NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY

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

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The journey of a man who gave life to seeds

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RAHUL GANDHI HAS NOT CHANGED, INDIA HAS

Does the chorus one hears on the streets indicate a new tipping point in India's politics?

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NATION

STATES 360°

West Bengal, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Manipur, Uttar Pradesh

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The State has its enemies, the enemies have each other

Swarna Bhatnagar

I sit by my window at that hour when darkness yields to the certainty of the sun. My knees and back hurt as I answer what I hope is my last distress call of the day.

"My plan for Saturday was to stay at home and read a book," a volunteer tells me on her way home after making sure our own have reached theirs.

The youth of the country is at war, and the war has come inside our houses. Our parents have stopped asking where we go and begun asking where it hurts. Relatives, who renounced their minds to a seventy-six-year-old demagogue drunk on the incense of his own worship, call us dishonourable for demanding answers.

We fight the police and the paramilitary forces who take their annoyance out on our bodies, then a media with a lung full of poison, stamping us Dimagi Naxals, anti-nationals, Pakistan-funded and whatever else its air-conditioned hate circus can dream up.

We fight lawyers' fees, FIRs, bail dates, savings meant for a house, professional circles where keeping your head down is safer than voicing your opinion. We fight to build lives we have hardly begun. I have an inbox full of rape and death threats from Sanghi goons who want to make examples of those who speak over the ear-splitting jingoism of *andhbhakti*. They call in the wee hours to see if my voice shakes. It does. We fight them too.

When I joined Meghnad and Rajiv at the Protest Support Initiative, we knew the months ahead would be difficult. "I was not prepared to have another person's safety rest in my hands", I told a volunteer providing medical aid in the detention camp. "I think we learnt it the hard way because no one else was coming to take over and we couldn't have left anyone behind," she replied.

Writing to Angela Davis as she awaited trial in prison, James Baldwin pronounced the stakes of solidarity: "For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night."

I think of the NEET protests in July, when gig workers made their eighth trip of the day, ferrying food sent by our strangers-in-arms hundreds of kilometres away. These are the 'foreign agents' feeding a bunch of kids fighting the fascists. A boy, barely twenty, stood with a packet of aloo bhujiya insisting passers-by take a handful. He didn't have much money; everyone had everything but there was no bhujiya. So he got that.

I think of Anoopa, offering a care package and funds from Bangalore, and Rayan in Hong Kong, helping spread the word, raise donations and counter false narratives from behind a screen. The geography of this movement has always exceeded the city. It includes those in the streets and those who make it possible for them to remain there.

The surveillance cameras will not show you this. They would rather you believe we are a good-for-nothing lot, tethered to our devices, gathered only to cause trouble. Their Meta glasses and high-tech gear, which by the way go gloriously blind when women are being raped, can record bodies packed one after the other in a fight to exercise a democratic right. But their viewfinders are too small to capture the compassion and ingenuity that keeps this fight alive.

And after all this we fight the great national gaslight that insists we are imagining things. That *Sab Changa Si*.

A protester was accused of 'stretching the truth' about her detention at her brother's lunch table. Whose truth was she stretching? Hers, or theirs, who bend their knee to a faint-hearted emperor of nothing?

What does it do to a person to live through something and then argue over whether it happened at all? To watch the evidence circulate and yet be told by the messiahs of mass delusion who watch *Republic TV* that you manufactured and politicised what happened?

You can repeat your story, show the evidence and point to your injuries only so many times. When a lie demands more labour than the truth ever should, you become a full-time prosecutor in the case of your own life.

The youth of this country do not owe their silence or their unquestioning loyalty to anyone

So, when Rahul Gandhi walked the Barakhamba Road with the 'Chalo Dilli' march, it felt like a window had opened in a room full of smoke. For the past four months, I and so many of my kind have fought for our lived experience to register and instead watched it being picked apart by people who were nowhere near what happened. We have forgotten what a full night of sleep feels like. Fear and fury have eaten into us, and the fatigue feels like a reason to give up and go home. For one epochal moment, he pulled us out of that disorienting spiral.

If I am admiring the Leader of the Opposition for doing his job, it tells you everything about the hour we live in. I am reminded of Bertolt Brecht in *The Threepenny Opera*: 'First comes the grub, then comes the morality.'

I do not have the luxury of doing an autopsy on Rahul Gandhi's conscience before acknowledging that his actions have helped us. It's perverse to demand that people who are paying for their dissent with their livelihoods, safety and peace of mind must first establish the moral purity of a politician who has chosen to listen to them.

Trolls calling me a paid 'Khangressi' can learn basic spelling. To the 'apoliticals' and 'neutrals' insisting he is doing it for the votes and the love of the chair, I ask: what exactly is the scandal here? That a politician discovered that speaking of the suffering of people might be politically useful?

And if I am saying this publicly, it is because I want the LoP to hear the rest of it, too. We will remember that he showed up and treated our demands as worthy of a response. But solidarity must continue after the cameras move on and the moment loses its political usefulness. We will keep asking him to do more, holding him accountable when he fails us. The stakes are too high for gratitude to become a gag order. He should expect nothing less from those whose right to question power he is defending.

The youth of this country do not owe their silence or their unquestioning loyalty to anyone. We only owe ourselves the freedom to demand a better future without choosing between our safety and conscience.

As I put these final words down, the first light is breaking across the sky. I step onto my balcony to the sound of Shreya Ghoshal's voice from a Bluetooth speaker playing in the flat next door, '*Woh Subah Hami Se Aayegi*'.

For once, I want the country to believe this. ■

SWARNA BHATNAGAR *is a writer who loves to cook up a perfect storm*

The 'femininomenon' on Delhi's streets

Sohini Sengupta

The October protests in Delhi began as a demand for electoral accountability. But it has since become inseparable from the not-so-sudden but rather unruly assertion of women's right to occupy public spaces and, more importantly, to do so on their own terms.

The protests against Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and a broken election system segued and branched off into a parallel mobilisation against sexual violence and for women's safety in the capital. The resulting movement didn't separate the right to vote from the right to walk home, protest, laugh, dress however or simply be angry.

This 'femininomenon' (borrowing from Chappell Roan's 2022 hit) became a cultural event in its own right. Delhi's streets brought together women, queer and non-binary people, students, journalists and first-time voters who were tired of being overlooked.

The protests began with demands for Gyanesh Kumar's resignation over irregularities in the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise that has seen some 13 crore voters struck off the electoral rolls. But when protesters gathered in Delhi on 3 October, allegations surfaced of sexual assault on three women journalists. The crackdown peaked over the weekend of 10–11 October, when Delhi Police detained thousands and heavily barricaded Jantar Mantar, citing orders under Section 163 of the new-fangled penal code BNSS.

This round of protests was more overtly gendered than Jantar Mantar 1.0, which led to the resignation of then education minister Dharmendra Pradhan. A journalist accused Delhi Police ACP Vivek Bhagat of assaulting her while trying to detain her during the protests. Bizarrely, what followed the day after she made this charge was the release of a promotion order for Bhagat. Small mercy that it was later withheld pending enquiry.

Soon, other women at the protests started flagging how unevenly public spaces were being policed. Women and feminine-presenting people—from AISA president Neha Bora to journalists being groped by police on camera to women being chased, threatened, abused by goons on the streets—were confronting the very dangers they are taught to avoid from childhood. Judging from the police reaction, their dissent itself seemed to warrant punishment.

Running parallel to the anti-CEC/SIR mobilisation, students from Delhi University's women's colleges protested the gang rape of a 17-year-old at Aastha Kunj Park on her birthday. Though Chief Minister Rekha Gupta acknowledged lapses, young women knew a 'Pink Force' on paper could do only so much. So, they took to chanting slogans like '*Ek kachori, do samosa/ in mardon ka kya bharosa*' to speak up and be heard.

One protester, sporting baby bangs, a septum piercing and winged eyeliner, held up a placard reading, 'The baddest bitches are demanding change.' Today's young women are neither victims nor likely to brook male condescension. They aren't 'good girls in need of protection'. They have been raised on promises of equality but inherited institutions that restrict their access to public life and employment. They do not fear being loud or rebellious. What harm, they ask, could either do to the trajectory of their life when they have so little to begin with?

Some might argue their generalising slogans unfairly target all men when stripped of context, but the women might counter they are, in fact, being kind… to compress years of street harassment, sexual assault, victim blaming, moral policing and institutional indifference into fun rhymes to chant atop yellow barricades.

These are the same men who circulate AI-generated misogynistic bilge, demeaning images of women, powerful or otherwise, and then look flabbergasted when women take offence. In a video from the protests, a man with a saffron cloth around his neck claimed that women chanting such slogans are cheap, that they 'sell themselves for 300 rupees'.

In late July, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said women using expletives at protests was a 'culture shock' and then proceeded to 'forgive them.' At a Chhatron Ki Goonj forum in Pune, opposition leader Rahul Gandhi challenged the condescension and spoke of the Manusmriti as the fountainhead of these regressive views on women.

But women on the streets—with their clothes torn in police assaults, their bodies battered by lathi charges, their failing mental and physical health, their missed assignments, lectures and deadlines—know how slow-learning the State is. The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, for instance, frames subsidised LPG connections as a means to secure women's *samman* (dignity).

Young women are looking past Modi's unsolicited forgiveness and Gandhi's call to 'smash the patriarchy'. They refuse to be poster girls for any political party. They have watched feminist language become campaign fodder, even as the State deploys AI-assisted cameras to surveil its own citizens. What angers them most, though, is the largely absent response to reports of harassment and sexual violence. So, these 'baddies' in their Y2K fits and chunky bangles take to the streets to 'clock' the patriarchy across party lines.

On 10 October, a group of allegedly right-wing men heckled and chased away protesting women in Connaught Place—and were allowed to go scot-free. Thankfully, the men in their 30s who raped a child in Aastha Kunj did get arrested. But women, young and old, are demanding action before verbal harassment can turn into sexual assault.

Under Sec. 43(5) of the BNSS, women cannot be arrested between sunset and sunrise, barring 'exceptional circumstances'. Where practicable, a woman police officer must make the arrest. Yet, in another viral reel, a young woman, hoarse from protesting, sat on her bed at 11 p.m. as her family worried about a police vehicle waiting outside to arrest her.

Still, how broken must a system be for women to *prefer* police buses? Some took rides home in detention buses that, they said, felt safer than Delhi at night.

Meanwhile, a group of women walking towards Jantar Mantar were reportedly profiled by Delhi Police, but only hijab-wearers were detained and asked to surrender their phones. Trans and non-binary people, including Arunachal's 'protest diva' Lobsang Riba added colour, range and a whole dimension to the protests.

Some of the most unsettling images from the protests feature women police officers dragging women protesters across the road. Their presence alone does nothing to challenge, leave alone dismantle, the patriarchy; the sindoor-flaunting women police officers are embedded in a male-dominated ecosystem and their fig-leaf presence only enables it.

So it is that in a video published by 'not.a.journalist' journalist Samdish Bhatia, a visibly shaken woman, her kurti torn by police restraint, screams in exasperation: "This is why we resist." ■



Photo: **Getty Images**

They aren't 'victims' nor likely to brook male condescension. They aren't 'good girls in need of protection'

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Let Jantar Mantar speak!

A.J. Philip



Photo: Getty Images

The move to denotify Jantar Mantar is clearly meant to gag dissent or to take it someplace where it can't be heard

More than six decades ago, when I was a schoolboy at Pathanamthitta in Kerala, an elderly man had made protest a part of his daily routine. Every working day, he would set up a small, foldable tent near the gate of the taluk office and sit there, pursuing a cause he believed was worth fighting for. He was a naturopath, and his demand was that the government should ban all non-vegetarian food.

He continued his agitation for hundreds of days. Eventually he died, and his protest came to an end. I saw him almost every day while going to school. Even as a boy, I could not understand the logic of his demand. It seemed unreasonable, if not downright impractical. Yet nobody questioned his right to peaceful protest.

That childhood memory came back to me when I visited London. One of the first places I wanted to see was Hyde Park, particularly Speakers' Corner, where people have traditionally gathered to express their opinions on practically every subject under the sun.

I remembered that George Bernard Shaw had used the park's public-speaking tradition to propagate his ideas and challenge conventional thinking. Speakers' Corner has long attracted people with strong convictions, unusual theories and sometimes eccentric beliefs. One need not agree with what they say to appreciate their right to say it.

I have since visited places associated with public demonstrations in Washington DC, Berlin and Paris. In each city, protest has a visible presence in public life. From environmental campaigners and vegan enthusiasts to gay-rights activists and political opponents, people take to public spaces to articulate their demands. Some protest against governments, others against social practices, economic policies or international developments.

In every city, protest venues are a visible presence in public life. For good reason

What struck me was that these protest sites were not tucked away in obscure corners. They were often situated in prominent locations, sometimes within sight of the institutions they sought to influence. In Washington, Lafayette Square is just across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House. Such places have also become part of the tourist circuit. Visitors come to see not merely monuments and buildings but the spaces where citizens have asserted their rights.

Delhi, however, has had a more complicated relationship with protest. For years, the lawns around the Boat Club near India Gate were the preferred venue for demonstrations and public meetings. The location was ideal. It was central, easily accessible and close to the institutions of government. A large gathering there could not be ignored by either the authorities or the public.

The massive farmers' mobilisation led by Mahendra Singh Tikait in 1988 changed that equation. Tens of thousands of farmers descended on the Boat Club area, bringing the capital to a standstill and compelling the government to reconsider whether such large demonstrations should be permitted in the heart of the city.

The government eventually settled on Jantar Mantar as the designated protest site. By the early 1990s, it had emerged as the place where citizens could assemble to voice their grievances. The arrangement had an obvious administrative advantage. The police could regulate the movement of demonstrators through a limited number of entry points, making crowd management easier.

For more than three decades, this arrangement broadly served both sides. Protesters could gather within reasonable proximity of Parliament, government offices and the residences of ministers and senior officials. Those in power, meanwhile, could monitor demonstrations and keep them within manageable limits. The protesters had the psychological satisfaction of being close to the people they wished to confront, while the authorities could tell themselves that dissent was being accommodated without allowing it to spread across the capital.

Jantar Mantar gradually became more than a piece of Delhi's real estate. It acquired a place in the democratic imagination of the country. Farmers, students, workers, government employees, social activists and representatives of marginalised communities assembled there to demand justice. Some campaigns attracted only a handful of people; others drew large crowds and national attention. The site became a familiar backdrop to the continuing argument between citizens and the State.

But the authorities seem to have forgotten the purpose of providing such a space. A protest site is not meant to make demonstrations convenient for the police. It is meant to allow people to communicate their grievances to those who govern them.

The recent protest mobilisation in Delhi appears to have tested the government's tolerance of public dissent. What it ought to have understood was that the size of the crowds reflected the intensity of the grievances, or at least the strength of feeling among those who had assembled.

Instead of recognising the message conveyed by the crowds, the authorities have chosen what appears to be an administrative solution: de-notifying Jantar Mantar as a designated protest site and identifying alternative venues—Ramlila Maidan, Burari Ground and CBD Ground. Ramlila Maidan is already associated with big public gatherings and religious celebrations, while the other proposed venues are considerably farther from the centre of power.

The practical consequence is obvious. A demonstration at a distant ground may be easy to police, but it is also easier for the government to ignore. If a million people assemble far from the offices of ministers and constitutional authorities, their physical presence need not cause those in power much inconvenience. They can continue with their official business while the protesters remain out of sight.

That, however, defeats the very purpose of protest. A demonstration is not a gathering of people who want to spend time together. It is a public declaration of disagreement, intended to attract attention and compel those responsible to respond. Location is therefore not a trivial administrative matter; it is part of the message.

The irony is that the government itself had helped create the arrangement it now wishes to dismantle. Having moved demonstrations away from the Boat Club and channelled them into Jantar Mantar, the authorities are now proposing to push protesters farther away from the capital's nerve centre. An arrangement that was once considered manageable has apparently become inconvenient because people are using it to express anger on a scale the government did not anticipate.

The elderly naturopath I saw more than sixty years ago may have had an impossible demand. He may have spent hundreds of days pursuing a cause that could never have been accepted. Yet his little tent occupied a space in public life, and passers-by could see him and understand that he was dissatisfied with something.

That is the essence of democracy. The right to protest does not belong only to people whose demands are sensible, whose arguments are persuasive or whose causes enjoy popular support. It belongs equally to those whose views we dislike, whose reasoning we reject and whose campaigns we consider futile. That is why Jantar Mantar must remain a place where dissent is heard, not where it is silenced. ■



TRIBUTE

CHERUVAYAL RAMAN
2 February 1952 – 14 October 2026

Wayanad's seedman is no more

K.A. Shaji remembers Cheruvayal Raman, the man who gave life to the seeds that give everyone nourishment

When Cheruvayal Raman was offered a government job in 1969 for a monthly salary of Rs 150, he could hardly refuse. The job was his opportunity to step away from the uncertainties of agriculture. He had registered with the employment exchange in Kannur the previous year.

But Raman had forty acres of land to think about. His uncle owned 22 acres of paddy fields and another 18 acres of dry land. When Raman told him about the appointment, the old man remained silent. Then he asked a question that would shape the rest of Raman's life.

"If you leave, who will look after all this? Won't it all dry up? If you don't want it, abandon everything and go!"

Raman abandoned the job instead. "This land was not the job the government had given me," he would recall.

He never really left those paddy fields.

Cheruvayal Raman, Wayanad's beloved Nellachan, died at the Kozhikode Medical College Hospital on 14 October. He was 76. With him has passed a remarkable custodian of agricultural memory.

Raman's journey as a seed conservator began with six traditional rice varieties left behind by his uncle. He was troubled by the thought that a family that had cultivated 40 acres of land had preserved so little of its original seed heritage.

Kerala once possessed an extraordinary diversity of rice varieties. Wayanad alone was home to more than a hundred traditional varieties, adapted to different soils, water conditions and seasons. As chemical-intensive farming and high-yielding varieties spread, many of these indigenous seeds disappeared from cultivation.

Raman travelled across Wayanad, searching for surviving varieties and persuading farmers to share what they had preserved. He also collected seeds from Kozhikode and Kannur. Over the years, his collection grew to around 55 traditional varieties, carefully cultivated on his own land.

But he was more than a conservator of seeds. He was preserving a way of life, an agricultural civilisation from the ravages of development and modernity.

Raman was not preserving his seeds as a relic. He wanted them returned to the soil. He distributed them free to people willing to cultivate them, asking that they preserve the varieties and return seeds from their harvest so the collection would grow.

For him, seeds were a living inheritance to be entrusted to the next generation.

*

Raman understood the promise of the Green Revolution. His opposition to chemical-intensive farming was not born of ignorance but a profound concern about what might be lost when agricultural success is measured in yield alone.

He refused to use chemical fertilisers and pesticides, relying instead on cow dung, organic waste and natural manure. He worried about the disappearance of frogs, insects, fish and other organisms from agricultural landscapes. His memory of the Mananthavady river, once abundant with fish and giant freshwater prawns, were inseparable from his grief over Wayanad's ecological decline.

He believed the soil had life, that farming was a relationship with nature rather than an exercise in extracting the maximum possible harvest.

"If hybrid seeds give you one tonne of rice, I may get only half a tonne. That is enough," he would say. "Nature prefers half a tonne that allows everyone to live over one tonne that allows only me to survive."

He was often dismissed as a fool for choosing traditional varieties that yielded less than modern alternatives. Raman accepted the criticism with a smile. "Everyone says I am a fool. But nature likes my foolishness."

He continued to thresh paddy by beating harvested sheaves with a stick rather than relying on a tractor. His methods were rooted in respect for the seeds and the ecological relationships that sustained them.

"Seeds should not be born in universities," he once argued, pointing to the millions of seeds scattered by wind, carried by water and dispersed by birds and animals. Nature was sustaining life long before human beings started classifying and manipulating seeds in laboratories.

Raman was not dismissing science. He was reminding us that scientific knowledge must retain the humility to marvel at the complexity of the living world.

*

When she visited his home in September 2025, Raman warmed to Wayanad MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra. She spent time listening to him and learning about his seed collection and farming practices. The relationship took root. He called her his daughter; she addressed him as *achchan* (father).

In a tribute following his death, Priyanka recalled that Raman had spoken to her about a month earlier and asked her to visit him again. "When I heard about his passing today, my heart sank," she wrote. She'd promised to return but had to cut short her Wayanad trip because of events in Delhi. She remembered him as wise, dignified and bold, a man who wanted better lives for his people and refused to accept discrimination and injustice. "He showed me his awards and honours with sadness in his eyes," Priyanka recalled. "He said they would mean nothing to him until his people could live better lives."

Rahul Gandhi, who had also met Raman during his time in Wayanad, remembered him as 'our beloved Ramettan'. In his condolence message, he wrote: "He devoted his life to preserving Wayanad's indigenous paddy seeds, keeping generations of Adivasi knowledge alive."

