

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

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NATION

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National Herald wishes its readers Eid Mubarak!

Lessons from a mindless 'war of choice'

Ashok Swain

There is a particular kind of strategic trap arrogant powerful leaders repeatedly fall into. A war launched with limited objectives achieves early tactical success, but gets defined over time by the one goal it cannot achieve. In Vietnam, it was the collapse of the government in Hanoi. In Iraq, it was the creation of an obedient political order. In Afghanistan, it was to dismantle the Taliban as a political force. In the current US-Israel war against Iran, that ambitious objective is 'regime change'.

Despite their overwhelmingly superior firepower, the aggressors have not managed to engineer a collapse of the Islamic Republic. On the contrary, the regime has consolidated around a harder line and gained from a surge of nationalistic sentiment in the face of foreign aggression.



Photo Getty Images

Trump, figure this! The war has inflicted severe damage on Iran but it has also apparently consolidated the regime around a harder line

The first phase of the war was framed as a campaign against the Iranian leadership and its military infrastructure. The assassination of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was meant to be a decisive decapitation strike. Iran's key command structures were targeted, its scientists and military officers killed, its alleged nuclear facilities bombed again. In the early hours of the conflict, it was still possible to argue that the campaign was directed primarily at the regime.

Many Iranians who have long resented the Islamic Republic might initially have seen hope in the strikes, seen the attack as a direct challenge to a government that has suppressed dissent and curtailed freedoms. But that sentiment evaporated fast. On the very first day of the war, the attack on an all-girls elementary school in Minab killed 186 students and their teacher. As the war progressed, the Trump administration's reasons for going into it shape-shifted and the target list expanded to oil facilities, desalination plants, civilian aircraft and infrastructure, even UNESCO heritage sites. It was now evident to ordinary Iranians, even those who hate the regime, that this was no war to liberate them.

This transformation is politically decisive. Regime change is not simply a military outcome but a social and political process. It requires a fractured ruling elite, a mobilised opposition capable of seizing power and a population whose anger is directed at its own rulers rather than foreign aggressors. The US

has managed to turn their ire onto itself.

The installation of Mojtaba Khamenei as the new supreme leader illustrates this failure. His father's killing was expected to produce institutional chaos that might destabilise the Islamic Republic. Instead the system adapted quickly. Leadership did change but the regime survived. In fact, the new leader assumed power under conditions that will reinforce his authority rather than weaken it. Wartime succession often strengthens regimes because leadership transitions occur under the banner of national defence. The younger Khamenei is now a symbol of continuity under siege.

What the US and Israel underestimated was Iran's memory of foreign meddling in their affairs. For more than a century, Iranians have experienced repeated attempts by outside powers to reshape the country's politics in order to exploit its resources. The

Military superiority may degrade enemy capability and kill its leaders, but it cannot win legitimacy with a victim population

Tobacco Protest of 1891-92, when the monarchy granted a British company control over Iran's tobacco industry and a mass boycott then forced it to cancel the concessions, was one of the country's first demonstrations of organised popular resistance to foreign economic domination.

In 1953, the US and Britain jointly orchestrated the overthrow of Iran's democratically elected prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh after he nationalised the country's oil industry. The coup restored Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to power and ushered in decades of authoritarian rule backed by Western governments, conditions that produced the anger and resentment that eventually fuelled the 1979 revolution and reshaped the country's political destiny.

Even after the revolution, external pressure continued to bear upon Iran's national trajectory. In the 1980s, the US

supported Iraq during Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran, a brutal eight-year war that claimed hundreds of thousands of Iranian lives. In later decades, waves of sanctions imposed by Washington crippled the Iranian economy, imposing enormous hardship on its citizens.

That historical context explains why the current war is producing the opposite of its intended effect. Instead of isolating the regime from its society, the conflict is reinforcing the regime's central narrative that Iran is a nation under constant external threat. Sovereignty and self-determination, powerful themes in Iranian politics, are once again in sharp focus, and even Iranians vocal about their demand for political reform and greater freedoms are unwilling to support the destruction of their country in the name of liberation.

Many in the Iranian diaspora who were initially supporting the US military campaign are feeling disoriented by the turn this war has taken. They had believed a limited war might accelerate the collapse of the Islamic Republic, an outcome they so desired, but the wanton destruction of civilian infrastructure, the loss of civilian lives in Iran is not a price even they are reconciled to pay. Even those who once symbolised resistance to the regime find themselves in a moral bind as their country bleeds.

Inside Iran, large crowds have taken to the streets, not to protest the government but to protest the war. Their demonstrations are expressing anger with the foreign aggressor and solidarity with the state.

For the US and Israel, the result is a paradox. The war has inflicted severe damage to Iran's military, nuclear and civilian infrastructure. Yet it has also politically strengthened the regime. In the eyes of ordinary Iranians, the Islamic Republic is today not just the apparatus that rules the country but the people who defend the country against foreign aggression. This outcome also underlines the incomprehension characteristic of so many Western interventions in West Asia. Military superiority does not automatically translate into political transformation. Bombing campaigns may degrade capabilities and kill leaders, but they cannot manufacture legitimacy or determine how a society interprets external violence. ■

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How to undermine elections, Assam style

Yogendra Yadav

Sir, I can tell you this with 200 per cent certainty. The election announcement won't come before 14 March. And let me add this—whatever happens in the other states, elections in Assam will be wrapped up before 14 April."

This was from about two weeks ago. We were crisscrossing Assam. I'd assumed that elections in four states would be announced end-February/early-March. When that didn't happen, I called a political worker in Assam.

He opened my eyes. "Look, sir, the prime minister is scheduled to visit Assam on the 13th or 14th. He'll make some big announcements. The Election Commission will wait for that, and only then impose the Model Code of Conduct. But after that, elections will be rushed through in Assam. This time, during Bihu, you'll see Zubeen Garg's photos everywhere, his songs playing—reminding people that the government never investigated his death. So, the BJP wants the elections over before Bihu begins on 14 April."

And that is exactly how it played out. Prime Minister Modi visited Assam on 13-14 March. In two days, he announced dozens of development schemes for the state: released the next instalment of the PM-Kisan scheme, distributed land titles to tea garden workers, flagged off three new trains, laid the foundation for an

expressway from Silchar to Shillong, and dedicated a new hydropower project—promised investments of Rs 47,800 crore just ahead of the announcement of poll dates. And in every speech, he lashed out at the previous Congress government.

The very next day—15 March—the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced elections in four states and the Model Code of Conduct kicked in. No one was surprised by the choreography—we have grown used to it.

We've grown used to another thing: just

before elections, cash will be transferred directly into voters' bank accounts as inducement. In keeping with this new tradition, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma was suddenly overcome with concern for women's welfare just ahead of the polls.

Under the state's Orunodoi scheme, four million women in self-help groups receive Rs 1,250 a month. But this time, in an outpouring of concern, they'll receive a lumpsum of Rs 9,000—six months' advance, plus a Bihu bonus. Clearly, this year's Bihu



Photo Getty Images

Himanta Biswa Sarma (left) has learnt his Machiavellian manoeuvres from the best in the business

is special. Last month, unemployed youth were also given a one-time payment of Rs 2,500 as 'life inspiration'. Nobody asked what inspired this inspiration dole, not even the media that otherwise scoffs at 'freebies'. Not even the Supreme Court, which often frets about the culture of handouts.

We've grown used to it. We've also grown used to elections bringing with them a storm of lies, a downpour of hate, spatters of blood.

On this count, Himanta Biswa Sarma has outdone even Yogi Adityanath.

Sarma openly urged his party workers to ensure that the votes of 'Miya' Muslims are struck off in the revision of voter lists. He even claimed that his party had filed objections against five lakh such voters. Not stopping there, the chief minister called for an economic boycott of Bengali-speaking Muslim citizens in his own state—asking people to pay a 'miya' rickshaw puller Rs 4 instead of Rs 5, to harass them in every possible way.

On a television programme, the chief minister candidly admitted that he knows

Bengali Muslims cannot be legally deported from Assam. "So I create pressure so that they leave on their own."

If that still wasn't clear enough, the Assam BJP released a video showing Sarma holding a pistol, aimed at a stereotyped 'miya' Muslim figure and a Congress leader seated beside him.

Not everyone, it seems, is inured to this kind of naked bigotry. They protested. The video was quietly taken down, but no action was taken for spreading hate.

Some naïve intellectuals in Assam made the mistake of approaching the Supreme Court against the chief minister's statements. Ever ready to intervene in matters big and small, the court promptly sent them back—empty-handed—to Gauhati High Court.

They, too, will get used to it. There is only one thing we are not yet used to.

In the United States, it is called gerrymandering—drawing electoral boundaries so as to ensure the victory of a particular party. We have learnt much from America but we hadn't yet reached this stage of 'development'. Assam has now crossed that threshold.

In 2023, parliamentary and assembly constituencies were redrawn in Assam. The order may have been issued by the Election Commission, but its meaning was spelt out by the chief minister himself. Right at the outset, he had declared that the delimitation exercise would reduce the electoral influence of 'miya' Muslims. Exactly what happened: the Election Commission carved out bizarrely shaped constituencies—some snake-like, others resembling crabs. The result: Muslim-majority assembly constituencies are down from 29 (out of 126) to 22.

This hasn't been normalised yet in the rest of the country. Not every Indian knows this or is accustomed to this. But habits have a way of forming—we'll get used to this too. ■

We've grown used to elections bringing along a storm of lies and hate, but Assam has set new standards

Divide-and-rule comes to Ladakh

Rashme Sehgal

A devious game is being played in Ladakh by the mandarins of the ministry of home affairs. In January, a new socio-political group—the Union of Buddhist Ladakh (UBL)—was formed in Leh, claiming to be the ‘true representative’ of the region’s Buddhists.

The Ladakh Apex Body (LAB) and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA), who have jointly fielded the concerns of the Ladakhi people, believe VBL was created to divide Ladakh’s influential Buddhist community and sow discord within the LAB, which has led a sustained protest since Ladakh was reduced to a Union Territory in 2019.

Led by Skarma Namtak, the VBL claims Buddhists are ‘under-represented’ in the MHA’s high-powered committee (HPC) and accuses the LAB of ‘undermining Buddhist interests’.

The LAB has countered by publicly calling the VBL a ‘BJP creation’ aimed at fracturing Leh-Kargil unity. LAB and KDA leaders cite heavy policing of their protests, and the detention of Sonam Wangchuk, who was arrested under the National Security Act during his hunger strike for Sixth Schedule status. Wangchuk was released on 14 March after five months in Jodhpur Jail.

The VBL’s direct access to senior MHA officials and the Lt Governor—and its freedom from similar crackdowns—are

signs of favouritism by a government that has created a ‘fringe’ group to suit its own agenda.

Namtak’s line has been that Buddhist-majority Leh and Muslim-majority Kargil “cannot be represented by one single body”, given their “vastly different settlements, cultural and religious identities.”

What’s more, he is willing to settle for less: a regional advisory council rather than full statehood.

“It’s obvious the MHA is trying to splinter us,” says Konchok Stanzin, former LAHDC executive councillor from Chushul. “Kargil has a slightly higher population growth rate than Leh, which the VBL is exploiting.”

An outspoken critic of the BJP, Stanzin adds that Ladakhis are becoming strangers in their own land. “After 2019, most of our land is being bought by outsiders to set up their own businesses.”

Asgar Ali Karbalai, co-chairman of the KDA and former chief executive councillor of the LAHDC, is equally upset. “The Centre is trying to divide us on the basis of religion but they won’t succeed. Their claim that the people of Zaskar did not support our struggle for autonomy was shattered on 16 March. People from Zaskar right up to Turtuk village abutting Pakistan, from Matayen (the first Ladakhi village after crossing Zoji La Pass) right up to the border village of Chushul, rallied in huge numbers to support our legitimate demands, as did many Buddhist monks.”

Accusing the Centre of gerrymandering, Karbalai said, “Only protest marches get us meetings; otherwise, dead silence. In five years, we’ve had 15 meetings with the MHA. Our demands are clear: statehood and our own legislature. As a UT without a legislature, we have no control over our finances.”

Karbalai’s logic is sound: “If four northeastern states can be included under the Sixth Schedule, which provides for autonomous councils that create laws as per local customs, why can’t we be similarly empowered? The MHA tells us we’re making too much of the Sixth Schedule, it has been diluted, with judicial and financial powers appropriated by the Centre. All it wants to do is rename the Leh Autonomous Council a ‘territorial council’. The Sixth Schedule exists to protect tribal populations, to enable them to frame laws on land, health and agriculture. That’s what we are fighting for.”

Lt Governor V.N. Saxena’s recent



The people of Ladakh, Buddhists and Muslims alike, are united in the demand to retain their rights over their land

Photo: Getty Images

statement that there’s no room for protest in Ladakh has not gone down well with Ladakhis. “What does he mean by that?” asked Karbalai. “The Constitution gives us the right to protest and we will continue to do so till our demands are met.”

LAB co-chair Dorjay Labrook believes the government rejected their demand for statehood and Sixth Schedule status on the grounds that the entire region is inhabited by schedule tribes who do not need special protection. Labrook, who is also the chairman of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, points out, “Meghalaya has autonomous councils under the Sixth Schedule—why not Ladakh? The government is misleading us.”

During protracted negotiations, the MHA reportedly offered a ‘territorial council’ for Ladakh with Article 371-like provisions and a chief executive councillor to be designated chief minister of the Union Territory. This has been rejected outright. “Strengthening hill councils was never our demand,” says Labrook.

Maintaining that the LBA is the primary representative body, Labrook warns against the attempt to divide the Buddhist community. While he sees the formation of the VBL as “a matter of concern”, KDA member Sajjad Kargili is more forthright. “The MHA is trying to break our unity.

“Ladakh is the size of Punjab. It has huge potential. And it’s obvious the Centre wants to hand it over to crony capitalists”

“We have always been in favour of dialogue. The recent rally was an appeal to the government to come to the table and talk. If they refuse our demands, we will be compelled to continue our Gandhian agitation of non-violent satyagraha.”

A unanimous demand across Ladakh is that locals retain their rights over the land. As Kargili says, “Ladakh is the size of Punjab. It has huge potential. It is obvious the Centre wants to hand over this land to its crony capitalists. Our land must be safeguarded at all costs.”

On the Solar Energy Corporation’s near-complete solar farm, he added, “The government hopes to generate 13 gigawatts of power from it.”

The government can admit hoarse that all this is part of administrative reform for better governance, but the public sees it as opening up Ladakh’s precious resources to corporates. Solar parks and mining projects in this environmentally fragile area will see thousands of workers pouring in from other regions. They could eventually acquire domicile status and permanently alter demographics.

Even the creation of five new districts—Sham, Nubra, Changthang, Zaskar and Drass—is viewed as an ominous move to reshape this volatile—and valuable—region’s profile. ■

We Ladakhis are small in number; our strength lies in our unity. The people of J&K praise us for staying united despite the Centre’s efforts to divide us along religious lines. Don’t forget that our language and culture is the same. They arrested Sonam Wangchuk to break our organisation. He was released to save face because the Supreme Court would have revoked his detention,” claims Kargili. Following his release, Wangchuk said,

“If four N-E states can have Sixth Schedule rights—autonomous councils and the right to create laws as per local customs—why not us?”

Where there’s a will...

...there’s a way to stand up to bulldozer justice. A judge shows the way in UP

A.J. Prabal

For years, Uttar Pradesh’s governance has been synonymous with a culture of ‘bulldozer justice’, fake encounters, arbitrary arrests, a blatant disregard for the rule of law. Rather than adhering to constitutional principles, the bureaucratic interpretation of justice often bent to political convenience. Recently, and remarkably, judicial intervention—led notably by Justice Atul Sreedharan of the Allahabad High Court—is beginning to restore faith in the courts.

Justice Sreedharan has critically challenged many actions of the state that infringed on citizens’ fundamental rights, particularly religious freedom, and has openly chastised officials for failing in their primary duty to maintain law and order without violating constitutional

guarantees. His bold judgments and outspoken observations serve not only as remedies to specific injustices but also as a clarion call for systemic change.

Consider Sambhal. When the district administration issued an order limiting the number of people offering prayers at a mosque during Ramzan, the court simply asked the additional advocate general, “Are such restrictions placed in temples? A stampede occurred at the Maha Kumbh Mela (last year in Prayagraj), did you restrict two persons per three square feet there? If the Hindus are praying in their houses, can they be stopped from doing so?”

When the state government defended the restriction on the grounds of maintaining law and order, the court’s observation was piercing. Justice Sreedharan said, “If the superintendent of police (SP) and district magistrate (DM) believe that a law-and-

order situation may arise due to a large number of people offering prayers inside the premises, they should either resign from their posts or seek a transfer out of Sambhal.” He reminded the law officers that it is the duty of the State to ensure law and order in all circumstances.

In a separate case in January 2026, the court pulled up state government officials for insisting that Christian devotees needed prior permission to gather in private homes for prayer meetings. The high court laid down the law in plain terms. There was no such requirement of prior government or police permission to conduct worship or prayers on private property.

Could similar restrictions be imposed on Hindus praying or singing bhajans in their own homes, asked the court, and observed that the rule of law must treat all citizens equally.

Mahmood Madani, president of the Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind, said, “Over the past few years—particularly in Uttar Pradesh—there have been several instances where FIRs were registered, arrests were made, and police action taken merely for offering prayers or worship religiously gatherings. Peaceful worship was wrongly projected as

a law-and-order issue, causing unnecessary fear and distress among law-abiding citizens. The high court’s ruling has now provided much-needed constitutional clarity.”

