

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

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Switching to organic farming is no walk in the park

Jaideep Hardikar

With the assembly elections to five states done and dusted, and Assam and West Bengal in the bag for the BJP, Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided it was time to ask Indians to brace themselves for price shocks and other crises emanating from the war in West Asia. As always, the onus of sacrifice was on citizens—don't buy gold, use less oil, work from home... All too familiar exhortations to exercise restraint and discipline and take patriotic responsibility.

He had one for farmers too: to "move to 50 per cent organic farming". But is the switch such a cinch?

It takes seven to ten years to move from chemical-intensive agriculture to organic—or sustainable—farming. The transition, as this writer has learnt in conversations with tens of thousands of farmers across the country, comes with big risks and massive shocks—sudden drops in production, spikes in labour wages, pest attacks, uncertain inputs...

The consensus is that while productivity stabilises over time, change requires constant guidance and services that are not available in the market. While India has some 400 definitions of organic farming in different regional languages, the agriculture science fraternity has not yet adopted it as a system of production.

By and large, organic farming has spread in India through community-based organisations, NGOs and, in some cases, highly motivated individual farmers, rarely through public institutions or universities.

At first glance, Modi's proposal to make a big switch to organic farming may seem ecologically sound. The crisis in Indian agriculture is real—farmers have had it rough for decades. Excessive use of chemicals has irreparably degraded soils, contaminated groundwater, reduced biodiversity and trapped farmers in expensive input-intensive systems. Few serious environmentalists would deny the urgent need for more sustainable agricultural practices.

The latest 2026 report by the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) and IFOAM Organics International shows that organic agriculture spans nearly 99 million hectares in over 180 countries, involving 4.8 million producers. The global organic food market has grown to nearly 145 billion. India, with four million hectares, has one of the world's largest numbers of certified organic farmers, topped by Australia with 53 million hectares.

The report does not consider farmers who practise organic farming but are not



Photo: Getty Images

certified. In India, for instance, the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) is used by millions of farmers as a process of certification for domestic consumption, in addition to the third-party certification usually required for export.

In India and worldwide, organic farming is a small fraction of the overall production ecosystem, but it is growing. For instance,

Ecological transitions are complex processes. Agriculture is not theatre and soil systems do not obey slogans

India is a leader in organic cotton. Ditto for millets. Millions of small farmers in tribal and lagging geographies use less chemicals and are de facto organic, but not certified by any of the expensive and difficult certification systems.

Note the gap though, between the first and the second. Australia has a systemic approach; India does not. Our problem is policy—or the lack of it. Farmers want to switch away from chemicals, no one needs to preach at them. What they await is policy support to do so.

As G.V. Ramanjaneyulu of the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA) in Hyderabad, one of the most ardent advocates of sustainable farming practices, puts it: "Farmers have done everything in the past 20 years to increase their incomes and switch to sustainable practices." They have tweaked their cropping choices, learnt organic practices, invested time and money and shouldered the risks during the transition.

With public institutions and systems overwhelmingly leaning on modern i.e. industrialised agriculture, organic farmers cannot compete in volatile markets.

"It is the Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) and agriculture universities that must be asked to institutionalise organic farming research

and strategy," he says. "Policy must support the farmers who practise non-chemical agriculture production systems."

Over 25 years, the CSA has steadily organised farmers in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh under its cooperatives and farmers' produce companies, helping them switch from chemical to organic or integrated pesticide management systems, under Sahaja Aharam, a brand of its own.

Yet, challenges remain: remunerative prices, access to markets, quality inputs, knowledge support and so on. Ramanjaneyulu says policy hasn't evolved to support farmers who made the switch; prices, credit flows, input markets remain stagnant; and the science of organic farming has not yet been institutionalised.

"Chemical farming systems have all the pillars in place: public institutions push it, banks and financial institutions support it, and markets latch it up," he says. For farmers to switch from one system to the other, they need similar pillars. "Who will provide those? What kind of knowledge systems are needed for the switch? These are critical issues that need government backing and strategy."

A farmer cannot switch to organic farming or stop using chemicals because someone says so. Before the prime minister

tells farmers to feel the moral obligation and bear the burden of the transition, he must put policy and systems in place.

The PM (and his cabinet) must answer some of these questions for farmers to practise what he preaches. What is the timeline for the transition? Under which procurement structures? Through what extension systems? What kind of financial support? How are they to absorb transitional yield losses? How will certification be managed? What happens to small cultivators already trapped in huge debt? How will states compensate for lower output during conversion years? Who will bear the economic risk of experimentation? These are not technical details. They are the difference between grandstanding and implementation.

For a sobering lesson, we need look no farther than Sri Lanka. In 2021, the Sri Lankan government abruptly banned the import of chemical fertilisers and aggressively pushed the country towards organic farming. The decision was wrapped up in ecological jargon and national pride. The results were disastrous. Crop yields fell sharply. Tea production suffered severe losses. Food shortages ballooned. Inflation spiralled. Rural distress deepened.

The lesson from Sri Lanka's experiment with organic farming is not that it's impossible or undesirable, but that agricultural practices cannot be altered overnight through executive fiat. These transitions require years of preparation, scientific planning, farmer consultation, market redesign, transition finance and decentralised adaptation to local ecological realities. Many organisations have done the spadework in India. We can learn from their experiences. Sikkim moved to a fully organic model, but farmers in the state did not benefit economically.

Ecological transitions are extraordinarily complex processes that cannot be reduced to moral exhortation from podiums. Agriculture is not theatre. Soil systems do not obey slogans.

Wars disrupt oil supplies, inflation rises, currencies weaken, uncertainty spreads across markets. Prudence, moderation, even austerity can become necessary. But what distinguishes democratic leadership from political theatre is whether sacrifice is evenly shared or selectively imposed.

By now, we know the most reliable way to understand this regime is not to listen to what it says but to observe what it does. For over a decade, structural crises in India have repeatedly been translated into moral obligations for citizens. Recall the prime minister's exhortations during the demonetisation of 2016 and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Now, geopolitical instability is being converted into another sermon on austerity instead of a serious national conversation about sustainable agriculture, fossil fuel dependence, resource conservation and ecological repair. That responsibility cannot be delegated downwards to already vulnerable citizens. ■

JAIDEEP HARDIKAR is a senior Nagpur-based journalist and author of Ramrao: The Story of India's Farm Crisis

Dear Prime Minister, Who will bear the brunt of the sacrifice you ask for?

Ajit Ranade

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent appeal, with the eleven specific requests spanning fuel, gold, fertilisers, cooking oil, solar pumps and foreign travel, is being read by many as a prelude to administered price hikes. But there is a larger ambition: it is to make forex conservation a national movement, a civic mobilisation comparable in spirit, if not form, to Mahatma Gandhi's Salt March of 1930.

Gandhi's genius was to choose salt, an everyday item, symbolically powerful, to make the case for economic self-reliance and to turn it into a mass movement. Modi's pitch is to make every Indian feel personally invested in the nation's economic resilience, when conserving foreign exchange becomes a patriotic duty.

The instinct deserves credit. India's dependence on imports of crude oil,

fertiliser inputs, gold and edible oil is a structural vulnerability that has been diagnosed for decades without adequate remedies. Modi is asking citizens to connect their everyday choices to the national balance of payments. Lal Bahadur Shastri did something similar with food in 1965, asking Indians to voluntarily fast on Monday evening as the country faced a war and food crisis. Socialist parliamentarian Madhu Limaye pressed the point further in Parliament, arguing that voluntary austerity was a constitutional duty in times of national stress, and that the political class must lead by example rather than just preach. The tradition of appealing to civic solidarity during economic emergencies is honourable, and has worked before.

But apart from the conviction he carried with the masses, the moral force of Gandhi's salt satyagraha movement came from the fact that the salt tax was visibly,

outrageously regressive. It hurt the poor more, and Gandhi chose salt for precisely that reason. On the other hand, the forex conservation movement is not against injustice and is itself regressive. Because it asks those with the least to bear a disproportionate share of the pain.

Look at the eleven requests through this lens. Deferring foreign vacations and destination weddings abroad is something only the affluent need consider. It is irrelevant to the poor. Shifting to an electric vehicle presumes having the capital to buy one. Work-from-home is an option for white-collar professionals, not daily-wage earners. Asking to reduce edible oil consumption falls hardest on those with the least since cooking oil is not a luxury. Some of the requests are well-targeted at the wealthy; others inadvertently ask those with the smallest margins to absorb a disproportionate share of the sacrifice.



The economic backdrop makes the equity question more urgent. India's three state-owned oil marketing companies are losing Rs 1,600-1,700 crore a day, with cumulative losses over the past ten weeks crossing Rs 1 lakh crore. Negative margins stand at Rs 14 per litre on petrol and Rs 18 on diesel. Excise duty cuts to cushion the blow are costing the treasury

Rs 14,000 crore a month. Fertiliser subsidies, budgeted at Rs 1.71 lakh crore, face an overrun of Rs 35,000-50,000 crore. And this crisis lands on top of an already strained fiscal position: in FY26, direct tax receipts fell short of revised estimates by Rs 80,594 crore. The FY27 direct tax target is Rs 26.97 lakh crore, a whopping 15 per cent jump over FY26 actuals. But revenues are already slowing down.

Here lies a structural paradox in Modi's appeal. Some of what he asks, like reducing gold imports and foreign travel, will genuinely help the current account without hurting domestic output. But fuel price hikes are categorically different: they are inflationary, compress real household incomes across the board, and will force the Reserve Bank of India into the uncomfortable trade-off between defending the rupee and protecting growth.

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Who will bear the brunt of the sacrifice you ask for?

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There is also a cognitive movement in government trying to suppress prices but also asking citizens to behave as if prices are too high.

There is now pressure on tax mobilisation. The Income Tax Department's Central Action Plan for 2026-27 directs field officers to prioritise demands of Rs 2.57 lakh crore in recovery upheld at appeal, track the top 10,000 PAN-wise defaulters, and classify Rs 7.88 lakh crore in large unclassified arrears by July. The scale of what has gone uncollected is striking: confirmed, undisputed tax demands of over Rs 9 lakh crore sit in arrears, concentrated overwhelmingly in Mumbai (Rs 1.65 lakh crore) and Delhi (Rs 1.21 lakh crore)—the wealthiest urban centres in the country. In FY26, the actual cash recovery, against a target of Rs 5.04 lakh crore, was only Rs 85,000 crore.

The government cannot credibly ask families to cut their cooking oil consumption while Rs 9 lakh crore in confirmed tax dues from large corporate and individual defaulters remains uncollected year after year. Ensuring that tax demands are recovered, using whatever digital surveillance, would be a powerful signal and lend some credence to the prime minister's call for a national sacrifice.

This is also a moment to reconsider India's tax architecture. Is it structurally progressive enough? India abolished wealth tax in 2015 and has had no estate or inheritance duty since 1985. The top one per cent of Indians hold an estimated forty per cent of the nation's wealth. A temporary crisis surge on very high incomes, a windfall levy on entities benefiting from the disruption—commodity traders, domestic refiners—or a carefully designed wealth tax would serve multiple purposes: raising revenue to offset the fiscal haemorrhage,

making burden-sharing visibly equitable, and giving the mass movement the moral authority it needs. Madhu Limaye's argument was precisely this: austerity without equity is not patriotism, it is the displacement of pain downward.

We also need to examine its resilience and risk buffers. IEA (International Energy Agency) member nations hold ninety days of strategic petroleum reserves as a treaty obligation. Europe built LNG import terminals and diversified supply at emergency speed. Japan and South Korea pass through price signals rapidly and hedge exposure through financial markets. India's strategic reserves cover roughly nine to ten days. India has had almost no institutional buffer to deploy. Which is why the response is perforce an appeal to voluntary restraint



So, it's austerity for aam junta and long convoys for our leaders

rather than a drawdown of non-existent reserves.

Modi's foresore conservation call will age badly if fuel prices are quietly raised while wealthy defaulters continue to defer confirmed tax dues, and the poor find cooking oil more expensive. Gandhi's movements succeeded because they were morally unimpeachable in their equity. If this is to be India's forex satyagraha, the design must match the ambition. It must be progressive in burden sharing, rigorous in enforcement, structural in remedy and honest about the price signals that no amount of voluntary restraint can ultimately replace. ■

AJIT RANADE is a noted economist. Courtesy: The Billion Press

Masterstroke that backfired

Why Bhagwant Mann must be ruining his new anti-sacrilege law

Herjinder

Bhagwant Mann thought it would be a masterstroke. On Baisakhi, 13 April, the Punjab chief minister convened a special session of the Vidhan Sabha, with a single-point agenda: to pass the Jaagat Jot Sri Guru Granth Sahib Satkar (Amendment) Bill, 2026, which introduces much stricter punishments for acts of sacrilege (*beyazbi*) against the Sikh holy text. The amendments substantially expand a 2008 Act, which primarily regulated the printing and handling of the Guru Granth Sahib.

The symbolism was unmistakable. *Beyazbi* is an emotionally charged issue in Punjab and Mann chose, on one of Sikhism's most sacred days, to position himself as the leader who finally governed what successive state governments had promised but failed to implement.

The new law prescribes a minimum punishment of 10 years in jail, extendable to life imprisonment. It imposes fines of Rs 5-25 lakh, makes the offence cognisable and non-bailable and empowers authorities to confiscate the properties of those accused of conspiring to incite communal unrest through sacrilege.

Mann thought the move was politically foolproof. No political party in Punjab could afford to oppose such a law—and they didn't. The Bill sailed through, with unanimous support from the ruling AAP, the Congress, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and the BJP. Governor Gulab Chand Kataria was equally prompt with his consent.

But the celebration lasted barely 24 hours. Opposition parties started distancing themselves. They questioned the intent of the law, and the haste over its passage. Opposition leaders alleged that MLAs had not been given advance copies of the legislation. Bills are normally circulated beforehand to allow scrutiny, but the compressed timeline of this session meant the entire process was allowed no more than a few hours.

The Akal Takht, the highest temporal seat of Sikhism, further sharpened the attack. Jathedar Giani Kuldip Singh Gargaj said the draft itself had been prepared as late as the night of 11 April.

"The unseemly haste was proof that the government was not serious about wider consultation," said Prof. Manjit Singh, a keen observer of Punjab politics.

By 14 April, leaders across the political spectrum had started questioning the lack of consultation with Sikh religious institutions and legal experts. The Congress said the law needed the broader debate. BJP leaders argued that religious organisations should have been consulted. Even sections of the SAD started aligning with the objections of the Sikh clergy.

Then came a bigger blow. As Bhagwant Mann launched his much-publicised 'shukrana yatra, a statewide 'march of gratitude' to brag about the new law, the Akal Takht formally rejected several key provisions. Mann now found himself presiding over state overreach into Sikh religious affairs.

The Akal Takht's objections were sweeping. The clergy argued that only the Akal Takht and institutions like the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee had the authority to frame rules relating to the *maryada* and sanctity of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. A state legislature, they argued, could not regulate matters traditionally governed by the Sikh Panth.

The sharpest criticism centred around the law's requirement for a central digital registry and Unique Identification Number (UIN) for every *bir* (volume) of the Guru Granth Sahib. The clergy termed it intrusive, dangerous and an invitation to 'mischievous elements'. Some even went on to argue that assigning identification numbers to the Guru Granth Sahib was to defile it.

The provisions relating to 'custodians'—including granthis, pathis and gurdwara committees—generated further resentment. Critics argued that instead of protecting devotees, the law effectively criminalised them by making the custodians legally liable for violations, including accidental ones.

The terminology also became controversial. Sikh scholars asked why the term '*bir*' had been replaced with '*saroop*', and criticised the use of bureaucratic expressions like



Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann found no takers for his 'shukrana yatra' Photos: IANS

Mann thought the move was politically foolproof. He didn't anticipate the Akal Takht red flag

Sandhwan. Following the meeting, the Jathedar issued a 15-day ultimatum to the Punjab government to remove clauses "against the Guru Granth Sahib, the Khalsa panth and Sikh sentiments".

The symbolism was devastating for the AAP government. Mann's carefully scripted 'shukrana yatra' was renamed 'ahankar (arrogance) yatra' by the Akal Takht.

Over the last decade or so, sacrilege has become an emotional explosive in Punjab. The 2015 Bargari desecration incident—involving torn pages of the Guru Granth Sahib—fundamentally reshaped the state's politics. The subsequent police firing at Behbal Kalan and Kotkapura, which killed two protesters, further intensified public anger and badly damaged the credibility of the then SAD-BJP government.

Since then, every political party has tried to position itself as the true defender of the Sikh faith.

According to Punjab data, around 597 sacrilege-related FIRs have been registered in the past ten years. Punjab leads the country in such cases, with Goa a distant second. Yet the conviction rate is a shockingly low 7-9 per cent.

Bhagwant Mann's masterstroke has clearly boomeranged. It has created a new schism between the state and the Sikh clergy. And that is rarely a battle any government wins easily. ■

Why Stalin stands tall even in defeat

K.A. Shaji

The afternoon M.K. Stalin lost Kolathur, the constituency he had nurtured for years, people imagined he'd show some signs of disappointment, if not anger or a brooding silence. Instead, the outgoing chief minister stepped out to greet tearful party cadres and sympathisers, looking utterly composed, a smile on his face, hands folded before the very voters who'd defeated him.

Travelling in an open vehicle, he thanked the people of Kolathur for standing with him for decades. Electoral verdicts are temporary, but public service must continue, he said, with no bitterness, no allegations of betrayal, no emotional drama. Even his critics admitted that he met defeat with a dignity rare in contemporary Indian politics.

Another image rippled across Tamil Nadu with extraordinary emotional resonance. C. Joseph Vijay, the actor who had just led his new party to power, arrived at Stalin's residence. Tamil Nadu has an ardent history of chief ministers ordering the arrest of opposition leaders, of ruling party MLAs coming to blows with their rivals inside the assembly.

But Stalin and his son Udhayanidhi, now leader of the opposition, received Vijay warmly, almost affectionately. No sign of insecurity, no attempt to diminish the young victor, no passive aggression—again, not a very likely scene in contemporary Indian politics.

"We're still wondering how he lost despite relatively good governance. His clear opposition to aggressive Hindutva kept the BJP at bay. Stalin is far from a spent force," says Chennai-based writer and social commentator Kavin Malar. Stalin's political strategies, she argues, will still keep Tamil Nadu difficult for the BJP, which managed to win only a single seat this time. His refusal to allow a DMK-AIADMK pact effectively aborted any possible attempt by the BJP leadership to manipulate the verdict. He even allowed DMK alliance partners to support Vijay.

"Defeat has not diminished him," says



Dignity in defeat M.K. Stalin greets and thanks his constituents after he lost from Kolathur

Prof. Sumathi Padmanabhan of Coimbatore's Kongunadu Arts and Science College. "Somewhere during his stint in power, Stalin ceased to be just a chief minister, he turned into a statesman. For millions in Tamil Nadu, he came to represent ideological clarity, decency and moderation at a time when Indian politics was becoming increasingly shrill and polarised."

Outside Tamil Nadu, many still don't get Stalin. For years, sections of the national media saw him as the reluctant inheritor of a political dynasty, as someone who lacked the charisma of his father, Karunanidhi. He was mocked for the way he spoke, for his caution and his mannerisms. He didn't have the star appeal of Jayalalitha.

"Stalin evolved into a patient politician. He didn't rule through fear. He didn't try to project infallibility. He preferred systems over spectacle," observes veteran Chennai-based journalist and political observer P.K. Sreenivasan.

For many people this writer spoke to,

Stalin's transformation into this leader was first visible during the Covid years. When many Indian states looked clueless or overwhelmed, Stalin strengthened public health outreach, expanded welfare delivery and invested heavily in district-level monitoring. Bureaucrats remarked that Stalin was unusually meticulous in review meetings and more focused on implementation than announcements.

"I've worked under different chief ministers," says a senior IAS officer from Bihar, who also worked with Stalin. "What astonished me was his grasp of environmental concerns, of climate change. Under him, wetlands were protected from encroachment and degradation. Forest cover improved. Biodiversity zones became safer. He represented a model of governance that was rooted in sustainability."

Across Tamil Nadu, the Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme, launched in 2022, became one of the most powerful symbols of Stalin's politics. In thousands of government schools, children from poor families started receiving breakfast, in addition to the state's celebrated Nutritious Noon Meal Programme. Critics were

dismissive of 'just another welfare scheme', but teachers across the state reported visible change—in attendance and the alertness of their wards. Parents, especially working mothers, expressed great relief.

