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The mystery of the book that never was

What makes General Naravane's 'unpublished' memoir so terrifying for the Government of India?

A.J. Prabhu

Barely two minutes after Rahul Gandhi began speaking in the Lok Sabha on 2 February, a visibly agitated Rajnath Singh leapt up. The House had been quiet until the Leader of the Opposition began reading a few lines from an article based on the memoirs of former army chief General M.M. Naravane.

"When four Chinese tanks entered Indian territory, the General writes..." is all Gandhi could say before the defence minister, flanked by prime minister Narendra Modi and home minister Amit Shah, sprang to his feet and cut him short.

There was no such book! The Speaker must disallow reading unsubstantiated content!

Over the next 10 minutes, Singh rose at least four times to make the same point: The book the LOP is referring to was never published... I have only one question: where is the book he is quoting from...? If he has the book, let him lay a copy of the book in the House... This book was never published... let him produce a copy of the book...

On 4 February, Rahul Gandhi heeded the call and brought a copy of the book with him. Holding it up to cameras, he said: "Every youngster in India should see that this book exists."

When Congress MP K.C. Venugopal sought to draw the Speaker's attention to the fact that the LOP was reading from a magazine article—"Naravane's Moment of Truth" by Sushant Singh, published in *Caravan*, February 2026—Amit Shah countered: "Magazines can publish anything... If the book has not been published, how can it be quoted?" When Rahul Gandhi insisted the content was "one hundred per cent authentic", Speaker Om Birla ruled him out. The raksha mantri had spoken, and that was that. The book did not exist.

Turns out it did. General Naravane's *Four Stars of Destiny* was clearly listed by publisher Penguin Random House—publishing date: 30 April 2024, print length: 448 pages, weight: 650 grams, ISBN numbers: 10-0670099759 and 13-978-0670099. It was also listed by online retailers like Amazon and Flipkart.

These online traces were scrubbed clean in less than 48 hours. With physical evidence in hand, Gandhi challenged the government: "If the prime minister comes to the House—I doubt he will—I would like to present the book to him... The home minister said... the book did not exist; the defence minister and the government said the book was never published, but here it is..."

The essay that Gandhi was prevented from quoting begins with an extract that was released by the *Press Trust of India* in December 2023 and carried by *The Print* on 18 December 2023. Details have been in the public domain for the past two years. Yet the government went blue in the face to shush it up in Parliament.

"What is written in it that they are so scared of? If they are not scared, they should allow me to read it. Why are they so scared?" asked Gandhi.

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Gen. Manoj Mukund Naravane (Retd) was chief of army staff between December 2019 and April 2022. This was the period when Indian and Chinese troops clashed in Galwan Valley, Ladakh; 20 Indian soldiers were killed in hand-to-hand combat. This was also the period when India's first chief of defence staff (CDS) was appointed, Gen. Bipin Rawat, who presided over all three arms of the defence forces. A consequential period, which saw Chinese incursions in eastern Ladakh and the loss of Indian territory—that the current government seems reconciled to—and the rollout of the controversial Agnipath scheme, which, Naravane writes, came as a bolt from the blue and was resisted by the army.

Sushant Singh, lecturer at Yale University, and consulting editor with *Caravan*, is a former army man himself. He based his essay on a typed manuscript of Naravane's book. He writes: 'Here's why this essay on Naravane's memoir matters... it sheds light on Chinese aggression, the decisions that led to the loss of Indian lives and territory, and the troubling absence of political accountability at a moment when the country stood on the brink of war.'

Singh begins with a reference to what happened after the army chief received a phone call at 8.15 p.m. on 31 August 2020. It



Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi shows a copy of the book that apparently does not exist

At a critical moment in the India-China standoff of 2020, army chief Naravane was made to wait over two hours for PM Modi's directive: "Jo uchit samjho, woh karo (do as you see fit)"

was eleven weeks since the hand-to-hand combat at Galwan. Indian and Chinese commanders were in disengagement talks at the Line of Actual Control. The informal China Study Group headed by national security advisor (NSA) Ajit Kumar Doval had held several rounds of meetings.

There was consensus, Naravane writes, that India needed to do something. However, he was instructed not to open fire on the Chinese unless a clearance was given 'from the very top'. The army pushed back. Given the events at Galwan, the army needed autonomy to act if provoked. It was eventually decided 'that as a last resort, if our own physical security was at stake, that detachment and that detachment alone could open fire in self-defence'.

The phone call on 31 August was from Lt Gen. Y.K. Joshi, who headed the Northern

Command. Four Chinese tanks had started moving towards the India-held position at Rachin La on the Kailash Range. Warning flares fired by Indian troops were being ignored. India held the advantage of height, artillery and heavier tanks. Gen. Joshi wanted permission to open fire to stop the advancing Chinese. Naravane called CDS Gen. Rawat, defence minister Rajnath Singh, NSA Ajit Doval, MEA S. Jaishankar, with the question: "What are my orders?"

In his account, quoted in the extracts released by *PTI* and in the *Caravan* essay, Gen. Naravane writes he was kept hanging till 10.30 p.m. That's when defence minister Rajnath Singh finally called to pass on prime minister Modi's directive: "Jo uchit samjho, woh karo (Do what you think fit)".

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"The ICC has been captured by a dominant member"

The run-up to the T20 World Cup (7 February to 8 March) saw two major hiccups: first, Bangladesh was expelled and then Pakistan announced a selective boycott of the marquee India game on 15 February. This is a warning sign of a failing global governing board, says Haroon Lorgat in an interview with Gautam Bhattacharyya.

There are few administrative roles in cricket that Lorgat, the former CEO of International Cricket Council (ICC), hasn't held in his distinguished career. A South African with Indian roots, Lorgat was in the hot seat between 2008 and 2012, before moving on as a special advisor to Sri Lanka Cricket, and taking over as the CEO of Cricket South Africa the very next year.

Now 65, Lorgat—a chartered accountant by profession who had been an accomplished allrounder for Eastern Province and Transvaal in South Africa's competitive domestic scene—took on many challenges at ICC, including the introduction of the Decision Review System (DRS) and the expansion of anti-corruption measures. Lorgat brought his experience and vision to conceptualising a T20 franchise league in his home country and helped lay the groundwork for the Pakistan Super League (PSL) as an advisor. Edited excerpts:

What do you make of Pakistan's selective boycott of the India game?

It'll be most unfortunate if it actually happens. The mere suggestion is a warning sign of a failing governing board that has been structurally captured by a dominant member, leaving smaller boards with almost no legitimate avenues to contest coercive power.

The ICC has created an environment where the dominant members' political comfort effectively determines participation norms. When one board can disengage selectively without sanction, it confirms that obligations in international cricket are enforced unevenly and shaped by power rather than principle. In that sense,



Photo: Getty Images

Pakistan's threat—or decision—lays bare a deeper crisis of governance, revealing the threatened boycott as a symptom of a captured and unfair system rather than a standalone political gesture.

It reflects a much wider issue, where might is right. [Considerations of] fairness, equity and justice seem to have escaped leaders around

the world.

Geopolitics seems to be getting precedence. Could ICC have avoided this?

Geopolitics was allowed to trump cricket long ago. The ICC traded independence for money, permitting the market power of one member to harden into political control over

scheduling, hosting and policy. ICC could have mitigated this crisis had it implemented the reforms recommended in the Woolf Report—in board and voting structures, needs-based funding and ethical safeguards, instead of endorsing a revenue and governance model that entrenched leverage and dominance. By refusing governance reform and allowing political and executive authority—the chairman and the CEO—to be concentrated in one shop, the ICC practically ensured that any dispute involving dominant members would escalate into a geopolitical showdown.

This favouritism towards one, or a chosen few, allows geopolitical hypocrisy to fester, forcing the likes of Pakistan into a stand that highlights cricket's politicisation under ICC's weak leadership.

True fairness demands accountability, not selective enforcement that favours some.

Has overdependence on one game (Ind-Pak) played a part in the crisis?

I do believe so and the ICC bears responsibility for engineering that dependency. The India-Pakistan fixture has been monetised as the crown jewel of all ICC events precisely because the commercial ecosystem and television audience in the Indian sub-continent underpins global broadcast revenues.

Once the ICC accepted a model where flagship events, hosting patterns and even the global calendar were reshaped around such broadcasters and advertisers, it effectively weaponised a single game as the financial fulcrum of world cricket, making any disruption—like Pakistan's threatened boycott—explosively consequential. Also inevitable. Overleveraging this one match is a direct result of a system

that rewards power over sporting equity. When that single game is withdrawn, the entire tournament architecture is destabilised.

How will it affect the saleability of international cricket in general?

Commercial partners have already signalled reduced valuations for international cricket. It is also a fact that international cricket is under threat from franchise leagues. Furthermore, ICC tournament design, venues and economics are built primarily around a few dominant members and only secondarily around competitive balance.

The boycott will serve to erode confidence in ICC events as genuine global competitions and accelerate the decline in the value of international cricket. Most members already struggle with precarious finances and shrinking opportunities. It cannot be right for the global game that one member gets 38.5 per cent share while the rest get a fraction of that amount to survive, let alone grow the game.

Will all this also hit the Asian Cricket Council (ACC)?

It seems obvious the ACC will also be impacted as it operates in an ecosystem where the same imbalances exist. India is an indispensable market on which other Asian boards are heavily dependent. The recent expulsion of Bangladesh from the T20 World Cup and the threatened boycott by Pakistan will shake the foundations of the ACC.

Bangladesh's attempt to relocate their fixtures signalled that even within Asia equity, sovereignty and security are negotiable if they clash with commercial priorities, straining the notion of a balanced and happy Asian bloc. ■

The mystery of a book that wasn't

Continued from page 1

Naravane writes, 'I had been handed a hot potato. With this carte blanche, the onus was now totally on me.' He told Joshi that India should not fire the first shot, and asked him to ensure that heavier Indian tanks were positioned at the edge of the ridge with nozzles pointed towards the Chinese tanks below.

If the prime minister was truly unavailable to the defence minister, the NSA, the CDS and the MEA for over two hours at such a critical moment, the government has a lot of explaining to do. Communication channels to the prime minister are open 24 hours a day and, under security protocols, he is never left alone. So—what happened on the evening of 31 August 2020? Will we ever know? *

Rajnath Singh's admission in the Lok Sabha on 3 February that clearance to Naravane's book was withheld because of 'factual inaccuracies' has added to the mystery. Could the book have been printed and published without clearance? Could it have been listed by Amazon, for pre-orders (which were then cancelled)? Could an extract have been released by PTT? Above all, if the book was never published, how did the physical copy appear and from where?

The former army chief himself does not seem to know of the government's decision to withhold clearance; perhaps the decision was never communicated to him? On *Aaj Tak* and at the Khushwant Singh Literature Festival (KSLF) in Kasauli in October 2025, he was pointedly asked why the book had not yet been released. At KSLF, Naravane said, 'My job was to write the book and give it to the publishers. It was the publishers who were to get permission from the Ministry of Defence. They gave (the book) to them. It is under review ... for more than a year now.' ■

The general also sought to allay suspicions of any foul play by pointing out that the vetting process may actually involve more than the MoD. While he had written about military operations, the contents, he said, might affect the external affairs ministry, defence production etc., and so the vetting process could drag. While it's still unclear when clearance was denied, Naravane has clearly not been informed.

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Both serving and retired army officers are required to seek clearance for any book they write. Books dealing with operational matters undergo a three-stage vetting process (army HQ, MoD and cabinet secretariat).

An interview to *India Today*, Lt Gen. K.J.S. 'Tiny' Dhillon (retd)—whose *Operation Sindoor: The Untold Story of India's Deep Strikes Inside Pakistan* was also published by Penguin Random House in September 2025, barely three months after the operation—listed three scenarios.

One, nothing objectionable is found and the book is cleared. Two, if objections are raised, the author is invited to explain his point of view and clearance granted after edits. Three, if the book gives out operational secrets that might affect national security, clearance is denied.

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While the government's directive 'Jo uchit samjho, woh karo' has been interpreted by spin masters as giving the army a free hand, what it suggests is an abdication of political responsibility. The government failed to convene the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS)—the highest policy-making body in matters of national security—and give clear directions to the army. By leaving the decision to Naravane and refusing to own it, were the political masters giving themselves room for plausible deniability? ■

Herjinder

Prime minister Narendra Modi's sudden visit to Dera Sachkhand Ballan in Jalandhar last Sunday, on the occasion of Ravidas Jayanti, was officially described as a spiritual outreach. But in Punjab's charged political atmosphere, few saw it as a routine religious engagement. Coming days after the Union government conferred the Padma Shri on dera chief Baba Nirjan Das, and the renaming of Adampur airport after Sant Ravidas, the visit has been widely interpreted as part of the BJP's renewed attempt to engineer a political opening in a state where it has traditionally struggled to find a firm footing.

Punjab has never been fertile ground for the BJP as an independent political force. Even after the party severed its decades-old alliance with the Shiromani Akali Dal, it failed to emerge as a serious contender on its own. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP marginally improved its vote share in Punjab but could not win a single seat. Its performance in the recently held local body elections was also underwhelming, reinforcing the perception that the party remains electorally marginal in the state.

Modi's visit to Dera Ballan, the renaming of Adampur airport and a Padma Shri for the dera chief are an all-too-obvious set of manoeuvres to court the Ravidasias

STATES 360° PUNJAB



The politics of BJP's Ravidasia outreach



Photo: IANS

PM Narendra Modi at the Dera Sachkhand Ballan in Jalandhar

Yet, the BJP appears far from reconciled to political irrelevance in Punjab. Instead, it seems to be experimenting with a long-term strategy centred on reshaping social coalitions, particularly by mobilising Dalit communities along caste and religious lines. The renewed focus on the Ravidasia community is seen as a key component of this strategy.

The Ravidasias form the second-largest Dalit community in Punjab after the Mazhabi Sikhs. They are concentrated largely in the Doaba region, and are a decisive factor in nearly 35 assembly constituencies, comprising over 30 per cent of the electorate. Unlike other Dalit groups, they are prosperous, with a significant section engaged in small businesses, overseas employment and professional occupations. The community also has a substantial and influential diaspora in countries like the UK, Canada and Italy, which plays a role in shaping local religious and political discourse back home.

Traditionally, Ravidasias in Punjab have voted overwhelmingly for the Congress and, to a lesser extent, for the Bahujan Samaj Party. The BJP has historically found little traction among them. Its recent outreach, therefore, marks a notable departure from past patterns.

The symbolism deployed in this outreach is unmistakable. Renaming the Adampur airport after Sant Ravidas, honouring the Dera Ballan

chief with a Padma award, and the PM's visit to the dera are all powerful signals aimed at projecting the BJP as a party attentive to Ravidasia identity and aspirations. The fact that Ravidasias also constitute a significant segment of the electorate in Modi's own parliamentary constituency of Varanasi adds another layer of political calculation.

Senior BJP leaders and Sangh Parivar figures have also been frequent visitors to Dera Ballan in recent years. Union home minister Amit Shah and RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat have both paid visits, underlining the importance the organisation attaches to the dera and the community it represents.

According to Amritsar-based political scientist Prof. Jagroop Singh Sekhon, the party is also quietly mobilising retired bureaucrats and officials from the Ravidasia community to build influence in rural Punjab.

It's also being said that the BJP is trying to create a social bridge by using respected figures from within the community with administrative experience and local credibility.

Supporters of this strategy argue that the BJP is merely doing what every national party does—seeking to expand its social base by reaching out to marginalised communities.

Critics see it as an attempt to rip Punjab's social fabric by deepening caste and religious fissures.

Sociologist Prof. Manjit Singh

offers a more cautious assessment. He believes that while the BJP's outreach may generate visibility, its actual electoral impact is likely to remain limited. 'The BJP in Punjab is essentially trying to polarise non-Jat and non-Sikh voters in rural areas and consolidate its urban base,' he told *National Herald*. 'But that base itself is not very large. I don't see this strategy dramatically altering Punjab's politics.'

The Union government's recent actions concerning Chandigarh and Panjab University, which many Punjabis perceive as an encroachment on the state's rights, has added to the resentment. Political observers believe these moves have further alienated the electorate from the BJP, cutting across caste and community lines.

Beyond electoral arithmetic, there are deeper ideological tensions that could complicate the BJP's outreach. For over a decade, Baba Nirjan Das has been demanding official recognition of Ravidasia as a separate religion. This demand directly conflicts with the ideological position of the Sangh Parivar, which views Ravidasias—and even Sikhs—as integral to the broader Hindu fold. Many observers believe this contradiction could eventually strain the relationship between the dera leadership and the BJP-RSS combine.

'There is a fundamental contradiction here,' said a senior academic familiar with Dalit religious movements. 'You cannot simultaneously court a community's distinct religious identity and deny its theological basis.'

Perhaps the most serious concern relates to Punjab's fragile social harmony. Critics fear that the BJP's 'divide and mobilise' approach, if pushed aggressively, could reopen old wounds and disturb communal peace.

Whether the BJP's Ravidasia strategy proves to be a political breakthrough or a marginal experiment remains to be seen. For now, it underscores the party's determination to remain relevant and its willingness to deploy identity politics in pursuit of that goal. ■

Women, minorities key in Bangladesh polls

Sourabh Sen

A Hindu woman confronts Bangladesh Nationalist Party candidate and party joint general secretary Chowdhury Anee at Lakshminarayan constituency. Why must Hindus always bear the brunt of whatever happens, good or bad, she asks. Anee patiently hears the college lecturer out and softly replies that he is not aware of any event in the locality that targeted Hindus in the past. However, he would address any apprehensions.

The woman breaks into a smile. 'I am safe and happy here; I have no issues but I was talking about the entire country, not just about me,' she adds. The video, which received scant attention in Bangladesh, was extensively shared on social media.

Hindus constitute barely eight per cent of Bangladesh's population and their political representation has always been insignificant. Most of the Hindu candidates in the last three elections were fielded by the Awami League. Seventeen Hindu candidates won last time and three became cabinet ministers in Sheikh Hasina's government. With Hasina in exile and the Awami League banned from taking part in the election, there were doubts on the representation of Hindus.

Though there is not much change in the number of Hindus—around 80—contesting for a seat in the Jatiya Sangsad (national parliament), the difference is that other parties too have put up Hindu candidates. Even the Jamaat-e-Islami has put up a Hindu candidate, Krishna Nandi in Khulna. Its alliance partner NCP has fielded two—one of them a woman—and the Jamaat's Ameer (highest-ranking officer) Shafiqur Rahman campaigned for both.

One of the most talked-about candidates is Manisha Chakrabarti, contesting from the Brahmanbaria constituency. Fielded by the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Chakrabarti, a doctor, is receiving support from unexpected quarters, even though her chances of victory appear slim. Burqa-clad

women campaigning for the BNP's minority front leader Tarun Dey have also been accepted by voters.

The outcome of the 12 February election will be determined by an estimated 45 million first-time voters between the age of 18 and 35, many of whom were unable to exercise their franchise in the past. While 6.28 crore women voters are also crucial, only 80 of the 1,981 candidates are women vying for a seat in the 300-member parliament.

Nearly all prominent political parties have nominated candidates from the minority community. The CPB has fielded the highest number of 17. The BNP has fielded six, of whom two are senior leaders—standing committee member Gayeshwar Chandra Roy and vice chairman Nitai Roy Chowdhury.

'The BNP—unlike Jamaat and other similar parties—avoids taking extreme positions and adheres to centrist politics. It regards minorities as citizens with equal rights. Former BNP chairman late Khaleda Zia often expressed her discomfort in using the term 'minority,'' recalls Dr. Shakhawat Hossain Sayantan, author, political analyst and secretary general of G-9, a think tank that advises the BNP.

'We have nominated a Hindu candidate. I am going to campaign for him. Hindus will vote for Jamaat. How much more evidence do we need to provide to convince people that we are in favour of communal harmony?' asked Mia Golam Pawar, a Jamaat candidate from Khulna-5. Speaking to *National Herald*, Pawar said the narrative of the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh was overstated.

The minority narrative in Bangladesh is rather complex and cannot be explained in terms of simple religious or social binaries. In the past, the BNP was accused of being unsympathetic towards minorities, citing instances of attacks on Hindus by party activists. The BNP's decision to ally with Jamaat as a coalition partner during its 2001-2006 term reinforced



Women supporters of Bangladesh Nationalist Party at an election campaign rally in Dhaka

Photo: Getty Images

In Bangladesh, as in India, parties in power have used minorities for political ends. Violence between the BNP and Awami League was also political—not religious

this impression. In India, it is the banned Awami League that is perceived as more tolerant and accommodating towards Hindus.

The ground reality, however, is not so simple. In Bangladesh, as in India, people and parties in power have used minorities to achieve their political goals, explains Hossain. The BNP versus Awami League rivalry expressed itself through acts of vendetta that often turned violent. What drove this violence was underlying political—not religious—identities and interests.

'The attack on Gayeshwar Chandra Roy is described as an attack on a BNP leader. However, when an Awami League leader—especially if he is from a minority group—is attacked, it is described in the media and public discourse as an attack by the BNP on a minority group,' Hossain added.

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The emergence of an Islamist

party like Jamaat in Bangladesh has complicated the question of women's empowerment. During an election rally on 22 January, Shafiqur Rahman declared, 'Together—women and men—we will build the Bangladesh of tomorrow... We can tolerate many things, but we will not tolerate any assault on the honour of our mothers and sisters. No form of violence against women will be allowed.'

Bangladesh watchers in India who have wagered on a reformed Jamaat were glad. But it did not take long for Rahman to do a volte face, saying women cannot take up leadership roles. Screenshots of a now-deleted post from Rahman's verified X account went viral on 31 January. The post reportedly claimed that women stepping outside their homes to work were morally decadent and exposed them to exploitation.

Rahman's remarks drew criticism from political parties,

rights activists and civil society organisations. On 1 February, the BNP's student wing Jatiotabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) staged a protest march in Dhaka University (recent student body elections were swept by the Jamaat-backed Islami Chhatra Shibir). JCD described Rahman's remarks as objectionable and degrading. Jamaat responded, saying Rahman's X account was hacked and the post did not reflect his views.

Pawar told *National Herald* that the hacking was done using the email of an employee at Bangabhaban—the Bangladesh president's official residence—and that the mail originated from India. The employee has since been arrested.

Describing Rahman's remarks as an open expression of misogyny, BNP's national election commission committee spokesperson Mahdi Amin said in a social media post: 'We see how our women, through their labour and sweat, produce goods and earn foreign currency. The global success of Bangladesh's garments industry owes a large part of its achievements to the contribution of our women.'

Rahman's remarks will work against the Jamaat in the elections. 'The party had no qualms about being part of the government under Begum Khaleda Zia in 2001,' pointed out a journalist in Dhaka.

Amidst all this, Bangladesh's social research organisation Innovision Consulting released the third round of its People's Election Pulse Survey on 30 January, which revealed the BNP consolidating its advantage over other parties.

The BNP appears to be holding its base while also drawing more support from those who previously leaned towards Jamaat or the NCP, as well as attracting Awami League voters. However, the survey could not determine the preferences of 30 per cent of respondents. The large voter swing from Jamaat to BNP could, in other words, potentially swing back. ■

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K.A. Shaji

On Republic Day, the Union government conferred the Padma Bhushan on 89-year-old Vellappally Natesan for 'social service'. The timing, just months before the assembly election, raised eyebrows.

Congress leaders and civil society groups questioned the award, pointing out that Vellappally had earlier dismissed them as political instruments, and that he had been named in over a hundred criminal cases, several involving allegations of corruption in cooperative banks and the misappropriation of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) funds.

While the BJP celebrated the decision unabashedly, chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan, along with cabinet colleagues V. Sivakutty, Saji Cherian and party leaders like Chinta Jerome, publicly congratulated him. BJP-affiliated social media crowed 'Ezava pride' and the award was projected as evidence that the BJP had finally acquired a credible social base in Kerala.

Almost on cue, Vellappally returned with a volley of statements targeting Muslims and the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML). He accused the League of "running the state by proxy", claimed that "Muslim appeasement" had reached dangerous levels, and warned that Kerala was becoming "another West Bengal".