Kerala Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan described Raman as "the guardian and gene bank of rare traditional paddy varieties". He said Raman had safeguarded Kerala's agricultural heritage for future generations.

*

Wayanad was once a landscape of flourishing paddy fields, traditional farming communities and extraordinary biodiversity. The gradual disappearance of its fields and indigenous varieties represents a loss that no tribute, no award can repair.

Raman received awards galore in his lifetime, include a Padma Shri in 2023 and most recently the first Oommen Chandy Memorial Agricultural Award, recognising his lifelong contribution. But the greatest tribute to Cheruvayal Raman would be to ensure his work outlives him. His seed varieties must live and multiply and the way of life he embraced survive the march of modern farming. ■

"*Everyone says I am a fool, but nature likes my foolishness*"



Photos: Sibi Pulpally

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Rahul Gandhi has not changed, India has



Photo: Getty Images



The face of change Rahul Gandhi's self-assurance has grown with time but the caring, empathetic core of his politics was manifest much before media pundits woke up to it

Ashok Swain

Rahul Gandhi's emergence as the great new hope of Indian politics is often misrepresented as the arrival of 'a new Rahul Gandhi'. That interpretation gives too much credit to nearly two decades of relentless caricaturing of this leader with a big heart. If this is an inflection point in the discovery of his politics, of what he has been fighting for, let that belated realisation not be confused for the emergence of a new politician.

RG's appeal has grown no doubt and if you scanned social media in the wake of the rousing march of 12 October, you'll even have seen new young converts professing their love for him, of how they distrusted him earlier but now know better what he is about.

The core of Rahul Gandhi's politics—his unshakeable belief in social justice, his championing of India's youth and their legitimate demands, his clear and fearless articulation of the dangers to the Constitution from the RSS-BJP's majoritarian agenda, his crusade against electoral manipulation—acquired definition a long time ago. So, pundits who see this moment as the arrival of 'a new Rahul Gandhi' are possibly coming to terms with their own late realisation or are rationalising their past reservations.

What is changing is India's perspective on the Modi government's authoritarian politics, its (mis)governance record, its capture of India's democratic institutions, its misuse of investigative agencies to hound the Opposition, its subversion of electoral mandates by engineering defections, its desperate bid to cling to power. Rahul Gandhi has been flagging all this for longer than many media pundits care to remember; what has changed is that more people are now lending him their ears.

Let's track back and review. Before the Jantar Mantar 1.0 agitation became the firestorm that forced the government to capitulate and former education minister Dharmendra Pradhan to resign, Rahul Gandhi had been talking about exam paper leaks and the betrayal of students whose families sink all their savings and take loans they can barely repay to prepare their wards for competitive examinations. He has connected these scandals to the employment crisis in India. For hundreds of thousands of young Indians and their families, these exams are the only way out of precarity, and a broken and gamed education system cuts off their only way out.

Before the *Indian Express* investigation revealed that even Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi had flagged irregularities and brazen illegalities in the SIR, a series of exposés in independent media had presented enough evidence that the electoral rolls were being manipulated at scale. Rahul Gandhi took this up in Parliament and outside much before other Opposition politicians were any the wiser. The government and their media mouthpieces made it look like sour grapes till the recent revelations made it impossible to sustain that line of argument.

It is not 'a new Rahul Gandhi' as much as a new realisation that he represents the change we wish to see

The latest round of protests have made it clear that now, finally, every Indian knows, including the Modi government's apologists, that the Election Commission of India under current CEC (chief election commissioner) Gyanesh Kumar and his predecessor Rajiv Kumar was up to no good. Rahul Gandhi is not claiming sole ownership of a movement that has multiple spearheads but it is only fair to remember that less than a month ago, he was still being mocked for questioning the SIR before the rest of the Opposition or civil society at large was willing to back his story.

This is not to argue that Rahul Gandhi arrived as a fully formed politician. His self-assurance has grown with time, experience and sustained engagement with the people. His ability to simultaneously engage and challenge the media, to address public gatherings of any size, to break down complex governance matters in everyday terms for lay audiences, his ability to command attention in the House and on the street have all grown over time. His ease with the people, both young and old, and his ability to engage without apparent preparation stands in stark, even comic, contrast to the Supreme Leader who is being lampooned today for his inability to speak without a teleprompter. This man, who can't speak without a prompter, was leading the pack that hurled all sorts of slurs at Rahul Gandhi while media controlled by his cronies joined the name-calling with glee.

The streets and the chorus you hear are an indication that India is at a new tipping point

Not many will remember Gandhi's many prescient warnings—about the infamous lockdown of 2020, the Demonetisation of 2016 or when he first attacked the crony nexus of Modi's '*suit-boot ki sarkar*'.

On 12 February 2020, when India had recorded only three coronavirus cases, Rahul Gandhi warned of a serious threat to public health and the economy. He urged timely action even as then Union health minister Harsh Vardhan questioned his credibility and insisted that all necessary precautions had already been taken. A week before Modi imposed a surprise national lockdown, RG warned of 'an economic tsunami' affecting millions.

An early official estimate soon after showed the GDP contracting by 24 per cent year-on-year.

The farm laws provided another clear test. On 14 January 2021, Gandhi predicted the government would have to repeal them, and it did eventually happen on 19 November. The victory belonged to the farmers but unlike the Modi government, which reckoned their resistance would slowly fade, Gandhi foresaw the denouement.

The grand spectacle of the recent protests can easily obscure the quiet political work that underpins this movement.

Shaken and stirred as it now looks, the Modi regime is still in power, lying in wait for the next opportunity to pounce. It won't go down quietly.

But if the posters and slogans on the streets, the memes and gags on social media and the faces of thousands of defiant young Indians is any indication, the end is not so far away.

There isn't a shadow of doubt anymore that the face of the political alternative, an alternative grounded in pluralism and social justice, is Rahul Gandhi. He did not become a thinking, empathetic leader when people began to listen. If more people are listening today, it is because the politics many had pinned their hopes on has failed to deliver the opportunities it promised. ■

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

The jackboot of the Indian State

The erosion of our democratic institutions is now an open secret, though international monitors are still catching up on its full extent

Aakar Patel

On 5 March 2021, the Press Information Bureau put out a statement headlined: 'Rebuttal to Freedom House report on India's declining status as a free country'.

It was in response to a report by the US think tank, founded in 1941, that found India was not really democratic, only 'partly free'. This was one of many similar findings by several renowned global institutions. We are focusing on this one because it elicited a response from the government.

The government's statement opened with a defence of the electoral process: 'Many states in India under its federal structure are ruled by parties other than the one at the national level, through an election process which is free and fair and which is conducted by an independent election body. This reflects the working of a vibrant democracy, which gives space to those who hold varying views.'

This was dishonest. The Freedom House report had two parts. The first, with 40 per cent weightage, was on political rights. Here, India got a score of 34/40 (falling to 33/40 in 2023), including full marks for free and fair elections, election commission impartiality, freedom to start political parties and opportunities for the Opposition to increase its power.

India did not get full marks on whether voting was unhampered by violence and unaffected by communal tension. This is hardly arguable. In fact, the government got 3/4 on transparency, which was probably overgenerous. The government's response was therefore merely repeating what Freedom House had already said. Where India's rating was hurt was in the other 60 per cent, for civil liberties, which are also a part of freedom.

Here, it performed poorly (33/60). On issues of freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, academic freedom, freedom for NGOs to work (the report specifically named the government's attack on Amnesty International India), the rule of law, independence of the judiciary and due process by the police, India's rating was poor.

The scores merely reflected the reality, but the government appeared baffled by the results. It sought details from ministries about the parameters used by the Economist Intelligence Unit in downgrading India to a 'flawed democracy', though the report itself clearly states that the 'primary cause was an erosion of civil liberties' and the introduction of religion into citizenship laws.

The scores have dropped further in 2026, which is based on the events of 2025. Political rights are now at 31/40 and civil liberties at 31/60, the lowest ever scores for India. One suspects that the events of the past few months will further damage the score and our image. Why do I say that?

India was a democratic State because its institutions were largely intact and widely seen as neutral, reasonably efficient and usually fair. They were as good or as bad as the democratic institutions of most real democracies. That is what the Freedom House score represents.

To the question, 'Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?', Freedom House thought that 'executive elections and selection procedures are generally regarded as free and fair' and gave us a score of 4/4.

On the question, 'Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?', we again got 4/4, with the observation that 'elections were considered generally free and fair, though some violations of campaign rules were reported'.

A score of 3/4 came on the question, 'Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?'

And here is the critical paragraph that says the opposition parties' concerns 'intensified in 2025 as the government expanded its Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the voter list, as carried out in Bihar, to 12 other states and territories. Among other things, the Opposition has alleged that the ECI has unfairly deleted large numbers of voters from the rolls and prevented eligible voters from registering by introducing excessive verification requirements. Political analysts and opposition leaders have expressed concern that the SIR suppresses the opposition vote and disenfranchises Muslim and other minority voters. Government officials have rejected allegations of voter roll manipulation. The SIR remained under way at year's end.'

This was last year.

On the question, 'Do the people have the right to organise in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?', India scored 3/4.

On 'Is there a realistic opportunity for the Opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?', again, we scored 3/4.

None of these scores make any sense now. They do not reflect our reality. The voter rolls have been mangled, the Election Commission is anything but independent. Legislators are bought en masse, and it doesn't matter who loses elections because the house always wins, as they say about casinos.

The beating civil liberties have taken over the past few years showed up immediately; the erosion of primary institutions has taken slightly longer to register with observers, but it is now clear.

The jackboot is a more honest symbol of the Indian State today than the ballot box. ■

Views are personal


Photo: Getty Images

Not even the full might of a police State was enough to quell the defiant spirit that animated the October protests

Global monitors saw the erosion of civil liberties first; now they see the erosion of our institutions



WEST BENGAL

Durga Puja gets a BJP makeover

Featuring a Gujarat event management firm, Adani awards, Sherawali and other alien delights



Photo: Getty Images

The laser-and-drone extravaganza at Eden Gardens

Sourabh Sen *and* **Kunal Chatterjee**

Kolkata, indeed the whole state of West Bengal, is witnessing a culture shock. Giddy with power, the new BJP government in the state is going bananas over Durga Puja this year. From painting busy flyovers in rainbow hues, 'inspired' by international pedestrian plazas, to splurging an eye-popping Rs 180 crore on a show at Eden Gardens—the city's iconic cricket stadium—the state is witnessing the kind of Durga Puja it has never seen before.

Gobananas, a Gujarat-based event management company, was paid a reported-but-unconfirmed Rs 180 crore for the event.

Finance minister Swapan Dasgupta, facing criticism for ignoring local event managers and talent, is reported to have blamed the local firms. At a private gathering, he reportedly told his guests, "We hope companies from West Bengal will draw lessons and be prepared to play a bigger role next year." His explanation was greeted with diplomatic silence but what Dasgupta left unsaid was how the tender rules made it impossible for local companies to bid.

The government's 'request for proposal' required a hefty Rs 1 crore deposit and 3 per cent performance security that small bidders couldn't possibly cough up. Also, bidders had to have an average annual turnover of Rs 50 crore or more and a track of executing national/international events that cost Rs 20 crore or more in the last decade, specifically for government projects. That effectively shut the doors on local players.

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No one was surprised that the contract went to a Gujarati firm. But it was the spending spree and style that raised eyebrows. Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari had invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi and home minister Amit Shah to the event, which explained the 'cost no bar' approach. But Bengalis were aghast to see the gaudy, televised laser-and-drone spectacle and the bastardised '*dhunuchi naach*', a traditional high-energy devotional dance ritual performed in front of the goddess.

What else can explain Durga sporting eight, nine, eleven or twelve arms?

Not to be left behind, the Adani Group made its branding debut by deciding to reward eight puja pandals. Out of some 40,000 public '*sarbajonin*' pujas statewide, these eight were rewarded handsomely—sculptors got Rs 10 lakh each and organisers Rs 15 lakh. It also enrolled one lakh people on 'first come basis' for a preview of the select pandals. Influencers were roped in as special guests to publicise the hassle-free 'darshan' and arrangements made by the group's volunteers.

The aim, according to Adani Group advisor Sanjay Thade: "We want to showcase the grandeur of Kolkata's Durga Puja to national and international delegates so that it becomes one of the most recognisable festivals in the world." One wonders if he knew that in 2021, Durga Puja in Kolkata became the first festival from Asia to be included in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. The Adanis have also pledged to revamp Kumartuli, the famous village of potters and sculptors.

*

The hand of 'outsiders' clearly oblivious to Bengali cultural mores and festival lore was visible in other ways too. What else can explain Durga sporting eight, nine, eleven or even twelve arms—instead of the sacred ten-armed (*dashabhuja*) form? Official Kolkata Municipal Corporation advertisements copy-pasted the Hindi word '*swachchata*', which in Bengali, means transparency, not cleanliness as intended. Sorry KMC, that was a terrible mishit!

Communication professional Sreeraj Mitra blames "this murder of the Bengali language" on "the over-dependence on AI translations." Jawhar Sircar, former Prasar Bharti CEO and secretary, department of culture, government of India, advised the state government to refrain from teaching Bengalis how to welcome Durga, their daughter. "People who have done it seem to be unaware that Bengali and Hindi have different syntax and nuances," Sircar said.

*

And then, of course, there is the food. The number of non-vegetarian food stalls, is fewer this year. Eateries are taking care to not advertise non-veg with images of Goddess Durga in the background.

The cultural shift is in your face. Jagrata and Sherawali have made a triumphant debut, and BJP leaders are competing to take over the Pujas in their localities.

Hindi bhajans and Hanuman Chalisa are much in demand and a Hindu outfit of some description has occupied the space outside the CPI(M) office on Alimuddin Street to hold round-the-clock *Chandipath*.

When the communists discovered their 60-year-old bookstall occupied by a Hindutva outfit, they had to seek redress in court, while the police looked the other way.

Local sponsors of cultural events, often builders, are hard to find this year as they are still negotiating arrangements and commissions with the new 'rulers'. In the absence of a clear power hierarchy, leaders at various levels are flexing their muscles, they say.

Another tradition to take a hit this year is the release of new Bengali music during this season. Navratri, garba events and Hindi devotional songs have edged out Bengali, it seems. It is all very disorienting for anyone who knew what made Durga Puja an 'intangible cultural heritage' worth celebrating. ■



TAMIL NADU

Benefit sans entitlement

K.A. Shaji on the state's new gold ring scheme

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay's decision to play *thaimaman* (maternal uncle) to the state's newborns just ahead of assembly bypolls is not exactly the warm and fuzzy welfare gesture his government has advertised it to be.

The Thaimanam Thanga Mothiram scheme, launched in Madurai on 28 September, provides a 1 gm, 22 carat gold ring to babies born on or after 22 June 2026 in state government hospitals or health centres.

The scheme was a pre-election promise of Vijay's TVK (Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam) party, but the rollout happened just days ahead of the 6 October bypolls to the Madurantakam and Dharapuram constituencies, inviting sharp reactions from the opposition DMK.

Since the gold ring scheme had been formally approved, budgeted for and gazetted by the cabinet on 23 June, it had the benefit of being treated legally as an ongoing, pre-approved policy rather than a pre-election inducement.

DMK MP Kanimozhi Karunanidhi has argued that women should be encouraged to be economically independent rather than count on ceremonial gifts from male relatives. "You have equal rights in property, education and income. Earn and stand tall," she said, invoking the Dravidian movement's emphasis on women's self-reliance. In Tamil Nadu, that argument has many votaries. Critics are asking: should women's welfare be framed as a gift from a benevolent male figure rather than as a right?

Kanimozhi has also questioned the Vijay government's priorities, expressing concerns about committing public money to the gold ring scheme instead of shoring up availability of essential medicines and doctors in public hospitals.

*

The government order of 23 June allocated Rs 755.83 crore a year for the scheme for an estimated 4.42 lakh newborn beneficiaries. The rings are made of 22 carat gold and carry unique serial numbers.

Eligibility is linked to delivery in government health institutions, registration under the Pregnancy and Infant Cohort Monitoring and Evaluation (PICME) system and possession of a Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) identification number, alongside applicable residence requirements.

The financial commitment has prompted questions about competing priorities. Kanimozhi's criticism centres on the need to strengthen public healthcare, while party colleague and Lok Sabha member Thamizachi Thangapandian draws attention to shortages in several government hospitals of life-saving medicines to treat respiratory distress in premature babies.

C. Lakshmanan, former faculty at the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), says "the challenge is to ensure that a new initiative complements the essential services on which vulnerable families depend rather than overshadowing those services."

*

The *thaimaman* occupies a special place in Tamil kinship traditions. The mother's brother often maintains a close relationship with his sister and her children after marriage, presenting gifts during childbirth and other family ceremonies.

Gold, clothes and money can express affection, reinforce ties with the maternal family and provide material support. For poor households, such gifts can have practical value. Gold may be retained as an asset or pledged during a financial emergency. A ring provided by the state can also relieve a family of the pressure to meet customary expectations.

At the launch in Madurai, beneficiary Mariselvi said she was not on speaking terms with her brother and saw Vijay as one. Despite the progressives' lament, many poor people will appreciate the material assistance as well as the scheme's emotional packaging.

Writing in *The News Minute*, development economist Dipa Sinha argues that maternity support should recognise women's reproductive labour and economic vulnerability rather than present the government as a benevolent male relative.

Pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding involve physical labour, health risks and lost income. Women employed in informal work are mostly denied paid maternity leave and financial protection during this period. A gold ring may be welcome, but it does not compensate a woman for lost wages or guarantee adequate nutrition, postnatal care and childcare. She argues for stronger maternity entitlements linked to women's economic circumstances and greater recognition of unpaid care work.

The distinction is important: a gift is not a legal entitlement. While a gift may receive gratitude, a legal right strengthens accountability. This does not mean the ring has no value or that families who welcome it are mistaken. It means that the material benefit and the social message conveyed by the scheme must be assessed separately. ■

A gold ring is welcome but 'a gift is not a right' and the scheme spells patriarchy





MANIPUR

When and how will the conflict end? Two voices, two solutions

The continued silence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah on Manipur has baffled everyone. Both Meitei and Kukis feel let down by New Delhi. Three years into the conflict, there is still no consensus on the way forward.

According to a Manipur home department report tabled in the state assembly, 28,899 people are in relief camps and temporary shelters as internally displaced persons (IDPs), as of September 2026. Attacks on civilians by armed groups intensified in August–September. In targeted killings over a 30-day period in August–September, 23 civilians were killed in the hill districts, forcing villagers to take refuge in nearby paddy fields and forests.

For Meiteis, the situation has improved in Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley and the trouble is now confined to the hills where Nagas and Kukis reside. Kukis believe Meiteis and Nagas have colluded against them. Meanwhile, Nagas—who share their home and faith with Kukis—are hedging their bets.

"Violence has resurfaced in the hills despite AFSPA being in force. Why is the Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement with Kuki armed groups not being implemented in the hills?" asked Mayengbam Dhananjay, spokesperson for the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity, an umbrella coalition of major Meitei civil society organisations.

Some leaders with skin in the game see a way out of the current mess. **Sourabh Sen** *spoke to* **Pramot Singh** *of Meitei Leepun and to* **Paolienlal Haokip**, *spokesperson for Kuki Inpi Manipur, to get their perspective on the conflict. Excerpts from the conversations:*



An 'India for Manipur' protest in New Delhi Photo: Getty Images

Drug war and Myanmar are the main issues

Pramot Singh, a Meitei hardliner associated with Meitei Leepun, which he describes as a cultural organisation to preserve Meitei values and heritage and which Kukis describe as a Meitei militant organisation with links to the RSS, explains why Modi is showing no interest in settling issues in the state. Both China and the US, he says, are fighting for the resources in Myanmar and Modi's intervention may complicate the issue. Edited excerpts:

It is a drug war, not an ethnic clash

The conflict in Manipur is a drug war engineered by traffickers manifesting as ethnic conflict. All the drug lords are in powerful political positions. During my UNDP-supported research work in 2006, I found common syndicates, protected by politicians, non-state actors and security forces, running human, drugs and arms trafficking across the India-Myanmar border.

Government failure to persuade Kukis through SoO

There have been two resolutions in Manipur assembly to revoke the SoO with Kukis. Nobody is listening. I recently met a VHP leader who told me that Kukis would support rebuilding mandirs destroyed in violence. If so, why can't the central government tell Kuki armed groups not to disturb Meiteis? The local BJP says it was the Congress which introduced SoO. So why can't the present BJP government repeal it? Nobody—not even the state government—knows who took the decision behind closed doors to extend SoO which is a tripartite arrangement. This is frustrating.

PM's intervention can turn a local conflict into a geopolitical issue

Then there is the question of geopolitics. The US is interested in the area because it wants to stop China from controlling Myanmar's energy and critical mineral assets. This is one of several reasons why Modi is quiet on Manipur. His engagement can add geopolitical complications to a conflict which has so far remained local in a sensitive border area.

