

FRONTLINE

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Deconstructing
the results in
Haryana and J&K

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The challenges
before Anura
Dissanayake

SRI LANKA ▶ PAGE 60



CRISIS or DIVIDEND?

India is in that sweet spot when its youth should be driving growth, but it might have already blunted this demographic edge





COVER STORY

More than just 'demographic dividend'

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Published by Nirmala Lakshman,
Kasturi Buildings, 859 & 860, Anna Salai,
Chennai 600-002 and Printed by SDT Rao at
Kala Jyothi Process Private Limited,
Plot No. CFC-1&2, Survey No. 18, E-City, SEZ
& General Industrial Park, Ravivijal & Srinagar
(Village), Maheswaram(M), R.R.Dist,
Telangana - 501359 on behalf of THG
PUBLISHING PVT LTD., Chennai-600 002.Editor: Vaishna Roy (Responsible for
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Amita Arudpragasam is an independent policy analyst based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She is interested in economics, politics, gender, and ethnic conflict and has over 10 years of experience in various roles from writer, analyst, researcher, and educator to filmmaker. She is a master of none. Amita currently runs learningtamil.com and is making a documentary on the climate crisis in northern Sri Lanka. She has an AB in English literature from Princeton and a master's in public policy from Harvard; study in the US always reminds her that South Asia is home.

Trisha Gupta is a writer and culture critic and a professor of journalism at Jindal Global University. Before journalism, she spent long years studying history (at the University of Delhi) and anthropology (at Cambridge and Columbia). She has written about literature, visual art, film, and cultural life in India for a range of reputed publications and is slowly writing a book. She lives in Delhi and, as much as she can, offline.



Amitabha Bagchi is the author of four novels and a volume of translations of the ghazals of Muneer Niazi, *Lost Paradise*. His fourth novel, *Half the Night is Gone*, won the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2019. His fifth novel, *Unknown City*, is due in January 2025 and is a sequel to his bestselling debut, *Above Average*. Bagchi's day job: he is a professor at IIT Delhi.

Illustration: P. Muthuraj

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Franklin D. Roosevelt said, "We cannot always build a future for our youth, but we can always build our youth for the future." The worry is that India today does not seem to be doing either.

The youth dividend widely considered to become India's most powerful springboard to dive into "developed" territory looks more and more like a trampoline on which policy experts and government mavens do an annual ritual dance. According to projections, by 2041 almost 59 per cent of India's population will be of working age, among the highest such ratios in the world. Such a youth bulge comes but once in the lifetime of a growing nation and, if exploited to its fullest, can not only mean a prodigious working population churning out goods and services for the world but also an equally large market with a high disposable income.

The next decade, therefore, is crucial. But data for 2024 show that unemployment in the 20-24 age group is at a high 45 per cent. The bigger cause for worry—what the economist Sujoy Chakravarty calls a "sinister trend"—is that employment numbers fall as academic qualifications rise. Remember what happened on July 16? There was pandemonium at Mumbai airport when more than 15,000 graduates and postgraduates rushed in to fill handyman posts paying Rs.22,000 a month. When young people desperately demote themselves in the job market like this, it is nothing short of a demographic disaster.

On the one hand, highly skilled youth continue to quit India. There is little cutting-edge invention, design, or research happening, and with no funding, infrastructure, or liberal policies to enthruse them, why would they stay back? On the other hand, the rash of colleges coming up everywhere, propelled by commerce rather than erudition, spits out thousands of semi-educated, semi-skilled, semi-literate youths each year, armed with degrees

but otherwise unemployable. The government, meanwhile, has never allocated more than 5 per cent of GDP to education in the past 20 years. Bolivia and Namibia allot almost 10 per cent.

INDIA HAS TO create jobs faster than the rate at which its youth population is growing in order to tap the demographic dividend. This is a big ask, and the statistics of the past decade (and the ominous antipathy towards statistics) are not encouraging. The latest Periodic Labour Force Survey shows that the post-COVID trend continues, with most jobs still in agriculture. Agriculture with a 15 per cent share of GDP being forced to absorb 45 per cent of the workforce is not a healthy sign. Most other jobs are in the self-employed, labour, or gig areas, all casual work. Of the women shown as self-employed, 37 per cent do unpaid household labour. Thus, we have neither employable graduates nor enough stable salaried jobs.

But Gen Z is a new force, restless, wilful, idealistic, and much more *au courant* than any generation before it. A strong social, educational, and political scaffolding is needed to harness its energy positively, but in its place all we see is an excess of religio-cultural signalling that only fuels anger and alienation.

While in the electoral arena, the BJP's ideological underpinning is a strength, giving its cadres a holy grail to win, in the governance world its ideological lens becomes blinkers. When an administration's priority is to deny science and statistics in its biggest research organisations, replace history and medicine with mythological gibberish, and remake eminent educational institutions into shallow ideological ponds, it will not be able to build a youth ready for the future or a future fit for its youth. That necessarily calls for an inclusive and progressive mindset.

Vaishna



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India & Pakistan

PAKISTAN was established on a flawed and skewed idea and is run not by a civilian government but by its rogue army that has been dictating its every move and initiative (Cover Story, October 18). Even as India-Pak relations have come to naught, Pakistan continues to promote cross-border terrorism. And yet all its efforts to disturb India have failed miserably.

It is time the civilian government of Pakistan and its military moved the coin first with India. This can



only benefit both countries. Political turmoil and economic upheaval have made Pakistan unstable, and it may take decades for the country to mend itself and recover fully.

M.Y. Shariff
Chennai

PAKISTAN may have a democratically elected government, but it is the military that still seems to call the shots. Although the LoC ceasefire has been in effect since 2021, the aiding and abetting of militants in Kashmir apparently with the covert/overt support of the Pakistani military continues.

Historically, Pakistan has been an unreliable, unpredictable, and hostile neighbour. The Lahore bus trip ended in the Kargil War; the 2004 peace efforts resulted in the Mumbai terror attacks; and let us not forget the 2016 Pathankot terrorist



attack. It is time the Pakistan government understood that violence and diplomacy cannot happen simultaneously. The Prime Minister of Pakistan needs to walk the talk and assure India that his government will desist from promoting state-sponsored terrorism and adopt a zero-tolerance attitude towards outfits that carry out anti-India activities on its soil.

B. Suresh Kumar
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

Sri Lanka

THE Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna's (JVP) history of violent ultra-nationalism, especially against India, makes one wonder if its electoral victory can be seen as a dawn of hope at all ("The dawn of hope", October 18). The fact remains that India's Neighbourhood First Policy has suffered yet another setback, with a wide swathe of its southern maritime domain facing multiple security threats.

While the JVP may have reinvented itself politically, shedding its violent baggage, it is likely to serve up populist policies. Meanwhile, India has proven its diplomatic mettle in Maldives and Bangladesh, as both countries have come to realise the growing importance of economic interdependence with India.

In the case of India and Sri Lanka, too, there is a strong case of economic interdependence. Sri Lanka's economic viability is heavily dependent upon transshipment traffic from India. Moreover, India was quick to come to Sri Lanka's aid at the height of the economic crisis in 2020 with a currency swap; supplies of fuel, rice, and medicine; and financial packages.

India should follow the Maldives template with



Sri Lanka and allow economic interdependence to iron out the edges of the JVP's politics. With President Anura Dissanayake recognising the importance of India for Sri Lanka's security and economic development, one hopes he will tread a cautious path to maintain a balance between India and China.

Sudipta Ghosh
Murshidabad, West Bengal

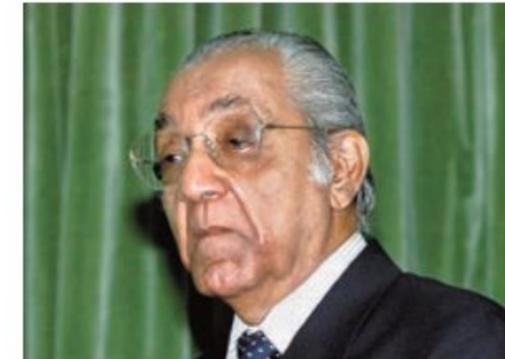
One nation, one election

PRIMA facie, it appears a Herculean task to get the "one nation, one election" Bill passed because the government does not have the required numbers ("One election, many issues", October 18).

Almost every session in the earlier Lok Sabha saw many Bills pushed through without debate after walkouts by the opposition. Therefore, it seems a foregone conclusion that the winter session may see only fireworks and not debate when the NDA leadership brings the Constitution amendment Bill, which is necessary to pass the "one nation, one election" Bill.

K.R. Srinivasan
Secunderabad, Telangana

A.G. Noorani



I AM a regular reader (and recently a subscriber) of *Frontline*. Your tribute to A.G. Noorani ("A polymath passes on", October 4) was superb and touching. Readers of *Frontline* are sure to miss his acerbic wit and incisive criticism.

K. Vijayan
Kochi, Kerala

Hospital horror

THE West Bengal government has appointed lawyers to defend Sandip Ghosh, the disgraced principal of R.G. Kar Medical College, betraying the



establishment's efforts to whitewash the rape and murder of the young medico ("A nation scarred", September 20).

Despite all evidence pointing to a brutal rape and murder, the procedure adopted by the police to investigate the crime is highly suspect. The police arrested Sanjoy Roy, who had initially confessed to the crime. Why then did they also arrest 30 others on suspicion? Did Sanjoy Roy alone commit the crime, or were there others involved? Only a court-monitored CBI investigation can unearth the truth about what really happened.

Kangayam R. Narasimhan
Chennai

Bangladesh

INDIA has stood by Bangladesh through thick and thin as a neighbour ("Time for a turnaround", September 20). After the forceful exit of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh has course-corrected the historic blunder of 1971. But the violence, the vandalism of Hindu temples, and the persecution of the Hindu community in a Muslim-majoritarian state must be condemned and stopped.

The interim government has brought rays of hope for hapless citizens after the end of a gruelling era, but there is still a long way to go. The rights of Hindus have to be protected as they continue to be the scapegoat of anti-India radical elements.

Janga Bahadur Sunuwar
Bagrakote, West Bengal

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

The Fortnight



► On a dangerous loop

In an accident that brought back memories of the tragic Balasore (Odisha) mishap of 2023, the Mysuru-Darbanga Express rammed into a stationary goods train at Kavaraipettai near Gummidipoondi in Chennai on October 11. The Express train, which had the green signal to pass through the main line, entered the loop line and collided with the goods train, resulting in the derailment of at least 13 coaches. However, no casualties were reported. ANI

► On October 3, the Supreme Court declared caste-based division of labour in prisons as "unconstitutional" and directed all States and Union Territories to revise their prison manuals within three months. Hearing a petition filed by journalist Sukanya Shantha, the three-judge Bench headed by Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud struck down several provisions of State prison manuals that reinforced caste differences.

5

people died at the air show organised by the Air Force as part of its 92nd anniversary at Marina beach in Chennai on October 6. The Tamil Nadu Health Minister said all five deaths were caused by heat-related issues. But many reports indicated that the lack of a proper exit strategy after the event might have contributed to it. With over 15 lakh people watching the performance, the show entered the Limca Book of Records.

► The Nobel Peace Prize for 2024 was given to Nihon Hidankyo, the Japanese organisation working for a nuclear weapons-free world. Receiving it, Nihon Hidankyo's co-head Toshiyuki Mimaki said the plight of children in Gaza is similar to the one faced by Japanese children at the end of the Second World War. Meanwhile, the Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to South Korean author Han Kang, known for her books such as *The Vegetarian*, *Greek Lessons*, and *The White Book*.



"Power and wealth are not two of my main stakes."

Tata Group's chairman emeritus, billionaire, and philanthropist **Ratan Tata** passed away at 86 in Mumbai on October 9. He is survived by his younger brothers Jimmy and Noel Tata and stepmother Simone Tata. Noel Tata was appointed chairman of Tata Trusts on October 11.



► The offensive continues

At least 30 people were killed by Israeli strikes in northern Gaza's Jabalia refugee camp on October 11, according to Gaza's civil defence agency. A total of 61 Palestinians were killed across the Gaza Strip on the same day. The Israeli military launched a deadly offensive a week ago claiming it aimed to stop Hamas from regrouping. On October 10, in southern Lebanon, the UN peacekeeping forces said that its headquarters was hit by new explosions, a day after Israel had struck the same place. In picture, Palestinians moving out of northern Gaza with their belongings. OMAR AL-QATTAA/AFP

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More than just 'demographic dividend'



India's youth, numbering a staggering 345 million, are keenly anticipated to be the key drivers of development, but the gains so far seem elusive. An interesting topography of this population is presented here, as we try to locate and analyse this cohort in the disruptive digital era.

Peter Ronald deSouza



In 2006, we published a book titled *Indian Youth in a Transforming World: Attitudes and Perceptions*. It was based on the first-ever opinion survey conducted in India of 5,000 youth from across the country. We sought their views on many different aspects of their lives, from family and social networks to leisure and lifestyle, to trust and circles of belonging, to their anxieties and aspirations. We even elicited their views on politics and democracy in India and of the place of the nation in the larger world. It was a comprehensive opinion survey yielding valuable insights into how Indian youth, from all categories of class, gender, caste, education, and place of residence, positioned themselves in a changing world.

The results were both expected and unexpected. Although it was mainly an opinion survey, we expanded the study with anthropological and sociological insights culled from some of the case studies that we had also commissioned. Here are three interesting findings.

On the issues of *trust and circles of belonging* we

▼ **The world of young people** world today changes fast, provides style icons, and creates aspirations. Here, young girls take a selfie with the Gandhi statue at the Sabarmati Gandhi Ashram on October 2, 2016. VIJAY SONEJI



found “that the social spaces in which youth are located constitute cultural islands with few bridges since the youth, by and large, count among their friends, persons of the same religion, caste and gender. This is interesting since it suggests that social borders are still quite strong and border crossings are discouraged... an important finding since it tells us that in spite of the big changes that have occurred in polity and economy, in the domain of the social world the changes” are taking place more slowly.

On family and social networks, we learnt that “parental authority has considerable leverage in the life of most Indian youth and even though variations are a function of education and socioeconomic status (SES), with small changes towards more autonomy of decision-making in the higher SES, it is not enough to undermine the observation that no generation gap exists in India. Youth prefer to remain within the cultural codes of their family and social networks.”

On the issue of leisure and lifestyles, we discovered the obvious, that “dressing up in the latest styles is an important facet of self-expression and that this was a view strongly held by the younger segment of the youth”. Youth here seemed no different from youth elsewhere in the world. “The power of the media, especially the electronic media, seems considerable with a majority of youth watching films and serials on television.” It was clear that

▼ **The ubiquitous smartphone** shapes the moral and existential coordinates of the youth today. At an Apple Inc. store in Mumbai in September 2024. DHIRAJ SINGH/BLOOMBERG

Apps such as WhatsApp, Spotify, and TikTok add to the cultural indoctrination of youth, telling them what they can be, should be, and aspire to be.

some messages, subliminal and overt, were getting through. There were many other interesting findings.

This was a world before the arrival of social media, after which everything changed. The moral and existential coordinates of youth have since been disturbed. The ubiquitous smartphone hosts news portals from which youth get their political information. It is their medical diagnostic tool, travel guide, fashion adviser, classroom, opinion board, photo exchanger, and, of course, social mobiliser. Their world today is more interconnected than it was in 2006. It changes fast, provides style icons, and creates aspirations. It is both real and virtual. The issue, therefore, is to know the impact of this digital world on Indian youth.

FOR THIS WE MUST go beyond statistics. First of all, let us be clear that the age group we are talking about is between 15 and 29. In 2006, the government of India considered youth to be between the ages of 15 and 35; against the UN definition of 15 to 24. India has now revised it to 15 to 29. The numbers tell us that we are looking at 27.2 per cent of the Indian population. As per 2021 figures, this translates to about 345 million people, which is more than the entire population of the US at 333 million. It is huge. How is the new digital world impacting 345 million youth in India?

There are two lenses through which we must construct an answer. The first, and the most obvious, concerns the “demographic dividend” that policymakers are excited about. This is seen in terms of (i) the increase in the labour pool, (ii) the growth in savings, (iii) the expansion of human capital, and (iv) the boost it gives to the economy.

Economists say that a “demographic dividend” occurs only once in the trajectory of a country’s economic growth. Hence, countries must not miss the opportunity to harness it. India is at such a moment. The government has prepared a National Perspective Plan for the Youth, 1996-2020, to reap its benefits. Ministries, business organisations, educational bodies, and youth associations have reportedly come together to implement the Skill India initiative. It is too early to say whether it is delivering results or whether it remains, like many other government schemes, another slogan.

The second lens is equally interesting. It looks at the impact of the drivers of modernity on youth. I use modernity as a catch-all concept that also covers the cultural products of post modernity. Today’s media is saturated with subliminal suggestions of goods to be consumed and lifestyles to be adopted. The images are unrelenting. In fact, you are regarded as belonging to the dinosaur age if you do not have an Instagram handle and a Facebook account. Apps and portals such as WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Spotify, and TikTok add to the cultural indoctrination of youth, telling them what they can be, should be, and aspire to be.

WHILE THE PRODUCTION centres of these digital images are global, they are driven largely by the Global North that produces the style statements, the fashion aspirations, the ankle-length pants, and so on, of our age. It is not surprising that LVMH, which owns brands such as Louis Vuitton, TAG Heuer, and Givenchy is, as of June 2024, the third most valuable company in Europe. One may think that I am giving an elitist view when I invoke LVMH, but this would be a wrong reading since the only point

These digital images are driven largely by the global north that produces the style statements and fashion aspirations of our age.

I am making is the power of consumption dreams. They dominate imaginations across the world. India is not unaffected. The Anant Ambani wedding confirms my claim. For example, why was Rihanna and not Shah Rukh or Salman the star of the show? Why was so much media space given to the Manish Malhotra dresses and to the Audemars Piguet watches given to the groomsmen? Think about it.

This lure of Western modernity, and its consequences for Indian youth, needs to be investigated. Although the impact on 345 million people will be varied, producing a plurality of responses, we can—on the basis of newspaper reports, trends in other societies, and amateur ethnography—still hazard an analysis. I shall, in what follows, propose a typology of groups—Weberian Ideal types—into which most youth in India can be placed. This is a tall and bold claim, but I think it works. The ty-

► **Young people** account for 27.2 per cent of population. Here, a group of young men in Udaipur in September 2013. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK





▼ **Large numbers of youth** migrate for jobs from the north to the south of India. In this image, migrant workers from Odisha share a light moment in Nettoor, Kerala. THULASI KAKKAT

pology offered is merely a conceptual device to group together youth on the basis of a common pre-eminent factor that defines their world. In the real world, although there may be many factors that influence youth, some from other types in the typology, placing them in one type is to highlight the pre-eminent factor that defines them.

MOST YOUTH, especially those who come from financially vulnerable families, are driven by the goal of livelihood security. This is a truism. As the economy moves from an era of stable employment to one of contract employment, and as the outsourcing of jobs to labour contractors becomes the norm, livelihood insecurity has come to define the world of a large section of youth across regions, classes, castes, and communities. In such an uncertain labour market, youth accept schemes that may not give them long-term financial security but meet their current economic needs. One such is the Agnipath scheme. It gives a job in the defence forces for four years and a golden handshake to

Livelihood insecurity has come to define the world of a large section of youth across regions, classes, castes, and communities.

most recruits thereafter, with only 25 per cent of those trained being retained. The scheme has met with strong criticism, especially in regions such as Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, where the army has been a major source of livelihood security for generations. Despite these drawbacks, in 2024, 12.8 lakh youth applied for the nearly 52,000 positions in the forces. This was reportedly an increase of 10 per cent over 2023 and illustrates the desperation among youth for work and employment. Let me call this first group of youth the Sarkari Job Seekers. Most youth belong to this category.

The second group are the Migrants. Today, large numbers of youth migrate for jobs, both internally and externally. Youth from the North, particularly from Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Bihar, migrate to the southern States of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Goa to take up jobs as plumbers, carpenters, masons, electricians, and hospital and municipal workers. They benefit from the better working conditions in these States, better salaries, and better personal safety, and hence the demographic dividend is accruing to the South from the youth bulge in the North. The migrants' world sadly acquired a physicality during the COVID-19 shutdown when thousands had to trek thousands of miles back to their homes in the North. The situation of the



▼ **Gig workers** are the bonded labourers of the digital age. Waiting to collect orders outside a mall in Mumbai in August 2023.

FRANCIS MASCARENHAS/REUTERS

external migrant is equally tragic. Not only do Indian youth pay large sums to traffickers to reach Europe and the US, but they also make highly risky journeys to get there.

Regular stories appear of young people risking their lives in harsh winters as they cross from Russia or Belarus into Poland or Finland or trek through the Darién Gap in South America to reach the US. On October 3, 2024, 6 migrants among 33 were shot and killed by Mexican soldiers when the truck they were travelling in tried to avoid a military patrol. There were Indians among them.

The third group of youth are the Gig Workers. Because of livelihood demands, youth have accepted the new gig jobs in companies such as Zomato, Swiggy, Amazon, Flipkart, Uber, and Ola. NITI Aayog has estimated the number of gig workers in 2022 to be between 8 million and 18 million. This is estimated to grow to 90 million.

Gig work is defined by high pressure from both ends, the company and the client, by income instability, by the absence of legal protections and employment security, and by

Gig work is defined by high pressure from both ends, the company and the client, by income instability, the absence of legal protections and job security.

considerable mental health problems. Gig workers are the bonded labourers of the digital age.

THE FOURTH GROUP, the Digital Nomad, although much smaller in size, constitutes a distinct segment. These young people have chosen to work remotely from favoured geographies such as Goa or Coonoor. Digital nomads have computing skills that the companies of the digital age require, whether startups or established IT firms. The digital nomad earns well and is happy not to be on the escalator of modern life. Which social class they belong to is unclear, although they come mainly from elitist backgrounds. Digital nomads sitting in India also work for global companies. They get work because they are networked. They have spawned a growing ecosystem of startups across the country but primarily in the metros. Their increasing number is a measure of the expanding middle class and a tribute to the Nehruvian policy of investment in higher education.

In tandem with digital nomads are the fifth group, the Cosmos (short for cosmopolitan), who respond in seconds to global trends in music, fashion, and leisure. In contrast to go-

vernment job seekers, migrants, and gig workers, the Cosmos are not troubled by livelihood concerns. They come from the cultural and economic elite, and although their numbers are small, they have a disproportionate impact on public life. They are the influencers. They drive social fashions. (Sanghis, who changed from khaki shorts to long pants, have already been alerted.) The recent scandal surrounding the resale of tickets for the 2025 Coldplay concert—originally priced between Rs.2,500 and Rs.12,000 but resold for up to Rs.9,00,000—highlights the rising influence of the Cosmo. A staggering 10 million people fought for 1,80,000 tickets. Cosmos are products of modernity, but a different modernity.

THE LAST GROUP are the Bhakts and Vigilantes. Emboldened by a government that is playing a sinister game of seeking to build an enduring political constituency through the poison of communal politics—just as Benjamin Netanyahu is doing in Israel—many underemployed youths have joined communal organisations that spread hatred. The Bhakts cross all the red lines the constitutional system has established over 75 years. A plural India is the only India there can be, which the Bhakts do not understand, schooled as they are in the hateful propaganda of the *shakha*. It is this plurality they seek to harm and undermine. Cultural vigilantism is their method. It acquires an added life through social media. I cannot forget the 2017

▼ **Cultural vigilantism** gets added life through social media and influences many young people. Here, Bajrang Dal activists brandish tridents at a protest at the National Institute of Technology, Srinagar, in 2016. NISSAR AHMAD

incident when a man in Rajsamand district of Rajasthan asked his 15-year-old nephew to record him on video as he hacked to death and then burnt a labourer suspected of “love jihad”. This hateful mentality, sadly, is present among many young people today, emboldened as they are by the current dispensation’s use of digital technology.

THIS IS THE TOPOGRAPHY of India’s youth. While the pressure of livelihood insecurity will push many of them into precarious work, driven by the app ecosystem that produces an underclass of citizens—the new bonded workers of the digital age—another group will ride the opportunities of the digital age to become entrepreneurs and influencers. Hindutva politics beams to all six groups.

The future of India that is Bharat is at stake. The Cosmos and the Bhakts are in direct and indirect contest—direct, such as when vigilante groups oppose Valentine’s Day, and indirect, when they rewrite school textbooks. It is difficult to say which one will prevail. India’s size makes one believe that Coldplay and Kanwar yatras can be simultaneously supported. Currently, they do coexist. In the long run, however, I believe the Cosmos will win. History is on the side of modernity. History favours the images of consumption that capitalism produces. Otherwise, Rihanna would not have got a visa to India, blacklisted as she was by the regime after her comments on the farmers’ protest. The cultural nativism of the Bhakts may initially get supporters, but as the middle class expands and joins the global elite, as has happened in Japan, China, Dubai, and Nigeria, their power will weaken. The periodic World Values Survey reports seem to suggest that this is the trajectory of most societies, and India is no exception. It is the short run, however, that worries us, for the poison of hate is spreading. How much damage will it do to the social fabric of this ancient land? Only Siva knows. Will he appear again to consume the poisons emerging from the digital churning of Indian life? ■

Peter Ronald deSouza is an independent scholar. *Indian Youth in a Transforming World: Attitudes and Perceptions* is available online at <https://sk.sagepub.com/books/indian-youth-in-a-transforming-world>



Skills-jobs mismatch

Nearly half of India's graduates are unemployable while people with formal vocational training make up just 4 per cent of the population. Herein lies the problem.

M. SURESH BABU

With 1.4 billion people, India has surpassed China to become the world's most populous country, according to UN estimates. As its population will continue to grow over the coming decade, India stands to gain numerous advantages, especially as developed countries grapple with declining birth rates and tight labour markets. The abundant availability of labour also makes India well placed to achieve its growth goals. However, this also opens up the challenge of augmenting and channelising productive resources to activities that absorb labour in order to reap the benefits. While numerous policies have been announced to accomplish the goal of enhanced labour absorption and job creation, data on employment released from time to time by multiple agencies point to contradictory trends. This raises a vital question on the ability of the economy to generate adequate jobs, failing which the potential advantage could turn out to be a catastrophe.

A country enters the demographic dividend phase when, along with sustained population growth, the share of its working-age population exceeds that of the very young and old. India has already entered this zone, according to an International Labour Organization report, and will remain in this phase for another decade. The Economic Survey 2018-19 states that the demographic dividend will peak around 2041, when the working-age population will be 59 per cent of the total population.

However, the World Bank's "Jobs for Resilience" report on South

There exists an enormous skill gap between the demand from industries and the kind of skill sets young people acquire through various education and training programmes.



Asia states that the region recorded the highest outflow of migrants during 2010-23, accounting for 2 per cent of the working-age population. The report also highlights that for the demographic dividend to be realised, the region needs to create more jobs, which means that India has to create jobs at a higher rate than its youth population growth rate. Current data on employment growth do not indicate this, and going by the timeline of the next decade as the peak of the demographic dividend phase, employment generation is a tough challenge.

As an economy grows, it is expected to experience structural transformation with sectoral share in output and employment too changing over time. Agrarian economies have a higher share of workers and output in the agricultural sector, and as industrial activities grow over time, the size of the agriculture sector in the economy reduces. As industrialisation proceeds, it absorbs workers released from the agriculture sector. This process culminates in a third phase, when the services sector grows faster and absorbs more

workers and contributes a larger share to the overall output. The linear progression outlined above assumes that output and employment growth move together.

IN INDIA'S CASE, such a linear trajectory was cut short by the sluggish growth of the industrial sector and the rapid growth of the services sector. Output transition is not accompanied by employment transition as agriculture, which contributes more to employment growth, has a lower share in output, and the services sector, which contributes more to output, has not generated more jobs. This scenario is complicated by the existence of the informal sector, which is a sizeable component of the services sector. Employment transition in India typically sees workers in the informal agricultural sector shift to informal roles in the services sector, effectively moving from one low-paid job to another, resulting in the persistence of the "working poor" in the economy.

Given this peculiar path of structural transformation, data on employment growth in India reveal divergent trends. Data from the Reserve Bank of India show a 6 per cent increase in job growth for the financial year 2023-24, while the

Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy shows that the unemployment rate rose to 9.2 per cent in June 2024 from 7 per cent in May. According to the **Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS)**, the unemployment rate in urban areas decreased from 6.8 per cent to 6.7 per cent from January-March 2023 to January-March 2024 for people aged 15 and above. According to Citigroup Research, India needs to create about 1.2 crore jobs every year to absorb new entrants into the labour market. However, with a 7 per cent growth rate, the country is able to generate only around 80-90 lakh jobs a year, resulting in a deficit of around 30-40 lakh jobs a year.

Unemployment in India has both demographic and structural dimensions. Among men, the highest unemployment rate is seen in the 15-19 age group, followed by those aged 20-24. Among women, the highest unemployment rate is found in the 20-24 age group.

The self-employed made up 57.3 per cent of those employed in rural and urban areas in 2022-23, and the share of salaried employees fell to 20.9 per cent during 2022-23 from 21.5 per cent in the previous year. In terms of broad in-

► **Sector-wise job placements** for skills courses show the most uptake in electronics and hardware. In pic, technicians ready photovoltaic panels at Fab City, Maheshwaram in Telangana. P.V. SIVAKUMAR

← *The National Sample Survey Office launched the PLFS in April 2017. It provides information on the worker population ratio, labour force participation rate, unemployment rate, and so on.*

dustry division, nearly 49.1 per cent of all rural males and 76.2 per cent of all rural females were employed in agriculture.

An important factor that hampers labour market operations is skill mismatch, which results in excess workers in some sectors and shortages in other sectors. Skills are the building blocks of efficient labour market outcomes as they represent an individual's ability to perform tasks and add value to a work environment.

Skill development is considered key for productive employment as it is an important means for increased productivity, inclusive economic growth, and poverty reduction. Given the demographic pressures and structural changes in the services sector, a better skilled and more adaptable labour force that can spur domestic and foreign investment is required for sustained economic and employment growth.

SKILL GAP IS the divergence between the skills required by the workforce and their current attributes and capabilities. According to the 12th Plan document, merely 2 per cent of the workforce has any vocational training. Further highlighting this, the India Skills Report 2015 stated that only one-third of all students applying for jobs had the appropriate skills to match employers' requirements.

There exists an enormous skill gap between the demand from industries and the kind of skill sets young people acquire through various education and training programmes. According to PLFS data, the percentage of formally vocationally trained individuals decreased from 2.2 per cent in 2011-12 to 2 per cent in 2017-18 and increased to 3.7 per cent in 2022-23, compared with 52 per cent in the US, 80 per cent in Japan, and 96 per cent in South Korea.

To address this acute shortage of skills, a number of policy measures have been envisaged. The National Skill Development Mission (NSDM) and the National Policy on Skill Development and Entrepreneurship have been the government's major response. The NSDM was implemented through schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana, and the National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme.

A major problem with skilling programmes has been their short duration. Since 2017-18, of the total vocationally trained individuals, the

share of those who undertook courses with a duration of less than six months increased from 22 per cent to 37 per cent.

A more worrying trend is that while in 2017, 29 per cent of individuals took two-year or longer courses, it has now declined to 14.29 per cent. This clearly indicates that there has been a rapid decrease in the duration of skill development courses, leading to a situation of more people getting some kind of formal certification through short-duration courses, some of which are as short as 10 days.

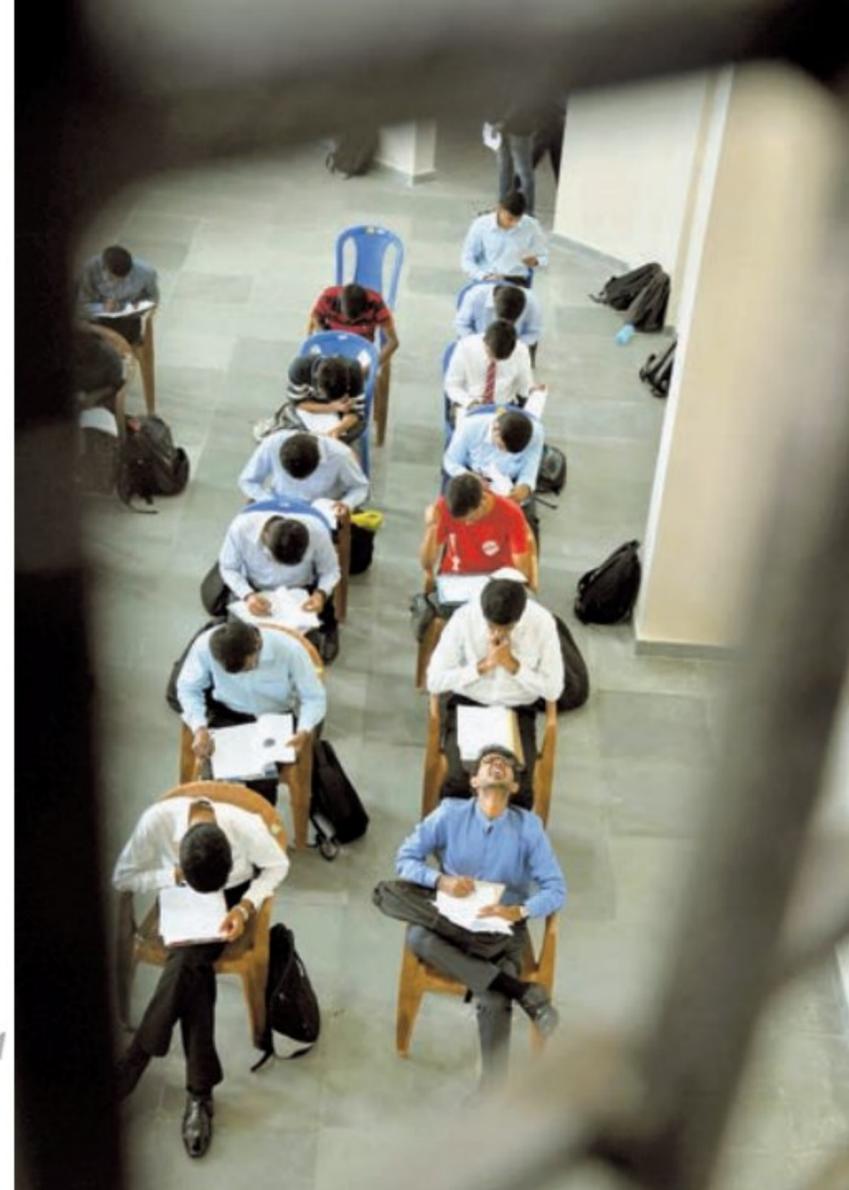
Short duration skill training programmes offer a range of courses across retail, hospitality, agriculture, wellness, construction, IT, and other sectors. These courses are intended to equip young people with the skills required to work as electricians, warehouse packagers, tailors, hairdressers, beauticians, farm machine repairers, solar technicians, videographers, and so on. But in reality, across regions, there have been some serious lacunae in the functioning of these initiatives. They range from an absence of training centres to poor training, lack of certification, inadequate or forced placement, shortage of trainers, and no assurance of a decent wage for those trained.

The shortcomings of the skill development courses are reflected in the post-training placement statistics. According to the PMKVY's official website, 54 per cent of the trainees are placed; however, an analysis of data shows that only 22.2 per cent were actually placed. The placement rate of the PMKVY shows not much improvement over time; for PMKVY 1.0, it is 18.4 per cent, for PMKVY 2.0, it is 23.4 per cent, and for PMKVY 3.0, it is 10.1 per cent. The sector-wise placement rate shows 54 per cent for electronics and hardware; 20 per cent for apparel; and for the rest of the eight sectors, BFSI (banking, financial services, and insurance), beauty and wellness, etc., it is lower than 10 per cent.

