

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

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New Delhi • 20 September 2026 • Pages: 8 • National • Vol. 9 Issue 48 • ₹20

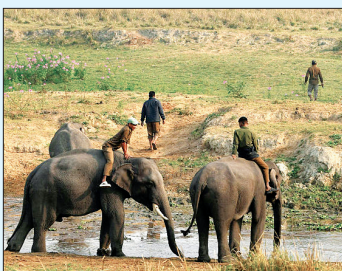
NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

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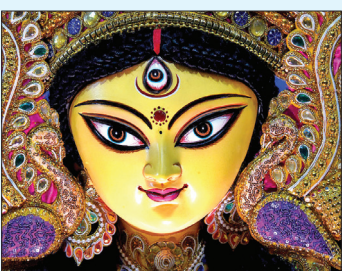


NATION

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Where India stands after the BRICS dance

Ashok Swain on why non-alignment by another name does not carry conviction

Sensing that geopolitical winds may once again be changing direction, the Modi government executed some nifty U-turns at the New Delhi BRICS summit on 12-13 September. For the nonce, China and Iran seem to have replaced US and Israel as the seasonal flavours of our foreign policy.

Judging by photo-ops featuring Modi, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Masoud Pezeshkian et al, BRICS is still alive and kicking and India and China can be friends with benefits, so to speak. Iran has noted that Modi is keen to mend ties, and even though these words do not appear in the summit joint statement, in his opening remarks, Modi said we are “not against anyone; we try to take everyone along”.

For Modi’s propaganda machinery, this was a validation of his government’s policy of ‘strategic autonomy’ in foreign relations. The posture is: India talks to everyone, joins no camp and maximises its options. But to go whichever way the wind blows is not the same as ‘non-alignment’ even if you call it ‘strategic autonomy’. And while the latest manoeuvres of India’s external affairs establishment may seem adroit, and big media sound gung-ho about the joint statement, the summit has once again exposed that India’s foreign policy is driven by short-term opportunism rather than a clear understanding of India’s long-term national interests.

In any case, strategic autonomy or non-alignment never meant equidistance from competing big powers. Rather it meant retaining the political, economic and military

independence to take decisions in India’s sovereign interests rather than yielding to the demands of a big power. Multi-alignment can be a modern expression of that tradition, but successful multi-alignment requires consistency of objectives even when relationships change.

India’s relations with China in the Modi years are a good illustration.

Six years after the Galwan clash, in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed, the territorial capture by China of over 2,000 sq. km of territory is still unresolved. Significant military deployments continue along the contested Himalayan frontier and China continues to make inroads into Indian territory. Also, China remains Pakistan’s principal military supplier and India’s most formidable security threat. Yet Xi received a red-carpet welcome in Delhi on his first visit to India in seven years. Modi and Xi promised an expansion of business ties, of transportation and people-to-people links and again committed themselves to seeking a mutually acceptable boundary settlement.

Dialogue with China is sensible, no doubt—to not engage with the world’s second-largest economy, also India’s most powerful neighbour, would be foolhardy. But what did India secure in the current rapprochement? What reciprocal concessions did the two sides make?

China’s foreign ministry declared on Monday that Modi had told Xi that India ‘will not allow any force to engage in anti-China activities on its territory’. The asymmetry is striking. Where is the equivalent Chinese assurance that its territory,

military-industrial complex and intelligence capabilities will not be used to strengthen activities that threaten India? Where is Beijing’s commitment to restrain material and military assistance to Pakistan in a confrontation with India?

The reconciliation with Beijing also exposes India’s economic dependence. After years of ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ sloganeering, India’s reliance on Chinese imports has in fact grown dramatically. The balance of trade is hopelessly askew and imports from China reached \$132 billion in the last financial year.

What’s the reconciliation based on when there is no credible move to settle the border dispute or any assurance from China vis-à-vis Pakistan or a fundamental convergence of geopolitical interests? Other than India’s dependence on Chinese machinery, electronics, components and industrial inputs—which is a compelling reason to make nice with China—what is India able to command in this relationship with its much-vaunted ‘strategic autonomy’? Is the recent lack of joy in trade talks with the Trump administration and the ensuing desperation to find alternatives ‘strategic autonomy’?

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The sudden show of great warmth for Pezeshkian would have been equally befuddling had people not come to expect Modi to put on a show

for the cameras. For much of his time as prime minister, India and Israel have had an interdependent relationship and Modi’s personal ties with Netanyahu have been well known. The two leaders have both made public declarations about their friendship and grown defence and intelligence cooperation between their countries. India has landed on Israel’s side in the genocidal war it has been waging in Palestine, supporting it diplomatically and militarily, a far cry from India’s balanced stand vis-à-vis Israel/Palestine since the creation of the Israeli state in 1948.



Photos: Getty Images



A show for the cameras The New Delhi Declaration at BRICS 2026 was possible because it artfully skirted the questions on which a deal may have faltered

But Netanyahu faces an election in October that he may well lose. Trump too faces midterm elections in November and his prospects are far from rosy; his authority may be seriously weakened in the aftermath. Suddenly, for Modi, to be seen in the corner of these embattled leaders in Washington and Jerusalem is not looking so good. Is that, then, the secret of the fussy attention Pezeshkian received in Delhi? Modi held extensive discussions with him while emphasising freedom of navigation, commerce and the safety of shipping amid the Gulf conflict. Is that the reason to invoke ‘a longstanding civilisational relationship’ with Iran and to speak of ‘a long-term win-win strategy’? Once again, engaging Iran is not a mistake, but do the overtures carry conviction? Iran has always mattered to

India’s long-term interests. It controls crucial energy routes. The Chabahar port project, where India has wound down operations under US pressure, granted India access to Afghanistan and Central Asia bypassing Pakistan. Stability around the Strait of Hormuz directly affects Indian energy security. These realities did not suddenly emerge in 2026; they were in play even when Modi was enthusiastically courting Netanyahu. What has changed is the geopolitical price of ignoring them.

It couldn’t have been easy to hammer out an agreement between Iran, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, China, Russia and others despite profound divisions, but consensus was also possible because the New Delhi Declaration artfully skirted the questions on which an agreement would have faltered. It called for ‘maximum restraint’ in West Asia

but avoided direct references to the perpetrators of the attacks on civilian and nuclear infrastructure; it criticised tariffs and unilateral sanctions without naming the United States.

That may be good summit diplomacy but it doesn’t constitute a shared geopolitical vision any more than hosting BRICS makes Modi the voice of the Global South. The US and Israel have no doubt taken notes. China and Iran, too, are unlikely to mistake India’s show of warmth for loyalty or even a firm commitment. Beijing understands India’s continuing partnership with Washington and its participation in the Quad. Tehran won’t forget India’s support of aggressor Israel or its decision to soft-pedal economic ties when Trump turned the screws during the war.

Everyone will deal with India because its market is not an inconsiderable attraction. But they will do so transactionally because they know that India’s foreign policy under Modi is not anchored in a geopolitical vision, that ‘strategic autonomy’ is really about what seems expedient in the short term. ■

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

SIR and the presumption of guilt in ‘New India’

You’re Indian when you’re taxed, you’re suspect when you vote

Aakar Patel

Attendance at the hearing is mandatory. Please treat this as urgent and make the necessary arrangements to attend without fail’.

I had meant to ignore the SIR notice which came over WhatsApp and had decided against going. But then my wife went the day before I did. The notice-issuing official seemed upset, she said, that I hadn’t even responded to his WhatsApp message. Noblesse oblige, and all that. And so I appeared before him with my raggedy file of papers to prove that I exist and that I am qualified to elect those we euphemistically call public servants.

The place was overrun with anxious people, as is to be expected in a place where uncertainty and chaos are the norm and where this government has gratuitously injected even more uncertainty.

The tech set is fond of the word ‘disruption’ and use it in a positive sense, but it is actually a violent term. Disruption of whose lives and to what end? That is not considered, at all. The poor and the marginalised have no real say in how their existence is unsettled (disrupted).

Anyway, the official turned out to be a teacher who would be doing

this well into October instead of teaching. He was pleasant, polite, competent, and finished off the process in a few minutes.

This is often the case. I have found that those at the business end of government are like this, even when asked to do things that are absurd. I include many of the officials who have raided our office and been told to book me and so on. It is further up the chain of command that we have malice, incompetence and, in these present times, a certain absurdity.



From pillar to post That’s the story of harried Indians trying to prove they belong

My file of documents is raggedy because of acts of both God and man. More precisely, acts of man who thinks he is God. My birth certificate (Nanavati Hospital, Bombay) and my school leaving certificate (Sir J.J. English School) were washed away in the Surat floods of 2006. Minimum governance had allowed water to accumulate in the dam upstream and maximum governance had released it without warning or preparation, flooding the banks of the city. My parents spent four days on their terrace, alone and

without assistance, losing most of what they had.

What else is there to produce? My passport is with a court, impounded. It occurs to me that the State insists I am Indian when taxing me and filing cases against me, but suspects I am not when it comes to voting. I wonder how my fellow criminals around the country are dealing with this paradox.

Anyway, I still had some documentation—bank statements, property papers etc—and these were accepted. Perhaps they will be

The presumption of guilt has been baked into many laws in New India

sufficient, perhaps not. We shall find out. It would be more exciting to be struck off the rolls and moved along the line of torture. In Assam, those unable to prove citizenship to the satisfaction of the malevolent State have been jailed in addition to being disenfranchised.

Consider what happens to people who are told one day that their bank accounts, licenses, passports are no longer valid. Then, of course, there are all these deportation stories. I am hoping to be sent to some civilised nation, perhaps in Southeast Asia. I would not mind China either, the rising star of humanity, though in all honesty it is in another South Asian nation that I would really be at home by way of culture and diet.

Knowing my luck, and knowing this government, that will likely not happen. I will be kept here, disenfranchised, but ordered to stand through six stanzas of Vande Mataram.

The ‘mother of democracy’ demands respect and adoration but it is a one-sided relationship. You have to prove you are her child, which is a strange position if you think about it.

The presumption of guilt has been baked into many laws in ‘New India’. It already existed in the laws

on terror and narcotics. In 2015, it was extended to the possession of beef. In 2018, it was extended to the ‘love jihad’ laws. Assam showed us the way to do it when it came to citizenship, and now here we are.

Wasn’t the BJP only some time ago talking of passing a law on compulsory voting? Wonder what happened to that and why the position went from ‘everyone must vote’ to ‘nobody can vote unless they pass this purity test’. To expect consistency of principle from them is the same as to expect humanity or civility.

In an earlier time, I would be deeply upset by both this process and the thought of being deprived of the right to vote. (I used to queue up at the booth at the crack of dawn.) Now I am more relaxed about it, and frankly I don’t care.

I have great affection for the people who comprise this nation; I have little and perhaps none for the rest of what comprises it. The New York city mayor in his magical campaign last year spoke of meeting a constituent for whom all romance around home had vanished. “I used to love New York,” she said to him, “now it’s just where I live.” Precisely. ■

Views are personal

Can Kaziranga survive?

Cutting down the buffer zone around the national park and tiger reserve is bad news, and not just for the animals it is home to, writes **Rashme Sehgal**



Jewel in the crown Kaziranga was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985 and attracts lakhs of tourists every year

Our politicians have the most cannibalistic instincts when it comes to the acquisition of forest land. Why else would the Assam state government want to cut down the Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) around the Kaziranga National Park & Tiger Reserve from ten kilometres to one kilometre? Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma set the cat among the pigeons by announcing that they were just waiting for the final notification from the ministry of environment and forests (MoEF) before going ahead. Shrinking the buffer zone would lift restrictions on local infrastructure and civic projects, including a modern stadium in Bokakhat, a commercial tourism complex and other civic amenities.

Other plans are afoot: three five-star hotels, a convention centre and an elevated corridor. Land at Ingle Pathar in Kaziranga has already

been given on a 99-year lease for a proposed luxury resort tied to Juniper Hotel, allegedly a subsidiary of the Hyatt group. The group is planning a 106-room luxury hotel on a 10 acre plot, to be operational by 2030.

Environmentalists warn that Ingle Pathar is home to nearly 300 elephants. Construction and increased human presence will precipitate animal-human conflict and destroy one of the last inviolate homes for wild elephants in the country.

Over the last three decades, the 1,000 sq. km. park has held out as one of the few remaining citadels of wildlife, where a dedicated team of foresters helped revive endangered species, especially the one-horned rhino. (Kaziranga is home to two-thirds of the world's one-horned rhino population.) Between 1 April 2025 and 28 May 2026, it attracted a record 5.5 lakh tourists. Declared a UNESCO World

Heritage Site in 1985, it became a tiger reserve in 2006, with 148 tigers to begin with.

While the state government maintains that no formal request has yet been made to the ministry, the Supreme Court had already muddled the waters. In its 2023 ruling, it stated that mandatory ESZs should be site-specific, determined by topography, local conditions and wildlife behaviour. This meant even one kilometre of protection was no longer a given.

As a result, several states reduced or dispensed with buffer zones. A preliminary analysis of 109 national parks and sanctuaries by the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy found that 60 national parks had done away with ESZs completely. Animals are increasingly bottled inside demarcated spaces in parks and sanctuaries. Kaziranga seems to be headed in the same direction.

State governments have justified shrinking or eliminating ESZs on

the grounds that it helps improve basic infrastructure and day-to-day activities for villagers living in peripheral areas. For the people on the periphery of Kaziranga, it's another story.

Forty-five Adivasi families at Ingle Pathar claim their agricultural and grazing land has been forcibly acquired. Other evictees say they were paying land tax until revenue officials stopped collections in 2022. Some claim they were offered compensation of Rs 3 lakh per family, which they have so far refused.

Public opinion is divided. Some believe tourists will benefit the area financially. Many, particularly women who are beneficiaries of state welfare schemes, are favourably inclined towards the BJP government. Others are deeply apprehensive, despite possessing permanent 'myadi' patta documents issued when their forefathers were brought in as indentured labourers by the British. Their livelihoods remain tied to the environment and they do not want it destroyed.

"Assam was once known as the

'Country of Golden Gardens'," a leading environmentalist told this reporter. (Garden being a euphemism not only for its tea gardens but also its subtropical forests and extraordinary wildlife.) "This push for development has placed an enormous strain on its natural resources and wildlife habitats. Earlier, vast tracts of the Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve were broken up because of illegal coal mining and forest felling. The mining mafia has now moved to the hills of Karbi Anglong, which form a boundary to Kaziranga."

Several locals believe mining is taking place surreptitiously along the nine vital elephant and tiger corridors leading out of the park. Recent media reports have pointed to the disappearance of the Parbari corridor, a critical wildlife passage connecting the park to the Karbi Anglong hills.

Mubina Akhtar, who heads the Kaziranga Wildlife Society, cannot make sense of the government's plans. The Kaziranga Elevated Corridor Project, inaugurated by Prime Minister Modi on 18 January 2026, involves the diversion of 20.4 hectares of forest land from the core zone of the tiger reserve and nearly 365 hectares from the existing ESZ. It also entails widening the highway that cuts through the park and constructing 21 km of greenfield bypasses around Jakhlabandha and Bokakhat.

"It beats me why the state government did not allot land for hotels in Bokakhat and Jakhlabandha, just 20-30 km from Kaziranga. The park is richly biodiverse. Increasing tourism while reducing its size is obviously going to affect animal life," said Akhtar.

The ESZ is particularly important during the rainy season. During floods, when the Brahmaputra flows south of the park, animals move northwards into the buffer zone. The Dhalamara area of Karbi Anglong becomes their refuge. "This needs to be protected," Akhtar added.

Kaziranga's DFO, Arun Vignesh, defended the elevated corridor, arguing that it would reduce animal deaths from vehicle collisions. A Gauhati University study found that 6,036 animals were killed in just two years (2016-17).

"The number of animals killed by speeding vehicles has come down. Poaching, especially of rhinos, has also gone down with the setting up of 170 camps with armed

forest guards in the park's core areas," said Vignesh.

A senior retired forester offers a sharply different assessment.

"Nothing is being done properly. Kaziranga is mainly a grassland. To maintain the grass, it has to be burnt every year. This is not being done properly and the grassland is shrinking. The entire focus is on building 'infrastructure' from which politicians can make money."

The menace of illegal mining also continues. Conservationist and legal-rights activist Rohit Choudhury filed a petition in 2012 highlighting unregulated quarrying and mining in and around Kaziranga, listing 60 illegal stone quarries. In 2019, the Supreme Court banned mining along Kaziranga's southern boundary and ordered that 'no new construction shall be permitted on private lands which form part of the nine identified animal corridors in the park'.

In 2026, Choudhury petitioned the Supreme Court-appointed central empowered committee, claiming illegal construction was taking place in two wildlife corridors in violation of the 2019 order. Park authorities say the complaint is 'under examination'.

"Mining has resumed on a large scale," Choudhury told this reporter. "Media reports confirm wetlands are drying up and our forests, especially bamboo forests, are fast disappearing. Once the natural habitat of the animals is destroyed, what chance does Kaziranga have?"

Activists speaking out against the sell-out are being harassed and jailed. The arrest of outspoken activist Pranab Doley under the National Security Act created shock waves. More than 60 rights groups, trade unions and civil-society organisations called the move "vindictive and arbitrary" and demanded his release. Several international human-rights and indigenous-rights organisations have written an open letter (dated 18 August 2026), demanding that no hotel project be pursued without the prior consent of indigenous communities living in the region.

The national park has survived poaching, floods, encroachment and mining. Can it now survive this latest threat of unregulated commercial urbanisation that risks destroying the very habitat that makes Kaziranga a shining jewel in India's crown? ■

A study of 109 national parks reveals that 60 of them have done away entirely with ESZs

The merits of 'quarantined engagement'

India, China have broken the ice at BRICS but the real test lies ahead, writes **Ajit Ranade**

The just-concluded BRICS summit in Delhi may not be remembered for a particularly muscular declaration. But to focus on that may miss its import for India. Did BRICS help a thaw in India-China relations?

India's diplomatic achievement was not that it convened the summit—it was anyway the BRICS chair—but that it managed to hammer out a common declaration among countries whose interests frequently collide. Iran and the UAE could sit around the same table despite their tensions; China could sign a statement condemning the Pahalgam terror attack; and members could agree on a dialogue in West Asia despite sharply different alignments. India had managed something similar during its G20 presidency in 2023, when it found consensus language despite bitter divisions over Ukraine.

The Modi-Xi meeting on the sidelines of the summit was more important than the communiqué. Xi was visiting India for the first time in seven years. The two leaders discussed business links, market access, the structural trade imbalance, people-to-people exchanges and the official readouts made careful references to jointly promoting border peace. It would be foolish to call this reconciliation, but it is certainly an opportunity.

India and China are neighbours, together accounting for more than one-third of humanity. Geography cannot be wished away. Nor will their border dispute disappear anytime soon. Deng Xiaoping's famous advice to Rajiv Gandhi in 1988 remains relevant: if our generation lacks the wisdom to solve the boundary question, let us leave it to a wiser future generation.

That does not mean forgetting Galwan, where 20 Indian soldiers

died in 2020. The border must be strongly defended. But the border can stay cold without freezing the entire relationship. Indeed, India and China are already practising compartmentalisation. At the SCO summit in Bishkek, they joined Pakistan, Russia and others in a declaration rejecting double standards in combating terrorism. If such contradictions can be managed inside SCO and BRICS, they can also be managed bilaterally.

The compartments are: border security; trade and investment; technology; rivers and riparian rights; Himalayan ecology; climate change; WTO reform; nuclear non-proliferation; universities, tourism and culture; and selective cooperation on international conflicts.

The economic case for pragmatism is compelling. India's trade deficit with China is around \$112 billion. Yet our dependence is not principally on cheap toys. China supplies vital APIs, electronic components, machinery, solar inputs and processed critical minerals. After Galwan, India tightened Chinese investment and technology access. Yet imports kept rising. The attempt to reduce political exposure did not eliminate economic dependence.

