NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY

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

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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

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Why we suddenly love Lakshadweep

There's more to the nationalist spin on preferring the Indian islands over the Maldives

Pankaj Chaturvedi

I am still in awe of the stunning beauty of its islands…' began PM Modi's social media post on 4 January. 'I had the opportunity to interact with people in Agatti, Bangaram and Kavaratti… here are some glimpses, including aerial glimpses from Lakshadweep... for those who wish to embrace the adventurer in them, Lakshadweep has to be on your list. During my stay, I also tried snorkelling—what an exhilarating experience it was! And those early morning walks along the pristine beaches were also moments of pure bliss…' concluded the gush about his two-day stay in Lakshadweep.

The scripted spiel was as much about his latest modelling assignment—do not miss the sartorial details—as his first visit to Lakshadweep; it was the second by a serving Indian prime minister. In December 1987, when Rajiv Gandhi was prime minister, he had attended to official work and then spent a year-end vacation on Bangaram island. This visit had been raked up by Modi during his election campaign in 2019, alleging that Rajiv Gandhi had misused his office for a private holiday—charges that retired defence services officers and the then Lakshadweep administrator, Wajahat Habibullah, had refuted as disinformation.

PM Modi's posts with photographs of him snorkelling in a life jacket have also prompted tongue-wags on social media, but the context for three Maldivian deputy ministers calling him a 'terrorist' and mocking him as a 'clown' is not clear, since the posts were deleted within hours after a social media shitstorm. All the three ministers were immediately 'suspended' and President Mohamed Muizzu, elected in October on an 'India out' plank, sought to placate ruffled feathers by condemning the comments as highly irresponsible. The Maldivian government expressed its regrets and Maldivian trade bodies apologised to their Indian partners.

Even while tamping down the diplomatic fracas with India, Muizzu, who is on a five-day state visit to China, met President Xi Jinping on 10 January and signed '20 key agreements', including one on tourism cooperation. 'Twenty key agreements were signed today between the government of the Maldives and the government of China this afternoon and both the Presidents witnessed the signing ceremony,' the Maldivian president's office said in a post on X.

Muizzu is on his third overseas trip and is yet to visit India, which was historically the first destination of Maldivian leaders. He urged China to regain the #1 slot and send more tourists to Maldives. He made no reference to India, but his appeal came soon after the 'Boycott Maldives' call in India, widely perceived to have an official nod.

While no formal statement was issued by the government of India, the external affairs ministry summoned the Maldivian envoy to express its displeasure. The silence of the Indian government on equally, if not more, vicious campaigns against the Maldives on social media reinforced the suspicion that it had official blessings, that it had been 'orchestrated, organised and ordained' even as the hashtag #BoycottMaldives began trending on X. Media reports claimed that Indian tour operators and airlines had reported largescale cancellation of travel plans by Indians, allegedly depressing prices in hotels and resorts in Maldives. Take it with a pinch of salt, though.

The Maldivian Tourism Authority's website claims that Indians constituted 11 per cent of tourist arrivals in Maldives in 2022, virtually neck-and-neck with Russians, with Chinese tourists comprising 10 per cent. While Indians, Russians and the Chinese accounted for approximately 3.2 million tourists, a similar number was made up by the UK, other European countries and the US, combined.

Seasoned diplomats are dismayed by the Indian response. "Restrained reaction would've forced an obviously non-friendly government to make amends. Instead, social media onslaught, calls for isolation (of Maldives) have worsened relations and given China a leg-up," commented former ambassador and commentator K.C. Singh.

In a scathing editorial, *Global Times*, the official mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China commented: 'Beijing has never asked Malé to reject New Delhi because of the conflicts between China and India, nor does it view cooperation between the Maldives and India as unfriendly or a threat... New Delhi should stay more open-minded as China's cooperation with South Asian countries is not a zero-sum game.' The editorial went on to add that Muizzu's decision to visit China before India 'did not necessarily mean that he is pro-China and anti-India'—it merely demonstrated that Muizzu was treating India with a 'normal mindset and steering the relationship between the Maldives and India to a normal State–State relationship'.

BJP leaders and the Indian foreign policy establishment greeted the criticism with stony silence. The editorial came as a bitter pill because just days earlier *Global Times* had carried a lavishly adulatory article on India, which was quoted profusely and with pride in India. Authored by Zhang Jiadong, director of the Centre for South Asian Studies at Fudan University, the article effusively praised India's 'great achievements' in becoming one of the fastest growing major economies. His last two visits to India in four years, Ziadong wrote, showed that the 'attitude toward Chinese scholars was more relaxed and moderate' and India was strategically more confident.

The mishandling of Muizzu—who had indeed campaigned and won on a nationalist 'India out' plank, and demanded post-election that India withdraw its military personnel from the islands—belied any such confidence or maturity.



PM Modi's day out: snorkelling in Lakshwadeep in the reassuring company of Navy divers

'One only hopes that India–Maldives relations, which are too vital and strategic, recover lost equilibrium as soon as possible… These are not ties to be trifled with,' says former foreign secretary Nirupama Rao

Muizzu had met Modi in Dubai on the sidelines of COP28 and had apparently reiterated the demand. The meeting, however, did little to break the ice. In December, Maldives decided to revoke an agreement with India for joint hydrographic surveys in Maldivian waters, signed during PM Modi's visit to the islands in 2019. It was said to be a symbol of India–Maldives defence ties.

Also in December, Maldives skipped the latest meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave, opting to attend a meeting of a China-led forum. Whether India's overbearing 'Big Brother-ly' bullying alienated the Maldivians or whether India took the Maldives for granted, thereby creating anti-India sentiment, is hard to say. The 'Boycott Maldives' campaign and reports that some pro-India politicians in the islands have demanded Muizzu's resignation are not helping cool the temperature and calm bilateral relations.

Anti-India sentiments are not new in Maldives. In 2018, Abdulla Yameen, the then president of Maldives, asked India to withdraw two of its helicopters and a Dornier aircraft, deployed by India for search and rescue operations in Maldives. Yameen insisted that if the helicopters and the aircraft were gifted to it, then their pilots must be from Maldives and not from India. Mutual distrust has also grown because of the BJP's perceived anti-Muslim politics at home.

The Hindu has reported meanwhile that speculation abounds in New Delhi of a Chinese plan to develop a naval base in the Maldives. 'In 2018, China planned an ocean observatory in Makunudhoo Atoll, north of Malé—not far from India's Lakshadweep islands. Maldivian opposition leaders had then expressed reservations about the observatory's potential military applications, including a provision for a submarine base,' it reported. While there is no evidence yet of China having revived that proposal, the possibility cannot be discounted.

"I only hope that India–Maldives relations, which are too vital and strategic, recover lost equilibrium as soon as possible… These are not ties to be trifled with. They matter too much. To both countries. We are equal partners. And must stay that way. This is not [just] about sand and beaches," weighed in former foreign secretary Nirupama Menon Rao. ■

'Some places need to be left alone'

He is no Christopher Columbus or Vasco da Gama. A political appointee, a former BJP minister from Gujarat, Praful Khoda Patel nonetheless 'discovered' Lakshadweep in 2020 when he took over as Administrator. Ever since, he has been trying to develop Lakshadweep 'like neighbouring Maldives, a renowned international tourist destination'.

He probably dreamed of a Hindu paradise on these islands where 93 per cent of the population happens to be Muslim. He withdrew beef and other kinds of meat from mid-day meals, an action endorsed by the Supreme Court, which felt it was the government's discretion to frame policy, and how did it matter anyway, as fish and eggs were still in plentiful supply.

He ordered coconut trees to be painted orange or saffron to 'beautify' them and proposed a ban on cow slaughter in a territory where there were no cows (except in dairy farms); a preventive detention law where there was no crime and took over the authority to acquire tribal land without paying compensation.

In the Lakshadweep islands, where the maximum road length is just 11 kilometres, he planned to widen the roads, allow exploitation of mineral resources and convert the islands into a hub for cement manufacture.

In another flash of brilliance, Khoda also initiated a population-control scheme on the islands where the total fertility rate, according to the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–20) was 1.4, which is far behind the national average of 2.2. He also planned to allow sale and consumption of alcohol though locals favoured its sale only in resorts and hotels.

The 'Goonda Act' was used to arrest dissenters like Hussain Manikfan for a Facebook post in which he complained about the lack of transport between the mainland and the islands. His FB post read: 'Only 2 of the 7 ships are running and people are going through hell. In a skewed logic, this will be a justification for not requiring more ships.'

The brouhaha that followed PM Modi's visit to Lakshadweep on 2–3 January 2024 would have people believe that the islands have been neglected over the past 70 years.



Lakshadweep Administrator Praful Khoda Patel with PM Modi

But every home in the islands has rainwater harvesting facilities and solar power substantially covers the islanders' electricity needs. All islands are connected by helicopter service since 1986, and high-speed passenger boats were purchased in the 1990s. The National Institute of Oceanography helped redesign tripods ensuring piped water supply from the fresh water lens that, in every coral island, floats on the saline underground seawater.

Minicoy boasted one of the country's first Navodaya Vidyalayas and Kadmat has a degree college. Indeed, every island had a computer by 1990, recalls the then Administrator, Wajahat Habibullah.

Ignoring the warnings of marine biologists, the Lakshadweep administration held an investors' meet in New Delhi and is pressing ahead with the construction of beach and lagoon villas. A tender notice was issued inviting proposals from developers for building 370 such villas using the design, build, finance, operate and transfer (DBFOT) model on a public–private partnership (PPP) basis on Minicoy, Kadmat and Suheli islands. On 4 January 2024, the day PM Modi ended his visit to the islands, the Lakshadweep collector acquired 1.9 hectares of land belonging to 218 residents for construction of a beach road.

Lakshadweep's environmental balance is shaken by land erosion, cyclones and rising water temperatures along the coast. This is exacerbated by fishing permission granted to large trawlers. S. Abhilash of the department of meteorology, Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT) says, "These islands are extremely sensitive. The sea here remains rough throughout the year. In addition to stormy waves, changing ocean currents and bleaching of coral reefs, large-scale construction will only worsen the situation."

Loveleen Arun, a veteran of the travel trade, points out, "While Maldives is spread across an area of 298 sq. km, Lakshadweep's is just 32 sq. km. In comparison, Andaman island is 6,000+ sq. km. The coral reefs around the Lakshadweep islands are already bleaching or dying. So please think twice before trying to promote it as the next Maldives. Some places need to be left alone."

A cluster of 32 islands with a population of 71,000, Lakshwadeep has been protected and preserved till now with good reason. But Khoda and his political masters have different ideas and would like to turn it into a concrete nightmare and a real estate player's wet dream. ■

–Pankaj Chaturvedi

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A turning point for the Congress in Andhra?

Late YSR's daughter Y.S. Sharmila's entry into the Congress is set to give a fillip to the party in the state

Suresh Dharur

One small step for an individual but a giant leap for the organisation" was how a senior Congress leader summed up the mood of the Andhra Pradesh unit following the induction of Y.S. Sharmila into the party. Daughter of popular Congress leader and twice chief minister of combined Andhra Pradesh, the late Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, and estranged sister of current chief minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, Sharmila's entry comes as a big boost ahead of simultaneous assembly and Lok Sabha elections in April–May.

Entrusting her a key position may not automatically lead to dramatic results, but her induction is being seen as a step towards securing some semblance of political relevance for a party relegated to the margins in Andhra Pradesh.

Sharmila has the unenviable task of revitalising the party and making it battle-ready to take on her elder brother's YSR Congress Party (YSRCP). While it would be unreasonable to expect the grand old party—whose vote share was less than 2 per cent in the 2019 polls—to pull off an electoral miracle, the latest development is bound to breathe life into the moribund organisation and lift the spirits of the cadre.

Political observers caution that Congress leaders must temper their expectations, given the ground realities. "The fact remains that there is no political vacuum in the state waiting to be filled. Already, three formidable regional parties—YSRCP, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Jana Sena Party (JSP)—are in the fray. With this, both the national parties—BJP and Congress—appear to have been squeezed out," political analyst and author Ramesh Kandula said.

Optimism in the air

The Congress' optimism is largely based on two factors. First, Sharmila may serve as the catalyst to resurrecting the memory of YSR, whose welfare policies still resonate with the masses, while consolidating the anti-incumbency against the Jagan Mohan Reddy government. Second, by projecting Sharmila as the true inheritor of YSR's political legacy, the party might attract several old-time Congressmen who had joined YSRCP following YSR's death in a copter crash in September 2009.

Signalling how crucial the development is for the Congress, top leaders including party president Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi were present during Sharmila's formal induction into the party in New Delhi. Congress general secretaries K.C. Venugopal and Jairam Ramesh as well as Andhra in-charge Manickam Tagore accompanied Sharmila when she met former Congress president Sonia Gandhi later.

The party brass is understood to have promised her a Rajya Sabha berth if she takes over the reins of the party in Andhra.

"She is the right candidate to revive the party's lost glory and keep YSR's legacy alive. YSR was a true mass leader and his legacy, marked by pro-poor policies, is still relevant in Andhra politics," senior Congress leader N. Tulasi Reddy said.

An overwhelming majority of the YSRCP leaders owe their political careers to YSR, and it was this loyalty that prompted them to sail with Jagan when he severed ties with Congress and floated his own party in 2011. "Now, Sharmila is ideally positioned to bring them back to the Congress fold," a senior party leader said.

"No doubt, we bore the brunt of public anger over the division of Andhra Pradesh to carve out a separate Telangana state. But the public mood is changing now. They understand our past compulsions," says state Congress chief G. Rudra Raju.

Rallying point for rebels

It is widely believed that Sharmila may emerge as a rallying point for YSRCP rebels who have been denied party tickets. Already, two ruling party MLAs—A. Ramakrishna Reddy and Malladi Vishnu—who have been denied renomination to the assembly seats have indicated that they *will* join the Congress.



Photo: Getty Images

Y.S. Sharmila joins the Congress party in New Delhi, 4 January 2024

Battling anti-incumbency, the chief minister has already dropped 13 sitting MLAs out of 35 candidates finalised so far for the assembly elections. The ruling party has 151 MLAs in the 175-member legislative assembly. According to YSRCP sources, more than 50 sitting legislators will be denied tickets this time. Some more will be shifted to other constituencies to improve their chances of winning.

A strong legacy

Andhra Pradesh was once considered a stronghold of the Congress. It was a major contributor to the UPA's kitty in 2004 and 2009. On both occasions, YSR had steered the party to victory in the undivided state, cementing his position as a regional satrap.

A four-time MP and five-time MLA, YSR was arguably the most popular mass leader of his times. He led several mass movements against the then TDP government. His pioneering welfare schemes—free power to farmers, health insurance for the poor and fee reimbursement for students—still find resonance with voters, 14 years after his untimely death. Jagan came to power in 2019 invoking that legacy and has since rechristened several welfare schemes in his father's name.

'The fact remains that there is no political vacuum in the state waiting to be filled. Already, three strong regional parties—YSRCP, TDP and JSP—are in the fray'

Sister-in-arms

Sharmila's political journey began when she stood by her brother in his hour of crisis. Jagan, then an MP from Kadapa, was jailed in May 2012 following a CBI probe into a case of alleged illegal assets. As general secretary of the fledgling YSRCP, Sharmila extensively campaigned on his behalf for the by-elections held that year, necessitated by the resignation of 18 Congress MLAs following Jagan's ouster from the Congress.

In October 2012, she undertook a 3,000-km-long *padayatra* from her village Idupulapaya in Kadapa district to Ichchapuram in Srikakulam. Ahead of the 2019 elections, she went on an 11-day bus yatra through Andhra Pradesh in support of her brother. During political rallies, she used to describe herself as an "arrow released by Jagan *anna*". Her public outreach not only established the YSRCP in every nook and corner of the state, but also generated sympathy for Jagan.

However, differences cropped up soon after the YSRCP stormed to power in 2019, with Jagan refusing to accommodate her in the party, fearing that she might emerge as a parallel power centre.

This forced Sharmila to move to neighbouring Telangana to pursue her political ambitions. Coinciding with YSR's birth anniversary, she launched YSR Telangana Party on 8 June 2021.

The trouble in the YSR family deepened further in June 2022 when Sharmila's mother Y.S. Vijayalakshmi quit as honorary president of the YSRCP and announced her support for her daughter.

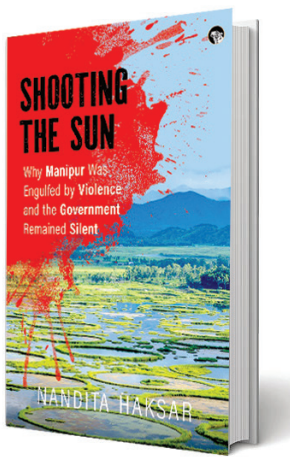
After running a fierce campaign against the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) government headed by K. Chandrashekar Rao, Sharmila subsequently decided to stay away from contesting the Telangana assembly polls, held on 30 November. Instead, her party extended support to the Congress to avoid a split in the opposition votes.

Despite the rift, Jagan and Sharmila have so far refrained from criticising each other in public. But the gloves may soon come off as Andhra sets the stage for the battle of siblings over their father's political legacy. ■

BOOK EXTRACT

Where have all the flowers gone?

Manipur is a place where many flowers have bloomed, literally and metaphorically



Title **Shooting the Sun**
Author **Nandita Haksar**
Publisher **Speaking Tiger**
Pages **200**
Price **₹399** (paperback)

The stories of Manipur that this book tells are violent, cruel and infused with unadulterated savagery. The hate and rage in them is tangible and there is no way to make the stories any less brutal.

The reports coming out of the state since May 2023 have eclipsed everything else there is to know about this magnificent place, its cultural as well as biological diversity. Almost as if wanting to remind us of these aspects of its beauty, three new species of flowers revealed themselves in Kakching.

[…]

Manipur is a place where many flowers have bloomed, literally and metaphorically. More than five centuries ago, Charairongba (1697–1709), a Meitei king, wrote a book called *Leiron* (*lei* means flower). He describes more than a hundred flowers, edible plants and medicinal herbs, and relates stories associated with each plant. Here are some descriptions of the flowers he gives:

Lei Kabok: It is a white flower that remains ever fresh and is not eaten by worms... an ideal present for boys and girls to give to each other to show their love.

Nongleishang: This flower grows in an enchanted forest in the remote hills and is associated with folk stories.

Santhong Maiba Lei: It is believed that this flower was a gift of the gods... it seems to be sprinkled with silver dust and it has silvery sword-like leaves... used by ancient priests and priestess[es] for religious offerings.

Kusum Lei: This flower was brought to Manipur by the Muslims... the petals of the flowers look as if they are made from gold and the leaves resemble the teeth of a tiger.

Singut Yenga Lei: This is a flower associated with a story of friendship and love of two women who turned themselves into two reeds so that during the dry season they may be burnt together and become ash, and they may rise to the sky in the form of smoke.

Thambal: This is the lotus in the Waithou Lake and is believed to flower which grows from the pit of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba's stomach.

The description of the flowers includes information about the plants from the hills as well as the valley, and those associated with folk stories of tribal people and also of the Muslims in Manipur.

I learnt much about Meitei culture when I was living in Manipur from 1988 to 1991. It was Maharaj Kumari Binodini, the daughter of the Manipur Kingdom's monarch, Sir Maharaj Churachand Singh, who told me of the pre-Hindu Sanamahi religion and even took me to meet a famous *maibi*, a woman priestess.

I was in the state to represent the Nagas in a case of large-scale human rights violations committed by the Indian security forces in the Poumai Naga-inhabited areas of Senapati district during the counter-insurgency operation codenamed Bluebird (1987). M.K. Binodini mobilised many well-known artists and writers in support of the case and campaign against the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958.

A Meitei sub-divisional officer, N. Surendra Singh, gave me all the relevant files from his SDO's office. [These] documented the human rights violations being committed during Operation Bluebird. (Many of these documents were field reports sent by him in the form of telegrams to the district administration.) He paid with his life for his act of courage.

The superintendent of jails was a man from the Kuki community. He helped me, among other things, by allowing me access to my clients in jail. He also came to my aid when I took up the case of the Burmese refugees who had started coming into Manipur after the military crackdown in Myanmar in 1988.

Numit Kappa or 'Shooting the Sun' is the oldest Meitei epic written in the period of the earliest monarchs of the Ningthouja dynasty

Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis were all extremely sympathetic to the Burmese refugees who had crossed to Manipur in the wake of crackdown. It was quite inspiring, because I knew there had been long wars with Burma in the past. I was deeply moved once again when I went to the Manipur High Court in 2021, in the midst of the Covid pandemic, after a gap of more than two decades, to once more represent some refugees who had fled to Manipur after the military coup in Myanmar in February that year. I was overwhelmed by the support, for both me and the cause I had taken up, by so many of my old friends and acquaintances (again, across communities).

This is not to say that I was, or am, not aware of the divisions and conflicts between the communities living in Manipur. After all, I was still called a *mayang* (a derogatory word for 'outsider'). There have been deadly conflicts between the communities many times in the past. What we saw in 2023, however, was different. This time, even the security forces were divided down ethnic lines, with the Manipur police and commandos identifying with the Meiteis, and the central forces, especially the Assam Rifles, identifying with the Kukis. There were even clashes between the police and the central forces.

[…]

The violence affected everyone in Manipur, from schoolchildren to those dependent on the internet for their livelihood, and from cultivators to lawyers. But it is clear that the violence was overwhelmingly directed at the Kuki-Zo.

The Kuki group of tribes in Manipur includes the Gangte, Hmar, Kom, Paite, Thadou, Vaiphei and Zo. With the exception of the Thadous, all the other communities have disowned the term Kuki and call themselves by their own names. Many prefer to refer to themselves as Zomi. The Thadou Kuki are numerically the largest community and have played a dominant role in Kuki politics. In Manipur, the Kuki-Zo are concentrated in the Churachandpur district, which has the highest literacy rate in the state, although they have villages in all the Naga-majority areas as well as the Valley.

[…]

The term 'Kuki', we may note, is an exonym. It was likely used by the Bengalis to refer to the tribes living in some of these regions of India and Myanmar. During British rule, all communities and tribes that were not included in the Naga group of tribes were called Kuki. They divided the Kukis into 'Old Kukis' and 'New Kukis', the former having largely identified themselves with the Naga group of tribes in the years since. Kukis on this side of the border are called 'Chins' by the Burmese. Although the Kuki-Chin-Mizo-Zo group of tribes are recognised as separate tribes, they have many similarities of culture and language.

This affinity has been at the root of accusations against the Kuki-Zo of being 'outsiders'—accusations which came to be thrown around with disturbing conviction as Manipur erupted like a volcano in May 2023.

[…]

Peace can only return if the truth is acknowledged. But there isn't one simple and straightforward truth that needs to be acknowledged. The story is complex.

[…]

The title of this book refers to *Numit Kappa* or 'Shooting the Sun', the oldest Meitei epic written in the period of the earliest monarchs of the Ningthouja dynasty of Manipur in the first century AD. It speaks of a time when there were two suns in the sky but one was shot dead and the other hid himself in a cave and plunged the land into darkness.

Then the people prayed to the sun to come out of the cave, and it finally did, shining over the land once again. ■

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STATES 360 CHHATTISGARH

Protests intensify against coal mining in Hasdeo

Divyendu

Our country has more than 600 known reserves of coal blocks, of which two-thirds are available for mining. Giving this bounty, and given that conservationists and environmentalists have reservations about mining in only one-third of these coal blocks, that still leaves plenty of options. Why, then, is the Adani Group, which routinely imports coal from Australia and Indonesia, so keen on plunder are the protests by adivasis, which are now spilling out of Chhattisgarh, with processions in adjoining Madhya Pradesh, including in the city of Indore. Arrests and road blocks on Sunday, 7 January, failed to prevent a large number of people from different parts of the state from converging at the rallying point in Hasdeo, where a large group of adivasis have been camping.

The protestors, staunch opponents to coal mining by the Adani Group in Hasdeo, are drawing inspiration from the Punjab farmers' agitation against the farm laws.



the Hasdeo Arand forest? Surely it could look elsewhere? If they are attached to the state, within Chhattisgarh itself there are other active coal mines. What, then, is the reason for the group to pursue mining rights in Hasdeo for the past decade-and-a-half?

Environmental lawyer Sudiep Shrivastava offers an explanation.

Hasdeo is a virgin forest, pristine and dense. The coal here is closer to the surface and easier to access. As a result, mining costs would be lower. Forest officials and forest mafia alike are also in favour of mining in the area with an eye to profiting from the proceeds of felled or filched timber. All that stands in the way of this

Not a kilo of coal would be allowed to move out of Chhattisgarh, they pledged. The protests, which have been going on for over 600 days, intensified last month after a large number of trees were swiftly felled days after the new BJP government was installed. The tribal voters from both Surguja and Bastar divisions who supported the new Adivasi chief minister feel betrayed. They are convinced he is already a puppet in the hands of the Adani Group and the Modi government. What other choice do they have now but to intensify protests, organise road blockades, seal the borders and stop the movement of coal?

The felling of trees in Hasdeo had begun in 2022 when there was a Congress government in the state. The Union government had also given its approval the same year. For mining, clearance was required by both the union government and the state government. After stalling for some time and, despite getting the assembly to unanimously pass a resolution *against* mining in Hasdeo, the Congress government succumbed to pressure. The state Congress chief Dipak Baij, MP, acknowledged on Sunday that it was a mistake and pledged to join the good fight against mining. He also publicly admitted that while the so-called approvals by the Gram Sabhas were secured under the previous BJP government, the Congress government under Bhupesh Baghel had failed to hold an inquiry and get those approvals overturned.

Alok Shukla of the Hasdeo Bachao Andolan explained that protestors are agitating on two basic points. They contend that the 'consents' shown by the Adani Group from Gram Sabha members and the Sarpanch have either been obtained by subterfuge and fraud or are, quite simply, fake. Many of the signatures cannot be attributed to any bona fide Gram Sabha members, while their own signatures on official documents are unidentifiable. On paper, this has been under investigation for the past five years but there is still no official word about the findings.

The second issue, Shukla said, is that both the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE) and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), in two separate reports, recommended against any mining in the area, citing that it would increase human-elephant conflict and negatively impact biodiversity. Both the studies, which were released in May 2022, pointed out that although Chhattisgarh has fewer elephants compared to other states, a disproportionately high number of deaths and damage to property are caused by human-elephant conflict resulting from habitat loss and clearing of forests. Filmmaker and researcher Ekta added that elephants are increasingly straying on to NH 343, as well as into urban areas.