This indicates that the rise of short-term skilling courses results only in an increase in the number of individuals who may now possess a certification labelling them as skilled but in reality lack the full training required to carry out tasks efficiently.

IMPARTING SKILL DEVELOPMENT programmes is also ridden with a number of problems, as finding a good instructor at a minimum wage and managing the centre within

The available resources and infrastructure limit these courses to producing half-trained workers



a budget is a tough task. Most centres thus run courses that require less funding, which means these centres cannot afford to buy big machines or hire well-skilled trainers.

Initially, skill development centres used to get money from the government before a batch completed a course; however, according to the new guidelines, funding is given only after the course is over and only for those who have successfully completed the certification. Further, in the initial phase, the Ministry allocated Rs.1,100 a student, with which the skilling centres had to provide equipment and products for training, pay teachers, and pay electricity bills.

Currently, the per-student budget at PMKVY centres is nearly Rs.6,000, with which these centres offer courses such as automotive service technician, healthcare, and food processing. Given this milieu of skill training programmes, there is a need for quality checks of the short-term courses. The available resources and infrastructure limit these courses to producing half-

▼ **Young engineers** writing a test at a campus placement programme held at IIT Madras, a 2016 picture. M. MOORTHY

trained workers, and the certificates of these trained jobseekers do not carry much value in the labour market as they essentially do not learn the required skills. This, in turn, hampers their chances of securing a job after the completion of these training programmes. In essence, the skilling system produces half-educated and quasi-trained personnel.

The India Skills Report 2021 argues that nearly half of India's graduates are unemployable. Further, the youth unemployment rate reflects worrying trends: for those with middle school (class VIII) education, it increased from 4.5 per cent to 13.7 per cent; for secondary education (class X), it rose from 5.9 per cent to 14.4 per cent; and for higher secondary (class XII) education, it climbed from 10.8 per cent to 23.8 per cent. Among graduates, the unemployment rate went up from 19.2 per cent to 35.8 per cent, while for postgraduates, it rose from 21.3 per cent to 36.2 per cent in 2022-23.

Studies show that effective, sustainable approaches to workforce development and employment must improve a combination of skills for employability of individuals and at the same time build a sustainable system for improved private sector competitiveness. Youth unemployment resulting from a mismatch between the supply of the education system and labour market needs can in particular be partly addressed through adequate skills development within a future-oriented, flexible, and holistic education system.

The current situation of educated unemployment, low demand for skill programmes, low-quality training, and poor placement rate calls for an urgent need to comprehensively review the skill development landscape. This assumes more importance as the country seems to be losing the demographic advantage.

The current youth unemployment rate is unacceptably high, with young people account for nearly 83 per cent of the country's total unemployed population. As of now, one in every three young Indians is neither pursuing education, nor is employed, nor enrolled in any skill-based training. This underscores the need to accelerate labour upskilling and strengthen women's participation in the workforce if India is to achieve its full economic potential. ■

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

THE NEET FACTOR

Individuals who are Not in Education, Employment, and Training make it difficult to measure unemployment accurately. Such individuals are often low in education and skills and never look for structured jobs, thus failing to participate in the labour force. **SUJOY CHAKRAVARTY**

Unemployment among younger workers in the labour force has been a worrying global trend from the turn of the century. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), young people are three times as likely as adults to be unemployed. The youth unemployment rate has been rising over the past several decades in the world—from 5.6 per cent in 2000 to 6.2 per cent in 2012, and then increasing threefold, to nearly 18 per cent in 2018, and reaching around 15.1 per cent in 2020. ILO estimates the overall unemployment in the 15-25 age group to be approximately 13 per cent in 2023, though in Asia it remains higher than in the global North.

Boosting employment for the young allows a country to leverage its demographic dividend, which is the potential growth associated with having a larger proportion of the population in the working age group. This is usually achieved by including a larger share of younger individuals in the workforce.

As illustrated in Figure 1, approximately 53 per cent of the Indian workforce was below 29 in 2021. This is demographically projected to decrease to 43 per cent by 2036.

Unemployed individuals are those who participate in the labour force and look for employment without obtaining a job. The size of the labour force, or the labour force participation rate (LFPR), is crucial in obtaining the unemployment rate. In this context, the precise measurement of youth unemployment is difficult because of the presence of the NEET factor (Not in Education, Employment, and Training), particularly in developing countries. These individuals, often low in educa-

tion and skills, never look for any form of structured employment and thus do not participate in the labour force even though they can be potentially employed if they acquire the skills. The unemployment rate is the fraction of individuals looking for jobs who fail to secure employment.

In India, different methods of sample selection used to classify individuals as employed produce wildly different estimates of the unemployment rate.

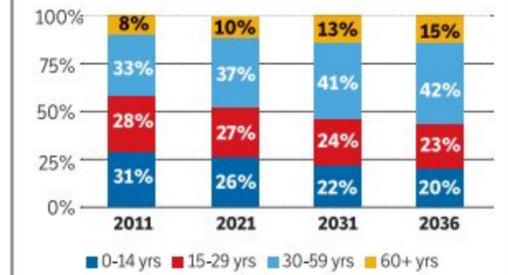
IN INDIA, DIFFERENT methods of sample selection used to classify individuals as employed produce wildly different estimates of the unemployment rate. For example, even within government estimates, the usual principal or subsidiary status (UPSS) of employment would deem an individual to be “employed” if they secured some employment of not less than 30 days in the previous 365 days (subsidiary status) or if they were employed for the majority of the last 365 days (principal status). The individuals identified as unemployed by the UPSS give us an estimate of the chronically unemployable. On the other hand, using the principal status gives us a far more stringent category for declaring an individual as employed and produces a different estimate of the unemployment rate.

Examining employment numbers, on one end we have the ILO, which finds a decreasing trend in employment and labour force participation among the youth. Specifically, the ILO India Employment Report shows employment in the 15-29 age group falling from 52 per cent to 37 per cent from 2000 to 2022, and labour force participation falling from 54 to 42 per cent over the same years (Figure 2). Among young women, the ILO report pegs labour force participation at a meagre 21.7 per cent in 2022 (Figure 3).

Similarly, the Centre for Monitoring Indian

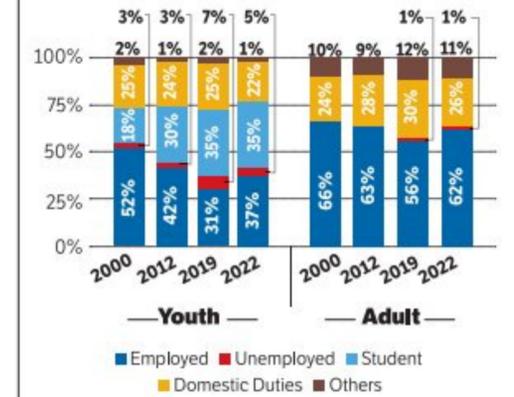
► New graduates at KLE Technological University in Hubballi, in 2019. There is a downward mobility in the market, with candidates having advanced degrees being forced to take up low-end and low-paid jobs. **KIRAN BAKALE**

Figure 1: Age distribution of the Indian workforce



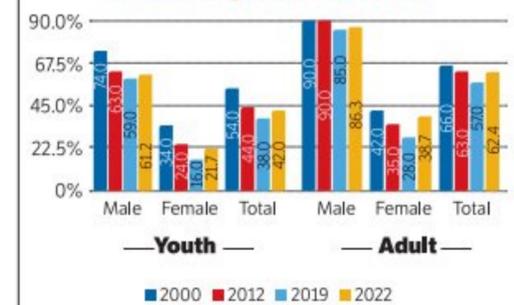
Source: ILO-IHD, India Employment Report 2024

Figure 2: Employment numbers of youth and adults using usual principal or subsidiary status (UPSS)



Source: ILO-IHD, India Employment Report 2024

Figure 3: Labour Force Participation of youth and adults using usual principal or subsidiary status (UPSS)



Source: ILO-IHD, India Employment Report 2024



Economy (CMIE) utilises its own survey and pegs the unemployment rate in the 20-24 age group at about 45 per cent in 2024. On the other hand, the government of India, in its Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), finds the extent of youth unemployment to be much more manageable. These figures are shown in Table 1. For 2022, the PLFS finds the unemployment rates for the 15-19, 20-24 and 25-29 age groups to be 19.2, 20.4 and 10.4 respectively among men and 23.0, 32.9 and 19.1 respectively for women.

Regardless of which set of figures one trusts, these figures, particularly for the 15-19 and 20-24 groups, a priori do not signal disaster as in this age most men and women who can afford higher education are not in the labour market. Furthermore, given the very generous definition of what it means to be employed or in the workforce in India, even relatively high levels of youth employment would belie significant disguised unemployment or underemployment, particularly for sporadic work in the informal sector.

Digging a little deeper, one can see a sinister trend underlying the youth employment numbers: youth unemployment increases with the level of academic attainment. Table 2 gives us unemployment rates in different age bands using the more stringent principal status classification. Perusing figures from the PLFS (2022-23) we find that though the unemployment rates for

▼ **An engineer** with an advanced robot welding machine. The AI disruption is poised to displace workers across a wide spectrum of jobs. GETTY IMAGES



individuals with postgraduate qualifications in the 15-59 age group are 10.25 and 20.82 per cent for men and women, respectively, they are 33.90 and 41.49 per cent respectively for the 15-29 age group. This indicates that about one-third of younger men with advanced degrees and above 40 per cent of women with advanced degrees are without jobs.

For less qualified young jobseekers, the unemployment rates are much lower, signifying that the bottleneck for our economy is in providing high-skill jobs for the highly trained. This downward mobility in the job market has come into focus in recent years when cohorts of individuals with advanced degrees like BTech, MTech, and MBA have been seen to apply for low-skilled jobs such as sanitation staff in several states, and this severely erodes our demographic dividend.

THIS DOWNWARD MOBILITY in the labour market results in reduced productivity, lower economic output, and a significant mismatch between workers' skills and job requirements, which negatively impacts the economy. Over time, this leads to diminishing returns on education, discouraging people from pursuing higher education. As a result, academic and professional programmes face declining enrolment, potentially leading to their eventual collapse. The phenomenon of unemployability of individuals with advanced degrees has been a long-standing global problem in this century that needs to be desperately addressed.

Writing in the premier science journal *Nature*, Mark Taylor in 2011 posited that either we reform the process of acquiring advanced postgraduate degrees or shut down the moribund programmes, particularly ones that grant PhDs, which produce many graduates who are then unable to find employment. While such bold pragmatic pronouncements may have some merit, it is also true that the instrumentalisation of education to merely provide meal tickets ultimately leads to undermining its purpose in society. This could lead to the collapse of programmes in arts, humanities, and the basic sciences which do not train individuals to necessarily create a product or offer a service.

A serious corollary to the lack of jobs for the qualified is the brain drain that has been endemic to the Indian economy for the last 50 years, with many trained and skilled individuals who cannot secure suitable employment migrating to

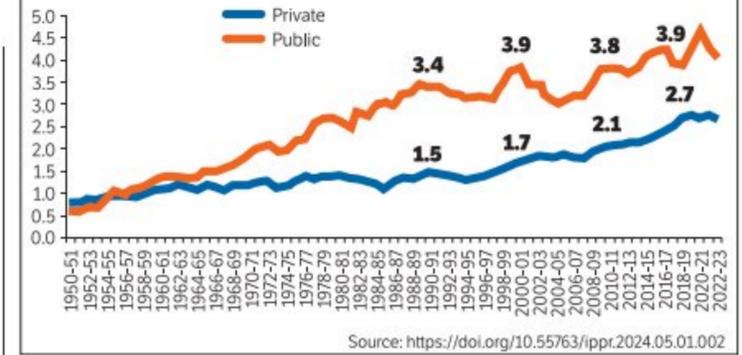
other countries, most often to get advanced degrees and not return, further eroding human capital in our economy. In a 2023 study by Prithwiraj Chaudhury and co-authors in the *Journal of Development Economics*, out of the 1,000 highest scorers in the 2010 Joint Entrance Examination of the Indian Institutes of Technology, around 36 per cent migrated abroad, and of the top 100 scorers, 62 per cent left the country. This trend of brain drain continues unabated, and in 2022, the number of Indian students who left the country for higher education reached a six-year high of 7,70,000.

WHAT ARE THE main reasons for well-educated young people in India not obtaining jobs today? For one, it is true that curricula in higher education programmes, at least in India, are largely outdated and rely on the memorisation of facts and figures, which may have passed muster 50 years ago but today produce rote learners who are unable to think outside the box or display the innovation required to function in a fast-paced globalised world. A key factor behind the lack of intellectual dynamism among our highly educated youth may be the insufficient investment in infrastructure and expertise in affordable higher education institutions, both public and private. These institutions often produce graduates with inadequate skills, making them less competitive in the job market and harder to employ. Elite public universities often have crumbling facilities, faculty posts that go unfilled for years and syllabi that are not appropriately updated.

This is not surprising given that government spending on education has not exceeded 5 per cent of GDP over the last 20 years, though the enrolment in higher education has increased from 3.42 crore to 4.33 crore just between 2014 and 2022. Of this, the higher education budget is meagre at best and gets less than 1 per cent of the GDP. There is a small set of elite private universities that have emerged in the last 20 years, but

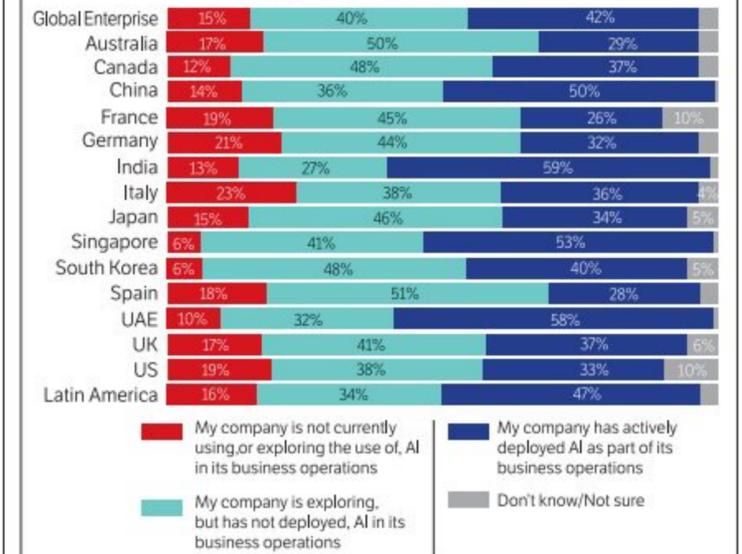
For less qualified young job seekers, the unemployment rates are much lower, signifying that the bottleneck for our economy is in providing high-skill jobs for the highly trained.

Figure 4: Government spending on education as a percentage of GDP



Source: <https://doi.org/10.55763/ijppr.2024.05.01.002>

Figure 5: AI deployment among companies surveyed by country



Source: IBM Global AI Adoption Index: Enterprise report (2023)

most of these are out of the reach of the Indian middle class. In the New Education Policy of 2020, the government has suggested that the education budget be raised to 6 per cent of the GDP. This is a welcome pronouncement and must be implemented immediately.

Secondly, the speed of diffusion of ideas and knowledge creation in the third decade of the 21st century is owed in no small part to automation, expert systems and artificial intelligence (AI) that have slowly but inexorably seeped into every institution in the world. This phenomenon further challenges the employability of young individuals by affecting the total supply of available jobs. According to Nobel laureates Esther Du-

flo and Abhijit Banerjee, while this particular wave of automation is in a nascent state, earlier disruptors like the steam engine, electricity, computer chips, and computer-based office innovations all lowered the need for human workers. According to David Autor, in the first IT revolution starting from the 1990s, jobs which involved routine repetitive tasks were made redundant. This meant that typists, assembly line workers, and office administrators such as clerks and peons became structurally unemployed.

This time around, computer systems, machines, and algorithms are self-learning and self-reinforcing. The algorithms that power these

Currently in India, there are no concrete policies in place regarding reskilling or compensation of individuals displaced by AI usage.

machines are superlative at non-repetitive analytical tasks and often perform faster and with lower bias than humans in solving complex multi-attribute problems in judgment and decision-making. The AI disruption is thus poised to displace individuals across a wide spectrum of jobs. Accountants, consultants, financial and media planners, paralegals, and journalists are already competing with some form of AI. In this “second machine age”, a phrase coined by Massachusetts Institute of Technology professors Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McGee, individuals with sophisticated skill sets and degrees from top institutions of higher education will become increasingly unemployable unless they acquire the skills to service this robot and algorithm-laden economy and have to look for lower paid/lower skill jobs, leading to a significant increase in inequality.

Yanis Varoufakis, the former Finance Minister of Greece and renowned economist, warns us of this new post-capitalist era of techno-feudalism, wherein a few corporations or cloud “lords” who exploit the power of digitisation and AI and their small skeleton workforces will control most of the world economy. Governments such as ours with a potentially large workforce need to urgently upskill the highly educated young people who exit our system of higher education so that they remain economically viable for the next decade in the global marketplace.

Currently in India, there are no concrete policies in place regarding reskilling or compensation of individuals displaced by AI usage. On the other hand, in a recent survey on AI deployment by IBM in several countries, 59 per cent of Indian companies reported using AI in their business operations (Figure 5). This is the highest among all countries surveyed and is a clarion call for our government to institute policies to safeguard our workers. ■

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Table 1: Unemployment rate for 15-29 age group using PLFS and Principal Status

Sector	Year	Female			Male		
		15-19	20-24	25-29	15-19	20-24	25-29
Rural	2017	18.1	23.9	9.6	29.3	24.0	9.6
	2018	17.4	24.7	11.2	31.7	21.1	9.7
	2019	14.7	18.6	8.8	20.8	20.2	8.8
	2020	9.3	17.2	7.6	19.5	17.9	7.9
	2021	8.0	21.2	8.4	20.1	17.5	8.0
	2022	7.9	19.9	7.9	17.0	15.7	5.6
Urban	2017	25.3	39.5	22.0	28.2	24.8	12.9
	2018	25.0	37.8	19.6	29.8	24.6	12.5
	2019	18.6	35.2	19.6	30.4	22.9	13.1
	2020	13.9	36.5	22.9	21.3	22.9	12.9
	2021	17.8	33.7	19.4	21.0	22.1	12.4
	2022	23.0	32.9	19.1	19.2	20.4	10.4

Table 2: Unemployment rate by education using PLFS (2023) and Principal Status

Education level	15-59 years		15-29 years	
	Female	Male	Female	Male
not literate	0.22	0.36	0.41	2.79
below primary	0.47	0.69	1.97	1.23
primary	0.65	1.06	0.63	3.70
middle	1.47	2.69	2.92	7.21
secondary	2.44	2.99	5.48	8.39
higher secondary	8.04	5.83	15.77	12.65
diploma	21.95	13.82	32.58	22.69
graduate	24.06	13.46	39.51	29.01
postgraduate & above	20.82	10.25	41.49	33.90

Source: <https://www.impriindia.com/insights/youth-unemployment-india/>
PLFS: Periodic Labour Force Survey



► Taking a selfie during the Haryana Assembly election in Faridabad on October 5. Young people today live in a remarkably egocentric universe. ൩

Decoding Gen Z

Gleanings from an ethnographic study conducted over 2023-24 in 12 different Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities in the 18-24 and 25-30 age groups in middle-income populations offer some interesting takeaways.

**MATHANGI KRISHNAMURTHY
& RAMA BIJAPURKAR**

In this post-election period, as we reckon again with the question of what India's future holds, front and centre is the question of the demographic dividend. By current calculations, India has the next 30 years to make hay should the young ones shine. How does one, therefore, understand the possibilities represented by this overwhelmingly high proportion of young people between the ages of 10 and 24 in the working population?

Characterisations of the desi Gen Z are rampant. On the one hand, they are seen to be a hyperaware, hyperconnected, and hyperarticulate generation; on the other, their commitment to work, resilience to critique, or ability to weather change is considered highly suspect. Further, much lore renders them emotionally uncalibrated and oversensitive, susceptible to lows and highs, and therefore difficult to work with. They are also seen to be singular in their social-media adeptness, with highly developed linguistic codes and forms of expression, along with the relentless need to exhibit their identity/ies.

Such characterisations, however, convert passing observations about the most visible and voluble of this set of people into homegrown wisdom about a large population, when it is actually greatly differentiated across lines of caste, class, and gender. Yet, is there a way to locate a set of tendencies among these young people and, more importantly, to contextualise it? In other words, to think of this set of people as the demographic dividend necessitates asking not just *what* are the youth, but *how* are the youth.

As we gather the results of an ethnographic study conducted over 2023-24 in 12 different Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities among broadly middle-income populations, specifically in the 18-24 and 25-30 age groups, with around half being first-generation college learners, what stands out most is the repeated and repetitive



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emergence of fragmentation. This story of fragmentation is not an easy one to tell, for it is driven not by many small differences across interlocutors but by capricious and unstable subject formation. Young people emerged in our study as such unstable subjects, expending enormous amounts of energy in attempting to make their way through tremendous economic, social, and political obstacles. What follows is a broad analysis, intertwined with observations on how young people themselves make sense of the world and their place in it.

TO BEGIN WITH, this generation presents itself as one without history. Part of this may be related to their parents having lived through three-odd decades of post-liberalisation upward economic movement. Having come of age in a period of relative prosperity, but also in an era of information overload about the state of the world and what may be available to them, young people today live in a remarkably egocentric universe, driven by neoliberal discourses that exhort them to take charge of their own destinies. Yet, the old bug bears of gender, caste, and to a large extent, class accompanied by the breakdown of systems of education render their efforts difficult to actualise. Having an inadequate sense of history, the long term is consequently also not visible to them; in the short term, they think about what might become of them in some vague future in presentist and self-involved terms. In this sense, the question of what one needs to do to get ahead is never far from their daily calculations. How do I increase my value in the world? How do I present myself to the outside world and increase perceived value? How do I maximise/optimize my time? And in a world of plenty, characterised by the absence of unilinear systems and structures that provide clear answers or paths, they hustle, pushing and shoving to make their way through a confusing and overwhelming culture and economy. Most of our study subjects juggled many jobs/training avenues/educational opportunities. Many of these were temporary or only provided highly specialised forms of training, and nearly all required to be privately funded.

As a result of such endless flailing, this generation has a schizophrenic relationship with the world, careening between introversion and extroversion, and appears to be suscepti-



ble to concurrent extremes of connection and alienation. The latter is far more common, with many experiencing a deep longing for the kind of community where they might be understood and accepted the way they are. This also results in physical and mental stress, with frequent illness and breakdown, and confusion about voice and identity. This alienation, while often acknowledging the seeming support of immediate family, is also bolstered by the sense that such support precludes true understanding. Parents and families seem more or less supportive, but they lack the knowledge and acumen to understand or advise this careening population in any meaningful fashion. One of the surprising insights from the study was how this generation, as a result, was also hungry for structures promising stability of

some kind. It showed up in views and desires about and for a stable government job, and marriage and “settling down” in their late 20s, along with the rejection of love and romance as unnecessary distractions to progress. We noticed a uniform conservatism and desire for order, clear roles, and escape from confusing times and people. The young people we met try very hard to focus on their immediate environment and self, expressing a deep longing for elusive happiness, calm, and community.

THEY ARE ALSO in need of constant distraction and relief to manage this overload of stimuli, desires, and activities. This is a hyperaware generation with a serious magpie complex, flitting between shiny new objects with shifting focus. While many see this as

▼ **The young people** surveyed expressed a deep longing for happiness and community.
GETTY IMAGES

With an inadequate sense of history, the long term is not visible to them; in the short term, they think of what might become of them in some vague future in presentist and self-involved terms.

rampant consumerism, it is also important to remember that this generation came of age at a time of a rapidly globalising India and were socialised through commodities as a form of identity. Reared on choice and low-cost, low-risk consumption, they are attentive only to surface attributes, even as their capacity to see many things at once is capacious. Young people are both able and compelled by a desire for large amounts of diverse information in the here and now, as well as for newness and endless distraction. As a result, they are deeply engaged in the immediate present, without the capacity for sustained passion. They are driven by a need for constant “engagement”, which can read as “entertainment”, “distraction”, or “validation”.

This capacity for movement, however, does not hold depth, and they reach for easily available sources of information as they do for entertainment. Their sources are varied and not always necessarily rigorously curated. As a result, the generation is susceptible to apathy in ideology, unless immediately connected to their life circumstances. The capacity to be informed has created a tendency to mouth homilies about development but with no great understanding. Likewise, even critiques are not necessarily embedded in a specific understanding of politics. Government and nation appear to be separate in their imagination; the former ineffective, the latter to be lauded. Yet, the former is where they also pin their hopes for stable futures. Absent in all this is an engagement with any specific political party or ideology.

If all this reads as bad news, here is some worthy of cheer. The young people we met are also, because of their restlessness, not hopeless. Constant movement and the need to be occupied provide them with avenues of information and work and, as a result, thought, desire,

and ambition. The latter may well be specific to whatever is fashionable or in circulation, but nevertheless functions as goalposts to move towards. India's youth seem to be led by something they do not quite understand or interrogate the nature of. This renders them endlessly active and constantly seeking and curious—building skills and information in the hopes of rendering themselves valuable at some point in an unforeseeable future. Often, this results in fatigue and the need for a break before embarking on the next pipe dream.

The alienation that thus ensues, in a world of leaner job prospects and a fragile economic milieu, renders them even more desperate to connect, hence the upsurge in a few deeply involved groups grappling with climate change, education, gender, caste, and so on. While some of those involved in fighting caste-based discrimination, for instance, are products of marginalisation themselves, the larger population we spoke with shared the need to find something to be passionate about. What can be surmised is that in a world that is pushing young people to constant movement in search of the next big unicorn, a passion project allows them some measure of transcendental joy and meaning, which is otherwise little available or valued.

In sociological terms, if we render this information through the rubric of structure and agency—structure being social, economic, and political structures, and agency being the individual's capacity to forge a future via and against these structures—the picture that emerges is alarming. We are looking at entropy in a generation willing and able to expend energy as it constantly runs up against structures that either refuse or diffuse its efforts.

YET, WHEN WE asked young people to speak about their lives, there was no sense of this entropy or what one might expect as hopelessness. They spoke of their daily lives, rituals, practices, and communities with great joy. Their hopes were lodged in being able to make it through, even if aware and beleaguered by the obstacles in their way. As one respondent said: "I would have taken over the world at 16 if I had the resources." As we concluded our study, the purported hyper self-awareness and self-centredness of this generation took on new meaning. Perhaps one must read it as a symptom. It then helps us under-

stand why young people might be focussed solely on the self—perhaps because they see only this to be in their control in a world running amok.

But the focus on self has other consequences that showed up in the issues they suffered from rather than in the ways they acted or spoke. The physical and mental health issues that emerged across interviews are a corollary effect of this meeting point between extreme self-consciousness, worldly ambition, and increasing incapacity to handle the surfeit of information or the endless obstacles in the face of an appetite they are at pains to control.

There are many other aspects to this study, only parts of which we have spoken about in this essay. The takeaways were neither good nor bad but were certainly sobering. In our attempt to understand India's Gen Z—misplaced as that moniker is both in terms of context and internal differences—we were confronted with a very vertiginous sense of the plummeting future prospects of this generation. To counter or remedy this, we have to be able to read their views and ways not just as sui generis qualities but as strategies they have developed to tackle the implications in their assessment of the current economic, sociopolitical, and cultural climate. In other words, to the question of how the youth are, the answer is "not good". As one respondent said: "Instability that is releasing so much energy, so much energy.... It is exhausting."

However, their agentive capacities and will to movement would suggest that not all is lost. If one finds a way and a will to fix the structures—social, economic, and political—one might be better able to nurture this restless energy towards a true and meaningful demographic dividend. ■

Government and nation appear to be separate in their imagination; the former ineffective, the latter to be lauded.

This essay is an excerpt from a research report entitled "Drivers of India's Destiny", authored by Rama Bijapurkar and Mathangi Krishnamurthy. The study was commissioned by Rama Bijapurkar, designed and conceptualised by Mathangi Krishnamurthy, and managed and carried out by a research team at AuxoHub led by Yashasvini Rajeshwar. Rama Bijapurkar is a business strategist, market researcher, and thought leader on consumer India. She is the author of multiple books, most famously, *We are like that only: Understanding the Logic of Consumer India* and, most recently, *Lilliput Land: How Small is Driving India's Mega Consumption Story*. Mathangi Krishnamurthy is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras.



[FROM THE SIDELINES]

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

BJP's turnaround moment?

Shrewd political management and the RSS' return to the field are among the key factors that helped the BJP snatch victory from defeat in Haryana, even as the Congress stumbled at the finish line once again.

The result from Haryana suggests that this is the moment when the turnaround of the BJP, led by Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, begins after the 240-seat disappointment in the 2024 national election. At the very least, this result confirms that within the arc of losses and defeat, we still live in a BJP-dominant age. Now the question is, will the narrative of decline be arrested and setbacks shrugged off as its cadre gets a steroid shot?

Here are the big takeaways. First, the cadre worked hard in Haryana, and there was none of the "staying at home" sulking in the Sangh structure that this columnist saw during the Lok Sabha election in Uttar Pradesh. Having achieved the task of humbling Prime Minister Narendra Modi somewhat, the cadre and party worked efficiently in unison to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat as it were. After all, the last thing an ideological cadre committed to Hindutva would want is to actually defeat the BJP!

This has implications for the upcoming battle in Maharashtra, where the BJP was seen to be somewhat out of joint after the entry of some regional players such as the Ajit Pawar faction of the Nationalist Congress Party. That mood has passed now, and in the State where the RSS is headquartered, the party and cadre

will put up a gritty fight in the Assembly election—with too much at stake in the home of big capital.

POLITICAL MANAGEMENT must also get a mention. Much of the success in wresting seats in the first-past-the-post system also came from the fact that the BJP was in power in Haryana and could transform a slender edge in a close contest into a win. The BJP got 48 seats with a vote share of 39.9 per cent, and the Congress got 37 seats with a vote share of 39.3 per cent. In Maharashtra, too, the party is in power, in an alliance. However, election-bound Jharkhand is ruled by an opposition alliance.

Classic BJP-RSS election management entails collecting constant feedback on each seat from the cadre and the government machinery and involves the mapping of localities. This is something RSS workers do efficiently when they are motivated and when they can work with the administration. The Congress, on the other hand, seemed clueless about the shifting realities on the ground and the possibility, flagged by a handful of observers, that the party's perceived closeness to one dominant caste group, the Jats (who constitute 27 per cent of the population), could alienate the OBCs (who are 40 per cent). Besides, even the Scheduled Castes make up nearly 20 per cent of the population.

The fact that the Congress marginalised its own veteran Dalit woman leader Kumari Selja, not letting her contest or even get seats for her supporters, certainly damaged the party. Indeed, this raises the larger point about words not matching deeds since Rahul Gandhi has positioned himself as speaking



for marginalised social groups. That in Haryana the Congress could not get its dominant regional Jat leaders to accommodate a woman, who is also a Dalit, spoke volumes.

In contrast, since it came to power in Haryana in 2014, the BJP has worked on the social calculus of building support among the non-dominant castes. On getting reports of anti-incumbency, the party changed the Chief Minister, placing the relatively young Nayab Singh Saini on the chair in March this year. He is a pleasant and personable figure from the Saini community that is categorised as OBC in Haryana but is not numerically dominant.

It is worth pointing out that two Chief Ministers with the longest careers in contemporary history are Nitish Kumar in Bihar and Modi in Gujarat. Both are from small OBC groups against which there is less scope for counter polarisation. That is one strand that must be understood when one gets into contests in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar where the BJP has worked on consolidating privileged castes and non-dominant OBCs. The formula faltered in the recent national election, but the party seems to have got into stride again in Haryana.

WHAT ALSO CHANGED in the BJP narrative in this election was projecting Saini as Chief Minister, something unusual in the Modi-era BJP until 2024. Until the general election, the Prime Minister was positioned as the be all and end all of State campaigns, and State leaders had to either fade away (such as former Rajasthan Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje) or adjust to new roles in the party under the firm hierarchy of Modi and Shah (such as Shivraj Singh Chouhan, former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister and now Union Agriculture Minister).

In this round in Haryana, Modi not only campaigned less but even the campaign mate-

The mandate from Jammu and Kashmir is being seen as a loss for the BJP even though it has done remarkably well in Jammu, going against early projections.



► **Haryana Chief Minister** Nayab Singh Saini being greeted by supporters after winning the Ladwa seat in Kurukshetra district, at Ladwa on October 8. PTI

rial marked him only notionally. This could possibly be the template adopted in forthcoming State elections. Still, Modi's post-result address on October 8 from the BJP headquarters shows the party's natural inclination to revert to the leadership cult. He began speaking after 8 pm and ended promptly at 9 pm in time for prime-time television news. After months, there was good news for the party to spin. The mandate from Jammu and Kashmir is being seen as a loss for the BJP even though it has done remarkably well in Jammu, going against early projections. True, the party was not able to achieve the ideological goal of anointing a "Hindu" Chief Minister in Kashmir. Preparations had been made to facilitate that goal by increasing the number of seats from Jammu, encouraging Independents to cut the votes of regional parties in the Valley, and putting out a line that even the National Conference would ally with the BJP.

The BJP has not achieved its goal to rule Srinagar. Yet, Hindutva is the undercurrent in the Jammu mandate and even in parts of Haryana. The sight of separatists contesting from the Valley and traditional parties generating great emotion on events unfolding in Gaza and Lebanon would have contributed to the counter polarisation in Jammu. Hence, on balance, the "Hindus in danger" psy-op still works for the BJP. To nuance it more carefully, while outright polarisation may flop, as it apparently did in the Lok Sabha election when the BJP lost the seat of Faizabad that includes Ayodhya, counter polarisation might still work in certain contexts.

The BJP held on to Jammu with smart political and ideological management. The Congress was tipped to do well in Jammu but was reduced to just one seat. It will be part of the National Conference-led alliance but this again reiterates the point that regional parties fare much better than the Congress in fighting the BJP in direct contests.

If there is one message from these elections, it is about balance for the BJP, which had to modify its approach even in Haryana to retain the State for a third term. The Congress has to recognise that infighting in the State units bears a high cost, be it in Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh a year ago or in Haryana now. It should also learn from the BJP that handing out a few seats to defectors, Independents, and smaller parties is often smarter than not accommodating them, for they have the capacity to cleave off a few hundred votes. ■

National Conference
president Farooq Abdullah
with son and party
vice president Omar
Abdullah at his home in
Srinagar on October 9.

MOHAMMAD AMIN WAR/ANI

Politics



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The National Conference wins a clear majority in Jammu and Kashmir, but the two regions have made distinct electoral choices, with the Valley voting the NC and Jammu preferring the BJP. **ASHISH RANJAN**

After a decade, Jammu and Kashmir has elected its representatives for the legislative Assembly. The Union Territory's people have given a historic mandate to the National Conference (NC)-Congress-CPI (M) alliance, with 49 of the 90 Assembly seats. The last time any party or pre-election bloc crossed the majority mark was in the 1996 Assembly election.

In 1996, the NC bagged 54 (if we exclude Leh-Ladakh and Kargil region) of 83 Assembly seats. Since then, the highest number of seats won by any party has been 28.

