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# How the deep south was won

The UDF must carry the lessons from a great victory into governance. Time to deliver on promises, writes **K.A. Shaji**

The verdict in Kerala on 4 May was not just a vote for change. Nor merely an expression of anti-incumbency as many commentators had you think. It was also a rejection of the divisive politics of the BJP, which did its damndest to split the vote on communal lines. The party still managed 11.4 per cent of the vote—signaling that the rot may have set in here too—but it wasn't enough to deliver any more than the three seats it managed. Three seats too many, for many Keralans.

The Congress-led UDF (United Democratic Front) secured a decisive 102 seats in the 140-member assembly and the CPI(M)-led LDF (Left Democratic Front) saw a big contraction. That contraction was in large measure a verdict on outgoing chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan's style of functioning—the cult of personality and the extreme concentration of power in his own hands as also his attempts to make nice with the BJP to stay afloat. It took seven rounds of counting for Vijayan to establish a lead in Left citadel Dharmadam and his final margin of victory was much slimmer than the 50,000+ votes in 2021. Thirteen of his cabinet ministers lost.

For a long time, factionalism had been the bane of the Congress in Kerala, often spilling into the public domain. And while contesting personal ambitions did again surface after the results, in the run-up to the elections, the party held together. Candidate selection, always a fraught affair, was handled with remarkable smoothness. No public altercations, no competing lists, no late-stage rebellions.

This unity was not accidental; it was managed with care. Party general secretary (organisation) K.C. Venugopal and Ramesh Chennithala took the lead in handling dissent, engaging with aspirants and ensuring that grievances were resolved internally. The emphasis was clear and consistent: winnability would override



The sweet taste of victory Celebrations at the Congress headquarters in Thiruvananthapuram and on the streets outside



Photo: Getty Images

factional claims. That message stuck. This rare organisational discipline translated into electoral coherence. The UDF looked a coordinated political unit, not a ragtag group carrying the same banner. This unity allowed the alliance to focus sharply on the electorate instead of itself, a critical advantage in a contest that was expected to be tight.

At the campaign level, V.D. Satheesan, leader of the opposition in the previous house, was the principal voice of this reset. His messaging was measured, consistent and rooted in governance concerns. "This verdict is about restoring democratic functioning and accountability," he said after the results.

The Congress has improved not just its tally of seats—from 22 in 2016 and 21 in 2021 to 63 this time—but also its vote share (28.8 per cent from 25.1 per cent in 2021). Allies like the IUML (Indian Union Muslim League) retained their strongholds. In central Kerala, several constituencies

returned to the UDF. In Malabar, which is traditionally a Left stronghold, the margins narrowed sharply and several seats flipped. Urban and semi-urban constituencies also recorded a shift, driven by economic anxieties and governance concerns.

One of the most consequential aspects of this election was the consolidation of Muslim and Christian voters behind the UDF, whose assurances clearly carried more credibility with these voters. IUML all-India general secretary P.K. Kunhalikutty said this shift was pivotal to the outcome. "People wanted a government that respects diversity and listens. That trust came back to the UDF," he said. The IUML's steady performance in Malabar anchored UDF gains. And the BJP's outreach to sections of the Church, in an attempt to disrupt settled social equations, failed to make an impact in the vote.

The unravelling of the Left The UDF did also benefit from voter

disatisfaction with the Left ecosystem. Local discontent among CPI(M) cadres and sympathisers further weakened the LDF organisationality.

But the LDF's defeat cannot be understood without examining the nature of its governance. Under Pinarayi Vijayan, the government projected decisiveness and administrative control. In the early days, this was seen as strength and efficiency, but over time, it began to look like something else—concentration of power and centralised decision-making.

The space for internal dissent shrank. Critics within the Left ecosystem started talking about an arrogant leadership that discouraged debate.

The Left in Kerala has historically sworn by collective leadership and ideological engagement. But under Vijayan, the political culture changed dramatically, from governance by (party) consensus to governance by decree. For a cadre-based movement, that transition was radical.

The LDF campaign relied too much on past achievements in welfare and infrastructure. Those achievements are no doubt substantial, but not brag-worthy any more in Kerala, whose voters are used to better base-level human development indicators than, say, the Hindi heartland states. The LDF's poll campaign was found wanting on emerging concerns such as unemployment and the rising cost of living. CPI state secretary Binoy Viswam admitted the need for introspection: "We must examine where we failed to connect with the people."

The SilverLine project (a.k.a. K-Rail)—a proposed 530 km semi-high-speed railway line connecting the capital Thiruvananthapuram in the state's south to Kasaragod in the north—was another flashpoint during the election.

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# Waking up to the BJP in West Bengal

Jagati Bagchi

As a child, mornings always carried more than the promise of a new day. They meant newspapers, discussions on politics, strains of Rabindra Sangeet over Akashvani. For the first time in all these years, on the morning of 5 May 2026, all those things seemed so distant, like relics from another life.

For the first time in independent Bengal, a far-right party is in power. Ironically, my state was the party's ideological womb. As the baby journeyed through life—metamorphosing from the Hindu Mahasabha to the Jan Sangh to adulthood as the Bharatiya Janata Party—it took a hundred years to realise its dream to rule over Bengal.

All this is very close to me. I am the daughter of a first-generation refugee. My father did not inherit stability. He built it, after losing his home, his rose garden, his trophies. He wasn't alone, just one of millions who crossed borders during moments of rupture in the subcontinent's history. Arriving in West Bengal as survivors, looking for ground beneath their feet, a roof over their heads. Bengal was not just a place—it was a possibility. Through language, culture and community, Bengal offered a fragile but real sense of continuity after the traumas of displacement.

Growing up, I did not experience that displacement directly. But I lived with its memory. Today, as the BJP comes to power, the language of politics has shifted in ways that feel familiar—not because I have lived them before, but because I have

inherited the memory of where they can lead. The sheer, all-too-familiar dread of 'not belonging'. Those words, that tone. Identity, citizenship, security, belonging—these are no longer neutral words. They carry implications that extend beyond governance into the realm of lived experience. For someone whose family history is rooted in displacement, these are not distant debates. These are personal.

The shift—that many are calling a 'recalibration'—is so much more than that. To me, it is the recolonisation of Bengal. Colonisation is not only about capturing territory; it is about capturing people. The

SIR created an atmosphere of repression. It brought back memories of displacement, of the constant nagging fear that one must be prepared to leave, anytime, without any warning.

The SIR unleashed a calculated, selective exclusion. I witnessed the desperation of people, especially women, during my trips to the suburbs of Kolkata and Sundarban. During one such trip, I saw a little girl holding on to her grandmother's sari, both standing at the door of a local train compartment. I found out that the woman had survived an attempt to take her own life after the SIR struck her name off the electoral roll. Perhaps the little girl was holding on to her to keep her tied to things that still mattered—family, love, community. On the morning of 5 May, this image came back to me in vivid high-definition.

It was difficult to fathom my emotions. Sometimes frustration, sometimes rage, but mostly, as the day rolled on, despair. Time and again, I questioned the importance of elections, I bewailed their futility. I hoped

that this day, too, would pass, like all the others. I wondered, after the dust settled, if I, too, would quietly accept this as 'fate'.

For minorities in Bengal, identity has historically been layered but relatively unthreatened in everyday life. On 5 May, I saw this baseline altered—not necessarily by removing their rights but by introducing a sense that their right to belong was being reassessed. Already the threat of dispossession was at work. To that was added the threat of displacement.

For Bengal's minorities—Muslims, Christians and smaller linguistic or ethnic groups—the political shift carries deeper implications. These communities have long been integral to the state's social fabric. Their presence is not marginal, it is the very essence of a state that was.

Change arrived in the shape of rhetoric that cast suspicion, administrative practices that felt uneven, a broader narrative that positioned certain identities as contingent. The shift was subtle but pervasive—from easy belonging with a sense of entitlement to belonging with

strings attached. A growing fear of dispossession and displacement—not always articulated through policy but felt through the atmosphere of uncertainty.

The current moment may appear chaotic and it's tempting to cling to the hope that it will pass. But the lived experience of minorities from other parts of India suggests that these conditions can get normalised.

It gave me an eerie feeling, of an impending storm that would destroy everything I held precious. As the day gave way to evening and then what felt like a never-ending night, I watched the destruction with horror. Overnight, social media had turned into a putrid cesspool of hatred and whataboutery.

The heckling of women candidates was, for me, the most dreadful. This had never happened before, not in my Bengal. Many women who have been vocal about the excesses of the BJP had to lock their social media profiles. The threats were so vile it did not matter that they were virtual. Reels showed men and young boys dressed up as Mamata Banerjee being disrobed and beaten. So, this is the fantasy of the BJP cadre in Bengal!

Public spaces have long been a canvas of political expression in West Bengal. But today these spaces are overrun by the BJP's lumpen cadre, brought in by the party for a hostile takeover of Bengal.

This is no 'recalibration'. It's the third colonisation of Bengal. The state is at risk of losing control over its resources, its intangible wealth of thought and expression. It faces a violent and terrifying transformation of its intellectual culture that has historically thrived on debate and dissent.

For me, a thread broke on the morning of 5 May. I'm trying to hold on, like that little girl, holding on to her grandmother's sari. ■



West Bengal now faces a violent and terrifying transformation

*The SIR brought back memories of displacement, of the constant nagging fear that one must be prepared to leave. Any time, without any warning*

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# A people's mandate lost in the fog of SIR

Sayantn Ghosh

If the BJP's triumph in the 2026 West Bengal assembly elections is remembered as a turning point in the history of the state, it won't be simply because the party got a brute majority (207 of the 293 seats) or because it ended Mamata Banerjee's uninterrupted reign of 15 years. There were early indications in the violence that ensued after the results, in the vulgarity of the victor's celebrations, in the bulldozing of meat shops in the city's iconic New Market on which way the state was headed.

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of voter rolls in West Bengal will also not be easily forgotten. By the time of the elections, held in two phases on 23 and 29 April, the Election Commission of India (ECI) had managed to remove ~91 lakh names from the rolls. That's nearly 12 per cent of the state's voter base, shrinking it from around 7.66 crore pre-SIR to 6.8 crore.

The scale and pattern of deletions are instructive: in 105 of the BJP's winning seats, i.e., half its tally, the number of deleted voters exceeded the party's victory margin. Of these, 86 were seats the BJP had never won before. Let's just say these numbers do not inspire confidence in the electoral process.

But what the dubious SIR exercise has also done is to deflect attention from the very real anti-incumbency in the state and obscured its impact on the results. Years of the 'syndicate raj' in construction and other sectors, the lack of employment opportunities, the state's 'cut money' culture of extortion and governance failures had earned the Trinamool Congress a terrible reputation in the state—and the desire for change was palpable. Across communities, including large sections of disaffected Muslims and women, who are generally seen as pro-TMC. The BJP capitalised on this fatigue even while making its own pre-poll promises of bigger doles and 'development'. And it's not far-fetched to assume that the high turnout was also a reflection of the desire for change.

If it's fair to assume the SIR went against the TMC, it's also fair to assume that a victory of this magnitude would not have

been possible without real discontent with the Trinamool Congress.

## Nevertheless, the rights

looms large over these results. It's not easy to brush aside the improbable fact of Trinamool bastions falling so decisively. And if we are still a democracy, then a thorough, independent scrutiny of the entire electoral process is in order. It's no trifling matter to summarily delete lakhs of voters from rolls in a country that has universal adult suffrage and whose Election Commission is mandated to ensure that 'no one is left out'.

The right to vote is a cornerstone of our Constitution. While a periodic clean-up of voter rolls is essential, the process must prioritise inclusion of legitimate citizens over exclusion on contested grounds. Even after the Calcutta High Court and Supreme Court oversaw aspects of the SIR exercise, the implementation left massive gaps. An estimated 27 lakh appeals were still pending when the elections got over.

As mentioned earlier, in several key battlegrounds, voter deletions outnumbered



BJP workers in Kolkata celebrate the brute majority the party won on 4 May

voter margins. Take just one example—Bhabanipur. Outgoing chief minister Mamata Banerjee lost to BJP's Suvendu Adhikari by ~15,000 votes and the number of voter deletions here was ~45,000. This happened to other TMC ministers as well.

## What the data reveals

Whereas the voter base contracted 12 per cent overall from the pre-SIR baseline, the effects were concentrated in urban areas and minority pockets. Analyses by different organisations show a disproportionate impact on Muslims, who comprise about 27 per cent of the state's population (2011 Census) and accounted for roughly 34 per cent of the ~91 lakh deletions. In the 27 lakh

pending cases 'under adjudication', estimates suggest ~17 lakh (or 63 per cent) are Muslims. In Murshidabad district, which has a Muslim concentration, the deletions are variously estimated to be between 4 lakh and 7 lakh. The Malda and North 24 Parganas districts also saw heavy deletions.

According to the Kolkata-based Sabar Institute, a data analytics outfit, the skew was sharper in certain constituencies. In Nandigram, for instance, where Muslims form about 25 per cent of the population, they accounted for over 95 per cent of deletions in several supplementary lists. Similar patterns appeared in Metiabruz and other Muslim-majority areas. Women,

particularly from minority and working-class backgrounds, also featured prominently in the deletions, often reportedly due to name mismatches or documentation issues spanning years.

Through all of this, the Election Commission of India maintained that the exercise was scrupulously fair and had targeted illegals and duplicates. It also took credit for enabling 'peaceful polls' and said record turnouts in some high-deletion areas were a sign that genuine voters were emboldened to participate. Try wrapping your head around that! ■

SAYANTAN GHOSH is the author of two books—*Battleground Bengal* and *The Aam Aadmi Party*

## How the deep south was won



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Projected by the LDF government as a transformative infrastructure initiative, it had triggered much concern over displacement, financial viability and its environmental impact. Protests spread across districts, and the government's response was seen as dismissive.

The UDF managed to reframe the debate to its advantage—arguing for development that is also sustainable and not thrust upon people. This resonated with a wide cross-section of voters, from farmers to middle-class households.

Even police action during protests—over large projects like SilverLine or even local agitations—and the government's tendency to justify police action by default had reinforced the perception of an intolerant state administration.

In the run-up to the election, the LDF would have sensed the changing mood, and it tried to head off imminent voter rejection with a publicity blitz. But, if anything, the high-decibel PR campaign amplified the gap between the official narrative and everyday reality.

The Left, which no doubt played a big hand in Kerala's social development, does not have a clear path to renewal; it certainly cannot live off its legacy forever.

The UDF has reason to feel chuffed with this hard-won victory, but the mandate comes with high expectations, and only good governance can grow their political capital.

The Kerala verdict carries significance beyond the state. It holds lessons for an opposition that is up against phenomenal odds. The UDF campaign was united, disciplined and internally consistent, its leadership looked well-coordinated and its message was clear. Differences were managed well and didn't spill into the public domain. Leaders spoke in one voice. The campaign stayed focused.

It takes all of that when you're fighting with your back to the wall. ■

## Defections, FIRs rule the roost

Punjab's political circles are abuzz with the zealotry of 'investigating' opposition leaders

### Herjinder

Less than a week after Sandeep Pathak—a Rajya Sabha MP from Punjab—defected from the Aam Aadmi Party to join the BJP, a Punjab Police team arrived at his official residence in Delhi. Pathak, however, had reportedly been tipped off. By the time the officers arrived, he had slipped through a rear exit and been slipped away by a waiting car. A video clip of his hasty departure has since been widely circulated, capturing what many see as a spiralling culture of political retribution.

In the days that followed, it emerged that two FIRs were registered against Pathak in separate districts of Punjab, invoking stringent legal provisions under which securing bail is difficult. Delhi Police personnel were deployed outside his residence. The message from Punjab was unmistakable: if he showed up, he would be arrested.

Pathak is not an isolated case. Rajinder Gupta—another of the seven AAP MPs who defected—has also run into legal trouble, albeit of a different nature. Gupta is chairman emeritus of the Tridant Group, a prominent industrialist with business interests spanning textiles and manufacturing. In 2022, the Bharatiya Kisan Union

(Ugrahan) had protested against alleged water pollution from the group's Dhaura unit in Barnala district. At the time, the state government appeared indifferent, and the issue faded from public discourse.

Gupta's defection seems to have galvanised the administration into action. The Punjab Noise Pollution Control Board has now initiated proceedings against him, and reopened the pollution case with renewed vigour. The timing has raised eyebrows, with critics arguing that selective enforcement of regulatory laws has become a convenient tool to 'discipline' dissenting political actors.

The use of state machinery to target political opponents is hardly unprecedented in Punjab. Yet, what distinguishes the current scenario is the scale and intensity with which these tactics are being used. The Punjab Vigilance Bureau, tasked with probing corruption, is increasingly perceived as an extension of executive authority, working zealously to investigate opposition leaders.

Parallely, central agencies have also stepped up their presence in Punjab. The Enforcement Directorate is currently probing at least 16 political leaders in Punjab, with several arrests already made—many of them from opposition parties, including the

Congress and AAP. The pattern has fuelled allegations that the fear of investigation is being used to engineer political realignments.

A report in *The Indian Express* (3 May 2026) reinforces this perception. Quoting party insiders, it reveals that several MPs had told Arvind Kejriwal during a parliamentary session that they were under immense pressure to join the BJP. Some reported raids on their premises; others claimed they had been warned of action by central agencies. The implication is clear: in today's political climate, allegiance is not merely an ideological choice—it is also an existential threat.

Perhaps the most intriguing illustration of these dynamics is former chief minister Capt. Amarinder Singh. While he was with the Congress, the ED had initiated proceedings against him over alleged foreign assets. After he joined the BJP, it was widely assumed that the matter had been quietly shelved. However, in a surprising move, a summons was issued earlier this year seeking his appearance before the ED's Jalandhar

office. Although Singh did not comply, the officer responsible for issuing the summons was subsequently transferred—an episode that only deepened the murkiness surrounding such investigations.

Caught in the crossfire are several senior Congress leaders, many of whom appear to be bearing the brunt of these actions. Charanjit Singh Channi, Sukhpal Singh Khaira, Bharat Brushan Ashu and Shyam Sundar Arora have all been subjected to investigations by either the ED or state vigilance authorities—or both. With the exception of Channi, several have also been arrested.

The actions have not been limited to legal proceedings. In a particularly controversial move, the state government ordered the demolition of a portion of Khaira's ancestral home using bulldozers, a spectacle that embodies the punitive use of administrative power. Such actions raise fundamental questions about the rule of law being replaced by a 'vendetta raj'.

As Punjab approaches another electoral cycle, the stakes can only rise. Political defections, legal battles and public accusations are likely to intensify, further entrenching mistrust. After a recent meeting with President Droupadi Murmu, Raghav Chadha—the 'leader' of the pack of seven defectors—warned that while the Punjab government controls the police force of one state, the BJP commands 21 across the country. This comment encapsulates the reality of contemporary Indian politics.

Punjab, once defined primarily by its agrarian economy and cultural vibrancy, now finds itself at the epicentre of a different kind of contest—where law enforcement agencies, regulatory bodies and investigative institutions are instruments in a larger political chess game.

In this context, vendetta politics is not merely about settling scores. It reflects the systemic erosion of institutional neutrality, where the boundaries between right and retribution grow increasingly indistinct. For the electorate, the consequences are significant.

When governance is overshadowed by political warfare, it is the people who pay. ■



It's defection season ...and Raghav Chadha and other AAP legislators who crossed over to the BJP in Delhi have the media's ears

With elections approaching, legal battles and public accusations are now flying thick and fast

# Vijay pries open the politics of Tamil Nadu

K.A. Shaji

Tamil Nadu has delivered a verdict that resists easy interpretation. At the centre of the churn is Joseph Vijay Chandrasekhar, whose emergence has not merely added another player to the field but altered the grammar of politics in the southern state. In challenging the state's entrenched duopoly of the DMK and AIADMK and successfully resisting a determined campaign by the resource-rich BJP, Vijay has positioned himself as the principal disruptor of a system that seemed immutable for decades.