The ICFRE study also pointed out that the loss of natural environment would cause grievous harm not only to the means of income for the local adivasis but also to their culture and identity. The study indicated that PEKB block (operated by Adani) provided 'habitat to rare, endangered and threatened flora and fauna'. Activists underscore the threat mining would pose to the Hasdeo river and the Bango reservoir, a source of both drinking water and irrigation in the region.

The report concluded by adding a caveat that if the government still wanted to go ahead, it should only allow mining in 'PEKB, Kanta Extension, Tara and Parsa' under 'strict environmental safeguards'.

Adivasis are, in fact, already opposing another coal mine being developed by the Adani Group in Raigarh, which will destroy villages, fertile fields, forests and places of tribal worship. Public hearings notified in June 2019 for land acquisition could not be undertaken owing to largescale protests.

Adivasis accuse officials of fabricating affidavits to claim that public hearings for acquisition of land were successfully held and the consent of villagers obtained legitimately. Renewed efforts were made last month to carry out a survey in the area for a new railway line to facilitate transportation of coal for both existing and future coal mines. The good news is that the surveyors were chased away by the people and had to beat a hasty retreat.

Kabhi haan, kabhi na

The alacrity with which the new BJP governments in both Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan have restored consent to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to investigate public servants working for the state government is indicative of what the central agencies are up to. Several states, including Punjab, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Mizoram, West Bengal, Telangana and Meghalaya had earlier withdrawn this consent, which meant that while the CBI could investigate central government officials in the state for corruption, it could not in the case of state government employees.

The restoration of consent by Chhattisgarh means that former chief minister Bhupesh Baghel—whose name is learnt to have been added to the chargesheet in the Mahadev App case by the Enforcement Directorate after he lost the election—and others in his government are going to face the heat before the Lok Sabha election. How machiavellian is that?

Vultures thrive while tigers dwindle

The Achanakmar Tiger Reserve is part of the Achanakmar Wildlife Sanctuary launched in 1975 in what was then undivided Madhya Pradesh. Part of Project Tiger, it was declared a Tiger Reserve in 2009 with much fanfare. Recent reports suggest that only around eight tigers are now left, prompting wildlife experts to give serious thought to relocating tigers from other reserves. Vultures, on the other hand, seem to have done better, having gone up over four years from around 30 to 45.

Vulture conservation and research associate Abhijit Sharma says that environmentalist Shirish Damre even spotted two new species, the Himalayan Griffon Vulture and the Eurasian Griffon Vulture, on 1 January 2024.

One such unsuspecting Himalayan Griffon was caught by villagers in Uttar Pradesh and generated much excitement with some TV channels claiming that 'Jatayu', the vulture-king demi-god from the epic *Ramayana*, had come to visit Ayodhya ahead of the consecration of the Ram Temple! Wonders never cease.





STATES 360° GUJARAT

Life is a big roadshow in India's westernmost state



Sujata Anandan

The prime minister's fascination with 'road shows' remains as strong as ever. Whether it is an international cricket match, a women's conference, election campaigns or the Vibrant Gujarat summit, the events are incomplete without a 'road show'.

The 10th edition of the biennial Vibrant Gujarat summit was no exception. The prime minister hit the streets again the evening before the three-day event started on 10 January.

What these road shows are designed to achieve besides burnishing the prime minister's brand image is not clear though. The political opposition, while grudgingly admitting the summit enhanced the state's image as an investment 'destination', especially with the state's former chief minister—now the country's prime minister—claims there is a huge gap between the hype and the reality.

The summit has, since 2019, sought partner countries for the event, and their numbers have steadily increased. This year saw 34 confirmations, 21 of the nations participating for the first time. Conspicuous by its absence this year was Canada, which partnered with the Gujarat government five times earlier.

At the event, promotional videos and publicity material highlighted the state's march into greater industrialisation. While the state was earlier known for its pharma, chemical and textile sectors, it is now known for automobiles, ceramics, renewable energy and ports too. With the backing of the Union government, Gujarat has also made inroads into the semiconductor, aircraft manufacture, defence, hydrogen ecosystem and space-related industries, even leaving several more industrialised states behind.

The state government claims to have attracted investment worth $55 billion in the last two decades, and points out that 13 per cent of Gujarat's FDI comes to the automobile sector, outshining India's national average of 5 per cent.

It is difficult, however, to gloss over the poor social indices of the state—including the stunted, wasted and underweight children. Gujarat ranks at 22 or lower among the 30 states for child health indices. The state is also one of the largest hazardous waste generators in the country, and fourth for plastic waste. One report claimed that only 80 per cent of its industrial units comply with waste water treatment norms. It has the third highest consumption of fossil fuels per capita too.

Still, no time to dwell now; these are problems to keep for another year (or term). Next 'road show': Ayodhya, later this month.

No. 1 in custodial deaths

Another 'best in class' for Gujarat, and not a good one: the latest report of the National Crimes Record Bureau (NCRB) provides a grim picture of custodial deaths in the state and a shocking lack of accountability. The highest number of such deaths in the country between 2020 and 2022 were reported from Gujarat. Yet, nobody has been convicted for custodial deaths since 2016.

On 9 January, a division bench of the Gujarat High Court finally upheld the life sentence of former IPS officer Sanjiv Bhatt for the custodial torture and death of a person in Jamnagar in 1990, when Bhatt was assistant superintendant of police there. Bhatt was first convicted by a sessions court in June 2019—the only such conviction from 2016 to 2023.

In 2022 alone,there were 14 deaths in police custody. Magisterial inquiries were ordered in 10 cases, judicial inquiries in four. Remarkably, no FIR has been filed and nobody has been charged as yet in any of them. As many as 83 custodial deaths within 24 hours of arrestwere reported between 2016 and 2021. Families of 26 of the deceased demanded judicial inquiries; the mandatory magisterial inquiry was conducted in only 42 cases; charge sheets were filed in just eight cases.

Not a pretty picture of policing.

Occupational hazard

Being an opposition MLA is risky business in Gujarat, as Jignesh Mevani had discovered. The Assam police had flown all the way to Gujarat to arrest him and drag him back over a frivolous complaint. Now, it is the turn of another opposition MLA, Chaitar Vasava, who has been in prison in Bharuch for the past two weeks.



Vasava is accused of brandishing a gun at a forest department official and snatching several thousand rupees from him. The police told the court that the incident happened inside a forest where the officer had gone to ostensibly evict tribal communities who have been cultivating patches of land in the clearings. The police also claimed that they had recovered 'only' Rs 30,000 from the MLA's house and were not able to recover the firearm allegedly used to intimidate the officer.

Vasava, a firebrand tribal leader himself and currently an Aam Aadmi Party MLA, has been giving the state government a tough time with hard-hitting questions, say his followers and his lawyer. The fabricated case is a handy way to keep him from embarrassing the government, they say. But the police in Gujarat are known to be 'tough' *and* 'reasonable'.

Bulgarian 'troublemaker'

When Cadilla, one of our largest pharmaceutical firms, hired a Bulgarian woman as a 'flight attendant' in November last year, it did not bargain for the embarrassment she would cause.

She accused chairman and managing director Rajiv Modi and one of his aides of molesting and raping her, a complaint that the police did not take seriously at first, even refusing to register a case. The persistent woman, however, knocked on the doors of four different police stations and a lower court until the Gujarat High Court ordered the case be registered. It finally was on 31 December.

The question remains why Cadilla needed a Bulgarian flight attendant. The explanation doing the rounds is that private corporates prefer flight crew unfamiliar with English and Indian languages so that they can't eavesdrop on business conversations. The lady says her designation was changed to 'personal attendant' to Modi when he travelled.

Gujarati media reports claim she complained to the Bulgarian embassy that Modi and his accomplices were coercing her to withdraw her complaint and file an affidavit stating that the dispute has been settled by demand draft, for Rs 24 lakh. It is not clear whether she is still in India, but the chances of case closure due to lack of evidence are high, it is speculated.


Cadilla MD Rajiv Modi

Hic, hic, hooray!

In deference to Mahatma Gandhi, Gujarat has been the only prohibition state in India ever since its institution in 1960. But tourists and revellers have long known how to live it up without catching any judgemental official eyes.

For the past three years, however, the Gujarat government—hot on the heels of Madhya Pradesh allowing open sales of liquor in supermarkets—relaxed its prohibition norms for those with 'medical grounds'. In these three years, a significant proportion of the 6.5 crore Gujarat population seem to have developed health issues that require a liquor permit.

According to the prohibition and excise department, 27,452 permits were issued in 2020—and they gave out 43,470 in 2023.

Ahmedabad tops the list with 13,456 permit holders, followed by Surat (9,238), Rajkot (4,502), Baroda (2,743), Jamnagar (2,039), Gandhinagar (1,851) and finally Gandhi's home town Porbandar (1,700).

All of these are persons the medical board diagnoses as needing liquor for their continued survival in good health.

Sita may be inseparable from Ram, but she has no place in a patriarchal Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's scheme of things

Why the RSS people don't say 'Jai Siyaram!'

Rahul Gandhi

During the yatra, I met many people. A pandit*ji* came to see me, and raised a very deep question, which he then proceeded to explain. He said, "Rahul*ji*, he who was Lord Ram, was an ascetic. He devoted his entire life to penance." Quite right. Then he said, "Gandhi*ji* used to say 'Hey Ram!' Gandhi*ji*'s slogan was 'Hey Ram!' What does 'Hey Ram' mean?" After a brief silence, he said, "The meaning of 'Hey Ram' is… Lord Ram was not just a person, he was a way of life full of love, brotherhood, respect and penance. He showed the whole world the way to live. And every time Gandhi*ji* said 'Hey Ram!' he meant that the feeling that is Lord Ram is present in our hearts. And that feeling should guide our lives. In other words, to live one's life by doing the kind of penance Lord Ram did, serving society the way he did, spreading love and brotherhood the way he did.

Next, there's 'Jai Siyaram'. What might 'Jai Siyaram' mean? Pandit*ji* told me this as well. I learned so much in course of the yatra. It means simply that Sita and Ram are one. Hence the slogan, 'Jai Siyaram' or 'Jai Sitaram'. Meaning Ram's way of life, the things he did for Sita. And what did Lord Ram do for Sita? Don't you know that? He went and fought for her honour. So, when we say 'Jai Siyaram', we remember Sita and honour her rightful place in society. Correct? So that's 'Jai Siyaram' or 'Jai Sitaram'.



There's a third slogan: 'Jai Shri Ram'. That's where we praise Lord Ram. Pandit*ji* asked me to raise this question in my speech: Why do the BJP people raise the slogan 'Jai Shri Ram' but never say 'Jai Siyaram' or 'Hey Ram'? I liked that a lot, as pandit*ji* had revealed a very deep thing to me. The RSS and BJP people do not live their lives the way Ram lived his life. Ram was not unjust to anyone. He worked to unite society. He was respectful towards everyone. Lord Ram helped farmers, labourers, traders, everyone. Right? His philosophy, his spirit, his way of life—that has not been adopted by the RSS and BJP people.

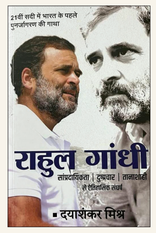
And the second slogan, 'Jai Siyaram', is perhaps the most important slogan of all. But how can they say 'Jai Siyaram' when there is not a single woman in their organisation! It is not a 'Jai Siyaram' organisation because women cannot join it. Sita cannot even think of being part of it. Sita has been excluded. This deep truth was revealed to me by a pandit*ji* from Madhya Pradesh as I travelled down this very road. Now, I want to say to our friends in the RSS, "Use all three slogans—'Jai Shri Ram', 'Jai Siyaram' and 'Hey Ram'—and please don't insult Sita*ji*".

Do you recall the picture of Ram Darbar, depicting *maryada purushottam* Ram, Lakshman, Sita and Hanuman? This picture, seen in every devout Hindu home, showed Ram carrying his bow slung across his shoulder. For their political purpose, the RSS and BJP use another picture of Lord Ram, in which he stands with his bow raised, aiming at the lord of the sea for obstructing his way to Lanka. He pulls the string. This is the only incident in the life of *maryada purushottam* where he gives in to wrath. This is the picture of Lord Ram that the RSS and BJP prefer. Where wrath is the central theme.

Similarly, an artist did some artistry with an image of the courageous and calm Hanuman and infused his image with anger. That picture was made the new identity of Bajrang Bali. Plastered on the backs of vehicles, this Hanuman does not look calm or courageous; instead, he looks wrathful. Here too, wrath is the central theme.

Having done with faith, it was now the turn of a national symbol. Spending thousands of crores of rupees, a new parliament house is being built to replace the old one. The name of this project is the Central Vista Renovation Project. An administrative area running all the way from Raisina Hill to India Gate in our capital Delhi. On the roof of the parliament house in this Central Vista, the Ashoka Pillar, our national symbol, has been installed. This 20-feet-high pillar weighing 9,500 kilos was unveiled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with all the Hindu rites and rituals. Lok Sabha Speaker, Om Birla, was merely marking attendance. If you look at the pictures of this Ashoka Pillar carefully, you will see that the calm, courageous and patient lions of the original Ashoka Pillar appear ravenous, roaring and enraged. It seems as if the four lions that symbolised strength, courage, confidence and pride have deliberately been depicted in agitated and aggressive mode.

Translated excerpts from Rahul Gandhi's speech at the rally in Agar-Malwa, Madhya Pradesh on 2 December 2022 during the Bharat Jodo Yatra



Title **Rahul Gandhi**
Author **Dayashankar Mishra**
Publisher **Self-published**

'A shop of love in the market of hate'

The yatra has now been on the road for 100 days. Through Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. On the way, along with our friends from the press, I see other dear friends. Usually, they happen to be standing atop the BJP offices. I start off, and there they are, standing with their hands tied. And what do I do? I spot them and I wave at them. They don't wave back. They keep standing, their hands tied. They keep watching me. They cannot wave a greeting to Rahul Gandhi. They might want to, but they cannot, they do not have permission. I wave some more. One or two wave back. And then I blow them a flying kiss, just as you did...

Sometimes they look at me and gesture a question towards me, because they cannot talk to me, you see! They cannot come to me, that's forbidden. I don't hate them. I fight against their ideology. But I like them, as I like all living beings.

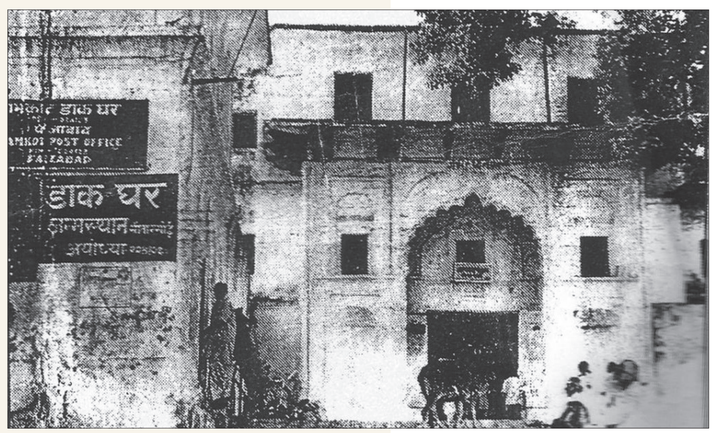
And so, they make that questioning gesture with their hands, meaning, "What are you doing? What *are* you doing?" You're going from Kanyakumari to Srinagar! Their leaders say, "Why is Rahul Gandhi marching?" That was on my mind. I thought about it for a while. What *was* I doing? What am I doing? I am walking. I am meeting people. I am hugging people. What am I doing? And I got my answer.

For their workers, their foot soldiers, for those who wave questioning hands at me and ask, "What are you doing?", my answer is, "I am opening a 'shop of love' in the market of hate."

Hate me. Abuse me. That's what's in your heart. You run a market of hate. I run a shop of love. And I'm not just talking about myself. Don't think that it's only Rahul Gandhi who is saying this. It's all of us, the entire organisation that led our country to freedom.

Who am I? It's people like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Ambedkar*ji*, Azad—all of them, each of them, had opened a 'shop of love' in the market of hate. That's what we do. So, this is my answer to all the BJP people. Join us. Start opening 'shops of love' in the market of hate. You will, eventually, have to. Because our land, our faith, is one of love and not of hate. ■

Translated excerpts from Rahul Gandhi's speech at the rally in Malakheda, Alwar on 19 December 2022, which marked 100 days of the Bharat Jodo Yatra.
Courtesy: **Dayashankar Mishra**, *from his book* Rahul Gandhi: Sampradayikta, Dushprachar, Tanashahi se Aitihasik Sangharsh



Lest We Forget

Religion, as Marx famously said, is 'the opium of the people'. In what looks like a drug-induced frenzy today about the inauguration of the Ram Mandir on 22 January, we are wont to forget that this temple to Lord Ram—revered through the ages as 'maryada purushottam' (a model of dignified, just conduct)—is being raised on the foundations of grave injustice. Not by a marauding conqueror but in an elected democracy

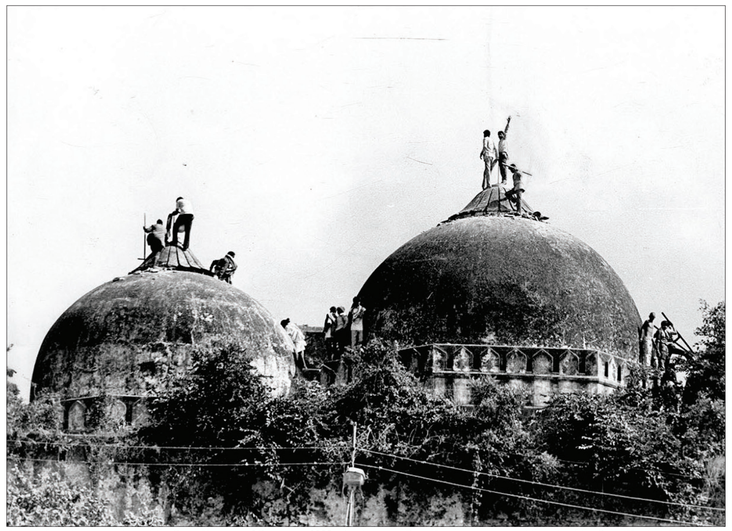




Photo: Getty Images

A scene from the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992; (right) **a grand Ram Mandir coming up at the site of the Babri Masjid, after the Supreme Court decided the case in favour of the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas in 2019**

The truth and the lies of a temple town

...and the erasure of a history of easy togetherness

Vivek Asri

They say Ram was born in Ayodhya; in Ayodhya he played and roamed around as a youth, grew into adulthood, was sent from there into exile in the forest, and then returned to rule there. There are temples in Ayodhya to commemorate every moment of his life. Where he played, there is Gulela Mandir. Where he studied, there is Vashishta Mandir. Where he sat and ruled, there is a mandir. Where he ate his meals, there is Sita Rasoi. Where Bharat stayed, there is a mandir. There's Hanuman Mandir, Kope Bhavan. There's Sumitra Mandir, Dashrath Bhavan. There are many many such temples and all of them are about 400 to 500 years old. That is to say, these temples were built when Hindustan was ruled by the Mughals, by Muslims.

How strange! How did Muslims permit these temples to be built? They are remembered, after all, for destroying temples. Under their very noses an entire town was gradually transformed by temples and they did nothing! What sort of usurpers were these who kept giving land for temples? They must be liars who say that the land where Gulela Mandir stands was given by the Muslim rulers. And certainly the documents in Digambar Akhara must be fake, in which it is written that the Muslim rulers donated 500 bighas of land for the specific purpose of building temples. And it cannot be true that Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah provided the land on which Nirmohi Akhara stands. No, the only truth is Babur and his Babri Masjid!

Now it seems Tulsi too was wrong. Born in 1511 by the Gregorian calendar, he was alive around 1528. People say it was in 1528 that Babur destroyed a Ram temple at the spot where Ram was born, and built the Babri Masjid. Surely, Tulsi would have known about this in his time. Even as Babur was demolishing the birthplace of Ram, Tulsi was writing '*maang ke khaibo, masit mein soibo*' (I eat by begging for alms, I sleep inside a masjid). And then he wrote *Ramcharitmanas*. How could Tulsi feel no sadness at all for the destruction of the Ram Mandir and the building of Babri Masjid upon its ruins? Surely he must have written about it somewhere?

Truth and falsehood have lost all meaning in Ayodhya.

For five generations, Muslims have grown flowers there. These flowers have all been consecrated at the temples, on the deities, on Ram.

Muslims have made *khadaus* (wooden sandals) there since who knows when. Sanyasis, sages, devotees of Ram, have all worn these *khadaus* made by Muslims.

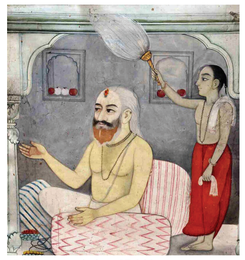
Sundar Bhavan Mandir was entirely run by a Muslim gentleman for four decades. In 1949, it was taken over by Munnu Mian who remained its manager till 23 December 1992. When sometimes, as it happened, devotees were fewer, and Munnu Mian himself clapped the *kartal* rhythmically during prayers, did he wonder, perhaps, what was the truth and what the lie of Ayodhya?

On every brick of a temple built by the Agarwals, is inscribed the figure 786. All the bricks for building this temple were given by Raja Hussain Ali Khan. What is the truth here? Were the Agarwals who built the temple out of their minds? Was Hussain Ali Khan insane that he was donating bricks to build a temple? The hands raised in prayer here cannot be identified as Hindu or Muslim, they all come here to worship. The one figure 786 made this temple belong to all. Is 6 December 1992 the only truth?

After 6 December 1992, the government took over most of the temples of Ayodhya. They were all locked down. *Aarati* ended. People stopped going to them. Did the deities seated behind closed doors curse those who clambered up on a dome with the ambition of laying their hands on Ram?

Truth and falsehood have lost all meaning in Ayodhya.

Ayodhya is the story of the transformation of a town into an 'issue'. Ayodhya is the story of the death of a civilisation. ■



17th century painting of Tulsidas

Translated by Nivedita Menon from a widely circulated social media post in Hindi, earlier attributed to Saroj Mishra

The night of 22 Dec 1949

...when the myth of Ram Janmabhoomi was born

Krishna Jha *and* Dhirendra Jha

The night was almost over. Ayodhya was still numb with sleep. Piercing through the quiet, a young sadhu, drenched in sweat, came scampering from Hanumangarhi, a fortress-like Hindu religious establishment housing over 500 sadhus in Ayodhya. He had been sent to summon Satyendra Das to his guru, Abhiram Das, who seemed to be breathing his last. Those were the early hours of 3 December 1981, and a curtain was coming down over a few forgotten pages of history.

Dharam Das, the other disciple who stayed with Abhiram Das in his one-room tenement, the *asan* in Hanumangarhi, had asked for him so that they could be with their guru in his last moments. The news did not come as a shock. Satyendra Das had been almost awaiting the moment, since he had known for long that his guru was nearing the end of his journey.

He had been at his bedside the whole day and the signs were not encouraging. Even when he had left Abhiram Das's *asan* to get a breather after hours of tending to the terminally ill, he had a premonition that his guru—the man who had led a small band of Hindus to surreptitiously plant the idol of Lord Ram in Babri Masjid on yet another December night three decades ago—might not live long.

After he had come away from the bedside, unwilling but tired to the bone, Satyendra Das was restless and unable to sleep. He dreaded the moment, yet knew that someone would knock on his doors with the news any time, and when it came, he responded fast, wrapped a quilt around himself and ran out along with the young sadhu who had come to fetch him.

[...]

The rituals for the final journey of ascetics are not the same as those for non-ascetic Hindu *grihasthas*, particularly in north India. Sadhus, unlike Hindu *grihasthas*, are rarely cremated. There are two options: either their bodies are smeared with salt and buried sitting in a meditative posture, or they are dropped down a sacred river tied with a rock or sacks full of sand. The fact that sadhus who take vows of complete renunciation are not cremated symbolises their separation from the material world. The claim goes that cremation for sadhus is superfluous since they have already burnt their attachments through ascetic initiation, opting for a life of austerities and renunciation.

In Ayodhya, the normal ascetic practice [is] to immerse the body of a sadhu in the Sarayu—the name given to the river only as [far] as it touches the shores of the town. Before and after Ayodhya, the river is known as the Ghaghara. The reason for this nomenclatural confusion lies in a particular Hindu belief. As mythology has turned Ayodhya into the birthplace of Lord Ram, the river flowing by it has also assumed the mythical name of Sarayu—the stream that is believed to have flowed through the kingdom of Lord Ram.

[...]

Outside the *asan*, the body of Abhiram Das had been placed on a platform made of bamboo in a seated posture, his face frozen into a mask of self-control, his eyes half-closed as if he were deep in meditation. A saffron piece of cloth that had the name of Lord Ram printed all over—a particular kind of cotton or silk material called Ramnami—had been carefully wrapped around the body. A similar cloth covered three sides of the bier made out of split bamboo that rested on the hard bamboo platform holding the corpse. The bamboo structure—euphemistically called *vimaan* to symbolise the mythical transporter of souls to the heavenly realm—had been kept uncovered on one side to enable people to have a last glimpse of the deceased.

Slowly, a group of sadhus lifted the *vimaan* on their shoulders and climbed up the flight of stairs leading to the temple of Lord Hanuman in the centre of Hanumangarhi. At the temple, the group swelled further and as the *vimaan* was taken out of Hanumangarhi, the motley crowd accompanying it chanted, "*Ram janmabhoomi uddharak amar rahen* (Long live the saviour of the birthplace of Ram)."

Three decades back, on the morning of 23 December 1949, the First Information Report (FIR) registered by Ayodhya police following the planting of the idol of Lord Ram in Babri Masjid on the night before had named Abhiram Das as the prime accused. He had also been tried for the crime he and his friends had committed that night, but the case had remained inconclusive. In the course of time, many Hindus in Ayodhya had started calling him *Ram janmabhoomi uddharak*.

The slogan-shouting grew louder as the *vimaan* reached the entrance of Babri Masjid, where it was carefully laid down. The priests of Ram Janmabhoomi, the temple that operated inside Babri Masjid ever since the idol was planted in it, as well as those of nearby Hindu religious establishments, already knew about the demise of the sadhu. They came out and garlanded the corpse and paid their homage to the departed soul.



Title **Ayodhya: The Dark Night**
Author **Krishna Jha** and **Dhirendra Jha**
Publisher **HarperCollins**

By and large, however, Ayodhya remained unaware of Abhiram Das's death. Though some residents looked at this funeral procession with curiosity, for the majority it was the demise of yet another old sadhu. After three decades, the historical facts associated with the developments in 1949 had slipped into obscurity.

