

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

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Prove again that you belong

With its recent 'clarification' on the validity of the passport, has the government issued yet another notice to Indian citizens? **Herjinder** weighs in

When officials of the ministry of external affairs (MEA) recently clarified that an Indian passport is 'primarily a travel document' and not conclusive proof of citizenship, they set the cat among the pigeons.

Less than nine per cent Indians hold a valid passport, according to the MEA, but that still means 12-13 crore Indians. For all these millions and many more aspirants, the Indian passport represents the Republic's highest seal of trust. It carries the national emblem, permits international travel and is accepted by governments across the world as proof of Indian nationality. If even this document cannot establish citizenship, the question is: what can?

The controversy erupted after the MEA 'clarified' during a media briefing on Passport Seva Divas (24 June) that, legally speaking, the Indian passport does not create citizenship, that citizenship is governed by the Citizenship Act, 1955, while passports are issued under the Passports Act, 1967. The clarification came when a reporter from *The Hindu* asked if an Indian citizen could use their valid passport as a document to legally challenge their exclusion from the voter rolls.

In a piece she wrote for *The Indian Express*, former foreign secretary Nirupama Menon Rao tried to introduce nuance into the debate. 'For most Indians, the passport is the most authoritative document the Republic issues. It bears the name of the Republic of India, carries the holder's identity, and is accepted around the world because foreign governments trust that India has verified the bearer's nationality before issuing it,' she writes.

But, she adds, 'a passport does not create citizenship. Nor is it the legal instrument that finally determines citizenship if that status is challenged before a court.' The courts will perhaps in due course affirm this position, but the reason



If even a passport cannot establish citizenship, what can?

why this 'clarification' has only aggravated citizen anxiety is that in recent times a series of other documents—like Aadhaar or voter I-card or PAN—that citizens used as proof of identity have been declared invalid for these purposes.

Over the past decade, India has witnessed a series of citizenship-related exercises and debates centred on the National Population Register (NPR) or the National Register of Citizens (NRC) or the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and more recently the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. Each exercise, each database may have distinct legal foundations, but what seems to lie at the heart of these exercises is a drive to re-certify Indians as Indians. There's great unease about the citizenship question—who is in and who is out; who is or isn't eligible for welfare; who is or isn't a voter and other such questions of belonging that hitherto weren't questions. Their citizenship must be

The experience of Assam's NRC process demonstrated how easily documentation gaps can place even long-time residents under suspicion

repeatedly verified and defended. It doesn't seem to matter that many do not possess the documents that will serve as valid proof of eligibility. And the list of acceptable documents is shrinking. Voter identity cards are issued only to eligible citizens, but have repeatedly been described as insufficient proof of citizenship. Aadhaar, which was seeded into all databases, even in violation of a Supreme Court order, and then used as the default proof of identity and address for banking, welfare and digital services, is invalid as proof of nationality. And now, we're told, that the passport isn't proof either.

Senior Congress leader and former external affairs minister Salman Khurshid summed up the paradox succinctly: "The Passports Act does not say that it is a proof of your citizenship, but it does say that if you are not a citizen, you won't get a passport."

Lawyer and activist Ayushman Pandey concurs with Khurshid, adding that delinking passports

from citizenship creates both legal contradictions and practical problems. The Passports Act explicitly limits passports to Indian citizens, barring exceptional circumstances. The application process involves extensive documentation and police verification. Globally, passports are the principal documents through which states certify nationality.

The case of veteran journalist R. Rajagopal, a former editor of *The Telegraph*, a Kolkata-based news daily, found he'd been struck off the voter rolls in West Bengal during the SIR exercise. He writes in a social media post, later reproduced by other digital media outlets, that the deletion affected police verification during the renewal of his passport, delaying the process by months and preventing him from travelling abroad to attend his daughter's wedding.

Rajagopal writes: 'Like nearly 27 lakh other residents of West Bengal, I was excluded on account of what were described as 'logical discrepancies'. No reason was furnished even after I submitted my matriculation certificate, and my appeal is now pending before one of the tribunals constituted pursuant to the Supreme Court's directions. As a consequence, I was unable to vote in the recent election.'

'More distressing has been the fate of my passport renewal application. Although I completed the biometric formalities on March 19, 2026, police verification has not been cleared because my name no longer appears on the electoral roll. Despite submitting several alternative documents, I have been informed that they are insufficient. In fact, today (June 27, 2026) is the 100th day since my biometrics for passport renewal were taken. I was formally informed last week by the passport-issuing authority that Kolkata Police sent an adverse report, citing the deletion of my name from the voters' list. I have been asked to appear before the

Regional Passport Office in Calcutta 'immediately' but when I sought an appointment, without which it is difficult to gain entry, the date granted is July 17, 2026.'

What transformed Rajagopal's ordeal into a larger public debate is the realisation that if a senior journalist with decades of public visibility could be victimised in this manner, what chance did an ordinary citizen have against a vindictive state and an indifferent bureaucracy?

The burden to produce legacy documents, ancestral records and other paperwork is not evenly distributed. Many Indians, especially the elderly, rural communities, migrant populations and economically vulnerable groups possess incomplete or sketchy documentation. Registration of birth became near-universal quite recently. Spelling variations, missing records, change in address and lost documents are common realities.

The experience of Assam's NRC process demonstrated how easily documentation gaps can place even long-time residents under suspicion.

The political rhetoric of illegal immigrants ('ghuspaithiye') has sharpened these anxieties. Minorities, particularly Muslims, understandably fear that the demand for documents may disproportionately affect them.

The argument that citizenship derives from the Citizenship Act rather than the passport may even be technically correct and legally sound, but what is the effect on citizens of this broad brush-stroke question mark on their status? Is governance about underlining the precise legal nuance or giving the public a sense of belonging?

As the debate rages, the question is less the validity of passports or other documents and more the relationship between citizens and the state. Should the state and its agencies err on the side of inclusion or make its 1.47-billion-strong citizenry jump through hoops to establish that they belong here. ■

When other faiths are in the crosshairs

A.J. Philip reflects on the new tendency to police faith and to use the FCRA as an instrument of coercion

Sabri Ram Janmabhoomi Teertha Kshetra occupies a unique place in India's public life. Constituted by the Union government on 5 February 2020, following the Supreme Court verdict on the Ayodhya dispute, it was entrusted with constructing and managing the Ram temple, arguably the most politically significant religious project in independent India.

On 18 October 2023, the Trust was granted permission under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act to receive overseas donations through the designated State Bank of India branch on Parliament Street in New Delhi.

Every organisation registered under the FCRA—whether based in Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu or Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh—must receive foreign contributions through this single branch. The arrangement leaves practically no room for secrecy. Every remittance is electronically recorded and is instantly accessible to the authorities. The Trust now finds itself facing

an uncomfortable situation. A Special Investigation Team has been given additional time to investigate the alleged theft of donations, including gold and silver offerings made by devotees. Two members of the Trust—general secretary Champat Rai and trustee Anil Mishra—have resigned, while eight employees have been arrested.

There are also reports that Rai had initially set out to file a police complaint but turned back after receiving a telephone call, and that for days the effort was to project that all was well. Investigative agencies such as the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate are now reportedly being considered to probe suspected violations of the FCRA. If that happens, the implications will extend well beyond Ayodhya.

During the last Budget session of Parliament, the government introduced amendments to the FCRA that would empower designated authorities to attach and

confiscate the properties of organisations found violating the Act. Significantly, the proposal does not prescribe any minimum threshold for the alleged violation.

More troubling is the process. A designated authority, who may be as junior as a district magistrate, could order confiscation and auction of a property, with the proceeds going to the consolidated fund of the Government of India. There is no requirement for prior judicial adjudication. No one seriously believes that the Ram temple will ever be auctioned. Nor should anyone wish for such an outcome. The temple stands on the faith and contributions of millions of devotees, who had reportedly donated more than Rs 3,500 crore even before the Trust received FCRA clearance.

Yet laws are drafted for all institutions, not merely for those against whom they are presently intended. A power conferred today upon the executive may be exercised tomorrow under very different political circumstances. For instance, FCRA was first enacted

during the Emergency in 1976. Recognising perhaps the political sensitivity of the issue, this time the government did not press the proposed amendments in Parliament after widespread criticism from Opposition parties.

Instead, it has achieved many of the same objectives through subordinate legislation. Fresh rules issued under earlier amendments have now come into force without parliamentary debate.

These rules considerably widen the net of liability. Earlier, responsibility for compliance rested primarily with the chief executive or principal office-bearer of an organisation. Now, chairpersons and every member of the governing board can also be held personally accountable. Serving on the board of a charitable institution has thus become a legally hazar-

Freedom of religion, association and expression will not survive if citizens can't serve, heal and worship without fear



Police escort some of the accused in the Ram Mandir donation embezzlement case

dous responsibility.

The consequences are already being felt.

The Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), one of India's oldest and most respected humanitarian organisations, maintained relief warehouses across the country for decades. Whether the emergency was a flood in Bihar, an earthquake in Gujarat or a cyclone on the eastern coast, its volunteers could move essential supplies within hours.

Today, even emergency humanitarian work risks delay due to procedural requirements. To undertake relief work in a state, the organisation may first have to complete regulatory formalities if prior approval has not been obtained. Imagine the consequences of such a dispensation in a

natural disaster.

The cumulative impact of successive FCRA amendments has been severe. Thousands employed by voluntary organisations, not necessarily Christian or Muslim, have lost their jobs, while many institutions that supplemented the government's welfare efforts now struggle to survive.

The purview of rules extends beyond financial accountability to the personal lives of those associated with such organisations. Even books or articles written by board members may have to be disclosed to the authorities. Financial regulation is one thing, monitoring intellectual activity quite another.

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What's a valid passport to Indian citizenship?

A.J. Philip writes an open letter to the Union external affairs minister after an official in his ministry told the passport was no more than a travel document

Dear Dr S. Jaishankar,

I obtained my first passport in 1979, soon after the Passport Office in Bhopal was inaugurated by one of your predecessors, Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It was my assignment to report the inauguration for *The Hitavada*, whose office happened to be in the same building.

Though it was an official function, Vajpayee delivered a remarkably humorous speech. I do not know whether my report fully captured the flavour of the occasion.

Soon afterwards, I obtained my passport. All the entries were handwritten. On the front page was a prominent stamp bearing the words 'National Status'. Beneath it, in much larger letters, appeared the words: 'Citizen of India'.

I was delighted, believing I'd obtained the most authoritative document certifying my status as an Indian citizen, entitled to all the rights and privileges that citizenship entails.

I still possess all my old passports and each one records my nationality simply as 'Indian'.

So I was deeply shocked when a spokesperson of your ministry recently said that a passport is no proof of citizenship, that it is just a document intended to facilitate international travel. This clarification was issued on Passport Seva Divas—a day whose existence, I confess, I hardly know until then.

Two years ago, I visited Sri Lanka, where Indian citizens are entitled to obtain a visa on arrival. If your ministry now maintains that a passport is no proof of nationality, how is an Indian traveller supposed to establish his nationality in this situation?

Your predecessor as foreign secretary, Nirupama Rao, wrote a piece trying to clear the confusion. Rao, who now dabbles in singing and writing poetry, argued that no immigration officer anywhere in the world will question the authenticity of an Indian's nationality as stated in his

passport. She may have been a distinguished ambassador, but that does not mean she can predict how every emigration officer's mind works.

I was once stopped by an immigration officer in Los Angeles. I had an invitation from Star TV. He asked me whether I'd report from America. I said yes. In that case, I should've had a work visa, he said. I was finally allowed to proceed after about 45 minutes, and only after I told a senior officer that I'd been invited to interview stars from shows like *Baywatch*, *The X-Files* and *The Simpsons*, and that I'd return in a fortnight as soon as the work was done.

During those 45 minutes, I even visualised catching a return flight from LA. Like the Bangladeshi official whom your government detained for about two hours at Delhi airport, I'm not a handsome person like you. If an immigration officer in, say, North Macedonia or São Tomé and Príncipe doesn't like my face and doesn't want me to enter his country, he could ask: "What's your nationality?"

When I say I'm Indian and show my passport, and if perchance he asks ChatGPT and learns what your ministry said on Passport Divas, what then? What

can I do in such a situation, except return without the tamarind toffee my grandnephew Nehemiah loves so much?

Let me ask you this: what proof would you show in a foreign country if asked about your identity? You are a minister and hold a diplomatic passport. Is your passport weightier than my ordinary passport when it comes to proving nationality?

In many countries, citizens are issued identity cards with a unique number. They only need to quote that number to prove their citizenship.

You'll remember the fanfare with which the Manmohan Singh government had introduced Aadhaar. It was to be a single document that served all purposes of identity within the country. Since it involved collecting biometric data, I was initially opposed to it. The Supreme Court too had reservations.

Today, when almost everyone has it, it is nothing more than a proof of address. You can use it to enter an airport or book a train ticket, but it is not proof of nationality. Likewise a PAN card merely proves you are an income-tax payer; it doesn't establish your nationality. I thought the voter ID served that purpose, until the Election Commission of India came up with its own rules.

In West Bengal, Bihar and Assam, even those who had these IDs and had voted in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections were still disenfranchised if they belonged to certain identifiable communities. The Election Commission had the temerity to ask Prof. Amartya Sen, a Nobel laureate, to prove his eligibility to vote in the recent assembly elections.

I don't know how I will prove my nationality. One proof I have is my old Bible in which my mother recorded the date and time of birth of all her five children. Fortunately, my father was in the Army, and I have his discharge certificate signed by a British officer. But neither a Bible nor a British signature is acceptable to you.

This is not my problem alone. Prabhu Chawla, a senior journalist known for his right-leaning views, writes: 'So, am I an Indian citizen? I wield an Aadhaar etched with biometrics, a voter ID baptised in e-voles, a PAN card chained to every tax I've ever paid. Yet, because I was born beyond today's borders, in a place now [known] as Pakistan, and because my parents' papers have perished with time, the courts declare I am no one—nameless, nationless, until I

summon proof from the shadows.'

You are a diplomat and a minister. You are expected to find solutions, not create problems. Can't you clarify that passports will be considered proof of nationality unless proven to be fake or fraudulently obtained?

No document is valid if it's obtained fraudulently. Then why devalue the passport? It's your responsibility to ensure that Indian passports are issued to only genuine Indian citizens; you cannot shy away from this responsibility.

I have reason to believe that your statement about passports and nationality is deliberate. Not many people would have noticed one surreptitious change the Modi government has introduced in passports.

Earlier, a passport showed both the permanent address and the present address of the holder, as well as the full address of the father/guardian and details of omitted passports. Now these details are omitted. The official argument is that such information is already with the immigration authorities and that addresses may change during the validity of a passport. But this is a cover-up. The real intent was to strip the passport of its status as proof of identity.

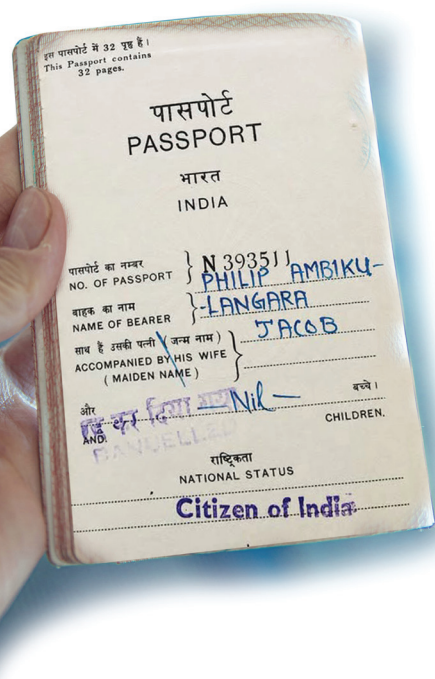
I recall another scheme your ministry tried to impose: issuing orange passports to people requiring Emigration Clearance Certificates for travel abroad. Today I checked my first passport. When renewed in Patna in 1984, the Superintendent had stamped 'emigration check required'—even though I was a postgraduate and exempt from such checks. Since I could not use the passport, I did not have to get any emigration clearance.

To justify the orange passport for the poor, you made the farcical argument that it would raise their aspirations—that those with orange passports would strive to get blue ones by studying and earning degrees. We would have been the only country in the world to issue passports in two different colours to its citizens—not counting the maroon diplomatic passports.

Let me conclude with a humble request. Please issue a clarification that a passport will ordinarily be accepted as proof of Indian citizenship. Exceptions are exceptions and can be dealt with separately. I hope you'll do the needful.

Yours etc.
A.J. Philip

This is an abridged version of the open letter that originally appeared in Indian Currents



“
You hold a diplomatic passport. Is your passport weightier when it comes to proving nationality?”

When other faiths are in the crosshairs

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A familiar political narrative continues to suggest that Christian organisations receive vast sums from abroad for religious conversion. Yet the architecture of the FCRA itself contradicts that claim. Every foreign contribution passes through one designated bank branch, where the authorities can monitor receipts in real time. If illegal funding exists, it can be identified almost instantly.

Moreover, the allegation that Indians can be induced to change their faith merely through foreign money diminishes the dignity of Indian citizens.

The record of Christian voluntary organisations also deserves acknowledgement. For generations, they have established schools, hospitals, leprosariums, orphanages and community development programmes, often in regions where the State itself had little presence. William Carey regarded education as central to social reform. St. Stephen pioneered modern healthcare in Delhi. Countless mission schools educated first-generation learners who might otherwise never have entered a classroom.

This writer has spent nearly 25 years with a Christian voluntary organisation, either as its head or chief disadvantaged. Lakhs of disadvantaged students completed their education through schools and learning centres supported by this organisation. Many were the first in their families to become literate. None embraced Christianity because of the education they received.

Equally instructive is the case of the Missionaries of Charity founded by Saint Teresa of Kolkata,

popularly known as Mother Teresa. In 2018, Sister Concilia and two associates in Jharkhand were arrested amid allegations of child trafficking. The arrests generated sensational headlines and prime time television debates. The congregation's childcare work suffered irreparable damage.

Last month, after years of legal proceedings, the elderly nun was acquitted, barely registered in the national media.

Across several states, attacks on Christian prayer meetings and educational institutions have become common. Small groups of self-appointed vigilantes disrupt worship, intimidate congregations and level allegations of conversion with little apparent fear of legal consequences. Victims often complain that police attention is directed more towards them than towards the perpetrators.

The recent cancellation of the licence of St. Paul School in Patela in Rajasthan's Dungarpur district, forcing students to seek admission elsewhere, adds to that sense of insecurity. Ironically, this comes at a time when several states have shut thousands of government schools, leaving poor children with fewer educational opportunities.

For Christians, worship is both personal and communal. Prayer in homes has always been an accepted expression of faith. Yet in some parts of India, even a small prayer gathering risks attracting allegations of unlawful conversion.

No democracy can flourish if ordinary acts of worship become objects of suspicion.

The State unquestionably has the authority to regulate foreign funding. Transparency is essential, and every institution—religious or secular—must comply. But laws must be even-handed, proportionate and accompanied with procedural safeguards that protect citizens against arbitrary executive action.

Our Constitution promises freedom of religion, association and expression. Those freedoms cannot survive simply because they are printed in the text. They survive only when citizens can educate, heal, serve and worship without constantly looking over their shoulders. ■

Silencing NGOs by other means

Defeating the FCRA bill in Parliament did not deter the government, writes **Aakar Patel**

What cannot be passed in Parliament as law can be effected through changes in the rules. The effect on the ground is often the same and the objective is achieved. This is not how democratic nations ought to function, but there is perhaps a reason why India is now, so many years after 1947, classified as 'partly free' rather than a full democracy.

In March this year, the Bill to attack, yet again, non-government organisations (NGOs). This is a sector to which, it must be clarified at the outset, the RSS does not belong because it is not a registered entity and does not, therefore, legally exist as one.

The Bill could not pass after the Opposition did what it should do more often: oppose. The prime minister, with his 240 MPs, took his Bill and went home. He then reintroduced much of its essence through changes to the rules under the existing law, something that does not require parliamentary sanction.

Exactly like the introduction of the Special Intensive Register, which did through rules what the National Register of Citizens (NRC) could not achieve through legislation.

The current attack on NGOs continues the effort to shut the sector down. It is aimed at organisations receiving foreign funding, with the familiar tropes of national security, the 'foreign hand', and similar others once again being invoked. At the outset, it must also be clarified that PM CARES too is not covered here because it is neither a government entity—and therefore falls outside the purview of the RTI Act—nor is it an NGO, and therefore cannot be held to the same standards. It is a mythical creature.

The new restrictions introduce a number of rules into NGO functioning. NGOs can conduct only those activities listed in a government-prescribed schedule. The government will also have greater control over where an

NGO can operate. An NGO's 'chief functionary' is defined not merely as its chief executive but also its trustees and office-bearers, while foreign nationals are barred from serving in those roles.

NGOs must also declare their social media accounts and are prohibited from publishing material the government considers political. Why are these rules not applied to the rest of the private sector, which is, after all, what 'non-government' means? Corporates are free to bring in as much foreign investment as they wish and are applauded for doing so. They can hire foreign CEOs, while Indian CEOs leading companies abroad are celebrated as national successes.

There are other obvious hypocrisies. In January 2013, a public interest litigation was filed in Delhi High Court alleging that both the BJP and the Congress had received donations from Vedanta/Sterlite in violation of the FCRA. On 28 March 2014, the court held that both parties had violated the Act and, in May that year, directed the Modi government and the Election Commission to take action against them.