Our withdrawal from RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) at the 2019 ASEAN summit in Bangkok offers a warning. India spent nine years negotiating the agreement but walked out abruptly in 2019, ostensibly over fear of Chinese imports. Those imports came anyway. We could have backloaded by fifteen years the conditions allowed in RCEP. What India may have sacrificed was the more valuable prize: becoming embedded in Asian production networks. Modern trade is not merely about bilateral deficits. It is about where

supply chains, factories and future investment locate.

The relationship may look lopsided but China too needs India. China has formidable economic strengths but some serious vulnerabilities as well. Its population is ageing, its workforce is beginning to shrink, its property sector is struggling, debt is high, domestic consumption remains weak and excess industrial capacity needs external markets. The IMF expects slower medium-term growth as demographics, weaker productivity and declining returns on investment bite.

India offers one of the world's largest and fastest-growing markets, a younger labour force and an alternative destination for Chinese capital facing barriers elsewhere. The appropriate response is not 'keep China out' but 'if you want access to the Indian market, manufacture, employ, source here and export from here'.

Why not begin by reopening



It would be foolish to call the Modi-Xi meeting during BRICS 2026 a reconciliation, but it did open up possibilities, if India can play it right

discussions targeted BYD about an Indian factory? BYD is now one of the world's dominant EV manufacturers. Its Indian ambitions were caught in the post-Galwan investment freeze. Invite it back to the table, but on Indian terms—local manufacturing, Indian employment, supplier development, strict data safeguards and progressively higher domestic value-addition.

Press Note 3 (2020 series), which effectively targeted FDI from China, should evolve from blanket suspicion to risk-based screening. Chinese participation in telecom networks is different from passive Chinese capital financing a highway, warehouse, water project or irrigation system. This is

'quarantined engagement', a pragmatic policy proposal outlined by Nitin Pai, Ajay Shah and this author in September 2025—it says accept capital without management control, exclude sensitive Chinese technology and begin with 'dumb infrastructure'.

Then open some smaller doors quickly.

Make visas for Chinese tourists, business visitors, academics and engineers easier. Restore more direct flights. Create a specially marketed Buddhist circuit—Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar and Nalanda—for Chinese tourists. Revive university partnerships in non-sensitive disciplines. Encourage cinema, sport and cultural exchanges. Two

civilisations representing such a large share of humanity should not interact mainly through soldiers, customs officials and diplomats.

At the same time, India should insist much more forcefully on access to China's vast consumer market. The answer to the trade deficit cannot simply be fewer Chinese imports. It must be more Indian pharmaceuticals, food products, services, entertainment and other goods entering China.

China's extraordinary growth, despite poor Ease of Doing Business rankings and the absence of Western-style democratic institutions, is a reminder that it must be understood as it is, not as theory says it ought to be. India should neither imitate China nor fear it. It should learn, compete and build its own capabilities—in aerospace, defence, semiconductors, critical minerals, pharmaceuticals and AI. Engagement is safest when backed by strength. AI sovereignty and technological capability are ultimately a better insurance than import prohibitions.

Nor should a thaw in ties with China dilute India's ties with America, Europe, Japan or the Quad. India should remain active simultaneously in BRICS, SCO, Quad, G20 and other useful formations. India's future choices cannot be held hostage to any of these relationships. That is 'strategic autonomy'.

China takes over the BRICS presidency in 2027. The next 12 months are a special window.

A thaw does not require friendship, much less trust. It requires reciprocal interest and some imagination. Protect where we must. Compete where we should. Cooperate where we can. And use the time and space created by engagement to become stronger. ■

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



The return of Jarange, the coming of UCC and a ‘Feku’ *Badgya*

Jaideep Hardikar

It seems the prospect of Maratha leader Manoj Jarange-Patil agitating in Mumbai during Ganeshotsav was too big a risk for the Devendra Fadnavis government.

Jarange had begun yet another Maratha-quota fast—his 12th since 2014, for a hundred-odd days cumulatively—in his native Antarwali Sarati in Jalna district of Marathwada. After two weeks in Jalna, he had embarked on a march to Mumbai, where he planned to resume his protest, smack in the middle of the festival.

The Fadnavis government was sweating over the prospect because Mumbai is anyway bursting at the seams this time of year, and law and order is a challenge because of the processions and the festivities, which often need reining in. There is also the looming spectre of heavy retreating monsoon rains.

Add to this Jarange’s famed capacity to mobilise people in his state, and the cocktail was enough to give the state government the heebie-jeebies.

Late on Wednesday, 16 September, Jarange was waylaid by a state government contingent in Beed, en route to Mumbai, where

he was expected on Saturday, 19 September. The government has conceded most of his demands and agreed to keep its promise in 90 days. What it’ll do once the festival ends is anybody’s guess.

Jarange’s protest this time pivots on the state government’s claim that a significant section of Marathas historically shares the same agrarian identity as the Kunbis, who are recognised as an OBC community. A government-appointed committee has reportedly identified 58 lakh historical records relating to the identity of Kunbis, including records from the Nizam-era Hyderabad Gazette in eight Marathwada districts. The government claims it has already issued 3,16,977 Kunbi certificates.

Jarange insists if the government has found the records, it must issue the certificates immediately. Therein lies the rub: a historical entry in a revenue record does not automatically convert into a caste certificate. Each claim must be verified, linked to an applicant’s family and genealogy and the administration must establish who among the 58 lakh records found are eligible people and how their eligibility transfers to descendants. However,

Jarange’s demand seems to make no room for a convoluted archival exercise—he wants entitlement as of yesterday.

Governments in Maharashtra have spent the last two decades trying to find a legally defensible route to Maratha reservation. Their Kunbi identity, if established, opens a possible route under the OBC quota. But to take that route is to invite the wrath of other OBCs, who are the BJP’s main voter base.

UCC Coming soon

On 14 September, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said Maharashtra intends to introduce a Uniform Civil Code bill in Nagpur during the winter session of the state legislature, after the committee examining the issue submits its report. His statement came a day after the Union home minister said in Mumbai that 21 BJP-ruled states would have the UCC in place before the 2029 Lok Sabha election.

What’s new is the BJP taking the state route, instead of bringing in a uniform central law, to realise a long-standing core objective of the Sangh Parivar. Maharashtra constituted a seven-member panel,



(Retd.) Justice Ranjana Desai

headed by retired (Supreme Court) Justice Ranjana Desai, in July 2026. The panel, which includes former Bombay High Court judges R.C. Chavan and S.G. Mehare, former chief secretary D.K. Jain, former advocate general Virendra Saraf, constitutional scholar Ramesh Patange and educationist Suvarna Rawal, has six months to make its recommendations.

The 9 July resolution asks the committee to examine the constitutional, legal, social, cultural and administrative consequences of a UCC. It has to study the experience of Uttarakhand and other states, examine marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance and succession, and recommend the legal, administrative and institutional changes required for Maharashtra. It is expected ‘to seek the views of representatives of different religions, women’s organisations, NGOs, experts and citizens’.

While the committee is rich in legal and administrative expertise, it has no representative of any minority religious community—Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist or Parsi—whose personal laws it is being asked to examine. There is no tribal representative either. In Mumbai, Shah explicitly said that tribal communities will remain outside the UCC and that their customs will be protected.

Uttarakhand has a UCC in force since January 2025. Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh have passed the law, but are yet to get the presidential assent. Maharashtra is

the fourth state to move on it. It remains to be seen if Maharashtra will produce a state-specific code or copy-paste an existing state law. Justice Desai was part of the Uttarakhand and Gujarat committees as well. So far, since its formation, the Maharashtra panel has had no public consultation. Dare we expect the state will make the process transparent—who is invited, what submissions are received and whether dissenting views actually influence the final recommendations?



Conceived as a form of resistance, the 145-year-old Marbat-Badgya tradition continues in Nagpur

The missing ‘Feku’

Nagpur’s Marbat festival has a 145-year-old history of speaking truth to power. It was conceived as a Raj-era form of resistance, a kind of civic safety valve where people take out a procession of ‘Marbat’ (symbolising a goddess that soaks up evil) and ‘Badgya’ (the shape of evil itself, typically a man), in a ritual of naming, mocking and consigning to flames the evils of their time. If it was foreign rule back in the days of the Raj and social ills always, it is

now inflation, unemployment, civic distress and political arrogance. Its power lies in its irreverence. In the lanes of the old city, amid drums, chants and crowds, no leader is above reproach and ridicule.

The festival is a barometer of the popular mood. So the reported last-minute disappearance of a ‘Feku’ *Badgya* and the BJP-ruled Nagpur Municipal Corporation’s Rs 2 crore attempt to recast the festival as a global cultural showcase is being seen as an attempt to desecrate its soul. Political patronage for a folk festival that traditionally challenged power is a mockery of its core idea.

While other *Badgyas* attacked unemployment, paper leaks, smart meters, drugs and civic problems, a ‘Feku’ *Badgya*—an obvious reference to Youknowwho—was dropped at the last moment under pressure from local BJP leaders, and replaced by one targeting Pakistan prime minister Shehbaz Sharif.

The Bapat effect

Tens of Ganesha Mandals across Maharashtra have voluntarily given up DJs and high-decibel sound systems as the ten-day celebrations got off to a colourful start on 14 September.

Nagpur’s other unique symbol of resistance—the radical Chandrashekhar Azad Ganesh Mandal, set up seven decades ago by the late freedom fighter Gulab Puri and now headed by his son Chandrashekhar Puri—made up for the *Marbat* miss. Austere in form and sharp in tone, this year’s Ganesha pandal decoration is on the Jantar Mantar protests, the sugar price spike and the ethanol controversy, inflation and unemployment, privatisation of education and other such concerns that big media has no bandwidth for. It does not spare the prime minister either. Ganesha-bhaktis are loving it. ■



Maratha-quota warrior Manoj Jarange-Patil

The Fadnavis government has bought peace with Jarange, but will it keep its word?



A different kind of politics?

K.A. Shaji

Retired teacher K.K. Surendran did not go to Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan for a favour. After 23 years of fighting the State, he went to say: “Please don’t appeal against me anymore.”

In 2003, Surendran, a former lecturer with the District Institute of Education and Training in Sulthan Batheri, Wayanad, was arrested after the historic Muthanga tribal agitation. The tribals, alienated from their land and resources for years, were on a long protest for their legitimate rights. As a concerned citizen, Surendran had extended his moral support. He was accused of collusion with the agitators, charged of violence and sabotage.

The criminal case eventually collapsed, and a CBI investigation exonerated him. But Surendran began another long battle: compensation for brutal custodial torture. In 2021, a lower court awarded him Rs 5 lakh, but the then Pinarayi Vijayan-led LDF government argued that releasing the compensation would affect police morale.

In March 2026, an appellate court bumped up the amount to Rs 12.5 lakh with interest and directed recovery from the police officers responsible. The LDF government decided to appeal and the process was delayed only because of the assembly election.

Encouraged by friends after the UDF returned to power, Surendran met Satheesan on 9 July. Instead of denying his request, the chief minister assured him that the compensation would come through, soonest.

According to political observer Damodar Prasad, this is a small episode, but it tells us more about Satheesan’s style of governance than any policy document.

“There is an important political statement here,” says writer and political observer Prof. M.N. Karassery. “The Muthanga police



At 3 p.m. on days Satheesan is in the state capital, the CMO becomes a place where power meets the people

action took place under the UDF government. Satheesan was not simply correcting a wrong committed by his political opponents. He was accepting responsibility. That is a different kind of politics.”

As the Satheesan government completes four months in the saddle, the difference is palpable in Thiruvananthapuram.

The secretariat is open in a way it hasn’t been for the past 10 years of Pinarayi Vijayan’s rule. The Chief Minister’s Office (CMO) has created time slots for citizens to meet Satheesan; seniors and persons with disabilities are prioritised. When the CM is away, the grievance cell remains open.

“Satheesan may not have instant solutions for all the people approaching him at the secretariat,” says Sojan James, a lawyer with Kerala High Court, and a native of Irinjalakuda in central Kerala. “But at least people feel that

the government is there to listen, to treat them with respect and stand with them.”

Kerala had become accustomed to an ever-tightening circle of security and an ever-expanding distance from the chief minister (be it under LDF or UDF). Satheesan’s decision to reduce the scale of his convoy and security arrangements goes beyond logistics: the barriers are lower and the chief minister seems determined to remain within reach. There have been repeated accounts of Satheesan stopping his vehicle when approached with petitions. The image is almost deliberately old-fashioned: a chief minister getting off his car, walking towards the people and taking a memorandum rather than allowing the convoy to whisk him away.

It matters, says V.K. Shyni, a postgraduate who passed the Public Service Commission exam but didn’t get a posting for years. She was part of a protest raising

V.D. Satheesan has made the CMO accessible, prioritising the old and infirm

concerns over the expiry of a rankers’ list when, to her disbelief, Satheesan stopped the convoy and reached out.

Cliff House, the chief minister’s official residence, was a fortress during the Pinarayi Vijayan years. When moving in, Satheesan instructed officials: no expensive renovations or lavish makeovers, only essential repairs. And Cliff House became an ‘open house’.

Senior journalist Sunnykutty Abraham says, “There is a change in the way the chief minister relates to media. Satheesan faces journalists after cabinet meetings, not once in a while—every week, as a routine.” At press briefings, Satheesan takes questions about Cabinet decisions, controversies, appointments, finances, political disputes. He argues, and sometimes, he is visibly irritated. But he doesn’t run away.

“This ritual has significance in a state where political communication was tightly controlled over the last decade. Satheesan is the only chief minister in India to do this. He is following the ‘Kerala model’ adopted by E.M.S. Namboodiripad, K. Karunakaran, C. Achutha Menon, E.K. Nayanar, V.S. Achuthanandan, A.K. Antony and Oommen Chandy but discontinued under Vijayan,” says Sunnykutty.

Pinarayi projected authority (with totalitarian symptoms); Satheesan projects actionable access. One said: I’m doing it my way. The other says: Let’s decide our path together.

This distinction is clearest in the handling of policies inherited from the previous government. SilverLine is the most obvious example. For thousands of families, the yellow survey stones had become symbols of fear and uncertainty, in courtyards, near kitchens, beside wells and across agricultural land.

The resistance to SilverLine became one of Kerala’s most sustained popular movements. The Satheesan government cancelled the project, scrapped land acquisition and ordered the removal of the yellow stones. It also moved towards withdrawing criminal cases against protesters.

At the same time, Satheesan has refused to accept the opposite proposition that every large infrastructure project must be rejected because the previous government proposed it.

E. Sreedharan’s new high-speed

rail corridor was not blindly onboarded as an alternative to SilverLine. The government appointed a four-member expert committee with expertise in railways, finance and environment to examine viability, implications, challenges and benefits. The committee found the proposal incomplete, citing the absence of adequate environmental and social impact assessments, realistic passenger projections, land availability and financial viability. The government put the proposal on hold pending further study.

Recently, Chief Minister Satheesan took his entire Cabinet to IIM Kozhikode for a strategic workshop on AI, climate resilience, disaster management and fiscal reform. Ministers going back to school sent out an important message: a government does not know everything simply because it governs. This willingness to learn and the humane face of governance are resonating with people.

Take six-year-old Ruvani from Vizhinjam. She made a video appeal for a house that wouldn’t leak during the rains the way her current home did. Her appeal reached Satheesan, who contacted her mother and assured the family that a house would be provided.

Or Seethalakshmi Ammal, affectionately known as Ammalu Amma. She met Satheesan during the 2018 floods, when he was the Paravur MLA involved in relief work. Years later, she travelled to Thiruvananthapuram for his swearing-in ceremony, carrying an old photograph. When asked what Satheesan meant to her, she did not say he was like a son, she said he was her son. Satheesan recognised her, embraced her and brought her up on stage.

Palakkad entrepreneur Joshy Thomas had spent nearly a year trying to obtain documents required for his business. His grievance reached the CMO through a comment on a local newspaper’s Facebook page. The documents were reportedly delivered in a day.

Satheesan’s government will eventually have to demonstrate that its early strengths of openness, willingness and people-friendliness translate into administrative efficiency, fiscal prudence and better public services.

Sometimes change is signalled in smaller ways. Reducing the distance between the citizen and the State is one such. ■

The long road home

Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu are caught between two uncertainties, writes **K.A. Shaji**

K Mahendran was barely 11 when his family fled war-torn Sri Lanka. When assailants came looking for boys above the age of 10, he and his brother hid between the roof and false ceiling of their home in Mannar, a Tamil-majority town. The family escaped to the coastal fishing village of Pesalai, where they waited 15 days before crossing the Palk Strait on 22 July 1990. At Dhanuskodi, his father carried the children ashore, wading through waist-deep water. Thirty-six years later, Mahendran, now 47, lives in Pudukkottai in southern Tamil Nadu. His father died seven years after their arrival in India. Mahendran studied at Loyola College in Chennai and now sells furniture on instalments. When asked where his 'native place' is, he still says Ceylon. His two children, however, would say Tamil Nadu. That difference captures the dilemma facing nearly 90,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India. In August 2026, Sri Lanka removed a major legal obstacle to their return. The Sri Lankan cabinet approved special arrangements for refugees who fled during the civil war without valid passports or through unauthorised departure points. Henceforth, those whose Sri Lankan identity is satisfactorily established can return (after security clearance) through authorised clearance without being prosecuted for having left the country via 'irregular' channels. The arrangement covers those who left before 1 August 2006, up until 19 May 2009, when the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. A Sri Lankan government notification made it clear that while those suspected of serious offences can

still face legal action, the rest will be issued temporary passports. In August last year, a 75-year-old Tamil refugee returning from India was arrested at Jaffna airport though no criminal track record was pending against him. For most refugees, being relieved of the fear of prosecution has not eased the fear of returning. After three decades of living in camps across Tamil Nadu, they are unsure of what awaits them in Sri Lanka. "How do they expect us to live?" asks V. Vaithyalingam, an inmate of Mandapam camp near Rameswaram. "How do they expect us to survive there?" Nearly 90,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees are still registered in India, almost all live in 105 government-run camps and another 32,800 outside camps. This is a fraction of

the 304,269 who arrived in Tamil Nadu as refugees from 1983 onwards when the Sinhala majority began targeting the Tamil ethnic minority. The difference in the numbers thousands decades of movement. Refugees repatriated voluntarily or returned independently; others left for third countries; still others died. Many moved out of the formal refugee system. The Union government says 99,469 had been repatriated by March 1995, after which there was no organised programme for many years. For those who stayed, India is no longer simply a temporary refuge. Children were born here, marriages took place, livelihoods were built. The paradox is stark. India has become their home without affording them permanent legal standing. Sri Lanka defines their nationality, but many no longer know what that means. They can live, study and work in India under refugee protection and state welfare, but they do not enjoy the legal rights of citizens. Their status remains tied to refugee registration and permissions governing their stay. Decades of residence do not automatically grant them citizenship. Under the Citizenship Act, those treated as illegal migrants are ordinarily barred from citizenship by registration or naturalisation unless specific exceptions apply. Being born in Tamil Nadu therefore does not automatically resolve the question for many children of refugee families. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, sharpened exclusion by creating a faster naturalisation route for specified persecuted minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, while



If staying on in India means being in legal limbo, going back to Sri Lanka is not straightforward either

leaving Sri Lankan Tamils outside its ambit. The result is a peculiar legal limbo: a Tamil refugee can spend 30-40 years in India, build a livelihood and educate children here while technically remaining a foreigner. Staying can mean a continuation of permanent impermanence; returning could mean going to a country where their homes, livelihoods and social connections may have disappeared. Land is among the first concerns. Some remember abandoned homes; others have lost documents, face property disputes or have no land. After 30 years, isn't starting "life from scratch, worse than a refugee life here?" wonders Mahendran. Successive Sri Lankan governments have offered housing and livelihood assistance, but the latest decision creates no new comprehensive resettlement programme. With productive years spent in

