

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

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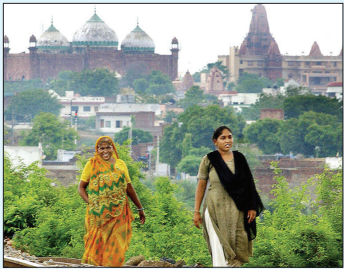
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Lip-reading the SAMADHAN initiative

A.J. Philip

The Supreme Court deserves appreciation for its imaginative initiative christened SAMADHAN—Supreme Court Action for Mediated Adjudication and Disputes Harmonisation Across Nation. Even those who question the wisdom of the exercise will concede that the acronym is ingenious. It reflects the judiciary's apparent desire to promote mediation and consensual settlement instead of prolonged litigation.

One cannot, however, overlook the fact that the court seems to have been inspired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's well-known fascination for memorable acronyms.

The Court has announced a three-day SAMADHAN Samaroh (August 21–23) to resolve through mediation all manner of disputes, including some very contentious religious ones. The sentiment is admirable, but the question is: can goodwill and mediation dissolve disputes that have resisted resolution for decades?

History suggests otherwise. The Ayodhya dispute witnessed numerous attempts at reconciliation. Among those who tried were the Shankaracharya of Kanchi and IPS officer-turned-scholar Kishore Kunal, renowned for his work at the Mahavir Mandir in Patna and his extensive research on the Ram Janmabhoomi issue. Many eminent citizens quietly explored formulas acceptable to both communities. None succeeded. The reason was simple.

Successful mediation requires authorised representatives capable of making binding compromises. Neither Hindus nor Muslims have a single organisation empowered to negotiate on behalf of all believers. Any individual or body claiming to represent one side would immediately be accused of conceding too much. Negotiators would have no guarantee that their own communities would honour the settlement. Faced with that reality, discretion became the better part of valour.

Ultimately, the Supreme Court had to decide the Ayodhya dispute.

When the judgment was delivered in November 2019, there was remarkable calm across the country. That was because both communities had prepared themselves for a judicial verdict after decades of litigation. The unanimous nature of the decision, extensive security arrangements, repeated appeals for peace and the general acceptance that the country's highest court had spoken helped prevent widespread unrest.

The Constitution bench consisted of Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi and Justices S.A. Bobde, D.Y. Chandrachud, Ashok Bhushan and S. Abdul Nazeer. Interestingly, the judgment acknowledged weaknesses in the Hindu side's evidentiary claims while also recording that the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 was an egregious

violation of the rule of law. It also recognised that Muslims had been unlawfully deprived of their mosque.

Yet, considering the totality of historical evidence and continuous Hindu belief regarding the birthplace of Lord Ram, the judges awarded the entire disputed site for construction of a Ram temple while directing that five acres of land be allotted elsewhere for a mosque.

In other words, the Supreme Court did what courts are expected to do—it decided the dispute, whatever its merits.

It's germane to recall at this point the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, which was enacted by Parliament during the Congress government headed by P.V. Narasimha Rao. This law froze the religious character of every place of worship as it existed on 15 August 1947, with the sole exception of Ayodhya, which was a pending dispute. It prohibited conversion of a place of worship into another and barred fresh litigation seeking to alter the historical religious status of any site.

The legislation represented Parliament's determination that independent India should not endlessly reopen medieval history. Successive governments, including those led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee and

Narendra Modi, allowed the law to remain on the statute book, presumably recognising that reopening ancient disputes would endanger communal harmony.

The wisdom of that law becomes evident if one recalls that organisations spearheading the Ayodhya movement often claimed that hundreds or even thousands of temples had been destroyed and replaced by mosques during medieval invasions. If every such claim were to become the subject of litigation, India would spend generations excavating the past, instead of building its future.

Courts would be flooded with historical

controversies requiring archaeologists, historians and theologians more than judges. Every disputed structure could become a flashpoint for communal mobilisation. The energy of the nation would be diverted from improving education, healthcare, employment, infrastructure and scientific progress. Independent India cannot become a nation permanently engaged in correcting every perceived historical wrong.

Unfortunately, the 1991 settlement gradually began to unravel.

The process started in Mathura. In December 2023, the Allahabad High Court ordered a court-monitored survey of the Shahi Idgah complex; the Supreme Court stayed the directive in January 2024. All this appeared inconsistent with the spirit, if not the letter, of the 1991 Act. The Supreme Court could have clarified at an early stage that subordinate courts lacked jurisdiction to reopen issues expressly frozen by Parliament.

Similar developments occurred in the Gyanvapi litigation, where inspection of the 'wazukhana' (the mosque's ablution area) led to claims that an object discovered there was a *shivling*. Muslims maintained that it was part of the fountain system used for ablutions. Whatever its true character, the

controversy dramatically altered the legal and political landscape and weakened the 1991 Act.

Sambhal followed a similar trajectory. A civil suit was filed questioning the status of the Shahi Jama Masjid, and almost on cue, a local court ordered a survey. The exercise immediately heightened communal tensions. Rumours spread rapidly, protests erupted and violent clashes followed, resulting in deaths and injuries. The episode demonstrated the dangers of permitting sensitive religious disputes to proceed without first addressing the threshold question of whether such litigation is barred by the Places of Worship Act.

The same tendency has surfaced even in relation to the Taj Mahal. Built during the reign of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in memory of Mumtaz Mahal, it is one of the Seven Wonders of the world and has long been recognised as one of the finest examples of Mughal architecture. Yet, ever so often you'll hear that it originally housed a Hindu temple. A local court in Agra has dismissed the claims, but litigation continues nevertheless.

Recently, the Allahabad High Court directed photographic and videographic documentation in related proceedings. One cannot help wondering whether every survey will produce fresh assertions about hidden religious symbols. Such exercises risk undermining the very purpose of the 1991 Act, which sought to prevent historical speculation from becoming contemporary litigation.

Significantly, the Supreme Court itself has entertained petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the Places of Worship Act. Once the validity of the law is under judicial scrutiny, uncertainty inevitably spreads to disputes that Parliament intended to settle permanently.

Against this backdrop, expecting the Mathura, Kashi and Sambhal disputes to disappear through SAMADHAN is optimistic, to say the least. Both sides have already expressed reservations about mediation. When fundamental questions of faith, history and identity are involved, goodwill compromises are difficult.

The Supreme Court may, therefore, have no option but to do what it ultimately did in Ayodhya: hear the evidence, interpret the law and pronounce a binding judgment.

There is an old saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. It means that noble motives alone cannot guarantee desirable outcomes. SAMADHAN may be born of fine intentions, but where mediation is impossible, justice demands not conciliation but adjudication. The Supreme Court cannot discharge its constitutional duty by avoiding difficult decisions. ■

A.J. PHILIP is a senior journalist and commentator on national affairs

The hidden costs of the ethanol push

Herjinder on why the E20 rollout is a rough ride

India's E20 (20 per cent ethanol-blended petrol) policy is being projected as a triumph. Achieved ahead of the original 2030 target, the ethanol-blending programme has, we are told, reduced millions of tonnes of carbon emissions and saved over a trillion rupees in crude oil imports. What's not to like?

But public policy cannot be judged only by what it does for the exchequer. It must also be judged by what it does to ordinary citizens, especially when they have no meaningful choice in the matter. That is where the E20 rollout fails a basic test of democratic fairness: consent.

More than 80 per cent of petrol vehicles on Indian roads were built before 2023 and designed primarily for E10 or lower ethanol blends. Their owners had no clue what was coming—a fuel their engines were not built for. They simply woke up to find E0 and E10 disappearing from pumps in many places. A consumer who paid full price, and often steep taxes, for a vehicle rated for a certain

fuel standard now has no legal way to buy that standard of fuel. This is not a consensual move towards cleaner energy—it's the removal of choice dressed up as inevitability, with little clear labelling, no meaningful colour-coding and often no other option at the counter.

The technical concerns are not imaginary. A study by the Automotive Research Association of India (ARAI), though not fully made public, reportedly found that using E20 in E10-compatible vehicles could lead to deterioration of rubber fuel-system components such as hoses, gaskets, seals and O-rings. The summary of the report also noted that some parts might require replacement. These findings align with concerns repeatedly expressed by owners of pre-2023 vehicles.

The contradiction becomes sharper when one looks at the regulatory framework. Vehicles manufactured after April 2023 are required to meet E20-certified standards, with separate material compatibility and

engine-tuning specifications. If E20 were truly safe for all existing vehicles without modification, why was a distinct certification regime needed? Why were new material standards introduced, and why did manufacturers have to retool? Claims that E20 is safe for old vehicles alongside mandatory E20 certification for new vehicles suggest either regulatory overreach or incomplete safety assurance for pre-2023 vehicles.

Automakers themselves have acknowledged the transition problem. Maruti Suzuki has promised an E20 upgrade kit for some older cars, reportedly at a cost of up to Rs 7,000. Hero MotoCorp and TVS Motor, two of India's largest motorcycle and scooter manufacturers, have advised that vehicles made before 2023 may require fuel-system modifications to run efficiently on E20. Shell India warned customers that they bear the risk of engine damage or warranty loss from E20 fuel. These are not fringe voices. They are among the country's largest

If E20 is truly safe for all existing vehicles without modification, why was a distinct certification regime needed? Why did car manufacturers have to retool?



vehicle and fuel-market stakeholders. Yet the government has largely dismissed complaints of mileage loss and wear-and-tear as misinformation. Concurrently, FIRs have reportedly been filed against some social media influencers who claimed that E20 was damaging vehicles. If the government is as confident as it appears, it should answer criticism—and justifiable concern—with transparent data, not intimidation. The second betrayal is value. Ethanol carries roughly 30 per cent less energy per litre than petrol. Multiple surveys, including one that covered more than 44,000 vehicle owners, have reported double-digit mileage losses for many pre-2023 vehicles, along with complaints of corroded seals, choked injectors and costly repairs.

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The hidden costs of the ethanol push

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Also, ethanol is procured at prices significantly lower than retail petrol. If the input is cheaper and the output does less work per rupee, the price at the pump should reflect that. It does not.

The result is that consumers pay roughly the same price for less mileage, while the savings from cheaper ethanol and reduced crude imports accrue elsewhere. Brazil, often cited as a successful ethanol-blending model, subsidises its high-ethanol fuel to precisely offset loss on mileage. India has not. The consumer absorbs the loss while the State celebrates the macroeconomic gain.

Some critics have tried to quantify the broader economic burden. Agnostos Theos of the Sikh Chamber of Commerce, who challenged the E20 decision in the Supreme Court, has argued that lower mileage alone could impose losses of around Rs 13.9 lakh crore over five years, with additional losses from repairs, breakdowns, scrapage and reduced resale value. These estimates are contested and should be treated with caution. But they point to a larger truth: even if the exact numbers are debated, the costs of the transition are being borne disproportionately by vehicle owners.

There is also a broader environmental and policy question. Ethanol in India is still produced largely from sugarcane, maize and rice—crops that are water-intensive and supported by substantial agricultural subsidies. Sugar mills and distilleries are among the industries with significant pollution concerns, and sugarcane cultivation has long been criticised for groundwater depletion. If the full cost of ethanol production includes subsidised water, electricity and fertilisers, the claim of simple economic savings becomes more complicated.

Union Minister Nitin Gadkari has been one of the strongest champions of ethanol blending and higher blending targets. The roots of the Gadkari family’s business date back to 1995, when Nitin Gadkari founded Purti Power and Sugar Ltd (which later transitioned into the Purti Group). Over the years, active management of these agro-industrial and sugar ventures was handed over to his sons, Nikhil and Sarang Gadkari. Nikhil Gadkari holds a dominant, majority stake of over 60 per cent in CIAN Agro Industries and Infrastructure Ltd—now a key player in India’s agricultural processing and ethanol manufacturing sectors—whose profitability and stock valuation has gone through the roof.

With the ministry of road transport and highways under his father Nitin Gadkari aggressively pushing national policies mandating higher ethanol blending—such as the rapid, nationwide rollout of E20—the question of conflict of interest is inevitable.

None of this is an argument against ethanol blending itself, or against the farmers and energy-security goals it serves. But surely the government owed its citizens informed choice, transparent pricing and honest data on the damage the new fuel does to older car engines. ■

Is there light at the end of this tunnel?

The Wayanad tunnel disaster could show the way to eco-sensitive development in Kerala’s mountain districts, writes **K.A. Shaji**

The recent landslide at the Anakkampoyil-Kalladi-Meppadi tunnel road project in Kerala’s Wayanad district has shaken public confidence.

The immediate questions are straightforward. What caused the landslide? Could it have been prevented? Were safety protocols followed? Did construction activities contribute to slope failure? We’ll hopefully have some answers when the results of the technical investigations ordered by the V.D. Satheesan-led UDF government are in.

Some larger questions loom: why did the previous government allow this huge infrastructure project in such a vulnerable landscape? Were geological warnings heeded or did political expediency overshadow ecological caution? And has Kerala learnt anything from all the climate disasters that have scarred its mountains over the past decade?

These questions are now central to Kerala’s political discourse. More so because the disaster occurred barely five kilometres from the Chooralmala-Mundakrai mountains, where a massive landslide in 2024 killed 298 and left many more severely injured or homeless.

It is ironic that one of Satheesan’s first big governance challenges concerns a project he had vehemently opposed as Leader of the Opposition. He had underlined the need for extreme care and a higher threshold of scientific scrutiny because the tunnel passed through a very sensitive stretch of the Western Ghats and mistakes could have irreversible consequences. Satheesan’s objections were dismissed as politically motivated. He was accused of obstructing development and denying Wayanad better connectivity.

The Pinarayi Vijayan-led LDF government billed it as a transformative link between Kozhikode and Wayanad through one of the longest road tunnels in southern India. It promised to reduce travel time, improve connection to Karnataka’s IT hubs in Bangalore and Mysore, improve year-round connectivity for residents and tourists, and provide an alternative to the existing accident-prone Thamarassery Ghat Road, where negotia-ting nine hairpin bends is an uphill task. For a district whose economy depends heavily on tourism apart from agricul-ture, the proposal has obvious appeal.

But the alignment passes through terrain that has repeatedly been marked in scientific assessments as fragile and vulnerable to landslides. Ecologists like



Warnings ignored The latest disaster occurred barely 5 km from the site of the 2024 landslide

C.K. Vishnudas of Wayanad-based Hume Centre for Ecology and Wildlife Biology have long argued that mountain ecosystems cannot be understood through conventional engineering calculations. The Western Ghats are dynamic geological systems where rock formations, groundwater movement,

vegetation, drainage and rainfall interact in complex ways. Disturbing one part of that system can trigger changes elsewhere, and the impact is cumulative.

Renowned climate scientist S. Abhilash of Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT) says this understanding is even more critical because climate change is altering rainfall patterns in Kerala. Short bursts of extremely heavy rain have become more frequent. Slopes that were stable for decades are now failing and infrastructure planning in this terrain requires geological investigation that goes beyond routine surveys.

The latest landslide has refocused attention on decisions taken during the conception, approval and execution of the project, Sreedhar Radhakrishnan, a leading environmental activist, points out. “Questions that were earlier treated as procedural objections now form part of the official inquiry.” The Satheesan government has suspended work and constituted a high-level expert committee to determine: a) how the landslide occurred and b) whether the project can safely proceed in its present form. The committee is headed by geologist C.P. Rajendran, whose work on earthquakes, tectonics and geological hazards is internationally recognised.

Could geological risks have been understood better before excavation

Climate change is altering rainfall patterns in Kerala. Slopes that were once stable are now failing and routine surveys are not able to read the terrain

began? Were hydrological studies sufficiently detailed? Were warning signs missed during construction? Did changing rainfall patterns demand additional safeguards? Answers to these questions will influence not just the future of this project but also infrastructure planning across Kerala’s mountain districts.

Long before the disaster, Rajendran had argued that tunnelling through complex mountain formations requires extensive geological investigations because excavation changes stress conditions within rock masses and may alter groundwater pathways. Vishnudas has repeatedly emphasised that mountains do not respond to individual projects in isolation. Every intervention—roads, quarries, plantations, buildings, tunnels and tourism infrastructure—adds pressure to a system already coping with erratic monsoon behaviour.

Kerala has experienced a series of disasters since 2018, when devastating floods triggered landslides across the state. Puthumala, Kavalappara, Koottickal, Pettimudi and finally Mundakkal and Chooralmala became painful reminders that extreme rainfall now interacts with altered landscapes in ways that old planning models failed to anticipate.

The Madhav Gadgil-led Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel a.k.a. Gadgil Commission, set up in 2010, had called for stronger ecological safeguards and warned against unregulated development in environmentally sensitive landscapes. Its recommendations became politically contentious. The recommendations of the K. Kasturirangan committee, which submitted its report in 2013, were moderate by comparison, but faced resistance nevertheless from political parties, sections of the Church, farmer organisations and, of course, business interests.

*

If the tunnel is eventually found to carry unacceptable environmental or geological risks, what alternatives does Wayanad have to improve connectivity? The rationale for better connectivity is also compelling—for agriculture, tourism, healthcare, education and emergency response.

Options include scientific strengthening of vulnerable stretches of the existing Thamarassery Ghat Road, advanced slope stabilisation techniques, better drainage management, careful evaluation of alternative alignments, real-time landslide monitoring, intelligent traffic systems and better public transport. The committee’s recommendations could become a blueprint for all infrastructure projects proposed in Kerala’s hill regions.

As climate expert K.G. Thara says: “Environment science should enter policy discussions *before* disasters occur. It must feature in the decision-making process *before* the first survey is conducted, *before* the first tender is issued and *before* the first excavator begins cutting into a mountain.” ■

The true worth of an Indian passport

...and the glories India’s first citizen is earning the nation on his many foreign trips

Ashis Ray

Even as the ministry of external affairs tries to make up its mind about the Indian passport, what it is and isn’t, whether it is proof of Indian citizenship or not, the 2026 edition of the Global Passport Index (GPI) published in early July ranks India at #125 among 197 countries. Not terribly flattering, whichever way you count, especially for a country that fancies itself as ‘Vishwaguru’ with the most widely travelled Indian prime minister ever, not out on a century-plus foreign trips since assuming office in 2014.

Unlike the highly cited Henley Passport Index, which ranks passports based on the number of destinations their holders can access visa-free, the GPI, brought out by citizenship advisory firm Global Citizen Solutions headquartered in London, uses a scoring system that measures the strength of passports on three parameters—global mobility or visa-free travel, which is assigned 50 per cent weightage; how friendly a country is to foreign investors, including tax regimes and business environment (25 per cent); and living conditions, personal freedoms and global reputation (25 per cent).

In mid-May 2026, Prime Minister Modi exhorted Indians to avoid foreign travel on account of the multiple economic crises buffeting India because of the West Asia war. He was presumably worried about India’s low oil reserves and dwindling foreign exchange reserves. The concerns weren’t entirely misplaced but his list of



Modi receiving the ‘Guardian of the Blue Horizon’ award in Seychelles

don’ts for citizens, with or without passports, were frankly laughable. Soon after he’d lectured Indians on the need for austerity, he set off on more foreign jaunts. As temperatures soared in Delhi, he hit the cooler climes of Europe. But another kind of heat lay in store. In the Netherlands, Dutch prime minister Rob Jetten voiced concerns about the erosion of press freedom and minority rights in India. In Norway, journalist Helle Lyng Svendsen asked Modi why he doesn’t take questions from the media.

At a presser later, Lyng asked an Indian diplomat, “Why should we trust you (India)? Can you try to stop the human rights violations that go on in your country?” Sibi George, India’s MEA secretary (West), tied himself in knots fielding the question, and soon became the butt of jokes on social media.

