NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY

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

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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER



REMEMBERING

Indira Gandhi Ji

India's first and only women Prime Minister – The Iron Lady

On her 109th Birth Anniversary

November 19th

NATIONAL INTEGRATION DAY

"Education is a liberating force, and in our age it is also a democratizing force, cutting across the barriers of caste and class, smoothing out inequalities imposed by birth and other circumstances."

Indira Gandhi

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NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
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‘The BJP has little to show for its 10 years in power’

Uttarakhand state Congress president **Ganesh Godiyal** *is dismissive of the large majority that the BJP enjoys in the assembly (47 seats to the Congress’s 20). Anti-incumbency against the Pushkar Singh Dhami government, he claims, is strong and infighting within the BJP intense. Dissatisfaction over paper leaks, youth unemployment and the chronic shortage of local jobs is high. Women’s safety, inflation, the cost of living, high maternal mortality and environmental concerns are top of mind. The BJP government has been bragging about record footfalls on the Char Dham circuit, ban on the sale of land to outsiders and the UCC… But none of this, says Godiyal, is a ticket to a third consecutive term. Alongside Pritam Singh and Harak Singh Rawat, Godiyal, a Brahmin, has been tasked with winning over Thakurs and Brahmins, who comprise 60 per cent of the state’s population. Assertive and articulate, Godiyal was state party president in 2021-22, and returned to the post in 2025. Excerpts from his conversation with* **Rashme Sehgal**:

How hopeful are you about the Congress’s chances in the assembly election?

The BJP has been in power for the last ten years but has little to show in terms of governance or accountability. Theirs is a story of unfulfilled promises. Crimes against women have risen sharply and women just don’t feel safe anymore. Unemployment levels have shot up and farmers, especially those living in the hills, have no sustainable means of livelihood. Deforestation has increased attacks by wild animals on these farming communities. Poor wildlife management has led to human-animal conflicts: thousands of cattle and 29 human lives were lost in 2025 alone.

Look at the increase in paper leaks. Over the last ten years, we have witnessed one leak after another. It is well known that ministers are often behind such leaks, and make money off them. The recruitment exam for village panchayat development officer conducted by the Uttarakhand Subordinate Service Selection Commission was leaked. Even the paper for the Uttarakhand Public Service Commission for patwaris and lekhpals was leaked—forcing cancellation and sparking off a statewide agitation. Paper leaks have occurred in engineering colleges as well. Government jobs are valued in the state but the BJP has destroyed what was meant to be a level playing field.

Do you think Uttarakhand sees more corruption today than ever before?

Undoubtedly. The liquor and sand mafias are all-powerful. Look at the extent of government land being sold fraudulently to builders. There are no checks in place. The public’s latest apprehension is that the drug mafia are moving into the state in a big way. Money is being made from transfer postings.

You mentioned crimes against women. Is the Ankita Bhandari murder case still resonating among the public and will it prove to be a rallying point?

Women want to work in a safe environment. Ankita was murdered because she refused to offer ‘special services’ to VIPs. In order to provide immunity to one of the prime suspects, the state has gone to the extent of appointing Dushyant Kumar Gautam the governor of Sikkim, even with a CBI probe ongoing. Ankita’s parents went to Delhi to lodge their protests. Both Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi went to India Gate to express their support. The case has become a rallying point for self-respecting people.

The BJP has hit back with the accusations of an unwed mother (Jenny, a.k.a. Indira Dewri). Congress leader Harak Singh Rawat stands accused of siring an illegitimate son…

The BJP has brought this up to divert attention away from the Ankita Bhandari case. For one, it is an old case which goes back to 2003 when Jenny first made the accusation. Rawat had refuted the allegation, resigned from the cabinet (he was a minister in the N.D. Tiwari government) and sought a CBI probe. The case was handed over to the CBI. He underwent a DNA test which showed that the child was not his. Reviving an old matter to discredit a Congress leader has failed.

Why is there an anti-Muslim campaign In Uttarakhand, given that they are a microscopic minority in the state?

To polarise the people. They want to disturb the communal harmony that has been the hallmark of this state. Take the example of Garhwal where Muslims have lived for generations. We believe in providing equal opportunities across all communities and castes. We do not believe in targeting any community to gain votes.



“The liquor and sand mafias are all-powerful. Look at how much govt land has been made over to them!

The BJP keeps talking about how the state has been overrun by *ghuspaitiyas*…

The BJP has been in power at the Centre for the past 12 years, and ruled Uttarakhand for the past 10 years. If they believe there has been a demographic change, why don’t they provide statistics: how many people have entered, what are their names and addresses, and other details? This is being done deliberately to create a false sense of fear among voters.

The SIR exercise saw the largescale deletion of names in the state. What’s your take on that?

More than eight lakh people were deleted from Uttarakhand’s electoral rolls during the month-long Special Intensive Revision (SIR). They have now been told they can apply for inclusion ahead of the 2027 assembly elections, with the Special Summary Revision (SSR) giving eligible voters another opportunity to register their names. They have to submit their claims and objections by 11 December. Those affected can fill out Form 6 (to add their names to the electoral roll) or Form 7 (if they wish to request the deletion of a name).

In some cases, people living in the border areas adjacent to Uttar Pradesh did have their names registered in both states. But such a large number of deletions is improbable.

We have posted our own local people at every booth in the hills to ensure that those whose names were wrongly deleted get reinstated. Some names are now back; the final list will be released on 4 January. Only then will we know whose names have been included and how many names have been excluded.

Is there a great deal of infighting among Congress leaders?

That is another myth propagated by the BJP. They face much more infighting than us.

True, but during elections they present a united front…

We, too, are united in wanting the BJP to lose. I have always believed in giving space to our leaders whether they be Harish Rawat, Pritam Singh, Karan Mahara or others. ■

Gig workers and the turning political tide

Jagdish Rattanani

One fallout of liberalisation and privatisation has been the decimation of trade unions in India. The space for workers to assert and exercise their rights has shrunk rapidly under the BJP. Early on in Gujarat when Narendra Modi was chief minister and thereafter nationwide.

In April 2026, after a mass strike in Noida’s industrial belt, more than 350 people (among those demanding higher minimum wages) were arrested; worker representatives were jailed. When State machinery is used to curb labour agitations, organising becomes a challenge. This is a far cry from the days when worker meetings were organised at factory gates, wage negotiations were hard fought and union representatives were leaders in their own right who wielded real power.

In the ‘new India’ of the gig economy, a new workforce has emerged. Gig workers number about 12 million across the nation—4.2 lakh in Telangana, mostly in Hyderabad. On 14 November, LoP Rahul Gandhi and Telangana chief minister Revanth Reddy rallied with thousands of gig workers in Hyderabad and launched the state’s new welfare scheme. The rally lent voice to a large and growing constituency that is expected to become over 23 million strong by the end of the decade. This growing base is forced into work relationships that straddle the twilight zone between the formal and the informal sector, getting the worst of both and the benefit of neither.

While platforms, with their dramatic growth and combined annual losses exceeding Rs 12,000 crore (locked in the race to gain market share) present the face of a new and growing India, their gig ‘partners’ tell a very different story. They are among the poorest and most precariously employed young people, working for low wages contracted by the hour (even minute) with virtually no facilities and no protection against risks and uncertainties.

The Telangana scheme (based on a 2023 assembly election promise) was launched on 14 November under a state law passed in March. It offers protections including accident insurance of Rs 5 lakh and health insurance of Rs 10 lakh for every gig worker. This will be funded by a 1 per cent levy on every transaction, which platforms must deposit with the state gig workers board. Besides transparency of work-related data, records and payments, the scheme also promises wifi-enabled rest zones and parking spots across Hyderabad.

As Rahul Gandhi put it: the BJP-RSS wants “the bedrock of this country” to “work 24 hours a day, to pour out [its] blood and sweat—to suffer injuries in accidents, to die, to be crushed, or to be maimed—all so that the entire benefit goes to billionaires.”

Strong words. Be it by choice or political compulsion, the winds seem to be turning in favour of workers’ rights. Gig and platform workers represent a structural change in the workforce, and can herald a concomitant change in the politics of the day. They cannot organise gate meetings, barge into the office of a manager or put their tools down. Their tools and offices are their vehicles, their homes, their own assets. Their access to the ‘office’ is an app or a helpline. Their protests, too, have had to be novel: the mass log-off, for instance on New Year’s Eve 2025, is the new version of the factory strike. The State cannot clamp down on them as it has on factory workers. Gig workers are not organised under one roof; on the contrary, they are atomised. Yet, the platform they work for can discipline them through ratings, incentives and deactivation. Being forcibly logged out of the app can be seen as the new lockout.

It’s not that the BJP government at the Centre has not courted gig workers. The four new Labour Codes that replaced 29 central laws formally recognised gig and platform workers and included them in schemes for social security, welfare funds and benefit portability (the schemes have yet to roll out). The Code on social security directs the framing of suitable social security measures for gig workers and platform workers. Given that the changes overrode the objections of central trade unions, new frictions were introduced, in effect making the reform meaningless.

Photo: Getty Images



A gig workers’ protest in Mumbai demanding minimum wages and safer working conditions

The Economic Survey 2025-26 did flag low pay, algorithmic control and platform power; and the exploitative 10-minute delivery promise was dropped by quick-commerce players in January, after the strike and a meeting with the Union labour minister. The Union government has approached the concerns of gig workers through phrases like “unprecedented opportunities”, “revenue generation” and “economic diversification”. The more forceful voices for worker rights have come from civil society and from Congress-ruled states, which have legislated first (Rajasthan in 2023, Karnataka in 2025 and now Telangana).

Consider the findings of the September 2026 nationwide survey by the non-profit Janpahal and the Gig Workers Association titled ‘Occupational safety and health of platform-based gig workers in India’. It concludes that gig and platform workers ‘routinely experience long working hours, sustained exposure to occupational hazards, limited access to basic infrastructure, and increasing vulnerability to climate risks. These conditions are not incidental; rather, they are structurally embedded within the organisation of platform-mediated work’.

It also states that ‘the absence of a clearly defined workplace further enables a diffusion of responsibility’ leading to ‘significant gaps in access to sanitation, rest, healthcare, and social protection’.

Over the past decade and more, the national polity has swung too far to the right. The effect of that swing can be seen in the loss of democratic spaces and the resultant mass discontent now confronting the Modi government. The Congress’s new approach to workers is a pullback not only from the BJP but also its own liberalisation-era policies. The turn is visible, but is it tokenistic or a fundamental shift? It will take much more political capital to move India from a system skewed in favour of big business to a new balance between business and labour. ■

Gig workers are not organised, they are atomised with no ways to push back against an exploitative work culture

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Courtesy: The Billion Press

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ANOTHER SHAM ELECTION

The deviousness of December polls in Ladakh

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MEMOIR

LOVE IN THE TIME OF HATE

The beauty of Sonia Gandhi's memoir is that it sets free the truth of her own story

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REFLECTIONS

ARTISTS IN INDIA, LISTEN UP!

The price of speaking up may be steep but silence is an awful career choice

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The great Dalit outreach in Uttar Pradesh



Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav greets supporters at the party's PDA event in Gorakhpur; (*left*) Azad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram)'s Chandrashekhar Azad and AIMIM president Asaduddin Owaisi

Nandlal Sharma

On 5 May 2017, barely months after the BJP came to power in Uttar Pradesh and Yogi Adityanath assumed the chief minister's office for his first term, caste violence erupted in Shabbirpur village of Saharanpur, the state's northernmost district at the foothills of the lower Himalaya. More than 50 Dalit homes were torched when a procession of upper caste Rajputs, 'celebrating' Maharana Pratap Jayanti, vandalised a statue of Sant Ravidas, revered by the state's Dalits.

The violence brought two young Dalit activists, Ravi Gautam and Chandrashekhar, together. Gautam was with the Yuva Shakti Dal, a Bahujan socio-political outfit. Azad then headed the Bhim Army he'd set up in 2015. {The Azad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) he now heads was floated in 2020)} Both hail from the Jatav/Chamar community. They mobilised protests and called a maha-panchayat at Saharanpur city's Gandhi Maidan on 9 May. Their agitation culminated in a major protest at Delhi's Jantar Mantar on 21 May.

Their political paths have since diverged. Ravi has joined the Samajwadi Party (SP) while Chandrashekhar leads the Azad Samaj Party, which recently entered an alliance with Asaduddin Owaisi's AIMIM (All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen) to challenge Akhilesh Yadav in the upcoming state assembly election.

Dalits make up over 20 per cent of the state and the Samajwadi Party (SP) is making a big push to win their support, moving beyond its traditional Muslim-Yadav base to capitalise on the electoral decline of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

On 15 November 2026, a massive crowd gathered in Agra for the SP's first major Dalit convention in nearly two decades. Manoj Kumar, a resident of Hapur active with the SP for over 20 years, believes the party outreach is gaining traction. "Dalits have received more respect in the SP in the past two years than ever before. The Jatav community is losing faith in Mayawati. People feel that Behenji cannot stand with them on their issues. Only if the right to vote survives will the Constitution survive, and so also people's access to rations and government schemes," he says.

Ravi is less dismissive of Mayawati's legacy. "When she was in power, she did a great deal for the community. But she failed to give young people a greater stake in the party. Akhilesh Yadav raises Dalit issues, provides financial assistance and stands with people in their fight. That is why they are gravitating towards him," he says.

Addressing the Agra gathering, Akhilesh linked the battle for Dalit support to the protection of constitutional rights: "Those who want to destroy the Constitution also want to take away your vote. If your vote is lost, the Constitution will not survive." This was an echo of the SP-Congress campaign in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, when saving the Constitution became the central plank of the Opposition. While the BJP spoke of '400-*paar*', a mandate of 400+ seats, fuelling concerns that they would overturn constitutional protections and guarantees that give the country's backward communities something to hold on to, Rahul Gandhi had already undertaken the Bharat Jodo Yatra and the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. The Congress organised Samvidhan Samman Sammelans across major cities while the SP pushed its PDA (Pichhda–Dalit–Alpasankhyak) formula. Where most of the political commentariat was giving the BJP a clean sweep, the INDIA alliance won 43 of the state's 80 Lok Sabha seats.

The SP also tested old caste equations by fielding Dalit candidates from general constituencies. In Ayodhya, Awadhesh Prasad of the Pasi community defeated the BJP, puncturing its triumphalist narrative around the Ram Mandir inauguration just a few months prior. Awadhesh Prasad has since become the face of Akhilesh's PDA pitch. A big draw at the Agra convention, he sits next to Akhilesh in Parliament's front row—as if to simply rub it in that after all the BJP-RSS theatre around the inauguration of the Ram Mandir, the BJP still lost Ayodhya.

*

Uttar Pradesh has 86 reserved assembly seats. In 2022, the BJP-led NDA won 65, while the SP alliance secured 20. In 2024, with some help from the Congress, the SP won seven of the state's 17 reserved Lok Sabha seats and the Congress one, while the NDA got eight. Those results indicate a strong SP-Congress presence among Dalit voters.

At the Agra convention, when Akhilesh said "The D in PDA stands for '*Damdaar* Dalit'," he meant an assertive generation—activists like Ravi, prepared to take to the streets for their dignity and rights. More than 200 statues of Babasaheb Ambedkar had been vandalised in Uttar Pradesh, he said, calling the attacks an assault on the hand that wrote the Constitution. Rajya Sabha MP Ramjilal Suman, a Jatav and five-time MP and a longtime associate of Mulayam Singh Yadav, who coordinated the convention, said the vandalisation was proof that the BJP-RSS was out to undermine Ambedkar's legacy and to show Dalits their place in society.

On 26 November, Akhilesh is scheduled to present the party's manifesto. At Agra, he offered a preview

Before 2019, Mayawati would always invoke the infamous 1995 guesthouse incident (when she and her party MLAs were gheraoed and attacked amid the collapse of the SP-BSP coalition government) to make the point that the Samajwadi Party was pathologically anti-Dalit. But the post-2024 Lok Sabha landscape appears different—the SP is now preparing to hold conventions like the one in Agra across all 18 administrative divisions (*mandal*s), which together encompass the state's 75 districts.

*

Dalits constitute approximately 20 per cent of the population of Uttar Pradesh. For decades, the BSP was their principal political vehicle and its decline has triggered an intense contest for their support among the BJP, SP, Congress and newer political formations.

The electoral shift is striking. In 2007, the BSP won 62 of the state's 86 reserved assembly seats and formed a majority government. The SP won 58 in 2012. The BJP subsequently consolidated non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits, weakening both parties. It won all 17 reserved Lok Sabha seats in 2014 and 15 in 2019, despite the SP-BSP alliance. In the 2017 assembly elections, the BJP-led NDA captured 70 reserved seats and in 2022, it won 65. The BSP, meanwhile, plummeted from 19 assembly seats in 2017 to just one in 2022. The party's declining vote share mirrors the same reality: from 30.4 per cent in 2007 to 22.2 per cent in 2017 and 12.9 per cent in 2022.

Since late October, Mayawati's nephew Akash Anand, apparently back in her good books, has addressed rallies in Bulandshahr, Saharanpur, Bareilly and Bijnor, seeking to revive the BSP. Imran Malik, a BSP supporter and hardware trader from Shikarpur who attended the Bulandshahr rally, says the gathering attracted people across communities, including Brahmins and Muslims. Prof. Vikram Harijan of Allahabad University thinks the BSP might do better this time.

Meanwhile, Chandrashekhar and Owaisi have formed the Samajik Parivartan Morcha (SPM) and say they will contest all 403 assembly seats. They have chosen to direct their attack on Akhilesh rather than the incumbent BJP, but that is hardly surprising, given Owaisi's track. The two parties together secured less than one per cent of the vote in 2022, but Chandrashekhar's Azad Samaj Party got 14.6 per cent in the four Lok Sabha constituencies it contested in 2024, signalling growing support and a potential challenge to both the SP–Congress alliance and the BSP.

Prof. Sheeshpal Gautam of Pt Sunderlal Memorial College, Kannauj, believes Chandrashekhar has channelled Dalit anger into street mobilisation, but advocate Netrapal Singh of Kithore offers a different assessment: Chandrashekhar may dent the opposition alliance somewhat, but voters understand that only the SP-Congress combine can defeat the BJP and are unlikely to split their vote.

