

Freedom is in Peril. Defend it with all you might Jawaharlal Nehru

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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

ECONOMY

KNOW YOUR
POPCORNS

The absurd logic of our
GST regime

► P2



NATION

THE DEVIL IN THE
ELECTORAL ROLLS

...and the real villain of
the piece

► P4



WORLD

BRACING FOR
TRUMP 2.0

Why India should expect no
favours from Modi's friend

► P7



Hold your breath, the Kumbh is nigh

Exclusion is the big highlight of the Maha Kumbh, not counting the luxury tents for the well-heeled faithful and other such excesses

Saiyed Zegham Murtaza

Bigger is better': bigger bangs, bigger business, bigger bucks. That seems to be the animating mantra of the Maha Kumbh Mela, a 45-day extravaganza starting 13 January.

The last Maha Kumbh was held in 2013, with the UP government claiming to have spent Rs 1,300 crore in making all the arrangements. In 2019, the Ardh Kumbh was allocated Rs 4,200 crore, the then Uttar Pradesh finance minister Rajesh Agarwal told news agency PTI. In 2025, the figure doing the rounds is Rs 7,500 crore, making this Maha Kumbh the costliest ever.

With some expenses being incurred by the Union government and agencies like the Indian Railways, it is not clear if the allocation also covers security, electricity and water supply. While the state government is expected to earn some revenue from the sale of tickets, accommodation and stalls, such collections will be a drop in the ocean.

A look at some of the figures reveals the leap between the Kumbh (held every three years) and the Maha Kumbh (held every 12 years). The Maha Kumbh of 2013 was spread over 1,600 hectares; the Ardh Kumbh (2019) occupied 3,200 hectares; this Maha Kumbh will sprawl over a designated area of over 4,000 hectares. Declared a district for the period of the 45-day festival, an estimated 400 million devotees are expected to attend from India and abroad. In 2013, the number was pegged at 120 million.

For the practising Hindu, a dip at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati rivers at Prayagraj (Allahabad) is believed to wash away the sins of many lifetimes. According to Hindu mythology, the churning of the ocean yielded the *kumbh* or pot of nectar, four drops of which are believed to have dropped at four locations: Haridwar, Ujjain, Nashik and Prayagraj. The cyclic hosting of the Kumbh mela every three years ensures each site features once every 12 years.

While the faithful come for prayers, many—irrespective of religious affiliation or lack thereof—come for the spectacle. This year, two features stand out. Non-Hindus, specifically Muslims, have been asked to stay away. Not only have Muslim vendors, who traditionally set up stalls, been barred, media reports in Hindi newspapers have cautioned pilgrims not to take vehicles driven by Muslims. No one has protested. A Muslim maulana did cause a stir by claiming that parts of the land being used belong to the Waqf Board, signifying that the land was donated by Muslims for public purposes. (Waqf means just that: a donation.)

The mela is being pitched like a massive PR event. While mandatory cutouts of Prime

Minister Modi and UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath have popped up across Delhi and Prayagraj, groups of saints and sects are aggressively promoting a Hindu Rashtira led by Yogi Adityanath as the chosen one after Modi.

The commercialisation of the Maha Kumbh is jaw-dropping. A private service provider is reported to have set up 44 'super-luxury' tents at the campsite. Each double-occupancy tent provides heating, running hot and cold water and 'butler services'. Guests who book them can 'meet-and-greet' sadhus exclusively, as well as avail of yoga, meditation sessions and guided tours of the various *akharas*. Each of these tents, which advertise panoramic views of the sangam and mela grounds, comes at a nightly pop of Rs 1 lakh! Clearly a pittance for the well-heeled, who seem have snapped them up. All 44 tents are apparently sold out for the six auspicious days, including the three '*shahi snan*' (royal bath) days of 14 and 29 January and 3 February.

The state government's allocation for the Maha Kumbh is possibly over and above the Rs 7,742 crore Ganga Expressway that connects Meerut with Prayagraj. The 594 km, greenfield, six-lane, controlled-access expressway is being developed in PPP (public-private partnership) mode, simultaneously in four parts—three by Adani Enterprises and one by IRB Infrastructure Developers. The Prayagraj airport has been upgraded at a cost of Rs 274 crore with the addition of a new terminal building and the expansion of the apron where planes are parked.

In 2019, 500 special trains were enough to service the Ardh Kumbh; in 2025, that number has been doubled. The state roadways will ply 7,000 buses on the highways that lead to Prayagraj and run around 550 shuttle buses from the city to the mela grounds. The Public Works Department (PWD) was assigned the construction of 400 km of temporary roads and 30 pontoon bridges over the Ganga. The state power department was instructed to install 67,000 LED lights and 2,000 solar hybrid lights, as well as two new power substations and 66 new transformers to ensure uninterrupted power supply during the 45-day event. The Uttar Pradesh Jal Nigam has laid a 1,249 km line to supply drinking water, besides installing 200 water ATMs and 85 water pumps.

Sources claim that the installation of 160,000 tents and 150,000 toilets (to be serviced by 15,000 sanitation workers) have been completed. In addition, seven riverfront roads, seven bus stands, nine paved ghats and 12 km of

Photos: Getty Images



Preparations in full swing for the Maha Kumbh 2025 in Prayagraj, UP. An estimated 400 million devotees from India and abroad are expected to attend the 45-day extravaganza



temporary ghats are under construction. More than 1.5 million square feet of murals and street paintings have been commissioned by the Prayagraj Mela Authority and over 2,000 CCTV cameras installed across the Maha Kumbh site and Prayagraj.

Those living in Prayagraj are bracing to stay indoors, or, if they can afford it, spend the next month-and-a-half away from their home town

Added attractions include food courts and amusement areas for children. For this makeshift city within a city, the administration is setting up a 100-bed central hospital, two 20-bed sub-centre hospitals, 25 first-aid posts, and keeping 125 ambulances on standby. If only India's under-served regions were lavished this kind of attention.

Surveillance will naturally be 'advanced' and 'extensive', with underwater, interceptor and tethered drones adding to human eyes.

Pilgrims will be tracked through 'attribute-based search cameras'. RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) wristbands will monitor each pilgrim's entry and exit time, while a mobile app will track their location around the clock.

Will the deployment of 40 per cent additional forces over the previous Kumbh and all the gizmos faithfully listed on the government website be enough to ease worries about crowd control and erase memories of 36 pilgrims killed in a stampede at Allahabad railway station in 2013? Who will watch the hackers and mischief-makers who have technology at their fingertips?

On 4 January, Ayush Kumar Jaiswal, a 22-year-old student from Bihar was arrested for issuing a bomb threat. Using a fake Instagram profile, with the assumed name of Nasir Pathan, Jaiswal warned of a bomb attack during the Maha Kumbh that would kill a thousand people. Mercifully, he was apprehended, but there are many Jaiswals on the loose today.

People who belong to the much-hated, easily reviled minority community can only hope for a peaceful end to the Maha Kumbh. Those living in Prayagraj are bracing to stay indoors, or, if they can afford it, spend the next month-and-a-half away from their home town. ■

Weapons of mass distraction

The (non-)issues that dominate the airwaves in the run-up to the elections early next month

Herjinder

If you were to judge by the election campaign and the TV debates, illegal migrants from Bangladesh and Rohingya refugees might be the biggest problems of the national capital. Not the city's alarming air pollution or its acute water scarcity, for example. The incumbent party's governance record is not quite in the frame even, as you might expect in the run-up to elections.

Both AAP and the BJP are busy trading charges over the inclusion of said 'illegals' in the electoral rolls. The rolls, incidentally, are not above suspicion (see *The devil in the electoral rolls*, page 4), but what makes them dubious is not the alleged inclusion of Rohingya refugees, as we're being led to believe.

In December 2024, Delhi lieutenant governor V.K. Saxena launched a 'crackdown' against Bangladeshi nationals living 'illegally' in the city. After two

weeks of police efforts, only 170 individuals were identified, less than three dozen detained, and a mere eight are currently being prepared for deportation to Bangladesh. A similar operation in 2022 identified around 1,000 'illegal' Bangladeshis residing in Delhi, including those who allegedly stayed on after their visas had lapsed.

As for Rohingya refugees, there are approximately 1,100 concentrated in four areas. Since they don't have voting rights, their electoral influence is not just negligible, it's non-existent. Assuming a fraction of illegal Bangladeshi and Rohingya refugees do get themselves added to the voter rolls, their impact would be statistically insignificant in a city with 33 million residents.

Yet, the election rhetoric continues to rhetor otherwise, creating the impression that the outcome hinges on these two groups.

Instead of addressing pressing concerns—pollution, traffic

congestion, water scarcity, waste management—verbal battles are being waged daily, with a cacophony of labels like *kattar imandar* (staunchly honest) versus *kattar beiman* (staunchly dishonest) and jibes about palaces and glass houses ('raj mahal' and 'sheesh mahal'). Who ordered the

demolition of temples? Why is the Pujari Granthi Samman Yojana being dragged out? Why so many freebies under the Chief Minister Mahila Samman Yojana? The airwaves are dominated by allegations, counter-allegations and as a wit aptly put it, 'weapons of mass distraction'.



A basti of Rohingya refugees in Delhi's Madanpur Khadar

A sensationalised narrative about illegals and a deliberate focus on polarising topics ensures that the electorate remains caught up in emotional debates, rather than demanding solutions to the systemic problems that define life in the capital.

The most persistent of these problems is pollution, with an Air Quality Index (AQI) 12 times higher than what is considered safe. Data reveals over 2.2 million children in Delhi are living with long-term health complications caused by exposure to such toxic air. A 2024 study by the University of Chicago estimated that pollution has slashed the average lifespan of Delhi residents by 11.9 years. A global survey conducted in 2022 by the US-based Health Effects Institute assessed pollution levels in 7,000 cities worldwide—Delhi was ranked the most polluted city on the planet.

In 2001, during Sheila Dikshit's tenure as chief minister, Delhi undertook an ambitious project

to transition its public transport system from diesel and petrol to compressed natural gas (CNG). This move resulted in a significant reduction in the levels of sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide. More than two decades later, the situation isn't better, it's worse.

The Delhi government's announcement on committing to replace DTC buses with electric vehicles is a step in the right direction. However, this effort is unlikely to make much of a difference, as these buses contribute only a small fraction to the city's overall vehicular emissions. What is glaringly absent, both in governance and in election discourse, is a concrete, actionable strategy to tackle the root causes. Despite the severity of the problem, pollution barely registers as a priority in ongoing political debates, leaving Delhi's residents to choke on the very air they breathe.

► Continued on page 2

India's 'middle class' delusion

If you're reading this piece, you can possibly do with a reality check on where you stand on India's economic ladder

Yogendra Yadav

In my teaching days, I often introduced my students to a game that revealed the true picture of India. I'd ask them to imagine a hundred-step ladder where every individual in the country stood according to their income—the poorest on the first step and the richest on the hundredth. I'd then ask them to place their family on this ladder. After hearing their answers, I'd present to them the real data. Disbelief would be writ large on their faces, and that is how their 'discovery of India' would begin, so to speak.

The Indian government recently released income data for rural and urban households for 2023-24; it is officially known as 'Household Consumption Expenditure Survey'. Economists have found that people either cannot or often do not want to accurately disclose their income, but when asked about their expenses, they are more forthcoming.

Based on information about daily food expenses and on other heads such as clothing, education, healthcare and entertainment, the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) estimates monthly per capita expenditure. For decades, this survey—conducted with large samples and by using credible methods—has been considered the most trusted source of data, forming the basis of many government policies.

Let's play the 'discovery of India' game using these figures. First, let's visit the home of Mr Krishnan, who recently got promoted to branch manager at a government bank. He earns 1.25 lakh per month, while his wife, a private school teacher, makes Rs 35,000. After living in a rented house, they bought a flat five years ago, where they now live with their two children. They own a modest car, and their son rides a motorcycle. There's an air conditioner in the bedroom. A typical 'middle-class family', you'd think.

Kanta works as domestic help in their house, earning Rs 8,000 a month, while her husband, Suresh, is a driver who makes Rs 15,000. Together, they support a family of five, including their three children, in a



The poorest families in India, often six members strong, make do with less than Rs 10,000 a month

Urban Indians, cocooned in relative privilege, have little to no idea of the harsh realities of the life of an average Indian. The truly poor are practically invisible. The real middle class is mistaken for the poor

would put Kanta around the 20th step, Krishnan between the 50th and 60th, and Khanna somewhere around the 80th or 90th. And this is where our understanding falters.

Let's test this perception against real data. According to the latest figures, the urban middle class—those between the 40th and 60th steps—spends less than Rs 4,000 per person per month. This means Kanta and Suresh, who run their family on Rs 20,000-25,000, are the true urban middle class. Urban households in the bottom 20 per cent can't even afford to spend Rs 3,000 per person per month.

On the other hand, any family that spends over Rs 20,000 per person per month is part of the top 5 per cent in urban India. Households that spend Rs 30,000 or more per person per month are in the top 1 per cent. So, whether they believe it or not, Mr Krishnan stands on the 95th step, and Mr Khanna is perched at the very top.

In rural India, the situation is even more grave. A family that spends Rs 7,000 per person per month (or Rs 35,000 for a family of five) belongs to the top 10 per cent. The rural middle class consists of families (of, say, five members) surviving on Rs 20,000 a month. The poorest families, often six members strong, make do with less than Rs 10,000 a month.

This, incidentally, is the national average, which hides worse regional disparities. Eastern states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Assam and eastern Uttar Pradesh fare the worst. In these regions, fewer than half the families can afford to spend even Rs 15,000 a month.

Countless iterations of the 'discovery of India' game have yielded the same conclusion—our understanding of India's economic stratification is deeply flawed. Urban Indians, cocooned in relative privilege, have little to no idea of the harsh realities of the life of an average Indian. The truly poor are practically invisible. The real middle class is mistaken for the poor and those at the top of the ladder are conveniently labelled the middle class. When will the country's ruling elite wake up from this comforting illusion? ■

How to eat your popcorn and tax it too

We've reached a point where our GST is now probably the most complex, illogical, avaricious and arcane tax in the world

Avay Shukla

I have little or no sympathy for those doubting Thomases who continue to question the stupendous growth of our economy. Such people should be packed off to one of the coral reefs around the Great Nicobar, which shall soon be ground to dust once the mega-crony project there takes off—it will serve them right. For, under the able guidance of she-who-does-not-eat- onions we have moved from being a 'pakoda economy' to a 'popcorn economy' by the wiseacres of the GST Council.

At the Council meeting on the Grasping Shifting Tax—in the third week of December 2024—it was decided to burst the bubble that has made billionaires out of those multiplex barons, what with popcorn costing more than your movie tickets! The soundest economic policy of all, according to Confucius, is that if you can't stop Peter from ripping off Paul, then at least ensure you get your share of Peter's booty.

And so, the GST on popcorn now has three separate rates, rising to 18 per cent for the caramelised, sugary variety. According to the halwa-eating lady, this is because when you caramelise the humble popcorn it becomes a sweet and should be taxed as such. (Notice the hair-splitting distinctions and the fine tuning done by our tax experts, who quite clearly have too much time on their hands.)

But here's a question for them that begs an answer: if one buys caramelised popcorn while watching a tax-exempted film like *The Kashmir Files* or *The Kerala Story* or *The Sabarmati Report*, will that popcorn also be exempt from GST? Since no one watches films in theatres these days without munching on popcorn, if the munchable is not made tax-free then no one is going to watch these movies, defeating the patriotic purpose behind making them tax-free. Then how does one keep the fake nationalist machine greased and going?