By October 2015, however, the Modi government had found a way around the problem. It amended the law to define any company registered in India, irrespective of its ownership, as an Indian company. In effect, 'foreign' was redefined as 'Indian'. That amounted, critics argued, to a fraud on the Indian people, but because both major parties stood to benefit, the change passed without meaningful resistance.

For the rest of us, the rules are different. In 2020, the government introduced another set of restrictions. First, the roughly 23,000 NGOs licensed to receive foreign contributions were required to receive all such funds through a single branch of the State Bank of India at Sansad Marg in New Delhi. Since only 1,488 of those NGOs were registered in Delhi, the rest had to travel to the capital simply to



Lawmakers protest against the FCRA Bill, 2026

Photo: IANS

open an account. The branch, in turn, would report to the home ministry the details of every remittance, including its source and mode of receipt.

The second change reduced the amount NGOs could spend on administrative expenses from 50 per cent to 20 per cent of the foreign funds they received. Salaries, travel expenses, the cost of hiring personnel, electricity and postal charges, telephone bills, water and courier charges, office repairs, stationery and printing, transport, accounting

and fund administration, vehicle maintenance, report writing, legal and professional fees, and rent were all classified as administrative expenses.

No more than 20 per cent of foreign funding could be spent on these essentials, even though no comparable restriction applies to any other sector in India. This disproportionately affected organisations engaged in research, advocacy and public policy work, which depend heavily on professionals such as lawyers, academics and researchers rather than brick-and-mortar projects like schools or hospitals.

Third, the law prohibited NGOs from transferring foreign funds to other NGOs, even when both organisations were fully FCRA-compliant. This struck at the way the sector functions. NGOs do not generally compete with one another in the way private companies do; they work through networks and partnerships. The change weakened those alliances, preventing larger organisations from supporting smaller grassroots groups that often lack the expertise or resources to raise funds independently.

And now come yet more rules in 2026, all of it accompanied by the astonishing slogan of 'minimum government, maximum governance'. ■

The latest attack on NGOs is like the SIR, which effected through rules what the NRC couldn't through legislation



What if the monsoon fails the farmer again

While monsoon patterns change, Indian farming is still stuck in yesterday's assumptions, writes **Jaideep Hardikar**

For Nitin Khadse, a five-acre farmer and social activist in the cotton district of Yavatmal, the first month of this monsoon is already a puzzle. "For the last few years, we've noticed that rainfall is not uniform in a circle of 10-12 villages, but this year, I see that pattern on one farm—while one patch of my farm got rain, the other patch did not," Khadse, 45, told *National Herald* over the phone from his Jalka village. "Many farmers have completed their sowing even when the rains are inadequate," he said. "My worry is that we may have to go for a resowing because our first sowing will probably fail."

Every year, June marks the beginning of rural India's most consequential gamble. Farmers till their fields, buy seeds, mostly on credit, buy fertilisers, and then wait for the first spells of dependable rain. In dryland areas across the country, agriculture has always been a wager on the monsoon, because that's the only source of irrigation. This year, as June comes to an end, the wager itself is uncertain—delayed or suspended, in the language of farmers.

Vast swathes of the country are yet to get adequate rainfall. In several regions, the rains have not yet arrived. By end-June, India had received roughly 42 per cent below-normal rainfall since the onset of the southwest monsoon, making this one of the driest Junes in a century. That's the countrywide average. The deficit, as per IMD (Indian Meteorological Department) data, has been particularly severe in central India where rainfall has been nearly 60% below normal in many regions. For farmers in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and adjoining states, this marks the difference between sowing on time and waiting anxiously for another week.

The monsoons have an overbearing effect on the Indian economy.

On the brighter side, the IMD forecasts better and well-distributed rains in most parts of the country in the first week of July. With growing inflation, dwindling incomes and other pressures, a bad rain year will have devastating consequences for small farmers, already grappling with rising fuel and fertiliser prices as a fallout of the war in West Asia.

By all accounts, there is a high possibility of drought-like conditions in 2026-27.

The southwest monsoon reached Kerala a few days behind schedule. What followed was far more significant than a delayed onset. The monsoon stalled over western and central India for over two weeks, with heat waves and humidity continuing well past the summer season in the farm calendar. Instead of advancing steadily

across the country, it lost momentum, leaving vast stretches of cropland dry when farmers would normally complete sowing operations after the first spell of rain.

Meteorologists point to a convergence of several atmospheric factors. El Niño conditions have now developed over the equatorial Pacific and are expected to gain strength through the season. An IMD press release on 25 June (IMD releases its weekly forecast every Thursday) says, 'the atmosphere has responded to the warming sea surface temperatures, and the coupled ocean-atmosphere system now exhibits characteristics consistent with El Niño conditions.'

In previous years, India sometimes escaped the worst effects of El Niño because a positive Indian Ocean Dipole, a.k.a. the Indian Niño—an irregular climate pattern defined by the difference in sea-surface temperatures between the western and eastern parts of the tropical Indian Ocean—supplied additional moisture. This year, that compensating influence is absent.

At the same time, the 'Somali Jet'—the low-level wind current that transports moisture from the Arabian Sea—has remained weaker than usual. Coupled with some atmospheric processes, these factors have yielded repeated 'break' conditions, interrupting the monsoon's advance.

The lived experiences of farmers are vastly different from how scientists understand these processes. They see



By end-June, India had received roughly 42 per cent below-normal rainfall since the onset of the southwest monsoon, making this one of the driest Junes in a century

parched fields where soyabean or cotton or maize or cereals should have germinated by now. If they have exhausted their savings or a part of their crop loans over the inputs already used, they start worrying if another loan will be needed should the rains fail for another week.

The impact is showing. By 25 June, kharif sowing was 23 per cent lower than at the same time last year. Soyabean, cotton, even maize sowings have yet to gain speed. The soyabean sowing is lagging by almost 65 per cent, cotton by 35 per cent, a Reuters report said. In many regions, rice transplantation has stalled; delayed transplantation leads to a drop in yields.

Every week of delay shrinks the growing season, reduces potential yields, increases vulnerability to pests and diseases, and often pushes the farmer deeper into debt and desperation.

As Khadse, the farmer in Yavatmal, said: "Farmers are worried. They'll be desperate if the rains continue to elude."

The Modi government has reportedly drawn up contingency plans for 315 vulnerable districts that could be severely affected by a weak monsoon this year. That includes more than a hundred dryland districts identified as 'highly vulnerable' because they have little assured irrigation. Agriculture departments have advised farmers to shift, where feasible, to short-duration crop varieties, pulses and millets if the rains continue to disappoint. Problem is, the switch is predicated on the

availability of alternative seeds and other inputs for those crops.

The government is understood to have set up an El Niño monitoring cell along with a Crop Weather Watch group to assess the evolving situation, but how it will transmit information to farmers in different states is not known.

The delayed and weak monsoon reveals a larger pattern. That contingency planning—often inadequate—is gradually becoming a permanent feature of Indian agriculture.

Indian monsoons are changing perceptibly in the era of climate change, as this writer has chronicled over the past 20 years. The number of rain-days is reducing, while the number of extreme rainfall events is increasing, turning many regions into climate hotspots, and throwing into disarray the farm household-level planning of agriculture.

Many climate scientists say that the old relationship between El Niño and drought is becoming less predictable. Rising sea temperatures and changing atmospheric circulation mean that the aggregate seasonal rainfall conceals growing variability. A district may eventually receive 'normal' aggregate rainfall over four monsoon months, yet suffer from agriculture drought because most of the rain fell in a few intense events separated by long dry spells.

Farmers understand this variability better because that's their lived reality. They judge a good or bad monsoon not by seasonal averages but by distribution. Did the first rains arrive on time for sowing? Did the soil retain enough moisture to aid crop growth? Was there a long dry spell immediately afterwards? Did an extreme rainfall event wash away seedlings? These questions and their answers determine how good or bad the harvest was.

India's policy response is inadequate because available long-term trends indicate the need for a new strategy.

For instance, our agriculture institutions—which came up in the Green Revolution period (the mid-1960s till the late seventies)—continue to function as though the climate of the 20th century still endures. Crop calendars assume that June will reliably mark the beginning of sowing. Procurement systems continue to favour water-intensive cereals and cash crops. The rural credit cycle and irrigation planning are all centred around assumptions of reliably predictable monsoons, whereas the monsoons are becoming erratic—ironically when India's early monsoon forecast and prediction science is getting better.

The monsoon may yet recover. Reservoirs may still fill to the brim, sowing might accelerate and this year's fears may recede. But should we rely on the possibility of recovery? Shouldn't we prepare for uncertainty? ■

'Normal' seasonal averages hold no meaning for farmers. They judge a good or bad monsoon by its distribution; for them, timing is key

The fortress has fallen. Forlorn lives hope

Chandril Bhattacharya tries to make sense of the new tune that people in Bengal are marching to



Missing in action People kept waiting for the old street fighter, but Mamata Banerjee was a bit like Ronaldo in a recent World Cup match—concentrating on being invisible

Even the BJP didn't expect its thumping victory in West Bengal. But pleasantly surprised, they scampered off to get some ministers and supporting rhetoric in place. The windfall didn't stop there, all their obstacles started vanishing by themselves. The BJP found itself in a rose-tinted Sooraj Barjatya film, the script written by their very own Ram and Syam(aprasad) Mookerjee.

While people kept waiting for retaliation from the 'street fighter', the miracle-maker Mamata Banerjee, she acted like Ronaldo in a recent World Cup match—concentrating on being invisible.

The Left Front is elated. They won a seat all by themselves and another through an ally. They will probably not stop gloating for another five years. It's almost like breaking into a victory lap after managing to score 4 in maths; just 96 more and it'd be 'wow!'

The BJP juggernaut is firing on all cylinders. We faintly heard somewhere that a thriving Opposition is essential for a

healthy democracy. But no ruling party ever cares for democracy, and even if the prospect of one-party rule seems preposterous, that has been the scenario in Bengal for several decades.

The Left Front had practically no opposition for many years in their 34-year rule. The Congress and later the TMC served as cardboard opposition, which sat there only to be accused and ridiculed. For longer than one can remember, nobody thought there would ever be a Bengal that wasn't ruled by Communists, until the Left leaders got too complacent and the cadre turned brutal.

The TMC too had a practically opposition-less run for 15 years when the Congress was non-existent, the CPM was clownish and the BJP was deemed impossible. So, the people of Bengal are no strangers to one-party rule. In fact, they love it. They don't demand change, until they cannot bear to overlook the atrocities anymore. It was when the TMC became unbearably corrupt and puffed up with

hubris that the people came out in their hordes to defeat them. This time the beneficiary was the BJP, the party with a radically different idea.

There are theories about the BJP making its opposition disappear—by luring some and intimidating others. But that still does not explain the great haste with which TMC leaders have abandoned their mother-party. It seemed they were escaping a torture chamber (or possible raids by the Enforcement Directorate). Some have formed a rebel faction; some have joined an obscure outfit. Both these camps are widely perceived to be BJP-supported groups whose purpose is to pretend hard to be non-BJP, much to the advantage of meme artists and amusement of the general public.

So, if the Bengal polity is divided into BJP-A, B, C, a toothless TMC and a staunchly under-ambitious, underachieving CPM, will the circus be worth watching? More likely that it will be a dream run for the BJP, which declares that Muslims

cannot block Red Road to offer prayer, and then blocks the same road for seven days to do yoga. The majority is with them, cheering on. The upbeat mood reflects a sense of freedom from the shackles of the previous ruling party, the same sense that was palpable when the Left Front was ousted in 2011. Mamata Banerjee was then seen as the messiah who would deliver Bengal from its red stains. But in a few months, the excitement waned with the realisation that happy endings are restricted to films.

This time, though, the plot may unfold differently. The BJP is a party with political acumen and incredibly deep pockets. Rewards will rain thick and fast. Expect new roads, bridges, airports and other infrastructure. And expect curbs on freedom of speech and personal liberties.

Both prospects are immensely appealing to common people. If water is pure, the streets are clean, hospital services are cheap, jobs are available, why would anybody pay heed to the wordmongers, whose contorted lips and deafening decibels are a source of irritation anyway? Bengal is fond of contrarians, but only in theory. People here give prizes for literature that advocates anarchy, but they won't tolerate a naysayer who swims against the current of majority opinion and slays holy cows. The BJP will probably ensure this hypersensitivity and allergy intensifies, that criticism becomes risky. It will keep intellectual pets.

As a certain-raiser, there have been instances of accused persons being paraded semi-clad, the show applauded by the masses and BJP honchos alike. Hawkers have been evicted, their stalls bulldozed, the 'right to walk' prioritised over the right to survive. Most people are euphoric at the thought of driving away illegal immigrants from the state.

BJP leaders in the state are declaring zero-tolerance with relish with stock phrases like 'nobody will be spared if...' and 'people will be taught a lesson if...' The hoi polloi are ecstatic throwing eggs at TMC leaders. Exclusion seems to be the day's speciality on the menu and people are finding the humiliation of 'the other' sweet.

It seems the whole world is drooling over the same platter—the US and Europe too are besotted with leaders who shout 'Throw them out!'

Polarisation has sunk its roots in Bengal. A section of Hindus believes the TMC appeased Muslims way too much. The BJP is likely to play the ruthless change-maker, it will go after minorities and critics without apology or restraint. The party that advertises bulldozer raj and brags about encounter killings is here finally, and the people couldn't be happier kissing the iron hand.

For the Opposition, fighting the BJP will be tough. After all, how do you fight democratic backsliding when its constituents—the people—lap up dictatorial vibes? How can you argue rights are being trampled when most people believe some people should have no rights?

What this means on the ground is that the Left can keep harping on a non-communal, pro-poor agenda, but it will appear too soft and abstract to most people. The TMC lacks bite and ideology was never its forte. Demands for development won't fly either when flyovers are being built everywhere. So, the opposition is checkmated and the BJP's double-engine sarkar, flush with cash and medieval ferocity, can chug along merrily.

But if hubris starts contaminating the fuel that drives the double-engine steamroller, if the BJP starts taking things for granted, loses its grip on reality, it might end up in the same heap as its two predecessors in Bengal. Then the Opposition can make its move.

Leaders who wield the whip tend to lose track of the moment when the whip takes over and starts wielding the hand.

That scenario is in 'If-land'. A new leader, a new party can emerge, upending all predictions. A new situation may change the entire story and prove everybody wrong. But going by the way the earth is spinning now, the match is for the BJP to lose. ■

CHANDRIL BHATTACHARYA is a lyricist, poet, essayist and filmmaker from Kolkata

A multipolar world without a global order

No single power can dictate anymore, yet no collective mechanism exists to manage confrontation and conflict among powerful states

Ashok Swain

There are moments in history when wars change far more than borders. They alter the architecture of international politics. The Iran War may ultimately prove to be one of those moments. Whether a lasting 'peace agreement' is reached or not, one geopolitical consequence is already becoming visible. The conflict has accelerated the end of the US-dominated unipolar era.

For more than three decades after the Cold War, Washington enjoyed an unparalleled ability to shape global events, build coalitions, impose sanctions, wage wars and define what constituted the international rules-based order. That era had already begun to recede with the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the growing confidence of regional powers. The Iran war has hastened a transition that was already underway.

Yet celebrating the arrival of a multipolar world would be dangerously premature. The world is becoming multipolar alright, but there's no alternative world order yet. The balance of power is changing much faster than the creation of any institutions and rules needed to manage that change. That is creating a very unstable international environment.

Every international order needs an anchor. It needs rules that even powerful states hesitate to violate. It needs institutions that have legitimacy even when they fail to satisfy everyone. It needs mechanisms capable of preventing crises from escalating into wars. Above all, it needs major powers to accept restraints because they recognise that stability ultimately serves their own interests.

Even with all its contradictions, the post WWII order provided some of these foundations. The United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, international law, arms control agreements and multilateral diplomacy offered channels through which disputes could be managed. The system was often selective, unequal and heavily influenced by American interests, but it nevertheless created a degree of predictability. Even when major

powers ignored international law, they usually felt compelled to justify their actions within its language because legitimacy still mattered.

Today that legitimacy is disappearing with international law increasingly subject to selective interpretation. Economic sanctions, military interventions, trade restrictions, cyber-attacks and political coercion are being justified on the pretext of national interest in defiance of accepted legal principles. Major powers are no longer trying to strengthen common rules; they are rewriting them to suit short-term strategic objectives.

The Iran conflict has bared this reality.

The military exchanges have demonstrated that overwhelming military superiority no longer guarantees political outcomes. Iran has shown that even a heavily sanctioned regional power can impose strategic costs on a superpower through asymmetric capabilities, regional networks and the ability to disrupt critical energy routes. At the same time, the conflict has revealed the limits of American influence. Many countries, including its traditional allies, have refused to automatically align themselves with Washington's position. Others have sought to maintain neutrality despite intense diplomatic pressure.

This does not mean that the United States has suddenly become weak. America still is the world's strongest military power, dominates the international financial system and is highly competitive in technological innovation. The dollar is still the world's principal reserve currency, and no country currently possesses the combination of military, financial, technological and cultural influence that Washington still enjoys. But this power is no longer synonymous with dominance or leverage. The US is still capable of influencing events, but it is losing its ability to determine their outcomes.

China has emerged as the principal long-term challenger to US primacy. Unlike previous rising powers, Beijing has avoided direct military confrontation with Washington. Instead, it has

expanded its influence through trade, technological development, infrastructure investments, diplomacy and economic partnerships. Its Belt and Road Initiative, expanding presence across South and West Asia, Africa and Latin America, and its growing role in strategic groupings like SCO and BRICS reflect a strategy based on patient accumulation of influence rather than confrontation.

Yet China is not replacing the US as the guarantor of global order. It seeks greater influence without assuming equivalent global responsibilities. Beijing consistently supports multilateralism in its official rhetoric, but it has shown little interest in becoming the world's primary security provider. During the Iran conflict, China condemned escalation and called for diplomacy but carefully avoided direct military involvement. This reflects strategic caution.

The result is a world where power is diffusing while responsibility is undefined—the defining paradox of our time. Multiple powers are emerging, but none is willing or capable of constructing a new international

Photo: Getty Images



order that commands broad legitimacy.

The institutions designed to facilitate collective action are formally alive but ineffective. The UN Security Council is paralysed by veto politics. The WTO struggles to resolve disputes. The IMF and World Bank face questions about representation and legitimacy. Even climate negotiations, pandemic responses, refugee protection and nuclear diplomacy are marked by geopolitical rivalry rather than international cooperation.

The irony is striking. World order is collapsing when humanity confronts bigger problems than at any point in modern history, when the need for collective action couldn't be greater. Climate change doesn't abide by national borders. Artificial intelligence creates risks beyond the capacity of individual governments. Cyber-attacks move instantly across continents. Financial instability spreads within hours. Pandemics remind us that viruses require no visas.

History offers little comfort. The last prolonged multipolar era before the First World War was initially

celebrated as a stable balance among several great powers—Britain, France, Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary all believed that shifting alliances would prevent any single state from dominating Europe. Instead, the absence of effective mechanisms for crisis management turned the assassination of one Archduke into a World War. Multipolarity without trusted institutions was inadequate to contain escalation.

Likewise, there is no reason to assume that today's multipolarity, the dispersion of power will automatically produce greater stability. On the contrary, the risks may be even greater. Nuclear weapons, cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence, economic interdependence and the militarisation of space create new pathways for regional crises to rapidly become global emergencies. The competition among great powers today extends beyond traditional military rivalry into technology, supply chains, energy, finance, information and critical minerals.

The Iran War announces the arrival of a world in which no single power can dictate outcomes,

yet no collective mechanism exists to manage competition among several powerful states. The US can no longer sustain the kind of unchallenged leadership that characterised the decades after the Cold War. China has not stepped forward to replace it. Russia is more disruptive than constructive. Europe is internally divided and leaderless. India swears by 'strategic autonomy' and has squandered the opportunity to be the voice of the Global South.

The Iran War may ultimately be remembered not as the conflict that ended the American century but as the moment the world entered an era when power became more widely dispersed while authority was dangerously absent. That is not the arrival of a new world order. It is the arrival of a world without one, where multilateralism survives in speeches, invocation of 'international law' is meaningless and global stability rests not upon agreed rules but upon shifting calculations of power and risk. ■

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Ironically, the old order is collapsing when the world confronts bigger problems than ever before and the need for collective action couldn't be greater

Being a Muslim in new Bengal

STATES 360°
WEST BENGAL



Exclusion, expulsion, detention, communal provocation... Muslims in Bengal are waking up to the reality of living in a BJP-ruled state

Kunal Chatterjee

West Bengal chief minister Svendul Adhikari's claim on 23 June, on the floor of the state assembly, that his government has already deported 10,000 Bangladeshis has gone largely unchallenged. There was no corroboration from New Delhi or Dhaka or the Border Security Force (BSF) and the claim has gone unquestioned by the state Opposition composed of rebel TMC leaders.

The Bangladesh Border Guards (BBG) revealed having foiled at least 30 BSF attempts to push Indian Muslims into Bangladesh. Dhaka insisted that deportation requires identification and investigation, yet the state government seems unconcerned, unrestrained by official procedures laid out by the Union home ministry.

Who exactly were these "undocumented Bangladeshis"? Where did they live, work, and how did they acquire citizenship documents? These questions remain unanswered and Indian Muslims living in the state's border districts are on tenterhooks.