On 26 November, Akhilesh is scheduled to present the party's manifesto. At Agra, he offered a preview: a separate budget for SC/STs, minimum wages and overtime provisions for workers, including those in Agra's footwear factories and legal safeguards against the vandalisation of statues. Party workers have been asked to take notes on the demands and concerns of Dalits in their constituencies.

The battle for the Dalit vote is not limited to the reserved constituencies. It is about who can credibly represent their aspirations—offering dignity, political agency, economic opportunity and a meaningful stake in governance. ■

Bilkis Bano and the flickering light of justice

Shahrukh Alam

The Supreme Court Rules state that in an appeal against conviction, a 'certificate of surrender' must be submitted first, even before the appeal is listed before a bench. If the convict has not surrendered, he must show good reason and ask for a formal exemption, which is not easily granted in serious crimes.

Criminal appeals, even after being admitted to the court's docket, take a very long time to be decided. The convict returns after serving a few years of jail time to ask for suspension of sentence. He pleads that his appeal is pending and that he has served 2/3 years in jail. The courts might summarily say: 'Come back after another year.'

There is an odd contradiction here: the court has found enough substance in the appeal to admit it to its docket, but is also aware that given the backlog of cases, if the convict is let off at the outset while his appeal is pending, he might never fully be brought to justice if eventually found guilty. So, the courts have devised an informal, discretionary method of punishment, a compromise in a judicial system that cannot promise quick resolution of cases. Here, the wait itself is made the punishment.

What is sufficient jail time before the court grants release and for what categories of offences is determined discretionarily by individual judges. Bilkis Bano's convicted attackers had done 17 years, and it might ordinarily be considered sufficient time served to be let off. Even with a very real possibility that the appeal would not be decided in the freed convicts' lifetime. But did the court weigh the nature of the crime while determining 'enough time served' in this case?

Courts do accord primacy to the nature of the crime over years spent in jail in some cases. For instance, there are many serving life sentences under special terror laws. Some were convicted for tangential roles like the adolescent boy who worked as a cleaner on a truck, from which illegal arms were recovered. He is now a middle-aged man, having served almost 24 years in prison.

There are others who have done 20-32 years, and do not have the means to appeal their conviction in the Supreme Court. Even while they serve their sentences, their applications for remission or even short parole are routinely rejected. Sentencing Review Boards reject remission applications mechanically, but in cases involving terror laws, courts prefer to not intervene, irrespective of the nature of crime or years already served.



Activists demand justice for Bilkis Bano

When we look for patterns across cases, the arc of justice often seems to tilt away from the marginals

Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam have served more than six years and the courts have even conceded to unproved accusations by the prosecution, but their bail applications still meet an unrelenting wall in the courts; the fact that the chargesheet invoked the terror law UAPA gives the courts the leeway.

The courts often let the State and the prosecution take the lead in defining the seriousness of a crime, or arbitrarily invoking special laws to refuse or grant release from jail on that basis.

Bilkis's case has been framed like a one-off criminal episode, which is extraordinary enough in the extreme violence it involved but it was much more than that. Two jeeps full of armed men chased and cornered a fleeing Muslim group that included a five-month pregnant Bilkis Bano, her cousin who had delivered a baby only two days ago, small children and other older men and women. Bilkis and her cousin were gangraped. The newborn was killed, as was Bilkis's three-year-old daughter. She was forcefully taken from her mother's arms, and her skull bashed against a stone. Bilkis's sisters, cousins and mother were murdered in front of her. She herself lost consciousness and was probably mistaken for dead.

These men went on a rampage against Muslims, believing the fire on the Sabarmati Express train in Godhra carrying Hindu pilgrims was communally motivated. The 'avenging' mobs pulled out any Muslim they could find, and created a looting, raping, murdering spectacle that went on for three days in the state of Gujarat. Bilkis and her family were attacked solely for being Muslim. Bilkis's body was used to score a communal point, to 'avenge' the unconnected death of Hindu pilgrims. This horribly violent crime was not a one-off incident, but part of a concerted hate campaign that targeted Muslims.

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...and now for sham elections in Ladakh

Herjinder on the deviousness of scheduling hill council elections in December

Photo: Getty Images



Before the harsh winter sets in, people of Ladakh get together to celebrate the Suru festival

Across the country, the Election Commission put the electoral rolls through a Special Intensive Revision, an exercise that was designed to strike voters off in very large numbers. Only three places were spared: Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Ladakh. Now, say Ladakh's leaders, the Union government has found its own way of shrinking the electorate in the one Union Territory the revision skipped.

Voting for Ladakh's eight hill councils will be conducted on 4 December, the month when temperatures here range from minus 20 to minus 30 degrees Celsius. Roads close, flights are unreliable and some 20 to 25 per cent of the population leaves for the milder plains. Those who stay are largely housebound for most of the season. To expect them to turn out in large numbers, above all the elderly, is to expect too much.

Ladakh's leadership has read the situation clearly. Sajjad Husain Kargili, a leader of the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA), put it bluntly: "We have seen the allegations of 'vote chori' in other parts of the country. Ladakh has been turned into a testing lab, and they have stolen representation from here. Decisions taken unilaterally clearly display the murder of democracy in Ladakh."

Until now, Ladakh had two districts, Leh and Kargil, and a hill council for each. The administration has since carved out eight districts, four each in Leh and Kargil. On 10 November, the State Election Commission announced elections to all eight councils. Chief secretary Ashish Kundra called it a "watershed moment" and argued that a December vote would give the new councils three months to frame budgets. Ladakh's MP, Mohmad Haneefa Jan, says he urged lieutenant governor V.K. Saxena to hold the polls in March or April, when people are back.

Timing is not the only grievance. Tsering Dorje Lakruk, leader of the Leh Apex Body (LAB), told *National Herald*: "There are many other problems, apart from the schedule. The provision for hill councils has been amended, and their authority cut drastically by transferring most powers to the lieutenant governor." There are also allegations that the delimitation of seats for the new councils involved largescale gerrymandering.

When the LAB and the KDA announced a boycott of the hill council polls, the administration's response was repression.

On 11 November, police removed Sonam Wangchuk from a protest site in Leh. He says masked men pushed him into a vehicle and whisked him home, where twenty-odd armed policemen have since been stationed. An order citing the election model code of conduct (MCC) bars him from any 'unauthorised rally, procession or public gathering' for 60 days. The order does not use the words 'house arrest' but Wangchuk says that's precisely what it is. In a letter to Union home minister Amit Shah and lieutenant governor Saxena, Wangchuk wrote that the model code 'cannot, by itself, be invoked as a blanket justification to curtail this right [to peaceful protest] or to impose restrictions that effectively confine me to my residence'.

Wangchuk's institutions have also felt the squeeze. In August 2025, the Leh administration cancelled the allotment of about 54 hectares for his Himalayan Institute of Alternative Learning (HIAL) in Phyang; he called it a "witch-hunt". Come November 2026, the administration told HIAL to halt activities at its Desert Flower school. HIAL's CEO and Wangchuk's wife Gitanjali Angmo calls the notice baseless and says it is the administration that has sat on the school's no-objection certificate.

With the streets closed to him, Wangchuk's only access to the nation is social media. In a video appeal he said: "While the judicial inquiry commission report on the 24 September incidents in Leh [in which four people died in police firing] moves at snail's pace... the Union Territory administration is moving at rocket speed to conduct some kind of 'council elections' here, apparently to have people of their choice installed to negotiate on democracy and safeguards."

> *"Ladakh is now a 'vote chori' testing lab; our representation has been stolen"*

The model code has also been used to ban every demonstration and procession. In many villages, people have reportedly decided to stay away from the panchayat and local body polls (on 21 November).

Talks between the Centre and Ladakh's leadership have been deadlocked since last month, and the local leaders are squarely in the line of fire. They say that Saxena is losing no opportunity to defame them.

On 7 November, Wangchuk released excerpts of what he calls a sting operation. His lawyers recorded the owner of a content-creation company, who allegedly said his firm was working with the 'LG's team' on content that would malign Wangchuk and burnish the LG's image. Wangchuk says he initially handed the material to the director of the Intelligence Bureau and went public only after the exchange fizzled out. The recording "establishes that the LG administration is directly involved in illegal smear campaigns" said Wangchuk, who has also appealed to President Droupadi Murmu. (These are Wangchuk's allegations; the recording has not been independently verified.)

In October, the lieutenant governor went on record at the *India Today* conclave to make a nasty swipe at Wangchuk. People called Wangchuk an environmentalist, Saxena sneered, but how many trees had he planted? He should know that Ladakh is a high-altitude cold desert: much of it is above the tree line, where saplings survive only with painstaking irrigation. Wangchuk's work is about water and glaciers, not forests.

It's been one step forward and two steps back. On 22 May, a sub-committee of the Union home ministry met the LAB and the KDA. Both sides announced an understanding: a model in which 'legislative, executive and financial powers' would rest with a Union Territory-level elected body. All bureaucrats, including the chief secretary, would answer to its executive head, proposed as chief minister.

Five months later, the ministry backed away. At a meeting in Leh on 15 October, it presented a 32-page draft that the two bodies rejected as an "archaic administrative model", comparing it with the old north-east frontier agency and calling it a complete U-turn. "They reneged again," said Wangchuk.

Kundra's defence was that Ladakh had already been told it would be neither a state nor a Union Territory with a legislature.

During these talks, the Ladakh leadership had already been forced to give up its core demand: protection under the Sixth Schedule. "We met Modi and Amit Shah: both said Sixth Schedule protection cannot be given. Instead, we were offered protection under Article 371A of the Constitution," says Lakruk.

With nominations closed, the stage is set for 4 December. KDA co-chairman Asgar Ali Karbalai has already warned that if the home ministry does not return to the 22 May understanding, Ladakhis will "hit the streets, agitate and prepare to go to jail".

A council election that most of Ladakh's organised voices intend to boycott, held in the season when many voters are away, may not settle the question of representation. It may well sharpen it. ■

Bilkis Bano...

Continued from page 3

It was part of a larger pattern in the pogrom of Gujarat in 2002. The violence was politically motivated and carried with it a sense of impunity. The state administration and the police and other officials were complicit.

Bilkis has stated in court that even though she had named her attackers, the police registered an FIR against 'unknown people'. The investigation was deliberately botched, and the case was sought to be closed for lack of any leads, until the Supreme Court intervened and transferred the case to the CBI. The intimidation of witnesses, indeed of Bilkis herself, continued and the trial had to be transferred out of Gujarat. It is important to know that the trial court in Mumbai convicted eleven men for the rapes and murders in Bilkis's family. The High Court confirmed those convictions, and additionally also convicted five policemen and two government doctors for wilful destruction of evidence.

In 2022, the state of Gujarat suddenly granted remission of sentence to the eleven men, meaning that it pardoned their remaining sentences and they were released. The Sentencing Review Board had ten government appointees, whose politics were conveniently aligned with that of the convicts. Their release was a political event—they were garlanded when they came out of prison. Bilkis left her residence in fear and trauma. The politics of hate that was acted out on her body has not abated. It has only become more centrestage. The convicts have shown no remorse nor been given a reason to introspect. They have instead been honoured for their role in the violence.

In 2022, the Supreme Court intervened and ruled that the state of Gujarat had no power to grant remissions since the case had been tried in Maharashtra. The convicts had to return to jail. Now two of them have been granted a suspension of sentence by the Supreme Court, since their appeals are pending and because they have 'served a long sentence already'. Bilkis was not given notice nor heard before this order was passed. Had she been present, she may have reiterated that she feels intimidated by their physical presence and by the fact that their hateful violent act is celebrated as a political victory. In fact, such behaviour by someone released on bail would ordinarily result in cancellation of bail. But not so for Bilkis's attackers.

Bilkis's case could have been framed as an act of terror. In that moment it was meant to terrorise an entire community.

Each felicitation of the perpetrators is a reiteration of that act of terror. The prosecution could at least have invoked special laws. In the event, the eleven men were tried and convicted for being part of an unlawful assembly that committed rapes and murders. The framing of a criminal case is a very political act.

The law believes it acts in silos: each case is judged on its own merits, as a complete whole. But somehow, when broader patterns are considered across cases, the arc of justice seems to tilt away from the marginals. ■

SHAHRUKH ALAM *is a constitutional lawyer and human rights activist*

The backdoor capture of Gokul

...and the growing shadow of state control over Maharashtra's cooperative institutions

Jaideep Hardikar

There's a saying in Kolhapur's political circles, uttered only half in jest: "Don't make me an MLA, but make me a director of Gokul at least once!"

The prestige surrounding this district dairy cooperative is such that every local political aspirant wants to serve on its board. The recent election (held once in five years) is a case in point. Fifty candidates fought for 25 directorial positions in a fiercely contested battle that ended with the state government seizing control through a controversial last-minute intervention.

On 19 October, when the Congress-backed panel won 13 seats and the Mahayuti-backed panel won 12, it seemed like a clear victory, however thin the margin. This arithmetic was to change dramatically.

On 6 November, the Devendra Fadnavis government hurriedly promulgated an ordinance amending the Maharashtra Cooperative Societies Act (MCSA), allowing five government-appointed members to be nominated to large cooperative institutions with an annual turnover exceeding Rs 500 crore. Four of these nominees were granted voting rights in elections to office-bearer positions, while the fifth, a government officer, would be a non-voting member. While cooperative laws allow institutions to nominate experts to improve management, this was the first time the state had empowered nominated members to vote in elections to executive positions.

Three days later, Mahayuti-backed Rajesh Patil was elected chairman of Gokul, securing 16 votes against 13 for his Congress-backed opponent. The four newly empowered nominees had, predictably, tilted the scales.

The Bombay High Court declined to stay the ordinance at the interim stage. The constitutional challenge remains pending.



Mahayuti's Rajesh Patil

The political significance of Gokul

Gokul is no ordinary dairy institution. Established in 1963 by grassroots cooperative leaders N.T. Sarnayak and Anandrao Patil-Chuyekar, it began in a rented room with 22 member societies and a daily milk collection of 700 litres. Today, the Kolhapur Zilla Sahakari Dudh Utpadak Sangh has an annual turnover of Rs 4,185 crore (2025-26), connects nearly 5.5 lakh dairy farmers and 8,400+ village-level primary dairy societies across 1,810 villages, and procures an average of 16.24 lakh litres of milk daily.

Its processing and distribution network extends across Kolhapur, Pune, Mumbai, Navi Mumbai, Thane and Goa. Gokul claims that 76-82 per cent of every sales rupee is returned to producers through milk prices and services.

It's not commercial scale alone that makes Gokul important. Its penetration into the rural economy and the institutional reach of its village-level societies makes it a formidable political platform. An MLA's electoral constituency is largely confined to one assembly segment. A Gokul director commands the entire district's rural economy, milk producers and influential village-level representatives. Such reach can ultimately influence electoral outcomes in Lok Sabha and assembly constituencies.

Despite its long history of political contestation, Gokul has always rejected state interference. For approximately three decades, its management was associated with local Congress stalwarts Mahadevrao Mahadik and the late P.N. Patil.

In 2021, the Maha Vikas Aghadi-backed Shahu Shetkari Aghadi, led by Congress leader Satej Patil and supported by Hasan Mushrif, then an NCP loyalist, won 17 of the 21 contested seats, ending the incumbent group's dominance. Following the NCP split, Mushrif joined Ajit Pawar and became a minister in the Mahayuti government, while Satej Patil remained with the Congress. Despite the combined strength of the ruling Mahayuti alliance, including Kolhapur's legislators and MPs, Satej Patil retained control through his Rajarshi Shahu Shetkari Samvichari Aghadi.

Cut to 2026. Of 5,418 eligible voters, 5,416 cast their votes—an extraordinary turnout of 99.96 per cent. Ten of Kolhapur's 12 talukas recorded 100 per cent voting. Counting took more than 12 hours. Patil's group initially appeared to be leading in 16 seats against nine for the Mahayuti-backed Chhatrapati Shahu Shetkari Vikas Aghadi. After recounting, the tally changed to 14–11 before the final result was declared: 13–12.

Among those defeated were Navid Mushrif, son of minister Hasan Mushrif and outgoing Gokul chairman; Shoumika Mahadik, sister-in-law of BJP MP Dhananjay Mahadik; and former Gokul chairman Arun Dongale.

The popular mandate favoured the Satej Patil-led panel, which wanted to install Gokul founder Anandrao Patil-Chuyekar's son Shashikant Chuyekar as chairman. The subsequent ordinance allowed Mushrif's panel to install Rajesh Patil, a former MLA, as chairman.

Both Mushrif and Satej Patil have since struck reconciliatory notes, invoking the 'interest of member farmers'. Nevertheless, the impression across Maharashtra is that the BJP overturned Gokul's electoral verdict to install its own man as part of a gameplan to wrest control of the cooperatives.

Despite being in power, the Fadnavis-led party has struggled to decisively penetrate Maharashtra's cooperative institutions, from major banks and agricultural marketing committees to sugar factories and dairies. It is increasingly using allies, local satraps and government intervention to do so. This approach mirrors the national agenda pursued through the ministry of cooperation, headed by Union home minister Amit Shah.

The bigger question

Cooperatives were conceived to pool resources, organise small producers, extend credit and create collective bargaining power. In Maharashtra, particularly in the sugar belt of western Maharashtra, they transformed rural economies by providing access to credit, markets, processing facilities, employment, education and welfare. They also created a new generation of grassroots political leadership.

> *Gokul's political capital derives from its scale and deep penetration into the state's rural economy*

Over time, however, these institutions became centres of political influence and targets of state interference. Control over a sugar factory, district cooperative bank or milk union could translate into influence over thousands of members, employees, borrowers and suppliers.

The Maharashtra State Cooperative Bank (MSCB) is a classic example. The apex institution in the state's short-term cooperative credit structure, it connects district central cooperative banks and primary agricultural credit societies at the village level.

In 2011, following serious financial and governance concerns identified by NABARD, the RBI recommended superseding its elected board. The Maharashtra registrar of cooperative societies did so, appointing administrators in May 2011. The intervention was justified at the time as necessary to protect the institution and its depositors.