Just as there can be no FIR under the PMLA (Prevention of Money Laundering Act) if there is no FIR in the predicate offence, similarly there

should be no tax on popcorn if there is no tax on the movie itself. Makes sense, right?

A friend of mine who is still in government informs me, sotto voce, that the next target of the eagle-eyed Council will be the even humbler condom. Currently there is no GST on condoms, but by extending the caramelised popcorn logic, a GST of 18 per cent is likely to be imposed on flavoured condoms as they shall come into the category of either sweets or fruits, depending on the flavour fancied. Makes sense, if you ask me. With both sweets and fruits having become so expensive—with 18 per cent and 12 per cent GST, respectively, in case you didn't know—more and more people are getting their kicks out of flavoured condoms instead: strawberry, mango, chocolate, rajbhog etc.

According to a tweet by the CEO of Swiggy on 1 January 2025, condoms were among the most ordered items on the last day of December—1.12 lakh packets on Swiggy and 4,779 on Blinkit. And the overwhelming favourite were the chocolate flavoured ones! The finance ministry may just be on the right trail to reduce its deficit.

But wait, that's not all, dear reader, you haven't even begun to fathom the genius of our tax-men and women. It is also proposed that for condoms bought/ used out of wedlock, the GST rate shall be 28 per cent, for it then becomes a 'sin goods'. Brilliant, isn't it? One's marital status will be verified at the PoS, for which the government shall shortly be issuing, and making mandatory, another identity document—the BAM (Bespoke and Married) card.

The card shall have to be renewed every year, given the rising incidence of divorces. Divorcees shall have to pay the 28 per cent rate (if they still want to have sex, that is)—another clever move by this Vishwaguru government to discourage divorces.

Clearly, our GST mandarins have gone berserk. As one social media



influencer pointed out, the English had imposed a salt tax but our native-born tsars have gone one better by imposing a higher sugar tax. I'm told there's also a proposal to levy GST on the Sulabh Sauchalay. Currently the service charge for taking a leak in one of them is Rs 5, but there might now be a GST of 18 per cent levied for diabetics who use the facilities: they are passing sugar, you see.

Consider next the ubiquitous biryani, a legacy of the much-reviled Mughals but consumed by the tonne by our *sanatan dharma bhakts*. Swiggy's annual report for 2024 informs us that it was the highest-selling dish on their platform—83 million dishes, or 3 orders per second! There is no GST on fresh meat or rice, but put the two together in a biryani and, hey presto, it now has a GST of 12 per cent.

And that's not all. If you eat biryani in an airconditioned restaurant, you will have to shell out GST at 18 per cent; if you wolf it down in a 5-star hotel, the rate is 28 per cent. No wonder the astute Indian prefers to order it from Swiggy, where he pays 5 per cent tax—of course, the rate may go up if there's an egg in it!

However, to give the devil his due, our tax guys are faithful to that other adage of Confucius: if you must be stupid, at least be consistent in your stupidity. This to the point where our GST is now probably the most complex, illogical, avaricious and arcane tax in the world. As someone said: the best things in life are free, but sooner or later the government will find a way to tax it. It's not for nothing that the words 'taxman' and 'taxidermist' have the first three letters in common—the only difference is that whereas the latter takes only your skin, the former takes it all.

As far back as in 1947, Winston Churchill, while giving his famous doomsday prediction for India, had said that "a day will come when even air and water would be taxed in India". Ms. Sitharaman has the dubious distinction of making that prediction come true. ■

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Weapons of mass distraction

► Continued from page 1

Also worrying is the number of homeless people who struggle to survive Delhi's bitter winters. A 2024 survey conducted by the NGO Urban Rights Forum revealed that Delhi has over 300,000 homeless people (this does not include those living in the National Capital Region).

The city has only 197 night-shelters with a total capacity of 7,092 individuals. This leaves the majority of the homeless with no choice but to spend freezing nights huddled outside hospitals, on footpaths, railway platforms, overbridges, subways. With little or no protection, every cold wave leads to tragic consequences.

According to data from the Centre for Holistic Development, an average of nine people a day succumb to the cold during the peak winter season in Delhi. Despite the alarming figures, solutions from the Centre and the Delhi government remain rhetorical.

The problem of homelessness is exacerbated by the influx of people migrating to Delhi in search of employment. According to the Delhi government's economic survey, as many as 221,000 people moved to Delhi in 2022 and chose to settle permanently. This translates to an average of 605 new residents being added to Delhi's population every day. Delhi's current population is projected to surge to 5.5 crore over the next 25 years, which will strain the city's resources and already creaking infrastructure to breaking point. Without a comprehensive and forward-thinking plan, Delhi can only implode.

Rivers are regarded as the lifeline of cities. The Yamuna, which flows through the heart of Delhi, is reduced to little more than a polluted drain. According to the Central Pollution Control Board, a 100 millilitres of the Yamuna's water contain up to 1.1 million coliform bacteria, way beyond safe levels even for bathing. Delhi contributes significantly to this toxicity, dumping 58 per cent of its waste into the river. Every day, 800 million litres of untreated sewage and 440 million litres of industrial waste find their way to the Yamuna. Originating from the pristine glaciers of the Himalayas, the river becomes so polluted within Delhi that it carries it all the way downstream to Prayagraj.

The blame game between the BJP and AAP over the Yamuna's degradation is relentless. Neither party has presented a credible action plan. Both the Centre and the Delhi government had ample time—ten years—to initiate meaningful efforts to clean up the river. Yet, no substantial progress has been made. Even now, amidst political sparring, no concrete programmes or strategies have emerged to rescue the Yamuna from its dire state.

Delhi faces a daunting array of problems—too many vehicles, chronic traffic jams, deteriorating roads, inadequate education and healthcare facilities. The most pressing, and depressing, problem however remains the state of politics in the city. On one hand, former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal touts his administration's revolutionary changes in Delhi's education system. On the other, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accuses the AAP government of having destroyed it.

Regardless of where the truth lies, such narratives only serve to divert voters' attention from the core issues plaguing the city. Disarray defines the political climate in Delhi today, leaving its residents with nothing more than promises no one intends to keep. ■



Will GST be exempt on caramelised popcorn while watching a tax-free film like *The Sabarmati Report*?

A step forward... and a couple back

Can India find a way ahead with China?

Shastri Ramachandaran

On 27 December, the Chinese news agency *Xinhua* reported that the authorities in northwest Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region had announced the formation of two new counties, He'an and Hekang, in the Hotan Prefecture. Aksai Chin, which New Delhi claims is under Chinese occupation, falls in Hotan, known as Khotan in India.

Since the areas are in what India considers occupied territory, the MEA's reaction was not unexpected. What was strange, though, was that it came after a full week. On 3 January, MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said, "We have lodged a 'solemn protest' with the Chinese side through diplomatic channels. Parts of jurisdiction of these so-called counties fall in India's Union Territory of Ladakh".

Jaiswal added that India had "never accepted the illegal Chinese occupation" of its territory. "[The] creation of new counties will neither have a bearing on India's long-standing and consistent position regarding our sovereignty over the area nor lend legitimacy to China's illegal and forcible occupation of the same." China is not known to have reacted to the MEA spokesperson's statement, possibly because it sees it as a domestic compulsion.

It looked like India-China ties might be on the mend when Beijing and New Delhi came to an agreement on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in October 2024. This was followed by high-level meetings to normalise relations that had broken down after the violent military conflict in the Galwan Valley in June 2020. Soon after the pact for disengagement of Indian and Chinese troops in eastern Ladakh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping met in Russia's Kazan on 23 October. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar also had a meeting with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

This was followed by a revival of the dialogue between the special representatives (SRs) of the two countries on the boundary issue after a gap of five-and-a-half years. (SR-level talks had stalled following the

outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and Galwan.) India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval held talks with Wang Yi in Beijing on 18 December, which was seen as another positive step in normalising bilateral relations, until Beijing dropped the bombshell less than 10 days after the Doval-Wang meeting.

It is not yet known whether Doval had been given a hint of what was to come or it was deliberately kept a secret to be sprung after the conclusion of the scheduled SR meeting. Curiously, on 26 December, a day before the *Xinhua* report on the new counties, China's defence ministry had said that Chinese and Indian militaries are "comprehensively and effectively" implementing the agreement to end the standoff in eastern Ladakh and that "steady progress" was being made.

Chinese defence spokesperson Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang made the remarks during a media briefing. He said that in recent times, based on the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries, China and India had maintained close communication on the border situation through diplomatic and military channels and achieved "great progress...". The creation of two new counties and reiteration of plans to build a dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo river in Tibet (the Brahmaputra in India)—which would affect India as a lower riparian state—therefore came as a surprise.

China, in turn, may like to remind us of India's August 2019 action in Jammu and Kashmir, when Jaishankar was set for his first visit as external affairs minister to China (where he had been India's ambassador from 2009 to 2013). His visit came against the backdrop of China expressing concern over the scrapping of Article 370 and making Ladakh a Union Territory. Beijing said these actions were "unacceptable" as "China always opposed India's inclusion of Chinese territory in the western section of the China-India boundary under its administrative jurisdiction".

Jaishankar's China visit—finalised before J&K's special status was revoked and the state split into two UTs—was to



Indian Army personnel at Bumla pass at the India-China border in Arunachal Pradesh; (left) MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal

plan President Xi's visit to India for the second summit with Modi. This was to be a follow-up on the Wuhan meeting of April 2018 that renewed bilateral relations after the Doklam military standoff in 2017. Instead, he had to soothe the Chinese feathers ruffled by the J&K development.

Ashok Kantha, former ambassador to China who was also director of the Institute of Chinese Studies, underscores how little such diversions serve the larger objectives of the relationship. "We are rightly objecting to administrative measures by China in the territory occupied by them in the Western Sector, much the same way they keep protesting about our activities in Arunachal Pradesh or, earlier in 2019, when a new political map of India was released following the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir," Kantha said.

"India had also lodged a strong protest over the release of a new Chinese map in 2023, which showed the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin within China's borders. If the Chinese wish to play this game, so can we."

It may or not be coincidence that every high-level engagement between the two countries is either preceded by or followed by such provocations and consequent protests. While these may not really impede the measured steps to normalise relations, they can alter perceptions and be seized upon by powerful interests that do not want China and India to settle bilateral differences in their common interest. ■

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A litany of unfulfilled promises and brouhaha over free food

Navin Kumar

All 26.3 million beneficiaries of the Mahayuti's Ladki Bahin scheme may not benefit from it after all. The list is being reviewed by the ruling coalition that rolled out the pre-poll promise of raising the monthly cash allowance of Rs 1,500 to 2,100 if voted back to power. Cry foul? Or fair?

It seems more than 2 million beneficiaries are likely to be dropped. Welfare minister Aditi Tatkare announced that those beneficiaries also listed under Namo Shetkari and other direct benefits schemes were dropped to privilege "those who really deserve it".

With women farmers also having to decide whether they want to benefit from Namo Kisan Samman Yojana or not, the number of (dis)affected women is likely to be higher. Significantly, no such restrictions were imposed when the scheme was rolled out barely three months before the assembly election on 20 November 2024. In fact, district administrators were encouraged not to scrutinise the applications.

Tatkare also disclosed that if the beneficiaries of other cash-transfer schemes are receiving less than what the Ladki Bahin scheme promises, they will only be entitled to the difference. Those receiving a higher cash benefit would be dropped altogether, as would those whose combined annual family income exceeds Rs 2.5 lakh.

Not surprisingly, opposition leaders are crying foul. The hasty scheme had only one

goal in mind. Now that it's been achieved, the government is harping about efficiency and plugging loopholes, said Congress state president Nana Patole. The state government had budgeted Rs 46,000 crore to provide a monthly allowance of Rs 1,500 to all women in the age group of 21 to 60 years. Around Rs 200 crore was spent on promoting the scheme. The caution advised by the finance department was pointedly ignored and eligibility criteria were deliberately not disclosed. Clearly crafted for electoral gain, the Ladki Bahin Yojana should be seen as electoral malpractice, maintains the opposition.

Agriculture minister Manikrao Kokate admitted that the scheme has put undue pressure on the state's finances, which is why the government is unable to announce loan waivers for farmers. As many as 5.2 million farmers have reportedly not been paid the subsidies that were announced. Official sources confirm that subsidies amounting to Rs 716 crore for 2023-24 have been withheld. If, the minister stated, Maharashtra's precarious financial condition improves in the next six months, the government would consider the loan waivers. That's a big if. Meanwhile, a CAG report has pointed to the state government's gaping fiscal deficit and mounting public debt.

Increasing the amount payable under the Ladki Bahin Yojana was not the only electoral promise made by the Mahayuti coalition. The loan waiver for farmers, under the Kisan Samman Yojana, was supposed to go up from Rs 12,000 to

Rs 15,000. The poor were to get food security and housing. The old age pension was to be raised from Rs 1,500 to Rs 2,100. Prices of essential commodities were to be stabilised. A monthly stipend of Rs 10,000 was to be provided to 1 million students to help ease the burden on their families. As many as 2.5 million new employment opportunities were to be generated.

Anganwadi workers were to get a monthly honorarium of Rs 15,000. Electricity bills were to be reduced by 30 per cent. The minimum price for soyabeans was to be Rs 6,000 per quintal. Free rations were to be provided through the Akshaya Anna Yojana. Of this litany of promises, how many will the Fadnavis government fulfil?

Sign of the times

The lingo of leaders is expected to change before and after elections. Even so, the people of Maharashtra are startled by the insulting tone of leaders such as deputy CM Ajit 'Dada' Pawar.

Known for his snippy tongue, 'Dada' had once responded to a farmers' complaint about the non-availability of irrigation water by asking if they wanted him to urinate in their fields. Last year, when Maharashtra's gender ratio was reported to be skewed in favour of boys, Pawar had said women in the state would have to opt for multiple partners like Draupadi in the Mahabharata.

When a villager in Medad complained about not finding work, Pawar reportedly

said, "Just because you voted for me, it doesn't mean you have become my boss and [can] order me around." The stunned silence that followed was filled by Pawar blaming the people for his wife's defeat from Baramati in the Lok Sabha election.

Ajit Pawar isn't the only one. Other ruling alliance leaders have been equally offensive in public. Sanjay Gaikwad, the Shiv Sena MLA from Buldhana, said voters were worse than prostitutes. At a meeting convened to felicitate him, Gaikwad accused voters of having sold their votes for liquor, mutton and money. While a section of his audience may have been scandalised, others actually laughed aloud, encouraging the man.



Ajit Pawar

Pawar's current foul mood can perhaps be attributed to the state's poor finances—Dada holds the finance portfolio—and the fact that political pressure is building on him to sack his minister Dhananjay Munde, who stands implicated in the killing of Santosh Deshmukh, a sarpanch from Beed. While Pawar has promised justice to Deshmukh's family, he has been unable to get Munde to resign from the ministry despite all evidence pointing to his henchmen carrying out the murder.

A storm in a cookpot?

Former BJP MP Sujay Vikhe Patil has denounced the practice of distributing free food at the Sai Prasadalaya in Shirdi. It should be stopped forthwith, everyone should pay Rs 25 for the food and the proceeds should be spent on the education of children. "The whole country," he reportedly said, "is eating here for free, and all the beggars in



BJP MP Sujay Vikhe Patil

Maharashtra have gathered here."

Devotees have taken umbrage at being called beggars and have condemned Patil, whose father Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil is the state's water resources minister and MLA from Shirdi for the past 35 years. The minister has not condoned his son's controversial statement. Devotees point out that Patil Jr is not involved in the management of Sai Prasadalaya and has made no contributions. While the well-off and VIPs are expected to pay Rs 50 for a meal, the free food is funded by donations. If the organisation is happy to do this, who is he to object, they ask. Does he want those donations to line his own pocket?

