

THE FIGHTBACK



“कितनों को अरेस्ट करोगे, अमित शाह?!”
(How many will you arrest, Amit Shah?)

— Abhijeet Dipke, CJP, ahead of the 10 October demonstration in Delhi

“They think we can be beaten at will, detained at will, thrown into detention at will, dumped 50 kilometre away past midnight... they forget we are citizens, and we have the right to ask questions and find out what happens to our vote.”

— AISA national president Neha Bora



“I have 45 FIRs against me... my target is 100. Every FIR against me is a medal for me

— Rahul Gandhi, after a case was filed against him for forcibly entering the Akashvani Bhavan premises



“ये डंडा नहीं, तिरंगा है। इसे छूना नहीं।”

— Priyanka Gandhi, after a police officer reportedly asked protesters to remove a 'danda', referring to the pole carrying the national flag

“When you stand on a frozen ridge at 18,000 feet, guarding the borders of our great nation, your identity is never in question.”

From Colonel (Retd.) **Rajesh Kalia's** first-person essay in *The Wire* contrasting his years guarding India's borders with his experience of proving his identity during the SIR. Kalia is a former Indian Army officer who served for 37 years, including operational deployments in Siachen, J&K, the Northeast and Sri Lanka. He retired in January 2025



“क्या ये कनॉट प्लेस है, दिल्ली है या भारत-पाकिस्तान की सीमा है?”
(Is this Connaught Place or the India-Pakistan border?)

— Jebi Mather Hisham, a Congress politician, lawyer and Rajya Sabha MP from Kerala, questioning the deployment of paramilitary personnel and extensive barricades as opposition MPs attempted to march towards Rajghat



“Heard on the Street

- “Gyanesh, it's done, bro”
- “Jab jab Modi darta hai, police ko aage karta hai.”

“ज्ञानेश कुमार कहाँ मिलेंगे? मोदीजी की गोदी में”

— Opposition leaders detained at Kingsway Camp police station

“If the ECI has now found so many errors in its own voter roll, whose heads are rolling?”

— Transparency campaigner **Anjali Bhardwaj** demanding the ECI's accountability for lists previously certified and used for elections



“आप हमें सरकार मुहैया कराते हैं... ब्लिंकिट का काम कर रहे हैं”
(You are supplying us with governments, like Blinkit delivers orders)

— RJD parliamentarian **Manoj Jha**



The end is nigh, the bugle has been sounded

Apoorvanand

Can protests bring about change? I have faced this question again and again over the past three months, especially since July, when young Indians from all corners of the country descended on Jantar Mantar in their thousands and forced the government to make the education minister resign.

The pompous boast that resignations did not take place under this government became a joke and the government itself was cornered to ultimately sacrifice Dharmendra Pradhan. Another matter that it tried to spin his resignation as a moral stand in the larger interest of saving the nation from the anarchy that the youth movement had unleashed. But the government's capitulation was seen for what it was—surrender in the face of determined resistance. That, in itself, was a big change.

This was not the first time the Modi government had to eat crow. The farmers of Punjab and Haryana showed tremendous grit and determination when they camped for a year on the borders of Delhi and forced the government to repeal

the farm laws. That was, in many ways, a greater defeat for Modi, as it involved a real policy turnaround, unlike the Pradhan resignation, which may have been a symbolic victory but did not fundamentally alter anything.

Even before the farmers' agitation came the movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), led by Muslim women. The movement was halted by the



COVID pandemic and faced brutal retaliation from state-backed Hindutva vigilantes, but it still managed to push back the government. The framing of rules under the CAA had to be delayed and the exclusionary NRC (National Register of Citizens) exercise put on hold.

These were great acts of resistance. But they didn't attain the universality of the July Jantar

Mantar uprising. Where the earlier movements had encountered hostility from sections of the public itself, the Jantar Mantar protest was adopted widely by the people. The youth belonged to everyone, free of any identity markers that could alienate any section of society. That could be the reason the Jantar Mantar protests had the kind of cross-sectional appeal the other movements lacked.

For the first time in 13 years, the government looks isolated and on the defensive. The people have overcome fear

Jantar Mantar dented the image of a feared, seemingly invincible supreme leader in a way that no other agitation had managed. It also lifted the media-generated smoke that obscured Modi's real face. It is hard to explain why it happened this way. We can only observe and describe what is happening and think about the possibilities this moment opens up.

The *Indian Express* exposé of the misdeeds of the Election Commission of India, which came on the heels of the Jantar Mantar uprising, has destroyed the legitimacy of the Modi government. That makes the task of the ongoing protests somewhat easier. People have started identifying with the protests and no longer see them as expressions of partisan interest.

Now that the air is clearer, people can see and hear leaders like Rahul Gandhi. The adverse perception media had created of politicians who spoke against the government and the RSS—preventing most Hindus from treating them as their voice—has gone. Rahul Gandhi is now the face of an alternative. For the first time in the past thirteen years, the

government is looking isolated and on the defensive. It can no longer whip up majoritarian frenzy against the protests in the way it did on earlier occasions.

Feeling politically powerless, the despotic regime has unleashed the state agencies to counter the protests. There are reports that Delhi Police are actively campaigning against the protests. This is not their job. They are exceeding their brief. It remains to be seen whether the courts will play along or try to be independent, taking advantage of the moment.

The people have overcome fear and hesitation. They are reclaiming their right to protest and are enjoying a newfound freedom. They are refusing to seek permission for protests. It is as if they have begun to feel whole and human again.

The protests are not going to stop. They will keep hammering at the edifice of power the BJP has built with the active support of the media, the corporate world and the judiciary. It is crumbling and is bound to fall. The media, the state agencies and the judiciary have to decide whether they want to break free and breathe independently or be a part of this great demise. ■

Lessons for Modi from Gandhi's protest

Once a large enough section of the citizenry takes to the streets, the State has to fold. Recall the Champaran satyagraha

Aakar Patel

With Gandhi Jayanti still on our minds and the right to peaceful assembly being brutally curbed in the run-up to the 10 October agitation, let's look at a few things that may be relevant. The Modi government is stopping protests from gathering because it wants to shield the chief election commissioner from accountability. His misconduct is not disputed: the facts are before us, but the government has adopted what we Indians call a 'jo karna hai kar lo' posture. Is it sustainable? We will get to that, but first, a detour.

Gandhi's opening protest in India was in 1917, when he was 47. He learned that the tenant farmers of Champaran were bound by law to plant indigo on 15 per cent of their land, whether they wanted to or not, under a system called *tinkathia*.

Gandhi decided to go on a fact-finding mission to Champaran. When he was ordered by the British magistrate to leave, Gandhi decided not to. He writes in his autobiography about what happened next: 'A sort of friendliness sprang up between the officials—[the] collector, magistrate, police superintendent—and myself. I might have legally resisted the notices served on me. Instead, I accepted them all, and my conduct towards the officials was correct. They thus saw that I did not want to offend them personally, but that I wanted to offer civil resistance to their orders.'

'In this way they were put at ease, and instead of harassing me,

they gladly availed themselves of my and my co-workers' cooperation in regulating the crowds. But it was a visible demonstration to them of the fact that their authority was shaken. The people had, for the moment, lost all fear of punishment and yielded obedience to the power of love which their new friends exercised.'

The British quickly assessed the situation as unwinnable. Gandhi writes: 'Before I could appear before the court to receive the sentence, the magistrate sent a written message that the lieutenant governor had ordered the case against me to be withdrawn, and the collector wrote to me saying that I was at liberty to conduct the proposed inquiry, and that I might count on whatever help I needed from the officials. None of us was prepared for this prompt and happy issue. Crowds of peasants came to make their statements, and they were followed by an army of companions who filled the compound and garden to overflowing.'

It should be noted that the British government then moved with empathy. Gandhi writes: 'The ever-growing number of ryots coming to make their statements increased the planters' wrath, and they moved heaven and earth to put an end to my inquiry. But Sir Edward Gait, the lieutenant governor, asked me to see him, expressed his willingness to appoint an inquiry and invited me to be a member of the committee. The committee voted in favour of the farmers, and recommended that the planters should refund a portion of the exactions made by them which the committee had found to

be unlawful, and that the *tinkathia* system should be abolished by law. The *tinkathia* system, which had been in existence for about a century, was thus abolished, and with it the planters' raj came to an end.'

This is how a government must work: it must concede the right to peaceful assembly and protest, and it must undo injustice.

Let us return to the present day. The Modi government was forced to concede the principle of accountability when it fired Dharmendra Pradhan over the botched functioning of the exam system. This concession came after it became clear that the government's posture, including the prime minister's Instagram videos, was not acceptable to the protesters.

The government is now resisting the firing of the chief election commissioner. He is of great importance to the BJP, as we have



Mahatma Gandhi during his 1917 fact-finding mission in Champaran

It is hard to see how Modi will be able to hold on to 'precious' Gyanesh Kumar, till January 2029

observed not only in this mess of an SIR but also in his conduct towards opposition parties.

The furious back-peddalling on the SIR shows that the government has become alarmed and wants to be seen making minor concessions so that people's anger dissipates. A tweak in the process here, a new form filled there.

Alas, this has not worked because citizens have seen how egregious the whole electoral roll scandal is. The problem for the government is that once a large

enough section of the citizenry takes to the streets, the State has to fold.

This happened with the farmers, it happened on the issue of the NRC, and it happened with the Dharmendra Pradhan. It will happen again, because there is no real alternative.

Gyanesh Kumar has another two-and-a-half years left in office, until January 2029. However precious he may be to Modi, it is hard to see the government being able to hold on to him until then. If

the protesters remain mobilised, the government will (ultimately) be compelled to do the right thing and concede (again) the principle of accountability.

It seems appropriate to say this, but it is obscure: the Modi government must learn from the way the British raj handled Gandhi at Champaran. Accept the right to peaceful assembly; reverse the injustice done to crores of voters; punish the man responsible. ■

Views are personal

Oh Calcutta! The city that defined the right to protest

As street protests mushroom around the country and the government cracks down on 'dimagi Naxals' who dare to defy, **Jawhar Sircar** takes a trip down memory lane

The 1960s were the decade of rage in Calcutta. Naxalite violence had reached the city. Not a day passed without multiple processions choking the streets. Army trucks with wary jawans behind mounted machine guns patrolled in slow motion. Intermittent slogans emerged from the lanes. Elected governments were being overthrown every few weeks or, at the most, months.

One could say civic unrest was built into the DNA of the city. In the 19th century, Calcutta was not just the capital of British India, it was also the site of battle between Hindu orthodoxy and western education, between ancient beliefs and exciting new ideas like liberty, equality and fraternity. Printing presses mushroomed, churning out countless books, pamphlets and polemical tracts in English, Bengali, Hindi and other Indian languages that carried these ideas to the literate.

As early as in 1818, progressive leaders like Rammohan Roy challenged the status quo through newspapers, fighting both colonial apologists and the powerful Hindu orthodoxy. Christian missionaries condemned Hinduism for its obscurantist customs and the air was electric, taut with tension. Textbook societies, libraries, literary associations, reformist organisations and political associations sprang up. Educated Bengalis increasingly learned to challenge government policies through petitions, public meetings and journalism.

One of the earliest demonstrations of this new political culture erupted in 1905, with Viceroy Lord Curzon's declaration of the 'Partition of Bengal'. Outraged Bengalis took to the streets, including Rabindranath Tagore, with his stirring songs. On 7 August 1905, the Swadeshi movement was formally launched from the Calcutta Town Hall; in Banaras, the Indian National Congress gave its clarion call to boycott British cloth and goods.

Within weeks, Calcutta resounded with boycotts, picketing,



The 2007 protest against land acquisition in Nandigram was a defining moment in Mamata Banerjee's political career

public meetings and processions. A day of mourning was observed on 16 October (the date of the proposed partition). It became clear that the rallies were not just anti-British demonstrations, but a newly-crafted technique for weaving social unity through varied elements—politics, education, literature, culture, music, commerce and street mobilisation. This blend became characteristic of Bengali political life and agitations.

Interestingly, the area dedicated to roads in a city is among the lowest in what is now Kolkata. Decades of unplanned growth led to overcrowding, narrowing existing routes. This was not a handicap to the tradition of public demonstrations. Smaller processions converged on the city-centre, the Esplanade, from different directions, stopping to listen to speeches and gather more participants as they proceeded. The open spaces around Shahid Minar in the Maidan, and the gigantic Brigade Parade Ground close by were the natural locations for some of the massive public protests we see framed in vintage photographs. Mounted police were often deployed to disperse unruly crowds.

Post-Independence, when tram fare was increased by just one paise in July 1953, people poured into the streets against profiteering by the

British-owned Calcutta Tramways Company. Protests continued for a month; and several tramcars were set on fire in response to police action. When the tram workers joined the movement, the government was compelled to review the fare hike.

Even today, bank and postal

employees, teachers too, can be seen protesting quite regularly. For several decades, Left unions routinely called supporters to leave their offices and join street marches or *micchil*.

The year 1954 saw secondary school teachers on a 10-day strike. Police firing killed five and injured many more. Public pushback ultimately compelled the government to accept the teachers' demands. In 1959, communists protested against rising food prices, with school and college students joining it. On 31 August, a massive demonstration in central Calcutta was fired upon—an estimated 50-100 people were shot dead. The Food Movement of 1966 was even more extensive, as mobilisation against the failures of the public distribution system spread to the districts and villages.

In 1967, the Left stormed into power but a section of Marxists fell out after the police opened fire on a farmers' rally in a village in Naxalbari, near Siliguri, on 25 May. This triggered the armed revolt known as the Naxal uprising. While mainstream politics was already wedded to processions and public meetings, naxalism laid stress on the annihilation of class enemies. Violence and fatalities became endemic with Naxalites fighting both the Left and the Congress. Even as student politics became exceptionally important, the Left parties mainstreamed and institutionalised protest over its 34-year rule.

On 21 July 1993, the police opened fire on a protest march of Youth Congress workers led by Mamata Banerjee; 13 political activists were killed. Alleging that the Congress was not aggressive enough, Banerjee quit and formed the Trinamool Congress. For 16 years, she would remain a street-fighting woman. In July 2006, her party launched agitations against land acquisition for the Tata's proposed car factory in Singur.

Mamata Banerjee's 26-day hunger strike in December 2006 grabbed national attention. In Nandigram, at a protest against land acquisition, the police opened

fire on 14 March 2007, killing 14 people. That is considered the moment that eventually led to the Trinamool Congress assuming power four years later.

The Singur-Nandigram movement—where intellectuals, writers and artists agitated alongside farmers, workers and students—demonstrated that Bengal's protest culture had survived the Left Front era and could, in fact, challenge and topple the Left itself.

With the BJP grabbing power at the Centre in 2014, its Bengal state unit emerged as the most belligerent opposition with active Union government support. Even as central agencies went after the corrupt ministers and leaders of Mamata's regime, it was the rape-and-murder of a young lady doctor at R.G. Kar Medical College in August 2022 that proved to be the last straw on the camel's back.

All of Kolkata took to the streets: not just doctors and medical staff, but actors, musicians, football fans, rickshaw pullers, gig workers... Rage mobilisation may well have contributed to the BJP's surprise victory in the assembly election of 2026. Ironically, on 9 September 2026, the new BJP chief minister himself led a protest of Jadhavpur University students for supporting Palestine and demanding Azaadi for Kashmir!

Protests and political violence are truly hardwired into Bengal's historical-political culture. But Bengalis are not a people permanently on protest. Bengal enjoyed long spells of political stability, and much of Bengali protest culture remained electoral and institutional rather than revolutionary. It nurtured poets, writers, scientists, thinkers, economists, film and media personalities, and dissed those who distanced themselves from mass concerns. But then, as now, it remained on a short fuse when it came to converting social grievance into organised public expression. ■

JAWHAR SIRCAR is a former bureaucrat and Rajya Sabha MP



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Photos: Getty Images

The age of the angry young woman

She won't give in, shut up or go away. She'll fight back, stand up and be counted

A.J. Philip

There is an interesting story about Amit Shah's first election victory, narrated by journalist Rajdeep Sardesai in his book *2024: The Election That Surprised India*. Shah was then a student and an ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad) candidate in a college election. His principal rival was a woman, and she was popular.

More importantly, the college had a sizeable number of women voters. Shah and his supporters feared that if the election became a straight contest, he would lose. That was when the young Shah apparently devised a strategy.

His associates obtained the telephone numbers of some of the girls' homes. (Those were the days of the landline!) Their parents were telephoned and warned that on polling day there might be trouble on campus. The warning had the desired effect. Some parents apparently decided not to send their daughters to college that day. The number of women voters consequently fell and, in what was reportedly a close contest, Shah won.

Sardesai recounts the episode not as a moral lesson but as illustrative of the tactical mind of a man who would eventually become one of India's most powerful politicians. The attempt here is not to discuss the ethics of that particular victory but to imagine what would happen if such a manoeuvre were tried today. I suspect the result would be very different. If someone attempts to frighten her, today's young woman will ask: Who is trying to frighten me, and why? And if someone tells her to stay away, she might do exactly the opposite!

The age of women who suffered quietly, went home crying, and tried to forget what

made them cry is rapidly disappearing. The Indian woman, particularly the young Indian woman, is more confident, more conscious of her rights and much less prepared to accept intimidation as destiny.

We have enough examples of women who challenged male power. Jhansi's Rani Lakshmbai fought the British to protect her kingdom. In Tamil literary tradition, Kannagi challenged a king and demanded justice for her wronged husband. Such women were exceptional because the society around them was overwhelmingly patriarchal. Today, the exception is becoming the norm.

That shift can be seen on the streets. When the Citizenship Amendment Act became a major political issue, women were at the forefront of protests across the country. Young women students from campuses such as Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University confronted the police and refused to be silenced.

Then came Shaheen Bagh. Women, many of them elderly and from modest backgrounds, occupied a public space in Delhi and dug in for weeks. They faced criticism, vilification, threats. Yet they refused to move. The protest eventually had to be suspended because the Covid-19 pandemic brought the country to a standstill.

But by then something important had happened: Indian society had seen women occupying the centre of a political movement. The lesson was unmistakable: women would no longer retreat simply because men in authority told them to.

The farmers' agitation reinforced the point. When farmers from Punjab and elsewhere were stopped at Delhi's borders during their protest against the three farm laws, women stood right beside them, through scorching heat, rain and a bone-

chilling winter. They were not decorative additions to a predominantly male movement. They were an integral part of it.

And then came the students. Their agitation demanding the resignation of Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan revealed a new generation of young women, confronting barricades, resisting attempts at dispersal, laughing in the face of police force.