This time, the NC alone won 42 seats. The BJP with 29 seats occupies the position of the main opposition party in the House. In a remarkable feat, the BJP bagged the second-highest number of seats for the second time, the first being in 2014. In 2014, the BJP won 30 seats (after accounting for the conversion of seats based on the delimitation in 2022). The biggest loser in this election is Mehbooba Mufti's Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). It won 29 seats in 2014 but was reduced to just 3 seats this time. The PDP lost 14 per cent of the votes (see Table 2) as well, compared with the previous Assembly election.

The mandate looks like a huge, consolidat-

The result suggests that the NC alliance received overwhelming support from the people and won the majority, but at the vote-share level, the alliance received 36 per cent or a little over one-third of the total votes only.

ed victory in terms of seats won by the parties and alliances, but a deep dive into the data reveals many variations. At the aggregate level, the result suggests that the NC alliance received overwhelming support from the people and won the majority, but at the vote-share le-

▼ **National Conference (NC)** vice president Omar Abdullah addresses an election campaign for the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly election, in Kupwara on September 29. MOHAMMAD AMIN WAR/ANI

vel, the alliance received 36 per cent or a little over one-third of the total votes only, which is 3 per cent less than the parties' combined vote share in 2014. However, it is the Congress' loss of votes that has led to the drop in the alliance's vote share. The Congress contested the 2014 election without tying up with the NC and received 17 per cent of the votes, but this time the party received just 12 per cent. The NC gained a 2 per cent vote share.

Apart from the major parties, Independents (including the Jamaat-e-Islami and Engi-

neer Rashid's Awami Ittehad Party [AIP]) received 17 per cent of the votes, 10 per cent more than in 2014. The other small parties, including the Peoples Conference (PC) and the Bahujan Samaj Party, received 13 per cent of the votes, 5 per cent more than in the previous election (see Table 2).

The region-wise results make it clear that Jammu and the Valley stand for two very distinct support bases. The BJP won all its seats in



The BJP won all its seats in the Jammu region (29 of 43) with a 45 per cent vote share. In the Valley, it drew a blank. The NC-led alliance won 41 of the 47 seats in the Valley with a 42 per cent vote share. The NC alone won 35 seats, 24 more than in the previous election.

the Jammu region (29 of 43) with a 45 per cent vote share. In the Valley, it drew a blank. The NC-led alliance won 41 of the 47 seats in the Valley with a 42 per cent vote share. The NC alone won 35 seats, 24 more than in the previous election. These two numbers clearly show that the Jammu and Kashmir regions have given a split verdict to the two main parties/alliances.

The two regions of Jammu and the Kashmir Valley have three subregions each; the Valley being divided into Central, North, and South, and Jammu into the Chenab Valley, Jammu, and Pir Panjal subregions. The deeper we analyse the data along these lines, the more we notice significant variations in the outcomes at the subregional level.

In the Valley, the NC and the PDP used to be the main contenders. However, for the past few years, the PDP has been a declining force here. The party that bagged 26 of the 47 seats in the Valley in 2014 could manage to win only 3 this time. Its decline was visible even in the Lok Sabha election earlier this year. The PDP was once not

just an electoral opponent of the NC in the Valley region, it was also an ideological challenger. However, the party's support base dwindled after it allied with the BJP in 2015.

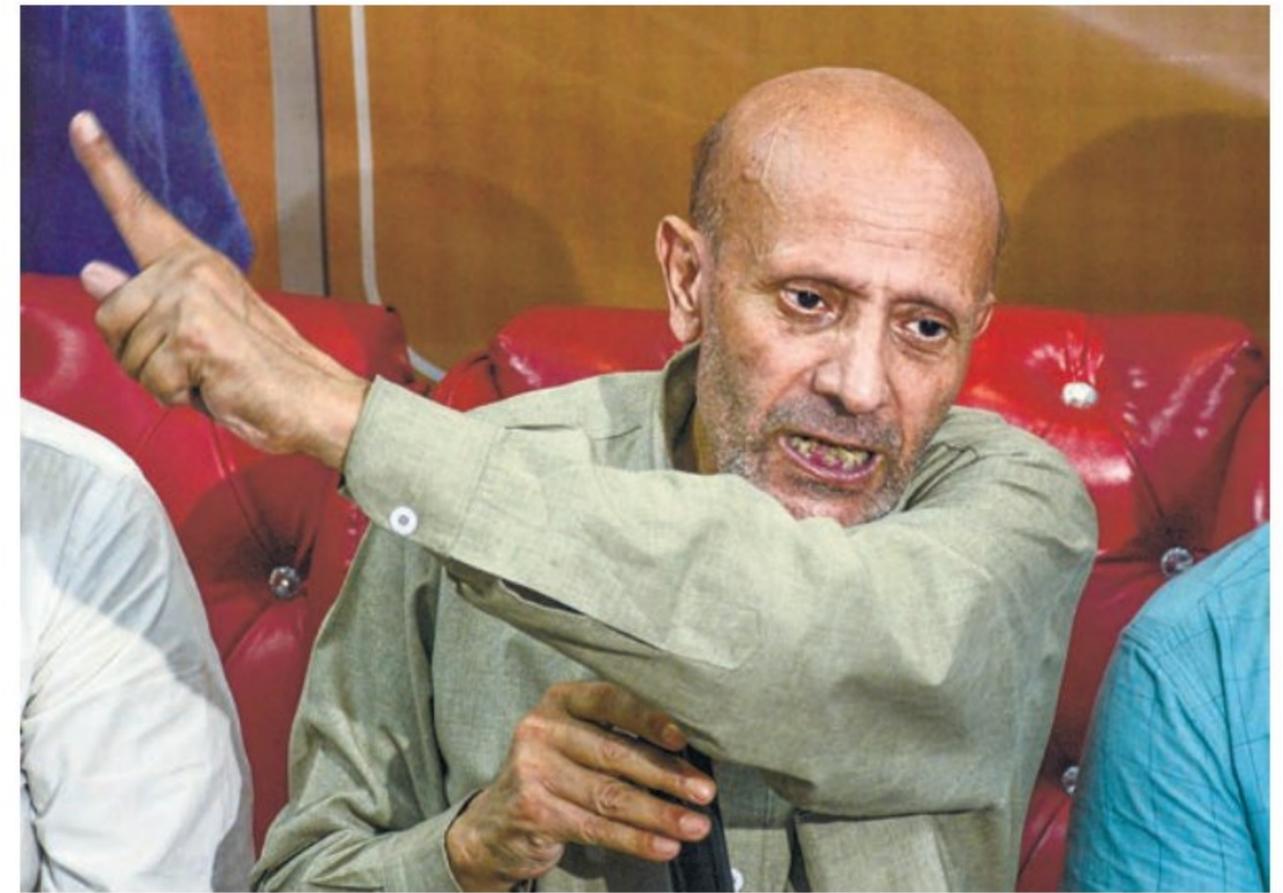
In the Lok Sabha election this year, a new political force emerged. Engineer Rashid won the Baramulla seat, defeating two stalwarts: Omar Abdullah and Sajad Lone (PC). Rashid's victory created a buzz because he won from jail, with his son campaigning for him. It seemed to indicate that the people of the Valley were not happy with the two established parties and thought Rashid would better represent their voice. However, the Assembly election did not reflect this trend. While Rashid had leads in 14 of the 18 Assembly segments in the Lok Sabha election, his AIP could not even open its account in the Assembly election. The AIP and its alliance partner, the Jamaat-e-Islami, received just about 2 per cent of the votes. The Jamaat, contesting an election after 35 years, had hoped to benefit from the influence it had in South Kashmir, but all it could manage was a little over 5 per cent of the total vote share of South Kashmir.

SIMILARLY, the AIP, which was expected to do well in the Kashmir region, performed poorly. It received just 3 per cent of the votes in Central and South Kashmir.

The overall outcome suggests that the NC has re-



▼ **PDP president**
Mehbooba Mufti
PTI

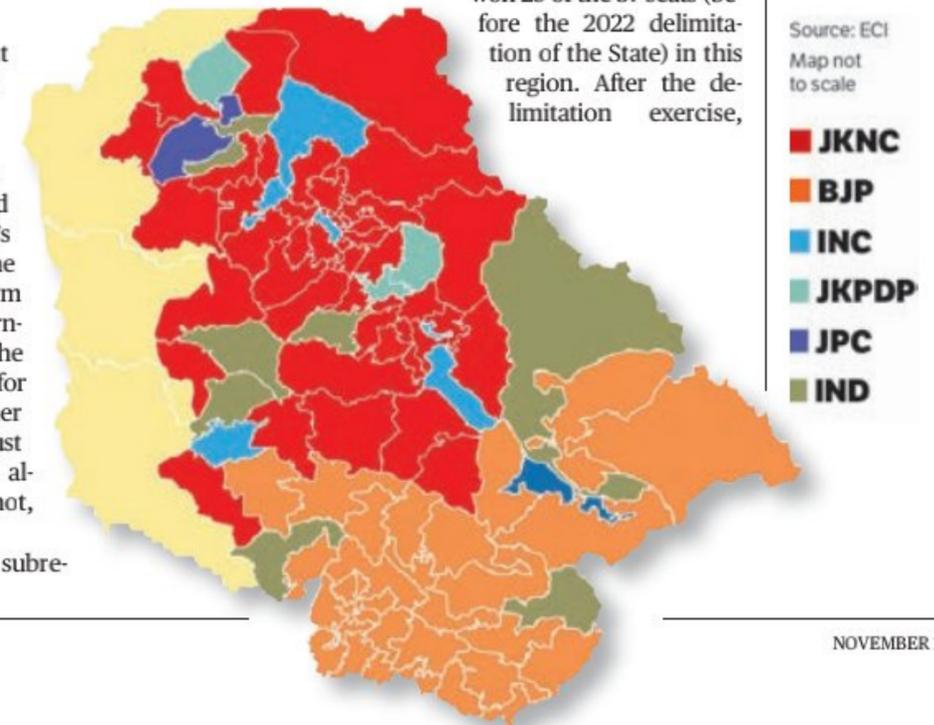


▼ **Member of Parliament** and Awami Ittehad Party chief Sheikh Abdul Rashid, popularly known as Engineer Rashid, addresses a press conference ahead of the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly election, in Srinagar on September 12. PTI

gions, which are based on geographical variation—Jammu in the plains, and Chenab and Pir Panjal in the mountains—the Congress used to have a lot of influence. However, the BJP broke this trend in 2014 with the Congress' huge electoral base shifting loyalties. In the 2014 Assembly election, the BJP won 25 of the 37 seats (before the 2022 delimitation of the State) in this region. After the delimitation exercise,

gained its pre-eminent position after a long time. While the PDP was decimated and the AIP failed to win voters over, the NC succeeded in convincing the Valley's electorate that it was the only party that could form a stable and strong government and bargain with the Central government for statehood and the other privileges lost in August 2019. Whether the NC alliance will succeed or not, only time will tell.

In Jammu's three subre-



Source: ECI
Map not to scale

TABLE 1: SEAT SHARE OF PARTIES/ ALLIANCES IN 2014 AND 2024

Parties	2014 AE*	2024 AE	Change
BJP	30	29	-1
JKNC+	24	49	25
JKPDP	29	3	-26
IND	3	7	4
OTHERS	4	2	-2

Data Source: ECI. *Figures after the conversion of seats based on delimitation in 2022

TABLE 2: PARTY-WISE VOTE SHARE CHANGE IN 10 YEARS

Parties	2014 AE	2024 AE	Change
BJP	23	26	+3
CPI(M)	1	1	0
INC	17	12	-5
JKNC+	21	23	+2
JKPDP	23	9	-14
IND	7	17	+10
OTH	8	13	+5

Note: All figures are in percentage and rounded off. Data Source: ECI

TABLE 3: VOTE SHARE OF PARTIES IN THE DIFFERENT SUBREGIONS OF KASHMIR

2024 AE	Region	BJP	JKNC+	JKPDP	IND	Others
Valley Region	Central Kashmir	2	50	20	15	14
	North Kashmir	1	37	8	27	26
	South Kashmir	3	42	22	20	12

Note: All figures are in percentage and rounded off. Data Source: ECI

TABLE 4: VOTE SHARE OF PARTIES IN THE DIFFERENT SUBREGIONS OF JAMMU

2024 AE	Region	BJP	JKNC+	JKPDP	IND	Others
Jammu Region	Chenab Valley	34	40	5	15	7
	Jammu Region	54	25	0	10	11
	Pir Panjal	32	37	7	19	5

Note: All figures are in percentage and rounded off. Data Source: ECI

AE: Assembly Election



► Peoples Conference chief Sajad Lone. PTI

the total number of seats in the Jammu region went up to 43, and of these the BJP was in the lead in 30 (the seat conversion exercise was carried out by the Data Action Lab for Emerging Societies [DALES] team after identifying and matching polling booth data).

In this election, the BJP won 29 Assembly seats: 22 in Jammu, 6 in Chenab, and 1 in Pir Panjal. In terms of vote share, both in Chenab and Pir Panjal, the BJP received around one-third of the total vote share (see Table 4). However, in the Jammu subregion, which has the highest number of Assembly seats (24), the BJP received the lion's share (54 per cent).

The NC alliance managed to receive just one-fourth of the total votes in the Jammu subregion. The PDP received 0.38 per cent votes—the party had 5 per cent in the Jammu subregion in the 2014 Assembly election. In Chenab and Pir Panjal, the NC alliance had an edge over the BJP.

The regional-level analysis clearly suggests that the Union Territory's two different regions have also expressed two distinct electoral choices. The NC has emerged strong in the Valley, whereas Jammu, where the BJP has been growing continuously, clearly favours the national party. How this will impact administrative decisions in the days to come is the critical question now. ■

Ashish Ranjan is an election researcher and co-founder of Data Action Lab for Emerging Societies.



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► **At Kharkhri Sohan village** in Bhiwani district on September 20, Dharambir Singh Chaudhary, BJP's MP from Bhiwani-Mahendragarh, campaigning for the party's candidate for the Tosham Assembly constituency. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

HOW THE BJP WON HARYANA

The BJP triumphed for a third consecutive term in the State by building an ethnic coalition against Jat dominance, addressing the specific needs of deprived communities, and fielding fresh faces.

ASHISH RANJAN & ATUL KUMAR PANDEY

The Haryana Assembly election in 2024 threw up a historic victory for the Bharatiya Janata Party. For the first time since the State's formation in 1966, a party has formed a government for a third successive term. This victory marks the BJP's largest win in the last three Assembly elections. The BJP won 48 of the 90 Assembly seats, while the Congress won 37 seats. The electoral contest was nail-biting and bipolar in terms of vote share, with the two major parties receiving nearly 80 per cent of the votes polled in the election. In terms of vote share, the gap between the BJP and Congress was just 0.8 per cent in favour of the BJP.

It is important to note that in Haryana, the combined vote share of the two major parties had never touched 70 per cent. Even in the 2019 Assembly election, the BJP and the Congress together polled only 64 per cent. What does this number explain? How did the BJP manage to get another term with a bigger share of seats and votes despite facing a palpable anti-incumbency in the State?

THE BJP HAS been ruling the State since 2014. Just before that, in the 2009 Assembly election, the party secured only four seats with 9 per cent of the votes. It won double-digit seats in 1996 only, when it formed

The BJP won double-digit seats only in 1996, when it formed an alliance with the Haryana Vikas Party. The party has grown remarkably since then in the State, particularly with decisive victories in 2014 and 2019, leveraging caste-based strategies and nationalistic sentiments.

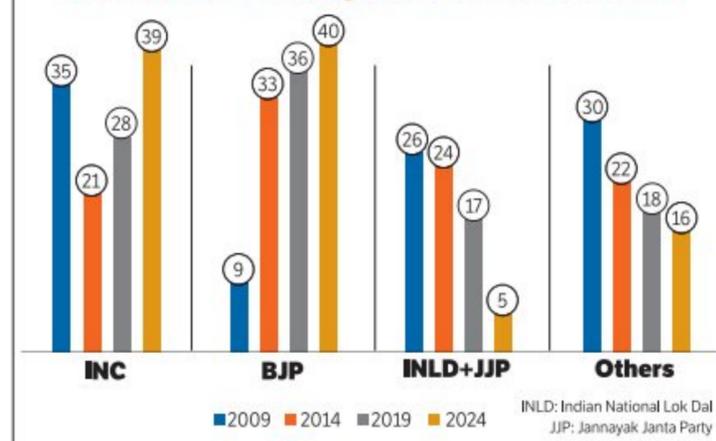
an alliance with the Haryana Vikas Party. In that election, the BJP won 11 seats with 9 per cent of the votes. The party has grown remarkably since then in the State, particularly with decisive victories in 2014 and 2019, leveraging caste-based strategies and nationalistic sentiments.

For a long time, the Congress and the Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) were the two major parties in the State. However, their combined vote share never crossed two-thirds of the total votes, which means that one-third of the electoral support was for the smaller parties and independent candidates. This trend changed in the 2019 Lok Sabha election, when the BJP and the Congress got 87 per cent of the votes. However, in the 2019 Assembly election, this came down to 64 per cent, with the reason for the decline being the BJP. The party lost 22 per cent of the votes within six months. Once again, in the 2024 parliamentary election, both the BJP and the Congress polled 90 per cent of the total votes. In terms of alliances, the NDA and the INDIA bloc together polled 94 per cent of the votes.

From the 2024 Lok Sabha election to the 2024 Assembly election, the BJP and the Congress lost 6 and 4 per cent votes, respectively. However, this time, the two parties polled 40 and 39 per cent votes, respectively (Chart 1). Two parties have never consolidated this large a vote share in any Assembly election in the State.

Apart from the vote consolidation, three trends emerge from the chart above: (1) Both the BJP and the Congress have been gaining votes in each Assembly election since 2014. The BJP's continuous gain has been since 2009. (2) The INLD (and the Jannayak Janta Party), known to be a Jat-supported party, has been in continuous decline, and its vote share has come down to 5 per cent. (3) The space for smaller parties and Independents has been shrinking fast. These small players used to have around 30 per cent of the votes, which has reduced to 16 per cent in

Chart 1: Distribution of vote share since the 2009 Assembly election in the State



Note: All figures are in percentage and rounded off. The calculation is done by the DALES team. Data Source: ECI

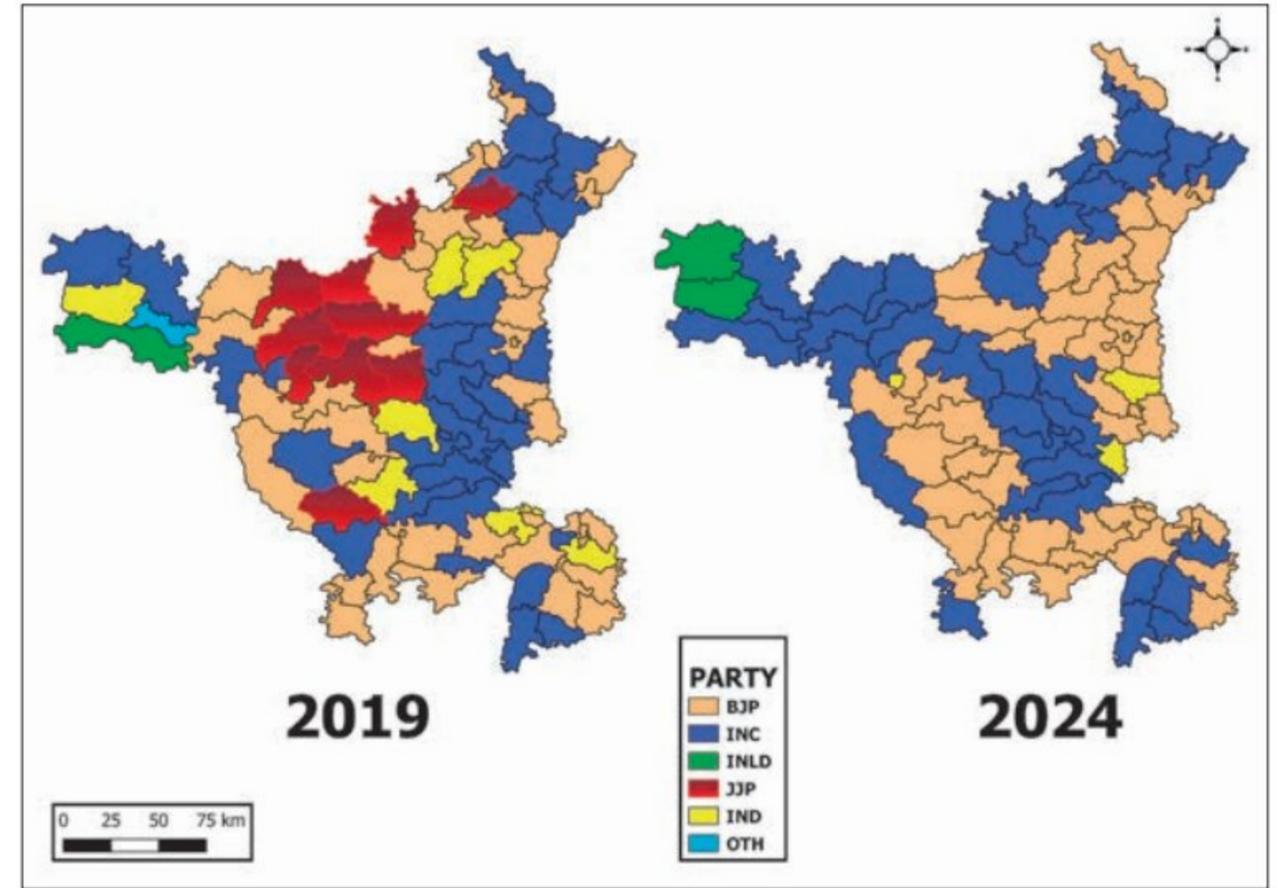
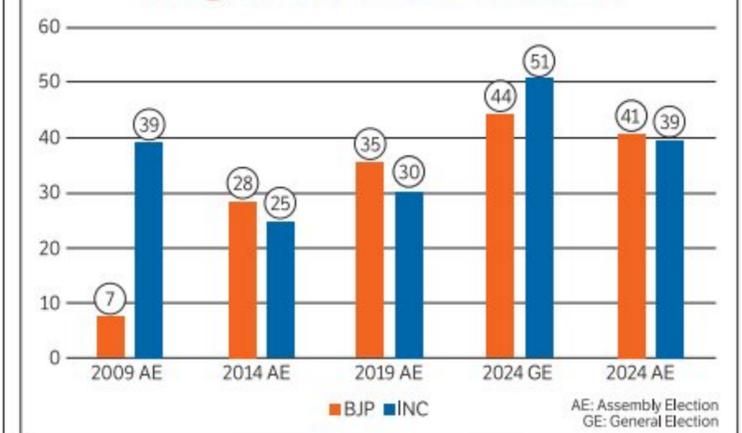


Chart 2: How BJP and Congress fared in high Jat concentration areas



Note: All figures are in percentage and rounded off. The calculation is done by the DALES team. Data Source: ECI

this election. However, there are a significant number of Independents whose votes were more than the margin of victory.

With the final numbers showing bipolarity, it is important to look into the reasons behind it.

The central narrative of this election revolves around "kisan [farmer], naujawan [youth], pehelwan [wrestler]". The farmers' movement organised one of the biggest protests during the NDA's second term. The protests, in which 700 farmers lost their lives, led the Narendra Modi government to take back the "three farm laws" through which the government intended to bring reform. Farmers of Punjab, Haryana, and western Uttar Pradesh were key to leading this movement, and in the case of Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, the Jat community participated in a big manner.

As many as 33 per cent of Haryana's farmers fall under the medium or large category with more than 2 hectares of land. Among them, Jats form the majority. In Sonipat, Devender (35, Dhanak [Lower SC]) and Amit (38, Lohar [Lower OBC]), both auto drivers, said that in their villages, they (the Lower SC and Lower OBC communities) did not have much land of their own and that they worked on the land of Jats. In towns,

they said, they were independent, but in rural areas, they had to be economically dependent on Jats. Sometimes the Jats exploited them. "Vo Chaudhary hai aur unki hi chalti hai" (which

roughly means, “The writ of the landlords always holds”).

Among the youth, the main reason for unhappiness against the incumbent government was the lack of job opportunities. Again, this issue is not unique to Haryana. Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) relating to 2023 (<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/chandigarh/haryana-tops-cmie-unemployment-chart-december-8359324/>) indicate that Haryana had the highest unemployment rate in India, exceeding 30 per cent. This built a narrative that the State government was unable to generate/create job opportunities for youths.

The *pehelwan* movement began last year against the issue of sexual harassment of women wrestlers by the authorities. As a result of this, Brij Bhushan Singh, who was a BJP MP, did not get the ticket in the 2024 parliamentary election.

The *kisan, naujawan, pehelwan* narrative seemed to suggest that a new segment was aligning itself with the Congress. However, it is significant to note that both farmers and wrestlers are essentially representatives of the Jat community. Additionally, a significant proportion of the youth demographic also belongs to this same community. This alignment highlights how the Congress’ appeal was primarily concentrated within specific social groups, rather than genuinely expanding beyond the party’s traditional constituents.

On the other side, BJP leaders used the cam-

The “kisan, naujawan, pehelwan” narrative seemed to suggest that a new segment was aligning itself with the Congress. However, it is significant to note that farmers and wrestlers are essentially representatives of the Jat community.

paign slogan that during their government, youth had got jobs “*bina kharchi, bina parchi*” (without paying a bribe and without expecting favouritism).

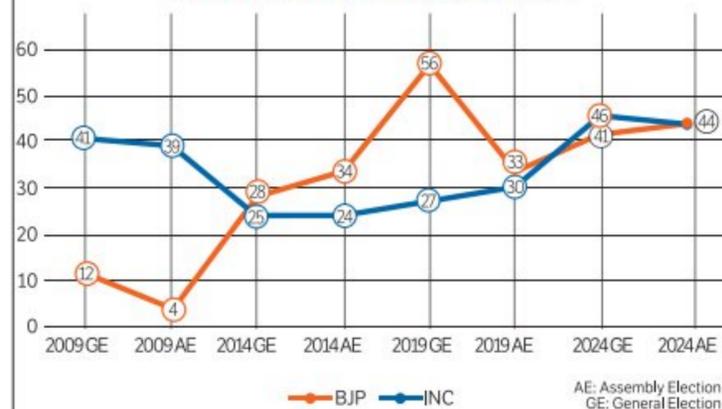
A notable example of this sentiment emerged during our ground visit in Haryana when a member of the Nai community named Vinod (40) in Panipat told us that one of his brothers got a job in the Haryana Police without spending a paisa. He said it was not possible in the Bhupinder Singh Hooda government. He remarked that during the Hooda government, when they asked for assistance, they were often told: “You can set up a chair anywhere and cut hair, but what will our Jat boys do?”

The example of Lower SCs and OBCs illustrates the growing rift between the backward and Dalit communities and the Jat community, which has directly benefited the BJP. This can be understood from a data point that shows the changing support base of the BJP and the Congress in the Jat belt since 2009. Bhiwani, Charkhi Dadri, Hisar, Jhajjar, Jind, Panipat, Rohtak, and Sonapat districts have a high concentration of Jats. In these districts, the aggregate share of Balmiki and Dhanak is 41 per cent (Census 2011) of the total SC population.

Chart 2 suggests that the Congress’ support base has come to the point where the party was in 2009, and that its support base has returned in the Assembly election. However, it needs to be noted that the Congress party’s highest vote share was in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, at 51 per cent. The BJP was 7 per cent behind the Congress in the Jat belt. It suggests that despite the *kisan, naujawan*, and *pehelwan* movements, the Congress lost its ground in the Jat belt.

ANY ANALYSIS OF the Haryana election will show that a lion’s share of Jats voted for the Congress, but the party failed to retain its support among the non-Jats, thereby losing a significant share (12 per cent,

Chart3: How BJP and Congress fared in reserved constituencies



Note: All figures are in percentage and rounded off. The calculation is done by the DALES team. Data Source: ECI



► **Congress workers** at the Haryana Vijay Sankalp Jansabha, in Julana on October 2. PTI

double the State-wise loss) of votes in the Jat belt. Contrary to this, the BJP has been able to mobilise its core support, primarily from the OBC and non-Jat privileged-caste Hindus, which is more evenly distributed. This allowed its vote share to translate more efficiently into Assembly seats. This homogeneous distribution of the BJP’s voter base gave it a strategic advantage, resulting in a higher conversion rate of votes to seats compared with the Congress. Of

the 36 seats in the Jat belt, the BJP won 20, while the Congress could manage only 13.

Two decades ago in Haryana, the Congress had leaders such as Bansi Lal from the Vishnoi (Bishnoi) community; Rao Inderjit Singh and Captain Ajay Singh Yadav from among the Ahir community; Bhupinder Hooda, Chaudhary Birender Singh, and Kiran Choudhry from the Jat community; and Kumari Selja and Ashok Tanwar from the SC community—all of whom had a say in party affairs, but this time

it was Hooda who dominated.

The different movements and the one-sided dominance of Hooda created the buzz that if the Congress government came to power, it would be a Jat dominance (*Jatshahi*), which reminded the lower sections of society about the exploitation and dominance they had faced in the past. As Vinod (Panipat) said: “*Abhi to hamse 10 rupaye lete hai, lekin ye satta me aa gaye to 100 rupaye lene lagenge, aur hame dena padega*” (Right now, the auto drivers near Panipat bus stand charge us Rs.10, but if they come to power, we will be forced to pay Rs.100).

IT IS NOT THAT ONLY JATS supported the Congress this time; other castes did too. But the majority of the party’s votes came from Jats, Jatavs (Upper SC), and Muslims. Together, they constitute around 40 per cent of the electorate. On the other hand, the BJP has been using social engineering since 2014 to form a coalition of non-dominant castes. In States such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, and Haryana the BJP did its best to build an ethnic coalition of politically marginalised communities.

The BJP also made a smart move on the Supreme Court’s August verdict on sub-categorisa-

▼
Vinesh Phogat
celebrates her win as Congress candidate from Julana, in Jind district, on October 8.
SHAHBAZ KHAN/PTI

tion for SCs and ST. In Haryana, SC voters account for 21 per cent of the electorate, with around 12 per cent belonging to the most vulnerable and deprived sections of the SC community, such as Balmiki and Dhanak. Ahead of the election, when the Supreme Court allowed the subclassification of SCs and STs, to create separate quotas within these groups, the BJP astutely embraced the decision at the State level.

In the previous general election, the Dalit community had largely supported the Congress because Rahul Gandhi’s “Save the Constitution” narrative had resonated strongly among them. However, when the issue of subclassification emerged with the Supreme Court’s decision, the Congress chose to remain silent. This silence cost the party dearly, as the most marginalised sections of the Dalit community felt neglected and abandoned.

As a result, these most vulnerable groups, which had earlier backed the Congress, shifted support away from the party, giving the BJP a crucial advantage. The BJP’s ability to address the specific needs of this deprived segment helped it consolidate support and gain momentum in key constituencies where the Congress had previously held sway.

The BJP adopted a mixed strategy to mitigate the impact of anti-incumbency. Prime Minister Modi’s rallies were reduced, and fewer posters featuring him were displayed at the local level. At the State level, several key Ministers, including the Chief Minister, were replaced with new faces before the election. The BJP fielded new candidates in 61 of the 90 constituencies, compared with 2019. This move sent a message to voters that their grievances were being heard and that the party cared about their concerns. And the BJP won 34 of the 61 Assembly seats. In contrast, during the 2019 Assembly election, the BJP won only 18 seats of the same 61 constituencies. Thus, the BJP effectively neutralised the effects of anti-incumbency.

This victory reflects the BJP’s successful narrative to build an ethnic coalition against the politics of dominance of a particular caste. What the Congress needs to do is not to leave its social base but to add some new constituencies to its kitty. ▶

Ashish Ranjan is an election researcher and co-founder of the Data Action Lab for Emerging Societies (DALES).
Atul Kumar Pandey is an election researcher.





► **Prime Minister** Narendra Modi launched initiatives related to the agriculture and animal husbandry sectors worth Rs.23,300 crore for Maharashtra, at Washim on October 5. In the picture, Modi, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde, and Deputy Chief Ministers Devendra Fadnavis and Ajit Pawar hand over a cheque to a beneficiary. ३१

High-stakes battle

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While the BJP's Haryana victory has sparked discussions about a spillover impact in Maharashtra, caste and farmers' issues play out differently here. What is certain though is that the Maha Vikas Aghadi has been served a warning. **AMEY TIRODKAR**

With the Election Commission of India having to complete the Assembly election in Maharashtra before November 26, when the term of the present Assembly ends, the race for power in the State is well under way. An electorate of 9.59 crore voters (4.95 crore men and 4.64 crore women) will decide the fate of candidates across 288 constituencies. Nearly 19.48 lakh are first-time voters. As many as 25 seats are reserved for the Scheduled Tribes (STs) and 29 for the Scheduled Castes (SCs).

Following the Haryana Assembly election results on October 8,

in which the ruling BJP trumped the Congress despite the perceived widespread anti-incumbency sentiment, political pundits have been quick to draw parallels between the two States and see the Haryana result as a pointer to the possibilities in Maharashtra. However, caste dynamics and agrarian issues, mostly involving the dominant Jat community, differ in both States. Moreover, in Maharashtra, the focus will be on the State's progressive identity, legacy of social justice politics, shifting political dynamics, and declining social indicators.

Political stability will be an important factor in the election. Between 2019 and 2024, Maharashtra saw three Chief Ministers, one of whom was in office for only 70 hours (Devendra Fadnavis of the BJP). The past five years also saw four Deputy Chief Ministers, with Ajit Pawar of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) being sworn in three times (from two different political parties). Besides Pawar, Fadnavis too is a Deputy Chief Minister in this government.

The split within the Shiv Sena (into the Uddhav Thackeray and Eknath Shinde factions) and the NCP (into the Sharad Pawar and Ajit Pawar factions) has increased the number of key political players to six, and this election could well decide which



faction of these parties truly represents the cadre.

In the recent Lok Sabha election, Maharashtra voted in favour of the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) consisting of the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Bala-saheb Thackeray), the NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar), and the Congress. The MVA won 31 of 48 seats in the State, while the ruling Mahayuti (the Shiv Sena led by Shinde, the BJP, and the NCP led by Ajit Pawar) could win only 17. The Congress increased its tally from just 1 seat in the 2019 election to 13 this time. The BJP's tally fell from 23 to 9. The Shiv Sena (UBT) won 9 seats, two more than the Shinde-led faction. The NCP (SP) won 8 seats, and Ajit Pawar's party only 1. An Independent who won extended support to the Congress.

The MVA's success is attributed to the BJP's ambivalence over the Maratha reservation issue, the agricultural crisis, and sub-nationalism. These issues will be potent in the Assembly election too. The Maratha community, which accounts for 30 per cent of the State's population, has been agitating since August last year for reservation.

Their leader, Manoj Jarange-Patil, went on a fast demanding the Kunbi certificate for Marathas of the Marathwada region, which would help them get reservation in jobs and education.

Kunbis belong to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). Chief Minister Shinde promised them reservation in the OBC category, but the OBCs objected on the grounds that it would encroach on their rights. The issue had an impact on voting behaviour in at least 12 Lok Sabha seats, and the govern-

ment's failure to resolve the issue meant that the Mahayuti won only one of the 12 seats.

Jarange-Patil's agitation has not lost momentum. On September 17, he went on his sixth hunger strike; he ended it eight days later because of ill health.

ON SEPTEMBER 30, the Maharashtra Cabinet approved the report of the Justice Sandeep Shinde Committee, which was constituted to expedite the process of issuing the Kunbi certificate on the basis of historical records. This is viewed as a significant step to appease the Maratha community ahead of the Assembly election.