John Dayal, human rights activist and member of the All-India Christian Council, said, “What you do inside your home, what you eat, how you dress is a personal matter. Why should any permission be needed? The fact that the court had to step in to restore this basic freedom says a lot about where we have travelled as a nation.”

The same bench of Justices Atul Sreedharan and Siddharth Nandan also issued a contempt notice to the district magistrate and senior superintendent of police, Bareilly, for allegedly restraining certain individuals (including petitioner Tarik Khan) from offering *namaz* inside a private house.

Tarik Khan was first detained on 16 January 2026 along with others for offering *namaz* in an empty home owned by one Reshma Khan, ‘without permission’. No citizen required any permission under the law to offer religious prayers, which is a citizen’s fundamental right under Article 25, the bench said.

One of the least publicised observations of Justice Sreedharan is when he scathingly deplored the ‘caste system’ and the ‘feudal mindset’ in the Madhya Pradesh judiciary. The judges of the high court, he stated, were deemed to be *savarnas* and district judges *shudras*. “The body language of the judges of the district judiciary when they greet a judge of the high court stops just short of grovelling, making the judges of the district judiciary the only identifiable species of invertebrate mammals,” he said. “Judges of the district judiciary not only personally attend to judges of the high court (as desired by them) on railway platforms and wait on them, judges of the district judiciary on deputation to the registry of the high court are almost never offered a seat by the judges of the high court,” he added.

The observation was made while allowing the appeal of a former district judge, Jagat Mohan Chaturvedi, who was dismissed from service in 2015 as a special judge SC/ST.

“They have families, children who go to school, parents undergoing treatment, a home to be built, savings to be accumulated, and when the High Court terminates his service abruptly on account of a judicial order passed by him, he and

his entire family is out on the streets with no pension and the stigma of facing a society that respects his integrity,” said the court, and ordered his pay and pension, besides ordering a lump-sum amount as compensation.

Justice Sreedharan was among those rare high court judges who sought a voluntary transfer out of Madhya Pradesh in 2023 on the grounds that his daughter was about to start practising as a lawyer in Indore. He was transferred to J&K high court, where he pulled up the police for keeping Fahadullah, the editor of *The Kashmirwallah* in jail since 2022, and ordered that he be released on bail.

The court frowned upon the charge of ‘narrative terrorism’ levelled against Shah and found no evidence that he was involved in any act of violence. It also questioned why Shah was held under UAPA for an article published in 2011.

In 2025, Sreedharan was repatriated to Madhya Pradesh and in August the same year transferred to Chhattisgarh, where he would have been a part of the collegium, being the second highest in seniority.

The Union government, however, intervened, and in October 2025, the collegium—presided over by the then CJI B.R. Gavai—transferred Justice Sreedharan to Allahabad high court, where he is number seven in order of seniority and, therefore, not a part of the collegium which comprises the three seniormost judges.

The reassignment was due to government interference and openly acknowledged as such by the Supreme Court collegium which did not provide any details on why the government did not want Justice Sreedharan in the Chhattisgarh high court.

Without referring to the Sreedharan case, Supreme Court Justice Ujjal Bhuyan, said during a talk in Pune, “The Centre can have no say in the transfer and posting of judges. It cannot say that such-and-such judge should or should not be transferred, or if transferred, to such-and-such high court.” He added, “When the collegium itself records in its minutes that the transfer of a high court judge is being made at the behest of the central government, it reveals a striking intrusion of executive influence.”

Justice Sreedharan joins a long list of upright judges in recent years, including Justice Akil Kureshi, Justice Muralidharan and Justice Jayant Patel, who have faced such pressures.

One can only wait and watch how long he lasts in UP. ■



Justice Atul Sreedharan’s reputation preceded him in UP. Seen here ticking off the police in J&K

Justice Sreedharan has challenged actions of the state that infringe on citizens’ fundamental rights, particularly their religious freedom

The meaning of energy sovereignty

Gurdeep Sappal on the alarming increase in India's dependence on oil imports and the policy misadventures that led to this

In 1955, a young minister named Keshav Dev Malviya walked into Jawaharlal Nehru's office with a daring proposal—India had to explore, drill and produce its own crude oil. Western powers and global oil majors lobbied strongly against Malviya's push for a sovereign, state-led oil exploration and production programme. These behemoths controlled the entire petroleum chain and were already pressuring India not to buy cheap Soviet oil—available against payment in rupees. They lobbied against oil exploration in India, citing prohibitive costs and a lack of qualified technical manpower.

Nehru and Malviya, leading a newly independent, underdeveloped nation, stood firm. The result was ONGC, the Oil and Natural Gas Commission, established in 1956. Within three years, India had trained and appointed its first batch of a hundred geologists and geophysicists. The new team struck oil in Cambay in 1959. By 1974, India's first offshore drilling platform at Bombay High was operational, meeting two-thirds of the country's oil needs by the 1980s. ONGC became India's most profitable company and the crown jewel of its energy sovereignty.

Seven decades later, that vision is in tatters. India now produces a meagre 13 per cent of its oil consumption. ONGC, which carried a Rs 13,000 crore cash surplus in 2014, had accumulated Rs 78,000 crore in

debt by 2024—exploited as it was to fund the Modi government's fiscal deficit and cover the Gujarat State Petroleum Corporation (GSPC) fiasco.

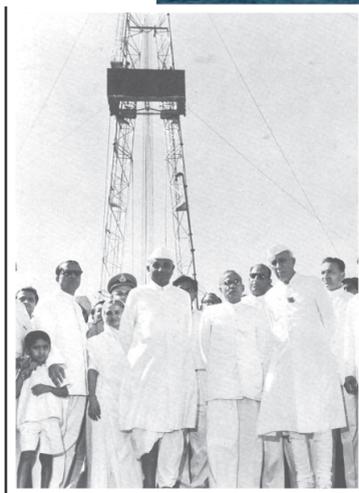
ONGC was forced to acquire GSPC, shelling out Rs 7,480 crore for a block with no commercial production, and to absorb Rs 19,576 crore of its debt. In 2018, it was again forced to purchase a 51 per cent stake in HPCL for Rs 36,915 crore—a transaction in which the government was simultaneously seller and beneficiary, using ONGC as an instrument to meet its own disinvestment targets. The result was a cash-depleted, debt-ridden company, which meant sacrificing capex for future exploration. India's oil production has declined from 26 per cent of domestic consumption in 2014 to 13 per cent today. The International Energy Agency (IEA) projects a further decline to just 8 per cent by 2030.

The oil bond alibi

While systematically weakening domestic production, the Modi government sought the distraction of 'the oil bond crisis' inherited from the UPA years. International crude prices have ranged from \$30–65 per barrel for most of the Modi years—far below the \$145 peak of the UPA era. Yet retail fuel prices remained persistently high and rising, with the oil bond repayment burden cited as justification.

The numbers tell a different story. Between 2014, when the Modi government began its first term in office, and now, the government has repaid Rs 3.2 lakh crore in oil bonds—but collected nearly Rs 44 lakh crore in petroleum taxes in the same period, a 400 per cent increase over the Rs 10.75 lakh crore collected during the UPA years. The oil bond repayment amounted to just 7.2 per cent of its petroleum tax receipts. The public bore a 400 per cent tax increase; the government offered a fiscal sleight of hand in return.

When Narendra Modi took office in May 2014, global crude was at \$107 per barrel, but prices collapsed within months; by January 2016, the 'Indian basket' [a weighted average of international prices for the specific mix of 'sour' (high-sulphur) and 'sweet' (low-sulphur) crude oil grades imported by Indian refineries] had fallen to



\$28—a 74 per cent fall. For a country importing 85 per cent of its oil, this was an extraordinary windfall. Consumers who had endured a decade of high prices deserved relief.

What followed instead was a masterclass in fiscal opportunism. Excise duty on petrol was raised by 350 per cent and on diesel by 380 per cent. Retail prices didn't move downwards. The entire benefit of the greatest oil price crash in decades flowed into government coffers.

The same playbook was deployed when crude crashed below \$20 in April 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2020, the government imposed record single-day hikes—Rs 10 per litre on petrol and Rs 13 on diesel. Petroleum excise revenue that year reached Rs 3.71 lakh crore, a 69 per cent jump in a single year. In April 2025, with Brent crude back at \$63, another Rs 2 per litre was added. Total petroleum tax collections under Modi between 2014–15 and 2025–26 will have exceeded Rs 67 lakh crore including the states' share, with the Union government receiving nearly Rs 44 lakh crore.

The Manmohan Singh years...

The UPA government under Dr Manmohan Singh (2004-2014) governed through an era of brutal crude prices—the



Nehru backed K.D. Malviya's (standing to Nehru's right) vision of self-sufficiency in the face of stiff resistance from global oil majors; (above) ONGC's rig in the Krishna-Godavari basin

By 2030, India is seen producing only 8% of its crude demand i.e., it'll have no energy security, no buffer against supply shocks

13 per cent today.

The IEA projects that without major new investments, India will produce just 540,000 barrels per day by 2030, meeting less than 8 per cent of projected consumption. The country will need to import over six million barrels per day, potentially making it the world's second-largest crude importer with an annual oil bill exceeding \$200 billion.

A country importing 92 per cent of its oil has no energy security, no leverage in energy diplomacy, and no buffer against supply shocks—whether from a Middle Eastern conflict, a Strait blockade, or an OPEC production decision.

In the 1950s, India was a nascent democracy with no resources, no trained manpower and no experience in energy governance. Yet within a decade, Nehru built not just a technical workforce for indigenous development but also resolved to resist foreign pressure and chart India's own course. He understood that energy sovereignty is the foundation of all other forms of independence.

ONGC was built against the wishes of the Western oil cartel, through years of painstaking development, and handed to future governments as an instrument of strategic autonomy. What has been done to that institution, and to the consumers who were denied the benefit of three separate windows of cheap global oil, is a story of institutional betrayal dressed in the language of fiscal responsibility.

And as India hurtles towards a 2030 oil import bill that could destabilise its current account, crowd out public investment, and leave its economy perpetually hostage to West Asian politics, the question is no longer whether this was a mistake. The question is whether there is still time and will to correct it. ■

GURDEEP SINGH SAPPAL is a Permanent Invitee to the Congress Working Committee

Established in 1956, ONGC went on to become the crown jewel of India's energy sovereignty. Seven decades later that vision is in tatters

Has Donald Trump met his Waterloo?

Not only has Iran not caved in, his misguided war has caused enormous damage to the economies of his Arab allies in the Persian Gulf

Ashish Ray

On 17 March, in the thick of the ongoing war in West Asia, a senior US intelligence official abruptly tendered his resignation. Joe Kent, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, posted on X, 'After much reflection, I have decided to resign from my position...'

He went on to say, 'I cannot in good conscience support the ongoing war in Iran. Iran posed no imminent threat to our nation, and it is clear that we started this war due to pressure from Israel and its powerful American lobby.' Quite blunt in stating that the attack on Iran was unprovoked and unjustified.

In a sense, Kent's statement made public a view that several members in Trump's cabinet privately hold but have not publicly aired. It is rumoured to be vice-president J.D. Vance's opinion as well. Vance, however, was produced before the press in the Oval Office to support his boss. He said—and this was live on news networks—that he trusted Trump to make sure that 'the mistakes of the past' are not repeated. Vance may find it difficult to distance himself from the double-edged endorsement, if he runs for president in 2028.

CNN reported, 'Kent was a staunch supporter of Trump and the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement.' His was the second public, headline-making departure from the Trump administration in this term after Elon Musk quit within weeks of being named the head of the short-lived and unpopular Department of Government Efficiency. It also exposed a fissure in the Trump regime, which could be the beginning of more dissent and possibly impact him in opinion polls.

At the presser where Vance spoke, Trump, while taking questions, said no intelligence had indicated that Iran might strike at its Arab neighbours in response to the US-Israeli attack. This was ridiculed by commentators, who said this was surely to be expected given that these states had US military bases.

In his letter of resignation to Trump, Kent further says, 'This echo chamber (meaning Israeli officials and a section of media) was used to deceive you into believing that Iran posed an imminent threat to the United States, and that should you strike now, there was a clear path to victory. This was a lie and is the same tactic the Israelis

used to draw us into the disastrous Iraq war that cost our nation the lives of thousands of our best men and women. We cannot make this mistake again.'

He added, 'You can reverse course and chart a new path for our nation, or you can allow us to slip further toward decline and chaos.'

Patty Murray, a Democrat Senator from Washington, once described Kent as a 'conspiracy theorist'. But it's undeniable that Kent possesses considerable experience in the military and counterintelligence, having done 11 combat tours in a 20-year career in the US Army and thereafter working as a CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) officer. His

first wife Shannon was killed in a 2019 incident in Syria while serving as a US Navy cryptologist.

Trump characteristically rubbished Kent, describing him as 'very weak on security'. After the initial wave of bombings on Iran, he had said it posed an 'imminent threat' to the US. Briefings by the Pentagon, the US department of war, to the Senate and the House of Representatives indicated that Iran had no such plans unless struck first.

Trump is putting up a brave face, but he will know from feedback that he has blundered. He didn't expect the resistance Iran has mounted and didn't expect the war to linger. By now, he surely knows he's been taken for a ride by

N Netanyahu. Trump is capable of cutting him loose, of declaring suddenly that the US is done with this war, but he needs a face-saving exit—and Iran is not obliging.

Surveys in the US reveal that Americans, Republicans included, are not in favour of ground troops entering Iran. But there's talk in Washington of a deployment to capture Iran's Kharg island, which has a major oil export facility.

For over a month, the Strait of Hormuz, south of Iran, has been teeming with US Navy ships, including two aircraft carriers. An amphibious assault ship, the USS Tripoli, is said to have been detected by AIS (Automatic Identification System) tracking data

off Singapore. The Tripoli was reportedly carrying a rapid response force of 2,200 marines.

At the White House media event on 16 March, Trump was ambivalent—suggesting that the mission had almost been accomplished but also that Tehran was not agreeing to his terms. He didn't spell out, though, what those terms were. On Tuesday, he lashed out at the US's NATO allies because they 'don't want to get involved' in the conflict. If the US was indeed on the verge of victory, why was he calling on NATO allies?

Not only has Iran defiantly refused to end hostilities, Trump's misguided war has caused enormous damage to the economies of his Arab allies in the Persian Gulf. Their oil and gas sectors have ground to a halt, with Iran choking shipments in the Strait of Hormuz. Their operations as air transport hubs have had to be significantly curtailed. Their reputation as financial capitals, as thriving tourist destinations has taken a huge hit. And even after the war stops, it'll be an uphill task to repair their reputation as safe and attractive destinations.

At an IISS (International Institute of Strategic Studies) seminar in London on the West Asia war, an analyst from the UAE indicated that Gulf nations that have taken a beating in this war would have to seriously rethink US military bases on their soil. The US security umbrella they had depended on for decades has evidently failed them, and now Tehran is demanding the closure of US bases in the region as a precondition for peace. For the US, the promise of protecting its allies is really about protecting its strategic interests in the region. So, it won't just up and leave, but how much credibility will its assurances now carry with these allies? ■



At an Oval Office press meet on 16 March, Vance said he trusted Trump to not repeat "mistakes of the past"

Photo: Getty Images

Trump is putting up a brave face, but he knows from feedback that he has blundered. He needs an off-ramp, but Iran is playing hardball

Another law to target political opponents?

The framing of the 130th amendment bill betrays its political motive. **Ajit Ranade** explains why it's not about keeping criminals out of power

In late February 2026, a Delhi court discharged all 23 accused in the excise policy case, ruling there was "no overarching conspiracy or criminal intent" in the policy at issue. One of the accused had spent 530 days in jail before being cleared. The Enforcement Directorate, which drove much of the prosecution, has registered 193 cases against politicians over the last decade. The total number of convictions has been two, which is barely one per cent.

Now consider this: the proportion of Members of Parliament who have declared pending criminal cases on their self-sworn affidavits has risen from 24 per cent in 2004 to 46 per cent in 2024. Among sitting MLAs across the country, 45 per cent face criminal charges of whom 29 per cent face serious charges including murder, attempt to murder, kidnapping and crimes against women. This criminalisation of politics is real, corrosive to democratic life and getting worse.

This defines the central dilemma of the Constitution (130th Amendment) Bill, 2025, currently before a joint parliamentary committee. The bill mandates the automatic cessation of the ministerial office for prime ministers, chief ministers and cabinet ministers, if they are arrested and detained for 30 consecutive days on charges punishable by five years or more. The intention is to put an end to governance from jail. The mechanism is, however, deeply flawed.

What a pending case actually means

Remember that a case pending in court is not a police FIR, not a noting in a history-sheeter's file, not a complaint lodged by a political rival. Charges are framed only after a full investigation is complete, after a



India's investigative agencies have arrested sitting chief ministers without even framing charges against them—Arvind Kejriwal (left) and Hemant Soren



court has taken cognisance of the offence, and after a judge independently determines that a prima facie case exists. This involves the judicial application of mind. An ordinary citizen with any such criminal blemish on their record cannot get government employment.

And yet politicians across party lines routinely argue that all such cases against them are fabricated or politically motivated. How can this be even in the case of heinous offences such as rape, murder, kidnapping and extortion? Courts do not frame such charges casually.

The wrong trigger

The problem with the bill is that it uses arrest—an executive action—as the trigger for removal from office, rather than the framing of charges by a court. Investigative agencies can arrest and detain without a conviction or even a formal trial. Under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), bail conditions are near-insurmountable. Section 45 imposes twin conditions for release and Section 24 reverses the burden of proof onto the accused. Under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), the difficulty is even greater. Securing bail within 30 days is near impossible.