Initially, the government underestimated them. That was a costly mistake. As was the brutal backlash unleashed on peaceful protesters. The students returned, stronger than before. Dharmendra Pradhan resigned. Right now, we are witnessing another confrontation between the young and the establishment. This time the issue is the Election Commission of India and Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar.

The controversy over the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls has assumed enormous proportions. More than 13 crore names were dropped from draft electoral rolls across 30 states and Union

Territories. Painted into a corner, the ECI has ordered special drives in 20 states and Union Territories to identify and enrol eligible voters who have been 'left out'.

For the protesters, this is not a technical exercise in electoral housekeeping. It is a question of the fundamental democratic right to vote. And once again, the young women are at the frontlines.

What is striking about the videos and reels circulating is not merely their anger but their refusal to be intimidated by the uniform. Girls can be seen shouting back at policemen, refusing to move when ordered, demanding to know under what authority they are being pushed away.

Some hold their ground even when surrounded. Others record everything on their phones. They do not lower their voices. They do not avert their eyes. They reveal their belief that the uniform does not automatically confer moral authority. The police may have physical power, but the girls have the power of visibility, solidarity and public opinion.

They are not the clichéd embodiments of suffering and sacrifice portrayed in Indian cinema once upon a time. These women wear jeans, shorts. They carry smart-phones. They speak the language of constitutional rights. They know the camera is watching. They know that an act of police excess that might once have disappeared into a station diary can now become a national story within minutes.

One incident during the present agitation is a dramatic illustration. Rosy, an independent journalist, alleged that she was sexually harassed by an IPS officer during the protest. She publicly detailed her experience and demanded action. Other journalists subsequently went to the police station with her and pressed for an FIR. The police have denied some of the

allegations, but the complaints have been forwarded for investigation.

There was a time when a woman subjected to such humiliation might have been told not to make a scene. Her parents might have worried more about the family's reputation than about the conduct of the man who violated her dignity. She might herself have wondered whether speaking out would destroy her 'character'. Those days are going, going, gone. Today's vocal woman is not merely defending herself. She is refusing to accept the old social contract in which women were expected to carry the burden of male misconduct in silence.

Interestingly, many of the young women appearing at the protests in Delhi are from neighbouring states like Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan. Many are accompanied by their parents. This is significant. They are not necessarily rebellious daughters who have escaped from home. They have the support of their parents. That means the transformation is deeper than a student movement. It is a social movement.

There is an unforgettable line in one of the videos circulating from the Delhi protests. A girl asks the policemen who have told her to leave the protest site: "Who are you to remove me?"

After all, the land she stands on and the air she breathes do not belong to the police. They belong to all of us.

The police may wear the uniform. The government may control the machinery of the State. The Election Commission may hold constitutional authority. But none of them owns the Republic.

The Republic belongs to its citizens—this is what the young women are telling us. And that is why the story of Amit Shah's first election is worth remembering. ■

What is most striking is not their anger but their refusal to be intimidated

What option do people have but to protest?

The survival of India's democracy now depends almost entirely on the political maturity of the people of India, writes **Dipankar Bhattacharya**

Never before has the country seen public protests on Gandhi Jayanti the way we did this year. As a pithy social media meme put it, 2 October is the day those who celebrate Gandhi's killers are forced to pay homage to him. Mahatma Gandhi, who inspired the world with his ideals of truth, non-violence and satyagraha, epitomised the power of peaceful protest by ordinary, unarmed people. That legacy came alive across India on his 157th birth anniversary as the youth lustily embraced his idea of non-violent protest.

Those who had started believing that Gandhi had lost his relevance were in for a shock. An image of a solitary woman standing with a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi on a makeshift stage at a street corner CPI(M) meeting in Kolkata even as a violent right-wing mob broke up the gathering deserved to be seen by many more people. As the mob threw chairs, tore up banners and posters and mouthed profanities, she stood still and defiant as a rock.

Hundreds of student activists and citizens, young and old, defied the intimidating deployment of security forces around a fortified Jantar Mantar in Delhi. The viciousness of their detention was no surprise (Jantar Mantar 1.0 is still fresh in our memories). Even as older citizens stoically marched in solidarity, the younger lot around Jantar Mantar chanted slogans, strummed guitars, raised questions, toppled barricades, slipped through police cordons, cracked jokes into camera. When put into buses, they simply jumped out of the windows and rejoined the protests. One young woman ran away with the ignition key of one of the buses in Delhi. In Mumbai, Shivaji Park resounded with



Undeterred and unstoppable Protesters at Jantar Mantar on 3 October

hundreds singing the national anthem, by choice, not diktat. While one viral video showed a policewoman abusing young women protestors calling them and their mothers *besharam* (shameless), another showed a protective circle of protestors fanning a woman cop who had fainted while on duty.

Even as the youngsters invoked the Gandhian legacy of peaceful protest, the government resurrected memories of the colonial mode of using brute force to crush civil disobedience.

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The rallying call for citizens across India is threefold: the immediate resignation of CEC Gyanesh Kumar, the scrapping of the SIR and the restoration of the voting rights of every wrongfully deleted voter. Citizens have realised the importance of repealing the 2023 Act that gave the government a free

hand to choose its own Election Commission (with no members of the Opposition represented) and placed election commissioners above the law by granting them lifelong immunity. The explosive *Indian Express* report (25 September 2026) on dissension within the ECI and its subsequent crisis management have only served to strengthen public outcry.

Following up on the 14 objections raised in 10 months by two of the three election commissioners, the *Indian Express* published another investigation on 6 October. This revealed that 11 appellate tribunal heads met on 11 August and raised at least five key defects in the portal for submitting appeals. What was once a suspicion is now a fact: a massive institutional fraud has been inflicted on India's electoral democracy and the constitutional right of universal adult franchise.

Now that the entire country is

talking about the disenfranchisement of more than 130 million voters, the ECI has asked all the chief electoral officers (CEOs) to reach out to all the left-out voters within a month! The term 'left out' is a fantastic euphemism for arbitrary and targeted exclusion, designed to tilt the electoral balance in favour of the BJP and its allies.

Even as the ECI was issuing this circular on 1 October, CPI(ML) activists were holding a public hearing of excluded voters in Patna. Party workers had carried out a door-to-door verification survey between June and September in 50 select booths over 10 of the 20 constituencies contested by the party in the 2025 Bihar assembly elections. They did precisely what the ECI has now asked BLOs to do: identify excluded voters by comparing the post-SIR electoral roll with the pre-SIR June 2025 roll. The survey revealed that wrongful deletion stood at a shocking

Photo: Getty Images

17 per cent.

Form 6 and Form 7 have both been weaponised by the BJP and the ECI not only to engineer mass exclusions but also to add names selectively to the electoral roll. On 6 October 2026, *Reporters' Collective* revealed as many as 16.18 lakh voters were added to UP's electoral roll in the initial phase of the SIR: neither their names nor details were listed.

Now that alterations made in Form 6 have been exposed as arbitrary, unauthorised and illegal—because making changes in the clauses of the form is the exclusive prerogative of Parliament—the ECI has withdrawn the controversial clauses without any explanation. Its attempt to claim the Supreme Court had approved the changes has been refuted by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant. The changes were clearly made to obstruct the inclusion of Gen Z voters in the electoral roll.

Form 6 is meant to serve as the entry route for first-time voters. Compelling voters who have been excluded from the electoral roll to use the same form as a condition for re-entry is patently illegal. Despite objections from day one, the ECI has persisted with this malpractice.

Even more sinister has been the industrial-scale misuse of Form 7 to exclude eligible voters. The confiscation of bundles of pre-filled Form 7 applications points to a systematic effort to target Muslim voters and those likely to vote against the BJP and its allies. Where a Form 7 complaint is used to seek the deletion of a voter's

name from the electoral roll, the voter must be given proper notice and a genuine opportunity to respond before any such deletion is made. This basic safeguard has been routinely disregarded.

The most shocking pattern of targeting and victimisation has been witnessed in West Bengal. Justice (Retd.) Indrajit Chatterjee, who has since quit as chair of Appellate Tribunal 11, revealed that 2.54 lakh Form 7 appeals were filed before his own tribunal by none other than the additional chief electoral officer of West Bengal seeking exclusion of voters who had been found eligible by judicial officers. According to the first *Indian Express* report, Election Commissioner Sukhbir Singh Sandhu had noted that neither he nor his fellow Election Commissioner Vivek Joshi nor the CEO of West Bengal had any idea who had authorised over 16 lakh appeals, mostly automated, to be filed on behalf of the ECI.

The institutional architecture of India's parliamentary democracy, the doctrine of separation of powers and the system of checks and balances that have been central to the survival of democracy in post-colonial India, are facing their gravest test. The Supreme Court, which could and should have restrained the ECI, virtually gave it a free hand to perpetrate this monumental electoral fraud. Had it not been shelved, the 6 October meeting between the joint parliamentary committee examining the One Nation, One Election bills and the Supreme Court would have been another glaring instance of the blurring of legislative-judicial boundaries.

With the rot having set in at the institutional level, the survival of democracy now depends almost entirely on the political maturity and alertness of the people of India. The 30 September meeting of the INDIA bloc and the growing assertion of Left student activists, Gen Z protesters, progressive citizens, alternative media activists and the non-NDA opposition parties signals the hope of a determined democratic turnaround. Will we be able to break the fascist stranglehold? Don't watch this space: watch the streets instead. ■

DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA is general secretary of the CPI-ML (Liberation)

IN HIS OWN WORDS

“My family continues to face vicious abuse”



Deepak Kumar’s troubles began when he stepped in to save 71-year-old Vakil Ahmed

On 26 January, 42-year-old gym owner and fitness trainer Deepak Kumar saw his neighbour Vakil Ahmed, the 71-year-old proprietor of Baba School Dress & Matching Centre, being harassed by Bajrang Dal activists to remove the supposedly Hindu word ‘Baba’ from his shop sign. When Deepak intervened, the crowd demanded his name. In a gesture of solidarity, he replied spontaneously, “My name is Mohammad Deepak”. A video of the incident went viral and thrust him into the national spotlight. What followed was a spiral of hate: FIRs, eviction notices, death threats, social-media abuse. His business collapsed. In

July, Deepak was in Delhi to lend support to the Jantar Mantar protests. In August, Supreme Court ordered the partial demolition of a mosque in Ujjain ordered by UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a local businessman accused him of abuse, assault and threats. On 1 October, Deepak was arrested. On 2 October, he was released on bail, bringing his turbulent nine-month journey—from defending his Muslim neighbour to becoming an accused—back into the spotlight. **Mohammad Deepak** tells his story to **Rashme Sehgal**

live in the small town of Kotdwar in Uttarakhand, where the people’s thinking has, over the years, become increasingly parochial and casteist. In the last few years, the government has unleashed so much anti-Muslim propaganda that it has polarised our society. I was born in Kotdwar and have lived here for 42 years, but I am not a Garhwali. Everyone here knows me. I ran a successful gym with more than 200 members, and could pay a monthly rent of Rs 40,000+. After the 26 January incident, in order to hide their guilt, members of the Hindu Raksha Samiti and Bajrang Dal began to malign me and spread all kinds of falsehoods against me. My family and I were subjected to vicious attacks over the phone. That wasn’t all. Every time I stepped out of our house, some shopkeepers (who were known to me) would make all kinds of derogatory remarks. The result of this hate propaganda was that the membership in my gym plummeted to 20 members. I am struggling to make ends meet. My wife started giving tuitions to kids at home, while my mother, who is 70 years old, runs a tea stall. Every time I go to pick up my daughter from her school or walk down to give my mother her lunch box, some of the shopkeepers start screaming, ‘*Katua ki aulad*’ (butcher’s son) ‘*Muhammad ki aulad*’ (Muhammad’s son). One of them is Sanjeev Tonk, better known as Bablu. On 1 October, as is my routine, I was taking the lunch box to my mother, when he began calling me names. I stopped and told him, “Bhai, don’t talk like this. It creates a wrong impression about me.” Bablu picked up the phone and rang up the Bajrang Dal Zilla Adhyaksh Raj Gaurav Nautiyal, who landed up with 60 other men. An argument followed and I was taken to the police station around 3 p.m. and put in the lockup. In his complaint, Sanjeev Tonk alleged

that I had abused, threatened and even tried to assault him. That entire group went to the police station. They parked there for the next four hours, shouting slogans and hectoring me. The police made no effort to stop them. My worried mother came to meet me but she was not allowed. The FIR lodged against me was under Section 351(2) (criminal intimidation) and Section 352 (intentional insult with intent to provoke breach of peace) of the BNS. The police subsequently added Sections 196 (promoting enmity between different groups) and 115 (voluntarily causing hurt). My mother contacted a lawyer and I was released the next day at 7 p.m. The SDM warned me, “The next time you misbehave, we will send you straight to Pauri jail.” Following this incident, my Facebook account has been blocked once again. For me, this is a source of regret as I have 1.3 million followers. Because of this sizeable following, I am able to earn Rs 12,000 a month from ad revenues. The ban has only added to my financial woes. Why should the police support these right-wing groups? So many people in our country need help. These right-wing people do not lift a finger to help the needy. Rather, these Hindutva boys have allowed themselves to become tools for pushing a divisive agenda. Even when it was evident from videos and other witnesses present at Vakil

Ahmed’s shop that I had nothing to do with the attack on Republic Day and had only stepped in to help an aged man who I saw was trembling with fear at the sight of so many Bajrang Dal activists threatening to close down his shop—an FIR was lodged against me. Vakil Ahmed had already had two heart attacks and was scared of suffering a third and fatal one. When I sought the help of the Nainital High Court to quash the FIR and take action against local police officers and the right-wing mob, my plea was dismissed by Justice Rakesh Thapliyal in March. The judge claimed I was using unwarranted ‘pressure tactics’ to influence the ongoing investigation. I was also barred from posting videos or making statements on social media regarding the incident. He felt I was trying to sensationalise the matter. I must emphasise that I have received love and respect from people around the country but not from those living in my own home state. Several lawyers from Delhi, on hearing about my situation, have helped me financially, which I appreciate greatly. I have sought relief from the Supreme Court. My case was argued by eminent advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi. On 31 August, the criminal proceedings against me were stayed and I was granted interim relief. The court also ordered the lifting of the social media restrictions that had been placed on me. The Muslim community does support me but they are a minority and are scared to come out in the open. Rahul Gandhi himself contacted me and I came to Delhi to meet him. He has promised to visit Kotdwar; I hope he will come soon. Sadly, the Congress workers on the ground do not speak out in my favour in the state. They are scared they will lose the Hindu vote bank. Some politicians such as Sanjay Singh have come out in my support. My family members were also subjected to hate attacks. At one point, they were so scared they felt that I should offer an apology to help get us out of this difficult situation. I refused. If I see anybody in a similar situation, I would not hesitate to help that person. I am a Hindu but for me *insaniyat* (humanity) is more important. I feel proud that I was able to help Vakil Ahmed. I also feel a sense of pride at the love and *sammaan* (respect) I have received from people around the country. I do not think I did anything wrong. I think more people should stand up for their fellow citizens. ■

“ I have received love and respect from people around the country but not in my home state”

“Don’t turn our future into a marketplace”

The slideshow of irate protests over a broken public examination system makes a Maharashtra stopover

Jaideep Hardikar

On 2 October, Gandhi Jayanti, while much of India’s attention was focused on Jantar Mantar in Delhi and Shivaji Park in Mumbai, hundreds of public service aspirants came together in Pune to agitate against the Maharashtra Public Service Commission (MPSC). For the young men and women squatting at Pune’s iconic S.M. Joshi Bridge, named after the socialist leader and freedom fighter, the MPSC’s continuing failures have meant the loss of their best years, money their families can scarcely afford, and the promise that has underpinned India’s social mobility for generations—study hard, compete fairly and you have a chance to make it. Over the past five years, aspirants have endured question-paper errors, alleged leaks, a cyber breach, repeated postponements, changing examination patterns, disputed vacancies, evaluation controversies and finally a confirmed leak that forced an entire recruitment process to be scrapped. Three different categories of problems emerged: those established/officially acted upon; alleged irregularities in particular examinations; and systemic administrative problems. Maharashtra has identified 203 pending cases of exam malpractice before 23 designated special courts, the oldest of which dates back to 2002. The present agitation is split into three streams of demands—one asks that MPSC chairman Vivek Bhimanwar be sacked; the second wants question papers to move from objective to descriptive, with more transparency in evaluation; the third wants the objective question paper system to be reinstated. The crowds are swelling by the day, and political support from all opposition parties including the Congress, sections within the BJP-led government and the CJP is pouring in. The state government has instituted a committee to look into the matter; its report is expected in December 2026. The police, meanwhile, have served notices on 68 protesters at three locations, saying the organisers had not obtained permission. The students, on their part, have threatened to intensify the agitation if their demands are not addressed. * Pune’s competitive-exam economy is built largely around young people from mofussil towns and rural districts, under the long shadow of agrarian distress and unemployment. Far from being affluent students with unlimited financial support, thousands

come from drought-prone Maharashtra, former suid-corn Vidarbha, the arid lands of western Maharashtra and other smaller towns. Pune is attractive because it is a major education centre and, compared to Delhi, is still relatively affordable. Vivekanand Maruti Patil is 24. He is a farmer’s son from Radhanagari in Kolhapur district. He began preparing for the MPSC while still in college. “We are from poor farmer families that face many hardships,” he says. “We don’t have Rs 50 lakh to throw around and buy jobs through influence. Don’t turn our future into a marketplace.” Vivekanand has emerged as one of the most recognisable voices of the movement. His speeches are laced with humour. He is well-read and moves with ease from Plato and Aristotle to Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram, before returning to the hardships of a student. “When MLAs and MPs were poached and parties were split, we didn’t feel anything,” he said at the boisterous—and packed—protest site. “But when our exam paper was leaked, it felt as though the sky had fallen on us.” Pune’s exam economics can be crushing. Students rent beds rather than rooms, eat at modest messes and tiffin centres (sometimes cutting down on food intake), sit for hours in crowded *abhyasikas* (libraries) and calculate the cost of every book, test series and coaching class. A 2023 report on Pune’s study centres quoted an MPSC aspirant from Kolhapur who said he was paying Rs 6,000 a month for a double-sharing paying guest (PG) in Shivajinagar. Newer accommodation cost Rs 10,500 for triple occupancy. An older



