the case and who provided an essential infrastructure of knowledge which I drew on and which I helped synthesise,



deepen, and widen for others through my own research and writing. In the first print run in India, the endnotes were available via a QR code, but they were printed in full in the book itself in the new edition released in June.

I can't single out any one aspect of the research as being more essential or important than another. It's the whole array of people, issues, and events put together that makes this such an extraordinary story. Perhaps the most unexpected interview I got was with the Pune Police. I thought that they would ignore or decline my requests for interviews, as they had done to most Indian journalists reporting on the case.

I had almost given up trying when I made one final call. It was to Shivaji Bodkhe, who was supervising the investigation in the Pune City Police. Bodkhe pleasantly surprised me by talking for an hour and a half about the arrests. Although I deeply disagreed with Bodkhe and told him he might not like my book as it gave a very different perspective to the case, it helped me understand how he thought the way he did.

**The most difficult part to read was the section about the hacking of the computers. How did you make sense of it?**

I knew almost nothing about digital technology before I began working on the book except how to send emails, type in a Word document, and create a rudimentary PowerPoint presentation for my students. But sometimes knowing nothing about a complex field can be an advantage as it allows you to ask a lot of stupid questions to try to get to the bottom of things in simple terms, which, in this case for me, was the activity of the human actors behind all the technological interventions.

I was lucky to interview some of the world's top cyber researchers based in the US who took an interest in the case and who worked on it, including those who had not talked to any Indian journalist. They were very patient with what must have seemed to them my naive questions about their rather technical digital forensic reports on this case.



**“The BK-16 activists were fighting the same anti-terror laws under which they find themselves incarcerated.”**

Between interviews, I did my own digging around on cyber espionage, which enabled me to present better questions to the experts.

Crucially, I also drew on my years of researching India and knowing how things worked; for instance, on the one hand, the everyday pressures on the police and their own likely limited digital capacity, and on the other hand, the young savvy IT [information technology] graduates coming out of colleges and universities for whom earning a big quick buck might be quite attractive despite the fact it was a risky industry. All these issues, which are ultimately tied to my quest to understand the people behind the digital interventions and their actions and logic, helped me craft what others have told me is a gripping and chilling story that anyone can understand.

**You have concluded that the hacking was done by professionals hired for the**

**purpose. Would this have been possible without clearance from the very top?**

A special independent investigation should be done to find out how this took place. In the book, I trace all the events that I think took place, as I reconstructed them through my interviews with US-based cyber forensic experts, which led me to conclude that a hacker-for-hire mercenary gang was likely to be central to how and why the BK-16 were incarcerated.

I also explicitly suggest, for a range of different reasons, that the highest levels of the state were involved in these incarcerations. This includes the fact that the NSO Israeli spyware with which the BK-16 were targeted is for the exclusive use of government intelligence and law enforcement agencies [pages 375-380]. It also includes the fact that when an individual in the Maharashtra government questioned the Pune City Police’s action in the case after reports in the media raised questions about the implantation of electronic evidence, the investigation was taken out of their hands and put under the control of the National Investigation Agency, the anti-terror task force directly under the Home Minister. Indeed, one section of the book in Part Six is titled “Cyber warfare

▼ **Maoist rebels** exercise at a temporary base in the Abujmarh forests of Chhattisgarh on April 13, 2007.  
MUSTAFA QURAIISHI/AP



backed by the highest levels of the state?”

**The shocking details about this hacking have not created much of a ripple in India. Do you find that strange?**

To me everything about this case is strange!

**You have researched naxalism and even lived in an Adivasi village in Jharkhand. At that time, how did you visualise the movement progressing? The Bhima Koregaon case is linked with the movement to some extent, and to the state’s perception of Maoists. Did you make any discoveries about the movement and the Indian government’s handling of it while working on the book?**

I think some background is important: I lived in two different Adivasi villages over four and a half years as a social anthropologist. I became interested in the naxalite movement when a branch of it was trying to recruit my village friends into its guerrilla armies. At first, I thought they were just protection racketeers like the Sicilian mafia. However, after I got to know many of those who had joined the movement at all levels, from foot soldiers to leaders, and I had lived in their guerrilla zones for a year and a half, I saw the naxalite movement as a revolutionary struggle trying to create a more equal world for everyone even if I didn’t agree with the methods or the analysis chosen by their leaders on many different issues.

I wrote my last book, *Nightmarch: Among India’s Revolutionary Guerrillas* (2018), on this movement, and how it attracted people from very different backgrounds to come together to change the world but who fell apart from within (and not just because of the intense state counter-insurgency operations against them). The Indian state has painted this movement as a terrorist one and used brutal methods of repression, including killing and mass incarcerations under draconian



▼ **People shout slogans** during the “Elgar against Fascism” protest near the Pune Collector’s office in August 2018. They were agitating against the arrest of five activists from different States.

JIGNESH MISTRY

anti-terror laws. Poor Adivasis and other minorities have been imprisoned as naxalites without trial for years. What’s striking about the BK-16 is how, amidst all their various democratic rights initiatives, many of them were trying to bring justice to these poor folk. In other words, they were fighting the same anti-terror laws under which they find themselves incarcerated.

**You have given a lot of space to Sudha Bhardwaj and Stan Swamy. Was there any reason behind this?**

Every single member of the BK-16 is covered in some depth and as and when it made the most sense in the narrative structure of the book. As I say there, some of the BK-16 appear more than others not because they are more important but because their life histories and work, and my access to them, allowed me to cover the wider story of the issues they dealt with. In other words, I use the more biographical chapters to tell the

**“I explicitly suggest, for a range of different reasons, that the highest levels of the state were involved in these incarcerations.”**

larger story of the grassroots struggles of many of the BK-16.

I hope readers can dip in and out of these more substantive biographical chapters, but reading the book in its entirety will help [readers] understand the case itself and how and why some of the other BK-16 may have got caught up in it and what they have suffered.

**Do you believe that India is a democracy?**

As charted in my book, even though India conducts democratic elections, I feel it is not a democratic country. Democracy is about the sharing of economic, political, and cultural power. One cannot call a country democratic when defenders of democracy are incarcerated across the nation; when anti-democratic measures, including street mobs and cyberwarfare are used to silence dissenters; and when the police, the media, and the courts not only allow this to happen but are even complicit.

India is also one of the most unequal countries in the world. Any attempt for real democracy will have to challenge these growing inequalities where 10 per cent of the population holds more than 70 per cent of the national wealth. This involves challenging the state-capital nexus and how, as I say in the book, the regime in power has given rise to oligarchs.

**You say that it is important to call the Indian government “fascist”. Will such a description be taken seriously by Western governments? And will they become more circumspect in their enthusiasm for the Narendra Modi government?**

As I say in the book, Western governments have a trade interest in India as a potential superpower with the world’s largest population. They see it as an important alternative to China. No change in perception, policy, and politics has come about without a struggle. My book joins other important critics situated in the West, including powerful voices such as the V-Dem Institute in Sweden that charted India’s collapse into electoral autocracy; *The Economist*, which has said India is “sleepwalking into authoritarianism”; and *Financial Times* that has done important reporting showing India’s

**“The repression of democratic rights was explicitly declared during Emergency, whereas what is happening in India now is not declared—which somehow makes it more powerful and more difficult to challenge.”**

*Rona Wilson is an activist, researcher, and the public relations secretary of the Committee for the Release of Political Prisoners. He is an accused in the Bhima Koregaon case.*

democratic decline. None of these critiques are voices of the Left (who have long been critiquing the regime in power), but they come from positions which are generally considered moderate, even centrist.

**Many of the Bhima Koregaon accused have been fighting for the human rights of tribals, workers, Kashmiris, and Dalits, and against corporates for a long time. Given that, is not your description of pre-2014 India as a secular democracy celebrating diversity a bit too rosy?**

I never romanticise the period before Modi. In fact, the explicit claim of the book is that all of the BK-16 were fighting against the abuse of state and corporate power and arguing for democratic rights no matter what regime was ruling the country. The book charts the continuities in repression of democratic rights before 2014 in every chapter: whether it is the repression of Adivasis, oppression of Dalits, or human rights atrocities in Kashmir. It even shows how the hacking of **Rona Wilson’s** computer began in 2012, when the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance was in power.

