NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY

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

RNI: DELENG/2017/73913, Postal Reg. No. DL(C)-14/1410/2026-28 Magazine Post Reg. No. DL(DS)-30/MP/2025-26-27 License To Post Without Pre Payment No. U(C)-126/2026-28

www.nationalheraldindia.com www.facebook.com/nationalheraldindia/ @NH_India www.navjivanindia.com, www.qaumiawaz.com

New Delhi • 15 March 2026 • Pages: 8 • National • Vol. 9 Issue 21 • ₹20

NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

UNDER THE SIR KNIFE

Will 50 lakh voters 'under adjudication' in Bengal make it to the final list?

▸ P2

HOME & ABROAD

A QUESTION OF FEDERALISM

The Kurian Joseph panel report makes a case for restoring the balance of Centre-State relations

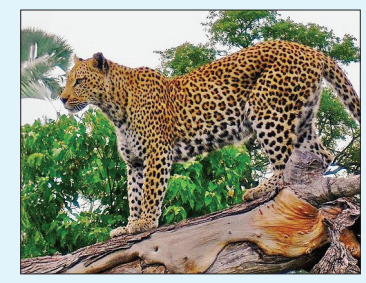
▸ P3

NATION

SHIPPING LEOPARDS TO VANTARA…

…won't solve human-animal conflict in Maharashtra

▸ P4



Why America will not win this war

Ashok Swain

The United States, together with Israel, has once again stepped into a war in the Middle East without a clear objective, without a coherent strategy, and without any realistic understanding of how it will end. The decision to attack Iran appears driven less by security necessity than by domestic political calculations and the desire to reshape the regional balance of power. What began with dramatic airstrikes and triumphant rhetoric is quickly turning into a prolonged confrontation with no achievable victory. The consequences are already extending far beyond the Middle East, accelerating the erosion of international law and order.

Israel's role in shaping the conflict also deserves careful attention. For decades Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has argued that Iran represents an existential threat that must be neutralised. Netanyahu therefore has strong incentives to push for sustained military pressure on Tehran. Yet the strategic burden of a prolonged war will fall primarily on the United States. As Washington becomes more deeply entangled, Israel can gradually reduce its exposure while American forces absorb most of the diplomatic, military and economic costs.

The most striking feature of this conflict is the absence of a consistent rationale. Washington's stated objectives have shifted repeatedly. At first, the goal was to destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities. Soon after it expanded to eliminating ballistic missile programmes. The mission was then described as dismantling Iran's regional proxy networks. At other moments, the language suggested a regime change in Tehran. The shifts in the stated purpose of waging war on Iran reflect the reality that the war was launched without a clearly defined political purpose.

Netanyahu will want sustained military pressure on Iran but the strategic burden of a prolonged war will fall mainly on the US

Photos: **Getty Images**

Public support for another prolonged war is very limited; (*right*) Iranians attend the funeral of IRGC commanders at Enghelab (Revolution) Square in Tehran

Even the explanations offered by senior American officials have exposed this confusion. At one point, US secretary of state Marco Rubio suggested that Washington acted because Israel was preparing to launch its own attack and the US wanted to strike first to prevent Iranian retaliation against American forces. The implication was that Washington had entered the war partly because Israel had already decided to do so. The remark was later softened, but the episode revealed how improvised the rationale for war has been.

Wars are not won simply by destroying targets. They are won when military action produces a political outcome that advances national interests. In the case of Iran, the US has not articulated what such an outcome would look like. Is the goal to weaken Iran sufficiently to force negotiations? Is it to dismantle its military capabilities? Or is it to engineer a total collapse of the regime?

The underlying assumption behind the American attack appears to have been that a rapid decapitation of Iran's leadership would destabilise the regime and force it to accept American demands. The killing of senior figures, including the country's supreme leader, was expected to trigger internal collapse and/or swift capitulation. That expectation reflects a familiar pattern of strategic miscalculation.

Iran is not a fragile state that can be toppled through a few dramatic strikes. It is a deeply institutionalised political system with multiple centres of authority and a powerful security apparatus. Even after losing key leaders, the regime has installed a new supreme leader and continues to function through an extensive network of military, intelligence and ideological institutions. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps alone commands enormous resources, influence and manpower. A political system that has survived more than four decades of internal and external pressure is unlikely to disintegrate overnight.

The belief that Iran would quickly surrender also ignores the country's history. In the 1980s, Iran fought a devastating war with Iraq that went on for eight years and cost hundreds of thousands of lives. Despite suffering massive casualties, economic hardship and international isolation—because Iraq was being supported by both the US and the then USSR—Tehran refused to capitulate. That war profoundly shaped the political culture of Iran. It reinforced a powerful narrative of endurance and resistance against foreign aggression. Expecting that the same society would now surrender after a few weeks of bombard- ment is not strategic analysis, it is wishful thinking.

The US approach also betrays a fundamental contradiction. Political transformation in a country of more than ninety million people cannot be imposed through missile strikes. Yet sending American ground forces into Iran would mean entering a war of enormous scale and uncertainty. Iran's armed forces and affiliated militias together number close to a million fighters. Occupying such a vast country, with a difficult terrain, would require a commitment far greater than anything the US has attempted during its wars in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Even the idea of installing a more favourable leadership in Tehran now appears increasingly unrealistic. President Donald Trump himself acknowledged that many individuals once considered potential successors have already been killed in American and Israeli airstrikes. Washington is trapped in a familiar dilemma. It can destroy infrastructure and eliminate leaders, but it cannot control what follows. Rather than producing a moderate new leadership, the decapitation strategy has hardened the regime. The succession of Mojtaba Khamenei following the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has consolidated power among the most hardline elements of the political system.

Domestic politics in the United States further complicate the situation. Rising casualties, increasing oil prices and growing economic uncertainty are already generating pressure at home. Public support for another prolonged Middle Eastern war is very limited. As the costs mount, the temptation for the White House will be to declare victory prematurely and look for an exit. Yet a hurried withdrawal after partial destruction will not eliminate Iran's capabilities or ambitions; it will simply leave the region even more unstable.

Iran understands this dynamic very well. Tehran has long known that American military power is formidable but politically constrained. By prolonging the conflict and raising its costs through regional retaliation, pressure on energy markets and asymmetric attacks, Iran exploits those constraints.

Continued on page 2

Who owns/controls our digital identities?

SIM binding is not the cybersafety silver bullet the government makes it out to be

Herjinder

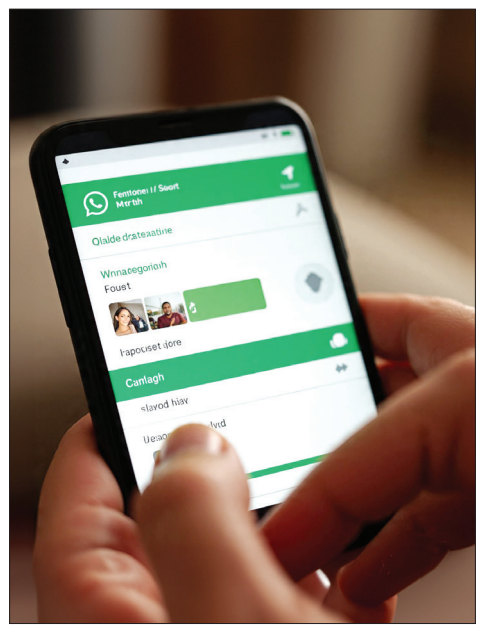
India's new SIM-binding mandate for messaging platforms, which came into effect on 1 March 2026, could fundamentally alter the way millions of citizens access and control their digital identities. Introduced under the Telecom Cyber Security Rules, the directive issued by the Department of Telecommunications requires messaging applications to keep user accounts continuously linked to the physical SIM card used during registration. If the SIM is removed, deactivated, swapped or inactive, access to the account can be blocked until the original SIM is reinserted and verified.

The rule applies to major messaging platforms including WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal and others that rely on mobile numbers for authentication. While the government says the measure is aimed at curbing cyberfraud and misuse of mobile numbers, the implications for privacy, digital ownership and user autonomy are far-reaching.

Take the example of WhatsApp. Under the new regime, a user cannot access their account if the specific SIM card used during registration is not present in the primary device. In practical terms, this means that access to one's personal conversations, contacts and digital history becomes dependent on possession of a particular SIM card.

This creates an unusual paradox: the user who created the account, built the contact network and generated the data may no longer have full control over it. Instead, access is effectively determined by the SIM card.

Ironically, even the SIM card itself is not legally owned by the user. Telecom subscribers are technically SIM holders, not SIM owners. The SIM card remains the property of the telecom operator that issued it. Consequently, control over messaging accounts is indirectly tied to infrastructure owned by telecom companies rather than to the individual who created the account. This shift raises fundamental questions about digital ownership and user rights in the age of platform-based communication.



Cyber law expert Pawan Duggal told *National Herald*, "The SIM-binding mandate is on shaky ground. Since no law was actually passed by Parliament for it, the mandate could easily be contested in court."

India's constitutional framework has already recognised privacy as a fundamental right. In the landmark *K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* case, a nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court of India unanimously ruled that the Right to Privacy is intrinsic to the Right to Life and Personal Liberty guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution of India.

The SIM-binding mandate raises deep concerns about user privacy and exposure to bad actors

The judgment explicitly recognised informational privacy—the right of individuals to control their personal data.

SIM binding complicates this principle. If a person's digital account can only be accessed through an operator-owned SIM card, their ability to control their own digital information becomes conditional. Critics argue that informational privacy becomes difficult to protect when the user is not even the ultimate controller of access to their own account.

Concerns about the new rules are not limited to privacy activists. Technology industry groups have also raised legal questions. The Broadband India Forum, which represents global technology companies such as Google and Meta, has warned that the mandate may exceed the statutory authority of the telecom regulator. In its communication to the government, the forum argued that extending telecom regulations to internet platforms through delegated legislation risks regulatory overlap and jurisdictional conflict. It also raised concerns about possible violations of the constitutional Right to Equality.

According to the industry body, forcing digital platforms to comply with telecom-style regulations could create inconsistent compliance requirements across sectors and add unnecessary operational burdens.

Another critical concern is the role of mobile numbers themselves. A phone number is considered personally identifiable information (PII).

Continued on page 2

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
www.nationalheraldindia.com
15 MARCH 2026

America will not win this war

Continued from page 1

The longer the war continues, the more Washington will be forced to choose between escalation and retreat. Neither option guarantees success.

The broader geopolitical consequences could be profound. The United States has repeatedly declared that its primary strategic focus lies in the Indo-Pacific and the challenge posed by China. Yet a prolonged war with Iran would once again divert American attention, resources and military assets back to the Middle East. Munitions stockpiles will be depleted, naval deployments stretched and diplomatic energy consumed by crisis management in a region Washington has long wished to deprioritise.

For China, this distraction presents a strategic opportunity. Beijing does not need to intervene directly in the conflict to benefit from it. As the United States commits itself to another open-ended confrontation in the Middle East, China can continue to expand its economic influence, strengthening military capabilities and deepening partnerships across the world. Strategic competition between great powers is ultimately a contest of endurance. A superpower that repeatedly exhausts itself in wars weakens its ability to compete elsewhere.

This is the deeper irony of the current conflict. A war launched to demonstrate American power and reinforce its global leadership status may instead expose the limits of American leverage and strategic judgment. ■

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

Who owns/controls our digital identities?

Continued from page 1

Linking it tightly to multiple digital platforms expands the scope of potential privacy risks.

Once a number becomes the central authentication key across several services, several dangers emerge:

- Data leaks: If a single platform is compromised, attackers may gain access to the mobile number associated with multiple accounts.
- Unwanted contact or harassment: Phone numbers exposed online can easily become tools for spam, abuse or stalking.
- Cross-platform tracking: Companies or malicious actors can track a user's activities across platforms through the same number.

The new system could also intensify risks of targeted harassment and doxxing. If a person's phone number becomes the universal key to their online presence, exposing that number could reveal multiple digital identities at once.

For journalists, political commentators or activists—who often face online trolling—the stakes could be particularly high. Civil liberties advocates also worry about the potential for expanded surveillance. Because SIM cards are issued only after Know-Your-Customer (KYC) verification, every SIM is already tied to a verified identity. When messaging accounts are permanently linked to these SIM cards, authorities theoretically gain an easier pathway to correlate digital communications with real-world identities.

Duggal asserts that the mandate infringes upon the right to privacy, right to expression and, by extension, right to life.

The government has defended the measure as a tool to combat cyber fraud and scams. India has witnessed a surge in digital fraud, including 'digital arrest' scams and SIM-swap frauds.

Authorities believe tighter SIM verification could help reduce such crimes. But experts caution that SIM binding is not a technological silver bullet.

Cybercriminals are quick to adapt. Instead of disappearing, crimes may simply evolve into new forms such as SIM cloning, where attackers duplicate a victim's SIM card to gain access to accounts tied to it. If messaging access becomes entirely dependent on the SIM, cloning it becomes an even more valuable target.

Similarly, fraudsters could exploit stolen or illegally obtained SIM cards to create fully verified digital identities.

For millions of Indians who rely on messaging apps for everyday communication, business, journalism and activism, the consequences may soon become visible in daily life.

The real debate is not just about SIM cards—but about who ultimately controls the digital identities that define modern communication. ■

Why is it taboo to discuss corruption in the judiciary?

Yogendra Yadav

At first glance, the whole episode looked like a storm in a teacup. But if you look a little more closely, the uproar over a brief reference to corruption in the judiciary in an NCERT textbook points to a deeper challenge confronting our democratic system. The real question is not who hatched a conspiracy to defame the judiciary and why. The real question is what happened under the cover of stopping the alleged conspiracy.

The story itself was rather ordinary. After a gap of nearly twenty years, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)—the body that publishes textbooks for CBSE schools—has started releasing a new set of textbooks. One of these is the Class VIII Social Science textbook. In the second part of the book, which introduces students to the country's political system, there is a chapter on the judiciary. After providing a general overview, the chapter includes a small section on the problems associated with it. One page carries the subheading 'Corruption in the Judiciary'. The entire controversy revolves around this page.

The interesting thing is that there is nothing in this section that could reasonably be called controversial. I'm not enamoured of the NCERT's new textbooks. But I see nothing objectionable in this portion—no sweeping claim that the entire judiciary is corrupt, no sensational tales of wrongdoing in the courts. The book simply notes, in a stiff official tone, that like all democratic institutions, the judiciary too faces certain challenges. It then says, quite plainly: 'People encounter corruption at various levels of the judiciary. As a result, it becomes even harder for poor and marginalised people to obtain justice. Due to a shortage of judges, complex legal procedures and weak infrastructure, the judicial system also faces the burden of a very large number of pending cases.'

The text then goes on to explain what steps the judiciary has taken to address these challenges—mentioning the code of conduct framed by the Supreme Court and the existence of internal inquiry mechanisms. One could certainly debate whether such information is of any value to students in Class VIII. One might ask whether the book also discusses corruption in the executive and the legislature. But there was nothing here that could possibly amount to contempt of the judiciary.

Now look at the uproar that followed. A national daily splashed this section on its front page, as if the textbook had attempted some radical experiment. In great haste, the Supreme Court took suo motu cognizance of the matter—the same Supreme Court that rarely takes suo motu notice of hate speeches printed daily in newspapers or of the lies and venom that find their way into textbooks. The Chief Justice of India thanked the media for bringing the 'truth' to light. Pulling up the NCERT, the court suggested the possibility of a deep conspiracy and issued a show cause notice to the NCERT director. For good measure, both the court order and the show cause notice dangle the threat of possible 'contempt of court' proceedings.

Seeing such swift action from the court, many must have wondered: if only the court displayed the same urgency and sternness in other matters as well. Many orders of the Supreme Court gather dust in government files. Every day, judicial directives are flouted—whether it is orders to halt bulldozer justice or directives to abolish the practice of manual scavenging. One only wishes the Supreme Court would brandish its powers under the Contempt of Courts Act in these cases too.

But who would dare question the Supreme Court? Or say: Your Lordships, there is nothing objectionable in the textbook. Spend a day in any courthouse listening to conversations about the corruption that people encounter there, and you'll forget about this book. Who would remind the court that only a few months ago the entire country read reports about the exploits of a judge of the Delhi High Court? Or that in the past ten years as many as 8,630 complaints of corruption have been registered against members of the higher judiciary? Who would ask how many of these complaints were investigated? Or how many judges adhered to their own code of conduct?

The NCERT gave in without offering a single argument in defence of its own textbook

The NCERT promptly surrendered. Without offering a single argument in defence of its own textbook, it issued an apology. The government threw up its hands, and the education ministry washed its hands of the matter. The book was not merely withdrawn; copies already distributed were recalled. As though in a country flooded day and night with fake news, hate speeches, pamphlets and incendiary films, this Class VIII textbook was the most dangerous piece of literature going around.

Whatever the intentions of the honourable judges may have been, the message of this order will be interpreted in only one way: no one should dare point a finger at the judiciary. It inevitably raises the suspicion that at a time when serious questions are being raised about the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, the institution is choosing to silence criticism rather than introspect.

The government will not object—as long as the judiciary does not prevent it from silencing its own critics. A tacit partnership, where the judiciary remains silent when the government gags its critics and the government keeps mum when the judiciary does the same, can only be deeply injurious to our democracy.

The issue is not a Class VIII textbook; the issue is the book we call the Constitution. ■

'Under adjudication' till it's too late?