NCP (Sharad Pawar) MP Supriya Sule interacts with agitating MPSC aspirants in Pune

survey found that nearly half of MPSC aspirants had come from rural areas. Their estimated average annual expenditure on preparation was about Rs 1.19 lakh. Coaching fees ranged from a few thousand rupees to over Rs 1 lakh. A current Pune coaching institute lists an MPSC prelims-and-mains programme with test series at around Rs 90,000. These are staggering sums, which are only getting higher. Every additional year of preparation in Pune means more debt for parents. That is why an examination postponed by several months has become an economic shock to

their families back home. The cruel contradiction at the heart of India’s government-job exam system is this: the more uncertain the recruitment process, the longer aspirants remain in the preparation-market. Even as aspirants age and lose confidence about making the cut, the industry apparatus thrives. In Pune, the pressure is visible. Last month, a 28-year-old MPSC aspirant from Dharashiv (formerly Osmanabad) was found dead in his rented accommodation. Police recovered a note mentioning a debt of about Rs 2.5 lakh. His death cannot simply be attributed to the examination

system—the circumstances are far more complicated—but it brought to public view the financial and emotional pressures under which many aspirants live. It is against this backdrop that the present agitation needs to be understood. MPSC’s recent controversies have accumulated (*see timeline*). Under pressure, the government has announced that the examinations will be conducted offline and has transferred MPSC secretary Mahendra Harpalkar. Earlier, following a meeting with student representatives, the government had promised six measures, including offline examinations, action under Article 317 against officials if warranted, a single-card system reducing repeated document submission and clubbing vacancies over three years. These assurances had temporarily led students to suspend their 2 October protest. Not trusting the government to follow through, they returned to their agitation. The crisis of public examinations is not unique to Maharashtra. Not so long ago, Madhya Pradesh’s ‘Vyapam scam’ was an industry-scale scandal. In Karnataka, aspirants have been demanding an overhaul of the Karnataka Public Service Commission over similar issues. In Jharkhand, thousands of aspirants protested alleged irregularities in examinations conducted by the Jharkhand Public Service Commission and the Jharkhand Staff Selection Commission. Earlier this year, protests over the NEET brought the credibility of India’s largest competitive examination system into national politics. *

For India’s lower and middle classes, a government job has never been just another job. It offers status and security in an economy where millions still work without formal contracts or social protection. For families in rural Maharashtra, it can mean the first secure salaried position with the promise of permanent income unaffected by seasonal fluctuations. This explains why a government job attracts such extraordinary numbers. Sample this: • Group C Combined Preliminary Exam, 2026: 10.86 lakh applications for 5,700 posts. • Drug Inspector Recruitment, 2026: 44,500 candidates for 154 posts. • State Services, 2025: 1.75 lakh applicants for 385 posts. The competitive examination has become some kind of lottery—with candidates expected to believe it isn’t. With paper leaks, postponements and delayed recruitments, the entire premise of fairness collapses. ■

MPSC’s poor report card

- 2021** Candidates challenge errors and ambiguous questions in an MPSC examination; five questions are eventually deleted.
- 2022** Pune Police uncover a wider recruitment-exam racket involving alleged paper leaks and malpractice in several state examinations. An alleged MPSC paper leak at a Nagpur centre is also reported, which MPSC denies.
- 2022–23** MPSC announces a shift from objective to descriptive, UPSC-style mains examination. Students protest, arguing that rules are being changed midway. The switch is eventually deferred to 2025.
- 2023** A suspected cyber breach exposes information relating to 94,195 MPSC hall

- tickets. A student is arrested; MPSC says there was no theft of candidate data.
- 2024** The State Services examination notification offers only 205 posts, triggering protests over inadequate vacancies. The preliminary examination is subsequently postponed several times.
- April 2025** More than 1,000 aspirants protest in Pune after PSI vacancies are cut from 441 to 261. Students cite an RTI showing nearly 2,959 vacant PSI posts in the state.
- September 2025** The State Services preliminary examination is postponed because of floods. Around 1.75 lakh candidates were expected to compete for just 385 posts.
- March 2026** MPSC conducts the Drug Inspector examination for 154 posts; around 44,500 candidates appear.

- July 2026** Allegations emerge that the Drug Inspector question paper was leaked before the examination. MPSC initially says it found no evidence of a leak and refers the matter to police.
- August 2026** Police find prima facie evidence of a leak. MPSC cancels the entire Drug Inspector recruitment, even though 488 candidates had already appeared for interviews.
- September 2026** Thousands of aspirants begin mobilising in Pune, demanding transparency, an independent investigation, accountability and examination reforms.
- 2 October 2026** The present agitation begins, with students demanding, among other things, the MPSC chairman’s resignation, recruitment against vacant posts and greater security and transparency.

THE HARYANA BANK SCAM

When the state’s own money was made to disappear

Herjinder

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has been adroit in cracking down on the Haryana bank scam. Three chargesheets have been filed, 16 people including three IAS officers have been arrested, and the agency has named 37 accused including three more IAS officers. Remarkably, not a single minister or politician has been named as complicit in the Rs 634 crore embezzlement. That is the amount of public money siphoned off through multiple bank accounts and shell companies, with the help of officials of two private banks. This, in less than two years.

The scam did not come to light through an audit, a regulator or a whistleblower. It surfaced in February 2026 when a Haryana government department sought to close its account at IDFC FIRST Bank and transfer the balance elsewhere. During reconciliation, officials discovered that the actual balance was far lower than the amount the department believed it held. Similar discrepancies were then found in other government-linked accounts. IDFC FIRST Bank disclosed the issue to regulators on 22 February 2026. According to investigators, funds meant to remain in government accounts or in fixed deposits had allegedly been diverted through unauthorised transactions. The Haryana Anti-Corruption Bureau registered an FIR, and because of the scale of the fraud, the Haryana government later recommended a CBI investigation.

The agency has arrested senior officials, including IAS officers Pankaj Agarwal, Ram Kumar Singh and Pradeep Kumar. The modus operandi was remarkably mundane. Government accounts were opened in two private banks, the bulk of it in IDFC FIRST Bank and a smaller number in AU Small Finance Bank, without mandatory approvals. Despite existing rules and restrictions, funds were transferred. Fixed deposits were created on paper while the money was diverted elsewhere. False debit entries were made and approved. Shell companies received funds. Some of the officials allegedly approved transactions ‘as directed’ by seniors (against the rules).



Beyond checks and balances The IDFC FIRST Bank scandal exposes the failure of institutional vigilance; (left) Haryana CM Nayab Singh Saini



In one case involving the Haryana Power Generation Corporation, officials were allegedly instructed to transfer Rs 50 crore from an existing IndusInd Bank fixed deposit to IDFC FIRST Bank. A letter from the bank offering an extraordinary 14 per cent interest rate was later found to be forged. Yet the transaction went ahead. If the chargesheets are to be believed, the officials were happy to oblige the banks for small returns. An IAS officer, the chargesheet said, was ‘gifted’ two gold coins bought from Sawan Jewellers in Sector 35. Another IAS officer was happy to attend four dance parties at Jade Manor hotel at Zirakpur. Seven to eight women dancers from Delhi and other female artistes were brought in and Rs 15-20 lakh in cash were showered on them by the officers present, paid for by the bank manager. A relatively junior

official, a superintendent, who is alleged to have facilitated the opening of the bank accounts was directly paid Rs 1 crore and his trips to Mumbai, Pune, Bangkok and Dubai, with wife and family, were funded by the banker. Yet another IAS officer is accused of accepting the bank’s hospitality in a Chandigarh hotel on three occasions in 2025, where several lakhs were spent on food and drinks. This is how large financial crimes often happen—not through a single spectacular act of deception but through a chain of small compliances. Someone proposes. Someone marks the file. Someone signs. Someone transfers the money. Someone at the bank processes it. Someone else decides not to ask any questions. By the time somebody does get round to asking, the money is gone.

*

The CBI says that the Haryana State Pollution Control Board’s account at IDFC FIRST Bank was opened in February 2025 without the required approval from the finance department. Within days, a Rs 50 crore investment was approved. The CBI alleges that instead of going into a genuine

fixed deposit, the money was diverted to CAPCO Fintech Services, described as a shell entity. Another Rs 17.9 crore was subsequently approved and allegedly siphoned through other shell companies. The board ultimately suffered an alleged loss of Rs 169.69 crore through 49 fraudulent debit transactions and six credit entries. The CBI says six placements between March 2025 and January 2026 took the bank’s deposits from the Board to about Rs 209.42 crore—far above the Rs 50 crore ceiling applicable to a newly empanelled bank. In one instance, the agency alleges that a higher-yielding bid from another bank was overlooked even though the IDFC FIRST quotation had allegedly arrived late and lacked a bank stamp and signatory name. The chargesheet refers to two 50 gm gold coins allegedly delivered to the residence of IAS officer Vineet Garg ahead of Diwali last year. It alleges that hotel and restaurant bills connected with IAS officer Mohammed Shayin were paid by accused bank manager Ribhav Rishi. It also describes parties allegedly organised for IAS officer Pankaj Agarwal, with

dancers, liquor, catering and large amounts of cash. Pankaj Agarwal is no stranger to controversy. In March, while serving as Chief Electoral Officer and Returning Officer for the Rajya Sabha election, he was accused of acting like a BJP agent in the conduct of the poll. Senior Congress leaders, including Bhupinder Singh Hooda, questioned his ‘dubious’ role and petitioned the governor over the manner in which the election process was handled. The finance department’s rules were flouted. There were limits on deposits. Banks were supposed to be selected through competitive processes. Government accounts required approvals. Departments maintained internal accounts and records. Banks had compliance systems. High-value transactions were subject to controls. Yet the alleged diversion continued across departments and across hundreds of transactions. Former SBI chairman Rajnish Kumar has pointed to the ‘positive pay’ mechanism introduced for high-value cheques. Such controls are useful only if somebody actually uses them. A control that exists on paper creates something more dangerous than the absence of a control: the illusion of safety. The scandal therefore exposes not simply a banking failure but a failure of institutional vigilance. The political response has also been revealing. When Congress MLAs protested the bank scam outside the Haryana assembly on 27 August, police action against them included manhandling of former chief minister and Leader of Opposition Bhupinder Singh Hooda. The Congress subsequently demanded a wider probe and a white

paper detailing where government departments had deposited public money, under what approvals and at what rates. The demand deserves to be considered on its merits, irrespective of who makes it. The government has already said that Rs 556 crore, including interest, has been returned to departments. The private banks sacked their managers and chose to cut their losses by returning the amount deposited by government departments. It is improbable that others in the two banks were totally ignorant of the amounts spent on ‘business promotion’ by the managers. There is no guarantee either that other branches in other states have not engaged in similar deals. Moreover, repayment by a bank is not the same thing as recovery from those who allegedly diverted the money. Public money is not a mere accounting entry. It belongs to the citizens. Its diversion damages something that cannot be restored by a bank transfer—the presumption that government institutions are capable of protecting it.

The absence of ministerial and political involvement in the CBI chargesheet raises the question of who was the mastermind and how many people in the government and the banking system looked away? A white paper on the government’s finances, a complete inventory of its bank deposits and interest payments must be open for public scrutiny or scrutiny by the legislature. Every exception made should be explained and every procedural breach examined. That seems to be reasonable but the government and the media appear willing to move on, without getting to the bottom of the scandal. The Haryana case is still before the courts, and every accused person is entitled to the presumption of innocence. Chargesheets, after all, are still allegations, not convictions. But institutional reform cannot wait for the verdict. The state should publish a complete inventory of its bank deposits: which department has money in which bank, under whose approval, at what interest rate and under which applicable rules. Every exception should be explained; every procedural breach examined.

Old banking wisdom is ‘trust but verify’. Public finance needs a tougher version: verify hardest when somebody is unusually eager to handle your money. When a bank, an official or an intermediary works especially hard to hold public money, the question should not simply be whether the offer is attractive; it should be: what do they expect in return? That is what Haryana’s financial machinery failed to ask. The price of that is being counted in crores. The real cost is being counted in trust. ■

The diversion of public money damages trust, which cannot be restored by a bank transfer

A state or a piece of prime real estate?

Section 118 loopholes are turning Himachal Pradesh into a real estate free-for-all, writes Avay Shukla

In response to my recent blog about unregulated construction in Himachal, a discerning reader commented that he had done an online search for available properties in the state and, to his horror, found that 23,450 properties were advertised for sale/rent/lease between just Shimla and Narkanda, a stretch of around 90 km. Even allowing for double counting, these figures tell a tale which our policymakers would do well to heed. Faulty policies, lack of vision and/or an inadequate understanding of economics are making Himachal prime real estate, up for grabs by whoever has the money and connections to exploit the system. But first, some background. Land is a precious commodity in Himachal. Utilisable land is less than 15 per cent of its geographical area—8 lakh hectares against a total of 55.67 lakh hectares—the rest being forests, ‘gair mumkin’ or areas above the tree line where nothing grows. The actual area under agriculture is just about 5.25 lakh hectares. Farming is almost at subsistence level. The average landholding is 0.94 hectares (in Punjab it is 3.64 hectares) and small and marginal farmers hold 89 per cent of arable land. Industry is nearly non-existent and the state has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. For all these reasons, as Nirmanyu Chauhan and Divyanshu Thakur put it so eloquently in their article (*The Wire*, 8 March 2026), land in this state is not just a commodity; it is a

source of dignity, livelihood, autonomy. And security. Himachal’s first chief minister Y.S. Parmar had the vision to realise this and therefore took steps to ensure that Himachalis were not deprived of their lands by rich and exploitative external elements. He brought in the Himachal Tenancy and Land Reforms Act in 1972, Section 118 of which imposes severe restrictions on non-Himachalis buying land in the state. They can do so only after obtaining prior government approval. Subsequent chief ministers, sadly, have lacked the same foresight and have introduced so many exemptions and loopholes in the law that now any smart lawyer or purchaser can buy any amount of land in the state for any purpose. And this is happening on a colossal scale, as the Shimla-Narkanda figures prove. In just the last three years, 1,494 approvals have been granted, but this is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg—the bulk of the problem lies below. The actual transfer of land to, and purchase by, outsiders would be many times the number of approvals officially cited above. Thanks to the many exemptions under Section 118, no approval is required for a society consisting of agriculturists, flats built in urban areas, houses/flats taken on lease or RERA-approved builder developments. These exemptions are actually loopholes and have virtually thrown open Himachal to land sharks and builders. Benami land transfers are another way of avoiding the rigours of the law. As living conditions in

north Indian cities and metros steadily worsen, more and more people are investing in second homes in places like Uttarakhand and Himachal, especially post-Covid. The threat hits rural Himachal, and its original residents, the hardest. Land prices have sky-rocketed, and the Himachali landowner, unable to resist the lure of quick money, is being dispossessed of his ancestral lands on a never before seen scale by hotels, homestays, builder developments and resorts. This is changing the very architecture of the mountains, replacing green cover with concrete, affecting the demographics (as in the ‘ghost’ villages of Uttarakhand) and distorting local cultures. At risk is not only the geology but the very identity of the state. The state’s policymakers must look at the long-term implications of such land transfers. It is time to review Section 118 of the Act to make it more restrictive. No approval should be given under this section for the construction of hotels and resorts in rural areas—they are ruining the hinterlands, just as they have the cities. One has only to visit the Tirthan Valley, the stretch from Jalori Pass to Jibhi, the once-pristine Barog Saddle or the Mashobra-Naldehra section to see for oneself how pastoral Himachal is being converted into a concrete mess of multi-storeyed structures. There should be a complete ban on Section 118 approvals for real estate development, housing societies, multi-storey apartment

blocks or villas. All the existing exemptions/loopholes in the Act need to be reviewed, especially those pertaining to RERA projects, purchase of flats and leases. Some new curbs need to be introduced in the law—for example, a ban on the purchase of land belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and BPL families (as in Uttarakhand) to prevent their exploitation by deep-pocketed outsiders and land sharks. Except for specific projects approved by the government, non-Himachalis who wish to purchase land in the state should be required to establish some connection to the state for a minimum number of years to qualify, whether by way of service, business or family. There would, of course, be legal



Photo: Getty Images

New normal? Shimla is today dotted with dense high-rise residential clusters

considerations involved in adopting this course of action. There is bound to be resistance from some panchayats, as the value of land will drop; from politicians egged on by land dealers and real estate companies; from the builder and property-dealer lobbies; and from influential people in the metros looking for a piece of the mountains as their own premium getaways from one form to pollution and civic collapse to another. Fortunately, the Himachal Pradesh High Court has at least grasped the gravity of the matter. In a recent order, it has castigated the government for allowing the concretisation and denudation of the green cover of Barog. It has sought details of approvals accorded

under Section 118, the sanction of building plans and the number of trees felled on private land, and has even warned that it would not hesitate to order an investigation by the CBI. Anyone who loves Himachal and its people will welcome this order and hope that it is the first of many to follow. The government should stop playing politics and making money, and realise that this is a matter of survival for the mountains and the people to whom they belong. The state cannot be allowed to become one huge resort or gated community. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

At risk is not only the geology of the state but its very identity

What ‘activating’ the Mecca pact really means

Saudi Arabia has compelling reasons to advertise that it is not alone, writes **Ashok Swain**

Saudi Arabia’s decision on 5 October to activate the Mecca defence pact reveals how precarious its security has become. In the Houthis it faces an enemy capable of threatening its cities, disrupting its energy infrastructure and challenging its access to the Red Sea. This, even after spending heavily on sophisticated US weapons and cultivating powerful Western partners. Bringing Turkey and Pakistan into the response may bolster its sense of security but it could also widen a war that none of the three governments can control.

The emergency meeting in Riyadh on 5 October committed the three countries to implementing their collective defence obligations and rapidly deploying agreed forces and capabilities to Saudi Arabia. Signed on 7 August this year, the agreement treats an armed attack against all member as an attack against all. Its activation gives political substance to that promise. Riyadh wants the Houthis and their Iranian backers to understand that continued attacks could bring them into confrontation with a broader coalition.

However, ‘activation’ does not mean that Turkey and Pakistani soldiers have entered combat against the Houthis. Pakistan’s defence minister has described their current role as supportive. Any deployment announcement is also subject to national legislation, and Turkey’s parliament has yet to ratify the agreement. These qualifications place limits on what the announcement immediately delivers. The pact has acquired greater political weight, but its operational contours are still fuzzy.

That distinction matters because military assistance takes different forms. Intelligence sharing, training and air defence could help protect Saudi territory without sending allied troops into Yemen. Yet defensive support can also facilitate offensive operations by freeing Saudi forces for other assignments. The danger lies in the gradual expansion of a mission.

Saudi Arabia has compelling

reasons to advertise that it is not alone. Repeated Houthi missile and drone attacks have exposed the limits of its territorial defence. Even successful interceptions consume scarce ammunition and require continuous readiness across a vast country. Reports of dwindling interceptor supplies from the US underline the problem. The Houthis need only occasional breakthroughs to cause disruption, whereas Saudi Arabia must protect airports, cities, military installations, oil facilities and sea routes simultaneously. Its superior military resources have not removed this costly imbalance.