The book also discusses the similarities and differences between the Emergency and what is happening now. The repression of democratic rights was explicitly declared during Emergency, whereas what is happening in India now is not declared—which somehow makes it more powerful and more difficult to challenge. Also, now abuses of democratic rights are taking place against not just people who have long been marginalised but anyone anywhere in the country, including the urban middle classes who may dissent in any way with the regime in power.

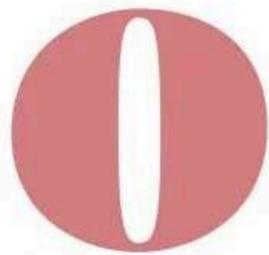
This also shows why it is imperative for everyone in India and abroad, no matter what our differences, to unite in solidarity at this moment in time, to call the regime(s) in India to account and fight for democratic rights. As India is the world’s most populous nation and an emerging global superpower, the protection of democratic rights here matters for democracy in the world at large. ■

Jyoti Punwani is a Mumbai-based freelance journalist.

# Demystifying J.C. Bose

Relying on a host of archival material, including correspondence with and by the physicist and polymath Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858–1937), Sudipto Das explores the rise and fall of the man widely known as “the founder of modern science” in India. **NANDITA JAYARAJ**

*“...whenever the galvanometer detected any radiation,... a small mirror attached to the galvanometer’s magnetic needle deflected a light beam that swept across the lecture hall. And every time there was a sweep, there was applause.”*



On September 21, 1896, a 38-year-old physics professor arrived at University College Liverpool, along with his wife, to deliver a lecture at a meeting of the British Association. Both were understandably nervous; after all, the audience included stalwarts such as J.J. Thomson, who would go on to discover the electron, and Lord Kelvin, who made fundamental discoveries in electricity and thermodynamics.

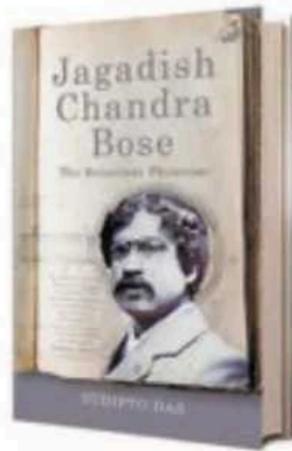
When his time came, the professor walked up on stage and demonstrated how a compact apparatus he had built in his laboratory with scarce resources could be used to study electromagnetic radiation. The set-up was such that each time the apparatus detected radiation, a light beam would sweep across the hall. The lecture was a hit, and it helped launch the physicist Jagadish Chandra Bose into scientific superstardom.

Early on in *The Reluctant Physicist* by Sudipto Das, we are told that this superstardom would not last. The legacy he leaves behind would be a mixed one: the Indian public still treats him as a hero, but the scientific community tends to be more reserved in its views. The whos, hows, whys, and whens of his downfall form the backbone of the book. According to Das, the book is “an attempt at demystifying the ‘Boseian’ myth”.

It is unfortunate that of the two things most Indians associate with J.C. Bose, the first is so-

## Jagadish Chandra Bose

The Reluctant Physicist



By Sudipto Das  
Niyogi Books  
Pages: 392  
Price: Rs.795

something he did not do nor claim to do (invent the radio), and the second is something that set off the decline in his scientific reputation (his experiments showing signs of “life” in plants and inanimate metals). There is relatively less awareness about Bose’s ingenious contributions to physics that are more relevant now than ever in this semiconductor and 5G world.

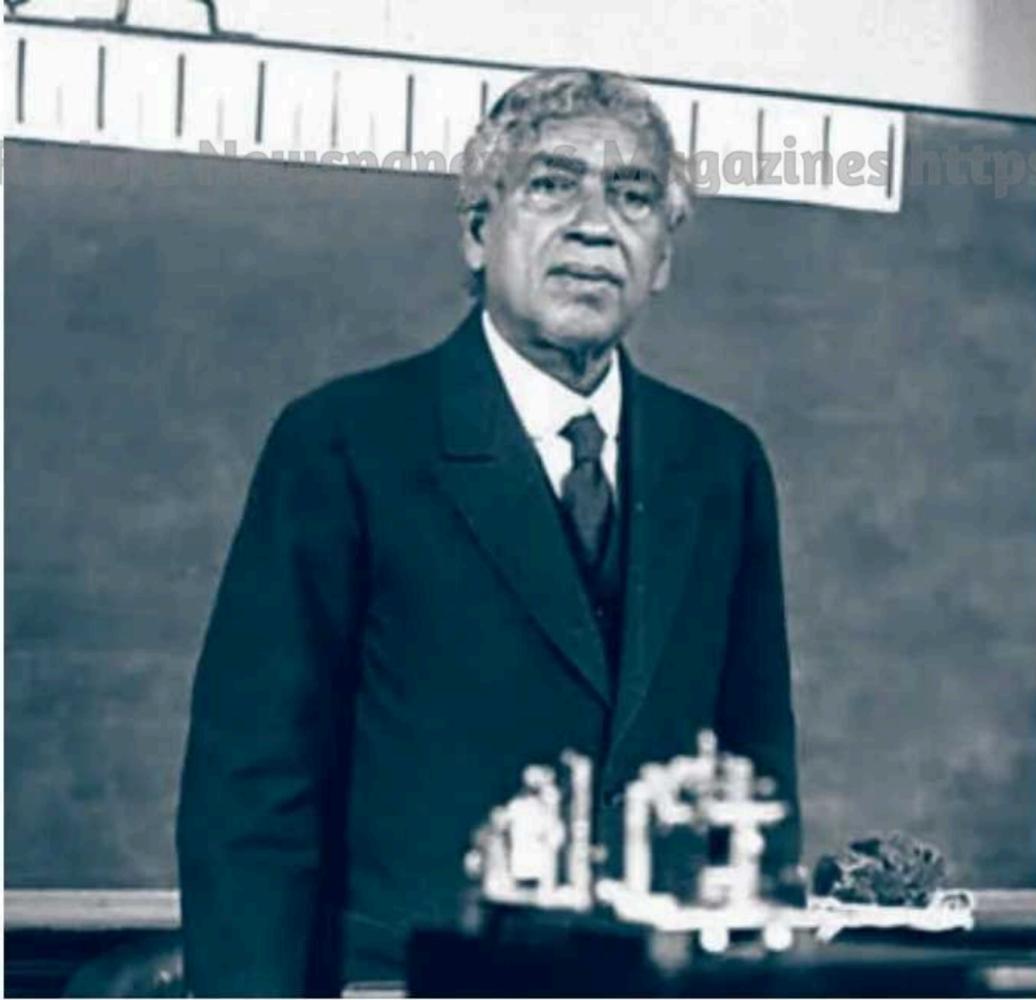
It was this work that caught the attention of leading scientists and led Bose to some of the most prestigious scientific institutions in the world. It was the late 1800s and the early 1900s, and these were not places that were used to seeing people of colour. While media reports of Bose’s work were appreciative, many reeked of stereotypes and racist overtones.

**A S DAS WRITES**, it was as if Bose’s “most incredible achievement was not being just another occult fakir or mahatma, but actually a scientist”. He adds that Bose was “dismayed to see the press create an aura of enigma and sorcery around him or project the often-misinterpreted mysticism about India”.

Thankfully, Das resists any undue glorification of the man whose life he has chosen to portray. He gives readers room to make up their own minds about the physicist, who is sometimes known as “the first Indian scientist in colonial India” and “the founder of modern science” in the country. Das relies on letters written by and to Bose as well as a host of archival material that surely must have taken him months (at least) to peruse and compile.

Was it an unconditional love for experimentation that drove Bose? Likely. After all, he la-





boured on for much of his academic life with the least interest in commercialising his work, despite unjust treatment from his British bosses at Calcutta's Presidency College. It is striking to realise how many of the struggles that Bose faced 125 years ago, such as unfair teaching loads and disincentivising research, continue to hold back scientists at Indian universities even today.

Or was it the desire to reclaim the greatness of his country and its heritage that drove Bose? The feeling of patriotism among the elite educated class in British India was understandably strong. However, these sentiments manifested in Bose in occasionally off-putting ways that intermixed uncomfortably with his science. He was obsessed with finding "unity" in diversity and often turned to Hindu scriptures to justify what he observed in nature and in the laboratory.

For much of his early career, Bose actively rebelled against an unfair and racist scientific administration. But as the freedom struggle intensified, Das notes, Bose was much less vocal against British rule. While he appreciated his close friend Rabindranath Tagore for renouncing his knighthood in protest against the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919, Bose showed no intention to do so himself. "He needed the British by his side to support his Temple of Science (Bose Institute)," surmises Das.