Civil society groups condemned the remarks as communal and dangerous, but there wasn't a peep from those in power. Even as Vellappally intensified his attacks on Muslims, Pinarayi Vijayan and other CPI(M) leaders kept mum. The BJP defended his right to speak, framing the controversy as an assault on Hindu voices. It was an odd spectacle: a rabble-rousing Hindu community leader was not just being backed by the Hindu Right but also receiving tacit support from the Marxist Left.

To understand this one must trace Vellappally's personal trajectory. Born into a wealthy Ezava family in central Kerala, he built his fortune primarily in the alcohol business, emerging as one of the most influential liquor barons in the state.

His ascent in the SNDP combined economic power with organisational control, allowing him to dominate the Yogam for decades.

"This background embodies an irony," observes Sunny Kapikkad, scholar and social activist. "Sree Narayana Guru explicitly warned Ezavas against engaging in the production and sale of liquor, seeing it as a social evil that trapped the community in economic dependence and moral decline. Yet today, the custodian of the Guru's legacy is a man whose wealth and power are rooted in precisely the industry the Guru opposed."

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When Vellappally Natesan announced a grand alliance between the OBC Ezavas and upper caste Nairs, he chose his words carefully. Speaking as long-serving general secretary of the SNDP—one of the most

How Kerala resists Hindu political consolidation

Witness the collapse of Vellappally Natesan's bid to forge an alliance between the state's Ezavas and Nairs



Photo: Getty Images



Vellappally Natesan (left) has a reputation for flip flops. He first backed the State government on the Sabarimala issue only to later endorse the BJP-led stir against the SC verdict

You cannot lead a Hindu civilisational front while aligning with a Marxist chief minister. You cannot claim to defend secular values while deploying communal rhetoric

powerful socio-religious outfits in the state that claims to carry forward the reformist legacy of 19th century leader Sree Narayana Guru—Vellappally projected the idea as a civilisational necessity. Kerala's Hindus, he argued, must overcome internal divisions and consolidate in the face of demographic change and minority assertion.

The numbers lent his claim a seductive plausibility. Ezavas, widely regarded as the largest Hindu community in Kerala, are estimated to constitute 22–25 per cent of the population. Nairs, a forward caste, make up 12–15 per cent. Together, they account for well over a third of the state's people, a potentially decisive bloc in a polity where elections are often settled by wafer-thin margins.

The political impact was immediate—with assembly elections approaching, parties started recalibrating strategies. An SNDP-Nair Service Society (NSS) alliance would redraw Kerala's political map.

Vellappally's ambiguous political location makes him harder to pin. In recent years, he has positioned himself as a man who belongs everywhere yet nowhere. His family-run political party, the Bharath Dharma Jana Sena (BDJS), led by wife Preethi Natesan and son Thushar

Vellappally, is a constituent of the BJP-led NDA (National Democratic Alliance) at the Centre. Yet, Vellappally has also openly described Pinarayi Vijayan as a close confidant and projected himself as a fellow-traveller. At the same time, he has intensified his attacks on the Congress, particularly V.D. Satheesan, leader of the Opposition in the state for the past four years.

Natesan's unity declaration was immediately echoed by G. Sukumaran Nair, the combative general secretary of the NSS. Both leaders are united in their hostility to the Congress and share a common discomfort with the party's renewed emphasis on secularism and minority rights.

Yet the grand alliance collapsed almost as soon as it was announced. Within days, the NSS board publicly distanced itself from the proposal, exposing not just the social fragility of Vellappally's project but also the institutional resistance within the NSS to overt political mobilisation that could be read as an extension of the BJP-RSS agenda.

Vellappally lashed out at the NSS leaders, accusing them of "betraying Hindu interests". The NSS retreated into neutrality. The BJP and CPI(M), both

hopeful of extracting electoral dividends from Vellappally's manoeuvres, were left looking like awkward bystanders.

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Kerala's demography explains why leaders like Vellappally matter so much to political parties. The populous Ezavas have historically been the backbone of the Communist movement. They dominated trade unions, peasant struggles and cooperative institutions for decades. The Nairs have historically held a privileged position in Kerala's caste hierarchy, with disproportionate representation in land ownership, education and the bureaucracy. They have had a strong presence in the Congress and, more recently, in the BJP.

"Together, these two communities represent an enormous reservoir of political influence," notes academic J. Prabhakar. "Even partial shifts in Ezava or Nair voting patterns can change outcomes in dozens of constituencies."

This wasn't Vellappally's first attempt at Hindu consolidation. What was different this time was the speed with which it unravelled. "The breakdown was telling," observes political analyst M.N. Karassery. "If even Sukumaran Nair, no champion of pluralism, wouldn't endorse Vellappally's plan, it shows how politically radioactive overt religious consolidation is in Kerala."

Vellappally's political evolution is riddled with contradictions. In the past, he aligned closely with the Muslim League, led joint movements for enhanced reservations and spoke the language of minority rights. During the Sabarimala controversy, when the Supreme Court allowed women of all ages to enter the temple, he stood firmly with the state government, welcomed the verdict, and even became an office bearer of the government-backed Kerala renaissance movement.

Later, he declared that the verdict had "hurt Hindu sentiments" and accused activists supporting women's entry of being part of an "anti-Hindu conspiracy". He publicly endorsed the BJP-led agitation against the judgment, sending contradictory signals to both leftist allies and rightist patrons.

"Vellappally's politics is not anchored in any stable ideological commitment," Karassery argues. "It moves opportunistically across fronts, aligning with the BJP at one moment, embracing the CPI(M) at another, while attacking the Congress relentlessly. His support for Pinarayi is transactional. His proximity to the BJP is strategic."

Kerala's political culture is deeply sceptical of such incoherence. "You cannot lead a Hindu civilisational front while aligning with a Marxist chief minister," Karassery warns.

"The deeper danger lies not in whether Vellappally wins elections," says academic and social thinker T.S. Shyam Kumar, "but in what his politics is doing to Kerala's moral language. By appropriating the legacy of Sree Narayana Guru, he is hollowing it out from within."

Sree Narayana Guru was for a society beyond caste, beyond religious fear, beyond inherited domination. To invoke his name while practising exclusion is a betrayal of the ethical foundation of Kerala's modern consciousness. ■

UNION BUDGET 2026-27

These 'reforms' are elitist and pro-business

True reforms would ensure a level playing field, provide fair opportunities for marginalised groups, empower informal workers and boost public investments in education, healthcare and social security

Arun Kumar

Both the Union Budget 2026 and the Economic Survey repeatedly mention 'reforms'. Every chapter of the survey uses the word, while prime minister Narendra Modi insists that 'Today, India is riding Reform Express'. What exactly does the word mean? Does it have a narrow connotation based on the policymaker's belief or is it something wider?

The survey highlights the reforms already underway—production-linked incentives (PLI), liberalised foreign direct investment (FDI), logistics modernisation, tax simplification, digital infrastructure rollout, labour law changes, skilling drives, improved female workforce participation, infrastructure expansion and easier entry-exit norms for businesses. It's an impressive list, credited for recent economic growth and lifting potential GDP growth to 7 per cent.

But are these reforms really delivering the goods?

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has repeatedly flagged that India's GDP data lacks credibility. It has pointed to many flaws in India's methods of measuring its economy, most importantly in the informal sector. The bulk of available data is from the organised sector. Hence growth is misrepresented. The survey has nothing to say about this. It does not offer an explanation for the errors in GDP data nor does it clarify if these 'reforms' have led to good growth.

Despite the claimed reforms, the share of

manufacturing in GDP has shrunk to around 12 per cent. The PLI scheme is way behind target with barely 10 per cent of allocated funds disbursed over four years. Skilling schemes have missed targets, as skilled workers are unable to find appropriate jobs. Schemes launched under the Employment Linked Incentive (ELI), announced with much fanfare, have barely taken off. To cover up, marginal employment and unpaid work is being counted—practices that defy ILO definitions. Poverty reduction is being claimed on the basis of faulty comparison of NFHS (National Family Health Survey) data.

The tax cuts announced in the Budget benefit the organised sector and the affluent. Raising the income tax exemption limit to Rs 12.75 lakh benefits only the top 1–2 per cent of the population. The middle class, especially those in the Rs 7 lakh to Rs 12 lakh income bracket, will benefit only marginally. Direct tax collections have declined by about Rs 2 lakh crore, impacting public expenditure on education and health.

Cuts in GST mainly help the organised sector—who pay the most GST—making their products cheaper when compared to the unorganised sector. Demand shifts towards the former may lead to higher consumption but will adversely impact income in the unorganised sector.

India's vast black economy undermines any attempt at reform by escaping tax and regulatory frameworks. A low direct tax to GDP ratio of 6.5 per cent—one of the lowest in the world—indicates the extent of this black economy. It also reduces potential growth rate, which has not been factored in the Economic Survey.

The newly enacted Labour Codes and the move to replace MGNREGA will further weaken the negligible bargaining power of farmers and trade unionised workers. Both changes undoubtedly come in response to trade pressure from the EU and the US who want access to Indian markets. Agricultural prices will drop further below minimum



Photo: Getty Images

support price (where MSP is announced) and non-agricultural producers will find their margins squeezed.

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Not only are these reforms pro-business, they are elitist. Air travel and over-priced deluxe trains are promoted while the masses are packed into trains and buses like sardines. Private businesses are being promoted via elite projects and privatisation. The Budget announced the setting up of five university towns—another red herring given that existing top universities are being eviscerated.

The anti-democratic stance of the government becomes apparent when it proposes dilutions in RTI, curtailing people's rights to scrutinise policies and expose the anti-people stance of those in the top echelons of policymaking. How anti-labour our elites are came to the fore recently when a top functionary of our constitutional court publicly blamed workers for the closure of factories and inadequate industrialisation. The argument simply ignores the promise in our

Those benefitting from the system are demanding more—and getting it. The marginalised are getting further marginalised. The so-called reforms are a zero-sum game

Constitution to give everyone a living wage. The Budget promotes tourism as a means of promoting employment. Wouldn't that promote commercialisation and overwhelm local cultures? There is talk of *swadeshi* and *atmanirbharata* while simultaneously promoting free trade. Given our weak R&D base, wouldn't India get swamped, as has happened with previous free trade agreements (FTAs)? China overwhelms us without an FTA. To meet the challenge, there is a need to focus on education, but underinvestment in the sector coupled with promoting unscientific ideas undermines the drive for innovation.

Clearly, India suffers from a demand problem. That requires the government to promote policies to reduce inequalities. But the Budget does the exact opposite by giving more to those who have been cornering the gains from growth.

The marginalised need quality employment but that is not the focus since resources are being funnelled mostly into organised sectors.

The promotion of crony capitalism spoils the investment climate. When rulers play favourites among businesses, the rest feel threatened. No wonder a large number of ultra-high net worth individuals are leaving the country.

True reforms would ensure a level playing field, provide fair opportunities for marginalised groups, empower informal workers and boost public investments in education, healthcare and social security. In a vicious cycle, those benefitting from the system are demanding more—and getting it. The marginalised, on the other hand, are getting further marginalised. That is at the root of rising inequality. And that is why the so-called reforms have become a zero-sum game. ■

ARUN KUMAR is a retired professor of economics, JNU, and the author of Indian Economy's Greatest Crisis: Impact of the Coronavirus and the Road Ahead

Mohd. Deepak, the new hero in town

A rare act of allyship comes with a price and a question: who is patronising the mob?

Rashme Sehgal and Nandlal Sharma

The sleepy town of Kotdwara, a little over 100 kilometre from Dehradun, has been in the news since 26 January, when two Hindu men confronted a Bajrang Dal gang for harassing a Muslim shopkeeper.

In recent years, the harassment of Muslims in Uttarakhand has become an everyday occurrence. Mobs patronised by politicians rule the streets and even the police do not come in their way. Resistance to 'Hindutva' goons was unthinkable until Deepak Kashyap and his friend Vijay Rawat stood up for Wakeel Ahmed. Born in Kotdwara, seventy-five-year-old Ahmed owns 'Baba Dresses', a garment shop that has been selling cloth for school uniforms for over four decades.

But how dare a Muslim-owned outlet flaunt the word 'Baba'! The Bajrangis wanted the shop name to be changed and changed immediately. When Ahmed, who suffers from Parkinson's, begged for time, they abused and pushed him around. That's when Deepak and Vijay, who were chatting with friends nearby, intervened. They protested against their foul language and maltreatment. A heated exchange followed.

It's not clear who shot a short video of the altercation and shared it on social media. The clip went viral for an unusual reason—when the mob asked Kashyap his name, he looked them in the eye and replied, "My name is Mohammad Deepak".

Speaking to this correspondent, Deepak said that although he is a Hindu, he believes in *insaaniyat*. "No religion propagates hate for another!"

A tall, muscular man, the 40-something gym-owner was clearly angry. "I have lived in Kotdwara all my life, everybody here knows me by name. So, when they asked for my name, I realised they were outsiders," he says. Since they had no other intention but to harass a Muslim shopkeeper, identifying himself as a fellow Muslim seemed to be the right thing to do.

Deepak and Ahmed were no more than nodding acquaintances. Whenever he visited friends who have shops in the neighbourhood, he would greet the old man out of common courtesy. Raised by a single mother who sold tea for a living, it was part

of his upbringing to be respectful to elders and do the right thing, he says. After the incident on 26 January, they met again on 4 February. The trembling old man embraced Kashyap. His defiance had given him strength, he said, and the hope that he is not alone in his hometown.

Both have since paid the price for their pushback. Customers have dwindled at Ahmed's shop and Deepak's gym stayed closed for over a week. On 31 January, a much bigger mob arrived in Kotdwara in SUVs from Dehradun. They converged outside his gym and residence. They abused him, his wife and mother, while he watched helplessly. Remembering their abuses, this strong man breaks down. He has suffered losses, his mother is afraid, his wife is traumatised. The police are far from sympathetic and a large section of fellow Hindus in the town blame him for the fracas and for drawing attention to Kotdwara.

The leader of the mob is a known face, a resident of Haridwar often used by the ruling party to foment trouble. The Bajrang Dal has warned Deepak that he will pay dearly for his defiance. The police have filed an FIR against Deepak under Sections 310(2) (voluntarily causing hurt), 191(1) (rioting), 351(2) (criminal intimidation), 352 (breach of peace). The FIR has been filed on the complaint of a Kamal Pal, who alleged that Deepak, Vijay and their friends abused and attacked the miscreants, though the videos show the exact opposite.

The FIR that has been filed against the 30-40 'unknown people' in the mob that surrounded Deepak's house—under Sections 191(2) (rioting), 121(2) (voluntarily causing hurt), 126(2) (wrongful restraint), 196(2) (promoting enmity between different groups), 352 (breach of peace)—is unlikely to go far. Strangers to Kotdwara, most of them are known faces to the people and police of Dehradun.

The BJP government headed by Pushkar Singh Dhami has given a free hand to the Bajrang Dal and other communal groups to harass and beat up people belonging to the minority community. With just ten months to go before another assembly election, the government has little to show by way of good governance. Islamophobia is the only weapon Dhami possesses which is why he has unleashed it with a vengeance.

Dehradun-based political commentator Trilochan Bhatt believes the increase in



Wakeel Ahmed (left) and Deepak Kashyap (far left and above) at the gym he owns in Kotdwara



Resistance to 'Hindutva' goons was unthinkable until Deepak Kashyap and his friend Vijay Rawat stood up for Wakeel Ahmed on Republic Day

communal clashes over the last two months is a diversionary tactic to shift attention from the Ankita Bhandari rape and murder case. Despite the government handing the inquiry to the CBI—after having resisted the demand for years—the people's protests refuse to die down. Bhatt points out the reason for their fury—the inquiry is based on an FIR filed by Dr Anil Joshi, an environmentalist, who has no locus standi on this case.

Ankita Bhandari's parents had demanded an additional FIR to investigate the role of prominent BJP leaders in burying the case—that has not happened. The people of Uttarakhand have risen as one to support that demand, and a panchayat is likely to assemble on Sunday, 8 February.

The CPI(ML) state secretary Indresh Maikhuri is also of the opinion that communal sentiments are being deliberately inflamed to distract from public demand for an investigation supervised by a Supreme Court judge.

Social worker Charu Tiwari believes that without the patronage of the government and the police, the Kotdwara incident could not have taken place. The chief minister was present in town on 31 January when the mob of rowdy

outsiders reached Deepak's doorstep. Police jeeps were following the mob, he recalls, and the local police station is only a stone's throw from the gym. How then was the mob able to harass Deepak and his family for nearly four hours, he asks.

The chief minister of Uttarakhand has the dubious distinction of topping the list of people delivering hate speeches in 2025. A report compiled by the Centre for the Study of Organised Hate and released by India Hate Lab attributes 71 hate speeches to Pushkar Singh Dhami. He repeatedly uses reprehensible terms like 'land jihad', 'love jihad', 'masjid jihad', 'mazaar jihad' and 'thook jihad', and encourages others to do the same. Hate speech incidents in Uttarakhand went up from 65 in 2024 to 155 in 2025. Dhami is proud of his 'achievement'. Proud of 'protecting the state's culture and demography.'

Meanwhile, Mohammad Deepak has had to shift his family. Despite people lauding his courage across the country, some even travelling to Kotdwara to meet him and take selfies with him, his future is uncertain.

As for Wakeel Ahmed, who knows how long he'll be seen behind the counter at 'Baba Dresses'. ■

Remember Manipur? It's a lot more complex than you realise

No community can be singled out as the 'innocent victim', nor can identity politics be the 'solution', writes Nandita Haksar

On 5 February, a day after Kuki-Zo BJP MLA Nemcha Kipgen was sworn in as deputy chief minister, protests broke out in Manipur's Churachandpur and Tuibuong. Many in the Kuki-Zo community saw it as a betrayal of a collective resolution to stay out of government without a written commitment to a negotiated political settlement. The Kuki Students' Organisation called a 24-hour shutdown on 6 February and announced further protests.

Those not conversant with Manipur's cultural nuances would have missed the symbolism at the swearing-in ceremony at Raj Bhawan in Imphal on 4 February. Yumnam Khemchand Singh took the oath as Manipur's new chief minister, Kipgen and Losi Dikho as his deputy chief ministers. Singh is a Meitei, Kipgen is a Kuki-Zo woman and Dikho is a Mao Naga.

This is just the latest example of identity politics being perpetuated by the Indian State without any vision for a future that might actually address the deep-rooted reasons for unabated violence. Appointing a chief minister and two deputies from three dominant communities is no solution, because the problem in Manipur is much

deeper than ethnic conflict.

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When events in Manipur made front page headlines in 2023, most Indian citizens were largely ignorant about the state, its geography and its demography, let alone its complex history going back several centuries. The media reported the conflict as an ethnic conflict between the Meitei and the Kuki-Zo or as a conflict between hill tribes and plains people.

In a way, this was correct, since the majority Meiteis do live in Imphal Valley, while the Kuki-Zo tribal communities live in the surrounding hills. And yes, the immediate cause of the conflict seemed to be objections from both Kuki-Zo and Naga tribes to Meiteis being included in the Scheduled Tribes.

This somewhat simplistic narrative, however, quickly fell apart. More than 300 Meitei churches in the Valley were burnt down by Meitei extremist groups in the first three days of the conflict.

Israeli media reported a crisis for India's Bnei Menashe community. According to the NGO Shavei Israel, over 1,000 members—that's approximately 20 per cent—were

displaced in the violence. One community member was killed, 'another shot in the chest and hospitalised'. Two synagogues and *mikvehs* (ritual baths) were burnt down, claimed reports from Israel.

If the conflict were truly between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, how does one explain Meitei extremist groups attacking a Meitei woman police officer (Thounaojam Brinda) for exposing narcoterrorism in the state, alleging the illicit trade enjoyed political patronage?

It was also hard to explain why Kukis began to be described in media reports as refugees in their own country. Some media persons focused on individual incidents—each undoubtedly horrific—but no single incident could explain the real nature of the conflict and its causes.

Now that Manipur no longer makes headlines, people have forgotten about it. The people living in Manipur, however, continue to face violence. Even communities that were not directly involved are being drawn into the conflict. Although it was largely the Kuki-Zo who suffered the most during the May 2023 conflict, the most important thing we need to understand is that no one community

can be singled out as the 'innocent victim'.

In the past, the violence in the state was between Indian security forces—including the Indian Army—and local militant groups. Today, militant groups are fighting each other as well as the Indian armed forces. Violence is endemic due to the vast quantity of unaccounted-for arms and ammunition circulating in Manipur.

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Political parties, armed groups and civil society organisations must stop looking at identity politics as a solution for Manipur.

Every single identity has been weaponised, literally and figuratively, backed by armed groups with the most sophisticated weapons that they do not hesitate to use. This identity politics has penetrated the administration as well, which explains conflicts between Assam Rifles and the Manipur police.

Exact figures on the number of armed groups operating in Manipur are hard to come by but recent reports highlight 5-10 major ones, including the United National Liberation Front, the People's Liberation Army, the Kangleipak Communist Party, the Kanglei Yawol Kanba Lup and the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak.

These groups have become more active after the 2023 violence. There are also vigilante groups like Arambai Tengol and Meitei Leepun. In addition, there are approximately 30 Kuki armed groups including the Kuki National Army, Zomi Revolutionary Front and Chin Kuki Revolutionary Front. Naga insurgent groups include the Naga National Council of Nagaland and Zeliangrong United Front, both recently engaged in bitter rivalries.

The Government of India does not seem to have an overall policy to deal with insurgency in Manipur. During ceasefire agreements or peace talks, armed groups have been allowed to consolidate their position, recruit cadres and procure arms.

What adds to the complexity is that intelligence agencies have always played a predominant role in dealing with insurgency in Manipur with almost no accountability or transparency. In the era of social media, this lack of transparency has had disastrous consequences. For instance, a report—purportedly based on leaked intelligence—stated that 'over 900 Kuki militants, newly trained in the use of drone-based bombs, projectiles, missiles and jungle warfare, have entered Manipur from Myanmar.'

A note, marked IMMEDIATE—No. 1/25/2024-CM, dated 16 September 2024—addressed to Manipur's director general of police and signed by then chief minister's secretary, Ningthoujam Geoffrey, was leaked and went viral on social media.

Authorities initially acknowledged the leak but denied its authenticity soon after. This is just one example of how news leaks, subsequent denials and lack of reliable information fuel volatility in the state—long described as a playground for foreign intelligence agencies.

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Another factor is that Manipur is situated in the northeast which makes it an extremely sensitive area geopolitically. Developments in Myanmar, China and Bangladesh directly impact the state. While Manipur does not share a border with Bangladesh, every regional instability there worsens the situation here.

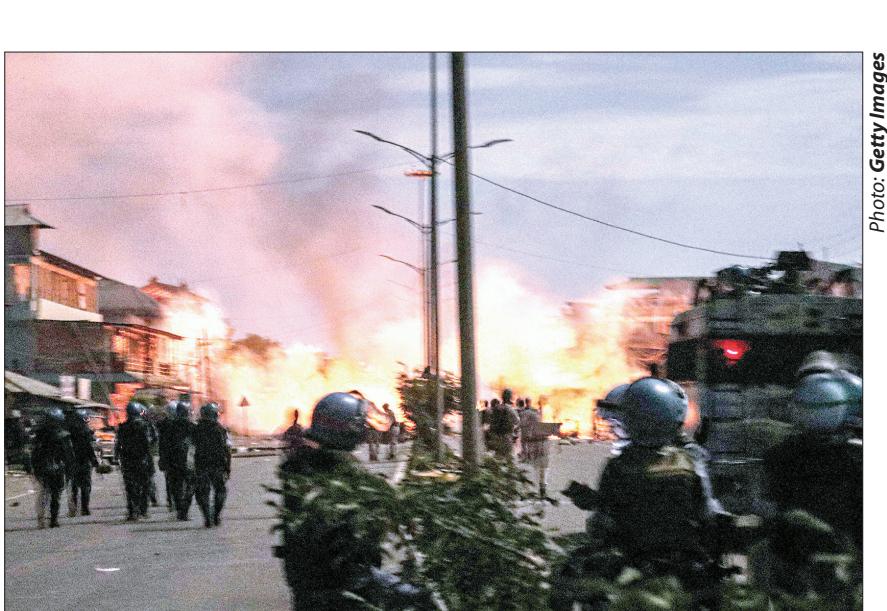
Some leaders of armed Manipuri groups have taken refuge in China. This has resulted in the supply of arms to insurgents through illicit markets near the China-Myanmar border. According to one report, 'Myanmar's allowance of Chinese security firms since early 2025 raises fears of Beijing monitoring India's borders, supporting rebels, and hindering counter-insurgency in Manipur and nearby states. Historical reports confirm Chinese aid to militants via Myanmar groups like Kachin rebels.'

