NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY

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

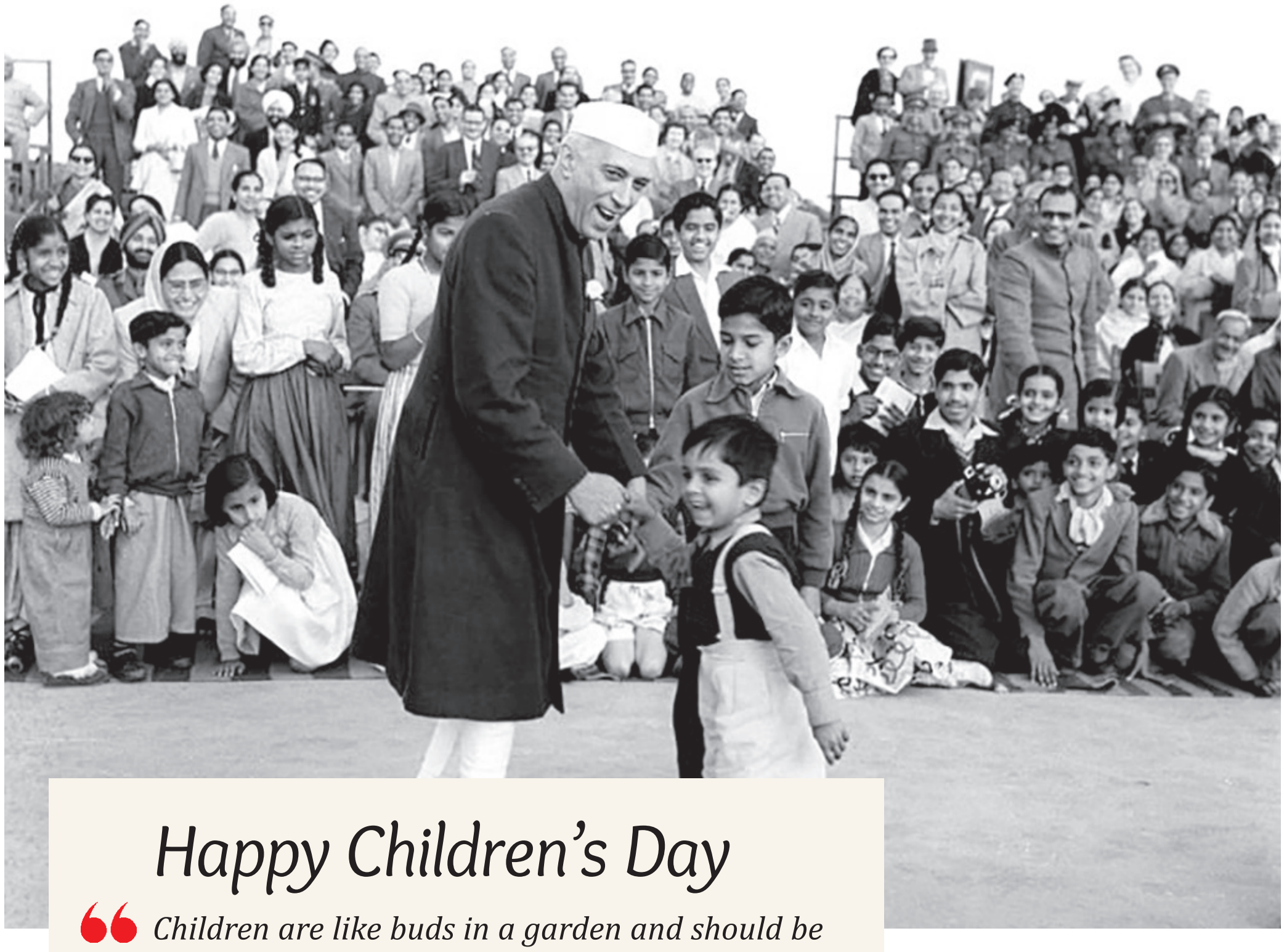
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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER





Happy Children's Day

Children are like buds in a garden and should be carefully and lovingly nurtured, as they are the future of the nation and the citizens of tomorrow.

Remembering

PANDIT JAWAHAR LAL NEHRU JI

On the 137th Birth Anniversary of India's first
Prime Minister, Architect of modern India

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STATES 360°  ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Caught between consent and diplomacy

Sourabh Sen

Along the rushing green waters of the Siang river in the eastern Himalaya, a decades-long struggle between indigenous rights and State-led megastructure ambition seems to have reached a point of no return. The flashpoint of this crisis is the proposed 11,200-MW Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP)—a mega dam projected by the government of India as both strategic hydel powerhub and downstream hydrologic buffer against upstream China's infrastructure on the Yarlung Tsangpo.

Yet, on the ground across the Abor and Adi valleys of Arunachal Pradesh, the project is regarded more as an existential threat to ancestral homelands than as a national security asset. Leading the charge against it is indigenous rights activist 'Abor Man' Katon Mayong, whose recent public statements have drawn clear red lines and reignited local resistance.

Tensions gathered momentum following protest rallies, bandhs and high-profile demonstrations. On 31 October, protesters gheraoed Arunachal Bhawan in New Delhi to demand the immediate release of detained anti-dam activists, a complete rollback of security forces deployed across the Siang valley and a total halt to the survey work for pre-feasibility reports (PFR).

Following his detention and subsequent release, Mayong convened a press conference where he delivered a forceful message, rejecting the state government's offer for further negotiations. "Discussion time is over," Mayong declared, signalling the complete collapse of formal talks. "We have been shouting in the government's ear for 47 years. From our grandfather's generation to ours, we have been clear: there will be no Siang Dam. Either you have to exterminate the entire Adi community or it will not be built."

Mayong's stark ultimatum underscores deep-seated anxieties among the Adi community—a scheduled tribe whose cultural identity, indigenous governance structures and historical territory are tied to the mainstream Siang river. Mayong's pushback against the SUMP mega dam weaves together local self-determination, indigenous rights, environmental advocacy and administrative critique.

Mayong reiterated that the anti-dam movement is not anti-development. He advocated building micro or small-scale hydropower dams along the river's smaller tributaries rather than constructing a massive concrete structure across the main flow of Siang. Blocking the main channel, local activists argue, will permanently alter aquatic ecosystems, submerge sacred tribal and Buddhist sites, and destroy the river ecosystem that has sustained local agriculture for generations.

A key criticism raised by Mayong has to do with the militarisation of ancestral lands. The state government's deployment of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) and security personnel across the Abor, Adi and Siang valleys is viewed by the tribes as an attempt to intimidate local populations into accepting survey teams. Mayong has called on the Pema Khandu-led state administration to put an end to police harassment, withdrawal of security forces and release of all peaceful protesters jailed during the agitations—a demand the state government has since acceded to.

In his public addresses, Mayong detailed attempts by state officials to bypass collective indigenous consent by exploiting localised disputes. He alleged that administrative authorities attempted to pit neighbouring Adi villages and subclans against one another—Komkar against Geku, Simo against Karko—in a bid to secure consent signatures. Mayong emphasised that true community consent requires absolute consensus across all 60 affected villages, asserting that over 99 per cent residents stand firmly against the project.

The civil society resistance against the Siang project is being met with political obduracy. Tapir Gao, the BJP MP from Arunachal East constituency, is in favour of the project. During a recent public meeting in Tezu (Lohit district), Gao asserted that the Siang dam "will be built, come what may." While state and central authorities justify SUMP as a buffer against China's upstream hydro-engineering, Mayong directly challenges this premise.

He points out that the government had shifted the narrative on SUMP—from development (flood control and power generation) to national security (buffer against water bombing by the Chinese). Indian policymakers and diplomats, he added, should focus on diplomatic engagement with Beijing to negotiate formal water-sharing treaties rather than placing the burden of border security onto vulnerable indigenous border communities.



Photo: Getty Images

Members of the Adi tribe at a community meeting against the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project

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Across the border in Tibet on the lower Yarlung Tsangpo—Arunachal's Siang and Assam's Brahmaputra—China commenced construction of the Medog hydropower station on 19 July 2025. Designed to be the world's largest hydropower installation, it has a planned capacity of 60 gigawatts and an annual power generation of roughly 300 terawatt-hours (TWh)—triple the capacity of the Three Gorges Dam. The project, estimated to cost around $150 billion, will achieve full commercial operations by 2033. The power generated will be transmitted via ultra-high-voltage lines to eastern China's industrial provinces and data centres.

99% of people across all 60 affected villages are against the Siang dam

Instead of a single massive dam, the Medog project will have five cascading hydropower stations and diversion tunnels bored through the Namcha Barwa mountain at Yarlung Tsangpo's Great Bend, bypassing a 2,000m drop over a short distance. While China officially maintains that the project will be designed as a 'run-of-the-river' style scheme—which, on paper, returns the water to the river after passing it through turbines rather than holding it back permanently—experts, regional governments and downstream communities remain deeply concerned about potential impacts on water availability.

The National Hydroelectric Power Corporation's SUMP will involve constructing a massive 300m high concrete gravity dam. The reservoir behind this dam will store 9.2 billion cubic metre of water, designed to act as a hydrological buffer during periods of excessive flow and controlled release during lean periods.

There is considerable debate among river experts, hydrologists and policymakers on whether the Medog project will pose a water-bomb threat or reduce the downstream flow. At the centre of this debate is the lack of reliable data on the Siang basin's hydrology. Three Chinese stations (Nugesha, Nuxia and Yangcun) that currently share rainfall data with India only give a partial picture as the Himalayan precipitation profile changes significantly around the Medog site.

"One can't rule out the possibility of flash floods or any sudden rush of water from upstream Yarlung Tsangpo. But the argument that the Brahmaputra will dry up due to the Medog project is not true. This is because most of the Brahmaputra is fed by rivers originating in India—downstream of Siang," river expert and scholar Nilanjan Ghosh told *National Herald*.

Ghosh explained that neither India nor China are signatories to the UN Watercourses Convention on non-navigational water use; other South Asian countries are. When the treaty was presented before the UN in 1997, China voted against it and India abstained. Neither are they signatories to regional treaties like the 1992 UNECE Water Convention—officially the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes—which originally covered Europe before opening up globally in 2016. Instead, India and China preferred to address such issues within a bilateral framework.

That is what Mayong alluded to when he urged Indian policymakers and diplomats to focus on 'higher' diplomatic engagement with Beijing. India is set to engage with Bangladesh over the Ganga Water-sharing treaty (which expires this December). The Siang may well open up a diplomatic Pandora's box, even as indigenous communities resist potential ecological erasure and physical displacement. ■

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

STATES 360°  PUNJAB

The Panthic voter: from Nankana Sahib to Instagram

Harjeshwar Pal Singh

A year ago this month, a little-known independent called Mandeep Singh polled nearly 20,000 votes in the Tarn Taran assembly bypoll. He neither won nor came second, but he pushed the Congress to fourth place in the heart of Majha. What he had was the backing of a jailed MP, Amritpal Singh, and the *ashirwad* of those written off by Punjab's pundits at least three times in thirty years: the Panthic voter.

Panth means 'the path'. In Sikh tradition, it came to mean the collective body of the Guru's followers. After Guru Gobind Singh, authority passed to the Guru Granth and the Guru Panth, so the community itself became sovereign. With *miri-piri*, the twin swords of spiritual and temporal power, religion and politics were never kept in separate compartments. The early Akalis said it plainly: they are one and the same.

The Panthic voter, then, is a Sikh who votes mainly through the lens of the Panth: its shrines, its institutions like the Akal Takht and the SGPC, its honour and its grievances. He is not necessarily a Khalistani or even an *amritdhari*; many are clean-shaven youngsters. What sets him apart is that the *qaum* comes before the party.

Panthic politics was born in the gurdwara reform movement of 1920-25, when the Sikhs fought to take historic shrines back from corrupt, loyalist *mahants*. The SGPC was formed in November 1920 and the Shiromani Akali Dal on 14 December the same year. About 130 Sikhs were killed at Nankana Sahib in 1921.

When the *Chabbian da Morcha* (the struggle for the keys of the Golden Temple) succeeded,



Panthic outreach? Sukhbir Singh Badal at a rally in Fatehgarh Sahib

Mahatama Gandhi wired Baba Kharak Singh: 'First decisive battle for India's freedom won'. The Gurdwaras Act of 1925 handed the shrines to an elected SGPC.

For seven decades, the Panthic voter was the backbone of regional Akali politics. He courted arrest during the Punjabi Suba movement (1966), the Emergency (1975), and the Dharam Yudh Morcha (1982). After Operation Bluestar and 1984, he turned to the radicals: in 1989, a jailed Simranjit Singh Mann won Tarn Taran by more than four lakh votes. Then came the retreat.

The radicals boycotted the 1992 polls, and less than a quarter of the electorate turned out to vote. In 1996, at Moga, Parkash Singh Badal moved the Akali Dal from 'Panth' to 'Punjab, Punjabi, Punjabiyat'.

In 1997, he sealed an alliance with the BJP. For two decades, the Panthic voter was a captive vote bank, taken for granted by a party that ran on the family, the *halqa* (constituency) system and the language of development.

Between 2015 and 2024, those ties foundered. The *beadbi* at Bargari, the firing at Behbal Kalan and pardoning the Dera chief broke the Badals' moral contract with the Panth. Agrarian distress, drugs, joblessness and the ensuing rush to Canada produced a restless generation, while social media provided a platform beyond the reach of any Badal.

The Kisan Andolan gave it confidence and, in Deep Sidhu, a new icon. When the AAP's promise of *badlav* faded, the neo-Panthics found their own vehicles: Mann in Sangrur (2022), Amritpal Singh and Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa (2024). Amritpal won the Khadoor Sahib Lok Sabha seat from Dibrugarh jail by nearly two lakh votes.

*

Yet the Panthic space today is more fractured than at any time since 1920. In December 2024, the Akal Takht declared Sukhbir Badal *tankhaiya*. In January 2025, Amritpal's Akali Dal (Waris Punjab De) was launched at the Maghi Mela in Muktsar. In August 2025, the rebels elected former Jathedar Giani Harpreet Singh to head the now floundering SAD (Punar Surjit), the first Dalit to lead any Akali faction. With Mann's SAD (Amritsar) still in the field, that makes four Akali Dals for one Panth. At Tarn Taran, the Badal Akali Dal and the Panthic candidate together polled about 50,000 votes, comfortably more than the AAP winner. Because they were divided, both lost.

So who is the Panthic voter of today? Recent field surveys in rural Malwa provide a rare close-up. Roughly one voter in six shows some Panthic attachment; about one in ten is committed to Amritpal or Mann.

Nearly two-thirds of committed Panthic voters are Jatt Sikhs—with a cross-caste fringe—one Jatt Sikh in four leans Panthic. Ramgarhias come next, with Dalit Sikhs comprising about a fifth of the core. Hindus are almost entirely absent, and that is the movement's glass ceiling.

The Panthic voter is young, male and, surprisingly, better educated than most. Among young Jatt Sikh men, nearly one in three is a committed Panthic voter. Support increases with education: graduates are more than twice as likely to vote Panthic as those who never went beyond middle school, the reverse of AAP's welfare base. Students are the most Panthic group; labourers the least. Today's Panthic voter is a 12th-pass, smartphone-carrying Jatt Sikh from a farming family; angry about drugs and jobs, scornful of handouts, suspicious of Delhi, devoted to a jailed leader, and ready to 'give the new party one chance'.

Most panthic voters name no national leader; Modi barely registers

Alongside the sons stand their mothers. Many middle-aged Jatt Sikh women back Amritpal for one reason: "*naujawani bachaunda*" (he saves our youth). Theirs is a vote against the *chitta* in their sons' veins, not a vote for Khalistan.

Drugs unite Punjab's voters. What distinguishes the Panthic voter is a broader sense of decay and injustice. He talks far more often about unemployment, corruption, *beadbi* and the release of the *Bandi Singhs*. It is Panth plus Punjab, with Sikh identity serving as the language of social anxiety.

He is proud, not poor. While many rural voters still give Bhagwant Mann's government a thumbs-up, the Panthic voter gives it a firm thumbs-down. Barely one in five credits the women's cash transfer. One respondent asked: "*Nang thodi aa lok, 1,500 naal rajj jange*? (Are these people beggars, to be satisfied with Rs 1,500?)"

This politics is about *anakh* (self-respect) and resentment of Delhi's *dakhal-andazi* (interference) as much as it is about scripture.

The Panthic voter's loyalty is not set in stone. Only about two in five of those who voted for Amritpal or Sarabjeet in 2024 plan to stay with the new party. At the same time, about a quarter of today's committed Panthic voters are former AAP voters—one in seven did not vote in 2024. The Panthic vote is less a fortress than a busy railway platform, with passengers getting on and off at every station.

It is a one-leader movement with no use for national leaders. Unlike the Badal loyalist, who votes for the party symbol, the Panthic voter weighs the candidate first.

More than three-quarters of the core name Amritpal as their favourite, while Mann, the old standard-bearer, has all but vanished. Nearly nine in ten name no national leader at all; Modi barely registers.

The reel has replaced the village *sath*. Four in five get their political news from Facebook, Instagram or YouTube. Support grows *pind* by *pind* (village by village). In some villages, two out of three voters are Panthic. Once the gurdwara committee or the youth club turns, the entire *pind* often follows.

Events also matter. After the killing of anti-drug activist Parvinder Jhota in October, many sympathisers in the area hardened into committed Panthic voters almost overnight.

In the rural Malwa belt, the Panthic and Badal votes together make up between one-third to two-fifths of the electorate. That is enough to decide who rules Punjab, but only if it votes as one.

History is clear: the Panth has been most powerful when it marched as one *jatha* (band), and most irrelevant when its leaders fought over the *siropa* (robe of honour). ■

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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

CAMPUS JANTAR MANTARS

Students are on the warpath and not just for their own rights

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WORLD

ISRAEL, BEFORE AND AFTER THE POLLS

Eisenkot or Netanyahu, the script remains the same

▸P6



MEMOIR

A STORY OF BELONGING

An extract from Sonia Gandhi's newly released autobiography

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CENSUS 2027

Another fraudulent register of citizens in the making?

Herjinder

Census 2027 asks 148 crore people to trust the State with their information. That trust gets shaky when the government is collecting unprecedented amounts of personal data through a proprietary platform that has a history of being hacked in a cyberespionage case.

Traditionally, a Census gathers demographic and housing information to frame public policy. Census 2027 goes further, seeking personal identifiers that raise serious questions about privacy, surveillance and the State's interest in citizens' data.

A notification of 14 August 2026, under Section 8(1) of the Census Act, 1948, lists 40 subjects for the Household Schedule, against 29 questions in 2011. Most of these—questions of age, religion, language, education, occupation, migration, for instance—are conventional, but Census 2027 will gather additional details that mark an alarming departure from the old demographic enumeration.

Items 35 to 40 seek the number of bank accounts, mobile number, Aadhaar number, EPIC (Voter ID) number and passport number and driving licence number for those who have it. As *Down To Earth* pointed out, no Indian Census between 1872 and 2011 sought document numbers. Item 34 even asks where the person received the COVID-19 vaccine. Why?