Modi’s inability to handle Q&A sessions with journalists—

de rigueur in a democracy—has become a pathology and is a national embarrassment. He is not even willing to use an interpreter and reply in Hindi, the language in which he is easily more fluent, also the language his government wants all Indians to embrace

Give him an award and he will come running. Ask him a question, and he will likely run away

without question.

India’s question and beholden mainstream media may be content with dictations, set pieces and third-party material from social media handles, but the fourth estate in still-functioning democracies is calling out Modi’s evasion of questions, especially since the assault on citizen freedoms and minorities in India is now an open secret abroad.

Foreign governments have assessed that he does not really understand international affairs. What he craves is publicity and a sure way to extract concessions is to pander to his vanity.

In Italy, which followed the bruising stops in the Netherlands and Norway, Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni waltzed him around Rome, hosted a dinner at the Colosseum, clicked selfies and received the Indian candy ‘Melody’ (which Meloni coyly interpreted as a blend of Meloni and Modi). And guess what? When Modi met Meloni at the G7 summit in France a month later, he couldn’t resist mentioning that photos of them together had gone ‘viral’ on Instagram! Diplomacy 101.

Our prime minister also has a penchant for collecting international awards, which is getting attention in foreign media. Following his visit to Seychelles in late June to collect the newly minted ‘Guardian of the Blue Horizon’ award, Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper ran a report headlined: ‘Give him any award, and he’ll come running.’

It wrote: ‘The award, it transpired, had only been created three

days before Modi’s arrival and he was the first and only recipient.’ The hurriedly produced certificate even misspelled ‘republic’ as ‘republic’ and ‘Seychelles’ as ‘Seycheeles’. [...] A red-faced Seychelles foreign ministry claimed that a ‘working draft’ had accidentally been circulated and that an ‘authentic and duly approved’ version had now been issued.’ But our broadminded prime minister collected it with pride nevertheless.

The importance of heads of government meetings should not be underestimated. But what has Modi achieved in his 12 years of frequent flying that an Indian ambassador or foreign minister couldn’t have accomplished? How is a prime minister who is so happy to preach fragility to citizens so unconcerned about throwing crores of taxpayer rupees on foreign photo-shops?

An utter lack of substance seems to define his overseas engagements. Almost every departure from time-tested Indian policies—the foundations of which were laid by India’s first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and tweaked for post-Cold War circumstances by prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao—has been a disaster. Jumping into America’s lap without obtaining any concessions or guarantees from Washington and making a trip to Israel and hugging its prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the eve of the US–Israel airstrikes on Iran have done India no favours.

Not a single country in the world, other than Israel, endorsed his government’s military action—codenamed Operation Sindoor—against Pakistan last year. In

contrast, Pakistan won active support from China, Turkey and Azerbaijan, with Saudi Arabia standing by. And this, despite India’s desperate efforts to have it named and shamed and treated as a pariah state. This was the same Saudi Arabia, whose crown prince was wooed by Modi and which now has a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Pakistan.

Then came trips to Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand. At his first halt, Modi was forced to listen to the Indonesian president extol Nehru’s role in enabling his country’s independence and as the ‘Father of Non-alignment’.

In Australia, Amnesty International urged the Australian government to raise India’s human rights record, while Alliance Against Islamophobia protested against ‘bigotry and persecution’ of Muslims and backward castes. A reporter with *7News*, Australia’s most watched news service, said in a piece-to-camera as Modi walked by in the distance behind him, “This is about as close as you’ll get to Narendra Modi on his trip to Melbourne. He famously avoids unsolicited news conferences, preferring instead more stage-managed appearances.”

Incidentally, the announcement that Australia had agreed to supply uranium to India was old news repackaged as new. Canberra did this in 2011 when Dr Manmohan Singh was prime minister.

Stuff, a news platform in New Zealand, revealed that Modi’s advance security and logistics team had asked the organisers to ‘allow for nap times’ and select ‘venues without stairs’. But that worry aside, we learnt from Rudrendra Tandon, MEA secretary (East), why Modi doesn’t do press meets: apparently because he is a “quintessential Indian politician” who “has perfected the art of direct contact with his electorate.” ■

Recognition, yes, but redistribution?

Maharashtra has passed a new law to recognise women farmers but has it done enough to really empower them?

Jaideep Hardikar

Savita Patil, a marginal farmer in Nimkhedi village of Maharashtra’s Dhule district, couldn’t enrol herself on Maha-DBT, the Maharashtra government’s portal for schemes and subsidies. With her husband, Savita Patil grows cotton and maize on their two-acre farm. But she couldn’t even register her name on the portal. The 37-year-old was not a farmer in official records. Savita Patil’s is not an isolated case.

For generations, women have tilled fields, transplanted paddy, harvested cotton, milked cattle, managed livestock, saved seeds, collected forest produce, grown mushrooms, harvested fish in the ponds and rivers, and sustained their households with labour and supplementary incomes.

Yet, in the eyes of the law, millions of women in rural Maharashtra, indeed across the country, have remained invisible—they are not farmers, but ‘wives’ or ‘agricultural labourers’ because the land they cultivate is usually registered in the name of fathers, husbands or sons.

Last week, Maharashtra took a significant step towards correcting this historical anomaly. The state legislature unanimously passed the Maharashtra Women Farmers Empowerment Act, 2026, making it



Challenges ahead The Maharashtra Women Farmers Empowerment Act, 2026, was unanimously passed during the recent monsoon session, but the real work begins now; (inset) Savita Patil

one of the first in the country to enact a law that grants legal recognition to women as ‘farmers’ engaged in agriculture, irrespective of whether or not they own agricultural land.

While the rights debate among women farm activists has centred around land entitlements, this law distinguishes farming from land ownership. The agitation for land entitlements has a long history but those rights are not yet on the horizon. What the new law provides, in the interim, is a template for inclusion of women farmers and labourers in government entitlement programmes.

The new law is the culmination of a three-decades-long campaign by women’s organisations, researchers and farmer collectives, who argued that Indian agricultural policy has systematically undercounted the contribution of women because it equated farming with ownership of land.

“This is significant because it redefines who we see as a farmer,” says Professor Nitya Rao, Gender and Development, at the University of East Anglia, UK, and a trustee of the M.S. Swaminathan Research

Foundation (MSSRF). “It challenges deeply embedded gender norms that have kept women invisible as ‘farmers’ in policy and practice.” Prof. Rao adds a note of caution: “Recognition must translate into real gains.”

The Bill was in active discussion since September 2025, when the state government signed an MoU with MSSRF. It was in May 2012 that late Dr Swaminathan had introduced a private member’s Bill in the Rajya Sabha—The Women Farmers’ Entitlement Bill, 2011—asking the government to provide for gender-specific needs like setting up creches or day-care centres for their children and to grant women farmers land entitlements. This legislation heavily draws from that Bill.

The MSSRF drafted a policy note in January 2026 as a precursor to the draft bill. The note was tabled before the legislature in March 2026 during the budget session, and it was during the debate that Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis announced that this would be moved in the monsoon session. It was passed unanimously.

During consultations with civil



Credit: MSSRF on Instagram

households.

The law also mandates creation of a statewide database of women farmers, a Women Farmers Empowerment Cell, assistance officers at district and sub-district levels, a dedicated fund for women farmers and also monitoring mechanisms to ensure their implementation across various departments.

Calling the legislation “long overdue”, Dr Soumya Swaminathan, chairperson of MSSRF, said the proposed WFCs were “a gateway to dignity, visibility and economic opportunity.” Its success, she cautioned, would depend on

of rural men—a reflection of both women’s centrality to farming and the continuing exodus of men for non-farm work.

The Situation Assessment Survey of Agricultural Households (NSSO, 2019) also points to a slow but significant rise in agricultural households headed by women, a trend driven by male migration, widowhood and demographic change. Together, these trends reveal a paradox: women increasingly sustain India’s farms, but continue to own only a fraction of the land and remain inadequately recognised in agricultural policy.

Researchers describe this shift as the feminisation of agriculture—a process driven by male out-migration, distress-led diversification of rural livelihoods and the growing responsibility of women in cultivation, livestock and farm management.

Yet feminisation has not meant empowerment.

As Vaishali Ghuge, a woman farmer in Dharashiv district said during one of the consultations, “I built everything step by step, but I could not access government schemes and subsidies as I do not own land.”

Even though women’s participation in farming and allied activities has grown, ownership of land, access to institutional finance and decision-making powers are still concentrated in the hands of their menfolk. The new Maharashtra law will rectify this to an extent but it has limitations.

It does not alter land ownership, inheritance or tenancy laws. A woman recognised as a farmer under this Act does not automatically become a landowner, nor does she acquire property rights by virtue of the certificate. So, the law addresses recognition but falls short of redistribution. Whether this recognition translates into economic empowerment remains to be seen. Banks will have to decide whether the certificate is sufficient to extend agricultural credit. Insurance companies and other agencies will need to treat certificate holders as eligible beneficiaries. Local officials will have to evolve transparent procedures to identify genuine cultivators without creating another bureaucratic hurdle.

The Devendra Fadnavis government will no doubt use the new law to brandish its pro-women credentials, but the ironic twist is that it came into being in the same week that his government admitted to the deletion of 92 lakh women from its much-trumpeted ‘Ladki Bahin Yojana’. That scheme, notified ahead of the 2024 assembly elections, had helped garner women’s votes but the state government now says it paid Rs 14,000 crore extra to ineligible beneficiaries. ■

While the debate among activists has been around land entitlements, the law separates farming from ownership

effective implementation.

For decades, the absence of legal recognition has meant that countless women cultivators found themselves excluded from institutional credit, crop insurance, government subsidies and training programmes simply because they could not prove that they were farmers. The new certificate will hopefully change this, providing them documentary recognition that government agencies can rely on while extending benefits.

One of the least acknowledged transformations in Indian agriculture has been its steady feminisation, first flagged in the Economic Survey of India, 2015-16. Successive Agriculture Censuses show that women accounted for 10.9 per cent of operational holdings in 2000-01, a figure that rose to 11.7 per cent in 2005-06, 12.8 per cent in 2010-11, and 13.9 per cent in 2015-16. At the same time, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24 shows that agriculture remains the principal source of employment for rural women, with nearly 77 per cent of employed rural women engaged in agriculture, compared to about half

If Ayodhya sounds like trouble, talk of Mathura

Nandlal Sharma in Mathura/Vrindavan

It’s a hot and humid afternoon in Mathura. Outside the Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi temple complex, ice-cream vendor Rakesh is waiting for customers. “Not enough people yet—it’s too hot. It might pick up in the evening,” he tells me. Has he heard about the *kar seva* called by the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad on 9 August, I ask him. He’s heard, he says, a bit disinterestedly.

It looks like just another day in Mathura, but I wonder if this is the lull before the storm. On 28 June, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath dropped the keywords ‘kar seva’ and ‘Krishna Janmabhoomi’, while speaking at a public event in Hathras, 50-odd kilometres from Agra. In the same breath, he baited his adversary Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, who had taken to social media on 7 June to allege embezzlement of temple donations in Ayodhya, bringing the matter into the national spotlight and setting off a chain reaction that embarrassed the entire Sangh Parivar. Yogi, as the incumbent chief minister, and with elections round the corner, has a little more at stake, and will desperately want a new narrative.

Before long the religious leadership in Mathura had awakened. On 4 July, Swami Sachchidanand Maharaj of the Shri Chitragupt Peeth in adjacent Vrindavan, declared that a *kar seva* would be organised on 9 August to remove the (Shahi Idgah) dome adjacent to the Krishna Janmabhoomi temple, “just like the *kar seva* that liberated the Ram Mandir”. His call was backed by the Nirmohi Akhara and Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad president Ravindra Puri, whose organisation represents 13 akharas and an estimated five lakh sadhus.

On 14 July, the campaign echoed at a gathering in neighbouring Vrindavan, when Swami Abhishek Brahmachari declared: “Krishna Lalla, we are coming.

We will build the temple there.” Posters targeting Akhilesh and Mulayam Singh Yadav appeared across the city, while Ravindra Puri told a television channel that even Akhilesh would eventually be persuaded to join the movement.

Reacting to these calls for *kar seva*, Tanveer Ahmad, secretary of the Mathura Eidgah Committee, said: “Such dates have been announced earlier as well. When cases are pending in court, statements like these are only made for political gain. Mathura is a religious city, but its people believe in communal harmony. Those calling for *kar seva* are outsiders.”

Ahmad points out that the Mathura dispute between Shri Krishna Janmasthan Seva Sansthan and the Shahi Eidgah Trust was settled through a 1968 agreement, and subsequently implemented through a court decree in 1973. According to a report in *The Hindu*, the Seva Sansthan transferred a portion of the land to the Shahi Eidgah. However, there are petitions pending in courts that challenge this agreement as ‘fraudulent’ and seek the transfer of the entire property in the name of Shri Krishna Virajman (the deity). Petitioners representing the Hindu side argue that the land on which the Shahi Eidgah mosque stands is Krishna Janmasthan and the Muslim side should remove its structure. They say land for an Eidgah can be provided at another location away from the Janmasthan.

On reports that the Supreme Court is encouraging negotiated settlements in Kashi, Mathura and Sambhal through Lok Adalats, Ahmad says notices have been issued in 23 pending cases in Mathura district, not just the Krishna Janmabhoomi–Shahi Idgah dispute. Possibly 18 connected cases are pending before the Allahabad High Court, he said, and about ten before the Supreme Court.

Local Congress leader Aditya Tiwari sees echoes of Ayodhya in the ‘Chalo Mathura’ call. “The same atmosphere is being created in Mathura. Kashi and Mathura have always been on the BJP–RSS



The main entrance gate of the Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi temple in Mathura

Photo: Nandlal Sharma

political agenda, but circumstances have changed. The Ram Mandir donation controversy has weakened public support. The locals are unlikely to back this campaign.”

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Away from the political heat, Jeetu Chaudhary, a factory worker by day and motorcycle taxi driver after sundown, worries about the proposed Banke Bihari corridor in nearby Vrindavan, and how it might affect his livelihood. “If my salary were enough, I wouldn’t have had to earn extra through my bike-taxi.” He has only vaguely heard about the *kar seva* and doesn’t really care.

In the narrow lanes around the Banke Bihari temple in Vrindavan, 10-odd kilometres from Mathura city, some residents have gathered to watch a painter marking houses with saffron lettering:

“285 properties have been identified for demolition in the Jungalkatti area. Of these, 30-35 are temples that are 400-500 years old”

‘Property of Shri Thakur Banke Bihari Ji Maharaj, Vrindavan’. More than 20 houses have been marked thus. In the Jungalkatti area opposite the temple, 285 properties have been identified for demolition. “Of these 285 properties, 30-35 are temples that are 400-500 years old. The corridor is putting Vrindavan’s civilisational and cultural heritage at risk,” says social activist Deepak Parashar.

The corridor project came on the heels of the 2022 Janmashtami stampede, in which two devotees died. The Uttar Pradesh government subsequently proposed the corridor to improve crowd management and, in 2025, passed the Shri Banke Bihari Ji Temple Trust Ordinance. The Goswami community challenged it, arguing that it would strip the temple’s hereditary custodians of their rights.

The Supreme Court has, in its interim order, stayed the formation of the proposed trust pending a final verdict, but permitted conditional use of temple funds to acquire about five acres for the corridor.

Parashar alleges irregularities in the acquisition process. “Different portions of the same original property have been assigned different values,” he says. He also questions the land acquisition before the detailed project report (DPR) has been made public. “There are complaints that owners were coerced into registering sale deeds. And how can people sell what is often worth their entire lifetime savings, and that too when the project has not even been disclosed?”

Leading the resistance is Sohan Lal Mishra, a priest at the Banke Bihari temple. “No locals are demanding a corridor; only outsiders.” Mishra says Vrindavan’s congestion owes less to poor infrastructure and more to poor traffic management. “Why allow cars into crowded streets? The corridor is being created so that luxury facilities can be built for wealthy visitors.” Locals are forced to take detours while affluent visitors get VIP access. “Has the Kashi Vishwanath corridor eliminated congestion?” ■

Learning to live with(out) America

Ashok Swain on how the Gulf countries are coming to terms with their America delusion

With West Asia on the boil again after a fragile cessation of hostilities, the Gulf monarchies confront an uncomfortable truth. The old security order may not have collapsed but it has certainly lost credibility. For decades, the Gulf states lived under a US security umbrella, buying protection, weapons and diplomatic backing in exchange for oil, military basing rights and strategic loyalty. The bargain was not equal, but it was predictable. The war with Iran has exposed the untenability of those old assumptions.

No state understands this better than Saudi Arabia, the strategic centre of the Gulf system. When Riyadh recalibrates, the region follows. Qatar may continue to mediate, the United Arab Emirates may pursue its own activist foreign policy, Oman may preserve its neutrality, and Bahrain and Kuwait try to hedge their bets by engaging both sides to manage the risks of regional escalation. Yet the future of Gulf security will ultimately be shaped by Saudi Arabia's conclusion that exclusive dependence on Washington has become a strategic liability.

The Iran war has not made the US irrelevant, it has made it insufficient. America's military power is still unmatched in the Gulf, but confidence in its judgment has eroded in Gulf capitals, which have seen Washington getting entangled in Israel's confrontation with Iran, in a 'war of choice' whose consequences are being borne disproportionately by Gulf states. US military bases, once seen as symbols of protection, are suddenly magnets of vulnerability. Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE are learning that to host American forces is to face the wrath of America's enemy in West Asia. While Saudi Arabia has escaped direct attacks, it has drawn exactly the same conclusion.

The security dilemma of Gulf states has become even more complicated with Israel suddenly shifting its focus from Iran to Türkiye. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has repeatedly accused Israel of expansionism, while Israeli leaders portray Türkiye's growing military presence in Syria and broader regional ambitions as a long-term strategic threat. What began as a diplomatic feud is turning into a geo-political confrontation that threatens to drag the region into another cycle of instability.

For Gulf leaders, the Israel-Turkey rivalry is unsettling because both countries are, in different ways, partners of the US, which finds itself balancing between two allies who mistrust each other. The Trump administration has tried to repair its own relations with Ankara, signalling that it might restore Türkiye's access to the F-35 fighter programme. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin



US military bases, once seen as symbols of protection, are suddenly magnets of vulnerability. The Gulf monarchies are witnessing a situation where their decades-old security guarantor may itself get trapped between competing regional partners

Netanyahu has reacted with alarm, warning that supplying advanced American aircraft to Türkiye would fundamentally alter the regional balance of power. The US remains Israel's primary and indispensable military patron. The Gulf monarchies are witnessing a never-before situation in which their decades-old security guarantor may itself get trapped between competing regional partners.

For Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, these developments are not abstract geopolitical concerns. They threaten to upend his 'Vision 2030' national transformation plan, which depends on big foreign investments, on a pivot away from its dependence on oil, on tourism and energy diversification and on political stability and the perception that Saudi Arabia is a safe place to invest and do business. Regional wars threaten all these ambitions. Missiles do not have to strike Riyadh to damage Saudi Arabia's future; political uncertainty creates business uncertainties, which can keep investors away.

The growing hostility between Israel and Türkiye compounds these risks. Syria

has become the principal arena where their interests collide. Turkish military deployments in northern Syria and Israel's attempt to prevent that build-up brings the two countries into direct confrontation. Military incidents between Israeli and Turkish forces, once quite unimaginable, are now in the realm of possibility, according to regional analysts. Any escalation will reverberate through the Gulf, disrupting trade, investment and energy markets and potentially entangle Washington.

This is why Saudi Arabia is quietly constructing a different security architecture. It is not abandoning the US. Riyadh understands that there is no real substitute for US military capability, its missile defence systems, intelligence networks and diplomatic influence. China has no desire to assume military responsibilities in the Gulf. Russia has neither the capacity nor credibility. Pakistan and Türkiye offer valuable partnerships but can hardly replace the US security system. Israel possesses formidable military capabilities and is a volatile adversary. Saudi Arabia's answer

to this challenge is to diversify.

