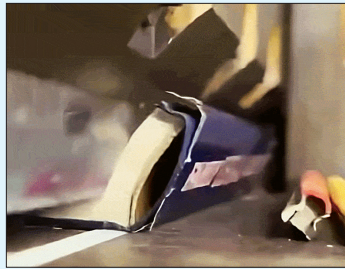


FOCUS

A DIGITAL DYSTOPIA

For cannibalising AI powerhouses, books are just big data sets for their insatiable LLMs

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FOOD POLITICS

MORE THAN JUST A MEAL PLAN

Why the planned introduction of chicken biriyani in Tamil Nadu's noon meal scheme is news

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WORLD

THE ISOLATION OF ISRAEL

Even the US is now giving up on Israel. Young Americans, in particular

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This Independence Day, we explore new and old Ways of Resistance at a time when our democracy is in the doldrums, old ways of speaking truth to power are failing and new ways of holding it accountable are giving people hope

Can we reclaim the spirit of the Tiranga?

Apoorvanand

The Tricolour can hold its head high this year, despite the misfortune of its unfurling at the Red Fort by a man who does not deserve to hold it. It was a slightly freer air that our national flag breathed this 15 August—the youth of this country have given it back something of its true meaning.

It is not the sight of the Tricolour being hoisted at the Red Fort on 15 August that uplifts an old person like me, who has seen many Prime Ministers and Presidents, some utterly unworthy, perform this ritual. What moves me are the images of the young holding the Tricolour with demands for justice on their lips. In those moments, the flag does not signify the pride of the nation. It becomes a symbol of the spirit of freedom, a yearning for liberty, a symbol of resistance against injustice, a symbol of the courage to face the violence of the oppressor with one's own soul force.

Not that this has happened for the first time in recent years. We saw farmers camping at the doors of Delhi five years ago. They held fort for an entire year, fighting against unjust farm laws. More than 750 of them paid for it with their lives, but they did not budge. The Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh too held their ground, Tricolour and Constitution in hand, as they opposed the communal reconfiguration of Indian citizenship. They weren't as fortunate as the farmers and the students. State-sponsored violence and the COVID pandemic put an end to their rousing, memorable protest. They did not achieve their objective, but their fightback was a powerful assertion of the meek before the brute. Through that struggle, the Tricolour was their constant companion.

The Tricolour, our Tiranga, does not derive its majesty from power. Nor does it derive it from the State. It gets its moral force from the hands that refuse to bend before the might of the state. It represents the will of an unarmed people. This is what Jawaharlal Nehru said at a Congress

conference in 1931: “Consider the national flag as a symbol of freedom and not merely a piece of tricolour cloth. It is not the flag of a king or emperor; it represents the unity and strength of the teeming millions of India.”

He also said, in the same breath: “I condemn cries of ‘Down with Union Jack’.” It took moral clarity and courage to say this when the people of India were fighting against the British. Nehru had the courage, as did his comrades, to assert that the Tricolour does not demean another flag, that it does not sit well in the hands of those who hate others, who see others as inferior to themselves.

The Tricolour is a symbol of an eternal search for freedom. Those who get frightened when they hear slogans demanding *Azadi* need to remember these words of Nehru, spoken when the Tricolour was being accepted by the Constituent Assembly. Nehru reminded the Assembly that even while celebrating the moment, it was important not to forget that the journey of freedom was unending: “It is right and proper that at this moment we should adopt the symbol of this achievement, the symbol of freedom. Now what is this freedom in its entirety and for all humanity? What is freedom and what is the struggle for freedom, and when does it end? As soon as you take one step forward and achieve something, further steps come up before you. There will be no full freedom in this country or in the world as long as a single human being is unfree. There will be no complete freedom as long as there is starvation, hunger, lack of clothing, lack of the necessities of life and lack of opportunity of growth for every single human being, man, woman and child in the country. [...] When we increase the happiness of the people, we increase their stature in many ways, and we proceed to our goal. I do not know if there is an end to this or not, but we proceed towards some kind of consummation...” Even in that triumphant moment, Nehru was modest enough to recognise that freedom cannot be reduced to the achievement of independence from

colonial rule. Independence was an event. Freedom was, and remains, a journey.

On the eve of Independence Day this year, I recall the words of P. Sainath, who criss-crossed the country to record the stories of freedom fighters still alive. One of them told him, very perceptively, that they had fought for freedom and independence. What was achieved was Independence, but the struggle for freedom still goes on.

The Tricolour looks beautiful in the hands of those who, even while asserting their sovereignty, do not wish to dominate others. Supremacist tendencies sleep under the skin of every nation, and one has to be aware of this danger. Nehru was mindful of this temptation: “...there is this danger in a country suddenly unshackled, in stretching out its arms and legs, [that it tries] to hit out at other people.” He was speaking about the imperialist propensity of nationalism.

But that expansionist desire can reside within a nation, within a group of people

External colonialism is easy to identify, but internal colonialism goes under the guise of nationalism

Photos: Getty Images



The Tricolour does not derive its majesty from power or from the State. It gets its moral force from the hands that refuse to bend before the might of the State

emboldened by their overwhelming numbers, who start believing they have the right to dictate to other groups how they should live.

Nehru's warning was not unfounded. In the islands of Lakshadweep, the Tricolour can turn into a symbol of domination when Indian authorities, while hoisting it on Independence Day, also betray an ambition to change the local people's settled way of life. In Kashmir, the Tricolour is a reminder that its natives cannot exercise their will. When madrasas are ordered to sing *Vande Mataram* along with the unfurling of the Tricolour, it becomes a symbol of coercion.

External colonialism is easy to identify, but internal colonialism goes under the guise of nationalism. The Adivasis of Bastar, the people of the Andaman and

Nicobar Islands, or Muslims in India experience it as the loss of their autonomy, as the gradual shrinking of the space in which they can determine how they wish to live.

What greater insult can the Tricolour weather than the spectacle of policemen thrashing a Muslim while demanding that he sing the national anthem? Gandhi would have been revolted by the sight. Wasn't it Gandhi who said that the Gita was dear to him, but if someone put a gun to his head and asked him to recite it, he would refuse?

When we raised the Tricolour this year, did we confess that we, as a nation, have failed to honour the spirit of freedom it represents? ■

APOORVANAND is an author and academic

“Why don’t you shut it down?”

Now protests at Jantar Mantar are also a problem, writes Aakar Patel

There was a remarkable exchange in Delhi High Court a little while ago. The government was asked why it wouldn't consider shutting down Jantar Mantar as a venue for protests.

“Why don't you shut it down? According to me, these things should not happen in the city, but it's the government's call. Why should the city be [held] to ransom unnecessarily?” the court asked. It was hearing a plea filed by the All India Dalit Christian Rights Protection Committee seeking directions to the Delhi Police to decide its plea for permission to hold a protest at Jantar Mantar.

The group's advocate then asked whether it is the Centre's stand that in Delhi there can be no protests. To this the Bench replied “that's for the police to decide”. The advocate said: “Fair enough, let them say that there will be no democratic, peaceful protests in Delhi. We will accept it.”



Too close for comfort is the lesson the judiciary seems to have learnt from the recent protests at Jantar Mantar

Photos: Getty Images

Article 19 grants citizens the right to ‘gather peaceably and without arms’

The position of the Bench was that the “city should not be held to ransom” by protesters. The government's response is not known but all governments in India have always thought that protests are a nuisance that get in the way of ‘good governance’.

It is important to examine the issue carefully.

Article 19 says: ‘All citizens shall have the right a) to freedom

of speech and expression; b) to assemble peaceably and without arms; c) to form associations or unions; d) to move freely throughout the territory of India; e) to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India; f) to practise any profession, or to carry on any occupation, trade or business’.

The reality is that today we have no such rights. Do Indians have the right to ‘assemble peacefully and without arms’? No. We have the right to apply for permission to the local police station. The police has the right to approve, deny or not respond (the last being the reason the Dalit Christians moved court). That is where the real right rests.

Scenes of groups of protesters, some just half-a-dozen strong, holding placards and chanting slogans outside business establishments and government offices, and at political rallies, are common in the United States and Europe. In India, such gatherings would be broken up or simply not permitted. India has criminalised protest. Where it is

allowed, after written permission, it is usually in the so-called ‘designated areas’ allocated for protest.

Some see even these as a nuisance. Jantar Mantar in Delhi is such a place, a stretch of road cordoned off at both ends by protest stalls, some unheard and unseen for months on end. In Bengaluru, you have the Town Hall and Freedom Park; in Mumbai, Azad Maidan, where protests may be allowed—after written permission—during specific periods of time. This does not constitute the right to peaceful assembly. Rather, it denies a fundamental right given to us by the Constitution. We have to claim this right.

Freedom of speech and expression is qualified by so many laws that it is hard to know where to begin. India has criminalised free speech through sedition, criminal defamation and criminal contempt of court.

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WAYS OF RESISTANCE

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A fist clenched to the sound of music

Naveen Joshi on the myriad ways of resistance that have grown out of the lived realities of people, their unique cultural consciousness

6 March 1974. Reni village, Chamoli district. A girl comes running into Gaura Devi's courtyard, breathless and screaming: "They've come to cut the forest... they're cutting down our forest!"

The men of the village had all gone to Chamoli that day on some business. Gaura was alarmed. In their absence, responsibility for the village fell on her: she was, after all, president of the Mahila Mangal Dal, the village women's collective. She gathered all the women and they rushed to the forest. Some fifty labourers were preparing to fell the trees. The contractor's *munshi* (a general factotum), was there too, along with a few armed men.

"Look, we beg you, don't cut our forest," Gaura told the labourers. "How will we survive without the forest? How will our *goru*, our cattle, survive?"

"Start cutting!" the *munshi* shouted.

"And you women, get out of here."

Gaura stood her ground. "This forest is ours. You think you can do as you please because the men are away today?"

Guns were pointed at the women. Gaura was fired up. "Come on," she told the women, "let's each of us do an '*angwaltha*' (a tight embrace, in the local Garhwali) around a tree... and let's see how they cut them now!"

Whichever tree the labourers approached, the women clung to it. "You'll have to cut us down before you cut the trees."

They were threatened, but they refused to budge. The guns were ultimately lowered. The labourers retreated. The forest survived.

This was the idea of 'Chipko' taking shape on the ground. Chandi Prasad Bhatt and other environmental and social activists had been travelling from village to village carrying the message of Chipko. Gaura Devi had heard them too. Now she had turned the idea into action.

28 November 1977. The forests of Kumaon were to be auctioned in Nainital. A few months earlier, some young men had

created such a huge ruckus that the auction had to be postponed. This time there was heavy police deployment. The authorities were prepared to arrest protesters, while the protesters themselves were hiding, trying to come up with another way to resist.

That morning, on the flats of Nainital, a bearded young man appeared with a *hudka*, the small hill drum, and began singing in Kumaoni:

‘आज हिमालय तुम्हें पुकार रहा है, जागो-जागो ओ मेरे लाल मत होने दो मेरी नीलामी, मत होने दो मुझे हलाल ।’

‘Today the Himalaya calls you—awake, awake, my children! Do not let them auction me, do not let them slaughter me.’

The police and PAC (Provincial Armed Constabulary) personnel took him for a beggar. But this was the poet Girish Tiwari 'Girda', who had spent the night adding new verses to an old song. The song was a call to the people of the hills: save the forests, save the mountains.

Word spread through Nainital like wildfire. By the time the administration realised what was happening, people had converged on the auction hall. The opposition was so fierce that the auction had to be cancelled.

These forms of resistance could only have grown out of the lived reality of people. History bears witness to the way people's cultural consciousness has given new voice and energy to non-violent resistance. Think of the stirring songs sung in processions, sit-ins, demonstrations during the freedom struggle. That tradition has continued to this day.

In popular movements across several states, particularly in Adivasi-majority regions, folk songs, newly composed protest songs and traditional instruments have often created such a charge that spectators, listeners, bystanders are drawn into the movement willily-nilly. Progressive outfits, their trade unions and IPTA (the Indian

People's Theatre Association) carried songs of resistance across the country. The songs and poetry of Faiz, Sahir, Jafri, Shailendra, Shalabh, Gorakh, Cheema and others have lent a cutting edge, a sense of urgency to many a popular movement. In protest marches, the *turhi*, *nishan*, *dhol-damaama* and other such folk instruments have sounded warnings to those in power. The same stream of resistance runs through street theatre, slogans and posters that awaken a consciousness of dissent.

This is essentially the path Gandhi showed, which drew strength and nourishment from the cultural consciousness of the people.

At the recent protest at Jantar Mantar, it was heartening to see Gen Z too singing protest songs to the beat of the *daphli*, the handheld frame drum. The posters they carried, the slogans they chanted were brimming with a heartening creative zest and inventive flair. Their movement forced



Chipko, 1974 When the women of Reni village in Chamoli made history

the autocratic Modi government to retreat; the autocratic power was shattered.

A state government of the very same ruling party is meanwhile trying to crush the non-violent protests of Adivasi villagers opposing the Ken-Betwa Link Project in Madhya Pradesh. The project threatens to uproot thousands of Adivasis without fair compensation, destroy forests and damage even the Panna Tiger Reserve. Protesters staged a '*chita andolan*' and threatened to take their lives by *jal samadhi*; their struggle continues.

We saw similar methods employed during the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Thousands of Adivasis staged collective *jal samadhi* protests against displacement and inadequate compensation. They won some victories too, but perhaps the greatest achievement of these innovative forms of resistance was to make ordinary villagers/ Adivasis conscious of their rights and to give them the will and determination to fight for those rights till the very end.

"We have a river, and you are giving us a handpump?"

When an ordinary Adivasi woman said this to government officials, they had no answer. No urban activist could have put it

quite like that. This was lived reality forging a consciousness of resistance.

"Delhi has the Yamuna too. Why don't you build a dam across it to generate electricity? Why don't you drown Delhi?"

Who could possibly answer a question so innocent and yet so devastating?

Another grassroots activist of the Narmada movement, Bijya Jugal Vasave, an Adivasi from Chimal Khedi in Maharashtra, once put the information in his own words:

"We knew something earlier about strategies like *anshan* and *padyatra*. We had our traditional weapons, bows and arrows, to fight with. But now we have put those aside and taken Gandhi's path of *satyagraha*. We have made the voice within us and our raised fist our new weapons." What could be more powerful than a raised fist that rises with the sound of music?

Today our democracy and constitutional values are under threat. But the people possess an extraordinary repertoire of non-violent ways of resistance, rooted in their own lives, cultures and collective consciousness. However brutal or powerful a government may be, it cannot hold out indefinitely against such resistance. ■

‘Why don’t you shut it down?’



Photo: Getty Images

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The mother country we borrowed these laws from no longer has them. The 'right to dissent' is non-existent in India and anything offensive to majoritarian Hindutva is called anti-national.

The Kashmiri can teach us a thing or two about freedom of speech and expression if we claim that India is free. Forming associations is not easy in India and registration can be denied or cancelled.

Those who work in the organised civil society space, meaning professional NGOs, know just how difficult the State makes it for them to exercise this fundamental right. We have seen the problem with the right to carry out a trade, which has been struck off for butchers and by extension, for restaurants. Many of these rights have become ossified. The State has invested heavily in denying them to us, and we are not so invested, it seems, in demanding them.

The footnote to Article 19 reads: 'Nothing shall affect the operation of any existing law, or prevent the State from making any law, in so far as such law imposes reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the right...' The question is whether the restrictions imposed are reasonable. They are not. Reclaiming our fundamental rights is the only way to realise and unlock the value of our Constitution.

We have to peacefully reclaim our rights both at the level of the individual and the level of civil society. India's civil society is weaker than other democracies. It is vibrant, yes, and it is defiant and brave. But it is small. India needs to create a bigger space for that part of our nation which is neither the State nor corporations. That part of the nation is civil society—groups, both formal and informal, and individuals, and the space they create with their actions.

These groups must be encouraged and given space to express themselves. They should not be seen as a nuisance, but unfortunately that is precisely how those in power and those with authority see them. The reason the government does not want protests to be held is that every time Indians are mobilised, against the farm laws, against the NRC, against exam paper leaks, the government succumbs. And it is for this reason that we must ensure that we do not lose this right of ours to peaceful assembly. ■

The other side of midnight

Somewhere between an iconic midnight speech in 1947 and an out-of-touch Instagram reel in 2026 lies the story of the decline of our republic, writes **Avay Shukla**

Now that we have an idea of what Mr Modi looks like at the midnight hour, and have learnt how to instal a teleprompter on a mobile phone, let us move on to some other aspects of the Jantar Mantar protests not yet reported upon.

Nothing shows and symbolises better the decline of our republic and the quality of its leadership than a comparison of two of our prime ministers speaking to the nation at the midnight hour. On 14–15 August 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, delivered to the world his iconic and immortal speech about India's tryst with destiny, acknowledged to be among the finest words ever uttered by any statesman—a speech brimming with pride, a sense of achievement, vision and hope for a new-born country.

At midnight on 23 July 2026, our current prime minister, Mr Narendra Modi, delivered a short video speech via his mobile phone, not to celebrate his country's freedom but to dig himself out of a hole of his own making—a jaded address reeking of insincerity, dissimulation and empty promises. Whereas Nehru's words electrified a whole nation, Mr Modi's words, deservedly, will be remembered only by his speechwriters—with, one hopes, a lot of mortification. Hopefully, we will not find them in our NCERT history books now that Mr Pradhan is himself history, but one can never be sure.

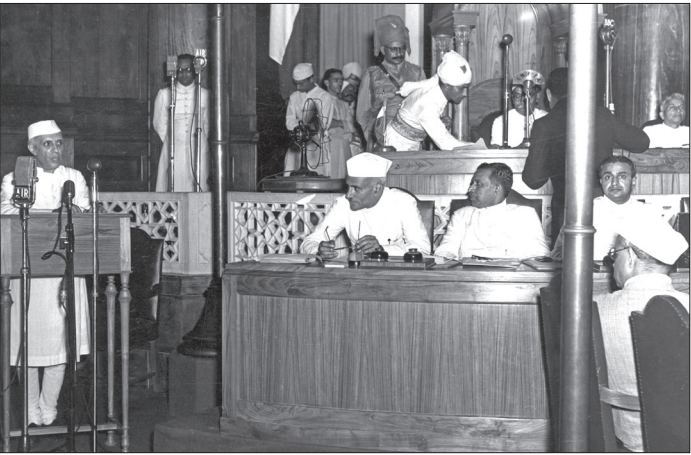
Every joke, said George Orwell, is a revolution. And oh, boy! Was he right!

For the CJP (Cockroach Janta Party) did give a joke. The Indianjad roaconteur was none other than our own Chief Justice of India, the venerable and honourable Surya Kant. It was his wisecrack equating the youth to cockroaches that brought them out of the chinks and cracks into which this government's policies had shoved them, bang into the arena of politics and public protests, bringing to its knees an authoritarian government led by one of the most formidable political parties in the world.

And the honourable CJI did not rest for a moment on his laurels, or his funny bone—he further immortalised his constitutional credentials by initially refusing to entertain a lawyer's plea to examine charges that the Delhi Police had used excessive force against protesters on 20 July, a claim the police have since denied.