Bose had a lot of pride associated with his science, and it is easy to be empathetic to this, but then why did he not do more to preserve his legacy? Das laments the fact that Bose had "no disciples or loyalists who would propagate his thoughts and doctrines, take on his adversaries and identify instances of deceit".

▼ **J.C. Bose** delivering a lecture on the "nervous system" of plants at the Sorbonne in Paris circa 1926.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

**It is striking to realise how many of the struggles that J.C. Bose faced 125 years ago continue to hold back scientists at Indian universities even today.**

In one instance, a young Bengali student comes to visit Bose at a time when the scientist was troubled by objections to his work on plant physiology. The student passed on a message to Bose through his wife, Abala: "If only Professor Bose allows us, a dozen of us, who thoroughly know our subject, are willing to fight for him." However, Bose reportedly never responded to this request. As a reader, I felt rather betrayed to read that towards the end of his career, Bose turned "irritable, irascible and insensitive". In fact, the author finds that many of Bose's former students and staff remember him as a "selfish and ruthless man".

**A** **NOTHER FASCINATING ASPECT** of Bose's life was the complex intimate relationships he had. Tagore was one of them, but the rest, interestingly, were all women. There was his wife, the feminist and social worker Abala, who seems to have been very present in his life though we do not hear enough about her in the book. Then there is the American philanthropist Sara Chapman Bull, who was a sort of mother figure in Bose's life, a source of emotional and financial support. The relationship that Das' book delves deepest into is the one Bose shared with Sister Nivedita, an Irish woman who dedicated her life to India and was very close to Bose. Their bond is harder to label: at times a science collaboration, at times maternal, at times more tempestuous than one would expect.

In 2023, many of us watched *Oppenheimer*, (possibly) the biggest science film in history. Besides the masterful depictions of the atomic bombing and the inner turmoil in the mind of J. Robert Oppenheimer, the movie also offered exciting glimpses into the academic spaces and figures of the 1920s and 1930s. *The Reluctant Physicist* does this too. Besides Tagore, Sister Nivedita, and Swami Vivekananda, who were lifelong influences on Bose's life, there are cameos by a dozen historical science celebrities, including Heinrich Hertz (who proved the existence of electromagnetic waves), Wilhelm Röntgen (who discovered X-rays), Max Planck, Pierre Curie, Lord Kelvin, and Nikola Tesla.

Then of course, there is the nemesis that never was—Guglielmo Marconi. There is an urban legend among some Indians that it was not Marconi but Bose who actually invented the radio, but while this is untrue, Das does il-

illustrate why it was not completely rubbish either. It is, however, profoundly intriguing how Bose left behind no evidence that he cared about the debates surrounding Marconi's patents at all.

While reading *The Reluctant Physicist*, I kept thinking about how rich with opportunities Bose's life is for adaptation into a film or a Web series. Should a filmmaker ever take this on, Das' book will make for a great resource. Sad-

ly, in the current political atmosphere, it is equally possible to spin a narrative of Bose's legacy that suits nationalist propaganda. One can only hope that an intelligent filmmaker gets there first! ■

Nandita Jayaraj is a science writer and co-founder of the feminist science media platform [TheLifeofScience.com](http://TheLifeofScience.com). She is the co-author of *Lab Hopping: A Journey to Find India's Women in Science*.

## The die is caste

*Saathiyin Peyaral* is not just a study of honour killings in Tamil Nadu; it is a document of the history of the State in the past 40 years. **V. ARASU**

*"Honour killing is the crux of this book. But this is not a book on death; it is about life too. It does not stop with stating that an honour killing occurred. It raises questions about 'why' it happened, thereby exploring the many aspects of life surrounding it, from multiple perspectives. The book brings our attention to the contradiction of an individual with fellow citizens, the distance between our ideals and practical lives and the many masks we hide our real faces under.*

*"It is in Tamil Nadu, hailed as the land of social justice, that we find caste rising its monstrous head. It is not just alive, but it gobbles up lovers and bloats each day. I wish to emphatically communicate this enormous contradiction and the grave danger of caste monstrosity. None of us can shrug away this reality as happening someplace else, to someone else. Those killed might be strangers; but the murderer is caste—and we all know it.... Seeing parents who murdered their children because of this cantankerous disease of casteism left a deep scar in my mind. And that scar permeates this book."*

**T**he above lines, from the journalist Ilangovan Rajasekaran's book *Saathiyin Peyaraal* (In the Name of Caste) are testimony to the fact that his journalism has also been

### Saathiyin Peyaraal

Aaanava Kolaigalin Pathivu



By Ilangovan Rajasekaran  
Translated from English by Marudhan and Niveditha Louis  
**Kizhaku Pathippakam**  
Pages: 224  
Price: Rs.260

a launch pad for his social activism. *Saathiyin Peyaral*, a compilation of accounts of seven inter-caste marriages in Tamil Nadu that ended in "honour killings", helps us understand the many ways in which caste operates in Tamil Nadu.

For instance, Ilangovan explains the Kausalya-Sankar case, where Sankar was hacked to death in 2016 by killers hired by Kausalya's family: "According to them [the dominant caste], it was not a murder. It was a punishment. When one is levied a death sentence, it is customary to explain why it is enforced. The same is followed here as well: 'You are allotted a space; you and yours should live there; but you have crossed that border. You have entered the space that belongs to our caste. Hence our honour is lost; your love and marriage have made us impure. Therefore, you deserve to die.'"

The unwritten rule has to do with the transgression of caste: How could a Dalit youth, educated as an engineer, marry a dominant-caste girl? It is a social crime and death is the price he has to pay.

Murder is inadmissible as a social ethic. No society ever accepts it. But the toxin of casteism normalises it. This casteist attitude is an

expression of the dominant caste's inability to accept the changes in the lives of the oppressed sections of society. Caste turns anti-human and works against the ethics of life. It acts as a fascist frenzy. We can sense that in each of these honour killings. One becomes a monster when one kills one's own child. The honour killings in Tamil Nadu are testimony to this social psychology.

Ilangovan's narrative unpacks the modes of functioning of this social psychology. He elaborates on how the media reports such cases; how powerful caste organisations formed in the past three decades help execute the honour killings; how political parties that vie with each other for vote banks, and the police, entrusted with maintaining law and order, deal with these incidents. In the process, he exposes the ugly faces of many social systems at work.

**I LANGOVAN ALSO EXPLORES** in parallel how patriarchy feeds the social psychology of caste, how it affects the Dalit man and the Dalit woman differently, and how gender equality is lost in this casteist psychology. The book helps the reader understand the social and psychological pressures borne by Dalit communities, while making the point that an honour killing is a crime committed because of social institutions and the social psychology driving them.

The past three decades have seen an explosion of mass media. In television and popular print media, honour killings pass off as consumer goods, laced with hyper-emotional drama. Even as news channels report the "breaking news" of these murders, they offer no meaningful analysis or counter-discussions around them or support or initiate any social activism beyond the headlines.

Ilangovan, on the other hand, has used the platforms provided by *The Hindu* and *Frontline* to hold detailed conversations on honour killings. For him, the murders are not "hot" news; they are a culmination of various caste dimensions in society. He exposes them boldly through his field-based studies. In doing so, the crassness of political parties, the government, the police, and caste-based organisations also stand exposed. Through Ilangovan's analysis, we become aware of the tactics various groups use



▼ **Divya and Ilavarasan,**

a file photograph. Ilavarasan, a Dalit youth from Dharmapuri, was found dead on July 4, 2013, months after he married Divya from the Vanniyar community against the wishes of her family. THE HINDU ARCHIVES

to safeguard their own caste interests.

Social change is unavoidable. Today, technology has strengthened human relationships and rendered the feudal aspects of communication between man and woman obsolete. Hence the remnants of feudalism like caste have also lost their everyday hold. Practically, a man and a woman can interact with each other, transgressing their respective castes. Caste has no role to play in this communication. It becomes natural for young people in public spaces to express their feelings. But caste—a remnant of the feudal system—does not approve of this. There is no understanding of social development within casteist communities. That is why they resort to killing the young couple. Caste groups, government institutions, and other public systems too function within this context. Ilangovan's work helps us understand this phenomenon with evidence.