Ironically enough, Meitei, Naga and Kuki students, young professionals and migrant workers who live far from their home state, turn to each other for support and succour. They routinely share rooms, enjoy the same food, laugh at the same jokes. Yes, there is an unwritten code: they do not talk about things back home. And yes, they all still consider Manipur home.

Then comes the clash of competing homelands: Kuki armed groups draw maps including vast swathes of Naga-inhabited areas, which angers the Nagas; Meitei imagine a kingdom that includes the hills, claiming they ruled the Nagas in the past, which adds to Naga wrath; Nagas call Kukis 'refugees' which leads to Naga-Kuki clashes. The community of 'Mayangs'—non-Mongoloid Indian citizens like the Marwaris who have been settled in Manipur for decades—are weary of all these imagined homelands, as they are not included in any. The Muslims of Manipur? They have their own imaginary homeland.

Years of divide and rule by the Indian government and intelligence agencies have ensured there is no unity among the groups. Despite occasional conflicts in the past, never has it been as deadly as it is today. ■

NANDITA HAKSAR is a human rights advocate long associated with the northeast. Her many books include *Shooting the Sun: Why Manipur was Engulfed by Violence* and *The Government Remained Silent (Speaking Tiger, 2023)*



Just another day in the life of Manipur

What adds to the complexity is that intelligence agencies have always played a predominant role in dealing with insurgency in Manipur with almost no accountability or transparency

How the India-US trade deal will deepen the farm crisis tomorrow

Yogendra Yadav

What many feared has come to pass. This writer has been warning for some time now that no matter what the Modi government claimed, Donald Trump would succeed in forcing India into a trade deal. Whatever the spin, agriculture would be part of it.

For months, courtier media kept insisting that Modi had refused to bow to American pressure. In August, the prime minister thumped his chest and declared that farmers, livestock rearers and fisherfolk were his top priority, and that there would be no compromise on their interests. The same claim was made when agriculture was kept out of the trade agreement with the European Union—proof, we were told, that Modi was protecting farmers.

In the end, what was bound to happen did happen. As with the India-Pakistan ceasefire, this time too Indians heard the news first from the US President. The prime minister has yet to open his mouth, and the Indian government has not issued a formal statement. But Trump's announcement clearly states that agriculture has been included in the deal. This has been confirmed by US agriculture secretary Brooke Rollins, who congratulated American farmers and wrote that President Trump had now thrown open the doors of Indian markets to their crops.

The Indian government will no doubt do a damage-control exercise. But before we get swept up in the mainstream media narrative, let's review a few basic facts. For decades—regardless of which party was in power—India's policy has been to keep agriculture out of international trade agreements, to protect farmers' interests.

Indian farmers are not threatened by foreign trade because they are inefficient or incompetent. All major agricultural producer countries heavily subsidise their farmers, allowing them to sell cheaply in global markets. In contrast, the Indian government extracts more from farmers' pockets than it gives them.

In technical terms, Indian farmers receive what amounts to a 'negative subsidy'. That is why the government imposes import duties on crops produced in sufficient quantities at home—to shield



As with the India-Pakistan ceasefire, this time too Indians first heard of the trade deal with the US from Donald Trump

For decades, India's policy has been to keep agriculture out of international trade deals to protect the interests of farmers

farmers from foreign dumping. This policy explains why agriculture was excluded from all major trade agreements in recent years. The proposed agreement with the European Union did allow processed foods, which could eventually affect Indian farmers—but raw agriculture remained protected.

Trump has now forced India to abandon this position. From the outset, American negotiators had their eyes on India's agricultural markets. The US is among the world's largest producers of maize, soyabean and cotton. Production has risen sharply in recent years, but China has cut back its purchases of maize and soyabean.

Last year, a US commerce department report identified India as a market that

could absorb this surplus. The obstacles were India's high import duties and the fact that most American maize and soyabean are genetically modified, which is banned in India. The US also wants to export milk and dairy products to India, but here too it runs into duties and India's condition that milk must come from cattle not fed animal feed. Washington wanted freedom from all these restrictions.

The details of the agreement are not yet public, so it is hard to say which of these conditions the Indian government has accepted. But one thing is certain: the Modi government has retreated from its long-held commitment to keep agriculture out of trade deals. It is also certain that imports of

crops such as almonds and apples will rise sharply, hitting farmers who grow them. Broadly speaking, the first blow will land on maize, soyabean and sugarcane farmers.

The production of maize and soyabean has risen in recent years, and farmers have received better prices. Cheap American imports will push prices down in the Indian market. Cotton may be less affected, since domestic production has declined and India already imports cotton. But this will indirectly hit sugarcane farmers. To bypass the ban on GM crops, it's possible the government will allow imported maize and soyabean to be used for oil extraction and ethanol production. India has abundant sugarcane and mills buy cane to produce ethanol. If ethanol starts coming in from the US, both sugar mills and sugarcane farmers will be hit. The fate of Indian dairy remains unclear for now, but if duties and restrictions are lifted, India's livestock rears will face a massive shock.

Commerce minister Piyush Goyal's statement in Parliament only adds to the fog. He claims the agreement safeguards the interests of farmers and the dairy sector, while also saying that discussions are still ongoing on the provisions of the deal. The obvious question is: if the agreement isn't final, what's the basis of the minister's reassurance that the farmers' interests are safe? Or, if indeed their interests have been protected, why not make the terms public? In any case, why hasn't the Indian government contradicted the statements of the US President and agriculture secretary?

The full picture emerges when this external shock is seen in conjunction with the internal indifference. There was not even a mention of farmers in the latest Union budget. Even token schemes announced in earlier years have been dropped. Spending on agriculture and allied sectors has been falling steadily since 2019; this year it has been cut from 3.38 per cent to 3.04 per cent. Not just that—six special missions announced last year received not a single rupee in this budget. On top of this, preparations are under way to cut urea subsidies. Yet there is no plan to address the long-term crisis in agriculture.

The government has decided to abandon farmers to their fate. The question now is how farmers and their organisations respond to the challenge. ■

Needed: a level playing field in Indian elections

Noor Mohammad

Since Independence, India's electoral process has evolved into a complex and largely resilient institutional framework. Recent events and public discourse—reflected in media coverage, debates in parliament and in civil society interventions, besides judicial proceedings—have raised renewed questions about the integrity of elections. There is clearly growing concern whether all political actors are truly competing on a level playing field. These concerns deserve serious attention if India's elections are to remain credible, inclusive and trusted by the people.

At its core, a level playing field in elections implies equal opportunity for political parties and candidates to communicate with voters, mobilise resources and seek electoral support without undue advantage to any actor. This principle is not merely aspirational; it is central to democratic legitimacy. When electoral outcomes are shaped more by asymmetries in power, resources or institutional access than by the contestation of ideas, the representative character of democracy is weakened.

One of the most prominent concerns in recent political discourse relates to disparities in political finance. Available data indicate a substantial gap between the financial resources of the ruling party and those of opposition parties. Electoral bonds introduced with the stated objective of improving transparency have instead attracted criticism for enabling opacity in political funding. Allegations that enforcement actions by state agencies have been followed by political donations to the ruling party have further eroded public confidence. The Supreme Court set aside the electoral bonds but the huge funds collected by political parties still remain with them and will continue to disturb the level

playing field. The electoral trusts in use today reflect similar patterns, with funds still managed by corporate houses, and thus susceptible to the dubious practices of the ruling establishment.

This problem could have been addressed by restructuring the management of these trusts into a broad-based body that allocates funds to political parties based on criteria proposed by the Commission and agreed upon by all parties.

In addition to unequal access of parties to corporate funding, the use of public funds and state welfare schemes in close proximity to elections by the government in power has raised questions about competitive neutrality. In recent years, several states have announced direct cash transfers or benefit schemes on the eve of elections. There are complaints that such transfers continued even after the announcement of election schedules, despite the Model Code of Conduct being in force. In essence, these fund transfers amount to bribing voters using public resources. They have occurred notwithstanding the extensive constitutional and statutory powers vested in the Election Commission of India (ECI) in Article 324 of the Constitution to check corrupt practices in elections.

These issues underline the need for a comprehensive Political Finance Law. The existing provisions under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, are inadequate for enforcing accountability. A modern legal framework should mandate full transparency of political donations, ensure strict enforcement of expenditure limits by both individual candidates and political parties. Such a law can draw upon international best practices while being tailored to India's political realities.

At present, only candidates are subjected to expenditure limits (it is next to impossible to enforce the

limit) while political parties have no limits prescribed and can spend as much as they want.

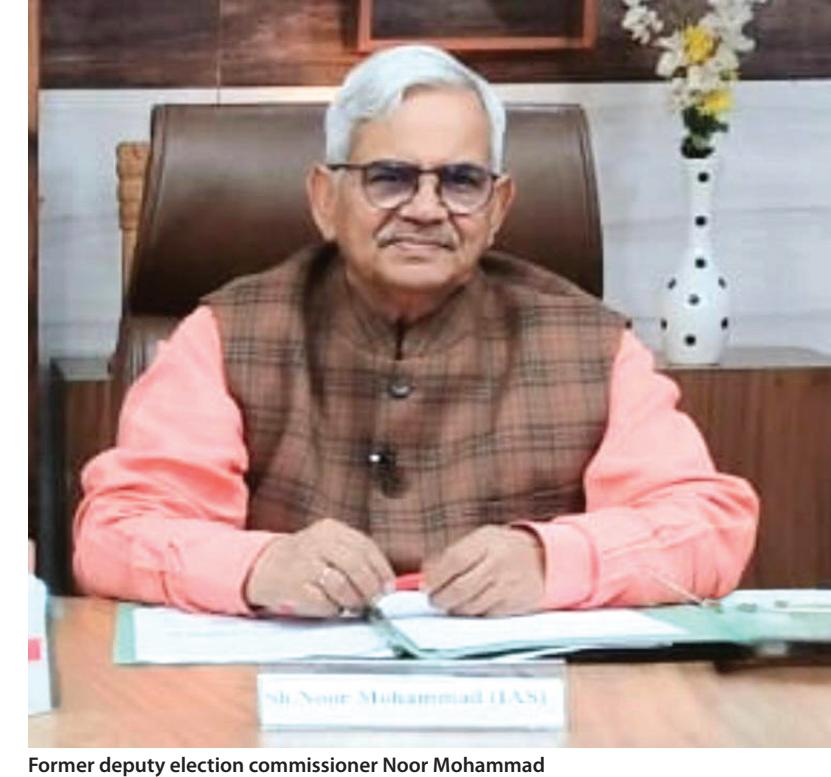
The digital transformation of electoral campaigns presents both opportunities and risks. Political parties with deep pockets now maintain sophisticated IT cells that enhance their outreach. Concerns have been raised about surrogate advertising, opaque targeted messaging and micro-targeting of voters without adequate safeguards. The emergence of AI-generated political content, such as manipulated audio-visual material and deepfakes, adds a new dimension to electoral risk. During the 2024 general elections, reports of AI-generated videos and images raised serious questions about misinformation, deception of voters and erosion of informed consent. These developments necessitate clearer regulatory norms for digital political advertising, mandatory transparency in online political spending and institutional mechanisms to identify and counter deceptive content. Electoral authorities, technology platforms and political parties must share responsibility for preserving the integrity of the digital campaign space.

Hate speeches and digital content created by political parties and their supporters to polarise voters on social media also create

confusion in the voter's mind; such violators should be held accountable. Social media platforms may be approached to include a para on voluntary restraint in the terms and conditions of their service; this must hold them accountable to the law of the land and the ECI must enforce it during elections.

Perhaps the most widely discussed theme in contemporary electoral debates is the perceived neutrality of the Election Commission of India. For a level playing field to exist, the electoral umpire must not only be independent but must also be seen to be independent; the appointment process of the electoral management body (EMB) must be transparent—some countries even mandate parliamentary approval for such appointments. Recent political discourse has included allegations that the ECI has been inconsistent or lenient in enforcing norms, particularly in relation to ruling party conduct—hate speeches by the star campaigners of the party in power often go unchecked. Even the perception of bias can damage institutional credibility.

Concerns surrounding voter lists merit special attention. Manipulation or largescale errors in electoral rolls can decisively affect outcomes if political parties and citizens are not vigilant. Recent Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercises—most notably in Bihar,



Former deputy election commissioner Noor Mohammad

followed by other states—have drawn criticism for being exclusionary. Long-established voter registration procedures were replaced with processes that placed the burden on voters to produce documentary proof of citizenship, despite the absence of a universal citizenship document in India. The identification of ineligible entries in voter rolls was managed without major disruption for over seven decades, underscoring that more balanced approaches are available.

Apart from voter registration, the delimitation of constituencies and location of polling stations are other pre-election activities where manipulations are possible. There is a procedure in place for consultation with political parties but parties with no cadres and meagre resources are unable to take advantage of these consultations. As a result, the possibility of gerrymandering in favour of the resource-rich parties is always present. Associate members on the delimitation commission fail to ensure effective participation due to lack of resources.

Transparency concerns also extend to electronic voting machines (EVMs) and Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) verification. While the VVPAT was introduced to enhance

voter confidence, the current practice of verifying slips from only five polling stations per constituency defeats the very purpose. Demands have been raised for public scrutiny of EVM and VVPAT software. This demand, along with the counting of VVPAT slips, at least on demand, deserves serious consideration.

Equally important is the accessibility of voter lists in machine-readable formats well in advance of elections. Such transparency enables independent verification by political parties and civil society, reduces administrative errors and strengthens confidence in the integrity of the electoral process.

If India aspires to global leadership, the goal of free, fair and widely accepted elections must receive renewed and serious attention. Numerous reform proposals—emanating from the Election Commission, parliamentary committees, the Law Commission and civil society organisations such as the Association for Democratic Reforms—remain unimplemented. It is high time these proposals are examined for a comprehensive electoral reform and a level playing field is created for all stakeholders with accountability for any violations. ■

When electoral outcomes are shaped more by asymmetries in power, resources or institutional access than the contestation of ideas, the representative character of democracy is weakened

In the US-Iran standoff, pray diplomacy wins

Any deal will be imperfect and contested, but imperfect diplomacy is far better than a perfect catastrophe, writes Ashok Swain

Once more, the United States and Iran are standing at the edge of a precipice. Warplanes and aircraft carriers are moving into position, troops are being deployed and dangerous threats being exchanged. In this tense atmosphere, even one wrong move or misunderstanding can trigger a crisis that will become very difficult to contain.

The downing of an Iranian drone this week by the US military in the Arabian Sea shows how quickly small incidents can turn into a major confrontation. There were fresh reports of Iranian forces harassing a US-flagged commercial vessel in the Strait of Hormuz, trying to stop it for boarding. These are not distant warnings but signs of a confrontation taking shape in real time.

Yet even with this rising tension, a small diplomatic opening still exists. Talks aimed at reviving a nuclear agreement are still on the table, and Washington insists negotiations are continuing even as military forces exchange signals of escalation. This opening is fragile, but it is also the only realistic way to prevent a conflict that could spread from a regional war into a global crisis with huge human and economic costs.

The most dangerous path would be a US military campaign to effect regime change in Tehran. History shows that these projects never produce stability. From Iraq to Libya, the collapse of a central state does not create a new stable governance system; it creates a vacuum.

Iran is not a small or weak country that can be reshaped easily. It is a nation of more than ninety million people with deep institutions, a strong sense of history and a powerful security system. If an outside attack tries to topple the ruling structure, the most likely result is not surrender or reform, but unity against an external enemy. Hardliners would gain power, security forces tighten control and many citizens who dislike the government still rally around the nation when it comes under foreign assault.

Recent experience should also serve as a warning to those who still believe that airstrikes can deliver political transformation. In 2025, Israel and the US carried out major airstrikes on Iranian territory, targeting sites linked to Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure. Those

strikes caused damage, but the regime did not collapse, its security apparatus did not break and its core leadership remained in place. Instead, the State adapted and reasserted control. In recent weeks, the Iranian authorities also managed to suppress yet another wave of protests with extreme force.

Iran may struggle to stop a major US air attack, especially against sensitive targets. That may be true in a narrow military sense. But the truth is that Iran does not need to win a conventional battle. Even if it cannot block airstrikes, it can retaliate across the region in ways that raise the costs for Washington and its partners. Iran has invested heavily in ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and combat and suicide drones. It also has the ability to strike at military bases and commercial infrastructure that matter far beyond Iran's borders. A limited strike could therefore trigger a much wider conflict, even if the original plan is to control escalation.

The collapse of Iran would not stay inside Iran; it would spill across West Asia at speed. Iran is deeply connected to the region through alliances, rivalries, armed groups, trade routes and energy networks. A US strike would almost certainly trigger asymmetric retaliation as per Iran's playbook: Tehran cannot match Washington in conventional power but it does not need to. It has built tools to respond through missiles, drones, proxy forces and pressure on strategic choke points.

The Persian Gulf would be the first place where global consequences appear. The Strait of Hormuz is one of the most important waterways on earth because 20 per cent of the world's oil and gas passes through it. Iran does not need to fully shut it down to cause major disruption. Limited harassment of ships, missile threats or mining can create panic. If markets fear shipping is unsafe, oil prices can surge within days. Europe, already under economic pressure, would feel the hit immediately. So would poorer countries that cannot afford sudden price jumps.

The battlefield would then widen. Iraq would become one of the first flashpoints. US troops and diplomatic facilities there could face attacks from Iran-aligned militias, pulling Iraq back into instability and violence. Lebanon could be dragged in as well. Hezbollah would face pressure to



Members of the Palestinian diaspora, joined by Iranian and other people from the Middle East, at a protest in Edmonton, Canada

respond to a major strike on Iran. Syria would be another danger zone. Wars do not always expand through deliberate plans; they often expand through miscalculations, panic and sudden retaliation.

Iran's instability would also have a direct spillover effect on the Kurdish question, creating new security and political dilemmas for a key US ally—Turkey. Ankara has long feared that weakening authority inside Iran could open space for Kurdish militant groups to reorganise, recruit and move more freely along the Iran-Turkey border.

The humanitarian impact could be enormous. If Iran weakens into internal fragmentation or civil conflict, millions could be displaced. Refugees could move towards Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan and the Caucasus. Those states already face economic and security pressures and would struggle to handle large migration flows. Europe would not be immune either. Migration politics has already divided European societies, and a new wave combined with energy disruption could sharpen instability far beyond West Asia.

The most dangerous long-term consequence would be nuclear. A war aimed at regime change would likely convince Iran's leaders that the US is committed to their destruction no matter what. In that situation, the incentive to obtain a nuclear deterrent becomes much stronger. A military strike intended to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons could push Iran to pursue them faster and with greater urgency.

Some in the region think Iran can be contained by creating an Islamic NATO, a military bloc ready to share burdens and confront Tehran. The project sounds plausible but such a coalition is far more talk than structure. Sunni-majority states have competing interests, different priorities and unresolved rivalries. Some view Iran as the main threat, while others focus on internal instability, economic survival or different geopolitical rivals. Pakistan matters because it is a nuclear power, but its central security focus is India. Gulf monarchies may seek American protection yet fear public backlash if they appear openly aligned in a war that could destroy the region's fragile stability.

That is why containment through military force is an illusion. It creates false confidence that escalation can be managed and costs shared. But once the first strike happens, control quickly disappears. Every side feels pressure to respond harder, faster and more visibly. Diplomacy is the only tool that can produce verifiable, long-term limits on Iran's nuclear programme through inspections and monitoring. The diplomatic talks now underway are more than just another round of dialogue; they may be the last meaningful chance to stop the slide towards a war without borders. Any agreement will be imperfect and contested, but imperfect diplomacy is far better than a perfect catastrophe. ■

ASHOK SWAIN is a professor of peace and conflict research at Uppsala University, Sweden

Containment through military force is an illusion. It creates false confidence that escalation can be managed and costs shared. Once the first strike happens, control quickly disappears

Are we living in a police state?

What happens when authorities in a democratic society deliberately violate the rule of law, particularly criminal law

Aakar Patel

As a democratic society, it is expected that India's authorities follow the rule of law. This includes the assumption that governance will not be arbitrary, especially when it comes to criminal law. This element is important because criminal law has the power to destroy lives, as a judge recently reminded a group of college students who had participated in a protest meet.

Why individuals attending a protest should be charged with a crime in the first place is a separate issue, but that is how things are here. The casual application of criminal law by the State and then the individual's struggle to fight for extended periods of time is also assumed by Indians to be the way things are. This is special to us: it cannot be natural that in the so-called mother of democracy, citizens are afraid of the police, the courts and the State in general. There is nothing new about this, 'police ka chakkar' is a term used in cinema for as long as one can remember.

What I want to discuss is something different that has taken root and is now a part of India's democracy. Two headlines (both from 30 January 2026) will illustrate.

The first is: 'Allahabad HC criticises Uttar Pradesh police for practice of shooting accused persons in legs' (Scroll). The subhead reads: "Such conduct is wholly impermissible, as the power to punish lies exclusively within the domain of the courts", the bench said.

The Uttar Pradesh government had put out the numbers in July

last year: 9,467 people had been shot in the leg by UP police since 2017. That means three people were shot in the leg daily for nine years.

The court made the following observations: people were being shot to please superior officers or to punish individuals without process. The court said this was an encroachment into the judicial domain and could not be accepted. On the recording of the statement and the investigation, the court noted that the police were not following Supreme Court guidelines.

The court was concerned about

police officers pressuring judges, particularly chief judicial magistrates, to pass specific orders. The judge said the court could not allow Uttar Pradesh to become a police state.

A State that kills people in custody, that maims those in custody, that destroys private property without due process and by overruling the justice system, including the Supreme Court, is apparently not already a police state.

The second headline read: 'Cases under Uttarakhand's conversion law fall in court: 7 years, 5 full trials, all 5 acquittals' (Indian Express).

The reference is to the Uttarakhand Freedom of Religion Act, 2018, the first of several state laws introduced and legislated by the BJP after the conspiracy theory of 'love jihad' began to be circulated.

It criminalises marriage between Muslims and Hindus if one of the partners converts. It also states that if any person comes back to his 'ancestral religion' it shall not be deemed conversion, without defining what 'ancestral religion' means. In short: conversion to Hinduism is not counted as conversion.

Once a complaint of 'love jihad' marriage has been filed, a district magistrate will then conduct an inquiry through the police 'with regard to real intention, purpose and cause of that proposed religion conversion'. Those who change their faith without applying to the government 'in the prescribed proforma' and without the consent of the government after the police inquiry face a year in jail.

This law has been in place for seven years. During this period, five cases have completed trial—in all of them all the accused were acquitted. Seven more cases were

dismissed during trial. The Indian Express report said: 'it is clear from court records that evidentiary standards have often not been met, consensual relationships criminalised, and there are procedural lapses in investigation and prosecution'.

On 31 January 2026, Indian Express editorialised its findings under the grand headline: 'In Uttarakhand, judiciary protects citizens from executive overreach'. This is absurd, because the punishment they have been put through is real. As youngsters are wont to say, the word 'protects' is doing a lot of work here.

What are we to conclude from what we see happening around us in our time? First, authorities across India are deliberately violating the law to align themselves with what the BJP governments want. They are doing so confident in the knowledge that they will not be held accountable; on the contrary (as the UP court has observed) they may well be rewarded for doing so.