Riyadh continues to buy advanced American weapons while simultaneously expanding defence cooperation with Türkiye, Pakistan, South Korea, China and Europe. It is investing heavily in domestic weapons production, drone technology, missile defence and cyber capabilities. It is exploring alternative trade routes, pipelines and logistics corridors that reduce dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz.

Saudi Arabia has accepted a reality that many ignore: that any security equation in the Gulf must account for Iran. It can be deterred, contained, sanctioned or negotiated with, but it cannot be wished away. Iran is a geographic reality and it has capabilities. It has missiles, drones, proxy networks and the capacity to disrupt maritime commerce. The war is demonstrating that even a weakened Iran retains the capability to impose enormous costs on its neighbours. Saudi Arabia's détente with Tehran is, therefore, not an act of trust but an acknowledgement of this reality.

The same realism shapes Riyadh's view of Türkiye and Israel. Saudi Arabia has no interest in their rivalry. It seeks productive relations with Ankara—whose growing defence industry has become an attraction—even while maintaining quiet channels with Israel, where necessary.

The UAE makes no bones about mistrusting Iran and cooperating with Israel. Qatar sees mediation as security doctrine, and Oman remains the Gulf's indispensable bridge to Tehran. Kuwait and Bahrain have both tried to cautiously hedge their bets, even making diplomatic overtures to Iran, but the balance is precarious at best, as demonstrated by the latest Iranian strikes on US bases in these countries.

Saudi Arabia is trying something more ambitious: to create a new regional order in which the US is still indispensable but not the sole guarantor of security; Iran is engaged even if mistrusted; Türkiye an important strategic partner; China an economic pillar and Israel still a powerful regional actor.

It's not clear at this point if this delicate dance will succeed. The Gulf states don't lack military hardware, but they do lack collective security mechanisms. The Iran war has demonstrated that even the most sophisticated weapons systems cannot guarantee resilience. The war has exposed the vulnerability of energy infrastructure, desalination facilities and supply chains—and by extension the vulnerability of potential future investments in these Gulf economies. ■

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

The return of the runaway leader

Faisal Mahmud tries to make sense of Sheikh Hasina's announcement to voluntarily return to Bangladesh

The sudden announcement by Sheikh Hasina, living in exile in India since August 2024, that she plans to return to Bangladesh by the end of the year was startling but not really a surprise. For nearly two years after fleeing Bangladesh in the face of a student uprising, she was still combative and tried hard to keep her banned Awami League party afloat. She spoke of returning and contesting elections again, but even her supporters knew that at the age of 78, chances of a political comeback were slim.

In her interview to *Reuters*, the ousted former prime minister acknowledged that she could be arrested, executed or even assassinated upon her return. Yet she insisted that she had no alternative. She explained that she wanted to die on the soil where her "parents were buried" and where her "blood was shed. The International Crimes Tribunal sentenced her to death in November 2025 for crimes against humanity linked to the deadly suppression of protests. Multiple murder and corruption cases followed. Dhaka repeatedly sent extradition requests to India, while New Delhi carefully avoided making any public commitment.

The Bangladesh government has welcomed the announcement. It has also warned that she will be arrested on arrival and sent to prison to stand trial. A government spokesperson suggested darkly that the former prime minister "should bring with her the world's best lawyers" to argue her case. India has officially said the request for extradition was being examined legally and that India's approach has not changed. India has not formally granted Sheikh Hasina political asylum. Since her ouster in August 2024, she has been living in India under what officials describe as a

'special guest' arrangement, but her exact legal status remains deliberately undefined.

The announcement by the former prime minister in exile reveals how dramatically her political options have narrowed. For the first time since she escaped to India following the uprising, exile no longer appears sustainable. Mounting legal pressure from Dhaka, India's delicate diplomatic dance, the collapse of her party structure and eroding support base have left her very little room for manoeuvre. The question is no longer whether Sheikh Hasina wants to return but whether circumstances are forcing her hand.

Hasina has even announced a tentative timetable, declaring that she intends to surrender voluntarily and said senior party leaders, including former home minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, who was also sentenced to death, would accompany her. It's hard to dismiss such a coordinated declaration as just political theatre.

India has consistently refused to reveal whether it intends to honour extradition requests. Responding to questions about her comments, external affairs ministry officials said there was no change in their position, that extradition was 'a legal issue that would be handled accordingly'. Diplomatic language often reveals as much through omission as declaration.

New Delhi has avoided rejecting Dhaka's requests outright. Equally notable is what it has not done: despite hosting her since August 2024, India has never publicly granted her political asylum. This is a crucial distinction. Asylum would amount to a commitment to shield her indefinitely.

Instead, she remains a sensitive guest whose presence complicates India's effort to rebuild ties with the new administration in Bangladesh. India sent a big delegation to

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's inauguration. The Bangladesh foreign minister later travelled to New Delhi in the most significant bilateral engagement since the change of government. Both countries have quietly resumed discussions on trade, connectivity and regional security.

Against that backdrop, indefinitely sheltering the most polarising figure in contemporary Bangladeshi politics is getting increasingly difficult.

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For India, the dilemma is profound. For over 15 years, New Delhi invested heavily in Hasina's administration. Her government became India's closest strategic partner in South Asia, delivering unprecedented security cooperation against northeastern insurgents while expanding economic integration and regional connectivity. Abandoning that ally entirely risks damaging India's credibility among partners across the region.

Yet continuing to protect a former leader sentenced to death for crimes against humanity also carries mounting diplomatic costs. The UN estimated that 1,400 people were killed during the crackdown on protesters that culminated in the collapse of her government. Although she rejects those findings, the scale of the allegations makes her a diplomatic liability.

Every extradition request from Dhaka increases that pressure. Every improvement in bilateral relations narrows New Delhi's room for procrastination. This does not mean that India is already preparing to extradite her. The legal process is complex. Indian courts could weigh the possibility that she will receive a fair trial. But India will find its ambiguity hard to defend.

Few countries today would willingly accept a deposed leader facing multiple criminal convictions and repeated extradition requests. Western democracies are highly unlikely to invite diplomatic confrontation over someone accused of presiding over mass murder. Even Gulf monarchies have shown little appetite for hosting controversial exiled leaders.

Russia is a theoretical possibility but will likely balk given Moscow's desire to preserve relations with Bangladesh, particularly as big commercial projects approach completion.

Zahed Ur Rahman, information advisor

Photo: Getty Images



Sheikh Hasina has announced a tentative timetable for her return and surrender

While it has hosted Sheikh Hasina since August 2024, India has not granted her political asylum

to the Bangladesh prime minister, said they were trying to bring back Hasina and would welcome her. He rejected suggestions that her return could destabilise the country, insisting she no longer had a political future. The tribunal proceedings, he said, would be transparent and open to international observation. That confidence reflects how the political landscape of

Bangladesh has changed since the uprising.

Before her fall, the Awami League appeared inseparable from the state. Two decades in power had allowed Hasina to centralise all key decisions. Institutions revolved around her personal authority. Her sudden departure exposed the consequences of that concentration. Many senior leaders fled the country. Others remain underground.

Hasina's admission that practically all party workers would face legal proceedings and her proposed collective surrender could be an attempt to project solidarity and lift organisational morale after two years of continuous decline. Returning voluntarily rather than being extradited might help her retain political agency.

She'll try to portray her surrender as a principled stand against political persecution rather than forced expulsion. But returning also means immediate arrest and imprisonment followed by criminal proceedings. The student deaths are still an open wound and public anger can easily become a security challenge. Yet, for Sheikh Hasina, her escape to India is now a dead-end. ■

FAISAL MAHMUD is a Dhaka-based journalist

COOPERATIVE FEDERALISM IN ACTION

Karnataka's renewed engagement at the 11th NITI aayog Governing Council meeting

"Building Partnerships for Inclusive Human Development and Viksit Bharat @2047"

India's journey towards becoming a developed nation by 2047 is closely intertwined with the strength of its federal structure. As the nation advances towards the vision of Viksit Bharat @2047, the role of States as equal partners in development has assumed greater significance. The Governing Council of NITI Aayog serves as the country's premier platform for fostering dialogue between the Union and the States, facilitating consensus on national priorities, and promoting collaborative policymaking. Against this backdrop, Karnataka Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar's participation in the 11th Governing Council Meeting of NITI Aayog in June 2026 marked an important milestone in the State's development journey. Convened under the theme "Inclusive Human Development for Viksit Bharat @2047," the meeting provided Karnataka with an opportunity to present its developmental priorities, advocate policy reforms, and seek support for key infrastructure projects. The visit was significant not only because of the issues placed before the Governing Council but also because it reflected Karnataka's renewed emphasis on institutional engagement with the Government of India. Through active participation in the national policy dialogue, the State reaffirmed its belief that sustained consultation, collaborative governance, and constructive partnerships are essential for addressing the challenges of rapid urbanisation and accelerating inclusive development.

More than a routine administrative engagement, the visit demonstrated Karnataka's commitment to aligning its development agenda with national priorities while securing timely approvals and financial assistance for projects critical to the State's long-term growth.

THE SPIRIT OF COOPERATIVE FEDERALISM

"Centre and States must work as equal partners in nation building." India's Constitution envisages a federal framework in which the Union and the States share responsibilities for governance and development. Over the years, the principle of Cooperative Federalism has emerged as the cornerstone of this partnership, encouraging consultation, coordination, and shared responsibility.

Addressing the Governing Council, Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar observed that contemporary governance demands close coordination among all levels of government. Whether responding to rapid urbanisation, climate change, technological transformation, public health challenges, or global economic uncertainties, effective solutions require collaborative policymaking.

The Chief Minister emphasised that India's aspiration of becoming a developed nation by 2047 can be realised only through synchronized policy implementation across sectors. States, being closest to citizens and responsible for delivering essential public services, play a pivotal role in translating national policies into tangible developmental outcomes.

He underscored that the relationship between the Centre and the States should be based on mutual trust, shared responsibility, and common developmental goals. This approach reflects the evolving role of NITI Aayog as a platform that promotes

evidence-based policymaking, policy innovation, and cooperative governance.

STRENGTHENING BENGALURU'S URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE

"Supporting India's innovation capital through strategic investment."

A major focus of Karnataka's presentation was the need for enhanced infrastructural support for Bengaluru.

The State informed the Governing Council that it has already initiated urban infrastructure projects worth nearly ₹1 lakh crore, covering transportation, public mobility, climate resilience, and sustainable urban development.

While these initiatives demonstrate Karnataka's commitment to strengthening urban infrastructure, the Chief Minister noted that the city's rapid growth necessitates additional support from the Union Government.

Given Bengaluru's role as a national economic hub, investments in its infrastructure benefit not only the city's residents but also millions of professionals, industries, educational institutions, startups, and multinational companies that contribute significantly to India's economy.

INFRASTRUCTURE AS AN ENGINE OF ECONOMIC GROWTH

"Integrated transport networks are essential for sustainable urbanisation."

During his visit to New Delhi, the Chief Minister also met Union Minister for Housing and Urban Affairs Manohar Lal Khattar to seek approvals and financial support for several key infrastructure projects.

Collectively valued at Rs 13,549 crore, these proposals include financial assistance of Rs 1,257 crore under the Urban Challenge Fund for an elevated corridor aimed at easing traffic congestion and improving mobility in Bengaluru.

The State also requested support for establishing a modern sewage treatment plant, recognising that sustainable urban development depends as much on environmental infrastructure as on transport networks.

Efficient wastewater management, river conservation, sanitation, and groundwater protection are increasingly



essential components of resilient and sustainable cities.

TRANSFORMING PUBLIC MOBILITY

"Connecting people, markets and opportunities."

Improving transportation infrastructure remains central to Karnataka's development strategy.

The State sought timely approvals and financial support for several landmark transport initiatives, including the Bengaluru Suburban Rail Project, which is expected to significantly improve regional connectivity while reducing dependence on private vehicles.

Karnataka also urged progress on the proposed Bengaluru–Mumbai High-Speed Rail Corridor, a transformative project expected to strengthen economic integration between two of India's most dynamic regions.

In addition, the Chief Minister requested approvals for Namma Metro Phases 3 and 3A, which will extend metro connectivity to rapidly growing residential and commercial areas.

Together, these initiatives represent an integrated approach to multimodal transportation planning, supporting sustainable urbanisation while enhancing economic productivity.

BALANCED REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

"Growth must extend beyond metropolitan boundaries."

While Bengaluru continues to be Karnataka's economic engine, the State emphasised the need to promote balanced regional development.

The Chief Minister stressed that sustained economic growth requires the creation of multiple centres of opportunity across Karnataka. Cities such as Mysuru, Hubballi-Dharwad,

Mangaluru, Belagavi, Kalaburagi, Shivamogga, Davanagere, Ballari, and Vijayapura possess significant potential for industrial development, logistics, higher education, tourism, healthcare, and manufacturing.

Strengthening these regional growth centres would generate employment opportunities across the State, reduce migration pressures on Bengaluru, and promote more inclusive development.

This approach aligns with the national objective of creating distributed centres of economic growth while ensuring equitable access to infrastructure and opportunities.

WATER SECURITY: A DEVELOPMENT IMPERATIVE

"Water management remains central to sustainable development."

Water security continues to be a key development priority for Karnataka.

Recognising its importance for agriculture, drinking water, industry, and environmental sustainability, the State sought early consideration of several major water resource initiatives.

The Chief Minister requested expeditious clearance for the Mekedatu Balancing Reservoir Project, emphasising its importance for long-term water management and drinking water security.

He also urged notification of the Krishna Water Disputes Tribunal-II Award, which would provide greater clarity regarding water allocations.

In addition, Karnataka sought the release of ₹5,300 crore in pending central assistance for the Upper Bhadra Project, a major irrigation initiative expected to enhance irrigation coverage, improve groundwater recharge, strengthen agricultural productivity, and support rural livelihoods.

These proposals reaffirm Karnataka's commitment to integrated water resource management as a foundation for sustainable development.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AT THE CENTRE OF PUBLIC POLICY

"Development must ultimately improve people's quality of life."

Reflecting the central theme of the Governing Council meeting, Karnataka highlighted the need to place human development at the heart of public policy.

The Chief Minister emphasised that economic progress should be measured alongside improvements in healthcare, nutrition, education, employment, and skill development.

To encourage better governance outcomes, Karnataka proposed that the Union Government introduce performance-based incentives for States demonstrating measurable progress in these sectors.

Such an approach would reward innovation, strengthen accountability, encourage healthy competition among States, and accelerate progress towards national human development goals.

INVESTING IN QUALITY PUBLIC EDUCATION

"Educational infrastructure shapes the future of the nation."

Education remains one of the most effective instruments for social transformation and economic progress.

The Government of Karnataka sought a one-time infrastructural grant for government schools and colleges to modernise classrooms, laboratories, libraries, digital learning facilities, hostels, sanitation, and sports infrastructure.

The objective is to provide students studying in public institutions with learning environments comparable to those available in quality private institutions.

Strengthening educational infrastructure would improve learning outcomes, enhance employability, promote innovation, and prepare India's youth for the demands of a knowledge-driven economy.

LEVERAGING CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

"Public-private partnerships can strengthen rural development."

Karnataka also proposed greater alignment of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives with national development priorities.

The Chief Minister suggested that the Ministry of Corporate Affairs

TOWARDS VIKSIT BHARAT @2047

"A shared vision built through shared responsibility."

The 11th Governing Council Meeting of NITI Aayog reaffirmed the importance of dialogue, consensus, and cooperative governance in advancing India's developmental aspirations.

For Karnataka, the meeting provided an important platform to present a comprehensive development agenda encompassing infrastructure, transportation, water security, regional development, education, governance reform, and human development.

The State's active engagement reflected its commitment to strengthening institutional partnerships with the Union Government while pursuing projects critical to Karnataka's long-term progress.

More importantly, the visit underscored the belief that national development is best achieved when the Centre and the States work together in a spirit of partnership, consultation, and shared purpose.

As India moves towards the vision of Viksit Bharat @2047, cooperative federalism will remain a defining pillar of governance. Karnataka's participation in the 11th NITI Aayog Governing Council Meeting demonstrates how constructive engagement can translate developmental priorities into actionable policy initiatives, ensuring that growth remains inclusive, sustainable, and people-centric.

The visit stands as a testament to the principle that dialogue strengthens democracy, partnership accelerates development, and cooperative federalism provides the institutional foundation for building a prosperous, resilient, and inclusive India. By combining State-level innovation with national support, Karnataka seeks not only to advance its own developmental priorities but also to contribute meaningfully to the country's collective journey towards a developed India by 2047.

encourage CSR investments towards strengthening healthcare and educational infrastructure in rural areas.

Such convergence between government programmes and private sector initiatives would maximise developmental outcomes, reduce regional disparities, and improve the delivery of essential services.

The proposal reflects Karnataka's belief that inclusive development requires active participation from governments, industry, civil society, and local communities.

CLIMATE RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABLE URBANISATION

"Building cities prepared for future challenges."

Rapid urbanisation presents both opportunities and challenges. The Chief Minister emphasised that future infrastructure planning must integrate climate resilience into every stage of urban development. Investments in public transportation, wastewater management, green infrastructure, sustainable mobility, and environmental protection are essential for ensuring that cities remain resilient, productive, and environmentally sustainable.

Karnataka's ongoing infrastructure initiatives seek to balance economic growth with ecological responsibility while supporting India's long-term climate commitments.



Has the hunger strike lost its moral charge?

Shailendra Chauhan on the continued relevance of Gandhi’s tradition of nonviolent resistance in a changed India

The history of Indian democracy is not merely the history of elections. It is equally a history of dissent, resistance and moral intervention. Among the many political instruments that have shaped this history, one acquired unparalleled moral legitimacy: the fast. Mahatma Gandhi transformed fasting from a simple act of abstaining from food into a means of cultivating inner strength, exerting moral pressure and shaping public opinion. Gandhi believed that no matter how powerful a government might be, if it were confronted by an unwavering commitment to truth and moral conviction, it would ultimately have to yield.

Three decades into the 21st century, a question presents itself with renewed urgency: has fasting as a political instrument lost its effectiveness? Sonam Wangchuk’s prolonged fast—first over Ladakh’s environmental concerns and constitutional rights and now seeking Dharmendra Pradhan’s resignation—the farmers’ movement, sit-ins by various civil society organisations and numerous local protests have revived a fundamental question: is today’s political establishment less responsive to moral pressure? Or has the very nature of democracy changed?

The answer lies not merely in the conduct of any particular government but in the broader political and social landscape. During Gandhi’s time, fasting was effective because it was embedded within extensive public engagement, dialogue and moral credibility. Every fast Gandhi undertook was more than an act of personal asceticism; it was an appeal to the conscience of society. News of his fasts reached villages across the country, dominated newspaper headlines and



Sonam Wangchuk on hunger strike at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi

The Narmada Bachao Andolan or the struggle for RTI appeared ineffective to start with, but in time, they shaped public policy and public consciousness

influenced the British government. The British were colonial rulers, but they were not entirely insulated from the pressures of global politics, parliamentary scrutiny, the press and democratic criticism. They still felt compelled to demonstrate a degree of political legitimacy.

Today, the circumstances are markedly different. Democratic governments derive their legitimacy from electoral majorities. That confidence, rooted in electoral success, can sometimes foster the belief that winning elections represents the electorate’s ultimate and final endorsement. Consequently, voices raised on the streets are often viewed as expressions of limited interest groups, partisan opposition or temporary discontent. In such an environment, the moral force of fasting no longer carries the same weight it once did.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that this is a phenomenon unique to the present government. Governments across the political spectrum have generally responded to large-scale movements through a familiar sequence: first, a period of waiting, followed by administrative control and, eventually, limited dialogue. This trend is visible in democracies around

the world. The modern state has become increasingly technocratic, security-obsessed and centralised. Administrative management has taken precedence over ethical persuasion.