For over five decades, Tamil Nadu's political landscape was defined by a stable, deeply institutionalised bipolarity. The DMK and the AIADMK were not just parties competing for office but a political ecosystem of two players that had shaped welfare delivery, governance practices and the state's distinctive political identity.

In assembly elections through the 1990s and 2000s, their combined vote share frequently crossed 70 per cent. Even in closer contests, it rarely went below 60 per cent. The reins of government alternated between the two, but the system held. That system has now been shaken loose.

The numbers underline the scale of change. Across urban constituencies, the combined vote share of the DMK and AIADMK has declined by an estimated 8-12 percentage points compared with the previous election cycle. In Chennai, where bipolar contests once produced margins exceeding 15 per cent, several constituencies have recorded victory margins below five per cent.

Multi-cornered contests have replaced predictable outcomes. North Tamil Nadu, including Vellore, Tiruvallur and Kanchipuram, has seen a fragmentation of traditional vote banks. Here, Vijay's TVK (Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam) has drawn disproportionately from first-time voters and lower middle-class urban clusters that were once split between the DMK and AIADMK.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that in the industrial belt of Sriperumbudur and Hosur, younger workers and service sector employees have shifted allegiance to the TVK, drawn to its aspirational messaging that still retains cultural familiarity.

In western Tamil Nadu, historically a stronghold of the AIADMK, the shift has been more nuanced. The party retains

pockets of strength among intermediate caste groups and agrarian communities, but its margins have thinned. TVK has not completely displaced the AIADMK but cut into its vote share to alter outcomes.

Triangular contests have replaced the earlier bipolar pattern in districts like Coimbatore, Erode and Salem. The Cauvery delta, for long a DMK bastion, continues to favour the party but with reduced margins. Welfare schemes and historical loyalty still hold, but even here, there is visible erosion among younger voters.

Southern Tamil Nadu, including Madurai, Ramanathapuram and Tirunelveli, presents a more complex picture, with caste alignments, local leadership and micro-level issues shaping outcomes alongside broader political churn.

Nearly 20 per cent of the electorate is now in the 18-29 age group. They are less bound to ideological inheritance and more responsive to leadership narratives, governance expectations and digital communication. "This is not a marginal shift in voting behaviour," says C. Lakshmanan, former faculty at the Madras Institute of Development Studies. "Traditional loyalties are weakening, especially among younger voters."

## Cinema meets politics

Tamil Nadu has known the political power of cinema. M.G. Ramachandran

*For over 50 years, the state's politics was defined by a stable, deeply institutionalised bipolarity. TVK has upset that equation*



TVK chief Vijay celebrates his party's victory, but the challenges of coalition politics still lie ahead

Photo: IANS

transformed his screen persona into a welfare-driven political force. J. Jayalalitha consolidated that legacy with a strong leadership model and expansive welfare programmes. M. Karunanidhi, on the other hand, anchored the DMK in ideological depth and organisational continuity. Each phase produced a stable axis of power.

The present moment is different, though, in that it is dissolving the old binary. Vijay's rise is not sudden; it's the culmination of a process. The Vijay Makkal Iyakkam, initially a fan network, evolved over two decades into a welfare-oriented organisation. Blood donation drives, disaster relief operations and educational assistance programmes created a grassroots presence that extended beyond fandom. By the time TVK was launched, the network already had booth-level structures and district-level organisers. Local body election victories provided early evidence of electoral viability.

"This is not just star power," says political observer Pradeep Damodaran. "It is years of organisational work."

Cinema provided the emotional connect with his support base. His films *Mersal*, *Sarkar*, *Master* and *Leo* weren't pure entertainers; they had a political sub-text. *Mersal* questioned taxation and public healthcare disparities. *Sarkar* invoked citizen rights and tangled with electoral malpractices. *Master* and *Leo* reinforced the image of an individual confronting entrenched power. These narratives created a political persona ahead of Vijay's plunge into active politics. "Cinema prepared audiences to accept him as a political figure," says Lakshmanan.

## A new era of coalition

Vijay's political arrival, the end of Tamil Nadu's old duopoly and a hung assembly have forced the state into a reckoning with coalition politics, a departure from its history of stable single-party dominance. At the time of writing, the Congress had offered conditional support to the TVK; the Left parties were still dragging their feet; Stalin had announced that the DMK would "not obstruct" the TVK government (if it comes into being) for the first six months and observe its functioning without interference. The TVK, which has 108 seats, was ten short of the 118 needed to get a ruling majority. According to some reports, the AIADMK had indicated its willingness to extend support from the outside, while others speculated that a breakaway faction may help it form the government.

Even in the midst of this churn, Tamil Nadu has resisted the national behemoth. With all the resources at its disposal, and even after running a determined campaign, with Prime Minister Modi trying to spin a narrative of civilisational continuity, the BJP has not been able to make significant inroads here, managing to win a solitary seat and 2.97 per cent of the vote.

Vijay's ambivalence on identity issues, central to the DMK's politics, and his avoidance of a direct confrontation with the BJP didn't cost him in this election. In his acknowledgement of Modi's congratulatory message the day after his victory, Vijay emphasised a commitment to governance that transcends political boundaries. The ambivalence of his public posture may be strategic, but it also makes observers wonder about his ideological moorings.

On the surface, Vijay situates himself within the symbolic universe of Dravidian politics. His gesture of garlanding Periyar and his invocation of Ambedkar and Kamaraj indicate that he draws on secular, Dravidian traditions. His interventions on issues like demonetisation, the Citizenship Amendment Act and the Sterlite protests have provided glimpses of his political credo. Yet these were still mainly gestures, that do not constitute a coherent ideological framework.

Some commentators have seen the Tamil Nadu election as the sun setting on Dravidian politics. But regional assertion and the principles of social justice and welfare remain deeply embedded in voter expectations. What has been challenged is the monopoly over these ideas. "The emotional contract between voters and parties has changed," says Chennai-based political observer P. Sundar Rajan. "Welfare schemes are still valued, but they are not enough."

Urbanisation has also played a hand. Tamil Nadu is nearly half-urban (>48 per cent), and exposure to diverse political narratives and the expansion of digital media have weakened the traditional networks of patronage.

If not by design, then simply via the availability of a third credible option, the electorate has forced every party to reassess its relevance. Power is now contingent. For Vijay, the next challenge is to articulate governance priorities and to forge out of his movement an organisation capable of governance.

"There is a difference between building a movement and running a government," says Sundar Rajan. "The real test lies ahead." ■

# A new impasse over an old route

Nepal's objection to the use of the Lipulekh Pass for the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra signals a new combativeness

Sourabh Sen

There's a new hotspot in South Asia's geopolitics. Located at an altitude of 17,000 feet, Lipulekh Pass is a narrow gap in the ridge line of Uttarakhand's Kumaon region. A historical trade route, the pass connects India's Vyas Valley and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, and is the gateway for the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra—an important pilgrimage for Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. Because of its unique position at the junction of the borders of India, China and Nepal, Lipulekh is one of the most strategically sensitive and culturally significant sites in the entire Himalayan range.

On 3 May, the foreign ministry of Nepal issued a formal objection regarding the use of the Lipulekh Pass for the 2026 Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra. In its note, the ministry said: "The Government of Nepal is completely clear and adamant on the fact that Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh and Kalapani east of the Mahakali River are integral parts of Nepal since the Sugauli Treaty of 1816. The Government of Nepal has reiterated its clear stance and concerns to both India and China through diplomatic channels regarding the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra, which is said to be organised via Nepali territory... The Government of Nepal has been continuously urging the Government of India not to carry out any activities such as road construction or expansion, border trade and pilgrimage in the area."

The note also observed that Nepal was not consulted before the route was finalised by India and China. Interestingly, the Kathmandu missile landed just ahead of foreign secretary Vikram Misri's scheduled visit to Kathmandu on 11 May to discuss bilateral ties and review India-funded projects.

In response, India's ministry of external affairs spokesman Randhir Jaiswal said: "India's position in this regard had been consistent and clear. Lipulekh Pass has been a long-standing route for the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra since 1954 and the Yatra through this route has been going on for decades. This is not a new development. As regards territorial claims, India has consistently maintained that such claims are neither justified nor based on historical facts and evidence. Such unilateral



artificial enlargement of territorial claims is untenable. India remains open to a constructive interaction with Nepal on all issues in the bilateral relationship, including on resolving agreed outstanding boundary issues through dialogue and diplomacy."

The Treaty of Sugauli—which Nepal invokes to underscore its sovereign right over Lipulekh Pass, a claim India dismisses—was signed on 2 December 1815 and ratified on 4 March 1816. It ended the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-1816) between the Kingdom of Nepal and the British East India Company and forced Nepal to cede roughly one-third of its territory, including Kumaon, Garhwal and the Terai region. The treaty also formalised the current shape of the India-Nepal border.

Nepal insists that Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh and Kalapani are inseparable parts of its territory; that official diplomatic notes have been sent to both New Delhi and Beijing, urging both to refrain from any activity in the area; and that, despite its objection, Nepal remains committed to resolving boundary disputes through peaceful diplomatic channels.

While the Yatra through Lipulekh is not a 'new development', what is new is Nepal's territorial assertion—under the new government headed by Balen Shah—over Lipulekh and its adjoining areas. Also significant is Nepal's conscious effort to keep both India and China at arm's length



Lipulekh Pass is a narrow gap at the junction of the India, China and Nepal borders

over this issue. Does this stance reflect Nepal's Gen Z-er in-your-face irreverence; or is there an hidden hand shepherding Nepal's foreign policy?

Nepal's newly-elected Prime Minister Balen Shah appears to be riding a wave of assertiveness. Social media discussions have identified Aksai Chin and Darjeeling as pressure points in its engagement with India. Viral videos argue 'If Aksai Chin can be depicted as part of India, why can't Lipulekh be depicted as part of Nepal?' Similar videos demand that Darjeeling be shown as part of Nepal.

Thus far, Shah remains an elusive figure, even in Nepal. He communicates via social media and appears to be avoiding giving interviews or addressing press conferences. Significantly, he declined to meet Sergio Gor, the US ambassador to India and special envoy for South and Central Asian affairs, during his recent Nepal visit, citing protocol. Unconfirmed reports suggest that Shah has been advised against visiting India unless he is received on arrival by the Indian prime minister. It is not even clear whether Misri will actually get to meet him.

On 30 April, a day before Gor visited the Everest base camp, Nepal's home ministry suspended the operations of Airlift Technology, a Nepali tech startup and Everest expedition operator, citing unspecified security concerns. Gor was hoping to see flight demos of drones to be used for airlifting garbage and supplies. According to *Kathmandu Post*, the order appeared to target two drones—the Chinese-made DJI FlyCart 100 and the US-made Freefly Systems Alta X Gen 2—both associated with Airlift's operations and both with 3D-mapping capabilities. The suspension order was lifted after five days.

Kedar Sharma, author, commentator and travel blogger from Nepal told *National Herald*, "Nepal has asserted its territorial right whenever the question of Lipulekh has come up vis-à-vis India. Allowing Indian pilgrims and traders to use Lipulekh Pass disregarding Nepal's territorial claim

was akin to undermining its broader engagement with Nepal—this seems to be the message the Foreign Ministry has tried to deliver to China."

Sharma used the Hindi proverb "*Jiski laathi, uski bhains*" (the one with the stick owns the buffalo) to describe India's claim on Lipulekh and dismissed allegations of the US or other countries playing *agent provocateur* as conspiracy theories suggest. "We tend to see the CIA's hand even when street dogs fight!"

Nepal's assertion of its territorial rights along a sensitive border point must, however, be seen in the context of a growing sentiment that no longer regards India as a reliable friend or partner. The sentiment hardened after the blockade in 2015-16 when India imposed restrictions on essential commodities—fuel, medicine and food—from entering landlocked Nepal from India for four-and-a-half months.

While India denied an official blockade and blamed it on the unrest among Nepal's Madhesi community—who live across the India-Nepal border—the disruption caused a severe humanitarian crisis, made worse in the aftermath of the April 2015 earthquake.

Since then, the prevailing belief is that India forced Nepal to accommodate Madhesi aspirations in its new Constitution by enforcing and leveraging the blockade. India's decision to reduce the recruitment of Gorkhas in the Indian Army, advising them to opt for the Agnipath scheme instead has also cooled relations.

Within Nepal, opinion appears divided. Several commentators point out that landlocked Nepal continues to depend on India for key supplies, including fuel and fertilisers. RSS activities in Nepal and India's contempt—expressed on social media—for its smaller neighbour complicate the relationship further. This has triggered a demand for a US base, military or otherwise, in Nepal as a counterweight to both India and China.

For now, it does seem that Prime Minister Balen Shah, despite his Madhesi ancestry and India connections, is in no mood to ease his grip on Lipulekh to reconnect India and China. ■

SOURABH SEN is a Kolkata-based independent writer and commentator on politics, human rights and foreign affairs

THE ETHANOL RUSH

# Of sugar highs and water lows

For Maharashtra's drought-stricken villages, nothing can sweeten the ethanol deal

**Jaideep Hardikar**

Think one day at a time. This was the strategy of farmers to stay afloat in Takwiki village, in Maharashtra's drought-prone Dharashiv district in the summer of 2013. A crippling water scarcity devastated its economy, driving people out in search of work and water.

Three more devastating droughts have since ravaged Marathwada regions in which Takwiki falls, and each time, some of its people left the village and translocated to other places.

That year, Maharashtra crushed 80 million tonnes of cane to produce 8 million quintals of sugar. Sugar mills in Dharashiv crushed over 25 lakh tonnes of sugarcane—a record.

In my successive trips to this village and tens of others in this rain-shadow, low-rainfall, arid region of the state, one paradox stood out: villages that clamour for tankers to supply drinking water grow tonnes of water-guzzling sugarcane for the state's sugar daddies. This, in a changing climate.

Year after year, they dig deep borewells to extract groundwater to irrigate cane crops, feeding factories that produce millions of tonnes of sugar and now ethanol, while a large section of people, especially in summer, are drinking water during drought years.

A few years ago, a geologist at the Maharashtra government Groundwater Surveys and Development Agency (GSDA) told me that Marathwada was sucking water from the palaeolithic age to grow orchards and cultivate sugarcane. The crisis is that serious.

In 2013, when the harangued district collector wrote to chief minister Prithviraj Chavan pleading for the suspension of the Diwali-to-March crushing season to preserve water for drinking needs, the entire political class was up in arms against him. He was snubbed, and transferred. People went without water, were forced to buy cans and packaged water by shelling out astronomical sums, but sugar mills worked round the clock, using millions of litres of water to produce the sweetener.

Cut to 2026. The water crisis has worsened, yet the Centre wants to push for vehicles to run on 100 per cent ethanol—produced by sugar factories—to tide over fuel shortages in the aftermath of the war in West Asia. It intends to amend the regulatory framework for mills, bringing ethanol into the framework in addition to sugar, molasses and other byproducts. This year, more of Maharashtra's sugarcane will not become sugar, but ethanol—fuel for India's vehicles.

The shift is part of India's aim to achieve, over time, 100 per cent ethanol blending in petrol. Oil marketing companies are expanding procurement and sugar mills across Maharashtra are rapidly adding distillation capacity. What was once a by-product—molasses—has now become a central economic driver. For five years, the Centre and states have, through policy tweaks, incentivised private and cooperative sugar factories to invest heavily in ethanol production. But in a state where water is already contested, the ethanol story is not just about energy. It is about how water is being used—and who decides.

Last week, the Modi government took a step toward enabling cars in India to run entirely on ethanol. Under normal circumstances, such a move would be welcome. But these are not normal times. Ongoing geopolitical tensions in West Asia have disrupted global oil supplies, raising fears of fuel shortages. Reducing dependence on petrol and diesel is therefore understandable.



Paradoxically, the villages that grow tonnes of water-guzzling sugarcane also clamour for tankers to supply drinking water

Early in April 2026, the ministry of consumer affairs, food and public distribution released the draft Sugarcane (Control) Order 2026 that aims to replace the 1966 order, to 'modernise the sugar sector'. Aside from what it will achieve and why, among the 14 key proposals in the draft is the move to expand the regulatory scope to include ethanol production from sugarcane juice, syrup and molasses, formally integrating ethanol into the regulatory framework.

In principle, this seems like a forward-looking decision. But implementing it now is akin to digging a well when thirsty. Energy demand is predictable and should have been prepared for in advance. This policy carries two serious risks.

The first concern is impending water scarcity.

This year's forecasts by multiple agencies including the IMD suggest that the 2026-27 monsoon may fall short by around 8 per cent due to the looming shadow of El Niño. Governments—right from the Centre down to municipalities—are already preparing for water shortages. Cities like Mumbai have announced water cuts. Against this backdrop, accelerating ethanol production begs a critical question. Ethanol manufacturing requires enormous quantities of water. Using conventional methods, producing one litre of ethanol can require up to 10,000 litres of water. Even when produced from grains like rice or maize, efficiency is limited—one tonne yields about 475 litres of ethanol. So how economic and ecological is the decision to harp on higher ethanol blends?

In India, ethanol is primarily derived from sugarcane. In Maharashtra alone, nearly 350 producers have invested heavily in ethanol production. Yet from a tonne of sugarcane juice (about 1,000 litres), only 70 litres of ethanol is produced. The process is doubly water-intensive: first, to grow a crop that guzzles vast quantities of water, and then, to expend further energy and resources to extract ethanol from it. Just as you need to spend money to earn money, producing energy also consumes energy. The question is how much and at what cost.

If water itself is scarce, as in the regions that cultivate sugarcane, should it be used for drinking, farming and essential needs—

*Producing a litre of ethanol takes 10,000 litres of water. But a tonne of sugarcane juice yields ~70 litres of ethanol*

or diverted toward fuel production? The answer is obvious. That is why pushing ethanol production at this moment appears deeply problematic.

The second concern is overcapacity and policy distortion.

Before the current energy crisis, the government had strongly incentivised ethanol production. As a result, India's ethanol production capacity has increased dramatically—from about 518 crore litres a decade ago to nearly 2,000 crore litres today. However, current demand is only about 1,100 crore litres. In other words, capacity far exceeds demand. Even within ethanol production, there is a hierarchy. Ethanol made from sugarcane is now being overshadowed by 'new' ethanol derived from grains like rice (also a water-guzzling crop) and maize. Government procurement policies appear to favour these newer producers, spelling uncertainty for traditional sugar-based ethanol producers—mainly sugar mills.

In Maharashtra and elsewhere, around 350 such producers have invested heavily, encouraged by earlier policies. But oil companies are now procuring only about half of their output, which leaves these producers struggling to recover their investments.

If India moves from 20 per cent blending to 85 or 100 per cent ethanol, demand will rise dramatically. But ethanol has lower

energy density than petrol or diesel. This means vehicles require more ethanol to travel the same distance. Higher consumption will therefore drive even greater demand for ethanol production. And that, in turn, means even greater demand for water.

At present, India's cropping patterns can support ethanol blending up to around 30 per cent. Moving to 85 or 100 per cent would require a massive expansion in ethanol-producing crops.

Rice and other cereals. Sugarcane and rice—both water-intensive crops—are already under scrutiny. Yet they continue to receive policy support due to political considerations and food security needs. This has led to growing pressure on water resources. In addition, excessive irrigation brings risks like soil salinity and land degradation, as seen in Satara.