Kunal Chatterjee

Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, on a two-day visit (9-10 March) to Kolkata with two other election commissioners, was welcomed with black flags. Not only at the airport but also on his way to the Westin, a luxury hotel in New Town, Rajarhat. The hotel—owned by a Marwari business family originally from Bihar—enjoys the patronage of Union ministers and visiting BJP leaders and chief ministers.

Given that the city has over 5,000 hotels, was it "just a coincidence that the election commissioners chose to stay in the same hotel?" wondered TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee. Chief minister Mamata Banerjee picked up the gauntlet, attacking the EC for creating a mess and sat on dharna.

The war of words took an ugly turn when district magistrates and police superintendents, invited to a meeting with the full bench of the ECI, were summoned to Nabanna, the state secretariat, to brief the political bosses. The CEC took offence and told officials that he would not brook such behaviour. If they didn't behave, they would pay the price after the election in May. Mamata retorted: would the CEC still be in office after May?

The state assembly ends on 7 May and elections have to be completed before that. Most political parties including the BJP, the CPM and the Congress have sought that polling—to elect 294 MLAs—be held in one or two phases. Five years ago, the Assembly elections had stretched over eight phases.

The standoff over the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, logical discrepancies and micro-observers was temporarily put aside by the Supreme Court's 10 March directive to set up appellate tribunals to resolve the status of those marked 'under adjudication'. If their names are struck off the voters' list, they can approach these tribunals. "The door has opened to some extent," said Banerjee, as she ended her sit-in demonstration.

However, the fate of the 60 lakh voters 'under adjudication' remains uncertain, even as judicial officers from West Bengal, Odisha and Jharkhand are engaged in verifying their claims following an earlier Supreme Court order.

Gyanesh Kumar declared that as of 10 March, 10.6 lakh names from the adjudicated list had been 'cleared' by judicial officers, without elaborating if they have been cleared to vote. That leaves 50 lakh more. While these numbers stem from 1.67 crore hearings, including 1.36 crore 'logical discrepancies' and 31 lakhs voters said to have been left unmapped with the 2002 electoral rolls, there is no clarity on how many of them are now eligible to vote.

The CEC said, "Anyone cleared by the judiciary from Bengal's adjudicated voter list will make it to the final rolls." He added that voters still facing issues could enrol their names by submitting Form 6 with proof of Indian citizenship. However, uncertainties persist on how the appellate tribunals are to be set up, the procedures they would follow and whether all appeals can be disposed of before the election.

Two questions, asked repeatedly at the CEC's media briefing, remained unanswered.

How many Bangladeshis, infiltrators and Rohingyas had been detected in the state during the SIR ? Why were voters who had already filled enumeration forms and produced requisite documentation, who had been verified physically, had attended hearings to clear misconceptions and been found to be mapped with the 2002 voters' list still 'under adjudication'?

A smile was all they got in response.

*

The Trinamool Congress continues to allege an unholy nexus between the EC and the BJP. It claims the SIR process is biased and that removal of pro-TMC voters (read: Muslims and backward communities) will work in the BJP's favour.

"The BJP gets pleasure in depriving Bengal and snatching people's voting rights," said TMC leader Kunal Ghosh. The CPM is in favour of weeding out bogus voters but opposes the misuse of power. "Our stand is not against the SIR per se but against the misuse of the exercise to delete names of genuine voters from any community," explained state secretary Mohammad Salim. Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury raised the alarm over voter exclusion on account of "minor discrepancies".

Photo Getty Images

Thousands of voters in West Bengal are 'under adjudication' over minor discrepancies

Advocate Anwarul Haque of the Malda district and sessions court confirmed that the district sub-registrar's office had unilaterally stopped registering properties involving people listed 'under adjudication' in the final voters' list. While the district magistrate denied the existence of any such instruction, S.K. Asiruddin, a resident of north Sunny Park in Malda town confirmed that the sale of his plot of land had been stalled because the buyer was found to be 'under adjudication'.

This incident points to possible complications for the 60 lakh voters listed thus. Rumours circulating in the state suggest that those disenfranchised by the EC could find their bank accounts frozen, be barred from owning mobile phones, making transactions or registering property. These fears likely explain the number of deaths due to natural causes (like hypertension) and increased cases of depression and suicides reported from different parts of West Bengal.

"I am getting calls from people every day, asking why their names are missing from the final list. Some are crying; some are even ready to pay a price to ensure they get on the first supplementary list," says Abhijit Bhattacharya, a Booth Level Officer (BLO) from Kolkata. Bhattacharya pointed out that most of these voters are genuine but have been flagged due to a 'logical discrepancy' or 'wrong mapping', mostly attributed to mistakes made by the ECI's own apps, algorithms or personnel.

Basudeb Mondal, another BLO, is optimistic that most of the names pending adjudication will eventually be included in the supplementary lists, as the people are genuine. "Since the officers could not verify all the submitted documents in a very short time, a large number of names are showing up in the adjudication list."

For the TMC, the race is on to shift as many names as possible from the 'pending' to the 'regular' list. On the other hand, keeping the pending list long through process delays or by getting embroiled in legal complications works in the BJP's favour. "They have not filed the proper documents, and hence their names were struck off," says Biswajit Roy, a BJP leader from Malda district.

According to an EC source, adjudication papers have been assigned to judicial officers on the basis of demographic distribution of people and number of judges available. "There are some judges who have been allotted 2,000 cases, whereas there are others who have 7,000. They are looking into logical discrepancy and comparing the details in the final list."

A judicial official involved in the process says that with 600 judges from Bengal and 150 from other states, it will take more than 90 days to complete the process. "There is a high chance that many in the pending list, even if they are genuine voters, may lose their chance to vote."

The TMC has deployed its vast organisation and hit the ground to carry out its own SIR. Armed with the 'final' published list, party workers are visiting all households to physically verify if the residents present tally with those who appear on the list. It is this organisational muscle that will eventually make the difference on polling day. ■

With 50 lakh more voters pending clearance, and more than 90 days needed to complete the process, delays and legal complications will work in the BJP's favour

This Newspaper is published by Pawan Kumar Bansal from Herald House, 5-A, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi – 110002 on behalf of The Associated Journals Limited, edited by Rajesh Jha and printed by Pawan Kumar Bansal at The Associated Journals Limited, Herald House, 5-A, Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, New Delhi – 110002 and The Indian Express Pvt Ltd Press, A-8, Sector 7, Gautam Budh Nagar, Noida, Uttar Pradesh-201301

How Trump and the mighty US were humbled

Ashis Ray

In capitals around the world there is talk of a prolonged war between Iran and US–Israel and the collateral damage this will inflict on Sunni Arab nations in the Persian Gulf. Most of these nations have protested claiming neutrality, but many host US military bases on their soil and at least some were covertly in favour of the US action.

The war wasn't showing any outward signs of abating at the time of writing, but it might end quite abruptly—before the end of March, if not earlier. This is because the world—the US included—has been plunged into acute energy-supply shortages and public opinion will likely pressure US president Donald Trump to do a volte-face.

Trump is scheduled to visit China from 31 March, and it is most unlikely that such a summit will take place while the war, where Washington and Beijing are awkwardly on opposite sides, is still on.

Crude oil prices have rocketed to levels not seen since the Russian invasion of Ukraine four years ago, and unless the war ends and supplies resume through the Strait of Hormuz, the world could be in for the biggest oil shock ever. Gas prices, too, have risen to a four-year high, with a force majeure shutdown announced by the world's sixth largest producer—Qatar. Even releases from the IEA's (International Energy Agency) emergency stockpile won't help beyond a limited period. The world's daily demand is an estimated 104 million barrels a day.

On 10 March, Trump's social media post claimed the US mission was 'very far ahead of schedule' and 'very complete, pretty much'. At a public event, he was heard saying "we are ahead of our initial timeline by a lot… we have taken out the leadership twice and maybe three times".

These are signs he is preparing the ground for a face-saving exit.

*

Trump had demanded an 'unconditional surrender' by Iran, but that hasn't happened. So, he might wave the elimination of Khamenei Sr. and hits on Iran's defensive shield to claim 'mission accomplished'.

In a televised address to the nation on 21 June 2025 (the day of the US strikes on Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan), Trump had claimed that "Iran's key nuclear enrichment facilities have been completely and totally obliterated". However, earlier this month (on 9 March) the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) head Rafael Grossi was quoted by *Reuters* as saying, "What we believe is that Isfahan had until our last inspection a bit more than 200 kg, maybe a little bit more than that, of 60 per cent (enriched) uranium." This stock is believed to be in tunnels that survived the strikes, and if enriched further, can yield sufficient explosive material for 10 nuclear weapons. The war has surely depleted Iran's arsenal of missiles but it's not spent yet. Also, Russian drone expertise, gained from its war with Ukraine, has been made available to Iran.

The despatch of US Navy aircraft carriers to the Strait of Hormuz was more gunboat diplomacy than a forerunner to an all-out assault on Iran.

On 26 February, Oman's foreign minister Badr Albusaidi, who was mediating talks between US and Iranian officials in Geneva, declared the two sides had made 'significant progress'. Experts from the two sides were supposed to meet in Vienna the following week to take the discussion forward.

For Israel's trigger-happy prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu—who has clung to power in the face of corruption charges at home and a warrant of arrest from the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes in Gaza—a US-Iran rapprochement is bad news.

Trump, who has nurtured ambitions to make a deal with Tehran that he can take credit for, betrayed the ongoing dialogue, reportedly because he didn't want Israel to take singular credit for the termination of Iran's supreme leader. He even crowed that *he* will decide Iran's new leadership.

Trump is now frustrated that even this strike has not produced a 'capitulation' of the Islamic regime. Not even after considerably greater US expenditure since last year to whip up a people's rebellion in Iran. Liberal Iranians, understandably livid with the suppression, are easy prey to such inducements. But the January uprising, partly fanned by the CIA, failed—and the crackdown by a ruthless Islamic establishment has claimed the lives of thousands.

Iran is a divided nation. Large sections of the country fervently wish for an ouster of the ruling Mullahs. But Mojtaba Khamenei, the new supreme leader, could initially benefit from a sympathy factor—his mother, wife and a son also died in the deadly attack to kill his father.

So, a regime change may not immediately be on the cards.

*

Meanwhile, fuel prices are soaring, and Americans are feeling the pinch of the rising cost of food and other essentials. Trump faces midterm elections in November. Around 60 per cent of Americans disapprove of the ongoing war; war; that number may balloon as the body bags of servicemen return to the US.

The war and the concomitant crude oil crisis have meant that US sanctions on the purchase of Russian oil are lifting, an embarrassing sideshow of which was the announcement that India was now "allowed" to resume purchases of Russian oil. Trump was upbeat about a phone call with Russia president Vladimir Putin, who signalled his country's willingness to provide oil and gas to Europe. It will be a coup for the Kremlin if Europe is compelled to resume business with Russia.

Onto the continuing strategic blunders of the Modi government, his presence in Tel Aviv 24 hours before Israel's attack on Iran was diplomatic hara-kiri. Modi's naked bias and his silence on the assassination of Khamenei has sunk India to a new low in the eyes of the developing world.

Contrast this with India's deft manoeuvres under P.V. Narasimha Rao to upgrade diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, after which India was seen as a neutral party both Israelis and Palestinians could turn to. Modi's lunge towards Netanyahu has wrecked India's standing in the Global South. Under the current government, India has consistently been on the wrong side of UN General Assembly votes on Israel, and will find itself in a minority on the West Asia issue at the BRICS summit India is scheduled to host later this year. ■

Photo: Getty Images

Trumpspeak On 10 March, Trump's social media post claimed the US mission was 'very far ahead of schedule' and 'very complete, pretty much'

The war might end quite abruptly because public opinion in the US will likely pressure Donald Trump to do a volte-face

ONOE and the question of federalism

The Kurian Joseph committee report calls for sweeping reforms to restore the balance of Centre-State relations

A.J. Prabal

In December 2025, the Lok Sabha extended the tenure of the joint parliamentary committee examining the draft 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) bill to the last week of the 2026 Budget session. The legislation is likely to be introduced and passed before the session ends on 2 April 2026, unless deferred. It has already been ruled that the bill will not need ratification from 50 per cent of the states.

The Centre has increasingly been flexing its muscles to show who's the boss. States have been made to surrender both autonomy and finances without promised gains, while Union cesses and surcharges—rising from Rs 1.99 lakh crore in 2016-17 to Rs 5.82 lakh crore in 2026-27—have shrunk the divisible pool. Politicisation of constitutional offices and interference in state policies, from education and health to language, has intensified, as seen in the abrupt reshuffling of governors.

All of a piece with the Centre showing the states the middle finger. And all the more reason why the Justice Kurian Joseph Committee report on centre-state relations is so significant.

Chaired by a former Supreme Court judge, Part I of the report—in Tamil and English—was tabled on 16 February in the Tamil Nadu assembly. It covered 10 key subjects, including language policy, the appointment and role of Governors and state responsibilities in framing policies related to education, health, delimitation, elections and GST.

The integration of 552 princely states with British India between 1947 and 1950 shaped the Constitution's tilt towards a strong Centre. But, argued M.K. Stalin while appointing the committee in April 2025, this model has failed to deliver.

The report notes that despite the Supreme Court's emphatic ruling in *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India* (1994) that federalism is part of the 'basic structure of the Constitution', the drift towards the Centre continues. On the move towards ONOE, the committee notes that the draft legislation 'mandates truncated tenures, unexpired-term elections, and confers unguided discretion on the Election Commission to defer assembly polls… with benefits overstated and harms structural, the proposal violates the Basic Structure and should be withdrawn'.

Empowering the states, the committee argues, 'is not to weaken the Union, but to right-size it—enabling it to focus on genuinely national responsibilities while restoring to the states the autonomy essential for effective governance… a Union that diffuses its energies across functions better performed by states and local bodies risks distraction from the larger national challenges that only it can address'.

In his letter to chief ministers, accompanying the report, M.K. Stalin wrote, 'Large ministries exist in New Delhi that duplicate states' functions and often attempt to steer the states' priorities through micromanagement and procedural oversight'.

In one of several interviews last year, Justice Kurian Joseph pointed out that while many—including responsible leaders—say 'nation first,' it should actually be 'Constitution first'.

"It is the Constitution that has constituted the nation. Without it, India is not India," he said, adding that in changing times, "the relationship of the Centre and the states is something to be examined periodically. The fiscal relationship, the administrative relationship, the legislative relationship, in all these, the need of the hour must be tested."

*

In 1967, C.N. Annadurai, Tamil Nadu's first DMK chief minister, had quipped that just as a goat did not require a beard, a state too did not really require a governor.

Present chief minister, M.K. Stalin—whose running battle with governor R.N. Ravi is no secret—asserts, "In a democracy, governments are to be run by elected representatives, not by ceremonial appointees." On 12 March, Ravi replaced Bengal governor C.V. Ananda Bose, following his sudden resignation weeks before assembly elections in both states. Neither state was consulted.

The committee recommends that governors be appointed from a panel of three names approved by the state legislative assembly and given a single, non-renewable five-year term. It suggests that governors be removed before their term only through a resolution of the state assembly and the 13th schedule of the Constitution be redrawn to limit the discretionary powers of the governors.

Here's a look at some key recommendations.

Article 368 A major structural concern identified by the committee is the flexibility of the constitutional amendment process under Article 368. This, it argues, allows significant alterations to federal balance without robust ratification by states or public consultation.

All constitutional amendments, the committee recommends, should require a two-thirds majority in each House of Parliament and most amendments should require ratification by two-thirds of the states representing two-thirds of India's population. Amendments affecting particular states should require ratification by those states alone and mandatory public consultation of three months should precede the introduction of constitutional amendment Bills.

Articles 2 and 3 The committee red flags Parliament's unilateral power under Article 3 to reorganise state boundaries as inconsistent with the idea of states as secure constitutional units in a federation. Creation of a new state should require state's consent or, failing that, a referendum in the affected area. No territorial reorganisation should be undertaken when a state is under President's Rule. A new Article 3A should prohibit the creation of new Union Territories and mandate periodic referendums for existing ones.

Separate Election Commissions The Committee recommends limiting the Election Commission of India to conducting elections to the Lok Sabha, the Rajya Sabha and Union territories while entrusting state assembly elections to independent state election commissions. It calls for the withdrawal of the Constitution One Hundred and Twenty-ninth Amendment Bill, 2024, which proposes simultaneous elections, terming it harmful to federal balance and legislative accountability.

Anti-defection law The committee proposes a six-year ban for defectors from contesting elections, deletion of the merger exception and treating strategic resignations as defections. It also recommends transferring adjudication from the Speaker to high courts with strict time limits, criminalising inducements for defection.

Give education back to states The committee recommends reversing the 42nd constitutional amendment and moving education, including medical education, back to the State List. It also recommends freeing top universities from central regulatory control and restricting the Union government's interventions strictly to academic standards. It recommends disbanding the National Testing Agency, abolishing NEET and NExT by amending the National Medical Commission Act, 2019 and replacing the all-India quota with a voluntary state-determined quota.

GST Council reforms and fiscal autonomy The committee proposes reducing or eliminating the Union's veto power, clarifying that GST Council recommendations are advisory in nature and allowing states to vary SGST rates within a limited band. It recommends an independent GST Council Secretariat, a statutory GST Dispute Settlement Authority chaired by a retired Supreme Court judge, instituting an annual GST rate calendar and enforcing a 'one product one rate' principle.