Notwithstanding the overwhelming visual evidence available in the public domain, the CJI was reported to have said that he did not have the time to watch videos of the police violence. This naturally enraged the youngsters to greater heights of determination, culminating in the government throwing in the blood-soaked towel on 25 July.

Which is why I feel that Gen XYZ (I can never figure out which is the appropriate alphabet for the current



Pt Jawaharlal Nehru delivering his 'Tryst with destiny' speech in Parliament "at the stroke of the midnight hour" on 14-15 August 1947

gen) has failed to give due credit to the CJI for its historic success. But they can still make amends: our local village idiot has suggested that the acronym CJP should now be read as the Chief Justice Party. That, according to him, would deservedly recognise CJI Surya Kant's contributions to the preservation of democracy and the idea of justice in India.

Being an idiot of long standing, however, he is not aware that this may constitute contempt of court, and that that is one power the courts are still willing to exercise. Hence, the clown's suggestion has been

Our local village idiot has suggested that CJP should now be read as the Chief Justice Party to give due recognition to CJI Surya Kant

rejected and he has been removed from his post. He went without any fuss, and no lathi charge was needed to persuade him.

The village drunkard suggested the moniker Cocktail Party, as it better reflects the mix of youthful spirits at Jantar Mantar; this found favour with most of us (except the excise inspector), and has been forwarded to Mr Dipke.

Coming now to Mr Pradhan's resignation letter. I have seen many resignation letters in my career, including one that said: "Dear Sir, I quit. Please accept my sympathies for your loss."

In one instance, the chappie came with a band and dancers to hand over his resignation letter: this oddity is normal in my Himachal, whether it is resignation, retirement or suspension! Here, they just need an excuse to uncork the *angoori*, form a circle and start gyrating, clockwise for retirements and anti-clockwise for resignations. But Mr Pradhan's resignation letter takes the (cow-dung) cake for its sheer effrontery.

It is not a resignation; it is a treatise, a CV and a character/commendation certificate all rolled into one. It is the farewell speech no one bothered to give him and it reminds me of that doleful Jim Reeves song: 'I missed me, how I missed me at your home last night...' Substitute 'your home' with 'my office' and the minister could have made a musical video of it and earned lavish praise from Gen RDX and Shakira. As it is, no one could figure out whether it was a resignation or an application for sainthood.

As someone said, all he needed to write was: 'Bro, I fu**ed up big time. Gotta go.' It would have been the honest truth, with no scope for ambiguity. Never mind, though; maybe the next minister could use this when his or her time comes.

And finally, what can one (an unabashed admirer) say of Ms Kangana Runout? Although situated in seismic zone VI, Himachal had no volcanoes till 2024. Then Ms Runout exploded onto the scene, and since then she has erupted regularly, covering her own face and that of her party with ashes and soot. She is one natural disaster the NDF is not equipped to handle, and for which the finance commissions provide no compensation to the state.

After her experience with the farmers' agitation, why on earth would she repeat it by vilifying and insulting the brave young girls at Jantar Mantar? My wife, Neerja, with the perspicacity that only women possess, has an explanation: Kangana is actually a Gandhian; having been slapped on one cheek by a Sikh lady police constable last year, she now wants to be slapped on the other one too, completing a virtuous circle, as it were.

She'll probably get her wish soon—God never disappoints the devout or the Runout. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

Step #1 The loss of fear. What’s next?

The strikingly new idiom of the Gen Z protests has created an opening for the Opposition. The way to change passes through larger solidarities, writes **Purushottam Agrawal**

Perhaps the most significant achievement of the recent Gen Z protest in Delhi is the breach it has opened in the climate of fear and submission. Equally, it has exposed the Modi government’s vulnerabilities. A regime that positions its obduracy as resolve—‘resignations do not happen in this government’—was forced into an embarrassing retreat. The ‘world’s largest political party’, backed by its formidable IT machinery, suddenly looked comical and ineffectual, both online and on the ground. Even the damage-control exertions of the ‘non-biological’ Prime Minister, jerked out of his preferred 8 p.m. television slot to try his hand at Instagram reels, backfired and became more fodder for gags and memes. The larger Hindutva project has also suffered a tremendous blow. Both the Modi government and some top functionaries of the RSS were ticked off by Parivar patriarch Mohan Bhagwat, who laboured the point at a youth conference in Mumbai that the Gen Z protesters were “not anti-nationals”, that the government must engage in dialogue, i.e., avoid its usual ‘my way or the highway’ approach. The Congress party, Rahul Gandhi in particular, had been raising students’ grievances for some time, but their efforts were not getting media attention, thanks to the long arm of the PMO. In fact, hoping it

would take steam out of the Congress campaign, the government was initially quite soft on the Cockroach Janta Party protest. Its calculations hadn’t budgeted for the support the CJP would get from those not drawn to ‘party politics’ but keen nevertheless to make common cause with a movement that gave voice to their own frustrations with a brutish, self-righteous government. The Congress protest, moreover, was in the standard political idiom. The Jantar Mantar protest, on the other hand, offered young Indians the freedom to articulate their feelings in a way that comes to them naturally. Gen Z turned laughter into a disarmingly effective weapon. Sarcasm and satire were put to imaginative and powerful use, perhaps for the first time in the history of modern India. Even the much-talked-about profanities were, in fact, a great antidote to the hypocrisies of a regime that has normalised abusive language and innuendo in Indian politics; they spare nobody, not even revered and long-dead national leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru and Maulana Azad. Those offended by teenage girls and young women using abusive language at the protest should take a tour of the H-pop space online. They should watch videos of young women under the spell of political Hindutva, gyrating provocatively and hurling the most obscene words at anyone opposed to their politics and their Supreme Leader. Before expressing shock over the profanities used at Jantar Mantar, the Prime Minister would have done well to recall his own choice expressions during election campaigns in Bengal, Rajasthan and elsewhere. He would have sounded a little more convincing if he had even once expressed the same shock at the language used by his supporters.

The cracks this protest has made in the Great Wall of Fear do offer hope. Perhaps because the Gen Z protests are largely focused on education-related issues, attempts to create fissures along caste and religious lines have so far been unsuccessful. We are witnessing the emergence of a constituency defined not by a particular mindset as much as commonsense. Led by the tactical smarts of its organisers, this motley crew is

demonstrating that people of different, even conflicting, opinions can come together for a common cause—those for and against reservations, for instance. In fact, there were initially some Modi admirers among them as well, whom the government, to the delight of its opponents, lost through its self-righteous obstinacy. It is becoming clearer by the day that young Indians confronting real problems in their lives are increasingly drawn more to empathic and rational communication rather than emotional provocation. This is an important historical moment, and one that may be lost if it is not used wisely. To his great credit, Rahul Gandhi has shown remarkable political maturity. He did not visit the protest site, wisely avoiding the charge of ‘politicising’ it or trying to take credit, and instead continued consolidating the Congress outreach. He has been careful to underline the non-partisan character of the demands and concerns surrounding the state of education today, and has mastered the art of rational communication with young Indians. His approach has the potential to turn the immediate protest into a long-term, future-oriented resistance to the totalitarian designs of the RSS-BJP. Caste, community, gender and language issues are no doubt realities of Indian politics, and they are constantly exploited to sabotage popular movements of resistance. No political programme or action can afford to ignore these realities. The challenge, therefore, is how to create and sustain the maximum possible unity among people. Let us also not forget that the present government is rigidly self-righteous and driven by an RSS ideology incurably opposed to an inclusive and democratic idea of India. It has captured mainstream media so completely that its political agenda and bigotry are promoted 24x7. In any authentic historical account, India’s lapdog media would be held largely responsible for the avalanche of stupidity unleashed upon citizens. The euphoria generated by the protest can be translated into sustained political action only if there is a convincing alternative to the designs of the present government and its ideological



(Top) Abhijeet Dipke and Team CJP celebrate the news of Dharmendra Pradhan’s resignation; (above) Rahul Gandhi has the back of young protesters as they speak to the press about the police action

The Congress, with its legacy of leading the freedom struggle and articulating an inclusive idea of India, has the most crucial role to play

fountainhead, the RSS. A sustained response to its agenda of hatred and a full-bodied alternative to the Hindutva vision of India must be articulated in a contemporary context shaped by AI and virtual reality on the one hand and the rise of sectarian politics of many hues on the other. The Congress, with its historical legacy of leading the national struggle and articulating an inclusive idea of India, has the most crucial role to play in this exercise. Alongside this theoretical exercise, it must also accommodate the expectations of potential allies. All this is easier said than done. But it is the only way out of the present mess; otherwise, this will be another lost opportunity. ■

PURUSHOTTAM AGRAWAL is an author, most recently of Majbooti ka Naam Mahatma Gandhi, Rajkamal Prakashan

Real pushback needs a political grammar



At Delhi’s Jantar Mantar, which became a grand theatre of protest, a magnet for Indians young and old from all walks of life

Jaideep Hardikar

Where there is power, there is resistance... Resistance has no single locus, no one great refusal. [It] is... dispersed across society, appearing wherever power is exercised.’ That’s Michel Foucault, French philosopher and political scientist, in his 1978 work on the history of sexuality. Perhaps this is a useful way of looking at the resistance movements mushrooming in India today. Over most of June and July 2026, Delhi’s Jantar Mantar became a grand theatre of protest. A movement initially focused on exam paper leaks, and broadly categorised as a Gen Z protest, soon became a magnet for citizens young and old, offering their sympathy and support to possibly the most credible pushback against this

authoritarian regime. Before long, it had inspired protests in other parts of the country, in state capitals and small towns, its echoes heard far and wide. Jantar Mantar drew people from all over. They weren’t all examination aspirants, their grievances not the same but the anger was directed without exception at a government they associate with hubris, cronyism and institutional capture. Jantar Mantar has a storied history. Farmers, students, industrial workers, government employees, environmentalists, Adivasis, women, informal workers, minorities worried about their citizenship have all brought their demands and grievances to this hallowed protest venue. They have come here under different banners at different times. At this very moment in our history, we have a multiplicity of protests across the country.

Can We, the People of India, commit ourselves to a rediscovery of a shared democratic project?

What we don’t have at this moment, though, is a common political grammar, a shared vocabulary that binds these disparate movements. This is not necessarily a sign that resistance is weak. Maybe it is the new shape of power, possibly the crony capitalist nexus that has become its defining feature, that has altered the common citizen’s equation with power. For much of the twentieth century, resistance was imagined vertically. The State was the principal adversary. Our freedom struggle had a national objective—Gandhi spoke of swadeshi. Ambedkar saw national liberation in the annihilation of caste through a constitutional democracy. The Left organised workers and peasants around a theory of class. The JP movement was a national confrontation with authoritarian rule. All these movements pivoted on a national imaginary. The economic liberalisation of the 1990s changed the landscape. It did not make the State disappear, but it radically altered the relationship between State, capital and society. From this new equation emerged the new ecology of civil society. NGOs became prominently engaged in myriad sectors—from education to farming to environmental activism. International funding opened up new possibilities for policy advocacy and mobilisation. As liberalisation deepened, rights-based movements became an important feature of public life. The 1990s produced a new kind of politics: professionalised, networked, issue-based and organised around particular constituencies and demands. The anti-globalisation movements of that period challenged the terms on which India entered the global economy. Environmental activism questioned the State and critiqued its development paradigm. Rights-based campaigns sought to make the State more accountable to citizens. Civil society came to occupy space between the common citizen and the State. And sometimes the movements they led resulted in course corrections and rights-based statutes for information, forest governance and more. Three decades later, the nature of the confrontation has changed again. It’s not simply local versus global or State versus

civil society. A farmer encounters the State and the market together—in the price his crop can fetch, the cost of inputs, access to credit, procurement and land ownership. A student too encounters them simultaneously—in the cost of education, the credibility of examinations and public institutions and the prospects of employment. A worker encounters them in precarious employment, migration and the absence of social security. An Adivasi encounters them in displacement. Environmental movements encounter them wherever ‘development’ and greed collide with long-term ecological viability. The question at the root of their resistance is: whose interests are the laws and rules of the land meant to serve? Is there any shared ground between landed farmers, farm labourers, students, industrial workers, environmentalists, displaced Adivasi tribes, informal labour and precarious minorities trapped in a majoritarian maelstrom? A hundred movements can co-exist and still fail to alter the structure of power if each remains trapped in its own vocabulary. There are some important lessons in the student protests and the farmers’ movement earlier. These two peaceful agitations on the streets brought together people and organisations with different interests, histories and political affiliations. They found some common ground: possibly in their insistence that the terms of engagement with the market and the State cannot simply be thrust upon them. A young and anxious India seems to have a new vocabulary to express its angst and aspirations. This generation feels connected to the world and is alert to local, national and global spirals. It is simultaneously a witness to and a victim of great change being wrought by new technology and other forces way too powerful. The headiness of making the State buckle and concede some demands is understandable but a larger question looms. Can India’s variously disaffected millions find and articulate a common democratic project? As we celebrate another Independence Day, can We, the People of India, commit ourselves to a rediscovery of a shared democratic project? ■

How resistance takes root and grows shoots

The power of resistance can be summed up in five words: breadth, unity, discipline, continuity and legitimacy, writes **Shailendra Chauhan**

A mature democracy stays alive through informed civic participation, freedom of thought and respect for dissent. Resistance, therefore, is not an aberration or an anti-system activity but a necessary part of democratic life. When those in power begin to suppress and discredit dissent instead of engaging with it, resistance becomes an essential instrument of democratic citizenship.

But what kind of resistance? What puts real pressure on power, and what makes news briefly before fading away? Are numbers decisive? Is non-violence always more effective? And when governments have not just the police and the administrative machinery but a surveillance apparatus, a propaganda machinery and enormous economic resources, what can effective resistance look like?

The history of India’s freedom struggle is instructive. Freedom was not won by a single method, organisation or leader. It encompassed mass movements, satyagraha, non-cooperation, boycotts, underground activity, revolutionary violence, attempts at military rebellion and ultimately a swell of popular political pressure. To reduce it to Gandhi and non-violence oversimplifies history; to see it as a story of revolutionary courage is equally flawed.

Perhaps Gandhi’s greatest political achievement was to take resistance out of the hands of a few courageous individuals and situate it among ordinary citizens. Satyagraha was not simply about fasts or demonstrations. Its central principle was non-cooperation with unjust authority. Boycotting government institutions and foreign goods, supporting swadeshi and encouraging mass participation were all part of this strategy. The Salt Satyagraha turned an ordinary commodity into a political symbol of resistance.

Crucially, Gandhian resistance required neither weapons nor wealth nor specialised training. Farmers, workers, students, traders, women and ordinary citizens could participate. Resistance thus acquired a broad social base.

This is where numbers matter. A state can suppress a small group through arrests, prosecutions and administrative controls. But when dissent spreads across different sections of society, it ceases to be merely a protest and becomes social unrest.

Research by political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan has similarly highlighted broad civic participation. Studies of largescale resistance have found non-violent mass campaigns



Photo: Getty Images

Gandhi’s salt satyagraha turned an everyday commodity into a powerful political symbol of resistance

more effective than violent ones in many circumstances. NAVCO 2.1, the updated dataset tracking mass movements, covers 389 violent and non-violent campaigns between 1945 and 2013. It notes greater participation and far fewer deaths per capita in non-violent campaigns, though their success rate declined after 2001.

The larger lesson is that numbers do matter, but numbers alone are not enough. Millions taking to the streets for a day may achieve more than sustained, organised and disciplined non-cooperation. Numbers become political power when combined with diversity, organisation, continuity and

a clear objective.

Gandhian movements mattered not simply because they mobilised large numbers, but because they pressured the structures that enabled British rule to function. Administration, taxation, transport, commerce, labour and political legitimacy all depend, in some measure, on civic cooperation. Non-cooperation and boycott could therefore strike at the social and economic foundations of power.

The revolutionary current had a different voice. Chandrashekhra Azad, Bhagat Singh, Ram Prasad Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan and others chose armed

resistance and audacious action against colonial rule. They challenged its legitimacy, inspired young people and sharpened the demand for independence. Bhagat Singh’s thinking extended further to questions of social and economic transformation.

Yet revolutionary actions alone could hardly have forced the British out of India. Their popular base was not comparable to that of Gandhian mass movements. Both traditions need to be understood in terms of their contribution and limitations.

It’s important to understand that non-violence does not mean passivity. It can be intensely active, disciplined and strategic. Its purpose is not merely moral persuasion but to exert pressure on the functioning and legitimacy of power. Strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, peaceful demonstrations, electoral interventions, consumer non-cooperation and institutional resistance can all serve this purpose.

The nature of power, however, has changed. Twentieth-century movements confronted police, armies, administrations and censorship. Governments today have at their command a surveillance apparatus, big data and data analytics, media cells to unleash propaganda via social media and instant information. Simply putting a large crowd on the streets is no longer enough. Yet the street remains important. Large protests across the world, including the ‘No Kings’ protests in the United States in 2025 and 2026, show that public spaces remain an arena of democratic power. But resistance today must connect the street with society, institutions, the economy and the information sphere.

Strength in numbers thus means social breadth, not merely a crowd. A movement confined to one organisation or social group can easily be dismissed as the work of a disgruntled minority. When students, farmers, workers, women, employees, intellectuals, small traders, professionals

and ordinary citizens participate, it becomes much harder to marginalise. Diversity can sometimes matter more than sheer numbers.

Continuity is equally important. Scattered protests can be contained through arrests, negotiations, vilification or selective concessions. The weakest protests are typically those that erupt over one event and then disappear. Effective resistance makes the issue bigger than an individual and broader than an event.

Digital media have created both new possibilities and vulnerabilities. Social media can carry a message to millions, but can also expose movements to rumours, frenzy and disinformation. Going viral is not the same as becoming politically effective. Digital resistance must connect with verified information, independent journalism, legal assistance, public debate and grassroots organisation.

Economic non-cooperation can also exert pressure because power depends on economic activity and civic cooperation. Peaceful strikes, consumer boycotts and institutional dissent can affect the networks that sustain power. But such action should not impose its greatest cost on ordinary citizens. Democratic resistance must pressure power without inflicting unnecessary violence or destruction on society.

This brings us to violence. History has certainly seen political change accompanied by violent struggle. But violence may win immediate attention while weakening a movement’s moral legitimacy and giving the state justification for harsher repression. It raises the cost of resistance for ordinary citizens. The more effective democratic path today is probably more civic participation.

The future of resistance can be summed up in five words: breadth, unity, discipline, continuity and legitimacy. Breadth takes a movement across society; unity maintains a minimum common objective despite differences; discipline keeps violence, hatred and chaos at bay; continuity turns protest into a political process; and legitimacy means that a substantial section of society regards its demands as just.

The future of resistance lies neither solely in Parliament, nor on the street, nor on social media, but in a civic energy capable of connecting them.

Elections are an occasion for democracy, not the whole of democratic life. Courts matter, but not every question reaches them. The media are essential, but when they weaken, society must develop independent systems of information. The street matters, but the street alone is not enough.

Effective democratic resistance must turn crowds into civil society, anger into organisation, organisation into sustained action and sustained action into democratic change. Its purpose should not merely be to defeat those in power, but to make power accountable, keep institutions independent, free citizens from fear and preserve space for reason and dissent.