Ethanol has altered the financial logic of the sector. Instead of being trapped in cycles of sugar surplus and low prices, mills now have an alternative market. Industry voices argue that ethanol has effectively stabilised the sector—indeed, Union minister Nitin Gadkari, a strong advocate for and player in the sugar sector and biofuels, recently claimed that without ethanol, a majority of mills in western Maharashtra would have shut down. There is little doubt that ethanol has revived the mills. But its mindless expansion rests on sugarcane and water, disregarding concerns about water availability and food security.

At the heart of Maharashtra's ethanol turn lies a familiar political economy, now reconfigured rather than replaced. The cooperative sugar mill—once the backbone of rural patronage—has evolved into an increasingly private agro-industrial hub that converts cane into sugar, power and fuel. Control over mills meant control of credit societies, transport contracts, labour networks, subsidies and ultimately electoral influence, particularly in western Maharashtra. Ethanol deepens this nexus. By improving cash flows through assured procurement by oil companies, it strengthens both cooperative and private mills, linked to political families across parties.

The beneficiaries are layered: mill owners secure new revenue streams,

political actors consolidate influence through financially viable institutions, and relatively larger cane-growing farmers gain from more reliable payments. The costs, however, are Marathwada, where by regions like Marathwada, where groundwater is overdrawn to sustain cane, and by smallholders locked into a water-intensive crop because mills dictate local cropping patterns. In effect, ethanol has not democratised the sugar economy; it has shifted its centre of gravity from a cooperative-led model to a hybrid regime of cooperatives and private mills, tightening the nexus between water, capital and political power while expanding it into newer, more fragile landscapes.

As Amey Tirotkar notes in *Frontline*, 'sugar built Maharashtra's cooperative power structure', a structure now under strain. The traditional cooperative model, once the backbone of rural political control, is being reshaped by debt, rising costs and uneven access to ethanol capacity. Mills with capital and political backing are adapting—investing in distilleries and securing new revenue streams—while weaker cooperatives struggle with unpaid dues running into thousands of crores. The result is a reconfiguration: from a broad-based cooperative network to a more uneven landscape where private mills and politically aligned entities consolidate control.

In this transition, ethanol acts as both stabiliser and filter—rewarding those who can invest, marginalising those who cannot. The benefits accrue upward, to mill owners and political actors, while the risks—water depletion, crop dependency and income volatility—are pushed onto farmers and labour.

In Maharashtra, sugarcane is not just a crop but a system of power. From Kolhapur and Sangli to Ahmednagar and Solapur, the geography of sugar overlaps with the geography of political influence. Cooperative mills historically anchored local economies, shaping access to credit, employment and electoral mobilisation.

Ethanol reinforces this system. By strengthening mill finances, it increases the institutional leverage of sugar networks. It also locks farmers into cane cultivation. Studies show that in Maharashtra, expansion in sugarcane production has been driven more by increase in area than productivity, indicating a steady spread of the crop across regions. That expansion has increasingly moved into drought-prone regions like Marathwada, or parts of western Maharashtra, where the ecological costs are far higher.

The impact of this transition is not the same across Maharashtra. Western Maharashtra—with canal irrigation systems and relatively higher rainfall—has historically supported sugarcane cultivation. Regions like Kolhapur, Sangli and Pune form the core of the sugar belt.

But Marathwada and parts of Vidarbha tell a different story. Here, sugarcane depends on groundwater extraction. Repeated droughts have already exposed the fragility of this model. Despite this, cane acreage has expanded into these regions, driven by the economic pull of mills. Ethanol risks accelerating that trend.

The shift also has implications for cropping diversity. As more land is committed to cane, less water is available for millets, pulses and oilseeds—crops that are both nutritionally and ecologically more suited to dryland agriculture. In effect, ethanol may be narrowing the state's agricultural choices and aggravating the water crisis even as it expands its energy options. ■

JAIDEEP HARDIKAR is a senior Nagpur-based journalist and author of *Ramrao: The Story of India's Farm Crisis*



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# ENGINEERING ON WATER: THE NEXT FRONTIER OF RENEWABLE ENERGY

## Karnataka's Blueprint for a Floating Energy Revolution: A New Model For Rural Development

Amid the composed and dignified setting of Vikas Soudha in Bengaluru, a pivotal decision quietly took shape on a March morning—measured in its emergence, yet far-reaching in its implications. Unaccompanied by dramatic announcements or immediate public attention, it nonetheless signaled the beginning of a carefully considered strategic shift.

Rooted in foresight and guided by the imperatives of sustainability, this decision has the potential to redefine how Karnataka manages, optimizes, and harmonizes its natural resources in the face of growing environmental pressures, rising energy demands, and the complexities of a rapidly changing world.

At the center of this initiative stands N. S. Boseraju, the Minister for Minor Irrigation, Science and Technology.



Source: Gettyimages (Representative Images)

panels benefit from the natural cooling effect of water. This helps maintain optimal operating conditions, leading to higher energy output.

In a climate like Karnataka's, where temperatures can soar during the summer months, this cooling effect can make a substantial difference in overall efficiency.

### Water Conservation: An Added Dividend

While energy generation is the primary objective, floating solar projects offer an equally compelling benefit—water conservation. Large water bodies lose significant volumes of water through evaporation, particularly during periods of intense heat. By covering portions of these surfaces with solar panels, evaporation is significantly reduced.

The panels act as a protective



During a high-level review meeting attended by senior officials, including representatives from Bangalore Electricity Supply Company Limited (BESCOM) and Karnataka Renewable Energy Development Limited (KREDL), as well as experts and administrators from the Minor Irrigation Department, the Minister issued a directive that may well define Karnataka's next phase of energy innovation.

The instruction was clear: examine, refine, and finalize an implementation framework for floating solar power



**Karnataka has long been recognized as a pioneer in India's renewable energy journey. From expansive solar parks to wind energy corridors, the state has consistently embraced innovation to meet its growing energy demands.**

plants across the state's water bodies, based on a detailed feasibility report submitted by Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited. What may appear at first glance as a technical policy directive is, in reality, the beginning of a broader narrative—one that intertwines energy security, water conservation, fiscal prudence, and environmental stewardship.

### A State at the Crossroads of Energy and Sustainability

Karnataka has long been recognized as a pioneer in India's renewable energy journey. From expansive solar parks to wind energy corridors, the state has consistently embraced innovation to meet its growing energy demands. Yet, as the pressures of urbanization, industrial growth, and agricultural dependency intensify, the limitations of conventional approaches have become increasingly evident.

The challenge is particularly acute in the agricultural sector, where lift irrigation schemes form the backbone of water distribution in many regions. These systems, designed to pump water from lower elevations to higher terrains, are essential for sustaining agriculture in drought-prone districts such as Kolar. However, their operation comes at a significant cost.

Hundreds of such schemes managed by the Minor Irrigation Department

consume vast quantities of electricity, placing an ever-growing financial burden on the state exchequer. As energy tariffs rise and demand continues to escalate, the sustainability of this model has come into question. The need for an alternative—one that is both economically viable and environmentally responsible—has never been more urgent. It is within this context that floating solar energy emerges not merely as an option, but as a necessity.

### The Concept: Turning Water into Power

Floating solar photovoltaic systems represent a simple yet powerful idea: utilizing the surface of water bodies to generate clean energy. Instead of occupying valuable land resources, solar panels are mounted on floating platforms that rest on lakes, reservoirs, and irrigation tanks.

This approach addresses one of the most pressing constraints in renewable energy deployment—land availability. In a state where land is a critical and often contested resource, the ability to generate power without displacing agriculture or ecosystems is a significant advantage.

The feasibility study conducted by Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited over a period of six months has provided a comprehensive roadmap for implementing this technology in

### From Pilot to Statewide Transformation

The proposed 100 MW project at Somambudi Agrahara Lake is just the beginning. The state has identified numerous water bodies with the potential to host similar installations. Many of these lakes and reservoirs span over 100 acres, offering substantial capacity for energy generation.

The long-term vision is ambitious: to create a network of floating solar plants across Karnataka, collectively generating thousands of megawatts of clean energy. Such a network would not only enhance the state's renewable energy capacity but also reduce its dependence on conventional power sources.

This distributed model of energy generation offers additional advantages. By producing power closer to the point of consumption, it reduces transmission losses and enhances grid stability. It also provides a level of resilience, ensuring that disruptions in one location do not impact the entire system.

### Economic and Social Impact

Beyond its environmental and technical benefits, the floating solar initiative holds significant promise for economic development. The implementation of these projects will create a wide range of employment opportunities, from manufacturing and installation to operation and maintenance.

Local communities, particularly in rural areas, stand to benefit directly. Training programs can equip youth with the skills needed to participate in this emerging sector, fostering a new generation of green energy professionals.

There is also potential for innovative public-private partnerships. By involving private players in the development and management of these projects, the state can leverage additional expertise and investment while ensuring accountability and efficiency.

Moreover, the presence of high-value infrastructure on water bodies can enhance monitoring and security, helping to prevent issues such as encroachment and pollution.

### Environmental Responsibility and Future Readiness

As with any large-scale initiative, floating solar projects must be implemented with careful consideration of environmental impacts. The state has recognized this and is taking proactive steps to address potential challenges.

Detailed studies will be conducted to assess the impact on aquatic life and bird habitats. Design modifications may be introduced to ensure minimal disruption to natural ecosystems. Robust anchoring systems will be developed to withstand monsoon conditions and fluctuating water levels.

Equally important is the need for long-term sustainability. Solar panels have a finite lifespan, and planning for their recycling and disposal is essential. By incorporating these considerations into the project from the outset, Karnataka is setting a benchmark for responsible innovation.

### A Vision Rooted in Pragmatism

What sets Karnataka's floating solar initiative apart is its balance of ambition and pragmatism. It is not driven by abstract ideals but by a clear understanding of the state's challenges and opportunities.

By leveraging existing water infrastructure, the state is optimizing its resources without incurring additional land acquisition costs.

By integrating energy generation with water conservation, it is addressing multiple issues simultaneously. And by fostering collaboration across departments, it is ensuring efficient implementation.

This approach reflects a broader shift in governance—one that prioritizes sustainability, efficiency, and innovation.

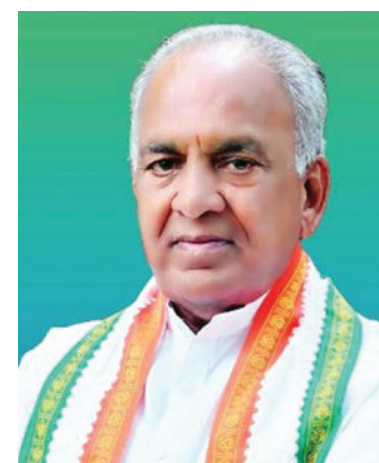
### A New Chapter in Karnataka's Growth Story

As the sun rises over the lakes of Karnataka, its reflection now carries a new meaning. It is no longer just a symbol of natural beauty but a source of power, progress, and possibility.

The directive issued in Vikas Soudha is more than an administrative decision; it is a statement of intent. It signals Karnataka's readiness to embrace the future with confidence and creativity.

Through the leadership of N. S. Boseraju and the collaborative efforts of institutions like Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited, BESCOM, and KREDL, the state is charting a course toward a more sustainable and resilient future.

In harnessing the sun on its waters, Karnataka is not merely adapting to change—it is leading it.



**Floating solar photovoltaic systems represent a simple yet powerful idea: utilizing the surface of water bodies to generate clean energy. Instead of occupying valuable land resources, solar panels are mounted on floating platforms that rest on lakes, reservoirs, and irrigation tanks.**

Karnataka. Among its key recommendations is the establishment of a pilot project at Somambudi Agrahara Lake in Kolar district—a project envisioned to generate approximately 100 megawatts of clean energy.

This pilot is not just a standalone initiative; it is the foundation upon which a much larger vision is being built.

### Engineering Innovation on the Water's Surface

Floating solar installations are a testament to modern engineering ingenuity. The solar panels are mounted on buoyant structures, often made of durable, weather-resistant materials, which allow them to remain stable on the water surface. These structures are anchored securely to the lakebed, ensuring resilience against wind, waves, and seasonal fluctuations in water levels.

Electricity generated by the panels is transmitted through specialized underwater cables to onshore substations. From there, it is integrated into the grid managed by BESCOM, ensuring seamless distribution to consumers.

One of the most notable advantages of this system lies in its efficiency. Unlike land-based solar panels, which are exposed to high temperatures that can reduce their performance, floating

shield, minimizing direct exposure to sunlight and wind. Over time, this can result in the preservation of millions of liters of water.

For regions like Kolar, where water scarcity is a persistent challenge, this dual benefit is transformative. The same infrastructure that generates electricity also helps conserve a critical natural resource, creating a synergy that is both practical and sustainable.

Additionally, the shading effect of the panels can improve water quality by limiting the growth of algae, thereby supporting healthier aquatic

ecosystems.

### Governance Through Collaboration

The success of Karnataka's floating solar initiative lies not only in its technological innovation but also in its governance model. The directive issued by N. S. Boseraju emphasizes a collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders.

The Minor Irrigation Department serves as the custodian of water bodies and the primary beneficiary of reduced energy costs. KREDL brings technical expertise and oversees the implementation of renewable energy projects. BESCOM ensures efficient grid integration and power distribution.

This coordinated effort reflects a "one-government" approach, where departments work in unison toward a shared objective.

By involving all key stakeholders from the outset, the state is ensuring that the project is not only technically sound but also administratively efficient.

The Minister's directive to undertake a technical re-evaluation of the feasibility report further underscores a commitment to scientific rigor and due diligence.

It is a reminder that innovation must be grounded in careful analysis and continuous improvement.

# The other high-risk gamble in West Asia

**Ashok Swain** on why the UAE's exit from OPEC spells more trouble in West Asia and beyond

**T**he UAE's decision to walk out of OPEC and OPEC+ is not just about oil. It represents a blunt geopolitical rupture. Abu Dhabi is no longer ignoring its rivalry with Saudi Arabia nor walking a tightrope between regional camps. It is openly gravitating towards a new axis consisting of the US, Israel and increasingly India—and this high-risk strategy is deepening conflict lines across regions already on edge.

OPEC, created in 1960, was designed to coordinate oil production and give oil-producing countries collective control over global prices. OPEC+ came into being in 2016 to fold in 10 other countries, including big producers like Russia. For decades, Saudi Arabia dominated both structures, using them as instruments of economic and geopolitical influence. The UAE's exit strips away part of that leverage and signals that Abu Dhabi no longer accepts Riyadh's leadership, not just in oil but in the broader regional order.

The economic argument for leaving is straightforward. The UAE wants to produce more oil than OPEC quotas allow because the Iran war has put its economy under great strain. It wants to monetise its reserves quickly, to hedge against a future where fossil fuel demand has declined. But this is only the surface. What lies underneath is a deeper strategic break with Saudi Arabia, stretching across energy cooperation in defence, intelligence and global partnerships.

The Abraham Accords of 2020 marked a significant geopolitical shift, with the UAE normalising relations with Israel and building cooperation in trade, technology and security. In contrast, Saudi Arabia declined to join the Accord, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman maintaining that normalisation of ties with Israel would be contingent on the establishment of a Palestinian state and broader regional considerations.

This divergence between the UAE and Saudi Arabia is growing, and it shows in their external alignments. Where Saudi Arabia is strengthening ties with Pakistan through a formal defence partnership, the UAE is moving closer to India, expanding cooperation in defence, intelligence, energy and technology, while also embedding itself

deeper into a shared strategic space with Israel.

The United States has quietly encouraged this shift. Washington has long viewed OPEC as an obstacle to lower oil prices and greater Western leverage over energy markets. By leaving OPEC, the UAE weakens the cartel's collective ability to control supply and pricing, opening space for increased Emirati production and greater market volatility that could benefit American oil producers. Abu Dhabi's move aligns neatly with broader US strategic interests: weakening Saudi-dominated oil coordination, reducing OPEC's influence and committing the UAE more deeply to a US-led geopolitical and economic order.

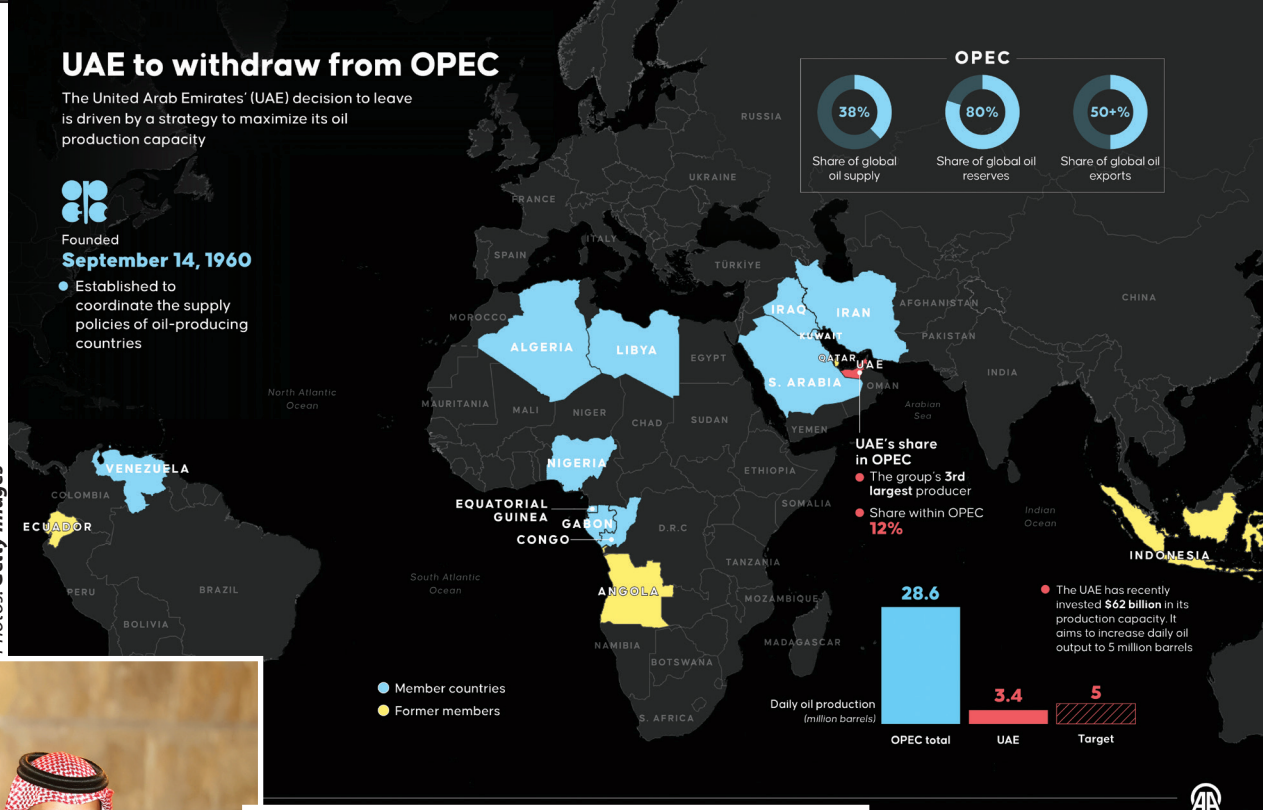
The UAE's growing proximity to India is also not just economic. It is political and strategic as well and carries serious implications. Abu Dhabi has chosen to align itself with a government in New Delhi whose domestic and regional policies have caused deep concern in the Muslim world. At the same time, India has been moving closer to Israel, expanding defence cooperation, intelligence sharing and technological partnerships. The convergence of interests—seen in evolving UAE-India ties and India-Israel relations—is not accidental but part of an opportunistic geopolitical realignment that prioritises security cooperation and economic gain without bothering with notions of accountability and justice or a rules-based order.