These personal identifiers could link Census records directly to government and commercial databases, including Aadhaar, voter rolls, passport records, mobile connections and banking systems. The result could be a detailed personal profile rather than an anonymous demographic snapshot.

Economist Dipa Sinha says this goes against the very logic of the Census: "The idea of a Census is to count, not identify."

The question, then, is: what statistical purpose does recording these document numbers, which link them to individuals, serve? Both the Census Act, 1948, and the United Nations' fundamental principles for censuses stress that individual population data must stay confidential. Section 15 of the Act protects census records from inspection and makes them inadmissible as evidence. If the data is meant to be anonymous, what purpose does the collection of these numbers serve?

The Household Schedule also seeks the names of parents, their religion and place of birth, down to the village level. Married persons are asked about their spouses. Digital rights groups argue that such intergenerational information goes beyond counting the present population, allowing the State to build family profiles and track individuals across generations.

The issue is not merely whether the government is legally entitled to ask for such information. It is whether citizens understand how the information that is being collected will be used, who will have access, how long it will be retained and whether it can later be linked to another government database. Against the background of earlier debates over citizenship and the NPR-NRC framework, the drive to gather granular personal information and the absence of clearly articulated boundaries on the use of this data is a big concern.

How will the personal data that is being collected be used and who will have access?



Photo: Getty Images

Profiling citizens? The design of Census 2027 will make it possible to identify and potentially target citizens

It is not even an option to withhold information, since participation is compulsory. When citizens must disclose personal, financial and ancestral information under threat of penal action, consent becomes notional. The Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) argues that the compulsion to disclose information places a heightened obligation on the State to minimise the nodes of data it seeks.

In effect, the ongoing exercise appears designed to de-anonymise Census data. K. Narayanan Unni, former deputy registrar general of India, says: "It appears the government is planning to use the data collected to update the National Population Register prepared in 2011, or prepare it afresh."

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The concerns around the collection of personal data acquire a bleeding edge with the government's decision to procure ArcGIS, a geographical information system from US company Esri, for mapping, creating enumeration blocks and processing demographic data. The registrar general's office has bought 96 licences for Rs 14.39 crore.

Researchers at US cybersecurity firm ReliaQuest documented a case in which a Chinese state-linked group, assessed with moderate confidence to be Flax Typhoon, compromised an ArcGIS server belonging to an unnamed organisation and kept covert access for over a year. Esri blames an exposed management interface without multifactor authentication and an overprivileged account—a compromised deployment, not necessarily compromised software. That distinction offers little reassurance.

Cyberlaw expert Pawan Duggal is blunt: "Using such software is against the sovereignty of the country." He argues that due diligence and a proper audit are essential before such applications are deployed, and if India cannot avoid foreign software, it must insist on access to the complete source code.

Then there is the US CLOUD [Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data] Act, which requires US-based providers to disclose data in their control to American authorities, even when stored overseas, subject to legal processes.

Apar Gupta of IFF underlines the stakes: "The software is recording the geospatial details of every resident of India. Imagine if this data is in the control of somebody other than the government of India. What does it mean?"

The procurement itself raises questions. According to IFF, which investigated the purchase, the licences were acquired through a 'proprietary article certificate', which permits buying without competitive tender when a product is deemed necessary. The contract, awarded on 10 June 2026, went to Corporate Infotech Private Limited for Rs 14,38,74,322. All four bidders offered the same Esri India product.

IFF says the government relied on a 2019 file to continue with the same platform and asks whether any fresh technical assessment preceded the 2026 purchase. India already has ISRO's Bhuvan, and open-source GIS offers other options. The government must disclose whether alternatives were evaluated and why they were rejected. Also, buying through an Indian reseller does not establish tech sovereignty.

IFF's RTI applications and letters to the registrar general and Esri India had not been answered when its report was published.

A Census is strictly mandated to maintain the anonymity of citizen data. This exercise, earlier conducted on paper and reliant on people, is now being done digitally, featuring interconnected software, devices and networks, each a potential point of vulnerability. Independent security audits and clear accountability is the least the government owes 148 crore Indians who must participate in the exercise and have no legal protection if they don't wish to disclose personal information. ■

What the ECI's backdoor changes don't fix

Nandlal Sharma

Street protests are giving the Election Commission of India (ECI) sleepless nights. Facing mounting allegations of 'vote chori', the Commission is scrambling to change its rules. Its latest U-turn concerns voters in Delhi, Maharashtra, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Telangana and Nagaland who were classified as ASDD (Absent, Shifted, Dead or Duplicate) during the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) and struck off electoral rolls.

They are now being asked to fill in fresh enumeration forms and submit in writing their reasons for failing to do so the first time. Meanwhile, after the public outcry over the SIR became impossible to ignore, the Commission is conducting a Special Summary Revision (SSR) in 23 states and Union Territories. A special *summary* revision right after a special *intensive* revision! Even if some names are restored after this SSR, who will vouch for the integrity of the process and the new rolls? Surely not the same ECI?

Former deputy election commissioner Noor Mohammad says, "The Commission is indirectly finding new ways to scrutinise a voter's eligibility. Nobody has the authority to demand a statement from a voter and, in the process, change the conditions for being recognised as a voter."

Under the Representation of the People Act, 1950, the eligibility norms are simple: a person must be an Indian citizen and at least 18 years old. Yet the ECI is demanding additional explanations from voters deleted by none other than the ECI. On what legal basis?



Photo: Getty Images

Citizens in Kolkata rally around a demand to scrap the SIR

The Commission's retreat began only after citizens, civil society organisations and the Opposition started clamouring unitedly for the resignation of CEC Gyanesh Kumar, for the scrapping of the SIR, and a reversal of the changes to the 2023 law governing the appointment of ECs (which also grants them lifelong immunity from prosecution). As the public turned up the heat on the ECI's opaque and arbitrary functioning, it hurriedly started chopping and changing its own (arbitrary) rules.

Yet Gyanesh Kumar stays firmly ensconced and there is no sign yet that the judiciary will revisit its clean chit to the SIR. Reassuringly, though, the agitations in the national capital and beyond have demonstrated beyond doubt that citizens are now alive to the shenanigans of the ECI under Gyanesh Kumar.

There are several serious charges against the Commission:

Gyanesh Kumar is still around and there is no sign yet that the judiciary will revisit its clean chit to the SIR

wrongfully deleting over 13 crore names from the electoral rolls, tinkering with Form 6 without parliamentary approval, using the ECINet platform to centrally control the electoral rolls and conspiring to manipulate elections held in the aftermath of the SIR.

The Form 6 controversy is particularly revealing. Prescribed under the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, Form 6 is a statutory document that only the central government can formally amend. Yet during the SIR, the Commission added an additional declaration to its online version, asking voters for details linking them or their parents and grandparents to earlier SIR electoral rolls. As revealed in the *Indian Express* report (23 September 2026), two election commissioners, Vivek Joshi and S.S. Sandhu objected. Following sustained criticism, the ECI finally removed this declaration from the online Form 6 on 21 October.

Worse, existing voters whose names had disappeared from draft rolls were being forced to submit Form 6 to seek re-enrolment. Form 6 requires applicants to declare that they are seeking registration for the first time and are not registered in another constituency. Voters rightly feared that signing it would amount to a false declaration, inviting prosecution under Section 31 of the Representation of the People Act.

On 3 November, the ECI declared that previously registered voters excluded from the SIR draft rolls could submit Form 6 without facing action. Which law or code entitles the ECI to now issue this guarantee after first illegally modifying the form itself?

The issue reached the Supreme Court during hearings on a petition filed by transparency activists Anjali Bhardwaj and Amrita Johri. The court observed that enumeration forms or Form 8 should be used to restore existing voters' names, rather than forcing them to make false declarations.

In a statement on 7 November 2026, the Voter Adhikar Manch asked why the latest corrective measure applied to only seven states. What about states where the SIR is already complete? West Bengal has even held elections using rolls prepared through this exercise. The organisation demanded that original EPIC numbers be restored and 'left out' voters reinstated in every state where the SIR was conducted.

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Students are on the warpath

…and not only for student rights. Nandlal Sharma reports on the Jantar Mantar effect

The Modi government may have succeeded in turning Jantar Mantar into a fortress, but they couldn't stop the energy sparked by the student-youth movement of July 2026 from spreading across the country, turning varsity campuses into powerful sites of protest.

At Delhi's Ambedkar University (Kashmere Gate), students staged a 17-day hunger strike demanding basic facilities. We pay lakhs in annual fees, they said, but: why are we not allowed to enter and exit through the university's main gate? Why are roads leading to the campus unsafe for women students? Why are there no teachers? Why is there no playground on campus? Why is the park reserved exclusively for the vice-chancellor? Why are PhD students required to mark biometric attendance? Why must students obtain written permission four days in advance to hold any meeting or protest?

The administration responded by turning the campus into a prison. A three-tier security cordon was set up to confine students. Security guards were forbidden to bring in food, students could not order meals, even ambulances were denied entry.

On 13 October, security personnel forcibly stopped a public screening of *Jai Bhim Comrade*, Anand Patwardhan's 2011 documentary. They tore down protest posters, injured several students and ripped the clothes of women protesters. The following day, police evicted all students from the protest site and the university suspended 11 students on charges of vandalism and clashes with security personnel. The students approached the Delhi High Court, which quashed the order.

Blessy, an MA student of gender studies, was among those suspended. She summed it up: "This isn't Ambedkar University, it's Tihar Jail. In jail, at least you get your meals on time. In a university, if a student asks questions, you won't even get food."



Photo: Getty Images

Students of Jamia Millia Islamia celebrate with a victory march

At Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), on 21 September, MA (Urdu) student Yasir Fahad began an indefinite hunger strike at the historic Duck Point. His demand: immediate restoration of student union elections, suspended for eight years. On 9 October, the administration announced elections and voting took place on 5 November. Their success inspired students at Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi, where the fight centred on alleged opacity in spot admissions and the restoration of student union elections (suspended for two decades).

The Jamia demonstration began on 12 October. On 24 October, the protest site was vandalised during negotiations, personal belongings damaged, and attempts made to take hunger-strikers into custody under the pretext of hospitalisation.

According to the Students' Federation of India (SFI), the police imposed Section 163, erected barricades and detained students. The administration shifted classes online, restricted access to libraries and reading rooms, and ordered students to vacate hostels. The students held firm. After 18 days of hunger strike, the administration was forced to back down and agree to the restoration of the student union elections.

At Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), too, student satyagraha prevailed. On Day 17 of an indefinite hunger strike launched by the students' union, the administration was forced to yield. Alongside basic demands, they agreed to revoke the unjust expulsion of union office-bearers and the former president, and withdraw proctorial inquiries and FIRs related to the protests.

Students are not fighting for students' rights only. They have since rallied behind more than 700 campus workers employed in sanitation, mess, security, gardening and maintenance services who are protesting wage cuts, unpaid statutory bonuses, arbitrary suspensions and other violations of labour rights.

Women students have been leading the charge. At Delhi University, they organised '*Hum Auratein Azaad Hain*' (We Women Are Free) marches across campuses, demanding safety, freedom and the right to occupy public spaces without fear. Their slogans—"Tear down the society that keeps women shackled" and "We have a right to the night too"—captured the anger of a generation unwilling to accept the domination of patriarchy.

From the night march at JNU's Sabarmati dhaba to the '*Pinjra Tod*' (Break the Cage) slogan at Delhi University, the message was unmistakable: "We want safety, not restrictions that treat us like prisoners." With Neha, Mudita and Nadia showing the way, students have been uninhibited in their dissent and united in their fight, without necessarily organising under any particular flag.

In West Bengal, the struggle has taken on a broader political dimension. Students of Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute (SRFTI), Jadavpur University and Presidency University are resisting what they see as saffron thuggery.

On 27 September, SRFTI students protested an event organised by the RSS-affiliated Akhil Bharatiya Grahak Panchayat, questioning the presence of politically aligned organisations on a publicly funded campus. The protest escalated into a violent confrontation. On 4 October, members of the Bangiya Hindu Jagran Manch were accused of throwing bricks and bottles at students. When the administration expelled six students in mid-October, protesters demanded their reinstatement, the vice-chancellor's resignation and better campus security.

> *"The students are no longer afraid of repression by RSS-backed VCs or the ruling establishment"*

At Jadavpur University, Left- and ABVP-affiliated students clashed over a general body meeting on 20 August. At Presidency, an ABVP poster featuring Swami Vivekananda triggered controversy. Ever since the BJP 'took' Bengal, students are on the warpath against the RSS's attempts to gain control of the state's educational institutions.

The resistance extends well beyond Bengal and Delhi. At Allahabad University, protests against fee hikes and a cut of 6,000 seats began in July 2026 and intensified in October. On 6 October, students organised a mass mobilisation and blocked the university's main gate, while women students took out a 'Freedom March' demanding safety and autonomy. Students of IISER Pune boycotted classes over stringent hostel rules.

At Banaras Hindu University, women students organised a candlelight march and indefinite sit-in opposing the 10 p.m. hostel curfew and discriminatory rules. At Lucknow University, students protested for more than 50 days (from 2 June) against fee hikes and the 'dictatorial' expulsion of three student leaders—Prem Prakash Yadav, Prince Prakash and Harshit Shukla—on charges of indiscipline.

"If the Jantar Mantar movement had not happened (forcing Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation), our suspensions would never have been revoked," says Vishal Singh, a PhD scholar at Lucknow University.

The footprint extends from Gorakhpur to Patna, from Pune's Savitribai Phule University to Mumbai University's Kalina campus, from Kalady's Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit to Mewat Engineering University (where protests ended after assurances from the Waqf Board (Haryana) and authorities).

The movement has also exposed institutional failures around mental health. The suicide of 31-year-old IIT Delhi student Rishikesh Kumar on 24 August rallied over 2,000 students. It took eight suicides in 30 months, an indefinite sit-in and an emotional appeal by Rishikesh's mother for the administration to constitute an inquiry committee headed by a former high court judge.

At IIT Bombay, the suicide of BTech student Sahil Wakode on 18 September sparked a three-day 'Students' Lives Matter' protest, with an 18-point demands' charter.

The country's top law schools have also been touched by the spirit of rebellion. In August, more than 400 students at Hyderabad's National Academy of Legal Studies and Research opposed inviting Chief Justice Surya Kant to their convocation. The controversy deepened when Bar Council of India chairman and BJP MP Manan Mishra wrote to put the enrolment of the 2026 graduating batch on hold. At Bengaluru's National Law School of India University, hundreds of students and alumni similarly opposed the presence of senior judicial officials.

SFI national president Adarsh M. Shaji believes the Jantar Mantar movement has given students the confidence to fight back. "They are no longer afraid of repression by RSS-backed vice-chancellors or the ruling establishment. Students are fighting to protect the very foundations of education."

The resistance across campuses makes one thing clear: the battle is far from over. Jantar Mantar is everywhere. Victory is infectious. Dissent is unstoppable. ■

What the ECI's fixes do not fix

Continued from page 3

It warned that wrongful deletions cannot be buried under the revision of the revision. In Delhi, where the SIR allegedly deleted one in three voters, a missive issued midway through the process cannot undo the damage. The only credible remedy is to withdraw the flawed SIR in toto and conduct a fresh exercise through transparent, public audits at the booth level.

The U-turns extend to its IT operations as well. New modules and portals being developed under director general (IT) Seema Khanna will now have to pass through a committee of officers before being submitted to the ECI for approval. Joshi and Sandhu had objected that these systems were being developed without their knowledge. Khanna has also been instructed to route files through the senior deputy election commissioner rather than send them directly to the ECI.

Both Joshi and Sandhu had demanded an audit of ECINet. On 14 October, the ECI constituted a committee, headed by a senior deputy election commissioner, to examine whether the platform complies with relevant laws and regulations. Proposed changes will apparently give grassroots officials greater authority and autonomy. Special drives have been ordered in states where the SIR is complete, alongside the SSR now under way.

But these administrative 'adjustments' are no more than cosmetic.

On 30 October 2026, Yogendra Yadav placed seven questions before the public that the Commission is yet to answer:

1. Who took the decision to conduct the SIR?
2. How did the ECI alter Form 6?
3. How did the Commission transfer the powers of electoral registration officers (EROs) to its IT division?
4. Who filed 16 lakh cases in West Bengal?
5. Which software determined logical discrepancies during the SIR?
6. How were large numbers of Form 7 applications filed simultaneously, and how could an official file Form 7?
7. If the SIR is complete, how are Form 8 applications still being accepted? Such a case occurred in Pilibhit. What guarantees it has not happened elsewhere, and why does the Commission's system have no mechanism to prevent it?

Nikhil Dey, a social activist associated with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, says the agitation will continue. "The entire process of adding and deleting names operates within a government-controlled framework. BLOs and EROs are government employees. The Election Commission listens only to the government. We therefore demand a public audit of electoral rolls three months before every election. The Commission must publicly read out names and explain who is being marked as shifted and who is being deleted. Only this can restore the confidence of citizens and political parties."

Dey makes another fundamental point: "Suppose the SIR is cancelled and a 'good' chief election commissioner is appointed. Even then, the citizen's future stays in the ECI's hands. That is something we cannot accept."

Can the ECI duck accountability by announcing a series of U-turns before the forthcoming assembly elections? Noor Mohammad is unequivocal: "Patchwork will not work. The Election Commission has weaponised Forms 6, 7 and 8. A particular political party is supporting this entire process. Public trust cannot be restored unless the entire exercise is cancelled. Ideally, the entire Commission should be replaced. Why is the government not taking the initiative? The Election Commission has run out of options."

The point is inescapable: an institution entrusted with protecting the citizen's right to vote cannot keep changing the rules, deleting names and offering belated clarifications without answering for its actions. Public trust cannot be restored through administrative patchwork. The ECI must answer for the damage already done. ■

Unpaid bills, broken promises, rising deaths

Delayed government payments have pushed contractors in Maharashtra to the brink

Jaideep Hardikar

On 19 October, contractors in Amravati, about 150 km from Nagpur, performed a mock funeral of the Maharashtra government. On 2 November, they returned to the PWD office to perform a symbolic *terhvi* (the 13th day ritual). Their grievance: non-payment of work completed two or three years back. The Maharashtra State Contractors Association (MSCA) claims over one lakh contractors are awaiting dues of Rs 90,000 crore to Rs 1 lakh crore.

Amravati is the latest in a long list. For over a year, the MSCA and its branches have protested—in Kolhapur, Nagpur and other towns in August 2025; in Mumbai in April 2026.

Contractors say they are drowning under loans, machines lie idle, workers remain unpaid and suppliers refuse further credit. Driven by debt, at least nine contractors have reportedly died by suicide in the past 18 months.

The latest protest has been triggered by the suicide of Sunil Wagadre, a 52-year-old contractor from Jarud in Amravati district. His family says he was owed nearly Rs 2.5 crore for work completed in 2023-24. In his suicide note, Sunil reportedly asked his nephew to sell part of his property and repay loans. His wife Varsha told the *Indian Express* that repeated requests for payment yielded nothing. "Now, I just want the government to return my husband."

