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of militancy
in Jammu

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Pune-based **Suhas Palshikar** is honorary co-director of Lokniti, a research programme on comparative democracy, based at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi, and chief editor of Lokniti's biannual journal brought out by Sage, *Studies in Indian Politics*. He was editor of *Samaaj Prabodhan Patrika* from 1990 to 2004. He has been associated with the National Election Study since the 1996 election. Professor Palshikar writes in English and Marathi on contemporary politics.

Smruti Koppikar, an award-winning Mumbai-based journalist and currently the Founder Editor of *Question of Cities*, has over three decades of experience in reporting and writing on a range of subjects from communal riots to general elections, and malnutrition to terror attacks. She has led newsroom and reporting teams for national newspapers and magazines, and has contributed to books on Mumbai. In journalism and chronicling work, she has focussed on marginalised groups in cities.



Gopakumar Menon is an MBA from the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore. He worked as an investment professional for 11 years before wisdom dawned. Since 2002, he has been facilitating workshops on Negotiation and Influencing and is forever surprised to find that he is still in business. He is the founder of The Otter Conservancy, which works to conserve otters and their habitat. He is the author of two books of short stories, and blogs regularly in the faint hope that someone somewhere will read his work.

Illustration: P Muthuraj

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The journalist Kunal Purohit, author of *H-Pop: The Secretive World of Hindutva Pop Stars*, was recently in Chennai, and a line from his talk has stayed with me. About the costumes and muscular imagery associated with H-Pop, he said its task was to make “religion cool”. What he left unsaid is something we have seen unspooling over the past decade: It is not just Hindu religion but hatred and violence against other religions that have also been made “cool”. The videos from the Kanwar Yatra showing young men breaking up cars, beating up people, or vandalising property have been alarming enough to move even the otherwise phlegmatic Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh to ask the *kanwariyas* to “practise self-discipline”. If these young men are so ready to resort to violence, it is because they fully recognise that being on pilgrimage grants them impunity and also that being a “cool pilgrim” is no longer about piety alone but about punitive aggression.

A telling line in a new book by Rahul Bhatia titled *The New India: The Unmaking of the World's Largest Democracy* says of a former RSS functionary named Partha Banerjee: “By the time he was nine or 10, Partha had located within himself the desire to beat up a couple of Muslim children at school.” Partha joined an RSS shakha when he was 6.

The angry young man has been a staple of Indian cinema but an entire nation of angry young men and women? Can we deal with that? Young people not angry with the state for its inadequacies and failures, who express anger in democratic ways, but citizens angry with fellow citizens. People so starved of jobs, status, and aspirations that they can be effortlessly whipped into fury against the first effigy you place in front of them.

After years of shrugging off the warnings and even denying the existence of a problem, the government gave its first passing nod to the unemployment

crisis in this Budget, unveiling some weak measures that largely expect the corporate sector to pick up the baton. It is unlikely to happen. Meanwhile, the number of angry young men roaming the streets will grow.

THE STRATEGY OF FINDING an enemy to ensure citizens take their eyes off their own spiralling problems can only work up to a point. When millions of Indians who struggle to put vegetables on the table are asked to bask in the vulgar pyrotechnics of an Ambani wedding, it is unlikely that religion or hatred alone will offer succour. Nor are they likely to remain apathetic to the news that 2024 alone has seen seven railway accidents so far, a number so outrageous any self-respecting Railway Minister would have bought himself a one-way train ticket. Similar alarming data abound across sectors and States, but it is invariably met with a curious mix of indifference and whataboutery from the government. However, with Assembly elections due in three States later this year, rhetoric will fly high again.

In anticipation, we have chosen this issue to focus on Maharashtra, India's third largest State and its wealthiest, whose election could well spell the end of some of its political players. Once a leader in agriculture, industry, commerce, cinema, theatre, transport, and social reform movements, Maharashtra is in some serious trouble today. Its infrastructure is a mess, its record of farmer suicides is frightening, chunks of its businesses are showing signs of migrating to other regions, and, most worryingly, its sociopolitical fabric is being rent apart.

None of this can be solved by simply making religion “cool” again or winking at violence, but that will certainly not deter political parties from trying.

Vaishna



India scorching

AS heatwaves visit us more frequently and more stridently, are we on the verge of the abyss or are we on the escalator to extinction (Cover Story, August 9)? India's heatwave action plans are far from perfect, as the policymakers themselves confess, with not enough attention given to identifying and targeting vulnerable sections in society. It is high time the focus shifted to phasing out carbon emissions rather than phasing down as was decided as part of the Paris Agreement.

The onus for tackling climate change does not rest solely with governmental agencies. Each and every one of us needs to examine our everyday lives in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

A. Raveendranath

Aranmula, Kerala

WITH rising temperatures linked to human-induced global warming, future heatwaves are projected to become more frequent and severe. Immediate and robust measures, including enhanced cooling infrastructure for vulnerable populations and stringent emissions reduction, are crucial. We must act now to mitigate these extreme weather events and safeguard public health. Addressing climate change is not just about preventing heatwaves; it is about ensuring a liveable future for all of us.

Muhamed Rajif N.P.

Taliparamba, Kerala

IN the past year alone, the temperatures for each month were higher than the highest ever recorded for that particular month. It is clear that warmer temperatures are upon us owing to the uncontrolled burning of fossil fuels. As a result of extreme heat, hundreds die and thousands get hospitalised due to heatstroke. The solution lies in restoring water bodies and increasing green cover on a massive scale both in urban and rural areas. Also, increasing the use of renewable sources of energy such as solar power and wind energy could go a long way in tackling climate change and its devastating effects.

Kangayam R. Narasimhan

Chennai



New criminal laws

INDIA'S criminal justice system entered a new era on July 1, 2024, with the enforcement of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) replacing the Indian Penal Code (IPC), the Bharatiya Nagrik Suraksha Sanhita replacing the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam replacing the Indian Evidence Act ("All change is not reform", August 9). However, it will take effect only after the cases filed under the old Codes, running into lakhs, are closed. In other words, cases filed after June 30, 2024, will be governed by the new criminal laws. This, in effect, means that two sets of Codes will be applied simultaneously.

Notwithstanding the mixed reactions from the legal fraternity, the new laws, which prescribe timelines, usage of technology, digital evidence, and mandatory forensic investigations, herald a liberal reformatory justice system. This should help the timely disposal of cases.

As the courts focus on ensuring the implementation of the new laws premised on the protection of freedom and civil liberties, let us hope that despite certain drawbacks, the cases get expedited in the right spirit.

K.R. Srinivasan

Secunderabad, Telangana

WHAT was the need for the BJP to bring in the BNS in such a tearing hurry when so many other serious issues have gone abegging? The Bills were passed hurriedly without the 30 days' pre-legislative consultation, without stakeholders and the general public taken into consideration, and without a full-fledged debate with all lawmakers present in full strength in Parliament.

The government could well have brought in amendments to the existing criminal laws without bringing new statutes with Hindi titles; if anything, this only makes the government's intention to impose Hindi on the entire nation evident.

The reduction of 511 sections in the earlier IPC to 356 sections in the BNS is not a big achievement, but replacing the Section 124-A of the IPC on sedition with Section 152 of the BNS on treason, giving more power to the police and thus more power to the government, is deeply problematic, as is the extension of police custody from 15 days to 60-90 days.

It seems the new laws are meant to protect the rights of the government rather than the citizen, and give more teeth to the police and the judiciary.

NOTE

Letters, whether by surface mail or email, must carry the full postal address and the full name, or the name with initials.

It is not known whether the issues of hate speech, inciting communal violence and communal riots, wanton destruction of public and private property, abduction, forced confinement, trafficking, bonded labour, child labour, moral policing, cow vigilantism, lynching, suppression of free speech and free media, and live-in relationships, to name just a few, have been suitably discussed.

M.Y. Shariff

Chennai

The future of AAP

SABA NAQVI'S column poses a very uncomfortable question to the future of democracy in India ("Can the AAP survive?", August 9). As a political organisation, the Aam Aadmi Party infused new ideas into a tired old system primarily dominated by the BJP and the Congress. It is not an exaggeration to say that the AAP's entry in 2012, and its meteoric rise, set off mild tremors in both the national parties.

The AAP model of development and its system of governance virtually changed the narrative, something that reflected in the manifestos of all political parties in the recently concluded Lok Sabha election.



The current conflict between the AAP and the Central government has only deprived the people of their right to good governance. Less power and more accountability for the AAP is no match for the office of the Lieutenant Governor, who has more powers and less accountability. The clash has taken a personal turn as well, and this will have far-reaching adverse consequences for the people of Delhi.

Surjit Singh

Kurukshetra, Haryana

I AM writing in response to Saba Naqvi's insightful column that discussed Arvind Kejriwal and Manish Sisodia's ongoing legal issues, especially in light of the most recent changes to the political scene. It is a strong argument to say that there might be some chance for their release due to a more independent court as a result of the June 4 order. But the complexity of their circumstances highlights a troubling fact.

The systematic targeting of opposition politicians by the Enforcement Directorate and the Central Bureau of Investigation has been on the rise during Narendra Modi's regime. The article

highlights a disturbing history of criminalising the opposition and ruining democratic institutions, which is reflected in the continuous witch hunt of AAP leaders. This calls into doubt the integrity of the rule of law and our political system.

The developments in Arvind Kejriwal's case, especially the way he was immediately arrested again after the Supreme Court granted him bail in the money laundering case, destroy public confidence in the legal system.

Despite its small geographical presence, the AAP is facing an aggressive reaction that poses the crucial question: why does the ruling party feel so threatened by a regional party?

As participants in, and witnesses to, our democracy, it is our duty to promote a political climate free from undue influence and conducive to an equitable administration of justice. The ability of our democratic institutions and courts to survive setbacks will be essential to protecting the rights of all political parties and guaranteeing that no one is unfairly targeted.

I hope more columns like this one promote a closer examination of our political system and the behaviour of individuals in positions of authority.

Muhammed Siyan K

Kannur, Kerala

MCQ

YOUR article rightly points out that question papers based on multiple-choice questions are inadequate to test the writing and analytical skills of candidates ("MCQ not the answer", July 26). There is much scope for malpractices like the leakage of question papers even a few minutes before the examinations since the answers can be memorised in the shortest possible time. Likewise, optical mark reader sheets, too, can be easily manipulated.

There is an urgent need to add a paper to evaluate the writing skills of candidates. If it becomes part and parcel of all competitive and entrance examinations, the learning and cultivation of writing skills right from the school level will get a boost.

There is already enough evidence that students who have passed class X and class XII lack the bare minimum writing skills. Whatever the technological advancement, the importance of writing skills in one's personal and professional life cannot be underestimated.

Ravi Bhushan

Kurukshetra, Haryana

The Fortnight

► A shooting star!

Manu Bhaker won two bronze medals in the women's 10 m air pistol event and the 10 m air pistol mixed team (with Sarabjot Singh) at the Paris Olympics 2024. The 22-year-old set two back-to-back records by becoming the first Indian woman shooter to win a medal at the Olympics and the first person since Independence to win two medals in the same edition of the games for India. ALAIN JOCARD/AFP



► “This is a tough business that we’re in.”

NASA pilots **Butch Wilmore** and Sunita Williams have been stuck in space for more than 50 days after the new Starliner capsule they were launched from on June 5 developed helium leaks and thruster problems during its journey to the International Space Station. With the two astronauts stuck there for much longer than planned, they suffer potential loss of muscle mass and bone density due to lack of gravitational pull in outer space. While NASA has not set a target landing date, it said there are opportunities throughout August.



► Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas' senior political leader, was killed in an Israeli strike in Tehran on July 31. The 62-year-old was in Iran to attend the swearing-in ceremony of the new Iranian President, Masoud Pezeshkian. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, has promised “harsh punishment” for Israel in retaliation. Experts have said this can escalate into a regional war and threaten the prospects of a ceasefire. Earlier in April, Haniyeh's three sons were also killed in an Israeli air strike in Gaza.

► In a crucial

6:1

majority ruling on August 1, the Supreme Court held that States have the power to create subclassifications within the reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. However, it said the States can only do that when there is “quantifiable and demonstrable data” highlighting the levels of backwardness and representation within government services. Justice B.R. Gawai said the States must develop a policy to identify and exclude the “creamy layer” in the SC and ST categories from quota benefits.

► 51 per cent

of the votes were won by Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela's presidential election held on July 28. His main opposition candidate, Edmundo González, garnered 44 per cent of the votes. As a section of Venezuelans took to the streets after the electoral authority officially declared President Maduro the winner, protests erupted across the country. After drawing criticism from some election observers, Maduro asked the country's high court to conduct an audit of the election.

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► Tragedy in Kerala

In one of India's most horrific landslides, more than 300 people died and 218 went missing (as on August 3) in the Chooralmala and Mundakkai areas of Wayanad district. Heavy rain on July 30 led to torrents of mud and water inundating the areas with devastating effect. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has appointed a Cabinet subcommittee of four Ministers to coordinate rescue efforts. RAFIQ MAQBOOL/AP

SPECIAL FOCUS

SATYAM ROYCHOWDHURY A MAN WITH A MISSION

Satyam Roychowdhury, the Founder & Managing Director of Techno India Group, the largest educational conglomerate in eastern India, is an ace educationalist, and a visionary in persistent pursuit of excellence, with a mission to bring about social equality through the spread of education among the masses.



Over the last four decades, an ordinary man's sheer determination to edify has evolved into an extraordinary

revolution in the education scenario of a state, and a country at large. Satyam Roychowdhury, the Founder and Managing Director of Techno India Group (TIG), has been tenaciously pursuing a vision—to bring about social equality, and ensure upliftment of the socio-economically backward and marginalised communities through the spread of education. He is an Edu-Preneur in the truest sense of the term. Under his leadership, Techno India Group has emerged as the largest educational conglomerate in eastern India, imparting education right from the kindergarten to the PhD level under one broad corporate umbrella. Although TIG runs engineering colleges, universities, business schools, world schools and public schools, with more than a hundred state-of-the-art campuses and overseas centres of excellence, Roychowdhury's passion continues to be the development of education at the rural level, and the spread of literacy among the deprived.

For all the business diversifications of the TIG into multifaceted sectors that complement its efforts in academics, Satyam Roychowdhury has persistently ensured that the Group does not stray from his primary vision of developing

► **Besides his business and social**

commitments, Satyam Roychowdhury is an eminent writer, and has several bestsellers to his name. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



► **Presenting the Honorary D. Litt.** to industry doyen Padma Vibhushan Shri Ratan Naval Tata, Chairman Emeritus, Tata Sons & Tata Group, in Mumbai, alongwith Dr. Sanku Bose, GCEO, Techno India Group. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

education as a primary tool for social change and development. "We aim to provide quality education to children from rural and semi-urban Bengal, ensuring excellence and making them internationally competitive. Our goal is to create self-sustaining institutions that serve the public good for generations," he says, outlining his vision.

While most in the education business might think it is convenient and certainly more lucrative to begin their enterprise on an urban platform, Satyam Roychowdhury lays more emphasis on the growth of education projects in the rural and semi-urban areas. Dr. Sanku Bose, the Group Chief Executive Officer of Techno India, points out that one of the main difficulties faced by the students from rural areas was their inability to communicate as fluently in English as their counterparts from urban institutions. This drawback in communication has been a stumbling block for rural students while competing in the job market, and an impediment in their scope for higher education abroad. "The inability to speak in English often forces students from rural regions to withdraw from the mainstream competition. It became crystal clear to us while interacting with the parents of rural students that their one deep desire was to see their children conversant in English. Satyam Roychowdhury has dared to dream to make their wish come true. Very few have thought about the education of the masses, particularly with an eye to making them competitive in the global workforce," says Dr. Bose.

CHANGING THE EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

Techno India has been instrumental in

transforming the educational landscape of Bengal for over four decades, creating a more equitable, dynamic, and future-ready system. Roychowdhury's vision has helped facilitate a change in the educational landscape of rural Bengal. "On an average, around 10,000 students pass out from our schools in rural regions; and all of them pass out speaking fluently in English. Satyam Roychowdhury's efforts have been a huge empowering factor in rural society. In this challenging situation, he is consistently working towards making more and more people employable," remarks Dr. Bose.

Satyam Roychowdhury does not see education simply as a business. To him, it is a commitment to the society, to enable its growth; and that is the reason why he established schools and educational institutions at the district and village level first, rather than focusing in urban areas where the financial returns would be much higher. He was well aware that a school not only imparts education to children, but also automatically promotes economic growth in the region, simply by functioning there. "When we set up a school at a particular rural area, the price of the land on which we build the school is not at all high; but within five years, the price of land in the adjacent areas goes up exponentially. Just the economic activities surrounding the school itself provide a livelihood to at least a thousand people," said a senior executive of Techno India Group. Currently, Techno India Group runs more than 35 schools across the length and breadth of West Bengal.

Roychowdhury's efforts have borne fruit, and students passing out of the Techno India schools in rural and semi-urban areas of Bengal are being



► **With the children** of tea plantation workers, students of a rural school adopted by TIGPS Siliguri. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

able to successfully compete with the rest of the country. "Every year, a large number of our students are getting into premier institutions of higher education like the IITs, and the Medical College. Many of our alumni are well-settled in global organisations all over the world. In all the top companies in the country, you will find the footprints of Satyam Roychowdhury's schools and colleges," says Dr. Sanku Bose, who is also the Dean, School of Engineering at Sister Nivedita University (SNU), under the aegis of Techno India Group, the 'youngest' private university in Bengal, established in 2017. Under the guidance of Satyam Roychowdhury, who is the Chancellor of the university, SNU has quickly become the 'University of Choice' for students looking for a value-based, all-inclusive education environment. Roychowdhury is also the Chancellor of Techno India University, Tripura (TIUT), which was established through The Techno India University, Tripura Act, 2023.

THE PHILANTHROPIST: SATYAM ROYCHOWDHURY FOUNDATION

Techno India Group has always stood beside meritorious yet economically challenged students in pursuance of their dreams. The Satyam Roychowdhury Foundation, a non-profit educational organization, is another tool set up by Roychowdhury to fulfil his vision of uplifting the underprivileged sections of the society through

education. The Foundation supports meritorious students from economically challenged backgrounds, and ensures that their educational journey does not founder on the rocks of financial constraints. Not only does the Foundation offer assistance to those studying in Techno India schools, but also those from outside. Since 2014, every year, the signature CSR event Techno India Group Uttarbanga Medha Ratna Utsav is celebrated in Siliguri to felicitate the toppers of all board examinations across North Bengal, and present them with scholarships. The Medha Ratna Utsav began in Tripura in 2023, and the first edition has been a massive success.

To address the educational problems of children and youth from marginalized sections of the society, Satyam Roychowdhury has started a number of programmes, both in rural and urban slums, some of which are District Learning Schools, Technology Learning Stations, Science for School children's project, several programs for differently-abled children and individuals. Satyam Roychowdhury Foundation also includes a special program of 'adopting' schools in rural areas to fund and promote the overall development. Some of the schools under the programme are Bondanga Adibasi Primary School, Phool Danga Primary School, SSK Primary School, Methibari, 40 schools in the Sunderbans, and



► **With his lifeline...** the students. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



► **With the Eastern Command** of the Indian Army as the Swarnim Vijay Mashaal arrived at Sister Nivedita University campus as part of the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the 1971 War of Liberation. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

others. The Foundation has also been engaged in developing infrastructure in economically backward regions through programmes like Gramin Sewa. It strives to provide better healthcare facilities, and build up infrastructure in backward places particularly in places like Hooghly, Siliguri and Bolpur.

With an eye on all-round development for the youth, Satyam Roychowdhury promotes sports among the talented under-privileged youth. Techno India entered into a joint venture with Brazilian Football Academy founded by ace footballer Jose Ramirez Barreto, to form Techno BFA, for the purpose of setting up coaching centres in different parts of the state, including Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Siliguri, Falakata, and Hooghly. The SRC Foundation also has a special sports scholarship called Khela Ratna for under-privileged girls.

AUTHOR AND LITERATEUR

Besides his business and social commitments, Satyam Roychowdhury is an eminent writer, and he has several bestsellers to his name, both in English and Bengali. He is the author of the popular 'For You' series that includes literary tributes 'Tagore For You', 'Vivekananda For You', 'Sri Ramakrishna For You', 'Nivedita For You', 'Netaji For You', 'Mahatma For You' and 'Bangabandhu For You.' Some of his other books are 'The Way of Love: St Teresa of Calcutta,'

'Pupil's President', 'Poetic Pilgrimage,' 'Biroher Antarale,' 'Duniyadari,' 'Kabitirtha Bilet,' 'Vatican er Diary,' and others. He is the Chairman of Aajkaal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., and the Millennium Post.

THE JOURNEY

For Satyam Roychowdhury, the journey of Techno India began in 1984, when Bengal was oblivious to computers, and a dearth of private engineering colleges resulted in meritorious students relocating to other states for higher studies after school, leading to Bengal losing its academic cream. He and his elder brother Goutam Roy Chowdhury had the foresight to realise the immense potential of computer education, and the fact that the professional life of the new generation would substantially be dependent on the application of computer in day-to-day life.

From establishing the Institute of Computer Engineers, India ICE(I) in a small room in Hooghly in 1984, within ten years, the Roychowdhury brothers established computer training centres in as many as 70 universities and colleges in West Bengal and Tripura. At the same time, their organization began to successfully execute several e-governance projects of various state governments. From 1998, the company began to set up engineering colleges and public schools across the state; and there was no looking back. Forty years later, Techno India Group is now a colossal entity in the field of

education, with four universities, 22 engineering colleges (all approved by the All India Council for Technical Education), eight business schools, five diploma colleges, one Ayurveda College, two upcoming medical colleges, 18 Industrial Training Institutes (ITI) in eastern India, more than 35 public schools, and an array of Research and Development (R&D) labs. Over the years, Techno India Group has ventured into multifaceted sectors, namely Healthcare, Hospitality, Sports, Entertainment, Media and Advertising.

However, for all the success and growth of Techno India, and the iconic stature Satyam Roychowdhury has attained as an entrepreneur and educationist, he has never lost connection with his roots. In fact, it is this marvellous aspect of his character that propels him to work unstoppably for those belonging to the weaker sections of the society. Although he is a maverick business magnet, he is a 'People's Person' – the visionary and social reformer everyone looks up to, an extraordinarily ordinary man for whom societal development is far more important than the monetary part of his business. Even after four decades, he is still the son of the soil, the man who empowers and inspires millions of young minds towards the 'enlightened path' of knowledge. As brilliant as he is, and as he likes to say even after forty years, he is 'just getting started'. ■

<https://telegram.me/PaperMagzine>

Cover Story

SHIFTING SANDS

The Assembly election scheduled to be held in Maharashtra later this year gains significance in the context of India's wealthiest State facing multiple crises, each of which needs to be addressed to return it to its lost glory.

—
Amev Tirodkar



he political manoeuvring of the past five years in Maharashtra has come at a cost: political uncertainty, economic decline, and rising communal and caste tensions. The serial poaching of MLAs and engineered defections have undermined the State's political culture, which was once built on mutual respect and cooperation among opposition parties.

It began with the 2019 Assembly election that disrupted the status quo in Maharashtra politics when the Uddhav Thackeray-led Shiv Sena broke away from the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and joined the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), led by Sharad Pawar, to form a government in the State.

Until 1995, when the Shiv Sena and the BJP joined hands and came to power, it was the Congress that had held sway over Maharashtra for many decades. That year marked the beginning of coalition politics in the State, with the Congress and the NCP predominantly on one side and the Shiv Sena-BJP on the other.

The saffron alliance continued in the elections that came thereafter. Significantly, the Shiv Sena was a founding member of the BJP-led NDA, which ruled the country in 1998, and it was the only constituent that shared the BJP's Hindutva agenda. In 2014, both parties contested the Assembly election separately, but formed a government in a post-election alliance, with Devendra Fadnis of the BJP as Chief Minister.

The 2019 election, however, upset the apple cart. The Shiv Sena, which was in a pre-election alliance with the BJP, demanded the Chief Minister's post, stating that the then BJP president Amit Shah had assured them of this. The BJP denied having given any such assurance. The snub prompted Uddhav to join the Congress-NCP alliance, and he became Chief



► **A farmer pumping water** from the Bendsura reservoir in drought-affected Beed district, an April 2019 picture. Maharashtra leads the country in farmer suicides, but political developments, rather than farmer suicides, have hogged media and social media attention.

DHIRAJ SINGH/BLOOMBERG

Of the 48 Lok Sabha seats in the State, the MVA won 30 and the NDA won 17. The BJP won a mere 9 seats against the 24 and 23 seats it had won in 2014 and 2019 respectively in alliance with Uddhav.

Minister of the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government on November 26, 2019.

THIS WAS A PARADIGM SHIFT in Maharashtra politics. The Sena, founded in 1966 on a sons-of-the-soil plank, had taken a right turn in the early 1990s and was one of the loudest voices of the Hindu Right until the rise of Narendra Modi. As such, Uddhav's alliance with the Congress and the NCP shook the right-wing ecosystem.

In its aftermath, the BJP tried every trick to discredit the Uddhav government. It attacked the MVA government on all issues, and worse, it unleashed investigation agencies, such as the Enforcement Directorate, the Central Bureau of Investigation, and the Income Tax department against several MVA leaders.

This no-holds-barred attack on the opposition altered the political culture of the State, bringing in an animosity hitherto unknown among its political leaders. The State has always taken pride in its tradition of maintaining cordial personal relationships between its ruling and opposition leaders, from the time of the BJP's first-generation leaders in Maharashtra such as Pramod Mahajan, Gopinath Munde, and Nitin Gadkari.

As Shiv Sena and NCP leaders began to feel the heat, many of them asked their leadership to relinquish power. Finally, in June 2022, a large group of Shiv Sena MLAs broke away from the Uddhav camp. The BJP supported the breakaway faction led by Eknath Shinde and made him Chief Minister. Devendra Fadnavis, reportedly much against his wish, became the Deputy Chief Minister.

The next step was to engineer a split in Sharad Pawar's NCP. His nephew Ajit Pawar, who was under investigation by many agencies, joined the Shinde-led Cabinet in June 2023. Ajit shared the Deputy Chief Minister's post



▼ **During a protest** on the Pune-Solapur Highway in connection with Maratha reservation, in Solapur on November 1, 2023. The State government's inept handling of the sensitive issue made it worse. PTI

with Fadnavis. Later, the Election Commission recognised the Shinde and Ajit Pawar groups of the Shiv Sena and the NCP, respectively, as the "real" parties. Both verdicts have been challenged and are pending in the Supreme Court.

DESPITE THESE EFFORTS, however, two years later the BJP's ambitions took a beating in the Lok Sabha election. Of the 48 Lok Sabha seats in the State, the MVA won 30 and the NDA won 17. One Independent who won affiliated himself with the Congress.

The BJP itself won a mere 9 seats against the 24 and 23 seats it won in 2014 and 2019 respectively in alliance with Uddhav. In 2014 and 2019, the BJP had been the first party since 1990 to win over 100 seats in the Assembly, 123 and 105 seats respectively. However, given the results of the

general election, it looks as if the BJP might have a tough task repeating such past performances.

The results also defy a myth about the BJP that it works to a long-term plan. Bringing down the MVA government by splitting parties is not being seen so much as a "Chanakya move" as an abuse of power. This has led to the BJP losing its psychological leverage over the opposition.

Worse, it is the State that has paid a huge price for the political instability. Once the most industrialised State in the country, Maharashtra is now lagging behind on many development parameters. The State's economic growth, according to the Economic Survey, was 4.5 per cent in 2019-24, falling from 6.1 per cent in 2014-19. The State debt amounts to Rs.7.11 lakh crore. It is estimated that at this pace, by 2026, debt will rise faster than the growth rate.

The Economic Survey says the State is in the

The State has paid a huge price for the political instability, lagging behind on many development parameters.

sixth place in the country's per capita income index. However, as pointed out by opposition leaders, a Press Information Bureau press note of July 24, 2023, says that Maharashtra, with a per capita net State domestic product of Rs.1.46 lakh, is actually at number 11 (see "Maharashtra Budget: Ambitious focus on welfare programmes, but where is the money?", *Frontline*, July 19, 2024).

The average growth rate in the industrial sector has fallen from 5.5 per cent in 2014-19 to 1.3 per cent in 2019-24. The average manufacturing growth rate from 2019 to 2024 has been negative, at -1 per cent.

SOcial indicators too have declined. According to Hindutva Watch, an independent research project that documents hate crimes and hate speech against religious minorities in India, Maharashtra saw the largest number of hate speeches in the country in 2023. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau reveal that Maharashtra had the highest number of people arrested in cases of riots in the country in 2022. Critics point out that Hindu right-wing groups tried to communalise society ahead of the recent Lok Sabha election as well.

The State has also seen a rift between the Maratha and Other Backward Classes in the past eight months over the issue of reservation. The State government's inept handling of the sensitive issue made it worse. Adding fuel to the fire were aggressive statements on reservation made by Ministers such as Chhagan Bhujbal.

Communal and caste conflicts have pushed real challenges like the agricultural crisis to the back burner. As many as 55 per cent of the State's population lives in rural areas. Of this, 87 per cent is dependent on agriculture. Maharashtra has the ignominy of leading the country in farmer suicides. Until July 15 this year, nearly 600 farmers had died by suicide. Political developments, rather than farmer suicides, have hogged media and social media attention.

It is against this background that the upcoming Assembly election gains significance. In the following pages, *Frontline* does an in-depth review of the status of Maharashtra by examining the State with respect to its sociopolitical transition, its economy, agriculture, industry, and infrastructure, and a stand-alone look at its capital Mumbai. ■

Something is rotten in the state of Maharashtra...

Historically, Maharashtra has displayed a marked trend towards moderation, which seems to be on the decline now as its political arena is dominated by crass power struggles, free use of the parochial card, and loud squabbles. **SUHAS PALSHIKAR**



If one were looking for just one example of what is wrong with politics in the State of Maharashtra, a statement by the BJP leader and Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis might serve the purpose well. In his capacity as Home Minister, referring to a youth who supposedly posted some text glorifying Aurangzeb on social media, Fadnavis said on June 7, 2023: “I know where these progeny of Aurangzeb [*‘aulad’*, a pejorative colloquial term] come from....” (Speaking in Hindi, Fadnavis said: “Somewhat suddenly, in some places in Maharashtra, *aulads* of Aurangzeb are being bred... we shall find out who their real owners are....”) In a

The story of Maharashtra in the past decade is one of a State losing its sociopolitical identity, giving up its progressive pretensions, and falling into the all-India trap of degeneration into sub-democratic politics.

sense, that statement represents the verbal and substantive rot that has set in in the politics of Maharashtra.

Sandwiched between the “north” and the “south”, Maharashtra has often displayed a tendency to vacillate between the sociopolitical features of both regions. However, it used to always display a marked trend towards moderation. Thus, if in the early 20th century, Maharashtra, like the province of Madras, had a **Brahmanetar** (non-Brahman) movement, it still did not produce a more pronounced anti-Brahminism sentiment while bringing about a reconstruction of power relations in the Marathi-speaking region.

Similarly, when by the late 20th century, the north was upholding a strong and vocal Hindutva among the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), Maharashtra too witnessed the rise of “vernacular” (a term used by Thomas Blom Hansen in the mid-1990s) Hindutva in the early 1990s, but unlike in the north, that did not produce a full-fledged dominance of the BJP at that time.

More contemporarily, this distinction for moderation appears to be declining. While politics has become extremely competitive—something that may seem to be a welcome feature in a democracy—current developments are robbing the State of its historical roots, giving way to crass power struggles, parochial identities, and sociopolitical conflicts that are of a verbose and voluble nature but leave the competitiveness empty of content. Fadnavis’ statement mentioned above is part of this process. It also represents the urgency with which the BJP is trying to polarise the public sphere along religious lines.

So, the story of Maharashtra in the past decade is one of a State losing its sociopolitical identity, giving up its progressive pretensions,

This movement, organised to oppose caste hierarchy and caste-based discrimination, was spearheaded by B.R. Ambedkar in Maharashtra.

► **Shiv Sena party workers** on a special train to Ayodhya from Thane in 2018.

VIBHAV BIRWATKAR



and falling into the all-India trap of degeneration into sub-democratic politics.

At a superficial level, political fragmentation and a collapse of governance mark the rot in the State. Since 2014, a large number of Congress and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leaders have moved over to the BJP. This steady stream of defections not only weakened the two Congress parties but also ensured a broader acceptability for the politics of the BJP. For a long time, Maharashtra had two major State-level players: the Shiv Sena and the NCP. Between 2019 and 2024, both the parties were split in two. One faction of each entered into an alliance with the BJP.

All decisions are in the form of knee-jerk responses and all pretence of planning is sacrificed at the altar of ad hoc packages that ministers announce to placate immediate distress.

▼ **Members of the Sakal Hindu Samaj** protest against "love jihad", at Shivaji Park in Dadar, south Mumbai, in January 2023. EMMANUAL YOGINI

At the same time, the State has been witnessing a steady rise in the number of smaller parties. These often lack any ideology and organisation. They are mostly confined to one or two districts and are willing to do business with any of the major players. Even the Vanchit Bahujan Aaghadi (Front of the Deprived Bahujans) led by Prakash Ambedkar only remained a spoiler without consolidating its own strength between 2019 and 2024. All these developments have resulted in a chaotic fragmentation of the political arena, making the social bases of all the parties uncertain and shaky.