The Houthis are striking Riyadh’s airport and oil infrastructure with disconcerting regularity. Pressure on its airports and energy infrastructure undermine the desert kingdom’s economic ambitions. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s Vision 2030 blueprint for Saudi Arabia’s economic diversification and growth will hinge critically on investor and tourist perception of its political stability. An adversary able to sustain attacks from across its southern border challenges that promise, regardless of how many

For both Turkey and Pakistan, to enter the war in Yemen is to risk other interests in the region

Photos: Getty Images



(Above) The leaders of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan at the signing of the Mecca pact; (left) Houthi supporters protesting Saudi intervention in Yemen



immediately weapons are intercepted. The struggle extends well beyond Saudi territory. With shipping through the Strait of Hormuz constrained by the Iran war, the kingdom’s western export routes through Bab al-Mandab have become more important. Moving crude across the peninsula towards the Red Sea offers an alternative, but pipelines, ports and tankers remain vulnerable. The Houthis’ ability to threaten Bab al-Mandab gives them leverage over international trade, affecting

countries even beyond the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi-backed Yemeni forces have launched an offensive seeking to recover Houthi-held territory, but determining Yemen’s political future and protecting Saudi cities are very different objectives. The Mecca pact has no answers for the first. Who will govern recovered areas? How will competing Yemeni factions share power? What settlement will communities accept? Without credible answers to

those questions, military advances will only create new fronts and fresh grievances rather than a durable end to the war.

The Houthis’ hostility towards Saudi Arabia has deep roots in Riyadh’s influence over Yemen’s political and religious life. The Houthis do have Iranian support, but to see them solely as Tehran’s instrument is to miss their independent ambitions and local roots. Saudi Arabia’s interventions since 2015 have failed to restore a friendly government with unchallenged authority in Yemen and enlisting more allies will not change this.

Pakistan has particularly strong reasons to avoid any direct involvement. While Saudi financial support and defence cooperation encourage Islamabad to demonstrate loyalty, Pakistan also

shares a border with Iran and has sought a diplomatic role in the wider conflict. Fighting the Houthis could strain its relations with Tehran. Sectarian tensions at home, existing security burdens and growing internal political opposition from Imran Khan’s supporters further complicate the choice. An alliance that raises Pakistan’s international standing may also reduce its freedom to refuse a costly foreign commitment.

Turkey faces a related calculation. Supporting Saudi defence strengthens Ankara’s influence in Gulf affairs and creates opportunities for military cooperation. Entering Yemen’s war would expose it to retaliation and another potentially prolonged deployment. NATO membership does not automatically extend alliance protection to every operation Turkey undertakes. Nor does Pakistan’s nuclear status establish an automatic nuclear guarantee for Saudi Arabia. Inflated assumptions about these relationships can encourage risks that underlying commitments do not justify.

Another big danger is that the pact connects conflicts already spreading across the region. American and Israeli attacks on Iran in February 2026 unleashed a war whose consequences now reach both sides of the Arabian Peninsula. Turkish or Pakistani casualties in combat could generate pressure for retaliation. Retaliation could provoke further attacks on their forces or interests. Governments might then escalate to defend the credibility of the alliance, defeating its original purpose of providing limited protection.

India must take this development seriously. Pakistan’s external security relationships can no longer be assessed primarily through its partnership with China. The Mecca pact introduces Saudi Arabia and Turkey into calculations surrounding future Indian military action against Pakistan. Their intervention would not be automatic; the circumstances of an attack, treaty interpretation and national decisions would matter. Nevertheless, New Delhi cannot assume that punitive actions or what Modi markets as surgical strikes would remain confined to a bilateral exchange. Political backing, intelligence and military supplies could alter the confrontation without allied troops appearing on the battlefield. ■

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The mystery of the Fairford withdrawal

Ashish Ray

Ever since WWII, American armed forces have remained stationed on British soil. The United States joined the Allied effort against Nazi Germany in response to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s appeal. On D-Day, 6 June 1944, a joint operation of Anglo-US troops landed on the Normandy coast, liberated France from German occupation and turned the tide of the war in Europe.

Both nations, particularly Whitehall, describe the continued US-UK alliance as a “special relationship”. Despite occasional bumps, solidarity has been steadfast and London, more than Washington, has adhered to the understanding.

In 1982, Britain would have preferred a joint operation when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher despatched the Royal Navy to recapture the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic from Argentina. In 1983, when Americans parachuted into Grenada in the

eastern Caribbean to oust—indeed exterminate—the island’s Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, the United Kingdom was not taken into confidence. This was an insult because Queen Elizabeth II was Grenada’s head of state.

Cut to 2003, when British Prime Minister Tony Blair collaborated with US President George Bush in the controversial invasion of Iraq. Saddam Hussain’s regime was not in possession of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ as alleged by the CIA, and was therefore not a nuclear threat to any country, let alone the US.

This year, British premier Keir Starmer turned the tide of cooperation, by refusing to participate in President Donald Trump’s unlawful attack on Iran. Trump attempted to retaliate by

hinting that Argentina enjoyed territorial rights over the Falklands, even as aggressive noises emerged from the right-wing government in Buenos Aires.

Among the US Air Force stations across Royal Air Force bases is RAF Fairford in Gloucestershire. In recent months, after Britain approved an American request for defensive strikes on Iran, the B-1 and B-52 bombers have flown from Fairford towards West Asia.

On 27 September, local residents noticed three white vans near the base, and reported ‘suspicious activity’ to the police. Five Londoners and a British Iranian national (all in their twenties) were arrested on suspicion of explosive and terrorism offences, handcuffed, and questioned. A ‘potential terror plot’ was declared.

An assistant commissioner of police told media that investigators are currently exploring “multiple lines of enquiry”, including whether proxies or individuals were working (knowingly or unknowingly) on behalf of a foreign State.

The UK’s Counter Terrorism Policing, which is leading the probe, said no improvised devices were found in the vans, but a “quantity of petrol” was recovered.

At the time the incident became public, the US military stated it was “working closely” with its UK counterparts “to monitor this situation, minimise impacts and ensure the safety of US personnel, their families and the local community”. Additionally, 85 households in the vicinity were temporarily evacuated.

On 28 September, US secretary of state Marco Rubio told *Fox News* that a “foreign actor” was clearly involved. It was, he said to another news outlet, “a very serious situation”.

The men arrested were, however, released on bail, albeit under ‘stringent conditions on their movement and contact with others’. Trump expressed his surprise at this, adding, “We know everything about them, we would not have released them.” In fact, he went to the extent of saying, “We had them under view for a long time, and we got them.”

British Prime Minister Andy Burnham urged people “not to speculate while the authorities establish the full facts”. Referring to a “string of indications” pointing to Iran’s involvement, he added: “We will say more in due course but we can confirm [...] that we believe Iran to have played a part.”

In turn, the Iranian embassy in London responded with a categorical rejection and strong condemnation of what it called “unfounded and malicious speculations” linking Iran to the incident. It even threatened legal action “to safeguard the rights and interests” of Iran and its people.

The investigative methods of the British and the Americans differ. The former rely more on deduction and detection and often deliver better results. Heavy-handedness is not their style. Releasing detainees on bail can lead to them lowering their guard, which in turn can lead investigators to the masterminds. It should soon be evident if this approach will bear results.

Meanwhile, the US administration went into action. Eight B-1 bombers were pulled out from Fairford and sent back to the US. Trump said this was due to “some threats”. US media suggested the decision was based on intelligence indicating that Iran was plotting a drone attack on expensive US aircraft. While Trump refused to be

drawn into this, speculation in Washington centred around such a possibility, were US-Iran hostilities to resume.

10 Downing Street effectively emphasising that RAF Fairford was safe. It pointed to an earlier statement by Trump wherein he praised the UK’s police, defence and security services in relation to the base.

While Rubio has downplayed the terror threat story, Trump’s loose talk has consequences

While Rubio played down the threat theory, saying it was “not unusual” for military assets to rotate and relocate, Trump’s remarks have added fuel to the narrative that Britain is teeming with Muslim terrorists because of the UK’s immigration policy. This has been uncomfortable for Britain.

However, as the international community now knows better than to take Trump’s pronouncements at face value, the reputational damage to Britain could be limited. The more pertinent question would be: does the pullout weaken western Europe’s ability to defend itself against a hypothetical threat from Russia? ■

Eight B-1s were pulled out of Fairford. Trump said there were “some threats”



B-1 bombers at RAF Fairford, Gloucestershire, just before the US recalled them

Photo: Getty Images

The perils of learning in the time of AI

Instructors have their hands full dissuading a new generation of learners from outsourcing their thinking

Lavina Jhangiani and Akhil Katyal

Over the last two years, we have felt the ground shift beneath our feet in higher education. AI has transformed what we do in college classrooms. The generation of students we now teach, fresh from school, first encountered AI in their formative years and (most) took to it like fish to water. Their reliance on it is exceptionally high. All elements of university life—teaching, learning, thinking—have been touched by this sea-change.

Public conversations around AI and its pitfalls usually circle around its effects on the environment and commerce rather than what it does to our minds. Concerns about its environmental degradation are often raised, for example the hyper use of water resources as coolants at burgeoning AI data centres. We also hear fears being voiced regarding the largescale theft of copyrighted material, indicated in recent reports about rare books being purchased, scanned and fed as training data for AI, only to be destroyed afterwards. These public concerns also extend to the nightmarish scenarios around AI’s capacity for learning, and eventually replacing forms of manual labour, captured in widely circulating images of factory workers in the global south being forced to wear cameras on their foreheads, effectively training AI robots to replicate their hand movements. “It feels like working in your own grave,” one of the workers remarked, reckoning with his own eventual redundancy. And most recently, apocalyptic dread around the super-rapid development of superintelligence, which can quickly get out of hand on a planetary scale, as has been confessed by AI’s big three—Altman, Amodei and Musk.



When students outsource crucial work to AI tools, it’s not just a shortcut—experts see it as a form of ‘cognitive offloading’

At universities, though, where the development of the mind is the central focus, we have a unique problem at hand. Here, a kind of ‘cognitive colonisation’ is palpable, striking at the very heart of what we do, which is the work of reading, writing and thinking. In the last five years or so, AI has crept into our institutions and altered how these three activities take place. Inside and outside the classrooms, we find students outsourcing this crucial work to AI tools. This is not simply a shortcut. Experts have called this a form of ‘cognitive offloading’ which implies that, in the long run, it effectively shrinks what our minds are capable of. As teachers of literature, we know that the task of reading and thinking for yourself can be both beautiful and hairpulling. It is meant to be that way. For any student, wrestling with a literary text—the particularity of its lines and words—is part and parcel of

the maturation of their thinking. In turn, and with practice, this allows them to read their surrounding worlds and its peculiarities, eventually becoming curious and critical citizens. At the university stage, they must go through the rites of passage where they fumble with each sentence, quibble over its meaning, and struggle individually to stencil their thoughts on a page. We consider this initial struggle a necessary and joyous baptism. In the post-AI landscape though, we see this happening less and less. Many (if not all) students opt for the easy transaction of asking Claude or Gemini: ‘tell me the *point* of this text’, ‘summarise this essay for me’ or simply feed the assessment prompt into the AI engine. As teachers of literature, this has, frankly, been disastrous. As we know, AI does not,

properly speaking, *think*. Instead, it processes patterns. It takes in the raw material of billions of words and sentences at its disposal, a vast jumble of other people’s frames of thinking, and generates what it estimates to be the most probable result. This is often conformist, reached via a path of least resistance, and inevitably absents any possibility of genuine breakthroughs in terms of thought and expression. It leaves little to no room for an individual way of thinking, let alone the outlier-ness of eccentricity, which is the delight of a university classroom. Such forms of thought emerge from patience, practice, poring over texts, and many enjoyable and

frustrating face-to-discussions with peers and instructors, each sedimenting inside us slowly and chiselling the way we think about the world. Not by ChatGPTing an answer. This means that when students rely extensively on AI, they effectively inhibit the possibility of developing their own individual *voice*. Voice, that distinct thing that gathers the alchemical combination of all their life experiences, readings, agreements, disagreements, evolving worldviews. Voice is so central to our pedagogy that one of our key aims is to encourage each student to write as differently as possible from the other; each piece to carry their distinct signature. Whenever we

are able to identify a student just by their writing, we know something has worked. AI has short-circuited this possibility. AI-influenced writing demonstrates uniformity in the place of uniqueness, conformity instead of critical thinking. In such work, we see a mass of correct-sounding, reasonably cogent writing hollowed out of much of the signs of human intentionality. This kind of writing often includes the same examples, their descriptions of events and characters use the same words, they come to the same tepid conclusions, topping it off with ornamental adjectives, as if a shadow assembly line of ideas was at work, instead of quirky, individual minds. For higher education, this confounds our guiding aim of enabling critical thought and imagination. Such cognitive colonisation implies a seismic turn of events. It marks an alarming moment both inside and outside academia.

At the universities, our job then becomes to preserve the endangered species of individual thought. Everything about the university—the way we teach, the way we assess, the way our students interact with knowledge—needs to be attended to and wrenched away from the long arm of AI. We need to find a way to demonstrate to students how joyous and fulfilling the work of thinking on one’s own can be. How the long route, instead of the shortcut, can be deeply enabling, both for their professional lives and for them to grow into people who are fully rounded, always curious and aware of each of their capacities. In the face of the availability of quick AI answers, this will often feel like David taking on Goliath. That’s the sort of task ahead of us. ■

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When students rely on AI, they inhibit the scope of discovering their own voice



Oxford University’s Pitt Rivers Museum will return 39 pieces (skull fragments), seized from Nagaland between 1910 and 1940 and displayed as ‘headhunting trophies’

Museum to return colonial-era objects to Nagaland

India’s long-fought campaign to get Britain to return colonial-era objects in its possession is starting to show results. An Oxford museum has agreed to repatriate a collection of the human remains of Naga people to their descendants—more than 100 years after they were taken. Even as the British Museum (which has one of the biggest collections of Indian-origin objects) continues to drag its feet, the Pitt Rivers Museum has announced that it will return 39 pieces—including a Naga warrior’s cranium and a woman’s skull—to their rightful owners. According to the museum, John Henry Hutton, a British colonial administrator, had seized the pieces between 1910 and 1940. The remains, mostly skull fragments, were part of an exhibit titled ‘Treatment of Dead Enemies’ and displayed under the label ‘headhunting trophies’. Museum Director Professor Laura Van Broekhoven said that the agreement, arrived at after protracted negotiations with Naga elders, would help “reconciliation and healing”. Ellen Konyak of the Forum for Naga Reconciliation said the repatriation would “bring back the light of our ancestors that was dimmed but never extinguished”. Meanwhile, the British Museum continues to play hard ball. More than 90 per cent of its estimated collection of eight million objects originate from other countries—nearly 53,000 are from India. The more contested items among them include the Amaravati Marbles, a collection of 120-plus limestone reliefs and inscriptions from the 2nd century Buddhist stupa in Andhra Pradesh, and the Bimaran

Casket, a gold box set with rubies, dating back to around 50-100 CE. ‘Zionism is racism’, says Green Party In a historic move, Britain’s Green Party has declared Zionism to be a form of racism. At its annual party conference in Brighton, members adopted a motion to this effect despite serious internal differences at the top. After weeks of ill-tempered debate, it was adopted with 1,022 votes for and 813 against. The motion defines Zionism as an ideology in support of ‘an ethnonationalist Jewish state’ and backs a ‘single democratic Palestinian state in all of historic Palestine’. It goes on to say: ‘The real, material,



A Green Party member has it out with a pro-Israel supporter in Brighton



Prime Minister Andy Burnham at the Labour Party conference in Liverpool

manifestation of Zionism has been the historic and ongoing dehumanisation, displacement, dispossession, disenfranchisement and destruction of Palestinians.’ Many of its Jewish members called it “indirect religious discrimination” and warned that the move would be “a terrible signal to send to Jewish members”. It is a brave move at a time when Jews have come to be regarded as inviolable. The Green Party’s message is: They aren’t.

Burnham is best

Not since Tony Blair has a new prime minister made such a splash across the political divide as Andy Burnham has. And to think this is the same man who lost three Labour leadership elections,

including one against his predecessor Keir Starmer. Many sneeringly dismissed him as a chancer when he had a fourth tilt at the premiership even as Starmer’s unravelled. But after he pulled off what to many seemed like an unlikely win, Burnham has been embraced by the nation like a long-lost son come to save it. Burnham’s informal “call me Andy” style and agenda of hope are a far cry from his predecessor’s stuffiness and lack of ideological conviction. His maiden speech at this year’s Labour conference in Liverpool had not just the party faithfuls but even the right-wing media swooning. Consider this from *The Times*, otherwise critical of his left-wing vision: ‘Andy Burnham gave a speech for the ages, a never-to-be forgotten classic. And any rival politician out there who reckons they can pretend otherwise will be taking a first giant leap toward defeat... The hall rose to its feet. In the front row, the cabinet beamed at their leader as though he were their son on his graduation day. [...] Down by the door, a security guard slowly drew his finger across the corner of his eye. There was even a noticeable moistening in some sections of the press tribune.’

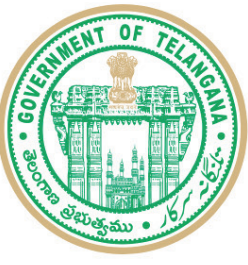
Who ‘bugged’ The Guardian?

News that *The Guardian*’s London office was infested with bedbugs has spawned conspiracy theories: have they been planted by its commercial rivals or right-wing political forces opposed to its liberal agenda? Pest controllers have been called in for the second time in recent months to tackle the infestation. Staff have alleged that management had not been transparent



The Guardian office in London

about how long they had known about the bedbugs. “The level of outrage is palpable,” said a staffer. And, lastly, like much else in modern Britain, its once famously starchy diplomatic service has shed its old snobbery. Its elitist textbooks on diplomatic etiquette are long gone and British diplomats now behave more like ‘normal’ people. One former diplomat recalls a slim green volume titled—what else—*Diplomatic Etiquette*. “I wish I’d kept my copy,” he said. “Two items stand out in my memory. One was that one should never congratulate one’s hostess on the meal, lest this imply she had anything to do with the kitchen. The other was extraordinary. It advised that a junior officer should never sit down on a sofa if his doing so would lead a senior officer (or the wife of a senior officer), desirous of sitting down, to have to sit next to the junior officer. Work that one out.” ■



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THE FIGHTBACK



“

कितनों को अरेस्ट करोगे, अमित शाह?!”
(How many will you arrest, Amit Shah?)