Ultimately, democratic resistance should be judged not by the size of the crowd or the number of arrests, but by what it changes in the conduct of those in power, in public discourse and in the civic consciousness. ■

Numbers do matter but millions taking to the streets for a day will achieve less than sustained, disciplined non-cooperation

The power of insisting gently

Meenakshi Natarajan

In recent days, a word has been restored to the vocabulary of Indian politics. That word is ‘resistance’. Whether resistance should be rendered in Hindi as *pratirodh* (resistance) or satyagraha (nonviolent resistance rooted in truth) is open to debate. The prefix *prati* can also carry negative connotations. But beyond that, there is something else—something deeply soothing. What could possibly be soothing about resistance? The question is a legitimate one.

Many episodes associated with resistance come to mind. There is resistance in Mirabai’s songs, in Andal’s verses, in Soyarabai’s abhangs, in *Avagha Rang Ek Zala*—but there is also love. After all, even today, the establishment is afraid of love, isn’t it? What greater form of resistance could there be than love?

When resistance emerges from the womb of lived reality, it transforms into a struggle for one’s rights. That is satyagraha. It is vaster than the idea of rights. And it is impossible without practice. Resistance cannot be carried out through old methods alone. It is not a one-day programme. It is not a sensational news story. It is forged through years of blood, sweat and tears. And even then, something like Chauri Chaura can happen. At such a moment, the seeker of truth has to admit: we weren’t completely prepared. This preparation is itself a practice.

Over the past few years, we have encountered new practices of resistance. They were not discovered through deliberate search; rather, the wires simply kept connecting. These practices are not new. They were not invented for the first time. They have begun to reappear on the political terrain.

In 2021, the practice of spinning the charkha began again. At the time, no one imagined that it would spread across the country, or that it would be used so extensively as a feminine, entirely nonviolent practice of political resistance. Again and again, the thread would break;

the yarn would turn out too thick or too weak. Everyone thought we would spin a little cotton, make a garland, and that would be that.

Then the story changed. One day, a woman comrade from Maharashtra began spinning the charkha at a public sit-in. The police told her, “Do whatever you want—but don’t slogans, do anything you like. That’s not spin.” Had the habits of colonial rule still not changed, that the baton-wielding police were frightened by a charkha?

In faraway Himachal Pradesh, a movement was underway against the suspension of MGNREGA work. A statue of Bapu stood a short distance from the protest site. A woman who had once served as the village sarpanch was given no particular recognition, despite the fact that during her tenure, MGNREGA work in the village had been carried out on an unprecedented scale.

In 2021, the practice of spinning the charkha began again. No one imagined it would be used as a feminine, nonviolent practice of political resistance



People’s organisations have adopted the *parai* as an instrument of resistance

The woman said nothing to her charkha and quietly sat beneath Bapu’s statue, spinning yarn.

After a while, the media, the comrades at the protest came and sat around her. All she said was this: the yarn comes from the sweat of workers and farmers. This is my resistance for the restoration of MGNREGA.

The charkha was spun in thirty towns across the country against electoral malpractice and the nexus of power. One may ask: what changed? What was gained? The Election Commission did not change. But a new practice of change was discovered. The conduct of political movements changed. A movement and protest site that had always been steeped in an overwhelmingly masculine, muscular culture began, in some measure, to acquire a feminine character. Women could sit as equals at protest sites and spin yarn. Attention was paid to their natural needs.

A similarly beautiful practice is slowly taking shape at Kranti, a women’s camp. In Tamil Nadu, there is an instrument somewhat like a tambourine. It is called the *parai*. It may well be one of the world’s

earliest musical instruments. It is made from the hide of dead cattle. For centuries it was played only by members of the Dalit community. It was played before temples, at public festivals and when someone of social standing passed away. The people who played the *parai* were called *paraiyar* with contempt.

That community was not allowed to enter the main village. They could not climb the steps of a temple. They could not use the public well. Even their funeral processions could not pass through the main village. Even today, the situation is more or less the same, although such discrimination is a legal offence.

Several reformers and people’s organisations have begun playing the *parai* as an instrument of resistance. It is still not used in political circles. At this camp, women from different regions, castes, religions and classes were participating, and so the experience was different.

The woman teaching the *parai* was a revolutionary comrade from the Dalit community. She spoke Tamil. Most of the participants could not understand Tamil at all. So there was a linguistic barrier. There was another difficulty: in a caste-dominated

society, it is not easy to learn from a Dalit woman.

Then, the murmurs began. The *parai* was made from cattle hide—how could one touch it? It was impure. Without practice, a woman who is forced to label herself impure for three days every month can still fail to be sensitive to communities that have been deemed impure for generations.

For two days, excuses were made: “My hands hurt.” “How can I hold such a heavy instrument?”

The woman teaching them simply continued to play, with affection and patience.

On the third day, after watching a video on the story of the *parai*, something melted. On the same day, there was a conversation with Devadasi women. All those accumulated feelings of impurity turned into tears. The heart was cleansed.

That evening, everyone picked up the *parai* and the air reverberated with its sound. Everyone also learned a two-step dance. It was as though one group struggling with one form of discrimination had reached out and held the other.

That day, the woman teaching them felt no linguistic barrier. The *parai* had found its own language. It had moved beyond language. She said that when the women held the *parai* with both hands, she felt as though they had pushed aside centuries of discrimination and embraced it. Accepted it.

That day, everyone’s eyes stayed moist. Discrimination, awareness, everything kept flowing. A folk singer from Karnataka sang the song ‘Kattuteva’—whose lyrics challenge the fear of inner slavery and say, come, let us make ourselves fearless.

Fearlessness awakens through love. That is the eternal form of resistance. A new culture of resistance is taking shape. It is becoming a practice.

The most powerful country in the world celebrated its 250th anniversary. But can it really be called free? Not without *சாதி* *அபராதம்*, those two-and-a-half letters of love.

Love is returning to politics. Through the practice of resistance. ■

The sixth-grader in the room: Karnataka's deliberate bet on an AI-native future

There is a detail buried in Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar's recent public appearances that is easy to miss amid the bigger announcements — the university, the hub, the export figures — but which may say more about Karnataka's actual strategy than any of them. Describing a proposed AI University at Google I/O Connect India 2026, he said its long-term goal is to bring AI education to rural students from Class 6 onward. Not engineering graduates. Not startup founders. A twelve-year-old in a village classroom.

That single image reframes everything else Shivakumar has said this year about technology, investment and growth. Read across his recent speeches — first to CEOs at an industry breakfast, then to developers and researchers at Google I/O — Karnataka's leadership is not simply courting the next wave of AI investment, in the way dozens of states now are.

It is attempting something more deliberate: setting the terms on which that investment travels once it arrives — who gets trained by it, which cities get built up by it, which classrooms get reached by it. The ambition is not only to attract capital, but to route it, so its effects do not stall at Bengaluru's city limits, the way so many previous booms have.

Taken together, the two addresses read less like separate speeches and more like chapters of a single plan, one that pairs symbolic commitments — such as India's first government-driven AI University — with the granular mechanics of governance: office pricing, CSR partnerships, data centre policy, and a hundred-day deadline for turning promises into paperwork.

A thank-you note, then a pivot

The Chief Minister's breakfast address to industry leaders began not with policy but with gratitude. Bengaluru's greatest strength, he told the CEOs, has never been its buildings or its climate — it has been its people, the companies and individuals who arrived decades ago and chose, again and again, to stay. "You are the ambassadors of Bengaluru. You are the ambassadors of Karnataka," he told them, framing industry not as a guest of the state but as a co-author of its story.

He cited the scale of what had been built together: software exports that have crossed Rs 4.36 lakh crore and are expected to exceed Rs 5.5 lakh crore this year — figures he was careful not to let stand alone, noting that behind each one is a young engineer landing a first job, a family edging closer to the life it wants.

He pointed to the state's Global Capability Centres, which have evolved from back-office administration into genuine engines of product engineering, a shift he credited to Bengaluru's dominance of India's office market. He also recalled conversations at Davos, where executives kept returning to the same comparison: work that might cost \$3.50 elsewhere, companies had told him, can be done for close to \$1 in Bengaluru — a gap he attributed to the city's talent, ecosystem and human



Photo: GettyImages

capital.

Many states are competing for the same investment, he acknowledged, but it is that combination, not incentives alone, that keeps global companies choosing Karnataka.

Having established that Bengaluru works, the address pivoted toward the places it doesn't yet reach. Within the next hundred days, Shivakumar announced, the government will introduce a policy built to pull industry out of Bengaluru and into the rest of the state, offering office infrastructure in other Karnataka cities for as little as fifty cents per square foot.

New IT, Space Technology and Startup policies — built around

DeepTech, digital infrastructure, research, industry-academia collaboration and entrepreneurship — have already been rolled out, alongside a Quantum Roadmap meant to get ahead of the next wave of emerging technology rather than chase it.

Two further announcements targeted the built environment of innovation directly: the Bengaluru Robotics and Innovation Zone, and the Sustainable Data Centre Policy 2026-31, aligning land, power, water, connectivity and renewable energy within a single framework.

It was here that the Chief Minister made his most memorable rhetorical move, reframing the relationship

between the capital and the rest of the state. "Bengaluru is our crown, but Karnataka is our heart," he said, naming Mysuru, Hubballi-Dharwad, Mangaluru and Belagavi as cities he expects to grow into major technology and investment destinations in their own right.

Human infrastructure, not charity

Nor did the Chief Minister confine his appeal to physical infrastructure. He asked companies to adopt a government school each under their CSR programmes — not as a gesture, but as a structural investment in classrooms, teacher training and learning outcomes.

He was candid about the scale of the problem: the state already spends more than Rs 1 lakh per child on government education, and still contends with teacher vacancies it cannot fill without partners.

Government alone, he told the room plainly, cannot close that gap; healthcare, he signalled, would be next. None of this was framed as charity — it was framed as the human infrastructure a state needs if AI-driven growth is to reach past its own capital city.

He also acknowledged Bengaluru's ongoing infrastructure and mobility strains, calling for industry and government to keep working in tandem there too.

An AI-native state, built to reach its own edges

Weeks earlier, on July 14, a different setting drew a different register from the Chief Minister, though the underlying ambition was unmistakably the same. Inaugurating Google I/O Connect India 2026 at BIEC, Shivakumar made what may prove the more consequential announcement of the two occasions: Karnataka will establish India's first government-driven Artificial Intelligence (AI) University, paired with an AI Hub designed as an incubation centre for research and development by startups, companies and independent innovators.

Speaking to technology leaders, developers, researchers and policymakers from across India and the world, Shivakumar described Artificial Intelligence as a revolution on the scale of the steam engine, electricity, the internet and mobile technology.

Bengaluru, he said, is not merely India's technology capital but one of the world's most vibrant innovation ecosystems, and Karnataka's ambition is to build one of the world's leading centres for responsible AI.

He backed the claim with figures he would repeat weeks later: nearly 40 per cent of India's software exports, more than 17,000 startups, and thousands of Global Capability Centres (GCC) engineering products for global markets.

What distinguished this address was how insistently it defined success in terms of reach rather than concentration. Karnataka's



Photo: GettyImages

first ambition, Shivakumar said, is to become an AI-native state — one where AI improves governance and daily life rather than functioning as a slogan. AI must help teachers teach better, doctors diagnose disease earlier, farmers receive sharper advisory support, citizens access government services with dignity and speed, and small businesses compete with confidence.

Each of those five constituencies lives largely outside the Global Capability Centres and startup campuses that dominate conversations about Bengaluru's tech economy — naming them so precisely was itself a routing instruction, a definition of who the AI-native state is actually meant to serve.

That same instinct shaped his

appeal to Google, whose two-decade partnership with Karnataka he credited for products — Search, Android, YouTube, Maps, Chrome, Gmail and Google Pay — that have reshaped how Indians access information, conduct business and interact with government.

He used that history to press for something more distributed: AI tools for education, healthcare, agriculture and small businesses; support for startups solving distinctly Indian problems at scale; expanded AI learning across the state; positioning Karnataka as a global laboratory for responsible technology; and a deeper commitment from Google as an ecosystem partner rather than an occasional investor.

It was at this same event that he floated the university itself — first floated in conversation with Google — as a centre for learning, innovation, collaboration and public digital access, before attaching to it the ambition that gives this strategy its clearest expression: AI education for rural students from Class 6 onward, so the benefits of the AI economy are not confined to those already inside Bengaluru's ecosystem.

He closed by asking developers to build boldly, entrepreneurs to dream big, researchers to keep innovating and students to never stop learning, framed around a single commitment: that Karnataka would keep shaping the future of technology while keeping AI innovative, inclusive and trusted.

The address closed with a look ahead to the Bengaluru Tech Summit, scheduled for November 17 to 19 at the Bangalore International Exhibition Centre, described not as a conference but as a platform for policy, partnerships and outcomes.

His final words were less an ask than a statement of intent: the government is not chasing short-term investment, he said, but long-term partnership — if industry is strong, Karnataka is strong. Minister for IT/BT and Home Priyank Kharge, Sharath Bachegowda and senior bureaucrats were present alongside him.

The thread between two podiums

Set beside each other, the two addresses function almost as bookends to a single argument. One is fluent in GDP figures, CSR ledgers and price-per-square-foot; the other in curiosity, responsibility and public purpose. But the overlap is not incidental.

Both describe the same AI University, built with industry rather than for it. Both invoke Google as a partner whose next contribution should be measured in classrooms and clinics, not just campuses.

And both circle back to the same tension: a state that has built one of the world's most successful technology economies inside a single city, now trying to ensure its next chapter isn't written there too.

That is what makes the rural sixth-grader such a useful test of the whole project. A Global Capability Centre or a fifty-cent-per-square-foot office park is a fairly conventional tool of industrial policy — attract the company, count the jobs, log the investment.

Committing to reach a child in a rural classroom with AI education is a different kind of commitment, one whose value will only become fully visible years down the line. It is, in that sense, the most far-sighted promise in either speech — and the clearest evidence of what Karnataka's leadership is actually building toward: not simply more AI investment arriving in the state, but a state that has decided, in advance, where that investment is meant to go.

That is also what gives the two addresses their real coherence. The AI University, the AI Hub, the Robotics and Innovation Zone, the Sustainable Data Centre Policy — each is a different instrument aimed at the same outcome: an AI economy engineered to travel, not concentrate.

Karnataka has named its destinations, set its timelines and enlisted its partners. What remains is execution, and the state has been explicit about its intent — a hundred-day policy window, a university built with industry rather than for it, and an invitation to companies to help carry AI education into classrooms far from Bengaluru's skyline. Karnataka has set its pace, and its next moves are already in motion — carrying its AI ambitions beyond the city that made them possible, into the towns and classrooms it has now named as its destination.

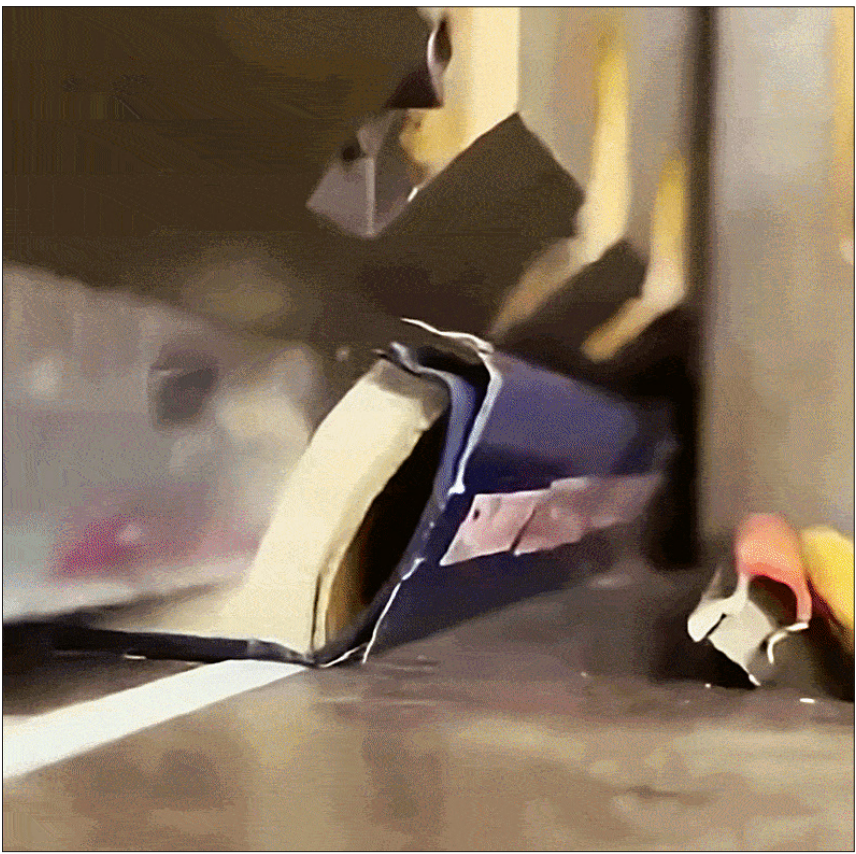
Photo: GettyImages



Welcome to an all-new digital dystopia

Lawrence Liang reflects on the brutish cannibalisation of books by AI powerhouses

Ray Bradbury’s dystopic science fiction novel *Fahrenheit 451*, a reference to the temperature at which paper burns, was based on one of the most defining images of cultural destruction in the 20th century—the spectacular and performative burning of books by Nazis. In the novel, people resist the wanton destruction of books by turning to an all too human skill, memory, to preserve books by learning them by heart. While fire has been the favoured tool of political ideology in its battle against books, there are indeed many other ways humans have destroyed books, and the latest version of this entails large AI companies like Anthropic destroying old books to ingest them as raw data for training large language models (LLM). Industrial scale blades guillotine the spines of physical books, unbinding the pages to be fed into high-end scanners that convert text into digital data while the physical remains are shredded. It’s hard to imagine a book lover who is able to watch a video of this form of book destruction without a sense of horror that echoes the nightmare conceived by Ray Bradbury. And yet, often, the only thing that outdoes the dystopia of science fiction is the feral reality of science and technology. If the bibliophiles of *Fahrenheit 451* turned to human memory, what is being assembled today is a vast memory machine that has no use or regard for imperfect human memory. Unlike book purges of the past that took place in the name of political ideology and the cleansing of culture, the contemporary destruction of books is ironically being carried out in the name of knowledge production and preservation. AI is an insatiable beast that must constantly be fed data to grow more powerful. But to an LLM, there is no difference between a recipe, a literary masterpiece, a diary or junk email. They are all just text to be tokenised, accorded computational weightage, chewed, digested and spat out as ‘intelligent’ answers to our endless queries.