*

Other important recommendations include freezing delimitation till 2126, extending the inter-state seat-allocation freeze based on the 1971 Census till 2126, or until total fertility rates converge; declaring English a permanent link language; separate Union and state delimitation commissions and equal representation of states in the Rajya Sabha, with six seats per state and abolition of nominated members to the Rajya Sabha. ■

Part I of the Kurian panel report was tabled in the Tamil Nadu assembly on 16 February

Empowering the states, the Kurian panel report argues, 'is not to weaken the Union, but to right-size it'

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
www.nationalheraldindia.com
15 MARCH 2026

When fat cats get favoured over big cats

Is shipping leopards to Vantara the way to reduce human-animal conflict? Think again, says Rashme Sehgal

Animal conservationists are aghast at Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis's recent decision to relocate 50 leopards from state rescue centres to the Reliance-owned Vantara (Greens Zoological Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre). Fadnavis, who heads the Maharashtra State Board for Wildlife (SBWL) claims this will help mitigate animal-man conflict. Jitendra Ramgaokar, chief conservator of forests (territorial) from the Maharashtra cadre, said, "Vantara is well equipped to handle leopards that have allegedly been attacking villagers".

Retired Indian Forest Service (IFS) officer Dr Uma Shankar Singh, who served as director of Lucknow Zoo, decries this trend of handing animals over to Vantara. "Rescue centres have to be site specific, climate specific and need specific; the whole purpose of a rescue and rehabilitation centre is to treat animals before returning them to the wild."

Our politicians and bureaucrats think otherwise.

In the last four years, Vantara has emerged as the largest privately-owned zoo in the world, housing over 2,000 species. Between 2019 and 2023, Vantara acquired over 3,819 wild animals, including exotics. Many came from South Africa—a country notorious for breeding big cats for profit. Independent reports indicated that Vantara imported 50 hybrid lions, 40 hybrid tigers, 40 cheetahs, 10 servals and 20 giraffes from South Africa. Official records claim the numbers are much smaller.

So smitten is our political class by Vantara that Madhya Pradesh chief minister Mohan Yadav visited the facility several times and persuaded the MP Tiger Foundation Samiti to sign an MoU with Vantara to set up similar centres in Ujjain, Jabbalpur and Uno.

Additional chief secretary (forest) Ashok Varnal gushed that apart from Vantara providing scientific expertise on gene mapping, "tiger experts from across the globe" would prepare a database "for conservation, management and research purposes".

Sounds great—if there are any tigers left to map. In 2025, Madhya Pradesh lost 55 tigers while Maharashtra lost 41. In the first six weeks of 2026 alone, MP lost eleven tigers while Maharashtra lost eight.

It's even more grim when it comes to leopards. Maharashtra recorded 40 leopard deaths between January and April 2025. Maharashtra's lackadaisical attitude is evident from its demand that leopards be removed from Schedule 1 of the Wildlife Protection Act. This would immediately strip them of protection levels and reduce legal restrictions on their capture. The state government also demanded—and received—permission from the Centre to neuter leopards as a means of de-escalating human-wildlife conflict.

Environmentalist Renu Paul points out where the real problem lies. "The decimation of Indian forests is forcing wildlife into human-dominated landscapes, including sugarcane fields. The single main cause for the rise in human-wildlife conflict is the loss of habitat."

R. Sreenivasa Murthy, retired IFS officer from the Madhya Pradesh cadre, believes the Centre set a wrong precedent by initiating "so many amendments to facilitate Vantara, including an amendment to CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). If Anant Ambani and his team were determined to 'reduce human-wildlife conflict', they could have collaborated with the government by providing financial help."

The Maharashtra government seems to be working overtime to help industrialists at the expense of ecology. In January 2026, Fadnavis chaired the SBWL meeting that gave the green-signal to opencast iron-ore mining in the ecologically sensitive Tadoba-Andhari tiger corridor. At risk is the destruction of over 18,000 trees and the displacement of at least 60 big cats. (Environmental activist Bandu Dhotre—who was on hunger strike against the proposed mining project since its clearance—was forcibly removed from the protest site on 9 March and shifted to a hospital.)

Next on their 'hitlist' is the Sanjay Gandhi National Park—the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation has already submitted a master plan to build homestays, retreats and commercial villages on this 103,840 hectare green oasis in Borivali.

Photo: Getty Images

Grim picture Maharashtra recorded 40 leopard deaths between January and April 2025

India has nearly 425 rescue services and 570+ sanctuaries that play a crucial role in rescuing injured or displaced wild animals

*

Readers may recall that in 2025, the Maharashtra government's transfer of the elephant Mahadevi to Vantara had sparked public protest. The Jain community had demanded she be moved to a government facility rather than be handed over to a private enterprise.

India already has 20 exclusive recognised centres for wildlife, in addition to numerous off-display rescue facilities attached to the 155 zoos recognised under Section 38-H of the Wild Life (Protection) Act. As of October 2025, India has around 425 wildlife rescue services and more than 570 authorised wildlife sanctuaries that, along with NGOs, play a crucial role in rescuing and rehabilitating injured or displaced wild animals.

Most IFS officers are furious at the importance being given to Vantara. "We have enough inhouse expertise to take care of our tigers and leopards. But if our political class abdicates responsibility and singles out officers who protest, the cadre will, by and large, remain quiet," said an officer on condition of anonymity.

Take Assam's Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation. Strategically located near the Kaziranga National Park, it has handled over 5,000 emergencies; 60 per cent of the injured animals were successfully returned to the wild.

A senior forest officer from eastern Assam asks why even healthy elephants from the northeast were sent to Jamnagar, over 3,000 km away. These elephants should have been transferred to the forest department for patrolling duties. Keeping them in semi-wild conditions rather than in sheds would allow them to socialise and even mate with wild elephants.

Besides, Vantara's location is highly unsuitable: right next to Reliance's mammoth petrochemical complex. Not only is it highly polluting, there is a high risk of accidents and flash fires.

Unfazed, Vantara is expanding. They are presently 'looking after' the Gujarat state zoo at Kevadia. Nityanand Srivastava, chief wildlife warden for the state, told media that since "wildlife management has become weak, it is important for companies with passion for wildlife to come in."

Vantara has acquired 60 leopards from Junagadh's Sakkarbaug zoo and two leopards from the Guwahati zoo. It has sourced animals from the Maharashtra customs and forest department, the Dhauladhar nature park in Himachal Pradesh, the Nagaland Zoological Park and the Delhi Zoological Park. With rumours that Vantara was looking to buy as many as 10,000 elephants, even the price of elephants shot up!

Vantara has also bought a tea estate located next to the Kaziranga National Park.

Observers say that given India's recent dilution of regulations against wildlife trading, Vantara might eventually set up a breeding farm. Others sense the conglomerate is planning to create private reserves outside protected areas. As Anant Ambani told a journalist in a recent interview, "What you've seen now is only 8-10 per cent of my vision."

Retired IFS officer Prakriti Srivastava says, "Instead of protecting and preserving our vast forests and biodiversity, the government seems hell-bent on privatising our key national resources. One reason wildlife is typically entrusted to the State is because animals continue to be sustained over generations. What will happen to the animals if these private groups lose interest in this project? In Africa, animals are known to have starved once second generation owners took over."

"No one knows what the end-game is," says Dr Uma Shankar Singh. "China, for example, has started tiger farming for commercial sale or trade of tiger parts. Importing animals is tricky because one doesn't know what virus, bacteria and other zoonotic diseases they may be carrying. I know just how fragile these animals are."

Dr Singh has written several letters to the prime minister and ministry officials against an organisation that he describes as "both illegitimate and illegal". He has, expectedly, not received any reply, yet. ■

Dial down the hype, dial up the delivery

The new high-speed trains overpromise and underdeliver, discovers Avay Shukla

I've said it before and I'll say it again for the doubtful benefit of this hearing-impaired government—putting old wine in new bottles doesn't change the wine for the better. A prime example is the Indian Railways and its slew of hyped-up new trains—Vande Bharat, Tejas, Namo Bharat and others— along with the claim that they have transformed the way Indians travel. They haven't. They have just made travel more expensive.

Last month, I had to go to my hometown, Kanpur, to revitalise my withering roots. I decided to travel by the Delhi–Varanasi Vande Bharat, touted as the last word in luxury, speed and punctuality. It was my first time on a Vande Bharat and it turned out to be none of the above.

The fallacy began to unravel on platform 16 of New Delhi railway station, where I arrived at 2.30 p.m. for a 3 p.m. departure. The train arrived two hours late and finally left at 5.20 p.m.—two-and-a-half hours behind schedule. So much for punctuality.

Worse, there was almost no information shared with the hundreds of waiting passengers. Every now and then a bored announcer would inform us that the train was "delayed by 15 minutes". It was always 15 minutes—not a minute more, not a minute less.

This instalment-style announcement of delays, copied from the airline industry, is inexplicable in this age of real-time information when a train's actual location can be tracked minute by minute. Why not share that information with the passengers who have trusted the Railways' bloated hype? And isn't it ironic that the railway minister is also the IT minister, yet the Railways appear not to know where their own trains are at any given moment?

Photo: Atul Shukla

Cattle class (*Left*) **The scene at New Delhi station;** (*above*) **Vande Bharat: littered and late**

The Delhi–Varanasi Vande Bharat, touted as the last word in luxury, speed and punctuality, was anything but

The stranded passengers were treated like dirt in other ways too. They had to stand for two hours; there were barely half-a-dozen dirty benches on the platform for more than a thousand people. If there were sick, disabled or elderly passengers, that was just too bad—collateral damage on the country's journey to Vishwaguru status.

The platform where India's supposedly most magnificent train was to arrive resembled a Sadar Bazaar trading yard. Every now and then, a policeman would come and shoo passengers away for causing overcrowding. Where exactly were they supposed to go?

It was no better inside the train when it finally arrived. The entrance foyer was jammed with food cartons, garbage bags and crates of bottled water. The toilets were awash like the Niagara Falls.

The meals showed privatisation at its worst—packets of *chura* of uncertain origin, a soft drink, something described as tea and a mouldy piece of cake. We added up the printed MRPs of the items, which came to about Rs 50. IRCTC must have procured them at least 25 per cent cheaper through the lowest tender process. The passengers, however, paid Rs 80 each—another sign of how rapidly the Railways are moving towards the airline model.

The train's maximum speed, displayed on an LED screen above the doors, never exceeded 128 kmph, and that too only briefly. So much for the much-advertised top speed of 180 kmph.

The worst, however, came on the return journey, when we got off the train at New Delhi railway station at around 11.00 p.m. Complete pandemonium prevailed at the Ajmeri Gate exit. There were no proper lanes for cars, no separate areas for taxis and no identified points for boarding or dropping passengers—facilities that are standard at railway stations in most developed countries. The result was chaos. Hundreds of passengers rushed around blocking traffic while trying to locate their booked Ola and Uber rides. Vehicles were parked randomly everywhere.

It took us more than 45 minutes—almost one-fifth of the train journey time from Kanpur—to locate our Ola and exit the station.

I shudder to think what the experience must have been for the elderly, the disabled, women travelling alone or foreign tourists who had swallowed the fable of '*atithi devo bhava*'.

I longed wistfully for the Shatabdi days, when one simply went to the prepaid taxi or auto-rickshaw booths managed by the police, paid the fare and was allotted a vehicle without any fuss or the risk of being run over.

So, here's the reality. Today's much-trumpeted trains are no better—perhaps even worse—than the earlier Shatabdis and Rajdhanis, which made no extravagant claims but delivered more than they promised.

It's a long way to 2047, minister—a much more difficult journey than the three-piece suit hop to Davos

All the hype about high-speed trains is just that—hype. We may have the technical capacity to build such trains, but we lack the administrative and policy-making ability to operate them properly.

The reasons are obvious: inadequate infrastructure (tracks, signalling and communication systems), poor staff training, weak catering systems, chaotic station management and little accountability.

The planning model appears inverted. Instead of introducing new trains first and hoping the system will cope, it should upgrade infrastructure to the standards of developed countries and only then introduce high-speed services.

The Railways must treat paying passengers with respect and consideration. Travel is not just about speed; it is a package. The responsibility does not end on the platform. It must develop proper infrastructure inside and outside stations, and create systems that allow passengers to enter and exit safely, conveniently and in an orderly manner.

Dial down the hype and dial up the delivery. It's a long way to 2047, Mr Minister—a much more difficult journey than the three-piece suit hop to Davos. ■

AVAY SHUKLA *is a retired IAS officer and author*

STARS IN THE SCHOOLYARD: A UNIVERSE ON WHEELS BRINGING SPACE SCIENCE TO RURAL KARNATAKA

Where curiosity meets the Cosmos: Karnataka's mobile planetarium movement

Since 2017, the Government of Karnataka has pursued this founding philosophy with remarkable tenacity. What began with just five vans has grown, over six years, into a fleet of eleven customised units that has reached more than 22.1 lakh students and teachers — 2.2 million young minds.

The scene outside Vidhana Soudha said everything. Eleven custom-built vans stood in formation as Chief Minister Siddaramaiah stepped forward to flag off Karnataka's newly upgraded Mobile Digital Planetarium fleet — a relaunch that carried the full weight of a government making good on a promise.

Behind those vans stretched eight years of quiet, transformative work: 55,440 shows, 7,920 schools visited, and 22.1 lakh students introduced, many for the first time, to the immensity of the universe above them.

The ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya programme — 'Planetarium in the Schoolyard' — was crossing a threshold, from celebrated pilot into full-scale 'Mission Mode' initiative, and the significance went well beyond administrative reclassification.

With Ministers N.S. Boseraju and Priyank Kharge flanking the Chief Minister, Karnataka's leadership delivered a message it intended the entire country to hear: that scientific curiosity must not remain a luxury of urban privilege, and that every child in the state — whether in a coastal classroom in Udupi or a drought-prone taluk in Raichur — deserves an equal, immersive encounter with the cosmos.

"Igniting scientific curiosity among rural schoolchildren is our priority. We are taking high-quality science education directly to them, ensuring they are not left behind." — Chief Minister Siddaramaiah.

FIVE VANS TO A MOVEMENT:

The idea behind ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya is elegantly simple: if a child in a remote village in Kalyana Karnataka cannot travel to the Jawaharlal Nehru Planetarium in Bengaluru — a journey that involves twelve hours of travel and significant expense — then the planetarium must travel to the child.

Since 2017, the Government of Karnataka has pursued this founding philosophy with remarkable tenacity. What began with just five vans has grown, over six years, into a fleet of eleven customised units that has reached more than 22.1 lakh students and teachers — 2.2 million young minds.

Approximately 7,920 schools have been visited in the current phase, with 55,440 total shows conducted across the state.

The government is actively preparing to expand to one dedicated van for every one of Karnataka's 31 districts by the 2027 fiscal year.

RS 1 CRORE UNIVERSE ON WHEELS:

Each mobile unit in the f leet is a Rs 1 crore technology laboratory on wheels — entirely self-sufficient, designed to function in the most remote corners of the state without external infrastructure.

The setup is swift and theatrical: within thirty minutes, an inflatable Digital Dome of five to six metres — constructed from specialised light-blocking fabric — rises in the schoolyard, accommodating thirty-five to forty students per show.

Every van carries its own UPS and generator system, ensuring that rural power cuts do not interrupt the space journey.

Inside, 360-degree fish-eye lens projectors, Digistar systems, create a seamless, immersive hemispherical sky.

For forty-five extraordinary minutes, students fly through the rings of Saturn, witness the birth of a star, or watch the real-time mechanics of an eclipse.

The units are fully air-conditioned with advanced ventilation, and the 2026 fleet represents a quantum leap over the 2017 versions, offering modern audio systems alongside the upgraded projection technology.

Photo: GettyImages

LEARNING THAT ALIGNS WITH THE CURRICULUM:

What distinguishes ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya from a mere spectacle is its rigorous alignment with the academic curriculum. The 2026 programme directly supports the science textbooks of Classes 8, 9, and 10.

"The Solar Family" takes students on detailed fly-throughs of planetary surfaces and moons. "Celestial Mechanics" provides real-time 3D demonstrations of eclipses, tides, and seasons. "Beyond the Milky Way" introduces nebulae, black holes, and the life cycle of stars.

A dedicated "Space Missions" module covers India's Gaganyaan and Chandrayaan programmes, instilling national pride alongside scientific knowledge.

In 2026, ten new show modules have been added in Kannada, Tulu, and Urdu. Multilingual narration in Kannada, English, and Urdu is now standard across all units, with plans to include further regional dialects, ensuring that no linguistic barriers exist in the pursuit of scientific understanding.

BUILDING THE SCIENTISTS OF TOMORROW:

The Government of Karnataka has recognised that a single forty-five-minute show is only the beginning of a child's scientific journey. To sustain that spark, the state has formalised two powerful pillars — the STAR initiative and the PlanEd framework.

The STAR initiative, developed in partnership with ISRO, identifies "Star Students" — those who perform exceptionally in post-show interactive quizzes — and rewards them with visits to the Satish Dhawan Space Centre or ISRO Headquarters in Bengaluru, and with state-level astronomy olympiads specifically designed for rural government school students.

The first batch of five hundred winners from the 2025–26 rural quiz circuit is scheduled to visit ISRO Bengaluru in late April 2026 — a milestone that marks the coming of age of this talent pipeline.

With the ISRO START 2026 programme calling for academic registrations between March and April 2026, these mobile planetariums are serving as the primary recruitment tool for the next generation of Indian scientific minds.