What began as a response to an institutional crisis became an extraordinarily prolonged administrative arrangement. The bank has not had an elected board since then and continues to function under a state-appointed administrator. Although its financial health has improved, it has lost its democratic and inclusive structure.

In Gokul's case, the state intervened to award the institution to its ally, defying the verdict of its members. It enabled a backdoor political capture and triggered a furore. The 6 November ordinance is sweeping: any cooperative with a turnover of Rs 500+ crore can face a similar takeover, should the ruling dispensation lose an election.

The two examples reveal a common problem: by reducing shareholder-members to spectators, the regime defeats the very idea of cooperative decision-making.

The issue therefore extends beyond Gokul and the MSCB. It concerns the future of cooperatives built over generations through community contribution. These are not merely assets to be distributed among competing political formations. Who should own India's cooperatives? And how long can institutions created in the name of collective ownership survive without meaningful collective decision-making? These are the questions we need to ask. ■

What should Democrats do with their win?

United against Trump, the party's next big battle is within its own ranks, writes Ashok Swain



Photo: Getty Images

Newly elected members of the US House of Representatives pose on the steps of the US Capitol in Washington D.C. on 12 November. The Democrats will have control of both houses of the new Congress when it convenes in January 2027

The Democrats have won a spectacular electoral victory, but its biggest battle may now be within its own ranks. The November 2026 midterm elections have delivered control of both houses of Congress to the Democrats, inflicted a humiliating defeat on Donald Trump's Republican Party, and dramatically altered the political landscape ahead of the 2028 presidential election. Yet beneath the celebrations lies an uncomfortable question: have American voters endorsed the Democratic establishment, or have they simply rejected Trump's increasingly unpopular presidency? The answer will determine not only the party's political future but also whether Washington's longstanding foreign policy consensus, particularly its unconditional blind support for Israel, can survive.

The scale of the triumph is extraordinary. From Texas to Alaska, Kansas to South Carolina, the party has made inroads into Republican territory previously considered impregnable. Texas has elected a Democrat senator for the first time since 1988. Progressive candidates have succeeded alongside moderates, suggesting that voters were less interested in ideological labels than in candidates offering credible responses to their economic anxieties. The continuing war with Iran, rising living costs, punitive tariffs and aggressive immigration enforcement helped turn public frustration into an electoral earthquake.

But electoral victories often conceal contradictions that become visible only when the celebrations end. The Democratic coalition now stretches from democratic socialists demanding structural economic transformation to conservative Democrats representing traditionally Republican constituencies. Their shared opposition to Trump should not be mistaken for agreement about what comes next. Winning against an unpopular president is considerably easier than constructing a governing programme capable of satisfying such different constituencies.

This is where the party's established leadership faces its greatest challenge. Chuck Schumer and Hakeem Jeffries represent a generation of politicians accustomed to managing competing interests through unprincipled compromises, powerful donors and party discipline. That approach may have helped hold the party together, but younger voters and increasingly assertive progressive activists are questioning whether it can deliver the changes they expect. Their dissatisfaction is not merely about personalities. It concerns a political culture that promises transformation during elections but frequently retreats into caution once power is secured. The challenges from progressive forces to the leadership may not succeed immediately, but they reveal something significant: the Democratic establishment can no longer take the loyalty of its own political base for granted.

The argument is also about what Democrats should do with their victory. Moderates point to impressive performances by candidates such as James Talarico in Texas and Roy Cooper in North Carolina as evidence that electoral success requires appealing beyond progressive strongholds. The Left counters that economic populism, criticism of billionaire influence and opposition to endless wars helped mobilise voters across ideological boundaries. Both interpretations contain elements of truth. The real question is whether Democrats can combine economic radicalism with electoral pragmatism rather than treating them as mutually exclusive.

The approaching presidential contest will intensify these disagreements. Potential contenders, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Pete Buttigieg, Jon Ossoff and other emerging Democrat figures, will have to articulate something more substantial than opposition to Trump. The 2028 primaries could become the party's most consequential ideological confrontation in decades. Unlike 2024, when Democrat voters were denied a genuinely competitive nomination process, the next contest offers an opportunity to debate the party's identity and its relationship with corporate power, militarism and America's changing electorate.

Nowhere will this confrontation be more consequential than over Israel. For generations, unwavering support for Israel has remained one of the few areas of bipartisan agreement in Washington. Democratic and Republican administrations have differed over settlements, Palestinian statehood and negotiations, but the underlying commitment to Israeli military domination has remained largely untouched. Even when Israeli governments openly defied American diplomatic preferences, Washington continued supplying weapons and providing diplomatic protection.

Democrats lack the numbers to override presidential vetoes. Their own caucus is divided over Israel

That consensus has been eroding. Israel's devastating military campaign in Gaza, the humanitarian catastrophe suffered by Palestinians and the subsequent expansion of regional warfare has profoundly altered the debate within Democratic politics. Younger Americans increasingly question why their government should finance military operations while claiming to defend human rights and international law. For them, Palestinian suffering is not a distant diplomatic complication but a test of US political morality.

The war with Iran has sharpened these contradictions. Trump's military intervention, undertaken despite his earlier promises to avoid costly foreign entanglements, has imposed economic and strategic costs on Americans already struggling with inflation. The connection between overseas warfare and domestic hardship has become politically unavoidable. When voters see rising fuel prices alongside enormous military expenditures, arguments about protecting distant allies acquire a different meaning.

Significantly, criticism of Washington's relationship with Israel is no longer confined to the Democratic left. Sections of the Republican coalition, including figures associated with vice president J.D. Vance, are questioning whether American interests should remain so closely tied to Israeli military ambitions. This emerging convergence does not signify agreement over Palestinian rights. Nevertheless, it suggests that the traditional bipartisan consensus is facing pressure from both directions.

For Democrats, the immediate test will come when the new Congress convenes in January 2027. Control of both chambers gives the party substantial powers over appropriations, investigations, military assistance and presidential appointments. Congressional committees can scrutinise weapons transfers, examine the conduct of the Iran war and demand accountability for civilian casualties.

But congressional control should not be confused with control of foreign policy. Trump remains president, retains extensive executive authority and can veto legislation. Democrats lack the numbers necessary to override presidential vetoes or easily overcome Senate filibusters. Moreover, their own caucus remains divided over how far Washington should go in confronting Israel. A dramatic rupture is unlikely before 2028.

There is, however, considerable room between unconditional support and abandoning an ally. Democrats could insist that military assistance comply with existing American laws, oppose settlement expansion, demand humanitarian access to Gaza and reject further military adventures undertaken without congressional authorisation. They could also make recognition of Palestinian self-determination a substantive diplomatic objective.

The greater obstacle may be political money. Pro-Israel organisations, defence contractors and wealthy donors have long exercised considerable influence over US elections. Challenging that requires more than rhetorical sympathy for Palestinians. It demands a willingness to confront the financial arrangements that sustain Washington's foreign policy establishment. For politicians accustomed to expensive campaigns, such independence carries substantial risks.

Refusing to change carries risks of its own. Democratic voters, particularly younger progressives, may not indefinitely accept a party that champions racial equality and human rights domestically while defending policies abroad that appear fundamentally inconsistent with those principles. The contradiction has become too visible to be managed through carefully worded statements expressing concern about civilian suffering.

The Democratic Party now stands at a historical crossroads. Its electoral triumph has weakened Trump politically, but it has also exposed the limitations of the leadership that delivered victory. The coming struggle is not simply between moderates and progressives. It concerns whether the Democratic Party can move beyond defending the institutions and policies that helped produce widespread public disillusionment. ■

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Can India reclaim its police from the ruling ideology?

Power is a communicable disease and the virus spreads quickly from host to host



Photo: Getty Images

The retrogression of the police under the present dispensation has been alarming

Avay Shukla

Any dispassionate and objective observer of India would have surely noted the decline of India's public institutions, both constitutional and statutory, over the last decade. I speak here not of their performance (though that too is a matter of concern in many cases), but of their waning independence, increasing politicisation, non-adherence to their mandate, lack of accountability and sensitivity to public concerns. Heading the list of such bodies is the police, particularly in the north-Indian states, or the cow belt, which now also includes Assam, Bengal and Odisha, unfortunately.

This has to be a matter of particular concern for all law-abiding citizens, because no other institution touches the public more directly than the civil police: it is the first port of call for any citizen coming in contact with the law, it has the power to use sovereign physical violence, it can deprive one of personal freedom, it can enmesh you in years of legal troubles.

The police is today the primary agency through which this government functions, because this regime does not believe in democratic institutions or practices—consultation, advice, dialogue, persuasion or public perception; the only medium of administration it knows is force. Therefore, it has to rely on the police, and that is where the deterioration begins.

A uniformed force committing transgressions and excesses on behalf of the government soon becomes immune to the rule of law, and functions like a law unto itself. It turns rogue and becomes as unaccountable to the government as the latter has become to the people. The two develop a parabiotic relationship: one to cling to power and the other to exercise its now unfettered power for its own aggrandisement.

This is what has happened to the Indian police over the last decade or so, especially in the Hindi heartland. Encounter killings, custodial torture and even deaths, indiscriminate arrests, demolitions, forcible evictions, illegal deportations, voter suppression, selective prosecution, mentoring of criminals, excessive use of force—these are now the norm. Kathua, Hathras, Lakhimpur Kheri don't make news anymore.

The Indian police had never really lost its colonial tinge, but its retrogression under the present governments—central and state, has been rapid and alarming. There are three clear indicators of this.

One: the excessive use of force and curbing of civil liberties and rights, often beyond the mandate of law, without any accountability. Examples of this are: the brutal crackdown on protesting youth on 20 July 2026 in Delhi and Bihar, the largescale registration of cases and arrests in the northeast Delhi riots in February 2020 (most of which have subsequently failed to stand judicial scrutiny), physical persecution and prosecution of those who protest against environmentally destructive projects such as bauxite mining in Odisha's Niyamgiri or the Siang mega dam in Arunachal.

According to official NHRC data, in six years (2016-2022), there were 813 encounter deaths and zero convictions of police officials. Custodial deaths also occur in frightening numbers. While NHRC figures put this at 1,606 in 2021-22, the ministry of home affairs informed Parliament (26 July 2022) that there were 4,484 such deaths in the same period.

'Bulldozer justice', demolitions of religious structures and houses of 'suspects' and 'accused', arbitrary imposition of the NSA and UAPA, arrests for alleged 'conversions', forcible deportations—these have become our sickening daily reality, notwithstanding repeated warnings and strictures by the courts.

Which brings us to the second indicator of the deterioration of the police: contempt for judicial orders and judgments. The most recent example of this was the ignoring of the Supreme Court's orders during the Delhi protests. Despite clear directions from the apex court, the Delhi police continued to detain lawyers and journalists, shut down Metro stations and roads, and obstruct the peaceful protests. (The court is now hearing a contempt case on the matter and the police commissioner and the Union home secretary have filed apology affidavits).

A uniformed force committing transgressions on behalf of the government soon turns rogue

The situation is even worse in some other states where high courts have repeatedly passed strictures against the police. On 3 November 2026, the Allahabad High Court, while accepting a habeas corpus petition, stated in an order that 'the civil liberties situation in UP is shameful: police have little regard for citizens' rights.'

It went on to observe that 'the infringement of these rights seems to have become a matter of routine for the UP police'. Similar observations have been made by other courts from time to time but these have neither deterred nor restrained the police from. Regrettably, the reluctance of the courts to go beyond strictures has only encouraged this growing tendency.

The third indicator, perhaps, provides the reason for this flagrant disregard of orders, laws and the misuse of authority and physical force. It is becoming increasingly evident that some sections of the police are now sympathetic to, and fully support, the Hindutva ideology of the ruling dispensation, and therefore have a personal animus towards those who do not. This explains the vicious use of force on protesters, the pellet guns and AK47s, the targeting of women journalists, even the reported sexual manhandling of young girls at Jantar Mantar, and their readiness to target members of a particular community.

It is difficult to believe that they would have been ordered by their superior officers to commit these selective excesses as part of their SOP, though I wouldn't be surprised if that was indeed the case. It may not be fair to single out the police, though, for this dubious honour, considering that even the higher echelons of the bureaucracy, defence services, universities and judiciary seem to espouse the ruling ideology.

Further—let us admit it—as an institution, the police force is dominated by upper castes. Even though affirmative action by various governments has improved the representation of backward castes, Dalits and Scheduled Tribes, their representation at 51 per cent is still far below their 67 per cent share of the general population.

The misogyny in our police forces is explained by the fact that women account for only 10 per cent, despite comprising 48 per cent of the general population. Muslims account for only 4 per cent (excluding Jammu and Kashmir) though they are, as per the 2011 Census, 14.2 per cent of the general population. These are precisely the sections of society for which the ruling ideology does not give a tinker's damn.

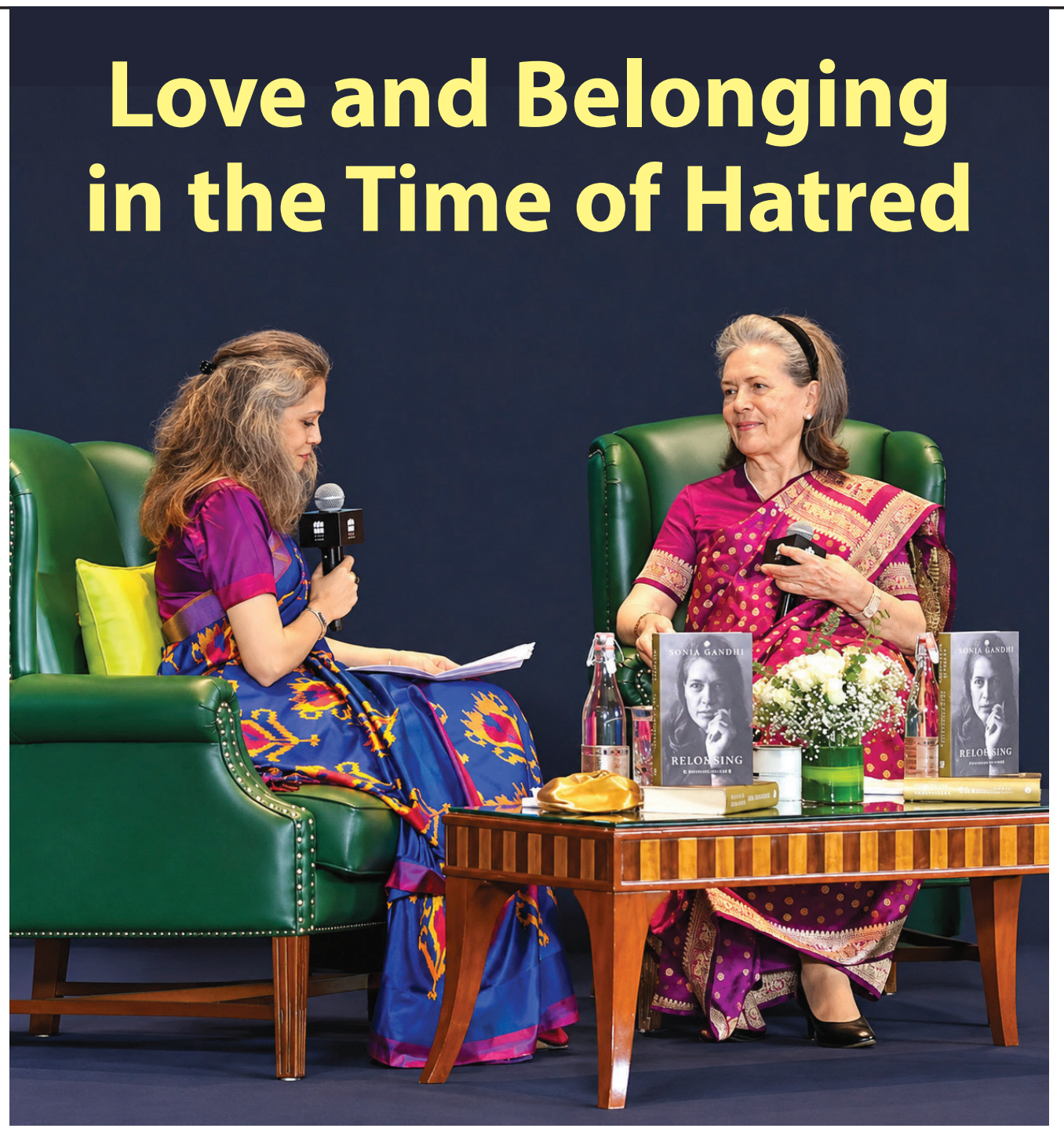
These figures go some way in explaining why a certain ideology is gaining traction within the police and dictating their actions. India is a highly divided society; police personnel emerge from this society and carry their biases and prejudices with them. When these negative influences are given free play (if not actively encouraged) by the political executive, the result is there for all to see.

To understand the greater danger we need to ask a future-facing question: when the good times, and the equitable rule of law, return, will the police shed the decomposition of values, their increasing malfeasance, the perversion of their mandate? Or have these become so embedded in their psyche that they will be impossible to dislodge? Even more disturbing: will succeeding governments, despite different persuasions and dogmas, be interested in reforming the police? For power is a communicable disease, and the virus needs very little time to spread from one host to another. ■

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Love and Belonging in the Time of Hatred



K.A. Shaji

There is something deeply satisfying about the public response to Sonia Gandhi's memoir *Belonging: A Journey of Love*. I see in this moment something much larger than the success of an autobiography. I see the spectacular failure of one of the most sustained character-assassination projects undertaken by India's Hindutva establishment. A woman whom the BJP and the hydra-headed Sangh Parivar have tried for decades to humiliate, delegitimise and politically destroy has found a way to narrate her own story. And people are listening.

The Sangh Parivar has done its damnedest to manufacture a fictitious Sonia Gandhi. Not the woman who arrived in India through love, who embraced this country as her home, who endured devastating personal tragedies and eventually entered public life, but an entirely fictional character assembled with prejudice with dollops of insinuation and organised vilification. For the Parivar, she was a bar dancer, an Italian stooge, a foreign conspirator plotting to appropriate India, a Christian agent out to convert Indians... These slurs were not uttered in the fever of an election; they constituted the vocabulary of a political campaign to question her place in this country, to cast her in the image of a hostile alien, to delegitimise her sense of belonging to India—the same politics of exclusion that has seen a million repugnant mutations.