This textual cannibalism craves a lot of text, but treats the physical carrier, the book, merely as a container of raw data. If books were earlier the primary artefacts of human memory and consciousness, now they are merely vehicles that carry data sets. Interestingly, this is not the first time the physical book and its contents have been on a collision course. In the early days of print history, book binders took an opposite route to arrive at the same destination. They routinely destroyed old manuscripts to use them in the spines of new books, valuing the parchment while discarding the text. History does repeat

itself, as farce and tragedy, not necessarily in any order. Writing in 1953, the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz hauntingly predicted that whatever does not exist on paper does not exist at all. As someone who lived through a communist dictatorship at the height of the cold war, Miłosz would have known better than most the importance of pitting political memory against enforced amnesia. His Czech counterpart, Milan Kundera echoed this sentiment in his famous lines ‘the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting’. Why should it matter, cynics may ask,

whether paper survives, when the word itself is being preserved. Consider a story that circulates among librarians. A researcher working on an arcane subject goes to a library with little hope of finding a rare book essential to their work. To their delight, the book is on the shelf, but to their surprise, the borrowing card is blank: in over fifty years nobody has ever issued it. They go to the librarian and ask if no one has ever taken this book out, who was it bought for? The librarian replies: why, you, sir. Books have always been a wager on the future, on readers who may not yet exist. But AI companies have no use or appetite to invest in unknown futures. Replacing human readers with memory machines reverses Bradbury’s consolation at the end of his book where the book people preserve memory by ingesting books into their beings. In the contemporary version, the machine will remember while we will forget because we have no paper. Digitisation is not a bad thing. Given the fragility of paper, it is important to digitise, but there is a big difference between a small

library digitising its fragile books and multibillion dollar companies choosing that route because non-destructive scanning is much slower and more expensive. But can we lay all the blame entirely on the actions of companies like Anthropic, or are we too complicit in some ways with the book burning of our times? One of the sharpest, and most controversial indictments of ordinary complicity during the Nazi regime came in the form of Daniel Goldhagen’s book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, which argued that the Holocaust was perpetrated not just by a group of SS fanatics but also by ordinary Germans who willingly and often zealously participated in the extermination of Jews. I certainly do not want to equate the destruction of books with the scale of violence and crime that he was speaking about, but the question nonetheless remains. How do we think about complicity in the contemporary destruction of books by AI companies? The enthusiastic embrace of all things AI by just about everyone comes at a cost. We have been informed of the huge ecological cost of even a single query on AI models but we choose, as we often do with ecology, to ignore it because the convenience is great. A college student querying ChatGPT for an easy fix to an inconvenient homework may not be thinking of their action as contributing to ecological or cultural damage, but if there is any lesson to be learnt from ecological disaster, it is that even when there is no single actor to hold accountable, and even if we plead innocence as individuals, we are all complicit and culpable. In our embrace of AI as the next great achievement of human civilisation, let us not forget Walter Benjamin’s dire warning that there is no document of civilisation that is not simultaneously a document of barbarity. ■

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Food politics and the MGR legacy

Tamil Nadu’s plan to introduce chicken biriyani in the state’s noon meal scheme is more than just a nutritional choice, argues K.A. Shaji

There’s a piping hot topic in Tamil Nadu and it’s biriyani. The new government led by actor-turned-chief minister Joseph Vijay is actively considering a proposal to introduce chicken biriyani once a week under the state’s Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme for students up to the senior secondary level. A cabinet committee is studying the proposal and a decision is expected soon. It comes at a time when food has become politicised across India. Words like ‘tradition’ and ‘religion’ overwhelm ‘nutrition’ and ‘science’. In several BJP-ruled states—West Bengal being the latest—even an egg a day is controversial, despite overwhelming evidence that eggs are one of the cheapest and best sources of protein for children. The proposed biriyani, therefore, is more than a mouthwatering idea. It’s the latest chapter in a story that goes back over a century, “a story of political courage, administrative imagination and an unwavering belief that education cannot succeed where children arrive hungry,” as I. Amal Raj, an educationist and faculty with Chennai’s Loyola College puts it. “Long before the Loyola College nutritional security entered international development discourse and governments began speaking of demographic dividends, Tamil Nadu had already understood that students learn better on full stomachs.” The tale of school meals in Tamil Nadu is inseparable from Marudur Gopalan Ramachandran, better known as MGR.

When he announced the expansion of the Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme in 1982, few believed it could succeed. The state proposed spending nearly Rs 150 crore a year, an astonishing amount for that period, to feed millions of children through tens of thousands of feeding centres. Economists questioned the fiscal wisdom. Bureaucrats feared logistical chaos. Political opponents dismissed it as an expensive populist exercise designed to convert box-office popularity into electoral loyalty. Editorials raised genuine concerns over procurement, transportation, food safety, storage, staffing and monitoring. Naysayers predicted that leakages and corruption would kill the programme. Some argued that poor parents would send children to school only for the food. Others opined that the state’s fragile finances would collapse under the weight of such an ambitious commitment. MGR heard all the criticism. And ignored almost all of it. Having experienced hunger and poverty in his own childhood, he understood something that economic models often failed to: a hungry child cannot concentrate. For MGR, the meal was not charity, it was the first lesson of the day. “Nutrition is not a favour extended to the poor. It is the foundation upon which equality is built,” he said. That philosophy led to one of the most influential public policy experiments in independent India. To credit MGR alone would be to ignore history. The idea of feeding schoolchildren dates back to the early twentieth century,

when the Justice Party governed Madras Presidency. The noon meal scheme kicked off in some government schools in what is now Chennai, and was later expanded by iconic Congress leader and chief minister K. Kamaraj. However, these initiatives remained limited in scale and ambition. MGR took the idea beyond welfare and made it central to governance. Thousands of kitchens emerged across villages and towns. Local women were employed as cooks and helpers. Communities became participants rather than passive beneficiaries. Children were fed; families were sustained. Governments changed. Fierce rivals occupied Fort St George, the seat of the

“Nutrition is not a favour extended to the poor. It is the foundation upon which equality is built”



“Every plate served is an investment in education, health, dignity and future productivity”



MGR, then Tamil Nadu chief minister, inaugurates the Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme in Tiruchi district on 1 July 1982

Tamil Nadu government. Yet none dared dismantle the programme. Instead, every administration sought to improve it. Karunanidhi expanded its nutritional components; Jayalalithaa strengthened the menu, introducing eggs more systematically; M.K. Stalin recognised that hunger pangs don’t wait till noon and introduced the free breakfast scheme for primary school children. Joseph Vijay’s proposal followed in their footsteps. The Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme outlived its architect because society saw it as indispensable. The real measure of its success wasn’t the number of meals served. School enrolment rose steadily among children from economically weaker families. Attendance improved because parents knew their children would receive at least one nutritious meal every day. Dropout rates fell, particularly among girls. It became an incentive for first-generation learners—who would otherwise accompany parents to work or construction sites—to stay in school. The scheme also quietly challenged entrenched social hierarchies. Children from different castes sat together and ate the same food. Women from disadvantaged backgrounds found the work as cooks and organisers. Public kitchens became spaces where the state intervened not merely against hunger but against exclusion. “School meals are often described as welfare. In reality, they are among the most productive investments a society can make. Every plate served is an investment in education, health, dignity and future productivity,” says K.J. Ajayakumar, a recently retired teacher from Chennai

Kerala Samajam Higher Secondary School. Tamil Nadu began recording educational and health indicators that placed it consistently ahead of much of India. While no single programme explains the state’s development arc, scholars have repeatedly pointed to the noon meal scheme as one of the foundational interventions that helped reduce inequalities over generations. It’s influence travelled beyond state borders. India’s celebrated Mid-Day Meal Scheme—renamed PM POSHAN in the Modi era—drew on the experience of Tamil Nadu. Today, it is the largest such programme in the world, serving more than 100 million children every school day. Whether chicken biriyani eventually reaches school kitchens is, in many ways, incidental. The larger lesson lies elsewhere. Decisions about what children should eat are increasingly driven by ideological preferences rather than nutritional evidence. Eggs are becoming taboo despite their proven efficacy in addressing protein deficiency. Vegetarian menus are justified in the name of ‘cultural values’, even when large sections of poor children come from communities whose regular diets include eggs, fish or meat whenever they can afford them. “Tamil Nadu has consistently resisted the Sangh Parivar agenda,” points out Chennai-based writer and political observer Kavin Malar. “Successive governments have largely treated noon meals as a scientific and public health question rather than a religious one. That explains why the state is debating the nutritional value of chicken biriyani instead of questioning whether animal protein belongs on school plates at all.” ■

How lonely it is to be Israel

Americans are finally giving up on Israel. **Ashok Swain** reads the tea leaves

For decades, Israel’s greatest strategic asset was not its army, nuclear capability or intelligence services. It was the extraordinary political support it enjoyed in the United States. Presidents of both parties treated Israel’s security as a permanent American commitment. Congress supplied weapons, money and diplomatic protection with little hesitation. Even when disagreements arose, the relationship remained secure because Israel enjoyed broad support among Americans.

That foundation is now cracking, and Benjamin Netanyahu bears the greatest responsibility. The change did not begin with the Gaza war. Years of occupation, settlement expansion and the disappearance of any credible political path for Palestinians had already damaged Israel’s image. But Gaza accelerated the transformation. The enormous scale of war crimes, displacement, starvation and destruction has changed how millions around the world see Israel.

Netanyahu responded to the Hamas attack of 7 October with a war that went far beyond any reasonable claim of military necessity. Entire neighbourhoods were destroyed. Families were buried under rubble. Hospitals, schools and civilian infrastructure were devastated. Hunger became a weapon of war. The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Netanyahu over war crimes and crimes against humanity.

This is the Israel younger Americans have been watching. The polls show how dramatic the change is. A 2018 Gallup poll found 64 per cent of Americans sympathised more with Israelis and only 19 per cent with Palestinians. By 2022, that gap had narrowed to 55 per cent and 26 per cent, respectively. In 2023, 54 per cent and 31 per cent. By 2025, 46 per cent and 33 per cent. Then the historic reversal, the first since 2001: in Gallup’s 2026 survey, only 36 per cent sympathise more with Israelis

and 41 per cent with Palestinians. The generational change is even more alarming for Israel. Among Americans aged 18 to 34, 53 per cent now sympathise more with Palestinians and only 23 per cent with Israelis. Among Democrats, the figures are 65 per cent for Palestinians and 17 per cent for Israelis. Even Republican sympathy for Israel has fallen from 80 per cent in 2024 to 70 per cent in 2026. At the same time, 57 per cent of Americans support the establishment of an independent Palestinian State.

Pew Research Center confirms the same trend through different questions. In 2022, 55 per cent of Americans viewed Israel favourably and 42 per cent unfavourably. By 2025, 53 per cent viewed Israel unfavourably; in 2026, 60 per cent. Netanyahu fares even worse: 59 per cent of Americans have little or no confidence in him on world affairs. Among Democrats the figure is 76 per cent. More significantly for Israel’s future, 57 per cent of Republicans aged 18 to 49 now view Israel unfavourably.

Gallup and Pew use different questions and methodologies, yet they reveal the same transformation. Israel is losing the American public, and it is losing younger Americans rapidly. This matters more than no votes at the United Nations or demonstrations in European capitals. Israel can survive criticism from Europe and condemnation from the Global South, but it cannot replace the United States.

For decades, Washington has provided Israel not only weapons and financial assistance but extraordinary diplomatic protection. While official US figures have historically put cumulative bilateral assistance above \$130 billion in nominal terms, inflation-adjusted estimates place total American aid at more than \$300 billion, including well over \$200 billion in military assistance. Israel is the largest cumulative recipient of US foreign aid since the Second World War.

The US has also used its veto around 50 times to block Security Council action involving Israel and the Palestinian question. Since the Gaza war began in October 2023, Washington has cast six vetoes on Gaza-related Security Council measures. In June and September 2025, the isolation was extraordinary: 14 members of the Security Council supported ceasefire resolutions while the US alone voted against them. American diplomatic power effectively prevented their adoption. The assumption that Washington would stand behind Israel in any major confrontation has been central to Israeli security; Netanyahu may have finally gambled it away.

His wars did not remain confined to Gaza. Violence and dispossession intensified in the West Bank. Israeli military operations expanded in Lebanon. Then came the war against Iran, a conflict Netanyahu had advocated for years. Instead of reducing threats around Israel, his strategy has widened the battlefield. He has tried to convince Israelis that



Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has painted himself into a corner

‘forever wars’ are necessary for survival, but that line has now become one of the greatest threats to Israel’s long-term security.

American foreign policy will not change overnight. Established institutions and lobbying networks remain powerful. But democratic governments cannot remain permanently insulated from public opinion. Younger Americans will eventually become senators, members of Congress, officials from the administration and voters deciding presidential elections. If their understanding of Israel has been shaped primarily by Gaza, occupation, settler violence and regional war, the consequences for the alliance will be profound.

Already more lawmakers are challenging arms transfers. More Democrats are distancing themselves from Netanyahu. More candidates are questioning unconditional American support. The political cost of criticising Israel is decreasing and conversely

the cost of defending Netanyahu’s wars is rising.

Future US governments may continue supporting Israel’s existence and legitimate security needs while refusing to finance occupation, settlement expansion and repeated wars. Military assistance could become conditional. Arms transfers could face restrictions. Diplomatic protection could weaken. Washington could become much more willing to pressure Israel to accept Palestinian statehood.

The loss of support is also global. Pew’s 2026 survey across 36 countries found a median of 67 per cent holding an unfavourable opinion of Israel, against only 25 per cent with a favourable view. Unfavourable opinion reached 69 per cent in Britain, 73 per cent in Germany, 75 per cent in Italy, 76 per cent in the Netherlands and 78 per cent in Spain and Sweden. Israel is, therefore, losing support not only among its traditional critics

but in countries that have been important diplomatic, economic and military partners. Yet the decline of support in the US is uniquely dangerous because no other country has backed Israel like the US.

The recent defence agreement between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan is also significant for Israel. These are major Muslim powers. Turkey is a NATO member and Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons. Their growing security cooperation is a sign that the region is looking for greater strategic autonomy and new ways of confronting Israel.

For generations, Israel could count on the US to stand behind it whatever happened in West Asia. But that ground may have slipped and Netanyahu will be remembered as the leader who pushed Israel to that point. ■

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Kanishka Narayan (left) arriving at 10 Downing Street with cabinet colleagues for a meeting with Prime Minister Andy Burnham

From Bihar to Britain’s cabinet

Guess who’s been dubbed Britain’s ‘most important minister’ in Prime Minister Andy Burnham’s cabinet?

Well, it isn’t one of the posh white boys from English counties, it’s Kanishka Narayan, an immigrant from Muzaffarpur, Bihar. He holds the portfolio for artificial intelligence—a domain billed as the ‘dawn of a new industrial revolution’.

A virtual unknown until recently, Narayan entered Parliament two years ago and now finds himself at the centre of frontline politics. Naturally, people are curious to know more about him. The way he tells it, his is a classic rags-to-riches story.

When he was eight, his parents made the “crazy, sacrificial” decision to move to Cardiff in Wales. He doesn’t explain his parents’ background, or why they chose Cardiff.

He recalls sleeping on the floor of his family’s one-bedroom home in an unglamorous suburb of Cardiff. He was a good student and a teacher suggested he apply for scholarships at some top schools.

Eton gave him a full bursary. From there, he flew through Oxford, Stanford, banking and the civil service. Britain, he says, is a land of possibility and freedom.

“You go from a place where living standards, on a per-capita basis, are comparable to England in the 1600s, to living in London in 2026. You feel like you’ve accelerated 400 years of progress in a lifetime of 36 years,” he gushes.

Britain, he says, offered him “a canvas for painting the kind of progress you can

make in life”. AI, he adds, offers similar possibilities for humankind if we get it right.

Americanisation of football lingo leaves Brits fuming

Forget the backlash against FIFA boss Giovanni Infantino’s eccentric antics, in Britain, passions are running high over a linguistic fallout from this year’s World Cup: the Americanisation of football lingo.



FIFA boss Gianni Infantino and US President Donald Trump with the FIFA trophy



Apparently, arguments have broken out in homes with parents shouting at their children for calling their beloved footie ‘soccer’. A survey has found that ‘soccer’ is “second highest on a list of grating Americanisms that make adults shudder.”

The Brits and Yanks have long been divided by a common language, but current fears are that the Americans are winning.

According to a survey of more than 1,500 adults conducted by Preply, a language-learning platform, ‘movies’, ‘awesome’ and ‘ATM’ were among the American English words most commonly used by British children. Leading this shift are TV shows and films, followed by YouTube, TikTok, children’s shows, music, Instagram, online gaming, travel, friends, family and other social media platforms.

In other words, the works. Move over,



fish and chips. Soon more than 36 per cent of Britons may be asking for fish and ‘fries’.

‘Damn democracy,’ say British voters

Disillusionment with the current state of Western democracy has reached a ‘crisis point’ in much of Europe. Research has found that a majority of British voters believe the UK has left its ‘best days’ behind.

Public pessimism in Britain has markedly increased since a similar survey last year, with more voters saying they expected to be worse off in 2026.

Like their European counterparts, Brits largely blamed political leaders for their current financial predicament and the deterioration of public services, rather than external factors such as inflation triggered by higher energy prices and increased government debt resulting from higher spending during Covid. UK voters were particularly concerned that the country was more divided—they felt more disconnected from society.

As many as 40 per cent of all respondents in UK and Europe said they needed a strong leader who was willing to break the rules to get things done. That, to some extent, explains the frightening rise of the far Right.

Spy versus Spy

Even as Britain struggles to be taken seriously in the arena of international affairs, its MI6 has emerged as Europe’s most powerful foreign intelligence service in a peer review by 60 professionals

from 25 countries. France’s General Directorate for External Security (DGSE) secured second place for its global reach and operational capability while Slovakia’s SIS, which is responsible for both domestic and foreign espionage, was rated the worst in Europe. Ukraine came fourth, respected for ‘innovation, ingenuity and risk-taking’, while Germany’s BND, widely mocked as an unwieldy bureaucracy, managed a modest fifth place.

MI6 won praise for its expertise in recruiting high-level moles and penetrating the ruling elites of Russia, China, Iran and Turkey. Britain was the first to warn Ukraine about the likelihood of a Russian invasion: a fact acknowledged by the CIA.

Robert Gorelick, a former CIA station chief, said, “The United Kingdom has by far the strongest secret services in Europe. MI6 is extraordinary.”

While a former head of the DGSE said: “The British have the ability to play the long game, investing in sources over a ten-year horizon, somewhat like the Russians. And they have a taste for dirty tricks.”

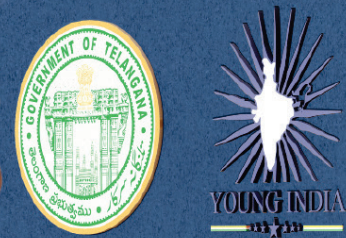


MI6 chief Blaise Metreweli

And, finally, Lindsay Hoyle, Speaker of the House of Commons, took a dig at the fast turnover of prime ministers. He told journalists: “Usually Speakers have trouble remembering the names of all the MPs. I am having trouble remembering the names of all the prime ministers.” ■



EDUCATION OF INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS



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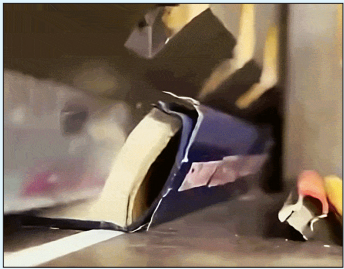
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FOCUS

A DIGITAL DYSTOPIA

For cannibalising AI powerhouses, books are just big data sets for their insatiable LLMs

► P6



FOOD POLITICS

MORE THAN JUST A MEAL PLAN

Why the planned introduction of chicken biriyani in Tamil Nadu's noon meal scheme is news

► P6



WORLD

THE ISOLATION OF ISRAEL

Even the US is now giving up on Israel. Young Americans, in particular

► P7



This **Independence Day**, we explore new and old Ways of Resistance at a time when our democracy is in the doldrums, old ways of speaking truth to power are failing and new ways of holding it accountable are giving people hope

Can we reclaim the spirit of the Tiranga?

