

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

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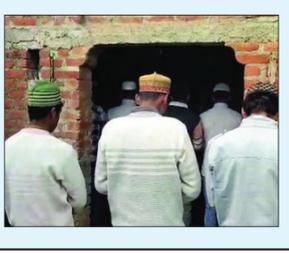
NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

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The "trashy ruminations of a convicted criminal"

A.J. Prabal with Vanshika Gupta

Six-and-a-half years after Jeffrey Epstein, 66 at the time, allegedly took his own life in a prison in New York, correspondence, photographs, logs and documents seized from his houses are still making news. As mysterious in life as in death, nobody quite knows how he made his wealth. What is known, however, is that he was accused and convicted of sexually abusing hundreds of children—over 500 victims had been identified—grooming and trafficking them. The fresh tranche of documents released in the US on 30 January 2026 contain references to several Indians, at least two of them more prominently than others.

Even as references to India and Indians in the infamous 'Epstein Files' continue to make ripples, curiously the references begin in 2014, the year India became 'independent' according to BJP MP Kangana Ranaut. What explains Epstein's interest in India and Indians after 2014 is a question that remains to be examined.

References to prime minister Narendra Modi, petroleum minister Hardeep Puri and industrialist Anil Ambani in the mails and documents released by the US Department of Justice, begin in May 2014 just before Narendra Modi was sworn in as prime minister on 26 May. Days before results were declared on 16 May 2014, Epstein in an email expressed his desire to visit India and mentioned 'Jaitley and Modi'. It is not clear if he was acquainted with the two. He is told in a reply that he would hate visiting India and was advised against visiting the country in summer.

Hardeep Puri's interactions with Epstein begin in June 2014, days after Modi is sworn in as PM and six months after Puri, a retired diplomat, joined the BJP in January 2014. Puri and Epstein, the files indicate, met four times between 5 June and 9 June 2014. From what is known so far, Puri does not figure in the files after he became a minister in the Modi cabinet in September 2017.

In a strong defence of his conduct, Puri has said he was meeting Epstein as a patriotic, far-sighted Indian seeking assistance to attract investments to India. He claims to have been far-sighted in referring in his mails in 2014 to 'Digital India' and 'Make in India'—two programmes launched in 2015

and 2016. He hasn't explained, though, why his interactions and exchanges with Epstein ceased once he joined the Union cabinet in September 2017. What was the outcome of his efforts? Which are the investments that came in because of his efforts as a 'private citizen' and through Epstein?

Puri cites Epstein's email in September 2014 to introduce him to LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman. 'Reid, Hardeep is your man in India'. In October, an impatient Epstein wants to know about the outcome of the meeting. Puri responds to say that he was due to meet Hoffman in San Francisco. 'You, my friend, make things happen. Any advice?' Puri asked the billionaire and after his meeting with Hoffman, sent a detailed note on digital openings in India, marking the note to both Hoffman and Epstein.

"Hardeep Puri at that time was a retired diplomat. In what capacity was he organising Hoffman's India visit?" asked Congress spokesman Pawan Khara. "Had the Indian embassy closed down? Was the Indian Ambassador not there? Wasn't Sushma Swaraj the external affairs minister? Why did Narendra Modi need the services of Hardeep Puri? And why did Narendra Modi need Epstein for Reid Hoffman's visit?" Khara asked.

There is nothing in the public domain to suggest that Epstein ever visited India. In both India and the US, immigration authorities would have the information if he did. Civil aviation authorities too would have the details if the billionaire power broker

In the Epstein Files, references to India and Indians begin just days before Narendra Modi was sworn in as prime minister on 26 May 2014



ever flew into the country in his private jet. Nor is there anything in public domain to suggest that Epstein ever invested in India or collaborated with anyone here. On the contrary, when Anil Ambani sought his help to raise \$70 million—after he declared himself 'bankrupt' in a London court—Epstein replied that loans would be difficult and the 'shares' were presumably not 'pretty'.

The references to India and Indians in the 3.5 million documents released so far, with three million more yet to be released, have created ripples nevertheless and raised uneasy questions. The most politically loaded insinuation by far is when Epstein claims to have told 'Modi's man' how to go about the Indian PM's visit to Israel in 2017, his first. Epstein claimed that he suggested the Indian PM 'sing and dance' for the US president while in Israel, before adding, 'it worked'.

The cryptic and loaded messages raise uneasy questions that are yet to be answered. What was Epstein's interest in Modi's visit to Israel? At whose behest was he monitoring political leaders in India? Allegations that he was part of the 'deep state' in both the US and Israel have been made by credible sources like former CIA and Mossad officials but are unlikely to be confirmed anytime soon.

In another email exchange, Epstein refers to the 'Middle East' and says he was not happy about the developments there and that

he held particularly strong views on the subject. Even as the context remains a mystery, it is also baffling that he would have this exchange with Anil Ambani. The only plausible explanation is that he wanted the Indian industrialist to communicate his views to the Indian 'leadership'.

Epstein seemed to believe that Ambani was close to the Indian 'leadership' and was acting at their behest while seeking appointments to meet people in President Trump's inner circle at the time, like Steve Bannon. The Indian industrialist may have tried to convey his proximity to the political establishment in India by claiming that he was asked by the 'leadership' to facilitate PM Modi's visit to Washington DC and the White House and meet Jared Kushner, President Trump's son-in-law.

Puri's loud claims of innocence, his multiple appearances on TV channels to attack Rahul Gandhi and his attempts to prove his own innocence have made him look worse. "I have been in touch with terrorists. Does that make me a terrorist?" he petulantly asked in one of the interviews, missing the point that nobody had accused him of being a paedophile.

Before the government shut him up, Puri did a good job of tying himself in knots—he "didn't know who Epstein was", was "not aware of who he was going to meet" even while he was in the car ... it was his boss at the International Peace Institute who sent him to Epstein ... he was part of a delegation ... he "met Epstein only three or four times" ... he was "pitching for investment in India" and "promoting Digital India" ... Epstein's Manhattan town house was next to his and he

had lived in New York for eight years... "it was all professional" ... Epstein was merely charged with having sex with an underage girl...

The denials and deflections notwithstanding, emails point to a degree of familiarity the minister is unwilling to admit or explain. In one of the emails, Puri wrote, 'please let me know when you are back from your exotic island'. How did Puri know of the exotic island? Even if he had by then picked up details of Epstein's past and 'Pedo island', would a casual, professional acquaintance refer to it? There is no suggestion or hint that Puri ever visited the island, but he knew enough and was close enough to Epstein to sneak in a reference.

Multiple documents suggest that within months of meeting each other professionally, Puri was being frequently invited to lunch or dinner at Epstein's house. In January 2017, Puri wrote to Epstein, "If you are in town, I want to drop by to give you a copy of my book, *Perilous Interventions*." He requested a meeting in May 2017 as well. The references and the trail suddenly stop in September 2017 when Puri became a Union minister.

In the most damning exchange between Epstein and Anil Ambani, the former offers the services of a 'tall, Swedish blonde' woman. Ambani responds by writing, 'Arrange that'. What was it all about? Were the services sought by the industrialist for himself or for someone else? Ambani is not talking, and India does not have a law to make him speak. Indian investigating agencies are not likely to launch an inquiry, and the ministry of external affairs will no doubt dismiss the "trashy ruminations of a convicted criminal" with the contempt they deserve. ■

Photos: Getty Images



Tying himself in knots Attempts by Hardeep Puri (left) to explain his links to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein have only thrown up more questions than answers

The right to be a rogue (until you're caught)

Nikhil Gupta's guilty plea in the Pannun assassination attempt case is by no means the end of the story, writes Ashis Ray

Indian businessman and alleged drug trafficker Nikhil Gupta (54)—arrested in 2023 and presently in detention in New York—has pleaded guilty before a United States magistrate judge on three counts: 'murder-for-hire, conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire and conspiracy to commit money laundering'.

This in connection with the attempted assassination of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a New York-based American citizen who is general counsel for 'Sikhs for Justice', a body that demands that an independent state of 'Khalistan' be carved out of India.

The Indian government denied any connection to Gupta or Vikash Yadav, a former employee of the external intelligence agency R&AW, who allegedly supplied the target and the funds to hire an assassin in the US.

Gupta's family struggled to fund his defence; had he not pleaded guilty, he would have faced a criminal trial which would have meant being cross-examined and confronting evidence.

The sub-title of a press note circulated by the US Attorney's Office after Gupta's admission reads, in bold, 'Nikhil Gupta worked at the Direction of an Indian Government Employee to Arrange the Murder of US-based Leader of Sikh Separatist Movement.'

That and the contents of the document

rattled the nerve centre of India's espionage establishment.

The FBI's assistant director in charge, James Barnacle, Jr. is quoted as saying: 'At the direction and coordination of an Indian government employee, Nikhil Gupta plotted to assassinate a United States citizen on American soil.'

The note named 'VIKASH YADAV' as that

Indian government employee and a 'co-defendant' in the case, describing him as being 'at relevant times an Indian government employee, to plot the assassination of an attorney and political activist (Pannun)'. It further specified: 'YADAV was employed by the Government of India's Cabinet Secretariat, which houses India's foreign

intelligence service, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW).'

It continued: 'In or about June 2023, YADAV recruited GUPTA to orchestrate the assassination of the Victim (Pannun) in the United States. At YADAV's direction, GUPTA contacted an individual whom GUPTA believed to be a criminal associate, but who was in fact a confidential source working with the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) [the 'CS' or the confidential source], for assistance in contacting a hitman to murder the Victim in New York City.'

It detailed: 'YADAV subsequently agreed, in dealings brokered by GUPTA, to pay the UC [undercover officer] \$100,000 to murder the Victim. On or about June 9, 2023, YADAV and GUPTA arranged for an associate to

deliver \$15,000 in cash to the UC as an advance payment for the murder.'

It also stated: 'In or about June 2023, in furtherance of the assassination plot, YADAV provided GUPTA with personal information about the Victim, including the Victim's home address in New York City, phone numbers associated with the Victim, and details about the Victim's day-to-day conduct, which GUPTA passed to the UC. GUPTA thereafter provided YADAV with regular updates on the assassination plot, including surveillance photographs of the Victim.'

Pannun reacted by saying, 'The [Narendra] Modi government's claim that [the] murder-for-hire conspiracy was the act of a "rogue agent" collapses under the weight of the evidence presented in federal court.'

On 16 February, *Economic Times* reported, 'Indian officials reiterated their position that New Delhi wasn't involved in the alleged plot...' It did not identify who those officials were.

Gupta pleading guilty is by no means the end of the story. Yadav remains a co-accused, and prosecutors are clearly pointing to a department of the Indian government that directly operates under Modi and national security adviser Ajit Doval.



(Above) Nikhil Gupta, who has pleaded guilty in the Pannun case

The assassination attempt, an extraterritorial misadventure, could only have been authorised at the highest level of the Indian government

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The right to be a rogue (until caught)

Continued from page 1

The extrajudicial, extraterritorial adventure illustrated by the apparent assassination attempt could only have been authorised at the highest level. While Samant Goel headed R&AW at the time, the orders would undoubtedly have come from the top. Since its creation in 1968, R&AW has been a reasonably competent external intelligence outfit, not known for Rambo-style forays—at least until 2014.

After a rather short six-month stint as director of India's Intelligence Bureau, Doval espoused what the glibly swallowed as the 'defensive-offensive' doctrine. His harebrained ideas drew on Mossad's playbook and dovetailed with Modi's fanciful 'muscular foreign policy'. The result was Indian intelligence officers being declared persona non grata in North America, Britain and Australia—a significant handicap for India.

Yadav was indicted on the same three counts as Gupta. US authorities issued an arrest warrant in October 2024, and he remains on the Interpol Red Corner Notice hanging over his head. It is unknown how much Gupta has revealed—or will reveal—with the hope of reducing a potential 20-year prison sentence. (In the US, defendants can plea bargain by admitting guilt, typically spilling the beans about co-accused in lieu of a lighter sentence.)

Now that Gupta stands convicted by admission, the US could renew its interest in Yadav with a formal extradition request. New Delhi will likely stall on this, if not refuse altogether. Yadav has either been sacked or quit his government post by mutual agreement.

A cunning move by the Modi dispensation would be to prosecute him for the Pannun case or some other offence. (Delhi Police has reportedly registered an extortion case against him.) If he is taken into judicial custody, South Block could invoke the 1997 US-India Extradition Treaty to avoid extraditing him. After all, Yadav may have too much to say about who ordered Pannun's assassination.

Intelligence agencies have a history of striking quid pro quo

deals with suspects, accused or convicted criminals, hiring them for dirty jobs, while maintaining plausible deniability. The Indian government could have distanced itself from Gupta, but the evidence of his apparent links to Yadav seem to be undeniable, which puts the Modi regime in a tight corner.

The statement issued by the US Attorney's Office also cites the killing of Sikh separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar outside a gurdwara on the outskirts of Vancouver in June 2023. At the time, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau said there were "credible allegations" that agents of the Indian government were involved.

The Modi apparatus dismissed the allegation as "absurd". The economic damage inflicted on Canada by US President Donald Trump in the past year has, however, compelled the Canadian government—under new prime minister Mark Carney—to temporarily put the Nijjar issue on the backburner. A former governor of the Bank of England, Carney has prioritised consolidating commercial ties with the non-US world, including India.

Much of the evidence in the Nijjar case—including alleged intercepts of communications between Indian officials—was gathered by the US and shared with Canada, not to mention the other 'Five Eyes' countries: Britain, Australia and New Zealand. Trump's unreliability and a relative lack of confidence in the current heads of US intelligence outfits—Tulsi Gabbard, director of National Intelligence and Kash Patel, director of FBI—has made Canadian intelligence agencies cautious.

A murderous approach to Khalistanis abroad is, arguably, overkill. With minimal secessionist sentiment in Punjab, such an attitude not only amounts to killing a fly with a sledgehammer, but also runs the risk of reviving a dying movement. Overemphasising Pannun's importance has made him a Sikh hero.

Offensive counter-espionage only works if you don't get caught. ■

ASHIS RAY was formerly editor-at-large of CNN. He is the author of *The Trial that Shook Britain*

The importance of being Gurinder Singh Dhillon

Is the head of the influential Radha Soami Satsang Beas transitioning to a political role?

Herjinder

In a state where religion and politics have long shared a porous boundary, recent developments around Gurinder Singh Dhillon have sparked intense debate. The spiritual head of the influential Radha Soami Satsang Beas—widely known to his followers simply as 'Baba'—appears to have stepped into Punjab's political theatre in a manner unprecedented for a dera chief.

The immediate trigger was Dhillon's visit to meet jailed senior Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leader Bikram Singh Majithia, who has been embroiled in legal battles over a disproportionate assets case (he is also facing drug-related charges). After the meeting (on 1 February), Dhillon publicly declared Majithia to be innocent. Whether that assessment was legally sound or not is beside the point. In a politically charged Punjab, such a statement from the head of the state's largest dera amounted to a clear political signal—one widely interpreted as a rebuke to the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government.

Dhillon's political visibility did not end there. On 10 February, he joined state governor Gulab Chand Kataria at an anti-drug awareness foot march in Ferozepur. Sharing the stage were SAD president Sukhbir Singh Badal and Punjab BJP's acting chief Ashwani Sharma. The optics were striking: a spiritual leader walking alongside leaders of rival political parties united in their opposition to the AAP.

A closed-door meeting during the event fuelled further speculation. Political circles buzzed with rumours that Dhillon was playing facilitator in reviving a potential SAD-BJP alliance to counter AAP and Congress. Observers described his role as that of a 'bridge'—someone capable of fostering cross-party cooperation on ostensibly social issues such as drug de-addiction, but with unmistakable political undertones.

Some went further, suggesting that the BJP, which is still struggling to find its feet in Punjab's complex political terrain, may see Dhillon as a possible chief ministerial face. While there is no formal indication of such a plan, the conjecture underscores the dramatic shift in conversation around the dera chief.

Visits by political heavyweights to Dera Beas are not new. Prime minister Narendra Modi, home minister Amit Shah and RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat have all been to the dera in recent years. Such visits are part of the state's longstanding political culture, where religious and spiritual institutions are courted before elections.

What is new, however, is the apparent reversal of roles. Traditionally, it's the politicians who seek blessings; rarely does a dera chief step so visibly into what seems like active political engagement.

Amritsar-based political observer Jagrup Singh Sekhon argues that the BJP is leaving no stone unturned to become a relevant player in Punjab. According to him, the party is attempting to disrupt established political equations and carve out space in a state where it has

With the BJP trying to carve out space in Punjab, where it has struggled, Dhillon's increased public activity acquires significance



Gurinder Singh Dhillon, head of Radha Soami Satsang Beas, at the Golden Temple

historically struggled. In that context, Dhillon's increased public activity acquires added significance.

Radha Soami Satsang Beas is arguably the most influential dera in Punjab, with millions of followers in India and abroad. Its vast network and disciplined structure give it formidable social capital. Yet, despite the perception of deras as vote banks, there is little empirical data to conclusively prove that dera endorsements directly translate into electoral outcomes. Political parties continue to seek their support and the actual impact on voting patterns remains largely anecdotal.

Dhillon's own public image has also been shaped by controversy. He was named in proceedings linked to the Ranbaxy scandal involving former promoters Malvinder and Shivinder Singh. Malvinder Singh alleged in court that a part of the proceeds from the sale of Ranbaxy Laboratories stake was diverted to Dhillon and his family.

In 2019, the Delhi High Court issued garnishee orders—a directive requiring a third party to pay funds directly to a creditor to satisfy a debt—against Dhillon, his family members and dozens of other entities.

Initially, the Dhillon family filed affidavits stating they did not owe money to Ranbaxy. Later that year,

Dhillon acknowledged certain financial transactions dating back to 2006, though he disputed the scale of liability claimed and maintained that a full and clear account of transactions had not been presented. This dented the dera chief's otherwise low-profile public persona.

Some analysts suggest that Dhillon's visible proximity to national leaders in the years following the Ranbaxy controversy may have been strategic—a way to consolidate influence or ensure institutional protection during turbulent times. Whether such claims remain speculative, they contribute to the broader narrative now unfolding.

In a significant and somewhat rare organisational decision, Dhillon named Jasdeep Singh Gill as his successor in September 2024. Gill's profile is markedly different: an alumnus of prestigious institutions including IIT, MIT and Cambridge, he has corporate experience that includes serving as a senior official at Ranbaxy. The move was seen as an attempt to institutionalise succession and insulate the dera from future turbulence.

Against this backdrop, Dhillon's recent political engagements appear more consequential. Is he gradually transitioning from spiritual leadership to a political role? ■

'Artificial' Intelligence and 'Natural' Greed

BOOK EXTRACT

Nandita Haksar

Artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics are no longer the stuff of science fiction; they have become a part of our everyday lives. India now ranks among the fastest-growing AI economies in the world [it just hosted the AI Impact Summit, 16-20 February 2026, attended by several heads of state]. With the growing threat of displacement and disruption by AI and new technologies, however, should we, Indian citizens, be proud or should we be alarmed?

Our government, like all governments around the world, paints a rosy picture of our AI-powered future. Take, for example, NITI Aayog's report, 'AI for Inclusive Societal Development' (October 2025), which promises that AI will empower India's 490 million informal workers by expanding access to healthcare, education, skilling and financial inclusion. The report highlights how AI-driven tools can boost productivity and resilience for millions who form the backbone of India's economy. The report also stresses that technology can bridge deep social and economic divides, ensuring that the benefits of AI reach every citizen. The Union Cabinet approved the India AI Mission in March 2024, with a budget outlay of Rs 10,371.92 crore over five years. A NITI Aayog report estimates that AI could add between US\$ 500 and 600 billion dollars to India's GDP by 2035.

Geoffrey Hinton, the 2024 Nobel Prize-winning computer scientist known as the 'godfather of Artificial Intelligence', has warned that AI may wipe out millions of jobs, while emphasising that the real danger does not lie with the technology, but with how society wants to deploy it. Hinton warns that AI systems might be able to

control humans just as easily as an adult can bribe a three-year-old child with candy.

Hinton says, "What's actually going to happen is rich people are going to use AI to replace workers. It's going to create massive unemployment and a huge rise in profits. It will make a few people much richer and most people poorer. That's not AI's fault, that is the capitalist system."

It is said that AI technologies are more environment-friendly, but in fact, they consume unfathomable amounts of data, labour and natural resources. For example, a single AI query can consume up to ten times more power than a basic online search and training a large language model can use over 1,000 megawatt-hours of electricity, roughly equal to the consumption by several hundred Indian households.

These technologies can lead to water scarcity. Cooling systems in large data centres rely on water-based technology, yet over 80 per cent of the facilities today are located in water scarce states such as Maharashtra, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu. In Bengaluru, data centres already consume nearly eight million litres of water each day, even as the city faces extreme water shortages. And then there are the robots.

