

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

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Survival sense in the time of war

Arun Kumar

It is hard to predict the end of the West Asia war. Even after the agreed two-week ceasefire at the time of writing, a deep distrust will persist on all sides and the situation will simmer. Even after the war stops, the Gulf nations will not be able to immediately ramp up production because their infrastructure has been damaged in the attacks. So, energy shortages will persist even after the war ends.

The adverse impact on India is increasing by the day. Prices are rising and output is hit in several industries, most visibly restaurants and hotels. Migrant workers in cities are finding it difficult to procure/afford cooking gas and are perforce heading back to their villages, as they did during the COVID pandemic.

As the war or war-like conditions persist, the global energy supply shock will bite harder. Since all production, distribution and consumption requires energy, shortage of crude and gas will impact output. The present global crude and gas shortage is at least 10 per cent, in spite of increased supplies from alternative sources and other interventions like permission to buy Russian and Iranian oil on high seas and the Saudi East-West pipeline a.k.a. Petroline providing an outlet via the Red Sea.

Stocks of petroleum products in the pipeline and strategic stocks will last for a limited time. So, global production is getting hit and supply chains are being disrupted. Since the world's dependence on petroleum products is far greater now than in the 1970s, during the Arab-Israeli war, the impact is greater.

Since all production activities, as well as transportation and distribution, require energy, an increase in energy prices has a cascading impact on all prices.

Further, crude oil is not just energy but also a source input for things like chemicals and gas. It yields sulphur and LPG. It is used in the production of synthetic fibres, fertilisers, plastics, pharmaceuticals, lubricants, bitumen for road surfaces and so on. So, a scarcity of crude leads to shortages of other commodities and their prices rise due to speculation and black marketing in addition to the spike on account of the increase in the price of inputs.

The impact in India

Agriculture will be impacted by the shortage of fertilisers and higher cost of irrigation and transportation. Any increase in food prices will then impact workers. Diesel shortages are already affecting fishing. Textiles, packaging and ceramic tiles units are also hit. Cooking gas shortages impact hotels and restaurants,

and many are reportedly closing. This, in turn, impacts the entertainment industry, which is also affected by the inevitable reduction in travel.

India will be hit particularly hard, given its high import dependence—85 per cent for crude oil and 50 per cent for LNG. Not only will India have to buy more expensive oil and gas from non-Gulf sources at the current high prices, it won't even get what it needs given the global shortage. The government claims there is no shortage, but the long queues and exorbitantly priced refills tell a different story.

With air and sea routes disrupted through West Asia, trade and travel in this region has declined. Airlines and shipping are impacted. People are stuck and trade has declined. Shipping insurance rates have risen and war-risk coverage for routes to/through West Asia.

In addition to the visible impact on prices, the crisis will also, at the macroeconomic level, impact output, growth, investments, employment, exports, imports, capital flows and the balance of payments.

As the rate of inflation rises, demand from the marginalised sections will decline and businesses will have to cut back production, thereby lowering the economy's rate of growth.

The global increase in prices of crude oil, LPG, etc., will lead to an increase in the import bill. India's exports to the Gulf region—of tea, rice, vegetables, meat, engineering items, etc.—will be adversely impacted. Exports to other countries facing supply problems will also fall.

Consequently, India's trade deficit will rise and there will be an outgo of foreign exchange and a weakening of the rupee relative to most currencies. In the past six months, net FDI (foreign direct investment) has been negative and portfolio investments have trended outward. So, capital flows will not help cover the trade deficit.

There are ten million Indians in West Asia. Many are returning and/or losing their jobs. Their remittances and deposits in NRI accounts are likely to decline, further weakening capital flows. Returning Indians will look for work in India, further exacerbating a precarious unemployment situation in India.

Speculation about the decline in the value of the rupee will rise. This will aggravate the outflow of dollars and weaken

Photos: Getty Images



If the war drags on or hostilities persist, the global energy supply shock will bite harder. Is India ready?



If the war does not end soon or spreads, the world could face a recession. The adverse impact on India is increasing by the day

the rupee. For instance, exporters will delay bringing back proceeds and importers will increase their imports. As more dollars flow out, liquidity will tighten and interest rates increase, leading to a worsening of the investment climate.

Tariffs and wars have already roiled the economy in various parts of the world. The trend is likely to worsen, further slowing down investments and growth. Money might gravitate towards gold and silver, leading to a further decline in investments in the real economy and share markets.

The world is moving towards stagflationary conditions with prices rising and growth stalling. If the war doesn't end soon or spreads, the world could face a recession.

India will have to dip into its strategic oil reserves, which may see it through for some time. The G7 are also using their strategic reserves. India could get more crude and gas from Russia, the US and Venezuela, but the prices will be higher.

Given the global situation vis-à-vis tariffs and supply bottlenecks, and with nations trying to shorten supply chains and onshore their capital, exports will face difficulties. India will have to depend more on its domestic market. The huge unorganised sector can provide that additional market provided it gets more employment and incomes. For instance, if we sell less textiles or food items abroad, the surplus can be absorbed by India's unorganised sector, provided they have more income.

Policy tweaks that help minimise use of private vehicles and incentivise use of public transportation will result in fuel savings. A moratorium on exports of petroleum products to preserve reserves in India will help. Other such policies that reduce the energy intensity of the economy and make it less prone to energy shocks are the order of the day. ■

ARUN KUMAR is a renowned economist and author most recently of Indian Economy's Greatest Crisis: Impact of the Coronavirus and the Road Ahead

Will Kerala vote to end the cult of personality?

V.D. Satheesan, the campaign face of the Congress-led United Democratic Front, speaks with the composure of a leader who has weathered one of the most aggressive campaigns in recent memory. In this post-poll conversation with **K.A. Shaji**, Satheesan reflects on the shifting nature of Left politics in the state, its lapse into a cult of personality, and why he believes Kerala is on the cusp of change.



You expressed concerns about the scale of personality projection in this election. Tell us more?

What we witnessed was unprecedented in Kerala. More than ten thousand hoardings across the state carried the face of one individual. Roads, junctions, television, newspapers, digital platforms, everywhere. This wasn't normal political communication. It was the construction of a personality cult using state machinery and political resources. The BJP tried to counter this with thousands of hoardings of the prime minister. We chose a different path. Across seven hundred hoardings, we presented the collective face of our national and state leaders. Because we believe politics is about institutions and people, not one individual.

You sound confident about the outcome. On what basis?

There is an attempt to influence perception through false surveys. In the last Lok Sabha election, similar surveys predicted defeat for K. Sudhakaran and Shafi Parambil. They both won. This time, money is being spent to discredit us. The verdict will expose these predictions. Congress and the UDF will form a responsible government. And we

will create a new Kerala.

You have also argued that the CPI(M) and BJP are not as oppositional as they claim. Could you elaborate?

The CPI(M) needs the BJP as a political reference point. The BJP benefits from the failures of the CPI(M). This reflects in how narratives are shaped and how attacks are directed. Take specific instances. On the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) and attempts to politically engage sections of the Christian community, the BJP's strategies stand exposed. On Sabarimala, their approach ended up helping Pinarayi Vijayan politically. In corruption cases, protective shields were provided at crucial

moments. So, while they appear to be adversaries, there are situations where their interests align. The casualty is genuine opposition politics.

You've been heard saying "We are the real Left". What do you mean?

The Left stands for social justice, equality, protection of the vulnerable and democratic rights. Who is actually standing for those values? Today, what we see is centralisation of power, suppression of dissent, lack of transparency and a growing disconnect from the people. If you look at who is consistently raising issues of livelihood, environment and marginalised communities, it is often the Congress and the UDF. In that sense, we are upholding the real spirit of Left politics today.

Do you agree that this time it was a spectacle-driven campaign?

Yes. There was a clear attempt to reduce politics to spectacle and image management. Real issues like unemployment, environmental degradation, coastal distress and agrarian crisis did not get the attention they deserve. Instead, we saw aggressive PR and emotional mobilisation.

“What we see today is centralisation of power, suppression of dissent, lack of transparency and a growing disconnect”

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Will Kerala vote to end the cult of personality?

► Continued from page 1

Your critics say you did not respond aggressively enough. Was that deliberate?

Yes. I decided that we will not stoop to that level, whatever the provocation. We wanted to protect the dignity and credibility of the electioneering. That matters in a state like Kerala. And I believe people have recognised that difference.

What is your primary critique of the present government's governance?

Governance has been reduced to announcements and publicity. There is serious financial stress, increased liabilities, delayed welfare payments, lack of transparency in major projects. Kerala cannot move forward on debt-driven models and image-building exercises. We need responsible governance.

You have said this election was a fight against two money powers. Do you still stand by that?

Very rightly. Both the CPI(M) and BJP spent crores in a few months. We don't have that kind of money. So we depended on democratic mobilisation. Direct engagement with people. That is the UDF's strength. Also, the Congress in Kerala acted with extreme unity. There were no major fissures. All our alliance partners did their best. It was truly a Team UDF effort.

Now that the dust has settled, what's your reading of this election campaign?

I've been in the Kerala legislative assembly for twenty years. I have seen many elections, but never such a defamatory campaign targeting an individual or his party. The CPI(M) targeted Team UDF, and me in particular, because I led a relentless campaign exposing their failures. They received support from the BJP. It was a highly organised attempt at character assassination, blessed by the top leadership. Capsules were distributed among cadres to post on social media. Every day, for six months, at least twenty cards and ten reels were created targeting me personally. I was branded a liar for countering them with facts. But I survived because of the strength I drew from the support I have received from Congress workers and from civil society for more than a quarter century. On the other hand, the chief minister's carefully constructed image began to crack, when he responded to questions in Kollam.

That was when people started seeing the difference between projection and reality.

In terms of issues uppermost on people's minds, what WAS this election about?

Can Kerala live with the cult of personality, with a politics driven by money and organised propaganda, or will it vote for a return to democratic values? That's what this election was about, I think. Kerala is seen as the last bastion of a certain Left tradition, but that tradition cannot endlessly endure this new cult, the image-building and propaganda around one man. I'm confident the verdict will reflect that people want this to change.

Your manifesto promises welfare expansion. How will you manage finances?

Welfare is an obligation. But it must be backed by sound financial planning. There is inefficiency and misallocation in the current system. If governance improves, resources can be managed better. We also need sustainable investment. Not reckless projects, but planned development.

Why has rehabilitation become a political issue in Wayanad?

Rehabilitation is primarily the responsibility of the state government. Even then, support came from many quarters. The Congress government in Karnataka contributed to the chief minister's relief fund. Opposition MLAs contributed. Funds are available. But only a small portion is being effectively used. The township was delayed, inaugurated just before the election notification. Even now, people are not properly accommodated. We faced many hurdles in identifying and purchasing land. The government also took more than a year to finalise land. Despite that, we are moving forward. IUML has constructed 53 houses. We are planning to build houses using AICC and KPCC funds for those excluded and those living in unsafe conditions. We are supporting families with rent. The local Congress MLA has ensured education for 143 students from affected families.

In effect, we are bridging the gaps in official rehabilitation. We supported the government plan. Yet, we were targeted.

If you form the government, what will be your immediate priorities?

First, restore credibility in governance. Transparency in finances and timely delivery of welfare. Second, ensure institutions function independently. Public trust must be rebuilt. Third, review major projects to ensure economic and environmental viability. ■

The war in Iran is real, India's response is surreal

Governments around the world are preparing their citizens for prolonged disruption, but our government is signalling calm even as shortages loom

Aakar Patel

We are in the second month of what is settling in to become a long war, and it is worth setting down a few observations.

The first is that nations around the world are preparing their populations for what lies ahead. Australia has made public transport free in Tasmania and Victoria to encourage citizens not to use cars. Egypt requires shops and restaurants to shut at 9 p.m. The Philippines now has a four-day week, and so does Pakistan. Myanmar uses an odd-even system to keep cars off the road.

Slovenia has imposed a 50-litre limit on fuel purchases, and Nepal has reduced the quantity of gas in LPG cylinders. Thailand's government has asked people not to wear jackets so that air-conditioners may be run at higher temperatures. Bangladesh has closed universities and introduced planned blackouts (what we used to call 'load-shedding'). South Sudan is also limiting electricity use. Sri Lanka has made Wednesday a public holiday. The list goes on.

In India, there has been no comparable measure yet. This is for two reasons. First, the government appears to believe, though it has not said so explicitly, that there is no real problem. It has suggested that shortages being felt by people are the result of panic, and that if this supposedly irrational panic were to subside, normalcy would return.

Second, the government's assertion that India has an adequate stock of commodities imported from the Gulf: fuel, gas, fertiliser inputs and so on. 'Adequate stock' is, of course, an elastic term, but nobody knows how long the war will continue.

None of this squares with what we are seeing on the ground in the form of autorickshaw queues and the migration of workers out of major cities. We will see how the situation evolves if Iran continues to hold out. People in the oil business say physical shortages may begin to appear from this week

Nations are preparing their people for what lies ahead. Pakistan has switched to a four-day week. Bangladesh has introduced planned blackouts



In denial? Long queues at fuel stations belie the government's claim of 'adequate' stocks

onward, now that shipments already at sea when the war began have been offloaded and new cargoes are not coming through.

Another observation concerns the United States attacking Iran without the Congress—its equivalent of Parliament—formally declaring war.

When the US Constitution was being debated, its framers believed that the authority to declare war was what separated a king from an elected leader. The president could direct and manage military force, but only after a formal declaration; Congress was required to shoulder the responsibility of declaring war.

This separation of powers appears to have eroded in the Iran conflict. If the distinction ultimately rests on the capacity to invade other nations, then the line between president and monarch becomes blurred.

It is notable that many conservatives, who typically describe themselves as constitution-alists, appear comfortable with this state of affairs. This is especially relevant given the mercurial nature of Donald Trump's presidency. He can describe the war as 'very complete' yet continuing; claim that talks are progressing well, and in the next breath say there is nobody left to talk to because the US has killed Iran's leadership.

He demands that Iran open the Strait of Hormuz in one statement, then declares in another that America will withdraw and it is for other nations to secure the passage. America's political class, the media and the institutional structures appear willing to accommodate these contradictions, which helps explain why Trump continues

as he does.

The third observation concerns India's own role. Many WhatsApp discussions remain preoccupied with the belief that Jawaharlal Nehru squandered India's security at a permanent United Nations Security Council seat. The basis of this belief is unclear, but let us assume for argument's sake that India did hold such a seat today. What would it do with it in the present crisis in the Persian Gulf?

The principal power of parliament members is the veto—the ability to block resolutions in the Security Council. The United Kingdom holds such power and says it is not a participant in the war. Yet what has it done, or what can it do, with that authority in the present situation? Very little, it would appear. That may explain why the world is not looking to the UNSC for leadership at this moment.

What any country, including India, can do to end the war or mitigate its consequences must come from initiatives that mobilise other nations. Those who choose to remain on the sidelines will make little difference, whether or not they possess the symbolic weight of a UNSC veto. They remain bystanders.

These are preliminary observations, and it is unlikely this will be the last time this column returns to the Iran war. Some events reshape the world and alter how it functions for decades to come. This appears to be one such moment, and the actions of America's president have pushed the world into a new reality—whether we welcome it or not. ■

Views are personal

Meet the 'modern dacoits' of Chambal

The Supreme Court has stayed a Rajasthan government move to denotify 732 hectares in a gharial sanctuary. But can the 'dacoits' be restrained?

Rashme Sehgal

The National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) projects has sanctioned more than 1,500 projects in the past ten years, with a 280 per cent surge in approvals in 2023-24 alone. Most of these projects are located inside or in close proximity of wildlife sanctuaries and national parks, leading to the diversion of more than two lakh hectares of forest for non-forest use.

The creeping acquisition of India's forest wealth for sundry 'development' activities is so commonplace it doesn't shock anyone. Nor does it make screaming media headlines. So, when the Rajasthan government denotified 732 hectares of the National Chambal Gharial Sanctuary (NCGS) in late December 2025, there was no outrage. But on 2 April 2026, the Supreme Court intervened and put a stay on the denotification.

The Chambal sanctuary is India's only tri-state (Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh) riverine sanctuary spanning some 600 km of the Chambal river, offering refuge to nearly 75 per cent of the global gharial population.

The gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) is rated 'Critically Endangered' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). It relies on the solid sandbanks, clean water and steady river flows of this region, its natural habitat, to breed and survive. The December denotification put this fragile ecosystem at grave risk. It was endorsed by the Union government and approved by the prime minister.

While the Rajasthan government argues the move will not dismantle the gharial habitat, conservationists point out that it is vulnerable to rampant sand mining and increased human intrusion. The presence of solid sandbanks is critical for the gharials to nest, and any disturbance to this riverine environment threatens their survival.

At a recent event on the Chambal riverfront in Kota, Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla proudly announced that long-held demands for a Chambal river cruise would finally be fulfilled, dismissing ecological concerns as secondary to 'development' and people's demands.

Kranti Jain, president of the Kota Vyapar Mahasangh, also welcomed the denotification, saying it would help regularise homes of one lakh people who had settled illegally inside the sanctuary limits.

However, Babul Jajoo, state coordinator of People for Animals, who has filed over 115 PILs, attributes the denotification to the influence of the sand mafia. More than a thousand truckloads of sand is mined daily in the affected areas, he says, on the watch of the police.

While ordering a stay on the denotification on 2 April had some choice words for the sand mafia—the "modern dacoits" of the Chambal. "The state government has thrown in the towel. It is an extremely sad state of affairs if the state

Protected areas across India are under threat, all supposedly to create vital infrastructure. The list is long and growing



Incriminating evidence How long can these gharials survive the sand mining in their habitat?

government says we cannot defend our natural resources," Justice Mehta said. Videos documenting the destruction were described by the judge as 'sterilising'. "One can see the animals moving around as earthmovers dig out the sand," he said. "Look at the number of sub-divisional magistrates, police and forest officers killed by the mining mafia... But the state has forgotten that there is a law called preventive detention."

Environmentalist Vijay Varney says, "Till the 1970s, gharials used to be found from Dholpur right up to Morena, but now there is no space left for them. Unless the sand mining lobby is restrained, gharials and other river fauna will become extinct. The villagers fighting for this cause are impoverished farmers who cannot afford expensive litigation."

The tragedy unfolding in the Chambal mirrors a nationwide trend. Wildlife

sanctuaries and other protected areas are being denotified in great haste, supposedly to create vital infrastructure. Varanasi, the Prime Minister's Lok Sabha constituency, witnessed the controversial relocation of the Turtle Wildlife Sanctuary (TWS)—India's first freshwater turtle sanctuary established in 1989—to facilitate an inland waterways project as part of the Ganga Action Plan. The relocation project is doomed as sand mining is rampant in the Bhadohi-Mirzapur region as well, devastating the local riverine ecosystem.

Nowhere are protected zones truly sacrosanct. Buffer zones around tiger reserves and national parks have shrunk, leaving little room for wildlife. Environmentalist Reenu Paul says, "Reserved forests are no longer no-go areas."

A Supreme Court decision in February 2021 allowed a road to pass through Rajaji National Park. The planned Haridwar bypass road threatens to cut through the Shivalik

elephant corridor, requiring the felling of over 700 trees.

The Maharashtra State Board for Wildlife, chaired by chief minister Devendra Fadnavis, has similarly okayed iron ore mining in the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve corridor—home to over 60 tigers—despite warnings about irreversible environmental damage and poor economic returns.

Among the most egregious denotification actions is the transfer of 11.44 sq. km of Galathea Bay wildlife sanctuary—the largest nesting ground of the endangered giant leatherback turtles—in Greater Nicobar Island for a Rs 72,000 crore transshipment port project.

Retired Indian Forest Service officer Prakriti Srivastava warns: "Everything is up for sale. The more forests are diverted, the larger your vote bank becomes. The bureaucrats clearing these projects are blind to the permanent damage they cause."