Modi's baffling silence on the state may have a geopolitical rationale

Partition not the solution

In a Kuki homeland project, Kuki customary laws would be paramount. In Nagalim, all social systems would be under Naga customary laws. Manipur has a tradition of communities co-existing peacefully and respecting one another. That was how our fathers and forefathers protected and preserved this land. This is the only way Manipur can survive. The concept of Kuki homeland cannot work because Meiteis, Nagas and others will not agree. Nagalim cannot work because Meitei, Kukis and others will not agree.

*

Trifurcate the state, expand the border

Paolienlal Haokip, BJP legislator from Saikot constituency of Churachandpur district and spokesperson for Kuki Inpi Manipur, the Kuki apex body, believes trifurcation of Manipur—a part each for Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis—is the only lasting solution. His other radical suggestion is that India intervene militarily in Myanmar and annex Kuki and Naga-dominated territory across the international border. Edited excerpts:

Hill people must stand together to end discrimination

The Union government—Prime Minister included—is silent over Manipur. However, unless a political solution protecting Manipur's hill people from developmental bias is found, there can be no durable solution. While a section of Nagas is trying to take advantage of the Meitei-Kuki conflict, the 'sensible' Nagas feel that Manipur's tribal hill community should come together so Meiteis can no longer meddle in our right to govern our own business.

Partition is one way to end the conflict

Trifurcation of Manipur is the only way forward. There may be unrest for a year or so. But it will settle the issue once and for all.

Indian foreign policy needs more teeth

There is a large Naga and Kuki population in Myanmar's Sagaing division. They are opposed to the military junta. Indian government could explore the possibility of expanding its boundaries. Myanmar will undoubtedly resist such a move; but if we claim to be the largest democracy of the world, we should support the democratic aspirations of the people in Sagaing. India's foreign policy is half-baked as far as the neighbourhood is concerned. ■

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



ODISHA

BJD's succession test

Naveen Patnaik's 'chosen successor' Sujata Rout Karthikeyan faces mixed reactions and big challenges

N.R. Mohanty

For 24 years, Naveen Patnaik dominated Odisha politics. The elections in 2024 marked a decisive turnaround when the BJP won 78 assembly seats and formed the government with allies. The BJD got 51 seats. That was not all. In the Lok Sabha elections held simultaneously, BJP bagged 20 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats, ending Patnaik's long reign.

The Biju Janata Dal's revival now faces a succession test centered on former IAS officer Sujata Rout Karthikeyan.

An Odia by birth and a former IAS officer, Sujata is the wife of V. Karthikeyan Pandian, Patnaik's trusted private secretary and the undisputed power behind the throne during his long tenure. Pandian's influence was pivotal; he controlled access to the chief minister and was seen as the architect of Patnaik's long stay in power. Yet, the BJP successfully painted Pandian as an outsider who exploited Odisha's resources for Tamil Nadu's benefit, damaging the BJD's credibility in the crucial 2024 elections.

Will Sujata succeed in reviving the BJD? This question has created ripples in political circles. Some believe she will be able to revive the BJD and restore it to its former glory, while others feel that when the baton formally passes from Patnaik, the party will split down the middle. The truth may lie somewhere in between.

Sujata and Pandian's career is intertwined with Odisha's political trajectory. Both IAS officers were assigned the Odisha cadre in 2000—the year Patnaik assumed power as head of a BJD-BJP coalition.

In 2007, as district collector of Ganjam, the seat of Patnaik's ancestral home and the constituency he represented (Hinjli), Pandian impressed the chief minister as a hard-working and competent officer who could do the chief minister's bidding without hesitation. By 2011, Pandian had become the CM's private secretary, a role he held for 12 years. During this time, Pandian was the gatekeeper for everyone, from party leaders to businessmen, overseeing promotions, allocations and policy decisions with Naveen Patnaik apparently ceding much authority to him. He came to be seen as Patnaik's alter ego.

Pandian was practically living in 'Naveen Niwas'—the private mansion of the chief minister bequeathed to him by his father, Biju Patnaik.



Naveen Patnaik welcomes Sujata Rout Karthikeyan to the Biju Janata Dal

He frequently travelled in the chief minister's official plane, inaugurating projects without Patnaik's direct involvement. The gatekeeping was complete and strict. Even senior ministers could not meet the chief minister without Pandian's permission. It was this dominance that also sowed the seeds of discontent.

When Pandian took voluntary retirement and officially joined the BJD barely six months before the assembly and Lok Sabha elections in May 2024, the plan was to be officially anointed Patnaik's successor.

But the plan went awry. The BJP focused on Pandian. The campaign found fertile ground in highlighting his alleged corruption and 'outsider' tags. WhatsApp messages and social media videos started spreading the story that Pandian had enriched his native Tamil Nadu at the expense of Odisha.

*

As the campaign for elections intensified, Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally amplified these accusations. In rally after rally, he repeated the party narrative that Pandian had siphoned off Odisha's wealth and taken it to his home state. He alleged that the missing keys to the inner chamber of Jagannath temple's Ratna Bhandar (Jewel Trove) had been sent to Tamil Nadu. The BJP made Odia *asmita* (Odia pride) the touchstone of the campaign, painting Pandian as the villain of the piece. And it worked.

Ousted from power after 24 years, the anger of the BJD cadre and leaders boiled over. Pandian was squarely blamed for the humiliating debacle. Recognising the shift, Pandian released a video declaring he was withdrawing from active politics, even as Patnaik continued to see him as his rightful heir.

But the clock was ticking. With the former chief minister's health declining, Pandian needed to seize control. Enter Sujata. The calculation was clear: the 'outsider' tag would not stick. Her family has roots in Kendrapada, a constituency previously represented by Biju Patnaik in Parliament.

*

Sujata took voluntary retirement in March 2025, barely a month before BJD's state council meeting. It was widely speculated that Patnaik would elevate her as working party president, effectively making her his political deputy. But fierce protests by senior leaders, resistant to 'proxy Tamilian rule', stalled any such announcement. Pandian chose to bide his time.

In June this year, Sujata joined the party as an 'ordinary' member. Notably, Patnaik introduced her as Sujata Rout, emphasising her Odia identity and distancing her from the Tamilian link.

In the last few months, those who benefitted from Pandian are cosying up to Sujata while others remain wary. Political observers feel that while Naveen Patnaik's succession strategy reflects a blend of continuity and image management, it also exposes the vulnerability of personalised leadership models. The jury is still out. ■

Can Sujata Rout revive the BJD? The question has created ripples in the state

N.R. MOHANTY *is a former resident editor of* Hindustan Times



UTTAR PARADESH

A death, an old case and a crisis for Yogi Adityanath

Rashme Sehgal

The death in prison on 11 October of 72-year-old journalist-activist Parvez Parwaz from Gorakhpur is likely to haunt Yogi Adityanath in the coming election season.

The activist had filed a criminal case for hate speech against Adityanath when he was an MP in 2007. Adityanath was arrested and spent 11 days in jail. On his release on bail, he cried in Parliament while narrating his 'plight'.

The case remained undecided and in 2017 after Adityanath became chief minister, one of his first acts was to withdraw all cases that were pending against him, including this one—a move that strangely went unchallenged by opposition parties.

Parwaz challenged the decision in court, but the Allahabad High Court, and later Supreme Court, dismissed his plea. The matter took a vicious turn when Parwaz and another person were convicted in 2020 of gangrape by a Gorakh-pur court and sentenced to life imprisonment. Parwaz's death can potentially electrify the poll cam-paign early next year. He resisted pressure for 10 years to withdraw the case against Yogi Adityanath and paid for his persistence.

*

Adityanath's woes seem to be piling. The row over embezzlement of public donations from the Ram temple at Ayodhya refuses to die down. Some weeks ago, Divya Mittal, a popular IAS officer, resigned, citing instances of misgovernance, and in a viral video announced her decision to enter public life. She did not detail the harassment she had faced while in service, but she is unlikely to remain silent if she contests elections. (*As we go to press, she has announced her own party and declared her intention to contest elections.*)

The bulldozer/half-encounter reality of Yogi's lofty claims of making the state crime-free are also well known. A key ally Sanjay Nishad publicly questioned how Ramesh Bind, associated with the Samajwadi Party, was gunned down earlier this year.

Bind's family alleges a staged police encounter; the police claim self-defence. UP Police proudly claims to have conducted 15,000 encounters since 2017 leading to the death of 238 'criminals' and 9,467 who were shot in the leg.

In an unusual move, an additional chief judicial magistrate Parvinder Singh, visited Deoband jail to question inmates who had sustained gunshot injuries. Singh's first-hand video interviews exposed how Supreme Court guidelines on police encounters were being flouted openly.

Retired IG of Police S.R. Darapuri, who has documented extrajudicial killings, alleges that crime rate figures put out by the state government are fabricated. Cases of Dalit atrocities, rape, murder and kidnapping of women have risen sharply, he says. The state's claim that women were safe was shattered by the gangrape of a minor girl in a public bus.

Former Lucknow University VC Prof. Roop Rekha Verma, says, "Through my NGO 'Saajhi Duniya', we have worked to bring justice for women who have been victims of rape; we also fight false cases against them. To stifle our voices, several NGOs, including mine, are being investigated by the Anti-Terrorist Squad."

*

Even after the ad blitz, facts do not support Yogi's claims that Uttar Pradesh now has a vibrant economy. While Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) has officially doubled from Rs 12.75 lakh crore in 2016-17 to an estimated Rs 24.99 lakh crore in 2026, the per capita income is only Rs 94,000, way below the national average of Rs 1.84 lakh. The growth rate is quite uneven with Noida alone accounting for 10 per cent of the state's economy while many districts in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bundelkhand contribute less than one per cent each.



Yogi Adityanth seems to be on the backfoot as UP heads for elections

The ad spends may not take Yogi past the finish line in the 2027 polls

Development economist Santosh Mehrotra has frequently critiqued the state's development model. "During the second investment summit, the Uttar Pradesh government signed MoUs worth Rs 34 lakh crore. But signing an MoU and implementation are two different things," he says.

Also, the unusually hefty investment in mega projects have failed to kickstart broader, sus-tainable growth. "Most of this expenditure has gone towards building wasteful expressways that few use. Of the 12 airports built in the past five years, six have closed down for lack of demand," he points out.

While the chief minister talks of employment generation, 90 per cent of the workforce is either self-employed or employed in casual agricultural work or engaged in low-quality jobs.

Nearly a third of the state's youth are economically and educationally inactive. According to the National Sample Survey, 33.5 per cent youth aged 15-24 were 'not in education, employment or training' compared to the national average of 29.3 per cent. This goes upto to 36.7 per cent for the 15-29 age group, against the national average of 32.9 per cent. Among young women, this is as high as 59.5 per cent.

A potentially lethal combination of controversies, misgovernance, failing law and order and sluggish economic development puts Adityanath in a precarious position ahead of the 2027 assembly elections. And the lavish government spend on advertising may not be quite enough to obscure the ground reality when Yogi Adityanath seeks a return mandate in March next year. ■



WEST BENGAL

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Featuring a Gujarat event management firm, Adani awards, Sherawali and other alien delights



Photo: Getty Images

The laser-and-drone extravaganza at Eden Gardens

Sourabh Sen *and* **Kunal Chatterjee**

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The aim, according to Adani Group advisor Sanjay Thade: "We want to showcase the grandeur of Kolkata's Durga Puja to national and international delegates so that it becomes one of the most recognisable festivals in the world." One wonders if he knew that in 2021, Durga Puja in Kolkata became the first festival from Asia to be included in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. The Adanis have also pledged to revamp Kumartuli, the famous village of potters and sculptors.

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The hand of 'outsiders' clearly oblivious to Bengali cultural mores and festival lore was visible in other ways too. What else can explain Durga sporting eight, nine, eleven or even twelve arms—instead of the sacred ten-armed (*dashabhuja*) form? Official Kolkata Municipal Corporation advertisements copy-pasted the Hindi word '*swachchata*', which in Bengali, means transparency, not cleanliness as intended. Sorry KMC, that was a terrible mishit!

Communication professional Sreeraj Mitra blames "this murder of the Bengali language" on "the over-dependence on AI translations." Jawhar Sircar, former Prasar Bharti CEO and secretary, department of culture, government of India, advised the state government to refrain from teaching Bengalis how to welcome Durga, their daughter. "People who have done it seem to be unaware that Bengali and Hindi have different syntax and nuances," Sircar said.

*

And then, of course, there is the food. The number of non-vegetarian food stalls, is fewer this year. Eateries are taking care to not advertise non-veg with images of Goddess Durga in the background.

The cultural shift is in your face. Jagrata and Sherawali have made a triumphant debut, and BJP leaders are competing to take over the Pujas in their localities.

Hindi bhajans and Hanuman Chalisa are much in demand and a Hindu outfit of some description has occupied the space outside the CPI(M) office on Alimuddin Street to hold round-the-clock *Chandipath*.

When the communists discovered their 60-year-old bookstall occupied by a Hindutva outfit, they had to seek redress in court, while the police looked the other way.

Local sponsors of cultural events, often builders, are hard to find this year as they are still negotiating arrangements and commissions with the new 'rulers'. In the absence of a clear power hierarchy, leaders at various levels are flexing their muscles, they say.

Another tradition to take a hit this year is the release of new Bengali music during this season. Navratri, garba events and Hindi devotional songs have edged out Bengali, it seems. It is all very disorienting for anyone who knew what made Durga Puja an 'intangible cultural heritage' worth celebrating. ■



TAMIL NADU

Benefit sans entitlement

K.A. Shaji on the state's new gold ring scheme

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay's decision to play *thaimaman* (maternal uncle) to the state's newborns just ahead of assembly bypolls is not exactly the warm and fuzzy welfare gesture his government has advertised it to be.

The Thaimanam Thanga Mothiram scheme, launched in Madurai on 28 September, provides a 1 gm, 22 carat gold ring to babies born on or after 22 June 2026 in state government hospitals or health centres.

The scheme was a pre-election promise of Vijay's TVK (Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam) party, but the rollout happened just days ahead of the 6 October bypolls to the Madurantakam and Dharapuram constituencies, inviting sharp reactions from the opposition DMK.

Since the gold ring scheme had been formally approved, budgeted for and gazetted by the cabinet on 23 June, it had the benefit of being treated legally as an ongoing, pre-approved policy rather than a pre-election inducement.

DMK MP Kanimozhi Karunanidhi has argued that women should be encouraged to be economically independent rather than count on ceremonial gifts from male relatives. "You have equal rights in property, education and income. Earn and stand tall," she said, invoking the Dravidian movement's emphasis on women's self-reliance. In Tamil Nadu, that argument has many votaries. Critics are asking: should women's welfare be framed as a gift from a benevolent male figure rather than as a right?

Kanimozhi has also questioned the Vijay government's priorities, expressing concerns about committing public money to the gold ring scheme instead of shoring up availability of essential medicines and doctors in public hospitals.

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The government order of 23 June allocated Rs 755.83 crore a year for the scheme for an estimated 4.42 lakh newborn beneficiaries. The rings are made of 22 carat gold and carry unique serial numbers.

Eligibility is linked to delivery in government health institutions, registration under the Pregnancy and Infant Cohort Monitoring and Evaluation (PICME) system and possession of a Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) identification number, alongside applicable residence requirements.

The financial commitment has prompted questions about competing priorities. Kanimozhi's criticism centres on the need to strengthen public healthcare, while party colleague and Lok Sabha member Thamizachi Thangapandian draws attention to shortages in several government hospitals of life-saving medicines to treat respiratory distress in premature babies.

C. Lakshmanan, former faculty at the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), says "the challenge is to ensure that a new initiative complements the essential services on which vulnerable families depend rather than overshadowing those services."

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The *thaimaman* occupies a special place in Tamil kinship traditions. The mother's brother often maintains a close relationship with his sister and her children after marriage, presenting gifts during childbirth and other family ceremonies.

Gold, clothes and money can express affection, reinforce ties with the maternal family and provide material support. For poor households, such gifts can have practical value. Gold may be retained as an asset or pledged during a financial emergency. A ring provided by the state can also relieve a family of the pressure to meet customary expectations.

At the launch in Madurai, beneficiary Mariselvi said she was not on speaking terms with her brother and saw Vijay as one. Despite the progressives' lament, many poor people will appreciate the material assistance as well as the scheme's emotional packaging.

Writing in *The News Minute*, development economist Dipa Sinha argues that maternity support should recognise women's reproductive labour and economic vulnerability rather than present the government as a benevolent male relative.

Pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding involve physical labour, health risks and lost income. Women employed in informal work are mostly denied paid maternity leave and financial protection during this period. A gold ring may be welcome, but it does not compensate a woman for lost wages or guarantee adequate nutrition, postnatal care and childcare. She argues for stronger maternity entitlements linked to women's economic circumstances and greater recognition of unpaid care work.

The distinction is important: a gift is not a legal entitlement. While a gift may receive gratitude, a legal right strengthens accountability. This does not mean the ring has no value or that families who welcome it are mistaken. It means that the material benefit and the social message conveyed by the scheme must be assessed separately. ■

A gold ring is welcome but 'a gift is not a right' and the scheme spells patriarchy





MANIPUR

When and how will the conflict end? Two voices, two solutions

The continued silence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah on Manipur has baffled everyone. Both Meitei and Kukis feel let down by New Delhi. Three years into the conflict, there is still no consensus on the way forward.

According to a Manipur home department report tabled in the state assembly, 28,899 people are in relief camps and temporary shelters as internally displaced persons (IDPs), as of September 2026. Attacks on civilians by armed groups intensified in August–September. In targeted killings over a 30-day period in August–September, 23 civilians were killed in the hill districts, forcing villagers to take refuge in nearby paddy fields and forests.

For Meiteis, the situation has improved in Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley and the trouble is now confined to the hills where Nagas and Kukis reside. Kukis believe Meiteis and Nagas have colluded against them. Meanwhile, Nagas—who share their home and faith with Kukis—are hedging their bets.

"Violence has resurfaced in the hills despite AFSPA being in force. Why is the Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement with Kuki armed groups not being implemented in the hills?" asked Mayengbam Dhananjay, spokesperson for the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity, an umbrella coalition of major Meitei civil society organisations.

Some leaders with skin in the game see a way out of the current mess. **Sourabh Sen** *spoke to* **Pramot Singh** *of Meitei Leepun and to* **Paolienlal Haokip**, *spokesperson for Kuki Inpi Manipur, to get their perspective on the conflict. Excerpts from the conversations:*



An 'India for Manipur' protest in New Delhi Photo: Getty Images

Drug war and Myanmar are the main issues

Pramot Singh, a Meitei hardliner associated with Meitei Leepun, which he describes as a cultural organisation to preserve Meitei values and heritage and which Kukis describe as a Meitei militant organisation with links to the RSS, explains why Modi is showing no interest in settling issues in the state. Both China and the US, he says, are fighting for the resources in Myanmar and Modi's intervention may complicate the issue. Edited excerpts:

It is a drug war, not an ethnic clash

The conflict in Manipur is a drug war engineered by traffickers manifesting as ethnic conflict. All the drug lords are in powerful political positions. During my UNDP-supported research work in 2006, I found common syndicates, protected by politicians, non-state actors and security forces, running human, drugs and arms trafficking across the India-Myanmar border.

Government failure to persuade Kukis through SoO

There have been two resolutions in Manipur assembly to revoke the SoO with Kukis. Nobody is listening. I recently met a VHP leader who told me that Kukis would support rebuilding mandirs destroyed in violence. If so, why can't the central government tell Kuki armed groups not to disturb Meiteis? The local BJP says it was the Congress which introduced SoO. So why can't the present BJP government repeal it? Nobody—not even the state government—knows who took the decision behind closed doors to extend SoO which is a tripartite arrangement. This is frustrating.

PM's intervention can turn a local conflict into a geopolitical issue

Then there is the question of geopolitics. The US is interested in the area because it wants to stop China from controlling Myanmar's energy and critical mineral assets. This is one of several reasons why Modi is quiet on Manipur. His engagement can add geopolitical complications to a conflict which has so far remained local in a sensitive border area.

Modi's baffling silence on the state may have a geopolitical rationale

Partition not the solution

In a Kuki homeland project, Kuki customary laws would be paramount. In Nagalim, all social systems would be under Naga customary laws. Manipur has a tradition of communities co-existing peacefully and respecting one another. That was how our fathers and forefathers protected and preserved this land. This is the only way Manipur can survive. The concept of Kuki homeland cannot work because Meiteis, Nagas and others will not agree. Nagalim cannot work because Meitei, Kukis and others will not agree.