A media report in April 2025 carried the heading that maids were being replaced by robots in Bengaluru. The report was about Manisha Roy from Hebbal, who replaced her cook with a kitchen robot capable of chopping, sautéing, and steaming. "Now I do other household chores while the food is

getting ready, because I know my food won't be charred," she shared.

The report stated that this shift is driven by the desire for consistent, hassle-free assistance. Robots offer reliability, and their one-time cost proves economical over a period of time. There is not even a passing mention of the impact of this shift on the maids, the tens of thousands of women who work as domestic help across the country to support their families.

One of the reasons is, as Karen Hao points out, AI generative technologies spawn "heightened volumes of misinformation". News reports and video clips celebrate how humanoids can paint, dance, play sports, and some have even learnt embroidery. There are news items which announced that robots in warehouses are loading and unloading materials, and there are some factories run entirely by robots called smart factories. Amidst all this reporting, full of joy and

wonder, there is very little mention of the impact of these new technologies on the lives of the millions of workers who are being displaced by automation and AI-driven robots.

India is one of the youngest nations in the world, with more than 62 per cent of its population in the working age group (15-59 years), and more than 54 per cent of its total population below 25 years of age. The government recognises that India faces a dual challenge of paucity of a highly trained workforce, as well as non-employability of large sections of the conventionally educated youth, who possess little or no job skills.

The Skill India programme was introduced by the central government in 2015 to upgrade the skills of workers to prepare them for the transition to new technologies. However, this scheme has not achieved its purported goal, according to the latest report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India. In its Performance audit of the Pradhan Mantri Kausal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), the CAG report has highlighted serious gaps in the implementation of India's flagship skill development scheme.

Trade union movements in India have come out strongly against the new labour codes [and the draft Shram Shakti Niti 2025]

However, they have so far not engaged with the question of new technologies and the disruption caused by them in working class lives. This disruption has been felt by the middle class as well when

major Indian IT companies, including TCS, Infosys, Tech Mahindra and Wipro, theiry began restructuring, quietly workforce, taking more than 50,000 people off their rolls. There have been mass layoffs in the manufacturing sector as well, especially in the automotive sector.

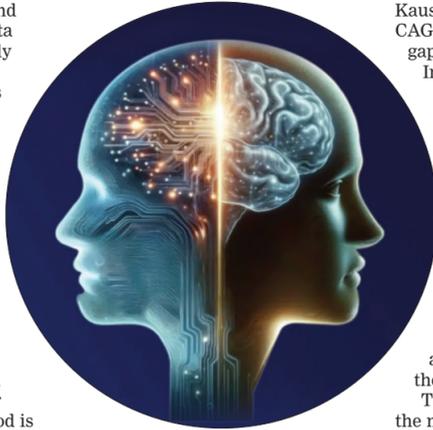
According to a pamphlet brought out in May 2025 by the Maruti Suzuki Asthaya Mazdoor Sangh, 'Suzuki presently employs 34,918 workers out of whom only 18 per cent are permanent, 40.72 per cent are contractual workers, 21.6 per cent are temporary workers (TW), 21 per cent are trainees (MST and SST) and apprentices. The vast non-permanent workforce together accounts for more than 80 per cent of the total workforce'.

These figures match the figures given in a report on the 'Future of Work in India's Automotive Sector', which observed 'a significant ratio of non-standard employment to permanent workers across OEMs (Original Equipment Manufacturers) and tier 1 vendors, with bulk of the work on the shop floor being performed by workers in non-standard employment'.

Some experts optimistically argue that during the past three industrial revolutions, driven by steam, electricity and digital technologies, people were displaced and there was disruption, but ultimately more jobs were created. The same will happen this time too. However, the fundamental difference between the other technological revolutions and the fourth industrial revolution is that human beings are being replaced with robots, which will, in turn, lead to industries without workers and growth without employment. ■

NANDITA HAKSAR is a lawyer and human rights activist

The impact of these new technologies on the lives of workers displaced by automation and AI-driven robots finds very little airtime



Call it the 'Mohammad Deepak effect'

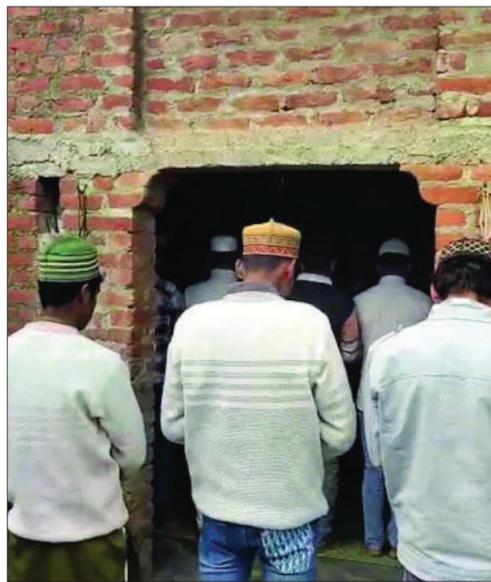
Are common folk in the Hindutva hate labs of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand pushing back? **Nandlal Sharma** reports

There's resistance in a state where a saffron scarf is a licence to assault—or even kill. Where a complaint from a BJP functionary is enough to get a headmaster suspended. Where universities prevent students from entering their own campuses but unnumbered vehicles bearing armed Hindutva hoodlums can roll in unchecked. Where Muslims can be arrested for offering Friday prayers inside a vacant house, even with permission. There's resistance in the state where Muslims are arrested for the slightest whiff of criticism in their social media posts. Call it the 'Mohammad Deepak effect', or call it the Allahabad High Court effect, reports coming in from Mathura, Allahabad, Varanasi—even Jaipur—suggest that the people are pushing back.

In a primary school in Mathura, headmaster Jan Mohammad has been reinstated—but only after the village panchayat of 20,000 people took to the streets. Locals rose above caste and religion and stood up to the ruling party's MLA and his associates. Teachers protested, students rallied behind their headmaster and over 300 villagers went to meet the district magistrate. A former MLA testified in his support. Only then did the administration relent. The children say their headmaster is excellent, fair and just. But in the eyes of a BJP leader, the integrity of this Muslim—who had spent 12 years in the paramilitary forces—had become intolerable.

Shyamsundar Sharma, eight-time former MLA from Mant in Mathura district, says that during the Special Intensive Revision (SIR), Jan Mohammad served as a booth level officer. Sharma alleges that BJP legislator Rajesh Chaudhary handed Jan Mohammad a list of voters. When Jan Mohammad refused to delete any names, the MLA allegedly threatened him: "You better watch out." Jan Mohammad reportedly replied, "Either way I'm dead, so why not die doing the right thing?" Soon after, Durgesh Pradhan, BJP president of Bajna mandal of Mant and resident of Nausherpur, filed a complaint against him.

The complaint alleged that at Nohjheel Primary School No. 1—where Jan Mohammad is the only Muslim teacher with five Hindu assistant teachers and two *shiksha mitras* on his staff—the headmaster lured children towards Islam, brainwashed them into offering namaz and insulted Hindu deities. It accused him of calling Hinduism inferior and of carrying out 'suspicious activities' to propagate Islam. It



Jan Mohammad (top) and Mohd. Deepak (above) were supported by locals; (left) offering Friday prayers in a vacant house invited police action

further claimed that he did not conduct the national anthem in the mornings and discouraged children if they tried to sing it. Also, Muslim clerics and members of the Tablighi Jamaat were frequent visitors to the school to pressure children and their families to adopt Islam.

On the basis of this complaint, the administration suspended Jan Mohammad within 24 hours—without any investigation—despite his 17 years of service. The suspension order, issued on 31 January 2026, by district basic education officer Ratan Kirti, said he appeared prima facie guilty of neglecting official duties and violating the Government Servants' Conduct Rules, 1999. He was attached to another primary school in Mant block, and a two-member inquiry committee was formed and given one month to report.

Public protest changed the course of events. On 3 February, the administration curtailed the inquiry period to three days. By 6 February, after recording written statements from students, parents, teachers and locals, the committee found none of the allegations were substantiated. Jan Mohammad was reinstated—with full pay.

Intervention by local residents, teachers' unions and public representatives forced the education officer to reconsider. Yet Jan

Mohammad fears reprisal. He does not wish to speak to the media and says he doesn't want any politics in his name. He'll fight his own battles, he says. But local resident Devdutt Pathak has a different take: "If people hadn't stood by him, he wouldn't have been reinstated."

Meanwhile, 15 Supreme Court advocates have stepped forward to support Mohammad Deepak, who defended Wakeel Ahmed—the elderly owner of Baba Dresses in Kotdwar, Uttarakhand—from Bajrang Dal hooligans.

After a 26 January clash where Deepak's family was abused by Hindutva hoods from Dehradun, Deepak's gym saw a drastic drop of members from 150 to 15. Social media users launched a campaign, encouraging people in Kotdwar to join his gym. A handle (@avidandiya) pledged to sponsor one month's membership for the first 100 people. By 17 February, the tweet had garnered 344 replies, over 1,900 retweets and 10,000 likes. Public figures amplified similar posts. On 8 February, CPI(M) parliamentary leader John Brittas met Ahmed and Deepak in Kotdwar. Brittas toured the gym and took a membership. Other advocates followed, taking gym

memberships and offering pro bono legal help. While Mohammad Deepak has paid a price for standing against hate—the people are standing with him.

Soon after the Kotdwar incident, Abdul Jabbar, who runs Pundir Tailors in Dehradun was harassed by Bajrang Dal members. That video also circulated widely. When local media visited the shop, the locals called Jabbar a decent man and condemned the hooligans.

On 14 February 2026, Valentine's Day, a video emerged from Jaipur. Young men wearing saffron scarves and carrying sticks were seen roaming in a park, threatening couples, demanding to know their religion and relationship. Some youths surrounded the vigilantes and asked: Who gave you the right to bully? Are you the police? Show your ID. Which organisation do you belong to? Who is your leader? The men had no answers, except, "Can't you see our scarves? We're from the Bajrang Dal." Feeling the heat from the young people, they fled.

Dr Medusa—known for her scathing satire of the Modi regime and its politics of hate—wrote on X that the video healed something inside her she hadn't realised was broken. "First Mohammad Deepak... and now this. Is the country truly healing—or am I being naïve?"

From Varanasi came a video of vigilantes descending on a 60-year-old *bakra mandi* (goat market) to 'check' vendors' licences. Abdullah, legal advisor of the local Goat Meat Union, said their aim was to target livelihoods and vitiate the atmosphere by spreading rumours of cow slaughter. A dozen men posing as officials demanded licences but the locals united, demanded their ID cards and forced them to turn tail.

Resident Adil Khan said thousands depend on the registered market, which operates daily from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., and is well known to the police. After inspection, authorities confirmed that no cow slaughter had occurred.

At Allahabad University, students associated with the Disha Students' Organization, paid the price for their activism. The cultural group organises film screenings, study circles and discussions around youth issues. The group had already drawn attention for a song sung by Disha member Priyanshu—"Kaho Narender, hazaar aa raha?" (So, Narender, are you having fun?)—that went viral on social media.

Following the Supreme Court stay on the new UGC regulations, Disha organised an event to debate the pros and cons. Around two dozen people were present at Bargad Lawn in the Arts Faculty of Allahabad University, when an unruly mob of 40-odd arrived, reportedly led by Bhavesh Dubey, a leader of the RSS-aligned Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP).

A Bajrang Dal vehicle entered the campus. The men called out a postgraduate student, Chandraprakash, grabbed his collar and assaulted him. When others intervened, they were abused with casteist slurs and beaten. Female students were allegedly dragged by their hair and kicked. The university administration watched silently. Several students, including Nidhi, Sanjay, Pooja, Soumya and Chandraprakash were seriously injured.

The victims do not dismiss the possibility that their viral song made them targets. When more students gathered, the attackers fled. The proctor also arrived but allegedly let the attackers escape and took the victims to his office instead.

The administration has suspended Nidhi and Bhavesh Dubey and issued show-cause notices. A complaint has been filed, but police say they won't register an FIR till the university report comes in. ■

The video healed her, Dr Medusa, known for her satire of the politics of hate, wrote on X. "First Mohd. Deepak... and now this. Is the country healing—or am I being naïve?"

Brace yourself for a deluge of GM crops

With the India-US trade deal, the Modi government has effectively sold off the interests of Indian farmers, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

Union agriculture minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has finally ended his silence on the Indo-US trade deal. On 17 February, Chouhan—who only last year said India needed to be cautious about allowing the entry of Genetically Modified (GM) crops—declared that Indian farmers had nothing to worry about, their interests were 'completely protected' in the ongoing negotiations. He said little on importing soyabean oil from genetically modified soyabeans and DDG (dried distillers' grains) made from GM maize, both of which find mention in the joint framework to the 'interim trade agreement'.

Down to Earth, the journal dedicated to environmental concerns, pointed out that a Centre for Science and Environment investigation in 2018 had found 'GM ingredients in 32 per cent of 65 food products in India, 80 per cent of them imported'.

Sridhar Krishnaswami, a researcher with the Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture (ASHA-Kisan Swaraj), fears that "DDGs and soyabean are just a ploy and that our agricultural market is going to be totally opened up." Why else would the US insist on India removing or relaxing 'restrictive' trade practices?

GM foods green-signalled in the deal include soyabean oil and DDGs made from GM maize and used for cattle and poultry feed. By doing so, the Modi government ended India's long-term moratorium on GM food crops. Under the Environment (Protection) Act 1986, the import of GM crops was disallowed; an exception was made for BT cotton in 2002.

India insisted that approval was required for every GM organism entering the food chain. As late as November 2022, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India had made it mandatory to label foods containing one per cent or more GM content insisting that all import consignments had to certify their non-GM status. In 2009, there was public backlash against moves to allow BT brinjal cultivation. This time, public reaction is muted because of lack of clarity and absence of details about the deal being negotiated. Even so, several experts say it is obvious that India has bowed to the pressure of major global seed companies (Bayer-Monsanto, Dupont Pioneer, Syngenta, Dow) and to the US, which is the

largest exporter of GM crops in the world.

Founder of Gene Campaign Suman Sahai believes the US desperately needed a market for its soyabean and corn, because China, once its top buyer, has dramatically scaled back its purchases. "Trump could not afford to annoy his large political base of soyabean and corn farmers, hence the pressure on us," says Sahai.

GM crops are plants whose DNA has been altered using genetic engineering techniques to introduce new traits such as resistance to insects and tolerance of herbicides and climate stress. This technology differs from traditional breeding, which mixes genes within a crop's broader family over several generations.

Experts believe India walked into this deal with its eyes closed, overlooking the 'precautionary principle'—followed by several countries—that prioritises the environment and health and safety measures while prohibiting the cultivation and entry of GM crops. More importantly, we are overlooking the fact that India is the centre of origin and genetic diversity for several crops. Regulators have repeatedly cited risks related to gene flow, biodiversity loss and long-term ecological impact.

Shockingly, civil society has remained largely silent on the alarming repercussions of the side entry of GM food products. Could they have swallowed minister of commerce and industry Piyush Goyal's assurances to the contrary?

India produces around 13.05 million tonnes of soya bean and approximately 42 million tonnes of corn, 20 per cent of which is used to make fuel-grade ethanol. Self-sufficient in its corn output, India imports soya oil for cooking because it lacks the processing infrastructure for edible oil. Farmers of soya and corn complain that prices of both these crops are depressed with the government not buying enough and traders paying much below the minimum support price (MSP) set by the government. As a result, even their production costs are not being met.

Farmers worry that these losses will mount if US goods enter the Indian market. For one, it will immediately hit their export market. Both soya and corn from India are being sold in the international market primarily because both are non-GM crops. "Once we are inundated with



Low yields and high-cost technology aggravated farmers' distress after BT cotton entered India

Photo: Getty Images

farmers into debt. BT cotton requires regular quantities of water—erratic rainfall caused crop failure. Pests like the pink bollworm developed pesticide resistance, compelling farmers to increase the use of pesticides. Lower yields combined with high-cost technology accelerated farmer distress, triggering a wave of suicides.

Krishnaswami believes the trade deal was deliberately stalled by the US for several months in order to arm-twist India to grant a back-door entry to GM crops. "Apart from the cost issue, there are proprietary concerns because the company holding the patent receives a cut on the sale of every packet of seed sold in the country," he points out. "The hard truth is that our regulatory sovereignty has been diluted because the US will end up demanding a harmonisation of our regulatory measures with that of the US."

The late Dr P.M. Bhargava, widely regarded as the architect of modern biology and biotechnology in India and founder-director of the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, consistently warned against both the import and cultivation of GM foods without comprehensive risk assessments of their effects on soil and surrounding fauna. The most disturbing aspect is that toxicity tests are being conducted by the multinational seed companies themselves, each with a vested interest in ensuring that their genetically modified organisms (GMO) are declared safe.

While studies have proved that genetically modified DNA in oils do not disappear just because they are processed, Piyush Goyal justified the import of soya oil at the presser by saying that "when a processed item is imported, the GM effects are no longer there".

National convener of ASHA-Kisan Swaraj Kirankumar Vissa says, "The minister's statement is both unscientific and opportunistic. Each product needs its own biosafety assessment. That is why we have a statutory regulatory framework. We are flouting domestic laws made by our Parliament to appease the Trump administration, throwing our citizens' interests away in the bargain. This 'interim agreement framework' is the first round of opening up Indian agriculture, to be followed by many more crops and animal products in the future, even while claiming protection." ■

American stuff, this will create doubts of adulteration in the minds of foreign buyers, who might no longer show interest in buying from us," said a soya farmer from Madhya Pradesh.

Farmer organisations have also expressed fears that the elimination of tariffs on the import of 'a wide range of US food and agricultural products' will undermine Indian farmers, horticulturists and oilseed growers, distort feed and livestock markets, and increase dependence on imports. In particular, the import of DDGs and red sorghum will impact the income of millions of farmers growing maize, jowar, soyabean and other crops used for fodder and feed for animals and poultry.

Once the floodgates of GM crops open, import will not be restricted to soya and maize. The US already has GM apples and GM fish in the market—many more are in the pipeline. Once restrictions are removed, will all these GM crops also be dumped in India?

India's experience with BT cotton should have been a wakeup call. We are Monsanto's biggest market outside the US—90 per cent of cotton seeds are sold in our country. BT cotton was introduced with much fanfare in 2002 with farmers promised a huge increase in yields. They were soon disillusioned. The seeds were expensive and forced small

Once the floodgates open, GM imports won't be restricted to soya and maize. The US already has GM apples and fish in the market, and more are in the pipeline

16th FINANCE COMMISSION REPORT

Will the nod at efficiency undermine equity?

Ajit Ranade

India's fiscal federalism on a deceptively simple bargain: the Union collects most broad-based taxes while the states carry the frontline responsibility for essential public services—schools, hospitals, policing, local roads, water supply and much else. The tax revenues and spending duties do not match. Indeed, states have two-thirds expenditure obligations, but control only about a third of revenues. So, the Constitution created a neutral referee—the Finance Commission (FC)—to periodically recommend how the 'divisible pool' of Central taxes should be shared between the Union and the states (vertical devolution) and among the states (horizontal devolution).

The Commission is reconstituted every five years, so that the division formula can adapt to changing realities rather than be frozen forever. The core job of the Commission follows from Article 280 and the implementation of recommendations from Article 281. In practice, FC awards become the financial 'operating system' of Indian federalism. They affect the monthly cash that states receive, their budget space for welfare and capital spending and even their ability to borrow.

With the 16th Finance Commission (FC-16) report now accepted by the Union government and placed before Parliament, the new formula will shape Centre-state fiscal relations for 2026–31. The key question is not just 'who gets how much' but what incentives the system creates—especially in a federation where prosperity and political power are unevenly distributed.

Like the previous Commission, FC-16 has retained the states' share at 41 per cent of the divisible pool. There was a demand from 22 states to increase their share to 50 per cent. This was partly due to their grievance concerning the trend of the Union's rising reliance on cesses and surcharges, which typically sit outside the divisible pool and therefore are not shared. As per the FC-16 report, since the total size of the divisible pool will nearly double from Rs 55 trillion to Rs 90 trillion during the FC-16 period, the states will have considerably more resources. But if the Union continues to expand non-shareable levies, the 41 per cent can feel smaller in effect than in the headlines.

The most striking element of FC-16 is on the horizontal side: it introduces



Photo: Getty Images

In a system where prosperity and political power are unevenly distributed, the key question is not who gets how much but what the incentives are

'contribution to national GDP' as a criterion with 10 per cent weight. The Commission does this by reducing weights elsewhere—cutting per capita income distance and demographic performance by 2.5 percentage points each, trimming area by 5 percentage points, and removing the (small) tax effort weight used by FC-15. It is as if the Commission now seeks a balance between its central role of 'gap filling' of shortfall in resources, with a new reward for efficiency signal. A reward for states that contribute more to the national output.

Why is this a big deal? Because it shifts the moral language of transfers. For decades, the dominant logic was: help states to provide comparable basic services—despite differences in income and capacity—and offset structural disadvantages. Economists call this 'equalisation'. The new GDP-contribution criterion, in effect, says: performance and contribution also matter. This is not really contrary to the spirit of the Constitution, but the change in emphasis is profound.