But this summary of competitive politics would be simplistic if we were to ignore the long-term trends and the deeper rot.

TWO FEATURES that have their roots in the 1980s characterise the State's politics today. In the early 1980s, the political elite (mostly from the Maratha caste cluster) lost their connection with the economy and an ability to minimally regulate the dominant material forces. This made their political clout rather vacuous, leading to frustration among the com-

Experience the Magic of Uttar Pradesh's

Braj Circuit

Mathura, the birthplace of Lord Krishna, is a spiritual city with ancient temples and rich history. The land deeply intertwined with the life and stories of Lord Krishna. The Braj circuit includes the holy towns of Mathura, Vrindavan, Gokul, Barsana, Mahavan, Baldeo, Goverdhan and Nandgaon. Each destination offers a unique blend of temples, crafts, and cuisines, making it a must-visit for devotees and travellers seeking a divine experience.



Uttar Pradesh
UTTAR PRADESH TOURISM



parents Yashoda and Nand, is a key destination in the Braj Circuit. The Raman Reti, where Krishna is believed to have played as a child, and in Gokulnath Temple, he performed many childhood pastimes. Along with these, there are other prominent locations in the Braj region.

Mathura: The Birthplace of Lord Krishna

Mathura, the birthplace of Lord Krishna, is a key site in Hindu mythology. The Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi Temple, believed to be the birthplace of Krishna. Janmashtami is celebrated here with great fervour, temples are decorated with flowers and lights. Another notable temple is Dwarkadhish Temple, dedicated to Krishna as the King of Dwarka, renowned for its intricate architecture and lively celebrations, particularly Holi and Janmashtami. Vishram Ghat, on the Yamuna River in Mathura, is sacred as the place where Krishna rested after defeating Kansa.

Vrindavan: The Land of Devotion

Vrindavan, where Lord Krishna spent his childhood, is renowned for its temples and profound spiritual atmosphere. Key sites include the Banke Bihari Temple, a revered temple of Lord Krishna that attracts thousands of devotees, and the ISKCON Temple, or Krishna Balaram Mandir, a major spiritual hub. The Prem Mandir, made of white marble, is dedicated to Radha-Krishna and Sita-Ram. Vrindavan is also known for its handcrafted Radha-Krishna idols, beadwork, and embroidered textiles, available in local markets.

Gokul: The Childhood Abode of Krishna

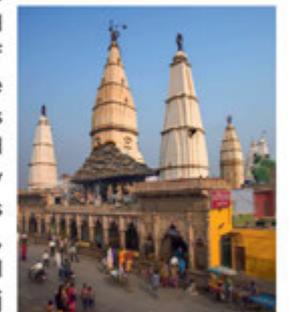
Gokul, where Lord Krishna was raised by his foster

Other Prominent Places

The other important places in the Braj Region include **Barsana**, the birthplace of Radha Rani; **Nandgaon**- The home of Lord Krishna's foster father Nand; **Mahavan**, also known as Brihadvan, it has lush green forests; **Goverdhan**, a sacred hill after which Goverdhan Puja is named; and **Baldeo**, the place where Lord Krishna's elder brother ruled. All these sacred places are marked with stories from Krishna's life and have ancient temples, which are highly revered by Radha-Krishna devotees.

Craft & Cuisines and Festivals:

Mathura is renowned for its traditional crafts and delicious cuisine. The local markets feature artifacts like Sanjhi arts, bead work, tulsī mala and dresses and jewellery of Lord Krishna are the highlight of the region's cultural heritage. Food lovers can enjoy Mathura's famous sweets, especially peda, kachoris and other local delicacies. The Braj region is also known for its festive fervor, celebrating Shri Krishna Janmotsava and Rangotsav with immense joy and enthusiasm.



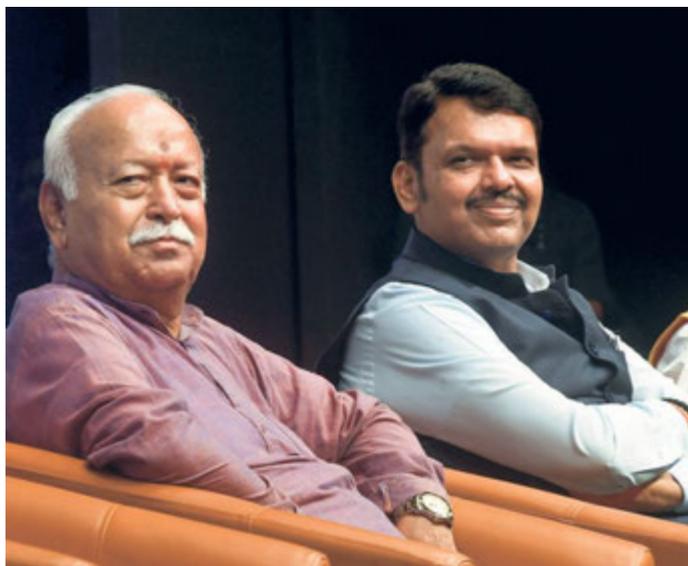


► **Congress workers** join the election campaign of Vikas Thakre, who fought against the BJP's Nitin Gadkari, in Jaitala Chowk in Nagpur, in April 2023. The recent Lok Sabha election showed that, unlike in 2014 and 2019, there is now space for an opposition in the State. EMMANUAL YOGINI

munity at large. Then, around the late 1980s, the spread of Hindutva in the rural areas and small towns took place through small-time organisations, resulting in the popularity of the ideology across regions and castes. Both Marathas and the OBCs were attracted to a Hindutva that gave them a sense of vicarious militancy and aggression.

In the past decade, these two features have become the dominant characteristics. Not only have the Marathas become more frustrated and

► **RSS chief** Mohan Bhagwat with Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis in Mumbai on June 29, 2024. Localised Hindutva organisations are active today, enjoying impunity and often the acquiescence of the state machinery. PTI



distrustful of their own leadership, but the political elite have become even more accommodative of dominant material interests. The suspicion of industrial interests in neighbouring Gujarat is a political fallout of this. Another fallout is the increasing rivalry between the Marathas and the OBCs.

At the same time, more viciously than in the late 1980s, localised Hindutva organisations are active today, enjoying impunity and often the acquiescence of the state machinery. They are busy vitiating the social atmosphere in the name of "love jihad" and other agenda items of Hindutva politics. Thus, a lack of control by the political elite over the economy and the collusion of sections of the political elite with crass vigilante elements of Hindutva overshadow the politics of Maharashtra today.

For quite some time, the State has practically given up on systematic planning. All decisions are in the form of knee-jerk responses and all pretence of planning is sacrificed at the altar of ad hoc packages that Ministers announce to placate immediate distress. More seriously, governance has become nominal with the increasing politicisation of the administrative machinery. Civil and police administrations are becoming extensions of the ruling parties, working in their service. The State government has been systematically weaponising the government machinery to discourage dissent. Above all, the political class has cynically allowed the Maratha issue to keep boiling with false promises.

THE COMPETITIVE POLITICS in the State unfolds in this complex context. With nine seats in 2024, the BJP may not appear to have improved its condition from its 2009 tally of exactly the same austere number, but politics in the State has changed almost dramatically in the intervening time. For the BJP, despite its seat tally going back to its strength in

A lack of control by the political elite over the economy and the collusion of sections of the political elite with crass vigilante elements of Hindutva overshadow the politics of Maharashtra today.

Explore the

RAMAYAN CIRCUIT

of Uttar Pradesh to relive the Epic Tales of Lord Ram

Uttar Pradesh
UTTAR PRADESH TOURISM



Uttar Pradesh is the pious land where even Gods incarnated and blessed the world by showing the virtuous path. Home to numerous revered pilgrimage sites, the state draws millions of devotees and spiritual seekers through its 12 mega tourism circuits. One of which is the Ramayan Circuit that allows the devotees to deep dive into spirituality and history at the same time. This circuit brings to life the epic tales of the Ramayan by connecting various significant locations linked to the life and journey of Lord Ram, as described in ancient Hindu scriptures. The Ramayan revolves around the stories of Lord Ram, the son of King Dasharath of Kosal, who was born in Ayodhya. Exiled for 14 years at the behest of his stepmother Kaikeyi, Lord Ram was accompanied by Mother Sita and his brother Lakshman. Their journey from Ayodhya to Chitrakoot, via Shringverpur, underscores the spiritual importance of these places and the all other included in the Ramayan Circuit.



Ayodhya

Ayodhya, the birthplace of Lord Ram, a descendant of the Ikshvaku dynasty, served as the capital of the Kosal Kingdom for centuries, reaching its zenith under Lord Ram's rule. The great epics, the Ramayan and the Shri Ramcharitmanas, reflect the glory of Ayodhya. Devotees visiting the Ramayan Circuit can explore significant sites such as Ramkot, Hanumangarhi, Kanak Bhawan, Mani Parvat and Ram Kund in Ayodhya.



Chitrakoot

It is the place where Lord Ram, Sita and Lakshman spent 12 years of their exile. Chitrakoot is set in sylvan surroundings on the banks of the Mandakini River, also known as River Payasvini. The town is dotted with temples and places of spiritual importance, such as Ram Ghat, Janki Kund, Sphatik Shila, Ramdarshan, Kamadgiri, and Bharat Milap.

Bithoor

It is another important location, believed to be where Sita lived after returning from Lanka and where her sons, Luv and Kush, were born and raised. Saint Valmiki meditated and later wrote the epic Ramayan here, earning it the name Ramale. Tourists can visit Valmiki Ashram and explore Sita Kund and Sita Rasoi, which are still preserved.



Shringverpur

According to the Ramayan, before entering the jungle, Lord Ram, Sita, and Lakshman stayed in Shringverpur at the invitation of Nishadraj. At the river bank, Nishadraj revered Lord Ram and washed his feet. A stone platform named Ramchura marks this place and is a significant site for the devotees.

The Ramayan Circuit is not only limited to these places. It also includes sites like Sita Samahit Sthal (Sitamarhi) in Bhadohi, Sitakund in Sultanpur, Bhardwaj Ashram in Prayagraj. Embarking on this journey of the Ramayan Circuit will not only bring tourists closer to history but also the heritage and rich culture of Uttar Pradesh.



2009, there are three major differences. One, in place of just a little over 18 per cent in 2009, its 2024 vote share is 26 per cent. This is only about two percentage points less than its vote share in the last two Lok Sabha elections (2014 and 2019). Second, in the last two Lok Sabha elections, the BJP won a large number of seats (23) from the State, making it the dominant party there. Third, in the Assembly elections that followed the Lok Sabha elections in 2014 and 2019, the performance of the BJP was quite handsome: with a vote share similar to that in the general election, the party won 122 and 105 seats respectively in the 288-member Assembly. In other words, the BJP, the somewhat weak player in State politics two decades ago, has now become the main driver of electoral politics in Maharashtra.

THIS ELECTORAL ASCENDANCE has naturally enthused the party, which believes it is on the verge of becoming the State's dominant force and aims to steer social and political processes in tune with its all-India ambitions. The gap between capacity and ambition produces tensions in the arena of competitive politics and, more generally, in the social sphere. Much of the cynical politics and excited mobilisations that the State has seen in recent times is because of the urgency with which the BJP is trying to match its limited capacity to its far-reaching ambition.

That larger ambition is twofold: first, to transform Maharashtra into a "party State", as in Gujarat or as is happening in Madhya Pradesh, where the party controls the entire public space; and second, to make Hindutva the lingua franca

▼ **The civil and police administrations**

work as extensions of the ruling parties. In this image from 2014, police *lathicharge* Youth Congress workers protesting against the poor condition Mumbai roads.

VIVEK BENDRE

The real challenge is beyond electoral calculations. It is about how the non-BJP parties understand the current moment and respond to it.

of social-cultural exchange. The recent Lok Sabha election showed that, unlike in 2014 and 2019, there is space for an opposition in the State now. But the Assembly elections in 2014 and 2019 underscored the BJP's ability to emerge as the single largest party. So, even if its ambitions are not immediately fulfilled, a handsome performance in the Assembly election would enable it to keep both the above aspirations alive. On the other hand, buoyed by its success in the Lok Sabha election, the Maha Vikas Aghadi could hope to restrict the BJP's electoral march.

But the real challenge is beyond electoral calculations. It is about how the non-BJP parties understand the current moment and their responsibility at this juncture. Do the non-BJP parties really want to strengthen the Maharashtra dharma and enter into a deeper confrontation with the BJP? Do the non-BJP parties intend to build on the inheritance of Yashwantrao Chavan's pluralist accommodation?

Achieving these will require reimagining social relations and reworking the political terrain. Keeping the BJP out of power might be easier than reimagining a democratic Maharashtra that will not be lured by exclusionary politics. One can only wish that the non-BJP parties will take up the challenge seriously. One fears that they are ill-equipped to pitch the battle at this level. And therein lies the present tragedy of Maharashtra. ■

Suhas Palshikar, based in Pune, taught political science and is co-author (with Rajeshwari Deshpande) of *The Last Fortress of Congress Dominance: Maharashtra since the 1990s* (2021).



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Sputtering economic engine

Maharashtra's economy is still the largest among the States, but it is showing the strain of rural stagnation, lack of job opportunities, and stark disparity between richer and poorer districts. **NEERAJ HATEKAR**

Maharashtra's economy dwarfs that of several national economies. In 2023-24, the nominal income of the State was Rs.40,44,251 crore. In dollar terms, at \$483.1 billion, Maharashtra's economy is larger than Nepal's. Among Indian States, its economy is the largest. As much as 31 per cent of its income comes from industry and 58 per cent from services, with the remaining from agriculture. Banking, finance, insurance, and real-estate services contribute a fifth of its GDP. According to the latest Economic Survey, the State's nominal GDP growth is expected to be 9.4 per cent in 2023-24, behind only Uttar Pradesh's (9.8 per cent). When adjusted for inflation, the State is expected to grow by 7.6 per cent.

While the nominal per capita income of the State, at Rs.2,52,389 in 2022-23, is ahead of the national average of Rs.1,69,496, States such as Telangana, Karnataka, Haryana, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu have a higher average standard of living.

The average per capita income of the State also masks significant disparity. For instance, the per capita income of the richest district, Mumbai, is almost three-and-a-half times greater than that of Washim, the poorest district. Over the years, this gap has only

Agricultural wages are particularly relevant for the rural poor. The wages in Maharashtra, for men and women, have consistently been below the national average, even before the pandemic.



worsened, with the ratio rising from 2.68 to 3.68. The relatively richer districts of Mumbai, Thane, Pune, Raigad, Sindhadurg, and Kolhapur are in the western parts. The seven poorest districts—Washim, Gadchiroli, Nandurbar, Buldhana, Hingoli, Yavatmal, and Amaravati—are all in eastern Maharashtra, the agrarian, dry-land agriculture region often referred to as Vidarbha.

The inter-district inequality in the State is thought to be under-reported when district income data are used. The methodology of calculating district-level GDP assumes that per capita service sector income is constant across the State. It is then assigned to respective districts on the basis of the estimated number of individuals employed in the service sector in each district. This inflates the service sector contribution of poorer districts where

service sector output per person is quite likely to be lower than that in richer districts.

The State is also highly urbanised: As per Census 2011 data 45 per cent of its population lives in urban areas. Most of it, however, is confined to the western parts, with outliers such as Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar (erstwhile Aurangabad) in Marathwada, and Nagpur in Vidarbha. The list of more urbanised districts overlaps with districts with higher per capita income. This has prompted many to argue that urbanisation—with its agglomeration effects of higher productivity and resource efficiency—is the chief driver of economic growth in the State. Indeed, the major contributors to Maharashtra's GDP—banking, finance, insurance, and real estate services—are predominantly urban. This sector is growing fast, propelling urban growth. On the other hand, the rural, agrarian economy continues to lag, as evidenced by the increasing income disparity between the richest and poorest districts.

► **Employees at an automobile plant** in Chakan, Maharashtra.

The State's high economic growth has not generated large-scale employment opportunities (a file photograph used for representational purpose only).

BLOOMBERG

The urbanised nature of economic growth masks Maharashtra's rural stagnation. The economist Surjit Bhalla's calculations show rural poverty in Maharashtra to be deeper than the national average.

The urbanised nature of economic growth is masking the State's rural stagnation. In a recent paper in *Economic & Political Weekly*, the economist Surjit Bhalla's calculations show rural poverty in Maharashtra to be deeper than the national average. Several economists argue that the old 2011 poverty line (the so-called Tendulkar poverty line) is no longer adequate. Instead,

Most agricultural households do not get most of their income from agriculture. It is the money these households earn from non-agricultural work that keep them above water.

since India is now a lower-middle-income country, Bhalla uses the poverty line of \$3.2 in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms as the new poverty line. Going by this yardstick, Rs.2,916 per person is the new rural poverty line for Maharashtra. At an average household size of four-and-a-half heads, rural households spending less than Rs.13,122 per month would be under the poverty line.

Professor Bhalla and his co-author find that such households make up 26 per cent of rural Maharashtra while the national rural poverty ratio is a little lower, at 24 per cent. Only Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal have a higher incidence of rural poverty compared with Maharashtra. Even the much-vilified Bihar has a lower incidence, at 23 per cent.

While a majority of the rural workforce is employed in agriculture, farming per se is no longer viable as an economic activity. The Situational Assessment Survey for Agricultural Households by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) for July 2018 to June 2019 shows that 73 per cent of agricultural households in Maharashtra own less than a hectare of land with highly fragmented land ownership.

Most of this land is also primarily rain-fed.

▼ **A worker** at a small-scale manufacturing unit in Mumbai. The majority of manufacturing entities in rural Maharashtra are owned by women. REUTERS

Even where dams are supposed to provide water, the non-existence of water users' associations means that the actual utilisation of water is highly unequal. The same report shows that the average monthly earnings of an agricultural household in the State is Rs.9,592. This figure, even adjusting for inflation over the 2019-24 period, is likely to fall short of the Rs.13,122 poverty line.

In fact, most agricultural households in Maharashtra do not get most of their income from agriculture. Of the Rs.9,592 that such households earned per month in 2019, only Rs.3,790 came from actual cultivation. It was the money these households earned from non-agricultural work that kept them above water. Agricultural wages are particularly relevant for the rural poor. The wages in Maharashtra, for men and women, have consistently been below the national average, even before the pandemic. Post pandemic, with more people returning to agriculture, the rate of growth of wages has not kept pace with the rise in food prices.

THE SITUATION IN URBAN Maharashtra is better. The higher productivity of workers coupled with greater economic opportunities has kept the ratio of urban poverty in 2022-23 at around 10 per cent (using the \$3.2 PPP poverty line), below the national average. The challenge in urban areas has been in providing decent housing, healthcare, transport, air, and water quality.

In general, the employment situation in the State raises concerns. Although Maharashtra is an industrialised State, high economic growth has not translated into employment opportunities. If one were to focus on industries registered under the Factories Act (the formal sector), total industrial employment in Maharashtra translates to 19,58,888 people. Of these, 13,94,957 were actual workers, with the remaining engaged otherwise. The average annual earnings per worker were about Rs.2,30,000. The number of workers in the formal sector has increased at a rate of 4 per cent over the past two decades.

One significant reason why employment has not increased in line with economic expansion is that much of the formal sector's growth has been fuelled by the rising use of capital and enhancements in the productivity of both capital and labour. This has meant that increasing production absorbs fewer workers. This is evident



at an all-India basis too, as a recent paper by Professor K.L. Krishna and colleagues in *Economic & Political Weekly* shows. Over the period 1994-2018, gross value added in the economy increased by 6.46 per cent per annum. Only 0.5 per cent of this is explained by the use of additional labour as an input. The growth is driven by increasing the use of capital as well as increases in labour and capital productivity.

The same phenomenon has been observed in Maharashtra as well. Hence, formal industrial growth has been unable to generate greater employment. Inflexible labour laws have been blamed for hindering job creation, but a more significant factor might be the nature of productivity improvements. In any case, increasingly, employment has taken the form of contractual employment as against direct recruitment by organisations. This reduces the relevance of labour laws in imposing restrictions in employment generation to an even greater extent.

MOST OF THE employment in the State is in the informal sector. As of 2022-23, 98.81 lakh individuals are employed in the informal sector, according to the NSSO's Survey of Unincorporated Enterprises: 75 lakh among them are men, while 23 lakh are women.

The vast majority are full-time workers; 32 lakh are in rural Maharashtra and the rest are in urban areas. As many as 52.71 lakh work in their own enterprises, which are without any hired

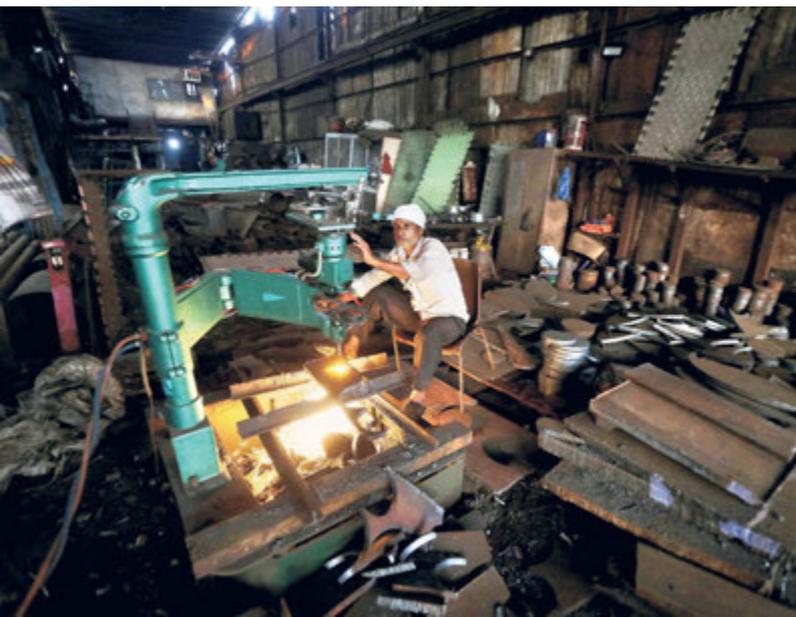
▼ **Commuters on a Mumbai local train.** The average per capita income of the State masks significant disparity. The per capita income of the richest district, Mumbai, is almost three-and-a-half times greater than that of Washim, the poorest district. BLOOMBERG

workers although they might have unpaid family workers helping them. There are 41 lakh such enterprises in the State. Forty-six lakh work in enterprises that operate with hired workers. There are a little over 11 lakh such enterprises.

Twenty-six per cent work in the manufacturing sector, while the others are equally distributed between trade and services. Although this sector provides significant employment, most enterprises are highly underfunded. For example, the value of assets in an average rural manufacturing unit is about Rs.3.5 lakh. Despite this, the average gross value added per enterprise is Rs.65,000, a return of about 20 per cent on capital invested. The average wage per casual employee is only around Rs.1 lakh a year. Employees with formal contracts do, however, get paid on a par with formal sector employees. The majority of manufacturing entities in rural Maharashtra are owned by women, with the proportion rising over the years, and 67 per cent of those employed in rural unorganised manufacturing are women.

Thus, the key to the revival of employment and reduction in poverty seems to lie in strengthening these tiny units by providing them better access to infrastructure, credit lines, marketing channels, and capacity building. ■

Neeraj Hatekar teaches at the School of Development, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. The views expressed in this article are personal.





Cover Story

A SAGA OF DROUGHT, DEBT AND DEATHS

Maharashtra's agrarian crisis has slowly deepened, its farmers now ensnared in a vicious cycle sharpened by the impact of climate change. **RADHESHYAM JADHAV**



On March 19, 1986, the sun set on the Karpe family in Yavatmal district, Vidarbha, Maharashtra. Despairing farmer Sahebrao Karpe, consumed by hopelessness, laced their last meal with poison. The chilling note he left behind read: "It is impossible to survive as a farmer."

Despite owning swathes of land, Karpe watched helplessly as his banana and wheat crops withered, deprived of water. The borewell stood useless; the power had been cut off due to unpaid bills. With

no way out, Karpe and his family ended their lives, a tragic act that signalled the beginning of an unending epidemic—farmers' suicides.

Fast forward to 2024, and the grim tale continues. In just six months of this year, 1,267 farmers in Maharashtra have taken their own lives. The Amravati division, home to Karpe's Yavatmal, bears the hea-

viest burden with 557 suicides. Close behind, the Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar division mourns 430 deaths, followed by Nashik (137), Nagpur (130), and Pune (13).

Last year, a staggering 2,851 farmers, overwhelmed by unrelenting distress, chose to end their lives. In 2022, the death toll was even higher, with 2,942 debt-ridden farmers succumbing to despair.

The previous year, 2021, saw 2,743 farmers take their own lives, each number a silent testament to the crushing burden they bore. Thanks to the farmer movement in the State, farmer suicides do not go unnoticed. However, the heart-wrenching data continue to paint

▼ **Farmers at a** sugarcane field in Kolhapur (file picture). The vagaries of nature have taken a severe toll on the State's agri-economy. **EMMANUAL YOGINI**

Last year, a staggering 2,851 farmers, overwhelmed by unrelenting distress, chose to end their lives. In 2022, the death toll was even higher, with 2,942 debt-ridden farmers succumbing to despair.

a grim picture of an ongoing crisis. Maharashtra's farmers find themselves ensnared in a relentless cycle of drought and debt, now exacerbated by the unyielding advance of climate change. The skies, once symbols of hope, have become harbingers of disaster. In recent years, unseasonal rains and hailstorms have pounded the State in November, December, February, April, and May, devastating rabi crops and seasonal fruits. These crops, sold between April and June, are the lifeline for farmers, their earnings crucial for repaying debts and purchasing essentials for the sowing season. Seeds, manure, insecticides—all depend on this vital income. The increase in rainfall has also led to a surge in pest infestations.

THE STATE ACTION PLAN for Climate Change underscores Maharashtra's vulnerability to extreme weather events such as floods, droughts, and cyclones, with about 68 per cent of cultivable land prone to drought. A report by The Energy and Resources Institute warns that rising temperatures could decrease crop yields. Recent studies by agricultural scientists indicate that a temperature increase of 1°C to 4°C can reduce potential crop yields.

"The cycle of droughts and unseasonal rains is beyond our understanding. What we understand is that farming is becoming impossible. Probably, we are the last generation in our village to cultivate," laments the septuagenarian farmer Madhukar Bande from Solapur. His sentiment is echoed by the youth, including young Prabhakar Bande, who see no future in farming.

"Generations after generations, the land size is shrinking, yields are declining, and

there's no certainty of the market even if the yield is good. Forget the market for crops; the 'marriage market' for young farmers is completely down. You'll find a bunch of young farmers who have crossed 40 and are still unmarried because nobody wants to marry a farmer," said Bande. He adds that many of his friends have migrated to Pune or Mumbai in search of work and brides.

The numbers tell a compelling story. In 2023-24, as per advance estimates, real gross State value added (GSVA) of "Agriculture and allied activities" is expected to grow at 1.9 per cent. The "industry" sector is expected to grow at 7.6 per cent and the "services" sector is expected to grow at 8.8 per cent. This growing disparity is a powerful magnet pulling young farmers like Bande away from their ancestral fields and into the urban sprawl, seeking better opportunities.

Over the current series from 2011-12 to 2022-23, the services sector dominated Maharashtra's nominal GSVA with a commanding 57.1 per cent share. The industry sector followed at 30.9 per cent, leaving agriculture and allied activities a distant third at just 12.0 per

As the next generation of farmers migrates to cities, small and marginal farmers are selling their lands to government officials, industrialists, and businessmen from urban areas.

▼ **The Maratha community,** primarily engaged in agriculture, has been calling for a share in OBC reservation. Amid a persistent agrarian crisis, they hold on to the hope that reservation can provide crucial support.
B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

cent; however, agriculture is still the mainstay of the State, with almost 82 per cent of the rural population depending on it for their livelihood.

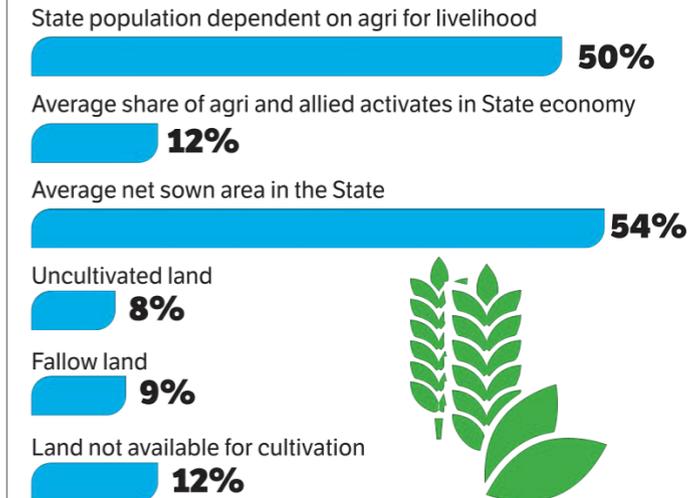
THE INDIA EMPLOYMENT Report 2024 by the International Labour Organization underscores a significant trend: the slow but steady exodus of the workforce from agriculture to non-farm sectors. Labour from agriculture has been primarily absorbed by the burgeoning construction and services sectors. In Maharashtra, this trend is accelerated by the relentless shrinking of landholdings. The average size of operational holdings in the State has dramatically decreased from 4.28 hectares in 1970-71 to just 1.34 ha in 2015-16.

Small and marginal holdings, up to 2 ha, constitute 45 per cent of the total operational area but account for a staggering 79.5 per cent of the number of operational holdings.

As the next generation of farmers migrates to cities, small and marginal farmers are selling their lands to government officials, industrialists, and businessmen from urban areas. "You will see the rich and powerful on a buying spree. Now, farmers are working as labourers on their own land," laments Nasim Sanadi, a farmer from Kolhapur in western Maharashtra.

As the land that once symbolised prosperity and self-reliance now shackles its former owners in a relentless cycle of servitude and despair, the farming community, particularly the Marathas, which makes up about 34 per cent of Maharashtra's population, clings to a flicker of hope in the form of reservation quotas. The Marathas are fervently demanding a share of the OBC reservation in government jobs and education, a demand that has ignited a volatile tinderbox of communal tension, widening the caste chasm in rural areas.

State of Agriculture



As the agrarian crisis deepens, the State government, led by Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, follows a familiar playbook of appeasement. Lavish promises of free power and increased subsidies rain down on farmers, while Ministers clamour for yet another loan waiver. These popular announcements are thinly veiled attempts to curry favour with voters ahead of the State Assembly election. But beneath the glittering facade of these schemes lies a grim reality: the failure to address the root causes of farmers' distress. Short-sighted solutions offered by politicians over the years have left farmers stranded. When the temporary relief from these programmes dissipates, the farmers are left high and dry, their fundamental issues unresolved, their futures uncertain.

MAHARASHTRA, WITH 24 per cent of the country's drought-prone areas, is testament to nature's harshness, with 99 talukas chronically parched. The problem looms large in central and eastern Maharashtra, rendering agriculture heavily reliant on the whims of the rain gods. Yet, in this dire scenario, the State government's silence on irrigation is deafening. This reticence harks back to the infamous Rs.70,000 crore irrigation scam, a scandalous revelation of alleged financial mismanagement and corruption that shook the State in 2012.

Despite the colossal sums funnelled into various irrigation projects, Maharashtra's capacity to harness water improved by a mere 0.1

"The cycle of droughts and unseasonal rains is beyond our understanding. What we understand is that farming is becoming impossible."

Madhukar Bande
Farmer



Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis recently had to warn nationalised banks about the prospect of being slapped with FIRs if they demanded CIBIL scores from farmers seeking crop loans.

per cent over an entire decade. The latest figures from the State government show that despite an irrigation potential of 55.60 lakh ha, only 42.33 lakh ha—or a paltry 76.1 per cent—were actually irrigated in 2022-23. The State’s unforgiving topography and geology restrict groundwater resources, while in regions where water is abundant, reckless over-extraction for cash crops continues.

Post-harvest woes compound their suffering. The fragility of many crops, combined with their limited shelf life, forces farmers into a desperate scramble, bearing high transportation costs, every harvest. The absence of essential infrastructure—grading, pre-cooling, packing, and cold storage facilities—cripples farmers’ ability to realise fair prices for their produce. A merciless, inconsistent agricultural export policy, coupled with a corrupt supply chain where middlemen siphon off 50 per cent of retail prices, plunges farmers further into the abyss.

Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs) are dominated by politicians who act as directors, running the show with the help of traders and commission agents known as *arhi-*

▼ **Amidst barren lands** and parched fields, the exodus of youth from rural areas paints a poignant picture of agricultural distress. Villages are left with old people who depend mostly on animal husbandry for survival.
B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

tiyas. The moment a farmer steps into an APMC, he is thrust into a world where he is a pawn in the hands of these powerful players.