This creates a structural vulnerability that any government can exploit against its opponents. Arrest rival ministers and hold them under a bail-resistant law for 30 days and evict, even before any court has examined the merits. The bill contains no safeguard against such misuse. The 244th Law Commission Report had explicitly recommended that disqualification be triggered at the stage of the framing of charges by a competent court i.e. the first point at which genuine judicial scrutiny occurs.

The ED data underlines why this matters. The agency has a conviction rate of only 1 per cent over a decade. Its overall PMLA conviction rate since 2019 is barely 6 per cent. This implies that arrest by such agencies is not a reliable proxy for guilt.

The conviction rate paradox

There is one counter-argument. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data reveals that conviction rates in Indian lower courts are, in many jurisdictions, alarmingly low. In Pune's lower judiciary the conviction rate in 2023 was only 8.8 per cent. Over 91 per cent of those who faced criminal trial were acquitted or discharged. If this pattern holds more widely, then any law that bars persons with pending court cases from public office would, in practice, be wrongly disqualifying the overwhelming majority who are innocent.

This is not a trivial objection. It cuts to the heart of what a pending case actually signifies in the Indian judicial context. Does it reflect genuine criminality, or a broken system of prosecution and investigation? The answer quite often, appears to be the latter.

The correct response to this paradox is not to abandon the project of keeping tainted candidates out of public life. It is to fix what is broken. Trials against sitting legislators must be fast-tracked as the Supreme Court directed in 2014 and again in 2017. The government's power to withdraw cases against powerful politicians under Section 321 of the CrPC must be curbed. And investigative agencies must be held to genuine standards of evidence before courts, not used as instruments of pre-trial political pressure.

Other failings

The bill also fails on its own stated logic.

A democracy cannot be held hostage to the criminalisation of politics. Nor should its laws be weaponised for political ends

the electoral arena in the first place.

What genuine reform looks like

For over 25 years, solutions have been documented and ignored. The Vohra Committee (1993), the 170th and 244th Law Commission Reports, the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, and the Supreme Court in its 2018 judgment in *Public Interest Foundation v. Union of India*, have all urged Parliament to disqualify candidates at the stage of the framing of charges by a competent court, for offences punishable by five years or more, in cases filed at least six months before the relevant election. Upon conviction for heinous crimes, the disqualification should be permanent. Also, political parties should be under the RTI Act. NOTA should be strengthened.

The ADR's proposed reformulation of the 130th Amendment says that any minister, prime minister, chief minister, MP or MLA against whom charges have been framed by a court for offences under Section 8(1), (2) and (3) of the Representation of the People Act, or for offences carrying a minimum five-year sentence, should be automatically relieved of their position. This is the judicial standard. This is what the Law Commission has repeatedly recommended. This is also what the SC, unable to act itself in 2018, expressly asked Parliament to do.

A democracy cannot be held hostage to laws that can be weaponised for political ends. The 130th Amendment, as drafted, risks being both ineffective against the first problem and dangerously enabling of the second. ■

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

Does a pending case reflect genuine criminality or a broken system of prosecution and investigation? More likely the latter

The policy of no principles...

...can do with a review, suggests **Aakar Patel**. Manmohan Singh's five-point foreign policy doctrine may be a good starting point

On 4 November 2013, then prime minister Manmohan Singh spoke to over 120 heads of Indian missions and outlined the five principles that defined his foreign policy. These were:

- 1 The recognition that India's relations with the world—major powers and Asian neighbours—were shaped by developmental priorities. "The single most important objective of Indian foreign policy," said Singh, "has to be to create a global environment conducive to the well-being of our great country."
- 2 Greater integration with the world economy would benefit India and enable Indians to realise their creative potential.
- 3 To seek stable, long term and mutually beneficial relations with all major powers, and work with the international community to create a global economic and security environment beneficial to all nations.
- 4 To recognise that the Indian subcontinent's shared destiny requires greater regional cooperation and connectivity.
- 5 A foreign policy defined not merely by interests, but also by the values dear to Indians: "India's experiment of pursuing economic development within the framework of a plural, secular and liberal democracy has inspired people around the world and should continue to do so." This was a clear exposition of



Photo: Getty Images

what was sought to be achieved. India would use foreign policy to advance its economic development; it would be friendly with global great powers and its neighbours; and it would be helped to do both by continuing to be a pluralist and secular democracy. I will not go into the present government's foreign policy principles, mainly because it doesn't have any.

This is not a smear or a casual observation—I have devoted an entire chapter in a book to explain why. It is, in fact, the only that the foreign minister not only accepts that our policy has no principles; he says that the lack of principles is the basis of our policy.

In a book of his compiled essays and speeches, he has laid out what he means. What India wanted was a 'multi-polar Asia', meaning one in

which India could claim parity with China. He offers no way of doing this and assumes that we can just because we want it to be so. He writes that many balls would need to be kept in the air—Jaishankar has a fondness for stock phrases—and that India would handle them with dexterity.

This was opportunism but that was alright because opportunism was India's character. Lessons from the Mahabharata, Jaishankar writes, are that deceit and immorality are merely means to avoid playing 'by the rules'.

Drona demanding Eklavya's thumb, Indra appropriating Karma's armour, Arjuna using Shikhandi as a human shield—these were but 'practices and traditions'.

Inconsistency in policy was not only fine but essential because 'obsessing about consistency' made little sense in changing circumstances. Here was a man who could make the insubstantial sound reasonable.

But what was such a doctrine to be called? In a speech he made where he first laid out this doctrine of opportunism and inconsistency, Jaishankar said it is hard to give it a name. He takes it up and discards the phrases—"multi-alignment" ("sounds too opportunistic") and "India first" ("sounds self-centred"). He finally settles on 'advancing prosperity and influence', which he says is accurate, while admitting it isn't catchy. He believes a name for it will eventually present itself if pursued long enough, because part of the challenge, he says, is that we are still in the early phase of a major transition.

This was published in 2020, in the second term of this government. The world—as we can see all around us—has changed since. It has become uncertain and it has turned dangerous, especially for nations that are dependent, as we

are, for energy and external employment, especially in the Gulf.

US president Donald Trump has offered no real reason for starting this third American Gulf War and has articulated no real aims that he wants achieved besides tactical ones.

The minister handling America's defence department appears totally unhinged and incompetent in his press briefings. How the war will conclude is not known to anyone because Iran has a say in how and when it will end.

Israel's involvement in the attack makes this war particularly alarming because unlike America, Israel cannot just cut and run, since it is part of the region and armed with nuclear weapons.

What should India do at this point? What kind of foreign policy should it adopt? Perhaps we will get by on what Jaishankar says we should do. Looking at what we are already doing, it seems clear that we have proceeded along the lines of opportunism. Hours before the war, with an armada in the bay, we flew to Tel Aviv to receive a medal, endorsing what was to come.

We have shied away from condemning state assassinations, the mass murder of schoolgirls and the murder of sailors without a declaration of war. Where we see opportunity, such as taking a couple of tankers, we will take it.

We have no role in the larger making of peace or reestablishment of a rules-based order because our creed is opportunism and that means not shaping the world but taking short-term advantages wherever we can.

This might work, but then again it might not. And for this reason, we should revisit first principles and reconsider what Manmohan Singh said about India's external policy, what it intended to achieve and for what reason. ■

Views are personal

GROWTH, GUARANTEES, GOVERNANCE: 1000 DAYS

1,000 days, one vision: Karnataka's rise as a development powerhouse

On February 17, 2026, the Karnataka Government reached a milestone that few administrations can claim with equal confidence — 1,000 days in office measured not in calendars, but in lives changed. From the paddy fields of the northern districts to the gleaming tech corridors of Bengaluru, the proof of purposeful governance is visible in every village, every household, and every aspiring young Kannadiga who today stands on firmer ground than before.

Under the leadership of Chief Minister Sri Siddaramaiah — a leader whose lifelong commitment to social justice has always been his governing compass — this is the story of a government that made promises, kept them, and is only just getting started.

A MANDATE HONOURED, A STATE TRANSFORMED

When Sri Siddaramaiah assumed office for his second term, he carried with him a governing philosophy forged over four decades of public life: that administration exists above all to serve those who have been historically left behind.

Confronting a State emerging from financial instability and institutional drift, his government moved swiftly — restoring fiscal discipline while simultaneously launching the most ambitious welfare architecture in Karnataka's history.

The results speak for themselves. More than Rs1.16 lakh crore has been channelled through five flagship guarantee schemes, and the proportion of households receiving direct government benefits has risen from 9.30 per cent in 2022 to a remarkable 72.70 per cent in 2024 — a statistic that King's College London and Azim Premji University have described as a revolutionary shift in poverty alleviation and women's empowerment.

THE SIXTH AND SEVENTH GUARANTEES

True to form, the government has not stopped at five. The sixth guarantee — the Land Guarantee Scheme — has addressed one of the most persistent sources of citizen hardship: land disputes.

With more than half of all pending court cases in Karnataka linked to land records, the scheme brought the Revenue Department directly to people's doorsteps. Village administrative officers now visit homes, digital records have replaced paper files, and over two lakh families have received their title deeds without setting foot in a government office. The appointment of 1,000 village accountants has strengthened this network across the State.

Deputy Chief Minister Sri D.K. Shivakumar has now announced the seventh guarantee — the Water Guarantee Scheme — which will ensure safe drinking water for every household and adequate irrigation supply across Karnataka, taking the government's covenant with its citizens to its most elemental promise yet.

STANDING WITH FARMERS, STRENGTHENING AGRICULTURE

Karnataka's farmers have found in this government a steadfast ally. When protests erupted over prices for mango, maize, and sugarcane, the government responded immediately — directing

sugar mills to pay fair prices, releasing over Rs300 crore in additional support, and advancing tur dal procurement centres ahead of schedule.

More than Rs10,000 crore in subsidies and support has reached farmers over this period, while 14.21 lakh farmers received Rs2,250 crore in crop damage compensation and 9.07 lakh milk producers benefitted from Rs4,130 crore in incentives.

Seven hours of uninterrupted three-phase power is now guaranteed daily for agricultural pump sets, 11,727 borewells have received power connections, and 3,735 agricultural wells have been dug.

The Krishi Bhagya Scheme has been relaunched with Rs200 crore, and agricultural mechanisation subsidies are making modern farming accessible to smallholders across the State.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AS A GOVERNING PRINCIPLE

The Siddaramaiah Government's commitment to social justice is structural, not rhetorical. Funds for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are

allocated in strict proportion to their population under the SCSP-TSP Act, and financial institutions have been directed to offer loans from Rs20 lakh to Rs10 crore at four per cent interest to SC and ST entrepreneurs.

A caste census — first agreed upon in 2013 — has been initiated to ensure that planning is grounded in accurate demographic data, enabling genuinely equitable resource distribution.

In schools and colleges across the State, the Preamble of the Constitution is now read during morning prayers — a daily reminder to every young Kannadiga of the values of equality, fraternity, and justice.

On International Human Rights Day, more than 2.5 million citizens formed a 2,500-kilometre human chain from Bidar to Chamarajanagara, setting a world record and a powerful statement of shared citizenship.

POWERING KARNATAKA'S INDUSTRIAL FUTURE

As Karnataka marks 1,000 days of this administration, its economic transformation is nothing short of extraordinary. Industries Minister M.B. Patil has set a target of 20 lakh new jobs over five years, backed by a

Clean Energy Policy with a \$50,000 crore investment target and active promotion of domestic manufacturing in semiconductors, smartphones, laptops, electronics, and electric vehicles.

The Global Investors Meet in Bengaluru secured investment commitments exceeding Rs10 lakh crore, of which Rs6.50 lakh crore has already materialised — a testament to investor confidence in Karnataka's governance.

A

genuine single-window system integrating 130 services, developed in partnership with Microsoft and supported by an AI chatbot for application tracking, has made doing business in Karnataka simpler and faster than ever.

Public enterprises have responded in kind: KSDL and MSIL have recorded their highest-ever turnovers and profits, with MSIL's new digital chit-fund platform targeting Rs10,000 crore in annual turnover.

INDIA'S INNOVATION CAPITAL, GROWING STRONGER

Under the stewardship of IT & BT Minister Priyank Kharge, Karnataka has decisively consolidated its position as India's premier technology and innovation hub.

The ELEVATE programme has supported over 1,200 startups with more than Rs1,280 crore in grants, while ELEVATE NXT commits Rs150 crore to deep-tech ventures in artificial intelligence, robotics, biotechnology, and quantum computing.

Global Capability Centres now account for nearly 40 per cent of all office leasing activity in Bengaluru, and the city's Grade A office stock has reached approximately 215 million square feet. Startup investment has drawn \$3.8 billion across stages, reflecting a deep and sustained innovation pipeline.

Karnataka's KED computer — an AI-ready device developed with KEONICS at just Rs18,999, running on RISC-V architecture with on-device AI — is simultaneously bridging the digital divide and positioning the State as a force in electronics and AI-led manufacturing.

The "Beyond Bengaluru" cluster strategy is extending this dynamism to Mysuru, Mangaluru, Hubballi-Dharwad-Belagavi, Shivamogga, Kalaburagi, and Tumakuru, ensuring that the technology dividend reaches every corner of the State.

BENGALURU REIMAGINED, KARNATAKA URBANISED

Bengaluru is being transformed into a

world-class global city. The Brand Bengaluru initiative encompasses 300 kilometres of new roads, double-decker flyovers, metro Phase II expansion, and tunnel road projects designed to ease the city's traffic burden.

The Chief Minister's Amrut Nagrothana scheme has resurfaced thousands of kilometres of roads, and Rs7,000 crore has been dedicated specifically to Bengaluru's development.

The Bengaluru Business Corridor is underway, water supply to 110 surrounding villages has commenced under Cauvery Phase V, and mega projects worth Rs15 lakh crore are in advanced planning.

Across smaller cities and towns, master plans have been approved to prevent unauthorised layouts, conditions for pourakarmikas have been improved with direct payment systems and housing support, and Urban Local Bodies have been financially strengthened to deliver better services to fast-growing communities.

RURAL KARNATAKA: CONNECTED, EMPOWERED, SELF-RELIANT

Rural Karnataka is being built for the future with equal determination. Under NREGA, the State leads the country in both labour and material expenditure.

More than 86 per cent of rural households now have piped water connections, and schools and anganwadis have achieved over 97 per cent coverage for toilets and water facilities. Gram Panchayats deliver over 100 services digitally through Bapuji Seva Kendras, e-Swathu software has streamlined property record access, and online counselling has made staff transfers in the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department fully transparent.

A State Maritime and Inland Waterways Master Plan worth Rs23,094 crore has been prepared to develop airports, suburban rail, and inland water transport.

The Gandhi Grama initiative is naming all 6,000 gram panchayat buildings after Mahatma Gandhi — a fitting tribute to the nation's father as rural Karnataka strides confidently forward.

CARING FOR WORKERS, PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

The government has built 42 residential schools for children of construction and other workers, established six residential complexes for their dependents across five districts, and spent Rs1,115 crore this year on the welfare of 14.34 lakh construction workers.

Twelve days of paid menstrual leave annually, the 'Akka Task Force' for women's safety, and a suite of healthcare and education reforms have placed Karnataka at the forefront of gender-responsive governance.

On the environmental front, afforestation and soil conservation have been backed by over Rs500 crore, eco-tourism is projected to generate Rs750–800 crore annually for reinvestment into forests, and Rs1,081 crore has been invested in rejuvenating lakes around Bengaluru.

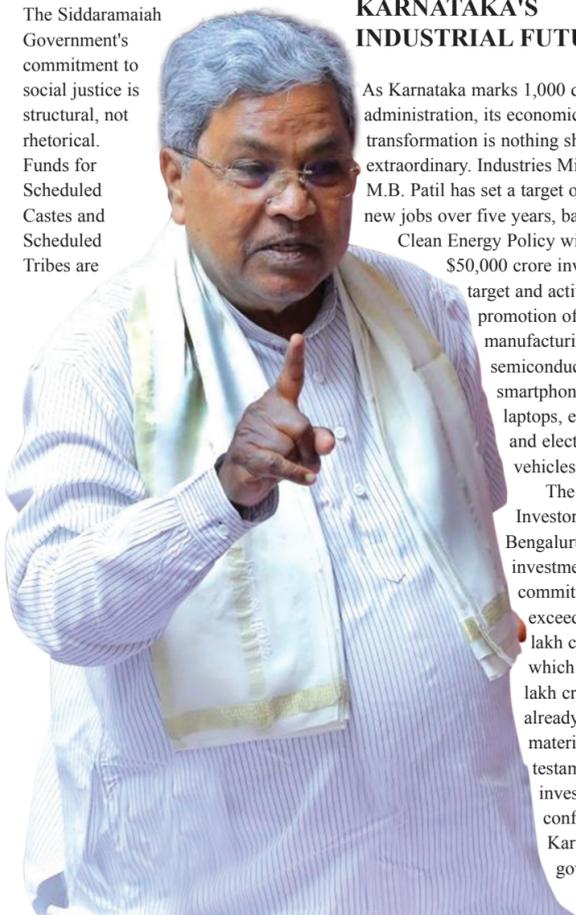
The India Justice 2025 report has ranked Karnataka first among large States in police and judicial systems — a recognition of the quality of governance that has characterised these 1,000 days.

1,000 DAYS: A FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE

As Karnataka celebrates this milestone, the numbers tell one story and the lived experience of its people tells another — and both are stories of progress.