Apoorvanand

The Tricolour can hold its head high this year, despite the misfortune of its unfurling at the Red Fort by a man who does not deserve to hold it. It was a slightly freer air that our national flag breathed this 15 August—the youth of this country have given it back something of its true meaning.

It is not the sight of the Tricolour being hoisted at the Red Fort on 15 August that uplifts an old person like me, who has seen many Prime Ministers and Presidents, some utterly unworthy, perform this ritual. What moves me are the images of the young holding the Tricolour with demands for justice on their lips. In those moments, the flag does not signify the pride of the nation. It becomes a symbol of the spirit of freedom, a yearning for liberty, a symbol of resistance against injustice, a symbol of the courage to face the violence of the oppressor with one's own soul force.

Not that this has happened for the first time in recent years. We saw farmers camping at the doors of Delhi five years ago. They held fort for an entire year, fighting against unjust farm laws. More than 750 of them paid for it with their lives, but they did not budge. The Muslim women of Shaheen Bagh too held their ground, Tricolour and Constitution in hand, as they opposed the communal reconfiguration of Indian citizenship. They weren't as fortunate as the farmers and the students. State-sponsored violence and the COVID pandemic put an end to their rousing, memorable protest. They did not achieve their objective, but their fightback was a powerful assertion of the meek before the brute. Through that struggle, the Tricolour was their constant companion.

The Tricolour, our Tiranga, does not derive its majesty from power. Nor does it derive it from the State. It gets its moral force from the hands that refuse to bend before the might of the state. It represents the will of an unarmed people. This is what Jawaharlal Nehru said at a Congress

conference in 1931: “Consider the national flag as a symbol of freedom and not merely a piece of tricolour cloth. It is not the flag of a king or emperor; it represents the unity and strength of the teeming millions of India.”

He also said, in the same breath: “I condemn cries of ‘Down with Union Jack’.” It took moral clarity and courage to say this when the people of India were fighting against the British. Nehru had the courage, as did his comrades, to assert that the Tricolour does not demean another flag, that it does not sit well in the hands of those who hate others, who see others as inferior to themselves.

The Tricolour is a symbol of an eternal search for freedom. Those who get frightened when they hear slogans demanding *Azadi* need to remember these words of Nehru, spoken when the Tricolour was being accepted by the Constituent Assembly. Nehru reminded the Assembly that even while celebrating the moment, it was important not to forget that the journey of freedom was unending: “It is right and proper that at this moment we should adopt the symbol of this achievement, the symbol of freedom. Now what is this freedom in its entirety and for all humanity? What is freedom and what is the struggle for freedom, and when does it end? As soon as you take one step forward and achieve something, further steps come up before you. There will be no full freedom in this country or in the world as long as a single human being is unfree. There will be no complete freedom as long as there is starvation, hunger, lack of clothing, lack of the necessities of life and lack of opportunity of growth for every single human being, man, woman and child in the country. [...] When we increase the happiness of the people, we increase their stature in many ways, and we proceed to our goal. I do not know if there is an end to this or not, but we proceed towards some kind of consummation...” Even in that triumphant moment, Nehru was modest enough to recognise that freedom cannot be reduced to the achievement of independence from

colonial rule. Independence was an event. Freedom was, and remains, a journey.

On the eve of Independence Day this year, I recall the words of P. Sainath, who criss-crossed the country to record the stories of freedom fighters still alive. One of them told him, very perceptively, that they had fought for freedom and independence. What was achieved was Independence, but the struggle for freedom still goes on.

The Tricolour looks beautiful in the hands of those who, even while asserting their sovereignty, do not wish to dominate others. Supremacist tendencies sleep under the skin of every nation, and one has to be aware of this danger. Nehru was mindful of this temptation: “...there is this danger in a country suddenly unshackled, in stretching out its arms and legs, [that it tries] to hit out at other people.” He was speaking about the imperialist propensity of nationalism.

But that expansionist desire can reside within a nation, within a group of people

External colonialism is easy to identify, but internal colonialism goes under the guise of nationalism

Photos: Getty Images



The Tricolour does not derive its majesty from power or from the State. It gets its moral force from the hands that refuse to bend before the might of the State

emboldened by their overwhelming numbers, who start believing they have the right to dictate to other groups how they should live.

Nehru's warning was not unfounded. In the islands of Lakshadweep, the Tricolour can turn into a symbol of domination when Indian authorities, while hoisting it on Independence Day, also betray an ambition to change the local people's settled way of life. In Kashmir, the Tricolour is a reminder that its natives cannot exercise their will. When madrasas are ordered to sing *Vande Mataram* along with the unfurling of the Tricolour, it becomes a symbol of coercion.

External colonialism is easy to identify, but internal colonialism goes under the guise of nationalism. The Adivasis of Bastar, the people of the Andaman and

Nicobar Islands, or Muslims in India experience it as the loss of their autonomy, as the gradual shrinking of the space in which they can determine how they wish to live.

What greater insult can the Tricolour weather than the spectacle of policemen thrashing a Muslim while demanding that he sing the national anthem? Gandhi would have been revolted by the sight. Wasn't it Gandhi who said that the Gita was dear to him, but if someone put a gun to his head and asked him to recite it, he would refuse?

When we raised the Tricolour this year, did we confess that we, as a nation, have failed to honour the spirit of freedom it represents? ■

APOORVANAND is an author and academic

“Why don’t you shut it down?”

Now protests at Jantar Mantar are also a problem, writes **Aakar Patel**

There was a remarkable exchange in Delhi High Court a little while ago. The government was asked why it wouldn't consider shutting down Jantar Mantar as a venue for protests.

“Why don't you shut it down? According to me, these things should not happen in the city, but it's the government's call. Why should the city be [held] to ransom unnecessarily?” the court asked. It was hearing a plea filed by the All India Dalit Christian Rights Protection Committee seeking directions to the Delhi Police to decide its plea for permission to hold a protest at Jantar Mantar.

The group's advocate then asked whether it is the Centre's stand that in Delhi there can be no protests. To this the Bench replied “that's for the police to decide”. The advocate said: “Fair enough, let them say that there will be no democratic, peaceful protests in Delhi. We will accept it.”



Too close for comfort is the lesson the judiciary seems to have learnt from the recent protests at Jantar Mantar

Article 19 grants citizens the right to ‘gather peaceably and without arms’

The position of the Bench was that the “city should not be held to ransom” by protesters. The government's response is not known but all governments in India have always thought that protests are a nuisance that get in the way of ‘good governance’.

It is important to examine the issue carefully. Article 19 says: ‘All citizens shall have the right a) to freedom

of speech and expression; b) to assemble peaceably and without arms; c) to form associations or unions; d) to move freely throughout the territory of India; e) to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India; f) to practise any profession, or to carry on any occupation, trade or business’.

The reality is that today we have no such rights. Do Indians have the right to ‘assemble peacefully and without arms’? No. We have the right to apply for permission to the local police station. The police has the right to approve, deny or not respond (the last being the reason the Dalit Christians moved court). That is where the real right rests.

Scenes of groups of protesters, some just half-a-dozen strong, holding placards and chanting slogans outside business establishments and government offices, and at political rallies, are common in the United States and Europe. In India, such gatherings would be broken up or simply not permitted. India has criminalised protest. Where it is

allowed, after written permission, it is usually in the so-called ‘designated areas’ allocated for protest.

Some see even these as a nuisance. Jantar Mantar in Delhi is such a place, a stretch of road cordoned off at both ends by protest stalls, some unheard and unseen for months on end. In Bengaluru, you have the Town Hall and Freedom Park; in Mumbai, Azad Maidan, where protests may be allowed—after written permission—during specific periods of time. This does not constitute the right to peaceful assembly. Rather, it denies a fundamental right given to us by the Constitution. We have to claim this right.

Freedom of speech and expression is qualified by so many laws that it is hard to know where to begin. India has criminalised free speech through sedition, criminal defamation and criminal contempt of court.

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WAYS OF RESISTANCE

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A fist clenched to the sound of music

Naveen Joshi on the myriad ways of resistance that have grown out of the lived realities of people, their unique cultural consciousness

26 March 1974. Reni village, Chamoli district. A girl comes running into Gaura Devi's courtyard, breathless and screaming: "They've come to cut the forest... they're cutting down our forest!"

The men of the village had all gone to Chamoli that day on some business. Gaura was alarmed. In their absence, responsibility for the village fell on her: she was, after all, president of the Mahila Mangal Dal, the village women's collective. She gathered all the women and they rushed to the forest. Some fifty labourers were preparing to fell the trees. The contractor's *munshi* (a general factotum), was there too, along with a few armed men.

"Look, we beg you, don't cut our forest," Gaura told the labourers. "How will we survive without the forest? How will our *goru*, our cattle, survive?"

"Start cutting!" the *munshi* shouted.

"And you women, get out of here."

Gaura stood her ground. "This forest is ours. You think you can do as you please because the men are away today?"

Guns were pointed at the women. Gaura was fired up. "Come on," she told the women, "let's each of us do an '*angwaltha*' (a tight embrace, in the local Garhwali) around a tree... and let's see how they cut them now!"

Whichever tree the labourers approached, the women clung to it. "You'll have to cut us down before you cut the trees."

They were threatened, but they refused to budge. The guns were ultimately lowered. The labourers retreated. The forest survived.

This was the idea of 'Chipko' taking shape on the ground. Chandi Prasad Bhatt and other environmental and social activists had been travelling from village to village carrying the message of Chipko. Gaura Devi had heard them too. Now she had turned the idea into action.

28 November 1977. The forests of Kumaon were to be auctioned in Nainital. A few months earlier, some young men had

created such a huge ruckus that the auction had to be postponed. This time there was heavy police deployment. The authorities were prepared to arrest protesters, while the protesters themselves were hiding, trying to come up with another way to resist.

That morning, on the flats of Nainital, a bearded young man appeared with a *hudka*, the small hill drum, and began singing in Kumaoni:

‘आज हिमालय तुम्हें पुकार रहा है, जागो-जागो ओ मेरे लाल मत होने दो मेरी नीलामी, मत होने दो मुझे हलाल।’

"Today the Himalaya calls you—awake, awake, my children! Do not let them auction me, do not let them slaughter me."

The police and PAC (Provincial Armed Constabulary) personnel took him for a beggar. But this was the poet Girish Tiwari 'Girda', who had spent the night adding new verses to an old song. The song was a call to the people of the hills: save the forests, save the mountains.

Word spread through Nainital like wildfire. By the time the administration realised what was happening, people had converged on the auction hall. The opposition was so fierce that the auction had to be cancelled.

These forms of resistance could only have grown out of the lived reality of people. History bears witness to the way people's cultural consciousness has given new voice and energy to non-violent resistance. Think of the stirring songs sung in processions, sit-ins, demonstrations during the freedom struggle. That tradition has continued to this day.

In popular movements across several states, particularly in Adivasi-majority regions, folk songs, newly composed protest songs and traditional instruments have often created such a charge that spectators, listeners, bystanders are drawn into the movement willily-nilly. Progressive outfits, their trade unions and IPTA (the Indian

People's Theatre Association) carried songs of resistance across the country. The songs and poetry of Faiz, Sahir, Jafri, Shailendra, Shalabh, Gorakh, Cheema and others have lent a cutting edge, a sense of urgency to many a popular movement. In protest marches, the *turhi*, *nishan*, *dhol-damaama* and other such folk instruments have sounded warnings to those in power. The same stream of resistance runs through street theatre, slogans and posters that awaken a consciousness of dissent.

This is essentially the path Gandhi showed, which drew strength and nourishment from the cultural consciousness of the people.

At the recent protest at Jantar Mantar, it was heartening to see Gen Z too singing protest songs to the beat of the *daphli*, the handheld frame drum. The posters they carried, the slogans they chanted were brimming with a heartening creative zest and inventive flair. Their movement forced



Chipko, 1974 When the women of Reni village in Chamoli made history

the autocratic Modi government to retreat; the arrogance of power was shattered.

A state government of the very same ruling party is meanwhile trying to crush the non-violent protests of Adivasi villagers opposing the Ken-Betwa Link Project in Madhya Pradesh. The project threatens to uproot thousands of Adivasis without fair compensation, destroy forests and damage even the Panna Tiger Reserve. Protesters staged a '*chita andolan*' and threatened to take their lives by *jal samadhi*; their struggle continues.

We saw similar methods employed during the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Thousands of Adivasis staged collective *jal samadhi* protests against displacement and inadequate compensation. They won some victories too, but perhaps the greatest achievement of these innovative forms of resistance was to make ordinary villagers/ Adivasis conscious of their rights and to give them the will and determination to fight for those rights till the very end.

"We have a river, and you are giving us a handpump?"

When an ordinary Adivasi woman said this to government officials, they had no answer. No urban activist could have put it

quite like that. This was lived reality forging a consciousness of resistance.

"Delhi has the Yamuna too. Why don't you build a dam across it to generate electricity? Why don't you drown Delhi?"

Who could possibly answer a question so innocent and yet so devastating?

Another grassroots activist of the Narmada movement, Bijya Jugal Vasave, an Adivasi from Chimal Khedi in Maharashtra, once put the information in his own words:

"We knew something earlier about strategies like *anshan* and *padyatra*. We had our traditional weapons, bows and arrows, to fight with. But now we have put those aside and taken Gandhi's path of *satyagraha*. We have made the voice within us and our raised fist our new weapons." What could be more powerful than a raised fist that rises with the sound of music?

Today our democracy and constitutional values are under threat. But the people possess an extraordinary repertoire of non-violent ways of resistance, rooted in their own lives, cultures and collective consciousness. However brutal or powerful a government may be, it cannot hold out indefinitely against such resistance. ■

'Why don't you shut it down?'



Photo: Getty Images

► Continued on page 2

The mother country we borrowed these laws from no longer has them. The 'right to dissent' is non-existent in India and anything offensive to majoritarian Hindutva is called anti-national.

The Kashmiri can teach us a thing or two about freedom of speech and expression if we claim that India is free. Forming associations is not easy in India and registration can be denied or cancelled.

Those who work in the organised civil society space, meaning professional NGOs, know just how difficult the State makes it for them to exercise this fundamental right. We have seen the problem with the right to carry out a trade, which has been struck off for butchers and by extension, for restaurants. Many of these rights have become ossified. The State has invested heavily in denying them to us, and we are not so invested, it seems, in demanding them.

The footnote to Article 19 reads: 'Nothing shall affect the operation of any existing law, or prevent the State from making any law, in so far as such law imposes reasonable restrictions on the exercise of the right...' The question is whether the restrictions imposed are reasonable. They are not. Reclaiming our fundamental rights is the only way to realise and unlock the value of our Constitution.

We have to peacefully reclaim our rights both at the level of the individual and the level of civil society. India's civil society is weaker than other democracies. It is vibrant, yes, and it is defiant and brave. But it is small. India needs to create a bigger space for that part of our nation which is neither the State nor corporations. That part of the nation is civil society—groups, both formal and informal, and individuals, and the space they create with their actions.

These groups must be encouraged and given space to express themselves. They should not be seen as a nuisance, but unfortunately that is precisely how those in power and those with authority see them. The reason the government does not want protests to be held is that every time Indians are mobilised, against the farm laws, against the NRC, against exam paper leaks, the government succumbs. And it is for this reason that we must ensure that we do not lose this right of ours to peaceful assembly. ■

The other side of midnight

Somewhere between an iconic midnight speech in 1947 and an out-of-touch Instagram reel in 2026 lies the story of the decline of our republic, writes **Avay Shukla**

Now that we have an idea of what Mr Modi looks like at the midnight hour, and have learnt how to instal a teleprompter on a mobile phone, let us move on to some other aspects of the Jantar Mantar protests not yet reported upon.

Nothing shows and symbolises better the decline of our republic and the quality of its leadership than a comparison of two of our prime ministers speaking to the nation at the midnight hour. On 14–15 August 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, delivered to the world his iconic and immortal speech about India's tryst with destiny, acknowledged to be among the finest words ever uttered by any statesman—a speech brimming with pride, a sense of achievement, vision and hope for a new-born country.

At midnight on 23 July 2026, our current prime minister, Mr Narendra Modi, delivered a short video speech via his mobile phone, not to celebrate his country's freedom but to dig himself out of a hole of his own making—a jaded address reeking of insincerity, dissimulation and empty promises. Whereas Nehru's words electrified a whole nation, Mr Modi's words, deservedly, will be remembered only by his speechwriters—with, one hopes, a lot of mortification. Hopefully, we will not find them in our NCERT history books now that Mr Pradhan is himself history, but one can never be sure.

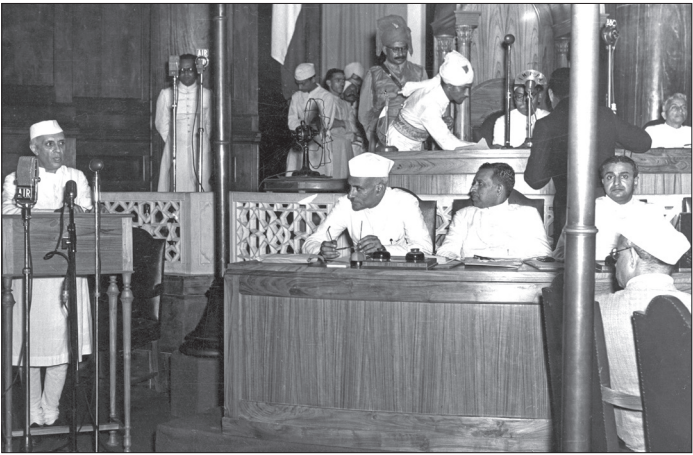
Every joke, said George Orwell, is a revolution. And oh, boy! Was he right!

For the CJP (Cockroach Janta Party) did give a joke. The inadvertent raconteur was none other than our own Chief Justice of India, the venerable and honourable Surya Kant. It was his wisecrack equating the youth to cockroaches that brought them out of the chinks and cracks into which this government's policies had shoved them, bang into the arena of politics and public protests, bringing to its knees an authoritarian government led by one of the most formidable political parties in the world.

And the honourable CJI did not rest for a moment on his laurels, or his funny bone—he further immortalised his constitutional credentials by initially refusing to entertain a lawyer's plea to examine charges that the Delhi Police had used excessive force against protesters on 20 July, a claim the police have since denied.

Notwithstanding the overwhelming visual evidence available in the public domain, the CJI was reported to have said that he did not have the time to watch videos of the police violence. This naturally enraged the youngsters to greater heights of determination, culminating in the government throwing in the blood-soaked towel on 25 July.