It is equally true that many contemporary Indian social activists and public intellectuals have expressed concern that the State’s response to protests is harsher than it once was. Restrictions on demonstrations, prolonged delays in granting permissions, the detention of protesters, internet shutdowns and limitations imposed on movement in the name of security have intensified the debate over whether the public space available for dissent is steadily shrinking.

The government argues that maintaining law and order, preventing disruptions to public life and safeguarding national security are part of its constitutional responsibilities. For that reason, this debate resists simplistic or one-sided conclusions.

It is within this context that Sonam Wangchuk’s movement assumes particular significance. His campaign was not centred on a personal grievance but on the protection of Ladakh’s fragile environment

and constitutional safeguards for the region. The activist-educator is now on fast seeking reforms in the education system. His fast has succeeded in drawing the attention of many citizens, yet it also underscores an important reality: moral appeals alone do not necessarily produce immediate policy changes.

Another significant change deserves attention. In Gandhi’s era, channels of communication were limited. A major fast naturally became national news. Today, society exists amid an overwhelming abundance of information. In an age of 24-hour news cycles and social media, each

Governments must recognise that dissent is not the enemy of democracy but one of its essential conditions

day brings new controversies, new campaigns, new public debates. Sustaining public attention around any one movement has become difficult. This crisis of visibility has also diminished the effectiveness of fasting as a form of political action.

A second major shift has occurred within civil society. During Gandhi’s time, the Indian National Congress functioned as a mass movement. Today, political parties, social organisations and citizens’ groups operate as distinct, often disconnected entities. The coordination that once existed among them is less evident. Consequently, it has become far more difficult for any single fast to embody the moral voice of society as a whole.

It is also worth recognising that the excessive use of fasting can weaken its moral authority. When every minor or major dispute culminates in a hunger strike, society gradually becomes desensitised. Gandhi himself regarded fasting as a moral measure of last resort, not an everyday political tactic. Its dignity rested precisely in its restrained and judicious use.

Does this mean that Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence has become irrelevant? The answer is no.

Nonviolence is not synonymous with fasting alone. It encompasses dialogue, truth, public organisation, constructive action, moral courage and democratic pressure working in concert. Detached from these elements, fasting is reduced to little more than a symbolic abstention from food. Combined, it can still stir public conscience, even if its immediate impact is not readily visible.

History bears witness to the fact that many movements did not achieve immediate success, yet profoundly reshaped the politics of later generations. The Chipko Movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the struggle for the Right to Information and numerous environmental campaigns initially appeared ineffective. In time, however, they deeply influenced both public policy and collective consciousness. The success of a fast, therefore, cannot be judged solely by whether the government accepted its demands at that particular moment.

The true test of democracy lies in the responsibilities of both those who govern and those who resist. Governments must recognise that dissent is not the enemy of democracy but one of its essential conditions. Social movements must recognise that symbolic resistance alone is insufficient without moral credibility, evidence-based discourse and sustained public engagement.

What is needed today is not a mechanical imitation of Gandhi’s methods but a fresh understanding of the philosophical principles that animated them. Were Gandhi alive today, he would likely not rely on fasting alone. He would probably integrate digital platforms, public dialogue, environmental concerns, local self-governance and community organisation into a wider moral movement. His objective would not be the defeat of any particular government but the awakening of society’s collective conscience.

To declare that fasting has become entirely meaningless does justice neither to history nor to politics. A more accurate conclusion is that the social and political context in which fasting operates has fundamentally changed.

The greatest challenge before Indian democracy is whether it will continue to treat dissent as an administrative problem or begin to embrace it as one of democracy’s life-giving forces. The answer to that question will shape the future. If the space for moral voices continues to contract, not only will social movements suffer—democracy itself will become less responsive and less humane. But if both the State and society succeed in reviving a culture of dialogue, Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence will remain relevant, not simply as a historical memory, but as an indispensable foundation for the future of democracy. ■

True resistance comes from satyagraha

Meenakshi Natarajan on what makes acts of resistance carry conviction and ring true

The recent rejection of my Rajya Sabha nomination gave me food for thought. Resistance cannot be just external, I thought—it must stem from an inner churn, a search for the truth. Without that churn, an act of resistance is mere spectacle, a reactionary outburst. Minus the intent to seek the truth, resistance is raw violence; it cannot give voice to a demand for change.

While there are no lingering doubts anymore about the integrity of the Election Commission of India or the transparency of the electoral process, certain questions still gnawed at my conscience. The rejection of my Rajya Sabha nomination stunned everyone and exposed yet again the democratic authoritarianism that has overwhelmed our democracy. Yet, this wasn’t the first time the tendency had bared itself. Initially no one paid heed, opportunism was even celebrated as political expediency, and those left behind in the process were dismissed as fools.

The tendency was already manifest when Madhya Pradesh, the state I come from, effectively stopped elections to the state’s APMCs (Agricultural Produce Market Committees) or *mandis* back in 2013. (The elected committees completed their terms in 2018, and the state government has kept deferring these elections ever since, placing the management of the mandis under state-appointed administrators. When this happened, we kept mum. I must concede.

The *mandi* is not an insignificant institution, not secondary to the Rajya Sabha in my reckoning. This is where the fate of a farmer’s produce is decided. A farmer’s voice rarely reaches the ministry of commerce, but it used to reach the *mandi*. That voice is fainter than the trader’s or the commission agent’s in the

social pecking order, but their representation in the *mandi* still gave the farmers’ voice some strength.

Once those elections stopped, procurement at the minimum support price (MSP) declined and farmers began to be silenced with token relief instead of getting their rightful dues. They were offered ex-gratia payments, agricultural credit plans, loan waivers and price-difference compensation. But amid these ‘acts of benevolence’, their actual rights got buried. No one seemed to realise that the right to representation, the very essence of

democracy, was being stifled by this gilded cage of handouts. Even when farmers faced gunfire, the demand for elections to *mandis* never made it to the narrative. Today, as deals are struck with America, the voice of the farmer is nowhere to be heard.

Cooperative societies met the same fate. Their elections retained no trace of the cooperative spirit; the government determined the lists of both voters and candidates—obviously in alignment with the ruling party’s interests. Why are these elections important? Because the availability of rations and seeds and

fertilisers for those at the very bottom of the social pyramid depends on these societies.

When powerful groups seize control, they script new narratives of exploitation. The most vulnerable get what remains after the village elites have taken their share. Where can they raise their voices? There is no mechanism left that will allow them to become decision-makers or to challenge the black-marketing, exploitation and plunder in the Public Distribution System. Even with reserved seats for the most oppressed sections of society, their voices go unheard because these positions usually go to pawns of the powerful.

While this was happening right under our noses, we didn’t register it as a hollowing out of our democracy. It didn’t trouble our political conscience. Instead, we saw this as a failure of the cooperative model, buying into the capitalist narrative that human nature is inherently uncooperative. Meanwhile, elected canal committees were dissolved; landowners took control. We weren’t happy about this, but didn’t offer meaningful resistance.

The chakka yat meetings were next. As

the rights of the *gram sabha* (village assembly) were eroding, we told ourselves it might be best to wait for a favourable government. There were now eligibility criteria for candidates, yet we didn’t see this as an attack on democracy. Most states conduct elections—or don’t—entirely at their whim. But all this isn’t quite unmoved. Why should it surprise me now that a Rajya Sabha election has come to resemble a cooperative society election?

The Rajya Sabha is, after all, a representative chamber elected by legislators. But there are many institutions, both elected and unelected, representing people far weaker. Cooperative societies, *gram sabhas*, panchayats, market committees, canal committees carry the voice of the marginalised, give voice to the soul of the nation. When those voices were being suppressed, we did sense that something was amiss. But did it strike us as injustice? That is the question that now occupies my mind.

There is another aspect to consider. The third candidate who was declared elected (*following the rejection of the author’s nomination to the Rajya Sabha*—Ed.) hails from a community that has for millennia faced rejection from powerful overlords solely on the basis of their birth. They faced exclusion everywhere—from temples, schools, communal dining, even cremation grounds. I was born into the community that did the excluding. Although women do not wear the *janeu* (sacred thread) and are not considered *dwija* (twice-born), the privileges I do have—my own *janeu*, so to speak—are markers of inequality. Let’s say my fate in the present context is penance for the karma of my community.

The Constitution is a blueprint to eradicate this very inequality. It grants both me and the unopposed candidate the right to fight on equal terms, ensuring a level playing field. Yet, as Babasaheb Ambedkar warned, socio-economic inequalities can devour political equality. Justice and empowerment do not come from representing the powerful, they come from challenging them.

The practice of resistance raises uncomfortable questions. Confronting these questions is *satyagraha*, the means to fight a righteous battle. ■



In 2017, villagers near Mhow staged a chakka jam with the body of Abhishek Patidar who was killed in police firing during a farmers’ stir. Not much has changed since

Photo: Getty Images

MEENAKSHI NATARAJAN is a former Member of Parliament from Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh

Exclusion has a new name, address

The lessons from Assam’s NRC remain unlearned or unheeded as the ECI juggernaut rolls across the country

Aakar Patel

One common trait in lawless nations is high levels of anxiety about arbitrariness. Medieval texts tell us this has always been the case in our part of the world. Cruelty is couched as process and millions are tortured in the name of procedure. Special Intensive Revision forms are being handed out across India. It is impossible, on a first reading of this form, no matter how educated the reader, to understand what one is required to do, even though it is a single page.

We are told by the executive and the judiciary that putting us through this wringer is not only reasonable but required. We have been down this road before.

In 1998, the governor of Assam, a retired military man named S.K. Sinha, sent a note to then president K.R. Narayanan in which he wrote, in alarmist and alarming language, ‘Large-scale illegal migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh over several decades has been altering the demographic complexion of this state. It poses a grave threat both to the identity of the Assamese people and to our national security. Successive governments at the Centre and in the state have not adequately met this challenge.’

Sinha demanded action ‘to avert the grave danger that has been building up for some time ... If not effectively checked, (Bangladeshis) may swamp the Assamese people and may sever the northeast land mass from the rest of India. This will lead to disastrous strategic and economic results’.

Sinha admitted that he was not basing this assessment on any data. He added: ‘Unfortunately, today we have no census report on the basis of which we can accurately define the contours of trans-border movement. Thus, we have to rely on broad estimates of theoretical extrapolations to work out the dimension of illegal migration that has taken place from East Pakistan/Bangladesh.’

In short, he had no evidence to prove this theory, but he felt strongly enough about it to raise it officially with the President.

In 2005, Sarbananda Sonowal, who later became the BJP chief minister of Assam, went to the Supreme Court to make the laws governing the identification of individuals suspected to be foreigners



Counting them out? Booth Level Officers verify details of residents as part of the ongoing Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls in New Delhi. More than 13,000 BLOs have been deployed in the national capital to verify and update voter details

harsher. The Supreme Court leaned on S.K. Sinha’s speculative note to conclude that Assam was facing an ‘external aggression’ that threatened a constitutional breakdown.

This reckless and unwarranted use of extremist language reflected the prejudices and bigotry against Muslims, which exist even in India’s highest court. The judiciary reversed the burden of proof on to the residents of Assam, a feature it regularly condones.

Normally, it is the State that must prove wrongdoing or criminal activity, and provide the evidence that someone should be punished. This is the meaning of the term ‘innocent until proven guilty’. However, the onus of proving they were not foreigners—and, for those born after 1971, that their parents or grandparents were not

foreigners—was thrust onto the Assamese by the judiciary. In effect, they were all guilty until they could prove themselves innocent.

In a nation where documentation is weak; where many, if not most, are poor and many, if not most, are not fully literate; and in a state where flooding is not rare and the total loss of property is quite common, this reversal of the burden of proof on such an important matter was cruelty.

The other thing that the Union did was to have almost no safeguards.

The foreigners’ tribunals, which would determine whether someone should be set free or sent to jail, were staffed by people given four days of training. They were advocates and retired civil servants hired on two-year contracts. It was before such

Reversing the burden of proof meant the Assamese were guilty till they could prove themselves innocent

people that individuals would present their cases.

The Assam government, run by the BJP, told the tribunal members what it wanted them to do by the simple expedient of not extending the contracts of those who had a low rate of declaring individuals foreigners.

This was revealed in an affidavit that the government itself submitted to Gauhati High Court when some of the tribunal members moved court, saying they had been let go from their jobs without any reason.

This was not so, said the government. All tribunal members, it claimed, had been given a performance appraisal. In 2017, it submitted a note which showed the names of the individuals, a column showing the ‘percentage of foreigners declared’, the ‘general view of the Government upon the member’ and ‘whether [the individual] may be considered for further retention or may be terminated’.

Members who had marked fewer than 10 per cent of the total number of people coming before their tribunal as foreigners were deemed to be ‘not satisfactory’ and shown to have been ‘terminated’.

Effectively, the state government was incentivising its tribunal officers to mark more people as foreigners, and punishing those officers who were not doing so. Such injustice did not receive nationwide, much less global, attention, and the matter was limited to the Assamese media.

The crisis snowballed when an Assamese, Ranjan Gogoi, was appointed Chief Justice of India. The state, which was under the BJP, drew up a first list excluding over 40 lakh people and then a final list of those considered to have met the criteria it had laid out. This was the so-called National Register of Citizens.

The list excluded 19 lakh people, who would now have to line up before the foreigners’ tribunals with their papers and prove their citizenship. The majority of these 19 lakh turned out to be Hindus. This was unexpected because the BJP had believed its own narrative and governor Sinha’s theory of a state overwhelmed by illegal immigrants, when there was no evidence to show that this was the case.

The BJP government then decided to scrap the Assam NRC that it had forced India—and Indians—to spend so many resources and so much effort on.

We are once again embarked on a similar exercise, this time nationwide. Reports of entitlement benefits being scrapped, passports being denied and forms being too confusing have begun coming in. The population is gripped by anxiety against arbitrariness and the cruelty of a State that sells its actions as minimum government. ■

Views are personal



The economic activity generated by international students in 2024-25 is reported to have supported the equivalent of 287,300 full-time jobs in the UK



LONDON DIARY

HASAN SUROOR



Education secretary and minister for women and equalities Bridget Phillipson

Overseas students or cash cows? “Broken Britain” going to pieces

The British government has been accused of trying to kill the goose that lays the golden egg with its hostility towards foreign students amid an increasingly xenophobic debate on immigration.

The accusation came on the back of a report showing that overseas students who pay up to three times more than their British peers generate an estimated £40 billion net economic benefit for the public exchequer during their studies.

Students from India form one of the largest cohorts of foreign students but their numbers have been steadily falling because of recent restrictions on student visas and measures to prevent them from bringing in dependants.

Researchers calculated the benefit by looking at tuition fee income, spending by universities and the impact of student spending on the wider economy.

An important finding is that the money brought in benefitted every parliamentary constituency of the country. Ironically, the biggest beneficiaries are the constituents of the outgoing Prime Minister Keir Starmer who led the crackdown on foreign students. His London constituency (Holborn & St Pancras) is heavily dependent for its development on their largesse.

The report by the consultancy firm London Economics claims that the economic activity generated by international students in the 2024-25 cohort supported about 287,300 full-time equivalent jobs.

Cash cows, anyone?

Further to the study on how Brits are leaving the country for greener pastures, it has emerged that the scale of the exodus is much bigger than was suggested and the reasons are not limited to the pursuit of career opportunities.

There is no one single factor that’s driving the flight from a country increasingly referred to as “broken Britain”. And, contrary to previous assumptions, it’s not limited to frustrated middle-aged professionals weighed down by family pressures, but is increasingly affecting a Gen Z struggling with the deepening cost-of-living crisis.

“Lately, when I get together with my friends, conversation goes down a familiar

path. It isn’t long before we start lamenting the state of the country, from its dysfunctional public services all the way up to its dysfunctional politics,” wrote *Times* columnist Cindy Yu.

Their favoured escape routes head towards the US, UAE, Australia, even those East European countries that once dumped their unemployed men and women on Britain (until Brexit put an end to free movement within the European Union).

Now, these same countries dismissively refer to Britain as a “low-income, high-cost” state—a euphemism for a place no longer fit to live in.

Real wages have remained largely stagnant since the 2008 financial crisis, while inflation has risen, eroding take-home earnings.



Low incomes and a high cost of living are reportedly driving an exodus of Brits from the UK

Politically, too, Britain has become more unstable, causing the collapse of trust in mainstream politicians and an alarming rise in the popularity of far-right populist parties like Reform UK and Restore Britain.

Britain’s ‘class warriors’

A unique facet of British class culture, not widely known outside the country, is the tendency among successful Brits to play down their privileged background.

This is particularly true of politicians who like to pretend they’re ordinary folk who understand their voters’ concerns.

It has thus emerged that as many as 40 Labour MPs who went to private school failed to declare it in their ‘Who’s Who’ entries. Among them were former defence secretary John Healey and current culture secretary Lisa Nandy.

The revelation has sparked allegations of hypocrisy amid a row over the Labour government’s introduction of a 20 per cent VAT charge on private school fees, which has been blamed for putting more than 100 schools out of business.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson has been accused of behaving like a “spiteful class warrior”.

“Labour’s hypocrisy knows no limits,” said Kevin Hollinrake, chairman of the opposition Conservative Party. “While they plot around the cabinet table to impose this spiteful tax on education, many Labour MPs have been busy covering up their own private school educations. They have no shame in pulling up the ladder behind them.”

True, for once.

Muslim International Film Festival in London

To be honest, the first I heard about this film festival was when I received an email announcing this year’s winners.

Apparently, it’s a ‘prominent cinematic event’ dedicated to showcasing films made by Muslim creators, starring Muslim actors, or centring on Muslim life and culture, and it’s in its second year.

Founded by UK Muslim Film, it seeks to amplify ‘authentic’ Muslim voices, offer platforms for emerging talent, and combat negative stereotypes in Western media.

It opened with the screening of *Hijra*, a Saudi film that follows generations of women crossing the desert toward Mecca. The festival’s prestigious Trailblazer Award was presented to the prominent British casting director Shaheen Baig.

Well-intentioned though the festival may be, the idea of cinema focusing only on the members of one religious denomination doesn’t augur well for an inclusive cinema movement.

What’s next? Separate Hindu, Sikh and Christian festivals?

And, finally, this columnist recently received an email from the Consulate General of India, Birmingham, requesting the publication of three articles refuting Pakistan’s ‘fake narrative’ on the Indus Waters treaty—two by name and the third ‘to be published anonymously’.

Wonder who the author is and why the secrecy? ■



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NATION

MATHURA DIARY

As calls for kar seva rise again, should we brace for a re-run of Ayodhya 1992?

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WORLD

RETURN OF THE RUNAWAY LEADER

What explains Sheikh Hasina's 'decision' to embrace an uncertain future back home

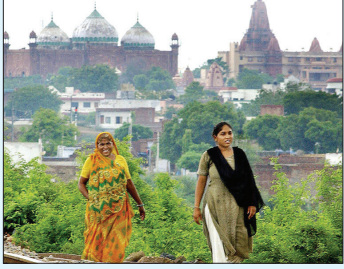
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OPPOSITION

WAYS OF RESISTANCE

Meenakshi Natarajan on why credible resistance can only follow from satyagraha

P6



Lip-reading the SAMADHAN initiative

A.J. Philip

The Supreme Court deserves appreciation for its imaginative initiative christened SAMADHAN—Supreme Court Action for Mediated Adjudication and Disputes Harmonisation Across Nation. Even those who question the wisdom of the exercise will concede that the acronym is ingenious. It reflects the judiciary's apparent desire to promote mediation and consensual settlement instead of prolonged litigation.

One cannot, however, overlook the fact that the court seems to have been inspired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's well-known fascination for memorable acronyms.