Similarly, free bus travel for women became transformative in ways that statistics alone cannot capture. The daily commute became easier for domestic workers, nurses, fish vendors, textile labourers and students. Families saved money. Women gained mobility and independence.

Under Stalin, welfare was designed as economic breathing space for ordinary people. Unlike older welfare politics focused entirely on subsidies, he attempted to combine social justice with aspiration. The Naan Mudhalvan programme focused on skill development, language training and employability among students. Tamil Nadu's lower middle classes increasingly saw the government as a facilitator of upward mobility.

Stalin's politics also represented a modernisation of the Dravidian ideology, seen outside Tamil Nadu mainly through the lens of anti-Hindi agitations and regional assertion. Stalin expanded Tamil identity politics within the constitutional language of federalism, social justice and pluralism. He consistently argued that

Stalin embodies a different possibility in opposition politics. The way he handed over the baton is proof

states must retain autonomy within the Union. He opposed Hindi imposition without slipping into separatist rhetoric. He challenged centralisation while remaining firmly committed to constitutional politics. That balance made him nationally important.

"One of the defining moments of his tenure was the appointment of trained temple priests from non-Brahmin communities," says Nagercoil-based women's rights activist Jessica Richard. "The move was hugely symbolic. Stalin pitched it as opposition to caste hierarchy rather than anti-religion, continuing the Dravidian movement's struggle against social exclusion."

Richard also highlights his government's early decision "to withdraw thousands of cases filed against protesters, activists and ordinary citizens during the previous regime. Those cases involved the anti-Sterlite protests, anti-CAA demonstrations and various environmental movements. The message was clear: a democratic state should not criminalise dissent."

Stalin's arguments on delimitation and his clear articulation of the risks of making this exercise population-centric resonated far beyond Tamil Nadu. His vocal resistance was a big reason why all the southern states made common cause, and why a regional anxiety became a national debate.

His personal journey also struck a chord. Not an overnight sensation manufactured by television studios, Stalin spent decades in organisational politics. As a young man, he went to jail during the Emergency. He spent years in the shadows, and his rise to the top was seen as a culmination of a tenacious political journey.

"Indian politics today is so aggressive. Opposition leaders are often treated as enemies rather than competitors," says Satheesh Kumar, a Coimbatore-based farmer leader. "Against this backdrop, Stalin's dignified restraint appeared almost extraordinary."

Even in defeat, Stalin embodies a different possibility for opposition politics in India. The way he has handed over the baton to Vijay is proof. ■

Vinesh versus WFI

Nandlal Sharma reports on another bout outside the ring

“Rules cannot be bent for anyone,” declared Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) president Sanjay Singh on 11 May, dismissing Olympian Vinesh Phogat’s plea to compete in the Senior Open Ranking wrestling tournament in Gonda (10–12 May). The event was meant to mark Vinesh’s return to competitive wrestling after nearly two years. Instead, it reopened the bitter conflict between India’s most celebrated woman wrestler and the federation she once publicly challenged.

A Congress MLA in Haryana since 2024 and young mother to 10-month-old Kridhav, Vinesh (31) arrived in Gonda, ready to compete. But the WFI refused to allow her participation, citing her suspension—till 26 June 2026—and a pending show cause notice. A self-righteous Singh told the media that she must respond to the 15-page notice before the WFI would even consider lifting her suspension. Without that, there was no question of her participating in the three-day championship.

Singh insisted that Vinesh needed to serve a six-month notice before returning to competition. Going by the timeline, that period would be over on 12 June 2026. The show cause notice reached Vinesh on 8 May, ten days after she completed her registration for the Gonda tournament.

Vinesh responded, “If you are indeed acting upon my communication dated 12 December 2025 [announcing her return to competitive wrestling] why did you wait five months to issue a notice and demand a response?” She also pointed out that she had completed her registration two days

before the 30 April deadline. In addition, she referred to a communication from the International Testing Authority (ITA) in Lausanne, Switzerland, stating her eligibility to compete again from 1 January 2026. She shared screenshots of the email (dated 3 July 2025) from Testing Officer Estelle Daloz, which read: ‘Indeed, my apologies for the mistake: you are allowed to compete from the January 1st, 2026, onwards’.

Singh disregarded all the above, cited “other violations”, which he insisted she must respond to, and dismissed the arrival of the show cause notice *after* her registration for the Gonda event as a “procedural delay”.

The show cause reportedly accuses her of indiscipline, anti-doping violations, misconduct during Olympic selection trials and of bringing ‘disrepute to the country’, a reference to her disqualification at the Paris Olympics for being 100 gm over the 50 kg limit before the final bout.

“The Federation must satisfy itself that you have not committed an anti-doping rule violation that would render you ineligible to represent the federation in any forthcoming competition,” the notice stated. Vinesh has till 22 May to respond.

The accusation has angered many in the sporting community, who view the Paris episode more as a tragedy than misconduct.

Several women wrestlers at Gonda felt the WFI was being unfair to Vinesh. Sangeeta Chikkara, a head constable posted in Meerut and gold medal winner at the World Police Games, recalled the two occasions she had fought Vinesh, and lost. She had learnt so much from her, she was looking forward to competing against her in Gonda. Twenty-year-old Shruti, bronze medallist at the Junior World Championship, also felt Vinesh should be given a chance.

Vinesh appealed for time to study the charges, consult her lawyers and submit further documents. Meanwhile, all she asked was to be allowed to participate. “I seek no special privilege, only an opportunity to train and compete,” she told the media, adding that she was not being allowed to use even the training facilities at Gonda.

Singh sanctimoniously said he had “personally guaranteed” that Vinesh would be perfectly safe, she was free to move around the complex but “rules are rules”.

The entire incident has revived

memories of the explosive wrestlers’ protest of 2023, when Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia led demonstrations at Delhi’s Jantar Mantar against then WFI chief and BJP member of Parliament Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh over allegations of sexual harassment.

The wrestlers were forcibly removed by the police. Distressing images of India’s champion athletes being manhandled and pushed into vans sparked outrage across the country.

The protest led to the stepping down of the BJP strongman from Gonda. Sanjay Singh, a close ally of Brij Bhushan, took his place as WFI president, ‘elected’ by 40 votes to just seven polled by a former woman wrestler. “Nothing has changed,” said Vinesh bitterly at Gonda, the same set of people were running the show.

In the ongoing row over her eligibility, Olympian bronze medallist Sakshi Malik came out in Vinesh’s support with a video appeal urging Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya and the Wrestling Federation to intervene.

In the video posted on social media, Malik said, “I can give many examples where sports federations of other countries make rules easier for their players so that even after becoming a mother, women can play for the country and win medals... Whereas our federation implements such rules two days before [the trials] so that Vinesh cannot make a comeback.”

“The fact that Vinesh wants to return



Losing battle? Olympian Vinesh Phogat is paying a heavy price for calling out sexual predators in the WFI

Instead of helping a star stage a comeback, the WFI is doing all it can to make sure she never does

(Bhilai, April 2026) would be eligible for trials. Bizarrely, the criteria also specifically mentioned that ‘past performance will not be considered’.

Critics argue that the timing and phrasing of the rules appear tailor-made to exclude Vinesh.

By wilfully keeping Vinesh out, the WFI risks damaging both athlete morale and India’s medal prospects. Vinesh is not just another wrestler. A three-time Olympian, she competed in 17 championships between the Rio (2016) and Tokyo (2020) Olympics, winning medals in 16 of them—nine golds, six silvers and a bronze medal. She battled a devastating knee injury post Rio and concussion and Covid-related setbacks after Tokyo. Following the heartbreak of Paris 2024, Vinesh wrote on X, ‘Wrestling won and I lost. My dreams are shattered’.

It’s worth noting that the tournament at Gonda was not even a selection trial. Vinesh possibly wanted to just test her stamina and fitness to see if she would still be able to compete in international tournaments.

Instead of supporting her bid to stage a comeback, the WFI seems determined to ensure she never does. That “the best, bravest and boldest athlete we have”—to quote sports writer Sharda Ugra—should be prevented from re-entering the arena on technical, bureaucratic and punitive objections is a loss not just for Vinesh Phogat, but for India, and the sport she remains committed to. ■

By keeping her out, the WFI is not just playing with athlete morale but also damaging India’s medal prospects

Leak, cancel, repeat: not so NEET, after all

India’s exam crisis won’t go away because there’s big money at stake and there are big fish in the game, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

The 13 May arrest by the CBI of Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha district secretary Dinesh Bilwal and his brother Mangilal Bilwal from Ramgarh in Rajasthan for their alleged involvement in the NEET-UG 2026 paper leak has triggered a political storm. Opposition parties in Rajasthan have alleged that the brothers acted as intermediaries in a larger network involving influential political leaders. The controversy has already led to the cancellation of the NEET-UG exam held on 3 May. It will now be held on 21 June.

Over 22 lakh students appeared for this prestigious and India’s largest medical entrance exam across 5,432 centres.

The NEET-UG is a gateway to 1.3 lakh medical seats across India’s medical colleges and the National Testing Agency, which conducts the exam, earns Rs 1,300 crore just in fees.

Investigators suspect the question paper was sold for Rs 15 lakh to be distributed to students. Rajasthan’s Special Operations Group (SOG) is investigating reports that a handwritten ‘guess paper’ was circulated among students via WhatsApp groups.

Senior officials in the SOG confirmed that over 100 Biology and Chemistry questions matched those in the actual test paper. The document was allegedly circulating among students as early as fifteen days before the test.

The investigation has linked the alleged guess paper to an MBBS student from Churu in Rajasthan, currently studying in Kerala. He is reported to have sent the document to his father who runs a paying guest accommodation in Sikar. The father in turn ‘sold’ these questions to his political contacts and to students. This document was then widely disseminated through coaching networks and messaging apps.

The latest episode puts the spotlight on Sikar’s booming coaching hub once again. Maheshwar Peri, founder of Careers360, claimed in a post on X that Sikar is the epicentre of a widespread network that has gained notoriety for such work. He said the region’s NEET success rate is six times higher than the national average. He further alleged that students in Sikar were summoned for a ‘mock test’ the day before the exam and were coached on these specific questions. He added that similar accusations had surfaced in 2024 but were not looked at with seriousness.



Protests in New Delhi over the leaked NEET-UG 2026 entrance exam

Educationists point to the nexus of politicians, coaching centres and the bureaucracy. One of them claimed that the leaked question paper had been widely circulated before the exam and had created a ‘social media storm’. This strangely went undetected by the National Testing Agency (NTA).

Director-general of NTA, Dr Abhishek Singh—an IT expert who assumed office only two months ago—defended the agency, saying the examination was cancelled as soon as evidence emerged that some questions matched a PDF circulating online before 3 May.

“With the help of central agencies, we found that some questions did match a PDF that had been circulating before the exam. Based on this, we took the decision to cancel the exam in line with our principle of ‘zero-error, zero-tolerance’ policy.”

- 10 years
- 89 paper leaks
- 48 re-exams

Anyone listening?

Singh said.

Investigators are examining whether the original NEET paper may have been leaked directly from the Nashik printing facility where this year’s papers were printed—a significant shift from the earlier paper leak cases that typically occurred during transportation or distribution.

DIG Shantanu Sen (retd), a former CBI joint director said, “Paper leaks occur primarily either where the paper is set or where it is printed.”

Sen said, “During my 33 years in service, we handled one UPSC paper leak. We solved the case within 15 days. It was the superintendent of the printing press who was responsible for the leak. In the last seven years however, over 70 paper leaks for major examinations have occurred.”

Rahul Gandhi, leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha, also targeted the

government for the repeated leaks. “In ten years, there have been 89 paper leaks and 48 re-examinations. Every time, the same promises are made, followed by the same deafening silence,” he wrote on X.

Gandhi also posted his concern at learning that former NTA director general Subodh Kumar Singh who had been removed from his post following major irregularities in NEET 2024 is currently serving as principal secretary to the chief minister of Chhattisgarh.

Questions are also being raised on how the NTA, which does not receive budgetary support from the central government, meets its administrative costs from money collected as fees from students. A Rajya Sabha committee report noted that the NTA generated thousands of crores as surplus revenue. In a written response submitted in Rajya Sabha on 31 July 2024, minister of state for education Sukanta Majumdar presented year-wise data on the income and expenditure of the NTA since its establishment in 2018 showing a profit of Rs 488 crore over the past six years.

For more than 22 lakh students who sat for the test on 3 May, the cancellation is traumatic considering the months of preparation that goes into this. For those who belong to disadvantaged communities, the experience is even more painful given that their families have made huge sacrifices to ensure access to expensive coaching and tuition.

While announcing the cancellation on 12 May, the NTA had assured that the exam would be reconducted without demanding fresh registration or examination fees and that the exam fee paid by the students would be refunded. On 14 June, the students will be issued fresh admit cards for the 21 June test. The registration data and candidature from the May 2026 cycle will be carried forward to the new exam date.

Ironically, the NTA claims the examination is conducted under a ‘full security protocol’, including GPS-tracked movement of question papers, biometric verification, AI-assisted CCTV monitoring and deployment of 5G jammers.

“If the security is so foolproof, how did such a leak occur?” asks Nikhil Malhotra, a Delhi-based student who appeared for the exam this year. ■

Op. Sindoor was a stress test India failed

Contrary to the Modi government's spin that it signalled India's new, no-tolerance military doctrine, it exposed our capabilities

Ashok Swain

A year after Operation Sindoor, the Modi government still brandishes it as a signal that terrorism traced to Pakistan will be punished. It would have us believe that this is India's new military doctrine. The claim has political force.

Yet wars are not judged by intent alone, but the balance of power they create in the aftermath. By that measure, Operation Sindoor looks less like a strategic success than a costly misadventure that exposed the limits of India's military and diplomatic power. For Operation Sindoor revived Pakistan's relevance and gave China an unexpected advertisement for its weapons.

The operation began after the Pahalgam massacre of 22 April 2025, in which twenty-six civilians were killed in Kashmir. India immediately blamed Pakistan-linked militants and struck targets across Pakistan and Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir in the early hours of 7 May.

New Delhi intended to hit terror infrastructure, keep escalation below the nuclear threshold, and demonstrate that the old restraint after major terror attacks had ended. In that narrow sense, the strike achieved visibility. It showed that India was willing to use force in the heartland of Pakistan despite nuclear risks. But the battlefield quickly slipped beyond the neat script of calibrated punishment.

Pakistan responded militarily and, more importantly, diplomatically and psychologically. Before the conflict, India enjoyed not just a larger economy and a larger military, but also a deeply entrenched perception of conventional superiority.

That perception mattered. It shaped diplomacy, deterrence, media narratives, and Pakistan's own sense of vulnerability. Operation Sindoor punctured it. Whether Pakistan shot down two, five or more Indian aircraft remains contested.

But even limited confirmation from India's senior military officials and several outside officials that Chinese-made Pakistani aircraft brought down Indian jets—including at least one Rafale—was enough to alter the strategic conversation. A country presumed to be outmatched had shown it could impose visible costs.

This is the central military lesson India should not evade. Conventional superiority is not a slogan. It must be proven across sensors, missiles, electronic warfare, command networks, quality of fighter jets,



A year later, one wonders whether Modi's highly politicised response improved India's security

pilot training and information discipline.

India may have hit Pakistani air bases and military infrastructure later in the conflict. It may have adapted after initial losses and used long range precision weapons effectively. But in modern conflict, the first images and first claims shape the global story. India's silence created a vacuum. Pakistan filled it. China amplified it. The world noticed not India's declared punitive precision, but the possibility that Chinese platforms and Pakistani tactics had successfully challenged India's airpower.

Pakistan did not need to prove every claim beyond doubt. It needed only to cast doubt on India's presumed air dominance. Operation Sindoor therefore did not establish uncontested asymmetry, as BJP supporters argue. It revealed contested asymmetry.

India remains militarily stronger in arithmetic aggregation, but Pakistan demonstrated that strength on paper can be blunted by new weapons, networking, Chinese support, long range missiles and a carefully managed escalation strategy.

The diplomatic consequences have been no less uncomfortable for India. Washington

It allowed Pakistan to flaunt its wares and raised doubts about India's edge in even a conventional war

was closer to India, the Gulf was more pragmatic, and Islamabad was weighed down by debt, political instability and insurgency. After Operation Sindoor, Pakistan did not become powerful, but it became useful again.

Donald Trump repeatedly claimed credit for the ceasefire, publicly inserted himself into the crisis, and treated Pakistan's army chief Asim Munir as a consequential interlocutor. For India, which insists that Kashmir and India-Pakistan tensions are bilateral matters, this was a diplomatic setback. The crisis meant to show India's action reopened space for outside mediation.

Munir gained from this. Pakistan's army, battered by domestic criticism before the conflict, recast itself as the defender that had stood up to India. The general's global profile rose, especially in Washington's highly personalised diplomacy under Trump. Pakistan also positioned itself as a useful actor in West Asia and around Iran and Gulf security. This may not be a durable strategic revival, but it weakened India's claim that Pakistan no longer matters. Modi wanted to punish Pakistan. Instead, he helped Rawalpindi recover the attention it had lost.

The China angle is even more consequential. Pakistan has long depended on Chinese arms, but Operation Sindoor deepened military and intelligence exchange between the two. China provided Pakistan with real-time support and used the crisis as a live laboratory for its weapons against Indian systems.

For Beijing, this was low-cost strategic foraging. It didn't have to fight directly; it watched India's responses, tested Chinese platforms, assessed Western aircraft and gathered lessons for a possible future conflict in the Himalayas or the Indo-Pacific.

For India's defence industry, the gains were immediate. The J-10C entered global debate not as an untested Chinese fighter but as an aircraft associated with combat success against India and its French fighter jets. AVIC Chengdu's revenues and share prices surged and interest in Chinese aircraft grew among states seeking cheaper, reliable alternatives to Western systems.

Even if Pakistan's claims were inflated, perceptions did the work. Defence markets are shaped by narrative as well as performance. A single contested battle can become a sales pitch. India, by launching an operation that allowed Pakistan and China to showcase their systems, unintentionally boosted the prestige of the

military ecosystem it should be trying to contain.

This does not mean India should have ignored Pahalgam. No government can remain passive after such a cold-blooded massacre. The question is not whether India had a right to respond. The question is whether Modi's chosen highly-politicised response improved India's security.

A punitive strike that triggers aircraft losses, strengthens Pakistan's military narrative, draws Trump into mediation claims, deepens China-Pakistan cooperation, and raises Chinese fighter stocks is not a clean success. It is a warning about the difference between tactical action and strategic outcome.

The deeper danger is that both India and Pakistan may now believe escalation can be managed. India has announced a new normal in which terrorism will be treated as an act of war. Pakistan believes rapid retaliation can internationalise the crisis.

Both sides have learned that drones, missiles, standoff weapons and information warfare can be used under the nuclear shadow. It lowers the threshold for the next confrontation and compresses decision time for leaders already trapped by domestic divisive nationalism.

Operation Sindoor should, therefore, be remembered not as a triumph or a new military doctrine but as a stress test India failed to control. It exposed serious gaps in intelligence, air combat preparedness, strategic communication and diplomatic articulation.

It showed that China is not a distant third party but an active force multiplier. It showed that Washington under Trump cannot be assumed to privilege Indian sensitivities over Pakistani utility. Above all, it showed that performative toughness can produce strategic embarrassment.

A year later, the ceasefire holds, but little else does. The Indus Waters Treaty remains suspended, diplomacy is frozen, and public opinion on both sides has become more militarised. Modi wanted Operation Sindoor to announce India's arrival as an unrestrained regional power. Instead, it revealed a harsher truth.

Power is not measured by the bravado to strike first. It is measured by the ability to shape what happens after. On that front, Modi's misadventure gave Pakistan a narrative, China a market, Trump a stage, and South Asia a more dangerous future. ■

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A realpolitik moment for Nepal and a test for India

Balendra Shah's 'equal stature' posture has unsettled the diplomatic status quo

Kanchan Jha

When Nepal's Prime Minister Balendra Shah declined to receive India's foreign secretary Vikram Misri last week, citing his now-celebrated 'equal stature' policy, he triggered a small diplomatic storm across Kathmandu, Delhi and beyond. Days earlier, he had also declined to meet US President Donald Trump's special envoy for South and Central Asia, Sergio Gor. Cabinet colleagues, including foreign minister Shisir Khanal and finance minister Swarnim Wagle, reportedly urged reconsideration. Balen held firm.