Talking to *Scroll*, 32-year-old Wasip Biswas from Murshidabad narrated the case of the 12 Muslims from Malda who were declared 'Bangladeshis' and sent off to a holding centre soon after Adhikari took over as chief minister on 9 May. "They are all from one family," he said. Biswas and his elder brother, who works in the BSF, are among the 27 lakh voters, a large number of them Muslims, whose names were struck off the voter rolls in the SIR (Special Intensive Revision). There is no update on their online appeals. In the



A throng of alleged 'Bangladeshi infiltrators' at the Hakimpur border in West Bengal

interim, they live in terror of being cut off from welfare schemes and other benefits.

No one knows why their names have been deleted though the law mandates a written explanation and an opportunity to be heard before deletion. A 75-year-old Muslim lawyer from Murshidabad, dropped from the electoral roll, appealed to the Supreme Court, which conceded—only just about—that there was enough evidence he was a practising lawyer in Indian courts and ordered redress. What recourse would a less influential citizen have?

The protests have died down. Even in Kolkata, Prof. Quazi Mohammad Alford, who took part in demonstrations at the Park Circus Maidan till May, said, "It has become too risky. All activists now to think twice before doing anything now."

Even well-heeled Muslims in West Bengal are feeling insecure. The case of the retired High Court judge, Sahidullah Munshi is illustrative. He and his family members were dropped from the electoral rolls for 'logical discrepancies'. His voting right was restored, though, within 48 hours of an interview to *Bar & Bench*. But Oxford-

educated anthropologist Adil Hossain, who teaches in a private university and has a valid passport, has not been so lucky; his name has not been restored. "We don't know what kind of rules they will make for people who do not have voting rights," he told *Scroll*.

Muslims in Bengal admit they have never felt so unsafe. Memories of the 1946-47 riots, which had receded over generations, are back. The renaming of Suhrawardy Avenue, named after the first Muslim vice-chancellor of Calcutta University, to Gopal Mukherjee Road—a rioter lionised as defender of Hindus—is one such step. The decision to celebrate the 125th birth anniversary of Syama Prasad Mookerjee, founder of Bharatiya Jan Sangh, for a year from 6 July is another.

The communal virus is spreading. Sheikh Ajijul (10) came home from school shaken—he was taunted by older schoolboys who called him a 'traitor' and a 'Pakistani'. In Muslim neighbourhoods like Garden Reach, people speak in hushed

tones of a new reality. Property papers and identity cards must be kept ready at all times for inspection. "Whenever a vehicle stops in our lane, everyone comes out to check who it is," says an anxious resident. They spend sleepless nights fearing sudden eviction and forced displacement.

At a recent gathering, Muslim speakers agreed their community was waking up to the kind of life their brethren have already seen in other BJP-ruled states. There are rumours of demolition drives in the Muslim-dense localities of Tangra, Tiljala, Khidderpore, Ekbalpore, Garden Reach and Park Circus, even while irregular structures elsewhere remain untouched. Talk of 'love jihad', infiltration, UCC (uniform civil code) and arrests targeting 'Muslim anti-socials' keep the community on edge.

Meanwhile, police cyber cells are crackling with criticisms of the govern-

ment, while extremist communal voices run amok online, with no fear of punishment or reprisal. This icon of hatred is already poisoning everyday interactions and public discourse.

Their businesses have been hit as well. Manzur Jameel, a manufacturer of electrical components, reports plummeting orders and closed factory lines. "It's not just Bengal," he says, "...Muslims are being pushed to the margins everywhere in India". The ban on street hawkers chokes small businesses, disproportionately affecting Muslim workers.

Park Circus in south Kolkata is a prominent, culturally vibrant neighbourhood, renowned for its iconic street food and buzzing cultural and political life. It has been home to many celebrities—sportspeople of note (Leander and Vece Paes and Akhtar Ali Khan, for example), revered musicians (Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Munawwar Ali Khan and the Dagar Bandhu, for instance) and politicians like the Suhrawardys, one of the most influential political families of undivided Bengal. (Yes, the very same Suhrawardy of the controversial road name).

On Eid mornings, the Park Circus 7-point crossing and surrounding streets used to look carnivalesque, but this time the Eid celebrations of 28 May, barely three weeks after the elections results, were eerily muted. There were many restrictions, on ritual slaughter and public congregation for prayers. The city's main, sprawling Eid namaz, which had been held on Red Road in central Kolkata for half a century, was also relocated to the Brigade Parade Ground a.k.a. Maidan.

The streets of Kolkata's many Muslim-dense neighbourhoods, the small businesses that ply their trade in their lanes and bylanes and holes in the wall, the people who offer prayers in its many mosques are all in a defensive crouch today, dealing with the endless communal provocation, and living in mortal fear of exclusion, detention, expulsion or worse. ■

Muslims in Bengal admit they have never felt so unsafe. The memories of Partition riots have returned

THE ROCK AND THE REALM: D.K. SHIVAKUMAR TAKES CHARGE OF A PROGRESSIVE NEW ERA FOR KARNATAKA

A seamless Siddaramaiah-Shivakumar handover sets Karnataka's next chapter of progressive expansion.

The atmosphere inside the Glass House at Lok Bhavan in Bengaluru was thick with anticipation on the afternoon of June 3, 2026. As the clock struck 4:15 p.m., a thunderous applause erupted, marking a historic milestone in Karnataka's political journey. D.K. Shivakumar stood before Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot, a copy of the Constitution of India held firmly in his hand, and took the oath of office as the 25th Chief Minister of Karnataka.

Sworn in the name of the revered late holy seer Gangadhara Ajjaya, his ascension represents far more than a routine change in leadership. It stands as a masterclass in political stability, a testament to strategic governance, and the beginning of a fresh chapter aimed at comprehensive state development.

This transition of power from the outgoing Chief Minister, Siddaramaiah, was execution at its finest. In a political landscape often defined by friction, Karnataka has demonstrated remarkable maturity by executing a seamless, planned mid-term leadership transition.

By ensuring continuity and maintaining absolute internal cohesion, the administration has sent a powerful signal of stability to citizens and investors alike. This smooth handover ensures that the momentum of governance remains uninterrupted, allowing the state to build directly upon its existing welfare foundations while injecting new visionary energy into its leadership.

Long before the scheduled ceremony, the city's pulse was noticeably faster. The areas surrounding the venue had transformed into a sea of vibrant colors. Thousands of supporters, party workers, and curious citizens arrived from every corner of Karnataka. Travel-weary but enthusiastic groups from regions like Kalyana-Karnataka, Kittur, and Old Mysuru poured out of buses and trains, carrying local flags, banners, and portraits.

The air was thick with the scent of fresh marigold garlands and jasmine. Traditional musicians playing the



Photo: Gettyimages

alongside Chief Minister Shivakumar, Dr. G. Parameshwar was sworn in as the Deputy Chief Minister, bringing seasoned legislative wisdom and institutional memory to the core leadership team.

Together with twelve newly inducted Cabinet Ministers, this executive body represents a harmonious blend of diverse regional interests and communities across Karnataka. The presence of national leaders, spiritual figures, and thousands of citizens at the venue underscored the broad-based consensus backing this new administration. It is a leadership structure engineered not just to govern, but to listen, adapt, and unify.

This collective approach to

governance ensures that every tier of society finds a voice in the highest corridors of power.

The climax of the day's emotion arrived during the administration of the oath. When the new Chief Minister held the Constitution of India and invoked the name of the late holy seer Gangadhara Ajjaya, a wave of visible emotion swept through the crowd.

Many older supporters in the audience could be seen wiping away tears of joy, viewing this moment as the culmination of decades of political struggle and loyalty. The calm, steady tone of Governor Gehlot contrasted beautifully with the raw, emotional energy of the venue.

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EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION

Wasting no time, Chief Minister Shivakumar chaired his first official Cabinet meeting immediately following the ceremony, rolling out a series of swift, high-impact policy decisions that establish a clear, citizen-centric roadmap.

As twilight fell over Bengaluru, the focus of the state shifted from the celebratory atmosphere of the Glass House to the majestic, illuminated stone facade of the Vidhana Soudha. Before stepping into the executive chambers, Chief Minister Shivakumar paused at the grand entrance to garland the statue of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, setting a grounded, responsible tone for the evening. Inside the corridors, the atmosphere was frantic but highly coordinated as senior IAS officers moved briskly through the wooden-paneled hallways, clutching thick, freshly prepared policy binders.

Inside the core Committee Room, the celebratory smiles quickly sharpened into intense focus the moment the heavy doors were closed to the media.

The mood instantly transitioned from a political victory lap to a corporate boardroom meeting, moving straight to the agenda items without any introductory filler speeches. At the heart of these announcements is a profound investment in human capital, particularly the state's youth.

The administration's decision to provide free bus passes to all students across Karnataka is a transformative socioeconomic

equalizer.

By removing financial barriers to mobility, the government ensures that no student is denied access to quality education due to commuting costs. This initiative alleviates a recurring financial burden for a large number of families, promoting higher enrollment and daily attendance in schools and colleges state-wide.

Outside the high iron gates, Preetha Gowda, a 20-year-old engineering student from Ramanagara, clutched her college backpack and expressed the immediate impact of the policy: "You have no idea what this means for families like mine. My father spends a chunk of his monthly wages just on my bus fares to get into Bengaluru for classes. The free pass order as his very first act makes me feel like this government actually sees us."

Complementing this educational support is a bold cultural and social engineering initiative: the establishment of 10,000 Bharat Jodo Yuvaka Sanghas. Backed by a substantial financial allocation of Rs 10 lakh each, these youth clubs are designed to channel the energy of the state's young population into constructive avenues. By funding local sports, cultural activities, and community service projects, these organizations will foster social harmony, cultivate grassroots leadership, and build resilient community networks among the youth.

A SHARED VISION FOR PROGRESS

The next morning, the front pages of major newspapers reflected this powerful blend of political history and swift administrative action. The Deccan Herald led with "DKS TAKES CHARGE: A Smooth Transition, A Swift Turn to Governance," highlighting the Rs 2,000 crore urban infrastructure package. Regional Kannada dailies like Prajavani celebrated the event with the headline (Leadership of the Rock: A Preface to Pro-People Governance), capturing the intense grassroots pride felt by citizens across the state.

Mahadevappa, a 58-year-old sugarcane farmer from Mandya who stood outside the secretariat gates, summarized the collective sentiment perfectly: "We have watched 'Kanakapura Bande' build his career brick by brick. Today, standing outside these gates, I feel like one of our own sons has taken the throne. He took the oath in the name of the holy seer, and that tells me he will govern with righteousness."

The initial actions of Chief

Minister D.K. Shivakumar's administration present a balanced blueprint that harmonizes welfare economics with structural growth. It bridges the aspirations of rural student communities with the infrastructure demands of a global metropolis.

The positive reception from the central government, highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's congratulatory message, underscores a shared commitment to cooperative federalism. This collaborative spirit between the state and center promises to accelerate public works, optimize resource allocation, and drive sustained economic progress.

As Karnataka steps into this new era, the focus is squarely on execution, transparency, and inclusive growth. Guided by an empowered leadership, a clear strategic vision, and an immediate focus on actionable public welfare, the new government stands fully prepared to honor its promises and elevate Karnataka to unprecedented heights of prosperity.

The structure of the newly formed Cabinet reflects a meticulous balance of experience, social representation, and administrative competence. Standing alongside Chief Minister Shivakumar, Dr. G. Parameshwar was sworn in as the Deputy Chief Minister, bringing seasoned legislative wisdom and institutional memory to the core leadership team.

nadaswaram and the rhythmic, thunderous beating of dholu drums set a festive, almost carnival-like tempo.

Folk dancers in traditional attire performed on the pavements, their energy mirroring the crowd's rising anticipation. For the people gathered, this was not just a political transition; it felt like a grand cultural festival.

THE FOUNDATION OF UNIFIED LEADERSHIP

Inside the majestic Glass House, the atmosphere shifted from festive celebration to dignified expectation. The sunlight filtering through the glass ceiling illuminated a meticulously arranged seating area that brought together an extraordinary cross-section of Indian society.

Senior national political leaders sat

shoulder-to-shoulder with prominent local legislators, their faces reflecting a sense of relief and accomplishment over a smooth, unified transition. In a striking display of Karnataka's pluralistic fabric, the front rows were also populated by saffron, white, and maroon robes.

Swaamijis from influential mathas, Muslim clerics, and Christian priests sat together, chatting amiably and lending an aura of spiritual sanctity to the political event. Captains of the IT and biotech industries from Bengaluru's tech corridors mingled with grassroots farmer union leaders, representing the dual engine of Karnataka's economy.

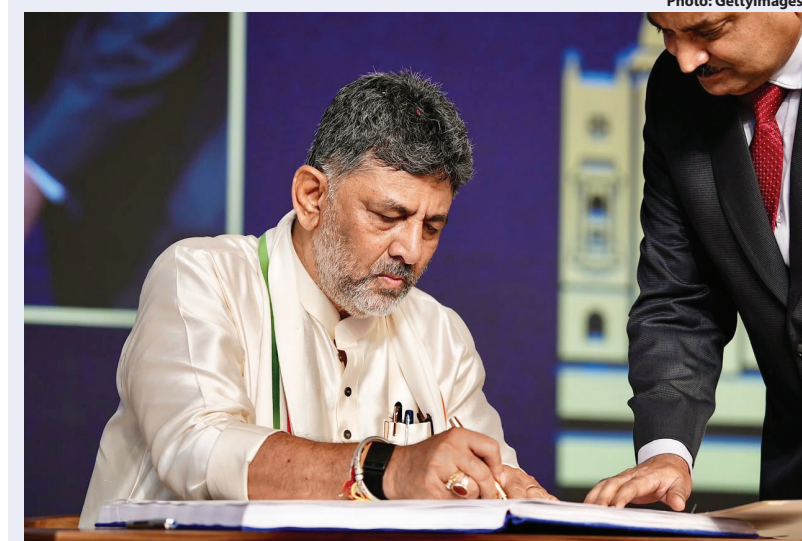
The structure of the newly formed Cabinet reflects a meticulous balance of experience, social representation, and administrative competence. Standing

TRANSFORMING INFRASTRUCTURE AND URBAN GOVERNANCE

Recognizing that robust infrastructure is the backbone of economic prosperity, the new administration moved decisively to address the immediate and

long-term urban challenges of Bengaluru. A dedicated allocation of Rs 2,000 crore was instantly declared for the comprehensive repair and modernization of the capital city's

Photo: Gettyimages



road networks.

This targeted financial injection goes beyond mere maintenance; it is an effort to restore Bengaluru's global reputation as a premier technology and innovation hub by enhancing urban mobility, reducing logistical delays, and improving the overall quality of daily life for millions of residents.

In tandem with physical infrastructure, the government introduced landmark administrative reforms aimed at regularizing urban land layout and property ownership. The extension of the B-Khata to A-Khata land conversions, coupled with a one-time regularization scheme for minor building layout violations, offers massive relief to hundreds of thousands of property owners. This pragmatic policy bridges the gap between rigid regulatory

frameworks and real-world urban development. By legalizing these properties, the state provides citizens with secure asset titles, unlocks access to formal banking credit, and significantly boosts municipal revenue streams through legitimate property tax collections.

A palpable silence gripped the room as the official files for these flagship welfare guarantees were placed before the Chief Minister. There was a brief pause, a collective holding of breath, and then the scratch of the pen.

The moment Shivakumar signed off on the executive decrees, a spontaneous round of applause broke out from the ministers at the table. The promises made to the crowds outside were codified into state law within hours of taking office.

Something is rotten in the land of Ram

Purnima S. Tripathi

On 19 June, Nripendra Mishra dropped a bombshell. In one of several interviews aired by TV channels on the day, Mishra, a member of the board of trustees for the Shri Ram Jannabhoomi Teerth Kshetra, also chairman of the Temple Construction Committee and former principal secretary to prime minister Narendra Modi, referred to stolen donation money in the Ayodhya Ram temple as “खुला डाक” (daylight robbery). Not surprisingly, the Sangh Parivar is squirming.

But it seems not everyone in the Parivar is equally invested in the damage-limitation exercise that has started in the wake of the discovery of embezzlement—running into several crores—according to some reports—and then the Mishra interview.

While the Shri Ram Jannabhoomi Teerth Kshetra trust was constituted by the government, following the 2019 Supreme Court judgment in the Ram Mandir case,



Members of the Sindhi community have now said they never got a receipt for their donation of 200 silver bricks for the Ram Mandir project. The silver was reportedly handed over in January 2021

many of its trustees are from the tentacular Sangh Parivar and swear allegiance to it. The temple, built at an estimated cost of approximately Rs 2,000 crore, donated by devotees from home and abroad, created quite a frenzy of excitement in this ecosystem—in the BJP, the militant Vishva-Hindu Parishad, which spearheaded the Ram Jannabhoomi movement, big daddy RSS, which claimed centre stage during the ‘*pran pratishtha*’ (consecration) ceremony (on 22 January 2024) and of course very large numbers of devout Hindus. Even mainstream media was all aflutter—awash in banner headlines declaring a triumphant civilisational moment.

With all the media hype and government promotion, it is hardly surprising that the temple has received the kind of attention—and donations—it has. Which has verily tested the integrity of some of the people in charge. It would be a

mistake to think it stops at the eight arrested by the Special Investigation Team. Among those taken into custody are Ramshankar Yadav alias Tinnu Yadav, a former driver and close aide of ex-trust general secretary Champat Rai, who reportedly held the keys to the temple’s cash-counting room; Manish Yadav, nephew of Tinnu Yadav, who was posted inside the temple’s cash-counting unit; Anukalp Mishra and Lavkush Mishra, relatives of involved trustee Anil Mishra, both involved in the daily counting process.

Offerings reportedly spiked during the Maha Kumbh in January 2025, and in an executive committee meeting on 13 December 2025, the trust reportedly disclosed that it had received Rs 4,575 crore in donations and other receipts up to 30 November 2025.

The steady and systematic loot of donations was exposed by insider whistleblowers in the first week of

June 2026. An accountant sacked by the trust in 2021, after he complained of keeping accounts of the gold, silver and jewellery donated. A group of Sindhis then claimed they had donated 200 silver bricks but never got a receipt. Perhaps emboldened by these disclosures, the head priest of Janaki temple in Janakpur, Nepal, said he was still in the dark about what happened to the precious metal donated to the trust.

It’s hard to explain how donations could be embezzled over such an extended period despite elaborate security, including surveillance by an estimated 1,600 CCTV cameras, and the counting of cash donations entrusted to the State Bank of India. Trust secretary Champat Rai initially tried to make light of the ‘theft’ but resigned when the scandal threatened to spin out of control. The trust was forced

to acknowledge that with the help of the police Rs 80 lakh was recovered from the houses of some trustees. No FIR was lodged but the trust requested Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath to set up a Special Investigation Team (SIT), which has filed an interim report.

According to sources in Lucknow, the preliminary SIT report estimates the amount swindled to be over Rs 200 crore. It is highly improbable that this scale of embezzlement went unnoticed by senior members of the trust and even by the PMO, which has been quite hands-on in the construction

of the temple and management of the trust. Given this detail, and Nripendra Mishra’s proximity to the prime minister, it seems improbable that he didn’t have a tip-off, not even an inkling that something was amiss. On paper, Mishra is chairman of the construction committee, but political observers say his job title does not indicate his span of influence. There is now intense speculation on the role of treasurer Govind Giri and former trustee Anil Mishra. While Champat Rai and Anil Mishra have resigned their posts, the final decision on their future is expected when the trust convenes on Sunday, 5 July.

“Since the temple was under the direct supervision of the PMO and the RSS, even if Yogi had knowledge of wrongdoing, he couldn’t have done much earlier,” says Ram Dutt Tripathi, senior journalist and former BBC correspondent in Lucknow. “But now that the scandal is public knowledge, the PMO and RSS want Yogi to manage the mess.”

“The Gorakhpur math Yogi heads was in the vanguard of the Ram temple movement since 1949, but he was completely ignored when the Ram Mandir trust was set up. During the *pran pratishtha*, Yogi was simply marking his presence. Now he will settle scores,” says Tripathi.

Suman Gupta, editor of Ayodhya-based *Jan Morcha*, does not believe a cover-up is now possible. “Local resentment was already high over outsiders controlling the trust. As infrastructure developed and land prices rose, the locals again found themselves losing out to outsiders.”

Sceptics doubt if the full extent of the scandal will ever be known, the money trail established, and the big fish made to pay a price. Others speculate that the scandal gives the PMO just the excuse it needs to tighten its grip even more on the management of temple affairs. Why else, they ask, would Nripendra Mishra suggest the appointment of a ‘professional CEO’ to manage the day-to-day affairs of the trust? Isn’t he echoing his master’s voice?

In private conversations, RSS functionaries admit the scandal has shaken the faith of millions and dented the image of the Sangh. But asked if the BJP will pay a political price, they affect unconcern. The consensus seems to be: ‘People will forgive and forget’.

Sceptics doubt if the full extent of the scandal will ever be known—the money trail established and the big fish made to pay a price

How did donations running into crores get embezzled over such an extended period despite all the security?

What our liberals don’t get about Rahul Gandhi

While many others have chosen tactical compromise with majoritarianism, Rahul Gandhi has consistently and fearlessly challenged it

Ashok Swain

One of the most striking features of contemporary Indian politics is not merely the consolidation of Narendra Modi’s power and the Hindutva project, but the persistent inability of a significant section of India’s liberals and intellectuals to recognise who has consistently stood against it.

Even as the Modi government has steadily eroded democratic institutions, normalised majoritarian politics, weakened constitutional safeguards and undermined India’s secular foundations, many among the country’s self-proclaimed liberal intelligentsia continue to direct their sharpest criticism not at the architects of this transformation but at Rahul Gandhi.