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Trifurcate the state, expand the border

Paolienlal Haokip, BJP legislator from Saikot constituency of Churachandpur district and spokesperson for Kuki Inpi Manipur, the Kuki apex body, believes trifurcation of Manipur—a part each for Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis—is the only lasting solution. His other radical suggestion is that India intervene militarily in Myanmar and annex Kuki and Naga-dominated territory across the international border. Edited excerpts:

Hill people must stand together to end discrimination

The Union government—Prime Minister included—is silent over Manipur. However, unless a political solution protecting Manipur's hill people from developmental bias is found, there can be no durable solution. While a section of Nagas is trying to take advantage of the Meitei-Kuki conflict, the 'sensible' Nagas feel that Manipur's tribal hill community should come together so Meiteis can no longer meddle in our right to govern our own business.

Partition is one way to end the conflict

Trifurcation of Manipur is the only way forward. There may be unrest for a year or so. But it will settle the issue once and for all.

Indian foreign policy needs more teeth

There is a large Naga and Kuki population in Myanmar's Sagaing division. They are opposed to the military junta. Indian government could explore the possibility of expanding its boundaries. Myanmar will undoubtedly resist such a move; but if we claim to be the largest democracy of the world, we should support the democratic aspirations of the people in Sagaing. India's foreign policy is half-baked as far as the neighbourhood is concerned. ■

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ODISHA

BJD's succession test

Naveen Patnaik's 'chosen successor' Sujata Rout Karthikeyan faces mixed reactions and big challenges

N.R. Mohanty

For 24 years, Naveen Patnaik dominated Odisha politics. The elections in 2024 marked a decisive turnaround when the BJP won 78 assembly seats and formed the government with allies. The BJD got 51 seats. That was not all. In the Lok Sabha elections held simultaneously, BJP bagged 20 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats, ending Patnaik's long reign.

The Biju Janata Dal's revival now faces a succession test centered on former IAS officer Sujata Rout Karthikeyan.

An Odia by birth and a former IAS officer, Sujata is the wife of V. Karthikeyan Pandian, Patnaik's trusted private secretary and the undisputed power behind the throne during his long tenure. Pandian's influence was pivotal; he controlled access to the chief minister and was seen as the architect of Patnaik's long stay in power. Yet, the BJP successfully painted Pandian as an outsider who exploited Odisha's resources for Tamil Nadu's benefit, damaging the BJD's credibility in the crucial 2024 elections.

Will Sujata succeed in reviving the BJD? This question has created ripples in political circles. Some believe she will be able to revive the BJD and restore it to its former glory, while others feel that when the baton formally passes from Patnaik, the party will split down the middle. The truth may lie somewhere in between.

Sujata and Pandian's career is intertwined with Odisha's political trajectory. Both IAS officers were assigned the Odisha cadre in 2000—the year Patnaik assumed power as head of a BJD-BJP coalition.

In 2007, as district collector of Ganjam, the seat of Patnaik's ancestral home and the constituency he represented (Hinjli), Pandian impressed the chief minister as a hard-working and competent officer who could do the chief minister's bidding without hesitation. By 2011, Pandian had become the CM's private secretary, a role he held for 12 years. During this time, Pandian was the gatekeeper for everyone, from party leaders to businessmen, overseeing promotions, allocations and policy decisions with Naveen Patnaik apparently ceding much authority to him. He came to be seen as Patnaik's alter ego.

Pandian was practically living in 'Naveen Niwas'—the private mansion of the chief minister bequeathed to him by his father, Biju Patnaik.



Naveen Patnaik welcomes Sujata Rout Karthikeyan to the Biju Janata Dal

He frequently travelled in the chief minister's official plane, inaugurating projects without Patnaik's direct involvement. The gatekeeping was complete and strict. Even senior ministers could not meet the chief minister without Pandian's permission. It was this dominance that also sowed the seeds of discontent.

When Pandian took voluntary retirement and officially joined the BJD barely six months before the assembly and Lok Sabha elections in May 2024, the plan was to be officially anointed Patnaik's successor.

But the plan went awry. The BJP focused on Pandian. The campaign found fertile ground in highlighting his alleged corruption and 'outsider' tags. WhatsApp messages and social media videos started spreading the story that Pandian had enriched his native Tamil Nadu at the expense of Odisha.

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As the campaign for elections intensified, Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally amplified these accusations. In rally after rally, he repeated the party narrative that Pandian had siphoned off Odisha's wealth and taken it to his home state. He alleged that the missing keys to the inner chamber of Jagannath temple's Ratna Bhandar (Jewel Trove) had been sent to Tamil Nadu. The BJP made Odia *asmita* (Odia pride) the touchstone of the campaign, painting Pandian as the villain of the piece. And it worked.

Ousted from power after 24 years, the anger of the BJD cadre and leaders boiled over. Pandian was squarely blamed for the humiliating debacle. Recognising the shift, Pandian released a video declaring he was withdrawing from active politics, even as Patnaik continued to see him as his rightful heir.

But the clock was ticking. With the former chief minister's health declining, Pandian needed to seize control. Enter Sujata. The calculation was clear: the 'outsider' tag would not stick. Her family has roots in Kendrapada, a constituency previously represented by Biju Patnaik in Parliament.

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Sujata took voluntary retirement in March 2025, barely a month before BJD's state council meeting. It was widely speculated that Patnaik would elevate her as working party president, effectively making her his political deputy. But fierce protests by senior leaders, resistant to 'proxy Tamilian rule', stalled any such announcement. Pandian chose to bide his time.

In June this year, Sujata joined the party as an 'ordinary' member. Notably, Patnaik introduced her as Sujata Rout, emphasising her Odia identity and distancing her from the Tamilian link.

In the last few months, those who benefitted from Pandian are cosying up to Sujata while others remain wary. Political observers feel that while Naveen Patnaik's succession strategy reflects a blend of continuity and image management, it also exposes the vulnerability of personalised leadership models. The jury is still out. ■

Can Sujata Rout revive the BJD? The question has created ripples in the state

N.R. MOHANTY *is a former resident editor of* Hindustan Times



UTTAR PARADESH

A death, an old case and a crisis for Yogi Adityanath

Rashme Sehgal

The death in prison on 11 October of 72-year-old journalist-activist Parvez Parwaz from Gorakhpur is likely to haunt Yogi Adityanath in the coming election season.

The activist had filed a criminal case for hate speech against Adityanath when he was an MP in 2007. Adityanath was arrested and spent 11 days in jail. On his release on bail, he cried in Parliament while narrating his 'plight'.

The case remained undecided and in 2017 after Adityanath became chief minister, one of his first acts was to withdraw all cases that were pending against him, including this one—a move that strangely went unchallenged by opposition parties.

Parwaz challenged the decision in court, but the Allahabad High Court, and later Supreme Court, dismissed his plea. The matter took a vicious turn when Parwaz and another person were convicted in 2020 of gangrape by a Gorakh-pur court and sentenced to life imprisonment. Parwaz's death can potentially electrify the poll cam-paign early next year. He resisted pressure for 10 years to withdraw the case against Yogi Adityanath and paid for his persistence.

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Adityanath's woes seem to be piling. The row over embezzlement of public donations from the Ram temple at Ayodhya refuses to die down. Some weeks ago, Divya Mittal, a popular IAS officer, resigned, citing instances of misgovernance, and in a viral video announced her decision to enter public life. She did not detail the harassment she had faced while in service, but she is unlikely to remain silent if she contests elections. (*As we go to press, she has announced her own party and declared her intention to contest elections.*)

The bulldozer/half-encounter reality of Yogi's lofty claims of making the state crime-free are also well known. A key ally Sanjay Nishad publicly questioned how Ramesh Bind, associated with the Samajwadi Party, was gunned down earlier this year.

Bind's family alleges a staged police encounter; the police claim self-defence. UP Police proudly claims to have conducted 15,000 encounters since 2017 leading to the death of 238 'criminals' and 9,467 who were shot in the leg.

In an unusual move, an additional chief judicial magistrate Parvinder Singh, visited Deoband jail to question inmates who had sustained gunshot injuries. Singh's first-hand video interviews exposed how Supreme Court guidelines on police encounters were being flouted openly.

Retired IG of Police S.R. Darapuri, who has documented extrajudicial killings, alleges that crime rate figures put out by the state government are fabricated. Cases of Dalit atrocities, rape, murder and kidnapping of women have risen sharply, he says. The state's claim that women were safe was shattered by the gangrape of a minor girl in a public bus.

Former Lucknow University VC Prof. Roop Rekha Verma, says, "Through my NGO 'Saajhi Duniya', we have worked to bring justice for women who have been victims of rape; we also fight false cases against them. To stifle our voices, several NGOs, including mine, are being investigated by the Anti-Terrorist Squad."

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Even after the ad blitz, facts do not support Yogi's claims that Uttar Pradesh now has a vibrant economy. While Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) has officially doubled from Rs 12.75 lakh crore in 2016-17 to an estimated Rs 24.99 lakh crore in 2026, the per capita income is only Rs 94,000, way below the national average of Rs 1.84 lakh. The growth rate is quite uneven with Noida alone accounting for 10 per cent of the state's economy while many districts in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bundelkhand contribute less than one per cent each.



Yogi Adityanth seems to be on the backfoot as UP heads for elections

The ad spends may not take Yogi past the finish line in the 2027 polls

Development economist Santosh Mehrotra has frequently critiqued the state's development model. "During the second investment summit, the Uttar Pradesh government signed MoUs worth Rs 34 lakh crore. But signing an MoU and implementation are two different things," he says.

Also, the unusually hefty investment in mega projects have failed to kickstart broader, sus-tainable growth. "Most of this expenditure has gone towards building wasteful expressways that few use. Of the 12 airports built in the past five years, six have closed down for lack of demand," he points out.

While the chief minister talks of employment generation, 90 per cent of the workforce is either self-employed or employed in casual agricultural work or engaged in low-quality jobs.

Nearly a third of the state's youth are economically and educationally inactive. According to the National Sample Survey, 33.5 per cent youth aged 15-24 were 'not in education, employment or training' compared to the national average of 29.3 per cent. This goes upto to 36.7 per cent for the 15-29 age group, against the national average of 32.9 per cent. Among young women, this is as high as 59.5 per cent.

A potentially lethal combination of controversies, misgovernance, failing law and order and sluggish economic development puts Adityanath in a precarious position ahead of the 2027 assembly elections. And the lavish government spend on advertising may not be quite enough to obscure the ground reality when Yogi Adityanath seeks a return mandate in March next year. ■

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Photo: Getty Images

US vice-president J.D. Vance minced no words in labelling hires from outside America

The end of an affair

Never in its history has India looked so pathetic on the world stage, never have its foreign relations been the godawful mess they are today. The credit for this goes to Messrs Modi and Jaishankar.

The spectacular unravelling of ties with the US is perhaps the best example of the ham-handedness that has characterised the Modi government's management of its external affairs. Ties carefully crafted over 35 years lie in tatters, and it has more to do with Modi's inability to stand up to a 'dear friend'-turned bully than Trump's unpredictability. Other world leaders, of nations small and big, have dealt with the bully much better.

The latest instance of the Trump administration's growing contempt for India is the clampdown on Indian and US technology firms sponsoring foreign workers for what is known as a green card or permanent residence in the US.

Trump has stopped Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services, Cognizant, Wipro and HCL, along with Microsoft, Capgemini and Adobe from applying for green cards for employees residing and working in the US on H-1B visas. The US labour secretary Keith Sonderling announced, "I am hereby suspending from the Permanent Labour Certification Program (PERM) some of the largest IT outsourcing firms in the world."

The move is seen as a big blow to Indian techies employed in the US as well as these companies whose hiring costs will shoot up. The Indian ministry of external affairs has again mewed a timid 'does not advance shared ambitions' response.

The MEA is grasping at straws because in his second term as president, which began in January 2025, Trump has not seen India as a preferred partner, and it got much worse after the four-day war between India and Pakistan in May 2025. Pakistan and China, India's two most difficult neighbours, are his priority.

His blunt message to skilled Indians is: get the hell out of the US. If Modi, Jaishankar and commerce minister Piyush Goyal have still not understood this, they are living in a fool's paradise.

Trump's vice-president J.D. Vance rubbed it in: "If you do the math, for every [American] worker Microsoft laid off, it replaced that worker with one and a half foreign indentured servants." He claimed the company had retrenched 6,000 American workers in 2025 to employ 6,300 others on H-1B visas and nearly 3,000 green card holders. India described Vance's comment as 'deeply offensive'. The MEA spokesperson said Vance was using 'terminology that carries painful historical and colonial legacy connotations'. More mewing.

Microsoft is reportedly the largest filer for PERMs, and these companies are expected to demonstrate that employing an overseas person will not adversely impact the wages or job opportunities of Americans. Ironically, the Microsoft CEO, Satya Nadella, is of Indian origin, and was even conferred the US National Medal of Technology and Innovation by Trump earlier this month.

In a desperate attempt to affect unconcern, Goyal remarked the US clampdown was "absolutely good for the Indian economy". He argued the restrictions would reverse the brain drain, encourage skilled professionals to stay back and dramatically accelerate the growth of domestic start-ups and Global Capability Centres in India.

Last year, Trump imposed 50 per cent tariffs on Indian exports to America, before a US Supreme Court ruling reduced it to 10 per cent in February 2026. However, the Damoclean threat of 100 per cent duties, approved by US Congress on countries buying Russian oil, is still dangling over India. Chances are Trump has not invoked the provision yet in order to shore up the flow of diesel from Russia to the world to ease prices.

India can only hope that next month's mid-term elections set him back, and Trump's hostility towards India is curbed by legislative safeguards that may come in the wake. But there is no real relief in sight until and unless a friendly Democrat enters the White House. ■

Trump's blunt message to skilled Indians is: get the hell out of the US

Britain itching to return to the EU

Ashis Ray

In a referendum held in 2016, Britain voted by a small margin to exit the European Union. As expected, the move lowered trade growth and trade turnover. As external demand slipped, so did production. Unemployment rose. Britain's GDP took a big hit.

A decade later, Britons have realised Brexit was a mistake. Recent opinion polls indicate that if a plebiscite were held today, Britons would vote decisively in favour of reintegration with the EU.

Two years ago, Britain's Labour party swept to power with a landslide. Their prime minister, Keir Starmer, sensed his people's desire to reintegrate, but Labour's election manifesto had ruled this out. It was a pledge Starmer couldn't dishonour, but he smoothened trade with the EU for some essential goods.

His successor, Andy Burnham, has been more forthright about the need for Britain to close ranks with the EU. This week, in a speech in the House of Commons—Britain's Lok Sabha—he confirmed there will be a summit between the UK and the EU on 20 November to explore their future relations.

"If we are serious about promoting growth, controlling immigration, upholding our values and security, it is a conversation we must have," he said. He emphasised, "Our immediate priority is securing a successful outcome at the summit, and I believe we should then set up a serious dialogue about the different options for our relationship in the long term."

He adhered to Starmer's position that there will be no return to the EU before the next general election, which is due in 2029, but it is within Burnham's powers to call a snap election to hasten the process. He hinted as much by saying, "At every stage, the British people will be the boss, and I am clear that public opinion currently supports a pragmatic approach like the one I am suggesting."

On that fateful day in June 2016 when the UK chose to leave the EU, it was their elderly population and white working classes besides a section of British Indians that tilted the scales. The youth stayed at home to party, confident the verdict would be to remain in the union. Now, they are frustrated because they can't move freely within the EU and have to put up with long queues at European airports. So they are impatient to return to the old order, which, from all indications, the Europeans would prefer as well.

Immigration is still a sensitive topic in Britain but the benefits of reintegration are compelling

Immigration is a burning issue in Britain. The rise of the far-right Reform UK party is founded on keeping foreigners out. Asked in Parliament if it was now harder for British authorities to control their borders, Burnham answered: "We are in a weaker position when it comes to controlling immigration than we were just over 10 years ago." A reason for this is that after Brexit the UK no longer enjoyed access to the Eurodac database, which contains biometric data about asylum seekers.

Reform (then under the garb of the Brexit Party) strenuously opposed free movement of people, which a member country of the EU was obliged to respect. This is still a sensitive subject in Britain. So, it was put to Burnham in the Commons if he would confirm a 'no return to freedom of movement'. He replied, "What we have to look at are the options that are available for the long-term relationship." Reform is on the defensive on the question of Britain's reintegration with the EU. They know their old stance is unpopular, except among their hardcore supporters.

Burnham is aware that Britons want an end to their economic misery, and have more or less come round to the view that reintegrating is the solution. A study by the consultancy Frontier Economics projects that reintegration could boost Britain's GDP by 2.5–3.6 per cent over the long term. So, a realignment of UK–EU ties is looking highly probable, though we do not at this point know the shape of the new arrangement. ■



Photo: Getty Images

"I'll not be scared"



Photo: Jigyasa Mishra

Ruby Ali Khan raises a defiant fist at the 2 October protest

Jigyasa Mishra

We want a fair, transparent voting system. It is our right."

Ruby Ali Khan was at the Jantar Mantar protest against Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and the Special Intensive Revision (SIR). A resident of the city, she'd had to change two metros, a bus and two autorickshaws to get to the heavily guarded protest site.

"If we don't have our names in the voting list, how can we choose our *neta*?" she asks. "They have closed the main Metro lines and stations today [this was 2 October] so that we don't come to Jantar Mantar. But they are stupid to think it could stop us."

A migrant from Bihar, Ruby, now in her 40s, arrived in the capital city almost three decades ago. Her name is on the voter list, but seven of her relatives, along with many of her neighbours, have been deleted. "My own sister who is a widow and has three children doesn't have her name in it. She fears losing her ration card," she adds. Without access to free rations, Ruby says it will be really difficult.

Ruby arrived at the protest around 10.30 a.m., wearing a black and beige salwar-kameez with a dupatta that doubled as a hijab; her red lipstick and off-white sports shoes soon took a beating in the heat and dust of the protest.

'*Ek kachori, do samosa; BJP ka nahi bharosa*,' she shouts out an anti-government slogan, her voice joining in the crowd of hundreds gathered here. There's no placard in her hand, but her strong voice and visible rage are enough.

On Ashoka Road leading up to Jantar Mantar, several private buses were lined up, and the police forced protestors into the buses.

Bindiya (name changed) was among those detained at the protest site. The 24-year-old is a student at a south Delhi women's college. She told *PARI*, "they [the police] took us at 1 p.m. in a private bus. Through-out the six hours [we were detained], around 40 of us students were not given anything to eat or drink."

By the end of the day, over 500 people had been arrested by the Delhi police who protesters say misbehaved with female students and women journalists. "They were beating us with lathis. Why? It was a peaceful protest. We were asking for our rights."

"If we don't have our names on the voting list how can we choose our neta?"

Worried for the girls, Ruby later travelled to the far-off Dwarka police station where some protesters were taken. "I went there and stayed until they were released around 7 p.m. They are not my relatives but my 'Hindu *betiyan*', fellow female protesters detained by male police personnel. So, I saw them off before heading home."

Ruby tells this reporter that being a woman and a Muslim is tough in today's India. She is aware that there is a cost she and her family might have to pay.

"I know that my home might be bulldozed, or my husband and sons could be beaten or abused. But I will not be scared," she says defiantly, tossing her dupatta over her head.

As *PARI* finishes speaking to her, she calls her husband who is a tailor, to tell him she is safe and will reach home late.

"I am the daughter of this country, and this government better not challenge and provoke housewives like me. I have come here as a woman first. I have come for our girls, who deserve a much better India." ■

Courtesy: People's Archive of Rural India

GOVERNMENT OF TELANGANA
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PATH OF PROGRESS... WELFARE OF ALL... PEOPLE'S GOVERNANCE

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October Spring

2–12 October 2026 The many hues of another famous protest, when the Opposition and civil society, people young and old, able-bodied and infirm, Indians committed to their democracy came together to thrust a balled fist in the face of a repressive State





















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NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY

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

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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

TRIBUTE

WAYANAD'S SEEDMAN IS NO MORE

The journey of a man who gave life to seeds

▸P2



NATION

RAHUL GANDHI HAS NOT CHANGED, INDIA HAS

Does the chorus one hears on the streets indicate a new tipping point in India's politics?

▸P3



NATION

STATES 360°

West Bengal, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Manipur, Uttar Pradesh

▸P4&5





The State has its enemies, the enemies have each other

Swarna Bhatnagar

I sit by my window at that hour when darkness yields to the certainty of the sun. My knees and back hurt as I answer what I hope is my last distress call of the day.

"My plan for Saturday was to stay at home and read a book," a volunteer tells me on her way home after making sure our own have reached theirs.

The youth of the country is at war, and the war has come inside our houses. Our parents have stopped asking where we go and begun asking where it hurts. Relatives, who renounced their minds to a seventy-six-year-old demagogue drunk on the incense of his own worship, call us dishonourable for demanding answers.

We fight the police and the paramilitary forces who take their annoyance out on our bodies, then a media with a lung full of poison, stamping us Dimagi Naxals, anti-nationals, Pakistan-funded and whatever else its air-conditioned hate circus can dream up.