FC-16 shifts the moral language of transfers. From helping poorer states offset structural disadvantages ('equalisation') to rewarding 'contribution to GDP'

Constitutionally, the Commission is to recommend a fair distribution of shareable taxes so that different levels of government can discharge responsibilities assigned in the Constitution. The FC has always used a mix of criteria—some anchored in equity (income distance, population, area, forest) and some that try to recognise efficiency (tax effort, fiscal discipline, demographic performance).

Adding 'contribution to GDP' is therefore not automatically unconstitutional. The deeper question is normative: what should be the dominant objective of tax devolution? Introducing GDP contribution can conflict with the revenue-disability logic. Besides, all states are not on a level playing field. A rich state often has better infrastructure and institutions that make it easier to respond to 'performance incentives', while a poorer state may not be able to do so quickly even if it wants to. The divergence may worsen. Some so-called backward states are incentivised to keep their forest cover and

slow down the pace of urbanisation, thereby resulting in slower GDP growth. Rewarding 'contribution' can harden advantages, unless compensated by investment in capacity and human capital in the lagging states.

The FC-16 report emphasises that equalisation remains the 'centre of gravity', with per-capita income distance still dominant. But incentives matter because they influence political narratives and administrative choices.

There are three possible behavioural effects. First, high-performing states will feel less penalised. This may reduce resentment in parts of the south and west of India, where the argument has been: "We contribute more, yet our share keeps shrinking." Second, lagging states may face weaker 'gap-filling' comfort. If they fear that future Commissions will steadily raise the 'performance' component, they may push harder for other compensations—special packages, centrally sponsored schemes, discretionary grants. Third, the conversation may shift from 'need' to 'merit'. This is politically potent and risky for cooperative federalism, since poorer regions will believe that the system doesn't provide safety nets anymore.

Whether the so-called north-south tension will ease will depend on other political and demographic factors. As such, the political centre of gravity is in the north and east, whereas the economic weight is more in the south. This structural imbalance cannot be addressed by the FC-16 alone. Given the sensitivities, any change in formula becomes a proxy for larger anxieties: representation, voice, fairness.

The other issue of increasing dependence on non-shareable levies like cesses and surcharges is still unresolved. Additionally, the surplus transfer from the Reserve Bank of India budgeted at 3.1 trillion per cent of Union revenues; it is non-shareable and is on a rising trend.

FC-16 is a 'continuity with a twist' award: stability on the vertical share, but a meaningful signal on the horizontal formula. It nudges India's fiscal federalism away from a pure 'gap-filling' narrative towards a mixed model that also acknowledges contribution and growth. To some extent it prevents fiscal bargaining between the Union and states from becoming a permanent tug-of-war in the political arena. But its legitimacy depends on fair and transparent rules and certainly not on encouraging stealth through non-shareable levies. India needs both: a credible equalisation system so every citizen can access minimum quality public services regardless of birthplace and a governance culture that rewards growth, reforms and revenue effort without locking poorer states into permanent dependence.

If that balance fails, we will not just argue about percentages—we will argue about the very idea of cooperative federalism. ■

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

Tarique Rahman's test at the edge of the Ganga

Ashok Swain

With the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) winning a decisive two-thirds majority and Tarique Rahman sworn in as prime minister, the country has, for the first time in almost 35 years, a male head of government. The electoral outcome marks a rupture with a political order dominated for more than 15 years by Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League.

Expectations are high and the pressures on the new prime minister are immense. Internally, Rahman faces the urgent task of restoring law and order after years of politicised policing, rebuilding public trust in state institutions and stabilising a battered economy.

He must also reform the Constitution, but his party MPs declined to take a second pledge to serve as members of the proposed Constitution Reform Council, leading to protests by the Opposition Jamaat-e-Islami and the National Citizens Party (NCP). The newly elected BNP legislators argued that the Council has not been incorporated into the existing Constitution and that any such body or reforms must first be legally adopted through parliamentary processes.

Externally, however, the most daunting challenges lie in managing relations with India, Bangladesh's most important and

powerful neighbour, where unresolved political and structural issues threaten to define the early years of his premiership.

The most immediate bilateral complication concerns Sheikh Hasina's presence in India. Following her political downfall and subsequent convictions in Bangladesh, including death sentences, her asylum in India is both a symbolic and practical sticking point. Demanding Hasina's extradition will be popular at home but diplomatically futile. India is unlikely to hand her over, not least because of historical constraints. A more realistic scenario, one that both sides may quietly accept, is that Hasina continues to reside in India with restrictions on her political activities. But even if this sensitive issue is managed through tacit understandings rather than formal agreements, it will continue to linger as a source of mistrust.

The more consequential test of Bangladesh-India ties, however, lies elsewhere. The Ganga Water Sharing Treaty, signed in 1996 for 30 years, will expire in December 2026. The treaty governs dry-season (January–May) water sharing at the Farakka barrage in West Bengal. If the water levels in Bangladesh at a vulnerable time of the year. Negotiations cannot be postponed, therefore, until the treaty's formal end; an understanding must be reached well in advance to avert a crisis.

For Bangladesh, the stakes couldn't be higher. The Ganga is a lifeline that sustains agriculture, fisheries, navigation, ecosystems and livelihoods across large parts of the country's southwest. Reduced dry-season flows since the construction and operation of the Farakka barrage in 1975 have already contributed to declining crop yields, loss of biodiversity and socio-economic stress. These impacts are cumulative and structural, not episodic. A further reduction in water availability will deepen anxieties in Bangladesh and pressure a fragile rural economy.

For India, particularly the Modi government, the politics of renegotiation are complex. While water sharing with Bangladesh is officially a bilateral matter, in practice it is deeply entangled with



The flow in the Ganga has reduced considerably since the Ganga Water Sharing Treaty was signed in 1996. Renegotiating the arrangement would be Tarique Rahman's first foreign policy test

India's federal politics.

West Bengal, where the Farakka barrage is located, holds significant leverage over any agreement that affects upstream withdrawals. Securing the consent of the West Bengal government for a water-sharing arrangement that Bangladesh would consider fair and sustainable has historically been difficult, and under the current political conditions, when the state election is just a few months away, it may be even more so.

The Modi government has a track of prioritising short-term political benefits at home over regional water cooperation, especially if it reckons that denying concessions to neighbouring countries can yield electoral gains in key states.

The changing hydrological signature of the Ganga will make the upcoming negotiations even more difficult. Population growth and development on both sides of the border have sharply increased water demand, while climate change has introduced new uncertainties about the reliability of the Ganga's flow. Changing monsoon

patterns, increased variability in precipitation, glacial retreat in the Himalayas and more frequent extreme events are all reshaping the river's hydrology.

The Ganga Water Sharing Treaty of 1996 divided water between India and Bangladesh based on historical average flows from 1949 to 1988. Since then, water flow in the Ganga has reduced considerably. A recent study by researchers at IIT Gandhinagar indicates that since 1980 the annual water flow in the Indus Basin has increased by eight per cent, while the Ganga Basin has experienced a decline of 17 per cent. The assumption of stable and predictable dry-season flows that underpinned earlier negotiations, and the 1996 treaty, is no longer tenable.

For Bangladesh's perspective, this reinforces a long-standing concern. The 1996 treaty was celebrated as a diplomatic breakthrough, but it was a compromise shaped by political consideration. While locking the two countries into an allocation formula tied to historical flow data, the treaty did not establish an adaptive basin-wide framework capable of responding to climate change. As climate pressures

intensify, the rigid sharing formula will become a liability, exposing downstream Bangladesh to risks it did little to create.

While navigating this terrain, Tarique Rahman will need strategic clarity, political courage and diplomatic finesse. Unlike Sheikh Hasina, he cannot rely on personal rapport with New Delhi or ideological alignment to smooth over structural disagreements. His government will need to articulate Bangladesh's water security concerns in a manner that is firm yet constructive, avoiding nationalist escalation while refusing to accept arrangements that perpetuate vulnerability. Politically, it will be suicidal for Rahman to accept an agreement less favourable to Bangladesh than the treaty negotiated by Sheikh Hasina in 1996.

Long-term water security in the Ganga basin depends on data sharing, joint monitoring, flexible allocation mechanisms and a cooperative approach to water management. Whether the Modi government, which often appears more committed to short-term political gains at home than to long-term regional stability and national interest, is willing to move in this direction remains an open question.

Threats to review or weaponise existing water agreements have become signalling of India's broader regional signalling. In an environment where the Indus Water Treaty has been kept in abeyance, persuading New Delhi to adopt a more cooperative and adaptive framework for the Ganga will be exceptionally challenging. Yet failure to do so will carry costs. A breakdown in negotiations will not only damage Bangladesh-India ties but also undermine the regional stability of South Asia.

The renegotiation of the Ganga treaty will be the defining foreign policy test of Tarique Rahman's early premiership. More than trade or symbolic gestures of goodwill, it will show whether he can protect Bangladesh's interests while maintaining a workable relationship with India. It will also test India's willingness to act as a responsible regional power rather than an uncompromising upstream hegemon. ■

ASHOK SWAIN is a professor of peace and conflict research and UNESCO Chair on International Water Cooperation at Uppsala University, Sweden

Karnataka at Davos: Engineering the Next 25 Years of Growth, Infrastructure and Global Leadership

Nestled in the Swiss Alps, Davos-Klosters came alive from 19–23 January 2026 as world leaders convened for the prestigious World Economic Forum Annual Meeting under the theme “A Spirit of Dialogue.” Amid this global congregation, Karnataka made its presence felt — not merely addressing the present, but laying out bold plans for the next 25 years.

The summit, a crucible for ideas and international collaboration, hosted forward-looking discussions on pressing global challenges and shared priorities. Leading the Karnataka delegation led by Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar and Large and Medium Industries Minister M.B.



Photo: Gettyimages

Thinking of Developing Transport Grids for All Cities in Karnataka

Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar said that transport grids are being planned for all the cities in the State keeping in mind a 25-year horizon.

Addressing a press conference at Vidhana Soudha in Bengaluru after returning from his visit to the World Economic Forum at Davos, he said:

“During the Davos meet, companies have expressed interest in investing in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities as well. Companies want infrastructure in these towns. We are looking at developing a transport grid including Ring Roads for all the cities in the State keeping in mind growth projections for the next 25 years. Time is precious and we need to plan for it from now itself in association with various departments.” “The investors are predicting 70% urbanization levels in the next 25 years and they wanted to know our plan to develop required infrastructure. In this backdrop, we have decided to develop a transport grid including aspects like road needs and road widths, etc.,” he added.

Patil underscored the importance of dialogue, decisive leadership, and collective action in shaping a future-ready, interconnected world.

From integrated transport grids and

cutting-edge tunnel corridors to AI cities and expanding data centre ecosystems, from Tier-2 industrial expansion to strategic global technology partnerships, Karnataka

unveiled a development roadmap that is ambitious, inclusive, and transformative — solidifying its role as a driving force in India’s growth story and a trusted partner in the global economy.

“During the Davos meet, companies have expressed interest in investing in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities as well. Companies want infrastructure in these towns. We are looking at developing a transport grid including Ring Roads for all the cities in the State keeping in mind growth projections for the next 25 years.”

AI City in Bidadi and Bengaluru Business Corridor

Many investors are excited about the AI city we are planning in Bidadi,” he said. Some expressed reservations about opposition to the project. “I told them that the project would be realized as farmers are giving up their land on their own. No other State has given the amount of compensation we have given for the Bengaluru Business Corridor.”

The vision is clear: Bengaluru is not merely expanding—it is evolving into a technology-driven global metropolis supported by sustainable and planned urban infrastructure.

Need to Create Awareness About Discipline

Deputy Chief Minister reflected:

“Davos is twice the size of Sadashiva

Nagara (a prominent, posh locality in North Bengaluru, spans approximately 1.22 to 1.31 sq. kms.) and all the world leaders had to walk from place to place. I noticed the discipline on roads during my travel. We need to create awareness about road discipline. This is my first visit to Davos and I had an opportunity to meet many world leaders and businessmen.”

“I noticed that the world is looking at India through Bengaluru which has 450 Fortune 500 companies. We discussed upgrading the infrastructure for the rapid urbanization.”

He met several global leaders including World Bank President Ajay Banga, National General Secretary Mark Rutte, and the Finance Minister of Saudi Arabia. BDA Chairman Harris conveyed to investors that Bengaluru is gearing up for the future. When asked about his ‘India Rising’ remarks, he stated: “Don’t bring politics into this, let’s look at it in a broadminded way. We would not want to hurt India abroad. Rahul Gandhi has also never done it. He has expressed his unhappiness internally. We will not let down our country.”

Speed of Doing Business

Many companies requested improvements in ease of doing business and flagged lengthy approval processes. The State is now working toward achieving “speed of doing business” for quicker approvals and faster clearances.

Discussion with JICA for Tunnel Roads

Discussed the tunnel project with the Maharashtra CM too as they are building a lot

Discussed Investments with 45 Companies in Davos

“Forty five companies had discussions with us,” the Deputy Chief Minister said, underlining the scale of engagement. These companies have expressed interest in investing in:

- Data centres
- Global Capability Centres (GCCs)
- Food processing (F&B)
- Aviation
- Renewable energy
- Electric vehicles (EV)
- Electronics
- Advanced manufacturing

“The companies have taken



Photo: Gettyimages

information on the availability of water and power for their industries,” he added.

Importantly, Karnataka has taken a strategic approach. “We decided not to sign the agreements with the investors in

Instead, we would like to invite them to the State to get a first-hand idea about the human resource, infrastructure, weather and other resources.”

Of the Rs11 lakh crore investment committed during the

Global Investors Meet, half of it is being realised. Investors are aware of massive investments such as Foxconn. They recognise that South Indian States offer an excellent business environment after China. Asked about FDI, he said there are guidelines for FDI. Some investors were interested in Race Course land, but they were informed that there are other lands in Bengaluru. Many expressed interest in lands within a 40 km radius from Bengaluru airport. Tourism development in coastal Karnataka was also discussed.

of tunnels. They have some suggestions about parking facilities near tunnels. We would like to visit some of the tunnel projects in Maharashtra,” he said.

Asked whether tunnel designs would change after inspecting projects abroad, he said Karnataka’s tunnel projects already have modern designs. Maharashtra has an agreement with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for their tunnel projects. “I will also travel to Japan to discuss our tunnel projects with JICA.”

Responding to Bengaluru’s traffic congestion ranking, he said: “We are spending about Rs2.5 lakh crores over the next five years to develop basic infrastructure in Bengaluru including tunnel roads, elevated corridors, buffer roads, etc.”

Bengaluru: The ‘City of the Future’

At Davos, the Deputy Chief Minister welcomed investors to invest in Bengaluru, “Bengaluru is the city of the future. We have excellent weather, culture and human resource. Many global companies are thriving in the city, I welcome you also to our city.”

More than 500 top global companies operate out of Bengaluru. The city boasts excellence in aerospace, IT and medicine. Karnataka has 70 medical colleges and 1.5 lakh medical professionals graduating annually.

“India has huge talent pool and we are preparing for the next 25 years. Bengaluru is Asia’s IT Capital. The urban population in India has gone up to 40% and it is likely to go up to 50% in the next 25 years.”

“World’s IT Capital California has 13 lakh engineers and Bengaluru has 25 lakh engineers. This demonstrates Bengaluru’s strength.”

The metro network will increase to 153 km

by next year. Bengaluru has 6,000 public transport buses, of which 2,500 are electric. Infrastructure is also being strengthened in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities. The State is developing infrastructure for the load in 2045. Karnataka assures full cooperation to investors.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has described Bengaluru as a global city—an affirmation of its stature on the world stage.

Global Partnerships and Sectoral Momentum

Discussions were held with the Prime Minister of Liechtenstein to attract EFTA-linked investments. Talks with Amazon Web Services focused on attracting global cloud firms. Automobile manufacturer Volvo expressed satisfaction with Karnataka’s environment.

Nokia Corporation has expressed interest in establishing a GCC and expanding in Tier-2 cities. The Government reaffirmed support for the WEF ‘Yes–BLR UpLink’ initiative after discussions with John Dutton.

US-based Vast Space expressed interest in partnership. Crescent Enterprises from the UAE showed interest in investing across sectors. Cloudflare described Karnataka as one of the world’s best destinations for cutting-edge technologies. Voyager Technologies expressed interest in partnering with the Government and collaborating with ISRO.

Davos Visit Accelerates Investments: M.B. Patil

Minister for Large and Medium Industries M.M. B. Patil stated that the WEF summit

has laid a strong foundation for rapid materialisation of investments, industrial expansion and partnerships.

Productive meetings were held with over 25 international companies and more than 15 Indian companies across aerospace and defence, advanced manufacturing, beverages and food processing, space technology, life sciences, data centres, digital infrastructure and clean energy.

Heads of multinational companies expressed readiness to prioritise and fast-track commitments in Karnataka. Industry leaders lauded the State’s industry-friendly policies.

46% of the Rs10.27 lakh crore commitments from the Global Investors Meet have already been implemented. Manufacturing leads with 58% project progress. These projects are expected to generate over six lakh jobs.

Fresh investments worth Rs1.1 lakh crore have flowed in over the last 11 months. New investments worth Rs1.5 lakh crore are expected across ESDM/semiconductors, automobiles and EVs, aerospace and defence manufacturing.

Major Investment Announcements

PSG Group will invest Rs10,500 crore in Vijayapura and Ballari. InoxGFL Group is keen on wind power tower manufacturing, having already invested Rs10,000 crore in the State.

Ramky Group expressed interest in CETPs and a Pharma Park. Tech Mahindra showed interest in Tier-2 industrial investments. Discussions were held with Singapore EDB on establishing a ‘Singapore Park’. Lenovo, Axon Cables and Boston Consulting Group engaged in strategic discussions.

Schneider Electric plans to establish 20 additional training infrastructure facilities,

expanding to 100 skill development centres. An MoU was signed with Swiss Chambers India to strengthen industrial ties.

Data Centres in Karnataka

Sify Technologies is set to inaugurate a new data centre facility in Karnataka. Bharti Enterprises has expressed interest in setting up a data centre; cumulative investments stand at Rs13,000 crore.

Talks were held with Mistral AI regarding a GCC or R&D centre in Bengaluru. Carlsberg Group is implementing a Rs350 crore bottling expansion and plans further growth.

Discussions with Imperial College London focused on expanding research collaboration and presence in KWIN City.

Philip Morris International reiterated its global procurement presence in Karnataka. PayPal Holdings Inc. highlighted its large workforce and interest in AI-focused reskilling programmes.

Bharat Forge Limited and Belrise Industries Limited discussed future investments and project implementation milestones.

Preparing for Emerging Technologies

Minister Patil emphasised the need to address challenges posed by artificial intelligence, robotics and quantum technology. Citing a Chinese manufacturing example where 500 workers were replaced by five or six with AI, he noted that while future technologies bring benefits, they also raise concerns about employment.

Priority is being given to creating employment opportunities for youth and women while harnessing future technologies for public welfare.

Karnataka: Confident, Collaborative, Future-Ready

From transport grids and Ring Roads to AI City in Bidadi, from tunnel roads and JICA discussions to global data centre ecosystems, from Tier-2 industrial growth to strategic global partnerships, Karnataka’s presence at Davos reaffirmed its position as a preferred investment destination.

The message was unmistakable: Karnataka is building for 2045.

Karnataka is accelerating “speed of doing business.”

Karnataka is inviting the world to grow together.

And as global leaders look at India through Bengaluru, the State stands ready—with infrastructure, talent, discipline and vision—to shape the next era of industrial and urban transformation.

Reforms, referendum and roadblocks

Despite overwhelming popular support for the July Charter of constitutional reforms, its implementation won't be easy in new Bangladesh

Sourabh Sen

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) landslide victory in the recent elections may just be the beginning of a protracted face-off with the opposition Jamaat-e-Islami and National Citizen Party (NCP). Central to this is the BNP's refusal to join the Constitution Reform Commission (CRC) despite backing the July Charter of referendum, underscoring a schism in the country's politics.

The simultaneous staging of the general election and the referendum meant the elected MPs had to take two oaths—one as MP and the second as a CRC member. The second oath obligated the MPs to implement the July Charter. "Taking oath as CRC member would bind us to implement the July Charter, overriding our notes of dissent to key provisions of the charter," a senior BNP leader told *National Herald*.

Asserting that the CRC's formation remains outside the formal Constitution Reform Council alongside regular MPs, said: "We have not been elected as members of the Constitution Reform Council; creation of the council is yet to be incorporated in the Constitution."

Things came to a head on the morning of 17 February when newly elected Jamaat and NCP members initially refused to take oath as MPs. "We will take no oath unless BNP MPs do so as members of Constitution Reform Council alongside regular MPs," said Jamaat's deputy chief Abdullah Mohammad Tahir. They relented after intense backroom parleys and took dual oaths but boycotted the swearing-in ceremony of prime minister Tarique Rahman and his Cabinet. The ruling BNP, however, remains outside the CRC.