Protected areas across India are under threat. The list is long and growing: Dampa Tiger Reserve in Mizoram, Pakke Tiger Reserve's buffer zone in Arunachal Pradesh, Melghat Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra, Mollem National Park (Goa), Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary (Gujarat), Eturnagaram Wildlife Sanctuary (Telangana)... Land in or near protected areas and their buffer zones is being made over to mining and/or infrastructure companies with practically no concern for wildlife and the preservation of their ecosystems.

A review of the minutes of the NBWL's standing committee meetings reveals an unsettling pattern: approvals rarely demonstrate any benefits to wildlife. 'Denotification' inside protected areas is illegal under the Wildlife Protection Act. Yet, the National Board for Wildlife is demonstrating no real concern for the areas it is mandated to protect, functioning instead as a clearing house rubber-stamping projects the government wants okayed. ■



The price AIADMK must pay to sail with the BJP

Seat-sharing tensions aside, the Dravidian party is hard put to take a stand on divisive issues

K.A. Shaji

In Thiruparankundram, a politically sensitive assembly constituency on the outskirts of the temple city of Madurai, the tensions within the AIADMK-BJP alliance are unfolding in full public view. The seat, traditionally held by the AIADMK, became a point of friction when the party refused to concede it to the BJP during seat-sharing negotiations. Recent local controversies around time-honoured traditions—involving animal sacrifice and the relocation of a sacred flame—were communalised by the BJP to rally Hindu sentiment. Yet, when the final list was drawn, the AIADMK retained the seat and fielded its own candidate, V.V. Rajan Chellappa, a senior leader with deep roots in the region.

Muslims, who once formed part of the AIADMK's broader social coalition, now view the alliance with unease. While the BJP seeks to benefit from the AIADMK's legacy vote even as it tries to build an independent political base, AIADMK cadres in Thiruparankundram admit, often off the record, that the BJP is not pulling its weight. Booth-level coordination remains inconsistent, and mobilisation lacks the urgency expected in a high-stakes contest.

Across Tamil Nadu, the relationship is marked by growing asymmetry. The AIADMK remains the senior partner in terms of seats, but the BJP is steadily expanding its footprint. This imbalance is especially visible in western Tamil Nadu, long considered an AIADMK fortress. Districts such as Coimbatore, Erode, Salem and Namakkal are witnessing growing BJP assertion. One of the party's most visible faces, former IPS officer and Tamil Nadu BJP president K. Annamalai, has maintained public discipline, but insiders acknowledge unease. While leaders speak openly about their growing base among intermediate castes and urban voters, they privately express dissatisfaction over seat-sharing arrangements.

Political analysts see a familiar pattern. "The BJP does not enter alliances to remain junior partners indefinitely," says M. Thiruvankadam, Chennai-based political observer and office bearer with the Social Science Collective. "It uses alliances as an entry point, builds its organisation and then gradually expands its influence. What we are seeing in Tamil Nadu is an early stage of that process."

There are also deeper ideological differences. Tamil Nadu's political landscape, rooted in the Dravidian movement, has historically resisted the



Future tense Union home minister Amit Shah with AIADMK leaders at a function in Pudukkottai earlier this year

ideology of the BJP.

For the AIADMK, this presents a great dilemma. Its decision to realign with the BJP ahead of the assembly election was driven by electoral necessity after a poor showing in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. However, the alliance has complicated the party's ability to articulate a clear ideological position, particularly on secularism and social justice, once central to Dravidian politics. In constituencies like Thiruparankundram, this tension manifests as cautious messaging that neither fully embraces the BJP's ideological framing nor decisively counters it. The consequences are visible. Minority voters are drifting away, while sections of the traditional base appear uncertain about the party's direction.

The contrast with Jayalalithaa's leadership is frequently invoked. During her tenure, alliances with the BJP were tactical and tightly controlled. She negotiated from a position of strength and ensured that ideological boundaries remained intact. "Jayalalithaa engaged with the BJP, but she never ceded space," says S. Sundarajan, Chennai-based political analyst and commentator on Dravidian politics. "What we see today is not engagement but accommodation."

The contrast with Jayalalithaa's leadership style is frequently invoked, when ties with the BJP were tactical and tightly controlled

The consolidation achieved under Edappadi K. Palaniswami after years of internal conflict has not translated into political confidence for the AIADMK. The expulsion of former coordinator O. Panneerselvam and the continuing shadow of V.K. Sasikala and T.T.V. Dhinakaran has meant centralisation without unification.

The BJP, in contrast, is playing a longer game. Its approach in Tamil Nadu is to enter through alliances, build cadre strength, target specific caste groups and change the narrative. Even in constituencies it does not contest, its ideological imprint is becoming visible. Thiruparankundram is a case in point, where the BJP has influenced the political conversation without securing the seat itself.

The movement of leaders underscores this shift. The current Tamil Nadu BJP president, K. Nainar Nagendran, a former AIADMK minister who crossed over to the BJP, represents a broader trend in which leaders and cadres, facing uncertainty within the AIADMK, are switching horses.

"The real story may begin after the election," says C. Lakshmanan, Chennai-based political analyst and retired faculty member of the Madras Institute of

Development Studies. "If the AIADMK fails to mount a strong challenge, the BJP will emerge as the more assertive opposition force. That is when we could see a realignment of political loyalties."

The DMK's sharpest line of attack has been to frame Palaniswami as the 'Nitish Kumar of Tamil Nadu'. To understand its resonance, one must look at how Nitish Kumar's politics in Bihar created conditions for the BJP's steady expansion without an immediate erosion of its own authority.

Nitish Kumar first came to power in 2005 through an alliance with the BJP, combining his support among backward castes with the BJP's base among upper castes and urban voters. Over time, he expanded this coalition by incorporating Extremely Backward Classes and marginalised groups through targeted welfare and governance measures. This broader base, however, also became accessible to the BJP within the alliance framework. His subsequent political shifts, breaking with the BJP in 2013, returning in 2017, exiting again in 2022 and rejoining in 2024, repeatedly altered Bihar's political equations. Yet one outcome remained consistent. The BJP steadily enlarged its independent organisational and ideological presence, eventually emerging as the dominant force within the alliance.

This is the essence of the Nitish model. A regional leader retains office and visibility, but the long-term beneficiary is the national party.

Tamil Nadu may be witnessing the early stages of a similar process. While Palaniswami may not replicate Nitish's frequent shifts, he may inadvertently play a comparable role. The comparison with Nitish Kumar has its limits, though. Nitish's strength lay in his ability to build a durable cross-caste coalition that the BJP could not easily displace. For a long period, he was the anchor of the alliance, not its dependant.

Palaniswami's rise within the AIADMK was shaped by organisational manoeuvring after Jayalalithaa's death. His strengths are his administrative record and his role in stabilising the party. But he lacks the statewide emotional connect that defined both M.G. Ramachandran and Jayalalithaa, and his authority does not command the same depth of loyalty across cadres.

Sumanth Raman, a Chennai-based commentator known for his work on electoral politics and public policy, points to this difference. "Nitish Kumar built a political base that the BJP needed. In Tamil Nadu, the equation is still evolving. The AIADMK has a legacy base, but it is fragmented. That makes the alliance structurally unequal from the beginning."

The DMK's framing of Palaniswami as a potential Nitish Kumar highlights the risks of accommodation. The challenge is to avoid the Nitish Kumar trajectory, where a regional party, in seeking short-term stability, creates conditions for a long-term shift in political power. That balance is difficult. In the unfolding politics of Tamil Nadu, it may well determine not just the future of the AIADMK, but the very shape of opposition politics. ■

When majoritarian bigotry boomerangs

The FCRA amendments and P.C. George's outburst have derailed the BJP's Christian outreach in Kerala

K.A. Shaji

As polling closed in Kerala's assembly election, the BJP found itself confronting a familiar ceiling just when it believed it had begun to crack it. This time, the party entered the contest with unusually high expectations in central Kerala, where even a modest shift in Christian votes could have altered outcomes in several key constituencies. What it needed was a break. What it encountered was a rupture.

At the centre of that rupture stands P.C. George, the BJP's controversial candidate from Kottayam's Poonjar, known for his abrasive rhetoric. His remarks have complicated an already fragile outreach effort, with sections of the clergy occasionally receptive, even as the laity largely resisted majoritarian politics. George, who has moved through the UDF and the LDF before landing in the BJP, publicly attacked Christian bishops at a crucial moment in the campaign.

Christians, he said, were "just two per cent" of the population and their bargaining with the "Hindu majority" was unwarranted. He accused sections of the clergy of playing a "double game" while benefiting from foreign funds, and called for stricter scrutiny of Church institutions and their financial dealings.

These comments landed in an already charged electoral atmosphere, amid growing anxiety around the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), the central law governing foreign funding to institutions in India. At the heart of the controversy is a provision in the FCRA Amendment Bill 2026 that allows the central government to take over assets created using foreign funds if an organisation's FCRA registration is cancelled, expires, is surrendered, or even if its renewal is delayed.

For organisations entangled in disputes, this provision is alarming. A delay caused

by litigation, administrative hurdles, or even technical lapses could potentially lead to state takeovers of properties and institutions. (See 'FCRA noose tightens', NH, 5 April 2026)

For the state's Christians, particularly Catholics, the FCRA directly affects a vast institutional network from hospitals in rural areas to schools for marginalised communities and social welfare programmes that often fill gaps left by the state.

"Foreign funding supports essential services," explains Fr Paul Thelakkatt, a former spokesperson of the Syro Malabar Church. "When licences are delayed or cancelled, the impact is immediate. It affects patients, students and entire communities."

By questioning the role of foreign funding and reducing Christians to numerical insignificance, -reinforced anxieties that were already present. Father Thomas Tharayil, deputy secretary general of the Kerala Catholic Bishops Conference said, "When someone says we are only two per cent and should not bargain, at a time when our institutions face scrutiny over funding, people will connect the two. It creates distrust."

For the Christian community, the FCRA impacts everything from hospitals and schools to welfare in rural areas



This distrust has altered the political mood in central Kerala. Constituencies where the BJP had hoped to make incremental gains have become cautious.

John Nellikunnel, Bishop of the Syro Malabar Church in Idukki, captures the shift: "Earlier, there was curiosity. Now people are asking what these policies mean for our institutions."

There is recognition in the BJP that they have lost both the moment and the momentum. Says a party functionary from central Kerala, "We were making gains this time, but issues like FCRA and statements like George's have set us back."

The response from the Church was swift and sharp. A Bishop of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church publicly rebuked George and warned against attempts to diminish a community that has played a foundational role in Kerala's social development. George's outburst strained the BJP's relationship with those he once claimed to represent and protect.

Kerala's demographic structure explains why this matters. Hindus constitute

roughly 54 to 55 per cent of the population, Muslims around 26 to 27 per cent and Christians about 18 to 19 per cent. Unlike in many other states, no single community can decisively determine electoral outcomes on its own. Within this framework, Christians occupy a pivotal position. Their concentration in districts such as Kottayam, Ernakulam, Idukki and Pathanamthitta gives them disproportionate electoral influence.

For the BJP, this demographic reality has long been a structural constraint. The party's vote share in Kerala has grown steadily, from around 6 per cent in the early 2000s to about 10-12 per cent in the last assembly elections. Yet this growth has not translated into proportional seat gains. The party opened its account in the assembly in 2016, lost that foothold within five years and has since struggled to expand pockets.

The reason lies in arithmetic. Even a near complete consolidation of upper caste Hindu votes does not take the BJP close to a winning threshold in most constituencies. Without support from either Muslims or

Christians, the path to power remains blocked. Given the political distance between the BJP and Muslim voters in Kerala, the Christian community has emerged as the more viable bridge.

Recognising this, prime minister Narendra Modi engaged with bishops during visits to Kerala. When Archbishop Joseph Pamplany said supporting the BJP was an option—provided economic demands like better rubber prices for largely Christian farmers were addressed—it indicated a willingness within sections of the Church to engage.

In Thrissur, Suresh Gopi demonstrated how this approach could translate electorally. By avoiding overtly polarising rhetoric and focusing on personal outreach, he reduced resistance among sections of Christian voters and became the BJP's first Lok Sabha MP from Kerala.

For the assembly election, the BJP hoped to capitalise on this beginning by fielding multiple Christian candidates, including P.C. George, his son Shone George, Union minister George Kurian and national leader Anoop Antony, all contesting on the lotus symbol. Yet as polling concluded, there was little evidence that this strategy had paid.

"We will talk to anyone who addresses our problems," says P.V. Kuriakose, a rubber farmer in Kanjirappally. "But if there is uncertainty about our institutions, people will step back."

Other groups, including Orthodox, Jacobite and Latin Catholic communities, remain sceptical of the BJP's ideological framework. The FCRA issue and George's remarks have reinforced that scepticism, while exposing the limits of an approach where policy and politics do not align. The BJP may yet manage to make deeper inroads in the state by engaging its large Christian community, but it did mess up its messaging this time round, squandering potential gains in these elections. ■



Crude lies and accounting sleights of hand

Gurdeep Singh Sappal

Even as the war in West Asia sends fuel prices into a dizzying upward spiral, at fuel stations in India, prices have counter-intuitively held steady. The Modi government has made much of its 'people-centric' interventions to shield citizens, but these interventions are nothing more than a 'commercial break' in a decade-long pattern of relentless extraction and profiteering.

Prime minister Narendra Modi's decade in power has been, in large part, a windfall for the government exchequer. Global crude oil prices have crashed repeatedly during his tenure, at one point touching \$30 a barrel. Each time crude prices fell, Indian consumers waited for retail petrol and diesel prices to follow suit. But they never did. The government quietly pocketed the difference, rarely even bothering to explain why the benefits had not been passed on.

When it deemed to explain, it trotted out the same three arguments: it was either the oil bonds issued by the Congress-led UPA government or roads built with petroleum revenues or cash transfers to the poor. The reality is vastly different, though and exposed by the government's own figures.

Claim #1 'We were repaying UPA-era oil bonds'
The Mamohan Singh government left behind Rs 1.6 lakh crore in oil bonds, instruments issued to oil marketing companies to compensate them for selling subsidised fuel. The BJP has repeated this ad nauseum, citing the oil bonds as both grievance and absolution.

The detail it conveniently skips is that over the past decade, the Modi government has collected more than Rs 44 lakh crore in petroleum taxes. Whereas the oil bond repayments, principal plus interest, amount to approximately Rs 3.3 lakh crore. That is roughly seven per cent of the taxes collected.

In other words, for every rupee that went towards repaying oil bonds, the Modi government pocketed thirteen.

Claim #2 'The money was used to build roads'
It cannot be denied that India has added highway kilometres during the Modi years. The government cites this as evidence that petroleum revenues were invested productively. On the face of it, this argument sounds more tenable, but it conceals an accounting sleight of hand.

As of March 2024, the National Highways

Authority of India (NHAI) carried an outstanding debt of Rs 3.35 lakh crore. That figure is more than twice the value of the oil bonds liability the BJP loves to lament. If, as the BJP argues, deferred debt is such an unconscionable burden on future generations, shouldn't the NHAI's balance sheet also demand the same outrage?

There is more. The highways built with borrowed money are now being sold back, in effect, to private investors and sovereign wealth funds through the InvIT (Infrastructure Investment Trust) mechanism. Future toll revenues are pledged to service debt in addition to generating returns for private players. Union road minister Nitin Gadkari has publicly stated that the NHAI's annual toll income is expected to rise from Rs 50,000 crore to Rs 1.45 lakh crore. In the financial year 2025-26, toll collections have already reached Rs 73,000 crore.

So, roads are built on borrowed money, future tolls are pledged to repay loans and to reward investors, and the citizen-consumer is asked to believe that the high taxes on fuel financed the road project. It's the same consumer that also pays the toll that supposedly repays the debt and rewards the private investor.

Claim #3 'The money went to the poor'

The third argument is the most sophisticated—and the most dishonest. The BJP cites Direct Benefit Transfers of over Rs 50 lakh crore during the Modi years as evidence that petroleum revenues were recycled to the poor. The number is striking until one disaggregates it.

India's total union budget, as a share of the Union Budget, has actually fallen from 16.3 per cent in 2013-14 to 13.06 per cent in 2025-26. Nearly 91 per cent of current subsidies cover food grain distribution, fertilisers, housing under the PM Awas Yojana and LPG, all of which existed in the UPA years as well—at substantially higher levels. So, this government has not expanded welfare; it has simply rebranded it.

The most telling figure is the collapse in petroleum subsidies—down from 5.1 per cent of the Union Budget under the UPA to a meagre 0.24 per cent today. Food and fertiliser subsidies together accounted for 9.6 per cent of the budget in 2013-14; they are now at 7.33 per cent. Nor has there been a compensating substantial increase in housing allocations over the UPA years.

It's worth noting that the 'efficiency gains' cited in DBT claims are government-

Photo: Getty Images



Scarcity panic? People queue up for fuel refills in Guwahati, 26 March 2026

When Modi took office in May 2014, India's national debt was ₹55 lakh crore. By March 2026, this had risen to ₹197 lakh crore

reported figures, not independently audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India. The government during the pipeline, reduced the volume flowing through it, and then presented the change as welfare.

Debt that's hard to hide

When Narendra Modi took office in May 2014, India's total national debt accumulated over 67 years, under all prime ministers Jawaharlal Nehru onwards, stood at approximately Rs 55 lakh crore. By March 2026, that figure had risen to Rs 197 lakh crore! The Union Budget for 2026-27 projects it will reach Rs 218.63 lakh crore by March 2027.

In a single decade, the Modi government has added nearly Rs 150 lakh crore to India's national debt, more than 2.5 times the debt all previous governments accumulated over nearly seven decades. India now pays approximately Rs 11 lakh crore a year

in interest. Every Indian citizen now carries an average debt burden exceeding Rs 1.5 lakh.

This does not include the off-budget liabilities of the NHAI, Indian Railway Finance Corporation, Power Finance Corporation and the Food Corporation of India, estimated at Rs 20-25 lakh crore, which do not appear in official FRBM (fiscal responsibility and budget management) statements.

If Rs 1.6 lakh crore in deferred subsidies was, as the BJP argues, an unconscionable burden on India's future, what do we call this Rs 150 lakh crore in new debt, accumulated not to subsidise the poor but to finance a governance model that extracts from citizen-consumers, mortgages public assets and calls it development? ■

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Women still hold the key in Bengal

Even though the dubious SIR exercise has significantly reduced the female voter ratio in the state—a first in over a decade

Gautam Bhattacharya and Kunal Chatterjee

At her election rallies, Mamata Banerjee repeatedly asks: "How many of you have had your names deleted from the voter list, raise your hands." She then picks out a few who do, says they have "nothing to fear", urges her party workers to help them file their appeals for re-inclusion, and proceeds to rail against the Election Commission of India and its "bid to deny them their right to vote and much else" via the Special Intensive Revision (SIR).

Mamata Banerjee is possibly fighting her toughest electoral battle yet. After three terms, she faces anti-incumbency, corruption charges against several colleagues and growing frustration with the lack of jobs and industrial development in the state. She is

now in her 70s and up against a formidable rival in the BJP, which won't stop at anything to unseat her. But in the 2016 and 2021 elections, women voted overwhelmingly for their 'Didi', and if the trend endures, Mamata is likely to retain power. The question is: will the trend endure?

The SIR has significantly reduced the female voter ratio in the state—a first in over a decade. Election Commission data, disclosed in a Rajya Sabha reply, show female electors in Bengal dropped to their lowest in 10 years, with the gender ratio falling from about 966 women per 1,000 men in the 2024 Lok Sabha rolls to roughly 956 after the SIR.

How will the deletions impact the electoral outcome? Trinamool Congress leader and state minister Chandrima Bhattacharya is blunt: "The Election Commission," she says, "has deliberately targeted women voters. Our booth-level

agents were not allowed at the hearings to help voters." The unheard category of 'logical discrepancy', she adds, "was not even mentioned when the SIR started." It was introduced later with the sole intention of deleting the names of genuine voters, she says, even while maintaining that the ploy will not work.