The Court has announced a three-day SAMADHAN Samaroh (August 21–23) to resolve through mediation all manner of disputes, including some very contentious religious ones. The sentiment is admirable, but the question is: can goodwill and mediation dissolve disputes that have resisted resolution for decades?

History suggests otherwise.

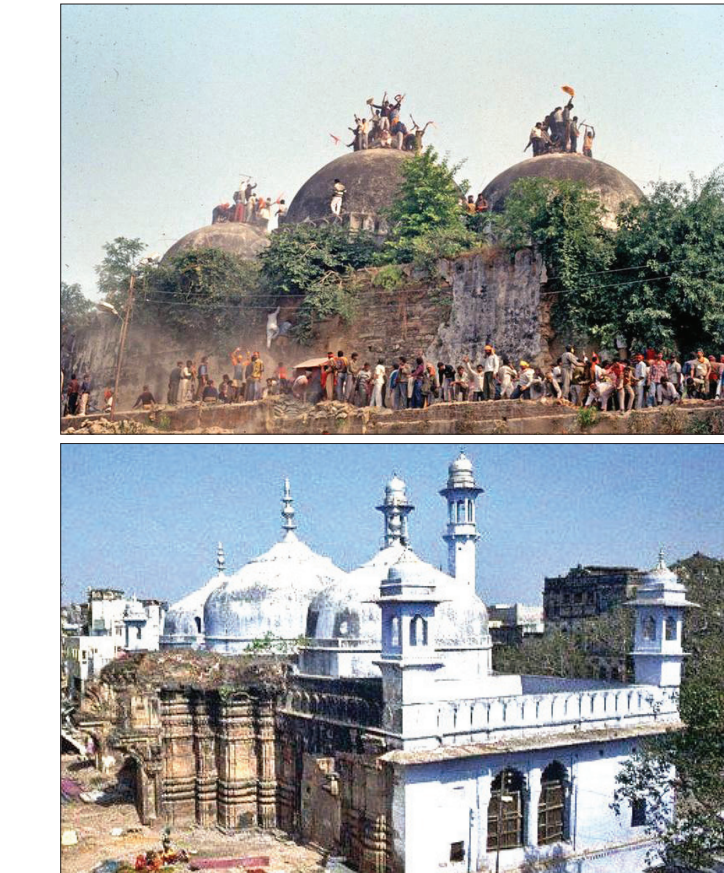
The Ayodhya dispute witnessed numerous attempts at reconciliation. Among those who tried were the Shankaracharya of Kanchi and IPS officer-turned-scholar Kishore Kunal, renowned for his work at the Mahavir Mandir in Patna and his extensive research on the Ram Janmabhoomi issue. Many eminent citizens quietly explored formulas acceptable to both communities. None succeeded. The reason was simple.

Successful mediation requires authorised representatives capable of making binding compromises. Neither Hindus nor Muslims have a single organisation empowered to negotiate on behalf of all believers. Any individual or body claiming to represent one side would immediately be accused of conceding too much. Negotiators would have no guarantee that their own communities would honour the settlement. Faced with that reality, discretion became the better part of valour.

Ultimately, the Supreme Court had to decide the Ayodhya dispute.

When the judgment was delivered in November 2019, there was remarkable calm across the country. That was because both communities had prepared themselves for a judicial verdict after decades of litigation. The unanimous nature of the decision, extensive security arrangements, repeated appeals for peace and the general acceptance that the country's highest court had spoken helped prevent widespread unrest.

The Constitution bench consisted of Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi and Justices S.A. Bobde, D.Y. Chandrachud, Ashok Bhushan and S. Abdul Nazeer. Interestingly, the judgment acknowledged weaknesses in the Hindu side's evidentiary claims while also recording that the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 was an egregious



Leap of faith? If attempts at reconciliation failed to resolve the Ram Janmabhoomi–Babri Masjid dispute, why might they succeed in Kashi or Mathura?

violation of the rule of law. It also recognised that Muslims had been unlawfully deprived of their mosque.

Yet, considering the totality of historical evidence and continuous Hindu belief regarding the birthplace of Lord Ram, the judges awarded the entire disputed site for construction of a Ram temple while directing that five acres of land be allotted elsewhere for a mosque.

In other words, the Supreme Court did what courts are expected to do—it decided the dispute, whatever its merits.

It's germane to recall at this point the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, which was enacted by Parliament during the Congress government headed by P.V. Narasimha Rao. This law froze the religious character of every place of worship as it existed on 15 August 1947, with the sole exception of Ayodhya, which was a pending dispute. It prohibited conversion of a place of worship into another and barred fresh litigation seeking to alter the historical religious status of any site.

The legislation represented Parliament's determination that independent India should not endlessly reopen medieval history. Successive governments, including those led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee and

Narendra Modi, allowed the law to remain on the statute book, presumably recognising that reopening ancient disputes would endanger communal harmony.

The wisdom of that law becomes evident if one recalls that organisations spearheading the Ayodhya movement often claimed that hundreds or even thousands of temples had been destroyed and replaced by mosques during medieval invasions. If every such claim were to become the subject of litigation, India would spend generations excavating the past, instead of building its future.

Courts would be flooded with historical

To expect that the Kashi, Mathura, Sambhal disputes can be settled out of court is optimistic, to say the very least

controversies requiring archaeologists, historians and theologians more than judges. Every disputed structure could become a flashpoint for communal mobilisation. The energy of the nation would be diverted from improving education, healthcare, employment, infrastructure and scientific progress. Independent India cannot become a nation permanently engaged in correcting every perceived historical wrong.

Unfortunately, the 1991 settlement gradually began to unravel.

The process started in Mathura. In December 2023, the Allahabad High Court ordered a court-monitored survey of the Shahi Idgah complex; the Supreme Court stayed the directive in January 2024. All this appeared inconsistent with the spirit, if not the letter, of the 1991 Act. The Supreme Court could have clarified at an early stage that subordinate courts lacked jurisdiction to reopen issues expressly frozen by Parliament.

Similar developments occurred in the Gyanvapi litigation, where inspection of the 'wazukhana' (the mosque's ablution area) led to claims that an object discovered there was a *shivling*. Muslims maintained that it was part of the fountain system used for ablutions. Whatever its true character, the

controversy dramatically altered the legal and political landscape and weakened the 1991 Act.

Sambhal followed a similar trajectory. A civil suit was filed questioning the status of the Shahi Jama Masjid, and almost on cue, a local court ordered a survey. The exercise immediately heightened communal tensions. Rumours spread rapidly, protests erupted and violent clashes followed, resulting in deaths and injuries. The episode demonstrated the dangers of permitting sensitive religious disputes to proceed without first addressing the threshold question of whether such litigation is barred by the Places of Worship Act.

The same tendency has surfaced even in relation to the Taj Mahal. Built during the reign of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in memory of Mumtaz Mahal, it is one of the Seven Wonders of the world and has long been recognised as one of the finest examples of Mughal architecture. Yet, ever so often you'll hear that it originally housed a Hindu temple. A local court in Agra has dismissed the claims, but litigation continues nevertheless.

Recently, the Allahabad High Court directed photographic and videographic documentation in related proceedings. One cannot help wondering whether every survey will produce fresh assertions about hidden religious symbols. Such exercises risk undermining the very purpose of the 1991 Act, which sought to prevent historical speculation from becoming contemporary litigation.

Significantly, the Supreme Court itself has entertained petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the Places of Worship Act. Once the validity of the law is under judicial scrutiny, uncertainty inevitably spreads to disputes that Parliament intended to settle permanently.

Against this backdrop, expecting the Mathura, Kashi and Sambhal disputes to disappear through SAMADHAN is optimistic, to say the least. Both sides have already expressed reservations about mediation. When fundamental questions of faith, history and identity are involved, goodwill compromises are difficult.

The Supreme Court may, therefore, have no option but to do what it ultimately did in Ayodhya: hear the evidence, interpret the law and pronounce a binding judgment.

There is an old saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. It means that noble motives alone cannot guarantee desirable outcomes. SAMADHAN may be born of fine intentions, but where mediation is impossible, justice demands not conciliation but adjudication. The Supreme Court cannot discharge its constitutional duty by avoiding difficult decisions. ■

A.J. PHILIP is a senior journalist and commentator on national affairs

The hidden costs of the ethanol push

Herjinder on why the E20 rollout is a rough ride

India's E20 (20 per cent ethanol-blended petrol) policy is being projected as a triumph. Achieved ahead of the original 2030 target, the ethanol-blending programme has, we are told, reduced millions of tonnes of carbon emissions and saved over a trillion rupees in crude oil imports. What's not to like?

But public policy cannot be judged only by what it does for the exchequer. It must also be judged by what it does to ordinary citizens, especially when they have no meaningful choice in the matter. That is where the E20 rollout fails a basic test of democratic fairness: consent.

More than 80 per cent of petrol vehicles on Indian roads were built before 2023 and designed primarily for E10 or lower ethanol blends. Their owners had no clue what was coming—a fuel their engines were not built for. They simply woke up to find E0 and E10 disappearing from pumps in many places. A consumer who paid full price, and often steep taxes, for a vehicle rated for a certain

fuel standard now has no legal way to buy that standard of fuel. This is not a consensual move towards cleaner energy—it's the removal of choice dressed up as inevitability, with little clear labelling, no meaningful colour-coding and often no other option at the counter.

The technical concerns are not imaginary. A study by the Automotive Research Association of India (ARAI), though not fully made public, reportedly found that using E20 in E10-compatible vehicles could lead to deterioration of rubber fuel-system components such as hoses, gaskets, seals and O-rings. The summary of the report also noted that some parts might require replacement. These findings align with concerns repeatedly expressed by owners of pre-2023 vehicles.

The contradiction becomes sharper when one looks at the regulatory framework. Vehicles manufactured after April 2023 are required to meet E20-certified standards, with separate material compatibility and

engine-tuning specifications. If E20 were truly safe for all existing vehicles without modification, why was a distinct certification regime needed? Why were new material standards introduced, and why did manufacturers have to retrofit? Claims that E20 is safe for old vehicles alongside mandatory E20 certification for new vehicles suggest either regulatory overreach or incomplete safety assurance for pre-2023 vehicles.

Automakers themselves have acknowledged the transition problem. Maruti Suzuki has promised an E20 upgrade kit for some older cars, reportedly at a cost of up to Rs 7,000. Hero MotoCorp and TVS Motor, two of India's largest motorcycle and scooter manufacturers, have advised that vehicles made before 2023 may require fuel-system modifications to run efficiently on E20. Shell India warned customers that they bear the risk of engine damage or warranty loss from E20 fuel. These are not fringe voices. They are among the country's largest



If E20 is truly safe for all existing vehicles without modification, why was a distinct certification regime needed? Why did car manufacturers have to retrofit?

vehicle and fuel-market stakeholders.

Yet the government has largely dismissed complaints of mileage loss and wear-and-tear as misinformation. Concurrently, FIRs have reportedly been filed against some social media influencers who claimed that E20 was damaging vehicles. If the government is as confident as it appears, it should answer criticism—and justifiable concern—with transparent data, not intimidation.

The second betrayal is value. Ethanol carries roughly 30 per cent less energy per litre than petrol. Multiple surveys, including one that covered more than 44,000 vehicle owners, have reported double-digit mileage losses for many pre-2023 vehicles, along with complaints of corroded seals, choked injectors and costly repairs.

► Continued on page 2

The hidden costs of the ethanol push

» Continued from page 1

Also, ethanol is procured at prices significantly lower than retail petrol. If the input is cheaper and the output does less work per rupee, the price at the pump should reflect that. It does not.

The result is that consumers pay roughly the same price for less mileage, while the savings from cheaper ethanol and reduced crude imports accrue elsewhere. Brazil, often cited as a successful ethanol-blending model, subsidises its high-ethanol fuel to precisely offset loss on mileage. India has not. The consumer absorbs the loss while the State celebrates the macroeconomic gain.

Some critics have tried to quantify the broader economic burden. Agnostos Theos of the Sikh Chamber of Commerce, who challenged the E20 decision in the Supreme Court, has argued that lower mileage alone could impose losses of around Rs 13.9 lakh crore over five years, with additional losses from repairs, breakdowns, scrappage and reduced resale value. These estimates are contested and should be treated with caution. But they point to a larger truth: even if the exact numbers are debated, the costs of the transition are being borne disproportionately by vehicle owners.

There is also a broader environmental and policy question. Ethanol in India is still produced largely from sugarcane, maize and rice—crops that are water-intensive and supported by substantial agricultural subsidies. Sugar mills and distilleries are among the industries with significant pollution concerns, and sugarcane cultivation has long been criticised for groundwater depletion. If the full cost of ethanol production includes subsidised water, electricity and fertilisers, the claim of simple economic savings becomes more complicated.

Union Minister Nitin Gadkari has been one of the strongest champions of ethanol blending and higher blending targets. The roots of the Gadkari family’s business date back to 1995, when Nitin Gadkari founded Purti Power and Sugar Ltd (which later transitioned into the Purti Group). Over the years, active management of these agro-industrial and sugar ventures was handed over to his sons, Nikhil and Sarang Gadkari. Nikhil Gadkari holds a dominant, majority stake of over 60 per cent in CIAN Agro Industries and Infrastructure Ltd—now a key player in India’s agricultural processing and ethanol manufacturing sectors—whose profitability and stock valuation has gone through the roof.

With the ministry of road transport and highways under his father Nitin Gadkari aggressively pushing national policies mandating higher ethanol blending—such as the rapid, nationwide rollout of E20—the question of conflict of interest is inevitable.

None of this is an argument against ethanol blending itself, or against the farmers and energy-security goals it serves. But surely the government owed its citizens informed choice, transparent pricing and honest data on the damage the new fuel does to older car engines. ■

Is there light at the end of this tunnel?

The Wayanad tunnel disaster could show the way to eco-sensitive development in Kerala’s mountain districts, writes **K.A. Shaji**

The recent landslide at the Anakkampoyil-Kalladi-Meppadi tunnel road project in Kerala’s Wayanad district has shaken public confidence.

The immediate questions are straightforward. What caused the landslide? Could it have been prevented? Were safety protocols followed? Did construction activities contribute to slope failure? We’ll hopefully have some answers when the results of the technical investigations ordered by the V.D. Satheesan-led UDF government are in.

Some larger questions loom: why did the previous government allow this huge infrastructure project in such a vulnerable landscape? Were geological warnings heeded or did political expediency overshadow ecological caution? And has Kerala learnt anything from all the climate disasters that have scarred its mountains over the past decade?

These questions are now central to Kerala’s political discourse. More so because the disaster occurred barely five kilometres from the Chooralmala-Mundakrai mountains, where a massive landslide in 2024 killed 298 and left many more severely injured or homeless.

It is ironic that one of Satheesan’s first big governance challenges concerns a project he had vehemently opposed as Leader of the Opposition. He had underlined the need for extreme care and a higher threshold of scientific scrutiny because the tunnel passed through a very sensitive stretch of the Western Ghats and mistakes could have irreversible consequences. Satheesan’s objections were dismissed as politically motivated. He was accused of obstructing development and denying Wayanad better connectivity.

The Pinarayi Vijayan-led LDF government billed it as a transformative link between Kozhikode and Wayanad through one of the longest road tunnels in southern India. It promised to reduce travel time, improve connection to Karnataka’s IT hubs in Bangalore and Mysore, improve year-round connectivity for residents and tourists, and provide an alternative to the existing accident-prone Thamarassery Ghat Road, where negotia-ting nine hairpin bends is an uphill task. For a district whose economy depends heavily on tourism apart from agricul-ture, the proposal has obvious appeal.

But the alignment passes through terrain that has repeatedly been marked in scientific assessments as fragile and vulnerable to landslides. Ecologists like



Warnings ignored The latest disaster occurred barely 5 km from the site of the 2024 landslide

C.K. Vishnudas of Wayanad-based Hume Centre for Ecology and Wildlife Biology have long argued that mountain ecosystems cannot be understood through conventional engineering calculations. The Western Ghats are dynamic geological systems where rock formations, groundwater movement,

vegetation, drainage and rainfall interact in complex ways. Disturbing one part of that system can trigger changes elsewhere, and the impact is cumulative.

Renowned climate scientist S. Abhilash of Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT) says this understanding is even more critical because climate change is altering rainfall patterns in Kerala. Short bursts of extremely heavy rain have become more frequent. Slopes that were stable for decades are now failing and infrastructure planning in this terrain requires geological investigation that goes beyond routine surveys.

The latest landslide has refocused attention on decisions taken during the conception, approval and execution of the project, Sreedhar Radhakrishnan, a leading environmental activist, points out. “Questions that were earlier treated as procedural objections now form part of the official inquiry.” The Satheesan government has suspended work and constituted a high-level expert committee to determine: a) how the landslide occurred and b) whether the project can safely proceed in its present form. The committee is headed by geologist C.P. Rajendran, whose work on earthquakes, tectonics and geological hazards is internationally recognised.

Could geological risks have been understood better before excavation

Climate change is altering rainfall patterns in Kerala. Slopes that were once stable are now failing and routine surveys are not able to read the terrain

began? Were hydrological studies sufficiently detailed? Were warning signs missed during construction? Did changing rainfall patterns demand additional safeguards? Answers to these questions will influence not just the future of this project but also infrastructure planning across Kerala’s mountain districts.

Long before the disaster, Rajendran had argued that tunnelling through complex mountain formations requires extensive geological investigations because excavation changes stress conditions within rock masses and may alter groundwater pathways. Vishnudas has repeatedly emphasised that mountains do not respond to individual projects in isolation. Every intervention—roads, quarries, plantations, buildings, tunnels and tourism infrastructure—adds pressure to a system already coping with erratic monsoon behaviour.

Kerala has experienced a series of disasters since 2018, when devastating floods triggered landslides across the state. Puthumala, Kavalappara, Koottickal, Pettimudi and finally Mundakkal and Chooralmala became painful reminders that extreme rainfall now interacts with altered landscapes in ways that old planning models failed to anticipate.

The Madhav Gadgil-led Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel a.k.a. Gadgil Commission, set up in 2010, had called for stronger ecological safeguards and warned against unregulated development in environmentally sensitive landscapes. Its recommendations of the K. Kasturirangan committee, which submitted its report in 2013, were moderate by comparison, but faced resistance nevertheless from political parties, sections of the Church, farmer organisations and, of course, business interests.

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If the tunnel is eventually found to carry unacceptable environmental or geological risks, what alternatives does Wayanad have to improve connectivity? The rationale for better connectivity is also compelling—for agriculture, tourism, healthcare, education and emergency response.

Options include scientific strengthening of vulnerable stretches of the existing Thamarassery Ghat Road, advanced slope stabilisation techniques, better drainage management, careful evaluation of alternative alignments, real-time landslide monitoring, intelligent traffic systems and better public transport. The committee’s recommendations could become a blueprint for all infrastructure projects proposed in Kerala’s hill regions.

As climate expert K.G. Thara says: “Environment science should enter policy discussions *before* disasters occur. It must feature in the decision-making process *before* the first survey is conducted, *before* the first tunnel is issued and *before* the first excavator begins cutting into a mountain.” ■

The true worth of an Indian passport

...and the glories India’s first citizen is earning the nation on his many foreign trips

Ashis Ray

Even as the ministry of external affairs tries to make up its mind about the Indian passport, what it is and isn’t, whether it is proof of Indian citizenship or not, the 2026 edition of the Global Passport Index (GPI) published in early July ranks India at #125 among 197 countries. Not terribly flattering, whichever way you count, especially for a country that fancies itself as ‘Vishwaguru’ with the most widely travelled Indian prime minister ever, not out on a century-plus foreign trips since assuming office in 2014.