The propaganda of the All India Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—that the idol had never been planted and Lord Ram had manifested *himself* at his place of birth—had gained ground among devout Hindus by now, largely delinking Abhiram Das from what he had done in the dark hours of that fateful night. Booklets and pamphlets written by Hindu communalists during the intervening period had flooded the shops of Ayodhya and had gone a long way in reinforcing the myth of 'divine exercise'.

For legal reasons, even those who had a role in that surreptitious act found it convenient to let the myth grow and capture popular imagination. The law, after all, could catch human conspiracies, but a 'divine exercise' was beyond its reach. Yet, to a small group of Hindus in Ayodhya, Abhiram Das continued to remain till his death *Ram janmabhoomi uddharak* or simply Uddharak Baba.

[...]

The indifferent response that Abhiram Das's death evoked among the local populace in 1981 was at odds with the atmosphere the town had witnessed three decades ago, during the years following Independence. At that time, many in Ayodhya, as in several other parts of the country, had seen things differently. The communal frenzy that had accompanied the partition of India had intensely brutalised the atmosphere. No less important was the role played by organisations which saw the immediate aftermath of Partition as an opportunity to derail the secular project of independent India.

The conspirators associated with these organisations and the conspiracies they hatched had already resulted in major national tragedies. One such was the gruesome murder of Mahatma Gandhi on 30 January 1948. The hands that pumped bullets into the chest of the Mahatma were that of Nathuram Godse, but, as was proved later, the assassination was part of a conspiracy hatched by top Hindu Mahasabha leaders, led by V.D. Savarkar, whose prime objectives were to snatch political initiative from the Congress and destabilise all efforts to uphold secularism in India.

The conspiracy to kill Gandhi could not remain hidden for long even though the trial, held immediately after the assassination, had failed to uncover its extent.

The surreptitious occupation of the Babri Masjid was an act planned by almost the same set of people about two years later—on the night of 22 December 1949. It was, in many ways, a reflection of the same brutalised atmosphere that saw Gandhi being murdered. Neither the conspirators nor their underlying objectives were different.

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The forces of oppression and supremacy have created no less trouble in the recent history of Ayodhya. History stands witness to the fact that whenever such forces acquire unlimited power and prosperity or become drunk on dominance, they try to interchange the definitions of goodwill and ill will. The intention is to project all efforts to spread goodwill as efforts to spread ill will and all acts that spread ill will to be honoured as acts of goodwill.

In the first half of the last decade of the previous century, this city had to go through many such turning points, when it saw such powers turning each into its opposite. Amidst the frenzy spread by them, Gandhians and Sarvodaya workers from different parts of the country came to Ayodhya for the first time with the belief that hatred could never defeat love under any circumstance, and that their prayers had the power to change the mindset of misguided people under the influence of malignant forces, heeding none, intent only on extending the barriers of ill will, relentlessly.

The kar sevaks of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad did not take even 24 hours to maul the confidence of these social activists. They had just begun their three-day fast at Ram ki Pauri, near the spot where Bapu's ashes were immersed in the river Sarayu in 1948, praying for the purification of everyone's intellect, the equality of all religions and the establishment of goodwill. As soon as the police and officials reached the site, instead of cracking down on the attackers and protecting the activists' right to a peaceful fast, they ordered them to bring down their tents and leave at once. The government representatives did not even deign to answer the question as to why, instead of providing protection to the activists' peaceful campaign to spread goodwill, they were taking the side of the violent kar sevaks.

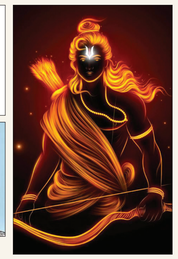


Title **Zero Mile Ayodhya**
Author **Krishna Pratap Singh**
Publisher **Vaam Prakashan**





The angry makeover of Ram and Hanuman—even of the Ashokan lion—also tells a story. Consider how these images contrast with the one at the other end of this centrepread



Senior Gandhian and Sarvodaya leaders Siddharaj Dhaddha and Amarnath Bhai were among those activists. When they made it clear to the officials that they would neither give in to any pressure, nor give up their right to sing the Ramdhun and fast peacefully, they were silenced with the threat that a prohibitory order was in force, under which the police and the administration had the authority to stop them without assigning any reason.

Ninety-year-old Amarnath Bhai, who now lives in a village in Varanasi, says that when they asserted that the prohibitory order was unfair, and that they would resort to civil disobedience, they were all arrested and pushed into buses. When night fell, they were sent, under the watchful eye of guards, to a jungle. There they were told they were free to go wherever they liked. "We refused to get down from the bus. We demanded to be taken to a nearby police station where we could register a case of violation of our rights. At this, the policemen took us to a police station where they enacted the charade of accepting our demands, then dropped us off at the railway station." ■

An extract from Zero Mile Ayodhya *by Krishna Pratap Singh*

Sita may be inseparable from Ram, but she has no place in a patriarchal Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's scheme of things

Why the RSS people don't say 'Jai Siyaram!'

Rahul Gandhi

During the yatra, I met many people. A pandit*ji* came to see me, and raised a very deep question, which he then proceeded to explain. He said, "Rahul*ji*, he who was Lord Ram, was an ascetic. He devoted his entire life to penance." Quite right. Then he said, "Gandhi*ji* used to say 'Hey Ram!' Gandhi*ji*'s slogan was 'Hey Ram!' What does 'Hey Ram' mean?" After a brief silence, he said, "The meaning of 'Hey Ram' is… Lord Ram was not just a person, he was a way of life full of love, brotherhood, respect and penance. He showed the whole world the way to live. And every time Gandhi*ji* said 'Hey Ram!' he meant that the feeling that is Lord Ram is present in our hearts. And that feeling should guide our lives. In other words, to live one's life by doing the kind of penance Lord Ram did, serving society the way he did, spreading love and brotherhood the way he did.

Next, there's 'Jai Siyaram'. What might 'Jai Siyaram' mean? Pandit*ji* told me this as well. I learned so much in course of the yatra. It means simply that Sita and Ram are one. Hence the slogan, 'Jai Siyaram' or 'Jai Sitaram'. Meaning Ram's way of life, the things he did for Sita. And what did Lord Ram do for Sita? Don't you know that? He went and fought for her honour. So, when we say 'Jai Siyaram', we remember Sita and honour her rightful place in society. Correct? So that's 'Jai Siyaram' or 'Jai Sitaram'.



There's a third slogan: 'Jai Shri Ram'. That's where we praise Lord Ram. Pandit*ji* asked me to raise this question in my speech: Why do the BJP people raise the slogan 'Jai Shri Ram' but never say 'Jai Siyaram' or 'Hey Ram'? I liked that a lot, as pandit*ji* had revealed a very deep thing to me. The RSS and BJP people do not live their lives the way Ram lived his life. Ram was not unjust to anyone. He worked to unite society. He was respectful towards everyone. Lord Ram helped farmers, labourers, traders, everyone. Right? His philosophy, his spirit, his way of life—that has not been adopted by the RSS and BJP people.

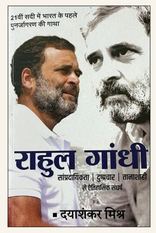
And the second slogan, 'Jai Siyaram', is perhaps the most important slogan of all. But how can they say 'Jai Siyaram' when there is not a single woman in their organisation! It is not a 'Jai Siyaram' organisation because women cannot join it. Sita cannot even think of being part of it. Sita has been excluded. This deep truth was revealed to me by a pandit*ji* from Madhya Pradesh as I travelled down this very road. Now, I want to say to our friends in the RSS, "Use all three slogans—'Jai Shri Ram', 'Jai Siyaram' and 'Hey Ram'—and please don't insult Sita*ji*".

Do you recall the picture of Ram Darbar, depicting *maryada purushottam* Ram, Lakshman, Sita and Hanuman? This picture, seen in every devout Hindu home, showed Ram carrying his bow slung across his shoulder. For their political purpose, the RSS and BJP use another picture of Lord Ram, in which he stands with his bow raised, aiming at the lord of the sea for obstructing his way to Lanka. He pulls the string. This is the only incident in the life of *maryada purushottam* where he gives in to wrath. This is the picture of Lord Ram that the RSS and BJP prefer. Where wrath is the central theme.

Similarly, an artist did some artistry with an image of the courageous and calm Hanuman and infused his image with anger. That picture was made the new identity of Bajrang Bali. Plastered on the backs of vehicles, this Hanuman does not look calm or courageous; instead, he looks wrathful. Here too, wrath is the central theme.

Having done with faith, it was now the turn of a national symbol. Spending thousands of crores of rupees, a new parliament house is being built to replace the old one. The name of this project is the Central Vista Renovation Project. An administrative area running all the way from Raisina Hill to India Gate in our capital Delhi. On the roof of the parliament house in this Central Vista, the Ashoka Pillar, our national symbol, has been installed. This 20-feet-high pillar weighing 9,500 kilos was unveiled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with all the Hindu rites and rituals. Lok Sabha Speaker, Om Birla, was merely marking attendance. If you look at the pictures of this Ashoka Pillar carefully, you will see that the calm, courageous and patient lions of the original Ashoka Pillar appear ravenous, roaring and enraged. It seems as if the four lions that symbolised strength, courage, confidence and pride have deliberately been depicted in agitated and aggressive mode.

Translated excerpts from Rahul Gandhi's speech at the rally in Agar-Malwa, Madhya Pradesh on 2 December 2022 during the Bharat Jodo Yatra



Title **Rahul Gandhi**
Author **Dayashankar Mishra**
Publisher **Self-published**

'A shop of love in the market of hate'

The yatra has now been on the road for 100 days. Through Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. On the way, along with our friends from the press, I see other dear friends. Usually, they happen to be standing atop the BJP offices. I start off, and there they are, standing with their hands tied. And what do I do? I spot them and I wave at them. They don't wave back. They keep standing, their hands tied. They keep watching me. They cannot wave a greeting to Rahul Gandhi. They might want to, but they cannot, they do not have permission. I wave some more. One or two wave back. And then I blow them a flying kiss, just as you did...

Sometimes they look at me and gesture a question towards me, because they cannot talk to me, you see! They cannot come to me, that's forbidden. I don't hate them. I fight against their ideology. But I like them, as I like all living beings.

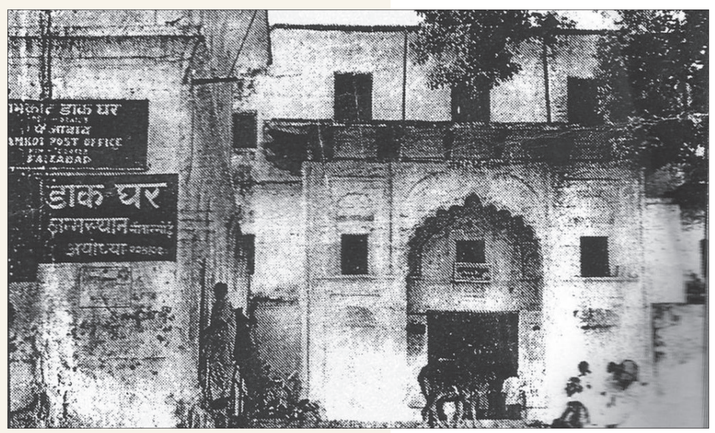
And so, they make that questioning gesture with their hands, meaning, "What are you doing? What *are* you doing?" You're going from Kanyakumari to Srinagar! Their leaders say, "Why is Rahul Gandhi marching?" That was on my mind. I thought about it for a while. What *was* I doing? What am I doing? I am walking. I am meeting people. I am hugging people. What am I doing? And I got my answer.

For their workers, their foot soldiers, for those who wave questioning hands at me and ask, "What are you doing?", my answer is, "I am opening a 'shop of love' in the market of hate."

Hate me. Abuse me. That's what's in your heart. You run a market of hate. I run a shop of love. And I'm not just talking about myself. Don't think that it's only Rahul Gandhi who is saying this. It's all of us, the entire organisation that led our country to freedom.

Who am I? It's people like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Ambedkar*ji*, Azad—all of them, each of them, had opened a 'shop of love' in the market of hate. That's what we do. So, this is my answer to all the BJP people. Join us. Start opening 'shops of love' in the market of hate. You will, eventually, have to. Because our land, our faith, is one of love and not of hate. ■

Translated excerpts from Rahul Gandhi's speech at the rally in Malakheda, Alwar on 19 December 2022, which marked 100 days of the Bharat Jodo Yatra.
Courtesy: **Dayashankar Mishra**, *from his book* Rahul Gandhi: Sampradayikta, Dushprachar, Tanashahi se Aitihasik Sangharsh



Lest We Forget

Religion, as Marx famously said, is 'the opium of the people'. In what looks like a drug-induced frenzy today about the inauguration of the Ram Mandir on 22 January, we are wont to forget that this temple to Lord Ram—revered through the ages as 'maryada purushottam' (a model of dignified, just conduct)—is being raised on the foundations of grave injustice. Not by a marauding conqueror but in an elected democracy

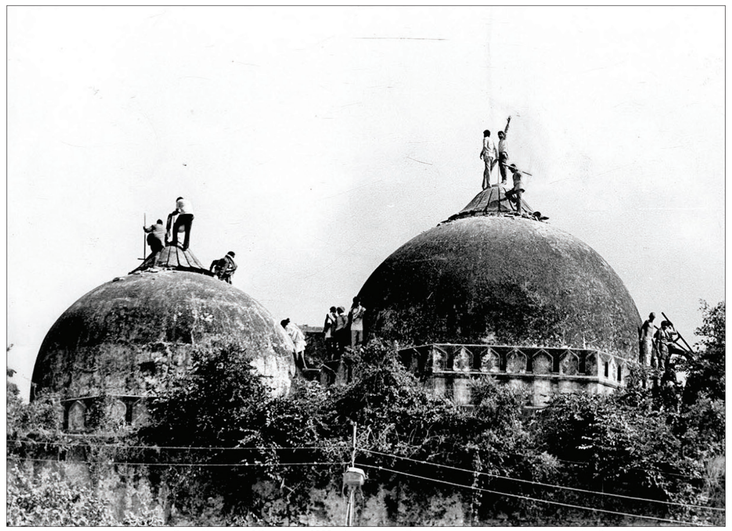




Photo: Getty Images

A scene from the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992; (right) **a grand Ram Mandir coming up at the site of the Babri Masjid, after the Supreme Court decided the case in favour of the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas in 2019**

The truth and the lies of a temple town

...and the erasure of a history of easy togetherness

Vivek Asri

They say Ram was born in Ayodhya; in Ayodhya he played and roamed around as a youth, grew into adulthood, was sent from there into exile in the forest, and then returned to rule there. There are temples in Ayodhya to commemorate every moment of his life. Where he played, there is Gulela Mandir. Where he studied, there is Vashishta Mandir. Where he sat and ruled, there is a mandir. Where he ate his meals, there is Sita Rasoi. Where Bharat stayed, there is a mandir. There's Hanuman Mandir, Kope Bhavan. There's Sumitra Mandir, Dashrath Bhavan. There are many many such temples and all of them are about 400 to 500 years old. That is to say, these temples were built when Hindustan was ruled by the Mughals, by Muslims.

How strange! How did Muslims permit these temples to be built? They are remembered, after all, for destroying temples. Under their very noses an entire town was gradually transformed by temples and they did nothing! What sort of usurpers were these who kept giving land for temples? They must be liars who say that the land where Gulela Mandir stands was given by the Muslim rulers. And certainly the documents in Digambar Akhara must be fake, in which it is written that the Muslim rulers donated 500 bighas of land for the specific purpose of building temples. And it cannot be true that Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah provided the land on which Nirmohi Akhara stands. No, the only truth is Babur and his Babri Masjid!

Now it seems Tulsi too was wrong. Born in 1511 by the Gregorian calendar, he was alive around 1528. People say it was in 1528 that Babur destroyed a Ram temple at the spot where Ram was born, and built the Babri Masjid. Surely, Tulsi would have known about this in his time. Even as Babur was demolishing the birthplace of Ram, Tulsi was writing '*maang ke khaibo, masit mein soibo*' (I eat by begging for alms, I sleep inside a masjid). And then he wrote *Ramcharitmanas*. How could Tulsi feel no sadness at all for the destruction of the Ram Mandir and the building of Babri Masjid upon its ruins? Surely he must have written about it somewhere?

Truth and falsehood have lost all meaning in Ayodhya.

For five generations, Muslims have grown flowers there. These flowers have all been consecrated at the temples, on the deities, on Ram.

Muslims have made *khadaus* (wooden sandals) there since who knows when. Sanyasis, sages, devotees of Ram, have all worn these *khadaus* made by Muslims.

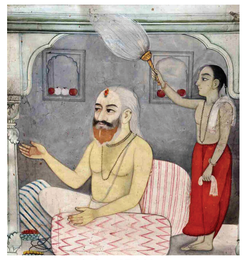
Sundar Bhavan Mandir was entirely run by a Muslim gentleman for four decades. In 1949, it was taken over by Munnu Mian who remained its manager till 23 December 1992. When sometimes, as it happened, devotees were fewer, and Munnu Mian himself clapped the *kartal* rhythmically during prayers, did he wonder, perhaps, what was the truth and what the lie of Ayodhya?

On every brick of a temple built by the Agarwals, is inscribed the figure 786. All the bricks for building this temple were given by Raja Hussain Ali Khan. What is the truth here? Were the Agarwals who built the temple out of their minds? Was Hussain Ali Khan insane that he was donating bricks to build a temple? The hands raised in prayer here cannot be identified as Hindu or Muslim, they all come here to worship. The one figure 786 made this temple belong to all. Is 6 December 1992 the only truth?

After 6 December 1992, the government took over most of the temples of Ayodhya. They were all locked down. *Aarati* ended. People stopped going to them. Did the deities seated behind closed doors curse those who clambered up on a dome with the ambition of laying their hands on Ram?

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Ayodhya is the story of the transformation of a town into an 'issue'. Ayodhya is the story of the death of a civilisation. ■



17th century painting of Tulsidas

Translated by Nivedita Menon from a widely circulated social media post in Hindi, earlier attributed to Saroj Mishra

The night of 22 Dec 1949

...when the myth of Ram Janmabhoomi was born

Krishna Jha *and* Dhirendra Jha

The night was almost over. Ayodhya was still numb with sleep. Piercing through the quiet, a young sadhu, drenched in sweat, came scampering from Hanumangarhi, a fortress-like Hindu religious establishment housing over 500 sadhus in Ayodhya. He had been sent to summon Satyendra Das to his guru, Abhiram Das, who seemed to be breathing his last. Those were the early hours of 3 December 1981, and a curtain was coming down over a few forgotten pages of history.

Dharam Das, the other disciple who stayed with Abhiram Das in his one-room tenement, the *asan* in Hanumangarhi, had asked for him so that they could be with their guru in his last moments. The news did not come as a shock. Satyendra Das had been almost awaiting the moment, since he had known for long that his guru was nearing the end of his journey.

He had been at his bedside the whole day and the signs were not encouraging. Even when he had left Abhiram Das's *asan* to get a breather after hours of tending to the terminally ill, he had a premonition that his guru—the man who had led a small band of Hindus to surreptitiously plant the idol of Lord Ram in Babri Masjid on yet another December night three decades ago—might not live long.

After he had come away from the bedside, unwilling but tired to the bone, Satyendra Das was restless and unable to sleep. He dreaded the moment, yet knew that someone would knock on his doors with the news any time, and when it came, he responded fast, wrapped a quilt around himself and ran out along with the young sadhu who had come to fetch him.

[...]

The rituals for the final journey of ascetics are not the same as those for non-ascetic Hindu *grihasthas*, particularly in north India. Sadhus, unlike Hindu *grihasthas*, are rarely cremated. There are two options: either their bodies are smeared with salt and buried sitting in a meditative posture, or they are dropped down a sacred river tied with a rock or sacks full of sand. The fact that sadhus who take vows of complete renunciation are not cremated symbolises their separation from the material world. The claim goes that cremation for sadhus is superfluous since they have already burnt their attachments through ascetic initiation, opting for a life of austerities and renunciation.

In Ayodhya, the normal ascetic practice [is] to immerse the body of a sadhu in the Sarayu—the name given to the river only as [far] as it touches the shores of the town. Before and after Ayodhya, the river is known as the Ghaghara. The reason for this nomenclatural confusion lies in a particular Hindu belief. As mythology has turned Ayodhya into the birthplace of Lord Ram, the river flowing by it has also assumed the mythical name of Sarayu—the stream that is believed to have flowed through the kingdom of Lord Ram.

[...]

Outside the *asan*, the body of Abhiram Das had been placed on a platform made of bamboo in a seated posture, his face frozen into a mask of self-control, his eyes half-closed as if he were deep in meditation. A saffron piece of cloth that had the name of Lord Ram printed all over—a particular kind of cotton or silk material called Ramnami—had been carefully wrapped around the body. A similar cloth covered three sides of the bier made out of split bamboo that rested on the hard bamboo platform holding the corpse. The bamboo structure—euphemistically called *vimaan* to symbolise the mythical transporter of souls to the heavenly realm—had been kept uncovered on one side to enable people to have a last glimpse of the deceased.

Slowly, a group of sadhus lifted the *vimaan* on their shoulders and climbed up the flight of stairs leading to the temple of Lord Hanuman in the centre of Hanumangarhi. At the temple, the group swelled further and as the *vimaan* was taken out of Hanumangarhi, the motley crowd accompanying it chanted, "*Ram janmabhoomi uddharak amar rahen* (Long live the saviour of the birthplace of Ram)."

Three decades back, on the morning of 23 December 1949, the First Information Report (FIR) registered by Ayodhya police following the planting of the idol of Lord Ram in Babri Masjid on the night before had named Abhiram Das as the prime accused. He had also been tried for the crime he and his friends had committed that night, but the case had remained inconclusive. In the course of time, many Hindus in Ayodhya had started calling him *Ram janmabhoomi uddharak*.

The slogan-shouting grew louder as the *vimaan* reached the entrance of Babri Masjid, where it was carefully laid down. The priests of Ram Janmabhoomi, the temple that operated inside Babri Masjid ever since the idol was planted in it, as well as those of nearby Hindu religious establishments, already knew about the demise of the sadhu. They came out and garlanded the corpse and paid their homage to the departed soul.



Title **Ayodhya: The Dark Night**
Author **Krishna Jha** and **Dhirendra Jha**
Publisher **HarperCollins**

By and large, however, Ayodhya remained unaware of Abhiram Das's death. Though some residents looked at this funeral procession with curiosity, for the majority it was the demise of yet another old sadhu. After three decades, the historical facts associated with the developments in 1949 had slipped into obscurity.

The propaganda of the All India Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—that the idol had never been planted and Lord Ram had manifested *himself* at his place of birth—had gained ground among devout Hindus by now, largely delinking Abhiram Das from what he had done in the dark hours of that fateful night. Booklets and pamphlets written by Hindu communalists during the intervening period had flooded the shops of Ayodhya and had gone a long way in reinforcing the myth of 'divine exercise'.

For legal reasons, even those who had a role in that surreptitious act found it convenient to let the myth grow and capture popular imagination. The law, after all, could catch human conspiracies, but a 'divine exercise' was beyond its reach. Yet, to a small group of Hindus in Ayodhya, Abhiram Das continued to remain till his death *Ram janmabhoomi uddharak* or simply Uddharak Baba.

[...]

The indifferent response that Abhiram Das's death evoked among the local populace in 1981 was at odds with the atmosphere the town had witnessed three decades ago, during the years following Independence. At that time, many in Ayodhya, as in several other parts of the country, had seen things differently. The communal frenzy that had accompanied the partition of India had intensely brutalised the atmosphere. No less important was the role played by organisations which saw the immediate aftermath of Partition as an opportunity to derail the secular project of independent India.

The conspirators associated with these organisations and the conspiracies they hatched had already resulted in major national tragedies. One such was the gruesome murder of Mahatma Gandhi on 30 January 1948. The hands that pumped bullets into the chest of the Mahatma were that of Nathuram Godse, but, as was proved later, the assassination was part of a conspiracy hatched by top Hindu Mahasabha leaders, led by V.D. Savarkar, whose prime objectives were to snatch political initiative from the Congress and destabilise all efforts to uphold secularism in India.

The conspiracy to kill Gandhi could not remain hidden for long even though the trial, held immediately after the assassination, had failed to uncover its extent.

The surreptitious occupation of the Babri Masjid was an act planned by almost the same set of people about two years later—on the night of 22 December 1949. It was, in many ways, a reflection of the same brutalised atmosphere that saw Gandhi being murdered. Neither the conspirators nor their underlying objectives were different.

In both instances, the conspirators belonged to the Hindu Mahasabha leadership—some of the prime movers of the planting of the idol had been the prime accused in the Gandhi murder case—and their objective this time too was to wrest the political centrestage from the Congress by provoking large-scale Hindu mobilisation in the name of Lord Ram. ■

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The murder of sense and sensibility

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In the first half of the last decade of the previous century, this city had to go through many such turning points, when it saw such powers turning each into its opposite. Amidst the frenzy spread by them, Gandhians and Sarvodaya workers from different parts of the country came to Ayodhya for the first time with the belief that hatred could never defeat love under any circumstance, and that their prayers had the power to change the mindset of misguided people under the influence of malignant forces, heeding none, intent only on extending the barriers of ill will, relentlessly.

The kar sevaks of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad did not take even 24 hours to maul the confidence of these social activists. They had just begun their three-day fast at Ram ki Pauri, near the spot where Bapu's ashes were immersed in the river Sarayu in 1948, praying for the purification of everyone's intellect, the equality of all religions and the establishment of goodwill. As soon as the police and officials reached the site, instead of cracking down on the attackers and protecting the activists' right to a peaceful fast, they ordered them to bring down their tents and leave at once. The government representatives did not even deign to answer the question as to why, instead of providing protection to the activists' peaceful campaign to spread goodwill, they were taking the side of the violent kar sevaks.

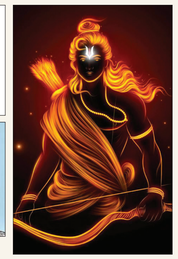


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An extract from Zero Mile Ayodhya *by Krishna Pratap Singh*

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
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14 JANUARY 2024

HERALD VIEW

Bilkis, maybe there's hope still

It was Independence Day in 2022 when the 11 rapists of Bilkis Bano walked free, even as Prime Minister Modi waxed eloquent on '*nari shakti*' in his 15 August address from the ramparts of the Red Fort. Ironic that he should have said: "you must have witnessed the power of *nari shakti* in our courts", when what we'd seen was a mockery of *nari shakti* and a travesty of justice.