Political analyst and academic Prof. Biswanath Chakraborty admits that the SIR adds a new layer of uncertainty to the electoral math. "The gender-ratio decline poses a more serious headache for the TMC than the deletion of Muslim voters," he notes, adding that it may become a decisive factor in closely fought seats. Yet, he expects that "a consolidation of this vote bank" (read: women) and a higher turnout will help Mamata make up lost ground.

Mamata Banerjee's brand of

welfarism, criticised by both the Left and the Right, for prioritising doles over industry, has nevertheless cemented her bond with women voters. Some observers point out that her welfare schemes for women are better targeted and budgeted for—unlike the pre-election cash transfers to women that go by names like *Ladli Behna* and *Ladki Bahin* in BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, the kind of ad hoc, pre-election largesse that has become the new standard.

Another important difference is the consultative process. The TMC's first finance minister, noted economist Dr Amit Mitra, is credited with the introduction of *Kanyashree* in 2013—a conditional cash transfer tied to delaying child marriages. Girls attending school and staying unmarried receive annual scholarships, going up to Rs 25,000 after finishing their higher secondary. The scheme has even won recognition from the United Nations and has benefited ten million girls, as per state government claims.

Next came *Rupashree* (2018), a one-time grant of Rs 25,000 to cover wedding expenses of adult women from poor families. In 2021 came *Lakshmir Bhandar*—covering about 2.4 crore women—a universal cash transfer scheme to all eligible women aged 25-60. While the amount is small, ranging from Rs 500 to Rs 1,700, graded for general categories and for SC/ST women, the money is regularly transferred to the accounts of all eligible women.

These cash transfers are over and beyond the old-age and widow pensions, the universal health insurance scheme *Swasthya Sathi* (2016)—launched long before Ayushman Bharat—with women controlling the family card, the *Sabuj Sathi* (2025), which offers bicycles to schoolgoing boys and girls, and the grants to build toilets and houses.

Months ahead of the assembly elections, the state government increased amounts paid under these schemes and the 2025-26 budget allocated over Rs 1.18 lakh crore for gender-specific schemes and Rs 59,000 crore for child-related initiatives. The Women & Child Development department's budget was increased to Rs 38,000 crore. The honorarium for ASHA frontline health workers increased, and the newly introduced Yuba Sathi scheme offers Rs 1,500 per month for up to five years to unemployed youth aged 21-40.

Other programmes like *Muktidhara* empower rural and tribal women with micro-enterprise aid, while the *Mahila Samridhi* Yojana provides credit and subsidies to SCs and marginalised women entrepreneurs.

The difference is visible on the ground. Dipali Santra, a flower seller, thanks Didi for bailing her out when her husband lost his job as a driver during the pandemic. She has since expanded to selling bottled water, *sattu* sherbet and snacks. "We're grateful to Didi," says her son Surajit, adding,

"These allowances don't make life easy, but they do reduce precarity; they allow these women to dream that better days may lie ahead"



Mamata Banerjee's targeted welfare schemes for women have been a big factor in her repeated re-election

RECLAIMING BASAVANNA: KARNATAKA REWRITES CASTE'S RULES IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE 12TH CENTURY

Manya's Law: How one woman's murder became Karnataka's most defiant social reform

Fifteen deaths over five years. Fifteen times, Karnataka's government recorded an honour killing, noted the caste arithmetic behind it, and moved forward. Then came December 2025, and Manya Patil.

Manya was Lingayat. She was pregnant. She had married Vivekananda — a man from a Dalit community — and her family allegedly killed her for it in Hubballi. Her death was not statistically unusual. What was unusual was what followed: a state that had absorbed fifteen such deaths in five years found, this time, that it could not. The public outcry was swift, sustained, and political.

Within months, the Karnataka Freedom of Choice in Marriage and Prevention and Prohibition of Crimes in the Name of Honour and Tradition (Eva Nammava Eva Nammava) Act, 2026 had been drafted, debated, and passed.

Introduced by Shri H.K. Patil, Minister for Law, Justice and Human Rights, Parliamentary Affairs and Legislation and Tourism, LA Bill No. 07 of 2026 cleared the Karnataka Legislative Assembly in its Ninth Session on 23 March 2026 — not as a routine legislative exercise, but as a reckoning.

THE CASE THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Manya Patil, a pregnant Lingayat woman from Hubballi, was allegedly murdered by her family in December 2025 for marrying Vivekananda, a man from a Dalit community. Her killing —



AI generated representative image

Law Minister H.K. Patil immediately offered to amend the phrasing. The words "to be together" were removed from Section 4, ensuring the declaration provision applied only to persons intending to enter into a recognised marriage or betrothal.

and the public outrage it generated — provided the final political momentum needed to finalise and fast-track the legislation.

The constitutional foundation Rooted in Articles 14, 19, and 21 — and the spirit of Basavanna and Ambedkar

The Bill draws its authority directly from the Constitution of India. It affirms the fundamental rights to equality before the law (Article 14), to life and personal liberty (Article 21), and to the freedoms of expression, association, and movement (Article 19).

It invokes the constitutional principle of fraternity — that essential, often overlooked value — as a demand for the eradication of caste-based discrimination and the promotion of social solidarity through the recognition and protection of inter-caste marriages.

The Statement of Objects and Reasons invokes the vision of Sree Basavanna and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, both of whom advocated inter-caste marriages as a means to eradicate caste hierarchy. But the Act's title goes further still — by naming the legislation after the 12th-century Vachana philosophy of the Sharana movement, the government has made an unmistakable statement.

The phrase *Eva Nammava, Eva Nammava* (He is one of us — everyone belongs to us) is not bureaucratic language. It is a deliberate reclamation of Basavanna's all-embracing social vision.

Law Minister H.K. Patil framed the Bill not merely as a penal code, but as a social revolution intended to dismantle the rigid structure of endogamy that sustains the caste system.

"This enactment is not just legislation. It is the State of Karnataka

declaring, in the language of Basavanna, that no birth, no caste, no family, and no community has the authority to override the constitutional liberty of two adults who choose to build a life together."

The gap in the law — and why this Bill fills it

The BNS acts after a murder. This Bill criminalises the ecosystem that enables it

Law Minister H.K. Patil addressed a pointed question that arose during legislative debate: if murder is already punishable under the *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita*, why does this Bill need to exist? His answer was precise.

The BNS only acts after a murder has been committed. This legislation criminalises what comes before it — the ecosystem of honour — the social boycotts, the thithi rituals performed against living daughters, the confiscation of phones, the freezing of bank accounts, the pressure campaigns waged by families and community assemblies that precede and often cause the eventual killing.

The BNS does not explicitly cover symbolic disownment rituals, forced dissolution of inter-caste marriages, denial of inheritance rights used as coercion, or the coordinated intimidation of couples by so-called caste assemblies.

This Act does. Even if a murder is not proven, the various crimes of honour carry their own heavy, non-bailable penalties under this legislation that the BNS does not provide for.

What the law declares

Freedom to marry is a fundamental right — and the State will protect it

Section 3 declares plainly: all persons shall have the right to autonomy over their own lives,

including the rights to liberty, freedom of expression, and freedom to marry a person of their choice.

The consent of a person's parents, family, caste, or clan is not necessary once two adult individuals agree to enter into a marriage. Any action to prevent the exercise of these rights — by any person or group — shall amount to an offence.

Section 4 allows any couple intending to marry to voluntarily declare their willingness to the District Magistrate or a designated Nodal Officer, who relays this information to the nearest police station. Upon such declaration, no action can be taken by the police or any authority — not at the instance of family members, relatives, community members, or any third party — against the couple. This declaration is not a pre-condition for exercising the right; it is an optional legal shield.

A comprehensive taxonomy of honour-based crimes

Section 6 prohibits unlawful assemblies

— any group of five or more persons gathering to deliberate on or condemn a marriage on grounds that it dishonours the caste, tribe, or community. This directly targets the extrajudicial gatherings that have long operated outside formal law. All offences under the Act are cognizable and non-bailable.

The legislature debates-objections and government responses

Three key flashpoints in the chamber — and how the government answered them

Objection — Scope of Section 4

Some members raised concern that the phrase "willing to be together" in Section 4 could be read as the State legitimising live-in relationships, which they argued fell outside the Bill's stated purpose of protecting marriage.

Government's response — Amendment accepted

Law Minister H.K. Patil immediately offered to amend the phrasing. The words "to be together" were removed from Section 4, ensuring the declaration provision applied only to persons intending to enter into a recognised marriage or betrothal.

The Minister stated: "This enactment will not support the living together concept."

The amendment was incorporated into the final Bill.

Objection — Why "inter-caste" and not "inter-religion"?

Some members questioned whether specifically highlighting inter-caste marriage — without extending equivalent protection to inter-religious unions — constituted a discriminatory focus on Hindu social structures, or left other communities' honour-based violence unaddressed.

GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE-STRUCTURAL JUSTIFICATION UPHELD

The government stood by the phrasing. The Minister cited the structural link between caste and endogamy as the primary and specific driver of this category of violence in Karnataka.

The Bill's preamble underlines this reasoning: endogamy operates as a structural mechanism designed to preserve the caste system, and inter-caste marriages serve as essential instruments for dismantling its rigid and oppressive framework.

The government did not rule out that inter-religious dimensions could be addressed through existing law, but held that this Bill's scope was intentionally and appropriately defined.

Institutional architecture

Safe houses, fast-track courts, special cells — and the *Eva Nammava Vedike*

The Act builds a comprehensive support structure around at-risk couples.

15 Reported honour killings in Karnataka, 2020–2025

22 Categories of honour-based crimes now explicitly penalised

06 hrs - Maximum window for police to provide protection after complaint

02 mths - Target timeline for trial completion from charge sheet

Twenty-two categories of prohibited conduct — finally named and penalised Section 5 enumerates twenty-two categories of conduct that constitute crimes in the name of honour and tradition, including but not limited to:

- Honour killings
- Abduction of the couple
- Social and economic boycott
- Excommunication and forced eviction
- Thithi rituals against living persons
- Phone and communication confiscation
- Freezing of bank accounts
- Forced termination of employment
- Denial of inheritance rights
- Forced abortion or miscarriage
- Sexual violence and harassment
- Spreading defamatory false information
- Forcibly declaring a married couple siblings
- Forced dissolution of marriage

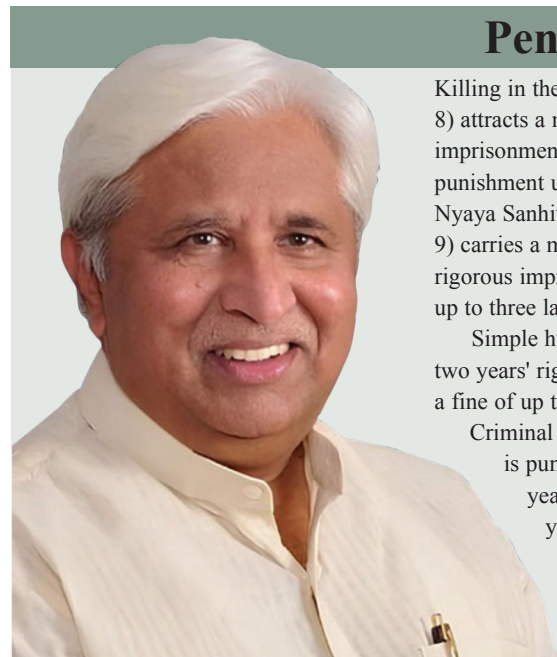
Section 17 mandates safe houses at every District Headquarters with adequate security and access to legal counsel and NGO representatives. Police must provide protection within six hours of a complaint.

Section 22 creates Special Cells in every district staffed by the Superintendent of Police and the District Social Welfare Officer, with a round-the-clock helpline. Section 23 establishes quarterly district-level monitoring committees that include civil society representatives.

Section 25 designates Special Fast Track Courts — in consultation with the High Court — with a mandate to complete trials within two months of charge sheet filing. Most distinctively, Section 24 creates the *Eva Nammava Vedike* in each district — a body comprising retired judges, police officers, revenue officers, and sub-registrars mandated to facilitate the solemnisation of inter-caste marriages and provide counselling. The *Vedike* is not merely protective; it is affirmative. It is the State showing up to celebrate what caste sought to forbid.

The District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police are also empowered under Section 19 to provide logistical support to couples wishing to solemnise their marriage under police protection, and to offer accommodation in safe houses for up to one year based on threat assessment.

Penalties: Graduated, deterrent, and non-bailable



Killing in the name of honour (Section 8) attracts a minimum of five years' imprisonment, in addition to punishment under the *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita*. Grievous hurt (Section 9) carries a minimum of three years' rigorous imprisonment and a fine of up to three lakh rupees.

Simple hurt attracts no fewer than two years' rigorous imprisonment with a fine of up to two lakh rupees.

Criminal intimidation (Section 11) is punishable by three to five years, extendable to seven years for the gravest threats. Participation in an unlawful assembly (Section 12) attracts

six months to five years.

Disobedience of a court injunction carries up to two years' imprisonment or a fine of up to one lakh rupees. Mandatory reporting obligations are placed on all village officers and specified government officials, with non-compliance punishable by up to two years' imprisonment.

"The BNS only acts after a murder. This Bill criminalises the ecosystem of honour — social boycotts, property exclusion, and ritual disownment — which current laws ignore entirely."

— Shri H.K. Patil, Minister for Law, Justice and Human Rights

The passage of the *Eva Nammava*

Bill, 2026 represents one of the most significant social reforms in Karnataka's recent legislative history. It was shaped in grief — by Manya Patil's murder and fifteen deaths over five years — but it is designed to prevent the next one.

By combining criminal deterrence with proactive protection mechanisms, an affirmative institutional presence in the *Eva Nammava Vedike*, and the moral weight of Basavanna's philosophy, the Karnataka government has attempted something rare in Indian legislative history: a law that is simultaneously a penal code, a welfare architecture, and a civilisational statement.

A re-enactment of Gaza in Lebanon

How is Israel's inhuman campaign to displace yet another population getting so little international attention, asks Ashok Swain

While the fear-fascinated gaze of the world was fixed on Donald Trump's dangerous brinkmanship with Iran, the simultaneous devastation in Lebanon was receiving too little attention. Israel is threatening to redraw the border with its northern neighbour and has over the past month escalated its military campaign from cross-border strikes earlier to a full-scale war that now includes a ground invasion, the bombardment of civilian areas and an explicit plan to occupy large parts of southern Lebanon.

Since mid-March, Israeli forces have advanced further into Lebanese territory after weeks of air strikes that targeted not just Hezbollah positions but also homes, hospitals, universities, bridges and other infrastructure in densely populated areas.

Entire Muslim-majority towns south of the Litani river are being depopulated. Expanding evacuation orders stretch across large parts of the country, and there is a largescale displacement of the population under ongoing bombardment. The humanitarian toll is staggering. More than one-and-a-half million people have been displaced, with hundreds of thousands forced to flee north. Civilian casualties continue to rise, with over 1,500 casualties since early March, including more than 200 women and children, and many medical workers and journalists. Entire families have been buried under the rubble as air strikes flatten homes in southern Lebanon and the suburbs of Beirut.

The pattern of destruction is familiar. Healthcare facilities have been struck, ambulance centres hit and medical personnel killed. Doctors on the ground warn that the targeting of Lebanon's already fragile health system mirrors what was previously seen in Gaza. Hospitals are shutting down not only because of direct damage but also due to lack of electricity, fuel, medical supplies and staff. A country already crippled by economic collapse is now facing the systematic erosion of its capacity to sustain life.

Israel is making no secret of its intentions, and the objective is no longer confined to weakening or disarming Hezbollah but to establish a buffer zone extending up to the Litani river and to prevent displaced Lebanese civilians from



Photo: Getty Images

Just hours after the ceasefire announcement on 8 April in the war with Iran, Lebanon took the heaviest Israeli bombardment

returning to their homes in the south. Entire border villages are slated for destruction as part of this strategy—in effect, another ethnic cleansing project is under way.

For those familiar with the region's history, the echoes are unmistakable. Israel maintained a security zone in southern Lebanon for nearly two decades, from 1982 to 2000. Predictably, the occupation fuelled resentment, strengthened Hezbollah and entrenched cycles of violence. Israel's current strategy will repeat this pattern on a larger, even more destructive scale.

What makes the present moment particularly alarming is the normalisation of extreme measures against civilian populations. Air strikes have repeatedly hit residential neighbourhoods, including areas that had previously been considered relatively safe. Even sites sheltering displaced civilians have not been spared. One widely reported strike targeted a Beirut seafront, where families, fleeing

earlier bombardments, had set up tents.

There is also a deliberate pattern in the destruction of infrastructure. Key roads and bridges have been struck, making large areas of southern Lebanon inaccessible. This doesn't just disrupt Hezbollah's military logistics, it traps civilians.

The conflict has also spilled into the international sphere in deeply troubling ways. Members of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), including three Indonesian peacekeepers, have been killed in Israeli shelling. The fact that UN personnel are being killed and wounded in what is supposedly a monitored conflict zone underscores how rapidly norms are eroding. Israeli soldiers have also destroyed UNIFIL surveillance cameras and even detained peacekeepers.

Meanwhile, the regional risks continue to grow. Hezbollah's involvement is closely tied to Iran, and the war in Lebanon cannot be separated from the confrontation unfolding across West Asia. Missile

exchanges, cross-border attacks and retaliatory strikes are creating a volatile environment in which the situation can escalate quickly and unpredictably.

Yet, despite the scale of destruction, the ethnic-cleansing pattern of the Israeli campaign and its rogue government's undisguised attempt to redraw the border, the international response has been muted. Some European governments have expressed concern and called for a ceasefire but their half-hearted attempts will not alter the course of events. The war in Lebanon is being overshadowed, treated as a secondary theatre in a larger geopolitical drama, but this silence has consequences.

When largescale ethnic displacement, destruction of civilian infrastructure and brazen territorial occupation does not trigger a forceful response from the international community, it grants impunity to bad actors and encourages worse transgressions. What happened in Gaza is proof. The erosion of international norms, even in the conduct of wars, does not happen dramatically; it happens gradually, through the normalisation of what was once considered unacceptable.

Israel is using military force to reshape and usurp the territory of another sovereign country. It is imposing immense costs on Lebanese civilians, who have no control over the dynamics driving the conflict. For Lebanon, the consequences are existential. The country was already in the grip of one of the worst economic crises in modern history. Its state institutions are weak, public services are collapsing and political divisions run deep. The war is accelerating the disintegration of an already fragile state.

The implications are equally profound for the region. A prolonged Israeli presence in southern Lebanon can only deepen resistance, strengthen militant networks and increase the likelihood of recurring conflict. It will, in a sense, institutionalise instability. If southern Lebanon is indeed being turned into another Gaza, the question is not only what is happening but why it is being allowed to happen, with so little scrutiny or resistance from the international community. ■

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Israel's horrific bid to expand into Lebanon is going unnoticed because it's seen as a minor theatre in a larger geopolitical drama

Time now to deliver

Once the afterglow fades, will the RSP in Nepal to fulfil its promises?



Photo: Getty Images

High expectations Nepal's youngest prime minister Balendra Shah and his young cabinet have their work cut out

Uddhab Pyakurel

The new government in Nepal has hit the ground running, taking a bewildering array of decisions in its first week in office, leaving people guessing and gasping. The morning after the youngest-ever prime minister Balendra Shah (36) was sworn in on 27 March 2026, the government authorised the arrests of former prime minister K.P. Sharma Oli and former home minister Ramesh Lekhak on charges of criminal negligence amounting to reckless homicide while suppressing the youth uprising of September 2025.

'You messed with the wrong generation', read new home minister Suran Gurung's cryptic social media post announcing the arrests. On 29 March, authorities arrested another former minister on money laundering charges and initiated investigations of corruption against three former prime ministers, including Oli.

On its second day in office, the government released a 100-point reform agenda. It instructed public and private hospitals to reserve 10 per cent of beds for economically disadvantaged patients with immediate effect and offered jobs at the national power authority to the families of

those killed during the protests—an estimated 70.