From the woman in Kalaburagi who travels freely to work under the Shakti scheme, to the farmer in Mandya who received fair price support for his sugarcane, to the young engineer in Mangaluru whose startup received ELEVATE funding, to the family in Bidar who finally holds a clear title to their land — the government's 1,000 days have been felt in homes, fields, factories, and classrooms across this great State.

Chief Minister Sri Siddaramaiah said it best: "Pro-people administration has always been my objective." On February 17, 2026, Karnataka did not merely mark 1,000 days in office — it marked 1,000 days of a promise kept, and the confident beginning of many more to come.



FIVE GUARANTEES, MILLIONS OF LIVES CHANGED

The guarantee schemes are not merely fiscal instruments — they are life-changing interventions delivered at scale. Under Gruha Lakshmi, Rs58,863 crore has reached 1.24 crore families directly into the hands of women.

Gruha Jyoti has extended free electricity up to 200 units to 1.65 crore households at a cost of Rs22,839 crore, ensuring that no Karnataka home is left in darkness.

The Shakti scheme has enabled 6.68 crore women to travel freely on public buses, saving each family Rs1,500 to Rs2,000 every month and opening new horizons of mobility and independence.

Yuvanidhi has supported 3.0 crore youth at a cost of Rs912 crore, while Annabhagya has delivered food security to 72.02 crore beneficiaries — a guarantee that no Kannadiga will go hungry.

The total outlay for these five schemes stands at Rs1,18,211.7 crore, and every rupee has been delivered with accountability and purpose.



MORE SHADES OF EXCLUSION

A lifetime of living as political pariahs

For Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India, the Citizenship Amendment Act has only sharpened the edge of exclusion

K.A. Shaji

When Tamil Nadu votes for a new assembly on 23 April, the ritual of democracy will unfold with familiar precision. Polling booths will open at dawn, voters will queue up in the heat, fingers marked with indelible ink will affirm participation in the Republic. But across more than a hundred refugee camps scattered through the state, nearly 60,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees will watch from the margins. Many arrived as children fleeing war. Their children were born in India, raised in its schools, shaped by its politics and anchored in its society. Yet none of them will vote. Four decades after crossing the Palk Strait in search of safety, they remain outside the democratic compact of the country they call home.

This exclusion is not new, but in the years since the Citizenship Amendment Act was passed, it has acquired a sharper edge and become more visible than ever before.

The story begins with a week of violence in 1983, a 'Black July' that altered the course of Sri Lanka's history. Anti-Tamil riots erupted across the island following the killing of 13 soldiers by Tamil militants. Mobs attacked Tamil neighbourhoods, burned homes and businesses. Hundreds were killed and thousands displaced.

The violence deepened into a civil war that would last more than two decades. For civilians caught between the State and militant groups, escape became the only option. Many crossed the narrow stretch of sea to Tamil Nadu in fishing boats and makeshift vessels. The arrivals came in waves through the 1980s and 1990s. At its peak, more than 200,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees were living in India. Camps were set up as temporary shelters—they would go back when it was safe to return. That moment never came.

While tens of thousands live in towns and villages, more than 58,000 refugees continue to live in government-run camps in Ramanathapuram, Tiruchirappalli, Madurai, Salem and Coimbatore.... Rows of modest houses line narrow lanes. Schools, small shops and tea stalls sustain everyday life. Families receive modest assistance from the state in the form of a monthly allowance, subsidised housing and access to education and healthcare. Over time, many refugees have entered the local workforce as daily wage labourers, while others run small businesses or pursue skilled occupations. Socially and economically, they are part of Tamil Nadu. Legally, they are not.

"We came here when I was eight years old," says S. Tharmalingam from Mandapam camp in Ramanathapuram district. "At that time, we thought we would



Photo: Getty Images

For many refugees staying in camps in Tamil Nadu, going back to Sri Lanka is neither practical nor desirable. Their lives are rooted in India

return in a few years. Now I am over forty. My children were born here, but we still live as refugees."

Under the law, only citizens can vote. Refugees, lacking citizenship, cannot be included in the electoral rolls. This exclusion is painfully evident during elections. Campaign vehicles move through nearby towns, television debates dominate public discourse, and political parties make promises. Camp residents follow these developments closely. But on polling day, they remain at home.

"We watch the news and discuss politics like everyone else," says Jeyarani Selvaraj from Kottapattu camp near Tiruchirappalli. "But when election day comes, we cannot vote." Jeyarani was born in the camp in the early 1990s after her parents fled the war.

"I have never seen Sri Lanka. My whole life is here in Tamil Nadu. But when people ask about citizenship, we do not know what to say."

India does not have a dedicated refugee law. Sri Lankan Tamil refugees are governed through administrative arrangements rather than a clear legal framework. They are allowed to stay, without belonging fully. They receive

welfare support, but their rights are limited. Their movement, employment opportunities and access to property are constrained. Citizenship by birth applies only to those born before 1 July 1987. Naturalisation requires documentation and administrative approval that many refugees struggle to obtain. Applications often remain pending for years. Time passes, but their legal status remains unchanged.

The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 introduced a fast-track route to citizenship for non-Muslim minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. It was presented as a humanitarian measure for persecuted communities. Sri Lankan Tamil refugees were not included. The CAA is based on a specific idea of persecution, one that is defined through religion and limited to Muslim-majority countries. Sri Lanka does not fit this framework. The persecution of Tamils, rooted in ethnicity and language, falls outside its scope. The consequence is a new line of exclusion.

A refugee who entered India from Bangladesh may now access a defined pathway to citizenship within a shorter period. A Sri Lankan Tamil who has lived

The CAA is defined by religion and limited to Muslim-majority countries. Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka do not fit this framework

UP Dalits and the social justice conversation

Will Rahul Gandhi's embrace of Dalit hero Kanshi Ram pay off for the Congress?

Nandlal Sharma

The message conveyed by the Congress party's Samajik Parivartan Diwas (Social Transformation Day) event at Lucknow to mark the 92nd birth anniversary of Kanshi Ram, founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party, is crystal clear.

The streets of Lucknow as well as the stage of the event were awash with posters of Gandhi, Nehru, Maulana Azad alongside those of Kanshi Ram, Shahuji Maharaj, Jyotiba Phule and Bhimrao Ambedkar. The programme at Jupiter Hall in the Indira Gandhi Pratishthan was scheduled to begin at 2.30 p.m., yet by 2 p.m. the hall was packed to capacity. Closely with Kanshi Ram and held positions within the BSP government including K.K. Gautam, Lalmani Prasad, Anees Ansari, Om Prakash Mahto and B.P. Ashok, among others—all hailing from the Dalit, extremely backward and Pasmanda communities.

When Rahul Gandhi addressed the gathering and said that mere sloganeering would achieve nothing, that he needed a hundred individuals willing to dedicate themselves to grassroots-level change in the politics of Uttar Pradesh—nearly the entire audience rose to their feet, chanting with raised fists: "Me! Me!"

None of this, however, is mere coincidence. The political landscape in Uttar Pradesh has undergone a transformation since campaigning began for the 2024 Lok Sabha election—when riding the momentum generated by the inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, the BJP's rallying slogan was '400 paar'. Nearly all political analysts, journalists and their dogs predicted a sweep for the BJP, but instead various sections of the electorate in Uttar Pradesh switched allegiance to the

Congress and Samajwadi Party, restricting the BJP to 33 seats in the state and its overall tally in the Lok Sabha to 240.

Of the 80 Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh, the Congress won six—up from one in 2019. The winners, apart from Rahul Gandhi, included Tanuj Punia (SC), Rakesh Rathore (OBC), Imran Masood (Muslim), Ujjwal Rewati Raman Singh (Bhumihar) and K.L. Sharma (Punjabi).

The Samajwadi Party—a Congress ally within the INDIA bloc—secured 37 seats (up from five in 2019) with Dalits, OBCs and Muslims accounting for 86 per cent of its winning candidates.

A post-poll survey conducted by CSDS-Lokniti in 2024 indicated that INDIA bloc candidates garnered votes of 92 per cent Muslims, 82 per cent Yadavs, 56 per cent non-Jatav Dalits and 25 per cent Jatav Dalits.

This is particularly significant because the BJP, which secured 48 per cent of the non-Jatav Dalit vote in 2019, saw the share drop to 29 per cent in 2024. The NDA found some solace in the fact that while it had received only 17 per cent of the Jatav vote in 2019, its vote share among this group rose to 24 per cent in 2024. This of course did not help the NDA's overall tally with the BJP winning 33 seats (down from 64 in 2019) and its allies bagging three.

This fragmentation of votes resulted in the BSP, led by former chief minister Mayawati, drawing a blank. Senior journalist Kumar Bhavesh Chandra says had the Dalit vote not shifted to the INDIA bloc, the BSP wouldn't have been wiped out. It is also a fact that there is a sense of indecisiveness among the Dalits which is likely to persist till the 2027 assembly elections in 2027.

It is no secret that Mayawati has been consistently cosying up to the BJP, led by Narendra Modi, Amit Shah and Yogi Adityanath. Speaker after speaker referred to this at the 13 March rally—without explicitly naming Mayawati—and repeated that leaders representing these communities are "compromised". Rahul Gandhi, too, alleged that prime minister Modi was "compromised"—a charge he contrasted with the conduct of Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram, neither of whom ever compromised on their principles.

Anil Jaihind, head of the Congress party's OBC wing, rightly observed that it is not merely leaders of the ruling party who are compromised but many in the Opposition as well. In contrast, Rahul Gandhi was openly speaking in favour of social justice, much like Kanshi Ram. Incidentally, Rahul Gandhi subsequently wrote to the prime minister demanding a Bharat Ratna for Kanshi Ram. This evoked a quick response from Mayawati who posted on X that the Congress was now trying to capitalise on the icons of the BSP.

It is not as if the Congress—or Rahul Gandhi—has suddenly begun speaking up for Dalits and their cause of social justice. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge is a Dalit. The Bihar assembly elections were fought under Rajesh Ram, also a Dalit.

One needs to mention here that the Congress and Rahul Gandhi did not suddenly decide to champion the cause of

Dalits and social justice. Throughout the Bharat Jodo Yatra and after, Rahul Gandhi has consistently been outspoken on issues related to the Constitution, caste census and reservations. During the Lok Sabha elections, his message—that 'the Constitution is in danger'—resonated with people all over the country and specially the disadvantaged classes. This was not merely a slogan.

Rahul Gandhi has successfully conveyed the message that the Constitution, which serves as the only safeguard for the rights of India's disadvantaged—Dalits, OBCs, Adivasis, minorities—from various forms of social exploitation and oppression, is currently under threat. Whenever he holds up a copy of the Constitution—easily identified by its red cover—at public rallies, the audience understands what he is saying: that the only way to protect their rights is to fight for the sanctity of this document.

This line of thought, the same dialogue with the people was reinforced through a series of 'Samvidhan sammelans'. The cumulative effect of these initiatives is a new public image of Rahul Gandhi as a sympathiser and reliable ally of the backward, the deprived, the oppressed.

Khalid Anis Ansari, sociologist and professor at Azim Premji University, views the efforts to reshape and expand the Congress thus: "Compared to Kanshi Ram's classic definition of social justice (the '85 versus 15' paradigm), Rahul Gandhi's vision of social justice is more expansive. It encompasses the working class, the labourer and the poor. It is not purely caste-centric; it also incorporates economic dimensions. Until now, Rahul Gandhi was a leader who lacked a distinct constituency (community or vote bank) of his own. Conversely, there are numerous constituencies that lack a leader or political party to represent them."

Ansari says it is in this context that the party has the option to reach out to those communities that are not typically recognised as the vote banks of any established party—the *ati-Dalits* (most marginalised Dalits), *ati-pichhdas* (most backward classes) and the Pasmandas. "The reality," he adds, "is that, among those who speak on social justice, Rahul Gandhi stands out as the sole visible figure; for those who do not align with the ideology of the Sangh and the BJP, there appears to be no alternative to Rahul Gandhi." ■



Photo: Getty Images

Rahul Gandhi at the Samajik Parivartan Diwas rally in Lucknow

Rahul Gandhi has championed the cause of the marginalised with consistency and tenacity—the UP event was not just a political gambit

Let's leave it be is the verdict

Nisha Susan on why a petition demanding a mandatory paid period leave policy for workplaces in India has knickers in a twist

Years ago, I watched a well-known 'upper caste' writer announcing on stage at a literary festival that he had learnt to cook because his mother practised ritual seclusion during her period every month. He sneered as he said it and though I've had the opportunity to watch him sneer many times before and after, that particular sneer has stayed laminated in my memory. He had offered this anecdote to the universe as part of his anti-caste activist persona and I was amazed (once again) at how often my fellow savarnas fling women's labour like party confetti. This 30-something man could well have resented his mother and profited by writing about it like the rest of us. Instead, he chose to represent his ability to cook (something he was very vain about and deployed like a social *brahmastra*) as something he was forced into as a tender lad because of his mother's self-indulgence. He could have substituted "because of her periods" with "because she was smoking ganja" and his tone would have stayed the same. Where was Appa? We don't know but I presume he had a long day of sneers to accomplish.

I found myself thinking about that delicate fraud when I read about the Supreme Court's response to a writ petition seeking paid menstrual leave for women in all workplaces in India. The court's disposal order says the 'competent authority' (Union government/ ministry of women and child development) 'may consider the representation and examine the possibility of framing a policy on menstrual leave after consulting all relevant stakeholders'. The observations of the bench, consisting of CJI Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi, expressed deep concern that a mandatory paid menstrual leave policy would discourage the private sector from hiring women and cause discrimination against women in the workplace. CJI Surya Kant reportedly said, "If they are giving (it) voluntarily, then it's excellent. But the moment you introduce it as a compulsory condition in law, you do not know the damage it will do to the career

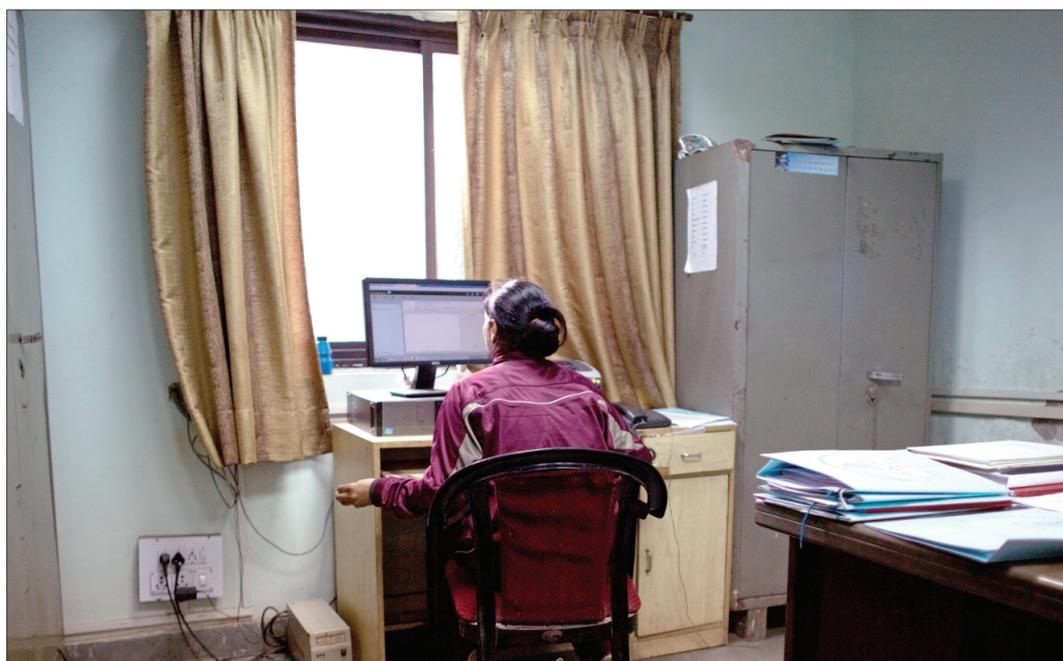


Photo: Getty Images

Equal, did you say? One only has to look at the number of women hired in the organised sector to get the real picture

of women. They (employers) will say you should sit at home... nobody will give them responsibilities, even in judicial services, a normal trial will not be assigned to them."

When workplaces need to include under-represented groups—women, trans people, people with disabilities—inevitably there is twitching and frothing and raising of 'practicalities'. Yet the average workplace is an irrational environment teeming with prejudice and impractical behaviour. Offices are full of inexplicable ritual and irrational displays. CEOs and founders go on LinkedIn every day to air their most nutty ideas about hiring employees and keeping employees. "We only interview

people on weekends at midnight'. 'Our employees sleep in the office to get things done'. 'Why are employees so eager to go home and gaze upon their wives?' Men in charge of hundreds of lives and incomes type up screeds like this and we all respond part mocking, part worried that this is what it means to be hardcore. Instead of declaring this a global mental health crisis. When nurses go on strike—because thankfully they can draw on a history of nurses going on strike—it is often because their precious degree certificates are being held hostage. Shady and non-shady establishments alike are all about the free market until their staff want to be practical

It's all too common for workplaces to invoke 'practicalities' when it comes to hiring under-represented groups

and rational—that is, seek better pay and better working conditions.

When workplaces have worker-friendly regulations thrust upon them—maternity leave, limits on work hours, anti-sexual harassment policies—through labour activism and law, their inevitable response is 'don't say we didn't warn you, but we won't be hiring people who make our workplaces difficult'. If you lived through the relatively recent MeToo years as a working adult, you could have filled your Notes app with details from tut-tutting conversations about how women will not be hired any more. What did those conversations mean? That you can't control your male employees? That you are not equipped for complex conversations about privilege and power? That you would rather keep paying the same sexual assaulter than hire non-violent employees? That you are not prepared for turmoil? Not that India believes in hiring women in the organised sector anyway. I will leave you to go look up the ever-depressing numbers.