What we saw more recently in our Supreme Court—against the tide and a little aberrantly even—was more a testament to that shakti and a sign that maybe not all is lost yet. You may have guessed that we are referring to the judgement delivered by the bench of Justice B.V. Nagarathna and Justice Ujjal Bhuyan, which upheld the petition of Bilkis Bano against the release of her rapists. Few would have expected the court to overturn the ruling, in 2022, of another Supreme Court bench—the ruling that had paved the way for the release of the convicts. Fewer would have expected the court to rap the Gujarat government on the knuckles for being in cahoots with the convicts. It is not without reason that the Supreme Court, in recent years, has come to be known as an 'Executive court'—it almost invariably lands on the side of the State in a dispute with citizens. We make no secret of our appreciation of the judgement delivered by Justices Nagarathna and Bhuyan—even if it does not quite restore our shaky faith in the Judiciary, it keeps a flicker of hope alive.

Justice Bhuyan was elevated to the Supreme Court in July 2023 while Justice Nagarathna is reportedly in line to be the first woman Chief Justice of India in 2027—albeit for a short, one-month period. Even so, the symbolism matters—if it comes to pass, it will certainly count as a more energetic expression of *nari shakti*, besides being a happy first instance of a father and a daughter having both held the CJI's office in their time. Justice Nagarathna is the daughter of E.S. Venkataramaiah, who served as the CJI in 1989. Justice Nagarathna's was the lone dissenting judgement when the Supreme Court (in early 2023) upheld the Demonetisation of 2016. To be clear, she wasn't passing judgement on the merit of the exercise, but making a point about the 'rule of law'. Even in the latest Bilkis Bano judgement on 8 January, she upheld the 'rule of law' and held that procedures could not be changed or used selectively and arbitrarily.

In our non-juridical understanding of the Bilkis Bano case, the 'rule of law' restraints that Justice Nagarathna invokes are only a saving grace—something that brings the rapists back into the fold of law, something that questions their immunity and makes them answerable again for their inhuman conduct. It doesn't seem enough, but it does alleviate the pain, the sense of injustice and helplessness Bilkis must have felt when they walked free and were garlanded like heroes come home. They had raped a pregnant 21-year-old Bilkis 22 times. This, for the benefit of young readers, was 2002, the year made infamous by the Gujarat riots. They killed 14 people, raped her mother and her sisters and smashed the head of her three-year-old child before throwing her body into a ravine. It was left to the Supreme Court to order that the investigation be handed over to the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) and the trial shifted to Maharashtra from Gujarat, apprehending that a fair trial would not be possible in Gujarat. The accused were sentenced to life imprisonment by a sessions court in Maharashtra. But they were sent to prison in Gujarat. While ostensibly serving life terms, they used their considerable influence and goodwill with the ruling state establishment to spend a 1,000+ days out of jail; one of them spent over 1,500 days out of jail on parole leave and furlough. When the Supreme Court ruling in 2022 allowed the Gujarat government to decide finally on the remission of their life sentence, Bilkis asked: "How can justice for any woman end like this? I trusted the courts, I trusted the system…" But the 'system' had colluded with the rapists.

It's hard to keep your faith in democratic institutions when they all look like a train wreck, but maybe there's hope still, Bilkis.

Guess why slavery persists in India

How do you shed 'gulami ki mansikta' when gulami is so deeply entrenched in our socio-economic fabric?



Sarosh Bana

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi exhorts Indians to shed their "*gulami ki mansikta*" (a slavish mindset), he is referring to our so-called colonial hangover, and evidently not to the entitled Indians, affluent landlords and high-powered moneylenders who enslave, for all intents and purposes, the poor and dispossessed among their own fellow Indians.

Take for example the Katkari tribals who do not even dwell in some forgotten corner of the country but just 84 km out of Mumbai, the financial capital of India, and home to Mukesh Ambani, Asia's richest person, with a net worth of $94.3 billion. The *Mid-Day* newspaper ran a campaign on how the impoverished Katkaris have been ruthlessly exploited over the years by landlords and brick-kiln owners from whom they borrowed money mainly to buy food. For context, the 2023 Global Hunger Index ranked India at #111 out of 125 countries, behind Sri Lanka (60), Nepal (69), Bangladesh (81) and Pakistan (102).

Mid-Day quotes a yet-to-be-released government survey that found as many as 95 per cent of Katkari households saddled with an average debt of Rs 14,000. There are instances of tribals, unable to repay their debts, being forced into life-long bonded labour. The loans in this exploitative system accrue usurious interest and extend across generations, but the lenders, often politically connected, get away.

Debt bondage is one of the most prevalent forms of modern slavery, and it persists in many parts of India. It persists because of crushing poverty and entrenched socio-economic inequities and caste prejudices. Pointing out that government officials avoid visiting these areas to witness first-hand the humiliation these tribal people are subjected to by their captors, *Mid-Day* reports that 'some of these enslaved tribals have been rescued by NGO workers and social activists, not (government) officials'. In the absence of government assistance, they have not, however, been rehabilitated, the report adds.

Scheduled Tribes (STs), alongside the Scheduled Castes (SCs), live on the fringes of society and are known to be among the most deprived social groups in the country, across a range of socio-economic indicators. Some of the most precarious of them, with alarmingly high levels of illiteracy, malnutrition and serious maladies, are identified by the government as 'particularly vulnerable tribal groups'.

The Modi government announced in Parliament in 2016 that its 15-year vision is aimed at "total abolition of bonded labour" where it would identify, release and rehabilitate around 18.4 million bonded labourers by 2030. 'Since its statement in 2016, [the government] has been able to release only 32,873 people from bonded labour, a yearly average of 4,696,' reported *IndiaSpend*, a data analyst on India's social and political economy, in October 2023. 'This would mean that at the same annual rate, by 2030, the government would have achieved only 2 per cent of its 18.4 million target, leaving 18 million Indians in bonded labour.'

Hundreds of fresh cases of bonded labour and trafficking for work are reported every year, though slavery is prohibited by the Constitution and despite the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1976 that outlaws it. The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 also provides for special/ exclusive courts to try such offences and for rehabilitation of victims.

According to the 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI), published by human rights group Walk Free Initiative, India is home to over 11 million slaves, the highest number worldwide. This is particularly disconcerting, as China, ranked second in the index, has a tally of 5.8 million and Russia, ranked #3, is home to 1.9 million slaves. 'Slavery in India manifests in various forms, including forced labour, human trafficking and child exploitation,' mentions GSI. 'Despite the significant strides the nation has made in terms of economic growth and technological advancement, slavery remains deeply entrenched in its societal and economic structures, victimising millions of vulnerable individuals.'

Aggravating the situation is the prevalence of domestic servitude and child labour. Reports indicate that it is not uncommon for servants employed in households across the country to be confined to the homes of their employers, and subjected to excessive work hours, constant abuse and exploitation. The forced recruitment of children, in turn, is among the most appalling forms of modern slavery, where they are driven into strenuous labour, often under hazardous conditions.

The National Crime Records Bureau's 'Crime in India 2022' report underscores the vulnerability of the country's STs and SCs when it notes that 1,347 (13.4%) of the 10,064 atrocities committed against STs in 2022 concerned rapes of tribal women, and an additional 1,022 (10.2%) pertained to 'assault on women with intent to outrage their modesty'. Moreover, 5,274 (9.2%) of the 57,582 cases of outrage against SCs were of criminal intimidation. These records were of registered cases, while it is well known that most such crimes remain unregistered.

In India, the practice of slavery has been facilitated by its hierarchical social and economic structures that have institutionalised exploitation of the weak and largely freed the oppressors of any accountability. It has besides been helped by a lax enforcement of labour laws, limited access to justice for marginalised communities, and a widening divide between the haves and have-nots.

Oxfam India's 'Survival of the Richest' report says the richest 1 per cent in India own more than 40 per cent of the country's total wealth, while the bottom half of the population share just three per cent. Between early 2020—when the Covid-19 pandemic began—and November 2022, billionaires in India have seen their collective wealth surge by 121 per cent, or Rs 3,608 crore a day in real terms. On the other hand, 64 per cent of the Rs 14.8 lakh crore collected under GST in 2021–22 came from the bottom 50 per cent of the population.

The sudden lockdown during the pandemic pushed 75 million people into poverty and annihilated small businesses that thrived on these migrant workers. More than 230 million people (16 per cent of the population), still experience poverty—the highest among all emerging economies, says a recent UNDP report, with the 'poor' being those living on less than $1.8 (Rs 150) a day. Oxfam points out that billionaires in India increased from 102 in 2020 to 166 in 2022, with the combined wealth of the 100 richest in the country touching $660 billion (Rs 54 lakh crore), 'an amount that could fund the entire Union Budget for more than 18 months'. It added: 'Taxing India's ten richest at five per cent can fetch [all the needed] money to bring children back to school.' ■

Letters to the Editor

Will Bilkis Bano's rapists go to jail?

By quashing the remission of 11 convicts in the Bilkis Bano case, the Supreme Court has rekindled hope among those who look toward it for getting justice. However, now the question is whether the men—convicted for gangraping a five-month pregnant Bano and brutally killing her toddler in 2002—will ever go to jail again? Media reports suggest that nine of the 11 convicts are 'missing' with the local police apparently having no clue about their whereabouts. However, a media report quoted neighbours and shopkeepers that all of them were seen till Sunday, a day before the SC verdict came. Now they are 'missing'. This should not be surprising. After all, even while serving life sentences, most of them had been frequently out on long paroles before getting remission in 2022 thanks to the State's benevolence. No court of law can do much when the State is bent on backing the convicts. We have seen this too frequently in recent years in the cases of Kuldeep Singh Sengar, Swami Chinmayanand, Baba Ram Raheem and, most recently, of Brijbhushan Sharan Singh. Now it's for the voters to decide if they want the supporters of criminals to run governments in their name.

Anurag Dey, Kolkata

SBI at it again

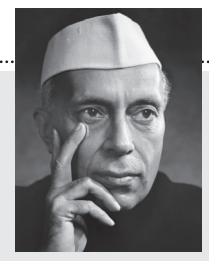
A new research report by the State Bank of India (SBI) takes exception to claims of India's K-shaped economic recovery and stresses that the claims are 'flawed, prejudiced, ill-concocted…'. A K-shaped recovery is a term used to suggest that while the overall economic growth numbers look robust, there is a growing underlying inequality. The SBI's own interpretation of data questions the 'efficacy of using age-old proxies like low two-wheeler sales or fragmented land holdings' and dismisses these as 'pre-destined narratives of India not doing well'. It argues that the muted post-pandemic sales of two-wheelers 'could reflect households reconfiguring their savings towards physical assets (real estate) and a buyers' percentage shifting to used/entry-level cars (substitution effect)'. It goes without saying that the SBI report suffers from some fundamental flaws. If the government has been forced to extend the scheme of subsidised food grain to 800 million Indians, does it not suggest deep economic distress? In a country where a minuscule population pays income tax, how reasonable is it to draw conclusions from tax data about broader inequality? Sadly, the SBI is only parroting the government's narrative.

Puja Awasthi, Mumbai

Delhi model of hospitals: key facilities missing, substandard material

Last week, a man who allegedly got injured in a bid to escape a police van on its way to a police station died after being denied admission at four government hospitals. Just a few days later, a 46-year-old patient died at Lok Nayak hospital after his family was told that there was no facility to conduct the upper gastrointestinal (GI) endoscopy that they were seeking, according to a media report. The patient had been sent to LNJP from GTB hospital in Shahdara, another Delhi-government-run facility, because the GI test was not available there. At the same time, the samples of medical supplies lifted by the vigilance department from different Delhi government hospitals were found to be sub-standard. Although the Delhi health department told media that it had procured the supplies from the central government's GeM portal, the overall conditions in AAP-led Delhi government hospitals are not up to the mark.

Dr. Mehmood Ali, Delhi



NEHRU'S WORD

Nehru consulted Gandhiji on Kashmir at every step

Are Nehru-baiters aware that some of their criticism directed at Nehru applies to Gandhiji as well? For those continuously blaming Nehru for all the ills plaguing Kashmir, it might be salutary to recall that Gandhiji was in Delhi and fully on board when the accession of Kashmir and the subsequent decision to send the Army to protect Kashmir was taken. The much-criticised reference to the United Nations was also made during Gandhiji's life-time. These extracts from two statements of Nehru dated 15 January and 7 September 1948 make it clear that he had consulted Gandhi at every step.

The government's decision in regard to the payment of the cash balances to Pakistan has been taken after the most careful thought and after consultation with Gandhi*ji*. I should like to make it clear that this does not mean any change in our unanimous view about the strength and validity of the government's position as set out in various statements made by distinguished colleagues of mine. Nor do we accept the facts or arguments advanced in the latest statement of the finance minister of Pakistan. We have come to this decision in the hope that this generous gesture, in accord with India's high ideals and Gandhi*ji*'s noble standards, will convince the world of our earnest desire for peace and goodwill.

We earnestly trust also that this will go a long way towards producing a situation which will induce Gandhiji to break his fast. That fast, of course, had nothing to do with this particular matter, and we have thought of it because of our desire to help in every way in easing the present tension. (***Explanatory note***: *India had agreed to allocate Rs 75 crore to Pakistan to help the latter make a start. In the meantime, Pakistan waged an undeclared war against India in Kashmir. Rs 20 crore having already been paid, the remaining Rs 55 crore was withheld, awaiting a settlement on Kashmir. This became another cause of bitterness between the two countries. When Gandhiji began his fast on 13 January and appealed to the nation to remove the ill will, prejudice and passion that was poisoning relations between India and Pakistan, the government of India decided to pay the amount due to Pakistan immediately as a gesture of goodwill and acontribution 'to the nonviolent and noble effort made by Gandhiji'. On 18 January, Gandhi terminated his fast.*)

Six months ago, we witnessed a miracle in Calcutta where ill will changed overnight into goodwill, through the alchemy of a similar fast. The alchemist who worked this change was described by our governor general as the one-man boundary force that succeeded when the boundary force of 50,000 men in West Punjab did not succeed in keeping the peace. This unarmed knight of non-violence is functioning again. May the same alchemy work again in India and elsewhere!

We have sought to remove one major cause of dispute and argument between India and Pakistan and we hope that other problems will also be resolved. But let it be remembered that the people of Kashmir are suffering from a brutal and unprovoked invasion, and we have pledged ourselves to help them gain their freedom. To that pledge, we shall hold and do our utmost to redeem it. We seek their freedom not for any gain to us, but to prevent the ravishing of a fair country and a peaceful people."

–New Delhi, 15 January 1948

***

We have, right from the beginning, taken whatever step we have taken, in the limelight; there has been no hiding. The House has been greatly interested in this matter of Kashmir. The Indian public has taken the greatest interest in it and, rightly, the burden of it has fallen on our government. It has been a heavy burden.

> *I tried to consider the question from the point of view of not drifting from the high principles we had proclaimed in the past*

I shall be frank and tell you why it has been heavy on me and more especially on my government: not because military operations were involved—although that is always a burden—but rather since we wanted to be sure that at no time did we act against the principles we had so long proclaimed.

May I take the House into confidence? In the early stages, towards the end of October and in November, I was so exercised over Kashmir—if anything had happened that, according to me, might have been disastrous for Kashmir, I would have been heartbroken. I was intensely interested, for emotional and personal reasons; I do not want to hide this: I am interested in Kashmir. Nevertheless, I tried to keep down the personal and emotional aspect and consider it from the larger viewpoint of India's good and Kashmir's good. I tried to consider the question from the point of view of not straying or drifting from the high principles which we had proclaimed in the past.

When this question first came up, I sought guidance, as I often did in other matters, from Mahatma*ji*. I went to him repeatedly and put to him my difficulties. The House knows that that apostle of non-violence was not a suitable guide in military matters—and he said so—but he undoubtedly, always, was a guide on moral issues. And so, I put my difficulties and my government's difficulties before him; and though it is not proper for me to drag in his name at this juncture in order to lessen my own responsibility on this issue, I nevertheless mention this matter merely to show how the moral aspect of this question has always troubled me. Especially when I saw in India all manner of things happening [that] brought India's name into disrepute, I was greatly troubled and anxious that we should keep straight.

Now, this has been my attitude, and I had proclaimed it publicly. Apart from rhetoric and vague insinuations, I should like to know from anybody, friend or enemy, from that day in the last week of October, when we took the fateful decision to send our troops by air to Kashmir, till today, what it is we have done in Kashmir which, from any point of view and byany standard, is wrong.

I want an answer to that question. Individuals may have erred here and there; but I say that the government of India and the Indian Army as a whole have done something inevitable; each step that we have taken has been an inevitable step which, if not taken, would have brought disgrace to us. That is how I have ventured to look at this question of Kashmir.

And when I find that on the other side, the whole case—that has been built up on what I venture to say, using strong language—is falsehood and deceit, am I wrong? That is what I ask this House and the country and the world to consider." ■

–A speech in the Constituent Assembly, New Delhi, 7 September 1948

Selected and edited by **MRIDULA MUKHERJEE**, *former professor of history at JNU and former director of Nehru Memorial Museum & Library*

#HOCKEYINVITES

ENROUTETOPARIS

FIH HOCKEY OLYMPIC QUALIFIERS 2024 RANCHI

FREE ENTRY

FIH HOCKEY OLYMPIC QUALIFIERS RANCHI 2024

MARANG GOMKE JAIPAL SINGH ASTROTURF HOCKEY STADIUM, RANCHI

BEGINS TODAY

13 JANUARY 2024

TODAY'S MATCHES

TIME: 12:00

GERMANY

VS

CHILE

TIME: 14:30

JAPAN

VS

CZECH REPUBLIC

TIME: 17:00

NEW ZEALAND

VS

ITALY

TIME: 19:30

INDIA

VS

UNITED STATES

INDIA

WATCH LIVE ON

STADIUM ENTRY
(FOR SPECTATORS)
1000 Hrs Onwards



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Chief Minister, Jharkhand

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A WAY OF LIFE

‘I am woman, I am fast’

A new play provokes a reflection on women athletes who do not conform to received notions of femininity

Sameera Iyengar



There’s a marvellous new book of plays out: *Ottam aur Anya Natak* (Ottam and Other Plays) by Sapan Saran, published by Vaam Prakashan. Each of the three plays in the book has a woman at its centre. While theatre is rife with portrayals of women as victims or heroines, long-suffering, silent and strong, Saran is not interested in that trope—her protagonists simply aspire to live life on their own terms and determinedly nurture that spirit in a world that is always trying to show them their place.

Ottam, the third play in Saran’s book, engages with a topic close to my heart—running. (‘*Ottam*’ is the Tamil word for running.) The protagonist Akai lives to run. One may say that running is her life. In a beautiful little scene, Saran captures the utter joy of running: Akai’s father is trying to teach her to play the *parai*, a percussion instrument that belongs to the Paraiyar caste. Akai, bored with the slowness of the tempo, starts messing around. She tells her father she’d much prefer to run. He challenges her, “Run through the river as I beat my drum.” She takes up the challenge and flies off. Anxious for his daughter at first, he gets caught up in her running and soon his drumbeats follow, triumphantly.

For me, this scene evoked memories of running as a young girl—my body launching into space and picking up pace till it found a rhythm with my breath; the wind rushing through my hair and against my face; the way it felt to hit second wind and keep pumping, pumping, pumping, beyond the barriers of my body. All runners experience this feeling of expansion, where you lose yourself and become much bigger than yourself. I have always felt utterly beautiful and free when I run.

In my life, running coincided with learning Bharatanatyam. My dance teacher did not like my short hair and boyish ways. I just didn’t have the right *adakkam*—a Tamil word for a woman’s ability to contain herself. What happens when society demands *adakkam* from you, but *ottam* claims you? What happens if you are a woman runner with a body that does not fit received ideas of femininity? An androgynous body perhaps, a body



Superathlete Caster Semenya was stripped of her medals for hyperandrogynism

too close to perceived masculinity in its strength and expression. In a society taught to think in binaries, only slowly awakening to the fluidities of gender, such a body does not fit. What happens then?

When I was young, I hated standing in airport queues. Twelve years of studying in the US meant an annual roundtrip flight, two security checks each way—24 flights, 48 checks. I’d stand in the women’s line, holding my breath, hoping to get through without incident. Invariably, I was asked to go to the men’s line. I’d stand my ground, but had to say that I was a woman—it was humiliating. My women friends are shocked when they hear this; at most, they agree, I could be androgynous. The bottom line, however, is that I am ‘not feminine enough’.

There are many such ‘not feminine enough’ women in the world of sports, who do not conform to expected presentations of femininity or, despite their skirts and visible breasts, are too muscular, too strong, too fast… just too much. The stories of women runners who’ve had to negotiate this are legion. I think of Flo-Jo (Florence Griffith-Joyner), the fastest woman sprinter ever, a

Powerful female athletes without adakkam *disturb, even affront, society. And chauvinistic society finds ways to rein them in*

vision in her short skirts and long painted nails and rippling muscles, flying past a field of champion runners. I think of the Williams sisters of tennis. And of how they always picked on Serena—too black, too unapologetic; Venus was more acceptably feminine. Powerful female athletes without *adakkam* disturb, even affront, society. And society finds ways to contain them.

One of the weapons by which this is done is gender testing. In her research for the play, Saran discovered how the method of gender verification developed over time. From all women being tested to nude parades for physical inspection of women athletes to the current scenario where only those who arouse suspicion are selected for gender testing. It is hardly surprising that ‘suspicious’ athletes tend to be those who are ‘not feminine enough’. Here’s how it works: the athlete’s testosterone levels are checked. If it is ‘too high’ (the norm is invariably the white woman) she is deemed ineligible to compete in women’s races and stripped of her medals. She is thrown out of competitive sport, with no place to go.

At the Mumbai book launch, Saran said, “Dutee Chand had to undergo a gender test, and failed it. Yet she won the case of hyperandrogynism (higher than normal levels of testosterone). She challenged the court and asked: what is the scientific proof that there is a direct relationship between naturally occurring testosterone and performance? They weren’t able to produce any scientific proof about it.”

A 2017 study (Bermon and Garnier), critiqued on grounds of method and bias, found that women with higher levels of testosterone do better in short distance races (up to 800m). But so what? Since these are naturally occurring testosterone levels, why should they disqualify an athlete? A 2014 study of 693 elite male and female athletes (Healy et al.) had already found that ‘16.5 per cent of men had low testosterone levels, whereas 13.7 per cent of women had high levels with complete overlap between the sexes.’

I have experienced the joy and freedom of running, but I also enjoy the privileges of caste, class, education, access and an encouraging family. What does competing at the highest level mean to people who are not cushioned in social privilege? An *Indian Express* spotlight (published on 1 January 2024) on the 256 medal winners of the September–October 2023 Asian Games sheds some light. Women contributed 43 per cent of the medals India won. A third of all medallists (men and women) came from rural areas. Homes headed by daily wagers accounted for 40 of 256 medals, i.e. 15 per cent; 244 athletes anonymously shared their household income—50 (or 20 per cent) came from families that earned less than Rs 50,000 a year when they began their chosen sport. Only 33 athletes had parents with a stable income.

In media interviews, athletes talk about their struggle, the support of their families, and a change in their social status when they are selected, when they win medals and acclaim. Successful sportspersons can dream of government jobs and financial security. Imagine, then, what it means to be debarred from competition because you are ‘not feminine enough’. Imagine the layers of injustice when a Santhi Soundarajan or a Dutee Chand are disqualified from competitive running on the basis of gender testing. Some, like Dutee, are able to fight back, but society yields nothing easily.

Saran understands that the runner’s feeling of freedom comes from an inner spring—society can neither give it nor take it away. As long as the runner keeps running, her spirit cannot be broken.

Ottam takes this metaphor and runs with it. Through the story of Akai, the play revels in women’s freedom and desire, confronts the violent machinations of patriarchal society, and rests power in the spirit of the individual woman.

When Caster Semenya, the South African middle-distance runner, winner of two Olympic gold medals and three World Championships, was gender-tested, stripped of her honours and disqualified from running, she responded with: “I am woman, I am fast.” *Ottam* celebrates this woman—fast, magnificent, and free. ■

SAMEERA IYENGAR *is a Mumbai-based theatre person and creative producer*

#HOCKEYINVITES
ENROUTETOPARIS
FIH HOCKEY OLYMPIC QUALIFIERS 2024 RANCHI
FIH
HOCKEY INDIA
FREE ENTRY
Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Astroturf Hockey Stadium, Ranchi

POOL-A Germany | Japan | Chile | Czech Republic
POOL-B India | New Zealand | United States | Italy

13TH JANUARY

MATCH#	TIME	MATCH
1	12:00	Germany vs Chile
2	14:30	Japan vs C.Republic
3	17:00	N. Zealand vs Italy
4	19:30	India vs USA

14TH JANUARY

MATCH#	TIME	MATCH
5	12:00	Chile vs C.Republic
6	14:30	Japan vs Germany
7	17:00	USA vs Italy
8	19:30	N. Zealand vs India

16TH JANUARY

MATCH#	TIME	MATCH
9	12:00	Germany vs C.Republic
10	14:30	Chile vs Japan
11	17:00	USA vs N. Zealand
12	19:30	India vs Italy

18TH JANUARY

M#	TIME	POOL	MATCH
13	10:30	5/8[1]	3rd Pool A vs 4th Pool B
14	13:30	5/8[1]	3rd Pool B vs 4th Pool A
15	16:30	SF[1]	1st Pool A vs 2nd Pool B
16	19:30	SF[1]	1st Pool B vs 2nd Pool A

19TH JANUARY

M#	TIME	POOL	MATCH
17	10:30	7/8	L. Match 13 vs L. Match 14
18	13:30	5/6	W. Match 13 vs W. Match 14
19	16:30	3/4	L. Match 15 vs L. Match 16
20	19:30	Final	W. Match 15 vs W. Match 16



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NATION

BACK IN THE RECKONING?

What YS Sharmila brings to the Congress in Andhra

▸P2



NATION

STATES 360°

In focus this week: Chhattisgarh and Gujarat

▸P3



THE RAM MANDIR SAGA

AYODHYA: LEST WE FORGET

The missing 'maryada purushottam' in the pomp and ceremony of 22 January

▸P4-5



Why we suddenly love Lakshadweep

There's more to the nationalist spin on preferring the Indian islands over the Maldives

Pankaj Chaturvedi

I am still in awe of the stunning beauty of its islands…' began PM Modi's social media post on 4 January. 'I had the opportunity to interact with people in Agatti, Bangaram and Kavaratti… here are some glimpses, including aerial glimpses from Lakshadweep... for those who wish to embrace the adventurer in them, Lakshadweep has to be on your list. During my stay, I also tried snorkelling—what an exhilarating experience it was! And those early morning walks along the pristine beaches were also moments of pure bliss…' concluded the gush about his two-day stay in Lakshadweep.