What exactly is the crime of becoming an Indian through love and marriage, through an intimacy with its people that came through an immersion in the country's extraordinary plurality? Is 'Indian' merely a geographical inheritance or more? Is it also a political and moral idea that people can consciously embrace? Must nationality be determined by birthplace, ancestry or religious identity? For the Sangh Parivar that has spared no effort to make Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin the defining feature of her existence, her life poses these questions with a discomfiting insistence.

The memoir is so moving because it lets you in, allowing you to glimpse the fragility of a difficult life

Her commitment to secularism and India's pluralistic imagination is even more consequential at a time when millions of Indians find their sense of belonging to this country being challenged by the majoritarian politics of the current regime.

The irony is magnificent: the woman they tried to imprison in a fabricated story has now written her own.

The difference between the two projects is unmistakable. The Sangh Parivar's Sonia Gandhi was manufactured through TV propaganda, political invective and relentless insinuation. The Sonia Gandhi of *Belonging* speaks through personal experience, emotional vulnerability, memory and the authority of lived history. One is a political caricature designed to provoke hatred, the other is a human being reclaiming her voice.

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What touches me most about *Belonging* is the absence of bitterness. A woman who has endured so much hatred has not allowed bitterness to become the defining emotion of her existence. There is something profoundly human and beautiful about that. It is perhaps one of the most difficult forms of courage: to be wounded without losing tenderness and to encounter hatred without surrendering one's capacity to love.

Her memoir, therefore, is also an invitation to understand the human being behind the public figure.

I particularly appreciate the courage involved in critically revisiting her own life and the decisions of those closest to her. To acknowledge mistakes made by her husband, her mother-in-law or her own political establishment couldn't have been easy. It requires a certain moral centre, a willingness to place truth above sentiment and history above family pride.

The Sangh Parivar's problem is not merely that they disagree with Sonia Gandhi. They also seem unable to accept the possibility that a woman they have relentlessly vilified might command affection, respect and now the attention of millions of readers. Which brings me to the evocative title of the memoir and the question it grapples with.

A country is not made one's own by birth alone. Belonging can come through love, commitment, sacrifice and an enduring emotional attachment to its people. Sonia Gandhi has lived that journey. Her Indianness must be understood through the life she chose to live here, the losses she endured here, the responsibilities she accepted here and the political values she continued to defend here.

I have never believed that Sonia Gandhi is beyond criticism; no political leader should be. The Congress must answer for its mistakes, and the Nehru-Gandhi family must be subjected to the same scrutiny as any other powerful family. But holding people up to standards is one thing and politically motivated vilification quite another. Political disagreement should never erase human dignity.

Sonia Gandhi's Indianness must be understood not through her birth but her embrace of the idea of India, her commitment to the idea that shaped her public life. She fought for the idea through strife and political defeats, she remained a binding force when political adversity tested people of weaker resolve, and she never saw the country merely as a political arena.

The memoir is touching because it lets you in, it allows you to glimpse fragility, to encounter a woman who has lived an extraordinarily difficult life but recalls it with no bitterness. It invites you to see her life not through the offices she held, nor her political victories or defeats but through what she endured, what she refused to surrender and what remained of her after everything she had been through.

Perhaps the most beautiful thing about Sonia Gandhi is that after all these years of being told that she does not belong, she has continued to live, love and work for an India in which everyone has the right to belong. That is why I believe *Belonging* should be read with an open heart.

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The extraordinary public response to the book is politically significant as well. Readers are queuing up and copies are reportedly disappearing from the shelves. The attention it is getting across India and abroad is not just the curiosity to peek into the private life of a public person; it is also an appetite to discover the truth of a story that has been appropriated by others for far too long.

The BJP's response is equally revealing. Even as sales break all sorts of records and the book becomes a runaway success, the hate factory is hard at work trying to find something that might give their propaganda fresh legs.

I celebrate Sonia Gandhi's memoir because it is a refusal to surrender her identity to the machinery of hatred, because it challenges the arrogant assumption that her sense of belonging can be questioned by those who hate her, that her life can be defined by those who will never get her. ■

Edited excerpts from two pieces originally posted on the author's Facebook wall

Even if the price of speaking up is steep...

Swarna Bhatnagar on why so many Indian artists have bewilderingly fallen into a 'spiral of silence'

At his Indore concert, after four songs from his setlist had been flagged by child protection authorities, Diljit Dosanjh thundered out the words of Rahat Indori, the poet who knew a thing or two about the limits of authority and the boundlessness of a tongue. "*Kisi ke baap ka Hindustan thodi hai*," the crowd, feeling ten feet taller, roared along.

A few months ago, when students were protesting against the NEET paper leak, Diljit, questioned about his silence, had a rather breezy response: "I'm an artist, bro. I'm not a politician."

That answer left me cold, because to my mind, the making of an artist is the making of a conscience. We speak about empathy as a shiny bonus in an artist's repertoire, but we have the relationship backwards. Art demands empathy before it demands talent. The preposterous conceit that an artist can leave that sensibility at the studio door is one I have never bought. There is no apolitical art. Only politics that have become so familiar they pass for common sense.

It is worth remembering that there are artists who have understood that their craft gives them a public voice. Meryl Streep, for instance, used her 2017 Golden Globes speech to call out Donald Trump, then president-elect, over his mockery of a disabled journalist. "Disrespect invites disrespect. Violence incites violence," she said, and made a plea for principled press, urging Hollywood to support the Committee to Protect Journalists. She reminisced about her conversation with Tommy Lee Jones, who reminded her what a privilege it was to be an actor. Streep spoke of the responsibility that came with that privilege, calling it the responsibility of empathy.



Photos: Getty Images

Artists like Meryl Streep, Robert De Niro and George Clooney understood their fame gave them a public voice—they used it to push back against abuse of power

In the same Hollywood welkin sits Robert De Niro, who has made no secret of his abhorrence for Trump. He took his protest to the stage at the 2018 Tony Awards and at Cannes in 2025. Accepting an honorary Palme d'Or, he spoke about the rising attacks on American democracy and the arts. "Art looks for truth. Art embraces diversity. And that's why art is a threat." It was a blunt warning that an artist's fealty to truth can put them on a slippery slope with those who hold power.

The real test, of course, comes when the person in need of a telling-off happens to be from your own political family. George Clooney, a steady Democrat who had advocated for Joe Biden and also hosted a star-strewn fundraiser, supplied an astonishing example when he wrote an op-ed titled 'I Love Joe Biden. But We Need A New Nominee' for the *NYT* in 2024, calling on Biden to withdraw from the presidential race.

It is worth highlighting that regardless of whether the disapprobation comes from across the street or from one's own political camp, the right to express it has a constitutional bedrock. The First Amendment in the US puts a fence around freedom of speech and of the press by constraining the State's power to abridge them, protecting speech even when it rankles those in power.

The protection has its limits, and it cannot spare a speaker every repercussion, but it does keep the government from stifling what it would rather not hear. India has a similar fundamental promise in Article 19(1)(a), which guarantees freedom of speech and expression, subject to reasonable restrictions set out in Article 19(2). But it is in the long trek between the inflated constitutional promise and the artist's real-world experience that the paint begins to peel.

If artists in India are keeping their noses out of trouble, it's also because they fear the blowback, because to speak up is to lose the next film, the next assignment, the next show... making silence the only solid ground beneath one's feet, the safest career choice.

The German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann called this the 'spiral of silence'. She theorised that people begin to zip up when the price of having a voice is social ostracism or a public dressing-down. Those who disagree start hearing their voices as a solo echo, while the loudest opinions saltate until they sound like the voice of the crowd. The eventual consensus is something of a ventriloquist's trick—a few voices speak for many, while the many remain tight-lipped.

Art demands empathy before talent; for an artist, empathy is not a bonus feature

For 'freedom of expression' to be anything beyond a constitutional promise, it needs somewhere to stand, and sometimes, quite literally, someone willing to foot the bill. America has, through bodies such as the National Endowment for the Arts, put public money behind its cultural life, in some ways freeing the artist to make work that might get up the nose of those holding the purse strings. By contrast, artists in India are left to sing for their supper. If they stir up a hornets' nest, they might struggle to find someone who will bankroll their next performance. Then again, if the taxpayer's money is to find its way into the arts, what stops it from being cornered by those who know how to curry favour?

I don't know how to answer every question this throws up, but I do know that it cannot be a one-way street, with society demanding lion-hearted artists while offering them no shelter when the backlash arrives. If we don't want the government of the day drawing the *Lakshman rekha* around our creative expression, we cannot make an artist's freedom contingent on keeping the audience sweet and the powers that be in good humour.

Even so, the law can only protect the freedom to make art. What an artist does with that freedom remains a matter of conscience. I want to leave James Baldwin's words on the table as I draw this piece to a close, trusting every artist to hear the call of their conscience. "The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers."

I know the price of speaking up is steep. But I hope artists remember that the world beyond their work is the well from which their work fetches its water—the people, the stories, the wounds, the bewildering joy, and the polaris their imagination keeps returning to.

The audience will go home with the film and the song, but the artist will have to go home to the same country as everyone else. If this is the country they make art in, the country they make a life in, then for the sake of the art they put into the world, I hope they never become strangers to it. ■

America signals a big reset in its polity

The US midterms have demonstrated that the country wants to heal itself. It'll have healthy side-effects for the world as well

Aakar Patel



Photo: Getty Images

Brought down a notch Trump's extravagance at a time of high inflation was the last straw for many Americans

Democracies correct themselves through elections. The leadership of all nations is imperfect, and problems become especially visible when strongmen take charge. With great power comes great overreach, and with overreach comes pushback. The American population has pushed back against its president and the way he governs.

It may surprise some of us—it certainly did me—that the number one factor behind the Republicans losing both the House and the Senate was neither inflation nor the dumb war in Iran. Both ranked high, but the most important reason voters punished Trump's party was corruption, and their unease at the way the government was being run by the wealthy, for the wealthy. Nine in ten voters ranked this at the top of their concerns.

Trump's sons have made thousands of crores while he has been in office, and are making more. His son-in-law has also made thousands of crores, while holding an unofficial position as an envoy and negotiating with the same Gulf nations from which he is taking money.

Trump himself has zoned out and is focused on things like the 600 m reflecting pool between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument (that long Egyptian-style obelisk), and a 250 ft arch modelled on the Arc de Triomphe. Photographs show that his 90,000 sq. ft ballroom is now larger than the White House itself, let alone the East Wing that it replaced.

Daily reporting on all of this, coming at a time when fuel prices are high and inflation is on the rise, was the last straw for many Americans, and they brought Trump down a notch.

What happens next? A few things. The first is that there is now pressure on Trump to conclude the war and normalise fuel prices and supplies. This might be difficult to achieve, given that the only way it seems doable is to return to the surrender document he signed at Versailles on 17 June (which lifted sanctions on Iran and gave it control over the Strait of Hormuz). Trump was fine with it until he was shamed into pulling out of the MoU by the very warmongers he is surrounded by, and who work in Israel's interests.

With great power comes great overreach, and with overreach comes pushback

That is the second thing that has now changed. The sweeping victories by the Democratic Party's leftwing show that Israel is an unpopular cause among Americans. Two-thirds of Americans think poorly of Israel, including three-fourths of those under 29. This means that, in the long term, Israel will not be able to rely on America to fight its wars.

On 21 October, the most influential lobby group AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) said it would stop endorsing candidates or giving them money directly. This happened after Republicans begged it to stay away from their races—a remarkable turnaround.

Along with their antipathy to foreign wars, the leftwing also pushes strongly for policies such as 'Medicare for All'. This is intended to make healthcare accessible in the country where it is the most expensive in the world. It is hard to see how this does not become the consensus view of both parties over time.

The president appointed his most hawkish anti-immigration supporter, a man named Stephen Miller, as his chief of staff. The brutality of ICE, the agency enforcing immigration law, has meant more backlash from ordinary Americans. There is a feeling that, other than criminals, undocumented immigrants (those referred to as 'illegal' by the unsympathetic) should be allowed to stay and given a pathway to citizenship. Some movement on policy may be expected here as well over time.

The last thing that will change is Trump's stranglehold on his party. He draws his power from the fact that those he backs usually win their Republican primaries (the phase before the election). As he staggers into his final months as president, those seeking to challenge and replace him will assert themselves as they have not done since 2016.

America has shifted course through elections before. Republican George W. Bush was replaced by a Democrat, Barack Obama, the first African American president, because Americans had tired of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Democrat Lyndon Johnson, otherwise one of the most accomplished leaders given his record on civil rights, was succeeded by Richard Nixon, who finally ended the Vietnam misadventure.

The erosion of the Republican Party in this month's elections also came in the deep south, in places such as Mississippi and Texas, without which the party cannot win the presidency in 2028, given the narrow path to 270 electoral college votes. This is bound to force a change in the party and its leaders as they chart a path to survival.

Democracies effect resets through elections. But for that to happen, elections must be free and fair

The world will benefit from the correction America is going through. Less violent foreign intervention will mean less suffering, both direct and indirect, for all of us. Democracies correct themselves through elections. But for that to happen, elections must be fair and free. Where elections are no longer seen as legitimate, the desire for correction expresses itself in other forms, as we are seeing on our streets today. ■

Views are personal

Beyond the bucket list and the fear of missing out

From forest bathing to townsizing, new trends are challenging the herd mentality of global tourism

Avay Shukla

Even as global tourism continues its relentless growth (1.52 billion in 2025 and growing at 4 per cent per annum), opposition to its environmental, social and cultural impacts is also increasing (except, of course, in India, where your typical North Indian tourist continues to carpet-bomb the Himalayan states with plastic, beer bottles, condoms and uncouth behaviour).

I was therefore gladdened to learn that, in other countries at least, new forms of tourism are emerging that are environmentally sustainable, respect local cultures, customs and traditions, and reject the bucket-list, itinerary-driven form of travel that currently prevails.

They offer better value for money and are more meaningful, relaxing and even therapeutic. I list below some of the new versions that are being embraced by increasing numbers of people, especially the younger generation.

Forest bathing (or land snorkelling)

Immersing oneself in a natural setting through quiet walks, without talking, is perhaps the best form of meditation. It reduces stress and improves one's mood.

Noctourism

Night tourism, both in pastoral and urban settings, offers a new perspective on our world. It includes night safaris, stargazing and constellation tracking. A survey in Tokyo (500 million tourists every year!) found that 67 per cent of visitors booked night tours.

Townsizing

Getting off the beaten track and away from the hustle and bustle, noise and congestion of metros in favour of small towns and villages, where one can experience the authenticity and charm of a laid-back lifestyle that is now almost a thing of the past. Increasingly preferred by Gen Z, this trend is also known as 'quietcations' and 'hushpitality'. It is meant to counter corporate burnout and digital fatigue.

JOMO (joy of missing out) tourism

The opposite of FOMO (fear of missing out) in today's digital world. It is about prioritising oneself and doing and experiencing what *you* want, instead of following the herd and keeping up with the Joneses. It is the opposite of group or chartered tourism.

Slow travel

Rejecting the rushed, tour-guide-dictated form of mass tourism in favour of a slower-paced experience and deeper involvement with the sites seen. It means staying longer in one place and understanding its culture, traditions, cuisine and people, rather than rushing from one 'must-see' hotspot to another. (The average tourist at the Louvre in Paris gets to see the Mona Lisa for just ten seconds before having to make way for the next in line!) It is much more personally fulfilling, and one returns home refreshed.



More and more tourists are beginning to realise the benefits of slowing down

Sleep tourism

This may come as a surprise to readers, but it makes sense when one learns that 100 million Americans do not get adequate sleep! In this genre, the top priority is to get a good night's sleep for a few days, detox and cut oneself off from the demands of daily urban existence. A survey by the Hilton group of hotels revealed that two-thirds of its guests sleep better in hotels than in their own homes. Hotels cater to this need by providing special mattresses, dimmed lighting, soundproofing and a DND ambience.

Regenerative tourism

Spas are the usual offering in the developed world, but in India, a different model is gaining popularity—wellness tourism, built around Ayurveda, Vipassana, yoga and traditional Indian medical practices. This has existed for some time in states such as Kerala, but of late, Himalayan states, with their unique mountain climate, geography and pollution-free ambience, are also cashing in on this trend. A rapidly ageing and health-conscious population provides a good catchment area for customers.

Dark tourism

Sadly, there are revenue-generating opportunities even in human tragedies, and dark tourism is one such product. It involves visiting sites of conflict, accidents and other tragedies. Initially prompted by a desire for closure, and a search for understanding and emotional resolution (Jallianwala Bagh, the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, the World Trade Center in New York, which receives 40,000 visitors a day, and the Holocaust Museum), it has now assumed macabre dimensions. Hundreds of Zionist Israelis have been visiting the front lines to witness the bombing, shelling and destruction of Gaza in real time.

Pregnancy tourism

This may sound freakish, but it exists and is a by-product of geopolitics and poverty. It involves pregnant women travelling to certain countries to deliver their babies in order to exploit the *jus soli* (citizenship by birth) principle, which forms part of the immigration laws of most countries. In the US, about 320,000 babies are born to mothers who are either illegal immigrants or are there on temporary or tourist visas. That constitutes 10 to 12 per cent of all births in the US. No wonder Trump has been trying his best to change the laws.

A version of this is rumoured to exist in Ladakh, too, though no evidence of this exists. It is claimed that women from Europe (especially Germany) travel to the Aryan Valley, where the Brokpa (also known as Drokpa) community lives, to conceive children with local men. The Brokpas are said to be direct descendants of soldiers from Alexander's army and to have pure Aryan blood. (Similar claims are made about residents of Malana village in Himachal Pradesh's Kullu district.) The idea is to have pure Aryan children. Geneticists are not even sure of these claims, and, for all we know, this may just be a ploy to boost tourism to the valley!