New Delhi has since said Misri's visit will be rescheduled 'at mutual convenience' and the diplomatic temperature has begun to cool. But the episode matters for reasons larger than diplomatic etiquette or political personality. It exposes a deeper transition underway in South Asia: the erosion of old equidistance politics and the growing pressure on smaller states like Nepal to adopt a more strategic, interest-driven foreign policy in an increasingly competitive region.

The real question is no longer whether Nepal can balance between powers rhetorically. It is whether it can think strategically enough to turn geography into leverage rather than insecurity.

The 'stature' doctrine is a textbook case of foreign policy driven more by symbolism and political theatre than by strategic consequences. It plays well at home. It looks like sovereignty asserting itself. But statecraft is not a tableau. It is the slow accumulation of trust, predictability and leverage. Foreign secretaries, by tradition, do call on prime ministers across the neighbourhood. This is not subservience. It is diplomatic symmetry.

Refusing such calls does not necessarily produce independence. It produces absence. And in international relations, absence is rarely neutral.

Classical realists from Thucydides to Hans Morgenthau, and neorealists from Kenneth Waltz to John Mearsheimer, share a sobering view of the international order: it is anarchic, structurally unequal and

fundamentally un sentimental. Idealism may visit. Realism always returns. States cooperate when it serves their interests. For a country like Nepal, landlocked, limited in market size, dependent on two giant neighbours and a wider donor ecosystem, this is not cynicism. It is geography speaking through theory.

The implication is unavoidable. Nepal's foreign policy cannot continue resting on inherited slogans of non-alignment or rigid equidistance. It must evolve into realpolitik: a clear-eyed pursuit of national interest, calibrated by capacity and disciplined by institutional maturity.

One of Nepal's most revered leaders and statesmen, B.P. Koirala, understood this decades ago. In the 1970s, he rejected equidistance as a 'numbers game', the simplistic notion that every agreement with Delhi must be balanced by one in Beijing. Instead, he argued for active internationalism rooted in interests, not artificial symmetry.

Two other lenses throw light on the present moment. The first is neoclassical realism, which insists that a state's external behaviour is not shaped by systemic pressures alone, but filtered through domestic institutions, leadership perceptions and political culture. By that measure, Nepal's foreign policy will

continue oscillating until its institutions stop oscillating. The second is strategic hedging: the small state of avoiding a lock-in with any single power while maintaining multiple credible options. Hedging is not equidistance. It is asymmetric, opportunistic and ruthlessly interest-driven. ASEAN states practise it. Vietnam practises it with both Washington and Beijing. Bangladesh is learning it after its recent political reset. Sri Lanka is rediscovering it between Colombo Port City and Trincomalee. Nepal must learn it too, and quickly.

What does that mean operationally? Three commitments.

First, Nepal must treat foreign policy as national capital, not seasonal currency. Every government that dissipates diplomatic gains for short-term domestic optics is liquidating capital painstakingly built by previous generations. The country needs a serious, merit-based and properly funded diplomatic service, a professional national school of foreign service and institutional continuity that outlasts cabinets.

Second, Parliament must reclaim ownership over foreign policy. The committees on international relations and state affairs should not function as ceremonial holding pens for MPs. They must scrutinise treaties, debate strategic priorities, ratify appointments, and hold the executive accountable to publicly stated objectives. The old 'water's edge principle' works only when the water's edge is institutional, not personal.

Third, and this is non-negotiable: Nepal and India must finally move toward resolving all outstanding border disputes. Lipulekh, Kalapani, Limpiyadhura and other contested points are not abstract dots on a map. They are the daily friction points along an open border of more than 1,750 kilometres that ties Bihar to Birgunj, Uttar Pradesh to Lumbini, West Bengal to Mechi. A resolved border would be one of the strongest signals South Asia could send to itself and to the world: that two democracies can settle inherited cartographic disputes through dialogue, patience and political courage. Border

Nepal and India must try to resolve border disputes. Lipulekh, Kalapani, Limpiyadhura...



Balendra Shah's 'equal stature' policy has triggered a diplomatic storm

Photo: Getty Images

management must become the priority, not the postscript.

Here, with respect, the larger burden lies with the larger country. India's Neighbourhood First policy has been cross-border and sincere in many respects. Substantial and power trade, the Motihari-Amlekhgunj petroleum pipeline, the Jaynagar-Janakpur rail link and post-earthquake reconstruction support have all strengthened regional connectivity. But neighbourhoods are not managed only with deliverables. They are sustained through restraint, generosity of spirit and the confidence to allow smaller partners find their own voice without taking offence at every whim.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee captured this best: you can change friends, but you cannot change neighbours. Nepal is not a problem for Delhi to solve. It is a partner to grow alongside. The Misri episode, rather than being a setback, can become an opportunity, a chance for India to demonstrate that mature powers and the bums without overreacting, and continue the conversation with strategic patience. Lead the neighbourhood; do not merely manage it.

For Kathmandu, however, the lesson runs the other way.

Prime ministers and presidents are the face of the nation. When the world comes to engage, through ambassadors, envoys or foreign secretaries, the head of government does not always need to sit in the room. But the door must never appear closed. India's foreign secretary carries the political weight of the Indian state behind him. The US special envoy for South and Central Asia speaks for the Oval Office. Refusing such meetings in the name of 'stature' is

not strategic confidence, it is stagecraft. Real counterparty lies in receiving counterparts, listening carefully, negotiating firmly, pushing back where necessary, and walking away with outcomes. That is realpolitik. Stagecraft produces headlines. Realpolitik produces highways, transit corridors, energy deals, investment flows and resolved borders.

China is watching. So are Bhutan, the Maldives, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Beijing engages South Asia on ruthlessly clear terms: Tibet first, connectivity next. South Asia is in the middle of a quiet reordering and the states that organise their institutions, define their direction and treat foreign policy as a long-term strategic asset will set the tempo. Nepal can be that country. India can be the partner that helps make it possible.

The old Nepali metaphor of the 'yam between two boulders' remains relevant but is perhaps misunderstood. The yam survives not by standing still, but by knowing when to bend, when to grow and when to ask the boulders to make space. The boulders, for their part, are wise when they understand that a thriving yam is a sign of a healthy mountain.

Nepal's choice today is not between Delhi and Beijing. It is between hesitation and strategic clarity. India's choice is not between influence and restraint. It is between managing the neighbourhood and maturing it. The road, as Robert Frost reminded us, is always there. Let us walk it together, with concrete steps, flexible minds and the humility neither of our nations can afford to lose. ■

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BRIDGE TO BENGALURU 2026: KARNATAKA UNVEILS GLOBAL VISION FOR TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

Karnataka showcases vision for a \$1 Trillion economy at International diplomatic forum

Source: x.com



Karnataka has positioned itself as a global partner for innovation, technology, trade and sustainable development, with Chief Minister Siddaramaiah using a major diplomatic gathering in New Delhi to invite countries around the world to co-create, invest with confidence and innovate with purpose alongside the southern Indian state.

Karnataka's positioning reflects a broader strategic effort to strengthen its role in the global knowledge economy, leveraging Bengaluru's

established reputation as a leading centre for technology, research and entrepreneurship while expanding partnerships across emerging and advanced economies.

Held on 17 April 2026 at the Shahjehan Hall of the Taj Palace, the event titled Bridge to Bengaluru 2026: Dialogue with Diplomats brought together ambassadors, high commissioners, diplomats, startup founders, industry leaders, innovators and policymakers in what Karnataka described as one of India's most significant state-led diplomatic engagements focused on technology and global partnerships.

The event, described by the Government of Karnataka as India's largest and first-of-its-kind diplomatic innovation dialogue, reflected the state's ambition to position itself not merely as an investment destination, but as a trusted global innovation partner at a time of rapid technological and geopolitical change.

Siddaramaiah's Call for Global Collaboration

Addressing delegates from nearly 80 countries, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said Karnataka was prepared to engage with the world not just in technology, but across trade, innovation and people-to-people collaboration.

He said it was an honour to welcome delegates to "Bridge to Bengaluru", adding that their presence reflected a shared commitment to foster innovation, deepen partnerships and co-create a future defined by inclusive growth and sustainability.

He reiterated Karnataka's goal of becoming a one-trillion-dollar economy by 2032, driven by "talent, technology and tenacity".

"At the heart of our governance lies a simple belief: innovation must empower people and uplift communities," he said, stressing that economic growth must align with equity and opportunity.

The Chief Minister underlined that Karnataka's development model is anchored in inclusive growth, innovation-led transformation and sustainable progress, and that the state seeks to deepen collaboration with international partners to accelerate shared solutions in emerging technologies and resilient development pathways.

Reaffirming the importance of multilateral cooperation, he said Karnataka's Global Innovation Alliance serves as a structured platform to connect ecosystems across



CHIEF MINISTER SIDDARAMAIAH

"At the heart of our governance lies a simple belief: innovation must empower people and uplift communities, ensuring that economic progress moves hand in hand with equity, opportunity and inclusive growth."



DEPUTY CHIEF MINISTER D. K. SHIVAKUMAR

"Namma Bengaluru continues to stand tall as India's leading hub for startups, research and deep technology, powered by talent and a deep-rooted culture of innovation, making it the engine of India's global technology leadership."



MINISTER PRIYANK KHARGE

"With GIA 2.0, we are aligning policy, talent, capital and diplomacy towards a single objective — positioning Karnataka as a global innovation partner of consequence, where collaboration translates into tangible and lasting outcomes."

continents, enabling knowledge exchange, co-development and scalable innovation partnerships.

The event was attended by Deputy Chief Minister D. K. Shivakumar, IT and BT Minister Priyank Kharge, Minister M. B. Patil, senior officials, industry leaders, startup founders and diplomats from over 80 countries, with more than 140 participants in total.

Participation from Global Partners

Diplomatic representatives from Switzerland, Saudi Arabia, Denmark, France, Egypt, Malaysia, Japan, Germany and Bhutan took part, with many highlighting strengthened ties through the Global Innovation Alliance (GIA). International trade and investment bodies also participated, reinforcing government-to-government and business-to-government collaboration and Karnataka's growing global innovation ecosystem.

Global Cooperation and Development Vision

The dialogue highlighted the importance of cooperation on climate change, public health, digital transformation and sustainable urbanisation. Through the Global Innovation Alliance, Karnataka seeks long-term partnerships with governments, universities, industries and startups.

The Chief Minister said these partnerships would enable joint R&D, talent exchange, startup market access, co-innovation in emerging technologies and climate-resilient solutions. He described Karnataka as a "global bridge" connecting nations through innovation-led development.

He added that global uncertainty, supply

chain shifts and technological disruption make such partnerships essential. He emphasised that Bridge to Bengaluru is more than a dialogue; it is a platform connecting ideas, economies and people, and a precursor to the Bengaluru Tech Summit 2026.

He said Karnataka offers political stability, transparent governance and strong rule of law, making it a trusted partner for global collaboration. Karnataka's governance model was highlighted for its policy stability and investor-friendly environment, reinforcing its position as a preferred destination for long-term partnerships.

Bengaluru and Karnataka Innovation Ecosystem

Siddaramaiah highlighted Bengaluru's evolution from India's Silicon Valley into a comprehensive global innovation hub. Karnataka hosts over 16,000 startups and nearly one-third of India's Global Capability Centres, with more than 550 GCCs, while startup numbers have now crossed 18,000.

The state's institutions continue to nurture talent across IT, biotechnology, aerospace, semiconductors, space technology, AI and quantum science. Innovation in Karnataka is a way of life.

Deputy Chief Minister D. K. Shivakumar described Bengaluru as a city that is collectively built by its people, highlighting its openness, strong ecosystem and high quality of life.

Speaking at the Bridge to Bengaluru: Dialogue with Diplomats in New Delhi, attended by representatives from over 80 countries, he said the engagement reflects the growing global interest in Karnataka's innovation ecosystem.

He noted that the dialogue, held as a curtain raiser to the upcoming Bengaluru Tech Summit, underscores Bengaluru's rising prominence as a hub for startups, research and deep technology, driven by talent and a deep-rooted culture of innovation.

"Namma Bengaluru continues to stand tall as India's leading hub for startups, research and deep technology, powered by talent and a culture of innovation. It remains the engine driving India's global technology leadership," he said.

He further stated that the unveiling of GIA 2.0 will strengthen Karnataka's global innovation partnerships and create new avenues for collaboration across sectors. Reaffirming the government's commitment, he said Karnataka remains focused on attracting investment, technology and opportunities, while deepening international partnerships that enhance Bengaluru's position as a global innovation hub.

Beyond Bengaluru and Frontier Technologies

Karnataka's strengths include a skilled workforce, strong institutions, digital infrastructure, global connectivity and a cosmopolitan environment. The "Beyond Bengaluru" initiative promotes innovation-led growth in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities.

The state's focus on frontier technologies

such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, aerospace innovation and biotechnology continues to attract global interest and foster collaborative research.

Priyank Kharge on Global Engagement

Priyank Kharge said Bridge to Bengaluru has emerged as a major platform for state-led global engagement.

He said envoys from 75 countries participated in dialogue with the Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister as part of the Bengaluru Tech Summit roadshow, setting a benchmark for global engagement.

He said GIA connects over 40 countries and is steadily translating engagement into partnerships.

"With GIA 2.0, we are aligning policy, talent, capital and diplomacy to position Karnataka as a global innovation partner of consequence," he said.

He added that Karnataka offers not just investment opportunities but a responsive governance ecosystem.

Inclusive Growth and Vision

Karnataka's vision places technology at the service of humanity, balancing growth with equity and sustainability. The state is investing in IT, biotech, startups, space technology and skilling to build a future-ready workforce.

He said innovation must address healthcare, education, agriculture and environmental challenges.

"At the heart of our governance lies a simple belief: innovation must empower people and uplift communities," he said.

Strengthening Global Engagements

Karnataka's global partnerships have expanded through GIA mixers, market access programmes and international collaborations, increasing investments, startup exchanges and research linkages.

Curtain Raiser to Bengaluru Tech Summit 2026

The event also served as a curtain raiser for the Bengaluru Tech Summit 2026 scheduled in November at the Bangalore International Exhibition Centre.

The summit, themed "AI & Beyond", will host more than 1,800 exhibitors, 25,000 delegates and over 60,000 visitors from over 75 countries.

Karnataka's Global Appeal

At the conclusion, diplomats praised Karnataka's policy environment, startup ecosystem and research partnerships, noting its transformation from a technology hub into a global innovation partner destination.

The Chief Minister concluded by inviting global partners to co-create, invest with confidence and innovate with purpose, reinforcing Karnataka's emergence as a globally connected innovation hub committed to inclusive and sustainable progress.

The Chief Minister underlined that Karnataka's development model is anchored in inclusive growth, innovation-led transformation and sustainable progress, and that the state seeks to deepen collaboration with international partners to accelerate shared solutions in emerging technologies and resilient development pathways.

GIA 2.0 and Outcome-Driven Partnerships

Under GIA 2.0, Karnataka aims to deepen collaboration in AI, deep tech, biotechnology and semiconductors. The framework focuses on measurable outcomes including pilot projects, investments and institutional linkages. It also expands global market access for startups and strengthens research and skilling partnerships. Officials said Karnataka is positioning itself as a system integrator of global innovation ecosystems.

The Global Innovation Alliance framework has been strengthened through structured bilateral engagements, enabling collaboration in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, semiconductor design, space technology and digital public infrastructure.

Karnataka's innovation ecosystem continues to benefit from strong academic-industry linkages, a robust startup culture and sustained policy support.

Try the famous rewdi of _____

Or ask what's the home of the mouth-watering *galawati kabab*, *Rahim ki nihari*, *Mubeen ke pasande*, *Idrees ki biryani*, *Tunday kabab*...

Sabika Abbas

Every time I stepped outside the city and told someone where I was from, the reaction was almost scripted. Either they would immediately start talking about kababs, nihari, biryani... or they would laugh at my insistence on saying 'hum' and my *talaffuz*. Nobody has ever heard 'Lucknow' and responded with, "Ah yes, *rewdi*." Nobody.

The smell that rises after *maghrib* (Arabic for sunset) from countless tandoors and grills across old Lucknow is practically one of the three reasons I moved back. People gather around hole-in-the-wall hotels to eat *Rahim ki nihari*, *Mubeen ke pasande*, *Idrees ki biryani*, *Tunday kabab*... Standing shoulder to shoulder, sometimes waiting for a plate of kababs so soft they melt in your mouth, just like your slightly liberal political opinion might in front of your

right-wing papa.

I grew up proudly telling people that Lucknow boasts of over forty varieties of kababs and that Awadhi cuisine is what truly puts us on the map. *Galawati kabab* so delicate they were supposedly invented for a toothless nawab. *Dhaagey ke kabab* tied carefully with thread so the meat would not disintegrate before cooking. *Shami kabab* and the endless debate about how crisp they should be. *Nargisi kabab*, *boti kabab*, *pasande*, *koftey*, *kokori kabab*, *majlisi kabab*... Even *lauki ke kabab*.

And this is just kababs. I have not even started on *nihari-kulcha* breakfasts after winter fog, *paya* simmering overnight, *bheja fry* at weddings, *yakhni pulao*, or even home-cooked *adraki gosht*, *methi machhli ka saalan* or even *gosht ka achaar*.

I am listing all this because one Uttar Pradesh government list would have us think that all of UP survives on vegetarian snacks. I truly hope this list does not reach my Lucknowi friends Tullika or Madhuvi or Shabnam Apa, who would launch a protest almost instinctively when they find out that only rewdi, mango produce and *chaat* made it to the Lucknow district cuisine.

Now listen, I have absolutely nothing against rewdi. What problem could I possibly have with those little *gur-and-til* discs sold every winter in every *gali* and every train stopping at LJN? I love them. I am also

deeply loyal to 'mango produce'. I'll physically defend the honour of Lucknowi *chausa* mangoes, if need be. So, this is not just about me taking the absence of kababs on that list personally.

Or maybe it is. Because the curious case of the missing kababs from UP's grand 'One District One Cuisine' list is absurd (and dangerous). According to ministers, district-level committees were formed across all 75 districts. District Magistrates chaired them. Teachers, professors and local experts were consulted. Surveys were conducted. Files moved. Meetings happened. *Chai* was consumed.

Can you imagine this? A full-blown committee of experts sat together to decide what the historic Lucknow district should boast of culturally and arrived at the revolutionary conclusion that the city globally associated with Awadhi meat cuisine should practically evaporate if exposed to sunlight for three minutes. Somehow that made the list.

This government is asking us to believe that only vegetarian items can serve MSME interests. Seriously? In the whole of Lucknow district? Which has mastered the art of packaging even *malai makkhan*, a dessert so delicate it practically evaporates if exposed to sunlight for three minutes.

Now, I'm a huge fan of malai makkhan. But one cannot ignore the saffron tint of practically any new policy. And by saffron, I do not mean the *zafraan* lovingly sprinkled over our biryani. I mean the

Photo: Getty Images



saffron draped over legislative and policy processes.

The state insists the omission of meat is 'not intentional'. Which is as far from the truth as *malai makkhan* is from *boti kabab*. The uncooked truth is this state-driven cultural and palate cleansing is a way to impose a *savarna* upper-caste vegetarian worldview on us all.

They are using food to shape identity, memory, nationalism and power. The state decides whose cuisine becomes 'heritage', whose food gets subsidies and branding support, and whose food is made to disappear from official memory.

This is not even about some exoticised Nawabi nostalgia. Lucknow's food culture survives in small businesses tucked inside narrow lanes, in *qasai mohallas*, in winter nihari breakfasts, in *bhuni kaleji* stalls, in *Kayastha* kitchens cooking *khade masale ka gosht*, in *Eid daawat* before the second roti arrives, and in *paya* simmering overnight for workers heading out before sunrise.

What's being erased in this *sanskari* project is the food of meat-

The curious case of the missing kababs An ODOC list won't diminish their stature nor change the foodie vote, but it says something about the listwala regime



eating communities and economies built around them. Out with Muslim food traditions! Out with Dalit food traditions! And their kitchens, roadside stalls, butchers, women preserving recipes through generations, and the labouring castes whose cuisines emerged from resilience and survival. None of this should suller our 'One District One Cuisine' list.