Unlike the highly cited Henley Passport Index, which ranks passports based on the number of destinations their holders can access visa-free, the GPI, brought out by citizenship advisory firm Global Citizen Solutions headquartered in London, uses a scoring system that measures the strength of passports on three parameters—global mobility or visa-free travel, which is assigned 50 per cent weightage; how friendly a country is to foreign investors, including tax regimes and business environment (25 per cent); and living conditions, personal freedoms and global reputation (25 per cent).

In mid-May 2026, Prime Minister Modi exhorted Indians to avoid foreign travel on account of the multiple economic crises buffeting India because of the West Asia war. He was presumably worried about India’s low oil reserves and dwindling foreign exchange reserves. The concerns weren’t entirely misplaced but his list of



don’ts for citizens, with or without passports, were frankly laughable. Soon after he’d lectured Indians on the need for austerity, he set off on more foreign jaunts. As temperatures soared in Delhi, he hit the cooler climes of Europe. But another kind of heat lay in store. In the Netherlands, Dutch prime minister Rob Jetten voiced concerns about the erosion of press freedom and minority rights in India. In Norway, journalist Helle Lyng Svendsen asked Modi why he doesn’t take questions from the media.

At a presser later, Lyng asked an Indian diplomat, “Why should we trust you (India)? Can you try to stop the human rights violations that go on in your country?” Sibi George, India’s MEA secretary (West), tied himself in knots fielding the question, and soon became the butt of jokes on social media.

Modi’s inability to handle Q&A sessions with journalists—

de rigueur in a democracy—has become a pathology and is a national embarrassment. He is not even willing to use an interpreter and reply in Hindi, the language in which he is easily more fluent, also the language his government wants all Indians to embrace

Give him an award and he will come running. Ask him a question, and he will likely run away

without question.

India’s question and beholden mainstream media may be content with dictations, set pieces and third-party material from social media handles, but the fourth estate in still-functioning democracies is calling out Modi’s evasion of questions, especially since the assault on citizen freedoms and minorities in India is now an open secret abroad.

Foreign governments have assessed that he does not really understand international affairs. What he craves is publicity and a sure way to extract concessions is to pander to his vanity.

In Italy, which followed the bruising stops in the Netherlands and Norway, Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni waltzed him around Rome, hosted a dinner at the Colosseum, clicked selfies and received the Indian candy ‘Melody’ (which Meloni coyly interpreted as a blend of Meloni and Modi). And guess what? When Modi met Meloni at the G7 summit in France a month later, he couldn’t resist mentioning that photos of them together had gone ‘viral’ on Instagram! Diplomacy 101.

Our prime minister also has a penchant for collecting international awards, which is getting attention in foreign media. Following his visit to Seychelles in late June to collect the newly minted ‘Guardian of the Blue Horizon’ award, Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper ran a report headlined: ‘Give him any award, and he’ll come running.’

It wrote: ‘The award, it transpired, had only been created three

days before Modi’s arrival and he was the first and only recipient.’ The hurriedly produced certificate even misspelled ‘republic’ as ‘republic’ and ‘Seychelles’ as ‘Seycheeles’. [...] A red-faced Seychelles foreign ministry claimed that a ‘working draft’ had accidentally been circulated and that an ‘authentic and duly approved’ version had now been issued.’ But our broadminded prime minister collected it with pride nevertheless.

The importance of heads of government meetings should not be underestimated. But what has Modi achieved in his 12 years of frequent flying that an Indian ambassador or foreign minister couldn’t have accomplished? How is a prime minister who is so happy to preach fragility to citizens so unconcerned about throwing crores of taxpayer rupees on foreign photo-ops?

An utter lack of substance seems to define his overseas engagements. Almost every departure from time-tested Indian policies—the foundations of which were laid by India’s first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru and tweaked for post-Cold War circumstances by prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao—has been a disaster. Jumping into America’s lap without obtaining any concessions or guarantees from Washington and making a trip to Israel and hugging its prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the eve of the US–Israel airstrikes on Iran have done India no favours.

Not a single country in the world, other than Israel, endorsed his government’s military action—codenamed Operation Sindoor—against Pakistan last year. In

contrast, Pakistan won active support from China, Turkey and Azerbaijan, with Saudi Arabia standing by. And this, despite India’s desperate efforts to have it named and shamed and treated as a pariah state. This was the same Saudi Arabia, whose crown prince was wooed by Modi and which now has a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement with Pakistan.

Then came trips to Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand. At his first halt, Modi was forced to listen to the Indonesian president extol Nehru’s role in enabling his country’s independence and as the ‘Father of Non-alignment’.

In Australia, Amnesty International urged the Australian government to raise India’s human rights record, while Alliance Against Islamophobia protested against ‘bigotry and persecution’ of Muslims and backward castes. A reporter with *7News*, Australia’s most watched news service, said in a piece-to-camera as Modi walked by in the distance behind him, “This is about as close as you’ll get to Narendra Modi on his trip to Melbourne. He famously avoids unsolicited news conferences, preferring instead more stage-managed appearances.”

Incidentally, the announcement that Australia had agreed to supply uranium to India was old news repackaged as new. Canberra did this in 2011 when Dr Manmohan Singh was prime minister.

Stuff, a news platform in New Zealand, revealed that Modi’s advance security and logistics team had asked the organisers to ‘allow for nap times’ and select ‘venues without stairs’. But that worry aside, we learnt from Rudrendra Tandon, MEA secretary (East), why Modi doesn’t do press meets: apparently because he is a “quintessential Indian politician” who “has perfected the art of direct contact with his electorate.” ■

Recognition, yes, but redistribution?

Maharashtra has passed a new law to recognise women farmers but has it done enough to really empower them?

Jaideep Hardikar

Savita Patil, a marginal farmer in Nimkhedi village of Maharashtra’s Dhule district, couldn’t enrol herself on Maha-DBT, the Maharashtra government’s portal for schemes and subsidies. With her husband, Savita Patil grows cotton and maize on their two-acre farm. But she couldn’t even register her name on the portal. The 37-year-old was not a farmer in official records. Savita Patil’s is not an isolated case.

For generations, women have tilled fields, transplanted paddy, harvested cotton, milked cattle, managed livestock, saved seeds, collected forest produce, grown mushrooms, harvested fish in the ponds and rivers, and sustained their households with labour and supplementary incomes.

Yet, in the eyes of the law, millions of women in rural Maharashtra, indeed across the country, have remained invisible—they are not farmers, but ‘wives’ or ‘agricultural labourers’ because the land they cultivate is usually registered in the name of fathers, husbands or sons.

Last week, Maharashtra took a significant step towards correcting this historical anomaly. The state legislature unanimously passed the Maharashtra Women Farmers Empowerment Act, 2026, making it



Challenges ahead The Maharashtra Women Farmers Empowerment Act, 2026, was unanimously passed during the recent monsoon session, but the real work begins now; (inset) Savita Patil

one of the first in the country to enact a law that grants legal recognition to women as ‘farmers’ engaged in agriculture, irrespective of whether or not they own agricultural land.

While the rights debate among women farm activists has centred around land entitlements, this law distinguishes farming from land ownership. The agitation for land entitlements has a long history but those rights are not yet on the horizon. What the new law provides, in the interim, is a template for inclusion of women farmers and labourers in government entitlement programmes.

The new law is the culmination of a three-decades-long campaign by women’s organisations, researchers and farmer collectives, who argued that Indian agricultural policy has systematically undercounted the contribution of women because it equated farming with ownership of land.

“This is significant because it redefines who we see as a farmer,” says Professor Nitya Rao, Gender and Development, at the University of East Anglia, UK, and a trustee of the M.S. Swaminathan Research

Foundation (MSSRF). “It challenges deeply embedded gender norms that have kept women invisible as ‘farmers’ in policy and practice.” Prof. Rao adds a note of caution: “Recognition must translate into real gains.”

The Bill was in active discussion since September 2025, when the state government signed an MoU with MSSRF. It was in May 2012 that late Dr Swaminathan had introduced a private member’s Bill in the Rajya Sabha—The Women Farmers’ Entitlement Bill, 2011—asking the government to provide for gender-specific needs like setting up creches or day-care centres for their children and to grant women farmers land entitlements. This legislation heavily draws from that Bill.

The MSSRF drafted a policy note in January 2026 as a precursor to the draft bill. The note was tabled before the legislature in March 2026 during the budget session, and it was during the debate that Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis announced that this would be moved in the monsoon session. It was passed unanimously.

During consultations with civil



Credit: MSSRF on Instagram

households.

The law also mandates creation of a statewide database of women farmers, a Women Farmers Empowerment Cell, assistance officers at district and sub-district levels, a dedicated fund for women farmers and also monitoring mechanisms to ensure their implementation across various departments.

Calling the legislation “long overdue”, Dr Soumya Swaminathan, chairperson of MSSRF, said the proposed WFCs were “a gateway to dignity, visibility and economic opportunity.” Its success, she cautioned, would depend on

of rural men—a reflection of both women’s centrality to farming and the continuing exodus of men for non-farm work.

The Situation Assessment Survey of Agricultural Households (NSSO, 2019) also points to a slow but significant rise in agricultural households headed by women, a trend driven by male migration, widowhood and demographic change. Together, these trends reveal a paradox: women increasingly sustain India’s farms, but continue to own only a fraction of the land and remain inadequately recognised in agricultural policy.

Researchers describe this shift as the feminisation of agriculture—a process driven by male out-migration, distress-led diversification of rural livelihoods and the growing responsibility of women in cultivation, livestock and farm management.

Yet feminisation has not meant empowerment.

As Vaishali Ghuge, a woman farmer in Dharashiv district said during one of the consultations, “I built everything step by step, but I could not access government schemes and subsidies as I do not own land.”

Even though women’s participation in farming and allied activities has grown, ownership of land, access to institutional finance and decision-making powers are still concentrated in the hands of their menfolk. The new Maharashtra law will rectify this to an extent but it has limitations.

It does not alter land ownership, inheritance or tenancy laws. A woman recognised as a farmer under this Act does not automatically become a landowner, nor does she acquire property rights by virtue of the certificate. So, the law addresses recognition but falls short of redistribution. Whether this recognition translates into economic empowerment remains to be seen. Banks will have to decide whether the certificate is sufficient to extend agricultural credit. Insurance companies and other agencies will need to treat certificate holders as eligible beneficiaries. Local officials will have to evolve transparent procedures to identify genuine cultivators without creating another bureaucratic hurdle.

The Devendra Fadnavis government will no doubt use the new law to brandish its pro-women credentials, but the ironic twist is that it came into being in the same week that his government admitted to the deletion of 92 lakh women from its much-trumpeted ‘Ladki Bahin Yojana’. That scheme, notified ahead of the 2024 assembly elections, had helped garner women’s votes but the state government now says it paid Rs 14,000 crore extra to ineligible beneficiaries. ■

While the debate among activists has been around land entitlements, the law separates farming from ownership

effective implementation.

For decades, the absence of legal recognition has meant that countless women cultivators found themselves excluded from institutional credit, crop insurance, government subsidies and training programmes simply because they could not prove that they were farmers. The new certificate will hopefully change this, providing them documentary recognition that government agencies can rely on while extending benefits.

One of the least acknowledged transformations in Indian agriculture has been its steady feminisation, first flagged in the Economic Survey of India, 2015-16. Successive Agriculture Censuses show that women accounted for 10.9 per cent of operational holdings in 2000-01, a figure that rose to 11.7 per cent in 2005-06, 12.8 per cent in 2010-11, and 13.9 per cent in 2015-16. At the same time, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023-24 shows that agriculture remains the principal source of employment for rural women, with nearly 77 per cent of employed rural women engaged in agriculture, compared to about half

If Ayodhya sounds like trouble, talk of Mathura

Nandlal Sharma in Mathura/Vrindavan

It’s a hot and humid afternoon in Mathura. Outside the Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi temple complex, ice-cream vendor Rakesh is waiting for customers. “Not enough people yet—it’s too hot. It might pick up in the evening,” he tells me. Has he heard about the *kar seva* called by the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad on 9 August, I ask him. He’s heard, he says, a bit disinterestedly.

It looks like just another day in Mathura, but I wonder if this is the lull before the storm. On 28 June, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath dropped the keywords ‘kar seva’ and ‘Krishna Janmabhoomi’, while speaking at a public event in Hathras, 50-odd kilometres from Agra. In the same breath, he baited his adversary Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, who had taken to social media on 7 June to allege embezzlement of temple donations in Ayodhya, bringing the matter into the national spotlight and setting off a chain reaction that embarrassed the entire Sangh Parivar. Yogi, as the incumbent chief minister, and with elections round the corner, has a little more at stake, and will desperately want a new narrative.

Before long the religious leadership in Mathura had awakened. On 4 July, Swami Sachchidanand Maharaj of the Shri Chitragupt Peeth in adjacent Vrindavan, declared that a *kar seva* would be organised on 9 August to remove the (Shahi Idgah) dome adjacent to the Krishna Janmabhoomi temple, “just like the *kar seva* that liberated the Ram Mandir”. His call was backed by the Nirmohi Akhara and Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad president Ravindra Puri, whose organisation represents 13 akharas and an estimated five lakh sadhus.

On 14 July, the campaign echoed at a gathering in neighbouring Vrindavan, when Swami Abhishek Brahmachari declared: “Krishna Lalla, we are coming.

We will build the temple there.” Posters targeting Akhilesh and Mulayam Singh Yadav appeared across the city, while Ravindra Puri told a television channel that even Akhilesh would eventually be persuaded to join the movement.

Reacting to these calls for *kar seva*, Tanveer Ahmad, secretary of the Mathura Eidgah Committee, said: “Such dates have been announced earlier as well. When cases are pending in court, statements like these are only made for political gain. Mathura is a religious city, but its people believe in communal harmony. Those calling for *kar seva* are outsiders.”

Ahmad points out that the Mathura dispute between Shri Krishna Janmasthan Seva Sansthan and the Shahi Eidgah Trust was settled through a 1968 agreement, and subsequently implemented through a court decree in 1973. According to a report in *The Hindu*, the Seva Sansthan transferred a portion of the land to the Shahi Eidgah. However, there are petitions pending in courts that challenge this agreement as ‘fraudulent’ and seek the transfer of the entire property in the name of Shri Krishna Virajman (the deity). Petitioners representing the Hindu side argue that the land on which the Shahi Eidgah mosque stands is Krishna Janmasthan and the Muslim side should remove its structure. They say land for an Eidgah can be provided at another location away from the Janmasthan.

On reports that the Supreme Court is encouraging negotiated settlements in Kashi, Mathura and Sambhal through Lok Adalats, Ahmad says notices have been issued in 23 pending cases in Mathura district, not just the Krishna Janmabhoomi–Shahi Idgah dispute. Possibly 18 connected cases are pending before the Allahabad High Court, he said, and about ten before the Supreme Court.

Local Congress leader Aditya Tiwari sees echoes of Ayodhya in the ‘Chalo Mathura’ call. “The same atmosphere is being created in Mathura. Kashi and Mathura have always been on the BJP–RSS



The main entrance gate of the Shri Krishna Janmabhoomi temple in Mathura

Photo: Nandlal Sharma

political agenda, but circumstances have changed. The Ram Mandir donation controversy has weakened public support. The locals are unlikely to back this campaign.”

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“285 properties have been identified for demolition in the Jungalkatti area. Of these, 30-35 are temples that are 400-500 years old”

‘Property of Shri Thakur Banke Bihari Ji Maharaj, Vrindavan’. More than 20 houses have been marked thus. In the Jungalkatti area opposite the temple, 285 properties have been identified for demolition. “Of these 285 properties, 30-35 are temples that are 400-500 years old. The corridor is putting Vrindavan’s civilisational and cultural heritage at risk,” says social activist Deepak Parashar.

The corridor project came on the heels of the 2022 Janmashtami stampede, in which two devotees died. The Uttar Pradesh government subsequently proposed the corridor to improve crowd management and, in 2025, passed the Shri Banke Bihari Ji Temple Trust Ordinance. The Goswami community challenged it, arguing that it would strip the temple’s hereditary custodians of their rights.

The Supreme Court has, in its interim order, stayed the formation of the proposed trust pending a final verdict, but permitted conditional use of temple funds to acquire about five acres for the corridor.

Parashar alleges irregularities in the acquisition process. “Different portions of the same original property have been assigned different values,” he says. He also questions the land acquisition before the detailed project report (DPR) has been made public. “There are complaints that owners were coerced into registering sale deeds. And how can people sell what is often worth their entire lifetime savings, and that too when the project has not even been disclosed?”

Leading the resistance is Sohan Lal Mishra, a priest at the Banke Bihari temple. “No locals are demanding a corridor; only outsiders.” Mishra says Vrindavan’s congestion owes less to poor infrastructure and more to poor traffic management. “Why allow cars into crowded streets? The corridor is being created so that luxury facilities can be built for wealthy visitors.” Locals are forced to take detours while affluent visitors get VIP access. “Has the Kashi Vishwanath corridor eliminated congestion?” ■

Learning to live with(out) America

Ashok Swain on how the Gulf countries are coming to terms with their America delusion

With West Asia on the boil again after a fragile cessation of hostilities, the Gulf monarchies confront an uncomfortable truth. The old security order may not have collapsed but it has certainly lost credibility. For decades, the Gulf states lived under a US security umbrella, buying protection, weapons and diplomatic backing in exchange for oil, military basing rights and strategic loyalty. The bargain was not equal, but it was predictable. The war with Iran has exposed the untenability of those old assumptions.

No state understands this better than Saudi Arabia, the strategic centre of the Gulf system. When Riyadh recalibrates, the region follows. Qatar may continue to mediate, the United Arab Emirates may pursue its own activist foreign policy, Oman may preserve its neutrality, and Bahrain and Kuwait try to hedge their bets by engaging both sides to manage the risks of regional escalation. Yet the future of Gulf security will ultimately be shaped by Saudi Arabia's conclusion that exclusive dependence on Washington has become a strategic liability.

The Iran war has not made the US irrelevant, it has made it insufficient. America's military power is still unmatched in the Gulf, but confidence in its judgment has eroded in Gulf capitals, which have seen Washington getting entangled in Israel's confrontation with Iran, in a 'war of choice' whose consequences are being borne disproportionately by Gulf states. US military bases, once seen as symbols of protection, are suddenly magnets of vulnerability. Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE are learning that to host American forces is to face the wrath of America's enemy in West Asia. While Saudi Arabia has escaped direct attacks, it has drawn exactly the same conclusion.

The security dilemma of Gulf states has become even more complicated with Israel suddenly shifting its focus from Iran to Türkiye. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has repeatedly accused Israel of expansionism, while Israeli leaders portray Türkiye's growing military presence in Syria and broader regional ambitions as a long-term strategic threat. What began as a diplomatic feud is turning into a geo-political confrontation that threatens to drag the region into another cycle of instability.

For Gulf leaders, the Israel-Turkey rivalry is unsettling because both countries are, in different ways, partners of the US, which finds itself balancing between two allies who mistrust each other. The Trump administration has tried to repair its own relations with Ankara, signalling that it might restore Türkiye's access to the F-35 fighter programme. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin



US military bases, once seen as symbols of protection, are suddenly magnets of vulnerability. The Gulf monarchies are witnessing a situation where their decades-old security guarantor may itself get trapped between competing regional partners

Netanyahu has reacted with alarm, warning that supplying advanced American aircraft to Türkiye would fundamentally alter the regional balance of power. The US remains Israel's primary and indispensable military patron. The Gulf monarchies are witnessing a never-before situation in which their decades-old security guarantor may itself get trapped between competing regional partners.

For Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, these developments are not abstract geopolitical concerns. They threaten to upend his 'Vision 2030' national transformation plan, which depends on big foreign investments, on a pivot away from its dependence on oil, on tourism and energy diversification and on political stability and the perception that Saudi Arabia is a safe place to invest and do business. Regional wars threaten all these ambitions. Missiles do not have to strike Riyadh to damage Saudi Arabia's future; political uncertainty creates business uncertainties, which can keep investors away.