Wagadre's death is not isolated. In September 2025, Nagpur-based contractor P.V. Verma took his life. His pending dues: Rs 40 crore. In July 2025, Sangli's Harshal Patil died by suicide. His family said nearly Rs 60 lakh remained unpaid. In August 2026, after Navi Mumbai contractor Gajanan Devkate killed himself, his family alleged officials had demanded a bribe to clear Rs 2.5 crore in outstanding payments.

The crisis raises a fundamental question: how can a government that commissions public infrastructure leave its financing to those executing the projects? Contractors are, in effect, becoming involuntary financiers and bearing the burden of debt.

Small and medium contractors are particularly vulnerable. They borrow at exorbitant interest rates. Buy cement, steel, pipes and machinery, hire labour and transport. After completing the government-contracted work, they submit bills and wait for certification and payment even as interest accumulates, suppliers and workers demand their dues, and household expenses continue. A delay of several months can hurt; two or three years can destroy.

This was evident in Harshal Patil's case. Maharashtra water resources minister Gulabrao Patil reportedly said that Patil was not registered under the relevant scheme and that no bill was pending in his name. The MSCA countered that he had executed the work as a subcontractor and depended on the principal contractor receiving payment. This bureaucratic distinction may be valid contractually, but does little to address the plight of the person who executes the work.

The dues, as per MSCA, include Rs 40,000 crore from the PWD, Rs 12,000 crore (Jal Jeevan Mission), Rs 6,000 crore (rural development), Rs 13,000 crore (water resources and conservation) and Rs 18,000 crore (for urban development). In April 2026, contractors put outstanding dues at Rs 96,400 crore. Other reports say Rs 76,000 to Rs 86,000 crore.

> *A delay of even a few months can hurt small businesses; two or three years can destroy them*



Contractors and subcontractors demand their dues at a protest in Kolhapur

The government disputes these claims. Public works minister Shivendraraje Bhosale said Rs 17,000 crore in PWD bills were pending, of which Rs 6,200 crore had been cleared. The gap between the two estimates remains unexplained, with no independent, department-wise accounting of bills submitted, certified, sanctioned and paid.

Maharashtra remains India's largest state economy, with projected gross state domestic product (GSDP) of around Rs 54 lakh crore in 2026-27. Yet its latest budget estimates a fiscal deficit of Rs 1.50 lakh crore and a revenue deficit of Rs 40,552 crore. Outstanding liabilities are projected at 20.4 per cent of GSDP. Salaries, pensions and interest payments alone account for nearly Rs 3.38 lakh crore in committed spends. Public debt is at Rs 10 lakh crore.

The late Ajit Pawar, who held the finance portfolio, had assured contractors their bills would be cleared in stages. After his death earlier this year, the ministry is under Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis. Many of the works awaiting payment were awarded by the pre-2024 Eknath Shinde government.

Contractors' associations allege that a disproportionate number of work orders were issued ahead of the November 2024 assembly elections, without adequate budgetary provision. Opposition leaders and contractors also allege that politically connected contractors receive preferential payments, while smaller, local contractors are made to wait.

The Jal Jeevan Mission deserves particular attention. Contractors claim tens of thousands of crores remain unpaid under the programme, jointly funded by the Union and state governments. It is essential to establish how much was allocated, how much the Centre has released, the state's contribution, how much work has been completed and certified, and how much has been paid.

The Congress too has repeatedly sought an audit of schemes. The MSCA is demanding department-wise registers of outstanding bills, recording submission and payment dates. It also wants time-bound payments, accountability for officials sitting on certified bills, and an audit of work orders. Subcontractors want statutory protection from the consequences of payment disputes. ■

STATES 360°  J&K

Credibility crisis amid political revolt

Haroon Reshi



Photo: Getty Images

Turning point? Aga Ruhullah Mehdi addresses his supporters at Behisht-e-Zehra park in Budgam on 3 November before announcing his decision to quit the National Conference and resign from Parliament

It's still too early to say whether Aga Ruhullah Mehdi's departure from the National Conference (NC) and Parliament on 3 November has damaged the party more or his own political career. This public rift, however, highlights serious concerns about the party's leadership, ideological commitment and ability to fulfil its electoral promises in Jammu and Kashmir.

Whether Ruhullah's decision is a principled political stand or a self-defeating gamble remains unclear. But his exit has certainly dented the NC's public image, exposing cracks in the party over promises it made in the 2024 election and its relationship with some of its own prominent leaders.

For the NC, the political cost is significant. The party fought the 2024 elections on the promise of restoring constitutional safeguards and special status, particularly Article 370.

Two years on, Ruhullah's accusation that the party has abandoned its manifesto resonates with the people. The fact remains that after securing a considerable mandate in 2024 amid high public expectations, the NC is warding off criticism initiated by one of its own.

Ruhullah is no ordinary dissenter. A three-time MLA from Budgam and MP from Srinagar, he has been with the NC for over two decades and was also involved in preparing the 2024 manifesto.

His principal contention is that the party has shifted its priorities from fighting to restore Article 370 to the restoration of statehood alone, shelving more forceful political action.

The revolt has spotlighted other unmet commitments: an injudicious reservation policy that disadvantages open-merit students and job-seekers; failure to generate employment, including the promised goal of creating one lakh jobs; free electricity and LPG; and inadequate efforts to secure the release of political prisoners and protect civil rights.

In truth, this confrontation has exposed the growing gap between the party's electoral promises and performance.

Questions are being raised about the party leadership, particularly its inability to reconcile with Ruhullah, who had publicly indicated his intention to resign months in advance.

His eventual departure has reinforced perceptions that the party was either unwilling or unable to address internal criticism, thereby missing a chance to publicly explain its constitutional and political strategy convincingly.

Moving forward, the NC faces the daunting task of crafting a fresh political narrative and credible manifesto in anticipation of mid-term elections for the Srinagar Lok Sabha seat and other future contests. Simply repeating old promises about autonomy, statehood, free utilities and jobs will not suffice. Voters increasingly demand transparency and accountability.

Meanwhile, the issue has handed NC's political rivals a readymade narrative.

The NC faces a credibility crisis; simply repeating old promises will not be enough

At the public gathering at Behisht-e-Zehra Park in Budgam, Ruhullah handed his resignation to Muhammad Ashraf Mattoo, father of Tufail Mattoo, a teenager killed in a 2010 police firing, when the NC was in power.

Critics were quick to point out Ruhullah's own association with the NC at the time. If the party was responsible for the deaths of several teenagers during the 2010 unrest, why, if he was genuinely sympathetic towards the victims of 2010, had he not voiced his concerns earlier? They accuse him of indulging in political theatrics by choosing Mattoo to convey the break.

The NC, meanwhile, has questioned Ruhullah's parliamentary record and his contribution as an MP towards the restoration of special status and statehood.

Party leaders say the NC provided him with an established political organisation, a recognisable electoral symbol, a network of workers and a presence across Jammu and Kashmir which helped him secure multiple electoral victories in Budgam and Srinagar.

Some critics have even suggested that the entire episode was staged at the behest of the BJP. These allegations gained traction after BJP leader Ram Madhav welcomed Ruhullah's exit and said he had the support and blessings of the people.

The NC, too, has alleged that his departure fits the BJP's strategy. While there is no evidence to establish that the BJP orchestrated Ruhullah's resignation, the schism certainly plays to the BJP's advantage by fracturing the region's main opposition.

If indeed his objective is to fight for the rights of the people of Kashmir, the path ahead is uncertain.

Ruhullah says he is looking for honest and committed people to build an alternative political force. Whether he can translate this intention into a viable political movement remains to be seen. Success will depend on his ability to organise effectively, articulate a clear, coherent agenda and broaden his public appeal.

Only time will tell whether Ruhullah's gambit will pay off or whether he will meet the fate of Ghulam Nabi Azad, who quit the Congress in August 2022 after decades of association with the party and then saw his political stock wither. ■

A Band-aid for a deep injury

It will take more than a two-year extension to correct the colossal blunder that is the Agnipath scheme

Rashme Sehgal

Vijay Kumar, who served in the Indian Army's Corps of Military Police for 24 years before retiring to his village Charkula in Uttar Pradesh, is a disillusioned man. A third-generation *fauji*, he has two sons who joined the army. The elder enlisted as a jawan for a fixed tenure of 24 years; the younger, Adesh Kumar, signed up as an Agniveer under the four-year Agnipath scheme. After training, Adesh was posted to Arunachal Pradesh. On 24 March 2026, he was killed in crossfire between Chinese and Indian forces.

Kumar has many questions about his son's death. "We were told there have been no exchanges of fire between Indian and Chinese soldiers. If so, how did my son get injured? I am suspicious of the circumstances under which he died. He died on a holiday, the very day he was to go on leave for his brother's wedding. When his body was brought home, no one from the government came to offer us a word of comfort." He adds, "We were given his insurance money and dues as an Agniveer, and informed he would receive the remaining amount after the court of inquiry. When regular soldiers die, they are treated as martyrs and given a befitting send-off. Not so with Agniveers. What status do they have, if any?"

Sohan Singh and his wife Chandravati live in Mathura district with their two sons. The elder is a regular jawan on permanent commission, the younger an Agniveer. Chandravati says, "Where are the employment opportunities? Young boys opt for whatever they can get. While my elder son received several marriage proposals and is now married, we have not received a single proposal for our younger son. No one wants an unemployed son-in-law."

As many as 20 families have sought 'martyr' status for Agniveer sons killed in combat or accidents. In January 2024, Ludhiana's Charanjit Singh lost his 23-year-old son Ajay in a landmine blast near the LoC in J&K's Rajouri district. Singh, a labourer, said, "My son's sacrifice deserves the same respect and dignity given to regular soldiers." Though he received Rs 40 lakh from insurance and another Rs 48 lakh from the army, he believes a martyr's family should receive the pension and medical benefits given to permanent soldiers. Families see this disparity as unbecoming of the armed forces. As Charanjit Singh's sister asked, "Was my brother a lesser mortal?"

Military expert Pravin Sawhney, editor of defence magazine *Force*, points out, "We have a huge boundary with China and Pakistan. We say our border with China is 3,488 km long, but the Chinese claim it is only 500 km. In Arunachal Pradesh, our border extends for over 3,000 km. There have been faceoffs between the Chinese and Indian armies at multiple locations, and tensions continue to simmer. The government can deny it, but recent comments by Shatrujeet Kapur, director general of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, confirm that these skirmishes are occurring."

Sawhney adds: "On 23 October 2021, the Chinese government passed a boundary law declaring territorial disputes a matter of national sovereignty [it went into effect on 1 January 2022]. They continue their salami slicing, and we must hold on to everything we have on the ground. Denying these faceoffs will further embolden the Chinese."

When the army needs manpower but the government wants to cut corners, what does it do? It introduces what Sawhney calls a "ridiculous scheme", where two categories of soldiers perform "similar jobs" but receive dissimilar treatment. "This immediately affects *esprit de corps*, camaraderie and regimental bonding. Command will falter. When a scheme creates disharmony, why will an Agniveer lay down his life for his regiment?" he asks.

Disparity in service norms was among the reasons military experts opposed the Agnipath scheme in 2022. Four years later, with the first batch due to complete its tenure by end-November 2026, the government has announced an overhaul. The remaining Agniveers—75 per cent of recruits—who were due to retire will receive a two-year extension.

Commenting on this rollback, Captain Yogendra Singh Yadav, a Kargil war hero and Param Vir Chakra awardee, wrote on social media: 'Following the extension, will Agniveers now get promotions and increments? If they excel in sports, will they be allowed to train for another two years? Why was Agnipath introduced only in the army, and not the other security forces (namely the CRPF, Border Security Force and ITBP)? The armed forces are a nation's final line of defence, yet the government was willing to experiment. Warfare has shifted to a technological, multi-domain model. When direct entry is available in other security forces at inspector, subedar and havaldar levels, why not recruit qualified B.Techs and M.Techs into the army under this scheme?'

Former chief of army staff V.N. Malik also believes Agnipath has pushed younger people towards paramilitary services rather than the army. Disparity within the services is untenable, he says, warning that without training and integrating these recruits into the army, "we will have a major problem on our hands".

Several military experts argue that the revised scheme has not addressed fundamental flaws. Lack of continuity will undermine operational readiness and combat experience, particularly since regular soldier recruitment has stopped altogether. With troop strength at around 12.48 lakh, the army faces a shortage of 1 lakh to 1.8 lakh soldiers. The shortfall is most acute among JCOs and NCOs (around 92,410). The deficit among officers is around 16 per cent, with thousands of vacancies for captains and majors.

India's defence forces are not a laboratory for an experimental employment scheme. The earlier recruitment system was built on experience, continuity, competence and commitment, ensuring operational effectiveness, preserving regimental ethos and offering reasonable career progression.

India's defence forces are not a laboratory for an experimental job scheme

Lt General Zameeruddin Shah (retd) calls Agnipath "a colossal blunder". He says, "I spent 20 years in my regiment. I knew every jawan, where he came from, his village, family background, even his sons' names. If one-third of the men change every year, the entire ethos gets diluted. The regimental system brought together individuals from the same area, speaking the same language and following similar social norms. That was a great unifier. Constant shuffling will change everything."

Former admiral Arun Prakash is equally blunt: "Given the possibility of our unstable northern and western borders becoming 'live' at short notice, any systemic change affecting combat effectiveness must be introduced cautiously and progressively."

Rear Admiral Sudhir Pillai (retd), like several military strategists, argues that modern warfare has evolved into multi-domain digital conflict driven by AI, autonomous systems and network integration. The more sophisticated the machine, the more experienced its operator must be. Military effectiveness depends on recruits becoming skilled operators and supervisors, capable of providing technical support and solving problems with the immediacy that can mean the difference between life and death.

Another crucial question is what happens when Agniveers leave the service. Even with a two-year extension, what skills will equip a 26- or 27-year-old to find private-sector employment? Reserving 50 per cent vacancies in CAPFs and Assam Rifles for former Agniveers raises its own problems, given differences in duties and long working hours. Several state governments had promised jobs when the scheme was launched, but that enthusiasm has waned given their inability to create employment.

Whatever official spin the government puts on its latest face-saver, this tactical retreat has evidently taken place on Prime Minister Modi's orders. He knows how unpopular the scheme is. With elections approaching in Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal and Punjab, he needs to blunt the opposition. This expediency comes at the cost of the army's combat effectiveness. The country's security has been imperilled by the foolhardy introduction of an untried recruitment system. ■





Agniveers like Adesh (*inset*)**, killed in crossfire on the Arunachal Pradesh border, deserve the same respect as regular soldiers**

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Israel, with or without Benjamin Netanyahu

In the foreseeable future, expect nothing more than a diplomatic dressing for the settler-colonial project, writes Ashok Swain



Photo: Getty Images

Leader of Yashar Party Gadi Eisenkot poses for a photoshoot before entering the Knesset on 10 November

The prospect of Benjamin Netanyahu losing power after dominating Israeli politics for nearly two decades has created expectations of a political turning point. President Isaac Herzog's decision to entrust former military chief Gadi Eisenkot with forming a government has brought Israel closer to a post-Netanyahu era. Yet the most important question is not whether Netanyahu finally leaves office. It is whether his departure will change Israel's treatment of Palestinians under its occupation, its regional military adventurism or its dependence on American support.

The answer is likely to disappoint those hoping for fundamental transformation. Eisenkot may replace Netanyahu's confrontational rhetoric with diplomatic sophistication and institutional respectability. He may restrain extremist settlers and permit limited humanitarian reconstruction in Gaza. But the occupation, settlement expansion, rejection of Palestinian sovereignty and overwhelming reliance on its military power are unlikely to disappear. Israel could acquire a more acceptable international face without substantially changing its policies.

The 27 October election produced a fragmented Knesset. Netanyahu's bloc secured 53 seats, Eisenkot's four-party opposition alliance 48 and Arab-led parties a historic 19. Although 67 lawmakers recommended Eisenkot for prime minister, endorsements do not automatically translate into coalition support. He has 28 days, potentially extended by another 14, to assemble a government.

Eisenkot's background offers little reason to anticipate a fundamental reversal of Israeli policy towards Palestinians. As military chief between 2015 and 2019, he became associated with the Dahiya doctrine, advocating overwhelming military force against enemy-controlled areas, including civilian infrastructure. His reputation rests on the use of brutal military force rather than a commitment to democratic and human rights of Palestinians.

More revealingly, Eisenkot explicitly rejects Palestinian statehood in the foreseeable future. His proposed Gaza strategy would replace Hamas with another administrative authority, potentially involving the Palestinian Authority or international arrangements, while preserving Israeli security control. He might permit partial reconstruction and humanitarian relief, but Palestinians would remain denied of self-determination.

Netanyahu has pursued territorial domination through aggressive settlement expansion, collective punishment and the empowerment of extremist settlers. Eisenkot might reduce the most provocative manifestations of these policies without challenging their underlying logic. He has promised tougher action against settler militia, restoration of law enforcement and restrictions on illegal outposts. Such measures could save Palestinian lives and should not be dismissed. Nevertheless, suppressing particularly violent settlers while maintaining occupation and denying statehood would regulate, rather than dismantle, the settler-colonial structure.

The danger is that international attention will shift from Palestinian dispossession to Israeli political moderation. Fewer inflammatory ministerial statements, strictly controlled humanitarian deliveries and renewed diplomatic negotiations could create an impression of progress while occupation and apartheid policy continue. For Palestinians, the decisive test is not whether Israel's prime minister speaks in politically correct language but whether the occupation ends, whether displaced communities can return, whether settlements cease to expand and equal political rights become attainable.

On Iran, the differences may prove even narrower. Eisenkot shares Netanyahu's fanaticism to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and preserve Israel's nuclear superiority. His reported proposals include American-enforced exclusion zones around Iranian nuclear facilities and expanded covert operations against Iran's missile capabilities. These proposals suggest tactical diversion rather than strategic restraint. Eisenkot may prefer coordinated American pressure, intelligence operations and selective military strikes over Netanyahu's confrontational political theatre. But the underlying assumption remains that Israel possesses an exceptional right to determine regional security arrangements through military power.

Similar continuity is likely in Lebanon and Syria. Eisenkot might negotiate limited withdrawals, strengthen cooperation with European governments and pursue security agreements. Yet he would retain Israeli military unilateral action and self-declared buffer zones.

Even if Israel sees the back of Netanyahu, it won't see the end of Netanyahuism

A change of leadership could therefore make Israeli military dominance more predictable and diplomatically manageable without making the region substantially more peaceful.

The most consequential transformation could occur internationally. Netanyahu has become politically toxic across significant sections of Western public opinion. His confrontations with European governments and increasingly partisan relationship with American politics have damaged Israel's diplomatic standing. Eisenkot offers Washington and European capitals an opportunity to restore relations without confronting the deeper contradictions of their Israel policies.

He would likely rebuild bipartisan American relationships, emphasising intelligence cooperation, military technology and Israel's strategic usefulness. European governments could go back to business as usual after renewed dialogue, limited humanitarian concessions and a less provocative administration.