We fight lawyers' fees, FIRs, bail dates, savings meant for a house, professional circles where keeping your head down is safer than voicing your opinion. We fight to build lives we have hardly begun. I have an inbox full of rape and death threats from Sanghi goons who want to make examples of those who speak over the ear-splitting jingoism of *andhbhakti*. They call in the wee hours to see if my voice shakes. It does. We fight them too.

When I joined Meghnad and Rajiv at the Protest Support Initiative, we knew the months ahead would be difficult. "I was not prepared to have another person's safety rest in my hands", I told a volunteer providing medical aid in the detention camp. "I think we learnt it the hard way because no one else was coming to take over and we couldn't have left anyone behind," she replied.

Writing to Angela Davis as she awaited trial in prison, James Baldwin pronounced the stakes of solidarity: "For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night."

I think of the NEET protests in July, when gig workers made their eighth trip of the day, ferrying food sent by our strangers-in-arms hundreds of kilometres away. These are the 'foreign agents' feeding a bunch of kids fighting the fascists. A boy, barely twenty, stood with a packet of aloo bhujiya insisting passers-by take a handful. He didn't have much money; everyone had everything but there was no bhujiya. So he got that.

I think of Anoopa, offering a care package and funds from Bangalore, and Rayan in Hong Kong, helping spread the word, raise donations and counter false narratives from behind a screen. The geography of this movement has always exceeded the city. It includes those in the streets and those who make it possible for them to remain there.

The surveillance cameras will not show you this. They would rather you believe we are a good-for-nothing lot, tethered to our devices, gathered only to cause trouble. Their Meta glasses and high-tech gear, which by the way go gloriously blind when women are being raped, can record bodies packed one after the other in a fight to exercise a democratic right. But their viewfinders are too small to capture the compassion and ingenuity that keeps this fight alive.

And after all this we fight the great national gaslight that insists we are imagining things. That *Sab Changa Si*.

A protester was accused of 'stretching the truth' about her detention at her brother's lunch table. Whose truth was she stretching? Hers, or theirs, who bend their knee to a faint-hearted emperor of nothing?

What does it do to a person to live through something and then argue over whether it happened at all? To watch the evidence circulate and yet be told by the messiahs of mass delusion who watch *Republic TV* that you manufactured and politicised what happened?

You can repeat your story, show the evidence and point to your injuries only so many times. When a lie demands more labour than the truth ever should, you become a full-time prosecutor in the case of your own life.

The youth of this country do not owe their silence or their unquestioning loyalty to anyone

So, when Rahul Gandhi walked the Barakhamba Road with the 'Chalo Dilli' march, it felt like a window had opened in a room full of smoke. For the past four months, I and so many of my kind have fought for our lived experience to register and instead watched it being picked apart by people who were nowhere near what happened. We have forgotten what a full night of sleep feels like. Fear and fury have eaten into us, and the fatigue feels like a reason to give up and go home. For one epochal moment, he pulled us out of that disorienting spiral.

If I am admiring the Leader of the Opposition for doing his job, it tells you everything about the hour we live in. I am reminded of Bertolt Brecht in *The Threepenny Opera*: 'First comes the grub, then comes the morality.'

I do not have the luxury of doing an autopsy on Rahul Gandhi's conscience before acknowledging that his actions have helped us. It's perverse to demand that people who are paying for their dissent with their livelihoods, safety and peace of mind must first establish the moral purity of a politician who has chosen to listen to them.

Trolls calling me a paid 'Khangressi' can learn basic spelling. To the 'apoliticals' and 'neutrals' insisting he is doing it for the votes and the love of the chair, I ask: what exactly is the scandal here? That a politician discovered that speaking of the suffering of people might be politically useful?

And if I am saying this publicly, it is because I want the LoP to hear the rest of it, too. We will remember that he showed up and treated our demands as worthy of a response. But solidarity must continue after the cameras move on and the moment loses its political usefulness. We will keep asking him to do more, holding him accountable when he fails us. The stakes are too high for gratitude to become a gag order. He should expect nothing less from those whose right to question power he is defending.

The youth of this country do not owe their silence or their unquestioning loyalty to anyone. We only owe ourselves the freedom to demand a better future without choosing between our safety and conscience.

As I put these final words down, the first light is breaking across the sky. I step onto my balcony to the sound of Shreya Ghoshal's voice from a Bluetooth speaker playing in the flat next door, '*Woh Subah Hami Se Aayegi*'.

For once, I want the country to believe this. ■

SWARNA BHATNAGAR *is a writer who loves to cook up a perfect storm*

The 'femininomenon' on Delhi's streets

Sohini Sengupta

The October protests in Delhi began as a demand for electoral accountability. But it has since become inseparable from the not-so-sudden but rather unruly assertion of women's right to occupy public spaces and, more importantly, to do so on their own terms.

The protests against Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and a broken election system segued and branched off into a parallel mobilisation against sexual violence and for women's safety in the capital. The resulting movement didn't separate the right to vote from the right to walk home, protest, laugh, dress however or simply be angry.

This 'femininomenon' (borrowing from Chappell Roan's 2022 hit) became a cultural event in its own right. Delhi's streets brought together women, queer and non-binary people, students, journalists and first-time voters who were tired of being overlooked.

The protests began with demands for Gyanesh Kumar's resignation over irregularities in the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) exercise that has seen some 13 crore voters struck off the electoral rolls. But when protesters gathered in Delhi on 3 October, allegations surfaced of sexual assault on three women journalists. The crackdown peaked over the weekend of 10–11 October, when Delhi Police detained thousands and heavily barricaded Jantar Mantar, citing orders under Section 163 of the new-fangled penal code BNSS.

This round of protests was more overtly gendered than Jantar Mantar 1.0, which led to the resignation of then education minister Dharmendra Pradhan. A journalist accused Delhi Police ACP Vivek Bhagat of assaulting her while trying to detain her during the protests. Bizarrely, what followed the day after she made this charge was the release of a promotion order for Bhagat. Small mercy that it was later withheld pending enquiry.

Soon, other women at the protests started flagging how unevenly public spaces were being policed. Women and feminine-presenting people—from AISA president Neha Bora to journalists being groped by police on camera to women being chased, threatened, abused by goons on the streets—were confronting the very dangers they are taught to avoid from childhood. Judging from the police reaction, their dissent itself seemed to warrant punishment.

Running parallel to the anti-CEC/SIR mobilisation, students from Delhi University's women's colleges protested the gang rape of a 17-year-old at Aastha Kunj Park on her birthday. Though Chief Minister Rekha Gupta acknowledged lapses, young women knew a 'Pink Force' on paper could do only so much. So, they took to chanting slogans like '*Ek kachori, do samosa/ in mardon ka kya bharosa*' to speak up and be heard.

One protester, sporting baby bangs, a septum piercing and winged eyeliner, held up a placard reading, 'The baddest bitches are demanding change.' Today's young women are neither victims nor likely to brook male condescension. They aren't 'good girls in need of protection'. They have been raised on promises of equality but inherited institutions that restrict their access to public life and employment. They do not fear being loud or rebellious. What harm, they ask, could either do to the trajectory of their life when they have so little to begin with?

Some might argue their generalising slogans unfairly target all men when stripped of context, but the women might counter they are, in fact, being kind… to compress years of street harassment, sexual assault, victim blaming, moral policing and institutional indifference into fun rhymes to chant atop yellow barricades.

These are the same men who circulate AI-generated misogynistic bilge, demeaning images of women, powerful or otherwise, and then look flabbergasted when women take offence. In a video from the protests, a man with a saffron cloth around his neck claimed that women chanting such slogans are cheap, that they 'sell themselves for 300 rupees'.

In late July, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said women using expletives at protests was a 'culture shock' and then proceeded to 'forgive them.' At a Chhatron Ki Goonj forum in Pune, opposition leader Rahul Gandhi challenged the condescension and spoke of the Manusmriti as the fountainhead of these regressive views on women.

But women on the streets—with their clothes torn in police assaults, their bodies battered by lathi charges, their failing mental and physical health, their missed assignments, lectures and deadlines—know how slow-learning the State is. The Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, for instance, frames subsidised LPG connections as a means to secure women's *samman* (dignity).

Young women are looking past Modi's unsolicited forgiveness and Gandhi's call to 'smash the patriarchy'. They refuse to be poster girls for any political party. They have watched feminist language become campaign fodder, even as the State deploys AI-assisted cameras to surveil its own citizens. What angers them most, though, is the largely absent response to reports of harassment and sexual violence. So, these 'baddies' in their Y2K fits and chunky bangles take to the streets to 'clock' the patriarchy across party lines.

On 10 October, a group of allegedly right-wing men heckled and chased away protesting women in Connaught Place—and were allowed to go scot-free. Thankfully, the men in their 30s who raped a child in Aastha Kunj did get arrested. But women, young and old, are demanding action before verbal harassment can turn into sexual assault.

Under Sec. 43(5) of the BNSS, women cannot be arrested between sunset and sunrise, barring 'exceptional circumstances'. Where practicable, a woman police officer must make the arrest. Yet, in another viral reel, a young woman, hoarse from protesting, sat on her bed at 11 p.m. as her family worried about a police vehicle waiting outside to arrest her.

Still, how broken must a system be for women to *prefer* police buses? Some took rides home in detention buses that, they said, felt safer than Delhi at night.

Meanwhile, a group of women walking towards Jantar Mantar were reportedly profiled by Delhi Police, but only hijab-wearers were detained and asked to surrender their phones. Trans and non-binary people, including Arunachal's 'protest diva' Lobsang Riba added colour, range and a whole dimension to the protests.

Some of the most unsettling images from the protests feature women police officers dragging women protesters across the road. Their presence alone does nothing to challenge, leave alone dismantle, the patriarchy; the sindoor-flaunting women police officers are embedded in a male-dominated ecosystem and their fig-leaf presence only enables it.

So it is that in a video published by 'not.a.journalist' journalist Samdish Bhatia, a visibly shaken woman, her kurti torn by police restraint, screams in exasperation: "This is why we resist." ■



Photo: **Getty Images**

They aren't 'victims' nor likely to brook male condescension. They aren't 'good girls in need of protection'

SOHINI SENGUPTA *is a writer, dog-addict and relentless questioner of the status quo*

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
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Let Jantar Mantar speak!

A.J. Philip



Photo: Getty Images

The move to denotify Jantar Mantar is clearly meant to gag dissent or to take it someplace where it can't be heard

More than six decades ago, when I was a schoolboy at Pathanamthitta in Kerala, an elderly man had made protest a part of his daily routine. Every working day, he would set up a small, foldable tent near the gate of the taluk office and sit there, pursuing a cause he believed was worth fighting for. He was a naturopath, and his demand was that the government should ban all non-vegetarian food.

He continued his agitation for hundreds of days. Eventually he died, and his protest came to an end. I saw him almost every day while going to school. Even as a boy, I could not understand the logic of his demand. It seemed unreasonable, if not downright impractical. Yet nobody questioned his right to peaceful protest.

That childhood memory came back to me when I visited London. One of the first places I wanted to see was Hyde Park, particularly Speakers' Corner, where people have traditionally gathered to express their opinions on practically every subject under the sun.

I remembered that George Bernard Shaw had used the park's public-speaking tradition to propagate his ideas and challenge conventional thinking. Speakers' Corner has long attracted people with strong convictions, unusual theories and sometimes eccentric beliefs. One need not agree with what they say to appreciate their right to say it.

I have since visited places associated with public demonstrations in Washington DC, Berlin and Paris. In each city, protest has a visible presence in public life. From environmental campaigners and vegan enthusiasts to gay-rights activists and political opponents, people take to public spaces to articulate their demands. Some protest against governments, others against social practices, economic policies or international developments.

In every city, protest venues are a visible presence in public life. For good reason

What struck me was that these protest sites were not tucked away in obscure corners. They were often situated in prominent locations, sometimes within sight of the institutions they sought to influence. In Washington, Lafayette Square is just across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House. Such places have also become part of the tourist circuit. Visitors come to see not merely monuments and buildings but the spaces where citizens have asserted their rights.

Delhi, however, has had a more complicated relationship with protest. For years, the lawns around the Boat Club near India Gate were the preferred venue for demonstrations and public meetings. The location was ideal. It was central, easily accessible and close to the institutions of government. A large gathering there could not be ignored by either the authorities or the public.

The massive farmers' mobilisation led by Mahendra Singh Tikait in 1988 changed that equation. Tens of thousands of farmers descended on the Boat Club area, bringing the capital to a standstill and compelling the government to reconsider whether such large demonstrations should be permitted in the heart of the city.

The government eventually settled on Jantar Mantar as the designated protest site. By the early 1990s, it had emerged as the place where citizens could assemble to voice their grievances. The arrangement had an obvious administrative advantage. The police could regulate the movement of demonstrators through a limited number of entry points, making crowd management easier.

For more than three decades, this arrangement broadly served both sides. Protesters could gather within reasonable proximity of Parliament, government offices and the residences of ministers and senior officials. Those in power, meanwhile, could monitor demonstrations and keep them within manageable limits. The protesters had the psychological satisfaction of being close to the people they wished to confront, while the authorities could tell themselves that dissent was being accommodated without allowing it to spread across the capital.

Jantar Mantar gradually became more than a piece of Delhi's real estate. It acquired a place in the democratic imagination of the country. Farmers, students, workers, government employees, social activists and representatives of marginalised communities assembled there to demand justice. Some campaigns attracted only a handful of people; others drew large crowds and national attention. The site became a familiar backdrop to the continuing argument between citizens and the State.

But the authorities seem to have forgotten the purpose of providing such a space. A protest site is not meant to make demonstrations convenient for the police. It is meant to allow people to communicate their grievances to those who govern them.

The recent protest mobilisation in Delhi appears to have tested the government's tolerance of public dissent. What it ought to have understood was that the size of the crowds reflected the intensity of the grievances, or at least the strength of feeling among those who had assembled.

Instead of recognising the message conveyed by the crowds, the authorities have chosen what appears to be an administrative solution: de-notifying Jantar Mantar as a designated protest site and identifying alternative venues—Ramlila Maidan, Burari Ground and CBD Ground. Ramlila Maidan is already associated with big public gatherings and religious celebrations, while the other proposed venues are considerably farther from the centre of power.

The practical consequence is obvious. A demonstration at a distant ground may be easy to police, but it is also easier for the government to ignore. If a million people assemble far from the offices of ministers and constitutional authorities, their physical presence need not cause those in power much inconvenience. They can continue with their official business while the protesters remain out of sight.

That, however, defeats the very purpose of protest. A demonstration is not a gathering of people who want to spend time together. It is a public declaration of disagreement, intended to attract attention and compel those responsible to respond. Location is therefore not a trivial administrative matter; it is part of the message.

The irony is that the government itself had helped create the arrangement it now wishes to dismantle. Having moved demonstrations away from the Boat Club and channelled them into Jantar Mantar, the authorities are now proposing to push protesters farther away from the capital's nerve centre. An arrangement that was once considered manageable has apparently become inconvenient because people are using it to express anger on a scale the government did not anticipate.

The elderly naturopath I saw more than sixty years ago may have had an impossible demand. He may have spent hundreds of days pursuing a cause that could never have been accepted. Yet his little tent occupied a space in public life, and passers-by could see him and understand that he was dissatisfied with something.

That is the essence of democracy. The right to protest does not belong only to people whose demands are sensible, whose arguments are persuasive or whose causes enjoy popular support. It belongs equally to those whose views we dislike, whose reasoning we reject and whose campaigns we consider futile. That is why Jantar Mantar must remain a place where dissent is heard, not where it is silenced. ■



TRIBUTE

CHERUVAYAL RAMAN
2 February 1952 – 14 October 2026

Wayanad's seedman is no more

K.A. Shaji remembers Cheruvayal Raman, the man who gave life to the seeds that give everyone nourishment

When Cheruvayal Raman was offered a government job in 1969 for a monthly salary of Rs 150, he could hardly refuse. The job was his opportunity to step away from the uncertainties of agriculture. He had registered with the employment exchange in Kannur the previous year.

But Raman had forty acres of land to think about. His uncle owned 22 acres of paddy fields and another 18 acres of dry land. When Raman told him about the appointment, the old man remained silent. Then he asked a question that would shape the rest of Raman's life.

"If you leave, who will look after all this? Won't it all dry up? If you don't want it, abandon everything and go!"

Raman abandoned the job instead. "This land was not the job the government had given me," he would recall.

He never really left those paddy fields.

Cheruvayal Raman, Wayanad's beloved Nellachan, died at the Kozhikode Medical College Hospital on 14 October. He was 76. With him has passed a remarkable custodian of agricultural memory.

Raman's journey as a seed conservator began with six traditional rice varieties left behind by his uncle. He was troubled by the thought that a family that had cultivated 40 acres of land had preserved so little of its original seed heritage.

Kerala once possessed an extraordinary diversity of rice varieties. Wayanad alone was home to more than a hundred traditional varieties, adapted to different soils, water conditions and seasons. As chemical-intensive farming and high-yielding varieties spread, many of these indigenous seeds disappeared from cultivation.

Raman travelled across Wayanad, searching for surviving varieties and persuading farmers to share what they had preserved. He also collected seeds from Kozhikode and Kannur. Over the years, his collection grew to around 55 traditional varieties, carefully cultivated on his own land.

But he was more than a conservator of seeds. He was preserving a way of life, an agricultural civilisation from the ravages of development and modernity.

Raman was not preserving his seeds as a relic. He wanted them returned to the soil. He distributed them free to people willing to cultivate them, asking that they preserve the varieties and return seeds from their harvest so the collection would grow.

For him, seeds were a living inheritance to be entrusted to the next generation.

*

Raman understood the promise of the Green Revolution. His opposition to chemical-intensive farming was not born of ignorance but a profound concern about what might be lost when agricultural success is measured in yield alone.

He refused to use chemical fertilisers and pesticides, relying instead on cow dung, organic waste and natural manure. He worried about the disappearance of frogs, insects, fish and other organisms from agricultural landscapes. His memory of the Mananthavady river, once abundant with fish and giant freshwater prawns, were inseparable from his grief over Wayanad's ecological decline.

He believed the soil had life, that farming was a relationship with nature rather than an exercise in extracting the maximum possible harvest.

"If hybrid seeds give you one tonne of rice, I may get only half a tonne. That is enough," he would say. "Nature prefers half a tonne that allows everyone to live over one tonne that allows only me to survive."

He was often dismissed as a fool for choosing traditional varieties that yielded less than modern alternatives. Raman accepted the criticism with a smile. "Everyone says I am a fool. But nature likes my foolishness."

He continued to thresh paddy by beating harvested sheaves with a stick rather than relying on a tractor. His methods were rooted in respect for the seeds and the ecological relationships that sustained them.

"Seeds should not be born in universities," he once argued, pointing to the millions of seeds scattered by wind, carried by water and dispersed by birds and animals. Nature was sustaining life long before human beings started classifying and manipulating seeds in laboratories.

Raman was not dismissing science. He was reminding us that scientific knowledge must retain the humility to marvel at the complexity of the living world.

*

When she visited his home in September 2025, Raman warmed to Wayanad MP Priyanka Gandhi Vadra. She spent time listening to him and learning about his seed collection and farming practices. The relationship took root. He called her his daughter; she addressed him as *achchan* (father).

In a tribute following his death, Priyanka recalled that Raman had spoken to her about a month earlier and asked her to visit him again. "When I heard about his passing today, my heart sank," she wrote. She'd promised to return but had to cut short her Wayanad trip because of events in Delhi. She remembered him as wise, dignified and bold, a man who wanted better lives for his people and refused to accept discrimination and injustice. "He showed me his awards and honours with sadness in his eyes," Priyanka recalled. "He said they would mean nothing to him until his people could live better lives."

Rahul Gandhi, who had also met Raman during his time in Wayanad, remembered him as 'our beloved Ramettan'. In his condolence message, he wrote: "He devoted his life to preserving Wayanad's indigenous paddy seeds, keeping generations of Adivasi knowledge alive."

Kerala Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan described Raman as "the guardian and gene bank of rare traditional paddy varieties". He said Raman had safeguarded Kerala's agricultural heritage for future generations.

*

Wayanad was once a landscape of flourishing paddy fields, traditional farming communities and extraordinary biodiversity. The gradual disappearance of its fields and indigenous varieties represents a loss that no tribute, no award can repair.

Raman received awards galore in his lifetime, include a Padma Shri in 2023 and most recently the first Oommen Chandy Memorial Agricultural Award, recognising his lifelong contribution. But the greatest tribute to Cheruvayal Raman would be to ensure his work outlives him. His seed varieties must live and multiply and the way of life he embraced survive the march of modern farming. ■

"Everyone says I am a fool, but nature likes my foolishness"



Photos: Sibi Pulpally

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Rahul Gandhi has not changed, India has



Photo: Getty Images



The face of change Rahul Gandhi's self-assurance has grown with time but the caring, empathetic core of his politics was manifest much before media pundits woke up to it

Ashok Swain

Rahul Gandhi's emergence as the great new hope of Indian politics is often misrepresented as the arrival of 'a new Rahul Gandhi'. That interpretation gives too much credit to nearly two decades of relentless caricaturing of this leader with a big heart. If this is an inflection point in the discovery of his politics, of what he has been fighting for, let that belated realisation not be confused for the emergence of a new politician.