For over a century, Shirdi has drawn devotees to Sai Baba's samadhi. Every year, millions visit Shirdi and donate cash, gold, silver and other valuables. In 2022, donations worth over Rs 400 crore were recorded. The Shirdi Mahotsav, held between 25 December 2024 and 2 January 2025 drew a collection of Rs 16.61 crore. Said to be the third-richest temple in the country, its assets are estimated to be worth Rs 20,000 crore.

It seems the Sai Sansthan Trust extends financial assistance to build roads and infrastructure like airports, and donated Rs 51 crore to the state government to fight the coronavirus in 2020. In 2018, when the then Fadnavis government was facing a financial crisis, the Trust gave an interest-free loan of Rs 500 crore to the government to complete the Neelwande irrigation project, without stipulating any deadline for repayment.

Is this a storm in a cookpot? Or is there more to it that meets the ire? ■



Agriculture minister Manikrao Kokate admitted that the Ladki Bahin scheme has put undue pressure on the state's finances, which is why the government is unable to announce loan waivers for farmers

The devil in the electoral rolls

There is compelling evidence of illegitimate additions and deletions from the electoral rolls, but the ECI is unfazed

A.J. Prabal

In December 2024, digital media outlet *Newslaundry* published a three-part report on the deletion of voters from electoral rolls in three Lok Sabha constituencies—Meerut and Farrukhabad in Uttar Pradesh and Chandni Chowk in Delhi. The survey was conducted over three months after Lok Sabha results were declared on 4 June.

The *Newslaundry* team led by Sumedha Mittal spoke to voters whose names had been deleted, to booth-level officers (BLOs) deployed to knock on doors to crosscheck claims of change of address or death and to Election Commission officials. The reports, which have been up on the website for more than three weeks, seem to have elicited no rebuttal from the Election Commission despite the damning details they contain.

In Meerut, the team discovered voter cards with the address given as ‘Uttar Pradesh’, ‘Jhuggi’ or ‘Naya’—86 such on voter lists at booth number 305 of Meerut Cantonment. In the same booth, around 240 voters are registered with RHA Colony as their address. The colony, however, does not exist! Vikas Chaudhary, postman at the head post office in Meerut Cantonment told the team, “You’re right—RHA Colony does not exist... bogus voters have become a big problem across Meerut. A couple of months back, I was tasked with distributing new voter cards sent by the EC, but had to dump thousands of them at the local election office as I could not find their addresses.”

Another report noted: “Three generations of Amjad’s family live in the dense cluster of houses known as Haveli Azam Khan in the Chandni Chowk constituency. The neighbourhood is walking distance from Delhi’s historic Jama Masjid... 23 members of the family are registered voters at polling booth number 10. But during the Lok Sabha elections in 2024, Amjad discovered that he was among the 20 people from his family who had been struck off the voters list on the pretext that they had shifted residence.”

“This is the first time we faced this,” Amjad, 55, told *Newslaundry*. The most frustrating thing was learning that they’d been deleted on polling day. “When we first went to booth 10, they told us they could not find our name in the voters’ lists, so we should check another booth in Jama Masjid. From there, we were sent to another booth... we visited five to six booths. And then finally, the reason given was that probably during the house-to-house survey, the BLO could not find us at home, so she struck off our names.”

The report states: ‘Amjad is among 36,815 voters who were deleted in 1,377 booths across the Lok Sabha constituency of

Chandni Chowk... many of these voter list revisions were in violation of the Election Commission’s norms.’

At his last press conference as Chief Election Commissioner on 7 January, Rajiv Kumar dismissed all allegations of largescale addition or deletion of names from electoral rolls. “India is a gold standard of elections,” he said. “All parties have the right to appoint booth-level parties (BLAs) to participate in the revision process... all claims and objections are shared with all political parties and no deletions are carried out without the statutory Form 7, the application form available online for filing objections to include or delete voters from the electoral roll.”

Hours earlier on the same day, Sumedha Mittal posted that the deletion rate was 24 per cent in one of the booths in Chandni Chowk. ‘I found 147 cases of wrongful deletions. Take the case of Nafees Ahmad and his wife Saira Bano. They’ve been voters for decades [and] had voted in the 2022 Delhi municipal elections. But ahead of the 2024 polls, their names were deleted. The voter list claimed Nafees was dead [and] Bano had shifted home. I found this to be false... during my field survey in Jama Masjid, I found several deletions in nearly every second Muslim household. Booth-level officers admitted to the errors, explaining that some names were removed because voters’ homes were found locked. When we asked the Election Commission why Chandni Chowk had a higher deletion rate, they claimed it was due



As per media reports, there were largescale deletions from electoral rolls in Muslim-populated areas in Delhi before the 2024 Lok Sabha polls

to a large population of migrant labourers and slum dwellers. [...] Furthermore, all 147 voters whose names were wrongfully deleted reported that they [had] never received any notice prior to the deletions. They only found out when they went to vote.’

In his presser on 7 January, the CEC made no mention of the complaint filed by Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav, alleging the deletion of 20,000 Yadav/Muslim voters in each of UP’s 403 constituencies before the 2022 assembly elections. Officials said the Samajwadi Party was asked to submit documentary proof as there was no provision in law for an electoral roll based on caste or religion. Akhilesh Yadav claimed his party had submitted proof with several thousand sworn affidavits but had not heard from the Commission in the past two years.

In December 2024, Maharashtra Congress leaders claimed that a large number of voters had been arbitrarily deleted from the electoral rolls after the Lok Sabha election, and around 10,000 voters added in every assembly constituency. In the words of the

unprecedented the EC: ‘Maharashtra witnessed an unpreceded increase of an estimated 47 lakh voters being added to the electoral roll between July 2024 [and] November 2024 [...] It is significant to note that out of the 50 assembly constituencies where there was an average increase of 50,000 voters, the ruling regime and its allies won in 47.’

They claimed to have raised the issue a month before polling day but no action was taken. They also cited the FIR registered by a voter registration officer at Dharashiv cyber police station against a large number of fake voter registrations in Tuljapur assembly seat.

The district electoral officer (DEO) of New Delhi conceded the allegation made by AAP parliamentarian Sanjay Singh that two applications were filed on 25 and 26 December 2024 to delete his wife’s name from the voter list. The election officer reported: ‘Upon field verification, the booth-level officers found her [Mr. Singh’s wife] residing at the given address, and both Form 7 applications were rejected. Additionally, an FIR was lodged against the objectors for wrongful filing

of Form 7.’

Arvind Kejriwal, who is contesting from the New Delhi constituency, claimed that applications had been filed since mid-December to delete the names of 5,000 voters.

Most of the objectors seeking deletion of Muslim voters in Muslim localities seemed to be non-Muslims. The forms shared with BLOs in Delhi do not carry addresses, just the first names of the objectors. With practically anybody able to object online under assumed identities, how are door-to-door checks being conducted, and what action has been taken against fake objectors?

The DEO held that according to the guidelines of the Election Commission, the summary of Form 7, including the names of both objectors and objectees, is shared on a weekly basis with all recognised political parties. This information is uploaded on the official website of CEC Delhi for public access. Mere submission of Form 7 does not lead to deletions.

Even if that were true, can the ECI put the onus of ensuring the veracity of the electoral rolls on voters and political parties? ■

The war over places of worship

The Places of Worship Act was meant to draw a clear line between India’s medieval history and its current affairs, writes Aakar Patel

The Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991 is a law to ‘prohibit conversion of any place of worship and to provide for the maintenance of the religious character of any place of worship as it existed on the 15th day of August, 1947’.

This is an unusually phrased law which says temples, mosques, churches, stupas, gurdwaras and so on will remain as they were in 1947. Meaning that the religion that was practiced in that structure would continue to be practiced. Why was it legislated? To prevent more incidents like

the Babri Masjid demolition. It could not be clearer in phrasing or in intent.

However, laws have rarely stopped things from happening in India, even in the courts.

In 2019, following the Supreme Court’s verdict handing over the Babri site to a temple, a petition was taken up in an Uttar Pradesh court regarding the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi. The court directed the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to conduct a survey, despite historians clearly recording that the mosque was built over an existing temple razed by Aurangzeb in

1669. The Places of Worship Act was meant to avoid precisely such medieval history from becoming current affairs.

The matter went to the Supreme Court in 2022. Here, D.Y. Chandrachud, who had authored the Babri judgment, made an observation that would prove to be devastating. He said the ‘ascertainment of the religious character’ of a place was not prohibited by the Places of Worship Act. Presumably meaning that people were free to bring to court suits to that effect.

He allowed the continuing of the

‘survey’, which came to be claimed around a fountain, the Hindu side claimed was a ‘Shivling’. In 2023, the Varanasi district court asked the ASI to ascertain whether the mosque was “constructed over a pre-existing structure of a Hindu temple”.

Predictably, these events have led to a number of judges in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and elsewhere admitting petitions that sought to ‘ascertain the religious character’ of mosques built in medieval India, and ordering surveys.

Demands for surveys on places of worship include the Adhai Dai Ka Jhonpra mosque in Agra—built in 1199 by Qutb-ud-Din Aibak (who also built the Qutb Minar in Delhi)—and the Ajmer dargah of Moinuddin Chishti, who died in 1236. The mosque, already an ASI-protected site for its historical value, was now subject to the BJP’s speaker in the state assembly demanding an ASI survey to find out if the claim was true that it had been a Sanskrit college earlier. The dispute over Lucknow’s largest mosque, Teelawali Masjid, was centred around a claim that it was built by Shah Jahan’s governor over a platform named after Lakshman.

In Badaun, the Jama Masjid Shamsi, built under Iltutmish (who also died in

1236) was claimed by the Akhila Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha. The Atal Bhasidhi in Jaunpur is, according to the government’s tourism website, ‘the ideal for the construction of the other mosques of Jaunpur’. A group named Swaraj Vahini Association has moved court demanding the right to worship inside it.

In March 2024, the 13th-century Bhodhshala Pradesha Maula complex in Madhya Pradesh’s Dhar district became the latest site for a ‘scientific survey’ by the ASI following an order from Madhya Pradesh High Court.

In November 2024, a court in western UP heard a petition on the Sambhal Jama Masjid. The court ordered a survey of the mosque premises, which took place on the same day (19 November).

The team returned for a second visit early on Sunday (24 November) and a rumour spread that it was digging under the mosque. A crowd of protesters gathered, and the police shot dead five of them. We can attribute this tragedy directly to the remarks made by Chandrachud in the Supreme Court, which, as experts have noted, have no binding authority. Those words have not been recorded in the order, and exist merely because they were reported at the moment they were uttered. The Supreme Court did not stay or undo the Places of Worship Act. It remains in force and unless a structure was actively used by multiple faiths on 15 August 1947, it cannot be brought to court in a dispute.

And yet as we can see, the number of cases is rising, with structures that are seven centuries old being claimed as disputed property. For those who, like this writer, were adults when the Ayodhya dispute began to bubble, before bursting to boiling point and becoming the core issue of politics for three decades, these events are alarming. Too much national energy and blood has been expended over it.

In December 2024, the Supreme Court stopped courts from registering new suits. It also said no interim or final orders could be passed in the pending suits until it decided on the validity of the Places of Worship Act.

The court will hear the matter again soon. That is when we may learn what the Modi government’s position on the law is. All governments are expected to defend the law, but it is unclear what the stand of this government is, headed as it is by the party that benefited from the movement that led to the legislation of the Places of Worship Act. ■



Police deployment outside the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi

...and yet, as we can see, the number of cases is rising, with structures that are seven centuries old being claimed as disputed property

Views are personal

Big thrust to labour welfare

Karnataka Government increases contributions to Labour Welfare Fund

The Labour Welfare Fund supports several critical initiatives, including housing, healthcare, education, and skill development programs for workers.

52 lakh workforce in organised sector is set to benefit from this amendment

The passage of the Karnataka Labour Welfare Fund (Amendment) Bill, 2024, marks a significant step in enhancing the welfare of the state's workforce by increasing the labour welfare corpus fund.

The bill proposes to increase the contributions made to the Labour Welfare Fund from workers, employers, and the government. The government's move is aimed at addressing the growing gap between the funds collected and the expenditure required to support welfare initiatives for organized labour in Karnataka.

Karnataka Congress government tabled this labour welfare Bill during the Winter legislature session held at the Suvarna Soudha, Karnataka's second secretariat building, in the border district of Belagavi.

The Karnataka Labour Welfare Fund (Amendment) Bill, 2024, is a timely response to the increasing financial demands of labour welfare.

By revising contributions from all stakeholders, the state aims to secure the necessary resources for the well-being of its organised workforce, that is now estimated to be around 52 lakh in the state. This progressive move underscores the government's commitment to fostering a supportive environment for organized labour and ensuring their socio-economic development.

Key Highlights of the Bill

Under the amended provisions: Workers will now contribute Rs 50 annually (up from Rs 20) Employers' contributions will rise to Rs 100 (from Rs 40) The government will also increase its contribution to Rs 50 (from Rs 20).

With this amendment the labour welfare corpus fund is likely to

garner around Rs 200 crore annually up from the present Rs 80 crore.

Piloting the bill, Labour Minister Santosh Lad highlighted the concept of labour welfare fund was introduced in 1969, for the first time in the state when the Congress was in power.

According to him the latest amendment would entail the Workers to contribute Rs 50 annually (up from Rs 20) Employers' contributions will rise to Rs 100 (from Rs 40) The government will also increase its contribution to Rs 50 (from Rs 20).

It is interesting to note that of the five amendments made to this clause since 1969, the successive Congress governments have effected this welfare

measure for four times ie, 1969, 1994, 2017 and 2024. These amendments stand testament to the firm commitment to Congress's unbridled support for the cause of labour welfare.

The bill received widespread approval from MLAs across party lines, reflecting a shared commitment to improving labour welfare in Karnataka.

Why the Amendment is Crucial

The Labour Welfare Fund supports several critical initiatives, including housing, healthcare, education, and skill development programs for workers. Over the years, the rising costs of these welfare measures have outpaced contributions, necessitating the revision. By increasing the collection amount, the state government aims to ensure sustainable funding for these essential programs.

This reform also provides an opportunity to innovate and expand

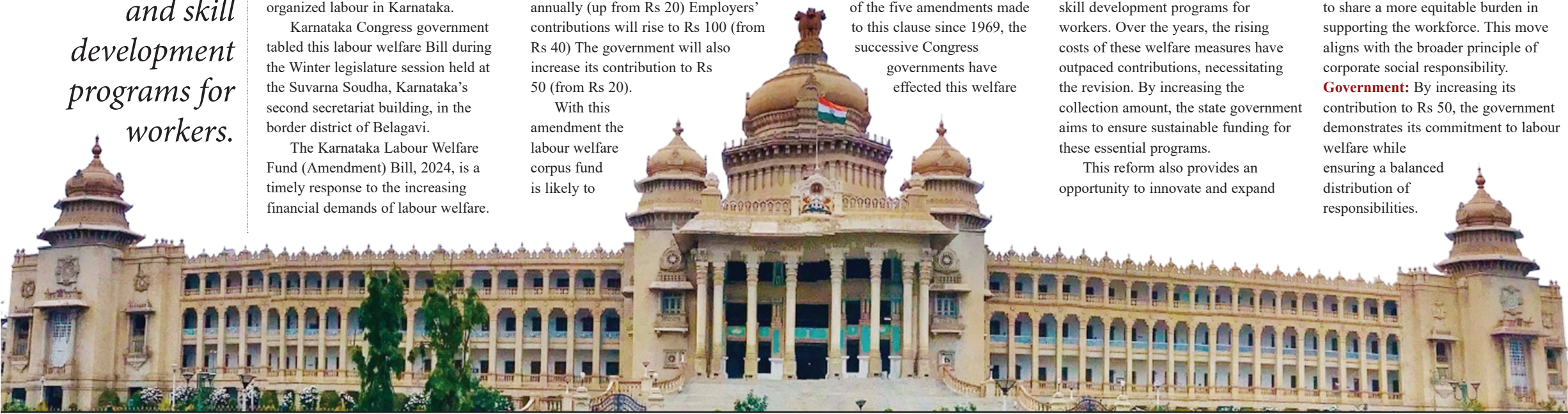
welfare programs. Digital tools and technology can be leveraged to streamline fund management and improve access to welfare benefits.