Which is why I feel that Gen XYZ (I can never figure out which is the appropriate alphabet for the current



Pt Jawaharlal Nehru delivering his 'Tryst with destiny' speech in Parliament "at the stroke of the midnight hour" on 14-15 August 1947

gen) has failed to give due credit to the CJI for its historic success. But they can still make amends: our local village idiot has suggested that the acronym CJP should now be read as the Chief Justice Party. That, according to him, would deservedly recognise CJI Surya Kant's contributions to the preservation of democracy and the idea of justice in India.

Being an idiot of long standing, however, he is not aware that this may constitute contempt of court, and that that is one power the courts are still willing to exercise. Hence, the clown's suggestion has been

rejected and he has been removed from his post. He went without any fuss, and no lathi charge was needed to persuade him.

The village drunkard suggested the moniker Cocktail Party, as it better reflects the mix of youthful spirits at Jantar Mantar; this found favour with most of us (except the excise inspector), and has been forwarded to Mr Dipke.

Coming now to Mr Pradhan's resignation letter. I have seen many resignation letters in my career, including one that said: "Dear Sir, I quit. Please accept my sympathies for your loss."

In one instance, the chap came with a band and dancers to hand over his resignation letter: this oddity is normal in my Himachal, whether it is resignation, retirement or suspension! Here, they just need an excuse to uncork the *angoori*, form a circle and start gyrating, clockwise for retirements and anti-clockwise for resignations. But Mr Pradhan's resignation letter takes the (cow-dung) cake for its sheer effrontery.

It is not a resignation; it is a treatise, a CV and a character/commendation certificate all rolled into one. It is the farewell speech no one bothered to give him and it reminds me of that doleful Jim Reeves song: 'I missed me, how I missed me at your home last night...' Substitute 'your home' with 'my office' and the minister could have made a musical video of it and earned lavish praise from Gen RDX and Shakira. As it is, no one could figure out whether it was a resignation or an application for sainthood.

As someone said, all he needed to write was: 'Bro, I fu**ed up big time. Gotta go.' It would have been the honest truth, with no scope for ambiguity. Never mind, though; maybe the next minister could use this when his or her time comes.

And finally, what can one (an unabashed admirer) say of Ms Kangana Runout? Although situated in seismic zone VI, Himachal had no volcanoes till 2024. Then Ms Runout exploded onto the scene, and since then she has erupted regularly, covering her own face and that of her party with ashes and soot. She is one natural disaster the NDF is not equipped to handle, and for which the finance commissions provide no compensation to the state.

After her experience with the farmers' agitation, why on earth would she repeat it by vilifying and insulting the brave young girls at Jantar Mantar? My wife, Neerja, with the perspicacity that only women possess, has an explanation: Kangana is actually a Gandhian; having been slapped on one cheek by a Sikh lady police constable last year, she now wants to be slapped on the other one too, completing a virtuous circle, as it were.

She'll probably get her wish soon—God never disappoints the devout or the Runout. ■

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Step #1 The loss of fear. What’s next?

The strikingly new idiom of the Gen Z protests has created an opening for the Opposition. The way to change passes through larger solidarities, writes **Purushottam Agrawal**

Perhaps the most significant achievement of the recent Gen Z protest in Delhi is the breach it has opened in the climate of fear and submission. Equally, it has exposed the Modi government’s vulnerabilities. A regime that positions its obduracy as resolve—‘resignations do not happen in this government’—was forced into an embarrassing retreat. The ‘world’s largest political party’, backed by its formidable IT machinery, suddenly looked comical and ineffectual, both online and on the ground. Even the damage-control exertions of the ‘non-biological’ Prime Minister, jerked out of his preferred 8 p.m. television slot to try his hand at Instagram reels, backfired and became more fodder for gags and memes.

The larger Hindutva project has also suffered a tremendous blow. Both the Modi government and some top functionaries of the RSS were ticked off by Parivar patriarch Mohan Bhagwat, who laboured the point at a youth conference in Mumbai that the Gen Z protesters were “not anti-nationals”, that the government must engage in dialogue, i.e., avoid its usual ‘my way or the highway’ approach.

The Congress party, Rahul Gandhi in particular, had been raising students’ grievances for some time, but their efforts were not getting media attention, thanks to the long arm of the PMO. In fact, hoping it

would take steam out of the Congress campaign, the government was initially quite soft on the Cockroach Janta Party protest. Its calculations hadn’t budgeted for the support the CJP would get from those not drawn to ‘party politics’ but keen nevertheless to make common cause with a movement that gave voice to their own frustrations with a brutish, self-righteous government. The Congress protest, moreover, was in the standard political idiom.

The Jantar Mantar protest, on the other hand, offered young Indians the freedom to articulate their feelings in a way that comes to them naturally. Gen Z turned laughter into a disarmingly effective weapon. Sarcasm and satire were put to imaginative and powerful use, perhaps for the first time in the history of modern India. Even the much-talked-about profanities were, in fact, a great antidote to the hypocrisies of a regime that has normalised abusive language and innuendo in Indian politics; they spare nobody, not even revered and long-dead national leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru and Maulana Azad.

Those offended by teenage girls and young women using abusive language at the protest should take a tour of the H-pop space online. They should watch videos of young women under the spell of political Hindutva, gyrating provocatively and hurling the most obscene words at anyone opposed to their politics and their Supreme Leader. Before expressing shock over the profanities used at Jantar Mantar, the Prime Minister would have done well to recall his own choice expressions during election campaigns in Bengal, Rajasthan and elsewhere. He would have sounded a little more convincing if he had even once expressed the same shock at the language used by his supporters.

The cracks this protest has made in the Great Wall of Fear do offer hope. Perhaps because the Gen Z protests are largely focused on education-related issues, attempts to create fissures along caste and religious lines have so far been unsuccessful. We are witnessing the emergence of a constituency defined not by a particular mindset as much as commonsense. Led by the tactical smarts of its organisers, this motley crew is

demonstrating that people of different, even conflicting, opinions can come together for a common cause—those for and against reservations, for instance. In fact, there were initially some Modi admirers among them as well, whom the government, to the delight of its opponents, lost through its self-righteous obstinacy. It is becoming clearer by the day that young Indians confronting real problems in their lives are increasingly drawn more to empathic and rational communication rather than emotional provocation. This is an important historical moment, and one that may be lost if it is not used wisely.

To his great credit, Rahul Gandhi has shown remarkable political maturity. He did not visit the protest site, wisely avoiding the charge of ‘politicising’ it or trying to take credit, and instead continued consolidating the Congress outreach. He has been careful to underline the non-partisan character of the demands and concerns surrounding the state of education today, and has mastered the art of rational communication with young Indians. His approach has the potential to turn the immediate protest into a long-term, future-oriented resistance to the totalitarian designs of the RSS-BJP.

Caste, community, gender and language issues are no doubt realities of Indian politics, and they are constantly exploited to sabotage popular movements of resistance. No political programme or action can afford to ignore these realities. The challenge, therefore, is how to create and sustain the maximum possible unity among people.

Let us also not forget that the present government is rigidly self-righteous and driven by an RSS ideology incurably opposed to an inclusive and democratic idea of India. It has captured mainstream media so completely that its political agenda and bigotry are promoted 24x7. In any authentic historical account, India’s lapdog media would be held largely responsible for the avalanche of stupidity unleashed upon citizens.

The euphoria generated by the protest can be translated into sustained political action only if there is a convincing alternative to the designs of the present government and its ideological



(Top) Abhijeet Dipke and Team CJP celebrate the news of Dharmendra Pradhan’s resignation; (above) Rahul Gandhi has the back of young protesters as they speak to the press about the police action

The Congress, with its legacy of leading the freedom struggle and articulating an inclusive idea of India, has the most crucial role to play

fountainhead, the RSS. A sustained response to its agenda of hatred and a full-bodied alternative to the Hindutva vision of India must be articulated in a contemporary context shaped by AI and virtual reality on the one hand and the rise of sectarian politics of many hues on the other.

The Congress, with its historical legacy of leading the national struggle and articulating an inclusive idea of India, has the most crucial role to play in this exercise. Alongside this theoretical exercise, it must also accommodate the expectations of potential allies.

All this is easier said than done. But it is the only way out of the present mess; otherwise, this will be another lost opportunity. ■

PURUSHOTTAM AGRAWAL is an author, most recently of *Majbooti ka Naam Mahatma Gandhi*, *Rajkamal Prakashan*

Real pushback needs a political grammar



At Delhi’s Jantar Mantar, which became a grand theatre of protest, a magnet for Indians young and old from all walks of life

Jaideep Hardikar

Where there is power, there is resistance... Resistance has no single locus, no one great refusal. [It] is... dispersed across society, appearing wherever power is exercised.’ That’s Michel Foucault, French philosopher and political scientist, in his 1978 work on the history of sexuality.

Perhaps this is a useful way of looking at the resistance movements mushrooming in India today.

Over most of June and July 2026, Delhi’s Jantar Mantar became a grand theatre of protest. A movement initially focused on exam paper leaks, and broadly categorised as a Gen Z protest, soon became a magnet for citizens young and old, offering their sympathy and support to possibly the most credible pushback against this

authoritarian regime.

Before long, it had inspired protests in other parts of the country, in state capitals and small towns, its echoes heard far and wide. Jantar Mantar drew people from all over. They weren’t all examination aspirants, their grievances not the same but the anger was directed without exception at a government they associate with hubris, cronyism and institutional capture.

Jantar Mantar has a storied history. Farmers, students, industrial workers, government employees, environmentalists, Adivasis, women, informal workers, minorities worried about their citizenship have all brought their demands and grievances to this hallowed protest venue. They have come here under different banners at different times. At this very moment in our history, we have a multiplicity of protests across the country.

Can We, the People of India, commit ourselves to a rediscovery of a shared democratic project?

What we don’t have at this moment, though, is a common political grammar, a shared vocabulary that binds these disparate movements.

This is not necessarily a sign that resistance is weak. Maybe it is the new shape of power, possibly the crony capitalist nexus that has become its defining feature, that has altered the common citizen’s equation with power.

For much of the twentieth century, resistance was imagined vertically. The State was the principal adversary. Our freedom struggle had a national objective—Gandhi spoke of swadeshi. Ambedkar saw national liberation in the annihilation of caste through a constitutional democracy. The Left organised workers and peasants around a theory of class. The JP movement was a national confrontation with authoritarian rule. All these movements pivoted on a national imaginary.

The economic liberalisation of the 1990s changed the landscape. It did not make the State disappear, but it radically altered the relationship between State, capital and society. From this new equation emerged the new ecology of civil society. NGOs became prominently engaged in myriad sectors—from education to farming to environmental activism. International funding opened up new possibilities for policy advocacy and mobilisation. As liberalisation deepened, rights-based movements became an important feature of public life.

The 1990s produced a new kind of politics: professionalised, networked, issue-based and organised around particular constituencies and demands. The anti-globalisation movements of that period challenged the terms on which India entered the global economy. Environmental activism questioned the State and critiqued its development paradigm. Rights-based campaigns sought to make the State more accountable to citizens. Civil society came to occupy space between the common citizen and the State. And sometimes the movements they led resulted in course corrections and rights-based statutes for information, forest governance and more.

Three decades later, the nature of the confrontation has changed again. It’s not simply local versus global or State versus

civil society. A farmer encounters the State and the market together—in the price his crop can fetch, the cost of inputs, access to credit, procurement and land ownership. A student too encounters them simultaneously—in the cost of education, the credibility of examinations and public institutions and the prospects of employment. A worker encounters them in precarious employment, migration and the absence of social security. An Adivasi encounters them in displacement. Environmental movements encounter them wherever ‘development’ and greed collide with long-term ecological viability.

The question at the root of their resistance is: whose interests are the laws and rules of the land meant to serve? Is there any shared ground between landed farmers, farm labourers, students, industrial workers, environmentalists, displaced Adivasi tribes, informal labour and precarious minorities trapped in a majoritarian maelstrom? A hundred movements can co-exist and still fail to alter the structure of power if each remains trapped in its own vocabulary.

There are some important lessons in the student protests and the farmers’ movement earlier. These two peaceful agitations on the streets brought together people and organisations with different interests, histories and political affiliations. They found some common ground: possibly in their insistence that the terms of engagement with the market and the State cannot simply be thrust upon them.

A young and anxious India seems to have a new vocabulary to express its angst and aspirations. This generation feels connected to the world and is alert to local, national and global spirals. It is simultaneously a witness to and a victim of great change being wrought by new technology and other forces way too powerful. The headiness of making the State buckle and concede some demands is understandable but a larger question looms. Can India’s variously disaffected millions find and articulate a common democratic project? As we celebrate another Independence Day, can We, the People of India, commit ourselves to a rediscovery of a shared democratic project? ■

How resistance takes root and grows shoots

The power of resistance can be summed up in five words: breadth, unity, discipline, continuity and legitimacy, writes **Shailendra Chauhan**

A mature democracy stays alive through informed civic participation, freedom of thought and respect for dissent. Resistance, therefore, is not an aberration or an anti-system activity but a necessary part of democratic life. When those in power begin to suppress and discredit dissent instead of engaging with it, resistance becomes an essential instrument of democratic citizenship.

But what kind of resistance? What puts real pressure on power, and what makes news briefly before fading away? Are numbers decisive? Is non-violence always more effective? And when governments have not just the police and the administrative machinery but a surveillance apparatus, a propaganda machinery and enormous economic resources, what can effective resistance look like?

The history of India’s freedom struggle is instructive. Freedom was not won by a single method, organisation or leader. It encompassed mass movements, satyagraha, non-cooperation, boycotts, underground activity, revolutionary violence, attempts at military rebellion and ultimately a swell of popular political pressure. To reduce it to Gandhi and non-violence oversimplifies history; to see it as a story of revolutionary courage is equally flawed.

Perhaps Gandhi’s greatest political achievement was to take resistance out of the hands of a few courageous individuals and situate it among ordinary citizens. Satyagraha was not simply about fasts or demonstrations. Its central principle was non-cooperation with unjust authority. Boycotting government institutions and foreign goods, supporting swadeshi and encouraging mass participation were all part of this strategy. The Salt Satyagraha turned an ordinary commodity into a political symbol of resistance.

Crucially, Gandhian resistance required neither weapons nor wealth nor specialised training. Farmers, workers, students, traders, women and ordinary citizens could participate. Resistance thus acquired a broad social base.

This is where numbers matter. A state can suppress a small group through arrests, prosecutions and administrative controls. But when dissent spreads across different sections of society, it ceases to be merely a protest and becomes social unrest.

Research by political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan has similarly highlighted broad civic participation. Studies of largescale resistance have found non-violent mass campaigns



Photo: Getty Images

Gandhi’s salt satyagraha turned an everyday commodity into a powerful political symbol of resistance

more effective than violent ones in many circumstances. NAVCO 2.1, the updated dataset tracking mass movements, covers 389 violent and non-violent campaigns between 1945 and 2013. It notes greater participation and far fewer deaths per capita in non-violent campaigns, though their success rate declined after 2001.

The larger lesson is that numbers do matter, but numbers alone are not enough. Millions taking to the streets for a day may achieve more than sustained, organised and disciplined non-cooperation. Numbers become political power when combined with diversity, organisation, continuity and

a clear objective.

Gandhian movements mattered not simply because they mobilised large numbers, but because they pressured the structures that enabled British rule to function. Administration, taxation, transport, commerce, labour and political legitimacy all depend, in some measure, on civic cooperation. Non-cooperation and boycott could therefore strike at the social and economic foundations of power.

The revolutionary current had a different voice. Chandrashekhra Azad, Bhagat Singh, Ram Prasad Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan and others chose armed

resistance and audacious action against colonial rule. They challenged its legitimacy, inspired young people and sharpened the demand for independence. Bhagat Singh’s thinking extended further to questions of social and economic transformation.

Yet revolutionary actions alone could hardly have forced the British out of India. Their popular base was not comparable to that of Gandhian mass movements. Both traditions need to be understood in terms of their contribution and limitations.

It’s important to understand that non-violence does not mean passivity. It can be intensely active, disciplined and strategic. Its purpose is not merely moral persuasion but to exert pressure on the functioning and legitimacy of power. Strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, peaceful demonstrations, electoral interventions, consumer non-cooperation and institutional resistance can all serve this purpose.

The nature of power, however, has changed. Twentieth-century movements confronted police, armies, administrations and censorship. Governments today have at their command a surveillance apparatus, big data and data analytics, media cells to unleash propaganda via social media and instant information. Simply putting a large crowd on the streets is no longer enough. Yet the street remains important. Large protests across the world, including the ‘No Kings’ protests in the United States in 2025 and 2026, show that public spaces remain an arena of democratic power. But resistance today must connect the street with society, institutions, the economy and the information sphere.

Strength in numbers thus means social breadth, not merely a crowd. A movement confined to one organisation or social group can easily be dismissed as the work of a disgruntled minority. When students, farmers, workers, women, employees, intellectuals, small traders, professionals

and ordinary citizens participate, it becomes much harder to marginalise. Diversity can sometimes matter more than sheer numbers.

Continuity is equally important. Scattered protests can be contained through arrests, negotiations, vilification or selective concessions. The weakest protests are typically those that erupt over one event and then disappear. Effective resistance makes the issue bigger than an individual and broader than an event.

Digital media have created both new possibilities and vulnerabilities. Social media can carry a message to millions, but can also expose movements to rumours, frenzy and disinformation. Going viral is not the same as becoming politically effective. Digital resistance must connect with verified information, independent journalism, legal assistance, public debate and grassroots organisation.

Economic non-cooperation can also exert pressure because power depends on economic activity and civic cooperation. Peaceful strikes, consumer boycotts and institutional dissent can affect the networks that sustain power. But such action should not impose its greatest cost on ordinary citizens. Democratic resistance must pressure power without inflicting unnecessary violence or destruction on society.

This brings us to violence. History has certainly seen political change accompanied by violent struggle. But violence may win immediate attention while weakening a movement’s moral legitimacy and giving the state justification for harsher repression. It raises the cost of resistance for ordinary citizens. The more effective democratic path today is probably more civic participation.

The future of resistance can be summed up in five words: breadth, unity, discipline, continuity and legitimacy. Breadth takes a movement across society; unity maintains a minimum common objective despite differences; discipline keeps violence, hatred and chaos at bay; continuity turns protest into a political process; and legitimacy means that a substantial section of society regards its demands as just.

The future of resistance lies neither solely in Parliament, nor on the street, nor on social media, but in a civic energy capable of connecting them.

Elections are an occasion for democracy, not the whole of democratic life. Courts matter, but not every question reaches them. The media are essential, but when they weaken, society must develop independent systems of information. The street matters, but the street alone is not enough.

Effective democratic resistance must turn crowds into civil society, anger into organisation, organisation into sustained action and sustained action into democratic change. Its purpose should not merely be to defeat those in power, but to make power accountable, keep institutions independent, free citizens from fear and preserve space for reason and dissent.

Ultimately, democratic resistance should be judged not by the size of the crowd or the number of arrests, but by what it changes in the conduct of those in power, in public discourse and in the civic consciousness. ■

Numbers do matter but millions taking to the streets for a day will achieve less than sustained, disciplined non-cooperation

The power of insisting gently

Meenakshi Natarajan

In recent days, a word has been restored to the vocabulary of Indian politics. That word is ‘resistance’. Whether resistance should be rendered in Hindi as *pratirodh* (resistance) or satyagraha (nonviolent resistance rooted in truth) is open to debate. The prefix *prati* can also carry negative connotations. But beyond that, there is something else—something deeply soothing. What could possibly be soothing about resistance? The question is a legitimate one.