This peculiar obsession says less about Rahul Gandhi and more about the intellectual and political contradictions of our liberal class.

For over a decade, Rahul Gandhi has been one of the very few national political leaders willing to challenge the ideological foundations of Hindutva. He has repeatedly spoken about constitutional values, minority rights, social justice, caste inequalities, institutional independence and democratic accountability. He has endured relentless media vilification, state harassment, legal persecution and personal attacks while continuing to articulate a political vision rooted in pluralism and constitutional democracy.

The Bharat Jodo Yatra and the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra were not merely political campaigns. They were perhaps the most sustained attempts by any Indian politician in recent decades to reconnect democratic politics with the concerns of ordinary citizens while directly confronting the politics of hate and polarisation.

Yet many liberals and intellectuals continue to portray

him as the principal obstacle to defeating Modi. Why?

The answer lies partly in history. Since the 1970s, being anti-Congress has become almost a cultural marker within large sections of India’s intellectual circles. Opposition to the Congress was once associated with resistance to the Emergency and centralised power. Over time, however, anti-Congressism evolved from a political position into an intellectual reflex. The Congress came to be viewed as the source of all political problems, while every regional challenger was celebrated as a potential saviour.

This attitude became even more pronounced because of the Gandhi family connection. Opposition to dynasty politics became a convenient shorthand through which many intellectuals dismissed Rahul Gandhi without engaging seriously with his political positions. Ironically, many of these same critics had little difficulty supporting regional parties dominated by powerful political families across India. Several senior BJP leaders too are from political dynasties. It was treated as an unforgivable sin only when it involved the Congress.

For years, the liberal commentariat enthusiastically promoted alternative opposition leaders as superior options to Rahul Gandhi. Nitish Kumar was repeatedly projected as the ideal anti-Modi leader despite his long record of political opportunism and his willingness to ally with the BJP whenever it suited his interests. Mamata Banerjee was celebrated as a national alternative despite her own accommodation of religious majoritarian impulses and her reluctance to build durable opposition unity. Arvind Kejriwal was hailed as the future of Indian politics even as his movement increasingly embraced selective nationalism and often collaborated with Hindutva forces.

None of them consistently



challenged the ideological core of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s project. None sought to build a nationwide democratic alternative based on constitutional values. None demonstrated sustained commitment to confronting majoritarianism. Yet many intellectuals have invested enormous energy in promoting them while dismissing Rahul Gandhi as politically irrelevant.

The record today speaks for itself. Nitish Kumar’s political credibility has largely evaporated after repeated shifts in allegiance. Arvind Kejriwal’s political project has suffered severe setbacks and remains geographically limited. Mamata Banerjee’s party was recently trounced by the BJP in West Bengal and has failed to emerge as a credible national challenger.

Meanwhile Rahul Gandhi has become the undisputed face of opposition politics at the national level. The Congress under his leadership significantly improved its parliamentary position in 2024, regained the status of the principal opposition party and re-established itself as the central pole around

which anti-BJP politics increasingly revolves. Yet instead of acknowledging this reality, many liberals continue searching for reasons to blame him.

Part of the explanation may lie in the abstract, they become noticeably uncomfortable when politics moves beyond procedural democracy toward questions of social and economic justice.

Rahul Gandhi’s emphasis on a caste census, wealth concentration, inequality, affirmative action and representation challenges entrenched structures of privilege. His politics increasingly combines constitutional democracy with demands for deeper social transformation. For many elite liberals, this agenda is far less comfortable than discussions about institutional reform or economic growth.

Indeed, a considerable section of India’s liberal establishment has long been more committed to market-driven growth than to redistribution, poverty reduction or structural equality. They readily criticise Hindutva’s excesses but remain uneasy about politics that seeks to alter existing hierarchies of caste and class. Rahul Gandhi’s recent focus on social justice has therefore created a new source of tension between him and sections of the liberal intelligentsia.

Another reason is the limited understanding of electoral politics among contemporary commentators. Most intellectuals have never organised a political campaign, built a party structure, mobilised voters or contested an election. Their understanding of politics is often mediated through media narratives and urban conversations. They tend to view elections as the sole measure of political success while ignoring the broader struggle over ideas, institutions and democratic norms.

Rahul Gandhi’s focus on social justice, inequality, affirmative action and representation dares entrenched privilege

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China steals another march on India

India has been caught flat-footed as Bangladesh pursues a deeper partnership with China, embracing strategic investments in its economy

Faisal Mahmud/Dhaka & Sourabh Sen/Kolkata

India's policy towards Bangladesh remains mired in pushing back supposed illegal migrants or raising the bogey of Jamaat consolidation along the border—'issues' highlighted ahead of the recently concluded elections in West Bengal. Meanwhile, Bangladesh's new government has wasted no time in signalling where it sees the country's economic future. Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's recent visit to Beijing, his first official visit, saw a raft of agreements on investment, technology and infrastructure.

There was another more consequential shift. The visit revived three projects that have been on Bangladesh's development agenda for years—the China-backed economic zone at Mongla Port, the long-delayed Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project and the proposed China-Myanmar-Bangladesh Economic Corridor. Together, they reveal an intent to make economic development the pivot of its foreign policy and statecraft.

For decades, Bangladesh's external engagements were shaped primarily by aid, trade preferences and development partnerships. Today, the country's ambitions are markedly different. Having crossed the threshold into lower-middle-income status and preparing to graduate from the UN's Least Developed Country category in 2029, Dhaka is increasingly seeking foreign relationships that will bring investments into the country—in its industry, infrastructure and towards greater integration with Asian supply chains.

That objective framed Rahman's discussions with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang. The two governments elevated bilateral ties to what Beijing described as a 'China-Bangladesh community with a shared future'. Both governments reaffirmed cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative and committed to accelerate projects that Bangladesh considers central to its next phase of economic development.

Foremost among these is Mongla, Bangladesh's second-largest seaport, long overshadowed

by Chattogram the country's busiest port, despite occupying a strategic position in the southwest. Considerable investments over the past decade have improved navigability, expanded cargo-handling capacity and strengthened road and rail connections through the Padma bridge and associated transport networks. Yet it has not become a major industrial hub.

The government's solution is to develop an export-oriented economic zone adjacent to the port with Chinese participation, turning Mongla into a manufacturing and logistics cluster rather than merely a maritime gateway.

Officials expect this move to attract factories serving regional and international markets while encouraging investment in warehousing, transport, shipbuilding and supporting industries. This reflects a broader shift in Bangladesh's industrial policy. Instead of viewing infrastructure as an end in itself, the government increasingly sees ports, highways and railways as platforms for industrial ecosystems capable of generating employment, expanding exports and raising productivity.

That also explains the renewed urgency surrounding the Teesta River Project. For over a decade, policymakers have discussed interventions along Bangladesh's fourth-largest river. The proposals extend far beyond dredging and embankment construction.

The project seeks to reshape the economic geography of northern Bangladesh through river restoration, flood protection, irrigation modernisation, urban development and land reclamation. Officials argue that controlling seasonal flooding, while improving water availability during the dry season, could significantly enhance agricultural productivity across multiple districts.

Modernising major river systems is, therefore, seen not simply as environmental management but as an investment in productivity and long-term growth. Rahman's announcement following his return from Beijing that the Teesta project would proceed "without delay" underscored the

administration's determination to move from planning to implementation.

The third pillar of the visit was connectivity. Bangladesh and China reaffirmed their commitment to the China-Myanmar-Bangladesh Economic Corridor, an initiative intended to strengthen transport and commercial links across the eastern Bay of Bengal.

The proposal complements Bangladesh's longstanding ambition to position itself as a logistical bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Improved road, rail and maritime connectivity would lower transport costs, shorten delivery times and enable Bangladeshi manufacturers to participate more deeply in regional production networks. That objective has become increasingly important as Bangladesh seeks to diversify beyond ready-made garments even as apparel remains the country's dominant export sector.

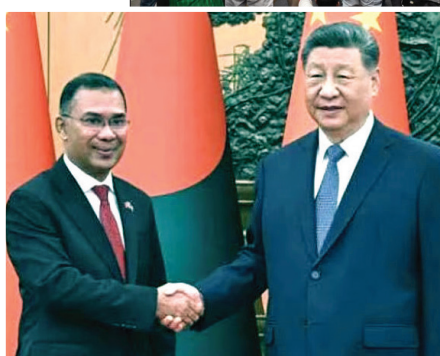
The message from Dhaka is clear and unambiguous—China has emerged as one of the few partners capable of providing all three simultaneously.

From India's perspective, the upgrade of Mongla Port—though not im-

Photo: Getty Images



Protests in Bangladesh against India's attempts to push 'illegal migrants' across the border; (left); Tarique Rahman with Xi Jinping in China



mediately impacting the commercial interests of the Kolkata and Haldia ports—will shift regional trade alignments and present strategic and security concerns. While it will introduce direct maritime competition in the Bay of Bengal, the core importance of the Syama Prasad Mookerjee Port (Kolkata and Haldia) is tied to serving India's domestic hinterland in the east, including the northeast and landlocked neighbours like Nepal and Bhutan.

While Nepal actively utilises its northern passes with China at Rasuwagadhi-Gyirong and Tatopani-Zhangmu as secondary lifelines, Bhutan maintains a strict policy of zero direct land connectivity with China. However, 'grey zone' encroachments at Doklam in

Western Bhutan in 2017 and satellite imagery reveal Chinese villages being constructed and 'border guardians' placed inside what Bhutan reckons as its own territory. Experts point out that it is a matter of time before such 'encroachments' get upgraded to all-weather roads connecting Nepal and Bhutan to China from the north, undermining India's regional advantage.

Indian intelligence and defence experts are concerned that an upgraded Mongla—located 188 km from Kolkata and only 80 km from the Indian border—will be too close for comfort.

Although senior officials in India's ministry of external affairs dismiss the Teesta River Project as non-viable due to lack of adequate water, security concerns similar to those over China's involvement in Mongla port remains.

Tarique Rahman's maiden foreign visit to China (instead of the customary first visit to India under earlier regimes) and the transfer of key infrastructure projects to China signals Bangladesh's broader policy

shift to reroute regional transit dependency away from Indian networks. The shift appears quite rational in light of the anti-Bangladesh rhetoric of BJP leaders in the run-up to the West Bengal elections and their preoccupation with the rise of radicalism along the border districts.

At the same time, the decision of the US department of war to rename the US Indo-Pacific Command back to its legacy title, US Pacific Command, dropping the 'Indo' prefix, leaves no room for doubt on who is filling the strategic vacuum. "There is no doubt that China now has a stronger footprint in the Bay of Bengal region. While Bangladesh has expressed its willingness to work closely with India, there is no reason why it won't deepen its engagement with China," says Bangladesh watcher Sreeradha Datta, lamenting the demise of India-fronted regional initiatives like BIMSTEC. ■

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Tarique Rahman's visit to China was a clear signal that Bangladesh is now pivoting away from India. Inevitable?

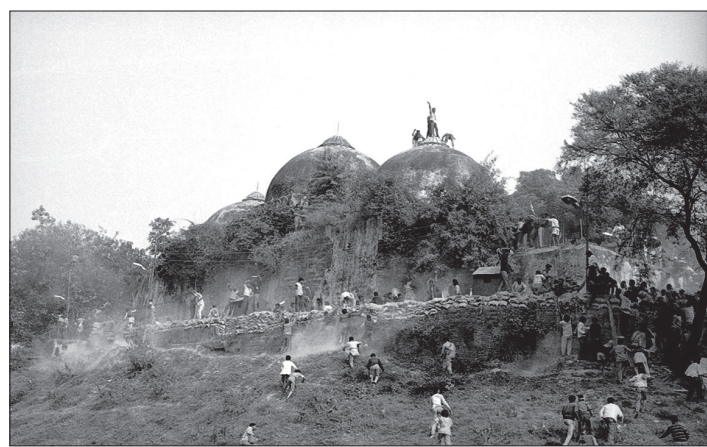
When history collides with Hindutva mythology

Academic and author Subhoranjan Dasgupta takes a detour from his reading of Romila Thapar's recently published memoir to explain why the grande dame of ancient Indian history is so reviled by the Hindutva establishment

Babri Masjid fell in 1992. For the BJP, its ideological mentor the RSS and its militant affiliate Vishva Hindu Parishad, which spearheaded the movement for Ram Janmabhoomi, this was a moment of civilisational triumph. For other Indians, still an overwhelming majority composed overwhelmingly of Hindus, proud of their Constitution's devotion to pluralism, it was a horrific reminder that the ghosts of Partition had not been exorcised, that religious bigotry was alive and kicking in the country.

The first rumblings of discontent with academic retellings of ancient and early medieval Indian history can be traced to the first non-Congress, Janata Party government that was voted to power in 1977, the election that followed the Emergency. The BJP, in its earlier avatar as Bharatiya Jana Sangh, was an influential partner in this government and it used its leverage to voice its impatience with the kind of history that had been disseminated and taught till then. Morarji Desai, then prime minister, was more than just sympathetic to the clamour; he 'asked that the history textbooks prescribed by the NCERT be banned, a stunning surprise.' (*Just Being: A Memoir*, Seagull Books, p.20).

The ensuing conflict, an outcome of the radical change in policy, soon degenerated into virulent, personal



Karsevaks atop the Babri Masjid shortly before it was demolished on 6 December 1992

attacks on old-vanguard historians like Romila Thapar. Affluent NRIs, no doubt egged on by their mentors in Delhi, sneeringly remarked 'I [Romila Thapar] was incompetent as a historian, inept as a scholar, and should never have been appointed to the position I held.' (p.221).

The Janata Party experiment unravelled quickly, which meant that the project to rewrite Indian history, in order to align it with the Hindutva project, had to wait till the first NDA government came to power in 1998 under its disarmingly amiable prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee.

On the surface, Vajpayee affected a moderate outlook with assertions like "India was secular, is secular, and will be secular," but he did nothing to curb his rampaging HRD minister Murali Manohar Joshi, who revived the history project and went after the likes of Irfan Habib, Sarvepalli Gopal and his bête noire, Romila Thapar.

In her own words, "Death threats that started in the 1980s were more often made at midnight over the phone" (p.222). They 'regarded me

as a threat that had to be silenced.' (p.481).

Why was Thapar such a prime target, I've often wondered. Two reasons come to mind. Thapar's area of interest was ancient and early India or the so-called Hindu and pre-Muslim India, which our majoritarian Hindutvavadis consider their stomping ground. And this gadfly impertinently questioned the glory and grandeur, the peace and harmony that reigned before the Muslim invaders arrived.

Indeed Romila Thapar and Richard Eaton, the celebrated American historian, had with their scholarship demolished this myth of Hindu India. While Thapar exposed (perhaps most eloquently in her 2020 book of essays *Voices of Dissent*) the bitter disputes between the Brahmanas and Shramanas, which even led to bloodshed and carnage, Eaton narrated the furious battles waged by Hindu kings against one another, who not only plundered the victims' kingdoms but also destroyed their temples and deities (*Temple Desecration and Muslim States in Medieval India*, 2004).

So, the plunder of Hindu temples, packaged in the Hindutva retelling as their 'desecration', began on our Sanatani soil much before Mahmud of Ghazni first stormed the Somnath temple in CE 1026. The champions of Hindutva, who were badmouthing Thapar, could have even turned to Patanjali, the grammarian they so revere, whom Thapar also cites (in his 2nd century BCE opus *Mahabhasya*), as having described the relationship between the Brahmanas and Shramanas as one between 'the snake and the mongoose.'

Thapar also likely riles the champions of Hindutva because she

wrote the history textbooks for school students. In her own words: 'I was viewed by Hindutva as an unacceptable historian not so much because of my academic books but mainly because of the textbooks that I wrote for middle schools. Textbooks are pivotal to controlling the popular interpretation of history or any body of knowledge.' (p.218-219).

It's instructive to bear in mind the foundational myths of Hindutva history. We are led to believe that India's pre-Muslim 'sanatani' past was a period of peace and social harmony. To hold on to this view, it elides the inhuman caste oppression of this time. To see it as 'an era of peace' is to ignore that great saga of forever wars—the Mahabharata, it is to ignore the annexationist practice of the 'ashwamedha yagna' that fuelled nonstop wars among Hindu kingdoms in this period.

The other myth about this sanatani Hindu civilisation are egregious overstatements about the strides it made in the arts and sciences, including the discovery of plastic surgery and airplanes. This civilisation was supposedly the greatest fountainhead of knowledge, a paradise looted and plundered by Muslim invaders, whose rule over these lands for five centuries constitute the Dark Ages of Indian history. In this reckoning of history, not a single Muslim monarch, not even Akbar, did anything of note or lasting value. They were all 'desecrators' and are, therefore, best erased from our history textbooks.

On the years of the British Raj, this fictionalised history is ambivalent and often contradictory because the people who held this worldview were absent in the freedom struggle. In fact, they collaborated with the British at times, as the eminent historian Sumit Sarkar has shown in his meticulously researched work *Towards Freedom*, which the NDA government had suppressed but was later published (Part 1 in 2007, Part 2 in 2009) by OUP.

No wonder Romila Thapar infuriates the Hindutva hordes and their preferred mythologists masquerading as historians. They pick on her because she challenges the Hindutvavadis on their own

stomping ground. Her very first book, *Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (1961) uses epigraphic and archaeological sources to show that the Mauryan state was secular, based on political pragmatism rather than religious piety. She debunks the myth of a Hindu golden period. Indeed, this denunciation runs like a refrain in her writings and can be heard in the same no-nonsense register in *Just Being*. Sample these: 'If Hindutva is Hindutva, then it had demonstrated that it was as violent and intolerant as any other religion' (p.383); 'religious nationalism plays havoc with history' (Page 400); 'Hindutva is not a religion and it is not Hinduism. I label Hindutva as 'Syndicated Hindutva'' (p.212) ...

She maintains that we have kept our own history—in our epics and discourses, edicts and monuments, and in excellent chronological narratives like Kalhana's 12th century CE classic *Rajatarangini*. In other words, her allegedly 'anti-Hindu', 'Eurocentric', 'Marxist' reading of history does not regurgitate the findings of colonial historians, as the Sanatanis do, in peddling the pernicious, colonial thesis of endless wars between Hindus and Muslims.

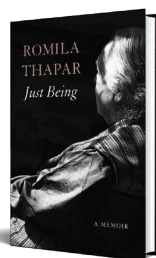
In *Somanatha* (2004) too, she nudges us to question this polarising Hindu-Muslim narrative: was Mahmud of Ghazni a religious bigot or a merciless plunderer, who did not hesitate to ravage the mosque at Kandahar after his assault on Somnath? Those who have issued death sentences on her, have still not answered this question.

Firmly opposed to Hindutva's compartmentalisation of culture and civilisation, Thapar argues that 'civilisation is not a closed entity' but rather 'a porous condition, shaped by the interface of multiple cultures.' (p.572)

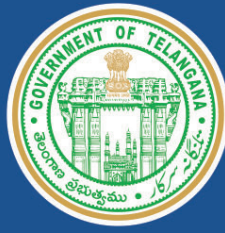
Her redemptive vision as a historian brings to mind these lines from her favourite poet T.S. Eliot in his 1920 poem 'Gerontion':

'After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now/ History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors/ And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions./ Guides us by vanities.' ■

Photo: Getty Images



Hindutva mythologists masquerading as historians pick on Romila Thapar because she defies them on their own stomping ground



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NATION


WILL THE MONSOON FAIL THE FARMER?
Why the rain deficit in June cannot be made good in July



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HOME & ABROAD

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In BJP-ruled Bengal, the whole community is on tenterhooks



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NATION

SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN THE LAND OF RAM
The embezzlement has blown the lid off an even more sordid saga



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Prove again that you belong

With its recent 'clarification' on the validity of the passport, has the government issued yet another notice to Indian citizens? **Herjinder** weighs in

When officials of the ministry of external affairs (MEA) recently clarified that an Indian passport is 'primarily a travel document' and not conclusive proof of citizenship, they set the cat among the pigeons.

Less than nine per cent Indians hold a valid passport, according to the MEA, but that still means 12-13 crore Indians. For all these millions and many more aspirants, the Indian passport represents the Republic's highest seal of trust. It carries the national emblem, permits international travel and is accepted by governments across the world as proof of Indian nationality. If even this document cannot establish citizenship, the question is: what can?

The controversy erupted after the MEA 'clarified' during a media briefing on Passport Seva Divas (24 June) that, legally speaking, the Indian passport does not create citizenship, that citizenship is governed by the Citizenship Act, 1955, while passports are issued under the Passports Act, 1967. The clarification came when a reporter from *The Hindu* asked if an Indian citizen could use their valid passport as a document to legally challenge their exclusion from the voter rolls.

In a piece she wrote for *The Indian Express*, former foreign secretary Nirupama Menon Rao tried to introduce nuance into the debate. 'For most Indians, the passport is the most authoritative document the Republic issues. It bears the name of the Republic of India, carries the holder's identity, and is accepted around the world because foreign governments trust that India has verified the bearer's nationality before issuing it,' she writes.

But, she adds, 'a passport does not create citizenship. Nor is it the legal instrument that finally determines citizenship if that status is challenged before a court.' The courts will perhaps in due course affirm this position, but the reason



If even a passport cannot establish citizenship, what can?

why this 'clarification' has only aggravated citizen anxiety is that in recent times a series of other documents—like Aadhaar or voter I-card or PAN—that citizens used as proof of identity have been declared invalid for these purposes.