Would implementing period leave in India be complicated? Of course. Would it need new models and revised models before it works? Sure.

The vaunted shift from maternity leave to parental leave in Sweden started in the 1970s, but it took decades of legislation and thoughtful adjustments to make it so that fathers took up their share of early parenting. Would legislated menstrual leave help millions of women think of work, at least conceptually, as a social realm that welcomes them—rather than tolerates them? Yes. Capitalism has never been logical or practical. Why pretend otherwise? Money moves like a beast and folks try to ride its tail pretending they have it on a leash.

I have been at a workplace where a creepy member of the top leadership secretly moved to another city, drew a salary for many months, stopped answering the phone, was fired and then... then he was re-hired some time later. You can't tell me that hiring him again was a practical decision. Perhaps everyone involved was on their period. Or maybe they were doing ganja. ■

Care needs a community

Karnataka's decision to introduce Kerala-style palliative care builds on a quiet revolution that began in Kozhikode

K.A. Shaji

When Karnataka announced in its budget that it would introduce Kerala-style home-based palliative care in collaboration with Pallium India, the decision carried a significance that went beyond any health policy. It pointed to a quiet experiment that began in Kozhikode three decades ago and gradually transformed the way suffering could be understood within India's healthcare system.

Across Kerala today, small teams of nurses, doctors and volunteers travel every day through narrow village roads and crowded town streets, stopping at addresses rarely recorded in hospital registers. Inside these homes are patients who have exhausted curative treatment. Some are in the final stages of cancer. Others live with paralysis, dementia or severe neurological illness. For them, the arrival of a palliative care team brings what modern medicine often overlooks once treatment ends—relief from pain, guidance for families, the assurance that they will not be abandoned simply because their disease cannot be cured. The idea that care should reach the patient rather than the patient chasing care is now widely known as the Kerala model of palliative care. Yet its origins were remarkably modest.

In the early 1990s, doctors at Kozhikode Medical College noticed a troubling pattern. Patients with advanced illness were discharged from hospitals with little support. Families were left to manage severe pain and complicated symptoms at home. Many patients spent their final weeks in silent suffering. For anaesthesiologist M.R. Rajagopal, the situation raised a fundamental question about the purpose of medicine. "When a cure is not possible, care becomes even more important," he says. "Care should reach the patient rather than forcing the patient to search for care."

Together with surgeon Suresh Kumar and a small group of colleagues, Dr Rajagopal started the Pain and Palliative Care Society at Kozhikode Medical College in 1993. The effort was small and informal. Doctors contributed modest amounts of money to run the clinic. Volunteers helped with patient registration and basic support. What distinguished the initiative was its philosophy: patients with incurable illnesses were not to be abandoned by the

healthcare system.

Early years revealed another challenge: many patients were too weak to travel to hospital. Some lived in remote villages. Others could not afford repeated medical visits. And so, doctors and nurses began visiting patients at home. Those visits transformed the programme.

"When we started entering people's homes, we realised that suffering was much larger than physical pain," says Dr Kumar. "Families were under emotional strain. Many faced financial hardship. Illness affected the entire household." It became clear that palliative care had to extend beyond clinical treatment. Emotional support, practical assistance and community involvement were equally important. This realisation led to the most important innovation in the movement's history.

In 1999, the programme expanded into what came to be known as the Neighbourhood Network in Palliative Care. Instead of depending entirely on doctors and nurses, it mobilised communities to participate in caring for patients in their own localities. Volunteers were trained to identify patients who required support. Medical teams organised home visits. Community groups raised funds to help families with medicines and other necessities.

Palliative care moved out of hospital wards and into neighbourhoods. Teachers, students, shopkeepers and retired people began joining as volunteers. Many had witnessed illness within their own families and understood how isolating it could be. The network spread rapidly across Kerala. Today, hundreds of palliative care units operate with the help of thousands of trained volunteers. The services are not limited to cancer patients. Individuals recovering from stroke, those living with dementia or suffering from severe neurological disorders are all included.

Despite accounting for a small share of India's population, Kerala provides a large proportion of the country's organised palliative care services. For Dr Rajagopal, the strength of the model lies in its social foundation. "This works because communities feel responsible for one another," he says. "It is not simply a medical programme. It is a community response to suffering."

For nearly a decade, the movement expanded largely through voluntary effort



Kerala today has hundreds of palliative care units that operate with the help of thousands of trained volunteers

The idea that care should reach the patient rather than the patient chasing care has now come to be known as the Kerala model of palliative care

character. Training also expanded rapidly. The Institute of Palliative Medicine in Kozhikode, which grew from the original clinic, now attracts healthcare professionals from across India and other countries seeking to learn from Kerala's experience. An important institution in spreading these ideas has been Pallium India, a non-profit organisation founded by Dr Rajagopal in Thiruvananthapuram in 2003.

Pallium India works to improve access to palliative care and pain relief across the country. It conducts training programmes for doctors and nurses, runs clinics and advocates policy reforms that make essential medicines more accessible. Through partnerships with hospitals and governments, the organisation has helped introduce palliative care initiatives in several states.

Training collaborations have been established with institutions such as the Bhagwan Mahaveer Cancer Hospital in Jaipur, the Gujarat Cancer and Research Institute in Ahmedabad and the MNJ Institute of Oncology in Hyderabad. Programmes inspired by the Kerala model have appeared in other states like Assam, Rajasthan, Delhi, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Even remote regions have begun exploring the approach. In Himachal Pradesh's Chamba district, community-based initiatives are experimenting with home-based care for patients living in mountainous villages far from hospitals. The model has also drawn attention beyond India. Healthcare professionals in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries have studied Kerala's experience while designing their own palliative care systems.

and local support. Eventually, the state government recognised its importance. In 2008, Kerala introduced the country's first state policy dedicated to palliative care. The policy integrated these services into the public health system and encouraged local self-government institutions to support community initiatives. Primary health centres began operating palliative care programmes. Panchayats provided logistical and financial support for home visits.

The movement gained institutional backing without losing its community





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NATION

DIVIDE-AND-RULE COMES TO LADAKH
How the BJP is trying to derail the agitation for Sixth Schedule rights

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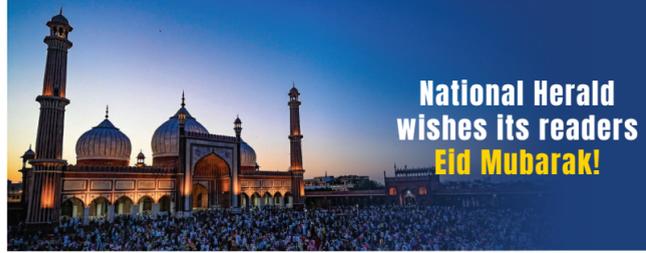
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National Herald wishes its readers Eid Mubarak!



Lessons from a mindless 'war of choice'

Ashok Swain

There is a particular kind of strategic trap arrogant powerful leaders repeatedly fall into. A war launched with limited objectives achieves early tactical success, but gets defined over time by the one goal it cannot achieve. In Vietnam, it was the collapse of the government in Hanoi. In Iraq, it was the creation of an obedient political order. In Afghanistan, it was to dismantle the Taliban as a political force. In the current US-Israel war against Iran, that ambitious objective is 'regime change'.

Despite their overwhelmingly superior firepower, the aggressors have not managed to engineer a collapse of the Islamic Republic. On the contrary, the regime has consolidated around a harder line and gained from a surge of nationalistic sentiment in the face of foreign aggression.



Photo Getty Images

Trump, figure this! The war has inflicted severe damage on Iran but it has also apparently consolidated the regime around a harder line

The first phase of the war was framed as a campaign against the Iranian leadership and its military infrastructure. The assassination of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was meant to be a decisive decapitation strike. Iran's key command structures were targeted, its scientists and military officers killed, its alleged nuclear facilities bombed again. In the early hours of the conflict, it was still possible to argue that the campaign was directed primarily at the regime.

Many Iranians who have long resented the Islamic Republic might initially have seen hope in the strikes, seen the attack as a direct challenge to a government that has suppressed dissent and curtailed freedoms. But that sentiment evaporated fast. On the very first day of the war, the attack on an all-girls elementary school in Minab killed 186 students and their teacher. As the war progressed, the Trump administration's reasons for going into it shape-shifted and the target list expanded to oil facilities, desalination plants, civilian aircraft and infrastructure, even UNESCO heritage sites. It was now evident to ordinary Iranians, even those who hate the regime, that this was no war to liberate them.

This transformation is politically decisive. Regime change is not simply a military outcome but a social and political process. It requires a fractured ruling elite, a mobilised opposition capable of seizing power and a population whose anger is directed at its own rulers rather than foreign aggressors. The US

has managed to turn their ire onto itself.

The installation of Mojtaba Khamenei as the new supreme leader illustrates this failure. His father's killing was expected to produce institutional chaos that might destabilise the Islamic Republic. Instead the system adapted quickly. Leadership did change but the regime survived. In fact, the new leader assumed power under conditions that will reinforce his authority rather than weaken it. Wartime succession often strengthens regimes because leadership transitions occur under the banner of national defence. The younger Khamenei is now a symbol of continuity under siege.

What the US and Israel underestimated was Iran's memory of foreign meddling in their affairs. For more than a century, Iranians have experienced repeated attempts by outside powers to reshape the country's politics in order to exploit its resources. The

Military superiority may degrade enemy capability and kill its leaders, but it cannot win legitimacy with a victim population

Tobacco Protest of 1891-92, when the monarchy granted a British company control over Iran's tobacco industry and a mass boycott then forced it to cancel the concessions, was one of the country's first demonstrations of organised popular resistance to foreign economic domination.

In 1953, the US and Britain jointly orchestrated the overthrow of Iran's democratically elected prime minister Mohammad Mosaddegh after he nationalised the country's oil industry. The coup restored Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to power and ushered in decades of authoritarian rule backed by Western governments, conditions that produced the anger and resentment that eventually fuelled the 1979 revolution and reshaped the country's political destiny.

Even after the revolution, external pressure continued to bear upon Iran's national trajectory. In the 1980s, the US

supported Iraq during Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran, a brutal eight-year war that claimed hundreds of thousands of Iranian lives. In later decades, waves of sanctions imposed by Washington crippled the Iranian economy, imposing enormous hardship on its citizens.

That historical context explains why the current war is producing the opposite of its intended effect. Instead of isolating the regime from its society, the conflict is reinforcing the regime's central narrative that Iran is a nation under constant external threat. Sovereignty and self-determination, powerful themes in Iranian politics, are once again in sharp focus, and even Iranians vocal about their demand for political reform and greater freedoms are unwilling to support the destruction of their country in the name of liberation.

Many in the Iranian diaspora who were initially supporting the US military campaign are feeling disoriented by the turn this war has taken. They had believed a limited war might accelerate the collapse of the Islamic Republic, an outcome they so desired, but the wanton destruction of civilian infrastructure, the loss of civilian lives in Iran is not a price even they are reconciled to pay. Even those who once symbolised resistance to the regime find themselves in a moral bind as their country bleeds.

Inside Iran, large crowds have taken to the streets, not to protest the government but to protest the war. Their demonstrations are expressing anger with the foreign aggressor and solidarity with the state.

For the US and Israel, the result is a paradox. The war has inflicted severe damage to Iran's military, nuclear and civilian infrastructure. Yet it has also politically strengthened the regime. In the eyes of ordinary Iranians, the Islamic Republic is today not just the apparatus that rules the country but the people who defend the country against foreign aggression. This outcome also underlines the incomprehension characteristic of so many Western interventions in West Asia. Military superiority does not automatically translate into political transformation. Bombing campaigns may degrade capabilities and kill leaders, but they cannot manufacture legitimacy or determine how a society interprets external violence. ■

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



How to undermine elections, Assam style

Yogendra Yadav

Sir, I can tell you this with 200 per cent certainty. The election announcement won't come before 14 March. And let me add this—whatever happens in the other states, elections in Assam will be wrapped up before 14 April."

This was from about two weeks ago. We were crisscrossing Assam. I'd assumed that elections in four states would be announced end-February/early-March. When that didn't happen, I called a political worker in Assam.

He opened my eyes. "Look, sir, the prime minister is scheduled to visit Assam on the 13th or 14th. He'll make some big announcements. The Election Commission will wait for that, and only then impose the Model Code of Conduct. But after that, elections will be rushed through in Assam. This time, during Bihu, you'll see Zubeen Garg's photos everywhere, his songs playing—reminding people that the government never investigated his death. So, the BJP wants the elections over before Bihu begins on 14 April."

And that is exactly how it played out. Prime Minister Modi visited Assam on 13-14 March. In two days, he announced dozens of development schemes for the state: released the next instalment of the PM-Kisan scheme, distributed land titles to tea garden workers, flagged off three new trains, laid the foundation for an

expressway from Silchar to Shillong, and dedicated a new hydropower project—promised investments of Rs 47,800 crore just ahead of the announcement of poll dates. And in every speech, he lashed out at the previous Congress government.

The very next day—15 March—the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced elections in four states and the Model Code of Conduct kicked in. No one was surprised by the choreography—we have grown used to it.

We've grown used to another thing: just

before elections, cash will be transferred directly into voters' bank accounts as inducement. In keeping with this new tradition, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma was suddenly overcome with concern for women's welfare just ahead of the polls.

Under the state's Orunodoi scheme, four million women in self-help groups receive Rs 1,250 a month. But this time, in an outpouring of concern, they'll receive a lumpsum of Rs 9,000—six months' advance, plus a Bihu bonus. Clearly, this year's Bihu



Photo Getty Images

Himanta Biswa Sarma (left) has learnt his Machiavellian manoeuvres from the best in the business

is special. Last month, unemployed youth were also given a one-time payment of Rs 2,500 as 'life inspiration'. Nobody asked what inspired this inspiration dole, not even the media that otherwise scoffs at 'freebies'. Not even the Supreme Court, which often frets about the culture of handouts.

We've grown used to it. We've also grown used to elections bringing with them a storm of lies, a downpour of hate, spatters of blood.

On this count, Himanta Biswa Sarma has outdone even Yogi Adityanath.

Sarma openly urged his party workers to ensure that the votes of 'Miya' Muslims are struck off in the revision of voter lists. He even claimed that his party had filed objections against five lakh such voters. Not stopping there, the chief minister called for an economic boycott of Bengali-speaking Muslim citizens in his own state—asking people to pay a 'miya' rickshaw puller Rs 4 instead of Rs 5, to harass them in every possible way.

On a television programme, the chief minister candidly admitted that he knows

Bengali Muslims cannot be legally deported from Assam. "So I create pressure so that they leave on their own."

If that still wasn't clear enough, the Assam BJP released a video showing Sarma holding a pistol, aimed at a stereotyped 'miya' Muslim figure and a Congress leader seated beside him.

Not everyone, it seems, is inured to this kind of naked bigotry. They protested. The video was quietly taken down, but no action was taken for spreading hate.

Some naïve intellectuals in Assam made the mistake of approaching the Supreme Court against the chief minister's statements. Ever ready to intervene in matters big and small, the court promptly sent them back—empty-handed—to Gauhati High Court.

They, too, will get used to it. There is only one thing we are not yet used to.

In the United States, it is called gerrymandering—drawing electoral boundaries so as to ensure the victory of a particular party. We have learnt much from America but we hadn't yet reached this stage of 'development'. Assam has now crossed that threshold.

In 2023, parliamentary and assembly constituencies were redrawn in Assam. The order may have been issued by the Election Commission, but its meaning was spelt out by the chief minister himself. Right at the outset, he had declared that the delimitation exercise would reduce the electoral influence of 'miya' Muslims. Exactly what happened: the Election Commission carved out bizarrely shaped constituencies—some snake-like, others resembling crabs. The result: Muslim-majority assembly constituencies are down from 29 (out of 126) to 22.

This hasn't been normalised yet in the rest of the country. Not every Indian knows this or is accustomed to this. But habits have a way of forming—we'll get used to this too. ■

We've grown used to elections bringing along a storm of lies and hate, but Assam has set new standards

Divide-and-rule comes to Ladakh

Rashme Sehgal

A devious game is being played in Ladakh by the mandarins of the ministry of home affairs. In January, a new socio-political group—the Force of Buddhist Ladakh (VBL)—was formed in Leh, claiming to be the ‘true representative’ of the region’s Buddhists.

The Ladakh Apex Body (LAB) and the Kargil Democratic Alliance (KDA), who have jointly fielded the concerns of the Ladakhi people, believe VBL was created to divide Ladakh’s influential Buddhist community and sow discord within the LAB, which has led a sustained protest since Ladakh was reduced to a Union Territory in 2019.

Led by Skarma Namtak, the VBL claims Buddhists are ‘under-represented’ in the MHA’s high-powered committee (HPC) and accuses the LAB of ‘undermining Buddhist interests’.

The LAB has countered by publicly calling the VBL a ‘BJP creation’ aimed at fracturing Leh-Kargil unity. LAB and KDA leaders cite heavy policing of their protests, and the detention of Sonam Wangchuk, who was arrested under the National Security Act during his hunger strike for Sixth Schedule status. Wangchuk was released on 14 March after five months in Jodhpur Jail.

The VBL’s direct access to senior MHA officials and the Lt Governor—and its freedom from similar crackdowns—are

signs of favouritism by a government that has created a ‘fringe’ group to suit its own agenda.

Namtak’s line has been that Buddhist-majority Leh and Muslim-majority Kargil “cannot be represented by one single body”, given their “vastly different settlements, cultural and religious identities.”