The government also ordered the abolition of all student unions affiliated with political parties (an odd decision for a Gen Z government) and banned bureaucrats, teachers and other state-affiliated personnel from directly or indirectly engaging with political parties. Political appointees to various boards have been asked to step down voluntarily; if they don't, the government seems determined to dismiss all 1,200 of them. A bill has been introduced, proposing private schools be deemed 'non-profit' institutions.

Criticism from private schools, the bureaucracy and sections of the public has been overshadowed by the euphoria following the landslide victory of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), a young party formed in 2022. The idealistic youth who led the protests against the government and succeeded in overthrowing it in six months seems to hold out hope for a better future. For the moment, Nepal is basking in the afterglow of what had appeared impossible in August 2025.

The new government, however, faces formidable challenges. Its pre-poll promises—ensuring a GDP growth rate of

seven per cent, creating 1.2 million jobs to prevent out-migration, turning an IT hub in the next five years—will require some luck and a lot of hard work. Opening a relatively closed economy in a land-locked country will demand innovative policies, as the government copes with rising aspirations, expectations of swift change and new economic opportunities.

Prime minister Balendra Shah, who is also the first Madhesi (plains person) to hold the office, has a delicate balancing act ahead—with competing pulls and pressures from the dominant Khas-Arya ethnic groups and the Madhesis, Dalits and other marginalised groups.

Nepal's government and politics has long been dominated by the high caste Khas-Arya hill people, who also control the judiciary and the bureaucracy. The people of the Madhes, comprising 20 per cent of the population, are seen as culturally closer to Indians across the border, their loyalty to the nation suspect in the eyes of Nepal's rulers. To counter this, the Madhesis demanded greater political representation and devolution of power through federalism, both of which were achieved on paper but not in practice. Madhes opposition to the 2015 Constitution's haphazard provincial delineation and unequal citizenship rights was fiercely countered by the Kathmandu elite, who saw the protests as driven by India.

Foreign minister Shishir Khanal has sought to dispel doubts about external affairs, declaring that Nepal would pursue non-alignment and uphold the country's sovereignty, integrity and national interests. "There will be no change in the country's foreign policy even if the government changes or a new minister comes," he added.

With the prime minister and several of his ministers having studied in India, observers expect relations with India to improve. In the past, Balendra Shah has had to try extra hard to prove he was not tilting towards India, to the extent of putting up a map of 'Greater Nepal' in his mayoral office in response to the RSS map of 'Akhand Bharat'.

Balendra Shah's rise marks an important shift in Nepali politics. After three-and-a-half years as mayor of Kathmandu, he joined the RSP in January 2026, led it to a decisive victory in March as prime-ministerial candidate, and was installed as PM by the end of the month.

Shah—who is better known as a singer and rapper and holds a Master's degree in structural engineering from Bengaluru—swiftly put together his cabinet of 14 ministers, five of them women and most of them from professional backgrounds. Finance minister Dr Swarnim Wagle, for instance, is a well-known economist with a PhD from Australia. With 10 out of 15 ministers below the age of 40 and 20 per

cent of the newly elected members of Parliament below the age of 30, it's youth power to the fore.

No election has been as decisive since Nepal's first general election in 1959, when the Nepali Congress (NC) won a two-thirds majority. The RSP's parliamentary majority with 182 of 275 seats is only the second instance of single-party dominance since the NC's win in 1999. Fragile coalitions dominated politics over the past two decades. While RSP chairman Rabi Lamichhane has reassured people that there would be no political vendettas, doubts persist.

It remains to be seen whether the hotheads among RSP supporters can be reined in. When Amisha Parajuli criticised Oli's arrest as unconstitutional and vindictive on social media, she was attacked viciously—on social media. The new government's attitude to freedom of speech and freedom of the Press is ambivalent. In the past, despite tight restrictions on media, was free to criticise even the panchayat system; it was bold enough to speak fearlessly against the majoritarian CPN Maoist-led government. Today's media seems more circumspect, afraid of being mocked as 'jhole' (blind followers or sycophants).

The Gen Z protests were carried out through social media, bypassing traditional media almost entirely. Given that the digital divide in Nepal is acute—40 per cent of the people are still do not have access to the internet—the new government's push for digital governance and reliance on digital and social media has caused unease. Political discourse, wrote a columnist, is being influenced by opaque social media algorithms.

As mayor of Kathmandu, Shah was known to have his way. A commentator wrote, 'He combined old-school nationalism with a healthy disdain for the existing party system and traditional media. He chose to communicate primarily on social media with his millions of followers. He differed with ward chiefs over parking issues, bulldozed illegal constructions, displaced landless squatters and street vendors, and faced intense opposition from scrap dealers.' His profanity in now-deleted social media posts, directed at other neighbouring countries and both Nepali leaders, caused concern.

The uphill task of guiding Nepal through turbulent times rests with a former rapper (Shah), a former DJ (Gurung) and a former talk show host (Lamichhane). Young, inexperienced and temperamental, they are impatient for change.

While the hopes of millions of citizens are riding on this trio, commentators in Kathmandu are busy speculating whether Balen Shah will end up adopting the governance style of Narendra Modi or Arvind Kejriwal. ■

UDDHAB PYAKUREL is associate professor of political sociology at Kathmandu University



Who will judge the judges?

Avay Shukla revisits a book that lays out the carcass of our judicial system

Before we get into this thought-provoking book, two things need to be said about it. One, it reaffirms that courageous journalism and writing still exist in India, notwithstanding the utter capitulation of much of the media to power and commerce. Two, the book raises troubling questions about our higher judiciary, based not on allegations or charges, but on facts available in the public domain and easily verifiable. The authors lay out the carcass of our judicial system, wounds and all, and leave it to the reader to make up his or her mind.

The central character is Justice Arun Mishra, appointed to the Supreme Court in July 2014 by the Narendra Modi government, even though the previous UPA government had twice rejected his case.

On his retirement from the SC in September 2020, he was appointed chairman of the NHRC (National Human Rights Commission) in June 2021, where he did not distinguish himself. For the first time ever, the NHRC was downgraded by GANHRI (Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions) from category A to B for its failure to investigate human rights violations and its police-led approach.

He retired from the NHRC in January 2025 and was, unsurprisingly and ironically, appointed ombudsman and ethics officer of the BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India).

In this book, fourteen of his most controversial judgments are subjected to a forensic analysis that the media, or any legal scholar, have never had the courage to undertake.

In each case, any reasonable person would find him wanting, feeling that he was prone to riding roughshod over high court judgments, fashioning previous judgments and precedents to suit his interpretations of the law, displaying a complete lack of empathy for human rights, failing to acknowledge conflicts of interest in some cases and refusing to recuse himself from them, and intriguingly ruling in favour of the government, the rich and the powerful even when there was considerable evidence to support a contrary decision.

The authors rarely, if ever, give their opinions on these cases (in deference, probably, to the prevailing climate of self-censorship, contempt laws and subdued criticism).

Instead, they meticulously lay out the facts, invariably supported by citations and references, and leave it to the astute reader to draw his or her own inferences and conclusions. Most conclusions will do no credit to Justice Mishra.

It is not possible to discuss each of these cases in a book review, but a few common threads that run through them become self-evident, enough to justify the title of this book.

Justice Mishra's propensity to favour the government's or prosecution's version

in just about every case is the first thing one notices. This is evident in the Elgar Parishad case, where a scholar-activist like Gautam Navlakha was allowed to be hauled out of the jurisdiction of the Delhi high court by the NIA (National Investigation Agency)—despite court orders—ensuring that he could not be granted bail for another couple of years.

It can also be seen in the case of Sanjiv Bhatt, an IPS officer of the Gujarat cadre who fell foul of those in power by revealing details of a meeting taken by Mr. Modi (then chief minister of Gujarat) during the riots of 2002, and for alleging that he was pressured by Modi and Shah to “withdraw a report he had prepared on the murder of former Gujarat home minister Haren Pandya”.

Bhatt's writ petition in the SC for constitution of an SIT to probe the Gujarat riots afresh was placed by Justice Mishra, who dismissed it, hearing implicit faith in the government's version. He accused Bhatt of misleading the court, of *suppressio veri* and *suggestio falsi*, and of not coming to the court “with clean hands”.

This judgment effectively sealed Bhatt's fate, the authors say. He was subsequently convicted in another, decades-old case and is now serving life in prison. His appeal is pending in the Gujarat high court, for whatever it is worth.

This book makes the reader wonder whether Justice Mishra was ever interested in the search for either truth or justice. In

Judge Loya's case, he inexplicably refused to allow a court-monitored probe into the mysterious death of one of his own. Loya was trying a case in which Amit Shah, now Union home minister, was accused in a murder or false encounter.

In the Sahara-Birla bribery case, he refused to allow in evidence a handwritten note in which payment of bribes was recorded, including allegedly to Mr. Modi, during his tenure as chief minister of Gujarat. The rejection was based on a technical definition of what constitutes a ‘diary’. Justice Mishra held that since the so-called payments were recorded on loose sheets of paper and did not have spiral or permanent binding, they could not be considered admissible evidence.

The case, naturally, fell apart in the absence of this crucial piece of evidence.

Hearing the constitutional challenge to the Forest Rights Act (FRA), which sought to confer land rights on traditional forest dwellers, Arun Mishra, instead of addressing the constitutional issues involved, peremptorily ordered the eviction of millions of tribals at the second hearing itself. This was done without ascertaining whether their claims had been adjudicated according to law.

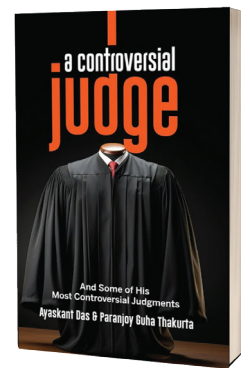
It was only when the BJP govt in Delhi, which had done nothing to defend its own Act, feared an electoral backlash and requested the court to reconsider, that Justice Mishra stayed his own order in 2020. The case remains in limbo to this day.

Brandishing his authority like a cudgel, the Hon'ble judge took suo motu notice of two tweets by Prashant Bhushan, noted activist and SC lawyer, about the role of four past chief justices in the dismantling of democracy, and convicted him of contempt of court.

This was in spite of advice to the contrary by the attorney-general of India and a legion of legal luminaries and civil society members. This judgment itself has done much to tarnish the image of the SC as a protector of free speech.

The book meticulously documents how, in the 18 months prior to his retirement, Justice Mishra delivered a series of judgments—eight, to be precise—in favour of the Adani Group and Reliance Industries. Through these rulings, the companies benefitted by thousands of crores of rupees, effectively reducing the telecom sector to a duopoly.

Once again, the rub lies in the manner of interpretation of laws, facts and precedents. Without going into the intricacies of the judgments—the reader can peruse them



Title **A Controversial Judge**
Authors **Paraskanta Das and Paranjoy Guha Thakurta**
Publisher **Paranjoy Guha Thakurta**
Year **2025**

and draw his or her own conclusions—the sheer coincidence of timing and disposal is intriguing. As Ian Fleming famously said: “Once is happening, twice is coincidence, but three times is enemy action!”

The other cases and judgments analysed in this book only reinforce the misgivings about Justice Mishra's credentials as an impartial purveyor of justice. Sadly, one cannot discuss them all in this review.

Suffice it to say, however, that by the end of this book, one cannot but grapple with some troubling questions. Are we overhyping the notion of ‘independence of the judiciary’, given that the virtual immunity offered to judges is not serving its stated purpose?

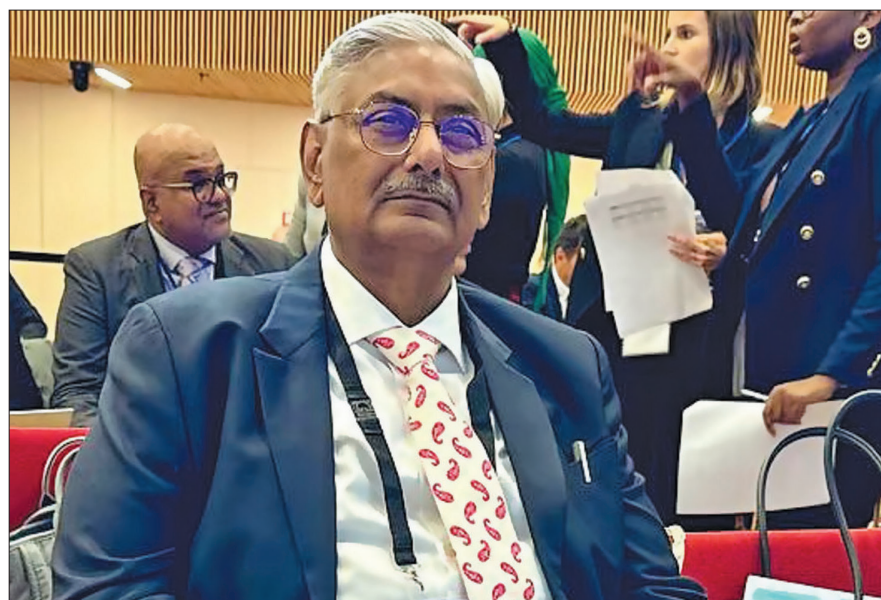
It is being demonstrated daily that judicial independence without corresponding accountability can only lead to judicial tyranny. Therefore, should there be greater focus on the other doctrine—accountability of the judiciary?

Is the country being let down by the manner in which we appoint and promote our judges? Should re-employment of retired judges be banned entirely, as it seriously compromises their loyalties?

Inconvenient questions, but ones that will have to be addressed sooner rather than later. If the fourteen judgments discussed in this book compel the reader to reflect on these issues, it would have done its job. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

Are we overhyping the notion of ‘independence of the judiciary’, given that the immunity granted our judges is not serving its purpose?



The damaged interiors of the historic Golestan Palace in Tehran

UK academics warn against threat to Iranian cultural heritage

Prominent British academics have expressed deep concern over the threat to Iranian cultural heritage from US-Israel's illegal war and relentless bombing. (Golestan Palace, the only UNESCO-listed building in Tehran, was hit on 28 February; Sharif University was bombed on 4 April).

Historic mosques, ancient desert cities and sites including the Soltani Mosque, and the Ali Qapu and Chehel Sutun palaces are at risk, they warn in an open letter.

‘All this is a loss for the cultural heritage of the world, not just for the people of Iran,’ say the signatories, who include historians and archaeologists specialising in West Asia from the British Museum, the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge University and the School of Oriental and African Studies.

In addition to the damage directly done to historic sites, the letter states that ‘damage to oil depots and refineries inevitably results in pollution that causes irreversible damage to sites such as Persepolis and Parsagadae and famous rock-reliefs such as Bisitun, Naqsh-e Rostam and Bishapur.’

Ali Ansari, professor of Iranian history at the University of St Andrews and

president of the British Institute of Persian Studies, said the nature of the war made it unclear as to how the international community would be able to help repair the damage in the future.

Several Western museums and other institutions are said to be still working with archaeologists in neighbouring Iraq in an attempt to undo the damage caused by previous wars.

Systematic anti-Muslim bias in UK media

There's ‘widespread and systemic anti-Muslim bias’ in British media, with around 70 per cent of coverage portraying Muslims in a negative light, associating them with themes of conflict, threat or controversy.

This is revealed in a comprehensive study by the Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM), an independent non-profit organisation which works to ensure a fair and accurate media landscape in UK.

It found that nearly half of all articles referencing Muslims or Islam in 2025 contained some degree of bias.

‘The analysis also highlights a cluster of right-wing media outlets responsible for producing the most severe and persistent forms of harmful coverage,’ it said.

The study is based on an analysis of over



LONDON DIARY

HASAN SUROOR

40,000 articles published across 30 major UK news outlets, reportedly making it the largest of its kind examining media portrayals of Muslims in Britain.

Among other things, it identifies structural patterns of bias in news reporting and examines how these patterns shape public narratives about Muslims and about Islam.

It will be interesting to see what a similar study of Indian media might reveal.

Sadiq Khan calls out Trump's lies about London

The ping-pong between London mayor Sadiq Khan and US president Donald Trump and his courtiers over the latter's campaign to ‘tarnish’ the British capital's image has escalated into a diplomatic scandal.

Khan—who has been personally targeted by Trump and called a “terrible mayor” who “wants to go to Sharia law”—has told British diplomats abroad to challenge “disinformation and lies” about the city.

Among other things, Trump has dubbed London the “crime capital” of Europe and claimed that the city has been overrun by Islamists, resulting in “no-go” zones for non-Muslims.



Sadiq Khan



Donald Trump with Keir Starmer

After a meeting with British diplomats, ambassadors and high commissioners, Khan said that London was safer than major US cities. He cited data showing that last year London logged its lowest number of per capita crime since records began being kept.

Incidents of phone-snatching, for which the British capital became notorious in recent years, had also fallen.

‘A lot of this misinformation, disinformation and lies comes from the United States of America. It's really important to counter the propaganda coming from President Trump,’ said Khan.

The row comes as the ‘special relationship’ between the US and the UK is being severely tested over the Iran war, with Trump calling prime minister Keir Starmer weak—“He's no Churchill”—for refusing Americans the use of British bases to bomb Iran.

And what about ‘crumbling’ American cities, Mr President?

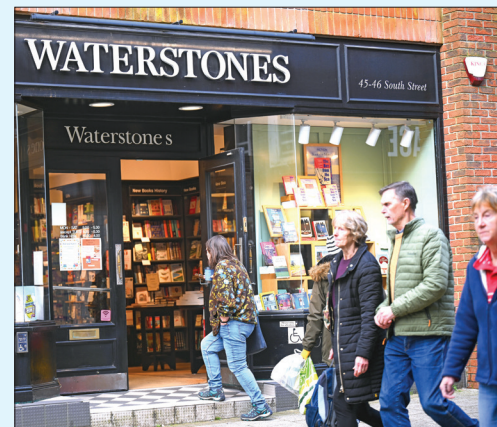
Meanwhile, British media is busy reminding the Yanks of the decline of their famous cities.

To quote *Times* columnist Janice Turner: ‘American cities, with their crumbling infrastructure, homeless camps, car domination and bust-up pavements are decades behind Paris, Barcelona or London in solving today's urban problems. I was beguiled by New York in 1995: now I wish everyone on its ratty, rat-infested subway could see the Elizabeth Line. Apart from its wildernesses, those it hasn't yet spoilt, America offers nothing to envy.’

No AI help please, literary agents warn writers

Planning to pitch a manuscript to a British literary agent?

Well, then stay as far away from AI as possible if you don't want the world to miss out on your next great novel.



Alarmed by the rampant use of artificial intelligence by authors, literary agents have tightened their rules for book submissions, warning that any hint of use of AI, not just in the manuscript but also in the covering letter, synopsis or proposal, would disqualify them.