The scripted spiel was as much about his latest modelling assignment—do not miss the sartorial details—as his first visit to Lakshadweep; it was the second by a serving Indian prime minister. In December 1987, when Rajiv Gandhi was prime minister, he had attended to official work and then spent a year-end vacation on Bangaram island. This visit had been raked up by Modi during his election campaign in 2019, alleging that Rajiv Gandhi had misused his office for a private holiday—charges that retired defence services officers and the then Lakshadweep administrator, Wajahat Habibullah, had refuted as disinformation.

PM Modi's posts with photographs of him snorkelling in a life jacket have also prompted tongue-wags on social media, but the context for three Maldivian deputy ministers calling him a 'terrorist' and mocking him as a 'clown' is not clear, since the posts were deleted within hours after a social media shitstorm. All the three ministers were immediately 'suspended' and President Mohamed Muizzu, elected in October on an 'India out' plank, sought to placate ruffled feathers by condemning the comments as highly irresponsible. The Maldivian government expressed its regrets and Maldivian trade bodies apologised to their Indian partners.

Even while tamping down the diplomatic fracas with India, Muizzu, who is on a five-day state visit to China, met President Xi Jinping on 10 January and signed '20 key agreements', including one on tourism cooperation. 'Twenty key agreements were signed today between the government of the Maldives and the government of China this afternoon and both the Presidents witnessed the signing ceremony,' the Maldivian president's office said in a post on X.

Muizzu is on his third overseas trip and is yet to visit India, which was historically the first destination of Maldivian leaders. He urged China to regain the #1 slot and send more tourists to Maldives. He made no reference to India, but his appeal came soon after the 'Boycott Maldives' call in India, widely perceived to have an official nod.

While no formal statement was issued by the government of India, the external affairs ministry summoned the Maldivian envoy to express its displeasure. The silence of the Indian government on equally, if not more, vicious campaigns against the Maldives on social media reinforced the suspicion that it had official blessings, that it had been 'orchestrated, organised and ordained' even as the hashtag #BoycottMaldives began trending on X. Media reports claimed that Indian tour operators and airlines had reported largescale cancellation of travel plans by Indians, allegedly depressing prices in hotels and resorts in Maldives. Take it with a pinch of salt, though.

The Maldivian Tourism Authority's website claims that Indians constituted 11 per cent of tourist arrivals in Maldives in 2022, virtually neck-and-neck with Russians, with Chinese tourists comprising 10 per cent. While Indians, Russians and the Chinese accounted for approximately 3.2 million tourists, a similar number was made up by the UK, other European countries and the US, combined.

Seasoned diplomats are dismayed by the Indian response. "Restrained reaction would've forced an obviously non-friendly government to make amends. Instead, social media onslaught, calls for isolation (of Maldives) have worsened relations and given China a leg-up," commented former ambassador and commentator K.C. Singh.

In a scathing editorial, *Global Times*, the official mouthpiece of the Communist Party of China commented: 'Beijing has never asked Malé to reject New Delhi because of the conflicts between China and India, nor does it view cooperation between the Maldives and India as unfriendly or a threat... New Delhi should stay more open-minded as China's cooperation with South Asian countries is not a zero-sum game.' The editorial went on to add that Muizzu's decision to visit China before India 'did not necessarily mean that he is pro-China and anti-India'—it merely demonstrated that Muizzu was treating India with a 'normal mindset and steering the relationship between the Maldives and India to a normal State–State relationship'.

BJP leaders and the Indian foreign policy establishment greeted the criticism with stony silence. The editorial came as a bitter pill because just days earlier *Global Times* had carried a lavishly adulatory article on India, which was quoted profusely and with pride in India. Authored by Zhang Jiadong, director of the Centre for South Asian Studies at Fudan University, the article effusively praised India's 'great achievements' in becoming one of the fastest growing major economies. His last two visits to India in four years, Ziadong wrote, showed that the 'attitude toward Chinese scholars was more relaxed and moderate' and India was strategically more confident.

The mishandling of Muizzu—who had indeed campaigned and won on a nationalist 'India out' plank, and demanded post-election that India withdraw its military personnel from the islands—belied any such confidence or maturity.



PM Modi's day out: snorkelling in Lakshwadeep in the reassuring company of Navy divers

'One only hopes that India–Maldives relations, which are too vital and strategic, recover lost equilibrium as soon as possible… These are not ties to be trifled with,' says former foreign secretary Nirupama Rao

Muizzu had met Modi in Dubai on the sidelines of COP28 and had apparently reiterated the demand. The meeting, however, did little to break the ice. In December, Maldives decided to revoke an agreement with India for joint hydrographic surveys in Maldivian waters, signed during PM Modi's visit to the islands in 2019. It was said to be a symbol of India–Maldives defence ties.

Also in December, Maldives skipped the latest meeting of the Colombo Security Conclave, opting to attend a meeting of a China-led forum. Whether India's overbearing 'Big Brother-ly' bullying alienated the Maldivians or whether India took the Maldives for granted, thereby creating anti-India sentiment, is hard to say. The 'Boycott Maldives' campaign and reports that some pro-India politicians in the islands have demanded Muizzu's resignation are not helping cool the temperature and calm bilateral relations.

Anti-India sentiments are not new in Maldives. In 2018, Abdulla Yameen, the then president of Maldives, asked India to withdraw two of its helicopters and a Dornier aircraft, deployed by India for search and rescue operations in Maldives. Yameen insisted that if the helicopters and the aircraft were gifted to it, then their pilots must be from Maldives and not from India. Mutual distrust has also grown because of the BJP's perceived anti-Muslim politics at home.

The Hindu has reported meanwhile that speculation abounds in New Delhi of a Chinese plan to develop a naval base in the Maldives. 'In 2018, China planned an ocean observatory in Makunudhoo Atoll, north of Malé—not far from India's Lakshadweep islands. Maldivian opposition leaders had then expressed reservations about the observatory's potential military applications, including a provision for a submarine base,' it reported. While there is no evidence yet of China having revived that proposal, the possibility cannot be discounted.

"I only hope that India–Maldives relations, which are too vital and strategic, recover lost equilibrium as soon as possible… These are not ties to be trifled with. They matter too much. To both countries. We are equal partners. And must stay that way. This is not [just] about sand and beaches," weighed in former foreign secretary Nirupama Menon Rao. ■

'Some places need to be left alone'

He is no Christopher Columbus or Vasco da Gama. A political appointee, a former BJP minister from Gujarat, Praful Khoda Patel nonetheless 'discovered' Lakshadweep in 2020 when he took over as Administrator. Ever since, he has been trying to develop Lakshadweep 'like neighbouring Maldives, a renowned international tourist destination'.

He probably dreamed of a Hindu paradise on these islands where 93 per cent of the population happens to be Muslim. He withdrew beef and other kinds of meat from mid-day meals, an action endorsed by the Supreme Court, which felt it was the government's discretion to frame policy, and how did it matter anyway, as fish and eggs were still in plentiful supply.

He ordered coconut trees to be painted orange or saffron to 'beautify' them and proposed a ban on cow slaughter in a territory where there were no cows (except in dairy farms); a preventive detention law where there was no crime and took over the authority to acquire tribal land without paying compensation.

In the Lakshadweep islands, where the maximum road length is just 11 kilometres, he planned to widen the roads, allow exploitation of mineral resources and convert the islands into a hub for cement manufacture.

In another flash of brilliance, Khoda also initiated a population-control scheme on the islands where the total fertility rate, according to the National Family Health Survey-5 (2019–20) was 1.4, which is far behind the national average of 2.2. He also planned to allow sale and consumption of alcohol though locals favoured its sale only in resorts and hotels.

The 'Goonda Act' was used to arrest dissenters like Hussain Manikfan for a Facebook post in which he complained about the lack of transport between the mainland and the islands. His FB post read: 'Only 2 of the 7 ships are running and people are going through hell. In a skewed logic, this will be a justification for not requiring more ships.'

The brouhaha that followed PM Modi's visit to Lakshadweep on 2–3 January 2024 would have people believe that the islands have been neglected over the past 70 years.



Lakshadweep Administrator Praful Khoda Patel with PM Modi

But every home in the islands has rainwater harvesting facilities and solar power substantially covers the islanders' electricity needs. All islands are connected by helicopter service since 1986, and high-speed passenger boats were purchased in the 1990s. The National Institute of Oceanography helped redesign tripods ensuring piped water supply from the fresh water lens that, in every coral island, floats on the saline underground seawater.

Minicoy boasted one of the country's first Navodaya Vidyalayas and Kadmat has a degree college. Indeed, every island had a computer by 1990, recalls the then Administrator, Wajahat Habibullah.

Ignoring the warnings of marine biologists, the Lakshadweep administration held an investors' meet in New Delhi and is pressing ahead with the construction of beach and lagoon villas. A tender notice was issued inviting proposals from developers for building 370 such villas using the design, build, finance, operate and transfer (DBFOT) model on a public–private partnership (PPP) basis on Minicoy, Kadmat and Suheli islands. On 4 January 2024, the day PM Modi ended his visit to the islands, the Lakshadweep collector acquired 1.9 hectares of land belonging to 218 residents for construction of a beach road.

Lakshadweep's environmental balance is shaken by land erosion, cyclones and rising water temperatures along the coast. This is exacerbated by fishing permission granted to large trawlers. S. Abhilash of the department of meteorology, Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT) says, "These islands are extremely sensitive. The sea here remains rough throughout the year. In addition to stormy waves, changing ocean currents and bleaching of coral reefs, large-scale construction will only worsen the situation."

Loveleen Arun, a veteran of the travel trade, points out, "While Maldives is spread across an area of 298 sq. km, Lakshadweep's is just 32 sq. km. In comparison, Andaman island is 6,000+ sq. km. The coral reefs around the Lakshadweep islands are already bleaching or dying. So please think twice before trying to promote it as the next Maldives. Some places need to be left alone."

A cluster of 32 islands with a population of 71,000, Lakshwadeep has been protected and preserved till now with good reason. But Khoda and his political masters have different ideas and would like to turn it into a concrete nightmare and a real estate player's wet dream. ■

–Pankaj Chaturvedi

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A turning point for the Congress in Andhra?

Late YSR's daughter Y.S. Sharmila's entry into the Congress is set to give a fillip to the party in the state

Suresh Dharur

One small step for an individual but a giant leap for the organisation" was how a senior Congress leader summed up the mood of the Andhra Pradesh unit following the induction of Y.S. Sharmila into the party. Daughter of popular Congress leader and twice chief minister of combined Andhra Pradesh, the late Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, and estranged sister of current chief minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, Sharmila's entry comes as a big boost ahead of simultaneous assembly and Lok Sabha elections in April–May.

Entrusting her a key position may not automatically lead to dramatic results, but her induction is being seen as a step towards securing some semblance of political relevance for a party relegated to the margins in Andhra Pradesh.

Sharmila has the unenviable task of revitalising the party and making it battle-ready to take on her elder brother's YSR Congress Party (YSRCP). While it would be unreasonable to expect the grand old party—whose vote share was less than 2 per cent in the 2019 polls—to pull off an electoral miracle, the latest development is bound to breathe life into the moribund organisation and lift the spirits of the cadre.

Political observers caution that Congress leaders must temper their expectations, given the ground realities. "The fact remains that there is no political vacuum in the state waiting to be filled. Already, three formidable regional parties—YSRCP, Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and Jana Sena Party (JSP)—are in the fray. With this, both the national parties—BJP and Congress—appear to have been squeezed out," political analyst and author Ramesh Kandula said.

Optimism in the air

The Congress' optimism is largely based on two factors. First, Sharmila may serve as the catalyst to resurrecting the memory of YSR, whose welfare policies still resonate with the masses, while consolidating the anti-incumbency against the Jagan Mohan Reddy government. Second, by projecting Sharmila as the true inheritor of YSR's political legacy, the party might attract several old-time Congressmen who had joined YSRCP following YSR's death in a copter crash in September 2009.

Signalling how crucial the development is for the Congress, top leaders including party president Mallikarjun Kharge and Rahul Gandhi were present during Sharmila's formal induction into the party in New Delhi. Congress general secretaries K.C. Venugopal and Jairam Ramesh as well as Andhra in-charge Manickam Tagore accompanied Sharmila when she met former Congress president Sonia Gandhi later.

The party brass is understood to have promised her a Rajya Sabha berth if she takes over the reins of the party in Andhra.

"She is the right candidate to revive the party's lost glory and keep YSR's legacy alive. YSR was a true mass leader and his legacy, marked by pro-poor policies, is still relevant in Andhra politics," senior Congress leader N. Tulasi Reddy said.

An overwhelming majority of the YSRCP leaders owe their political careers to YSR, and it was this loyalty that prompted them to sail with Jagan when he severed ties with Congress and floated his own party in 2011. "Now, Sharmila is ideally positioned to bring them back to the Congress fold," a senior party leader said.

"No doubt, we bore the brunt of public anger over the division of Andhra Pradesh to carve out a separate Telangana state. But the public mood is changing now. They understand our past compulsions," says state Congress chief G. Rudra Raju.

Rallying point for rebels

It is widely believed that Sharmila may emerge as a rallying point for YSRCP rebels who have been denied party tickets. Already, two ruling party MLAs—A. Ramakrishna Reddy and Malladi Vishnu—who have been denied renomination to the assembly seats have indicated that they *will* join the Congress.



Photo: Getty Images

Y.S. Sharmila joins the Congress party in New Delhi, 4 January 2024

Battling anti-incumbency, the chief minister has already dropped 13 sitting MLAs out of 35 candidates finalised so far for the assembly elections. The ruling party has 151 MLAs in the 175-member legislative assembly. According to YSRCP sources, more than 50 sitting legislators will be denied tickets this time. Some more will be shifted to other constituencies to improve their chances of winning.

A strong legacy

Andhra Pradesh was once considered a stronghold of the Congress. It was a major contributor to the UPA's kitty in 2004 and 2009. On both occasions, YSR had steered the party to victory in the undivided state, cementing his position as a regional satrap.

A four-time MP and five-time MLA, YSR was arguably the most popular mass leader of his times. He led several mass movements against the then TDP government. His pioneering welfare schemes—free power to farmers, health insurance for the poor and fee reimbursement for students—still find resonance with voters, 14 years after his untimely death. Jagan came to power in 2019 invoking that legacy and has since rechristened several welfare schemes in his father's name.

'The fact remains that there is no political vacuum in the state waiting to be filled. Already, three strong regional parties—YSRCP, TDP and JSP—are in the fray'

Sister-in-arms

Sharmila's political journey began when she stood by her brother in his hour of crisis. Jagan, then an MP from Kadapa, was jailed in May 2012 following a CBI probe into a case of alleged illegal assets. As general secretary of the fledgling YSRCP, Sharmila extensively campaigned on his behalf for the by-elections held that year, necessitated by the resignation of 18 Congress MLAs following Jagan's ouster from the Congress.

In October 2012, she undertook a 3,000-km-long *padayatra* from her village Idupulapaya in Kadapa district to Ichchapuram in Srikakulam. Ahead of the 2019 elections, she went on an 11-day bus yatra through Andhra Pradesh in support of her brother. During political rallies, she used to describe herself as an "arrow released by Jagan *anna*". Her public outreach not only established the YSRCP in every nook and corner of the state, but also generated sympathy for Jagan.

However, differences cropped up soon after the YSRCP stormed to power in 2019, with Jagan refusing to accommodate her in the party, fearing that she might emerge as a parallel power centre.

This forced Sharmila to move to neighbouring Telangana to pursue her political ambitions. Coinciding with YSR's birth anniversary, she launched YSR Telangana Party on 8 June 2021.

The trouble in the YSR family deepened further in June 2022 when Sharmila's mother Y.S. Vijayalakshmi quit as honorary president of the YSRCP and announced her support for her daughter.

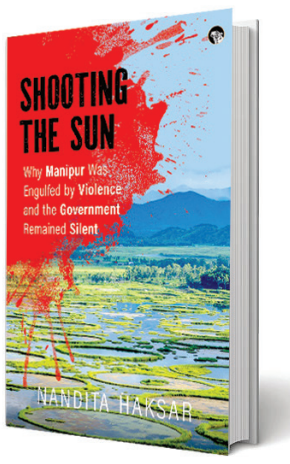
After running a fierce campaign against the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) government headed by K. Chandrashekar Rao, Sharmila subsequently decided to stay away from contesting the Telangana assembly polls, held on 30 November. Instead, her party extended support to the Congress to avoid a split in the opposition votes.

Despite the rift, Jagan and Sharmila have so far refrained from criticising each other in public. But the gloves may soon come off as Andhra sets the stage for the battle of siblings over their father's political legacy. ■

BOOK EXTRACT

Where have all the flowers gone?

Manipur is a place where many flowers have bloomed, literally and metaphorically



Title **Shooting the Sun**
Author **Nandita Haksar**
Publisher **Speaking Tiger**
Pages **200**
Price **₹399** (paperback)

The stories of Manipur that this book tells are violent, cruel and infused with unadulterated savagery. The hate and rage in them is tangible and there is no way to make the stories any less brutal.

The reports coming out of the state since May 2023 have eclipsed everything else there is to know about this magnificent place, its cultural as well as biological diversity. Almost as if wanting to remind us of these aspects of its beauty, three new species of flowers revealed themselves in Kakching.

[…]

Manipur is a place where many flowers have bloomed, literally and metaphorically. More than five centuries ago, Charairongba (1697–1709), a Meitei king, wrote a book called *Leiron* (*lei* means flower). He describes more than a hundred flowers, edible plants and medicinal herbs, and relates stories associated with each plant. Here are some descriptions of the flowers he gives:

Lei Kabok: It is a white flower that remains ever fresh and is not eaten by worms... an ideal present for boys and girls to give to each other to show their love.

Nongleishang: This flower grows in an enchanted forest in the remote hills and is associated with folk stories.

Santhong Maiba Lei: It is believed that this flower was a gift of the gods... it seems to be sprinkled with silver dust and it has silvery sword-like leaves... used by ancient priests and priestess[es] for religious offerings.

Kusum Lei: This flower was brought to Manipur by the Muslims... the petals of the flowers look as if they are made from gold and the leaves resemble the teeth of a tiger.

Singut Yenga Lei: This is a flower associated with a story of friendship and love of two women who turned themselves into two reeds so that during the dry season they may be burnt together and become ash, and they may rise to the sky in the form of smoke.

Thambal: This is the lotus in the Waithou Lake and is believed to flower which grows from the pit of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba's stomach.

The description of the flowers includes information about the plants from the hills as well as the valley, and those associated with folk stories of tribal people and also of the Muslims in Manipur.

I learnt much about Meitei culture when I was living in Manipur from 1988 to 1991. It was Maharaj Kumari Binodini, the daughter of the Manipur Kingdom's monarch, Sir Maharaj Churachand Singh, who told me of the pre-Hindu Sanamahi religion and even took me to meet a famous *maibi*, a woman priestess.

I was in the state to represent the Nagas in a case of large-scale human rights violations committed by the Indian security forces in the Poumai Naga-inhabited areas of Senapati district during the counter-insurgency operation codenamed Bluebird (1987). M.K. Binodini mobilised many well-known artists and writers in support of the case and campaign against the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958.

A Meitei sub-divisional officer, N. Surendra Singh, gave me all the relevant files from his SDO's office. [These] documented the human rights violations being committed during Operation Bluebird. (Many of these documents were field reports sent by him in the form of telegrams to the district administration.) He paid with his life for his act of courage.

The superintendent of jails was a man from the Kuki community. He helped me, among other things, by allowing me access to my clients in jail. He also came to my aid when I took up the case of the Burmese refugees who had started coming into Manipur after the military crackdown in Myanmar in 1988.

Numit Kappa or 'Shooting the Sun' is the oldest Meitei epic written in the period of the earliest monarchs of the Ningthouja dynasty

Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis were all extremely sympathetic to the Burmese refugees who had crossed to Manipur in the wake of crackdown. It was quite inspiring, because I knew there had been long wars with Burma in the past. I was deeply moved once again when I went to the Manipur High Court in 2021, in the midst of the Covid pandemic, after a gap of more than two decades, to once more represent some refugees who had fled to Manipur after the military coup in Myanmar in February that year. I was overwhelmed by the support, for both me and the cause I had taken up, by so many of my old friends and acquaintances (again, across communities).

This is not to say that I was, or am, not aware of the divisions and conflicts between the communities living in Manipur. After all, I was still called a *mayang* (a derogatory word for 'outsider'). There have been deadly conflicts between the communities many times in the past. What we saw in 2023, however, was different. This time, even the security forces were divided down ethnic lines, with the Manipur police and commandos identifying with the Meiteis, and the central forces, especially the Assam Rifles, identifying with the Kukis. There were even clashes between the police and the central forces.

[…]

The violence affected everyone in Manipur, from schoolchildren to those dependent on the internet for their livelihood, and from cultivators to lawyers. But it is clear that the violence was overwhelmingly directed at the Kuki-Zo.

The Kuki group of tribes in Manipur includes the Gangte, Hmar, Kom, Paite, Thadou, Vaiphei and Zo. With the exception of the Thadous, all the other communities have disowned the term Kuki and call themselves by their own names. Many prefer to refer to themselves as Zomi. The Thadou Kuki are numerically the largest community and have played a dominant role in Kuki politics. In Manipur, the Kuki-Zo are concentrated in the Churachandpur district, which has the highest literacy rate in the state, although they have villages in all the Naga-majority areas as well as the Valley.

[…]

The term 'Kuki', we may note, is an exonym. It was likely used by the Bengalis to refer to the tribes living in some of these regions of India and Myanmar. During British rule, all communities and tribes that were not included in the Naga group of tribes were called Kuki. They divided the Kukis into 'Old Kukis' and 'New Kukis', the former having largely identified themselves with the Naga group of tribes in the years since. Kukis on this side of the border are called 'Chins' by the Burmese. Although the Kuki-Chin-Mizo-Zo group of tribes are recognised as separate tribes, they have many similarities of culture and language.

This affinity has been at the root of accusations against the Kuki-Zo of being 'outsiders'—accusations which came to be thrown around with disturbing conviction as Manipur erupted like a volcano in May 2023.

[…]

Peace can only return if the truth is acknowledged. But there isn't one simple and straightforward truth that needs to be acknowledged. The story is complex.

[…]

The title of this book refers to *Numit Kappa* or 'Shooting the Sun', the oldest Meitei epic written in the period of the earliest monarchs of the Ningthouja dynasty of Manipur in the first century AD. It speaks of a time when there were two suns in the sky but one was shot dead and the other hid himself in a cave and plunged the land into darkness.

Then the people prayed to the sun to come out of the cave, and it finally did, shining over the land once again. ■

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STATES 360 CHHATTISGARH

Protests intensify against coal mining in Hasdeo

Divyendu

Our country has more than 600 known reserves of coal blocks, of which two-thirds are available for mining. Giving this bounty, and given that conservationists and environmentalists have reservations about mining in only one-third of these coal blocks, that still leaves plenty of options. Why, then, is the Adani Group, which routinely imports coal from Australia and Indonesia, so keen on plunder are the protests by adivasis, which are now spilling out of Chhattisgarh, with processions in adjoining Madhya Pradesh, including in the city of Indore. Arrests and road blocks on Sunday, 7 January, failed to prevent a large number of people from different parts of the state from converging at the rallying point in Hasdeo, where a large group of adivasis have been camping.

The protestors, staunch opponents to coal mining by the Adani Group in Hasdeo, are drawing inspiration from the Punjab farmers' agitation against the farm laws.



the Hasdeo Arand forest? Surely it could look elsewhere? If they are attached to the state, within Chhattisgarh itself there are other active coal mines. What, then, is the reason for the group to pursue mining rights in Hasdeo for the past decade-and-a-half?

Environmental lawyer Sudiep Shrivastava offers an explanation.

Hasdeo is a virgin forest, pristine and dense. The coal here is closer to the surface and easier to access. As a result, mining costs would be lower. Forest officials and forest mafia alike are also in favour of mining in the area with an eye to profiting from the proceeds of felled or filched timber. All that stands in the way of this

Not a kilo of coal would be allowed to move out of Chhattisgarh, they pledged. The protests, which have been going on for over 600 days, intensified last month after a large number of trees were swiftly felled days after the new BJP government was installed. The tribal voters from both Surguja and Bastar divisions who supported the new Adivasi chief minister feel betrayed. They are convinced he is already a puppet in the hands of the Adani Group and the Modi government. What other choice do they have now but to intensify protests, organise road blockades, seal the borders and stop the movement of coal?

The felling of trees in Hasdeo had begun in 2022 when there was a Congress government in the state. The Union government had also given its approval the same year. For mining, clearance was required by both the union government and the state government. After stalling for some time and, despite getting the assembly to unanimously pass a resolution *against* mining in Hasdeo, the Congress government succumbed to pressure. The state Congress chief Dipak Baij, MP, acknowledged on Sunday that it was a mistake and pledged to join the good fight against mining. He also publicly admitted that while the so-called approvals by the Gram Sabhas were secured under the previous BJP government, the Congress government under Bhupesh Baghel had failed to hold an inquiry and get those approvals overturned.

Alok Shukla of the Hasdeo Bachao Andolan explained that protestors are agitating on two basic points. They contend that the 'consents' shown by the Adani Group from Gram Sabha members and the Sarpanch have either been obtained by subterfuge and fraud or are, quite simply, fake. Many of the signatures cannot be attributed to any bona fide Gram Sabha members, while their own signatures on official documents are unidentifiable. On paper, this has been under investigation for the past five years but there is still no official word about the findings.

The second issue, Shukla said, is that both the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE) and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), in two separate reports, recommended against any mining in the area, citing that it would increase human-elephant conflict and negatively impact biodiversity. Both the studies, which were released in May 2022, pointed out that although Chhattisgarh has fewer elephants compared to other states, a disproportionately high number of deaths and damage to property are caused by human-elephant conflict resulting from habitat loss and clearing of forests. Filmmaker and researcher Ekta added that elephants are increasingly straying on to NH 343, as well as into urban areas.

The ICFRE study also pointed out that the loss of natural environment would cause grievous harm not only to the means of income for the local adivasis but also to their culture and identity. The study indicated that PEKB block (operated by Adani) provided 'habitat to rare, endangered and threatened flora and fauna'. Activists underscore the threat mining would pose to the Hasdeo river and the Bango reservoir, a source of both drinking water and irrigation in the region.