Over the past decade, India has witnessed a series of citizenship-related exercises and debates centred on the National Population Register (NPR) or the National Register of Citizens (NRC) or the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and more recently the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. Each exercise, each database may have distinct legal foundations, but what seems to lie at the heart of these exercises is a drive to re-certify Indians as Indians. There's great unease about the citizenship question—who is in and who is out; who is or isn't eligible for welfare; who is or isn't a voter and other such questions of belonging that hitherto weren't questions. Their citizenship must be

The experience of Assam's NRC process demonstrated how easily documentation gaps can place even long-time residents under suspicion

repeatedly verified and defended. It doesn't seem to matter that many do not possess the documents that will serve as valid proof of eligibility. And the list of acceptable documents is shrinking. Voter identity cards are issued only to eligible citizens, but have repeatedly been described as insufficient proof of citizenship. Aadhaar, which was seeded into all databases, even in violation of a Supreme Court order, and then used as the default proof of identity and address for banking, welfare and digital services, is invalid as proof of nationality. And now, we're told, that the passport isn't proof either.

Senior Congress leader and former external affairs minister Salman Khurshid summed up the paradox succinctly: "The Passports Act does not say that it is a proof of your citizenship, but it does say that if you are not a citizen, you won't get a passport."

Lawyer and activist Ayushman Pandey concurs with Khurshid, adding that delinking passports

from citizenship creates both legal contradictions and practical problems. The Passports Act explicitly limits passports to Indian citizens, barring exceptional circumstances. The application process involves extensive documentation and police verification. Globally, passports are the principal documents through which states certify nationality.

The case of veteran journalist R. Rajagopal, a former editor of *The Telegraph*, a Kolkata-based news daily, found he'd been struck off the voter rolls in West Bengal during the SIR exercise. He writes in a social media post, later reproduced by other digital media outlets, that the deletion affected police verification during the renewal of his passport, delaying the process by months and preventing him from travelling abroad to attend his daughter's wedding.

Rajagopal writes: 'Like nearly 27 lakh other residents of West Bengal, I was excluded on account of what were described as 'logical discrepancies'. No reason was furnished even after I submitted my matriculation certificate, and my appeal is now pending before one of the tribunals constituted pursuant to the Supreme Court's directions. As a consequence, I was unable to vote in the recent election.'

'More distressing has been the fate of my passport renewal application. Although I completed the biometric formalities on March 19, 2026, police verification has not been cleared because my name no longer appears on the electoral roll. Despite submitting several alternative documents, I have been informed that they are insufficient. In fact, today (June 27, 2026) is the 100th day since my biometrics for passport renewal were taken. I was formally informed last week by the passport-issuing authority that Kolkata Police sent an adverse report, citing the deletion of my name from the voters' list. I have been asked to appear before the

Regional Passport Office in Calcutta 'immediately' but when I sought an appointment, without which it is difficult to gain entry, the date granted is July 17, 2026.'

What transformed Rajagopal's ordeal into a larger public debate is the realisation that if a senior journalist with decades of public visibility could be victimised in this manner, what chance did an ordinary citizen have against a vindictive state and an indifferent bureaucracy?

The burden to produce legacy documents, ancestral records and other paperwork is not evenly distributed. Many Indians, especially the elderly, rural communities, migrant populations and economically vulnerable groups possess incomplete or sketchy documentation. Registration of birth became near-universal quite recently. Spelling variations, missing records, change in address and lost documents are common realities.

The experience of Assam's NRC process demonstrated how easily documentation gaps can place even long-time residents under suspicion.

The political rhetoric of illegal immigrants ('ghuspaithiye') has sharpened these anxieties. Minorities, particularly Muslims, understandably fear that the demand for documents may disproportionately affect them.

The argument that citizenship derives from the Citizenship Act rather than the passport may even be technically correct and legally sound, but what is the effect on citizens of this broad brush-stroke question mark on their status? Is governance about underlining the precise legal nuance or giving the public a sense of belonging?

As the debate rages, the question is less the validity of passports or other documents and more the relationship between citizens and the state. Should the state and its agencies err on the side of inclusion or make its 1.47-billion-strong citizenry jump through hoops to establish that they belong here. ■

When other faiths are in the crosshairs

A.J. Philip reflects on the new tendency to police faith and to use the FCRA as an instrument of coercion

Sabri Ram Janmabhoomi Teertha Kshetra occupies a unique place in India's public life. Constituted by the Union government on 5 February 2020, following the Supreme Court verdict on the Ayodhya dispute, it was entrusted with constructing and managing the Ram temple, arguably the most politically significant religious project in independent India.

On 18 October 2023, the Trust was granted permission under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act to receive overseas donations through the designated State Bank of India branch on Parliament Street in New Delhi.

Every organisation registered under the FCRA—whether based in Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu or Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh—must receive foreign contributions through this single branch. The arrangement leaves practically no room for secrecy. Every remittance is electronically recorded and is instantly accessible to the authorities.

The Trust now finds itself facing

an uncomfortable situation. A Special Investigation Team has been given additional time to investigate the alleged theft of donations, including gold and silver offerings made by devotees. Two members of the Trust—general secretary Champat Rai and trustee Anil Mishra—have resigned, while eight employees have been arrested.

There are also reports that Rai had initially set out to file a police complaint but turned back after receiving a telephone call, and that for days the effort was to project that all was well. Investigative agencies such as the CBI and the Enforcement Directorate are now reportedly being considered to probe suspected violations of the FCRA.

If that happens, the implications will extend well beyond Ayodhya.

During the last Budget session of Parliament, the government introduced amendments to the FCRA that would empower designated authorities to attach and

confiscate the properties of organisations found violating the Act. Significantly, the proposal does not prescribe any minimum threshold for the alleged violation.

More troubling is the process. A designated authority, who may be as junior as a district magistrate, could order confiscation and auction of a property, with the proceeds going to the consolidated fund of the Government of India. There is no requirement for prior judicial adjudication.

No one seriously believes that the Ram temple will ever be auctioned. Nor should anyone wish for such an outcome. The temple stands on the faith and contributions of millions of devotees, who had reportedly donated more than Rs 3,500 crore even before the Trust received FCRA clearance.

Yet laws are drafted for all institutions, not merely for those against whom they are presently intended. A power conferred today upon the executive may be exercised tomorrow under very different political circumstances. For instance, FCRA was first enacted

during the Emergency in 1976. Recognising perhaps the political sensitivity of the issue, this time the government did not press the proposed amendments in Parliament after widespread criticism from Opposition parties.

Instead, it has achieved many of the same objectives through subordinate legislation. Fresh rules issued under earlier amendments have now come into force without parliamentary debate.

These rules considerably widen the net of liability. Earlier, responsibility for compliance rested primarily with the chief executive or principal office-bearer of an organisation. Now, chairpersons and every member of the governing board can also be held personally accountable. Serving on the board of a charitable institution has thus become a legally hazar-

Freedom of religion, association and expression will not survive if citizens can't serve, heal and worship without fear



Police escort some of the accused in the Ram Mandir donation embezzlement case

dous responsibility.

The consequences are already being felt.

The Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), one of India's oldest and most respected humanitarian organisations, maintained relief warehouses across the country for decades. Whether the emergency was a flood in Bihar, an earthquake in Gujarat or a cyclone on the eastern coast, its volunteers could move essential supplies within hours.

Today, even emergency humanitarian work risks delay due to procedural requirements. To undertake relief work in a state, the organisation may first have to complete regulatory formalities if prior approval has not been obtained. Imagine the consequences of such a dispensation in a

natural disaster.

The cumulative impact of successive FCRA amendments has been severe. Thousands employed by voluntary organisations, not necessarily Christian or Muslim, have lost their jobs, while many institutions that supplemented the government's welfare efforts now struggle to survive.

The purview of rules extends beyond financial accountability to the personal lives of those associated with such organisations. Even books or articles written by board members may have to be disclosed to the authorities. Financial regulation is one thing, monitoring intellectual activity quite another.

►► Continued on page 2

What's a valid passport to Indian citizenship?

A.J. Philip writes an open letter to the Union external affairs minister after an official in his ministry said the passport was no more than a travel document

Dear Dr S. Jaishankar,

I obtained my first passport in 1979, soon after the Passport Office in Bhopal was inaugurated by one of your predecessors, Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It was my assignment to report the inauguration for *The Hitavada*, whose office happened to be in the same building.

Though it was an official function, Vajpayee delivered a remarkably humorous speech. I do not know whether my report fully captured the flavour of the occasion.

Soon afterwards, I obtained my passport. All the entries were handwritten. On the front page was a prominent stamp bearing the words 'National Status'. Beneath it, in much larger letters, appeared the words: 'Citizen of India'.

I was delighted, believing I'd obtained the most authoritative document certifying my status as an Indian citizen, entitled to all the rights and privileges that citizenship entails.

I still possess all my old passports and each one records my nationality simply as 'Indian'.

So I was deeply shocked when a spokesperson of your ministry recently said that a passport is no proof of citizenship, that it is just a document intended to facilitate international travel. This clarification was issued on Passport Seva Divas—a day whose existence, I confess, I hardly know until then.

Two years ago, I visited Sri Lanka, where Indian citizens are entitled to obtain a visa on arrival. If your ministry now maintains that a passport is no proof of nationality, how is an Indian traveller supposed to establish his nationality in this situation?

Your predecessor as foreign secretary, Nirupama Rao, wrote a piece trying to clear the confusion. Rao, who now dabbles in singing and writing poetry, argued that no immigration officer anywhere in the world will question the authenticity of an Indian's nationality as stated in his

passport. She may have been a distinguished ambassador, but that does not mean she can predict how every emigration officer's mind works.

I was once stopped by an immigration officer in Los Angeles. I had an invitation from Star TV. He asked me whether I'd report from America. I said yes. In that case, I should've had a work visa, he said. I was finally allowed to proceed after about 45 minutes, and only after I told a senior officer that I'd been invited to interview stars from shows like *Baywatch*, *The X-Files* and *The Simpsons*, and that I'd return in a fortnight as soon as the work was done.

During those 45 minutes, I even visualised catching a return flight from LA. Like the Bangladeshi official whom your government detained for about two hours at Delhi airport, I'm not a handsome person like you. If an immigration officer in, say, North Macedonia or São Tomé and Príncipe doesn't like my face and doesn't want me to enter his country, he could ask: "What's your nationality?"

When I say I'm Indian and show my passport, and if perchance he asks ChatGPT and learns what your ministry said on Passport Divas, what then? What

can I do in such a situation, except return without the tamarind toffee my grandnephew Nehemiah loves so much?

Let me ask you this: what proof would you show in a foreign country if asked about your identity? You are a minister and hold a diplomatic passport. Is your passport weightier than my ordinary passport when it comes to proving nationality?

In many countries, citizens are issued identity cards with a unique number. They only need to quote that number to prove their citizenship.

You'll remember the fanfare with which the Manmohan Singh government had introduced Aadhaar. It was to be a single document that served all purposes of identity within the country. Since it involved collecting biometric data, I was initially opposed to it. The Supreme Court too had reservations.

Today, when almost everyone has it, it is nothing more than a proof of address. You can use it to enter an airport or book a train ticket, but it is not proof of nationality. Likewise a PAN card merely proves you are an income-tax payer; it doesn't establish your nationality. I thought the voter ID served that purpose, until the Election Commission of India came up with its own rules.

In West Bengal, Bihar and Assam, even those who had these IDs and had voted in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections were still disenfranchised if they belonged to certain identifiable communities. The Election Commission had the temerity to ask Prof. Amartya Sen, a Nobel laureate, to prove his eligibility to vote in the recent assembly elections.

I don't know how I will prove my nationality. One proof I have is my old Bible in which my mother recorded the date and time of birth of all her five children. Fortunately, my father was in the Army, and I have his discharge certificate signed by a British officer. But neither a Bible nor a British signature is acceptable to you.

This is not my problem alone. Prabhu Chawla, a senior journalist known for his right-leaning views, writes: 'So, am I an Indian citizen? I wield an Aadhaar etched with biometrics, a voter ID baptised in e-volets, a PAN card chained to every tax I've ever paid. Yet, because I was born beyond today's borders, in a place now [known] as Pakistan, and because my parents' papers have perished with time, the courts declare I am no one—nameless, nationless, until I

summon proof from the shadows.'

You are a diplomat and a minister. You are expected to find solutions, not create problems. Can't you clarify that passports will be considered proof of nationality unless proven to be fake or fraudulently obtained?

No document is valid if it's obtained fraudulently. Then why devalue the passport? It's your responsibility to ensure that Indian passports are issued to only genuine Indian citizens; you cannot shy away from this responsibility.

I have reason to believe that your statement about passports and nationality is deliberate. Not many people would have noticed one surreptitious change the Modi government has introduced in both the

Earlier, a passport showed both the permanent address and the present address of the holder, as well as the full address of the father/guardian and details of omitted passports. Now these details are omitted. The official argument is that such information is already with the immigration authorities and that addresses may change during the validity of a passport. But this is a cover-up. The real intent was to strip the passport of its status as proof of identity.

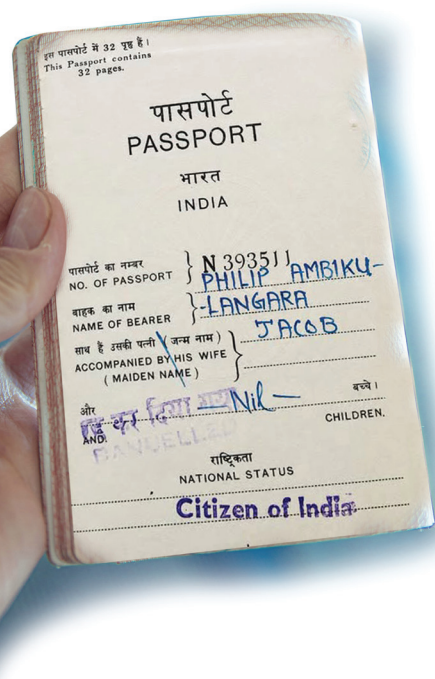
I recall another scheme your ministry tried to impose: issuing orange passports to people requiring Emigration Clearance Certificates for travel abroad. Today I checked my first passport. When renewed in Patna in 1984, the Superintendent had stamped 'emigration check required'—even though I was a postgraduate and exempt from such checks. Since I could not use the passport, I did not have to get any emigration clearance.

To justify the orange passport for the poor, you made the farcical argument that it would raise their aspirations—that those with orange passports would strive to get blue ones by studying and earning degrees. We would have been the only country in the world to issue passports in two different colours to its citizens—not counting the maroon diplomatic passports.

Let me conclude with a humble request. Please issue a clarification that a passport will ordinarily be accepted as proof of Indian citizenship. Exceptions are exceptions and can be dealt with separately. I hope you'll do the needful.

Yours etc.
A.J. Philip

This is an abridged version of the open letter that originally appeared in Indian Currents



“You hold a diplomatic passport. Is your passport weightier when it comes to proving nationality?”

When other faiths are in the crosshairs

Continued from page 1

A familiar political narrative continues to suggest that Christian organisations receive vast sums from abroad for religious conversion. Yet the architecture of the FCRA itself contradicts that claim. Every foreign contribution passes through one designated bank branch, where the authorities can monitor receipts in real time. If illegal funding exists, it can be identified almost instantly.

Moreover, the allegation that Indians can be induced to change their faith merely through foreign money diminishes the dignity of Indian citizens.

The record of Christian voluntary organisations also deserves acknowledgement. For generations, they have established schools, hospitals, leprosariums, orphanages and community development programmes, often in regions where the State itself had little presence. William Carey regarded education as central to social reform. St. Stephen pioneered modern healthcare in Delhi. Countless mission schools educated first-generation learners who might otherwise never have entered a classroom.

This writer has spent nearly 25 years with a Christian voluntary organisation, either as its head or chief disadvantaged. Lakhs of disadvantaged students completed their education through schools and learning centres supported by this organisation. Many were the first in their families to become literate. None embraced Christianity because of the education they received.

Equally instructive is the case of the Missionaries of Charity founded by Saint Teresa of Kolkata,

popularly known as Mother Teresa. In 2018, Sister Concilia and two associates in Jharkhand were arrested amid allegations of child trafficking. The arrests generated sensational headlines and prime time television debates. The congregation's childcare work suffered irreparable damage.

Last month, after years of legal proceedings, the elderly nun was acquitted, barely registered in the national media.

Across several states, attacks on Christian prayer meetings and educational institutions have become common. Small groups of self-appointed vigilantes disrupt worship, intimidate congregations and level allegations of conversion with little apparent fear of legal consequences. Victims often complain that police attention is directed more towards them than towards the perpetrators.

The recent cancellation of the licence of St. Paul School in Patela in Rajasthan's Dungarpur district, forcing students to seek admission elsewhere, adds to that sense of insecurity. Ironically, this comes at a time when several states have shut thousands of government schools, leaving poor children with fewer educational opportunities.

For Christians, worship is both personal and communal. Prayer in homes has always been an accepted expression of faith. Yet in some parts of India, even a small prayer gathering risks attracting allegations of unlawful conversion.

No democracy can flourish if ordinary acts of worship become objects of suspicion.

The State unquestionably has the authority to regulate foreign funding. Transparency is essential, and every institution—religious or secular—must comply. But laws must be even-handed, proportionate and accompanied with procedural safeguards that protect citizens against arbitrary executive action.

Our Constitution promises freedom of religion, association and expression. Those freedoms cannot survive simply because they are printed in the text. They survive only when citizens can educate, heal, serve and worship without constantly looking over their shoulders. ■

Silencing NGOs by other means

Defeating the FCRA bill in Parliament did not deter the government, writes **Aakar Patel**

What cannot be passed in Parliament as law can be effected through changes in the rules. The effect on the ground is often the same and the objective is achieved. This is not how democratic nations ought to function, but there is perhaps a reason why India is now, so many years after 1947, classified as 'partly free' rather than a full democracy.

In March this year, the Bill to attack, yet again, non-government organisations (NGOs). This is a sector to which, it must be clarified at the outset, the RSS does not belong because it is not a registered entity and does not, therefore, legally exist as one.

The Bill could not pass after the Opposition did what it should do more often: oppose. The prime minister, with his 240 MPs, took his Bill and went home. He then reintroduced much of its essence through changes to the rules under the existing law, something that does not require parliamentary sanction.

Exactly like the introduction of the Special Intensive Register, which did through rules what the National Register of Citizens (NRC) could not achieve through legislation.

The current attack on NGOs continues the effort to shut the sector down. It is aimed at organisations receiving foreign funding, with the familiar tropes of national security, the 'foreign hand', and similar others once again being invoked. At the outset, it must also be clarified that PM CARES too is not covered here because it is neither a government entity—and therefore falls outside the purview of the RTI Act—nor is it an NGO, and therefore cannot be held to the same standards. It is a mythical creature.

The new restrictions introduce a number of rules into NGO functioning. NGOs can conduct only those activities listed in a government-prescribed schedule. The government will also have greater control over where an

NGO can operate. An NGO's 'chief functionary' is defined not merely as its chief executive but also its trustees and office-bearers, while foreign nationals are barred from serving in those roles.

NGOs must also declare their social media accounts and are prohibited from publishing material the government considers political. Why are these rules not applied to the rest of the private sector, which is, after all, what 'non-government' means? Corporates are free to bring in as much foreign investment as they wish and are applauded for doing so. They can hire foreign CEOs, while Indian CEOs leading companies abroad are celebrated as national successes.

There are other obvious hypocrisies. In January 2013, a public interest litigation was filed in Delhi High Court alleging that both the BJP and the Congress had received donations from Vedanta/Sterlite in violation of the FCRA. On 28 March 2014, the court held that both parties had violated the Act and, in May that year, directed the Modi government and the Election Commission to take action against them.

By October 2015, however, the Modi government had found a way around the problem. It amended the law to define any company registered in India, irrespective of its ownership, as an Indian company. In effect, 'foreign' was redefined as 'Indian'. That amounted, critics argued, to a fraud on the Indian people, but because both major parties stood to benefit, the change passed without meaningful resistance.

For the rest of us, the rules are different. In 2020, the government introduced another set of restrictions. First, the roughly 23,000 NGOs licensed to receive foreign contributions were required to receive all such funds through a single branch of the State Bank of India at Sansad Marg in New Delhi. Since only 1,488 of those NGOs were registered in Delhi, the rest had to travel to the capital simply to



Lawmakers protest against the FCRA Bill, 2026

Photo: IANS

open an account. The branch, in turn, would report to the home ministry the details of every remittance, including its source and mode of receipt.

The second change reduced the amount NGOs could spend on administrative expenses from 50 per cent to 20 per cent of the foreign funds they received. Salaries, travel expenses, the cost of hiring personnel, electricity and postal charges, telephone bills, water and courier charges, office repairs, stationery and printing, transport, accounting

and fund administration, vehicle maintenance, report writing, legal and professional fees, and rent were all classified as administrative expenses.

No more than 20 per cent of foreign funding could be spent on these essentials, even though no comparable restriction applies to any other sector in India. This disproportionately affected organisations engaged in research, advocacy and public policy work, which depend heavily on professionals such as lawyers, academics and researchers rather than brick-and-mortar projects like schools or hospitals.

Third, the law prohibited NGOs from transferring foreign funds to other NGOs, even when both organisations were fully FCRA-compliant. This struck at the way the sector functions. NGOs do not generally compete with one another in the way private companies do; they work through networks and partnerships. The change weakened those alliances, preventing larger organisations from supporting smaller grassroots groups that often lack the expertise or resources to raise funds independently.