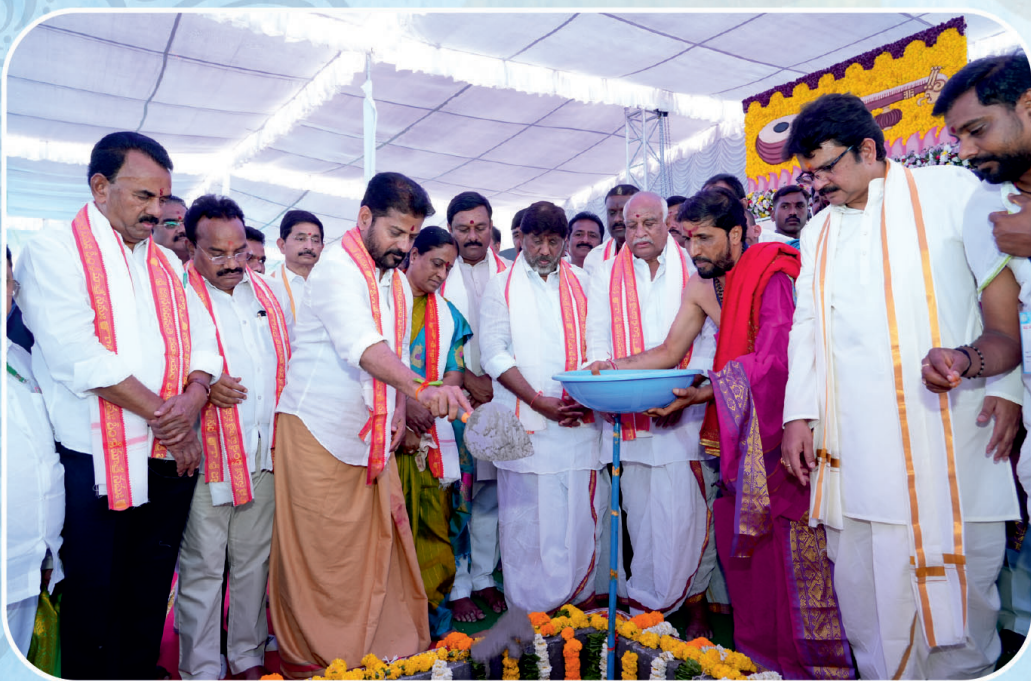
And, finally, a British commentator noted that events in the Middle East “lend weight to the observation that war is God's way of teaching Americans geography. ■



Honouring Faith, Building Legacy Telangana's Commitment to Temple Development

Honourable Chief Minister
Sri A.Revanth Reddy Garu

Performed in Bhoomi Puja for
Redevelopment works at
Bhadrachalam Temple and Basara Temple



Sri Gnana Saraswathi Devasthanam
Basara Saraswati Temple redevelopment
works Estimated cost Rs. **225 Crore**



Sri Sita Ramachandra Swamy devasthanam,
Bhadrachalam Temple redevelopment
works Construction of Godavari Pushkar Ghats
Estimated Cost: **₹351 Crores**

PEOPLE'S GOVERNMENT: PATH TO PROGRESS AND WELFARE FOR ALL

Issued by Information and Public Relations Department, Govt. of Telangana

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

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NATION


POLL-BOUND STATES
Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal



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NATION

THE 'MODERN DACOITS' OF CHAMBAL
Sand mafia in a gharial sanctuary



► P2

NATION

OF CRUDE LIES AND THE NATIONAL DEBT
Exposing a decade-long pattern of relentless extraction and profiteering



► P4

Survival sense in the time of war

Arun Kumar

It is hard to predict the end of the West Asia war. Even after the agreed two-week ceasefire at the time of writing, a deep distrust will persist on all sides and the situation will simmer. Even after the war stops, the Gulf nations will not be able to immediately ramp up production because their infrastructure has been damaged in the attacks. So, energy shortages will persist even after the war ends.

The adverse impact on India is increasing by the day. Prices are rising and output is hit in several industries, most visibly restaurants and hotels. Migrant workers in cities are finding it difficult to procure/afford cooking gas and are perforce heading back to their villages, as they did during the COVID pandemic.

As the war or war-like conditions persist, the global energy supply shock will bite harder. Since all production, distribution and consumption requires energy, shortage of crude and gas will impact output. The present global crude and gas shortage is at least 10 per cent, in spite of increased supplies from alternative sources and other interventions like permission to buy Russian and Iranian oil on high seas and the Saudi East-West pipeline a.k.a. Petroline providing an outlet via the Red Sea.

Stocks of petroleum products in the pipeline and strategic stocks will last for a limited time. So, global production is getting hit and supply chains are being disrupted. Since the world's dependence on petroleum products is far greater now than in the 1970s, during the Arab-Israeli war, the impact is greater.

Since all production activities, as well as transportation and distribution, require energy, an increase in energy prices has a cascading impact on all prices.

Further, crude oil is not just energy but also a source input for things like chemicals and gas. It yields sulphur and LPG. It is used in the production of synthetic fibres, fertilisers, plastics, pharmaceuticals, lubricants, bitumen for road surfaces and so on. So, a scarcity of crude leads to shortages of other commodities and their prices rise due to speculation and black marketing in addition to the spike on account of the increase in the price of inputs.

The impact in India

Agriculture will be impacted by the shortage of fertilisers and higher cost of irrigation and transportation. Any increase in food prices will then impact workers. Diesel shortages are already affecting fishing. Textiles, packaging and ceramic tiles units are also hit. Cooking gas shortages impact hotels and restaurants,

and many are reportedly closing. This, in turn, impacts the entertainment industry, which is also affected by the inevitable reduction in travel.

India will be hit particularly hard, given its high import dependence—85 per cent for crude oil and 50 per cent for LNG. Not only will India have to buy more expensive oil and gas from non-Gulf sources at the current high prices, it won't even get what it needs given the global shortage. The government claims there is no shortage, but the long queues and exorbitantly priced refills tell a different story.

With air and sea routes disrupted through West Asia, trade and travel in this region has declined. Airlines and shipping are impacted. People are stuck and trade has declined. Shipping insurance rates have risen and war-risk coverage for routes to/through West Asia.

In addition to the visible impact on prices, the crisis will also, at the macroeconomic level, impact output, growth, investments, employment, exports, imports, capital flows and the balance of payments.

As the rate of inflation rises, demand from the marginalised sections will decline and businesses will have to cut back production, thereby lowering the economy's rate of growth.

The global increase in prices of crude oil, LPG, etc., will lead to an increase in the import bill. India's exports to the Gulf region—of tea, rice, vegetables, meat, engineering items, etc.—will be adversely impacted. Exports to other countries facing supply problems will also fall.

Consequently, India's trade deficit will rise and there will be an outgo of foreign exchange and a weakening of the rupee relative to most currencies. In the past six months, net FDI (foreign direct investment) has been negative and portfolio investments have trended outward. So, capital flows will not help cover the trade deficit.

There are ten million Indians in West Asia. Many are returning and/or losing their jobs. Their remittances and deposits in NRI accounts are likely to decline, further weakening capital flows. Returning Indians will look for work in India, further exacerbating a precarious unemployment situation in India.

Speculation about the decline in the value of the rupee will rise. This will aggravate the outflow of dollars and weaken

Photos: Getty Images



If the war drags on or hostilities persist, the global energy supply shock will bite harder. Is India ready?



If the war does not end soon or spreads, the world could face a recession. The adverse impact on India is increasing by the day

the rupee. For instance, exporters will delay bringing back proceeds and importers will increase their imports. As more dollars flow out, liquidity will tighten and interest rates increase, leading to a worsening of the investment climate.

Tariffs and wars have already roiled the economy in various parts of the world. The trend is likely to worsen, further slowing down investments and growth. Money might gravitate towards gold and silver, leading to a further decline in investments in the real economy and share markets.

The world is moving towards stagflationary conditions with prices rising and growth stalling. If the war doesn't end soon or spreads, the world could face a recession.

India will have to dip into its strategic oil reserves, which may see it through for some time. The G7 are also using their strategic reserves. India could get more crude and gas from Russia, the US and Venezuela, but the prices will be higher.

Given the global situation vis-à-vis tariffs and supply bottlenecks, and with nations trying to shorten supply chains and onshore their capital, exports will face difficulties. India will have to depend more on its domestic market. The huge unorganised sector can provide that additional market provided it gets more employment and incomes. For instance, if we sell less textiles or food items abroad, the surplus can be absorbed by India's unorganised sector, provided they have more income.

Policy tweaks that help minimise use of private vehicles and incentivise use of public transportation will result in fuel savings. A moratorium on exports of petroleum products to preserve reserves in India will help. Other such policies that reduce the energy intensity of the economy and make it less prone to energy shocks are the order of the day. ■

ARUN KUMAR is a renowned economist and author most recently of Indian Economy's Greatest Crisis: Impact of the Coronavirus and the Road Ahead

Will Kerala vote to end the cult of personality?

V.D. Satheesan, the campaign face of the Congress-led United Democratic Front, speaks with the composure of a leader who has weathered one of the most aggressive campaigns in recent memory. In this post-poll conversation with **K.A. Shaji**, Satheesan reflects on the shifting nature of Left politics in the state, its lapse into a cult of personality, and why he believes Kerala is on the cusp of change.



You expressed concerns about the scale of personality projection in this election. Tell us more?

What we witnessed was unprecedented in Kerala. More than ten thousand hoardings across the state carried the face of one individual. Roads, junctions, television, newspapers, digital platforms, everywhere. This wasn't normal political communication. It was the construction of a personality cult using state machinery and political resources. The BJP tried to counter this with thousands of hoardings of the prime minister. We chose a different path. Across seven hundred hoardings, we presented the collective face of our national and state leaders. Because we believe politics is about institutions and people, not one individual.

You sound confident about the outcome. On what basis?

There is an attempt to influence perception through false surveys. In the last Lok Sabha election, similar surveys predicted defeat for K. Sudhakaran and Shafi Parambil. They both won. This time, money is being spent to discredit us. The verdict will expose these predictions. Congress and the UDF will form a responsible government. And we

will create a new Kerala.

You have also argued that the CPI(M) and BJP are not as oppositional as they claim. Could you elaborate?

The CPI(M) needs the BJP as a political reference point. The BJP benefits from the failures of the CPI(M). This reflects in how narratives are shaped and how attacks are directed. Take specific instances. On the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) and attempts to politically engage sections of the Christian community, the BJP's strategies stand exposed. On Sabarimala, their approach ended up helping Pinarayi Vijayan politically. In corruption cases, protective shields were provided at crucial

moments. So, while they appear to be adversaries, there are situations where their interests align. The casualty is genuine opposition politics.

You've been heard saying "We are the real Left". What do you mean?

The Left stands for social justice, equality, protection of the vulnerable and democratic rights. Who is actually standing for those values? Today, what we see is centralisation of power, suppression of dissent, lack of transparency and a growing disconnect from the people.

If you look at who is consistently raising issues of livelihood, environment and marginalised communities, it is often the Congress and the UDF. In that sense, we are upholding the real spirit of Left politics today.

Do you agree that this time it was a spectacle-driven campaign?

Yes. There was a clear attempt to reduce politics to spectacle and image management. Real issues like unemployment, environmental degradation, coastal distress and agrarian crisis did not get the attention they deserve. Instead, we saw aggressive PR and emotional mobilisation.

“*What we see today is centralisation of power, suppression of dissent, lack of transparency and a growing disconnect*”

► Continued on page 2

Will Kerala vote to end the cult of personality?

► Continued from page 1

Your critics say you did not respond aggressively enough. Was that deliberate?

Yes. I decided that we will not stoop to that level, whatever the provocation. We wanted to protect the dignity and credibility of the electioneering. That matters in a state like Kerala. And I believe people have recognised that difference.

What is your primary critique of the present government's governance?

Governance has been reduced to announcements and publicity. There is serious financial stress, increased liabilities, delayed welfare payments, lack of transparency in major projects. Kerala cannot move forward on debt-driven models and image-building exercises. We need responsible governance.

You have said this election was a fight against two money powers. Do you still stand by that?

Very loudly. Both the CPI(M) and BJP spent crores in a few months. We don't have that kind of money. So we depended on democratic mobilisation. Direct engagement with people. That is the UDF's strength. Also, the Congress in Kerala acted with extreme unity. There were no major fissures. All our alliance partners did their best. It was truly a Team UDF effort.

Now that the dust has settled, what's your reading of this election campaign?

I've been in the Kerala legislative assembly for twenty years. I have seen many elections, but never such a defamatory campaign targeting an individual or his party. The CPI(M) targeted Team UDF, and me in particular, because I led a relentless campaign exposing their failures. They received support from the BJP. It was a highly organised attempt at character assassination, blessed by the top leadership. Capsules were distributed among cadres to post on social media. Every day, for six months, at least twenty cards and ten reels were created targeting me personally. I was branded a liar for countering them with facts. But I survived because of the strength I drew from the support I have received from Congress workers and from civil society for more than a quarter century. On the other hand, the chief minister's carefully constructed image began to crack, when he responded to questions in Kollam.

That was when people started seeing the difference between projection and reality.

In terms of issues uppermost on people's minds, what WAS this election about?

Can Kerala live with the cult of personality, with a politics driven by money and organised propaganda, or will it vote for a return to democratic values? That's what this election was about, I think. Kerala is seen as the last bastion of a certain Left tradition, but that tradition cannot endlessly endure this new cult, the image-building and propaganda around one man. I'm confident the verdict will reflect that people want this to change.

Your manifesto promises welfare expansion. How will you manage finances?

Welfare is an obligation. But it must be backed by sound financial planning. There is inefficiency and misallocation in the current system. If governance improves, resources can be managed better. We also need sustainable investment. Not reckless projects, but planned development.

Why has rehabilitation become a political issue in Wayanad?

Rehabilitation is primarily the responsibility of the state government. Even then, support came from many quarters. The Congress government in Karnataka contributed to the chief minister's relief fund. Opposition MLAs contributed. Funds are available. But only a small portion is being effectively used. The township was delayed, inaugurated just before the election notification. Even now, people are not properly accommodated. We faced many hurdles in identifying and purchasing land. The government also took more than a year to finalise land. Despite that, we are moving forward. IUML has constructed 53 houses. We are planning to build houses using AICC and KPCC funds for those excluded and those living in unsafe conditions. We are supporting families with rent. The local Congress MLA has ensured education for 143 students from affected families.

In effect, we are bridging the gaps in official rehabilitation. We supported the government plan. Yet, we were targeted.

If you form the government, what will be your immediate priorities?

First, restore credibility in governance. Transparency in finances and timely delivery of welfare. Second, ensure institutions function independently. Public trust must be rebuilt. Third, review major projects to ensure economic and environmental viability. ■

The war in Iran is real, India's response is surreal

Governments around the world are preparing their citizens for prolonged disruption, but our government is signalling calm even as shortages loom

Aakar Patel

We are in the second month of what is settling in to become a long war, and it is worth setting down a few observations.

The first is that nations around the world are preparing their populations for what lies ahead. Australia has made public transport free in Tasmania and Victoria to encourage citizens not to use cars. Egypt requires shops and restaurants to shut at 9 p.m. The Philippines now has a four-day week, and so does Pakistan. Myanmar uses an odd-even system to keep cars off the road.

Slovenia has imposed a 50-litre limit on fuel purchases, and Nepal has reduced the quantity of gas in LPG cylinders. Thailand's government has asked people not to wear jackets so that air-conditioners may be run at higher temperatures. Bangladesh has closed universities and introduced planned blackouts (what we used to call 'load-shedding'). South Sudan is also limiting electricity use. Sri Lanka has made Wednesday a public holiday. The list goes on.

In India, there has been no comparable measure yet. This is for two reasons. First, the government appears to believe, though it has not said so explicitly, that there is no real problem. It has suggested that shortages being felt by people are the result of panic, and that if this supposedly irrational panic were to subside, normalcy would return.

Second, the government's assertion that India has an adequate stock of commodities imported from the Gulf: fuel, gas, fertiliser inputs and so on. 'Adequate stock' is, of course, an elastic term, but nobody knows how long the war will continue.

None of this squares with what we are seeing on the ground in the form of autorickshaw queues and the migration of workers out of major cities. We will see how the situation evolves if Iran continues to hold out. People in the oil business say physical shortages may begin to appear from this week

Nations are preparing their people for what lies ahead. Pakistan has switched to a four-day week. Bangladesh has introduced planned blackouts



In denial? Long queues at fuel stations belie the government's claim of 'adequate' stocks

onward, now that shipments already at sea when the war began have been offloaded and new cargoes are not coming through.

Another observation concerns the United States attacking Iran without the Congress—its equivalent of Parliament—formally declaring war.

When the US Constitution was being debated, its framers believed that the authority to declare war was what separated a king from an elected leader. The president could direct and manage military force, but only after a formal declaration; Congress was required to shoulder the responsibility of declaring war.

This separation of powers appears to have eroded in the Iran conflict. If the distinction ultimately rests on the capacity to invade other nations, then the line between president and monarch becomes blurred.

It is notable that many conservatives, who typically describe themselves as constitution-alists, appear comfortable with this state of affairs. This is especially relevant given the mercurial nature of Donald Trump's presidency. He can describe the war as 'very complete' yet continuing; claim that talks are progressing well, and in the next breath say there is nobody left to talk to because the US has killed Iran's leadership.

He demands that Iran open the Strait of Hormuz in one statement, then declares in another that America will withdraw and it is for other nations to secure the passage. America's political class, the media and the institutional structures appear willing to accommodate these contradictions, which helps explain why Trump continues

as he does.

The third observation concerns India's own role. Many WhatsApp discussions remain preoccupied with the belief that Jawaharlal Nehru squandered India's security at a permanent United Nations Security Council seat. The basis of this belief is unclear, but let us assume for argument's sake that India did hold such a seat today. What would it do with it in the present crisis in the Persian Gulf?

The principal power of parliament members is the veto—the ability to block resolutions in the Security Council. The United Kingdom holds such power and says it is not a participant in the war. Yet what has it done, or what can it do, with that authority in the present situation? Very little, it would appear. That may explain why the world is not looking to the UNSC for leadership at this moment.

What any country, including India, can do to end the war or mitigate its consequences must come from initiatives that mobilise other nations. Those who choose to remain on the sidelines will make little difference, whether or not they possess the symbolic weight of a UNSC veto. They remain bystanders.

These are preliminary observations, and it is unlikely this will be the last time this column returns to the Iran war. Some events reshape the world and alter how it functions for decades to come. This appears to be one such moment, and the actions of America's president have pushed the world into a new reality—whether we welcome it or not. ■

Views are personal

Meet the 'modern dacoits' of Chambal

The Supreme Court has stayed a Rajasthan government move to designate 732 hectares in a gharial sanctuary. But can the 'dacoits' be restrained?

Rashme Sehgal

The National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) has sanctioned more than 1,500 projects in the past ten years, with a 280 per cent surge in approvals in 2023-24 alone. Most of these projects are located inside or in close proximity of wildlife sanctuaries and national parks, leading to the diversion of more than two lakh hectares of forest for non-forest use.

The creeping acquisition of India's forest wealth for sundry 'development' activities is so commonplace it doesn't shock anyone. Nor does it make screaming media headlines. So, when the Rajasthan government denotified 732 hectares of the National Chambal Gharial Sanctuary (NCGS) in late December 2025, there was no outrage. But on 2 April 2026, the Supreme Court intervened and put a stay on the denotification.

The Chambal sanctuary is India's only tri-state (Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh) riverine sanctuary spanning some 600 km of the Chambal river, offering refuge to nearly 75 per cent of the global gharial population.

The gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) is rated 'Critically Endangered' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). It relies on the solid sandbanks, clean water and steady river flows of this region, its natural habitat, to breed and survive. The December denotification put this fragile ecosystem at grave risk. It was endorsed by the Union government and approved by the prime minister.

While the Rajasthan government argues the move will not dismantle the gharial habitat, conservationists point out that it is vulnerable to rampant sand mining and increased human intrusion. The presence of solid sandbanks is critical for the gharials to nest, and any disturbance to this riverine environment threatens their survival.

At a recent event on the Chambal riverfront in Kota, Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla proudly announced that long-held demands for a Chambal river cruise would finally be fulfilled, dismissing ecological concerns as secondary to 'development' and people's demands.

Kranti Jain, president of the Kota Vyapar Mahasangh, also welcomed the denotification, saying it would help regularise homes of one lakh people who had settled illegally inside the sanctuary limits.

However, Babul Jajoo, state coordinator of People for Animals, who has filed over 115 PILs, attributes the denotification to the influence of the sand mafia. More than a thousand truckloads of sand is mined daily in the affected areas, he says, on the watch of the police.

While ordering a stay on the denotification on 2 April, had some choice words for the sand mafia—the "modern dacoits" of the Chambal. "The state government has thrown in the towel. It is an extremely sad state of affairs if the state



Incriminating evidence How long can these gharials survive the sand mining in their habitat?

natural resources," Justice Mehta said. Videos documenting the destruction were described by the judge as 'terrifying'. "One can see the animals moving around as earthmovers dig out the sand," he said. "Look at the number of sub-divisional magistrates, police and forest officers killed by the mining mafia... But the state has forgotten that there is a law called preventive detention."