Unlike in Haryana, where non-Jats rallied behind the BJP, the issue of reservation has sharpened the identity consciousness in many castes in Maharashtra. The fact that the Mahayuti government has accepted the Maratha reservation demand but has not yet implemented it is a sore point among them.

Then comes the issue of the Dhargar community, which now belongs to the OBC-Nomadic Tribes category, wanting ST status. The government has formed a committee to look into their demand, but this has disturbed the STs, who constitute 9 per cent of the total population. In the 2024 Lok Sabha election, the Mahayuti (National Democratic Alliance) won only one of the four seats reserved for STs in Maharashtra, as against all four in 2014 and 2019.

Another issue that affected the BJP's chances in the Lok Sabha election in Maharashtra was the falling prices of onion, cotton, and soya bean. The onion farmers' crisis cost the Mahayuti eight Lok Sabha seats. The Union government has now suspended the export duty on onions. However, onion prices at Agriculture Produce Market Committees (APMCs) in Maharashtra have not improved much.

To placate cotton and soya bean farmers, who wield huge influence in 11 Lok Sabha constituencies, the government has offered to pay Rs.2,500 crore in subsidies to 65 lakh farmers. This is the difference in the market price

▼ **Congress leader** Rahul Gandhi holds a statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj during the Constitution Samman Sammelan, in Kolhapur on October 5.



and the minimum support price (MSP) for both crops. On September 30, the government transferred Rs.5,000 for an acre to every cotton and soya bean farmer. A farmer is entitled to subsidy for his crop on 2 hectares. These measures are aimed particularly at farmers of Marathwada and Vidarbha regions, once BJP strongholds that have since shifted their allegiance to the Congress.

Just as in Haryana, the agrarian crisis is of great significance in Maharashtra too. However, the election in the western State will be held when it is harvesting time for cotton and soya bean. More than the subsidies, the government will have to see that farmers get the desired price in this season. Managing the agricultural market in real time could pose a tough challenge.

WHAT LOOKS BRIGHT for the Mahayuti are the good monsoon season and the Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin (Chief Minister's My Beloved Sister) Yojana, a cash-transfer scheme that aims to reach 2.5 crore women aged between 21 and 65 with Rs.1,500 a month (see "Maharashtra's Ladki Bahin scheme: Great expectations?", *Frontline* website, September 26, 2024). Its leaders hope that this single scheme will change the "narrative" of the election. For the Ladki Bahin scheme, the government has already reached out to 1.85 crore women. But if the Mahayuti is seen as leveraging the government machinery, it could backfire.

What matters more is that voters seemed not to have taken kindly to the BJP's political manoeuvres in splitting the Shiv Sena and the NCP

▼ **Shiv Sena (UBT) chief** Uddhav Thackeray at an event of civil society members, in Mumbai, on October 8.

Ruling party leaders hope that the Mukhyamantri Majhi Ladki Bahin (Chief Minister's My Beloved Sister) Yojana will change the "narrative" of the election.

in order to gain power. This was seen as an attack on Maharashtra by Delhi. The first sign of voter discontent manifested itself in the Lok Sabha election, although other issues such as the Ram temple, unemployment, and inflation too played a role.

Additionally, the relocation of industrial projects to Gujarat has raised concerns about the Central government's neglect of Maharashtra. This becomes stronger with the connection of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah to Gujarat. MVA campaigns revolving around this could work to its advantage.

Then there is the polarising tactics of the BJP, with leaders such as Nitesh Rane making communal speeches at rallies. Fadnavis recently accused the minorities of engaging in "vote jihad" in 11 constituencies in the Lok Sabha election, where the party believes that Muslims voted en bloc for one party. Organisations affiliated with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh have also taken an aggressive stance over the recent communal tension in western Maharashtra's Kolhapur (over removal of encroachments near the Vishalgad fort) and Konkan's Bhiwandi (over rumours of stone throwing on a Ganesh idol immersion procession).

There will in all likelihood be three alliances in the election, with smaller parties such as Bachchu Kadu's Prahar Janshakti Party (PJP), Raju Shetti's Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana, and Sambhajiraje Chhatrapati's Swarajya Sanghatana engaging in talks to form an alliance. Bachchu Kadu, who has been with the Shiv Sena, found-

ed a sociopolitical organisation called Prahar in the early 2000s. It later became the PJP, gaining influence in the Achalpur and Chandur Bajar tehsils. In 2004, Kadu was elected to the Assembly and is now expanding his influence across 32 Assembly seats in western Vidarbha.

Shetti's Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana is a splinter group of the once-strong farmers' movement in the State. Shetti believes that farmers' interests can be safeguarded without aligning with the major parties. As such, he contested the Hatkanangle Lok Sabha constituency in Kolhapur district. Although he lost, his organisation has a presence in 40 Assembly constituencies in the sugar belt of western Maharashtra.

Sambhajiraje Chhatrapati is the son of Shahu Maharaj, a descendant of the Maratha king Shivaji Maharaj. He has been trying to mobilise the Maratha community for reservation over the past three years. However, he lost prominence when Jarange-Patil entered the scene. He claims

▼ **NCP (SP) chief**

Sharad Pawar being felicitated during the inauguration of a new building of Mahatma Gandhi Vidyalaya, at Kale village in Karad on September 22. ❧

to have a sizeable influence in 120 Assembly constituencies in north Maharashtra, Marathwada, and western Maharashtra.

Raj Thackeray's Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) and Prakash Ambedkar's Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) have significant influence in different pockets of the State. Both leaders have already started announcing their candidates in various constituencies. Raj Thackeray supported the Mahayuti in the Lok Sabha election, but he has decided to go solo in the Assembly election. Although his party has only one MLA, its influence is spread across some 65 constituencies in the Mumbai, Pune, and Nashik regions.

The VBA polled 2.75 per cent votes in the Lok Sabha election. It does not have any MLA. It is banking on the 11 per cent Dalit votes in the State.

Critics see the creation of a third front as the BJP's ploy to split the MVA votes. But the Mahayuti's seat-sharing has been problematic just as it was during the Lok Sabha election. If the MVA capitalises on this as an example of divisive tactics, it would be able to consolidate non-Mahayuti votes.

ANOTHER SIGNIFICANT SHIFT in Maharashtra politics is the resurgence of the erstwhile dominant political families, which started with the Lok Sabha election and has gained momentum ahead of the Assembly election. Many of them who faced setbacks in the past 10 to 15 years hope to regain their hold in their respective areas and have joined hands overtly or covertly. ("Reviving a dormant legacy", *Frontline*, April 26, 2024). Although it may seem to be to the advantage of the MVA, the outcome could be different if Mahayuti leaders portray it as a battle between feudal lords and the people.

Apart from the political alliances, ideological battles are also intensifying. The RSS has reportedly deployed senior office-bearers to coordinate with the BJP in the State. They are holding district-wise meetings to activate the organisational machinery.

Meanwhile, citizens' initiatives such as the Bharat Jodo Abhiyan, Lok Morcha 2024, and Nirbhay Bano have started awareness campaigns among the people about the election.

Haryana's results may have given the BJP a shot in the arm, but it has definitely served notice to the MVA to get its act together. ■



► A banner at Albert Ekka Chowkin Ranchi urging the Central government to release the dues of Rs.1.36 lakh crore. SOMNATH SEN/ANI

BJP ups the tribal ante

Confident of winning the non-tribal and urban vote, the BJP is focussing its energy, and divisive campaigns, on Jharkhand's 28 tribal seats for the upcoming election. **ANAND MISHRA**

While the contest for tribal votes has intensified in election-bound Jharkhand, emerging trends suggest that non-tribal seats will also play an important role in deciding the outcome of the upcoming Assembly election, which is shaping up into a fierce battle of alliances. On October 1, the Loktantra Bachao Abhiyan (Save Democracy Campaign), or LBA, led by a group of rights bodies, released a public manifesto in Ranchi on the vision of the Jharkhand movement "Abua Jharkhand, Abua Raj" (Our Jharkhand, Our Rule) and urged political parties committed to communal harmony and constitutional values to include its demands in their manifestos.

While taking note of the successful initiatives in line with public expectation by the Hemant Soren government, the LBA statement underlined the many promises that were still pending. They include the enactment of a law against mob lynching and the notification of the Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Rules. "Action should be taken within the first six months of the formation of the government on *jal* [water], *jangal* [forest], *zameen* [land], identity, Adivasi autonomy, and freedom from exploitation," the LBA demanded. It also called for the formation of a Displacement and Rehabilitation Commission to enable the distribution of land to the displaced landless, Dalits, and poor farmers.

Against this, the campaigns of the main political parties continue to be on

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emotive issues and identity politics. It has evolved into a battle of alliances, where social coalitions and community voting patterns seem to matter more than issues.

The BJP's campaign during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's September 15 and October 2 visits revolved around Bangladeshi Muslims, whose alleged illegal infiltration has apparently undermined tribal interests. It accused the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) of vote-bank politics and trying to change the State's identity, and promised to implement the National Register of Citizens in Jharkhand.

Tribal people constitute 26 per cent of the electorate and have 28 reserved seats. Muslims are 14.5 per cent of the voting population and have the ability to influence the outcome in 20 seats in 7 districts. In 11 others, they are present in good numbers.

In 2019, the BJP contested alone after its attempt to form an alliance with the All Jharkhand Students Union (AJSU) led by Sudesh Mahto, a former National Democratic Alliance (NDA) constituent, failed; it won just 25 of the 81 seats in the Assembly. This time the party has formed an alliance with the AJSU and the Janata Dal (United), or JD(U), and is in talks with the Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) led by Chirag Paswan. The two Bihar-based parties have considerable influence among non-tribal voters, who matter in 53 seats, including 9 seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs).

The AJSU has influence over the Kurmi Mahto tribal community (16 per cent of the population) in at least 14 Assembly seats where the BJP performance was below par last time. However, it will have to contend with the emergence of Jairam Mahto of the Jharkhandi Bhasha Khatiyani Sangharsh Samiti given the fact that his appeal extends to youth across community lines.

In August, the Congress too joined the battle for the Kurmi Mahto vote when it replaced Rajesh Thakur, its privileged-caste (Bhumihar) State party chief, with Keshav Mahto Kamlesh, a Kurmi Mahto leader.

THE CONGRESS AT ONE TIME had tall non-tribal leaders such as Sarfaraz Ahmad, Subodhkant Sahay, Furqan Ansari, Rajendra Singh, and Chandrashekhar Dubey but now needs the support of the tribal-dominated JMM to be in power. The daughters of Sahay and Singh lost from Ranchi and Dhanbad,

respectively, in the 2024 Lok Sabha election.

The BJP holds just 2 of the 28 tribal seats, down from 11 in 2014. However, its good performance in non-tribal and urban seats helped it win 25 seats in 2019 against the 37 it won in 2014. The strategy this time is to maintain the hold on these seats while trying to repeat its 2014 performance in the tribal seats. (In the 2019 Assembly election, the JMM won 30 seats and the Congress 16.) According to the 2011 Census, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) constitute 46.1 per cent and STs 26.2 per cent of the population in the State.

On the face of it, the BJP seems to have regained some lost ground in the past five years. In the 2024 Lok Sabha election, the voting pattern in the 14 Lok Sabha constituencies revealed that the BJP-AJSU alliance was ahead in 50 Assembly segments and the JMM-Congress in 31. According to the 2024 Lok Sabha voting pattern, the JMM leads in only 22 Assembly segments and the Congress in 7.

NON-TRIBAL PEOPLE ARE angry with political parties as the entire focus of the election has seemingly turned to tribal issues. Although Jharkhand was created as a land for tribal communities, they do not constitute the majority of the voters in the State. According to a leader of the JMM-led alliance, a large number of people from eastern Uttar Pradesh and the erstwhile undivided Bihar, from which Jharkhand was carved out in 2000, vote for non-tribal candidates and parties. This, he asserts, poses a challenge to the JMM-led alliance. For obvious reasons the BJP performed well in non-tribal Assembly seats in 2019, especially in the urban ones.

Meanwhile, Hemant Soren has held a number of meetings with top Congress leaders in Delhi, asserting that "all is well" for their alliance. In fact, some leaders who left the two-party alliance to join the BJP ahead of the 2019 election have since returned. For instance, Kunal Sarangi has rejoined the JMM, slamming the BJP as a party of multinationals. His return is a shot in the arm for the JMM as he has earned a name for his social work in East Singhbhum. Sukhdev Bhagat rejoined the Congress in 2022, and Jaiprakash Bhai Patel did so in March this year.

For the BJP, the return of its former leader Saryu Rai into the NDA fold, as a member of the JD(U), is a big positive. He left the party before the 2019 election and contested as an Independent

Although Jharkhand was created in the name of a tribal land, tribal people do not constitute the majority of the voters in the State.

against the then Chief Minister, Raghubar Das, in Jamshepur East. Rai's rebellion cost the BJP all 14 Assembly seats in the Kolhan region (comprising East Singhbhum, Seraikela Kharsawan, and West Singhbhum districts). Rai's return was facilitated after the BJP agreed to give him one seat as a JD(U) candidate. Besides, with former JMM Chief Minister Champai Soren joining the BJP in August and the Congress party's Geeta Koda doing so in February, the party is confident of retrieving lost ground.

HOWEVER, IT IS THE tribal question that stares the BJP in the face, ironically in a State where the RSS-backed Vanvasi Kalyan Kendra has been active and the BJP's Vananchal State pitch has had some resonance. The party is not taking it easy.

After its experiment with a non-tribal Chief Minister (Raghubar Das) cost it the 2019 Assemb-

▼ **Jharkhand Mukti Morcha** (JMM) leader Kalpana Soren tries her hand at playing a traditional drum (Mandar) during the Maiya Samman Yatra in Sisai on October 7. SOMNATH SEN/ANI

In the 2024 Lok Sabha election, the voting pattern in the 14 constituencies revealed that the BJP-AJSU alliance was ahead in 50 Assembly segments and the JMM-Congress in 31.

ly election, the BJP brought back the popular Santhal leader Babulal Marandi to lead the party. It also brought into its fold Sita Soren, JMM leader Shibu Soren's rebel daughter-in-law, and fielded her from Dumka in the Lok Sabha election. Geeta Koda contested from Chaibasa.

The party, however, failed to win any of the tribal-dominated seats in the Lok Sabha election, which was fought in the wake of an emotional campaign by the JMM after Hemant Soren was forced to resign as Chief Minister following his arrest and imprisonment in a corruption case by the Enforcement Directorate.

Now, using some well-known tribal faces, the BJP hopes to win a few Assembly seats, where it plans to field even those who lost the Lok Sabha election. As such, apart from Geeta Koda in Chaibasa, Sita Soren in Dumka, and its former Chief Minister Arjun Munda in Kharsawan, the BJP plans to field Champai Soren from Saraikela, and former JMM MLA Lobin Hembrom from the Rajmahal region.

Both Champai Soren and Lobin Hembrom are the JMM's founding leaders. While Champai rebelled against Hemant Soren after being dropped as Chief Minister after the Lok Sabha election, Lobin Hembrom was expelled from the party after he contested as an Independent from the Rajmahal Lok Sabha seat against the party's decision.

With this line-up, the BJP hopes to improve its performance in tribal areas. "The BJP's target is to win 10-12 of the 28 tribal seats with the help of these tribal leaders as it is confident of a good show in the urban non-tribal seats," said a leader. Besides, in 18 seats falling in the Santhal Pargana region, the Muslim-versus-tribal discourse could become a worry for the JMM.

Whether the BJP's confidence will pay off, as it did in Haryana, is the big question. But one thing is certain: Jharkhand is bracing for a steely battle of nerves. ■



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Minorities as soft targets

Sectarian outfits have escalated a minor local dispute into a State-wide campaign of polarisation that threatens Himachal Pradesh's social harmony as well as its tourism industry. The ruling Congress seems indifferent. **T.K. RAJALAKSHMI**



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For more than a month now, Himachal Pradesh has been simmering with communal tension. For a State where Muslims form just 2.18 per cent of the population, the scope to engineer or foment unrest was hitherto limited. In 6 of the State's 12 districts, the Muslim population is less than 1 per cent. In Shimla, it is 1.45 per cent according to the 2011 Census.

On August 31, a skirmish between a resident and some labourers in Malyana, near Sanjauli town in Shimla district, over payment of wages ended up as a conflict with communal overtones.

On September 11, members of fraternal Hindu organisations took out a march from Malyana to Sanjauli and submitted a list of demands, which included the abolition of the State Waqf Board, the identification of all illegal migrants and illegal mosques and structures belonging to Muslims, and the demolition of the "illegal" mosque at Sanjauli.

The march was taken out despite the imposition of prohibitory orders. Flouting these orders, the protesters identified shops with Muslim names and called for their social and economic boycott. Sources said that rallies were held in Kullu, Paonta Sahib, Sunni, Ghumarwain, and Palampur, and calls for State-wide protests were given.

The protest called for the abolition of the Waqf Board, which was accused of encouraging illegal activities. An outfit calling itself the Dev Bhoomi Sangharsh Samiti, along with some local supporters, called for the demolition of the Sanjauli mosque, claiming it was illegal.

The outfit's strength on the ground, according to sources, was derived mainly from existing supporters of the BJP and the Sangh Parishad. One of its fraternal outfits, the Dev Bhoomi Jagran Manch, distributed pamphlets asking people to participate in a "jan jagran abhiyaan" (public awareness campaign) on September 30 at a Hanuman temple. The pamphlet "requested" people to keep an eye on migrants and exhorted them not to rent out homes or shops to them; to boycott dealings with migrant painters, saloon owners, artisans, and so on; to not buy food items from those who engaged in cow slaughter; and to get clothes stitched only by Hindu tailors. Despite the divisive nature of the pamphlet, the State government is yet to register any case against the outfit.

FOR HIMACHAL PRADESH, all this was very new. The campaigns also alleged that the demographic balance of the State was sought to be compromised with by the influx of migrants, Rohingyas, and others from Bangladesh. There is zero evidence to back these claims.

While it was no surprise that such statements came from right-wing outfits, the response of two senior Ministers in the Congress

► **At a massive protest** in Shimla demanding the demolition of "illegal" structures in a mosque in the Sanjauli locality, on September 11. PTI

government was shocking.

On September 4, Anirudh Singh, Minister for Rural Development and Panchayati Raj, speaking in the Assembly, questioned the legality of the Sanjauli mosque. Singh, who represents the Kasumpti seat, alleged that four storeys had been built without permission from authorities. He also claimed that the land belonged to the government, implying that the mosque was in illegal possession of the land. He also voiced concerns about the mosque's location, which according to him was surrounded by temples, schools, and educational institutions with 99 per cent of people belonging to other religions.

On September 26, Public Works Department Minister Vikramaditya Singh issued an order directing all eateries to publicly display the names of owners and staffers out of respect for the dietary preferences of pilgrims and to maintain law and order.

At a meeting, he said that all shopkeepers and vendors should display their identification. He drew parallels with the system in Uttar Pradesh where a similar directive was issued during the

No case was registered against any leader who had openly issued inflammatory statements and carried out protests targeting Muslims, despite video and other evidence.

Kanwar yatra, where Kanwariyas (mostly male pilgrims) trek to Haridwar to carry Ganga water back to their villages.

What the Minister conveniently forgot was that in July the Supreme Court stayed the Uttar Pradesh government's directive. The court held (*Association for the Protection of Civil Rights v. the State of Uttar Pradesh and Ors*) that while food sellers may be required to display details of the food they were serving, they must not be forced to display the name and identity of owners and employees of establishments.

The Minister's move put the Congress in a tough position as it had opposed such directives in BJP-ruled States. The Congress high command sought an explanation from Vikramaditya Singh. But his directive had not been officially withdrawn until the time of this report going to press, although its implementation was on hold.

THE CONGRESS GOVERNMENT, which will complete two years in office in December, has been riven by factionalism ever since it assumed office. The party could not win a single seat in the recent Lok Sabha election in the State. More importantly, the rift between Pradesh Congress Committee chief Pratibha Singh, who is also Vikramaditya's Singh's mother, and Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu is well known. At one point Pratibha Singh was openly critical of Sukhu's functioning.

There were attempts early on to destabilise the government after a few legislators defected to the BJP, threatening to reduce the Sukhu government to a minority. But the plan failed. In the subsequent byelections necessitated following the defections, the Congress retained control of most of the seats.

The government has been seen as not having done enough to send a strong message to those seeking to disrupt communal harmony. Barring an all-party meeting, the government has demurred from invoking the law against disruptive elements. A "sadbhavana" (goodwill) rally was conducted by Left parties and progressive organisations. Despite such moves, the efforts to polarise people on communal lines continues.

Tikender Panwar, former Deputy Mayor of Shimla, filed a petition in the Himachal Pradesh High Court seeking its intervention to "restore peace and constitutional values".



Panwar, who is also an urban expert and Senior Visiting Fellow of the Impact and Policy Research Institute (IMPRI) in Delhi, said in his petition that the Minister's directive had a detrimental impact on Shimla's traditionally harmonious social fabric and its vital tourism economy.

The petition further said that the directive was issued ostensibly to preserve hygiene and food safety, but the "compelled disclosure of the proprietors' and the staff's names served as a proxy for revealing their religious identity". He added that this had created a climate that was "conducive to a socially enforced economic boycott of Muslim-owned businesses".

The petition also sought a court directive to the government to, among other things, appoint a senior police officer in every district to take measures to prevent intimidation, harassment, and violence and constitute a Special Task Force to procure intelligence reports about people likely to commit communal intimidation and disseminate hatred and fake news.

Sources told *Frontline* that no case had been registered against any leader who had openly issued inflammatory statements and carried out protests targeting Muslims, despite video and other evidence.

In Palampur district, the Muslim community gave a representation to the tehsildar on September 14 stating that they feared for their security following incidents of violence, looting, and

▼ **Mosque authorities** demolish illegal structures on the order of the Municipal Commissioner, in Mandi on September 13. *PTI*

vandalism against their community members. This intimidation, they said, occurred under the pretext of a protest rally by certain organisations.

In Mandi district, members of a Hindu outfit converged on a Muslim tailor's shop and warned people not to get their clothes stitched by him. But no action was taken against the leaders of the protest.

A senior lawyer in the Himachal Pradesh High Court told *Frontline* that none of the minority community members was confident of approaching the courts owing to fear of reprisal. No individual would sign on the representation since it would ultimately be in the name of the "whole Muslim community".

In 2022, a bench of Justices K.M. Joseph and B.V. Nagarathna ordered (*Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay v. Sanjay Hegde*) that even if no complaint had been made, suo motu action should be taken to register cases in instances where any speech or action had taken place that attracted offences under Sections 153A, 153B, 295A, or 505 of the Indian Penal Code.

An order on similar lines was passed in a writ petition in *Shaheen Abdulla v. Union of India and Ors* where the petitioners had raised the issue of hate speeches against the minority community.

IN THE CASE of the Sanjauli mosque, the entire dispute over the "illegal" floors came to nought when the custodians of the property offered to demolish the additional floors on their own. On October 5, the Shimla Municipal Commissioner's Court directed the Himachal Pradesh Waqf Board and the Muslim Welfare Committee to demolish the top three floors of the mosque on the grounds that they were unauthorised.

The mosque finds a mention in the *Gazetteer* of 1970. The total area is around 4,590 square feet and the mosque has been constructed on about 1,700 sq ft. There were three Muslim and seven to eight non-Muslim tenants who had petty shops as well. *Frontline* learnt that the non-Muslim tenants had not paid any rent since 1970 and that had emerged as a bone of contention, which was exploited by sectarian elements.

The Congress government cannot afford to have a lackadaisical attitude to the issue as it is evident that if it gives sectarian elements a free run, keeping an eye on votes, it will take a toll on the social fabric in the State. ▶



► **Udhayanidhi Stalin** visits grandfather M. Karunanidhi's home on September 29 before taking oath as Deputy Chief Minister. PTI

FOR More Newspapers & Magazines <https://telegram.me/+5S3fmia1ZnJiYzE1> The grandson rises

The elevation of Udhayanidhi Stalin as Deputy Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu has raised eyebrows, but there is no pushback from within the DMK. **R.K. RADHAKRISHNAN**

The [DMK] party is not Sankara Mutt," former Chief Minister and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam president M. Karunanidhi had famously responded, on multiple occasions, to questions if his son M.K. Stalin would succeed him as party chief. He went on to explain that the party would decide on his successor and not a pontiff (or the elder in the house). (In the Sankara Mutt in Kancheepuram, succession is decided by the pontiff and not by popular vote.) Every time the argument of dynastic succession was brought up at press interactions or in private conversations, Karunanidhi would point out that the DMK was structured as a democratic political party that valued the opinion of the majority of its members.

Stalin had to climb the hierarchy the hard way. He became a member of the party general council in 1973 and won his first Assembly election in 1989, after losing an earlier one. Although he be-

came the elected Mayor of Chennai in 1996, Stalin had to wait until 2006, his fourth term as an MLA, to be inducted into the Cabinet.

By then it was clear that Stalin would succeed Karunanidhi as the DMK president. This was, however, not formally stated until the DMK's party constitution was amended in 2017 to elevate Stalin as "working president". The next year, after Karunanidhi's death, the DMK general council named him party president.

On Stalin's elevation, R. Mani, an independent journalist and popular talking head on Tamil news television, said: "It was family politics or dynastic politics no doubt, but it was done gradually, over a period of more than 40 years. Stalin was jailed during the Emergency and brutally beaten up. I know this because my father's close friend, who is now a neurosurgeon in the US, treated him. Over the years, Karunanidhi groomed him, and



making him Mayor was part of the process.”

He added: “Stalin was also an instinctively political person. So, in 2009, when Stalin was made Deputy Chief Minister, seniors like Anbazhagan did not protest. There was method in the elevation.” (K. Anbazhagan was former Finance Minister and former DMK general secretary.)

IN CONTRAST, Udhayanidhi Stalin's elevation as Deputy Chief Minister in September 2024 was quick, even by the standards of dynastic politics. He made his first political on-stage appearance in 2018. In just about six years, he has gone from the DMK president's son to No.3 in the State protocol among Ministers. Actually, he is de facto No.2 in both party and government. The elevation is all the more surprising because in 2017 Stalin had stated that no one from his family would join politics. He repeated this on a Tamil television channel in 2018. Udhayanidhi, too, in a response tweet to this correspondent in May 2011 had claimed: “I don't have any intention of getting into politics” (*sic*). In June that year, he reiterated: “*Kandippa politics vara maataen*” (I certainly won't enter politics). He repeated it a few interviews later. (Both tweets have since been deleted.)

In 2019, Udhayanidhi was suddenly named the party's star campaigner for the Lok Sabha election. On July 4 that year, he was made secretary of the party's youth wing. He immersed himself in party work, dividing the youth wing into seven zones and conducting meetings and classes. It helped that he had the blessings of his father and party president, and it was also made clear to the party's district bosses that they had to support the youth wing's efforts.

Ahead of the 2021 Assembly election, media reports speculated that he would contest a seat. A report in *The Hindu* in March 2021 said that

Within the party, there is no publicly expressed dissent. For one, the seniors are too old and their children have skin in the game.

when Udhayanidhi appeared before a DMK Assembly seat selection panel, his father appeared surprised. “Mr. Stalin, who was present there, wondered why he had come for the interview since he had already been advised not to contest in the election,” a senior DMK source said.... Mr. Stalin put his foot down saying that he could not be given the ticket. Party leaders said Mr. Stalin was not ready to play into the hands of his critics, who have been accusing him of promoting his son in the party.”

A few days later, however, it was announced that Udhayanidhi would contest the Triplicane-Chepauk seat, one of the safest DMK seats. His opponent was a lightweight from the Pattali Makkal Katchi, and Udhayanidhi had a cakewalk into the Assembly. He campaigned extensively and did well to capture the imagination of the voters by holding up a brick and proclaiming that he had “stolen” it from the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) site in Madurai. The “*otha sengal*” (single brick) back story is that the Centre announced an AIIMS in Madurai, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone ahead of the 2019 Lok Sabha election. But there was zero progress even in 2021.

This provided great campaign material for Udhayanidhi and the DMK, with the former proclaiming he had “stolen” the only brick he found at the AIIMS site. While his speech did not have much variation (and hence did not make for good television), it resonated among the cadre, who cheered when he displayed the brick with “AIIMS” written on it. When the

DMK won the 2021 election, it was speculated that Udhayanidhi would be made a Minister. When his name did not make it to the list, senior party members and Ministers kept periodically claiming that he had “all the qualities for a Minister”. And just 18 months after becoming an MLA, he was appointed Minister.

Udhayanidhi was given charge of the Sports (and Youth Welfare) Ministry, in line with the image sought for him, that of a young leader wanting to reach out to the youth. He was given additional charge of Special Programme Implementation (SPI), poverty alleviation, rural indebtedness, and, later, planning and development.

At this time, Dr Darez Ahamed, a civil servant known for his efficiency and ability to work with politicians, who had made a significant contribution to the National Health Mission in the State, was put in charge of SPI. He was also put in charge of the Chess Olympiad, the first major programme Udhayanidhi undertook, and it was a spectacular success.

Similarly, when Udhayanidhi was elevated as Deputy Chief Minister, cementing his position in both party and government, Pradeep Yadav, another civil servant known for his efficiency, connections in New Delhi, and ability to work seamlessly with the political leadership, was made secretary to the Deputy Chief Minister. This was a new phenomenon. In the two earlier occasions when the State has had Deputy Chief Ministers—in the form of Stalin and O. Panneerselvam—neither had civil servants as personal secretaries.

These moves make it clear that Stalin is aware of the flaws of such a rapid promotion to Udhayanidhi and is trying to mitigate some of the damage by appointing strong officers to handle critical issues.

At the same time, the elevation of his son has increased murmurs about Stalin's health. Sources said that Sta-

lin told a DMK senior: “I won't make him [my son] wait too long.” A reference perhaps to the four decades that Stalin had to wait before he could make it to the top chair.

Within the party, there is no publicly expressed dissent. For one, the seniors are too old and their children have skin in the game, a few of them already elected representatives at various levels. A party functionary said: “I look at it this way. The leader has endorsed X or Y. We accept the decision because he understands the party and the State better than us.”

There is just one competitor to Udhayanidhi in the DMK, his aunt and Stalin's half-sister, Kanimozhi, once a challenger to Stalin's position itself.

► **Udhayanidhi** with father M.K. Stalin in the run-up to the party's youth wing conference held at Pethanaickenpalayam in Salem district on January 20.

LAKSHMI NARAYANAN E.

Kanimozhi, a published poet and an economics student who worked as a journalist in India and Singapore, resisted popular demands to join the party until late 2006. In 2007, she was nominated to the Rajya Sabha.

Initially brought in to counter AIADMK supremo Jayalithaa, she won the Thoothukudi seat in 2019 and 2024 and went on to become the DMK's deputy leader in the Lok Sabha and a valuable English-speaking party representative in New Delhi. In 2022, Stalin made her the DMK's deputy general secretary.

The dearth of leadership material in the DMK after the mid-1990s has three reasons. It was partly by design because Karunanidhi did not want another challenger like Vaiko (who went on to launch the Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam); it was partly because regional leaders were content nurturing their own pocket boroughs; and lastly, after Stalin took

over, he almost doubled the number of district secretaries to 65, thereby reducing the power of this feared and respected party pillar.

WHILE THE DMK's allies have welcomed Udhayanidhi's elevation, the BJP has questioned it. BJP State president K. Annamalai, now on study leave in the UK, tweeted on September 29: “The sun shines for the privileged few....”

Mani, the independent journalist, said the move was brazen and undignified. “This is throwing all political decency to the winds. This is a party which, since 2021, has been talking about social justice. The very concept of social justice is a contradiction to dynasty politics.”

Mani argues that the post of Deputy Chief Minister or Deputy Prime Minister is created for a reason and there was no compelling reason in Tamil Nadu to do so. “In Stalin's case, Kalaingar [Karunanidhi] was not well. In Panneerselvam's case, it was a political consideration,” he said, adding that when inner party power structures get problematic, as in Karnataka, it too could warrant a Deputy Chief Minister. “In this case, the only reason is to keep power in the family.”

Today, the opposition is at its weakest in Tamil Nadu. If the AIADMK and the BJP lead separate coalitions in the 2026 election, it will be easy for the DMK to win a three-cornered election. The Tamil superstar Vijay has just entered politics, but his stand on most issues is not yet clear. There seems to be a marked reluctance in the way he is taking each step forward. As of now, he does not seem to be a major challenger.

With the party's rank and file accepting Udhayanidhi's elevation, it is now up to the people of Tamil Nadu to decide if this was the right time and if he was the right choice to succeed Stalin. They will get their chance to speak in 2026. ■



A QUIET VICTORY

Anura Dissanayake's historic ascent signals the arrival of change, but he has to contend with high expectations on the social and economic fronts while his opponents watch his every step. **AMITA ARUDPRAGASAM**

On September 23, 55-year-old Anura Kumara Dissanayake took oath as Sri Lanka's ninth Executive President in a modest ceremony at the presidential secretariat. The popular election was the first since the country faced fuel lines, daily power cuts, severe inflation, and a shortage of drugs and essential goods during its worst economic crisis in recent years. It was also the first time the public voted since mass protests forced the resignations of Gotabaya Rajapaksa, as President, and his brother Mahinda Rajapaksa, as Prime Minister.

Although Dissanayake's victory has been described as a "landslide", an "earthquake", a "political tsunami", or a "seismic shift", his margins are less impressive than headlines imply. For the first time in Sri Lanka's history, a presidential candidate failed to secure more than 50 per cent of votes in the first round of counting—compelling the election commission to consider preferential votes in a second round. In the first round, Dissanayake secured 5.6 million votes (42.31 per cent), as against the 6.9 million that Gotabaya Rajapaksa secured to win the 2019 presidential election, or the 6.2 million votes that Maithripala Sirisena polled in 2015 to become President.

Dissanayake's slim margin is partially explained by the fact that the election was a three-way competition, instead of the straight contest that presidential elections typically boil down to. Dissanayake's main contender, opposition leader Sajith Premadasa, secured around 33 per cent of the votes. Incumbent President Ranil Wickremesinghe, whose long-standing leadership struggles with

Dissanayake's "outsider" status, humility, and nobody-to-somebody character arc captured voter imagination in a country disillusioned by its political elite.

Premadasa led to a split of their common party in 2020, secured about 17 per cent. Dissanayake's margins can also be explained by his rivals' use of powerful negative marketing campaigns.

Dissanayake's party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), has Marxist-Leninist origins, although traditional leftist parties have often questioned the JVP's ideological commitments to Marxism and the JVP founder's interpretations of Leninism.

Under the leadership of its revolutionary founder Rohana Wijeweera, the party undoubtedly had a violent past. In 1971, the JVP led an anti-state insurrection that was swiftly crushed. In 1987, however, the JVP mounted a more protracted armed insurgency against the state. This insurrection led to state retaliation that was several times more violent and resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of men and women, including JVP cadres and sympathisers and sometimes innocent bystanders.

In the latest election, hysteria amounting to a "red scare" brought back memories of that violence. But although Dissanayake was part of student political movements and participated in student protests in 1987, he was only inducted into the party's Central Committee in 1997 and appointed to the Politburo in 1998, after the party had distanced itself from such violence and had been mainstreamed into electoral politics.