And now come yet more rules in 2026, all of it accompanied by the astonishing slogan of 'minimum government, maximum governance'. ■

The latest attack on NGOs is like the SIR, which effected through rules what the NRC couldn't through legislation

What if the monsoon fails the farmer again

While monsoon patterns change, Indian farming is still stuck in yesterday's assumptions, writes **Jaideep Hardikar**

For Nitin Khadse, a five-acre farmer and social activist in the cotton district of Yavatmal, the first month of this monsoon is already a puzzle. "For the last few years, we've noticed that rainfall is not uniform in a circle of 10-12 villages, but this year, I see that pattern on one farm—while one patch of my farm got rain, the other patch did not," Khadse, 45, told *National Herald* over the phone from his Jalka village. "Many farmers have completed their sowing even when the rains are inadequate," he said. "My worry is that we may have to go for a resowing because our first sowing will probably fail."

Every year, June marks the beginning of rural India's most consequential gamble. Farmers till their fields, buy seeds, mostly on credit, buy fertilisers, and then wait for the first spells of dependable rain. In dryland areas across the country, agriculture has always been a wager on the monsoon, because that's the only source of irrigation. This year, as June comes to an end, the wager itself is uncertain—delayed or suspended, in the language of farmers.

Vast swathes of the country are yet to get adequate rainfall. In several regions, the rains have not yet arrived. By end-June, India had received roughly 42 per cent below-normal rainfall since the onset of the southwest monsoon, making this one of the driest Junes in a century. That's the countrywide average. The deficit, as per IMD (Indian Meteorological Department) data, has been particularly severe in central India where rainfall has been nearly 60% below normal in many regions. For farmers in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and adjoining states, this marks the difference between sowing on time and waiting anxiously for another week.

The monsoons have an overbearing effect on the Indian economy.

On the brighter side, the IMD forecasts better and well-distributed rains in most parts of the country in the first week of July. With growing inflation, dwindling incomes and other pressures, a bad rain year will have devastating consequences for small farmers, already grappling with rising fuel and fertiliser prices as a fallout of the war in West Asia.

By all accounts, there is a high possibility of drought-like conditions in 2026-27.

The southwest monsoon reached Kerala a few days behind schedule. What followed was far more significant than a delayed onset. The monsoon stalled over western and central India for over two weeks, with heat waves and humidity continuing well past the summer season in the farm calendar. Instead of advancing steadily

across the country, it lost momentum, leaving vast stretches of cropland dry when farmers would normally complete sowing operations after the first spell of rain.

Meteorologists point to a convergence of several atmospheric factors. El Niño conditions have now developed over the equatorial Pacific and are expected to gain strength through the season. An IMD press release on 25 June (IMD releases its weekly forecast every Thursday) says, "the atmosphere has responded to the warming sea surface temperatures, and the coupled ocean-atmosphere system now exhibits characteristics consistent with El Niño conditions."

In previous years, India sometimes escaped the worst effects of El Niño because a positive Indian Ocean Dipole, a.k.a. the Indian Niño—an irregular climate pattern defined by the difference in sea-surface temperatures between the western and eastern parts of the tropical Indian Ocean—supplied additional moisture. This year, that compensating influence is absent.

At the same time, the 'Somali Jet'—the low-level wind current that transports moisture from the Arabian Sea—has remained weaker than usual. Coupled with some atmospheric processes, these factors have yielded repeated 'break' conditions, interrupting the monsoon's advance.

The lived experiences of farmers are vastly different from how scientists understand these processes. They see



By end-June, India had received roughly 42 per cent below-normal rainfall since the onset of the southwest monsoon, making this one of the driest Junes in a century

parched fields where soyabean or cotton or maize or cereals should have germinated by now. If they have exhausted their savings or a part of their crop loans over the inputs already used, they start worrying if another loan will be needed should the rains fail for another week.

The impact is showing. By 25 June, kharif sowing was 23 per cent lower than at the same time last year. Soyabean, cotton, even maize sowings have yet to gain speed. The soyabean sowing is lagging by almost 65 per cent, cotton by 35 per cent, a Reuters report said. In many regions, rice transplantation has stalled; delayed transplantation leads to a drop in yields.

Every week of delay shrinks the growing season, reduces potential yields, increases vulnerability to pests and diseases, and often pushes the farmer deeper into debt and desperation.

As Khadse, the farmer in Yavatmal, said: "Farmers are worried. They'll be desperate if the rains continue to elude."

The Modi government has reportedly drawn up contingency plans for 315 vulnerable districts that could be severely affected by a weak monsoon this year. That includes more than a hundred dryland districts identified as 'highly vulnerable' because they have little assured irrigation. Agriculture departments have advised farmers to shift, where feasible, to short-duration crop varieties, pulses and millets if the rains continue to disappoint. Problem is, the switch is predicated on the

availability of alternative seeds and other inputs for those crops.

The government is understood to have set up an El Niño monitoring cell along with a Crop Weather Watch group to assess the evolving situation, but how it will transmit information to farmers in different states is not known.

The delayed and weak monsoon reveals a larger pattern. That contingency planning—often inadequate—is gradually becoming a permanent feature of Indian agriculture.

Indian monsoons are changing perceptibly in the era of climate change, as this writer has chronicled over the past 20 years. The number of rain-days is reducing, while the number of extreme rainfall events is increasing, turning many regions into climate hotspots, and throwing into disarray the farm household-level planning of agriculture.

Many climate scientists say that the old relationship between El Niño and drought is becoming less predictable. Rising sea temperatures and changing atmospheric circulation mean that the aggregate seasonal rainfall conceals growing variability. A district may eventually receive 'normal' aggregate rainfall over four monsoon months, yet suffer from agriculture drought because most of the rain fell in a few intense events separated by long dry spells.

Farmers understand this variability better because that's their lived reality. They judge a good or bad monsoon not by seasonal averages but by distribution. Did the first rains arrive on time for sowing? Did the soil retain enough moisture to aid crop growth? Was there a long dry spell immediately afterwards? Did an extreme rainfall event wash away seedlings? These questions and their answers determine how good or bad the harvest was.

India's policy response is inadequate because available long-term trends indicate the need for a new strategy.

For instance, our agriculture institutions—which came up in the Green Revolution period (the mid-1960s till the late seventies)—continue to function as though the climate of the 20th century still endures. Crop calendars assume that June will reliably mark the beginning of sowing. Procurement systems continue to favour water-intensive cereals and cash crops. The rural credit cycle and irrigation planning are all centred around assumptions of reliably predictable monsoons, whereas the monsoons are becoming erratic—ironically when India's early monsoon forecast and prediction science is getting better.

The monsoon may yet recover. Reservoirs may still fill to the brim, sowing might accelerate and this year's fears may recede. But should we rely on the possibility of recovery? Shouldn't we prepare for uncertainty? ■

'Normal' seasonal averages hold no meaning for farmers. They judge a good or bad monsoon by its distribution; for them, timing is key

The fortress has fallen. Forlorn lives hope

Chandril Bhattacharya tries to make sense of the new tune that people in Bengal are marching to



Missing in action People kept waiting for the old street fighter, but Mamata Banerjee was a bit like Ronaldo in a recent World Cup match—concentrating on being invisible

Even the BJP didn't expect its thumping victory in West Bengal. But pleasantly surprised, they scampered off to get some ministers and supporting rhetoric in place. The windfall didn't stop there, all their obstacles started vanishing by themselves. The BJP found itself in a rose-tinted Sooraj Barjatya film, the script written by their very own Ram and Syam(aprasad) Mookerjee.

While people kept waiting for retaliation from the 'street fighter', the miracle-maker Mamata Banerjee, she acted like Ronaldo in a recent World Cup match—concentrating on being invisible.

The Left Front is elated. They won a seat all by themselves and another through an ally. They will probably not stop gloating for another five years. It's almost like breaking into a victory lap after managing to score 4 in maths; just 96 more and it'd be 'wow!'

The BJP juggernaut is firing on all cylinders. We faintly heard somewhere that a thriving Opposition is essential for a

healthy democracy. But no ruling party ever cares for democracy, and even if the prospect of one-party rule seems preposterous, that has been the scenario in Bengal for several decades.

The Left Front had practically no opposition for many years in their 34-year rule. The Congress and later the TMC served as cardboard opposition, which sat there only to be accused and ridiculed. For longer than one can remember, nobody thought there would ever be a Bengal that wasn't ruled by Communists, until the Left leaders got too complacent and the cadre turned brutal.

The TMC too had a practically opposition-less run for 15 years when the Congress was non-existent, the CPM was clownish and the BJP was deemed impossible. So, the people of Bengal are no strangers to one-party rule. In fact, they love it. They don't demand change, until they cannot bear to overlook the atrocities anymore. It was when the TMC became unbearably corrupt and puffed up with

hubris that the people came out in their hordes to defeat them. This time the beneficiary was the BJP, the party with a radically different idea.

There are theories about the BJP making its opposition disappear—by luring some and intimidating others. But that still does not explain the great haste with which TMC leaders have abandoned their mother-party. It seemed they were escaping a torture chamber (or possible raids by the Enforcement Directorate). Some have formed a rebel faction; some have joined an obscure outfit. Both these camps are widely perceived to be BJP-supported groups whose purpose is to pretend hard to be non-BJP, much to the advantage of meme artists and amusement of the general public.

So, if the Bengal polity is divided into BJP-A, B, C, a toothless TMC and a staunchly under-ambitious, underachieving CPM, will the circus be worth watching? More likely that it will be a dream run for the BJP, which declares that Muslims

cannot block Red Road to offer prayer, and then blocks the same road for seven days to do yoga. The majority is with them, cheering on. The upbeat mood reflects a sense of freedom from the shackles of the previous ruling party, the same sense that was palpable when the Left Front was ousted in 2011. Mamata Banerjee was then seen as the messiah who would deliver Bengal from its red stains. But in a few months, the excitement waned with the realisation that happy endings are restricted to films.

This time, though, the plot may unfold differently. The BJP is a party with political acumen and incredibly deep pockets. Rewards will rain thick and fast. Expect new roads, bridges, airports and other infrastructure. And expect curbs on freedom of speech and personal liberties.

Both prospects are immensely appealing to common people. If water is pure, the streets are clean, hospital services are cheap, jobs are available, why would anybody pay heed to the wordmongers, whose contorted lips and deafening decibels are a source of irritation anyway? Bengal is fond of contrarians, but only in theory. People here give prizes for literature that advocates anarchy, but they won't tolerate a naysayer who swims against the current of majority opinion and slays holy cows. The BJP will probably ensure this hypersensitivity and allergy intensifies, that criticism becomes risky. It will keep intellectual pets.

As a certain-raiser, there have been instances of accused persons being paraded semi-clad, the show applauded by the masses and BJP honchos alike. Hawkers have been evicted, their stalls bulldozed, the 'right to walk' prioritised over the right to survive. Most people are euphoric at the thought of driving away illegal immigrants from the state.

BJP leaders in the state are declaring zero-tolerance with relish with stock phrases like 'nobody will be spared if...' and 'people will be taught a lesson if...' The hoi polloi are ecstatic throwing eggs at TMC leaders. Exclusion seems to be the day's speciality on the menu and people are finding the humiliation of 'the other' sweet.

It seems the whole world is drooling over the same platter—the US and Europe too are besotted with leaders who shout 'Throw them out!'

Polarisation has sunk its roots in Bengal. A section of Hindus believes the TMC appeased Muslims way too much. The BJP is likely to play the ruthless change-maker, it will go after minorities and critics without apology or restraint. The party that advertises bulldozer raj and brags about encounter killings is here finally, and the people couldn't be happier kissing the iron hand.

For the Opposition, fighting the BJP will be tough. After all, how do you fight democratic backsliding when its constituents—the people—lap up dictatorial vibes? How can you argue rights are being trampled when most people believe some people should have no rights?

What this means on the ground is that the Left can keep harping on a non-communal, pro-poor agenda, but it will appear too soft and abstract to most people. The TMC lacks bite and ideology was never its forte. Demands for development won't fly either when flyovers are being built everywhere. So, the opposition is checkmated and the BJP's double-engine sarkar, flush with cash and medieval ferocity, can chug along merrily.

But if hubris starts contaminating the fuel that drives the double-engine steamroller, if the BJP starts taking things for granted, loses its grip on reality, it might end up in the same heap as its two predecessors in Bengal. Then the Opposition can make its move.

Leaders who wield the whip tend to lose track of the moment when the whip takes over and starts wielding the hand.

That scenario is in 'If-land'. A new leader, a new party can emerge, upending all predictions. A new situation may change the entire story and prove everybody wrong. But going by the way the earth is spinning now, the match is for the BJP to lose. ■

CHANDRIL BHATTACHARYA is a lyricist, poet, essayist and filmmaker from Kolkata

A multipolar world without a global order

No single power can dictate anymore, yet no collective mechanism exists to manage confrontation and conflict among powerful states

Ashok Swain

There are moments in history when wars change far more than borders. They alter the architecture of international politics. The Iran War may ultimately prove to be one of those moments. Whether a lasting 'peace agreement' is reached or not, one geopolitical consequence is already becoming visible. The conflict has accelerated the end of the US-dominated unipolar era.

For more than three decades after the Cold War, Washington enjoyed an unparalleled ability to shape global events, build coalitions, impose sanctions, wage wars and define what constituted the international rules-based order. That era had already begun to recede with the rise of China, the resurgence of Russia, and the growing confidence of regional powers. The Iran war has hastened a transition that was already underway.

Yet celebrating the arrival of a multipolar world would be dangerously premature. The world is becoming multipolar alright, but there's no alternative world order yet. The balance of power is changing much faster than the creation of any institutions and rules needed to manage that change. That is creating a very unstable international environment.

Every international order needs an anchor. It needs rules that even powerful states hesitate to violate. It needs institutions that have legitimacy even when they fail to satisfy everyone. It needs mechanisms capable of preventing crises from escalating into wars. Above all, it needs major powers to accept restraints because they recognise that stability ultimately serves their own interests.

Even with all its contradictions, the post WWII order provided some of these foundations. The United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions, international law, arms control agreements and multilateral diplomacy offered channels through which disputes could be managed. The system was often selective, unequal and heavily influenced by American interests, but it nevertheless created a degree of predictability. Even when major

powers ignored international law, they usually felt compelled to justify their actions within its language because legitimacy still mattered.

Today that legitimacy is disappearing with international law increasingly subject to selective interpretation. Economic sanctions, military interventions, trade restrictions, cyber-attacks and political coercion are being justified on the pretext of national interest in defiance of accepted legal principles. Major powers are no longer trying to strengthen common rules; they are rewriting them to suit short-term strategic objectives.

The Iran conflict has bared this reality.

The military exchanges have demonstrated that overwhelming military superiority no longer guarantees political outcomes. Iran has shown that even a heavily sanctioned regional power can impose strategic costs on a superpower through asymmetric capabilities, regional networks and the ability to disrupt critical energy routes. At the same time, the conflict has revealed the limits of American influence. Many countries, including its traditional allies, have refused to automatically align themselves with Washington's position. Others have sought to maintain neutrality despite intense diplomatic pressure.

This does not mean that the United States has suddenly become weak. America still is the world's strongest military power, dominates the international financial system and is highly competitive in technological innovation. The dollar is still the world's principal reserve currency, and no country currently possesses the combination of military, financial, technological and cultural influence that Washington still enjoys. But this power is no longer synonymous with dominance or leverage. The US is still capable of influencing events, but it is losing its ability to determine their outcomes.

China has emerged as the principal long-term challenger to US primacy. Unlike previous rising powers, Beijing has avoided direct military confrontation with Washington. Instead, it has

expanded its influence through trade, technological development, infrastructure investments, diplomacy and economic partnerships. Its Belt and Road Initiative, expanding presence across South and West Asia, Africa and Latin America, and its growing role in strategic groupings like SCO and BRICS reflect a strategy based on patient accumulation of influence rather than confrontation.

Yet China is not replacing the US as the guarantor of global order. It seeks greater influence without assuming equivalent global responsibilities. Beijing consistently supports multilateralism in its official rhetoric, but it has shown little interest in becoming the world's primary security provider. During the Iran conflict, China condemned escalation and called for diplomacy but carefully avoided direct military involvement. This reflects strategic caution.

The result is a world where power is diffusing while responsibility is undefined—the defining paradox of our time. Multiple powers are emerging, but none is willing or capable of constructing a new international

Photo: Getty Images



order that commands broad legitimacy.

The institutions designed to facilitate collective action are formally alive but ineffective. The UN Security Council is paralysed by veto politics. The WTO struggles to resolve disputes. The IMF and World Bank face questions about representation and legitimacy. Even climate negotiations, pandemic responses, refugee protection and nuclear diplomacy are marked by geopolitical rivalry rather than international cooperation.

The irony is striking. World order is collapsing when humanity confronts bigger problems than at any point in modern history, when the need for collective action couldn't be greater. Climate change doesn't abide by national borders. Artificial intelligence creates risks beyond the capacity of individual governments. Cyber-attacks move instantly across continents. Financial instability spreads within hours. Pandemics remind us that viruses require no visas.

History offers little comfort. The last prolonged multipolar era before the First World War was initially

celebrated as a stable balance among several great powers—Britain, France, Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary all believed that shifting alliances would prevent any single state from dominating Europe. Instead, the absence of effective mechanisms for crisis management turned the assassination of one Archduke into a World War. Multipolarity without trusted institutions was inadequate to contain escalation.

Likewise, there is no reason to assume that today's multipolarity, the dispersion of power will automatically produce greater stability. On the contrary, the risks may be even greater. Nuclear weapons, cyberwarfare, artificial intelligence, economic interdependence and the militarisation of space create new pathways for regional crises to rapidly become global emergencies. The competition among great powers today extends beyond traditional military rivalry into technology, supply chains, energy, finance, information and critical minerals.

The Iran War announces the arrival of a world in which no single power can dictate outcomes,

yet no collective mechanism exists to manage competition among several powerful states. The US can no longer sustain the kind of unchallenged leadership that characterised the decades after the Cold War. China has not stepped forward to replace it. Russia is more disruptive than constructive. Europe is internally divided and leaderless. India swears by 'strategic autonomy' and has squandered the opportunity to be the voice of the Global South.

The Iran War may ultimately be remembered not as the conflict that ended the American century but as the moment the world entered an era when power became more widely dispersed while authority was dangerously absent. That is not the arrival of a new world order. It is the arrival of a world without one, where multilateralism survives in speeches, invocation of 'international law' is meaningless and global stability rests not upon agreed rules but upon shifting calculations of power and risk. ■

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Ironically, the old order is collapsing when the world confronts bigger problems than ever before and the need for collective action couldn't be greater

Being a Muslim in new Bengal

STATES 360°
WEST BENGAL



Exclusion, expulsion, detention, communal provocation... Muslims in Bengal are waking up to the reality of living in a BJP-ruled state

Kunal Chatterjee

West Bengal chief minister Svendula Adhikari's claim on 23 June, on the floor of the state assembly, that his government has already deported 10,000 Bangladeshis has gone largely unchallenged. There was no corroboration from New Delhi or Dhaka or the Border Security Force (BSF) and the claim has gone unquestioned by the state Opposition composed of rebel TMC leaders.

The Bangladesh Border Guards (BBG) revealed having foiled at least 30 BSF attempts to push Indian Muslims into Bangladesh. Dhaka insisted that deportation requires identification and investigation, yet the state government seems unconcerned, unrestrained by official procedures laid out by the Union home ministry.

Who exactly were these "undocumented Bangladeshis"? Where did they live, work, and how did they acquire citizenship documents? These questions remain unanswered and Indian Muslims living in the state's border districts are on tenterhooks.

Talking to *Scroll*, 32-year-old Wasip Biswas from Murshidabad narrated the case of the 12 Muslims from Malda who were declared 'Bangladeshis' and sent off to a holding centre soon after Adhikari took over as chief minister on 9 May. "They are all from one family," he said. Biswas and his elder brother, who works in the BSF, are among the 27 lakh voters, a large number of them Muslims, whose names were struck off the voter rolls in the SIR (Special Intensive Revision). There is no update on their online appeals. In the



A throng of alleged 'Bangladeshi infiltrators' at the Hakimpur border in West Bengal

interim, they live in terror of being cut off from welfare schemes and other benefits.

No one knows why their names have been deleted though the law mandates a written explanation and an opportunity to be heard before deletion. A 75-year-old Muslim lawyer from Murshidabad, dropped from the electoral roll, appealed to the Supreme Court, which conceded—only just about—that there was enough evidence he was a practising lawyer in Indian courts and ordered redress. What recourse would a less influential citizen have?

The protests have died down. Even in Kolkata, Prof. Quazi Mohammad Alfaruk, who took part in demonstrations at the Park Circus Maidan till May, said, "It has become too risky. All activists now to think twice before doing anything now."

Even well-heeled Muslims in West Bengal are feeling insecure. The case of the retired High Court judge, Sahidullah Munshi is illustrative. He and his family members were dropped from the electoral rolls for 'logical discrepancies'. His voting right was restored, though, within 48 hours of an interview to *Bar & Bench*. But Oxford-

educated anthropologist Adil Hossain, who teaches in a private university and has a valid passport, has not been so lucky; his name has not been restored. "We don't know what kind of rules they will make for people who do not have voting rights," he told *Scroll*.

Muslims in Bengal admit they have never felt so unsafe. Memories of the 1946-47 riots, which had receded over generations, are back. The renaming of Suhrawardy Avenue, named after the first Muslim vice-chancellor of Calcutta University, to Gopal Mukherjee Road—a rioter lionised as defender of Hindus—is one such step. The decision to celebrate the 125th birth anniversary of Syama Prasad Mookerjee, founder of Bharatiya Jan Sangh, for a year from 6 July is another.