Vimal Nagtilak, a beleaguered farmer from Dharashiv in the desolate Marathwada region—synonymous with the grim spectre of farmer suicides—said: “The entire system, top to bottom, is rotten, pushing us to the brink.” The desperation in her voice is palpable as she recounts farmers’ reliance on private money-lenders and the predatory financial companies who infiltrate every village with loans at exorbitant interest rates. Banks, mistrustful and unwilling to lend, leave farmers with nowhere else to turn.

In 2023-24, a staggering Rs.60,195 crore in crop loans and Rs.93,926 crore in agricultural term loans were disbursed through scheduled commercial banks, regional rural banks, and district central cooperative banks. Yet, Deputy Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis recently had to warn nationalised banks about the prospect of being slapped with FIRs if they demanded CIBIL (Credit Information Bureau India Ltd, a credit information company engaged in the maintenance of records of all credit-related activities of individuals and organisations) scores from farmers seeking crop loans, highlighting the mistrust in the system.

“The only way to go forward is collectivisation. The concept of farmer producer organisations (FPOs) has provided an opportunity to rejuvenate the agriculture sector,” said Vilas Shinde, chairman and managing director of Sahyadri Farms, the FPO in Nashik that has



Number and area of operational holdings in the State

Size class (ha)	No. of operational holdings (000)			Area of operational holdings (000 ha)		
	1970-71	2010-11	2015-16	1970-71	2010-11	2015-16
Marginal (upto 1.0)	1,242	6,709	7,816	578	3,186	3,449
Small (1.0 - 2.0)	878	4,052	4,339	1,284	5,739	5,771
Semi-medium (2.0 - 4.0)	1,087	2,159	2,327	3,131	5,765	6,025
Medium (4.0 - 10.0)	1,229	711	734	7,717	3,993	4,099
Large (10.0 & above)	514	68	69	8,470	1,084	1,162
All size class	4,950	13,699	15,285	21,180	19,767	20,506

SOURCE: MAHARASHTRA ECONOMIC SURVEY 2023-24

ha = hectare



► **In the absence of irrigation schemes**, many farmers are left with no choice but to dig bore wells and wells. Despite excavating as deep as 400 feet into the earth, a considerable number of farmers struggle to find sufficient water for their crops. B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

“The only way to go forward is collectivisation. The concept of farmer producer organisations has provided an opportunity to rejuvenate the agriculture sector.”

Vilas Shinde,
CMD, Sahyadri Farms

crossed an annual turnover of Rs.1,000 crore. Sahyadri Farms is recognised as India’s leading FPO in grape production and export, as well as tomato processing.

A National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development analysis shows that training farmers in new techniques such as pond and micro irrigation, and providing improved seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides and technology transfer from agricultural universities could boost yields. Focussing on high-value horticulture can also increase farmers’ incomes through urban markets and export opportunities.

Amar Habib, a farmer activist, said: “The plight of our farmers demands more than mere Band-Aid solutions; it calls for sustainable, transformative changes such as scrapping anti-farmer laws that strike at the very roots of their suffering.” Habib and other farmer activists have launched a movement to observe a hunger strike each year on March 19, the day of Karpe’s tragic death. This annual act of solidarity serves as a stark, emotional reminder of the ongoing crisis. It is a rallying cry for the State and the nation to grant farmers the freedom to access markets and technology. ■

INEQUALITY HURTS

Data show that much needs to be done to eliminate multidimensional deprivation across Maharashtra. Investing in basic public infrastructure may be the silver bullet to counter underdevelopment and reduce regional disparities.

SAVITA KULKARNI AND NEERAJ HATEKAR

Prosperity and deprivation have coexisted in Maharashtra ever since it was formed. Prosperous districts and cities such as Mumbai, Pune, Thane, and Kolhapur on the western side of the State coexist with the relatively backward regions of Vidarbha and Marathwada. The per capita nominal net domestic district product, a measure of per capita income, shows the degree of disparity. In 2022-23, the per capita income of Mumbai, Thane (including Palghar), Pune, Nagpur, and Kolhapur was higher than Rs.3 lakh each, and below Rs.1.5 lakh for districts such as Washim, Gadchiroli, Yavatmal, and Buldhana. A similar pattern can be seen in various social and human development indicators too.

The latest NITI Aayog report shows that in Nagpur, Pune, Sangli, and Wardha districts, 3-4 per cent of the population is deprived of multiple health and education benefits and basic household amenities, while more than 10 per cent of the people in several districts in Vidarbha and Marathwada regions are multidimensionally poor. This proportion is as high as 33 per cent and 24 per cent in Nandurbar and Dhule respectively.

Geographical diversity certainly creates natural variations in region-wise endowments and the structure of the local economy. However, when certain districts show signs of perpetual economic stagnation and restrict people's freedom to live the life of their choice, one needs

In deprivation management, among all the States and Union Territories, Kerala is the most advanced, followed by Haryana, while Maharashtra is 21st.



to raise questions about the long-term vision and effective functioning of the government.

Among others, planning and creation and maintenance of infrastructural facilities form a key part of the government's responsibilities, and these amenities have a strong link with overall economic and social development.

GOVERNMENT-SUPPLIED infrastructure such as electricity and water, transport facilities, and telecommunication systems and the availability of financial capital promote job creation and entrepreneurship. The building of these facilities itself stimulates the local economy by increasing demand for labour, heavy capital goods, land, and other resources. Education and health infrastructure makes a skilful and productive labour pool available local-

ly. Easy access to health and education also enables different sections of the population to participate in the growth process.

Various public infrastructural facilities complement each other and aid economies to transit from low-productivity sectors to high-productivity ones. Infrastructural investment by the government, therefore, can generate sustained economic growth with inclusive and equal income distribution. On the other hand, deficiencies in public investment in infrastructure can create various destabilising forces such as influx of migrants, growth of the informal sector, and overburdened infrastructure in fast-growing regions coupled with deceleration in backward regions.

THIS DUALISM CAUSES social unrest, an increase in the demand for job reservation, and political campaigns calling for the break-up of one State and its merger with another in the hopes of a better future.

Infrastructure development appears to be

▼ **An injured tribal man** being carried by family members in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district on July 27. The group had to travel about 14 km to reach the nearest hospital, on the way crossing a swollen stream by boat. PTI

Rural areas in States such as Bihar, Rajasthan, and Chhattisgarh are better off than rural Maharashtra in the provisioning of public amenities.

more advanced in urban areas than in rural ones. Even with this discrepancy, urban citizens frequently express their disappointment regarding the adequacy and quality of infrastructure delivered. Cities have become unsustainable, as evidenced by statistics such as per capita power generation, road length per thousand population, severe water scarcity, problems in waste management, and insufficient hospital beds relative to population. Rural areas, on the contrary, lack one to many of these amenities in conve-

nient proximity. The issue of their maintenance and quality of services becomes secondary.

We measured the lack of infrastructural facilities at the village level by constructing an index. A total of 22 infrastructure facilities pertaining to general infrastructure (11 facilities), health (6), and education (5) were combined in the index.

General infrastructure includes facilities such as all-weather roads and internal roads, public transportation, telephone and broadband, electricity, banks, ATMs, markets, and ration stores. In the health dimension, we included the availability of anganwadi centres, mother and child health facilities, primary healthcare centres, accessibility to piped water, sanitary toilets, and drainage systems.

E DUCATION-RELATED INFRASTRUCTURE was accessed by checking the availability of primary, middle, high, and secondary schools and vocational training centres within 10 kilometres of every village. The Ministry of Panchayati Raj's village-level dataset, known as Mission Antyodaya, for 2019-20 was used to compute the multidimensional infrastructure deprivation index.

We defined deprivation as the absence of an amenity within 10 km of the village. The above public facilities are so essential for livelihood and

Regional imbalances in public investment for rural infrastructure are largely consistent with the dualistic nature of development in the State.

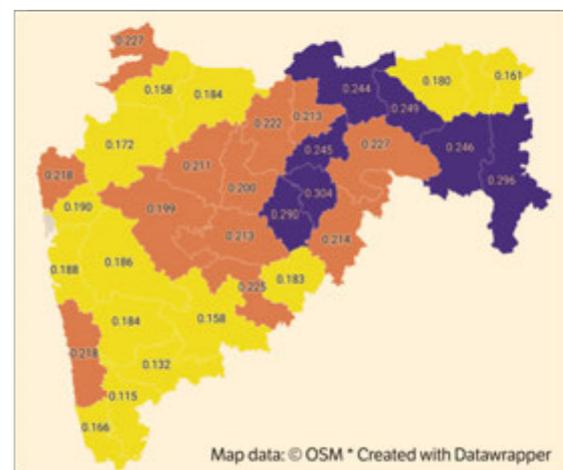
to lead a dignified life that their absence even within 10 km should be taken seriously as it indicates the hardships and disadvantages faced by the villagers.

The distance criterion is also justified given the differences in population size between villages and geographical features such as water bodies, elevation, and so on. The non-availability of an amenity in a hamlet was assigned the value of 1 and 0 in all other cases. With averaging, the index scores ranged between 0 and 1. The upper bound indicates the lack of all infrastructure facilities and the lower bound shows the absence of deprivation, which is most desirable.

The ranking of States and districts based on deprivation score largely challenges the conventional belief about regional disparities within Maharashtra as well as the State's position among all States and Union Territories (UTs) in the context of rural infrastructural backwardness.

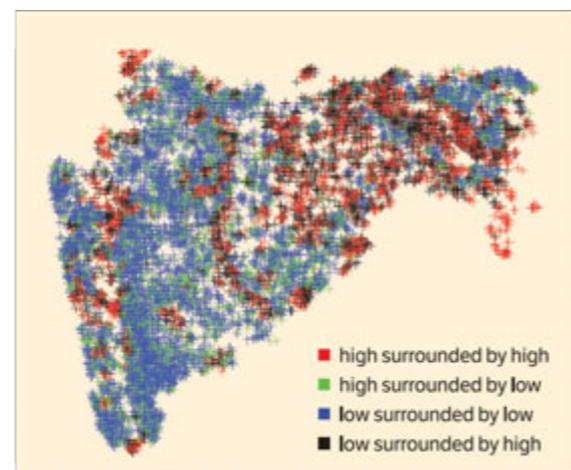
As shown in Figure 1, Kolhapur has the least

Figure 1
DISTRICT-WISE RANKING IN
MULTIDIMENSIONAL DEPRIVATION



Source: Author's calculation

Figure 2
SPATIAL ANALYSIS OF VILLAGE-LEVEL
MULTIDIMENSIONAL DEPRIVATION



deprivation index score among all the districts of Maharashtra. Some of the better performing districts are Sangli, Solapur, and Dhule. The most backward districts in terms of rural public infrastructure are Hingoli, Parbhani, Gadchiroli, and Wardha. Districts such as Sangli, Sindhudurg, Hingoli, and Washim have a similar number of villages, but they stand at the opposite end of the spectrum as a result of differences in public infrastructure provisioning.

T HE 11 MOST IMPOVERISHED districts of Maharashtra belong to the Marathwada and Vidarbha regions, with the exception of Bhandara and Gondia. The Aurangabad revenue division is the single largest contributor to multidimensional deprivation in the State. This is followed by Nagpur and Amravati subdivisions. Pune has the least multidimensional deprivation. The imbalances in the rural infrastructural availability are consistent with the larger pattern of regional inequality in the State.

In case of inter-State comparison (including UTs), Kerala is the most advanced, followed by Haryana, the UT of Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Guj-

▼
At a job fair
in Chinchwad
in 2019.
Unemployment
is a major issue
in many regions
within the State.
DANISH SIDDIQUI/
REUTERS

arat, and Punjab. The deprivation score of these States and UTs is nearly 0. Maharashtra, with a deprivation score of 0.109, stands 21st among all States and UTs.

It is noteworthy that the rural areas in States such as Bihar (ranked 15), Rajasthan (18), and Chhattisgarh (19) are better off than rural Maharashtra in the provisioning of public amenities. This is in line with recent findings by S. Bhalla and K. Bhasin, who wrote in *Economic & Political Weekly (EPW)* in July 2024 that the incidence of rural poverty in Maharashtra at 26 per cent was higher than in Bihar (23.4 per cent).

We adopted a granular approach to identify particular geographic patterns, if any, in the deprivation that villages endure. For example, are villages with high deprivation scores surrounded by villages with similar levels of backwardness, or are the nearby villages comparatively prosperous?

Figure 2 shows the geographical distribution of leading and laggard villages in terms of public infrastructure. The red-coloured villages are

those with high deprivation and which are surrounded by other similar impoverished villages. Villages forming clusters with low levels of deprivation in public infrastructure are indicated in blue. Green and black-coloured villages are anomalies or outliers. Villages in black are distinguished from other under-developed villages as they have more facilities. On the other hand, villages highlighted in green are highly deprived villages situated in the vicinity of prosperous villages in terms of public investment.

Figure 2 largely resembles Figure 1, but the spatial analysis brings out distinctive features of regional disparities and deprivation. Across the State, we observed pockets of deprivation or pockets of abundance.

EVEN THOUGH western Maharashtra is composed of districts with lower deprivation scores, the clusters of backward villages can be observed in the tribal areas of Nandurbar and Palghar and the villages on the Sahyadri mountain range, along with various parts of Vidarbha and Marathwada. Although western and southern Maharashtra are generally well-developed, the border areas of Solapur and Sangli, and certain Konkan districts, are still comparatively undeveloped. On the other hand, Gondia and Bhandara report less spatial deprivation clustering than other Vidarbha districts.

The health infrastructure deprivation map (not included) looks much more similar to the

Most of the impoverished districts are in the Marathwada and Vidarbha regions; Pune has the least multidimensional deprivation.

▼ **Malnourished children** being weighed at a remote village in Palghar district in 2016. Malnutrition continues to be a major problem in several districts of the State.

PRASHANT NAKWE

one in Figure 2, whereas the education infrastructure deprivation map (not included) shows less clustering in Vidarbha but a lot more in Marathwada districts. Gadchiroli, the tribal districts of Palghar and Nandurbar, and the villages along the Sahyadri ridge continue to lack education-related infrastructure.

To summarise, the regional imbalances in public investment for rural infrastructure are largely consistent with the dualistic nature of regional development in Maharashtra. However, granularity in the data analysis establishes that multidimensional deprivation in Maharashtra is clustered in a fashion that goes beyond the usual understanding of a “backward” Vidarbha and Marathwada and an “economically prosperous”, better endowed western Maharashtra.

DEPRIVATION SPANS administrative divisions and individual districts. We have established that the deprivation index scores are positively correlated with various under-development indicators such as low economic activity, undernutrition, and low non-farm female employment, as pointed out by Gharat *et al.* in “Multidimensional Deprivation Index and Spatial Clustering” (*EPW*). Therefore, the spatial pattern in deprivation in public infrastructure implies clustering of under-development too.

Investment in basic public infrastructure generates multifaceted benefits for government, producers, and local citizens. It may prove to be a straightforward solution to the complex problem of geographical concentration of under-development and widening regional inequality. Coordination and allocation of resources, which may require tier III governments to go beyond the official administrative boundaries, would be imperative to reduce regional disparities in Maharashtra. ■

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MAXIMUM CITY MINIMUM CARE

Mumbai's past is somewhat troubled but has its fair share of glory. Its future is less certain and probably slipping away. **SMRUTI KOPPIKAR**

Rain anxiety is real in Mumbai these days. Every year for the past 20 years, when rainfall in July-August turns heavy-to-very heavy, people and the authorities are on tenterhooks wondering if there will be a repeat, in some degree, of the massive flood of July 26, 2005. Before that day, the city would come to a standstill for a few days every monsoon but it was not a life- or economy-threatening crisis. Two decades later, Mumbai's rivers have retaining walls to hold rainwater, storm-water drains are annually desilted, spending hundreds of crores, and water pumps have been installed at many locations to literally throw the rainwater into the Arabian Sea.

What Mumbai's authorities have not done is pay attention to its ecology either in response to climate change-induced extreme weather or as a necessary parallel to its economy. Instead, the city

lost a staggering 2,028 hectares of green cover in just five years from 2016 to 2021 for a slew of infrastructure projects. Its complex system of watercourses lies fractured. Two years ago, the Maharashtra government made it legally possible for Mumbai's real estate developers to construct on every inch of their plots without leaving any open space. Where will the rainwater go?

Of course, as the country's premier city of commerce, finance, and entertainment, Mumbai has an eye-popping list of high-investment infrastructure projects. The two newest and biggest projects, Atal Setu and Coastal Road, together cost a whopping Rs.30,900 crore. The authorities say that investments in such high-cost projects are meant to boost the city's eco-

► **Mumbai's skyline** as seen from Bandra. GETTY IMAGES



onomy. In July, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched a Rs.29,000 crore investment drive in Mumbai, focussing on more infrastructure projects to elevate Mumbai's status as a global powerhouse in fintech. Every election brings a bounty of sorts.

Yet, is Mumbai a liveable city, a city of sustainable growth? Or is its pre-eminent position, built through the colonial and postcolonial decades, being gradually eroded? The short answer: the economy of Mumbai is growing, but the city is neither sustainable nor entirely liveable except for those at the top of the economic pyramid. Detaching the economy from the quality of life for the working millions in a city of nearly 21 million and delinking it from its natural ecological template—an estuary, an archipelago—only sets it up for worse times ahead. Mumbai's past is somewhat troubled but has its fair share of glory; its future is less certain, probably slipping away.

THE UNCERTAINTY COMES despite the flurry of announcements, inaugurations, and showcasing of select urban geography like the Bandra Kurla Complex (BKC) that commands eye-popping property prices. Nowhere in these is the recognition that Mumbai sits uneasy, threatened by extreme heat, air pollution, floods, and rise in sea levels—a climate-sensitive city with one of the world's highest population densities, at about 14 times the national average, and with one of the worst instances of urban inequality in India.

The Mumbai Climate Action Plan, released two years ago, suggested ways forward for the city's ecology. However, it is not a statutory plan, which means the State government and Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) are not bound to follow it. Mumbai's Development Plan 2014-34, finalised in 2017-18, focussed on the use and zoning of land as if the city was in an ecolog-

Detaching Mumbai's economy from the quality of life for the working millions in a city of nearly 21 million and delinking it from its natural ecological template only sets it up for worse times ahead.

Growth and distribution percentage of population in Mumbai from 1981 to 2011 across city and suburbs

Area / Year	1981	1991	2001	2011
Island city	39.8	31.9	27.9	25.2
Suburbs	60.2	68.1	72.1	74.8

Source: Census Survey of India

KEY ECOLOGICAL FACTS

- ▶ **42.5** per cent decline in green cover over three decades from 1988
- ▶ **12,446** hectares total lost, which is larger than the size of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park
- ▶ **47** per cent of total city was green space in 1988; declined to 26 per cent due to development and infrastructure
- ▶ **3**-fold increase in land surface temperature, leading to micro-climate changes across Mumbai
- ▶ **0.25°C** temperature increase per decade observed between 1973 and 2020
- ▶ **40** per cent of people in M-East ward with low incomes, and slums exposed to temperatures over 35°C; only 0.9 per cent similarly exposed in A-ward with high-incomes and better amenities
- ▶ **1.24** square metres open space per person compared with 21.52 sq m per person in Delhi and 17.32 sq m in Bengaluru. London has 31.68 sq m and New York City has 26.4 sq m.

Sources: Springer Nature Journal, Mumbai Climate Action Plan, World Resources Institute India

ical vacuum. The two critical plans are neither cohesive nor rational when read together.

Then, there is the ambitious target set by the NITI Aayog and repeated by the State government: Mumbai's GDP was pegged at \$140 billion in 2023 and, as the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), was projected to touch \$300 billion by 2030. How the city's economy can flourish when it does not even pretend to factor in ecological challenges is anyone's guess. How such a city can offer improved quality of life to millions is not even debated.

The political economy of Mumbai—the corporates, the real estate czars, the fintech outfits, the unicorn startups, the education cartels, the infrastructure builders—prefers it this way: allow the blitzkrieg of glamour to build the perception of the city and cover up its gritty underbelly with grandiose announcements. To this deadly mix another layer has been added in recent years: the quiet spiriting away of some of its defining industries by the BJP-led government at the Centre and in the State.

Fintech is being lured to GIFT City near Ahmedabad with concessions that Mumbai cannot legally offer, such as allowing Indians to open US dollar accounts. Several diamond trading businesses, housed in Pancharatna in south Mumbai and later in the Bharat Diamond Bourse in the BKC, opened or shifted offices to the massive Surat Diamond Bourse last year. Although the diamondaires are yet to give up on Mumbai, it is a significant shift. Concerted efforts have been made to get the Hindi film industry to the National Capital Region, especially Noida, with the government of Uttar Pradesh proffering incentives. Four major projects worth nearly Rs.1.8 lakh crore were moved out of Maharashtra as soon as the Eknath Shinde-Devendra Fadnavis government assumed charge in 2022. If the services sector (which grew from 59 per cent of the city's economy in 1993-94 to 74 per cent in 2010) shrinks, Mumbai will stumble.

THE POLITICAL SLUGFEST over Mumbai is not new. At the time of Independence, there was a strong demand that Bombay be made a Union Territory or the capital of Gujarat. It was literally wrested from the powers-that-were to become the capital of Maharashtra and invested in thereafter to become

In 1981, 60 per cent of Mumbai's population lived in the suburbs; by 2011, it was nearly 75 per cent.

▼ **Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus**, formerly Victoria Terminus, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the oldest railway stations in India. GETTY IMAGES

the commercial powerhouse it became. Mumbai's growth can be seen in two phases. One, in the post-Independence decades during which its booming economy was driven by the manufacturing sector, when the city grew geographically into suburbs such as Malad, Borivali, and Mulund.

The other was the post-liberalisation phase during which the manufacturing sector gave way to the services sector, to the informalisation of work and post-industrial urbanisation that the well-known urbanist Saskia Sassen talked about, and densification in most parts except in its old south. In 1981, 60 per cent of Mumbai's population lived in the suburbs; by 2011, it was nearly 75 per cent. This was not planned growth; the plans only determined land use, appropriating more and more land in the name of development—landfilling from the sea, hacking down forests, building on the floodplains of its four rivers, and so on. Despite this, Mumbai continues to house more than 54 per cent of its population—an astonishing 11 million people—in slums. Affordable housing within city limits is only a political slogan.

In the past decade, the construction boom was mostly redevelopment, razing old buildings or slums to construct high-rises. Mumbai's skyline changed in upscale and middle-class areas. Those living on its margins—in slums and almost-forgotten suburbs like Govandi and Mankhurd where community toilet floors have given way





and killed people, and good schools are a distant dream—live in a different Mumbai; nothing has changed for them.

As the Dharavi slum goes under the bulldozer, to be redeveloped into a swanky township by Adani Realty, turning nearly 600 acres of public land over for private profit, it typifies much of what is wrong about Mumbai. Project-led development has done the city in: large infrastructure projects, small beautification projects, metro projects that do not connect to other transit lines, the Dharavi project, the BKC project constructed on land stolen from the Mithi river (a Supreme Court-appointed committee stated this). Project planning has replaced comprehensive urban planning, leading to silos on the city's landscape and selective development.

THEN, THERE IS the isolationist approach of detaching Mumbai from the MMR, when Mumbai's economy and life are closely tied to the larger metropolitan region. The MMR has a total of nine municipal corporations, several municipal councils, and village panchayats, for which a regional plan was drawn up by the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority, but it is grandly independent of Mumbai's plans. If there is rampant construction on the wetlands in Navi Mumbai or its rivers are bent for the new international airport, it cannot but hurt Mumbai. This interdependence is not reflected in plans or programmes.

Within Mumbai too, there has been a steady and marked shift from the old downtown to suburbs, which have seen a proliferation of business

▼ **Atal Setu**, the 21.8-km-long expressway bridge that connects Mumbai with Navi Mumbai, was inaugurated on January 12 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

EMMANUAL YOGINI

If there is rampant construction on the wetlands in Navi Mumbai or its rivers are bent for the new international airport, it cannot but hurt Mumbai.

districts and the entrenchment of the creative-entertainment industry. A corresponding shift in governance attention and resource allocation by the BMC is missing. For example, at the height of air pollution in 2023, the civic body deployed six mist vans to keep the dust down; three moved along the sea-abutting areas that had the least polluted air even as the worst polluted were left to their fate.

The governance of Mumbai has to take the blame for the city's condition. Key civic services are with the BMC, but some areas and projects are exclusively governed by autonomous bodies that have no accountability to the city's elected body or by special purpose vehicles such as the Dharavi Redevelopment Project Private Limited where people's voices are not represented. Mumbai's suburban railway system, servicing 7.5 million commuters every day over nearly 100 km, is yet to see a massive investment that would improve the one- or two-hour commutes. The double- and triple-engine sarkar model has not worked for Mumbai in the past decade.

The distressing economic inequality and ecological slide cannot but touch the iconic Mumbai quality of embracing strangers, making space despite the crunch, and folding in different strains of music, life, and food unto itself. That it still holds magic for so many must have something to do with its enigmatic sea breeze. ■

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[FROM THE SIDELINES]

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

Not the greater common good

The Modi era may have promoted the union of big corporate oligarchies with Hindutva like never before, but people are beginning to see that cronyism is hollowing out the nation.

The Forbes World Billionaires annual list for 2024 included 25 new names from India, taking the number of Indians to 200. The Narendra Modi decade has undoubtedly been fantastic for a section of the super-rich, and through the years of COVID, reverse migration, agriculture crisis, and the collapse of many small and medium industries, the nation has efficiently produced billionaires. The joke is on us. We live in an age when some suggest that the bloated wedding of an heir to an Indian business magnate should be seen as a form of job creation.

The Modi years have blinded some of us to the morality of the common good, which translates to benefits for the entire community and the welfare of all. Among the factors leading to the reduced mandate for Modi's BJP are the failure of Hindutva mobilisation, the supposed fading appeal of Modi himself, and the collapse of what the BJP/RSS call "social engineering" (other parties call it social justice). All these issues will continue to be tested in electoral battles this year.

But the other big factor lurking behind the public disenchantment is the realisation that the state is receding from the public sector and that pieces of what constitute people's assets are being hawked to private players. It is indeed the norm in India that private fortunes

are also built from government contracts and leases to public resources and/or through privatisation of public assets. One can therefore suggest a direct causal link between the creation of billionaires and the diminishing jobs in the government and the public sector.

In many parts of India the poor have understood that the regime may have thrown free rations their way but is dismantling structures that protect their future. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, the BJP lost a chunk of votes and seats because of the perception that government jobs are shrinking and being outsourced to the private sector and reserved posts are being given to general category candidates. To add credibility to this narrative, a Minister from a small caste-based party in Uttar Pradesh, Apna Dal (Soneylal), wrote to the Chief Minister about this after the June 4 mandate.

There is also the clear neglect of a national asset like the Railways, a lifeline for all Indians (except those who attend weddings in private jets). The Railway Ministry was once a prized portfolio, and political heavyweights such as Lal Bahadur Shastri, Jagjivan Ram, Madhu Dandavate, Ram Vilas Paswan, Nitish Kumar, Mamata Banerjee, and Lalu Prasad have held it. The Modi regime made a point of ending the 92-year-old tradition of a separate Railway Budget and merged it with the Union Budget in 2017.

The current Railway Minister, Ashwini Vaishnaw, is an IIT graduate and former IAS officer, who was appointed Deputy Secretary in Atal Bihari Vajpayee's PMO where, his Wikipedia entry says, he contributed to "creating public-private partnership framework in infrastructure projects". He went for an MBA to Wharton Business School, left the Civil Service in 2010



to join GE Transportation (then Siemens), and in 2012 set up automotive component companies in Gujarat.

In 2019, the Modi regime brought him into the Rajya Sabha. As someone who left government service for private business (before being called to serve Prime Minister Modi), one can surmise his orientation. Today, besides the Railways, he also helms the Ministries of Electronics and Information Technology, and Communications.

UNDER HIS WATCH, one of the world's greatest rail networks seems to be getting systematically destroyed and under-prioritised to the extent that the 2024-25 Budget made only one reference to it, that too in passing. Meanwhile, the number of train accidents has shot up. In 2024 alone, there have been seven accidents so far. When the Modi regime shows interest in the Railways, it is in high-cost vanity projects such as a bullet train between Ahmedabad and Mumbai. Any backdrop that allows the Prime Minister to pose and inaugurate something shiny gets prioritised, while ordinary people in ramshackle carriages get derailed.

Other monopolies continue to be created. For instance, unlike earlier, it is no longer possible to watch the Olympics on the national TV channel, Doordarshan, as Reliance-owned Jio has purchased the telecast rights. Prasara Bharati sources say they cannot legally compete on cable, but if consumers install a Doordarshan dish antenna for Rs.1,500, they can still watch the games on DD Sports, which is funded by taxpayer money.

While Jio's subscriber numbers would have

The BJP's financial wealth has escalated, even as the "Modi method" has ensured the impoverishment of other political parties through the use of state agencies to take over their assets and deny them new sources of funding.



► **Prime Minister Narendra Modi** with business tycoons at a meeting to discuss ways to improve growth and job creation, in New Delhi on January 6, 2020. PTI

zoomed, the figures for public health will not. Experts note that the allocation for health in the Budget declined from 2.3 per cent in 2019-20 to 1.9 per cent in 2024-25. But the word "health" was mentioned four times, clubbed with other phrases about social welfare. From that perspective, I suppose it fared better than the Railways.

In the pre-Modi days, the BJP collected funds mostly from its support base among shopkeepers and slowly shifted to big corporate donors after Vajpayee came to power in 1998. But the Modi era has marked the union of big capital with Hindutva as never before. The numbers speak for themselves: Modi ran the most expensive election campaign in Indian history this year.

The BJP's financial wealth has escalated, according to their own income tax statements submitted to the Election Commission, even as the "Modi method" has ensured the impoverishment of other political parties through the use of state agencies to take over their assets and deny them new sources of funding. In 2019, too, the Centre for Media Studies found that India ran the most expensive election in the world, surpassing the money spent in the 2016 US election that brought Donald Trump to power.

Yet, the BJP's 2024 effort fell short. If one hears the voices of young first-time MPs in Parliament today, they are making speeches about protecting the lands and rights of people from corporate greed and political malevolence. The issue of caste has returned to centre stage because it is the pivot on which the idea of social justice turns.

The marriage of big corporate oligarchies with Hindutva forces worked on the premise that people would be so enraptured by issues of identity that they would not focus on their rights, livelihoods, and material conditions. This edifice created by Modi still holds, but it is being challenged. Many people are beginning to see cronyism hollowing out the nation. ■

CHINKS IN THE ARMOUR

Experts attribute the resurgence of militancy south of the Pir Panjal in the Jammu region, where terrorist threats had waned over a decade ago, to gaps in the counter-terror grid and the collapse of human intelligence gathering networks. **ASHUTOSH SHARMA**

On January 13, 2023, following a series of terrorist attacks in Jammu's Rajouri and Poonch districts near the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan, Union Home Minister Amit Shah announced a three-month strategy to combat militancy in the region and pledged to cast "a 360-degree net" after mobilising all security agencies. His press conference in Jammu city followed a review meeting at the Raj Bhavan that the following people attended: Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha;

Home Secretary A.K. Bhalla; the Northern Command chief Lieutenant General Upendra Dwivedi; heads of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the Border Security Force (BSF), the National Investigation Agency, the Intelligence Bureau, and the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW); and top officers of the Jammu and Kashmir Police and the civil administration.

One and a half years later, militancy has still not abated. After Narendra Modi assumed office as Prime Minister for the third term on June 9, which coincided with a terrorist attack on a bus in Reasi district in Jammu that killed nine pilgrims, there has been a sharp rise in militant attacks and movement. In July alone, 12 soldiers lost their lives to militancy. On July 25, authorities announced the closure of all Army

► **The Romeo Force** of the Indian Army and personnel of the Poonch Police keep vigil at LKG forest during a search operation, in Poonch on January 14. ANI



schools and Kendriya Vidyalayas in Jammu and along the Jammu-Pathankot National Highway for four days because of security concerns. Nearly 50 security personnel—the majority of them Army men—have died in various terror attacks in Jammu province, besides civilians, after the October 2021 clash between militants and the Army in the Poonch, Chamrer, and Bhatta Durrian forests.

INFILTRATION BIDS HAVE led to repeated ceasefire violations along the international border and the LoC. Even though there is a three-tier Anti Infiltration Obstacle System (AIOS) along the heavily mined border with Pakistan, it remains porous at certain places due to geographical and climatic reasons. With militants using tunnels and insulated cutters to cross the fencing system in the past, the demand for a smart fencing system has increased following the recent attacks.

Defence strategists such as Major General (ret'd) G.D. Bakshi and former DGP of the Jammu and Kashmir Police S.P. Vaid believe that since the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's special status in 2019, China has been aiding Pakistan in covert operations in Jammu. The region had enjoyed relative peace for over a decade, but the relocation of troops to Ladakh as a result of the standoff with China after the 2020 deadly clashes at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Galwan Valley has weakened the counterterrorism grid.

Vaid describes the recent spate of militant attacks as “an act of war”. He claims that over 600 commandos from Pakistan's Special Service Group (SSG) have been designated for operations, with some already having infiltrated Jammu and Kashmir to carry out terror attacks. “It is no surprise the precision with which these attacks are taking place,” he said, adding that Pakistan was attempting to create a situation similar to the Kargil conflict in the Jammu region.