India, returning to Sri Lanka will restart the cycle of uncertainty, especially for those children who have known only Tamil Nadu. Some have married into Indian families; others have children of their own pursuing higher education in India. Only 92 refugees returned in 2025, compared with 203 in 2024, minuscule figures when compared to those who stayed. "There is no evidence that the latest legal change has triggered a rush towards Sri Lanka. That is not necessarily a rejection of the idea of return. It is evidence of how much more complicated return has become," says Manuraj Shanmugasundaram, a lawyer dealing with refugee rehabilitation in Tamil Nadu. The civil war ended in 2009, but residual trauma remains. Returnees must establish their identity and undergo checks. For those who fled amid fear of state forces and militancy, this can be unsettling. Identity and citizenship records may be missing. Which

documents will be accepted? What happens when papers no longer exist? Doubts remain. Sri Lanka has taken an important step by acknowledging that people who fled during wartime should not face prosecution decades later. But it is only the first step. The responsibility cannot lie solely with the refugees. "A dignified return would require secure access to land and housing, functioning documentation systems, employment and livelihood opportunities, education and healthcare. It would require transparent security procedures and sustained support after arrival," says demographer S. Irudayarajan. Mahendran still dreams of 'Ceylon', even as he acknowledges what Tamil Nadu has given his children. After three decades, legal return is a real option. But can it be exercised with dignity intact? That is the larger question. ■

They have built homes and lives in India and raised families, but they have no legal standing

STATES 360° PUNJAB

The arithmetic of appeasement

Herjinder on why the AAP government in Punjab plumps for 68 lakh women over 7.5 lakh employees and pensioners

Election season has a way of turning government employees into the most persuasive lobbyists. It is, after all, the one window in the political calendar when a government cannot afford to say no—or so history has led Punjab's employee unions to believe. Ahead of the 2027 assembly elections, they are marching, striking and petitioning courts to force the release of pending dearness allowance (DA) arrears. This time, however, the Bhagwant Singh Mann government appears to be working off a very different playbook: one built not around 7.5 lakh employees and pensioners, but around 68 lakh women voters. At the heart of the impasse is a litany of unresolved demands. Employee unions want payment of 18 per cent pending DA arrears, restoration of the Old Pension Scheme (OPS), withdrawal of the July 2020 decision by the previous Congress government that imposed central pay scales on all future recruits, and reversal of a letter (dated 15 January 2015) that restricted new employees to basic pay during their three-year probation period. The unions peg the pending DA arrears and related dues at approximately Rs 14,191 crore—a figure the state government does not dispute outright. Their case is simple: with tax collections improving, the state can afford to pay up. It is a demand that carries real political weight. With around 3.5 lakh employees and 4 lakh pensioners behind the agitation, it's large enough to unsettle any incumbent government heading into an election year. The confrontation has now spilled into the courts. The Punjab and Haryana High Court directed the state government to clear the remaining DA dues within a compressed 15-day deadline. Instead



The gamble The state government seems to have the money to woo women voters with direct benefit transfers, but only excuses for not releasing the DA arrears of government employees

of complying, the Mann government moved the Supreme Court, arguing that immediate payment is practically impossible under treasury rules and would disrupt essential public expenditure. That single line of argument—'impossible under treasury rules'—is where the story gets interesting. Even as the government pleads fiscal constraint on one hand, it is simultaneously bankrolling one of the most expensive welfare schemes in Punjab's history on the other. The scheme in question is the Mukh Mantri Mawan Dheeyan Sukh Yojana, also known as the Maa-Beti Samman Yojana—a women-centric direct benefit transfer programme that promises monthly financial support of Rs 1,500 for women from Scheduled Caste households and Rs 1,000 for

women in other eligible categories. The scale is enormous. Registrations have already crossed 68 lakh women, and three instalments have already been transferred directly into the Aadhaar-linked bank accounts of the beneficiaries. Three more are expected before voters head to the polls. All told, the scheme is estimated to cost the state exchequer close to Rs 20,000 crore. There is a second layer to the programme that has drawn its own share of scrutiny. The government has enlisted a large network of women volunteers—Saktar Sakhis—across every assembly constituency, tasked with registering eligible women for the scheme. Each registration earns the volunteer a fixed payment of Rs 200. It is being suggested, though not officially confirmed, that this

registration drive doubles as a means of building a granular database of women voters in each constituency, complete with phone numbers, an asset with obvious value closer to election day. Consider the math. On one hand, a Rs 14,191 crore DA arrears bill owed to 7.5 lakh employees and pensioners, a constituency that—however vocal—is finite and largely fixed in its political loyalties. On the other, a Rs 20,000 crore welfare scheme that reaches nearly ten times as many people, spread

across every household and every constituency in the state, with fresh instalments timed to land before voting begins. Put them side by side and you begin to see why the government is pushing one, and pleading impossibility for the other. Finance Minister Harpal Singh Cheema has publicly maintained that rising revenue collections do not translate into surplus cash, pointing to Punjab's heavy debt-servicing obligations and structural deficits. The state's fiscal position lends some credibility to that claim: the fiscal deficit for the year is pegged at close to Rs 39,971 crore, or about 4.1-4.2 per cent of GSDP, well above recommended consolidation targets. The revenue deficit alone is almost Rs 21,955 crore. Punjab's outstanding public debt has already

crossed Rs 4.13 lakh crore and is projected to touch nearly Rs 4.47 lakh crore, pushing the debt-to-GSDP ratio to roughly 45 per cent, among the highest of any major Indian state. Over 90 per cent of revenue receipts are already locked into committed expenditure: salaries, pensions, power subsidies and interest payments. In other words, the treasury genuinely may not have room for both. And when a government with limited fiscal headroom has to choose between pay-outs to 68 lakh women voters against 7.5 lakh employees and pensioners, the choice starts to look less like a matter of affordability and more like a matter of calculated benefit. The government insists it has not abandoned its employees altogether. It points out that DA has already been raised by 14 percentage points in stages since late 2021, taking it to 42 per cent, and that over Rs 4,500 crore in arrears has been disbursed through monthly instalments. Officials also argue that Punjab's pay structure is already more generous than the Centre's: a state government clerk drawing 42 per cent DA takes home more than a central government counterpart on 60 per cent DA, making a straight matching of central DA rates financially unviable. Reviving the Old Pension Scheme or clearing DA arrears in full would buy peace with a committed but numerically limited electorate. Sustaining the Mawan Dhiyan Saktar Yojana, on the other hand, reaches a female electorate nearly ten times larger, delivers cash directly into their accounts on a schedule that conveniently peaks before polling day and, through its registration drive, potentially hands the ruling party a fresh voter database to work with. The political logic underpinning the government's position couldn't be clearer. ■

How does the fiscal constraint plea square with the rollout of an expensive pre-poll DBT scheme?



A CHILD'S PIN CODE SHOULD NEVER DECIDE WHO GETS TO BUILD THE FUTURE

With KEO, a homegrown open-source AI computer, Karnataka sets out to carry advanced computing past Bengaluru's city limits and into 239 taluks, 31 districts and the classrooms in between.

Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar launched the KEO AI PC 2026 in Bengaluru, an affordable, open-source, artificial-intelligence-ready desktop computer developed through KEONICS in collaboration with the Department of Electronics, IT and Biotechnology, semiconductor industry partners, technology startups and AI-focused system integrators.

The ceremony, held on a Friday last month, brought together government, industry and educators around a machine built for the parts of Karnataka technology has reached last — one meant to expand computing access for students, particularly those in rural government schools.

KEO stands for Knowledge-driven, Economical and Open-source, an acronym that doubles as a statement of intent. The platform was built around the idea that advanced computing should be available not only to those who own high-end devices and enjoy reliable connectivity, but to people across geographies and income levels — students, farmers, small businesses, entrepreneurs and institutions alike, including those living far from major technology centres or working with limited internet access.

The framing names a specific problem. In much of Karnataka the barrier is arithmetic: a machine costs more than a household can spare, and most AI tools assume a broadband connection many taluks lack. KEO addresses both at once, so that access to artificial intelligence stops being settled by address and income.

The device itself was unveiled some months earlier; Friday's ceremony marked Phase 1 of its rollout, carrying KEO out of demonstration and into classrooms and hostels across the state.

From Electronic City to open silicon

Tracing Karnataka's technological journey, Shivakumar credited former Chief Ministers Devaraj Urs and S.M. Krishna with laying the foundation for the state's growth. Urs, he recalled, envisioned Electronic City, which KEONICS developed in 1978, while Krishna strengthened the state's technology infrastructure. "Devaraj Urs and S.M. Krishna laid the foundation for an entire generation of innovation," he said. "Karnataka did not merely adopt technology. We created our own path to become India's Silicon Valley."

Describing KEONICS as the backbone of Karnataka's electronics and semiconductor development, the Chief Minister said KEO demonstrated the state's ability to design, develop and deliver world-class technology locally.

He praised IT and BT Minister Priyank Kharge, KEONICS Chairman Sharath Bachchegowda and everyone involved in developing the computer.

Inside a machine built to work offline

KEO brings together an open-source RISC-V processor architecture, open-source hardware and software, and on-device artificial intelligence in a compact desktop platform. Its defining piece of engineering is a dedicated on-device AI accelerator, which allows AI



Photo: GettyImages

applications, coding suites, machine learning modules and digital learning tools to run locally rather than in the cloud.

That makes the device particularly relevant for communities and institutions operating in areas where connectivity is inconsistent — a classroom does not need a broadband line, or high-end hardware, for the machine to do its work.

The choice of an open architecture is equally deliberate. As the platform runs on open hardware and software, the tools that support AI literacy and Karnataka's education ecosystem can be studied, adapted and extended by the people using them, rather than merely consumed.

RISC-V is an open instruction set architecture — the layer at which a processor's basic vocabulary is defined. Unlike the proprietary architectures that dominate consumer computing, it carries no licensing fee and no single owner, which allows a state, an institution or a startup to design around it without seeking permission.

For a government building at scale, that changes the economics of every unit produced. For a student sitting in front of the machine, it means the computer on the desk is, in principle, inspectable all the way down to the silicon — a teaching instrument as much as a tool.

Running models on the device rather than in a data centre has consequences beyond connectivity as well. A classroom in a taluk headquarters is not competing for bandwidth with the rest of the country, a lesson does not stall when the line drops, and the recurring costs that usually accompany cloud services do not follow the school year after year.

An inclusion device, not a luxury device

Kharge described KEO as the world's most affordable AI PC and said Karnataka was the first state to address computing challenges at the grassroots. The device carries the tagline "Compact Intelligence and Infinite Possibilities"

and is intended to support students, creators, innovators and inventors.

KEO is Karnataka's practical answer to the digital divide. It reflects the state's commitment to inclusive innovation and accessible computing. It is not a luxury device, but an inclusion device. Affordable mass computing will allow every student, every small business and every household to participate fully in the digital economy. - Priyank Kharge, Minister for Home, Information Technology and Biotechnology

"The aim is not merely to distribute computers but to distribute capability, allowing children to learn, create and participate in an AI-driven economy," Kharge said.

He credited Chetan Som of XLE with helping conceive the affordable AI PC after being challenged to develop an economical, open-source device for Karnataka. He also acknowledged Sharath Bachchegowda's engineering-led efforts, the Oplus team's contribution to the device's design and execution, and the Sikhshana Foundation's commitment to deploying the initiative across centres and hostels.

Notably, Kharge said the programme was entirely supported through corporate cooperation, without government funding. He urged companies, think tanks and individuals to back the Chief Minister's vision for an inclusive AI economy and Karnataka's ambition to gain an early advantage in artificial intelligence.

A programme of this size delivered without a budgetary allocation is a claim about method as much as about money. It positions KEO as a public platform assembled out of private capability: the state supplying the mandate, the institutional reach and the last mile into schools and hostels, and companies, startups and non-profits supplying the engineering, the industrial design and the deployment.

As part of the launch, the government said 3,000 KEO devices will be rolled out in all. Of these, 1,000 will initially go to government schools, while around 2,000 have already been

placed across rural libraries, educational institutions and community spaces.

The distribution pattern is as telling as the total. By placing eight machines in each of two Model Arivu Kendras in every one of the state's 239 taluks, the first phase spreads deliberately thin and wide rather than concentrating resources in a handful of showcase institutions: no taluk waits for a second phase to see the device.

The 310 units going to 31 Model Residential Schools, ten apiece, follow the same logic at the district level, reaching students who live where they study and who therefore have the machines available beyond school hours.

The government aims to extend the facility to every government school in the state, and plans to scale up deployments significantly in the coming months — taking KEO into more schools, institutions, businesses, households and citizen-facing environments across Karnataka.

The launch also carried the announcement of KEO Lite and KEO Pro, expanding the portfolio to address different computing requirements and user segments.

A wider chorus

Echoing the day's sentiments in a detailed statement on LinkedIn, N.S. Boseraju, former Minister for Minor Irrigation and Science & Technology, hailed the launch as a transformative step towards making Karnataka's technological progress more inclusive, accessible and future-ready.

The open-source RISC-V architecture, he wrote, marks an important milestone in democratising access to emerging technologies and creating new opportunities for learning, innovation and digital empowerment — ensuring that geography or connectivity does not determine who gets to participate in the technology revolution.

"This is more than a technology initiative," Boseraju said. "It is an investment in Karnataka's young minds, innovation ecosystem and inclusive digital future." Expressing appreciation for the Chief Minister's visionary leadership and his commitment to taking the benefits of innovation to every corner of the state, he added: "Together, we are building a generation that is not merely prepared for the AI era, but empowered to shape it."

Rahul Gandhi, the Congress leader and Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, also appreciated the initiative, describing it as beneficial to students, particularly those in rural areas, and praising the government's forward-looking programme.

The road ahead

Shivakumar appealed to industry partners and CSR organisations to help take KEO to every government school by directing funds towards rural education and student development. "When technology serves people instead of profit, the entire society progresses," he said.

The Chief Minister said KEO would evolve alongside advances in processors and AI models, and that Karnataka's students must not merely witness the growth of artificial intelligence but learn with it, use it and build with it.

"Today they are students," he said. "Tomorrow, they will be innovators, entrepreneurs, scientists and leaders who will shape not only Karnataka but the world."

Something of that continuity was visible in the hall itself. Among the guests and technocrats seated for the ceremony were the engineers who had built the machine, crowding together for photographs beside the device they had spent months designing — a reminder that KEO has authors, most of them working within a few kilometres of where it was unveiled.

That is, finally, the argument the state is making with KEO. Karnataka has spent nearly five decades building the institutions, the industrial base and the talent that made the machine possible, beginning with a piece of land in 1978 that became Electronic City.

The test of the next phase is whether the same state can carry the results of that work to a Class VIII student in a taluk that has never seen a data centre — and whether, having been given the tools, that student turns out to be a user of artificial intelligence or an author of it.

The launch was attended by Ministers K.H. Muniyappa, Eshwar Khandre and Priyank M. Kharge; KEONICS Chairman and MLA Sharath Bachchegowda; Principal Secretary of the IT&BT Department Dr. Manjula N.; and industry leaders Kris Gopalakrishnan and Prashanth Prakash, along with other dignitaries.

KEO — Knowledge-driven, Economical and Open-source. Developed by KEONICS with the Department of Electronics, IT and Biotechnology, Government of Karnataka, in collaboration with semiconductor companies, technology partners and startups.

A programme of this size delivered without a budgetary allocation is a claim about method as much as about money. It positions KEO as a public platform assembled out of private capability: the state supplying the mandate, the institutional reach and the last mile into schools and hostels, and companies, startups and non-profits supplying the engineering, the industrial design and the deployment.

Not merely launching a device

Today, we are not merely launching a device. We are setting a dream in motion — a dream in which every child in Karnataka, from remote villages to urban centres, can learn and help shape the future of AI. - D.K. Shivakumar, Chief Minister of Karnataka, at the launch ceremony on Friday, 21 August 2026

Speaking at the launch ceremony, the Chief Minister said technology in government schools was not a luxury but a foundation for equality, opportunity and growth.

"A child's pin code should never determine access to technology and opportunity," he said, adding that a rural student using KEO today could become



Photo: Gettyimages (for representation)

tomorrow's innovator, entrepreneur or problem-solver. The vision behind the initiative, he said, is to ensure "that

Karnataka's leadership in technology translates into opportunities for every student and every citizen across the state."

That leadership, he argued, translates into something tangible only when it travels. "KEO represents Karnataka's vision of taking technology beyond innovation hubs and into the hands of people," Shivakumar said. "We have built a strong ecosystem in semiconductors, electronics, deep technology and artificial intelligence, and the next step is to ensure that these capabilities translate into real benefits for our citizens."

KEO is a Made-in-Karnataka platform that brings AI-ready computing closer to students, entrepreneurs, farmers, small businesses and institutions, including those in areas where connectivity may be limited."

Let this warning not go in vain

The flood disaster of 26 August was not the first nor the last. **Shekhar Pathak** tells us, yet again, what we must learn from it

The stretch of the Himalaya along the Tibet-Nepal border where the 26 August disaster originated is exceptionally fragile. Only last year, on 8 July 2025, a flood here killed 18 people. It destroyed the Nepal-Tibet Road, the check post at Rasuwagadhi, bridges, hydropower projects and transmission lines. There is no official account of what happened on the Tibetan side that year, though an advance warning did come from China.

This time no such warning was possible. Perhaps no one expected such an event on a clear, rainless day. It happened so quickly that the information system could not respond in time. Yet the very next day, China informed Nepal that landslides had created two lakes on two tributaries of the Bhote Koshi, the Tushchen and Purepu, and advised Nepal to stay alert. There must also have been loss of life and great destruction of property in Tibet, though official information is still awaited.

Eleven years earlier, on 25 April 2015, Nepal was struck by a magnitude 7.8 earthquake, the country's biggest since 1934. More than 9,000 people were killed and over 22,000 injured across Nepal, India, China and Bangladesh. It also triggered an avalanche in Mt. Langtang's south face burying 300 people in village Bhangtang.

As of 7 September, 1,400 lives have been lost this time—1,357 in Nepal and 43 in Tibet. The destruction of property—offices, schools, roads, bridges, hydropower and solar-energy projects besides homes, shops, hotels, restaurants and cottage industry units as also community assets like temples, chortens, watermills and panchayat buildings—has been enormous. Nepal's finance minister has estimated the losses at \$4.5 billion.

More than 1,600 people from 32 countries, including 300 Indians, were reportedly still missing at the time of writing—over a thousand in Nepal and about 600 in Tibet. Human bodies were later seen floating in the Gandak in India. These numbers will inevitably swell as more information comes in. Most of those killed or uprooted were farmers, livestock-rearers and owners of small businesses. There were also many pilgrims and tourists in the region as thousands use this route every year to go to Kailas-Mansarovar and other pilgrimage sites. Animals and wildlife were also killed, and what happened to the fish is beyond our imagining.

The disaster would have caused less devastation had the development model in Tibet and Nepal been shaped by studies of the region's geology, seismicity, geography and flood history. Governments refuse to learn or try to be too clever, and engineering does not adapt in step with a changing environment.

Within minutes, the flood destroyed 12 hydropower projects—eight operational, four under construction—besides 41 bridges, transmission lines, power substations, heavy machinery, bulldozers, trucks... A successful 25 MW solar project at Nuwakot was buried under debris. More than 100 kilometres of highway was destroyed.

At the Trishuli hydropower project and in other tunnels, 917 workers, including 70 Indians, were left suspended between life and death. It is estimated that the river



Gone in a flash A man takes in the aftermath of floods at Trishuli in Nuwakot district, Nepal

Photo: Getty Images

What is really needed is a broad dialogue among all Himalayan countries

carried 100-200 million cubic metres of debris, mud, silt, trees, other material and machinery at a flow speed of 193 kmph!

Nepal must, of course, reflect on how to deal with the consequences of this disaster, what lessons to draw from it and what precautions to take in future. But what is really needed now is a broad dialogue among all Himalayan countries—Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and China.