This would create an uncomfortable paradox: the removal of Netanyahu could reduce international pressure precisely when sustained scrutiny of Israeli conduct remains necessary. Western governments might portray Eisenkot as evidence that Israeli democracy can correct itself, overlooking the continued exclusion of Palestinians from determining their political future. Sanctions discussions could weaken, diplomatic isolation might ease and demands for accountability could lose momentum.

The United States would almost certainly remain Israel's principal strategic protector. Military assistance, intelligence cooperation and diplomatic backing would survive Netanyahu's departure. What might change is the political cost for the Trump administration of providing that support. Eisenkot's greatest international achievement could thus be restoring Western confidence in Israel without requiring Israel to fundamentally change.

For India, Netanyahu's departure would probably produce limited disruption to bilateral relations, although their political character and public presentation could change significantly.

The relationship between Narendra Modi and Netanyahu has acquired a distinctly ethno-political dimension, reflecting ideological affinities between Hindu nationalism and Zionist nationalism. Their highly personalised partnership has often projected a shared nationalist anti-Muslim worldview, extending beyond conventional diplomatic cooperation.

Under Eisenkot, India-Israel relations could become less overtly ideologically political and more firmly anchored in traditional diplomatic, security and economic interests. Arms sales, intelligence sharing and cyber snooping would remain central pillars of the partnership.

Eisenkot's military background could further strengthen institutional cooperation between the two countries' security establishments, while reducing the political symbolism associated with the Modi-Netanyahu relationship. The substance of India-Israel cooperation would remain largely intact, even if its public expression became less overtly ethno-political and more military and intelligence driven.

Netanyahu's personal future presents another uncertainty. Losing office would deprive him of the authority, visibility and political leverage that have helped sustain his megalomania and political career. His longstanding corruption trial would continue, while questions concerning responsibility for the 7 October security failures could intensify. Losing office would weaken his ability to shape the political environment surrounding accountability. Nevertheless, Netanyahu will not disappear. A fragile coalition might offer him opportunities for a comeback. He could also seek to preserve influence through a unity arrangement or political negotiations concerning his future. Whether Likud eventually abandons him would depend on its assessment of his electoral usefulness.

Netanyahu's departure could end an era of personalised political dominance without ending Netanyahuism. Netanyahu has become the international symbol of Israel's destructive policies in the region and genocidal policies in occupied territories.

Replacing him may reduce global anger and give Western governments a convenient justification for returning to business as usual. For Palestinians, however, changing the identity of the prime minister without changing the structures of domination would offer little more than a different administrator of the same injustice. Israel may be approaching the end of Netanyahu's rule. Whether it is approaching the end of Netanyahu's policies is an entirely different question ■

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Trumpism after the midterms

Might a hamstrung US President become even more dangerous and erratic on overseas affairs?



Photo: Getty Images

Rally for democracy People march through Manhattan, New York, after the results of the midterm elections

Ashis Ray

It was an uncomfortable coincidence for the Narendra Modi regime that a United States civil court issued summonses on Indian national security adviser Ajit Doval and a former external espionage agency Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) chief Samant Goel this week.

India's ministry of external affairs predictably condemned the concerned case as a 'frivolous lawsuit' based on 'fabricated and malicious' charges. The matter pertains to an attempt to assassinate an anti-India Khalistan separatist in New York Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in 2024. In February 2026, Nikhil Gupta, 54, an Indian national, pleaded guilty of hiring for murder and is currently awaiting sentencing.

Prosecutors had alleged Gupta was directed by an official known as Vikas Yadav who worked in the Indian government's cabinet secretariat (which houses the R&AW) to execute the plot. While this man's indictment was apprehended, serving subpoenas to Doval and Goel is not only a major exacerbation in the legal proceedings, its timing is also being interpreted in some diplomatic circles in Washington as yet another pressure tactic by the US as its trade talks with India drag on.

Preceding this development, there was, not unexpectedly, worldwide interest in the US midterm elections. It is, after all, still the world's leading superpower, though rapidly conceding ground to China. Interest was enhanced by the fact that President Donald Trump had caused more turmoil in the world in the past two years than any of his predecessors. The outcome mattered to many. Speculation abounded. Would the elections clip his wings? Could Congressional restraints make him more dangerous and erratic on overseas affairs?

Let's begin with what the result might mean for India. For more than a year and a half, New Delhi has been harassed by crippling customs duties, demands for increased imports from the US and a threat of 100 per cent tariffs on Indian exports to the US if India continued to buy Russian crude.

Such aggressive behaviour by Trump has been analysed as being a consequence of weakness on the part of the Modi government; the kind of frailty no previous Indian administration had ever demonstrated. In simple terms, far from standing up to the bully, Modi was seen to have succumbed rather abysmally.

Without going into why that happened, let us examine whether the equation can change, now that Trump has received a thorough drubbing in the midterms. "Just imagine," he said at rally after rally for a month, "just imagine I am on the ballot." American voters did; and dealt him a deserving rebuke.

Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs told *The Wire*'s Karan Thapar: "What I'd say to my friends in India and friends anywhere is negotiate hard. This man doesn't have the authority, nor does he have the political support to what he's doing… hold your ground. Get a good deal. Don't cave in… the American people don't want tariffs. They don't want the sanctions."

Those are precisely the urgings consistently underlined in these columns since February 2025, when Trump delivered a somewhat unfriendly démarche to Modi: that India should exponentially multiply its purchase of US goods and services. The latter apparently acquiesced. The US supreme court struck down his April 2025 executive order which imposed tariffs on countries across the globe, including India. It will likely do the same to his renewed efforts to revive levies by other means. The lower courts have done so.

In these circumstances, if Modi continues to be browbeaten by a lame-duck Trump, it will amplify concerns that there is more to such weakness than meets the eye. What did Trump mean when he said in October 2025 that he can "destroy Modi's career"? Why did a photo of a private meeting between Hardeep Puri, a minister in Modi's cabinet, and the late convicted New York paedophile Jeffrey Epstein suddenly surface last month? Did Epstein visit Delhi in January 2017? Who met him? Such questions swirled around the District of Colombia.

If Modi continues to be browbeaten by a lame-duck Trump, it can only mean there's more than meets the eye

Bloomberg headlined, 'India Sees Some Trade Relief, New Risks After Democrat Sweep.' Experts in Washington seem to believe the outcome of the midterms may motivate Trump to push harder for an early trade deal with India. They also feel India now has some elbow room to negotiate the nitty-gritty in the draft, which has made visibly slow progress for months now.

With a significant opposition Democratic majority—when the newly elected lawmakers enter the House of Representatives and Senate in January—Congress would be empowered under US laws to revise or cancel presidential executive orders; but that can, in turn, be opposed by a White House power of veto. In short, it is a recipe for a gridlock unless better sense prevails.

In such a situation, it will be tougher for Trump to whimsically escalate rates of tariff, which could be a relief for India's garments and textiles, gems and jewellery sectors. At the same time, it might be wise for New Delhi to widen diplomatic outreach beyond the administration to Congress and the states which benefit from Indian exports. Where Democrats and Trump's Republicans may be united is in pushing for US agricultural and dairy products into the Indian market—a virtual death knell for Indian farmers. The smart money is on Trump's electoral setback not necessarily making him any less protectionist.

Then there's the matter of the new US law approved by Trump which holds the threat of slapping 100 per cent tariffs on India for its import of Russian crude. A *Reuters* file last month said implementation—in addition to an abeyance signed off by Trump—is linked to a US investigation into assessing whether excess production in various countries is damaging American businesses.

The US is India's biggest export market. In 2025, reportedly $103.8 billion worth of Indian goods were absorbed in America, against US exports of $45.6 billion. The figures vis-à-vis services were $48.7 billion and $43.6 billion, respectively.

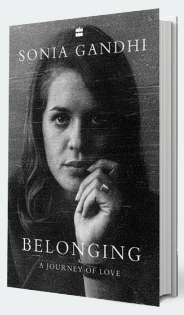
For the record, there is no prospect of the US easing H-1B visa restrictions on India, notwithstanding Trump admitting his harsh immigration policy was one of the reasons for the wipeout of Republicans in the midterms.

The mood swings of the US electorate this century defy evaluation. In 2001, after 9/11, they turned hostile towards Muslims. Turbaned Sikhs mistaken for being of the Islamic faith suffered too. Conservative George Bush was consequently granted a second term. In 2008, US voters pivoted to not merely a liberal, but their first-ever black president Barack Obama, a Christian with a Kenyan Muslim father. 2016 saw the election of Donald Trump, 2020 his rejection, 2024 his return. Two years later, his right-wing, undemocratic ways have been reproached to the extent of Egyptian-origin Abdul el-Sayed being voted in as America's first-ever Muslim senator.

Internationally, most eyes will be on Trump's moves on the US war against Iran and the Russia-Ukraine imbroglio. Many fear he will resume armed conflict with Tehran. Chances are that may not happen before the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, a 21-nation gathering at Shenzhen next week. A meeting between Trump, Chinese president Xi Jinping and Russian president Vladimir Putin is being touted as a possibility on the sidelines. ■

BOOK EXTRACT

'Just leave it!'



Title: **Belonging: A Journey of Love**
Author: **Sonia Gandhi**
Publisher: **HarperCollins Publishers India**
Price: **₹1,299**

'An instinct kept warning me that my actions would have far-reaching consequences...'

Some months before the election, my children and I had discussed the issue of my possible prime ministership. One of them asked me straight out whether I would accept the post, just in case our party pulled off a victory. "Absolutely not!" I'd said, almost indignantly. "Are you sure?" they pressed me. "I'm very clear," I said emphatically. Neither Rahul nor Priyanka felt that I should become prime minister. They'd lived through the trauma of their grandmother's assassination and the brutal murder of their father. In their minds, holding that office was intrinsically linked with heightened danger. They looked relieved and I, too, felt lighter, having said my views out loud on the question for the first time. And there the matter rested. I never spoke of it to anyone else. Throughout the election, I'd give a noncommittal answer whenever I was asked this question in public. We were in a battle for our survival and I had to keep my party together, to face our foes head-on as a cohesive team. It wasn't an option to allow a leadership struggle to arise between the contenders in our party. I kept my views firmly to myself, not even confiding in my closest colleagues. I just knew instinctively that the person to carry forward the legacy of past Congress governments would have to be someone with long experience in government and an impeccable record of integrity.

We returned from Rashtrapati Bhawan to my home at 10 Janpath. I saw Dr. Singh to his car. There had been no discussion about the prime ministership between the two of us on the drive back, nor had there been before that. I said nothing to him even now. He had quite naturally assumed, like everyone else, that it would be me. The right-wing parties went into full gear again.

[...]

The trip to the president's house had brought home the enormity of the situation I found myself in. How was I going to admit to all my colleagues and my allies, to the workers who had exhausted themselves rallying together and shouting slogans in my name and that of our party, for months on end—to the whole country, in fact—that I had led this entire campaign knowing full well that I'd refuse to lead the government? I felt a hollow in my chest. I didn't know whether I could go through with it now, how I could face them all. I had a day full of meetings ahead. I felt I couldn't breathe.

[...]

Years ago, when I took the first step of the journey that had brought me to this point, I knew in my heart what my husband and my mother-in-law would have expected of me. I had felt an inner call of duty towards them and all that they had fought for throughout their lives. But now I was at sea; I had to search within my troubled self for an answer. One part of me rejected the idea completely, the other part was calling on my sense of obligation towards the party workers who'd be hurt and disappointed by my refusal, but also to the people who'd given us their vote. My emotions were changing, moment to moment. One minute I was clear, the next, I was torn.

A meeting had been fixed with the leaders of the alliance. They were to come to my house the next afternoon. "We'll convince her," they'd assured my colleagues. When I look back at those moments, they take on their own pace, as they unspool in time. [...] A meeting is going on with some of the leaders of the alliance in Rajiv's conference room at the far end of my house. They've been talking in turns for over an hour, urging me to agree to their proposal, while I listen silently. As the discussion comes to an end, they look towards me for a response. I muster up as much courage as I can and I say my piece.

There is an uproar amongst them, they stand up and move towards me. I, too, stand up. They physically surround me. "We will not accept this," one of them says. "You cannot take this decision, Madam," says another. Their tone is forceful, almost aggressive. "We will not take no for an answer." I am shaken. I feel overpowered. "Theek hai," ("All right,"), I mumble almost inaudibly. The assembled leaders don't even wait for me to finish my sentence, they begin to congratulate me, one by one. "She has agreed, she has agreed," someone says. I just stand there, numb, unable to say anything further. The leaders depart, satisfied.

[...]

I walked into my bedroom and placed another call to AP. I told him that, despite what had just transpired with the alliance leaders, I was still in the process of taking a decision, either way. I wanted him to contain any fallout of the leaders having stated in public that I had agreed.

[...]

An instinct kept warning me that my actions would have far-reaching consequences, not just for my party but for India. [...] My entry into politics had been driven by the conviction that the BJP, propelled by the RSS and its many fanatical wings, would encourage strife between communities and subvert the Constitution if they came to power.

I knew very well that the noise being made now by them, and the propaganda they had drummed up through the election campaign, wouldn't abate if I accepted. The BJP and its allies would for certain use my 'foreign origin' as an issue, they would stir up emotions and create havoc that would subsume every other good—of the past, and of the coming years. How could I agree to holding the office of prime minister knowing it could wound my country, the country that I loved? No, never!

Night was drawing to a close. It had been a long night [...] I retreated into my bedroom and lay quietly as always on my husband's side of the bed. One voice within me said, "Sonia, this is a ridiculous proposition. You were born and brought up in Italy and here you are, being chosen to lead a nation of more than a billion people at the other end of the world." Another voice replied, "This is your country; you owe your whole adult life and allegiance to it. When you lost the man you loved, it took you in its arms as one of its own. Its people have comforted you and nurtured you through shattering tragedies. How can you abandon your responsibility to those who have placed their faith in you, in your party?" A flood of emotion overcame me, and I longed for Rajiv's comforting presence. As I was drifting into sleep out of sheer exhaustion, my mind suddenly cleared itself of the last shreds of doubt. "Sonia, be true to yourself," I could hear myself say. "You've always known it. Just leave it!"

I woke up in a few hours, went straight to my son's room, and knocked on the door. "I've made up my mind. I'm going to stick to my stand," I told him. He stepped up to me and with his arms around me said, "It's the right decision." I felt at peace for the first time since the election results had been declared. No one would be able to sway me now from my purpose. ■



Photo: Getty Images

Flying off the shelves Readers queue up to buy *Belonging: A Journey of Love* at a bookstore in New Delhi

"I felt at peace for the first time... No one would be able to sway me now from my purpose"

Are we living through the Right's Peterloo moment?

Swarna Bhatnagar

I'm writing this in the red netted dress that I bought for my birthday, hammering away excitedly at my keyboard because some alpha males across the world are having a difficult year, and I cannot let the moment pass without registering my glee.

I was in my first year of journalism college when the current right-wing government came to power in India. Simultaneously, the right and centre-right found lush land in large swathes of the world—in Europe, the US and in central and South America. Its leaders became international celebrities rolling each other's logs and its pep squad had a coadunate pathology of persecution complexes and a great appetite for hatred. The same tyrannical mindset sprawled from Washington to Budapest, Jerusalem and Delhi. They called it a new world order, called themselves the future.

Theatre, darling. Pure theatre.

The political mood right now has given me the voyeuristic pleasure of watching an extremely expensive outfit come apart at the seams on someone else. And I would never be so ungenerous as to deny myself a little schadenfreude. A fourth term for Lula, a student-backed electoral victory in Serbia, Orbán's great departure after sixteen years, Netanyahu struggling to save his skin and Trump in lame-duck land. Add their Indian counterpart, and the international brotherhood of strongmen is coming to terms with an alternative reality that ain't so cheery for them.

I know the world won't arrange itself into convenient political narratives for my entertainment and these developments cannot be bundled together and passed off as evidence of some sweeping global realignment, but I'm enjoying the view.

I watched this politics take up space in my own country, and in my own life. I watched invisible writs decide which story I was cleared to write for the newspaper that day. I walked away from a job I had spent years studying for because I could not pal around with that arrangement. I saw up close how prejudice becomes prime-time entertainment. I saw it become dinner-table conversation in my own family. I watched the most elementary demands for dignity rescripted as seditious acts of disloyalty. I watched people being asked to prove their patriotism and bigots decide who could claim the country and on what terms. I watched the public square become inhospitable to anyone who declined to yield to the amour propre of men who could not tolerate being questioned.

Mark Fisher wrote in *Capitalist Realism* about the trouble of imagining a world beyond the one we have. Political dominance produces a similar mental surrender. Instead of asking what might replace it, you start thinking about how to live with it. But I refuse to do that, now more than ever, when people across the world are reminding their governments that political power flows from their will, and the electorate will take it back when it wants.

I found my M.A. English notes during the annual Diwali cleaning, and re-read P.B. Shelley's *The Masque of Anarchy*. It took me back to Peterloo. In August 1819, thousands gathered in Manchester to demand parliamentary reform. The state answered with cavalry, killing at least fifteen and injuring hundreds. Shelley was in Italy when the news reached him, and in response, he wrote this incendiary poem, and came up with a rallying cry that has waded across two centuries of political strife: 'Ye are many—they are few!'

Shelley encapsulated the theory of political power in five words. Even with its cavalry, courts, prisons and the whole weight of officialdom behind it, the State chickens out at the sight of a heaving crowd. The crackdown that was expected to chill the people and force a retreat became the bugle call for the reform movement.

It would be foolish to write the obituary of the Right just yet.

Growing inequality and precarity provide fertile ground for right-wing sentiment. Exclusionary and extremist as those ideas might be, they are still popular, and firmly embedded in institutions, the media and public life. As long as it can maintain its stranglehold on these institutions, the Right will hold on to power even if popular support slowly dwindles. What gives hope is that the brotherhood, for all its money, muscle and repulsive fanfaronade, is learning that the audience can lose interest even when the show is still running.

Rebecca Solnit, in *Hope in the Dark*, writes about hope as a way of inhabiting uncertainty, of recognising that the future remains open even when the present gives us very little to believe in it. I like that idea because it doesn't ask us to become cheerleaders for our own circumstances. It asks very little of our optimism and a little more of our imagination.

India has unfinished business with the political project of the Right. Which has enfeebled its democratic institutions, made vitriol defensible in public life, taught people to live with a curtailed sense of belonging. None of this will disappear because the political weather has changed elsewhere. There is work to do, and plenty of it, but I no longer feel the rest of my life is a prisoner of the present moment.

The Right wants us to accept its reading of the future as a *fait accompli*. Even as the rest of us recover the nerve to imagine otherwise. Character building for everyone involved. I suppose this is also why I have so little patience for the idea that we must wait until everything is fixed before we let ourselves celebrate. I want to be furious when fury is warranted and frivolous when frivolity floats my boat. The world is a dreadful place to live in if we surrender all its pleasures to the people making it dreadful.