Talking to *Frontline*, Vaid stated that the recent unrest in Jammu was part of the Pakistani deep state's deliberate strategy in response to the setbacks in Kashmir. “Jammu has been peaceful for the past 10-15 years, troop deployment has been diluted, and there has been a general laxity. Therefore, it has targeted Jammu to ease pressure on the security grid in Kashmir and the India-China border in Ladakh. It is happening in conjunction with China,” he said. Un-



▼ **At Hunderman village** near the Line of Control in Kargil district on July 27.

TAUSEEF MUSTAFA/AFP

With militants using tunnels and insulated cutters, the demand for a smart fencing system has increased.

like Kashmir, he said, Jammu's challenging terrain requires more troops, giving Pakistan an advantage.

“I can't recall if we have seen these kind of ambush attacks even in Kashmir in the past where they are getting away unscathed after killing soldiers,” said Vaid. “They are well-trained, using steel-coated Chinese bullets and secure Chinese apps for communication. The pattern of ambushes and attacks, seen in Rajouri and Poonch a few years ago, is now spreading to districts like Reasi, Kathua, Udhampur, and Doda.”

In June this year, Rashmi Ranjan Swain, DGP incharge of Jammu and Kashmir, told reporters that despite a “degraded capability”, Pakistan continued to send personnel and resources to Jammu and Kashmir. He maintained that 60 to 70 terrorists remained active on launch pads across the LoC. Many security experts believe that militants have already set up bases deep inside the Pir Panjal forests. They have called for Operation Sarp Vinash 2.0 to eliminate the terrorist bases.

Of late, the J&K Police have also decided to recruit new Special Police Officers (SPOs) from villages that have been declared militancy-affected, besides strengthening village defence groups (VDGs). The police have offered cash rewards for information on militants.

Meanwhile, Swain has proposed that militant supporters be prosecuted under the Enemy

Agents Ordinance of 2005, which carries life imprisonment or the death penalty, rather than the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). According to the provisions of the ordinance, the accused cannot hire a lawyer unless authorised by the court and there is no provision for appeal against the verdict.

The police have also warned that sharing propaganda posts of militants on social media will invite action under Sections 13 (encouraging or

MILITANCY RELATED DEATHS IN J&K

Year	Civilians	Security personnel	Militants
2014	28	47	114
2015	19	41	115
2016	14	88	165
2017	54	83	220
2018	86	95	271
2019	42	78	163
2020	33	56	232
2021	36	45	193
2022	30	30	193
2023	12	33	87
2024	17	17	34
Total	371	613	1,787

Data up to July 29, 2024.
Source: South Asia Terrorism Portal

The Jammu and Kashmir Police have decided to recruit new Special Police Officers from villages that have been declared militancy-affected, besides strengthening village defence groups.

inciting the commission of an illegal activity) and 18 (encouraging or inciting the commission of a terrorist act) of the UAPA.

The Lt Governor's administration, meanwhile, has decided to seize properties of those who had crossed the border from Kishtwar, Doda, and Ramban districts to engage in militancy from there. Security agencies claim to have intercepted calls revealing their efforts to motivate local youths to join militancy.

THE RECENT ATTACKS, which challenge the government's claims of normalcy, coincide with major attacks in Pakistan's restive regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Pakistan has been accusing India of carrying out “sophisticated and sinister extraterritorial and extrajudicial killings” in its terrain. In June, unidentified gunmen in Pakistani Punjab's Jhelum district killed Amir Hamza, a retired Pakistan Army brigadier and former Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) operative who was a prime suspect in the 2018 fidayeen (suicide squad) attack on the Sunjuwan Army camp in Jammu. In a separate incident last year, Lashkar-e-Taiba commander Khwaja Shahid, also known as Mia Mujahid, another suspect in the Sunjuwan attack, was found beheaded near the LoC in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). Their names feature on the list of over two dozen terror operatives killed across the border by unknown gunmen.

After the recent ambushes on soldiers in the forested terrain of Jammu province, some reports pointed to frequent delays in the arrival of reinforcements. This sparked concerns about operational inefficiencies, strategic lapses, and logistical shortcomings. In an interview with *Frontline*, Lieutenant General (ret'd) D.S. Hooda, the former General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the Northern Command, who was in charge of planning and executing the Uri surgical strike, emphasised the need to refine counter-infiltration strategies besides creating a unified command system for better coordination between different security forces and intelligence agencies, making optimum utilisation of resources, and above all, establishing clear accountability (see interview on page 52).

After every attack, security personnel round up scores of local people for questioning and, in

some cases, claim to have arrested some over-ground workers of the Pakistan-based terror group Jaish-e-Mohammed. But they have not yet got any important leads. As the Central government intensifies its efforts to remilitarise the region and enhance aerial surveillance, Para-Commandos have been deployed to sensitive areas to track down terrorists. However, significant challenges remain.

Some recent incidents involving the killing of civilians suspected of being militants or their associates underline a breakdown in communication between the security forces and local com-

SOLDIERS KILLED IN JAMMU REGION SINCE OCTOBER 2021

- **October 11, 2021:** Five, in Chamrer forests
- **October 16:** Four, including two JCOs, in Bhatta Durrian
- **October 30:** Two, in Nowshera sector
- **August 11, 2022:** Five, in Rajouri's Darhal area
- **April 20, 2023:** Five, in Bhatta Durrian
- **May 5:** Five Para-Commandos, in Rajouri's Kesri Hills
- **November 22:** Five, including two captains, in Dharamshal area of Rajouri
- **December 21:** Five, at Dera Ki Gali in Surankote, Poonch
- **April 28, 2024:** A village defence guard, at Basantgarh in Udhampur district
- **May 4:** An IAF Corporal, at Surankote in Poonch
- **June 11:** CRPF jawan, at Hiranagar in Kathua
- **July 8, 2024:** Five, in Billawar area of Kathua
- **July 16:** Four, including a commissioned officer, killed in the mountainous Desa forests of Doda



On July 30, 2024, the Ministry of Home Affairs informed the Lok Sabha that up to July 21 of this year, 28 individuals—comprising both civilians and security personnel—were killed in 11 terrorist incidents and 24 counter-terror operations across Jammu and Kashmir.

As the Central government intensifies its efforts to remilitarise the region and enhance aerial surveillance, Para-Commandos have been deployed to sensitive areas to track down terrorists.

munities. In border regions, where the presence of the civil administration is scant and residents are largely dependent on the Army and the BSF, there are a lot of unresolved grievances. In some areas, the security forces have revived the tradition of regular civil-military meetings.

INTELLIGENCE SOURCES and ground reports indicate that failures in human intelligence gathering continue to hinder the security forces. “To gather intelligence effectively, having a Counter Intelligence grid on the ground is crucial. However, once this grid is removed, where will the inputs come from? The local police have their limitations. The ISI has identified this gap and is exploiting it,” Gen. Bakshi said.

He further said: “The situation was even more dire in Rajouri-Poonch, where militants operated in large groups and launched fidayeen attacks on the brigade headquarters. The forested and mountainous terrain facilitated their operations, but we have managed to break their backbone.”

Many security officers posted along the LoC admit that intelligence gathered through local sources was proving ineffective. Local observers blame it on the past failures of the security forces. According to them, many sources they employed were never suitably rewarded for risking their lives.

There are also reports about residents along the LoC being involved in narco-terrorism activities. Nizam Din, a resident of Poonch district's heavily militarised Keerni village, which is situated several kilometres behind the zero line and across the fence from Pakistan, was arrested in 2022 for his alleged involvement in illegal cross-border activities. The family refuted the charges, asserting that he actively participated in military civic action programmes under Operation Sadbhavana. Din was a government teacher awaiting job regularisation. Following his arrest, the pol-



ice announced that they had busted a network involved in smuggling an improvised explosive device and a large quantity of narcotics. The operation led to the arrest of five terror associates, including a young woman named Zaitoona Akhter, from the nearby Qasba village.

A few years ago, this writer met several border residents in the same district who had worked alongside security and intelligence agencies but felt neglected after the ebb of militancy in the region. One such villager, Ghulam Hussain alias Titru, has an intriguing story. He worked as an intelligence operative and earned commendation certificates but had little to sustain his family. After militants blasted his house in Guntrian village in a revenge attack, he was forced to live in hiding.

Likewise, residents, as well as SPOs and those working in VDGs, previously Village Defence Committees, express concerns that they are considered expendable. There is no dearth of stories of men who were recruited as spies and risked everything to work undercover in Pakistan only to be abandoned after their capture. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs' annual report for 2022-23, Jammu and Kashmir has

Special Police Officers and those working in VDGs, previously Village Defence Committees, express concerns that they are considered expendable.

▼ **Firing practice** at a CRPF camp in Jammu's Sunderbani district in January 2023. The police chief said Village Defence Guards (VDGs) were being strengthened.
BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

4,153 VDGs and 32,355 SPOs. The VDGs, established in 1995 and overseen by district police officers, and the SPOs, introduced the same year to assist in counterterrorism efforts, face challenges from ongoing cross-border terrorism.

THE SPOS LARGELY REMAIN a casualised workforce and earn between Rs.6,000 and Rs.18,000 a month depending on experience. In some cases SPOs who have played a key role in getting more than a dozen militants killed are awaiting job regularisation even after 15 years. In January this year, police chief Swain gave an assurance that those who had demonstrated exceptional performance would be regularised. Following a recent encounter in the Hiranagar sector, where two terrorists were killed, Swain promoted nine SPOs as constables. Talking to reporters in Kathua, he said the VDGs too shall be strengthened.

Emphasising the need for a strong military because of the mountainous borders with Pakistan and China, Gen. Bakshi said: “While a 1:3 superiority is needed in plain terrain, a 1:10 ratio is required in mountainous regions. It is already costing us in terms of resurgence of terrorism.”

The government's claims of normalcy seem misplaced. Most of the internally displaced migrants in the past 10 years have not gone back to their native villages in the upper reaches of the Pir Panjal. “I will be the first to return to my native village, Narkote, if the government provides basic amenities in the area and gives me some financial assistance to rebuild my home and res-

'A unified command will ensure a cohesive strategy against terrorists'

Interview with Lt General D.S. Hooda, the former General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the Northern Command.

ASHUTOSH SHARMA

Lieutenant General (retd) D.S. Hooda, the former General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the Northern Command, was in charge of the planning and execution of the Uri surgical strike across the Line of Control (LoC) in Pakistan. He is a co-founder of the New Delhi-based think tank Council for Strategic and Defence Research and a Senior Fellow at the Delhi Policy Group. Excerpts from an interview:

Militancy is on the rise in the Jammu region. What is your assessment of the situation?

Two years ago, according to the previous J&K Director General of Police Dilbag Singh, Jammu had been freed from militancy except one district where three or four terrorists were operating. The new DGP, R.R. Swain, has indicated the presence of 60-80 terrorists. These people are not locals. In the wake of infiltration attempts at the Line of Control and the international border with Pakistan, obviously there is a deliberate effort to revive militancy. One reason is that they are not getting much success in the Valley.

While it is crucial to deter Pakistan from using terrorism as a state policy through diplomatic,



economic, and possibly military means, we must also take robust and strategic measures to eliminate terrorist activities within our own borders.

How is the current wave of militancy different from the previous one?

Their tactics have evolved. Previously, we witnessed fidayeen [suicide squad] attacks where militants would sneak into military areas and engage in prolonged gunfights until they were neutralised. Notable incidents include the 2013 attack on a police station and an Army camp in the Hiranagar sector, the 2016 attack at Nagrota, and the 2018 attack on the Sunjuwan Army camp among others.

These attacks followed a discernible pattern from militants originating in Pakistan. Today, however, the strategy has shifted to ambushes targeting military patrols

and convoys, with attackers then vanishing into the mountains and forests. These regions are characterised by low population density and poor road connectivity, complicating counter-measures.

During such targeted attacks, especially the latest in Kathua district, there are reports about delayed reinforcement.

Assessing potential delays in reinforcements and evacuation is challenging. Jammu's terrain and troop deployment differ significantly from Kashmir's. For instance, in Kathua district's Bani-Machedi area, where an ambush claimed the lives of five Army soldiers, troop presence was notably sparse at the time of the attack. This area is managed by the Western Command, headquartered in Chandimandir, whereas most of Jammu and Kashmir is under the Northern Command, based in the nearby Udhampur district.

Some experts have suggested that Pakistani army regulars may be involved in these ambush attacks. Yes, there have been some reports claiming that both active and retired Pakistani army officers are involved in planning and executing these attacks. Some claim that a covert Pakistani operation, involving around 600 SSG [Special Service Group] commandos, is active in J&K. Since there is no credible information about this, I have my doubts.

Relationships between security personnel and local communities seem to have faltered after the ebb of the initial wave of militancy. Is there a significant gap in human intelligence gathering network? Many in sensitive areas feel they were treated as expendables.

We need to strengthen our outreach with the local communities. These are the people who helped us tremendously in rolling back insurgency in Jammu region. The Gujjar-Bakerwal community played a crucial role. When there is a long period of peace and normalcy, this outreach tends to weaken. Practically, it also happens when some troops get pulled out from the area as it happened in Jammu when they were sent to eastern Ladakh. This thinning out also affects such efforts.

What are the important measures that need to be taken to deal with the situation?

We need to start with strengthening our counter-infiltration system at the LoC and the International Border. If we are successful in stopping the infiltration, half the problem is solved. In Jammu, there is some local support to terrorists but there are not many reports of local men

joining terrorist groups. We have been talking for long about a smart fence to plug vulnerable gaps. We carried out some trials in both Jammu as well as Kashmir region. It has been over 10-12 years now, and we haven't fully implemented the project as yet. I know a huge cost is involved, but then it is a matter of national security.

Apart from this, additional troops have already been moved into the area. The larger footprint of troops will not only keep terrorists under pressure but also help to strengthen the reachout to local people. Also, there is a need to increase the number of SPOs [Special Police Officers] in the J&K Police from local communities and strengthen the Village Defence Guards.

It is not just terrorists who need local support to survive, we also need local support to root them out.

What needs to be done to improve coordination between different the security forces deployed in the region?

A unified command system is essential for addressing the escalating situation. At present, multiple security forces, including the Army, the Border Security Force, the Central Reserve Police Force, and J&K Police, besides intelligence agencies, operate in the region with separate command structures and reporting lines.

A unified command will ensure a cohesive strategy against terrorists, enable more effective use of resources, and establish clear accountability.

We need to refine our counter-infiltration strategies. This involves harnessing advanced technology, strengthening the capabilities of the Special Forces, and expanding our human intelligence network.

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We need to refine our counter-infiltration strategies. This involves harnessing advanced technology, strengthening the capabilities of the Special Forces, and expanding our human intelligence network.

Former Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti demanded the sacking of DGP Swain after the recent attacks. Swain, on the other hand, accused regional parties of sympathising with militants. "There is ample evidence showing that many leaders have mastered the art of running with the hare and hunting with the hound, leaving the common man and security forces confused," he was quoted as saying.

Mehbooba's predecessor and National Conference leader Omar Abdullah puts the onus on the Centre. "If you think that the situation is worse than 1996 and you want to establish the supremacy of militants over your security forces, don't hold the election," he told reporters in Srinagar. "But if you feel that the military and the police are in control, and the authorities have enough courage, elections must be held on time." ■



MINERAL TAX TAKEAWAYS

The Supreme Court empowers States on mining levies but leaves room for federal manoeuvring. Critics fear a race to the bottom that can cripple industry. **V. VENKATESAN**

On July 25, the Supreme Court held that the division of legislative powers between the Union and the States is a fundamental aspect of India's federal structure. This division, the court added, also serves as a constitutional limitation on legislative powers. Parliament cannot encroach upon the plenary power of State legislatures under normal circumstances, except where the Constitution specifically allows it. The Court emphasised that the appropriate legislature must possess the competence to enact laws on the subject matter it seeks to legislate.

These observations, part of the majority judgment of the Su-

preme Court's nine-judge bench in *Mineral Area Development Authority (MADA) v. Steel Authority of India*, are likely to set the tone for the debate on fiscal federalism in the days to come.

Indian federalism is defined as asymmetric because it tilts towards the Centre, producing a strong Central government. The majority judges underlined in *MADA*, however, that it has not necessarily resulted in weak State governments. The Indian States are sovereigns within the legislative competence assigned to them, the majority judges held to ensure that State legislatures are not subordinated to the Union in the areas exclusively reserved for them.

One of the basic features of fiscal federalism is that both the Union government and the State governments ought to have adequate fiscal resources to discharge their constitutional responsibilities. The

Constitution has entrusted the Union and the States with the responsibility to regulate mines and mineral development in consonance with the principles of the public trust doctrine and the sustainable development of mineral resources.

The public trust doctrine is founded on the principle that certain resources are nature's bounty which ought to be reserved for the whole populace, for the present and for the future. Since these resources are intrinsically im-

The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957, assigns both the Union government and in the case of minor minerals, the State government, a greater responsibility for the development of minerals in India.

► **Coal pickers** work at an opencast mine in Jharia, on the outskirts of Dhanbad in Jharkhand on May 24. A Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court held that unless Parliament imposes a limitation, the plenary power of the State legislature to levy taxes on mineral rights is unaffected.

IDREES MOHAMMED/AFP

portant to every person in society, the State acts as a public trustee to safeguard them.

The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act (MMDRA), 1957, assigns both the Union government and, in the case of minor minerals, the State government a greater responsibility for the development of minerals in India.

The case before the Supreme Court sought clarity on who—the Union Government or the State—has the power to tax mines and minerals. The court had to interpret Entry 54 of List I (Union List) under the Seventh Schedule to the Constitution. Entry 54 of List I deals with the regulation of mines and mineral development. The majority judges held that this is a general entry, and does not include the power of taxation.

THE CHIEF JUSTICE OF INDIA, D.Y. Chandrachud, authored the majority judgment on behalf of himself and seven judges: Justices Hrishikesh Roy, A.S. Oka, J.B. Pardiwala, Manoj Misra, Ujjal Bhuyan, S.C. Sharma, and A.G. Masih.

Article 246 of the Constitution exclusively empowers the State legislatures to make laws with respect to entries in List II (States List), which includes taxes on mineral rights under Entry 50. This Entry permits States to tax mineral rights subject to any limitations imposed by Parliament by law relating to mineral development.

Article 248 provides that the residuary powers of Parliament shall include the power to make any law imposing a tax not mentioned in either the State List or the Concurrent List (List III), under which both Parliament and State can legislate. Under Entry 97 of List I, Parliament can make a law with respect to any other matter not enumerated in List II or List III, including any tax not mentioned in either of those lists.

The majority judges held that as the field of tax on mineral rights vests with the State legislature under Entry 50 of List II, Parliament cannot impose a tax on mineral rights under Entry 54 of List I or under its residuary powers.

The question had to be resolved by the nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court, in



► **In her dissent,** Justice B.V. Nagarathna cautioned that the steep increase in prices of minerals would result in a hike in prices of all industrial and other products dependent on minerals as a raw material or for other infrastructural purposes.

THE HINDU ARCHIVES

view of the doubt expressed by a five-judge bench in 2004 in *State of West Bengal v. Kesoram Industries Ltd* about the correctness of the decision laid down by a seven-judge bench in *India Cement Ltd v. State of Tamil Nadu* in 1990. The case was referred to a nine-judge bench in 2011 by a three-judge bench that noticed the divergence between *India Cement* and *Kesoram*.

In the *India Cement* case, the Supreme Court had concluded that the States could not impose taxes on minerals because of the limitation imposed by Section 9 of the MMDRA, in the form of imposition of royalty. In this case, the Supreme Court construed royalty in the nature of a tax or an exaction.

Royalty is compensation paid for rights and privileges enjoyed by the grantee. It is a payment made by the lessee to the lessor or proprietor of the minerals for the removal of minerals. It serves to compensate the lessor for the degradation of the value of the mine because of the extraction of minerals.

On July 25, the majority judges distinguished royalty from tax, saying the latter is an imposition of a sovereign and is imposed by the authority of law. Royalty, on the contrary, flows from the lease deed, they held. They, therefore, declared the observation in *India Cement* to the effect that royalty is a tax as incorrect.

The majority judges then held that unless Parliament imposes a limitation, the plenary power of the State legislature to levy taxes on mineral rights is unaffected. “There is no direct conflict between the taxing powers of the States under Entry 50 of List II and the regulatory powers of the Union. The principle of federal supremacy has no application in the instant case,” they held.

However, the majority judges gave room for

Parliament to intervene, if it wanted to. The purpose of including the phrase “by law” in Entry 50 of List II is to indicate that Parliament has to specify the extent to which it seeks to limit the taxing powers under Entry 50 of List II. The majority judges held that any law enacted by Parliament under Entry 54 of List I cannot impliedly denude the powers of the State legislature under Entry 50 of List II in order to usurp the taxing powers of the State.

IN HER DISSENT, Justice B.V. Nagarathna concluded that the decision in *India Cement* was correct, and the reference to the nine-judge bench was not called for. In her view, States cannot impose taxes on mineral rights over and above payment of royalty on a holder of a mining lease. This, she warned, would lead to mineral development in an uneven and haphazard manner, increase unhealthy competition between States, and engage them in a race to the bottom in a nationally sensitive market.

She further cautioned that the steep increase in prices of minerals would result in a hike in prices of all industrial and other products dependent on minerals as a raw material or for other infrastructural purposes.

As a result, the overall economy of the country would suffer, with the non-mineral States resorting to importing minerals, which would hamper the foreign exchange reserves of the country, she added. A slump in the mining activity in States having mineral deposits owing to huge levies that have to be met by the holders of mining licences is another grim scenario that she has envisaged in her dissent.

If Parliament does introduce limitations on States’ power to tax minerals through a specific law, as envisaged by the majority judges, Justice Nagarathna warns of resulting legal uncertainty that would cause adverse economic consequences. In her view, the mineral-rich States would then resort to levying taxes under Entry 49 of List II (dealing with power to tax land and buildings) in order to bypass Entry 50 of List II, so as not to be bound by any limitation that Parliament could impose by law. ■

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The majority judges distinguished royalty from tax, saying the latter is an imposition of a sovereign, and done by the authority of law. Royalty, on the contrary, flows from the lease deed.

The neoliberal lenses that skew the vision

The Budget is no more an instrument to spur growth. It has become an exercise in manipulated accounting and a poor attempt at propaganda.

C.P. Chandrasekhar

With the short-term, frenzied interest that accompanies annual Budget presentations having ended, it is time to look at issues that were largely ignored in the debate.

Prime among them is the question of how much or how little new taxes were raised to finance the many pressing demands that face the government: from investments in essential infrastructure to building the much-needed human capital, promoting employment, and ensuring universal access to necessities.

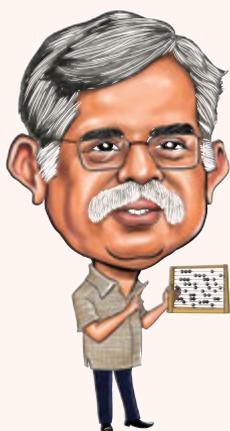
In an accounting sense, budgets reveal where each average rupee the government spends came from and to which areas each average rupee spent was allocated. But in a developmental sense, what matters is how much by way of additional resources the government has been able to garner to support and spur a growing economy and deliver benefits to citizens. It also matters from whom those resources (if any) were raised. From whom the government raises its past and new resources and to whom it delivers the Budget's benefits reveal its distributional consequences.

However, neoliberalism's transformation of the objectives of budget-making has changed the lens through which budgets are viewed. One consequence of neoliberalism on the fiscal front has been that budgets underplay the resource mobilisation aspect. While taxes (especially cesses and surcharges not shared with States) are occasionally imposed or raised, the focus is on "rationalisation" of the tax structure and reducing the burden of taxation. The net result is that even while the nation's tax-GDP ratio is low, little effort is made to raise it.

This is surprising in the current global context wherein the expenditures needed to pursue the UN's sustainable development goals and address the climate change challenge make it imperative to raise the government's resource mobilisation significantly. In fact, around the time when Budget 2024-25 was presented, the G20 Finance Ministers' meeting in Rio had agreed on jointly pursuing a proposal to impose a 2 per cent wealth tax on the super-rich to mobilise around \$250 billion each year to help address the climate crisis and reduce poverty and social deprivation.

There was no such intent visible in the Indian government's Budget. That should surprise for many reasons. India's corporate sector, according to Economic Survey 2023-24, released just before the Budget, is "swimming in profits". It is also buried in wealth. A much-publicised marriage of a scion of a leading Indian business family was celebrated with unabashed ostentation that is reported to have cost thousands of crores of rupees. India has its super-rich, and they are prone to blowing their money on wasteful expenditure. But there is virtually no wealth tax imposed on them.

What is surprising in the current context is that, despite all this, the claim is that India's rich are not under-taxed and that the country's tax levels are at some "optimum". Following the Budget presentation, the Revenue Secretary argued that India's "tax to GDP, given [its] level of development, is actually not so low". Noting that the ratio is around "12 per cent for the government of India, and another 6 per cent in States, so it is about 18 per



cent,” he reportedly went on to maintain that “if you plot it with per capita income of various countries, then we are slightly above what that per capita income should actually indicate”.

The evidence does not warrant that judgment because what matters is not just per capita income but the distribution of India’s large absolute GDP. The country is characterised by extreme inequality. Yet, India’s tax-GDP ratio in 2022, while equal to that of Kenya and Burkina Faso, was lower than that of El Salvador, Nepal, and Chile; significantly lower than that of Türkiye, Bolivia, and Nicaragua; and substantially lower than that of Brazil, Uruguay, and Namibia.

A SECOND FEATURE of neoliberal budget-making is establishing that the government is fiscally prudent, to signal which it must keep the deficit under control. However, since ensuring that—when increased taxation is sought to be abjured—is difficult, the government seeks to dig into its own vaults to scoop out some money. Public sector equity is divested, some units are privatised or sold, assets are monetised, and profitable units and even the RBI are forced to pay large sums as special dividends to the government. However, it has become clear that such exceptional financing is not enough to meet even restrained expenses.

So, there is now less emphasis on traversing to a low deficit-to-GDP ratio, such as 3 per cent, and more on keeping the deficit within a flexible “target” range. In fact, following this year’s Budget, Finance Secretary T.V. Somanathan went to the extent of admitting that the 3 per cent of the GDP target “has no scientific basis” and declaring that from 2026-27, the government’s “endeavour will be to keep the fiscal deficit each year... (at a level)... such that the Central Government debt will be on a declining path as a percentage of the GDP”. But that demands reduction of the fiscal-deficit-



► **Finance Minister** Nirmala Sitharaman with the Budget briefcase.

ALTAF HUSSAIN/REUTERS

to-GDP ratio or the current year’s borrowing relative to the GDP, even if not to some irrational 3 per cent target.

Following these two aspects of neoliberal budget-making, a third feature of recent budgets is a focus on limiting or reducing the inflation-adjusted expenditure side. But that is not easy. Since now it is the private sector rather than the state that should lead the developmental thrust, it has to be incentivised. Tax concessions and straightforward transfers, through initiatives such as the “production-linked incentive schemes” or subsidies labelled as “tax expenditures”, are doled out to the corporate sector. That fattens profits but does not really stimulate much new private investment.

In an effort to divert attention from this engineered redistribution of income, each Budget claims that it spurs growth, through enhanced capital spending by the government, as well

as delivers transfers and benefits to one or more needy sections. Such claims dominate the lengthy and tiring Part A of the Budget speech. But, given the self-imposed constraints on additional resource mobilisation, allocations for “expansionary” spending and “largesse” fall far short of the expenditure actually needed.

Deflation and austerity become the new normal. For example, while track renovation and allocations for safety equipment for the railways languish, much is made of new lines and new fast trains. Measly sums are promised as employment-linked subsidies to underpaid workers or oversubsidised corporates and as provisions for “skilling”. These are presented as a solution for an employment problem that comes from inadequate demand and inappropriate growth.

Meanwhile, other “flagship” schemes from the past, such as the employment guarantee programme or the subsidy on food for beneficiaries of the National Food Security Act, stagnate or decline.

The result is that both from the resource mobilisation and expenditure allocation perspective, the Budget is no more an annual plan and instrument to spur growth and improve distribution. It has become an exercise in manipulated accounting and a poor attempt at propaganda. ■

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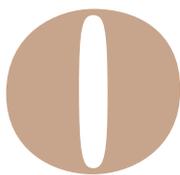
Small sums are promised as employment-linked subsidies to underpaid workers or oversubsidised corporates. These are presented as a solution for an employment problem that comes from inadequate demand.



► RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat at a shakha meeting in Jammu, a file photograph. PTI

A CALL TO JOIN?

The ban on government servants' participation in RSS activities is quietly lifted, while a similar ban relating to the Jamaat-e-Islami stays in place. **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**



On July 9, the government of India's Department of Personnel & Training (DOPT), Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, issued an office memorandum (OM) that lifted a 58-year-old ban on the participation of government servants in the activities of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

Strangely, this OM was made public first on social media some 10 days later, after which sections of the media reported it. The OM was posted on the DOPT website only on July 30.

The publication of the OM followed a July 25 order of a two-judge bench of the Madhya Pradesh High Court directing the DOPT and the Ministry of Home Affairs to display the OM on the home page of their websites. Hearing the matter initially on July 11, the court



had reserved its order, and while doing so mentioned that the July 9 OM was placed before it on July 10. From this, it would seem that the government conveyed its decision on the OM only to the court and did not publicise it.

The ban on government employees taking part in the activities of the Jamaat-e-Islami, however, stays in place.

The July 9 OM simply states that the mention of the RSS is being removed from three previous OMs issued in 1966, 1970, and 1980. The 1970 and 1980 OMs reiterate the 1966 OM, but the one in 1980 also refers to the “need to ensure secular outlook on the part of government servants”, and the “need to eradicate communal feelings and communal bias”. The 1966 OM, dated November 30, was in the nature of a clarification that membership of the RSS and the Jamaat-e-Islami and participation in their activities would constitute a violation of **sub-rule (1)** of Rule 5 of the Central Civil Services, or CCS, (Conduct) Rules, 1964, which debar the participation of government servants in political activity.

This sub-rule, which derives its legitimacy from the internationally accepted doctrine of the political neutrality of government servants, still stands. Instead, the power of the government to interpret, in the event of any question arising, on whether any organisation and its activities are political or not (derived from sub-rule 3 of the same rule 5) has been used to effectively declare the RSS to be a non-political organisation.

I NTERESTINGLY, THE NUMBER of the July 9 OM—F. No. 34013/1(S)/2016-Estt.B—suggests that the government file that eventually resulted in the OM originated in 2016 (based on the functional file indexing system followed in government). However, the final decision came in the background of a writ petition filed in the Madhya Pradesh High Court in 2023 wherein a retired government employee challenged the constitutional validity of the rules on which the 1966, 1970, and 1980 OMs were based. The petitioner claimed that those rules prevented him from joining the RSS in the “dusk of his life”, though it is not clear if the restrictions extend to retired employees too.

The final order of the court indicated that until May 6, 2024, the Union of India, as respondent no 1, had not filed its reply. The court thereafter asked the government to submit its reply

The sub-rule states: “No government servant shall be a member of, or be otherwise associated with, any political party or any organisation which takes part in politics nor shall he take part in, subscribe in aid of, or assist in any other manner, any political movement or activity.”

BJP IT cell chief Amit Malviya was among the first to welcome the lifting of the ban and said the original order imposing it should not have been passed.

in 15 days or have its senior functionaries appear in person to explain why they could not submit the reply.

On May 22, the Solicitor General submitted that the said OMs were under review, and the matter was adjourned. On July 10, the Union of India filed an affidavit declaring the result of that review, attaching along with it the July 9 OM.

On July 25, while disposing of the petition, the two-judge bench stated: “Ideally, we would have disposed of the writ petition as having rendered infructuous and academic, post the filing of the affidavit dated 10.07.2024. However, since the issues raised in the present petition have national ramifications, especially pertaining to one of the largest voluntary non-governmental organisations, viz. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (for brevity ‘RSS’), therefore before parting with the matter, this court finds condign to make certain observations. These observations are necessary to ensure that any coveted voluntary organisation, working in public and national interest is not crucified again through executive instructions/OMs at the whims and fancies of the government of the day, in the manner in which the RSS has been so treated for last almost five decades.”



A direct fallout is that the government has taken an open position vis-a-vis the RSS. It has also blurred the line between the Legislature and the Executive.

The judges went on to make several pronouncements castigating the procedures followed by the government of India in characterising the RSS. The court also observed that “the circulars/OMs that affect the fundamental rights of its employees throughout the nation, specially the rights guaranteed under Article 19(1)(g), must always be viewed with utmost caution with the magnifying lens of judicial review”.

THE GOVERNMENT, which has now permitted the participation of government employees in RSS activities, is not known to have a stellar record in protecting fundamental rights of citizens. In fact, while a certain “liberalism” has been shown in the interpretation of the CCS (Conduct) Rules insofar as they apply to government employees, repeated attempts have been made to impose these rules to restrict the freedom of expression of university teachers.

The Federation of Central University Teachers’ Association (FEDCUTA) drew attention to this in a recent press conference. The FEDCUTA said: “University teachers are not government servants. University teachers have a public role—they serve the public, and that is not the same

thing as serving the government. This position has been upheld by the courts and yet attempts to impose CCS Conduct Rules on university teachers continue to be made.”