The UAE's relations with Pakistan have deteriorated sharply. Abu Dhabi has scaled back financial support, cooled diplomatic engagement and withdrawn from investment commitments. Pakistan was asked to pay back the entire UAE debt of \$3.5 billion in April. So the UAE-Saudi rivalry will extend beyond West Asia, and what was once a regional competition is now entangled with India-Pakistan dynamics, creating overlapping fault lines. Instead of trying to reduce tensions, the UAE is embedding itself firmly on one side of a deeply polarised geopolitical divide.

The UAE's broader foreign policy reinforces this pattern. From Yemen to Libya, from Ethiopia and Sudan to the Horn of Africa, Abu Dhabi has pursued



*The UAE's rivalry with Saudi Arabia is spilling over into newer areas. In days to come, South Asia will feel the heat*



**Deepening divisions** (Clockwise from above) An infographic snapshots of OPEC; deserted OPEC headquarters in Vienna; Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud of Saudi Arabia

influence through strategic investments, military interventions and even proxy actors. In Yemen, it backed separatist groups that clashed with Saudi-supported forces. In Sudan, it supports paramilitary actors accused of terrible atrocities. In Libya, it armed and financed a rival strongman. It has forged ties with Somaliland. All these actions have entrenched division.

The UAE frames its activism as a fight against extremism and disorder. But the reality is more troubling. It has continued to expand economic, technological and military cooperation with Israel despite its horrific genocidal project in Gaza. Trade has grown and defence and intelligence ties have deepened. The Iran war has only hardened Abu Dhabi's conviction that its security lies with Israel and the US, not with Arab institutions.

The addition of India to this axis intensifies the problem. By aligning with Netanyahu-led Israel and Modi-led India while distancing itself from traditional

partners, the UAE risks deepening divisions across West and South Asia. It also risks undermining its own credibility. A state that claims to promote tolerance cannot indefinitely ignore the implications of its alliances.

Saudi Arabia is not without fault. Its own interventions and ambitions have contributed to regional instability. But the UAE's challenge is a competing model of authoritarian power projection. The rivalry between the two is less about ideology and more about who will dominate the next phase of regional politics.

The risk is that this competition, now intertwined with India-Pakistan dynamics and reinforced by external alliances, will deepen instability across multiple regions. Yemen, Sudan and Libya are already paying the price. South Asia could become another arena for Gulf rivalries to play out.

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

# China holds the aces in Trump-Xi meet

The US failure to knock out Iran has meant that Trump goes to Beijing with a much weaker hand, writes **Ashis Ray**

**S**ince the time US President Donald Trump contemplated a summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping during his proposed visit to Beijing on 14-15 May—rescheduled from late March—the balance of power in world affairs has shifted.

Trump's failure to pre-empt Iran in an unprovoked, unprovoked, knock-out strike—indeed to be checkmated by that proud Asian nation—means he will arrive in the Chinese capital with a relatively weak hand. India's northern neighbour will attempt to make the best of this, though Trump is bound to spin it differently.

Joerg Wuttke, a former president of the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China, told the media, "The US is fighting without winning, China is winning without fighting."

William Klein, a US diplomat who organised Trump's sojourn to Beijing in 2017, disagreed somewhat. Speaking to reporters earlier this week he said, "The leverage hasn't changed, it hasn't strengthened, or [at least] it hasn't weakened because of the Iran war to date". He did however admit, "Obviously, the Iran

war casts a shadow on the visit, will shape this visit..."

Iran is China's closest partner in the Persian Gulf. Therefore, for the People's Republic, American aggression was not only an assault against a friend, but a proxy attack on China. Iran's oil and gas supplies, which are vital for the Chinese economy, have been disrupted by the US Navy's presence in the Gulf and latterly its blockade of Iranian ship movement. A former Chinese diplomat Cui Hongjian went on record to say the West Asia crisis has "seriously disrupted" China's overall planning.

CNN quoted an informed Chinese source as giving the impression that the US's "conflict with Iran [had] potentially strengthened its 'negotiating position'." Beijing views the upcoming meeting as a singular opportunity to secure a more stable long-term relationship with Washington.

"Of course, Trump would want to visit China after he's finished with Iran, so he can project power... but if he were to attack Iran after visiting China, it would appear as if China has abandoned Iran," the source

added. America's current control over Venezuela's crude exports has, incidentally, hurt China considerably.

Modern China is a creation of the US. In the early 1970s, US President Richard Nixon and his Machiavellian national security adviser (later secretary of state) Henry Kissinger, not merely rescued a sinking Chinese economy under Mao Zedong, but midwived an economic boom—to spite the Soviet Union, then Washington's main adversary. The avowed purpose was to drive a wedge in the communist cosmos between Moscow and Beijing so as to weaken the former. Consequently, China today is not only a fiscal giant but also a military and technological powerhouse challenging America's more than a century old supremacy.

The climate is not conducive to the highest-level talks that were originally envisaged to discuss and readjust economic relations between the planet's two biggest economies. After the US supreme court nullified Trump's hostile tariff policy, Trump's hands are somewhat tied and China's negotiating position is stronger.

Last month, the US treasury blacklisted

five Chinese refiners. The Chinese government declared Trump's earlier executive order on the subject as unenforceable on Chinese soil. *Fortune* magazine highlighted the Chinese ministry of commerce announcement last week that China 'shall not recognise', 'shall not enforce' and 'shall not comply with' US sanctions as 'unprecedented'. Other such acts of defiance may well be on the cards.

The real issue in turmoil following the US-Israeli action against Iran, and Tehran's tactical response of attacking US military bases and energy generating plants in the Arab nations near it and blocking the critical Strait of Hormuz. Global oil and gas prices have skyrocketed. Stock markets have collapsed. Shortages and inflation are on the rise everywhere.

China has been clever enough not to show its hand. But, along with Russia, it is one of the two behind-the-scenes forces assisting Iran to tackle US-Israeli aerial bombardment. While the Islamic regime wasn't short of drones and missiles to counter the threat, its air defences were inadequate. China stepped in to alleviate deficiency and replenish equipment, much to Trump's chagrin.

The Chinese sensed the vulnerability plummeting approval rating among Americans reflects, no intelligent person takes seriously—and went on the offensive. In effect, the US and China are indirect combatants in the Iranian theatre of war.

While China has, admittedly, refrained from directly criticising Trump in the run-up to his trip, it is expected to leverage its vast domestic market and dominance in the rare earth supply chain. The Chinese government's number one ambition is to absorb capitalist pro-America Taiwan into its mainland. Since WWII, the US has provided a security guarantee to the government in Taipei, a cause of ceaseless friction between Washington and Beijing. China clearly wants the US to dial down its support for an independent Taiwan.

*South China Morning Post*, a longstanding daily published out of Hong Kong, carried Trump's widely reported claim that his trip to China 'is going to be amazing'. The word 'amazing' in the English language has multiple meanings. The US president's intended messaging is

not necessarily in sync with general interpretation.

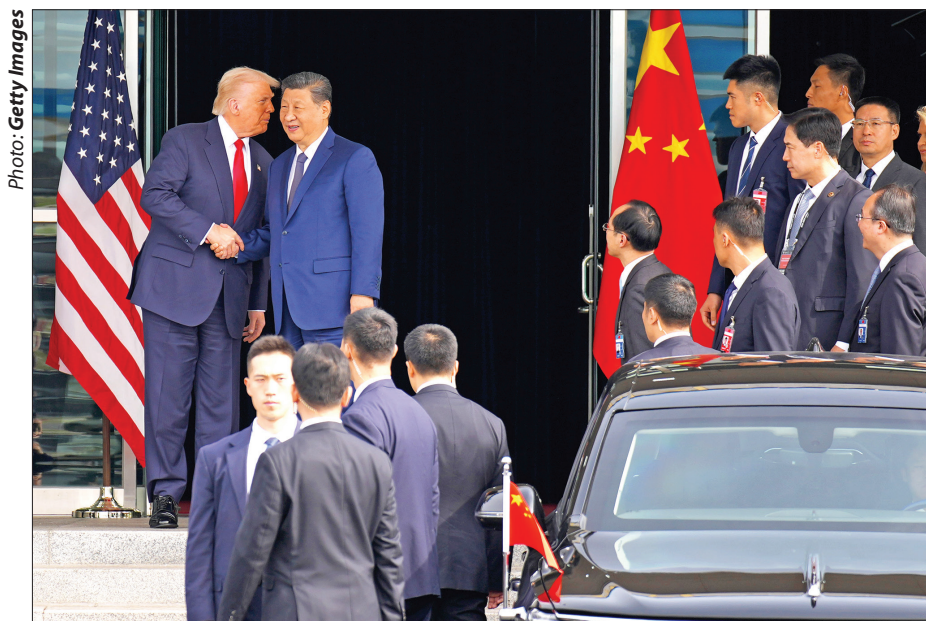
For a start, he is intellectually incapable of substantive dialogue and agreements. His tendency to opt for 'framework' arrangements is testimony to this. In his second term as president, his ability to attend to detail has shrunk even further with age—he is now 79. In other words, any deal with Beijing could be patchwork, even unfavourable.

From an Indian standpoint, Trump's plan is disturbing. That he chose to go to China before coming to India—a strategic 'partner'—reiterated that his worldview was drastically different from that of his predecessors. It is unsurprising that he considers China to be more important to US interests than India. What is worrying is that the containment of China's hegemonistic designs may not be his priority.

China poses the greatest of all threats to India's security. QUAD—constituted between the US, Japan, India and Australia—was mounted to discourage Chinese expansionism. Given Trump's recent and rather public spats—over the West Asia conflict with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and over the new Japanese prime minister Sanae Takaichi's nationalist outlook—not to mention the short shrift extended to Narendra Modi, it is difficult to visualise QUAD playing a robust role during the current US presidency.

America's closest post-war ally has been with Europe. This is crumbling because of Trump's softness towards the Kremlin. With US troops pulling out, NATO's military protection to Germany—post-WWII disarmament—is being weakened. The same could occur in Spain and Italy, even Britain. These four countries, like the rest of the European continent, have openly opposed Trump's war against Iran.

Similarly, the US's commitment to Japan, which has the largest contingent of American troops stationed anywhere outside the US, cannot be taken for granted under Trump. Likewise for South Korea and Washington's other Asian allies. As for Modi, his premeditated and ill-considered tilt towards the US, his physical and metaphorical embrace of Trump, has, if anything, exploded in his face.



**Uneasy handshake** China's negotiating position is definitely stronger in the current scenario

*That Trump has chosen to visit China before coming to India shows their relative importance in his calculus*



# It's a matchless hate monopoly

Why the BJP has no rival in the politics it has perfected

**Aakar Patel**

If you are a normal voter, you have any number of parties you can support and vote for. There is the DMK, AIADMK, TDP, NCP, PDP, TMC, INC, JD(S) and JD(U), the TRS, the new TVK, the CPI(M) and so on. There is no shortage of parties with different platforms.

But if your primary interest lies in the bullying and harassment of Indian minorities, particularly Muslims, there is only one party for you—and that is the BJP. Fortunately, it is on offer nationally and in most states. It unites prejudiced Indians in much the same way that cricket and the English language do, cutting across regions.

In a recent media interaction, an analyst put the same point differently. He said of the BJP's appeal: "Anybody with a right-wing ideology has one party. On the other side, there is so much competition, that vote gets split."

Let us try to understand why this is the case, because it is true: the BJP has no competition when it comes to what it does. The term 'right-wing' is often a euphemism for hate-based politics—and we shall see why in a moment. First, after accepting that there is no rival to the BJP, we must also accept that it offers a simple, easy-to-

understand formula.

"I hate Muslims!" does not require further elaboration. It is clear, direct and effective. The voter does not need to examine a manifesto to understand what the party represents. The distilled essence of the BJP's ideology is anti-minority.

If you are in the market for a party that does this, you have one at hand—with a national presence and decades of proven delivery on this issue. So why look for another? There is no need.

A question arises: can the BJP not face competition from another party whose position is: "But I hate Muslims more!"?

It could, and it might, but that position can also be taken within the BJP itself, as we will likely see if and when succession struggles begin. The full spectrum of the BJP's ideology ranges from disliking minorities to detesting them, and all sentiments within this spectrum are acceptable.

This is the first and most important reason why the BJP has no rival in what it does: it is consistently anti-minority. The second reason is that other parties either choose not to do what the BJP focuses on, or do it episodically so they come across as inauthentic. As we know, many parties in India have dabbled in communalism. But communalism is not at the centre of their politics or identity. The BJP is not the only party to have profited from division and hate, but it is the only one to have made this its central platform.

The list of issues that has made the BJP what it is—India's largest party—remained unchanged for years. Muslims must give up their mosque in Ayodhya; Muslims must give up their constitutional autonomy in Kashmir; Muslims must give up their personal law. Note that there is nothing for Hindus in this framework—for instance, reservations for Dalits and Adivasis remain untouched. The focus is on minorities, which underpins conclusions about what the party stands for.

Having achieved most of what it set out to do, the party has remained on the same path, as we have seen. Muslims must give

Photo: Getty Images



**Saffron monomania** The remains of a Delhi mosque that was vandalised and burnt down in 2020

up their diet; must give up agency over whom to love and marry, where to live and pray; must forgo voting rights or forever be in uncertainty over whether they can vote, whether they can seek asylum... and so on. There is no end to this, and there will be no end, because harassment is the intent and bullying the ultimate objective.

This bigotry is often described as 'right-wing' ideology—a characterisation that does a disservice to the term. Conservatism, as generally understood in politics, has a long and respectable tradition. It seeks continuity and values stability.

Abolishing currency, for instance, is a radical idea, not a conservative one. None of the arbitrary tinkering, renaming, institutional weakening or disruption we have witnessed fits within classical conservatism. What is presented as 'right-wing' here is, in fact, intense prejudice cloaked in a more acceptable label.

It is for this reason that BJP manifestos over the decades have experimented with,

*The full spectrum of the BJP's ideology ranges from disliking minorities to detesting them. All variations in that spectrum work*

adopted, and then abandoned many positions. In the 1960s and 1970s, they leaned towards socialism. Under Vajpayee, the party proposed capping incomes and home sizes—later abandoned. It argued against mechanisation replacing labour in factories—also dropped. It even advocated the use of bullocks instead of tractors—again, abandoned. None of these positions were taken up, or abandoned, with much explanation, because none was needed.

The primary product that the BJP and its predecessor, the Jana Sangh, have consistently offered has always been visible: an unchanging hostility towards minorities. The rest has been secondary. As long as that core promise was delivered—and one must concede, it has been—the rest was largely irrelevant.

That is why there is only one BJP—and why it is unlikely to face a challenger on its chosen terrain. ■

Views are personal

*'I hate Muslims!' needs no elaboration. It's clear, direct, effective. No need to refer to a manifesto to get that message*



King Charles had US Congress members eating out of his hands

## From zero to hero: King Charles's US visit

Behind the hype over King Charles's 'bravura' performance in Washington—his gag-packed swipe at populist Trumpism—lies a rather twisted backstory of his relations with the media.

Its breathless and fawning coverage of his US visit, variously hailed as a 'historic' and 'landmark' event, represents a new phase in their chequered relationship; a 'love-in' that would once have been unthinkable.

Until some years ago, when he finally ascended the throne at the ripe age of 73—an age when monarchs normally think of retiring—Charles was the media's favourite whipping boy. A pampered man-child who couldn't get anything right, not even squeeze toothpaste onto his brush—a loyal valet would do it for him.

He was also mocked for his 'spidery' incomprehensible handwriting—made even more unintelligible by his use of green ink (a nod to his love for the environment). His talking to plants was another topic of amusement.

Every time he opened his mouth, his half-mumbled remarks were seized by cartoonists and sketch writers to poke fun at him and question his suitability for the 'top job'.

Rumours in the media had it that one reason why the Queen continued to cling on to the throne despite her age and health problems was that she didn't trust him with the job.

Dubbed as the man who may never achieve his ambition, there was even talk

of skipping a generation and anointing his son, William, as the Queen's successor.

But all that changed overnight when he did finally get to wear the crown amid a nationwide sympathy wave after his mother's death in 2022.

The same media that once revelled in ridiculing him suddenly started to discover hidden qualities in him. Within weeks he was transformed from an embarrassment to an asset, and praised for the 'gravitas' he brought to his role. The way he conducted himself after being diagnosed with cancer helped in his rehabilitation.

So, there we are: a complete image makeover in a remarkably short period.

To be sure, he did live up to his new image in Washington—demonstrating a chutzpah he has not often exhibited. If his Mamma, as he called his mother, were alive she would have permitted herself a wry smile watching her famously stiff upper-lipped son find his tongue, finally.

As for his much adumbrated achievements on this tour, the reality was best summed up by an Indian-origin *Times* reader, Deepak Sagar, who wrote: 'So far, the only positive outcome has been the lowering of tariffs on (Scotch) whisky. I would wait for better and longer-term results before jumping to the glory of British institutions and culture.'

## Region, religion and Indian landlords

Once upon a time, white British landlords faced accusations of racism for refusing to rent their



**LONDON DIARY**  
HASAN SUROOR

homes to Asians and blacks.

Today, many Indian expats have been found to discriminate against fellow Indians—from regions and religions other than their own—while letting out their homes.

Advertisements have appeared seeking tenants of specific persuasions or from specific Indian states.

One estate agency has advertised rooms 'available [only] for Muslims', 'ONLY [a] Gujarati couple', 'only [for] Punjabis'.

Under the law, if a landlord is sharing their home with tenants, they are allowed to rent to people who share their religion



Volunteer ambulances run by the Jewish community gutted in north London

to avoid, for example, having alcohol in the house.

However, it is illegal even for live-in landlords to advertise for a tenant of a particular religion.

"Race is a protected characteristic under the 2010 Equality Act [which] includes nationality, and an advert in those terms would be discriminatory," said Arran Dowling-Hussey, a barrister who specialises in property disputes.

Roshan Properties, one such estate agency, said it was reviewing its processes to ensure adverts were "appropriate, inclusive, and in line with legal

requirements".

The government has said that "discrimination against anyone based on their religion or race is illegal, including in the rental sector", warning that "any landlord not complying with the law should face the consequences".

## Muslim-Jewish relations at a new low

Events in West Asia—Israel's violent occupation of Gaza and the US-Israeli invasion of Iran—continue to inflame Muslim-Jewish relations, with any criticism of Israel dubbed 'antisemitism' by the Jewish community.

Tensions have been further fuelled by the actions of some Muslim fanatics, including physical attacks on Jews.

Last week, after two Jewish men were stabbed in north London by a Somalia-born Muslim man, Britain's terrorism watchdog declared antisemitism the 'biggest national emergency since Covid'.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer described the attack as "utterly appalling" and said any attacks on "our Jewish community are attacks on Britain".

Jewish groups have demanded the resignation of Scotland Yard chief Mark Rowley who was heckled with shouts of "shame on you" when he visited the scene of the attack.

**And, finally,** to return to the 'Great King Charles Show', it has set people wondering who scripted the gags. Does the King have a new speech writer? ■





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Vijay's TVK has broken the stranglehold of a decades-old duopoly

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#### OF SUGAR HIGHS AND WATER LOWS

For Maharashtra's drought-stricken villages, nothing can sweeten the ethanol deal

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### WORLD

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The world is watching with concern another high-risk gamble in West Asia

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# How the deep south was won

The UDF must carry the lessons from a great victory into governance. Time to deliver on promises, writes **K.A. Shaji**

The verdict in Kerala on 4 May was not just a vote for change. Nor merely an expression of anti-incumbency as many commentators had you think. It was also a rejection of the divisive politics of the BJP, which did its damndest to split the vote on communal lines. The party still managed 11.4 per cent of the vote—signaling that the rot may have set in here too—but it wasn't enough to deliver any more than the three seats it managed. Three seats too many, for many Keralans.