So yes, there was a red birthday dress, and there was a woman sitting in it, rather uncomfortably, conjuring the end for those who spent years trying to dictate the terms of everybody's existence. And she had a rather good time doing it. ■





Photos: Getty Images

Even with the whole weight of officialdom behind it, the State chickens out at the sight of a heaving crowd

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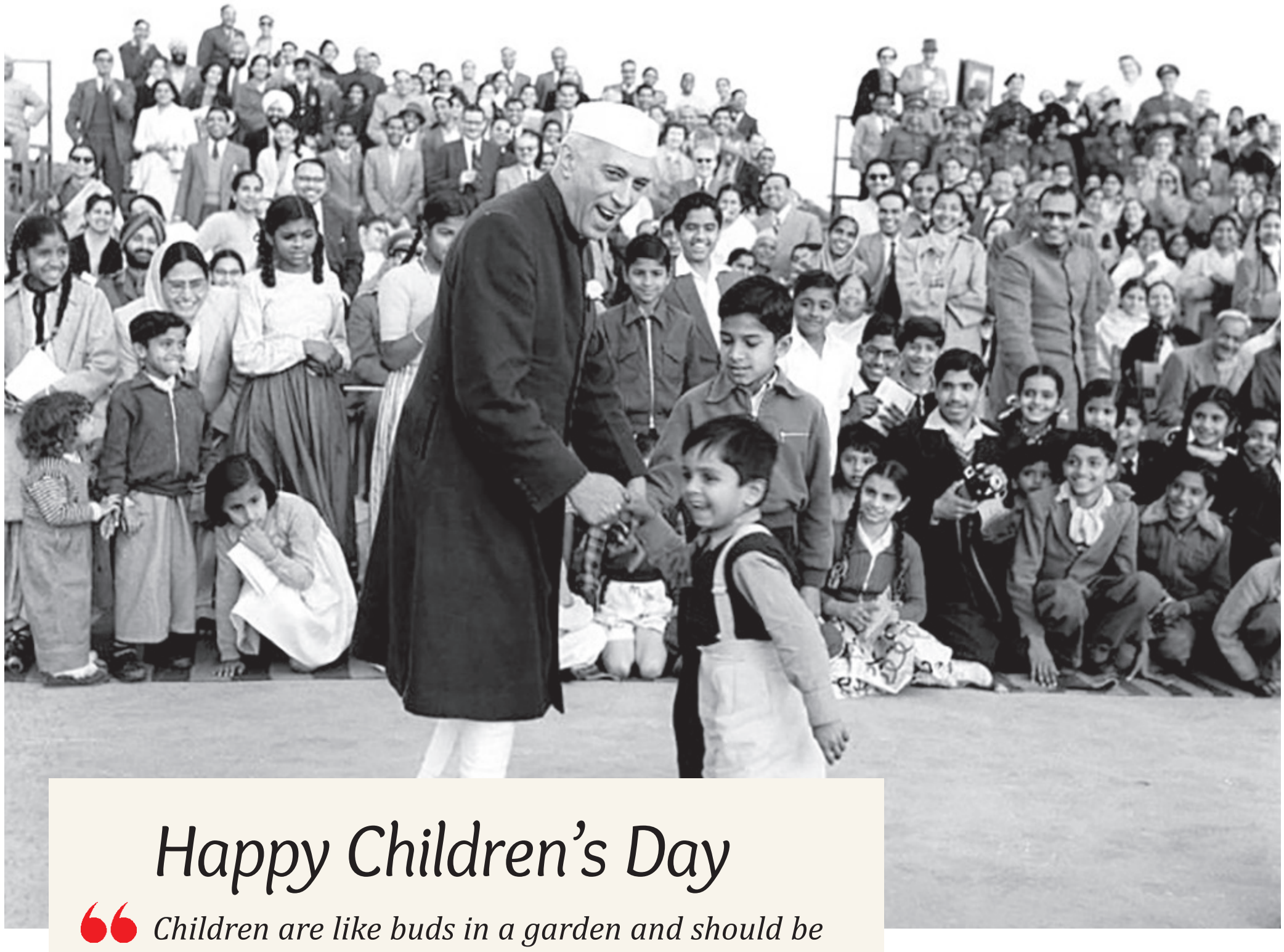
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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER





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STATES 360°  ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Caught between consent and diplomacy

Sourabh Sen

Along the rushing green waters of the Siang river in the eastern Himalaya, a decades-long struggle between indigenous rights and State-led megastructure ambition seems to have reached a point of no return. The flashpoint of this crisis is the proposed 11,200-MW Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP)—a mega dam projected by the government of India as both strategic hydel powerhub and downstream hydrologic buffer against upstream China's infrastructure on the Yarlung Tsangpo.

Yet, on the ground across the Abor and Adi valleys of Arunachal Pradesh, the project is regarded more as an existential threat to ancestral homelands than as a national security asset. Leading the charge against it is indigenous rights activist 'Abor Man' Katon Mayong, whose recent public statements have drawn clear red lines and reignited local resistance.

Tensions gathered momentum following protest rallies, bandhs and high-profile demonstrations. On 31 October, protesters gheraoed Arunachal Bhawan in New Delhi to demand the immediate release of detained anti-dam activists, a complete rollback of security forces deployed across the Siang valley and a total halt to the survey work for pre-feasibility reports (PFR).

Following his detention and subsequent release, Mayong convened a press conference where he delivered a forceful message, rejecting the state government's offer for further negotiations. "Discussion time is over," Mayong declared, signalling the complete collapse of formal talks. "We have been shouting in the government's ear for 47 years. From our grandfather's generation to ours, we have been clear: there will be no Siang Dam. Either you have to exterminate the entire Adi community or it will not be built."

Mayong's stark ultimatum underscores deep-seated anxieties among the Adi community—a scheduled tribe whose cultural identity, indigenous governance structures and historical territory are tied to the mainstream Siang river. Mayong's pushback against the SUMP mega dam weaves together local self-determination, indigenous rights, environmental advocacy and administrative critique.

Mayong reiterated that the anti-dam movement is not anti-development. He advocated building micro or small-scale hydropower dams along the river's smaller tributaries rather than constructing a massive concrete structure across the main flow of Siang. Blocking the main channel, local activists argue, will permanently alter aquatic ecosystems, submerge sacred tribal and Buddhist sites, and destroy the river ecosystem that has sustained local agriculture for generations.

A key criticism raised by Mayong has to do with the militarisation of ancestral lands. The state government's deployment of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) and security personnel across the Abor, Adi and Siang valleys is viewed by the tribes as an attempt to intimidate local populations into accepting survey teams. Mayong has called on the Pema Khandu-led state administration to put an end to police harassment, withdrawal of security forces and release of all peaceful protesters jailed during the agitations—a demand the state government has since acceded to.

In his public addresses, Mayong detailed attempts by state officials to bypass collective indigenous consent by exploiting localised disputes. He alleged that administrative authorities attempted to pit neighbouring Adi villages and subclans against one another—Komkar against Geku, Simo against Karko—in a bid to secure consent signatures. Mayong emphasised that true community consent requires absolute consensus across all 60 affected villages, asserting that over 99 per cent residents stand firmly against the project.

The civil society resistance against the Siang project is being met with political obduracy. Tapir Gao, the BJP MP from Arunachal East constituency, is in favour of the project. During a recent public meeting in Tezu (Lohit district), Gao asserted that the Siang dam "will be built, come what may." While state and central authorities justify SUMP as a buffer against China's upstream hydro-engineering, Mayong directly challenges this premise.

He points out that the government had shifted the narrative on SUMP—from development (flood control and power generation) to national security (buffer against water bombing by the Chinese). Indian policymakers and diplomats, he added, should focus on diplomatic engagement with Beijing to negotiate formal water-sharing treaties rather than placing the burden of border security onto vulnerable indigenous border communities.



Photo: Getty Images

Members of the Adi tribe at a community meeting against the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project

*

Across the border in Tibet on the lower Yarlung Tsangpo—Arunachal's Siang and Assam's Brahmaputra—China commenced construction of the Medog hydropower station on 19 July 2025. Designed to be the world's largest hydropower installation, it has a planned capacity of 60 gigawatts and an annual power generation of roughly 300 terawatt-hours (TWh)—triple the capacity of the Three Gorges Dam. The project, estimated to cost around $150 billion, will achieve full commercial operations by 2033. The power generated will be transmitted via ultra-high-voltage lines to eastern China's industrial provinces and data centres.

99% of people across all 60 affected villages are against the Siang dam

Instead of a single massive dam, the Medog project will have five cascading hydropower stations and diversion tunnels bored through the Namcha Barwa mountain at Yarlung Tsangpo's Great Bend, bypassing a 2,000m drop over a short distance. While China officially maintains that the project will be designed as a 'run-of-the-river' style scheme—which, on paper, returns the water to the river after passing it through turbines rather than holding it back permanently—experts, regional governments and downstream communities remain deeply concerned about potential impacts on water availability.

The National Hydroelectric Power Corporation's SUMP will involve constructing a massive 300m high concrete gravity dam. The reservoir behind this dam will store 9.2 billion cubic metre of water, designed to act as a hydrological buffer during periods of excessive flow and controlled release during lean periods.

There is considerable debate among river experts, hydrologists and policymakers on whether the Medog project will pose a water-bomb threat or reduce the downstream flow. At the centre of this debate is the lack of reliable data on the Siang basin's hydrology. Three Chinese stations (Nugesha, Nuxia and Yangcun) that currently share rainfall data with India only give a partial picture as the Himalayan precipitation profile changes significantly around the Medog site.

"One can't rule out the possibility of flash floods or any sudden rush of water from upstream Yarlung Tsangpo. But the argument that the Brahmaputra will dry up due to the Medog project is not true. This is because most of the Brahmaputra is fed by rivers originating in India—downstream of Siang," river expert and scholar Nilanjan Ghosh told *National Herald*.

Ghosh explained that neither India nor China are signatories to the UN Watercourses Convention on non-navigational water use; other South Asian countries are. When the treaty was presented before the UN in 1997, China voted against it and India abstained. Neither are they signatories to regional treaties like the 1992 UNECE Water Convention—officially the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes—which originally covered Europe before opening up globally in 2016. Instead, India and China preferred to address such issues within a bilateral framework.

That is what Mayong alluded to when he urged Indian policymakers and diplomats to focus on 'higher' diplomatic engagement with Beijing. India is set to engage with Bangladesh over the Ganga Water-sharing treaty (which expires this December). The Siang may well open up a diplomatic Pandora's box, even as indigenous communities resist potential ecological erasure and physical displacement. ■

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

STATES 360°  PUNJAB

The Panthic voter: from Nankana Sahib to Instagram

Harjeshwar Pal Singh

A year ago this month, a little-known independent called Mandeep Singh polled nearly 20,000 votes in the Tarn Taran assembly bypoll. He neither won nor came second, but he pushed the Congress to fourth place in the heart of Majha. What he had was the backing of a jailed MP, Amritpal Singh, and the *ashirwad* of those written off by Punjab's pundits at least three times in thirty years: the Panthic voter.

Panth means 'the path'. In Sikh tradition, it came to mean the collective body of the Guru's followers. After Guru Gobind Singh, authority passed to the Guru Granth and the Guru Panth, so the community itself became sovereign. With *miri-piri*, the twin swords of spiritual and temporal power, religion and politics were never kept in separate compartments. The early Akalis said it plainly: they are one and the same.

The Panthic voter, then, is a Sikh who votes mainly through the lens of the Panth: its shrines, its institutions like the Akal Takht and the SGPC, its honour and its grievances. He is not necessarily a Khalistani or even an *amritdhari*; many are clean-shaven youngsters. What sets him apart is that the *qaum* comes before the party.

Panthic politics was born in the gurdwara reform movement of 1920-25, when the Sikhs fought to take historic shrines back from corrupt, loyalist *mahants*. The SGPC was formed in November 1920 and the Shiromani Akali Dal on 14 December the same year. About 130 Sikhs were killed at Nankana Sahib in 1921.

When the *Chabbian da Morcha* (the struggle for the keys of the Golden Temple) succeeded,



Panthic outreach? Sukhbir Singh Badal at a rally in Fatehgarh Sahib

Mahatama Gandhi wired Baba Kharak Singh: 'First decisive battle for India's freedom won'. The Gurdwaras Act of 1925 handed the shrines to an elected SGPC.

For seven decades, the Panthic voter was the backbone of regional Akali politics. He courted arrest during the Punjabi Suba movement (1966), the Emergency (1975), and the Dharam Yudh Morcha (1982). After Operation Bluestar and 1984, he turned to the radicals: in 1989, a jailed Simranjit Singh Mann won Tarn Taran by more than four lakh votes. Then came the retreat.

The radicals boycotted the 1992 polls, and less than a quarter of the electorate turned out to vote. In 1996, at Moga, Parkash Singh Badal moved the Akali Dal from 'Panth' to 'Punjab, Punjabi, Punjabiyat'.

In 1997, he sealed an alliance with the BJP. For two decades, the Panthic voter was a captive vote bank, taken for granted by a party that ran on the family, the *halqa* (constituency) system and the language of development.

Between 2015 and 2024, those ties foundered. The *beadbi* at Bargari, the firing at Behbal Kalan and pardoning the Dera chief broke the Badals' moral contract with the Panth. Agrarian distress, drugs, joblessness and the ensuing rush to Canada produced a restless generation, while social media provided a platform beyond the reach of any Badal.

The Kisan Andolan gave it confidence and, in Deep Sidhu, a new icon. When the AAP's promise of *badlav* faded, the neo-Panthics found their own vehicles: Mann in Sangrur (2022), Amritpal Singh and Sarabjeet Singh Khalsa (2024). Amritpal won the Khadoor Sahib Lok Sabha seat from Dibrugarh jail by nearly two lakh votes.

*

Yet the Panthic space today is more fractured than at any time since 1920. In December 2024, the Akal Takht declared Sukhbir Badal *tankhaiya*. In January 2025, Amritpal's Akali Dal (Waris Punjab De) was launched at the Maghi Mela in Muktsar. In August 2025, the rebels elected former Jathedar Giani Harpreet Singh to head the now floundering SAD (Punar Surjit), the first Dalit to lead any Akali faction. With Mann's SAD (Amritsar) still in the field, that makes four Akali Dals for one Panth. At Tarn Taran, the Badal Akali Dal and the Panthic candidate together polled about 50,000 votes, comfortably more than the AAP winner. Because they were divided, both lost.

So who is the Panthic voter of today? Recent field surveys in rural Malwa provide a rare close-up. Roughly one voter in six shows some Panthic attachment; about one in ten is committed to Amritpal or Mann.

Nearly two-thirds of committed Panthic voters are Jatt Sikhs—with a cross-caste fringe—one Jatt Sikh in four leans Panthic. Ramgarhias come next, with Dalit Sikhs comprising about a fifth of the core. Hindus are almost entirely absent, and that is the movement's glass ceiling.

The Panthic voter is young, male and, surprisingly, better educated than most. Among young Jatt Sikh men, nearly one in three is a committed Panthic voter. Support increases with education: graduates are more than twice as likely to vote Panthic as those who never went beyond middle school, the reverse of AAP's welfare base. Students are the most Panthic group; labourers the least. Today's Panthic voter is a 12th-pass, smartphone-carrying Jatt Sikh from a farming family; angry about drugs and jobs, scornful of handouts, suspicious of Delhi, devoted to a jailed leader, and ready to 'give the new party one chance'.

Most panthic voters name no national leader; Modi barely registers

Alongside the sons stand their mothers. Many middle-aged Jatt Sikh women back Amritpal for one reason: "*naujawani bachaunda*" (he saves our youth). Theirs is a vote against the *chitta* in their sons' veins, not a vote for Khalistan.

Drugs unite Punjab's voters. What distinguishes the Panthic voter is a broader sense of decay and injustice. He talks far more often about unemployment, corruption, *beadbi* and the release of the *Bandi Singhs*. It is Panth plus Punjab, with Sikh identity serving as the language of social anxiety.

He is proud, not poor. While many rural voters still give Bhagwant Mann's government a thumbs-up, the Panthic voter gives it a firm thumbs-down. Barely one in five credits the women's cash transfer. One respondent asked: "*Nang thodi aa lok, 1,500 naal rajj jange*? (Are these people beggars, to be satisfied with Rs 1,500?)"

This politics is about *anakh* (self-respect) and resentment of Delhi's *dakhal-andazi* (interference) as much as it is about scripture.

The Panthic voter's loyalty is not set in stone. Only about two in five of those who voted for Amritpal or Sarabjeet in 2024 plan to stay with the new party. At the same time, about a quarter of today's committed Panthic voters are former AAP voters—one in seven did not vote in 2024. The Panthic vote is less a fortress than a busy railway platform, with passengers getting on and off at every station.

It is a one-leader movement with no use for national leaders. Unlike the Badal loyalist, who votes for the party symbol, the Panthic voter weighs the candidate first.

More than three-quarters of the core name Amritpal as their favourite, while Mann, the old standard-bearer, has all but vanished. Nearly nine in ten name no national leader at all; Modi barely registers.

The reel has replaced the village *sath*. Four in five get their political news from Facebook, Instagram or YouTube. Support grows *pind* by *pind* (village by village). In some villages, two out of three voters are Panthic. Once the gurdwara committee or the youth club turns, the entire *pind* often follows.

Events also matter. After the killing of anti-drug activist Parvinder Jhota in October, many sympathisers in the area hardened into committed Panthic voters almost overnight.

In the rural Malwa belt, the Panthic and Badal votes together make up between one-third to two-fifths of the electorate. That is enough to decide who rules Punjab, but only if it votes as one.

History is clear: the Panth has been most powerful when it marched as one *jatha* (band), and most irrelevant when its leaders fought over the *siropa* (robe of honour). ■

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

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CENSUS 2027

Another fraudulent register of citizens in the making?

Herjinder

Census 2027 asks 148 crore people to trust the State with their information. That trust gets shaky when the government is collecting unprecedented amounts of personal data through a proprietary platform that has a history of being hacked in a cyberespionage case.

Traditionally, a Census gathers demographic and housing information to frame public policy. Census 2027 goes further, seeking personal identifiers that raise serious questions about privacy, surveillance and the State's interest in citizens' data.

A notification of 14 August 2026, under Section 8(1) of the Census Act, 1948, lists 40 subjects for the Household Schedule, against 29 questions in 2011. Most of these—questions of age, religion, language, education, occupation, migration, for instance—are conventional, but Census 2027 will gather additional details that mark an alarming departure from the old demographic enumeration.

Items 35 to 40 seek the number of bank accounts, mobile number, Aadhaar number, EPIC (Voter ID) number and passport number and driving licence number for those who have it. As *Down To Earth* pointed out, no Indian Census between 1872 and 2011 sought document numbers. Item 34 even asks where the person received the COVID-19 vaccine. Why?

These personal identifiers could link Census records directly to government and commercial databases, including Aadhaar, voter rolls, passport records, mobile connections and banking systems. The result could be a detailed personal profile rather than an anonymous demographic snapshot.

Economist Dipa Sinha says this goes against the very logic of the Census: "The idea of a Census is to count, not identify."