For teachers, it is not only the restriction on participation in political activities that is the concern. The CCS (Conduct) Rules also have several provisions prohibiting participation in protest actions of different kinds, even on service matters, and restricting the right to comment on government policies in writing or in the media, or to publicly air independent views on them.

They also mandate prior government approval for editing any periodical. Such restrictions not only have no place in academia but would spell the death knell of universities, say teachers. The common thread linking the removal of restrictions on the participation of government servants in RSS activities with the extension of CCS (Conduct) Rules to university teachers is the propagation of authoritarianism where no opinion other than that in support of the ruling regime is given space.

When news of the lifting of the ban was posted on social media, BJP IT cell chief Amit Malviya was among the first to welcome it. He shared a screenshot of the announcement and said that the original order should not have been passed in the first place. “The unconstitutional order, issued 58 years ago, in 1966, imposing a ban on government employees taking part in Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh activities has been withdrawn by the Modi government,” he tweeted.

The RSS welcomed the government circular. Sunil Ambekar, Akhil Bhartiya prachar pramukh, said in a statement that the move would strengthen the democratic system of India. The RSS, he said, had been continuously engaged in the reconstruction of the nation and service of society for the past 99 years.

“Due to the RSS’ contributions in times of national security, unity-integrity and natural disasters, the various types of leadership in the country have, from time to time, praised the role of the RSS. Due to their political self-interests, the then governments unjustly prohibited government employees from participating in the activities of a constructive organisation like the RSS. The recent decision of the government is appropriate and will strengthen then democratic system of Bharat,” he said.

▶ **A RSS shakha** in New Delhi, a file photograph.
PRAKASH SINGH/AFP



Opposition parties like the Congress, the Bahujan Samaj Party, and the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen criticised the move.

THE DECISION itself is fraught with grave consequences, not only in terms of governance but for those who may seek to benefit from displaying their political allegiance and alignment of a sectarian nature for short-term goals while serving in government.

A direct fallout is that the government has taken an open position vis-a-vis the RSS. It has also blurred the line between the Legislature and the Executive. While the former can have political leanings, the latter cannot as that would colour decisions at the time of execution. It is for good reason that some senior retired bureaucrats have expressed concern at this recent development and demanded a wider discussion in Parliament.

On July 30, E.A.S Sarma, former Secretary to the government of India, wrote to Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba expressing his anguish and stating that the memorandum made a mockery of the vision of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, considered the architect of the civil services in India. He expressed concern about the long-term adverse implications of the move that “cuts at the root of the apolitical, secular role expected of the civil services in the country”.

Sarma wrote: “Now that the RSS has gained a strong presence in politics, does the latest order of the government represent the present political executive’s endeavour to extend such a presence among the country’s civil services also?” He wondered whether the latest memo was “a part of an orchestrated attempt of the political establishment to politicise institutions, one by

▼ **At a meeting** of the RSS in Ahmedabad in 2002 that Narendra Modi, then the Chief Minister of Gujarat, attended. PTI

Repeated attempts have been made to impose CCS (Conduct) Rules on university teachers to restrict their freedom of expression.

one, systematically”. He pointed out that “the role of the civil services was far too important a matter for a political party to take such a summary unilateral decision without a wider debate in Parliament and among the public, as once civil services become politicised, without a firm commitment to the secular, democratic values of the Constitution, it may usher in a highly regressive system of governance that cannot evoke public credibility and trust, paving the way for fissures within society.”

In his letter to the Cabinet Secretary, Sarma also referred to Sardar Patel’s address to civil servants on April 21, 1947, in which he emphasised the need to remain apolitical and independent. Sarma recalled that Patel had advised civil servants to “maintain the utmost impartiality and incorruptibility of administration. A civil servant cannot afford to, and must not, take part in politics. Nor must he involve himself in communal wrangles. To depart from the path of rectitude in either of these respects is to debase public service and to lower its dignity.”

The retired IAS official M.G. Devasahayam said the circular had merely confirmed the suspicion that the BJP had, after coming to power in 2014, appointed several people with RSS leanings in key positions. “Forget civil servants, I know of Governors who conduct and preside over shakhas in the Raj Bhavans. The shakhas are a basic feature of the RSS. What they have now done is to make it formal, misusing the discretionary powers under Rule 5(3). Under Rule 5(1), there is no question of lifting this ban,” he told *Frontline*.

THE OPPOSITION to the memorandum has not been at expected levels; neither has there been a discussion in Parliament on the issue. It is significant that the CCS (Conduct) Rules and the All India Service (Conduct) Rules, which have similar provisions, derive their legitimacy from Article 309 of the Constitution. This Article empowers the Central or State Legislatures, or the President and Governors until the Legislatures have adopted an appropriate Act, to “regulate the recruitment, and conditions of service of persons appointed, to public services and posts in connection with the affairs of the Union or of any State”. It remains to be seen whether the Legislature will now exercise its prerogative and take up the matter for discussion. ■



► **Defence Minister Rajnath Singh** flanked by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Uttar Pradesh Deputy Chief Ministers Brijesh Pathak and Keshav Prasad Maurya, at a roadshow in Lucknow in April 2024. SANDEEP SAXENA

Back to the basics

Despite the setbacks the BJP suffered in the recently held election and byelections, which is widely seen as a vote against Hindutva, it has gone back to its divisive politics, this time pitting Muslims against OBCs ahead of the next round at the ballot box. **ANAND MISHRA**

The BJP is back to its time-tested politics of polarisation, especially in Uttar Pradesh, where byelections to 10 Assembly seats are scheduled this year, and in Jharkhand, Haryana, and Maharashtra which will elect new Assemblies this year. The Lok Sabha results in these States were not too heartening for the BJP. With no new narrative at its command to capture the imagination of voters, the party is falling back on Hindutva, whether it is raising the pitch over “love jihad” and “land jihad” in Jharkhand, using the “Aurangzeb Fan Club” jibe in Maharashtra, or asking eateries on the Kanwar Yatra route in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand to display their owners’ names.

The Narendra Modi government’s move to lift the decades-old ban

on government officials participating in RSS events is another move in this direction. These decisions are being steamrolled despite opposition from allies like the Janata Dal (United) and the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) in Bihar and the Rashtriya Lok Dal in Uttar Pradesh.

The Supreme Court on July 22 imposed an interim stay on the Uttar Pradesh (and other States) administration order asking eateries on the Kanwar Yatra route to display names of owners and staff. (On July 26, the stay was extended until August 5, the next date of hearing on petitions challenging the order.) Undeterred, the BJP is doubling down on its communal rhetoric.

This renewed push for polarisation is prompted, at least in part and especially in Uttar Pradesh, by the urgent need to paper over differences within the party. While a section of leaders has rallied behind Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, others are with the Kushwaha leader and Deputy



Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya, who seems to have the backing of the BJP's central leadership. Maurya is an OBC leader who was tipped to be Chief Minister in 2017.

Fissures in the party deepened after the Lok Sabha election debacle in Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP won only 33 of the 80 seats, down from 62 in 2019 and 71 in 2014, leaving the party exposed to attacks from a strengthened opposition. Besides the Adityanath-Maurya rift, there are widespread reports of serious differences between Adityanath and Union Home Minister Amit Shah.

For the first time in 10 years, National Democratic Alliance (NDA) partners in Uttar Pradesh (Anupriya Patel, Sanjay Nishad, and Om Prakash Rajbhar) have questioned the BJP-led government on issues such as alleged discrimination against OBC candidates applying for government jobs, mandatory digital attendance for teachers (now put on hold), and the "misuse" of bulldozers. Voices within the BJP are also heard criticising the Chief Minister's style of functioning. The upcoming byelections are being seen as a referendum on Adityanath's rule. Against this backdrop, the BJP has little hope of successfully running a personality-oriented campaign, and this may be a reason for reverting to the Hindutva plank.

IN JHARKHAND, the BJP could not win any of the five tribal seats in the Lok Sabha election. All its star candidates, Arjun Munda, Sita Soren, and Gita Koda, lost, and this in a State where the party has been in power for the most part since 2000 when it was carved out of Bihar.

The party faced a tribal backlash after Chief Minister and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader Hemant Soren was sent to jail in a graft case. The All Jharkhand Students Union, an NDA ally, has been losing its base among Kurmis, the second largest population group in Jharkhand. The BJP is trying to deal with the situation by raising the bogey of Muslims as the "other" that the tribal people must fight. Now that Hemant Soren is out on bail and back as Chief Minister, the BJP hopes that the sympathy factor for him will peter out and the issue of illegal settlers can be used to turn attention to the narrative of a demographic threat to tribal people.

Tribal people account for over 26 per cent of the population in Jharkhand, Kurmis are 16 per cent, and Muslims about 14.5 per cent. The JMM-

In Haryana, Amit Shah is attempting to create a larger OBC narrative by painting Muslims as cutting into the OBC share of the pie, a strategy evident in Maharashtra as well.

Congress-CPI(M-L) alliance seems to have a hold over the Muslim vote; it also draws the majority of tribal and a good chunk of Kurmi votes.

Addressing party workers in Ranchi on July 20, Shah accused Hemant Soren of propagating "land jihad" and "love jihad". He alleged that this was bringing demographic changes in Jharkhand. Illegal immigrants from Bangladesh (read Muslims) were marrying tribal women and settling in the State by buying land, he claimed.

The BJP MP from Godda, Nishikant Dubey, demanded in the Lok Sabha on July 25 that the National Register of Citizens be implemented in Jharkhand and a separate Union Territory incorporating parts of Jharkhand and West Bengal be created to deal with the problem of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. A furious Trinamool Congress asked for the "divisive" remarks to be expunged from House records.

In April, the Prime Minister reacted to reports of schools in Muslim-dominated localities having declared Friday their weekly holiday by accusing the JMM of trying to start a fight with Christians.

A Jharkhand High Court order of July 3 directing the State government to repatriate illegal immigrants from Bangladesh gave some teeth to the BJP's campaign. The court is hearing a PIL petition that alleges that illegal migrants are marrying tribal women to secure land and are settling in areas like Jamtara, Godda, Dumka, Sahibganj, Deoghar, and Pakur. The court recently reprimanded the State government for not furnishing proper responses.

PLAYING MUSLIMS OFF against Backward Classes seems to be the strategy in Haryana too. Addressing a "Backward Classes Samman Sammelan" in Haryana's Mahendragarh on July 16, Shah said the Congress took away reservation from Backward Classes and gave it to Muslims in Karnataka and would do the same in Haryana if it came to power. He promised that the BJP would not allow Muslim reservation in Haryana.

Haryana's OBC Chief Minister Nayab Saini replaced Manohar Lal Khattar, a Khatri by caste, in March. The move was part of the BJP's strategy to mobilise OBCs and Dalits against the Congress' dominant Jat leadership under Bhupinder Singh Hooda. The Congress is also likely to draw a sizeable number of Muslim votes here.

The OBCs, comprising 78 big and small castes, make up 40 per cent of Haryana's popu-



lation, but being heavily splintered, they lack effective leadership and influence over all castes in the group. The Jats, 27 per cent of the population, are more assertive politically. Dalits comprise 20 per cent and Muslims 7 per cent. Shah is attempting to create a larger OBC narrative by painting Muslims as cutting into the OBC share of the pie.

THIS DIVISIVE STRATEGY was evident in Maharashtra too. On July 21, addressing a BJP State convention in Pune, Shah called the Maha Vikas Aghadi an "Aurangzeb Fan Club". The BJP has often invoked the imagery of Aurangzeb to portray medieval Muslim rulers as oppressors of Hindus.

Prem Singh, a former teacher at Delhi University and a fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, told *Frontline* that communal polarisation was the only key the BJP had. The party, he said, had never backed down from "hard-line Hindutva" in the past 10 years. With politics in the country devoid of ideology, the RSS and BJP are unlikely to have problems forming newer coalitions. "Their work is going on in the north-eastern and southern regions. They have made a strong base in places where they had no entry earlier. They have made deep inroads among NRIs. In their mission, the RSS and the BJP are far ahead of the secularists," he said.

▼ **JMM leader**
Hemant Soren comes out of Ranchi's Birsa Munda Central Jail after getting bail in a money laundering case linked to land purchase, on June 28. Soren was reinstated as Chief Minister shortly thereafter.
PTI

Harish S. Wankhede, Assistant Professor, Centre for Political Studies, School of Social Sciences, JNU, does not believe the polarisation will work. He told *Frontline*: "It is the realisation that the issues of development and social justice are not working in its favour that is making the BJP go back to its tested formula of communal mobilisation. In the upcoming Assembly elections in Jharkhand, Maharashtra, and Haryana, the BJP has nothing much to offer on substantive issues of development, employment, and for the betterment of farmers, Dalits, and Adivasis. Communal polarisation is an old tactic that targets Muslims as anti-nationals, spreads prejudice against them (as in the Kanwar Yatra episode), and demonises them as producing more children. However, the voters understand the BJP's tactic and it will not work this time."

He said the hype surrounding Modi and development had fallen flat in Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Haryana, and to some extent Karnataka and Rajasthan. "Only in the last three phases of the election we noticed the BJP building a campaign around anti-Muslim rhetoric. However, it hardly worked," Wankhede said.

The results of the byelections in 13 Assembly seats across seven States in July seem to have further emboldened the INDIA bloc, with the alliance winning 10 seats across States: the Trinamool Congress all 4 in West Bengal, the Congress 2 of 3 seats in Himachal Pradesh and both seats in Uttarakhand, and the AAP and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam 1 seat each in Punjab and Tamil Nadu, respectively. The BJP won a lone seat in Madhya Pradesh and 1 in Himachal Pradesh, while 1 seat in Bihar went to an independent candidate.

The loss in Uttarakhand, where the party is in power and where it won all five Lok Sabha seats, hit the BJP hard. In particular, the party's loss of Badrinath, a key Hindu pilgrimage town, coming on the heels of the loss in Faizabad (won by the Samajwadi Party's Awadhesh Prasad), seems to have placed a serious question mark on the BJP's core plank, where it had tried to portray both the SP and Congress as "Ramdrohi".

Some observers believe the time for hard-line Hindutva politics is up, and the BJP's downhill journey will not be reversed by knee-jerk polarisation responses. But another section believes that with communalism having taken deep root in society, the BJP may well stage a comeback with its old game. ■

'Periyar's legacy remains strong even today'

Interview with K. Veeramani, leader of the Dravidar Kazhagam. **ILANGO VAN RAJASEKARAN**

In 1925, the social reformer E.V. Ramasamy, widely known as Periyar, launched the Self-Respect Movement, a unique initiative to transform Tamil society into a rationalist, modern, and radical society by pulling it out from the mire of dehumanising casteism and religious obscurantism.

Nearly a hundred years later, many of Periyar's dreams have come true. Everyone, including the most oppressed sections of a caste-based society of graded inequality, is able to lead a life of dignity through education (and employment), which they had been denied for

centuries. Many radical laws were passed to protect these hard-fought gains.

However, a considerable chunk of Tamil society, which once dropped caste suffixes from names as a result of the Self-Respect Movement's sustained campaign, still holds on to the demeaning practice of caste oppression, which has led to pointed questions about Periyar, who passed away in 1973, and his movement.

Today, debates and discussions are rife on whether the movement achieved what it set out to. Is it true that Periyar targeted Brahmins to empower Other Backward Classes (OBCs)? Did he fail Dalits in the process? Did he compromise on Tamil identity? Was his Dravidian ideology not inclusive? These uncomfortable questions are often raised on social platforms by Dalit intellectuals and some fringe elements who champion the cause of Tamil nationalism.

A few non-Brahmin groups, for whose emancipation he strived hard, also hold grievances against him and his ideology and attempt to confine his legacy to linguistic, casteist, and regional boundaries. But Periyar was not one to flinch in the face of such criticisms—as is amply evident in his writings and speeches.

As the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK), the organisation he led, gets ready to celebrate the centenary of the Self-Respect Movement in 2025, its current leader, the 90-year-old veteran K. Veeramani, spoke to *Frontline* on Periyar's relevance and how the party has defeated attempts

► **DK leader** K. Veeramani.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



to reduce Periyar to just an anti-Brahmin leader who professed atheism. Excerpts:

The Self-Respect Movement's impact on a stratified society plagued by poverty, ignorance, and superstitions was significant. Has the movement become obsolete today?

There is no equivalent term for the concept of self-respect. The word dignity is perhaps the closest in the English language. Periyar, with visionary insight, chose this term in 1925, and it remains relevant even after 100 years. Many sceptics predicted that after Periyar the movement would fade away. However, they were proven wrong. The DK, its Self-Respect Movement, its *Kudi Arasu* journal, and Periyar's legacy remain strong even today.

Periyar's ideas are adaptable and continue to be influential. There is no rationalist movement anywhere else in the world that has had such a lasting impact and longevity. It serves as an institution to address social injustices. The Self-Respect Movement is a public movement founded on core humanistic values because it opposes untouchability and unapproachability.

The caste system has been the source of numerous social ills throughout history. Eliminating it from people's minds is a challenging task because of its perceived divine sanction. We need to fight in the minds of people to eradicate deeply entrenched and time-defying beliefs and superstitions. It is a complex battle.

Yes, the movement faced and continues to face stiff resistance from religious bigots, pseudo-secularists, Hindutva supporters, casteists, and fringe linguistic groups. However, the movement aims to create a casteless, humanist society.

Periyar was originally with the Congress, but after participating in the Vaikom struggle against untouchability in Kerala in 1924-25, he launched *Kudi Arasu*, a journal to propagate his ideologies. *Kudi Arasu* remains a potent weapon to promote the principles of revolution, liberation, democracy, revolt, and rationalism, which the Self-Respect Movement stands for.

The Self-Respect Movement is a unique combination of radicalism and the

PERIYAR IN THE DIGITAL AGE

• Periyar Vision OTT platform

* Launched in July 2024

* Over 5,000 subscribers in a week since launch

* Available for iOS, Android, and Android TV

• Periyar YouTube channel

* Started in 2008

* **2.04 lakh** subscribers

* **63.4 lakh** views

• Periyar.org website

* Launched in 1996

Gandhian principle of non-violence juxtaposed. Are they not incompatible?

Periyar fought against social evils and the oppression of people based on their birth, which he believed the Congress did not address. However, he firmly believed in Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence. He had differences with Gandhi on *varnashrama dharma*. When Gandhi was assassinated in 1948 by Nathuram Godse, an RSS-trained Brahmin, not a single individual was harmed in the Madras Presidency, while Maharashtra and other parts of the country witnessed violence against Brahmins. Periyar addressed the people over radio at the request of the then Chief Minister O.P. Ramaswamy Reddiyar, asking them to refrain from harming anyone of any race or creed. There was total peace.

Periyar fashioned the Self-Respect Movement on the principle of non-violence, which moulded the collective psyche of the Tamil people against any form of physical violence. However, he encountered violence and was attacked by fringe elements in his lifetime. Despite this, he preached *ahimsa*, although he did not approve of Gandhi's support for *varnashrama dharma*.

Periyar's movement was against Brahminism but not against Brahmins themselves. He attacked religious ideologies and dogmas that were harmful to establishing an egalitarian society. The movement was

Periyar's movement was aimed at recognising all non-Brahmins, irrespective of caste or creed, as victims of the system.



aimed at recognising all non-Brahmins, irrespective of caste or creed, as victims of the system.

Please expand on Periyar’s attitude towards Brahmins and Brahminism.

Periyar attacked Brahminism, which he considered the root cause of all social ills. He strongly believed that an egalitarian Tamil society could be created once the caste system and the divine sanction it was based on were dismantled.

He understood that the battle was complex and intricate because it required changing the mindset of people. He recognised it as distinct from the Left’s class struggle as economic reversals could potentially erase class differences, but it was impossible to do the same in a fight against birth-based privilege and descent.

He had a clear understanding of class and caste hierarchies and their dynamics.

For 100 years, the movement he started has been actively battling caste discrimination and oppression. Even the Constitution can be amended but not *varnashrama dharma*. As long as it exists, caste inequality and social evils will persist. Hence, the struggle needs to

▼ **K. Veeramani** paying tribute to Periyar, known as the father of the Dravidian movement, in Chennai in 2016. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

be fought on all fronts—against gods and religions.

In 1936, Dr B.R. Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* was translated into Tamil and published in *Kudi Arasu*, making it the first translation of the work. Both Ambedkar and Periyar were on the same page and shared the same ideological views.

It is an undeniable fact that the Self-Respect Movement laid the foundation for the sweeping social reforms we see in Tamil society today. Periyar opposed Brahmin dominance in education and employment, but he was not against any individual. There are unfounded accusations against him in this respect. Just show me one incident where Periyar instigated violence against any caste or creed.

Certain Tamil chauvinistic groups have argued that the Dravidian movement does not solely represent Tamil interests and, in targeting Brahmins, it undermines the real issues Tamils faced. Some Dalits also have the same grudge.

The term Dravidian identifies a race. The term was chosen consciously to denote a casteless and humanistic society with a rationalistic ideology. It is Tamil and its core objective is to eradicate birth-based discrimination and gender disparity. Neither the Dravidian movement nor the Self-Respect Movement is anti-religion or anti-god. They faulted religion and its accessories for demeaning fellow human beings.

Our focus is on critiquing *varnashrama dharma*, which created a caste structure by establishing god, religion, and superstitious beliefs, which were developed and perfected by Brahminism to keep non-Brahmins suppressed in the social order.

Did his long-fought social battle ever achieve what he dreamt of in his lifetime?

Yes. In the history of reformists, Periyar was the only leader who saw his dreams come true during his lifetime. His followers like C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi realised many of his cherished objectives when they became Chief Minister. They used their office to create an environment that ensured equitable distribution of education and employment for all. His efforts led to constitutional

protection for reservation in the Ninth Schedule.

He worked towards legalising inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, which he referred to as “self-respect marriages”, as well as widow remarriage, besides granting of property rights to women.

In the post-Periyar era, the reservation policy continues, uplifting socially disadvantaged groups. The reservation percentage was increased to 69 per cent in the early 1990s, and today Tamil Nadu is the State with the highest percentage of reservation, benefiting OBCs, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes.

These social justice laws have significantly boosted the State’s efforts to achieve fair distribution of wealth, education, and employment, ensuring equal social and economic growth for all.

Is the Periyarist movement prepared to tackle the new challenges in this digital era of communication?

Today, the electronic media often spreads falsehoods and misconceptions about leaders and their ideologies. We have adopted multidimensional approaches so that Periyar, being the one most trolled, and the Self-Respect Movement remain relevant.

Although our enemies are few, they may be more visible today. They employ individuals to continue their disruptive agenda. When the Devadasi system was abolished, it was non-Brahmins more than orthodox individuals who opposed it. Unfortunately, the supporters of the Periyarist ideology have become victims of their manipulative tactics.

The Self-Respect Movement has led to a non-violent social renaissance. Its motto of “Everything for everyone” promotes humanity. We oppose those who dehumanise others based on birth. Anyone who supports the caste system is our enemy, and we will confront them.

The Dravidian movement promotes equality and aims to establish a free and fair society. Our position is not rooted in hatred towards anyone. We respect those who criticise our ideology, which strives for a casteless society of humanism. ■

The term Dravidian identifies a race. The term was chosen consciously to denote a casteless and humanistic society with a rationalistic ideology.



PERIYAR AND HIS LEGACY

SOWING THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

- ▶ **1925:** Participates in Vaikom Satyagraha against the prohibition of entry of oppressed castes in streets around the Vaikom temple
- ▶ **1925:** Starts *Kudi Arasu* journal to propagate Self-Respect Movement
- ▶ **1929:** Proposes resolution for equal property rights for women
- ▶ **1938:** Organises first anti-Hindi movement in Madras presidency

HOW PERIYAR’S DREAMS BECAME REALITY

Reservation in Tamil Nadu

- ▶ **1927:** Justice Party ratifies class wise reservation, passes orders for implementation
- ▶ **1951:** OBCs get 25 per cent reservation
- ▶ **1971:** Reservation for OBCs hiked to 31 per cent, for SC/ST to 18 per cent
- ▶ **1980:** OBC reservation increased to 50 per cent
- ▶ **1989:** Govt splits OBC quota, giving 30 per cent to OBCs and 20 per cent to MBCs
- ▶ **1994:** Govt’s 69 per cent reservation for OBCs, MBCs, and SC/ST placed in Ninth Schedule

Self-respect marriages

- ▶ **1967:** C.N. Annadurai enacts law to give legal sanction to self-respect marriages

Non-Brahmin priests

- ▶ **2021:** CM Stalin appoints 29 persons from OBC, MBC, and SC groups as priests and reciters in temples

World Affairs

STUDENTS ON THE WARPATH



The Sheikh Hasina government in Bangladesh was caught unawares as student protests over a quota for freedom fighters in jobs and education turned violent and claimed more than 150 lives. While Hasina sees it as the handiwork of political opponents, saner voices have urged her to reach out to the students. **PRANAY SHARMA**

The rich history of student protests in Bangladesh is replete with tales of sacrifice, violence, and resolve. Students were at the forefront during the days of the “Bhasha Andolon”, the language movement of 1952, and the freedom struggle of 1971.

The language movement began with the “Urdu only” protests of 1948 in erstwhile East Pakistan. And many of its student leaders, such as Mujibur Rahman and Tajuddin Ahmad, subsequently became leading political figures in

the freedom movement of 1971, alongside leaders like Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani. All three are now revered as founding fathers of Bangladesh.

With such an illustrious heritage, where does one place the current student protests in Bangladesh that continue to shake the country?

At its height, it ran for more than a week, and there was mayhem, violence, and brutality as police and security personnel went on a shooting spree and rival factions of students clashed with each other on campuses and in the streets, damaging government property, installations

On July 21, the Supreme Court struck down the June ruling by the High Court Division that threw out a 2018 decision to scrap the quota but brought in a 5 per cent quota for freedom fighters’ descendants.

and vehicles. The protests threw life out of gear in Bangladesh and raised serious questions about the stability of the Sheikh Hasina government.

As India, which shares its longest border with Bangladesh and is known to back the Awami League government, kept an eagle eye on the fast-paced developments in the neighbouring country, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina called in the army and imposed curfew to restore normalcy.

▶ **Bangladesh’s state** broadcaster building set on fire by protesters on July 18, a day after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina appeared on the network seeking to calm escalating clashes over television and radio. AFP

THE VIOLENCE CLAIMED 150 lives (the official death toll released by the government on July 29) and left over 3,000 injured. There were allegations that many of the injured were hunted down in hospitals by rival students or members of state intelligence agencies.

The Prime Minister blamed inimical forces that wanted to destroy her and thwart the country’s economic growth and development. The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the banned Islamist outfit the Jamaat-e-Islami were alleged to be behind the unrest.

The BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami have been out of power for a very long time and are marginalised in Bangladeshi politics, government supporters say. The protests allowed them an opportunity to crawl back to the political centre stage.

As Bangladesh limps back to normalcy, with Internet and mobile phone services restored, people are asking how and why the agitating students, who were for weeks protesting peacefully, suddenly turned violent and hostile.

Mahfuz Anam, editor of Bangladesh’s English-language newspaper *Daily Star*, wrote: “Slowly but surely, the story of the student movement for quota reform is fading from the official narrative and that of the BNP-Jamaat conspiracy to destabilise the country is gaining currency.”

He added: “In our view, both stories merit coverage and in-depth analyses. Why one is fading and the other is becoming bigger is because one suits those in power and the other embarrasses them. The blame game is on; demonising the other is in full swing.”

THE PROTESTS were centred essentially around the demand to reform the quota system in Bangladesh. Quotas were introduced in 1972, reserving 56 per cent of government jobs for different categories. A bulky 30 per cent was reserved for freedom fighters, and there was little objection to that in the initial days of independence.

In subsequent years, the privilege was extended to the freedom fighters’ children and then their grandchildren, triggering protests. Many people questioned the wisdom of the quota, and a perception gained ground that privileges were being given in perpetuity to families of freedom fighters. The question of who merited the description of “freedom fighter” was also contested, and it was often left to those in the ruling Awami League to make a decision on this.

During a similar student agitation in 2018,



► **Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina** weeps while inspecting the Mirpur metro station in Dhaka, which was vandalised during the protests.
BANGLADESH PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE/AFP

The term “razakar” is used for those who worked with the Pakistani army in 1971 to identify, torture, and kill freedom fighters. It is considered pejorative in Bangladesh.

Prime Minister Hasina became so disgusted with the bickering about freedom fighters that she decided to scrap the quota system. But in June this year, the High Court Division (popularly known as the “High Court”) of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh reinstated the quota system and dismissed the government order of 2018. This brought the students back on the streets. The Prime Minister decided to move the Supreme Court and challenge the High Court ruling.

On July 21, the Supreme Court of Bangladesh struck down the June ruling by the High Court Division but brought in a 5 per cent quota for freedom fighters’ descendants. The ruling also said 1 per cent of government jobs would be reserved for people of tribal communities and 1 per cent for people with disabilities or identifying as the third gender; for the remaining 93 per cent of government jobs, candidates would be judged on merit.

MANY OBSERVERS saw two distinct phases of the protests: a peaceful one and another that gradually turned violent in the wake of reports of the Prime Minister’s “razakar” comment on July 14. The term “razakar” is used for those who collaborated with the Pakistani army in 1971 to identify, torture, and kill hundreds of families of freedom fighters or their sympathisers. It is considered pejorative in Bangladesh.

Hasina has since denied that she compared the students to “razakars”. However, while answering questions on the protests, she said: “I don’t know why there is so much resentment against freedom fighters.” She went on to talk about the sacrifices by freedom fighters and their contribution to founding an independent Bangladesh, and added: “If the grandchildren of freedom fighters don’t enjoy the quotas, grandchildren of razakars will enjoy them.”

The Prime Minister may not have likened student protesters to razakars, but her use of the word in the context of the protests was widely



interpreted by students as an attempt to identify them with razakars.

As the students’ anger spilled out of campuses, there emerged newly coined slogans such as “*tumi ke, ami ke?... razakar, razakar*” (Who are you and who am I? We are all razakar, razakar) or “*chaite gelam odhikar, hoye gelam razakar*” (We were protesting for our rights but now we are all branded as razakar). They were meant to be ironical as the students deliberately invoked this hated term to focus on their plight. The government and its supporters saw it as an act of defiance.

As the protests turned violent, many armed youngsters started roaming the streets posing as students. It was hard to distinguish between them and genuine student protesters. The government emptied out hostels and shut all schools and educational institutions indefinitely. All scheduled examinations were cancelled, to be held only after restoration of normalcy.

Hasina, who won her fourth consecutive term as Prime Minister in January, which also made

The Prime Minister may not have likened student protesters to razakars, but her use of the word in the context of the protests was widely interpreted by the students as such.

▼ **Cultural activists** clash with the police during a song march on July 30 for people who were killed in the recent protests in Dhaka. The government has since called for a day of mourning on that day, but students denounced the gesture as disrespectful.
MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/AFP

her the longest-serving leader in Bangladesh, saw the violence as the handiwork of the BNP-Jamaat combine and said the students were used as shields.

Her critics blamed her for the way the situation spiralled out of control, citing her thoughtless “razakar” comment and her decision to use the police and her Chhatra League student leaders to deal with the situation instead of engaging with the protesters herself.

“The Prime Minister could have intervened early and restrained the trigger-happy police,” said Imtiaz Ahmed, a former political science professor of Dhaka University.

Michael Kugelman, Director of the South Asia Institute in Washington, DC’s Wilson Center, felt the protests were orchestrated and led by the wider public, mostly students, but with no initial involvement from the BNP or its allies. He added that this did not mean that they had not infiltrated the protests. “Given how large and widespread the protests were, they could have easily blended in. But the government is wrong to paint these protests solely as a violent play by political thugs.”

“On the contrary, the protests reflect the anger and grievances of the public, not of a political party. Given how angry the students were about the state’s harsh response—and about state repression and corruption more broadly—the protesters’ violence was really a reflection of pure public rage, much of it pent up, against the state,” Kugelman pointed out.

Hasina is now trying to unearth the forces that she believes have taken advantage of the student protests to launch an assault against her to destabilise her government.

Mahfuz Anam suggested that she should reach out to the students who are deeply hurt by the government's repressive measures during the protests. "Students' trust must be regained. A difficult task, but it must be attempted with sincerity and earnestness," he wrote.

Sceptics however think Hasina will fall back on her tried and trusted methods. Kugelman said: "She has resorted to her usual playbook: crack down hard and blame violent opposition forces." He said that these tactics had worked in the past. "But this time around, with the repressive response of such great scale, and having generated so much public anger, she is taking a big gamble."

Many in Bangladesh and India may refuse to accept Kugelman's position. They seriously believe that Hasina, one of the most targeted leaders in the world who has faced at least 19 attempts on her life and whose family was wiped out in a military coup, has good reason to find the masterminds behind the recent crisis. Her election victory in January was a smooth run as the BNP and most other opposition parties stayed away when the government refused to accept their demand that the election be held under a caretaker government.