The JVP's Sinhala-nationalist leanings have also come under scrutiny with this election. Historically, the JVP has oscillated between class critique and nationalism for ideological fuel. It opposed the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Accords promising devolution to the provinces, and played vital roles in scuttling the peace process between the Sri Lanka government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) between 2000 and 2005; in disbanding a tsunami aid distribution agreement between the government and the LTTE in 2005; in advocating for a complete military solution to the ethnic conflict; and in opposing President



Chandrika Kumaratunga's devolution proposals in 2000.

Like the other southern presidential candidates, Dissanayake was not expected to hold alleged war criminals accountable or to devolve land and police powers to Tamil-dominated regions. Yet, the JVP refrained from Sinhala-Buddhist ethnic outbidding in the recent election, and the three top election contenders avoided anti-minority and ultranationalist rhetoric that were a large part of the 2019 presidential election. In its current form the JVP is unlikely to be as ultranationalist as it was in previous decades.

CONTEMPORARY JVP'S POLITICS cannot easily be surmised by reference to its history. Not only has it responded dynamically to the post-crisis economic discourse, the last five decades have seen important shifts in the party's leadership, alliances, base, and policy.

The rural educated youth, with whom the JVP ranks originally swelled in the 1970s and the 1980s, are today deradicalised and willing participants of consumerist culture as a result of increased Internet and mobile phone penetration. Meanwhile, semi-urban populations and an emergent middle class became vital

new constituencies for the JVP in the 1990s.

A major development in 2008 saw vocally racist ultranationalists leave the party to form the National Freedom Front. And in 2012, a socialist faction left the JVP to form the Frontline Socialist Party. In 2019, the JVP also formed an alliance with diverse groups to broaden its electoral appeal, including women's groups, youth groups, and civil society organisations. It was under the banner of this broader alliance, called the National People's Power (NPP), that Dissanayake contested in 2024 and from which his choice of Prime Minister also emerges.

Dissanayake's detractors recalled the JVP's history to warn that his victory would unleash either revolutionary or anti-minority violence, or alternatively, a protectionist, anti-market economic policy that would send the country spiralling back to the fuel and gas cylinder queues of 2022. A frenzied international media rushed to characterise Dissanayake as Marxist or Marxist-leaning in post-election headlines, without much consideration of its current policies.

The NPP's manifesto, its most updated policy statement that is a result of intra-coalition

▼ **Anura Kumara Dissanayake**

addressing supporters at his last public rally before the election, in Colombo on September 18.

ERANGA JAYAWARDENA/AP

negotiation and a social contract between voters and Dissanayake, contains policies that are at odds with its avowedly Marxist history. It states, for example, that the NPP will introduce pro-market reforms, increase the ease of doing business, encourage free trade agreements, promote foreign direct investment, improve trade through export diversification, and develop the country's port facilities and its capacity as a trading and logistics hub.

Party associates, who often refer to this manifesto in debates, interviews, and public gatherings, also reaffirmed that the NPP will work with the International Monetary Fund, widely considered a neoliberal institution.

DISSANAYAKE'S RECENT appointments of economic advisers signal that the party is taking its new business-friendly, pro-market positionality seriously. Meanwhile, his appointment of Dr Harini Amarasinghe, a feminist academic with progressive views on minority issues, as Prime Minister demonstrates the party's commitment to social justice and its intent to further grow its voter base to fill a void in liberal political representation.

The NPP manifesto contains policies on legalising safe abortion, abolishing the gender wage gap, and increasing the representation of female politicians in parliament, and is far more progressive than can be expected of the socially conservative ultranationalist JVP of the past.

While headlines about the extent of Dissanayake's victory are misleading, this is the first time that the JVP is holding such a large sway in electoral politics. In the 2015 parliamentary election, it managed to secure only six parliamentary seats; in 2020, it was able to retain just three seats. In contrast, if Dissanayake's 2024 presidential victory translates into parliamentary seats, the NPP would have secured 105 out of 225 seats in parliament.

There is, therefore, uncertainty about how the JVP-led NPP coalition will govern after the general election in November, how diligently it will abide by its manifesto, and how dynamics within the coalition will impact policy implementation. If governance runs into rough weather, it is not clear whether the alliance will revert to previous incarnations and strategies that might have favoured planned eco-

The new President will have to contend with a crippled justice sector and the inefficiencies of a state bureaucracy destroyed by successive years of populism.

The government had set up the State-Owned Enterprise Restructuring Unit to carry out reforms in the SOE sector. It mandated the unit in March 2023 to divest an identified set of SOEs. According to reports, there are 527 SOEs and most are plagued by inefficiency and losses.

nomies, isolationist foreign policy, romanticisation of the agrarian economy as a solution to food insecurity, abandonment of the IMF programme, or even minority scapegoating.

In the run-up to the election, Dissanayake's opponents stressed the importance of experienced governance in steering the country through its ongoing economic crisis. Wickremesinghe, for example, highlighted his own experience as a six-time Prime Minister. Dissanayake, by contrast, has only served as a Minister of Agriculture, Land and Livestock, and that too for about 14 months between 2004 and 2005. Analysts, thus, have little by way of a governing record to base their predictions.

In the weeks leading to the general election, it is clear that Dissanayake wishes to dispel the fears about violence related to his party. Rohana Hettiarachchi, executive director of People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, described the just concluded presidential election as the most peaceful in the country's history. One of Dissanayake's messages to his supporters at his final rally at Nugegoda, a Colombo suburb, was to remain non-violent regardless of electoral outcomes; post-election he urged supporters to celebrate peacefully.

In the interim period between presidential and parliamentary elections, Dissanayake has also exercised caution in governance. He has not overturned too many economic policies introduced by Wickremesinghe, who made significant progress in stabilising the nominal side of Sri Lanka's economy after he took over from Gotabaya Rajapaksa in July 2022.

His only questionable move thus far has been an apparent pause, without justification, on much-needed **reforms in state-owned enterprises (SOEs)**. Dissanayake has retained the former Secretary to the Treasury and the central bank Governor, who is credited with reining in inflation after excessive money-printing in previous years.

Within the first six months of Wickremesinghe's appointment, a fuel distribution system was created, power cuts were shortened, and gas and essential goods shortages ended. In March 2023, an IMF Extended Fund Facility programme of around \$3 billion was approved. In the second half of 2023, GDP growth revived. Government revenue collection also improved following tax increases implemented in 2022 and 2023, and the country

recorded a current account surplus as tourist arrivals and migrant remittances increased, although debt payments remained suspended and import restrictions were still in place.

Dissanayake's caution is commendable given the historically anti-state and anti-ruling class proclivities of his party as well as the levels of classism and arrogance faced on the election trail. For example, Wickremesinghe, while emphasising the progress made under his presidency in stabilising the economy, warned of a "bottomless abyss" to which citizens would return should he not be elected, and claimed that "Ranil and Ranil alone" could make lives better.

Wickremesinghe's campaign rhetoric was laced with elitism. In a pre-election interview, the former President remarked that he funded the expansion of Dissanayake's school when he was Education Minister while his relative and political mentor, former President J.R. Jayawardene, funded Dissanayake's university. The interviewer echoed the incumbent's condescension in response, saying: "Now that ko-

lu gataya [little boy] from Thambuttegama is running for President."

It was, however, Dissanayake's "outsider" status, humility, and nobody-to-somebody character arc that captured voter imagination in a country disillusioned by its political elite. Dissanayake, who was schooled in Thambuttegama in Anuradhapura district, does not come from a politically connected family. While his top three political rivals—Wickremesinghe, Premadasa, and Namal Rajapaksa—hail from powerful political families, Dissanayake's father was an office aide in the Government Survey Department and his mother a homemaker.

In the aftermath of a crisis that stripped the middle class of social mobility and saw poverty levels double in 2022, Dissanayake's origins, quiet confidence, and oratory skills were reassuring. Prior to the election, voters across the country began to feel the burden of austerity measures: higher taxes, increased electricity

Dissanayake's caution is commendable given the historically anti-state and anti-ruling class proclivities of his party.

▼ **On October 6,** Dissanayake visited the St. Sebastian's Church in Katuwapitiya where the Easter Sunday attack occurred in 2019. After the visit, he said on X: "We will ensure a fair, transparent investigation which will bring justice to the victims." X.COM/ANURADISANAYAKE





and water tariffs, and poor social protection mechanisms. In 2023, over a million electricity lines were cut during sweltering heatwaves, mainly in poorer households that could not afford higher tariffs.

While headline inflation subsided to single digits from an average of 46.4 per cent in 2022, the average index was still over 90 per cent higher in 2023 than in 2021. Since wages did not keep up with rising prices, purchasing power was limited and poverty traps loomed over or ensnared low-income households. With over 27 per cent of households facing food insecurity as voters headed to polling booths, Dissanayake's call for a "system change" struck a chord.

IN HIS PERSON, if not in policy, Anura Kumara Dissanayake most closely embodied the system overhaul and shift in political culture that Sri Lanka's citizenry yearned for in the widespread protests that gripped the country in 2022. His strong anti-corruption platform resonated with voters frustrated by repeated corruption scandals, political impunity, and elitism. "We don't have the experience of making the country bankrupt.... [But] we will gain experience in building the country," Amarasuriya said shortly after Dissanayake's victory.

In policy, Dissanayake and Premadasa have much in common. Both agree that Sri Lanka must continue with its IMF programme while improving social protection for those most vulnerable. Both promised to take swift legal action against the perpetrators of the Easter Sunday attacks, in which more than 300 people were killed on April 21, 2019, and both pledged to establish a public prosecutor's office to reduce conflicts of interest in the justice sector.

▼ **Dissanayake** with IMF officials on October 3. He expressed commitment to achieving the IMF programme's goals. X.COM/ANURADISANAYAKE

There is uncertainty about how the JVP-led NPP will govern after the general election in November and how dynamics within the coalition will impact policy implementation.

While neither convincingly pledged to hold alleged war criminals accountable, both promised to abolish the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act, a law that is hostile to minority communities. Both also pledged to abolish the Executive Presidency if elected.

And critically, both their parties have been constructive and responsible in opposition, supporting legislation that was critical to the country during the last two years, while contributing productively to necessary economic dialogue in parliament.

While Dissanayake is now reaping the fruits of rational economic policy implemented just before his takeover, as well as mild weather and a drop in global fuel prices, he is yet to be tested.

His supporters await the promised results on corruption cases and the Catholic belt, where he swept the election, will expect justice for the Easter Sunday attacks.

But Dissanayake will have to contend with a crippled justice sector, the inefficiencies of a state bureaucracy destroyed by successive years of populism, and the time-consuming banality of due process. In the interim, his less-constructive political opponents are likely to become louder and bolder, waiting to seize on missteps in policy implementation or uncontrollable shifts in the external environment, whether escalating conflicts in West Asia leading to rising fuel prices or unpredictable local weather events that ravage harvests.

All along, Dissanayake will also need to sustain reform momentum to ensure economic growth under incredible constraints. As victorious as he might be now, Dissanayake's position is unenviable. ■

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Tabish Khair is an Indian novelist and academic who teaches in Denmark.

The enablers of Israel

By blithely equating Israel with Jews, Western regimes and the Western media are actually sowing the seeds of anti-Semitism, not combating it as they claim.

There is no point pinning all the blame on Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, for the violence and bloodletting that his regime has unleashed as his aggression is enabled by the support and funding of the US, aided by the UK and Germany in particular. If blame were to be allotted, it should first be apportioned to the enablers, without whom Netanyahu's bravado would collapse like the proverbial house of cards.

When Hamas launched its brutal attack on Israeli communes, I and almost all other commentators called it by the right name: "terrorism". There was condemnation, sometimes without using that word, from Arab regimes and ordinary Arabs. That was the time when the US could have shown leadership and enabled a global political coalition to challenge Hamas and strengthen Israel. Instead, Joe Biden decided to take the easy and more lucrative way out: supply Israel with arms and missiles worth billions. It was a shortcut for the US regime, and it enabled ordinary taxpayers' money to be ploughed into the private military-industrial complex, which is by far America's most lucrative business.

When Netanyahu, taking advantage of the duplicity and cynicism of Western regimes, launched a brutal wave of attacks on Gaza, the

term that came to mind, "genocidal violence", was not used by the same governments and the "free" media in their countries. Buoyed by such support and the limitations of Arab regimes, themselves not much more popular in their countries than Netanyahu is in Israel and dependent likewise on the US and other secret services to avoid internal challenges, Netanyahu moved from one level of aggression to another. Currently, he is jabbing at Lebanon, and might invade it, while domestically he is affiliated with another far-right Israeli party, which believes in "war on all seven fronts". His rhetoric of "total victory" is itself, obviously, genocidal rhetoric because after what he has done to Palestinians and might do to the Lebanese, there can be "total victory"—in his terms—only when the last Palestinian has been eradicated.

The "free media" in the West is choosing not to see this, but Netanyahu, who is no fool, knows it. He knows that after what he has done and what he plans to do, he will leave a much more radicalised Arab and Palestinian population. For every Hamas he destroys, three Hamas-like organisations are likely to be born. This can only be prevented if Palestinians are given a viable—not a truncated—and free country, and it is clear by now that not only Netanyahu but most other Israeli politicians have no real intention of doing so.

Even the two-nation solution still parroted by Biden is a joke: it will lead to a Palestinian state with no chance of ever becoming truly independent and hence with every chance of succumbing to Hamas-like ideologies. If such a state is created, it will simply mark a pause in the ongoing genocidal violence. Netanyahu knows that he is aiming at genocide as, alas, the "fi-





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nal solution” of the Palestinian problem.

All this is being enabled by the US and its allies, who form the core of the old colonial countries of Europe. Without their material and ideological support, Netanyahu would have long lost power or changed tack. The Israeli military would also not have had the wherewithal to sustain its genocidal violence and expand it further. Interestingly, when Israeli attacks killed Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Hezbollah in Lebanon, thus provoking a further escalation, Israeli leaders came on CNN to claim that this was “a chance for the

Even the two-nation solution still parroted by Biden is a joke: it will lead to a Palestinian state with no chance of ever becoming truly independent and hence with every chance of succumbing to Hamas-like ideologies.

► **An Israeli military bombardment** of the northern Gaza Strip on November 15, 2023. FADEL SENNA/AFP

people of Lebanon to claim their country back” from Hezbollah. Obviously, CNN is unlikely to broadcast something similar about Netanyahu and the people of Israel seizing the chance to “claim their country back” from him.

Criticism of the ongoing genocidal violence and political mayhem is silenced in the West by raising the spectre of anti-Semitism. As I noted a long time ago, I can criticise Iran and Saudi Arabia—and I have done so—without being anti-Islamic or Islamophobic. But as soon as I criticise Israel, an apartheid nation, I will be considered anti-Semitic in many circles. This is rubbish: just as the regimes of Iran or Saudi Arabia do not represent Muslims, the regime of Israel does not represent Jews. By blithely equating Israel with Jews, Western regimes and the Western media are actually sowing the seeds of anti-Semitism, not combating it as they claim.

This is not surprising because the destruction—between Netanyahu and the US (and its allies)—of a common, peaceful future for (Semitic) Arabs and (Semitic) Israelis is arguably the worst act of anti-Semitism after Hitler. Its consequences will ripen into the far future: its victims will be “Semitic” peoples on all sides in that region. Yes, the real anti-Semites are people and regimes that support or justify Netanyahu and his game plan. ■



► **At a protest** to mark the first anniversary of the war between Hamas and Israel, in Los Angeles on October 5. Support for Palestine continues to be strong in the US, which is inconvenient for Kamala Harris since the Joe Biden administration is supplying weapons to Israel. RINGO CHIU/AFP

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THE FOLLY OF LESSER EVILISM

One may argue that Donald Trump would be even more dreadful than Kamala Harris, but the latter candidate stretches the notion of the lesser evil to its breaking point in the run-up to the US presidential election. **JOHN CLARKE**

There can be no denying that the dangers posed by a potential second Donald Trump presidency are stark and very real. The “art of the deal” billionaire turned politician is dangerously erratic, overtly racist, and deeply authoritarian. Moreover, the MAGA (Make America Great Again) base that he has drawn around himself is extremely reactionary and includes openly fascist elements.

However, whatever electoral choices individuals make, it is highly problematic for unions, social movements, and those on

the Left to pull out the vote for Kamala Harris. She is, after all, the sitting Vice President in an administration that is arming and actively enabling the genocide that is unfolding in Gaza. It may be to her advantage to appear concerned about Palestinian lives, but as *The New Arab* has put it: “[T]here is nothing more revealing of Harris’ deceptive rhetoric than her talk of



supporting a ceasefire deal and displaying a broken heart over the suffering of civilians in Gaza, while simultaneously sending more lethal weapons to Israel.”

Israel is now using some of those very weapons in Lebanon and, in doing so, is taking the situation to the very edge of a catastrophic regional conflagration. Even as this horror unfolds, Harris is giving no indication that she intends to set any limit on Israel's rampages. As her administration sends more troops into the region, she is utterly complicit in an appalling escalation that might well lead to direct US involvement in the conflict.

Writing in *Tempest Magazine*, Ashley Smith argues that Harris' role as Vice President and her present electoral campaign are entirely in line with the imperial interests of the US. During her debate with Trump, “[s]he promised to make ‘our’ military the ‘most lethal fighting force in the world’” and to win the contest with China for global dominance. “She also vowed to implement a Republican ‘border security bill’ to repress migrants, adopt law and order policies to ‘crack down on violent crime’, and greenlight more fracking, just like [Joe] Biden did with his Inflation Reduction Act.”

Smith also suggests that “[u]p until the rise of Trump, the Democrats had been the ruling class's B Team” but adds that this has changed because decisive sections of the US establishment have lost confidence in the Republicans with Trump at the helm. His dangerous and unpredictable track record has convinced many in the corridors of power that, for the present at least, the Democrats are a more reliable “A Team” than their rivals.

HARRIS' DECIDEDLY RIGHT-WING turn on the campaign trail is no aberration. Writing in *Counterpunch*, in 2016, Richard Moser noted that when running for office, “the Democrats position themselves to the right of the labour and social movements, and it could well be argued, of the majority of Democratic voters”.

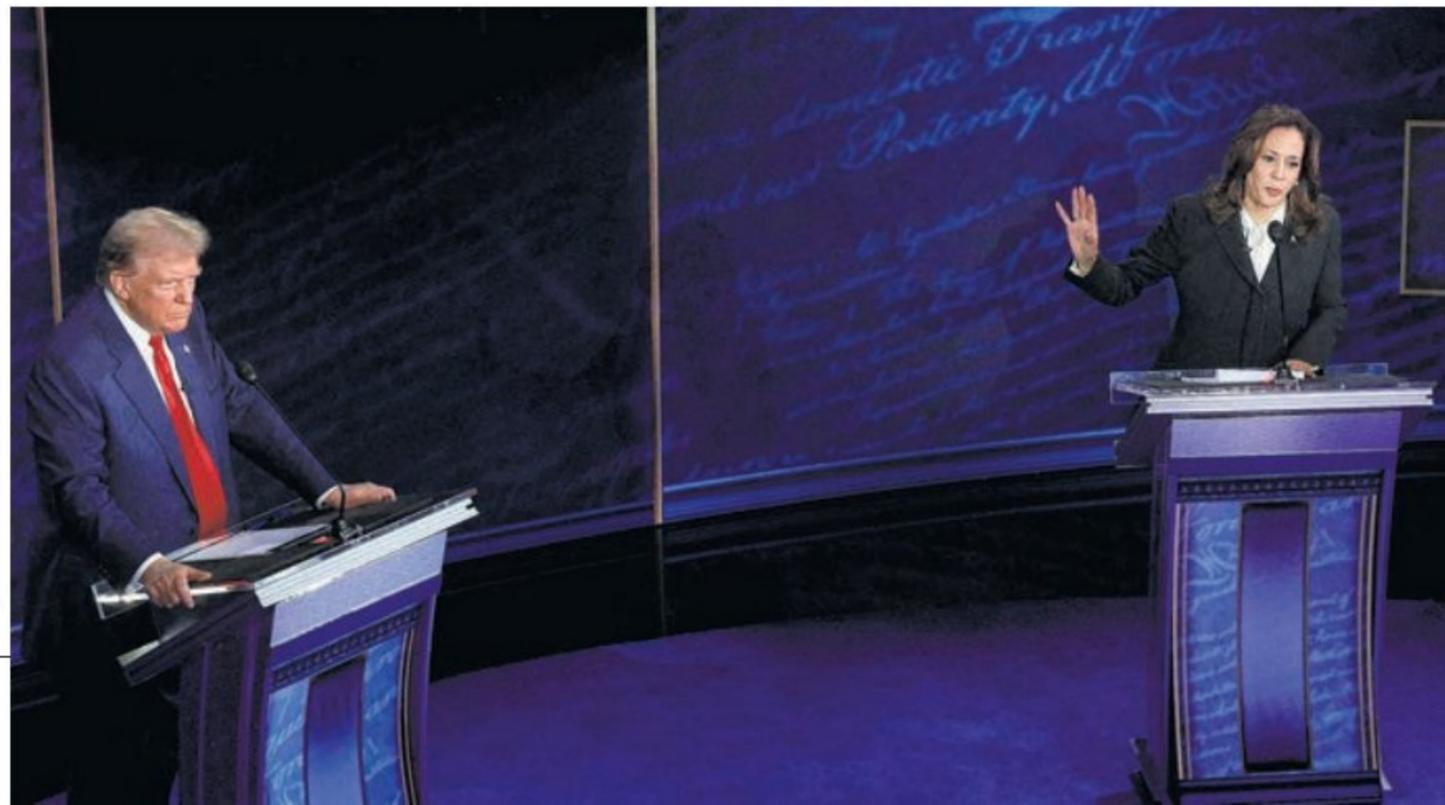
In the US electoral system, the results in most States during a presidential contest are a foregone conclusion and everything rests on the outcomes that are obtained in a small number of “swing States”. These are the places where Democrats hope to convince potential Republican voters to come over to their side, and it is, there-

The very dubious breath of fresh air that Harris brings to the presidential race may be enough to keep Trump out but it is hardly an open pathway to a just society.

fore, in their interest to play to that relatively small grouping of “moderate” conservatives in order to settle the matter. Harris is following this course, bolstering her support among the ruling establishment, while assuming that unions and social movements will continue, as in the past, to grumble quietly while “holding their noses” and working for a Democratic victory.

One may argue that Trump would be even more dreadful than Harris, but there is no doubt that the latter candidate stretches the notion of supporting the lesser evil to its breaking point. The old saying “out of the frying pan, into the fire” comes to mind as Leftist activists convince themselves, and as many others as they can, that supporting an enabler of genocide is the price that must be paid for keeping Trump out of the White House.

When social movements stand down in order to try and elect the least worst of their enemies, the results are likely to be deeply unfortunate. The commentators David McNally and Charles Post have pointed to the effort to demobilise the sweeping Black Lives Matter protests that were unfolding in the run-up to the presidential contest between Trump and Biden in 2020. They concluded that at that time, following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, “the largest and most diverse anti-racist protest movement in US history was surging powerfully for-



ward”, weakening the confidence of Trump's reactionary social base in the process.

However, the Democratic establishment, largely through the efforts of former US President Barack Obama, worked to head off the anti-racist strike action, contain social mobilisation, and discredit the “Defund the Police” demand that was resonating powerfully at that time. The most dynamic US social upheaval against racism and police violence in decades was subordinated to the perceived electoral needs of the Democrats.

ALTHOUGH THE EVENTS unfolding in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon are so appalling that Palestine solidarity action will be hard to subdue, there is no doubt that such a mobilisation is decidedly inconvenient for the present Democratic presidential candidate. The Biden-Harris administration is supplying most of the weapons that are allowing the killings to proceed, and no serious movement on the streets can ignore this obvious reality. Democratic electoral fortunes and the need to challenge a genocidal rampage simply cannot be reconciled in such a situation.

Lesser evilism has a long and very particular history in the US, but it is an international political phenomenon, and it is running into trouble in this period. The capturing of the Republican Party by hard-right forces is part of a general

According to media reports, the hard-right National Rally won 143 seats, while the left-wing New Popular Front won 182. The centrist Ensemble front got only 168.

▼ **During the presidential debate** between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, in Philadelphia on September 10.

BRIAN SNYDER/
REUTERS

trend in which mainstream conservative parties are embracing more radical ideas, often facing pressure from even more right-wing formations vying for a place in the political mainstream.

The right-wing populist leaders that are thrown up in this situation play to a support base caught up in a mood of reactionary rage that the volatile and uncertain social conditions of this period have produced. They present themselves as the opponents of smug elites and offer fake solutions that can win them a following. For those who personify the worst political instincts, they are a ray of hope.

In the face of this right-wing tide, the tired and discredited parties of the political Centre are a very poor defence indeed. In this or that political contest, they may still fend off the challenge from the Right, but things are not going their way. In France, for instance, President Emmanuel **Macron's total inability** to offer a compelling alternative to a brand of made-over fascism is a case in point. It took an initiative by the political Left to drive back the threat of Marine Le Pen.

The belated but entirely unavoidable dumping of Joe Biden by the Democratic Party establishment and the very dubious breath of fresh air that Harris brings to the presidential race may be enough to keep Trump out of the White House. It may also be argued that this would be a preferred result, but it is hardly an open pathway to a just society. But these considerations are by no means the end of the matter.

The Trumps of the world point the way towards a regressive and bleak future. The progressive alternative to that outcome is to be found on the Left. For their part, the forces of the political Centre present only a failed and discredited status quo that has no future. For the Left, and the movements it is active in, to periodically suspend operations to try and get the least dreadful option elected is a profound mistake.

The Democratic Party, which has long functioned as a tool to divert and demobilise popular struggles and social resistance, is a clear example of the folly of backing the lesser evil. It would be far wiser to leave Harris to her attempt to convince enough wavering swing State Republicans to vote for her, while preparing for an inevitable struggle against whichever of the two candidates takes their seat in the Oval Office. ■

John Clarke is an anti-poverty organiser and political activist based in Toronto, Canada.

Tariff shock for Chinese EVs in Europe

Outdone by China in EV manufacturing with its better technology, supply chain advantages, and larger production scale, the EU has imposed high tariffs on Chinese EV imports, rather than provide better subsidies to the European industry.

C.P. Chandrasekhar

In early October, in a show of pique, a European Commission (EC) proposal to impose additional tariffs of up to 35.3 per cent (on top of the pre-existing 10 per cent) on electrical vehicles (EVs) imported from China was passed by a majority vote in the European parliament. With that vote, Europe joined the US in the effort to use high tariffs to block imports from China. The US has, typically, responded to China's success in EV manufacture by raising tariffs to as high as 100 per cent despite lower imports of Chinese vehicles. It has also used national security as a reason to shut out Chinese imports, alluding to electronics allegedly equivalent to smartphones being embedded in Chinese EVs.

The EC's proposal was clearly in response to the spike in EV imports from China into Europe and a rise in the market share of Chinese firms, especially BYD. There are two factors driving increased imports from China. The first is that the country has competitive advantages as a location, which benefit not just Chinese companies but also firms like Mercedes and Tesla that manufacture in China to serve European markets. The second is that Chinese EV makers like BYD are ahead in terms of technology, which allows them to offer cheaper products of better quality.

As a result, one in every five vehicles sold in the EU last year came from China. But the coun-

try was not the only source of imported automobiles; it contributed just 3,00,000 EVs to the 10.5 million cars sold in the EU. This speaks of the huge replacement market for EVs open to anyone willing to up their game and win buyer support, including producers from the EU. The issue is not just Chinese competition but the backwardness of the European industry.

BUT IN THE case of both the US and Europe, the inability to face up to being overtaken by a "newcomer" in an advanced technology area seems to be the factor driving the protectionist turn. The case made for tariffs is that Chinese production is outcompeting local firms because of subsidies being offered by the Chinese state to its own producers, allowing the latter to sell below cost and win market share. That justification does not carry any weight because it is not only imports of EVs produced by Chinese firms that are doing well in European markets but also those produced by European firms with manufacturing facilities in China. To argue that China would hugely subsidise even foreign firms to ensure increased production in the country does seem a stretch.

Problems facing EV producers in Europe stem from other factors, not least of which are non-competitive costs and quality disadvantages. Costs of EU producers have risen further because of a fall in capacity utilisation and loss of scale economies as these firms lose market share to more competitive rivals in a slowing Chinese market. Some like Stellantis, which produces Peugeots and Chryslers, have reportedly lost out even in the US because of overpricing their cars.

Not surprisingly, there is disagreement within Europe and in the US on the wisdom of the protectionist response. Germany and Hungary, for example, voted against the proposal for fear that Chinese retaliation would harm their exports to that country.

European EV manufacturers too are unhappy. They not only fear that their Chinese manufacturing facilities will lose an important export market, but that China may respond in ways that affect their sales in that country. Overall, 10 member states voted in favour of the tariff hikes, 5 against, and 12 abstained.

In the debate that preceded the final decision, non-Chinese producers were vocal in their opposition. To appease them, differential tariffs have been imposed on different manufacturers. Following protests from Tesla, for example, the tariff on cars of the company imported from China into Europe were hiked by only 9 percentage points to 19 per cent. The lower discriminatory tariff, arrived at through a non-transparent special investigation into Tesla's China operations based on a request from the company, has been justified with references to benefits provided by the Chinese government, such as access to land at subsidised rates, income tax concessions, and lower battery prices.

Chinese EV manufacturers like BYD and Geely, on the other hand, were subjected to maximal hikes based on the presumption of having benefited from higher subsidies and on the grounds that they did not cooperate adequately with the pre-hike investigation by the EC. If the Chinese had demanded similar information from European or US producers, they possibly would have been accused of industrial or regular espionage.

The Chinese government has, as expected, responded aggressively, saying that it had provided "tens of thousands" of pages of evidence to establish its case against the accusation of unfairly subsidising exports, and to argue that Chinese EVs were cheaper because of "factors such as industrial scale, comprehensive supply chain advantages and intense market competition". It does have a case, inasmuch as a fundamental feature of dumping, which is lower prices in ex-



► EV cars inside BYD's first electric vehicle factory in South-East Asia, in Rayong, Thailand, on July 4. CHALINEETHIRASUPA/REUTERS

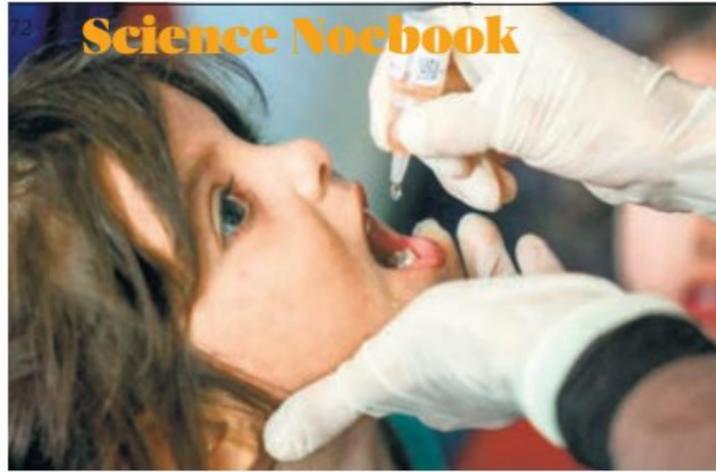
port markets as compared with prices at home, does not hold. Chinese EVs are much cheaper in the Chinese market than in European markets. BYD's Seal U model reportedly sells for €20,500 in China and €42,000 in the EU. Despite the higher price, Chinese exports outcompete the products of many European firms. Not surprisingly, China has filed a complaint against the protectionist tariffs at the World Trade Organization and begun retaliatory probes into dumping of French cognac and EU pork in Chinese markets.

IT IS INTERESTING that retaliation from Europe to alleged dumping comes not through competing subsidies to ones it claims China is providing but through protectionist tariff hikes. The fiscal conservatism that has overwhelmed the elite-dominated parties of both the Right and the Left is clearly an explanation for that. It is also telling that these elites (and those in the US) do not see cheaper Chinese EVs as "more of an

opportunity than a threat" as an editorial in the conservative *Financial Times* characterised them. Cheaper EVs can make a significant contribution to realising the EU's declared goal of phasing out cars with carbon-emitting combustion engines by 2025. The volume of EVs required to meet that goal is so high that European and US manufacturers will be hard put to deliver enough vehicles, and at affordable prices. Rather than rely on China's production and price advantages in the area, the EC has resorted to punitive tariffs. It has chosen to conceal its pique over being overtaken by the technological superiority of an "upstart" rival by imposing protectionist tariffs on specious grounds that defeat its own pretentious decarbonisation goals. ■

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Gaza's kids get oral polio vaccine

"A RARE positive story from Gaza: the first round of the polio vaccination campaign ended successfully," posted Philippe Lazzarini, the Commissioner General of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) on his official X account on September 16. According to his post, UNRWA and partners vaccinated hundreds of thousands of children, reaching 90 per cent coverage. "Our next challenge is to provide children with their second dose at the end of September." UNRWA's report on this second round is awaited.

This oral polio vaccination campaign targeting children aged ≤10 years is in response to the identification of circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus type 2 in wastewater in Gaza and a single confirmed case of paralytic poliomyelitis in a young child.

Writing in the latest issue of *The Lancet*, three US public health specialists from George Washington University—Ronald Waldman, Robert Steinglass, and Phillip Nieburg—said: "Now that an operational platform is in place, we believe that the second round should include vaccination against measles, which has consistently been the deadliest vaccine-preventable disease in humanitarian emergencies."

As with poliovirus, they said, past coverage with injectable measles vaccine has been high in Gaza but has been falling, and with the collapse of the healthcare system, many children are unlikely to have been vaccinated last year. "Treatment of complications of measles will be difficult, if not impossible.

► **During the first round** of UNRWA's oral polio vaccination drive in Gaza. UNRWA

Due to the very rapid rate of transmission and the dangerous environment, vaccinating after an outbreak occurs might be too late—prevention is by far the best, if not the only, life-saving measure," they added. "High population density, inadequate shelter, poor sanitation, and under-nutrition are all major risk factors for infection, severity, and death, and all are features of the deplorable conditions for those people living in Gaza. The imminent arrival of cooler temperatures adds to the urgency to vaccinate against this disease, which can cause the death of up to 15 per cent of those infected.... There is good reason that, for nearly 50 years, mass measles vaccination campaigns have become a standard early intervention in conflict... and other humanitarian settings; the risk of a measles outbreak and accompanying high mortality is just too great," they wrote.

CERN measures ultra-rare kaon decay

AT a seminar on September 24, the NA62 collaboration at the Geneva-based CERN presented the first experimental observation of the ultra-rare decay of the charged kaon into a charged pion and a chargeless neutrino-antineutrino pair ($K^+ \rightarrow \pi + u\bar{u}$). This finding could open a new path to discover physics beyond the current understanding of how the building blocks of matter interact based on the Standard Model (SM).

The process $K^+ \rightarrow \pi + u\bar{u}$ is very sensitive to new physics beyond the SM description. The SM predicts that less than 1 in 10 billion kaons will decay this way. The NA62 experiment was designed and constructed specifically to measure this ultra-rare kaon decay.

Experiments, including NA62, have previously seen evidence of this process, but this is the first time it has been measured with



► **The NA62 experiment** is roughly 270 m long and is housed in the TCC8 and ECN3 caverns in CERN's North Area. M. BRICE/CERN

a statistical significance of five standard deviations (or 5 sigma), crossing the threshold conventionally required to claim a discovery in particle physics.