The Congress-led UDF (United Democratic Front) secured a decisive 102 seats in the 140-member assembly and the CPI(M)-led LDF (Left Democratic Front) saw a big contraction. That contraction was in large measure a verdict on outgoing chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan's style of functioning—the cult of personality and the extreme concentration of power in his own hands as also his attempts to make nice with the BJP to stay afloat. It took seven rounds of counting for Vijayan to establish a lead in Left citadel Dharmadam and his final margin of victory was much slimmer than the 50,000+ votes in 2021. Thirteen of his cabinet ministers lost.



The sweet taste of victory Celebrations at the Congress headquarters in Thiruvananthapuram and on the streets outside



Photo: Getty Images

dissatisfaction with the Left ecosystem. Local discontent among CPI(M) cadres and sympathisers further weakened the LDF organisationally.

But the LDF's defeat cannot be understood without examining the nature of its governance. Under Pinarayi Vijayan, the government projected decisiveness and administrative control. In the early days, this was seen as strength and efficiency, but over time, it began to look like something else—concentration of power and centralised decision-making.

The space for internal dissent shrank. Critics within the Left ecosystem started talking about an arrogant leadership that discouraged debate.

The Left in Kerala has historically sworn by collective leadership and ideological engagement. But under Vijayan, the political culture changed dramatically, from governance by (party) consensus to governance by decree. For a cadre-based movement, that transition was radical.

For a long time, factionalism had been the bane of the Congress in Kerala, often spilling into the public domain. And while contesting personal ambitions did again surface after the results, in the run-up to the elections, the party held together. Candidate selection, always a fraught affair, was handled with remarkable smoothness. No public altercations, no competing lists, no late-stage rebellions.

This unity was not accidental; it was managed with care. Party general secretary (organisation) K.C. Venugopal and Ramesh Chennithala took the lead in handling dissent, engaging with aspirants and ensuring that grievances were resolved internally. The emphasis was clear and consistent: winnability would override

factional claims. That message stuck.

This rare organisational discipline translated into electoral coherence. The UDF looked a coordinated political unit, not a ragtag group carrying the same banner. This unity allowed the alliance to focus sharply on the electorate instead of itself, a critical advantage in a contest that was expected to be tight.

At the campaign level, V.D. Sathesnan, leader of the opposition in the previous house, was the principal voice of this reset. His messaging was measured, consistent and rooted in governance concerns. "This verdict is about restoring democratic functioning and accountability," he said after the results.

The Congress has improved not just its tally of seats—from 22 in 2016 and 21 in 2021 to 63 this time—but also its vote share (28.8 per cent from 25.1 per cent in 2021). Allies like the IUML (Indian Union Muslim League) retained their strongholds. In central Kerala, several constituencies

*In the run-up to the elections, the UDF looked a coordinated political unit—no competing lists, no late-stage rebellions*

returned to the UDF. In Malabar, which is traditionally a Left stronghold, the margins narrowed sharply and several seats flipped. Urban and semi-urban constituencies also recorded a shift, driven by economic anxieties and governance concerns.

One of the most consequential aspects of this election was the consolidation of Muslim and Christian voters behind the UDF, whose assurances clearly carried more credibility with these voters. IUML all-India general secretary P.K. Kunhalikutty said this shift was pivotal to the outcome. "People wanted a government that respects diversity and listens. That trust came back to the UDF," he said. The IUML's steady performance in Malabar anchored UDF gains. And the BJP's outreach to sections of the Church, in an attempt to disrupt settled social equations, failed to make an impact in the vote.

**The unravelling of the Left**  
The UDF did also benefit from voter

► Continued on page 2

# Waking up to the BJP in West Bengal

**Jagati Bagchi**

As a child, mornings always carried more than the promise of a new day. They meant newspapers, discussions on politics, strains of Rabindra Sangeet over Akashvani. For the first time in all these years, on the morning of 5 May 2026, all those things seemed so distant, like relics from another life.

For the first time in independent Bengal, a far-right party is in power. Ironically, my state was the party's ideological womb. As the baby journeyed through life—metamorphosing from the Hindu Mahasabha to the Jan Sangh to adulthood as the Bharatiya Janata Party—it took a hundred years to realise its dream to rule over Bengal.

All this is very close to me. I am the daughter of a first-generation refugee. My father did not inherit stability. He built it, after losing his home, his rose garden, his trophies. He wasn't alone, just one of millions who crossed borders during moments of rupture in the subcontinent's history. Arriving in West Bengal as survivors, looking for ground beneath their feet, a roof over their heads. Bengal was not just a place—it was a possibility. Through language, culture and community, Bengal offered a fragile but real sense of continuity after the traumas of displacement.

Growing up, I did not experience that displacement directly. But I lived with its memory. Today, as the BJP comes to power, the language of politics has shifted in ways that feel familiar—not because I have lived them before, but because I have

inherited the memory of where they can lead. The sheer, all-too-familiar dread of 'not belonging'. Those words, that tone. Identity, citizenship, security, belonging—these are no longer neutral words. They carry implications that extend beyond governance into the realm of lived experience. For someone whose family history is rooted in displacement, these are not distant debates. These are personal.

The shift—that many are calling a 'recalibration'—is so much more than that. To me, it is the recolonisation of Bengal. Colonisation is not only about capturing territory; it is about capturing people. The

SIR created an atmosphere of repression. It brought back memories of displacement, of the constant nagging fear that one must be prepared to leave, anytime, without any warning.

The SIR unleashed a calculated, selective exclusion. I witnessed the desperation of people, especially women, during my trips to the suburbs of Kolkata and Sundarban. During one such trip, I saw a little girl holding on to her grandmother's sari, both standing at the door of a local train compartment. I found out that the woman had survived an attempt to take her own life after the SIR struck her name off the electoral roll. Perhaps the little girl was holding on to her to keep her tied to things that still mattered—family, love, community. On the morning of 5 May, this image came back to me in vivid high-definition.

It was difficult to fathom my emotions. Sometimes frustration, sometimes rage, but mostly, as the day rolled on, despair. Time and again, I questioned the importance of elections, I bewailed their futility. I hoped

that this day, too, would pass, like all the others. I wondered, after the dust settled, if I, too, would quietly accept this as 'fate'.

For minorities in Bengal, identity has historically been layered but relatively unthreatened in everyday life. On 5 May, I saw this baseline altered—not necessarily by removing their rights but by introducing a sense that their right to belong was being reassessed. Already the threat of dispossession was at work. To that was added the threat of displacement.

For Bengal's minorities—Muslims, Christians and smaller linguistic or ethnic groups—the political shift carries deeper implications. These communities have long been integral to the state's social fabric. Their presence is not marginal, it is the very essence of a state that was.

Change arrived in the shape of rhetoric that cast suspicion, administrative practices that felt uneven, a broader narrative that positioned certain identities as contingent. The shift was subtle but pervasive—from easy belonging with a sense of entitlement to belonging with

strings attached. A growing fear of dispossession and displacement—not always articulated through policy but felt through the atmosphere of uncertainty.

The current moment may appear chaotic and it's tempting to cling to the hope that it will pass. But the lived experience of minorities from other parts of India suggests that these conditions can get normalised.

It gave me an eerie feeling, of an impending storm that would destroy everything I held precious. As the day gave way to evening and then what felt like a never-ending night, I watched the destruction with horror. Overnight, social media had turned into a putrid cesspool of hatred and whataboutery.

The heckling of women candidates was, for me, the most dreadful. This had never happened before, not in my Bengal. Many women who have been vocal about the excesses of the BJP had to lock their social media profiles. The threats were so vile it did not matter that they were virtual. Reels showed men and young boys dressed up as Mamata Banerjee being disrobed and beaten. So, this is the fantasy of the BJP cadre in Bengal!

Public spaces have long been a canvas of political expression in West Bengal. But today these spaces are overrun by the BJP's lumpen cadre, brought in by the party for a hostile takeover of Bengal.

This is no 'recalibration'. It's the third colonisation of Bengal. The state is at risk of losing control over its resources, its intangible wealth of thought and expression. It faces a violent and terrifying transformation of its intellectual culture that has historically thrived on debate and dissent.

For me, a thread broke on the morning of 5 May. I'm trying to hold on, like that little girl, holding on to her grandmother's sari. ■



West Bengal now faces a violent and terrifying transformation

*The SIR brought back memories of displacement, of the constant nagging fear that one must be prepared to leave. Any time, without any warning*

JAGATI BAGCHI is a political and gender rights activist, with a background in law and forensic anthropology. She divides her time between Kolkata and Kampala



# A people's mandate lost in the fog of SIR

Sayantn Ghosh

If the BJP's triumph in the 2026 West Bengal assembly elections is remembered as a turning point in the history of the state, it won't be simply because the party got a brute majority (207 of the 293 seats) or because it ended Mamata Banerjee's uninterrupted reign of 15 years. There were early indications in the violence that ensued after the results, in the vulgarity of the victor's celebrations, in the bulldozing of meat shops in the city's iconic New Market on which way the state was headed.

The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of voter rolls in West Bengal will also not be easily forgotten. By the time of the elections, held in two phases on 23 and 29 April, the Election Commission of India (ECI) had managed to remove ~91 lakh names from the rolls. That's nearly 12 per cent of the state's voter base, shrinking it from around 7.66 crore pre-SIR to 6.8 crore.

The scale and pattern of deletions are instructive: in 105 of the BJP's winning seats, i.e., half its tally, the number of deleted voters exceeded the party's victory margin. Of these, 86 were seats the BJP had never won before. Let's just say these numbers do not inspire confidence in the electoral process.

But what the dubious SIR exercise has also done is to deflect attention from the very real anti-incumbency in the state and obscured its impact on the results. Years of the 'syndicate raj' in construction and other sectors, the lack of employment opportunities, the state's 'cut money' culture of extortion and governance failures had earned the Trinamool Congress a terrible reputation in the state—and the desire for change was palpable. Across communities, including large sections of disaffected Muslims and women, who are generally seen as pro-TMC. The BJP capitalised on this fatigue even while making its own pre-poll promises of bigger doles and 'development'. And it's not far-fetched to assume that the high turnout was also a reflection of the desire for change.

If it's fair to assume the SIR went against the TMC, it's also fair to assume that a victory of this magnitude would not have

been possible without real discontent with the Trinamool Congress.

## Nevertheless, the rights

looms large over these results. It's not easy to brush aside the improbable fact of Trinamool bastions falling so decisively. And if we are still a democracy, then a thorough, independent scrutiny of the entire electoral process is in order. It's no trifling matter to summarily delete lakhs of voters from rolls in a country that has universal adult suffrage and whose Election Commission is mandated to ensure that 'no one is left out'.

The right to vote is a cornerstone of our Constitution. While a periodic clean-up of voter rolls is essential, the process must prioritise inclusion of legitimate citizens over exclusion on contested grounds. Even after the Calcutta High Court and Supreme Court oversaw aspects of the SIR exercise, the implementation left massive gaps. An estimated 27 lakh appeals were still pending when the elections got over.

As mentioned earlier, in several key battlegrounds, voter deletions outnumbered



BJP workers in Kolkata celebrate the brute majority the party won on 4 May

voter margins. Take just one example—Bhabanipur. Outgoing chief minister Mamata Banerjee lost to BJP's Suvendu Adhikari by ~15,000 votes and the number of voter deletions here was ~45,000. This happened to other TMC ministers as well.

## What the data reveals

Whereas the voter base contracted 12 per cent overall from the pre-SIR baseline, the effects were concentrated in urban areas and minority pockets. Analyses by different organisations show a disproportionate impact on Muslims, who comprise about 27 per cent of the state's population (2011 Census) and accounted for roughly 34 per cent of the ~91 lakh deletions. In the 27 lakh

pending cases 'under adjudication', estimates suggest ~17 lakh (or 63 per cent) are Muslims. In Murshidabad district, which has a Muslim concentration, the deletions are variously estimated to be between 4 lakh and 7 lakh. The Malda and North 24 Parganas districts also saw heavy deletions.

According to the Kolkata-based Sabar Institute, a data analytics outfit, the skew was sharper in certain constituencies. In Nandigram, for instance, where Muslims form about 25 per cent of the population, they accounted for over 95 per cent of deletions in several supplementary lists. Similar patterns appeared in Metiabruz and other Muslim-majority areas. Women,

particularly from minority and working-class backgrounds, also featured prominently in the deletions, often reportedly due to name mismatches or documentation issues spanning years.

Through all of this, the Election Commission of India maintained that the exercise was scrupulously fair and had targeted illegals and duplicates. It also took credit for enabling 'peaceful polls' and said record turnouts in some high-deletion areas were a sign that genuine voters were emboldened to participate. Try wrapping your head around that! ■

SAYANTAN GHOSH is the author of two books—*Battleground Bengal* and *The Aam Aadmi Party*

## How the deep south was won



Continued from page 1

Projected by the LDF government as a transformative infrastructure initiative, it had triggered much concern over displacement, financial viability and its environmental impact. Protests spread across districts, and the government's response was seen as dismissive.

The UDF managed to reframe the debate to its advantage—arguing for development that is also sustainable and not thrust upon people. This resonated with a wide cross-section of voters, from farmers to middle-class households.

Even police action during protests—over large projects like SilverLine or even local agitations—and the government's tendency to justify police action by default had reinforced the perception of an intolerant state administration.

In the run-up to the election, the LDF would have sensed the changing mood, and it tried to head off imminent voter rejection with a publicity blitz. But, if anything, the high-decibel PR campaign amplified the gap between the official narrative and everyday reality.

The Left, which no doubt played a big hand in Kerala's social development, does not have a clear path to renewal; it certainly cannot live off its legacy forever.

The UDF has reason to feel chuffed with this hard-won victory, but the mandate comes with high expectations, and only good governance can grow their political capital.

The Kerala verdict carries significance beyond the state. It holds lessons for an opposition that is up against phenomenal odds. The UDF campaign was united, disciplined and internally consistent, its leadership looked well-coordinated and its message was clear. Differences were managed well and didn't spill into the public domain. Leaders spoke in one voice. The campaign stayed focused.

It takes all of that when you're fighting with your back to the wall. ■

## Defections, FIRs rule the roost

Punjab's political circles are abuzz with the zealotry of 'investigating' opposition leaders

### Herjinder

Less than a week after Sandeep Pathak—a Rajya Sabha MP from Punjab—defected from the Aam Aadmi Party to join the BJP, a Punjab Police team arrived at his official residence in Delhi. Pathak, however, had reportedly been tipped off. By the time the officers arrived, he had slipped through a rear exit and been hidden away by a waiting car. A video clip of his hasty departure has since been widely circulated, capturing what many see as a spiralling culture of political retribution.

In the days that followed, it emerged that two FIRs were registered against Pathak in separate districts of Punjab, invoking stringent legal provisions under which securing bail is difficult. Delhi Police personnel were deployed outside his residence. The message from Punjab was unmistakable: if he showed up, he would be arrested.

Pathak is not an isolated case. Rajinder Gupta—another of the seven AAP MPs who defected—has also run into legal trouble, albeit of a different nature. Gupta is chairman emeritus of the Trident Group, a prominent industrialist with business interests spanning textiles and manufacturing. In 2022, the Bharatiya Kisan Union

(Ugrahan) had protested against alleged water pollution from the group's Dhaura unit in Barnala district. At the time, the state government appeared indifferent, and the issue faded from public discourse.

Gupta's defection seems to have galvanised the administration into action. The Punjab State Pollution Control Board has now initiated proceedings against him, and reopened the pollution case with renewed vigour. The timing has raised eyebrows, with critics arguing that selective enforcement of regulatory laws has become a convenient tool to 'discipline' dissenting political actors.

The use of state machinery to target political opponents is hardly unprecedented in Punjab. Yet, what distinguishes the current scenario is the scale and intensity with which these tactics are being used. The Punjab Vigilance Bureau, tasked with probing corruption, is increasingly perceived as an extension of executive authority, working zealously to investigate opposition leaders.

Parallely, central agencies have also stepped up their presence in Punjab. The Enforcement Directorate is currently probing at least 16 political leaders in Punjab, with several arrests already made—many of them from opposition parties, including the

Congress and AAP. The pattern has fuelled allegations that the fear of investigation is being used to engineer political realignments.

A report in *The Indian Express* (3 May 2026) reinforces this perception. Quoting party insiders, it reveals that several MPs had told Arvind Kejriwal during a parliamentary session that they were under immense pressure to join the BJP. Some reported raids on their premises; others claimed they had been warned of action by central agencies. The implication is clear: in today's political climate, allegiance is not merely an ideological choice—it is also an existential threat.

Perhaps the most intriguing illustration of these dynamics is former chief minister Capt. Amarinder Singh. While he was with the Congress, the ED had initiated proceedings against him over alleged foreign assets. After he joined the BJP, it was widely assumed that the matter had been quietly shelved. However, in a surprising move, a summons was issued earlier this year seeking his appearance before the ED's Jalandhar

office. Although Singh did not comply, the officer responsible for issuing the summons was subsequently transferred—an episode that only deepened the murkiness surrounding such investigations.

Caught in the crossfire are several senior Congress leaders, many of whom appear to be bearing the brunt of these actions. Charanjit Singh Channi, Sukhpal Singh Khaira, Bharat Brushan Ashu and Shyam Sundar Arora have all been subjected to investigations by either the ED or state vigilance authorities—or both. With the exception of Channi, several have also been arrested.

The actions have not been limited to legal proceedings. In a particularly controversial order, the state government ordered the demolition of a portion of Khaira's ancestral home using bulldozers, a spectacle that embodies the punitive use of administrative power. Such actions raise fundamental questions about the rule of law being replaced by a 'vendetta raj'.

As Punjab approaches another electoral cycle, the stakes can only rise. Political defections, legal battles and public accusations are likely to intensify, further entrenching mistrust. After a recent meeting with President Droupadi Murmu, Raghav Chadha—the 'leader' of the pack of seven defectors—warned that while the Punjab government controls the police force of one state, the BJP commands 21 across the country. This comment encapsulates the reality of contemporary Indian politics.

Punjab, once defined primarily by its agrarian economy and cultural vibrancy, now finds itself at the epicentre of a different kind of contest—where law enforcement agencies, regulatory bodies and investigative institutions are instruments in a larger political chess game.

In this context, vendetta politics is not merely about settling scores. It reflects the systemic erosion of institutional neutrality, where the boundaries between right and retribution grow increasingly indistinct. For the electorate, the consequences are significant.

When governance is overshadowed by political warfare, it is the people who pay. ■



It's defection season ...and Raghav Chadha and other AAP legislators who crossed over to the BJP in Delhi have the media's ears

With elections approaching, legal battles and public accusations are now flying thick and fast

# Vijay pries open the politics of Tamil Nadu

K.A. Shaji

Tamil Nadu has delivered a verdict that resists easy interpretation. At the centre of the churn is Joseph Vijay Chandrasekhar, whose emergence has not merely added another player to the field but altered the grammar of politics in the southern state. In challenging the state's entrenched duopoly of the DMK and AIADMK and successfully resisting a determined campaign by the resource-rich BJP, Vijay has positioned himself as the principal disruptor of a system that seemed immutable for decades.

For over five decades, Tamil Nadu's political landscape was defined by a stable, deeply institutionalised bipolarity. The DMK and the AIADMK were not just parties competing for office but a political ecosystem of two players that had shaped welfare delivery, governance practices and the state's distinctive political identity.