Second, we must return to where we started and ask what happens when authorities in a democratic society deliberately violate the rule of law, particularly criminal law. There are short-term and long-term consequences of this and both are inevitable.

The short-term consequences are those we read about: lives ruined by the actions of government. The long-term ones are those that affect the nation and society as a whole. A nation that lies to itself about being a 'rule of law democracy' will not end up where the rule of law is intended to take it. ■

UP government figures released in July 2025 revealed that the state police had shot 9,467 people in the leg since 2017. That's three people a day for nine years



Policemen inspecting the Ghaziabad site where notorious criminal Balram Thakur was killed in an encounter in 2025

Views are personal

Pause before you forward that WhatsApp

There is an environmental cost to digital diarrhoea, and it's time you did your bit

Avay Shukla

If you ask me, this WhatsApp (WA) texting is getting quite out of hand. I'm no social spark, my social skills being on par with a grizzly just emerging from a four-month hibernation, but even I find about 20-25 new messages on my phone when I wake up of a morning. And during the course of the day there will be about another 30 or so. Of this, only about five will convey anything meaningful, the rest will be rubbish—generic religious greetings, homilies on how to live well, quotations from unheard of sages, all kinds of fake news, RIP messages. Some of these I find intriguing. Let me explain.

Take the RIPs. What's the point of sending an RIP on a group chat if a member (or member's relative/friend) has passed on? How does that console the affected family? Would it not make more sense if the message were sent directly to the family of the deceased? Is the intention of the message to make a public display of your concern or to show genuine sympathy and grief? If the former, wouldn't it be better to take out a two-column insert in the *Tribune* or *Times of India*?

Then come the proforma greetings—Happy Republic Day! Happy New Year! Happy Women's Day! Happy Ganesh Chaturthi! Now, apart from the fact that there is little happiness attached to any of these occasions nowadays, not one of these messages is usually composed by the sender—all of them are 'Forwards'! These are 'pass through' wishes, second-hand greetings: this alone says a lot about their sincerity or genuineness. And what's the ruddy point of all this, considering that your cup of happiness is already

overflowing since every blessed day of the year is 'Happy something or the other'?

Even the 'news' or informative items are usually forwarded. Rarely does the sender verify their authenticity or give his own views, and one doesn't have a clue why it has been sent. Not only is this intellectual laziness at its worst, it also assumes that you are an ignoramus who has no idea of what is going on in the world and therefore needs to be reminded every half hour!

I usually delete all these messages without even reading them. In addition,

We need to practise digital detoxing—every little bit helps. Or stop complaining about the AQI. A country gets the leaders—and the AQI—it deserves



Photo: Getty Images

I have on my WA groups a mental list of such serial offenders—their messages I delete without even looking at them. So, you may well ask, why am I getting so riled up about all this?

Because, dear reader, there's an environmental cost to this digital diarrhoea. The internet contributes more to global pollution levels than the aviation sector—3.7 per cent as against the latter's 3 per cent. Globally, 150 billion WA messages are sent every day—this is in addition to 300 billion emails! Every WA (or email) message

generates 0.3 to 0.7 gm of CO₂; attached pictures, video or audio increase this to 17 gm. (This is because of the energy needed to power your device, servers and the data centres that store the data). Does it appear too trivial to bother you much? Do the math to understand my angst.

India has about 800 million WA users; assuming each user sends just 20 messages a day, the daily total comes to 16 billion messages. Assume again that each message contributes 0.5 gm of CO₂, the daily emission is 0.5 gm per user.

Extrapolating this for 800 million users, the pollution contribution by WhatsApp comes to 8,000 tonnes per day or 2,920,000 tonnes per annum.

This does not include the contributions of Gmail, Netflix, YouTube which are much higher. The latest to join the polluting bandwagon is AI whose data centres consume humungous amounts of power (and water): the AI chatbot ChatGPT's emissions per month are equivalent to 260 flights from New York to London! The digital carbon footprint, currently almost 4 per cent of total emissions, is expected to double in the next five years.

As in other areas of consumption, we must be more responsible, and incorporate digital, or data, hygiene into our use of the internet. Apart from putting a stop to unnecessary texting, experts advise that we should clear out storage regularly (that means deleting old and dated messages, photos and videos regularly), avoid sending attachments unnecessarily, unsubscribe from unwanted newsletters, compress docs before sending them and stop this pernicious and fashionable practice of 'binge-watching'. It is not necessary to forward every message received on WhatsApp to all and sundry simply to show how well connected, or informed, you are; moreover, chances are that most of these folks would already have received these messages from others who think just as you do!

Try and spend one day a week without sending any messages. Every little bit helps and we need to practice digital detoxing on a regular basis. If not, stop complaining about the AQI: a country gets the leaders—and AQI—it deserves. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



Photos: Getty Images

Former Conservative home secretary Suella Braverman, now with Reform UK

Britain's boring politics goes 'full Indian'

Britain's once famed two-party system which offered two clear choices to the voters—free marketeer, small-state Conservatives and socially liberal big state Labour—has collapsed, like much else of what was once considered uniquely British including, one dare say, driving and good manners.

It was first challenged by Liberal Democrats offering a left-wing and 'wokeish' alternative to the two main parties. Back in 2010, under its then leader Nick Clegg—yes, the same chap who later defected to American capitalism as Mark Zuckerberg's troubleshooter—the party won enough seats to prop up David Cameron's Conservative government as a junior coalition partner.

That move went down so badly with its core supporters that the Lib Dems have since then been struggling to stage a comeback.

Meanwhile, a new far-right party with a Trumpian anti-immigrant agenda has hit the scene like a gale force wind shaking the very foundations of the Conservative-Labour duopoly.

Nigel Farage's Reform UK party (a new avatar of the 2018 Brexit Party) has risen rapidly in the polls on the back of a populist agenda that includes deporting immigrants back to where they came from—to make a 'broken Britain great again'.

According to pollsters, if elections were to be held tomorrow, it would be in pole position to form the next government with the chain-smoking, beer-swilling Farage as prime minister.

Conservative MPs are deserting in droves to join Reform with the Indian-origin Suella Braverman, a former home secretary, being the latest to jump ship. Farage claims he now has more members of the last Conservative cabinet in his top team than its leader Kemi Badenoch does, prompting jokes about this lot's role in the chaotic administrations of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss.

Suddenly, Britain's once boring politics has gone 'full Indian' in its unpredictability.



LONDON DIARY

HASAN SUROOR

Buy your way to permanent residency—illegally

If you happen to be in Britain and don't have the requisite documents to stay on permanently, you can now buy a work visa. An undercover investigation by the *Times* has revealed that fake jobs are being sold for up to £20,000.

These fraudulent schemes enable people to obtain visas by presenting sponsorship certificates issued by government-approved companies that falsely claim they are being hired for high-skilled jobs or in sectors where local talent is not available.

The documents thus obtained are used to stay in the UK, creating a paper trail to support claims for permanent residency (after five years).

For over four months, the *Times* was part of 13 Facebook groups for people seeking UK visas. Reporters spoke to 26 agents offering sponsorship and documented more than 250 examples of fake jobs being offered in hospitality, logistics, social care, IT, finance and marketing.

Agents and companies demanded payments ranging from £7,000 to £20,000. There was a premium for roles that allowed dependants to live and work in the UK.

Those buying sponsorship include people who have lost their sponsored jobs and need a new one within 60 days if they are to remain in the UK. Other agents target international students who want to stay after their graduate visas end, 'the



report said.

The government has promised urgent intervention. "We are investigating this illegal activity and it will not be tolerated," the Home Office said.

But this is not the first time such a scam has been exposed. Probably not the last, either.

Church of England makes history

The last outpost of male monopoly in British public life has been busted with the Church of England appointing a woman as the Archbishop of Canterbury—a first in its 1,429-year history.

Sarah Mullally (64) who replaces Justin Welby—forced to resign for failing to check child abuse in the Church—will lead the Church of England and its 110-million



Sarah Mullally, the new Archbishop of Canterbury

strong worldwide Anglican communion.

She takes over at a particularly difficult time for the Church. Average attendance at Church of England services on any given Sunday in 2024 was about 580,000—that's less than one per cent of the population.

Her priority must be to reverse what appears to be an inexorable decline. As one commentator put it, this will "need all her administrative and political skills".

Cancelled subscriptions for focusing on politics

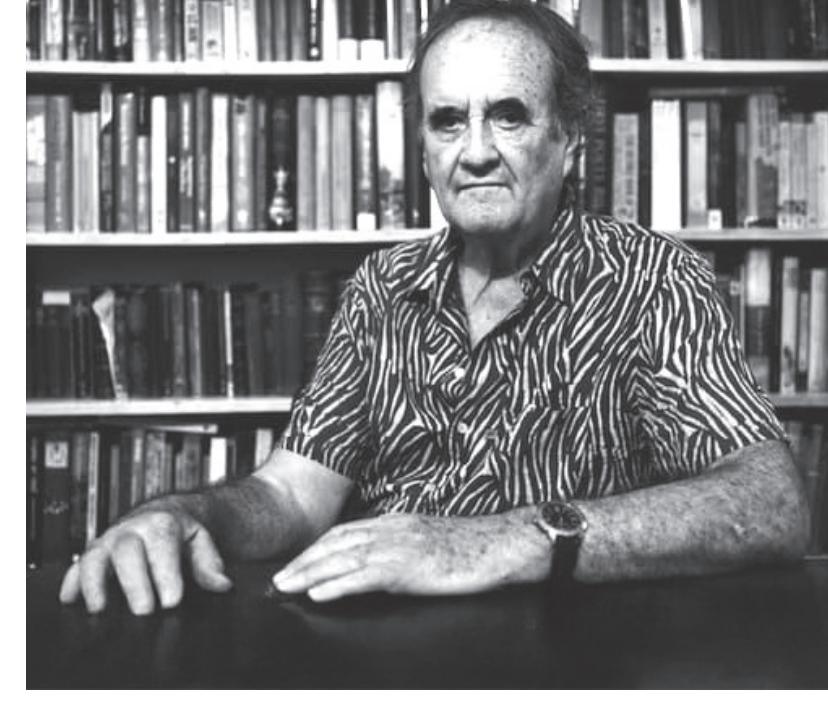
The London Stock Exchange Group has cancelled hundreds of *Financial Times* subscriptions complaining that it isn't covering the London markets enough and is focusing more on political news.

According to one analysis, the *FT* mentions the FTSE-100 about 70 per cent less than it did in 2010, despite lending its name to the index.

And, finally, an example of poor general knowledge in British journalism as narrated by *Times* columnist Samuel Martin: "I once worked at a newspaper where a junior on the foreign desk asked if our house style was Iran or Iraq. It's the type of question one can imagine emanating from the White House these days."

TRIBUTE

The man who told us about India's 'neta babu raj'



Veteran journalist Prem Shankar Jha reminisces about Mark Tully

Mark Tully was that rarest of rare journalists who never shirked a challenge and never lost his sense of humour even in the most perilous of moments. This was not because he found what he saw and heard around him 'amusing'. There wasn't a shred of condescension about him; just an intense interest in everything he saw, felt and heard.

I first heard Mark's broadcasts shortly after returning to Delhi in the late sixties and was deeply envious of their vividness. Two decades later, I read William

Dalrymple's *City of Djinns* and was again green with envy! Why did one have to be a foreigner to really see Delhi, I'd wondered. How easily do we who grow up as Indians take the sheer uniqueness of our society and its extraordinary culture for granted? As a result how casually do we destroy it?

In those early days of Mark's sojourn in Delhi, India was practically a closed country. To know what was happening in our own country we had to rely on a BBC broadcast at 9 p.m. and a shorter follow-up the next afternoon. So, if we heard news that made the government uncomfortable, it was almost invariably from the BBC. And that meant Mark.

Mark's broadcasts shaped my views as also my life thereafter. I have two vivid memories. The first

was when I heard and then read in Mark and Satish Jacob's book *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle* about how the developing Khalistan movement and its murderous reprisal attacks on Hindus in Punjab was being guided by Bhindranwale and his followers from the Golden Temple.

This book which I couldn't put down till I'd finished, gave me my first understanding of what happened later in Punjab and the ballast of knowledge with which to understand and write about what was happening there—and later

counsel prime minister V.P. Singh on Punjab as his media advisor.

But Mark reached the apogee of his influence and the respect he enjoyed with his assiduous, measured yet brutally frank reporting of the days of the Emergency—the censorship and police repression and compulsory sterilisation unleashed upon the people of north India by Sanjay Gandhi's vasectomy programme. That got Mark kicked out of India and, if memory serves me right, the BBC blocked for a good long while during the Emergency.

From then on, especially after his return to India, Mark was no longer 'Mark Sahib' but our Mark.

On a more personal note, I have an abiding affection for Mark because he wrote a two-page review of my first book, *India: A Political Economy of Stagnation* in 1980 for the BBC's trademark magazine, *The Listener*. It was in that review that he coined the phrase 'neta babu raj' to describe India. ■

Rs 7,432 CRORE IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS: TRANSFORMING BADAMI, VARUNA, SEDAM, JEWARGI, and YADRAMI

Comprehensive initiatives in heritage, infrastructure, education, irrigation, and farmers' welfare under CM Siddaramaiah's leadership

Karnataka is witnessing an unprecedented surge in development. In January 2026, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's Government launched projects worth thousands of crores across key constituencies, including Badami, Varuna, Yadrami, and Sedam. These initiatives include Rs 2,000 crore for Badami's infrastructure, Rs 1,932 crore for Varuna, Rs 906 crore across Yadrami and Jewargi, and Rs 1,595 crore in Sedam, covering roads, irrigation, schools, and GTTC centers. Beyond the figures, these projects exemplify a governance model that fulfills promises, strengthens communities, and fosters inclusive growth across Kalyana Karnataka and Mysuru districts.

By systematically implementing these initiatives, the Government is transforming the landscape of Karnataka's three prominent regions—Kittur Karnataka, Mysuru Karnataka, and Kalyana Karnataka—demonstrating a holistic approach that prioritizes infrastructure, employment, social welfare, and equitable progress under Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's leadership.

Transforming Badami Constituency: Rs 2,000 Crore for Heritage and Development

In Bagalkote district, the Badami constituency has witnessed remarkable development under the current Government. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah revealed that approximately Rs 2,000 crore has been allocated to Badami over the last two years. "Our Government is committed to the overall development of Badami, ensuring that the constituency thrives in



"Our government acts as the Chalukyas did, promoting harmony and inclusive progress. The Chalukya Utsava will highlight temples built by the Chalukyas, drawing visitors from across India and abroad," the Chief Minister elaborated. The festival, besides celebrating heritage, is a platform to showcase Badami, Aihole, and Pattadakal as key tourist and cultural destinations.

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In addition to cultural initiatives, substantial development works have been undertaken in Badami. These include a lift irrigation project worth Rs 1,400 crore, a drinking water project costing Rs 400 crore, and several road

the kindness of Badami residents."

Highlighting the initiatives during the current term, the Chief Minister addressed the unveiling of the ImmadiPulikesi statue, the foundation stone laying for various departmental projects, and the organization of cultural festivals that reflect both heritage and modern development. "At the insistence of local leaders and public representatives, the Chalukya

October 2024, works worth Rs 501 crore were inaugurated, followed by projects worth Rs 1,108 crore on 9 August 2025. The most recent launch, including the Kupya village projects, brings the total development expenditure in the constituency to Rs 1,932 crore.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah emphasized the scale of work undertaken, noting that more than 1,500 programmes have been implemented, covering both infrastructure development and guarantee schemes designed to benefit local communities. The Government has also allocated substantial funds across Mysuru district, with total development works worth approximately Rs 10,000 crore.

Responding to criticism from opposition parties regarding fund shortages, the Chief Minister clarified, "It would not have been possible to undertake these development works if the treasury were empty. In two and a half years, Rs 1,932 crore has been spent exclusively on development, and Rs 1,15,000 crore has been allocated to guarantee schemes. The opposition should understand this reality."

Efforts to engage with citizens have been strengthened in Varuna constituency. The Chief Minister highlighted that Dr. Yathindra, a key representative, regularly visits the constituency two to three times a week to listen to grievances and ensure prompt redressal, particularly in the Chief Minister's absence. This continuous engagement reflects the Government's commitment to citizen-centric governance.

Farmers' Welfare: Relief and Support in Kalyana Karnataka

The Government has prioritized

projects valued at Rs 50 crore. Emphasizing the Government's commitment to fulfilling promises, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah remarked, "Our Government acts exactly as it promises. Out of the 590 promises made in our manifesto, 240 have already been fulfilled, and several guarantee schemes have been successfully implemented."

The Chief Minister also acknowledged the support of Badami residents in his political journey. "I served as the MLA of Badami for five years. When I contested from Chamundeshwari in 2018, I faced defeat, but the people of Badami constituency once again supported me and elected me. Their goodwill has enabled me to serve Varuna constituency as well. I will never forget

Utsava has been organized with a budget allocation of Rs 3 crore, with an additional Rs 1 crore dedicated to the unveiling of the ImmadiPulikesi statue," he said.

Varuna Constituency Development: Rs 1,932 Crore in Projects Launched

In Mysuru district, the Varuna constituency has been the focus of extensive development initiatives. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah confirmed that total development works worth Rs 1,932 crore have been launched across the constituency, with foundation stone laying and inaugurations taking place in Kupya village for works worth approximately Rs 323 crore.

Since assuming office, the Government has organized development programmes in the Varuna constituency on three separate occasions. On 22

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Yadrami Taluk Development: Bridging Inequalities with Rs 906 Crore in Works

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah expressed confidence that inequalities in Kalyana Karnataka would be eliminated within ten years, ensuring equitable development. At a function held at the KPS School premises in Yadrami, under the joint aegis of the District Administration, District Panchayat, and Kalyana Karnataka Development Board, the Chief Minister inaugurated and laid foundation stones for various departmental projects while distributing benefits to beneficiaries. In Yadrami Taluk and Jewargi

constituency, projects totaling Rs 906 crore were inaugurated, with 87 projects worth Rs 867.49 crore in Jewargi and Rs 38.29 crore in Yadrami. Addressing political criticism, he stated, "Opposition parties are spreading lies for political gain, claiming there are no funds for infrastructure works under guarantee schemes. If the Government were bankrupt, we could not have spent Rs 906 crore in Jewargi constituency alone."

The Chief Minister emphasized the Government's adherence to

promises, citing that over Rs 1,12,000 crore in grants has been disbursed. 592 promises from the last election manifesto have been partially fulfilled, with the remaining to be implemented. During the previous term, 158 of 165 promises were completed, alongside 30 additional programmes not listed in the manifesto, demonstrating the Government's commitment to delivery. In contrast, the BJP, which governed from 2018, fulfilled only 10% of its promises, highlighting the efficiency and accountability of the

current administration.

Further, the Government has approved PrasajaSoudhas in 49 taluks, ensuring the construction of government offices across Kalyana Karnataka. While BJP approved only 19 taluks, our Government has expanded infrastructure to 17 taluks with 97 Nadu offices and 39 offices already completed, with 53 more under construction. This systematic expansion reflects a focus on accessibility and administrative efficiency.

Consolidated Key Statistics

Badami Constituency Development: Rs 2,000 crore

- Lift Irrigation Project: Rs 1,400 crore
- Drinking Water Project: Rs 400 crore
- Roads & Other Development Works: Rs 50 crore
- Chalukya Utsava & ImmadiPulikesi Statue: Rs 4 crore

Varuna Constituency Development: Rs 1,932 crore

- Kupya Village Development Works: Rs 323 crore
- Development Works: Rs 501 crore
- Development Works: Rs 1,108 crore
- Roads, Education & Other Works: Part of total allocation

Sedam Constituency Development: Rs 1,595 crore

- Departmental Projects & GTTC Centers: Rs 680 crore
- GTTC Center Establishment: Rs 73 crore
- Lift Irrigation Projects: Rs 326.70 crore
- Other Development Works: Rs 515.3 crore

Yadrami & Jewargi Projects: Rs 906 crore

- Jewargi Constituency Development Works: Rs 867.49 crore
- Additional Projects: Rs 38.29 crore

Farmers' Relief: Rs 2,249 crore

- SDRF & Government Compensation: Rs 2,249 crore
- Crop Damage Assistance: 14.21 lakh farmers affected statewide
- Kalyana Karnataka Farmers Relief: 721,786 farmers
- Kalaburagi District Relief: 323,318 farmers
- Pulses Crop Assistance: Rs 233 crore
- Sugarcane Farmers Compensation: Rs 300 crore

farmer welfare, particularly in regions affected by heavy rainfall and crop loss.

In Kalyana Karnataka, 721,786 farmers suffered crop damage, and a relief package totaling Rs 1,218 crore through SDRF, along with an additional Rs 1,031 crore from the State Government, was sanctioned.

Across Karnataka, 14.21 lakh farmers experienced crop losses, and relief measures amounting to Rs 1,072 crore have been disbursed. In Kalaburagi district alone, 323,318 farmers received Rs 498 crore in relief. Specific interventions included Rs 233 crore for pigeon pea crops affected by nettle disease and Rs 300 crore for sugarcane farmers, with 50% of the assistance provided by the State Government and 50% by sugar factories.

The Chief Minister emphasized that farmers' accounts were directly credited, ensuring rapid relief and highlighting the Government's dedication to agricultural sustainability.

Sedam Constituency Development: Rs 1,595 Crore in Projects

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah highlighted that the Central Government is denying the right to employment and doing injustice to workers, and that the State Government is committed to providing opportunities and infrastructure for growth.

Under the joint aegis of the District Administration, District Panchayat, and Kalyana Karnataka Development Board, Sedam witnessed foundation stone laying and inaugurations for projects worth Rs 680 crore, including international-level GTTC centers, along with distribution of benefits to beneficiaries.

A total of Rs 1,595 crore worth of development works in Jewargi and Sedam were launched on this occasion. In Sedam, foundation stone laying was carried out for Rs 579.68 crore of works, and projects worth Rs 108.35 crore were inaugurated. The Chief Minister reiterated that the Government has fulfilled most of the pre-election promises, in stark contrast to BJP's record of fulfilling only 10% of promises despite four years in power.

Jobs and Education: Filling Vacancies and Establishing GTTC Centers

The 371J Act has facilitated the appointment of 10,000 doctors, 30,000 engineers, 12,000 dentists, and other higher-education professionals in

Kalyana Karnataka. About 85,000 people have secured government employment, with vacant positions being filled step by step. The Sedam municipality has been upgraded to a city municipal council, reflecting urban development alongside social welfare.

A GTTC center costing Rs 73 crore is being established in Sedam, providing guaranteed employment for trained candidates. During BJP's tenure, only four GTTC centers were established, whereas the current Government has launched ten GTTC centers in just two and a half years.

Lift Irrigation and Medical Infrastructure

Sedam is witnessing four lift irrigation projects: Kachur Rs 85.50 lakh, Biranahalli Rs 90 crore, Yadahalli Rs 67.30 crore, and Taranahalli Rs 82.90 crore, providing irrigation for 8,000 hectares. This enables cultivation of commercial crops such as pigeon pea and sugarcane, raises groundwater levels, and ensures drinking water availability.

Medical colleges are being established across all districts, with Dakshina Kannada and Ramanagara slated to start this year. This initiative aims to make healthcare accessible and affordable, especially for the economically weaker sections, circumventing the high costs of private hospitals.

Inclusivity and Legacy: 371J Implementation

"Our Government is inclusive of all people. The successful implementation of 371J was made possible through the relentless efforts of Mallikarjun Kharge and Dharam Singh. Without their support, these reforms could not have been realized," the Chief Minister emphasized.

In addition, 300 Karnataka Public Schools have had foundation stones laid, complementing educational initiatives and ensuring infrastructure for learning. Overall, 900 KPS schools have been sanctioned across the State.