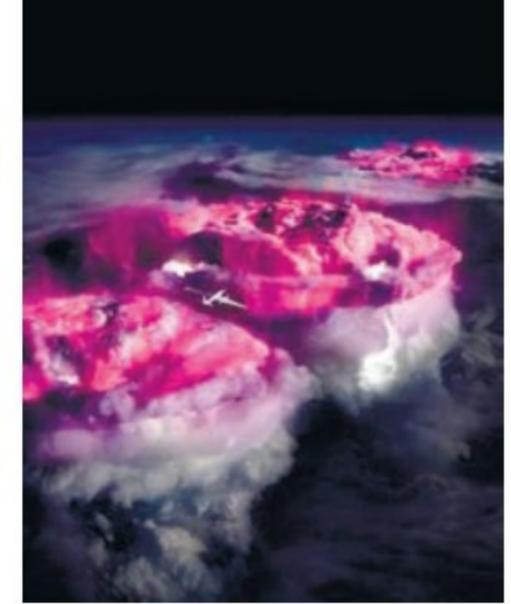
Kaons are produced by a high-intensity proton beam from the CERN Super Proton Synchrotron colliding with a stationary target. This creates a beam of secondary particles with almost a billion particles per second flying into the NA62 detector, about 6 per cent of which are charged kaons. The detector identifies and measures precisely each kaon and its decay products, except neutrinos, the identification of which is deduced from the missing energy in the final state of the process.

The new result is based on the combination of data taken by the NA62 experiment in 2021-22 and a previously published result based on the 2016-18 dataset. The fraction of K^+ that decayed via the channel $K^+ \rightarrow \pi + u\bar{u}$ was measured to be about 13.0 in 100 billion. With a relative precision of 25 per cent, this is the most precise measurement of the decay to date. The result is about 50 per cent higher than the SM prediction but is compatible with it given the overall uncertainty. But this could also be due to new particles that increase the likelihood of this decay. With data taking ongoing, NA62 is set to be able to test the possibility of new physics in this decay within the next few years.

More in a thundercloud than meets the eye

THERE is more to thunderclouds than rain and lightning. Along with visible light emissions, thunderclouds can produce intense bursts of gamma rays, the most energetic form of light, that last for millionths of a second. The clouds can also glow steadily with gamma rays for seconds to minutes at a time. New observations from NASA's ER-2 research aircraft have now found a new kind of gamma-ray emission that is shorter in duration than the steady glows and longer than the microsecond bursts. Researchers

► **An artist's impression** of NASA's high-flying ER-2 aeroplane that carries instrumentation of the ALOFT mission to record gamma rays (coloured purple for illustration) from thunderclouds. NASA/ALOFT TEAM



have called it a flickering gamma-ray flash. The discovery fills the missing link in scientists' understanding of thundercloud radiation and provides new insights into the mechanisms that produce lightning. This could lead to more accurate lightning risk estimates for people, aircraft, and spacecraft, according to NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center (GSFC) release. The international research team, led by the University of Bergen, Norway, included researchers from NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center, the GSFC, the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory, and universities in the US, Mexico, Colombia, and Europe. The findings were published in two papers in the October 2 issue of *Nature*.

The discovery was made while flying a battery of detectors aboard the ER-2 in a series of flights in July 2023. It flew a few kilometres above tropical thunderclouds in the Caribbean and Central America. The payload was developed for the Airborne Lightning Observatory campaign called ALOFT. The researchers had hoped that the ALOFT instruments would observe fast radiation bursts known as terrestrial gamma-ray flashes (TGFs) that were first discovered in 1992. Despite their high intensity, few TGFs were spotted during previous aircraft-based studies. However, this time around they saw 130 TGFs. But the flickering gamma-ray flashes were a complete surprise, according to Nikolai Østgaard of the University of Bergen. The team found over 25 of these new flashes, each lasting 50-200 ms.

Scientists believe that the abundance of fast bursts and the discovery of intermediate-duration flashes could be among the most important thundercloud discoveries in a decade or more.

Compiled by **R Ramachandran**

FISHING IN PHOTOVOLTAIC WATERS

A solar plant in the heart of Nathsgar reservoir, where fishers eke out a meagre living, could upset the delicate ecosystem and snuff out traditional communities. **PRAGATHI RAVI AND MITUL KAJARIA**

As the June sun shines bright, River Godavari laps up against the banks of Nathsgar in Paithan, Maharashtra. Chhaya Subhash Kuchir ambles out of her bamboo home to survey her catch.

It is late morning. She returned from her fishing expedition five hours ago. "In the evening I lower the net and I pull it out at 5 am the next morning," she says. Her catch of 5 to 6 kilos of tilapia fish fetches her an average of Rs.20 to Rs.30 a kilo every day. This is hardly enough to sustain her household and her son's medical expenses: Nitin, 28, has a disability in his right hand.

Soon, the lapping water from the reservoir will be covered with swathes of photovoltaic panels, as part of the proposed Jayakwadi floating solar power project, sounding the death knell to the livelihoods of traditional fishers such as Chhaya, who foresees a steep

decline in catch and income.

The concerns of the fishing community are not unfounded. If the project by NTPC becomes operational, nearly two lakh artisanal fishers from Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar district (previously Aurangabad), whose only income is fishing, will be rendered unemployed and homeless.

The multipurpose Jayakwadi dam, the largest constructed on the Godavari, is 10 km long and has a height of about 41 metres. On an average, six fishers catch 30 kilos of fish, which fetches them a total of Rs.300-400 every day. "If we divide this between six families, how will we eat?" asks Kusum Kete, a fisherwoman who does not know her age.

Chhaya, too, is vague about her age and blames this on her lack of literacy. She is, however, able to trace the events in her life by the tragedies dotting it, such as her husband's

▼ **Ganshiram Kete**, 62, a fisherman, paddles into the reservoir on a boat he made out of thermocol and bamboo.

PHOTOGRAPHS: MITUL KAJARIA



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death, her son's disability, and her youngest child succumbing to illness. She recalls a time 15 years ago when there was abundant fish and no family went hungry.

"There was always enough fish for all fishers. While they are not well-educated, their income was good," says Kishore Pathak, the honorary wildlife warden of Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar.

SCIENTISTS BELIEVE THAT an accidental introduction of the invasive fish species—*Tilapia mossambica*—into the reservoir resulted in the decline of other fish species. "There were initially 85 species of native fish, now there are only 10 or 12 remaining as tilapia feast on the eggs of other fishes," explains Dilip Birute, a naturalist and a professor at Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University. The villagers also explain that the water level in the reservoir has reduced; they have got accustomed to relocating their self-constructed, tarpaulin settlements to accommodate the changing shoreline.

The Nathasagar Jalashay (reservoir), formed by the Jayakwadi dam, is 55 km long and covers an area of over 350 sq km. While it fills up every year, the water recedes in no time, leaving only 25 per cent of it in dead storage. "Today, the situation is such that there is only 5 per cent of water. Even if the reservoir is at full capacity, the water comes up only to your knees," says Bajrang Limbore, president of the "Protect Jayakwadi Fisherpeople" committee. The water is deep only at the centre of the reservoir, which means Chhaya and her peers have to set out more than 5 km into the water on their makeshift thermocol boats to cast their diaphanous nets. The thin nets, the fishwomen claim, often get entangled due to gusty winds, resulting in the loss of a day's entire catch. And sometimes, the winds topple their boats, endangering their lives.

The NTPC project is the brainchild of MP and Union Minister of State for Finance Bhagwat Karad. Karad has claimed that the solar panels will occupy 7,500 hectares, or 21 per cent of the total reservoir area. But Limbore believes the project will need at least 30 per cent of the water body, and he claims that the panels will be laid at the centre of the reservoir, where fishers primarily fish. He says this is the area where water accumulates the



▼ A view of the Jayakwadi dam.

most, the part of the reservoir that never empties out, even in summer when the water recedes.

"If the water body is teeming with aquatic life, then the coverage [by the panels] should not be more than 10-15 per cent," says Arun Kumar, professor at the department of hydro and renewable energy, Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee. This is recommended by various international bodies, says Kumar while referencing Germany's mandate of using only 15 per cent of its artificial lakes to set up projects. "And as the panels will be laid without a gap, the organisms that generally come up for oxygen will not be able to do so and will die," Limbore says.

IF THERE ARE no fish, this will also reduce the number of migratory and native birds from the adjacent sanctuary. "With no place to roost, the food chain will be destroyed," he says.

The staunch opposition to the floating solar power project began when the area was surveyed seven months ago. "There are 55 gram panchayats around the reservoir, and they

passed a resolution stating that they do not want the project," Limbore says.

Early 2024 saw scores of fishing communities marching to the District Collector's office, demanding that the project be scrapped. The fishers received a written assurance from the Collector that a meeting would be held between them and elected representatives. The Collector was subsequently transferred.

Acting on an application filed by the Kahar Samaj Panch Committee, a registered trust representing fishermen, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) this year has sought a report from the Union Environment Ministry and the State forest department to determine whether the proposed project falls within the eco-sensitive zone notified along the periphery of the dam.

As per a gazette notification issued on July 12, 2017, the area is protected under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. The NGT-mandated report will also evaluate if the project counts as a "permissible activity" and if it can damage the environment or pollute the reservoir.

In April 2022, the State water resources department wrote to the Ministry of New and Re-



▼ Kusumtai Kete, sitting beside her fishing net outside her makeshift house in one of the settlements in Paithan.

newable Energy stating that according to the revenue and forest department's 1986 notification, the Jayakwadi reservoir is a prohibited area, and the government of Maharashtra cannot give permission to NTPC for assessment studies to set up a floating solar power project.

"The birds feed on fish, crabs, and water spiders," says Limbore. There were 242 recorded bird species, out of which 80 were migratory, and so the region was declared a sanctuary. Villagers and experts believe this project will have a massive impact on the biodiversity of the region.

WHEN SOLAR PANELS are stacked on a stagnant water body such as the Nathasagar reservoir, Pathak believes it will lead to eutrophication, a pro-

Early 2024 saw scores of fishing communities marching to the District Collector's office, demanding that the project be scrapped.



▼ **Bajrang Limbore**, 39, of the "Protect Jayakwadi Fisherpeople" committee reads the response to an RTI petition the committee filed regarding the allotment of land and water body for the floating solar project in the Jayakwadi reservoir.

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cess wherein the excessive growth of algae in the water depletes oxygen.

Kusum also says that the quality of water will deteriorate. "Our forefathers caught fish, our children will catch fish, this is our tradition; where do we fix our nets when the project is installed?" she asks.

In November 2022, Karad, who has twice served as the Mayor of Chhatrapati Sambhajnagar, claimed that the current ruling alliance spearheaded by Chief Minister Eknath Shinde has given the nod to the project. Karad backs the project, claiming that it will provide electricity to lakhs of farmers. In 2022, he wrote to the Central government seeking permission to launch the floating solar power project. Earlier this year, he also wrote to the State forest department seeking the denotification of the reservoir as a bird sanctuary.

Maharashtra is not the only State that has jumped onto the floating solar projects bandwagon. Bids have been invited for setting up floating solar power projects across Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Punjab, Jharkhand, Bihar, and West Bengal, despite local communities' protests. Since 2020, the Solar Energy Corpo-

"Our forefathers caught fish, our children will catch fish; where do we fix our nets when the project is installed?"

Kusum Kete,
a fisherwoman

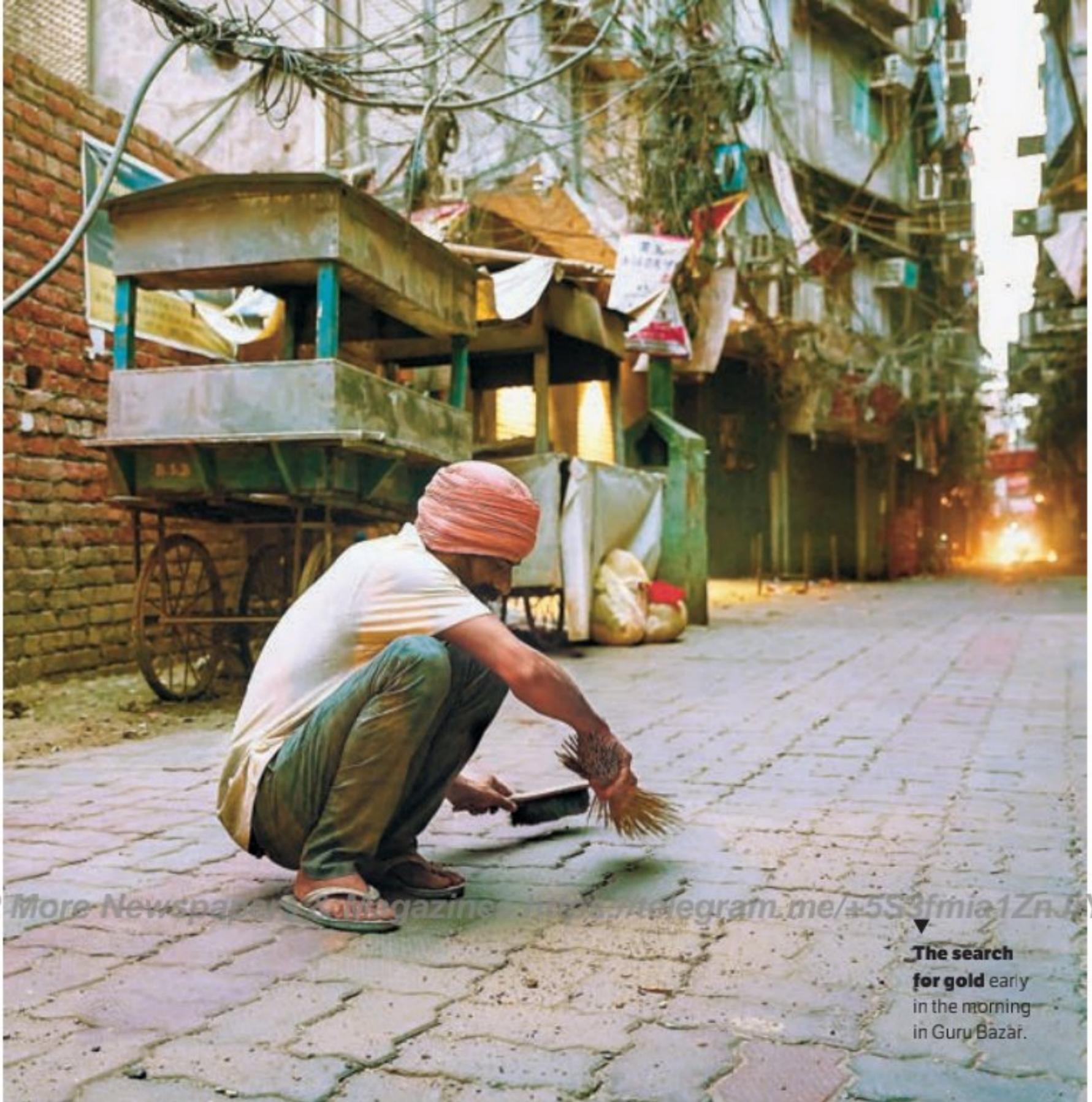
ration of India has floated seven tenders for these projects.

Although floating solar projects cost 15-20 per cent more than rooftop and ground-mounted projects, they score when it comes to land acquisition, both in terms of availability of contiguous parcels and their cost.

Much like Jayakwadi, another floating solar power project in Madhya Pradesh has robbed fishers of their livelihood and evicted them from their homes. Touted as India's largest floating solar project, the plant was built on the backwaters of the Omkareshwar dam, where panels were laid on fishing areas.

Chhaya and Kusum fear that their homes will be taken over once the project becomes operational. "We do not have farms, the dam is our farm." ■

Mitul Kajaria is an award-winning photographer, curator, and educator with a background in architecture. He is currently training in psychology and psychodrama. Pragathi Ravi is an independent journalist writing at the intersection of climate justice, energy transitions, and natural resource governance. She acknowledges the support of Internews' Earth Journalism Network.



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▼
**The search
for gold** early
in the morning
in Guru Bazar.

Photo Essay

THE GOLD RUSH

Flecks of gold fly about in the air in Amritsar's Guru Bazar jewellery market, to be scooped up and resold by a community of sweepers.

Text and photographs by **Shivam Khanna**

In the bustling heart of Amritsar, where history and tradition shimmer in the air, a lesser-known tale unfolds in the narrow lanes of Guru Bazar. While the Golden Temple stands majestically nearby and Jallianwala Bagh whispers memories of past trauma, the untold story of Guru Bazar's sweeper community is one that has escaped the attention of history.

The goldsmiths of Guru Bazar, always busy cutting, shaping, and moulding gold into intricate jewellery, unintentionally scatter tiny particles of gold as they work. As they wash their hands, golden specks flow into the drains. On the streets, gold dust clings to their clothes and falls as they make their way home after a long day. Hidden in the dirt of the market, these flecks of gold become a daily treasure hunt for the sweepers of Guru Bazar.

Every morning at around 4:30 am, when the shops are still shut and the temples have not yet opened their doors, a group arrives with buckets, brooms, and brushes. The men gather the dust from the streets hoping to find traces of gold mixed within. One of these men is Jagjeet, a sweeper who has been working these streets for nearly 15 years. Each day, Jagjeet collects the dust in a shallow pan, meticulously searching for gold.

His method is time-consuming. "I wash the muck with water," he explains. The heavier gold sinks to the bottom of the pan. Then comes the crucial part: "I hold the pan with the mixture over a furnace and add acid." The heat burns away the sand and other metals, leaving only the gold behind. "Sometimes, I get acid on my hands, but now I have got used to it," Jagjeet adds with a resigned smile. He works six to seven hours a day, patiently repeating this process.

THE WORK is a tradition in the sweeper community, passed down through generations. "A group of sweepers has its area marked out; others cannot come in there," Jagjeet says. The territory is divided among the sweepers, about 300 of whom scour the streets of Guru Bazar every morning. On good days, Jagjeet earns between Rs.200 and Rs.300, and during the festive Diwali season, his earnings can go up to Rs.500. The value of his findings varies with the seasons and luck. On the day we spoke, Jagjeet had found a few grains of gold and some small pieces of the metal.



▼ **Tools of the trade:** broom, brush, and bucket.



▼ **Separating the gold from the dirt** swept up from the street is an arduous process. Here, the mud is mixed with water. The gold collects at the bottom of the container.

▶ **Jagjeet and his friend** sift the grains of the mud they have collected in a shallow pan.



▼ **Jagjeet adds acid** to the mud. The acid burns everything except the gold.



▼ **A sweeper** points to the gold particles that have been separated successfully, in a small steel bowl.

▶ **A sweeper** swirls the muddy water in a pan where he hopes gold particles have collected at the bottom. A jeweller, who buys the gold that the sweepers retrieve, sits watching.



► **The jeweller** checking the gold particles separated from the dirt.

Once he collects enough gold, Jagjeet sells it to jewellers in the market, such as Madanlal, who owns a shop on the very street where Jagjeet and other sweepers work. Madanlal tests the quality of the gold before paying for it. "We share a good relationship," Jagjeet says. "Sometimes he gives extra money, but he never pays less." However, on days when the sweepers accumulate too much dust and do not have time to sift through it, they sell the entire heap, though this brings in less money.

The work is mostly solitary. Each sweeper works alone, relying on luck to find gold. Jagjeet, though, is always confident he will find at least a little each day. But it is becoming harder to find gold now. "The drains are getting covered with tiles," Jagjeet laments, making it more difficult for the sweepers to retrieve what they seek. Despite this challenge, he continues his work, supplementing his income with other part-time jobs to support his wife and daughter.

Not all sweepers are willing to talk about their work. Some fear ridicule for what they do, preferring to stay in the shadows. Others, like Jagjeet, are more open, candidly sharing their experiences in a job that blends tradition, luck, and a small glimmer of gold hidden beneath the dust of Guru Bazar. ■

Shivam Khanna is an independent photojournalist based in Delhi.

FRONTLINE



► **Jagjeet**, who has sifted dirt to retrieve gold particles for 15 years, bargains with the jeweller who buys the separated gold from him, asking him to raise the price he pays.

► **Homeward bound.** A sweeper heads home after a day's work scouting for gold.





► The actor Dharmendra in a still from *Shalimar*, 1978, silver gelatin print. PHOTOGRAPHS: O.P. SHARMA COLLECTION

THE MIND'S EYE

A recent retrospective of O.P. Sharma's works in New Delhi offered not only a tour of mid-20th century India's cultural scene but also a peek into the photographer's creative process. **TRISHA GUPTA**

The first thing you saw at the retrospective titled "O.P. Sharma & the Fine Art of Photography: 1950s-1990s" (September 5 to October 3)—organised by the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts in collaboration with Art Heritage, at Shridharani Gallery, Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi—was not a photograph. It was a watercolour, an experiment in form. In pale yellow

tinged with red, the near-perfect symmetry of the shapes initially evoked thoughts of inanimate objects rather than the human body. It could have been a collection of cylindrical pillars, each crowned by an oblong capital, or a tall candle with a gently burning flame and a halo.

It was the title, *Christ with Disciples*, that led the viewer to "see" the painting as a depiction of human figures. The fact that one of these figures was physically taller than the surrounding ones got "translated" by the mind to mean that this was the prophet—instantly, the other forms began to appear as the disciples huddled around him. The popular associations of pillars and flames, of course, nudged the mind along a metaphorical route that aided meaning: pillars of the community, the light of wisdom. And yet the architectural quality of the image was not minimised.

In the show, the shapes in the painting were strikingly echoed by the image placed just below: Sharma's photographic portrait of Madan Lal Nagar, his teacher at Government Arts College, Lucknow, seat-



ed in front of Nagar's painting of the city's iconic Imambara.

Christ with Disciples was the only painting in the show, and yet its presence added something ineffable to our sense of O.P. Sharma's aes-

Sharma's penchant for studio portraiture extended to a much wider galaxy of stars of his time, many of them underphotographed, like Kaka Kalelkar, Gandhian writer and head of the first Backward Classes Commission.

▼ **Black & white,** c.1980s, silver gelatin print, combined photogram.

thetic preoccupations: an interest in form over content, the symbolic over the real, and the fictional-magical qualities of photography rather than its documentary-factual potential. The co-curators Sukanya Baskar and Rahaab Allana of the Alkazi Foundation did a splendid job of paying tribute not just to Sharma's unusual individual oeuvre but also to a lost world of photography clubs and magazines, especially those in the tradition of what is called "pictorialist" photography.

A plaque at the exhibition explained the term, quoting the art critic K.B. Goel: "What Sharma intended to prove is simple: no longer should we make the old distinction between a painter and a photographer. Now photographers, too, can 'make' pictures rather than 'take' them." In other words, the pictorialists

There was an undeniable frisson in viewing the stunning, youthful images of Geeta Kapur, doyenne of Indian art criticism, and Anuradha Kapur, eminent theatre person and ex-director of the National School of Drama.

wanted photography to be placed on the same plane as art. To that end, they developed a series of camera-free techniques that involved manipulating the photographic negative to "create" an image. The exhibition contained examples of many such techniques, from enlargement to extreme overexposure (called "solarisation") to re-photographing with an overlay of grids or other geometrical patterns.

On photography, though, it is always worth going back to Walter Benjamin—among the first, and still the finest, thinkers on the subject. Benjamin argues that a photograph always contains something of the real person (or place or thing or creature) that is being photographed, something that defies absorption into "art". But more on Benjamin and photography as art later.

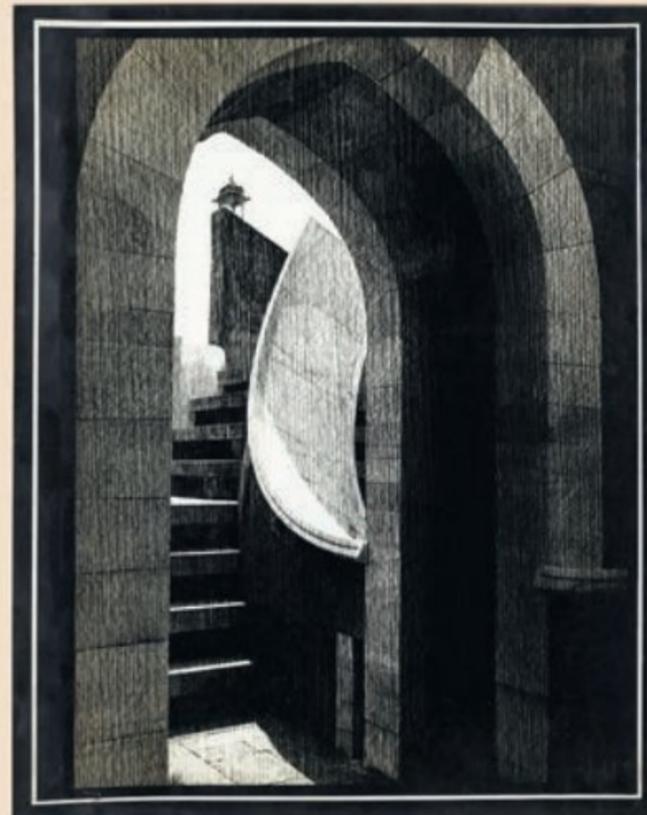
SHARMA (B. 1937) was a Lucknow-based physics student with an interest in painting when he first discovered the camera. He has reminisced about wandering the city with it, going to the Char Bagh railway station, and that first rush of finding images everywhere. He soon joined the U.P. Amateur Photographic Association, which was filled with pictorialists who shaped his thinking. Meanwhile, the Head of Department of Physics at Lucknow University gave Sharma access to the darkroom, and the science student taught himself the rest.

In 1958, he moved to Delhi and began to teach photography alongside his own practice. His first job was at Modern School, which had established a deep connection with Tagore's Visva Bharati University. Under Kamala Bose, the founding principal who remained in office from 1920 to 1947, great ar-



► **Geeta Kapur**, 1960s (taken 1965-66), silver gelatin print, combined photogram.

► **Jantar Mantar, Jaipur**, 1990, silver gelatin print.





▼ **Dharmendra** in a still from *Shalimar*, 1978, silver gelatin print.

tists like Sarada Ukil and Ramkinkar Baij came from Santiniketan to teach at Modern School. Under the next principal, Mahendra Nath Kapur—a young man when he applied for the job in 1947—the school set up one of Delhi’s first photographic darkrooms. It was a milieu congenial to all kinds of art, with cross-fertilization and the heady air of the new nation creating an energy that would be hard to find today.

The artist couple Kanwal and Devyani Krishna had returned from their travels in the Himalaya to teach art at Modern School. The young O.P. Sharma met and married their

His film stills were glamorous, but in two *Shalimar* images, one could see him gravitating to his formal preoccupations: a grid of TV screens nearly overshadowed actor Dharmendra in one, and a black-and-white masked man crawled on a black-and-white patterned floor in the other.

daughter, Chitrangada, a photographer in her own right.

This cast of characters—Principal Kapur and his daughters, Geeta and Anuradha, and Kanwal Krishna and his daughter, Chitrangada—all made an appearance in the show. The straight-backed M.N. Kapur could have played a heroine’s impressive barrister father in any 1950s’ Hindi film, and there was an undeniable frisson in viewing the stunning, youthful images of Geeta Kapur, doyenne of Indian art criticism, and Anuradha Kapur, eminent theatre person and ex-director of the National School of Drama.

Sharma’s penchant for studio portraiture extended to a much wider galaxy of stars of his time, many of them underphotographed. There was, for instance, Kaka Kalelkar, Gandhian writer and head of the first Backward Classes Commission, captured with a thoughtful eye and a beard as impressive as Tagore’s; or the bespectacled Sobha Singh, civil contractor for Lutyens’ Delhi, real estate baron and father of Khushwant, known in his time as “*adha Dilli da malik*” (owner of half of Delhi), who looked rather more bookish than I would have imagined.

Other images reflected Sharma’s particular interest in literature, dance, and music: there



Some of the show’s most striking images were pictures that created a mood—a haunted house in a hill station, an owl in close-up—or captured form.

were marvellous images of the poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, the singers Gangubai Hangal and Begum Akhtar, and the Hindi literary greats Agyeya, Yashpal, and Amrit Lal Nagar. Outside the studio, we saw the shehnai legend Bismillah Khan at his early morning *riyaz* in a chequered lungi, and rehearsals at the tabla maestro Pandit Kishan Maharaj’s home with all the children of the household, including the girls.

IN THE 1970S, O.P. and Chitrangada were introduced by a friend, the character actor Sajjan, to the Bombay film industry. They ended up working on several films, two of them international co-productions. The show displayed gorgeous stills from these: *Siddhartha*, based on the Herman Hesse novel and starring Shashi Kapoor and Simi Garewal, and *Shalimar*, a heist drama starring Rex Harrison, Dharmendra, and Zeenat Aman.

▼ **The photographer O.P. Sharma** (seated) with the co-curator Rahaab Allana (standing and gesticulating) at the exhibition on September 29, 2024. TRISHA GUPTA

So, the exhibition offered, in microcosm, a tour of the mid-20th century Indian cultural scene as viewed from Delhi. But documentary value was never enough to fulfil Sharma’s pictorialist ambitions. His film stills were glamorous, but in two *Shalimar* images, one could see him gravitating to his formal preoccupations: a grid of TV screens nearly overshadowed actor Dharmendra in one, and a black-and-white masked man crawled on a black-and-white patterned floor in the other. It did not matter that it was Dharmendra under the mask; Sharma was there for his art.

Some of the show’s most striking images were pictures that created a mood—a haunted house in a hill station, an owl in close-up—or captured form. An image of Jantar Mantar enlarged a part of the structure, making us engage with the architecture differently. Another memorable series changed our perspective on the Ellora cave temples, from the grandeur of the whole to the geometry of the parts—by focussing on angles, chinks, shadows, moonlight, parts of staircases, fragments of walls.

Meanwhile, a picture taken from a car on a rainy day was crafted into a black-and-white pointillist vision by the process of solarisa-

tion: a street scene like no other. Elsewhere, a visual and emotional effect was sought to be created by the addition of graphics to photographed human silhouettes: a miniature pair of human figures hemmed into a rectangular space at the centre of what seemed like a maze, or concentric black-and-white circles radiating outward from a pair of young actors on a stage.

Sharma's work is undoubtedly art. And yet, it was also rather wonderful to learn about the reality from which they sprang—that those actors were students performing a Shakespeare Society play at St Stephen's College sometime in the 1970s, or that those particular fragments of stone wall were Ellora. To return to Walter Benjamin's point, a photograph cannot completely escape the specifics of what it documents. Viewers will search a picture, always, for that "tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject". But is that not also photography's power?

IN THE 1980s, Sharma started taking evening photography classes at Triveni Kala Sangam, an institution to which his connection went back to 1963, when the Shridharani Gallery there hosted his first-ever solo show of pictures. So, on the evening of

“What Sharma intended to prove is simple: no longer should we make the old distinction between a painter and a photographer. Now photographers, too, can ‘make’ pictures rather than ‘take’ them.”

K.B. Goel

Art critic

► **In the Rain**, 1980-85, silver gelatin print, C-effect. The original photograph was taken in Shimla from inside a moving car and consequently developed in high contrast, using the "C-effect" to accentuate the sense of motion.



September 29, when the 87-year-old arrived at Shridharani for a personal interaction with visitors to his retrospective, it felt like certain things had come full circle. Wheeled in by his son Aseem (also a photographer), Sharma was accompanied around the gallery by Rahaab Allana, who, apart from being the show's co-curator, is from the Alkazi family, which runs the Art Heritage gallery at Triveni. They were soon surrounded by an enthusiastic crowd of people, many of them Sharma's ex-students. Several in the crowd were photographing, taking videos. Most fittingly, though, one young woman was sketching the veteran photographer in his wheelchair, pointing out a detail.

Sharma would have taught photography to hundreds, perhaps thousands, sharpening eyes but also skills, in an era before the digital medium took the work—or at least the physics and chemistry—out of photography. That evening, speaking of the Internet age, he said: "*Ab jo zamana hai usse accept karna padega*" (We have to accept the mores of the era we are in).

WHEN SPEAKING of his practice, Sharma grew animated. He offered tidbits about things like the location of a photograph (the rainy day in the picture referred to earlier being in Shimla, for instance) but did not remember the moments they were taken. That was not the point. "If you start searching your old negatives, you can make [new images]," he said. "Even when you are sleeping, all these things come in your mind. *Ki iss picture ko aisa karein...* [That oh, I could do this to that picture...]"

There is another pioneering argument that Benjamin makes in his essay "Short History of Photography" (1931). "It is through photography that we first discover the existence of the optical unconscious," he writes, suggesting that the camera "sees" the world in ways that the human eye cannot. In the light of Benjamin's words, Sharma's Ellora images or many of his graphic-aided or solarised ones make even better sense.

Sharma's art emerges out of the interplay between his own unconscious—and that of the camera. ■

Trisha Gupta is a writer and critic based in Delhi and Professor of Practice at the Jindal School of Journalism and Communication, Sonapat, Haryana.

The subtle art of displacement

Simply circumventing censorship through little acts of subterfuge does not make a film progressive, it only turns the capacity to evoke pity into an artistic virtue.

Prathyush Parasuraman

A subtle film is also a misunderstood film. While speaking to the director Vikramaditya Motwane at a Q&A session after a screening of *Indi(r)a's Emergency*—his documentary on Indira Gandhi and the clamping of both freedom and sperm ducts under her and her son Sanjay Gandhi's forceful thumb between 1975 and 1977—I asked if he was comfortable with his film being misread.

The tightly wound, densely researched documentary begins with 1942's Quit India Movement, quickly flips to Independence, Partition, the Constituent Assembly debates, the early decades, Indira's initially limping but eventually strident rise to power, and then the Emergency. This much is clear: the film is not interested in Indira's journey as much as in what she does when she reaches her destination.

It is claustrophobically factual: every sentence of the documentary is a fact, narrated in the chilling monotone of Swanand Kirkire. The film's thrust is clear to those who read between the lines: Motwane is interested in Indira as an allegory, another incarnation of which is Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The point is to make that connection. But what if that connection is not made? Does the film lose its moral purpose?

The liberal will be sated having made the connection. The demagogue and his coterie, too, would be sated, seeing that brutal Congress legacy given voice. What gets lost between the two is the film. If Roland Barthes argued for the death of the author, Motwane here argues for the death of the text itself. You see in it and take from it what you want. In itself, it is immaterial.

Ideology, after all, grounds facts, which themselves have a habit of floating in the wind.

Motwane insists that the film is a mirror of the times. It is a transcription, not a translation. It is the usual posture of objectivity, which rarely holds when you test it, for objectivity itself is a myth. Motwane cites and suggests Gyan Prakash's *Emergency Chronicles*, but the opening of the book made its disdain for neoliberalism, for the current status quo, gin clear. We are always standing at a slant to the world. Why pretend otherwise?

The producer Sameer Nair, also on stage, replied, "All subtext is purely coincidental." A chuckle ruffled the audience.

This is not to argue against subtext, but when we grab onto subtext out of fear, not form, it is a different kind of reading we have to perform, one of valourised pity. Unless fear itself has become a form. In which case, the very act of spectatorship turns into one of patronising investigation, the eyes serving as telescopes, the watching inflected by reading. When in Anurag Kashyap's *Kennedy*, we hear about "bade papa" (big daddy) and his consummate influence over civic life, we have to know he is talking about Mukesh Ambani and only then the joke lands. To state things plainly would be implausible, especially given that the film had its India premiere at the Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre to a packed audience—a coup, if you ask me. The state cannot be called out, and Ambani has cemented his state-like status with unambiguity. Something must shimmer.