Here too Gen Z is showing the way, in getting off the treadmill and the beaten holiday track

It is, however, heartening to note that more and more people are beginning to realise the value of nature, the importance of authentic indigenous ways of life, the benefits of a slower pace of life and the need to leave behind a smaller ecological footprint. Maybe we in India too will wake up to this one day. ■

AVAY SHUKLA is a retired IAS officer and author

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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER



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November 19th

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Indira Gandhi

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‘The BJP has little to show for its 10 years in power’

Uttarakhand state Congress president **Ganesh Godiyal** *is dismissive of the large majority that the BJP enjoys in the assembly (47 seats to the Congress’s 20). Anti-incumbency against the Pushkar Singh Dhami government, he claims, is strong and infighting within the BJP intense. Dissatisfaction over paper leaks, youth unemployment and the chronic shortage of local jobs is high. Women’s safety, inflation, the cost of living, high maternal mortality and environmental concerns are top of mind. The BJP government has been bragging about record footfalls on the Char Dham circuit, ban on the sale of land to outsiders and the UCC… But none of this, says Godiyal, is a ticket to a third consecutive term. Alongside Pritam Singh and Harak Singh Rawat, Godiyal, a Brahmin, has been tasked with winning over Thakurs and Brahmins, who comprise 60 per cent of the state’s population. Assertive and articulate, Godiyal was state party president in 2021-22, and returned to the post in 2025. Excerpts from his conversation with* **Rashme Sehgal**:

How hopeful are you about the Congress’s chances in the assembly election?

The BJP has been in power for the last ten years but has little to show in terms of governance or accountability. Theirs is a story of unfulfilled promises. Crimes against women have risen sharply and women just don’t feel safe anymore. Unemployment levels have shot up and farmers, especially those living in the hills, have no sustainable means of livelihood. Deforestation has increased attacks by wild animals on these farming communities. Poor wildlife management has led to human-animal conflicts: thousands of cattle and 29 human lives were lost in 2025 alone.

Look at the increase in paper leaks. Over the last ten years, we have witnessed one leak after another. It is well known that ministers are often behind such leaks, and make money off them. The recruitment exam for village panchayat development officer conducted by the Uttarakhand Subordinate Service Selection Commission was leaked. Even the paper for the Uttarakhand Public Service Commission for patwaris and lekhpals was leaked—forcing cancellation and sparking off a statewide agitation. Paper leaks have occurred in engineering colleges as well. Government jobs are valued in the state but the BJP has destroyed what was meant to be a level playing field.

Do you think Uttarakhand sees more corruption today than ever before?

Undoubtedly. The liquor and sand mafias are all-powerful. Look at the extent of government land being sold fraudulently to builders. There are no checks in place. The public’s latest apprehension is that the drug mafia are moving into the state in a big way. Money is being made from transfer postings.

You mentioned crimes against women. Is the Ankita Bhandari murder case still resonating among the public and will it prove to be a rallying point?

Women want to work in a safe environment. Ankita was murdered because she refused to offer ‘special services’ to VIPs. In order to provide immunity to one of the prime suspects, the state has gone to the extent of appointing Dushyant Kumar Gautam the governor of Sikkim, even with a CBI probe ongoing. Ankita’s parents went to Delhi to lodge their protests. Both Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi went to India Gate to express their support. The case has become a rallying point for self-respecting people.

The BJP has hit back with the accusations of an unwed mother (Jenny, a.k.a. Indira Dewri). Congress leader Harak Singh Rawat stands accused of siring an illegitimate son…

The BJP has brought this up to divert attention away from the Ankita Bhandari case. For one, it is an old case which goes back to 2003 when Jenny first made the accusation. Rawat had refuted the allegation, resigned from the cabinet (he was a minister in the N.D. Tiwari government) and sought a CBI probe. The case was handed over to the CBI. He underwent a DNA test which showed that the child was not his. Reviving an old matter to discredit a Congress leader has failed.

Why is there an anti-Muslim campaign In Uttarakhand, given that they are a microscopic minority in the state?

To polarise the people. They want to disturb the communal harmony that has been the hallmark of this state. Take the example of Garhwal where Muslims have lived for generations. We believe in providing equal opportunities across all communities and castes. We do not believe in targeting any community to gain votes.



“The liquor and sand mafias are all-powerful. Look at how much govt land has been made over to them!

The BJP keeps talking about how the state has been overrun by *ghuspaitiyas*…

The BJP has been in power at the Centre for the past 12 years, and ruled Uttarakhand for the past 10 years. If they believe there has been a demographic change, why don’t they provide statistics: how many people have entered, what are their names and addresses, and other details? This is being done deliberately to create a false sense of fear among voters.

The SIR exercise saw the largescale deletion of names in the state. What’s your take on that?

More than eight lakh people were deleted from Uttarakhand’s electoral rolls during the month-long Special Intensive Revision (SIR). They have now been told they can apply for inclusion ahead of the 2027 assembly elections, with the Special Summary Revision (SSR) giving eligible voters another opportunity to register their names. They have to submit their claims and objections by 11 December. Those affected can fill out Form 6 (to add their names to the electoral roll) or Form 7 (if they wish to request the deletion of a name).

In some cases, people living in the border areas adjacent to Uttar Pradesh did have their names registered in both states. But such a large number of deletions is improbable.

We have posted our own local people at every booth in the hills to ensure that those whose names were wrongly deleted get reinstated. Some names are now back; the final list will be released on 4 January. Only then will we know whose names have been included and how many names have been excluded.

Is there a great deal of infighting among Congress leaders?

That is another myth propagated by the BJP. They face much more infighting than us.

True, but during elections they present a united front…

We, too, are united in wanting the BJP to lose. I have always believed in giving space to our leaders whether they be Harish Rawat, Pritam Singh, Karan Mahara or others. ■

Gig workers and the turning political tide

Jagdish Rattanani

One fallout of liberalisation and privatisation has been the decimation of trade unions in India. The space for workers to assert and exercise their rights has shrunk rapidly under the BJP. Early on in Gujarat when Narendra Modi was chief minister and thereafter nationwide.

In April 2026, after a mass strike in Noida’s industrial belt, more than 350 people (among those demanding higher minimum wages) were arrested; worker representatives were jailed. When State machinery is used to curb labour agitations, organising becomes a challenge. This is a far cry from the days when worker meetings were organised at factory gates, wage negotiations were hard fought and union representatives were leaders in their own right who wielded real power.

In the ‘new India’ of the gig economy, a new workforce has emerged. Gig workers number about 12 million across the nation—4.2 lakh in Telangana, mostly in Hyderabad. On 14 November, LoP Rahul Gandhi and Telangana chief minister Revanth Reddy rallied with thousands of gig workers in Hyderabad and launched the state’s new welfare scheme. The rally lent voice to a large and growing constituency that is expected to become over 23 million strong by the end of the decade. This growing base is forced into work relationships that straddle the twilight zone between the formal and the informal sector, getting the worst of both and the benefit of neither.

While platforms, with their dramatic growth and combined annual losses exceeding Rs 12,000 crore (locked in the race to gain market share) present the face of a new and growing India, their gig ‘partners’ tell a very different story. They are among the poorest and most precariously employed young people, working for low wages contracted by the hour (even minute) with virtually no facilities and no protection against risks and uncertainties.

The Telangana scheme (based on a 2023 assembly election promise) was launched on 14 November under a state law passed in March. It offers protections including accident insurance of Rs 5 lakh and health insurance of Rs 10 lakh for every gig worker. This will be funded by a 1 per cent levy on every transaction, which platforms must deposit with the state gig workers board. Besides transparency of work-related data, records and payments, the scheme also promises wifi-enabled rest zones and parking spots across Hyderabad.

As Rahul Gandhi put it: the BJP-RSS wants “the bedrock of this country” to “work 24 hours a day, to pour out [its] blood and sweat—to suffer injuries in accidents, to die, to be crushed, or to be maimed—all so that the entire benefit goes to billionaires.”

Strong words. Be it by choice or political compulsion, the winds seem to be turning in favour of workers’ rights. Gig and platform workers represent a structural change in the workforce, and can herald a concomitant change in the politics of the day. They cannot organise gate meetings, barge into the office of a manager or put their tools down. Their tools and offices are their vehicles, their homes, their own assets. Their access to the ‘office’ is an app or a helpline. Their protests, too, have had to be novel: the mass log-off, for instance on New Year’s Eve 2025, is the new version of the factory strike. The State cannot clamp down on them as it has on factory workers. Gig workers are not organised under one roof; on the contrary, they are atomised. Yet, the platform they work for can discipline them through ratings, incentives and deactivation. Being forcibly logged out of the app can be seen as the new lockout.

It’s not that the BJP government at the Centre has not courted gig workers. The four new Labour Codes that replaced 29 central laws formally recognised gig and platform workers and included them in schemes for social security, welfare funds and benefit portability (the schemes have yet to roll out). The Code on social security directs the framing of suitable social security measures for gig workers and platform workers. Given that the changes overrode the objections of central trade unions, new frictions were introduced, in effect making the reform meaningless.

Photo: Getty Images



A gig workers’ protest in Mumbai demanding minimum wages and safer working conditions

Gig workers are not organised, they are atomised with no ways to push back against an exploitative work culture

The Economic Survey 2025-26 did flag low pay, algorithmic control and platform power; and the exploitative 10-minute delivery promise was dropped by quick-commerce players in January, after the strike and a meeting with the Union labour minister. The Union government has approached the concerns of gig workers through phrases like “unprecedented opportunities”, “revenue generation” and “economic diversification”. The more forceful voices for worker rights have come from civil society and from Congress-ruled states, which have legislated first (Rajasthan in 2023, Karnataka in 2025 and now Telangana).

Consider the findings of the September 2026 nationwide survey by the non-profit Janpahal and the Gig Workers Association titled ‘Occupational safety and health of platform-based gig workers in India’. It concludes that gig and platform workers ‘routinely experience long working hours, sustained exposure to occupational hazards, limited access to basic infrastructure, and increasing vulnerability to climate risks. These conditions are not incidental; rather, they are structurally embedded within the organisation of platform-mediated work’.

It also states that ‘the absence of a clearly defined workplace further enables a diffusion of responsibility’ leading to ‘significant gaps in access to sanitation, rest, healthcare, and social protection’.

Over the past decade and more, the national polity has swung too far to the right. The effect of that swing can be seen in the loss of democratic spaces and the resultant mass discontent now confronting the Modi government. The Congress’s new approach to workers is a pullback not only from the BJP but also its own liberalisation-era policies. The turn is visible, but is it tokenistic or a fundamental shift? It will take much more political capital to move India from a system skewed in favour of big business to a new balance between business and labour. ■

JAGDISH RATTANANI *is a journalist and faculty member at SPJIMR.*
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ANOTHER SHAM ELECTION

The deviousness of December polls in Ladakh

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MEMOIR

LOVE IN THE TIME OF HATE

The beauty of Sonia Gandhi's memoir is that it sets free the truth of her own story

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REFLECTIONS

ARTISTS IN INDIA, LISTEN UP!

The price of speaking up may be steep but silence is an awful career choice

▸P6



The great Dalit outreach in Uttar Pradesh



Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav greets supporters at the party's PDA event in Gorakhpur; (*left*) Azad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram)'s Chandrashekhar Azad and AIMIM president Asaduddin Owaisi

Nandlal Sharma

On 5 May 2017, barely months after the BJP came to power in Uttar Pradesh and Yogi Adityanath assumed the chief minister's office for his first term, caste violence erupted in Shabbirpur village of Saharanpur, the state's northernmost district at the foothills of the lower Himalaya. More than 50 Dalit homes were torched when a procession of upper caste Rajputs, 'celebrating' Maharana Pratap Jayanti, vandalised a statue of Sant Ravidas, revered by the state's Dalits.

The violence brought two young Dalit activists, Ravi Gautam and Chandrashekhar, together. Gautam was with the Yuva Shakti Dal, a Bahujan socio-political outfit. Azad then headed the Bhim Army he'd set up in 2015. {The Azad Samaj Party (Kanshi Ram) he now heads was floated in 2020)} Both hail from the Jatav/Chamar community. They mobilised protests and called a maha-panchayat at Saharanpur city's Gandhi Maidan on 9 May. Their agitation culminated in a major protest at Delhi's Jantar Mantar on 21 May.

Their political paths have since diverged. Ravi has joined the Samajwadi Party (SP) while Chandrashekhar leads the Azad Samaj Party, which recently entered an alliance with Asaduddin Owaisi's AIMIM (All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen) to challenge Akhilesh Yadav in the upcoming state assembly election.

Dalits make up over 20 per cent of the state and the Samajwadi Party (SP) is making a big push to win their support, moving beyond its traditional Muslim-Yadav base to capitalise on the electoral decline of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP).

On 15 November 2026, a massive crowd gathered in Agra for the SP's first major Dalit convention in nearly two decades. Manoj Kumar, a resident of Hapur active with the SP for over 20 years, believes the party outreach is gaining traction. "Dalits have received more respect in the SP in the past two years than ever before. The Jatav community is losing faith in Mayawati. People feel that Behenji cannot stand with them on their issues. Only if the right to vote survives will the Constitution survive, and so also people's access to rations and government schemes," he says.

Ravi is less dismissive of Mayawati's legacy. "When she was in power, she did a great deal for the community. But she failed to give young people a greater stake in the party. Akhilesh Yadav raises Dalit issues, provides financial assistance and stands with people in their fight. That is why they are gravitating towards him," he says.

Addressing the Agra gathering, Akhilesh linked the battle for Dalit support to the protection of constitutional rights: "Those who want to destroy the Constitution also want to take away your vote. If your vote is lost, the Constitution will not survive." This was an echo of the SP-Congress campaign in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, when saving the Constitution became the central plank of the Opposition. While the BJP spoke of '400-*paar*', a mandate of 400+ seats, fuelling concerns that they would overturn constitutional protections and guarantees that give the country's backward communities something to hold on to, Rahul Gandhi had already undertaken the Bharat Jodo Yatra and the Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra. The Congress organised Samvidhan Samman Sammelans across major cities while the SP pushed its PDA (Pichhda–Dalit–Alpasankhyak) formula. Where most of the political commentariat was giving the BJP a clean sweep, the INDIA alliance won 43 of the state's 80 Lok Sabha seats.

The SP also tested old caste equations by fielding Dalit candidates from general constituencies. In Ayodhya, Awadhesh Prasad of the Pasi community defeated the BJP, puncturing its triumphalist narrative around the Ram Mandir inauguration just a few months prior. Awadhesh Prasad has since become the face of Akhilesh's PDA pitch. A big draw at the Agra convention, he sits next to Akhilesh in Parliament's front row—as if to simply rub it in that after all the BJP-RSS theatre around the inauguration of the Ram Mandir, the BJP still lost Ayodhya.

*

Uttar Pradesh has 86 reserved assembly seats. In 2022, the BJP-led NDA won 65, while the SP alliance secured 20. In 2024, with some help from the Congress, the SP won seven of the state's 17 reserved Lok Sabha seats and the Congress one, while the NDA got eight. Those results indicate a strong SP-Congress presence among Dalit voters.

At the Agra convention, when Akhilesh said "The D in PDA stands for '*Damdaar* Dalit'," he meant an assertive generation—activists like Ravi, prepared to take to the streets for their dignity and rights. More than 200 statues of Babasaheb Ambedkar had been vandalised in Uttar Pradesh, he said, calling the attacks an assault on the hand that wrote the Constitution. Rajya Sabha MP Ramjilal Suman, a Jatav and five-time MP and a longtime associate of Mulayam Singh Yadav, who coordinated the convention, said the vandalisation was proof that the BJP-RSS was out to undermine Ambedkar's legacy and to show Dalits their place in society.

On 26 November, Akhilesh is scheduled to present the party's manifesto. At Agra, he offered a preview

Before 2019, Mayawati would always invoke the infamous 1995 guesthouse incident (when she and her party MLAs were gheraoed and attacked amid the collapse of the SP-BSP coalition government) to make the point that the Samajwadi Party was pathologically anti-Dalit. But the post-2024 Lok Sabha landscape appears different—the SP is now preparing to hold conventions like the one in Agra across all 18 administrative divisions (*mandal*s), which together encompass the state's 75 districts.

*

Dalits constitute approximately 20 per cent of the population of Uttar Pradesh. For decades, the BSP was their principal political vehicle and its decline has triggered an intense contest for their support among the BJP, SP, Congress and newer political formations.

The electoral shift is striking. In 2007, the BSP won 62 of the state's 86 reserved assembly seats and formed a majority government. The SP won 58 in 2012. The BJP subsequently consolidated non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits, weakening both parties. It won all 17 reserved Lok Sabha seats in 2014 and 15 in 2019, despite the SP-BSP alliance. In the 2017 assembly elections, the BJP-led NDA captured 70 reserved seats and in 2022, it won 65. The BSP, meanwhile, plummeted from 19 assembly seats in 2017 to just one in 2022. The party's declining vote share mirrors the same reality: from 30.4 per cent in 2007 to 22.2 per cent in 2017 and 12.9 per cent in 2022.

Since late October, Mayawati's nephew Akash Anand, apparently back in her good books, has addressed rallies in Bulandshahr, Saharanpur, Bareilly and Bijnor, seeking to revive the BSP. Imran Malik, a BSP supporter and hardware trader from Shikarpur who attended the Bulandshahr rally, says the gathering attracted people across communities, including Brahmins and Muslims. Prof. Vikram Harijan of Allahabad University thinks the BSP might do better this time.

Meanwhile, Chandrashekhar and Owaisi have formed the Samajik Parivartan Morcha (SPM) and say they will contest all 403 assembly seats. They have chosen to direct their attack on Akhilesh rather than the incumbent BJP, but that is hardly surprising, given Owaisi's track. The two parties together secured less than one per cent of the vote in 2022, but Chandrashekhar's Azad Samaj Party got 14.6 per cent in the four Lok Sabha constituencies it contested in 2024, signalling growing support and a potential challenge to both the SP–Congress alliance and the BSP.

Prof. Sheeshpal Gautam of Pt Sunderlal Memorial College, Kannauj, believes Chandrashekhar has channelled Dalit anger into street mobilisation, but advocate Netrapal Singh of Kithore offers a different assessment: Chandrashekhar may dent the opposition alliance somewhat, but voters understand that only the SP-Congress combine can defeat the BJP and are unlikely to split their vote.