What’s more, he is willing to settle for less: a regional advisory council rather than full statehood.

“It’s obvious the MHA is trying to splinter us,” says Konchok Stanzin, former LAHDC executive councillor from Chushul. “Kargil has a slightly higher population growth rate than Leh, which the VBL is exploiting.”

An outspoken critic of the BJP, Stanzin adds that Ladakhis are becoming strangers in their own land. “After 2019, most of our land is being bought by outsiders to set up their own businesses.”

Asgar Ali Karbalai, co-chairman of the KDA and former chief executive councillor of the LAHDC, is equally upset. “The Centre is trying to divide us on the basis of religion but they won’t succeed. Their claim that the people of Zaskar did not support our struggle for autonomy was shattered on 16 March. People from Zaskar right up to Turtuk village abutting Pakistan, from Matayen (the first Ladakhi village after crossing Zoji La Pass) right up to the border village of Chushul, rallied in huge numbers to support our legitimate demands, as did many Buddhist monks.”

Accusing the Centre of gerrymandering, Karbalai said, “Only protest marches get us meetings; otherwise, dead silence. In five years, we’ve had 15 meetings with the MHA. Our demands are clear: statehood and our own legislature. As a UT without a legislature, we have no control over our finances.”

Karbalai’s logic is sound: “If four northeastern states can be included under the Sixth Schedule, which provides for autonomous councils that create laws as per local customs, why can’t we be similarly empowered? The MHA tells us we’re making too much of the Sixth Schedule, it has been diluted, with judicial and financial powers appropriated by the Centre. All it wants to do is rename the Leh Autonomous Council a ‘territorial council’. The Sixth Schedule exists to protect tribal populations, to enable them to frame laws on land, health and agriculture. That’s what we are fighting for.”

Lt Governor V.N. Saxena’s recent



The people of Ladakh, Buddhists and Muslims alike, are united in the demand to retain their rights over their land

Photo: Getty Images

statement that there’s no room for protest in Ladakh has not gone down well with Ladakhis. “What does he mean by that?” asked Karbalai. “The Constitution gives us the right to protest and we will continue to do so till our demands are met.”

LAB co-chairman Dorjay Labrook believes the government rejected their demand for statehood and Sixth Schedule status on the grounds that the entire region is inhabited by schedule tribes who do not need special protection. Labrook, who is also the chairman of the Ladakh Buddhist Association, points out, “Meghalaya has autonomous councils under the Sixth Schedule—why not Ladakh? The government is misleading us.”

During protracted negotiations, the MHA reportedly offered a ‘territorial council’ for Ladakh with Article 371-like provisions and a chief executive councillor to be designated chief minister of the Union Territory. This has been rejected outright. “Strengthening hill councils was never our demand,” says Labrook.

Maintaining that the LBA is the primary representative body, Labrook warns against the attempt to divide the Buddhist community. While he sees the formation of the VBL as “a matter of concern”, KDA member Sajjad Kargili is more forthright. “The MHA is trying to break our unity.

“Ladakh is the size of Punjab. It has huge potential. And it’s obvious the Centre wants to hand it over to crony capitalists”

“We have always been in favour of dialogue. The recent rally was an appeal to the government to come to the table and talk. If they refuse our demands, we will be compelled to continue our Gandhian agitation of non-violent satyagraha.”

A unanimous demand across Ladakh is that locals retain their rights over the land. As Kargili says, “Ladakh is the size of Punjab. It has huge potential. It is obvious the Centre wants to hand over this land to its crony capitalists. Our land must be safeguarded at all costs.”

On the Solar Energy Corporation’s near-complete solar farm, he added, “The government hopes to generate 13 gigawatts of power from it.”

The government can admit hoarse that all this is part of administrative reform for better governance, but the public sees it as opening up Ladakh’s precious resources to corporates. Solar parks and mining projects in this environmentally fragile area will see thousands of workers pouring in from other regions. They could eventually acquire domicile status and permanently alter demographics.

Even the creation of five new districts—Sham, Nubra, Changthang, Zaskar and Drass—is viewed as an ominous move to reshape this volatile—and valuable—region’s profile. ■

We Ladakhis are small in number; our strength lies in our unity. The people of J&K praise us for staying united despite the Centre’s efforts to divide us along religious lines. Don’t forget that our language and culture is the same. They arrested Sonam Wangchuk to break our organisation. He was released to save face because the Supreme Court would have revoked his detention,” claims Kargili. Following his release, Wangchuk said,

“If four N-E states can have Sixth Schedule rights—autonomous councils and the right to create laws as per local customs—why not us?”

Where there’s a will...

...there’s a way to stand up to bulldozer justice. A judge shows the way in UP

A.J. Prabal

For years, Uttar Pradesh’s governance has been synonymous with a culture of ‘bulldozer justice’, fake encounters, arbitrary arrests, a blatant disregard for the rule of law. Rather than adhering to constitutional principles, the bureaucratic interpretation of justice often bent to political convenience. Recently, and remarkably, judicial intervention—led notably by Justice Atul Sreedharan of the Allahabad High Court—is beginning to restore faith in the courts.

Justice Sreedharan has critically challenged many actions of the state that infringed on citizens’ fundamental rights, particularly religious freedom, and has openly chastised officials for failing in their primary duty to maintain law and order without violating constitutional

guarantees. His bold judgments and outspoken observations serve not only as remedies to specific injustices but also as a clarion call for systemic change.

Consider Sambhal. When the district administration issued an order limiting the number of people offering prayers at a mosque during Ramzan, the court simply asked the additional advocate general, “Are such restrictions placed in temples? A stampede occurred at the Maha Kumbh Mela (last year in Prayagraj), did you restrict two persons per three square feet there? If the Hindus are praying in their houses, can they be stopped from doing so?”

When the state government defended the restriction on the grounds of maintaining law and order, the court’s observation was piercing. Justice Sreedharan said, “If the superintendent of police (SP) and district magistrate (DM) believe that a law-and-

order situation may arise due to a large number of people offering prayers inside the premises, they should either resign from their posts or seek a transfer out of Sambhal.” He reminded the law officers that it is the duty of the State to ensure law and order in all circumstances.

In a separate case in January 2026, the court pulled up state government officials for insisting that Christian devotees needed prior permission to gather in private homes for prayer meetings. The high court laid down the law in plain terms. There was no such requirement of prior government or police permission to conduct worship or prayers on private property.

Could similar restrictions be imposed on Hindus praying or singing bhajans in their own homes, asked the court, and observed that the rule of law must treat all citizens equally.

Mahmood Madani, president of the Jamiat Ulama-e-Hind, said, “Over the past few years—particularly in Uttar Pradesh—there have been several instances where FIRs were registered, arrests were made, and police action taken merely for offering prayers or religious gatherings. Peaceful worship was wrongly projected as

a law-and-order issue, causing unnecessary fear and distress among law-abiding citizens. The high court’s ruling has now provided much-needed constitutional clarity.”

John Dayal, human rights activist and member of the All-India Christian Council, said, “What you do inside your home, what you eat, how you dress is a personal matter. Why should any permission be needed? The fact that the court had to step in to restore this basic freedom says a lot about where we have travelled as a nation.”

The same bench of Justices Atul Sreedharan and Siddharth Nandan also issued a contempt notice to the district magistrate and senior superintendent of police, Bareilly, for allegedly restraining certain individuals (including petitioner Tarik Khan) from offering *namaz* inside a private house.

Tarik Khan was first detained on 16 January 2026 along with others for offering *namaz* in an empty home owned by one Reshma Khan, ‘without permission’. No citizen required any permission under the law to offer religious prayers, which is a citizen’s fundamental right under Article 25, the bench said.

One of the least publicised observations of Justice Sreedharan is when he scathingly deplored the ‘caste system’ and the ‘feudal mindset’ in the Madhya Pradesh judiciary. The judges of the high court, he stated, were deemed to be *savarnas* and district judges *shudras*. “The body language of the judges of the district judiciary when they greet a judge of the high court stops just short of grovelling, making the judges of the district judiciary the only identifiable species of invertebrate mammals,” he said. “Judges of the district judiciary not only personally attend to judges of the high court (as desired by them) on railway platforms and wait on them, judges of the district judiciary on deputation to the registry of the high court are almost never offered a seat by the judges of the high court,” he added.

The observation was made while allowing the appeal of a former district judge, Jagat Mohan Chaturvedi, who was dismissed from service in 2015 as a special judge SC/ST.

“They have families, children who go to school, parents undergoing treatment, a home to be built, savings to be accumulated, and when the High Court terminates his service abruptly on account of a judicial order passed by him, he and

his entire family is out on the streets with no pension and the stigma of facing a society that respects his integrity,” said the court, and ordered his pay and pension, besides ordering a lump-sum amount as compensation.

Justice Sreedharan was among those rare high court judges who sought a voluntary transfer out of Madhya Pradesh in 2023 on the grounds that his daughter was about to start practising as a lawyer in Indore. He was transferred to J&K high court, where he pulled up the police for keeping Fahad Shah, the editor of *The Kashmirwallah* in jail since 2022, and ordered that he be released on bail.

The court frowned upon the charge of ‘narrative terrorism’ levelled against Shah and found no evidence that he was involved in any act of violence. It also questioned why Shah was held under UAPA for an article published in 2011.

In 2025, Sreedharan was repatriated to Madhya Pradesh and in August the same year transferred to Chhattisgarh, where he would have been a part of the collegium, being the second highest in seniority.

The Union government, however, intervened, and in October 2025, the collegium—presided over by the then CJI B.R. Gavai—transferred Justice Sreedharan to Allahabad high court, where he is number seven in order of seniority and, therefore, not a part of the collegium which comprises the three seniormost judges. The reassignment was due to government interference and openly acknowledged as such by the Supreme Court collegium which did not provide any details on why the government did not want Justice Sreedharan in the Chhattisgarh high court.

Without referring to the Sreedharan case, Supreme Court Justice Ujjal Bhuyan, said during a talk in Pune, “The Centre can have no say in the transfer and posting of judges. It cannot say that such-and-such judge should or should not be transferred, or if transferred, to such-and-such high court.” He added, “When the collegium itself records in its minutes that the transfer of a high court judge is being made at the behest of the central government, it reveals a striking intrusion of executive influence.”

Justice Sreedharan joins a long list of upright judges in recent years, including Justice Akil Kureshi, Justice Muralidharan and Justice Jayant Patel, who have faced such pressures.

One can only wait and watch how long he lasts in UP. ■



Justice Atul Sreedharan’s reputation preceded him in UP. Seen here ticking off the police in J&K

Justice Sreedharan has challenged actions of the state that infringe on citizens’ fundamental rights, particularly their religious freedom

The meaning of energy sovereignty

Gurdeep Sappal on the alarming increase in India's dependence on oil imports and the policy misadventures that led to this

In 1955, a young minister named Keshav Dev Malviya walked into Jawaharlal Nehru's office with a daring proposal—India had to explore, drill and produce its own crude oil. Western powers and global oil majors lobbied strongly against Malviya's push for a sovereign, state-led oil exploration and production programme. These behemoths controlled the entire petroleum chain and were already pressuring India not to buy cheap Soviet oil—available against payment in rupees. They lobbied against oil exploration in India, citing prohibitive costs and a lack of qualified technical manpower.

Nehru and Malviya, leading a newly independent, underdeveloped nation, stood firm. The result was ONGC, the Oil and Natural Gas Commission, established in 1956. Within three years, India had trained and appointed its first batch of a hundred geologists and geophysicists. The new team struck oil in Cambay in 1959. By 1974, India's first offshore drilling platform at Bombay High was operational, meeting two-thirds of the country's oil needs by the 1980s. ONGC became India's most profitable company and the crown jewel of its energy sovereignty.

Seven decades later, that vision is in tatters. India now produces a meagre 13 per cent of its oil consumption. ONGC, which carried a Rs 13,000 crore cash surplus in 2014, had accumulated Rs 78,000 crore in

debt by 2024—exploited as it was to fund the Modi government's fiscal deficit and cover the Gujarat State Petroleum Corporation (GSPC) fiasco.

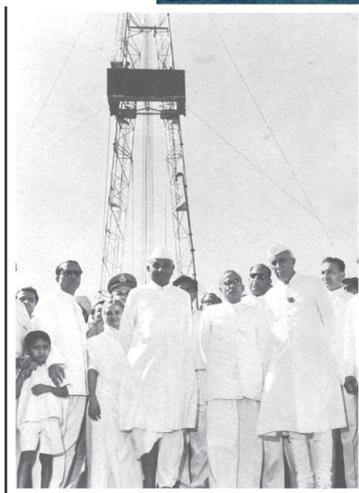
ONGC was forced to acquire GSPC, shelling out Rs 7,480 crore for a block with no commercial production, and to absorb Rs 19,576 crore of its debt. In 2018, it was again forced to purchase a 51 per cent stake in HPCL for Rs 36,915 crore—a transaction in which the government was simultaneously seller and beneficiary, using ONGC as an instrument to meet its own disinvestment targets. The result was a cash-depleted, debt-ridden company, which meant sacrificing capex for future exploration. India's oil production has declined from 26 per cent of domestic consumption in 2014 to 13 per cent today. The International Energy Agency (IEA) projects a further decline to just 8 per cent by 2030.

The oil bond alibi

While systematically weakening domestic production, the Modi government sought the distraction of 'the oil bond crisis' inherited from the UPA years. International crude prices have ranged from \$30–65 per barrel for most of the Modi years—far below the \$145 peak of the UPA era. Yet retail fuel prices remained persistently high and rising, with the oil bond repayment burden cited as justification.

The numbers tell a different story. Between 2014, when the Modi government began its first term in office, and now, the government has repaid Rs 3.2 lakh crore in oil bonds—but collected nearly Rs 44 lakh crore in petroleum taxes in the same period, a 400 per cent increase over the Rs 10.75 lakh crore collected during the UPA years. The oil bond repayment amounted to just 7.2 per cent of its petroleum tax receipts. The public bore a 400 per cent tax increase; the government offered a fiscal sleight of hand in return.

When Narendra Modi took office in May 2014, global crude was at \$107 per barrel, but prices collapsed within months; by January 2016, the 'Indian basket' [a weighted average of international prices for the specific mix of 'sour' (high-sulphur) and 'sweet' (low-sulphur) crude oil grades imported by Indian refineries] had fallen to



\$28—a 74 per cent fall. For a country importing 85 per cent of its oil, this was an extraordinary windfall. Consumers who had endured a decade of high prices deserved relief.

What followed instead was a masterclass in fiscal opportunism. Excise duty on petrol was raised by 350 per cent and on diesel by 380 per cent. Retail prices didn't move downwards. The entire benefit of the greatest oil price crash in decades flowed into government coffers.

The same playbook was deployed when crude crashed below \$20 in April 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2020, the government imposed record single-day hikes—Rs 10 per litre on petrol and Rs 13 on diesel. Petroleum excise revenue that year reached Rs 3.71 lakh crore, a 69 per cent jump in a single year. In April 2025, with Brent crude back at \$63, another Rs 2 per litre was added. Total petroleum tax collections under Modi between 2014–15 and 2025–26 will have exceeded Rs 67 lakh crore including the states' share, with the Union government receiving nearly Rs 44 lakh crore.

The Manmohan Singh years...

The UPA government under Dr Manmohan Singh (2004-2014) governed through an era of brutal crude prices—the



Nehru backed K.D. Malviya's (standing to Nehru's right) vision of self-sufficiency in the face of stiff resistance from global oil majors; (above) ONGC's rig in the Krishna-Godavari basin

By 2030, India is seen producing only 8% of its crude demand i.e., it'll have no energy security, no buffer against supply shocks

13 per cent today.

The IEA projects that without major new investments, India will produce just 540,000 barrels per day by 2030, meeting less than 8 per cent of projected consumption. The country will need to import over six million barrels per day, potentially making it the world's second-largest crude importer with an annual oil bill exceeding \$200 billion.

A country importing 92 per cent of its oil has no energy security, no leverage in energy diplomacy, and no buffer against supply shocks—whether from a Middle Eastern conflict, a Strait blockade, or an OPEC production decision.

In the 1950s, India was a nascent democracy with no resources, no trained manpower and no experience in energy governance. Yet within a decade, Nehru built not just a technical workforce for indigenous development but also resolved to resist foreign pressure and chart India's own course. He understood that energy sovereignty is the foundation of all other forms of independence.

ONGC was built against the wishes of the Western oil cartel, through years of painstaking development, and handed to future governments as an instrument of strategic autonomy. What has been done to that institution, and to the consumers who were denied the benefit of three separate windows of cheap global oil, is a story of institutional betrayal dressed in the language of fiscal responsibility.

And as India hurtles towards a 2030 oil import bill that could destabilise its current account, crowd out public investment, and leave its economy perpetually hostage to West Asian politics, the question is no longer whether this was a mistake. The question is whether there is still time and will to correct it. ■

GURDEEP SINGH SAPPAL is a Permanent Invitee to the Congress Working Committee

Established in 1956, ONGC went on to become the crown jewel of India's energy sovereignty. Seven decades later that vision is in tatters

Has Donald Trump met his Waterloo?

Not only has Iran not caved in, his misguided war has caused enormous damage to the economies of his Arab allies in the Persian Gulf

Ashish Ray

On 17 March, in the thick of the ongoing war in West Asia, a senior US intelligence official abruptly tendered his resignation. Joe Kent, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, posted on X, 'After much reflection, I have decided to resign from my position...'

He went on to say, 'I cannot in good conscience support the ongoing war in Iran. Iran posed no imminent threat to our nation, and it is clear that we started this war due to pressure from Israel and its powerful American lobby.' Quite blunt in stating that the attack on Iran was unprovoked and unjustified.