So why did the Jamaat and NCP eventually relent? "Not taking oaths was not our party's decision. Our



Crowds gather at the National Parliament square in Dhaka to watch their new prime minister Tarique Rahman's oath-taking ceremony, 17 February 2026

Photo: Getty Images

alliance partners and some of our members may have expressed their own opinions," newly elected Jamaat MP from Dhaka-14 Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem told *National Herald*. There was also a buzz about challenging the CRC, hinting at a protracted legal battle.

After the collapse of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government on 5 August 2024, the interim administration of Muhammad Yunus took office not only to oversee the election of a new democratic government but also to introduce reforms to eliminate dynastic politics—be it Mujibur Rahman's lineage under Awami League or Ziaur Rahman's family under BNP. Multiple reform bodies were set up culminating in

With a two-thirds majority, the BNP now believes it does not need to commit itself to a charter that will limit its span of control

the National Consensus Commission (NCC) tasked with consolidating recommendations into a single binding political declaration in the form of the July Charter. This was signed by 26 political parties on 17 October 2025.

The 61-page July Charter talked about the 'consensus, achieved through mutual and collective deliberations among various political parties, alliances and forces... (which) aims to reform the constitution, electoral system, judiciary, public administration, police administration and mechanisms for combating corruption.'

On 13 November 2025, President Mohammed Shahabuddin Chuppu authorised the Bangladesh Election Commission to conduct a referen-

dum. The referendum asked voters to accept or reject a linked package of, among others, four key reforms—restoring the caretaker government system; establishing a bicameral parliament; overhauling the judiciary and election commission; and, limiting prime ministerial power to two. A 'yes' vote meant acceptance of the entire package; a 'no' vote rejected all reforms outright.

The referendum—adopted through the 12 February referendum—is now a politically binding 'pledge of commitment from the signatories' to implement the 84 reform proposals, roughly half of which require amending Bangladesh's existing Constitution. By refusing to take the second oath, BNP MPs are not empowered to implement the July Charter.

The referendum threw up mixed results. According to Election Commission data, with a voter turnout of 60.25 per cent, while 62.74 per cent supported the charter, nearly 30 per cent opposed it. Approximately 9.5 per cent ballots were found invalid. Significantly, in 11 parliamentary constituencies—including three in strongholds like Gopalganj and the hill districts—the vote was a 'no'.

The charter redefines Bangladesh's national identity, proposing a change from Bengali to Bangladeshi to include ethnic minorities like Chakmas, Marmas and Santals who felt marginalised by a linguistically defined identity. While Bengali remains the primary state language, the charter recognises all mother tongues. Four Mujib-era legacies of nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism have been replaced by equality, human dignity, social justice and religious harmony. The charter replaces secularism and freedom of religion with 'guaranteed coexistence' and 'due dignity of all communities'. Other changes involve blocking

an individual from simultaneously serving as prime minister, leader of the House and party president; expanding the powers of the president to appoint heads of human rights, law and information commissions. The charter reinstates the non-party caretaker government to oversee general elections (abolished by the Awami League in 2011) and bars the prime minister's office from appointing judges, instead setting up a Judicial Appointments Commission led by the chief justice.

Taking note of digital blackouts and the youth-led nature of the 2024 uprising, the charter recognises uninterrupted internet service as a fundamental right, elevating digital access to a constitutional level. It also explicitly protects the right to personal information.

With a two-thirds majority, the BNP now believes it needn't commit itself to implementing a charter that does not sufficiently reflect its concerns. Of the nine notes of dissent, the party had strong reservations against the provision of electoral representation to elect upper house members, fearing it will weaken the mandate of major parties. Some activists and student leaders have also rejected the charter, describing it as a 'political compromise'. The exclusion of the Awami League from the consultative process also makes the charter not quite inclusive or representative enough.

"What happened on the morning of 17 February should have been avoided as it does not send a good message," ambassador Mohammad Humayun Kabir told *National Herald*. For the time being, the opposition parties may have relented, but non-implementation of the charter could deepen political rifts despite the BNP's brute majority in Parliament. ■

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

The coconut tree that refused to fall

Kerala's Malappuram district and its grammar of mutual accommodation and practical neighbourliness

K.A. Shaji

Nearly four decades ago, in a small village in north Kerala's Muslim-dominated Malappuram district, a coconut tree became an unlikely symbol of communal anxiety and tension. The tree stood inside the compound of a Hindu household. Its fronds leaned towards the neighbouring mosque. Every few weeks, ripe coconuts would fall onto its clay-tiled roof. Tiles cracked. Rainwater seeped in. The mosque committee complained. The Hindu family refused to cut the tree as the coconuts contributed to their meagre monthly income.

With each falling coconut, grievances quietly accumulated. The son of the Hindu household, now in his political youth, had begun leaning towards Hindutva. For him, the mosque was no longer just a neighbour. The tree no longer just a tree.

As tension mounted, elders from both communities decided to take the matter to the most respected Muslim leader in Malabar, Panakkad Syed Mohammedali Shihab Thangal (1936-2009), the IUMML of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUMML) whose moral authority extended far beyond religion and party.

The Thangal listened patiently to both sides. Then, he reached into his pocket, took out some money, handed it to the president of the mosque committee, and declared, "The masjid has to be demolished. The clay roof-tiles should be replaced with concrete."

Among believers in Malabar, there is a popular conviction, call it superstition if you will, that if the first donation comes from the Thangal, his blessings will take the project to successful completion. That night, both parties returned to their village.

When the Hindu household's old matriarch heard what had happened, she chided her son for the curse he had brought upon the family and rushed to Panakkad that very night. The wise old man received her with grace and, in his famously gentle manner, dismissed her promises to cut down the guilty tree and her apologies for her indiscreet son.

"The coconut tree is the elixir of our life," the Thangal said. "It should be protected at any cost."

The mosque was rebuilt in concrete. The coconut tree still stands.

In Malappuram, this story is remembered not as a miracle but as a simple example of how social disputes are supposed to end.

Last year, when the Shree Lakshmi Narasimha Murthy Vishnu Temple in Punnathala village in Malappuram hosted an iftar for hundreds of Muslims, the event grabbed national headlines. Television studios framed it as an extraordinary spectacle of communal harmony. The temple authorities dismissed the hype, saying they had been doing it for decades.

"The times have become so cynical that normal social gestures of the past have come to be seen as extraordinary spectacles of communal harmony," observes Thoppil Shajahan, a Malappuram-based social observer.

The results of the recent local body elections were another fitting reply to the canards against Malappuram. The Congress-IUML combine won all the wards in the district panchayat, with hundreds of Christians and Hindus winning on IUML tickets. As per the alliance deal, the vice-president's post went to the IUML—Vishnumoorthy Theyyam, a Dalit Hindu woman, who had won from a general seat, was chosen.

In a district where Hindus are said to be threatened, a large majority of Hindus still cast their votes in favour of the two Muslim candidates representing the Muslim League and the CPI(M) in almost every election, leaving the BJP with just about 65,000 votes. That a BJP candidate promoted voters quality beef if elected became a hilarious side story of the campaign.

According to Malappuram native and prominent Malayalam writer Alamkode Leela Krishnan, Muslim-majority (70.25 per cent) Malappuram "can be the world's most beautiful experiment in pluralism". No major communal conflict has occurred in this district since the 1921 Mappila rebellion, which was inspired and fermented largely by British colonial policies.

Malappuram's Muslim leadership, Krishnan argues, has historically stood for communal harmony. The Hindus, in turn, have complete faith in the local leadership and its commitment to people's wellbeing,

regardless of religious identity.

Begin here, and Malappuram's story of everyday accommodation and mutual responsibility falls into place. A story of resistance to the labels—'mini-Pakistan', 'jihadist hub'—the national narrative keeps trying to pin on the district. The labels have political uses, but they do not explain why Hindu priests accept donations from Muslim families, why Muslim farmers tend lotus ponds for temple rituals, why mosque courtyards become provision centres for tens of thousands of poor families regardless of religion.

This is an explainer about those habits, and the attempt to overwrite (and override) them.

Malappuram is not a small place. The 2011 Census recorded a population of 4,112,920 people, spread across towns and a dense network of villages. Muslims form the majority at 70.2 per cent, Hindus 27.6 per cent and Christians 1 to 2 per cent of the population. The district's sex ratio of 1,098 females per 1,000 males and its literacy figures place it among Kerala's socially advanced districts on many human development indicators. Nearly 44 per cent live in urban areas.

These figures are helpful, but they do not explain the social routines that make neighbourliness practical here.

On the outskirts of Valanchery in Malappuram, the Moonnakkal Juma Masjid opens its compound thrice a month to a long and patient queue of women. Token in hand, each woman steps forward to collect a monthly quota of rice, sometimes also wheat and sugar, distributed from a large

community store run by the masjid committee. Donations come from worshippers who buy and give as part of religious custom.

Outside the mosque, a cluster of rice shops exists largely for this service. Inside, a modest processing facility cleans, packs and issues sacks as per a token system. The beneficiaries—over 28,000 families across 171 mahals in 21 panchayats—are a mixed lot. "Religion has never been a criterion," explains K. Anfal, a masjid committee member. More than half the families collecting rice are Hindus and Christians. Many locals say they prefer the mosque's arrangement to the public distribution system because of better quality and steadier quantities.

In Edakkullam village, Muslim farmers tend lotus ponds that supply puja flowers to

some of Kerala's most famous temples. Last year, families from Edakkullam supplied more than 100 kg of lotus for a major *thulabharam* ritual at Guruvayur.

In Kottakkal, the Palappuram mosque's *mimbar* is donated by P.S. Varier, founder of the Kottakkal Arya Vaidya Sala. The Panakkad Thangal family continues to act as mediator and moral anchor in Malappuram's public life.

At Kaliyattakkavu Bhagavathy Temple in Munniyur, devotees first visit the maqbara of Mamburam Thangal before beginning the festival procession. At Thunchanparambu near Tirur, the birthplace of Thunchathu Ezhuthachan, thousands of children, many from Muslim families, are initiated into their letters during Vidyarambham (Vijayadashmi day), with Muslim volunteers distributing milk and snacks.

Against these textures of everyday life, a political industry of manufactured suspicion has repeatedly tried to nationalise local affairs.

When the Air India Express flight crashed at Kozhikode airport in August 2020, local residents were the first responders. They used private cars to ferry the injured, guarded passengers' belongings, donated blood and organised food for survivors.

No one asked who was Hindu, who was Muslim. Similar scenes unfolded during the 2001 Kadalundi train accident and other disasters.

Malappuram's real story lies elsewhere. In the coconut tree that was not cut. In the temple that serves iftar without ceremony. In the rice sack handed to a Christian widow inside a mosque courtyard. ■



(Clockwise from top) Rations being distributed from a mosque courtyard; Vishnumoorthy Theyyam, the Dalit Hindu chosen as the Muslim League's first woman national office-bearer; Muslim devotees at the Kasargod temple festival; iftar hosted at a temple in Malappuram

"The times have become so cynical that normal social gestures of the past have come to be seen as extraordinary spectacles of communal harmony"

3 minutes 10 seconds of patriotism, or else

The MHA's orders on the national song make it abundantly clear that we are short on nationalism, writes **Aakar Patel**

There must always be a shortage of nationalism in our country, because there seems to be such a big demand for it. In all my decades, I never heard of a demand for Vande Mataram to be tagged on to the national anthem at every official occasion. Now, we are told this is to be the case.

There are six stanzas to the song, which will have to be memorised. The singing must be 3 minutes and 10 seconds long, as ordered by the ministry of home affairs. The orders are not clear if this singing is voluntary (like Aadhaar) or compulsory (also like Aadhaar).

This confusion arises from the wording. The ministry of home affairs tells us that 'it is not possible to give an exhaustive list of occasions on which the singing—as opposed to the playing—of [the] official version of [the] National Song can be permitted', but it helpfully adds that 'there is no objection to the singing... as long as it is done with due respect'. There are no guidelines on what constitutes 'due respect' but we will no doubt find out soon what constitutes violation. The more nationalistic among us will educate those who are less so.

Why I say it is unclear whether it is voluntary or not is because the order adds: 'the National Song may be sung on occasions which, although not strictly ceremonial, are nevertheless invested with significance because of the presence of Ministers etc.' and further: 'mass singing is desirable.' What does the 'etc.' include or exclude? What is the true interpretation of 'desirable'?

Again, we shall find out what happens when someone chooses to interpret the words 'may' and 'desirable' as being indicators of voluntary action. But all this is ultimately beside the point. The point—the main one—is that there is always a shortage of nationalism in our country and this is one way in which that shortage can be met. And, as our history tells us, this sort of thing works.

Exactly 50 years ago, in 1976, the then government added 'fundamental duties' to the Constitution to 'promote harmony and

the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities; to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women'. Who can deny that this has happened? India would not be the global example of brotherhood and a model of safety for women if these instructions had not come to us.

There is also on the list a duty to 'protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life, and to have compassion for living creatures' and (my favourite) to 'develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform'.

These duties were added because in 1976 nationalism was in high demand and short supply. That is the case now.

Cynics and haters of the present dispensation will argue that there are other ways to show love for the nation. That anthems and slogans are peripheral to national progress. That we would be better off as a nation if we were also to behave better in traffic, for instance, and we were to refrain from littering. The national anthem talks about rivers—it would be difficult to name a country whose rivers are filthier than the ones in India.

We could show our patriotism by refusing to take or give bribes. Or by not



There are no guidelines on what constitutes 'due respect' but we'll no doubt find out what constitutes violation. The more nationalistic among us will educate those who are less so

attempting to cheat on taxes, something that comes so naturally to the most patriotic among us that it's a wonder tax evasion hasn't been included in our fundamental duties. There is a long list of things that we could do, but as our government and its defenders will likely say: these are things that the citizens of many nations can do. They are not special.

We need something unique and distinct to show our love. That is precisely what this new order has given us. 'Whenever the official version of the National Song is sung or played', the ministry of home affairs order cautions, 'the audience shall stand

to attention'.

Perhaps what this means is that once it has been determined that the song is to be played, those present at the venue must comply? Which means participation is then no longer voluntary. If that is the case, what is the difference between our national song and our national anthem? We do not know, but our government in all its wisdom surely does.

And there's more: 'In all schools, the day's work may begin with the community singing of the National Song.' In my opinion this is necessary to instil the same levels of patriotism in the next generation

as are to be found in our generation, and the one before ours. There are other benefits as well. The unemployed will utilise their spare time memorising the six stanzas. Moreover, they will be productively employed in policing the crowd to see who is unobservant and straying from 'proper decorum'. Reports of them (violently) enforcing the new order will probably start reaching us at any minute now. The lazy will stand an additional 3 minutes and 10 seconds and thus improve their fitness.

The nation will progress. ■

Views are personal

BUDGET 2026-27

What about the environment, Madam finance minister?

The catastrophic deficiency in planning persists, with the alarming dimension of accelerating climate change

Avay Shukla

The preservation and protection of the environment has never been a priority in our annual Budgets; all finance ministers have taken it for granted, treating nature as an infinite resource rather than a living entity to be nurtured and carefully harvested on a sustainable basis. Eleven years after I wrote the piece 'Budget 2014: Short-changing the environment', the catastrophic deficiency in planning persists.

What is new, and compelling, is the acceleration of climate change. The need of the day is not only to provide public funding for measures to counter climate change but also for the rehabilitation of those directly affected by it—poor farmers, landless labourers, fishermen, nomadic tribes. Unfortunately (and predictably) this Budget, like its predecessors, does none of this.

We should perhaps have expected this from the tone of the Economic Survey 2026, released before the budget was presented. In it, chief economic advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran blatantly bats for growth and neoliberalism at the cost of the environment. Defying all science, he states that cutting carbon emissions should not be our top priority, and that a world 3° Celsius warmer would be a liveable one! Confounding all evidence and scientific global consensus, he goes on to maintain that 'growth and prosperity strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability'.

Yes, sir, they do, but only if done in a sustainable and ecologically friendly manner, which is not how it is happening in India. Maybe, if Nageswaran had paid more attention to what Gita Gopinath, a fellow economist (without any political bias) had said in Davos, he would have better understood both the problem, and how wrong he is.

This government suffers from a severe case of CID (Compulsive Infrastructure Disorder). Capex is fine and needed for growth, but so is the environment. There are huge environmental costs to rapid infrastructural expansion—both the World Bank and the IMF estimate this at between 3.5-5 per cent of our GDP, which comes to



Photos: Getty Images



The criminal neglect of the environment continues in our planning and funding processes. Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman (left) has just nudged us closer to environmental collapse

about \$200 billion or Rs 1,80,000 crore.

The 2026-27 budget proudly mentions the creation of a mineral corridor (for rare earths) in four southern states, three more high-speed rail corridors, zero duties for maritime catches in India's EEZ or the high seas, tax exemptions for setting up data centres... but there is no mention of how the environmental consequences of these initiatives will be addressed or their mitigation funded. Are these corridors necessary at all, given the large number of expressways being built all over the country? The corridors will only lead to largescale land acquisition and massive displacement of populations, adding to the

The 16th Finance Commission has completely ignored the right of Himalayan states to fair compensation for the ecological services they provide

60 million 'project refugees' already created since Independence. Hundreds of thousands of trees—especially mangroves, since rare earths are found in large quantities in coastal areas—will be destroyed. The boost to maritime fisheries is welcome, but where are the guardrails to ensure that the livelihoods of traditional fishermen will be protected and not replaced by mechanised trawlers or that measures will be taken to curb overfishing? Data centres require humongous quantities of power and water—where will they come from in this water-stressed country?

We can expect minimum oversight or safeguards in the execution of these projects thanks to the dilution of the

regulations that could have checked such extensive damage. The defenestration of regulatory institutions and dilution of the Forest Conservation Act, the Environmental Protection Act, the Wildlife Protection Act will see to this.

Thousands of crores are needed to mitigate—and compensate for—the adverse impacts of these projects, but finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman has said not a word about who will pay and where the funds will come from. This silence and ambiguity appear to be part of the deliberate strategy of decentralisation of costs to the states. The political credit and financial gains will accrue to the Centre, but the social and budgetary costs will have to be borne by the states from their own resources—an innovative (mis)interpretation of the concept of federalism!

Finally, it appears that the 16th Finance Commission—like all the so-called autonomous institutions in this country—is in lockstep with the central government. It has chosen to completely ignore the right of the Himalayan states to fair compensation for the ecological services they provide to the country (water, clean air, carbon sequestration, climate moderation). These states, supported by a large number of advocacy groups, had demanded a Green Bonus of Rs. 50,000 crore over the five-year period of 2026-2031.

Not only would this have been fair compensation, these funds would have met their development needs without having to resort to the unsustainable exploitation of their forests, rivers, minerals and tourism potential. Any idiot can see that excessive and unsustainable 'development' of the Himalayas (and other mountain ranges like the Aravallis and Western Ghats) is not in the interest of the country as a whole, and that therefore these mountain states should be incentivised to not do so.

The 16th Finance Commission failed to see this simple truth. Early reports indicate that it has not provided any Green Bonus; nor has it provided any special grants (outside the Centre's discretion, which has now become totally politicised) for climate mitigation or disaster relief. All it has done is tinkered with the definition of forests which, in pure financial terms, is meaningless. Even worse, it has now discontinued the RDG (Revenue Deficit Grant) which these states had been receiving since 1974, making a huge dent in their finances. To fund their development activities, they shall now have no option but to continue to ravage the fragile Himalayan environment.

Whether or not the BJP gains from this year's Union Budget is a moot question; what is not moot is that the criminal neglect of the environment continues unabated in our planning and funding processes. Nirmala Sitharaman and her co-pilot in the Finance Commission have just nudged us closer to the financial collapse of some states and the environmental collapse that affects us all. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



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NATION

THE 'MOHAMMAD DEEPAK EFFECT'

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16th FINANCE COMMISSION

Will the nod at efficiency and 'contribution to GDP' parameter undermine equity?



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HOME & ABROAD

A FOREIGN POLICY TEST FOR RAHMAN

Renegotiating the Ganga Water Sharing Treaty will test the new Bangla PM's political acumen



► P4

The "trashy ruminations of a convicted criminal"

A.J. Prabal with Vanshika Gupta

Six-and-a-half years after Jeffrey Epstein, 66 at the time, allegedly took his own life in a prison in New York, correspondence, photographs, logs and documents seized from his houses are still making news. As mysterious in life as in death, nobody quite knows how he made his wealth. What is known, however, is that he was accused and convicted of sexually abusing hundreds of children—over 500 victims had been identified—grooming and trafficking them. The fresh tranche of documents released in the US on 30 January 2026 contain references to several Indians, at least two of them more prominently than others.

Even as references to India and Indians in the infamous 'Epstein Files' continue to make ripples, curiously the references begin in 2014, the year India became 'independent' according to BJP MP Kangana Ranaut. What explains Epstein's interest in India and Indians after 2014 is a question that remains to be examined.