The report concluded by adding a caveat that if the government still wanted to go ahead, it should only allow mining in 'PEKB, Kanta Extension, Tara and Parsa' under 'strict environmental safeguards'.

Adivasis are, in fact, already opposing another coal mine being developed by the Adani Group in Raigarh, which will destroy villages, fertile fields, forests and places of tribal worship. Public hearings notified in June 2019 for land acquisition could not be undertaken owing to largescale protests.

Adivasis accuse officials of fabricating affidavits to claim that public hearings for acquisition of land were successfully held and the consent of villagers obtained legitimately. Renewed efforts were made last month to carry out a survey in the area for a new railway line to facilitate transportation of coal for both existing and future coal mines. The good news is that the surveyors were chased away by the people and had to beat a hasty retreat.

Kabhi haan, kabhi na

The alacrity with which the new BJP governments in both Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan have restored consent to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to investigate public servants working for the state government is indicative of what the central agencies are up to. Several states, including Punjab, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Mizoram, West Bengal, Telangana and Meghalaya had earlier withdrawn this consent, which meant that while the CBI could investigate central government officials in the state for corruption, it could not in the case of state government employees.

The restoration of consent by Chhattisgarh means that former chief minister Bhupesh Baghel—whose name is learnt to have been added to the chargesheet in the Mahadev App case by the Enforcement Directorate after he lost the election—and others in his government are going to face the heat before the Lok Sabha election. How machiavellian is that?

Vultures thrive while tigers dwindle

The Achanakmar Tiger Reserve is part of the Achanakmar Wildlife Sanctuary launched in 1975 in what was then undivided Madhya Pradesh. Part of Project Tiger, it was declared a Tiger Reserve in 2009 with much fanfare. Recent reports suggest that only around eight tigers are now left, prompting wildlife experts to give serious thought to relocating tigers from other reserves. Vultures, on the other hand, seem to have done better, having gone up over four years from around 30 to 45.

Vulture conservation and research associate Abhijit Sharma says that environmentalist Shirish Damre even spotted two new species, the Himalayan Griffon Vulture and the Eurasian Griffon Vulture, on 1 January 2024.

One such unsuspecting Himalayan Griffon was caught by villagers in Uttar Pradesh and generated much excitement with some TV channels claiming that 'Jatayu', the vulture-king demi-god from the epic *Ramayana*, had come to visit Ayodhya ahead of the consecration of the Ram Temple! Wonders never cease.





STATES 360° GUJARAT

Life is a big roadshow in India's westernmost state



Sujata Anandan

The prime minister's fascination with 'road shows' remains as strong as ever. Whether it is an international cricket match, a women's conference, election campaigns or the Vibrant Gujarat summit, the events are incomplete without a 'road show'.

The 10th edition of the biennial Vibrant Gujarat summit was no exception. The prime minister hit the streets again the evening before the three-day event started on 10 January.

What these road shows are designed to achieve besides burnishing the prime minister's brand image is not clear though. The political opposition, while grudgingly admitting the summit enhanced the state's image as an investment 'destination', especially with the state's former chief minister—now the country's prime minister—claims there is a huge gap between the hype and the reality.

The summit has, since 2019, sought partner countries for the event, and their numbers have steadily increased. This year saw 34 confirmations, 21 of the nations participating for the first time. Conspicuous by its absence this year was Canada, which partnered with the Gujarat government five times earlier.

At the event, promotional videos and publicity material highlighted the state's march into greater industrialisation. While the state was earlier known for its pharma, chemical and textile sectors, it is now known for automobiles, ceramics, renewable energy and ports too. With the backing of the Union government, Gujarat has also made inroads into the semiconductor, aircraft manufacture, defence, hydrogen ecosystem and space-related industries, even leaving several more industrialised states behind.

The state government claims to have attracted investment worth $55 billion in the last two decades, and points out that 13 per cent of Gujarat's FDI comes to the automobile sector, outshining India's national average of 5 per cent.

It is difficult, however, to gloss over the poor social indices of the state—including the stunted, wasted and underweight children. Gujarat ranks at 22 or lower among the 30 states for child health indices. The state is also one of the largest hazardous waste generators in the country, and fourth for plastic waste. One report claimed that only 80 per cent of its industrial units comply with waste water treatment norms. It has the third highest consumption of fossil fuels per capita too.

Still, no time to dwell now; these are problems to keep for another year (or term). Next 'road show': Ayodhya, later this month.

No. 1 in custodial deaths

Another 'best in class' for Gujarat, and not a good one: the latest report of the National Crimes Record Bureau (NCRB) provides a grim picture of custodial deaths in the state and a shocking lack of accountability. The highest number of such deaths in the country between 2020 and 2022 were reported from Gujarat. Yet, nobody has been convicted for custodial deaths since 2016.

On 9 January, a division bench of the Gujarat High Court finally upheld the life sentence of former IPS officer Sanjiv Bhatt for the custodial torture and death of a person in Jamnagar in 1990, when Bhatt was assistant superintendant of police there. Bhatt was first convicted by a sessions court in June 2019—the only such conviction from 2016 to 2023.

In 2022 alone,there were 14 deaths in police custody. Magisterial inquiries were ordered in 10 cases, judicial inquiries in four. Remarkably, no FIR has been filed and nobody has been charged as yet in any of them. As many as 83 custodial deaths within 24 hours of arrestwere reported between 2016 and 2021. Families of 26 of the deceased demanded judicial inquiries; the mandatory magisterial inquiry was conducted in only 42 cases; charge sheets were filed in just eight cases.

Not a pretty picture of policing.

Occupational hazard

Being an opposition MLA is risky business in Gujarat, as Jignesh Mevani had discovered. The Assam police had flown all the way to Gujarat to arrest him and drag him back over a frivolous complaint. Now, it is the turn of another opposition MLA, Chaitar Vasava, who has been in prison in Bharuch for the past two weeks.



Vasava is accused of brandishing a gun at a forest department official and snatching several thousand rupees from him. The police told the court that the incident happened inside a forest where the officer had gone to ostensibly evict tribal communities who have been cultivating patches of land in the clearings. The police also claimed that they had recovered 'only' Rs 30,000 from the MLA's house and were not able to recover the firearm allegedly used to intimidate the officer.

Vasava, a firebrand tribal leader himself and currently an Aam Aadmi Party MLA, has been giving the state government a tough time with hard-hitting questions, say his followers and his lawyer. The fabricated case is a handy way to keep him from embarrassing the government, they say. But the police in Gujarat are known to be 'tough' *and* 'reasonable'.

Bulgarian 'troublemaker'

When Cadilla, one of our largest pharmaceutical firms, hired a Bulgarian woman as a 'flight attendant' in November last year, it did not bargain for the embarrassment she would cause.

She accused chairman and managing director Rajiv Modi and one of his aides of molesting and raping her, a complaint that the police did not take seriously at first, even refusing to register a case. The persistent woman, however, knocked on the doors of four different police stations and a lower court until the Gujarat High Court ordered the case be registered. It finally was on 31 December.

The question remains why Cadilla needed a Bulgarian flight attendant. The explanation doing the rounds is that private corporates prefer flight crew unfamiliar with English and Indian languages so that they can't eavesdrop on business conversations. The lady says her designation was changed to 'personal attendant' to Modi when he travelled.

Gujarati media reports claim she complained to the Bulgarian embassy that Modi and his accomplices were coercing her to withdraw her complaint and file an affidavit stating that the dispute has been settled by demand draft, for Rs 24 lakh. It is not clear whether she is still in India, but the chances of case closure due to lack of evidence are high, it is speculated.


Cadilla MD Rajiv Modi

Hic, hic, hooray!

In deference to Mahatma Gandhi, Gujarat has been the only prohibition state in India ever since its institution in 1960. But tourists and revellers have long known how to live it up without catching any judgemental official eyes.

For the past three years, however, the Gujarat government—hot on the heels of Madhya Pradesh allowing open sales of liquor in supermarkets—relaxed its prohibition norms for those with 'medical grounds'. In these three years, a significant proportion of the 6.5 crore Gujarat population seem to have developed health issues that require a liquor permit.

According to the prohibition and excise department, 27,452 permits were issued in 2020—and they gave out 43,470 in 2023.

Ahmedabad tops the list with 13,456 permit holders, followed by Surat (9,238), Rajkot (4,502), Baroda (2,743), Jamnagar (2,039), Gandhinagar (1,851) and finally Gandhi's home town Porbandar (1,700).

All of these are persons the medical board diagnoses as needing liquor for their continued survival in good health.

Sita may be inseparable from Ram, but she has no place in a patriarchal Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's scheme of things

Why the RSS people don't say 'Jai Siyaram!'

Rahul Gandhi

During the yatra, I met many people. A pandit*ji* came to see me, and raised a very deep question, which he then proceeded to explain. He said, "Rahul*ji*, he who was Lord Ram, was an ascetic. He devoted his entire life to penance." Quite right. Then he said, "Gandhi*ji* used to say 'Hey Ram!' Gandhi*ji*'s slogan was 'Hey Ram!' What does 'Hey Ram' mean?" After a brief silence, he said, "The meaning of 'Hey Ram' is… Lord Ram was not just a person, he was a way of life full of love, brotherhood, respect and penance. He showed the whole world the way to live. And every time Gandhi*ji* said 'Hey Ram!' he meant that the feeling that is Lord Ram is present in our hearts. And that feeling should guide our lives. In other words, to live one's life by doing the kind of penance Lord Ram did, serving society the way he did, spreading love and brotherhood the way he did.

Next, there's 'Jai Siyaram'. What might 'Jai Siyaram' mean? Pandit*ji* told me this as well. I learned so much in course of the yatra. It means simply that Sita and Ram are one. Hence the slogan, 'Jai Siyaram' or 'Jai Sitaram'. Meaning Ram's way of life, the things he did for Sita. And what did Lord Ram do for Sita? Don't you know that? He went and fought for her honour. So, when we say 'Jai Siyaram', we remember Sita and honour her rightful place in society. Correct? So that's 'Jai Siyaram' or 'Jai Sitaram'.



There's a third slogan: 'Jai Shri Ram'. That's where we praise Lord Ram. Pandit*ji* asked me to raise this question in my speech: Why do the BJP people raise the slogan 'Jai Shri Ram' but never say 'Jai Siyaram' or 'Hey Ram'? I liked that a lot, as pandit*ji* had revealed a very deep thing to me. The RSS and BJP people do not live their lives the way Ram lived his life. Ram was not unjust to anyone. He worked to unite society. He was respectful towards everyone. Lord Ram helped farmers, labourers, traders, everyone. Right? His philosophy, his spirit, his way of life—that has not been adopted by the RSS and BJP people.

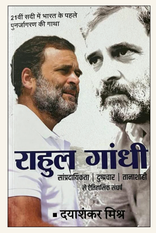
And the second slogan, 'Jai Siyaram', is perhaps the most important slogan of all. But how can they say 'Jai Siyaram' when there is not a single woman in their organisation! It is not a 'Jai Siyaram' organisation because women cannot join it. Sita cannot even think of being part of it. Sita has been excluded. This deep truth was revealed to me by a pandit*ji* from Madhya Pradesh as I travelled down this very road. Now, I want to say to our friends in the RSS, "Use all three slogans—'Jai Shri Ram', 'Jai Siyaram' and 'Hey Ram'—and please don't insult Sita*ji*".

Do you recall the picture of Ram Darbar, depicting *maryada purushottam* Ram, Lakshman, Sita and Hanuman? This picture, seen in every devout Hindu home, showed Ram carrying his bow slung across his shoulder. For their political purpose, the RSS and BJP use another picture of Lord Ram, in which he stands with his bow raised, aiming at the lord of the sea for obstructing his way to Lanka. He pulls the string. This is the only incident in the life of *maryada purushottam* where he gives in to wrath. This is the picture of Lord Ram that the RSS and BJP prefer. Where wrath is the central theme.

Similarly, an artist did some artistry with an image of the courageous and calm Hanuman and infused his image with anger. That picture was made the new identity of Bajrang Bali. Plastered on the backs of vehicles, this Hanuman does not look calm or courageous; instead, he looks wrathful. Here too, wrath is the central theme.

Having done with faith, it was now the turn of a national symbol. Spending thousands of crores of rupees, a new parliament house is being built to replace the old one. The name of this project is the Central Vista Renovation Project. An administrative area running all the way from Raisina Hill to India Gate in our capital Delhi. On the roof of the parliament house in this Central Vista, the Ashoka Pillar, our national symbol, has been installed. This 20-feet-high pillar weighing 9,500 kilos was unveiled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with all the Hindu rites and rituals. Lok Sabha Speaker, Om Birla, was merely marking attendance. If you look at the pictures of this Ashoka Pillar carefully, you will see that the calm, courageous and patient lions of the original Ashoka Pillar appear ravenous, roaring and enraged. It seems as if the four lions that symbolised strength, courage, confidence and pride have deliberately been depicted in agitated and aggressive mode.

Translated excerpts from Rahul Gandhi's speech at the rally in Agar-Malwa, Madhya Pradesh on 2 December 2022 during the Bharat Jodo Yatra



Title **Rahul Gandhi**
Author **Dayashankar Mishra**
Publisher **Self-published**

'A shop of love in the market of hate'

The yatra has now been on the road for 100 days. Through Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. On the way, along with our friends from the press, I see other dear friends. Usually, they happen to be standing atop the BJP offices. I start off, and there they are, standing with their hands tied. And what do I do? I spot them and I wave at them. They don't wave back. They keep standing, their hands tied. They keep watching me. They cannot wave a greeting to Rahul Gandhi. They might want to, but they cannot, they do not have permission. I wave some more. One or two wave back. And then I blow them a flying kiss, just as you did...

Sometimes they look at me and gesture a question towards me, because they cannot talk to me, you see! They cannot come to me, that's forbidden. I don't hate them. I fight against their ideology. But I like them, as I like all living beings.

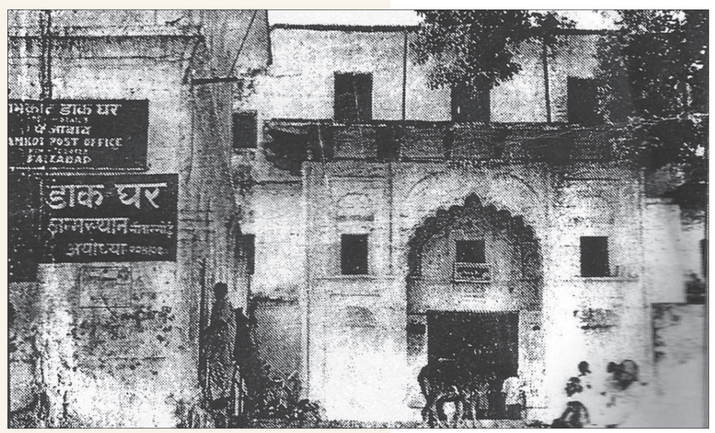
And so, they make that questioning gesture with their hands, meaning, "What are you doing? What *are* you doing?" You're going from Kanyakumari to Srinagar! Their leaders say, "Why is Rahul Gandhi marching?" That was on my mind. I thought about it for a while. What *was* I doing? What am I doing? I am walking. I am meeting people. I am hugging people. What am I doing? And I got my answer.

For their workers, their foot soldiers, for those who wave questioning hands at me and ask, "What are you doing?", my answer is, "I am opening a 'shop of love' in the market of hate."

Hate me. Abuse me. That's what's in your heart. You run a market of hate. I run a shop of love. And I'm not just talking about myself. Don't think that it's only Rahul Gandhi who is saying this. It's all of us, the entire organisation that led our country to freedom.

Who am I? It's people like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Ambedkar*ji*, Azad—all of them, each of them, had opened a 'shop of love' in the market of hate. That's what we do. So, this is my answer to all the BJP people. Join us. Start opening 'shops of love' in the market of hate. You will, eventually, have to. Because our land, our faith, is one of love and not of hate. ■

Translated excerpts from Rahul Gandhi's speech at the rally in Malakheda, Alwar on 19 December 2022, which marked 100 days of the Bharat Jodo Yatra.
Courtesy: **Dayashankar Mishra**, *from his book* Rahul Gandhi: Sampradayikta, Dushprachar, Tanashahi se Aitihasik Sangharsh



Lest We Forget

Religion, as Marx famously said, is 'the opium of the people'. In what looks like a drug-induced frenzy today about the inauguration of the Ram Mandir on 22 January, we are wont to forget that this temple to Lord Ram—revered through the ages as 'maryada purushottam' (a model of dignified, just conduct)—is being raised on the foundations of grave injustice. Not by a marauding conqueror but in an elected democracy

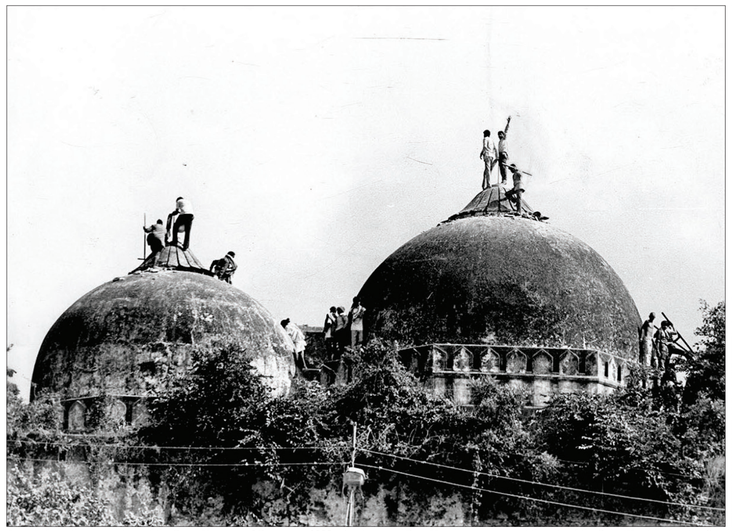




Photo: Getty Images

A scene from the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992; (right) **a grand Ram Mandir coming up at the site of the Babri Masjid, after the Supreme Court decided the case in favour of the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas in 2019**

The truth and the lies of a temple town

...and the erasure of a history of easy togetherness

Vivek Asri

They say Ram was born in Ayodhya; in Ayodhya he played and roamed around as a youth, grew into adulthood, was sent from there into exile in the forest, and then returned to rule there. There are temples in Ayodhya to commemorate every moment of his life. Where he played, there is Gulela Mandir. Where he studied, there is Vashishta Mandir. Where he sat and ruled, there is a mandir. Where he ate his meals, there is Sita Rasoi. Where Bharat stayed, there is a mandir. There's Hanuman Mandir, Kope Bhavan. There's Sumitra Mandir, Dashrath Bhavan. There are many many such temples and all of them are about 400 to 500 years old. That is to say, these temples were built when Hindustan was ruled by the Mughals, by Muslims.

How strange! How did Muslims permit these temples to be built? They are remembered, after all, for destroying temples. Under their very noses an entire town was gradually transformed by temples and they did nothing! What sort of usurpers were these who kept giving land for temples? They must be liars who say that the land where Gulela Mandir stands was given by the Muslim rulers. And certainly the documents in Digambar Akhara must be fake, in which it is written that the Muslim rulers donated 500 bighas of land for the specific purpose of building temples. And it cannot be true that Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah provided the land on which Nirmohi Akhara stands. No, the only truth is Babur and his Babri Masjid!

Now it seems Tulsi too was wrong. Born in 1511 by the Gregorian calendar, he was alive around 1528. People say it was in 1528 that Babur destroyed a Ram temple at the spot where Ram was born, and built the Babri Masjid. Surely, Tulsi would have known about this in his time. Even as Babur was demolishing the birthplace of Ram, Tulsi was writing '*maang ke khaibo, masit mein soibo*' (I eat by begging for alms, I sleep inside a masjid). And then he wrote *Ramcharitmanas*. How could Tulsi feel no sadness at all for the destruction of the Ram Mandir and the building of Babri Masjid upon its ruins? Surely he must have written about it somewhere?

Truth and falsehood have lost all meaning in Ayodhya.

For five generations, Muslims have grown flowers there. These flowers have all been consecrated at the temples, on the deities, on Ram.

Muslims have made *khadaus* (wooden sandals) there since who knows when. Sanyasis, sages, devotees of Ram, have all worn these *khadaus* made by Muslims.

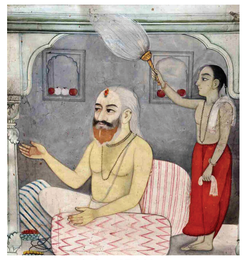
Sundar Bhavan Mandir was entirely run by a Muslim gentleman for four decades. In 1949, it was taken over by Munnu Mian who remained its manager till 23 December 1992. When sometimes, as it happened, devotees were fewer, and Munnu Mian himself clapped the *kartal* rhythmically during prayers, did he wonder, perhaps, what was the truth and what the lie of Ayodhya?

On every brick of a temple built by the Agarwals, is inscribed the figure 786. All the bricks for building this temple were given by Raja Hussain Ali Khan. What is the truth here? Were the Agarwals who built the temple out of their minds? Was Hussain Ali Khan insane that he was donating bricks to build a temple? The hands raised in prayer here cannot be identified as Hindu or Muslim, they all come here to worship. The one figure 786 made this temple belong to all. Is 6 December 1992 the only truth?

After 6 December 1992, the government took over most of the temples of Ayodhya. They were all locked down. *Aarati* ended. People stopped going to them. Did the deities seated behind closed doors curse those who clambered up on a dome with the ambition of laying their hands on Ram?

Truth and falsehood have lost all meaning in Ayodhya.

Ayodhya is the story of the transformation of a town into an 'issue'. Ayodhya is the story of the death of a civilisation. ■



17th century painting of Tulsidas

Translated by Nivedita Menon from a widely circulated social media post in Hindi, earlier attributed to Saroj Mishra

The night of 22 Dec 1949

...when the myth of Ram Janmabhoomi was born

Krishna Jha *and* Dhirendra Jha

The night was almost over. Ayodhya was still numb with sleep. Piercing through the quiet, a young sadhu, drenched in sweat, came scampering from Hanumangarhi, a fortress-like Hindu religious establishment housing over 500 sadhus in Ayodhya. He had been sent to summon Satyendra Das to his guru, Abhiram Das, who seemed to be breathing his last. Those were the early hours of 3 December 1981, and a curtain was coming down over a few forgotten pages of history.

Dharam Das, the other disciple who stayed with Abhiram Das in his one-room tenement, the *asan* in Hanumangarhi, had asked for him so that they could be with their guru in his last moments. The news did not come as a shock. Satyendra Das had been almost awaiting the moment, since he had known for long that his guru was nearing the end of his journey.

He had been at his bedside the whole day and the signs were not encouraging. Even when he had left Abhiram Das's *asan* to get a breather after hours of tending to the terminally ill, he had a premonition that his guru—the man who had led a small band of Hindus to surreptitiously plant the idol of Lord Ram in Babri Masjid on yet another December night three decades ago—might not live long.

After he had come away from the bedside, unwilling but tired to the bone, Satyendra Das was restless and unable to sleep. He dreaded the moment, yet knew that someone would knock on his doors with the news any time, and when it came, he responded fast, wrapped a quilt around himself and ran out along with the young sadhu who had come to fetch him.

[...]

The rituals for the final journey of ascetics are not the same as those for non-ascetic Hindu *grihasthas*, particularly in north India. Sadhus, unlike Hindu *grihasthas*, are rarely cremated. There are two options: either their bodies are smeared with salt and buried sitting in a meditative posture, or they are dropped down a sacred river tied with a rock or sacks full of sand. The fact that sadhus who take vows of complete renunciation are not cremated symbolises their separation from the material world. The claim goes that cremation for sadhus is superfluous since they have already burnt their attachments through ascetic initiation, opting for a life of austerities and renunciation.

In Ayodhya, the normal ascetic practice [is] to immerse the body of a sadhu in the Sarayu—the name given to the river only as [far] as it touches the shores of the town. Before and after Ayodhya, the river is known as the Ghaghara. The reason for this nomenclatural confusion lies in a particular Hindu belief. As mythology has turned Ayodhya into the birthplace of Lord Ram, the river flowing by it has also assumed the mythical name of Sarayu—the stream that is believed to have flowed through the kingdom of Lord Ram.

[...]

Outside the *asan*, the body of Abhiram Das had been placed on a platform made of bamboo in a seated posture, his face frozen into a mask of self-control, his eyes half-closed as if he were deep in meditation. A saffron piece of cloth that had the name of Lord Ram printed all over—a particular kind of cotton or silk material called Ramnami—had been carefully wrapped around the body. A similar cloth covered three sides of the bier made out of split bamboo that rested on the hard bamboo platform holding the corpse. The bamboo structure—euphemistically called *vimaan* to symbolise the mythical transporter of souls to the heavenly realm—had been kept uncovered on one side to enable people to have a last glimpse of the deceased.

Slowly, a group of sadhus lifted the *vimaan* on their shoulders and climbed up the flight of stairs leading to the temple of Lord Hanuman in the centre of Hanumangarhi. At the temple, the group swelled further and as the *vimaan* was taken out of Hanumangarhi, the motley crowd accompanying it chanted, "*Ram janmabhoomi uddharak amar rahen* (Long live the saviour of the birthplace of Ram)."

Three decades back, on the morning of 23 December 1949, the First Information Report (FIR) registered by Ayodhya police following the planting of the idol of Lord Ram in Babri Masjid on the night before had named Abhiram Das as the prime accused. He had also been tried for the crime he and his friends had committed that night, but the case had remained inconclusive. In the course of time, many Hindus in Ayodhya had started calling him *Ram janmabhoomi uddharak*.

The slogan-shouting grew louder as the *vimaan* reached the entrance of Babri Masjid, where it was carefully laid down. The priests of Ram Janmabhoomi, the temple that operated inside Babri Masjid ever since the idol was planted in it, as well as those of nearby Hindu religious establishments, already knew about the demise of the sadhu. They came out and garlanded the corpse and paid their homage to the departed soul.



Title **Ayodhya: The Dark Night**
Author **Krishna Jha** and **Dhirendra Jha**
Publisher **HarperCollins**

By and large, however, Ayodhya remained unaware of Abhiram Das's death. Though some residents looked at this funeral procession with curiosity, for the majority it was the demise of yet another old sadhu. After three decades, the historical facts associated with the developments in 1949 had slipped into obscurity.

The propaganda of the All India Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—that the idol had never been planted and Lord Ram had manifested *himself* at his place of birth—had gained ground among devout Hindus by now, largely delinking Abhiram Das from what he had done in the dark hours of that fateful night. Booklets and pamphlets written by Hindu communalists during the intervening period had flooded the shops of Ayodhya and had gone a long way in reinforcing the myth of 'divine exercise'.