The electoral social space in Tamil Nadu, like elsewhere, is based on vote banks. It has remained so from the 1950s to the 1990s in a covert way. The Dravidian parties that grew out of the tradition of self-respect based on social justice did not moot overt references to caste. With the advent of Ambedkar's centenary, the Dalit movement, especially the one led by Thol. Thirumavalavan, has risen to newer heights. To counter that, the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) shaped itself as the party of the Vanniyar caste group, which translates into a vote bank and restructures the mobilisation of caste-based communities. It has been proven that casteist associations were behind the murder in the Divya-Ilavarasan case of Dharmapuri.

Dharmapuri district in Tamil Nadu has been the bastion of the Maoist movement

**Also read**



"In the name of honour" by Ilangovan Rajasekaran

since the 1970s. Ilavarasan and Divya hailed from different castes, but the communities themselves were not averse to inter-caste marriages. Divya's father supported the Maoist ideology. But the newly emerging Vanniyar caste group converted the wedding of Divya and Ilavarasan into fodder for their vote bank. Disheartened, Divya's father was driven to suicide. Cashing in on his death, Vanniyar caste groups set fire to three Dalit villages. Soon after, Ilavarasan was found dead. The two deaths were announced as suicides; the inquiry commissions formed by the government and the police took the word of the Vanniyar caste organisation as the "truth".

**I**F THE VANNIYAR caste organisation was the culprit in the Ilavarasan case, a Kongu Vellala Gounder caste organisation is responsible for the murder in the Gokulraj case. The case was handled by Vishnupriya, Deputy Superintendent of Police and a Dalit by birth. The caste group killed both Gokulraj and Vishnupriya and projected their deaths as suicides. Thanks to the lawyer P.P. Mohan and his comrades, the Gounder caste group leader Yuvaraj was found to be guilty and is serving life imprisonment now.

By documenting in detail how these caste-based organisations are responsible for honour killings, Ilangovan establishes how the feudal remnants of caste have transformed themselves into caste organisations and political parties that depend on them as vote banks. Honour killings, therefore, are not an issue of inter-caste marriages alone; they are the contemporary manifestations of caste organisations with political clout. The entire administrative system supports these activities. The commissions formed by the government, local khap panchayats, and the police in particular, cover up these realities and make them seem like casual occurrences.

This book also lays bare the modes by which caste hierarchy and patriarchy intersect in honour killings. Of the seven cases discussed in the book, the majority of those murdered are women. In India, the murders of women in the name of caste purity strengthen the stranglehold of male chauvinism and patriarchy. Ilangovan painstakingly documents the facts to prove how the oppression of women plays its part in honour killings as well.

**Saathiyin Peyaral lays bare the modes by which caste hierarchy and patriarchy intersect in honour killings.**

It is Dalits who are murdered in honour killings. Like in other caste atrocities, the lowest in the hierarchy gets affected the most. The book registers how even within the marginalised castes, honour killings occur on the basis of the hegemony of caste and class.

Recounting Ilangovan's mental state in his own words would not be out of place here: "When the news of Ilavarasan's body being found near the railway tracks reached me, it was like a huge rock that fell upon me. I had to reconfirm over and over if the news was actually true. My heart hoped against hope that it should not be true. I had met Ilavarasan just the day before, and spoken to him. His face filled my thoughts. His smile grew larger and larger and shook me.

"I suffered sleeplessness for many days. I felt lost; there was a void in me. My usual self was gone; it was like something was grabbed away from me and I didn't know what it was. It took me a long time to calm my mind and come out of that tragedy."

This quote reminds us that a journalist should also be a humanist invested in the social good. *Saathiyin Peyaraal* is not just a work on honour killings in Tamil Nadu; it is a document of the history of Tamil Nadu in the past 40 years. It reveals how the democratic process of elections depends on caste groups as vote banks. These caste organisations take society backwards. This work is a resource book for students of social history. It is a document of gender oppression and caste hierarchy in our social rubric, and a must-read for all social activists. We owe our thanks and appreciation to Ilangovan Rajasekaran for writing this book.

The book also includes in the appendix the translation of an article in English by Sowjanya Tamalapakula on inter-caste weddings among Dalits. It helps us understand the workings of caste, and its gender dimensions, among Dalits. Thanks to the lucid translation by Maruthan and Niveditha Louis, *Saathiyin Peyaraal* reads with the flow of an original Tamil work. ■

V. Arasu retired as Professor and Head of the Department of Tamil, University of Madras. He is currently the General Editor of Ambedkar's writings, to be published in 75 volumes by New Century Book House for the Government of Tamil Nadu.

The writer thanks A. Mangai for translating this review.

# The life and times of Asaf Ali

With a lovely lightness of touch, T.C.A. Raghavan brings alive the forgotten freedom fighter Asaf Ali and his circle of friends and mentors in this book set in the decades that led to Independence and Partition. **PARVATI SHARMA**

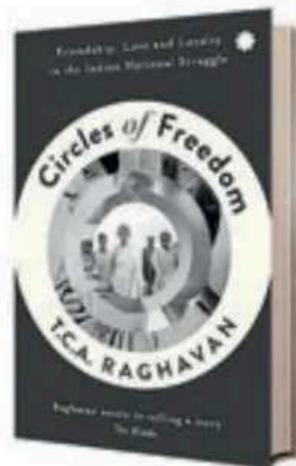
**T**he only son of an elite family of depleting means, Asaf Ali grew up in a haveli in Kucha Chelan, Daryaganj, once home to Delhi's brightest lights and also the site of their punitive massacre after 1857. As such, Asaf was of the Muslim elite that was brutalised and marginalised after the 1857 uprising and, a half-century later, remained insecure about its prospects in British India. But also, he was a dapper young graduate of St. Stephen's College, a barrister from Lincoln's Inn, a man about town in early-1900s London "dressed in the height of fashion—well cut, well pressed lounge suits, fancy waistcoats, butterfly collars, foulard bow ties and bandana silk handkerchiefs".

Soon enough, however, he would give up the silk for khadi, begin to address public meetings, get arrested, contest elections. A romantic with a conservative heart—he tore up a painting of Oscar Wilde after learning the writer was gay—Asaf nevertheless wanted a strong, independent-minded wife, and so married the scene-stealing Aruna Gangulee (amid vituperations in the press that would put our own media's apoplexies to shame: "When they see such instances, Hindus begin to feel that every Musalman is unfit to be trusted—that you never can tell when he will cut your throat," fumed an article titled "The Vile Act of Mr Asaf Ali").

A dissident of moderate temperament, Asaf would nevertheless defend nationalists accused of political violence, including Bhagat Singh, Sheikh Abdullah, and the three Army officers accused of treason in the INA trial held in Delhi's Red Fort, the very place where Bahadur Shah Zafar was tried for the same crime less than a century earlier. How times had changed: where once a sovereign monarch

## Circles of Freedom

Friendship, Love and Loyalty in the Indian National Struggle



By T.C.A. Raghavan  
**Juggernaut**  
Pages: 408  
Price: Rs.799

could be held guilty of treason to a trading company, now three officers who had defected from the British army walked out free. Afterwards, Shah Nawaz Khan, Prem Kumar Sahgal, and Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon marched to Asaf's house in Kucha Chelan: where once hundreds had been killed to avenge 1857, now hundreds gathered to cheer their release.

The eddies of history swirl through Asaf Ali's life and times. For this and other reasons, Asaf, the protagonist of T.C.A. Raghavan's *Circles of Freedom*, is a writer's dream. A man not cut, fully formed, from heroic cloth but rather moulded by the pull of his own desires and the push of his challenging times; a man hungry for love and politics, teetering under the unexpected weight of both, determined not to buckle; a man who is only, and in the most fragile way, human during a historical moment full of ambitions to immortality.

**R**AGHAVAN WIELDS A deft pen when drawing out such historical figures, "attendant lords" as he calls them, quoting T.S. Eliot's very unheroic Prufrock. An earlier book by Raghavan, so titled, brought out the ambitions and ultimate tragedy of Bairam Khan and Abdur Rahim, courtiers and poets in the Mughal court. Now, it is Asaf and his revolving circles of friends, acquaintances, and mentors whose story he tells. A friend described the book as "warm", and so it is, with a lovely lightness of touch that brings its characters alive.