Complementing the STAR initiative is the PlanEt Mobile App, launched in late 2025, which provides multilingual Kannada and English content, VR sky-watching guides, a Sky Map tailored to the Kannada night sky, and real-time alerts for celestial events such as eclipses and meteor showers — ensuring every student continues their cosmic journey from the palm of their hand.

PlanEd workshops, integrated into teachers' annual professional development programmes, equip educators with the digital tools and curriculum-aligned methods to continue astronomy education long after the van has moved on, transforming the mobile planetarium from a one-time event into a permanent enrichment of the school's educational culture.

"The objective is simple — every child, irrespective of location, should get to experience modern science and astronomy." — Minister N.S. Boseraju, Science & Technology.

IMPACT THAT GOES BEYOND NUMBERS:

The Karnataka Monitoring and Evaluation Authority (KMEA) has independently assessed the programme, and the findings are remarkable. Ninety-eight percent of students who attended a show reported a heightened interest in astronomy — a near-universal transformation of attitude in a single session. 93 percent of rural students expressed a desire to pursue STEM — Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics — careers after the forty-five-minute experience.

Teachers report that students return to class with sharper curiosity and clearer understanding of scientific concepts; parents say their children speak excitedly about space at home, asking questions about planets, stars, and rockets. One student from Tumkur captured it simply: "It felt like we were in space. Now I want to become a scientist."

The programme has also been especially effective in encouraging rural girls to take up science, breaking through traditional barriers that have long suppressed female participation in high-school science education. By presenting science as thrilling, accessible, and universal, ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya is quietly dismantling some of the most stubborn gender inequities in rural education.

STARS ON THE MOVE:

As Karnataka enters the summer of 2026, the fleet is moving through what the Department of Science and Technology has designated the Summer Circuit — a March-to-May schedule of science fairs and community sky-watch events reaching the state's most underserved communities.

All seven districts of the Kalyana Karnataka region are served by dedicated units. Between March 15 and April 10, seven units move through rural high schools and taluk-level science centres in Kalaburagi, Yadgir, and Raichur.

From April 12 to April 30, the Belagavi Division — Belagavi and Bagalakote — receives a special focus on STAR initiative workshops for top-performing students. From May 1 to May 20, the Mysuru and Coastal regions host Lunar and Planetary Observation nights at Sub-Regional Science Centres.

The government has prioritised schools not visited in the last three years, and any student or teacher in a rural district can request a visit through their District Science Centre.

A MODEL FOR THE NATION:

The relaunch of ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya was not merely a celebration of past achievement — it was a declaration of intent. The current fleet of eleven units is being expanded to thirty-one — one for every district — by the 2027 fiscal year.

Show content in Kannada, Tulu, and Urdu will deepen its multilingual reach. The KMEA recommends at least one annual visit to every school, a goal the fleet expansion will make possible for the first time.

The PlanEt app, PlanEd workshops, the STAR initiative's ISRO visits, and the community science fairs of the Summer Circuit are each KMEA recommendations now brought to life by a government that listens.

Beyond the mobile fleet, ministers have signalled the construction of permanent Science Centres and Planetariums in regional hubs — Hampi, Shivamogga, and Yadgir — planned for 2026–27, ensuring the mobile spark lights a permanent flame of curiosity across Karnataka's landscape.

By blending science, technology, and imagination, Karnataka's ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya is proving that education can be both inspiring and inclusive. It has opened a window to the universe for rural children, making them believe that their dreams can be as vast as the skies above, and demonstrated that when a government commits to equity in education — genuinely, financially, and operationally — the results are transformative.

If expanded further, this initiative could become a model for the entire nation, ensuring that no child, regardless of where they live, is denied the chance to wonder at the stars. Karnataka has shown the way. The universe, it turns out, belongs to everyone — and thanks to ShaaleyaAngaladalle Taaralaya, the children of rural Karnataka now know it.

A GOVERNMENT UNITED BEHIND THE STARS:

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, whose commitment to the democratisation of education is a defining feature of his government's agenda, described the programme as a tool for social equity as much as scientific advancement.

He lauded the milestone of reaching seventeen lakh students — a figure that has since surpassed twenty-two lakh as of March 2026 — as a "significant achievement in democratizing access to astronomy," and reaffirmed that the "planetarium-on-wheels" model is the most effective means of eliminating the rural-urban learning gap.

Minister N.S. Boseraju, Science and Technology, the primary architect of the programme's 2026 expansion, has provided the strategic direction for the initiative's technical evolution and geographical footprint.

He highlighted that the 2026 fleet features advanced 360-degree fish-eye projection and modern audio systems, making the experience more immersive than the 2017 pilot.

In multiple statements in November 2025 and March 2026, he confirmed the government's promise: "While mobile planetariums currently operate in select districts, we are preparing to extend this initiative to all districts in the coming months," adding simply, "The objective is simple — every child, irrespective of location, should get to experience modern science and astronomy."

Photo: GettyImages

Minister Priyank Kharge, overseeing IT, BT, and Rural Development, linked the programme to Karnataka's broader ambitions for a future-ready workforce.

His conviction is that early exposure to space science through mobile domes is the "first step" toward creating a generation ready for the global space economy, and that rural government schools must become "centres of excellence" rather than merely basic educational outposts.

Together, this triumvirate of leadership — united under the banner of equity, technological excellence, and future readiness — has given ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya its institutional strength and its unstoppable momentum.

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
www.nationalheraldindia.com
15 MARCH 2026

A tale of two elections

Similar preludes and contexts, vastly differing outcomes

Sourabh Sen

The youth and students who led popular uprisings in Bangladesh and Nepal—toppling entrenched governments in August 2024 and September 2025, respectively—have fared very differently in subsequent elections.

In Bangladesh, the National Citizen Party (NCP) was rejected in the election held on 12 February 2026, winning just six seats and three per cent of the vote. In Nepal, the Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP), formed in July 2022, received an overwhelming mandate, winning two-thirds of the seats and giving the country its first single-party government in three decades. Observers noted that voters in Bangladesh were wary of the instability and inexperience of the youth, while in Nepal they saw the RSP as more disciplined and reformist.

The results in Nepal surprised people and 'experts' alike. The RSP's landslide victory was fronted by 35-year-old structural engineer and rapper-turned-politician Balendra 'Balen' Shah. A former mayor of Kathmandu, Shah will be Nepal's youngest prime minister and the first from Madhesh in the plains. Like several previous prime ministers, Shah has an India connection, having studied engineering in Bengaluru. He defeated four-time prime minister and CPN-UML chairman K.P. Sharma Oli in the latter's own constituency of Jhapa-5 by a margin of 50,000 votes.

The two back-to-back elections had, prima facie, similar preludes and contexts. In both countries, Gen Z took to the streets in protest against establishments steeped in corruption and misgovernance, economic stagnation and perceived nepotism. In Nepal, it was the government's decision to monitor social media that sparked the protests; in Bangladesh, it was the movement against reservation in government services and educational institutions that brought the students out. Although both culminated in somewhat free and fair elections, Gen Z caused a 'generational earthquake' in Nepal. In Bangladesh, it was co-opted and diffused. Despite similar optics, were there drivers other than Gen Z at work?

*

For decades, a revolving door of three parties dominated politics in Nepal: the Nepali Congress (NC), the CPN-UML and the Maoist Centre. This election effectively shattered all of them. Almost all top-tier leaders from the traditional parties—including veteran leaders like Sher Bahadur Deuba and Gagan Thapa—faced humiliating defeats or a significant loss of influence.

Political observers in Nepal suggest that Gen Z acted as a safety valve to vent decades of simmering public anger against established political parties. In May 1980, following widespread student demonstrations and political unrest demanding democratic reforms, the then King Birendra called for a national referendum which allowed voters to choose between retaining the party-less panchayat or adopting a multiparty system. The panchayat system won with 54.99 per cent of the votes and, despite being suppressed, dissent persisted.

Photos: Getty Images

(*Above*) **Victorious Balendra Shah and RSP chairman Rabi Lamichhane wave to supporters; (*left*) BNP chairman Tarique Rahman**

Since then, Nepal has witnessed a number of political upheavals. These include the Maoist rebellion (1996-2006), the royal palace massacre of 2001 and King Gyanendra's coup of February 2005. The Gen Z uprising of September 2025 is part of this continuum. "Living through decades of political upheaval has given the people of Nepal a deep-rooted confidence to raise their voice in protest," observed a vlogger from Nepal, ironically on condition of anonymity.

Thousands of older demonstrators, a motley group of monarchists and ex-Maoists—many of whom resorted to arson—infiltrated the 8 September protest called by Gen Z. They pushed the crowd towards Parliament, attacked ministers and public servants, and ransacked both public and private property. The template was otherwise standard—police clashing with rioters, firing and killing protesters—be it in Kathmandu or in Dhaka.

While the Gen Z uprising in Nepal caused a 'generational earthquake', in Bangladesh the agitating youth were later co-opted

One of the triggers of the Gen Z protests was the Oli government's move to control social media platforms, all of whom were directed to register with the ministry of communication and information technology. Except TikTok and Viber, most refused. When Meta (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp), Alphabet (YouTube) and X ignored the seven-day deadline, the authorities moved to block them. As *The Kathmandu Post* put it, 'For Nepal's digitally dependent Gen Z, it was the final straw.'

With Nepalis flocking en masse to mobile-based social media, the RSP ran much of its election campaign by pushing its messaging and symbol of the blue bell through social media. While the internet-savvy RSP optimised algorithms, bots, monetised websites and content creators, traditional parties found themselves on the backfoot.

In Bangladesh, the NCP went through its political baptism even before it was prepared. Senior NCP leaders told *National Herald* that despite similarities in the political contexts of Nepal and Bangladesh, youth groups engaged with them in markedly different ways.

"When we formed the NCP, we thought of ourselves as a pressure group that would force the administration to respond to important issues," said NCP leader Yeasir Arafat. "Internally, we debated vigorously before deciding to emerge as a political party."

Arafat dismissed the speculation that joining the interim government or getting into an alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami may have worked against his party. According to him, although youngsters voted in large numbers, the BNP was the main beneficiary of Gen Z's support in Bangladesh.

Arafat pointed out that, unlike the NCP, Nepal's RSP had comparatively more experience in politics and governance. By the time it captured the imagination of Nepal's Gen Z, the party had already served as a coalition partner in the Prachanda-led government, holding four cabinet ministries from March 2024 to July 2024.

While Gen Z may have disrupted the Nepali establishment's inertia, many pass it off as a temporary wave, likely to settle as the RSP transitions from activism to governance and things return to business as usual. They point out that the uneasy understanding between Nepal's face of change Balen Shah and RSP supremo Ravi Lamichhane is driven more by accommodation than policy or ideology.

Recent experience in Bangladesh and Nepal shows that toppling entrenched governments through youth-led uprisings is easier than sustaining them in the aftermath. If political exigencies replace policy, such movements can easily be co-opted by the system. If that happens, a sense of déjà vu will engulf Nepal, and the RSP may meet the same fate as the NCP in Bangladesh. ■

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

Photo: Getty Images

President Donald Trump greets Keir Starmer

LONDON DIARY

HASAN SUROOR

UK-US 'special relationship' in trouble over Iran crisis

Donald Trump once famously lavished praise on Keir Starmer's "beautiful accent" and—hold your breath—his "beautiful, great" wife while welcoming them to the White House in February 2025 when the British prime minister handed him a personal letter from King Charles offering Trump a state visit to Britain.

Now, however, Trump is furious with Starmer for refusing to allow Americans to use UK bases to launch military strikes against Iran. He called him a "loser" and said: "This is not Winston Churchill that we're dealing with".

Starmer initially argued that the strikes were illegal and said, "This government does not believe in regime change from the sky." (He has since done a U-turn, claiming that Iran's retaliatory strikes pose a threat to Britain's security.)

Suddenly, not only does the historic US-UK 'special relationship' seem to be in serious trouble, Starmer also finds himself caught between pro- and anti-war factions in his own Labour Party.

Its significant Muslim constituency is threatening to defect to the pacifist Green Party whose charismatic leader Zack Polanski has taken a strong anti-US stand.

In the London assembly, Polanski voted against a motion welcoming the 'removal' (read assassination) of Ayatollah Khamenei.

While acknowledging that Khamenei's regime was "brutal", he called US-Israeli action "an illegal and unprovoked attack by the US government and the Israeli state", adding that he strongly hoped "recent events mark the start of a new chapter for Iran."

He also refused to support another motion condemning the vandalism of Churchill's statue in Parliament Square.

Never a popular figure either within his own party or outside, Starmer's ratings have fallen drastically in recent years. putting a question mark over his political future.

Leicester riots: whodunit?

Recriminations over the identity of the troublemakers behind the 2022 Hindu-Muslim riots in Leicester continue to rock community relations.

Hindu groups have reacted with anger to a report blaming Hindutva elements for exacerbating tensions following India's victory celebrations post the India-Pakistan Asia Cup match in Dubai.

They have rejected the report and expressed concerns about the inquiry committee's impartiality, funding and composition.

The report—led by SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), London School of Economics and the Monitoring Group—was boycotted by most Hindu organisations.

While the inquiry found that no single community was to blame, it held Hindu extremist elements largely responsible for inflaming passions.

The Hindu Community Organisations Group (HCOG) Leicester, which claims to represent over 50,000 Hindus, said the inquiry was funded by a £620,000 grant from George Soros, "known for his critical stance on India and Hindus".

It claimed that, contrary to the report's findings, Hindus suffered the most.

"The Leicester violence in 2022 saw targeted attacks on Hindu homes, temples and individuals, with clear anti-Hindu sentiments evidenced in acts such as the vandalism of a Hindu temple and assaults on Hindu youth. Yet the SOAS inquiry seems to downplay these incidents while amplifying unverified claims," said the HCOG.

Once hailed as an inclusive 'Little India', today Leicester resembles the polarised 'new India' more than a British multicultural city.

Hindu-Muslim tensions are making Leicester's 'Little India' resemble new India

Coming soon: a crackdown on dependants of foreign workers

Family members of UK visa holders living here as workers or students, be warned.

A crackdown on the 'human baggage' that accompanies foreign workers and scholars is coming after it emerged that the sharp rise in new arrivals in Britain is *not*—as is generally assumed—driven by job-seekers but by family members allowed to accompany them.

UK border and passport control at Stansted airport

As many as 83 per cent of the 3.5 million non-EU citizens who arrived—and stayed on—in Britain since Brexit were international students and family members who were allowed to accompany both students and migrant workers. According to a new study, only 17 per cent came on work visas.

Academics at Oxford University's Migration Observatory, who carried out the research, said the findings mean that a series of restrictions on work visas announced by successive governments since 2023 to reduce overall levels of immigration will affect only a minority of working migrants.

Which, to put it bluntly, makes nonsense of the government's plans to restrict work visas. What it needs is a crackdown on the 'baggage' migrants carry—their dependants.

So, think twice before wanting to ride to Britain on the back of a visa-holding family member.

Marlowe's British Kitchen in Leeds has become a symbol of inter-faith unity

Muslims and Jews bond over fish and chips

Even as Britain's Muslim and Jewish communities continue to exchange barbs, to put it mildly, over Israeli actions in Gaza, a Muslim-owned fish-and-chips shop in Leeds, Yorkshire, has become an unlikely symbol of inter-faith unity.

At the request of local Rabbi, Anthony Gilbert, shop owners Jenade Yamin and Arabaab 'Paddy' Munir, introduced kosher options alongside their halal menu to cater to the city's Jewish community.

TV celebrity, Rob Rinder, whose grandfather was a kosher caterer specialising in fish, hailed it as "a glimpse of the country we can still choose to be".

And, finally, in a recent bye-election in Manchester for a seat with a large number of Pak-origin immigrants, a video produced by the Green Party in Urdu depicted Prime Minister Keir Starmer shaking hands with Narendra Modi (who is a deeply unpopular figure in Pakistan). And the trick worked. Greens won the Labour-held seat—pushing Labour to third place. ■

सूचना एवं जनसम्पर्क विभाग, झारखण्ड

Published Date 15 March 2026 2026 (Sunday). Posted at LPC Delhi RMS, Delhi-06. Posting Days Friday and Saturday

TELANGANA RISING

TELANGANA RISING
CURE - PURE - RARE

SECURING OUR FUTURE, EMPOWERING OUR YOUTH.

20 LAKH NEXT-GEN JOBS
GLOBAL OPPORTUNITIES AT HOME

- ₹4 Lakh Crore Investment to drive industry
- Hyderabad leads the capability revolution as a global capability centre (GCC)
- No. 1 in Aero Engines, Life Sciences, and Advanced Industry

PROTECTING OUR OWN
SAFETY NET AT HOME & ABROAD

- 70,000 government jobs delivered to our youth
- Dedicated Gulf Board & ₹10 lakh cover for Gulf workers

EQUIPPING FOR THE WORLD
UPSKILLING FOR OPPORTUNITY

- India's first Young India Skills University, chaired by Anand Mahindra
- World-class Integrated Residential Schools

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION
TOWARDS A STRONGER FUTURE

- Zero tolerance on drugs to protect our youth led by the EAGLE Force
- Rebuilding youth through a culture of sports and fitness

Issued by: Dept.of Information and Public Relations, Govt.of Telangana

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY

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

RNI: MAHENG/2021/84829, Postal Reg. No. MCN/328/2024-2026
Magazine Post Reg. No. MSD/059/2025, License To Post Without Pre Payment No. MR/Tech/WPP-363/North/2025-26

www.nationalheraldindia.com *www.facebook.com/nationalheraldindia/* *@NH_India* *www.navjivanindia.com, www.qaumiawaz.com*

Mumbai • 15 March 2026 • Pages: 8 • Vol. 5 Issue 18 • ₹20

NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

UNDER THE SIR KNIFE

Will 50 lakh voters 'under adjudication' in Bengal make it to the final list?