FOR EXAMPLE, in Dibakar Banerjee's film *Tees*—a triptych that traces a Muslim family from 1990s Kashmir to present-day Mumbai to a dystopian Delhi in the future—it is the future that is the site of state censorship. The protagonist An-



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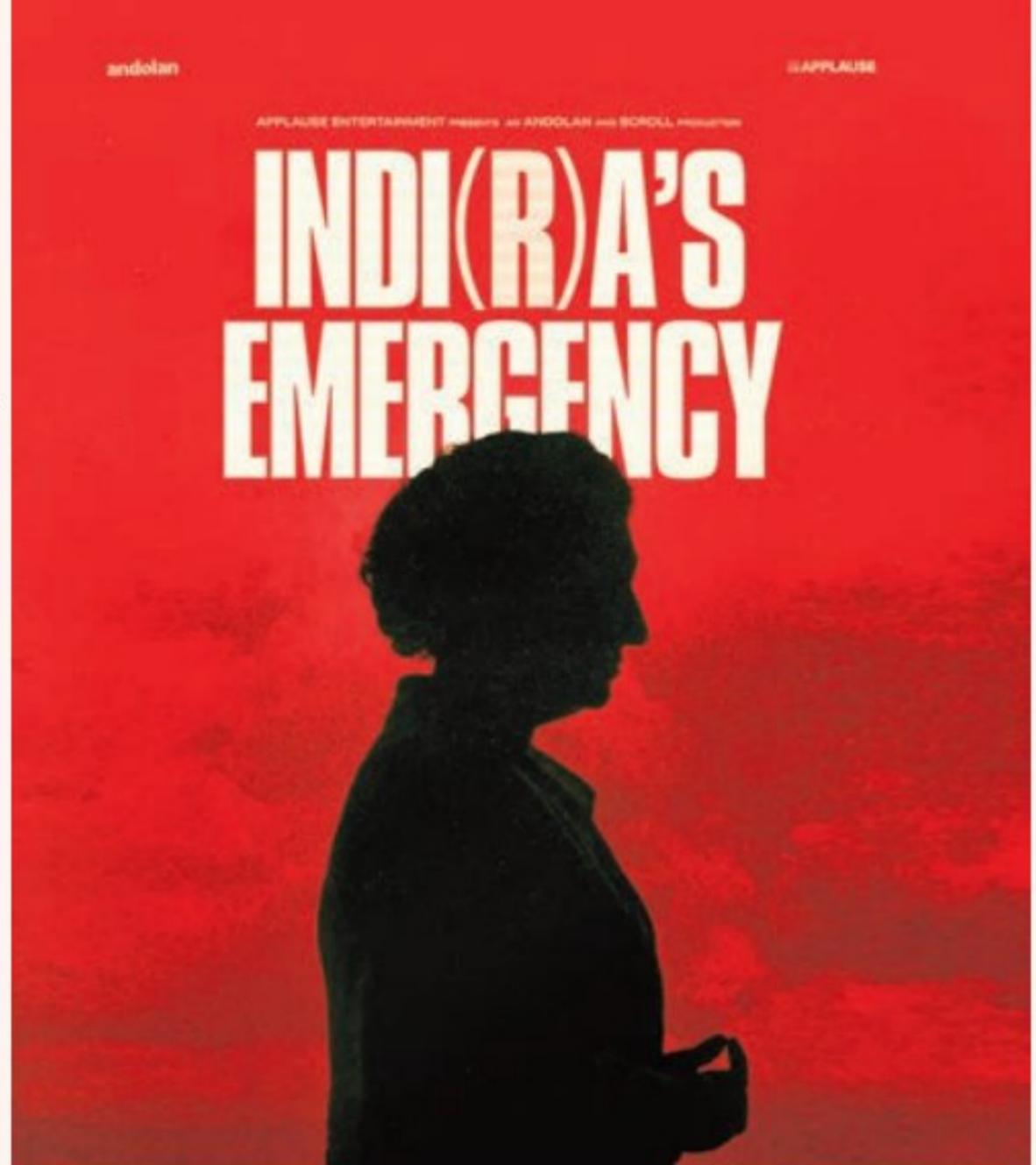
had Draboo, a poor writer from a well-to-do family, is trying to get his book published but is rejected by a committee. He ignores their inane suggestions and does not resubmit his manuscript. He will remain poor and unpublished; that is his stance as a principled artist—oblivion.

Banerjee has displaced the censorship regime of the present to the future. He satirises it, making the tragic comic, easier to swallow. The other stories, of the present and the past, are told without this comedy. The tragicomic genre is, after all, meant to sweeten the consumption of pain.

WHY NOT MAKE state censorship part of the present day's story? This was the question a few of us discussed after the screening. Banerjee's present, instead, is preoccupied with an upper-class Muslim woman and her female lover unable to get a flat in Mumbai. Sometimes it is sexuality, elsewhere religion, that is a bottleneck. The state is not involved here; it is society and its unwritten rules. The state is a culmination of society. That culmination, a regression, is darting towards the future.

Both *Tees* and *Indi(r)a's Emergency* were commissioned by Netflix. Both were dropped when the OTT platform developed cold feet after seeing the final cut. Both directors have a significant filmography against their name. Both are progressive voices and make no bones about it in their fictional films whose subtext is apparent even if dangerously close to being unsubtly textual. They use political subterfuge—if you can even call it that—in these specific films by displacing the commentary, either by burying it under the text or by fabulating a future that gives voice to the present.

Displacement is a strategy that filmmakers use in fascist regimes. In Iran, for example, where you are not allowed to show kisses or even physical contact between the sexes, film-



► A poster of the documentary *Indi(r)a's Emergency* by Vikramaditya Motwane.

makers show love through poetry, through images of the sea. We have to develop strategies, noted Maryam Tafakory in her video essay *Irani Bag* (2020), to “touch without touching”. Tafakory gives an example of a man and a woman on a bike, a bag between them, the bag an extension of her body and his, the incarnated promise of touch. It is also why in the 1980s and 1990s you had more films featuring children, who could evade the no-touch policy for adults. Even a close-up of a woman was a subversion. This kind of displacement can lead to what Hamid Taheri calls “fetishising resistance”, where we read small progressive gestures in a film as its general progressive posture, mis-

taking the part for the whole. We turn the capacity to evoke pity into an artistic virtue.

I suppose if we are looking for strident filmmaking, we must look towards filmmakers coming from India's non-fiction space: Arbab Ahmad's *Insides And Outsides*, Nausha Khan's *Land Of My Dreams*, Nishtha Jain's *Farming The Revolution*, any film from Anand Patwardhan or Rakesh Sharma. These films state artlessly but directly. But maybe art is a luxury that can be afforded only by those who perform displacement. ■

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

They use political subterfuge—if you can even call it that—in these specific films by displacing the commentary, either by burying it under the text or by fabulating a future that gives voice to the present.

'BHA KTI IS A MATTER OF FIRE AND BLOOD'

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For Jerry Pinto, who has translated the *abhangs* of medieval Marathi saint-poets, the act of translation across time, gender, language, and culture requires a plunge into the dark heart of bhakti. **VARSHA TIWARY**

It is hard to find a form of writing that Jerry Pinto does not revel in. He started as a poet. His 2006 biography of the Bollywood dancing star Helen (*Helen: The Life and Times of A Bollywood H-Bomb*) changed that. These light-hearted literary avatars were pushed aside by the tender and courageous novel *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012). On its heels came *Cobalt Blue* (2013), a musical, Marathi-inflected translation of Sachin Kundalkar's novel. *Murder in Mahim*, a murder mystery-cum-inquiry into homophobia that is now a major JioCinema series, came in 2017, again upsetting critics busy with literary slotting.

In between, Pinto has translated significant Marathi Dalit literature, edited anthologies, and picked up translating from Hindi, bringing in 2021 Swadesh Deepak's memoir, *Maine Mandu Nahin Dekha*, into English as *I Have Not Seen Mandu*. In 2022, his endearing coming-of-age novel, *The Education of Yuri*, won hearts.

Why should a poet-translator not also translate poetry? In collaboration with Neela Bhagwat, he brought out the translation of the *abhangs* (a form of devotional poetry in praise of Vitthal or Vithoba) of Marathi women saints as *The Ant Who Swallowed the Sun* (2019). His collaborative translations of Tukaram's

► **Jerry Pinto:** "What led you to the bhakti poem is its mutability, its subtlety, its multivalence."

SUKANT DEEPAK



bhakti poetry and why it needs many translations. Edited excerpts:

You are a poet-novelist-multilingual translator. Why do you keep flitting from genre to genre, sipping and soaring as a poet-novelist one moment, and chaining yourself to the rack of translation in the next? What is behind this ceaseless literary adventurism?

When I was a young man, I would say, “I chose language as a means of self-expression.” That was the hubris of youth, a way of suggesting there were others I could have chosen. I didn’t. But I was aware that there were stories I wanted to tell, my own, and also the ones I heard, the ones I overheard, the ones I imagined, which were woven out of strands of all the above.

The good thing about language is that it is limited only by how much time you give it and how much attention you bring to it. So, really, it does not feel like I am doing different things when I am writing a poem or a story or a novel or an essay; this is the same me dealing with the challenges of getting the noumenon of the idea into the shape or form of words. Translating requires the same effort, but it also demands I leave my ego at the door, and that is a difficult task, far more than anything else one has to do. To give primacy to another voice, to find space inside your own within which you let another speak... sometimes I wonder why anyone dares.

Some version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—that a fundamental incommunicability exists across cultures and languages, negotiating which is both impossible and ill-advised—is often hurled at translators. More so, at translators of medieval poetry. Why do you think medieval poetry demands translation into English/Englishes?

It is most certainly ill-advised and it is all but impossible. The thing about those of us who want to translate across time and gender, adding to language and culture, is that we are foolhardy and we are possessed. When you hear *Kiti he marti, kiti he radti* [How much death, how much weeping], you think, “I wish more people could know this. I want more people to know this.” And before you

know it, you are trying to translate a line in your head. That becomes the line that leads you into the labyrinth, and you have nothing to guide you but your heart and your spirit. You know you will fail. As you follow the line, it gets thinner and thinner. You are losing so much. You are failing, and then suddenly there’s a faint glow and you’re at the heart of a poem. It’s a rare experience, but when it happens, it become something you want to do again and again.

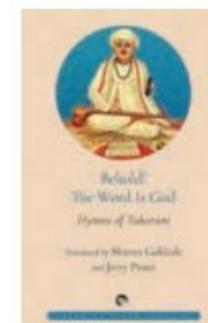
So, yes, it is foolhardy, but who cares? Yes, it is ill-advised, but when I look at my shelves and think of Rumi and Andal and Basavanna and Meerabai, and I think of the bravehearts who ignored the advice and went on, plunging into the dark heart of bhakti, I think: I am proud to be of that tribe, however small and unimportant a member.

The “original text” is seen as some sort of ideal text, with an autonomous, sacrosanct existence against which the effectiveness of the translation is measured. By this lens, a translation cannot but err, either on the side of the original’s meaning or its rhythm. Do you think that the yardstick of “original” can be legitimately applied to bhakti poetry, itself a product of an oral tradition, coming to us on a ceaselessly flowing 500-year-old river of interpretation?

The “original text” is very important to me. It is my North Star; I will never get there, but I will be guided by its light. I know that the light I see left the star long ago; I am bathing in a memory, but it is a great and lovely bath. The light will pour on past me and into the future. There it will appear different even if the words are the same. This is the glory of the bhakti tradition because it peels you away from you and speaks to something you once had easy access to but which you covered up with layers of pretence. Welcome to nudity.

And so, you are quite right to question the validity of the original while remembering that it is a hologram, cast from a million respectful versions, a billion reverential prayers.

Bhakti poetry is sound-based, meant to flow from ear to ear, and performance-oriented. What do you



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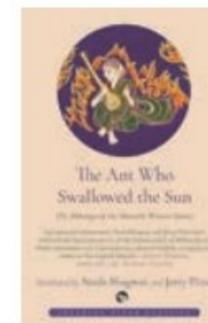
translate when you translate such poetry? The line, the sound, the metre? Should one render it in the language of the times back then or in the language of right now? Should verse be rendered as verse or as prose? What is added, what is omitted? How does one decide?

There are times when you know where you are going because you have a sense of the poem. There are other times when you are blind. What led you to the poem is its mutability, its subtlety, its multivalence. Now you must settle these issues to allow English to seep in. How do you do that? You start by saying: this is what I will do. You end by saying: this is what I can do.

Given the subjectivity of the process and the fluidity of not just the source text but also of time, of words themselves, what do you think a translation brings to a modern reader of medieval poetry?

I think the first thing that we are in awe of is the intimacy of the saint and the godhead. How closely intertwined they are, how familiar. God belches over Janabai. Tukaram mounts a spirited attack on Vitthal. Kanhopatra prostrates herself. Bahinabai seems often not to want to look past Tukaram. You envy this, you envy their certainties.

But you are also wary because the epiphanies are many and glorious, but then comes the long dark night of the soul when there is no answer to the cry that goes out from the heart. If you have never known god, it might not matter. But to know god and then to be deprived is torment, and their cries echo in our ears and terrify us. They remind us that bhakti is a matter of fire and blood, and fire in the blood, and the blood on fire, and is not to be taken lightly. They



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abhangs with Shanta Gokhale, *Behold! The Word is God* (2023), features the transliterated *abhangs* in two versions, one by Shanta Gokhale and the other by Pinto. These readings of the *abhangs* bring out the spirit of bhakti poetry—a constant questioning of fixities, including caste, class, and patriarchy, embedded in the poets’ love for the divine—that makes it relevant across time and religion.

A charismatic communicator, Pinto is, above all, a much-loved teacher. At SCMSophia, Mumbai, and through countless peripatetic lectures, he gives his students something that cannot be purchased in these late consumer-capitalistic times: the courage to fail that is the other side of joy.

Pinto talks to *Frontline* here on the pull of

The bhakti poets are modern and medieval at the same time and we must allow for both. To ask them to be who we want them to be without letting them be who they were is to do a disservice to them and to ourselves.



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signpost it clearly. They warn you; this is not for the faint-hearted, and we are, most of us, faint-hearted. I know I am.

Then there is their “modernity”. I put that in inverted commas because these are ancient voices and the fact that they are still around means that they meant something at each point in time from the first issuance to the moment we are hearing them, and each time, the listener thought, “Ah, she speaks to me, he has voiced my problems and my concerns, yes, I feel this way, she could well belong to my age.” So they are modern and they are medieval at the same time, and we must allow for both. To ask them to be who we want them to be without letting them be who they were is to do a disservice to them and to ourselves.

I think of Soyarabai [a 14th century Dalit

I think the first thing that we are in awe of is the intimacy of the saint and the godhead. How closely intertwined they are, how familiar.

▼ **Andal** was the only female bhakti poet among the 12 poet-saints of south India. Here, a scene from the performance of *Naachiyar*, a dance-drama on her life, at Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan in Chennai in 2022.

RAGHUNATHAN S.R.

saint] and Muktabai as my friends. I would like to sit down and have a conversation with them, and then suddenly I read a line that is speaking to me and I am again delighted by the possibility of conversations that keep happening without bodies and with words. You just have to keep listening; they will get through.

How do your translation and writing practices nurture each other?

I recently read a book that suggested that language arose out of play, and play suggests a lack of planning that suddenly emerges into a form. You do not set out to do one to nurture the other. They do, but in unexpected and interesting ways that you can only see in retrospect.

Please tell us about your next book.

The next book will be a translation of Farid Khan’s Hindi memoir, *Apnon Ke Beech Mein Ajnabi*, titled *Stranger in My Own Land*. Published by LeftWord, it will be out by the end of this year or early next year. ■

Varsha Tiwary is a Delhi-based writer and translator. She recently published *1990, Aramganj*, a translation of the bestselling Hindi novel *Rambhakt Rangbaz*.

Pak's political implosion

Distilling all the nuances of a live political situation into a postmodern comedy, the book recaps Pakistan's past decade with a focus on the civil-military power struggle as manifested through Imran Khan. **ADITYA SINHA**

This reviewer went to several well-known and well-stocked bookshops but could not find a copy of *Fallout: Power, Intrigue and Political Upheaval in Pakistan*.

More shockingly, there are hardly any non-fiction books or fiction, for that matter, on Pakistan to be found. And Pakistan's literary fiction, some claim, is superior to India's. Then I realised that one hardly reads about Pakistan in the newspapers either; there is the same brain-dead parroting by the usual right-wing foghorns, but no update on our largest neighbour, from whom we are actually "separated-at-birth". It all no doubt has to do with the government and its policy of deep-freezing relations with Pakistan.

When I did get this book, I was fascinated. The book is a recapping of Pakistan's past decade with a focus on the civil-military power struggle as manifested through the former international cricket celebrity Imran Khan. It is a collection of columns by Salman Masood, a correspondent for *The New York Times* since 2003 and editor of *The Nation* since 2020. It throws one into the thick of things without warning or explanation or background of the dramatis personae. This is initially disorienting even for a news junkie but is a gift in the sense that one is immediately and easily carried down the white waters of a fast-moving narrative river.

Before I began reading, I thought: what a cop-out to take your columns and lazily slap them together into a collection. Only big bores do that. However, by the time I finished *Fallout*, I had to doff my cap to Masood and marvel at how well his collection came together into a telling and flowing narrative of the past decade.

Fallout

Power, Intrigue and Political Upheaval in Pakistan



By Salman Masood
Penguin Random House India, 2024
 Pages: 256
 Price: Rs.599

It works because (a) it is never boring; (b) instead of being a comprehensive academic study of an institution like the army or the free fall of the Pakistan economy, it is a broad overview of "The Project", which Masood claims was the army's design to bring Khan to power, and its ultimate souring; (c) it focusses on two main players, Khan and the army chief from 2016 to 2022, General Qamar Javed Bajwa; (d) the 59 chapters, each being column-length (700-1,000 words, presumably), are easy to read and take a break from; (e) Masood writes well, better than most Indian columnists, and that is perhaps a tradition passed down from the martial law days under General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88), when journalists had to tell one something without saying it outright.

IT IS NOT difficult to decode what is going on in Pakistan: it has been from the start a struggle for supremacy between the military and the political class, and it never ends well for the civilians because, well, the military sooner or later realises that it does not want to, or cannot, let go of power no matter how much it would like to. All one really needs is a fine episodic recount of events written with a cynical eye, and thus Masood's *Fallout* is somewhat like *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, in this case the recurring death of democracy. Reading about this political implosion is like watching a car crash in slow motion.

In the book, The Project starts in 2011—although Khan has been hanging around on the periphery of politics since 1996, having garnered an iconic status for himself through a brilliant test career in the 1980s and having captained the World Cup-winning team in 1992 and cementing his status by building the





country's first cancer hospital—but gains momentum only in 2014, which is where *Fallout* begins. Nawaz Sharif is Prime Minister, yet again, and the army is sick of him and his businessmen pals. It is also sick of former President Asif Zardari, the wily widower of Benazir Bhutto, and it seems the general public is also sick of these dynasts who cannot solve Pakistan's problems.

THE MAIN PROBLEM is the economy. The military does not want to take ownership of a problem that is too difficult for *fauji* (martial) minds to tackle. The "Panama Papers" (remember them?) come to the rescue and Sharif has to go. Khan, thus, is the new, squeaky-clean saviour.

General Bajwa repeatedly talks about letting civilians take primacy in politics. But things are not so easy; the army already has its fingers in a lot of pies in the civilian economy, and retired generals expect the same sinecures that their seniors enjoyed. The Pakistan Army in the economy is like the US Army in a Muslim country: unable to withdraw.

Then there is Khan himself. Although he finally reaches power on the back of adulating masses from small towns, he and his team are equally clueless about how to fix the economy (aside from the World Bank's politically unpalatable prescriptions, like hiking electricity tariffs). Failing at governance, Khan switches over to strongman-mode, spouting religious nationalism and economic populism. It is not hard, after all everyone in the world is doing it, whether it is next door in Narendra Modi's India or across the planet in Donald Trump's America.

▼ **Supporters of Imran Khan** at a rally in Karachi on August 23, 2014. In *Fallout*, "The Project", which Salman Masood claims was the Pakistan Army's design to bring Khan to power, gains momentum in 2014, which is where the book begins.

FAREED KHAN/AP

It is not difficult to decode what is going on in Pakistan: it has been from the start a struggle for supremacy between the military and the political class, and it never ends well for the civilians.

Populists, however, need an enemy. For Khan, it becomes the US. It is a convincing enemy, given how much of a fair-weather friend it has been to Pakistan, be it after the withdrawal of the erstwhile Union of Soviet Socialist Republics from Afghanistan in 1989 or its own withdrawal in 2023. China has been a more reliable friend, even if a more usurious one (in view of its management of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, in which Pakistani infrastructure is built with Chinese loans at high interest rates and by employing only Chinese infrastructure companies). It is not difficult, then, to convince your supporters that the US is the great Satan.

Side by side, Khan tries to wrangle some power back from Bajwa and gang, a fool's errand. It is telling that in April 2022, Khan refused to heed the US call to cancel a trip to Russia (which invaded Ukraine in February that year) and, in that same month, lost a no-confidence motion and was removed as Prime Minister.

A month later, however, the Lahore Corps commander's house was attacked by Khan's supporters and burnt to the ground. The army, in its infinite wisdom, court-martials the corps commander.

Khan is thrown into jail on some pretty unconvincing charges, and an election is held without him. Oddly, the authorities not only ban his party and take away its election symbol but also ban the Internet on the day of polling. And still, his band of Independents are far larger than the other parties. Buoyed by his success, Khan refuses to share power and stays in jail, and that is where the narrative comes to a halt, though the story is far from over. One should probably expect a few more corps commanders to be slapped around. This is where the downward spiral of civil-military relations in Pakistan has brought us.

Masood writes wryly and concisely, distilling all the nuance of a live political situation into a postmodern comedy. There is an anecdote about a lower-rung politician's run-in with the army; we in India do not hear much about lower-rung politicians unless they rape or run over someone.

I only wish I could get my hands on more books like *Fallout*. ■

Aditya Sinha is a journalist and author living in Gurugram.

Linked by trade

Sanjay Subrahmanyam's new book explores the connectedness of the regions around the western Indian Ocean in the early modern age. **RADHIKA SESHAN**

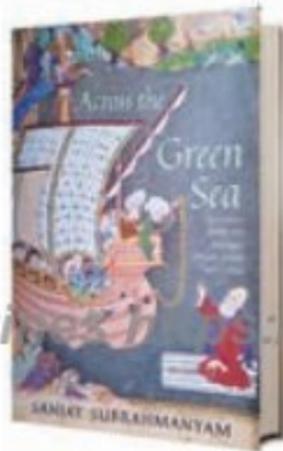
The "Green Sea", one of the terms used by Arabic speakers for the Arabian Sea, was linked to the wider world of commerce from ancient times with the earliest recorded contacts dating back to the Roman Empire. But from the 15th century, contacts increased and diversified, to include, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam has pointed out, the slave trade and movements of merchants and migrants from different parts of the Indian Ocean World and, later, the Europeans. Not to forget the travellers—whether of Asian and African origin—like Abdur Razzaq and Ibn Battuta or the innumerable European travellers, from Nicolo Conti, Italian, in the middle of the 15th century; Afanasius Nikitin, Russian, at the same time; Ludovico di Varthema, Portuguese, early 16th century; and in the 17th, Thomas Coryat, who went on foot from Europe to India and finally died in Surat. This was one part of the "connected world", the concept that Subrahmanyam first put forward in 1997, and which has been accepted, contested, modified, or just dismissed by many since then.

The book is divided into four chapters, prefixed by an introduction and suffixed by a conclusion. The introduction spans a wide geographical and chronological range and identifies a key aspect of the book wherein Subrahmanyam notes that the heavy reliance on early 16th century Portuguese texts can now be supplemented to "recover a history with a far greater variety of actors and interests, written from a diversity of perspectives".

Beginning with what he calls "An Epoch of Transitions, 1440-1520", Subrahmanyam lays out the geographical contours ("Considered conventional, even obligatory") before moving on to the "political geometry" of the century.

Across the Green Sea

Histories From the Western Indian Ocean, 1440-1640



By Sanjay Subrahmanyam
Permanent Black and Ashoka University, 2024

Pages: 247
Price: Rs. 895

The next chapter takes us to the view from Makkah, to talk of the work of Qutv-ud-Din Nahrawardi, who, in the 16th century, wrote an account of the Ottoman conquest of Yemen. Scholars working on earlier texts have "been able to identify more than two hundred significant merchants based in Makkah, especially after the 1420s". The third chapter takes us to the links between eastern Africa and western India and the "patchwork of polities" that was in many ways the distinctive feature of the time and space covered by the book. For many readers from India, much of what is covered in this chapter will be unfamiliar, given the woeful lack of knowledge of the east coast of Africa (beyond a very cursory awareness of the Hasbhi/Siddi presence on the west coast of India). The circuits of commerce linking Gujarat and the Konkan coast with the East African coast included trade in textiles, ivory and slaves. Many of these slaves came to play a significant role in the formation of the Deccan state in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The final chapter takes us to the slightly more familiar ground of the port of Surat. Surat looked out at the sea and into the land. As the premier port—the *bandar-i-mubarak*—of the Mughal Empire, it had as its hinterland that entire empire. And with extensive connections spanning the Persian Gulf, Red Sea regions, the Swahili coast, the Indian Ocean archipelagos, and further east to the networks of the eastern Indian Ocean, as well as along the Indian coastline, Surat held an unparalleled position in 17th century India. (Masulipatam, on the east coast, may have come close but was still a little less extensive in its reach.)

Descriptions of the port are innumerable. European accounts have a wealth of information, with employees of the English East India Company like William Finch, Peter Mundy,



The idea of connected worlds... begins with questioning the effect of nationalism and national boundaries on the study of a pre-colonial (and often pre-nation state) past.

and John Fryer describing the city in great detail. Surat was the point of departure for ships leaving for Europe, often the first point of entry for the ships coming in, and provided access to almost every part of the Mughal Empire, as well as southwards to the entire peninsula. The French merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier was among the many who travelled from Surat to Burhanpur, Agra, Masulipatam, and Goa.

THE FINAL chapter begins on an autobiographical note, on Subrahmanyam's own entry into the field on which he has since written a great deal. It goes on to discuss in greater detail an area that has been much ignored in writings on the Indian Ocean world, the region of Sind. Sind is ideally located geographically, connecting, as it does, to the Indus systems on the one hand and to Kandahar and parts further west and northwards on the other. Portuguese and English records do have a fair bit on both the importance of Sind and the problems they faced in the region. The English records make it clear that they saw "the Portuguese trading presence in Sind as a formidable obstacle by the 1610s".

As with many of Subrahmanyam's works, there is a wealth of source and historiographic material, in many languages. For readers who have read his earlier works, there is much that is familiar, for we have read some of what is in this book in his research papers and in his books (for instance, in his *Writing the Mughal*

World, written jointly with Muzaffar Alam, and his *Three ways to be an Alien*). But there is much that is new. The detailed linkages between regions, states, innumerable political players, competitors, collaborators, adventurers, and traders are laid out in his inimitable style.

FOR ME, THE introduction is the most interesting given the way it identifies the trajectories of his development of the idea of "connected worlds", which began with a questioning of the established paradigm of comparative history. The idea of connected worlds, as he has said over and over again, begins with questioning the effect of nationalism and national boundaries on the study of a pre-colonial (and often pre-nation state) past. The ways in which this concept has been accepted, challenged, and critiqued by different scholars makes for a remarkable exercise in teaching and researching methodology and historiography.

This is not a book for students, nor for the lay reader: but both students and lay readers ought to read it, to perhaps get a hint of the fascinating worlds of history and the Indian Ocean. ■

▼
A container vessel with a full load of cargo sailing from Kochi port, a file photograph. The western Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea have long offered sea routes for trade between the regions dotting their shores.

K.K. MUSTAFAH

Radhika Seshan retired as Professor and Head, Department of History, Savitribai Phule Pune University, in 2019 and is now Visiting Faculty at the Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts, Pune. Her most recent publication is *Empires of the Sea: A Human History of the Indian Ocean World* (Pan Macmillan India, 2024).



Ahead of her times

Much of today's feminist conversation revolves around the timeless ideas that Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay expressed decades ago, as one discovers in Nico Slate's biography of the feminist freedom fighter and institution builder.

UMA MAHADEVAN DASGUPTA

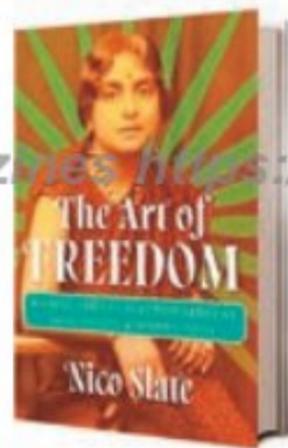
Autumn 1947, New Delhi. British rule in India had ended. Cyril Radcliffe had drawn a line dividing the subcontinent into two. In the violent Partition riots that ensued, half a million people died and 10 million fled. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay arrived at the newly created Relief and Rehabilitation Secretariat in New Delhi seeking to resettle the thousands of refugees in desperate need of shelter and stability. Finding the bureaucrats unresponsive, she identified a patch of open land near the city and declared that unless an alternative site was given within three days, she would personally accompany the refugees to claim it. The night before the group was to occupy the space, the clearance arrived. This is how Kamaladevi helped set up a new settlement for refugees in Faridabad in newly independent India.

Nico Slate's biography of Kamaladevi is thoughtful and deeply researched. Kamaladevi was among the most remarkable Indian women of the 20th century: married at the age of 11 and widowed a year later; defying convention by falling in love and getting remarried at the age of 16 at a civil registry office, outside language, caste, and region; performing on stage in public; and travelling across the country and the world as a key leader of India's freedom struggle.

Kamaladevi's life story contains much more, and Slate retells it with rich detail and insight. At the age of 18, she went to England and did fieldwork in London's slums. In the 1920s, she was one of the first women to stand for election to a legislature in colonial India. She was a founder and the first secretary of the All India Women's Conference. She was

The Art of Freedom

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and the Making of Modern India



By Nico Slate
Fourth Estate
 Pages: 365
 Price: Rs. 799

one of the first women to be arrested in the freedom struggle. She co-founded a socialist group within the Indian National Congress. She opposed the partition of India. In the true spirit of Gandhian action, she worked for grassroots social change through the revival of Indian arts and crafts for sustainable livelihoods. She founded institutions that became part of the narrative of modern India.

In addition to these extraordinary achievements, she wrote incessantly and reflected on the work. Slate quotes the socialist leader Yusuf Meherally's vivid description of her writing style: "She always carries a typewriter with her even on her travels, much to the exasperation of her friends, and sits in a crowded third-class railway compartment typing out articles direct on the machine instead of writing them first by hand."

Kamaladevi was born into an affluent and progressive family in colonial Mangalore. Her mother, Girijabai, an associate of Pandita Ramabai, helped to form the first women's organisation in the district. When Kamaladevi's father died, the family property went to a male relative. Kamaladevi felt this injustice sharply: "Women had no rights and we should qualify to stake our claims and assert them. The question was not one of possessions but of principle."

A child widow herself, she saw the suffering and ostracism that widows experienced. She noted that the word "widow" itself was used as a term of abuse; they were "souls in agony". Another issue that concerned her greatly was domestic violence. Spousal abuse had led to early deaths within her family. Kamaladevi was determined to work for a future in which





no woman would need to fear such abuse.

In 1919, in Bombay, Kamaladevi went with her sister-in-law Sarojini Naidu to hear Gandhi speak. The draconian new Rowlatt Act allowed the colonial state to detain political prisoners without trial. In protest, Gandhi had called for a day of fasting and prayer. A sea of humanity had gathered on Chowpatty Beach. The next day, Gandhi spoke with measured clarity about his new strategy of “satyagraha”, or passive resistance: “This is going to be a great struggle with a powerful adversary. If you want to take it up, you must be prepared to lose everything and train yourselves to the strictest non-violence and discipline.”

Kamaladevi was ready. For her, satyagraha was a compelling force: “The application of this concept of satyagraha as a political weapon was startling and exciting. It was like gazing on a new instrument, complicated and powerful to operate.”

Even as she threw herself into nationalist politics, Kamaladevi continued to work for women’s rights across the country. In Madras, she fought for maternity leave for women workers. In Madurai, she spoke to unionised women textile workers. In Mangalore, she helped organise women workers in the transport sector and cashew processing plants. In Bengal and Assam, she inquired into women’s working conditions on tea plantations. And most powerfully, in March 1930, on the road between Jambusar and Amod in Gujarat, she challenged Gandhi himself. Catching up with the leader on his great Salt March to Dandi

▼
December 18, 1977:
 Prime Minister Morarji Desai presenting the National UNESCO Award for 1977 to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in New Delhi.

THE HINDU ARCHIVES

“The significance of a non-violent struggle,” she told Gandhi, “is that the weakest can take an equal part with the strongest and share in the triumph as you yourself have said.” Gandhi agreed.

wherein only male satyagrahis had been chosen to accompany him, she urged Gandhi to recognise that women could indeed participate in every part of the freedom struggle, including direct action. “The significance of a non-violent struggle,” she told Gandhi, “is that the weakest can take an equal part with the strongest and share in the triumph as you yourself have said.” Gandhi agreed. “I felt I had won the world,” Kamaladevi would recall later.

The woman whom Yusuf Meherally described as a “fearless crusader” was also fearless about prison. When she entered the Bombay Stock Exchange to sell banned salt, she was arrested. Arrested again near Vijayawada, she laughed off the difficult jail conditions: “I have had the most glorious experiences in Gudivada—two days to get a change of clothes, four days to get toothpaste, five for a comb and on to the sixth day a cake of soap actually arrived!” In Vellore jail, in intense heat, she was kept in solitary confinement and allowed only one letter a month. Even the women who brought her food were not allowed to speak to her. Nevertheless she wrote sardonically to fellow freedom fighter Acharya Kripalani about the British colonialists: “You and I will stick to the plains and its gloom while our very illustrious friends rush to the Imperial Capital of the cool hill-station of Simla. Don’t you wish they would settle down there forever and never come down again?”

In an important dimension of this biography, Slate describes how Kamaladevi challenged those who shaped India’s freedom

struggle to think beyond political independence from British rule to a more expansive meaning of freedom. In Kamaladevi's powerful vision, true freedom implied equal rights for all and the overall flourishing of human potential. She insisted on a proposal to make primary education compulsory across India. She pushed a proposal for radical land reform through the gradual elimination of intermediaries between cultivators and the state. In a resolution on fundamental rights and economic policy, she argued with Jawaharlal Nehru over the word "protection", pointing out that the use of the word was paternalistic and implied an inherent weakness in women. Even if her efforts did not always meet with success, they were ambitious in scope and added value to the quality of the deliberations.

Through her extensive travels around the world, Kamaladevi built bridges of solidarity. In a lecture on BBC Empire in 1939, she spoke about Gandhi's vision for "the liberation of the world". In the US, apart from the corridors of power, she also visited Sing Sing prison. With Eleanor Roosevelt she shared the belief that a country is a "collection of human beings". In 1941, encountering Jim Crow racism on a segregated train in Louisiana, she self-identified as a coloured woman and refused to move from her seat. Writing about racial discrimination across the world, she pointed out that the "Africa problem" was in fact a "world problem", one that "divides the world between the White and the Coloured, the dominating and the exploited, a basic human problem that can only be overcome with a radical change in our social and economic values".

Kamaladevi was a woman of principle and action. At a meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission, when the US declined to ratify the covenant on human rights, the discussions that followed felt tedious and empty: "For weeks we wrangled over punctuation marks in our meticulous drafts on notional decisions."