Through these extensive initiatives across Badami, Varuna, Yadrami, and Sedam, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's Government has demonstrated a commitment to inclusive development, cultural preservation, educational empowerment, agricultural relief, and employment generation. With meticulous planning, substantial financial allocation, and citizen-focused governance, Karnataka is on the path to transformative growth, bridging inequalities and delivering progress across all sectors.

NATION

THE MANIPUR QUESTION

To see it as just an ethnic conflict is to misread the state's angst



► P4

NATION

FARMERS ABANDONED TO THEIR FATE

The India-US trade deal will deepen the farm crisis

► P5



HOME & ABROAD

THE US-IRAN STANDOFF

Why we should pray that diplomacy will win

► P6



The mystery of the book that never was

What makes General Naravane's 'unpublished' memoir so terrifying for the Government of India?

A.J. Prabal

Barely two minutes after Rahul Gandhi began speaking in the Lok Sabha on 2 February, a visibly agitated Rajnath Singh leapt up. The House had been quiet until the Leader of the Opposition began reading a few lines from an article based on the memoirs of former army chief General M.M. Naravane.

"When four Chinese tanks entered Indian territory, the General writes..." is all Gandhi could say before the defence minister, flanked by prime minister Narendra Modi and home minister Amit Shah, sprang to his feet and cut him short.

There was no such book! The Speaker must disallow reading unsubstantiated content!

Over the next 10 minutes, Singh rose at least four times to make the same point: The book the LOP is referring to was never published... I have only one question: where is the book he is quoting from...? If he has the book, let him lay a copy of the book in the House... This book was never published... let him produce a copy of the book...

On 4 February, Rahul Gandhi heeded the call and brought a copy of the book with him. Holding it up to cameras, he said: "Every youngster in India should see that this book exists."

When Congress MP K.C. Venugopal sought to draw the Speaker's attention to the fact that the LOP was reading from a magazine article—"Naravane's Moment of Truth" by Sushant Singh, published in *Caravan*, February 2026—Amit Shah countered: "Magazines can publish anything... If the book has not been published, how can it be quoted?" When Rahul Gandhi insisted the content was "one hundred per cent authentic", Speaker Om Birla ruled him out. The raksha mantri had spoken, and that was that. The book did not exist.

Turns out it did. General Naravane's *Four Stars of Destiny* was clearly listed by publisher Penguin Random House—publishing date: 30 April 2024, print length: 448 pages, weight: 650 grams, ISBN numbers: 10-0670099759 and 13-978-0670099. It was also listed by online retailers like Amazon and Flipkart.

These online traces were scrubbed clean in less than 48 hours. With physical evidence in hand, Gandhi challenged the government: "If the prime minister comes to the House—I doubt he will—I would like to present the book to him... The home minister said... the book did not exist; the defence minister and the government said the book was never published, but here it is..."

The essay that Gandhi was prevented from quoting begins with an extract that was released by the *Press Trust of India* in December 2023 and carried by *The Print* on 18 December 2023. Details have been in the public domain for the past two years. Yet the government went blue in the face to shush it up in Parliament.

"What is written in it that they are so scared of? If they are not scared, they should allow me to read it. Why are they so scared?" asked Gandhi.

*

Gen. Manoj Mukund Naravane (Retd) was chief of army staff between December 2019 and April 2022. This was the period when Indian and Chinese troops clashed in Galwan Valley, Ladakh; 20 Indian soldiers were killed in hand-to-hand combat. This was also the period when India's first chief of defence staff (CDS) was appointed, Gen. Bipin Rawat, who presided over all three arms of the defence forces. A consequential period, which saw Chinese incursions in eastern Ladakh and the loss of Indian territory—that the current government seems reconciled to—and the rollout of the controversial Agnipath scheme, which, Naravane writes, came as a bolt from the blue and was resisted by the army.

Sushant Singh, lecturer at Yale University, and consulting editor with *Caravan*, is a former army man himself. He based his essay on a typed manuscript of Naravane's book. He writes: 'Here's why this essay on Naravane's memoir matters... it sheds light on Chinese aggression, the decisions that led to the loss of Indian lives and territory, and the troubling absence of political accountability at a moment when the country stood on the brink of war.'

Singh begins with a reference to what happened after the army chief received a phone call at 8.15 p.m. on 31 August 2020. It



Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi shows a copy of the book that apparently does not exist

At a critical moment in the India-China standoff of 2020, army chief Naravane was made to wait over two hours for PM Modi's directive: "Jo uchit samjho, woh karo (do as you see fit)"

was eleven weeks since the hand-to-hand combat at Galwan. Indian and Chinese commanders were in disengagement talks at the Line of Actual Control. The informal China Study Group headed by national security advisor (NSA) Ajit Kumar Doval had held several rounds of meetings.

There was consensus, Naravane writes, that India needed to do something. However, he was instructed not to open fire on the Chinese unless a clearance was given 'from the very top'. The army pushed back. Given the events at Galwan, the army needed autonomy to act if provoked. It was eventually decided 'that as a last resort, if our own physical security was at stake, that detachment and that detachment alone could open fire in self-defence'.

The phone call on 31 August was from Lt Gen. Y.K. Joshi, who headed the Northern

Command. Four Chinese tanks had started moving towards the India-held position at Rachin La on the Kailash Range. Warning flares fired by Indian troops were being ignored. India held the advantage of height, artillery and heavier tanks. Gen. Joshi wanted permission to open fire to stop the advancing Chinese. Naravane called CDS Gen. Rawat, defence minister Rajnath Singh, NSA Ajit Doval, MEA S. Jaishankar, with the question: "What are my orders?"

In his account, quoted in the extracts released by PTI and in the *Caravan* essay, Gen. Naravane writes he was kept hanging till 10.30 p.m. That's when defence minister Rajnath Singh finally called to pass on prime minister Modi's directive: "Jo uchit samjho, woh karo (Do what you think fit)".

► Continued on page 2

"The ICC has been captured by a dominant member"

The run-up to the T20 World Cup (7 February to 8 March) saw two major hiccups: first, Bangladesh was expelled and then Pakistan announced a selective boycott of the marquee India game on 15 February. This is a warning sign of a failing global governing board, says Haroon Lorgat in an interview with Gautam Bhattacharyya.

There are few administrative roles in cricket that Lorgat, the former CEO of International Cricket Council (ICC), hasn't held in his distinguished career. A South African with Indian roots, Lorgat was in the hot seat between 2008 and 2012, before moving on as a special advisor to Sri Lanka Cricket, and taking over as the CEO of Cricket South Africa the very next year.

Now 65, Lorgat—a chartered accountant by profession who had been an accomplished allrounder for Eastern Province and Transvaal in South Africa's competitive domestic scene—took on many challenges at ICC, including the introduction of the Decision Review System (DRS) and the expansion of anti-corruption measures. Lorgat brought his experience and vision to conceptualising a T20 franchise league in his home country and helped lay the groundwork for the Pakistan Super League (PSL) as an advisor. Edited excerpts:

What do you make of Pakistan's selective boycott of the India game?

It'll be most unfortunate if it actually happens. The mere suggestion is a warning sign of a failing governing board that has been structurally captured by a dominant member, leaving smaller boards with almost no legitimate avenues to contest coercive power.



Photo: Getty Images

The ICC has created an environment where the dominant members' political comfort effectively determines participation norms. When one board can disengage selectively without sanction, it confirms that obligations in international cricket are enforced unevenly and shaped by power rather than principle. In that sense,

Pakistan's threat—or decision—lays bare a deeper crisis of governance, revealing the threatened boycott as a symptom of a captured and unfair system rather than a standalone political gesture.

It reflects a much wider issue, where might is right. [Considerations of] fairness, equity and justice seem to have escaped leaders around

the world.

Geopolitics seems to be getting precedence. Could ICC have avoided this?

Geopolitics was allowed to trump cricket long ago. The ICC traded independence for money, permitting the market power of one member to harden into political control over

scheduling, hosting and policy. ICC could have mitigated this crisis had it implemented the reforms recommended in the Woolf Report—in board and voting structures, needs-based funding and ethical safeguards, instead of endorsing a revenue and governance model that entrenched leverage and dominance. By refusing governance reform and allowing political and executive authority—the chairman and the CEO—to be concentrated in one shop, the ICC practically ensured that any dispute involving dominant members would escalate into a geopolitical showdown.

This favouritism towards one, or a chosen few, allows geopolitical hypocrisy to fester, forcing the likes of Pakistan into a stand that highlights cricket's politicisation under ICC's weak leadership.

True fairness demands accountability, not selective enforcement that favours some.

Has overdependence on one game (Ind-Pak) played a part in the crisis?

I do believe so and the ICC bears responsibility for engineering that dependency. The India-Pakistan fixture has been monetised as the crown jewel of all ICC events precisely because the commercial ecosystem and television audience in the Indian sub-continent underpins global broadcast revenues.

Once the ICC accepted a model where flagship events, hosting patterns and even the global calendar were reshaped around such broadcasters and advertisers, it effectively weaponised a single game as the financial fulcrum of world cricket, making any disruption—like Pakistan's threatened boycott—explosively consequential. Also inevitable. Overleveraging this one match is a direct result of a system

that rewards power over sporting equity. When that single game is withdrawn, the entire tournament architecture is destabilised.

How will it affect the saleability of international cricket in general?

Commercial partners have already signalled reduced valuations for international cricket. It is also a fact that international cricket is under threat from franchise leagues. Furthermore, ICC tournament design, venues and economics are built primarily around a few dominant members and only secondarily around competitive balance.

The boycott will serve to erode confidence in ICC events as genuine global competitions and accelerate the decline in the value of international cricket. Most members already struggle with precarious finances and shrinking opportunities. It cannot be right for the global game that one member gets 38.5 per cent share while the rest get a fraction of that amount to survive, let alone grow the game.

Will all this also hit the Asian Cricket Council (ACC)?

It seems obvious the ACC will also be impacted as it operates in an ecosystem where the same imbalances exist. India is an indispensable market on which other Asian boards are heavily dependent. The recent expulsion of Bangladesh from the T20 World Cup and the threatened boycott by Pakistan will shake the foundations of the ACC.

Bangladesh's attempt to relocate their fixtures signalled that even within Asia equity, sovereignty and security are negotiable if they clash with commercial priorities, straining the notion of a balanced and happy Asian bloc. ■

The mystery of a book that wasn't

Continued from page 1

Naravane writes, 'I had been handed a hot potato. With this carte blanche, the onus was now totally on me.' He told Joshi that India should not fire the first shot, and asked him to ensure that heavier Indian tanks were positioned at the edge of the ridge with nozzles pointed towards the Chinese tanks below.

If the prime minister was truly unavailable to the defence minister, the NSA, the CDS and the MEA for over two hours at such a critical moment, the government has a lot of explaining to do. Communication channels to the prime minister are open 24 hours a day and, under security protocols, he is never left alone. So—what happened on the evening of 31 August 2020? Will we ever know? *

Rajnath Singh's admission in the Lok Sabha on 3 February that clearance to Naravane's book was withheld because of 'factual inaccuracies' has added to the mystery. Could the book have been printed and published without clearance? Could it have been listed by Amazon, for pre-orders (which were then cancelled)? Could an extract have been released by PTT? Above all, if the book was never published, how did the physical copy appear and from where?

The former army chief himself does not seem to know of the government's decision to withhold clearance; perhaps the decision was never communicated to him? On *Aaj Tak* and at the Khushwant Singh Literature Festival (KSLF) in Kasauli in October 2025, he was pointedly asked why the book had not yet been released. At KSLF, Naravane said, 'My job was to write the book and give it to the publishers. It was the publishers who were to get permission from the Ministry of Defence. They gave (the book) to them. It is under review ... for more than a year now.' ■

The general also sought to allay suspicions of any foul play by pointing out that the vetting process may actually involve more than the MoD. While he had written about military operations, the contents, he said, might affect the external affairs ministry, defence production etc., and so the vetting process could drag. While it's still unclear when clearance was denied, Naravane has clearly not been informed.

*

Both serving and retired army officers are required to seek clearance for any book they write. Books dealing with operational matters undergo a three-stage vetting process (army HQ, MoD and cabinet secretariat).

An interview to *India Today*, Lt Gen. K.J.S. 'Tiny' Dhillon (retd)—whose *Operation Sindoor: The Untold Story of India's Deep Strikes Inside Pakistan* was also published by Penguin Random House in September 2025, barely three months after the operation—listed three scenarios.

One, nothing objectionable is found and the book is cleared. Two, if objections are raised, the author is invited to explain his point of view and clearance granted after edits. Three, if the book gives out operational secrets that might affect national security, clearance is denied.

*

While the government's directive 'Jo uchit samjho, woh karo' has been interpreted by spin masters as giving the army a free hand, what it suggests is an abdication of political responsibility. The government failed to convene the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS)—the highest policy-making body in matters of national security—and give clear directions to the army. By leaving the decision to Naravane and refusing to own it, were the political masters giving themselves room for plausible deniability? ■

Herjinder

Prime minister Narendra Modi's sudden visit to Dera Sachkhand Ballan in Jalandhar last Sunday, on the occasion of Ravidas Jayanti, was officially described as a spiritual outreach. But in Punjab's charged political atmosphere, few saw it as a routine religious engagement. Coming days after the Union government conferred the Padma Shri on dera chief Baba Nirjan Das, and the renaming of Adampur airport after Sant Ravidas, the visit has been widely interpreted as part of the BJP's renewed attempt to engineer a political opening in a state where it has traditionally struggled to find a firm footing.

Punjab has never been fertile ground for the BJP as an independent political force. Even after the party severed its decades-old alliance with the Shiromani Akali Dal, it failed to emerge as a serious contender on its own. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP marginally improved its vote share in Punjab but could not win a single seat. Its performance in the recently held local body elections was also underwhelming, reinforcing the perception that the party remains electorally marginal in the state.

Modi's visit to Dera Ballan, the renaming of Adampur airport and a Padma Shri for the dera chief are an all-too-obvious set of manoeuvres to court the Ravidasias

STATES 360° PUNJAB



The politics of BJP's Ravidasia outreach



PM Narendra Modi at the Dera Sachkhand Ballan in Jalandhar

Photo: IANS

Yet, the BJP appears far from reconciled to political irrelevance in Punjab. Instead, it seems to be experimenting with a long-term strategy centred on reshaping social coalitions, particularly by mobilising Dalit communities along caste and religious lines. The renewed focus on the Ravidasia community is seen as a key component of this strategy.

The Ravidasias form the second-largest Dalit community in Punjab after the Mazhabi Sikhs. They are concentrated largely in the Doaba region, and are a decisive factor in nearly 35 assembly constituencies, comprising over 30 per cent of the electorate. Unlike other Dalit groups, they are prosperous, with a significant section engaged in small businesses, overseas employment and professional occupations. The community also has a substantial and influential diaspora in countries like the UK, Canada and Italy, which plays a role in shaping local religious and political discourse back home.

Traditionally, Ravidasias in Punjab have voted overwhelmingly for the Congress and, to a lesser extent, for the Bahujan Samaj Party. The BJP has historically found little traction among them. Its recent outreach, therefore, marks a notable departure from past patterns.

The symbolism deployed in this outreach is unmistakable. Renaming the Adampur airport after Sant Ravidas, honouring the Dera Ballan

chief with a Padma award, and the PM's visit to the dera are all powerful signals aimed at projecting the BJP as a party attentive to Ravidasia identity and aspirations.

The fact that Ravidasias also constitute a significant segment of the electorate in Modi's own parliamentary constituency of Varanasi adds another layer of political calculation.

Senior BJP leaders and Sangh Parivar figures have also been frequent visitors to Dera Ballan in recent years. Union home minister Amit Shah and RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat have both paid visits, underlining the importance the organisation attaches to the dera and the community it represents.

According to Amritsar-based political scientist Prof. Jagroop Singh Sekhon, the party is also quietly mobilising retired bureaucrats and officials from the Ravidasia community to build influence in rural Punjab.

It's also being said that the BJP is trying to create a social bridge by using respected figures from within the community with administrative experience and local credibility.

Supporters of this strategy argue that the BJP is merely doing what every national party does—seeking to expand its social base by reaching out to marginalised communities.

Critics see it as an attempt to rip Punjab's social fabric by deepening caste and religious fissures.

Sociologist Prof. Manjit Singh

offers a more cautious assessment. He believes that while the BJP's outreach may generate visibility, its actual electoral impact is likely to remain limited. 'The BJP in Punjab is essentially trying to polarise non-Jat and non-Sikh voters in rural areas and consolidate its urban base,' he told *National Herald*. 'But that base itself is not very large. I don't see this strategy dramatically altering Punjab's politics.'

The Union government's recent actions concerning Chandigarh and Panjab University, which many Punjabis perceive as an encroachment on the state's rights, has added to the resentment. Political observers believe these moves have further alienated the electorate from the BJP, cutting across caste and community lines.

Beyond electoral arithmetic, there are deeper ideological tensions that could complicate the BJP's outreach. For over a decade, Baba Nirjan Das has been demanding official recognition of Ravidasia as a separate religion. This demand directly conflicts with the ideological position of the Sangh Parivar, which views Ravidasias—and even Sikhs—as integral to the broader Hindu fold.

Many observers believe this contradiction could eventually strain the relationship between the dera leadership and the BJP-RSS combine. 'There is a fundamental contradiction here,' said a senior academic familiar with Dalit religious movements. 'You cannot simultaneously court a community's distinct religious identity and deny its theological basis.'

Perhaps the most serious concern relates to Punjab's fragile social harmony. Critics fear that the BJP's 'divide and mobilise' approach, if pushed aggressively, could reopen old wounds and disturb communal peace.

Whether the BJP's Ravidasia strategy proves to be a political breakthrough or a marginal experiment remains to be seen. For now, it underscores the party's determination to remain relevant and its willingness to deploy identity politics in pursuit of that goal. ■

Women, minorities key in Bangladesh polls

Sourabh Sen

A Hindu woman confronts Bangladesh Nationalist Party candidate and party joint general secretary Chowdhury Anee at Lakshminarayana constituency. Why must Hindus always bear the brunt of whatever happens, good or bad, she asks. Anee patiently hears the college lecturer out and softly replies that he is not aware of any event in the locality that targeted Hindus in the past. However, he would address any apprehensions.

The woman breaks into a smile. 'I am safe and happy here; I have no issues but I was talking about the entire country, not just about me,' she adds. The video, which received scant attention in Bangladesh, was extensively shared on social media.

Hindus constitute barely eight per cent of Bangladesh's population and their political representation has always been insignificant. Most of the Hindu candidates in the last three elections were fielded by the Awami League. Seventeen Hindu candidates won last time and three became cabinet ministers in Sheikh Hasina's government. With Hasina in exile and the Awami League banned from taking part in the election, there were doubts on the representation of Hindus.

Though there is not much change in the number of Hindus—around 80—contesting for a seat in the Jatiya Sangsad (national parliament), the difference is that other parties too have put up Hindu candidates. Even the Jamaat-e-Islami has put up a Hindu candidate, Krishna Nandi in Khulna. Its alliance partner NCP has fielded two—one of them a woman—and the Jamaat's Ameer (highest-ranking officer) Shafiqur Rahman campaigned for both.

One of the most talked-about candidates is Manisha Chakrabarti, contesting from the Brahmanbaria constituency. Fielded by the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Chakrabarti, a doctor, is receiving support from unexpected quarters, even though her chances of victory appear slim. Burqa-clad

women campaigning for the BNP's minority front leader Tarun Dey have also been accepted by voters.

The outcome of the 12 February election will be determined by an estimated 45 million first-time voters between the age of 18 and 35, many of whom were unable to exercise their franchise in the past. While 6.28 crore women voters are also crucial, only 80 of the 1,981 candidates are women vying for a seat in the 300-member parliament.

Nearly all prominent political parties have nominated candidates from the minority community. The CPB has fielded the highest number of 17. The BNP has fielded six, of whom two are senior leaders—standing committee member Gayeshwar Chandra Roy and vice chairman Nitai Roy Chowdhury.

'The BNP—unlike Jamaat and other similar parties—avoids taking extreme positions and adheres to centrist politics. It regards minorities as citizens with equal rights. Former BNP chairman late Khaleda Zia often expressed her discomfort in using the term 'minority,'' recalls Dr. Shakhawat Hossain Sayantan, author, political analyst and secretary general of G-9, a think tank that advises the BNP.

'We have nominated a Hindu candidate. I am going to campaign for him. Hindus will vote for Jamaat. How much more evidence do we need to provide to convince people that we are in favour of communal harmony?' asked Mia Golam Pawar, a Jamaat candidate from Khulna-5. Speaking to *National Herald*, Pawar said the narrative of the persecution of Hindus in Bangladesh was overstated.

The minority narrative in Bangladesh is rather complex and cannot be explained in terms of simple religious or social binaries. In the past, the BNP was accused of being unsympathetic towards minorities, citing instances of attacks on Hindus by party activists. The BNP's decision to ally with Jamaat as a coalition partner during its 2001-2006 term reinforced



Photo: Getty Images

In Bangladesh, as in India, parties in power have used minorities for political ends. Violence between the BNP and Awami League was also political—not religious

this impression. In India, it is the banned Awami League that is perceived as more tolerant and accommodating towards Hindus.

The ground reality, however, is not so simple. In Bangladesh, as in India, people and parties in power have used minorities to achieve their political goals, explains Hossain. The BNP versus Awami League rivalry expressed itself through acts of vendetta that often turned violent. What drove this violence was underlying political—not religious—identities and interests.

'The attack on Gayeshwar Chandra Roy is described as an attack on a BNP leader. However, when an Awami League leader—especially if he is from a minority group—is attacked, it is described in the media and public discourse as an attack by the BNP on a minority group,' Hossain added.

The emergence of an Islamist

party like Jamaat in Bangladesh has complicated the question of women's empowerment. During an election rally on 22 January, Shafiqur Rahman declared, 'Together—women and men—we will build the Bangladesh of tomorrow... We can tolerate many things, but we will not tolerate any assault on the honour of our mothers and sisters. No form of violence against women will be allowed.'

Bangladesh watchers in India who have wagered on a reformed Jamaat were glad. But it did not take long for Rahman to do a volte face, saying women cannot take up leadership roles. Screenshots of a now-deleted post from Rahman's verified X account went viral on 31 January. The post reportedly claimed that women stepping outside their homes to work were morally decadent and exposed them to exploitation.

Rahman's remarks drew criticism from political parties,

rights activists and civil society organisations. On 1 February, the BNP's student wing Jatiotabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) staged a protest march in Dhaka University (recent student body elections were swept by the Jamaat-backed Islami Chhatra Shibir). JCD described Rahman's remarks as objectionable and degrading. Jamaat responded, saying Rahman's X account was hacked and the post did not reflect his views.

Pawar told *National Herald* that the hacking was done using the email of an employee at Bangabhaban—the Bangladesh president's official residence—and that the mail originated from India. The employee has since been arrested.

Describing Rahman's remarks as an open expression of misogyny, BNP's national election commission committee spokesperson Mahdi Amin said in a social media post: 'We see how our women, through their labour and sweat, produce goods and earn foreign currency. The global success of Bangladesh's garments industry owes a large part of its achievements to the contribution of our women.'

Rahman's remarks will work against the Jamaat in the elections. 'The party had no qualms about being part of the government under Begum Khaleda Zia in 2001,' pointed out a journalist in Dhaka.

Amidst all this, Bangladesh's social research organisation Innovision Consulting released the third round of its People's Election Pulse Survey on 30 January, which revealed the BNP consolidating its advantage over other parties.

The BNP appears to be holding its base while also drawing more support from those who previously leaned towards Jamaat or the NCP, as well as attracting Awami League voters. However, the survey could not determine the preferences of 30 per cent of respondents. The large voter swing from Jamaat to BNP could, in other words, potentially swing back. ■

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K.A. Shaji

On Republic Day, the Union government conferred the Padma Bhushan on 89-year-old Vellappally Natesan for 'social service'. The timing, just months before the assembly election, raised eyebrows.

Congress leaders and civil society groups questioned the award, pointing out that Vellappally had earlier dismissed them as political instruments, and that he had been named in over a hundred criminal cases, several involving allegations of corruption in cooperative banks and the misappropriation of Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) funds.