▸ P2

HOME & ABROAD

A QUESTION OF FEDERALISM

The Kurian Joseph panel report makes a case for restoring the balance of Centre-State relations

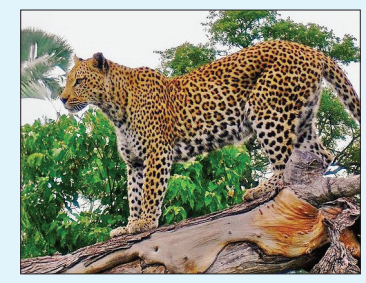
▸ P3

NATION

SHIPPING LEOPARDS TO VANTARA…

…won't solve human-animal conflict in Maharashtra

▸ P4



Why America will not win this war

Ashok Swain

The United States, together with Israel, has once again stepped into a war in the Middle East without a clear objective, without a coherent strategy, and without any realistic understanding of how it will end. The decision to attack Iran appears driven less by security necessity than by domestic political calculations and the desire to reshape the regional balance of power. What began with dramatic airstrikes and triumphant rhetoric is quickly turning into a prolonged confrontation with no achievable victory. The consequences are already extending far beyond the Middle East, accelerating the erosion of international law and order.

Israel's role in shaping the conflict also deserves careful attention. For decades Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has argued that Iran represents an existential threat that must be neutralised. Netanyahu therefore has strong incentives to push for sustained military pressure on Tehran. Yet the strategic burden of a prolonged war will fall primarily on the United States. As Washington becomes more deeply entangled, Israel can gradually reduce its exposure while American forces absorb most of the diplomatic, military and economic costs.

The most striking feature of this conflict is the absence of a consistent rationale. Washington's stated objectives have shifted repeatedly. At first, the goal was to destroy Iran's nuclear capabilities. Soon after it expanded to eliminating ballistic missile programmes. The mission was then described as dismantling Iran's regional proxy networks. At other moments, the language suggested a regime change in Tehran. The shifts in the stated purpose of waging war on Iran reflect the reality that the war was launched without a clearly defined political purpose.

Netanyahu will want sustained military pressure on Iran but the strategic burden of a prolonged war will fall mainly on the US

Photos: **Getty Images**

Public support for another prolonged war is very limited; (*right*) Iranians attend the funeral of IRGC commanders at Enghelab (Revolution) Square in Tehran

Even the explanations offered by senior American officials have exposed this confusion. At one point, US secretary of state Marco Rubio suggested that Washington acted because Israel was preparing to launch its own attack and the US wanted to strike first to prevent Iranian retaliation against American forces. The implication was that Washington had entered the war partly because Israel had already decided to do so. The remark was later softened, but the episode revealed how improvised the rationale for war has been.

Wars are not won simply by destroying targets. They are won when military action produces a political outcome that advances national interests. In the case of Iran, the US has not articulated what such an outcome would look like. Is the goal to weaken Iran sufficiently to force negotiations? Is it to dismantle its military capabilities? Or is it to engineer a total collapse of the regime?

The underlying assumption behind the American attack appears to have been that a rapid decapitation of Iran's leadership would destabilise the regime and force it to accept American demands. The killing of senior figures, including the country's supreme leader, was expected to trigger internal collapse and/or swift capitulation. That expectation reflects a familiar pattern of strategic miscalculation.

Iran is not a fragile state that can be toppled through a few dramatic strikes. It is a deeply institutionalised political system with multiple centres of authority and a powerful security apparatus. Even after losing key leaders, the regime has installed a new supreme leader and continues to function through an extensive network of military, intelligence and ideological institutions. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps alone commands enormous resources, influence and manpower. A political system that has survived more than four decades of internal and external pressure is unlikely to disintegrate overnight.

The belief that Iran would quickly surrender also ignores the country's history. In the 1980s, Iran fought a devastating war with Iraq that went on for eight years and cost hundreds of thousands of lives. Despite suffering massive casualties, economic hardship and international isolation—because Iraq was being supported by both the US and the then USSR—Tehran refused to capitulate. That war profoundly shaped the political culture of Iran. It reinforced a powerful narrative of endurance and resistance against foreign aggression. Expecting that the same society would now surrender after a few weeks of bombard- ment is not strategic analysis, it is wishful thinking.

The US approach also betrays a fundamental contradiction. Political transformation in a country of more than ninety million people cannot be imposed through missile strikes. Yet sending American ground forces into Iran would mean entering a war of enormous scale and uncertainty. Iran's armed forces and affiliated militias together number close to a million fighters. Occupying such a vast country, with a difficult terrain, would require a commitment far greater than anything the US has attempted during its wars in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Even the idea of installing a more favourable leadership in Tehran now appears increasingly unrealistic. President Donald Trump himself acknowledged that many individuals once considered potential successors have already been killed in American and Israeli airstrikes. Washington is trapped in a familiar dilemma. It can destroy infrastructure and eliminate leaders, but it cannot control what follows. Rather than producing a moderate new leadership, the decapitation strategy has hardened the regime. The succession of Mojtaba Khamenei following the assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has consolidated power among the most hardline elements of the political system.

Domestic politics in the United States further complicate the situation. Rising casualties, increasing oil prices and growing economic uncertainty are already generating pressure at home. Public support for another prolonged Middle Eastern war is very limited. As the costs mount, the temptation for the White House will be to declare victory prematurely and look for an exit. Yet a hurried withdrawal after partial destruction will not eliminate Iran's capabilities or ambitions; it will simply leave the region even more unstable.

Iran understands this dynamic very well. Tehran has long known that American military power is formidable but politically constrained. By prolonging the conflict and raising its costs through regional retaliation, pressure on energy markets and asymmetric attacks, Iran exploits those constraints.

Continued on page 2

Who owns/controls our digital identities?

SIM binding is not the cybersafety silver bullet the government makes it out to be

Herjinder

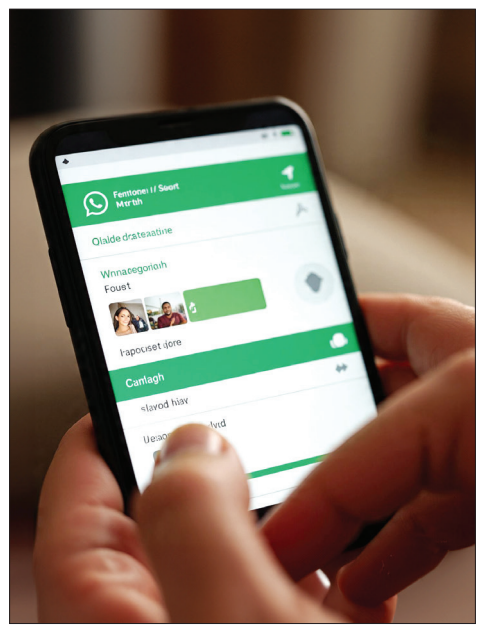
India's new SIM-binding mandate for messaging platforms, which came into effect on 1 March 2026, could fundamentally alter the way millions of citizens access and control their digital identities. Introduced under the Telecom Cyber Security Rules, the directive issued by the Department of Telecommunications requires messaging applications to keep user accounts continuously linked to the physical SIM card used during registration. If the SIM is removed, deactivated, swapped or inactive, access to the account can be blocked until the original SIM is reinserted and verified.

The rule applies to major messaging platforms including WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal and others that rely on mobile numbers for authentication. While the government says the measure is aimed at curbing cyberfraud and misuse of mobile numbers, the implications for privacy, digital ownership and user autonomy are far-reaching.

Take the example of WhatsApp. Under the new regime, a user cannot access their account if the specific SIM card used during registration is not present in the primary device. In practical terms, this means that access to one's personal conversations, contacts and digital history becomes dependent on possession of a particular SIM card.

This creates an unusual paradox: the user who created the account, built the contact network and generated the data may no longer have full control over it. Instead, access is effectively determined by the SIM card.

Ironically, even the SIM card itself is not legally owned by the user. Telecom subscribers are technically SIM holders, not SIM owners. The SIM card remains the property of the telecom operator that issued it. Consequently, control over messaging accounts is indirectly tied to infrastructure owned by telecom companies rather than to the individual who created the account. This shift raises fundamental questions about digital ownership and user rights in the age of platform-based communication.



Cyber law expert Pawan Duggal told *National Herald*, "The SIM-binding mandate is on shaky ground. Since no law was actually passed by Parliament for it, the mandate could easily be contested in court."

India's constitutional framework has already recognised privacy as a fundamental right. In the landmark *K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* case, a nine-judge bench of the Supreme Court of India unanimously ruled that the Right to Privacy is intrinsic to the Right to Life and Personal Liberty guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution of India.

The SIM-binding mandate raises deep concerns about user privacy and exposure to bad actors

The judgment explicitly recognised informational privacy—the right of individuals to control their personal data.

SIM binding complicates this principle. If a person's digital account can only be accessed through an operator-owned SIM card, their ability to control their own digital information becomes conditional. Critics argue that informational privacy becomes difficult to protect when the user is not even the ultimate controller of access to their own account.

Concerns about the new rules are not limited to privacy activists. Technology industry groups have also raised legal questions. The Broadband India Forum, which represents global technology companies such as Google and Meta, has warned that the mandate may exceed the statutory authority of the telecom regulator. In its communication to the government, the forum argued that extending telecom regulations to internet platforms through delegated legislation risks regulatory overlap and jurisdictional conflict. It also raised concerns about possible violations of the constitutional Right to Equality.

According to the industry body, forcing digital platforms to comply with telecom-style regulations could create inconsistent compliance requirements across sectors and add unnecessary operational burdens.

Another critical concern is the role of mobile numbers themselves. A phone number is considered personally identifiable information (PII).

Continued on page 2

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
www.nationalheraldindia.com
15 MARCH 2026

America will not win this war

Continued from page 1

The longer the war continues, the more Washington will be forced to choose between escalation and retreat. Neither option guarantees success.

The broader geopolitical consequences could be profound. The United States has repeatedly declared that its primary strategic focus lies in the Indo-Pacific and the challenge posed by China. Yet a prolonged war with Iran would once again divert American attention, resources and military assets back to the Middle East. Munitions stockpiles will be depleted, naval deployments stretched and diplomatic energy consumed by crisis management in a region Washington has long wished to deprioritise.

For China, this distraction presents a strategic opportunity. Beijing does not need to intervene directly in the conflict to benefit from it. As the United States commits itself to another open-ended confrontation in the Middle East, China can continue to expand its economic influence, strengthening military capabilities and deepening partnerships across the world. Strategic competition between great powers is ultimately a contest of endurance. A superpower that repeatedly exhausts itself in wars weakens its ability to compete elsewhere.

This is the deeper irony of the current conflict. A war launched to demonstrate American power and reinforce its global leadership status may instead expose the limits of American leverage and strategic judgment. ■

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

Who owns/controls our digital identities?

Continued from page 1

Linking it tightly to multiple digital platforms expands the scope of potential privacy risks.

Once a number becomes the central authentication key across several services, several dangers emerge:

- Data leaks: If a single platform is compromised, attackers may gain access to the mobile number associated with multiple accounts.
- Unwanted contact or harassment: Phone numbers exposed online can easily become tools for spam, abuse or stalking.
- Cross-platform tracking: Companies or malicious actors can track a user's activities across platforms through the same number.

The new system could also intensify risks of targeted harassment and doxxing. If a person's phone number becomes the universal key to their online presence, exposing that number could reveal multiple digital identities at once.

For journalists, political commentators or activists—who often face online trolling—the stakes could be particularly high. Civil liberties advocates also worry about the potential for expanded surveillance. Because SIM cards are issued only after Know-Your-Customer (KYC) verification, every SIM is already tied to a verified identity. When messaging accounts are permanently linked to these SIM cards, authorities theoretically gain an easier pathway to correlate digital communications with real-world identities.

Duggal asserts that the mandate infringes upon the right to privacy, right to expression and, by extension, right to life.

The government has defended the measure as a tool to combat cyber fraud and scams. India has witnessed a surge in digital fraud, including 'digital arrest' scams and SIM-swap frauds.

Authorities believe tighter SIM verification could help reduce such crimes. But experts caution that SIM binding is not a technological silver bullet.

Cybercriminals are quick to adapt. Instead of disappearing, crimes may simply evolve into new forms such as SIM cloning, where attackers duplicate a victim's SIM card to gain access to accounts tied to it. If messaging access becomes entirely dependent on the SIM, cloning it becomes an even more valuable target.

Similarly, fraudsters could exploit stolen or illegally obtained SIM cards to create fully verified digital identities.

For millions of Indians who rely on messaging apps for everyday communication, business, journalism and activism, the consequences may soon become visible in daily life.

The real debate is not just about SIM cards—but about who ultimately controls the digital identities that define modern communication. ■

Why is it taboo to discuss corruption in the judiciary?

Yogendra Yadav

At first glance, the whole episode looked like a storm in a teacup. But if you look a little more closely, the uproar over a brief reference to corruption in the judiciary in an NCERT textbook points to a deeper challenge confronting our democratic system. The real question is not who hatched a conspiracy to defame the judiciary and why. The real question is what happened under the cover of stopping the alleged conspiracy.

The story itself was rather ordinary. After a gap of nearly twenty years, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT)—the body that publishes textbooks for CBSE schools—has started releasing a new set of textbooks. One of these is the Class VIII Social Science textbook. In the second part of the book, which introduces students to the country's political system, there is a chapter on the judiciary. After providing a general overview, the chapter includes a small section on the problems associated with it. One page carries the subheading 'Corruption in the Judiciary'. The entire controversy revolves around this page.

The interesting thing is that there is nothing in this section that could reasonably be called controversial. I'm not enamoured of the NCERT's new textbooks. But I see nothing objectionable in this portion—no sweeping claim that the entire judiciary is corrupt, no sensational tales of wrongdoing in the courts. The book simply notes, in a stiff official tone, that like all democratic institutions, the judiciary too faces certain challenges. It then says, quite plainly: 'People encounter corruption at various levels of the judiciary. As a result, it becomes even harder for poor and marginalised people to obtain justice. Due to a shortage of judges, complex legal procedures and weak infrastructure, the judicial system also faces the burden of a very large number of pending cases.'

The text then goes on to explain what steps the judiciary has taken to address these challenges—mentioning the code of conduct framed by the Supreme Court and the existence of internal inquiry mechanisms. One could certainly debate whether such information is of any value to students in Class VIII. One might ask whether the book also discusses corruption in the executive and the legislature. But there was nothing here that could possibly amount to contempt of the judiciary.

Now look at the uproar that followed. A national daily splashed this section on its front page, as if the textbook had attempted some radical experiment. In great haste, the Supreme Court took suo motu cognizance of the matter—the same Supreme Court that rarely takes suo motu notice of hate speeches printed daily in newspapers or of the lies and venom that find their way into textbooks. The Chief Justice of India thanked the media for bringing the 'truth' to light. Pulling up the NCERT, the court suggested the possibility of a deep conspiracy and issued a show cause notice to the NCERT director. For good measure, both the court order and the show cause notice dangle the threat of possible 'contempt of court' proceedings.

Seeing such swift action from the court, many must have wondered: if only the court displayed the same urgency and sternness in other matters as well. Many orders of the Supreme Court gather dust in government files. Every day, judicial directives are flouted—whether it is orders to halt bulldozer justice or directives to abolish the practice of manual scavenging. One only wishes the Supreme Court would brandish its powers under the Contempt of Courts Act in these cases too.

But who would dare question the Supreme Court? Or say: Your Lordships, there is nothing objectionable in the textbook. Spend a day in any courthouse listening to conversations about the corruption that people encounter there, and you'll forget about this book. Who would remind the court that only a few months ago the entire country read reports about the exploits of a judge of the Delhi High Court? Or that in the past ten years as many as 8,630 complaints of corruption have been registered against members of the higher judiciary? Who would ask how many of these complaints were investigated? Or how many judges adhered to their own code of conduct?

The NCERT gave in without offering a single argument in defence of its own textbook

The NCERT promptly surrendered. Without offering a single argument in defence of its own textbook, it issued an apology. The government threw up its hands, and the education ministry washed its hands of the matter. The book was not merely withdrawn; copies already distributed were recalled. As though in a country flooded day and night with fake news, hate speeches, pamphlets and incendiary films, this Class VIII textbook was the most dangerous piece of literature going around.

Whatever the intentions of the honourable judges may have been, the message of this order will be interpreted in only one way: no one should dare point a finger at the judiciary. It inevitably raises the suspicion that at a time when serious questions are being raised about the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, the institution is choosing to silence criticism rather than introspect.

The government will not object—as long as the judiciary does not prevent it from silencing its own critics. A tacit partnership, where the judiciary remains silent when the government gags its critics and the government keeps mum when the judiciary does the same, can only be deeply injurious to our democracy.

The issue is not a Class VIII textbook; the issue is the book we call the Constitution. ■

'Under adjudication' till it's too late?

Kunal Chatterjee

Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar, on a two-day visit (9-10 March) to Kolkata with two other election commissioners, was welcomed with black flags. Not only at the airport but also on his way to the Westin, a luxury hotel in New Town, Rajarhat. The hotel—owned by a Marwari business family originally from Bihar—enjoys the patronage of Union ministers and visiting BJP leaders and chief ministers.