In assembly elections through the 1990s and 2000s, their combined vote share frequently crossed 70 per cent. Even in closer contests, it rarely went below 60 per cent. The reins of government alternated between the two, but the system held. That system has now been shaken loose.

The numbers underline the scale of change. Across urban constituencies, the combined vote share of the DMK and AIADMK has declined by an estimated 8-12 percentage points compared with the previous election cycle. In Chennai, where bipolar contests once produced margins exceeding 15 per cent, several constituencies have recorded victory margins below five per cent.

Multi-cornered contests have replaced predictable outcomes. North Tamil Nadu, including Vellore, Tiruvallur and Kanchipuram, has seen a fragmentation of traditional vote banks. Here, Vijay's TVK (Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam) has drawn disproportionately from first-time voters and lower middle-class urban clusters that were once split between the DMK and AIADMK.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that in the industrial belt of Sriperumbudur and Hosur, younger workers and service sector employees have shifted allegiance to the TVK, drawn to its aspirational messaging that still retains cultural familiarity.

In western Tamil Nadu, historically a stronghold of the AIADMK, the shift has been more nuanced. The party retains

pockets of strength among intermediate caste groups and agrarian communities, but its margins have thinned. TVK has not completely displaced the AIADMK but cut into its vote share to alter outcomes.

Triangular contests have replaced the earlier bipolar pattern in districts like Coimbatore, Erode and Salem. The Cauvery delta, for long a DMK bastion, continues to favour the party but with reduced margins. Welfare schemes and historical loyalty still hold, but even here, there is visible erosion among younger voters.

Southern Tamil Nadu, including Madurai, Ramanathapuram and Tirunelveli, presents a more complex picture, with caste alignments, local leadership and micro-level issues shaping outcomes alongside broader political churn.

Nearly 20 per cent of the electorate is now in the 18-29 age group. They are less bound to ideological inheritance and more responsive to leadership narratives, governance expectations and digital communication. "This is not a marginal shift in voting behaviour," says C. Lakshmanan, former faculty at the Madras Institute of Development Studies. "Traditional loyalties are weakening, especially among younger voters."

## Cinema meets politics

Tamil Nadu has known the political power of cinema. M.G. Ramachandran

*For over 50 years, the state's politics was defined by a stable, deeply institutionalised bipolarity. TVK has upset that equation*



TVK chief Vijay celebrates his party's victory, but the challenges of coalition politics still lie ahead

Photo: IANS

transformed his screen persona into a welfare-driven political force. J. Jayalalitha consolidated that legacy with a strong leadership model and expansive welfare programmes. M. Karunanidhi, on the other hand, anchored the DMK in ideological depth and organisational continuity. Each phase produced a stable axis of power.

The present moment is different, though, in that it is dissolving the old binary. Vijay's rise is not sudden; it's the culmination of a process. The Vijay Makkal Iyakkam, initially a fan network, evolved over two decades into a welfare-oriented organisation. Blood donation drives, disaster relief operations and educational assistance programmes created a grassroots presence that extended beyond fandom. By the time TVK was launched, the network already had booth-level structures and district-level organisers. Local body election victories provided early evidence of electoral viability.

"This is not just star power," says political observer Pradeep Damodaran. "It is years of organisational work."

Cinema provided the emotional connect with his support base. His films *Mersal*, *Sarkar*, *Master* and *Leo* weren't pure entertainers; they had a political sub-text. *Mersal* questioned taxation and public healthcare disparities. *Sarkar* invoked citizen rights and tangled with electoral malpractices. *Master* and *Leo* reinforced the image of an individual confronting entrenched power. These narratives created a political persona ahead of Vijay's plunge into active politics. "Cinema prepared audiences to accept him as a political figure," says Lakshmanan.

## A new era of coalition

Vijay's political arrival, the end of Tamil Nadu's old duopoly and a hung assembly have forced the state into a reckoning with coalition politics, a departure from its history of stable single-party dominance. At the time of writing, the Congress had offered conditional support to the TVK; the Left parties were still dragging their feet; Stalin had announced that the DMK would "not obstruct" the TVK government (if it comes into being) for the first six months and observe its functioning without interference. The TVK, which has 108 seats, was ten short of the 118 needed to get a ruling majority. According to some reports, the AIADMK had indicated its willingness to extend support from the outside, while others speculated that a breakaway faction may help it form the government.

Even in the midst of this churn, Tamil Nadu has resisted the national behemoth. With all the resources at its disposal, and even after running a determined campaign, with Prime Minister Modi trying to spin a narrative of civilisational continuity, the BJP has not been able to make significant inroads here, managing to win a solitary seat and 2.97 per cent of the vote.

Vijay's ambivalence on identity issues, central to the DMK's politics, and his avoidance of a direct confrontation with the BJP didn't cost him in this election. In his acknowledgement of Modi's congratulatory message the day after his victory, Vijay emphasised a commitment to governance that transcends political boundaries. The ambivalence of his public posture may be strategic, but it also makes observers wonder about his ideological moorings.

On the surface, Vijay situates himself within the symbolic universe of Dravidian politics. His gesture of garlanding Periyar and his invocation of Ambedkar and Kamaraj indicate that he draws on secular, Dravidian traditions. His interventions on issues like demonetisation, the Citizenship Amendment Act and the Sterlite protests have provided glimpses of his political credo. Yet these were still mainly gestures, that do not constitute a coherent ideological framework.

Some commentators have seen the Tamil Nadu election as the sun setting on Dravidian politics. But regional assertion and the principles of social justice and welfare remain deeply embedded in voter expectations. What has been challenged is the monopoly over these ideas. "The emotional contract between voters and parties has changed," says Chennai-based political observer P. Sundar Rajan. "Welfare schemes are still valued, but they are not enough."

Urbanisation has also played a hand. Tamil Nadu is nearly half-urban (>48 per cent), and exposure to diverse political narratives and the expansion of digital media have weakened the traditional networks of patronage.

If not by design, then simply via the availability of a third credible option, the electorate has forced every party to reassess its relevance. Power is now contingent. For Vijay, the next challenge is to articulate governance priorities and to forge out of his movement an organisation capable of governance.

"There is a difference between building a movement and running a government," says Sundar Rajan. "The real test lies ahead." ■

# A new impasse over an old route

Nepal's objection to the use of the Lipulekh Pass for the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra signals a new combativeness

Sourabh Sen

There's a new hotspot in South Asia's geopolitics. Located at an altitude of 17,000 feet, Lipulekh Pass is a narrow gap in the ridge line of Uttarakhand's Kumaon region. A historical trade route, the pass connects India's Vyas Valley and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, and is the gateway for the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra—an important pilgrimage for Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. Because of its unique position at the junction of the borders of India, China and Nepal, Lipulekh is one of the most strategically sensitive and culturally significant sites in the entire Himalayan range.

On 3 May, the foreign ministry of Nepal issued a formal objection regarding the use of the Lipulekh Pass for the 2026 Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra. In its note, the ministry said: "The Government of Nepal is completely clear and adamant on the fact that Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh and Kalapani east of the Mahakali River are integral parts of Nepal since the Sugauli Treaty of 1816. The Government of Nepal has reiterated its clear stance and concerns to both India and China through diplomatic channels regarding the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra, which is said to be organised via Nepali territory... The Government of Nepal has been continuously urging the Government of India not to carry out any activities such as road construction or expansion, border trade and pilgrimage in the area."

The note also observed that Nepal was not consulted before the route was finalised by India and China. Interestingly, the Kathmandu missile landed just ahead of foreign secretary Vikram Misri's scheduled visit to Kathmandu on 11 May to discuss bilateral ties and review India-funded projects.

In response, India's ministry of external affairs spokesman Randhir Jaiswal said: "India's position in this regard had been consistent and clear. Lipulekh Pass has been a long-standing route for the Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra since 1954 and the Yatra through this route has been going on for decades. This is not a new development. As regards territorial claims, India has consistently maintained that such claims are neither justified nor based on historical facts and evidence. Such unilateral



artificial enlargement of territorial claims is untenable. India remains open to a constructive interaction with Nepal on all issues in the bilateral relationship, including on resolving agreed outstanding boundary issues through dialogue and diplomacy."

The Treaty of Sugauli—which Nepal invokes to underscore its sovereign right over Lipulekh Pass, a claim India dismisses—was signed on 2 December 1815 and ratified on 4 March 1816. It ended the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-1816) between the Kingdom of Nepal and the British East India Company and forced Nepal to cede roughly one-third of its territory, including Kumaon, Garhwal and the Terai region. The treaty also formalised the current shape of the India-Nepal border.

Nepal insists that Limpiyadhura, Lipulekh and Kalapani are inseparable parts of its territory; that official diplomatic notes have been sent to both New Delhi and Beijing, urging both to refrain from any activity in the area; and that, despite its objection, Nepal remains committed to resolving boundary disputes through peaceful diplomatic channels.

While the Yatra through Lipulekh is not a 'new development', what is new is Nepal's territorial assertion—under the new government headed by Balen Shah—over Lipulekh and its adjoining areas. Also significant is Nepal's conscious effort to keep both India and China at arm's length



Lipulekh Pass is a narrow gap at the junction of the India, China and Nepal borders

over this issue. Does this stance reflect Nepal's Gen Z-irreverence in-your-face irreverence; or is there an hidden hand shepherding Nepal's foreign policy?

Nepal's newly-elected Prime Minister Balen Shah appears to be riding a wave of assertiveness. Social media discussions have identified Aksai Chin and Darjeeling as pressure points in its engagement with India. Viral videos argue 'If Aksai Chin can be depicted as part of India, why can't Lipulekh be depicted as part of Nepal?' Similar videos demand that Darjeeling be shown as part of Nepal.

Thus far, Shah remains an elusive figure, even in Nepal. He communicates via social media and appears to be avoiding giving interviews or addressing press conferences. Significantly, he declined to meet Sergio Gor, the US ambassador to India and special envoy for South and Central Asian affairs, during his recent Nepal visit, citing protocol. Unconfirmed reports suggest that Shah has been advised against visiting India unless he is received on arrival by the Indian prime minister. It is not even clear whether Misri will actually get to meet him.

On 30 April, a day before Gor visited the Everest base camp, Nepal's home ministry suspended the operations of Airlift Technology, a Nepali tech startup and Everest expedition operator, citing unspecified security concerns. Gor was hoping to see flight demos of drones to be used for airlifting garbage and supplies. According to *Kathmandu Post*, the order appeared to target two drones—the Chinese-made DJI FlyCart 100 and the US-made Freefly Systems Alta X Gen 2—both associated with Airlift's operations and both with 3D-mapping capabilities. The suspension order was lifted after five days.

Kedar Sharma, author, commentator and travel blogger from Nepal told *National Herald*, "Nepal has asserted its territorial right whenever the question of Lipulekh has come up vis-à-vis India. Allowing Indian pilgrims and traders to use Lipulekh Pass disregarding Nepal's territorial claim

was akin to undermining its broader engagement with Nepal—this seems to be the message the Foreign Ministry has tried to deliver to China."

Sharma used the Hindi proverb "*Jiski laathi, uski bhains*" (the one with the stick owns the buffalo) to describe India's claim on Lipulekh and dismissed allegations of the US or other countries playing *agent provocateur* as conspiracy theories suggest. "We tend to see the CIA's hand even when street dogs fight!"

Nepal's assertion of its territorial rights along a sensitive border point must, however, be seen in the context of a growing sentiment that no longer regards India as a reliable friend or partner. The sentiment hardened after the blockade in 2015-16 when India imposed restrictions on essential commodities—fuel, medicine and food—from entering landlocked Nepal from India for four-and-a-half months.

While India denied an official blockade and blamed it on the unrest among Nepal's Madhesi community—who live across the India-Nepal border—the disruption caused a severe humanitarian crisis, made worse in the aftermath of the April 2015 earthquake.

Since then, the prevailing belief is that India forced Nepal to accommodate Madhesi aspirations in its new Constitution by enforcing and leveraging the blockade. India's decision to reduce the recruitment of Gorkhas in the Indian Army, advising them to opt for the Agnipath scheme instead has also cooled relations.

Within Nepal, opinion appears divided. Several commentators point out that landlocked Nepal continues to depend on India for key supplies, including fuel and fertilisers. RSS activities in Nepal and India's contempt—expressed on social media—for its smaller neighbour complicate the relationship further. This has triggered a demand for a US base, military or otherwise, in Nepal as a counterweight to both India and China.

For now, it does seem that Prime Minister Balen Shah, despite his Madhesi ancestry and India connections, is in no mood to ease his grip on Lipulekh to reconnect India and China. ■

SOURABH SEN is a Kolkata-based independent writer and commentator on politics, human rights and foreign affairs

THE ETHANOL RUSH

# Of sugar highs and water lows

For Maharashtra's drought-stricken villages, nothing can sweeten the ethanol deal

**Jaideep Hardikar**

**T**hink one day at a time. This was the strategy of farmers to stay afloat in Takwiki village, in Maharashtra's drought-prone Dharashiv district in the summer of 2013. A crippling water scarcity devastated its economy, driving people out in search of work and water.

Three more devastating droughts have since ravaged Marathwada regions in which Takwiki falls, and each time, some of its people left the village and translocated to other places.

That year, Maharashtra crushed 80 million tonnes of cane to produce 8 million quintals of sugar. Sugar mills in Dharashiv crushed over 25 lakh tonnes of sugarcane—a record.

In my successive trips to this village and tens of others in this rain-shadow, low-rainfall, arid region of the state, one paradox stood out: villages that clamour for tankers to supply drinking water grow tonnes of water-guzzling sugarcane for the state's sugar daddies. This, in a changing climate.

Year after year, they dig deep borewells to extract groundwater to irrigate cane crops, feeding factories that produce millions of tonnes of sugar and now ethanol, while a large section of people, especially in summer, are drinking water during drought years.

A few years ago, a geologist at the Maharashtra government Groundwater Surveys and Development Agency (GSDA) told me that Marathwada was sucking water from the palaeolithic age to grow orchards and cultivate sugarcane. The crisis is that serious.

In 2013, when the harangued district collector wrote to chief minister Prithviraj Chavan pleading for the suspension of the Diwali-to-March crushing season to preserve water for drinking needs, the entire political class was up in arms against him. He was snubbed, and transferred. People went without water, were forced to buy cans and packaged water by shelling out astronomical sums, but sugar mills worked round the clock, using millions of litres of water to produce the sweetener.

Cut to 2026. The water crisis has worsened, yet the Centre wants to push for vehicles to run on 100 per cent ethanol—produced by sugar factories—to tide over fuel shortages in the aftermath of the war in West Asia. It intends to amend the regulatory framework for mills, bringing ethanol into the framework in addition to sugar, molasses and other byproducts. This year, more of Maharashtra's sugarcane will not become sugar, but ethanol—fuel for India's vehicles.

The shift is part of India's aim to achieve, over time, 100 per cent ethanol blending in petrol. Oil marketing companies are expanding procurement and sugar mills across Maharashtra are rapidly adding distillation capacity. What was once a by-product—molasses—has now become a central economic driver. For five years, the Centre and states have, through policy tweaks, incentivised private and cooperative sugar factories to invest heavily in ethanol production. But in a state where water is already contested, the ethanol story is not just about energy. It is about how water is being used—and who decides.

Last week, the Modi government took a step toward enabling cars in India to run entirely on ethanol. Under normal circumstances, such a move would be welcome. But these are not normal times. Ongoing geopolitical tensions in West Asia have disrupted global oil supplies, raising fears of fuel shortages. Reducing dependence on petrol and diesel is therefore understandable.



Paradoxically, the villages that grow tonnes of water-guzzling sugarcane also clamour for tankers to supply drinking water

Early in April 2026, the ministry of consumer affairs, food and public distribution released the draft Sugarcane (Control) Order 2026 that aims to replace the 1966 order, to 'modernise the sugar sector'. Aside from what it will achieve and why, among the 14 key proposals in the draft is the move to expand the regulatory scope to include ethanol production from sugarcane juice, syrup and molasses, formally integrating ethanol into the regulatory framework.

In principle, this seems like a forward-looking decision. But implementing it now is akin to digging a well when thirsty. Energy demand is predictable and should have been prepared for in advance. This policy carries two serious risks.

The first concern is impending water scarcity.

This year's forecasts by multiple agencies including the IMD suggest that the 2026-27 monsoon may fall short by around 8 per cent due to the looming shadow of El Niño. Governments—right from the Centre down to municipalities—are already preparing for water shortages. Cities like Mumbai have announced water cuts. Against this backdrop, accelerating ethanol production begs a critical question. Ethanol manufacturing requires enormous quantities of water. Using conventional methods, producing one litre of ethanol can require up to 10,000 litres of water. Even when produced from grains like rice or maize, efficiency is limited—one tonne yields about 475 litres of ethanol. So how economic and ecological is the decision to harp on higher ethanol blends?

In India, ethanol is primarily derived from sugarcane. In Maharashtra alone, nearly 350 producers have invested heavily in ethanol production. Yet from a tonne of sugarcane juice (about 1,000 litres), only 70 litres of ethanol is produced. The process is doubly water-intensive: first, to grow a crop that guzzles vast quantities of water, and then, to expend further energy and resources to extract ethanol from it. Just as you need to spend money to earn money, producing energy also consumes energy. The question is how much and at what cost.

If water itself is scarce, as in the regions that cultivate sugarcane, should it be used for drinking, farming and essential needs—

*Producing a litre of ethanol takes 10,000 litres of water. But a tonne of sugarcane juice yields ~70 litres of ethanol*

or diverted toward fuel production? The answer is obvious. That is why pushing ethanol production at this moment appears deeply problematic.

The second concern is overcapacity and policy distortion.

Before the current energy crisis, the government had strongly incentivised ethanol production. As a result, India's ethanol production capacity has increased dramatically—from about 518 crore litres a decade ago to nearly 2,000 crore litres today. However, current demand is only about 1,100 crore litres. In other words, capacity far exceeds demand. Even within ethanol production, there is a hierarchy. Ethanol made from sugarcane is now being overshadowed by 'new' ethanol derived from grains like rice (also a water-guzzling crop) and maize. Government procurement policies appear to favour these newer producers, spelling uncertainty for traditional sugar-based ethanol producers—mainly sugar mills.

In Maharashtra and elsewhere, around 350 such producers have invested heavily, encouraged by earlier policies. But oil companies are now procuring only about half of their output, which leaves these producers struggling to recover their investments.

If India moves from 20 per cent blending to 85 or 100 per cent ethanol, demand will rise dramatically. But ethanol has lower

energy density than petrol or diesel. This means vehicles require more ethanol to travel the same distance. Higher consumption will therefore drive even greater demand for ethanol production. And that, in turn, means even greater demand for water.

At present, India's cropping patterns can support ethanol blending up to around 30 per cent. Moving to 85 or 100 per cent would require a massive expansion in ethanol-producing crops.

Rice and other cereals. Sugarcane and rice—both water-intensive crops—are already under scrutiny. Yet they continue to receive policy support due to political considerations and food security needs. This has led to growing pressure on water resources. In addition, excessive irrigation brings risks like soil salinity and land degradation, as seen in Satara.

Ethanol has altered the financial logic of the sector. Instead of being trapped in cycles of sugar surplus and low prices, mills now have an alternative market. Industry voices argue that ethanol has effectively stabilised the sector—indeed, Union minister Nitin Gadkari, a strong advocate for and player in the sugar sector and biofuels, recently claimed that without ethanol, a majority of mills in western Maharashtra would have shut down. There is little doubt that ethanol has revived the mills. But its mindless expansion rests on sugarcane and water, disregarding concerns about water availability and food security.