Slate shows how Kamaladevi, the institution-builder, worked on a foundation of cooperation and collaboration. "Planning of projects is not a compiling of figures or tabulation of needs," she wrote with wisdom gained from decades of impactful work on the ground. "It is very definitely a social act. It can succeed only with the active responsible participation

She argued with Nehru over the word "protection", pointing out that the use of the word was paternalistic and implied an inherent weakness in women.

of the widest range of individuals and groups." An important example of such collaborative work was a massive national handicrafts survey over several months and across 56,000 kilometres. Kamaladevi's effort to make handicrafts a part of daily life was based on a Gandhian vision of self-reliance. She herself travelled to the small town of Chamba in the Himalaya to visit a master artist known for her exquisite embroidered rumals. In Kalahasti, she went to meet one of the last surviving master craftsmen of Kalamkari. From Hyderabad, in blazingly hot weather and wearing a wet towel on her head, she drove to Pochampally to offer support to handloom weavers. It is an example of Slate's quiet style that this one telling detail—the wet towel—conveys Kamaladevi's dauntless commitment to endure the heat and get on with the work.

It seems almost unbelievable that so much can be put into one life; yet somehow, Kamaladevi did it all. Slate tells her story with clear-sightedness and balance. As a biographer, he respects Kamaladevi's lifelong privacy about her personal life even as he draws connections between her personal life and the principles for which she fought. The Kamaladevi who comes alive in these pages is a Gandhian who argues with Gandhi but also lives by his ideals throughout her life; a socialist who argues for women's rights; a feminist with an inclusive and intersectional approach; a nationalist political leader with a global vision of freedom; a woman of action who fights for refugee rehabilitation; and a fierce believer in arts and crafts not only as a source of sustainable livelihoods but as a wellspring of human creativity.

"Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive / But to be young was very heaven!" wrote William Wordsworth about the French Revolution. Like the best books about the freedom struggle, *The Art of Freedom* conveys, through the life of its extraordinary subject, the powerful and deeply felt emotions of another dawn. Slate weaves a textured narrative about a woman of action and intellect who was far ahead of her times, who challenged orthodoxy with her own radical and uncompromising vision of freedom, and who wore her achievements lightly. This is a tremendous book that deserves to be widely read. ■

Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta is in the IAS.

Death at a discount

In Baburao Bagul's collection of raw and gut-wrenching stories, Mumbai's streets, graveyards, brothels, police stations, and slums form the backdrop to a theatre of desperate poverty. **JANHAVI ACHAREKAR**

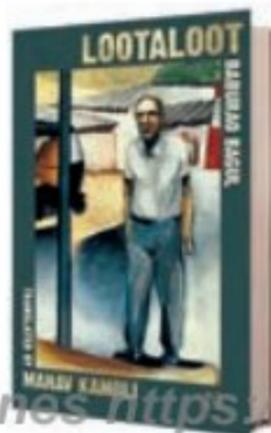
In the titular story of Baburao Bagul's classic short story collection *Maran Swasta Hot Aahe (Death is Becoming Cheap)*—published in Marathi in 1969 and now available in translation as *Lootaloot*—a poet and short story writer walks through the city in search of a muse but finds, instead, sordid stories of the dispossessed. “This is Mumbai. Here human eats human and death is becoming cheap,” writes the poet after discarding his original ode to the city. The line resonates even today.

“*Maran Swasta Hot Aahe* is considered a milestone for both: Bagul's writing and Marathi literature at large,” says the translator Manav Kambli in his introduction to *Lootaloot*. The book, adds Kambli, “firmly placed [Bagul] amidst the most prolific, impactful Dalit voices of his generation”. It was in the Marathi language that Dalit literature made its first appearance, and the wealth of stories in this language—both fictional and autobiographical—has been steadily tapped for translation in recent decades. *Lootaloot* comes a few years after Jerry Pinto's translation of Bagul's seminal work, his first collection of stories, *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti (When I Hid My Caste)*.

Bagul (1930-2008), an important leader of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra together with Namdeo Dhasal and Arun Kamble, was also a poet and essayist. Born in Nashik, he spent his childhood in Mumbai's Matunga Labour Camp, “which happened to be a node for the Ambedkarite and other workers' movements, and where Bagul discovered Dalit-Marxist writers like Anna Bhau Sathe”, Kambli tells us in the introduction.

In *Lootaloot*, Bagul lays bare the cruel realities of a milieu he has seen at close quarters; a theme we see across Dalit writing. But his sto-

Lootaloot



By Baburao Bagul, translated by Manav Kambli

Hachette India

Pages: 200

Price: Rs.499

In *Lootaloot*, Bagul lays bare the cruel realities of a milieu he has seen at close quarters; a theme we see across Dalit writing.

ries also explore the hierarchy of exploitation, the shifting balance of power even among the lowest of the downtrodden, a people united merely by their miserable circumstances. The titular story of this translation, “*Lootaloot/Plunder*”, is set in a brothel; its “Madam”, who exploits her own niece, is herself a victim. Meanwhile, the brothel as a whole is seen as a victim of an oppressive social and administrative system whose vultures have a pecking order that includes the exploitative Madam, her violent customers, corrupt cops, and an opportunistic landlord.

In “*Saktamazuri/Hard Labour*”, we see the desperate poverty of a man trying to run a roadside gambling den with his equally destitute companions. The customers they are trying to attract—mill workers—are themselves mascots of the oppressed. When Sikander Sindhi tells Fernandes, the mastermind, “Brother, shut it down. Today, we don't have any luck on our side”, we see the irony. For them, life itself is a gamble, a game of chance.

BAGUL'S CHARACTERS—prostitutes and lepers, slumlords and ruffians, ragpickers and beggars—are bound by the hopelessness of their subhuman existence. Even those seemingly at the rock bottom are afraid of falling further down the abyss; in the story “*Lootaloot*”, the prostitute Putali fears being sent to a worse place. Those who dare to dream, or to make an honest living, are crushed by fate and put in place. Death is the only release.

In “*Tahan/Thirst*”, a group of homeless people taking shelter in a municipal school building at night rely on sexual fantasy as a coping mechanism. In “*Injustice*”, a pregnant woman desperately tries to get bail for her innocent husband in a corrupt system that has ren-

dered them both faceless and voiceless. In “*Bhook/Hunger*”, we see the struggles of motherhood as a fisherwoman burning with fever looks for eels to feed her starving sons, as also in “*Aai/Mother*”, where a poem titled “*Mother*” brings out, in a young boy, a short-lived surge of love towards his single mother, from among various other conflicted emotions.

Bagul takes us on a dark tour into the underbelly of the city. Mumbai’s streets, graveyards, brothels, police stations, and slums—the latter is likened to a concentration camp in “*Kavitecha Janma/The Birth of a Poem*”—form the backdrop to this tragic theatre of desperate poverty. In “*Maidanatil Manse/The People in the Field*”, a man afflicted with tuberculosis donates blood for money, members of the Phanse Pardhi tribe (a denotified nomadic tribe that continues to be viewed as a criminal group) find comfort in violence and seek sex for warmth in the biting cold, while a beggar seeks safety and privacy in childbirth, eliciting the sympathy of a hardened strongman from the illicit liquor trade.

DEATH IS THE LEITMOTIF, and in the story “*Maran Swasta Hot Aahe*”, it manifests itself in various forms. A wrestler turned butcher sees his dead wife in the eyes of a slaughtered lamb; an ex-schoolteacher, now homeless, falls unconscious while taking a dump on the railway tracks; a prostitute sells sex for a meal; a cripple forces



▼
Dharavi, Mumbai,
2010.

HELENA SCHAETZLE/LAIF

his daughter into prostitution but she sells herself to a brothel to escape her life on the street. For the poor, the city of dreams is unforgiving, and even those who survive it are dead in spirit. “This country is but a boundless prison. I am an inmate here....” says a learned Dalit, a poet seeking a daily labourer’s job in “*The Birth of a Poem*”. It is the prison of his circumstances that proves to be the unlikely muse for his poetry, inspiring an ode to death.

Raw, gut-wrenching and graphic in description, this collection shows up a mirror to the soul of a deluded metropolis. Written over five decades ago, its situations and settings remain as familiar now as they were then. Proof that in the fast-paced city of Mumbai, with its contrast of glittering skyscrapers and grubby slums, nothing changes for the oppressed and the dispossessed. ■

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

Mir in Americanese

Ranjit Hoskote’s translations of Mir’s poetry feel hurried and stiff and do not cohere as a collection. **AMITABHA BAGCHI**

Let me admit that I am a votary of the following falsifiable proposition that is almost a cliché among those who follow Urdu poetry: A great poet creates a new idiom for the language.

This proposition yields the following corollary for the translator: The translation of a great poet, especially a translation that positions itself as a presentation of the great poet to the

target language's audience, must create a new idiom in the target language. On this count, Ranjit Hoskote's *The Homeland's an Ocean: Mir Taqi Mir translated from the Urdu* is, unfortunately, a failure.

Not wanting to disadvantage the translator, I deliberately did not read the Urdu originals of the poems translated in this volume, although they are presented alongside their translations. Competing with Mir's sonorous, metrical and allusive poetry would have been challenging. But even on their own the translations disappoint. The regular incursion of contemporary turns of phrase fall like clanging plates. Sample this American idiom that shatters the attempt to evoke a premodern world of language: "Don't go by how things have panned out for me / Stuff happens." Even the jaunty contraction that makes it into the title—"Homeland's"—evokes the world of a globalised English-speaking culture that sits at odds with the world of the nightingale and the rose.

Stepping away from these linguistic equivalents of invasive species, we find little succour. A verse like "the throat fills with a wave of rose breath / tinged with the loved one's bloodthirsty sword" offers no easy pathway for an English speaker to enter into its tangle of metaphors. How then is one to make a way to the pleasure that lies within? Overall, the translations feel hurried and stiff and do not cohere as a collection.

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION is customary for a volume of translations, but *The Homeland's an Ocean* suffers from too much of what is normally a good thing. Hoskote's introductory essay runs to 83 pages. A review of poetry translation is usually not a space for data analytics but 150 translated couplets with 83 pages of introduction comes to around 2 couplets per page of commentary. A similar calculation for Shamsur Rehman Faruqi's translation of Mir's ghazals that came out just a few years ago (around 700 couplets and 11 pages of introduction) yields a more satisfactory number of 63.6 couplets per page of introduction.

Is this then a case of the verse supporting their commentary rather than the other way round? That too can be a legitimate exercise, but Hoskote's introduction lacks both the rigour of good academic writing and the careful-

The Homeland's an Ocean



By Mir Taqi Mir,
translated by
Ranjit Hoskote
Penguin
Pages: 272
Price: Rs. 499

Even the jaunty contraction that makes it into the title—"Homeland's"—evokes the world of a globalised English-speaking culture that sits at odds with the world of the nightingale and the rose.

ly devised structure that makes popular writing on arcane topics accessible to a wider audience. At times, the essay takes up unnecessary straw men, for example, the question, "Why is Ghalib more popular than Mir?" No measure of popularity is provided to establish that Ghalib is indeed more popular than Mir, but an explanation is provided: Mir missed the era of print, whereas Ghalib took advantage of it. What then of the fact that Urdu poetry was widely consumed and transmitted in the 19th century by people who could not read? What then of the fact that in the current day, *baitbazi* competitions, in which the person who has memorised more Urdu couplets is more likely to succeed, are growing in popularity?

IN ANOTHER PLACE there is a two-page argument on why ghazals cannot or should not be translated in their entirety. But then, is not failure built into the process of translation, and should we not continue to translate despite the fear of failure? If Hoskote had said, "I didn't translate whole ghazals because I didn't feel like it", that would have made much more sense than to say something that implies that all translators of whole ghazals are on a fool's errand (conflict of interest alert: I have translated ghazals in their entirety and published them). Such critical gaps emerge in many of the claims made through the essay.

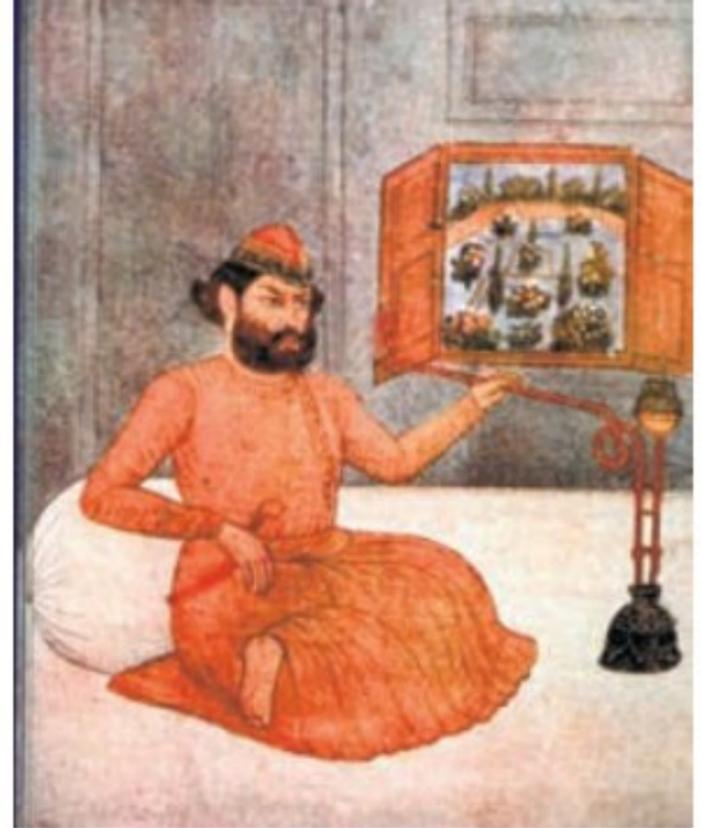
Eventually, after finding myself outraging on several rather loose sections—the one-paragraph summary, for example, of the development of Hindi that flattened a century of a complex history into not much more than a potshot at Hindutva—I settled on the idea that rather than reading this introduction as an academic essay, it should be viewed in the way that commentary on the *Ramcharitmanas* is developed by *kathavachaks* (people who recite and expound on Tulsī's *Ramayana*): reading the text gives rise to thoughts and feelings, referred to as *bhav*, that are then used to fill out the explication of the text.

As with these *kathavachaks*, in *The Homeland's an Ocean*, it appears that the secondary texts that Hoskote has read have moved him in different ways and given rise to different kinds of *bhav* over a period of time, and the essay expresses and elucidates these feelings. This is very well for a private conversation between

It appears that the secondary texts that Hoskote has read have moved him in different ways and given rise to different kinds of *bhav* over a period of time, and the essay expresses and elucidates these feelings.

friends on a boozy evening, but when we see Hoskote talking about a “far more political” Mir than has been presented before, we wonder if that more political Mir exists anywhere outside Hoskote’s own imagination, and if by attempting to create that Mir on the page, the author is not doing a disservice to the poet.

At the end of the day, it is not clear what role this volume is expected to play in the field of writings in English about Mir. Faruqi’s translations of Mir’s ghazals are better crafted and provide an immersive experience simply by being more in number. C.M. Naim’s translation of *Zikr-i-Mir* (Mir’s autobiography) pro-



► A painting of Mir Taqi Mir from 1786.

WIKI COMMONS

vides a wonderful glimpse of Mir’s prose and also contains an academically sound introductory essay. But Hoskote’s greater standing in the world of Indian English poetry is likely to bring Mir to a wider English-speaking audience in this country who might not be aware of the works of the experts on Urdu, and that, in itself, is perhaps a good enough reason to publish the volume under review. ■

Amitabha Bagchi has translated the ghazals of Muneer Niazi. His new novel, *Unknown City*, releases soon.

Music of the forests

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih’s translated Khasi novel, longlisted for the 2024 JCB Prize for Literature, is epic in scope but suffers from a distinct lack of editorial care. **DEBAPRIYA BASU**

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih’s enigmatically titled new book, *The Distaste of the Earth*, retells a Khasi folktale of star-crossed love. Similar to *Funeral Nights* (Context, 2021), which offered a documentation of the Khasi people’s traditional stories and cultural practices tied around the six-day feast of the dead called Ka Phor Sorat, the “true and tragic love story” of Manik Raitong (“Manik the Wretched”) and *mahadei* (queen) Lieng Makaw is the anchor of the present volume.

The tale holds a celebrated place in Khasi culture. Born into privilege, groomed as a great warrior but devastatingly betrayed by his clan, Manik lives as a recluse in sackcloth and ashes, renouncing the material wealth that had been the root of his misfortune. This pauper-prince does possess, however, the eternal and irresistible power of music and wields his *sharati* (flute) like an otherworldly sceptre. Manik’s soul-stirring music makes the wife of the powerful ruler of the largest *hima* (“state”) of Khasi antiquity succumb to



Manik is Orpheus-like for the Khasi people, and his story is a mythic archetype. No wonder then that it exists in numerous tellings, not least by the author himself.

its enchantment with inevitable tragic consequences.

Manik is Orpheus-like for the Khasi people, and his story is a mythic archetype. No wonder then that it exists in numerous tellings, not least by the author himself in *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* (Penguin, 2007) and *Manik, A Play in Five Acts* (Dhault Books, 2018). Why, then, does it bear repeating? The answer possibly lies in another myth that Nongkynrih seeks to merge with Manik's. This is a "little-known legend about a man with mystical powers seeking redress in the world of animals". The nameless protagonist's wretchedness is enticingly similar to Manik's, and Nongkynrih, like Lieng Makaw, cannot resist.

In the author's hands, the two tragic heroes become one and receive spiritual succour in the non-human world. The forest folk, nonetheless, are as bitter as Manik in their misanthropy. We are given a magic real sequence in which animals take turns to reveal the deceit in man-made stories about their respective natures. They seek, and exact, revenge on Manik's enemies and one corner of the book's plot thus dutifully sounds an ecological warning bell. Nongkynrih believes that this mythosynthesis sheds light "on the protagonist's inexplicable and reclusive behaviour[,] highlights the human-non-human encounter and reminds us of where our anthropocentric attitude is leading us", thereby explaining the book's title, although perhaps not its puzzling grammar.

Nongkynrih has been said to possess an anthropologic imagination. Unfortunately, somewhere among the long lists of flora and fauna (with Latin names in parentheses), step-by-step description of rituals, painstaking sartorial anatomisation, and long-winded political debates ("Our system of governance now



▼ **Exotic Landscape**

(1910), oil on canvas by Henri Rousseau.

WIKI COMMONS

is monarchical in form only; in nature it is republican" is one claim), the budding shoots of epic imagination drown in a flood of ethnographic zeal.

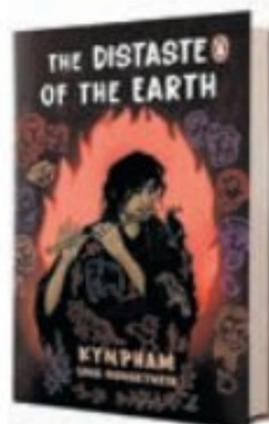
The parallel account of the people at the liquor den framing Manik's story is merely an adventitious appendage, revealing greater authorial interest in subaltern inclusivity than narrative art. While a book of this diversity may perhaps accommodate some unevenness in tone and register ("extispicy rites", for instance, happily coexisting with "messed up" in the narrative voice), its ambitious thesis suffers from a distinct lack of editorial attention to detail.

A STRONGER GRAMMAR and idiom check could have smoothed some of the awkward constructions and held the tonal inconsistency at bay, but the most annoying lack of editorial presence is in the foreign word policy as it relates to punctuation and typesetting. Within the same paragraph, in a speech by a single character, the same phrase is set once in italics, once without. Entire sentences in Khasi are sometimes left to speak for themselves, at other times an unpunctuated English translation follows hard on their heels, at yet other times they come capriciously swaddled in both parentheses and quotations marks. Khasi words are flung at the reader in italics at some points; elsewhere they are inexplicably cushioned in single quotes.

The story of the true love of Manik and his queen, nevertheless, still glistens like a cabochon irradiated by the truth of all great myths, irrespective of the style, material, or craftsmanship of its setting. ■

Debapriya Basu is Assistant Professor, English, at IIT Guwahati.

The Distaste of the Earth



By Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

Penguin

Pages: 480

Price: Rs.799

Fiction

The Degenerates
Raeden Richardson
Text Publishing

Headshot
Rita Bullwinkel
Picador India

Our Evenings
Alan Hollinghurst
Random House

Gabriel's Moon
William Boyd
Viking

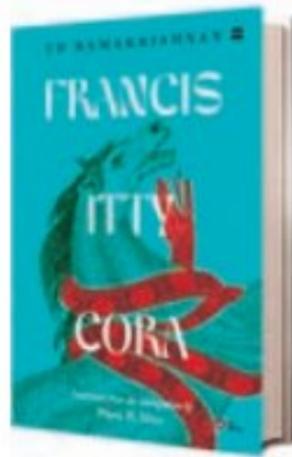
Non-Fiction

Orpheus in the Underworld: Essays on Music
Theodor W. Adorno,
translated by
Douglas Roberts
Seagull Books

Mughal Glass: A History of Glassmaking in India
Tara Desjardins
Roli Books

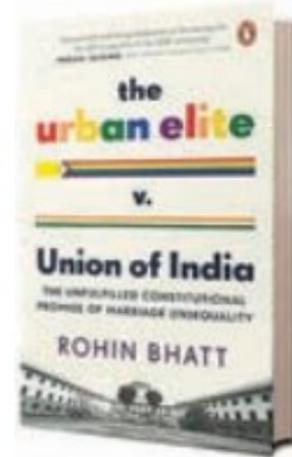
My Palestine: An Impossible Exile
Mohammad Tarbush, preface
by Nada Tarbush
Haus Publishing

Night Magic: Adventures Among Glowworms, Moon Gardens, and Other Marvels of the Dark
Leigh Ann Henion
Algonquin Books



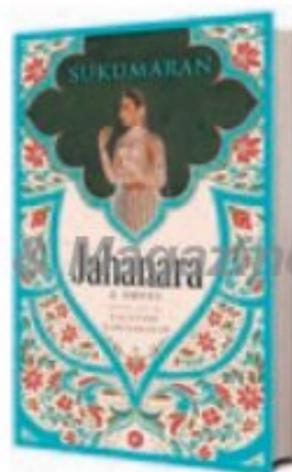
Francis Itty Cora
T.D. Ramakrishnan,
translated by
Priya K. Nair
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A genre-bender combining history, mythology, and mystery. Set in present-day Kerala, war-torn Iraq, ancient Alexandria, and Renaissance Florence, the Malayalam classic is a romp.



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A first-of-its-kind book on the history of the fight for the decriminalisation of Section 377, it includes a first-hand account by a queer person of litigating for queer rights in India.



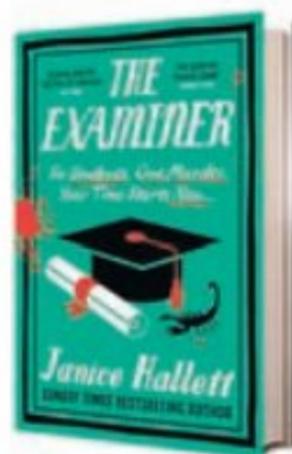
Jahanara Eka
Sukumaran
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Shah Jahan's daughter Jahanara, the most erudite female royal, lived a life of isolation, brokering peace between her brothers and tending to her father, with a eunuch, Panipat, for company. *Jahanara* is Panipat's story of the princess.



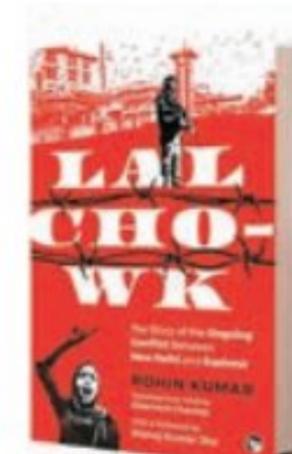
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Sharyl Attkisson
HarperCollins
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Lal Chowk: The Story of the Ongoing Conflict Between New Delhi and Kashmir
Rohin Kumar,
translated by
Dharmesh Chaubey
Speaking Tiger
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The book addresses burning issues like militarisation and human rights abuses in Kashmir. The translation is of a revised and updated version of the Hindi original.

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The restless traveller: A vignette

By **KAZI NAZRUL ISLAM**. Translated from the Bengali by **DHRUBAJYOTI SARKAR**

He was walking through an impassable thorny way. At one stage he turned back and saw millions of steadfast gazes fixed upon him. An incandescent lustre of seething excitement and expectation radiated from those gazes. It filled the traveller's heart with an intoxicating pride. With a smile of profound satisfaction, he asked in fraternal confidence, "Bhai! Where did you get such a powerful gaze?"

Millions of lustrous eyes replied, "O brave traveller, we got it by looking at the long stretch of road you have travelled!"

Someone's sorrowful yet tender glance sent him a message, "Hai! This treacherous road leads a youthful traveller only to inevitable death!" Millions of others cried loudly in desperation, "Shut up! You coward! This is the eternal and true path of the soul of humanity!"

With both of his eyes wide open, the traveller deeply drank in the beneficence of the million gazes. Just as a per-

fectly tuned veena comes to life at the touch of a finger, the dormant truth of the traveller's heart also responded with an animated resolve: "Fare forward!"

The sylvan expanse filled the traveller with its impulsive youthfulness and announced, "Let me put on your forehead the mark of youth's sovereignty! This makes you immortal with everlasting youth." Distant skies stooped down to kiss his head in benediction. The distant horizon showed him the blurred outline of freedom. The wayside trees waved their branches at him in greeting. Across the entrance to the free country, the fiery awakening call of the flute attracted the traveller like a captivating deer. Guided by the tune, he started running towards the path to freedom, shouting, "Ho, where is your grand gateway to freedom? Open the doors, open the doors—show me light, show me the way!"

The mantra of universal beneficence engulfed him and said, "It's still far away, keep walking!"

The startled traveller said, "Hey, you are the one I want!"

The unknown companion replied, "To get me you have to cross that lofty portal ahead."

The restless traveller quickened his unrelenting pace, and said, "Yes *bhai!* That is my destination!" The unbounded sky momentarily peeped through a parting in the distant forest, and millions of young voices from behind him thunderously echoed his resolve, "We too have the same destination; move forward *bhai*, be in front of us—we too are following your footprints."

Showing the pride and satisfaction of a pioneer, the traveller reminded them: "But, this road leads to death!"

Agitated, the fiery youth roared back, "We don't care! This is not death; this is the beginning of a new life."

Far behind, a group of feeble-hearted, older people was shivering in fear of death. Sitting astride on their shoulders, someone with a grimacing face mocked them, "Look at me, I am Death. I am here!"

Nearby, a fragrant pyre had been lit to create an illusion for the dim, old eyes! Trying hard to suppress derisive laughter, someone drove them to the burning pyre and said, "Lo and behold! That is your path to salvation. Why do you risk your lives on this long and rugged track at such an advanced age? It is just a matter of time before the restless traveller and those who are following him are killed."

Raising both their hands up above, the elderly people said, "Yes sir, of course!"

A mischievous voice repeatedly cautioned, "Oho fools, never beg for anything! They will slowly burn you to death in the pyre."

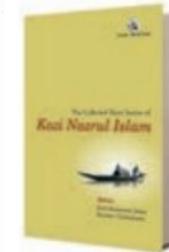
Their shepherd suppressed another bout of laughter and advised them, "Na, na, don't listen to them. Their path is a frightful and long one, and is filled with troubles, obstacles and misery. Your liberation is close at hand."

The restless traveller was still following the tune of the entrance-flute, overflowing from the land of freedom.... The phantom called Horrors of the Road now started to torment him. The traveller could see trace of a few faint footmarks still pointing the way forward. The phantom held out a skull to the traveller and said, "Look, this is what happened to those before you on this path."

PLACING THE SKULL on his head, the traveller announced: "Aha! They are the ones who have called me! I too want such an end. My death will not be my end. Instead, I will live among those countless youth walking behind me."

When the phantom asked him, "Who are you?", the traveller replied with a smile, "I am the eternal seeker of liberation. Those whose skulls are strewn here are not dead either; each of them has invigorated me with new energy, new life, and a new glow. The clan of the liberated souls has become immortal."

The phantom trembled and desperately cried out, "Don't you know me? I am bondage personified. Whatever you say, my goal is to



destroy you; to put freedom in chains is my goal. You have to die at my hands!"

The traveller paused and replied, "Kill—tie up—but you can never really confine me. Death cannot destroy me! I will keep returning!"

The phantom blocked his path again and declared, "As long as I have any strength left, I will kill you every time you return. If you have the strength, kill me; otherwise, you have to endure my torment."

Far off, from the wide-open terrace of the state of freedom, the past martyr-travellers of the road appeared in the effulgence of eternal youth and welcomed him! The traveller asked them, "Does the significance of life lie only in giving it away?"

A free soul on the free terrace replied in a voice full of tenderness and empathy, "Yes, *bhai!* For ages life has sung the paean of such death. The significance of your death lies in rejuvenating millions of lives. Your death achieves its immortality and eternal consciousness by arousing others to life!"

The young traveller bared his mighty chest and stepped forward. "Swing your scimitar," he said. The youths who followed him hoisted the lifeless body of the restless traveller above their head and cried out loudly, "Come back again!"

From the far-off horizon, a symphony of voices rang out,

Your kettle drums have delighted the far-away lands with their solemn beats,

Here comes and gathers around your seat, a group of the valorous! ■

Selected by Mini Krishnan

Reproduced courtesy of Orient BlackSwan

Illustrations by Siddharth Sengupta

Just as a perfectly tuned veena comes to life at the touch of a finger, the dormant truth of the traveller's heart also responded with an animated resolve: "Fare forward!"



Staying In



Directed by Naga

and written by Bala Kumaran, *Thalaivettiyaan Paalayam* is from the same team that created the original series.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Films & Series

Thalaivettiyaan Paalayam

Social comedy
The Tamil remake of the much-appreciated Hindi series *Panchayat* is a light-hearted entertainer in its own right. Siddharth (Abishek Kumar), a city-bred young man, is posted as the panchayat secretary in Tirunelveli's Thalaivettiyaan Paalayam, a village left almost untouched by modernity. The panchayat's chairperson, Meenakshi Devi (Devadarshini), is stuck at home doing household chores while her husband performs her role at work. The comedy is light and fresh, with simplicity its greatest asset. Streaming on Amazon Prime Video.

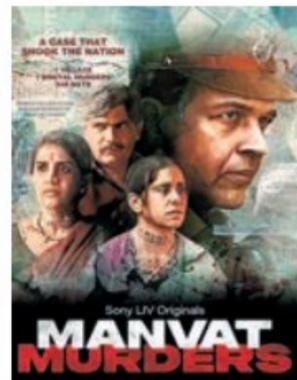
8 episodes, Tamil
Amazon Prime Video

The Completely Made-Up Adventures of Dick Turpin

Historical comedy
Dick Turpin was a notorious highwayman who was executed in 1739 in York for stealing horses. In later stories, he was made into a Robin Hood figure though he was anything but. This whacky comedy series, based on Harrison Ainsworth's 1834 novel, *Rookwood*, makes him into a jolly fool. Starring the musician and comedian of *The IT Crowd* fame, Noel Fielding, as Dick Turpin, the series has *Blackadder* vibes. It premiered in March 2024 on Apple TV+, and another season is in the making.

6 episodes, English
Apple TV+

Manvat Murders



Thriller, crime drama

The Hindi/Marathi series is based on the real-life incident of a series of killings in 1970s Maharashtra that left everyone aghast. Although the case, involving shamans, human sacrifice, a treasure hunt, was full of sensational elements, the series, to its credit, does not overplay them. Rather, the focus is on the deductive methods and plodding legwork of the police officer in

charge of the investigation, Ramakant Kulkarni, played by Ashutosh Gowariker. It is hard to come across a smartly made Indian police procedural, but *Manvat Murders* almost makes the cut. Based on Ramakant Kulkarni's 2004 memoir, *Footprints on the Sands of Crime*, *Manvat Murders* is streaming on SonyLIV from October 4.

6 episodes, Hindi/Marathi
Sony LIV

Grave of the Fireflies

Adult anime

The 1988 Studio Ghibli film directed by Isao Takahata, co-founder of Studio Ghibli, tells the story of the orphaned siblings Seita and Setsuko struggling to survive in Kobe, Japan, during the final days of the Second World War. The deeply moving animated film is considered to be a classic, and it is streaming on Netflix from September 16.

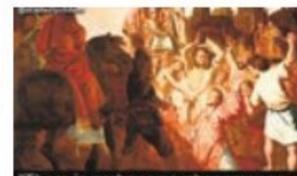
Japanese, 1h 28m
Netflix

YouTube channels

Academy of Idea

This channel with 1.88 million subscribers, sometimes criticised as a glorified self-help channel, has episodes on lofty topics like "Carl Jung and the Archetypes" or "How Adversity and Trauma can Make You Stronger".

www.youtube.com/@academyofideas



"There is perhaps no phenomenon which contains so much destructive feeling as 'moral indignation,' which permits envy or hate to be acted out under the guise of virtue."

Stepping Out



Jigra is co-produced

by Alia Bhatt's Eternal Sunshine Productions and Karan Johar's Dharma Productions.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Films

Jigra

Action, thriller

Alia Bhatt has made a mark in Bollywood by playing strong female leads. The Dasara season opens with *Jigra*, where Bhatt appears as "action hero" Satya, a woman who will stop at nothing to get her brother out of prison. Directed by Vasan Bala, *Jigra* tackles issues like disturbed childhood while underlining siblings' love. Vedang Raina, of *The Archies*' fame, plays Satya's brother, Ankur. He reprises the song "*Phoolo ka taaro ko*", from the 1971 film *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*.
Hindi & Telugu, 2h 33m
U/A

Vettaiyan

Cop drama

The other big Dasara film of the year is *Vettaiyan* (Hunter),

which has a jaw-dropping cast comprising Rajinikanth, Amitabh Bachchan, Fahadh Faasil, Rana Daggubati, Manju Warrier, Ritika Singh, and Dushara Vijayan. The action thriller marks Bachchan's Tamil debut. Playing a cop who prefers to stick to the rulebook, he has to fight with Rajinikanth's character, an encounter specialist who believes in taking the law into his own hands. With music by Anirudh Ravichander, the film has all the ingredients for success.

Tamil, 2h 45m
U/A

Art



Inked Worlds

This exhibition presents a dialogue between the works of Chhering Negi and Kanika Shah, two printmakers working on the themes of survival, identity, and environmental consciousness. Negi's practice bears the imprint of Spiti, a land of extremes where people fight a tough battle to survive. Shah's art explores personal and female identities, especially in the context of nature's cycles. Organised by Apre Art House, the show is on until October 22 at Kathiwada City House, Worli, Mumbai.
Mumbai

2024 Provoke Art Festival

The annual art festival celebrating creativity through music, dance, and other events, returns to Chennai in November. Taking place on November 2 and 3 at Music Academy, the festival will have performances by famous artists such as Shobana, Abhishek Raghuram, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Renjith, and Vijna. This festival seeks to underline the talents of artists who have redefined creativity by pushing the boundaries of the forms they practise.
Chennai

City walks

Shorewalk in Bandra

Sarmaya and Marine Life of Mumbai are presenting a unique opportunity for the intrepid traveller to dive into the mysteries of the Mumbai sea. It invites the curious by saying, "Pomfret, rawas, bombil, surmai, prawns... we all know and have our favourites among these fish. But have you ever slowed down and wondered what other marine life lives off of Mumbai's shores?" The event will take place on October 19, 5:30 pm, in Bandra. More on Sarmaya's website.
Mumbai



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UPGRADE
YOUR
WIFE NOW!

AI RANI: SUBSERVIENCE (Early 2000s version)



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