We share mountains and rivers, and challenges too—like pollution, earthquakes, glacial lake outbursts that can generate catastrophic floods and other disasters driven by climate change, which will only increase in the future.

Nepal must open a dialogue with India and China because we share rivers, but the scope of these discussions must be the entire Himalaya. Nepal must also present its concerns forcefully at climate summits and environmental conferences, international forums and the United Nations.

The disaster also gives Nepal's political, social, community, cultural and religious leaders an opportunity to think of developing a safer model of development for their country. The youth, in particular, must think deeply about this.

Projects designed for entirely different environments should not

once again be imposed on Nepal or other Himalayan regions. Sustainable agriculture, cottage industry, pastoralism and seasonal migration should sit at the heart of the planning for pilgrimage, tourism and energy production.

The ideas 'Small is Beautiful' and 'Gross National Happiness' (GNH) are particularly relevant to mountains and ecologically fragile regions. If not in their entirety, they should be followed as far as possible. Engineering and technology should be used to solve the problems of the mountains, not to challenge the mountains.

The Himalaya is still forming and rising. Earthquakes, landslides, avalanches, retreating glaciers, snowstorms, floods and forest fires are all part of its nature. Human beings have not achieved even partial mastery over these processes. What they can do is look for ways to protect life and property.

In a monsoon-driven ecosystem, floods have many meanings. They can alter landforms. Floods are no doubt shaped by rainfall and the hydrological cycle, but also by the condition of the watershed, the severity of rainfall, vegetation cover, slope, seismicity and groundwater levels. Manmade structures and human interventions in a river's channel and floodplain—dams, barrages, uncontrolled mining, deforestation, weakened watersheds, encroachment on riverbanks—can make a river more aggressive. As indeed can climate change.

Communities that live by rivers watch their behaviour—the amount of water they carry, changes in colour and other signs. People traditionally avoided encroaching on the riverbed or floodplain. There was a time when small floods were awaited in the plains because they brought rich, fertile soil. In the mountains, floods create *seras* (the fertile flatland/s) along river valleys. Similarly, people of the high Himalaya understand the moods of glaciers and avalanches.

When we flout unwritten rules and traditions followed for generations, when greed or even necessity leads to dangerous encroachments, the community leadership must step in to remind people not to cross the 'Lakshman Rekha'. Children must be raised with

this awareness; it must be woven into education.

The Hindu Kush-Himalayan region has another serious problem: only about five per cent of its land is cultivable. Most of the fertile land lies in river valleys; the rest is on terraced slopes. This is also the land held in individual ownership. Pressure on such scarce land has repeatedly led to encroachment, and people have repeatedly paid the price.

In recent decades, the encroachment on this land, on its forests and water, on the wilderness and biodiversity, has come in the name of 'development'.

Development is necessary, but the current models violate Himalayan ecology. Modern engineering is useful in many situations, but the Himalaya needs a model that takes into account that it is a young and fragile mountain system, sitting atop a maze of geological faults vulnerable to earthquakes, landslides and avalanches.

Many parts of Nepal and Uttarakhand are regarded by geologists and seismologists as 'seismic gap areas'. Seismic gaps are regions where no major earthquake has occurred for centuries. Geological energy remains trapped and accumulates, and one day it may produce a massive earthquake. Many of these areas lie around the Main Central Thrust, or MCT, regarded as one of the most active fault systems of the Himalaya.

Tibet and the Himalaya—or, more broadly, the Indian subcontinent—are divided into many geological, climatic, ecological and agricultural zones. Rivers behave differently in different regions. In the high Himalaya, many valleys are narrow and steep-sided. When snow and rock break loose and tumble down, they may block a river for some time. When the resulting lake bursts, it can wreak havoc downstream. By now, everyone knows this.

We also need to understand the difference between old foundational ice or permafrost and fresh snow. In the high Himalaya and mountain passes, fresh snow settles over older ice. Water searches out a channel

and flows away. When rising temperatures cause rain instead of hail or snow at high elevations, the destructive power of water multiplies many times.

Recall 16-17 June 2013, when heavy rain fell in Kedarnath. Rain probably fell over Chorabari Tal as well, where a large dam of moraine and natural boulders broke. The lake was small, but the rainfall was immense (400 mm in 24 hours). Despite the relatively broad terrain around Kedarnath, a large part of the town was swept away.

The destruction was even greater at Rambara and Gaurikund, where the Mandakini runs through a narrow valley. Downstream, muck and debris from barrages and tunnels amplified the disaster. But it must be remembered that the prime driver of the devastation was roughly 400 mm of rain in 24 hours.

As the Earth warms and snowfall in the high Himalaya declines, small glacial ponds can begin to expand. Sometimes they merge and become tremendous. That is what happened in Sikkim on 3-4 October 2023 when the lake at the South Lhonak Glacier burst into the Teesta. Along with the loss of lives and property, the Teesta III dam—a project that cost about Rs 14,000 crore and was expected to generate 1,200 MW of electricity—was destroyed.

This was clearly a GLOF (glacial lake outburst flood) event. The existence of the lake was known, but the danger it posed was not properly understood. Nor were the warnings of the local Lepcha community taken seriously. The Lepchas knew the Teesta's long history of floods.

With rising temperatures, the amount of meltwater released from ice can become 1.6 times greater than the normal discharge from a glacier. The risk from GLOFs is becoming unavoidable and will only increase across the Himalaya. A five-year assessment by 200 scientists has warned that, unless greenhouse-gas emissions are brought under control, the Himalaya could lose 66 per cent of its ice by 2100. It is a frightening projection.

Consider the Beas and Parvati rivers in Himachal Pradesh. The Beas rises from the glacial lake Beas Kund near Rohtang Pass, while the Parvati rises from the Mantalai Glacier near Pin-Parvati Pass. The two meet in Kullu. Over the past few decades, there has been extensive encroachment within their watersheds and along their banks. The September 1995 flood in the Beas caused heavy loss of life and property. In 1996, judicial intervention in the *M.C. Mehta vs.*

The Himalaya is still forming and rising. It needs a model of development that factors this in

Kamal Nath case put a brake on such encroachment. A major factor behind flooding in these two rivers was the dumping of muck and debris generated by highway construction along the riverbanks, other construction works and the large tunnel below Rohtang Pass. Construction within the watershed, erosion and climate change were additional factors.

On 1 August 2024, the failure of the Malana dam on the Parvati added to the destruction. From 2022 to 2025, this valley suffered disasters for four consecutive years, with immense loss of life and property. But these weren't all GLOF events.

Scientists have repeatedly warned that warming in the Himalaya is roughly twice the global average. This makes the region more vulnerable to avalanches, landslides and floods. The United Nations said in 2023 that the Nepal Himalaya had already lost a third of its ice reserves. It is also important to remember that Nepal has more than 2,000 glacial lakes, of which 21 have been classified as extremely dangerous.

The Himalayan countries and provinces face three broad categories of danger. The first is ecological, the second disaster-related and the third driven by climate change. They are interconnected and have several dimensions. Any ecological damage multiplies the destructive impact of disasters, while both are increasingly driven by climate change.

In Nepal's case, it can be said that the country's own carbon emissions are extremely low—barely 0.1 per cent of global emissions—yet it is paying the price for black carbon and brown dust released into the atmosphere by its neighbours on the Indian subcontinent. These pollutants have contributed to rising temperatures in the Himalaya. Haze is now appearing even over Nepal's mountains.

An honest dialogue, coordination and understanding are essential among Himalayan countries, and between them and global institutions. Regional and national understanding of the Himalaya, as well as research, should be shared. Scientists need to speak to one another, and countries need agreements over shared resources such as rivers. Traditional knowledge and experience relating to disasters and floods should also be exchanged.

It is true that people living in these difficult parts of the Himalaya accept a degree of risk. Mountain communities are not astonished when calamities arrive from causes both understood and unknown. Today, however, climate change has joined geology and geography as an additional source of danger.

Development in the mountains cannot be carried out in the same way as in the plains, plateaus or deserts. Societies take long to forget disasters but governments forget them fast and often learn nothing from them. But when the next disaster comes, it is always ordinary people who are uprooted once again. ■

SHEKHAR PATHAK is a mountain historian, founder of the nonprofit Pahar Foundation and one of the founder-editors of the journal PAHAR that bears the name of the Foundation



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A message for Himachal: Back off!

Avay Shukla makes an urgent case to stop the desecration of ‘Dev Bhoomi’

Only a fool learns from his own mistakes, said Otto von Bismarck, the wise man learns from the mistakes of others. It is now time for policymakers in Himachal (who have so far refused to learn from either their own mistakes or those of Uttarakhand and Kerala/ Wayanad) to imbibe some lessons from the horrendous tragedy in Nepal. The primary lesson is simple: the Himalayas have had enough. Back off!

‘Development’ has gone berserk in Himachal: 12,000 hectares of precious forest land diverted in the last twenty years for various projects, 174 hydel projects sanctioned/commissioned, 5 million trees felled, construction rules relaxed to permit 10-storey buildings, the Shimla Development Plan 2041 approved to deregulate the city’s precious green belts and allow construction even in heritage and core areas, an epidemic of unnecessary four-lane highways crisscrossing the state, scores of tunnels under the fragile mountains, plans to increase tourist footfall from the present 20 million per annum to an unsustainable 50 million. The natural features that held the fragile mountain strata together—trees, glaciers, snowfields, river drainage—are being decimated and destroyed by these activities. No number of warnings or reports from environmentalists and scientists that the mountains simply cannot sustain this level of anthropogenic activities have made the governments (past and present) see sense.

The Himalayas are now pushing back, with increasing intensity. Not-so-natural disasters in just three years (2022-2024) have caused direct financial losses of Rs 13,500 crore to the state and claimed 800 lives; indirect losses to business and livelihoods are much higher. In 2026, the losses have already amounted to Rs 1,400 crore and 200+ dead.

The Himalayas are warming at twice the average global rate. This warming effect is being amplified by local ‘heat islands’ caused by emissions from heavy machinery and labour camps, carbon deposits on ice fields, pollutants from the ever-increasing number of vehicles



The reckless four-laning of highways in the state is nothing short of a death wish. An exhibit from the outskirts of Shimla

intruding into high altitude fragile ecosystems, removal of green cover... The permafrost which holds together the fractured mountain soil is melting. Dumping of muck in the watercourses is reducing their capacity to carry excess water, resulting in regular ‘flash floods’. Too many red lines have been crossed.

The warnings have been many: Kedarnath in 2013, Chamoli in 2021, Sikkim in 2023, Dharali in 2025, and now Nepal. Among the most dangerous impending threats to Himachal is the growing number and size of the glacial lakes in the state, primarily responsible for the disasters above.

In 1990, the state had 107 glacial lakes of noticeable size with a total area of 5.54 sq. km. Now there are 669 lakes over 11.20 sq. km. Some have reached dangerous proportions, like Ghepan in Lahaul which has grown six times to almost 100 hectares. All the major rivers spring from the glaciers above these lakes and the hydel projects on these rivers are extremely vulnerable to GLOFs (glacial lake outburst floods). The very hydrology of these rivers is changing. Any damage to these projects would also endanger the

lakhs of people living in towns and villages below them, as Nepal has so tragically shown.

Himachal is also naturally susceptible to other risks: the state comes under seismic category VI, the highest; it has 20,000 landslide-prone hotspots; and EWEs (extreme weather events) caused by climate change have gone up by 40 per cent in the last few years.

The time for studies and seminars is over. What is needed urgently is decisive action and a drastic change in the model of development the state has been following all these years. The government needs to consider these measures urgently:

- Impose a moratorium on all new hydel projects, and stay those which have been sanctioned but not yet started construction. Scrap the dozens of projects approved/planned for the high-altitude Chenab and Chandrabhaga basin in Lahaul-Spiti, and in Kinnaur and Pangri areas (which the local people have already been protesting against for many years).
- Exhume the 2010 report of the environmental impact of hydel projects by the then additional chief secretary (forests) which

the high court had accepted, only for the then government to oppose it and successive ones to mothball it. Consider its major recommendations: ban hydel projects in high-altitude, alpine, glaciated, forest catchment areas; maintain a minimum distance of 5 km between projects; ensure minimum perennial flow of rivers; develop EIAs (environmental impact assessments), EMPs (environmental management plans) and CAT (catchment area treatment) plans for the entire river basin—not just individual projects—before sanctioning any project on any river. Review all projects in the light of these recommendations, and if they do not conform to them, or pose a threat, decommission them.

- Vigorously oppose the Centre’s proposal for an 8.7 km tunnel below the Pir Panjal range to bring the waters of the Chandrabhaga in Lahaul to the Beas in Kullu. This project would rip out the heart of the Himachal Himalayas and be a disaster of unprecedented proportions. It would destabilise the geology of three districts; generate tens of millions of tonnes of muck which can only clog the rivers, waterways and drainage of these areas; disturb the underground aquifers and affect hundreds of water supply schemes. The additional water added to the Beas would amplify the river’s destructive potential, which already causes havoc in Kullu every year. New Delhi’s diplomatic failures (which triggered this project) should not morph into misery for the state.

- Reconsider the mindless focus on increasing tourist numbers to 50 million per year. The state’s environment cannot support such numbers. The infrastructure needed—roads, buildings, water supply, sewage and garbage disposal—would result in huge damage to the natural environment and cultural identity of the state. Learn from the Bhutan model: limit numbers, improve quality.
- Impose a ban on tourist/real estate/commercial constructions in rural areas, especially on the peripheries of major towns.

Himachal’s cities have been ruined by such constructions, mainly by outsiders who are now despoiling the rural areas, cutting hills, felling trees, congesting rural roads, straining local water availability, polluting the forests and water sources with sewage and garbage, creating noise and light pollution. The areas adjoining Kasauli, Solan, Shimla, Manali, Palampur and Dharamsala bear abundant testimony to this ravaging of the environment. Himachal’s rural areas should not be allowed to go the way of its towns.

- Immediately discontinue and put a halt to the four-laning epidemic, which only benefits politicians, contractors and bureaucrats. They are not needed, they fracture the geology of the areas they pass through, destabilise the slopes, destroy properties, deprive people of livelihoods, encourage even more polluting vehicles to contaminate our pristine ambience. Both the Parwanoo-Shimla and Kiratpur-Manali highways are ongoing (and very expensive) disasters that prove this. Both remain ‘under construction’ after a decade.

The time to act is now. The Himalayas have tolerated our arrogance for centuries, but their patience is now wearing thin. Their warnings are getting more frequent, and more powerful each year. We call Himachal ‘Dev Bhoomi’ but ravage and pillage it shamelessly for votes and profit. This must change.

Even the Supreme Court warned the state government some months ago to be more sensitive to the environment or the state would ‘disappear from the map’ of India. We are proving right the words of Hubert Reeves, a French astro-physicist and environmentalist: ‘Man is the most insane species. He worships an invisible god and destroys a visible nature. Unaware that this nature he is destroying is the god he is worshipping.’

Respect nature. That is the true worship of god. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

Bengal receives a lesson in the right (way) to pray

Chandril Bhattacharya

Of course the lion has to be replaced. You cannot have Durga ride a fierce carnivore and ask worshippers to be strict herbivores. And why should Ma Durga, a pure and authentic goddess, ride an animal that devours flesh? Why should she not ride a plunderous pumpkin or an eccentric eggplant? True, some hymns will have to be subtly tweaked, but who understands Sanskrit anyway? If a reddish radish is glorified in a bombastic sloka with imperfect metre, who is going to complain? Yes, the goddess will be unhappy at first; she isn’t used to a ‘vahana’ that won’t respond when she bids it to roll forward or veer leftward, but even she must bow to superior ethics. And if she throws a tantrum, how about a rambunctious rhinoceros? Or perhaps a monumental mammoth? Oh, Ganesha will not like that and the choreography of the divine ensemble will be disturbed, but Durga might have the just-right herbivore to command. That aggressive yet stately jumbo could coil its trunk around Mahishasura, hoist him and fling him and trample him and for good effect sink its tusks into the asura’s villainous breast. Wouldn’t that make a glorious spectacle? And isn’t it time to change the old vahana anyway? Which brings us to the subject of stubborn Bengalis.

Bengalis are a weird tribe. They are so lazy, physically and mentally. Especially mentally. Their cerebrums and cerebellums simply do not admit the idea that everything—even Bengaliness—must change with time. Why must they go on and on with the same old ways of celebration? Why can’t they

see that they have been irresponsible worshippers and non-introspecting revellers? They have elected a new ruling party, and now that the party is trying to energetically implement Bengal 2.0, they are gagging and throwing up. What sort of dumb, disloyal reaction is that? If a race thinks their identity depends on gobbling animal flesh, it must be reined in and gene-edited. So many people are trying to correct the Bengali way—by scolding, trolling, abusing, pontificating, decreeing... yet the Bengali shrugs and continues to chant the same-old mantra: ‘freedom to choose my food’, ‘freedom to express my opinion’! But a good citizen should express opinions certified by the Government, that is the only freedom allowed. Remember, you are blessed with the power of the double engine now, so do not try to be singular and snobbish.

If you are an Indian, and if most Indians have vegetarian food during a period of pious worship, how dare you munch on egg-chicken rolls? That pollutes the prayers, cancels the oblations and the collective curse of dead animals lowers the GDP. The VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad) is so generous, it is not even demanding a blanket ban on ‘non-veg’ during the pujas; it is merely asking that the place of worship should not be sullied with the sight and smell of fried/boiled/mangled animal tissue. Yes, no tandoori prawn within, say, 200 metres of a puja pandal. Another matter that these food stall owners must be clear which pandal they are trying to avoid when there are three in much less than 200 metres of each other, their loudspeakers crisscrossing each other’s songs.

So what must shift? The pandals, the shops or the commandment?

What if the food stall is at a respectful distance, but a customer, delighting in succulent kababs, gets too close to the pandal or the deity? The simple answer may be: do not eat, do not even *think* food; after all, this is a time for piety and purity. Better focus on patriotic petitions to the goddess about India overtaking China or winning over Trump. Time Bengalis thought of the Puja as a cleansing ritual, a time to abjure individual greed. But try convincing a Bengali and you’ll likely get a mouthful of ‘freedom to eat as I please’

*

Why should the pandal decorations have a ‘theme’? When did worship need flights of imagination? To ‘theme’ a puja is to think—somebody must conceive of a theme, others must understand it. But isn’t unthinking obeisance the essence of worship? Why should imagination, interpretation, analysis interfere with spiritual surrender? How about an all-white Durga Puja this year, untainted by the sensuousness of colour? What if all pandals were a stark white, with white idols and white lights (and unadorned flute tunes enveloping it all) to give the puja the right aura of purity? But Bengalis would grumble and compete to come up with new and innovative themes. They want to outdo each other in reimagining their idols, pandals, lighting and music. They see the puja festival as a showcase of their talent. They want to weave their take on current affairs into puja art. They want to be playful and irreverent. They are impossible!

Why don’t we just say it as it is? That in Bengal, Durga Puja is not primarily a religious festival but an extended picnic that encompasses the joy of meeting friends, of eating

out, of dressing up in new clothes and endless *adda*. It’s a gigantic art exhibition pulsating with creative energy, a carnival over five days. It’s an explosion of sensory delight. That’s the problem! How can puja be about pleasure? The very idea is preposterous. As for the conceit that it’s an art showcase, that’s what museums and galleries are for. What could be more anti-spiritual? All that distracting ‘art’ needs to be scrubbed off, so that the Puja can become what it’s meant to be: clean, austere and sombre.

The stubborn Bengali needs to learn that puja is about self-negation, not hedonism. West Bengal’s greatest festival needs to be rigorously redefined. Bengalis should seriously ponder the question: what is Puja? It should be

Time Bengalis understood that everything must change—even their settled ways of life

Photo: Getty Images



It’s time for Durga to change her ‘vahana’. Even she must bow to superior ethics and keep up with the times

alright to humbly pray to the deity for more money. Or the humiliation of your enemies. Or your brother-in-law. But in a serious tone, not bouncing like a bubbly bunny!