In the run-up to the election, the BNP had managed to convince the US about Hasina's democratic backsliding, and the Joe Biden administration imposed a series of sanctions on her to ensure a free and fair election. India, however, succeeded in persuading the US that the election was an "internal affair" of Bangladesh and it was left to Hasina to deal with her political opponents. The BNP and Hasina's detractors in the West may use the violence during the student protests and the killings to convince the US and the European Union to impose fresh sanctions on her government.

DID INDIA'S position change after the protests? As long as the BJP is in power in India, the BNP will not be an option, said Kugelman. He pointed out that New Delhi is categorical in its belief that the BNP, and parties friendly with it like the Jamaat, represent a dangerous Islamist threat. "India will back Hasina to the bitter end," Kugelman said.

▼ **Protesters clashing with Border Guard Bangladesh in Dhaka on July 19.**
MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/REUTERS



India has facilitated the safe return of about 6,700 of its nationals, mostly students, in the wake of the disturbances. It has shown confidence in Hasina's leadership by describing the crisis as an "internal matter".

Narendra Modi and Hasina have succeeded in forging a special bond of friendship and cooperation that has led the two countries to work together in a wide range of areas from energy and connectivity to security and defence to trade and investment. Despite China's growing footprint in Bangladesh in recent years, the Bangladeshi Prime Minister has managed to achieve a diplomatic balance between the two rival powers. She has also stayed unfazed by occasional taunts and derogatory remarks made by BJP leaders against Bangladesh.

India is yet to forget the "uncooperative years" of the BNP government in Dhaka. While there was negligible cooperation in the economic sector, anti-Indian elements, such as insurgent groups in India's north-eastern region, were encouraged to operate from Bangladeshi soil.

Some BNP leaders have tried to reach out to the Modi government to persuade it that a cooperative partnership may be possible in fu-

Narendra Modi and Hasina have succeeded in forging a special bond of friendship that has led the two countries to work together in a wide range of areas.

ture. But India believes that once the BNP comes to power it will not be able to resist the influence of the Jamaat and other anti-India forces.

India has high stakes in Bangladesh. It is in India's interest to see the country stabilise under Hasina's leadership at the earliest. A prolonged phase of violence and instability in Bangladesh can be a serious cause of concern for India. "Instability in any part of the neighbourhood is a matter of concern for India," said Vee-na Sikri, a former High Commissioner to Bangladesh.

Neighbouring Myanmar has been going through a long spell of violence and instability. A similar situation in Bangladesh can expose India's vulnerable north-eastern region, which shares borders with these two countries, to huge security challenges. India would want to prevent such a situation at its doorstep. ■

Pranay Sharma is a commentator on political and foreign-affairs related developments. He has worked in senior editorial positions in leading media organisations.

AT A GLANCE



Language movement

The language movement of East Pakistan began in 1948. It reached a climactic moment on February 21, 1952, when several students lost their lives in police firing on protesters. The movement ended in 1956 with the adoption of both Urdu and Bengali as state languages of Pakistan.



Coup of August 15, 1975

Bangladesh's founding father Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and most of his family were assassinated in a coup on August 15, 1975. The US' CIA and Pakistan were at that time widely believed to have masterminded the coup, especially because of the way it was carried out on India's Independence Day.



War crime trials

The International Crimes Tribunal was set up in Bangladesh in 2009 to try the "war criminals" of 1971. The charges include rape, murder, and abductions. Notwithstanding its name, it is a local tribunal. The sentences handed down by the tribunal include the death penalty.



Relations with India

India has been a friend of Bangladesh from the moment of its birth in 1971. Bangladesh is now India's biggest trade partner in South Asia. India is Bangladesh's second largest trading partner. Fifty-four rivers flow between the two countries, including the Teesta.

The ‘secret’ agenda of Trump 2.0

Project 2025, prepared by a Washington-based conservative think tank, provides the details of what to expect in a second Donald Trump administration. Some of the ideas are so extreme that even the Trump campaign does not want to be publicly associated with it. **SANGAY K. MISHRA**

The political upheaval caused initially by the assassination attempt on former President Donald Trump and subsequently by President Joe Biden’s decision to drop out of the race has reconfigured the 2024 US presidential race dramatically. The media discussions after the first presidential debate, where Biden’s performance was widely considered to be terrible, became exclusively focussed on Biden’s age and declining health.

The assassination attempt on Trump during a rally in Pennsylvania moved the conversation to the dangers of political violence, generating some sympathy for Trump. In the process, a critical issue was completely sidelined: what would a second Trump administration look like? What should people expect if Trump, who has refused to accept the results of the 2020 presidential election, comes back to power, a scenario that seemed the most likely outcome before Biden decided to withdraw from the race and Vice President Kamala Harris emerged as the most likely nominee of the Democratic Party.

A document called Project 2025 provides a peek into what the second Trump administration might look like. Prepared by the Heritage Foundation, a well-known conservative think tank in Washington, DC, it is seen as the most detailed view of what to expect if Trump is elected. Some of the ideas in it are so extreme and controversial that the Trump campaign does not want to be publicly asso-

A sense of victimhood, specifically the idea of violence produced by the Left’s rhetoric, is something Trump has found extremely useful after the assassination attempt.

ciated with it. The Republican convention in the immediate wake of the assassination attempt was a good moment to turn a page on the controversy and pivot to a message of national unity and calm. The Trump campaign used the sympathy wave to briefly claim that Trump was interested in national unity and in lowering the political temperature. However, the core tenets of the second Trump presidential campaign, as reflected in Project 2025, remain deeply troubling.

AT A CONFIDENT and boisterous Republican convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Trump accepted the Republican presidential nomination. Leading up to it, the US national media wrote that an emotional Trump appeared vulnerable and softer after the attack. They called him more relatable and anticipated a call for national unity and a sombre political tone in his convention speech.

Trump started his speech by talking at length about the attack. He invoked fate, God, and the uncertainties of life. For a brief while, he used a different style of speaking—sombre, reflective, and vulnerable—and called for national unity. But he soon reverted to his angry, rambling self, going on to deliver the longest convention speech given by a Republican presidential nominee.

A large part of the speech was focussed on the greatest “invasion” that the US is enduring in the form of unauthorised border crossings. He depicted migrants in the most dehumanising language: “They are coming from prisons. They are coming from jails. They are coming from mental institutions and insane asylums.” Trump invoked the iconic character of Hannibal Lecter, a serial killer who ate his victims, from the movie *The Silence of the Lambs* to



describe migrants crossing the border. It was clear that Trump, even when finding himself in a stronger position and with an opportunity to reset his campaign tone, could not move away from a dark tone evoking “American carnage” and cities being taken over by migrant criminals and rapists, a hyperbolic statement completely disconnected from reality.

MANY, INCLUDING THOSE in the Trump campaign, saw the assassination attempt as politically motivated, triggered by a history of strong liberal and Left rhetoric against Trump. Some prominent Republicans took to the social media platform X to lay the blame on the Left and the Biden campaign.

For example, Senator J.D. Vance, who was not then named the vice presidential candidate, said: “The central premise of the Biden campaign is that President Donald Trump is an authoritarian fascist who must be stopped at all costs. That rhetoric led directly to President Trump’s attempted assassination.” Marjorie Taylor Greene, a well-known Republican member of Congress, wrote: “Pray for Ameri-

ca. The left wants a civil war. They have been trying to start one for years. These people are sick and evil.” Similar comments flooded the airwaves and social media to create the impression that Trump was a victim of Left- and liberal-inspired violence.

It came like a boon for a candidate who is not only known for his extremist utterances but who also effectively endorsed the violence unleashed on January 6, 2021, when a mob of his supporters attacked Capitol Hill to stop the certification of Biden as President. Trump never accepted Biden as a legitimately elected President, and a large segment of Republican elected officials and electorate followed him in

▼ **Former President**
Donald Trump immediately after the assassination attempt on July 13.
GENE J. PUSKAR/AP

A core policy proposal emerging from Project 2025 is a call for dismantling the “administrative state”, to demand the evisceration of the federal bureaucracy dealing with regulations on the environment and health.

With J.D. Vance, seen as the ideological inheritor of the Make America Great Again platform, as his running mate, Trump has tried to further cement his populist image as the saviour of the white working classes.

questioning the legitimacy of the electoral process.

A sense of victimhood, specifically the idea of violence produced by the Left's rhetoric, is something Trump has found extremely useful after the assassination attempt. However, as law enforcement agencies began to dig into the gunman's possible motives and his past, the story did not add up to reach the political motives that were initially attributed to the attack. The initial stages of the investigation seemed to suggest that Thomas Crooks, the 20-year-old gunman, might have been closer to the perpetrators of gun violence in US schools rather than a politically motivated assassin interested in left-liberal rhetoric.

The FBI investigation and journalistic accounts suggest a young man not too interested in politics and without a history of strong political opinions. Crooks came from a suburban family with mixed political leanings. His moth-

▼ **J.D. Vance**, Republican vice presidential nominee, and his family greet supporters on July 28 in St Cloud, Minnesota.
STEPHEN MATUREN/GETTY IMAGES VIA AFP



er is a Democrat while his father and older sister are Libertarians. He was a registered Republican and once donated \$15 to a progressive cause. His friends from school and other acquaintances do not recall him talking politics or being passionate about political issues. He came from a family that owned multiple guns, including the AR-15 rifle used in the assassination attempt. According to a report in *The New York Times*, experts who study gun violence have said that Crooks looked closer to a 21st century school shooter than a John Wilkes Booth, the man who assassinated Abraham Lincoln to aid the political cause of confederacy.

There is no doubt that US politics has been deeply polarised and its social fabric frayed, but the assassination attempt has raised questions about the high prevalence of gun violence that the US political system, specifically the Republican Party, has refused to engage with. The ongoing investigation might still reveal some unknown aspects, but so far the incident does not fit the narrative that Trump supporters want to believe.

WITH THE CHOICE of J.D. Vance as his vice presidential candidate, Trump has tried to further cement his populist image as the saviour of the white working classes. Vance is seen as the ideological inheritor of Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) platform and a part of Trump's attempt to further transform the Republican Party according to his vision. Project 2025 is a significant part of this transformation, where traditional conservatism has been blended into the MAGA platform.

Even though Project 2025 was produced under the stewardship of the Heritage Foundation with the contribution of hundreds of conservative groups, there are a number of people from the first Trump administration who played important roles in crafting the policies. A core policy proposal emerging from the document is a call for dismantling the "administrative state". This umbrella term is used to demand the evisceration of the federal bureaucracy dealing with regulations on the environment, health, education, and other important matters. It envisions a vast expansion of presidential power that includes ending the neutrality of the Justice Department.

FRONTLINE



Project 2025 implores the next Republican President to start by erasing terms like sexual orientation and gender identity; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI); gender equality; and gender sensitivity. The project urges the next President to excise what it terms as the noxious tenets of critical race theory and gender ideology from curricula in public schools. This demand about critical race theory and DEI has been explicitly articulated on the Republican platform as well.

The project asks the federal government to do everything possible to ensure that women carry their pregnancy to the full term, no matter the circumstances, by excluding, defunding, and eliminating any other option. It calls for revoking the Food and Drug Administration approval of the abortion pill Mifepristone, which is used in more than half the abortions nationwide. Despite its close proximity to Project 2025, the Trump campaign has tried to distance itself strategically from extreme views, such as the one on abortion, given the fact that such positions are not popular among women and the general electorate.

THE PROJECT ALSO calls for an unprecedented cut in both undocumented and documented immigration. It matches with the Republican platform of 2024, written by the Trump campaign, that states that the party is committed to implementing the largest deportation campaign in the history of the US. There are 11 to 12 million undocumented immigrants in the US, an

▼ **Kamala Harris**, who is set to fight the US presidential election as the Democratic candidate in 2024, with Joe Biden at a press conference in August 2020 when he was the presidential candidate and she was his running mate.
OLIVIER DOULIERY/AFP

The Trump campaign has tried to distance itself strategically from extreme views, such as the one on abortion, given that such positions are not popular among women and the general electorate.

overwhelming majority of whom are law-abiding, productive individuals and families. A large majority of them have lived in the US for more than a decade and built deep connections in their communities.

Trump invokes President Dwight Eisenhower in his speeches as his role model in planning a historic deportation. In a tragic and inhumane chapter in US history, the Eisenhower administration claimed to have deported 1.3 million undocumented Mexican labourers over a short period starting in 1954. Officially termed Operation Wetback, a racist slur used in the US for Mexican farm labour, the deportation campaign used the military to round up Mexican workers and even deported a significant number of American citizens of Mexican origin. Mae Ngai, an immigration scholar, wrote that a large number were deported using ships that a congressional investigation compared to an "eighteenth century slave ship".

As the election campaign moves into high gear, Trump has to be pressed to take a stand on these questions, and the outcome will depend on how well the Democratic candidate highlights some of these extreme ideas at the core of a second Trump administration. Most of all, the fundamental relationship between the Trump campaign and the illiberal and authoritarian ideas in Project 2025 needs to be fully challenged. ■

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Country	Team Size			P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	Total	Rank	Awards			
	All	M	F									G	S	B	HM
United States	6	5	1	42	41	19	40	35	15	192	1	5	1	0	0
People's Republic of China	6	6	0	42	42	31	40	22	13	190	2	5	1	0	0
Republic of Korea	6	6	0	42	37	18	42	7	22	168	3	2	4	0	0
India	6	6	0	42	34	11	42	28	10	167	4	4	1	0	1

HM: honourable mention

India's rich haul at maths olympiad

THE six-member Indian team that took part in the 65th edition of the International Mathematical Olympiad (IMO 2024) held in Bath, UK, from July 11 to 22 won four gold medals, one silver, and one honourable mention. The team rank was fourth out of 108 participating countries. The team comprised Adhitya Mangudy Venkata Ganesh (Pune), Ananda Bhaduri (Guwahati), Kanav Talwar (Noida, Uttar Pradesh), and Rushil Mathur (Mumbai), all of whom won gold; Arjun Gupta (Delhi), who won silver; and Siddharth Choppara (Pune), who got an honourable mention.

This is the best performance in the IMO by an Indian team since the country's debut in the competition in 1989, in terms of the number of gold medals won and the rank achieved, a press release by the Homi Bhabha

▼ **The victorious Team India** at IMO 2024 with the accompanying Deputy Leader Rijul Saini, Short Term Visitor at HBCSE (extreme right) and Observer Mainak Ghosh, Postdoctoral Fellow at ISI, Bengaluru (extreme left). HBCSE, MUMBAI



Centre for Science Education (HBCSE) of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai, said.

The IMO, which was started in 1959, is the World Championship Mathematics Competition for high school students and is held annually in a different country. Participating countries send at most six students to the IMO each year. Indian participation is coordinated by the HBCSE.

IMO 2024 had six questions of 7 marks each. Google's specialised AI systems, AlphaProof and AlphaGeometry 2, developed at its subsidiary DeepMind, worked together to successfully solve four out of the six problems, which is equivalent to winning the silver medal. The top four countries and their scores are given in the table above. In all 609 students took part (528 boys, 81 girls).

A blood test to detect cancer

ROGER ZEMP and colleagues of the University of Alberta, Canada, have developed a non-invasive and painless cancer-detection method using ultrasound waves instead of the usual biopsy for tissue extraction to obtain genetic information about a patient's cancer. The method also enables early detection of certain types of cancer. Zemp reported this development by his team at the recent meeting of the Acoustical Society of America in Ottawa, Canada.

Knowledge about genetic mutations or chromosomal abnormalities in the cells of a growing tumour is critical for an accurate diagnosis of the cancer and for prognosis and treatment. Zemp's team used ultrasound

FRONTLINE



▼ **Roger Zemp and Parsin Hajireza** with their equipment that is capable of early detection of cancer in growing tumours using acoustic waves.

FACULTY OF ENGINEERING/UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

pulses to stimulate cancer cells to release their genetic information. This information then circulates in the bloodstream and can be detected through a blood test. This is less painful, significantly cheaper, and easier to perform than a traditional biopsy.

By growing cancerous human tumours in mice, the team found that this method also increased the concentration of cancer-relevant DNA and RNA biomarkers in the bloodstream by up to a factor of 100, which was sufficient for detection with a blood test. "People have been looking for ways to use blood tests to make diagnoses for quite some time, but it's challenging because very few tumor-specific biomarkers are naturally present in the blood," Zemp was quoted by the American Physical Society's online magazine *Physics*.

Curiosity finds elemental sulphur on Mars

ON May 30, Curiosity, NASA's Mars rover, drove over a rock and cracked it open to reveal something never seen before on the red planet: elemental yellow sulphur crystals.

Since October 2023, the rover has been exploring a region of Mars rich with sulphates, compounds containing sulphur and oxygen that form as water evaporates. Unlike the past findings, which have been of such sulphur-based minerals made of sulphur and other materials, the most recent detection is of pure elemental sulphur. NASA scientists are not clear about what relationship, if any, the elemental sulphur has to the other sulphur-based minerals in the area.

Unlike sulphur compounds that smell of rotten eggs arising from hydrogen sulphide gas, elemental sulphur is odourless. It forms only in a narrow range of conditions that scientists had not associated with the history of this location. And Curiosity has found a lot of it: an entire region of bright rocks similar to the one the rover crushed. "Finding a field of stones made of pure sulphur is like finding an oasis in the desert," said Ashwin Vasavada, Curiosity's project scientist of NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. "It shouldn't be there, so now we have to explain it."

It is one of the several discoveries Curiosity has made while roving over the rocky Martian terrain within Gediz Vallis channel, a groove that winds down on the 5-km-tall Mount



▼ **A close-up** of the pure sulphur crystals that

NASA's Curiosity Mars rover found inside a rock on May 30, the 4,200th Martian day, or sol, of the mission. Curiosity captured this image on June 4, the 4,205th sol of the mission.

NASA/JPL-CALTECH/
MALIN SPACE SCIENCE
SYSTEMS

Sharp, the base of which the rover has been ascending since 2014. Each layer of the mountain represents a different period of Martian history. Curiosity's mission is to study where and when the planet's ancient terrain could have provided the nutrients needed for microbial life, if any ever formed on Mars.

While the sulphur rocks were too small and brittle to be sampled with a drill at the discovery site, a large rock nicknamed "Mammoth Lakes" that was safe for drilling with the rover's powerful drill at the end of the six-wheeled rover's 2 m robotic arm was located close by. Curiosity pocketed the powdered rock into instruments within it for further analysis.

Compiled by **R. Ramachandran**



Environment

DAMMED IN THE HIMALAYA

Given the high possibility of one or more devastating earthquakes in the Himalaya in the near future, the reckless construction of big dams in the mountains spells disaster. **GOPAKUMAR MENON**

In the essay “Who is responsible for Sikkim’s glacial lake outburst flood?” that appeared in *Frontline* on October 25, 2023, the author and researcher Mona Chettri wrote: “On the night of October 3, 2023, the South Lhonak Lake in North Sikkim breached, causing a Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF).

“Located approximately 60 kilometres downstream of the lake, in Chungthang town of Mangan district, was the 1,200 MW Teesta III dam, the biggest hydropower project in Sikkim. The dam was decimated by the GLOF, which also unleashed devasta-

tion on downstream areas and communities.”

A disaster of this magnitude in the fragile ecosystem of the Himalaya had long been predicted. But the interest in hydropower—classified as green energy despite its extraordinarily poor record in that respect—continues unabated. R.K. Singh, the then Union Minister for Power, and New & Renewable Energy, stated in a written rep-

ly in the Rajya Sabha on December 12, 2023, that eight large hydropower projects (above 25 megawatt), with a combined capacity of 6,037 MW, were under construction in the north-eastern region; one of these projects is the 2,000 MW Lower Subansiri dam, one of the largest hydropower projects planned in the Himalayan region, which is likely to become operational soon, after years of delay, numerous accidents on site, and cost escalations. Delays, disasters, and devolvement are the norm rather than the exception in most such projects planned across India. Yet more are on the anvil as clearances get issued.

For instance, in Arunachal Pradesh, on August 12, 2023, the State government handed over to three Central public sector undertakings 12 long-pending hydropower projects that the private sector had taken on and then rejected as unviable. All the projects come at extraordinarily high cost—financially, socially, and ecologically. For instance, the projected cost overrun of the Lower Subansiri dam is expected to be over Rs.13,200 crore, while ecological costs involve the destruction of swathes of evergreen forests, and social costs include the displacement of people without adequate compensation or resettlement provisions. Re-

▶ **The Himalayan plate boundary** showing the major earthquakes in recent history (1897 to 1950). The Central Seismic Gap is the segment that has not been affected over the past several centuries. According to scientists at the University of Colorado, Boulder, this suggests that the region is overdue for an earthquake with a magnitude of 8. ADAPTED FROM THE BOOK *THE RUMBLING EARTH: THE STORY OF INDIAN EARTHQUAKES* BY C.P. RAJENDRAN AND KUSALA RAJENDRAN (2024)

Delays, disasters, and devolvement are the norm rather than the exception in most hydropower projects planned across India. Yet more are on the anvil as clearances get issued.

sentment against these projects has been brewing for a long time in Arunachal Pradesh, with human rights groups and organisations pleading to let affected people have a greater say in the decision-making process. Their objections have gone largely unheeded.

THE BIG QUESTION then is, are projects of this magnitude worth it? The answer involves not just cost-benefit analyses and understanding of the recent dismal history of the hydropower sector but another essential element: risk. Hydropower projects in the Himalaya face two real, ever-present, risks: the possibility of a devastating earthquake and ruinous floods caused by glacial lake overflows.

In April 2015, an earthquake in Nepal with a moment magnitude (Mw) of 7.8 killed over 9,000 people and injured at least 22,000; it was the worst natural disaster in Nepal since the 1934 Nepal-Bihar earthquake. It triggered an avalanche on Mount Everest, killing 22 climbers and flattening villages, decimating a third of Nepal’s hydropower capacity and destroying UNESCO World Heritage Sites in the Kathmandu valley. This came close on the heels of the Uttarakhand floods of 2013, possibly caused by a glacial lake outburst, which killed hundreds and damaged properties worth crores in India, including at least 10 hydropower projects under construction.

Earthquakes are likely to recur in the Himalaya: scientific studies have warned of a devastating, intense earthquake with a Mw of above 8 in the region. Across the world, one great earthquake—defined as an event that measures 8 or more on the Mw scale—happens every year or two. Data help us understand the destructive potential of such an earthquake: an earthquake with a magnitude of 8 has 10 times the level of ground shaking as an earthquake with a magnitude 7 and releases energy equal to that resulting from the detonation of 6 million tonnes of TNT.

In an article in *The Hindu* titled “A hydro onslaught the Himalayas cannot take” (September 3, 2021), Mallika Bhanot, a member of Ganga Ahvaan, and C.P. Rajendran, Adjunct Professor, National Institute of Advanced Studies, note that about 15 per cent of the great



▶ **An aerial view of** the Tapovan hydropower project plant washed away by the flash floods in Chamoli, Uttarakhand, on February 12, 2021. ARUN SHARMA/PTI

earthquakes of the 20th century took place in the Himalaya.

THE LIKELIHOOD of such an earthquake recurring in the Himalaya has been endorsed by a number of experts, including Roger Bilham, Professor of Geology, University of Colorado at Boulder, and Luca Dal Zilio, Assistant Professor of Geophysics, Earth Observatory of Singapore. In August 2020, Steven G. Wesnousky, Professor of Geology and Seismology, University of Nevada, US, published a paper in the research journal *Seismological Research Letters* titled “Great Pending Himalayan Earthquakes”. The principal conclusion of his paper was that ge-

ological, historical, and geophysical observations show that the entire Himalayan arc is poised to produce a sequence of great earthquakes. Supriyo Mitra, Professor at the Department of Earth Sciences in the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Kolkata, noted that this research matched previous studies.

The eminence of these scientists and their observations need to be taken seriously. Arunachal Pradesh is categorised as Zone V (at maximum risk) in the mapping of seismic zones in India and it has a recent history of numerous quakes measuring above 5 on the Richter scale, including the Assam-Tibet earthquake of 1950 with its epicentre in the Mishmi

Hills that killed at least 4,800 people.

The critical difference between the great earthquakes of half a century ago and those of today is that the damaging impact of such an earthquake on a mega-structure like a dam will be without precedence. It will have horrific consequences for communities living alongside these structures and downstream from them, with economic losses running into billions of dollars and environmental damage that will take decades to repair (if at all). The damage to the mountain ecosystem will be immeasurable, making it even more vulnerable to future hazards. Compounding the risk is the increasing threat from glacial lake outbursts as a result of climate change.

Satellite imagery and ground-level observations indicate that glaciers in the Himalaya are melting at an unprecedented rate, increasing the chances of glacial lake breaches or “outbursts”. GLOFs have already caused large-scale destruction: the Uttarakhand floods of 2013, for instance, which caused immense damage, were triggered by very heavy rainfall along with climate change-induced melting of the Chorabari glacier. As climate change gathers higher-than-expected momentum, the number of glacial lakes being created (they are formed in large depressions that were earlier eroded by glacial activity) and the concomitant risks posed by GLOFs are compounding.

In the Chenab basin, for instance, where Lahaul is situated, the threat of such outbursts looms large: from just 55 such lakes in 2001, the basin recorded 254 in 2018, an increase of 462 per cent in just 18 years. A research paper titled “Hazard from Himalayan glacier lake outburst floods” (2019) by Georg Veh, Oliver Korup, and Ariane Walz noted with concern: “Sustained glacier melt in the Himalayas has gradually spawned more than 5,000 glacier lakes that are dammed by potentially unstable moraines. When such dams break, glacier lake outburst floods can cause catastrophic societal and geomorphic impacts.”

IN APRIL 2024, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) released satellite-data-based analysis covering about 40 years on expansion of glacial lakes in the catchment areas of Indian Himalayan rivers. A catchment is a vast area of land usually surrounded by hills or mountains that collects water, which, in turn, is funnelled into the river through streams and underground channels. The ISRO study was meant to understand the modifications that have occurred, principally as a consequence of climate change. The results were worrying: a quarter of these lakes have expanded to about twice their size from four decades ago as glaciers retreat in the face of warming.

Another study from July 2016 led by Wolfgang Schwanghart, a geomorphologist at the Institute of Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Potsdam, Germany, estimat-

Worryingly, a large number of these hydro projects are located in the eastern Himalaya, where the global lake outburst flood risks are the highest.

ed that of the 177 hydropower projects located close to Himalayan glaciers, over a fifth—including many in India—could be under threat from floods caused by glacial lake outbursts. Worryingly, a large number of these hydro projects are located in the eastern Himalaya, where the GLOF risks are the highest (the ISRO study estimated that 58 lakes in the catchment of the Brahmaputra have expanded significantly).

IF EARTHQUAKES AND GLOFs were not enough, there is another risk: of random raining of debris from the relatively young Himalayan land-mass, which is now being modified at an unprecedented rate. The European Space Agency reported on June 14, 2021, “On 7 February 2021, the Chamoli district in the Uttarakhand region of India experienced a humanitarian tragedy when a large mass of rock and ice, around 27 million cubic metres, was released from the steep mountain flank of the Ronti peak.

This collapse caused a flow of debris to barrel down the Ronti Gad, Rishiganga, and Dhauliganga river valleys, causing significant destruction along the route, killing more than 200 people and destroying two major hydropower facilities that were under construction.... The study provides satellite evidence that the disaster was caused by a large mass of ice and rock dislodged from the slopes of Ronti Peak, starting as a giant landslide that transformed into a mud and debris flow causing destruction along its path.” The BBC reported: “To put this volume [of debris] in context, it’s about 10 times that of the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt. When the mass hit the Ronti Gad valley floor, it released the energy equivalent to 15 Hi-

A study from 2016 estimated that of the 177 hydropower projects located close to Himalayan glaciers, over a fifth—including many in India—could be under threat from floods caused by glacial lake outbursts.



► **On the banks of the swollen Sutlej** after heavy monsoon rains in Rampur, Himachal Pradesh, on July 9, 2023. AFP



► **Muck deposited** on the banks of the Alaknanda river during the repair and restoration of Vishnuprayag hydropower project's barrage on December 6, 2013. KAVITA UPADHYAY



► **The flash flood-ravaged** town of Rangpo in Sikkim, on October 5, 2023. The flooding worsened when parts of a dam on the Teesta were washed away. PRAKASH ADHIKARI/AP

Landslides are far more common today than they used to be, more so along slopes that have witnessed construction

roshima atomic bombs” (“Chamoli disaster: ‘It hit the valley floor like 15 atomic bombs’”, June 13, 2021).

THE EGREGIOUS AND RECKLESS construction activity in these fragile ecosystems—both public constructions such as for roads and hydropower dams and private housing—is making the problem worse. Landslides are far more common today than they used to be, more so along slopes that have witnessed construction.

The 2023 monsoon season was disastrous for Himachal Pradesh. The Environics Trust reported: “Unprecedented rains during the current monsoon season in several pockets have wreaked havoc across the State. Extreme events such as flash floods and cloudbursts and associated landslides, subsidence and sinking of land and complete failure of populated hill slopes devastated lives across the State. Current estimates indicate 404 people lost their lives, 38 people are still missing, and 377 have been injured in the various events across the State.... *Three extreme spells* [emphasis added] (8 to 11 July, 14 to 15 August, and 22 to 23 August) and 163 identified landslides and 72 flash floods have been responsible for most of the impact. Kullu, Mandi, Shimla, Sirmour, Solan and Chamba districts were some of the worst affected” (“Preliminary analysis of 2023 disaster across Himachal Pradesh”, September 2023).

There is enough scientific and visual evidence today to rethink the aggressive plan for Himalayan development and adopt the precautionary principle, one that acts before there is complete scientific proof of a risk. There is far too much at stake to continue down the current course, and in our humility lies redemption. ■

Gopakumar Menon is a conservationist and author with a deep interest in the Himalaya.



Photo Essay

VENETIAN AFFAIR

The light in Venice teases and tempts the photographer, makes them look inwards.

Text and photographs by **Naveen Kishore**

*I am the man stilled
in a landscape racing past me*

So much remains still. So much remains in a state of *almost-born*. We know this in the case of thoughts. Or in my case, images. My constant battle between the analogue and the instant nature of the digital or the phone-*chimera*. That which excites even as it obliterates. Leaving very little room for “living”, that stretched period of anxious time that creates suspense.

I bring you back to my first encounter with the Stoppardian suspense. That startling opening of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. R & G, having lost their way into a limbo somewhere between Shakespeare and Beckett, are seen tossing coins. Guildenstern remarks: “There is an art to the building up of suspense,” flips a coin, then continues, “though it can be done by luck alone.” One of the two characters is aware that the coin is, in fact, two-headed. So there is no way the spinning can change the fate of the coin or of the character. And yet, what if? This



“existential” suspense is our modern-day condition. As in, despite the knowledge of the odds being stacked against us, there is a tiny window of hope.

The photographic *suspense* I speak of is somewhat in the nature of a moment *paused*. An act of almost-revealed. Not by accident. But by design and purpose. Perhaps even with some degree of motivation, as in Pinter’s plays. The Pinteresque pause anticipates in that moment of imposed-suspense a limbo that is full of everyday menace at one level and a vast melancholic helplessness at another. But. We know that the pause will create an active (or passive) moment of decision. Choice. For the character. One which implies the desire to act. Or to not do anything. Either because all has been numbed or because every act implies a risk-taking. You don’t want to take a risk. You let time step in—perhaps in the guise of circumstance—and choose for you. This choosing to *not choose* builds suspense.

This *phone-“chimera”*—the phone camera or digital camera is the modern-day instrument of what I call “obliterates”. The chimera offered by the digital while creating images is prone to a disappearance that is comparable to a “censoring” of the images. To deleting the ones that “in my opinion” do not work for me. Versus the old-fashioned analogue camera that transfers the movement into film, thereby stilling it for as long as the film lasts. The life term allotted to the invention called film negative. This mode of image-making does not allow you to tamper with that which is captured.