While the BJP celebrated the decision unabashedly, chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan, along with cabinet colleagues V. Sivakutty, Saji Cherian and party leaders like Chinta Jerome, publicly congratulated him. BJP-affiliated social media crowed 'Ezava pride' and the award was projected as evidence that the BJP had finally acquired a credible social base in Kerala.

Almost on cue, Vellappally returned with a volley of statements targeting Muslims and the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML). He accused the League of "running the state by proxy", claimed that "Muslim appeasement" had reached dangerous levels, and warned that Kerala was becoming "another West Bengal".

Civil society groups condemned the remarks as communal and dangerous, but there wasn't a peep from those in power. Even as Vellappally intensified his attacks on Muslims, Pinarayi Vijayan and other CPI(M) leaders kept mum. The BJP defended his right to speak, framing the controversy as an assault on Hindu voices. It was an odd spectacle: a rabble-rousing Hindu community leader was not just being backed by the Hindu Right but also receiving tacit support from the Marxist Left.

To understand this one must trace Vellappally's personal trajectory. Born into a wealthy Ezava family in central Kerala, he built his fortune primarily in the alcohol business, emerging as one of the most influential liquor barons in the state.

His ascent in the SNDP combined economic power with organisational control, allowing him to dominate the Yogam for decades.

"This background embodies an irony," observes Sunny Kapikkad, scholar and social activist. "Sree Narayana Guru explicitly warned Ezavas against engaging in the production and sale of liquor, seeing it as a social evil that trapped the community in economic dependence and moral decline. Yet today, the custodian of the Guru's legacy is a man whose wealth and power are rooted in precisely the industry the Guru opposed."

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When Vellappally Natesan announced a grand alliance between the OBC Ezavas and upper caste Nairs, he chose his words carefully. Speaking as long-serving general secretary of the SNDP—one of the most

How Kerala resists Hindu political consolidation

Witness the collapse of Vellappally Natesan's bid to forge an alliance between the state's Ezavas and Nairs



Photo: Getty Images



Vellappally Natesan (left) has a reputation for flip flops. He first backed the State government on the Sabarimala issue only to later endorse the BJP-led stir against the SC verdict

You cannot lead a Hindu civilisational front while aligning with a Marxist chief minister. You cannot claim to defend secular values while deploying communal rhetoric"

powerful socio-religious outfits in the state that claims to carry forward the reformist legacy of 19th century leader Sree Narayana Guru—Vellappally projected the idea as a civilisational necessity. Kerala's Hindus, he argued, must overcome internal divisions and consolidate in the face of demographic change and minority assertion.

The numbers lent his claim a seductive plausibility. Ezavas, widely regarded as the largest Hindu community in Kerala, are estimated to constitute 22–25 per cent of the population. Nairs, a forward caste, make up 12–15 per cent. Together, they account for well over a third of the state's people, a potentially decisive bloc in a polity where elections are often settled by wafer-thin margins.

The political impact was immediate—with assembly elections approaching, parties started recalibrating strategies. An SNDP-Nair Service Society (NSS) alliance would redraw Kerala's political map.

Vellappally's ambiguous political location makes him harder to pin. In recent years, he has positioned himself as a man who belongs everywhere yet nowhere. His family-run political party, the Bharath Dharma Jana Sena (BDJS), led by wife Preethi Natesan and son Thushar

Vellappally, is a constituent of the BJP-led NDA (National Democratic Alliance) at the Centre. Yet, Vellappally has also openly described Pinarayi Vijayan as a close confidant and projected himself as a fellow-traveller. At the same time, he has intensified his attacks on the Congress, particularly V.D. Satheesan, leader of the Opposition in the state for the past four years.

Natesan's unity declaration was immediately echoed by G. Sukumaran Nair, the combative general secretary of the NSS. Both leaders are united in their hostility to the Congress and share a common discomfort with the party's renewed emphasis on secularism and minority rights.

Yet the grand alliance collapsed almost as soon as it was announced. Within days, the NSS board publicly distanced itself from the proposal, exposing not just the social fragility of Vellappally's project but also the institutional resistance within the NSS to overt political mobilisation that could be read as an extension of the BJP-RSS agenda.

Vellappally lashed out at the NSS leaders, accusing them of "betraying Hindu interests". The NSS retreated into neutrality. The BJP and CPI(M), both

hopeful of extracting electoral dividends from Vellappally's manoeuvres, were left looking like awkward bystanders.

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Kerala's demography explains why leaders like Vellappally matter so much to political parties. The populous Ezavas have historically been the backbone of the Communist movement. They dominated trade unions, peasant struggles and cooperative institutions for decades. The Nairs have historically held a privileged position in Kerala's caste hierarchy, with disproportionate representation in land ownership, education and the bureaucracy. They have had a strong presence in the Congress and, more recently, in the BJP.

"Together, these two communities represent an enormous reservoir of political influence," notes academic J. Prabhakar. "Even partial shifts in Ezava or Nair voting patterns can change outcomes in dozens of constituencies."

This wasn't Vellappally's first attempt at Hindu consolidation. What was different this time was the speed with which it unravelled. "The breakdown was telling," observes political analyst M.N. Karassery. "If even Sukumaran Nair, no champion of pluralism, wouldn't endorse Vellappally's plan, it shows how politically radioactive overt religious consolidation is in Kerala."

Vellappally's political evolution is riddled with contradictions. In the past, he aligned closely with the Muslim League, led joint movements for enhanced reservations and spoke the language of minority rights. During the Sabarimala controversy, when the Supreme Court allowed women of all ages to enter the temple, he stood firmly with the state government, welcomed the verdict, and even became an office bearer of the government-backed Kerala renaissance movement.

Later, he declared that the verdict had "hurt Hindu sentiments" and accused activists supporting women's entry of being part of an "anti-Hindu conspiracy". He publicly endorsed the BJP-led agitation against the judgment, sending contradictory signals to both leftist allies and rightist patrons.

"Vellappally's politics is not anchored in any stable ideological commitment," Karassery argues. "It moves opportunistically across fronts, aligning with the BJP at one moment, embracing the CPI(M) at another, while attacking the Congress relentlessly. His support for Pinarayi is transactional. His proximity to the BJP is strategic."

Kerala's political culture is deeply sceptical of such incoherence. "You cannot lead a Hindu civilisational front while aligning with a Marxist chief minister," Karassery warns.

"The deeper danger lies not in whether Vellappally wins elections," says academic and social thinker T.S. Shyam Kumar, "but in what his politics is doing to Kerala's moral language. By appropriating the legacy of Sree Narayana Guru, he is hollowing it out from within."

Sree Narayana Guru was for a society beyond caste, beyond religious fear, beyond inherited domination. To invoke his name while practising exclusion is a betrayal of the ethical foundation of Kerala's modern consciousness. ■

UNION BUDGET 2026-27

These 'reforms' are elitist and pro-business

True reforms would ensure a level playing field, provide fair opportunities for marginalised groups, empower informal workers and boost public investments in education, healthcare and social security

Arun Kumar

Both the Union Budget 2026 and the Economic Survey repeatedly mention 'reforms'. Every chapter of the survey uses the word, while prime minister Narendra Modi insists that 'Today, India is riding Reform Express'. What exactly does the word mean? Does it have a narrow connotation based on the policymaker's belief or is it something wider?

The survey highlights the reforms already underway—production-linked incentives (PLI), liberalised foreign direct investment (FDI), logistics modernisation, tax simplification, digital infrastructure rollout, labour law changes, skilling drives, improved female workforce participation, infrastructure expansion and easier entry-exit norms for businesses. It's an impressive list, credited for recent economic growth and lifting potential GDP growth to 7 per cent.

But are these reforms really delivering the goods?

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has repeatedly flagged that India's GDP data lacks credibility. It has pointed to many flaws in India's methods of measuring its economy, most importantly in the informal sector. The bulk of available data is from the organised sector. Hence growth is misrepresented. The survey has nothing to say about this. It does not offer an explanation for the errors in GDP data nor does it clarify if these 'reforms' have led to good growth.

Despite the claimed reforms, the share of

manufacturing in GDP has shrunk to around 12 per cent. The PLI scheme is way behind target with barely 10 per cent of allocated funds disbursed over four years. Skilling schemes have missed targets, as skilled workers are unable to find appropriate jobs. Schemes launched under the Employment Linked Incentive (ELI), announced with much fanfare, have barely taken off. To cover up, marginal employment and unpaid work is being counted—practices that defy ILO definitions. Poverty reduction is being claimed on the basis of faulty comparison of NFHS (National Family Health Survey) data.

The tax cuts announced in the Budget benefit the organised sector and the affluent. Raising the income tax exemption limit to Rs 12.75 lakh benefits only the top 1–2 per cent of the population. The middle class, especially those in the Rs 7 lakh to Rs 12 lakh income bracket, will benefit only marginally. Direct tax collections have declined by about Rs 2 lakh crore, impacting public expenditure on education and health.

Cuts in GST mainly help the organised sector—who pay the most GST—making their products cheaper when compared to the unorganised sector. Demand shifts towards the former may lead to higher consumption but will adversely impact income in the unorganised sector.

India's vast black economy undermines any attempt at reform by escaping tax and regulatory frameworks. A low direct tax to GDP ratio of 6.5 per cent—one of the lowest in the world—indicates the extent of this black economy. It also reduces potential growth rate, which has not been factored in the Economic Survey.

The newly enacted Labour Codes and the move to replace MGNREGA will further weaken the negligible bargaining power of farmers and trade unionised workers. Both changes undoubtedly come in response to trade pressure from the EU and the US who want access to Indian markets. Agricultural prices will drop further below minimum



Photo: Getty Images

support price (where MSP is announced) and non-agricultural producers will find their margins squeezed.

Not only are these reforms pro-business, they are elitist. Air travel and over-priced deluxe trains are promoted while the masses are packed into trains and buses like sardines. Private businesses are being promoted via elite projects and privatisation. The Budget announced the setting up of five university towns—another red herring given that existing top universities are being eviscerated.

The anti-democratic stance of the government becomes apparent when it proposes dilutions in RTI, curtailing people's rights to scrutinise policies and expose the anti-people stance of those in the top echelons of policymaking. How anti-labour our elites are came to the fore recently when a top functionary of our constitutional court publicly blamed workers for the closure of factories and inadequate industrialisation. The argument simply ignores the promise in our

Those benefitting from the system are demanding more—and getting it. The marginalised are getting further marginalised. The so-called reforms are a zero-sum game

Constitution to give everyone a living wage. The Budget promotes tourism as a means of promoting employment. Wouldn't that promote commercialisation and overwhelm local cultures? There is talk of *swadeshi* and *atmanirbharata* while simultaneously promoting free trade. Given our weak R&D base, wouldn't India get swamped, as has happened with previous free trade agreements (FTAs)? China overwhelms us without an FTA. To meet the challenge, there is a need to focus on education, but underinvestment in the sector coupled with promoting unscientific ideas undermines the drive for innovation.

Clearly, India suffers from a demand problem. That requires the government to promote policies to reduce inequalities. But the Budget does the exact opposite by giving more to those who have been cornering the gains from growth.

The marginalised need quality employment but that is not the focus since resources are being funnelled mostly into organised sectors.

The promotion of crony capitalism spoils the investment climate. When rulers play favourites among businesses, the rest feel threatened. No wonder a large number of ultra-high net worth individuals are leaving the country.

True reforms would ensure a level playing field, provide fair opportunities for marginalised groups, empower informal workers and boost public investments in education, healthcare and social security. In a vicious cycle, those benefitting from the system are demanding more—and getting it. The marginalised, on the other hand, are getting further marginalised. That is at the root of rising inequality. And that is why the so-called reforms have become a zero-sum game. ■

ARUN KUMAR is a retired professor of economics, JNU, and the author of Indian Economy's Greatest Crisis: Impact of the Coronavirus and the Road Ahead

Mohd. Deepak, the new hero in town

A rare act of allyship comes with a price and a question: who is patronising the mob?

Rashme Sehgal and Nandlal Sharma

The sleepy town of Kotdwara, a little over 100 kilometre from Dehradun, has been in the news since 26 January, when two Hindu men confronted a Bajrang Dal gang for harassing a Muslim shopkeeper.

In recent years, the harassment of Muslims in Uttarakhand has become an everyday occurrence. Mobs patronised by politicians rule the streets and even the police do not come in their way. Resistance to 'Hindutva' goons was unthinkable until Deepak Kashyap and his friend Vijay Rawat stood up for Wakeel Ahmed. Born in Kotdwara, seventy-five-year-old Ahmed owns 'Baba Dresses', a garment shop that has been selling cloth for school uniforms for over four decades.

But how dare a Muslim-owned outlet flaunt the word 'Baba'! The Bajrangis wanted the shop name to be changed and changed immediately. When Ahmed, who suffers from Parkinson's, begged for time, they abused and pushed him around. That's when Deepak and Vijay, who were chatting with friends nearby, intervened. They protested against their foul language and maltreatment. A heated exchange followed.

It's not clear who shot a short video of the altercation and shared it on social media. The clip went viral for an unusual reason—when the mob asked Kashyap his name, he looked them in the eye and replied, "My name is Mohammad Deepak".

Speaking to this correspondent, Deepak said that although he is a Hindu, he believes in *insaaniyat*. "No religion propagates hate for another!"

A tall, muscular man, the 40-something gym-owner was clearly angry. "I have lived in Kotdwara all my life, everybody here knows me by name. So, when they asked for my name, I realised they were outsiders," he says. Since they had no other intention but to harass a Muslim shopkeeper, identifying himself as a fellow Muslim seemed to be the right thing to do.

Deepak and Ahmed were no more than nodding acquaintances. Whenever he visited friends who have shops in the neighbourhood, he would greet the old man out of common courtesy. Raised by a single mother who sold tea for a living, it was part

of his upbringing to be respectful to elders and do the right thing, he says. After the incident on 26 January, they met again on 4 February. The trembling old man embraced Kashyap. His defiance had given him strength, he said, and the hope that he is not alone in his hometown.

Both have since paid the price for their pushback. Customers have dwindled at Ahmed's shop and Deepak's gym stayed closed for over a week. On 31 January, a much bigger mob arrived in Kotdwara in SUVs from Dehradun. They converged outside his gym and residence. They abused him, his wife and mother, while he watched helplessly. Remembering their abuses, this strong man breaks down. He has suffered losses, his mother is afraid, his wife is traumatised. The police are far from sympathetic and a large section of fellow Hindus in the town blame him for the fracas and for drawing attention to Kotdwara.

The leader of the mob is a known face, a resident of Haridwar often used by the ruling party to foment trouble. The Bajrang Dal has warned Deepak that he will pay dearly for his defiance. The police have filed an FIR against Deepak under Sections 310(2) (voluntarily causing hurt), 191(1) (rioting), 351(2) (criminal intimidation), 352 (breach of peace). The FIR has been filed on the complaint of a Kamal Pal, who alleged that Deepak, Vijay and their friends abused and attacked the miscreants, though the videos show the exact opposite.

The FIR that has been filed against the 30-40 'unknown people' in the mob that surrounded Deepak's house—under Sections 191(2) (rioting), 121(2) (voluntarily causing hurt), 126(2) (wrongful restraint), 196(2) (promoting enmity between different groups), 352 (breach of peace)—is unlikely to go far. Strangers to Kotdwara, most of them are known faces to the people and police of Dehradun.

The BJP government headed by Pushkar Singh Dhami has given a free hand to the Bajrang Dal and other communal groups to harass and beat up people belonging to the minority community. With just ten months to go before another assembly election, the government has little to show by way of good governance. Islamophobia is the only weapon Dhami possesses which is why he has unleashed it with a vengeance.

Dehradun-based political commentator Trilochan Bhatt believes the increase in



Wakeel Ahmed (left) and Deepak Kashyap (far left and above) at the gym he owns in Kotdwara



Resistance to 'Hindutva' goons was unthinkable until Deepak Kashyap and his friend Vijay Rawat stood up for Wakeel Ahmed on Republic Day

communal clashes over the last two months is a diversionary tactic to shift attention from the Ankita Bhandari rape and murder case. Despite the government handing the inquiry to the CBI—after having resisted the demand for years—the people's protests refuse to die down. Bhatt points out the reason for their fury—the inquiry is based on an FIR filed by Dr Anil Joshi, an environmentalist, who has no locus standi on this case.

Ankita Bhandari's parents had demanded an additional FIR to investigate the role of prominent BJP leaders in burying the case—that has not happened. The people of Uttarakhand have risen as one to support that demand, and a panchayat is likely to assemble on Sunday, 8 February.

The CPI(ML) state secretary Indresh Maikhuri is also of the opinion that communal sentiments are being deliberately inflamed to distract from public demand for an investigation supervised by a Supreme Court judge.

Social worker Charu Tiwari believes that without the patronage of the government and the police, the Kotdwara incident could not have taken place. The chief minister was present in town on 31 January when the mob of rowdy

outsiders reached Deepak's doorstep. Police jeeps were following the mob, he recalls, and the local police station is only a stone's throw from the gym. How then was the mob able to harass Deepak and his family for nearly four hours, he asks.

The chief minister of Uttarakhand has the dubious distinction of topping the list of people delivering hate speeches in 2025. A report compiled by the Centre for the Study of Organised Hate and released by India Hate Lab attributes 71 hate speeches to Pushkar Singh Dhami. He repeatedly uses reprehensible terms like 'land jihad', 'love jihad', 'masjid jihad', 'mazaar jihad' and 'thook jihad', and encourages others to do the same. Hate speech incidents in Uttarakhand went up from 65 in 2024 to 155 in 2025. Dhami is proud of his 'achievement'. Proud of 'protecting the state's culture and demography.'

Meanwhile, Mohammad Deepak has had to shift his family. Despite people lauding his courage across the country, some even travelling to Kotdwara to meet him and take selfies with him, his future is uncertain.

As for Wakeel Ahmed, who knows how long he'll be seen behind the counter at 'Baba Dresses'. ■

Remember Manipur? It's a lot more complex than you realise

No community can be singled out as the 'innocent victim', nor can identity politics be the 'solution', writes Nandita Haksar

On 5 February, a day after Kuki-Zo BJP MLA Nemcha Kipgen was sworn in as deputy chief minister, protests broke out in Manipur's Churachandpur and Tuibuong. Many in the Kuki-Zo community saw it as a betrayal of a collective resolution to stay out of government without a written commitment to a negotiated political settlement. The Kuki Students' Organisation called a 24-hour shutdown on 6 February and announced further protests.

Those not conversant with Manipur's cultural nuances would have missed the symbolism at the swearing-in ceremony at Raj Bhawan in Imphal on 4 February. Yumnam Khemchand Singh took the oath as Manipur's new chief minister, Kipgen and Losi Dikho as his deputy chief ministers. Singh is a Meitei, Kipgen is a Kuki-Zo woman and Dikho is a Mao Naga.

This is just the latest example of identity politics being perpetuated by the Indian State without any vision for a future that might actually address the deep-rooted reasons for unabated violence. Appointing a chief minister and two deputies from three dominant communities is no solution, because the problem in Manipur is much

deeper than ethnic conflict.

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When events in Manipur made front page headlines in 2023, most Indian citizens were largely ignorant about the state, its geography and its demography, let alone its complex history going back several centuries. The media reported the conflict as an ethnic conflict between the Meitei and the Kuki-Zo or as a conflict between hill tribes and plains people.

In a way, this was correct, since the majority Meiteis do live in Imphal Valley, while the Kuki-Zo tribal communities live in the surrounding hills. And yes, the immediate cause of the conflict seemed to be objections from both Kuki-Zo and Naga tribes to Meiteis being included in the Scheduled Tribes.

This somewhat simplistic narrative, however, quickly fell apart. More than 300 Meitei churches in the Valley were burnt down by Meitei extremist groups in the first three days of the conflict.

Israeli media reported a crisis for India's Bnei Menashe community. According to the NGO Shavei Israel, over 1,000 members—that's approximately 20 per cent—were

displaced in the violence. One community member was killed, 'another shot in the chest and hospitalised'. Two synagogues and *mikvehs* (ritual baths) were burnt down, claimed reports from Israel.

If the conflict were truly between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities, how does one explain Meitei extremist groups attacking a Meitei woman police officer (Thounaojam Brinda) for exposing narcoterrorism in the state, alleging the illicit trade enjoyed political patronage?

It was also hard to explain why Kukis began to be described in media reports as refugees in their own country. Some media persons focused on individual incidents—each undoubtedly horrific—but no single incident could explain the real nature of the conflict and its causes.

Now that Manipur no longer makes headlines, people have forgotten about it. The people living in Manipur, however, continue to face violence. Even communities that were not directly involved are being drawn into the conflict. Although it was largely the Kuki-Zo who suffered the most during the May 2023 conflict, the most important thing we need to understand is that no one community

can be singled out as the 'innocent victim'.

In the past, the violence in the state was between Indian security forces—including the Indian Army—and local militant groups. Today, militant groups are fighting each other as well as the Indian armed forces. Violence is endemic due to the vast quantity of unaccounted-for arms and ammunition circulating in Manipur.

Political parties, armed groups and civil society organisations must stop looking at identity politics as a solution for Manipur.

Every single identity has been weaponised, literally and figuratively, backed by armed groups with the most sophisticated weapons that they do not hesitate to use. This identity politics has penetrated the administration as well, which explains conflicts between Assam Rifles and the Manipur police.

Exact figures on the number of armed groups operating in Manipur are hard to come by but recent reports highlight 5-10 major ones, including the United National Liberation Front, the People's Liberation Army, the Kangleipak Communist Party, the Kanglei Yawol Kanba Lup and the People's Revolutionary Party of Kangleipak.

These groups have become more active after the 2023 violence. There are also vigilante groups like Arambai Tengol and Meitei Leepun. In addition, there are approximately 30 Kuki armed groups including the Kuki National Army, Zomi Revolutionary Front and Chin Kuki Revolutionary Front. Naga insurgent groups include the Naga National Council of Nagaland and Zeliangrong United Front, both recently engaged in bitter rivalries.

The Government of India does not seem to have an overall policy to deal with insurgency in Manipur. During ceasefire agreements or peace talks, armed groups have been allowed to consolidate their position, recruit cadres and procure arms.

What adds to the complexity is that intelligence agencies have always played a predominant role in dealing with insurgency in Manipur with almost no accountability or transparency. In the era of social media, this lack of transparency has had disastrous consequences. For instance, a report—purportedly based on leaked intelligence—stated that 'over 900 Kuki militants, newly trained in the use of drone-based bombs, projectiles, missiles and jungle warfare, have entered Manipur from Myanmar.'

A note, marked IMMEDIATE—No. 1/25/2024-CM, dated 16 September 2024—addressed to Manipur's director general of police and signed by then chief minister's secretary, Ningthoujam Geoffrey, was leaked and went viral on social media.

Authorities initially acknowledged the leak but denied its authenticity soon after. This is just one example of how news leaks, subsequent denials and lack of reliable information fuel volatility in the state—long described as a playground for foreign intelligence agencies.

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Another factor is that Manipur is situated in the northeast which makes it an extremely sensitive area geopolitically. Developments in Myanmar, China and Bangladesh directly impact the state. While Manipur does not share a border with Bangladesh, every regional instability there worsens the situation here.