What’s the Puja spirit? A state of mind that lets you grasp that devotion goes hand in hand with frugality, when your being has been cleansed of any desire to buy gold or go on foreign holidays. What’s just deserts for Bengalis who have

ignored (even mocked) this self-evident truth? Ban the festivities, announce a curfew or a lock-down, if you will, and make everybody stay in for those five days. God knows they need the time and isolation for reflection, and they could use the time to memorise all the six stanzas of Vande Mataram. ■

CHANDRIL BHATTACHARYA is a lyricist, poet, essayist and filmmaker from Kolkata

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Mumbai • 20 September 2026 • Pages: 8 • Vol. 5 Issue 45 • ₹20

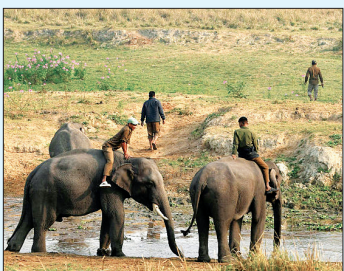
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HIMALAYA

KNOW YOUR MOUNTAIN

The 26 August disaster in Nepal is another wake-up call, writes Shekhar Pathak

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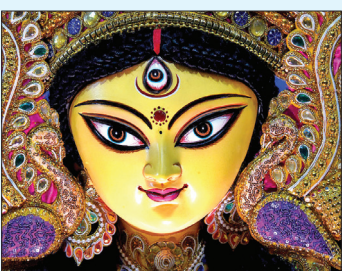


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WILL THE BENGALI EVER LEARN?

The right way to celebrate Durga Puja

► P7



Where India stands after the BRICS dance

Ashok Swain on why non-alignment by another name does not carry conviction

Sensing that geopolitical winds may once again be changing direction, the Modi government executed some nifty U-turns at the New Delhi BRICS summit on 12-13 September. For the nonce, China and Iran seem to have replaced US and Israel as the seasonal flavours of our foreign policy.

Judging by photo-ops featuring Modi, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Masoud Pezeshkian et al, BRICS is still alive and kicking and India and China can be friends with benefits, so to speak. Iran has noted that Modi is keen to mend ties, and even though these words do not appear in the summit joint statement, in his opening remarks, Modi said we are “not against anyone; we try to take everyone along”.

For Modi’s propaganda machinery, this was a validation of his government’s policy of ‘strategic autonomy’ in foreign relations. The posture is: India talks to everyone, joins no camp and maximises its options. But to go whichever way the wind blows is not the same as ‘non-alignment’ even if you call it ‘strategic autonomy’. And while the latest manoeuvres of India’s external affairs establishment may seem adroit, and big media sound gung-ho about the joint statement, the summit has once again exposed that India’s foreign policy is driven by short-term opportunism rather than a clear understanding of India’s long-term national interests.

In any case, strategic autonomy or non-alignment never meant equidistance from competing big powers. Rather it meant retaining the political, economic and military

independence to take decisions in India’s sovereign interests rather than yielding to the demands of a big power. Multi-alignment can be a modern expression of that tradition, but successful multi-alignment requires consistency of objectives even when relationships change.

India’s relations with China in the Modi years are a good illustration.

Six years after the Galwan clash, in which 20 Indian soldiers were killed, the territorial capture by China of over 2,000 sq. km of territory is still unresolved. Significant military deployments continue along the contested Himalayan frontier and China continues to make inroads into Indian territory. Also, China remains Pakistan’s principal military supplier and India’s most formidable security threat. Yet Xi received a red-carpet welcome in Delhi on his first visit to India in seven years. Modi and Xi promised an expansion of business ties, of transportation and people-to-people links and again committed themselves to seeking a mutually acceptable boundary settlement.

Dialogue with China is sensible, no doubt—to not engage with the world’s second-largest economy, also India’s most powerful neighbour, would be foolhardy. But what did India secure in the current rapprochement? What reciprocal concessions did the two sides make?

China’s foreign ministry declared on Monday that Modi had told Xi that India ‘will not allow any force to engage in anti-China activities on its territory’. The asymmetry is striking. Where is the equivalent Chinese assurance that its territory,

military-industrial complex and intelligence capabilities will not be used to strengthen activities that threaten India? Where is Beijing’s commitment to restrain material and military assistance to Pakistan in a confrontation with India?

The reconciliation with Beijing also exposes India’s economic dependence. After years of ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’ sloganeering, India’s reliance on Chinese imports has in fact grown dramatically. The balance of trade is hopelessly askew and imports from China reached \$132 billion in the last financial year.

What’s the reconciliation based on when there is no credible move to settle the border dispute or any assurance from China vis-à-vis Pakistan or a fundamental convergence of geopolitical interests? Other than India’s dependence on Chinese machinery, electronics, components and industrial inputs—which is a compelling reason to make nice with China—what is India able to command in this relationship with its much-vaunted ‘strategic autonomy’? Is the recent lack of joy in trade talks with the Trump administration and the ensuing desperation to find alternatives ‘strategic autonomy’?

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The sudden show of great warmth for Pezeshkian would have been equally befuddling had people not come to expect Modi to put on a show

for the cameras. For much of his time as prime minister, India and Israel have had an interdependent relationship and Modi’s personal ties with Netanyahu have been well known. The two leaders have both made public declarations about their friendship and grown defence and intelligence cooperation between their countries. India has landed on Israel’s side in the genocidal war it has been waging in Palestine, supporting it diplomatically and militarily, a far cry from India’s balanced stand vis-à-vis Israel/Palestine since the creation of the Israeli state in 1948.

Photos: Getty Images



A show for the cameras The New Delhi Declaration at BRICS 2026 was possible because it artfully skirted the questions on which a deal may have faltered

but avoided direct references to the perpetrators of the attacks on civilian and nuclear infrastructure; it criticised tariffs and unilateral sanctions without naming the United States.

That may be good summit diplomacy but it doesn’t constitute a shared geopolitical vision any more than hosting BRICS makes Modi the voice of the Global South. The US and Israel have no doubt taken notes. China and Iran, too, are unlikely to mistake India’s show of warmth for loyalty or even a firm commitment. Beijing understands India’s continuing partnership with Washington and its participation in the Quad. Tehran won’t forget India’s support of aggressor Israel or its decision to soft-pedal economic ties when Trump turned the screws during the war.

Everyone will deal with India because its market is not an inconsiderable attraction. But they will do so transactionally because they know that India’s foreign policy under Modi is not anchored in a geopolitical vision, that ‘strategic autonomy’ is really about what seems expedient in the short term. ■

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

SIR and the presumption of guilt in ‘New India’

You’re Indian when you’re taxed, you’re suspect when you vote

Aakar Patel

Attendance at the hearing is mandatory. Please treat this as urgent and make the necessary arrangements to attend without fail’.

I had meant to ignore the SIR notice which came over WhatsApp and had decided against going. But then my wife went the day before I did. The notice-issuing official seemed upset, she said, that I hadn’t even responded to his WhatsApp message. Noblesse oblige, and all that. And so I appeared before him with my raggedy file of papers to prove that I exist and that I am qualified to elect those we euphemistically call public servants.

The place was overrun with anxious people, as is to be expected in a place where uncertainty and chaos are the norm and where this government has gratuitously injected even more uncertainty.

The tech set is fond of the word ‘disruption’ and use it in a positive sense, but it is actually a violent term. Disruption of whose lives and to what end? That is not considered, at all. The poor and the marginalised have no real say in how their existence is unsettled (disrupted).

Anyway, the official turned out to be a teacher who would be doing

this well into October instead of teaching. He was pleasant, polite, competent, and finished off the process in a few minutes.

This is often the case. I have found that those at the business end of government are like this, even when asked to do things that are absurd. I include many of the officials who have raided our office and been told to book me and so on. It is further up the chain of command that we have malice, incompetence and, in these present times, a certain absurdity.



From pillar to post That’s the story of harried Indians trying to prove they belong

My file of documents is raggedy because of acts of both God and man. More precisely, acts of man who thinks he is God. My birth certificate (Nanavati Hospital, Bombay) and my school leaving certificate (Sir J.J. English School) were washed away in the Surat floods of 2006. Minimum governance had allowed water to accumulate in the dam upstream and maximum governance had released it without warning or preparation, flooding the banks of the city. My parents spent four days on their terrace, alone and

without assistance, losing most of what they had.

What else is there to produce? My passport is with a court, impounded. It occurs to me that the State insists I am Indian when taxing me and filing cases against me, but suspects I am not when it comes to voting. I wonder how my fellow criminals around the country are dealing with this paradox.

Anyway, I still had some documentation—bank statements, property papers etc—and these were accepted. Perhaps they will be

sufficient, perhaps not. We shall find out. It would be more exciting to be struck off the rolls and moved along the line of torture. In Assam, those unable to prove citizenship to the satisfaction of the malevolent State have been jailed in addition to being disenfranchised.

Consider what happens to people who are told one day that their bank accounts, licenses, passports are no longer valid. Then, of course, there are all these deportation stories. I am hoping to be sent to some civilised nation, perhaps in Southeast Asia. I would not mind China either, the rising star of humanity, though in all honesty it is in another South Asian nation that I would really be at home by way of culture and diet.

Knowing my luck, and knowing this government, that will likely not happen. I will be kept here, disenfranchised, but ordered to stand through six stanzas of Vande Mataram.

The ‘mother of democracy’ demands respect and adoration but it is a one-sided relationship. You have to prove you are her child, which is a strange position if you think about it.

The presumption of guilt has been baked into many laws in ‘New India’. It already existed in the laws

on terror and narcotics. In 2015, it was extended to the possession of beef. In 2018, it was extended to the ‘love jihad’ laws. Assam showed us the way to do it when it came to citizenship, and now here we are.

Wasn’t the BJP only some time ago talking of passing a law on compulsory voting? Wonder what happened to that and why the position went from ‘everyone must vote’ to ‘nobody can vote unless they pass this purity test’. To expect consistency of principle from them is the same as to expect humanity or civility.

In an earlier time, I would be deeply upset by both this process and the thought of being deprived of the right to vote. (I used to queue up at the booth at the crack of dawn.) Now I am more relaxed about it, and frankly I don’t care.

I have great affection for the people who comprise this nation; I have little and perhaps none for the rest of what comprises it. The New York city mayor in his magical campaign last year spoke of meeting a constituent for whom all romance around home had vanished. “I used to love New York,” she said to him, “now it’s just where I live.” Precisely. ■

Views are personal

Can Kaziranga survive?

Cutting down the buffer zone around the national park and tiger reserve is bad news, and not just for the animals it is home to, writes **Rashme Sehgal**



Jewel in the crown Kaziranga was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985 and attracts lakhs of tourists every year

Our politicians have the most cannibalistic instincts when it comes to the acquisition of forest land. Why else would the Assam state government want to cut down the Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) around the Kaziranga National Park & Tiger Reserve from ten kilometres to one kilometre? Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma set the cat among the pigeons by announcing that they were just waiting for the final notification from the ministry of environment and forests (MoEF) before going ahead. Shrinking the buffer zone would lift restrictions on local infrastructure and civic projects, including a modern stadium in Bokakhat, a commercial tourism complex and other civic amenities.

Other plans are afoot: three five-star hotels, a convention centre and an elevated corridor. Land at Ingle Pathar in Kaziranga has already

been given on a 99-year lease for a proposed luxury resort tied to Juniper Hotel, allegedly a subsidiary of the Hyatt group. The group is planning a 106-room luxury hotel on a 10 acre plot, to be operational by 2030.

Environmentalists warn that Ingle Pathar is home to nearly 300 elephants. Construction and increased human presence will precipitate animal-human conflict and destroy one of the last inviolate homes for wild elephants in the country.

Over the last three decades, the 1,000 sq. km. park has held out as one of the few remaining citadels of wildlife, where a dedicated team of foresters helped revive endangered species, especially the one-horned rhino. (Kaziranga is home to two-thirds of the world's one-horned rhino population.) Between 1 April 2025 and 28 May 2026, it attracted a record 5.5 lakh tourists. Declared a UNESCO World

Heritage Site in 1985, it became a tiger reserve in 2006, with 148 tigers to begin with.

While the state government maintains that no formal request has yet been made to the ministry, the Supreme Court had already muddled the waters. In its 2023 ruling, it stated that mandatory ESZs should be site-specific, determined by topography, local conditions and wildlife behaviour. This meant even one kilometre of protection was no longer a given.

As a result, several states reduced or dispensed with buffer zones. A preliminary analysis of 109 national parks and sanctuaries by the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy found that 60 national parks had done away with ESZs completely. Animals are increasingly bottled inside demarcated spaces in parks and sanctuaries. Kaziranga seems to be headed in the same direction.

State governments have justified shrinking or eliminating ESZs on

the grounds that it helps improve basic infrastructure and day-to-day activities for villagers living in peripheral areas. For the people on the periphery of Kaziranga, it's another story.

Forty-five Adivasi families at Ingle Pathar claim their agricultural and grazing land has been forcibly acquired. Other evictees say they were paying land tax until revenue officials stopped collections in 2022. Some claim they were offered compensation of Rs 3 lakh per family, which they have so far refused.

Public opinion is divided. Some believe tourists will benefit the area financially. Many, particularly women who are beneficiaries of state welfare schemes, are favourably inclined towards the BJP government. Others are deeply apprehensive, despite possessing permanent 'myadi' patta documents issued when their forefathers were brought in as indentured labourers by the British. Their livelihoods remain tied to the environment and they do not want it destroyed.

"Assam was once known as the

'Country of Golden Gardens'," a leading environmentalist told this reporter. (Garden being a euphemism not only for its tea gardens but also its subtropical forests and extraordinary wildlife.) "This push for development has placed an enormous strain on its natural resources and wildlife habitats. Earlier, vast tracts of the Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve were broken up because of illegal coal mining and forest felling. The mining mafia has now moved to the hills of Karbi Anglong, which form a boundary to Kaziranga."

Several locals believe mining is taking place surreptitiously along the nine vital elephant and tiger corridors leading out of the park. Recent media reports have pointed to the disappearance of the Parbari corridor, a critical wildlife passage connecting the park to the Karbi Anglong hills.

Mubina Akhtar, who heads the Kaziranga Wildlife Society, cannot make sense of the government's plans. The Kaziranga Elevated Corridor Project, inaugurated by Prime Minister Modi on 18 January 2026, involves the diversion of 20.4 hectares of forest land from the core zone of the tiger reserve and nearly 365 hectares from the existing ESZ. It also entails widening the highway that cuts through the park and constructing 21 km of greenfield bypasses around Jakhlabandha and Bokakhat.

"It beats me why the state government did not allot land for hotels in Bokakhat and Jakhlabandha, just 20-30 km from Kaziranga. The park is richly biodiverse. Increasing tourism while reducing its size is obviously going to affect animal life," said Akhtar.

The ESZ is particularly important during the rainy season. During floods, when the Brahmaputra flows south of the park, animals move northwards into the buffer zone. The Dhalamara area of Karbi Anglong becomes their refuge. "This needs to be protected," Akhtar added.

Kaziranga's DFO, Arun Vignesh, defended the elevated corridor, arguing that it would reduce animal deaths from vehicle collisions. A Gauhati University study found that 6,036 animals were killed in just two years (2016-17).

"The number of animals killed by speeding vehicles has come down. Poaching, especially of rhinos, has also gone down with the setting up of 170 camps with armed

forest guards in the park's core areas," said Vignesh.

A senior retired forester offers a sharply different assessment.

"Nothing is being done properly. Kaziranga is mainly a grassland. To maintain the grass, it has to be burnt every year. This is not being done properly and the grassland is shrinking. The entire focus is on building 'infrastructure' from which politicians can make money."

The menace of illegal mining also continues. Conservationist and legal-rights activist Rohit Choudhury filed a petition in 2012 highlighting unregulated quarrying and mining in and around Kaziranga, listing 60 illegal stone quarries. In 2019, the Supreme Court banned mining along Kaziranga's southern boundary and ordered that 'no new construction shall be permitted on private lands which form part of the nine identified animal corridors in the park'.

In 2026, Choudhury petitioned the Supreme Court-appointed central empowered committee, claiming illegal construction was taking place in two wildlife corridors in violation of the 2019 order. Park authorities say the complaint is 'under examination'.

"Mining has resumed on a large scale," Choudhury told this reporter. "Media reports confirm wetlands are drying up and our forests, especially bamboo forests, are fast disappearing. Once the natural habitat of the animals is destroyed, what chance does Kaziranga have?"

Activists speaking out against the sell-out are being harassed and jailed. The arrest of outspoken activist Pranab Doley under the National Security Act created shock waves. More than 60 rights groups, trade unions and civil-society organisations called the move "vindictive and arbitrary" and demanded his release. Several international human-rights and indigenous-rights organisations have written an open letter (dated 18 August 2026), demanding that no hotel project be pursued without the prior consent of indigenous communities living in the region.

The national park has survived poaching, floods, encroachment and mining. Can it now survive this latest threat of unregulated commercial urbanisation that risks destroying the very habitat that makes Kaziranga a shining jewel in India's crown? ■

A study of 109 national parks reveals that 60 of them have done away entirely with ESZs

The merits of 'quarantined engagement'

India, China have broken the ice at BRICS but the real test lies ahead, writes **Ajit Ranade**

The just-concluded BRICS summit in Delhi may not be remembered for a particularly muscular declaration. But to focus on that may miss its import for India. Did BRICS help a thaw in India-China relations?

India's diplomatic achievement was not that it convened the summit—it was anyway the BRICS chair—but that it managed to hammer out a common declaration among countries whose interests frequently collide. Iran and the UAE could sit around the same table despite their tensions; China could sign a statement condemning the Pahalgam terror attack; and members could agree on a dialogue in West Asia despite sharply different alignments. India had managed something similar during its G20 presidency in 2023, when it found consensus language despite bitter divisions over Ukraine.

The Modi-Xi meeting on the sidelines of the summit was more important than the communiqué. Xi was visiting India for the first time in seven years. The two leaders discussed business links, market access, the structural trade imbalance, people-to-people exchanges and the official readouts made careful references to jointly promoting border peace. It would be foolish to call this reconciliation, but it is certainly an opportunity.

India and China are neighbours, together accounting for more than one-third of humanity. Geography cannot be wished away. Nor will their border dispute disappear anytime soon. Deng Xiaoping's famous advice to Rajiv Gandhi in 1988 remains relevant: if our generation lacks the wisdom to solve the boundary question, let us leave it to a wiser future generation.

That does not mean forgetting Galwan, where 20 Indian soldiers

died in 2020. The border has been strongly defended. But the border can stay cold without freezing the entire relationship. Indeed, India and China are already practising compartmentalisation. At the SCO summit in Bishkek, they joined Pakistan, Russia and others in a declaration rejecting double standards in combating terrorism. If such contradictions can be managed inside SCO and BRICS, they can also be managed bilaterally.

The compartments are: border security; trade and investment; technology; rivers and riparian rights; Himalayan ecology; climate change; WTO reform; nuclear non-proliferation; universities, tourism and culture; and selective cooperation on international conflicts.

The economic case for pragmatism is compelling. India's trade deficit with China is around \$112 billion. Yet our dependence is not principally on cheap toys. China supplies vital APIs, electronic components, machinery, solar inputs and processed critical minerals. After Galwan, India tightened Chinese investment and technology access. Yet imports kept rising. The attempt to reduce political exposure did not eliminate economic dependence.

Our withdrawal from RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) at the 2019 ASEAN summit in Bangkok offers a warning. India spent nine years negotiating the agreement but walked out abruptly in 2019, ostensibly over fear of Chinese imports. Those imports came anyway. We could have backloaded by fifteen years the conditions allowed in RCEP. What India may have sacrificed was the more valuable prize: becoming embedded in Asian production networks. Modern trade is not merely about bilateral deficits. It is about where

supply chains, factories and future investment locate.