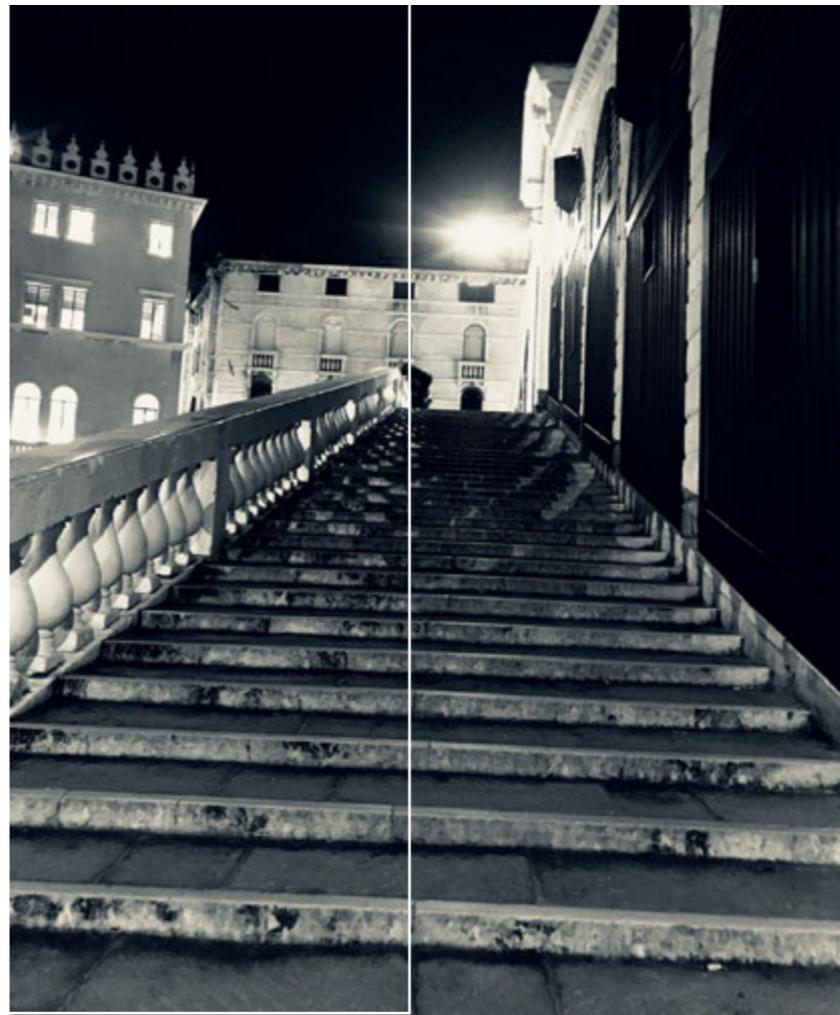
The light in Venice teases and tempts the photographer. Resist the lure of a Venice in colour. Except when overwhelmed by a combination of light and colour made translucent. By the very clear crisp direct Venetian light you become devoted to. Your theatre life cannot resist the clothesline hanging above your head that breaks the blue of the almost spring sky with a backlit red.

Mostly it is the black that accentuates the white in my photographs. Reflective, this light in Venice. Makes you look inwards. Even as you frame the odd gondo-



<https://telegram.me/PaperMagzine>







la silhouetted against the sunlit heritage of the buildings growing out of the canals. The boatman's shadow lengthening into the narrow canal waters with a shimmering hazy set of windows refusing to drown. Or the geometry of the black shadow squaring up like a dark pyramid on its side to the old warrior whose left knee matches the triangular tip of the shadow approaching slowly towards him at Campo S. Stae. The firstborn sliver of moon; the light upon the door knocker the size of your elbow challenging you to knock on the rosewood door.

Venice changes into a silent noir film late at night. The tourists are at rest. Only the few inhabitants (they have slowly dwindled over the years) move around like so many torsos on racing feet negotiating the several tiny bridges and the shadows in the criss-crossing lanes and by-lanes that run parallel to the canals. ■

Naveen Kishore is a photographer, theatre lighting designer, poet, and the publisher of Seagull Books.



A SIGHT TO BEHOLD

The opposite of the hero is not the villain but the pathetic man, a man we see only too often in life.

Prathyush Parasuraman

Pay Rs.50 and you can enter Thiruvananthapuram's C Theater. A few streets away from the city's bustling centre of temples and palaces, the theatre's facade has crumbled, with the overgrowth of monsoon foliage left untended for its regular clientele—men who gather in rhythmic routines around 11:30 am, 2:30 pm, 6:30 pm, and 9:30 pm, and seat themselves in tattered chairs to watch soft porn on a screen so roughhewn they might as well be projecting those heaving breasts on jute.

Men eye not just the faded screen but each other's squandered bodies too, walking towards them, sitting beside them, touching them, before finally leading them off to the bathroom outside on the edge of a field of overgrowth. They watch, they ask if they can be next, they queue, as if for rations.

These men are desperate. They stare, they demand, but it is all tinged with self-pity. It is not a roaring demand but a rumbled one. "Am I not handsome?" asked an old man circling around me.

A complicated masculinity was taking shape before my eyes. One that held its inadequacies on its shoulders and yet made the same male demands. The same but tamed by the possibility of rejection, even if not undeterred by it. It seems that the opposite of the hero is not the villain but the pathetic man, a man we see only too often in life. He is usually sublimated into the villain, who at the moment of being vanquished turns back into the pathetic man, pleading for his life or dignity or whatever the hero has stripped apart.

While working on *Soorai Potru* (2020),

the writer-director Sudha Kongara was insistent that Suriya's character—the entrepreneurial hero—borrow money from his wife, feeling almost embarrassed about it, despite everyone in the writers' room asking her to delete the scene. It was too pathetic for them, this scene, something no hero could ever retrieve from. They were seeing the very image of the hero elude their grasp. Kongara stood her ground.

The pathetic man is a sight to behold because he extinguishes the very possibility of heroism. Through his wretchedness, he expresses the limits of desirability—the limits beyond which he is irretrievably lost to desire, to heroism, to that centralising glamorous force. Kongara, then, set herself a challenge—through the force of storytelling to bring the man back from the brink of the pathetic—a challenge she met with the relentless punch of dialogues and soundscape.

THERE ARE OTHER WAYS, too, to perform this rescue operation. The Pakistani director Asim Abbasi sends a possibility from the other side of the border.

A man is eating a mango, ravenous, eyes ajar, sucking the fibrous seed, his flushed pink lips puckered. A single father holds his young, bespectacled son in his arms as they sleep, the father's arms curled around the son's body. The taut arched lower back of a man showering in translucent white underwear, the cut of each muscle glistening.

It is most likely you will emerge from Asim Abbasi's *Barzakh* with a stack of screenshots, the images I transcribed above, images heated with sex and tender with longing. How do you respond to Fawad Khan tracing kohl into the waterline of his eye, a close-up breathless with passion as though the image is in love with itself? Holding these images in your hands, you will try to imagine a show far superior, far more coherent





► **Fawad Khan** in a still from the teaser of *Barzakh*. BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

than what you watched because the images themselves are poignant, touched by a softness we do not see attached to men, a patient eros they are not given to often expressing on screen. It is what we do with great art; we make excuses for it. The art here, to be clear, is not the show itself, but the still, captured fragments of it. What is the opposite of gestalt?

Barzakh is obsessed with the figure of the grieving man: a patriarch still wounded from his long dead first love, his two sons, one weeping over his closeted homosexuality, the other burning with guilt over his wife's suicide. The women in their lives are entirely absent: recently dead, long dead, uninterested. At one point, now old and surly, the older brother asks the younger what he wants: "*Pyaar chahta hoon, bhai, aur kya?*" (I want love, brother, what else?) Abbasi has disbursed the nurturing, supportive nature of the female presence generally seen on screen to his many male characters. It is almost a negation of the demands we make of a man, and as a result of the woman too.

What does it mean to be a man represented? Masculinity on screen is often a central, mobilising road map

around which everything else congeals: the state, the women, even justice. To be anything on screen is to react to the men, their masculinity, each show rippling with the force of the male throw. The heroic man is the one who celebrates this centrality.

The opposite of the heroic man, naturally then, is the pathetic man—the one who sees life slipping away from him, the image of Guru Dutt singing "*Bichad gaya*" on loop. He is inconceivable as a central character. After all, you do not surrender to a pathetic man as you would to a hero. Instead, you reassure him. He demands more from you.

Of what use is a pathetic man to commercial storytelling, then? At his best, he refashions the very idea of heroism. At the least, he is a challenge for the filmmaker to overcome, and Abbasi girds the pathetic-ness of his men with tender and erotic images of

youth, to remind us that these men were once young and yearned in ways their bodies forgot. You are forced to see in them who they are and what they were, such is the pungency of the imagery.

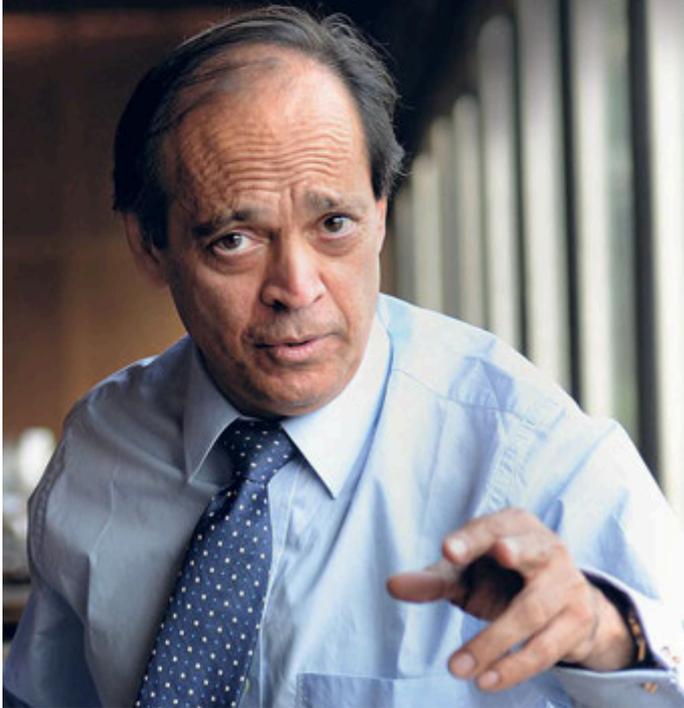
Maybe that is what made the men in that forgotten theatre deeply palpable, even if not desirable. Conversations with them eventually fell into the same interrogations: how long have you been coming here? What is your story? One of them tells me he was a football player for the State. He unconsciously pats his paunch as though to say it was not there before. He wears a hat to cover his hairline. There was more here before. I imagine his past, even if it is to forget his present. I reassure him. ■

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

You do not surrender to a pathetic man as you would to a hero. Instead, you reassure him. He demands more from you.

SONIC PATHWAYS

Vikram Seth's translation of the much-loved hymn to Hanuman is important because it reminds us, above all, that we are no longer translating our poetry just for an imagined "Western" audience but for each other as multilingual South Asians. **VIVEK NARAYANAN**



► **Vikram Seth** in New Delhi in 2013. MEETA AHLAWAT

Chanted in 40 *chaupais* with introductory and closing *dohas*, the *Hanuman Chalisa* is among the most popular and beloved of Hindi prayers. It is reputedly also authored and signed by Tulsidas of the great *Ramcharitmanas*, and while it cannot match the *Manas* in the range of that epic's imagery or the fineness of its emotional nuances, the *Chalisa* is first of all an ecstasy in sound, as Vikram Seth suggests in the introduction to his translation in this generously bilingual and gorgeously produced new Speaking Tiger edition. This is so in ways an ear like Seth's is perfectly equipped to capture: "the repeated nasal vowels of the 23rd *chaupai* or the repeated retroflex sounds of the 36th *chaupai*".

Each of us may have encountered this living sonic organism of the *Hanuman Chalisa* in a different, very specific, way or place. My own most intense memory of its recital is from a visit to Ayodhya in December 2019. The town was utterly wretched, utterly neglected, over-surveilled, and hate-destroyed, but my one bright spot was on the ghat each morning when a young bodybuilder lost himself in the chant of the prayer, deeply immersed in the sound, in the trust of his self-performance. I could see in him the sense of success and possibility that Hanuman seems to provide.

PERHAPS THE MOST interesting thing about Hanuman as a whole, then, is that he means something different to each of us. For Seth, the connection is so deep that it manifests, at least according to his introduction, in a charming dedication to a character from his novel *A Suitable Boy*: to Bhaskar, the young mathematician genius, who, according to possibly new details revealed by Seth in the introduction, has learned and loved the *Hanuman Chalisa* as part of his practice for the Ramlila (is Seth quietly revealing part of the plot of his unfinished sequel to *A Suitable Boy* here?). True to the dreamiest relations of the authorial mind, Seth dedicates his own *Hanuman Chalisa* translation "to Bhaskar, who learned the poem before he was five, but who spent his fifties fighting the chauvinism and intolerance to which this and many other well-beloved religious texts and rituals have been put".

The Hindi text and the diacritics-free Roman transliteration then, lest we forget, provide a vital entry point for *any* reader to experience the sound in the original alongside the translation. But the question remains, if the qualities of the poem in the original are deeply and crucially sound-dependent, can it be translated into a distinctly foreign language like English? There are two categories of possible answers: 1) No and 2) Maybe.

Count me in the realms of Maybe: no





one translation need aspire to do it all, but the pressure of translation *even when wrong or inaccurate* can exert an interesting innovative pressure on the language it is written in. Most of all, a *sonic* pressure.

Moreover, I am much of a believer (hoper) that translators of poetry ought to be practising poets themselves, with both the understanding from the inside of what it means to write a poem, and the immersion in the past and contemporary poetry of the language they are translating the poem into.

Seth seems qualified: at his best he can write ingenious verse with a simple and profound sonic imagination and an unerring sense for “traditional” English iambic metres; google his poem “Dubious” to see it all come together. Seth also has a gift for intricate end-rhymes (those that come at the end of the line) and—unlike much Sanskrit verse, for instance—Tulsidas’ rooted Awadhi verse does indeed achieve glory in a full range of lovely and sonorous end-rhymes.

Translating metre, however, is a thornier matter. A wide range of classical and traditional metres, including Ancient Greek, Sanskrit, and most Indian languages, primarily measure and add together “quantity”—or syllable/vowel length; for *chaupais*, this is calculated by the *mātrā*. Early English metre, by contrast, like other Germanic and Northern European metres, marks and counts the “stresses” (stressed syllables/accented syllables) and later the “unstressed syllables” between them. In other words, in the Northern European system, the metrical foot can be understood as a counting of beats and/or pulse, whereas the classical “quantity” is more a measure of time.

▼
Hanuman being worshipped by all *vanara* (monkey) chiefs and by Jambavan in a banana garden. An original work inspired by the *Hanuman Chalisa* by Narra Seshu Vinod of Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh. WIKI COMMONS

By putting the verb last, Seth has also bent standard English syntax further towards Indian expectations.

The attempts from the 16th century onwards to force Greek quantitative metrical language onto English/Anglo-Saxon stress-based metre and Latinate syllable-counting metre did result in a new approach to English metre that would dominate the scene for the next 400 years or so—what we call the English “accental-syllabic” metrical system—but it also caused, and continues to cause, a great deal of confusion, even for young poets scratching their heads over English metre today.

In fact, the Greek nomenclature was never particularly helpful or appropriate to English because of the essential difference between quantity and stress. Most complex Greek metres and feet cannot be duplicated with great and reliable accuracy into English stressed lines. This leaves us, on most days, with more or less just one kind of very reliable “traditional” English foot—the iambic (te-tum), with the possibility of reversal in a trochee (tum-te).

Seth himself in his earlier poetry has shown he can handle iambs with great subtlety and wit, and at first I expected him, along with rhyming his couplets, to play his *Hanuman Chalisa chaupais* in standard iambic tetrametre (four-foot) or pentametre (five-foot) couplets or quatrains. However, he has instead attempted, notably, something far more risky and vulnerable: to try to cast the Awadhi metre, sound, and cadence into the English.

He does this in a very formalised way: reversing the iambic foot and bending it towards “falling metres” (trochaic, dactylic, tum-te, tum-te-te, etc.) to match a performative Indian-language poetry that might highlight a line’s penultimate or antepenultimate syllable

instead of its last syllable. For instance, Seth's version of the fourth *chaupai* goes: "Golden-bodied—in fine robes appearing, / Curly-haired—on each side an earring"—with both lines ending on the unstressed syllable "ing".

Seth can only be commended for making himself metrically vulnerable in this way as he is exploring a set of important possibilities for South Asian poetry in English. One can even hear in one's mind, perhaps, a recitation, even singing, of the English lines given above to the cadence, rhythm of their original Hindi/Awadhi lines: "*kanchana barana biraaja subsesaa / kaanana kunDala kunchita kesaa*".

And, of course, by putting the verb last, Seth has also bent standard English syntax further towards Indian expectations. Could a devotee one day then recite Seth's English version of the *Hanuman Chalisa* with the same verve, and devotion, and relish for sound and word that the Hindi receives? This is a question time will answer.

UNFORTUNATELY, TO MY EAR, the current versions of Seth's metrical experiment often failed to convince. Part of the problem could be that he does not push himself far enough. For his final unstressed syllable, Seth too often relies on gerund-ish "-ing" endings (as in the quote from his translation above) or on latinized "-tion" endings; both moves can get metrically weak in English and begin to sound monotonous in the best of circumstances. In Seth's translation of the first five *chaupais*, for instance, three verses rely on rhyming words with "-ing" endings, although he is careful to also rhyme the penultimate syllables: "towering / overpowering", "telling / dispelling", "appearing / ear-ring". Compare that narrow, repeated closure of sound with the wonderfully wide range in the original Hindi rhyme pairs: "*dhaamaa / naamaa*", "*bajarangee / sumati ke sangee*", "*biraaja subesa / kunchita kesaa*".

When Seth does manage to break free of "-ing" or "-tion" or other formulaic endings while keeping the falling metre, the sound effects can be delightful: "beholder / shoulder" (5th *chaupai*). This does not happen often enough in the current translation for my taste, but it does suggest that Seth might in future be able to keep the metre while revising his version of the poem, as is always worthwhile to

The Hanuman Chalisa



Translated by
Vikram Seth
Speaking Tiger
Pages: 103
Price: Rs.399

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Hanuman as a whole, then, is that he means something different to each of us. For Vikram Seth the connection is so deep that it manifests, at least according to his introduction, in a charming dedication to a character from his novel *A Suitable Boy*.

do, to make the vocabulary fresher and the sound more varied. The syntax of Seth's translation, interesting for the reasons I have suggested above, can similarly at times strain comprehension too far in a way that undercuts both emotion and rhythm.

Throughout, Seth's own devotion to and knowledge of the *Hanuman Chalisa* remain unquestionable. One wishes indeed that he will eventually write the longer apparatus he mentions in the introduction but abandons, in a long essay with a detailed analysis of the prosody and rhythm of the original and perhaps his own history with the poem. My critical audition of Seth's translation is subjective, determined inevitably by what I have learned to expect in an English poem and even the moment in which I am reading it. Future South Asian readers might easily learn better to tolerate and feel syntactic strain, more "Indian English" moves, even in their translations. And, above all, such experiments remind us that we are no longer translating our poetry just for an imagined "Western" audience but for each other as multilingual South Asians.

What remains also is the enduring mystery of Hanuman's appeal beyond the militaristic appropriations and dominant strains of recent right-wing Hindu authoritarianism. While we are often ambivalent about Ram's role in the Ramayana, other characters take foreground: Ravan, the noble and alluring anti-hero; Sita, for some the epic's true emotional centre; or this simian god whom so many, believers and unbelievers, keep the closest, more than any humanoid deity.

Why do we love Hanuman so? It is an almost impossible question to answer, for which one would have to travel deep in our subconscious and sense of relation—think of Jeffrey Masson's Hanuman as an imaginary friend—through reams and reams of philosophy, Hanuman's role as the ultimate devotee, and also the long legacy of the "monkey mind", which is our human mind, in thought and epic all across Asia. Hanuman may be strong, but ultimately we may love him the most because he is vulnerable, like us. ■

Vivek Narayanan's most recent books of poems are *The Kuruntokai and its Mirror* (Hanuman Editions, 2024) and *After* (HarperCollins, 2022). He teaches in the MFA Creative Writing Program at George Mason University.

A gentler past

Nandita Haksar's book is a nostalgic trip through a simpler India, where values such as access to justice and the rights of the economically poor and politically disenfranchised held great significance. **KALPANA SHARMA**

<https://telegram.me/PaperMagzine>

Nandita Haksar's memoir is like a rollercoaster ride through an India that is disappearing or, perhaps, has already disappeared. For the post-Independence generation, who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s like the author, it is a nostalgia trip—through a simpler India, a country where it was not unusual for a young person to be idealistic, to want to “do something” for the country, and to make that a life mission.

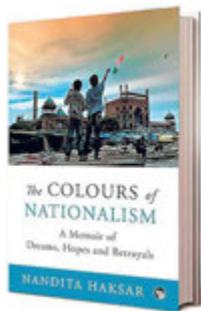
Born into privilege, the daughter of a diplomat and powerful bureaucrat who had the ear of Prime Ministers, in a city where doors opened effortlessly if you had the right antecedents, Haksar could have chosen to lead a comfortable life following any career of her choice. Instead, she decided to immerse herself in fighting for human rights of groups and individuals who were victims of state-endorsed violence.

After a short stint in journalism, she chose to become a human rights lawyer even as she admits she knew that the law could not be an “instrument for change or liberation”. She says being a lawyer allowed her “to take sides”, and she chose to stand by “the economically poor, the politically disenfranchised”.

Access to those in power is the defining theme even today in India's national capital. It does not matter whether you are a lawyer, in business, an artist, or even a journalist. Nothing moves without access. Although Haksar did not follow in her father's footsteps, her recounting of her early days, where all kinds of well-known people were “uncle”, “chacha”, or “aunty”, it is evident that many of the hurdles others without her pedigree would have

The Colours of Nationalism

A Memoir of Dreams, Hopes and Betrayals



By Nandita Haksar
Speaking Tiger 2024
 Pages: 399
 Price: Rs.599

confronted melted away because she was born into a family with influence. That said, she used this not to promote herself but the causes for which she was fighting.

Compared with other young women who came of age during that time, she is also fortunate that her parents did not stand in her way and allowed her to pursue her passion.

Haksar's exposure to human rights issues happened in the post-Emergency years, when the excesses committed by Indira Gandhi's government spawned several human rights groups across India. Her book reminds us of that period when these different civil society groups sent out fact-finding teams comprising lawyers, journalists, and activists to investigate human rights violations. Maliana, Hashimpura, Oinam. How many of those growing up in the past decade even know what these names mean? Yet, thanks to the efforts of the fact-finding teams, these cases were investigated, documented, and in some instances pursued through the courts.

ON MAY 22, 1987, after incidents of communal trouble in Hashimpura in Uttar Pradesh, the Provincial Armed Constabulary in the State rounded up hundreds of people. Of these, 33 men were shot dead and their bodies dumped in a canal. In his book *Hashimpura: 22 May*, Vibhuti Narain Rai, who belonged to the Uttar Pradesh Police, called this “the country's biggest custodial killing”. Haksar was part of the team that painstakingly collected evidence that was placed before the Indian People's Human Rights Tribunal in 1989. The tribunal was presided over by two retired judges, former Supreme Court Justice A.C. Gupta and former Calcutta High Court Justice Jyotirmoyee Nag. Their report



was released the same year. It is an important record of an instance of violence that would have otherwise been erased. Also, the very fact that there was such a tribunal, that it could hold sittings in Delhi, that people could come and depose before it, and that it could pronounce its conclusions is a stark reminder of how much has changed.

Haksar makes an interesting observation following her experience of urging human rights groups to investigate the violence in Uttar Pradesh. She writes: “What troubled me most then—as it does now—was the lack of protest by civil society, specifically the Hindu liberal. Even the human rights movement did not seem to think this was an issue worthy of being taken up.” One could argue that this is a generalisation and that there are several so-called “Hindu liberals” who have actively pursued the course of justice for minorities affected by growing communalisation and who have also led teams to document communal violence. But it is worth debating whether such concern has diminished.

Reports, such as the one on Hashimpura and Maliana, also remind us of the need for more such documentation today as we witness multiple incidents of violence against the vulnerable, often with the complicity of the state, that fail to be investigated. Yet, the space that had opened up for civil society intervention in the post-Emergency years has virtually closed now, especially in the past decade of the Bharatiya Janata Party in power at the Centre and in several States, making such civil society interventions much more difficult.

The issue for which Haksar is perhaps best

▼
Hajra, whose son
 and relatives fell
 victim to the incidents
 of communal trouble
 in May 1987 in
 Hashimpura in Uttar
 Pradesh, a 2018
 picture. R.V. MOORTHY

**Haksar’s
 passionate
 involvement
 every step of
 the way on
 issues like
 Oinam is
 evident in this
 book. This is a
 difficult choice
 that people
 like her have
 made.**

known is for her immersion in the Naga issue, in particular the Nagas who are a part of Manipur State. Although the current conflict in Manipur has not touched the Nagas living in Ukhrul and Senapati districts, Haksar reminds us of the years of clashes between different Naga underground groups and the Indian security forces that were stationed in Manipur.

ONE OF THE WORST incidents was in Oinam, a village in Senapati district. On July 9, 1987, following an attack on an Assam Rifles outpost in the village by one of the Naga underground groups, in which nine soldiers were killed and a large cache of arms and ammunition was stolen, the Assam Rifles launched Operation Bluebird in Oinam and 30 surrounding villages. It led to the killing of 27 people and reports of widespread torture, rape, and destruction of property.

In October 1987, Haksar filed a case in the Gauhati High Court on behalf of the Naga People’s Movement for Human Rights. She spent time with Naga activists, collecting evidence and testimonies, and presented these in 12 volumes to the court. The case dragged on for years and finally, in 2019, the court stated that as the evidence had been “misplaced”, the district authorities should once again collect testimonies of an incident that occurred more than two decades earlier. Haksar calls this “nothing short of a mockery of justice”.

The story of how the evidence was collected in the first place, the hazards and hurdles the people involved had to go through, the people who were killed even as this process was on, is a heartbreaking reminder of the continuing failure of justice on human rights issues in this country.

Haksar’s passionate involvement every step of the way on issues like Oinam is evident in this book. This is a difficult choice that people like her, and other human rights defenders like Harsh Mander, for instance, have made. Yet, so much of this history would have been erased if not for the determined effort of these individuals.

The book is densely packed with accounts of the many causes that Haksar took up. Even though the subject matter is grim, these sto-

ries make for a racy read as the author spins through the early years, her own choices, the Emergency, the formation of human rights groups, her involvement in feminist issues, her work as a lawyer, and her involvement in the Naga cause.

In the midst of all this grim business, there are also some fun episodes, like her marriage to Sebastian Hongray, a Tangkhul Naga. How do a privileged Kashmiri Pandit from Delhi and a Naga from Manipur get married? What kind of vows can they take when one, Nandita, is an avowed atheist who will not follow any

religious ritual and the other, Sebastian, is a Catholic? The account is hilarious.

Reading Haksar's memoirs in 2024, a year when the election results hold out the promise of some change but also the reality that much will remain the same, makes one wonder: if in recent times India saw so many groups and individuals exposing the oppressive power of the state, can this not happen again? ■

Kalpna Sharma is an independent journalist and author. Her most recent book is *The Silence and the Storm: Narratives of Violence Against Women in India*.

Memory and desire

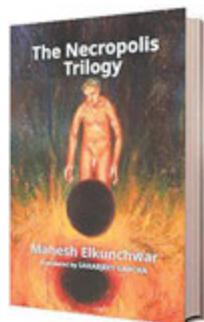
The Marathi playwright Mahesh Elkunchwar's collection of essays, conceived as a monologue with the self, is hauntingly beautiful. **DEEPA GANESH**

Are the "good old days" always as great as we remember them? Central to nostalgia is a cognitive bias that blurs all the difficulties and disappointments that may have been part of the original reality. It is, as said often, looking at the past through rose-tinted glasses.

In his collection of essays *The Necropolis Trilogy*, the playwright Mahesh Elkunchwar revisits his past, but it is not a rosy recollection. Elkunchwar's lens moves in and out of his childhood and youth, reflecting on who and how the author was in those days. But it is neither a tell-all autobiography nor a memoir with methodically selected episodes: with a stream-of-consciousness flow, it adds moments as it moves along. The poetic quality of the writing, the picturesque details, the stunning organisation of fact and imagination make these essays haunting.

Meanings do not come to you instantly though. Elkunchwar does not arrange his life neatly into blocks to make the experience easy for the reader. Conceived as a monologue with

The Necropolis Trilogy



By Mahesh Elkunchwar, translated by Sarabjeet Garcha
Copper Coin
Pages: 144
Price: Rs.499

the self, the essays encounter emotions and betrayals through the narrated incidents. It recognises invisible cruelties, changing social structures, and urban chaos but also flows with a seeming lightness of being. Interspersed with the playful and the poetic, the entire work moves through philosophical questions of lightness and weight. In her introduction to the book, theatre director Amal Alana says: "Hauntingly beautiful like the fragment of a melody that persistently replays itself in one's mind, the *Necropolis Trilogy* is a dense and rich creation, full of undiscovered meanings..."

In the very first essay, "Necropolis", Elkunchwar writes: "It's natural to want to sound ultramodern, yet even though the language is continuously evolving, its old avatar does not disappear. Speakers of the standard urban Marathi find many words in *Jnaneshwari* [a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita written by the Marathi saint and poet Sant Dnyaneshwar in 1290 CE] strange and arcane. However, many of those words are still widely used in the rural Marathi of Vidarbha and Marathwada, without the slightest deviation from

their original meanings. Even if ancient language forms may seem to have disappeared, that's not quite the case. Like animals hibernating underground, these language forms lie dormant. Or, like corpses dreaming in graves, they await liberation and when the time comes, they creep up and lend our experience a truly picturesque quality, which is often beyond the reach of new language."

In this stunning passage, which captures the tone of the collection, Elkunchwar is speaking of language that, like memory, remains dormant only to wake up when it finds the right trigger. This is how he introduces Bhiwa, the man who took care of him as a child.

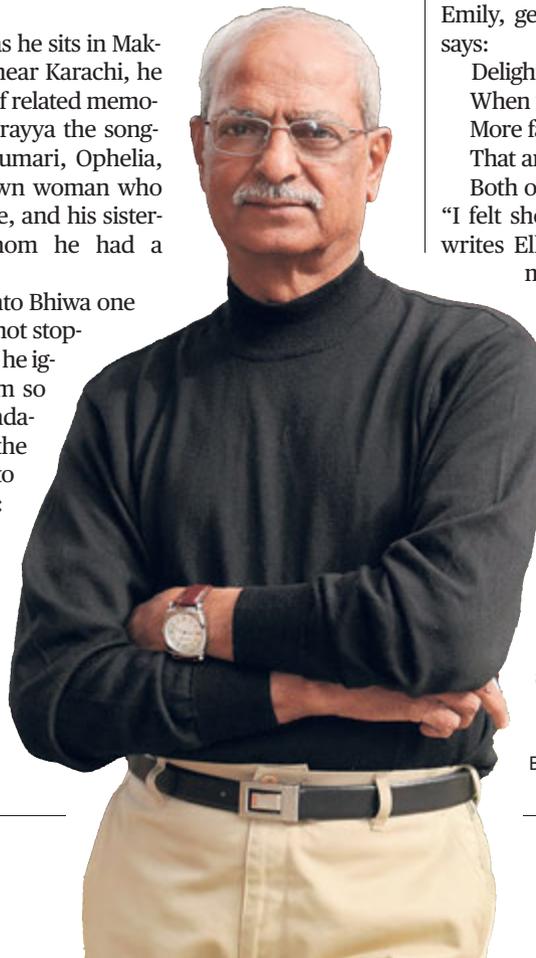
"Another gentle gust left my body refreshed and my mind relaxed. I felt as if someone was fanning me as wave upon cool wave of air rushed over me now and then. Who is fanning me with such affection? Look, I can even hear the swish of the fan. And the breeze smells of khus and coolness. It has to be Bhiwa. Only he blew such a breeze over me. But isn't Bhiwa dead? Why did I never come to terms with that? How can he be here, then? Only after many years did I discover he was dead."

THINKING OF BHIWA as he sits in Makli, a vast necropolis near Karachi, he is assailed by a host of related memories. With Bhiwa walks in Surayya the songstress, followed by Meena Kumari, Ophelia, Emily Dickinson, the unknown woman who could sing only in her afterlife, and his sister-in-law Mandakini, with whom he had a strange relationship.

He remembers bumping into Bhiwa one day on his way to school but not stopping to speak to him. Why did he ignore this man who loved him so much once? Meanwhile, Mandakini, as she comes alive in the graveyard, gently prods him to enter the world of emotions: "But what about my eyes...?" Elkunchwar, in this conversation between the real and the dead, says: "My ears turned red with shame, I wanted to crumble into dust and disappear forever into the depths of the underworld below the graves."

In this rich tapestry of real and imagined conversations, Elkunchwar inhabits multiple realities. He effortlessly transcends time and space, talking to memories.

▼
Mahesh Elkunchwar
in New Delhi on March
1, 2011. V.V. KRISHNAN



The chat around eyes takes him to the day his mother passed away. He remembers that her eyes remained open, despite efforts to close them. In them he sees what he did not see while she lived. "Why did her eyes look like the eyes of an orphan who has been unjustly punished? What kind of sorrow was it that she could not tell even me? I fell short; maybe I was a bad son."

In this rich tapestry of real and imagined conversations, Elkunchwar inhabits multiple realities. He effortlessly transcends time and space, talking to memories. As reality, dream, and everyday life collide, they create a new universe: that of the artist.

Sitting in Makli, he says: "I don't believe in reincarnation. But the thought of lying asleep after death while dreaming a never-ending dream is simply fantastic. It is very logical. It may seem illogical to us. But won't the logic of the dead be different too.... It is a region where the intellect cannot reach.... It is absurd to even think of crossing it with these useless, broken oars of the intellect."

He tells Emily Dickinson: "Whenever I think of Bhiwa, I become a little sentimental." Emily, gently placing a loving hand on his, says:

Delight becomes pictorial
When viewed through pain—
More fair, because impossible
That any gain.

Both of them remain silent for a long time. "I felt she was telling me the secret of art," writes Elkunchwar. He asks Emily: "So you

mean that everything becomes beautiful when touched by art? Delight becomes more pictorial. But what about pain?"

Emily says: "We decide to make the ugly beautiful. Why should it be? Truth is often ugly. Let it be exactly that."