At the heart of Maharashtra's ethanol turn lies a familiar political economy, now reconfigured rather than replaced. The cooperative sugar mill—once the backbone of rural patronage—has evolved into an increasingly private agro-industrial hub that converts cane into sugar, power and fuel. Control over mills meant control of credit societies, transport contracts, labour networks, subsidies and ultimately electoral influence, particularly in western Maharashtra. Ethanol deepens this nexus. By improving cash flows through assured procurement by oil companies, it strengthens both cooperative and private mills, linked to political families across parties.

The beneficiaries are layered: mill owners secure new revenue streams,

political actors consolidate influence through financially viable institutions, and relatively larger cane-growing farmers gain from more reliable payments. The costs, however, are marathwada, where by regions like Marathwada, where groundwater is overdrawn to sustain cane, and by smallholders locked into a water-intensive crop because mills dictate local cropping patterns. In effect, ethanol has not democratised the sugar economy; it has shifted its centre of gravity from a cooperative-led model to a hybrid regime of cooperatives and private mills, tightening the nexus between water, capital and political power while expanding it into newer, more fragile landscapes.

As Amey Tirotkar notes in *Frontline*, 'sugar built Maharashtra's cooperative power structure', a structure now under strain. The traditional cooperative model, once the backbone of rural political control, is being reshaped by debt, rising costs and uneven access to ethanol capacity. Mills with capital and political backing are adapting—investing in distilleries and securing new revenue streams—while weaker cooperatives struggle with unpaid dues running into thousands of crores. The result is a reconfiguration: from a broad-based cooperative network to a more uneven landscape where private mills and politically aligned entities consolidate control.

In this transition, ethanol acts as both stabiliser and filter—rewarding those who can invest, marginalising those who cannot. The benefits accrue upward, to mill owners and political actors, while the risks—water depletion, crop dependency and income volatility—are pushed onto farmers and labour.

In Maharashtra, sugarcane is not just a crop but a system of power. From Kolhapur and Sangli to Ahmednagar and Solapur, the geography of sugar overlaps with the geography of political influence. Cooperative mills historically anchored local economies, shaping access to credit, employment and electoral mobilisation.

Ethanol reinforces this system. By strengthening mill finances, it increases the institutional leverage of sugar networks. It also locks farmers into cane cultivation. Studies show that in Maharashtra, expansion in sugarcane production has been driven more by increase in area than productivity, indicating a steady spread of the crop across regions. That expansion has increasingly moved into drought-prone regions like Marathwada, or parts of western Maharashtra, where the ecological costs are far higher.

The impact of this transition is not the same across Maharashtra. Western Maharashtra—with canal irrigation systems and relatively higher rainfall—has historically supported sugarcane cultivation. Regions like Kolhapur, Sangli and Pune form the core of the sugar belt.

But Marathwada and parts of Vidarbha tell a different story. Here, sugarcane depends on groundwater extraction. Repeated droughts have already exposed the fragility of this model. Despite this, cane acreage has expanded into these regions, driven by the economic pull of mills. Ethanol risks accelerating that trend.

The shift also has implications for cropping diversity. As more land is committed to cane, less water is available for millets, pulses and oilseeds—crops that are both nutritionally and ecologically more suited to dryland agriculture. In effect, ethanol may be narrowing the state's agricultural choices and aggravating the water crisis even as it expands its energy options. ■

JAIDEEP HARDIKAR is a senior Nagpur-based journalist and author of *Ramrao: The Story of India's Farm Crisis*



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# ENGINEERING ON WATER: THE NEXT FRONTIER OF RENEWABLE ENERGY

## Karnataka's Blueprint for a Floating Energy Revolution: A New Model For Rural Development

Amid the composed and dignified setting of Vikas Soudha in Bengaluru, a pivotal decision quietly took shape on a March morning—measured in its emergence, yet far-reaching in its implications. Unaccompanied by dramatic announcements or immediate public attention, it nonetheless signaled the beginning of a carefully considered strategic shift.

Rooted in foresight and guided by the imperatives of sustainability, this decision has the potential to redefine how Karnataka manages, optimizes, and harmonizes its natural resources in the face of growing environmental pressures, rising energy demands, and the complexities of a rapidly changing world.

At the center of this initiative stands N. S. Boseraju, the Minister for Minor Irrigation, Science and Technology.



Source: Gettyimages (Representative Images)

panels benefit from the natural cooling effect of water. This helps maintain optimal operating conditions, leading to higher energy output.

In a climate like Karnataka's, where temperatures can soar during the summer months, this cooling effect can make a substantial difference in overall efficiency.

### Water Conservation: An Added Dividend

While energy generation is the primary objective, floating solar projects offer an equally compelling benefit—water conservation. Large water bodies lose significant volumes of water through evaporation, particularly during periods of intense heat. By covering portions of these surfaces with solar panels, evaporation is significantly reduced.

The panels act as a protective



During a high-level review meeting attended by senior officials, including representatives from Bangalore Electricity Supply Company Limited (BESCOM) and Karnataka Renewable Energy Development Limited (KREDL), as well as experts and administrators from the Minor Irrigation Department, the Minister issued a directive that may well define Karnataka's next phase of energy innovation.

The instruction was clear: examine, refine, and finalize an implementation framework for floating solar power



**Karnataka has long been recognized as a pioneer in India's renewable energy journey. From expansive solar parks to wind energy corridors, the state has consistently embraced innovation to meet its growing energy demands.**

plants across the state's water bodies, based on a detailed feasibility report submitted by Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited. What may appear at first glance as a technical policy directive is, in reality, the beginning of a broader narrative—one that intertwines energy security, water conservation, fiscal prudence, and environmental stewardship.

### A State at the Crossroads of Energy and Sustainability

Karnataka has long been recognized as a pioneer in India's renewable energy journey. From expansive solar parks to wind energy corridors, the state has consistently embraced innovation to meet its growing energy demands. Yet, as the pressures of urbanization, industrial growth, and agricultural dependency intensify, the limitations of conventional approaches have become increasingly evident.

The challenge is particularly acute in the agricultural sector, where lift irrigation schemes form the backbone of water distribution in many regions. These systems, designed to pump water from lower elevations to higher terrains, are essential for sustaining agriculture in drought-prone districts such as Kolar. However, their operation comes at a significant cost.

Hundreds of such schemes managed by the Minor Irrigation Department

consume vast quantities of electricity, placing an ever-growing financial burden on the state exchequer. As energy tariffs rise and demand continues to escalate, the sustainability of this model has come into question. The need for an alternative—one that is both economically viable and environmentally responsible—has never been more urgent. It is within this context that floating solar energy emerges not merely as an option, but as a necessity.

### The Concept: Turning Water into Power

Floating solar photovoltaic systems represent a simple yet powerful idea: utilizing the surface of water bodies to generate clean energy. Instead of occupying valuable land resources, solar panels are mounted on floating platforms that rest on lakes, reservoirs, and irrigation tanks.

This approach addresses one of the most pressing constraints in renewable energy deployment—land availability. In a state where land is a critical and often contested resource, the ability to generate power without displacing agriculture or ecosystems is a significant advantage.

The feasibility study conducted by Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited over a period of six months has provided a comprehensive roadmap for implementing this technology in

### From Pilot to Statewide Transformation

The proposed 100 MW project at Somambudi Agrahara Lake is just the beginning. The state has identified numerous water bodies with the potential to host similar installations. Many of these lakes and reservoirs span over 100 acres, offering substantial capacity for energy generation.

The long-term vision is ambitious: to create a network of floating solar plants across Karnataka, collectively generating thousands of megawatts of clean energy. Such a network would not only enhance the state's renewable energy capacity but also reduce its dependence on conventional power sources.

This distributed model of energy generation offers additional advantages. By producing power closer to the point of consumption, it reduces transmission losses and enhances grid stability. It also provides a level of resilience, ensuring that disruptions in one location do not impact the entire system.

### Economic and Social Impact

Beyond its environmental and technical benefits, the floating solar initiative holds significant promise for economic development. The implementation of these projects will create a wide range of employment opportunities, from manufacturing and installation to operation and maintenance.

Local communities, particularly in rural areas, stand to benefit directly. Training programs can equip youth with the skills needed to participate in this emerging sector, fostering a new generation of green energy professionals.

There is also potential for innovative public-private partnerships. By involving private players in the development and management of these projects, the state can leverage additional expertise and investment while ensuring accountability and efficiency.

Moreover, the presence of high-value infrastructure on water bodies can enhance monitoring and security, helping to prevent issues such as encroachment and pollution.

### Environmental Responsibility and Future Readiness

As with any large-scale initiative, floating solar projects must be implemented with careful consideration of environmental impacts. The state has recognized this and is taking proactive steps to address potential challenges.

Detailed studies will be conducted to assess the impact on aquatic life and bird habitats. Design modifications may be introduced to ensure minimal disruption to natural ecosystems. Robust anchoring systems will be developed to withstand monsoon conditions and fluctuating water levels.

Equally important is the need for long-term sustainability. Solar panels have a finite lifespan, and planning for their recycling and disposal is essential. By incorporating these considerations into the project from the outset, Karnataka is setting a benchmark for responsible innovation.

### A Vision Rooted in Pragmatism

What sets Karnataka's floating solar initiative apart is its balance of ambition and pragmatism. It is not driven by abstract ideals but by a clear understanding of the state's challenges and opportunities.

By leveraging existing water infrastructure, the state is optimizing its resources without incurring additional land acquisition costs.

By integrating energy generation with water conservation, it is addressing multiple issues simultaneously. And by fostering collaboration across departments, it is ensuring efficient implementation.

This approach reflects a broader shift in governance—one that prioritizes sustainability, efficiency, and innovation.

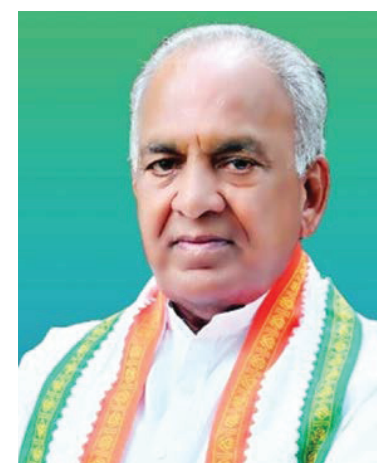
### A New Chapter in Karnataka's Growth Story

As the sun rises over the lakes of Karnataka, its reflection now carries a new meaning. It is no longer just a symbol of natural beauty but a source of power, progress, and possibility.

The directive issued in Vikas Soudha is more than an administrative decision; it is a statement of intent. It signals Karnataka's readiness to embrace the future with confidence and creativity.

Through the leadership of N. S. Boseraju and the collaborative efforts of institutions like Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited, BESCOM, and KREDL, the state is charting a course toward a more sustainable and resilient future.

In harnessing the sun on its waters, Karnataka is not merely adapting to change—it is leading it.



**Floating solar photovoltaic systems represent a simple yet powerful idea: utilizing the surface of water bodies to generate clean energy. Instead of occupying valuable land resources, solar panels are mounted on floating platforms that rest on lakes, reservoirs, and irrigation tanks.**

Karnataka. Among its key recommendations is the establishment of a pilot project at Somambudi Agrahara Lake in Kolar district—a project envisioned to generate approximately 100 megawatts of clean energy.

This pilot is not just a standalone initiative; it is the foundation upon which a much larger vision is being built.

### Engineering Innovation on the Water's Surface

Floating solar installations are a testament to modern engineering ingenuity. The solar panels are mounted on buoyant structures, often made of durable, weather-resistant materials, which allow them to remain stable on the water surface. These structures are anchored securely to the lakebed, ensuring resilience against wind, waves, and seasonal fluctuations in water levels.

Electricity generated by the panels is transmitted through specialized underwater cables to onshore substations. From there, it is integrated into the grid managed by BESCOM, ensuring seamless distribution to consumers.

One of the most notable advantages of this system lies in its efficiency. Unlike land-based solar panels, which are exposed to high temperatures that can reduce their performance, floating

shield, minimizing direct exposure to sunlight and wind. Over time, this can result in the preservation of millions of liters of water.

For regions like Kolar, where water scarcity is a persistent challenge, this dual benefit is transformative. The same infrastructure that generates electricity also helps conserve a critical natural resource, creating a synergy that is both practical and sustainable.

Additionally, the shading effect of the panels can improve water quality by limiting the growth of algae, thereby supporting healthier aquatic

ecosystems.

### Governance Through Collaboration

The success of Karnataka's floating solar initiative lies not only in its technological innovation but also in its governance model. The directive issued by N. S. Boseraju emphasizes a collaborative approach involving multiple stakeholders.

The Minor Irrigation Department serves as the custodian of water bodies and the primary beneficiary of reduced energy costs. KREDL brings technical expertise and oversees the implementation of renewable energy projects. BESCOM ensures efficient grid integration and power distribution.

This coordinated effort reflects a "one-government" approach, where departments work in unison toward a shared objective.

By involving all key stakeholders from the outset, the state is ensuring that the project is not only technically sound but also administratively efficient.

The Minister's directive to undertake a technical re-evaluation of the feasibility report further underscores a commitment to scientific rigor and due diligence.

It is a reminder that innovation must be grounded in careful analysis and continuous improvement.

# The other high-risk gamble in West Asia

**Ashok Swain** on why the UAE's exit from OPEC spells more trouble in West Asia and beyond

**T**he UAE's decision to walk out of OPEC and OPEC+ is not just about oil. It represents a blunt geopolitical rupture. Abu Dhabi is no longer ignoring its rivalry with Saudi Arabia nor walking a tightrope between regional camps. It is openly gravitating towards a new axis consisting of the US, Israel and increasingly India—and this high-risk strategy is deepening conflict lines across regions already on edge.

OPEC, created in 1960, was designed to coordinate oil production and give oil-producing countries collective control over global prices. OPEC+ came into being in 2016 to fold in 10 other countries, including big producers like Russia. For decades, Saudi Arabia dominated both structures, using them as instruments of economic and geopolitical influence. The UAE's exit strips away part of that leverage and signals that Abu Dhabi no longer accepts Riyadh's leadership, not just in oil but in the broader regional order.

The economic argument for leaving is straightforward. The UAE wants to produce more oil than OPEC quotas allow because the Iran war has put its economy under great strain. It wants to monetise its reserves quickly, to hedge against a future where fossil fuel demand has declined. But this is only the surface. What lies underneath is a deeper strategic break with Saudi Arabia, stretching across energy cooperation in defence, intelligence and global partnerships.

The Abraham Accords of 2020 marked a significant geopolitical shift, with the UAE normalising relations with Israel and building cooperation in trade, technology and security. In contrast, Saudi Arabia declined to join the Accord, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman maintaining that normalisation of ties with Israel would be contingent on the establishment of a Palestinian state and broader regional considerations.

This divergence between the UAE and Saudi Arabia is growing, and it shows in their external alignments. Where Saudi Arabia is strengthening ties with Pakistan through a formal defence partnership, the UAE is moving closer to India, expanding cooperation in defence, intelligence, energy and technology, while also embedding itself

deeper into a shared strategic space with Israel.

The United States has quietly encouraged this shift. Washington has long viewed OPEC as an obstacle to lower oil prices and greater Western leverage over energy markets. By leaving OPEC, the UAE weakens the cartel's collective ability to control supply and pricing, opening space for increased Emirati production and greater market volatility that could benefit American oil producers. Abu Dhabi's move aligns neatly with broader US strategic interests: weakening Saudi-dominated oil coordination, reducing OPEC's influence and committing the UAE more deeply to a US-led geopolitical and economic order.

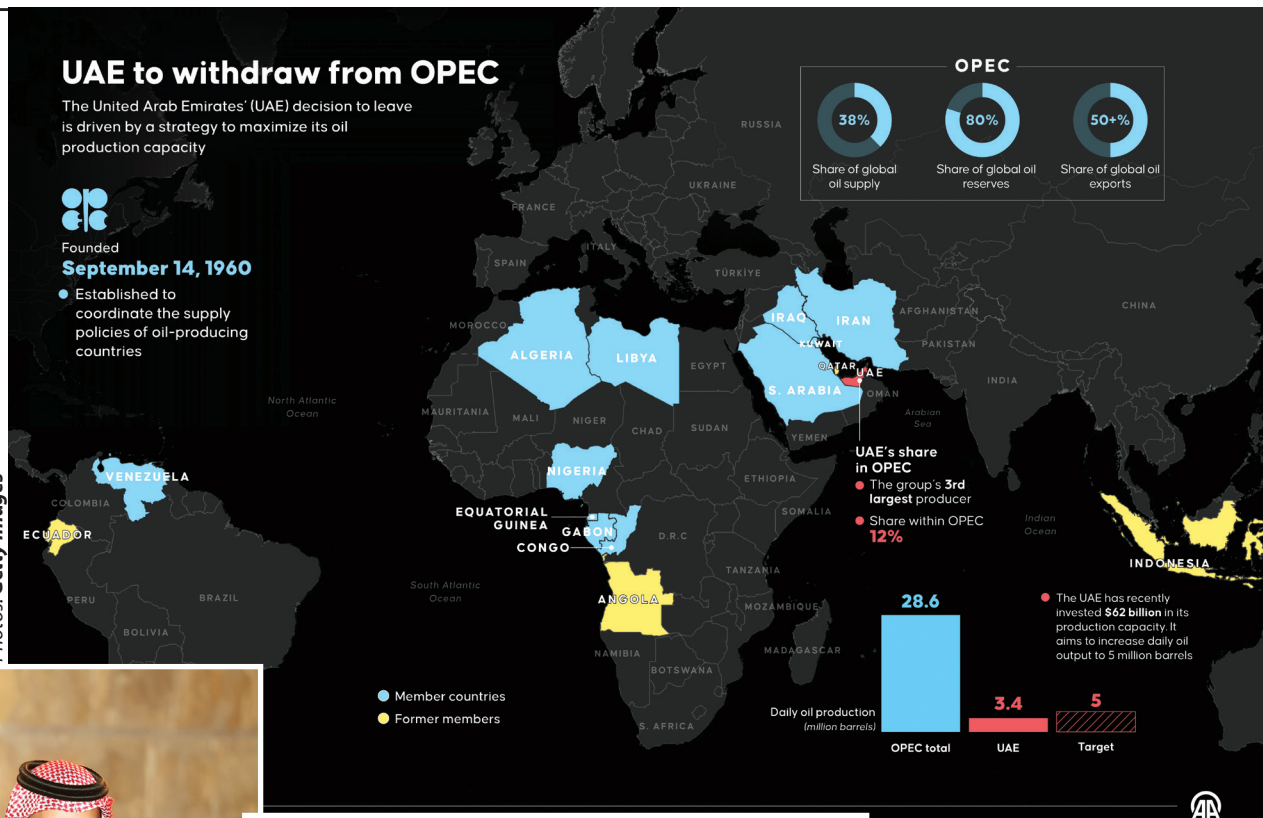
The UAE's growing proximity to India is also not just economic. It is political and strategic as well and carries serious implications. Abu Dhabi has chosen to align itself with a government in New Delhi whose domestic and regional policies have caused deep concern in the Muslim world. At the same time, India has been moving closer to Israel, expanding defence cooperation, intelligence sharing and technological partnerships. The convergence of interests—seen in evolving UAE-India ties and India-Israel relations—is not accidental but part of an opportunistic geopolitical realignment that prioritises security cooperation and economic gain without bothering with notions of accountability and justice or a rules-based order.

The UAE's relations with Pakistan have deteriorated sharply. Abu Dhabi has scaled back financial support, cooled diplomatic engagement and withdrawn from investment commitments. Pakistan was asked to pay back the entire UAE debt of \$3.5 billion in April. So the UAE-Saudi rivalry will extend beyond West Asia, and what was once a regional competition is now entangled with India-Pakistan dynamics, creating overlapping fault lines. Instead of trying to reduce tensions, the UAE is embedding itself firmly on one side of a deeply polarised geopolitical divide.