The question, then, is: what statistical purpose does recording these document numbers, which link them to individuals, serve? Both the Census Act, 1948, and the United Nations' fundamental principles for censuses stress that individual population data must stay confidential. Section 15 of the Act protects census records from inspection and makes them inadmissible as evidence. If the data is meant to be anonymous, what purpose does the collection of these numbers serve?

The Household Schedule also seeks the names of parents, their religion and place of birth, down to the village level. Married persons are asked about their spouses. Digital rights groups argue that such intergenerational information goes beyond counting the present population, allowing the State to build family profiles and track individuals across generations.

The issue is not merely whether the government is legally entitled to ask for such information. It is whether citizens understand how the information that is being collected will be used, who will have access, how long it will be retained and whether it can later be linked to another government database. Against the background of earlier debates over citizenship and the NPR-NRC framework, the drive to gather granular personal information and the absence of clearly articulated boundaries on the use of this data is a big concern.

How will the personal data that is being collected be used and who will have access?

It is not even an option to withhold information, since participation is compulsory. When citizens must disclose personal, financial and ancestral information under threat of penal action, consent becomes notional. The Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF) argues that the compulsion to disclose information places a heightened obligation on the State to minimise the nodes of data it seeks.

In effect, the ongoing exercise appears designed to de-anonymise Census data. K. Narayanan Unni, former deputy registrar general of India, says: "It appears the government is planning to use the data collected to update the National Population Register prepared in 2011, or prepare it afresh."

*

The concerns around the collection of personal data acquire a bleeding edge with the government's decision to procure ArcGIS, a geographical information system from US company Esri, for mapping, creating enumeration blocks and processing demographic data. The registrar general's office has bought 96 licences for Rs 14.39 crore.

Researchers at US cybersecurity firm ReliaQuest documented a case in which a Chinese state-linked group, assessed with moderate confidence to be Flax Typhoon, compromised an ArcGIS server belonging to an unnamed organisation and kept covert access for over a year. Esri blames an exposed management interface without multifactor authentication and an overprivileged account—a compromised deployment, not necessarily compromised software. That distinction offers little reassurance.

Cyberlaw expert Pawan Duggal is blunt: "Using such software is against the sovereignty of the country." He argues that due diligence and a proper audit are essential before such applications are deployed, and if India cannot avoid foreign software, it must insist on access to the complete source code.

Then there is the US CLOUD [Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data] Act, which requires US-based providers to disclose data in their control to American authorities, even when stored overseas, subject to legal processes.

Apar Gupta of IFF underlines the stakes: "The software is recording the geospatial details of every resident of India. Imagine if this data is in the control of somebody other than the government of India. What does it mean?"

The procurement itself raises questions. According to IFF, which investigated the purchase, the licences were acquired through a 'proprietary article certificate', which permits buying without competitive tender when a product is deemed necessary. The contract, awarded on 10 June 2026, went to Corporate Infotech Private Limited for Rs 14,38,74,322. All four bidders offered the same Esri India product.

IFF says the government relied on a 2019 file to continue with the same platform and asks whether any fresh technical assessment preceded the 2026 purchase. India already has ISRO's Bhuvan, and open-source GIS offers other options. The government must disclose whether alternatives were evaluated and why they were rejected. Also, buying through an Indian reseller does not establish tech sovereignty.

IFF's RTI applications and letters to the registrar general and Esri India had not been answered when its report was published.

A Census is strictly mandated to maintain the anonymity of citizen data. This exercise, earlier conducted on paper and reliant on people, is now being done digitally, featuring interconnected software, devices and networks, each a potential point of vulnerability. Independent security audits and clear accountability is the least the government owes 148 crore Indians who must participate in the exercise and have no legal protection if they don't wish to disclose personal information. ■



Photo: Getty Images

Profiling citizens? The design of Census 2027 will make it possible to identify and potentially target citizens

What the ECI's backdoor changes don't fix

Nandlal Sharma

Street protests are giving the Election Commission of India (ECI) sleepless nights. Facing mounting allegations of 'vote chori', the Commission is scrambling to change its rules. Its latest U-turn concerns voters in Delhi, Maharashtra, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Telangana and Nagaland who were classified as ASDD (Absent, Shifted, Dead or Duplicate) during the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) and struck off electoral rolls.

They are now being asked to fill in fresh enumeration forms and submit in writing their reasons for failing to do so the first time. Meanwhile, after the public outcry over the SIR became impossible to ignore, the Commission is conducting a Special Summary Revision (SSR) in 23 states and Union Territories. A special *summary* revision right after a special *intensive* revision! Even if some names are restored after this SSR, who will vouch for the integrity of the process and the new rolls? Surely not the same ECI?

Former deputy election commissioner Noor Mohammad says, "The Commission is indirectly finding new ways to scrutinise a voter's eligibility. Nobody has the authority to demand a statement from a voter and, in the process, change the conditions for being recognised as a voter."

Under the Representation of the People Act, 1950, the eligibility norms are simple: a person must be an Indian citizen and at least 18 years old. Yet the ECI is demanding additional explanations from voters deleted by none other than the ECI. On what legal basis?

The Commission's retreat began only after citizens, civil society organisations and the Opposition started clamouring unitedly for the resignation of CEC Gyanesh Kumar, for the scrapping of the SIR, and a reversal of the changes to the 2023 law governing the appointment of ECs (which also grants them lifelong immunity from prosecution). As the public turned up the heat on the ECI's opaque and arbitrary functioning, it hurriedly started chopping and changing its own (arbitrary) rules.

Yet Gyanesh Kumar stays firmly ensconced and there is no sign yet that the judiciary will revisit its clean chit to the SIR. Reassuringly, though, the agitations in the national capital and beyond have demonstrated beyond doubt that citizens are now alive to the shenanigans of the ECI under Gyanesh Kumar.

There are several serious charges against the Commission:

Gyanesh Kumar is still around and there is no sign yet that the judiciary will revisit its clean chit to the SIR

wrongfully deleting over 13 crore names from the electoral rolls, tinkering with Form 6 without parliamentary approval, using the ECINet platform to centrally control the electoral rolls and conspiring to manipulate elections held in the aftermath of the SIR.

The Form 6 controversy is particularly revealing. Prescribed under the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, Form 6 is a statutory document that only the central government can formally amend. Yet during the SIR, the Commission added an additional declaration to its online version, asking voters for details linking them or their parents and grandparents to earlier SIR electoral rolls. As revealed in the *Indian Express* report (23 September 2026), two election commissioners, Vivek Joshi and S.S. Sandhu objected. Following sustained criticism, the ECI finally removed this declaration from the online Form 6 on 21 October.

Worse, existing voters whose names had disappeared from draft rolls were being forced to submit Form 6 to seek re-enrolment. Form 6 requires applicants to declare that they are seeking registration for the first time and are not registered in another constituency. Voters rightly feared that signing it would amount to a false declaration, inviting prosecution under Section 31 of the Representation of the People Act.

On 3 November, the ECI declared that previously registered voters excluded from the SIR draft rolls could submit Form 6 without facing action. Which law or code entitles the ECI to now issue this guarantee after first illegally modifying the form itself?

The issue reached the Supreme Court during hearings on a petition filed by transparency activists Anjali Bhardwaj and Amrita Johri. The court observed that enumeration forms or Form 8 should be used to restore existing voters' names, rather than forcing them to make false declarations.

In a statement on 7 November 2026, the Voter Adhikar Manch asked why the latest corrective measure applied to only seven states. What about states where the SIR is already complete? West Bengal has even held elections using rolls prepared through this exercise. The organisation demanded that original EPIC numbers be restored and 'left out' voters reinstated in every state where the SIR was conducted.

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Photo: Getty Images

Citizens in Kolkata rally around a demand to scrap the SIR

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
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Students are on the warpath

…and not only for student rights. Nandlal Sharma reports on the Jantar Mantar effect

The Modi government may have succeeded in turning Jantar Mantar into a fortress, but they couldn't stop the energy sparked by the student-youth movement of July 2026 from spreading across the country, turning varsity campuses into powerful sites of protest.

At Delhi's Ambedkar University (Kashmere Gate), students staged a 17-day hunger strike demanding basic facilities. We pay lakhs in annual fees, they said, but: why are we not allowed to enter and exit through the university's main gate? Why are roads leading to the campus unsafe for women students? Why are there no teachers? Why is there no playground on campus? Why is the park reserved exclusively for the vice-chancellor? Why are PhD students required to mark biometric attendance? Why must students obtain written permission four days in advance to hold any meeting or protest?

The administration responded by turning the campus into a prison. A three-tier security cordon was set up to confine students. Security guards were forbidden to bring in food, students could not order meals, even ambulances were denied entry.

On 13 October, security personnel forcibly stopped a public screening of *Jai Bhim Comrade*, Anand Patwardhan's 2011 documentary. They tore down protest posters, injured several students and ripped the clothes of women protesters. The following day, police evicted all students from the protest site and the university suspended 11 students on charges of vandalism and clashes with security personnel. The students approached the Delhi High Court, which quashed the order.

Blessy, an MA student of gender studies, was among those suspended. She summed it up: "This isn't Ambedkar University, it's Tihar Jail. In jail, at least you get your meals on time. In a university, if a student asks questions, you won't even get food."



Photo: Getty Images

Students of Jamia Millia Islamia celebrate with a victory march

At Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), on 21 September, MA (Urdu) student Yasir Fahad began an indefinite hunger strike at the historic Duck Point. His demand: immediate restoration of student union elections, suspended for eight years. On 9 October, the administration announced elections and voting took place on 5 November. Their success inspired students at Jamia Millia Islamia in Delhi, where the fight centred on alleged opacity in spot admissions and the restoration of student union elections (suspended for two decades).

The Jamia demonstration began on 12 October. On 24 October, the protest site was vandalised during negotiations, personal belongings damaged, and attempts made to take hunger-strikers into custody under the pretext of hospitalisation.

According to the Students' Federation of India (SFI), the police imposed Section 163, erected barricades and detained students. The administration shifted classes online, restricted access to libraries and reading rooms, and ordered students to vacate hostels. The students held firm. After 18 days of hunger strike, the administration was forced to back down and agree to the restoration of the student union elections.

At Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), too, student satyagraha prevailed. On Day 17 of an indefinite hunger strike launched by the students' union, the administration was forced to yield. Alongside basic demands, they agreed to revoke the unjust expulsion of union office-bearers and the former president, and withdraw proctorial inquiries and FIRs related to the protests.

Students are not fighting for students' rights only. They have since rallied behind more than 700 campus workers employed in sanitation, mess, security, gardening and maintenance services who are protesting wage cuts, unpaid statutory bonuses, arbitrary suspensions and other violations of labour rights.

Women students have been leading the charge. At Delhi University, they organised '*Hum Auratein Azaad Hain*' (We Women Are Free) marches across campuses, demanding safety, freedom and the right to occupy public spaces without fear. Their slogans—"Tear down the society that keeps women shackled" and "We have a right to the night too"—captured the anger of a generation unwilling to accept the domination of patriarchy.

From the night march at JNU's Sabarmati dhaba to the '*Pinjra Tod*' (Break the Cage) slogan at Delhi University, the message was unmistakable: "We want safety, not restrictions that treat us like prisoners." With Neha, Mudita and Nadia showing the way, students have been uninhibited in their dissent and united in their fight, without necessarily organising under any particular flag.

In West Bengal, the struggle has taken on a broader political dimension. Students of Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute (SRFTI), Jadavpur University and Presidency University are resisting what they see as saffron thuggery.

On 27 September, SRFTI students protested an event organised by the RSS-affiliated Akhil Bharatiya Grahak Panchayat, questioning the presence of politically aligned organisations on a publicly funded campus. The protest escalated into a violent confrontation. On 4 October, members of the Bangiya Hindu Jagran Manch were accused of throwing bricks and bottles at students. When the administration expelled six students in mid-October, protesters demanded their reinstatement, the vice-chancellor's resignation and better campus security.

> *"The students are no longer afraid of repression by RSS-backed VCs or the ruling establishment"*

At Jadavpur University, Left- and ABVP-affiliated students clashed over a general body meeting on 20 August. At Presidency, an ABVP poster featuring Swami Vivekananda triggered controversy. Ever since the BJP 'took' Bengal, students are on the warpath against the RSS's attempts to gain control of the state's educational institutions.

The resistance extends well beyond Bengal and Delhi. At Allahabad University, protests against fee hikes and a cut of 6,000 seats began in July 2026 and intensified in October. On 6 October, students organised a mass mobilisation and blocked the university's main gate, while women students took out a 'Freedom March' demanding safety and autonomy. Students of IISER Pune boycotted classes over stringent hostel rules.

At Banaras Hindu University, women students organised a candlelight march and indefinite sit-in opposing the 10 p.m. hostel curfew and discriminatory rules. At Lucknow University, students protested for more than 50 days (from 2 June) against fee hikes and the 'dictatorial' expulsion of three student leaders—Prem Prakash Yadav, Prince Prakash and Harshit Shukla—on charges of indiscipline.

"If the Jantar Mantar movement had not happened (forcing Dharmendra Pradhan's resignation), our suspensions would never have been revoked," says Vishal Singh, a PhD scholar at Lucknow University.

The footprint extends from Gorakhpur to Patna, from Pune's Savitribai Phule University to Mumbai University's Kalina campus, from Kalady's Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit to Mewat Engineering University (where protests ended after assurances from the Waqf Board (Haryana) and authorities).

The movement has also exposed institutional failures around mental health. The suicide of 31-year-old IIT Delhi student Rishikesh Kumar on 24 August rallied over 2,000 students. It took eight suicides in 30 months, an indefinite sit-in and an emotional appeal by Rishikesh's mother for the administration to constitute an inquiry committee headed by a former high court judge.

At IIT Bombay, the suicide of BTech student Sahil Wakode on 18 September sparked a three-day 'Students' Lives Matter' protest, with an 18-point demands' charter.

The country's top law schools have also been touched by the spirit of rebellion. In August, more than 400 students at Hyderabad's National Academy of Legal Studies and Research opposed inviting Chief Justice Surya Kant to their convocation. The controversy deepened when Bar Council of India chairman and BJP MP Manan Mishra wrote to put the enrolment of the 2026 graduating batch on hold. At Bengaluru's National Law School of India University, hundreds of students and alumni similarly opposed the presence of senior judicial officials.

SFI national president Adarsh M. Shaji believes the Jantar Mantar movement has given students the confidence to fight back. "They are no longer afraid of repression by RSS-backed vice-chancellors or the ruling establishment. Students are fighting to protect the very foundations of education."

The resistance across campuses makes one thing clear: the battle is far from over. Jantar Mantar is everywhere. Victory is infectious. Dissent is unstoppable. ■

What the ECI's fixes do not fix

Continued from page 3

It warned that wrongful deletions cannot be buried under the revision of the revision. In Delhi, where the SIR allegedly deleted one in three voters, a missive issued midway through the process cannot undo the damage. The only credible remedy is to withdraw the flawed SIR in toto and conduct a fresh exercise through transparent, public audits at the booth level.

The U-turns extend to its IT operations as well. New modules and portals being developed under director general (IT) Seema Khanna will now have to pass through a committee of officers before being submitted to the ECI for approval. Joshi and Sandhu had objected that these systems were being developed without their knowledge. Khanna has also been instructed to route files through the senior deputy election commissioner rather than send them directly to the ECI.

Both Joshi and Sandhu had demanded an audit of ECINet. On 14 October, the ECI constituted a committee, headed by a senior deputy election commissioner, to examine whether the platform complies with relevant laws and regulations. Proposed changes will apparently give grassroots officials greater authority and autonomy. Special drives have been ordered in states where the SIR is complete, alongside the SSR now under way.

But these administrative 'adjustments' are no more than cosmetic.

On 30 October 2026, Yogendra Yadav placed seven questions before the public that the Commission is yet to answer:

1. Who took the decision to conduct the SIR?
2. How did the ECI alter Form 6?
3. How did the Commission transfer the powers of electoral registration officers (EROs) to its IT division?
4. Who filed 16 lakh cases in West Bengal?
5. Which software determined logical discrepancies during the SIR?
6. How were large numbers of Form 7 applications filed simultaneously, and how could an official file Form 7?
7. If the SIR is complete, how are Form 8 applications still being accepted? Such a case occurred in Pilibhit. What guarantees it has not happened elsewhere, and why does the Commission's system have no mechanism to prevent it?

Nikhil Dey, a social activist associated with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, says the agitation will continue. "The entire process of adding and deleting names operates within a government-controlled framework. BLOs and EROs are government employees. The Election Commission listens only to the government. We therefore demand a public audit of electoral rolls three months before every election. The Commission must publicly read out names and explain who is being marked as shifted and who is being deleted. Only this can restore the confidence of citizens and political parties."

Dey makes another fundamental point: "Suppose the SIR is cancelled and a 'good' chief election commissioner is appointed. Even then, the citizen's future stays in the ECI's hands. That is something we cannot accept."

Can the ECI duck accountability by announcing a series of U-turns before the forthcoming assembly elections? Noor Mohammad is unequivocal: "Patchwork will not work. The Election Commission has weaponised Forms 6, 7 and 8. A particular political party is supporting this entire process. Public trust cannot be restored unless the entire exercise is cancelled. Ideally, the entire Commission should be replaced. Why is the government not taking the initiative? The Election Commission has run out of options."

The point is inescapable: an institution entrusted with protecting the citizen's right to vote cannot keep changing the rules, deleting names and offering belated clarifications without answering for its actions. Public trust cannot be restored through administrative patchwork. The ECI must answer for the damage already done. ■

Unpaid bills, broken promises, rising deaths

Delayed government payments have pushed contractors in Maharashtra to the brink

Jaideep Hardikar

On 19 October, contractors in Amravati, about 150 km from Nagpur, performed a mock funeral of the Maharashtra government. On 2 November, they returned to the PWD office to perform a symbolic *terhvi* (the 13th day ritual). Their grievance: non-payment of work completed two or three years back. The Maharashtra State Contractors Association (MSCA) claims over one lakh contractors are awaiting dues of Rs 90,000 crore to Rs 1 lakh crore.

Amravati is the latest in a long list. For over a year, the MSCA and its branches have protested—in Kolhapur, Nagpur and other towns in August 2025; in Mumbai in April 2026.

Contractors say they are drowning under loans, machines lie idle, workers remain unpaid and suppliers refuse further credit. Driven by debt, at least nine contractors have reportedly died by suicide in the past 18 months.

The latest protest has been triggered by the suicide of Sunil Wagadre, a 52-year-old contractor from Jarud in Amravati district. His family says he was owed nearly Rs 2.5 crore for work completed in 2023-24. In his suicide note, Sunil reportedly asked his nephew to sell part of his property and repay loans. His wife Varsha told the *Indian Express* that repeated requests for payment yielded nothing. "Now, I just want the government to return my husband."