Given that the city has over 5,000 hotels, was it "just a coincidence that the election commissioners chose to stay in the same hotel?" wondered TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee. Chief minister Mamata Banerjee picked up the gauntlet, attacking the EC for creating a mess and sat on dharna.

The war of words took an ugly turn when district magistrates and police superintendents, invited to a meeting with the full bench of the ECI, were summoned to Nabanna, the state secretariat, to brief the political bosses. The CEC took offence and told officials that he would not brook such behaviour. If they didn't behave, they would pay the price after the election in May. Mamata retorted: would the CEC still be in office after May?

The state assembly ends on 7 May and elections have to be completed before that. Most political parties including the BJP, the CPM and the Congress have sought that polling—to elect 294 MLAs—be held in one or two phases. Five years ago, the Assembly elections had stretched over eight phases.

The standoff over the special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, logical discrepancies and micro-observers was temporarily put aside by the Supreme Court's 10 March directive to set up appellate tribunals to resolve the status of those marked 'under adjudication'. If their names are struck off the voters' list, they can approach these tribunals. "The door has opened to some extent," said Banerjee, as she ended her sit-in demonstration.

However, the fate of the 60 lakh voters 'under adjudication' remains uncertain, even as judicial officers from West Bengal, Odisha and Jharkhand are engaged in verifying their claims following an earlier Supreme Court order.

Gyanesh Kumar declared that as of 10 March, 10.6 lakh names from the adjudicated list had been 'cleared' by judicial officers, without elaborating if they have been cleared to vote. That leaves 50 lakh more. While these numbers stem from 1.67 crore hearings, including 1.36 crore 'logical discrepancies' and 31 lakhs voters said to have been left unmapped with the 2002 electoral rolls, there is no clarity on how many of them are now eligible to vote.

The CEC said, "Anyone cleared by the judiciary from Bengal's adjudicated voter list will make it to the final rolls." He added that voters still facing issues could enrol their names by submitting Form 6 with proof of Indian citizenship. However, uncertainties persist on how the appellate tribunals are to be set up, the procedures they would follow and whether all appeals can be disposed of before the election.

Two questions, asked repeatedly at the CEC's media briefing, remained unanswered.

How many Bangladeshis, infiltrators and Rohingyas had been detected in the state during the SIR ? Why were voters who had already filled enumeration forms and produced requisite documentation, who had been verified physically, had attended hearings to clear misconceptions and been found to be mapped with the 2002 voters' list still 'under adjudication'?

A smile was all they got in response.

*

With 50 lakh more voters pending clearance, and more than 90 days needed to complete the process, delays and legal complications will work in the BJP's favour

Photo Getty Images

Lakhs of voters in West Bengal are 'under adjudication' over minor discrepancies

The Trinamool Congress continues to allege an unholy nexus between the EC and the BJP. It claims the SIR process is biased and that removal of pro-TMC voters (read: Muslims and backward communities) will work in the BJP's favour.

"The BJP gets pleasure in depriving Bengal and snatching people's voting rights," said TMC leader Kunal Ghosh. The CPM is in favour of weeding out bogus voters but opposes the misuse of power. "Our stand is not against the SIR per se but against the misuse of the exercise to delete names of genuine voters from any community," explained state secretary Mohammad Salim. Congress leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury raised the alarm over voter exclusion on account of "minor discrepancies".

Advocate Anwarul Haque of the Malda district and sessions court confirmed that the district sub-registrar's office had unilaterally stopped registering properties involving people listed 'under adjudication' in the final voters' list. While the district magistrate denied the existence of any such instruction, S.K. Asiruddin, a resident of north Sunny Park in Malda town confirmed that the sale of his plot of land had been stalled because the buyer was found to be 'under adjudication'.

This incident points to possible complications for the 60 lakh voters listed thus. Rumours circulating in the state suggest that those disenfranchised by the EC could find their bank accounts frozen, be barred from owning mobile phones, making transactions or registering property. These fears likely explain the number of deaths due to natural causes (like hypertension) and increased cases of depression and suicides reported from different parts of West Bengal.

"I am getting calls from people every day, asking why their names are missing from the final list. Some are crying; some are even ready to pay a price to ensure they get on the first supplementary list," says Abhijit Bhattacharya, a Booth Level Officer (BLO) from Kolkata. Bhattacharya pointed out that most of these voters are genuine but have been flagged due to a 'logical discrepancy' or 'wrong mapping', mostly attributed to mistakes made by the ECI's own apps, algorithms or personnel.

Basudeb Mondal, another BLO, is optimistic that most of the names pending adjudication will eventually be included in the supplementary lists, as the people are genuine. "Since the officers could not verify all the submitted documents in a very short time, a large number of names are showing up in the adjudication list."

For the TMC, the race is on to shift as many names as possible from the 'pending' to the 'regular' list. On the other hand, keeping the pending list long through process delays or by getting embroiled in legal complications works in the BJP's favour. "They have not filed the proper documents, and hence their names were struck off," says Biswajit Roy, a BJP leader from Malda district.

According to an EC source, adjudication papers have been assigned to judicial officers on the basis of demographic distribution of people and number of judges available. "There are some judges who have been allotted 2,000 cases, whereas there are others who have 7,000. They are looking into logical discrepancy and comparing the details in the final list."

A judicial official involved in the process says that with 600 judges from Bengal and 150 from other states, it will take more than 90 days to complete the process. "There is a high chance that many in the pending list, even if they are genuine voters, may lose their chance to vote."

The TMC has deployed its vast organisation and hit the ground to carry out its own SIR. Armed with the 'final' published list, party workers are visiting all households to physically verify if the residents present tally with those who appear on the list. It is this organisational muscle that will eventually make the difference on polling day. ■

This newspaper is Published by Pawan Kumar Bansal from AJL House, Ground floor, CTS No. 608/1 A Plot No. 2, Survey No. 341, Bandra (E), Mumbai – 400051 on behalf of The Associated Journals Limited, edited by Mr. Rajesh Jha and printed by Mr. Pawan Kumar Bansal at AJL House, Ground floor, CTS No. 608/1 A Plot No. 2, Survey No. 341, Bandra (E), Mumbai – 400051 & by Vaidehi Thakar at the Indian Express Press Plot No. EL – 208, TTC Industrial Area, Mahape, Navi Mumbai 400710

How Trump and the mighty US were humbled

Ashis Ray

In capitals around the world there is talk of a prolonged war between Iran and US–Israel and the collateral damage this will inflict on Sunni Arab nations in the Persian Gulf. Most of these nations have protested claiming neutrality, but many host US military bases on their soil and at least some were covertly in favour of the US action.

The war wasn't showing any outward signs of abating at the time of writing, but it might end quite abruptly—before the end of March, if not earlier. This is because the world—the US included—has been plunged into acute energy-supply shortages and public opinion will likely pressure US president Donald Trump to do a volte-face.

Trump is scheduled to visit China from 31 March, and it is most unlikely that such a summit will take place while the war, where Washington and Beijing are awkwardly on opposite sides, is still on.

Crude oil prices have rocketed to levels not seen since the Russian invasion of Ukraine four years ago, and unless the war ends and supplies resume through the Strait of Hormuz, the world could be in for the biggest oil shock ever. Gas prices, too, have risen to a four-year high, with a force majeure shutdown announced by the world's sixth largest producer—Qatar. Even releases from the IEA's (International Energy Agency) emergency stockpile won't help beyond a limited period. The world's daily demand is an estimated 104 million barrels a day.

On 10 March, Trump's social media post claimed the US mission was 'very far ahead of schedule' and 'very complete, pretty much'. At a public event, he was heard saying "we are ahead of our initial timeline by a lot… we have taken out the leadership twice and maybe three times".

These are signs he is preparing the ground for a face-saving exit.

*

Trump had demanded an 'unconditional surrender' by Iran, but that hasn't happened. So, he might wave the elimination of Khamenei Sr. and hits on Iran's defensive shield to claim 'mission accomplished'.

In a televised address to the nation on 21 June 2025 (the day of the US strikes on Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan), Trump had claimed that "Iran's key nuclear enrichment facilities have been completely and totally obliterated". However, earlier this month (on 9 March) the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) head Rafael Grossi was quoted by *Reuters* as saying, "What we believe is that Isfahan had until our last inspection a bit more than 200 kg, maybe a little bit more than that, of 60 per cent (enriched) uranium." This stock is believed to be in tunnels that survived the strikes, and if enriched further, can yield sufficient explosive material for 10 nuclear weapons. The war has surely depleted Iran's arsenal of missiles but it's not spent yet. Also, Russian drone expertise, gained from its war with Ukraine, has been made available to Iran.

The despatch of US Navy aircraft carriers to the Strait of Hormuz was more gunboat diplomacy than a forerunner to an all-out assault on Iran.

On 26 February, Oman's foreign minister Badr Albusaidi, who was mediating talks between US and Iranian officials in Geneva, declared the two sides had made 'significant progress'. Experts from the two sides were supposed to meet in Vienna the following week to take the discussion forward.

For Israel's trigger-happy prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu—who has clung to power in the face of corruption charges at home and a warrant of arrest from the International Criminal Court (ICC) for war crimes in Gaza—a US-Iran rapprochement is bad news.

Trump, who has nurtured ambitions to make a deal with Tehran that he can take credit for, betrayed the ongoing dialogue, reportedly because he didn't want Israel to take singular credit for the termination of Iran's supreme leader. He even crowed that *he* will decide Iran's new leadership.

Trump is now frustrated that even this strike has not produced a 'capitulation' of the Islamic regime. Not even after considerably greater US expenditure since last year to whip up a people's rebellion in Iran. Liberal Iranians, understandably livid with the suppression, are easy prey to such inducements. But the January uprising, partly fanned by the CIA, failed—and the crackdown by a ruthless Islamic establishment has claimed the lives of thousands.

Iran is a divided nation. Large sections of the country fervently wish for an ouster of the ruling Mullahs. But Mojtaba Khamenei, the new supreme leader, could initially benefit from a sympathy factor—his mother, wife and a son also died in the deadly attack to kill his father.

So, a regime change may not immediately be on the cards.

*

Meanwhile, fuel prices are soaring, and Americans are feeling the pinch of the rising cost of food and other essentials. Trump faces midterm elections in November. Around 60 per cent of Americans disapprove of the ongoing war; war; that number may balloon as the body bags of servicemen return to the US.

The war and the concomitant crude oil crisis have meant that US sanctions on the purchase of Russian oil are lifting, an embarrassing sideshow of which was the announcement that India was now "allowed" to resume purchases of Russian oil. Trump was upbeat about a phone call with Russia president Vladimir Putin, who signalled his country's willingness to provide oil and gas to Europe. It will be a coup for the Kremlin if Europe is compelled to resume business with Russia.

Onto the continuing strategic blunders of the Modi government, his presence in Tel Aviv 24 hours before Israel's attack on Iran was diplomatic hara-kiri. Modi's naked bias and his silence on the assassination of Khamenei has sunk India to a new low in the eyes of the developing world.

Contrast this with India's deft manoeuvres under P.V. Narasimha Rao to upgrade diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, after which India was seen as a neutral party both Israelis and Palestinians could turn to. Modi's lunge towards Netanyahu has wrecked India's standing in the Global South. Under the current government, India has consistently been on the wrong side of UN General Assembly votes on Israel, and will find itself in a minority on the West Asia issue at the BRICS summit India is scheduled to host later this year. ■

Photo: Getty Images

Trumpspeak On 10 March, Trump's social media post claimed the US mission was 'very far ahead of schedule' and 'very complete, pretty much'

The war might end quite abruptly because public opinion in the US will likely pressure Donald Trump to do a volte-face

ONOE and the question of federalism

The Kurian Joseph committee report calls for sweeping reforms to restore the balance of Centre-State relations

A.J. Prabal

In December 2025, the Lok Sabha extended the tenure of the joint parliamentary committee examining the draft 'One Nation, One Election' (ONOE) bill to the last week of the 2026 Budget session. The legislation is likely to be introduced and passed before the session ends on 2 April 2026, unless deferred. It has already been ruled that the bill will not need ratification from 50 per cent of the states.

The Centre has increasingly been flexing its muscles to show who's the boss. States have been made to surrender both autonomy and finances without promised gains, while Union cesses and surcharges—rising from Rs 1.99 lakh crore in 2016-17 to Rs 5.82 lakh crore in 2026-27—have shrunk the divisible pool. Politicisation of constitutional offices and interference in state policies, from education and health to language, has intensified, as seen in the abrupt reshuffling of governors.

All of a piece with the Centre showing the states the middle finger. And all the more reason why the Justice Kurian Joseph Committee report on centre-state relations is so significant.

Chaired by a former Supreme Court judge, Part I of the report—in Tamil and English—was tabled on 16 February in the Tamil Nadu assembly. It covered 10 key subjects, including language policy, the appointment and role of Governors and state responsibilities in framing policies related to education, health, delimitation, elections and GST.

The integration of 552 princely states with British India between 1947 and 1950 shaped the Constitution's tilt towards a strong Centre. But, argued M.K. Stalin while appointing the committee in April 2025, this model has failed to deliver.

The report notes that despite the Supreme Court's emphatic ruling in *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India* (1994) that federalism is part of the 'basic structure of the Constitution', the drift towards the Centre continues. On the move towards ONOE, the committee notes that the draft legislation 'mandates truncated tenures, unexpired-term elections, and confers unguided discretion on the Election Commission to defer assembly polls… with benefits overstated and harms structural, the proposal violates the Basic Structure and should be withdrawn'.

Empowering the states, the committee argues, 'is not to weaken the Union, but to right-size it—enabling it to focus on genuinely national responsibilities while restoring to the states the autonomy essential for effective governance… a Union that diffuses its energies across functions better performed by states and local bodies risks distraction from the larger national challenges that only it can address'.

In his letter to chief ministers, accompanying the report, M.K. Stalin wrote, 'Large ministries exist in New Delhi that duplicate states' functions and often attempt to steer the states' priorities through micromanagement and procedural oversight'.

In one of several interviews last year, Justice Kurian Joseph pointed out that while many—including responsible leaders—say 'nation first,' it should actually be 'Constitution first'.

"It is the Constitution that has constituted the nation. Without it, India is not India," he said, adding that in changing times, "the relationship of the Centre and the states is something to be examined periodically. The fiscal relationship, the administrative relationship, the legislative relationship, in all these, the need of the hour must be tested."

*

In 1967, C.N. Annadurai, Tamil Nadu's first DMK chief minister, had quipped that just as a goat did not require a beard, a state too did not really require a governor.

Present chief minister, M.K. Stalin—whose running battle with governor R.N. Ravi is no secret—asserts, "In a democracy, governments are to be run by elected representatives, not by ceremonial appointees." On 12 March, Ravi replaced Bengal governor C.V. Ananda Bose, following his sudden resignation weeks before assembly elections in both states. Neither state was consulted.

The committee recommends that governors be appointed from a panel of three names approved by the state legislative assembly and given a single, non-renewable five-year term. It suggests that governors be removed before their term only through a resolution of the state assembly and the 13th schedule of the Constitution be redrawn to limit the discretionary powers of the governors.

Here's a look at some key recommendations.

Article 368 A major structural concern identified by the committee is the flexibility of the constitutional amendment process under Article 368. This, it argues, allows significant alterations to federal balance without robust ratification by states or public consultation.

All constitutional amendments, the committee recommends, should require a two-thirds majority in each House of Parliament and most amendments should require ratification by two-thirds of the states representing two-thirds of India's population. Amendments affecting particular states should require ratification by those states alone and mandatory public consultation of three months should precede the introduction of constitutional amendment Bills.

Articles 2 and 3 The committee red flags Parliament's unilateral power under Article 3 to reorganise state boundaries as inconsistent with the idea of states as secure constitutional units in a federation. Creation of a new state should require state's consent or, failing that, a referendum in the affected area. No territorial reorganisation should be undertaken when a state is under President's Rule. A new Article 3A should prohibit the creation of new Union Territories and mandate periodic referendums for existing ones.

Separate Election Commissions The Committee recommends limiting the Election Commission of India to conducting elections to the Lok Sabha, the Rajya Sabha and Union territories while entrusting state assembly elections to independent state election commissions. It calls for the withdrawal of the Constitution One Hundred and Twenty-ninth Amendment Bill, 2024, which proposes simultaneous elections, terming it harmful to federal balance and legislative accountability.

Anti-defection law The committee proposes a six-year ban for defectors from contesting elections, deletion of the merger exception and treating strategic resignations as defections. It also recommends transferring adjudication from the Speaker to high courts with strict time limits, criminalising inducements for defection.

Give education back to states The committee recommends reversing the 42nd constitutional amendment and moving education, including medical education, back to the State List. It also recommends freeing top universities from central regulatory control and restricting the Union government's interventions strictly to academic standards. It recommends disbanding the National Testing Agency, abolishing NEET and NExT by amending the National Medical Commission Act, 2019 and replacing the all-India quota with a voluntary state-determined quota.

GST Council reforms and fiscal autonomy The committee proposes reducing or eliminating the Union's veto power, clarifying that GST Council recommendations are advisory in nature and allowing states to vary SGST rates within a limited band. It recommends an independent GST Council Secretariat, a statutory GST Dispute Settlement Authority chaired by a retired Supreme Court judge, instituting an annual GST rate calendar and enforcing a 'one product one rate' principle.