The communal virus is spreading. Sheikh Ajijul (10) came home from school shaken—he was taunted by older schoolboys who called him a 'traitor' and a 'Pakistani'. In Muslim neighbourhoods like Garden Reach, people speak in hushed

tones of a new reality. Property papers and identity cards must be kept ready at all times for inspection. "Whenever a vehicle stops in our lane, everyone comes out to check who it is," says an anxious resident. They spend sleepless nights fearing sudden eviction and forced displacement.

At a recent gathering, Muslim speakers agreed their community was waking up to the kind of life their brethren have already seen in other BJP-ruled states. There are rumours of demolition drives in the Muslim-dense localities of Tangra, Tiljala, Khidderpore, Ekbalpore, Garden Reach and Park Circus, even while irregular structures elsewhere remain untouched. Talk of 'love jihad', infiltration, UCC (uniform civil code) and arrests targeting 'Muslim anti-socials' keep the community on edge.

Meanwhile, police cyber cells are crackling with criticisms of the govern-

ment, while extremist communal voices run amok online, with no fear of punishment or reprisal. This icon of hatred is already poisoning everyday interactions and public discourse.

Their businesses have been hit as well. Manzur Jameel, a manufacturer of electrical components, reports plummeting orders and closed factory lines. "It's not just Bengal," he says, "...Muslims are being pushed to the margins everywhere in India". The ban on street hawkers chokes small businesses, disproportionately affecting Muslim workers.

Park Circus in south Kolkata is a prominent, culturally vibrant neighbourhood, renowned for its iconic street food and buzzing cultural and political life. It has been home to many celebrities—sportspersons of note (Leander and Vece Paes and Akhtar Ali Khan, for example), revered musicians (Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Munawwar Ali Khan and the Dagar Bandhu, for instance) and politicians like the Suhrawardys, one of the most influential political families of undivided Bengal. (Yes, the very same Suhrawardy of the controversial road name).

On Eid mornings, the Park Circus 7-point crossing and surrounding streets used to look carnivalesque, but this time the Eid celebrations of 28 May, barely three weeks after the elections results, were eerily muted. There were many restrictions, on ritual slaughter and public congregation for prayers. The city's main, sprawling Eid namaz, which had been held on Red Road in central Kolkata for half a century, was also relocated to the Brigade Parade Ground a.k.a. Maidan.

The streets of Kolkata's many Muslim-dense neighbourhoods, the small businesses that ply their trade in their lanes and bylanes and holes in the wall, the people who offer prayers in its many mosques are all in a defensive crouch today, dealing with the endless communal provocation, and living in mortal fear of exclusion, detention, expulsion or worse. ■

Muslims in Bengal admit they have never felt so unsafe. The memories of Partition riots have returned

THE ROCK AND THE REALM: D.K. SHIVAKUMAR TAKES CHARGE OF A PROGRESSIVE NEW ERA FOR KARNATAKA

A seamless Siddaramaiah-Shivakumar handover sets Karnataka's next chapter of progressive expansion.

The atmosphere inside the Glass House at Lok Bhavan in Bengaluru was thick with anticipation on the afternoon of June 3, 2026. As the clock struck 4:15 p.m., a thunderous applause erupted, marking a historic milestone in Karnataka's political journey. D.K. Shivakumar stood before Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot, a copy of the Constitution of India held firmly in his hand, and took the oath of office as the 25th Chief Minister of Karnataka.

Sworn in the name of the revered late holy seer Gangadhara Ajjaya, his ascension represents far more than a routine change in leadership. It stands as a masterclass in political stability, a testament to strategic governance, and the beginning of a fresh chapter aimed at comprehensive state development.

This transition of power from the outgoing Chief Minister, Siddaramaiah, was execution at its finest. In a political landscape often defined by friction, Karnataka has demonstrated remarkable maturity by executing a seamless, planned mid-term leadership transition.

By ensuring continuity and maintaining absolute internal cohesion, the administration has sent a powerful signal of stability to citizens and investors alike. This smooth handover ensures that the momentum of governance remains uninterrupted, allowing the state to build directly upon its existing welfare foundations while injecting new visionary energy into its leadership.

Long before the scheduled ceremony, the city's pulse was noticeably faster. The areas surrounding the venue had transformed into a sea of vibrant colors. Thousands of supporters, party workers, and curious citizens arrived from every corner of Karnataka. Travel-weary but enthusiastic groups from regions like Kalyana-Karnataka, Kittur, and Old Mysuru poured out of buses and trains, carrying local flags, banners, and portraits.

The air was thick with the scent of fresh marigold garlands and jasmine. Traditional musicians playing the



Photo: Gettyimages

alongside Chief Minister Shivakumar, Dr. G. Parameshwar was sworn in as the Deputy Chief Minister, bringing seasoned legislative wisdom and institutional memory to the core leadership team.

Together with twelve newly inducted Cabinet Ministers, this executive body represents a harmonious blend of diverse regional interests and communities across Karnataka. The presence of national leaders, spiritual figures, and thousands of citizens at the venue underscored the broad-based consensus backing this new administration. It is a leadership structure engineered not just to govern, but to listen, adapt, and unify.

This collective approach to

governance ensures that every tier of society finds a voice in the highest corridors of power.

The climax of the day's emotion arrived during the administration of the oath. When the new Chief Minister held the Constitution of India and invoked the name of the late holy seer Gangadhara Ajjaya, a wave of visible emotion swept through the crowd.

Many older supporters in the audience could be seen wiping away tears of joy, viewing this moment as the culmination of decades of political struggle and loyalty. The calm, steady tone of Governor Gehlot contrasted beautifully with the raw, emotional energy of the venue.

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EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION

Wasting no time, Chief Minister Shivakumar chaired his first official Cabinet meeting immediately following the ceremony, rolling out a series of swift, high-impact policy decisions that establish a clear, citizen-centric roadmap.

As twilight fell over Bengaluru, the focus of the state shifted from the celebratory atmosphere of the Glass House to the majestic, illuminated stone facade of the Vidhana Soudha. Before stepping into the executive chambers, Chief Minister Shivakumar paused at the grand entrance to garland the statue of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, setting a grounded, responsible tone for the evening. Inside the corridors, the atmosphere was frantic but highly coordinated as senior IAS officers moved briskly through the wooden-paneled hallways, clutching thick, freshly prepared policy binders.

Inside the core Committee Room, the celebratory smiles quickly sharpened into intense focus the moment the heavy doors were closed to the media.

The mood instantly transitioned from a political victory lap to a corporate boardroom meeting, moving straight to the agenda items without any introductory filler speeches. At the heart of these announcements is a profound investment in human capital, particularly the state's youth.

The administration's decision to provide free bus passes to all students across Karnataka is a transformative socioeconomic

equalizer.

By removing financial barriers to mobility, the government ensures that no student is denied access to quality education due to commuting costs. This initiative alleviates a recurring financial burden for a large number of families, promoting higher enrollment and daily attendance in schools and colleges state-wide.

Outside the high iron gates, Preetha Gowda, a 20-year-old engineering student from Ramanagara, clutched her college backpack and expressed the immediate impact of the policy: "You have no idea what this means for families like mine. My father spends a chunk of his monthly wages just on my bus fares to get into Bengaluru for classes. The free pass order as his very first act makes me feel like this government actually sees us."

Complementing this educational support is a bold cultural and social engineering initiative: the establishment of 10,000 Bharat Jodo Yuvaka Sanghas. Backed by a substantial financial allocation of Rs 10 lakh each, these youth clubs are designed to channel the energy of the state's young population into constructive avenues. By funding local sports, cultural activities, and community service projects, these organizations will foster social harmony, cultivate grassroots leadership, and build resilient community networks among the youth.

A SHARED VISION FOR PROGRESS

The next morning, the front pages of major newspapers reflected this powerful blend of political history and swift administrative action. The Deccan Herald led with "DKS TAKES CHARGE: A Smooth Transition, A Swift Turn to Governance," highlighting the Rs 2,000 crore urban infrastructure package. Regional Kannada dailies like Prajavani celebrated the event with the headline (Leadership of the Rock: A Preface to Pro-People Governance), capturing the intense grassroots pride felt by citizens across the state.

Mahadevappa, a 58-year-old sugarcane farmer from Mandya who stood outside the secretariat gates, summarized the collective sentiment perfectly: "We have watched 'Kanakapura Bande' build his career brick by brick. Today, standing outside these gates, I feel like one of our own sons has taken the throne. He took the oath in the name of the holy seer, and that tells me he will govern with righteousness."

The initial actions of Chief

Minister D.K. Shivakumar's administration present a balanced blueprint that harmonizes welfare economics with structural growth. It bridges the aspirations of rural student communities with the infrastructure demands of a global metropolis.

The positive reception from the central government, highlighted by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's congratulatory message, underscores a shared commitment to cooperative federalism. This collaborative spirit between the state and center promises to accelerate public works, optimize resource allocation, and drive sustained economic progress.

As Karnataka steps into this new era, the focus is squarely on execution, transparency, and inclusive growth. Guided by an empowered leadership, a clear strategic vision, and an immediate focus on actionable public welfare, the new government stands fully prepared to honor its promises and elevate Karnataka to unprecedented heights of prosperity.

The structure of the newly formed Cabinet reflects a meticulous balance of experience, social representation, and administrative competence. Standing alongside Chief Minister Shivakumar, Dr. G. Parameshwar was sworn in as the Deputy Chief Minister, bringing seasoned legislative wisdom and institutional memory to the core leadership team.

nadaswaram and the rhythmic, thunderous beating of dholu drums set a festive, almost carnival-like tempo.

Folk dancers in traditional attire performed on the pavements, their energy mirroring the crowd's rising anticipation. For the people gathered, this was not just a political transition; it felt like a grand cultural festival.

THE FOUNDATION OF UNIFIED LEADERSHIP

Inside the majestic Glass House, the atmosphere shifted from festive celebration to dignified expectation. The sunlight filtering through the glass ceiling illuminated a meticulously arranged seating area that brought together an extraordinary cross-section of Indian society.

Senior national political leaders sat

shoulder-to-shoulder with prominent local legislators, their faces reflecting a sense of relief and accomplishment over a smooth, unified transition. In a striking display of Karnataka's pluralistic fabric, the front rows were also populated by saffron, white, and maroon robes.

Swaamijis from influential mathas, Muslim clerics, and Christian priests sat together, chatting amiably and lending an aura of spiritual sanctity to the political event. Captains of the IT and biotech industries from Bengaluru's tech corridors mingled with grassroots farmer union leaders, representing the dual engine of Karnataka's economy.

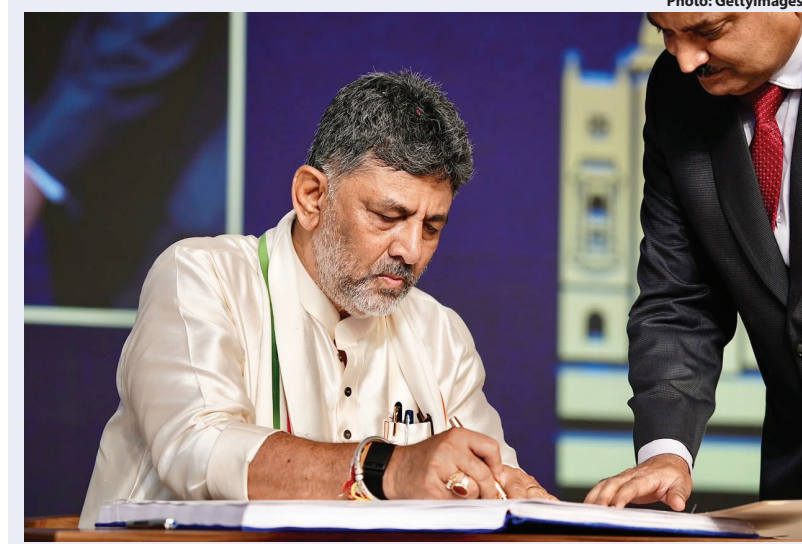
The structure of the newly formed Cabinet reflects a meticulous balance of experience, social representation, and administrative competence. Standing

TRANSFORMING INFRASTRUCTURE AND URBAN GOVERNANCE

Recognizing that robust infrastructure is the backbone of economic prosperity, the new administration moved decisively to address the immediate and

long-term urban challenges of Bengaluru. A dedicated allocation of Rs 2,000 crore was instantly declared for the comprehensive repair and modernization of the capital city's

Photo: Gettyimages



road networks.

This targeted financial injection goes beyond mere maintenance; it is an effort to restore Bengaluru's global reputation as a premier technology and innovation hub by enhancing urban mobility, reducing logistical delays, and improving the overall quality of daily life for millions of residents.

In tandem with physical infrastructure, the government introduced landmark administrative reforms aimed at regularizing urban land layout and property ownership. The extension of the B-Khata to A-Khata land conversions, coupled with a one-time regularization scheme for minor building layout violations, offers massive relief to hundreds of thousands of property owners. This pragmatic policy bridges the gap between rigid regulatory

frameworks and real-world urban development. By legalizing these properties, the state provides citizens with secure asset titles, unlocks access to formal banking credit, and significantly boosts municipal revenue streams through legitimate property tax collections.

A palpable silence gripped the room as the official files for these flagship welfare guarantees were placed before the Chief Minister. There was a brief pause, a collective holding of breath, and then the scratch of the pen.

The moment Shivakumar signed off on the executive decrees, a spontaneous round of applause broke out from the ministers at the table. The promises made to the crowds outside were codified into state law within hours of taking office.

Something is rotten in the land of Ram

Purnima S. Tripathi

On 19 June, Nripendra Mishra dropped a bombshell. In one of several interviews aired by TV channels on the day, Mishra, a member of the board of trustees for the Shri Ram Jannabhoomi Teerth Kshetra, also chairman of the Temple Construction Committee and former principal secretary to prime minister Narendra Modi, referred to stolen donation money in the Ayodhya Ram temple as “खुला डाक” (daylight robbery). Not surprisingly, the Sangh Parivar is squirming.

But it seems not everyone in the Parivar is equally invested in the damage-limitation exercise that has started in the wake of the discovery of embezzlement—running into several crores according to some reports—and then the Mishra interview.

While the Shri Ram Jannabhoomi Teerth Kshetra trust was constituted by the government, following the 2019 Supreme Court judgment in the Ram Mandir case,



Members of the Sindhi community have now said they never got a receipt for their donation of 200 silver bricks for the Ram Mandir project. The silver was reportedly handed over in January 2021

many of its trustees are from the tentacular Sangh Parivar and swear allegiance to it. The temple, built at an estimated cost of approximately Rs 2,000 crore, donated by devotees from home and abroad, created quite a frenzy of excitement in this ecosystem—in the BJP, the militant Vishva-Hindu Parishad, which spearheaded the Ram Jannabhoomi movement, big daddy RSS, which claimed centre stage during the ‘*pran pratishtha*’ (consecration) ceremony (on 22 January 2024) and of course very large numbers of devout Hindus. Even mainstream media was all aflutter—awash in banner headlines declaring a triumphant civilisational moment.

With all the media hype and government promotion, it is hardly surprising that the temple has received the kind of attention—and donations—it has. Which has verily tested the integrity of some of the people in charge. It would be a

mistake to think it stops at the eight arrested by the Special Investigation Team. Among those taken into custody are Ramshankar Yadav alias Tinnu Yadav, a former driver and close aide of ex-trust general secretary Champat Rai, who reportedly held the keys to the temple’s cash-counting room; Manish Yadav, nephew of Tinnu Yadav, who was posted inside the temple’s cash-counting unit; Anukalp Mishra and Lavkush Mishra, relatives of involved trustee Anil Mishra, both involved in the daily counting process.

Offerings reportedly spiked during the Maha Kumbh in January 2025, and in an executive committee meeting on 13 December 2025, the trust reportedly disclosed that it had received Rs 4,575 crore in donations and other receipts up to 30 November 2025.

The steady and systematic looting of donations was exposed by insider whistleblowers in the first week of

June 2026. An accountant sacked by the trust in 2021, after he complained of keeping accounts of the gold, silver and jewellery donated. A group of Sindhis then claimed they had donated 200 silver bricks but never got a receipt. Perhaps emboldened by these disclosures, the head priest of Janaki temple in Janakpur, Nepal, said he was still in the dark about what happened to the precious metal donated to the trust.

It’s hard to explain how donations could be embezzled over such an extended period despite elaborate security, including surveillance by an estimated 1,600 CCTV cameras, and the counting of cash donations entrusted to the State Bank of India. Trust secretary Champat Rai initially tried to make light of the ‘theft’ but resigned when the scandal threatened to spin out of control. The trust was forced

to acknowledge that with the help of the police Rs 80 lakh was recovered from the houses of some trustees. No FIR was lodged but the trust requested Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath to set up a Special Investigation Team (SIT), which has filed an interim report.

According to sources in Lucknow, the preliminary SIT report estimates the amount swindled to be over Rs 200 crore. It is highly improbable that this scale of embezzlement went unnoticed by senior members of the trust and even by the PMO, which has been quite hands-on in the construction

of the temple and management of the trust. Given this detail, and Nripendra Mishra’s proximity to the prime minister, it seems improbable that he didn’t have a tip-off, not even an inkling that something was amiss. On paper, Mishra is chairman of the construction committee, but political observers say his job title does not indicate his span of influence. There is now intense speculation on the role of treasurer Govind Giri and former trustee Anil Mishra. While Champat Rai and Anil Mishra have resigned their posts, the final decision on their future is expected when the trust convenes on Sunday, 5 July.

“Since the temple was under the direct supervision of the PMO and the RSS, even if Yogi had knowledge of wrongdoing, he couldn’t have done much earlier,” says Ram Dutt Tripathi, senior journalist and former BBC correspondent in Lucknow. “But now that the scandal is public knowledge, the PMO and RSS want Yogi to manage the mess.”

“The Gorakhpur math Yogi heads was in the vanguard of the Ram temple movement since 1949, but he was completely ignored when the Ram Mandir trust was set up. During the *pran pratishtha*, Yogi was simply marking his presence. Now he will settle scores,” says Tripathi.

Suman Gupta, editor of Ayodhya-based *Jan Morcha*, does not believe a cover-up is now possible. “Local resentment was already high over outsiders controlling the trust. As infrastructure developed and land prices rose, the locals again found themselves losing out to outsiders.”

Sceptics doubt if the full extent of the scandal will ever be known, the money trail established and the big fish made to pay a price. Others speculate that the scandal gives the PMO just the excuse it needs to tighten its grip even more on the management of temple affairs. Why else, they ask, would Nripendra Mishra suggest the appointment of a ‘professional CEO’ to manage the day-to-day affairs of the trust? Isn’t he echoing his master’s voice?

In private conversations, RSS functionaries admit the scandal has shaken the faith of millions and dented the image of the Sangh. But asked if the BJP will pay a political price, they affect unconcern. The consensus seems to be: ‘People will forgive and forget’.

Sceptics doubt if the full extent of the scandal will ever be known—the money trail established and the big fish made to pay a price

How did donations running into crores get embezzled over such an extended period despite all the security?

What our liberals don’t get about Rahul Gandhi

While many others have chosen tactical compromise with majoritarianism, Rahul Gandhi has consistently and fearlessly challenged it

Ashok Swain

One of the most striking features of contemporary Indian politics is not merely the consolidation of Narendra Modi’s power and the Hindutva project, but the persistent inability of a significant section of India’s liberals and intellectuals to recognise who has consistently stood against it.

Even as the Modi government has steadily eroded democratic institutions, normalised majoritarian politics, weakened constitutional safeguards and undermined India’s secular foundations, many among the country’s self-proclaimed liberal intelligentsia continue to direct their sharpest criticism not at the architects of this transformation but at Rahul Gandhi.

This peculiar obsession says less about Rahul Gandhi and more about the intellectual and political contradictions of our liberal class.

For over a decade, Rahul Gandhi has been one of the very few national political leaders willing to challenge the ideological foundations of Hindutva. He has repeatedly spoken about constitutional values, minority rights, social justice, caste inequalities, institutional independence and democratic accountability. He has endured relentless media vilification, state harassment, legal persecution and personal attacks while continuing to articulate a political vision rooted in pluralism and constitutional democracy.

The Bharat Jodo Yatra and the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra were not merely political campaigns. They were perhaps the most sustained attempts by any Indian politician in recent decades to reconnect democratic politics with the concerns of ordinary citizens while directly confronting the politics of hate and polarisation.

Yet many liberals and intellectuals continue to portray

him as the principal obstacle to defeating Modi. Why?

The answer lies partly in history. Since the 1970s, being anti-Congress has become almost a cultural marker within large sections of India’s intellectual circles. Opposition to the Congress was once associated with resistance to the Emergency and centralised power. Over time, however, anti-Congressism evolved from a political position into an intellectual reflex. The Congress came to be viewed as the source of all political problems, while every regional challenger was celebrated as a potential saviour.

This attitude became even more pronounced because of the Gandhi family connection. Opposition to dynasty politics became a convenient shorthand through which many intellectuals dismissed Rahul Gandhi without engaging seriously with his political positions. Ironically, many of these same critics had little difficulty supporting regional parties dominated by powerful political families across India. Several senior BJP leaders too are from political dynasties. It was treated as an unforgivable sin only when it involved the Congress.