In a sense, Kent's statement made public a view that several members in Trump's cabinet privately hold but have not publicly aired. It is rumoured to be vice-president J.D. Vance's opinion as well. Vance, however, was produced before the press in the Oval Office to support his boss. He said—and this was live on news networks—that he trusted Trump to make sure that 'the mistakes of the past' are not repeated. Vance may find it difficult to distance himself from the double-edged endorsement, if he runs for president in 2028.

CNN reported, 'Kent was a staunch supporter of Trump and the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement.' His was the second public, headline-making departure from the Trump administration in this term after Elon Musk quit within weeks of being named the head of the short-lived and unpopular Department of Government Efficiency. It also exposed a fissure in the Trump regime, which could be the beginning of more dissent and possibly impact him in opinion polls.

At the presser where Vance spoke, Trump, while taking questions, said no intelligence had indicated that Iran might strike at its Arab neighbours in response to the US-Israeli attack. This was ridiculed by commentators, who said this was surely to be expected given that these states had US military bases.

In his letter of resignation to Trump, Kent further says, 'This echo chamber (meaning Israeli officials and a section of media) was used to deceive you into believing that Iran posed an imminent threat to the United States, and that should you strike now, there was a clear path to victory. This was a lie and is the same tactic the Israelis

used to draw us into the disastrous Iraq war that cost our nation the lives of thousands of our best men and women. We cannot make this mistake again.'

He added, 'You can reverse course and chart a new path for our nation, or you can allow us to slip further toward decline and chaos.'

Patty Murray, a Democrat Senator from Washington, once described Kent as a 'conspiracy theorist'. But it's undeniable that Kent possesses considerable experience in the military and counterintelligence, having done 11 combat tours in a 20-year career in the US Army and thereafter working as a CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) officer. His

first wife Shannon was killed in a 2019 incident in Syria while serving as a US Navy cryptologist.

Trump characteristically rubbished Kent, describing him as 'very weak on security'. After the initial wave of bombings on Iran, he had said it posed an 'imminent threat' to the US. Briefings by the Pentagon, the US department of war, to the Senate and the House of Representatives indicated that Iran had no such plans unless struck first.

Trump is putting up a brave face, but he will know from feedback that he has blundered. He didn't expect the resistance Iran has mounted and didn't expect the war to linger. By now, he surely knows he's been taken for a ride by

N Netanyahu. Trump is capable of cutting him loose, of declaring suddenly that the US is done with this war, but he needs a face-saving exit—and Iran is not obliging.

Surveys in the US reveal that Americans, Republicans included, are not in favour of ground troops entering Iran. But there's talk in Washington of a deployment to capture Iran's Kharg island, which has a major oil export facility.

For over a month, the Strait of Hormuz, south of Iran, has been teeming with US Navy ships, including two aircraft carriers. An amphibious assault ship, the USS Tripoli, is said to have been detected by AIS (Automatic Identification System) tracking data

off Singapore. The Tripoli was reportedly carrying a rapid response force of 2,200 marines.

At the White House media event on 16 March, Trump was ambivalent—suggesting that the mission had almost been accomplished but also that Tehran was not agreeing to his terms. He didn't spell out, though, what those terms were. On Tuesday, he lashed out at the US's NATO allies because they 'don't want to get involved' in the conflict. If the US was indeed on the verge of victory, why was he calling on NATO allies?

Not only has Iran defiantly refused to end hostilities, Trump's misguided war has caused enormous damage to the economies of his Arab allies in the Persian Gulf. Their oil and gas sectors have ground to a halt, with Iran choking shipments in the Strait of Hormuz. Their operations as air transport hubs have had to be significantly curtailed. Their reputation as financial capitals, as thriving tourist destinations has taken a huge hit. And even after the war stops, it'll be an uphill task to repair their reputation as safe and attractive destinations.

At an IISS (International Institute of Strategic Studies) seminar in London on the West Asia war, an analyst from the UAE indicated that Gulf nations that have taken a beating in this war would have to seriously rethink US military bases on their soil. The US security umbrella they had depended on for decades has evidently failed them, and now Tehran is demanding the closure of US bases in the region as a precondition for peace. For the US, the promise of protecting its allies is really about protecting its strategic interests in the region. So, it won't just up and leave, but how much credibility will its assurances now carry with these allies? ■



At an Oval Office press meet on 16 March, Vance said he trusted Trump to not repeat "mistakes of the past"

Photo: Getty Images

Trump is putting up a brave face, but he knows from feedback that he has blundered. He needs an off-ramp, but Iran is playing hardball

Another law to target political opponents?

The framing of the 130th amendment bill betrays its political motive. **Ajit Ranade** explains why it's not about keeping criminals out of power

In late February 2026, a Delhi court discharged all 23 accused in the excise policy case, ruling there was "no overarching conspiracy or criminal intent" in the policy at issue. One of the accused had spent 530 days in jail before being cleared. The Enforcement Directorate, which drove much of the prosecution, has registered 193 cases against politicians over the last decade. The total number of convictions has been two, which is barely one per cent.

Now consider this: the proportion of Members of Parliament who have declared pending criminal cases on their self-sworn affidavits has risen from 24 per cent in 2004 to 46 per cent in 2024. Among sitting MLAs across the country, 45 per cent face criminal charges of whom 29 per cent face serious charges including murder, attempt to murder, kidnapping and crimes against women. This criminalisation of politics is real, corrosive to democratic life and getting worse.

This defines the central dilemma of the Constitution (130th Amendment) Bill, 2025, currently before a joint parliamentary committee. The bill mandates the automatic cessation of the ministerial office for prime ministers, chief ministers and cabinet ministers, if they are arrested and detained for 30 consecutive days on charges punishable by five years or more. The intention is to put an end to governance from jail. The mechanism is, however, deeply flawed.

What a pending case actually means

Remember that a case pending in court is not a police FIR, not a noting in a history-sheeter's file, not a complaint lodged by a political rival. Charges are framed only after a full investigation is complete, after a



India's investigative agencies have arrested sitting chief ministers without even framing charges against them—Arvind Kejriwal (left) and Hemant Soren



court has taken cognisance of the offence, and after a judge independently determines that a prima facie case exists. This involves the judicial application of mind. An ordinary citizen with any such criminal blemish on their record cannot get government employment.

And yet politicians across party lines routinely argue that all such cases against them are fabricated or politically motivated. How can this be even in the case of heinous offences such as rape, murder, kidnapping and extortion? Courts do not frame such charges casually.

The wrong trigger

The problem with the bill is that it uses arrest—an executive action—as the trigger for removal from office, rather than the framing of charges by a court. Investigative agencies can arrest and detain without a conviction or even a formal trial. Under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), bail conditions are near-insurmountable. Section 45 imposes twin conditions for release and Section 24 reverses the burden of proof onto the accused. Under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), the difficulty is even greater. Securing bail within 30 days is near impossible.

This creates a structural vulnerability that any government can exploit against its opponents. Arrest rival ministers and hold them under a bail-resistant law for 30 days and evict, even before any court has examined the merits. The bill contains no safeguard against such misuse. The 244th Law Commission Report had explicitly recommended that disqualification be triggered at the stage of the framing of charges by a competent court i.e. the first point at which genuine judicial scrutiny occurs.

The ED data underlines why this matters. The agency has a conviction rate of only 1 per cent over a decade. Its overall PMLA conviction rate since 2019 is barely 6 per cent. This implies that arrest by such agencies is not a reliable proxy for guilt.

The conviction rate paradox

There is one counter-argument. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data reveals that conviction rates in Indian lower courts are, in many jurisdictions, alarmingly low. In Pune's lower judiciary the conviction rate in 2023 was only 8.8 per cent. Over 91 per cent of those who faced criminal trial were acquitted or discharged. If this pattern holds more widely, then any law that bars persons with pending court cases from public office would, in practice, be wrongly disqualifying the overwhelming majority who are innocent.

This is not a trivial objection. It cuts to the heart of what a pending case actually signifies in the Indian judicial context. Does it reflect genuine criminality, or a broken system of prosecution and investigation? The answer quite often, appears to be the latter.

The correct response to this paradox is not to abandon the project of keeping tainted candidates out of public life. It is to fix what is broken. Trials against sitting legislators must be fast-tracked as the Supreme Court directed in 2014 and again in 2017. The government's power to withdraw cases against powerful politicians under Section 321 of the CrPC must be curbed. And investigative agencies must be held to genuine standards of evidence before courts, not used as instruments of pre-trial political pressure.

Other failings

The bill also fails on its own stated logic.

A democracy cannot be held hostage to the criminalisation of politics. Nor should its laws be weaponised for political ends

the electoral arena in the first place.

What genuine reform looks like

For over 25 years, solutions have been documented and ignored. The Vohra Committee (1993), the 170th and 244th Law Commission Reports, the National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution, and the Supreme Court in its 2018 judgment in *Public Interest Foundation v. Union of India*, have all urged Parliament to disqualify candidates at the stage of the framing of charges by a competent court, for offences punishable by five years or more, in cases filed at least six months before the relevant election. Upon conviction for heinous crimes, the disqualification should be permanent. Also, political parties should be under the RTI Act. NOTA should be strengthened.

The ADR's proposed reformulation of the 130th Amendment says that any minister, prime minister, chief minister, MP or MLA against whom charges have been framed by a court for offences under Section 8(1), (2) and (3) of the Representation of the People Act, or for offences carrying a minimum five-year sentence, should be automatically relieved of their position. This is the judicial standard. This is what the Law Commission has repeatedly recommended. This is also what the SC, unable to act itself in 2018, expressly asked Parliament to do.

A democracy cannot be held hostage to laws that can be weaponised for political ends. The 130th Amendment, as drafted, risks being both ineffective against the first problem and dangerously enabling of the second. ■

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

Does a pending case reflect genuine criminality or a broken system of prosecution and investigation? More likely the latter

The policy of no principles...

...can do with a review, suggests **Aakar Patel**. Manmohan Singh's five-point foreign policy doctrine may be a good starting point

On 4 November 2013, then prime minister Manmohan Singh spoke to over 120 heads of Indian missions and outlined the five principles that defined his foreign policy. These were:

- 1 The recognition that India's relations with the world—major powers and Asian neighbours—were shaped by developmental priorities. "The single most important objective of Indian foreign policy," said Singh, "has to be to create a global environment conducive to the well-being of our great country."
- 2 Greater integration with the world economy would benefit India and enable Indians to realise their creative potential.
- 3 To seek stable, long term and mutually beneficial relations with all major powers, and work with the international community to create a global economic and security environment beneficial to all nations.
- 4 To recognise that the Indian subcontinent's shared destiny requires greater regional cooperation and connectivity.
- 5 A foreign policy defined not merely by interests, but also by the values dear to Indians: "India's experiment of pursuing economic development within the framework of a plural, secular and liberal democracy has inspired people around the world and should continue to do so." This was a clear exposition of



Photo: Getty Images

what was sought to be achieved. India would use foreign policy to advance its economic development; it would be friendly with global great powers and its neighbours; and it would be helped to do both by continuing to be a pluralist and secular democracy. I will not go into the present government's foreign policy principles, mainly because it doesn't have any.

This is not a smear or a casual observation—I have devoted an entire chapter in a book to explain why. It is, in fact, the only that the foreign minister not only accepts that our policy has no principles; he says that the lack of principles is the basis of our policy.

In a book of his compiled essays and speeches, he has laid out what he means. What India wanted was a 'multi-polar Asia', meaning one in

which India could claim parity with China. He offers no way of doing this and assumes that we can just because we want it to be so. He writes that many balls would need to be kept in the air—Jaishankar has a fondness for stock phrases—and that India would handle them with dexterity.

This was opportunism but that was alright because opportunism was India's character. Lessons from the Mahabharata, Jaishankar writes, are that deceit and immorality are merely means to avoid playing 'by the rules'.

Drona demanding Eklavya's thumb, Indra appropriating Karma's armour, Arjuna using Shikhandi as a human shield—these were but 'practices and traditions'.

Inconsistency in policy was not only fine but essential because 'obsessing about consistency' made little sense in changing circumstances. Here was a man who could make the insubstantial sound reasonable.

But what was such a doctrine to be called? In a speech he made where he first laid out this doctrine of opportunism and inconsistency, Jaishankar said it is hard to give it a name. He takes it up and discards the phrases—"multi-alignment" ("sounds too opportunistic") and "India first" ("sounds self-centred"). He finally settles on 'advancing prosperity and influence', which he says is accurate, while admitting it isn't catchy. He believes a name for it will eventually present itself if pursued long enough, because part of the challenge, he says, is that we are still in the early phase of a major transition.

This was published in 2020, in the second term of this government. The world—as we can see all around us—has changed since. It has become uncertain and it has turned dangerous, especially for nations that are dependent, as we

are, for energy and external employment, especially in the Gulf.

US president Donald Trump has offered no real reason for starting this third American Gulf War and has articulated no real aims that he wants achieved besides tactical ones.

The minister handling America's defence department appears totally unhinged and incompetent in his press briefings. How the war will conclude is not known to anyone because Iran has a say in how and when it will end.

Israel's involvement in the attack makes this war particularly alarming because unlike America, Israel cannot just cut and run, since it is part of the region and armed with nuclear weapons.

What should India do at this point? What kind of foreign policy should it adopt? Perhaps we will get by on what Jaishankar says we should do. Looking at what we are already doing, it seems clear that we have proceeded along the lines of opportunism. Hours before the war, with an armada in the Gulf, we flew to Tel Aviv to receive a medal, endorsing what was to come.

We have shied away from condemning state assassinations, the mass murder of schoolgirls and the murder of sailors without a declaration of war. Where we see opportunity, such as taking a couple of tankers, we will take it.

We have no role in the larger making of peace or reestablishment of a rules-based order because our creed is opportunism and that means not shaping the world but taking short-term advantages wherever we can.

This might work, but then again it might not. And for this reason, we should revisit first principles and reconsider what Manmohan Singh said about India's external policy, what it intended to achieve and for what reason. ■

Views are personal

GROWTH, GUARANTEES, GOVERNANCE: 1000 DAYS

1,000 days, one vision: Karnataka's rise as a development powerhouse

On February 17, 2026, the Karnataka Government reached a milestone that few administrations can claim with equal confidence — 1,000 days in office measured not in calendars, but in lives changed. From the paddy fields of the northern districts to the gleaming tech corridors of Bengaluru, the proof of purposeful governance is visible in every village, every household, and every aspiring young Kannadiga who today stands on firmer ground than before.

Under the leadership of Chief Minister Sri Siddaramaiah — a leader whose lifelong commitment to social justice has always been his governing compass — this is the story of a government that made promises, kept them, and is only just getting started.

A MANDATE HONOURED, A STATE TRANSFORMED

When Sri Siddaramaiah assumed office for his second term, he carried with him a governing philosophy forged over four decades of public life: that administration exists above all to serve those who have been historically left behind.

Confronting a State emerging from financial instability and institutional drift, his government moved swiftly — restoring fiscal discipline while simultaneously launching the most ambitious welfare architecture in Karnataka's history.

The results speak for themselves. More than Rs1.16 lakh crore has been channelled through five flagship guarantee schemes, and the proportion of households receiving direct government benefits has risen from 9.30 per cent in 2022 to a remarkable 72.70 per cent in 2024 — a statistic that King's College London and Azim Premji University have described as a revolutionary shift in poverty alleviation and women's empowerment.

THE SIXTH AND SEVENTH GUARANTEES

True to form, the government has not stopped at five. The sixth guarantee — the Land Guarantee Scheme — has addressed one of the most persistent sources of citizen hardship: land disputes.

With more than half of all pending court cases in Karnataka linked to land records, the scheme brought the Revenue Department directly to people's doorsteps. Village administrative officers now visit homes, digital records have replaced paper files, and over two lakh families have received their title deeds without setting foot in a government office. The appointment of 1,000 village accountants has strengthened this network across the State.

Deputy Chief Minister Sri D.K. Shivakumar has now announced the seventh guarantee — the Water Guarantee Scheme — which will ensure safe drinking water for every household and adequate irrigation supply across Karnataka, taking the government's covenant with its citizens to its most elemental promise yet.

STANDING WITH FARMERS, STRENGTHENING AGRICULTURE

Karnataka's farmers have found in this government a steadfast ally. When protests erupted over prices for mango, maize, and sugarcane, the government responded immediately — directing

sugar mills to pay fair prices, releasing over Rs300 crore in additional support, and advancing tur dal procurement centres ahead of schedule.

More than Rs10,000 crore in subsidies and support has reached farmers over this period, while 14.21 lakh farmers received Rs2,250 crore in crop damage compensation and 9.07 lakh milk producers benefitted from Rs4,130 crore in incentives.

Seven hours of uninterrupted three-phase power is now guaranteed daily for agricultural pump sets, 11,727 borewells have received power connections, and 3,735 agricultural wells have been dug.

The Krishi Bhagya Scheme has been relaunched with Rs200 crore, and agricultural mechanisation subsidies are making modern farming accessible to smallholders across the State.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AS A GOVERNING PRINCIPLE

The Siddaramaiah Government's commitment to social justice is structural, not rhetorical. Funds for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are



allocated in strict proportion to their population under the SCSP-TSP Act, and financial institutions have been directed to offer loans from Rs20 lakh to Rs10 crore at four per cent interest to SC and ST entrepreneurs.

A caste census — first agreed upon in 2013 — has been initiated to ensure that planning is grounded in accurate demographic data, enabling genuinely equitable resource distribution.