References to prime minister Narendra Modi, petroleum minister Hardeep Puri and industrialist Anil Ambani in the mails and documents released by the US Department of Justice, begin in May 2014 just before Narendra Modi was sworn in as prime minister on 26 May. Days before results were declared on 16 May 2014, Epstein in an email expressed his desire to visit India and mentioned 'Jaitley and Modi'. It is not clear if he was acquainted with the two. He is told in a reply that he would hate visiting India and was advised against visiting the country in summer.

Hardeep Puri's interactions with Epstein begin in June 2014, days after Modi is sworn in as PM and six months after Puri, a retired diplomat, joined the BJP in January 2014. Puri and Epstein, the files indicate, met four times between 5 June and 9 June 2014. From what is known so far, Puri does not figure in the files after he became a minister in the Modi cabinet in September 2017.

In a strong defence of his conduct, Puri has said he was meeting Epstein as a patriotic, far-sighted Indian seeking assistance to attract investments to India. He claims to have been far-sighted in referring in his mails in 2014 to 'Digital India' and 'Make in India'—two programmes launched in 2015

and 2016. He hasn't explained, though, why his interactions and exchanges with Epstein ceased once he joined the Union cabinet in September 2017. What was the outcome of his efforts? Which are the investments that came in because of his efforts as a 'private citizen' and through Epstein?

Puri cites Epstein's email in September 2014 to introduce him to LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman. 'Reid, Hardeep is your man in India'. In October, an impatient Epstein wants to know about the outcome of the meeting. Puri responds to say that he was due to meet Hoffman in San Francisco. 'You, my friend, make things happen. Any advice?' Puri asked the billionaire and after his meeting with Hoffman, sent a detailed note on digital openings in India, marking the note to both Hoffman and Epstein.

"Hardeep Puri at that time was a retired diplomat. In what capacity was he organising Hoffman's India visit?" asked Congress spokesman Pawan Khera. "Had the Indian embassy closed down? Was the Indian Ambassador not there? Wasn't Sushma Swaraj the external affairs minister? Why did Narendra Modi need the services of Hardeep Puri? And why did Narendra Modi need Epstein for Reid Hoffman's visit?" Khera asked.

There is nothing in the public domain to suggest that Epstein ever visited India. In both India and the US, immigration authorities would have the information if he did. Civil aviation authorities too would have the details if the billionaire power broker

In the Epstein Files, references to India and Indians begin just days before Narendra Modi was sworn in as prime minister on 26 May 2014



ever flew into the country in his private jet. Nor is there anything in public domain to suggest that Epstein ever invested in India or collaborated with anyone here. On the contrary, when Anil Ambani sought his help to raise \$70 million—after he declared himself 'bankrupt' in a London court—Epstein replied that loans would be difficult and the 'shares' were presumably not 'pretty'.

The references to India and Indians in the 3.5 million documents released so far, with three million more yet to be released, have created ripples nevertheless and raised uneasy questions. The most politically loaded insinuation by far is when Epstein claims to have told 'Modi's man' how to go about the Indian PM's visit to Israel in 2017, his first. Epstein claimed that he suggested the Indian PM 'sing and dance' for the US president while in Israel, before adding, 'it worked'.

The cryptic and loaded messages raise uneasy questions that are yet to be answered. What was Epstein's interest in Modi's visit to Israel? At whose behest was he monitoring political leaders in India? Allegations that he was part of the 'deep state' in both the US and Israel have been made by credible sources like former CIA and Mossad officials but are unlikely to be confirmed anytime soon.

In another email exchange, Epstein refers to the 'Middle East' and says he was not happy about the developments there and that

he held particularly strong views on the subject. Even as the context remains a mystery, it is also baffling that he would have this exchange with Anil Ambani. The only plausible explanation is that he wanted the Indian industrialist to communicate his views to the Indian 'leadership'.

Epstein seemed to believe that Ambani was close to the Indian 'leadership' and was acting at their behest while seeking appointments to meet people in President Trump's inner circle at the time, like Steve Bannon. The Indian industrialist may have tried to convey his proximity to the political establishment in India by claiming that he was asked by the 'leadership' to facilitate PM Modi's visit to Washington DC and the White House and meet Jared Kushner, President Trump's son-in-law.

Puri's loud claims of innocence, his multiple appearances on TV channels to attack Rahul Gandhi and his attempts to prove his own innocence have made him look worse. "I have been in touch with terrorists. Does that make me a terrorist?" he petulantly asked in one of the interviews, missing the point that nobody had accused him of being a paedophile.

Before the government shut him up, Puri did a good job of tying himself in knots—he "didn't know who Epstein was", was "not aware of who he was going to meet" even while he was in the car ... it was his boss at the International Peace Institute who sent him to Epstein ... he was part of a delegation ... he "met Epstein only three or four times" ... he was "pitching for investment in India" and "promoting Digital India" ... Epstein's Manhattan town house was next to his and he

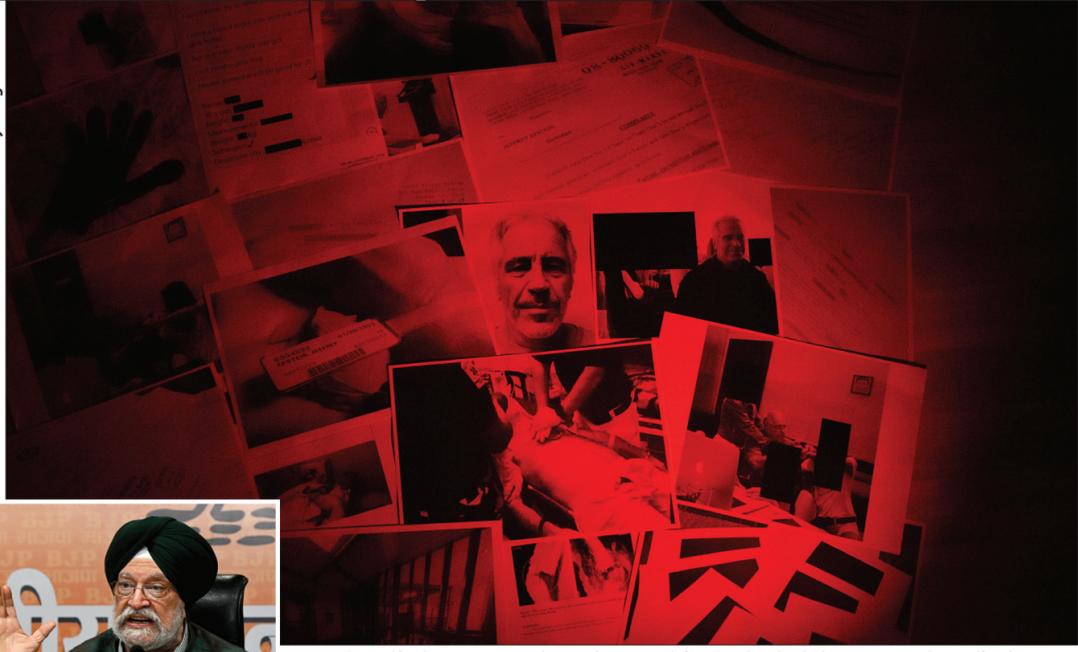
had lived in New York for eight years... "it was all professional" ... Epstein was merely charged with having sex with an underage girl...

The denials and deflections notwithstanding, emails point to a degree of familiarity the minister is unwilling to admit or explain. In one of the emails, Puri wrote, 'please let me know when you are back from your exotic island'. How did Puri know of the exotic island? Even if he had by then picked up details of Epstein's past and 'Pedo island', would a casual, professional acquaintance refer to it? There is no suggestion or hint that Puri ever visited the island, but he knew enough and was close enough to Epstein to sneak in a reference.

Multiple documents suggest that within months of meeting each other professionally, Puri was being frequently invited to lunch or dinner at Epstein's house. In January 2017, Puri wrote to Epstein, "If you are in town, I want to drop by to give you a copy of my book, *Perilous Interventions*." He requested a meeting in May 2017 as well. The references and the trail suddenly stop in September 2017 when Puri became a Union minister.

In the most damning exchange between Epstein and Anil Ambani, the former offers the services of a 'tall, Swedish blonde' woman. Ambani responds by writing, 'Arrange that'. What was it all about? Were the services sought by the industrialist for himself or for someone else? Ambani is not talking, and India does not have a law to make him speak. Indian investigating agencies are not likely to launch an inquiry, and the ministry of external affairs will no doubt dismiss the "trashy ruminations of a convicted criminal" with the contempt they deserve. ■

Photos: Getty Images



Tying himself in knots Attempts by Hardeep Puri (left) to explain his links to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein have only thrown up more questions than answers

The right to be a rogue (until you're caught)

Nikhil Gupta's guilty plea in the Pannun assassination attempt case is by no means the end of the story, writes Ashis Ray

Indian businessman and alleged drug trafficker Nikhil Gupta (54)—arrested in 2023 and presently in detention in New York—has pleaded guilty before a United States magistrate judge on three counts: 'murder-for-hire, conspiracy to commit murder-for-hire and conspiracy to commit money laundering'.

This in connection with the attempted assassination of Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, a New York-based American citizen who is general counsel for 'Sikhs for Justice', a body that demands that an independent state of 'Khalistan' be carved out of India.

The Indian government denied any connection to Gupta or Vikash Yadav, a former employee of the external intelligence agency R&AW, who allegedly supplied the target and the funds to hire an assassin in the US.

Gupta's family struggled to fund his defence; had he not pleaded guilty, he would have faced a criminal trial which would have meant being cross-examined and confronting evidence.

The sub-title of a press note circulated by the US Attorney's Office after Gupta's admission reads, in bold, 'Nikhil Gupta worked at the Direction of an Indian Government Employee to Arrange the Murder of US-based Leader of Sikh Separatist Movement.'

That and the contents of the document

rattled the nerve centre of India's espionage establishment.

The FBI's assistant director in charge, James Barnacle, Jr. is quoted as saying: 'At the direction and coordination of an Indian government employee, Nikhil Gupta plotted to assassinate a United States citizen on American soil.'

The note named 'VIKASH YADAV' as that

Indian government employee and a 'co-defendant' in the case, describing him as being 'at relevant times an Indian government employee, to plot the assassination of an attorney and political activist (Pannun).'

It further specified: 'YADAV was employed by the Government of India's Cabinet Secretariat, which houses India's foreign

intelligence service, the Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW).'

It continued: 'In or about June 2023, YADAV recruited GUPTA to orchestrate the assassination of the Victim (Pannun) in the United States. At YADAV's direction, GUPTA contacted an individual whom GUPTA believed to be a criminal associate, but who was in fact a confidential source working with the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) [the 'CS' or the confidential source], for assistance in contacting a hitman to murder the Victim in New York City.'

It detailed: 'YADAV subsequently agreed, in dealings brokered by GUPTA, to pay the UC [undercover officer] \$100,000 to murder the Victim. On or about June 9, 2023, YADAV and GUPTA arranged for an associate to

deliver \$15,000 in cash to the UC as an advance payment for the murder.'

It also stated: 'In or about June 2023, in furtherance of the assassination plot, YADAV provided GUPTA with personal information about the Victim, including the Victim's home address in New York City, phone numbers associated with the Victim, and details about the Victim's day-to-day conduct, which GUPTA passed to the UC. GUPTA thereafter provided YADAV with regular updates on the assassination plot, including surveillance photographs of the Victim.'

Pannun reacted by saying, "The [Narendra] Modi government's claim that [the] murder-for-hire conspiracy was the act of a "rogue agent" collapses under the weight of the evidence presented in federal court.'

On 16 February, *Economic Times* reported, 'Indian officials reiterated their position that New Delhi wasn't involved in the alleged plot...' It did not identify who those officials were.

Gupta pleading guilty is by no means the end of the story. Yadav remains a co-accused, and prosecutors are clearly pointing to a department of the Indian government that directly operates under Modi and national security adviser Ajit Doval.



(Above) Nikhil Gupta, who has pleaded guilty in the Pannun case

The assassination attempt, an extraterritorial misadventure, could only have been authorised at the highest level of the Indian government

► Continued on page 2

The right to be a rogue (until caught)

Continued from page 1

The extrajudicial, extraterritorial adventure illustrated by the apparent assassination attempt could only have been authorised at the highest level. While Samant Goel headed R&AW at the time, the orders would undoubtedly have come from the top. Since its creation in 1968, R&AW has been a reasonably competent external intelligence outfit, not known for Rambo-style forays—at least until 2014.

After a rather short six-month stint as director of India's Intelligence Bureau, Doval espoused what the gullible swallowed as the 'defensive-offensive' doctrine. His harebrained ideas drew on Mossad's playbook and dovetailed with Modi's fanciful 'muscular foreign policy'. The result was Indian intelligence officers being declared persona non grata in North America, Britain and Australia—a significant handicap for India.

Yadav was indicted on the same three counts as Gupta. US authorities issued an arrest warrant in October 2024, and he remains on the Interpol Red Corner Notice hanging over his head. It is unknown how much Gupta has revealed—or will reveal—with the hope of reducing a potential 20-year prison sentence. (In the US, defendants can plea bargain by admitting guilt, typically spilling the beans about co-accused in lieu of a lighter sentence.)

Now that Gupta stands convicted by admission, the US could renew its interest in Yadav with a formal extradition request. New Delhi will likely stall on this, if not refuse altogether. Yadav has either been sacked or quit his government post by mutual agreement.

A cunning move by the Modi dispensation would be to prosecute him for the Pannun case or some other offence. (Delhi Police has reportedly registered an extortion case against him.) If he is taken into judicial custody, South Block could invoke the 1997 US-India Extradition Treaty to avoid extraditing him. After all, Yadav may have too much to say about who ordered Pannun's assassination.

Intelligence agencies have a history of striking quid pro quo

deals with suspects, accused or convicted criminals, hiring them for dirty jobs, while maintaining plausible deniability. The Indian government could have distanced itself from Gupta, but the evidence of his apparent links to Yadav seem to be undeniable, which puts the Modi regime in a tight corner.

The statement issued by the US Attorney's Office also cites the killing of Sikh separatist Hardeep Singh Nijjar outside a gurdwara on the outskirts of Vancouver in June 2023. At the time, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau said there were "credible allegations" that agents of the Indian government were involved.

The Modi apparatus dismissed the allegation as "absurd". The economic damage inflicted on Canada by US President Donald Trump in the past year has, however, compelled the Canadian government—under new prime minister Mark Carney—to temporarily put the Nijjar issue on the backburner. A former governor of the Bank of England, Carney has prioritised consolidating commercial ties with the non-US world, including India.

Much of the evidence in the Nijjar case—including alleged intercepts of communications between Indian officials—was gathered by the US and shared with Canada, not to mention the other 'Five Eyes' countries: Britain, Australia and New Zealand. Trump's unreliability and a relative lack of confidence in the current heads of US intelligence outfits—Tulsi Gabbard, director of National Intelligence and Kash Patel, director of FBI—has made Canadian intelligence agencies cautious.

A murderous approach to Khalistanis abroad is, arguably, overkill. With minimal secessionist sentiment in Punjab, such an attitude not only amounts to killing a fly with a sledgehammer, but also runs the risk of reviving a dying movement. Overemphasising Pannun's importance has made him a Sikh hero.

Offensive counter-espionage only works if you don't get caught. ■

ASHIS RAY was formerly editor-at-large of CNN. He is the author of *The Trial that Shook Britain*

The importance of being Gurinder Singh Dhillon

Is the head of the influential Radha Soami Satsang Beas transitioning to a political role?

Herjinder

In a state where religion and politics have long shared a porous boundary, recent developments around Gurinder Singh Dhillon have sparked intense debate. The spiritual head of the influential Radha Soami Satsang Beas—widely known to his followers simply as 'Baba'—appears to have stepped into Punjab's political theatre in a manner unprecedented for a dera chief.

The immediate trigger was Dhillon's visit to meet jailed senior Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) leader Bikram Singh Majithia, who has been embroiled in legal battles over a disproportionate assets case (he is also facing drug-related charges). After the meeting (on 1 February), Dhillon publicly declared Majithia to be innocent. Whether that assessment was legally sound or not is beside the point. In a politically charged Punjab, such a statement from the head of the state's largest dera amounted to a clear political signal—one widely interpreted as a rebuke to the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government.

Dhillon's political visibility did not end there. On 10 February, he joined state governor Gulab Chand Kataria at an anti-drug awareness foot march in Ferozepur. Sharing the stage were SAD president Sukhbir Singh Badal and Punjab BJP's acting chief Ashwani Sharma. The optics were striking: a spiritual leader walking alongside leaders of rival political parties united in their opposition to the AAP.

A closed-door meeting during the event fuelled further speculation. Political circles buzzed with rumours that Dhillon was playing facilitator in reviving a potential SAD-BJP alliance to counter AAP and Congress. Observers described his role as that of a 'bridge'—someone capable of fostering cross-party cooperation on ostensibly social issues such as drug de-addiction, but with unmistakable political undertones.

Some went further, suggesting that the BJP, which is still struggling to find its feet in Punjab's complex political terrain, may see Dhillon as a possible chief ministerial face. While there is no formal indication of such a plan, the conjecture underscores the dramatic shift in conversation around the dera chief.

Visits by political heavyweights to Dera Beas are not new. Prime minister Narendra Modi, home minister Amit Shah and RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat have all been to the dera in recent years. Such visits are part of the state's longstanding political culture, where religious and spiritual institutions are courted before elections.

What is new, however, is the apparent reversal of roles. Traditionally, it's the politicians who seek blessings; rarely does a dera chief step so visibly into what seems like active political engagement.

Amritsar-based political observer Jagrup Singh Sekhon argues that the BJP is leaving no stone unturned to become a relevant player in Punjab. According to him, the party is attempting to disrupt established political equations and carve out space in a state where it has

With the BJP trying to carve out space in Punjab, where it has struggled, Dhillon's increased public activity acquires significance



Gurinder Singh Dhillon, head of Radha Soami Satsang Beas, at the Golden Temple

historically struggled. In that context, Dhillon's increased public activity acquires added significance.

Radha Soami Satsang Beas is arguably the most influential dera in Punjab, with millions of followers in India and abroad. Its vast network and disciplined structure give it formidable social capital. Yet, despite the perception of deras as vote banks, there is little empirical data to conclusively prove that dera endorsements directly translate into electoral outcomes. Political parties continue to seek their support and the actual impact on voting patterns remains largely anecdotal.

Dhillon's own public image has also been shaped by controversy. He was named in proceedings linked to the Ranbaxy scandal involving former promoters Malvinder and Shivinder Singh. Malvinder Singh alleged in court that a part of the proceeds from the sale of Ranbaxy Laboratories stake was diverted to Dhillon and his family.

In 2019, the Delhi High Court issued garnishee orders—a directive requiring a third party to pay funds directly to a creditor to satisfy a debt—against Dhillon, his family members and dozens of other entities.

Initially, the Dhillon family filed affidavits stating they did not owe money to Ranbaxy. Later that year,

Dhillon acknowledged certain financial transactions dating back to 2006, though he disputed the scale of liability claimed and maintained that a full and clear account of transactions had not been presented. This dented the dera chief's otherwise low-profile public persona.

Some analysts suggest that Dhillon's visible proximity to national leaders in the years following the Ranbaxy controversy may have been strategic—a way to consolidate influence or ensure institutional protection during turbulent times. Such claims remain speculative, they contribute to the broader narrative now unfolding.

In a significant and somewhat rare organisational decision, Dhillon named Jasdeep Singh Gill as his successor in September 2024. Gill's profile is markedly different: an alumnus of prestigious institutions including IIT, MIT and Cambridge, he has corporate experience that includes serving as a senior official at Ranbaxy. The move was seen as an attempt to institutionalise succession and insulate the dera from future turbulence.

Against this backdrop, Dhillon's recent political engagements appear more consequential. Is he gradually transitioning from spiritual leadership to a political role? ■

'Artificial' Intelligence and 'Natural' Greed

BOOK EXTRACT

Nandita Haksar

Artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics are no longer the stuff of science fiction; they have become a part of our everyday lives. India now ranks among the fastest-growing AI economies in the world [it just hosted the AI Impact Summit, 16-20 February 2026, attended by several heads of state]. With the growing threat of displacement and disruption by AI and new technologies, however, should we, Indian citizens, be proud or should we be alarmed?

Our government, like all governments around the world, paints a rosy picture of our AI-powered future. Take, for example, NITI Aayog's report, 'AI for Inclusive Societal Development' (October 2025), which promises that AI will empower India's 490 million informal workers by expanding access to healthcare, education, skilling and financial inclusion. The report highlights how AI-driven tools can boost productivity and resilience for millions who form the backbone of India's economy. The report also stresses that technology can bridge deep social and economic divides, ensuring that the benefits of AI reach every citizen. The Union Cabinet approved the India AI Mission in March 2024, with a budget outlay of Rs 10,371.92 crore over five years. A NITI Aayog report estimates that AI could add between US\$ 500 and 600 billion dollars to India's GDP by 2035.