The relationship may look lopsided but China too needs India. China has formidable economic strengths but some serious vulnerabilities as well. Its population is ageing, its workforce is beginning to shrink, its property sector is struggling, debt is high, domestic consumption remains weak and excess industrial capacity needs external markets. The IMF expects slower medium-term growth as demographics, weaker productivity and declining returns on investment bite.

India offers one of the world's largest and fastest-growing markets, a younger labour force and an alternative destination for Chinese capital facing barriers elsewhere. The appropriate response is not 'keep China out' but 'if you want access to the Indian market, manufacture, employ, source here and export from here'.

Why not begin by reopening



It would be foolish to call the Modi-Xi meeting during BRICS 2026 a reconciliation, but it did open up possibilities, if India can play it right

discussions targeted BYD about an Indian factory? BYD is now one of the world's dominant EV manufacturers. Its Indian ambitions were caught in the post-Galwan investment freeze. Invite it back to the table, but on Indian terms—local manufacturing, Indian employment, supplier development, strict data safeguards and progressively higher domestic value-addition.

Press Note 3 (2020 series), which effectively targeted FDI from China, should evolve from blanket suspicion to risk-based screening. Chinese participation in telecom networks is different from passive Chinese capital financing a highway, warehouse, water project or irrigation system. This is

'quarantined engagement', a pragmatic policy proposal outlined by Nitin Pai, Ajay Shah and this author in September 2025—it says accept capital without management control, exclude sensitive Chinese technology and begin with 'dumb infrastructure'.

Then open some smaller doors quickly.

Make visas for Chinese tourists, business visitors, academics and engineers easier. Restore more direct flights. Create a specially marketed Buddhist circuit—Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar and Nalanda—for Chinese tourists. Revive university partnerships in non-sensitive disciplines. Encourage cinema, sport and cultural exchanges. Two

civilisations representing such a large share of humanity should not interact mainly through soldiers, customs officials and diplomats.

At the same time, India should insist much more forcefully on access to China's vast consumer market. The answer to the trade deficit cannot simply be fewer Chinese imports. It must be more Indian pharmaceuticals, food products, services, entertainment and other goods entering China.

China's extraordinary growth, despite poor Ease of Doing Business rankings and the absence of Western-style democratic institutions, is a reminder that it must be understood as it is, not as theory says it ought to be. India should neither imitate China nor fear it. It should learn, compete and build its own capabilities—in aerospace, defence, semiconductors, critical minerals, pharmaceuticals and AI. Engagement is safest when backed by strength. AI sovereignty and technological capability are ultimately a better insurance than import prohibitions.

Nor should a thaw in ties with China dilute India's ties with America, Europe, Japan or the Quad. India should remain active simultaneously in BRICS, SCO, Quad, G20 and other useful formations. India's future choices cannot be held hostage to any of these relationships. That is 'strategic autonomy'.

China takes over the BRICS presidency in 2027. The next 12 months are a special window.

A thaw does not require friendship, much less trust. It requires reciprocal interest and some imagination. Protect where we must. Compete where we should. Cooperate where we can. And use the time and space created by engagement to become stronger. ■

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



The return of Jarange, the coming of UCC and a ‘Feku’ *Badgya*

Jaideep Hardikar

It seems the prospect of Maratha leader Manoj Jarange-Patil agitating in Mumbai during Ganeshotsav was too big a risk for the Devendra Fadnavis government.

Jarange had begun yet another Maratha-quota fast—his 12th since 2014, for a hundred-odd days cumulatively—in his native Antarwali Sarati in Jalna district of Marathwada. After two weeks in Jalna, he had embarked on a march to Mumbai, where he planned to resume his protest, smack in the middle of the festival.

The Fadnavis government was sweating over the prospect because Mumbai is anyway bursting at the seams this time of year, and law and order is a challenge because of the processions and the festivities, which often need reining in. There is also the looming spectre of heavy retreating monsoon rains.

Add to this Jarange’s famed capacity to mobilise people in his state, and the cocktail was enough to give the state government the heebie-jeebies.

Late on Wednesday, 16 September, Jarange was waylaid by a state government contingent in Beed, en route to Mumbai, where

he was expected on Saturday, 19 September. The government has conceded most of his demands and agreed to keep its promise in 90 days. What it’ll do once the festival ends is anybody’s guess.

Jarange’s protest this time pivots on the state government’s claim that a significant section of Marathas historically shares the same agrarian identity as the Kunbis, who are recognised as an OBC community. A government-appointed committee has reportedly identified 58 lakh historical records relating to the identity of Kunbis, including records from the Nizam-era Hyderabad Gazette in eight Marathwada districts. The government claims it has already issued 3,16,977 Kunbi certificates.

Jarange insists if the government has found the records, it must issue the certificates immediately. Therein lies the rub: a historical entry in a revenue record does not automatically convert into a caste certificate. Each claim must be verified, linked to an applicant’s family and genealogy and the administration must establish who among the 58 lakh records found are eligible people and how their eligibility transfers to descendants. However,

Jarange’s demand seems to make no room for a convoluted archival exercise—he wants entitlement as of yesterday.

Governments in Maharashtra have spent the last two decades trying to find a legally defensible route to Maratha reservation. Their Kunbi identity, if established, opens a possible route under the OBC quota. But to take that route is to invite the wrath of other OBCs, who are the BJP’s main voter base.

UCC Coming soon

On 14 September, Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said Maharashtra intends to introduce a Uniform Civil Code bill in Nagpur during the winter session of the state legislature, after the committee examining the issue submits its report. His statement came a day after the Union home minister said in Mumbai that 21 BJP-ruled states would have the UCC in place before the 2029 Lok Sabha election.

What’s new is the BJP taking the state route, instead of bringing in a uniform central law, to realise a long-standing core objective of the Sangh Parivar. Maharashtra constituted a seven-member panel,



(Retd.) Justice Ranjana Desai

headed by retired (Supreme Court) Justice Ranjana Desai, in July 2026. The panel, which includes former Bombay High Court judges R.C. Chavan and S.G. Mehare, former chief secretary D.K. Jain, former advocate general Virendra Saraf, constitutional scholar Ramesh Patange and educationist Suvarna Rawal, has six months to make its recommendations.

The 9 July resolution asks the committee to examine the constitutional, legal, social, cultural and administrative consequences of a UCC. It has to study the experience of Uttarakhand and other states, examine marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance and succession, and recommend the legal, administrative and institutional changes required for Maharashtra. It is expected ‘to seek the views of representatives of different religions, women’s organisations, NGOs, experts and citizens’.

While the committee is rich in legal and administrative expertise, it has no representative of any minority religious community—Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Jain, Buddhist or Parsi—whose personal laws it is being asked to examine. There is no tribal representative either. In Mumbai, Shah explicitly said that tribal communities will remain outside the UCC and that their customs will be protected.

Uttarakhand has a UCC in force since January 2025. Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh have passed the law, but are yet to get the presidential assent. Maharashtra is

the fourth state to move on it. It remains to be seen if Maharashtra will produce a state-specific code or copy-paste an existing state law. Justice Desai was part of the Uttarakhand and Gujarat committees as well. So far, since its formation, the Maharashtra panel has had no public consultation. Dare we expect the state will make the process transparent—who is invited, what submissions are received and whether dissenting views actually influence the final recommendations?



Conceived as a form of resistance, the 145-year-old Marbat-Badgya tradition continues in Nagpur

The missing ‘Feku’

Nagpur’s Marbat festival has a 145-year-old history of speaking truth to power. It was conceived as a Raj-era form of resistance, a kind of civic safety valve where people take out a procession of ‘Marbat’ (symbolising a goddess that soaks up evil) and ‘Badgya’ (the shape of evil itself, typically a man), in a ritual of naming, mocking and consigning to flames the evils of their time. If it was foreign rule back in the days of the Raj and social ills always, it is

now inflation, unemployment, civic distress and political arrogance. Its power lies in its irreverence. In the lanes of the old city, amid drums, chants and crowds, no leader is above reproach and ridicule.

The festival is a barometer of the popular mood. So the reported last-minute disappearance of a ‘Feku’ *Badgya* and the BJP-ruled Nagpur Municipal Corporation’s Rs 2 crore attempt to recast the festival as a global cultural showcase is being seen as an attempt to desecrate its soul. Political patronage for a folk festival that traditionally challenged power is a mockery of its core idea.

While other *Badgyas* attacked unemployment, paper leaks, smart meters, drugs and civic problems, a ‘Feku’ *Badgya*—an obvious reference to Youknowwho—was dropped at the last moment under pressure from local BJP leaders, and replaced by one targeting Pakistan prime minister Shehbaz Sharif.

The Bapat effect

Tens of Ganesha Mandals across Maharashtra have voluntarily given up DJs and high-decibel sound systems as the ten-day celebrations got off to a colourful start on 14 September.

Nagpur’s other unique symbol of resistance—the radical Chandrashekhar Azad Ganesh Mandal, set up seven decades ago by the late freedom fighter Gulab Puri and now headed by his son Chandrashekhar Puri—made up for the *Marbat* miss. Austere in form and sharp in tone, this year’s Ganesha pandal decoration is on the Jantar Mantar protests, the sugar price spike and the ethanol controversy, inflation and unemployment, privatisation of education and other such concerns that big media has no bandwidth for. It does not spare the prime minister either. Ganesha-bhaktis are loving it. ■



Maratha-quota warrior Manoj Jarange-Patil

The Fadnavis government has bought peace with Jarange, but will it keep its word?



A different kind of politics?

K.A. Shaji

Retired teacher K.K. Surendran did not go to Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan for a favour. After 23 years of fighting the State, he went to say: “Please don’t appeal against me anymore.”

In 2003, Surendran, a former lecturer with the District Institute of Education and Training in Sulthan Batheri, Wayanad, was arrested after the historic Muthanga tribal agitation. The tribals, alienated from their land and resources for years, were on a long protest for their legitimate rights. As a concerned citizen, Surendran had extended his moral support. He was accused of collusion with the agitators, charged of violence and sabotage.

The criminal case eventually collapsed, and a CBI investigation exonerated him. But Surendran began another long battle: compensation for brutal custodial torture. In 2021, a lower court awarded him Rs 5 lakh, but the then Pinarayi Vijayan-led LDF government argued that releasing the compensation would affect police morale.

In March 2026, an appellate court bumped up the amount to Rs 12.5 lakh with interest and directed recovery from the police officers responsible. The LDF government decided to appeal and the process was delayed only because of the assembly election.

Encouraged by friends after the UDF returned to power, Surendran met Satheesan on 9 July. Instead of denying his request, the chief minister assured him that the compensation would come through, soonest.

According to political observer Damodar Prasad, this is a small episode, but it tells us more about Satheesan’s style of governance than any policy document.

“There is an important political statement here,” says writer and political observer Prof. M.N. Karassery. “The Muthanga police



At 3 p.m. on days Satheesan is in the state capital, the CMO becomes a place where power meets the people

action took place under the UDF government. Satheesan was not simply correcting a wrong committed by his political opponents. He was accepting responsibility. That is a different kind of politics.”

As the Satheesan government completes four months in the saddle, the difference is palpable in Thiruvananthapuram.

The secretariat is open in a way it hasn’t been for the past 10 years of Pinarayi Vijayan’s rule. The Chief Minister’s Office (CMO) has created time slots for citizens to meet Satheesan; seniors and persons with disabilities are prioritised. When the CM is away, the grievance cell remains open.

“Satheesan may not have instant solutions for all the people approaching him at the secretariat,” says Sojan James, a lawyer with Kerala High Court, and a native of Irinjalakuda in central Kerala. “But at least people feel that

the government is there to listen, to treat them with respect and stand with them.”

Kerala had become accustomed to an ever-tightening circle of security and an ever-expanding distance from the chief minister (be it under LDF or UDF). Satheesan’s decision to reduce the scale of his convoy and security arrangements goes beyond logistics: the barriers are lower and the chief minister seems determined to remain within reach. There have been repeated accounts of Satheesan stopping his vehicle when approached with petitions. The image is almost deliberately old-fashioned: a chief minister getting off his car, walking towards the people and taking a memorandum rather than allowing the convoy to whisk him away.

It matters, says V.K. Shyni, a postgraduate who passed the Public Service Commission exam but didn’t get a posting for years. She was part of a protest raising

V.D. Satheesan has made the CMO accessible, prioritising the old and infirm

concerns over the expiry of a rankers’ list when, to her disbelief, Satheesan stopped the convoy and reached out.

Cliff House, the chief minister’s official residence, was a fortress during the Pinarayi Vijayan years. When moving in, Satheesan instructed officials: no expensive renovations or lavish makeovers, only essential repairs. And Cliff House became an ‘open house’.

Senior journalist Sunnykutty Abraham says, “There is a change in the way the chief minister relates to media. Satheesan faces journalists after cabinet meetings, not once in a while—every week, as a routine.” At press briefings, Satheesan takes questions about Cabinet decisions, controversies, appointments, finances, political disputes. He argues, and sometimes, he is visibly irritated. But he doesn’t run away.

“This ritual has significance in a state where political communication was tightly controlled over the last decade. Satheesan is the only chief minister in India to do this. He is following the ‘Kerala model’ adopted by E.M.S. Namboodiripad, K. Karunakaran, C. Achutha Menon, E.K. Nayanar, V.S. Achuthanandan, A.K. Antony and Oommen Chandy but discontinued under Vijayan,” says Sunnykutty.

Pinarayi projected authority (with totalitarian symptoms); Satheesan projects actionable access. One said: I’m doing it my way. The other says: Let’s decide our path together.

This distinction is clearest in the handling of policies inherited from the previous government. SilverLine is the most obvious example. For thousands of families, the yellow survey stones had become symbols of fear and uncertainty, in courtyards, near kitchens, beside wells and across agricultural land.

The resistance to SilverLine became one of Kerala’s most sustained popular movements. The Satheesan government cancelled the project, scrapped land acquisition and ordered the removal of the yellow stones. It also moved towards withdrawing criminal cases against protesters.

At the same time, Satheesan has refused to accept the opposite proposition that every large infrastructure project must be rejected because the previous government proposed it.

E. Sreedharan’s new high-speed

rail corridor was not blindly onboarded as an alternative to SilverLine. The government appointed a four-member expert committee with expertise in railways, finance and environment to examine viability, implications, challenges and benefits. The committee found the proposal incomplete, citing the absence of adequate environmental and social impact assessments, realistic passenger projections, land availability and financial viability. The government put the proposal on hold pending further study.

Recently, Chief Minister Satheesan took his entire Cabinet to IIM Kozhikode for a strategic workshop on AI, climate resilience, disaster management and fiscal reform. Ministers going back to school sent out an important message: a government does not know everything simply because it governs. This willingness to learn and the humane face of governance are resonating with people.

Take six-year-old Ruvani from Vizhinjam. She made a video appeal for a house that wouldn’t leak during the rains the way her current home did. Her appeal reached Satheesan, who contacted her mother and assured the family that a house would be provided.

Or Seethalakshmi Ammal, affectionately known as Ammalu Amma. She met Satheesan during the 2018 floods, when he was the Paravur MLA involved in relief work. Years later, she travelled to Thiruvananthapuram for his swearing-in ceremony, carrying an old photograph. When asked what Satheesan meant to her, she did not say he was like a son, she said he was her son. Satheesan recognised her, embraced her and brought her up on stage.

Palakkad entrepreneur Joshy Thomas had spent nearly a year trying to obtain documents required for his business. His grievance reached the CMO through a comment on a local newspaper’s Facebook page. The documents were reportedly delivered in a day.

Satheesan’s government will eventually have to demonstrate that its early strengths of openness, willingness and people-friendliness translate into administrative efficiency, fiscal prudence and better public services.

Sometimes change is signalled in smaller ways. Reducing the distance between the citizen and the State is one such. ■

The long road home

Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu are caught between two uncertainties, writes **K.A. Shaji**

K Mahendran was barely 11 when his family fled war-torn Sri Lanka. When assailants came looking for boys above the age of 10, he and his brother hid between the roof and false ceiling of their home in Mannar, a Tamil-majority town. The family escaped to the coastal fishing village of Pesalai, where they waited 15 days before crossing the Palk Strait on 22 July 1990. At Dhanuskodi, his father carried the children ashore, wading through waist-deep water. Thirty-six years later, Mahendran, now 47, lives in Pudukkottai in southern Tamil Nadu. His father died seven years after their arrival in India. Mahendran studied at Loyola College in Chennai and now sells furniture on instalments. When asked where his 'native place' is, he still says Ceylon. His two children, however, would say Tamil Nadu. That difference captures the dilemma facing nearly 90,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India. In August 2026, Sri Lanka removed a major legal obstacle to their return. The Sri Lankan cabinet approved special arrangements for refugees who fled during the civil war without valid passports or through unauthorised departure points. Henceforth, those whose Sri Lankan identity is satisfactorily established can return (after security clearance) through authorised clearance without being prosecuted for having left the country via 'irregular' channels. The arrangement covers those who left before 1 August 2006, up until 19 May 2009, when the LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran. A Sri Lankan government notification made it clear that while those suspected of serious offences can

still face legal action, the rest will be issued temporary passports. In August last year, a 75-year-old Tamil refugee returning from India was arrested at Jaffna airport though no criminal track record was pending against him. For most refugees, being relieved of the fear of prosecution has not eased the fear of returning. After three decades of living in camps across Tamil Nadu, they are unsure of what awaits them in Sri Lanka. "How do they expect us to live?" asks V. Vaithyalingam, an inmate of Mandapam camp near Rameswaram. "How do they expect us to survive there?" Nearly 90,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees are still registered in India, almost all live in 105 government-run camps and another 32,800 outside camps. This is a fraction of

the 304,269 who arrived in Tamil Nadu as refugees from 1983 onwards when the Sinhala majority began targeting the Tamil ethnic minority. The difference in the numbers thousands decades of movement. Refugees repatriated voluntarily or returned independently; others left for third countries; still others died. Many moved out of the formal refugee system. The Union government says 99,469 had been repatriated by March 1995, after which there was no organised programme for many years. For those who stayed, India is no longer simply a temporary refuge. Children were born here, marriages took place, livelihoods were built. The paradox is stark. India has become their home without affording them permanent legal standing. Sri Lanka defines their nationality, but many no longer know what that means. They can live, study and work in India under refugee protection and state welfare, but they do not enjoy the legal rights of citizens. Their status remains tied to refugee registration and permissions governing their stay. Decades of residence do not automatically grant them citizenship. Under the Citizenship Act, those treated as illegal migrants are ordinarily barred from citizenship by registration or naturalisation unless specific exceptions apply. Being born in Tamil Nadu therefore does not automatically resolve the question for many children of refugee families. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, sharpened exclusion by creating a faster naturalisation route for specified persecuted minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, while



If staying on in India means being in legal limbo, going back to Sri Lanka is not straightforward either

leaving Sri Lankan Tamils outside its ambit. The result is a peculiar legal limbo: a Tamil refugee can spend 30-40 years in India, build a livelihood and educate children here while technically remaining a foreigner. Staying can mean a continuation of permanent impermanence; returning could mean going to a country where their homes, livelihoods and social connections may have disappeared. Land is among the first concerns. Some remember abandoned homes; others have lost documents, face property disputes or have no land. After 30 years, isn't starting "life from scratch, worse than a refugee life here?" wonders Mahendran. Successive Sri Lankan governments have offered housing and livelihood assistance, but the latest decision creates no new comprehensive resettlement programme. With productive years spent in