Environmentalist Vijay Varney says, "Till the 1970s, gharials used to be found from Dholpur right up to Morena, but now there is no space left for them. Unless the sand mining lobby is restrained, gharials and other river fauna will become extinct. The villagers fighting for this cause are impoverished farmers who cannot afford expensive litigation."

The tragedy unfolding in the Chambal mirrors a nationwide trend. Wildlife

sanctuaries and other protected areas are being denotified in great haste, supposedly to create vital infrastructure. Varanasi, the Prime Minister's Lok Sabha constituency, witnessed the controversial relocation of the Turtle Wildlife Sanctuary (TWS)—India's first freshwater turtle sanctuary established in 1989—to facilitate an inland waterways project as part of the Ganga Action Plan. The relocation project is doomed as sand mining is rampant in the Bhadohi-Mirzapur region as well, devastating the local riverine ecosystem.

Nowhere are protected zones truly sacrosanct. Buffer zones around tiger reserves and national parks have shrunk, leaving little room for wildlife. Environmentalist Reenu Paul says, "Reserved forests are no longer no-go areas."

A Supreme Court decision in February 2021 allowed a road to pass through Rajaji National Park. The planned Haridwar bypass road threatens to cut through the Shivalik

elephant corridor, requiring the felling of over 700 trees.

The Maharashtra State Board for Wildlife, chaired by chief minister Devendra Fadnavis, has similarly okayed iron ore mining in the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve corridor—home to over 60 tigers—despite warnings about irreversible environmental damage and poor economic returns.

Among the most egregious denotification actions is the transfer of 11.44 sq. km of Galathea Bay wildlife sanctuary—the largest nesting ground of the endangered giant leatherback turtles—in Greater Nicobar Island for a Rs 72,000 crore transshipment port project.

Retired Indian Forest Service officer Prakriti Srivastava warns: "Everything is up for sale. The more forests are diverted, the larger your vote bank becomes. The bureaucrats clearing these projects are blind to the permanent damage they cause."

Protected areas across India are under threat. The list is long and growing: Dampa Tiger Reserve in Mizoram, Pakke Tiger Reserve's buffer zone in Arunachal Pradesh, Melghat Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra, Mollem National Park (Goa), Girnar Wildlife Sanctuary (Gujarat), Eturnagaram Wildlife Sanctuary (Telangana)... Land in or near protected areas and their buffer zones is being made over to mining and/or infrastructure companies with practically no concern for wildlife and the preservation of their ecosystems.

A review of the minutes of the NBWL's standing committee meetings reveals an unsettling pattern: approvals rarely demonstrate any benefits to wildlife. 'Denotification' inside protected areas is illegal under the Wildlife Protection Act. Yet, the National Board for Wildlife is demonstrating no real concern for the areas it is mandated to protect, functioning instead as a clearing house rubber-stamping projects the government wants okayed. ■



The price AIADMK must pay to sail with the BJP

Seat-sharing tensions aside, the Dravidian party is hard put to take a stand on divisive issues

K.A. Shaji

In Thiruparankundram, a politically sensitive assembly constituency on the outskirts of the temple city of Madurai, the tensions within the AIADMK-BJP alliance are unfolding in full public view. The seat, traditionally held by the AIADMK, became a point of friction when the party refused to concede it to the BJP during seat-sharing negotiations. Recent local controversies around time-honoured traditions—involving animal sacrifice and the relocation of a sacred flame—were communalised by the BJP to rally Hindu sentiment. Yet, when the final list was drawn, the AIADMK retained the seat and fielded its own candidate, V.V. Rajan Chellappa, a senior leader with deep roots in the region.

Muslims, who once formed part of the AIADMK's broader social coalition, now view the alliance with unease. While the BJP seeks to benefit from the AIADMK's legacy vote even as it tries to build an independent political base, AIADMK cadres in Thiruparankundram admit, often off the record, that the BJP is not pulling its weight. Booth-level coordination remains inconsistent, and mobilisation lacks the urgency expected in a high-stakes contest.

Across Tamil Nadu, the relationship is marked by growing asymmetry. The AIADMK remains the senior partner in terms of seats, but the BJP is steadily expanding its footprint. This imbalance is especially visible in western Tamil Nadu, long considered an AIADMK fortress. Districts such as Coimbatore, Erode, Salem and Namakkal are witnessing growing BJP assertion. One of the party's most visible faces, former IPS officer and Tamil Nadu BJP president K. Annamalai, has maintained public discipline, but insiders acknowledge unease. While leaders speak openly about their growing base among intermediate castes and urban voters, they privately express dissatisfaction over seat-sharing arrangements.

Political analysts see a familiar pattern. "The BJP does not enter alliances to remain junior partners indefinitely," says M. Thiruvengadam, Chennai-based political observer and office bearer with the Social Science Collective. "It uses alliances as an entry point, builds its organisation and then gradually expands its influence. What we are seeing in Tamil Nadu is an early stage of that process."

There are also deeper ideological differences. Tamil Nadu's political landscape, rooted in the Dravidian movement, has historically resisted the



Future tense Union home minister Amit Shah with AIADMK leaders at a function in Pudukkottai earlier this year

ideology of the BJP.

For the AIADMK, this presents a great dilemma. Its decision to realign with the BJP ahead of the assembly election was driven by electoral necessity after a poor showing in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. However, the alliance has complicated the party's ability to articulate a clear ideological position, particularly on secularism and social justice, once central to Dravidian politics. In constituencies like Thiruparankundram, this tension manifests as cautious messaging that neither fully embraces the BJP's ideological framing nor decisively counters it. The consequences are visible. Minority voters are drifting away, while sections of the traditional base appear uncertain about the party's direction.

The contrast with Jayalalithaa's leadership is frequently invoked. During her tenure, alliances with the BJP were tactical and tightly controlled. She negotiated from a position of strength and ensured that ideological boundaries remained intact. "Jayalalithaa engaged with the BJP, but she never ceded space," says S. Sundarajan, Chennai-based political analyst and commentator on Dravidian politics. "What we see today is not engagement but accommodation."

The contrast with Jayalalithaa's leadership style is frequently invoked, when ties with the BJP were tactical and tightly controlled

The consolidation achieved under Edappadi K. Palaniswami after years of internal conflict has not translated into political confidence for the AIADMK. The expulsion of former coordinator O. Panneerselvam and the continuing shadow of V.K. Sasikala and T.T.V. Dhinakaran has meant centralisation without unification.

The BJP, in contrast, is playing a longer game. Its approach in Tamil Nadu is to enter through alliances, build cadre strength, target specific caste groups and change the narrative. Even in constituencies it does not contest, its ideological imprint is becoming visible. Thiruparankundram is a case in point, where the BJP has influenced the political conversation without securing the seat itself.

The movement of leaders underscores this shift. The current Tamil Nadu BJP president, K. Nainar Nagendran, a former AIADMK minister who crossed over to the BJP, represents a broader trend in which leaders and cadres, facing uncertainty within the AIADMK, are switching horses.

"The real story may begin after the election," says C. Lakshmanan, Chennai-based political analyst and retired faculty member of the Madras Institute of

Development Studies. "If the AIADMK fails to mount a strong challenge, the BJP will emerge as the more assertive opposition force. That is when we could see a realignment of political loyalties."

The DMK's sharpest line of attack has been to frame Palaniswami as the 'Nitish Kumar of Tamil Nadu'. To understand its resonance, one must look at how Nitish Kumar's politics in Bihar created conditions for the BJP's steady expansion without an immediate erosion of its own authority.

Nitish Kumar first came to power in 2005 through an alliance with the BJP, combining his support among backward castes with the BJP's base among upper castes and urban voters. Over time, he expanded this coalition by incorporating Extremely Backward Classes and marginalised groups through targeted welfare and governance measures. This broader base, however, also became accessible to the BJP within the alliance framework. His subsequent political shifts, breaking with the BJP in 2013, returning in 2017, exiting again in 2022 and rejoining in 2024, repeatedly altered Bihar's political equations. Yet one outcome remained consistent. The BJP steadily enlarged its independent organisational and ideological presence, eventually emerging as the dominant force within the alliance.

This is the essence of the Nitish model. A regional leader retains office and visibility, but the long-term beneficiary is the national party.

Tamil Nadu may be witnessing the early stages of a similar process. While Palaniswami may not replicate Nitish's frequent shifts, he may inadvertently play a comparable role. The comparison with Nitish Kumar has its limits, though. Nitish's strength lay in his ability to build a durable cross-caste coalition that the BJP could not easily displace. For a long period, he was the anchor of the alliance, not its dependant.

Palaniswami's rise within the AIADMK was shaped by organisational manoeuvring after Jayalalithaa's death. His strengths are his administrative record and his role in stabilising the party. But he lacks the statewide emotional connect that defined both M.G. Ramachandran and Jayalalithaa, and his authority does not command the same depth of loyalty across cadres.

Sumanth Raman, a Chennai-based commentator known for his work on electoral politics and public policy, points to this difference. "Nitish Kumar built a political base that the BJP needed. In Tamil Nadu, the equation is still evolving. The AIADMK has a legacy base, but it is fragmented. That makes the alliance structurally unequal from the beginning."

The DMK's framing of Palaniswami as a potential Nitish Kumar highlights the risks of accommodation. The challenge is to avoid the Nitish Kumar trajectory, where a regional party, in seeking short-term stability, creates conditions for a long-term shift in political power. That balance is difficult. In the unfolding politics of Tamil Nadu, it may well determine not just the future of the AIADMK, but the very shape of opposition politics. ■

When majoritarian bigotry boomerangs

The FCRA amendments and P.C. George's outburst have derailed the BJP's Christian outreach in Kerala

K.A. Shaji

As polling closed in Kerala's assembly election, the BJP found itself confronting a familiar ceiling just when it believed it had begun to crack it. This time, the party entered the contest with unusually high expectations in central Kerala, where even a modest shift in Christian votes could have altered outcomes in several key constituencies. What it needed was a break. What it encountered was a rupture.

At the centre of that rupture stands P.C. George, the BJP's controversial candidate from Kottayam's Poonjar, known for his abrasive rhetoric. His remarks have complicated an already fragile outreach effort, with sections of the clergy occasionally receptive, even as the laity largely resisted majoritarian politics. George, who has moved through the UDF and the LDF before landing in the BJP, publicly attacked Christian bishops at a crucial moment in the campaign.

Christians, he said, were "just two per cent" of the population and their bargaining with the "Hindu majority" was unwarranted. He accused sections of the clergy of playing a "double game" while benefiting from foreign funds, and called for stricter scrutiny of Church institutions and their financial dealings.

These comments landed in an already charged electoral atmosphere, amid growing anxiety around the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), the central law governing foreign funding to institutions in India. At the heart of the controversy is a provision in the FCRA Amendment Bill 2026 that allows the central government to take over assets created using foreign funds if an organisation's FCRA registration is cancelled, expires, is surrendered, or even if its renewal is delayed.

For organisations entangled in disputes, this provision is alarming. A delay caused

by litigation, administrative hurdles, or even technical lapses could potentially lead to state takeovers of properties and institutions. (See 'FCRA noose tightens', NH, 5 April 2026)

For the state's Christians, particularly Catholics, the FCRA directly affects a vast institutional network from hospitals in rural areas to schools for marginalised communities and social welfare programmes that often fill gaps left by the state.

"Foreign funding supports essential services," explains Fr Paul Thelakkatt, a former spokesperson of the Syro Malabar Church. "When licences are delayed or cancelled, the impact is immediate. It affects patients, students and entire communities."

By questioning the role of foreign funding and reducing Christians to numerical insignificance, -reinforced anxieties that were already present. Father Thomas Tharayil, deputy secretary general of the Kerala Catholic Bishops Conference said, "When someone says we are only two per cent and should not bargain, at a time when our institutions face scrutiny over funding, people will connect the two. It creates distrust."

For the Christian community, the FCRA impacts everything from hospitals and schools to welfare in rural areas



This distrust has altered the political mood in central Kerala. Constituencies where the BJP had hoped to make incremental gains have become cautious.

John Nellikunnel, Bishop of the Syro Malabar Church in Idukki, captures the shift: "Earlier, there was curiosity. Now people are asking what these policies mean for our institutions."

There is recognition in the BJP that they have lost both the moment and the momentum. Says a party functionary from central Kerala, "We were making gains this time, but issues like FCRA and statements like George's have set us back."

The response from the Church was swift and sharp. A Bishop of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church publicly rebuked George and warned against attempts to diminish a community that has played a foundational role in Kerala's social development. George's outburst strained the BJP's relationship with those he once claimed to represent and protect.

Kerala's demographic structure explains why this matters. Hindus constitute

roughly 54 to 55 per cent of the population, Muslims around 26 to 27 per cent and Christians about 18 to 19 per cent. Unlike in many other states, no single community can decisively determine electoral outcomes on its own. Within this framework, Christians occupy a pivotal position. Their concentration in districts such as Kottayam, Ernakulam, Idukki and Pathanamthitta gives them disproportionate electoral influence.

For the BJP, this demographic reality has long been a structural constraint. The party's vote share in Kerala has grown steadily, from around 6 per cent in the early 2000s to about 10-12 per cent in the last assembly elections. Yet this growth has not translated into proportional seat gains. The party opened its account in the assembly in 2016, lost that foothold within five years and has since struggled to expand pockets.

The reason lies in arithmetic. Even a near complete consolidation of upper caste Hindu votes does not take the BJP close to a winning threshold in most constituencies. Without support from either Muslims or

Christians, the path to power remains blocked. Given the political distance between the BJP and Muslim voters in Kerala, the Christian community has emerged as the more viable bridge.

Recognising this, prime minister Narendra Modi engaged with bishops during visits to Kerala. When Archbishop Joseph Pamplany said supporting the BJP was an option—provided economic demands like better rubber prices for largely Christian farmers were addressed—it indicated a willingness within sections of the Church to engage.

In Thrissur, Suresh Gopi demonstrated how this approach could translate electorally. By avoiding overtly polarising rhetoric and focusing on personal outreach, he reduced resistance among sections of Christian voters and became the BJP's first Lok Sabha MP from Kerala.

For the assembly election, the BJP hoped to capitalise on this beginning by fielding multiple Christian candidates, including P.C. George, his son Shone George, Union minister George Kurian and national leader Anoop Antony, all contesting on the lotus symbol. Yet as polling concluded, there was little evidence that this strategy had paid.

"We will talk to anyone who addresses our problems," says P.V. Kuriakose, a rubber farmer in Kanjirappally. "But if there is uncertainty about our institutions, people will step back."

Other groups, including Orthodox, Jacobite and Latin Catholic communities, remain sceptical of the BJP's ideological framework. The FCRA issue and George's remarks have reinforced that scepticism, while exposing the limits of an approach where policy and politics do not align. The BJP may yet manage to make deeper inroads in the state by engaging its large Christian community, but it did mess up its messaging this time round, squandering potential gains in these elections. ■



Crude lies and accounting sleights of hand

Gurdeep Singh Sappal

Even as the war in West Asia sends fuel prices into a dizzying upward spiral, at fuel stations in India, prices have counter-intuitively held steady. The Modi government has made much of its 'people-centric' interventions to shield citizens, but these interventions are nothing more than a 'commercial break' in a decade-long pattern of relentless extraction and profiteering.

Prime minister Narendra Modi's decade in power has been, in large part, a windfall for the government exchequer. Global crude oil prices have crashed repeatedly during his tenure, at one point touching \$30 a barrel. Each time crude prices fell, Indian consumers waited for retail petrol and diesel prices to follow suit. But they never did. The government quietly pocketed the difference, rarely even bothering to explain why the benefits had not been passed on.

When it argued to explain, it trotted out the same three arguments: it was either the oil bonds issued by the Congress-led UPA government or roads built with petroleum revenues or cash transfers to the poor. The reality is vastly different, though and exposed by the government's own figures.

Claim #1 'We were repaying UPA-era oil bonds'
The Mamohan Singh government left behind Rs 1.6 lakh crore in oil bonds, instruments issued to oil marketing companies to compensate them for selling subsidised fuel. The BJP has repeated this ad nauseum, citing the oil bonds as both grievance and absolution.

The detail it conveniently skips is that over the past decade, the Modi government has collected more than Rs 44 lakh crore in petroleum taxes. Whereas the oil bond repayments, principal plus interest, amount to approximately Rs 3.3 lakh crore. That is roughly seven per cent of the taxes collected.

In other words, for every rupee that went towards repaying oil bonds, the Modi government pocketed thirteen.

Claim #2 'The money was used to build roads'
It cannot be denied that India has added highway kilometres during the Modi years. The government cites this as evidence that petroleum revenues were invested productively. On the face of it, this argument sounds more tenable, but it conceals an accounting sleight of hand.

As of March 2024, the National Highways

Authority of India (NHAI) carried an outstanding debt of Rs 3.35 lakh crore. That figure is more than twice the value of the oil bonds liability the BJP loves to lament. If, as the BJP argues, deferred debt is such an unconscionable burden on future generations, shouldn't the NHAI's balance sheet also demand the same outrage?

There is more. The highways built with borrowed money are now being sold back, in effect, to private investors and sovereign wealth funds through the InvIT (Infrastructure Investment Trust) mechanism. Future toll revenues are pledged to service debt in addition to generating returns for private players. Union road minister Nitin Gadkari has publicly stated that the NHAI's annual toll income is expected to rise from Rs 50,000 crore to Rs 1.45 lakh crore. In the financial year 2025-26, toll collections have already reached Rs 73,000 crore.

So, roads are built on borrowed money, future tolls are pledged to repay loans and to reward investors, and the citizen-consumer is asked to believe that the high taxes on fuel financed the road project. It's the same consumer that also pays the toll that supposedly repays the debt and rewards the private investor.

Claim #3 'The money went to the poor'

The third argument is the most sophisticated—and the most dishonest. The BJP cites Direct Benefit Transfers of over Rs 50 lakh crore during the Modi years as evidence that petroleum revenues were recycled to the poor. The number is striking until one disaggregates it.

India's total union budget, as a share of the Union Budget, has actually fallen from 16.3 per cent in 2013-14 to 13.06 per cent in 2025-26. Nearly 91 per cent of current subsidies cover food grain distribution, fertilisers, housing under the PM Awas Yojana and LPG, all of which existed in the UPA years as well—at substantially higher levels. So, this government has not expanded welfare; it has simply rebranded it.

The most telling figure is the collapse in petroleum subsidies—down from 5.1 per cent of the Union Budget under the UPA to a meagre 0.24 per cent today. Food and fertiliser subsidies together accounted for 9.6 per cent of the budget in 2013-14; they are now at 7.33 per cent. Nor has there been a compensating substantial increase in housing allocations over the UPA years.

It's worth noting that the 'efficiency gains' cited in DBT claims are government-



Scarcity panic? People queue up for fuel refills in Guwahati, 26 March 2026

When Modi took office in May 2014, India's national debt was ₹55 lakh crore. By March 2026, this had risen to ₹197 lakh crore

reported figures, not independently audited by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India. The government during the pipeline, reduced the volume flowing through it, and then presented the change as welfare.

Debt that's hard to hide

When Narendra Modi took office in May 2014, India's total national debt accumulated over 67 years, under all prime ministers Jawaharlal Nehru onwards, stood at approximately Rs 55 lakh crore. By March 2026, that figure had risen to Rs 197 lakh crore! The Union Budget for 2026-27 projects it will reach Rs 218.63 lakh crore by March 2027.

In a single decade, the Modi government has added nearly Rs 150 lakh crore to India's national debt, more than 2.5 times the debt all previous governments accumulated over nearly seven decades. India now pays approximately Rs 11 lakh crore a year

in interest. Every Indian citizen now carries an average debt burden exceeding Rs 1.5 lakh.

This does not include the off-budget liabilities of the NHAI, Indian Railway Finance Corporation, Power Finance Corporation and the Food Corporation of India, estimated at Rs 20-25 lakh crore, which do not appear in official FRBM (fiscal responsibility and budget management) statements.