And how they love their unitary fantasies! 'One District One Cuisine', 'One Nation One Election', 'One Nation One Tax, One Nation One Ration Card, One Nation One Grid... One Language, One Culture. One Supreme Leader. One (political) Party. Obliterate all and everything that does not fit their notion of a Hindu *rashtra* cooked in the Nagpur kitchen.

Remember this cuisine list is tied directly to state benefits, subsidies, packaging support, branding and promotion. So the question arises: whose food entrepreneurs will benefit? Whose labour will get visibility? Whose cuisines will the state deem worthy of investment?

It's almost comical to think that UP has been one of India's largest exporters of buffalo meat. UP is perfectly comfortable exporting buffalo meat all over the world, generating crores through slaughterhouses and meat-

processing infrastructure. A fully packaged buffalo can board an international cargo ship, but the kabab cannot enter a tourism brochure.

We are casually informed that the ODOC list is 'flexible', that additions can later be approved by the Chief Minister. Will he approve my kababs? I won't hold my breath. But this isn't about my beloved kababs. I'm angry because this is part of a much larger political project of omission and erasure — of food, language, culture, names, love stories, old histories!

I'm sure this woman from Lucknow district is not the only person enraged about this list. So, friends from other districts, do speak up! I refuse to believe Azamgarh is happy to be represented by *tehrri*—and I say this as someone who considers *tehrri* deeply emotional comfort food. Rampur, my friend, are you okay with this list? And Moradabad? Bareilly? Meerut? Will you just sit quietly while your food histories are vegetarian-ised under your noses?

For the nonce, if someone asks what in Lucknow they must absolutely try, I guess I'll have to offer: "Ye lijiye, rewdi nallah *farmaiye*".

And now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get a plate of kababs to calm my nerves. ■



What's being erased in this *sanskari* project is the food of meat-eating communities and economies built around them. Out with Muslim food!

Lacking a taste for diversity

For most food lovers, the UP government's One District One Cuisine misadventure has left a bad taste in the mouth. Prabhat Singh tells us why

The other day, I was invited to dinner at the home of a dear acquaintance in Delhi.

Alongside an assortment of Marwari dishes on the table sat a bowl of *lauki ke lachche*. Out of curiosity, I asked where they'd come from. "From Allahabad," came the reply. "From Matadeen's." Where in Delhi, after all, are you to find sweets with that kind of flavour? And no, not that Matadeen—not the one from (Harishankar) Parsai nor the one from Prayagraj. For generations now, the taste of their *ghevar*, *ghiya ke lachche* and *gajak* has lingered on the tongues of Allahabadis; the city itself only recently became Prayagraj. At their old establishments in Loknath, sweets are still wrapped in newspaper and tied up with cotton string.

I bring up that evening because the very next day the newspapers announced that the UP government, in its wisdom to promote 'native flavours', had released a list under its 'One District One Cuisine' scheme. The list apparently has 208 entries. The first bewildering thing about the news was that UP has only 75 districts; by the logic of one per district, there ought to have been 75. But you know these babes and their aides.

Meanwhile, social media was on fire because kababs and biryanis didn't make it to the list. The trouble with these social media warriors—always diving headfirst into shallow pools with oceans of self-confidence—is that they do not read bus panels. Those who have travelled in UP's state buses may remember that the old slogan once painted across them, 'Tu sachcha tera naam sachcha', has long been replaced by the more uplifting 'Show kindness to animals'. In the race to manufacture outrage,

everyone forgot the UNESCO tag bestowed upon the city of Lucknow, which honours everything from *galawat ke kabab* to *sheermal*.

And then, if you really want to go there—the list also excludes *Sahukare ka aloo-swaal*, *Afeemchi ke chhole*, Prayag's rustic *rasgulla* (read: *gulab jamun*), Faizabad's *fara*, the Pandeypur Sardarji's *launglata*, Rampuri *gulathhi*, the laddoos of Sandila and Thaggu... so what exactly are we to conclude? There's a great deal else missing too.

Had social media erupted over the absurdity of the list itself, one would understand. But why obsess only over what isn't there? If these list-happy ignoramuses knew anything at all, would *Chitrakoot ka maawa*, *Raebareli ke masala* and *Ghaziabad's soya chaap* have made it to the list? Had any of these mandarins even a nodding acquaintance with the matter, they would either have named one signature dish from every district—

a sort of 'name a flower' exercise—or perhaps come up with something less stupid, on the lines of 'One District, Countless Cuisines'.

They might even have drawn inspiration from our old favourite Munshiji, who knew a thing or two about making lists. Read his 1920 story *Manushya ka Param Dharma*, first published in *Swadesh*, where the grand gourmand Moteram Shastri declares: "If your platter contains the *imarti* of Jaunpur, the *motichoor* of Agra, the *peda* of Mathura, the *kalakand* of Banaras, the *rasgulla* of Lucknow, the *gulab jamun* of Ayodhya, and the *sohan halwa* of Delhi, then it is fit for the gods."

Now that is a list. Parsai, too, once wrote of such platters: "After a good meal, I often become a humanist." By that reckoning, if you like, you may even consider this latest government list a humanist campaign.

In Munshiji's time there was no

FDA, only *namak ke daroga*, which is why he could rattle off so many *mawa*-based sweets in a single breath. These days, around Holi and Diwali, FDA officials suddenly spring to life, crushing quintals of *mawa* and paneer under bulldozers, raiding sweet shops, collecting *samosa* samples—fake ghee here, adulterated oil there. But the martyrs to flavour scarcely worry, because the lab reports don't surface till a year after.

Which is why I feel that rather than exhausting ourselves over the marketing prospects of *makkhan malai*, *dahi-jalebi* or *singhadu kachri*, it may be wiser to discuss the flavours that top the list.

Perhaps the powers that be didn't like the idea of a 'Thaggu' making an appearance in an official document. Because they've never eaten *bum-makkhan*. So, trusting food vloggers instead, they casually wrote 'samosa' instead of Kanpur. *Arre janaab*, the truly celebrated

samosa is the Allahabadi *samosa*. Otherwise every mohalla in every town has at least one halwai whose *samosa* has a cult following. Only someone who has never eaten the *samosa* at Kumar Talkies or Pooran Halwai in Bareilly, Aamki's in Tilhar, or Baba's in Jhunsu could make such a blunder.

Sure I'm glib but not yet tasting Fatehpur's famed *bedmi*. But I have eaten it in Banda. Also in Hathras, Vrindavan, Mathura and Agra. It is Braj country's favourite breakfast, and at Basu Halwai's in Banda, I found the exact same Braj flavour. You may ask how/why. Well, he had apparently brought in two cooks from Vrindavan. It would hardly be a surprise if someone in Fatehpur did the same. Till now, it was Mallawan's *peda* that I associated with Fatehpur. I confess it's Bode Ram Halwai's *sohan halwa* that I taste when I think of Banda. Not just me—the whole world swears by his *sohan halwa*.

I noticed that Aligarh had been paired with *kachori* and *imarti*. Less said about that stodgy lump of refined flour masquerading as *kachori* the better. No filling to speak of, no delicate aspect, and an accompanying curry so ferocious it could send smoke out of your ears. It is to douse those flames that you're served a watery *raita* alongside. Usually served in flimsy plastic tumblers, it spills easily, invoking that well-worn Hindi gag.

As for Aligarh's *imarti*, I only recently learnt of its fame. Khalid *bhai* tells me, from experience, that wherever there's a kabab shop, a sweet shop is never far away. Maybe even the listwala knew this. Kushinagar only recently started growing bananas, yet banana chips have already become their defining snack—and the world didn't even notice. Even Gorakhpur's partial to *litti-mutton* may hesitate to claim that *litti-chokha* or *samosa* are what Gorakhpur is famous for. Anyway, they're probably too full of the *lehsun chhole* of Chauri Chaura and the *sattu sharbat* available all over town to complain.

Had these poor babus or their clerks bothered to taste the *gatte* of Kannauj and Jaunpur, and trusted their own tongues a little more, the list might have looked different.

Besides, do you think Agra's *peetha*, Pindra's *golib jamun*, Meerut's *gajak-rewdi*, Hapur's *papad*, Hathras's *rabri*, Pratapgarh's *amla*, Ballia's *sattu*, Farrukhabad's *dal moth*, Rampur's *habshi halwa*, Jaunpur's *imarti*, Tilhar's *launj* or Badaun's *peda* need government patronage to become popular? ■



The ODOC list makes no mention of these, but for food lovers in Allahabad, Hari Ram and Loknath are food heaven

Why obsess only over what isn't there? The sins of inclusion in the ODOC list are no less eye-popping

PRABHAT SINGH is an author and journalist. Translated from the Hindi original, published in Navjivan, with apologies to the author for the audacity

Odisha's quiet emergency

From economic boycotts to physical assaults, anti-Christian violence in the state is organised, state-sponsored and accelerating

Aakar Patel

This month, I was in Odisha as part of a people's tribunal examining atrocities against Christians, in particular Adivasis. My fellow tribunal members and I joined the organisation Karwan-e-Mohabbat in Nabarangpur, Jeypore, Balasore and Baripada to hear around 300 women and men, of whom the majority, more than 90 per cent or so, were Adivasi.

What is clear from what we heard and saw is that in the past two years, the Odisha government has stepped aside to allow the constitutional and fundamental rights of individuals to be crushed. Organised violence against Christians is permitted and, when the government machinery acts, it is usually in an attempt to prevent the victims from getting justice.

The violence has become templated, as is the case with Hindutva actions across this land. Something begins, often triggered by the passing of a law, and then we are inundated by waves of similar-sounding incidents: beef lynchings, love jihad, bulldozers and so on. The other noticeable thing was that the pace of atrocities is accelerating as the templates are digested across the state and then replicated.

In Odisha we observed four broad types of atrocities.

The first is the forceful prevention of the burial of Adivasi Christians. They are no longer being allowed to bury their dead in the common burial ground where other Adivasis are buried. They are blocked even from burying their dead on their privately

owned land. Mobs gather to physically stop burial and funeral prayers. Bodies wait, sometimes on ice, sometimes rotting, while the 'negotiations' happen. The police are interested more in 'order' than in law, meaning it wants no trouble and therefore sides with the mob.

The second is the social and economic boycott of Christians. This occurs through fines on those who engage with Christians or sell produce to them; some families have even been forced to expel their sons and daughters. Many Christians have no work and no means to sustain themselves; many are living in the forest. Almost all these

cases were from this year, many from the last two months.

The third involves physical attacks on Christian places of worship (including chapels and house churches) and on pastors and priests. There have been multiple episodes of forceful disruption and closure of prayer meetings and collective worship. When the police arrive, the victims are often made the accused under false charges of unlawful religious conversion. The victims are taken to jail and kept there while the mob runs free—this is common.

The fourth, and predictable, template is violence. Christian women and men are being tied up, beaten, stripped, humiliated and injured for professing their faith (it reminds one of what happened to early Christian martyrs).

Individuals were tied to trees, forced into sacks and physically assaulted. Some were assaulted sexually. Others were nearly burnt alive—attempts that were halted only at the last minute.

What was the government doing while these things happened? In most cases of violence, the police registered criminal charges against those who were attacked, followed by their detention in police stations and jails. There were also instances where the police played a direct role in the intimidation and violence against Christians.

It is not incorrect to conclude that what we saw was a deliberate abandonment of duty and a breakdown of constitutional machinery. That conclusion is inescapable given the frequency with which people told



St. Paul Church in Dengaswargi village in Rayagada, Odisha, after it was attacked and desecrated by a Hindu mob in March

us that the police joined Hindutva organisations in forcing them to sign 'compromise' agreements in which they undertake to give up their Christian faith and collective worship.

Odisha has taken a communal colour, not surprising given that it is now run by the BJP, and the elements aligned to its anti-minority ideology are being given a free run.

The tribunal has written to Manoj Ahuja, the chief secretary of the state, hoping that the government recognises not only how serious the issue is but also that it is obliged to act. Perhaps the evidence will move them. We will not hold our breath.

The last thing I want to say is that the Adivasis testified to what they had undergone with immense dignity. They were stoic and calm while recounting the crimes against them. This included the

women, one of whom, as she described her sexual assault, paused for a second, wiped her tears and continued.

Many of them will stay on in my mind as they do in the notes I took. One young man, as he was finishing, broke into a prayer. Our interpreter said it was Psalm 23. I looked it up later and it was something I knew from school:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me. ■

Views are personal

In most cases, the police registered criminal charges against those who were attacked

A dirge to our beloved democracy

A devil's wind is blowing through the country these days, exposing the outcrop of power lust, religious bigotry and more

Avay Shukla

Since these are tricky times, let us begin this week with a trick question: what do the following events have in common?

- The huge, and sometimes violent, protests in Noida last month by factory workers and domestic help over increase in minimum wages
- The refusal of a high court judge to recuse herself from a case in which her children are employed by one of the parties, and she herself is reported to have attended functions organised by that party's affiliates
- A gherao of judicial officers (appointed as adjudicators in appeals by deleted voters) by thousands of such disenfranchised voters in a district of West Bengal
- The deletion of names of almost 30 lakh voters in West Bengal, who had voted in previous elections and were in possession of all the required documents, thanks to an opaque, algorithm-driven 'logical discrepancy' feature not provided in any law or used in any other state
- The holding of polls without deciding the pending appeals of these 30 lakh unfortunates, and the callous indifference of the Supreme Court to their constitutional right to vote, saying that they could vote in the next election
- The imposition by an Odisha court on an Adivasi Dalit accused (but not convicted) of a casteist bail condition that they should clean police stations every morning for two months, demeaning their dignity and making a mockery of the law
- The defection of seven Rajya Sabha MPs, led by one Raghav Chadha, from the AAP to the BJP
- A poor tribal in Odisha being compelled



Brutal crackdown Noida's protesting workers lathicharged by the police, for demanding minimum wages

to carry the corpse of his dead sister to a bank in order to prove her death, just so that the meagre balance in her account could be transferred to him as the heir—KYC converted from Know Your Customer to Know Your Corpse

- The dismissal of cases of hate speech against leaders of a political party by a court on the grounds that their utterances did not amount to expressing hate or inciting violence. One of these speeches included the now infamous exhortation: "desh ke gaddaron ko, goli maro saalon ko" (shoot the bastard anti-nationals). The other was a video of a chief minister pointing a rifle at a target with a picture of a Muslim man

The incidents noted above differ in context, content, import and location, but they all contain one common element: the

complete collapse of what makes a developed country a developed country—governance, common law, societal values, empathy, the rule of law, trust in the government or its institutions, the idea of equity and even-handed justice.

Taken together, they point to the breakdown of something cumulatively more precious—democracy itself. They vindicate the far-sighted and cautionary words of Dr Ambedkar. He famously said that democracy in India was only a thin layer of topsoil that could easily be washed away and should not be taken for granted.

A devil's wind is blowing through the country these days, removing Ambedkar's topsoil and exposing the outcrop of power lust, greed, religious bigotry, casteism and violence that have always underpinned our society.

We had expected that progressive governments, democratically elected, would, over time, erode and disintegrate these negative features of our civilisational landscape, but the opposite has happened.

Successive governments, more so the one we have had for the last twelve years, have only reinforced these flaws and fault lines; they have been made the driving force behind national (even international) policies, they are being embedded in laws and educational curricula, they have become unapologetic instruments of state policy, they are the agenda on which elections are now being fought.

The defection of Raghav Chadha only confirms this terminal decline because it shows that a liberal upbringing and London education are no shield against the unscrupulousness of India's politics, and vindicates the mounting distrust of politicians in general.

The executive has even managed to brutalise our society to a point where the top 10 per cent care only for their own comforts and privileges, leaving the other 90 per cent to survive as best as they can.

We are among the most inequitable countries in the world, and proud of it. Democracy is the last thing that can emerge from this witch's cauldron.

We had naively expected that when the executive went on a rampage, our judiciary at least would rein it in and preserve the rule of law. That hope has been belied and now lies trampled in the dust, as some of the above episodes demonstrate.

We have today plumbed depths lower even than the ADM Jabalpur moment of Emergency days. Then at least, there was a constitutionally legitimate state of Emergency in place; today we do not have even that fig leaf to cover the government's naked pursuit of absolute power.

Today we are being shredded by a thousand judicial cuts every day, whether it be on denying bail, allowing elections to be stolen from under magisterial noses, redefining hate to suit a particular ideology, spurning any notion of accountability, or throwing overboard any restatement of judicial values.

A Constitution alone cannot make a democracy or ensure that a democracy survives. For that to happen, the topsoil has to be tended carefully, its nutrients lovingly added and preserved, the negative infestations and weeds kept away; the gardeners have to be people of wisdom and empathy, people who love what they are doing, not mercenaries seeking the maximum payouts.

Sadly, it is the mercenaries and carpet-baggers who own our patch of land today. What remains of the topsoil will be blown away soon, leaving a civilisational desert of no value to anyone but these rapacious seekers of power and their hirelings. They will rule over a wasteland, but then, as Satan mused in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'Better to reign in Hell, than to serve in Heaven.' ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

The Constitution alone won't save our democracy. As Ambedkar told us, that 'topsoil' needs careful tending



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INITIATIVES & ACHIEVEMENTS

- CURE–Education Development Plan implemented with an outlay of ₹1,011.65 Crores to strengthen school education in CURE region.
- Launch of Young India Integrated Residential Schools (YIIRS) with an outlay of ₹21,000 crore to benefit 2.69 lakh students in 105 rural constituencies.
- Telangana Public Schools (TPS) being established in 100 Assembly Constituencies outside CURE.
- Breakfast Scheme for more than 20 lakh students from Pre-Primary to Intermediate level from AY 2026-27.
- Pre-Primary Sections introduced in 1,362 Schools with expansion planned in 2,700 more schools during AY 2026-27.
- 120 KGBVs upgraded to Intermediate level and 93 designated as Young India Institutes of Excellence.
- 10,006 Teachers Recruited and 25,954 Teachers Promoted after long pending stagnation.
- 58,632 School Maintenance Works completed with an expenditure of ₹788.98 Crores through Amma Adarsha Pathashala Committees (AAPCs).
- Free Electricity provided to all Government Educational institutions.
- Digital Learning, STEM, AXL & Telangana Achievers Programmes implemented for future-ready education.
- Foreign exposure visits are being organised for Government teachers. Finland visit was completed in April 2026, while similar visits to Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam are being planned shortly.

- ₹ 183 Cr infrastructure push: 8 new buildings, digital classrooms, and repairs in 326 Government Junior Colleges.
- 5,500 CCTVs installed in Govt Junior Colleges for live exam monitoring.
- 7,000+ Junior Lecturers, Principals trained at MCRHRDI
- Tele-MANAS, Yoga, Anti-narcotics drives, Prajwala counselling launched for junior college students.
- Mid-Day Meals, breakfast and milk announced for govt. junior college students; 1,000 retrofitted scooters for CwSN students from A.Y. 2026–27.

- 40% Higher Education GER vs 28% National average
- Government sanction of ₹ 90+ crores for infrastructure strengthening
- 21% enrolment growth in two years
- 65% GDCs secured NAAC accreditation - a mark of quality
- Apprenticeship Embedded Degree Program (AEDP) scaled up to 24 courses across 94 Govt. Degree Colleges
- Industry-aligned curriculum for skilling and employability

- 2 New Universities & 8 Colleges Established
- RGUKT Campus Established at Mahabubnagar
- 3 Engineering, 3 Law & 1 Pharmacy College established in State Universities
- ₹1000 Crore Special Allocation to Osmania University
- ₹500 Crore Sanctioned to Veeranari Chakali Ilamma Women's University

- In collaboration with Tata Technologies - Centres of Excellence in all Govt. Polytechnics
- Industry-driven revamped curriculum in place with support from CII and IIT Hyderabad
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NATION

MASTERSTROKE THAT BOOMERANGED

Why Bhagwant Mann is in a fix over his new anti-sacrilege law



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VINESH VS THE WFI

Now grappling with the wrestling federation over her return to the ring




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FOOD

ODOC AND OTHER ODDITIES

Food lists that leave a bad taste in the mouth



► P6

Switching to organic farming is no walk in the park

Jaideep Hardikar

With the assembly elections to five states done and dusted, and Assam and West Bengal in the bag for the BJP, Prime Minister Narendra Modi decided it was time to ask Indians to brace themselves for price shocks and other crises emanating from the war in West Asia. As always, the onus of sacrifice was on citizens—don't buy gold, use less oil, work from home... All too familiar exhortations to exercise restraint and discipline and take patriotic responsibility.