For years, the liberal commentariat enthusiastically promoted alternative opposition leaders as superior options to Rahul Gandhi. Nitish Kumar was repeatedly projected as the ideal anti-Modi leader despite his long record of political opportunism and his willingness to ally with the BJP whenever it suited his interests. Mamata Banerjee was celebrated as a national alternative despite her own accommodation of religious majoritarian impulses and her reluctance to build durable opposition unity. Arvind Kejriwal was hailed as the future of Indian politics even as his movement increasingly embraced selective nationalism and often collaborated with Hindutva forces.

None of them consistently



challenged the ideological core of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s project. None sought to build a nationwide democratic alternative based on constitutional values. None demonstrated sustained commitment to confronting majoritarianism. Yet many intellectuals have invested enormous energy in promoting them while dismissing Rahul Gandhi as politically irrelevant.

The record today speaks for itself. Nitish Kumar’s political credibility has largely evaporated after repeated shifts in allegiance. Arvind Kejriwal’s political project has suffered severe setbacks and remains geographically limited. Mamata Banerjee’s party was recently trounced by the BJP in West Bengal and has failed to emerge as a credible national challenger.

Meanwhile Rahul Gandhi has become the undisputed face of opposition politics at the national level. The Congress under his leadership significantly improved its parliamentary position in 2024, regained the status of the principal opposition party and re-established itself as the central pole around

which anti-BJP politics increasingly revolves. Yet instead of acknowledging this reality, many liberals continue searching for reasons to blame him.

Part of the explanation may lie in the abstract, they become noticeably uncomfortable when politics moves beyond procedural democracy toward questions of social and economic justice.

Rahul Gandhi’s emphasis on a caste census, wealth concentration, inequality, affirmative action and representation challenges entrenched structures of privilege. His politics increasingly combines constitutional democracy with demands for deeper social transformation. For many elite liberals, this agenda is far less comfortable than discussions about institutional reform or economic growth.

Indeed, a considerable section of India’s liberal establishment has long been more committed to market-driven growth than to redistribution, poverty reduction or structural equality. They readily criticise Hindutva’s excesses but remain uneasy about politics that seeks to alter existing hierarchies of caste and class. Rahul Gandhi’s recent focus on social justice has therefore created a new source of tension between him and sections of the liberal intelligentsia.

Another reason is the limited understanding of electoral politics among contemporary commentators. Most intellectuals have never organised a political campaign, built a party structure, mobilised voters or contested an election. Their understanding of politics is often mediated through media narratives and urban conversations. They tend to view elections as the sole measure of political success while ignoring the broader struggle over ideas, institutions and democratic norms.

Rahul Gandhi’s focus on social justice, inequality, affirmative action and representation dares entrenched privilege

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China steals another march on India

India has been caught flat-footed as Bangladesh pursues a deeper partnership with China, embracing strategic investments in its economy

Faisal Mahmud/Dhaka & Sourabh Sen/Kolkata

India's policy towards Bangladesh remains mired in pushing back supposed illegal migrants or raising the bogey of Jamaat consolidation along the border—'issues' highlighted ahead of the recently concluded elections in West Bengal. Meanwhile, Bangladesh's new government has wasted no time in signalling where it sees the country's economic future. Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's recent visit to Beijing, his first official visit, saw a raft of agreements on investment, technology and infrastructure.

There was another more consequential shift. The visit revived three projects that have been on Bangladesh's development agenda for years—the China-backed economic zone at Mongla Port, the long-delayed Teesta River Comprehensive Management and Restoration Project and the proposed China-Myanmar-Bangladesh Economic Corridor. Together, they reveal an intent to make economic development the pivot of its foreign policy and statecraft.

For decades, Bangladesh's external engagements were shaped primarily by aid, trade preferences and development partnerships. Today, the country's ambitions are markedly different. Having crossed the threshold into lower-middle-income status and preparing to graduate from the UN's Least Developed Country category in 2029, Dhaka is increasingly seeking foreign relationships that will bring investments into the country—in its industry, infrastructure and towards greater integration with Asian supply chains.

That objective framed Rahman's discussions with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang. The two governments elevated bilateral ties to what Beijing described as a 'China-Bangladesh community with a shared future'. Both governments reaffirmed cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative and committed to accelerate projects that Bangladesh considers central to its next phase of economic development.

Foremost among these is Mongla, Bangladesh's second-largest seaport, long overshadowed

by Chattogram the country's busiest port, despite occupying a strategic position in the southwest. Considerable investments over the past decade have improved navigability, expanded cargo-handling capacity and strengthened road and rail connections through the Padma bridge and associated transport networks. Yet it has not become a major industrial hub.

The government's solution is to develop an export-oriented economic zone adjacent to the port with Chinese participation, turning Mongla into a manufacturing and logistics cluster rather than merely a maritime gateway.

Officials expect this move to attract factories serving regional and international markets while encouraging investment in warehousing, transport, shipbuilding and supporting industries. This reflects a broader shift in Bangladesh's industrial policy. Instead of viewing infrastructure as an end in itself, the government increasingly sees ports, highways and railways as platforms for industrial ecosystems capable of generating employment, expanding exports and raising productivity.

That also explains the renewed urgency surrounding the Teesta River Project. For over a decade, policymakers have discussed interventions along Bangladesh's fourth-largest river. The proposals extend far beyond dredging and embankment construction.

The project seeks to reshape the economic geography of northern Bangladesh through river restoration, flood protection, irrigation modernisation, urban development and land reclamation. Officials argue that controlling seasonal flooding, while improving water availability during the dry season, could significantly enhance agricultural productivity across multiple districts.

Modernising major river systems is, therefore, seen not simply as environmental management but as an investment in productivity and long-term growth. Rahman's announcement following his return from Beijing that the Teesta project would proceed "without delay" underscored the

administration's determination to move from planning to implementation.

The third pillar of the visit was connectivity. Bangladesh and China reaffirmed their commitment to the China-Myanmar-Bangladesh Economic Corridor, an initiative intended to strengthen transport and commercial links across the eastern Bay of Bengal.

The proposal complements Bangladesh's longstanding ambition to position itself as a logistical bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. Improved road, rail and maritime connectivity would lower transport costs, shorten delivery times and enable Bangladeshi manufacturers to participate more deeply in regional production networks. That objective has become increasingly important as Bangladesh seeks to diversify beyond ready-made garments even as apparel remains the country's dominant export sector.

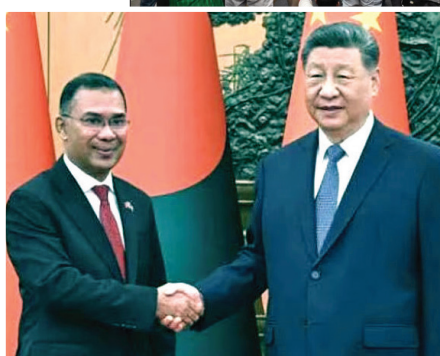
The message from Dhaka is clear and unambiguous—China has emerged as one of the few partners capable of providing all three simultaneously.

From India's perspective, the upgrade of Mongla Port—though not im-

Photo: Getty Images



Protests in Bangladesh against India's attempts to push 'illegal migrants' across the border; (left); Tarique Rahman with Xi Jinping in China



mediately impacting the commercial interests of the Kolkata and Haldia ports—will shift regional trade alignments and present strategic and security concerns. While it will introduce direct maritime competition in the Bay of Bengal, the core importance of the Syama Prasad Mookerjee Port (Kolkata and Haldia) is tied to serving India's domestic hinterland in the east, including the northeast and landlocked neighbours like Nepal and Bhutan.

While Nepal actively utilises its northern passes with China at Rasuwagadhi-Gyirong and Tatanpani-Zhangmu as secondary lifelines, Bhutan maintains a strict policy of zero direct land connectivity with China. However, 'grey zone' encroachments at Doklam in

Western Bhutan in 2017 and satellite imagery reveal Chinese villages being constructed and 'border guardians' placed inside what Bhutan reckons as its own territory. Experts point out that it is a matter of time before such 'encroachments' get upgraded to all-weather roads connecting Nepal and Bhutan to China from the north, undermining India's regional advantage.

Indian intelligence and defence experts are concerned that an upgraded Mongla—located 188 km from Kolkata and only 80 km from the Indian border—will be too close for comfort.

Although senior officials in India's ministry of external affairs dismiss the Teesta River Project as non-viable due to lack of adequate water, security concerns similar to those over China's involvement in Mongla port remains.

Tarique Rahman's maiden foreign visit to China (instead of the customary first visit to India under earlier regimes) and the transfer of key infrastructure projects to China signals Bangladesh's broader policy

shift to reroute regional transit dependency away from Indian networks. The shift appears quite rational in light of the anti-Bangladesh rhetoric of BJP leaders in the run-up to the West Bengal elections and their preoccupation with the rise of radicalism along the border districts.

At the same time, the decision of the US department of war to rename the US Indo-Pacific Command back to its legacy title, US Pacific Command, dropping the 'Indo' prefix, leaves no room for doubt on who is filling the strategic vacuum. "There is no doubt that China now has a stronger footprint in the Bay of Bengal region. While Bangladesh has expressed its willingness to work closely with India, there is no reason why it won't deepen its engagement with China," says Bangladesh watcher Sreeradha Datta, lamenting the demise of India-fronted regional initiatives like BIMSTEC. ■

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Tarique Rahman's visit to China was a clear signal that Bangladesh is now pivoting away from India. Inevitable?

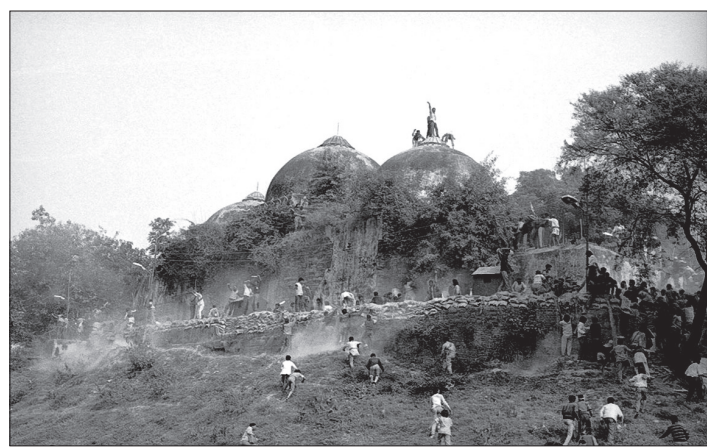
When history collides with Hindutva mythology

Academic and author Subhoranjan Dasgupta takes a detour from his reading of Romila Thapar's recently published memoir to explain why the grande dame of ancient Indian history is so reviled by the Hindutva establishment

Babri Masjid fell in 1992. For the BJP, its ideological mentor the RSS and its militant affiliate Vishva Hindu Parishad, which spearheaded the movement for Ram Janmabhoomi, this was a moment of civilisational triumph. For other Indians, still an overwhelming majority composed overwhelmingly of Hindus, proud of their Constitution's devotion to pluralism, it was a horrific reminder that the ghosts of Partition had not been exorcised, that religious bigotry was alive and kicking in the country.

The first rumblings of discontent with academic retellings of ancient and early medieval Indian history can be traced to the first non-Congress, Janata Party government that was voted to power in 1977, the election that followed the Emergency. The BJP, in its earlier avatar as Bharatiya Jana Sangh, was an influential partner in this government and it used its leverage to voice its impatience with the kind of history that had been disseminated and taught till then. Morarji Desai, then prime minister, was more than just sympathetic to the clamour; he 'asked that the history textbooks prescribed by the NCERT be banned, a stunning surprise.' (*Just Being: A Memoir*, Seagull Books, p.20).

The ensuing conflict, an outcome of the radical change in policy, soon degenerated into virulent, personal



Karsevaks atop the Babri Masjid shortly before it was demolished on 6 December 1992

attacks on old-vanguard historians like Romila Thapar. Affluent NRIs, no doubt egged on by their mentors in Delhi, sneeringly remarked 'I [Romila Thapar] was incompetent as a historian, inept as a scholar, and should never have been appointed to the position I held.' (p.221).

The Janata Party experiment unravelled quickly, which meant that the project to rewrite Indian history, in order to align it with the Hindutva project, had to wait till the first NDA government came to power in 1998 under its disarmingly amiable prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee.

On the surface, Vajpayee affected a moderate outlook with assertions like "India was secular, is secular, and will be secular," but he did nothing to curb his rampaging HRD minister Murali Manohar Joshi, who revived the history project and went after the likes of Irfan Habib, Sarvepalli Gopal and his bête noire, Romila Thapar.

In her own words, "Death threats that started in the 1980s were more often made at midnight over the phone" (p.222). They 'regarded me

as a threat that had to be silenced.' (p.481).

Why was Thapar such a prime target, I've often wondered. Two reasons come to mind. Thapar's area of interest was ancient and early India or the so-called Hindu and pre-Muslim India, which our majoritarian Hindutvavadis consider their stomping ground. And this gadfly impertinently questioned the glory and grandeur, the peace and harmony that reigned before the Muslim invaders arrived.

Indeed Romila Thapar and Richard Eaton, the celebrated American historian, had with their scholarship demolished this myth of Hindu India. While Thapar exposed (perhaps most eloquently in her 2020 book of essays *Voices of Dissent*) the bitter disputes between the Brahmanas and Shramanas, which even led to bloodshed and carnage, Eaton narrated the furious battles waged by Hindu kings against one another, who not only plundered the victims' kingdoms but also destroyed their temples and deities (*Temple Desecration and Muslim States in Medieval India*, 2004).

So, the plunder of Hindu temples, packaged in the Hindutva retelling as their 'desecration', began on our Sanatani soil much before Mahmud of Ghazni first stormed the Somnath temple in CE 1026. The champions of Hindutva, who were badmouthing Thapar, could have even turned to Patanjali, the grammarian they so revere, whom Thapar also cites (in his 2nd century BCE opus *Mahabhasya*), as having described the relationship between the Brahmanas and Shramanas as one between 'the snake and the mongoose.'

Thapar also likely riles the champions of Hindutva because she

wrote the history textbooks for school students. In her own words: 'I was viewed by Hindutva as an unacceptable historian not so much because of my academic books but mainly because of the textbooks that I wrote for middle schools. Textbooks are pivotal to controlling the popular interpretation of history or any body of knowledge.' (p.218-219).

It's instructive to bear in mind the foundational myths of Hindutva history. We are led to believe that India's pre-Muslim 'sanatani' past was a period of peace and social harmony. To hold on to this view, it elides the inhuman caste oppression of this time. To see it as 'an era of peace' is to ignore that great saga of forever wars—the Mahabharata, it is to ignore the annexationist practice of the 'ashwamedha yagna' that fuelled nonstop wars among Hindu kingdoms in this period.

The other myth about this sanatani Hindu civilisation are egregious overstatements about the strides it made in the arts and sciences, including the discovery of plastic surgery and airplanes. This civilisation was supposedly the greatest fountainhead of knowledge, a paradise looted and plundered by Muslim invaders, whose rule over these lands for five centuries constitute the Dark Ages of Indian history. In this reckoning of history, not a single Muslim monarch, not even Akbar, did anything of note or lasting value. They were all 'desecrators' and are, therefore, best erased from our history textbooks.

On the years of the British Raj, this fictionalised history is ambivalent and often contradictory because the people who held this worldview were absent in the freedom struggle. In fact, they collaborated with the British at times, as the eminent historian Sumit Sarkar has shown in his meticulously researched work *Towards Freedom*, which the NDA government had suppressed but was later published (Part 1 in 2007, Part 2 in 2009) by OUP.

No wonder Romila Thapar infuriates the Hindutva hordes and their preferred mythologists masquerading as historians. They pick on her because she challenges the Hindutvavadis on their own

stomping ground. Her very first book, *Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (1961) uses epigraphic and archaeological sources to show that the Mauryan state was secular, based on political pragmatism rather than religious piety. She debunks the myth of a Hindu golden period. Indeed, this denunciation runs like a refrain in her writings and can be heard in the same no-nonsense register in *Just Being*. Sample these: 'If Hindutva is Hindutva, then it had demonstrated that it was as violent and intolerant as any other religion' (p.383); 'religious nationalism plays havoc with history' (Page 400); 'Hindutva is not a religion and it is not Hinduism. I label Hindutva as 'Syndicated Hindutva'' (p.212) ...

She maintains that we have kept our own history—in our epics and discourses, edicts and monuments, and in excellent chronological narratives like Kalhana's 12th century CE classic *Rajatarangini*. In other words, her allegedly 'anti-Hindu', 'Eurocentric', 'Marxist' reading of history does not regurgitate the findings of colonial historians, as the Sanatanis do, in peddling the pernicious, colonial thesis of endless wars between Hindus and Muslims.

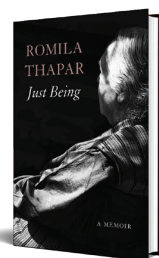
In *Somanatha* (2004) too, she nudges us to question this polarising Hindu-Muslim narrative: was Mahmud of Ghazni a religious bigot or a merciless plunderer, who did not hesitate to ravage the mosque at Kandahar after his assault on Somnath? Those who have issued death sentences on her, have still not answered this question.

Firmly opposed to Hindutva's compartmentalisation of culture and civilisation, Thapar argues that 'civilisation is not a closed entity' but rather 'a porous condition, shaped by the interface of multiple cultures.' (p.572)

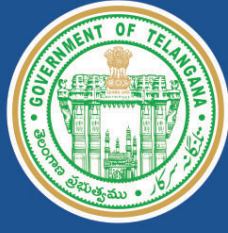
Her redemptive vision as a historian brings to mind these lines from her favourite poet T.S. Eliot in his 1920 poem 'Gerontion':

'After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now/ History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors/ And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions./ Guides us by vanities.' ■

Photo: Getty Images



Hindutva mythologists masquerading as historians pick on Romila Thapar because she defies them on their own stomping ground



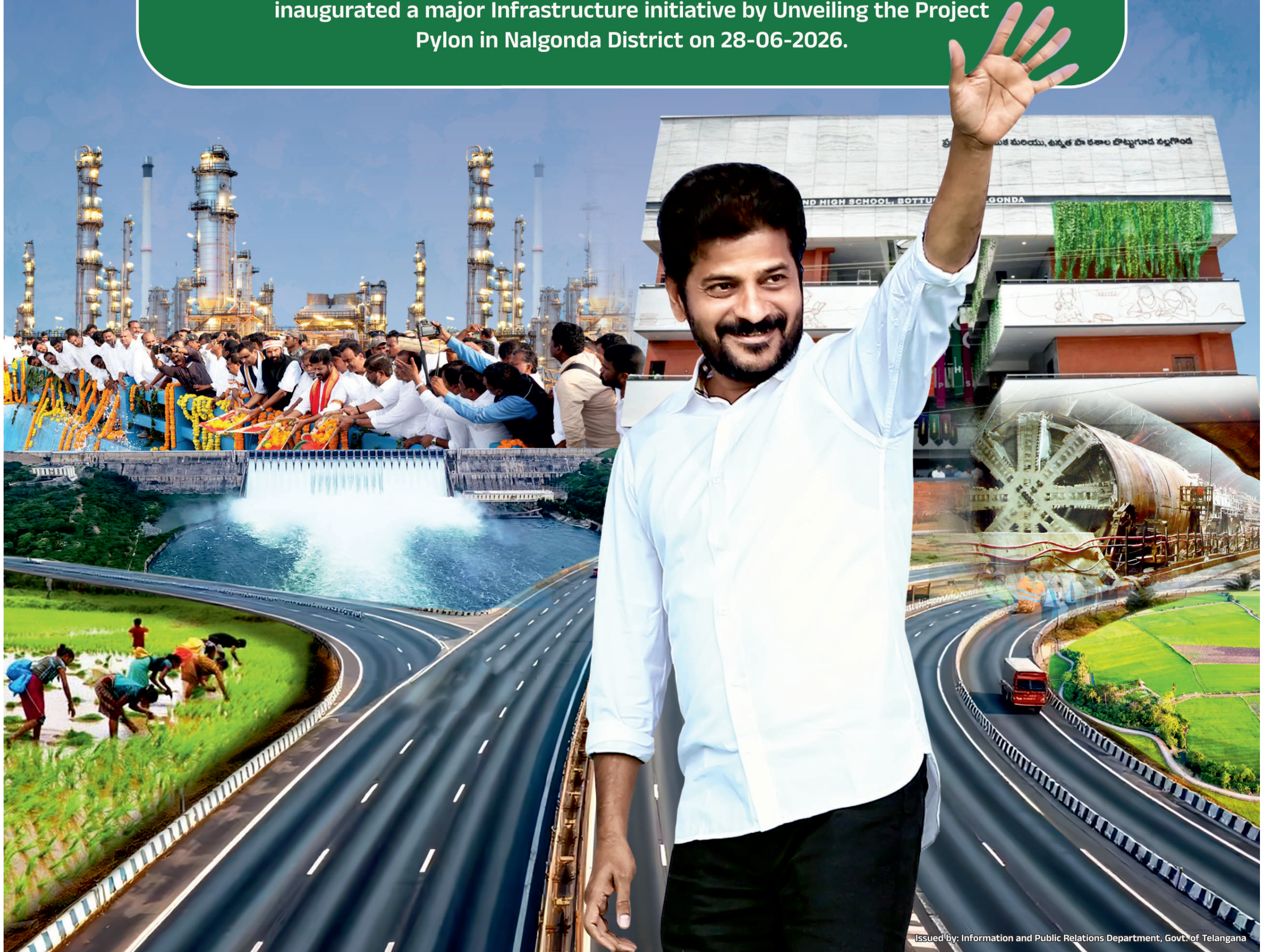
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