Impact on Stakeholders

Workers: Although the increased contribution of Rs 50 per year may appear minor, the cumulative impact on welfare schemes is significant. The enhanced funding will enable better services and resources for organized labour.

Employers: With the new contribution set at Rs 100, employers are expected to share a more equitable burden in supporting the workforce. This move aligns with the broader principle of corporate social responsibility.

Government: By increasing its contribution to Rs 50, the government demonstrates its commitment to labour welfare while ensuring a balanced distribution of responsibilities.



Labour welfare since 1969



The Karnataka Labour Welfare Fund Act has seen five amendments. The Act was amended for the fifth time in December 2024.

According to the data, Chief Minister Veerendra Patil led government in 1969 introduced by entail the Workers to contribute Re 1 annually Employers' contributions to Rs 2 and the state government contribution remained at Re 1.

Until 1994, no amendments were brought to this law, under the Chief Minister, M Veerappa Moily, government introduced amendment to increase the contributions – Workers to Rs 3 (Up from Re 1), Employer share to Rs 6 (Up from Rs 2) and state's share went to Rs 3 (from Re 1).

In 2011, the government led by Chief Minister, D V Sadanada Gowda amended the clause to raise the contributions – Workers to Rs 6 (Up from Rs 3), Employer share to Rs 12 (Up from Rs 6) and state's share went to Rs 6 (from Rs 3).

In 2017, under the Chief Minister, Siddaramaiah and Labor welfare minister, Santhosh Lad, government decided to hike the contribution - Workers to Rs 20 (Up from Rs 6), Employer share to Rs 40 (Up from Rs 12) and state's share went to Rs 20 (from Rs 6).

In 2024, the government under the stewardship of Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Labour minister Santhosh Lad contributions were raised again - Workers to Rs 50 (Up from Rs 20), Employer share to Rs 100 (Up from Rs 40) and state's share went to Rs 50 (from Rs 20).

Origin of the Department

The Department of Labour in Karnataka was established in the year 1935 and will set centenary celebrations in the year 2035. The Department is instrumental in resolving industrial disputes arising between employers and employees through a tripartite conciliation mechanism, thereby fostering harmonious relationships between them and ensuring optimum productivity. Thereby, the Department of Labour being a very important wing of the Government contributes to the economic progress of the State.

Vision of the Department

Making Karnataka a model state for global investment and progressive industrial production based on the twin principles of decent quality employment generation and inclusive all-round development of the working class by designing and implementing feasible creative approaches and pragmatic operational strategies.

Mission of the Department

To evolve model frameworks in respect of Labour Legislation, Policies, Action Plans, Schemes and Programmes by involving all the parties vitally concerned and implementing the same using advanced technologies so as to

To make Karnataka as a preferred destination of domestic and foreign investment hub of talented, skilled, productive and meritocratic pool of human capital.



Photo: GettyImages

achieve efficiency and effectiveness in reaching the target group and thereby ensuring Karnataka's competitiveness in the Domestic and Global market as a preferred destination for investment and decent quality employment generation.

Aim of the Department

To evolve and implement progressive reform measures which usher in the inclusive development of productive partners namely employees and employers and to achieve peaceful, symbiotic and harmonious industrial relations in the State by creating congenial atmosphere for socio-economic development through pro-active labour administration.

Objectives of the Department

- 01 To implement the labour laws for ensuring decent and qualitative living and working standards for employees.
- 02 To strive to ensure labour market security, employment security, economic security and socio-income security for the working population both in organized and unorganized sectors of the economy.
- 03 To create a conducive and enabling eco-system for rapid generation of decent employment through attraction of large scale private and public investment.
- 04 To foster symbiotic relationship between the workers and employers and minimization of adversarial labour relations in the state.
- 05 To strengthen, modernize and energize labour administration by re-structuring of the Department and equip it with requisite infrastructure, intellectual resources, and advanced technologies and by providing life-long continued education to the officials and functionaries.
- 06 To create a decent and enabling environment and cater to special needs for women workers in workplaces.
- 07 To strengthen the culture of Research and Development (R&D) in the Department by involving reputed Academic Bodies and Professional Research Institutes.
- 08 To design and implement schemes and programmes aimed at continuously raising the quality of life of the unorganized workforce, by putting in place basic lifeline social security as well as consolidating social security made available by different Ministries and Departments as well as society at large.
- 09 To strengthen the service-delivery mechanisms in the Department of Labour by creating on-line and time-bound systems for issuance of approvals under various labour laws.
- 10 To document success stories concerning the working of tripartite social partners and replicate the same with appropriate local adaptations.
- 11 To review the working of labour legislations, rules and subordinate notifications and to identify the bottlenecks, problem areas, and recommend feasible amendments and changes for their improvement.
- 12 To design measures and programmes for improving safety, security, health, welfare and environment standards for all workers at workplaces.
- 13 To design schemes and programmes and thereby create an enabling eco-system for the meaningful implementation of Labour Standards of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in the State.
- 14 To evolve a Protocol and implement the same for protecting the inter-state and intra-state migrant labour against exploitation, discrimination and safeguard their rights and interests.
- 15 To strengthen the statutory Boards created for the welfare of organized and unorganized workers towards unified and beneficial management of their funds, keeping in view

- long-term sustainable social security needs of the vulnerable groups, in the State.
- 16 To evolve mechanisms for continuous social dialogue involving tripartite social partners and others vitally concerned with the issues at different levels so as to make Karnataka a hub of democratic consultation and broad consensus based labour administration.
- 17 To evolve and experiment non-statutory models of alternative schemes and programmes, based on voluntary co-operation of multi-partite social partners for the betterment of the working class.
- 18 To work-out Guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) with a view of achieving transparency in employer employee relationship and motivate officials and organizations to work with mutual cooperation.
- 19 To make Karnataka as a preferred destination of domestic and foreign investment hub of talented, skilled, productive and meritocratic pool of human capital.

6 PRECARIOUS LIVES

Their dammed future

First they had to move to make space for tigers and now it's the Ken-Betwa river linking project. Do these Adivasi lives matter?

Priti David

The SDM (sub-divisional magistrate) came in June and said, "Here's a notice to leave." Babulal Adivasi points to the large banyan tree at the entrance to his village Gahdara—the place where community meetings are held—and now the spot where the future of his people changed in a day. Thousands of residents of 22 villages in and around the Panna Tiger Reserve (PTR) in Madhya Pradesh have been asked to give up their homes and land for a dam and a river-linking project. Final environmental clearances came as far back as 2017, and tree cutting has started in the national park. But imminent eviction threats have gained momentum. In the pipeline for over two decades, the project is a Rs 44,605 crore plan (Phase I) to link the rivers Ken and Betwa with a 218-kilometre long canal.

The project has been widely criticised. "There is no justification for the project, not even hydrological justification," says scientist Himanshu Thakkar who has been involved in the water sector for 35 years. "To begin with, the Ken does not have surplus water. There has been no credible assessment or objective study, only pre-determined conclusions," he adds. Thakkar is coordinator of the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP). He was a member of the expert committee set up around 2004 by the ministry of water resources (now renamed as jal shakti ministry) on the interlinking of rivers. He says the very basis of the project is shocking. "River linking will have huge environmental and consequent social impacts on forest, river, biodiversity and will impoverish people here as well as in Bundelkhand and far beyond."

The dam's 77-metre high reservoir will drown 14 villages. It will also drown core tiger habitat, cut off critical wildlife corridors, and so eight other villages like Babulal's have been handed over by the state to the forest department as compensatory land.

So far, nothing unusual. Lakhs of rural Indians, especially Adivasis, are routinely displaced to make way for cheetahs, tigers, renewable energy, dams and mines.

The stupendous success of Project Tiger, now in its 51st year with 3,682 tigers per 2022 tiger census, has come at great cost to India's indigenous forest communities. These communities are among the nation's most deprived citizens.

In 1973 India had nine tiger reserves, today we have 53. For every tiger we've added since 1972, we have displaced on average 150 forest dwellers. That too, is a

Photos: Priti David



Babulal Adivasi from Gahdara; (right) the banyan tree where community meetings were held; (below) Mahasingh Rajbhor is a cattle herder in Sukhwaha, one of the villages that will be drowned; village women return home after gathering firewood



serious underestimate.

It's not ending. On 19 June 2024, a letter issued by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) called for moving lakhs more—591 villages across the country will be moved on a priority basis.

Panna Tiger Reserve (PTR) has 79 of the great cats and when the dam drains a large part of core forest area, they must be compensated. Babulal's land and home in Gahdara must go for the tigers. She put: it's the forest department being 'compensated', not the displaced villagers who are losing their homes forever.

"We will reforest it," says Anjana Tirki, deputy forest officer of Panna range. "Our job is to convert it into grassland and manage the wildlife," she adds, unwilling to comment on the agroecological aspects of the project.

On conditions of anonymity though, officials admit that the best they can do is only grow plantations to compensate for the 60 sq km of dense and biodiverse forest that will drown. This, just two years after UNESCO included Panna in the World Network of Biosphere Reserves. What will be the hydrological implication of cutting down some 46 lakh trees (as per the assessment given at a Forest Advisory Committee meeting in 2017) from natural forest has not even been assessed.

Tigers are not the only hapless wild residents. The area is also an important nesting site for the Indian vulture that is on the IUCN Red List for Critically Endangered birds. Besides there are many large herbivores and carnivores who will lose habitat.

Babulal is a small farmer with a few bigas of rain-fed land which he relies on to feed his family. "Since no date was given for

leaving, we thought we would plant some *makkai* (maize) so that we could feed ourselves." As he and hundreds of others in the village got their fields ready, forest rangers appeared. "They told us to stop. They said, 'we will bring a tractor and crush your fields if you don't listen'."

Showing *PARI* his fallow land he grumbles, "Neither have they given us our full compensation so that we can move, nor have they allowed us to continue living and sowing here. We are asking the government that as long as our village is here, let us farm our fields... or what will we eat?"

Loss of ancestral homes is another blow. A visibly distressed Swami Prasad Parohar tells *PARI* that his family has lived in Gahdara for over 300 years. "We had income from farming, from forest produce like mahua and tendu. Now where will we go? Where will we die? Where will we drown, who knows?" The 80-year-old worries that coming generations will lose all touch with the jungle.

The river linking project is just the latest land grab by the state for 'development'.

In October 2023 when the final sanctions for the Ken-Betwa River Linking Project (KBRLP) came through, it was welcomed with cheers by then BJP chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. He called it a "fortunate day for the people of Bundelkhand who had lagged behind". He made no mention of the thousands of farmers, herders, forest dwellers and their families in his state that it would deprive. Nor did he see that the forest clearance was awarded on the basis that power generation would be outside the PTR, but now it is inside.

The idea of linking surplus with deficient river basins started in the 1970s, and the National Water Development Agency (NWDA) was born. It began studying the possibility of 30 links across rivers in the country—a 'grand garland' of canals.

The Ken originates in the Kaimur hills of central India and is part of the Ganga basin, meeting the Yamuna in Banda district of Uttar Pradesh. On its 427-km journey, it passes through the Panna Tiger Reserve. The village of Dhodan inside the park is the site for the dam.

Running far west of the Ken is the Betwa. The KBRLP aims to take water from a 'surplus' Ken and send it upslope to the 'deficient' Betwa. Linking the two is expected to irrigate 343,000 hectares in water-deficient areas of Bundelkhand, an economically backward region and votebank. But in fact, scientists say the

project will facilitate export of water from Bundelkhand to areas of upper Betwa basin, outside Bundelkhand.

The notion that the Ken has surplus water needs to be questioned, says Dr. Nachiket Kelkar. The dams that already exist on the Ken, such as the Bariyarpur barrage, Gangau dam and one at Pawai, should have provided for irrigation. "When I visited Banda and surroundings along the Ken some years back, I regularly heard that irrigation water was not available," adds this ecologist at the Wildlife Conservation Trust.

Researchers from SANDRP who walked the length of the river in 2017 wrote in a report, "...the Ken is now not a perennial river everywhere... For a longer part, the river runs flowless and waterless."

Ken itself has an irrigation deficit, so what it can give to Betwa will compromise its own command area. A point echoed by Nilesh Tiwari who has lived all his life in Panna. He says there is a lot of anger about the dam as it will permanently deprive people of Madhya Pradesh while seeming to benefit neighbouring Uttar Pradesh.

"The dam will drown lakhs of trees, thousands of animals. People (forest dwellers) will lose their freedom, they will be rendered homeless. People are angry, but the State is not paying attention," says Tiwari.

"Somewhere, they (government) set up a national park, somewhere a dam in this river and on that... and people are displaced, moved out..." says Janka Bai whose home in Umrawa is swallowed by the expanding PTR in 2015. In her 50s, the Gond tribal has been fighting for adequate compensation for a decade now. She points out that her land, taken for the tigers, will now have a resort. "See, here is the land they have surveyed for tourists to come and stay, after throwing us out."

On the eastern side of the PTR in Gahdara, the situation is no different. "The collector (of Panna) said we will re-establish you as you were. It will be to your convenience. We will rebuild this village for you," says Parohar. "Nothing has been done, and now we are being told to leave."

The amount of compensation is also not clear and many figures are floating around—between Rs 12-20 lakh for each male over 18 years. People here ask: "Is that per head or for each family? What about where women are the head? Will they compensate us for the land and animals separately?"

In every village that *PARI* visited, no one knew when and where they would go, or the exact amount of compensation. People of 22 villages seem to be living in a state of suspended animation. ■

Courtesy: People's Archive of Rural India (PARI)



A total of 14 villages inside PTR will be lost forever; (right, L-R) Paramalal, Sudama Prasad, Sharad Prasad, Birendra Pathak and Swami Prasad Parohar of Gahdara village say they have no idea when the full and final settlement will come



"River linking will have huge environmental and consequent social impacts on forest, river, biodiversity and will impoverish people here as well as in Bundelkhand"



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Will Trump ease India’s security nightmare?

Donald Trump is unlikely to lose sleep over India’s troubles with its neighbours, including China and Bangladesh

Ashis Ray

The Narendra Modi government’s hankering for H-1B US visas for Indian citizens is demeaning for any proud Indian. Such a bent of mind can be defended if the purpose is to go and work for a subsidiary or affiliate of an Indian company, thereby rendering it competitive in the face of international competition. When foreign firms absorb the skilled, it constitutes a loss of talent to a rival. Such a brain drain is not in the national interest.

Outward migration indicates a worrying failure to create jobs at home. It is for the government to incentivise Indian industry as well as foreign multinational corporations to establish shop in India, so that the workforce produced by the prestigious IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology) and other institutions benefit the Indian economy first and foremost. Instead—and more so in the last decade—the IITs have become factories for exportable manpower. Rather than lament this loss, the Modi regime pats itself on the back when Indians or foreign nationals of Indian origin become CEOs of commercial giants in the US.