– Abhijeet Dipke, CJP, ahead of the 10 October demonstration in Delhi

“
They think we can be beaten at will, detained at will, thrown into detention at will, dumped 50 kilometre away past midnight... they forget we are citizens, and we have the right to ask questions and find out what happens to our vote.”

– AISA national president
Neha Bora



“

I have 45 FIRs against me... my target is 100. Every FIR against me is a medal for me

– Rahul Gandhi, after a case was filed against him for forcibly entering the Akashvani Bhavan premises



“

ये डंडा नहीं, तिरंगा है।
इसे छूना नहीं।”

– Priyanka Gandhi, after a police officer reportedly asked protesters to remove a 'danda', referring to the pole carrying the national flag



“

When you stand on a frozen ridge at 18,000 feet, guarding the borders of our great nation, your identity is never in question.”

From Colonel (Retd.) **Rajesh Kalia's** first-person essay in *The Wire* contrasting his years guarding India's borders with his experience of proving his identity during the SIR. Kalia is a former Indian Army officer who served for 37 years, including operational deployments in Siachen, J&K, the Northeast and Sri Lanka. He retired in January 2025



“

Heard on the Street

- “Gyanesh, it's done, bro”
- “Jab jab Modi darta hai, police ko aage karta hai.”

“ज्ञानेश कुमार कहाँ मिलेंगे? मोदीजी की गोदी में”

– Opposition leaders detained at Kingsway Camp police station

“

If the ECI has now found so many errors in its own voter roll, whose heads are rolling?”

– Transparency campaigner **Anjali Bhardwaj** demanding the ECI's accountability for lists previously certified and used for elections



“

आप हमें सरकार मुहैया कराते हैं... ब्लिंकिट का काम कर रहे हैं”

(You are supplying us with governments, like Blinkit delivers orders)

– RJD parliamentarian **Manoj Jha**



“

क्या ये कनॉट प्लेस है, दिल्ली है या भारत-पाकिस्तान की सीमा है?”
(Is this Connaught Place or the India-Pakistan border?)

– **Jebi Mather Hisham**, a Congress politician, lawyer and Rajya Sabha MP from Kerala, questioning the deployment of paramilitary personnel and extensive barricades as opposition MPs attempted to march towards Rajghat



The end is nigh, the bugle has been sounded

Apoorvanand

Can protests bring about change? I have faced this question again and again over the past three months, especially since July, when young Indians from all corners of the country descended on Jantar Mantar in their thousands and forced the government to make the education minister resign. The pompous boast that resignations did not take place under this government became a joke and the government itself was cornered to ultimately sacrifice Dharmendra Pradhan. Another matter that it tried to spin his resignation as a moral stand in the larger interest of saving the nation from the anarchy that the youth movement had unleashed. But the government's capitulation was seen for what it was—surrender in the face of determined resistance. That, in itself, was a big change. This was not the first time the Modi government had to eat crow. The farmers of Punjab and Haryana showed tremendous grit and determination when they camped for a year on the borders of Delhi and forced the government to repeal

the farm laws. That was, in many ways, a greater defeat for Modi, as it involved a real policy turnaround, unlike the Pradhan resignation, which may have been a symbolic victory but did not fundamentally alter anything. Even before the farmers' agitation came the movement against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), led by Muslim women. The movement was halted by the



COVID pandemic and faced brutal retaliation from state-backed Hindutva vigilantes, but it still managed to push back the government. The framing of rules under the CAA had to be delayed and the exclusionary NRC (National Register of Citizens) exercise put on hold. These were great acts of resistance. But they didn't attain the universality of the July Jantar

Mantar uprising. Where the earlier movements had encountered hostility from sections of the public itself, the Jantar Mantar protest was adopted widely by the people. The youth belonged to everyone, free of any identity markers that could alienate any section of society. That could be the reason the Jantar Mantar protests had the kind of cross-sectional appeal the other movements lacked.

For the first time in 13 years, the government looks isolated and on the defensive. The people have overcome fear

Jantar Mantar dented the image of a feared, seemingly invincible supreme leader in a way that no other agitation had managed. It also lifted the media-generated smoke that obscured Modi's real face. It is hard to explain why it happened this way. We can only observe and describe what is happening and think about the possibilities this moment opens up. The *Indian Express* exposé of the misdeeds of the Election Commission of India, which came on the heels of the Jantar Mantar uprising, has destroyed the legitimacy of the Modi government. That makes the task of the ongoing protests somewhat easier. People have started identifying with the protests and no longer see them as expressions of partisan interest. Now that the air is clearer, people can see and hear leaders like Rahul Gandhi. The adverse perception media had created of politicians who spoke against the government and the RSS—preventing most Hindus from treating them as their voice—has gone. Rahul Gandhi is now the face of an alternative. For the first time in the past thirteen years, the

government is looking isolated and on the defensive. It can no longer whip up majoritarian frenzy against the protests in the way it did on earlier occasions. Feeling politically powerless, the despotic regime has unleashed the state agencies to counter the protests. There are reports that Delhi Police are actively campaigning against the protests. This is not their job. They are exceeding their brief. It remains to be seen whether the courts will play along or try to be independent, taking advantage of the moment. The people have overcome fear and hesitation. They are reclaiming their right to protest and are enjoying a newfound freedom. They are refusing to seek permission for protests. It is as if they have begun to feel whole and human again. The protests are not going to stop. They will keep hammering at the edifice of power the BJP has built with the active support of the media, the corporate world and the judiciary. It is crumbling and is bound to fall. The media, the state agencies and the judiciary have to decide whether they want to break free and breathe independently or be a part of this great demise. ■

Lessons for Modi from Gandhi's protest

Once a large enough section of the citizenry takes to the streets, the State has to fold. Recall the Champaran satyagraha

Aakar Patel

With Gandhi Jayanti still on our minds and the right to peaceful assembly being brutally curbed in the run-up to the 10 October agitation, let's look at a few things that may be relevant. The Modi government is stopping protesters from gathering because it wants to shield the chief election commissioner from accountability. His misconduct is not disputed: the facts are before us, but the government has adopted what we Indians call a 'jo karna hai kar lo' posture. Is it sustainable? We will get to that, but first, a detour.

Gandhi's opening protest in India was in 1917, when he was 47. He learned that the tenant farmers of Champaran were bound by law to plant indigo on 15 per cent of their land, whether they wanted to or not, under a system called *tinkathia*.

Gandhi decided to go on a fact-finding mission to Champaran. When he was ordered by the British magistrate to leave, Gandhi decided not to. He writes in his autobiography about what happened next: 'A sort of friendliness sprang up between the officials—[the] collector, magistrate, police superintendent—and myself. I might have legally resisted the notices served on me. Instead, I accepted them all, and my conduct towards the officials was correct. They thus saw that I did not want to offend them personally, but that I wanted to offer civil resistance to their orders.'

'In this way they were put at ease, and instead of harassing me,

they gladly availed themselves of my and my co-workers' cooperation in regulating the crowds. But it was a visible demonstration to them of the fact that their authority was shaken. The people had, for the moment, lost all fear of punishment and yielded obedience to the power of love which their new friends exercised.'

The British quickly assessed the situation as unwinnable. Gandhi writes: 'Before I could appear before the court to receive the sentence, the magistrate sent a written message that the lieutenant governor had ordered the case against me to be withdrawn, and the collector wrote to me saying that I was at liberty to conduct the proposed inquiry, and that I might count on whatever help I needed from the officials. None of us was prepared for this prompt and happy issue. Crowds of peasants came to make their statements, and they were followed by an army of companions who filled the compound and garden to overflowing.'

It should be noted that the British government then moved with empathy. Gandhi writes: 'The ever-growing number of ryots coming to make their statements increased the planters' wrath, and they moved heaven and earth to put an end to my inquiry. But Sir Edward Gait, the lieutenant governor, asked me to see him, expressed his willingness to appoint an inquiry and invited me to be a member of the committee. The committee voted in favour of the farmers, and recommended that the planters should refund a portion of the exactions made by them which the committee had found to

be unlawful, and that the *tinkathia* system should be abolished by law. The *tinkathia* system, which had been in existence for about a century, was thus abolished, and with it the planters' raj came to an end.'

This is how a government must work: it must concede the right to peaceful assembly and protest, and it must undo injustice.

Let us return to the present day. The Modi government was forced to concede the principle of accountability when it fired Dharmendra Pradhan over the botched functioning of the exam system. This concession came after it became clear that the government's posture, including the prime minister's Instagram videos, was not acceptable to the protesters.

The government is now resisting the firing of the chief election commissioner. He is of great importance to the BJP, as we have



Mahatma Gandhi during his 1917 fact-finding mission in Champaran

observed not only in this mess of an SIR but also in his conduct towards opposition parties.

The furious back-peddalling on the SIR shows that the government has become alarmed and wants to be seen making minor concessions so that people's anger dissipates. A tweak in the process here, a new form filled there.

Alas, this has not worked because citizens have seen how egregious the whole electoral roll scandal is. The problem for the government is that once a large

enough section of the citizenry takes to the streets, the State has to fold.

This happened with the farmers, it happened on the issue of the NRC, and it happened with the Dharmendra Pradhan. It will happen again, because there is no real alternative.

Gyanesh Kumar has another two-and-a-half years left in office, until January 2029. However precious he may be to Modi, it is hard to see the government being able to hold on to him until then. If

the protesters remain mobilised, the government will (ultimately) be compelled to do the right thing and concede (again) the principle of accountability.

It seems appropriate to say this, but it is appropriate: the Modi government must learn from the way the British raj handled Gandhi at Champaran. Accept the right to peaceful assembly; reverse the injustice done to crores of voters; punish the man responsible. ■

Views are personal

Oh Calcutta! The city that defined the right to protest

As street protests mushroom around the country and the government cracks down on 'dimagi Naxals' who dare to defy, **Jawhar Sircar** takes a trip down memory lane

The 1960s were the decade of rage in Calcutta. Naxalite violence had reached the city. Not a day passed without multiple processions choking the streets. Army trucks with wary jawans behind mounted machine guns patrolled in slow motion. Intermittent slogans emerged from the lanes. Elected governments were being overthrown every few weeks or, at the most, months.

One could say civic unrest was built into the DNA of the city. In the 19th century, Calcutta was not just the capital of British India, it was also the site of battle between Hindu orthodoxy and western education, between ancient beliefs and exciting new ideas like liberty, equality and fraternity. Printing presses mushroomed, churning out countless books, pamphlets and polemical tracts in English, Bengali, Hindi and other Indian languages that carried these ideas to the literate.

As early as in 1818, progressive leaders like Rammohan Roy challenged the status quo through newspapers, fighting both colonial apologists and the powerful Hindu orthodoxy. Christian missionaries condemned Hinduism for its obscurantist customs and the air was electric, taut with tension. Textbook societies, libraries, literary associations, reformist organisations and political associations sprang up. Educated Bengalis increasingly learned to challenge government policies through petitions, public meetings and journalism.

One of the earliest demonstrations of this new political culture erupted in 1905, with Viceroy Lord Curzon's declaration of the 'Partition of Bengal'. Outraged Bengalis took to the streets, including Rabindranath Tagore, with his stirring songs. On 7 August 1905, the Swadeshi movement was formally launched from the Calcutta Town Hall; in Banaras, the Indian National Congress gave its clarion call to boycott British cloth and goods.

Within weeks, Calcutta resounded with boycotts, picketing,



The 2007 protest against land acquisition in Nandigram was a defining moment in Mamata Banerjee's political career

public meetings and processions. A day of mourning was observed on 16 October (the date of the proposed partition). It became clear that the rallies were not just anti-British demonstrations, but a newly-crafted technique for weaving social unity through varied elements—politics, education, literature, culture, music, commerce and street mobilisation. This blend became characteristic of Bengali political life and agitations.

Interestingly, the area dedicated to roads in a city is among the lowest in what is now Kolkata. Decades of unplanned growth led to overcrowding, narrowing existing routes. This was not a handicap to the tradition of public demonstrations. Smaller processions converged on the city-centre, the Esplanade, from different directions, stopping to listen to speeches and gather more participants as they proceeded. The open spaces around Shahid Minar in the Maidan, and the gigantic Brigade Parade Ground close by were the natural locations for some of the massive public protests we see framed in vintage photographs. Mounted police were often deployed to disperse unruly crowds.

Post-Independence, when tram fare was increased by just one paise in July 1953, people poured into the streets against profiteering by the

British-owned Calcutta Tramways Company. Protests continued for a month; and several tramcars were set on fire in response to police action. When the tram workers joined the movement, the government was compelled to review the fare hike.

Even today, bank and postal

employees, teachers too, can be seen protesting quite regularly. For several decades, Left unions routinely called supporters to leave their offices and join street marches or *micchil*.

The year 1954 saw secondary school teachers on a 10-day strike. Police firing killed five and injured many more. Public pushback ultimately compelled the government to accept the teachers' demands. In 1959, communists protested against rising food prices, with school and college students joining it. On 31 August, a massive demonstration in central Calcutta was fired upon—an estimated 50-100 people were shot dead. The Food Movement of 1966 was even more extensive, as mobilisation against the failures of the public distribution system spread to the districts and villages.

In 1967, the Left stormed into power but a section of Marxists fell out after the police opened fire on a farmers' rally in a village in Naxalbari, near Siliguri, on 25 May. This triggered the armed revolt known as the Naxal uprising. While mainstream politics was already wedded to processions and public meetings, naxalism laid stress on the annihilation of class enemies. Violence and fatalities became endemic with Naxalites fighting both the Left and the Congress. Even as student politics became exceptionally important, the Left parties mainstreamed protest over its 34-year rule.

On 21 July 1993, the police opened fire on a protest march of Youth Congress workers led by Mamata Banerjee; 13 political activists were killed. Alleging that the Congress was not aggressive enough, Banerjee quit and formed the Trinamool Congress. For 16 years, she would remain a street-fighting woman. In July 2006, her party launched agitations against land acquisition for the Tata's proposed car factory in Singur.

Mamata Banerjee's 26-day hunger strike in December 2006 grabbed national attention. In Nandigram, at a protest against land acquisition, the police opened

fire on 14 March 2007, killing 14 people. That is considered the moment that eventually led to the Trinamool Congress assuming power four years later.

The Singur-Nandigram movement—where intellectuals, writers and artists agitated alongside farmers, workers and students—demonstrated that Bengal's protest culture had survived the Left Front era and could, in fact, challenge and topple the Left itself.

With the BJP grabbing power at the Centre in 2014, its Bengal state unit emerged as the most belligerent opposition with active Union government support. Even as central agencies went after the corrupt ministers and leaders of Mamata's regime, it was the rape-and-murder of a young lady doctor at R.G. Kar Medical College in August 2022 that proved to be the last straw on the camel's back.

All of Kolkata took to the streets: not just doctors and medical staff, but actors, musicians, football fans, rickshaw pullers, gig workers... Rage mobilisation may well have contributed to the BJP's surprise victory in the assembly election of 2026. Ironically, on 9 September 2026, the new BJP chief minister himself led a protest of saffron-party workers against Jadavpur University students for supporting Palestine and demanding Azaadi for Kashmir!

Protests and political violence are truly hardwired into Bengal's historical-political culture. But Bengalis are not a people permanently on protest. Bengal enjoyed long spells of political stability, and much of Bengali protest culture remained electoral and institutional rather than revolutionary. It nurtured poets, writers, scientists, thinkers, economists, film and media personalities, and dissed those who distanced themselves from mass concerns. But then, as now, it remained on a short fuse when it came to converting social grievance into organised public expression. ■

JAWHAR SIRCAR is a former bureaucrat and Rajya Sabha MP



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Photos: Getty Images

The age of the angry young woman

She won't give in, shut up or go away. She'll fight back, stand up and be counted

A.J. Philip

There is an interesting story about Amit Shah's first election victory, narrated by journalist Rajdeep Sardesai in his book *2024: The Election That Surprised India*. Shah was then a student and an ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad) candidate in a college election. His principal rival was a woman, and she was popular.

More importantly, the college had a sizeable number of women voters. Shah and his supporters feared that if the election became a straight contest, he would lose. That was when the young Shah apparently devised a strategy.

His associates obtained the telephone numbers of some of the girls' homes. (Those were the days of the landline!) Their parents were telephoned and warned that on polling day there might be trouble on campus. The warning had the desired effect. Some parents apparently decided not to send their daughters to college that day. The number of women voters consequently fell and, in what was reportedly a close contest, Shah won.

Sardesai recounts the episode not as a moral lesson but as illustrative of the tactical mind of a man who would eventually become one of India's most powerful politicians. The attempt here is not to discuss the ethics of that particular victory but to imagine what would happen if such a manoeuvre were tried today. I suspect the result would be very different. If someone attempts to frighten her, today's young woman will ask: Who is trying to frighten me, and why? And if someone tells her to stay away, she might do exactly the opposite!

The age of women who suffered quietly, went home crying, and tried to forget what

made them cry is rapidly disappearing. The Indian woman, particularly the young Indian woman, is more confident, more conscious of her rights and much less prepared to accept intimidation as destiny.

We have enough examples of women who challenged male power. Jhansi's Rani Lakshmbai fought the British to protect her kingdom. In Tamil literary tradition, Kannagi challenged a king and demanded justice for her wronged husband. Such women were exceptional because the society around them was overwhelmingly patriarchal. Today, the exception is becoming the norm.

That shift can be seen on the streets. When the Citizenship Amendment Act became a major political issue, women were at the forefront of protests across the country. Young women students from campuses such as Jamia Millia Islamia and Aligarh Muslim University confronted the police and refused to be silenced.

Then came Shaheen Bagh. Women, many of them elderly and from modest backgrounds, occupied a public space in Delhi and dug in for weeks. They faced criticism, vilification, threats. Yet they refused to move. The protest eventually had to be suspended because the Covid-19 pandemic brought the country to a standstill.

But by then something important had happened: Indian society had seen women occupying the centre of a political movement. The lesson was unmistakable: women would no longer retreat simply because men in authority told them to.

The farmers' agitation reinforced the point. When farmers from Punjab and elsewhere were stopped at Delhi's borders during their protest against the three farm laws, women stood right beside them, through scorching heat, rain and a bone-

chilling winter. They were not decorative additions to a predominantly male movement. They were an integral part of it.

And then came the students. Their agitation demanding the resignation of Union education minister Dharmendra Pradhan revealed a new generation of young women, confronting barricades, resisting attempts at dispersal, laughing in the face of police force.