The growing hostility between Israel and Türkiye compounds these risks. Syria

has become the principal arena where their interests collide. Turkish military deployments in northern Syria and Israel's attempt to prevent that build-up brings the two countries into direct confrontation. Military incidents between Israeli and Turkish forces, once quite unimaginable, are now in the realm of possibility, according to regional analysts. Any escalation will reverberate through the Gulf, disrupting trade, investment and energy markets and potentially entangle Washington.

This is why Saudi Arabia is quietly constructing a different security architecture. It is not abandoning the US. Riyadh understands that there is no real substitute for US military capability, its missile defence systems, intelligence networks and diplomatic influence. China has no desire to assume military responsibilities in the Gulf. Russia has neither the capacity nor credibility. Pakistan and Türkiye offer valuable partnerships but can hardly replace the US security system. Israel possesses formidable military capabilities and is a volatile adversary. Saudi Arabia's answer

to this challenge is to diversify.

Riyadh continues to buy advanced American weapons while simultaneously expanding defence cooperation with Türkiye, Pakistan, South Korea, China and Europe. It is investing heavily in domestic weapons production, drone technology, missile defence and cyber capabilities. It is exploring alternative trade routes, pipelines and logistics corridors that reduce dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz.

Saudi Arabia has accepted a reality that many ignore: that any security equation in the Gulf must account for Iran. It can be deterred, contained, sanctioned or negotiated with, but it cannot be wished away. Iran is a geographic reality and it has capabilities. It has missiles, drones, proxy networks and the capacity to disrupt maritime commerce. The war is demonstrating that even a weakened Iran retains the capability to impose enormous costs on its neighbours. Saudi Arabia's détente with Tehran is, therefore, not an act of trust but an acknowledgement of this reality.

The same realism shapes Riyadh's view of Türkiye and Israel. Saudi Arabia has no interest in their rivalry. It seeks productive relations with Ankara—whose growing defence industry has become an attraction—even while maintaining quiet channels with Israel, where necessary.

The UAE makes no bones about mistrusting Iran and cooperating with Israel. Qatar sees mediation as security doctrine, and Oman remains the Gulf's indispensable bridge to Tehran. Kuwait and Bahrain have both tried to cautiously hedge their bets, even making diplomatic overtures to Iran, but the balance is precarious at best, as demonstrated by the latest Iranian strikes on US bases in these countries.

Saudi Arabia is trying something more ambitious: to create a new regional order in which the US is still indispensable but not the sole guarantor of security; Iran is engaged even if mistrusted; Türkiye an important strategic partner; China an economic pillar and Israel still a powerful regional actor.

It's not clear at this point if this delicate dance will succeed. The Gulf states don't lack military hardware, but they do lack collective security mechanisms. The Iran war has demonstrated that even the most sophisticated weapons systems cannot guarantee resilience. The war has exposed the vulnerability of energy infrastructure, desalination facilities and supply chains—and by extension the vulnerability of potential future investments in these Gulf economies. ■

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

The return of the runaway leader

Faisal Mahmud tries to make sense of Sheikh Hasina's announcement to voluntarily return to Bangladesh

The sudden announcement by Sheikh Hasina, living in exile in India since August 2024, that she plans to return to Bangladesh by the end of the year was startling but not really a surprise. For nearly two years after fleeing Bangladesh in the face of a student uprising, she was still combative and tried hard to keep her banned Awami League party afloat. She spoke of returning and contesting elections again, but even her supporters knew that at the age of 78, chances of a political comeback were slim.

In her interview to *Reuters*, the ousted former prime minister acknowledged that she could be arrested, executed or even assassinated upon her return. Yet she insisted that she had no alternative. She explained that she wanted to die on the soil where her "parents were buried" and where her "blood was shed. The International Crimes Tribunal sentenced her to death in November 2025 for crimes against humanity linked to the deadly suppression of protests. Multiple murder and corruption cases followed. Dhaka repeatedly sent extradition requests to India, while New Delhi carefully avoided making any public commitment.

The Bangladesh government has welcomed the announcement. It has also warned that she will be arrested on arrival and sent to prison to stand trial. A government spokesperson suggested darkly that the former prime minister "should bring with her the world's best lawyers" to argue her case. India has officially said the request for extradition was being examined legally and that India's approach has not changed. India has not formally granted Sheikh Hasina political asylum. Since her ouster in August 2024, she has been living in India under what officials describe as a

'special guest' arrangement, but her exact legal status remains deliberately undefined.

The announcement by the former prime minister in exile reveals how dramatically her political options have narrowed. For the first time since she escaped to India following the uprising, exile no longer appears sustainable. Mounting legal pressure from Dhaka, India's delicate diplomatic dance, the collapse of her party structure and eroding support base have left her very little room for manoeuvre. The question is no longer whether Sheikh Hasina wants to return but whether circumstances are forcing her hand.

Hasina has even announced a tentative timetable, declaring that she intends to surrender voluntarily and said senior party leaders, including former home minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, who was also sentenced to death, would accompany her. It's hard to dismiss such a coordinated declaration as just political theatre.

India has consistently refused to reveal whether it intends to honour extradition requests. Responding to questions about her comments, external affairs ministry officials said there was no change in their position, that extradition was 'a legal issue that would be handled accordingly'. Diplomatic language often reveals as much through omission as declaration.

New Delhi has avoided rejecting Dhaka's requests outright. Equally notable is what it has not done: despite hosting her since August 2024, India has never publicly granted her political asylum. This is a crucial distinction. Asylum would amount to a commitment to shield her indefinitely.

Instead, she remains a sensitive guest whose presence complicates India's effort to rebuild ties with the new administration in Bangladesh. India sent a big delegation to

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman's inauguration. The Bangladesh foreign minister later travelled to New Delhi in the most significant bilateral engagement since the change of government. Both countries have quietly resumed discussions on trade, connectivity and regional security.

Against that backdrop, indefinitely sheltering the most polarising figure in contemporary Bangladeshi politics is getting increasingly difficult.

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For India, the dilemma is profound. For over 15 years, New Delhi invested heavily in Hasina's administration. Her government became India's closest strategic partner in South Asia, delivering unprecedented security cooperation against northeastern insurgents while expanding economic integration and regional connectivity. Abandoning that ally entirely risks damaging India's credibility among partners across the region.

Yet continuing to protect a former leader sentenced to death for crimes against humanity also carries mounting diplomatic costs. The UN estimated that 1,400 people were killed during the crackdown on protesters that culminated in the collapse of her government. Although she rejects those findings, the scale of the allegations makes her a diplomatic liability.

Every extradition request from Dhaka increases that pressure. Every improvement in bilateral relations narrows New Delhi's room for procrastination. This does not mean that India is already preparing to extradite her. The legal process is complex. Indian courts could weigh the possibility that she will receive a fair trial. But India will find its ambiguity hard to defend.

Few countries today would willingly accept a deposed leader facing multiple criminal convictions and repeated extradition requests. Western democracies are highly unlikely to invite diplomatic confrontation over someone accused of presiding over mass murder. Even Gulf monarchies have shown little appetite for hosting controversial exiled leaders.

Russia is a theoretical possibility but will likely balk given Moscow's desire to preserve relations with Bangladesh, particularly as big commercial projects approach completion.

Zahed Ur Rahman, information advisor

Photo: Getty Images



Sheikh Hasina has announced a tentative timetable for her return and surrender

While it has hosted Sheikh Hasina since August 2024, India has not granted her political asylum

to the Bangladesh prime minister, said they were trying to bring back Hasina and would welcome her. He rejected suggestions that her return could destabilise the country, insisting she no longer had a political future. The tribunal proceedings, he said, would be transparent and open to international observation. That confidence reflects how the political landscape of

Bangladesh has changed since the uprising.

Before her fall, the Awami League appeared inseparable from the state. Two decades in power had allowed Hasina to centralise all key decisions. Institutions revolved around her personal authority. Her sudden departure exposed the consequences of that concentration. Many senior leaders fled the country. Others remain underground.

Hasina's admission that practically all party workers would face legal proceedings and her proposed collective surrender could be an attempt to project solidarity and lift organisational morale after two years of continuous decline. Returning voluntarily rather than being extradited might help her retain political agency.

She'll try to portray her surrender as a principled stand against political persecution rather than forced expulsion. But returning also means immediate arrest and imprisonment followed by criminal proceedings. The student deaths are still an open wound and public anger can easily become a security challenge. Yet, for Sheikh Hasina, her escape to India is now a dead-end. ■

FAISAL MAHMUD is a Dhaka-based journalist

COOPERATIVE FEDERALISM IN ACTION

Karnataka's renewed engagement at the 11th NITI aayog Governing Council meeting

"Building Partnerships for Inclusive Human Development and Viksit Bharat @2047"

India's journey towards becoming a developed nation by 2047 is closely intertwined with the strength of its federal structure. As the nation advances towards the vision of Viksit Bharat @2047, the role of States as equal partners in development has assumed greater significance. The Governing Council of NITI Aayog serves as the country's premier platform for fostering dialogue between the Union and the States, facilitating consensus on national priorities, and promoting collaborative policymaking. Against this backdrop, Karnataka Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar's participation in the 11th Governing Council Meeting of NITI Aayog in June 2026 marked an important milestone in the State's development journey. Convened under the theme "Inclusive Human Development for Viksit Bharat @2047," the meeting provided Karnataka with an opportunity to present its developmental priorities, advocate policy reforms, and seek support for key infrastructure projects. The visit was significant not only because of the issues placed before the Governing Council but also because it reflected Karnataka's renewed emphasis on institutional engagement with the Government of India. Through active participation in the national policy dialogue, the State reaffirmed its belief that sustained consultation, collaborative governance, and constructive partnerships are essential for addressing the challenges of rapid urbanisation and accelerating inclusive development.

More than a routine administrative engagement, the visit demonstrated Karnataka's commitment to aligning its development agenda with national priorities while securing timely approvals and financial assistance for projects critical to the State's long-term growth.

THE SPIRIT OF COOPERATIVE FEDERALISM

"Centre and States must work as equal partners in nation building." India's Constitution envisages a federal framework in which the Union and the States share responsibilities for governance and development. Over the years, the principle of Cooperative Federalism has emerged as the cornerstone of this partnership, encouraging consultation, coordination, and shared responsibility.

Addressing the Governing Council, Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar observed that contemporary governance demands close coordination among all levels of government. Whether responding to rapid urbanisation, climate change, technological transformation, public health challenges, or global economic uncertainties, effective solutions require collaborative policymaking.

The Chief Minister emphasised that India's aspiration of becoming a developed nation by 2047 can be realised only through synchronized policy implementation across sectors. States, being closest to citizens and responsible for delivering essential public services, play a pivotal role in translating national policies into tangible developmental outcomes.

He underscored that the relationship between the Centre and the States should be based on mutual trust, shared responsibility, and common developmental goals. This approach reflects the evolving role of NITI Aayog as a platform that promotes

evidence-based policymaking, policy innovation, and cooperative governance.

STRENGTHENING BENGALURU'S URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE

"Supporting India's innovation capital through strategic investment."

A major focus of Karnataka's presentation was the need for enhanced infrastructural support for Bengaluru.

The State informed the Governing Council that it has already initiated urban infrastructure projects worth nearly ₹1 lakh crore, covering transportation, public mobility, climate resilience, and sustainable urban development.

While these initiatives demonstrate Karnataka's commitment to strengthening urban infrastructure, the Chief Minister noted that the city's rapid growth necessitates additional support from the Union Government.

Given Bengaluru's role as a national economic hub, investments in its infrastructure benefit not only the city's residents but also millions of professionals, industries, educational institutions, startups, and multinational companies that contribute significantly to India's economy.

INFRASTRUCTURE AS AN ENGINE OF ECONOMIC GROWTH

"Integrated transport networks are essential for sustainable urbanisation."

During his visit to New Delhi, the Chief Minister also met Union Minister for Housing and Urban Affairs Manohar Lal Khattar to seek approvals and financial support for several key infrastructure projects.

Collectively valued at Rs 13,549 crore, these proposals include financial assistance of Rs 1,257 crore under the Urban Challenge Fund for an elevated corridor aimed at easing traffic congestion and improving mobility in Bengaluru.

The State also requested support for establishing a modern sewage treatment plant, recognising that sustainable urban development depends as much on environmental infrastructure as on transport networks.

Efficient wastewater management, river conservation, sanitation, and groundwater protection are increasingly



essential components of resilient and sustainable cities.

TRANSFORMING PUBLIC MOBILITY

"Connecting people, markets and opportunities."

Improving transportation infrastructure remains central to Karnataka's development strategy.

The State sought timely approvals and financial support for several landmark transport initiatives, including the Bengaluru Suburban Rail Project, which is expected to significantly improve regional connectivity while reducing dependence on private vehicles.

Karnataka also urged progress on the proposed Bengaluru–Mumbai High-Speed Rail Corridor, a transformative project expected to strengthen economic integration between two of India's most dynamic regions.

In addition, the Chief Minister requested approvals for Namma Metro Phases 3 and 3A, which will extend metro connectivity to rapidly growing residential and commercial areas.

Together, these initiatives represent an integrated approach to multimodal transportation planning, supporting sustainable urbanisation while enhancing economic productivity.

BALANCED REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

"Growth must extend beyond metropolitan boundaries."

While Bengaluru continues to be Karnataka's economic engine, the State emphasised the need to promote balanced regional development.

The Chief Minister stressed that sustained economic growth requires the creation of multiple centres of opportunity across Karnataka. Cities such as Mysuru, Hubballi-Dharwad,

Mangaluru, Belagavi, Kalaburagi, Shivamogga, Davanagere, Ballari, and Vijayapura possess significant potential for industrial development, logistics, higher education, tourism, healthcare, and manufacturing.

Strengthening these regional growth centres would generate employment opportunities across the State, reduce migration pressures on Bengaluru, and promote more inclusive development.

This approach aligns with the national objective of creating distributed centres of economic growth while ensuring equitable access to infrastructure and opportunities.

WATER SECURITY: A DEVELOPMENT IMPERATIVE

"Water management remains central to sustainable development."

Water security continues to be a key development priority for Karnataka.

Recognising its importance for agriculture, drinking water, industry, and environmental sustainability, the State sought early consideration of several major water resource initiatives.

The Chief Minister requested expeditious clearance for the Mekedatu Balancing Reservoir Project, emphasising its importance for long-term water management and drinking water security.

He also urged notification of the Krishna Water Disputes Tribunal-II Award, which would provide greater clarity regarding water allocations.

In addition, Karnataka sought the release of ₹5,300 crore in pending central assistance for the Upper Bhadra Project, a major irrigation initiative expected to enhance irrigation coverage, improve groundwater recharge, strengthen agricultural productivity, and support rural livelihoods.

These proposals reaffirm Karnataka's commitment to integrated water resource management as a foundation for sustainable development.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AT THE CENTRE OF PUBLIC POLICY

"Development must ultimately improve people's quality of life."

Reflecting the central theme of the Governing Council meeting, Karnataka highlighted the need to place human development at the heart of public policy.

The Chief Minister emphasised that economic progress should be measured alongside improvements in healthcare, nutrition, education, employment, and skill development.

To encourage better governance outcomes, Karnataka proposed that the Union Government introduce performance-based incentives for States demonstrating measurable progress in these sectors.

Such an approach would reward innovation, strengthen accountability, encourage healthy competition among States, and accelerate progress towards national human development goals.

INVESTING IN QUALITY PUBLIC EDUCATION

"Educational infrastructure shapes the future of the nation."

Education remains one of the most effective instruments for social transformation and economic progress.

The Government of Karnataka sought a one-time infrastructural grant for government schools and colleges to modernise classrooms, laboratories, libraries, digital learning facilities, hostels, sanitation, and sports infrastructure.

The objective is to provide students studying in public institutions with learning environments comparable to those available in quality private institutions.

Strengthening educational infrastructure would improve learning outcomes, enhance employability, promote innovation, and prepare India's youth for the demands of a knowledge-driven economy.

LEVERAGING CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

"Public-private partnerships can strengthen rural development."

Karnataka also proposed greater alignment of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives with national development priorities.

The Chief Minister suggested that the Ministry of Corporate Affairs

TOWARDS VIKSIT BHARAT @2047

"A shared vision built through shared responsibility."

The 11th Governing Council Meeting of NITI Aayog reaffirmed the importance of dialogue, consensus, and cooperative governance in advancing India's developmental aspirations.

For Karnataka, the meeting provided an important platform to present a comprehensive development agenda encompassing infrastructure, transportation, water security, regional development, education, governance reform, and human development.

The State's active engagement reflected its commitment to strengthening institutional partnerships with the Union Government while pursuing projects critical to Karnataka's long-term progress.

More importantly, the visit underscored the belief that national development is best achieved when the Centre and the States work together in a spirit of partnership, consultation, and shared purpose.

As India moves towards the vision of Viksit Bharat @2047, cooperative federalism will remain a defining pillar of governance. Karnataka's participation in the 11th NITI Aayog Governing Council Meeting demonstrates how constructive engagement can translate developmental priorities into actionable policy initiatives, ensuring that growth remains inclusive, sustainable, and people-centric.

The visit stands as a testament to the principle that dialogue strengthens democracy, partnership accelerates development, and cooperative federalism provides the institutional foundation for building a prosperous, resilient, and inclusive India. By combining State-level innovation with national support, Karnataka seeks not only to advance its own developmental priorities but also to contribute meaningfully to the country's collective journey towards a developed India by 2047.

encourage CSR investments towards strengthening healthcare and educational infrastructure in rural areas.

Such convergence between government programmes and private sector initiatives would maximise developmental outcomes, reduce regional disparities, and improve the delivery of essential services.

The proposal reflects Karnataka's belief that inclusive development requires active participation from governments, industry, civil society, and local communities.

CLIMATE RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABLE URBANISATION

"Building cities prepared for future challenges."

Rapid urbanisation presents both opportunities and challenges. The Chief Minister emphasised that future infrastructure planning must integrate climate resilience into every stage of urban development. Investments in public transportation, wastewater management, green infrastructure, sustainable mobility, and environmental protection are essential for ensuring that cities remain resilient, productive, and environmentally sustainable.

Karnataka's ongoing infrastructure initiatives seek to balance economic growth with ecological responsibility while supporting India's long-term climate commitments.



Has the hunger strike lost its moral charge?

Shailendra Chauhan on the continued relevance of Gandhi’s tradition of nonviolent resistance in a changed India

The history of Indian democracy is not merely the history of elections. It is equally a history of dissent, resistance and moral intervention. Among the many political instruments that have shaped this history, one acquired unparalleled moral legitimacy: the fast. Mahatma Gandhi transformed fasting from a simple act of abstaining from food into a means of cultivating inner strength, exerting moral pressure and shaping public opinion. Gandhi believed that no matter how powerful a government might be, if it were confronted by an unwavering commitment to truth and moral conviction, it would ultimately have to yield.

Three decades into the 21st century, a question presents itself with renewed urgency: has fasting as a political instrument lost its effectiveness? Sonam Wangchuk’s prolonged fast—first over Ladakh’s environmental concerns and constitutional rights and now seeking Dharmendra Pradhan’s resignation—the farmers’ movement, sit-ins by various civil society organisations and numerous local protests have revived a fundamental question: is today’s political establishment less responsive to moral pressure? Or has the very nature of democracy changed?