For legal reasons, even those who had a role in that surreptitious act found it convenient to let the myth grow and capture popular imagination. The law, after all, could catch human conspiracies, but a 'divine exercise' was beyond its reach. Yet, to a small group of Hindus in Ayodhya, Abhiram Das continued to remain till his death *Ram janmabhoomi uddharak* or simply Uddharak Baba.

[...]

The indifferent response that Abhiram Das's death evoked among the local populace in 1981 was at odds with the atmosphere the town had witnessed three decades ago, during the years following Independence. At that time, many in Ayodhya, as in several other parts of the country, had seen things differently. The communal frenzy that had accompanied the partition of India had intensely brutalised the atmosphere. No less important was the role played by organisations which saw the immediate aftermath of Partition as an opportunity to derail the secular project of independent India.

The conspirators associated with these organisations and the conspiracies they hatched had already resulted in major national tragedies. One such was the gruesome murder of Mahatma Gandhi on 30 January 1948. The hands that pumped bullets into the chest of the Mahatma were that of Nathuram Godse, but, as was proved later, the assassination was part of a conspiracy hatched by top Hindu Mahasabha leaders, led by V.D. Savarkar, whose prime objectives were to snatch political initiative from the Congress and destabilise all efforts to uphold secularism in India.

The conspiracy to kill Gandhi could not remain hidden for long even though the trial, held immediately after the assassination, had failed to uncover its extent.

The surreptitious occupation of the Babri Masjid was an act planned by almost the same set of people about two years later—on the night of 22 December 1949. It was, in many ways, a reflection of the same brutalised atmosphere that saw Gandhi being murdered. Neither the conspirators nor their underlying objectives were different.

In both instances, the conspirators belonged to the Hindu Mahasabha leadership—some of the prime movers of the planting of the idol had been the prime accused in the Gandhi murder case—and their objective this time too was to wrest the political centrestage from the Congress by provoking large-scale Hindu mobilisation in the name of Lord Ram. ■

Their objective this time too was to wrest the political centrestage from the Congress by provoking large-scale Hindu mobilisation in the name of Lord Ram

The murder of sense and sensibility

The forces of oppression and supremacy have created no less trouble in the recent history of Ayodhya. History stands witness to the fact that whenever such forces acquire unlimited power and prosperity or become drunk on dominance, they try to interchange the definitions of goodwill and ill will. The intention is to project all efforts to spread goodwill as efforts to spread ill will and all acts that spread ill will to be honoured as acts of goodwill.

In the first half of the last decade of the previous century, this city had to go through many such turning points, when it saw such powers turning each into its opposite. Amidst the frenzy spread by them, Gandhians and Sarvodaya workers from different parts of the country came to Ayodhya for the first time with the belief that hatred could never defeat love under any circumstance, and that their prayers had the power to change the mindset of misguided people under the influence of malignant forces, heeding none, intent only on extending the barriers of ill will, relentlessly.

The kar sevaks of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad did not take even 24 hours to maul the confidence of these social activists. They had just begun their three-day fast at Ram ki Pauri, near the spot where Bapu's ashes were immersed in the river Sarayu in 1948, praying for the purification of everyone's intellect, the equality of all religions and the establishment of goodwill. As soon as the police and officials reached the site, instead of cracking down on the attackers and protecting the activists' right to a peaceful fast, they ordered them to bring down their tents and leave at once. The government representatives did not even deign to answer the question as to why, instead of providing protection to the activists' peaceful campaign to spread goodwill, they were taking the side of the violent kar sevaks.

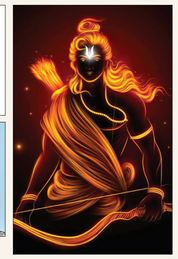


Title **Zero Mile Ayodhya**
Author **Krishna Pratap Singh**
Publisher **Vaam Prakashan**





The angry makeover of Ram and Hanuman—even of the Ashokan lion—also tells a story. Consider how these images contrast with the one at the other end of this centrepread



Senior Gandhian and Sarvodaya leaders Siddharaj Dhaddha and Amarnath Bhai were among those activists. When they made it clear to the officials that they would neither give in to any pressure, nor give up their right to sing the Ramdhun and fast peacefully, they were silenced with the threat that a prohibitory order was in force, under which the police and the administration had the authority to stop them without assigning any reason.

Ninety-year-old Amarnath Bhai, who now lives in a village in Varanasi, says that when they asserted that the prohibitory order was unfair, and that they would resort to civil disobedience, they were all arrested and pushed into buses. When night fell, they were sent, under the watchful eye of guards, to a jungle. There they were told they were free to go wherever they liked. "We refused to get down from the bus. We demanded to be taken to a nearby police station where we could register a case of violation of our rights. At this, the policemen took us to a police station where they enacted the charade of accepting our demands, then dropped us off at the railway station." ■

An extract from Zero Mile Ayodhya *by Krishna Pratap Singh*

Sita may be inseparable from Ram, but she has no place in a patriarchal Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's scheme of things

Why the RSS people don't say 'Jai Siyaram!'

Rahul Gandhi

During the yatra, I met many people. A pandit*ji* came to see me, and raised a very deep question, which he then proceeded to explain. He said, "Rahul*ji*, he who was Lord Ram, was an ascetic. He devoted his entire life to penance." Quite right. Then he said, "Gandhi*ji* used to say 'Hey Ram!' Gandhi*ji*'s slogan was 'Hey Ram!' What does 'Hey Ram' mean?" After a brief silence, he said, "The meaning of 'Hey Ram' is… Lord Ram was not just a person, he was a way of life full of love, brotherhood, respect and penance. He showed the whole world the way to live. And every time Gandhi*ji* said 'Hey Ram!' he meant that the feeling that is Lord Ram is present in our hearts. And that feeling should guide our lives. In other words, to live one's life by doing the kind of penance Lord Ram did, serving society the way he did, spreading love and brotherhood the way he did.

Next, there's 'Jai Siyaram'. What might 'Jai Siyaram' mean? Pandit*ji* told me this as well. I learned so much in course of the yatra. It means simply that Sita and Ram are one. Hence the slogan, 'Jai Siyaram' or 'Jai Sitaram'. Meaning Ram's way of life, the things he did for Sita. And what did Lord Ram do for Sita? Don't you know that? He went and fought for her honour. So, when we say 'Jai Siyaram', we remember Sita and honour her rightful place in society. Correct? So that's 'Jai Siyaram' or 'Jai Sitaram'.



There's a third slogan: 'Jai Shri Ram'. That's where we praise Lord Ram. Pandit*ji* asked me to raise this question in my speech: Why do the BJP people raise the slogan 'Jai Shri Ram' but never say 'Jai Siyaram' or 'Hey Ram'? I liked that a lot, as pandit*ji* had revealed a very deep thing to me. The RSS and BJP people do not live their lives the way Ram lived his life. Ram was not unjust to anyone. He worked to unite society. He was respectful towards everyone. Lord Ram helped farmers, labourers, traders, everyone. Right? His philosophy, his spirit, his way of life—that has not been adopted by the RSS and BJP people.

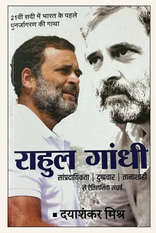
And the second slogan, 'Jai Siyaram', is perhaps the most important slogan of all. But how can they say 'Jai Siyaram' when there is not a single woman in their organisation! It is not a 'Jai Siyaram' organisation because women cannot join it. Sita cannot even think of being part of it. Sita has been excluded. This deep truth was revealed to me by a pandit*ji* from Madhya Pradesh as I travelled down this very road. Now, I want to say to our friends in the RSS, "Use all three slogans—'Jai Shri Ram', 'Jai Siyaram' and 'Hey Ram'—and please don't insult Sita*ji*".

Do you recall the picture of Ram Darbar, depicting *maryada purushottam* Ram, Lakshman, Sita and Hanuman? This picture, seen in every devout Hindu home, showed Ram carrying his bow slung across his shoulder. For their political purpose, the RSS and BJP use another picture of Lord Ram, in which he stands with his bow raised, aiming at the lord of the sea for obstructing his way to Lanka. He pulls the string. This is the only incident in the life of *maryada purushottam* where he gives in to wrath. This is the picture of Lord Ram that the RSS and BJP prefer. Where wrath is the central theme.

Similarly, an artist did some artistry with an image of the courageous and calm Hanuman and infused his image with anger. That picture was made the new identity of Bajrang Bali. Plastered on the backs of vehicles, this Hanuman does not look calm or courageous; instead, he looks wrathful. Here too, wrath is the central theme.

Having done with faith, it was now the turn of a national symbol. Spending thousands of crores of rupees, a new parliament house is being built to replace the old one. The name of this project is the Central Vista Renovation Project. An administrative area running all the way from Raisina Hill to India Gate in our capital Delhi. On the roof of the parliament house in this Central Vista, the Ashoka Pillar, our national symbol, has been installed. This 20-feet-high pillar weighing 9,500 kilos was unveiled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with all the Hindu rites and rituals. Lok Sabha Speaker, Om Birla, was merely marking attendance. If you look at the pictures of this Ashoka Pillar carefully, you will see that the calm, courageous and patient lions of the original Ashoka Pillar appear ravenous, roaring and enraged. It seems as if the four lions that symbolised strength, courage, confidence and pride have deliberately been depicted in agitated and aggressive mode.

Translated excerpts from Rahul Gandhi's speech at the rally in Agar-Malwa, Madhya Pradesh on 2 December 2022 during the Bharat Jodo Yatra



Title **Rahul Gandhi**
Author **Dayashankar Mishra**
Publisher **Self-published**

'A shop of love in the market of hate'

The yatra has now been on the road for 100 days. Through Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. On the way, along with our friends from the press, I see other dear friends. Usually, they happen to be standing atop the BJP offices. I start off, and there they are, standing with their hands tied. And what do I do? I spot them and I wave at them. They don't wave back. They keep standing, their hands tied. They keep watching me. They cannot wave a greeting to Rahul Gandhi. They might want to, but they cannot, they do not have permission. I wave some more. One or two wave back. And then I blow them a flying kiss, just as you did...

Sometimes they look at me and gesture a question towards me, because they cannot talk to me, you see! They cannot come to me, that's forbidden. I don't hate them. I fight against their ideology. But I like them, as I like all living beings.

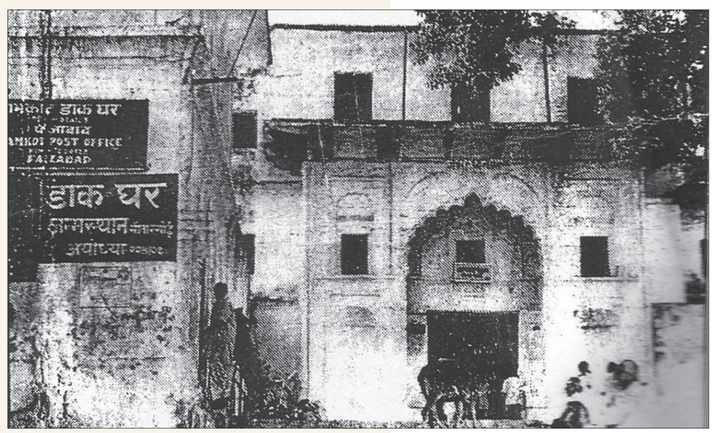
And so, they make that questioning gesture with their hands, meaning, "What are you doing? What *are* you doing?" You're going from Kanyakumari to Srinagar! Their leaders say, "Why is Rahul Gandhi marching?" That was on my mind. I thought about it for a while. What *was* I doing? What am I doing? I am walking. I am meeting people. I am hugging people. What am I doing? And I got my answer.

For their workers, their foot soldiers, for those who wave questioning hands at me and ask, "What are you doing?", my answer is, "I am opening a 'shop of love' in the market of hate."

Hate me. Abuse me. That's what's in your heart. You run a market of hate. I run a shop of love. And I'm not just talking about myself. Don't think that it's only Rahul Gandhi who is saying this. It's all of us, the entire organisation that led our country to freedom.

Who am I? It's people like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, Ambedkar*ji*, Azad—all of them, each of them, had opened a 'shop of love' in the market of hate. That's what we do. So, this is my answer to all the BJP people. Join us. Start opening 'shops of love' in the market of hate. You will, eventually, have to. Because our land, our faith, is one of love and not of hate. ■

Translated excerpts from Rahul Gandhi's speech at the rally in Malakheda, Alwar on 19 December 2022, which marked 100 days of the Bharat Jodo Yatra.
Courtesy: **Dayashankar Mishra**, *from his book* Rahul Gandhi: Sampradayikta, Dushprachar, Tanashahi se Aitihasik Sangharsh



Lest We Forget

Religion, as Marx famously said, is 'the opium of the people'. In what looks like a drug-induced frenzy today about the inauguration of the Ram Mandir on 22 January, we are wont to forget that this temple to Lord Ram—revered through the ages as 'maryada purushottam' (a model of dignified, just conduct)—is being raised on the foundations of grave injustice. Not by a marauding conqueror but in an elected democracy

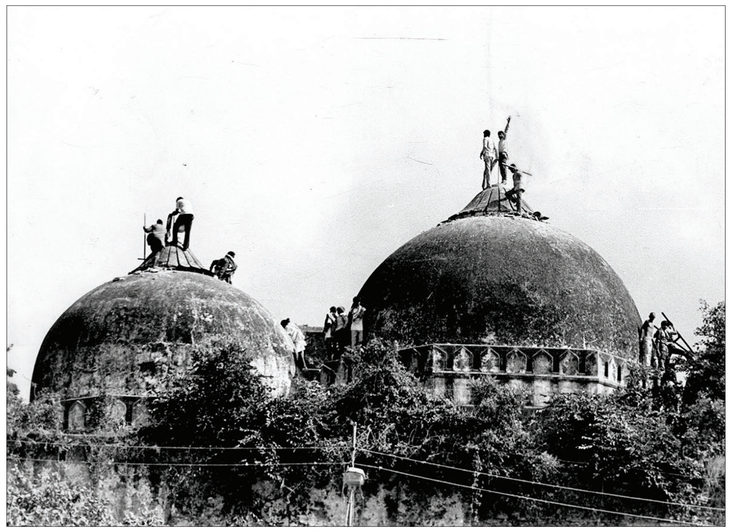




Photo: Getty Images

A scene from the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992; (right) **a grand Ram Mandir coming up at the site of the Babri Masjid, after the Supreme Court decided the case in favour of the Ramjanmabhoomi Nyas in 2019**

The truth and the lies of a temple town

...and the erasure of a history of easy togetherness

Vivek Asri

They say Ram was born in Ayodhya; in Ayodhya he played and roamed around as a youth, grew into adulthood, was sent from there into exile in the forest, and then returned to rule there. There are temples in Ayodhya to commemorate every moment of his life. Where he played, there is Gulela Mandir. Where he studied, there is Vashishta Mandir. Where he sat and ruled, there is a mandir. Where he ate his meals, there is Sita Rasoi. Where Bharat stayed, there is a mandir. There's Hanuman Mandir, Kope Bhavan. There's Sumitra Mandir, Dashrath Bhavan. There are many many such temples and all of them are about 400 to 500 years old. That is to say, these temples were built when Hindustan was ruled by the Mughals, by Muslims.

How strange! How did Muslims permit these temples to be built? They are remembered, after all, for destroying temples. Under their very noses an entire town was gradually transformed by temples and they did nothing! What sort of usurpers were these who kept giving land for temples? They must be liars who say that the land where Gulela Mandir stands was given by the Muslim rulers. And certainly the documents in Digambar Akhara must be fake, in which it is written that the Muslim rulers donated 500 bighas of land for the specific purpose of building temples. And it cannot be true that Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah provided the land on which Nirmohi Akhara stands. No, the only truth is Babur and his Babri Masjid!

Now it seems Tulsi too was wrong. Born in 1511 by the Gregorian calendar, he was alive around 1528. People say it was in 1528 that Babur destroyed a Ram temple at the spot where Ram was born, and built the Babri Masjid. Surely, Tulsi would have known about this in his time. Even as Babur was demolishing the birthplace of Ram, Tulsi was writing '*maang ke khaibo, masit mein soibo*' (I eat by begging for alms, I sleep inside a masjid). And then he wrote *Ramcharitmanas*. How could Tulsi feel no sadness at all for the destruction of the Ram Mandir and the building of Babri Masjid upon its ruins? Surely he must have written about it somewhere?

Truth and falsehood have lost all meaning in Ayodhya.

For five generations, Muslims have grown flowers there. These flowers have all been consecrated at the temples, on the deities, on Ram.

Muslims have made *khadaus* (wooden sandals) there since who knows when. Sanyasis, sages, devotees of Ram, have all worn these *khadaus* made by Muslims.

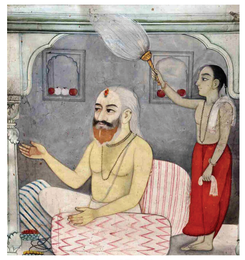
Sundar Bhavan Mandir was entirely run by a Muslim gentleman for four decades. In 1949, it was taken over by Munnu Mian who remained its manager till 23 December 1992. When sometimes, as it happened, devotees were fewer, and Munnu Mian himself clapped the *kartal* rhythmically during prayers, did he wonder, perhaps, what was the truth and what the lie of Ayodhya?

On every brick of a temple built by the Agarwals, is inscribed the figure 786. All the bricks for building this temple were given by Raja Hussain Ali Khan. What is the truth here? Were the Agarwals who built the temple out of their minds? Was Hussain Ali Khan insane that he was donating bricks to build a temple? The hands raised in prayer here cannot be identified as Hindu or Muslim, they all come here to worship. The one figure 786 made this temple belong to all. Is 6 December 1992 the only truth?

After 6 December 1992, the government took over most of the temples of Ayodhya. They were all locked down. *Aarati* ended. People stopped going to them. Did the deities seated behind closed doors curse those who clambered up on a dome with the ambition of laying their hands on Ram?

Truth and falsehood have lost all meaning in Ayodhya.

Ayodhya is the story of the transformation of a town into an 'issue'. Ayodhya is the story of the death of a civilisation. ■



17th century painting of Tulsidas

Translated by Nivedita Menon from a widely circulated social media post in Hindi, earlier attributed to Saroj Mishra

The night of 22 Dec 1949

...when the myth of Ram Janmabhoomi was born

Krishna Jha *and* Dhirendra Jha

The night was almost over. Ayodhya was still numb with sleep. Piercing through the quiet, a young sadhu, drenched in sweat, came scampering from Hanumangarhi, a fortress-like Hindu religious establishment housing over 500 sadhus in Ayodhya. He had been sent to summon Satyendra Das to his guru, Abhiram Das, who seemed to be breathing his last. Those were the early hours of 3 December 1981, and a curtain was coming down over a few forgotten pages of history.

Dharam Das, the other disciple who stayed with Abhiram Das in his one-room tenement, the *asan* in Hanumangarhi, had asked for him so that they could be with their guru in his last moments. The news did not come as a shock. Satyendra Das had been almost awaiting the moment, since he had known for long that his guru was nearing the end of his journey.

He had been at his bedside the whole day and the signs were not encouraging. Even when he had left Abhiram Das's *asan* to get a breather after hours of tending to the terminally ill, he had a premonition that his guru—the man who had led a small band of Hindus to surreptitiously plant the idol of Lord Ram in Babri Masjid on yet another December night three decades ago—might not live long.

After he had come away from the bedside, unwilling but tired to the bone, Satyendra Das was restless and unable to sleep. He dreaded the moment, yet knew that someone would knock on his doors with the news any time, and when it came, he responded fast, wrapped a quilt around himself and ran out along with the young sadhu who had come to fetch him.

[...]

The rituals for the final journey of ascetics are not the same as those for non-ascetic Hindu *grihasthas*, particularly in north India. Sadhus, unlike Hindu *grihasthas*, are rarely cremated. There are two options: either their bodies are smeared with salt and buried sitting in a meditative posture, or they are dropped down a sacred river tied with a rock or sacks full of sand. The fact that sadhus who take vows of complete renunciation are not cremated symbolises their separation from the material world. The claim goes that cremation for sadhus is superfluous since they have already burnt their attachments through ascetic initiation, opting for a life of austerities and renunciation.

In Ayodhya, the normal ascetic practice [is] to immerse the body of a sadhu in the Sarayu—the name given to the river only as [far] as it touches the shores of the town. Before and after Ayodhya, the river is known as the Ghaghara. The reason for this nomenclatural confusion lies in a particular Hindu belief. As mythology has turned Ayodhya into the birthplace of Lord Ram, the river flowing by it has also assumed the mythical name of Sarayu—the stream that is believed to have flowed through the kingdom of Lord Ram.

[...]

Outside the *asan*, the body of Abhiram Das had been placed on a platform made of bamboo in a seated posture, his face frozen into a mask of self-control, his eyes half-closed as if he were deep in meditation. A saffron piece of cloth that had the name of Lord Ram printed all over—a particular kind of cotton or silk material called Ramnami—had been carefully wrapped around the body. A similar cloth covered three sides of the bier made out of split bamboo that rested on the hard bamboo platform holding the corpse. The bamboo structure—euphemistically called *vimaan* to symbolise the mythical transporter of souls to the heavenly realm—had been kept uncovered on one side to enable people to have a last glimpse of the deceased.

Slowly, a group of sadhus lifted the *vimaan* on their shoulders and climbed up the flight of stairs leading to the temple of Lord Hanuman in the centre of Hanumangarhi. At the temple, the group swelled further and as the *vimaan* was taken out of Hanumangarhi, the motley crowd accompanying it chanted, "*Ram janmabhoomi uddharak amar rahen* (Long live the saviour of the birthplace of Ram)."

Three decades back, on the morning of 23 December 1949, the First Information Report (FIR) registered by Ayodhya police following the planting of the idol of Lord Ram in Babri Masjid on the night before had named Abhiram Das as the prime accused. He had also been tried for the crime he and his friends had committed that night, but the case had remained inconclusive. In the course of time, many Hindus in Ayodhya had started calling him *Ram janmabhoomi uddharak*.

The slogan-shouting grew louder as the *vimaan* reached the entrance of Babri Masjid, where it was carefully laid down. The priests of Ram Janmabhoomi, the temple that operated inside Babri Masjid ever since the idol was planted in it, as well as those of nearby Hindu religious establishments, already knew about the demise of the sadhu. They came out and garlanded the corpse and paid their homage to the departed soul.



Title **Ayodhya: The Dark Night**
Author **Krishna Jha** and **Dhirendra Jha**
Publisher **HarperCollins**

By and large, however, Ayodhya remained unaware of Abhiram Das's death. Though some residents looked at this funeral procession with curiosity, for the majority it was the demise of yet another old sadhu. After three decades, the historical facts associated with the developments in 1949 had slipped into obscurity.

The propaganda of the All India Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—that the idol had never been planted and Lord Ram had manifested *himself* at his place of birth—had gained ground among devout Hindus by now, largely delinking Abhiram Das from what he had done in the dark hours of that fateful night. Booklets and pamphlets written by Hindu communalists during the intervening period had flooded the shops of Ayodhya and had gone a long way in reinforcing the myth of 'divine exercise'.

For legal reasons, even those who had a role in that surreptitious act found it convenient to let the myth grow and capture popular imagination. The law, after all, could catch human conspiracies, but a 'divine exercise' was beyond its reach. Yet, to a small group of Hindus in Ayodhya, Abhiram Das continued to remain till his death *Ram janmabhoomi uddharak* or simply Uddharak Baba.

[...]

The indifferent response that Abhiram Das's death evoked among the local populace in 1981 was at odds with the atmosphere the town had witnessed three decades ago, during the years following Independence. At that time, many in Ayodhya, as in several other parts of the country, had seen things differently. The communal frenzy that had accompanied the partition of India had intensely brutalised the atmosphere. No less important was the role played by organisations which saw the immediate aftermath of Partition as an opportunity to derail the secular project of independent India.

The conspirators associated with these organisations and the conspiracies they hatched had already resulted in major national tragedies. One such was the gruesome murder of Mahatma Gandhi on 30 January 1948. The hands that pumped bullets into the chest of the Mahatma were that of Nathuram Godse, but, as was proved later, the assassination was part of a conspiracy hatched by top Hindu Mahasabha leaders, led by V.D. Savarkar, whose prime objectives were to snatch political initiative from the Congress and destabilise all efforts to uphold secularism in India.

The conspiracy to kill Gandhi could not remain hidden for long even though the trial, held immediately after the assassination, had failed to uncover its extent.

The surreptitious occupation of the Babri Masjid was an act planned by almost the same set of people about two years later—on the night of 22 December 1949. It was, in many ways, a reflection of the same brutalised atmosphere that saw Gandhi being murdered. Neither the conspirators nor their underlying objectives were different.

In both instances, the conspirators belonged to the Hindu Mahasabha leadership—some of the prime movers of the planting of the idol had been the prime accused in the Gandhi murder case—and their objective this time too was to wrest the political centrestage from the Congress by provoking large-scale Hindu mobilisation in the name of Lord Ram. ■

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The murder of sense and sensibility

The forces of oppression and supremacy have created no less trouble in the recent history of Ayodhya. History stands witness to the fact that whenever such forces acquire unlimited power and prosperity or become drunk on dominance, they try to interchange the definitions of goodwill and ill will. The intention is to project all efforts to spread goodwill as efforts to spread ill will and all acts that spread ill will to be honoured as acts of goodwill.

In the first half of the last decade of the previous century, this city had to go through many such turning points, when it saw such powers turning each into its opposite. Amidst the frenzy spread by them, Gandhians and Sarvodaya workers from different parts of the country came to Ayodhya for the first time with the belief that hatred could never defeat love under any circumstance, and that their prayers had the power to change the mindset of misguided people under the influence of malignant forces, heeding none, intent only on extending the barriers of ill will, relentlessly.

The kar sevaks of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad did not take even 24 hours to maul the confidence of these social activists. They had just begun their three-day fast at Ram ki Pauri, near the spot where Bapu's ashes were immersed in the river Sarayu in 1948, praying for the purification of everyone's intellect, the equality of all religions and the establishment of goodwill. As soon as the police and officials reached the site, instead of cracking down on the attackers and protecting the activists' right to a peaceful fast, they ordered them to bring down their tents and leave at once. The government representatives did not even deign to answer the question as to why, instead of providing protection to the activists' peaceful campaign to spread goodwill, they were taking the side of the violent kar sevaks.