India, returning to Sri Lanka will restart the cycle of uncertainty, especially for those children who have known only Tamil Nadu. Some have married into Indian families; others have children of their own pursuing higher education in India. Only 92 refugees returned in 2025, compared with 203 in 2024, minuscule figures when compared to those who stayed. "There is no evidence that the latest legal change has triggered a rush towards Sri Lanka. That is not necessarily a rejection of the idea of return. It is evidence of how much more complicated return has become," says Manuraj Shanmugasundaram, a lawyer dealing with refugee rehabilitation in Tamil Nadu. The civil war ended in 2009, but residual trauma remains. Returnees must establish their identity and undergo checks. For those who fled amid fear of state forces and militancy, this can be unsettling. Identity and citizenship records may be missing. Which

documents will be accepted? What happens when papers no longer exist? Doubts remain. Sri Lanka has taken an important step by acknowledging that people who fled during wartime should not face prosecution decades later. But it is only the first step. The responsibility cannot lie solely with the refugees. "A dignified return would require secure access to land and housing, functioning documentation systems, employment and livelihood opportunities, education and healthcare. It would require transparent security procedures and sustained support after arrival," says demographer S. Irudayarajan. Mahendran still dreams of 'Ceylon', even as he acknowledges what Tamil Nadu has given his children. After three decades, legal return is a real option. But can it be exercised with dignity intact? That is the larger question. ■

They have built homes and lives in India and raised families, but they have no legal standing

STATES 360° PUNJAB

The arithmetic of appeasement

Herjinder on why the AAP government in Punjab plumps for 68 lakh women over 7.5 lakh employees and pensioners

Election season has a way of turning government employees into the most persuasive lobbyists. It is, after all, the one window in the political calendar when a government cannot afford to say no—or so history has led Punjab's employee unions to believe. Ahead of the 2027 assembly elections, they are marching, striking and petitioning courts to force the release of pending dearness allowance (DA) arrears. This time, however, the Bhagwant Singh Mann government appears to be working off a very different playbook: one built not around 7.5 lakh employees and pensioners, but around 68 lakh women voters. At the heart of the impasse is a litany of unresolved demands. Employee unions want payment of 18 per cent pending DA arrears, restoration of the Old Pension Scheme (OPS), withdrawal of the July 2020 decision by the previous Congress government that imposed central pay scales on all future recruits, and reversal of a letter (dated 15 January 2015) that restricted new employees to basic pay during their three-year probation period. The unions peg the pending DA arrears and related dues at approximately Rs 14,191 crore—a figure the state government does not dispute outright. Their case is simple: with tax collections improving, the state can afford to pay up. It is a demand that carries real political weight. With around 3.5 lakh employees and 4 lakh pensioners behind the agitation, it's large enough to unsettle any incumbent government heading into an election year. The confrontation has now spilled into the courts. The Punjab and Haryana High Court directed the state government to clear the remaining DA dues within a compressed 15-day deadline. Instead



The gamble The state government seems to have the money to woo women voters with direct benefit transfers, but only excuses for not releasing the DA arrears of government employees

of complying, the Mann government moved the Supreme Court, arguing that immediate payment is practically impossible under treasury rules and would disrupt essential public expenditure. That single line of argument—'impossible under treasury rules'—is where the story gets interesting. Even as the government pleads fiscal constraint on one hand, it is simultaneously bankrolling one of the most expensive welfare schemes in Punjab's history on the other. The scheme in question is the Mukh Mantri Mawan Dheeyan Sukh Yojana, also known as the Maa-Beti Samman Yojana—a women-centric direct benefit transfer programme that promises monthly financial support of Rs 1,500 for women from Scheduled Caste households and Rs 1,000 for

women in other eligible categories. The scale is enormous. Registrations have already crossed 68 lakh women, and three instalments have already been transferred directly into the Aadhaar-linked bank accounts of the beneficiaries. Three more are expected before voters head to the polls. All told, the scheme is estimated to cost the state exchequer close to Rs 20,000 crore. There is a second layer to the programme that has drawn its own share of scrutiny. The government has enlisted a large network of women volunteers—Saktar Sakhis—across every assembly constituency, tasked with registering eligible women for the scheme. Each registration earns the volunteer a fixed payment of Rs 200. It is being suggested, though not officially confirmed, that this

registration drive doubles as a means of building a granular database of women voters in each constituency, complete with phone numbers, an asset with obvious value closer to election day. Consider the math. On one hand, a Rs 14,191 crore DA arrears bill owed to 7.5 lakh employees and pensioners, a constituency that—however vocal—is finite and largely fixed in its political loyalties. On the other, a Rs 20,000 crore welfare scheme that reaches nearly ten times as many people, spread

across every household and every constituency in the state, with fresh instalments timed to land before voting begins. Put them side by side and you begin to see why the government is pushing one, and pleading impossibility for the other. Finance Minister Harpal Singh Cheema has publicly maintained that rising revenue collections do not translate into surplus cash, pointing to Punjab's heavy debt-servicing obligations and structural deficits. The state's fiscal position lends some credibility to that claim: the fiscal deficit for the year is pegged at close to Rs 39,971 crore, or about 4.1-4.2 per cent of GSDP, well above recommended consolidation targets. The revenue deficit alone is almost Rs 21,955 crore. Punjab's outstanding public debt has already

crossed Rs 4.13 lakh crore and is projected to touch nearly Rs 4.47 lakh crore, pushing the debt-to-GSDP ratio to roughly 45 per cent, among the highest of any major Indian state. Over 90 per cent of revenue receipts are already locked into committed expenditure: salaries, pensions, power subsidies and interest payments. In other words, the treasury genuinely may not have room for both. And when a government with limited fiscal headroom has to choose between pay-outs to 68 lakh women voters against 7.5 lakh employees and pensioners, the choice starts to look less like a matter of affordability and more like a matter of calculated benefit. The government insists it has not abandoned its employees altogether. It points out that DA has already been raised by 14 percentage points in stages since late 2021, taking it to 42 per cent, and that over Rs 4,500 crore in arrears has been disbursed through monthly instalments. Officials also argue that Punjab's pay structure is already more generous than the Centre's: a state government clerk drawing 42 per cent DA takes home more than a central government counterpart on 60 per cent DA, making a straight matching of central DA rates financially unviable. Reviving the Old Pension Scheme or clearing DA arrears in full would buy peace with a committed but numerically limited electorate. Sustaining the Mawan Dhiyan Saktar Yojana, on the other hand, reaches a female electorate nearly ten times larger, delivers cash directly into their accounts on a schedule that conveniently peaks before polling day and, through its registration drive, potentially hands the ruling party a fresh voter database to work with. The political logic underpinning the government's position couldn't be clearer. ■

How does the fiscal constraint plea square with the rollout of an expensive pre-poll DBT scheme?



A CHILD'S PIN CODE SHOULD NEVER DECIDE WHO GETS TO BUILD THE FUTURE

With KEO, a homegrown open-source AI computer, Karnataka sets out to carry advanced computing past Bengaluru's city limits and into 239 taluks, 31 districts and the classrooms in between.

Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar launched the KEO AI PC 2026 in Bengaluru, an affordable, open-source, artificial-intelligence-ready desktop computer developed through KEONICS in collaboration with the Department of Electronics, IT and Biotechnology, semiconductor industry partners, technology startups and AI-focused system integrators.

The ceremony, held on a Friday last month, brought together government, industry and educators around a machine built for the parts of Karnataka technology has reached last — one meant to expand computing access for students, particularly those in rural government schools.

KEO stands for Knowledge-driven, Economical and Open-source, an acronym that doubles as a statement of intent. The platform was built around the idea that advanced computing should be available not only to those who own high-end devices and enjoy reliable connectivity, but to people across geographies and income levels — students, farmers, small businesses, entrepreneurs and institutions alike, including those living far from major technology centres or working with limited internet access.

The framing names a specific problem. In much of Karnataka the barrier is arithmetic: a machine costs more than a household can spare, and most AI tools assume a broadband connection many taluks lack. KEO addresses both at once, so that access to artificial intelligence stops being settled by address and income.

The device itself was unveiled some months earlier; Friday's ceremony marked Phase 1 of its rollout, carrying KEO out of demonstration and into classrooms and hostels across the state.

From Electronic City to open silicon

Tracing Karnataka's technological journey, Shivakumar credited former Chief Ministers Devaraj Urs and S.M. Krishna with laying the foundation for the state's growth. Urs, he recalled, envisioned Electronic City, which KEONICS developed in 1978, while Krishna strengthened the state's technology infrastructure. "Devaraj Urs and S.M. Krishna laid the foundation for an entire generation of innovation," he said. "Karnataka did not merely adopt technology. We created our own path to become India's Silicon Valley."

Describing KEONICS as the backbone of Karnataka's electronics and semiconductor development, the Chief Minister said KEO demonstrated the state's ability to design, develop and deliver world-class technology locally.

He praised IT and BT Minister Priyank Kharge, KEONICS Chairman Sharath Bachchegowda and everyone involved in developing the computer.

Inside a machine built to work offline

KEO brings together an open-source RISC-V processor architecture, open-source hardware and software, and on-device artificial intelligence in a compact desktop platform. Its defining piece of engineering is a dedicated on-device AI accelerator, which allows AI



Photo: GettyImages

applications, coding suites, machine learning modules and digital learning tools to run locally rather than in the cloud.

That makes the device particularly relevant for communities and institutions operating in areas where connectivity is inconsistent — a classroom does not need a broadband line, or high-end hardware, for the machine to do its work.

The choice of an open architecture is equally deliberate. As the platform runs on open hardware and software, the tools that support AI literacy and Karnataka's education ecosystem can be studied, adapted and extended by the people using them, rather than merely consumed.

RISC-V is an open instruction set architecture — the layer at which a processor's basic vocabulary is defined. Unlike the proprietary architectures that dominate consumer computing, it carries no licensing fee and no single owner, which allows a state, an institution or a startup to design around it without seeking permission.

For a government building at scale, that changes the economics of every unit produced. For a student sitting in front of the machine, it means the computer on the desk is, in principle, inspectable all the way down to the silicon — a teaching instrument as much as a tool.

Running models on the device rather than in a data centre has consequences beyond connectivity as well. A classroom in a taluk headquarters is not competing for bandwidth with the rest of the country, a lesson does not stall when the line drops, and the recurring costs that usually accompany cloud services do not follow the school year after year.

An inclusion device, not a luxury device

Kharge described KEO as the world's most affordable AI PC and said Karnataka was the first state to address computing challenges at the grassroots. The device carries the tagline "Compact Intelligence and Infinite Possibilities"

and is intended to support students, creators, innovators and inventors.

KEO is Karnataka's practical answer to the digital divide. It reflects the state's commitment to inclusive innovation and accessible computing. It is not a luxury device, but an inclusion device. Affordable mass computing will allow every student, every small business and every household to participate fully in the digital economy. - Priyank Kharge, Minister for Home, Information Technology and Biotechnology

"The aim is not merely to distribute computers but to distribute capability, allowing children to learn, create and participate in an AI-driven economy," Kharge said.

He credited Chetan Som of XLE with helping conceive the affordable AI PC after being challenged to develop an economical, open-source device for Karnataka. He also acknowledged Sharath Bachchegowda's engineering-led efforts, the Oplus team's contribution to the device's design and execution, and the Sikhshana Foundation's commitment to deploying the initiative across centres and hostels.

Notably, Kharge said the programme was entirely supported through corporate cooperation, without government funding. He urged companies, think tanks and individuals to back the Chief Minister's vision for an inclusive AI economy and Karnataka's ambition to gain an early advantage in artificial intelligence.

A programme of this size delivered without a budgetary allocation is a claim about method as much as about money. It positions KEO as a public platform assembled out of private capability: the state supplying the mandate, the institutional reach and the last mile into schools and hostels, and companies, startups and non-profits supplying the engineering, the industrial design and the deployment.

As part of the launch, the government said 3,000 KEO devices will be rolled out in all. Of these, 1,000 will initially go to government schools, while around 2,000 have already been

placed across rural libraries, educational institutions and community spaces.

The distribution pattern is as telling as the total. By placing eight machines in each of two Model Arivu Kendras in every one of the state's 239 taluks, the first phase spreads deliberately thin and wide rather than concentrating resources in a handful of showcase institutions: no taluk waits for a second phase to see the device.

The 310 units going to 31 Model Residential Schools, ten apiece, follow the same logic at the district level, reaching students who live where they study and who therefore have the machines available beyond school hours.

The government aims to extend the facility to every government school in the state, and plans to scale up deployments significantly in the coming months — taking KEO into more schools, institutions, businesses, households and citizen-facing environments across Karnataka.

The launch also carried the announcement of KEO Lite and KEO Pro, expanding the portfolio to address different computing requirements and user segments.

A wider chorus

Echoing the day's sentiments in a detailed statement on LinkedIn, N.S. Boseraju, former Minister for Minor Irrigation and Science & Technology, hailed the launch as a transformative step towards making Karnataka's technological progress more inclusive, accessible and future-ready.

The open-source RISC-V architecture, he wrote, marks an important milestone in democratising access to emerging technologies and creating new opportunities for learning, innovation and digital empowerment — ensuring that geography or connectivity does not determine who gets to participate in the technology revolution.

"This is more than a technology initiative," Boseraju said. "It is an investment in Karnataka's young minds, innovation ecosystem and inclusive digital future." Expressing appreciation for the Chief Minister's visionary leadership and his commitment to taking the benefits of innovation to every corner of the state, he added: "Together, we are building a generation that is not merely prepared for the AI era, but empowered to shape it."

Rahul Gandhi, the Congress leader and Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, also appreciated the initiative, describing it as beneficial to students, particularly those in rural areas, and praising the government's forward-looking programme.

The road ahead

Shivakumar appealed to industry partners and CSR organisations to help take KEO to every government school by directing funds towards rural education and student development. "When technology serves people instead of profit, the entire society progresses," he said.

The Chief Minister said KEO would evolve alongside advances in processors and AI models, and that Karnataka's students must not merely witness the growth of artificial intelligence but learn with it, use it and build with it.

"Today they are students," he said. "Tomorrow, they will be innovators, entrepreneurs, scientists and leaders who will shape not only Karnataka but the world."

Something of that continuity was visible in the hall itself. Among the guests and technocrats seated for the ceremony were the engineers who had built the machine, crowding together for photographs beside the device they had spent months designing — a reminder that KEO has authors, most of them working within a few kilometres of where it was unveiled.

That is, finally, the argument the state is making with KEO. Karnataka has spent nearly five decades building the institutions, the industrial base and the talent that made the machine possible, beginning with a piece of land in 1978 that became Electronic City.

The test of the next phase is whether the same state can carry the results of that work to a Class VIII student in a taluk that has never seen a data centre — and whether, having been given the tools, that student turns out to be a user of artificial intelligence or an author of it.

The launch was attended by Ministers K.H. Muniyappa, Eshwar Khandre and Priyank M. Kharge; KEONICS Chairman and MLA Sharath Bachchegowda; Principal Secretary of the IT&BT Department Dr. Manjula N.; and industry leaders Kris Gopalakrishnan and Prashanth Prakash, along with other dignitaries.

KEO — Knowledge-driven, Economical and Open-source. Developed by KEONICS with the Department of Electronics, IT and Biotechnology, Government of Karnataka, in collaboration with semiconductor companies, technology partners and startups.

A programme of this size delivered without a budgetary allocation is a claim about method as much as about money. It positions KEO as a public platform assembled out of private capability: the state supplying the mandate, the institutional reach and the last mile into schools and hostels, and companies, startups and non-profits supplying the engineering, the industrial design and the deployment.

Not merely launching a device

Today, we are not merely launching a device. We are setting a dream in motion — a dream in which every child in Karnataka, from remote villages to urban centres, can learn and help shape the future of AI. - D.K. Shivakumar, Chief Minister of Karnataka, at the launch ceremony on Friday, 21 August 2026

Speaking at the launch ceremony, the Chief Minister said technology in government schools was not a luxury but a foundation for equality, opportunity and growth.

"A child's pin code should never determine access to technology and opportunity," he said, adding that a rural student using KEO today could become



Photo: Gettyimages (for representation)

tomorrow's innovator, entrepreneur or problem-solver. The vision behind the initiative, he said, is to ensure "that

Karnataka's leadership in technology translates into opportunities for every student and every citizen across the state."

That leadership, he argued, translates into something tangible only when it travels. "KEO represents Karnataka's vision of taking technology beyond innovation hubs and into the hands of people," Shivakumar said. "We have built a strong ecosystem in semiconductors, electronics, deep technology and artificial intelligence, and the next step is to ensure that these capabilities translate into real benefits for our citizens."

KEO is a Made-in-Karnataka platform that brings AI-ready computing closer to students, entrepreneurs, farmers, small businesses and institutions, including those in areas where connectivity may be limited."

Let this warning not go in vain

The flood disaster of 26 August was not the first nor the last. **Shekhar Pathak** tells us, yet again, what we must learn from it

The stretch of the Himalaya along the Tibet-Nepal border where the 26 August disaster originated is exceptionally fragile. Only last year, on 8 July 2025, a flood here killed 18 people. It destroyed the Nepal-Tibet Road, the check post at Rasuwagadhi, bridges, hydropower projects and transmission lines. There is no official account of what happened on the Tibetan side that year, though an advance warning did come from China.

This time no such warning was possible. Perhaps no one expected such an event on a clear, rainless day. It happened so quickly that the information system could not respond in time. Yet the very next day, China informed Nepal that landslides had created two lakes on two tributaries of the Bhote Koshi, the Tushchen and Purepu, and advised Nepal to stay alert. There must also have been loss of life and great destruction of property in Tibet, though official information is still awaited.

Eleven years earlier, on 25 April 2015, Nepal was struck by a magnitude 7.8 earthquake, the country's biggest since 1934. More than 9,000 people were killed and over 22,000 injured across Nepal, India, China and Bangladesh. It also triggered an avalanche in Mt. Langtang's south face burying 300 people in village Bhangtang.

As of 7 September, 1,400 lives have been lost this time—1,357 in Nepal and 43 in Tibet. The destruction of property—offices, schools, roads, bridges, hydropower and solar-energy projects besides homes, shops, hotels, restaurants and cottage industry units as also community assets like temples, chortens, watermills and panchayat buildings—has been enormous. Nepal's finance minister has estimated the losses at \$4.5 billion.

More than 1,600 people from 32 countries, including 300 Indians, were reportedly still missing at the time of writing—over a thousand in Nepal and about 600 in Tibet. Human bodies were later seen floating in the Gandak in India. These numbers will inevitably swell as more information comes in. Most of those killed or uprooted were farmers, livestock-rearers and owners of small businesses. There were also many pilgrims and tourists in the region as thousands use this route every year to go to Kailas-Mansarovar and other pilgrimage sites. Animals and wildlife were also killed, and what happened to the fish is beyond our imagining.

The disaster would have caused less devastation had the development model in Tibet and Nepal been shaped by studies of the region's geology, seismicity, geography and flood history. Governments refuse to learn or try to be too clever, and engineering does not adapt in step with a changing environment.

Within minutes, the flood destroyed 12 hydropower projects—eight operational, four under construction—besides 41 bridges, transmission lines, power substations, heavy machinery, bulldozers, trucks... A successful 25 MW solar project at Nuwakot was buried under debris. More than 100 kilometres of highway was destroyed.

At the Trishuli hydropower project and in other tunnels, 917 workers, including 70 Indians, were left suspended between life and death. It is estimated that the river



Gone in a flash A man takes in the aftermath of floods at Trishuli in Nuwakot district, Nepal

What is really needed is a broad dialogue among all Himalayan countries

carried 100-200 million cubic metres of debris, mud, silt, trees, other material and machinery at a flow speed of 193 kmph!

Nepal must, of course, reflect on how to deal with the consequences of this disaster, what lessons to draw from it and what precautions to take in future. But what is really needed now is a broad dialogue among all Himalayan countries—Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Bangladesh and China.

We share mountains and rivers, and challenges too—like pollution, earthquakes, glacial lake outbursts that can generate catastrophic floods and other disasters driven by climate change, which will only increase in the future.

Nepal must open a dialogue with India and China because we share rivers, but the scope of these discussions must be the entire Himalaya. Nepal must also present its concerns forcefully at climate summits and environmental conferences, international forums and the United Nations.

The disaster also gives Nepal's political, social, community, cultural and religious leaders an opportunity to think of developing a safer model of development for their country. The youth, in particular, must think deeply about this.