Initially, the government underestimated them. That was a costly mistake. As was the brutal backlash unleashed on peaceful protesters. The students returned, stronger than before. Dharmendra Pradhan resigned. Right now, we are witnessing another confrontation between the young and the establishment. This time the issue is the Election Commission of India and Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar.

The controversy over the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls has assumed enormous proportions. More than 13 crore names were dropped from draft electoral rolls across 30 states and Union

Territories. Painted into a corner, the ECI has ordered special drives in 20 states and Union Territories to identify and enrol eligible voters who have been 'left out'.

For the protesters, this is not a technical exercise in electoral housekeeping. It is a question of the fundamental democratic right to vote. And once again, the young women are at the frontlines.

What is striking about the videos and reels circulating is not merely their anger but their refusal to be intimidated by the uniform. Girls can be seen shouting back at policemen, refusing to move when ordered, demanding to know under what authority they are being pushed away.

Some hold their ground even when surrounded. Others record everything on their phones. They do not lower their voices. They do not avert their eyes. They reveal their belief that the uniform does not automatically confer moral authority. The police may have physical power, but the girls have the power of visibility, solidarity and public opinion.

They are not the clichéd embodiments of suffering and sacrifice portrayed in Indian cinema once upon a time. These women wear jeans, shorts. They carry smart-phones. They speak the language of constitutional rights. They know the camera is watching. They know that an act of police excess that might once have disappeared into a station diary can now become a national story within minutes.

One incident during the present agitation is a dramatic illustration. Rosy, an independent journalist, alleged that she was sexually harassed by an IPS officer during the protest. She publicly detailed her experience and demanded action. Other journalists subsequently went to the police station with her and pressed for an FIR. The police have denied some of the

allegations, but the complaints have been forwarded for investigation.

There was a time when a woman subjected to such humiliation might have been told not to make a scene. Her parents might have worried more about the family's reputation than about the conduct of the man who violated her dignity. She might herself have wondered whether speaking out would destroy her 'character'. Those days are going, going, gone. Today's vocal woman is not merely defending herself. She is refusing to accept the old social contract in which women were expected to carry the burden of male misconduct in silence.

Interestingly, many of the young women appearing at the protests in Delhi are from neighbouring states like Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan. Many are accompanied by their parents. This is significant. They are not necessarily rebellious daughters who have escaped from home. They have the support of their parents. That means the transformation is deeper than a student movement. It is a social movement.

There is an unforgettable line in one of the videos circulating from the Delhi protests. A girl asks the policemen who have told her to leave the protest site: "Who are you to remove me?"

After all, the land she stands on and the air she breathes do not belong to the police. They belong to all of us.

The police may wear the uniform. The government may control the machinery of the State. The Election Commission may hold constitutional authority. But none of them owns the Republic.

The Republic belongs to its citizens—this is what the young women are telling us. And that is why the story of Amit Shah's first election is worth remembering. ■

What is most striking is not their anger but their refusal to be intimidated

What option do people have but to protest?

The survival of India's democracy now depends almost entirely on the political maturity of the people of India, writes **Dipankar Bhattacharya**

Never before has the country seen public protests on Gandhi Jayanti the way we did this year. As a pithy social media meme put it, 2 October is the day those who celebrate Gandhi's killers are forced to pay homage to him. Mahatma Gandhi, who inspired the world with his ideals of truth, non-violence and satyagraha, epitomised the power of peaceful protest by ordinary, unarmed people. That legacy came alive across India on his 157th birth anniversary as the youth lustily embraced his idea of non-violent protest.

Those who had started believing that Gandhi had lost his relevance were in for a shock. An image of a solitary woman standing with a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi on a makeshift stage at a street corner CPI(M) meeting in Kolkata even as a violent right-wing mob broke up the gathering deserved to be seen by many more people. As the mob threw chairs, tore up banners and posters and mouthed profanities, she stood still and defiant as a rock.

Hundreds of student activists and citizens, young and old, defied the intimidating deployment of security forces around a fortified Jantar Mantar in Delhi. The viciousness of their detention was no surprise (Jantar Mantar 1.0 is still fresh in our memories). Even as older citizens stoically marched in solidarity, the younger lot around Jantar Mantar chanted slogans, strummed guitars, raised questions, toppled barricades, slipped through police cordons, cracked jokes into camera. When put into buses, they simply jumped out of the windows and rejoined the protests. One young woman ran away with the ignition key of one of the buses in Delhi. In Mumbai, Shivaji Park resounded with



Undeterred and unstoppable Protesters at Jantar Mantar on 3 October

hundreds singing the national anthem, by choice, not diktat. While one viral video showed a policewoman abusing young women protestors calling them and their mothers *besharam* (shameless), another showed a protective circle of protestors fanning a woman cop who had fainted while on duty.

Even as the youngsters invoked the Gandhian legacy of peaceful protest, the government resurrected memories of the colonial mode of using brute force to crush civil disobedience.

*

The rallying call for citizens across India is threefold: the immediate resignation of CEC Gyanesh Kumar, the scrapping of the SIR and the restoration of the voting rights of every wrongfully deleted voter. Citizens have realised the importance of repealing the 2023 Act that gave the government a free

hand to choose its own Election Commission (with no members of the Opposition represented) and placed election commissioners above the law by granting them lifelong immunity. The explosive *Indian Express* report (25 September 2026) on dissension within the ECI and its subsequent crisis management have only served to strengthen public outcry.

Following up on the 14 objections raised in 10 months by two of the three election commissioners, the *Indian Express* published another investigation on 6 October. This revealed that 11 appellate tribunal heads met on 11 August and raised at least five key defects in the portal for submitting appeals. What was once a suspicion is now a fact: a massive institutional fraud has been inflicted on India's electoral democracy and the constitutional right of universal adult franchise.

Now that the entire country is

talking about the disenfranchisement of more than 130 million voters, the ECI has asked all the chief electoral officers (CEOs) to reach out to all the left-out voters within a month! The term 'left out' is a fantastic euphemism for arbitrary and targeted exclusion, designed to tilt the electoral balance in favour of the BJP and its allies.

Even as the ECI was issuing this circular on 1 October, CPI(ML) activists were holding a public hearing of excluded voters in Patna. Party workers had carried out a door-to-door verification survey between June and September in 50 select booths over 10 of the 20 constituencies contested by the party in the 2025 Bihar assembly elections. They did precisely what the ECI has now asked BLOs to do: identify excluded voters by comparing the post-SIR electoral roll with the pre-SIR June 2025 roll. The survey revealed that wrongful deletion stood at a shocking

17 per cent.

Form 6 and Form 7 have both been weaponised by the BJP and the ECI not only to engineer mass exclusions but also to add names selectively to the electoral roll. On 6 October 2026, *Reporters' Collective* revealed as many as 16.18 lakh voters were added to UP's electoral roll in the initial phase of the SIR: neither their names nor details were listed.

Now that alterations made in Form 6 have been exposed as arbitrary, unauthorised and illegal—because making changes in the clauses of the form is the exclusive prerogative of Parliament—the ECI has withdrawn the controversial clauses without any explanation. Its attempt to claim the Supreme Court had approved the changes has been refuted by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant. The changes were clearly made to obstruct the inclusion of Gen Z voters in the electoral roll.

Form 6 is meant to serve as the entry route for first-time voters. Compelling voters who have been excluded from the electoral roll to use the same form as a condition for re-entry is patently illegal. Despite objections from day one, the ECI has persisted with this malpractice.

Even more sinister has been the industrial-scale misuse of Form 7 to exclude eligible voters. The confiscation of bundles of pre-filled Form 7 applications points to a systematic effort to target Muslim voters and those likely to vote against the BJP and its allies. Where a Form 7 complaint is used to seek the deletion of a voter's

name from the electoral roll, the voter must be given proper notice and a genuine opportunity to respond before any such deletion is made. This basic safeguard has been routinely disregarded.

The most shocking pattern of targeting and victimisation has been witnessed in West Bengal. Justice (Retd.) Indrajit Chatterjee, who has since quit as chair of Appellate Tribunal 11, revealed that 2.54 lakh Form 7 appeals were filed before his own tribunal by none other than the additional chief electoral officer of West Bengal seeking exclusion of voters who had been found eligible by judicial officers. According to the first *Indian Express* report, Election Commissioner Sukhbir Singh Sandhu had noted that neither he nor his fellow Election Commissioner Vivek Joshi nor the CEO of West Bengal had any idea who had authorised over 16 lakh appeals, mostly automated, to be filed on behalf of the ECI.

The institutional architecture of India's parliamentary democracy, the doctrine of separation of powers and the system of checks and balances that have been central to the survival of democracy in post-colonial India, are facing their gravest test. The Supreme Court, which could and should have restrained the ECI, virtually gave it a free hand to perpetrate this monumental electoral fraud. Had it not been shelved, the 6 October meeting between the joint parliamentary committee examining the One Nation, One Election bills and the Supreme Court would have been another glaring instance of the blurring of legislative-judicial boundaries.

With the rot having set in at the institutional level, the survival of democracy now depends almost entirely on the political maturity and alertness of the people of India. The 30 September meeting of the INDIA bloc and the growing assertion of Left student activists, Gen Z protesters, progressive citizens, alternative media activists and the non-NDA opposition parties signals the hope of a determined democratic turnaround. Will we be able to break the fascist stranglehold? Don't watch this space: watch the streets instead. ■

Will India be able to break this fascist stranglehold? Keep an eye on the streets

DIPANKAR BHATTACHARYA is general secretary of the CPI-ML (Liberation)

IN HIS OWN WORDS

“My family continues to face vicious abuse”



Deepak Kumar’s troubles began when he stepped in to save 71-year-old Vakil Ahmed

On 26 January, 42-year-old gym owner and fitness trainer Deepak Kumar saw his neighbour Vakil Ahmed, the 71-year-old proprietor of Baba School Dress & Matching Centre, being harassed by Bajrang Dal activists to remove the supposedly Hindu word ‘Baba’ from his shop sign. When Deepak intervened, the crowd demanded his name. In a gesture of solidarity, he replied spontaneously, “My name is Mohammad Deepak”. A video of the incident went viral and thrust him into the national spotlight. What followed was a spiral of hate: FIRs, eviction notices, death threats, social-media abuse. His business collapsed. In

July, Deepak was in Delhi to lend support to the Jantar Mantar protests. In August, Supreme Court ordered the partial demolition of a mosque in Ujjain ordered by UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a local businessman accused him of abuse, assault and threats. On 1 October, Deepak was arrested. On 2 October, he was released on bail, bringing his turbulent nine-month journey—from defending his Muslim neighbour to becoming an accused—back into the spotlight. **Mohammad Deepak** tells his story to **Rashme Sehgal**

live in the small town of Kotdwar in Uttarakhand, where the people’s thinking has, over the years, become increasingly parochial and casteist. In the last few years, the government has unleashed so much anti-Muslim propaganda that it has polarised our society. I was born in Kotdwar and have lived here for 42 years, but I am not a Garhwali. Everyone here knows me. I ran a successful gym with more than 200 members, and could pay a monthly rent of Rs 40,000+. After the 26 January incident, in order to hide their guilt, members of the Hindu Raksha Samiti and Bajrang Dal began to malign me and spread all kinds of falsehoods against me.

My family and I were subjected to vicious attacks over the phone. That wasn’t all. Every time I stepped out of our house, some shopkeepers (who were known to me) would make all kinds of derogatory remarks. The result of this hate propaganda was that the membership in my gym plummeted to 20 members. I am struggling to make ends meet. My wife started giving tuitions to kids at home, while my mother, who is 70 years old, runs a tea stall. Every time I go to pick up my daughter from her school or walk down to give my mother her lunch box, some of the shopkeepers start screaming, ‘*Katua ki aulad*’ (butcher’s son) ‘*Muhammad ki aulad*’ (Muhammad’s son).

One of them is Sanjeev Tonk, better known as Bablu. On 1 October, as is my routine, I was taking the lunch box to my mother, when he began calling me names. I stopped and told him, “Bhai, don’t talk like this. It creates a wrong impression about me.” Bablu picked up the phone and rang up the Bajrang Dal Zilla Adhyaksh Raj Gaurav Nautiyal, who landed up with 60 other men. An argument followed and I was taken to the police station around 3 p.m. and put in the lockup.

In his complaint, Sanjeev Tonk alleged

that I had abused, threatened and even tried to assault him.

That entire group went to the police station. They parked there for the next four hours, shouting slogans and hectoring me. The police made no effort to stop them. My worried mother came to meet me but she was not allowed. The FIR lodged against me was under Section 351(2) (criminal intimidation) and Section 352 (intentional insult with intent to provoke breach of peace) of the BNS. The police subsequently added Sections 196 (promoting enmity between different groups) and 115 (voluntarily causing hurt).

My mother contacted a lawyer and I was released the next day at 7 p.m. The SDM warned me, “The next time you misbehave, we will send you straight to Pauri jail.”

Following this incident, my Facebook account has been blocked once again. For me, this is a source of regret as I have 1.3 million followers. Because of this sizeable following, I am able to earn Rs 12,000 a month from ad revenues. The ban has only added to my financial woes.

Why should the police support these right-wing groups? So many people in our country need help. These right-wing people do not lift a finger to help the needy. Rather, these Hindutva boys have allowed themselves to become tools for pushing a divisive agenda.

Even when it was evident from videos and other witnesses present at Vakil

Ahmed’s shop that I had nothing to do with the attack on Republic Day and had only stepped in to help an aged man who I saw was trembling with fear at the sight of so many Bajrang Dal activists threatening to close down his shop—an FIR was lodged against me. Vakil Ahmed had already had two heart attacks and was scared of suffering a third and fatal one.

When I sought the help of the Nainital High Court to quash the FIR and take action against local police officers and the right-wing mob, my plea was dismissed by Justice Rakesh Thapliyal in March. The judge claimed I was using unwarranted ‘pressure tactics’ to influence the ongoing investigation. I was also barred from posting videos or making statements on social media regarding the incident. He felt I was trying to sensationalise the matter.

I must emphasise that I have received love and respect from people around the country but not from those living in my own home state. Several lawyers from Delhi, on hearing about my situation, have helped me financially, which I appreciate greatly. I have sought relief from the Supreme Court. My case was argued by eminent advocate Abhishek Manu Singhvi. On 31 August, the criminal proceedings against me were stayed and I was granted interim relief. The court also ordered the lifting of the social media restrictions that had been placed on me.

The Muslim community does support me but they are a minority and are scared to come out in the open. Rahul Gandhi himself contacted me and I came to Delhi to meet him. He has promised to visit Kotdwar; I hope he will come soon. Sadly, the Congress workers on the ground do not speak out in my favour in the state. They are scared they will lose the Hindu vote bank. Some politicians such as Sanjay Singh have come out in my support.

My family members were also subjected to hate attacks. At one point, they were so scared they felt that I should offer an apology to help get us out of this difficult situation. I refused. If I see anybody in a similar situation, I would not hesitate to help that person. I am a Hindu but for me *insaniyat* (humanity) is more important. I feel proud that I was able to help Vakil Ahmed. I also feel a sense of pride at the love and *sammaan* (respect) I have received from people around the country. I do not think I did anything wrong. I think more people should stand up for their fellow citizens. ■

“
I have received love and respect from people around the country but not in my home state”

“Don’t turn our future into a marketplace”

The slideshow of irate protests over a broken public examination system makes a Maharashtra stopover

Jaideep Hardikar

On 2 October, Gandhi Jayanti, while much of India’s attention was focused on Jantar Mantar in Delhi and Shivaji Park in Mumbai, hundreds of public service aspirants came together in Pune to agitate against the Maharashtra Public Service Commission (MPSC).

For the young men and women squatting at Pune’s iconic S.M. Joshi Bridge, named after the socialist leader and freedom fighter, the MPSC’s continuing failures have meant the loss of their best years, money their families can scarcely afford, and the promise that has underpinned India’s social mobility for generations—study hard, compete fairly and you have a chance to make it.

Over the past five years, aspirants have endured question-paper errors, alleged leaks, a cyber breach, repeated postponements, changing examination patterns, disputed vacancies, evaluation controversies and finally a confirmed leak that forced an entire recruitment process to be scrapped. Three different categories of problems emerged: those established/officially acted upon; alleged irregularities in particular examinations; and systemic administrative problems. Maharashtra has identified 203 pending cases of exam malpractice before 23 designated special courts, the oldest of which dates back to 2002.

The present agitation is split into three streams of demands—one asks that MPSC chairman Vivek Bhimanwar be sacked; the second wants question papers to move from objective to descriptive, with more transparency in evaluation; the third wants the objective question paper system to be reinstated. The crowds are swelling by the day, and political support from all opposition parties including the Congress, sections within the BJP-led government and the CJP is pouring in. The state government has instituted a committee to look into the matter; its report is expected in December 2026.

The police, meanwhile, have served notices on 68 protesters at three locations, saying the organisers had not obtained permission. The students, on their part, have threatened to intensify the agitation if their demands are not addressed.

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Pune’s competitive-exam economy is built largely around young people from mofussil towns and rural districts, under the long shadow of agrarian distress and unemployment.

Far from being affluent students with unlimited financial support, thousands

come from drought-prone Maharashtra, former suidhant Vidarbha, the arid beds of western Maharashtra and other smaller towns. Pune is attractive because it is a major education centre and, compared to Delhi, is still relatively affordable.

Vivekanand Maruti Patil is 24. He is a farmer’s son from Radhanagari in Kolhapur district. He began preparing for the MPSC while still in college. “We are from poor farmer families that face many hardships,” he says. “We don’t have Rs 50 lakh to throw around and buy jobs through influence. Don’t turn our future into a marketplace.”

Vivekanand has emerged as one of the most recognisable voices of the movement. His speeches are laced with humour. He is well-read and moves with ease from Plato and Aristotle to Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram, before returning to the hardships of a student.

“When MLAs and MPs were poached and parties were split, we didn’t feel anything,” he said at the boisterous—and packed—protest site. “But when our exam paper was leaked, it felt as though the sky had fallen on us.”

Pune’s exam economics can be crushing. Students rent beds rather than rooms, eat at modest messes and tiffin centres (sometimes cutting down on food intake), sit for hours in crowded *abhyasikas* (libraries) and calculate the cost of every book, test series and coaching class.

A 2023 report on Pune’s study centres quoted an MPSC aspirant from Kolhapur who said he was paying Rs 6,000 a month for a double-sharing paying guest (PG) in Shivajinagar. Newer accommodation cost Rs 10,500 for triple occupancy. An older



NCP (Sharad Pawar) MP Supriya Sule interacts with agitating MPSC aspirants in Pune

survey found that nearly half of MPSC aspirants had come from rural areas. Their estimated average annual expenditure on preparation was about Rs 1.19 lakh. Coaching fees ranged from a few thousand rupees to over Rs 1 lakh. A current Pune coaching institute lists an MPSC prelims-and-mains programme with test series at around Rs 90,000. These are staggering sums, which are only getting higher.