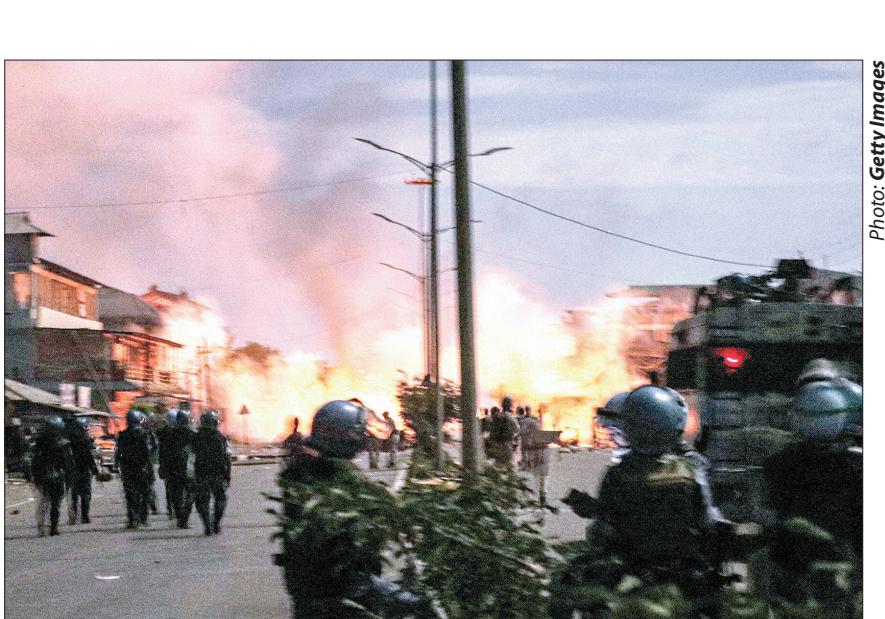
Some leaders of armed Manipuri groups have taken refuge in China. This has resulted in the supply of arms to insurgents through illicit markets near the China-Myanmar border. According to one report, 'Myanmar's allowance of Chinese security firms since early 2025 raises fears of Beijing monitoring India's borders, supporting rebels, and hindering counter-insurgency in Manipur and nearby states. Historical reports confirm Chinese aid to militants via Myanmar groups like Kachin rebels.'

Ironically enough, Meitei, Naga and Kuki students, young professionals and migrant workers who live far from their home state, turn to each other for support and succour. They routinely share rooms, enjoy the same food, laugh at the same jokes. Yes, there is an unwritten code: they do not talk about things back home. And yes, they all still consider Manipur home.

Then comes the clash of competing homelands: Kuki armed groups draw maps including vast swathes of Naga-inhabited areas, which angers the Nagas; Meitei imagine a kingdom that includes the hills, claiming they ruled the Nagas in the past, which adds to Naga wrath; Nagas call Kukis 'refugees' which leads to Naga-Kuki clashes. The community of 'Mayangs'—non-Mongoloid Indian citizens like the Marwaris who have been settled in Manipur for decades—are weary of all these imagined homelands, as they are not included in any. The Muslims of Manipur? They have their own imaginary homeland.

Years of divide and rule by the Indian government and intelligence agencies have ensured there is no unity among the groups. Despite occasional conflicts in the past, never has it been as deadly as it is today. ■

NANDITA HAKSAR is a human rights advocate long associated with the northeast. Her many books include *Shooting the Sun: Why Manipur was Engulfed by Violence* and *The Government Remained Silent (Speaking Tiger, 2023)*



Just another day in the life of Manipur

What adds to the complexity is that intelligence agencies have always played a predominant role in dealing with insurgency in Manipur with almost no accountability or transparency

How the India-US trade deal will deepen the farm crisis tomorrow

Yogendra Yadav

What many feared has come to pass. This writer has been warning for some time now that no matter what the Modi government claimed, Donald Trump would succeed in forcing India into a trade deal. Whatever the spin, agriculture would be part of it.

For months, courtier media kept insisting that Modi had refused to bow to American pressure. In August, the prime minister thumped his chest and declared that farmers, livestock rearers and fisherfolk were his top priority, and that there would be no compromise on their interests. The same claim was made when agriculture was kept out of the trade agreement with the European Union—proof, we were told, that Modi was protecting farmers.

In the end, what was bound to happen did happen. As with the India-Pakistan ceasefire, this time too Indians heard the news first from the US President. The prime minister has yet to open his mouth, and the Indian government has not issued a formal statement. But Trump's announcement clearly states that agriculture has been included in the deal. This has been confirmed by US agriculture secretary Brooke Rollins, who congratulated American farmers and wrote that President Trump had now thrown open the doors of Indian markets to their crops.

The Indian government will no doubt do a damage-control exercise. But before we get swept up in the mainstream media narrative, let's review a few basic facts. For decades—regardless of which party was in power—India's policy has been to keep agriculture out of international trade agreements, to protect farmers' interests.

Indian farmers are not threatened by foreign trade because they are inefficient or incompetent. All major agricultural producer countries heavily subsidise their farmers, allowing them to sell cheaply in global markets. In contrast, the Indian government extracts more from farmers' pockets than it gives them.

In technical terms, Indian farmers receive what amounts to a 'negative subsidy'. That is why the government imposes import duties on crops produced in sufficient quantities at home—to shield



As with the India-Pakistan ceasefire, this time too Indians first heard of the trade deal with the US from Donald Trump

For decades, India's policy has been to keep agriculture out of international trade deals to protect the interests of farmers

farmers from foreign dumping. This policy explains why agriculture was excluded from all major trade agreements in recent years. The proposed agreement with the European Union did allow processed foods, which could eventually affect Indian farmers—but raw agriculture remained protected.

Trump has now forced India to abandon this position. From the outset, American negotiators had their eyes on India's agricultural markets. The US is among the world's largest producers of maize, soyabean and cotton. Production has risen sharply in recent years, but China has cut back its purchases of maize and soyabean.

Last year, a US commerce department report identified India as a market that

could absorb this surplus. The obstacles were India's high import duties and the fact that most American maize and soyabean are genetically modified, which is banned in India. The US also wants to export milk and dairy products to India, but here too it runs into duties and India's condition that milk must come from cattle not fed animal feed. Washington wanted freedom from all these restrictions.

The details of the agreement are not yet public, so it is hard to say which of these conditions the Indian government has accepted. But one thing is certain: the Modi government has retreated from its long-held commitment to keep agriculture out of trade deals. It is also certain that imports of

crops such as almonds and apples will rise sharply, hitting farmers who grow them. Broadly speaking, the first blow will land on maize, soyabean and sugarcane farmers.

The production of maize and soyabean has risen in recent years, and farmers have received better prices. Cheap American imports will push prices down in the Indian market. Cotton may be less affected, since domestic production has declined and India already imports cotton. But this will indirectly hit sugarcane farmers. To bypass the ban on GM crops, it's possible the government will allow imported maize and soyabean to be used for oil extraction and ethanol production. India has abundant sugarcane and mills buy cane to produce ethanol. If ethanol starts coming in from the US, both sugar mills and sugarcane farmers will be hit. The fate of Indian dairy remains unclear for now, but if duties and restrictions are lifted, India's livestock rears will face a massive shock.

Commerce minister Piyush Goyal's statement in Parliament only adds to the fog. He claims the agreement safeguards the interests of farmers and the dairy sector, while also saying that discussions are still ongoing on the provisions of the deal. The obvious question is: if the agreement isn't final, what's the basis of the minister's reassurance that the farmers' interests are safe? Or, if indeed their interests have been protected, why not make the terms public? In any case, why hasn't the Indian government contradicted the statements of the US President and agriculture secretary?

The full picture emerges when this external shock is seen in conjunction with the internal indifference. There was not even a mention of farmers in the latest Union budget. Even token schemes announced in earlier years have been dropped. Spending on agriculture and allied sectors has been falling steadily since 2019; this year it has been cut from 3.38 per cent to 3.04 per cent. Not just that—six special missions announced last year received not a single rupee in this budget. On top of this, preparations are under way to cut urea subsidies. Yet there is no plan to address the long-term crisis in agriculture.

The government has decided to abandon farmers to their fate. The question now is how farmers and their organisations respond to the challenge. ■

Needed: a level playing field in Indian elections

Noor Mohammad

Since Independence, India's electoral process has evolved into a complex and largely resilient institutional framework. Recent events and public discourse—reflected in media coverage, debates in parliament and in civil society interventions, besides judicial proceedings—have raised renewed questions about the integrity of elections. There is clearly growing concern whether all political actors are truly competing on a level playing field. These concerns deserve serious attention if India's elections are to remain credible, inclusive and trusted by the people.

At its core, a level playing field in elections implies equal opportunity for political parties and candidates to communicate with voters, mobilise resources and seek electoral support without undue advantage to any actor. This principle is not merely aspirational; it is central to democratic legitimacy. When electoral outcomes are shaped more by asymmetries in power, resources or institutional access than by the contestation of ideas, the representative character of democracy is weakened.

One of the most prominent concerns in recent political discourse relates to disparities in political finance. Available data indicate a substantial gap between the financial resources of the ruling party and those of opposition parties. Electoral bonds introduced with the stated objective of improving transparency have instead attracted criticism for enabling opacity in political funding. Allegations that enforcement actions by state agencies have been followed by political donations to the ruling party have further eroded public confidence. The Supreme Court set aside the electoral bonds but the huge funds collected by political parties still remain with them and will continue to disturb the level

playing field. The electoral trusts in use today reflect similar patterns, with funds still managed by corporate houses, and thus susceptible to the dubious practices of the ruling establishment.

This problem could have been addressed by restructuring the management of these trusts into a broad-based body that allocates funds to political parties based on criteria proposed by the Commission and agreed upon by all parties.

In addition to unequal access of parties to corporate funding, the use of public funds and state welfare schemes in close proximity to elections by the government in power has raised questions about competitive neutrality. In recent years, several states have announced direct cash transfers or benefit schemes on the eve of elections. There are complaints that such transfers continued even after the announcement of election schedules, despite the Model Code of Conduct being in force. In essence, these fund transfers amount to bribing voters using public resources. They have occurred notwithstanding the extensive constitutional and statutory powers vested in the Election Commission of India (ECI) in Article 324 of the Constitution to check corrupt practices in elections.

These issues underline the need for a comprehensive Political Finance Law. The existing provisions under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, are inadequate for enforcing accountability. A modern legal framework should mandate full transparency of political donations, ensure strict enforcement of expenditure limits by both individual candidates and political parties. Such a law can draw upon international best practices while being tailored to India's political realities.

At present, only candidates are subjected to expenditure limits (it is next to impossible to enforce the

limit) while political parties have no limits prescribed and can spend as much as they want.

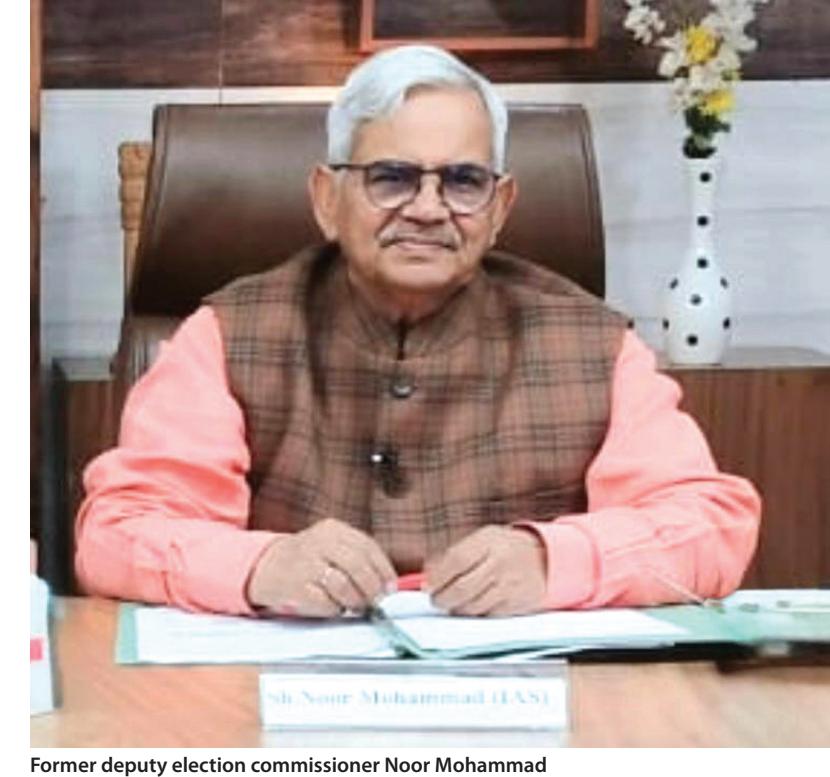
The digital transformation of electoral campaigns presents both opportunities and risks. Political parties with deep pockets now maintain sophisticated IT cells that enhance their outreach. Concerns have been raised about surrogate advertising, opaque targeted messaging and micro-targeting of voters without adequate safeguards. The emergence of AI-generated political content, such as manipulated audio-visual material and deepfakes, adds a new dimension to electoral risk. During the 2024 general elections, reports of AI-generated videos and images raised serious questions about misinformation, deception of voters and erosion of informed consent. These developments necessitate clearer regulatory norms for digital political advertising, mandatory transparency in online political spending and institutional mechanisms to identify and counter deceptive content. Electoral authorities, technology platforms and political parties must share responsibility for preserving the integrity of the digital campaign space.

Hate speeches and digital content created by political parties and their supporters to polarise voters on social media also create

confusion in the voter's mind; such violators should be held accountable. Social media platforms may be approached to include a para on voluntary restraint in the terms and conditions of their service; this must hold them accountable to the law of the land and the ECI must enforce it during elections.

Perhaps the most widely discussed theme in contemporary electoral debates is the perceived neutrality of the Election Commission of India. For a level playing field to exist, the electoral umpire must not only be independent but must also be seen to be independent; the appointment process of the electoral management body (EMB) must be transparent—some countries even mandate parliamentary approval for such appointments. Recent political discourse has included allegations that the ECI has been inconsistent or lenient in enforcing norms, particularly in relation to ruling party conduct—hate speeches by the star campaigners of the party in power often go unchecked. Even the perception of bias can damage institutional credibility.

Concerns surrounding voter lists merit special attention. Manipulation or largescale errors in electoral rolls can decisively affect outcomes if political parties and citizens are not vigilant. Recent Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercises—most notably in Bihar,



Former deputy election commissioner Noor Mohammad

followed by other states—have drawn criticism for being exclusionary. Long-established voter registration procedures were replaced with processes that placed the burden on voters to produce documentary proof of citizenship, despite the absence of a universal citizenship document in India. The identification of ineligible entries in voter rolls was managed without major disruption for over seven decades, underscoring that more balanced approaches are available.

Apart from voter registration, the delimitation of constituencies and location of polling stations are other pre-election activities where manipulations are possible. There is a procedure in place for consultation with political parties but parties with no cadres and meagre resources are unable to take advantage of these consultations. As a result, the possibility of gerrymandering in favour of the resource-rich parties is always present. Associate members on the delimitation commission fail to ensure effective participation due to lack of resources.

Transparency concerns also extend to electronic voting machines (EVMs) and Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) verification. While the VVPAT was introduced to enhance

voter confidence, the current practice of verifying slips from only five polling stations per constituency defeats the very purpose. Demands have been raised for public scrutiny of EVM and VVPAT software. This demand, along with the counting of VVPAT slips, at least on demand, deserves serious consideration.

Equally important is the accessibility of voter lists in machine-readable formats well in advance of elections. Such transparency enables independent verification by political parties and civil society, reduces administrative errors and strengthens confidence in the integrity of the electoral process.

If India aspires to global leadership, the goal of free, fair and widely accepted elections must receive renewed and serious attention. Numerous reform proposals—emanating from the Election Commission, parliamentary committees, the Law Commission and civil society organisations such as the Association for Democratic Reforms—remain unimplemented. It is high time these proposals are examined for a comprehensive electoral reform and a level playing field is created for all stakeholders with accountability for any violations. ■

When electoral outcomes are shaped more by asymmetries in power, resources or institutional access than the contestation of ideas, the representative character of democracy is weakened

In the US-Iran standoff, pray diplomacy wins

Any deal will be imperfect and contested, but imperfect diplomacy is far better than a perfect catastrophe, writes Ashok Swain

Once more, the United States and Iran are standing at the edge of a precipice. Warplanes and aircraft carriers are moving into position, troops are being deployed and dangerous threats being exchanged. In this tense atmosphere, even one wrong move or misunderstanding can trigger a crisis that will become very difficult to contain.

The downing of an Iranian drone this week by the US military in the Arabian Sea shows how quickly small incidents can turn into a major confrontation. There were fresh reports of Iranian forces harassing a US-flagged commercial vessel in the Strait of Hormuz, trying to stop it for boarding. These are not distant warnings but signs of a confrontation taking shape in real time.

Yet even with this rising tension, a small diplomatic opening still exists. Talks aimed at reviving a nuclear agreement are still on the table, and Washington insists negotiations are continuing even as military forces exchange signals of escalation. This opening is fragile, but it is also the only realistic way to prevent a conflict that could spread from a regional war into a global crisis with huge human and economic costs.

The most dangerous path would be a US military campaign to effect regime change in Tehran. History shows that these projects never produce stability. From Iraq to Libya, the collapse of a central state does not create a new stable governance system; it creates a vacuum.

Iran is not a small or weak country that can be reshaped easily. It is a nation of more than ninety million people with deep institutions, a strong sense of history and a powerful security system. If an outside attack tries to topple the ruling structure, the most likely result is not surrender or reform, but unity against an external enemy. Hardliners would gain power, security forces tighten control and many citizens who dislike the government still rally around the nation when it comes under foreign assault.

Recent experience should also serve as a warning to those who still believe that airstrikes can deliver political transformation. In 2025, Israel and the US carried out major airstrikes on Iranian territory, targeting sites linked to Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure. Those

strikes caused damage, but the regime did not collapse, its security apparatus did not break and its core leadership remained in place. Instead, the State adapted and reasserted control. In recent weeks, the Iranian authorities also managed to suppress yet another wave of protests with extreme force.

Iran may struggle to stop a major US air attack, especially against sensitive targets. That may be true in a narrow military sense. But the truth is that Iran does not need to win a conventional battle. Even if it cannot block airstrikes, it can retaliate across the region in ways that raise the costs for Washington and its partners. Iran has invested heavily in ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and combat and suicide drones. It also has the ability to strike at military bases and commercial infrastructure that matter far beyond Iran's borders. A limited strike could therefore trigger a much wider conflict, even if the original plan is to control escalation.

The collapse of Iran would not stay inside Iran; it would spill across West Asia at speed. Iran is deeply connected to the region through alliances, rivalries, armed groups, trade routes and energy networks. A US strike would almost certainly trigger asymmetric retaliation as per Iran's playbook: Tehran cannot match Washington in conventional power but it does not need to. It has built tools to respond through missiles, drones, proxy forces and pressure on strategic choke points.

The Persian Gulf would be the first place where global consequences appear. The Strait of Hormuz is one of the most important waterways on earth because 20 per cent of the world's oil and gas passes through it. Iran does not need to fully shut it down to cause major disruption. Limited harassment of ships, missile threats or mining can create panic. If markets fear shipping is unsafe, oil prices can surge within days. Europe, already under economic pressure, would feel the hit immediately. So would poorer countries that cannot afford sudden price jumps.

The battlefield would then widen. Iraq would become one of the first flashpoints. US troops and diplomatic facilities there could face attacks from Iran-aligned militias, pulling Iraq back into instability and violence. Lebanon could be dragged in as well. Hezbollah would face pressure to



Members of the Palestinian diaspora, joined by Iranian and other people from the Middle East, at a protest in Edmonton, Canada

respond to a major strike on Iran. Syria would be another danger zone. Wars do not always expand through deliberate plans; they often expand through miscalculations, panic and sudden retaliation.

Iran's instability would also have a direct spillover effect on the Kurdish question, creating new security and political dilemmas for a key US ally—Turkey. Ankara has long feared that weakening authority inside Iran could open space for Kurdish militant groups to reorganise, recruit and move more freely along the Iran-Turkey border.

The humanitarian impact could be enormous. If Iran weakens into internal fragmentation or civil conflict, millions could be displaced. Refugees could move towards Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan and the Caucasus. Those states already face economic and security pressures and would struggle to handle large migration flows. Europe would not be immune either. Migration politics has already divided European societies, and a new wave combined with energy disruption could sharpen instability far beyond West Asia.

The most dangerous long-term consequence would be nuclear. A war aimed at regime change would likely convince Iran's leaders that the US is committed to their destruction no matter what. In that situation, the incentive to obtain a nuclear deterrent becomes much stronger. A military strike intended to stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons could push Iran to pursue them faster and with greater urgency.

Some in the region think Iran can be contained by creating an Islamic NATO, a military bloc ready to share burdens and confront Tehran. The project sounds plausible but such a coalition is far more talk than structure. Sunni-majority states have competing interests, different priorities and unresolved rivalries. Some view Iran as the main threat, while others focus on internal instability, economic survival or different geopolitical rivals. Pakistan matters because it is a nuclear power, but its central security focus is India. Gulf monarchies may seek American protection yet fear public backlash if they appear openly aligned in a war that could destroy the region's fragile stability.

That is why containment through military force is an illusion. It creates false confidence that escalation can be managed and costs shared. But once the first strike happens, control quickly disappears. Every side feels pressure to respond harder, faster and more visibly. Diplomacy is the only tool that can produce verifiable, long-term limits on Iran's nuclear programme through inspections and monitoring. The diplomatic talks now underway are more than just another round of dialogue; they may be the last meaningful chance to stop the slide towards a war without borders. Any agreement will be imperfect and contested, but imperfect diplomacy is far better than a perfect catastrophe. ■

ASHOK SWAIN is a professor of peace and conflict research at Uppsala University, Sweden

Containment through military force is an illusion. It creates false confidence that escalation can be managed and costs shared. Once the first strike happens, control quickly disappears

Are we living in a police state?

What happens when authorities in a democratic society deliberately violate the rule of law, particularly criminal law

Aakar Patel

As a democratic society, it is expected that India's authorities follow the rule of law. This includes the assumption that governance will not be arbitrary, especially when it comes to criminal law. This element is important because criminal law has the power to destroy lives, as a judge recently reminded a group of college students who had participated in a protest meet.

Why individuals attending a protest should be charged with a crime in the first place is a separate issue, but that is how things are here. The casual application of criminal law by the State and then the individual's struggle to fight for extended periods of time is also assumed by Indians to be the way things are. This is special to us: it cannot be natural that in the so-called mother of democracy, citizens are afraid of the police, the courts and the State in general. There is nothing new about this, 'police ka chakkar' is a term used in cinema for as long as one can remember.

What I want to discuss is something different that has taken root and is now a part of India's democracy. Two headlines (both from 30 January 2026) will illustrate.

The first is: 'Allahabad HC criticises Uttar Pradesh police for practice of shooting accused persons in legs' (Scroll). The subhead reads: "Such conduct is wholly impermissible, as the power to punish lies exclusively within the domain of the courts", the bench said.

The Uttar Pradesh government had put out the numbers in July

last year: 9,467 people had been shot in the leg by UP police since 2017. That means three people were shot in the leg daily for nine years.

The court made the following observations: people were being shot to please superior officers or to punish individuals without process. The court said this was an encroachment into the judicial domain and could not be accepted. On the recording of the statement and the investigation, the court noted that the police were not following Supreme Court guidelines.

The court was concerned about

police officers pressuring judges, particularly chief judicial magistrates, to pass specific orders. The judge said the court could not allow Uttar Pradesh to become a police state.

A State that kills people in custody, that maims those in custody, that destroys private property without due process and by overruling the justice system, including the Supreme Court, is apparently not already a police state.

The second headline read: 'Cases under Uttarakhand's conversion law fall in court: 7 years, 5 full trials, all 5 acquittals' (Indian Express).

The reference is to the Uttarakhand Freedom of Religion Act, 2018, the first of several state laws introduced and legislated by the BJP after the conspiracy theory of 'love jihad' began to be circulated.

It criminalises marriage between Muslims and Hindus if one of the partners converts. It also states that if any person comes back to his 'ancestral religion' it shall not be deemed conversion, without defining what 'ancestral religion' means. In short: conversion to Hinduism is not counted as conversion.

Once a complaint of 'love jihad' marriage has been filed, a district magistrate will then conduct an inquiry through the police 'with regard to real intention, purpose and cause of that proposed religion conversion'. Those who change their faith without applying to the government 'in the prescribed proforma' and without the consent of the government after the police inquiry face a year in jail.