Geoffrey Hinton, the 2024 Nobel Prize-winning computer scientist known as the 'godfather of Artificial Intelligence', has warned that AI may wipe out millions of jobs, while emphasising that the real danger does not lie with the technology, but with how society wants to deploy it. Hinton warns that AI systems might be able to

control humans just as easily as an adult can bribe a three-year-old child with candy.

Hinton says, "What's actually going to happen is rich people are going to use AI to replace workers. It's going to create massive unemployment and a huge rise in profits. It will make a few people much richer and most people poorer. That's not AI's fault, that is the capitalist system."

It is said that AI technologies are more environment-friendly, but in fact, they consume unfathomable amounts of data, labour and natural resources. For example, a single AI query can consume up to ten times more power than a basic online search and training a large language model can use over 1,000 megawatt-hours of electricity, roughly equal to the consumption by several hundred Indian households.

These technologies can lead to water scarcity. Cooling systems in large data centres rely on water-based technology, yet over 80 per cent of the facilities today are located in water scarce states such as Maharashtra, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu. In Bengaluru, data centres already consume nearly eight million litres of water each day, even as the city faces extreme water shortages. And then there are the robots.

A media report in April 2025 carried the heading that maids were being replaced by robots in Bengaluru. The report was about Manisha Roy from Hebbal, who replaced her cook with a kitchen robot capable of chopping, sautéing, and steaming. "Now I do other household chores while the food is

getting ready, because I know my food won't be charred," she shared.

The report stated that this shift is driven by the desire for consistent, hassle-free assistance. Robots offer reliability, and their one-time cost proves economical over a period of time. There is not even a passing mention of the impact of this shift on the maids, the tens of thousands of women who work as domestic help across the country to support their families.

One of the reasons is, as Karen Hao points out, AI generative technologies spawn "heightened volumes of misinformation". News reports and video clips celebrate how humanoids can paint, dance, play sports, and some have even learnt embroidery. There are news items which announced that robots in warehouses are loading and unloading materials, and there are some factories run entirely by robots called smart factories. Amidst all this reporting, full of joy and

wonder, there is very little mention of the impact of these new technologies on the lives of the millions of workers who are being displaced by automation and AI-driven robots.

India is one of the youngest nations in the world, with more than 62 per cent of its population in the working age group (15-59 years), and more than 54 per cent of its total population below 25 years of age. The government recognises that India faces a dual challenge of paucity of a highly trained workforce, as well as non-employability of large sections of the conventionally educated youth, who possess little or no job skills.

The Skill India programme was introduced by the central government in 2015 to upgrade the skills of workers to prepare them for the transition to new technologies. However, this scheme has not achieved its purported goal, according to the latest report of the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India. In its performance audit of the Pradhan Mantri Kausal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), the CAG report has highlighted serious gaps in the implementation of India's flagship skill development scheme.

Trade union movements in India have come out strongly against the new labour codes [and the draft Shram Shakti Niti 2025]

However, they have so far not engaged with the question of new technologies and the disruption caused by them in working class lives. This disruption has been felt by the middle class as well when

major Indian IT companies, including TCS, Infosys, Tech Mahindra and Wipro, their Mahindra and Wipro, quietly began restructuring their workforce, taking more than 50,000 people off their rolls. There have been mass layoffs in the manufacturing sector as well, especially in the automotive sector.

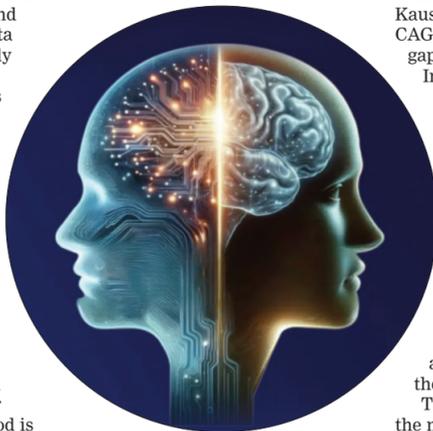
According to a pamphlet brought out in May 2025 by the Maruti Suzuki Asthaya Mazdoor Sangh, 'Suzuki presently employs 34,918 workers out of whom only 18 per cent are permanent, 40.72 per cent are contractual workers, 21.6 per cent are temporary workers (TW), 21 per cent are trainees (MST and SST) and apprentices. The vast non-permanent workforce together accounts for more than 80 per cent of the total workforce'.

These figures match the figures given in a report on the 'Future of Work in India's Automotive Sector', which observed 'a significant ratio of non-standard employment to permanent workers across OEMs (Original Equipment Manufacturers) and tier 1 vendors, with bulk of the work on the shop floor being performed by workers in non-standard employment'.

Some experts optimistically argue that during the past three industrial revolutions, driven by steam, electricity and digital technologies, people were displaced and there was disruption, but ultimately more jobs were created. The same will happen this time too. However, the fundamental difference between the other technological revolutions and the fourth industrial revolution is that human beings are being replaced with robots, which will, in turn, lead to industries without workers and growth without employment. ■

NANDITA HAKSAR is a lawyer and human rights activist

The impact of these new technologies on the lives of workers displaced by automation and AI-driven robots finds very little airtime



Call it the 'Mohammad Deepak effect'

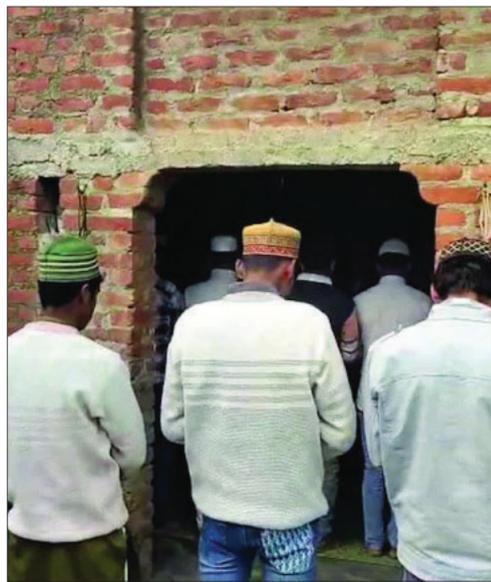
Are common folk in the Hindutva hate labs of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand pushing back? **Nandlal Sharma** reports

There's resistance in a state where a saffron scarf is a licence to assault—or even kill. Where a complaint from a BJP functionary is enough to get a headmaster suspended. Where universities prevent students from entering their own campuses but unnumbered vehicles bearing armed Hindutva hoodlums can roll in unchecked. Where Muslims can be arrested for offering Friday prayers inside a vacant house, even with permission. There's resistance in the state where Muslims are arrested for the slightest whiff of criticism in their social media posts. Call it the 'Mohammad Deepak effect', or call it the Allahabad High Court effect, reports coming in from Mathura, Allahabad, Varanasi—even Jaipur—suggest that the people are pushing back.

In a primary school in Mathura, headmaster Jan Mohammad has been reinstated—but only after the village panchayat of 20,000 people took to the streets. Locals rose above caste and religion and stood up to the ruling party's MLA and his associates. Teachers protested, students rallied behind their headmaster and over 300 villagers went to meet the district magistrate. A former MLA testified in his support. Only then did the administration relent. The children say their headmaster is excellent, fair and just. But in the eyes of a BJP leader, the integrity of this Muslim—who had spent 12 years in the paramilitary forces—had become intolerable.

Shyamsundar Sharma, eight-time former MLA from Mant in Mathura district, says that during the Special Intensive Revision (SIR), Jan Mohammad served as a booth level officer. Sharma alleges that BJP legislator Rajesh Chaudhary handed Jan Mohammad a list of voters. When Jan Mohammad refused to delete any names, the MLA allegedly threatened him: "You better watch out." Jan Mohammad reportedly replied, "Either way I'm dead, so why not die doing the right thing?" Soon after, Durgesh Pradhan, BJP president of Bajna mandal of Mant and resident of Nausherpur, filed a complaint against him.

The complaint alleged that at Nohjheel Primary School No. 1—where Jan Mohammad is the only Muslim teacher with five Hindu assistant teachers and two *shiksha mitras* on his staff—the headmaster lured children towards Islam, brainwashed them into offering namaz and insulted Hindu deities. It accused him of calling Hinduism inferior and of carrying out 'suspicious activities' to propagate Islam. It



Jan Mohammad (top) and Mohd. Deepak (above) were supported by locals; (left) offering Friday prayers in a vacant house invited police action

further claimed that he did not conduct the national anthem in the mornings and discouraged children if they tried to sing it. Also, Muslim clerics and members of the Tablighi Jamaat were frequent visitors to the school to pressure children and their families to adopt Islam.

On the basis of this complaint, the administration suspended Jan Mohammad within 24 hours—without any investigation—despite his 17 years of service. The suspension order, issued on 31 January 2026, by district basic education officer Ratan Kirti, said he appeared prima facie guilty of neglecting official duties and violating the Government Servants' Conduct Rules, 1999. He was attached to another primary school in Mant block, and a two-member inquiry committee was formed and given one month to report.

Public protest changed the course of events. On 3 February, the administration curtailed the inquiry period to three days. By 6 February, after recording written statements from students, parents, teachers and locals, the committee found none of the allegations were substantiated. Jan Mohammad was reinstated—with full pay.

Intervention by local residents, teachers' unions and public representatives forced the education officer to reconsider. Yet Jan

Mohammad fears reprisal. He does not wish to speak to the media and says he doesn't want any politics in his name. He'll fight his own battles, he says. But local resident Devdutt Pathak has a different take: "If people hadn't stood by him, he wouldn't have been reinstated."

Meanwhile, 15 Supreme Court advocates have stepped forward to support Mohammad Deepak, who defended Wakeel Ahmed—the elderly owner of Baba Dresses in Kotdwar, Uttarakhand—from Bajrang Dal hooligans.

After a 26 January clash where Deepak's family was abused by Hindutva hoods from Dehradun, Deepak's gym saw a drastic drop of members from 150 to 15. Social media users launched a campaign, encouraging people in Kotdwar to join his gym. A handle (@avidandiya) pledged to sponsor one month's membership for the first 100 people. By 17 February, the tweet had garnered 344 replies, over 1,900 retweets and 10,000 likes. Public figures amplified similar posts. On 8 February, CPI(M) parliamentary leader John Brittas met Ahmed and Deepak in Kotdwar. Brittas toured the gym and took a membership. Other advocates followed, taking gym

memberships and offering pro bono legal help. While Mohammad Deepak has paid a price for standing against hate—the people are standing with him.

Soon after the Kotdwar incident, Abdul Jabbar, who runs Pundir Tailors in Dehradun was harassed by Bajrang Dal members. That video also circulated widely. When local media visited the shop, the locals called Jabbar a decent man and condemned the hooligans.

On 14 February 2026, Valentine's Day, a video emerged from Jaipur. Young men wearing saffron scarves and carrying sticks were seen roaming in a park, threatening couples, demanding to know their religion and relationship. Some youths surrounded the vigilantes and asked: Who gave you the right to bully? Are you the police? Show your ID. Which organisation do you belong to? Who is your leader? The men had no answers, except, "Can't you see our scarves? We're from the Bajrang Dal." Feeling the heat from the young people, they fled.

Dr Medusa—known for her scathing satire of the Modi regime and its politics of hate—wrote on X that the video healed something inside her she hadn't realised was broken. "First Mohammad Deepak... and now this. Is the country truly healing—or am I being naïve?"

From Varanasi came a video of vigilantes descending on a 60-year-old *bakra mandi* (goat market) to 'check' vendors' licences. Abdullah, legal advisor of the local Goat Meat Union, said their aim was to target livelihoods and vitiate the atmosphere by spreading rumours of cow slaughter. A dozen men posing as officials demanded licences but the locals united, demanded their ID cards and forced them to turn tail.

Resident Adil Khan said thousands depend on the registered market, which operates daily from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., and is well known to the police. After inspection, authorities confirmed that no cow slaughter had occurred.

At Allahabad University, students associated with the Disha Students' Organization, paid the price for their activism. The cultural group organises film screenings, study circles and discussions around youth issues. The group had already drawn attention for a song sung by Disha member Priyanshu—"Kaho Narender, hazaar aa raha?" (So, Narender, are you having fun?)—that went viral on social media.

Following the Supreme Court stay on the new UGC regulations, Disha organised an event to debate the pros and cons. Around two dozen people were present at Bargad Lawn in the Arts Faculty of Allahabad University, when an unruly mob of 40-odd arrived, reportedly led by Bhavesh Dubey, a leader of the RSS-aligned Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP).

A Bajrang Dal vehicle entered the campus. The men called out a postgraduate student, Chandraprakash, grabbed his collar and assaulted him. When others intervened, they were abused with casteist slurs and beaten. Female students were allegedly dragged by their hair and kicked. The university administration watched silently. Several students, including Nidhi, Sanjay, Pooja, Soumya and Chandraprakash were seriously injured.

The victims do not dismiss the possibility that their viral song made them targets. When more students gathered, the attackers fled. The proctor also arrived but allegedly let the attackers escape and took the victims to his office instead.

The administration has suspended Nidhi and Bhavesh Dubey and issued show-cause notices. A complaint has been filed, but police say they won't register an FIR till the university report comes in. ■

The video healed her, Dr Medusa, known for her satire of the politics of hate, wrote on X. "First Mohd. Deepak... and now this. Is the country healing—or am I being naïve?"

Brace yourself for a deluge of GM crops

With the India-US trade deal, the Modi government has effectively sold off the interests of Indian farmers, writes **Rashme Sehgal**

Union agriculture minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has finally ended his silence on the Indo-US trade deal. On 17 February, Chouhan—who only last year said India needed to be cautious about allowing the entry of Genetically Modified (GM) crops—declared that Indian farmers had nothing to worry about, their interests were 'completely protected' in the ongoing negotiations. He said little on importing soyabean oil from genetically modified soyabeans and DDG (dried distillers' grains) made from GM maize, both of which find mention in the joint framework to the 'interim trade agreement'.

Down to Earth, the journal dedicated to environmental concerns, pointed out that a Centre for Science and Environment investigation in 2018 had found 'GM ingredients in 32 per cent of 65 food products in India, 80 per cent of them imported'.

Sridhar Krishnaswami, a researcher with the Alliance for Sustainable & Holistic Agriculture (ASHA-Kisan Swaraj), fears that "DDGs and soyabean are just a ploy and that our agricultural market is going to be totally opened up." Why else would the US insist on India removing or relaxing 'restrictive' trade practices?

GM foods green-signalled in the deal include soyabean oil and DDGs made from GM maize and used for cattle and poultry feed. By doing so, the Modi government ended India's long-term moratorium on GM food crops. Under the Environment (Protection) Act 1986, the import of GM crops was disallowed; an exception was made for BT cotton in 2002.

India insisted that approval was required for every GM organism entering the food chain. As late as November 2022, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India had made it mandatory to label foods containing one per cent or more GM content insisting that all import consignments had to certify their non-GM status. In 2009, there was public backlash against moves to allow BT brinjal cultivation. This time, public reaction is muted because of lack of clarity and absence of details about the deal being negotiated. Even so, several experts say it is obvious that India has bowed to the pressure of major global seed companies (Bayer-Monsanto, Dupont Pioneer, Syngenta, Dow) and to the US, which is the

largest exporter of GM crops in the world.

Founder of Gene Campaign Suman Sahai believes the US desperately needed a market for its soyabean and corn, because China, once its top buyer, has dramatically scaled back its purchases. "Trump could not afford to annoy his large political base of soyabean and corn farmers, hence the pressure on us," says Sahai.

GM crops are plants whose DNA has been altered using genetic engineering techniques to introduce new traits such as resistance to insects and tolerance of herbicides and climate stress. This technology differs from traditional breeding, which mixes genes within a crop's broader family over several generations.

Experts believe India walked into this deal with its eyes closed, overlooking the 'precautionary principle'—followed by several countries—that prioritises the environment and health and safety measures while prohibiting the cultivation and entry of GM crops. More importantly, we are overlooking the fact that India is the centre of origin and genetic diversity for several crops. Regulators have repeatedly cited risks related to gene flow, biodiversity loss and long-term ecological impact.

Shockingly, civil society has remained largely silent on the alarming repercussions of the side entry of GM food products. Could they have swallowed minister of commerce and industry Piyush Goyal's assurances to the contrary? ■

India produces around 13.05 million tonnes of soya bean and approximately 42 million tonnes of corn, 20 per cent of which is used to make fuel-grade ethanol. Self-sufficient in its corn output, India imports soya oil for cooking because it lacks the processing infrastructure for edible oil. Farmers of soya and corn complain that prices of both these crops are depressed with the government not buying enough and traders paying much below the minimum support price (MSP) set by the government. As a result, even their production costs are not being met.

Farmers worry that these losses will mount if US goods enter the Indian market. For one, it will immediately hit their export market. Both soya and corn from India are being sold in the international market primarily because both are non-GM crops. "Once we are inundated with



Low yields and high-cost technology aggravated farmers' distress after BT cotton entered India

Photo: Getty Images

farmers into debt. BT cotton requires regular quantities of water—erratic rainfall caused crop failure. Pests like the pink bollworm developed pesticide resistance, compelling farmers to increase the use of pesticides. Lower yields combined with high-cost technology accelerated farmer distress, triggering a wave of suicides.

Krishnaswami believes the trade deal was deliberately stalled by the US for several months in order to arm-twist India to grant a back-door entry to GM crops. "Apart from the cost issue, there are proprietary concerns because the company holding the patent receives a cut on the sale of every packet of seed sold in the country," he points out. "The hard truth is that our regulatory sovereignty has been diluted because the US will end up demanding a harmonisation of our regulatory measures with that of the US."

The late Dr P.M. Bhargava, widely regarded as the architect of modern biology and biotechnology in India and founder-director of the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, consistently warned against both the import and cultivation of GM foods without comprehensive risk assessments of their effects on soil and surrounding fauna. The most disturbing aspect is that toxicity tests are being conducted by the multinational seed companies themselves, each with a vested interest in ensuring that their genetically modified organisms (GMO) are declared safe.

While studies have proved that genetically modified DNA in oils do not disappear just because they are processed, Piyush Goyal justified the import of soya oil at the presser by saying that "when a processed item is imported, the GM effects are no longer there".

National convener of ASHA-Kisan Swaraj Kirankumar Vissa says, "The minister's statement is both unscientific and opportunistic. Each product needs its own biosafety assessment. That is why we have a statutory regulatory framework. We are flouting domestic laws made by our Parliament to appease the Trump administration, throwing our citizens' interests away in the bargain. This 'interim agreement framework' is the first round of opening up Indian agriculture, to be followed by many more crops and animal products in the future, even while claiming protection." ■

American stuff, this will create doubts of adulteration in the minds of foreign buyers, who might no longer show interest in buying from us," said a soya farmer from Madhya Pradesh.

Farmer organisations have also expressed fears that the elimination of tariffs on the import of 'a wide range of US food and agricultural products' will undermine Indian farmers, horticulturists and oilseed growers, distort feed and livestock markets, and increase dependence on imports. In particular, the import of DDGs and red sorghum will impact the income of millions of farmers growing maize, jowar, soyabean and other crops used for fodder and feed for animals and poultry.

Once the floodgates of GM crops open, import will not be restricted to soya and maize. The US already has GM apples and GM fish in the market—many more are in the pipeline. Once restrictions are removed, will all these GM crops also be dumped in India?

India's experience with BT cotton should have been a wakeup call. We are Monsanto's biggest market outside the US—90 per cent of cotton seeds are sold in our country. BT cotton was introduced with much fanfare in 2002 with farmers promised a huge increase in yields. They were soon disillusioned. The seeds were expensive and forced small

Once the floodgates open, GM imports won't be restricted to soya and maize. The US already has GM apples and fish in the market, and more are in the pipeline

16th FINANCE COMMISSION REPORT

Will the nod at efficiency undermine equity?

Ajit Ranade

India's fiscal federalism on a deceptively simple bargain: the Union collects most broad-based taxes while the states carry the frontline responsibility for essential public services—schools, hospitals, policing, local roads, water supply and much else. The tax revenues and spending duties do not match. Indeed, states have two-thirds expenditure obligations, but control only about a third of revenues. So, the Constitution created a neutral referee—the Finance Commission (FC)—to periodically recommend how the 'divisible pool' of Central taxes should be shared between the Union and the states (vertical devolution) and among the states (horizontal devolution).

The Commission is reconstituted every five years, so that the division formula can adapt to changing realities rather than be frozen forever. The core job of the Commission follows from Article 280 and the implementation of recommendations from Article 281. In practice, FC awards become the financial 'operating system' of Indian federalism. They affect the monthly cash that states receive, their budget space for welfare and capital spending and even their ability to borrow.

With the 16th Finance Commission (FC-16) report now accepted by the Union government and placed before Parliament, the new formula will shape Centre-state fiscal relations for 2026-31. The key question is not just 'who gets how much' but what incentives the system creates—especially in a federation where prosperity and political power are unevenly distributed.