Wagadre's death is not isolated. In September 2025, Nagpur-based contractor P.V. Verma took his life. His pending dues: Rs 40 crore. In July 2025, Sangli's Harshal Patil died by suicide. His family said nearly Rs 60 lakh remained unpaid. In August 2026, after Navi Mumbai contractor Gajanan Devkate killed himself, his family alleged officials had demanded a bribe to clear Rs 2.5 crore in outstanding payments.

The crisis raises a fundamental question: how can a government that commissions public infrastructure leave its financing to those executing the projects? Contractors are, in effect, becoming involuntary financiers and bearing the burden of debt.

Small and medium contractors are particularly vulnerable. They borrow at exorbitant interest rates. Buy cement, steel, pipes and machinery, hire labour and transport. After completing the government-contracted work, they submit bills and wait for certification and payment even as interest accumulates, suppliers and workers demand their dues, and household expenses continue. A delay of several months can hurt; two or three years can destroy.

This was evident in Harshal Patil's case. Maharashtra water resources minister Gulabrao Patil reportedly said that Patil was not registered under the relevant scheme and that no bill was pending in his name. The MSCA countered that he had executed the work as a subcontractor and depended on the principal contractor receiving payment. This bureaucratic distinction may be valid contractually, but does little to address the plight of the person who executes the work.

The dues, as per MSCA, include Rs 40,000 crore from the PWD, Rs 12,000 crore (Jal Jeevan Mission), Rs 6,000 crore (rural development), Rs 13,000 crore (water resources and conservation) and Rs 18,000 crore (for urban development). In April 2026, contractors put outstanding dues at Rs 96,400 crore. Other reports say Rs 76,000 to Rs 86,000 crore.

> *A delay of even a few months can hurt small businesses; two or three years can destroy them*



Contractors and subcontractors demand their dues at a protest in Kolhapur

The government disputes these claims. Public works minister Shivendraraje Bhosale said Rs 17,000 crore in PWD bills were pending, of which Rs 6,200 crore had been cleared. The gap between the two estimates remains unexplained, with no independent, department-wise accounting of bills submitted, certified, sanctioned and paid.

Maharashtra remains India's largest state economy, with projected gross state domestic product (GSDP) of around Rs 54 lakh crore in 2026-27. Yet its latest budget estimates a fiscal deficit of Rs 1.50 lakh crore and a revenue deficit of Rs 40,552 crore. Outstanding liabilities are projected at 20.4 per cent of GSDP. Salaries, pensions and interest payments alone account for nearly Rs 3.38 lakh crore in committed spends. Public debt is at Rs 10 lakh crore.

The late Ajit Pawar, who held the finance portfolio, had assured contractors their bills would be cleared in stages. After his death earlier this year, the ministry is under Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis. Many of the works awaiting payment were awarded by the pre-2024 Eknath Shinde government.

Contractors' associations allege that a disproportionate number of work orders were issued ahead of the November 2024 assembly elections, without adequate budgetary provision. Opposition leaders and contractors also allege that politically connected contractors receive preferential payments, while smaller, local contractors are made to wait.

The Jal Jeevan Mission deserves particular attention. Contractors claim tens of thousands of crores remain unpaid under the programme, jointly funded by the Union and state governments. It is essential to establish how much was allocated, how much the Centre has released, the state's contribution, how much work has been completed and certified, and how much has been paid.

The Congress too has repeatedly sought an audit of schemes. The MSCA is demanding department-wise registers of outstanding bills, recording submission and payment dates. It also wants time-bound payments, accountability for officials sitting on certified bills, and an audit of work orders. Subcontractors want statutory protection from the consequences of payment disputes. ■

STATES 360°  J&K

Credibility crisis amid political revolt

Haroon Reshi



Photo: Getty Images

Turning point? Aga Ruhullah Mehdi addresses his supporters at Behisht-e-Zehra park in Budgam on 3 November before announcing his decision to quit the National Conference and resign from Parliament

It's still too early to say whether Aga Ruhullah Mehdi's departure from the National Conference (NC) and Parliament on 3 November has damaged the party more or his own political career. This public rift, however, highlights serious concerns about the party's leadership, ideological commitment and ability to fulfil its electoral promises in Jammu and Kashmir.

Whether Ruhullah's decision is a principled political stand or a self-defeating gamble remains unclear. But his exit has certainly dented the NC's public image, exposing cracks in the party over promises it made in the 2024 election and its relationship with some of its own prominent leaders.

For the NC, the political cost is significant. The party fought the 2024 elections on the promise of restoring constitutional safeguards and special status, particularly Article 370.

Two years on, Ruhullah's accusation that the party has abandoned its manifesto resonates with the people. The fact remains that after securing a considerable mandate in 2024 amid high public expectations, the NC is warding off criticism initiated by one of its own.

Ruhullah is no ordinary dissenter. A three-time MLA from Budgam and MP from Srinagar, he has been with the NC for over two decades and was also involved in preparing the 2024 manifesto.

His principal contention is that the party has shifted its priorities from fighting to restore Article 370 to the restoration of statehood alone, shelving more forceful political action.

The revolt has spotlighted other unmet commitments: an injudicious reservation policy that disadvantages open-merit students and job-seekers; failure to generate employment, including the promised goal of creating one lakh jobs; free electricity and LPG; and inadequate efforts to secure the release of political prisoners and protect civil rights.

In truth, this confrontation has exposed the growing gap between the party's electoral promises and performance.

Questions are being raised about the party leadership, particularly its inability to reconcile with Ruhullah, who had publicly indicated his intention to resign months in advance.

His eventual departure has reinforced perceptions that the party was either unwilling or unable to address internal criticism, thereby missing a chance to publicly explain its constitutional and political strategy convincingly.

Moving forward, the NC faces the daunting task of crafting a fresh political narrative and credible manifesto in anticipation of mid-term elections for the Srinagar Lok Sabha seat and other future contests. Simply repeating old promises about autonomy, statehood, free utilities and jobs will not suffice. Voters increasingly demand transparency and accountability.

Meanwhile, the issue has handed NC's political rivals a readymade narrative.

The NC faces a credibility crisis; simply repeating old promises will not be enough

At the public gathering at Behisht-e-Zehra Park in Budgam, Ruhullah handed his resignation to Muhammad Ashraf Mattoo, father of Tufail Mattoo, a teenager killed in a 2010 police firing, when the NC was in power.

Critics were quick to point out Ruhullah's own association with the NC at the time. If the party was responsible for the deaths of several teenagers during the 2010 unrest, why, if he was genuinely sympathetic towards the victims of 2010, had he not voiced his concerns earlier? They accuse him of indulging in political theatrics by choosing Mattoo to convey the break.

The NC, meanwhile, has questioned Ruhullah's parliamentary record and his contribution as an MP towards the restoration of special status and statehood.

Party leaders say the NC provided him with an established political organisation, a recognisable electoral symbol, a network of workers and a presence across Jammu and Kashmir which helped him secure multiple electoral victories in Budgam and Srinagar.

Some critics have even suggested that the entire episode was staged at the behest of the BJP. These allegations gained traction after BJP leader Ram Madhav welcomed Ruhullah's exit and said he had the support and blessings of the people.

The NC, too, has alleged that his departure fits the BJP's strategy. While there is no evidence to establish that the BJP orchestrated Ruhullah's resignation, the schism certainly plays to the BJP's advantage by fracturing the region's main opposition.

If indeed his objective is to fight for the rights of the people of Kashmir, the path ahead is uncertain.

Ruhullah says he is looking for honest and committed people to build an alternative political force. Whether he can translate this intention into a viable political movement remains to be seen. Success will depend on his ability to organise effectively, articulate a clear, coherent agenda and broaden his public appeal.

Only time will tell whether Ruhullah's gambit will pay off or whether he will meet the fate of Ghulam Nabi Azad, who quit the Congress in August 2022 after decades of association with the party and then saw his political stock wither. ■

A Band-aid for a deep injury

It will take more than a two-year extension to correct the colossal blunder that is the Agnipath scheme

Rashme Sehgal

Vijay Kumar, who served in the Indian Army's Corps of Military Police for 24 years before retiring to his village Charkula in Uttar Pradesh, is a disillusioned man. A third-generation *fauji*, he has two sons who joined the army. The elder enlisted as a jawan for a fixed tenure of 24 years; the younger, Adesh Kumar, signed up as an Agniveer under the four-year Agnipath scheme. After training, Adesh was posted to Arunachal Pradesh. On 24 March 2026, he was killed in crossfire between Chinese and Indian forces.

Kumar has many questions about his son's death. "We were told there have been no exchanges of fire between Indian and Chinese soldiers. If so, how did my son get injured? I am suspicious of the circumstances under which he died. He died on a holiday, the very day he was to go on leave for his brother's wedding. When his body was brought home, no one from the government came to offer us a word of comfort." He adds, "We were given his insurance money and dues as an Agniveer, and informed he would receive the remaining amount after the court of inquiry. When regular soldiers die, they are treated as martyrs and given a befitting send-off. Not so with Agniveers. What status do they have, if any?"

Sohan Singh and his wife Chandravati live in Mathura district with their two sons. The elder is a regular jawan on permanent commission, the younger an Agniveer. Chandravati says, "Where are the employment opportunities? Young boys opt for whatever they can get. While my elder son received several marriage proposals and is now married, we have not received a single proposal for our younger son. No one wants an unemployed son-in-law."

As many as 20 families have sought 'martyr' status for Agniveer sons killed in combat or accidents. In January 2024, Ludhiana's Charanjit Singh lost his 23-year-old son Ajay in a landmine blast near the LoC in J&K's Rajouri district. Singh, a labourer, said, "My son's sacrifice deserves the same respect and dignity given to regular soldiers." Though he received Rs 40 lakh from insurance and another Rs 48 lakh from the army, he believes a martyr's family should receive the pension and medical benefits given to permanent soldiers. Families see this disparity as unbecoming of the armed forces. As Charanjit Singh's sister asked, "Was my brother a lesser mortal?"

Military expert Pravin Sawhney, editor of defence magazine *Force*, points out, "We have a huge boundary with China and Pakistan. We say our border with China is 3,488 km long, but the Chinese claim it is only 500 km. In Arunachal Pradesh, our border extends for over 3,000 km. There have been faceoffs between the Chinese and Indian armies at multiple locations, and tensions continue to simmer. The government can deny it, but recent comments by Shatrujeet Kapur, director general of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, confirm that these skirmishes are occurring."

Sawhney adds: "On 23 October 2021, the Chinese government passed a boundary law declaring territorial disputes a matter of national sovereignty [it went into effect on 1 January 2022]. They continue their salami slicing, and we must hold on to everything we have on the ground. Denying these faceoffs will further embolden the Chinese."

When the army needs manpower but the government wants to cut corners, what does it do? It introduces what Sawhney calls a "ridiculous scheme", where two categories of soldiers perform "similar jobs" but receive dissimilar treatment. "This immediately affects *esprit de corps*, camaraderie and regimental bonding. Command will falter. When a scheme creates disharmony, why will an Agniveer lay down his life for his regiment?" he asks.

Disparity in service norms was among the reasons military experts opposed the Agnipath scheme in 2022. Four years later, with the first batch due to complete its tenure by end-November 2026, the government has announced an overhaul. The remaining Agniveers—75 per cent of recruits—who were due to retire will receive a two-year extension.

Commenting on this rollback, Captain Yogendra Singh Yadav, a Kargil war hero and Param Vir Chakra awardee, wrote on social media: 'Following the extension, will Agniveers now get promotions and increments? If they excel in sports, will they be allowed to train for another two years? Why was Agnipath introduced only in the army, and not the other security forces (namely the CRPF, Border Security Force and ITBP)? The armed forces are a nation's final line of defence, yet the government was willing to experiment. Warfare has shifted to a technological, multi-domain model. When direct entry is available in other security forces at inspector, subedar and havaldar levels, why not recruit qualified B.Techs and M.Techs into the army under this scheme?'

Former chief of army staff V.N. Malik also believes Agnipath has pushed younger people towards paramilitary services rather than the army. Disparity within the services is untenable, he says, warning that without training and integrating these recruits into the army, "we will have a major problem on our hands".

Several military experts argue that the revised scheme has not addressed fundamental flaws. Lack of continuity will undermine operational readiness and combat experience, particularly since regular soldier recruitment has stopped altogether. With troop strength at around 12.48 lakh, the army faces a shortage of 1 lakh to 1.8 lakh soldiers. The shortfall is most acute among JCOs and NCOs (around 92,410). The deficit among officers is around 16 per cent, with thousands of vacancies for captains and majors.

India's defence forces are not a laboratory for an experimental employment scheme. The earlier recruitment system was built on experience, continuity, competence and commitment, ensuring operational effectiveness, preserving regimental ethos and offering reasonable career progression.

India's defence forces are not a laboratory for an experimental job scheme

Lt General Zameeruddin Shah (retd) calls Agnipath "a colossal blunder". He says, "I spent 20 years in my regiment. I knew every jawan, where he came from, his village, family background, even his sons' names. If one-third of the men change every year, the entire ethos gets diluted. The regimental system brought together individuals from the same area, speaking the same language and following similar social norms. That was a great unifier. Constant shuffling will change everything."

Former admiral Arun Prakash is equally blunt: "Given the possibility of our unstable northern and western borders becoming 'live' at short notice, any systemic change affecting combat effectiveness must be introduced cautiously and progressively."

Rear Admiral Sudhir Pillai (retd), like several military strategists, argues that modern warfare has evolved into multi-domain digital conflict driven by AI, autonomous systems and network integration. The more sophisticated the machine, the more experienced its operator must be. Military effectiveness depends on recruits becoming skilled operators and supervisors, capable of providing technical support and solving problems with the immediacy that can mean the difference between life and death.

Another crucial question is what happens when Agniveers leave the service. Even with a two-year extension, what skills will equip a 26- or 27-year-old to find private-sector employment? Reserving 50 per cent vacancies in CAPFs and Assam Rifles for former Agniveers raises its own problems, given differences in duties and long working hours. Several state governments had promised jobs when the scheme was launched, but that enthusiasm has waned given their inability to create employment.

Whatever official spin the government puts on its latest face-saver, this tactical retreat has evidently taken place on Prime Minister Modi's orders. He knows how unpopular the scheme is. With elections approaching in Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal and Punjab, he needs to blunt the opposition. This expediency comes at the cost of the army's combat effectiveness. The country's security has been imperilled by the foolhardy introduction of an untried recruitment system. ■





Agniveers like Adesh (*inset*)**, killed in crossfire on the Arunachal Pradesh border, deserve the same respect as regular soldiers**

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Israel, with or without Benjamin Netanyahu

In the foreseeable future, expect nothing more than a diplomatic dressing for the settler-colonial project, writes Ashok Swain



Photo: Getty Images

Leader of Yashar Party Gadi Eisenkot poses for a photoshoot before entering the Knesset on 10 November

The prospect of Benjamin Netanyahu losing power after dominating Israeli politics for nearly two decades has created expectations of a political turning point. President Isaac Herzog's decision to entrust former military chief Gadi Eisenkot with forming a government has brought Israel closer to a post-Netanyahu era. Yet the most important question is not whether Netanyahu finally leaves office. It is whether his departure will change Israel's treatment of Palestinians under its occupation, its regional military adventurism or its dependence on American support.

The answer is likely to disappoint those hoping for fundamental transformation. Eisenkot may replace Netanyahu's confrontational rhetoric with diplomatic sophistication and institutional respectability. He may restrain extremist settlers and permit limited humanitarian reconstruction in Gaza. But the occupation, settlement expansion, rejection of Palestinian sovereignty and overwhelming reliance on its military power are unlikely to disappear. Israel could acquire a more acceptable international face without substantially changing its policies.

The 27 October election produced a fragmented Knesset. Netanyahu's bloc secured 53 seats, Eisenkot's four-party opposition alliance 48 and Arab-led parties a historic 19. Although 67 lawmakers recommended Eisenkot for prime minister, endorsements do not automatically translate into coalition support. He has 28 days, potentially extended by another 14, to assemble a government.

Eisenkot's background offers little reason to anticipate a fundamental reversal of Israeli policy towards Palestinians. As military chief between 2015 and 2019, he became associated with the Dahiya doctrine, advocating overwhelming military force against enemy-controlled areas, including civilian infrastructure. His reputation rests on the use of brutal military force rather than a commitment to democratic and human rights of Palestinians.

More revealingly, Eisenkot explicitly rejects Palestinian statehood in the foreseeable future. His proposed Gaza strategy would replace Hamas with another administrative authority, potentially involving the Palestinian Authority or international arrangements, while preserving Israeli security control. He might permit partial reconstruction and humanitarian relief, but Palestinians would remain denied of self-determination.

Netanyahu has pursued territorial domination through aggressive settlement expansion, collective punishment and the empowerment of extremist settlers. Eisenkot might reduce the most provocative manifestations of these policies without challenging their underlying logic. He has promised tougher action against settler militia, restoration of law enforcement and restrictions on illegal outposts. Such measures could save Palestinian lives and should not be dismissed. Nevertheless, suppressing particularly violent settlers while maintaining occupation and denying statehood would regulate, rather than dismantle, the settler-colonial structure.

The danger is that international attention will shift from Palestinian dispossession to Israeli political moderation. Fewer inflammatory ministerial statements, strictly controlled humanitarian deliveries and renewed diplomatic negotiations could create an impression of progress while occupation and apartheid policy continue. For Palestinians, the decisive test is not whether Israel's prime minister speaks in politically correct language but whether the occupation ends, whether displaced communities can return, whether settlements cease to expand and equal political rights become attainable.

On Iran, the differences may prove even narrower. Eisenkot shares Netanyahu's fanaticism to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and preserve Israel's nuclear superiority. His reported proposals include American-enforced exclusion zones around Iranian nuclear facilities and expanded covert operations against Iran's missile capabilities. These proposals suggest tactical diversion rather than strategic restraint. Eisenkot may prefer coordinated American pressure, intelligence operations and selective military strikes over Netanyahu's confrontational political theatre. But the underlying assumption remains that Israel possesses an exceptional right to determine regional security arrangements through military power.

Similar continuity is likely in Lebanon and Syria. Eisenkot might negotiate limited withdrawals, strengthen cooperation with European governments and pursue security agreements. Yet he would retain Israeli military unilateral action and self-declared buffer zones.

Even if Israel sees the back of Netanyahu, it won't see the end of Netanyahuism

A change of leadership could therefore make Israeli military dominance more predictable and diplomatically manageable without making the region substantially more peaceful.

The most consequential transformation could occur internationally. Netanyahu has become politically toxic across significant sections of Western public opinion. His confrontations with European governments and increasingly partisan relationship with American politics have damaged Israel's diplomatic standing. Eisenkot offers Washington and European capitals an opportunity to restore relations without confronting the deeper contradictions of their Israel policies.

He would likely rebuild bipartisan American relationships, emphasising intelligence cooperation, military technology and Israel's strategic usefulness. European governments could go back to business as usual after renewed dialogue, limited humanitarian concessions and a less provocative administration.

This would create an uncomfortable paradox: the removal of Netanyahu could reduce international pressure precisely when sustained scrutiny of Israeli conduct remains necessary. Western governments might portray Eisenkot as evidence that Israeli democracy can correct itself, overlooking the continued exclusion of Palestinians from determining their political future. Sanctions discussions could weaken, diplomatic isolation might ease and demands for accountability could lose momentum.