We meet draft versions of V.D. Savarkar and M.A. Jinnah, for example, who were both, once, advocates of Hindu-Muslim unity. As the "presiding deity" of Sunday debates in London's India House, which Asaf often attended, Savarkar would read from his book on 1857, in which he argued for the uprising as "a joint Hindu-Muslim enterprise". Years later, Asaf



would gift Aruna the book; she was “thrilled” by it; she said: “It politicised me.” Jinnah, meanwhile, would go on to hammer out a Congress-Muslim League pact with the Congress’ most Hindu face, B.G. Tilak; and later still, be heckled and booed for not being enamoured of the Khilafat movement.

**I**N LONDON, JINNAH and Asaf were part of a circle orbiting the generous, gregarious, and fiercely secular Sarojini Naidu. Sarojini had a fondness for holding durbars, whether in the English nursing home where Asaf found her attendants “on the verge of a breakdown”, ferrying flowers and visitors to and from their “ungovernable patient” or in her bungalow in Hyderabad, named with splendid egotism after her first book of poetry, *The Golden Threshold*. The charismatic Syud Hossain, a freelance journalist from Bengal, “in and out of debt, in love with a married Englishwoman”, was the fourth of this party. We see it in flickering black and white: the quartet meeting at the National Liberal Club, downing aperitifs at the Café Royal, dining in Soho, and staying up until dawn, delighting in each other’s conversation.

In other moments, we see the Stephanian lodged firmly within the freedom fighter when Asaf jokes of how “the world suffers from handicaps but India suffers from Gandhicans”; we see Syud Hossain exiled to America after he elopes with Jawaharlal Nehru’s younger sister (like a Wodehouse heroine sent to Blandings Castle, she was banished to Gandhi’s Ashram); we see Asaf and Nehru gardening together to pass the time while imprisoned in Ahmednagar fort (when the first sprouts appeared, “Jawaharlal shouted the glad tidings to me and I felt like a child securing his first toy”).

And finally, we see another “character” emerge in Raghavan’s narrative—in the form of the many arguments around the political relations between Hindus and Muslims. Increasingly, it was a question that the Congress preferred to defer—something to be dealt with post-Independence—and one that the Muslim



**February 7, 1947:**

Asaf Ali with Sarojini Naidu at Delhi’s Palam airport just before his departure to the US as India’s first Ambassador to that country.

THE HINDU ARCHIVES

**Asaf Ali is a man hungry for love and politics, who is only, and in the most fragile way, human during a historical moment full of ambitions to immortality.**

League wanted settled first of all. Increasingly, the compromise that Jinnah was willing to allow was a loose confederation of States, while Nehru was adamant on a strong, centralised government. Between them lay Asaf’s body, on the line quite literally: he was a Congressman, a member of the interim government, and a living argument, therefore, against separate electorates, against the need for a confederacy. And equally, for the League, he was not a real Muslim, or only one of the “Muslim dummies”, as the British government described them, “with which the Congress dress their shop window”.

Raghavan’s eye for the ironies, the missed chances, and perhaps even the complacency of the decades that led to Independence and Partition is unflinching. We know today, better than at any other point in our post-Independence history, how crucial and unsettled the question of India’s secular identity remains; we have seen what the dangers of a “strong” Centre can be. In *Circles of Freedom*, we see these debates reflected in the anger, ambition, and resignation of its various actors—in Aruna’s declaration that “Unless the Congress can take to the masses its programme of a social revolution they will be puppets in nefarious hands”; in the patronising terms in which she is dismissed (“hysterical”, Nehru said); in the quiet dignity with which Asaf continues to love a wife who has left him and his moderations far behind and a country where “sly hints and allegations” about the loyalty of Muslims have become commonplace.

Like Prufrock, Asaf was no Prince Hamlet, nor was he meant to be. As his crumbling haveli in Kucha Chelan filled with terrified men and women escaping the mobs of Partition, Asaf may have wondered at how history was circling in upon itself, at whether the insecurities of the Muslim elite post-1857 would recur in the Muslim masses post-Independence. As his marriage ended and his friendships and ideals ruptured, he might have wondered if he was not, like Prufrock, at times, a Fool. And still, Raghavan writes in his final pages, Asaf “soldiered on bravely”. Sometimes, that is the most heroic thing a person can do. ■

Parvati Sharma is the author, most recently, of *Akbar of Hindustan and Jahangir: An Intimate Portrait of a Great Mughal*.

# Paradise in flames

Rana Safvi's standing as a historian of repute comes to the fore in this work of fiction as she draws on extensive research to create a vividly detailed panorama of life in the Lal Qila in 1857. **MADHULIKA LIDDLE**

**N**ear the end of Rana Safvi's debut historical novel, *A Firestorm in Paradise*, a short poem by Zebunissa "Makhfi" (one of Aurangzeb's daughters, a poet and a princess) is quoted:

...Through the green boughs the bulbul's note is heard,

And, wing-clipt and imprisoned, my heart's bird

Flutters against the barriers, wild for flight.

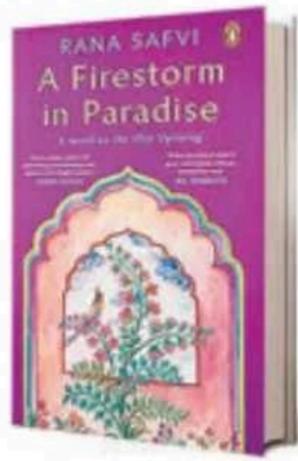
The front cover of the book may well be an illustration of these lines. The stylised bulbul, the crimson flowers, the green leaves, the billowing clouds: natural beauty, framed in a scalloped arch of what looks like red sandstone. It requires little to make that further inference, that this is the Lal Qila, where that immortal verse is inscribed: *Agar firdaus bar rue-e-zamin ast, Hamin ast-o hamin ast-o hamin ast* (If there is Paradise on earth / It is this, it is this, it is this).

But turn the book over and the back cover tells a different story. The red flowers and verdant branches have been replaced by orange-red fire: Paradise, wrapped in flames.

**T**HE CHANGE, from Paradise on earth to Paradise destroyed, is what Safvi describes through the story of her protagonist, the fictitious Falak Ara, daughter of Emperor Bahadur Shah "Zafar" from a concubine. Falak Ara, who has lived all her life within the closely guarded, cloistered confines of the imperial harem has little chance to interact with the outside world except through her faithful maid-cum-nurse, Mubarak, who lives in the city. And, every morning, Falak Ara sits in a riverside pavilion and gazes at the world on the *reti* (sandbar), on the bank of the Yamu-

## A Firestorm in Paradise

A Novel on the 1875 Uprising



By Rana Safvi  
Penguin  
Pages: 416  
Price: Rs.699

na. It is on this *reti* that she first sees the handsome young man she falls in love with. Mirza Qaiser is one of the *salatin* (member of the royal family), his father a distant relative of Bahadur Shah, and for him, too, it is love at first sight.

But neither Falak nor Qaiser, nor Mubarak and her friends both inside the fort and outside, realise just how ephemeral their paradise is. This, after all, is 1857, a watershed year in the history of Delhi, and everybody is already wondering how the Mughal court, despite the excesses of the East India Company's officers, is able to not just make ends meet but also maintain what seems like a lavish lifestyle. There are rumours of a buried treasure within the fort. There are also gathering storm-clouds of discontent and dissent: of people making special chapattis and sending them out, of murmurs of cartridges greased with the fat of cows and pigs.

Safvi's standing as a historian of repute comes to the fore even in this work of fiction: she draws on what is obviously extensive research to create a vividly detailed panorama of life in the Lal Qila in 1857. Whether it is the nitty-gritty of the rituals and traditions governing everyday life in the fort or highly detailed insights into the clothing, jewellery, relationships, and rivalries within the imperial family—all come through sharp and clear in Safvi's descriptions.

Equally evocative is Safvi's recreation of the world outside the fort: not just in the tangible sounds and sights and smells of Shahjahanabad but also through its people. The banglesellers, the dhobis, the maids, the courtesans, the students at the Delhi College. The poets, the nobility, the saints, and the charlatans. Each social class has its own distinctiveness, whether it is in the brash, bold *karkhaandari*



► **Moti Masjid**  
inside the Red Fort  
complex in Delhi.  
GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

*zubaan* spoken by Mubarak and her ilk or the refined, poetry-laced *begumaati zubaan* of the upper classes. There are many ways in which the classes intersect, too, for instance at the festivities centring around the annual Phoolwaalon ki Sair (procession of the flower sellers, celebrated by Hindus and Muslims alike).