Like the previous Commission, FC-16 has retained the states' share at 41 per cent of the divisible pool. There was a demand from 22 states to increase their share to 50 per cent. This was partly due to their grievance concerning the trend of the Union's rising reliance on cesses and surcharges, which typically sit outside the divisible pool and therefore are not shared. As per the FC-16 report, since the total size of the divisible pool will nearly double from Rs 55 trillion to Rs 90 trillion during the FC-16 period, the states will have considerably more resources. But if the Union continues to expand non-shareable levies, the 41 per cent can feel smaller in effect than in the headlines.

The most striking element of FC-16 is on the horizontal side: it introduces



Photo: Getty Images

In a system where prosperity and political power are unevenly distributed, the key question is not who gets how much but what the incentives are

'contribution to national GDP' as a criterion with 10 per cent weight. The Commission does this by reducing weights elsewhere—cutting per capita income distance and demographic performance by 2.5 percentage points each, trimming area by 5 percentage points, and removing the (small) tax effort weight used by FC-15. It is as if the Commission now seeks a balance between its central role of 'gap filling' of shortfall in resources, with a new reward for efficiency signal. A reward for states that contribute more to the national output.

Why is this a big deal? Because it shifts the moral language of transfers. For decades, the dominant logic was: help states to provide comparable basic services—despite differences in income and capacity—and offset structural disadvantages. Economists call this 'equalisation'. The new GDP-contribution criterion, in effect, says: performance and contribution also matter. This is not really contrary to the spirit of the Constitution, but the change in emphasis is profound.

FC-16 shifts the moral language of transfers. From helping poorer states offset structural disadvantages ('equalisation') to rewarding 'contribution to GDP'

Constitutionally, the Commission is to recommend a fair distribution of shareable taxes so that different levels of government can discharge responsibilities assigned in the Constitution. The FC has always used a mix of criteria—some anchored in equity (income distance, population, area, forest) and some that try to recognise efficiency (tax effort, fiscal discipline, demographic performance).

Adding 'contribution to GDP' is therefore not automatically unconstitutional. The deeper question is normative: what should be the dominant objective of tax devolution? Introducing GDP contribution can conflict with the revenue-disability logic. Besides, all states are not on a level playing field. A rich state often has better infrastructure and institutions that make it easier to respond to 'performance incentives', while a poorer state may not be able to do so quickly even if it wants to. The divergence may worsen. Some so-called backward states are incentivised to keep their forest cover and

slow down the pace of urbanisation, thereby resulting in slower GDP growth. Rewarding 'contribution' can harden advantages, unless compensated by investment in capacity and human capital in the lagging states.

The FC-16 report emphasises that equalisation remains the 'centre of gravity', with per-capita income distance still dominant. But incentives matter because they influence political narratives and administrative choices.

There are three possible behavioural effects. First, high-performing states will feel less penalised. This may reduce resentment in parts of the south and west of India, where the argument has been: "We contribute more, yet our share keeps shrinking." Second, lagging states may face weaker 'gap-filling' comfort. If they fear that future Commissions will steadily raise the 'performance' component, they may push harder for other compensations—special packages, centrally sponsored schemes, discretionary grants. Third, the conversation may shift from 'need' to 'merit'. This is politically potent and risky for cooperative federalism, since poorer regions will believe that the system doesn't provide safety nets anymore.

Whether the so-called north-south tension will ease will depend on other political and demographic factors. As such, the political centre of gravity is in the north and east, whereas the economic weight is more in the south. This structural imbalance cannot be addressed by the FC-16 alone. Given the sensitivities, any change in formula becomes a proxy for larger anxieties: representation, voice, fairness.

The other issue of increasing dependence on non-shareable levies like cesses and surcharges is still unresolved. Additionally, the surplus transfer from the Reserve Bank of India budgeted at 3.1 trillion per cent of Union revenues; it is non-shareable and is on a rising trend.

FC-16 is a 'continuity with a twist' award: stability on the vertical share, but a meaningful signal on the horizontal formula. It nudges India's fiscal federalism away from a pure 'gap-filling' narrative towards a mixed model that also acknowledges contribution and growth. To some extent it prevents fiscal bargaining between the Union and states from becoming a permanent tug-of-war in the political arena. But its legitimacy depends on fair and transparent rules and certainly not on encouraging stealth through non-shareable levies. India needs both: a credible equalisation system so every citizen can access minimum quality public services regardless of birthplace and a governance culture that rewards growth, reforms and revenue effort without locking poorer states into permanent dependence.

If that balance fails, we will not just argue about percentages—we will argue about the very idea of cooperative federalism. ■

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

Tarique Rahman's test at the edge of the Ganga

Ashok Swain

With the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) winning a decisive two-thirds majority and Tarique Rahman sworn in as prime minister, the country has, for the first time in almost 35 years, a male head of government. The electoral outcome marks a rupture with a political order dominated for more than 15 years by Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League.

Expectations are high and the pressures on the new prime minister are immense. Internally, Rahman faces the urgent task of restoring law and order after years of politicised policing, rebuilding public trust in state institutions and stabilising a battered economy.

He must also reform the Constitution, but his party MPs declined to take a second pledge to serve as members of the proposed Constitution Reform Council, leading to protests by the Opposition Jamaat-e-Islami and the National Citizens Party (NCP). The newly elected BNP legislators argued that the Council has not been incorporated into the existing Constitution and that any such body or reforms must first be legally adopted through parliamentary processes.

Externally, however, the most daunting challenges lie in managing relations with India, Bangladesh's most important and

powerful neighbour, where unresolved political and structural issues threaten to define the early years of his premiership.

The most immediate bilateral complication concerns Sheikh Hasina's presence in India. Following her political downfall and subsequent convictions in Bangladesh, including death sentences, her asylum in India is both a symbolic and practical sticking point. Demanding Hasina's extradition will be popular at home but diplomatically futile. India is unlikely to hand her over, not least because of historical constraints. A more realistic scenario, one that both sides may quietly accept, is that Hasina continues to reside in India with restrictions on her political activities. But even if this sensitive issue is managed through tacit understandings rather than formal agreements, it will continue to linger as a source of mistrust.

The more consequential test of Bangladesh-India ties, however, lies elsewhere. The Ganga Water Sharing Treaty, signed in 1996 for 30 years, will expire in December 2026. The treaty governs dry-season (January-May) water sharing at the Farakka barrage in West Bengal. If the water levels in Bangladesh at a vulnerable time of the year. Negotiations cannot be postponed, therefore, until the treaty's formal end; an understanding must be reached well in advance to avert a crisis.

For Bangladesh, the stakes couldn't be higher. The Ganga is a lifeline that sustains agriculture, fisheries, navigation, ecosystems and livelihoods across large parts of the country's southwest. Reduced dry-season flows since the construction and operation of the Farakka barrage in 1975 have already contributed to declining crop yields, loss of biodiversity and socio-economic stress. These impacts are cumulative and structural, not episodic. A further reduction in water availability will deepen anxieties in Bangladesh and pressure a fragile rural economy.

For India, particularly the Modi government, the politics of renegotiation are complex. While water sharing with Bangladesh is officially a bilateral matter, in practice it is deeply entangled with



The flow in the Ganga has reduced considerably since the Ganga Water Sharing Treaty was signed in 1996. Renegotiating the arrangement will be Tarique Rahman's first foreign policy test

India's federal politics.

West Bengal, where the Farakka barrage is located, holds significant leverage over any agreement that affects upstream withdrawals. Securing the consent of the West Bengal government for a water-sharing arrangement that Bangladesh would consider fair and sustainable has historically been difficult, and under the current political conditions, when the state election is just a few months away, it may be even more so.

The Modi government has a track of prioritising short-term political benefits at home over regional water cooperation, especially if it reckons that denying concessions to neighbouring countries can yield electoral gains in key states.

The changing hydrological signature of the Ganga will make the upcoming negotiations even more difficult. Population growth and development on both sides of the border have sharply increased water demand, while climate change has introduced new uncertainties about the reliability of the Ganga's flow. Changing monsoon

patterns, increased variability in precipitation, glacial retreat in the Himalayas and more frequent extreme events are all reshaping the river's hydrology.

The Ganga Water Sharing Treaty of 1996 divided water between India and Bangladesh based on historical average flows from 1949 to 1988. Since then, water flow in the Ganga has reduced considerably. A recent study by researchers at IIT Gandhinagar indicates that since 1980 the annual water flow in the Indus Basin has increased by eight per cent, while the Ganga Basin has experienced a decline of 17 per cent. The assumption of stable and predictable dry-season flows that underpinned earlier negotiations, and the 1996 treaty, is no longer tenable.

For Bangladesh's perspective, this reinforces a long-standing concern. The 1996 treaty was celebrated as a diplomatic breakthrough, but it was a compromise shaped by political consideration. While locking the two countries into an allocation formula tied to historical flow data, the treaty did not establish an adaptive basin-wide framework capable of responding to climate change. As climate pressures

intensify, the rigid sharing formula will become a liability, exposing downstream Bangladesh to risks it did little to create.

While navigating this terrain, Tarique Rahman will need strategic clarity, political courage and diplomatic finesse. Unlike Sheikh Hasina, he cannot rely on personal rapport with New Delhi or ideological alignment to smooth over structural disagreements. His government will need to articulate Bangladesh's water security concerns in a manner that is firm yet constructive, avoiding nationalist escalation while refusing to accept arrangements that perpetuate vulnerability. Politically, it will be suicidal for Rahman to accept an agreement less favourable to Bangladesh than the treaty negotiated by Sheikh Hasina in 1996.

Long-term water security in the Ganga basin depends on data sharing, joint monitoring, flexible allocation mechanisms and a cooperative approach to water management. Whether the Modi government, which often appears more committed to short-term political gains at home than to long-term regional stability and national interest, is willing to move in this direction remains an open question.

Threats to review or weaponise existing water agreements have become signalling of India's broader regional signalling. In an environment where the Indus Water Treaty has been kept in abeyance, persuading New Delhi to adopt a more cooperative and adaptive framework for the Ganga will be exceptionally challenging. Yet failure to do so will carry costs. A breakdown in negotiations will not only damage Bangladesh-India ties but also undermine the regional stability of South Asia.

The renegotiation of the Ganga treaty will be the defining foreign policy test of Tarique Rahman's early premiership. More than trade or symbolic gestures of goodwill, it will show whether he can protect Bangladesh's interests while maintaining a workable relationship with India. It will also test India's willingness to act as a responsible regional power rather than an uncompromising upstream hegemon. ■

ASHOK SWAIN is a professor of peace and conflict research and UNESCO Chair on International Water Cooperation at Uppsala University, Sweden

Karnataka at Davos: Engineering the Next 25 Years of Growth, Infrastructure and Global Leadership

Nestled in the Swiss Alps, Davos-Klosters came alive from 19–23 January 2026 as world leaders convened for the prestigious World Economic Forum Annual Meeting under the theme “A Spirit of Dialogue.” Amid this global congregation, Karnataka made its presence felt — not merely addressing the present, but laying out bold plans for the next 25 years.

The summit, a crucible for ideas and international collaboration, hosted forward-looking discussions on pressing global challenges and shared priorities. Leading the Karnataka delegation led by Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar and Large and Medium Industries Minister M.B.



Photo: Gettyimages

Thinking of Developing Transport Grids for All Cities in Karnataka

Deputy Chief Minister D K Shivakumar said that transport grids are being planned for all the cities in the State keeping in mind a 25-year horizon.

Addressing a press conference at Vidhana Soudha in Bengaluru after returning from his visit to the World Economic Forum at Davos, he said:

“During the Davos meet, companies have expressed interest in investing in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities as well. Companies want infrastructure in these towns. We are looking at developing a transport grid including Ring Roads for all the cities in the State keeping in mind growth projections for the next 25 years. Time is precious and we need to plan for it from now itself in association with various departments.” “The investors are predicting 70% urbanization levels in the next 25 years and they wanted to know our plan to develop required infrastructure. In this backdrop, we have decided to develop a transport grid including aspects like road needs and road widths, etc.,” he added.

Patil underscored the importance of dialogue, decisive leadership, and collective action in shaping a future-ready, interconnected world.

From integrated transport grids and

cutting-edge tunnel corridors to AI cities and expanding data centre ecosystems, from Tier-2 industrial expansion to strategic global technology partnerships, Karnataka

unveiled a development roadmap that is ambitious, inclusive, and transformative — solidifying its role as a driving force in India’s growth story and a trusted partner in the global economy.

“During the Davos meet, companies have expressed interest in investing in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities as well. Companies want infrastructure in these towns. We are looking at developing a transport grid including Ring Roads for all the cities in the State keeping in mind growth projections for the next 25 years.”

AI City in Bidadi and Bengaluru Business Corridor

Many investors are excited about the AI city we are planning in Bidadi,” he said. Some expressed reservations about opposition to the project. “I told them that the project would be realized as farmers are giving up their land on their own. No other State has given the amount of compensation we have given for the Bengaluru Business Corridor.”

The vision is clear: Bengaluru is not merely expanding—it is evolving into a technology-driven global metropolis supported by sustainable and planned urban infrastructure.

Need to Create Awareness About Discipline

Deputy Chief Minister reflected:

“Davos is twice the size of Sadashiva

Nagara (a prominent, posh locality in North Bengaluru, spans approximately 1.22 to 1.31 sq. kms.) and all the world leaders had to walk from place to place. I noticed the discipline on roads during my travel. We need to create awareness about road discipline. This is my first visit to Davos and I had an opportunity to meet many world leaders and businessmen.”

“I noticed that the world is looking at India through Bengaluru which has 450 Fortune 500 companies. We discussed upgrading the infrastructure for the rapid urbanization.”

He met several global leaders including World Bank President Ajay Banga, National General Secretary Mark Rutte, and the Finance Minister of Saudi Arabia. BDA Chairman Harris conveyed to investors that Bengaluru is gearing up for the future. When asked about his ‘India Rising’ remarks, he stated: “Don’t bring politics into this, let’s look at it in a broadminded way. We would not want to hurt India abroad. Rahul Gandhi has also never done it. He has expressed his unhappiness internally. We will not let down our country.”

Speed of Doing Business

Many companies requested improvements in ease of doing business and flagged lengthy approval processes. The State is now working toward achieving “speed of doing business” for quicker approvals and faster clearances.

Discussion with JICA for Tunnel Roads

Discussed the tunnel project with the Maharashtra CM too as they are building a lot

Discussed Investments with 45 Companies in Davos

“Forty five companies had discussions with us,” the Deputy Chief Minister said, underlining the scale of engagement. These companies have expressed interest in investing in:

- Data centres
- Global Capability Centres (GCCs)
- Food processing (F&B)
- Aviation
- Renewable energy
- Electric vehicles (EV)
- Electronics
- Advanced manufacturing

“The companies have taken



Photo: Gettyimages

information on the availability of water and power for their industries,” he added.

Importantly, Karnataka has taken a strategic approach. “We decided not to sign the agreements with the investors in

Instead, we would like to invite them to the State to get a first-hand idea about the human resource, infrastructure, weather and other resources.”

Of the Rs11 lakh crore investment committed during the

Global Investors Meet, half of it is being realised. Investors are aware of massive investments such as Foxconn. They recognise that South Indian States offer an excellent business environment after China. Asked about FDI, he said there are guidelines for FDI. Some investors were interested in Race Course land, but they were informed that there are other lands in Bengaluru. Many expressed interest in lands within a 40 km radius from Bengaluru airport. Tourism development in coastal Karnataka was also discussed.

of tunnels. They have some suggestions about parking facilities near tunnels. We would like to visit some of the tunnel projects in Maharashtra,” he said.

Asked whether tunnel designs would change after inspecting projects abroad, he said Karnataka’s tunnel projects already have modern designs. Maharashtra has an agreement with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for their tunnel projects. “I will also travel to Japan to discuss our tunnel projects with JICA.”

Responding to Bengaluru’s traffic congestion ranking, he said: “We are spending about Rs2.5 lakh crores over the next five years to develop basic infrastructure in Bengaluru including tunnel roads, elevated corridors, buffer roads, etc.”

Bengaluru: The ‘City of the Future’

At Davos, the Deputy Chief Minister welcomed investors to invest in Bengaluru, “Bengaluru is the city of the future. We have excellent weather, culture and human resource. Many global companies are thriving in the city, I welcome you also to our city.”

More than 500 top global companies operate out of Bengaluru. The city boasts excellence in aerospace, IT and medicine. Karnataka has 70 medical colleges and 1.5 lakh medical professionals graduating annually.

“India has huge talent pool and we are preparing for the next 25 years. Bengaluru is Asia’s IT Capital. The urban population in India has gone up to 40% and it is likely to go up to 50% in the next 25 years.”

“World’s IT Capital California has 13 lakh engineers and Bengaluru has 25 lakh engineers. This demonstrates Bengaluru’s strength.”

The metro network will increase to 153 km

by next year. Bengaluru has 6,000 public transport buses, of which 2,500 are electric. Infrastructure is also being strengthened in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities. The State is developing infrastructure for the load in 2045. Karnataka assures full cooperation to investors.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has described Bengaluru as a global city—an affirmation of its stature on the world stage.

Global Partnerships and Sectoral Momentum

Discussions were held with the Prime Minister of Liechtenstein to attract EFTA-linked investments. Talks with Amazon Web Services focused on attracting global cloud firms. Automobile manufacturer Volvo expressed satisfaction with Karnataka’s environment.

Nokia Corporation has expressed interest in establishing a GCC and expanding in Tier-2 cities. The Government reaffirmed support for the WEF ‘Yes-BLR UpLink’ initiative after discussions with John Dutton.

US-based Vast Space expressed interest in partnership. Crescent Enterprises from the UAE showed interest in investing across sectors. Cloudflare described Karnataka as one of the world’s best destinations for cutting-edge technologies. Voyager Technologies expressed interest in partnering with the Government and collaborating with ISRO.

Davos Visit Accelerates Investments: M.B. Patil

Minister for Large and Medium Industries M.M. B. Patil stated that the WEF summit

has laid a strong foundation for rapid materialisation of investments, industrial expansion and partnerships.

Productive meetings were held with over 25 international companies and more than 15 Indian companies across aerospace and defence, advanced manufacturing, beverages and food processing, space technology, life sciences, data centres, digital infrastructure and clean energy.

Heads of multinational companies expressed readiness to prioritise and fast-track commitments in Karnataka. Industry leaders lauded the State’s industry-friendly policies.

46% of the Rs10.27 lakh crore commitments from the Global Investors Meet have already been implemented. Manufacturing leads with 58% project progress. These projects are expected to generate over six lakh jobs.

Fresh investments worth Rs1.1 lakh crore have flowed in over the last 11 months. New investments worth Rs1.5 lakh crore are expected across ESDM/semiconductors, automobiles and EVs, aerospace and defence manufacturing.

Major Investment Announcements

PSG Group will invest Rs10,500 crore in Vijayapura and Ballari. InoxGFL Group is keen on wind power tower manufacturing, having already invested Rs10,000 crore in the State.

Ramky Group expressed interest in CETPs and a Pharma Park. Tech Mahindra showed interest in Tier-2 industrial investments. Discussions were held with Singapore EDB on establishing a ‘Singapore Park’. Lenovo, Axon Cables and Boston Consulting Group engaged in strategic discussions.

Schneider Electric plans to establish 20 additional training infrastructure facilities,

expanding to 100 skill development centres. An MoU was signed with Swiss Chambers India to strengthen industrial ties.

Data Centres in Karnataka

Sify Technologies is set to inaugurate a new data centre facility in Karnataka. Bharti Enterprises has expressed interest in setting up a data centre; cumulative investments stand at Rs13,000 crore.

Talks were held with Mistral AI regarding a GCC or R&D centre in Bengaluru. Carlsberg Group is implementing a Rs350 crore bottling expansion and plans further growth.

Discussions with Imperial College London focused on expanding research collaboration and presence in KWIN City.

Philip Morris International reiterated its global procurement presence in Karnataka. PayPal Holdings Inc. highlighted its large workforce and interest in AI-focused reskilling programmes.

Bharat Forge Limited and Belrise Industries Limited discussed future investments and project implementation milestones.

Preparing for Emerging Technologies

Minister Patil emphasised the need to address challenges posed by artificial intelligence, robotics and quantum technology. Citing a Chinese manufacturing example where 500 workers were replaced by five or six with AI, he noted that while future technologies bring benefits, they also raise concerns about employment.

Priority is being given to creating employment opportunities for youth and women while harnessing future technologies for public welfare.

Karnataka: Confident, Collaborative, Future-Ready

From transport grids and Ring Roads to AI City in Bidadi, from tunnel roads and JICA discussions to global data centre ecosystems, from Tier-2 industrial growth to strategic global partnerships, Karnataka’s presence at Davos reaffirmed its position as a preferred investment destination.

The message was unmistakable: Karnataka is building for 2045.

Karnataka is accelerating “speed of doing business.”

Karnataka is inviting the world to grow together.

And as global leaders look at India through Bengaluru, the State stands ready—with infrastructure, talent, discipline and vision—to shape the next era of industrial and urban transformation.