RG's appeal has grown no doubt and if you scanned social media in the wake of the rousing march of 12 October, you'll even have seen new young converts professing their love for him, of how they distrusted him earlier but now know better what he is about.

The core of Rahul Gandhi's politics—his unshakeable belief in social justice, his championing of India's youth and their legitimate demands, his clear and fearless articulation of the dangers to the Constitution from the RSS-BJP's majoritarian agenda, his crusade against electoral manipulation—acquired definition a long time ago. So, pundits who see this moment as the arrival of 'a new Rahul Gandhi' are possibly coming to terms with their own late realisation or are rationalising their past reservations.

What is changing is India's perspective on the Modi government's authoritarian politics, its (mis)governance record, its capture of India's democratic institutions, its misuse of investigative agencies to hound the Opposition, its subversion of electoral mandates by engineering defections, its desperate bid to cling to power. Rahul Gandhi has been flagging all this for longer than many media pundits care to remember; what has changed is that more people are now lending him their ears.

Let's track back and review. Before the Jantar Mantar 1.0 agitation became the firestorm that forced the government to capitulate and former education minister Dharmendra Pradhan to resign, Rahul Gandhi had been talking about exam paper leaks and the betrayal of students whose families sink all their savings and take loans they can barely repay to prepare their wards for competitive examinations. He has connected these scandals to the employment crisis in India. For hundreds of thousands of young Indians and their families, these exams are the only way out of precarity, and a broken and gamed education system cuts off their only way out.

Before the *Indian Express* investigation revealed that even Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi had flagged irregularities and brazen illegalities in the SIR, a series of exposés in independent media had presented enough evidence that the electoral rolls were being manipulated at scale. Rahul Gandhi took this up in Parliament and outside much before other Opposition politicians were any the wiser. The government and their media mouthpieces made it look like sour grapes till the recent revelations made it impossible to sustain that line of argument.

It is not 'a new Rahul Gandhi' as much as a new realisation that he represents the change we wish to see

The latest round of protests have made it clear that now, finally, every Indian knows, including the Modi government's apologists, that the Election Commission of India under current CEC (chief election commissioner) Gyanesh Kumar and his predecessor Rajiv Kumar was up to no good. Rahul Gandhi is not claiming sole ownership of a movement that has multiple spearheads but it is only fair to remember that less than a month ago, he was still being mocked for questioning the SIR before the rest of the Opposition or civil society at large was willing to back his story.

This is not to argue that Rahul Gandhi arrived as a fully formed politician. His self-assurance has grown with time, experience and sustained engagement with the people. His ability to simultaneously engage and challenge the media, to address public gatherings of any size, to break down complex governance matters in everyday terms for lay audiences, his ability to command attention in the House and on the street have all grown over time. His ease with the people, both young and old, and his ability to engage without apparent preparation stands in stark, even comic, contrast to the Supreme Leader who is being lampooned today for his inability to speak without a teleprompter. This man, who can't speak without a prompter, was leading the pack that hurled all sorts of slurs at Rahul Gandhi while media controlled by his cronies joined the name-calling with glee.

The streets and the chorus you hear are an indication that India is at a new tipping point

Not many will remember Gandhi's many prescient warnings—about the infamous lockdown of 2020, the Demonetisation of 2016 or when he first attacked the crony nexus of Modi's '*suit-boot ki sarkar*'.

On 12 February 2020, when India had recorded only three coronavirus cases, Rahul Gandhi warned of a serious threat to public health and the economy. He urged timely action even as then Union health minister Harsh Vardhan questioned his credibility and insisted that all necessary precautions had already been taken. A week before Modi imposed a surprise national lockdown, RG warned of 'an economic tsunami' affecting millions.

An early official estimate soon after showed the GDP contracting by 24 per cent year-on-year.

The farm laws provided another clear test. On 14 January 2021, Gandhi predicted the government would have to repeal them, and it did eventually happen on 19 November. The victory belonged to the farmers but unlike the Modi government, which reckoned their resistance would slowly fade, Gandhi foresaw the denouement.

The grand spectacle of the recent protests can easily obscure the quiet political work that underpins this movement.

Shaken and stirred as it now looks, the Modi regime is still in power, lying in wait for the next opportunity to pounce. It won't go down quietly.

But if the posters and slogans on the streets, the memes and gags on social media and the faces of thousands of defiant young Indians is any indication, the end is not so far away.

There isn't a shadow of doubt anymore that the face of the political alternative, an alternative grounded in pluralism and social justice, is Rahul Gandhi. He did not become a thinking, empathetic leader when people began to listen. If more people are listening today, it is because the politics many had pinned their hopes on has failed to deliver the opportunities it promised. ■

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

The jackboot of the Indian State

The erosion of our democratic institutions is now an open secret, though international monitors are still catching up on its full extent

Aakar Patel

On 5 March 2021, the Press Information Bureau put out a statement headlined: 'Rebuttal to Freedom House report on India's declining status as a free country'.

It was in response to a report by the US think tank, founded in 1941, that found India was not really democratic, only 'partly free'. This was one of many similar findings by several renowned global institutions. We are focusing on this one because it elicited a response from the government.

The government's statement opened with a defence of the electoral process: 'Many states in India under its federal structure are ruled by parties other than the one at the national level, through an election process which is free and fair and which is conducted by an independent election body. This reflects the working of a vibrant democracy, which gives space to those who hold varying views.'

This was dishonest. The Freedom House report had two parts. The first, with 40 per cent weightage, was on political rights. Here, India got a score of 34/40 (falling to 33/40 in 2023), including full marks for free and fair elections, election commission impartiality, freedom to start political parties and opportunities for the Opposition to increase its power.

India did not get full marks on whether voting was unhampered by violence and unaffected by communal tension. This is hardly arguable. In fact, the government got 3/4 on transparency, which was probably overgenerous. The government's response was therefore merely repeating what Freedom House had already said. Where India's rating was hurt was in the other 60 per cent, for civil liberties, which are also a part of freedom.

Here, it performed poorly (33/60). On issues of freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, academic freedom, freedom for NGOs to work (the report specifically named the government's attack on Amnesty International India), the rule of law, independence of the judiciary and due process by the police, India's rating was poor.

The scores merely reflected the reality, but the government appeared baffled by the results. It sought details from ministries about the parameters used by the Economist Intelligence Unit in downgrading India to a 'flawed democracy', though the report itself clearly states that the 'primary cause was an erosion of civil liberties' and the introduction of religion into citizenship laws.

The scores have dropped further in 2026, which is based on the events of 2025. Political rights are now at 31/40 and civil liberties at 31/60, the lowest ever scores for India. One suspects that the events of the past few months will further damage the score and our image. Why do I say that?

India was a democratic State because its institutions were largely intact and widely seen as neutral, reasonably efficient and usually fair. They were as good or as bad as the democratic institutions of most real democracies. That is what the Freedom House score represents.

To the question, 'Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?', Freedom House thought that 'executive elections and selection procedures are generally regarded as free and fair' and gave us a score of 4/4.

On the question, 'Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?', we again got 4/4, with the observation that 'elections were considered generally free and fair, though some violations of campaign rules were reported'.

A score of 3/4 came on the question, 'Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?'

And here is the critical paragraph that says the opposition parties' concerns 'intensified in 2025 as the government expanded its Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the voter list, as carried out in Bihar, to 12 other states and territories. Among other things, the Opposition has alleged that the ECI has unfairly deleted large numbers of voters from the rolls and prevented eligible voters from registering by introducing excessive verification requirements. Political analysts and opposition leaders have expressed concern that the SIR suppresses the opposition vote and disenfranchises Muslim and other minority voters. Government officials have rejected allegations of voter roll manipulation. The SIR remained under way at year's end.'

This was last year.

On the question, 'Do the people have the right to organise in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?', India scored 3/4.

On 'Is there a realistic opportunity for the Opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?', again, we scored 3/4.

None of these scores make any sense now. They do not reflect our reality. The voter rolls have been mangled, the Election Commission is anything but independent. Legislators are bought en masse, and it doesn't matter who loses elections because the house always wins, as they say about casinos.

The beating civil liberties have taken over the past few years showed up immediately; the erosion of primary institutions has taken slightly longer to register with observers, but it is now clear.

The jackboot is a more honest symbol of the Indian State today than the ballot box. ■

Views are personal


Photo: Getty Images

Not even the full might of a police State was enough to quell the defiant spirit that animated the October protests

Global monitors saw the erosion of civil liberties first; now they see the erosion of our institutions



WEST BENGAL

Durga Puja gets a BJP makeover

Featuring a Gujarat event management firm, Adani awards, Sherawali and other alien delights



Photo: Getty Images

The laser-and-drone extravaganza at Eden Gardens

Sourabh Sen *and* **Kunal Chatterjee**

Kolkata, indeed the whole state of West Bengal, is witnessing a culture shock. Giddy with power, the new BJP government in the state is going bananas over Durga Puja this year. From painting busy flyovers in rainbow hues, 'inspired' by international pedestrian plazas, to splurging an eye-popping Rs 180 crore on a show at Eden Gardens—the city's iconic cricket stadium—the state is witnessing the kind of Durga Puja it has never seen before.

Gobananas, a Gujarat-based event management company, was paid a reported-but-unconfirmed Rs 180 crore for the event.

Finance minister Swapan Dasgupta, facing criticism for ignoring local event managers and talent, is reported to have blamed the local firms. At a private gathering, he reportedly told his guests, "We hope companies from West Bengal will draw lessons and be prepared to play a bigger role next year." His explanation was greeted with diplomatic silence but what Dasgupta left unsaid was how the tender rules made it impossible for local companies to bid.

The government's 'request for proposal' required a hefty Rs 1 crore deposit and 3 per cent performance security that small bidders couldn't possibly cough up. Also, bidders had to have an average annual turnover of Rs 50 crore or more and a track of executing national/international events that cost Rs 20 crore or more in the last decade, specifically for government projects. That effectively shut the doors on local players.

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No one was surprised that the contract went to a Gujarati firm. But it was the spending spree and style that raised eyebrows. Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari had invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi and home minister Amit Shah to the event, which explained the 'cost no bar' approach. But Bengalis were aghast to see the gaudy, televised laser-and-drone spectacle and the bastardised '*dhunuchi naach*', a traditional high-energy devotional dance ritual performed in front of the goddess.

What else can explain Durga sporting eight, nine, eleven or twelve arms?

Not to be left behind, the Adani Group made its branding debut by deciding to reward eight puja pandals. Out of some 40,000 public '*sarbajonin*' pujas statewide, these eight were rewarded handsomely—sculptors got Rs 10 lakh each and organisers Rs 15 lakh. It also enrolled one lakh people on 'first come basis' for a preview of the select pandals. Influencers were roped in as special guests to publicise the hassle-free 'darshan' and arrangements made by the group's volunteers.

The aim, according to Adani Group advisor Sanjay Thade: "We want to showcase the grandeur of Kolkata's Durga Puja to national and international delegates so that it becomes one of the most recognisable festivals in the world." One wonders if he knew that in 2021, Durga Puja in Kolkata became the first festival from Asia to be included in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. The Adanis have also pledged to revamp Kumartuli, the famous village of potters and sculptors.

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The hand of 'outsiders' clearly oblivious to Bengali cultural mores and festival lore was visible in other ways too. What else can explain Durga sporting eight, nine, eleven or even twelve arms—instead of the sacred ten-armed (*dashabhuja*) form? Official Kolkata Municipal Corporation advertisements copy-pasted the Hindi word '*swachchata*', which in Bengali, means transparency, not cleanliness as intended. Sorry KMC, that was a terrible mishit!

Communication professional Sreeraj Mitra blames "this murder of the Bengali language" on "the over-dependence on AI translations." Jawhar Sircar, former Prasar Bharti CEO and secretary, department of culture, government of India, advised the state government to refrain from teaching Bengalis how to welcome Durga, their daughter. "People who have done it seem to be unaware that Bengali and Hindi have different syntax and nuances," Sircar said.

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And then, of course, there is the food. The number of non-vegetarian food stalls, is fewer this year. Eateries are taking care to not advertise non-veg with images of Goddess Durga in the background.

The cultural shift is in your face. Jagrata and Sherawali have made a triumphant debut, and BJP leaders are competing to take over the Pujas in their localities.

Hindi bhajans and Hanuman Chalisa are much in demand and a Hindu outfit of some description has occupied the space outside the CPI(M) office on Alimuddin Street to hold round-the-clock *Chandipath*.

When the communists discovered their 60-year-old bookstall occupied by a Hindutva outfit, they had to seek redress in court, while the police looked the other way.

Local sponsors of cultural events, often builders, are hard to find this year as they are still negotiating arrangements and commissions with the new 'rulers'. In the absence of a clear power hierarchy, leaders at various levels are flexing their muscles, they say.

Another tradition to take a hit this year is the release of new Bengali music during this season. Navratri, garba events and Hindi devotional songs have edged out Bengali, it seems. It is all very disorienting for anyone who knew what made Durga Puja an 'intangible cultural heritage' worth celebrating. ■



TAMIL NADU

Benefit sans entitlement

K.A. Shaji on the state's new gold ring scheme

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay's decision to play *thaimaman* (maternal uncle) to the state's newborns just ahead of assembly bypolls is not exactly the warm and fuzzy welfare gesture his government has advertised it to be.

The Thaimanam Thanga Mothiram scheme, launched in Madurai on 28 September, provides a 1 gm, 22 carat gold ring to babies born on or after 22 June 2026 in state government hospitals or health centres.

The scheme was a pre-election promise of Vijay's TVK (Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam) party, but the rollout happened just days ahead of the 6 October bypolls to the Madurantakam and Dharapuram constituencies, inviting sharp reactions from the opposition DMK.

Since the gold ring scheme had been formally approved, budgeted for and gazetted by the cabinet on 23 June, it had the benefit of being treated legally as an ongoing, pre-approved policy rather than a pre-election inducement.

DMK MP Kanimozhi Karunanidhi has argued that women should be encouraged to be economically independent rather than count on ceremonial gifts from male relatives. "You have equal rights in property, education and income. Earn and stand tall," she said, invoking the Dravidian movement's emphasis on women's self-reliance. In Tamil Nadu, that argument has many votaries. Critics are asking: should women's welfare be framed as a gift from a benevolent male figure rather than as a right?

Kanimozhi has also questioned the Vijay government's priorities, expressing concerns about committing public money to the gold ring scheme instead of shoring up availability of essential medicines and doctors in public hospitals.

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The government order of 23 June allocated Rs 755.83 crore a year for the scheme for an estimated 4.42 lakh newborn beneficiaries. The rings are made of 22 carat gold and carry unique serial numbers.

Eligibility is linked to delivery in government health institutions, registration under the Pregnancy and Infant Cohort Monitoring and Evaluation (PICME) system and possession of a Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) identification number, alongside applicable residence requirements.

The financial commitment has prompted questions about competing priorities. Kanimozhi's criticism centres on the need to strengthen public healthcare, while party colleague and Lok Sabha member Thamizachi Thangapandian draws attention to shortages in several government hospitals of life-saving medicines to treat respiratory distress in premature babies.

C. Lakshmanan, former faculty at the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), says "the challenge is to ensure that a new initiative complements the essential services on which vulnerable families depend rather than overshadowing those services."

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The *thaimaman* occupies a special place in Tamil kinship traditions. The mother's brother often maintains a close relationship with his sister and her children after marriage, presenting gifts during childbirth and other family ceremonies.

Gold, clothes and money can express affection, reinforce ties with the maternal family and provide material support. For poor households, such gifts can have practical value. Gold may be retained as an asset or pledged during a financial emergency. A ring provided by the state can also relieve a family of the pressure to meet customary expectations.

At the launch in Madurai, beneficiary Mariselvi said she was not on speaking terms with her brother and saw Vijay as one. Despite the progressives' lament, many poor people will appreciate the material assistance as well as the scheme's emotional packaging.

Writing in *The News Minute*, development economist Dipa Sinha argues that maternity support should recognise women's reproductive labour and economic vulnerability rather than present the government as a benevolent male relative.

Pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding involve physical labour, health risks and lost income. Women employed in informal work are mostly denied paid maternity leave and financial protection during this period. A gold ring may be welcome, but it does not compensate a woman for lost wages or guarantee adequate nutrition, postnatal care and childcare. She argues for stronger maternity entitlements linked to women's economic circumstances and greater recognition of unpaid care work.

The distinction is important: a gift is not a legal entitlement. While a gift may receive gratitude, a legal right strengthens accountability. This does not mean the ring has no value or that families who welcome it are mistaken. It means that the material benefit and the social message conveyed by the scheme must be assessed separately. ■

A gold ring is welcome but 'a gift is not a right' and the scheme spells patriarchy





MANIPUR

When and how will the conflict end? Two voices, two solutions

The continued silence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah on Manipur has baffled everyone. Both Meitei and Kukis feel let down by New Delhi. Three years into the conflict, there is still no consensus on the way forward.

According to a Manipur home department report tabled in the state assembly, 28,899 people are in relief camps and temporary shelters as internally displaced persons (IDPs), as of September 2026. Attacks on civilians by armed groups intensified in August–September. In targeted killings over a 30-day period in August–September, 23 civilians were killed in the hill districts, forcing villagers to take refuge in nearby paddy fields and forests.

For Meiteis, the situation has improved in Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley and the trouble is now confined to the hills where Nagas and Kukis reside. Kukis believe Meiteis and Nagas have colluded against them. Meanwhile, Nagas—who share their home and faith with Kukis—are hedging their bets.

"Violence has resurfaced in the hills despite AFSPA being in force. Why is the Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement with Kuki armed groups not being implemented in the hills?" asked Mayengbam Dhananjay, spokesperson for the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity, an umbrella coalition of major Meitei civil society organisations.

Some leaders with skin in the game see a way out of the current mess. **Sourabh Sen** *spoke to* **Pramot Singh** *of Meitei Leepun and to* **Paolienlal Haokip**, *spokesperson for Kuki Inpi Manipur, to get their perspective on the conflict. Excerpts from the conversations:*



An 'India for Manipur' protest in New Delhi Photo: Getty Images

Drug war and Myanmar are the main issues

Pramot Singh, a Meitei hardliner associated with Meitei Leepun, which he describes as a cultural organisation to preserve Meitei values and heritage and which Kukis describe as a Meitei militant organisation with links to the RSS, explains why Modi is showing no interest in settling issues in the state. Both China and the US, he says, are fighting for the resources in Myanmar and Modi's intervention may complicate the issue. Edited excerpts:

It is a drug war, not an ethnic clash

The conflict in Manipur is a drug war engineered by traffickers manifesting as ethnic conflict. All the drug lords are in powerful political positions. During my UNDP-supported research work in 2006, I found common syndicates, protected by politicians, non-state actors and security forces, running human, drugs and arms trafficking across the India-Myanmar border.

Government failure to persuade Kukis through SoO

There have been two resolutions in Manipur assembly to revoke the SoO with Kukis. Nobody is listening. I recently met a VHP leader who told me that Kukis would support rebuilding mandirs destroyed in violence. If so, why can't the central government tell Kuki armed groups not to disturb Meiteis? The local BJP says it was the Congress which introduced SoO. So why can't the present BJP government repeal it? Nobody—not even the state government—knows who took the decision behind closed doors to extend SoO which is a tripartite arrangement. This is frustrating.

PM's intervention can turn a local conflict into a geopolitical issue

Then there is the question of geopolitics. The US is interested in the area because it wants to stop China from controlling Myanmar's energy and critical mineral assets. This is one of several reasons why Modi is quiet on Manipur. His engagement can add geopolitical complications to a conflict which has so far remained local in a sensitive border area.

Modi's baffling silence on the state may have a geopolitical rationale

Partition not the solution

In a Kuki homeland project, Kuki customary laws would be paramount. In Nagalim, all social systems would be under Naga customary laws. Manipur has a tradition of communities co-existing peacefully and respecting one another. That was how our fathers and forefathers protected and preserved this land. This is the only way Manipur can survive. The concept of Kuki homeland cannot work because Meiteis, Nagas and others will not agree. Nagalim cannot work because Meitei, Kukis and others will not agree.