If Rs 1.6 lakh crore in deferred subsidies was, as the BJP argues, an unconscionable burden on India's future, what do we call this Rs 150 lakh crore in new debt, accumulated not to subsidise the poor but to finance a governance model that extracts from citizen-consumers, mortgages public assets and calls it development? ■

GURDEEP SINGH SAPPAL is a Permanent Invitee to the Congress Working Committee



Women still hold the key in Bengal

Even though the dubious SIR exercise has significantly reduced the female voter ratio in the state—a first in over a decade

Gautam Bhattacharya and Kunal Chatterjee

At her election rallies, Mamata Banerjee repeatedly asks: "How many of you have had your names deleted from the voter list, raise your hands." She then picks out a few who do, says they have "nothing to fear", urges her party workers to help them file their appeals for re-inclusion, and proceeds to rail against the Election Commission of India and its "bid to deny them their right to vote and much else" via the Special Intensive Revision (SIR).

Mamata Banerjee is possibly fighting her toughest electoral battle yet. After three terms, she faces anti-incumbency, corruption charges against several colleagues and growing frustration with the lack of jobs and industrial development in the state. She is

now in her 70s and up against a formidable rival in the BJP, which won't stop at anything to unseat her. But in the 2016 and 2021 elections, women voted overwhelmingly for their 'Didi', and if the trend endures, Mamata is likely to retain power. The question is: will the trend endure?

The SIR has significantly reduced the female voter ratio in the state—a first in over a decade. Election Commission data, disclosed in a Rajya Sabha reply, show female electors in Bengal dropped to their lowest in 10 years, with the gender ratio falling from about 966 women per 1,000 men in the 2024 Lok Sabha rolls to roughly 956 after the SIR.

How will the deletions impact the electoral outcome? Trinamool Congress leader and state minister Chandrima Bhattacharya is blunt: "The Election Commission," she says, "has deliberately targeted women voters. Our booth-level

agents were not allowed at the hearings to help voters." The unheard category of 'logical discrepancy', she adds, "was not even mentioned when the SIR started." It was introduced later with the sole intention of deleting the names of genuine voters, she says, even while maintaining that the ploy will not work.

Political analyst and academic Prof. Biswanath Chakraborty admits that the SIR adds a new layer of uncertainty to the electoral math. "The gender-ratio decline poses a more serious headache for the TMC than the deletion of Muslim voters," he notes, adding that it may become a decisive factor in closely fought seats. Yet, he expects that "a consolidation of this vote bank" (read: women) and a higher turnout will help Mamata make up lost ground.

Mamata Banerjee's brand of

welfarism, criticised by both the Left and the Right, for prioritising doles over industry, has nevertheless cemented her bond with women voters. Some observers point out that her welfare schemes for women are better targeted and budgeted for—unlike the pre-election cash transfers to women that go by names like *Ladli Behna* and *Ladki Bahin* in BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, the kind of ad hoc, pre-election largesse that has become the new standard.

Another important difference is the consultative process. The TMC's first finance minister, noted economist Dr Amit Mitra, is credited with the introduction of *Kanyashree* in 2013—a conditional cash transfer tied to delaying child marriages. Girls attending school and staying unmarried receive annual scholarships, going up to Rs 25,000 after finishing their higher secondary. The scheme has even won recognition from the United Nations and has benefited ten million girls, as per state government claims.

Next came *Rupashree* (2018), a one-time grant of Rs 25,000 to cover wedding expenses of adult women from poor families. In 2021 came *Lakshmir Bhandar*—covering about 2.4 crore women—a universal cash transfer scheme to all eligible women aged 25-60. While the amount is small, ranging from Rs 500 to Rs 1,700, graded for general categories and for SC/ST women, the money is regularly transferred to the accounts of all eligible women.

These cash transfers are over and beyond the old-age and widow pensions, the universal health insurance scheme *Swasthya Sathi* (2016)—launched long before Ayushman Bharat—with women controlling the family card, the *Sabuj Sathi* (2025), which offers bicycles to schoolgoing boys and girls, and the grants to build toilets and houses.

Months ahead of the assembly elections, the state government increased amounts paid under these schemes and the 2025-26 budget allocated over Rs 1.18 lakh crore for gender-specific schemes and Rs 59,000 crore for child-related initiatives. The Women & Child Development department's budget was increased to Rs 38,000 crore. The honorarium for ASHA frontline health workers increased, and the newly introduced *Yuba Sathi* scheme offers Rs 1,500 per month for up to five years to unemployed youth aged 21-40.

Other programmes like *Muktidhara* empower rural and tribal women with micro-enterprise aid, while the *Mahila Samridhi* Yojana provides credit and subsidies to SCs and marginalised women entrepreneurs.

The difference is visible on the ground. Dipali Santra, a flower seller, thanks Didi for bailing her out when her husband lost his job as a driver during the pandemic. She has since expanded to selling bottled water, *sattu* sherbet and snacks. "We're grateful to Didi," says her son Surajit, adding,

"These allowances don't make life easy, but they do reduce precarity; they allow these women to dream that better days may lie ahead"



Mamata Banerjee's targeted welfare schemes for women have been a big factor in her repeated re-election

RECLAIMING BASAVANNA: KARNATAKA REWRITES CASTE'S RULES IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE 12TH CENTURY

Manya's Law: How one woman's murder became Karnataka's most defiant social reform

Fifteen deaths over five years. Fifteen times, Karnataka's government recorded an honour killing, noted the caste arithmetic behind it, and moved forward. Then came December 2025, and Manya Patil.

Manya was Lingayat. She was pregnant. She had married Vivekananda — a man from a Dalit community — and her family allegedly killed her for it in Hubballi. Her death was not statistically unusual. What was unusual was what followed: a state that had absorbed fifteen such deaths in five years found, this time, that it could not. The public outcry was swift, sustained, and political.

Within months, the Karnataka Freedom of Choice in Marriage and Prevention and Prohibition of Crimes in the Name of Honour and Tradition (Eva Nammava Eva Nammava) Act, 2026 had been drafted, debated, and passed.

Introduced by Shri H.K. Patil, Minister for Law, Justice and Human Rights, Parliamentary Affairs and Legislation and Tourism, LA Bill No. 07 of 2026 cleared the Karnataka Legislative Assembly in its Ninth Session on 23 March 2026 — not as a routine legislative exercise, but as a reckoning.

THE CASE THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Manya Patil, a pregnant Lingayat woman from Hubballi, was allegedly murdered by her family in December 2025 for marrying Vivekananda, a man from a Dalit community. Her killing —



AI generated representative image

Law Minister H.K. Patil immediately offered to amend the phrasing. The words "to be together" were removed from Section 4, ensuring the declaration provision applied only to persons intending to enter into a recognised marriage or betrothal.

and the public outrage it generated — provided the final political momentum needed to finalise and fast-track the legislation.

The constitutional foundation Rooted in Articles 14, 19, and 21 — and the spirit of Basavanna and Ambedkar

The Bill draws its authority directly from the Constitution of India. It affirms the fundamental rights to equality before the law (Article 14), to life and personal liberty (Article 21), and to the freedoms of expression, association, and movement (Article 19).

It invokes the constitutional principle of fraternity — that essential, often overlooked value — as a demand for the eradication of caste-based discrimination and the promotion of social solidarity through the recognition and protection of inter-caste marriages.

The Statement of Objects and Reasons invokes the vision of Sree Basavanna and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, both of whom advocated inter-caste marriages as a means to eradicate caste hierarchy. But the Act's title goes further still — by naming the legislation after the 12th-century Vachana philosophy of the Sharana movement, the government has made an unmistakable statement.

The phrase *Eva Nammava, Eva Nammava* (He is one of us — everyone belongs to us) is not bureaucratic language. It is a deliberate reclamation of Basavanna's all-embracing social vision.

Law Minister H.K. Patil framed the Bill not merely as a penal code, but as a social revolution intended to dismantle the rigid structure of endogamy that sustains the caste system.

"This enactment is not just legislation. It is the State of Karnataka

declaring, in the language of Basavanna, that no birth, no caste, no family, and no community has the authority to override the constitutional liberty of two adults who choose to build a life together."

The gap in the law — and why this Bill fills it

The BNS acts after a murder. This Bill criminalises the ecosystem that enables it

Law Minister H.K. Patil addressed a pointed question that arose during legislative debate: if murder is already punishable under the *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita*, why does this Bill need to exist? His answer was precise.

The BNS only acts after a murder has been committed. This legislation criminalises what comes before it — the ecosystem of honour — the social boycotts, the thithi rituals performed against living daughters, the confiscation of phones, the freezing of bank accounts, the pressure campaigns waged by families and community assemblies that precede and often cause the eventual killing.

The BNS does not explicitly cover symbolic disownment rituals, forced dissolution of inter-caste marriages, denial of inheritance rights used as coercion, or the coordinated intimidation of couples by so-called caste assemblies.

This Act does. Even if a murder is not proven, the various crimes of honour carry their own heavy, non-bailable penalties under this legislation that the BNS does not provide for.

What the law declares

Freedom to marry is a fundamental right — and the State will protect it

Section 3 declares plainly: all persons shall have the right to autonomy over their own lives,

including the rights to liberty, freedom of expression, and freedom to marry a person of their choice.

The consent of a person's parents, family, caste, or clan is not necessary once two adult individuals agree to enter into a marriage. Any action to prevent the exercise of these rights — by any person or group — shall amount to an offence.

Section 4 allows any couple intending to marry to voluntarily declare their willingness to the District Magistrate or a designated Nodal Officer, who relays this information to the nearest police station. Upon such declaration, no action can be taken by the police or any authority — not at the instance of family members, relatives, community members, or any third party — against the couple. This declaration is not a pre-condition for exercising the right; it is an optional legal shield.

A comprehensive taxonomy of honour-based crimes

Section 6 prohibits unlawful assemblies

— any group of five or more persons gathering to deliberate on or condemn a marriage on grounds that it dishonours the caste, tribe, or community. This directly targets the extrajudicial gatherings that have long operated outside formal law. All offences under the Act are cognizable and non-bailable.

The legislature debates-objections and government responses

Three key flashpoints in the chamber — and how the government answered them

Objection — Scope of Section 4

Some members raised concern that the phrase "willing to be together" in Section 4 could be read as the State legitimising live-in relationships, which they argued fell outside the Bill's stated purpose of protecting marriage.

Government's response — Amendment accepted

Law Minister H.K. Patil immediately offered to amend the phrasing. The words "to be together" were removed from Section 4, ensuring the declaration provision applied only to persons intending to enter into a recognised marriage or betrothal.

The Minister stated: "This enactment will not support the living together concept."

The amendment was incorporated into the final Bill.

Objection — Why "inter-caste" and not "inter-religion"?

Some members questioned whether specifically highlighting inter-caste marriage — without extending equivalent protection to inter-religious unions — constituted a discriminatory focus on Hindu social structures, or left other communities' honour-based violence unaddressed.

GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE-STRUCTURAL JUSTIFICATION UPHELD

The government stood by the phrasing. The Minister cited the structural link between caste and endogamy as the primary and specific driver of this category of violence in Karnataka.

The Bill's preamble underlines this reasoning: endogamy operates as a structural mechanism designed to preserve the caste system, and inter-caste marriages serve as essential instruments for dismantling its rigid and oppressive framework.

The government did not rule out that inter-religious dimensions could be addressed through existing law, but held that this Bill's scope was intentionally and appropriately defined.

Institutional architecture

Safe houses, fast-track courts, special cells — and the *Eva Nammava Vedithe*

The Act builds a comprehensive support structure around at-risk couples.

15 Reported honour killings in Karnataka, 2020–2025

22 Categories of honour-based crimes now explicitly penalised

06 hrs - Maximum window for police to provide protection after complaint

02 mths - Target timeline for trial completion from charge sheet

Twenty-two categories of prohibited conduct — finally named and penalised Section 5 enumerates twenty-two categories of conduct that constitute crimes in the name of honour and tradition, including but not limited to:

- Honour killings
- Abduction of the couple
- Social and economic boycott
- Excommunication and forced eviction
- Thithi rituals against living persons
- Phone and communication confiscation
- Freezing of bank accounts
- Forced termination of employment
- Denial of inheritance rights
- Forced abortion or miscarriage
- Sexual violence and harassment
- Spreading defamatory false information
- Forcibly declaring a married couple siblings
- Forced dissolution of marriage

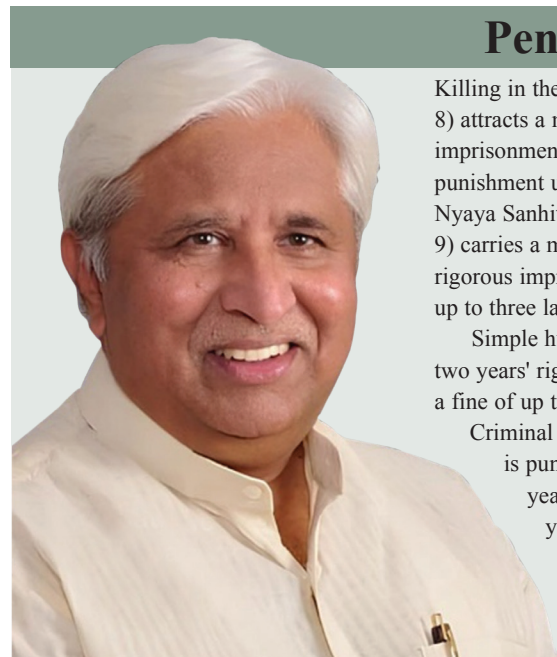
Section 17 mandates safe houses at every District Headquarters with adequate security and access to legal counsel and NGO representatives. Police must provide protection within six hours of a complaint.

Section 22 creates Special Cells in every district staffed by the Superintendent of Police and the District Social Welfare Officer, with a round-the-clock helpline. Section 23 establishes quarterly district-level monitoring committees that include civil society representatives.

Section 25 designates Special Fast Track Courts — in consultation with the High Court — with a mandate to complete trials within two months of charge sheet filing. Most distinctively, Section 24 creates the *Eva Nammava Vedithe* in each district — a body comprising retired judges, police officers, revenue officers, and sub-registrars mandated to facilitate the solemnisation of inter-caste marriages and provide counselling. The *Vedithe* is not merely protective; it is affirmative. It is the State showing up to celebrate what caste sought to forbid.

The District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police are also empowered under Section 19 to provide logistical support to couples wishing to solemnise their marriage under police protection, and to offer accommodation in safe houses for up to one year based on threat assessment.

Penalties: Graduated, deterrent, and non-bailable



Killing in the name of honour (Section 8) attracts a minimum of five years' imprisonment, in addition to punishment under the *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita*. Grievous hurt (Section 9) carries a minimum of three years' rigorous imprisonment and a fine of up to three lakh rupees.

Simple hurt attracts no fewer than two years' rigorous imprisonment with a fine of up to two lakh rupees.

Criminal intimidation (Section 11) is punishable by three to five years, extendable to seven years for the gravest threats. Participation in an unlawful assembly (Section 12) attracts

six months to five years.

Disobedience of a court injunction carries up to two years' imprisonment or a fine of up to one lakh rupees. Mandatory reporting obligations are placed on all village officers and specified government officials, with non-compliance punishable by up to two years' imprisonment.

"The BNS only acts after a murder. This Bill criminalises the ecosystem of honour — social boycotts, property exclusion, and ritual disownment — which current laws ignore entirely."

— Shri H.K. Patil, Minister for Law, Justice and Human Rights

The passage of the *Eva Nammava*

Bill, 2026 represents one of the most significant social reforms in Karnataka's recent legislative history. It was shaped in grief — by Manya Patil's murder and fifteen deaths over five years — but it is designed to prevent the next one.

By combining criminal deterrence with proactive protection mechanisms, an affirmative institutional presence in the *Eva Nammava Vedithe*, and the moral weight of Basavanna's philosophy, the Karnataka government has attempted something rare in Indian legislative history: a law that is simultaneously a penal code, a welfare architecture, and a civilisational statement.

A re-enactment of Gaza in Lebanon

How is Israel's inhuman campaign to displace yet another population getting so little international attention, asks Ashok Swain

While the fear-fascinated gaze of the world was fixed on Donald Trump's dangerous brinkmanship with Iran, the simultaneous devastation in Lebanon was receiving too little attention. Israel is threatening to redraw the border with its northern neighbour and has over the past month escalated its military campaign from cross-border strikes earlier to a full-scale war that now includes a ground invasion, the bombardment of civilian areas and an explicit plan to occupy large parts of southern Lebanon.

Since mid-March, Israeli forces have advanced further into Lebanese territory after weeks of air strikes that targeted not just Hezbollah positions but also homes, hospitals, universities, bridges and other infrastructure in densely populated areas.

Entire Muslim-majority towns south of the Litani river are being depopulated. Expanding evacuation orders stretch across large parts of the country, and there is a largescale displacement of the population under ongoing bombardment. The humanitarian toll is staggering. More than one-and-a-half million people have been displaced, with hundreds of thousands forced to flee north. Civilian casualties continue to rise, with over 1,500 casualties since early March, including more than 200 women and children, and many medical workers and journalists. Entire families have been buried under the rubble as air strikes flatten homes in southern Lebanon and the suburbs of Beirut.

The pattern of destruction is familiar. Healthcare facilities have been struck, ambulance centres hit and medical personnel killed. Doctors on the ground warn that the targeting of Lebanon's already fragile health system mirrors what was previously seen in Gaza. Hospitals are shutting down not only because of direct damage but also due to lack of electricity, fuel, medical supplies and staff. A country already crippled by economic collapse is now facing the systematic erosion of its capacity to sustain life.

Israel is making no secret of its intentions, and the objective is no longer confined to weakening or disarming Hezbollah but to establish a buffer zone extending up to the Litani river and to prevent displaced Lebanese civilians from



Just hours after the ceasefire announcement on 8 April in the war with Iran, Lebanon took the heaviest Israeli bombardment

Photo: Getty Images

returning to their homes in the south. Entire border villages are slated for destruction as part of this strategy—in effect, another ethnic cleansing project is under way.

For those familiar with the region's history, the echoes are unmistakable. Israel maintained a security zone in southern Lebanon for nearly two decades, from 1982 to 2000. Predictably, the occupation fuelled resentment, strengthened Hezbollah and entrenched cycles of violence. Israel's current strategy will repeat this pattern on a larger, even more destructive scale.

What makes the present moment particularly alarming is the normalisation of extreme measures against civilian populations. Air strikes have repeatedly hit residential neighbourhoods, including areas that had previously been considered relatively safe. Even sites sheltering displaced civilians have not been spared. One widely reported strike targeted a Beirut seafront, where families, fleeing

earlier bombardments, had set up tents.

There is also a deliberate pattern in the destruction of infrastructure. Key roads and bridges have been struck, making large areas of southern Lebanon inaccessible. This doesn't just disrupt Hezbollah's military logistics, it traps civilians.

The conflict has also spilled into the international sphere in deeply troubling ways. Members of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), including three Indonesian peacekeepers, have been killed in Israeli shelling. The fact that UN personnel are being killed and wounded in what is supposedly a monitored conflict zone underscores how rapidly norms are eroding. Israeli soldiers have also destroyed UNIFIL surveillance cameras and even detained peacekeepers.

Meanwhile, the regional risks continue to grow. Hezbollah's involvement is closely tied to Iran, and the war in Lebanon cannot be separated from the confrontation unfolding across West Asia. Missile

exchanges, cross-border attacks and retaliatory strikes are creating a volatile environment in which the situation can escalate quickly and unpredictably.

Yet, despite the scale of destruction, the ethnic-cleansing pattern of the Israeli campaign and its rogue government's undisguised attempt to redraw the border, the international response has been muted. Some European governments have expressed concern and called for a ceasefire but their half-hearted attempts will not alter the course of events. The war in Lebanon is being overshadowed, treated as a secondary theatre in a larger geopolitical drama, but this silence has consequences.

When largescale ethnic displacement, destruction of civilian infrastructure and brazen territorial occupation does not trigger a forceful response from the international community, it grants impunity to bad actors and encourages worse transgressions. What happened in Gaza is proof. The erosion of international norms, even in the conduct of wars, does not happen dramatically; it happens gradually, through the normalisation of what was once considered unacceptable.