He had one for farmers too: to "move to 50 per cent organic farming". But is the switch such a cinch?

It takes seven to ten years to move from chemical-intensive agriculture to organic—or sustainable—farming. The transition, as this writer has learnt in conversations with tens of thousands of farmers across the country, comes with big risks and massive shocks—sudden drops in production, spikes in labour wages, pest attacks, uncertain inputs...

The consensus is that while productivity stabilises over time, change requires constant guidance and services that are not available in the market. While India has some 400 definitions of organic farming in different regional languages, the agriculture science fraternity has not yet adopted it as a system of production.

By and large, organic farming has spread in India through community-based organisations, NGOs and, in some cases, highly motivated individual farmers, rarely through public institutions or universities.

At first glance, Modi's proposal to make a big switch to organic farming may seem ecologically sound. The crisis in Indian agriculture is real—farmers have had it rough for decades. Excessive use of chemicals has irreparably degraded soils, contaminated groundwater, reduced biodiversity and trapped farmers in expensive input-intensive systems. Few serious environmentalists would deny the urgent need for more sustainable agricultural practices.

The latest 2026 report by the Research Institute of Organic Agriculture (FiBL) and IFOAM Organics International shows that organic agriculture spans nearly 99 million hectares in over 180 countries, involving 4.8 million producers. The global organic food market has grown to nearly 145 billion. India, with four million hectares, has one of the world's largest numbers of certified organic farmers, topped by Australia with 53 million hectares.

The report does not consider farmers who practise organic farming but are not



Photo: Getty Images

certified. In India, for instance, the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) is used by millions of farmers as a process of certification for domestic consumption, in addition to the third-party certification usually required for export.

In India and worldwide, organic farming is a small fraction of the overall production ecosystem, but it is growing. For instance,

Ecological transitions are complex processes. Agriculture is not theatre and soil systems do not obey slogans

India is a leader in organic cotton. Ditto for millets. Millions of small farmers in tribal and lagging geographies use less chemicals and are de facto organic, but not certified by any of the expensive and difficult certification systems.

Note the gap though, between the first and the second. Australia has a systemic approach; India does not. Our problem is policy—or the lack of it. Farmers want to switch away from chemicals, no one needs to preach at them. What they await is policy support to do so.

As G.V. Ramanjaneyulu of the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA) in Hyderabad, one of the most ardent advocates of sustainable farming practices, puts it: "Farmers have done everything in the past 20 years to increase their incomes and switch to sustainable practices." They have tweaked their cropping choices, learnt organic practices, invested time and money and shouldered the risks during the transition.

With public institutions and systems overwhelmingly leaning on modern i.e. industrialised agriculture, organic farmers cannot compete in volatile markets.

"It is the Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) and agriculture universities that must be asked to institutionalise organic farming research

and strategy," he says. "Policy must support the farmers who practise non-chemical agriculture production systems."

Over 25 years, the CSA has steadily organised farmers in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh under its cooperatives and farmers' produce companies, helping them switch from chemical to organic or integrated pesticide management systems, under Sahaja Aharam, a brand of its own.

Yet, challenges remain: remunerative prices, access to markets, quality inputs, knowledge support and so on. Ramanjaneyulu says policy hasn't evolved to support farmers who made the switch; prices, credit flows, input markets remain stagnant; and the science of organic farming has not yet been institutionalised.

"Chemical farming systems have all the pillars in place: public institutions push it, banks and financial institutions support it, and markets latch it up," he says. For farmers to switch from one system to the other, they need similar pillars. "Who will provide those? What kind of knowledge systems are needed for the switch? These are critical issues that need government backing and strategy."

A farmer cannot switch to organic farming or stop using chemicals because someone says so. Before the prime minister

tells farmers to feel the moral obligation and bear the burden of the transition, he must put policy and systems in place.

The PM (and his cabinet) must answer some of these questions for farmers to practise what he preaches. What is the timeline for the transition? Under which procurement structures? Through what extension systems? What kind of financial support? How are they to absorb transitional yield losses? How will certification be managed? What happens to small cultivators already trapped in huge debt? How will states compensate for lower output during conversion years? Who will bear the economic risk of experimentation? These are not technical details. They are the difference between grandstanding and implementation.

For a sobering lesson, we need look no farther than Sri Lanka. In 2021, the Sri Lankan government abruptly banned the import of chemical fertilisers and aggressively pushed the country towards organic farming. The decision was wrapped up in ecological jargon and national pride. The results were disastrous. Crop yields fell sharply. Tea production suffered severe losses. Food shortages ballooned. Inflation spiralled. Rural distress deepened.

The lesson from Sri Lanka's experiment with organic farming is not that it's impossible or undesirable, but that agricultural practices cannot be altered overnight through executive fiat. These transitions require years of preparation, scientific planning, farmer consultation, market redesign, transition finance and decentralised adaptation to local ecological realities. Many organisations have done the spadework in India. We can learn from their experiences. Sikkim moved to a fully organic model, but farmers in the state did not benefit economically.

Ecological transitions are extraordinarily complex processes that cannot be reduced to moral exhortation from podiums. Agriculture is not theatre. Soil systems do not obey slogans.

Wars disrupt oil supplies, inflation rises, currencies weaken, uncertainty spreads across markets. Prudence, moderation, even austerity can become necessary. But what distinguishes democratic leadership from political theatre is whether sacrifice is evenly shared or selectively imposed.

By now, we know the most reliable way to understand this regime is not to listen to what it says but to observe what it does. For over a decade, structural crises in India have repeatedly been translated into moral obligations for citizens. Recall the prime minister's exhortations during the demonetisation of 2016 and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. Now, geopolitical instability is being converted into another sermon on austerity instead of a serious national conversation about sustainable agriculture, fossil fuel dependence, resource conservation and ecological repair. That responsibility cannot be delegated downwards to already vulnerable citizens. ■

JAIDEEP HARDIKAR is a senior Nagpur-based journalist and author of Ramrao: The Story of India's Farm Crisis

Dear Prime Minister, Who will bear the brunt of the sacrifice you ask for?

Ajit Ranade

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent appeal, with the eleven specific requests spanning fuel, gold, fertilisers, cooking oil, solar pumps and foreign travel, is being read by many as a prelude to administered price hikes. But there is a larger ambition: it is to make forex conservation a national movement, a civic mobilisation comparable in spirit, if not form, to Mahatma Gandhi's Salt March of 1930.

Gandhi's genius was to choose salt, an everyday item, symbolically powerful, to make the case for economic self-reliance and to turn it into a mass movement. Modi's pitch is to make every Indian feel personally invested in the nation's economic resilience, when conserving foreign exchange becomes a patriotic duty.

The instinct deserves credit. India's dependence on imports of crude oil,

fertiliser inputs, gold and edible oil is a structural vulnerability that has been diagnosed for decades without adequate remedies. Modi is asking citizens to connect their everyday choices to the national balance of payments. Lal Bahadur Shastri did something similar with food in 1965, asking Indians to voluntarily fast on Monday evenings as the country faced a war and food crisis. Socialist parliamentarian Madhu Limaye pressed the point further in Parliament, arguing that voluntary austerity was a constitutional duty in times of national stress, and that the political class must lead by example rather than just preach. The tradition of appealing to civic solidarity during economic emergencies is honourable, and has worked before.

But apart from the conviction he carried with the masses, the moral force of Gandhi's salt satyagraha movement came from the fact that the salt tax was visibly,

outrageously regressive. It hurt the poor more, and Gandhi chose salt for precisely that reason. On the other hand, the forex conservation movement is not against injustice and is itself regressive. Because it asks those with the least to bear a disproportionate share of the pain.

Look at the eleven requests through this lens. Deferring foreign vacations and destination weddings abroad is something only the affluent need consider. It is irrelevant to the poor. Shifting to an electric vehicle presumes having the capital to buy one. Work-from-home is an option for white-collar professionals, not daily-wage earners. Asking to reduce edible oil consumption falls hardest on those with the least since cooking oil is not a luxury. Some of the requests are well-targeted at the wealthy; others inadvertently ask those with the smallest margins to absorb a disproportionate share of the sacrifice.



The economic backdrop makes the equity question more urgent. India's three state-owned oil marketing companies are losing Rs 1,600-1,700 crore a day, with cumulative losses over the past ten weeks crossing Rs 1 lakh crore. Negative margins stand at Rs 14 per litre on petrol and Rs 18 on diesel. Excise duty cuts to cushion the blow are costing the treasury

Rs 14,000 crore a month. Fertiliser subsidies, budgeted at Rs 1.71 lakh crore, face an overrun of Rs 35,000-50,000 crore. And this crisis lands on top of an already strained fiscal position: in FY26, direct tax receipts fell short of revised estimates by Rs 80,594 crore. The FY27 direct tax target is Rs 26.97 lakh crore, a whopping 15 per cent jump over FY26 actuals. But revenues are already slowing down.

Here lies a structural paradox in Modi's appeal. Some of what he asks, like reducing gold imports and foreign travel, will genuinely help the current account without hurting domestic output. But fuel price hikes are categorically different: they are inflationary, compress real household incomes across the board, and will force the Reserve Bank of India into the uncomfortable trade-off between defending the rupee and protecting growth.

► Continued on page 2

Who will bear the brunt of the sacrifice you fear?

Continued from page 1

There is also a cognitive movement in the government trying to suppress prices but also asking citizens to behave as if prices are too high.

There is now pressure on tax mobilisation. The Income Tax Department's Central Action Plan for 2026-27 directs field officers to prioritise recovery of Rs 2.57 lakh crore in demands upheld at appeal, track the top 10,000 PAN-wise defaulters, and classify Rs 7.88 lakh crore in large unclassified arrears by July. The scale of what has gone uncollected is striking: confirmed, undisputed tax demands of over Rs 9 lakh crore sit in arrears, concentrated overwhelmingly in Mumbai (Rs 1.65 lakh crore) and Delhi (Rs 1.21 lakh crore)—the wealthiest urban centres in the country. In FY26, the actual cash recovery, against a target of Rs 5.04 lakh crore, was only Rs 85,000 crore.

The government cannot credibly ask families to cut their cooking oil consumption while Rs 9 lakh crore in confirmed tax dues from large corporate and individual defaulters remains uncollected year after year. Ensuring that tax demands are recovered, using whatever digital surveillance, would be a powerful signal and lend some credence to the prime minister's call for a national sacrifice.

This is also a moment to reconsider India's tax architecture. Is it structurally progressive enough? India abolished wealth tax in 2015 and has had no estate or inheritance duty since 1985. The top one per cent of Indians hold an estimated forty per cent of the nation's wealth. A temporary crisis surge on very high incomes, a windfall levy on entities benefiting from the disruption—commodity traders, domestic refiners—or a carefully designed wealth tax would serve multiple purposes: raising revenue to offset the fiscal haemorrhage,

making burden-sharing visibly equitable, and giving the mass movement the moral authority it needs. Madhu Limaye's argument was precisely this: austerity without equity is not patriotism, it is the displacement of pain downward.

We also need to consider our resilience and risk buffers. IEA (International Energy Agency) member nations hold ninety days of strategic petroleum reserves as a treaty obligation. Europe built LNG import terminals and diversified supply at emergency speed. Japan and South Korea pass through price signals rapidly and hedge exposure through financial markets. India's strategic reserves cover roughly nine to ten days. India has had almost no institutional buffer to deploy. Which is why the response is perform an appeal to voluntary restraint



So, it's austerity for aam junta and long convoys for our leaders

rather than a drawdown of non-existent reserves.

Modi's foresore conservation call will age badly if fuel prices are quietly raised while wealthy defaulters continue to defer confirmed tax dues, and the poor find cooking oil more expensive. Gandhi's movements succeeded because they were morally unimpeachable in their equity. If this is to be India's forex satyagraha, the design must match the ambition. It must be progressive in burden sharing, rigorous in enforcement, structural in remedy and honest about the price signals that no amount of voluntary restraint can ultimately replace. ■

AJIT RANADE is a noted economist. Courtesy: The Billion Press

Masterstroke that backfired

Why Bhagwant Mann must be ruing his new anti-sacrilege law

Herjinder

Bhagwant Mann thought it would be a masterstroke. On Baisakhi, 13 April, the Punjab chief minister convened a special session of the Vidhan Sabha, with a single-point agenda: to pass the Jaagat Jot Sri Guru Granth Sahib Satkar (Amendment) Bill, 2026, which introduces much stricter punishments for acts of sacrilege (*beyazbi*) against the Sikh holy text. The amendments substantially expand a 2008 Act, which primarily regulated the printing and handling of the Guru Granth Sahib.

The symbolism was unmistakable. *Beyazbi* is an emotionally charged issue in Punjab and Mann chose, on one of Sikhism's most sacred days, to position himself as the leader who finally governed what successive state governments had promised but failed to implement.

The new law prescribes a minimum punishment of 10 years in jail, extendable to life imprisonment. It imposes fines of Rs 5-25 lakh, makes the offence cognisable and non-bailable and empowers authorities to confiscate the properties of those accused of conspiring to incite communal unrest through sacrilege.

Mann thought the move was politically foolproof. No political party in Punjab could afford to oppose such a law—and they didn't. The Bill sailed through, with unanimous support from the ruling AAP, the Congress, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and the BJP. Governor Gulab Chand Kataria was equally proud with his consent.

But the celebration lasted barely 24 hours. Opposition parties started distancing themselves. They questioned the intent of the law, and the haste over its passage. Opposition leaders alleged that MLAs had not been given advance copies of the legislation. Bills are normally circulated beforehand to allow scrutiny, but the compressed timeline of this session meant the entire process was allowed no more than a few hours.

The Akal Takht, the highest temporal seat of Sikhism, further sharpened the attack. Jathedar Giani Kuldip Singh Gargaj said the draft itself had been prepared as late as the night of 11 April.

"The unseemly haste was proof that the government was not serious about wider consultation," said Prof. Manjit Singh, a keen observer of Punjab politics.

By 14 April, leaders across the political spectrum had started questioning the lack of consultation with Sikh religious institutions and legal experts. The Congress said the law needed the broader debate. BJP leaders argued that religious organisations should have been consulted. Even sections of the SAD started aligning with the objections of the Sikh clergy.

Then came a bigger blow. As Bhagwant Mann launched his much-publicised 'shukrana yatra, a statewide 'march of gratitude' to brag about the new law, the Akal Takht formally rejected several key provisions. Mann now found himself presiding over state overreach into Sikh religious affairs.

The Akal Takht's objections were sweeping. The clergy argued that only the Akal Takht and institutions like the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee had the authority to frame rules relating to the *maryada* and sanctity of the *Guru Granth Sahib*. A state legislature, they argued, could not regulate matters traditionally governed by the Sikh Panth.

The sharpest criticism centred around the law's requirement for a central digital registry and Unique Identification Number (UIN) for every *bir* (volume) of the Guru Granth Sahib. The clergy termed it intrusive, dangerous and an invitation to 'mischievous elements'. Some even went on to argue that assigning identification numbers to the Guru Granth Sahib was to defile it.

The provisions relating to 'custodians'—including granthis, pathis and gurdwara committees—generated further resentment. Critics argued that instead of protecting devotees, the law effectively criminalised them by making the custodians legally liable for violations, including accidental ones.

The terminology also became controversial. Sikh scholars asked why the term '*bir*' had been replaced with '*saroop*', and criticised the use of bureaucratic expressions like



Punjab CM Bhagwant Mann found no takers for his 'shukrana yatra' Photos: IANS

Mann thought the move was politically foolproof. He didn't anticipate the Akal Takht red flag

Sandhwan. Following the meeting, the Jathedar issued a 15-day ultimatum to the Punjab government to remove clauses "against the Guru Granth Sahib, the Khalsa panth and Sikh sentiments".

The symbolism was devastating for the AAP government. Mann's carefully scripted 'shukrana yatra' was renamed 'ahankar (arrogance) yatra' by the Akal Takht.

Over the last decade or so, sacrilege has become an emotional explosive in Punjab. The 2015 Bargari desecration incident—involving torn pages of the Guru Granth Sahib—fundamentally reshaped the state's politics. The subsequent police firing at Behal Kalan and Kotkapura, which killed two protesters, further intensified public anger and badly damaged the credibility of the then SAD-BJP government.

Since then, every political party has tried to position itself as the true defender of the Sikh faith.

According to Punjab data, around 597 sacrilege-related FIRs have been registered in the past ten years. Punjab leads the country in such cases, with Goa a distant second. Yet the conviction rate is a shockingly low 7-9 per cent.

Bhagwant Mann's masterstroke has clearly boomeranged. It has created a new schism between the state and the Sikh clergy. And that is rarely a battle any government wins easily. ■

Why Stalin stands tall even in defeat

K.A. Shaji

The afternoon M.K. Stalin lost Kolathur, the constituency he had nurtured for years, people imagined he'd show some signs of disappointment, if not anger or a brooding silence. Instead, the outgoing chief minister stepped out to greet tearful party cadres and sympathisers, looking utterly composed, a smile on his face, hands folded before the very voters who'd defeated him.

Travelling in an open vehicle, he thanked the people of Kolathur for standing with him for decades. Electoral verdicts are temporary, but public service must continue, he said, with no bitterness, no allegations of betrayal, no emotional drama. Even his critics admitted that he met defeat with a dignity rare in contemporary Indian politics.

Another image rippled across Tamil Nadu with extraordinary emotional resonance. C. Joseph Vijay, the actor who had just led his new party to power, arrived at Stalin's residence. Tamil Nadu has an ugly history of chief ministers ordering the arrest of opposition leaders, of ruling party MLAs coming to blows with their rivals inside the assembly.

But Stalin and his son Udhayanidhi, now leader of the opposition, received Vijay warmly, almost affectionately. No sign of insecurity, no attempt to diminish the young victor, no passive aggression—again, not a very likely scene in contemporary Indian politics.

"We're still wondering how he lost despite relatively good governance. His clear opposition to aggressive Hindutva kept the BJP at bay. Stalin is far from a spent force," says Chennai-based writer and social commentator Kavin Malar. Stalin's political strategies, she argues, will still keep Tamil Nadu difficult for the BJP, which managed to win only a single seat this time. His refusal to allow a DMK-AIADMK pact effectively aborted any possible attempt by the BJP leadership to manipulate the verdict. He even allowed DMK alliance partners to support Vijay.

"Defeat has not diminished him," says



Dignity in defeat M.K. Stalin greets and thanks his constituents after he lost from Kolathur

Prof. Sumathi Padmanabhan of Coimbatore's Kongunadu Arts and Science College. "Somewhere during his stint in power, Stalin ceased to be just a chief minister, he turned into a statesman. For millions in Tamil Nadu, he came to represent ideological clarity, decency and moderation at a time when Indian politics was becoming increasingly shrill and polarised."

Outside Tamil Nadu, many still don't get Stalin. For years, sections of the national media saw him as the reluctant inheritor of a political dynasty, as someone who lacked the charisma of his father, Karunanidhi. He was mocked for the way he spoke, for his caution and his mannerisms. He didn't have the star appeal of Jayalalitha.

"Stalin evolved into a patient politician. He didn't rule through fear. He didn't try to project infallibility. He preferred systems over spectacle," observes veteran Chennai-based journalist and political observer P.K. Sreenivasan.

For many people this writer spoke to,

Stalin's transformation into this leader was first visible during the Covid years. When many Indian states looked clueless or overwhelmed, Stalin strengthened public health outreach, expanded welfare delivery and invested heavily in district-level monitoring. Bureaucrats remarked that Stalin was unusually meticulous in review meetings and more focused on implementation than announcements.

"I've worked under different chief ministers," says a senior IAS officer from Bihar, who also worked with Stalin. "What astonished me was his grasp of environmental concerns, of climate change. Under him, wetlands were protected from encroachment and degradation. Forest cover improved. Biodiversity zones became safer. He represented a model of governance that was rooted in sustainability."

Across Tamil Nadu, the Chief Minister's Breakfast Scheme, launched in 2022, became one of the most powerful symbols of Stalin's politics. In thousands of government schools, children from poor families started receiving breakfast, in addition to the state's celebrated Nutritious Noon Meal Programme. Critics were

dismissive of 'just another welfare scheme', but teachers across the state reported visible change—in attendance and the alertness of their wards. Parents, especially working mothers, expressed great relief.