Right now, though, Raisina Hill waits with baited breath on the shape that president-in-waiting Donald Trump’s India policy might take. Trump’s swearing in on 20 January will mark the beginning of his second term in the White House. His ‘Make America Great Again’ (MAGA) base opposes H-1B visas. Their contention is that foreign workers under the scheme “take away American jobs”. They also maintain, with a racist overtone, that the inflow poses a “threat to Western civilisation”.

Interestingly, the American Left are on the same page as the Far Right on the issue. US senator Bernie Sanders described the H1-B programme as a tool for corporate exploitation. ‘The main function’ he wrote, ‘is not to hire “the best and the brightest”, but rather to replace

Is Jaishankar camping in America to plead with Trump’s team to send an invite to Modi? Why any self-respecting person would yearn for an invitation to be a bystander is inexplicable

Photo: Getty Images



good-paying American jobs with low-wage indentured servants from abroad. The cheaper the labor they hire, the more money the billionaires make.’

This is not the first instance in the Western world of the Left and the Far Right coalescing in the interest of the white working class. Hitherto restricted to fighting for the blue collared sector, it has now spilled over to other segments.

Trump pressed pause on the granting of H-1B visas in 2020 during his previous term as president. In his second term, he may abandon his core supporters and adopt the line advocated by Elon Musk, who argued, ‘America needs talented people, and the H-1B allows the world’s top talent to live and work in the US.’

Meanwhile, the government of outgoing President Joe Biden may have extended a favour to H-1B visa holders. They are likely to be able to renew their visas without having to return to India to do so. The process is expected to roll out this year, subject to a formal notification. Indians account for the highest number of H-1B visa applicants. In 2023, 72 per cent of the 386,000 visas granted were to Indians. The

US wings of Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services are leading beneficiaries. They shore up the technology industries in the US as well as healthcare and research.

Informed sources in the Indian Foreign Service say the signs so far indicate Trump 2.0 may not be bountiful for India. Trump, like Modi, does not forget easily and is inclined to be vengeful. (Modi avoided meeting him on his visit to the US in September.)

‘Heartiest congratulations, my friend,’ tweeted Modi in response to Trump’s comeback victory in November. The jubilation was as misplaced as the term ‘friend’ misleading. Assuming that it’s ‘America First’ rather than ‘Trump first’, India and Modi do not currently figure in the framework.

Is Modi experiencing a loss of face after proclaiming Trump a ‘friend’? Has Indian external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, been camping in America to plead with Trump’s team to send an invite to Modi—as has widely been perceived in the media? Why any self-respecting person would yearn for an invitation from Trump to be a

bystander at his inauguration is inexplicable. President Xi Jinping, no friend of Trump, but a force to be reckoned with globally, was invited and—not unexpectedly—declined. Clearly, Modi is not even *vishwabandhu*, let alone *vishwaguru*.

It is of course true that right-wing politicians from various parts of the world have been invited for the occasion. Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni dropped in on Trump at his Florida home on 5 January. Whether she will come again in the same month remains to be seen. Leaks to news organisations suggest that Hungarian PM Viktor Orban and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy are also among the invitees, but their attendance is yet to be confirmed.

From the time Modi (then chief minister of Gujarat) and Jaishankar (then Indian ambassador to China) stealthily befriended each other (the Intelligence Bureau had got wind of it and reported it to then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh), the onus to justify the departure from a productive Indian foreign policy of genuine multi-alignment to a pro-US tilt has fallen on

Jaishankar. An isolationist US position under Trump would upset the Modi–Jaishankar appercat.

While Trump is almost certainly going to engage in a tariff war with China, he could be less aggressive on Chinese expansionism. Standing up to Beijing on New Delhi’s border dispute with it has become heavily dependent on solidarity from Washington. Will Trump continue with the priority given to this crucial issue by the Biden administration? Indeed, the extent to which QUAD—the US, India, Japan and Australia—will remain a robust counterweight to China is also in doubt.

Over and above this, it will be humiliating for Modi if he has to eat humble pie on his headline towards Pakistan and is forced to initiate a dialogue with Islamabad.

During Trump’s election campaign, and fortified by Hindu extremists in the US who normally vote for him, Trump wrote on X, ‘I strongly condemn the barbaric violence against Hindus, Christians and other minorities who are getting attacked and looted by mobs in Bangladesh...’ The proof of the pudding will be in the action he takes (or fails to take) in order to extricate India from a difficult wicket—the loss of Bangladesh as a reliable neighbour.

While Trump is almost certainly going to engage in a tariff war with China, he could be less aggressive on Chinese expansionism

If successful, moves by Dhaka under its new dispensation to improve relations with Pakistan will mean almost a status quo ante to pre-1971. In other words, a potential security threat from the east in addition to the serious prevailing threats from China in the north and Pakistan in the west.

Good foreign policy secures a country. In this respect, the Modi–Jaishankar duo have failed miserably. India is today surrounded by hostile or indifferent neighbours. Trump is unlikely to lose sleep over this. ■

ASHIS RAY can be found on X at [@ashisrcray](#)

When first cousins marry, cultures clash

The growing demand for a ban on marriages between cousins—common among Muslims, especially Pakistani immigrants—has set the stage for a culture clash in the UK. Supporters of the ban argue that such marriages risk spreading genetic disorders.

It is estimated that between 38 per cent and 59 per cent of British Pakistanis marry their first cousins.

A bill to ban the practice, introduced in Parliament recently by the Conservative MP Richard Holden, is being opposed by some Muslim politicians.

An independent Muslim MP, Iqbal Mohamed, said the government should treat marriages between first cousins as a “health awareness issue” rather than legislate against them.

He acknowledged that there were “documented health risks” to children from first-cousin marriages but “the way to redress this is not to empower the state” to implement a ban. He said the legislation would not be “effective or enforceable”.

“The matter needs to be approached as a health awareness issue and a cultural issue, where women are being forced



MP Iqbal Mohamed

against their will to undergo marriage,” Mohamed added.

He argued that the practice was so common because ordinary people saw it as “something very positive, something that builds family bonds, and something that puts families on a more secure financial foothold”.

Muslims say that they should not be stigmatised and genetic testing should be offered to people, as it is in Middle Eastern states. Studies show that if a child is born from parents who are first cousins, the risk of a birth defect rises from three per cent to six per cent.

Most Muslims, however, remain in denial and dismiss the proposed ban as Islamophobic.

Keir Starmer in the doghouse

Keir Starmer has been the prime minister for barely six months but most voters are already experiencing the buyer’s remorse.

According to pundits, his is the worst start any British prime minister in recent memory has had, though that’s not exactly true. That dubious distinction goes to another Labour PM, Gordon Brown, whose three-year term (2007–2010) was saved only by his competent handling of the 2008 financial crisis.

In the general election that followed, he led the Labour Party to a humiliating defeat. It took 14 years for Labour to stage a comeback, and that because people were fed up and favoured “anyone but the Tories”.

The Starmer government has failed miserably to capitalise on this. Pollsters reckon that if an election were to be held tomorrow, Labour would likely lose its majority, leading to a hung parliament.

According to a YouGov poll for the *Times*, not even one in five adults approves of Starmer’s government. Most voters see Labour as “incompetent”, “dishonest” and “unsuccessful”, with 46 per cent saying, “I expected them to do well but have been



Prime Minister Keir Starmer

disappointed”.

Starmer has acknowledged that many in Britain find it “hard to think about the future”. In a New Year’s Day message, he promised a “year of rebuilding” to restore prosperity, repair public services and reverse his own sliding poll ratings. Meanwhile, a newspaper which claims to



British teenage girls have been found to be leading the rest of Europe in hard drinking

have read Starmer’s horoscope is more optimistic about his future. It advises him to “build up confidence simply by enjoying... life”.

‘One imagines,’ wrote the *Times*, ‘he’ll be getting more freebies from Lord Alli’, a Labour donor who made presents worth thousands of pounds to Starmer and his wife, including the expensive clothes they wore, as they moved into Downing Street.

British girls and binge-drinking

British teenage girls have been found to be leading the rest of Europe in hard drinking.

Research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that they are more likely to get “repeatedly drunk” than their peers from almost anywhere else in Europe. (Only Hungarian, Danish and Italian outdrink British girls.)

More than a third of 15-year-old girls in Britain have been drunk at least twice, compared with less than a quarter of boys the same age.

Experts attribute this to alcohol companies “heavily targeting” young women with ads that “present alcohol consumption as a feminine practice”, and a sign of female empowerment.

Another (misogynistic?) guess is that these girls are mirroring their mothers’ behaviour as British women are known to binge-drink more than those anywhere else in Europe.

The study looked at drinking habits in 34 countries. When 15-year-olds were asked if they had been drunk at least twice, the average for boys and girls together in the UK was 29 per cent, compared with an EU average of 23 per cent.

And, finally, for all their professed love of monarchy, the majority of Britons don’t wish to put their money where their mouth is.

A whopping 56 per cent have told pollsters that they are opposed to taxpayers’ money being used to pay for the proposed £369 million refurbishment of Buckingham Palace which is said to be falling apart and needs extensive repairs. ■



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GST regime

► P2



NATION

THE DEVIL IN THE
ELECTORAL ROLLS
...and the real villain of
the piece

► P4



WORLD

BRACING FOR
TRUMP 2.0
Why India should expect no
favours from Modi's friend

► P6



Hold your breath, the Kumbh is nigh

Exclusion is the big highlight of the Maha Kumbh, not counting the luxury tents for the well-heeled faithful and other such excesses

Saiyed Zegham Murtaza

Bigger is better': bigger bangs, bigger business, bigger bucks. That seems to be the animating mantra of the Maha Kumbh Mela, a 45-day extravaganza starting 13 January.

The last Maha Kumbh was held in 2013, with the UP government claiming to have spent Rs 1,300 crore in making all the arrangements. In 2019, the Ardh Kumbh was allocated Rs 4,200 crore, the then Uttar Pradesh finance minister Rajesh Agarwal told news agency PTI. In 2025, the figure doing the rounds is Rs 7,500 crore, making this Maha Kumbh the costliest ever.

With some expenses being incurred by the Union government and agencies like the Indian Railways, it is not clear if the allocation also covers security, electricity and water supply. While the state government is expected to earn some revenue from the sale of tickets, accommodation and stalls, such collections will be a drop in the ocean.

A look at some of the figures reveals the leap between the Kumbh (held every three years) and the Maha Kumbh (held every 12 years). The Maha Kumbh of 2013 was spread over 1,600 hectares; the Ardh Kumbh (2019) occupied 3,200 hectares; this Maha Kumbh will sprawl over a designated area of over 4,000 hectares. Declared a district for the period of the 45-day festival, an estimated 400 million devotees are expected to attend from India and abroad. In 2013, the number was pegged at 120 million.

For the practising Hindu, a dip at the confluence of the Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati rivers at Prayagraj (Allahabad) is believed to wash away the sins of many lifetimes. According to Hindu mythology, the churning of the ocean yielded the *kumbh* or pot of nectar, four drops of which are believed to have dropped at four locations: Haridwar, Ujjain, Nashik and Prayagraj. The cyclic hosting of the Kumbh mela every three years ensures each site features once every 12 years.

While the faithful come for prayers, many—irrespective of religious affiliation or lack thereof—come for the spectacle. This year, two features stand out. Non-Hindus, specifically Muslims, have been asked to stay away. Not only have Muslim vendors, who traditionally set up stalls, been barred, media reports in Hindi newspapers have cautioned pilgrims not to take vehicles driven by Muslims. No one has protested. A Muslim maulana did cause a stir by claiming that parts of the land being used belong to the Waqf Board, signifying that the land was donated by Muslims for public purposes. (Waqf means just that: a donation.)

The mela is being pitched like a massive PR event. While mandatory cutouts of Prime

Minister Modi and UP chief minister Yogi Adityanath have popped up across Delhi and Prayagraj, groups of saints and sects are aggressively promoting a Hindu Rashtra led by Yogi Adityanath as the chosen one after Modi.

The commercialisation of the Maha Kumbh is jaw-dropping. A private service provider is reported to have set up 44 'super-luxury' tents at the campsite. Each double-occupancy tent provides heating, running hot and cold water and 'butler services'. Guests who book them can 'meet-and-greet' sadhus exclusively, as well as avail of yoga, meditation sessions and guided tours of the various *akharas*. Each of these tents, which advertise panoramic views of the sangam and mela grounds, comes at a nightly pop of Rs 1 lakh! Clearly a pittance for the well-heeled, who seem have snapped them up. All 44 tents are apparently sold out for the six auspicious days, including the three '*shahi snan*' (royal bath) days of 14 and 29 January and 3 February.

The state government's allocation for the Maha Kumbh is possibly over and above the Rs 7,742 crore Ganga Expressway that connects Meerut with Prayagraj. The 594 km, greenfield, six-lane, controlled-access expressway is being developed in PPP (public-private partnership) mode, simultaneously in four parts—three by Adani Enterprises and one by IRB Infrastructure Developers. The Prayagraj airport has been upgraded at a cost of Rs 274 crore with the addition of a new terminal building and the expansion of the apron where planes are parked.

In 2019, 500 special trains were enough to service the Ardh Kumbh; in 2025, that number has been doubled. The state roadways will ply 7,000 buses on the highways that lead to Prayagraj and run around 550 shuttle buses from the city to the mela grounds. The Public Works Department (PWD) was assigned the construction of 400 km of temporary roads and 30 pontoon bridges over the Ganga. The state power department was instructed to install 67,000 LED lights and 2,000 solar hybrid lights, as well as two new power substations and 66 new transformers to ensure uninterrupted power supply during the 45-day event. The Uttar Pradesh Jal Nigam has laid a 1,249 km line to supply drinking water, besides installing 200 water ATMs and 85 water pumps.

Sources claim that the installation of 160,000 tents and 150,000 toilets (to be serviced by 15,000 sanitation workers) have been completed. In addition, seven riverfront roads, seven bus stands, nine paved ghats and 12 km of

Photos: Getty Images



Preparations in full swing for the Maha Kumbh 2025 in Prayagraj, UP. An estimated 400 million devotees from India and abroad are expected to attend the 45-day extravaganza



temporary ghats are under construction. More than 1.5 million square feet of murals and street paintings have been commissioned by the Prayagraj Mela Authority and over 2,000 CCTV cameras installed across the Maha Kumbh site and Prayagraj.

Those living in Prayagraj are bracing to stay indoors, or, if they can afford it, spend the next month-and-a-half away from their home town

Added attractions include food courts and amusement areas for children. For this makeshift city within a city, the administration is setting up a 100-bed central hospital, two 20-bed sub-centre hospitals, 25 first-aid posts, and keeping 125 ambulances on standby. If only India's under-served regions were lavished this kind of attention.

Surveillance will naturally be 'advanced' and 'extensive', with underwater, interceptor and tethered drones adding to human eyes.

Pilgrims will be tracked through 'attribute-based search cameras'. RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) wristbands will monitor each pilgrim's entry and exit time, while a mobile app will track their location around the clock.

Will the deployment of 40 per cent additional forces over the previous Kumbh and all the gizmos faithfully listed on the government website be enough to ease worries about crowd control and erase memories of 36 pilgrims killed in a stampede at Allahabad railway station in 2013? Who will watch the hackers and mischief-makers who have technology at their fingertips?

On 4 January, Ayush Kumar Jaiswal, a 22-year-old student from Bihar was arrested for issuing a bomb threat. Using a fake Instagram profile, with the assumed name of Nasir Pathan, Jaiswal warned of a bomb attack during the Maha Kumbh that would kill a thousand people. Mercifully, he was apprehended, but there are many Jaiswals on the loose today.