Many episodes associated with resistance come to mind. There is resistance in Mirabai’s songs, in Andal’s verses, in Soyarabai’s abhangs, in *Avagha Rang Ek Zala*—but there is also love. After all, even today, the establishment is afraid of love, isn’t it? What greater form of resistance could there be than love?

When resistance emerges from the womb of lived reality, it transforms into a struggle for one’s rights. That is satyagraha. It is vaster than the idea of rights. And it is impossible without practice. Resistance cannot be carried out through old methods alone. It is not a one-day programme. It is not a sensational news story. It is forged through years of blood, sweat and tears. And even then, something like Chauri Chaura can happen. At such a moment, the seeker of truth has to admit: we weren’t completely prepared. This preparation is itself a practice.

Over the past few years, we have encountered new practices of resistance. They were not discovered through deliberate search; rather, the wires simply kept connecting. These practices are not new. They were not invented for the first time. They have begun to reappear on the political terrain.

In 2021, the practice of spinning the charkha began again. At the time, no one imagined that it would spread across the country, or that it would be used so extensively as a feminine, entirely nonviolent practice of political resistance. Again and again, the thread would break;

the yarn would turn out too thick or too weak. Everyone thought we would spin a little cotton, make a garland, and that would be that.

Then the story changed. One day, a woman comrade from Maharashtra began spinning the charkha at a public sit-in. The police told her, “Do whatever you want—shoot slogans, do anything you like. But don’t spin.” Had the habits of colonial rule still not changed, that the baton-wielding police were frightened by a charkha?

In faraway Himachal Pradesh, a movement was underway against the suspension of MGNREGA work. A statue of Bapu stood a short distance from the protest site. A woman who had once served as the village sarpanch was given no particular recognition, despite the fact that during her tenure, MGNREGA work in the village had been carried out on an unprecedented scale.

In 2021, the practice of spinning the charkha began again. No one imagined it would be used as a feminine, nonviolent practice of political resistance



People’s organisations have adopted the *parai* as an instrument of resistance

The woman said nothing to her. She picked up her charkha and quietly sat beneath Bapu’s statue, spinning yarn.

After a while, the media, the comrades at the protest came and sat around her. All she said was this: the yarn comes from the sweat of workers and farmers. This is my resistance for the restoration of MGNREGA.

The charkha was spun in thirty towns across the country against electoral malpractice and the nexus of power. One may ask: what changed? What was gained? The Election Commission did not change. But a new practice of change was discovered. The conduct of political movements changed. A movement and protest site that had always been steeped in an overwhelmingly masculine, muscular culture began, in some measure, to acquire a feminine character. Women could sit as equals at protest sites and spin yarn. Attention was paid to their natural needs.

A similarly beautiful practice is slowly taking shape at Kranti, a women’s camp.

In Tamil Nadu, there is an instrument somewhat like a tambourine. It is called the *parai*. It may well be one of the world’s

earliest musical instruments. It is made from the hide of dead cattle. For centuries it was played only by members of the Dalit community. It was played before temples, at public festivals and when someone of social standing passed away. The people who played the *parai* were called *paraiyar* with contempt.

That community was not allowed to enter the main village. They could not climb the steps of a temple. They could not use the public well. Even their funeral processions could not pass through the main village. Even today, the situation is more or less the same, although such discrimination is a legal offence.

Several reformers and people’s organisations have begun playing the *parai* as an instrument of resistance. It is still not used in political circles. At this camp, women from different regions, castes, religions and classes were participating, and so the experience was different.

The woman teaching the *parai* was a revolutionary comrade from the Dalit community. She spoke Tamil. Most of the participants could not understand Tamil at all. So there was a linguistic barrier. There was another difficulty: in a caste-dominated

society, it is not easy to learn from a Dalit woman.

Then, the murmurs began. The *parai* was made from cattle hide—how could one touch it? It was impure. Without practice, a woman who is forced to label herself impure for three days every month can still fail to be sensitive to communities that have been deemed impure for generations.

For two days, excuses were made: “My hands hurt.” “How can I hold such a heavy instrument?”

The woman teaching them simply continued to play, with affection and patience.

On the third day, after watching a video on the story of the *parai*, something melted. On the same day, there was a conversation with Devadasi women. All those accumulated feelings of impurity turned into tears. The heart was cleansed.

That evening, everyone picked up the *parai* and the air reverberated with its sound. Everyone also learned a two-step dance. It was as though one group struggling with one form of discrimination had reached out and held the other.

That day, the woman teaching them felt no linguistic barrier. The *parai* had found its own language. It had moved beyond language. She said that when the women held the *parai* with both hands, she felt as though they had pushed aside centuries of discrimination and embraced it. Accepted it.

That day, everyone’s eyes stayed moist. Discrimination, awareness, everything kept flowing. A folk singer from Karnataka sang the song ‘Kattuteva’—whose lyrics challenge the fear of inner slavery and say, come, let us make ourselves fearless.

Fearlessness awakens through love. That is the eternal form of resistance. A new culture of resistance is taking shape. It is becoming a practice.

The most powerful country in the world celebrated its 250th anniversary. But can it really be called free? Not without *சாதி* *அபராதிகா*, those two-and-a-half letters of love.

Love is returning to politics. Through the practice of resistance. ■

The sixth-grader in the room: Karnataka's deliberate bet on an AI-native future

There is a detail buried in Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar's recent public appearances that is easy to miss amid the bigger announcements — the university, the hub, the export figures — but which may say more about Karnataka's actual strategy than any of them. Describing a proposed AI University at Google I/O Connect India 2026, he said its long-term goal is to bring AI education to rural students from Class 6 onward. Not engineering graduates. Not startup founders. A twelve-year-old in a village classroom.

That single image reframes everything else Shivakumar has said this year about technology, investment and growth. Read across his recent speeches — first to CEOs at an industry breakfast, then to developers and researchers at Google I/O — Karnataka's leadership is not simply courting the next wave of AI investment, in the way dozens of states now are.

It is attempting something more deliberate: setting the terms on which that investment travels once it arrives — who gets trained by it, which cities get built up by it, which classrooms get reached by it. The ambition is not only to attract capital, but to route it, so its effects do not stall at Bengaluru's city limits, the way so many previous booms have.

Taken together, the two addresses read less like separate speeches and more like chapters of a single plan, one that pairs symbolic commitments — such as India's first government-driven AI University — with the granular mechanics of governance: office pricing, CSR partnerships, data centre policy, and a hundred-day deadline for turning promises into paperwork.

A thank-you note, then a pivot

The Chief Minister's breakfast address to industry leaders began not with policy but with gratitude. Bengaluru's greatest strength, he told the CEOs, has never been its buildings or its climate — it has been its people, the companies and individuals who arrived decades ago and chose, again and again, to stay. "You are the ambassadors of Bengaluru. You are the ambassadors of Karnataka," he told them, framing industry not as a guest of the state but as a co-author of its story.

He cited the scale of what had been built together: software exports that have crossed Rs 4.36 lakh crore and are expected to exceed Rs 5.5 lakh crore this year — figures he was careful not to let stand alone, noting that behind each one is a young engineer landing a first job, a family edging closer to the life it wants.

He pointed to the state's Global Capability Centres, which have evolved from back-office administration into genuine engines of product engineering, a shift he credited to Bengaluru's dominance of India's office market. He also recalled conversations at Davos, where executives kept returning to the same comparison: work that might cost \$3.50 elsewhere, companies had told him, can be done for close to \$1 in Bengaluru — a gap he attributed to the city's talent, ecosystem and human



Photo: Gettyimages

capital.

Many states are competing for the same investment, he acknowledged, but it is that combination, not incentives alone, that keeps global companies choosing Karnataka.

Having established that Bengaluru works, the address pivoted toward the places it doesn't yet reach. Within the next hundred days, Shivakumar announced, the government will introduce a policy built to pull industry out of Bengaluru and into the rest of the state, offering office infrastructure in other Karnataka cities for as little as fifty cents per square foot.

New IT, Space Technology and Startup policies — built around

DeepTech, digital infrastructure, research, industry-academia collaboration and entrepreneurship — have already been rolled out, alongside a Quantum Roadmap meant to get ahead of the next wave of emerging technology rather than chase it.

Two further announcements targeted the built environment of innovation directly: the Bengaluru Robotics and Innovation Zone, and the Sustainable Data Centre Policy 2026-31, aligning land, power, water, connectivity and renewable energy within a single framework.

It was here that the Chief Minister made his most memorable rhetorical move, reframing the relationship

between the capital and the rest of the state. "Bengaluru is our crown, but Karnataka is our heart," he said, naming Mysuru, Hubballi-Dharwad, Mangaluru and Belagavi as cities he expects to grow into major technology and investment destinations in their own right.

Human infrastructure, not charity

Nor did the Chief Minister confine his appeal to physical infrastructure. He asked companies to adopt a government school each under their CSR programmes — not as a gesture, but as a structural investment in classrooms, teacher training and learning outcomes.

He was candid about the scale of the problem: the state already spends more than Rs 1 lakh per child on government education, and still contends with teacher vacancies it cannot fill without partners.

Government alone, he told the room plainly, cannot close that gap; healthcare, he signalled, would be next. None of this was framed as charity — it was framed as the human infrastructure a state needs if AI-driven growth is to reach past its own capital city.

He also acknowledged Bengaluru's ongoing infrastructure and mobility strains, calling for industry and government to keep working in tandem there too.

The address closed with a look ahead to the Bengaluru Tech Summit, scheduled for November 17 to 19 at the Bangalore International Exhibition Centre, described not as a conference but as a platform for policy, partnerships and outcomes.

His final words were less an ask than a statement of intent: the government is not chasing short-term investment, he said, but long-term partnership — if industry is strong, Karnataka is strong. Minister for IT/BT and Home Priyank Kharge, Sharath Bachegowda and senior bureaucrats were present alongside him.

The thread between two podiums

Set beside each other, the two addresses function almost as bookends to a single argument. One is fluent in GDP figures, CSR ledgers and price-per-square-foot; the other in curiosity, responsibility and public purpose. But the overlap is not incidental.

Both describe the same AI University, built with industry rather than for it. Both invoke Google as a partner whose next contribution should be measured in classrooms and clinics, not just campuses.

And both circle back to the same tension: a state that has built one of the world's most successful technology economies inside a single city, now trying to ensure its next chapter isn't written there too.

That is what makes the rural sixth-grader such a useful test of the whole project. A Global Capability Centre or a fifty-cent-per-square-foot office park is a fairly conventional tool of industrial policy — attract the company, count the jobs, log the investment.

Committing to reach a child in a rural classroom with AI education is a different kind of commitment, one whose value will only become fully visible years down the line. It is, in that sense, the most far-sighted promise in either speech — and the clearest evidence of what Karnataka's leadership is actually building toward: not simply more AI investment arriving in the state, but a state that has decided, in advance, where that investment is meant to go.

That is also what gives the two addresses their real coherence. The AI University, the AI Hub, the Robotics and Innovation Zone, the Sustainable Data Centre Policy — each is a different instrument aimed at the same outcome: an AI economy engineered to travel, not concentrate.

Karnataka has named its destinations, set its timelines and enlisted its partners. What remains is execution, and the state has been explicit about its intent — a hundred-day policy window, a university built with industry rather than for it, and an invitation to companies to help carry AI education into classrooms far from Bengaluru's skyline. Karnataka has set its pace, and its next moves are already in motion — carrying its AI ambitions beyond the city that made them possible, into the towns and classrooms it has now named as its destination.

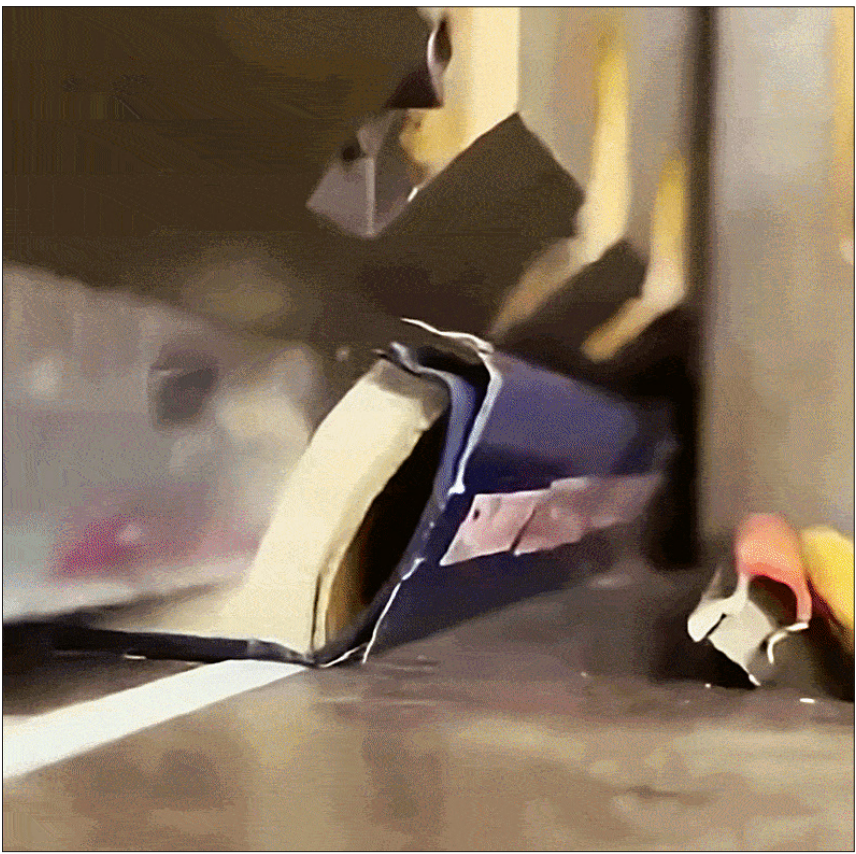
Photo: Gettyimages



Welcome to an all-new digital dystopia

Lawrence Liang reflects on the brutish cannibalisation of books by AI powerhouses

Ray Bradbury’s dystopic science fiction novel *Fahrenheit 451*, a reference to the temperature at which paper burns, was based on one of the most defining images of cultural destruction in the 20th century—the spectacular and performative burning of books by Nazis. In the novel, people resist the wanton destruction of books by turning to an all too human skill, memory, to preserve books by learning them by heart. While fire has been the favoured tool of political ideology in its battle against books, there are indeed many other ways humans have destroyed books, and the latest version of this entails large AI companies like Anthropic destroying old books to ingest them as raw data for training large language models (LLM). Industrial scale blades guillotine the spines of physical books, unbinding the pages to be fed into high-end scanners that convert text into digital data while the physical remains are shredded. It’s hard to imagine a book lover who is able to watch a video of this form of book destruction without a sense of horror that echoes the nightmare conceived by Ray Bradbury. And yet, often, the only thing that outdoes the dystopia of science fiction is the feral reality of science and technology. If the bibliophiles of *Fahrenheit 451* turned to human memory, what is being assembled today is a vast memory machine that has no use or regard for imperfect human memory. Unlike book purges of the past that took place in the name of political ideology and the cleansing of culture, the contemporary destruction of books is ironically being carried out in the name of knowledge production and preservation. AI is an insatiable beast that must constantly be fed data to grow more powerful. But to an LLM, there is no difference between a recipe, a literary masterpiece, a diary or junk email. They are all just text to be tokenised, accorded computational weightage, chewed, digested and spat out as ‘intelligent’ answers to our endless queries.



This textual cannibalism craves a lot of text, but treats the physical carrier, the book, merely as a container of raw data. If books were earlier the primary artefacts of human memory and consciousness, now they are merely vehicles that carry data sets. Interestingly, this is not the first time the physical book and its contents have been on a collision course. In the early days of print history, book binders took an opposite route to arrive at the same destination. They routinely destroyed old manuscripts to use them in the spines of new books, valuing the parchment while discarding the text. History does repeat

itself, as farce and tragedy, not necessarily in any order. Writing in 1953, the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz hauntingly predicted that whatever does not exist on paper does not exist at all. As someone who lived through a communist dictatorship at the height of the cold war, Milosz would have known better than most the importance of pitting political memory against enforced amnesia. His Czech counterpart, Milan Kundera echoed this sentiment in his famous lines ‘the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting’. Why should it matter, cynics may ask,

whether paper survives, when the word itself is being preserved. Consider a story that circulates among librarians. A researcher working on an arcane subject goes to a library with little hope of finding a rare book essential to their work. To their delight, the book is on the shelf, but to their surprise, the borrowing card is blank: in over fifty years nobody has ever issued it. They go to the librarian and ask if no one has ever taken this book out, who was it bought for? The librarian replies: why, you, sir. Books have always been a wager on the future, on readers who may not yet exist. But AI companies have no use or appetite to invest in unknown futures. Replacing human readers with memory machines reverses Bradbury’s consolation at the end of his book where the book people preserve memory by ingesting books into their beings. In the contemporary version, the machine will remember while we will forget because we have no paper. Digitisation is not a bad thing. Given the fragility of paper, it is important to digitise, but there is a big difference between a small

library digitising its fragile books and multibillion dollar companies choosing that route because non-destructive scanning is much slower and more expensive. But can we lay all the blame entirely on the actions of companies like Anthropic, or are we too complicit in some ways with the book burning of our times? One of the sharpest, and most controversial indictments of ordinary complicity during the Nazi regime came in the form of Daniel Goldhagen’s book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*, which argued that the Holocaust was perpetrated not just by a group of SS fanatics but also by ordinary Germans who willingly and often zealously participated in the extermination of Jews. I certainly do not want to equate the destruction of books with the scale of violence and crime that he was speaking about, but the question nonetheless remains. How do we think about complicity in the contemporary destruction of books by AI companies? The enthusiastic embrace of all things AI by just about everyone comes at a cost. We have been informed of the huge ecological cost of even a single query on AI models but we choose, as we often do with ecology, to ignore it because the convenience is great. A college student querying ChatGPT for an easy fix to an inconvenient homework may not be thinking of their action as contributing to ecological or cultural damage, but if there is any lesson to be learnt from ecological disaster, it is that even when there is no single actor to hold accountable, and even if we plead innocence as individuals, we are all complicit and culpable. In our embrace of AI as the next great achievement of human civilisation, let us not forget Walter Benjamin’s dire warning that there is no document of civilisation that is not simultaneously a document of barbarity. ■

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Food politics and the MGR legacy

Tamil Nadu’s plan to introduce chicken biriyani in the state’s noon meal scheme is more than just a nutritional choice, argues K.A. Shaji

There’s a piping hot topic in Tamil Nadu and it’s biriyani. The new government led by actor-turned-chief minister Joseph Vijay is actively considering a proposal to introduce chicken biriyani once a week under the state’s Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme for students up to the senior secondary level. A cabinet committee is studying the proposal and a decision is expected soon. It comes at a time when food has become politicised across India. Words like ‘tradition’ and ‘religion’ overwhelm ‘nutrition’ and ‘science’. In several BJP-ruled states—West Bengal being the latest—even an egg a day is controversial, despite overwhelming evidence that eggs are one of the cheapest and best sources of protein for children. The proposed biriyani, therefore, is more than a mouthwatering idea. It’s the latest chapter in a story that goes back over a century, “a story of political courage, administrative imagination and an unwavering belief that education cannot succeed where children arrive hungry,” as I. Amal Raj, an educationist and faculty with Chennai’s Loyola College puts it. “Long before the Loyola College nutritional security entered international development discourse and governments began speaking of demographic dividends, Tamil Nadu had already understood that students learn better on full stomachs.” The tale of school meals in Tamil Nadu is inseparable from Marudur Gopalan Ramachandran, better known as MGR.