Reforms, referendum and roadblocks

Despite overwhelming popular support for the July Charter of constitutional reforms, its implementation won't be easy in new Bangladesh

Sourabh Sen

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party's (BNP) landslide victory in the recent elections may just be the beginning of a protracted face-off with the opposition Jamaat-e-Islami and National Citizen Party (NCP). Central to this is the BNP's refusal to join the Constitution Reform Commission (CRC) despite backing the July Charter of referendum, underscoring a schism in the country's politics.

The simultaneous staging of the general election and the referendum meant the elected MPs had to take two oaths—one as MP and the second as a CRC member. The second oath obligated the MPs to implement the July Charter. "Taking oath as CRC member would bind us to implement the July Charter, overriding our notes of dissent to key provisions of the charter," a senior BNP leader told *National Herald*.

Asserting that the CRC's formation remains outside the formal Constitution Reform Council alongside regular MPs," said Jamaat's deputy chief Abdullah Mohammad Tahir. They relented after intense backroom parleys and took dual oaths but boycotted the swearing-in ceremony of prime minister Tarique Rahman and his Cabinet. The ruling BNP, however, remains outside the CRC.

So why did the Jamaat and NCP eventually relent? "Not taking oaths was not our party's decision. Our



Crowds gather at the National Parliament square in Dhaka to watch their new prime minister Tarique Rahman's oath-taking ceremony, 17 February 2026

Photo: Getty Images

alliance partners and some of our members may have expressed their own opinions," newly elected Jamaat MP from Dhaka-14 Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem told *National Herald*. There was also a buzz about challenging the CRC, hinting at a protracted legal battle.

After the collapse of Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government on 5 August 2024, the interim administration of Muhammad Yunus took office not only to oversee the election of a new democratic government but also to introduce reforms to eliminate dynastic politics—be it Mujibur Rahman's lineage under Awami League or Ziaur Rahman's family under BNP. Multiple reform bodies were set up culminating in

With a two-thirds majority, the BNP now believes it does not need to commit itself to a charter that will limit its span of control

the National Consensus Commission (NCC) tasked with consolidating recommendations into a single binding political declaration in the form of the July Charter. This was signed by 26 political parties on 17 October 2025.

The 61-page July Charter talked about the 'consensus, achieved through mutual and collective deliberations among various political parties, alliances and forces... (which) aims to reform the constitution, electoral system, judiciary, public administration, police administration and mechanisms for combating corruption.'

On 13 November 2025, President Mohammed Shahabuddin Chuppu authorised the Bangladesh Election Commission to conduct a referen-

dum. The referendum asked voters to accept or reject a linked package of, among others, four key reforms—restoring the caretaker government system; establishing a bicameral parliament; overhauling the judiciary and election commission; and, limiting prime ministerial power to two. A 'yes' vote meant acceptance of the entire package; a 'no' vote rejected all reforms outright.

The referendum—adopted through the 12 February referendum—is now a politically binding 'pledge of commitment from the signatories' to implement the 84 reform proposals, roughly half of which require amending Bangladesh's existing Constitution. By refusing to take the second oath, BNP MPs are not empowered to implement the July Charter.

The referendum threw up mixed results. According to Election Commission data, with a voter turnout of 60.25 per cent, while 62.74 per cent supported the charter, nearly 30 per cent opposed it. Approximately 9.5 per cent ballots were found invalid. Significantly, in 11 parliamentary constituencies—including three in strongholds like Gopalganj and the hill districts—the vote was a 'no'.

The charter redefines Bangladesh's national identity, proposing a change from Bengali to Bangladeshi to include ethnic minorities like Chakmas, Marmas and Santals who felt marginalised by a linguistically defined identity. While Bengali remains the primary state language, the charter recognises all mother tongues. Four Mujib-era legacies of nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism have been replaced by equality, human dignity, social justice and religious harmony. The charter replaces secularism and freedom of religion with 'guaranteed coexistence' and 'due dignity of all communities'. Other changes involve blocking

an individual from simultaneously serving as prime minister, leader of the House and party president; expanding the powers of the president to appoint heads of human rights, law and information commissions. The charter reinstates the non-party caretaker government to oversee general elections (abolished by the Awami League in 2011) and bars the prime minister's office from appointing judges, instead setting up a Judicial Appointments Commission led by the chief justice.

Taking note of digital blackouts and the youth-led nature of the 2024 uprising, the charter recognises uninterrupted internet service as a fundamental right, elevating digital access to a constitutional level. It also explicitly protects the right to personal information.

With a two-thirds majority, the BNP now believes it needn't commit itself to implementing a charter that does not sufficiently reflect its concerns. Of the nine notes of dissent, the party had strong reservations against the provision of electoral representation to elect upper house members, fearing it will weaken the mandate of major parties. Some activists and student leaders have also rejected the charter, describing it as a 'political compromise'. The exclusion of the Awami League from the consultative process also makes the charter not quite inclusive or representative enough.

"What happened on the morning of 17 February should have been avoided as it does not send a good message," ambassador Mohammad Humayun Kabir told *National Herald*. For the time being, the opposition parties may have relented, but non-implementation of the charter could deepen political rifts despite the BNP's brute majority in Parliament. ■

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

The coconut tree that refused to fall

Kerala's Malappuram district and its grammar of mutual accommodation and practical neighbourliness

K.A. Shaji

Nearly four decades ago, in a small village in north Kerala's Muslim-dominated Malappuram district, a coconut tree became an unlikely symbol of communal anxiety and tension. The tree stood inside the compound of a Hindu household. Its fronds leaned towards the neighbouring mosque. Every few weeks, ripe coconuts would fall onto its clay-tiled roof. Tiles cracked. Rainwater seeped in. The mosque committee complained. The Hindu family refused to cut the tree as the coconuts contributed to their meagre monthly income.

With each falling coconut, grievances quietly accumulated. The son of the Hindu household, now in his political youth, had begun leaning towards Hindutva. For him, the mosque was no longer just a neighbour. The tree no longer just a tree.

As tension mounted, elders from both communities decided to take the matter to the most respected Muslim leader in Malabar, Panakkad Syed Mohammedali Shihab Thangal (1936-2009), the IUMML of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUMML) whose moral authority extended far beyond religion and party.

The Thangal listened patiently to both sides. Then, he reached into his pocket, took out some money, handed it to the president of the mosque committee, and declared, "The masjid has to be demolished. The clay roof-tiles should be replaced with concrete."

Among believers in Malabar, there is a popular conviction, call it superstition if you will, that if the first donation comes from the Thangal, his blessings will take the project to successful completion. That night, both parties returned to their village.

When the Hindu household's old matriarch heard what had happened, she chided her son for the curse he had brought upon the family and rushed to Panakkad that very night. The wise old man received her with grace and, in his famously gentle manner, dismissed her promises to cut down the guilty tree and her apologies for her indiscreet son.

"The coconut tree is the elixir of our life," the Thangal said. "It should be protected at any cost."

The mosque was rebuilt in concrete. The coconut tree still stands.

In Malappuram, this story is remembered not as a miracle but as a simple example of how social disputes are supposed to end.

Last year, when the Shree Lakshmi Narasimha Murthy Vishnu Temple in Punnathala village in Malappuram hosted an iftar for hundreds of Muslims, the event grabbed national headlines. Television studios framed it as an extraordinary spectacle of communal harmony. The temple authorities dismissed the hype, saying they had been doing it for decades.

"The times have become so cynical that normal social gestures of the past have come to be seen as extraordinary spectacles of communal harmony," observes Thoppil Shajahan, a Malappuram-based social observer.

The results of the recent local body elections were another fitting reply to the canards against Malappuram. The Congress-IUMML combine won all the wards in the district panchayat, with hundreds of Christians and Hindus winning on IUMML tickets. As per the alliance deal, the vice-president's post went to the IUMML—Vishnumoorthy Theyyam, a Dalit Hindu woman, who had won from a general seat, was chosen.

In a district where Hindus are said to be threatened, a large majority of Hindus still cast their votes in favour of the two Muslim candidates representing the Muslim League and the CPI(M) in almost every election, leaving the BJP with just about 65,000 votes. That a BJP candidate promoted voters quality beef if elected became a hilarious side story of the campaign.

According to Malappuram native and prominent Malayalam writer Alamkode Leela Krishnan, Muslim-majority (70.25 per cent) Malappuram "can be the world's most beautiful experiment in pluralism". No major communal conflict has occurred in this district since the 1921 Mappila rebellion, which was fermented largely by British colonial policies.

Malappuram's Muslim leadership, Krishnan argues, has historically stood for communal harmony. The Hindus, in turn, have complete faith in the local leadership and its commitment to people's wellbeing,

regardless of religious identity.

Begin here, and Malappuram's story of everyday accommodation and mutual responsibility falls into place. A story of resistance to the labels—'mini-Pakistan', 'jihadist hub'—the national narrative keeps trying to pin on the district. The labels have political uses, but they do not explain why Hindu priests accept donations from Muslim families, why Muslim farmers tend lotus ponds for temple rituals, why mosque courtyards become provision centres for tens of thousands of poor families regardless of religion.

This is an explainer about those habits, and the attempt to overwrite (and override) them.

Malappuram is not a small place. The 2011 Census recorded a population of 4,112,920 people, spread across towns and a dense network of villages. Muslims form the majority at 70.2 per cent, Hindus 27.6 per cent and Christians 1 to 2 per cent of the population. The district's sex ratio of 1,098 females per 1,000 males and its literacy figures place it among Kerala's socially advanced districts on many human development indicators. Nearly 44 per cent live in urban areas.

These figures are helpful, but they do not explain the social routines that make neighbourliness practical here.

On the outskirts of Valanchery in Malappuram, the Moonakkal Juma Masjid opens its compound thrice a month to a long and patient queue of women. Token in hand, each woman steps forward to collect a monthly quota of rice, sometimes also wheat and sugar, distributed from a large

community store run by the masjid committee. Donations come from worshippers who buy and give as part of religious custom.

Outside the mosque, a cluster of rice shops exists largely for this service. Inside, a modest processing facility cleans, packs and issues sacks as per a token system. The beneficiaries—over 28,000 families across 171 mahals in 21 panchayats—are a mixed lot. "Religion has never been a criterion," explains K. Anfal, a masjid committee member. More than half the families collecting rice are Hindus and Christians. Many locals say they prefer the mosque's arrangement to the public distribution system because of better quality and steadier quantities.

In Edakkullam village, Muslim farmers tend lotus ponds that supply puja flowers to

some of Kerala's most famous temples. Last year, families from Edakkullam supplied more than 100 kg of lotus for a major *thulabharam* ritual at Guruvayur.

In Kottakkal, the Palappuram mosque's *mimbar* is donated by P.S. Varier, founder of the Kottakkal Arya Vaidya Sala. The Panakkad Thangal family continues to act as mediator and moral anchor in Malappuram's public life.

At Kaliyattakkavu Bhagavathy Temple in Munniyur, devotees first visit the maqbara of Mamburam Thangal before beginning the festival procession. At Thunchanparambu near Tirur, the birthplace of Thunchathu Ezhuthachan, thousands of children, many from Muslim families, are initiated into their letters during Vidyarambham (Vijayadashmi day), with Muslim volunteers distributing milk and snacks.

Against these textures of everyday life, a political industry of manufactured suspicion has repeatedly tried to nationalise local affairs.

When the Air India Express flight crashed at Kozhikode airport in August 2020, local residents were the first responders. They used private cars to ferry the injured, guarded passengers' belongings, donated blood and organised food for survivors.

No one asked who was Hindu, who was Muslim. Similar scenes unfolded during the 2001 Kadalundi train accident and other disasters.

Malappuram's real story lies elsewhere. In the coconut tree that was not cut. In the temple that serves iftar without ceremony. In the rice sack handed to a Christian widow inside a mosque courtyard. ■



(Clockwise from top) Rations being distributed from a mosque courtyard; Vishnumoorthy Theyyam, the Dalit Hindu chosen as the Muslim League's first woman national office-bearer; Muslim devotees at the Kasargod temple festival; iftar hosted at a temple in Malappuram

"The times have become so cynical that normal social gestures of the past have come to be seen as extraordinary spectacles of communal harmony"

3 minutes 10 seconds of patriotism, or else

The MHA's orders on the national song make it abundantly clear that we are short on nationalism, writes **Aakar Patel**

There must always be a shortage of nationalism in our country, because there seems to be such a big demand for it. In all my decades, I never heard of a demand for Vande Mataram to be tagged on to the national anthem at every official occasion. Now, we are told this is to be the case.

There are six stanzas to the song, which will have to be memorised. The singing must be 3 minutes and 10 seconds long, as ordered by the ministry of home affairs. The orders are not clear if this singing is voluntary (like Aadhaar) or compulsory (also like Aadhaar).

This confusion arises from the wording. The ministry of home affairs tells us that 'it is not possible to give an exhaustive list of occasions on which the singing—as opposed to the playing—of [the] official version of [the] National Song can be permitted', but it helpfully adds that 'there is no objection to the singing... as long as it is done with due respect'. There are no guidelines on what constitutes 'due respect' but we will no doubt find out soon what constitutes violation. The more nationalistic among us will educate those who are less so.

Why I say it is unclear whether it is voluntary or not is because the order adds: 'the National Song may be sung on occasions which, although not strictly ceremonial, are nevertheless invested with significance because of the presence of Ministers etc.' and further: 'mass singing is desirable.' What does the 'etc.' include or exclude? What is the true interpretation of 'desirable'?

Again, we shall find out what happens when someone chooses to interpret the words 'may' and 'desirable' as being indicators of voluntary action. But all this is ultimately beside the point. The point—the main one—is that there is always a shortage of nationalism in our country and this is one way in which that shortage can be met. And, as our history tells us, this sort of thing works.

Exactly 50 years ago, in 1976, the then government added 'fundamental duties' to the Constitution to 'promote harmony and

the spirit of common brotherhood amongst all the people of India transcending religious, linguistic and regional or sectional diversities; to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women'. Who can deny that this has happened? India would not be the global example of brotherhood and a model of safety for women if these instructions had not come to us.

There is also on the list a duty to 'protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life, and to have compassion for living creatures' and (my favourite) to 'develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of inquiry and reform'.

These duties were added because in 1976 nationalism was in high demand and short supply. That is the case now.

Cynics and haters of the present dispensation will argue that there are other ways to show love for the nation. That anthems and slogans are peripheral to national progress. That we would be better off as a nation if we were also to behave better in traffic, for instance, and we were to refrain from littering. The national anthem talks about rivers—it would be difficult to name a country whose rivers are filthier than the ones in India.

We could show our patriotism by refusing to take or give bribes. Or by not



There are no guidelines on what constitutes 'due respect' but we'll no doubt find out what constitutes violation. The more nationalistic among us will educate those who are less so

attempting to cheat on taxes, something that comes so naturally to the most patriotic among us that it's a wonder tax evasion hasn't been included in our fundamental duties. There is a long list of things that we could do, but as our government and its defenders will likely say: these are things that the citizens of many nations can do. They are not special.

We need something unique and distinct to show our love. That is precisely what this new order has given us. 'Whenever the official version of the National Song is sung or played', the ministry of home affairs order cautions, 'the audience shall stand

to attention'.

Perhaps what this means is that once it has been determined that the song is to be played, those present at the venue must comply? Which means participation is then no longer voluntary. If that is the case, what is the difference between our national song and our national anthem? We do not know, but our government in all its wisdom surely does.

And there's more: 'In all schools, the day's work may begin with the community singing of the National Song.' In my opinion this is necessary to instil the same levels of patriotism in the next generation

as are to be found in our generation, and the one before ours. There are other benefits as well. The unemployed will utilise their spare time memorising the six stanzas. Moreover, they will be productively employed in policing the crowd to see who is unobservant and straying from 'proper decorum'. Reports of them (violently) enforcing the new order will probably start reaching us at any minute now. The lazy will stand an additional 3 minutes and 10 seconds and thus improve their fitness.

The nation will progress. ■

Views are personal

BUDGET 2026-27

What about the environment, Madam finance minister?

The catastrophic deficiency in planning persists, with the alarming dimension of accelerating climate change

Avay Shukla

The preservation and protection of the environment has never been a priority in our annual Budgets; all finance ministers have taken it for granted, treating nature as an infinite resource rather than a living entity to be nurtured and carefully harvested on a sustainable basis. Eleven years after I wrote the piece 'Budget 2014: Short-changing the environment', the catastrophic deficiency in planning persists.

What is new, and compelling, is the acceleration of climate change. The need of the day is not only to provide public funding for measures to counter climate change but also for the rehabilitation of those directly affected by it—poor farmers, landless labourers, fishermen, nomadic tribes. Unfortunately (and predictably) this Budget, like its predecessors, does none of this.

We should perhaps have expected this from the tone of the Economic Survey 2026, released before the budget was presented. In it, chief economic advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran blatantly bats for growth and neoliberalism at the cost of the environment. Defying all science, he states that cutting carbon emissions should not be our top priority, and that a world 3° Celsius warmer would be a liveable one! Confounding all evidence and scientific global consensus, he goes on to maintain that 'growth and prosperity strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability'.

Yes, sir, they do, but only if done in a sustainable and ecologically friendly manner, which is not how it is happening in India. Maybe, if Nageswaran had paid more attention to what Gita Gopinath, a fellow economist (without any political bias) had said in Davos, he would have better understood both the problem, and how wrong he is.

This government suffers from a severe case of CID (Compulsive Infrastructure Disorder). Capex is fine and needed for growth, but so is the environment. There are huge environmental costs to rapid infrastructural expansion—both the World Bank and the IMF estimate this at between 3.5-5 per cent of our GDP, which comes to



Photos: Getty Images

The criminal neglect of the environment continues in our planning and funding processes. Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman (left) has just nudged us closer to environmental collapse



about \$200 billion or Rs 1,80,000 crore.

The 2026-27 budget proudly mentions the creation of a mineral corridor (for rare earths) in four southern states, three more high-speed rail corridors, zero duties for maritime catches in India's EEZ or the high seas, tax exemptions for setting up data centres... but there is no mention of how the environmental consequences of these initiatives will be addressed or their mitigation funded. Are these corridors necessary at all, given the large number of expressways being built all over the country? The corridors will only lead to largescale land acquisition and massive displacement of populations, adding to the

The 16th Finance Commission has completely ignored the right of Himalayan states to fair compensation for the ecological services they provide

60 million 'project refugees' already created since Independence. Hundreds of thousands of trees—especially mangroves, since rare earths are found in large quantities in coastal areas—will be destroyed. The boost to maritime fisheries is welcome, but where are the guardrails to ensure that the livelihoods of traditional fishermen will be protected and not replaced by mechanised trawlers or that measures will be taken to curb overfishing? Data centres require humongous quantities of power and water—where will they come from in this water-stressed country?

We can expect minimum oversight or safeguards in the execution of these projects thanks to the dilution of the

regulations that could have checked such extensive damage. The defenestration of regulatory institutions and dilution of the Forest Conservation Act, the Environmental Protection Act, the Wildlife Protection Act will see to this.

Thousands of crores are needed to mitigate—and compensate for—the adverse impacts of these projects, but finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman has said not a word about who will pay and where the funds will come from. This silence and ambiguity appear to be part of the deliberate strategy of decentralisation of costs to the states. The political credit and financial gains will accrue to the Centre, but the social and budgetary costs will have to be borne by the states from their own resources—an innovative (mis)interpretation of the concept of federalism!

Finally, it appears that the 16th Finance Commission—like all the so-called autonomous institutions in this country—is in lockstep with the central government. It has chosen to completely ignore the right of the Himalayan states to fair compensation for the ecological services they provide to the country (water, clean air, carbon sequestration, climate moderation). These states, supported by a large number of advocacy groups, had demanded a Green Bonus of Rs. 50,000 crore over the five-year period of 2026-2031.

Not only would this have been fair compensation, these funds would have met their development needs without having to resort to the unsustainable exploitation of their forests, rivers, minerals and tourism potential. Any idiot can see that excessive and unsustainable 'development' of the Himalayas (and other mountain ranges like the Aravallis and Western Ghats) is not in the interest of the country as a whole, and that therefore these mountain states should be incentivised to not do so.

The 16th Finance Commission failed to see this simple truth. Early reports indicate that it has not provided any Green Bonus; nor has it provided any special grants (outside the Centre's discretion, which has now become totally politicised) for climate mitigation or disaster relief. All it has done is tinkered with the definition of forests which, in pure financial terms, is meaningless. Even worse, it has now discontinued the RDG (Revenue Deficit Grant) which these states had been receiving since 1974, making a huge dent in their finances. To fund their development activities, they shall now have no option but to continue to ravage the fragile Himalayan environment.

Whether or not the BJP gains from this year's Union Budget is a moot question; what is not moot is that the criminal neglect of the environment continues unabated in our planning and funding processes. Nirmala Sitharaman and her co-pilot in the Finance Commission have just nudged us closer to the financial collapse of some states and the environmental collapse that affects us all. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author



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