The Phoolwaalon ki Sair represents a crucial element of *A Firestorm in Paradise*, in that it is one of the ways in which Safvi is able to illustrate the syncretic culture of Dilli in the 1800s. This is reflected too in the customs of the imperial family, many of which were derived from Hindu tradition (there is, for instance, a fascinating description of the anniversary celebrations of the emperor's coronation, which begins with the making of *moong dal vadas*). The communal harmony of the period comes through in the book with an easy fluidity, a matter-of-fact acceptance that religion is just one aspect of life, and one that

**Equally evocative is Safvi's recreation of the world outside the fort: not just in the tangible sounds and sights and smells of Shahjahanabad but also through its people.**

need not necessarily divide.

Against this backdrop of events, Safvi's characters—the doomed lovers, their friends and family, other peripheral but important figures like Hira and Hariyali—play out their lives, convincingly depicted and believable. To heighten that sense of transporting its reader into the period, Safvi bookends each chapter with a short verse from classic Urdu or Persian poetry. Always a carefully chosen verse that reflects the emotion or the times perfectly, this serves to make the novel even more reflective of Delhi's culture, its poetic traditions going all the way back to Amir Khusro.

If there is a lacuna, it is in the slightly careless editing in the first one-third or so of the novel. Besides the occasional (relatively rare) typo, there are several instances of repetitions; for instance, the episode of Ghulam Qadir Rohilla's attack on the Lal Qila in 1788 and his subsequent ravaging of the fort and its residents is recounted in a few places.

But this, I will concede, is a minor niggle; it is a good novel, a worthy companion to Safvi's fine corpus of narrative history. ■

Madhulika Liddle is a novelist and short story writer.

## Contrary pulls

Saikat Majumdar's latest book is a campus novel interspersing the lyrical with the banal, and with characters drawn determinedly towards unhappiness. **SHAD NAVED**

**S**aikat Majumdar is a writer of sexuality. The body and sexuality are everyday terms for academic writers in the humanities. Majumdar, also a professor of English, claims this academic background for his latest novel, *The Remains of the Body*.

The novel is academic in another sense too for almost all its characters study at fabled schools in Canada and the US: Kaustav, a long-standing PhD candidate in anthropology; his high-school friend from Kolkata and an object

of physical and emotional obsession, Avik, from another elite university who now works for a pharmaceutical company; and Sunetra, an accomplished scientist.

What binds the three characters to each other is sexuality. In its more mainstream association today, sexuality is spoken of as a thing or a quality that we possess. It is then assumed that each of us has a specific "orientation" to this thing from which comes the names for the exclusive enclaves of sexual





identity. Majumdar's novel, partly because it is a campus novel, wants to interest readers in the theoretical conception of sexuality in sexuality studies as the ambiguous terrain of physical relations where truth is only what the body experiences and not what words can capture. His central characters suffer the consequences of not affirming this truth for themselves.

The novel's present moves between California and Canada. Avik is heterosexual, manly, once athletic, and now an affluent diasporic man, but his sexual life is more of a "boy-man's". He is attracted to women but does not know how to be with them or to understand the orientation of their desire and, by implication, his own. He is married to the svelte and sexually assertive Sunetra, who recognises early the boy-man in him and wants to enfold him like a baby. A few years into the marriage, she cannot bear his masculine bluster. Finally, Kaustav, the omniscient narrator's chosen one, is torn between his unconsummated physical passion for Avik's irresistible masculinity and his undeniable attraction for the "boyish-girlish" Sunetra, who affects the lives of the two men and from whom she seeks fulfilment of her own sexuality.

The complexity of this sexual triad can be simplified by the term bisexuality. While the academic convictions of the writer may not want us to settle on any one such restrictive identity name, the novel's pattern of interspersing the heterosexual with the homosexual (depicted in a central passage of lovemaking where the action is "heterosexual" but interlined with "homosexual" fantasies of one of the characters) points towards this much neglected category, which is often ignored even by LGBTQIA+ writers and activists.

Bisexuality is the novel's central drama; it might draw readers who may not otherwise connect with its narrow world of US "grad stu-

▼ **Bisexuality** is the novel's central drama. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

dents" and "postdocs", the Bengali-speaking diaspora in North America, jaded researchers, and corporate consultants living affluent lives. Once we are done labelling our sexuality according to its desired body parts, what must remain of sexuality is an unsettled (and unsettling) bisexuality, a bisexuality that is not the personal identity of a person, as each of the three characters shows through their actions in the novel. The boys have obvious bisexual moments with one another, but the female protagonist's bisexuality consists of being sexually drawn simultaneously to her masculine husband and his boyish-girlish friend.

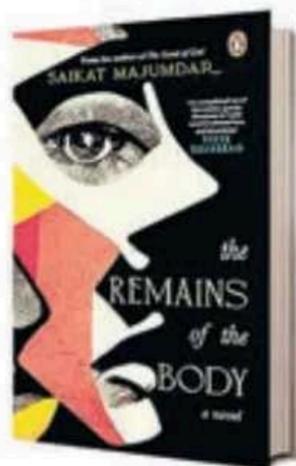
**T**HIS CENTRAL DRAMA of the novel is written in choppy prose, interspersing the lyrical with the banal, and broken into collage-like chapters. One gets the sense that there is something the narrative deliberately does not want to bring together just as the characters do not want to build on the contrary pull of bisexuality. It is not clear whether this is praise or criticism of bisexuality because the characters are too sure of who they are and the past that has made them. They are drawn towards unhappiness (or at least loneliness), and it is implied that their bisexual wishes are somehow responsible for this.

It may be incorrect to read destinies of fictional characters as a comment on human sexual relations in general, but in its final sentences, the novel invites this possibility: "Human beings were forms etched on water. Shapeless, slippery forms you were stupid enough to love." This generalises Kaustav's tortured attraction to the now single Avik, raising it above the conventional encounters of diasporic academics at high-ranking university conferences.

Why must gay or lesbian literature always end in unhappiness was the activist cry of an earlier time. Majumdar's novel portrays a bisexual conflict that ends in unhappiness. It brings to mind such other works of painful bisexuality as Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World* and the more recent *Call Me By Your Name* by André Aciman. A satisfying, if not happy, bisexuality should become the call for our times. ■

Shad Naved teaches literature in Delhi.

### The Remains of the Body



By Saikat Majumdar  
**Vintage Books**  
 Pages: 184  
 Price: Rs. 499

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Julia Alvarez  
**Algonquin Books**

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Ferdia Lennon  
**Fig Tree**

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Antal Szerb, translated by Len Rix  
**Pushkin Press**

*Murder in Midsummer: Classic Mysteries for the Holidays*  
Various  
**Profile Books**

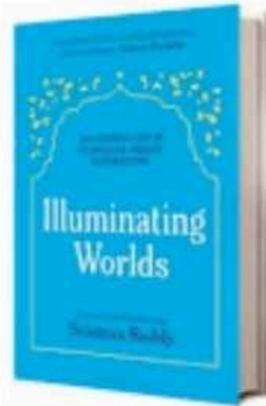
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**University of Exeter Press**

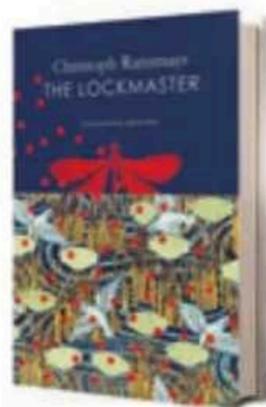
*Age of Revolutions: Progress and Backlash From 1600 to the Present*  
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**Illuminating Worlds**  
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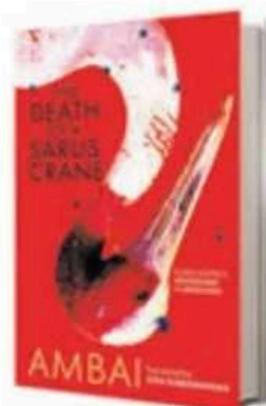
translations of classical Indian texts from Vedic hymns to Buddhist sutras to the songs of Tamil bhakti, this collection opens a window into the diverse, interconnected philosophies that have shaped Indian civilisation. Endorsed by Salman Rushdie.