People who belong to the much-hated, easily reviled minority community can only hope for a peaceful end to the Maha Kumbh. Those living in Prayagraj are bracing to stay indoors, or, if they can afford it, spend the next month-and-a-half away from their home town. ■

Weapons of mass distraction

The (non-)issues that dominate the airwaves in the run-up to the elections early next month

Herjinder

If you were to judge by the election campaign and the TV debates, illegal migrants from Bangladesh and Rohingya refugees might be the biggest problems of the national capital. Not the city's alarming air pollution or its acute water scarcity, for example. The incumbent party's governance record is not quite in the frame even, as you might expect in the run-up to elections.

Both AAP and the BJP are busy trading charges over the inclusion of said 'illegals' in the electoral rolls. The rolls, incidentally, are not above suspicion (see *The devil in the electoral rolls*, page 4), but what makes them dubious is not the alleged inclusion of Rohingya refugees, as we're being led to believe.

In December 2024, Delhi lieutenant governor V.K. Saxena launched a 'crackdown' against Bangladeshi nationals living 'illegally' in the city. After two

weeks of police efforts, only 170 individuals were identified, less than three dozen detained, and a mere eight are currently being prepared for deportation to Bangladesh. A similar operation in 2022 identified around 1,000 'illegal' Bangladeshis residing in Delhi, including those who allegedly stayed on after their visas had lapsed.

As for Rohingya refugees, there are approximately 1,100 concentrated in four areas. Since they don't have voting rights, their electoral influence is not just negligible, it's non-existent. Assuming a fraction of illegal Bangladeshi and Rohingya refugees do get themselves added to the voter rolls, their impact would be statistically insignificant in a city with 33 million residents.

Yet, the election rhetoric continues to rhetor otherwise, creating the impression that the outcome hinges on these two groups.

Instead of addressing pressing concerns—pollution, traffic

congestion, water scarcity, waste management—verbal battles are being waged daily, with a cacophony of labels like *kattar imandar* (staunchly honest) versus *kattar beiman* (staunchly dishonest) and jibes about palaces and glass houses ('raj mahal' and 'sheesh mahal'). Who ordered the

demolition of temples? Why is the Pujari Granthi Samman Yojana being dragged out? Why so many freebies under the Chief Minister Mahila Samman Yojana? The airwaves are dominated by allegations, counter-allegations and as a wit aptly put it, 'weapons of mass distraction'.



A basti of Rohingya refugees in Delhi's Madanpur Khadar

A sensationalised narrative about illegals and a deliberate focus on polarising topics ensures that the electorate remains caught up in emotional debates, rather than demanding solutions to the systemic problems that define life in the capital.

The most persistent of these problems is pollution, with an Air Quality Index (AQI) 12 times higher than what is considered safe. Data reveals over 2.2 million children in Delhi are living with long-term health complications caused by exposure to such toxic air. A 2024 study by the University of Chicago estimated that pollution has slashed the average lifespan of Delhi residents by 11.9 years. A global survey conducted in 2022 by the US-based Health Effects Institute assessed pollution levels in 7,000 cities worldwide—Delhi was ranked the most polluted city on the planet.

In 2001, during Sheila Dikshit's tenure as chief minister, Delhi undertook an ambitious project

to transition its public transport system from diesel and petrol to compressed natural gas (CNG). This move resulted in a significant reduction in the levels of sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide. More than two decades later, the situation isn't better, it's worse.

The Delhi government's announcement on committing to replace DTC buses with electric vehicles is a step in the right direction. However, this effort is unlikely to make much of a difference, as these buses contribute only a small fraction to the city's overall vehicular emissions. What is glaringly absent, both in governance and in election discourse, is a concrete, actionable strategy to tackle the root causes. Despite the severity of the problem, pollution barely registers as a priority in ongoing political debates, leaving Delhi's residents to choke on the very air they breathe.

► Continued on page 2

India's 'middle class' delusion

If you're reading this piece, you can possibly do with a reality check on where you stand on India's economic ladder

Yogendra Yadav

In my teaching days, I often introduced my students to a game that revealed the true picture of India. I'd ask them to imagine a hundred-step ladder where every individual in the country stood according to their income—the poorest on the first step and the richest on the hundredth. I'd then ask them to place their family on this ladder. After hearing their answers, I'd present to them the real data. Disbelief would be writ large on their faces, and that is how their 'discovery of India' would begin, so to speak.

The Indian government recently released income data for rural and urban households for 2023-24; it is officially known as 'Household Consumption Expenditure Survey'. Economists have found that people either cannot or often do not want to accurately disclose their income, but when asked about their expenses, they are more forthcoming.

Based on information about daily food expenses and on other heads such as clothing, education, healthcare and entertainment, the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) estimates monthly per capita expenditure. For decades, this survey—conducted with large samples and by using credible methods—has been considered the most trusted source of data, forming the basis of many government policies.

Let's play the 'discovery of India' game using these figures. First, let's visit the home of Mr Krishnan, who recently got promoted to branch manager at a government bank. He earns 1.25 lakh per month, while his wife, a private school teacher, makes Rs 35,000. After living in a rented house, they bought a flat five years ago, where they now live with their two children. They own a modest car, and their son rides a motorcycle. There's an air conditioner in the bedroom. A typical 'middle-class family', you'd think.

Kanta works as domestic help in their house, earning Rs 8,000 a month, while her husband, Suresh, is a driver who makes Rs 15,000. Together, they support a family of five, including their three children, in a



The poorest families in India, often six members strong, make do with less than Rs 10,000 a month

Urban Indians, cocooned in relative privilege, have little to no idea of the harsh realities of the life of an average Indian. The truly poor are practically invisible. The real middle class is mistaken for the poor

rented house. They dream of buying a scooter someday—a hardworking family.

Mr Khanna, who has an account in Mr Krishnan's bank, earns Rs 2.5-3 lakh a month. He owns a factory, which employs six people, and he lives in a large house with his wife, two children and elderly mother. They own two cars and have even travelled abroad once—not old-money aristocrats, but well-to-do.

In everyday urban lingo, Mr Krishnan's family would be labelled 'middle class', Mr Khanna's 'upper middle class' and Kanta's 'poor'. On the hundred-step ladder, most

would put Kanta around the 20th step, Krishnan between the 50th and 60th, and Khanna somewhere around the 80th or 90th. And this is where our understanding falters.

Let's test this perception against real data. According to the latest figures, the urban middle class—those between the 40th and 60th steps—spends less than Rs 4,000 per person per month. This means Kanta and Suresh, who run their family on Rs 20,000-25,000, are the true urban middle class. Urban households in the bottom 20 per cent can't even afford to spend Rs 3,000 per person per month.

On the other hand, any family that spends over Rs 20,000 per person per month is part of the top 5 per cent in urban India. Households that spend Rs 30,000 or more per person per month are in the top 1 per cent. So, whether they believe it or not, Mr Krishnan stands on the 95th step, and Mr Khanna is perched at the very top.

In rural India, the situation is even more grave. A family that spends Rs 7,000 per person per month (or Rs 35,000 for a family of five) belongs to the top 10 per cent. The rural middle class consists of families (of, say, five members) surviving on Rs 20,000 a month. The poorest families, often six members strong, make do with less than Rs 10,000 a month.

This, incidentally, is the national average, which hides worse regional disparities. Eastern states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Assam and eastern Uttar Pradesh fare the worst. In these regions, fewer than half the families can afford to spend even Rs 15,000 a month.

Countless iterations of the 'discovery of India' game have yielded the same conclusion—our understanding of India's economic stratification is deeply flawed. Urban Indians, cocooned in relative privilege, have little to no idea of the harsh realities of the life of an average Indian. The truly poor are practically invisible. The real middle class is mistaken for the poor and those at the top of the ladder are conveniently labelled the middle class. When will the country's ruling elite wake up from this comforting illusion? ■

How to eat your popcorn and tax it too

We've reached a point where our GST is now probably the most complex, illogical, avaricious and arcane tax in the world

Avay Shukla

I have little or no sympathy for those doubting Thomases who continue to question the stupendous growth of our economy. Such people should be packed off to one of the coral reefs around the Great Nicobar, which shall soon be ground to dust once the mega-crony project there takes off—it will serve them right. For, under the able guidance of she-who-does-not-eat-oneself we have moved from being a 'pakoda economy' to a 'popcorn economy' by the wiseacres of the GST Council.

At the Council meeting on the Grasping Shifting Tax—in the third week of December 2024—it was decided to burst the bubble that has made billionaires out of those multiplex barons, what with popcorn costing more than your movie tickets! The soundest economic policy of all, according to Confucius, is that if you can't stop Peter from ripping off Paul, then at least ensure you get your share of Peter's booty.

And so, the GST on popcorn now has three separate rates, rising to 18 per cent for the caramelised, sugary variety. According to the halwa-eating lady, this is because when you caramelise the humble popcorn it becomes a sweet and should be taxed as such. (Notice the hair-splitting distinctions and the fine tuning done by our tax experts, who quite clearly have too much time on their hands.)

But here's a question for them that begs an answer: if one buys caramelised popcorn while watching a tax-exempted film like *The Kashmir Files* or *The Kerala Story* or *The Sabarmati Report*, will that popcorn also be exempt from GST? Since no one watches films in theatres these days without munching on popcorn, if the munchable is not made tax-free then no one is going to watch these movies, defeating the patriotic purpose behind making them tax-free. Then how does one keep the fake nationalist machine greased and going?

Just as there can be no FIR under the PMLA (Prevention of Money Laundering Act) if there is no FIR in the predicate offence, similarly there

should be no tax on popcorn if there is no tax on the movie itself. Makes sense, right?

A friend of mine who is still in government informs me, sotto voce, that the next target of the eagle-eyed Council will be the even humbler condom. Currently there is no GST on condoms, but by extending the caramelised popcorn logic, a GST of 18 per cent is likely to be imposed on flavoured condoms as they shall come into the category of either sweets or fruits, depending on the flavour fancied. Makes sense, if you ask me. With both sweets and fruits having become so expensive—with 18 per cent and 12 per cent GST, respectively, in case you didn't know—more and more people are getting their kicks out of flavoured condoms instead: strawberry, mango, chocolate, rajbhog etc.

According to a tweet by the CEO of Swiggy on 1 January 2025, condoms were among the most ordered items on the last day of December—1.12 lakh packets on Swiggy and 4,779 on Blinkit. And the overwhelming favourite were the chocolate flavoured ones! The finance ministry may just be on the right trail to reduce its deficit.

But wait, that's not all, dear reader, you haven't even begun to fathom the genius of our tax-men and women. It is also proposed that for condoms bought/ used out of wedlock, the GST rate shall be 28 per cent, for it then becomes a 'sin goods'. Brilliant, isn't it? One's marital status will be verified at the PoS, for which the government shall shortly be issuing, and making mandatory, another identity document—the BAM (Bespoke and Married) card.

The card shall have to be renewed every year, given the rising incidence of divorces. Divorcees shall have to pay the 28 per cent rate (if they still want to have sex, that is)—another clever move by this Vishwaguru government to discourage divorces.

Clearly, our GST mandarins have gone berserk. As one social media

influencer pointed out, the English had imposed a salt tax but our native-born tsars have gone one better by imposing a higher sugar tax. I'm told there's also a proposal to levy GST on the Sulabh Sauchalay. Currently the service charge for taking a leak in one of them is Rs 5, but there might now be a GST of 18 per cent levied for diabetics who use the facilities: they are passing sugar, you see.

Consider next the ubiquitous biryani, a legacy of the much-reviled Mughals but consumed by the tonne by our *sanatan dharma bhakts*. Swiggy's annual report for 2024 informs us that it was the highest-selling dish on their platform—83 million dishes, or 3 orders per second! There is no GST on fresh meat or rice, but put the two together in a biryani and, hey presto, it now has a GST of 12 per cent.

And that's not all. If you eat biryani in an airconditioned restaurant, you will have to shell out GST at 18 per cent; if you wolf it down in a 5-star hotel, the rate is 28 per cent. No wonder the astute Indian prefers to order it from Swiggy, where he pays 5 per cent tax—of course, the rate may go up if there's an egg in it!

However, to give the devil his due, our tax guys are faithful to that other adage of Confucius: if you must be stupid, at least be consistent in your stupidity. This to the point where our GST is now probably the most complex, illogical, avaricious and arcane tax in the world. As someone said: the best things in life are free, but sooner or later the government will find a way to tax it. It's not for nothing that the words 'taxman' and 'taxidermist' have the first three letters in common—the only difference is that whereas the latter takes only your skin, the former takes it all.

As far back as in 1947, Winston Churchill, while giving his famous doomsday prediction for India, had said that "a day will come when even air and water would be taxed in India". Ms. Sitharaman has the dubious distinction of making that prediction come true. ■

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Weapons of mass distraction

► Continued from page 1

Also worrying is the number of homeless people who struggle to survive Delhi's bitter winters. A 2024 survey conducted by the NGO Urban Rights Forum revealed that Delhi has over 300,000 homeless people (this does not include those living in the National Capital Region).

The city has only 197 night-shelters with a total capacity of 7,092 individuals. This leaves the majority of the homeless with no choice but to spend freezing nights huddled outside hospitals, on footpaths, railway platforms, overbridges, subways. With little or no protection, every cold wave leads to tragic consequences.

According to data from the Centre for Holistic Development, an average of nine people a day succumb to the cold during the peak winter season in Delhi. Despite the alarming figures, solutions from the Centre and the Delhi government remain rhetorical.

The problem of homelessness is exacerbated by the influx of people migrating to Delhi in search of employment. According to the Delhi government's economic survey, as many as 221,000 people moved to Delhi in 2022 and chose to settle permanently. This translates to an average of 605 new residents being added to Delhi's population every day. Delhi's current population is projected to surge to 5.5 crore over the next 25 years, which will strain the city's resources and already creaking infrastructure to breaking point. Without a comprehensive and forward-thinking plan, Delhi can only implode.

Rivers are regarded as the lifeline of cities. The Yamuna, which flows through the heart of Delhi, is reduced to little more than a polluted drain. According to the Central Pollution Control Board, a 100 millilitres of the Yamuna's water contain up to 1.1 million coliform bacteria, way beyond safe levels even for bathing. Delhi contributes significantly to this toxicity, dumping 58 per cent of its waste into the river. Every day, 800 million litres of untreated sewage and 440 million litres of industrial waste find their way to the Yamuna. Originating from the pristine glaciers of the Himalayas, the river becomes so polluted within Delhi that it carries it all the way downstream to Prayagraj.

The blame game between the BJP and AAP over the Yamuna's degradation is relentless. Neither party has presented a credible action plan. Both the Centre and the Delhi government had ample time—ten years—to initiate meaningful efforts to clean up the river. Yet, no substantial progress has been made. Even now, amidst political sparring, no concrete programmes or strategies have emerged to rescue the Yamuna from its dire state.

Delhi faces a daunting array of problems—too many vehicles, chronic traffic jams, deteriorating roads, inadequate education and healthcare facilities. The most pressing, and depressing, problem however remains the state of politics in the city. On one hand, former chief minister Arvind Kejriwal touts his administration's revolutionary changes in Delhi's education system. On the other, Prime Minister Narendra Modi accuses the AAP government of having destroyed it.

Regardless of where the truth lies, such narratives only serve to divert voters' attention from the core issues plaguing the city. Disarray defines the political climate in Delhi today, leaving its residents with nothing more than promises no one intends to keep. ■



Will GST be exempt on caramelised popcorn while watching a tax-free film like *The Sabarmati Report*?