The answer lies not merely in the conduct of any particular government but in the broader political and social landscape. During Gandhi’s time, fasting was effective because it was embedded within extensive public engagement, dialogue and moral credibility. Every fast Gandhi undertook was more than an act of personal asceticism; it was an appeal to the conscience of society. News of his fasts reached villages across the country, dominated newspaper headlines and



Sonam Wangchuk on hunger strike at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi

Photo: Vipin

and constitutional safeguards for the region. The activist-educator is now on fast seeking reforms in the education system. His fast has succeeded in drawing the attention of many citizens, yet it also underscores an important reality: moral appeals alone do not necessarily produce immediate policy changes. Another significant change deserves attention. In Gandhi’s era, channels of communication were limited. A major fast naturally became national news. Today, society exists amid an overwhelming abundance of information. In an age of 24-hour news cycles and social media, each

Nonviolence is not synonymous with fasting alone. It encompasses dialogue, truth, public organisation, constructive action, moral courage and democratic pressure working in concert. Detached from these elements, fasting is reduced to little more than a symbolic abstention from food. Combined, it can still stir public conscience, even if its immediate impact is not readily visible.

History bears witness to the fact that many movements did not achieve immediate success, yet profoundly reshaped the politics of later generations. The Chipko Movement, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the struggle for the Right to Information and numerous environmental campaigns initially appeared ineffective. In time, however, they deeply influenced both public policy and collective consciousness. The success of a fast, therefore, cannot be judged solely by whether the government accepted its demands at that particular moment.

The true test of democracy lies in the responsibilities of both those who govern and those who resist. Governments must recognise that dissent is not the enemy of democracy but one of its essential conditions. Social movements must recognise that symbolic resistance alone is insufficient without moral credibility, evidence-based discourse and sustained public engagement.

What is needed today is not a mechanical imitation of Gandhi’s methods but a fresh understanding of the philosophical principles that animated them. Were Gandhi alive today, he would likely not rely on fasting alone. He would probably integrate digital platforms, public dialogue, environmental concerns, local self-governance and community organisation into a wider moral movement. His objective would not be the defeat of any particular government but the awakening of society’s collective conscience.

To declare that fasting has become entirely meaningless does justice neither to history nor to politics. A more accurate conclusion is that the social and political context in which fasting operates has fundamentally changed.

The greatest challenge before Indian democracy is whether it will continue to treat dissent as an administrative problem or begin to embrace it as one of democracy’s life-giving forces. The answer to that question will shape the future. If the space for moral voices continues to contract, not only will social movements suffer—democracy itself will become less responsive and less humane. But if both the State and society succeed in reviving a culture of dialogue, Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence will remain relevant, not simply as a historical memory, but as an indispensable foundation for the future of democracy. ■

Governments must recognise that dissent is not the enemy of democracy but one of its essential conditions

The Narmada Bachao Andolan or the struggle for RTI appeared ineffective to start with, but in time, they shaped public policy and public consciousness

influenced the British government. The British were colonial rulers, but they were not entirely insulated from the pressures of global politics, parliamentary scrutiny, the press and democratic criticism. They still felt compelled to demonstrate a degree of political legitimacy.

Today, the circumstances are markedly different. Democratic governments derive their legitimacy from electoral majorities. That confidence, rooted in electoral success, can sometimes foster the belief that winning elections represents the electorate’s ultimate and final endorsement. Consequently, voices raised on the streets are often viewed as expressions of limited interest groups, partisan opposition or temporary discontent. In such an environment, the moral force of fasting no longer carries the same weight it once did. It would be inaccurate to suggest that this is a phenomenon unique to the present government. Governments across the political spectrum have generally responded to large-scale movements through a familiar sequence: first, a period of waiting, followed by administrative control and, eventually, limited dialogue. This trend is visible in democracies around

the world. The modern state has become increasingly technocratic, security-obsessed and centralised. Administrative management has taken precedence over ethical persuasion.

It is equally true that many contemporary Indian social activists and public intellectuals have expressed concern that the State’s response to protests is harsher than it once was. Restrictions on demonstrations, prolonged delays in granting permissions, the detention of protesters, internet shutdowns and limitations imposed on movement in the name of security have intensified the debate over whether the public space available for dissent is steadily shrinking.

The government argues that maintaining law and order, preventing disruptions to public life and safeguarding national security are part of its constitutional responsibilities. For that reason, this debate resists simplistic or one-sided conclusions.

It is within this context that Sonam Wangchuk’s movement assumes particular significance. His campaign was not centred on a personal grievance but on the protection of Ladakh’s fragile environment

and day brings new controversies, new campaigns, new public debates. Sustaining public attention around any one movement has become difficult. This crisis of visibility has also diminished the effectiveness of fasting as a form of political action.

A second major shift has occurred within civil society. During Gandhi’s time, the Indian National Congress functioned as a mass movement. Today, political parties, social organisations and citizens’ groups operate as distinct, often disconnected entities. The coordination that once existed among them is less evident. Consequently, it has become far more difficult for any single fast to embody the moral voice of society as a whole.

It is also worth recognising that the excessive use of fasting can weaken its moral authority. When every minor or major dispute culminates in a hunger strike, society gradually becomes desensitised. Gandhi himself regarded fasting as a moral measure of last resort, not an everyday political tactic. Its dignity rested precisely in its restrained and judicious use.

Does this mean that Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence has become irrelevant? The answer is no.

True resistance comes from satyagraha

Meenakshi Natarajan on what makes acts of resistance carry conviction and ring true

The recent rejection of my Rajya Sabha nomination gave me food for thought. Resistance cannot be just external, I thought—it must stem from an inner churn, a search for the truth. Without that churn, an act of resistance is mere spectacle, a reactionary outburst. Minus the intent to seek the truth, resistance is raw violence; it cannot give voice to a demand for change.

While there are no lingering doubts anymore about the integrity of the Election Commission of India or the transparency of the electoral process, certain questions still gnawed at my conscience. The rejection of my Rajya Sabha nomination stunned everyone and exposed yet again the democratic authoritarianism that has overwhelmed our democracy. Yet, this wasn’t the first time the tendency had bared itself. Initially no one paid heed, opportunism was even celebrated as political expediency, and those left behind in the process were dismissed as fools.

The tendency was already manifest when Madhya Pradesh, the state I come from, effectively stopped elections to the state’s APMCs (Agricultural Produce Market Committees) or *mandis* back in 2013. (The elected committees completed their terms in 2018, and the state government has kept deferring these elections ever since, placing the management of the mandis under state-appointed administrators. When this happened, we kept mum. I must concede.

The *mandi* is not an insignificant institution, not secondary to the Rajya Sabha in my reckoning. This is where the fate of a farmer’s produce is decided. A farmer’s voice rarely reaches the ministry of commerce, but it used to reach the *mandi*. That voice is fainter than the trader’s or the commission agent’s in the

social pecking order, but their representation in the *mandi* still gave the farmers’ voice some strength.

Once those elections stopped, procurement at the minimum support price (MSP) declined and farmers began to be silenced with token relief instead of getting their rightful dues. They were offered ex-gratia payments, agricultural credit plans, loan waivers and price-difference compensation. But amid these ‘acts of benevolence’, their actual rights got buried. No one seemed to realise that the right to representation, the very essence of

democracy, was being stifled by this gilded cage of handouts. Even when farmers faced gunfire, the demand for elections to *mandis* never made it to the narrative. Today, as deals are struck with America, the voice of the farmer is nowhere to be heard.

Cooperative societies met the same fate. Their elections retained no trace of the cooperative spirit; the government determined the lists of both voters and candidates—obviously in alignment with the ruling party’s interests. Why are these elections important? Because the availability of rations and seeds and

fertilisers for those at the very bottom of the social pyramid depends on these societies.

When powerful groups seize control, they script new narratives of exploitation. The most vulnerable get what remains after the village elites have taken their share. Where can they raise their voices? There is no mechanism left that will allow them to become decision-makers or to challenge the black-marketing, exploitation and plunder in the Public Distribution System. Even with reserved seats for the most oppressed sections of society, their voices go unheard because these positions usually go to pawns of the powerful.

While this was happening right under our noses, we didn’t register it as a hollowing out of our democracy. It didn’t trouble our political conscience. Instead, we saw this as a failure of the cooperative model, buying into the capitalist narrative that human nature is inherently uncooperative. Meanwhile, elected canal committees were dissolved; landowners took control. We weren’t happy about this, but didn’t offer meaningful resistance. The *chakka jam* elections were next. As

the rights of the *gram sabha* (village assembly) were eroding, we told ourselves it might be best to wait for a favourable government. There were now eligibility criteria for candidates, yet we didn’t see this as an attack on democracy. Most states conduct elections—or don’t—entirely at their whim. But all this isn’t quite unmoved. Why should it surprise me now that a Rajya Sabha election has come to resemble a cooperative society election?

The Rajya Sabha is, after all, a representative chamber elected by legislators. But there are many institutions, both elected and unelected, representing people far weaker. Cooperative societies, *gram sabhas*, *panchayats*, market committees, canal committees carry the voice of the marginalised, give voice to the soul of the nation. When those voices were being suppressed, we did sense that something was amiss. But did it strike us as injustice? That is the question that now occupies my mind.

There is another aspect to consider. The third candidate who was declared elected (*following the rejection of the author’s nomination to the Rajya Sabha*—Ed.) hails from a community that has for millennia faced rejection from powerful overlords solely on the basis of their birth. They faced exclusion everywhere—from temples, schools, communal dining, even cremation grounds. I was born into the community that did the excluding. Although women do not wear the *janeu* (sacred thread) and are not considered *dwija* (twice-born), the privileges I do have—my own *janeu*, so to speak—are markers of inequality. Let’s say my fate in the present context is penance for the karma of my community.

The Constitution is a blueprint to eradicate this very inequality. It grants both me and the unopposed candidate the right to fight on equal terms, ensuring a level playing field. Yet, as Babasaheb Ambedkar warned, socio-economic inequalities can devour political equality. Justice and empowerment do not come from representing the powerful, they come from challenging them.

The practice of resistance raises uncomfortable questions. Confronting these questions is *satyagraha*, the means to fight a righteous battle. ■



In 2017, villagers near Mhow staged a *chakka jam* with the body of Abhishek Patidar who was killed in police firing during a farmers’ stir. Not much has changed since

Photo: Getty Images

MEENAKSHI NATARAJAN is a former Member of Parliament from Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh

Exclusion has a new name, address

The lessons from Assam’s NRC remain unlearned or unheeded as the ECI juggernaut rolls across the country

Aakar Patel

One common trait in lawless nations is high levels of anxiety about arbitrariness. Medieval texts tell us this has always been the case in our part of the world. Cruelty is couched as process and millions are tortured in the name of procedure. Special Intensive Revision forms are being handed out across India. It is impossible, on a first reading of this form, no matter how educated the reader, to understand what one is required to do, even though it is a single page.

We are told by the executive and the judiciary that putting us through this wringer is not only reasonable but required. We have been down this road before.

In 1998, the governor of Assam, a retired military man named S.K. Sinha, sent a note to then president K.R. Narayanan in which he wrote, in alarmist and alarming language, ‘Large-scale illegal migration from East Pakistan/Bangladesh over several decades has been altering the demographic complexion of this state. It poses a grave threat both to the identity of the Assamese people and to our national security. Successive governments at the Centre and in the state have not adequately met this challenge.’

Sinha demanded action ‘to avert the grave danger that has been building up for some time ... If not effectively checked, (Bangladeshis) may swamp the Assamese people and may sever the northeast land mass from the rest of India. This will lead to disastrous strategic and economic results’.

Sinha admitted that he was not basing this assessment on any data. He added: ‘Unfortunately, today we have no census report on the basis of which we can accurately define the contours of trans-border movement. Thus, we have to rely on broad estimates of theoretical extrapolations to work out the dimension of illegal migration that has taken place from East Pakistan/Bangladesh.’

In short, he had no evidence to prove this theory, but he felt strongly enough about it to raise it officially with the President.

In 2005, Sarbananda Sonowal, who later became the BJP chief minister of Assam, went to the Supreme Court to make the laws governing the identification of individuals suspected to be foreigners



Counting them out? Booth Level Officers verify details of residents as part of the ongoing Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls in New Delhi. More than 13,000 BLOs have been deployed in the national capital to verify and update voter details

harsher. The Supreme Court leaned on S.K. Sinha’s speculative note to conclude that Assam was facing an ‘external aggression’ that threatened a constitutional breakdown.

This reckless and unwarranted use of extremist language reflected the prejudices and bigotry against Muslims, which exist even in India’s highest court. The judiciary reversed the burden of proof on to the residents of Assam, a feature it regularly condones.

Normally, it is the State that must prove wrongdoing or criminal activity, and provide the evidence that someone should be punished. This is the meaning of the term ‘innocent until proven guilty’. However, the onus of proving they were not foreigners—and, for those born after 1971, that their parents or grandparents were not

foreigners—was thrust onto the Assamese by the judiciary. In effect, they were all guilty until they could prove themselves innocent.

In a nation where documentation is weak; where many, if not most, are poor and many, if not most, are not fully literate; and in a state where flooding is not rare and the total loss of property is quite common, this reversal of the burden of proof on such an important matter was cruelty.

The other thing that the Union did was to have almost no safeguards.

The foreigners’ tribunals, which would determine whether someone should be set free or sent to jail, were staffed by people given four days of training. They were advocates and retired civil servants hired on two-year contracts. It was before such

Reversing the burden of proof meant the Assamese were guilty till they could prove themselves innocent

people that individuals would present their cases.

The Assam government, run by the BJP, told the tribunal members what it wanted them to do by the simple expedient of not extending the contracts of those who had a low rate of declaring individuals foreigners.

This was revealed in an affidavit that the government itself submitted to Gauhati High Court when some of the tribunal members moved court, saying they had been let go from their jobs without any reason.

This was not so, said the government. All tribunal members, it claimed, had been given a performance appraisal. In 2017, it submitted a note which showed the names of the individuals, a column showing the ‘percentage of foreigners declared’, the ‘general view of the Government upon the member’ and ‘whether [the individual] may be considered for further retention or may be terminated’.

Members who had marked fewer than 10 per cent of the total number of people coming before their tribunal as foreigners were deemed to be ‘not satisfactory’ and shown to have been ‘terminated’.

Effectively, the state government was incentivising its tribunal officers to mark more people as foreigners, and punishing those officers who were not doing so. Such injustice did not receive nationwide, much less global, attention, and the matter was limited to the Assamese media.

The crisis snowballed when an Assamese, Ranjan Gogoi, was appointed Chief Justice of India. The state, which was under the BJP, drew up a first list excluding over 40 lakh people and then a final list of those considered to have met the criteria it had laid out. This was the so-called National Register of Citizens.

The list excluded 19 lakh people, who would now have to line up before the foreigners’ tribunals with their papers and prove their citizenship. The majority of these 19 lakh turned out to be Hindus. This was unexpected because the BJP had believed its own narrative and governor Sinha’s theory of a state overwhelmed by illegal immigrants, when there was no evidence to show that this was the case.

The BJP government then decided to scrap the Assam NRC that it had forced India—and Indians—to spend so many resources and so much effort on.

We are once again embarked on a similar exercise, this time nationwide. Reports of entitlement benefits being scrapped, passports being denied and forms being too confusing have begun coming in. The population is gripped by anxiety against arbitrariness and the cruelty of a State that sells its actions as minimum government. ■

Views are personal



The economic activity generated by international students in 2024-25 is reported to have supported the equivalent of 287,300 full-time jobs in the UK



LONDON DIARY
HASAN SUROOR



Education secretary and minister for women and equalities Bridget Phillipson

Overseas students or cash cows? “Broken Britain” going to pieces

The British government has been accused of trying to kill the goose that lays the golden egg with its hostility towards foreign students amid an increasingly xenophobic debate on immigration.

The accusation came on the back of a report showing that overseas students who pay up to three times more than their British peers generate an estimated £40 billion net economic benefit for the public exchequer during their studies.

Students from India form one of the largest cohorts of foreign students but their numbers have been steadily falling because of recent restrictions on student visas and measures to prevent them from bringing in dependants.

Researchers calculated the benefit by looking at tuition fee income, spending by universities and the impact of student spending on the wider economy.

An important finding is that the money brought in benefitted every parliamentary constituency of the country. Ironically, the biggest beneficiaries are the constituents of the outgoing Prime Minister Keir Starmer who led the crackdown on foreign students. His London constituency (Holborn & St Pancras) is heavily dependent for its development on their largesse.

The report by the consultancy firm London Economics claims that the economic activity generated by international students in the 2024-25 cohort supported about 287,300 full-time equivalent jobs.

Cash cows, anyone?

Further to the study on how Brits are leaving the country for greener pastures, it has emerged that the scale of the exodus is much bigger than was suggested and the reasons are not limited to the pursuit of career opportunities.

There is no one single factor that’s driving the flight from a country increasingly referred to as “broken Britain”. And, contrary to previous assumptions, it’s not limited to frustrated middle-aged professionals weighed down by family pressures, but is increasingly affecting a Gen Z struggling with the deepening cost-of-living crisis.

“Lately, when I get together with my friends, conversation goes down a familiar

path. It isn’t long before we start lamenting the state of the country, from its dysfunctional public services all the way up to its dysfunctional politics,” wrote *Times* columnist Cindy Yu.

Their favoured escape routes head towards the US, UAE, Australia, even those East European countries that once dumped their unemployed men and women on Britain (until Brexit put an end to free movement within the European Union).

Now, these same countries dismissively refer to Britain as a “low-income, high-cost” state—a euphemism for a place no longer fit to live in.

Real wages have remained largely stagnant since the 2008 financial crisis, while inflation has risen, eroding take-home earnings.



Low incomes and a high cost of living are reportedly driving an exodus of Brits from the UK

Politically, too, Britain has become more unstable, causing the collapse of trust in mainstream politicians and an alarming rise in the popularity of far-right populist parties like Reform UK and Restore Britain.

Britain’s ‘class warriors’

A unique facet of British class culture, not widely known outside the country, is the tendency among successful Brits to play down their privileged background.

This is particularly true of politicians who like to pretend they’re ordinary folk who understand their voters’ concerns.

It has thus emerged that as many as 40 Labour MPs who went to private school failed to declare it in their ‘Who’s Who’ entries. Among them were former defence secretary John Healey and current culture secretary Lisa Nandy.

The revelation has sparked allegations of hypocrisy amid a row over the Labour government’s introduction of a 20 per cent VAT charge on private school fees, which has been blamed for putting more than 100 schools out of business.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson has been accused of behaving like a “spiteful class warrior”.

“Labour’s hypocrisy knows no limits,” said Kevin Hollinrake, chairman of the opposition Conservative Party. “While they plot around the cabinet table to impose this spiteful tax on education, many Labour MPs have been busy covering up their own private school educations. They have no shame in pulling up the ladder behind them.”

True, for once.

Muslim International Film Festival in London

To be honest, the first I heard about this film festival was when I received an email announcing this year’s winners.

Apparently, it’s a ‘prominent cinematic event’ dedicated to showcasing films made by Muslim creators, starring Muslim actors, or centring on Muslim life and culture, and it’s in its second year.

Founded by UK Muslim Film, it seeks to amplify ‘authentic’ Muslim voices, offer platforms for emerging talent, and combat negative stereotypes in Western media.

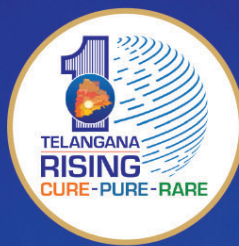
It opened with the screening of *Hijra*, a Saudi film that follows generations of women crossing the desert toward Mecca. The festival’s prestigious Trailblazer Award was presented to the prominent British casting director Shaheen Baig.

Well-intentioned though the festival may be, the idea of cinema focusing only on the members of one religious denomination doesn’t augur well for an inclusive cinema movement.

What’s next? Separate Hindu, Sikh and Christian festivals?

And, finally, this columnist recently received an email from the Consulate General of India, Birmingham, requesting the publication of three articles refuting Pakistan’s ‘fake narrative’ on the Indus Waters treaty—two by name and the third ‘to be published anonymously’.

Wonder who the author is and why the secrecy? ■



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