This law has been in place for seven years. During this period, five cases have completed trial—in all of them all the accused were acquitted. Seven more cases were

dismissed during trial. The Indian Express report said: 'it is clear from court records that evidentiary standards have often not been met, consensual relationships criminalised, and there are procedural lapses in investigation and prosecution'.

On 31 January 2026, Indian Express editorialised its findings under the grand headline: 'In Uttarakhand, judiciary protects citizens from executive overreach'. This is absurd, because the punishment they have been put through is real. As youngsters are wont to say, the word 'protects' is doing a lot of work here.

What are we to conclude from what we see happening around us in our time? First, authorities across India are deliberately violating the law to align themselves with what the BJP governments want. They are doing so confident in the knowledge that they will not be held accountable; on the contrary (as the UP court has observed) they may well be rewarded for doing so.

Second, we must return to where we started and ask what happens when authorities in a democratic society deliberately violate the rule of law, particularly criminal law. There are short-term and long-term consequences of this and both are inevitable.

The short-term consequences are those we read about: lives ruined by the actions of government. The long-term ones are those that affect the nation and society as a whole. A nation that lies to itself about being a 'rule of law democracy' will not end up where the rule of law is intended to take it. ■

UP government figures released in July 2025 revealed that the state police had shot 9,467 people in the leg since 2017. That's three people a day for nine years



Policemen inspecting the Ghaziabad site where notorious criminal Balram Thakur was killed in an encounter in 2025

Views are personal

Pause before you forward that WhatsApp

There is an environmental cost to digital diarrhoea, and it's time you did your bit

Avay Shukla

If you ask me, this WhatsApp (WA) texting is getting quite out of hand. I'm no social spark, my social skills being on par with a grizzly just emerging from a four-month hibernation, but even I find about 20-25 new messages on my phone when I wake up of a morning. And during the course of the day there will be about another 30 or so. Of this, only about five will convey anything meaningful, the rest will be rubbish—generic religious greetings, homilies on how to live well, quotations from unheard of sages, all kinds of fake news, RIP messages. Some of these I find intriguing. Let me explain.

Take the RIPs. What's the point of sending an RIP on a group chat if a member (or member's relative/friend) has passed on? How does that console the affected family? Would it not make more sense if the message were sent directly to the family of the deceased? Is the intention of the message to make a public display of your concern or to show genuine sympathy and grief? If the former, wouldn't it be better to take out a two-column insert in the *Tribune* or *Times of India*?

Then come the proforma greetings—Happy Republic Day! Happy New Year! Happy Women's Day! Happy Ganesh Chaturthi! Now, apart from the fact that there is little happiness attached to any of these occasions nowadays, not one of these messages is usually composed by the sender—all of them are 'Forwards'! These are 'pass through' wishes, second-hand greetings: this alone says a lot about their sincerity or genuineness. And what's the ruddy point of all this, considering that your cup of happiness is already

overflowing since every blessed day of the year is 'Happy something or the other'?

Even the 'news' or informative items are usually forwarded. Rarely does the sender verify their authenticity or give his own views, and one doesn't have a clue why it has been sent. Not only is this intellectual laziness at its worst, it also assumes that you are an ignoramus who has no idea of what is going on in the world and therefore needs to be reminded every half hour!

I usually delete all these messages without even reading them. In addition,

We need to practise digital detoxing—every little bit helps. Or stop complaining about the AQI. A country gets the leaders—and the AQI—it deserves



Photo: Getty Images

I have on my WA groups a mental list of such serial offenders—their messages I delete without even looking at them. So, you may well ask, why am I getting so riled up about all this?

Because, dear reader, there's an environmental cost to this digital diarrhoea. The internet contributes more to global pollution levels than the aviation sector—3.7 per cent as against the latter's 3 per cent. Globally, 150 billion WA messages are sent every day—this is in addition to 300 billion emails! Every WA (or email) message

generates 0.3 to 0.7 gm of CO₂; attached pictures, video or audio increase this to 17 gm. (This is because of the energy needed to power your device, servers and the data centres that store the data). Does it appear too trivial to bother you much? Do the math to understand my angst.

India has about 800 million WA users; assuming each user sends just 20 messages a day, the daily total comes to 16 billion messages. Assume again that each message contributes 0.5 gm of CO₂, the daily emission is 0.5 gm per user.

Extrapolating this for 800 million users, the pollution contribution by WhatsApp comes to 8,000 tonnes per day or 2,920,000 tonnes per annum.

This does not include the contributions of Gmail, Netflix, YouTube which are much higher. The latest to join the polluting bandwagon is AI whose data centres consume humungous amounts of power (and water): the AI chatbot ChatGPT's emissions per month are equivalent to 260 flights from New York to London! The digital carbon footprint, currently almost 4 per cent of total emissions, is expected to double in the next five years.

As in other areas of consumption, we must be more responsible, and incorporate digital, or data, hygiene into our use of the internet. Apart from putting a stop to unnecessary texting, experts advise that we should clear out storage regularly (that means deleting old and dated messages, photos and videos regularly), avoid sending attachments unnecessarily, unsubscribe from unwanted newsletters, compress docs before sending them and stop this pernicious and fashionable practice of 'binge-watching'. It is not necessary to forward every message received on WhatsApp to all and sundry simply to show how well connected, or informed, you are; moreover, chances are that most of these folks would already have received these messages from others who think just as you do!

Try and spend one day a week without sending any messages. Every little bit helps and we need to practice digital detoxing on a regular basis. If not, stop complaining about the AQI: a country gets the leaders—and AQI—it deserves. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



Photos: Getty Images

Former Conservative home secretary Suella Braverman, now with Reform UK

Britain's boring politics goes 'full Indian'

Britain's once famed two-party system which offered two clear choices to the voters—free marketeer, small-state Conservatives and socially liberal big state Labour—has collapsed, like much else of what was once considered uniquely British including, one dare say, driving and good manners.

It was first challenged by Liberal Democrats offering a left-wing and 'wokeish' alternative to the two main parties. Back in 2010, under its then leader Nick Clegg—yes, the same chap who later defected to American capitalism as Mark Zuckerberg's troubleshooter—the party won enough seats to prop up David Cameron's Conservative government as a junior coalition partner.

That move went down so badly with its core supporters that the Lib Dems have since then been struggling to stage a comeback.

Meanwhile, a new far-right party with a Trumpian anti-immigrant agenda has hit the scene like a gale force wind shaking the very foundations of the Conservative-Labour duopoly.

Nigel Farage's Reform UK party (a new avatar of the 2018 Brexit Party) has risen rapidly in the polls on the back of a populist agenda that includes deporting immigrants back to where they came from—to make a 'broken Britain great again'.

According to pollsters, if elections were to be held tomorrow, it would be in pole position to form the next government with the chain-smoking, beer-swilling Farage as prime minister.

Conservative MPs are deserting in droves to join Reform with the Indian-origin Suella Braverman, a former home secretary, being the latest to jump ship. Farage claims he now has more members of the last Conservative cabinet in his top team than its leader Kemi Badenoch does, prompting jokes about this lot's role in the chaotic administrations of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss.

Suddenly, Britain's once boring politics has gone 'full Indian' in its unpredictability.



LONDON DIARY

HASAN SUROOR

Buy your way to permanent residency—illegally

If you happen to be in Britain and don't have the requisite documents to stay on permanently, you can now buy a work visa. An undercover investigation by the *Times* has revealed that fake jobs are being sold for up to £20,000.

These fraudulent schemes enable people to obtain visas by presenting sponsorship certificates issued by government-approved companies that falsely claim they are being hired for high-skilled jobs or in sectors where local talent is not available.

The documents thus obtained are used to stay in the UK, creating a paper trail to support claims for permanent residency (after five years).

For over four months, the *Times* was part of 13 Facebook groups for people seeking UK visas. Reporters spoke to 26 agents offering sponsorship and documented more than 250 examples of fake jobs being offered in hospitality, logistics, social care, IT, finance and marketing.

Agents and companies demanded payments ranging from £7,000 to £20,000. There was a premium for roles that allowed dependants to live and work in the UK.

Those buying sponsorship include people who have lost their sponsored jobs and need a new one within 60 days if they are to remain in the UK. Other agents target international students who want to stay after their graduate visas end, 'the



report said.

The government has promised urgent intervention. "We are investigating this illegal activity and it will not be tolerated," the Home Office said.

But this is not the first time such a scam has been exposed. Probably not the last, either.

Church of England makes history

The last outpost of male monopoly in British public life has been busted with the Church of England appointing a woman as the Archbishop of Canterbury—a first in its 1,429-year history.

Sarah Mullally (64) who replaces Justin Welby—forced to resign for failing to check child abuse in the Church—will lead the Church of England and its 110-million



Sarah Mullally, the new Archbishop of Canterbury

strong worldwide Anglican communion.

She takes over at a particularly difficult time for the Church. Average attendance at Church of England services on any given Sunday in 2024 was about 580,000—that's less than one per cent of the population.

Her priority must be to reverse what appears to be an inexorable decline. As one commentator put it, this will "need all her administrative and political skills".

Cancelled subscriptions for focusing on politics

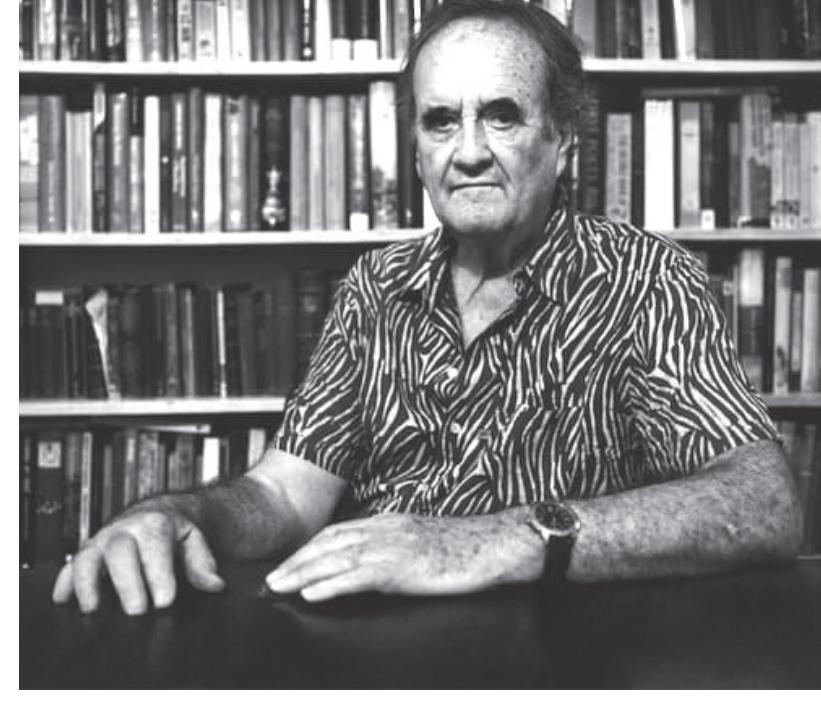
The London Stock Exchange Group has cancelled hundreds of *Financial Times* subscriptions complaining that it isn't covering the London markets enough and is focusing more on political news.

According to one analysis, the *FT* mentions the FTSE-100 about 70 per cent less than it did in 2010, despite lending its name to the index.

And, finally, an example of poor general knowledge in British journalism as narrated by *Times* columnist Samuel Martin: "I once worked at a newspaper where a junior on the foreign desk asked if our house style was Iran or Iraq. It's the type of question one can imagine emanating from the White House these days."

TRIBUTE

The man who told us about India's 'neta babu raj'



Veteran journalist
Prem Shankar Jha reminisces
about **Mark Tully**

Mark Tully was that rarest of rare journalists who never shirked a challenge and never lost his sense of humour even in the most perilous of moments. This was not because he found what he saw and heard around him 'amusing'. There wasn't a shred of condescension about him; just an intense interest in everything he saw, felt and heard.

I first heard Mark's broadcasts shortly after returning to Delhi in the late sixties and was deeply envious of their vividness. Two decades later, I read William

Dalrymple's *City of Djinns* and was again green with envy! Why did one have to be a foreigner to really see Delhi, I'd wondered. How easily do we who grow up as Indians take the sheer uniqueness of our society and its extraordinary culture for granted? As a result how casually do we destroy it?

In those early days of Mark's sojourn in Delhi, India was practically a closed country. To know what was happening in our own country we had to rely on a BBC broadcast at 9 p.m. and a shorter follow-up the next afternoon.

So, if we heard news that made the government uncomfortable, it was almost invariably from the BBC. And that meant Mark.

Mark's broadcasts shaped my views as also my life thereafter. I have two vivid memories. The first

was when I heard and then read in Mark and Satish Jacob's book *Amritsar: Mrs Gandhi's Last Battle* about how the developing Khalistan movement and its murderous reprisal attacks on Hindus in Punjab was being guided by Bhindranwale and his followers from the Golden Temple.

This book which I couldn't put down till I'd finished, gave me my first understanding of what happened later in Punjab and the ballast of knowledge with which to understand and write about what was happening there—and later

counsel prime minister V.P. Singh on Punjab as his media advisor.

But Mark reached the apogee of his influence and the respect he enjoyed with his assiduous, measured yet brutally frank reporting of the days of the Emergency—the censorship and police repression and compulsory sterilisation unleashed upon the people of north India by Sanjay Gandhi's vasectomy programme. That got Mark kicked out of India and, if memory serves me right, the BBC blocked for a good long while during the Emergency.

From then on, especially after his return to India, Mark was no longer 'Mark Sahib' but our Mark.

On a more personal note, I have an abiding affection for Mark because he wrote a two-page review of my first book, *India: A Political Economy of Stagnation* in 1980 for the BBC's trademark magazine, *The Listener*. It was in that review that he coined the phrase 'neta babu raj' to describe India. ■

Rs 7,432 CRORE IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS: TRANSFORMING BADAMI, VARUNA, SEDAM, JEWARGI, and YADRAMI

Comprehensive initiatives in heritage, infrastructure, education, irrigation, and farmers' welfare under CM Siddaramaiah's leadership

Karnataka is witnessing an unprecedented surge in development. In January 2026, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's Government launched projects worth thousands of crores across key constituencies, including Badami, Varuna, Yadrami, and Sedam. These initiatives include Rs 2,000 crore for Badami's infrastructure, Rs 1,932 crore for Varuna, Rs 906 crore across Yadrami and Jewargi, and Rs 1,595 crore in Sedam, covering roads, irrigation, schools, and GTTC centers. Beyond the figures, these projects exemplify a governance model that fulfills promises, strengthens communities, and fosters inclusive growth across Kalyana Karnataka and Mysuru districts.

By systematically implementing these initiatives, the Government is transforming the landscape of Karnataka's three prominent regions—Kittur Karnataka, Mysuru Karnataka, and Kalyana Karnataka—demonstrating a holistic approach that prioritizes infrastructure, employment, social welfare, and equitable progress under Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's leadership.

Transforming Badami Constituency: Rs 2,000 Crore for Heritage and Development

In Bagalkote district, the Badami constituency has witnessed remarkable development under the current Government. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah revealed that approximately Rs 2,000 crore has been allocated to Badami over the last two years. "Our Government is committed to the overall development of Badami, ensuring that the constituency thrives in



"Our government acts as the Chalukyas did, promoting harmony and inclusive progress. The Chalukya Utsava will highlight temples built by the Chalukyas, drawing visitors from across India and abroad," the Chief Minister elaborated. The festival, besides celebrating heritage, is a platform to showcase Badami, Aihole, and Pattadakal as key tourist and cultural destinations.

Minister elaborated. The festival, besides celebrating heritage, is a platform to showcase Badami, Aihole, and Pattadakal as key tourist and cultural destinations.

In addition to cultural initiatives, substantial development works have been undertaken in Badami. These include a lift irrigation project worth Rs 1,400 crore, a drinking water project costing Rs 400 crore, and several road

the kindness of Badami residents."

Highlighting the initiatives during the current term, the Chief Minister addressed the unveiling of the ImmadiPulikesi statue, the foundation stone laying for various departmental projects, and the organization of cultural festivals that reflect both heritage and modern development. "At the insistence of local leaders and public representatives, the Chalukya

October 2024, works worth Rs 501 crore were inaugurated, followed by projects worth Rs 1,108 crore on 9 August 2025. The most recent launch, including the Kupya village projects, brings the total development expenditure in the constituency to Rs 1,932 crore.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah emphasized the scale of work undertaken, noting that more than 1,500 programmes have been implemented, covering both infrastructure development and guarantee schemes designed to benefit local communities. The Government has also allocated substantial funds across Mysuru district, with total development works worth approximately Rs 10,000 crore.

Responding to criticism from opposition parties regarding fund shortages, the Chief Minister clarified, "It would not have been possible to undertake these development works if the treasury were empty. In two and a half years, Rs 1,932 crore has been spent exclusively on development, and Rs 1,15,000 crore has been allocated to guarantee schemes. The opposition should understand this reality."

Efforts to engage with citizens have been strengthened in Varuna constituency. The Chief Minister highlighted that Dr. Yathindra, a key representative, regularly visits the constituency two to three times a week to listen to grievances and ensure prompt redressal, particularly in the Chief Minister's absence. This continuous engagement reflects the Government's commitment to citizen-centric governance.

Farmers' Welfare: Relief and Support in Kalyana Karnataka

The Government has prioritized

every sector," he stated.

The Chalukya legacy, which defines the cultural and architectural grandeur of Badami, has been central to the Government's focus. During a grand function at the ImmadiPulikesi stage, held under the aegis of the District Administration, District Panchayat, Bagalkote, the Department of Kannada and Culture, and the Tourism Department, the Chief Minister inaugurated the Chalukya Utsava 2026, a festival aimed at showcasing the architectural brilliance of the Chalukya dynasty.

"Our government acts as the Chalukyas did, promoting harmony and inclusive progress. The Chalukya Utsava will highlight temples built by the Chalukyas, drawing visitors from across India and abroad," the Chief

projects valued at Rs 50 crore. Emphasizing the Government's commitment to fulfilling promises, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah remarked, "Our Government acts exactly as it promises. Out of the 590 promises made in our manifesto, 240 have already been fulfilled, and several guarantee schemes have been successfully implemented."

The Chief Minister also acknowledged the support of Badami residents in his political journey. "I served as the MLA of Badami for five years. When I contested from Chamundeshwari in 2018, I faced defeat, but the people of Badami constituency once again supported me and elected me. Their goodwill has enabled me to serve Varuna constituency as well. I will never forget

Utsava has been organized with a budget allocation of Rs 3 crore, with an additional Rs 1 crore dedicated to the unveiling of the ImmadiPulikesi statue," he said.

Varuna Constituency Development: Rs 1,932 Crore in Projects Launched

In Mysuru district, the Varuna constituency has been the focus of extensive development initiatives. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah confirmed that total development works worth Rs 1,932 crore have been launched across the constituency, with foundation stone laying and inaugurations taking place in Kupya village for works worth approximately Rs 323 crore.

Since assuming office, the Government has organized development programmes in the Varuna constituency on three separate occasions. On 22

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Yadrami Taluk Development: Bridging Inequalities with Rs 906 Crore in Works

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah expressed confidence that inequalities in Kalyana Karnataka would be eliminated within ten years, ensuring equitable development. At a function held at the KPS School premises in Yadrami, under the joint aegis of the District Administration, District Panchayat, and Kalyana Karnataka Development Board, the Chief Minister inaugurated and laid foundation stones for various departmental projects while distributing benefits to beneficiaries. In Yadrami Taluk and Jewargi

constituency, projects totaling Rs 906 crore were inaugurated, with 87 projects worth Rs 867.49 crore in Jewargi and Rs 38.29 crore in Yadrami. Addressing political criticism, he stated, "Opposition parties are spreading lies for political gain, claiming there are no funds for infrastructure works under guarantee schemes. If the Government were bankrupt, we could not have spent Rs 906 crore in Jewargi constituency alone."

The Chief Minister emphasized the Government's adherence to

promises, citing that over Rs 1,12,000 crore in grants has been disbursed. 592 promises from the last election manifesto have been partially fulfilled, with the remaining to be implemented. During the previous term, 158 of 165 promises were completed, alongside 30 additional programmes not listed in the manifesto, demonstrating the Government's commitment to delivery. In contrast, the BJP, which governed from 2018, fulfilled only 10% of its promises, highlighting the efficiency and accountability of the

current administration.

Further, the Government has approved PrasajaSoudhas in 49 taluks, ensuring the construction of government offices across Kalyana Karnataka. While BJP approved only 19 taluks, our Government has expanded infrastructure to 17 taluks with 97 Nadu offices and 39 offices already completed, with 53 more under construction. This systematic expansion reflects a focus on accessibility and administrative efficiency.

Consolidated Key Statistics

Badami Constituency Development: Rs 2,000 crore

- Lift Irrigation Project: Rs 1,400 crore
- Drinking Water Project: Rs 400 crore
- Roads & Other Development Works: Rs 50 crore
- Chalukya Utsava & ImmadiPulikesi Statue: Rs 4 crore

Varuna Constituency Development: Rs 1,932 crore

- Kupya Village Development Works: Rs 323 crore
- Development Works: Rs 501 crore
- Development Works: Rs 1,108 crore
- Roads, Education & Other Works: Part of total allocation

Sedam Constituency Development: Rs 1,595 crore

- Departmental Projects & GTTC Centers: Rs 680 crore
- GTTC Center Establishment: Rs 73 crore
- Lift Irrigation Projects: Rs 326.70 crore
- Other Development Works: Rs 515.3 crore

Yadrami&Jewargi Projects: Rs 906 crore

- Jewargi Constituency Development Works: Rs 867.49 crore
- Additional Projects: Rs 38.29 crore

Farmers' Relief: Rs 2,249 crore

- SDRF & Government Compensation: Rs 2,249 crore
- Crop Damage Assistance: 14.21 lakh farmers affected statewide
- Kalyana Karnataka Farmers Relief: 721,786 farmers
- Kalaburagi District Relief: 323,318 farmers
- Pulses Crop Assistance: Rs 233 crore
- Sugarcane Farmers Compensation: Rs 300 crore

Kalyana Karnataka. About 85,000 people have secured government employment, with vacant positions being filled step by step. The Sedam municipality has been upgraded to a city municipal council, reflecting urban development alongside social welfare.

A GTTC center costing Rs 73 crore is being established in Sedam, providing guaranteed employment for trained candidates. During BJP's tenure, only four GTTC centers were established, whereas the current Government has launched ten GTTC centers in just two and a half years.

Lift Irrigation and Medical Infrastructure

Sedam is witnessing four lift irrigation projects: Kachur Rs 85.50 lakh, Biranahalli Rs 90 crore, Yadahalli Rs 67.30 crore, and Taranahalli Rs 82.90 crore, providing irrigation for 8,000 hectares. This enables cultivation of commercial crops such as pigeon pea and sugarcane, raises groundwater levels, and ensures drinking water availability.

Medical colleges are being established across all districts, with Dakshina Kannada and Ramanagara slated to start this year. This initiative aims to make healthcare accessible and affordable, especially for the economically weaker sections, circumventing the high costs of private hospitals.

Inclusivity and Legacy: 371J Implementation

"Our Government is inclusive of all people. The successful implementation of 371J was made possible through the relentless efforts of Mallikarjun Kharge and Dharam Singh. Without their support, these reforms could not have been realized," the Chief Minister emphasized.

In addition, 300 Karnataka Public Schools have had foundation stones laid, complementing educational initiatives and ensuring infrastructure for learning. Overall, 900 KPS schools have been sanctioned across the State.

Through these extensive initiatives across Badami, Varuna, Yadrami, and Sedam, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah's Government has demonstrated a commitment to inclusive development, cultural preservation, educational empowerment, agricultural relief, and employment generation. With meticulous planning, substantial financial allocation, and citizen-focused governance, Karnataka is on the path to transformative growth, bridging inequalities and delivering progress across all sectors.

Jobs and Education: Filling Vacancies and Establishing GTTC Centers

The 371J Act has facilitated the appointment of 10,000 doctors, 30,000 engineers, 12,000 dentists, and other higher-education professionals in