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Trifurcate the state, expand the border

Paolienlal Haokip, BJP legislator from Saikot constituency of Churachandpur district and spokesperson for Kuki Inpi Manipur, the Kuki apex body, believes trifurcation of Manipur—a part each for Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis—is the only lasting solution. His other radical suggestion is that India intervene militarily in Myanmar and annex Kuki and Naga-dominated territory across the international border. Edited excerpts:

Hill people must stand together to end discrimination

The Union government—Prime Minister included—is silent over Manipur. However, unless a political solution protecting Manipur's hill people from developmental bias is found, there can be no durable solution. While a section of Nagas is trying to take advantage of the Meitei-Kuki conflict, the 'sensible' Nagas feel that Manipur's tribal hill community should come together so Meiteis can no longer meddle in our right to govern our own business.

Partition is one way to end the conflict

Trifurcation of Manipur is the only way forward. There may be unrest for a year or so. But it will settle the issue once and for all.

Indian foreign policy needs more teeth

There is a large Naga and Kuki population in Myanmar's Sagaing division. They are opposed to the military junta. Indian government could explore the possibility of expanding its boundaries. Myanmar will undoubtedly resist such a move; but if we claim to be the largest democracy of the world, we should support the democratic aspirations of the people in Sagaing. India's foreign policy is half-baked as far as the neighbourhood is concerned. ■

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ODISHA

BJD's succession test

Naveen Patnaik's 'chosen successor' Sujata Rout Karthikeyan faces mixed reactions and big challenges

N.R. Mohanty

For 24 years, Naveen Patnaik dominated Odisha politics. The elections in 2024 marked a decisive turnaround when the BJP won 78 assembly seats and formed the government with allies. The BJD got 51 seats. That was not all. In the Lok Sabha elections held simultaneously, BJP bagged 20 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats, ending Patnaik's long reign.

The Biju Janata Dal's revival now faces a succession test centered on former IAS officer Sujata Rout Karthikeyan.

An Odia by birth and a former IAS officer, Sujata is the wife of V. Karthikeyan Pandian, Patnaik's trusted private secretary and the undisputed power behind the throne during his long tenure. Pandian's influence was pivotal; he controlled access to the chief minister and was seen as the architect of Patnaik's long stay in power. Yet, the BJP successfully painted Pandian as an outsider who exploited Odisha's resources for Tamil Nadu's benefit, damaging the BJD's credibility in the crucial 2024 elections.

Will Sujata succeed in reviving the BJD? This question has created ripples in political circles. Some believe she will be able to revive the BJD and restore it to its former glory, while others feel that when the baton formally passes from Patnaik, the party will split down the middle. The truth may lie somewhere in between.

Sujata and Pandian's career is intertwined with Odisha's political trajectory. Both IAS officers were assigned the Odisha cadre in 2000—the year Patnaik assumed power as head of a BJD-BJP coalition.

In 2007, as district collector of Ganjam, the seat of Patnaik's ancestral home and the constituency he represented (Hinjli), Pandian impressed the chief minister as a hard-working and competent officer who could do the chief minister's bidding without hesitation. By 2011, Pandian had become the CM's private secretary, a role he held for 12 years. During this time, Pandian was the gatekeeper for everyone, from party leaders to businessmen, overseeing promotions, allocations and policy decisions with Naveen Patnaik apparently ceding much authority to him. He came to be seen as Patnaik's alter ego.

Pandian was practically living in 'Naveen Niwas'—the private mansion of the chief minister bequeathed to him by his father, Biju Patnaik.



Naveen Patnaik welcomes Sujata Rout Karthikeyan to the Biju Janata Dal

He frequently travelled in the chief minister's official plane, inaugurating projects without Patnaik's direct involvement. The gatekeeping was complete and strict. Even senior ministers could not meet the chief minister without Pandian's permission. It was this dominance that also sowed the seeds of discontent.

When Pandian took voluntary retirement and officially joined the BJD barely six months before the assembly and Lok Sabha elections in May 2024, the plan was to be officially anointed Patnaik's successor.

But the plan went awry. The BJP focused on Pandian. The campaign found fertile ground in highlighting his alleged corruption and 'outsider' tags. WhatsApp messages and social media videos started spreading the story that Pandian had enriched his native Tamil Nadu at the expense of Odisha.

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As the campaign for elections intensified, Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally amplified these accusations. In rally after rally, he repeated the party narrative that Pandian had siphoned off Odisha's wealth and taken it to his home state. He alleged that the missing keys to the inner chamber of Jagannath temple's Ratna Bhandar (Jewel Trove) had been sent to Tamil Nadu. The BJP made Odia *asmita* (Odia pride) the touchstone of the campaign, painting Pandian as the villain of the piece. And it worked.

Ousted from power after 24 years, the anger of the BJD cadre and leaders boiled over. Pandian was squarely blamed for the humiliating debacle. Recognising the shift, Pandian released a video declaring he was withdrawing from active politics, even as Patnaik continued to see him as his rightful heir.

But the clock was ticking. With the former chief minister's health declining, Pandian needed to seize control. Enter Sujata. The calculation was clear: the 'outsider' tag would not stick. Her family has roots in Kendrapada, a constituency previously represented by Biju Patnaik in Parliament.

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Sujata took voluntary retirement in March 2025, barely a month before BJD's state council meeting. It was widely speculated that Patnaik would elevate her as working party president, effectively making her his political deputy. But fierce protests by senior leaders, resistant to 'proxy Tamilian rule', stalled any such announcement. Pandian chose to bide his time.

In June this year, Sujata joined the party as an 'ordinary' member. Notably, Patnaik introduced her as Sujata Rout, emphasising her Odia identity and distancing her from the Tamilian link.

In the last few months, those who benefitted from Pandian are cosying up to Sujata while others remain wary. Political observers feel that while Naveen Patnaik's succession strategy reflects a blend of continuity and image management, it also exposes the vulnerability of personalised leadership models. The jury is still out. ■

Can Sujata Rout revive the BJD? The question has created ripples in the state

N.R. MOHANTY *is a former resident editor of* Hindustan Times



UTTAR PARADESH

A death, an old case and a crisis for Yogi Adityanath

Rashme Sehgal

The death in prison on 11 October of 72-year-old journalist-activist Parvez Parwaz from Gorakhpur is likely to haunt Yogi Adityanath in the coming election season.

The activist had filed a criminal case for hate speech against Adityanath when he was an MP in 2007. Adityanath was arrested and spent 11 days in jail. On his release on bail, he cried in Parliament while narrating his 'plight'.

The case remained undecided and in 2017 after Adityanath became chief minister, one of his first acts was to withdraw all cases that were pending against him, including this one—a move that strangely went unchallenged by opposition parties.

Parwaz challenged the decision in court, but the Allahabad High Court, and later Supreme Court, dismissed his plea. The matter took a vicious turn when Parwaz and another person were convicted in 2020 of gangrape by a Gorakh-pur court and sentenced to life imprisonment. Parwaz's death can potentially electrify the poll cam-paign early next year. He resisted pressure for 10 years to withdraw the case against Yogi Adityanath and paid for his persistence.

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Adityanath's woes seem to be piling. The row over embezzlement of public donations from the Ram temple at Ayodhya refuses to die down. Some weeks ago, Divya Mittal, a popular IAS officer, resigned, citing instances of misgovernance, and in a viral video announced her decision to enter public life. She did not detail the harassment she had faced while in service, but she is unlikely to remain silent if she contests elections. (*As we go to press, she has announced her own party and declared her intention to contest elections.*)

The bulldozer/half-encounter reality of Yogi's lofty claims of making the state crime-free are also well known. A key ally Sanjay Nishad publicly questioned how Ramesh Bind, associated with the Samajwadi Party, was gunned down earlier this year.

Bind's family alleges a staged police encounter; the police claim self-defence. UP Police proudly claims to have conducted 15,000 encounters since 2017 leading to the death of 238 'criminals' and 9,467 who were shot in the leg.

In an unusual move, an additional chief judicial magistrate Parvinder Singh, visited Deoband jail to question inmates who had sustained gunshot injuries. Singh's first-hand video interviews exposed how Supreme Court guidelines on police encounters were being flouted openly.

Retired IG of Police S.R. Darapuri, who has documented extrajudicial killings, alleges that crime rate figures put out by the state government are fabricated. Cases of Dalit atrocities, rape, murder and kidnapping of women have risen sharply, he says. The state's claim that women were safe was shattered by the gangrape of a minor girl in a public bus.

Former Lucknow University VC Prof. Roop Rekha Verma, says, "Through my NGO 'Saajhi Duniya', we have worked to bring justice for women who have been victims of rape; we also fight false cases against them. To stifle our voices, several NGOs, including mine, are being investigated by the Anti-Terrorist Squad."

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Even after the ad blitz, facts do not support Yogi's claims that Uttar Pradesh now has a vibrant economy. While Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) has officially doubled from Rs 12.75 lakh crore in 2016-17 to an estimated Rs 24.99 lakh crore in 2026, the per capita income is only Rs 94,000, way below the national average of Rs 1.84 lakh. The growth rate is quite uneven with Noida alone accounting for 10 per cent of the state's economy while many districts in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bundelkhand contribute less than one per cent each.



Yogi Adityanth seems to be on the backfoot as UP heads for elections

The ad spends may not take Yogi past the finish line in the 2027 polls

Development economist Santosh Mehrotra has frequently critiqued the state's development model. "During the second investment summit, the Uttar Pradesh government signed MoUs worth Rs 34 lakh crore. But signing an MoU and implementation are two different things," he says.

Also, the unusually hefty investment in mega projects have failed to kickstart broader, sus-tainable growth. "Most of this expenditure has gone towards building wasteful expressways that few use. Of the 12 airports built in the past five years, six have closed down for lack of demand," he points out.

While the chief minister talks of employment generation, 90 per cent of the workforce is either self-employed or employed in casual agricultural work or engaged in low-quality jobs.

Nearly a third of the state's youth are economically and educationally inactive. According to the National Sample Survey, 33.5 per cent youth aged 15-24 were 'not in education, employment or training' compared to the national average of 29.3 per cent. This goes upto to 36.7 per cent for the 15-29 age group, against the national average of 32.9 per cent. Among young women, this is as high as 59.5 per cent.

A potentially lethal combination of controversies, misgovernance, failing law and order and sluggish economic development puts Adityanath in a precarious position ahead of the 2027 assembly elections. And the lavish government spend on advertising may not be quite enough to obscure the ground reality when Yogi Adityanath seeks a return mandate in March next year. ■



WEST BENGAL

Durga Puja gets a BJP makeover

Featuring a Gujarat event management firm, Adani awards, Sherawali and other alien delights



Photo: Getty Images

The laser-and-drone extravaganza at Eden Gardens

Sourabh Sen *and* **Kunal Chatterjee**

Kolkata, indeed the whole state of West Bengal, is witnessing a culture shock. Giddy with power, the new BJP government in the state is going bananas over Durga Puja this year. From painting busy flyovers in rainbow hues, 'inspired' by international pedestrian plazas, to splurging an eye-popping Rs 180 crore on a show at Eden Gardens—the city's iconic cricket stadium—the state is witnessing the kind of Durga Puja it has never seen before.

Gobananas, a Gujarat-based event management company, was paid a reported-but-unconfirmed Rs 180 crore for the event.

Finance minister Swapan Dasgupta, facing criticism for ignoring local event managers and talent, is reported to have blamed the local firms. At a private gathering, he reportedly told his guests, "We hope companies from West Bengal will draw lessons and be prepared to play a bigger role next year." His explanation was greeted with diplomatic silence but what Dasgupta left unsaid was how the tender rules made it impossible for local companies to bid.

The government's 'request for proposal' required a hefty Rs 1 crore deposit and 3 per cent performance security that small bidders couldn't possibly cough up. Also, bidders had to have an average annual turnover of Rs 50 crore or more and a track of executing national/international events that cost Rs 20 crore or more in the last decade, specifically for government projects. That effectively shut the doors on local players.

*

No one was surprised that the contract went to a Gujarati firm. But it was the spending spree and style that raised eyebrows. Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari had invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi and home minister Amit Shah to the event, which explained the 'cost no bar' approach. But Bengalis were aghast to see the gaudy, televised laser-and-drone spectacle and the bastardised '*dhunuchi naach*', a traditional high-energy devotional dance ritual performed in front of the goddess.

What else can explain Durga sporting eight, nine, eleven or twelve arms?

Not to be left behind, the Adani Group made its branding debut by deciding to reward eight puja pandals. Out of some 40,000 public '*sarbajonin*' pujas statewide, these eight were rewarded handsomely—sculptors got Rs 10 lakh each and organisers Rs 15 lakh. It also enrolled one lakh people on 'first come basis' for a preview of the select pandals. Influencers were roped in as special guests to publicise the hassle-free 'darshan' and arrangements made by the group's volunteers.

The aim, according to Adani Group advisor Sanjay Thade: "We want to showcase the grandeur of Kolkata's Durga Puja to national and international delegates so that it becomes one of the most recognisable festivals in the world." One wonders if he knew that in 2021, Durga Puja in Kolkata became the first festival from Asia to be included in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. The Adanis have also pledged to revamp Kumartuli, the famous village of potters and sculptors.

*

The hand of 'outsiders' clearly oblivious to Bengali cultural mores and festival lore was visible in other ways too. What else can explain Durga sporting eight, nine, eleven or even twelve arms—instead of the sacred ten-armed (*dashabhuja*) form? Official Kolkata Municipal Corporation advertisements copy-pasted the Hindi word '*swachchata*', which in Bengali, means transparency, not cleanliness as intended. Sorry KMC, that was a terrible mishit!

Communication professional Sreeraj Mitra blames "this murder of the Bengali language" on "the over-dependence on AI translations." Jawhar Sircar, former Prasar Bharti CEO and secretary, department of culture, government of India, advised the state government to refrain from teaching Bengalis how to welcome Durga, their daughter. "People who have done it seem to be unaware that Bengali and Hindi have different syntax and nuances," Sircar said.

*

And then, of course, there is the food. The number of non-vegetarian food stalls, is fewer this year. Eateries are taking care to not advertise non-veg with images of Goddess Durga in the background.

The cultural shift is in your face. Jagrata and Sherawali have made a triumphant debut, and BJP leaders are competing to take over the Pujas in their localities.

Hindi bhajans and Hanuman Chalisa are much in demand and a Hindu outfit of some description has occupied the space outside the CPI(M) office on Alimuddin Street to hold round-the-clock *Chandipath*.

When the communists discovered their 60-year-old bookstall occupied by a Hindutva outfit, they had to seek redress in court, while the police looked the other way.

Local sponsors of cultural events, often builders, are hard to find this year as they are still negotiating arrangements and commissions with the new 'rulers'. In the absence of a clear power hierarchy, leaders at various levels are flexing their muscles, they say.

Another tradition to take a hit this year is the release of new Bengali music during this season. Navratri, garba events and Hindi devotional songs have edged out Bengali, it seems. It is all very disorienting for anyone who knew what made Durga Puja an 'intangible cultural heritage' worth celebrating. ■



TAMIL NADU

Benefit sans entitlement

K.A. Shaji on the state's new gold ring scheme

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay's decision to play *thaimaman* (maternal uncle) to the state's newborns just ahead of assembly bypolls is not exactly the warm and fuzzy welfare gesture his government has advertised it to be.

The Thaimanam Thanga Mothiram scheme, launched in Madurai on 28 September, provides a 1 gm, 22 carat gold ring to babies born on or after 22 June 2026 in state government hospitals or health centres.

The scheme was a pre-election promise of Vijay's TVK (Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam) party, but the rollout happened just days ahead of the 6 October bypolls to the Madurantakam and Dharapuram constituencies, inviting sharp reactions from the opposition DMK.

Since the gold ring scheme had been formally approved, budgeted for and gazetted by the cabinet on 23 June, it had the benefit of being treated legally as an ongoing, pre-approved policy rather than a pre-election inducement.

DMK MP Kanimozhi Karunanidhi has argued that women should be encouraged to be economically independent rather than count on ceremonial gifts from male relatives. "You have equal rights in property, education and income. Earn and stand tall," she said, invoking the Dravidian movement's emphasis on women's self-reliance. In Tamil Nadu, that argument has many votaries. Critics are asking: should women's welfare be framed as a gift from a benevolent male figure rather than as a right?

Kanimozhi has also questioned the Vijay government's priorities, expressing concerns about committing public money to the gold ring scheme instead of shoring up availability of essential medicines and doctors in public hospitals.

*

The government order of 23 June allocated Rs 755.83 crore a year for the scheme for an estimated 4.42 lakh newborn beneficiaries. The rings are made of 22 carat gold and carry unique serial numbers.

Eligibility is linked to delivery in government health institutions, registration under the Pregnancy and Infant Cohort Monitoring and Evaluation (PICME) system and possession of a Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) identification number, alongside applicable residence requirements.

The financial commitment has prompted questions about competing priorities. Kanimozhi's criticism centres on the need to strengthen public healthcare, while party colleague and Lok Sabha member Thamizachi Thangapandian draws attention to shortages in several government hospitals of life-saving medicines to treat respiratory distress in premature babies.

C. Lakshmanan, former faculty at the Madras Institute of Development Studies (MIDS), says "the challenge is to ensure that a new initiative complements the essential services on which vulnerable families depend rather than overshadowing those services."

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The *thaimaman* occupies a special place in Tamil kinship traditions. The mother's brother often maintains a close relationship with his sister and her children after marriage, presenting gifts during childbirth and other family ceremonies.

Gold, clothes and money can express affection, reinforce ties with the maternal family and provide material support. For poor households, such gifts can have practical value. Gold may be retained as an asset or pledged during a financial emergency. A ring provided by the state can also relieve a family of the pressure to meet customary expectations.

At the launch in Madurai, beneficiary Mariselvi said she was not on speaking terms with her brother and saw Vijay as one. Despite the progressives' lament, many poor people will appreciate the material assistance as well as the scheme's emotional packaging.

Writing in *The News Minute*, development economist Dipa Sinha argues that maternity support should recognise women's reproductive labour and economic vulnerability rather than present the government as a benevolent male relative.

Pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding involve physical labour, health risks and lost income. Women employed in informal work are mostly denied paid maternity leave and financial protection during this period. A gold ring may be welcome, but it does not compensate a woman for lost wages or guarantee adequate nutrition, postnatal care and childcare. She argues for stronger maternity entitlements linked to women's economic circumstances and greater recognition of unpaid care work.

The distinction is important: a gift is not a legal entitlement. While a gift may receive gratitude, a legal right strengthens accountability. This does not mean the ring has no value or that families who welcome it are mistaken. It means that the material benefit and the social message conveyed by the scheme must be assessed separately. ■

A gold ring is welcome but 'a gift is not a right' and the scheme spells patriarchy





MANIPUR

When and how will the conflict end? Two voices, two solutions

The continued silence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah on Manipur has baffled everyone. Both Meitei and Kukis feel let down by New Delhi. Three years into the conflict, there is still no consensus on the way forward.

According to a Manipur home department report tabled in the state assembly, 28,899 people are in relief camps and temporary shelters as internally displaced persons (IDPs), as of September 2026. Attacks on civilians by armed groups intensified in August–September. In targeted killings over a 30-day period in August–September, 23 civilians were killed in the hill districts, forcing villagers to take refuge in nearby paddy fields and forests.

For Meiteis, the situation has improved in Meitei-dominated Imphal Valley and the trouble is now confined to the hills where Nagas and Kukis reside. Kukis believe Meiteis and Nagas have colluded against them. Meanwhile, Nagas—who share their home and faith with Kukis—are hedging their bets.

"Violence has resurfaced in the hills despite AFSPA being in force. Why is the Suspension of Operation (SoO) agreement with Kuki armed groups not being implemented in the hills?" asked Mayengbam Dhananjay, spokesperson for the Coordinating Committee on Manipur Integrity, an umbrella coalition of major Meitei civil society organisations.

Some leaders with skin in the game see a way out of the current mess. **Sourabh Sen** *spoke to* **Pramot Singh** *of Meitei Leepun and to* **Paolienlal Haokip**, *spokesperson for Kuki Inpi Manipur, to get their perspective on the conflict. Excerpts from the conversations:*



An 'India for Manipur' protest in New Delhi Photo: Getty Images

Drug war and Myanmar are the main issues

Pramot Singh, a Meitei hardliner associated with Meitei Leepun, which he describes as a cultural organisation to preserve Meitei values and heritage and which Kukis describe as a Meitei militant organisation with links to the RSS, explains why Modi is showing no interest in settling issues in the state. Both China and the US, he says, are fighting for the resources in Myanmar and Modi's intervention may complicate the issue. Edited excerpts:

It is a drug war, not an ethnic clash

The conflict in Manipur is a drug war engineered by traffickers manifesting as ethnic conflict. All the drug lords are in powerful political positions. During my UNDP-supported research work in 2006, I found common syndicates, protected by politicians, non-state actors and security forces, running human, drugs and arms trafficking across the India-Myanmar border.