**The Lockmaster**  
*A Short Story of Killing*  
Christoph Ransmayr, translated by Simon Pare  
**Seagull Books**  
**Rs.699**

The latest novel

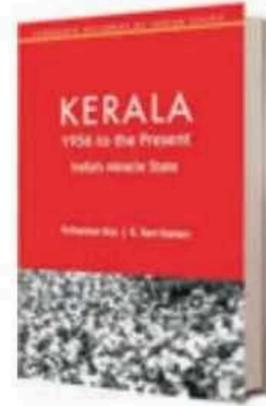
from Seagull Books' German list is at once a mystery of a missing man, a cautionary tale about the climate catastrophe, and an enquiry into the timeless themes of guilt and forgiveness. Its vision of future technology and reactionary politics is chilling.



**The Death of a Sarus Crane**  
Ambai, translated by Gita Subramanian  
**Speaking Tiger**  
**Rs.499**

The Tamil writer Ambai's detective, Sudha Gupta,

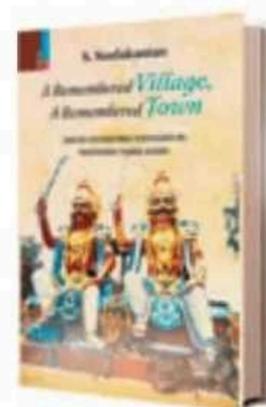
returns with these four long stories that paint a grittily realistic portrait of Mumbai. As investigations take Sudha to hidden corners, she discovers new ideas and changing versions of the maximum city.



**Kerala, 1956 to the Present**  
*India's Miracle State*  
K. Ravi Raman and Tirthankar Roy  
**Cambridge University Press**  
**Rs.695**

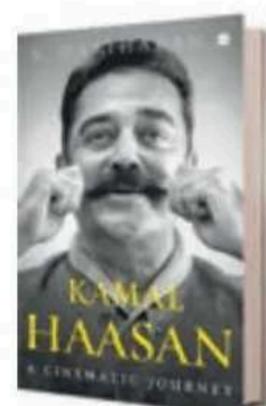
Kerala has always

fascinated economists for its high levels of education and healthcare. This book traces the State's foundations of human development and how its income growth owes much to past globalisation, labour mobility, and a legacy of welfare spending.



**A Remembered Village, A Remembered Town**  
*Socio-economic Changes in Western Tamil Nadu*  
S. Neelakantan  
**Primus Books**  
**Rs.995**

An economist's impressionistic account of "change" in the village of Appipalayam, this book looks at labour, landed power, caste, and rural-urban linkages in the Kongu region in Tamil Nadu across five decades.



**Kamal Haasan**  
*A Cinematic Journey*  
K. Hariharan  
**HarperCollins**  
**Rs.699**

Blurbled as "the best introduction possible to Kamal Haasan: his life, his

thoughts and his movies", this biography explores 50 years of the actor's cinematic journey from his beginnings as a child star in *Kalathur Kannamma* (1960) down to his most recent blockbuster, *Vikram* (2022).

## White Space



► **The grave** of a soldier of the Great War in the Flanders region of Belgium. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

# POPPIES IN FLANDERS

The fallen soldiers of the First World War are a living presence at the memorial in Ypres, Belgium, dedicated to their valour. **ADITYA SONDHI**

**T**he Armistice Day service at Bengaluru's gorgeous, two-century-old St Mark's Cathedral is a calendar event. Veterans attend in uniform, poppies on their lapels, solemnly remembering their fallen comrades from the First World War. A poem that is unfailingly read at the service is the Canadian soldier John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields", which ends with the stirring verse:

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
In Flanders fields.

The last three lines haunted me enough to want to make it to Flanders at some point. In December 2019, when I hap-



► **More than a hundred years** later, First World War bombs are still being discovered in Ypres.

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

pened to be in Europe, I registered myself with Quasimodo Tours, which arranges day-long trips to Ypres in Belgium. This is where the Battle of Flanders between the German and the Allied Forces was fought; incidentally, July 2024 marks the 110th anniversary of the Great War (1914-18). I took the early morning train from Brussels to Bruges and was received by my host, Philippe, in a van that drove us across Ypres and its adjoining theatre of war. More than a hundred years later, live mines are still discovered there. In the biting cold, we visited the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) and other cemeteries: wide, eerie expanses of lawn with hundreds of marble graves and an overhanging silence that speaks of the horrors that these grounds have seen.

It was interesting to see German tombstones placed flat on the ground with no head-

stones. In the British cemetery, amidst rows of raised tombstones for fallen soldiers lay two flat tombstones. These, we learnt, were German soldiers given an honourable burial by their foes. Indeed, all is fair in love and war.

Some of the cemeteries had graves of soldiers as young as 18, schoolboys out on an adventure or perhaps driven by a greater calling. There was also a Victoria Cross winner among the scores of the fallen. Sam Mendes' Oscar-winning film *1917* is set among these graves, which are maintained meticulously by the Commonwealth Graves Commission.

Our guide showed us parts of the theatre where rival troops were barely metres apart, gridlocked, eyeballing each other and waiting for the next move, which often never came. The Battles of Ypres were a test of stamina as much as of martial offence. Legend has it that the two sides would declare a ceasefire over Christmas and meet to exchange gifts and sing carols together.

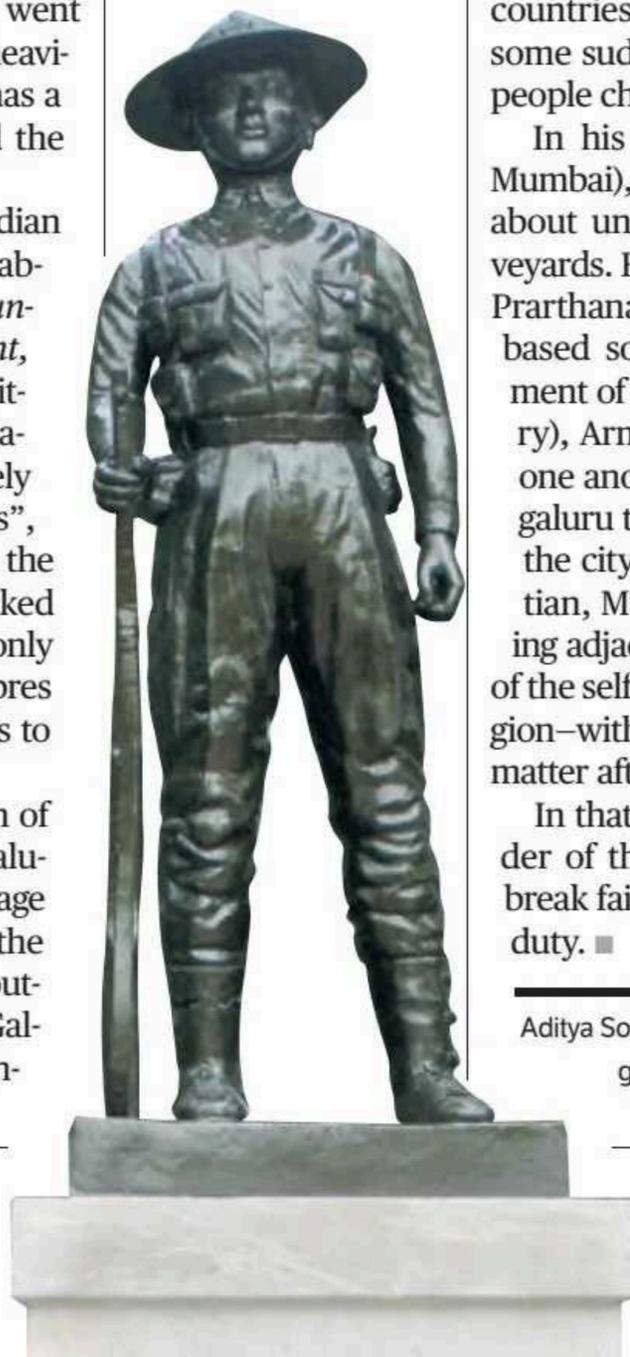
**E**VERY EVENING, Ypres holds a solemn remembrance ceremony where the "Last Post" is played by a bugler under the arches of the Menin Gate, a memorial to the thousands of British soldiers who went missing in action. Ypres, a quaint town heavily adorned with military plaques, also has a life-size statue of a Gurkha soldier and the Lion Capital of Asoka.