The UAE's broader foreign policy reinforces this pattern. From Yemen to Libya, from Ethiopia and Sudan to the Horn of Africa, Abu Dhabi has pursued



*The UAE's rivalry with Saudi Arabia is spilling over into newer areas. In days to come, South Asia will feel the heat*



**Deepening divisions** (Clockwise from above) An infographic snapshots of OPEC; deserted OPEC headquarters in Vienna; Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud of Saudi Arabia

influence through strategic investments, military interventions and even proxy actors. In Yemen, it backed separatist groups that clashed with Saudi-supported forces. In Sudan, it supports paramilitary actors accused of terrible atrocities. In Libya, it armed and financed a rival strongman. It has forged ties with Somaliland. All these actions have entrenched division.

The UAE frames its activism as a fight against extremism and disorder. But the reality is more troubling. It has continued to expand economic, technological and military cooperation with Israel despite its horrific genocidal project in Gaza. Trade has grown and defence and intelligence ties have deepened. The Iran war has only hardened Abu Dhabi's conviction that its security lies with Israel and the US, not with Arab institutions.

The addition of India to this axis intensifies the problem. By aligning with Netanyahu-led Israel and Modi-led India while distancing itself from traditional

partners, the UAE risks deepening divisions across West and South Asia. It also risks undermining its own credibility. A state that claims to promote tolerance cannot indefinitely ignore the implications of its alliances.

Saudi Arabia is not without fault. Its own interventions and ambitions have contributed to regional instability. But the UAE's challenge is a competing model of authoritarian power projection. The rivalry between the two is less about ideology and more about who will dominate the next phase of regional politics.

The risk is that this competition, now intertwined with India-Pakistan dynamics and reinforced by external alliances, will deepen instability across multiple regions. Yemen, Sudan and Libya are already paying the price. South Asia could become another arena for Gulf rivalries to play out.

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

# China holds the aces in Trump-Xi meet

The US failure to knock out Iran has meant that Trump goes to Beijing with a much weaker hand, writes **Ashis Ray**

**S**ince the time US President Donald Trump contemplated a summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping during his proposed visit to Beijing on 14-15 May—rescheduled from late March—the balance of power in world affairs has shifted.

Trump's failure to pre-empt Iran in an unlawful, unprovoked, knock-out strike—indeed to be checkmated by that proud Asian nation—means he will arrive in the Chinese capital with a relatively weak hand. India's northern neighbour will attempt to make the best of this, though Trump is bound to spin it differently.

Joerg Wuttke, a former president of the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China, told the media, "The US is fighting without winning, China is winning without fighting."

William Klein, a US diplomat who organised Trump's sojourn to Beijing in 2017, disagreed somewhat. Speaking to reporters earlier this week he said, "The leverage hasn't changed, it hasn't strengthened, or [at least] it hasn't weakened because of the Iran war to date". He did however admit, "Obviously, the Iran

war casts a shadow on the visit, will shape this visit..."

Iran is China's closest partner in the Persian Gulf. Therefore, for the People's Republic, American aggression was not only an assault against a friend, but a proxy attack on China. Iran's oil and gas supplies, which are vital for the Chinese economy, have been disrupted by the US Navy's presence in the Gulf and latterly its blockade of Iranian ship movement. A former Chinese diplomat Cui Hongjian went on record to say the West Asia crisis has "seriously disrupted" China's overall planning.

CNN quoted an informed Chinese source as giving the impression that the US's "conflict with Iran [had] potentially strengthened its 'negotiating position'." Beijing views the upcoming meeting as a singular opportunity to secure a more stable long-term relationship with Washington.

"Of course, Trump would want to visit China after he's finished with Iran, so he can project power... but if he were to attack Iran after visiting China, it would appear as if China has abandoned Iran," the source

added. America's current control over Venezuela's crude exports has, incidentally, hurt China considerably.

Modern China is a creation of the US. In the early 1970s, US President Richard Nixon and his Machiavellian national security adviser (later secretary of state) Henry Kissinger, not merely rescued a sinking Chinese economy under Mao Zedong, but midwived an economic boom—to spite the Soviet Union, then Washington's main adversary. The avowed purpose was to drive a wedge in the communist cosmos between Moscow and Beijing so as to weaken the former. Consequently, China today is not only a fiscal giant but also a military and technological powerhouse challenging America's more than a century old supremacy.

The climate is not conducive to the highest-level talks that were originally envisaged to discuss and readjust economic relations between the planet's two biggest economies. After the US supreme court nullified Trump's hostile tariff policy, Trump's hands are somewhat tied and China's negotiating position is stronger.

Last month, the US treasury blacklisted

five Chinese refiners. The Chinese government declared Trump's earlier executive order on the subject as unenforceable on Chinese soil. *Fortune* magazine highlighted the Chinese ministry of commerce announcement last week that China 'shall not recognise', 'shall not enforce' and 'shall not comply with' US sanctions as 'unprecedented'. Other such acts of defiance may well be on the cards.

The risk is in turmoil following the US-Israeli action against Iran, and Tehran's tactical response of attacking US military bases and energy generating plants in the Arab nations near it and blocking the critical Strait of Hormuz. Global oil and gas prices have skyrocketed. Stock markets have collapsed. Shortages and inflation are on the rise everywhere.

China has been clever enough not to show its hand. But, along with Russia, it is one of the two behind-the-scenes forces assisting Iran to tackle US-Israeli aerial bombardment. While the Islamic regime wasn't short of drones and missiles to counter the threat, its air defences were inadequate. China stepped in to alleviate deficiency and replenish equipment, much to Trump's chagrin.

The Chinese sensed the vulnerability plummeting approval rating among Americans reflects, no intelligent person takes seriously—and went on the offensive. In effect, the US and China are indirect combatants in the Iranian theatre of war.

While China has, admittedly, refrained from directly criticising Trump in the run-up to his trip, it is expected to leverage its vast domestic market and dominance in the rare earth supply chain. The Chinese government's number one ambition is to absorb capitalist pro-America Taiwan into its mainland. Since WWII, the US has provided a security guarantee to the government in Taipei, a cause of ceaseless friction between Washington and Beijing. China clearly wants the US to dial down its support for an independent Taiwan.

*South China Morning Post*, a longstanding daily published out of Hong Kong, carried Trump's widely reported claim that his trip to China 'is going to be amazing'. The word 'amazing' in the English language has multiple meanings. The US president's intended messaging is

not necessarily in sync with general interpretation.

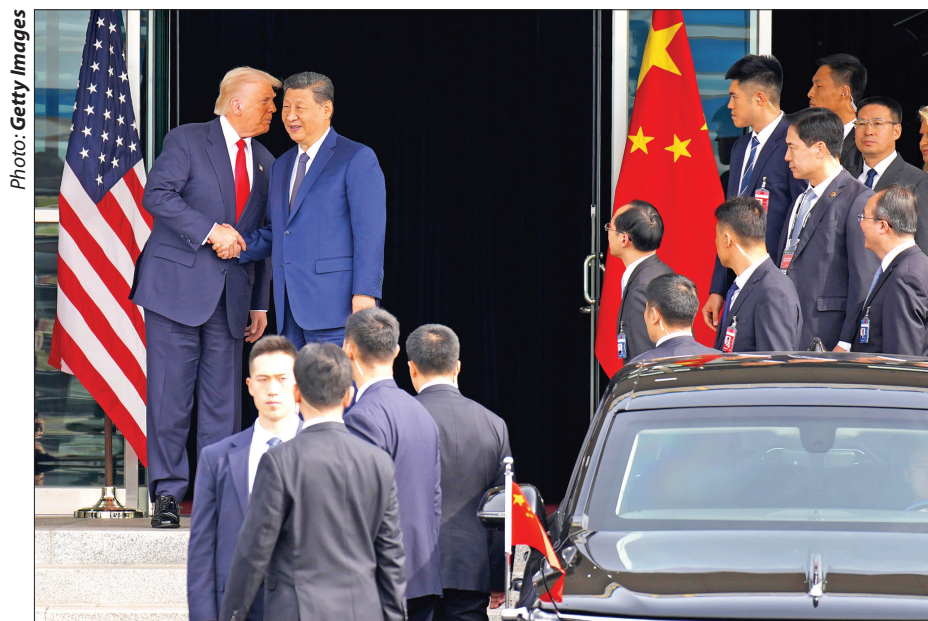
For a start, he is intellectually incapable of substantive dialogue and agreements. His tendency to opt for 'framework' arrangements is testimony to this. In his second term as president, his ability to attend to detail has shrunk even further with age—he is now 79. In other words, any deal with Beijing could be patchwork, even unfavourable.

From an Indian standpoint, Trump's plan is disturbing. That he chose to go to China before coming to India—a strategic 'partner'—reiterated that his worldview was drastically different from that of his predecessors. It is unsurprising that he considers China to be more important to US interests than India. What is worrying is that the containment of China's hegemonistic designs may not be his priority.

China poses the greatest of all threats to India's security. QUAD—constituted between the US, Japan, India and Australia—was mounted to discourage Chinese expansionism. Given Trump's recent and rather public spats—over the West Asia conflict with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and over the new Japanese prime minister Sanae Takaichi's nationalist outlook—not to mention the short shrift extended to Narendra Modi, it is difficult to visualise QUAD playing a robust role during the current US presidency.

America's closest post-war ally has been with Europe. This is crumbling because of Trump's softness towards the Kremlin. With US troops pulling out, NATO's military protection to Germany—post-WWII disarmament—is being weakened. The same could occur in Spain and Italy, even Britain. These four countries, like the rest of the European continent, have openly opposed Trump's war against Iran.

Similarly, the US's commitment to Japan, which has the largest contingent of American troops stationed anywhere outside the US, cannot be taken for granted under Trump. Likewise for South Korea and Washington's other Asian allies. As for Modi, his premeditated and ill-considered tilt towards the US, his physical and metaphorical embrace of Trump, has, if anything, exploded in his face.



**Uneasy handshake** China's negotiating position is definitely stronger in the current scenario

*That Trump has chosen to visit China before coming to India shows their relative importance in his calculus*



# It's a matchless hate monopoly

Why the BJP has no rival in the politics it has perfected

**Aakar Patel**

If you are a normal voter, you have any number of parties you can support and vote for. There is the DMK, AIADMK, TDP, NCP, PDP, TMC, INC, JD(S) and JD(U), the TRS, the new TVK, the CPI(M) and so on. There is no shortage of parties with different platforms.

But if your primary interest lies in the bullying and harassment of Indian minorities, particularly Muslims, there is only one party for you—and that is the BJP. Fortunately, it is on offer nationally and in most states. It unites prejudiced Indians in much the same way that cricket and the English language do, cutting across regions.

In a recent media interaction, an analyst put the same point differently. He said of the BJP's appeal: "Anybody with a right-wing ideology has one party. On the other side, there is so much competition, that vote gets split."

Let us try to understand why this is the case, because it is true: the BJP has no competition when it comes to what it does. The term 'right-wing' is often a euphemism for hate-based politics—and we shall see why in a moment. First, after accepting that there is no rival to the BJP, we must also accept that it offers a simple, easy-to-

understand formula.

"I hate Muslims!" does not require further elaboration. It is clear, direct and effective. The voter does not need to examine a manifesto to understand what the party represents. The distilled essence of the BJP's ideology is anti-minority.

If you are in the market for a party that does this, you have one at hand—with a national presence and decades of proven delivery on this issue. So why look for another? There is no need.

A question arises: can the BJP not face competition from another party whose position is: "But I hate Muslims more!"?

It could, and it might, but that position can also be taken within the BJP itself, as we will likely see if and when succession struggles begin. The full spectrum of the BJP's ideology ranges from disliking minorities to detesting them, and all sentiments within this spectrum are acceptable.

This is the first and most important reason why the BJP has no rival in what it does: it is consistently anti-minority. The second reason is that other parties either choose not to do what the BJP focuses on, or do it episodically so they come across as inauthentic. As we know, many parties in India have dabbled in communalism. But communalism is not at the centre of their politics or identity. The BJP is not the only party to have profited from division and hate, but it is the only one to have made this its central platform.

The list of issues that has made the BJP what it is—India's largest party—remained unchanged for years. Muslims must give up their mosque in Ayodhya; Muslims must give up their constitutional autonomy in Kashmir; Muslims must give up their personal law. Note that there is nothing for Hindus in this framework—for instance, reservations for Dalits and Adivasis remain untouched. The focus is on minorities, which underpins conclusions about what the party stands for.

Having achieved most of what it set out to do, the party has remained on the same path, as we have seen. Muslims must give

Photo: Getty Images



**Saffron monomania** The remains of a Delhi mosque that was vandalised and burnt down in 2020

up their diet; must give up agency over whom to love and marry, where to live and pray; must forgo voting rights or forever be in uncertainty over whether they can vote, whether they can seek asylum... and so on. There is no end to this, and there will be no end, because harassment is the intent and bullying the ultimate objective.

This bigotry is often described as 'right-wing' ideology—a characterisation that does a disservice to the term. Conservatism, as generally understood in politics, has a long and respectable tradition. It seeks continuity and values stability.

Abolishing currency, for instance, is a radical idea, not a conservative one. None of the arbitrary tinkering, renaming, institutional weakening or disruption we have witnessed fits within classical conservatism. What is presented as 'right-wing' here is, in fact, intense prejudice cloaked in a more acceptable label.

It is for this reason that BJP manifestos over the decades have experimented with,

*The full spectrum of the BJP's ideology ranges from disliking minorities to detesting them. All variations in that spectrum work*

adopted, and then abandoned many positions. In the 1960s and 1970s, they leaned towards socialism. Under Vajpayee, the party proposed capping incomes and home sizes—later abandoned. It argued against mechanisation replacing labour in factories—also dropped. It even advocated the use of bullocks instead of tractors—again, abandoned. None of these positions were taken up, or abandoned, with much explanation, because none was needed.

The primary product that the BJP and its predecessor, the Jana Sangh, have consistently offered has always been visible: an unchanging hostility towards minorities. The rest has been secondary. As long as that core promise was delivered—and one must concede, it has been—the rest was largely irrelevant.

That is why there is only one BJP—and why it is unlikely to face a challenger on its chosen terrain. ■

Views are personal

*'I hate Muslims!' needs no elaboration. It's clear, direct, effective. No need to refer to a manifesto to get that message*



King Charles had US Congress members eating out of his hands

## From zero to hero: King Charles's US visit

Behind the hype over King Charles's 'bravura' performance in Washington—his gag-packed swipe at populist Trumpism—lies a rather twisted backstory of his relations with the media.

Its breathless and fawning coverage of his US visit, variously hailed as a 'historic' and 'landmark' event, represents a new phase in their chequered relationship; a 'love-in' that would once have been unthinkable.

Until some years ago, when he finally ascended the throne at the ripe age of 73—an age when monarchs normally think of retiring—Charles was the media's favourite whipping boy. A pampered man-child who couldn't get anything right, not even squeeze toothpaste onto his brush—a loyal valet would do it for him.

He was also mocked for his 'spidery' incomprehensible handwriting—made even more unintelligible by his use of green ink (a nod to his love for the environment). His talking to plants was another topic of amusement.

Every time he opened his mouth, his half-mumbled remarks were seized by cartoonists and sketch writers to poke fun at him and question his suitability for the 'top job'.

Rumours in the media had it that one reason why the Queen continued to cling on to the throne despite her age and health problems was that she didn't trust him with the job.

Dubbed as the man who may never achieve his ambition, there was even talk

of skipping a generation and anointing his son, William, as the Queen's successor.

But all that changed overnight when he did finally get to wear the crown amid a nationwide sympathy wave after his mother's death in 2022.

The same media that once revelled in ridiculing him suddenly started to discover hidden qualities in him. Within weeks he was transformed from an embarrassment to an asset, and praised for the 'gravitas' he brought to his role. The way he conducted himself after being diagnosed with cancer helped in his rehabilitation.

So, there we are: a complete image makeover in a remarkably short period.

To be sure, he did live up to his new image in Washington—demonstrating a chutzpah he has not often exhibited. If his Mamma, as he called his mother, were alive she would have permitted herself a wry smile watching her famously stiff upper-lipped son find his tongue, finally.

As for his much adumbrated achievements on this tour, the reality was best summed up by an Indian-origin *Times* reader, Deepak Sagar, who wrote: 'So far, the only positive outcome has been the lowering of tariffs on (Scotch) whisky. I would wait for better and longer-term results before jumping to the glory of British institutions and culture.'

## Region, religion and Indian landlords

Once upon a time, white British landlords faced accusations of racism for refusing to rent their

homes to Asians and blacks.

Today, many Indian expats have been found to discriminate against fellow Indians—from regions and religions other than their own—while letting out their homes.

Advertisements have appeared seeking tenants of specific persuasions or from specific Indian states.

One estate agency has advertised rooms 'available [only] for Muslims', 'ONLY [a] Gujarati couple', 'only [for] Punjabis'.

Under the law, if a landlord is sharing their home with tenants, they are allowed to rent to people who share their religion



Volunteer ambulances run by the Jewish community gutted in north London



LONDON DIARY

HASAN SUROOR

Photo: Getty Images

Photo: Getty Images



requirements".

The government has said that "discrimination against anyone based on their religion or race is illegal, including in the rental sector", warning that "any landlord not complying with the law should face the consequences".

## Muslim-Jewish relations at a new low

Events in West Asia—Israel's violent occupation of Gaza and the US-Israeli invasion of Iran—continue to inflame Muslim-Jewish relations, with any criticism of Israel dubbed 'antisemitism' by the Jewish community.

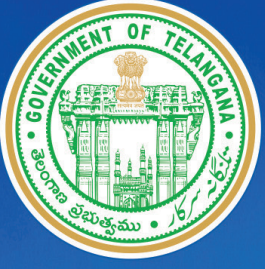
Tensions have been further fuelled by the actions of some Muslim fanatics, including physical attacks on Jews.

Last week, after two Jewish men were stabbed in north London by a Somalia-born Muslim man, Britain's terrorism watchdog declared antisemitism the 'biggest national emergency since Covid'.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer described the attack as "utterly appalling" and said any attacks on "our Jewish community are attacks on Britain".

Jewish groups have demanded the resignation of Scotland Yard chief Mark Rowley who was heckled with shouts of "shame on you" when he visited the scene of the attack.

And, finally, to return to the 'Great King Charles Show', it has set people wondering who scripted the gags. Does the King have a new speech writer? ■



# LABOUR WELFARE IS GOAL FOR THE People's Government



## Welfare Schemes for Building & Other Construction Workers

### FINANCIAL BENEFITS TO REGISTERED WORKERS

- ₹10,00,000 to the dependents of the deceased BOC worker in case of accidental death occurred anywhere else
- Up to ₹4,00,000 for partial / permanent disability
- ₹5,00,000 for total permanent disability
- Artificial limbs, wheelchair/tricycle and treatment support
- ₹2,00,000 in case of Natural Death of the BOC worker
- ₹30,000 as Marriage Gift for women worker and two daughters of either male or female worker
- ₹30,000 towards maternity benefit (up to two deliveries) to women worker and two daughters of either male or female worker
- Skill Development Training
- Admissions into Advanced Training Centers
- Free health check-ups 19 types of medical tests and doctor consultations worth ₹3,256 for workers.
- Health insurance coverage up to ₹5 Lakhs under the Ayushman Bharat

### BENEFITS FOR UNREGISTERED WORKERS

- ₹50,000 in case of death at worksite
- ₹20,000 for disability above 50%
- ₹10,000 for disability below 50%

All services provided online.

TO RESOLVE ISSUES PLEASE CALL

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