Every additional year of preparation in Pune means more debt for parents. That is why an examination postponed by several months has become an economic shock to

their families back home.

The cruel contradiction at the heart of India’s government-job exam system is this: the more uncertain the recruitment process, the longer aspirants remain in the preparation-market. Even as aspirants age and lose confidence about making the cut, the industry apparatus thrives.

In Pune, the pressure is visible. Last month, a 28-year-old MPSC aspirant from Dharashiv (formerly Osmanabad) was found dead in his rented accommodation. Police recovered a note mentioning a debt of about Rs 2.5 lakh. His death cannot simply be attributed to the examination

system—the circumstances are far more complicated—but it brought to public view the financial and emotional pressures under which many aspirants live. It is against this backdrop that the present agitation needs to be understood.

MPSC’s recent controversies have accumulated (*see timeline*). Under pressure, the government has announced that the examinations will be conducted offline and has transferred MPSC secretary Mahendra Harpalkar. Earlier, following a meeting with student representatives, the government had promised six measures, including offline examinations and clubbing vacancies over three years. These assurances had temporarily led students to suspend their 2 October protest. Not trusting the government to follow through, they returned to their agitation.

The crisis of public examinations is not unique to Maharashtra. Not so long ago, Madhya Pradesh’s ‘Vyapam scam’ was an industry-scale scandal. In Karnataka, aspirants have been demanding an overhaul of the Karnataka Public Service Commission over similar issues. In Jharkhand, thousands of aspirants protested alleged irregularities in examinations conducted by the Jharkhand Public Service Commission and the Jharkhand Staff Selection Commission. Earlier this year, protests over the NEET brought the credibility of India’s largest competitive examination system into national politics.

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For India’s lower and middle classes, a government job has never been just another job. It offers status and security in an economy where millions still work without formal contracts or social protection. For families in rural Maharashtra, it can mean the first secure salaried position with the promise of permanent income unaffected by seasonal fluctuations.

This explains why a government job attracts such extraordinary numbers. Sample this:

- Group C Combined Preliminary Exam, 2026: 10.86 lakh applications for 5,700 posts.
- Drug Inspector Recruitment, 2026: 44,500 candidates for 154 posts.
- State Services, 2025: 1.75 lakh applicants for 385 posts.

The competitive examination has become some kind of lottery—with candidates expected to believe it isn’t. With paper leaks, postponements and delayed recruitments, the entire premise of fairness collapses. ■

MPSC’s poor report card

2021 Candidates challenge errors and ambiguous questions in an MPSC examination; five questions are eventually deleted.

2022 Pune Police uncover a wider recruitment-exam racket involving alleged paper leaks and malpractice in several state examinations. An alleged MPSC paper leak at a Nagpur centre is also reported, which MPSC denies.

2022–23 MPSC announces a shift from objective to descriptive, UPSC-style mains examination. Students protest, arguing that rules are being changed midway. The switch is eventually deferred to 2025.

2023 A suspected cyber breach exposes information relating to 94,195 MPSC hall

tickets. A student is arrested; MPSC says there was no theft of candidate data.

2024 The State Services examination notification offers only 205 posts, triggering protests over inadequate vacancies. The preliminary examination is subsequently postponed several times.

April 2025 More than 1,000 aspirants protest in Pune after PSI vacancies are cut from 441 to 261. Students cite an RTI showing nearly 2,959 vacant PSI posts in the state.

September 2025 The State Services preliminary examination is postponed because of floods. Around 1.75 lakh candidates were expected to compete for just 385 posts.

March 2026 MPSC conducts the Drug Inspector examination for 154 posts; around 44,500 candidates appear.

July 2026 Allegations emerge that the Drug Inspector question paper was leaked before the examination. MPSC initially says it found no evidence of a leak and refers the matter to police.

August 2026 Police find prima facie evidence of a leak. MPSC cancels the entire Drug Inspector recruitment, even though 488 candidates had already appeared for interviews.

September 2026 Thousands of aspirants begin mobilising in Pune, demanding transparency, an independent investigation, accountability and examination reforms.

2 October 2026 The present agitation begins, with students demanding, among other things, the MPSC chairman’s resignation, recruitment against vacant posts and greater security and transparency.

THE HARYANA BANK SCAM

When the state’s own money was made to disappear

Herjinder

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has been adroit in cracking down on the Haryana bank scam. Three chargesheets have been filed, 16 people including three IAS officers have been arrested, and the agency has named 37 accused including three more IAS officers. Remarkably, not a single minister or politician has been named as complicit in the Rs 634 crore embezzlement. That is the amount of public money siphoned off through multiple bank accounts and shell companies, with the help of officials of two private banks. This, in less than two years.

The scam did not come to light through an audit, a regulator or a whistleblower. It surfaced in February 2026 when a Haryana government department sought to close its account at IDFC FIRST Bank and transfer the balance elsewhere. During reconciliation, officials discovered that the actual balance was far lower than the amount the department believed it held. Similar discrepancies were then found in other government-linked accounts. IDFC FIRST Bank disclosed the issue to regulators on 22 February 2026. According to investigators, funds meant to remain in government accounts or in fixed deposits had allegedly been diverted through unauthorised transactions. The Haryana Anti-Corruption Bureau registered an FIR, and because of the scale of the fraud, the Haryana government later recommended a CBI investigation.

The agency has arrested senior officials, including IAS officers Pankaj Agarwal, Ram Kumar Singh and Pradeep Kumar. The modus operandi was remarkably mundane. Government accounts were opened in two private banks, the bulk of it in IDFC FIRST Bank and a smaller number in AU Small Finance Bank, without mandatory approvals. Despite existing rules and restrictions, funds were transferred. Fixed deposits were created on paper while the money was diverted elsewhere. False debit entries were made and approved. Shell companies received funds. Some of the officials allegedly approved transactions ‘as directed’ by seniors (against the rules).



Beyond checks and balances The IDFC FIRST Bank scandal exposes the failure of institutional vigilance; (left) Haryana CM Nayab Singh Saini



In one case involving the Haryana Power Generation Corporation, officials were allegedly instructed to transfer Rs 50 crore from an existing IndusInd Bank fixed deposit to IDFC FIRST Bank. A letter from the bank offering an extraordinary 14 per cent interest rate was later found to be forged. Yet the transaction went ahead. If the chargesheets are to be believed, the officials were happy to oblige the banks for small returns. An IAS officer, the chargesheet said, was ‘gifted’ two gold coins bought from Sawan Jewellers in Sector 35. Another IAS officer was happy to attend four dance parties at Jade Manor hotel at Zirakpur. Seven to eight women dancers from Delhi and other female artistes were brought in and Rs 15-20 lakh in cash were showered on them by the officers present, paid for by the bank manager. A relatively junior

official, a superintendent, who is alleged to have facilitated the opening of the bank accounts was directly paid Rs 1 crore and his trips to Mumbai, Pune, Bangkok and Dubai, with wife and family, were funded by the banker. Yet another IAS officer is accused of accepting the bank’s hospitality in a Chandigarh hotel on three occasions in 2025, where several lakhs were spent on food and drinks. This is how large financial crimes often happen—not through a single spectacular act of deception but through a chain of small compliances. Someone proposes. Someone marks the file. Someone signs. Someone transfers the money. Someone at the bank processes it. Someone else decides not to ask any questions. By the time somebody does get round to asking, the money is gone.

*

The CBI says that the Haryana State Pollution Control Board’s account at IDFC FIRST Bank was opened in February 2025 without the required approval from the finance department. Within days, a Rs 50 crore investment was approved. The CBI alleges that instead of going into a genuine

fixed deposit, the money was diverted to CAPCO Fintech Services, described as a shell entity. Another Rs 17.9 crore was subsequently approved and allegedly siphoned through other shell companies. The board ultimately suffered an alleged loss of Rs 169.69 crore through 49 fraudulent debit transactions and six credit entries. The CBI says six placements between March 2025 and January 2026 took the bank’s deposits from the Board to about Rs 209.42 crore—far above the Rs 50 crore ceiling applicable to a newly empanelled bank. In one instance, the agency alleges that a higher-yielding bid from another bank was overlooked even though the IDFC FIRST quotation had allegedly arrived late and lacked a bank stamp and signatory name. The chargesheet refers to two 50 gm gold coins allegedly delivered to the residence of IAS officer Vineet Garg ahead of Diwali last year. It alleges that hotel and restaurant bills connected with IAS officer Mohammed Shayin were paid by accused bank manager Ribhav Rishi. It also describes parties allegedly organised for IAS officer Pankaj Agarwal, with

dancers, liquor, catering and large amounts of cash. Pankaj Agarwal is no stranger to controversy. In March, while serving as Chief Electoral Officer and Returning Officer for the Rajya Sabha election, he was accused of acting like a BJP agent in the conduct of the poll. Senior Congress leaders, including Bhupinder Singh Hooda, questioned his ‘dubious’ role and petitioned the governor over the manner in which the election process was handled. The finance department’s rules were flouted. There were limits on deposits. Banks were supposed to be selected through competitive processes. Government accounts required approvals. Departments maintained internal accounts and records. Banks had compliance systems. High-value transactions were subject to controls. Yet the alleged diversion continued across departments and across hundreds of transactions. Former SBI chairman Rajnish Kumar has pointed to the ‘positive pay’ mechanism introduced for high-value cheques. Such controls are useful only if somebody actually uses them. A control that exists on paper creates something more dangerous than the absence of a control: the illusion of safety. The scandal therefore exposes not simply a banking failure but a failure of institutional vigilance. The political response has also been revealing. When Congress MLAs protested the bank scam outside the Haryana assembly on 27 August, police action against them included manhandling of former chief minister and Leader of Opposition Bhupinder Singh Hooda. The Congress subsequently demanded a wider probe and a white

paper detailing where government departments had deposited public money, under what approvals and at what rates. The demand deserves to be considered on its merits, irrespective of who makes it. The government has already said that Rs 556 crore, including interest, has been returned to departments. The private banks sacked their managers and chose to cut their losses by returning the amount deposited by government departments. It is improbable that others in the two banks were totally ignorant of the amounts spent on ‘business promotion’ by the managers. There is no guarantee either that other branches in other states have not engaged in similar deals. Moreover, repayment by a bank is not the same thing as recovery from those who allegedly diverted the money. Public money is not a mere accounting entry. It belongs to the citizens. Its diversion damages something that cannot be restored by a bank transfer—the presumption that government institutions are capable of protecting it.

The absence of ministerial and political involvement in the CBI chargesheet raises the question of who was the mastermind and how many people in the government and the banking system looked away? A white paper on the government’s finances, a complete inventory of its bank deposits and interest payments must be open for public scrutiny or scrutiny by the legislature. Every exception made should be explained and every procedural breach examined. That seems to be reasonable but the government and the media appear willing to move on, without getting to the bottom of the scandal. The Haryana case is still before the courts, and every accused person is entitled to the presumption of innocence. Chargesheets, after all, are still allegations, not convictions. But institutional reform cannot wait for the verdict. The state should publish a complete inventory of its bank deposits: which department has money in which bank, under whose approval, at what interest rate and under which applicable rules. Every exception should be explained; every procedural breach examined.

Old banking wisdom is ‘trust but verify’. Public finance needs a tougher version: verify hardest when somebody is unusually eager to handle your money. When a bank, an official or an intermediary works especially hard to hold public money, the question should not simply be whether the offer is attractive; it should be: what do they expect in return? That is what Haryana’s financial machinery failed to ask. The price of that is being counted in crores. The real cost is being counted in trust. ■

The diversion of public money damages trust, which cannot be restored by a bank transfer

A state or a piece of prime real estate?

Section 118 loopholes are turning Himachal Pradesh into a real estate free-for-all, writes Avay Shukla

In response to my recent blog about unregulated construction in Himachal, a discerning reader commented that he had done an online search for available properties in the state and, to his horror, found that 23,450 properties were advertised for sale/rent/lease between just Shimla and Narkanda, a stretch of around 90 km. Even allowing for double counting, these figures tell a tale which our policymakers would do well to heed. Faulty policies, lack of vision and/or an inadequate understanding of economics are making Himachal prime real estate, up for grabs by whoever has the money and connections to exploit the system. But first, some background. Land is a precious commodity in Himachal. Utilisable land is less than 15 per cent of its geographical area—8 lakh hectares against a total of 55.67 lakh hectares—the rest being forests, ‘gair mumkin’ or areas above the tree line where nothing grows. The actual area under agriculture is just about 5.25 lakh hectares. Farming is almost at subsistence level. The average landholding is 0.94 hectares (in Punjab it is 3.64 hectares) and small and marginal farmers hold 89 per cent of arable land. Industry is nearly non-existent and the state has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. For all these reasons, as Nirmanyu Chauhan and Divyanshu Thakur put it so eloquently in their article (*The Wire*, 8 March 2026), land in this state is not just a commodity; it is a

source of dignity, livelihood, autonomy. And security. Himachal’s first chief minister Y.S. Parmar had the vision to realise this and therefore took steps to ensure that Himachalis were not deprived of their lands by rich and exploitative external elements. He brought in the Himachal Tenancy and Land Reforms Act in 1972, Section 118 of which imposes severe restrictions on non-Himachalis buying land in the state. They can do so only after obtaining prior government approval. Subsequent chief ministers, sadly, have lacked the same foresight and have introduced so many exemptions and loopholes in the law that now any smart lawyer or purchaser can buy any amount of land in the state for any purpose. And this is happening on a colossal scale, as the Shimla-Narkanda figures prove. In just the last three years, 1,494 approvals have been granted, but this is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg—the bulk of the problem lies below. The actual transfer of land to, and purchase by, outsiders would be many times the number of approvals officially cited above. Thanks to the many exemptions under Section 118, no approval is required for a society consisting of agriculturists, flats built in urban areas, houses/flats taken on lease or RERA-approved builder developments. These exemptions are actually loopholes and have virtually thrown open Himachal to land sharks and builders. Benami land transfers are another way of avoiding the rigours of the law. As living conditions in

north Indian cities and metros steadily worsen, more and more people are investing in second homes in places like Uttarakhand and Himachal, especially post-Covid. The threat hits rural Himachal, and its original residents, the hardest. Land prices have sky-rocketed, and the Himachali landowner, unable to resist the lure of quick money, is being dispossessed of his ancestral lands on a never before seen scale by hotels, homestays, builder developments and resorts. This is changing the very architecture of the mountains, replacing green cover with concrete, affecting the demographics (as in the ‘ghost’ villages of Uttarakhand) and distorting local cultures. At risk is not only the geology but the very identity of the state. The state’s policymakers must look at the long-term implications of such land transfers. It is time to review Section 118 of the Act to make it more restrictive. No approval should be given under this section for the construction of hotels and resorts in rural areas—they are ruining the hinterlands, just as they have the cities. One has only to visit the Tirthan Valley, the stretch from Jalori Pass to Jibhi, the once-pristine Barog Saddle or the Mashobra-Naldehra section to see for oneself how pastoral Himachal is being converted into a concrete mess of multi-storeyed structures. There should be a complete ban on Section 118 approvals for real estate development, housing societies, multi-storey apartment

blocks or villas. All the existing exemptions/loopholes in the Act need to be reviewed, especially those pertaining to RERA projects, purchase of flats and leases. Some new curbs need to be introduced in the law—for example, a ban on the purchase of land belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and BPL families (as in Uttarakhand) to prevent their exploitation by deep-pocketed outsiders and land sharks. Except for specific projects approved by the government, non-Himachalis who wish to purchase land in the state should be required to establish some connection to the state for a minimum number of years to qualify, whether by way of service, business or family. There would, of course, be legal



New normal? Shimla is today dotted with dense high-rise residential clusters

considerations involved in adopting this course of action. There is bound to be resistance from some panchayats, as the value of land will drop; from politicians egged on by land dealers and real estate companies; from the builder and property-dealer lobbies; and from influential people in the metros looking for a piece of the mountains as their own premium getaways from one form to pollution and civic collapse to another. Fortunately, the Himachal Pradesh High Court has at least grasped the gravity of the matter. In a recent order, it has castigated the government for allowing the concretisation and denudation of the green cover of Barog. It has sought details of approvals accorded

under Section 118, the sanction of building plans and the number of trees felled on private land, and has even warned that it would not hesitate to order an investigation by the CBI. Anyone who loves Himachal and its people will welcome this order and hope that it is the first of many to follow. The government should stop playing politics and making money, and realise that this is a matter of survival for the mountains and the people to whom they belong. The state cannot be allowed to become one huge resort or gated community. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



What ‘activating’ the Mecca pact really means

Saudi Arabia has compelling reasons to advertise that it is not alone, writes **Ashok Swain**

Saudi Arabia’s decision on 5 October to activate the Mecca defence pact reveals how precarious its security has become. In the Houthis, it faces an enemy capable of threatening its cities, disrupting its energy infrastructure and challenging its access to the Red Sea. This, even after spending heavily on sophisticated US weapons and cultivating powerful Western partners. Bringing Turkey and Pakistan into the response may bolster its sense of security but it could also widen a war that none of the three governments can control.

The emergency meeting in Riyadh on 5 October committed the three countries to implementing their collective defence obligations and rapidly deploying agreed forces and capabilities to Saudi Arabia. Signed on 7 August this year, the agreement treats an armed attack against all member as an attack against all. Its activation gives political substance to that promise. Riyadh wants the Houthis and their Iranian backers to understand that continued attacks could bring them into confrontation with a broader coalition.

However, ‘activation’ does not mean that Turkey and Pakistani soldiers have entered combat against the Houthis. Pakistan’s defence minister has described their current role as supportive. Any deployment announcement is also subject to national legislation, and Turkey’s parliament has yet to ratify the agreement. These qualifications place limits on what the announcement immediately delivers. The pact has acquired greater political weight, but its operational contours are still fuzzy.

That distinction matters because military assistance takes different forms. Intelligence sharing, training and air defence could help protect Saudi territory without sending allied troops into Yemen. Yet defensive support can also facilitate offensive operations by freeing Saudi forces for other assignments. The danger lies in the gradual expansion of a mission. Saudi Arabia has compelling

reasons to advertise that it is not alone. Repeated Houthi missile and drone attacks have exposed the limits of its territorial defence. Even successful interceptions consume scarce ammunition and require continuous readiness across a vast country. Reports of dwindling interceptor supplies from the US underline the problem. The Houthis need only occasional breakthroughs to cause disruption, whereas Saudi Arabia must protect airports, cities, military installations, oil facilities and sea routes simultaneously. Its superior military resources have not removed this costly imbalance.