Projects designed for entirely different environments should not

once again be imposed on Nepal or other Himalayan regions. Sustainable agriculture, cottage industry, pastoralism and seasonal migration should sit at the heart of the planning for pilgrimage, tourism and energy production.

The ideas 'Small is Beautiful' and 'Gross National Happiness' (GNH) are particularly relevant to mountains and ecologically fragile regions. If not in their entirety, they should be followed as far as possible. Engineering and technology should be used to solve the problems of the mountains, not to challenge the mountains.

The Himalaya is still forming and rising. Earthquakes, landslides, avalanches, retreating glaciers, snowstorms, floods and forest fires are all part of its nature. Human beings have not achieved even partial mastery over these processes. What they can do is look for ways to protect life and property.

In a monsoon-driven ecosystem, floods have many meanings. They can alter landforms. Floods are no doubt shaped by rainfall and the hydrological cycle, but also by the condition of the watershed, the severity of rainfall, vegetation cover, slope, seismicity and groundwater levels. Manmade structures and human interventions in a river's channel and floodplain—dams, barrages, uncontrolled mining, deforestation, weakened watersheds, encroachment on riverbanks—can make a river more aggressive. As indeed can climate change.

Communities that live by rivers watch their behaviour—the amount of water they carry, changes in colour and other signs. People traditionally avoided encroaching on the riverbed or floodplain. There was a time when small floods were awaited in the plains because they brought rich, fertile soil. In the mountains, floods create *seras* (the fertile flatland/s) along river valleys. Similarly, people of the high Himalaya understand the moods of glaciers and avalanches.

When we flout unwritten rules and traditions followed for generations, when greed or even necessity leads to dangerous encroachments, the community leadership must step in to remind people not to cross the 'Lakshman Rekha'. Children must be raised with

this awareness; it must be woven into education.

The Hindu Kush-Himalayan region has another serious problem: only about five per cent of its land is cultivable. Most of the fertile land lies in river valleys; the rest is on terraced slopes. This is also the land held in individual ownership. Pressure on such scarce land has repeatedly led to encroachment, and people have repeatedly paid the price.

In recent decades, the encroachment on this land, on its forests and water, on the wilderness and biodiversity, has come in the name of 'development'.

Development is necessary, but the current models violate Himalayan ecology. Modern engineering is useful in many situations, but the Himalaya needs a model that takes into account that it is a young and fragile mountain system, sitting atop a maze of geological faults vulnerable to earthquakes, landslides and avalanches.

Many parts of Nepal and Uttarakhand are regarded by geologists and seismologists as 'seismic gap areas'. Seismic gaps are regions where no major earthquake has occurred for centuries. Geological energy remains trapped and accumulates, and one day it may produce a massive earthquake. Many of these areas lie around the Main Central Thrust, or MCT, regarded as one of the most active fault systems of the Himalaya.

Tibet and the Himalaya—or, more broadly, the Indian subcontinent—are divided into many geological, climatic, ecological and agricultural zones. Rivers behave differently in different regions. In the high Himalaya, many valleys are narrow and steep-sided. When snow and rock break loose and tumble down, they may block a river for some time. When the resulting lake bursts, it can wreak havoc downstream. By now, everyone knows this.

We also need to understand the difference between old foundational ice or permafrost and fresh snow. In the high Himalaya and mountain passes, fresh snow settles over older ice. Water searches out a channel

and flows away. When rising temperatures cause rain instead of hail or snow at high elevations, the destructive power of water multiplies many times.

Recall 16-17 June 2013, when heavy rain fell in Kedarnath. Rain probably fell over Chorabari Tal as well, where a large dam of moraine and natural boulders broke. The lake was small, but the rainfall was immense (400 mm in 24 hours). Despite the relatively broad terrain around Kedarnath, a large part of the town was swept away.

The destruction was even greater at Rambara and Gaurikund, where the Mandakini runs through a narrow valley. Downstream, muck and debris from barrages and tunnels amplified the disaster. But it must be remembered that the prime driver of the devastation was roughly 400 mm of rain in 24 hours.

As the Earth warms and snowfall in the high Himalaya declines, small glacial ponds can begin to expand. Sometimes they merge and become tremendous. That is what happened in Sikkim on 3-4 October 2023 when the lake at the South Lhonak Glacier burst into the Teesta. Along with the loss of lives and property, the Teesta III dam—a project that cost about Rs 14,000 crore and was expected to generate 1,200 MW of electricity—was destroyed.

This was clearly a GLOF (glacial lake outburst flood) event. The existence of the lake was known, but the danger it posed was not properly understood. Nor were the warnings of the local Lepcha community taken seriously. The Lepchas knew the Teesta's long history of floods.

With rising temperatures, the amount of meltwater released from ice can become 1.6 times greater than the normal discharge from a glacier. The risk from GLOFs is becoming unavoidable and will only increase across the Himalaya. A five-year assessment by 200 scientists has warned that, unless greenhouse-gas emissions are brought under control, the Himalaya could lose 66 per cent of its ice by 2100. It is a frightening projection.

Consider the Beas and Parvati rivers in Himachal Pradesh. The Beas rises from the glacial lake Beas Kund near Rohtang Pass, while the Parvati rises from the Mantalai Glacier near Pin-Parvati Pass. The two meet in Kullu. Over the past few decades, there has been extensive encroachment within their watersheds and along their banks. The September 1995 flood in the Beas caused heavy loss of life and property. In 1996, judicial intervention in the *M.C. Mehta vs.*

The Himalaya is still forming and rising. It needs a model of development that factors this in

Kamal Nath case put a brake on such encroachment. A major factor behind flooding in these two rivers was the dumping of muck and debris generated by highway construction along the riverbanks, other construction works and the large tunnel below Rohtang Pass. Construction within the watershed, erosion and climate change were additional factors.

On 1 August 2024, the failure of the Malana dam on the Parvati added to the destruction. From 2022 to 2025, this valley suffered disasters for four consecutive years, with immense loss of life and property. But these weren't all GLOF events.

Scientists have repeatedly warned that warming in the Himalaya is roughly twice the global average. This makes the region more vulnerable to avalanches, landslides and floods. The United Nations said in 2023 that the Nepal Himalaya had already lost a third of its ice reserves. It is also important to remember that Nepal has more than 2,000 glacial lakes, of which 21 have been classified as extremely dangerous.

The Himalayan countries and provinces face three broad categories of danger. The first is ecological, the second disaster-related and the third driven by climate change. They are interconnected and have several dimensions. Any ecological damage multiplies the destructive impact of disasters, while both are increasingly driven by climate change.

In Nepal's case, it can be said that the country's own carbon emissions are extremely low—barely 0.1 per cent of global emissions—yet it is paying the price for black carbon and brown dust released into the atmosphere by its neighbours on the Indian subcontinent. These pollutants have contributed to rising temperatures in the Himalaya. Haze is now appearing even over Nepal's mountains.

An honest dialogue, coordination and understanding are essential among Himalayan countries, and between them and global institutions. Regional and national understanding of the Himalaya, as well as research, should be shared. Scientists need to speak to one another, and countries need agreements over shared resources such as rivers. Traditional knowledge and experience relating to disasters and floods should also be exchanged.

It is true that people living in these difficult parts of the Himalaya accept a degree of risk. Mountain communities are not astonished when calamities arrive from causes both understood and unknown. Today, however, climate change has joined geology and geography as an additional source of danger.

Development in the mountains cannot be carried out in the same way as in the plains, plateaus or deserts. Societies take long to forget disasters but governments forget them fast and often learn nothing from them. But when the next disaster comes, it is always ordinary people who are uprooted once again. ■

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A message for Himachal: Back off!

Avay Shukla makes an urgent case to stop the desecration of ‘Dev Bhoomi’

Only a fool learns from his own mistakes, said Otto von Bismarck, the wise man learns from the mistakes of others. It is now time for policymakers in Himachal (who have so far refused to learn from either their own mistakes or those of Uttarakhand and Kerala/ Wayanad) to imbibe some lessons from the horrendous tragedy in Nepal. The primary lesson is simple: the Himalayas have had enough. Back off!

‘Development’ has gone berserk in Himachal: 12,000 hectares of precious forest land diverted in the last twenty years for various projects, 174 hydel projects sanctioned/commissioned, 5 million trees felled, construction rules relaxed to permit 10-storey buildings, the Shimla Development Plan 2041 approved to deregulate the city’s precious green belts and allow construction even in heritage and core areas, an epidemic of unnecessary four-lane highways crisscrossing the state, scores of tunnels under the fragile mountains, plans to increase tourist footfall from the present 20 million per annum to an unsustainable 50 million. The natural features that held the fragile mountain strata together—trees, glaciers, snowfields, river drainage—are being decimated and destroyed by these activities. No number of warnings or reports from environmentalists and scientists that the mountains simply cannot sustain this level of anthropogenic activities have made the governments (past and present) see sense.

The Himalayas are now pushing back, with increasing intensity. Not-so-natural disasters in just three years (2022-2024) have caused direct financial losses of Rs 13,500 crore to the state and claimed 800 lives; indirect losses to business and livelihoods are much higher. In 2026, the losses have already amounted to Rs 1,400 crore and 200+ dead.

The Himalayas are warming at twice the average global rate. This warming effect is being amplified by local ‘heat islands’ caused by emissions from heavy machinery and labour camps, carbon deposits on ice fields, pollutants from the ever-increasing number of vehicles



The reckless four-laning of highways in the state is nothing short of a death wish. An exhibit from the outskirts of Shimla

intruding into high altitude fragile ecosystems, removal of green cover... The permafrost which holds together the fractured mountain soil is melting. Dumping of muck in the watercourses is reducing their capacity to carry excess water, resulting in regular ‘flash floods’. Too many red lines have been crossed.

The warnings have been many: Kedarnath in 2013, Chamoli in 2021, Sikkim in 2023, Dharali in 2025, and now Nepal. Among the most dangerous impending threats to Himachal is the growing number and size of the glacial lakes in the state, primarily responsible for the disasters above.

In 1990, the state had 107 glacial lakes of noticeable size with a total area of 5.54 sq. km. Now there are 669 lakes over 11.20 sq. km. Some have reached dangerous proportions, like Ghepan in Lahaul which has grown six times to almost 100 hectares. All the major rivers spring from the glaciers above these lakes and the hydel projects on these rivers are extremely vulnerable to GLOFs (glacial lake outburst floods). The very hydrology of these rivers is changing. Any damage to these projects would also endanger the

lakhs of people living in towns and villages below them, as Nepal has so tragically shown.

Himachal is also naturally susceptible to other risks: the state comes under seismic category VI, the highest; it has 20,000 landslide-prone hotspots; and EWEs (extreme weather events) caused by climate change have gone up by 40 per cent in the last few years.

The time for studies and seminars is over. What is needed urgently is decisive action and a drastic change in the model of development the state has been following all these years. The government needs to consider these measures urgently:

- Impose a moratorium on all new hydel projects, and stay those which have been sanctioned but not yet started construction. Scrap the dozens of projects approved/planned for the high-altitude Chenab and Chandrabhaga basin in Lahaul-Spiti, and in Kinnaur and Pangri areas (which the local people have already been protesting against for many years).
- Exhume the 2010 report on the environmental impact of hydel projects by the then additional chief secretary (forests) which

the high court had accepted, only for the then government to oppose it and successive ones to mothball it. Consider its major recommendations: ban hydel projects in high-altitude, alpine, glaciated, forest catchment areas; maintain a minimum distance of 5 km between projects; ensure minimum perennial flow of rivers; develop EIAs (environmental impact assessments), EMPs (environmental management plans) and CAT (catchment area treatment) plans for the entire river basin—not just individual projects—before sanctioning any project on any river. Review all projects in the light of these recommendations, and if they do not conform to them, or pose a threat, decommission them.

- Vigorously oppose the Centre’s proposal for an 8.7 km tunnel below the Pir Panjal range to bring the waters of the Chandrabhaga in Lahaul to the Beas in Kullu. This project would rip out the heart of the Himachal Himalayas and be a disaster of unprecedented proportions. It would destabilise the geology of three districts; generate tens of millions of tonnes of muck which can only clog the rivers, waterways and drainage of these areas; disturb the underground aquifers and affect hundreds of water supply schemes. The additional water added to the Beas would amplify the river’s destructive potential, which already causes havoc in Kullu every year. New Delhi’s diplomatic failures (which triggered this project) should not morph into misery for the state.

- Reconsider the mindless focus on increasing tourist numbers to 50 million per year. The state’s environment cannot support such numbers. The infrastructure needed—roads, buildings, water supply, sewage and garbage disposal—would result in huge damage to the natural environment and cultural identity of the state. Learn from the Bhutan model: limit numbers, improve quality.
- Impose a ban on tourist/real estate/commercial constructions in rural areas, especially on the peripheries of major towns.

Himachal’s cities have been ruined by such constructions, mainly by outsiders who are now despoiling the rural areas, cutting hills, felling trees, congesting rural roads, straining local water availability, polluting the forests and water sources with sewage and garbage, creating noise and light pollution. The areas adjoining Kasauli, Solan, Shimla, Manali, Palampur and Dharamsala bear abundant testimony to this ravaging of the environment. Himachal’s rural areas should not be allowed to go the way of its towns.

- Immediately discontinue and put a halt to the four-laning epidemic, which only benefits politicians, contractors and bureaucrats. They are not needed, they fracture the geology of the areas they pass through, destabilise the slopes, destroy properties, deprive people of livelihoods, encourage even more polluting vehicles to contaminate our pristine ambience. Both the Parwanoo-Shimla and Kiratpur-Manali highways are ongoing (and very expensive) disasters that prove this. Both remain ‘under construction’ after a decade.

The time to act is now. The Himalayas have tolerated our arrogance for centuries, but their patience is now wearing thin. Their warnings are getting more frequent, and more powerful each year. We call Himachal ‘Dev Bhoomi’ but ravage and pillage it shamelessly for votes and profit. This must change.

Even the Supreme Court warned the state government some months ago to be more sensitive to the environment or the state would ‘disappear from the map’ of India. We are proving right the words of Hubert Reeves, a French astro-physicist and environmentalist: ‘Man is the most insane species. He worships an invisible god and destroys a visible nature. Unaware that this nature he is destroying is the god he is worshipping.’

Respect nature. That is the true worship of god. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

Bengal receives a lesson in the right (way) to pray

Chandril Bhattacharya

Of course the lion has to be replaced. You cannot have Durga ride a fierce carnivore and ask worshippers to be strict herbivores. And why should Ma Durga, a pure and authentic goddess, ride an animal that devours flesh? Why should she not ride a plunderous pumpkin or an eccentric eggplant? True, some hymns will have to be subtly tweaked, but who understands Sanskrit anyway? If a reddish radish is glorified in a bombastic sloka with imperfect metre, who is going to complain? Yes, the goddess will be unhappy at first; she isn’t used to a ‘vahana’ that won’t respond when she bids it to roll forward or veer leftward, but even she must bow to superior ethics. And if she throws a tantrum, how about a rambunctious rhinoceros? Or perhaps a monumental mammoth? Oh, Ganesha will not like that and the choreography of the divine ensemble will be disturbed, but Durga might have the just-right herbivore to command. That aggressive yet stately jumbo could coil its trunk around Mahishasura, hoist him and fling him and trample him and for good effect sink its tusks into the asura’s villainous breast. Wouldn’t that make a glorious spectacle? And isn’t it time to change the old vahana anyway? Which brings us to the subject of stubborn Bengalies.

Bengalis are a weird tribe. They are so lazy, physically and mentally. Especially mentally. Their cerebrums and cerebellums simply do not admit the idea that everything—even Bengaliness—must change with time. Why must they go on and on with the same old ways of celebration? Why can’t they

see that they have been irresponsible worshippers and non-introspecting revellers? They have elected a new ruling party, and now that the party is trying to energetically implement Bengal 2.0, they are gagging and throwing up. What sort of dumb, disloyal reaction is that? If a race thinks their identity depends on gobbling animal flesh, it must be reined in and gene-edited. So many people are trying to correct the Bengali way—by scolding, trolling, abusing, pontificating, decreeing... yet the Bengali shrugs and continues to chant the same-old mantra: ‘freedom to choose my food’, ‘freedom to express my opinion’! But a good citizen should express opinions certified by the Government, that is the only freedom allowed. Remember, you are blessed with the power of the double engine now, so do not try to be singular and snobbish.

If you are an Indian, and if most Indians have vegetarian food during a period of pious worship, how dare you munch on egg-chicken rolls? That pollutes the prayers, cancels the oblations and the collective curse of dead animals lowers the GDP. The VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad) is so generous, it is not even demanding a blanket ban on ‘non-veg’ during the pujas; it is merely asking that the place of worship should not be sullied with the sight and smell of fried/boiled/mangled animal tissue. Yes, no tandoori prawn within, say, 200 metres of a puja pandal. Another matter that these food stall owners must be clear which pandal they are trying to avoid when there are three in much less than 200 metres of each other, their loudspeakers crisscrossing each other’s songs.

So what must shift? The pandals, the shops or the commandment?

What if the food stall is at a respectful distance, but a customer, delighting in succulent kababs, gets too close to the pandal or the deity? The simple answer may be: do not eat, do not even *think* food; after all, this is a time for piety and purity. Better focus on patriotic petitions to the goddess about India overtaking China or winning over Trump. Time Bengalies thought of the Puja as a cleansing ritual, a time to abjure individual greed. But try convincing a Bengali and you’ll likely get a mouthful of ‘freedom to eat as I please’

Why should the pandal decorations have a ‘theme’? When did worship need flights of imagination? To ‘theme’ a puja is to think—somebody must conceive of a theme, others must understand it. But isn’t unthinking obeisance the essence of worship? Why should imagination, interpretation, analysis interfere with spiritual surrender? How about an all-white Durga Puja this year, untainted by the sensuousness of colour? What if all pandals were a stark white, with white idols and white lights (and unadorned flute tunes enveloping it all) to give the puja the right aura of purity? But Bengalies would grumble and compete to come up with new and innovative themes. They want to outdo each other in reimagining their idols, pandals, lighting and music. They see the puja festival as a showcase of their talent. They want to weave their take on current affairs into puja art. They want to be playful and irreverent. They are impossible!

Why don’t we just say it as it is? That in Bengal, Durga Puja is not primarily a religious festival but an extended picnic that encompasses the joy of meeting friends, of eating

out, of dressing up in new clothes and endless *adda*. It’s a gigantic art exhibition pulsating with creative energy, a carnival over five days. It’s an explosion of sensory delight. That’s the problem! How can puja be about pleasure? The very idea is preposterous. As for the conceit that it’s an art showcase, that’s what museums and galleries are for. What could be more anti-spiritual? All that distracting ‘art’ needs to be scrubbed off, so that the Puja can become what it’s meant to be: clean, austere and sombre.

The stubborn Bengali needs to learn that puja is about self-negation, not hedonism. West Bengal’s greatest festival needs to be rigorously redefined. Bengalies should seriously ponder the question: what is Puja? It should be

Time Bengalies understood that everything must change—even their settled ways of life

Photo: Getty Images



It’s time for Durga to change her ‘vahana’. Even she must bow to superior ethics and keep up with the times

alright to humbly pray to the deity for more money. Or the humiliation of your enemies. Or your brother-in-law. But in a serious tone, not bouncing like a bubbly bunny!

What’s the Puja spirit? A state of mind that lets you grasp that devotion goes hand in hand with frugality, when your being has been cleansed of any desire to buy gold or go on foreign holidays. What’s just deserts for Bengalies who have

ignored (even mocked) this self-evident truth? Ban the festivities, announce a curfew or a lock-down, if you will, and make everybody stay in for those five days. God knows they need the time and isolation for reflection, and they could use the time to memorise all the six stanzas of Vande Mataram. ■

CHANDRIL BHATTACHARYA is a lyricist, poet, essayist and filmmaker from Kolkata

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