*

Other important recommendations include freezing delimitation till 2126, extending the inter-state seat-allocation freeze based on the 1971 Census till 2126, or until total fertility rates converge; declaring English a permanent link language; separate Union and state delimitation commissions and equal representation of states in the Rajya Sabha, with six seats per state and abolition of nominated members to the Rajya Sabha. ■

Part I of the Kurian panel report was tabled in the Tamil Nadu assembly on 16 February

Empowering the states, the Kurian panel report argues, 'is not to weaken the Union, but to right-size it'

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
www.nationalheraldindia.com
15 MARCH 2026

When fat cats get favoured over big cats

Is shipping leopards to Vantara the way to reduce human-animal conflict? Think again, says Rashme Sehgal

Animal conservationists are aghast at Maharashtra chief minister Devendra Fadnavis's recent decision to relocate 50 leopards from state rescue centres to the Reliance-owned Vantara (Greens Zoological Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre). Fadnavis, who heads the Maharashtra State Board for Wildlife (SBWL) claims this will help mitigate animal-man conflict. Jitendra Ramgaokar, chief conservator of forests (territorial) from the Maharashtra cadre, said, "Vantara is well equipped to handle leopards that have allegedly been attacking villagers".

Retired Indian Forest Service (IFS) officer Dr Uma Shankar Singh, who served as director of Lucknow Zoo, decries this trend of handing animals over to Vantara. "Rescue centres have to be site specific, climate specific and need specific; the whole purpose of a rescue and rehabilitation centre is to treat animals before returning them to the wild."

Our politicians and bureaucrats think otherwise.

In the last four years, Vantara has emerged as the largest privately-owned zoo in the world, housing over 2,000 species. Between 2019 and 2023, Vantara acquired over 3,819 wild animals, including exotics. Many came from South Africa—a country notorious for breeding big cats for profit. Independent reports indicated that Vantara imported 50 hybrid lions, 40 hybrid tigers, 40 cheetahs, 10 servals and 20 giraffes from South Africa. Official records claim the numbers are much smaller.

So smitten is our political class by Vantara that Madhya Pradesh chief minister Mohan Yadav visited the facility several times and persuaded the MP Tiger Foundation Samiti to sign an MoU with Vantara to set up similar centres in Ujjain, Jabbalpur and Uno.

Additional chief secretary (forest) Ashok Varnal gushed that apart from Vantara providing scientific expertise on gene mapping, "tiger experts from across the globe" would prepare a database "for conservation, management and research purposes".

Sounds great—if there are any tigers left to map. In 2025, Madhya Pradesh lost 55 tigers while Maharashtra lost 41. In the first six weeks of 2026 alone, MP lost eleven tigers while Maharashtra lost eight.

It's even more grim when it comes to leopards. Maharashtra recorded 40 leopard deaths between January and April 2025. Maharashtra's lackadaisical attitude is evident from its demand that leopards be removed from Schedule 1 of the Wildlife Protection Act. This would immediately strip them of protection levels and reduce legal restrictions on their capture. The state government also demanded—and received—permission from the Centre to neuter leopards as a means of de-escalating human-wildlife conflict.

Environmentalist Renu Paul points out where the real problem lies. "The decimation of Indian forests is forcing wildlife into human-dominated landscapes, including sugarcane fields. The single main cause for the rise in human-wildlife conflict is the loss of habitat."

R. Sreenivasa Murthy, retired IFS officer from the Madhya Pradesh cadre, believes the Centre set a wrong precedent by initiating "so many amendments to facilitate Vantara, including an amendment to CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora). If Anant Ambani and his team were determined to 'reduce human-wildlife conflict', they could have collaborated with the government by providing financial help."

The Maharashtra government seems to be working overtime to help industrialists at the expense of ecology. In January 2026, Fadnavis chaired the SBWL meeting that gave the green-signal to opencast iron-ore mining in the ecologically sensitive Tadoba-Andhari tiger corridor. At risk is the destruction of over 18,000 trees and the displacement of at least 60 big cats. (Environmental activist Bandu Dhotre—who was on hunger strike against the proposed mining project since its clearance—was forcibly removed from the protest site on 9 March and shifted to a hospital.)

Next on their 'hitlist' is the Sanjay Gandhi National Park—the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation has already submitted a master plan to build homestays, retreats and commercial villages on this 103,840 hectare green oasis in Borivali.

Photo: Getty Images

Grim picture Maharashtra recorded 40 leopard deaths between January and April 2025

India has nearly 425 rescue services and 570+ sanctuaries that play a crucial role in rescuing injured or displaced wild animals

*

Readers may recall that in 2025, the Maharashtra government's transfer of the elephant Mahadevi to Vantara had sparked public protest. The Jain community had demanded she be moved to a government facility rather than be handed over to a private enterprise.

India already has 20 exclusive recognised centres for wildlife, in addition to numerous off-display rescue facilities attached to the 155 zoos recognised under Section 38-H of the Wild Life (Protection) Act. As of October 2025, India has around 425 wildlife rescue services and more than 570 authorised wildlife sanctuaries that, along with NGOs, play a crucial role in rescuing and rehabilitating injured or displaced wild animals.

Most IFS officers are furious at the importance being given to Vantara. "We have enough inhouse expertise to take care of our tigers and leopards. But if our political class abdicates responsibility and singles out officers who protest, the cadre will, by and large, remain quiet," said an officer on condition of anonymity.

Take Assam's Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation. Strategically located near the Kaziranga National Park, it has handled over 5,000 emergencies; 60 per cent of the injured animals were successfully returned to the wild.

A senior forest officer from eastern Assam asks why even healthy elephants from the northeast were sent to Jamnagar, over 3,000 km away. These elephants should have been transferred to the forest department for patrolling duties. Keeping them in semi-wild conditions rather than in sheds would allow them to socialise and even mate with wild elephants.

Besides, Vantara's location is highly unsuitable: right next to Reliance's mammoth petrochemical complex. Not only is it highly polluting, there is a high risk of accidents and flash fires.

Unfazed, Vantara is expanding. They are presently 'looking after' the Gujarat state zoo at Kevadia. Nityanand Srivastava, chief wildlife warden for the state, told media that since "wildlife management has become weak, it is important for companies with passion for wildlife to come in."

Vantara has acquired 60 leopards from Junagadh's Sakkarbaug zoo and two leopards from the Guwahati zoo. It has sourced animals from the Maharashtra customs and forest department, the Dhauladhar nature park in Himachal Pradesh, the Nagaland Zoological Park and the Delhi Zoological Park. With rumours that Vantara was looking to buy as many as 10,000 elephants, even the price of elephants shot up!

Vantara has also bought a tea estate located next to the Kaziranga National Park.

Observers say that given India's recent dilution of regulations against wildlife trading, Vantara might eventually set up a breeding farm. Others sense the conglomerate is planning to create private reserves outside protected areas. As Anant Ambani told a journalist in a recent interview, "What you've seen now is only 8-10 per cent of my vision."

Retired IFS officer Prakriti Srivastava says, "Instead of protecting and preserving our vast forests and biodiversity, the government seems hell-bent on privatising our key national resources. One reason wildlife is typically entrusted to the State is because animals continue to be sustained over generations. What will happen to the animals if these private groups lose interest in this project? In Africa, animals are known to have starved once second generation owners took over."

"No one knows what the end-game is," says Dr Uma Shankar Singh. "China, for example, has started tiger farming for commercial sale or trade of tiger parts. Importing animals is tricky because one doesn't know what virus, bacteria and other zoonotic diseases they may be carrying. I know just how fragile these animals are."

Dr Singh has written several letters to the prime minister and ministry officials against an organisation that he describes as "both illegitimate and illegal". He has, expectedly, not received any reply, yet. ■

Dial down the hype, dial up the delivery

The new high-speed trains overpromise and underdeliver, discovers Avay Shukla

I've said it before and I'll say it again for the doubtful benefit of this hearing-impaired government—putting old wine in new bottles doesn't change the wine for the better. A prime example is the Indian Railways and its slew of hyped-up new trains—Vande Bharat, Tejas, Namo Bharat and others— along with the claim that they have transformed the way Indians travel. They haven't. They have just made travel more expensive.

Last month, I had to go to my hometown, Kanpur, to revitalise my withering roots. I decided to travel by the Delhi–Varanasi Vande Bharat, touted as the last word in luxury, speed and punctuality. It was my first time on a Vande Bharat and it turned out to be none of the above.

The fallacy began to unravel on platform 16 of New Delhi railway station, where I arrived at 2.30 p.m. for a 3 p.m. departure. The train arrived two hours late and finally left at 5.20 p.m.—two-and-a-half hours behind schedule. So much for punctuality.

Worse, there was almost no information shared with the hundreds of waiting passengers. Every now and then a bored announcer would inform us that the train was "delayed by 15 minutes". It was always 15 minutes—not a minute more, not a minute less.

This instalment-style announcement of delays, copied from the airline industry, is inexplicable in this age of real-time information when a train's actual location can be tracked minute by minute. Why not share that information with the passengers who have trusted the Railways' bloated hype? And isn't it ironic that the railway minister is also the IT minister, yet the Railways appear not to know where their own trains are at any given moment?

Photo: Atul Shukla

Cattle class (*Left*) **The scene at New Delhi station;** (*above*) **Vande Bharat: littered and late**

The Delhi–Varanasi Vande Bharat, touted as the last word in luxury, speed and punctuality, was anything but

The stranded passengers were treated like dirt in other ways too. They had to stand for two hours; there were barely half-a-dozen dirty benches on the platform for more than a thousand people. If there were sick, disabled or elderly passengers, that was just too bad—collateral damage on the country's journey to Vishwaguru status.

The platform where India's supposedly most magnificent train was to arrive resembled a Sadar Bazaar trading yard. Every now and then, a policeman would come and shoo passengers away for causing overcrowding. Where exactly were they supposed to go?

It was no better inside the train when it finally arrived. The entrance foyer was jammed with food cartons, garbage bags and crates of bottled water. The toilets were awash like the Niagara Falls.

The meals showed privatisation at its worst—packets of *chura* of uncertain origin, a soft drink, something described as tea and a mouldy piece of cake. We added up the printed MRPs of the items, which came to about Rs 50. IRCTC must have procured them at least 25 per cent cheaper through the lowest tender process. The passengers, however, paid Rs 80 each—another sign of how rapidly the Railways are moving towards the airline model.

The train's maximum speed, displayed on an LED screen above the doors, never exceeded 128 kmph, and that too only briefly. So much for the much-advertised top speed of 180 kmph.

The worst, however, came on the return journey, when we got off the train at New Delhi railway station at around 11.00 p.m. Complete pandemonium prevailed at the Ajmeri Gate exit. There were no proper lanes for cars, no separate areas for taxis and no identified points for boarding or dropping passengers—facilities that are standard at railway stations in most developed countries. The result was chaos. Hundreds of passengers rushed around blocking traffic while trying to locate their booked Ola and Uber rides. Vehicles were parked randomly everywhere.

It took us more than 45 minutes—almost one-fifth of the train journey time from Kanpur—to locate our Ola and exit the station.

I shudder to think what the experience must have been for the elderly, the disabled, women travelling alone or foreign tourists who had swallowed the fable of '*atithi devo bhava*'.

I longed wistfully for the Shatabdi days, when one simply went to the prepaid taxi or auto-rickshaw booths managed by the police, paid the fare and was allotted a vehicle without any fuss or the risk of being run over.

So, here's the reality. Today's much-trumpeted trains are no better—perhaps even worse—than the earlier Shatabdis and Rajdhanis, which made no extravagant claims but delivered more than they promised.

It's a long way to 2047, minister—a much more difficult journey than the three-piece suit hop to Davos

All the hype about high-speed trains is just that—hype. We may have the technical capacity to build such trains, but we lack the administrative and policy-making ability to operate them properly.

The reasons are obvious: inadequate infrastructure (tracks, signalling and communication systems), poor staff training, weak catering systems, chaotic station management and little accountability.

The planning model appears inverted. Instead of introducing new trains first and hoping the system will cope, it should upgrade infrastructure to the standards of developed countries and only then introduce high-speed services.

The Railways must treat paying passengers with respect and consideration. Travel is not just about speed; it is a package. The responsibility does not end on the platform. It must develop proper infrastructure inside and outside stations, and create systems that allow passengers to enter and exit safely, conveniently and in an orderly manner.

Dial down the hype and dial up the delivery. It's a long way to 2047, Mr Minister—a much more difficult journey than the three-piece suit hop to Davos. ■

AVAY SHUKLA *is a retired IAS officer and author*

STARS IN THE SCHOOLYARD: A UNIVERSE ON WHEELS BRINGING SPACE SCIENCE TO RURAL KARNATAKA

Where curiosity meets the Cosmos: Karnataka's mobile planetarium movement

Since 2017, the Government of Karnataka has pursued this founding philosophy with remarkable tenacity. What began with just five vans has grown, over six years, into a fleet of eleven customised units that has reached more than 22.1 lakh students and teachers — 2.2 million young minds.

The scene outside Vidhana Soudha said everything. Eleven custom-built vans stood in formation as Chief Minister Siddaramaiah stepped forward to flag off Karnataka's newly upgraded Mobile Digital Planetarium fleet — a relaunch that carried the full weight of a government making good on a promise.

Behind those vans stretched eight years of quiet, transformative work: 55,440 shows, 7,920 schools visited, and 22.1 lakh students introduced, many for the first time, to the immensity of the universe above them.

The ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya programme — 'Planetarium in the Schoolyard' — was crossing a threshold, from celebrated pilot into full-scale 'Mission Mode' initiative, and the significance went well beyond administrative reclassification.

With Ministers N.S. Boseraju and Priyank Kharge flanking the Chief Minister, Karnataka's leadership delivered a message it intended the entire country to hear: that scientific curiosity must not remain a luxury of urban privilege, and that every child in the state — whether in a coastal classroom in Udupi or a drought-prone taluk in Raichur — deserves an equal, immersive encounter with the cosmos.

"Igniting scientific curiosity among rural schoolchildren is our priority. We are taking high-quality science education directly to them, ensuring they are not left behind." — Chief Minister Siddaramaiah.

FIVE VANS TO A MOVEMENT:

The idea behind ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya is elegantly simple: if a child in a remote village in Kalyana Karnataka cannot travel to the Jawaharlal Nehru Planetarium in Bengaluru — a journey that involves twelve hours of travel and significant expense — then the planetarium must travel to the child.

Since 2017, the Government of Karnataka has pursued this founding philosophy with remarkable tenacity. What began with just five vans has grown, over six years, into a fleet of eleven customised units that has reached more than 22.1 lakh students and teachers — 2.2 million young minds.

Approximately 7,920 schools have been visited in the current phase, with 55,440 total shows conducted across the state.

The government is actively preparing to expand to one dedicated van for every one of Karnataka's 31 districts by the 2027 fiscal year.

RS 1 CRORE UNIVERSE ON WHEELS:

Each mobile unit in the f leet is a Rs 1 crore technology laboratory on wheels — entirely self-sufficient, designed to function in the most remote corners of the state without external infrastructure.

The setup is swift and theatrical: within thirty minutes, an inflatable Digital Dome of five to six metres — constructed from specialised light-blocking fabric — rises in the schoolyard, accommodating thirty-five to forty students per show.

Every van carries its own UPS and generator system, ensuring that rural power cuts do not interrupt the space journey.

Inside, 360-degree fish-eye lens projectors, Digistar systems, create a seamless, immersive hemispherical sky.

For forty-five extraordinary minutes, students fly through the rings of Saturn, witness the birth of a star, or watch the real-time mechanics of an eclipse.

The units are fully air-conditioned with advanced ventilation, and the 2026 fleet represents a quantum leap over the 2017 versions, offering modern audio systems alongside the upgraded projection technology.

Photo: GettyImages

LEARNING THAT ALIGNS WITH THE CURRICULUM:

What distinguishes ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya from a mere spectacle is its rigorous alignment with the academic curriculum. The 2026 programme directly supports the science textbooks of Classes 8, 9, and 10.

"The Solar Family" takes students on detailed fly-throughs of planetary surfaces and moons. "Celestial Mechanics" provides real-time 3D demonstrations of eclipses, tides, and seasons. "Beyond the Milky Way" introduces nebulae, black holes, and the life cycle of stars.

A dedicated "Space Missions" module covers India's Gaganyaan and Chandrayaan programmes, instilling national pride alongside scientific knowledge.

In 2026, ten new show modules have been added in Kannada, Tulu, and Urdu. Multilingual narration in Kannada, English, and Urdu is now standard across all units, with plans to include further regional dialects, ensuring that no linguistic barriers exist in the pursuit of scientific understanding.

BUILDING THE SCIENTISTS OF TOMORROW:

The Government of Karnataka has recognised that a single forty-five-minute show is only the beginning of a child's scientific journey. To sustain that spark, the state has formalised two powerful pillars — the STAR initiative and the PlanEd framework.

The STAR initiative, developed in partnership with ISRO, identifies "Star Students" — those who perform exceptionally in post-show interactive quizzes — and rewards them with visits to the Satish Dhawan Space Centre or ISRO Headquarters in Bengaluru, and with state-level astronomy olympiads specifically designed for rural government school students.

The first batch of five hundred winners from the 2025–26 rural quiz circuit is scheduled to visit ISRO Bengaluru in late April 2026 — a milestone that marks the coming of age of this talent pipeline.

With the ISRO START 2026 programme calling for academic registrations between March and April 2026, these mobile planetariums are serving as the primary recruitment tool for the next generation of Indian scientific minds.