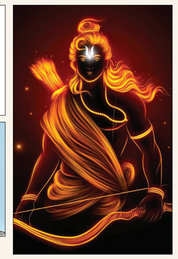


Title **Zero Mile Ayodhya**
Author **Krishna Pratap Singh**
Publisher **Vaam Prakashan**





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An extract from Zero Mile Ayodhya *by Krishna Pratap Singh*

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HERALD VIEW

Bilkis, maybe there's hope still

It was Independence Day in 2022 when the 11 rapists of Bilkis Bano walked free, even as Prime Minister Modi waxed eloquent on '*nari shakti*' in his 15 August address from the ramparts of the Red Fort. Ironic that he should have said: "you must have witnessed the power of *nari shakti* in our courts", when what we'd seen was a mockery of *nari shakti* and a travesty of justice.

What we saw more recently in our Supreme Court—against the tide and a little aberrantly even—was more a testament to that shakti and a sign that maybe not all is lost yet. You may have guessed that we are referring to the judgement delivered by the bench of Justice B.V. Nagarathna and Justice Ujjal Bhuyan, which upheld the petition of Bilkis Bano against the release of her rapists. Few would have expected the court to overturn the ruling, in 2022, of another Supreme Court bench—the ruling that had paved the way for the release of the convicts. Fewer would have expected the court to rap the Gujarat government on the knuckles for being in cahoots with the convicts. It is not without reason that the Supreme Court, in recent years, has come to be known as an 'Executive court'—it almost invariably lands on the side of the State in a dispute with citizens. We make no secret of our appreciation of the judgement delivered by Justices Nagarathna and Bhuyan—even if it does not quite restore our shaky faith in the Judiciary, it keeps a flicker of hope alive.

Justice Bhuyan was elevated to the Supreme Court in July 2023 while Justice Nagarathna is reportedly in line to be the first woman Chief Justice of India in 2027—albeit for a short, one-month period. Even so, the symbolism matters—if it comes to pass, it will certainly count as a more energetic expression of *nari shakti*, besides being a happy first instance of a father and a daughter having both held the CJI's office in their time. Justice Nagarathna is the daughter of E.S. Venkataramaiah, who served as the CJI in 1989. Justice Nagarathna's was the lone dissenting judgement when the Supreme Court (in early 2023) upheld the Demonetisation of 2016. To be clear, she wasn't passing judgement on the merit of the exercise, but making a point about the 'rule of law'. Even in the latest Bilkis Bano judgement on 8 January, she upheld the 'rule of law' and held that procedures could not be changed or used selectively and arbitrarily.

In our non-juridical understanding of the Bilkis Bano case, the 'rule of law' restraints that Justice Nagarathna invokes are only a saving grace—something that brings the rapists back into the fold of law, something that questions their immunity and makes them answerable again for their inhuman conduct. It doesn't seem enough, but it does alleviate the pain, the sense of injustice and helplessness Bilkis must have felt when they walked free and were garlanded like heroes come home. They had raped a pregnant 21-year-old Bilkis 22 times. This, for the benefit of young readers, was 2002, the year made infamous by the Gujarat riots. They killed 14 people, raped her mother and her sisters and smashed the head of her three-year-old child before throwing her body into a ravine. It was left to the Supreme Court to order that the investigation be handed over to the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation) and the trial shifted to Maharashtra from Gujarat, apprehending that a fair trial would not be possible in Gujarat. The accused were sentenced to life imprisonment by a sessions court in Maharashtra. But they were sent to prison in Gujarat. While ostensibly serving life terms, they used their considerable influence and goodwill with the ruling state establishment to spend a 1,000+ days out of jail; one of them spent over 1,500 days out of jail on parole leave and furlough. When the Supreme Court ruling in 2022 allowed the Gujarat government to decide finally on the remission of their life sentence, Bilkis asked: "How can justice for any woman end like this? I trusted the courts, I trusted the system…" But the 'system' had colluded with the rapists.

It's hard to keep your faith in democratic institutions when they all look like a train wreck, but maybe there's hope still, Bilkis.

Guess why slavery persists in India

How do you shed 'gulami ki mansikta' when gulami is so deeply entrenched in our socio-economic fabric?



Sarosh Bana

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi exhorts Indians to shed their "*gulami ki mansikta*" (a slavish mindset), he is referring to our so-called colonial hangover, and evidently not to the entitled Indians, affluent landlords and high-powered moneylenders who enslave, for all intents and purposes, the poor and dispossessed among their own fellow Indians.

Take for example the Katkari tribals who do not even dwell in some forgotten corner of the country but just 84 km out of Mumbai, the financial capital of India, and home to Mukesh Ambani, Asia's richest person, with a net worth of $94.3 billion. The *Mid-Day* newspaper ran a campaign on how the impoverished Katkaris have been ruthlessly exploited over the years by landlords and brick-kiln owners from whom they borrowed money mainly to buy food. For context, the 2023 Global Hunger Index ranked India at #111 out of 125 countries, behind Sri Lanka (60), Nepal (69), Bangladesh (81) and Pakistan (102).

Mid-Day quotes a yet-to-be-released government survey that found as many as 95 per cent of Katkari households saddled with an average debt of Rs 14,000. There are instances of tribals, unable to repay their debts, being forced into life-long bonded labour. The loans in this exploitative system accrue usurious interest and extend across generations, but the lenders, often politically connected, get away.

Debt bondage is one of the most prevalent forms of modern slavery, and it persists in many parts of India. It persists because of crushing poverty and entrenched socio-economic inequities and caste prejudices. Pointing out that government officials avoid visiting these areas to witness first-hand the humiliation these tribal people are subjected to by their captors, *Mid-Day* reports that 'some of these enslaved tribals have been rescued by NGO workers and social activists, not (government) officials'. In the absence of government assistance, they have not, however, been rehabilitated, the report adds.

Scheduled Tribes (STs), alongside the Scheduled Castes (SCs), live on the fringes of society and are known to be among the most deprived social groups in the country, across a range of socio-economic indicators. Some of the most precarious of them, with alarmingly high levels of illiteracy, malnutrition and serious maladies, are identified by the government as 'particularly vulnerable tribal groups'.

The Modi government announced in Parliament in 2016 that its 15-year vision is aimed at "total abolition of bonded labour" where it would identify, release and rehabilitate around 18.4 million bonded labourers by 2030. 'Since its statement in 2016, [the government] has been able to release only 32,873 people from bonded labour, a yearly average of 4,696,' reported *IndiaSpend*, a data analyst on India's social and political economy, in October 2023. 'This would mean that at the same annual rate, by 2030, the government would have achieved only 2 per cent of its 18.4 million target, leaving 18 million Indians in bonded labour.'

Hundreds of fresh cases of bonded labour and trafficking for work are reported every year, though slavery is prohibited by the Constitution and despite the Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act of 1976 that outlaws it. The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989 also provides for special/ exclusive courts to try such offences and for rehabilitation of victims.

According to the 2023 Global Slavery Index (GSI), published by human rights group Walk Free Initiative, India is home to over 11 million slaves, the highest number worldwide. This is particularly disconcerting, as China, ranked second in the index, has a tally of 5.8 million and Russia, ranked #3, is home to 1.9 million slaves. 'Slavery in India manifests in various forms, including forced labour, human trafficking and child exploitation,' mentions GSI. 'Despite the significant strides the nation has made in terms of economic growth and technological advancement, slavery remains deeply entrenched in its societal and economic structures, victimising millions of vulnerable individuals.'

Aggravating the situation is the prevalence of domestic servitude and child labour. Reports indicate that it is not uncommon for servants employed in households across the country to be confined to the homes of their employers, and subjected to excessive work hours, constant abuse and exploitation. The forced recruitment of children, in turn, is among the most appalling forms of modern slavery, where they are driven into strenuous labour, often under hazardous conditions.

The National Crime Records Bureau's 'Crime in India 2022' report underscores the vulnerability of the country's STs and SCs when it notes that 1,347 (13.4%) of the 10,064 atrocities committed against STs in 2022 concerned rapes of tribal women, and an additional 1,022 (10.2%) pertained to 'assault on women with intent to outrage their modesty'. Moreover, 5,274 (9.2%) of the 57,582 cases of outrage against SCs were of criminal intimidation. These records were of registered cases, while it is well known that most such crimes remain unregistered.

In India, the practice of slavery has been facilitated by its hierarchical social and economic structures that have institutionalised exploitation of the weak and largely freed the oppressors of any accountability. It has besides been helped by a lax enforcement of labour laws, limited access to justice for marginalised communities, and a widening divide between the haves and have-nots.

Oxfam India's 'Survival of the Richest' report says the richest 1 per cent in India own more than 40 per cent of the country's total wealth, while the bottom half of the population share just three per cent. Between early 2020—when the Covid-19 pandemic began—and November 2022, billionaires in India have seen their collective wealth surge by 121 per cent, or Rs 3,608 crore a day in real terms. On the other hand, 64 per cent of the Rs 14.8 lakh crore collected under GST in 2021–22 came from the bottom 50 per cent of the population.

The sudden lockdown during the pandemic pushed 75 million people into poverty and annihilated small businesses that thrived on these migrant workers. More than 230 million people (16 per cent of the population), still experience poverty—the highest among all emerging economies, says a recent UNDP report, with the 'poor' being those living on less than $1.8 (Rs 150) a day. Oxfam points out that billionaires in India increased from 102 in 2020 to 166 in 2022, with the combined wealth of the 100 richest in the country touching $660 billion (Rs 54 lakh crore), 'an amount that could fund the entire Union Budget for more than 18 months'. It added: 'Taxing India's ten richest at five per cent can fetch [all the needed] money to bring children back to school.' ■

Letters to the Editor

Will Bilkis Bano's rapists go to jail?

By quashing the remission of 11 convicts in the Bilkis Bano case, the Supreme Court has rekindled hope among those who look toward it for getting justice. However, now the question is whether the men—convicted for gangraping a five-month pregnant Bano and brutally killing her toddler in 2002—will ever go to jail again? Media reports suggest that nine of the 11 convicts are 'missing' with the local police apparently having no clue about their whereabouts. However, a media report quoted neighbours and shopkeepers that all of them were seen till Sunday, a day before the SC verdict came. Now they are 'missing'. This should not be surprising. After all, even while serving life sentences, most of them had been frequently out on long paroles before getting remission in 2022 thanks to the State's benevolence. No court of law can do much when the State is bent on backing the convicts. We have seen this too frequently in recent years in the cases of Kuldeep Singh Sengar, Swami Chinmayanand, Baba Ram Raheem and, most recently, of Brijbhushan Sharan Singh. Now it's for the voters to decide if they want the supporters of criminals to run governments in their name.

Anurag Dey, Kolkata

SBI at it again

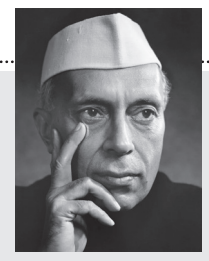
A new research report by the State Bank of India (SBI) takes exception to claims of India's K-shaped economic recovery and stresses that the claims are 'flawed, prejudiced, ill-concocted…'. A K-shaped recovery is a term used to suggest that while the overall economic growth numbers look robust, there is a growing underlying inequality. The SBI's own interpretation of data questions the 'efficacy of using age-old proxies like low two-wheeler sales or fragmented land holdings' and dismisses these as 'pre-destined narratives of India not doing well'. It argues that the muted post-pandemic sales of two-wheelers 'could reflect households reconfiguring their savings towards physical assets (real estate) and a buyers' percentage shifting to used/entry-level cars (substitution effect)'. It goes without saying that the SBI report suffers from some fundamental flaws. If the government has been forced to extend the scheme of subsidised food grain to 800 million Indians, does it not suggest deep economic distress? In a country where a minuscule population pays income tax, how reasonable is it to draw conclusions from tax data about broader inequality? Sadly, the SBI is only parroting the government's narrative.

Puja Awasthi, Mumbai

Delhi model of hospitals: key facilities missing, substandard material

Last week, a man who allegedly got injured in a bid to escape a police van on its way to a police station died after being denied admission at four government hospitals. Just a few days later, a 46-year-old patient died at Lok Nayak hospital after his family was told that there was no facility to conduct the upper gastrointestinal (GI) endoscopy that they were seeking, according to a media report. The patient had been sent to LNJP from GTB hospital in Shahdara, another Delhi-government-run facility, because the GI test was not available there. At the same time, the samples of medical supplies lifted by the vigilance department from different Delhi government hospitals were found to be sub-standard. Although the Delhi health department told media that it had procured the supplies from the central government's GeM portal, the overall conditions in AAP-led Delhi government hospitals are not up to the mark.

Dr. Mehmood Ali, Delhi



NEHRU'S WORD

Nehru consulted Gandhiji on Kashmir at every step

Are Nehru-baiters aware that some of their criticism directed at Nehru applies to Gandhiji as well? For those continuously blaming Nehru for all the ills plaguing Kashmir, it might be salutary to recall that Gandhiji was in Delhi and fully on board when the accession of Kashmir and the subsequent decision to send the Army to protect Kashmir was taken. The much-criticised reference to the United Nations was also made during Gandhiji's life-time. These extracts from two statements of Nehru dated 15 January and 7 September 1948 make it clear that he had consulted Gandhi at every step.

The government's decision in regard to the payment of the cash balances to Pakistan has been taken after the most careful thought and after consultation with Gandhi*ji*. I should like to make it clear that this does not mean any change in our unanimous view about the strength and validity of the government's position as set out in various statements made by distinguished colleagues of mine. Nor do we accept the facts or arguments advanced in the latest statement of the finance minister of Pakistan. We have come to this decision in the hope that this generous gesture, in accord with India's high ideals and Gandhi*ji*'s noble standards, will convince the world of our earnest desire for peace and goodwill.

We earnestly trust also that this will go a long way towards producing a situation which will induce Gandhiji to break his fast. That fast, of course, had nothing to do with this particular matter, and we have thought of it because of our desire to help in every way in easing the present tension. (***Explanatory note***: *India had agreed to allocate Rs 75 crore to Pakistan to help the latter make a start. In the meantime, Pakistan waged an undeclared war against India in Kashmir. Rs 20 crore having already been paid, the remaining Rs 55 crore was withheld, awaiting a settlement on Kashmir. This became another cause of bitterness between the two countries. When Gandhiji began his fast on 13 January and appealed to the nation to remove the ill will, prejudice and passion that was poisoning relations between India and Pakistan, the government of India decided to pay the amount due to Pakistan immediately as a gesture of goodwill and acontribution 'to the nonviolent and noble effort made by Gandhiji'. On 18 January, Gandhi terminated his fast.*)

Six months ago, we witnessed a miracle in Calcutta where ill will changed overnight into goodwill, through the alchemy of a similar fast. The alchemist who worked this change was described by our governor general as the one-man boundary force that succeeded when the boundary force of 50,000 men in West Punjab did not succeed in keeping the peace. This unarmed knight of non-violence is functioning again. May the same alchemy work again in India and elsewhere!

We have sought to remove one major cause of dispute and argument between India and Pakistan and we hope that other problems will also be resolved. But let it be remembered that the people of Kashmir are suffering from a brutal and unprovoked invasion, and we have pledged ourselves to help them gain their freedom. To that pledge, we shall hold and do our utmost to redeem it. We seek their freedom not for any gain to us, but to prevent the ravishing of a fair country and a peaceful people."

–New Delhi, 15 January 1948

***

We have, right from the beginning, taken whatever step we have taken, in the limelight; there has been no hiding. The House has been greatly interested in this matter of Kashmir. The Indian public has taken the greatest interest in it and, rightly, the burden of it has fallen on our government. It has been a heavy burden.

> *I tried to consider the question from the point of view of not drifting from the high principles we had proclaimed in the past*

I shall be frank and tell you why it has been heavy on me and more especially on my government: not because military operations were involved—although that is always a burden—but rather since we wanted to be sure that at no time did we act against the principles we had so long proclaimed.

May I take the House into confidence? In the early stages, towards the end of October and in November, I was so exercised over Kashmir—if anything had happened that, according to me, might have been disastrous for Kashmir, I would have been heartbroken. I was intensely interested, for emotional and personal reasons; I do not want to hide this: I am interested in Kashmir. Nevertheless, I tried to keep down the personal and emotional aspect and consider it from the larger viewpoint of India's good and Kashmir's good. I tried to consider the question from the point of view of not straying or drifting from the high principles which we had proclaimed in the past.

When this question first came up, I sought guidance, as I often did in other matters, from Mahatma*ji*. I went to him repeatedly and put to him my difficulties. The House knows that that apostle of non-violence was not a suitable guide in military matters—and he said so—but he undoubtedly, always, was a guide on moral issues. And so, I put my difficulties and my government's difficulties before him; and though it is not proper for me to drag in his name at this juncture in order to lessen my own responsibility on this issue, I nevertheless mention this matter merely to show how the moral aspect of this question has always troubled me. Especially when I saw in India all manner of things happening [that] brought India's name into disrepute, I was greatly troubled and anxious that we should keep straight.

Now, this has been my attitude, and I had proclaimed it publicly. Apart from rhetoric and vague insinuations, I should like to know from anybody, friend or enemy, from that day in the last week of October, when we took the fateful decision to send our troops by air to Kashmir, till today, what it is we have done in Kashmir which, from any point of view and byany standard, is wrong.

I want an answer to that question. Individuals may have erred here and there; but I say that the government of India and the Indian Army as a whole have done something inevitable; each step that we have taken has been an inevitable step which, if not taken, would have brought disgrace to us. That is how I have ventured to look at this question of Kashmir.

And when I find that on the other side, the whole case—that has been built up on what I venture to say, using strong language—is falsehood and deceit, am I wrong? That is what I ask this House and the country and the world to consider." ■

–A speech in the Constituent Assembly, New Delhi, 7 September 1948

Selected and edited by **MRIDULA MUKHERJEE**, *former professor of history at JNU and former director of Nehru Memorial Museum & Library*

#HOCKEYINVITES

ENROUTETOPARIS

FIH HOCKEY OLYMPIC QUALIFIERS 2024 RANCHI

FREE ENTRY

FIH HOCKEY OLYMPIC QUALIFIERS RANCHI 2024

MARANG GOMKE JAIPAL SINGH ASTROTURF HOCKEY STADIUM, RANCHI

BEGINS TODAY

13 JANUARY 2024

TODAY'S MATCHES

TIME: 12:00

GERMANY

VS

CHILE

TIME: 14:30

JAPAN

VS

CZECH REPUBLIC

TIME: 17:00

NEW ZEALAND

VS

ITALY

TIME: 19:30

INDIA

VS

UNITED STATES

INDIA

WATCH LIVE ON

STADIUM ENTRY
(FOR SPECTATORS)
1000 Hrs Onwards



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Chief Minister, Jharkhand

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A WAY OF LIFE

‘I am woman, I am fast’

A new play provokes a reflection on women athletes who do not conform to received notions of femininity



Sameera Iyengar

There’s a marvellous new book of plays out: *Ottam aur Anya Natak* (Ottam and Other Plays) by Sapan Saran, published by Vaam Prakashan. Each of the three plays in the book has a woman at its centre. While theatre is rife with portrayals of women as victims or heroines, long-suffering, silent and strong, Saran is not interested in that trope—her protagonists simply aspire to live life on their own terms and determinedly nurture that spirit in a world that is always trying to show them their place.

Ottam, the third play in Saran’s book, engages with a topic close to my heart—running. (‘*Ottam*’ is the Tamil word for running.) The protagonist Akai lives to run. One may say that running is her life. In a beautiful little scene, Saran captures the utter joy of running: Akai’s father is trying to teach her to play the *parai*, a percussion instrument that belongs to the Paraiyar caste. Akai, bored with the slowness of the tempo, starts messing around. She tells her father she’d much prefer to run. He challenges her, “Run through the river as I beat my drum.” She takes up the challenge and flies off. Anxious for his daughter at first, he gets caught up in her running and soon his drumbeats follow, triumphantly.

For me, this scene evoked memories of running as a young girl—my body launching into space and picking up pace till it found a rhythm with my breath; the wind rushing through my hair and against my face; the way it felt to hit second wind and keep pumping, pumping, pumping, beyond the barriers of my body. All runners experience this feeling of expansion, where you lose yourself and become much bigger than yourself. I have always felt utterly beautiful and free when I run.

In my life, running coincided with learning Bharatanatyam. My dance teacher did not like my short hair and boyish ways. I just didn’t have the right *adakkam*—a Tamil word for a woman’s ability to contain herself. What happens when society demands *adakkam* from you, but *ottam* claims you? What happens if you are a woman runner with a body that does not fit received ideas of femininity? An androgynous body perhaps, a body too close to perceived masculinity in its strength and expression. In a society taught to think in binaries, only slowly awakening to the fluidities of gender, such a body does not fit. What happens then?



Superathlete Caster Semenya was stripped of her medals for hyperandrogynism

When I was young, I hated standing in airport queues. Twelve years of studying in the US meant an annual roundtrip flight, two security checks each way—24 flights, 48 checks. I’d stand in the women’s line, holding my breath, hoping to get through without incident. Invariably, I was asked to go to the men’s line. I’d stand my ground, but had to say that I was a woman—it was humiliating. My women friends are shocked when they hear this; at most, they agree, I could be androgynous. The bottom line, however, is that I am ‘not feminine enough’.

There are many such ‘not feminine enough’ women in the world of sports, who do not conform to expected presentations of femininity or, despite their skirts and visible breasts, are too muscular, too strong, too fast… just too much. The stories of women runners who’ve had to negotiate this are legion. I think of Flo-Jo (Florence Griffith-Joyner), the fastest woman sprinter ever, a vision in her short skirts and long painted nails and rippling muscles, flying past a field of champion runners. I think of the Williams sisters of tennis. And of how they always picked on Serena—too black, too unapologetic; Venus was more acceptably feminine. Powerful female athletes without *adakkam* disturb, even affront, society. And society finds ways to contain them.

Powerful female athletes without adakkam *disturb, even affront, society. And chauvinistic society finds ways to rein them in*

One of the weapons by which this is done is gender testing. In her research for the play, Saran discovered how the method of gender verification developed over time. From all women being tested to nude parades for physical inspection of women athletes to the current scenario where only those who arouse suspicion are selected for gender testing. It is hardly surprising that ‘suspicious’ athletes tend to be those who are ‘not feminine enough’. Here’s how it works: the athlete’s testosterone levels are checked. If it is ‘too high’ (the norm is invariably the white woman) she is deemed ineligible to compete in women’s races and stripped of her medals. She is thrown out of competitive sport, with no place to go.

At the Mumbai book launch, Saran said, “Dutee Chand had to undergo a gender test, and failed it. Yet she won the case of hyperandrogynism (higher than normal levels of testosterone). She challenged the court and asked: what is the scientific proof that there is a direct relationship between naturally occurring testosterone and performance? They weren’t able to produce any scientific proof about it.”

A 2017 study (Bermon and Garnier), critiqued on grounds of method and bias, found that women with higher levels of testosterone do better in short distance races (up to 800m). But so what? Since these are naturally occurring testosterone levels, why should they disqualify an athlete? A 2014 study of 693 elite male and female athletes (Healy et al.) had already found that ‘16.5 per cent of men had low testosterone levels, whereas 13.7 per cent of women had high levels with complete overlap between the sexes.’

I have experienced the joy and freedom of running, but I also enjoy the privileges of caste, class, education, access and an encouraging family. What does competing at the highest level mean to people who are not cushioned in social privilege? An *Indian Express* spotlight (published on 1 January 2024) on the 256 medal winners of the September–October 2023 Asian Games sheds some light. Women contributed 43 per cent of the medals India won. A third of all medallists (men and women) came from rural areas. Homes headed by daily wagers accounted for 40 of 256 medals, i.e. 15 per cent; 244 athletes anonymously shared their household income—50 (or 20 per cent) came from families that earned less than Rs 50,000 a year when they began their chosen sport. Only 33 athletes had parents with a stable income.

In media interviews, athletes talk about their struggle, the support of their families, and a change in their social status when they are selected, when they win medals and acclaim. Successful sportspersons can dream of government jobs and financial security. Imagine, then, what it means to be debarred from competition because you are ‘not feminine enough’. Imagine the layers of injustice when a Santhi Soundarajan or a Dutee Chand are disqualified from competitive running on the basis of gender testing. Some, like Dutee, are able to fight back, but society yields nothing easily.

Saran understands that the runner’s feeling of freedom comes from an inner spring—society can neither give it nor take it away. As long as the runner keeps running, her spirit cannot be broken.

Ottam takes this metaphor and runs with it. Through the story of Akai, the play revels in women’s freedom and desire, confronts the violent machinations of patriarchal society, and rests power in the spirit of the individual woman.

When Caster Semenya, the South African middle-distance runner, winner of two Olympic gold medals and three World Championships, was gender-tested, stripped of her honours and disqualified from running, she responded with: “I am woman, I am fast.” *Ottam* celebrates this woman—fast, magnificent, and free. ■

SAMEERA IYENGAR *is a Mumbai-based theatre person and creative producer*

#HOCKEYINVITES
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FIH
HOCKEY INDIA
FREE ENTRY
Marang Gomke Jaipal Singh Astroturf Hockey Stadium, Ranchi

POOL-A Germany | Japan | Chile | Czech Republic
POOL-B India | New Zealand | United States | Italy

13TH JANUARY

MATCH#	TIME	MATCH
1	12:00	Germany vs Chile
2	14:30	Japan vs C.Republic
3	17:00	N. Zealand vs Italy
4	19:30	India vs USA

14TH JANUARY

MATCH#	TIME	MATCH
5	12:00	Chile vs C.Republic
6	14:30	Japan vs Germany
7	17:00	USA vs Italy
8	19:30	N. Zealand vs India

16TH JANUARY

MATCH#	TIME	MATCH
9	12:00	Germany vs C.Republic
10	14:30	Chile vs Japan
11	17:00	USA vs N. Zealand
12	19:30	India vs Italy

18TH JANUARY

M#	TIME	POOL	MATCH
13	10:30	5/8[1]	3rd Pool A vs 4th Pool B
14	13:30	5/8[1]	3rd Pool B vs 4th Pool A
15	16:30	SF[1]	1st Pool A vs 2nd Pool B
16	19:30	SF[1]	1st Pool B vs 2nd Pool A

19TH JANUARY

M#	TIME	POOL	MATCH
17	10:30	7/8	L. Match 13 vs L. Match 14
18	13:30	5/6	W. Match 13 vs W. Match 14
19	16:30	3/4	L. Match 15 vs L. Match 16
20	19:30	Final	W. Match 15 vs W. Match 16



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Chief Minister, Jharkhand

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