On 26 November, Akhilesh is scheduled to present the party's manifesto. At Agra, he offered a preview: a separate budget for SC/STs, minimum wages and overtime provisions for workers, including those in Agra's footwear factories and legal safeguards against the vandalisation of statues. Party workers have been asked to take notes on the demands and concerns of Dalits in their constituencies.

The battle for the Dalit vote is not limited to the reserved constituencies. It is about who can credibly represent their aspirations—offering dignity, political agency, economic opportunity and a meaningful stake in governance. ■

Bilkis Bano and the flickering light of justice

Shahrukh Alam

The Supreme Court Rules state that in an appeal against conviction, a 'certificate of surrender' must be submitted first, even before the appeal is listed before a bench. If the convict has not surrendered, he must show good reason and ask for a formal exemption, which is not easily granted in serious crimes.

Criminal appeals, even after being admitted to the court's docket, take a very long time to be decided. The convict returns after serving a few years of jail time to ask for suspension of sentence. He pleads that his appeal is pending and that he has served 2/3 years in jail. The courts might summarily say: 'Come back after another year.'

There is an odd contradiction here: the court has found enough substance in the appeal to admit it to its docket, but is also aware that given the backlog of cases, if the convict is let off at the outset while his appeal is pending, he might never fully be brought to justice if eventually found guilty. So, the courts have devised an informal, discretionary method of punishment, a compromise in a judicial system that cannot promise quick resolution of cases. Here, the wait itself is made the punishment.

What is sufficient jail time before the court grants release and for what categories of offences is determined discretionarily by individual judges. Bilkis Bano's convicted attackers had done 17 years, and it might ordinarily be considered sufficient time served to be let off. Even with a very real possibility that the appeal would not be decided in the freed convicts' lifetime. But did the court weigh the nature of the crime while determining 'enough time served' in this case?

Courts do accord primacy to the nature of the crime over years spent in jail in some cases. For instance, there are many serving life sentences under special terror laws. Some were convicted for tangential roles like the adolescent boy who worked as a cleaner on a truck, from which illegal arms were recovered. He is now a middle-aged man, having served almost 24 years in prison.

There are others who have done 20-32 years, and do not have the means to appeal their conviction in the Supreme Court. Even while they serve their sentences, their applications for remission or even short parole are routinely rejected. Sentencing Review Boards reject remission applications mechanically, but in cases involving terror laws, courts prefer to not intervene, irrespective of the nature of crime or years already served.



Activists demand justice for Bilkis Bano

When we look for patterns across cases, the arc of justice often seems to tilt away from the marginals

Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam have served more than six years and the courts have even conceded to unproved accusations by the prosecution, but their bail applications still meet an unrelenting wall in the courts; the fact that the chargesheet invoked the terror law UAPA gives the courts the leeway.

The courts often let the State and the prosecution take the lead in defining the seriousness of a crime, or arbitrarily invoking special laws to refuse or grant release from jail on that basis.

Bilkis's case has been framed like a one-off criminal episode, which is extraordinary enough in the extreme violence it involved but it was much more than that. Two jeeps full of armed men chased and cornered a fleeing Muslim group that included a five-month pregnant Bilkis Bano, her cousin who had delivered a baby only two days ago, small children and other older men and women. Bilkis and her cousin were gangraped. The newborn was killed, as was Bilkis's three-year-old daughter. She was forcefully taken from her mother's arms, and her skull bashed against a stone. Bilkis's sisters, cousins and mother were murdered in front of her. She herself lost consciousness and was probably mistaken for dead.

These men went on a rampage against Muslims, believing the fire on the Sabarmati Express train in Godhra carrying Hindu pilgrims was communally motivated. The 'avenging' mobs pulled out any Muslim they could find, and created a looting, raping, murdering spectacle that went on for three days in the state of Gujarat. Bilkis and her family were attacked solely for being Muslim. Bilkis's body was used to score a communal point, to 'avenge' the unconnected death of Hindu pilgrims. This horribly violent crime was not a one-off incident, but part of a concerted hate campaign that targeted Muslims.

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...and now for sham elections in Ladakh

Herjinder on the deviousness of scheduling hill council elections in December

Photo: Getty Images



Before the harsh winter sets in, people of Ladakh get together to celebrate the Suru festival

Across the country, the Election Commission put the electoral rolls through a Special Intensive Revision, an exercise that was designed to strike voters off in very large numbers. Only three places were spared: Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Ladakh. Now, say Ladakh's leaders, the Union government has found its own way of shrinking the electorate in the one Union Territory the revision skipped.

Voting for Ladakh's eight hill councils will be conducted on 4 December, the month when temperatures here range from minus 20 to minus 30 degrees Celsius. Roads close, flights are unreliable and some 20 to 25 per cent of the population leaves for the milder plains. Those who stay are largely housebound for most of the season. To expect them to turn out in large numbers, above all the elderly, is to expect too much.

Ladakh's leadership has read the situation clearly. Sajjad Husain Kargili, a leader of the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA), put it bluntly: "We have seen the allegations of 'vote chori' in other parts of the country. Ladakh has been turned into a testing lab, and they have stolen representation from here. Decisions taken unilaterally clearly display the murder of democracy in Ladakh."

Until now, Ladakh had two districts, Leh and Kargil, and a hill council for each. The administration has since carved out eight districts, four each in Leh and Kargil. On 10 November, the State Election Commission announced elections to all eight councils. Chief secretary Ashish Kundra called it a "watershed moment" and argued that a December vote would give the new councils three months to frame budgets. Ladakh's MP, Mohmad Haneefa Jan, says he urged lieutenant governor V.K. Saxena to hold the polls in March or April, when people are back.

Timing is not the only grievance. Tsering Dorje Lakruk, leader of the Leh Apex Body (LAB), told *National Herald*: "There are many other problems, apart from the schedule. The provision for hill councils has been amended, and their authority cut drastically by transferring most powers to the lieutenant governor." There are also allegations that the delimitation of seats for the new councils involved largescale gerrymandering.

When the LAB and the KDA announced a boycott of the hill council polls, the administration's response was repression.

On 11 November, police removed Sonam Wangchuk from a protest site in Leh. He says masked men pushed him into a vehicle and whisked him home, where twenty-odd armed policemen have since been stationed. An order citing the election model code of conduct (MCC) bars him from any 'unauthorised rally, procession or public gathering' for 60 days. The order does not use the words 'house arrest' but Wangchuk says that's precisely what it is. In a letter to Union home minister Amit Shah and lieutenant governor Saxena, Wangchuk wrote that the model code 'cannot, by itself, be invoked as a blanket justification to curtail this right [to peaceful protest] or to impose restrictions that effectively confine me to my residence'.

Wangchuk's institutions have also felt the squeeze. In August 2025, the Leh administration cancelled the allotment of about 54 hectares for his Himalayan Institute of Alternative Learning (HIAL) in Phyang; he called it a "witch-hunt". Come November 2026, the administration told HIAL to halt activities at its Desert Flower school. HIAL's CEO and Wangchuk's wife Gitanjali Angmo calls the notice baseless and says it is the administration that has sat on the school's no-objection certificate.

With the streets closed to him, Wangchuk's only access to the nation is social media. In a video appeal he said: "While the judicial inquiry commission report on the 24 September incidents in Leh [in which four people died in police firing] moves at snail's pace... the Union Territory administration is moving at rocket speed to conduct some kind of 'council elections' here, apparently to have people of their choice installed to negotiate on democracy and safeguards."

> *"Ladakh is now a 'vote chori' testing lab; our representation has been stolen"*

The model code has also been used to ban every demonstration and procession. In many villages, people have reportedly decided to stay away from the panchayat and local body polls (on 21 November).

Talks between the Centre and Ladakh's leadership have been deadlocked since last month, and the local leaders are squarely in the line of fire. They say that Saxena is losing no opportunity to defame them.

On 7 November, Wangchuk released excerpts of what he calls a sting operation. His lawyers recorded the owner of a content-creation company, who allegedly said his firm was working with the 'LG's team' on content that would malign Wangchuk and burnish the LG's image. Wangchuk says he initially handed the material to the director of the Intelligence Bureau and went public only after the exchange fizzled out. The recording "establishes that the LG administration is directly involved in illegal smear campaigns" said Wangchuk, who has also appealed to President Droupadi Murmu. (These are Wangchuk's allegations; the recording has not been independently verified.)

In October, the lieutenant governor went on record at the *India Today* conclave to make a nasty swipe at Wangchuk. People called Wangchuk an environmentalist, Saxena sneered, but how many trees had he planted? He should know that Ladakh is a high-altitude cold desert: much of it is above the tree line, where saplings survive only with painstaking irrigation. Wangchuk's work is about water and glaciers, not forests.

It's been one step forward and two steps back. On 22 May, a sub-committee of the Union home ministry met the LAB and the KDA. Both sides announced an understanding: a model in which 'legislative, executive and financial powers' would rest with a Union Territory-level elected body. All bureaucrats, including the chief secretary, would answer to its executive head, proposed as chief minister.

Five months later, the ministry backed away. At a meeting in Leh on 15 October, it presented a 32-page draft that the two bodies rejected as an "archaic administrative model", comparing it with the old north-east frontier agency and calling it a complete U-turn. "They reneged again," said Wangchuk.

Kundra's defence was that Ladakh had already been told it would be neither a state nor a Union Territory with a legislature.

During these talks, the Ladakh leadership had already been forced to give up its core demand: protection under the Sixth Schedule. "We met Modi and Amit Shah: both said Sixth Schedule protection cannot be given. Instead, we were offered protection under Article 371A of the Constitution," says Lakruk.

With nominations closed, the stage is set for 4 December. KDA co-chairman Asgar Ali Karbalai has already warned that if the home ministry does not return to the 22 May understanding, Ladakhis will "hit the streets, agitate and prepare to go to jail".

A council election that most of Ladakh's organised voices intend to boycott, held in the season when many voters are away, may not settle the question of representation. It may well sharpen it. ■

Bilkis Bano...

Continued from page 3

It was part of a larger pattern in the pogrom of Gujarat in 2002. The violence was politically motivated and carried with it a sense of impunity. The state administration and the police and other officials were complicit.

Bilkis has stated in court that even though she had named her attackers, the police registered an FIR against 'unknown people'. The investigation was deliberately botched, and the case was sought to be closed for lack of any leads, until the Supreme Court intervened and transferred the case to the CBI. The intimidation of witnesses, indeed of Bilkis herself, continued and the trial had to be transferred out of Gujarat. It is important to know that the trial court in Mumbai convicted eleven men for the rapes and murders in Bilkis's family. The High Court confirmed those convictions, and additionally also convicted five policemen and two government doctors for wilful destruction of evidence.

In 2022, the state of Gujarat suddenly granted remission of sentence to the eleven men, meaning that it pardoned their remaining sentences and they were released. The Sentencing Review Board had ten government appointees, whose politics were conveniently aligned with that of the convicts. Their release was a political event—they were garlanded when they came out of prison. Bilkis left her residence in fear and trauma. The politics of hate that was acted out on her body has not abated. It has only become more centrestage. The convicts have shown no remorse nor been given a reason to introspect. They have instead been honoured for their role in the violence.

In 2022, the Supreme Court intervened and ruled that the state of Gujarat had no power to grant remissions since the case had been tried in Maharashtra. The convicts had to return to jail. Now two of them have been granted a suspension of sentence by the Supreme Court, since their appeals are pending and because they have 'served a long sentence already'. Bilkis was not given notice nor heard before this order was passed. Had she been present, she may have reiterated that she feels intimidated by their physical presence and by the fact that their hateful violent act is celebrated as a political victory. In fact, such behaviour by someone released on bail would ordinarily result in cancellation of bail. But not so for Bilkis's attackers.

Bilkis's case could have been framed as an act of terror. In that moment it was meant to terrorise an entire community.

Each felicitation of the perpetrators is a reiteration of that act of terror. The prosecution could at least have invoked special laws. In the event, the eleven men were tried and convicted for being part of an unlawful assembly that committed rapes and murders. The framing of a criminal case is a very political act.

The law believes it acts in silos: each case is judged on its own merits, as a complete whole. But somehow, when broader patterns are considered across cases, the arc of justice seems to tilt away from the marginals. ■

SHAHRUKH ALAM *is a constitutional lawyer and human rights activist*

The backdoor capture of Gokul

...and the growing shadow of state control over Maharashtra's cooperative institutions

Jaideep Hardikar

There's a saying in Kolhapur's political circles, uttered only half in jest: "Don't make me an MLA, but make me a director of Gokul at least once!"

The prestige surrounding this district dairy cooperative is such that every local political aspirant wants to serve on its board. The recent election (held once in five years) is a case in point. Fifty candidates fought for 25 directorial positions in a fiercely contested battle that ended with the state government seizing control through a controversial last-minute intervention.

On 19 October, when the Congress-backed panel won 13 seats and the Mahayuti-backed panel won 12, it seemed like a clear victory, however thin the margin. This arithmetic was to change dramatically.

On 6 November, the Devendra Fadnavis government hurriedly promulgated an ordinance amending the Maharashtra Cooperative Societies Act (MCSA), allowing five government-appointed members to be nominated to large cooperative institutions with an annual turnover exceeding Rs 500 crore. Four of these nominees were granted voting rights in elections to office-bearer positions, while the fifth, a government officer, would be a non-voting member. While cooperative laws allow institutions to nominate experts to improve management, this was the first time the state had empowered nominated members to vote in elections to executive positions.

Three days later, Mahayuti-backed Rajesh Patil was elected chairman of Gokul, securing 16 votes against 13 for his Congress-backed opponent. The four newly empowered nominees had, predictably, tilted the scales.

The Bombay High Court declined to stay the ordinance at the interim stage. The constitutional challenge remains pending.



Mahayuti's Rajesh Patil

The political significance of Gokul

Gokul is no ordinary dairy institution. Established in 1963 by grassroots cooperative leaders N.T. Sarnayak and Anandrao Patil-Chuyekar, it began in a rented room with 22 member societies and a daily milk collection of 700 litres. Today, the Kolhapur Zilla Sahakari Dudh Utpadak Sangh has an annual turnover of Rs 4,185 crore (2025-26), connects nearly 5.5 lakh dairy farmers and 8,400+ village-level primary dairy societies across 1,810 villages, and procures an average of 16.24 lakh litres of milk daily.

Its processing and distribution network extends across Kolhapur, Pune, Mumbai, Navi Mumbai, Thane and Goa. Gokul claims that 76-82 per cent of every sales rupee is returned to producers through milk prices and services.

It's not commercial scale alone that makes Gokul important. Its penetration into the rural economy and the institutional reach of its village-level societies makes it a formidable political platform. An MLA's electoral constituency is largely confined to one assembly segment. A Gokul director commands the entire district's rural economy, milk producers and influential village-level representatives. Such reach can ultimately influence electoral outcomes in Lok Sabha and assembly constituencies.

Despite its long history of political contestation, Gokul has always rejected state interference. For approximately three decades, its management was associated with local Congress stalwarts Mahadevrao Mahadik and the late P.N. Patil.

In 2021, the Maha Vikas Aghadi-backed Shahu Shetkari Aghadi, led by Congress leader Satej Patil and supported by Hasan Mushrif, then an NCP loyalist, won 17 of the 21 contested seats, ending the incumbent group's dominance. Following the NCP split, Mushrif joined Ajit Pawar and became a minister in the Mahayuti government, while Satej Patil remained with the Congress. Despite the combined strength of the ruling Mahayuti alliance, including Kolhapur's legislators and MPs, Satej Patil retained control through his Rajarshi Shahu Shetkari Samvichari Aghadi.

Cut to 2026. Of 5,418 eligible voters, 5,416 cast their votes—an extraordinary turnout of 99.96 per cent. Ten of Kolhapur's 12 talukas recorded 100 per cent voting. Counting took more than 12 hours. Patil's group initially appeared to be leading in 16 seats against nine for the Mahayuti-backed Chhatrapati Shahu Shetkari Vikas Aghadi. After recounting, the tally changed to 14–11 before the final result was declared: 13–12.

Among those defeated were Navid Mushrif, son of minister Hasan Mushrif and outgoing Gokul chairman; Shoumika Mahadik, sister-in-law of BJP MP Dhananjay Mahadik; and former Gokul chairman Arun Dongale.

The popular mandate favoured the Satej Patil-led panel, which wanted to install Gokul founder Anandrao Patil-Chuyekar's son Shashikant Chuyekar as chairman. The subsequent ordinance allowed Mushrif's panel to install Rajesh Patil, a former MLA, as chairman.

Both Mushrif and Satej Patil have since struck reconciliatory notes, invoking the 'interest of member farmers'. Nevertheless, the impression across Maharashtra is that the BJP overturned Gokul's electoral verdict to install its own man as part of a gameplan to wrest control of the cooperatives.

Despite being in power, the Fadnavis-led party has struggled to decisively penetrate Maharashtra's cooperative institutions, from major banks and agricultural marketing committees to sugar factories and dairies. It is increasingly using allies, local satraps and government intervention to do so. This approach mirrors the national agenda pursued through the ministry of cooperation, headed by Union home minister Amit Shah.

The bigger question

Cooperatives were conceived to pool resources, organise small producers, extend credit and create collective bargaining power. In Maharashtra, particularly in the sugar belt of western Maharashtra, they transformed rural economies by providing access to credit, markets, processing facilities, employment, education and welfare. They also created a new generation of grassroots political leadership.

> *Gokul's political capital derives from its scale and deep penetration into the state's rural economy*

Over time, however, these institutions became centres of political influence and targets of state interference. Control over a sugar factory, district cooperative bank or milk union could translate into influence over thousands of members, employees, borrowers and suppliers.

The Maharashtra State Cooperative Bank (MSCB) is a classic example. The apex institution in the state's short-term cooperative credit structure, it connects district central cooperative banks and primary agricultural credit societies at the village level.

In 2011, following serious financial and governance concerns identified by NABARD, the RBI recommended superseding its elected board. The Maharashtra registrar of cooperative societies did so, appointing administrators in May 2011. The intervention was justified at the time as necessary to protect the institution and its depositors.

What began as a response to an institutional crisis became an extraordinarily prolonged administrative arrangement. The bank has not had an elected board since then and continues to function under a state-appointed administrator. Although its financial health has improved, it has lost its democratic and inclusive structure.