Similarly, free bus travel for women became transformative in ways that statistics alone cannot capture. The daily commute became easier for domestic workers, nurses, fish vendors, textile labourers and students. Families saved money. Women gained mobility and independence.

Under Stalin, welfare was designed as economic breathing space for ordinary people. Unlike older welfare politics focused entirely on subsidies, he attempted to combine social justice with aspiration. The Naan Mudhalvan programme focused on skill development, language training and employability among students. Tamil Nadu's lower middle classes increasingly saw the government as a facilitator of upward mobility.

Stalin's politics also represented a modernisation of the Dravidian ideology, seen outside Tamil Nadu mainly through the lens of anti-Hindi agitations and regional assertion. Stalin expanded Tamil identity politics within the constitutional language of federalism, social justice and pluralism. He consistently argued that

Stalin embodies a different possibility in opposition politics. The way he handed over the baton is proof

states must retain autonomy within the Union. He opposed Hindi imposition without slipping into separatist rhetoric. He challenged centralisation while remaining firmly committed to constitutional politics. That balance made him nationally important.

"One of the defining moments of his tenure was the appointment of trained temple priests from non-Brahmin communities," says Nagercoil-based women's rights activist Jessica Richard. "The move was hugely symbolic. Stalin pitched it as opposition to caste hierarchy rather than anti-religion, continuing the Dravidian movement's struggle against social exclusion."

Richard also highlights his government's early decision "to withdraw thousands of cases filed against protesters, activists and ordinary citizens during the previous regime. Those cases involved the anti-Sterlite protests, anti-CAA demonstrations and various environmental movements. The message was clear: a democratic state should not criminalise dissent."

Stalin's arguments on delimitation and his clear articulation of the risks of making this exercise population-centric resonated far beyond Tamil Nadu. His vocal resistance was a big reason why all the southern states made common cause, and why a regional anxiety became a national debate.

His personal journey also struck a chord. Not an overnight sensation manufactured by television studios, Stalin spent decades in organisational politics. As a young man, he went to jail during the Emergency. He spent years in the shadows, and his rise to the top was seen as a culmination of a tenacious political journey.

"Indian politics today is so aggressive. Opposition leaders are often treated as enemies rather than competitors," says Satheesh Kumar, a Coimbatore-based farmer leader. "Against this backdrop, Stalin's dignified restraint appeared almost extraordinary."

Even in defeat, Stalin embodies a different possibility for opposition politics in India. The way he has handed over the baton to Vijay is proof. ■

Vinesh versus WFI

Nandlal Sharma reports on another bout outside the ring

“Rules cannot be bent for anyone,” declared Wrestling Federation of India (WFI) president Sanjay Singh on 11 May, dismissing Olympian Vinesh Phogat’s plea to compete in the Senior Open Ranking wrestling tournament in Gonda (10–12 May). The event was meant to mark Vinesh’s return to competitive wrestling after nearly two years. Instead, it reopened the bitter conflict between India’s most celebrated woman wrestler and the federation she once publicly challenged.

A Congress MLA in Haryana since 2024 and young mother to 10-month-old Kridhav, Vinesh (31) arrived in Gonda, ready to compete. But the WFI refused to allow her participation, citing her suspension—till 26 June 2026—and a pending show cause notice. A self-righteous Singh told the media that she must respond to the 15-page notice before the WFI would even consider lifting her suspension. Without that, there was no question of her participating in the three-day championship.

Singh insisted that Vinesh needed to serve a six-month notice before returning to competition. Going by the timeline, that period would be over on 12 June 2026. The show cause notice reached Vinesh on 8 May, ten days after she completed her registration for the Gonda tournament.

Vinesh responded, “If you are indeed acting upon my communication dated 12 December 2025 [announcing her return to competitive wrestling] why did you wait five months to issue a notice and demand a response?” She also pointed out that she had completed her registration two days

before the 30 April deadline. In addition, she referred to a communication from the International Testing Authority (ITA) in Lausanne, Switzerland, stating her eligibility to compete again from 1 January 2026. She shared screenshots of the email (dated 3 July 2025) from Testing Officer Estelle Daloz, which read: ‘Indeed, my apologies for the mistake: you are allowed to compete from the January 1st, 2026, onwards’.

Singh disregarded all the above, cited “other violations”, which he insisted she must respond to, and dismissed the arrival of the show cause notice *after* her registration for the Gonda event as a “procedural delay”.

The show cause reportedly accuses her of indiscipline, anti-doping violations, misconduct during Olympic selection trials and of bringing ‘disrepute to the country’, a reference to her disqualification at the Paris Olympics for being 100 gm over the 50 kg limit before the final bout.

“The Federation must satisfy itself that you have not committed an anti-doping rule violation that would render you ineligible to represent the federation in any forthcoming competition,” the notice stated. Vinesh has till 22 May to respond.

The accusation has angered many in the sporting community, who view the Paris episode more as a tragedy than misconduct.

Several women wrestlers at Gonda felt the WFI was being unfair to Vinesh. Sangeeta Chikkara, a head constable posted in Meerut and gold medal winner at the World Police Games, recalled the two occasions she had fought Vinesh, and lost. She had learnt so much from her, she was looking forward to competing against her in Gonda. Twenty-year-old Shruti, bronze medallist at the Junior World Championship, also felt Vinesh should be given a chance.

Vinesh appealed for time to study the charges, consult her lawyers and submit further documents. Meanwhile, all she asked was to be allowed to participate. “I seek no special privilege, only an opportunity to train and compete,” she told the media, adding that she was not being allowed to use even the training facilities at Gonda.

Singh sanctimoniously said he had “personally guaranteed” that Vinesh would be perfectly safe, she was free to move around the complex but “rules are rules”.

The entire incident has revived

memories of the explosive wrestlers’ protest of 2023, when Vinesh Phogat, Sakshi Malik and Bajrang Punia led demonstrations at Delhi’s Jantar Mantar against then WFI chief and BJP member of Parliament Brij Bhushan Sharan Singh over allegations of sexual harassment.

The wrestlers were forcibly removed by the police. Distressing images of India’s champion athletes being manhandled and pushed into vans sparked outrage across the country.

The protest led to the stepping down of the BJP strongman from Gonda. Sanjay Singh, a close ally of Brij Bhushan, took his place as WFI president, ‘elected’ by 40 votes to just seven polled by a former woman wrestler. “Nothing has changed,” said Vinesh bitterly at Gonda, the same set of people were running the show.

In the ongoing row over her eligibility, Olympian bronze medallist Sakshi Malik came out in Vinesh’s support with a video appeal urging Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Sports Minister Mansukh Mandaviya and the Wrestling Federation to intervene.

In the video posted on social media, Malik said, “I can give many examples where sports federations of other countries make rules easier for their players so that even after becoming a mother, women can play for the country and win medals... Whereas our federation implements such rules two days before [the trials] so that Vinesh cannot make a comeback.”

“The fact that Vinesh wants to return



Losing battle? Olympian Vinesh Phogat is paying a heavy price for calling out sexual predators in the WFI

Instead of helping a star stage a comeback, the WFI is doing all it can to make sure she never does

(Bhilai, April 2026) would be eligible for trials. Bizarrely, the criteria also specifically mentioned that ‘past performance will not be considered’.

Critics argue that the timing and phrasing of the rules appear tailor-made to exclude Vinesh.

By wilfully keeping Vinesh out, the WFI risks damaging both athlete morale and India’s medal prospects. Vinesh is not just another wrestler. A three-time Olympian, she competed in 17 championships between the Rio (2016) and Tokyo (2020) Olympics, winning medals in 16 of them—nine golds, six silvers and a bronze medal. She battled a devastating knee injury post Rio and concussion and Covid-related setbacks after Tokyo. Following the heartbreak of Paris 2024, Vinesh wrote on X, ‘Wrestling won and I lost. My dreams are shattered’.

It’s worth noting that the tournament at Gonda was not even a selection trial. Vinesh possibly wanted to just test her stamina and fitness to see if she would still be able to compete in international tournaments.

Instead of supporting her bid to stage a comeback, the WFI seems determined to ensure she never does. That “the best, bravest and boldest athlete we have”—to quote sports writer Sharda Ugra—should be prevented from re-entering the arena on technical, bureaucratic and punitive objections is a loss not just for Vinesh Phogat, but for India, and the sport she remains committed to. ■

after becoming a mother should be celebrated, not obstructed,” she added.

The controversy has also drawn attention to new eligibility criteria issued by the WFI on 6 May for upcoming international trials. The revised rules specify that only medal winners from the Senior National Wrestling Championship (Ahmedabad, December 2025), the Senior Federation Cup (Ghaziabad, February 2026) and Under-20 National Championship

By keeping her out, the WFI is not just playing with athlete morale but also damaging India’s medal prospects

Leak, cancel, repeat: not so NEET, after all

India’s exam crisis won’t go away because there’s big money at stake and there are big fish in the game, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

The 13 May arrest by the CBI of Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha district secretary Dinesh Bilwal and his brother Mangilal Bilwal from Ramgarh in Rajasthan for their alleged involvement in the NEET-UG 2026 paper leak has triggered a political storm. Opposition parties in Rajasthan have alleged that the brothers acted as intermediaries in a larger network involving influential political leaders. The controversy has already led to the cancellation of the NEET-UG exam held on 3 May. It will now be held on 21 June.

Over 22 lakh students appeared for this prestigious and India’s largest medical entrance exam across 5,432 centres.

The NEET-UG is a gateway to 1.3 lakh medical seats across India’s medical colleges and the National Testing Agency, which conducts the exam, earns Rs 1,300 crore just in fees.

Investigators suspect the question paper was sold for Rs 15 lakh to be distributed to students. Rajasthan’s Special Operations Group (SOG) is investigating reports that a handwritten ‘guess paper’ was circulated among students via WhatsApp groups.

Senior officials in the SOG confirmed that over 100 Biology and Chemistry questions matched those in the actual test paper. The document was allegedly circulating among students as early as fifteen days before the test.

The investigation has linked the alleged guess paper to an MBBS student from Churu in Rajasthan, currently studying in Kerala. He is reported to have sent the document to his father who runs a paying guest accommodation in Sikar. The father in turn ‘sold’ these questions to his political contacts and to students. This document was then widely disseminated through coaching networks and messaging apps.

The latest episode puts the spotlight on Sikar’s booming coaching hub once again. Maheshwar Peri, founder of Careers360, claimed in a post on X that Sikar is the epicentre of a widespread network that has gained notoriety for such work. He said the region’s NEET success rate is six times higher than the national average. He further alleged that students in Sikar were summoned for a ‘mock test’ the day before the exam and were coached on these specific questions. He added that similar accusations had surfaced in 2024 but were not looked at with seriousness.



Protests in New Delhi over the leaked NEET-UG 2026 entrance exam

Educationists point to the nexus of politicians, coaching centres and the bureaucracy. One of them claimed that the leaked question paper had been widely circulated before the exam and had created a ‘social media storm’. This strangely went undetected by the National Testing Agency (NTA).

Director-general of NTA, Dr Abhishek Singh—an IT expert who assumed office only two months ago—defended the agency, saying the examination was cancelled as soon as evidence emerged that some questions matched a PDF circulating online before 3 May.

“With the help of central agencies, we found that some questions did match a PDF that had been circulating before the exam. Based on this, we took the decision to cancel the exam in line with our principle of ‘zero-error, zero-tolerance’ policy.”

- 10 years
- 89 paper leaks
- 48 re-exams

Anyone listening?

government for the repeated leaks. “In ten years, there have been 89 paper leaks and 48 re-examinations. Every time, the same promises are made, followed by the same deafening silence,” he wrote on X.

Gandhi also posted his concern at learning that former NTA director general Subodh Kumar Singh who had been removed from his post following major irregularities in NEET 2024 is currently serving as principal secretary to the chief minister of Chhattisgarh.

Questions are also being raised on how the NTA, which does not receive budgetary support from the central government, meets its administrative costs from money collected as fees from students. A Rajya Sabha committee report noted that the NTA generated thousands of crores as surplus revenue. In a written response submitted in Rajya Sabha on 31 July 2024, minister of state for education Sukanta Majumdar presented year-wise data on the income and expenditure of the NTA since its establishment in 2018 showing a profit of Rs 488 crore over the past six years.

For more than 22 lakh students who sat for the test on 3 May, the cancellation is traumatic considering the months of preparation that goes into this. For those who belong to disadvantaged communities, the experience is even more painful given that their families have made huge sacrifices to ensure access to expensive coaching and tuition.

While announcing the cancellation on 12 May, the NTA had assured that the exam would be reconducted without demanding fresh registration or examination fees and that the exam fee paid by the students would be refunded. On 14 June, the students will be issued fresh admit cards for the 21 June test. The registration data and candidature from the May 2026 cycle will be carried forward to the new exam date.

Ironically, the NTA claims the examination is conducted under a ‘full security protocol’, including GPS-tracked movement of question papers, biometric verification, AI-assisted CCTV monitoring and deployment of 5G jammers.

“If the security is so foolproof, how did such a leak occur?” asks Nikhil Malhotra, a Delhi-based student who appeared for the exam this year. ■

Singh said. Investigators are examining whether the original NEET paper may have been leaked directly from the Nashik printing facility where this year’s papers were printed—a significant shift from the earlier paper leak cases that typically occurred during transportation or distribution.

DIG Shantanu Sen (retd), a former CBI joint director said, “Paper leaks occur primarily either where the paper is set or where it is printed.”

Sen said, “During my 33 years in service, we handled one UPSC paper leak. We solved the case within 15 days. It was the superintendent of the printing press who was responsible for the leak. In the last seven years however, over 70 paper leaks for major examinations have occurred.”

Rahul Gandhi, leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha, also targeted the

Op. Sindoor was a stress test India failed

Contrary to the Modi government's spin that it signalled India's new, no-tolerance military doctrine, it exposed our capabilities

Ashok Swain

A year after Operation Sindoor, the Modi government still brandishes it as a signal that terrorism traced to Pakistan will be punished. It would have us believe that this is India's new military doctrine. The claim has political force.

Yet wars are not judged by intent alone, but the balance of power they create in the aftermath. By that measure, Operation Sindoor looks less like a strategic success than a costly misadventure that exposed the limits of India's military and diplomatic power. For Operation Sindoor revived Pakistan's relevance and gave China an unexpected advertisement for its weapons.

The operation began after the Pahalgam massacre of 22 April 2025, in which twenty-six civilians were killed in Kashmir. India immediately blamed Pakistan-linked militants and struck targets across Pakistan and Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir in the early hours of 7 May.

New Delhi intended to hit terror infrastructure, keep escalation below the nuclear threshold, and demonstrate that the old restraint after major terror attacks had ended. In that narrow sense, the strike achieved visibility. It showed that India was willing to use force in the heartland of Pakistan despite nuclear risks. But the battlefield quickly slipped beyond the neat script of calibrated punishment.

Pakistan responded militarily and, more importantly, diplomatically and psychologically. Before the conflict, India enjoyed not just a larger economy and a larger military, but also a deeply entrenched perception of conventional superiority.

That perception mattered. It shaped diplomacy, deterrence, media narratives, and Pakistan's own sense of vulnerability. Operation Sindoor punctured it. Whether Pakistan shot down two, five or more Indian aircraft remains contested.

But even limited confirmation from India's senior military officials and several outside officials that Chinese-made Pakistani aircraft brought down Indian jets—including at least one Rafale—was enough to alter the strategic conversation. A country presumed to be outmatched had shown it could impose visible costs.

This is the central military lesson India should not evade. Conventional superiority is not a slogan. It must be proven across sensors, missiles, electronic warfare, command networks, quality of fighter jets,



A year later, one wonders whether Modi's highly politicised response improved India's security

pilot training and information discipline.

India may have hit Pakistani air bases and military infrastructure later in the conflict. It may have adapted after initial losses and used long range precision weapons effectively. But in modern conflict, the first images and first claims shape the global story. India's silence created a vacuum. Pakistan filled it. China amplified it. The world noticed not India's declared punitive precision, but the possibility that Chinese platforms and Pakistani tactics had successfully challenged India's airpower.

Pakistan did not need to prove every claim beyond doubt. It needed only to cast doubt on India's presumed air dominance. Operation Sindoor therefore did not establish uncontested asymmetry, as BJP supporters argue. It revealed contested asymmetry.

India remains militarily stronger in arithmetic aggregation, but Pakistan demonstrated that strength on paper can be blunted by new weapons, networking, Chinese support, long range missiles and a carefully managed escalation strategy.

The diplomatic consequences have been no less uncomfortable for India. Washington

was closer to India, the Gulf was more pragmatic, and Islamabad was weighed down by debt, political instability and insurgency. After Operation Sindoor, Pakistan did not become powerful, but it became useful again.

Donald Trump repeatedly claimed credit for the ceasefire, publicly inserted himself into the crisis, and treated Pakistan's army chief Asim Munir as a consequential interlocutor. For India, which insists that Kashmir and India-Pakistan tensions are bilateral matters, this was a diplomatic setback. The crisis meant to show India's action reopened space for outside mediation.

Munir gained from this. Pakistan's army, battered by domestic criticism before the conflict, recast itself as the defender that had stood up to India. The general's global profile rose, especially in Washington's highly personalised diplomacy under Trump. Pakistan also positioned itself as a useful actor in West Asia and around Iran and Gulf security. This may not be a durable strategic revival, but it weakened India's claim that Pakistan no longer matters. Modi wanted to punish Pakistan. Instead, he helped Rawalpindi recover the attention it had lost.

The China angle is even more consequential. Pakistan has long depended on Chinese arms, but Operation Sindoor deepened military and intelligence exchange between the two. China provided Pakistan with real-time support and used the crisis as a live laboratory for its weapons against Indian systems.

For Beijing, this was low-cost strategic foraging. It didn't have to fight directly; it watched India's responses, tested Chinese platforms, assessed Western aircraft and gathered lessons for a possible future conflict in the Himalayas or the Indo-Pacific.

For India's defence industry, the gains were immediate. The J-10C entered global debate not as an untested Chinese fighter but as an aircraft associated with combat success against India and its French fighter jets. AVIC Chengdu's revenues and share prices surged and interest in Chinese aircraft grew among states seeking cheaper, reliable alternatives to Western systems.

Even if Pakistan's claims were inflated, perceptions did the work. Defence markets are shaped by narrative as well as performance. A single contested battle can become a sales pitch. India, by launching an operation that allowed Pakistan and China to showcase their systems, unintentionally boosted the prestige of the

military ecosystem it should be trying to contain.

This does not mean India should have ignored Pahalgam. No government can remain passive after such a cold-blooded massacre. The question is not whether India had a right to respond. The question is whether Modi's chosen highly-politicised response improved India's security.

A punitive strike that triggers aircraft losses, strengthens Pakistan's military narrative, draws Trump into mediation claims, deepens China-Pakistan cooperation, and raises Chinese fighter stocks is not a clean success. It is a warning about the difference between tactical action and strategic outcome.

The deeper danger is that both India and Pakistan may now believe escalation can be managed. India has announced a new normal in which terrorism will be treated as an act of war. Pakistan believes rapid retaliation can internationalise the crisis.

Both sides have learned that drones, missiles, standoff weapons and information warfare can be used under the nuclear shadow. It lowers the threshold for the next confrontation and compresses decision time for leaders already trapped by domestic divisive nationalism.

Operation Sindoor should, therefore, be remembered not as a triumph or a new military doctrine but as a stress test India failed to control. It exposed serious gaps in intelligence, air combat preparedness, strategic communication and diplomatic articulation.

It showed that China is not a distant third party but an active force multiplier. It showed that Washington under Trump cannot be assumed to privilege Indian sensitivities over Pakistani utility. Above all, it showed that performative toughness can produce strategic embarrassment.

A year later, the ceasefire holds, but little else does. The Indus Waters Treaty remains suspended, diplomacy is frozen, and public opinion on both sides has become more militarised. Modi wanted Operation Sindoor to announce India's arrival as an unrestrained regional power. Instead, it revealed a harsher truth.

Power is not measured by the bravado to strike first. It is measured by the ability to shape what happens after. On that front, Modi's misadventure gave Pakistan a narrative, China a market, Trump a stage, and South Asia a more dangerous future. ■

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It allowed Pakistan to flaunt its wares and raised doubts about India's edge in even a conventional war

A realpolitik moment for Nepal and a test for India

Balendra Shah's 'equal stature' posture has unsettled the diplomatic status quo

Kanchan Jha

When Nepal's Prime Minister Balendra Shah declined to receive India's foreign secretary Vikram Misri last week, citing his now-celebrated 'equal stature' policy, he triggered a small diplomatic storm across Kathmandu, Delhi and beyond. Days earlier, he had also declined to meet US President Donald Trump's special envoy for South and Central Asia, Sergio Gor. Cabinet colleagues, including foreign minister Shisir Khanal and finance minister Swarnim Wagle, reportedly urged reconsideration. Balen held firm.