The United States would almost certainly remain Israel's principal strategic protector. Military assistance, intelligence cooperation and diplomatic backing would survive Netanyahu's departure. What might change is the political cost for the Trump administration of providing that support. Eisenkot's greatest international achievement could thus be restoring Western confidence in Israel without requiring Israel to fundamentally change.

For India, Netanyahu's departure would probably produce limited disruption to bilateral relations, although their political character and public presentation could change significantly.

The relationship between Narendra Modi and Netanyahu has acquired a distinctly ethno-political dimension, reflecting ideological affinities between Hindu nationalism and Zionist nationalism. Their highly personalised partnership has often projected a shared nationalist anti-Muslim worldview, extending beyond conventional diplomatic cooperation.

Under Eisenkot, India-Israel relations could become less overtly ideologically political and more firmly anchored in traditional diplomatic, security and economic interests. Arms sales, intelligence sharing and cyber snooping would remain central pillars of the partnership.

Eisenkot's military background could further strengthen institutional cooperation between the two countries' security establishments, while reducing the political symbolism associated with the Modi-Netanyahu relationship. The substance of India-Israel cooperation would remain largely intact, even if its public expression became less overtly ethno-political and more military and intelligence driven.

Netanyahu's personal future presents another uncertainty. Losing office would deprive him of the authority, visibility and political leverage that have helped sustain his megalomania and political career. His longstanding corruption trial would continue, while questions concerning responsibility for the 7 October security failures could intensify. Losing office would weaken his ability to shape the political environment surrounding accountability. Nevertheless, Netanyahu will not disappear. A fragile coalition might offer him opportunities for a comeback. He could also seek to preserve influence through a unity arrangement or political negotiations concerning his future. Whether Likud eventually abandons him would depend on its assessment of his electoral usefulness.

Netanyahu's departure could end an era of personalised political dominance without ending Netanyahuism. Netanyahu has become the international symbol of Israel's destructive policies in the region and genocidal policies in occupied territories.

Replacing him may reduce global anger and give Western governments a convenient justification for returning to business as usual. For Palestinians, however, changing the identity of the prime minister without changing the structures of domination would offer little more than a different administrator of the same injustice. Israel may be approaching the end of Netanyahu's rule. Whether it is approaching the end of Netanyahu's policies is an entirely different question ■

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Trumpism after the midterms

Might a hamstrung US President become even more dangerous and erratic on overseas affairs?



Photo: Getty Images

Rally for democracy People march through Manhattan, New York, after the results of the midterm elections

Ashis Ray

It was an uncomfortable coincidence for the Narendra Modi regime that a United States civil court issued summonses on Indian national security adviser Ajit Doval and a former external espionage agency Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) chief Samant Goel this week.

India's ministry of external affairs predictably condemned the concerned case as a 'frivolous lawsuit' based on 'fabricated and malicious' charges. The matter pertains to an attempt to assassinate an anti-India Khalistan separatist in New York Gurpatwant Singh Pannun in 2024. In February 2026, Nikhil Gupta, 54, an Indian national, pleaded guilty of hiring for murder and is currently awaiting sentencing.

Prosecutors had alleged Gupta was directed by an official known as Vikas Yadav who worked in the Indian government's cabinet secretariat (which houses the R&AW) to execute the plot. While this man's indictment was apprehended, serving subpoenas to Doval and Goel is not only a major exacerbation in the legal proceedings, its timing is also being interpreted in some diplomatic circles in Washington as yet another pressure tactic by the US as its trade talks with India drag on.

Preceding this development, there was, not unexpectedly, worldwide interest in the US midterm elections. It is, after all, still the world's leading superpower, though rapidly conceding ground to China. Interest was enhanced by the fact that President Donald Trump had caused more turmoil in the world in the past two years than any of his predecessors. The outcome mattered to many. Speculation abounded. Would the elections clip his wings? Could Congressional restraints make him more dangerous and erratic on overseas affairs?

Let's begin with what the result might mean for India. For more than a year and a half, New Delhi has been harassed by crippling customs duties, demands for increased imports from the US and a threat of 100 per cent tariffs on Indian exports to the US if India continued to buy Russian crude.

Such aggressive behaviour by Trump has been analysed as being a consequence of weakness on the part of the Modi government; the kind of frailty no previous Indian administration had ever demonstrated. In simple terms, far from standing up to the bully, Modi was seen to have succumbed rather abysmally.

Without going into why that happened, let us examine whether the equation can change, now that Trump has received a thorough drubbing in the midterms. "Just imagine," he said at rally after rally for a month, "just imagine I am on the ballot." American voters did; and dealt him a deserving rebuke.

Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs told *The Wire*'s Karan Thapar: "What I'd say to my friends in India and friends anywhere is negotiate hard. This man doesn't have the authority, nor does he have the political support to what he's doing… hold your ground. Get a good deal. Don't cave in… the American people don't want tariffs. They don't want the sanctions."

Those are precisely the urgings consistently underlined in these columns since February 2025, when Trump delivered a somewhat unfriendly démarche to Modi: that India should exponentially multiply its purchase of US goods and services. The latter apparently acquiesced. The US supreme court struck down his April 2025 executive order which imposed tariffs on countries across the globe, including India. It will likely do the same to his renewed efforts to revive levies by other means. The lower courts have done so.

In these circumstances, if Modi continues to be browbeaten by a lame-duck Trump, it will amplify concerns that there is more to such weakness than meets the eye. What did Trump mean when he said in October 2025 that he can "destroy Modi's career"? Why did a photo of a private meeting between Hardeep Puri, a minister in Modi's cabinet, and the late convicted New York paedophile Jeffrey Epstein suddenly surface last month? Did Epstein visit Delhi in January 2017? Who met him? Such questions swirled around the District of Colombia.

If Modi continues to be browbeaten by a lame-duck Trump, it can only mean there's more than meets the eye

Bloomberg headlined, 'India Sees Some Trade Relief, New Risks After Democrat Sweep.' Experts in Washington seem to believe the outcome of the midterms may motivate Trump to push harder for an early trade deal with India. They also feel India now has some elbow room to negotiate the nitty-gritty in the draft, which has made visibly slow progress for months now.

With a significant opposition Democratic majority—when the newly elected lawmakers enter the House of Representatives and Senate in January—Congress would be empowered under US laws to revise or cancel presidential executive orders; but that can, in turn, be opposed by a White House power of veto. In short, it is a recipe for a gridlock unless better sense prevails.

In such a situation, it will be tougher for Trump to whimsically escalate rates of tariff, which could be a relief for India's garments and textiles, gems and jewellery sectors. At the same time, it might be wise for New Delhi to widen diplomatic outreach beyond the administration to Congress and the states which benefit from Indian exports. Where Democrats and Trump's Republicans may be united is in pushing for US agricultural and dairy products into the Indian market—a virtual death knell for Indian farmers. The smart money is on Trump's electoral setback not necessarily making him any less protectionist.

Then there's the matter of the new US law approved by Trump which holds the threat of slapping 100 per cent tariffs on India for its import of Russian crude. A *Reuters* file last month said implementation—in addition to an abeyance signed off by Trump—is linked to a US investigation into assessing whether excess production in various countries is damaging American businesses.

The US is India's biggest export market. In 2025, reportedly $103.8 billion worth of Indian goods were absorbed in America, against US exports of $45.6 billion. The figures vis-à-vis services were $48.7 billion and $43.6 billion, respectively.

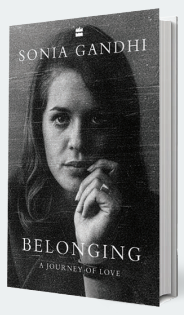
For the record, there is no prospect of the US easing H-1B visa restrictions on India, notwithstanding Trump admitting his harsh immigration policy was one of the reasons for the wipeout of Republicans in the midterms.

The mood swings of the US electorate this century defy evaluation. In 2001, after 9/11, they turned hostile towards Muslims. Turbaned Sikhs mistaken for being of the Islamic faith suffered too. Conservative George Bush was consequently granted a second term. In 2008, US voters pivoted to not merely a liberal, but their first-ever black president Barack Obama, a Christian with a Kenyan Muslim father. 2016 saw the election of Donald Trump, 2020 his rejection, 2024 his return. Two years later, his right-wing, undemocratic ways have been reproached to the extent of Egyptian-origin Abdul el-Sayed being voted in as America's first-ever Muslim senator.

Internationally, most eyes will be on Trump's moves on the US war against Iran and the Russia-Ukraine imbroglio. Many fear he will resume armed conflict with Tehran. Chances are that may not happen before the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, a 21-nation gathering at Shenzhen next week. A meeting between Trump, Chinese president Xi Jinping and Russian president Vladimir Putin is being touted as a possibility on the sidelines. ■

BOOK EXTRACT

'Just leave it!'



Title: **Belonging: A Journey of Love**
Author: **Sonia Gandhi**
Publisher: **HarperCollins Publishers India**
Price: **₹1,299**

'An instinct kept warning me that my actions would have far-reaching consequences...'

Some months before the election, my children and I had discussed the issue of my possible prime ministership. One of them asked me straight out whether I would accept the post, just in case our party pulled off a victory. "Absolutely not!" I'd said, almost indignantly. "Are you sure?" they pressed me. "I'm very clear," I said emphatically. Neither Rahul nor Priyanka felt that I should become prime minister. They'd lived through the trauma of their grandmother's assassination and the brutal murder of their father. In their minds, holding that office was intrinsically linked with heightened danger. They looked relieved and I, too, felt lighter, having said my views out loud on the question for the first time. And there the matter rested. I never spoke of it to anyone else. Throughout the election, I'd give a noncommittal answer whenever I was asked this question in public. We were in a battle for our survival and I had to keep my party together, to face our foes head-on as a cohesive team. It wasn't an option to allow a leadership struggle to arise between the contenders in our party. I kept my views firmly to myself, not even confiding in my closest colleagues. I just knew instinctively that the person to carry forward the legacy of past Congress governments would have to be someone with long experience in government and an impeccable record of integrity.

We returned from Rashtrapati Bhawan to my home at 10 Janpath. I saw Dr. Singh to his car. There had been no discussion about the prime ministership between the two of us on the drive back, nor had there been before that. I said nothing to him even now. He had quite naturally assumed, like everyone else, that it would be me. The right-wing parties went into full gear again.

[...]

The trip to the president's house had brought home the enormity of the situation I found myself in. How was I going to admit to all my colleagues and my allies, to the workers who had exhausted themselves rallying together and shouting slogans in my name and that of our party, for months on end—to the whole country, in fact—that I had led this entire campaign knowing full well that I'd refuse to lead the government? I felt a hollow in my chest. I didn't know whether I could go through with it now, how I could face them all. I had a day full of meetings ahead. I felt I couldn't breathe.

[...]

Years ago, when I took the first step of the journey that had brought me to this point, I knew in my heart what my husband and my mother-in-law would have expected of me. I had felt an inner call of duty towards them and all that they had fought for throughout their lives. But now I was at sea; I had to search within my troubled self for an answer. One part of me rejected the idea completely, the other part was calling on my sense of obligation towards the party workers who'd be hurt and disappointed by my refusal, but also to the people who'd given us their vote. My emotions were changing, moment to moment. One minute I was clear, the next, I was torn.

A meeting had been fixed with the leaders of the alliance. They were to come to my house the next afternoon. "We'll convince her," they'd assured my colleagues. When I look back at those moments, they take on their own pace, as they unspool in time. [...] A meeting is going on with some of the leaders of the alliance in Rajiv's conference room at the far end of my house. They've been talking in turns for over an hour, urging me to agree to their proposal, while I listen silently. As the discussion comes to an end, they look towards me for a response. I muster up as much courage as I can and I say my piece.

There is an uproar amongst them, they stand up and move towards me. I, too, stand up. They physically surround me. "We will not accept this," one of them says. "You cannot take this decision, Madam," says another. Their tone is forceful, almost aggressive. "We will not take no for an answer." I am shaken. I feel overpowered. "Theek hai," ("All right,"), I mumble almost inaudibly. The assembled leaders don't even wait for me to finish my sentence, they begin to congratulate me, one by one. "She has agreed, she has agreed," someone says. I just stand there, numb, unable to say anything further. The leaders depart, satisfied.

[...]

I walked into my bedroom and placed another call to AP. I told him that, despite what had just transpired with the alliance leaders, I was still in the process of taking a decision, either way. I wanted him to contain any fallout of the leaders having stated in public that I had agreed.

[...]

An instinct kept warning me that my actions would have far-reaching consequences, not just for my party but for India. [...] My entry into politics had been driven by the conviction that the BJP, propelled by the RSS and its many fanatical wings, would encourage strife between communities and subvert the Constitution if they came to power.

I knew very well that the noise being made now by them, and the propaganda they had drummed up through the election campaign, wouldn't abate if I accepted. The BJP and its allies would for certain use my 'foreign origin' as an issue, they would stir up emotions and create havoc that would subsume every other good—of the past, and of the coming years. How could I agree to holding the office of prime minister knowing it could wound my country, the country that I loved? No, never!

Night was drawing to a close. It had been a long night [...] I retreated into my bedroom and lay quietly as always on my husband's side of the bed. One voice within me said, "Sonia, this is a ridiculous proposition. You were born and brought up in Italy and here you are, being chosen to lead a nation of more than a billion people at the other end of the world." Another voice replied, "This is your country; you owe your whole adult life and allegiance to it. When you lost the man you loved, it took you in its arms as one of its own. Its people have comforted you and nurtured you through shattering tragedies. How can you abandon your responsibility to those who have placed their faith in you, in your party?" A flood of emotion overcame me, and I longed for Rajiv's comforting presence. As I was drifting into sleep out of sheer exhaustion, my mind suddenly cleared itself of the last shreds of doubt. "Sonia, be true to yourself," I could hear myself say. "You've always known it. Just leave it!"

I woke up in a few hours, went straight to my son's room, and knocked on the door. "I've made up my mind. I'm going to stick to my stand," I told him. He stepped up to me and with his arms around me said, "It's the right decision." I felt at peace for the first time since the election results had been declared. No one would be able to sway me now from my purpose. ■



Photo: Getty Images

Flying off the shelves Readers queue up to buy *Belonging: A Journey of Love* at a bookstore in New Delhi

"I felt at peace for the first time... No one would be able to sway me now from my purpose"

Are we living through the Right's Peterloo moment?

Swarna Bhatnagar

I'm writing this in the red netted dress that I bought for my birthday, hammering away excitedly at my keyboard because some alpha males across the world are having a difficult year, and I cannot let the moment pass without registering my glee.

I was in my first year of journalism college when the current right-wing government came to power in India. Simultaneously, the right and centre-right found lush land in large swathes of the world—in Europe, the US and in central and South America. Its leaders became international celebrities rolling each other's logs and its pep squad had a coadunate pathology of persecution complexes and a great appetite for hatred. The same tyrannical mindset sprawled from Washington to Budapest, Jerusalem and Delhi. They called it a new world order, called themselves the future.

Theatre, darling. Pure theatre.

The political mood right now has given me the voyeuristic pleasure of watching an extremely expensive outfit come apart at the seams on someone else. And I would never be so ungenerous as to deny myself a little schadenfreude. A fourth term for Lula, a student-backed electoral victory in Serbia, Orbán's great departure after sixteen years, Netanyahu struggling to save his skin and Trump in lame-duck land. Add their Indian counterpart, and the international brotherhood of strongmen is coming to terms with an alternative reality that ain't so cheery for them.

I know the world won't arrange itself into convenient political narratives for my entertainment and these developments cannot be bundled together and passed off as evidence of some sweeping global realignment, but I'm enjoying the view.

I watched this politics take up space in my own country, and in my own life. I watched invisible writs decide which story I was cleared to write for the newspaper that day. I walked away from a job I had spent years studying for because I could not pal around with that arrangement. I saw up close how prejudice becomes prime-time entertainment. I saw it become dinner-table conversation in my own family. I watched the most elementary demands for dignity rescripted as seditious acts of disloyalty. I watched people being asked to prove their patriotism and bigots decide who could claim the country and on what terms. I watched the public square become inhospitable to anyone who declined to yield to the amour propre of men who could not tolerate being questioned.

Mark Fisher wrote in *Capitalist Realism* about the trouble of imagining a world beyond the one we have. Political dominance produces a similar mental surrender. Instead of asking what might replace it, you start thinking about how to live with it. But I refuse to do that, now more than ever, when people across the world are reminding their governments that political power flows from their will, and the electorate will take it back when it wants.

I found my M.A. English notes during the annual Diwali cleaning, and re-read P.B. Shelley's *The Masque of Anarchy*. It took me back to Peterloo. In August 1819, thousands gathered in Manchester to demand parliamentary reform. The state answered with cavalry, killing at least fifteen and injuring hundreds. Shelley was in Italy when the news reached him, and in response, he wrote this incendiary poem, and came up with a rallying cry that has waded across two centuries of political strife: 'Ye are many—they are few!'

Shelley encapsulated the theory of political power in five words. Even with its cavalry, courts, prisons and the whole weight of officialdom behind it, the State chickens out at the sight of a heaving crowd. The crackdown that was expected to chill the people and force a retreat became the bugle call for the reform movement.

It would be foolish to write the obituary of the Right just yet.

Growing inequality and precarity provide fertile ground for right-wing sentiment. Exclusionary and extremist as those ideas might be, they are still popular, and firmly embedded in institutions, the media and public life. As long as it can maintain its stranglehold on these institutions, the Right will hold on to power even if popular support slowly dwindles. What gives hope is that the brotherhood, for all its money, muscle and repulsive fanfaronade, is learning that the audience can lose interest even when the show is still running.

Rebecca Solnit, in *Hope in the Dark*, writes about hope as a way of inhabiting uncertainty, of recognising that the future remains open even when the present gives us very little to believe in it. I like that idea because it doesn't ask us to become cheerleaders for our own circumstances. It asks very little of our optimism and a little more of our imagination.

India has unfinished business with the political project of the Right. Which has enfeebled its democratic institutions, made vitriol defensible in public life, taught people to live with a curtailed sense of belonging. None of this will disappear because the political weather has changed elsewhere. There is work to do, and plenty of it, but I no longer feel the rest of my life is a prisoner of the present moment.

The Right wants us to accept its reading of the future as a *fait accompli*. Even as the rest of us recover the nerve to imagine otherwise. Character building for everyone involved. I suppose this is also why I have so little patience for the idea that we must wait until everything is fixed before we let ourselves celebrate. I want to be furious when fury is warranted and frivolous when frivolity floats my boat. The world is a dreadful place to live in if we surrender all its pleasures to the people making it dreadful.

So yes, there was a red birthday dress, and there was a woman sitting in it, rather uncomfortably, conjuring the end for those who spent years trying to dictate the terms of everybody's existence. And she had a rather good time doing it. ■





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Even with the whole weight of officialdom behind it, the State chickens out at the sight of a heaving crowd

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