Israel is using military force to reshape and usurp the territory of another sovereign country. It is imposing immense costs on Lebanese civilians, who have no control over the dynamics driving the conflict. For Lebanon, the consequences are existential. The country was already in the grip of one of the worst economic crises in modern history. Its state institutions are weak, public services are collapsing and political divisions run deep. The war is accelerating the disintegration of an already fragile state.

The implications are equally profound for the region. A prolonged Israeli presence in southern Lebanon can only deepen resistance, strengthen militant networks and increase the likelihood of recurring conflict. It will, in a sense, institutionalise instability. If southern Lebanon is indeed being turned into another Gaza, the question is not only what is happening but why it is being allowed to happen, with so little scrutiny or resistance from the international community. ■

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Israel's horrific bid to expand into Lebanon is going unnoticed because it's seen as a minor theatre in a larger geopolitical drama

Time now to deliver

Once the afterglow fades, will the RSP in Nepal to fulfil its promises?



Photo: Getty Images

High expectations Nepal's youngest prime minister Balendra Shah and his young cabinet have their work cut out

Uddhab Pyakurel

The new government in Nepal has hit the ground running, taking a bewildering array of decisions in its first week in office, leaving people guessing and gasping. The morning after the youngest-ever prime minister Balendra Shah (36) was sworn in on 27 March 2026, the government authorised the arrests of former prime minister K.P. Sharma Oli and former home minister Ramesh Lekhak on charges of criminal negligence amounting to reckless homicide while suppressing the youth uprising of September 2025.

'You messed with the wrong generation', read new home minister Sudan Gurung's cryptic social media post announcing the arrests. On 29 March, authorities arrested another former minister on money laundering charges and initiated investigations of corruption against three former prime ministers, including Oli.

On its second day in office, the government released a 100-point reform agenda. It instructed public and private hospitals to reserve 10 per cent of beds for economically disadvantaged patients with immediate effect and offered jobs at the national power authority to the families of

those killed during the protests—an estimated 70.

The government also ordered the abolition of all student unions affiliated with political parties (an odd decision for a Gen Z government) and banned bureaucrats, teachers and other state-affiliated personnel from directly or indirectly engaging with political parties. Political appointees to various boards have been asked to step down voluntarily; if they don't, the government seems determined to dismiss all 1,200 of them. A bill has been introduced, proposing private schools be deemed 'non-profit' institutions.

Criticism from private schools, the bureaucracy and sections of the public has been overshadowed by the euphoria following the landslide victory of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), a young party formed in 2022. The idealistic youth who led the protests against the government and succeeded in overthrowing it in six months seems to hold out hope for a better future. For the moment, Nepal is basking in the afterglow of what had appeared impossible in August 2025.

The new government, however, faces formidable challenges. Its pre-poll promises—ensuring a GDP growth rate of

seven per cent, creating 1.2 million jobs to prevent out-migration, turning an IT hub in the next five years—will require some luck and a lot of hard work. Opening a relatively closed economy in a land-locked country will demand innovative policies, as the government copes with rising aspirations, expectations of swift change and new economic opportunities.

Prime minister Balendra Shah, who is also the first Madhesi (plains person) to hold the office, has a delicate balancing act ahead—with competing pulls and pressures from the dominant Khas-Arya ethnic groups and the Madhesis, Dalits and other marginalised groups.

Nepal's government and politics has long been dominated by the high caste Khas-Arya hill people, who also control the judiciary and the bureaucracy. The people of the population, are seen as culturally closer to Indians across the border, their loyalty to the nation suspect in the eyes of Nepal's rulers. To counter this, the Madhesis demanded greater political representation and devolution of power through federalism, both of which were achieved on paper but not in practice. Madhes opposition to the 2015 Constitution's haphazard provincial delineation and unequal citizenship rights was fiercely countered by the Kathmandu elite, who saw the protests as driven by India.

Foreign minister Shishir Khanal has sought to dispel doubts about external affairs, declaring that Nepal would pursue non-alignment and uphold the country's sovereignty, integrity and national interests. "There will be no change in the country's foreign policy even if the government changes or a new minister comes," he added.

With the prime minister and several of his ministers having studied in India, observers expect relations with India to improve. In the past, Balendra Shah has had to try extra hard to prove he was not tilting towards India, to the extent of putting up a map of 'Greater Nepal' in his mayoral office in response to the RSS map of 'Akhand Bharat'.

Balendra Shah's rise marks an important shift in Nepali politics. After three-and-a-half years as mayor of Kathmandu, he joined the RSP in January 2026, led it to a decisive victory in March as prime-ministerial candidate, and was installed as PM by the end of the month.

Shah—who is better known as a singer and rapper and holds a Master's degree in structural engineering from Bengaluru—swiftly put together his cabinet of 14 ministers, five of them women and most of them from professional backgrounds. Finance minister Dr Swarnim Wagle, for instance, is a well-known economist with a PhD from Australia. With 10 out of 15 ministers below the age of 40 and 20 per

cent of the newly elected members of Parliament below the age of 30, it's youth power to the fore.

No election has been as decisive since Nepal's first general election in 1959, when the Nepali Congress (NC) won a two-thirds majority. The RSP's parliamentary majority with 182 of 275 seats is only the second instance of single-party dominance since the NC's win in 1999. Fragile coalitions dominated politics over the past two decades. While RSP chairman Rabi Lamichhane has reassured people that there would be no political vendettas, doubts persist.

It remains to be seen whether the hotheads among RSP supporters can be reined in. When Amisha Parajuli criticised Oli's arrest as unconstitutional and vindictive on social media, she was attacked viciously—on social media. The new government's attitude to freedom of speech and freedom of the Press is ambivalent. In the past, despite tight restrictions on media, was free to criticise even the panchayat system; it was bold enough to speak fearlessly against the majoritarian CPN Maoist-led government. Today's media seems more circumspect, afraid of being mocked as 'jhole' (blind followers or sycophants).

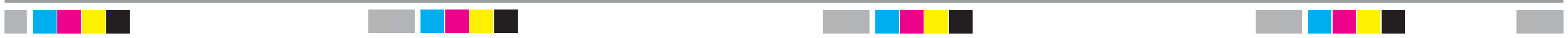
The Gen Z protests were carried out through social media, bypassing traditional media almost entirely. Given that the digital divide in Nepal is acute—40 per cent of the people are still do not have access to the internet—the new government's push for digital governance and reliance on digital and social media has caused unease. Political discourse, wrote a columnist, is being influenced by opaque social media algorithms.

As mayor of Kathmandu, Shah was known to have his way. A commentator wrote, 'He combined old-school nationalism with a healthy disdain for the existing party system and traditional media. He chose to communicate primarily on social media with his millions of followers. He differed with ward chiefs over parking issues, bulldozed illegal constructions, displaced landless squatters and street vendors, and faced intense opposition from scrap dealers.' His profanity in now-deleted social media posts, directed at other neighbouring countries and both Nepali leaders, caused concern.

The uphill task of guiding Nepal through turbulent times rests with a former rapper (Shah), a former DJ (Gurung) and a former talk show host (Lamichhane). Young, inexperienced and temperamental, they are impatient for change.

While the hopes of millions of citizens are riding on this trio, commentators in Kathmandu are busy speculating whether Balen Shah will end up adopting the governance style of Narendra Modi or Arvind Kejriwal. ■

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Who will judge the judges?

Avay Shukla revisits a book that lays out the carcass of our judicial system

Before we get into this thought-provoking book, two things need to be said about it. One, it reaffirms that courageous journalism and writing still exist in India, notwithstanding the utter capitulation of much of the media to power and commerce. Two, the book raises troubling questions about our higher judiciary, based not on allegations or charges, but on facts available in the public domain and easily verifiable. The authors lay out the carcass of our judicial system, wounds and all, and leave it to the reader to make up his or her mind.

The central character is Justice Arun Mishra, appointed to the Supreme Court in July 2014 by the Narendra Modi government, even though the previous UPA government had twice rejected his case.

On his retirement from the SC in September 2020, he was appointed chairman of the NHRC (National Human Rights Commission) in June 2021, where he did not distinguish himself. For the first time ever, the NHRC was downgraded by GANHRI (Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions) from category A to B for its failure to investigate human rights violations and its police-led approach.

He retired from the NHRC in January 2025 and was, unsurprisingly and ironically, appointed ombudsman and ethics officer of the BCCI (Board of Control for Cricket in India).

In this book, fourteen of his most controversial judgments are subjected to a forensic analysis that the media, or any legal scholar, have never had the courage to undertake.

In each case, any reasonable person would find him wanting, feeling that he was prone to riding roughshod over high court judgments, fashioning previous judgments and precedents to suit his interpretations of the law, displaying a complete lack of empathy for human rights, failing to acknowledge conflicts of interest in some cases and refusing to recuse himself from them, and intriguingly ruling in favour of the government, the rich and the powerful even when there was considerable evidence to support a contrary decision.

The authors rarely, if ever, give their opinions on these cases (in deference, probably, to the prevailing climate of self-censorship, contempt laws and subdued criticism).

Instead, they meticulously lay out the facts, invariably supported by citations and references, and leave it to the astute reader to draw his or her own inferences and conclusions. Most conclusions will do no credit to Justice Mishra.

It is not possible to discuss each of these cases in a book review, but a few common threads that run through them become self-evident, enough to justify the title of this book.

Justice Mishra's propensity to favour the government's or prosecution's version

in just about every case is the first thing one notices. This is evident in the Elgar Parishad case, where a scholar-activist like Gautam Navlakha was allowed to be hauled out of the jurisdiction of the Delhi high court by the NIA (National Investigation Agency)—despite court orders—ensuring that he could not be granted bail for another couple of years.

It can also be seen in the case of Sanjiv Bhatt, an IPS officer of the Gujarat cadre who fell foul of those in power by revealing details of a meeting taken by Mr. Modi (then chief minister of Gujarat) during the riots of 2002, and for alleging that he was pressured by Modi and Shah to "withdraw a report he had prepared on the murder of former Gujarat home minister Haren Pandya".

Bhatt's writ petition in the SC for constitution of an SIT to probe the Gujarat riots afresh was placed by Justice Mishra, who dismissed it, hearing implicit faith in the government's version. He accused Bhatt of misleading the court, of *suppressio veri* and *suggestio falsi*, and of not coming to the court "with clean hands".

This judgment effectively sealed Bhatt's fate, the authors say. He was subsequently convicted in another, decades-old case and is now serving life in prison. His appeal is pending in the Gujarat high court, for whatever it is worth.

This book makes the reader wonder whether Justice Mishra was ever interested in the search for either truth or justice. In

Judge Loya's case, he inexplicably refused to allow a court-monitored probe into the mysterious death of one of his own. Loya was trying a case in which Amit Shah, now Union home minister, was accused in a murder or false encounter.

In the Sahara-Birla bribery case, he refused to allow in evidence a handwritten note in which payment of bribes was recorded, including allegedly to Mr. Modi, during his tenure as chief minister of Gujarat. The rejection was based on a technical definition of what constitutes a 'diary'. Justice Mishra held that since the so-called payments were recorded on loose sheets of paper and did not have spiral or permanent binding, they could not be considered admissible evidence.

The case, naturally, fell apart in the absence of this crucial piece of evidence.

Hearing the constitutional challenge to the Forest Rights Act (FRA), which sought to confer land rights on traditional forest dwellers, Arun Mishra, instead of addressing the constitutional issues involved, peremptorily ordered the eviction of millions of tribals at the second hearing itself. This was done without ascertaining whether their claims had been adjudicated according to law.

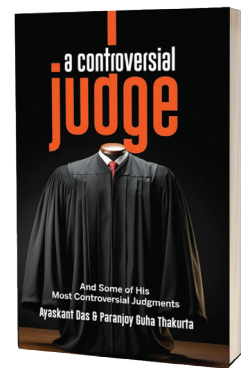
It was only when the BJP govt in Delhi, which had done nothing to defend its own Act, feared an electoral backlash and requested the court to reconsider, that Justice Mishra stayed his own order in 2020. The case remains in limbo to this day.

Brandishing his authority like a cudgel, the Hon'ble judge took suo motu notice of two tweets by Prashant Bhushan, noted activist and SC lawyer, about the role of four past chief justices in the dismantling of democracy, and convicted him of contempt of court.

This was in spite of advice to the contrary by the attorney-general of India and a legion of legal luminaries and civil society members. This judgment itself has done much to tarnish the image of the SC as a protector of free speech.

The book meticulously documents how, in the 18 months prior to his retirement, Justice Mishra delivered a series of judgments—eight, to be precise—in favour of the Adani Group and Reliance Industries. Through these rulings, the companies benefitted by thousands of crores of rupees, effectively reducing the telecom sector to a duopoly.

Once again, the rub lies in the manner of interpretation of laws, facts and precedents. Without going into the intricacies of the judgments—the reader can peruse them



Title **A Controversial Judge**
Authors **Paraskanta Das and Paranjay Guha Thakurta**
Publisher **Paranjay Guha Thakurta**
Year **2025**

and draw his or her own conclusions—the sheer coincidence of timing and disposal is intriguing. As Ian Fleming famously said: "Once is happening, twice is coincidence, but three times is enemy action!"

The other cases and judgments analysed in this book only reinforce the misgivings about Justice Mishra's credentials as an impartial purveyor of justice. Sadly, one cannot discuss them all in this review.

Suffice it to say, however, that by the end of this book, one cannot but grapple with some troubling questions. Are we overhyping the notion of 'independence of the judiciary', given that the virtual immunity offered to judges is not serving its stated purpose?

It is being demonstrated daily that judicial independence without corresponding accountability can only lead to judicial tyranny. Therefore, should there be greater focus on the other doctrine—accountability of the judiciary?

Is the country being let down by the manner in which we appoint and promote our judges? Should re-employment of retired judges be banned entirely, as it seriously compromises their loyalties?

Inconvenient questions, but ones that will have to be addressed sooner rather than later. If the fourteen judgments discussed in this book compel the reader to reflect on these issues, it would have done its job. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

Are we overhyping the notion of 'independence of the judiciary', given that the immunity granted our judges is not serving its purpose?



The damaged interiors of the historic Golestan Palace in Tehran

UK academics warn against threat to Iranian cultural heritage

Prominent British academics have expressed deep concern over the threat to Iranian cultural heritage from US-Israel's illegal war and relentless bombing. (Golestan Palace, the only UNESCO-listed building in Tehran, was hit on 28 February; Sharif University was bombed on 4 April).

Historic mosques, ancient desert cities and sites including the Soltani Mosque, and the Ali Qapu and Chehel Sutun palaces are at risk, they warn in an open letter.

'All this is a loss for the cultural heritage of the world, not just for the people of Iran,' say the signatories, who include historians and archaeologists specialising in West Asia from the British Museum, the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge University and the School of Oriental and African Studies.

In addition to the damage directly done to historic sites, the letter states that 'damage to oil depots and refineries inevitably results in pollution that causes irreversible damage to sites such as Persepolis and Parsagadae and famous rock-reliefs such as Bisitun, Naqsh-e Rostam and Bishapur.'

Ali Ansari, professor of Iranian history at the University of St Andrews and

president of the British Institute of Persian Studies, said the nature of the war made it unclear as to how the international community would be able to help repair the damage in the future.

Several Western museums and other institutions are said to be still working with archaeologists in neighbouring Iraq in an attempt to undo the damage caused by previous wars.

Systematic anti-Muslim bias in UK media

There's 'widespread and systemic anti-Muslim bias' in British media, with around 70 per cent of coverage portraying Muslims in a negative light, associating them with themes of conflict, threat or controversy.

This is revealed in a comprehensive study by the Centre for Media Monitoring (CfMM), an independent non-profit organisation which works to ensure a fair and accurate media landscape in UK.

It found that nearly half of all articles referencing Muslims or Islam in 2025 contained some degree of bias.

'The analysis also highlights a cluster of right-wing media outlets responsible for producing the most severe and persistent forms of harmful coverage,' it said.

The study is based on an analysis of over



LONDON DIARY

HASAN SUROOR

40,000 articles published across 30 major UK news outlets, reportedly making it the largest of its kind examining media portrayals of Muslims in Britain.

Among other things, it identifies structural patterns of bias in news reporting and examines how these patterns shape public narratives about Muslims and about Islam.

It will be interesting to see what a similar study of Indian media might reveal.

Sadiq Khan calls out Trump's lies about London

The ping-pong between London mayor Sadiq Khan and US president Donald Trump and his courtiers over the latter's campaign to 'tarnish' the British capital's image has escalated into a diplomatic scandal.

Khan—who has been personally targeted by Trump and called a "terrible mayor" who "wants to go to Sharia law"—has told British diplomats abroad to challenge "disinformation and lies" about the city.

Among other things, Trump has dubbed London the "crime capital" of Europe and claimed that the city has been overrun by Islamists, resulting in "no-go" zones for non-Muslims.



Sadiq Khan



Donald Trump with Keir Starmer

After a meeting with British diplomats, ambassadors and high commissioners, Khan said that London was safer than major US cities. He cited data showing that last year London logged its lowest number of per capita crime since records began being kept.

Incidents of phone-snatching, for which the British capital became notorious in recent years, had also fallen.

'A lot of this misinformation, disinformation and lies comes from the United States of America. It's really important to counter the propaganda coming from President Trump,' said Khan.

The row comes as the 'special relationship' between the US and the UK is being severely tested over the Iran war, with Trump calling prime minister Keir Starmer weak—"He's no Churchill"—for refusing Americans the use of British bases to bomb Iran.

And what about 'crumbling' American cities, Mr President?

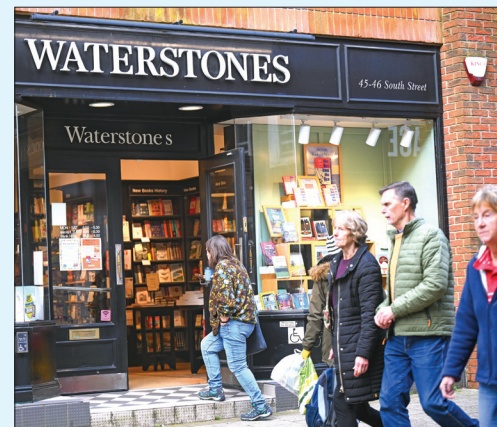
Meanwhile, British media is busy reminding the Yanks of the decline of their famous cities.

To quote *Times* columnist Janice Turner: 'American cities, with their crumbling infrastructure, homeless camps, car domination and bust-up pavements are decades behind Paris, Barcelona or London in solving today's urban problems. I was beguiled by New York in 1995: now I wish everyone on its ratty, rat-infested subway could see the Elizabeth Line. Apart from its wildernesses, those it hasn't yet spoilt, America offers nothing to envy.'

No AI help please, literary agents warn writers

Planning to pitch a manuscript to a British literary agent?

Well, then stay as far away from AI as possible if you don't want the world to miss out on your next great novel.



Alarmed by the rampant use of artificial intelligence by authors, literary agents have tightened their rules for book submissions, warning that any hint of use of AI, not just in the manuscript but also in the covering letter, synopsis or proposal, would disqualify them.

And, finally, a British commentator noted that events in the Middle East "lend weight to the observation that war is God's way of teaching Americans geography. ■



Honouring Faith, Building Legacy Telangana's Commitment to Temple Development

Honourable Chief Minister
Sri A.Revanth Reddy Garu

Performed in Bhoomi Puja for
Redevelopment works at
Bhadrachalam Temple and Basara Temple



Sri Gnana Saraswathi Devasthanam
Basara Saraswati Temple redevelopment
works Estimated cost Rs. **225 Crore**



Sri Sita Ramachandra Swamy devasthanam,
Bhadrachalam Temple redevelopment
works Construction of Godavari Pushkar Ghats
Estimated Cost: **₹351 Crores**

PEOPLE'S GOVERNMENT: PATH TO PROGRESS AND WELFARE FOR ALL