A step forward... and a couple back

Can India find a way ahead with China?

Shastri Ramachandaran

On 27 December, the Chinese news agency *Xinhua* reported that the authorities in northwest Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region had announced the formation of two new counties, He'an and Hekang, in the Hotan Prefecture. Aksai Chin, which New Delhi claims is under Chinese occupation, falls in Hotan, known as Khotan in India.

Since the areas are in what India considers occupied territory, the MEA's reaction was not unexpected. What was strange, though, was that it came after a full week. On 3 January, MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said, "We have lodged a 'solemn protest' with the Chinese side through diplomatic channels. Parts of jurisdiction of these so-called counties fall in India's Union Territory of Ladakh".

Jaiswal added that India had "never accepted the illegal Chinese occupation" of its territory. "[The] creation of new counties will neither have a bearing on India's long-standing and consistent position regarding our sovereignty over the area nor lend legitimacy to China's illegal and forcible occupation of the same." China is not known to have reacted to the MEA spokesperson's statement, possibly because it sees it as a domestic compulsion.

It looked like India-China ties might be on the mend when Beijing and New Delhi came to an agreement on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in October 2024. This was followed by high-level meetings to normalise relations that had broken down after the violent military conflict in the Galwan Valley in June 2020. Soon after the pact for disengagement of Indian and Chinese troops in eastern Ladakh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping met in Russia's Kazan on 23 October. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar also had a meeting with China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

This was followed by a revival of the dialogue between the special representatives (SRs) of the two countries on the boundary issue after a gap of five-and-a-half years. (SR-level talks had stalled following the

outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and Galwan.) India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval held talks with Wang Yi in Beijing on 18 December, which was seen as another positive step in normalising bilateral relations, until Beijing dropped the bombshell less than 10 days after the Doval-Wang meeting.

It is not yet known whether Doval had been given a hint of what was to come or it was deliberately kept a secret to be sprung after the conclusion of the scheduled SR meeting. Curiously, on 26 December, a day before the *Xinhua* report on the new counties, China's defence ministry had said that Chinese and Indian militaries are "comprehensively and effectively" implementing the agreement to end the standoff in eastern Ladakh and that "steady progress" was being made.

Chinese defence spokesperson Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang made the remarks during a media briefing. He said that in recent times, based on the important consensus reached by the leaders of the two countries, China and India had maintained close communication on the border situation through diplomatic and military channels and achieved "great progress...". The creation of two new counties and reiteration of plans to build a dam on the Yarlung Tsangpo river in Tibet (the Brahmaputra in India)—which would affect India as a lower riparian state—therefore came as a surprise.

China, in turn, may like to remind us of India's August 2019 action in Jammu and Kashmir, when Jaishankar was set for his first visit as external affairs minister to China (where he had been India's ambassador from 2009 to 2013). His visit came against the backdrop of China expressing concern over the scrapping of Article 370 and making Ladakh a Union Territory. Beijing said these actions were "unacceptable" as "China always opposed India's inclusion of Chinese territory in the western section of the China-India boundary under its administrative jurisdiction".

Jaishankar's China visit—finalised before J&K's special status was revoked and the state split into two UTs—was to



Indian Army personnel at Bumla pass at the India-China border in Arunachal Pradesh; (left) MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal



It is not known whether Doval had been given a hint of what was to come or it was deliberately kept a secret to be sprung after the conclusion of the scheduled SR meeting

plan President Xi's visit to India for the second summit with Modi. This was to be a follow-up on the Wuhan meeting of April 2018 that renewed bilateral relations after the Doklam military standoff in 2017. Instead, he had to soothe the Chinese feathers ruffled by the J&K development.

Ashok Kantha, former ambassador to China who was also director of the Institute of Chinese Studies, underscores how little such diversions serve the larger objectives of the relationship. "We are rightly objecting to administrative measures by China in the territory occupied by them in the Western Sector, much the same way they keep protesting about our activities in Arunachal Pradesh or, earlier in 2019, when a new political map of India was released following the reorganisation of Jammu and Kashmir," Kantha said.

"India had also lodged a strong protest over the release of a new Chinese map in 2023, which showed the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin within China's borders. If the Chinese wish to play this game, so can we."

It may or not be coincidence that every high-level engagement between the two countries is either preceded by or followed by such provocations and consequent protests. While these may not really impede the measured steps to normalise relations, they can alter perceptions and be seized upon by powerful interests that do not want China and India to settle bilateral differences in their common interest. ■

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A litany of unfulfilled promises and brouhaha over free food

Navin Kumar

All 26.3 million beneficiaries of the Mahayuti's Ladki Bahin scheme may not benefit from it after all. The list is being reviewed by the ruling coalition that rolled out the pre-poll promise of raising the monthly cash allowance of Rs 1,500 to 2,100 if voted back to power. Cry foul? Or fair?

It seems more than 2 million beneficiaries are likely to be dropped. Welfare minister Aditi Tatkare announced that those beneficiaries also listed under Namo Shetkari and other direct benefits schemes were dropped to privilege "those who really deserve it".

With women farmers also having to decide whether they want to benefit from Namo Kisan Samman Yojana or not, the number of (dis)affected women is likely to be higher. Significantly, no such restrictions were imposed when the scheme was rolled out barely three months before the assembly election on 20 November 2024. In fact, district administrators were encouraged not to scrutinise the applications.

Tatkare also disclosed that if the beneficiaries of other cash-transfer schemes are receiving less than what the Ladki Bahin scheme promises, they will only be entitled to the difference. Those receiving a higher cash benefit would be dropped altogether, as would those whose combined annual family income exceeds Rs 2.5 lakh.

Not surprisingly, opposition leaders are crying foul. The hasty scheme had only one

goal in mind. Now that it's been achieved, the government is harping about efficiency and plugging loopholes, said Congress state president Nana Patole. The state government had budgeted Rs 46,000 crore to provide a monthly allowance of Rs 1,500 to all women in the age group of 21 to 60 years. Around Rs 200 crore was spent on promoting the scheme. The caution advised by the finance department was pointedly ignored and eligibility criteria were deliberately not disclosed. Clearly crafted for electoral gain, the Ladki Bahin Yojana should be seen as electoral malpractice, maintains the opposition.

Agriculture minister Manikrao Kokate admitted that the scheme has put undue pressure on the state's finances, which is why the government is unable to announce loan waivers for farmers. As many as 5.2 million farmers have reportedly not been paid the subsidies that were announced. Official sources confirm that subsidies amounting to Rs 716 crore for 2023-24 have been withheld. If, the minister stated, Maharashtra's precarious financial condition improves in the next six months, the government would consider the loan waivers. That's a big if. Meanwhile, a CAG report has pointed to the state government's gaping fiscal deficit and mounting public debt.

Increasing the amount payable under the Ladki Bahin Yojana was not the only electoral promise made by the Mahayuti coalition. The loan waiver for farmers, under the Kisan Samman Yojana, was supposed to go up from Rs 12,000 to

Rs 15,000. The poor were to get food security and housing. The old age pension was to be raised from Rs 1,500 to Rs 2,100. Prices of essential commodities were to be stabilised. A monthly stipend of Rs 10,000 was to be provided to 1 million students to help ease the burden on their families. As many as 2.5 million new employment opportunities were to be generated.

Anganwadi workers were to get a monthly honorarium of Rs 15,000. Electricity bills were to be reduced by 30 per cent. The minimum price for soyabeans was to be Rs 6,000 per quintal. Free rations were to be provided through the Akshaya Anna Yojana. Of this litany of promises, how many will the Fadnavis government fulfil?

Sign of the times

The lingo of leaders is expected to change before and after elections. Even so, the people of Maharashtra are startled by the insulting tone of leaders such as deputy CM Ajit 'Dada' Pawar.

Known for his snippy tongue, 'Dada' had once responded to a farmers' complaint about the non-availability of irrigation water by asking if they wanted him to urinate in their fields. Last year, when Maharashtra's gender ratio was reported to be skewed in favour of boys, Pawar had said women in the state would have to opt for multiple partners like Draupadi in the Mahabharata.

When a villager in Medad complained about not finding work, Pawar reportedly

said, "Just because you voted for me, it doesn't mean you have become my boss and [can] order me around." The stunned silence that followed was filled by Pawar blaming the people for his wife's defeat from Baramati in the Lok Sabha election.

Ajit Pawar isn't the only one. Other ruling alliance leaders have been equally offensive in public. Sanjay Gaikwad, the Shiv Sena MLA from Buldhana, said voters were worse than prostitutes. At a meeting convened to felicitate him, Gaikwad accused voters of having sold their votes for liquor, mutton and money. While a section of his audience may have been scandalised, others actually laughed aloud, encouraging the man.



Ajit Pawar

Pawar's current foul mood can perhaps be attributed to the state's poor finances—Dada holds the finance portfolio—and the fact that political pressure is building on him to sack his minister Dhananjay Munde, who stands implicated in the killing of Santosh Deshmukh, a sarpanch from Beed. While Pawar has promised justice to Deshmukh's family, he has been unable to get Munde to resign from the ministry despite all evidence pointing to his henchmen carrying out the murder.

A storm in a cookpot?

Former BJP MP Sujay Vikhe Patil has denounced the practice of distributing free food at the Sai Prasadalaya in Shirdi. It should be stopped forthwith, everyone should pay Rs 25 for the food and the proceeds should be spent on the education of children. "The whole country," he reportedly said, "is eating here for free, and all the beggars in



BJP MP Sujay Vikhe Patil

Maharashtra have gathered here."

Devotees have taken umbrage at being called beggars and have condemned Patil, whose father Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil is the state's water resources minister and MLA from Shirdi for the past 35 years. The minister has not condoned his son's controversial statement. Devotees point out that Patil Jr is not involved in the management of Sai Prasadalaya and has made no contributions. While the well-off and VIPs are expected to pay Rs 50 for a meal, the free food is funded by donations. If the organisation is happy to do this, who is he to object, they ask. Does he want those donations to line his own pocket?

For over a century, Shirdi has drawn devotees to Sai Baba's samadhi. Every year, millions visit Shirdi and donate cash, gold, silver and other valuables. In 2022, donations worth over Rs 400 crore were recorded. The Shirdi Mahotsav, held between 25 December 2024 and 2 January 2025 drew a collection of Rs 16.61 crore. Said to be the third-richest temple in the country, its assets are estimated to be worth Rs 20,000 crore.

It seems the Sai Sansthan Trust extends financial assistance to build roads and infrastructure like airports, and donated Rs 51 crore to the state government to fight the coronavirus in 2020. In 2018, when the then Fadnavis government was facing a financial crisis, the Trust gave an interest-free loan of Rs 500 crore to the government to complete the Neelwande irrigation project, without stipulating any deadline for repayment.

Is this a storm in a cookpot? Or is there more to it that meets the ire? ■



The devil in the electoral rolls

There is compelling evidence of illegitimate additions and deletions from the electoral rolls, but the ECI is unfazed

A.J. Prabal

In December 2024, digital media outlet *Newslaundry* published a three-part report on the deletion of voters from electoral rolls in three Lok Sabha constituencies—Meerut and Farrukhabad in Uttar Pradesh and Chandni Chowk in Delhi. The survey was conducted over three months after Lok Sabha results were declared on 4 June.

The *Newslaundry* team led by Sumedha Mittal spoke to voters whose names had been deleted, to booth-level officers (BLOs) deployed to knock on doors to crosscheck claims of change of address or death and to Election Commission officials. The reports, which have been up on the website for more than three weeks, seem to have elicited no rebuttal from the Election Commission despite the damning details they contain.

In Meerut, the team discovered voter cards with the address given as ‘Uttar Pradesh’, ‘Jhuggi’ or ‘Naya’—86 such on voter lists at booth number 305 of Meerut Cantonment. In the same booth, around 240 voters are registered with RHA Colony as their address. The colony, however, does not exist! Vikas Chaudhary, postman at the head post office in Meerut Cantonment told the team, “You’re right—RHA Colony does not exist... bogus voters have become a big problem across Meerut. A couple of months back, I was tasked with distributing new voter cards sent by the EC, but had to dump thousands of them at the local election office as I could not find their addresses.”

Another report noted: “Three generations of Amjad’s family live in the dense cluster of houses known as Haveli Azam Khan in the Chandni Chowk constituency. The neighbourhood is walking distance from Delhi’s historic Jama Masjid... 23 members of the family are registered voters at polling booth number 10. But during the Lok Sabha elections in 2024, Amjad discovered that he was among the 20 people from his family who had been struck off the voters list on the pretext that they had shifted residence.”

“This is the first time we faced this,” Amjad, 55, told *Newslaundry*. The most frustrating thing was learning that they’d been deleted on polling day. “When we first went to booth 10, they told us they could not find our name in the voters’ lists, so we should check another booth in Jama Masjid. From there, we were sent to another booth... we visited five to six booths. And then finally, the reason given was that probably during the house-to-house survey, the BLO could not find us at home, so she struck off our names.”

The report states: ‘Amjad is among 36,815 voters who were deleted in 1,377 booths across the Lok Sabha constituency of

Chandni Chowk... many of these voter list revisions were in violation of the Election Commission’s norms.’

At his last press conference as Chief Election Commissioner on 7 January, Rajiv Kumar dismissed all allegations of largescale addition or deletion of names from electoral rolls. “India is a gold standard of elections,” he said. “All parties have the right to appoint booth-level parties (BLAs) to participate in the revision process... all claims and objections are shared with all political parties and no deletions are carried out without the statutory Form 7, the application form available online for filing objections to include or delete voters from the electoral roll.”

Hours earlier on the same day, Sumedha Mittal posted that the deletion rate was 24 per cent in one of the booths in Chandni Chowk. ‘I found 147 cases of wrongful deletions. Take the case of Nafees Ahmad and his wife Saira Bano. They’ve been voters for decades [and] had voted in the 2022 Delhi municipal elections. But ahead of the 2024 polls, their names were deleted. The voter list claimed Nafees was dead [and] Bano had shifted home. I found this to be false... during my field survey in Jama Masjid, I found several deletions in nearly every second Muslim household. Booth-level officers admitted to the errors, explaining that some names were removed because voters’ homes were found locked. When we asked the Election Commission why Chandni Chowk had a higher deletion rate, they claimed it was due



As per media reports, there were largescale deletions from electoral rolls in Muslim-populated areas in Delhi before the 2024 Lok Sabha polls

Most of the objectors seeking deletion of Muslim voters seemed to be non-Muslim. The objection forms do not carry addresses, just the first names of the objectors

to a large population of migrant labourers and slum dwellers. [...] Furthermore, all 147 voters whose names were wrongfully deleted reported that they [had] never received any notice prior to the deletions. They only found out when they went to vote.’

In his presser on 7 January, the CEC made no mention of the complaint filed by Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav, alleging the deletion of 20,000 Yadav/Muslim voters in each of UP’s 403 constituencies before the 2022 assembly elections. Officials said the Samajwadi Party was asked to submit documentary proof as there was no provision in law for an electoral roll based on caste or religion. Akhilesh Yadav claimed his party had submitted proof with several thousand sworn affidavits but had not heard from the Commission in the past two years.

In December 2024, Maharashtra Congress leaders claimed that a large number of voters had been arbitrarily deleted from the electoral rolls after the Lok Sabha election, and around 10,000 voters added in every assembly constituency. In the words of the

unprecedented the EC: ‘Maharashtra witnessed an unprecedent increase of an estimated 47 lakh voters being added to the electoral roll between July 2024 [and] November 2024 [...] It is significant to note that out of the 50 assembly constituencies where there was an average increase of 50,000 voters, the ruling regime and its allies won in 47.’