Shrabani Basu records the role of Indian soldiers in the First World War in her absorbing book *For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front, 1914-18*. She points out how "extensive British accounts of the Battles of Neuve Chapelle, Ypres and the Somme would rarely mention the presence of the Indians", though one and a half million fought for the Empire. The graves and plaques tucked away in these distant lands are now the only records of their service. Sikhs visiting Ypres from London occasionally carry wreaths to honour their fallen forebears.

Basu writes of Sepoy Khudadad Khan of the 129th Duke of Connaught's Own Baluchis, who lies buried in a field in the village of Hollebeke in Ypres. Sepoy Khan was the first Asian to win a Victoria Cross for his outstanding gallantry. The Lord Ashcroft Gallery at the Imperial War Museum in Lon-

**Legend has it that the two opposing sides would declare a ceasefire over Christmas and meet to exchange gifts and sing carols together.**

▼  
The statue of a Gurkha soldier in Ypres.  
WIKI COMMONS



don redeems the lopsided archival of the Great War by recognising the many Victoria Cross winners from India.

In my book *The Order of the Crest: Tracing the Alumni of Bishop Cotton Boys' School, Bangalore (1865-2015)*, I have profiled the fallen soldiers from my school who are buried in Flanders. As I gifted a copy to Philippe, the owner of Quasimodo, who is also a brilliant tour guide and a genuine lover of military history, I hoped that one day I would be able to trace all their graves and place wreaths in remembrance.

Mark Connelly and Stefan Goebel say in their book *Great Battles: Ypres* that Flanders has "faded from German collective memory and largely disappeared from tourist itineraries". This is due to the passing of many veterans and the lower "emotional connection" that Germans have to the land as compared to, say, the British.

Yet, as Connelly and Goebel point out, French President François Mitterrand and West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl shook hands over the war graves of Verdun (in France) in 1984, in a symbolic gesture announcing the restoration of ties between their countries. While many graves are forgotten, some suddenly assume gravitas when statespeople choose to remember them.

In his lucid biography of Bombay (now Mumbai), *City Adrift*, Naresh Fernandes writes about understanding a city through its graveyards. He visits Antop Hill in Mumbai to find Prarthana Samajis (members of the Bombay-based social and religious reformist movement of the same name from the 19th century), Armenians, and Baha'is buried close to one another. This eclecticism is true of Bengaluru too: for instance, right in the heart of the city, in Shantinagar, you will find Christian, Muslim, and Hindu cemeteries standing adjacent to one another. They remind us of the self-evident truth that differences of religion—with which we seem obsessed—cease to matter after death.

In that sense, war graves are also a reminder of the futility of war. Yet, we must not break faith with those who died in the line of duty. ■

Aditya Sondhi is a senior advocate based in Delhi. He grew up in Bengaluru.

# Staying in



▼ **The Bear Season 1** won 13 Emmy awards, with the honour for the best lead actor in a comedy series going to Jeremy Allen White.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## Films and Series

### The Bear Season 3

Comedy, drama  
The adjective “bingeworthy” is perhaps more applicable to *The Bear* than to any other show since it is all about a set of cooks in a bustling restaurant who dish out wonderful food for their customers. The first two seasons—about chef Carmen “Carry” Berzatto (played by Jeremy Allen White) who returns to Chicago to run his family’s sandwich shop after a tragedy—were a feast. In Season 3, too many cooks seem to have spoilt the broth, as it were, but the episodes are still piquant, with moments of psychological clarity. Streaming from June 27.

English, 10 episodes  
Disney+ Hotstar

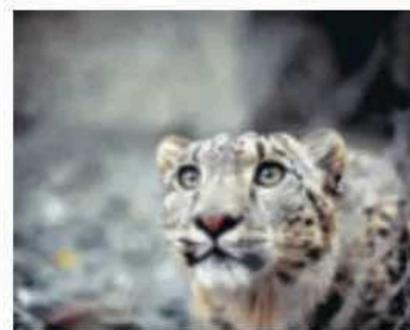
### The Beast

Romance, sci-fi, thriller

This 2023 film starring Léa Seydoux is a meditation on the implications of artificial intelligence. It shifts between three time periods (1910, 2014, and 2044), with the protagonist trying to make sense of the reality from which she feels alienated. She undergoes a surgical procedure to remove all memories of her past lives. In doing so, she realises how her story has long been intertwined with that of a young man (played by George MacKay). With echoes of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, this lushly melancholic movie touches upon Gen Z anxieties as well as on unchanging existential dilemmas. Available for rent on Amazon Prime Video. English and French, 2h 26m  
Amazon Prime Video

## Podcasts and audiobooks

### Ladakh Si Podcast



The first podcast ever produced in Ladakhi, this series examines Ladakh’s natural history, animals, vegetation, ecology, and environment. With episodes on the brown bear, the snow leopard, the black-necked crane, scrublands, heritage

and more, the series, hosted by wildlife photographer Morup Namgail and educationist Padma Rigzin, is informal and engaging. Spotify

### The Sunita Narain Show: Water Crisis In Indian Cities

The water crisis in cities like Delhi and Bengaluru is getting worse each year. Environmentalist Sunita Narain, director general of Centre for Science and Environment and editor of the magazine, *Down To Earth*, tells us how to rethink our cities to mitigate the crisis. She suggests that recycling waste water and redesigning existing sewage systems constitute the way ahead. YouTube

### Norwegian Wood

This 1987 novel by Haruki Murakami is all about music, love, and the Swinging Sixties. When Toru Watanabe hears his ex-girlfriend’s favourite Beatles song, he is transported back to his college days, marked by the mess of friendship, romance and impossible choices. Back in the present day, as Toru meets the beguiling Midori, he has to decide whether he should cling on to the past or open himself up to new possibilities. Murakami’s cult novel is narrated by stage actor Adam Sims in this audiobook. Audible



# Stepping out



▼ **Ullozhukku** was screened at the Indian Film Festival of Los Angeles on June 29. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

## Films

### Ullozhukku

Family, drama  
This debut feature film by two-time National Award-winning director Christo Tomy, best known for the Netflix documentary *Curry and Cyanide: The Jolly Joseph Case*, is an underrated gem that is gradually getting the attention it deserves. The film combines suspense, tragedy and drama, with superb acting by the lead actors, Urvashi and Parvathy Thiruvothu, who play a mother- and daughter-in-law duo. Emotional turbulence overhangs the film like the monsoon clouds over Kuttanad, where the story is set.

Malayalam, PG  
2h 3m

### Kalki 2898 AD

Action, sci-fi  
This much hyped futuristic thriller directed by Nag Ashwin has been getting mixed reviews. While the all-star cast—including Prabhas, Amitabh Bachchan, Kamal Haasan, Deepika Padukone—is dazzling in itself, the plot is a mishmash of several Hollywood sci-fi dramas, from *Star Wars* to *Mad Max*, all sprinkled with Indian mythology. Improbabilities abound and the stock rolls are wasted on actors like Bachchan and Haasan, but Prabhas is good in action sequences and the technology used is Hollywood-class.

Telugu, U/A  
3h

## Art

### Past in Perspective Printmaking Practices from Bengal



On till July 27 at Akar Prakar, Delhi, this exhibition traces the evolution of printmaking from a medium of mass reproduction to a medium of fine art. Calcutta in the 19th century was the hub of printing and publishing. In 1915, the Bichitra Club was founded by the Tagore family as a studio for

experimentations in painting and printmaking. Its members included Gaganendranath and Rabindranath Tagore, Mukul Dey, and Nandalal Bose. Later, under artists like Chittoprasad, K.G. Subramanyam, and Krishna Reddy, printmaking reached unprecedented levels of excellence in Bengal.  
Delhi

### Dawn to Dusk: A Silent Symphony

Contemporary textile-based artist Ujjal Dey pays homage to women's labour in daily life in this show. It has artworks ranging from small textile panels to large hanging pieces that are reminiscent of handmade calicoes. Dey uses everyday implements and culinary moulds as blocks to underscore his conceptual framework. On till August 20 at Emami Art, Kolkata.  
Kolkata

### The Revisiting

This solo exhibition by Avijit Dutta at KYNKYN Art Gallery (till July 19), was preceded by an immersive art show in C.V. Raman's Bengaluru home, Panchavati, on June 22 and 23. The series of 15 paintings on display is inspired by the house, a colonial bungalow at the centre of a 2.5-acre property, where Raman lived for nearly 30 years. The past inspires the present in the artworks, which pay homage to Kolkata and Bengaluru—cities losing their heritage to rapid urbanisation.  
Bengaluru