In Gokul's case, the state intervened to award the institution to its ally, defying the verdict of its members. It enabled a backdoor political capture and triggered a furore. The 6 November ordinance is sweeping: any cooperative with a turnover of Rs 500+ crore can face a similar takeover, should the ruling dispensation lose an election.

The two examples reveal a common problem: by reducing shareholder-members to spectators, the regime defeats the very idea of cooperative decision-making.

The issue therefore extends beyond Gokul and the MSCB. It concerns the future of cooperatives built over generations through community contribution. These are not merely assets to be distributed among competing political formations. Who should own India's cooperatives? And how long can institutions created in the name of collective ownership survive without meaningful collective decision-making? These are the questions we need to ask. ■

What should Democrats do with their win?

United against Trump, the party's next big battle is within its own ranks, writes Ashok Swain



Photo: Getty Images

Newly elected members of the US House of Representatives pose on the steps of the US Capitol in Washington D.C. on 12 November. The Democrats will have control of both houses of the new Congress when it convenes in January 2027

The Democrats have won a spectacular electoral victory, but its biggest battle may now be within its own ranks. The November 2026 midterm elections have delivered control of both houses of Congress to the Democrats, inflicted a humiliating defeat on Donald Trump's Republican Party, and dramatically altered the political landscape ahead of the 2028 presidential election. Yet beneath the celebrations lies an uncomfortable question: have American voters endorsed the Democratic establishment, or have they simply rejected Trump's increasingly unpopular presidency? The answer will determine not only the party's political future but also whether Washington's longstanding foreign policy consensus, particularly its unconditional blind support for Israel, can survive.

The scale of the triumph is extraordinary. From Texas to Alaska, Kansas to South Carolina, the party has made inroads into Republican territory previously considered impregnable. Texas has elected a Democrat senator for the first time since 1988. Progressive candidates have succeeded alongside moderates, suggesting that voters were less interested in ideological labels than in candidates offering credible responses to their economic anxieties. The continuing war with Iran, rising living costs, punitive tariffs and aggressive immigration enforcement helped turn public frustration into an electoral earthquake.

But electoral victories often conceal contradictions that become visible only when the celebrations end. The Democratic coalition now stretches from democratic socialists demanding structural economic transformation to conservative Democrats representing traditionally Republican constituencies. Their shared opposition to Trump should not be mistaken for agreement about what comes next. Winning against an unpopular president is considerably easier than constructing a governing programme capable of satisfying such different constituencies.

This is where the party's established leadership faces its greatest challenge. Chuck Schumer and Hakeem Jeffries represent a generation of politicians accustomed to managing competing interests through unprincipled compromises, powerful donors and party discipline. That approach may have helped hold the party together, but younger voters and increasingly assertive progressive activists are questioning whether it can deliver the changes they expect. Their dissatisfaction is not merely about personalities. It concerns a political culture that promises transformation during elections but frequently retreats into caution once power is secured. The challenges from progressive forces to the leadership may not succeed immediately, but they reveal something significant: the Democratic establishment can no longer take the loyalty of its own political base for granted.

The argument is also about what Democrats should do with their victory. Moderates point to impressive performances by candidates such as James Talarico in Texas and Roy Cooper in North Carolina as evidence that electoral success requires appealing beyond progressive strongholds. The Left counters that economic populism, criticism of billionaire influence and opposition to endless wars helped mobilise voters across ideological boundaries. Both interpretations contain elements of truth. The real question is whether Democrats can combine economic radicalism with electoral pragmatism rather than treating them as mutually exclusive.

The approaching presidential contest will intensify these disagreements. Potential contenders, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Pete Buttigieg, Jon Ossoff and other emerging Democrat figures, will have to articulate something more substantial than opposition to Trump. The 2028 primaries could become the party's most consequential ideological confrontation in decades. Unlike 2024, when Democrat voters were denied a genuinely competitive nomination process, the next contest offers an opportunity to debate the party's identity and its relationship with corporate power, militarism and America's changing electorate.

Nowhere will this confrontation be more consequential than over Israel. For generations, unwavering support for Israel has remained one of the few areas of bipartisan agreement in Washington. Democratic and Republican administrations have differed over settlements, Palestinian statehood and negotiations, but the underlying commitment to Israeli military domination has remained largely untouched. Even when Israeli governments openly defied American diplomatic preferences, Washington continued supplying weapons and providing diplomatic protection.

Democrats lack the numbers to override presidential vetoes. Their own caucus is divided over Israel

That consensus has been eroding. Israel's devastating military campaign in Gaza, the humanitarian catastrophe suffered by Palestinians and the subsequent expansion of regional warfare has profoundly altered the debate within Democratic politics. Younger Americans increasingly question why their government should finance military operations while claiming to defend human rights and international law. For them, Palestinian suffering is not a distant diplomatic complication but a test of US political morality.

The war with Iran has sharpened these contradictions. Trump's military intervention, undertaken despite his earlier promises to avoid costly foreign entanglements, has imposed economic and strategic costs on Americans already struggling with inflation. The connection between overseas warfare and domestic hardship has become politically unavoidable. When voters see rising fuel prices alongside enormous military expenditures, arguments about protecting distant allies acquire a different meaning.

Significantly, criticism of Washington's relationship with Israel is no longer confined to the Democratic left. Sections of the Republican coalition, including figures associated with vice president J.D. Vance, are questioning whether American interests should remain so closely tied to Israeli military ambitions. This emerging convergence does not signify agreement over Palestinian rights. Nevertheless, it suggests that the traditional bipartisan consensus is facing pressure from both directions.

For Democrats, the immediate test will come when the new Congress convenes in January 2027. Control of both chambers gives the party substantial powers over appropriations, investigations, military assistance and presidential appointments. Congressional committees can scrutinise weapons transfers, examine the conduct of the Iran war and demand accountability for civilian casualties.

But congressional control should not be confused with control of foreign policy. Trump remains president, retains extensive executive authority and can veto legislation. Democrats lack the numbers necessary to override presidential vetoes or easily overcome Senate filibusters. Moreover, their own caucus remains divided over how far Washington should go in confronting Israel. A dramatic rupture is unlikely before 2028.

There is, however, considerable room between unconditional support and abandoning an ally. Democrats could insist that military assistance comply with existing American laws, oppose settlement expansion, demand humanitarian access to Gaza and reject further military adventures undertaken without congressional authorisation. They could also make recognition of Palestinian self-determination a substantive diplomatic objective.

The greater obstacle may be political money. Pro-Israel organisations, defence contractors and wealthy donors have long exercised considerable influence over US elections. Challenging that requires more than rhetorical sympathy for Palestinians. It demands a willingness to confront the financial arrangements that sustain Washington's foreign policy establishment. For politicians accustomed to expensive campaigns, such independence carries substantial risks.

Refusing to change carries risks of its own. Democratic voters, particularly younger progressives, may not indefinitely accept a party that champions racial equality and human rights domestically while defending policies abroad that appear fundamentally inconsistent with those principles. The contradiction has become too visible to be managed through carefully worded statements expressing concern about civilian suffering.

The Democratic Party now stands at a historical crossroads. Its electoral triumph has weakened Trump politically, but it has also exposed the limitations of the leadership that delivered victory. The coming struggle is not simply between moderates and progressives. It concerns whether the Democratic Party can move beyond defending the institutions and policies that helped produce widespread public disillusionment. ■

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Can India reclaim its police from the ruling ideology?

Power is a communicable disease and the virus spreads quickly from host to host



Photo: Getty Images

The retrogression of the police under the present dispensation has been alarming

Avay Shukla

Any dispassionate and objective observer of India would have surely noted the decline of India's public institutions, both constitutional and statutory, over the last decade. I speak here not of their performance (though that too is a matter of concern in many cases), but of their waning independence, increasing politicisation, non-adherence to their mandate, lack of accountability and sensitivity to public concerns. Heading the list of such bodies is the police, particularly in the north-Indian states, or the cow belt, which now also includes Assam, Bengal and Odisha, unfortunately.

This has to be a matter of particular concern for all law-abiding citizens, because no other institution touches the public more directly than the civil police: it is the first port of call for any citizen coming in contact with the law, it has the power to use sovereign physical violence, it can deprive one of personal freedom, it can enmesh you in years of legal troubles.

The police is today the primary agency through which this government functions, because this regime does not believe in democratic institutions or practices—consultation, advice, dialogue, persuasion or public perception; the only medium of administration it knows is force. Therefore, it has to rely on the police, and that is where the deterioration begins.

A uniformed force committing transgressions and excesses on behalf of the government soon becomes immune to the rule of law, and functions like a law unto itself. It turns rogue and becomes as unaccountable to the government as the latter has become to the people. The two develop a parabiotic relationship: one to cling to power and the other to exercise its now unfettered power for its own aggrandisement.

This is what has happened to the Indian police over the last decade or so, especially in the Hindi heartland. Encounter killings, custodial torture and even deaths, indiscriminate arrests, demolitions, forcible evictions, illegal deportations, voter suppression, selective prosecution, mentoring of criminals, excessive use of force—these are now the norm. Kathua, Hathras, Lakhimpur Kheri don't make news anymore.

The Indian police had never really lost its colonial tinge, but its retrogression under the present governments—central and state, has been rapid and alarming. There are three clear indicators of this.

One: the excessive use of force and curbing of civil liberties and rights, often beyond the mandate of law, without any accountability. Examples of this are: the brutal crackdown on protesting youth on 20 July 2026 in Delhi and Bihar, the largescale registration of cases and arrests in the northeast Delhi riots in February 2020 (most of which have subsequently failed to stand judicial scrutiny), physical persecution and prosecution of those who protest against environmentally destructive projects such as bauxite mining in Odisha's Niyamgiri or the Siang mega dam in Arunachal.

According to official NHRC data, in six years (2016-2022), there were 813 encounter deaths and zero convictions of police officials. Custodial deaths also occur in frightening numbers. While NHRC figures put this at 1,606 in 2021-22, the ministry of home affairs informed Parliament (26 July 2022) that there were 4,484 such deaths in the same period.

'Bulldozer justice', demolitions of religious structures and houses of 'suspects' and 'accused', arbitrary imposition of the NSA and UAPA, arrests for alleged 'conversions', forcible deportations—these have become our sickening daily reality, notwithstanding repeated warnings and strictures by the courts.

Which brings us to the second indicator of the deterioration of the police: contempt for judicial orders and judgments. The most recent example of this was the ignoring of the Supreme Court's orders during the Delhi protests. Despite clear directions from the apex court, the Delhi police continued to detain lawyers and journalists, shut down Metro stations and roads, and obstruct the peaceful protests. (The court is now hearing a contempt case on the matter and the police commissioner and the Union home secretary have filed apology affidavits).

A uniformed force committing transgressions on behalf of the government soon turns rogue

The situation is even worse in some other states where high courts have repeatedly passed strictures against the police. On 3 November 2026, the Allahabad High Court, while accepting a habeas corpus petition, stated in an order that 'the civil liberties situation in UP is shameful: police have little regard for citizens' rights.'

It went on to observe that 'the infringement of these rights seems to have become a matter of routine for the UP police'. Similar observations have been made by other courts from time to time but these have neither deterred nor restrained the police from. Regrettably, the reluctance of the courts to go beyond strictures has only encouraged this growing tendency.

The third indicator, perhaps, provides the reason for this flagrant disregard of orders, laws and the misuse of authority and physical force. It is becoming increasingly evident that some sections of the police are now sympathetic to, and fully support, the Hindutva ideology of the ruling dispensation, and therefore have a personal animus towards those who do not. This explains the vicious use of force on protesters, the pellet guns and AK47s, the targeting of women journalists, even the reported sexual manhandling of young girls at Jantar Mantar, and their readiness to target members of a particular community.

It is difficult to believe that they would have been ordered by their superior officers to commit these selective excesses as part of their SOP, though I wouldn't be surprised if that was indeed the case. It may not be fair to single out the police, though, for this dubious honour, considering that even the higher echelons of the bureaucracy, defence services, universities and judiciary seem to espouse the ruling ideology.

Further—let us admit it—as an institution, the police force is dominated by upper castes. Even though affirmative action by various governments has improved the representation of backward castes, Dalits and Scheduled Tribes, their representation at 51 per cent is still far below their 67 per cent share of the general population.

The misogyny in our police forces is explained by the fact that women account for only 10 per cent, despite comprising 48 per cent of the general population. Muslims account for only 4 per cent (excluding Jammu and Kashmir) though they are, as per the 2011 Census, 14.2 per cent of the general population. These are precisely the sections of society for which the ruling ideology does not give a tinker's damn.

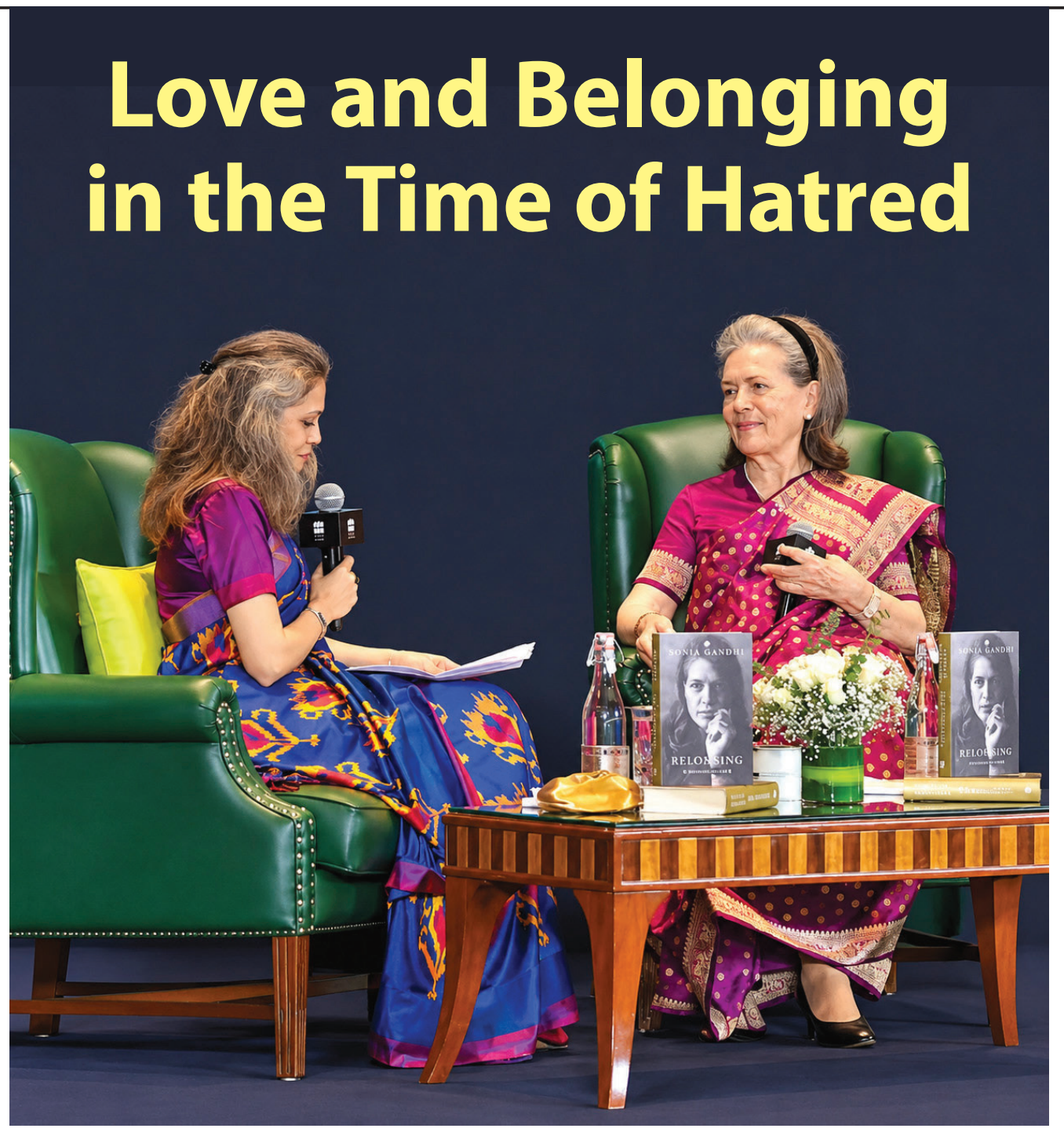
These figures go some way in explaining why a certain ideology is gaining traction within the police and dictating their actions. India is a highly divided society; police personnel emerge from this society and carry their biases and prejudices with them. When these negative influences are given free play (if not actively encouraged) by the political executive, the result is there for all to see.

To understand the greater danger we need to ask a future-facing question: when the good times, and the equitable rule of law, return, will the police shed the decomposition of values, their increasing malfeasance, the perversion of their mandate? Or have these become so embedded in their psyche that they will be impossible to dislodge? Even more disturbing: will succeeding governments, despite different persuasions and dogmas, be interested in reforming the police? For power is a communicable disease, and the virus needs very little time to spread from one host to another. ■

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Love and Belonging in the Time of Hatred



K.A. Shaji

There is something deeply satisfying about the public response to Sonia Gandhi's memoir *Belonging: A Journey of Love*. I see in this moment something much larger than the success of an autobiography. I see the spectacular failure of one of the most sustained character-assassination projects undertaken by India's Hindutva establishment. A woman whom the BJP and the hydra-headed Sangh Parivar have tried for decades to humiliate, delegitimise and politically destroy has found a way to narrate her own story. And people are listening.

The Sangh Parivar has done its damnedest to manufacture a fictitious Sonia Gandhi. Not the woman who arrived in India through love, who embraced this country as her home, who endured devastating personal tragedies and eventually entered public life, but an entirely fictional character assembled with prejudice with dollops of insinuation and organised vilification. For the Parivar, she was a bar dancer, an Italian stooge, a foreign conspirator plotting to appropriate India, a Christian agent out to convert Indians... These slurs were not uttered in the fever of an election; they constituted the vocabulary of a political campaign to question her place in this country, to cast her in the image of a hostile alien, to delegitimise her sense of belonging to India—the same politics of exclusion that has seen a million repugnant mutations.