They claimed to have raised the issue a month before polling day but no action was taken. They also cited the FIR registered by a voter registration officer at Dharashiv cyber police station against a large number of fake voter registrations in Tuljapur assembly seat.

The district electoral officer (DEO) of New Delhi conceded the allegation made by AAP parliamentarian Sanjay Singh that two applications were filed on 25 and 26 December 2024 to delete his wife’s name from the voter list. The election officer reported: ‘Upon field verification, the booth-level officers found her [Mr. Singh’s wife] residing at the given address, and both Form 7 applications were rejected. Additionally, an FIR was lodged against the objectors for wrongful filing

of Form 7.’

Arvind Kejriwal, who is contesting from the New Delhi constituency, claimed that applications had been filed since mid-December to delete the names of 5,000 voters.

Most of the objectors seeking deletion of Muslim voters in Muslim localities seemed to be non-Muslims. The forms shared with BLOs in Delhi do not carry addresses, just the first names of the objectors. With practically anybody able to object online under assumed identities, how are door-to-door checks being conducted, and what action has been taken against fake objectors?

The DEO held that according to the guidelines of the Election Commission, the summary of Form 7, including the names of both objectors and objectees, is shared on a weekly basis with all recognised political parties. This information is uploaded on the official website of CEC Delhi for public access. Mere submission of Form 7 does not lead to deletions.

Even if that were true, can the ECI put the onus of ensuring the veracity of the electoral rolls on voters and political parties? ■

The war over places of worship

The Places of Worship Act was meant to draw a clear line between India’s medieval history and its current affairs, writes Aakar Patel

The Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991 is a law to ‘prohibit conversion of any place of worship and to provide for the maintenance of the religious character of any place of worship as it existed on the 15th day of August, 1947’.

This is an unusually phrased law which says temples, mosques, churches, stupas, gurdwaras and so on will remain as they were in 1947. Meaning that the religion that was practiced in that structure would continue to be practiced. Why was it legislated? To prevent more incidents like

the Babri Masjid demolition. It could not be clearer in phrasing or in intent.

However, laws have rarely stopped things from happening in India, even in the courts.

In 2019, following the Supreme Court’s verdict handing over the Babri site to a temple, a petition was taken up in an Uttar Pradesh court regarding the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi. The court directed the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to conduct a survey, despite historians clearly recording that the mosque was built over an existing temple razed by Aurangzeb in

1669. The Places of Worship Act was meant to avoid precisely such medieval history from becoming current affairs.

The matter went to the Supreme Court in 2022. Here, D.Y. Chandrachud, who had authored the Babri judgment, made an observation that would prove to be devastating. He said the ‘ascertainment of the religious character’ of a place was not prohibited by the Places of Worship Act. Presumably meaning that people were free to bring to court suits to that effect.

He allowed the continuing of the

‘survey’, which came to be claimed around a fountain, the Hindu side claimed was a ‘Shivling’. In 2023, the Varanasi district court asked the ASI to ascertain whether the mosque was “constructed over a pre-existing structure of a Hindu temple”.

Predictably, these events have led to a number of judges in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and elsewhere admitting petitions that sought to ‘ascertain the religious character’ of mosques built in medieval India, and ordering surveys.

Demands for surveys on places of worship include the Adhai Dai Ka Jhonpra mosque in Agra—built in 1199 by Qutb-ud-Din Aibak (who also built the Qutb Minar in Delhi)—and the Ajmer dargah of Moinuddin Chishti, who died in 1236. The mosque, already an ASI-protected site for its historical value, was now subject to the BJP’s speaker in the state assembly demanding an ASI survey to find out if the claim was true that it had been a Sanskrit college earlier. The dispute over Lucknow’s largest mosque, Teelawali Masjid, was centred around a claim that it was built by Shah Jahan’s governor over a platform named after Lakshman.

In Badaun, the Jama Masjid Shamsi, built under Iltutmish (who also died in

1236) was claimed by the Akhila Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha. The Atal Bhasidhi in Jaunpur is, according to the government’s tourism website, ‘the ideal for the construction of the other mosques of Jaunpur’. A group named Swaraj Vahini Association has moved court demanding the right to worship inside it.

In March 2024, the 13th-century Bhodhshala Pradesha Maula complex in Madhya Pradesh’s Dhar district became the latest site for a ‘scientific survey’ by the ASI following an order from Madhya Pradesh High Court.

In November 2024, a court in Western UP heard a petition on the Sambhal Jama Masjid. The court ordered a survey of the mosque premises, which took place on the same day (19 November).

The team returned for a second visit early on Sunday (24 November) and a rumour spread that it was digging under the mosque. A crowd of protesters gathered, and the police shot dead five of them. We can attribute this tragedy directly to the remarks made by Chandrachud in the Supreme Court, which, as experts have noted, have no binding authority. Those words have not been recorded in the order, and exist merely because they were reported at the moment they were uttered. The Supreme Court did not stay or undo the Places of Worship Act. It remains in force and unless a structure was actively used by multiple faiths on 15 August 1947, it cannot be brought to court in a dispute.

And yet as we can see, the number of cases is rising, with structures that are seven centuries old being claimed as disputed property. For those who, like this writer, were adults when the Ayodhya dispute began to bubble, before bursting to boiling point and becoming the core issue of politics for three decades, these events are alarming. Too much national energy and blood has been expended over it.

In December 2024, the Supreme Court stopped courts from registering new suits. It also said no interim or final orders could be passed in the pending suits until it decided on the validity of the Places of Worship Act.

The court will hear the matter again soon. That is when we may learn what the Modi government’s position on the law is. All governments are expected to defend the law, but it is unclear what the stand of this government is, headed as it is by the party that benefited from the movement that led to the legislation of the Places of Worship Act. ■



Police deployment outside the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi

...and yet, as we can see, the number of cases is rising, with structures that are seven centuries old being claimed as disputed property

Views are personal

Will Trump ease India's security nightmare?

Donald Trump is unlikely to lose sleep over India's troubles with its neighbours, including China and Bangladesh

Ashis Ray

The Narendra Modi government's hankering for H-1B US visas for Indian citizens is demeaning for any proud Indian. Such a bent of mind can be defended if the purpose is to go and work for a subsidiary or affiliate of an Indian company, thereby rendering it competitive in the face of international competition. When foreign firms absorb the skilled, it constitutes a loss of talent to a rival. Such a brain drain is not in the national interest.

Outward migration indicates a worrying failure to create jobs at home. It is for the government to incentivise Indian industry as well as foreign multinational corporations to establish shop in India, so that the workforce produced by the prestigious IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology) and other institutions benefit the Indian economy first and foremost. Instead—and more so in the last decade—the IITs have become factories for exportable manpower. Rather than lament this loss, the Modi regime pats itself on the back when Indians or foreign nationals of Indian origin become CEOs of commercial giants in the US.

Right now, though, Raisina Hill waits with baited breath on the shape that president-in-waiting Donald Trump's India policy might take. Trump's swearing in on 20 January will mark the beginning of his second term in the White House. His 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) base opposes H-1B visas. Their contention is that foreign workers under the scheme "take away American jobs". They also maintain, with a racist overtone, that the inflow poses a "threat to Western civilisation".

Interestingly, the American Left are on the same page as the Far Right on the issue. US senator Bernie Sanders described the H-1B programme as a tool for corporate exploitation. 'The main function' he wrote, 'is not to hire "the best and the brightest", but rather to replace

Is Jaishankar camping in America to plead with Trump's team to send an invite to Modi? Why any self-respecting person would yearn for an invitation to be a bystander is inexplicable



good-paying American jobs with low-wage indentured servants from abroad. The cheaper the labor they hire, the more money the billionaires make.'

This is not the first instance in the Western world of the Left and the Far Right coalescing in the interest of the white working class. Hitherto restricted to fighting for the blue collared sector, it has now spilled over to other segments.

Trump pressed pause on the granting of H-1B visas in 2020 during his previous term as president. In his second term, he may abandon his core supporters and adopt the line advocated by Elon Musk, who argued, 'America needs talented people, and the H-1B allows the world's top talent to live and work in the US.'

Meanwhile, the government of outgoing President Joe Biden may have extended a favour to H-1B visa holders. They are likely to be able to renew their visas without having to return to India to do so. The process is expected to roll out this year, subject to a formal notification. Indians account for the highest number of H-1B visa applicants. In 2023, 72 per cent of the 386,000 visas granted were to Indians. The

US wings of Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services say the technology beneficiaries. They shore up the technology industries in the US as well as healthcare and research.

Informed sources in the Indian Foreign Service say the signs so far indicate Trump 2.0 may not be bountiful for India. Trump, like Modi, does not forget easily and is inclined to be vengeful. (Modi avoided meeting him on his visit to the US in September.)

'Heartiest congratulations, my friend,' tweeted Modi in response to Trump's comeback victory in November. The jubilation was as misplaced as the term 'friend' misleading. Assuming that it's 'America First' rather than 'Trump first', India and Modi do not currently figure in the framework.

Is Modi experiencing a loss of face after proclaiming Trump a 'friend'? Has Indian external affairs minister, S. Jaishankar, been camping in America to plead with Trump's team to send an invite to Modi—as has widely been perceived in the media? Why any self-respecting person would yearn for an invitation from Trump to be a

bystander at his inauguration is inexplicable. President Xi Jinping, no friend of Trump, but a force to be reckoned with globally, was invited and—not unexpectedly—declined. Clearly, Modi is not even *vishwabandhu*, let alone *vishwaguru*.

It is of course true that right-wing politicians from various parts of the world have been invited for the occasion. Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni dropped in on Trump at his Florida home on 5 January. Whether she will come again in the same month remains to be seen. Leaks to news organisations suggest that Hungarian PM Viktor Orban and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy are also among the invitees, but their attendance is yet to be confirmed.

From the time Modi (then chief minister of Gujarat) and Jaishankar (then Indian ambassador to China) stealthily befriended each other (the Intelligence Bureau had got wind of it and reported it to then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh), the onus to justify the departure from a productive Indian foreign policy of genuine multi-alignment to a pro-US tilt has fallen on

Jaishankar. An isolationist US position going to engage in a tariff war with China, he could be less aggressive on Chinese expansionism. Standing up to Beijing on New Delhi's border dispute with it has become heavily dependent on solidarity from Washington. Will Trump continue with the priority given to this crucial issue by the Biden administration? Indeed, the extent to which QUAD—the US, India, Japan and Australia—will remain a robust counterweight to China is also in doubt.

Over and above this, it will be humiliating for Modi if he has to eat humble pie on his headline towards Pakistan and is forced to initiate a dialogue with Islamabad.

During Trump's election campaign, and fortified by Hindu extremists in the US who normally vote for him, Trump wrote on X, 'I strongly condemn the barbaric violence against Hindus, Christians and other minorities who are getting attacked and looted by mobs in Bangladesh...' The proof of the pudding will be in the action he takes (or fails to take) in order to extricate India from a difficult wicket—the loss of Bangladesh as a reliable neighbour.

While Trump is almost certainly going to engage in a tariff war with China, he could be less aggressive on Chinese expansionism

If successful, moves by Dhaka under its new dispensation to improve relations with Pakistan will mean almost a status quo ante to pre-1971. In other words, a potential security threat from the east in addition to the serious prevailing threats from China in the north and Pakistan in the west.

Good foreign policy secures a country. In this respect, India-Jaishankar duo have failed miserably. India is today surrounded by hostile or indifferent neighbours. Trump is unlikely to lose sleep over this. ■

ASHIS RAY can be found on X at [ashisray](#)

When first cousins marry, cultures clash

The growing demand for a ban on marriages between cousins—common among Muslims, especially Pakistani immigrants—has set the stage for a culture clash in the UK. Supporters of the ban argue that such marriages risk spreading genetic disorders.

It is estimated that between 38 per cent and 59 per cent of British Pakistanis marry their first cousins.

A bill to ban the practice, introduced in Parliament recently by the Conservative MP Richard Holden, is being opposed by some Muslim politicians.

An independent Muslim MP, Iqbal Mohamed, said the government should treat marriages between first cousins as a "health awareness issue" rather than legislate against them.

He acknowledged that there were "documented health risks" to children from first-cousin marriages but "the way to redress this is not to empower the state" to implement a ban. He said the legislation would not be "effective or enforceable".

"The matter needs to be approached as a health awareness issue and a cultural issue, where women are being forced



MP Iqbal Mohamed

against their will to undergo marriage," Mohamed added.

He argued that the practice was so common because ordinary people saw it as "something very positive, something that builds family bonds, and something that puts families on a more secure financial foothold".

Muslims say that they should not be stigmatised and genetic testing should be offered to people, as it is in Middle Eastern states. Studies show that if a child is born from parents who are first cousins, the risk of a birth defect rises from three per cent to six per cent.

Most Muslims, however, remain in denial and dismiss the proposed ban as Islamophobic.

Keir Starmer in the doghouse

Keir Starmer has been the prime minister for barely six months but most voters are already experiencing the buyer's remorse.

According to pundits, his is the worst start any British prime minister in recent memory has had, though that's not exactly true. That dubious distinction goes to another Labour PM, Gordon Brown, whose three-year term (2007–2010) was saved only by his competent handling of the 2008 financial crisis.

In the general election that followed, he led the Labour Party to a humiliating defeat. It took 14 years for Labour to stage a comeback, and that because people were fed up and favoured "anyone but the Tories".

The Starmer government has failed miserably to capitalise on this. Pollsters reckon that if an election were to be held tomorrow, Labour would likely lose its majority, leading to a hung parliament.

According to a YouGov poll for the *Times*, not even one in five adults approves of Starmer's government. Most voters see Labour as "incompetent", "dishonest" and "unsuccessful", with 46 per cent saying, "I expected them to do well but have been



Prime Minister Keir Starmer

disappointed".

Starmer has acknowledged that many in Britain find it "hard to think about the future". In a New Year's Day message, he promised a "year of rebuilding" to restore prosperity, repair public services and reverse his own sliding poll ratings. Meanwhile, a newspaper which claims to



British teenage girls have been found to be leading the rest of Europe in hard drinking

have read Starmer's horoscope is more optimistic about his future. It advises him to "build up confidence simply by enjoying... life".

'One imagines,' wrote the *Times*, 'he'll be getting more freebies from Lord Alli', a Labour donor who made presents worth thousands of pounds to Starmer and his wife, including the expensive clothes they wore, as they moved into Downing Street.

British girls and binge-drinking

British teenage girls have been found to be leading the rest of Europe in hard drinking.

Research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that they are more likely to get "repeatedly drunk" than their peers from almost anywhere else in Europe. (Only Hungarian, Danish and Italian outdrink British girls.)

More than a third of 15-year-old girls in Britain have been drunk at least twice, compared with less than a quarter of boys the same age.

Companies "heavily targeting" young women with ads that "present alcohol consumption as a feminine practice", and a sign of female empowerment.

Another (misogynistic?) guess is that these girls are mirroring their mothers' behaviour as British women are known to binge-drink more than those anywhere else in Europe.

The study looked at drinking habits in 34 countries. When 15-year-olds were asked if they had been drunk at least twice, the average for boys and girls together in the UK was 29 per cent, compared with an EU average of 23 per cent.

And, finally, for all their professed love of monarchy, the majority of Britons don't wish to put their money where their mouth is.

A whopping 56 per cent have told pollsters that they are opposed to taxpayers' money being used to pay for the proposed £369 million refurbishment of Buckingham Palace which is said to be falling apart and needs extensive repairs. ■



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