Complementing the STAR initiative is the PlanEt Mobile App, launched in late 2025, which provides multilingual Kannada and English content, VR sky-watching guides, a Sky Map tailored to the Kannada night sky, and real-time alerts for celestial events such as eclipses and meteor showers — ensuring every student continues their cosmic journey from the palm of their hand.

PlanEd workshops, integrated into teachers' annual professional development programmes, equip educators with the digital tools and curriculum-aligned methods to continue astronomy education long after the van has moved on, transforming the mobile planetarium from a one-time event into a permanent enrichment of the school's educational culture.

"The objective is simple — every child, irrespective of location, should get to experience modern science and astronomy." — Minister N.S. Boseraju, Science & Technology.

IMPACT THAT GOES BEYOND NUMBERS:

The Karnataka Monitoring and Evaluation Authority (KMEA) has independently assessed the programme, and the findings are remarkable. Ninety-eight percent of students who attended a show reported a heightened interest in astronomy — a near-universal transformation of attitude in a single session. 93 percent of rural students expressed a desire to pursue STEM — Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics — careers after the forty-five-minute experience.

Teachers report that students return to class with sharper curiosity and clearer understanding of scientific concepts; parents say their children speak excitedly about space at home, asking questions about planets, stars, and rockets. One student from Tumkur captured it simply: "It felt like we were in space. Now I want to become a scientist."

The programme has also been especially effective in encouraging rural girls to take up science, breaking through traditional barriers that have long suppressed female participation in high-school science education. By presenting science as thrilling, accessible, and universal, ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya is quietly dismantling some of the most stubborn gender inequities in rural education.

STARS ON THE MOVE:

As Karnataka enters the summer of 2026, the fleet is moving through what the Department of Science and Technology has designated the Summer Circuit — a March-to-May schedule of science fairs and community sky-watch events reaching the state's most underserved communities.

All seven districts of the Kalyana Karnataka region are served by dedicated units. Between March 15 and April 10, seven units move through rural high schools and taluk-level science centres in Kalaburagi, Yadgir, and Raichur.

From April 12 to April 30, the Belagavi Division — Belagavi and Bagalakote — receives a special focus on STAR initiative workshops for top-performing students. From May 1 to May 20, the Mysuru and Coastal regions host Lunar and Planetary Observation nights at Sub-Regional Science Centres.

The government has prioritised schools not visited in the last three years, and any student or teacher in a rural district can request a visit through their District Science Centre.

A MODEL FOR THE NATION:

The relaunch of ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya was not merely a celebration of past achievement — it was a declaration of intent. The current fleet of eleven units is being expanded to thirty-one — one for every district — by the 2027 fiscal year.

Show content in Kannada, Tulu, and Urdu will deepen its multilingual reach. The KMEA recommends at least one annual visit to every school, a goal the fleet expansion will make possible for the first time.

The PlanEt app, PlanEd workshops, the STAR initiative's ISRO visits, and the community science fairs of the Summer Circuit are each KMEA recommendations now brought to life by a government that listens.

Beyond the mobile fleet, ministers have signalled the construction of permanent Science Centres and Planetariums in regional hubs — Hampi, Shivamogga, and Yadgir — planned for 2026–27, ensuring the mobile spark lights a permanent flame of curiosity across Karnataka's landscape.

By blending science, technology, and imagination, Karnataka's ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya is proving that education can be both inspiring and inclusive. It has opened a window to the universe for rural children, making them believe that their dreams can be as vast as the skies above, and demonstrated that when a government commits to equity in education — genuinely, financially, and operationally — the results are transformative.

If expanded further, this initiative could become a model for the entire nation, ensuring that no child, regardless of where they live, is denied the chance to wonder at the stars. Karnataka has shown the way. The universe, it turns out, belongs to everyone — and thanks to ShaaleyaAngaladalle Taaralaya, the children of rural Karnataka now know it.

A GOVERNMENT UNITED BEHIND THE STARS:

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, whose commitment to the democratisation of education is a defining feature of his government's agenda, described the programme as a tool for social equity as much as scientific advancement.

He lauded the milestone of reaching seventeen lakh students — a figure that has since surpassed twenty-two lakh as of March 2026 — as a "significant achievement in democratizing access to astronomy," and reaffirmed that the "planetarium-on-wheels" model is the most effective means of eliminating the rural-urban learning gap.

Minister N.S. Boseraju, Science and Technology, the primary architect of the programme's 2026 expansion, has provided the strategic direction for the initiative's technical evolution and geographical footprint.

He highlighted that the 2026 fleet features advanced 360-degree fish-eye projection and modern audio systems, making the experience more immersive than the 2017 pilot.

In multiple statements in November 2025 and March 2026, he confirmed the government's promise: "While mobile planetariums currently operate in select districts, we are preparing to extend this initiative to all districts in the coming months," adding simply, "The objective is simple — every child, irrespective of location, should get to experience modern science and astronomy."

Photo: GettyImages

Minister Priyank Kharge, overseeing IT, BT, and Rural Development, linked the programme to Karnataka's broader ambitions for a future-ready workforce.

His conviction is that early exposure to space science through mobile domes is the "first step" toward creating a generation ready for the global space economy, and that rural government schools must become "centres of excellence" rather than merely basic educational outposts.

Together, this triumvirate of leadership — united under the banner of equity, technological excellence, and future readiness — has given ShaaleyaAngaladalleTaaralaya its institutional strength and its unstoppable momentum.

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
www.nationalheraldindia.com
15 MARCH 2026

A tale of two elections

Similar preludes and contexts, vastly differing outcomes

Sourabh Sen

The youth and students who led popular uprisings in Bangladesh and Nepal—toppling entrenched governments in August 2024 and September 2025, respectively—have fared very differently in subsequent elections.

In Bangladesh, the National Citizen Party (NCP) was rejected in the election held on 12 February 2026, winning just six seats and three per cent of the vote. In Nepal, the Rashtriya Swatantra Party (RSP), formed in July 2022, received an overwhelming mandate, winning two-thirds of the seats and giving the country its first single-party government in three decades. Observers noted that voters in Bangladesh were wary of the instability and inexperience of the youth, while in Nepal they saw the RSP as more disciplined and reformist.

The results in Nepal surprised people and 'experts' alike. The RSP's landslide victory was fronted by 35-year-old structural engineer and rapper-turned-politician Balendra 'Balen' Shah. A former mayor of Kathmandu, Shah will be Nepal's youngest prime minister and the first from Madhesh in the plains. Like several previous prime ministers, Shah has an India connection, having studied engineering in Bengaluru. He defeated four-time prime minister and CPN-UML chairman K.P. Sharma Oli in the latter's own constituency of Jhapa-5 by a margin of 50,000 votes.

The two back-to-back elections had, prima facie, similar preludes and contexts. In both countries, Gen Z took to the streets in protest against establishments steeped in corruption and misgovernance, economic stagnation and perceived nepotism. In Nepal, it was the government's decision to monitor social media that sparked the protests; in Bangladesh, it was the movement against reservation in government services and educational institutions that brought the students out. Although both culminated in somewhat free and fair elections, Gen Z caused a 'generational earthquake' in Nepal. In Bangladesh, it was co-opted and diffused. Despite similar optics, were there drivers other than Gen Z at work?

*

For decades, a revolving door of three parties dominated politics in Nepal: the Nepali Congress (NC), the CPN-UML and the Maoist Centre. This election effectively shattered all of them. Almost all top-tier leaders from the traditional parties—including veteran leaders like Sher Bahadur Deuba and Gagan Thapa—faced humiliating defeats or a significant loss of influence.

Political observers in Nepal suggest that Gen Z acted as a safety valve to vent decades of simmering public anger against established political parties. In May 1980, following widespread student demonstrations and political unrest demanding democratic reforms, the then King Birendra called for a national referendum which allowed voters to choose between retaining the party-less panchayat or adopting a multiparty system. The panchayat system won with 54.99 per cent of the votes and, despite being suppressed, dissent persisted.

Photos: Getty Images

(*Above*) **Victorious Balendra Shah and RSP chairman Rabi Lamichhane wave to supporters; (*left*) BNP chairman Tarique Rahman**

Since then, Nepal has witnessed a number of political upheavals. These include the Maoist rebellion (1996-2006), the royal palace massacre of 2001 and King Gyanendra's coup of February 2005. The Gen Z uprising of September 2025 is part of this continuum. "Living through decades of political upheaval has given the people of Nepal a deep-rooted confidence to raise their voice in protest," observed a vlogger from Nepal, ironically on condition of anonymity.

Thousands of older demonstrators, a motley group of monarchists and ex-Maoists—many of whom resorted to arson—infiltrated the 8 September protest called by Gen Z. They pushed the crowd towards Parliament, attacked ministers and public servants, and ransacked both public and private property. The template was otherwise standard—police clashing with rioters, firing and killing protesters—be it in Kathmandu or in Dhaka.

While the Gen Z uprising in Nepal caused a 'generational earthquake', in Bangladesh the agitating youth were later co-opted

One of the triggers of the Gen Z protests was the Oli government's move to control social media platforms, all of whom were directed to register with the ministry of communication and information technology. Except TikTok and Viber, most refused. When Meta (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp), Alphabet (YouTube) and X ignored the seven-day deadline, the authorities moved to block them. As *The Kathmandu Post* put it, 'For Nepal's digitally dependent Gen Z, it was the final straw.'

With Nepalis flocking en masse to mobile-based social media, the RSP ran much of its election campaign by pushing its messaging and symbol of the blue bell through social media. While the internet-savvy RSP optimised algorithms, bots, monetised websites and content creators, traditional parties found themselves on the backfoot.

In Bangladesh, the NCP went through its political baptism even before it was prepared. Senior NCP leaders told *National Herald* that despite similarities in the political contexts of Nepal and Bangladesh, youth groups engaged with them in markedly different ways.

"When we formed the NCP, we thought of ourselves as a pressure group that would force the administration to respond to important issues," said NCP leader Yeasir Arafat. "Internally, we debated vigorously before deciding to emerge as a political party."

Arafat dismissed the speculation that joining the interim government or getting into an alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami may have worked against his party. According to him, although youngsters voted in large numbers, the BNP was the main beneficiary of Gen Z's support in Bangladesh.

Arafat pointed out that, unlike the NCP, Nepal's RSP had comparatively more experience in politics and governance. By the time it captured the imagination of Nepal's Gen Z, the party had already served as a coalition partner in the Prachanda-led government, holding four cabinet ministries from March 2024 to July 2024.

While Gen Z may have disrupted the Nepali establishment's inertia, many pass it off as a temporary wave, likely to settle as the RSP transitions from activism to governance and things return to business as usual. They point out that the uneasy understanding between Nepal's face of change Balen Shah and RSP supremo Ravi Lamichhane is driven more by accommodation than policy or ideology.

Recent experience in Bangladesh and Nepal shows that toppling entrenched governments through youth-led uprisings is easier than sustaining them in the aftermath. If political exigencies replace policy, such movements can easily be co-opted by the system. If that happens, a sense of déjà vu will engulf Nepal, and the RSP may meet the same fate as the NCP in Bangladesh. ■

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

Photo: Getty Images

President Donald Trump greets Keir Starmer

LONDON DIARY

HASAN SUROOR

UK-US 'special relationship' in trouble over Iran crisis

Donald Trump once famously lavished praise on Keir Starmer's "beautiful accent" and—hold your breath—his "beautiful, great" wife while welcoming them to the White House in February 2025 when the British prime minister handed him a personal letter from King Charles offering Trump a state visit to Britain.

Now, however, Trump is furious with Starmer for refusing to allow Americans to use UK bases to launch military strikes against Iran. He called him a "loser" and said: "This is not Winston Churchill that we're dealing with".

Starmer initially argued that the strikes were illegal and said, "This government does not believe in regime change from the sky." (He has since done a U-turn, claiming that Iran's retaliatory strikes pose a threat to Britain's security.)

Suddenly, not only does the historic US-UK 'special relationship' seem to be in serious trouble, Starmer also finds himself caught between pro- and anti-war factions in his own Labour Party.

Its significant Muslim constituency is threatening to defect to the pacifist Green Party whose charismatic leader Zack Polanski has taken a strong anti-US stand.

In the London assembly, Polanski voted against a motion welcoming the 'removal' (read assassination) of Ayatollah Khamenei.

While acknowledging that Khamenei's regime was "brutal", he called US-Israeli action "an illegal and unprovoked attack by the US government and the Israeli state", adding that he strongly hoped "recent events mark the start of a new chapter for Iran."

He also refused to support another motion condemning the vandalism of Churchill's statue in Parliament Square.

Never a popular figure either within his own party or outside, Starmer's ratings have fallen drastically in recent years. putting a question mark over his political future.

Leicester riots: whodunit?

Recriminations over the identity of the troublemakers behind the 2022 Hindu-Muslim riots in Leicester continue to rock community relations.

Hindu groups have reacted with anger to a report blaming Hindutva elements for exacerbating tensions following India's victory celebrations post the India-Pakistan Asia Cup match in Dubai.

They have rejected the report and expressed concerns about the inquiry committee's impartiality, funding and composition.

The report—led by SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), London School of Economics and the Monitoring Group—was boycotted by most Hindu organisations.

While the inquiry found that no single community was to blame, it held Hindu extremist elements largely responsible for inflaming passions.

The Hindu Community Organisations Group (HCOG) Leicester, which claims to represent over 50,000 Hindus, said the inquiry was funded by a £620,000 grant from George Soros, "known for his critical stance on India and Hindus".

It claimed that, contrary to the report's findings, Hindus suffered the most.

"The Leicester violence in 2022 saw targeted attacks on Hindu homes, temples and individuals, with clear anti-Hindu sentiments evidenced in acts such as the vandalism of a Hindu temple and assaults on Hindu youth. Yet the SOAS inquiry seems to downplay these incidents while amplifying unverified claims," said the HCOG.

Once hailed as an inclusive 'Little India', today Leicester resembles the polarised 'new India' more than a British multicultural city.

Hindu-Muslim tensions are making Leicester's 'Little India' resemble new India

Coming soon: a crackdown on dependants of foreign workers

Family members of UK visa holders living here as workers or students, be warned.

A crackdown on the 'human baggage' that accompanies foreign workers and scholars is coming after it emerged that the sharp rise in new arrivals in Britain is *not*—as is generally assumed—driven by job-seekers but by family members allowed to accompany them.

UK border and passport control at Stansted airport

As many as 83 per cent of the 3.5 million non-EU citizens who arrived—and stayed on—in Britain since Brexit were international students and family members who were allowed to accompany both students and migrant workers. According to a new study, only 17 per cent came on work visas.

Academics at Oxford University's Migration Observatory, who carried out the research, said the findings mean that a series of restrictions on work visas announced by successive governments since 2023 to reduce overall levels of immigration will affect only a minority of working migrants.

Which, to put it bluntly, makes nonsense of the government's plans to restrict work visas. What it needs is a crackdown on the 'baggage' migrants carry—their dependants.

So, think twice before wanting to ride to Britain on the back of a visa-holding family member.

Marlowe's British Kitchen in Leeds has become a symbol of inter-faith unity

Muslims and Jews bond over fish and chips

Even as Britain's Muslim and Jewish communities continue to exchange barbs, to put it mildly, over Israeli actions in Gaza, a Muslim-owned fish-and-chips shop in Leeds, Yorkshire, has become an unlikely symbol of inter-faith unity.

At the request of local Rabbi, Anthony Gilbert, shop owners Jenade Yamin and Arabaab 'Paddy' Munir, introduced kosher options alongside their halal menu to cater to the city's Jewish community.

TV celebrity, Rob Rinder, whose grandfather was a kosher caterer specialising in fish, hailed it as "a glimpse of the country we can still choose to be".

And, finally, in a recent bye-election in Manchester for a seat with a large number of Pak-origin immigrants, a video produced by the Green Party in Urdu depicted Prime Minister Keir Starmer shaking hands with Narendra Modi (who is a deeply unpopular figure in Pakistan). And the trick worked. Greens won the Labour-held seat—pushing Labour to third place. ■

सूचना एवं जनसम्पर्क विभाग, झारखण्ड

RNI: MAHENG/2021/84829, Postal Reg. No. MCN/328/2024-2026, Magazine Post Reg. No. MSD/059/2025
License To Post Without Pre Payment No. MR/Tech/WPP-363/North/2025-26
Published Date 15 March 2026 (Sunday), Posted at Patrika Channel Sorting Office, Mumbai-400001. Posting Days Monday and Tuesday

TELANGANA RISING

TELANGANA RISING
CURE - PURE - RARE

SECURING OUR FUTURE, EMPOWERING OUR YOUTH.

20 LAKH NEXT-GEN JOBS
GLOBAL OPPORTUNITIES AT HOME

- ₹4 Lakh Crore Investment to drive industry
- Hyderabad leads the capability revolution as a global capability centre (GCC)
- No. 1 in Aero Engines, Life Sciences, and Advanced Industry

PROTECTING OUR OWN
SAFETY NET AT HOME & ABROAD

- 70,000 government jobs delivered to our youth
- Dedicated Gulf Board & ₹10 lakh cover for Gulf workers

EQUIPPING FOR THE WORLD
UPSKILLING FOR OPPORTUNITY

- India's first Young India Skills University, chaired by Anand Mahindra
- World-class Integrated Residential Schools

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION
TOWARDS A STRONGER FUTURE

- Zero tolerance on drugs to protect our youth led by the EAGLE Force
- Rebuilding youth through a culture of sports and fitness

Issued by: Dept.of Information and Public Relations, Govt.of Telangana