New Delhi has since said Misri's visit will be rescheduled 'at mutual convenience' and the diplomatic temperature has begun to cool. But the episode matters for reasons larger than diplomatic etiquette or political personality. It exposes a deeper transition underway in South Asia: the erosion of old equidistance politics and the growing pressure on smaller states like Nepal to adopt a more strategic, interest-driven foreign policy in an increasingly competitive region.

The real question is no longer whether Nepal can balance between powers rhetorically. It is whether it can think strategically enough to turn geography into leverage rather than insecurity.

The 'stature' doctrine is a textbook case of foreign policy driven more by symbolism and political theatre than by strategic consequences. It plays well at home. It looks like sovereignty asserting itself. But statecraft is not a tableau. It is the slow accumulation of trust, predictability and leverage. Foreign secretaries, by tradition, do call on prime ministers across the neighbourhood. This is not subservience. It is diplomatic symmetry.

Refusing such calls does not necessarily produce independence. It produces absence. And in international relations, absence is rarely neutral.

Classical realists from Thucydides to Hans Morgenthau, and neorealists from Kenneth Waltz to John Mearsheimer, share a sobering view of the international order: it is anarchic, structurally unequal and

fundamentally un sentimental. Idealism may visit. Realism always returns. States cooperate when it serves their interests. For a country like Nepal, landlocked, limited in market size, dependent on two giant neighbours and a wider donor ecosystem, this is not cynicism. It is geography speaking through theory.

The implication is unavoidable. Nepal's foreign policy cannot continue resting on inherited slogans of non-alignment or rigid equidistance. It must evolve into realpolitik: a clear-eyed pursuit of national interest, calibrated by capacity and disciplined by institutional maturity.

One of Nepal's most revered leaders and statesmen, B.P. Koirala, understood this decades ago. In the 1970s, he rejected equidistance as a 'numbers game', the simplistic notion that every agreement with Delhi must be balanced by one in Beijing. Instead, he argued for active internationalism rooted in interests, not artificial symmetry.

Two other lenses throw light on the present moment. The first is neoclassical realism, which insists that a state's external behaviour is not shaped by systemic pressures alone, but filtered through domestic institutions, leadership perceptions and political culture. By that measure, Nepal's foreign policy will

continue oscillating until its institutions stop oscillating. The second is strategic hedging: the small state of avoiding a lock-in with any single power while maintaining multiple credible options. Hedging is not equidistance. It is asymmetric, opportunistic and ruthlessly interest-driven. ASEAN states practise it. Vietnam practises it with both Washington and Beijing. Bangladesh is learning it after its recent political reset. Sri Lanka is rediscovering it between Colombo Port City and Trincomalee. Nepal must learn it too, and quickly.

What does that mean operationally? Three commitments.

First, Nepal must treat foreign policy as national capital, not seasonal currency. Every government that dissipates diplomatic gains for short-term domestic optics is liquidating capital painstakingly built by previous generations. The country needs a serious, merit-based and properly funded diplomatic service, a professional national school of foreign service and institutional continuity that outlasts cabinets.

Second, Parliament must reclaim ownership over foreign policy. The committees on international relations and state affairs should not function as ceremonial holding pens for MPs. They must scrutinise treaties, debate strategic priorities, ratify appointments, and hold the executive accountable to publicly stated objectives. The old 'water's edge principle' works only when the water's edge is institutional, not personal.

Third, and this is non-negotiable: Nepal and India must finally move toward resolving all outstanding border disputes. Lipulekh, Kalapani, Limpiyadhura and other contested points are not abstract dots on a map. They are the daily friction points along an open border of more than 1,750 kilometres that ties Bihar to Birgunj, Uttar Pradesh to Lumbini, West Bengal to Mechi. A resolved border would be one of the strongest signals South Asia could send to itself and to the world: that two democracies can settle inherited cartographic disputes through dialogue, patience and political courage. Border

Nepal and India must try to resolve border disputes. Lipulekh, Kalapani, Limpiyadhura...



Balendra Shah's 'equal stature' policy has triggered a diplomatic storm

Photo: Getty Images

management must become the priority, not the postscript.

Here, with respect, the larger burden lies with the larger country. India's Neighbourhood First policy has been cross-border and sincere in many respects. Substantial and power trade, the Motihari-Amlekhgunj petroleum pipeline, the Jaynagar-Janakpur rail link and post-earthquake reconstruction support have all strengthened regional connectivity. But neighbourhoods are not managed only with deliverables. They are sustained through restraint, generosity of spirit and the confidence to allow smaller partners find their own voice without taking offence at every wobble.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee captured this best: you can change friends, but you cannot change neighbours. Nepal is not a problem for Delhi to solve. It is a partner to grow alongside. The Misri episode, rather than being a setback, can become an opportunity, a chance for India to demonstrate that mature powers and the bums without overreacting, and continue the conversation with strategic patience. Lead the neighbourhood; do not merely manage it.

For Kathmandu, however, the lesson runs the other way.

Prime ministers and presidents are the face of the nation. When the world comes to engage, through ambassadors, envoys or foreign secretaries, the head of government does not always need to sit in the room. But the door must never appear closed. India's foreign secretary carries the political weight of the Indian state behind him. The US special envoy for South and Central Asia speaks for the Oval Office. Refusing such meetings in the name of 'stature' is

not strategic confidence, it is stagecraft. Real counterparts lies in receiving counterparts, listening carefully, negotiating firmly, pushing back where necessary, and walking away with outcomes. That is realpolitik. Stagecraft produces headlines. Realpolitik produces highways, transit corridors, energy deals, investment flows and resolved borders.

China is watching. So are Bhutan, the Maldives, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Beijing engages South Asia on ruthlessly clear terms: Tibet first, connectivity next. South Asia is in the middle of a quiet reordering and the states that organise their institutions, define their direction and treat foreign policy as a long-term strategic asset will set the tempo. Nepal can be that country. India can be the partner that helps make it possible.

The old Nepali metaphor of the 'yam between two boulders' remains relevant but is perhaps misunderstood. The yam survives not by standing still, but by knowing when to bend, when to grow and when to ask the boulders to make space. The boulders, for their part, are wise when they understand that a thriving yam is a sign of a healthy mountain.

Nepal's choice today is not between Delhi and Beijing. It is between hesitation and strategic clarity. India's choice is not between influence and restraint. It is between managing the neighbourhood and maturing it. The road, as Robert Frost reminded us, is always there. Let us walk it together, with concrete steps, flexible minds and the humility neither of our nations can afford to lose. ■

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BRIDGE TO BENGALURU 2026: KARNATAKA UNVEILS GLOBAL VISION FOR TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

Karnataka showcases vision for a \$1 Trillion economy at International diplomatic forum

Source: x.com



Karnataka has positioned itself as a global partner for innovation, technology, trade and sustainable development, with Chief Minister Siddaramaiah using a major diplomatic gathering in New Delhi to invite countries around the world to co-create, invest with confidence and innovate with purpose alongside the southern Indian state.

Karnataka's positioning reflects a broader strategic effort to strengthen its role in the global knowledge economy, leveraging Bengaluru's

established reputation as a leading centre for technology, research and entrepreneurship while expanding partnerships across emerging and advanced economies.

Held on 17 April 2026 at the Shahjehan Hall of the Taj Palace, the event titled Bridge to Bengaluru 2026: Dialogue with Diplomats brought together ambassadors, high commissioners, diplomats, startup founders, industry leaders, innovators and policymakers in what Karnataka described as one of India's most significant state-led diplomatic engagements focused on technology and global partnerships.

The event, described by the Government of Karnataka as India's largest and first-of-its-kind diplomatic innovation dialogue, reflected the state's ambition to position itself not merely as an investment destination, but as a trusted global innovation partner at a time of rapid technological and geopolitical change.

Siddaramaiah's Call for Global Collaboration

Addressing delegates from nearly 80 countries, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah said Karnataka was prepared to engage with the world not just in technology, but across trade, innovation and people-to-people collaboration.

He said it was an honour to welcome delegates to "Bridge to Bengaluru", adding that their presence reflected a shared commitment to foster innovation, deepen partnerships and co-create a future defined by inclusive growth and sustainability.

He reiterated Karnataka's goal of becoming a one-trillion-dollar economy by 2032, driven by "talent, technology and tenacity".

"At the heart of our governance lies a simple belief: innovation must empower people and uplift communities," he said, stressing that economic growth must align with equity and opportunity.

The Chief Minister underlined that Karnataka's development model is anchored in inclusive growth, innovation-led transformation and sustainable progress, and that the state seeks to deepen collaboration with international partners to accelerate shared solutions in emerging technologies and resilient development pathways.

Reaffirming the importance of multilateral cooperation, he said Karnataka's Global Innovation Alliance serves as a structured platform to connect ecosystems across



CHIEF MINISTER SIDDARAMAIAH

"At the heart of our governance lies a simple belief: innovation must empower people and uplift communities, ensuring that economic progress moves hand in hand with equity, opportunity and inclusive growth."



DEPUTY CHIEF MINISTER D. K. SHIVAKUMAR

"Namma Bengaluru continues to stand tall as India's leading hub for startups, research and deep technology, powered by talent and a deep-rooted culture of innovation, making it the engine of India's global technology leadership."



MINISTER PRIYANK KHARGE

"With GIA 2.0, we are aligning policy, talent, capital and diplomacy towards a single objective — positioning Karnataka as a global innovation partner of consequence, where collaboration translates into tangible and lasting outcomes."

chain shifts and technological disruption make such partnerships essential. He emphasised that Bridge to Bengaluru is more than a dialogue; it is a platform connecting ideas, economies and people, and a precursor to the Bengaluru Tech Summit 2026.

He said Karnataka offers political stability, transparent governance and strong rule of law, making it a trusted partner for global collaboration. Karnataka's governance model was highlighted for its policy stability and investor-friendly environment, reinforcing its position as a preferred destination for long-term partnerships.

Bengaluru and Karnataka Innovation Ecosystem

Siddaramaiah highlighted Bengaluru's evolution from India's Silicon Valley into a comprehensive global innovation hub. Karnataka hosts over 16,000 startups and nearly one-third of India's Global Capability Centres, with more than 550 GCCs, while startup numbers have now crossed 18,000.

The state's institutions continue to nurture talent across IT, biotechnology, aerospace, semiconductors, space technology, AI and quantum science. Innovation in Karnataka is a way of life.

Deputy Chief Minister D. K. Shivakumar described Bengaluru as a city that is collectively built by its people, highlighting its openness, strong ecosystem and high quality of life.

Speaking at the Bridge to Bengaluru: Dialogue with Diplomats in New Delhi, attended by representatives from over 80 countries, he said the engagement reflects the growing global interest in Karnataka's innovation ecosystem.

He noted that the dialogue, held as a curtain raiser to the upcoming Bengaluru Tech Summit, underscores Bengaluru's rising prominence as a hub for startups, research and deep technology, driven by talent and a deep-rooted culture of innovation.

"Namma Bengaluru continues to stand tall as India's leading hub for startups, research and deep technology, powered by talent and a culture of innovation. It remains the engine driving India's global technology leadership," he said.

He further stated that the unveiling of GIA 2.0 will strengthen Karnataka's global innovation partnerships and create new avenues for collaboration across sectors. Reaffirming the government's commitment, he said Karnataka remains focused on attracting investment, technology and opportunities, while deepening international partnerships that enhance Bengaluru's position as a global innovation hub.

Beyond Bengaluru and Frontier Technologies

Karnataka's strengths include a skilled workforce, strong institutions, digital infrastructure, global connectivity and a cosmopolitan environment. The "Beyond Bengaluru" initiative promotes innovation-led growth in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities.

The state's focus on frontier technologies

such as artificial intelligence, quantum computing, aerospace innovation and biotechnology continues to attract global interest and foster collaborative research.

Priyank Kharge on Global Engagement

Priyank Kharge said Bridge to Bengaluru has emerged as a major platform for state-led global engagement.

He said envoys from 75 countries participated in dialogue with the Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister as part of the Bengaluru Tech Summit roadshow, setting a benchmark for global engagement.

He said GIA connects over 40 countries and is steadily translating engagement into partnerships.

"With GIA 2.0, we are aligning policy, talent, capital and diplomacy to position Karnataka as a global innovation partner of consequence," he said.

He added that Karnataka offers not just investment opportunities but a responsive governance ecosystem.

Inclusive Growth and Vision

Karnataka's vision places technology at the service of humanity, balancing growth with equity and sustainability. The state is investing in IT, biotech, startups, space technology and skilling to build a future-ready workforce.

He said innovation must address healthcare, education, agriculture and environmental challenges.

"At the heart of our governance lies a simple belief: innovation must empower people and uplift communities," he said.

Strengthening Global Engagements

Karnataka's global partnerships have expanded through GIA mixers, market access programmes and international collaborations, increasing investments, startup exchanges and research linkages.

Curtain Raiser to Bengaluru Tech Summit 2026

The event also served as a curtain raiser for the Bengaluru Tech Summit 2026 scheduled in November at the Bangalore International Exhibition Centre.

The summit, themed "AI & Beyond", will host more than 1,800 exhibitors, 25,000 delegates and over 60,000 visitors from over 75 countries.

Karnataka's Global Appeal

At the conclusion, diplomats praised Karnataka's policy environment, startup ecosystem and research partnerships, noting its transformation from a technology hub into a global innovation partner destination.

The Chief Minister concluded by inviting global partners to co-create, invest with confidence and innovate with purpose, reinforcing Karnataka's emergence as a globally connected innovation hub committed to inclusive and sustainable progress.

The Chief Minister underlined that Karnataka's development model is anchored in inclusive growth, innovation-led transformation and sustainable progress, and that the state seeks to deepen collaboration with international partners to accelerate shared solutions in emerging technologies and resilient development pathways.

GIA 2.0 and Outcome-Driven Partnerships

Under GIA 2.0, Karnataka aims to deepen collaboration in AI, deep tech, biotechnology and semiconductors. The framework focuses on measurable outcomes including pilot projects, investments and institutional linkages. It also expands global market access for startups and strengthens research and skilling partnerships. Officials said Karnataka is positioning itself as a system integrator of global innovation ecosystems.

The Global Innovation Alliance framework has been strengthened through structured bilateral engagements, enabling collaboration in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, semiconductor design, space technology and digital public infrastructure.

Karnataka's innovation ecosystem continues to benefit from strong academic-industry linkages, a robust startup culture and sustained policy support.

continents, enabling knowledge exchange, co-development and scalable innovation partnerships.

The event was attended by Deputy Chief Minister D. K. Shivakumar, IT and BT Minister Priyank Kharge, Minister M. B. Patil, senior officials, industry leaders, startup founders and diplomats from over 80 countries, with more than 140 participants in total.

Participation from Global Partners

Diplomatic representatives from Switzerland, Saudi Arabia, Denmark, France, Egypt, Malaysia, Japan, Germany and Bhutan took part, with many highlighting strengthened ties through the Global Innovation Alliance (GIA). International trade and investment bodies also participated, reinforcing government-to-government and business-to-government collaboration and Karnataka's growing global innovation ecosystem.

Global Cooperation and Development Vision

The dialogue highlighted the importance of cooperation on climate change, public health, digital transformation and sustainable urbanisation. Through the Global Innovation Alliance, Karnataka seeks long-term partnerships with governments, universities, industries and startups.

The Chief Minister said these partnerships would enable joint R&D, talent exchange, startup market access, co-innovation in emerging technologies and climate-resilient solutions. He described Karnataka as a "global bridge" connecting nations through innovation-led development.

He added that global uncertainty, supply

Try the famous rewdi of _____

Or ask what's the home of the mouth-watering *galawati kabab*, *Rahim ki nihari*, *Mubeen ke pasande*, *Idrees ki biryani*, *Tunday kabab*...

Sabika Abbas

Every time I stepped outside the city and told someone where I was from, the reaction was almost scripted. Either they would immediately start talking about kababs, nihari, biryani... or they would laugh at my insistence on saying 'hum' and my *talaffuz*. Nobody has ever heard 'Lucknow' and responded with, "Ah yes, *rewdi*." Nobody.

The smell that rises after *maghrib* (Arabic for sunset) from countless tandoors and grills across old Lucknow is practically one of the three reasons I moved back. People gather around hole-in-the-wall hotels to eat *Rahim ki nihari*, *Mubeen ke pasande*, *Idrees ki biryani*, *Tunday kabab*... Standing shoulder to shoulder, sometimes waiting for a plate of kababs so soft they melt in your mouth, just like your slightly liberal political opinion might in front of your

right-wing papa.

I grew up proudly telling people that Lucknow boasts of over forty varieties of kababs and that Awadhi cuisine is what truly puts us on the map. *Galawati kabab* so delicate they were supposedly invented for a toothless nawab. *Dhaagey ke kabab* tied carefully with thread so the meat would not disintegrate before cooking. *Shami kabab* and the endless debate about how crisp they should be. *Nargisi kabab*, *boti kabab*, *pasande*, *koftey*, *kokori kabab*, *majlisi kabab*... Even *lauki ke kabab*.

And this is just kababs. I have not even started on *nihari-kulcha* breakfasts after winter fog, *paya* simmering overnight, *bheja fry* at weddings, *yakhni pulao*, or even home-cooked *adraki gosht*, *methi machhli ka saalan* or even *gosht ka achaar*.

I am listing all this because one Uttar Pradesh government list would have us think that all of UP survives on vegetarian snacks. I truly hope this list does not reach my Lucknowi friends Tullika or Madhuvi or Shabnam Apa, who would launch a protest almost instinctively when they find out that only *rewdi*, mango produce and *chaat* made it to the Lucknow district cuisine.

Now listen, I have absolutely nothing against *rewdi*. What problem could I possibly have with those little *gur-and-til* discs sold every winter in every *gali* and every train stopping at LJN? I love them. I am also

deeply loyal to 'mango produce'. I'll physically defend the honour of Lucknowi *chausa* mangoes, if need be. So, this is not just about me taking the absence of kababs on that list personally.

Or maybe it is. Because the curious case of the missing kababs from UP's grand 'One District One Cuisine' list is absurd (and dangerous). According to ministers, district-level committees were formed across all 75 districts. District Magistrates chaired them. Teachers, professors and local experts were consulted. Surveys were conducted. Files moved. Meetings happened. *Chai* was consumed.

Can you imagine this? A full-blown committee of experts sat together to decide what the historic Lucknow district should boast of culturally and arrived at the revolutionary conclusion that the city globally associated with Awadhi meat cuisine should practically evaporate if exposed to sunlight for three minutes. Somehow that made the list.

This government is asking us to believe that only vegetarian items can serve MSME interests. Seriously? In the whole of Lucknow district? Which has mastered the art of packaging even *malai makkhan*, a dessert so delicate it practically evaporates if exposed to sunlight for three minutes.

Now, I'm a huge fan of *malai makkhan*. But one cannot ignore the saffron tint of practically any new policy. And by saffron, I do not mean the *zafraan* lovingly sprinkled over our biryani. I mean the

Photo: Getty Images



saffron draped over legislative and policy processes.

The state insists the omission of meat is 'not intentional'. Which is as far from the truth as *malai makkhan* is from *boti kabab*. The uncooked truth is this state-driven cultural and palate cleansing is a way to impose a *savarna* upper-caste vegetarian worldview on us all.

They are using food to shape identity, memory, nationalism and power. The state decides whose cuisine becomes 'heritage', whose food gets subsidies and branding support, and whose food is made to disappear from official memory.

This is not even about some exoticised Nawabi nostalgia. Lucknow's food culture survives in small businesses tucked inside narrow lanes, in *qasai mohallas*, in winter nihari breakfasts, in *bhuni kaleji* stalls, in *Kayastha* kitchens cooking *khade masale ka gosht*, in *Eid daawat* before the second *roti* arrives, and in *paya* simmering overnight for workers heading out before sunrise.