The Necropolis Trilogy is a contemplative and complex piece of internal theatre by a living legend. Garcha's English rendition retains beautifully the poetry of the original. This collection is not to be missed. ■

Deepa Ganesh teaches at RV University, Bengaluru.

Heart of light

Anita Desai returns after 13 years with *Rosarita*, a novella made up of luminous images and eloquent silences. **ANUSUA MUKHERJEE**

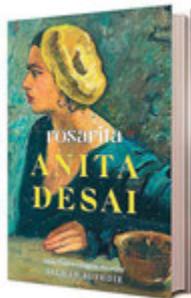
<https://telegram.me/PaperMagzine>

When Anita Desai, the *grande dame* of Indian English literature, publishes a new book, it is an event to be celebrated. For a generation that has grown up reading Desai (her Sahitya Akademi Award-winning 1977 novel, *Fire on the Mountain*, was included in university syllabi), another novel from her is like a much-awaited letter from a beloved friend that you read and reread with joy, savouring each inflection of the familiar voice. *Rosarita*, published 13 years after Desai's last collection of novellas, *The Artist of Disappearance*, is a reassuring piece of work, telling us that the 87-year-old author has lost nothing of the understated brilliance that sets her apart. Using the imagery of travel that runs through her works, one can say that coming to *Rosarita* is like returning to a favourite old place by the sea and registering with a pleasant shock that the quality of light there is as searing as you remember it from the last time.

Desai is much concerned with questions of travel, like the American poet Elizabeth Bishop before her. Is travelling, leaving one place for another, worth all the hassle? After all, the sunset we watch from our home window is the same as the one in an exotic landscape. Or, is it? Journeys change us as we experience peoples and cultures very different from our own. The self watching the sunset from the window of her home and its later edition looking at the sunset from the hotel window in a foreign land might well be two separate people.

Given that we change along with places, is it ever possible to return to the same location? In other words, can one ever find a fixed, steady place called home? One of the epigraphs to *Rosarita* is from Daniel Kehlman's astounding 2005 novel, *Measuring the World*. It goes: "He

Rosarita



By Anita Desai
Picador India
Pages: 112
Price: Rs.499

too wanted to go on a voyage, said Humboldt. Foster nodded. Quite a few had that wish. And everyone regretted it later. Why? Because one could never come back."

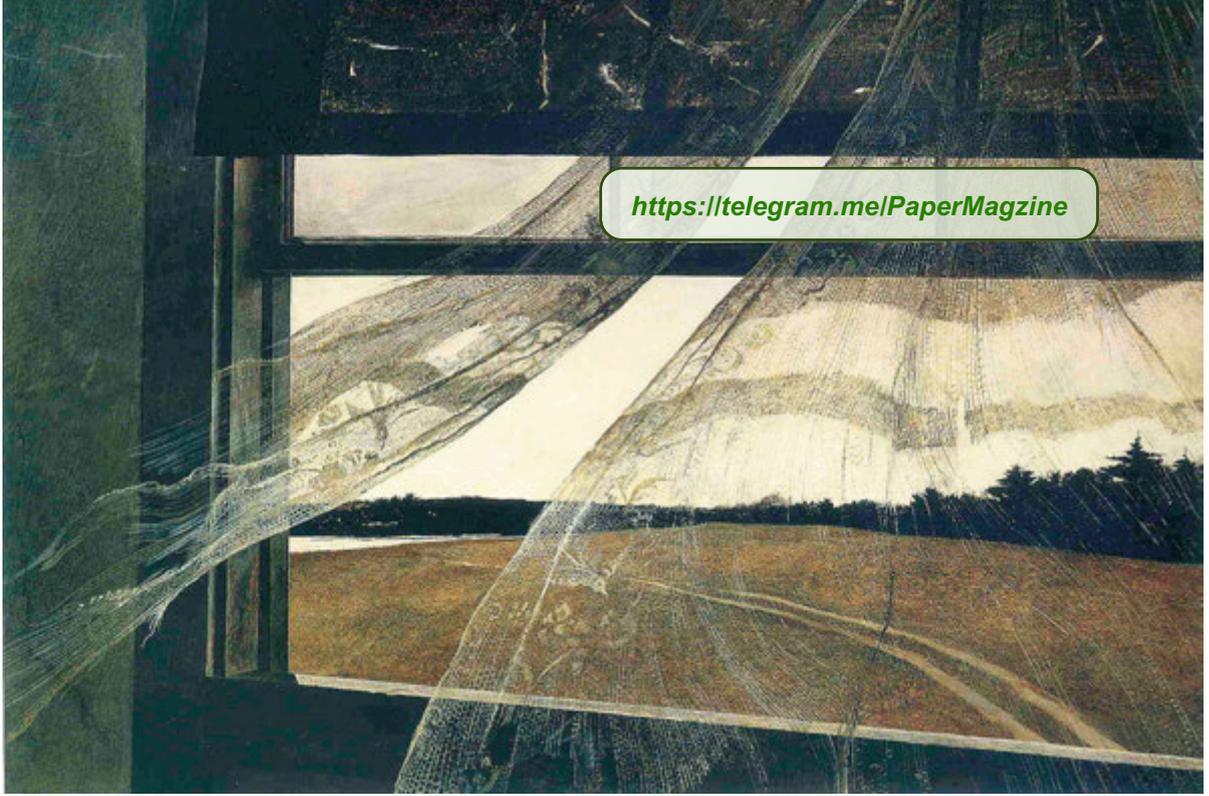
The protagonist, Bonita, is a young Indian woman studying Spanish at a residency in Mexico. She is a woman on the run, trying to escape her home, her country, her past, her unprocessed griefs. She chose the study of language so that it "would wrench you out, lead you as far away as you could get—French that took you to Pondicherry, Portuguese that took you to Goa, and the Portuguese led you to Spanish and Spanish had brought you here—here and now. *Aqui y ahora.*"

The emphasis on "here and now" tells us that the sojourn in Mexico is just a stop in Bonita's endeavour to break free. Having experienced the discreet charm of home, she has chosen to be an eternal outsider. In this she is like her creator, Anita, who left India in her 40s for England and now lives in the US.

In separate interviews after the release of *Rosarita*, Desai has said that America feels as alien to her as present-day India. This dissociation helps her write: "Always being apart. Perhaps that is being a writer. One is always an observer rather than a participant" (interview in *The Guardian*, June 29, 2024). No matter how close Anita must be to Bonita, she distances her too, addressing her as "you", keeping her at arm's length.

BONITA, when we meet her first on a park bench, is taking in the sights and sounds of San Miguel de Allende, that glorious city of the arts celebrated for its baroque Spanish architecture. She seems quite content until she is approached by a flamboyantly dressed elderly Mexican woman with kohl-rimmed eyes. This woman, the antithesis of quiet Bonita in her muchness, remains a

<https://telegram.me/PaperMagazine>



mystery throughout. Later called the “Trickster”, she holds Bonita spellbound with her story about Bonita’s mother, Sarita, who in this dame’s version becomes Rosarita, a gifted artist who had come to Mexico to paint.

For Bonita, her mother had been that uncomplaining wife who had accepted her place in the shadows of the household. She had been a part of what Bonita had left behind. And then the Trickster presents a version of her mother who might be more like Bonita: a rebel, a wanderer, an artist dislocated by terrible sorrows, killings, violence. Can that be true? Did her mother have a double life? Bonita is suspicious of the Trickster’s narrative but is also captivated by the story, like the wedding guest from Coleridge’s poem who is eager to escape the clutches of the batty old mariner but cannot do so until he has listened to the intriguing, disturbing tale in full.

However, the Trickster’s story does not take up the entire novella. She is left behind as Bonita continues her journey onward in Mexico. Yet the Trickster’s chronicle (which might be a figment of her imagination) shifts something in Bonita, showing her the possibility of exchanging her old demons of grief, resentment, exhaustion with a daimon—her mother, but a mother who is nothing like the one she knew, a restless wraith who can guide her in the rest of her travels.

The novella too opens up as Bonita hits the seas from the inlands, and there is an onrush of light. Here is her first encounter with the

▼
Wind from the Sea
(1947), a painting by
Andrew Wyeth.
WIKI COMMONS

Having experienced the discreet charm of home, Bonita has chosen to be an eternal outsider. In this she is like her creator, Anita, who left India in her 40s for England and now lives in the US.

Pacific Ocean at La Manzanilla: “You want to throw out your arms, run like a bird across the sand, cry out with relief, the relief that feels like joy. You have arrived, and in one instant you have recovered what you thought was lost: clarity, clarity, the promise of clarity.” This scene, with its sudden drama, is like a crest of revelation on which you are magically suspended for a moment until the novella settles down to its unhurried pace again.

THERE ARE SMALLER MOMENTS of luminosity before and after—the pigeons that “murmur and coo in an expression of mounting ecstasy”, the egret that takes off, “trailing its legs like afterthoughts”, the flocks of sandpipers that race “ahead of you in search, always in search”—as Bonita journeys on. What changes in the days following the encounter with the Trickster is that the progression of moments seems less unyielding than before. Bonita notices the sun disappear into the Pacific Ocean, the vines with mauve flowers “that will be dead by night”, a cemetery with lovingly tended graves that will one day be swallowed by the sea, and the relentless change speaks not so much of loss as of freedom gifted by loss. She returns to the memory of her mother’s death, at which she was not present, and is reminded of the cold letter her sister had sent her afterwards, scrupulously dividing their mother’s assets. If the bits and



bobs of the past had burdened her once, now they seem to say in chorus: "Go free".

Rosarita ends as suddenly as it starts, leaving you hankering for more. One can even gripe that, speaking in images, it promises more than it delivers. There are fleeting references to Partition, to the Mexican Revolution (1910-17), and a telling portrait of a traditional Indian home where "If there was a god, it could only be The Husband". But Desai is evidently reluctant to spell it all out.

Leaving the reader with just a snapshot is also the classic Anita Desai touch. As she said in *The Guardian* interview: "I'm not writing a Victorian novel starting with childhood and going on to old age and death! This is just one little section. A little piece of their lives. A fragment."

If you are still dissatisfied, you can gaze in silence at the stunning cover featuring an early self-portrait by Amrita Sher-Gil that adds to Desai's story while telling its own. ■

Dark nights in Puducherry

Ari Gautier brings out the seamy side of this seemingly pretty tourist town in this collection of stories. **GEETA DOCTOR**

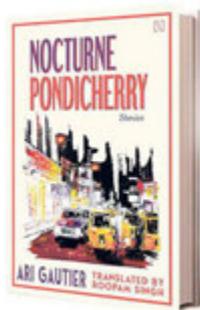
Ari Gautier is the self-designated purveyor of "*le thinnai*", the semi-open platforms attached to traditional Puducherry homes, and he takes another look at these fertile spaces in this collection. This time, however, he has become the Baudelaire of Puducherry misfits, recording the fetid smell of the flowers of evil in the gutters of the seaside town.

The collection belies the promise of its elegant cover image painted by Anarkali Checkrahmatoula to present a Puducherry marked by streets of insidious intent. The title, *Nocturne*, suggests a dreamy, romantic engagement between two lovers, unrestricted by sex or caste affiliations. But what unravels in these pages is very different: episodes of lust and longing darkened by the perverse.

Gautier has the rare ability to convey the smell of what another French writer called "nausea": the stench of being too much in this world. It serves him well as he intuits the grosser acts of bestiality. We do not see what happens to Viji, the young girl who has escaped her scheming mother to find refuge with a seemingly kind autorickshaw driver, as

Nocturne Pondicherry

Stories



By Ari Gautier,
translated by Roopam
Singh

Hachette India

Pages: 144

Price: Rs.399

the doors of her new home open and her nostrils pucker at the odour of a drunken client. Or the episode where a young girl escapes the stigma of caste to make a life for herself, and we are told tangentially: "In this society, where ugliness is hereditary, her battle against destiny was titanic. But she had won!"

The story "Mani Enna?" is one of the most casually brutal in the collection. The title forms a refrain as a young man, Arjuna-Jacques, swings between hope for redemption and fear as he waits against a filthy wall, where his humiliation takes place. It has echoes of T.S. Eliot's "Hurry up, please, it's time" (*The Waste Land*).

IN HIS EARLIER FULL-LENGTH NOVEL, *The Thinnaï*, Gautier chronicled a Puducherry not described in tourist brochures: the working-class district of Kuruskuppam whose inhabitants have multiple identities, like Gautier himself, who was born in Madagascar, lived in both India and France, before settling down in Norway. He traversed the white town-black town ambiguities of Puducherry with a certain grace.

But in *Nocturne*, he gives himself over to the depiction of the corrupt and the vile as he exa-



mines the caste system in all its polluting perversity, with race as its colonial counterpart.

When Puducherry was finally uncoupled from its French embrace in 1954, its inhabitants were given the option of either staying French or becoming Indian citizens. Even before that, some families down the caste scale

▼
In this collection,
 Gautier becomes
 the Baudelaire of
 Puducherry misfits.
 GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

had the option of learning French, converting to Christianity, and travelling to France. One ironic story describes how, by changing his name to La-Porte, one gentleman finds the doorway to a new identity. Yet, as Gautier describes it, the door half opening into a kitchen full of intoxicating aromas could also be a portal into nothingness. Baudelaire once said: “Looking from outside into an open window one never sees as much as when one looks through a closed window.” In these stories, Gautier is more of a *flâneur*, occasionally resting outside on *thinnaïs*, hoping to be let in. ■

Geeta Doctor is a Chennai-based writer, critic, and cultural commentator.

Sequel with a soul

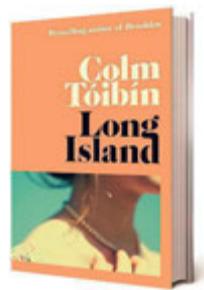
If homesickness was the top note in Colm Tóibín’s *Brooklyn*, in this follow-up novel, *Long Island*, we see how the homecoming unspools. **BHAVYA DORE**

Colm Tóibín never liked sequels and never thought he should write one, he told NPR recently. So, the ending of his 2009 blockbuster novel, *Brooklyn*, should have been final. Except, now Tóibín has returned with an update to the story in the form of *Long Island*.

At the end of *Brooklyn*, Eilis Lacey, the young Irish immigrant from Enniscorthy, torn between new country and old, American husband and Irish suitor, returned to New York. Tóibín’s sixth novel, later turned into an exquisite Oscar-nominated film starring Saoirse Ronan, sharply and movingly examined the 1950s’ migrant experience. It was also, at its heart, a love story, a marriage plot in disguise. By the end, Eilis chose Tony Fiorello, her Italian-origin husband based in America, despite the pull of Jim Farrell, a love interest kindled on a long sabbatical back home in Ireland.

The danger of revisiting a much-loved novel is obvious: burden the characters with a future

Long Island



By Colm Tóibín
Pan Macmillan
 Pages: 304
 Price: Rs.750

they were never designed to inhabit and foreclose our sense of their possibilities.

I embarked upon *Long Island* with both trepidation and curiosity; would Tóibín ruin a perfectly good thing, or did he have some more tricks yet? It is both a relief and a pleasure to report that he has pulled off a magical double act: *Long Island* is assured, tender, and a total triumph. It takes the old story and characters in new and rewarding directions, in ways that feel both surprising and still authentic.

Two decades have passed, and Eilis is now a homeowner and wife, an American resident nestled in the titular New York suburb. She has two children with the plumber Tony and a bevy of boisterous Italian in-laws who live next-door. *Long Island* opens with a propulsive curvball, and by page two we are in the heart of the crisis.

A mysterious, and somewhat aggressive, Irishman knocks on Eilis’ door and tells her: “he





is good at his job, your husband”, “his plumbing is so good that [my wife] is to have a baby in August”. Eilis barely has time to masticate this news of her husband’s perfidy when the stranger informs her that he plans to drop off “this little bastard” at their doorstep. Eilis is gobsmacked: she “wanted to ask him what part of Ireland he was from as a way of ignoring what he had said”.

If we rooted for the earnest, lovelorn Tony in the previous novel, his deceit makes him less likeable now. He refuses to give Eilis any assurance that he will turf out his illegitimate child, should the alleged cuckold carry out his promise. One stilted confrontation uncovers the affair in passing, but for the most part, Eilis chooses to digest the news alone. Instead of fight, she kicks into flight mode; she plans a trip to Ireland, ostensibly for her mother’s 80th birthday but really a kind of self-exile, as she tacitly gives Tony time to deal with the problem. Will she return? Will her marriage survive? She is not sure. It all depends on the choices Tony makes.

Long Island gives us a grown-up Eilis; a mother, a wronged woman, a suffocated daughter-in-law and daughter. If *Brooklyn* buffeted her by the force of circumstance, this novel gives the middle-aged heroine greater agency.

THE BULK OF THE ACTION is centred in Enniscorthy, where Eilis, returning after several years, cuts a distinct, fashionable figure (“She seemed like a different person. Something had happened to her in America”, one character thinks). Tóibín deli-

▼
A still from the movie *Brooklyn* (2015) starring Saoirse Ronan.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Tóibín is a master of making much happen from very little action. And he is best when he is observing intimate moments, the textures of everyday interactions and private thoughts.

cately captures the dislocation of the returning emigree and the adjustment to rhythms of the old country. If homesickness was the top note in *Brooklyn*, now we see how the homecoming unspools. Eilis glimpses versions of her old self, and what-ifs and could-have-beens linger portentously.

In the Tóibín multiverse, characters cross-pollinate novels across his oeuvre. Lily Deveaux of *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999) has a fleeting, if loaded, mention here as does the widow Nora Webster, who had a titular turn in his 2014 novel. Nancy Sheridan previously appeared in a short story called “The Name of the Game” as also in *Brooklyn*.

Neither the town nor Eilis knows this, but her old flame, Jim, is seeing her old friend, Nancy. The animating tension is how Eilis and Jim will meet, as they inevitably must, all those years after she broke his heart, and what new complications might ensue from here on.

Unlike *Brooklyn*, which glided along from Eilis’ perspective, here we are privy to three different points of view. For the first time, we understand how Jim processed the heartbreak two decades ago and his complicated web of feelings now (“he really wanted to ask if she had thought about him much over the years and if she had ever regretted not staying”). Nancy, a widow and small business owner, has her own minefields to navigate, of which Jim is just a piece. Like *Brooklyn*, the geometry of this novel, too, is a love triangle. Tony, back in Long Island, has been relegated to the shadows.

The writing is as always unpretentious, unshowy. Tóibín is a master of making much happen from very little action. And he is best when he is observing intimate moments, the textures of everyday interactions and private thoughts. These suppressions and secrets swirl in an atmosphere of small-town gossip and minor revelations. How will the two contradictory narrative impulses eventually collide?

Action escalates at the end, and the denouement may feel slightly underwhelming. But Tóibín has managed to do that difficult thing: give us a sequel with heart and soul and magic. ■

Bhavya Dore is a freelance journalist who writes for various Indian and international publications.

Fiction

Our Long Marvelous Dying
Anna DeForest
Little, Brown and Company

Stone Yard Devotional
Charlotte Wood
Sceptre

The Memory Police
Yoko Ogawa, translated by
Stephen Snyder
Pantheon

Anomaly
Andrej Nikolaidis, translated
by Will Firth
Peirene Press

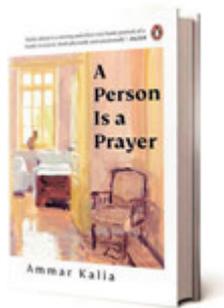
Non-fiction

Everyday Reading: Middlebrow Magazines and Book Publishing in Post-Independence India
Aakriti Mandhwani
University of Massachusetts Press

India's Near East: A New History
Avinash Paliwal
Hurst Publishers

Pax Economica: Left-Wing Visions of a Free Trade World
Marc-William Palen
Princeton University Press

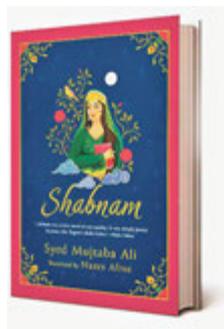
Ghassan Kanafani: Selected Political Writings
Edited by Louis Brehony and Tahrir Hamdi
Pluto Press



A Person is a Prayer
Ammar Kalia
Penguin India
Rs.399

Exploring the emotional gap between

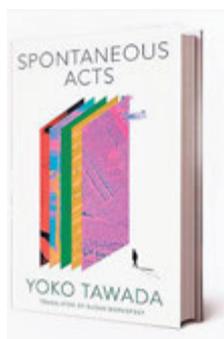
family members when communication falls apart, this novel about the generational search for happiness travels from Kenya and India to England and is narrated over three different days.



Shabnam
Syed Mujtaba Ali, translated by Nazes Afroz
Speaking Tiger
Rs.499

In this love story by the

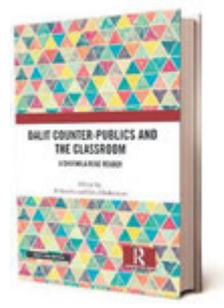
celebrated Bengali writer Syed Mujtaba Ali, a Bengali teacher and an Afghan woman fall headlong into love, transcending the barriers of language and culture in 1920s Afghanistan.



Spontaneous Acts
Yoko Tawada, translated by Susan Bernofsky
Dialogue Books
Rs.499

A literary researcher in Berlin struggles

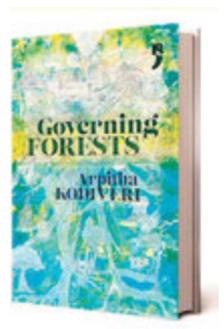
to get on with life. The post-lockdown world constantly overwhelms him until he meets an enigmatic stranger.



Dalit Counter-Publics and the classroom
Edited by V. Geetha and Uma Chakravarti
Routledge India
Rs.1,295

The collected

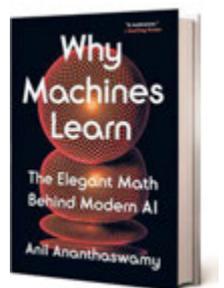
essays of the feminist scholar Sharmila Rege (1964–2013) span a range of themes such as critical perspectives on women's movements, Dalit standpoint feminism, and women's studies vis-a-vis other disciplines.



Governing Forests
Arpitha Kodiveri
Yoda Press
Rs.599

The environmental lawyer Arpitha Kodiveri describes how India's

forest-dwelling communities, who bear the costs of both development and conservation, are now driving creative and visionary solutions in forest law.



Why Machines Learn
Anil Ananthaswamy
EP Dutton
Rs.2,757

To make the most of artificial

intelligence, Anil Ananthaswamy says we need to understand its limitations. The answer lies in simple 18th century mathematics.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARUN SHARMA

LIFE IS NOT INSTANT COFFEE

In a world overwhelmed by hustle culture, we need to slow down and watch life as it happens around us. **TABISH KHAIR**

My favourite Danish song is from 1973: it was sung by Poul Dissing, with lyrics by Benny Andersen, and it is supposed to have been written by a fictive persona, Svante, a “half-drunk, half-in-love, half-bald, half-fat” poet. This song, “*Svantes lykkelige dag*”, along with other song-

poems that Andersen attributed to Svante in his novel-album, *Svantes Viser*—a *viser* is something like a ballad about ordinary life—was an unexpected hit and remains a Danish classic.

“*Svantes lykkelige dag*” (Svante’s happy day) is better known by its refrain: “*Om lidt er kaffen klar*” (In a while, the coffee will be ready). Essentially, it is Svante talking about one of his happy mornings: he has not always had a happy life, at least not by neoliberal standards. His girlfriend is taking a bath, and he is waiting for her to come out and join him for breakfast, the common Danish fare of cheese on rolls. The coffee is on: it takes a while for good coffee to be brewed. Svante looks around himself and observes things like a flock of birds, a spider: small unimportant things. The stanzas point out that “life is not the worst one has” and end with the refrain: “And in a while, the coffee will be ready.”

There is no instant coffee in that song. I have nothing against instant coffee, but good coffee, like everything good in life, takes time.

WE LIVE in an age where time has been stolen from us. Everything has to be done faster. Speed is the only thing that matters: from fast food to faster cars to supersonic jets. It is only a few privileged people who, if they wish, can buy themselves time. Most of us, especially the aspiring middle classes, are running around trying to “make time.” The faster we run, the less time we have. Part of the appeal of a song like “*Svantes lykkelige dag*” is that it reminds us that we need to slow down and watch life as it happens around us. Life, after all, is not the worst one has—a point made with typical Danish understatement!

This is not just a question of “living life”; it is also a question of solving life’s problems. In a culture of instant coffee, fast food, and so on, we come to expect, at times unconsciously, quick solutions. This spreads from ordinary life to global politics, from relationships to wars. What Israelis want in Gaza is a quick solution. What Putin wanted in Ukraine was a quick

solution. What Western powers would like in both Palestine-Israel and Russia-Ukraine is a quick solution. Politicians—across the Left-Right spectrum—come to power by promising “quick solutions”. As a rule, not one of these solutions works.

Danish politics in the 20th century was characterised by the realisation, rare in most nation states, that solutions take time. Life takes time. It is not instant coffee. Societies cannot be run like a computer program.

THIS WAS ONE of the things that, when I moved to Denmark in the 1990s, appealed to me: the traces of this tradition of stopping, thinking, acting, giving it time, were still there. Since then, even in Denmark, the movers and shakers, the hustlers, have been taking over—across party divisions. These politicians are often aided by technocrats. This is inevitable because technology, unlike society or life, can be changed instantly: if you have the means, you just need to implement it. You flick a few switches, turn an extra knob. So can corporations, at least if their bottom line is “profit”: it just takes a slight reordering of regulations and numbers.

Both technology and corporations are extremely



In a culture of instant coffee, fast food, and so on, we come to expect, at times unconsciously, quick solutions. This spreads from ordinary life to global politics, from relationships to wars.

bad models on which to base a state, a society, let alone life. These are instant coffee models. Politicians who have bought into these models—and name me a single significant politician in India or abroad who has not!—are simply incapable of solving the problems of society; they are essentially even incapable of living life as it should be lived. And they impose that dangerous incapacity on all the rest of us, when we accept their paradigms, definitions, and assumptions.

As against that hegemonic tradition, we have someone like Svante, the half-fat, half-in-love, half-bald poet, a man not very successful and not always wise, who nevertheless knows that “life is not the worst one has”, that you cannot run after life or happiness. You have to wait calmly, waiting for the coffee to brew, your partner to finish her bath and come out drying her hair, the flock of birds to fly across the patch of sky that you can see, the small spider to scramble up the wall.

This is knowledge all of us have deep inside, but it is shouted down by the “systems that matter”. We sometimes protest for more jobs or more pay, but we never protest for “more time”. But that, as the Jamaican-British reggae-poet Linton Kwesi Johnson wrote, ought to be a political demand: “More time fi leasha / More time fi pleasha / More time fi edificaeshun / More time fi reckreashun / More time fi contemplate / More time fi ruminare / More time / Wi need / More / Time / Gi wi more time.” ■

Tabish Khair is an Indian novelist and academic who teaches in Denmark.

Staying in



Directed by **Karan Gour**, *Fairy Folk* stars Rasika Dugla and Mukul Chadda.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Films & Series

Fairy Folk

Sci-fi, marital drama

This indie drama released in theatres to critical acclaim in March 2024. But it was pulled out soon because of distribution hurdles. The film, now available for rent, is worth your while for its sheer quality. It examines a modern stultified marriage through the device of fantasy: a genderless woodland creature enters the lives of a bored couple, making them question their bond with each other. The film goes deep and hits hard.

English/ Hindi, 1h 40m
<https://www.fairyfolkthefilm.com>

Mountain Queen: The Summits of Lhakpa Sherpa

Documentary
This is the story of Lhakpa Sherpa, a daughter of yak

farmers from rural Nepal, who migrated to the US, where she survived domestic violence to provide for her two young daughters on her own. In 2000, she became the first Nepali woman to summit Mount Everest and now holds the record for the most Everest summits by a woman, at 10 successful climbs. Lucy Walker's documentary follows Sherpa as she climbs Mount Everest. It had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2023.
English, 1 h 45 m
[Netflix](#)

Music

Heirangkhoi



The Manipuri folk rock band Ereimang's second song, "Heirangkhoi", about the cycle of life and relationships, takes listeners to the forests and valleys of Manipur. The band, founded by the Bengaluru-based Kamal Singhto, became famous after the release of their debut single, "Kwakta Lamjel", in 2023. "Heirangkhoi" was filmed in late 2023 in Manipur amidst the ongoing violence. The music video, directed by Heisnam Shantanu, continues the ancient tribal tradition of storytelling and features Manipuri dance forms and vocals alongside rock riffs.

The vocals are by Nganthoibi Ningthouja.
[Spotify](#), [Apple Music](#), [YouTube](#)

The Poetry of Earth (Geophony)

This single by the European composer and activist Max Richter is inspired by the Romantic poet John Keats' famous line: "The poetry of earth is never dead." Released on July 12, 2024, the composition is a part of Richter's forthcoming album, *In a Landscape*, which delves into "themes of optimism and human emotion accompanied by an innovative exploration of electronic sounds and field recordings". It is an invitation to the imagination to create stories of its own.
[Spotify](#), [Apple Music](#), [YouTube](#)

Podcasts

Wild Frequencies

The new podcast series by *Mongabay-India* explores bioacoustics, the study of sounds made by living organisms. The sounds are recorded and analysed by researchers and conservationists to decode animal and bird behaviours. In the first episode, the hosts talk to researchers who record sound to locate, count, and document elusive species.
[Spotify](#), [Apple Podcasts](#)



Stepping out



Deadpool & Wolverine stars Ryan Reynolds as Deadpool and Hugh Jackman as Wolverine.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Films

Deadpool & Wolverine

Action, comedy

This American superhero film is the 34th in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and a sequel to *Deadpool* (2016) and *Deadpool 2* (2018). Deadpool and Wolverine are both misfits who leave fans screaming in admiration. Deadpool is a mercenary with a poison tongue, and Wolverine is a gruff mutant with magical regenerative powers. With plenty of in-jokes, the film is delightfully meta, and the comedy lies chiefly in that. The director, Shawn Levy, has promised however that the enjoyment of *Deadpool & Wolverine* requires no bingeing beforehand.
English, 2h 7m

[A](#)

Raayan

Action, thriller

Actor Dhanush's 50th film, which also marks his second directorial venture, is a gritty gangster drama about three brothers. Starring S.J. Suryah, Sundeep Kishan, Prakash Raj, Dushara Vijayan, Aparna Balamurali, Selvaraghavan, and Kalidas Jayaram in key roles, it is brimful of murder, debauchery, feuds, and the fight for power. Although it makes generous use of clichés common in Tamil cinema, A.R. Rahman's background score and Om Prakash's cinematography are enthralling.

Tamil, 2h 25m

[A](#)

Theatre

Park



Manav Kaul's play *Park* will be staged on August 11 at Sangeet Natak Akademi, Lucknow, as part of the Repertwahr Weekends. Hosted in Lucknow, Repertwahr is one of India's biggest performing arts festivals. At the most apparent level, *Park* is a comedy about three men in a park fighting for their seats. But this contest for space has a metaphorical dimension as well, directing attention to

shortfalls and aspirations that inform modern life.

[Lucknow](#)

Dekh Rahe Hain Nayan

Kolkata Centre for Creativity is celebrating the 100th birth anniversary of Habib Tanvir with *Dekh Rahe Hain Nayan*, a three-day festival on his life, work, and contribution to Indian theatre. To be held from August 30 to September 1, the festival will have a diverse range of events including an exhibition, workshops, masterclasses, panel discussions, film screenings, readings, *dastangoi*, musical and theatrical performances, and other cultural events. The masterclasses on acting and directing will be facilitated by the likes of Naseeruddin Shah, Danish Husain, Raghuvir Yadav, and M.K. Raina. More details on <https://rzp.io/l/tVIMy9gKA> Kolkata

Art

Neverending Stories

Subtitled "a search for a space where words and images might meet", this is an exhibition of the works of the visual artist and writer Manjari Chakravarti. It features Chakravarti's graphic essays, accordion books of prose-poetry alongside visuals, and children's books. On until September at Arthshila, Ahmedabad



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TRENDS

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HALAHALA EDITION

RASHTRIA'S NATIONAL CARTOON

APPUPEN

COMING UP:
'TIRED OF
INSPIRING'
SAYS IKAT

PARIS FASHION OLYMPIX

GOVT : TRY COLOURS, TARUN.
DESIGNER : OK!

SHOULDER STRAP
- CAN BE PULLED UP
EASILY FOR BAD
BEHAVIOUR.

SLEEVELESS
STRAITJACKET
- LIKE UNDECLARED
EMERGENCY!

SLEEVE STRAP
FOR THAT 'DONT
MESS WITH 1.4bn
OF US' LOOK.

POCKET FOR
MEDALS

SAFE DISTANCE
BETWEEN COLOURS.

TRICOLOUR
PASTE



NO IDENTITY

TRICOLOUR+
SAREE =
TRY SAREE!

TRADITIONAL,
WELL-BEHAVED
HOMELY LOOK.

NO POCKETS

NOT REJECTED
AIR INDIA
UNIFORM!

OOOH...
SO COOL!

* WITH FREE
IKAT STICKERS

PARIS
SPEECHLESS!

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