What exactly is the crime of becoming an Indian through love and marriage, through an intimacy with its people that came through an immersion in the country's extraordinary plurality? Is 'Indian' merely a geographical inheritance or more? Is it also a political and moral idea that people can consciously embrace? Must nationality be determined by birthplace, ancestry or religious identity? For the Sangh Parivar that has spared no effort to make Sonia Gandhi's foreign origin the defining feature of her existence, her life poses these questions with a discomfiting insistence.

The memoir is so moving because it lets you in, allowing you to glimpse the fragility of a difficult life

Her commitment to secularism and India's pluralistic imagination is even more consequential at a time when millions of Indians find their sense of belonging to this country being challenged by the majoritarian politics of the current regime.

The irony is magnificent: the woman they tried to imprison in a fabricated story has now written her own.

The difference between the two projects is unmistakable. The Sangh Parivar's Sonia Gandhi was manufactured through TV propaganda, political invective and relentless insinuation. The Sonia Gandhi of *Belonging* speaks through personal experience, emotional vulnerability, memory and the authority of lived history. One is a political caricature designed to provoke hatred, the other is a human being reclaiming her voice.

*

What touches me most about *Belonging* is the absence of bitterness. A woman who has endured so much hatred has not allowed bitterness to become the defining emotion of her existence. There is something profoundly human and beautiful about that. It is perhaps one of the most difficult forms of courage: to be wounded without losing tenderness and to encounter hatred without surrendering one's capacity to love.

Her memoir, therefore, is also an invitation to understand the human being behind the public figure.

I particularly appreciate the courage involved in critically revisiting her own life and the decisions of those closest to her. To acknowledge mistakes made by her husband, her mother-in-law or her own political establishment couldn't have been easy. It requires a certain moral centre, a willingness to place truth above sentiment and history above family pride.

The Sangh Parivar's problem is not merely that they disagree with Sonia Gandhi. They also seem unable to accept the possibility that a woman they have relentlessly vilified might command affection, respect and now the attention of millions of readers. Which brings me to the evocative title of the memoir and the question it grapples with.

A country is not made one's own by birth alone. Belonging can come through love, commitment, sacrifice and an enduring emotional attachment to its people. Sonia Gandhi has lived that journey. Her Indianness must be understood through the life she chose to live here, the losses she endured here, the responsibilities she accepted here and the political values she continued to defend here.

I have never believed that Sonia Gandhi is beyond criticism; no political leader should be. The Congress must answer for its mistakes, and the Nehru-Gandhi family must be subjected to the same scrutiny as any other powerful family. But holding people up to standards is one thing and politically motivated vilification quite another. Political disagreement should never erase human dignity.

Sonia Gandhi's Indianness must be understood not through her birth but her embrace of the idea of India, her commitment to the idea that shaped her public life. She fought for the idea through strife and political defeats, she remained a binding force when political adversity tested people of weaker resolve, and she never saw the country merely as a political arena.

The memoir is touching because it lets you in, it allows you to glimpse fragility, to encounter a woman who has lived an extraordinarily difficult life but recalls it with no bitterness. It invites you to see her life not through the offices she held, nor her political victories or defeats but through what she endured, what she refused to surrender and what remained of her after everything she had been through.

Perhaps the most beautiful thing about Sonia Gandhi is that after all these years of being told that she does not belong, she has continued to live, love and work for an India in which everyone has the right to belong. That is why I believe *Belonging* should be read with an open heart.

*

The extraordinary public response to the book is politically significant as well. Readers are queuing up and copies are reportedly disappearing from the shelves. The attention it is getting across India and abroad is not just the curiosity to peek into the private life of a public person; it is also an appetite to discover the truth of a story that has been appropriated by others for far too long.

The BJP's response is equally revealing. Even as sales break all sorts of records and the book becomes a runaway success, the hate factory is hard at work trying to find something that might give their propaganda fresh legs.

I celebrate Sonia Gandhi's memoir because it is a refusal to surrender her identity to the machinery of hatred, because it challenges the arrogant assumption that her sense of belonging can be questioned by those who hate her, that her life can be defined by those who will never get her. ■

Edited excerpts from two pieces originally posted on the author's Facebook wall

Even if the price of speaking up is steep...

Swarna Bhatnagar on why so many Indian artists have bewilderingly fallen into a 'spiral of silence'

At his Indore concert, after four songs from his setlist had been flagged by child protection authorities, Diljit Dosanjh thundered out the words of Rahat Indori, the poet who knew a thing or two about the limits of authority and the boundlessness of a tongue. "*Kisi ke baap ka Hindustan thodi hai*," the crowd, feeling ten feet taller, roared along.

A few months ago, when students were protesting against the NEET paper leak, Diljit, questioned about his silence, had a rather breezy response: "I'm an artist, bro. I'm not a politician."

That answer left me cold, because to my mind, the making of an artist is the making of a conscience. We speak about empathy as a shiny bonus in an artist's repertoire, but we have the relationship backwards. Art demands empathy before it demands talent. The preposterous conceit that an artist can leave that sensibility at the studio door is one I have never bought. There is no apolitical art. Only politics that have become so familiar they pass for common sense.

It is worth remembering that there are artists who have understood that their craft gives them a public voice. Meryl Streep, for instance, used her 2017 Golden Globes speech to call out Donald Trump, then president-elect, over his mockery of a disabled journalist. "Disrespect invites disrespect. Violence incites violence," she said, and made a plea for principled press, urging Hollywood to support the Committee to Protect Journalists. She reminisced about her conversation with Tommy Lee Jones, who reminded her what a privilege it was to be an actor. Streep spoke of the responsibility that came with that privilege, calling it the responsibility of empathy.



Photos: Getty Images

Artists like Meryl Streep, Robert De Niro and George Clooney understood their fame gave them a public voice—they used it to push back against abuse of power

In the same Hollywood welkin sits Robert De Niro, who has made no secret of his abhorrence for Trump. He took his protest to the stage at the 2018 Tony Awards and at Cannes in 2025. Accepting an honorary Palme d'Or, he spoke about the rising attacks on American democracy and the arts. "Art looks for truth. Art embraces diversity. And that's why art is a threat." It was a blunt warning that an artist's fealty to truth can put them on a slippery slope with those who hold power.

The real test, of course, comes when the person in need of a telling-off happens to be from your own political family. George Clooney, a steady Democrat who had advocated for Joe Biden and also hosted a star-strewn fundraiser, supplied an astonishing example when he wrote an op-ed titled 'I Love Joe Biden. But We Need A New Nominee' for the *NYT* in 2024, calling on Biden to withdraw from the presidential race.

It is worth highlighting that regardless of whether the disapprobation comes from across the street or from one's own political camp, the right to express it has a constitutional bedrock. The First Amendment in the US puts a fence around freedom of speech and of the press by constraining the State's power to abridge them, protecting speech even when it rankles those in power.

The protection has its limits, and it cannot spare a speaker every repercussion, but it does keep the government from stifling what it would rather not hear. India has a similar fundamental promise in Article 19(1)(a), which guarantees freedom of speech and expression, subject to reasonable restrictions set out in Article 19(2). But it is in the long trek between the inflated constitutional promise and the artist's real-world experience that the paint begins to peel.

If artists in India are keeping their noses out of trouble, it's also because they fear the blowback, because to speak up is to lose the next film, the next assignment, the next show... making silence the only solid ground beneath one's feet, the safest career choice.

The German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann called this the 'spiral of silence'. She theorised that people begin to zip up when the price of having a voice is social ostracism or a public dressing-down. Those who disagree start hearing their voices as a solo echo, while the loudest opinions saltate until they sound like the voice of the crowd. The eventual consensus is something of a ventriloquist's trick—a few voices speak for many, while the many remain tight-lipped.

Art demands empathy before talent; for an artist, empathy is not a bonus feature

For 'freedom of expression' to be anything beyond a constitutional promise, it needs somewhere to stand, and sometimes, quite literally, someone willing to foot the bill. America has, through bodies such as the National Endowment for the Arts, put public money behind its cultural life, in some ways freeing the artist to make work that might get up the nose of those holding the purse strings. By contrast, artists in India are left to sing for their supper. If they stir up a hornets' nest, they might struggle to find someone who will bankroll their next performance. Then again, if the taxpayer's money is to find its way into the arts, what stops it from being cornered by those who know how to curry favour?

I don't know how to answer every question this throws up, but I do know that it cannot be a one-way street, with society demanding lion-hearted artists while offering them no shelter when the backlash arrives. If we don't want the government of the day drawing the *Lakshman rekha* around our creative expression, we cannot make an artist's freedom contingent on keeping the audience sweet and the powers that be in good humour.

Even so, the law can only protect the freedom to make art. What an artist does with that freedom remains a matter of conscience. I want to leave James Baldwin's words on the table as I draw this piece to a close, trusting every artist to hear the call of their conscience. "The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions that have been hidden by the answers."

I know the price of speaking up is steep. But I hope artists remember that the world beyond their work is the well from which their work fetches its water—the people, the stories, the wounds, the bewildering joy, and the polaris their imagination keeps returning to.

The audience will go home with the film and the song, but the artist will have to go home to the same country as everyone else. If this is the country they make art in, the country they make a life in, then for the sake of the art they put into the world, I hope they never become strangers to it. ■

America signals a big reset in its polity

The US midterms have demonstrated that the country wants to heal itself. It'll have healthy side-effects for the world as well

Aakar Patel



Photo: Getty Images

Brought down a notch Trump's extravagance at a time of high inflation was the last straw for many Americans

Democracies correct themselves through elections. The leadership of all nations is imperfect, and problems become especially visible when strongmen take charge. With great power comes great overreach, and with overreach comes pushback. The American population has pushed back against its president and the way he governs.

It may surprise some of us—it certainly did me—that the number one factor behind the Republicans losing both the House and the Senate was neither inflation nor the dumb war in Iran. Both ranked high, but the most important reason voters punished Trump's party was corruption, and their unease at the way the government was being run by the wealthy, for the wealthy. Nine in ten voters ranked this at the top of their concerns.

Trump's sons have made thousands of crores while he has been in office, and are making more. His son-in-law has also made thousands of crores, while holding an unofficial position as an envoy and negotiating with the same Gulf nations from which he is taking money.

Trump himself has zoned out and is focused on things like the 600 m reflecting pool between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument (that long Egyptian-style obelisk), and a 250 ft arch modelled on the Arc de Triomphe. Photographs show that his 90,000 sq. ft ballroom is now larger than the White House itself, let alone the East Wing that it replaced.

Daily reporting on all of this, coming at a time when fuel prices are high and inflation is on the rise, was the last straw for many Americans, and they brought Trump down a notch.

What happens next? A few things. The first is that there is now pressure on Trump to conclude the war and normalise fuel prices and supplies. This might be difficult to achieve, given that the only way it seems doable is to return to the surrender document he signed at Versailles on 17 June (which lifted sanctions on Iran and gave it control over the Strait of Hormuz). Trump was fine with it until he was shamed into pulling out of the MoU by the very warmongers he is surrounded by, and who work in Israel's interests.

With great power comes great overreach, and with overreach comes pushback

That is the second thing that has now changed. The sweeping victories by the Democratic Party's leftwing show that Israel is an unpopular cause among Americans. Two-thirds of Americans think poorly of Israel, including three-fourths of those under 29. This means that, in the long term, Israel will not be able to rely on America to fight its wars.

On 21 October, the most influential lobby group AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) said it would stop endorsing candidates or giving them money directly. This happened after Republicans begged it to stay away from their races—a remarkable turnaround.

Along with their antipathy to foreign wars, the leftwing also pushes strongly for policies such as 'Medicare for All'. This is intended to make healthcare accessible in the country where it is the most expensive in the world. It is hard to see how this does not become the consensus view of both parties over time.

The president appointed his most hawkish anti-immigration supporter, a man named Stephen Miller, as his chief of staff. The brutality of ICE, the agency enforcing immigration law, has meant more backlash from ordinary Americans. There is a feeling that, other than criminals, undocumented immigrants (those referred to as 'illegal' by the unsympathetic) should be allowed to stay and given a pathway to citizenship. Some movement on policy may be expected here as well over time.

The last thing that will change is Trump's stranglehold on his party. He draws his power from the fact that those he backs usually win their Republican primaries (the phase before the election). As he staggers into his final months as president, those seeking to challenge and replace him will assert themselves as they have not done since 2016.

America has shifted course through elections before. Republican George W. Bush was replaced by a Democrat, Barack Obama, the first African American president, because Americans had tired of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Democrat Lyndon Johnson, otherwise one of the most accomplished leaders given his record on civil rights, was succeeded by Richard Nixon, who finally ended the Vietnam misadventure.

The erosion of the Republican Party in this month's elections also came in the deep south, in places such as Mississippi and Texas, without which the party cannot win the presidency in 2028, given the narrow path to 270 electoral college votes. This is bound to force a change in the party and its leaders as they chart a path to survival.

Democracies effect resets through elections. But for that to happen, elections must be free and fair

The world will benefit from the correction America is going through. Less violent foreign intervention will mean less suffering, both direct and indirect, for all of us. Democracies correct themselves through elections. But for that to happen, elections must be fair and free. Where elections are no longer seen as legitimate, the desire for correction expresses itself in other forms, as we are seeing on our streets today. ■

Views are personal

Beyond the bucket list and the fear of missing out

From forest bathing to townsizing, new trends are challenging the herd mentality of global tourism

Avay Shukla

Even as global tourism continues its relentless growth (1.52 billion in 2025 and growing at 4 per cent per annum), opposition to its environmental, social and cultural impacts is also increasing (except, of course, in India, where your typical North Indian tourist continues to carpet-bomb the Himalayan states with plastic, beer bottles, condoms and uncouth behaviour).

I was therefore gladdened to learn that, in other countries at least, new forms of tourism are emerging that are environmentally sustainable, respect local cultures, customs and traditions, and reject the bucket-list, itinerary-driven form of travel that currently prevails.

They offer better value for money and are more meaningful, relaxing and even therapeutic. I list below some of the new versions that are being embraced by increasing numbers of people, especially the younger generation.

Forest bathing (or land snorkelling)

Immersing oneself in a natural setting through quiet walks, without talking, is perhaps the best form of meditation. It reduces stress and improves one's mood.

Noctourism

Night tourism, both in pastoral and urban settings, offers a new perspective on our world. It includes night safaris, stargazing and constellation tracking. A survey in Tokyo (500 million tourists every year!) found that 67 per cent of visitors booked night tours.

Townsizing

Getting off the beaten track and away from the hustle and bustle, noise and congestion of metros in favour of small towns and villages, where one can experience the authenticity and charm of a laid-back lifestyle that is now almost a thing of the past. Increasingly preferred by Gen Z, this trend is also known as 'quietcations' and 'hushpitality'. It is meant to counter corporate burnout and digital fatigue.

JOMO (joy of missing out) tourism

The opposite of FOMO (fear of missing out) in today's digital world. It is about prioritising oneself and doing and experiencing what *you* want, instead of following the herd and keeping up with the Joneses. It is the opposite of group or chartered tourism.

Slow travel

Rejecting the rushed, tour-guide-dictated form of mass tourism in favour of a slower-paced experience and deeper involvement with the sites seen. It means staying longer in one place and understanding its culture, traditions, cuisine and people, rather than rushing from one 'must-see' hotspot to another. (The average tourist at the Louvre in Paris gets to see the Mona Lisa for just ten seconds before having to make way for the next in line!) It is much more personally fulfilling, and one returns home refreshed.



More and more tourists are beginning to realise the benefits of slowing down

Sleep tourism

This may come as a surprise to readers, but it makes sense when one learns that 100 million Americans do not get adequate sleep! In this genre, the top priority is to get a good night's sleep for a few days, detox and cut oneself off from the demands of daily urban existence. A survey by the Hilton group of hotels revealed that two-thirds of its guests sleep better in hotels than in their own homes. Hotels cater to this need by providing special mattresses, dimmed lighting, soundproofing and a DND ambience.

Regenerative tourism

Spas are the usual offering in the developed world, but in India, a different model is gaining popularity—wellness tourism, built around Ayurveda, Vipassana, yoga and traditional Indian medical practices. This has existed for some time in states such as Kerala, but of late, Himalayan states, with their unique mountain climate, geography and pollution-free ambience, are also cashing in on this trend. A rapidly ageing and health-conscious population provides a good catchment area for customers.

Dark tourism

Sadly, there are revenue-generating opportunities even in human tragedies, and dark tourism is one such product. It involves visiting sites of conflict, accidents and other tragedies. Initially prompted by a desire for closure, and a search for understanding and emotional resolution (Jallianwala Bagh, the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, the World Trade Center in New York, which receives 40,000 visitors a day, and the Holocaust Museum), it has now assumed macabre dimensions. Hundreds of Zionist Israelis have been visiting the front lines to witness the bombing, shelling and destruction of Gaza in real time.

Pregnancy tourism

This may sound freakish, but it exists and is a by-product of geopolitics and poverty. It involves pregnant women travelling to certain countries to deliver their babies in order to exploit the *jus soli* (citizenship by birth) principle, which forms part of the immigration laws of most countries. In the US, about 320,000 babies are born to mothers who are either illegal immigrants or are there on temporary or tourist visas. That constitutes 10 to 12 per cent of all births in the US. No wonder Trump has been trying his best to change the laws.

A version of this is rumoured to exist in Ladakh, too, though no evidence of this exists. It is claimed that women from Europe (especially Germany) travel to the Aryan Valley, where the Brokpa (also known as Drokpa) community lives, to conceive children with local men. The Brokpas are said to be direct descendants of soldiers from Alexander's army and to have pure Aryan blood. (Similar claims are made about residents of Malana village in Himachal Pradesh's Kullu district.) The idea is to have pure Aryan children. Geneticists are not even sure of these claims, and, for all we know, this may just be a ploy to boost tourism to the valley!

Here too Gen Z is showing the way, in getting off the treadmill and the beaten holiday track

It is, however, heartening to note that more and more people are beginning to realise the value of nature, the importance of authentic indigenous ways of life, the benefits of a slower pace of life and the need to leave behind a smaller ecological footprint. Maybe we in India too will wake up to this one day. ■

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