What's being erased in this *sanskari* project is the food of meat-

The curious case of the missing kababs An ODOC list won't diminish their stature nor change the foodie vote, but it says something about the listwala regime



eating communities and economies built around them. Out with Muslim food traditions! Out with Dalit food traditions! And their kitchens, roadside stalls, butchers, women preserving recipes through generations, and the labouring castes whose cuisines emerged from resilience and survival. None of this should suller our 'One District One Cuisine' list.

And how they love their unitary fantasies! 'One District One Cuisine', 'One Nation One Election', 'One Nation One Tax, One Nation One Ration Card, One Nation One Grid... One Language, One Culture. One Supreme Leader. One (political) Party. Obliterate all and everything that does not fit their notion of a Hindu *rashtra* cooked in the Nagpur kitchen.

Remember this cuisine list is tied directly to state benefits, subsidies, packaging support, branding and promotion. So the question arises: whose food entrepreneurs will benefit? Whose labour will get visibility? Whose cuisines will the state deem worthy of investment?

It's almost comical to think that UP has been one of India's largest exporters of buffalo meat. UP is perfectly comfortable exporting buffalo meat all over the world, generating crores through slaughterhouses and meat-

processing infrastructure. A fully packaged buffalo can board an international cargo ship, but the kabab cannot enter a tourism brochure.

We are casually informed that the ODOC list is 'flexible', that additions can later be approved by the Chief Minister. Will he approve my kababs? I won't hold my breath. But this isn't about my beloved kababs. I'm angry because this is part of a much larger political project of omission and erasure — of food, language, culture, names, love stories, old histories!

I'm sure this woman from Lucknow district is not the only person enraged about this list. So, friends from other districts, do speak up! I refuse to believe Azamgarh is happy to be represented by *tehrri*—and I say this as someone who considers *tehrri* deeply emotional comfort food. Rampur, my friend, are you okay with this list? And Moradabad? Bareilly? Meerut? Will you just sit quietly while your food histories are vegetarian-ised under your noses?

For the nonce, if someone asks what in Lucknow they must absolutely try, I guess I'll have to offer: "Ye lijiye, *rewdi naah farmaiye*".

And now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get a plate of kababs to calm my nerves. ■



What's being erased in this *sanskari* project is the food of meat-eating communities and economies built around them. Out with Muslim food!

Lacking a taste for diversity

For most food lovers, the UP government's One District One Cuisine misadventure has left a bad taste in the mouth. **Prabhat Singh** tells us why

The other day, I was invited to dinner at the home of a dear acquaintance in Delhi.

Alongside an assortment of Marwari dishes on the table sat a bowl of *lauki ke lachche*. Out of curiosity, I asked where they'd come from. "From Allahabad," came the reply. "From Matadeen's." Where in Delhi, after all, are you to find sweets with that kind of flavour? And no, not that Matadeen—not the one from (Harishankar) Parsai nor the one from Prayagraj. For generations now, the taste of their *ghevar*, *ghiya ke lachche* and *gajak* has lingered on the tongues of Allahabadis; the city itself only recently became Prayagraj. At their old establishments in Loknath, sweets are still wrapped in newspaper and tied up with cotton string.

I bring up that evening because the very next day the newspapers announced that the UP government, in its wisdom to promote 'native flavours', had released a list under its 'One District One Cuisine' scheme. The list apparently has 208 entries. The first bewildering thing about the news was that UP has only 75 districts; by the logic of one per district, there ought to have been 75. But you know these babes and their aides.

Meanwhile, social media was on fire because kababs and biryanis didn't make it to the list. The trouble with these social media warriors—always diving headfirst into shallow pools with oceans of self-confidence—is that they do not read bus panels. Those who have travelled in UP's state buses may remember that the old slogan once painted across them, 'Tu sachcha tera naam sachcha', has long been replaced by the more uplifting 'Show kindness to animals'. In the race to manufacture outrage,

everyone forgot the UNESCO tag bestowed upon the city of Lucknow, which honours everything from *galawat ke kabab* to *sheermal*.

And then, if you really want to go there—the list also excludes *Sahukare ka aloo-swaal*, *Afeemchi ke chhole*, Prayag's rustic *rasgulla* (read: *gulab jamun*), Faizabad's *fara*, the Pandeypur Sardarji's *launglata*, Rampuri *gulathhi*, the laddoos of Sandila and Thaggu... so what exactly are we to conclude? There's a great deal else missing too.

Had social media erupted over the absurdity of the list itself, one would understand. But why obsess only over what isn't there? If these list-happy ignoramus knew anything at all, would *Chitrakoot ka maawa*, *Raebareli ke masala* and *Ghaziabad's soya chaap* have made it to the list? Had any of these mandarins even a nodding acquaintance with the matter, they would either have named one signature dish from every district—

a sort of 'name a flower' exercise—or perhaps come up with something less stupid, on the lines of 'One District, Countless Cuisines'.

They might even have drawn inspiration from our old favourite *Munshiji*, who knew a thing or two about making lists. Read his 1920 story *Manushya ka Param Dharma*, first published in *Swadesh*, where the grand gourmand Moteram Shastri declares: "If your platter contains the *imarti* of Jaunpur, the *motichoor* of Agra, the *peda* of Mathura, the *kalakand* of Banaras, the *rasgulla* of Lucknow, the *gulab jamun* of Ayodhya, and the *sohan halwa* of Delhi, then it is fit for the gods."

Now that is a list. Parsai, too, once wrote of such platters: "After a good meal, I often become a humanist." By that reckoning, if you like, you may even consider this latest government list a humanist campaign.

In *Munshiji's* time there was no

FDA, only *namak ke daroga*, which is why he could rattle off so many *maawa*-based sweets in a single breath. These days, around Holi and Diwali, FDA officials suddenly spring to life, crushing quintals of *maawa* and paneer under bulldozers, raiding sweet shops, collecting *samosa* samples—fake ghee here, adulterated oil there. But the martyrs to flavour scarcely worry, because the lab reports don't surface till a year after.

Which is why I feel that rather than exhausting ourselves over the marketing prospects of *makkhan malai*, *dahi-jalebi* or *singhadu kachri*, it may be wiser to discuss the flavours that top the list.

Perhaps the powers that be didn't like the idea of a 'Thaggu' making an appearance in an official document. Because they've never eaten *bum-makkhan*. So, trusting food vloggers instead, they casually wrote 'samosa' instead of Kanpur. *Arre janaab*, the truly celebrated

samosa is the Allahabadi *samosa*. Otherwise every mohalla in every town has at least one halwai whose *samosa* has a cult following. Only someone who has never eaten the *samosa* at Kumar Talkies or Pooran Halwai in Bareilly, Aamki's in Tilhar, or Baba's in Jhansi could make such a blunder.

Sure I'm glib but not yet tasting Fatehpur's famed *bedmi*. But I have eaten it in Banda. Also in Hathras, Vrindavan, Mathura and Agra. It is Braj country's favourite breakfast, and at Basu Halwai's in Banda, I found the exact same Braj flavour. You may ask how/why. Well, he had apparently brought in two cooks from Vrindavan. It would hardly be a surprise if someone in Fatehpur did the same. Till now, it was Mallawan's *peda* that I associated with Fatehpur. I confess it's Bode Ram Halwai's *sohan halwa* that I taste when I think of Banda. Not just me—the whole world swears by his *sohan halwa*.

I noticed that Aligarh had been paired with *kachori* and *imarti*. Less said about that stodgy lump of refined flour masquerading as *kachori* the better. No filling to speak of, no delicate aspect, and an accompanying curry so ferocious it could send smoke out of your ears. It is to douse those flames that you're served a watery *raita* alongside. Usually served in flimsy plastic tumblers, it spills easily, invoking that well-worn Hindi gag.

As for Aligarh's *imarti*, I only recently learnt of its fame. *Khalid bhai* tells me, from experience, that wherever there's a kabab shop, a sweet shop is never far away. Maybe even the listwala knew this. Kushinagar only recently started growing bananas, yet banana chips have already become their defining snack—and the world didn't even notice. Even Gorakhpur's partial to *litti-mutton* may hesitate to claim that *litti-chokha* or *samosa* are what Gorakhpur is famous for. Anyway, they're probably too full of the *lehsun chhole* of Chauri Chaura and the *sattu sharbat* available all over town to complain.

Had these poor babus or their clerks bothered to taste the *gatte* of Kannauj and Jaunpur, and trusted their own tongues a little more, the list might have looked different. Besides, do you think Agra's *peetha*, Pindra's *golib jamun*, Meerut's *gajak-rewdi*, Hapur's *papad*, Hathras's *rabri*, Pratapgarh's *amla*, Ballia's *sattu*, Farrukhabad's *dal moth*, Rampur's *habshi halwa*, Jaunpur's *imarti*, Tilhar's *launj* or Badaun's *peda* need government patronage to become popular? ■



The ODOC list makes no mention of these, but for food lovers in Allahabad, Hari Ram and Loknath are food heaven

Why obsess only over what isn't there? The sins of inclusion in the ODOC list are no less eye-popping

PRABHAT SINGH is an author and journalist. Translated from the Hindi original, published in Navjivan, with apologies to the author for the audacity

Odisha's quiet emergency

From economic boycotts to physical assaults, anti-Christian violence in the state is organised, state-sponsored and accelerating

Aakar Patel

This month, I was in Odisha as part of a people's tribunal examining atrocities against Christians, in particular Adivasis. My fellow tribunal members and I joined the organisation Karwan-e-Mohabbat in Nabarangpur, Jeypore, Balasore and Baripada to hear around 300 women and men, of whom the majority, more than 90 per cent or so, were Adivasi.

What is clear from what we heard and saw is that in the past two years, the Odisha government has stepped aside to allow the constitutional and fundamental rights of individuals to be crushed. Organised violence against Christians is permitted and, when the government machinery acts, it is usually in an attempt to prevent the victims from getting justice.

The violence has become templated, as is the case with Hindutva actions across this land. Something begins, often triggered by the passing of a law, and then we are inundated by waves of similar-sounding incidents: beef lynchings, love jihad, bulldozers and so on. The other noticeable thing was that the pace of atrocities is accelerating as the templates are digested across the state and then replicated.

In Odisha we observed four broad types of atrocities.

The first is the forceful prevention of the burial of Adivasi Christians. They are no longer being allowed to bury their dead in the common burial ground where other Adivasis are buried. They are blocked even from burying their dead on their privately

owned land. Mobs gather to physically stop burial and funeral prayers. Bodies wait, sometimes on ice, sometimes rotting, while the 'negotiations' happen. The police are interested more in 'order' than in law, meaning it wants no trouble and therefore sides with the mob.

The second is the social and economic boycott of Christians. This occurs through fines on those who engage with Christians or sell produce to them; some families have even been forced to expel their sons and daughters. Many Christians have no work and no means to sustain themselves; many are living in the forest. Almost all these

cases were from this year, many from the last two months.

The third involves physical attacks on Christian places of worship (including chapels and house churches) and on pastors and priests. There have been multiple episodes of forceful disruption and closure of prayer meetings and collective worship. When the police arrive, the victims are often made the accused under false charges of unlawful religious conversion. The victims are taken to jail and kept there while the mob runs free—this is common.

The fourth, and predictable, template is violence. Christian women and men are being tied up, beaten, stripped, humiliated and injured for professing their faith (it reminds one of what happened to early Christian martyrs).

Individuals were tied to trees, forced into sacks and physically assaulted. Some were assaulted sexually. Others were nearly burnt alive—attempts that were halted only at the last minute.

What was the government doing while these things happened? In most cases of violence, the police registered criminal charges against those who were attacked, followed by their detention in police stations and jails. There were also instances where the police played a direct role in the intimidation and violence against Christians.

It is not incorrect to conclude that what we saw was a deliberate abandonment of duty and a breakdown of constitutional machinery. That conclusion is inescapable given the frequency with which people told



St. Paul Church in Dengaswargi village in Rayagada, Odisha, after it was attacked and desecrated by a Hindu mob in March

us that the police joined Hindutva organisations in forcing them to sign 'compromise' agreements in which they undertake to give up their Christian faith and collective worship.

Odisha has taken a communal colour, not surprising given that it is now run by the BJP, and the elements aligned to its anti-minority ideology are being given a free run.

The tribunal has written to Manoj Ahuja, the chief secretary of the state, hoping that the government recognises not only how serious the issue is but also that it is obliged to act. Perhaps the evidence will move them. We will not hold our breath.

The last thing I want to say is that the Adivasis testified to what they had undergone with immense dignity. They were stoic and calm while recounting the crimes against them. This included the

women, one of whom, as she described her sexual assault, paused for a second, wiped her tears and continued.

Many of them will stay on in my mind as they do in the notes I took. One young man, as he was finishing, broke into a prayer. Our interpreter said it was Psalm 23. I looked it up later and it was something I knew from school:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me. ■

Views are personal

In most cases, the police registered criminal charges against those who were attacked

A dirge to our beloved democracy

A devil's wind is blowing through the country these days, exposing the outcrop of power lust, religious bigotry and more

Avay Shukla

Since these are tricky times, let us begin this week with a trick question: what do the following events have in common?

- The huge, and sometimes violent, protests in Noida last month by factory workers and domestic help over increase in minimum wages
- The refusal of a high court judge to recuse herself from a case in which her children are employed by one of the parties, and she herself is reported to have attended functions organised by that party's affiliates
- A gherao of judicial officers (appointed as adjudicators in appeals by deleted voters) by thousands of such disenfranchised voters in a district of West Bengal
- The deletion of names of almost 30 lakh voters in West Bengal, who had voted in previous elections and were in possession of all the required documents, thanks to an opaque, algorithm-driven 'logical discrepancy' feature not provided in any law or used in any other state
- The holding of polls without deciding the pending appeals of these 30 lakh unfortunates, and the callous indifference of the Supreme Court to their constitutional right to vote, saying that they could vote in the next election
- The imposition by an Odisha court on an Adivasi Dalit accused (but not convicted) of a casteist bail condition that they should clean police stations every morning for two months, demeaning their dignity and making a mockery of the law
- The defection of seven Rajya Sabha MPs, led by one Raghav Chadha, from the AAP to the BJP
- A poor tribal in Odisha being compelled



Brutal crackdown Noida's protesting workers lathicharged by the police, for demanding minimum wages

to carry the corpse of his dead sister to a bank in order to prove her death, just so that the meagre balance in her account could be transferred to him as the heir—KYC converted from Know Your Customer to Know Your Corpse

- The dismissal of cases of hate speech against leaders of a political party by a court on the grounds that their utterances did not amount to expressing hate or inciting violence. One of these speeches included the now infamous exhortation: "desh ke gaddaron ko, goli maro saalon ko" (shoot the bastard anti-nationals). The other was a video of a chief minister pointing a rifle at a target with a picture of a Muslim man

The incidents noted above differ in context, content, import and location, but they all contain one common element: the

complete collapse of what makes a developed country a developed country—governance, common law, societal values, empathy, the rule of law, trust in the government or its institutions, the idea of equity and even-handed justice.

Taken together, they point to the breakdown of something cumulatively more precious—democracy itself. They vindicate the far-sighted and cautionary words of Dr Ambedkar. He famously said that democracy in India was only a thin layer of topsoil that could easily be washed away and should not be taken for granted.

A devil's wind is blowing through the country these days, removing Ambedkar's topsoil and exposing the outcrop of power lust, greed, religious bigotry, casteism and violence that have always underpinned our society.

We had expected that progressive governments, democratically elected, would, over time, erode and disintegrate these negative features of our civilisational landscape, but the opposite has happened.

Successive governments, more so the one we have had for the last twelve years, have only reinforced these flaws and fault lines; they have been made the driving force behind national (even international) policies, they are being embedded in laws and educational curricula, they have become unapologetic instruments of state policy, they are the agenda on which elections are now being fought.

The defection of Raghav Chadha only confirms this terminal decline because it shows that a liberal upbringing and London education are no shield against the unscrupulousness of India's politics, and vindicates the mounting distrust of politicians in general.

The executive has even managed to brutalise our society to a point where the top 10 per cent care only for their own comforts and privileges, leaving the other 90 per cent to survive as best as they can.

We are among the most inequitable countries in the world, and proud of it. Democracy is the last thing that can emerge from this witch's cauldron.

We had naïvely expected that when the executive went on a rampage, our judiciary at least would rein it in and preserve the rule of law. That hope has been belied and now lies trampled in the dust, as some of the above episodes demonstrate.

We have today plumbed depths lower even than the ADM Jabalpur moment of Emergency days. Then at least, there was a constitutionally legitimate state of Emergency in place; today we do not have even that fig leaf to cover the government's naked pursuit of absolute power.

Today we are being shredded by a thousand judicial cuts every day, whether it be on denying bail, allowing elections to be stolen from under magisterial noses, redefining hate to suit a particular ideology, spurning any notion of accountability, or throwing overboard any restatement of judicial values.

A Constitution alone cannot make a democracy or ensure that a democracy survives. For that to happen, the topsoil has to be tended carefully, its nutrients lovingly added and preserved, the negative infestations and weeds kept away; the gardeners have to be people of wisdom and empathy, people who love what they are doing, not mercenaries seeking the maximum payouts.

Sadly, it is the mercenaries and carpet-baggers who own our patch of land today. What remains of the topsoil will be blown away soon, leaving a civilisational desert of no value to anyone but these rapacious seekers of power and their hirelings. They will rule over a wasteland, but then, as Satan mused in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'Better to reign in Hell, than to serve in Heaven.' ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

The Constitution alone won't save our democracy. As Ambedkar told us, that 'topsoil' needs careful tending



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Government of Telangana Department of Education
PRAJA PALANA - PRAGATI PRANALIKA

EDUCATION WEEK -2026, 11th May to 17th May 2026

INITIATIVES & ACHIEVEMENTS

- CURE–Education Development Plan implemented with an outlay of ₹1,011.65 Crores to strengthen school education in CURE region.
- Launch of Young India Integrated Residential Schools (YIIRS) with an outlay of ₹21,000 crore to benefit 2.69 lakh students in 105 rural constituencies.
- Telangana Public Schools (TPS) being established in 100 Assembly Constituencies outside CURE.
- Breakfast Scheme for more than 20 lakh students from Pre-Primary to Intermediate level from AY 2026-27.
- Pre-Primary Sections introduced in 1,362 Schools with expansion planned in 2,700 more schools during AY 2026-27.
- 120 KGBVs upgraded to Intermediate level and 93 designated as Young India Institutes of Excellence.
- 10,006 Teachers Recruited and 25,954 Teachers Promoted after long pending stagnation.
- 58,632 School Maintenance Works completed with an expenditure of ₹788.98 Crores through Amma Adarsha Pathashala Committees (AAPCs).
- Free Electricity provided to all Government Educational institutions.
- Digital Learning, STEM, AXL & Telangana Achievers Programmes implemented for future-ready education.
- Foreign exposure visits are being organised for Government teachers. Finland visit was completed in April 2026, while similar visits to Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam are being planned shortly.

- ₹ 183 Cr infrastructure push: 8 new buildings, digital classrooms, and repairs in 326 Government Junior Colleges.
- 5,500 CCTVs installed in Govt Junior Colleges for live exam monitoring.
- 7,000+ Junior Lecturers, Principals trained at MCRHRDI
- Tele-MANAS, Yoga, Anti-narcotics drives, Prajwala counselling launched for junior college students.
- Mid-Day Meals, breakfast and milk announced for govt. junior college students; 1,000 retrofitted scooters for CwSN students from A.Y. 2026–27.

- 40% Higher Education GER vs 28% National average
- Government sanction of ₹ 90+ crores for infrastructure strengthening
- 21% enrolment growth in two years
- 65% GDCs secured NAAC accreditation - a mark of quality
- Apprenticeship Embedded Degree Program (AEDP) scaled up to 24 courses across 94 Govt. Degree Colleges
- Industry-aligned curriculum for skilling and employability

- 2 New Universities & 8 Colleges Established
- RGUKT Campus Established at Mahabubnagar
- 3 Engineering, 3 Law & 1 Pharmacy College established in State Universities
- ₹1000 Crore Special Allocation to Osmania University
- ₹500 Crore Sanctioned to Veeranari Chakali Ilamma Women's University

- In collaboration with Tata Technologies - Centres of Excellence in all Govt. Polytechnics
- Industry-driven revamped curriculum in place with support from CII and IIT Hyderabad
- Expanded Internship & Industry Exposure Opportunities to Diploma students
- New Age Diploma Courses Introduced in alignment with industry needs
- Focus on skilling and placement in all Govt. Polytechnics



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