The Houthis are striking Riyadh’s airport and oil infrastructure with disconcerting regularity. Pressure on its airports and energy infrastructure undermine the desert kingdom’s economic ambitions. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s Vision 2030 blueprint for Saudi Arabia’s economic diversification and growth will hinge critically on investor and tourist perception of its political stability. An adversary able to sustain attacks from across its southern border challenges that promise, regardless of how many

For both Turkey and Pakistan, to enter the war in Yemen is to risk other interests in the region

Photos: Getty Images



(Above) The leaders of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan at the signing of the Mecca pact; (left) Houthi supporters protesting Saudi intervention in Yemen



immediately weapons are intercepted.

The struggle extends well beyond Saudi territory. With shipping through the Strait of Hormuz constrained by the Iran war, the kingdom’s western export routes through Bab al-Mandab have become more important. Moving crude across the peninsula towards the Red Sea offers an alternative, but pipelines, ports and tankers remain vulnerable. The Houthis’ ability to threaten Bab al-Mandab gives them leverage over international trade, affecting

countries even beyond the Arabian Peninsula.

Saudi-backed Yemeni forces have launched an offensive seeking to recover Houthi-held territory, but determining Yemen’s political future and protecting Saudi cities are very different objectives. The Mecca pact has no answers for the first. Who will govern recovered areas? How will competing Yemeni factions share power? What settlement will communities accept? Without credible answers to

those questions, military advances will only create new fronts and fresh grievances rather than a durable end to the war.

The Houthis’ hostility towards Saudi Arabia has deep roots in Riyadh’s influence over Yemen’s political and religious life. The Houthis do have Iranian support, but to see them solely as Tehran’s instrument is to miss their independent ambitions and local roots. Saudi Arabia’s interventions since 2015 have failed to restore a friendly government with unchallenged authority in Yemen and enlisting more allies will not change this.

Pakistan has particularly strong reasons to avoid any direct involvement. While Saudi financial support and defence cooperation encourage Islamabad to demonstrate loyalty, Pakistan also

shares a border with Iran and has sought a diplomatic role in the wider conflict. Fighting the Houthis could strain its relations with Tehran. Sectarian tensions at home, existing security burdens and growing internal political opposition from Imran Khan’s supporters further complicate the choice. An alliance that raises Pakistan’s international standing may also reduce its freedom to refuse a costly foreign commitment.

Turkey faces a related calculation. Supporting Saudi defence strengthens Ankara’s influence in Gulf affairs and creates opportunities for military cooperation. Entering Yemen’s war would expose it to retaliation and another potentially prolonged deployment. NATO membership does not automatically extend alliance protection to every operation Turkey undertakes. Nor does Pakistan’s nuclear status establish an automatic nuclear guarantee for Saudi Arabia. Inflated assumptions about these relationships can encourage risks that underlying commitments do not justify.

Another big danger is that the pact connects conflicts already spreading across the region. American and Israeli attacks on Iran in February 2026 unleashed a war whose consequences now reach both sides of the Arabian Peninsula. Turkish or Pakistani casualties in combat could generate pressure for retaliation. Retaliation could provoke further attacks on their forces or interests. Governments might then escalate to defend the credibility of the alliance, defeating its original purpose of providing limited protection.

India must take this development seriously. Pakistan’s external security relationships can no longer be assessed primarily through its partnership with China. The Mecca pact introduces Saudi Arabia and Turkey into calculations surrounding future Indian military action against Pakistan. Their intervention would not be automatic; the circumstances of an attack, treaty interpretation and national decisions would matter. Nevertheless, New Delhi cannot assume that punitive actions or what Modi markets as surgical strikes would remain confined to a bilateral exchange. Political backing, intelligence and military supplies could alter the confrontation without allied troops appearing on the battlefield. ■

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The mystery of the Fairford withdrawal

Ashish Ray

Ever since WWII, American armed forces have remained stationed on British soil. The United States joined the Allied effort against Nazi Germany in response to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s appeal. On D-Day, 6 June 1944, a joint operation of Anglo-US troops landed on the Normandy coast, liberated France from German occupation and turned the tide of the war in Europe.

Both nations, particularly Whitehall, describe the continued US-UK alliance as a “special relationship”. Despite occasional bumps, solidarity has been steadfast and London, more than Washington, has adhered to the understanding.

In 1982, Britain would have preferred a joint operation when Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher despatched the Royal Navy to recapture the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic from Argentina. In 1983, when Americans parachuted into Grenada in the

eastern Caribbean to oust—indeed exterminate—the island’s Prime Minister Maurice Bishop, not taken into confidence. This was an insult because Queen Elizabeth II was Grenada’s head of state.

Cut to 2003, when British Prime Minister Tony Blair collaborated with US President George Bush in the controversial invasion of Iraq. Saddam Hussain’s regime was not in possession of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ as alleged by the CIA, and was therefore not a nuclear threat to any country, let alone the US.

This year, British premier Keir Starmer turned the tide of cooperation, by refusing to participate in President Donald Trump’s unlawful attack on Iran. Trump attempted to retaliate by

hinting that Argentina enjoyed territorial rights over the Falklands, even as aggressive noises emerged from the right-wing government in Buenos Aires.

Among the US Air Force stations across Royal Air Force bases is RAF Fairford in Gloucestershire. In recent months, after Britain approved an American request for defensive strikes on Iran, the Houthis and B-52 bombers have flown from Fairford towards West Asia.

On 27 September, local residents noticed three white vans near the base, and reported ‘suspicious activity’ to the police. Five Londoners and a British Iranian national (all in their twenties) were arrested on suspicion of explosive and terrorism offences, handcuffed, and questioned. A ‘potential terror plot’ was declared.

An assistant commissioner of police told media that investigators are currently exploring “multiple lines of enquiry”, including whether proxies or individuals were working (knowingly or unknowingly) on behalf of a foreign State.

The UK’s Counter Terrorism Policing, which is leading the probe, said no improvised devices were found in the vans, but a “quantity of petrol” was recovered.

At the time the incident became public, the US military stated it was “working closely” with its UK counterparts “to monitor this situation, minimise impacts and ensure the safety of US personnel, their families and the local community”. Additionally, 85 households in the vicinity were temporarily evacuated.

On 28 September, US secretary of state Marco Rubio told *Fox News* that a “foreign actor” was clearly involved. It was, he said to another news outlet, “a very serious situation”.

The men arrested were, however, released on bail, albeit under ‘stringent conditions on their movement and contact with others’. Trump expressed his surprise at this, adding, “We know everything about them, we would not have released them.” In fact, he went to the extent of saying, “We had them under view for a long time, and we got them.”

British Prime Minister Andy Burnham urged people “not to speculate while the authorities establish the full facts”. Referring to a “string of indications” pointing to Iran’s involvement, he added: “We will say more in due course but we can confirm [...] that we believe Iran to have played a part.”

In turn, the Iranian embassy in London responded with a categorical rejection and strong condemnation of what it called “unfounded and malicious speculations” linking Iran to the incident. It even threatened legal action “to safeguard the rights and interests” of Iran and its people.

The investigative methods of the British and the Americans differ. The former rely more on deduction and detection and often deliver better results. Heavy-handedness is not their style. Releasing detainees on bail can lead to them lowering their guard, which in turn can lead investigators to the masterminds. It should soon be evident if this approach will bear results.

Meanwhile, the US administration went into action. Eight B-1 bombers were pulled out from Fairford and sent back to the US. Trump said this was due to “some threats”. US media suggested the decision was based on intelligence indicating that Iran was plotting a drone attack on expensive US aircraft. While Trump refused to be

drawn into this, speculation in Washington centred around such a possibility, were US-Iran hostilities to resume.

10 Downing Street effectively emphasising that RAF Fairford was safe. It pointed to an earlier statement by Trump wherein he praised the UK’s police, defence and security services in relation to the base.

While Rubio has downplayed the terror threat story, Trump’s loose talk has consequences

While Rubio played down the threat theory, saying it was “not unusual” for military assets to rotate and relocate, Trump’s remarks have added fuel to the narrative that Britain is teeming with Muslim terrorists because of the UK’s immigration policy. This has been uncomfortable for Britain. However, as the international community now knows better than to take Trump’s pronouncements at face value, the reputational damage to Britain could be limited. The more pertinent question would be: does the pullout weaken western Europe’s ability to defend itself against a hypothetical threat from Russia? ■

Eight B-1s were pulled out of Fairford. Trump said there were “some threats”



B-1 bombers at RAF Fairford, Gloucestershire, just before the US recalled them

Photo: Getty Images

The perils of learning in the time of AI

Instructors have their hands full dissuading a new generation of learners from outsourcing their thinking

Lavina Jhangiani and Akhil Katyal

Over the last two years, we have felt the ground shift beneath our feet in higher education. AI has transformed what we do in college classrooms. The generation of students we now teach, fresh from school, first encountered AI in their formative years and (most) took to it like fish to water. Their reliance on it is exceptionally high. All elements of university life—teaching, learning, thinking—have been touched by this sea-change.

Public conversations around AI and its pitfalls usually circle around its effects on the environment and commerce rather than what it does to our minds. Concerns about its environmental degradation are often raised, for example the hyper use of water resources as coolants at burgeoning AI data centres. We also hear fears being voiced regarding the largescale theft of copyrighted material, indicated in recent reports about rare books being purchased, scanned and fed as training data for AI, only to be destroyed afterwards. These public concerns also extend to the nightmarish scenarios around AI’s capacity for learning, and eventually replacing forms of manual labour, captured in widely circulating images of factory workers in the global south being forced to wear cameras on their foreheads, effectively training AI robots to replicate their hand movements. “It feels like working in your own grave,” one of the workers remarked, reckoning with his own eventual redundancy. And most recently, apocalyptic dread around the super-rapid development of superintelligence, which can quickly get out of hand on a planetary scale, as has been confessed by AI’s big three—Altman, Amodei and Musk.



When students outsource crucial work to AI tools, it’s not just a shortcut—experts see it as a form of ‘cognitive offloading’

At universities, though, where the development of the mind is the central focus, we have a unique problem at hand. Here, a kind of ‘cognitive colonisation’ is palpable, striking at the very heart of what we do, which is the work of reading, writing and thinking. In the last five years or so, AI has crept into our institutions and altered how these three activities take place. Inside and outside the classrooms, we find students outsourcing this crucial work to AI tools. This is not simply a shortcut. Experts have called this a form of ‘cognitive offloading’ which implies that, in the long run, it effectively shrinks what our minds are capable of. As teachers of literature, we know that the task of reading and thinking for yourself can be both beautiful and hairpulling. It is meant to be that way. For any student, wrestling with a literary text—the particularity of its lines and words—is part and parcel of

the maturation of their thinking. In turn, and with practice, this allows them to read their surrounding worlds and its peculiarities, eventually becoming curious and critical citizens. At the university stage, they must go through the rites of passage where they fumble with each sentence, quibble over its meaning, and struggle individually to stencil their thoughts on a page. We consider this initial struggle a necessary and joyous baptism. In the post-AI landscape though, we see this happening less and less. Many (if not all) students opt for the easy transaction of asking Claude or Gemini: ‘tell me the *point* of this text’, ‘summarise this essay for me’ or simply feed the assessment prompt into the AI engine. As teachers of literature, this has, frankly, been disastrous. As we know, AI does not,

properly speaking, *think*. Instead, it processes patterns. It takes in the raw material of billions of words and sentences at its disposal, a vast jumble of other people’s frames of thinking, and generates what it estimates to be the most probable result. This is often conformist, reached via a path of least resistance, and inevitably absents any possibility of genuine breakthroughs in terms of thought and expression. It leaves little to no room for an individual way of thinking, let alone the outlier-ness of eccentricity, which is the delight of a university classroom. Such forms of thought emerge from patience, practice, poring over texts, and many enjoyable and

frustrating face-to-discussions with peers and instructors, each sedimenting inside us slowly and chiselling the way we think about the world. Not by ChatGPTing an answer. This means that when students rely extensively on AI, they effectively inhibit the possibility of developing their own individual *voice*. Voice, that distinct thing that gathers the alchemical combination of all their life experiences, readings, agreements, disagreements, evolving worldviews. Voice is so central to our pedagogy that one of our key aims is to encourage each student to write as differently as possible from the other; each piece to carry their distinct signature. Whenever we

are able to identify a student just by their writing, we know something has worked. AI has short-circuited this possibility. AI-influenced writing demonstrates uniformity in the place of uniqueness, conformity instead of critical thinking. In such work, we see a mass of correct-sounding, reasonably cogent writing hollowed out of much of the signs of human intentionality. This kind of writing often includes the same examples, their descriptions of events and characters use the same words, they come to the same tepid conclusions, topping it off with ornamental adjectives, as if a shadow assembly line of ideas was at work, instead of quirky, individual minds. For higher education, this confounds our guiding aim of enabling critical thought and imagination. Such cognitive colonisation implies a seismic turn of events. It marks an alarming moment both inside and outside academia.

At the universities, our job then becomes to preserve the endangered species of individual thought. Everything about the university—the way we teach, the way we assess, the way our students interact with knowledge—needs to be attended to and wrenched away from the long arm of AI. We need to find a way to demonstrate to students how joyous and fulfilling the work of thinking on one’s own can be. How the long route, instead of the shortcut, can be deeply enabling, both for their professional lives and for them to grow into people who are fully rounded, always curious and aware of each of their capacities. In the face of the availability of quick AI answers, this will often feel like David taking on Goliath. That’s the sort of task ahead of us. ■

LAVINA JHANGIANI and AKHIL KATYAL
work at the BITS Law School Writing Centre

When students rely on AI, they inhibit the scope of discovering their own voice



Oxford University’s Pitt Rivers Museum will return 39 pieces (skull fragments), seized from Nagaland between 1910 and 1940 and displayed as ‘headhunting trophies’

Museum to return colonial-era objects to Nagaland

India’s long-fought campaign to get Britain to return colonial-era objects in its possession is starting to show results. An Oxford museum has agreed to repatriate a collection of the human remains of Naga people to their descendants—more than 100 years after they were taken. Even as the British Museum (which has one of the biggest collections of Indian-origin objects) continues to drag its feet, the Pitt Rivers Museum has announced that it will return 39 pieces—including a Naga warrior’s cranium and a woman’s skull—to their rightful owners. According to the museum, John Henry Hutton, a British colonial administrator, had seized the pieces between 1910 and 1940. The remains, mostly skull fragments, were part of an exhibit titled ‘Treatment of Dead Enemies’ and displayed under the label ‘headhunting trophies’. Museum Director Professor Laura Van Broekhoven said that the agreement, arrived at after protracted negotiations with Naga elders, would help “reconciliation and healing”. Ellen Konyak of the Forum for Naga Reconciliation said the repatriation would “bring back the light of our ancestors that was dimmed but never extinguished”. Meanwhile, the British Museum continues to play hard ball. More than 90 per cent of its estimated collection of eight million objects originate from other countries—nearly 53,000 are from India. The more contested items among them include the Amaravati Marbles, a collection of 120-plus limestone reliefs and inscriptions from the 2nd century Buddhist stupa in Andhra Pradesh, and the Bimaran

Casket, a gold box set with rubies, dating back to around 50-100 CE. ‘Zionism is racism’, says Green Party In a historic move, Britain’s Green Party has declared Zionism to be a form of racism. At its annual party conference in Brighton, members adopted a motion to this effect despite serious internal differences at the top. After weeks of ill-tempered debate, it was adopted with 1,022 votes for and 813 against. The motion defines Zionism as an ideology in support of ‘an ethnonationalist Jewish state’ and backs a ‘single democratic Palestinian state in all of historic Palestine’. It goes on to say: ‘The real, material,



A Green Party member has it out with a pro-Israel supporter in Brighton



Prime Minister Andy Burnham at the Labour Party conference in Liverpool

manifestation of Zionism has been the historic and ongoing dehumanisation, displacement, dispossession, disenfranchisement and destruction of Palestinians.’ Many of its Jewish members called it “indirect religious discrimination” and warned that the move would be “a terrible signal to send to Jewish members”. It is a brave move at a time when Jews have come to be regarded as inviolable. The Green Party’s message is: They aren’t.

Burnham is best

Not since Tony Blair has a new prime minister made such a splash across the political divide as Andy Burnham has. And to think this is the same man who lost three Labour leadership elections,

including one against his predecessor Keir Starmer. Many sneeringly dismissed him as a chancer when he had a fourth tilt at the premiership even as Starmer’s unravelled. But after he pulled off what to many seemed like an unlikely win, Burnham has been embraced by the nation like a long-lost son come to save it. Burnham’s informal “call me Andy” style and agenda of hope are a far cry from his predecessor’s stuffiness and lack of ideological conviction. His maiden speech at this year’s Labour conference in Liverpool had not just the party faithfuls but even the right-wing media swooning. Consider this from *The Times*, otherwise critical of his left-wing vision: ‘Andy Burnham gave a speech for the ages, a never-to-be forgotten classic. And any rival politician out there who reckons they can pretend otherwise will be taking a first giant leap toward defeat... The hall rose to its feet. In the front row, the cabinet beamed at their leader as though he were their son on his graduation day. [...] Down by the door, a security guard slowly drew his finger across the corner of his eye. There was even a noticeable moistening in some sections of the press tribune.’

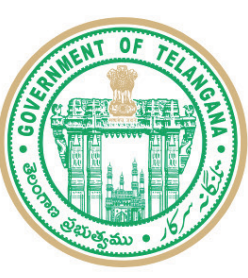
Who ‘bugged’ The Guardian?

News that *The Guardian*’s London office was infested with bedbugs has spawned conspiracy theories: have they been planted by its commercial rivals or right-wing political forces opposed to its liberal agenda? Pest controllers have been called in for the second time in recent months to tackle the infestation. Staff have alleged that management had not been transparent



The Guardian office in London

about how long they had known about the bedbugs. “The level of outrage is palpable,” said a staffer. And, lastly, like much else in modern Britain, its once famously starchy diplomatic service has shed its old snobbery. Its elitist textbooks on diplomatic etiquette are long gone and British diplomats now behave more like ‘normal’ people. One former diplomat recalls a slim green volume titled—what else—*Diplomatic Etiquette*. “I wish I’d kept my copy,” he said. “Two items stand out in my memory. One was that one should never congratulate one’s hostess on the meal, lest this imply she had anything to do with the kitchen. The other was extraordinary. It advised that a junior officer should never sit down on a sofa if his doing so would lead a senior officer (or the wife of a senior officer), desirous of sitting down, to have to sit next to the junior officer. Work that one out.” ■



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