When he announced the expansion of the Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme in 1982, few believed it could succeed. The state proposed spending nearly Rs 150 crore a year, an astonishing amount for that period, to feed millions of children through tens of thousands of feeding centres. Economists questioned the fiscal wisdom. Bureaucrats feared logistical chaos. Political opponents dismissed it as an expensive populist exercise designed to convert box-office popularity into electoral loyalty. Editorials raised genuine concerns over procurement, transportation, food safety, storage, staffing and monitoring. Naysayers predicted that leakages and corruption would kill the programme. Some argued that poor parents would send children to school only for the food. Others opined that the state’s fragile finances would collapse under the weight of such an ambitious commitment. MGR heard all the criticism. And ignored almost all of it. Having experienced hunger and poverty in his own childhood, he understood something that economic models often failed to: a hungry child cannot concentrate. For MGR, the meal was not charity, it was the first lesson of the day. “Nutrition is not a favour extended to the poor. It is the foundation upon which equality is built,” he said. That philosophy led to one of the most influential public policy experiments in independent India. To credit MGR alone would be to ignore history. The idea of feeding schoolchildren dates back to the early twentieth century,

when the Justice Party governed Madras Presidency. The noon meal scheme kicked off in some government schools in what is now Chennai, and was later expanded by iconic Congress leader and chief minister K. Kamaraj. However, these initiatives remained limited in scale and ambition. MGR took the idea beyond welfare and made it central to governance. Thousands of kitchens emerged across villages and towns. Local women were employed as cooks and helpers. Communities became participants rather than passive beneficiaries. Children were fed; families were sustained. Governments changed. Fierce rivals occupied Fort St George, the seat of the



MGR, then Tamil Nadu chief minister, inaugurates the Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme in Tiruchi district on 1 July 1982

Tamil Nadu government. Yet none dared dismantle the programme. Instead, every administration sought to improve it. Karunanidhi expanded its nutritional components; Jayalalithaa strengthened the menu, introducing eggs more systematically; M.K. Stalin recognised that hunger pangs don’t wait till noon and introduced the free breakfast scheme for primary school children. Joseph Vijay’s proposal followed in their footsteps. The Nutritious Noon Meal Scheme outlived its architect because society saw it as indispensable. The real measure of its success wasn’t the number of meals served. School enrolment rose steadily among children from economically weaker families. Attendance improved because parents knew their children would receive at least one nutritious meal every day. Dropout rates fell, particularly among girls. It became an incentive for first-generation learners—who would otherwise accompany parents to work or construction sites—to stay in school. The scheme also quietly challenged entrenched social hierarchies. Children from different castes sat together and ate the same food. Women from disadvantaged backgrounds found the work as cooks and organisers. Public kitchens became spaces where the state intervened not merely against hunger but against exclusion. “School meals are often described as welfare. In reality, they are among the most productive investments a society can make. Every plate served is an investment in education, health, dignity and future productivity,” says K.J. Ajayakumar, a recently retired teacher from Chennai

Kerala Samajam Higher Secondary School. Tamil Nadu began recording educational and health indicators that placed it consistently ahead of much of India. While no single programme explains the state’s development arc, scholars have repeatedly pointed to the noon meal scheme as one of the foundational interventions that helped reduce inequalities over generations. It’s influence travelled beyond state borders. India’s celebrated Mid-Day Meal Scheme—renamed PM POSHAN in the Modi era—drew on the experience of Tamil Nadu. Today, it is the largest such programme in the world, serving more than 100 million children every school day. Whether chicken biriyani eventually reaches school kitchens is, in many ways, incidental. The larger lesson lies elsewhere. Decisions about what children should eat are increasingly driven by ideological preferences rather than nutritional evidence. Eggs are becoming taboo despite their proven efficacy in addressing protein deficiency. Vegetarian menus are justified in the name of ‘cultural values’, even when large sections of poor children come from communities whose regular diets include eggs, fish or meat whenever they can afford them. “Tamil Nadu has consistently resisted the Sangh Parivar agenda,” points out Chennai-based writer and political observer Kavin Malar. “Successive governments have largely treated noon meals as a scientific and public health question rather than a religious one. That explains why the state is debating the nutritional value of chicken biriyani instead of questioning whether animal protein belongs on school plates at all.” ■



“Every plate served is an investment in education, health, dignity and future productivity”

How lonely it is to be Israel

Americans are finally giving up on Israel. **Ashok Swain** reads the tea leaves

For decades, Israel’s greatest strategic asset was not its army, nuclear capability or intelligence services. It was the extraordinary political support it enjoyed in the United States. Presidents of both parties treated Israel’s security as a permanent American commitment. Congress supplied weapons, money and diplomatic protection with little hesitation. Even when disagreements arose, the relationship remained secure because Israel enjoyed broad support among Americans.

That foundation is now cracking, and Benjamin Netanyahu bears the greatest responsibility. The change did not begin with the Gaza war. Years of occupation, settlement expansion and the disappearance of any credible political path for Palestinians had already damaged Israel’s image. But Gaza accelerated the transformation. The enormous scale of war crimes, displacement, starvation and destruction has changed how millions around the world see Israel.

Netanyahu responded to the Hamas attack of 7 October with a war that went far beyond any reasonable claim of military necessity. Entire neighbourhoods were destroyed. Families were buried under rubble. Hospitals, schools and civilian infrastructure were devastated. Hunger became a weapon of war. The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Netanyahu over war crimes and crimes against humanity.

This is the Israel younger Americans have been watching. The polls show how dramatic the change is. A 2018 Gallup poll found 64 per cent of Americans sympathised more with Israelis and only 19 per cent with Palestinians. By 2022, that gap had narrowed to 55 per cent and 26 per cent, respectively. In 2023, 54 per cent and 31 per cent. By 2025, 46 per cent and 33 per cent. Then the historic reversal, the first since 2001: in Gallup’s 2026 survey, only 36 per cent sympathise more with Israelis

and 41 per cent with Palestinians. The generational change is even more alarming for Israel. Among Americans aged 18 to 34, 53 per cent now sympathise more with Palestinians and only 23 per cent with Israelis. Among Democrats, the figures are 65 per cent for Palestinians and 17 per cent for Israelis. Even Republican sympathy for Israel has fallen from 80 per cent in 2024 to 70 per cent in 2026. At the same time, 57 per cent of Americans support the establishment of an independent Palestinian State.

Pew Research Center confirms the same trend through different questions. In 2022, 55 per cent of Americans viewed Israel favourably and 42 per cent unfavourably. By 2025, 53 per cent viewed Israel unfavourably; in 2026, 60 per cent. Netanyahu fares even worse: 59 per cent of Americans have little or no confidence in him on world affairs. Among Democrats the figure is 76 per cent. More significantly for Israel’s future, 57 per cent of Republicans aged 18 to 49 now view Israel unfavourably.

Gallup and Pew use different questions and methodologies, yet they reveal the same transformation. Israel is losing the American public, and it is losing younger Americans rapidly. This matters more than no votes at the United Nations or demonstrations in European capitals. Israel can survive criticism from Europe and condemnation from the Global South, but it cannot replace the United States.

For decades, Washington has provided Israel not only weapons and financial assistance but extraordinary diplomatic protection. While official US figures have historically put cumulative bilateral assistance above \$130 billion in nominal terms, inflation-adjusted estimates place total American aid at more than \$300 billion, including well over \$200 billion in military assistance. Israel is the largest cumulative recipient of US foreign aid since the Second World War.

The US has also used its veto around 50 times to block Security Council action involving Israel and the Palestinian question. Since the Gaza war began in October 2023, Washington has cast six vetoes on Gaza-related Security Council measures. In June and September 2025, the isolation was extraordinary: 14 members of the Security Council supported ceasefire resolutions while the US alone voted against them. American diplomatic power effectively prevented their adoption. The assumption that Washington would stand behind Israel in any major confrontation has been central to Israeli security; Netanyahu may have finally gambled it away.

His wars did not remain confined to Gaza. Violence and dispossession intensified in the West Bank. Israeli military operations expanded in Lebanon. Then came the war against Iran, a conflict Netanyahu had advocated for years. Instead of reducing threats around Israel, his strategy has widened the battlefield. He has tried to convince Israelis that



Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has painted himself into a corner

‘forever wars’ are necessary for survival, but that line has now become one of the greatest threats to Israel’s long-term security.

American foreign policy will not change overnight. Established institutions and lobbying networks remain powerful. But democratic governments cannot remain permanently insulated from public opinion. Younger Americans will eventually become senators, members of Congress, officials from the administration and voters deciding presidential elections. If their understanding of Israel has been shaped primarily by Gaza, occupation, settler violence and regional war, the consequences for the alliance will be profound.

Already more lawmakers are challenging arms transfers. More Democrats are distancing themselves from Netanyahu. More candidates are questioning unconditional American support. The political cost of criticising Israel is decreasing and conversely

the cost of defending Netanyahu’s wars is rising.

Future US governments may continue supporting Israel’s existence and legitimate security needs while refusing to finance occupation, settlement expansion and repeated wars. Military assistance could become conditional. Arms transfers could face restrictions. Diplomatic protection could weaken. Washington could become much more willing to pressure Israel to accept Palestinian statehood.

The loss of support is also global. Pew’s 2026 survey across 36 countries found a median of 67 per cent holding an unfavourable opinion of Israel, against only 25 per cent with a favourable view. Unfavourable opinion reached 69 per cent in Britain, 73 per cent in Germany, 75 per cent in Italy, 76 per cent in the Netherlands and 78 per cent in Spain and Sweden. Israel is, therefore, losing support not only among its traditional critics

but in countries that have been important diplomatic, economic and military partners. Yet the decline of support in the US is uniquely dangerous because no other country has backed Israel like the US.

The recent defence agreement between Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan is also significant for Israel. These are major Muslim powers. Turkey is a NATO member and Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons. Their growing security cooperation is a sign that the region is looking for greater strategic autonomy and new ways of confronting Israel.

For generations, Israel could count on the US to stand behind it whatever happened in West Asia. But that ground may have slipped and Netanyahu will be remembered as the leader who pushed Israel to that point. ■

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Kanishka Narayan (left) arriving at 10 Downing Street with cabinet colleagues for a meeting with Prime Minister Andy Burnham

From Bihar to Britain’s cabinet

Guess who’s been dubbed Britain’s ‘most important minister’ in Prime Minister Andy Burnham’s cabinet?

Well, it isn’t one of the posh white boys from English counties, it’s Kanishka Narayan, an immigrant from Muzaffarpur, Bihar. He holds the portfolio for artificial intelligence—a domain billed as the ‘dawn of a new industrial revolution’.

A virtual unknown until recently, Narayan entered Parliament two years ago and now finds himself at the centre of frontline politics. Naturally, people are curious to know more about him. The way he tells it, his is a classic rags-to-riches story.

When he was eight, his parents made the “crazy, sacrificial” decision to move to Cardiff in Wales. He doesn’t explain his parents’ background, or why they chose Cardiff.

He recalls sleeping on the floor of his family’s one-bedroom home in an unglamorous suburb of Cardiff. He was a good student and a teacher suggested he apply for scholarships at some top schools.

Eton gave him a full bursary. From there, he flew through Oxford, Stanford, banking and the civil service. Britain, he says, is a land of possibility and freedom.

“You go from a place where living standards, on a per-capita basis, are comparable to England in the 1600s, to living in London in 2026. You feel like you’ve accelerated 400 years of progress in a lifetime of 36 years,” he gushes.

Britain, he says, offered him “a canvas for painting the kind of progress you can

make in life”. AI, he adds, offers similar possibilities for humankind if we get it right.

Americanisation of football lingo leaves Brits fuming

Forget the backlash against FIFA boss Giovanni Infantino’s eccentric antics, in Britain, passions are running high over a linguistic fallout from this year’s World Cup: the Americanisation of football lingo.



FIFA boss Gianni Infantino and US President Donald Trump with the FIFA trophy



Photos: Getty Images

Apparently, arguments have broken out in homes with parents shouting at their children for calling their beloved footie ‘soccer’. A survey has found that ‘soccer’ is “second highest on a list of grating Americanisms that make adults shudder.”

The Brits and Yanks have long been divided by a common language, but current fears are that the Americans are winning.

According to a survey of more than 1,500 adults conducted by Preply, a language-learning platform, ‘movies’, ‘awesome’ and ‘ATM’ were among the American English words most commonly used by British children. Leading this shift are TV shows and films, followed by YouTube, TikTok, children’s shows, music, Instagram, online gaming, travel, friends, family and other social media platforms.

In other words, the works. Move over,



fish and chips. Soon more than 36 per cent of Britons may be asking for fish and ‘fries’.

‘Damn democracy,’ say British voters

Disillusionment with the current state of Western democracy has reached a ‘crisis point’ in much of Europe. Research has found that a majority of British voters believe the UK has left its ‘best days’ behind.

Public pessimism in Britain has markedly increased since a similar survey last year, with more voters saying they expected to be worse off in 2026.

Like their European counterparts, Brits largely blamed political leaders for their current financial predicament and the deterioration of public services, rather than external factors such as inflation triggered by higher energy prices and increased government debt resulting from higher spending during Covid. UK voters were particularly concerned that the country was more divided—they felt more disconnected from society.

As many as 40 per cent of all respondents in UK and Europe said they needed a strong leader who was willing to break the rules to get things done. That, to some extent, explains the frightening rise of the far Right.

Spy versus Spy

Even as Britain struggles to be taken seriously in the arena of international affairs, its MI6 has emerged as Europe’s most powerful foreign intelligence service in a peer review by 60 professionals

from 25 countries.

France’s General Directorate for External Security (DGSE) secured second place for its global reach and operational capability while Slovakia’s SIS, which is responsible for both domestic and foreign espionage, was rated the worst in Europe. Ukraine came fourth, respected for ‘innovation, ingenuity and risk-taking’, while Germany’s BND, widely mocked as an unwieldy bureaucracy, managed a modest fifth place.

MI6 won praise for its expertise in recruiting high-level moles and penetrating the ruling elites of Russia, China, Iran and Turkey. Britain was the first to warn Ukraine about the likelihood of a Russian invasion: a fact acknowledged by the CIA.

Robert Gorelick, a former CIA station chief, said, “The United Kingdom has by far the strongest secret services in Europe. MI6 is extraordinary.”

While a former head of the DGSE said: “The British have the ability to play the long game, investing in sources over a ten-year horizon, somewhat like the Russians. And they have a taste for dirty tricks.”

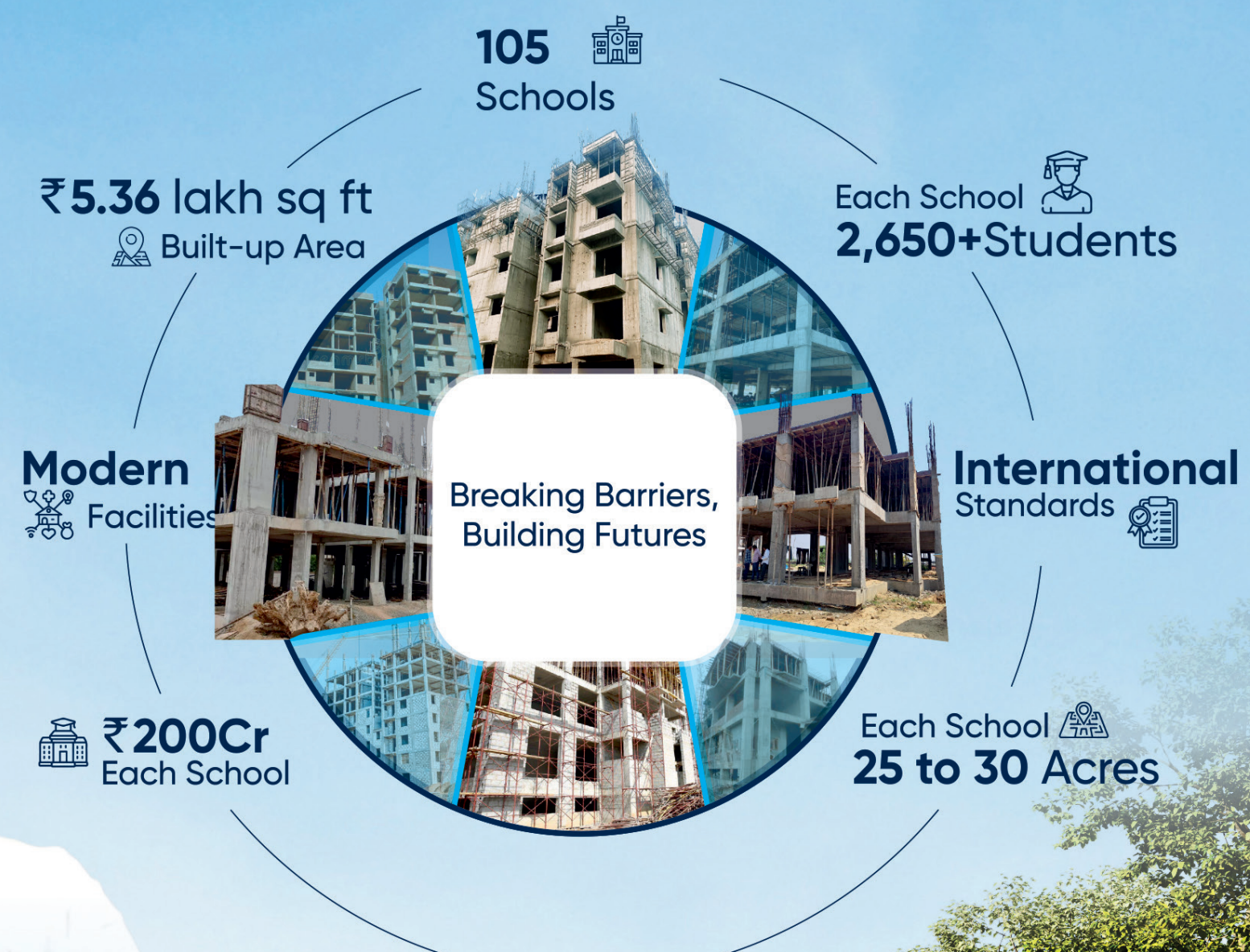


MI6 chief Blaise Metreweli

And, finally, Lindsay Hoyle, Speaker of the House of Commons, took a dig at the fast turnover of prime ministers. He told journalists: “Usually Speakers have trouble remembering the names of all the MPs. I am having trouble remembering the names of all the prime ministers.” ■



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