Government failure to persuade Kukis through SoO

There have been two resolutions in Manipur assembly to revoke the SoO with Kukis. Nobody is listening. I recently met a VHP leader who told me that Kukis would support rebuilding mandirs destroyed in violence. If so, why can't the central government tell Kuki armed groups not to disturb Meiteis? The local BJP says it was the Congress which introduced SoO. So why can't the present BJP government repeal it? Nobody—not even the state government—knows who took the decision behind closed doors to extend SoO which is a tripartite arrangement. This is frustrating.

PM's intervention can turn a local conflict into a geopolitical issue

Then there is the question of geopolitics. The US is interested in the area because it wants to stop China from controlling Myanmar's energy and critical mineral assets. This is one of several reasons why Modi is quiet on Manipur. His engagement can add geopolitical complications to a conflict which has so far remained local in a sensitive border area.

Modi's baffling silence on the state may have a geopolitical rationale

Partition not the solution

In a Kuki homeland project, Kuki customary laws would be paramount. In Nagalim, all social systems would be under Naga customary laws. Manipur has a tradition of communities co-existing peacefully and respecting one another. That was how our fathers and forefathers protected and preserved this land. This is the only way Manipur can survive. The concept of Kuki homeland cannot work because Meiteis, Nagas and others will not agree. Nagalim cannot work because Meitei, Kukis and others will not agree.

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Trifurcate the state, expand the border

Paolienlal Haokip, BJP legislator from Saikot constituency of Churachandpur district and spokesperson for Kuki Inpi Manipur, the Kuki apex body, believes trifurcation of Manipur—a part each for Meiteis, Nagas and Kukis—is the only lasting solution. His other radical suggestion is that India intervene militarily in Myanmar and annex Kuki and Naga-dominated territory across the international border. Edited excerpts:

Hill people must stand together to end discrimination

The Union government—Prime Minister included—is silent over Manipur. However, unless a political solution protecting Manipur's hill people from developmental bias is found, there can be no durable solution. While a section of Nagas is trying to take advantage of the Meitei-Kuki conflict, the 'sensible' Nagas feel that Manipur's tribal hill community should come together so Meiteis can no longer meddle in our right to govern our own business.

Partition is one way to end the conflict

Trifurcation of Manipur is the only way forward. There may be unrest for a year or so. But it will settle the issue once and for all.

Indian foreign policy needs more teeth

There is a large Naga and Kuki population in Myanmar's Sagaing division. They are opposed to the military junta. Indian government could explore the possibility of expanding its boundaries. Myanmar will undoubtedly resist such a move; but if we claim to be the largest democracy of the world, we should support the democratic aspirations of the people in Sagaing. India's foreign policy is half-baked as far as the neighbourhood is concerned. ■

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



ODISHA

BJD's succession test

Naveen Patnaik's 'chosen successor' Sujata Rout Karthikeyan faces mixed reactions and big challenges

N.R. Mohanty

For 24 years, Naveen Patnaik dominated Odisha politics. The elections in 2024 marked a decisive turnaround when the BJP won 78 assembly seats and formed the government with allies. The BJD got 51 seats. That was not all. In the Lok Sabha elections held simultaneously, BJP bagged 20 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats, ending Patnaik's long reign.

The Biju Janata Dal's revival now faces a succession test centered on former IAS officer Sujata Rout Karthikeyan.

An Odia by birth and a former IAS officer, Sujata is the wife of V. Karthikeyan Pandian, Patnaik's trusted private secretary and the undisputed power behind the throne during his long tenure. Pandian's influence was pivotal; he controlled access to the chief minister and was seen as the architect of Patnaik's long stay in power. Yet, the BJP successfully painted Pandian as an outsider who exploited Odisha's resources for Tamil Nadu's benefit, damaging the BJD's credibility in the crucial 2024 elections.

Will Sujata succeed in reviving the BJD? This question has created ripples in political circles. Some believe she will be able to revive the BJD and restore it to its former glory, while others feel that when the baton formally passes from Patnaik, the party will split down the middle. The truth may lie somewhere in between.

Sujata and Pandian's career is intertwined with Odisha's political trajectory. Both IAS officers were assigned the Odisha cadre in 2000—the year Patnaik assumed power as head of a BJD-BJP coalition.

In 2007, as district collector of Ganjam, the seat of Patnaik's ancestral home and the constituency he represented (Hinjli), Pandian impressed the chief minister as a hard-working and competent officer who could do the chief minister's bidding without hesitation. By 2011, Pandian had become the CM's private secretary, a role he held for 12 years. During this time, Pandian was the gatekeeper for everyone, from party leaders to businessmen, overseeing promotions, allocations and policy decisions with Naveen Patnaik apparently ceding much authority to him. He came to be seen as Patnaik's alter ego.

Pandian was practically living in 'Naveen Niwas'—the private mansion of the chief minister bequeathed to him by his father, Biju Patnaik.



Naveen Patnaik welcomes Sujata Rout Karthikeyan to the Biju Janata Dal

He frequently travelled in the chief minister's official plane, inaugurating projects without Patnaik's direct involvement. The gatekeeping was complete and strict. Even senior ministers could not meet the chief minister without Pandian's permission. It was this dominance that also sowed the seeds of discontent.

When Pandian took voluntary retirement and officially joined the BJD barely six months before the assembly and Lok Sabha elections in May 2024, the plan was to be officially anointed Patnaik's successor.

But the plan went awry. The BJP focused on Pandian. The campaign found fertile ground in highlighting his alleged corruption and 'outsider' tags. WhatsApp messages and social media videos started spreading the story that Pandian had enriched his native Tamil Nadu at the expense of Odisha.

*

As the campaign for elections intensified, Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally amplified these accusations. In rally after rally, he repeated the party narrative that Pandian had siphoned off Odisha's wealth and taken it to his home state. He alleged that the missing keys to the inner chamber of Jagannath temple's Ratna Bhandar (Jewel Trove) had been sent to Tamil Nadu. The BJP made Odia *asmita* (Odia pride) the touchstone of the campaign, painting Pandian as the villain of the piece. And it worked.

Ousted from power after 24 years, the anger of the BJD cadre and leaders boiled over. Pandian was squarely blamed for the humiliating debacle. Recognising the shift, Pandian released a video declaring he was withdrawing from active politics, even as Patnaik continued to see him as his rightful heir.

But the clock was ticking. With the former chief minister's health declining, Pandian needed to seize control. Enter Sujata. The calculation was clear: the 'outsider' tag would not stick. Her family has roots in Kendrapada, a constituency previously represented by Biju Patnaik in Parliament.

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Sujata took voluntary retirement in March 2025, barely a month before BJD's state council meeting. It was widely speculated that Patnaik would elevate her as working party president, effectively making her his political deputy. But fierce protests by senior leaders, resistant to 'proxy Tamilian rule', stalled any such announcement. Pandian chose to bide his time.

In June this year, Sujata joined the party as an 'ordinary' member. Notably, Patnaik introduced her as Sujata Rout, emphasising her Odia identity and distancing her from the Tamilian link.

In the last few months, those who benefitted from Pandian are cosying up to Sujata while others remain wary. Political observers feel that while Naveen Patnaik's succession strategy reflects a blend of continuity and image management, it also exposes the vulnerability of personalised leadership models. The jury is still out. ■

Can Sujata Rout revive the BJD? The question has created ripples in the state

N.R. MOHANTY *is a former resident editor of* Hindustan Times



UTTAR PARADESH

A death, an old case and a crisis for Yogi Adityanath

Rashme Sehgal

The death in prison on 11 October of 72-year-old journalist-activist Parvez Parwaz from Gorakhpur is likely to haunt Yogi Adityanath in the coming election season.

The activist had filed a criminal case for hate speech against Adityanath when he was an MP in 2007. Adityanath was arrested and spent 11 days in jail. On his release on bail, he cried in Parliament while narrating his 'plight'.

The case remained undecided and in 2017 after Adityanath became chief minister, one of his first acts was to withdraw all cases that were pending against him, including this one—a move that strangely went unchallenged by opposition parties.

Parwaz challenged the decision in court, but the Allahabad High Court, and later Supreme Court, dismissed his plea. The matter took a vicious turn when Parwaz and another person were convicted in 2020 of gangrape by a Gorakh-pur court and sentenced to life imprisonment. Parwaz's death can potentially electrify the poll cam-paign early next year. He resisted pressure for 10 years to withdraw the case against Yogi Adityanath and paid for his persistence.

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Adityanath's woes seem to be piling. The row over embezzlement of public donations from the Ram temple at Ayodhya refuses to die down. Some weeks ago, Divya Mittal, a popular IAS officer, resigned, citing instances of misgovernance, and in a viral video announced her decision to enter public life. She did not detail the harassment she had faced while in service, but she is unlikely to remain silent if she contests elections. (*As we go to press, she has announced her own party and declared her intention to contest elections.*)

The bulldozer/half-encounter reality of Yogi's lofty claims of making the state crime-free are also well known. A key ally Sanjay Nishad publicly questioned how Ramesh Bind, associated with the Samajwadi Party, was gunned down earlier this year.

Bind's family alleges a staged police encounter; the police claim self-defence. UP Police proudly claims to have conducted 15,000 encounters since 2017 leading to the death of 238 'criminals' and 9,467 who were shot in the leg.

In an unusual move, an additional chief judicial magistrate Parvinder Singh, visited Deoband jail to question inmates who had sustained gunshot injuries. Singh's first-hand video interviews exposed how Supreme Court guidelines on police encounters were being flouted openly.

Retired IG of Police S.R. Darapuri, who has documented extrajudicial killings, alleges that crime rate figures put out by the state government are fabricated. Cases of Dalit atrocities, rape, murder and kidnapping of women have risen sharply, he says. The state's claim that women were safe was shattered by the gangrape of a minor girl in a public bus.

Former Lucknow University VC Prof. Roop Rekha Verma, says, "Through my NGO 'Saajhi Duniya', we have worked to bring justice for women who have been victims of rape; we also fight false cases against them. To stifle our voices, several NGOs, including mine, are being investigated by the Anti-Terrorist Squad."

*

Even after the ad blitz, facts do not support Yogi's claims that Uttar Pradesh now has a vibrant economy. While Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) has officially doubled from Rs 12.75 lakh crore in 2016-17 to an estimated Rs 24.99 lakh crore in 2026, the per capita income is only Rs 94,000, way below the national average of Rs 1.84 lakh. The growth rate is quite uneven with Noida alone accounting for 10 per cent of the state's economy while many districts in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bundelkhand contribute less than one per cent each.



Yogi Adityanth seems to be on the backfoot as UP heads for elections

The ad spends may not take Yogi past the finish line in the 2027 polls

Development economist Santosh Mehrotra has frequently critiqued the state's development model. "During the second investment summit, the Uttar Pradesh government signed MoUs worth Rs 34 lakh crore. But signing an MoU and implementation are two different things," he says.

Also, the unusually hefty investment in mega projects have failed to kickstart broader, sus-tainable growth. "Most of this expenditure has gone towards building wasteful expressways that few use. Of the 12 airports built in the past five years, six have closed down for lack of demand," he points out.

While the chief minister talks of employment generation, 90 per cent of the workforce is either self-employed or employed in casual agricultural work or engaged in low-quality jobs.

Nearly a third of the state's youth are economically and educationally inactive. According to the National Sample Survey, 33.5 per cent youth aged 15-24 were 'not in education, employment or training' compared to the national average of 29.3 per cent. This goes upto to 36.7 per cent for the 15-29 age group, against the national average of 32.9 per cent. Among young women, this is as high as 59.5 per cent.

A potentially lethal combination of controversies, misgovernance, failing law and order and sluggish economic development puts Adityanath in a precarious position ahead of the 2027 assembly elections. And the lavish government spend on advertising may not be quite enough to obscure the ground reality when Yogi Adityanath seeks a return mandate in March next year. ■

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Photo: Getty Images

US vice-president J.D. Vance minced no words in labelling hires from outside America

The end of an affair

Never in its history has India looked so pathetic on the world stage, never have its foreign relations been the godawful mess they are today. The credit for this goes to Messrs Modi and Jaishankar.

The spectacular unravelling of ties with the US is perhaps the best example of the ham-handedness that has characterised the Modi government's management of its external affairs. Ties carefully crafted over 35 years lie in tatters, and it has more to do with Modi's inability to stand up to a 'dear friend'-turned bully than Trump's unpredictability. Other world leaders, of nations small and big, have dealt with the bully much better.

The latest instance of the Trump administration's growing contempt for India is the clampdown on Indian and US technology firms sponsoring foreign workers for what is known as a green card or permanent residence in the US.

Trump has stopped Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services, Cognizant, Wipro and HCL, along with Microsoft, Capgemini and Adobe from applying for green cards for employees residing and working in the US on H-1B visas. The US labour secretary Keith Sonderling announced, "I am hereby suspending from the Permanent Labour Certification Program (PERM) some of the largest IT outsourcing firms in the world."

The move is seen as a big blow to Indian techies employed in the US as well as these companies whose hiring costs will shoot up. The Indian ministry of external affairs has again mewed a timid 'does not advance shared ambitions' response.

The MEA is grasping at straws because in his second term as president, which began in January 2025, Trump has not seen India as a preferred partner, and it got much worse after the four-day war between India and Pakistan in May 2025. Pakistan and China, India's two most difficult neighbours, are his priority.

His blunt message to skilled Indians is: get the hell out of the US. If Modi, Jaishankar and commerce minister Piyush Goyal have still not understood this, they are living in a fool's paradise.

Trump's vice-president J.D. Vance rubbed it in: "If you do the math, for every [American] worker Microsoft laid off, it replaced that worker with one and a half foreign indentured servants." He claimed the company had retrenched 6,000 American workers in 2025 to employ 6,300 others on H-1B visas and nearly 3,000 green card holders. India described Vance's comment as 'deeply offensive'. The MEA spokesperson said Vance was using 'terminology that carries painful historical and colonial legacy connotations'. More mewing.

Microsoft is reportedly the largest filer for PERMs, and these companies are expected to demonstrate that employing an overseas person will not adversely impact the wages or job opportunities of Americans. Ironically, the Microsoft CEO, Satya Nadella, is of Indian origin, and was even conferred the US National Medal of Technology and Innovation by Trump earlier this month.

In a desperate attempt to affect unconcern, Goyal remarked the US clampdown was "absolutely good for the Indian economy". He argued the restrictions would reverse the brain drain, encourage skilled professionals to stay back and dramatically accelerate the growth of domestic start-ups and Global Capability Centres in India.

Last year, Trump imposed 50 per cent tariffs on Indian exports to America, before a US Supreme Court ruling reduced it to 10 per cent in February 2026. However, the Damoclean threat of 100 per cent duties, approved by US Congress on countries buying Russian oil, is still dangling over India. Chances are Trump has not invoked the provision yet in order to shore up the flow of diesel from Russia to the world to ease prices.

India can only hope that next month's mid-term elections set him back, and Trump's hostility towards India is curbed by legislative safeguards that may come in the wake. But there is no real relief in sight until and unless a friendly Democrat enters the White House. ■

Trump's blunt message to skilled Indians is: get the hell out of the US

Britain itching to return to the EU

Ashis Ray

In a referendum held in 2016, Britain voted by a small margin to exit the European Union. As expected, the move lowered trade growth and trade turnover. As external demand slipped, so did production. Unemployment rose. Britain's GDP took a big hit.

A decade later, Britons have realised Brexit was a mistake. Recent opinion polls indicate that if a plebiscite were held today, Britons would vote decisively in favour of reintegration with the EU.

Two years ago, Britain's Labour party swept to power with a landslide. Their prime minister, Keir Starmer, sensed his people's desire to reintegrate, but Labour's election manifesto had ruled this out. It was a pledge Starmer couldn't dishonour, but he smoothened trade with the EU for some essential goods.

His successor, Andy Burnham, has been more forthright about the need for Britain to close ranks with the EU. This week, in a speech in the House of Commons—Britain's Lok Sabha—he confirmed there will be a summit between the UK and the EU on 20 November to explore their future relations.

"If we are serious about promoting growth, controlling immigration, upholding our values and security, it is a conversation we must have," he said. He emphasised, "Our immediate priority is securing a successful outcome at the summit, and I believe we should then set up a serious dialogue about the different options for our relationship in the long term."

He adhered to Starmer's position that there will be no return to the EU before the next general election, which is due in 2029, but it is within Burnham's powers to call a snap election to hasten the process. He hinted as much by saying, "At every stage, the British people will be the boss, and I am clear that public opinion currently supports a pragmatic approach like the one I am suggesting."

On that fateful day in June 2016 when the UK chose to leave the EU, it was their elderly population and white working classes besides a section of British Indians that tilted the scales. The youth stayed at home to party, confident the verdict would be to remain in the union. Now, they are frustrated because they can't move freely within the EU and have to put up with long queues at European airports. So they are impatient to return to the old order, which, from all indications, the Europeans would prefer as well.

Immigration is still a sensitive topic in Britain but the benefits of reintegration are compelling

Immigration is a burning issue in Britain. The rise of the far-right Reform UK party is founded on keeping foreigners out. Asked in Parliament if it was now harder for British authorities to control their borders, Burnham answered: "We are in a weaker position when it comes to controlling immigration than we were just over 10 years ago." A reason for this is that after Brexit the UK no longer enjoyed access to the Eurodac database, which contains biometric data about asylum seekers.

Reform (then under the garb of the Brexit Party) strenuously opposed free movement of people, which a member country of the EU was obliged to respect. This is still a sensitive subject in Britain. So, it was put to Burnham in the Commons if he would confirm a 'no return to freedom of movement'. He replied, "What we have to look at are the options that are available for the long-term relationship." Reform is on the defensive on the question of Britain's reintegration with the EU. They know their old stance is unpopular, except among their hardcore supporters.

Burnham is aware that Britons want an end to their economic misery, and have more or less come round to the view that reintegrating is the solution. A study by the consultancy Frontier Economics projects that reintegration could boost Britain's GDP by 2.5–3.6 per cent over the long term. So, a realignment of UK–EU ties is looking highly probable, though we do not at this point know the shape of the new arrangement. ■



Photo: Getty Images

"I'll not be scared"



Photo: Jigyasa Mishra

Ruby Ali Khan raises a defiant fist at the 2 October protest

Jigyasa Mishra

We want a fair, transparent voting system. It is our right."

Ruby Ali Khan was at the Jantar Mantar protest against Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar and the Special Intensive Revision (SIR). A resident of the city, she'd had to change two metros, a bus and two autorickshaws to get to the heavily guarded protest site.

"If we don't have our names in the voting list, how can we choose our *neta*?" she asks. "They have closed the main Metro lines and stations today [this was 2 October] so that we don't come to Jantar Mantar. But they are stupid to think it could stop us."

A migrant from Bihar, Ruby, now in her 40s, arrived in the capital city almost three decades ago. Her name is on the voter list, but seven of her relatives, along with many of her neighbours, have been deleted. "My own sister who is a widow and has three children doesn't have her name in it. She fears losing her ration card," she adds. Without access to free rations, Ruby says it will be really difficult.

Ruby arrived at the protest around 10.30 a.m., wearing a black and beige salwar-kameez with a dupatta that doubled as a hijab; her red lipstick and off-white sports shoes soon took a beating in the heat and dust of the protest.

'*Ek kachori, do samosa; BJP ka nahi bharosa*,' she shouts out an anti-government slogan, her voice joining in the crowd of hundreds gathered here. There's no placard in her hand, but her strong voice and visible rage are enough.

On Ashoka Road leading up to Jantar Mantar, several private buses were lined up, and the police forced protestors into the buses.

Bindiya (name changed) was among those detained at the protest site. The 24-year-old is a student at a south Delhi women's college. She told *PARI*, "they [the police] took us at 1 p.m. in a private bus. Through-out the six hours [we were detained], around 40 of us students were not given anything to eat or drink."

By the end of the day, over 500 people had been arrested by the Delhi police who protesters say misbehaved with female students and women journalists. "They were beating us with lathis. Why? It was a peaceful protest. We were asking for our rights."

"If we don't have our names on the voting list how can we choose our neta?"

Worried for the girls, Ruby later travelled to the far-off Dwarka police station where some protesters were taken. "I went there and stayed until they were released around 7 p.m. They are not my relatives but my 'Hindu *betiyan*', fellow female protesters detained by male police personnel. So, I saw them off before heading home."

Ruby tells this reporter that being a woman and a Muslim is tough in today's India. She is aware that there is a cost she and her family might have to pay.

"I know that my home might be bulldozed, or my husband and sons could be beaten or abused. But I will not be scared," she says defiantly, tossing her dupatta over her head.

As *PARI* finishes speaking to her, she calls her husband who is a tailor, to tell him she is safe and will reach home late.

"I am the daughter of this country, and this government better not challenge and provoke housewives like me. I have come here as a woman first. I have come for our girls, who deserve a much better India." ■

Courtesy: People's Archive of Rural India

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October Spring

2–12 October 2026 The many hues of another famous protest, when the Opposition and civil society, people young and old, able-bodied and infirm, Indians committed to their democracy came together to thrust a balled fist in the face of a repressive State





















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