In schools and colleges across the State, the Preamble of the Constitution is now read during morning prayers — a daily reminder to every young Kannadiga of the values of equality, fraternity, and justice.

On International Human Rights Day, more than 2.5 million citizens formed a 2,500-kilometre human chain from Bidar to Chamarajanagara, setting a world record and a powerful statement of shared citizenship.

POWERING KARNATAKA'S INDUSTRIAL FUTURE

As Karnataka marks 1,000 days of this administration, its economic transformation is nothing short of extraordinary. Industries Minister M.B. Patil has set a target of 20 lakh new jobs over five years, backed by a Clean Energy Policy with a

\$50,000 crore investment target and active promotion of domestic manufacturing in semiconductors, smartphones, laptops, electronics, and electric vehicles.

The Global Investors Meet in Bengaluru secured investment commitments exceeding Rs10 lakh crore, of which Rs6.50 lakh crore has already materialised — a testament to investor confidence in Karnataka's governance.

A

genuine single-window system integrating 130 services, developed in partnership with Microsoft and supported by an AI chatbot for application tracking, has made doing business in Karnataka simpler and faster than ever.

Public enterprises have responded in kind: KSDL and MSIL have recorded their highest-ever turnovers and profits, with MSIL's new digital chit-fund platform targeting Rs10,000 crore in annual turnover.

INDIA'S INNOVATION CAPITAL, GROWING STRONGER

Under the stewardship of IT & BT Minister Priyank Kharge, Karnataka has decisively consolidated its position as India's premier technology and innovation hub.

The ELEVATE programme has supported over 1,200 startups with more than Rs1,280 crore in grants, while ELEVATE NXT commits Rs150 crore to deep-tech ventures in artificial intelligence, robotics, biotechnology, and quantum computing.

Global Capability Centres now account for nearly 40 per cent of all office leasing activity in Bengaluru, and the city's Grade A office stock has reached approximately 215 million square feet. Startup investment has drawn \$3.8 billion across stages, reflecting a deep and sustained innovation pipeline.

Karnataka's KED computer — an AI-ready device developed with KEONICS at just Rs18,999, running on RISC-V architecture with on-device AI — is simultaneously bridging the digital divide and positioning the State as a force in electronics and AI-led manufacturing.

The "Beyond Bengaluru" cluster strategy is extending this dynamism to Mysuru, Mangaluru, Hubballi-Dharwad-Belagavi, Shivamogga, Kalaburagi, and Tumakuru, ensuring that the technology dividend reaches every corner of the State.

BENGALURU REIMAGINED, KARNATAKA URBANISED

Bengaluru is being transformed into a

world-class global city. The Brand Bengaluru initiative encompasses 300 kilometres of new roads, double-decker flyovers, metro Phase II expansion, and tunnel road projects designed to ease the city's traffic burden.

The Chief Minister's Amrut Nagrothana scheme has resurfaced thousands of kilometres of roads, and Rs7,000 crore has been dedicated specifically to Bengaluru's development.

The Bengaluru Business Corridor is underway, water supply to 110 surrounding villages has commenced under Cauvery Phase V, and mega projects worth Rs15 lakh crore are in advanced planning.

Across smaller cities and towns, master plans have been approved to prevent unauthorised layouts, conditions for pourakarmikas have been improved with direct payment systems and housing support, and Urban Local Bodies have been financially strengthened to deliver better services to fast-growing communities.

RURAL KARNATAKA: CONNECTED, EMPOWERED, SELF-RELIANT

Rural Karnataka is being built for the future with equal determination. Under NREGA, the State leads the country in both labour and material expenditure.

More than 86 per cent of rural households now have piped water connections, and schools and anganwadis have achieved over 97 per cent coverage for toilets and water facilities. Gram Panchayats deliver over 100 services digitally through Bapuji Seva Kendras, e-Swathu software has streamlined property record access, and online counselling has made staff transfers in the Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Department fully transparent.

A State Maritime and Inland Waterways Master Plan worth Rs23,094 crore has been prepared to develop airports, suburban rail, and inland water transport.

The Gandhi Grama initiative is naming all 6,000 gram panchayat buildings after Mahatma Gandhi — a fitting tribute to the nation's father as rural Karnataka strides confidently forward.

CARING FOR WORKERS, PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

The government has built 42 residential schools for children of construction and other workers, established six residential complexes for their dependents across five districts, and spent Rs1,115 crore this year on the welfare of 14.34 lakh construction workers.

Twelve days of paid menstrual leave annually, the 'Akka Task Force' for women's safety, and a suite of healthcare and education reforms have placed Karnataka at the forefront of gender-responsive governance.

On the environmental front, afforestation and soil conservation have been backed by over Rs500 crore, eco-tourism is projected to generate Rs750–800 crore annually for reinvestment into forests, and Rs1,081 crore has been invested in rejuvenating lakes around Bengaluru.

The India Justice 2025 report has ranked Karnataka first among large States in police and judicial systems — a recognition of the quality of governance that has characterised these 1,000 days.

1,000 DAYS: A FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE

As Karnataka celebrates this milestone, the numbers tell one story and the lived experience of its people tells another — and both are stories of progress.

From the woman in Kalaburagi who travels freely to work under the Shakti scheme, to the farmer in Mandya who received fair price support for his sugarcane, to the young engineer in Mangaluru whose startup received ELEVATE funding, to the family in Bidar who finally holds a clear title to their land — the government's 1,000 days have been felt in homes, fields, factories, and classrooms across this great State.

Chief Minister Sri Siddaramaiah said it best: "Pro-people administration has always been my objective." On February 17, 2026, Karnataka did not merely mark 1,000 days in office — it marked 1,000 days of a promise kept, and the confident beginning of many more to come.

FIVE GUARANTEES, MILLIONS OF LIVES CHANGED

The guarantee schemes are not merely fiscal instruments — they are life-changing interventions delivered at scale. Under Gruha Lakshmi, Rs58,863 crore has reached 1.24 crore families directly into the hands of women.

Gruha Jyoti has extended free electricity up to 200 units to 1.65 crore households at a cost of Rs22,839 crore, ensuring that no Karnataka home is left in darkness.

The Shakti scheme has enabled 6.68 crore women to travel freely on public buses, saving each family Rs1,500 to Rs2,000 every month and opening new horizons of mobility and independence.

Yuvanidhi has supported 3.0 crore youth at a cost of Rs912 crore, while Annabhagya has delivered food security to 72.02 crore beneficiaries — a guarantee that no Kannadiga will go hungry.

The total outlay for these five schemes stands at Rs1,18,211.7 crore, and every rupee has been delivered with accountability and purpose.



MORE SHADES OF EXCLUSION

A lifetime of living as political pariahs

For Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India, the Citizenship Amendment Act has only sharpened the edge of exclusion

K.A. Shaji

When Tamil Nadu votes for a new assembly on 23 April, the ritual of democracy will unfold with familiar precision. Polling booths will open at dawn, voters will queue up in the heat, fingers marked with indelible ink will affirm participation in the Republic. But across more than a hundred refugee camps scattered through the state, nearly 60,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees will watch from the margins. Many arrived as children fleeing war. Their children were born in India, raised in its schools, shaped by its politics and anchored in its society. Yet none of them will vote. Four decades after crossing the Palk Strait in search of safety, they remain outside the democratic compact of the country they call home.

This exclusion is not new, but in the years since the Citizenship Amendment Act was passed, it has acquired a sharper edge and become more visible than ever before.

The story begins with a week of violence in 1983, a 'Black July' that altered the course of Sri Lanka's history. Anti-Tamil riots erupted across the island following the killing of 13 soldiers by Tamil militants. Mobs attacked Tamil neighbourhoods, burned homes and businesses. Hundreds were killed and thousands displaced.

The violence deepened into a civil war that would last more than two decades. For civilians caught between the State and militant groups, escape became the only option. Many crossed the narrow stretch of sea to Tamil Nadu in fishing boats and makeshift vessels. The arrivals came in waves through the 1980s and 1990s. At its peak, more than 200,000 Sri Lankan Tamil refugees were living in India. Camps were set up as temporary shelters—they would go back when it was safe to return. That moment never came.

While tens of thousands live in towns and villages, more than 58,000 refugees continue to live in government-run camps in Ramanathapuram, Tiruchirappalli, Madurai, Salem and Coimbatore.... Rows of modest houses line narrow lanes. Schools, small shops and tea stalls sustain everyday life. Families receive modest assistance from the state in the form of a monthly allowance, subsidised housing and access to education and healthcare. Over time, many refugees have entered the local workforce as daily wage labourers, while others run small businesses or pursue skilled occupations. Socially and economically, they are part of Tamil Nadu. Legally, they are not.

"We came here when I was eight years old," says S. Tharmalingam from Mandapam camp in Ramanathapuram district. "At that time, we thought we would



Photo: Getty Images

For many refugees staying in camps in Tamil Nadu, going back to Sri Lanka is neither practical nor desirable. Their lives are rooted in India

return in a few years. Now I am over forty. My children were born here, but we still live as refugees."

Under the law, only citizens can vote. Refugees, lacking citizenship, cannot be included in the electoral rolls. This exclusion is painfully evident during elections. Campaign vehicles move through nearby towns, television debates dominate public discourse, and political parties make promises. Camp residents follow these developments closely. But on polling day, they remain at home.

"We watch the news and discuss politics like everyone else," says Jeyarani Selvaraj from Kottapattu camp near Tiruchirappalli. "But when election day comes, we cannot vote." Jeyarani was born in the camp in the early 1990s after her parents fled the war.

"I have never seen Sri Lanka. My whole life is here in Tamil Nadu. But when people ask about citizenship, we do not know what to say."

India does not have a dedicated refugee law. Sri Lankan Tamil refugees are governed through administrative arrangements rather than a clear legal framework. They are allowed to stay, without belonging fully. They receive

welfare support, but their rights are limited. Their movement, employment opportunities and access to property are constrained. Citizenship by birth applies only to those born before 1 July 1987. Naturalisation requires documentation and administrative approval that many refugees struggle to obtain. Applications often remain pending for years. Time passes, but their legal status remains unchanged.

The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 introduced a fast-track route to citizenship for non-Muslim minorities from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. It was presented as a humanitarian measure for persecuted communities. Sri Lankan Tamil refugees were not included. The CAA is based on a specific idea of persecution, one that is defined through religion and limited to Muslim-majority countries. Sri Lanka does not fit this framework. The persecution of Tamils, rooted in ethnicity and language, falls outside its scope. The consequence is a new line of exclusion.

A refugee who entered India from Bangladesh may now access a defined pathway to citizenship within a shorter period. A Sri Lankan Tamil who has lived

The CAA is defined by religion and limited to Muslim-majority countries. Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka do not fit this framework

UP Dalits and the social justice conversation

Will Rahul Gandhi's embrace of Dalit hero Kanshi Ram pay off for the Congress?

Nandlal Sharma

The message conveyed by the Congress party's Samajik Parivartan Diwas (Social Transformation Day) event at Lucknow to mark the 92nd birth anniversary of Kanshi Ram, founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party, is crystal clear.

The streets of Lucknow as well as the stage of the event were awash with posters of Gandhi, Nehru, Maulana Azad alongside those of Kanshi Ram, Shahuji Maharaj, Jyotiba Phule and Bhimrao Ambedkar. The programme at Jupiter Hall in the Indira Gandhi Pratishthan was scheduled to begin at 2.30 p.m., yet by 2 p.m. the hall was packed to capacity. Closely with Kanshi Ram and held positions within the BSP government including K.K. Gautam, Lalmani Prasad, Anees Ansari, Om Prakash Mahto and B.P. Ashok, among others—all hailing from the Dalit, extremely backward and Pasmanda communities.

When Rahul Gandhi addressed the gathering and said that mere sloganeering would achieve nothing, that he needed a hundred individuals willing to dedicate themselves to grassroots-level change in the politics of Uttar Pradesh—nearly the entire audience rose to their feet, chanting with raised fists: "Me! Me!"

None of this, however, is mere coincidence. The political landscape in Uttar Pradesh has undergone a transformation since campaigning began for the 2024 Lok Sabha election—when riding the momentum generated by the inauguration of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, the BJP's rallying slogan was '400 paar'. Nearly all political analysts, journalists and their dogs predicted a sweep for the BJP, but instead various sections of the electorate in Uttar Pradesh switched allegiance to the

Congress and Samajwadi Party, restricting the BJP to 33 seats in the state and its overall tally in the Lok Sabha to 240.

Of the 80 Lok Sabha seats in Uttar Pradesh, the Congress won six—up from one in 2019. The winners, apart from Rahul Gandhi, included Tanuj Punia (SC), Rakesh Rathore (OBC), Imran Masood (Muslim), Ujjwal Rewari Raman Singh (Bhumihar) and K.L. Sharma (Punjabi).

The Samajwadi Party—a Congress ally within the INDIA bloc—secured 37 seats (up from five in 2019) with Dalits, OBCs and Muslims accounting for 86 per cent of its winning candidates.

A post-poll survey conducted by CSDS-Lokniti in 2024 indicated that INDIA bloc candidates garnered votes of 92 per cent Muslims, 82 per cent Yadavs, 56 per cent non-Jatav Dalits and 25 per cent Jatav Dalits.

This is particularly significant because the BJP, which secured 48 per cent of the non-Jatav Dalit vote in 2019, saw the share drop to 29 per cent in 2024. The NDA found some solace in the fact that while it had received only 17 per cent of the Jatav vote in 2019, its vote share among this group rose to 24 per cent in 2024. This of course did not help the NDA's overall tally with the BJP winning 33 seats (down from 64 in 2019) and its allies bagging three.

This fragmentation of votes resulted in the BSP, led by former chief minister Mayawati, drawing a blank. Senior journalist Kumar Bhavesh Chandra says had the Dalit vote not shifted to the INDIA bloc, the BSP wouldn't have been wiped out. It is also a fact that there is a sense of indecisiveness among the Dalits which is likely to persist till the 2027 assembly elections in 2027.

It is no secret that Mayawati has been consistently cosying up to the BJP, led by Narendra Modi, Amit Shah and Yogi Adityanath. Speaker after speaker referred to this at the 13 March rally—without explicitly naming Mayawati—and repeated that leaders representing these communities are "compromised". Rahul Gandhi, too, alleged that prime minister Modi was "compromised"—a charge he contrasted with the conduct of Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram, neither of whom ever compromised on their principles.

Anil Jaihind, head of the Congress party's OBC wing, rightly observed that it is not merely leaders of the ruling party who are compromised but many in the Opposition as well. In contrast, Rahul Gandhi was openly speaking in favour of social justice, much like Kanshi Ram. Incidentally, Rahul Gandhi subsequently wrote to the prime minister demanding a Bharat Ratna for Kanshi Ram. This evoked a quick response from Mayawati who posted on X that the Congress was now trying to capitalise on the icons of the BSP.

It is not as if the Congress—or Rahul Gandhi—has suddenly begun speaking up for Dalits and their cause of social justice. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge is a Dalit. The Bihar assembly elections were fought under Rajesh Ram, also a Dalit.

One needs to mention here that the Congress and Rahul Gandhi did not suddenly decide to champion the cause of

Dalits and social justice. Throughout the Bharat Jodo Yatra and after, Rahul Gandhi has consistently been outspoken on issues related to the Constitution, caste census and reservations. During the Lok Sabha elections, his message—that 'the Constitution is in danger'—resonated with people all over the country and specially the disadvantaged classes. This was not merely a slogan.

Rahul Gandhi has successfully conveyed the message that the Constitution, which serves as the only safeguard for the rights of India's disadvantaged—Dalits, OBCs, Adivasis, minorities—from various forms of social exploitation and oppression, is currently under threat. Whenever he holds up a copy of the Constitution—easily identified by its red cover—at public rallies, the audience understands what he is saying: that the only way to protect their rights is to fight for the sanctity of this document.

This line of thought, the same dialogue with the people was reinforced through a series of 'Samvidhan sammelans'. The cumulative effect of these initiatives is a new public image of Rahul Gandhi as a sympathiser and reliable ally of the backward, the deprived, the oppressed.

Khalid Anis Ansari, sociologist and professor at Azim Premji University, views the efforts to reshape and expand the Congress thus: "Compared to Kanshi Ram's classic definition of social justice (the '85 versus 15' paradigm), Rahul Gandhi's vision of social justice is more expansive. It encompasses the working class, the labourer and the poor. It is not purely caste-centric; it also incorporates economic dimensions. Until now, Rahul Gandhi was a leader who lacked a distinct constituency (community or vote bank) of his own. Conversely, there are numerous constituencies that lack a leader or political party to represent them."

Ansari says it is in this context that the party has the option to reach out to those communities that are not typically recognised as the vote banks of any established party—the *ati-Dalits* (most marginalised Dalits), *ati-pichhdas* (most backward classes) and the Pasmandas. "The reality," he adds, "is that, among those who speak on social justice, Rahul Gandhi stands out as the sole visible figure; for those who do not align with the ideology of the Sangh and the BJP, there appears to be no alternative to Rahul Gandhi." ■



Photo: Getty Images

Rahul Gandhi at the Samajik Parivartan Diwas rally in Lucknow

Rahul Gandhi has championed the cause of the marginalised with consistency and tenacity—the UP event was not just a political gambit

Let's leave it be is the verdict

Nisha Susan on why a petition demanding a mandatory paid period leave policy for workplaces in India has knickers in a twist

Years ago, I watched a well-known 'upper caste' writer announcing on stage at a literary festival that he had learnt to cook because his mother practised ritual seclusion during her period every month. He sneered as he said it and though I've had the opportunity to watch him sneer many times before and after, that particular sneer has stayed laminated in my memory. He had offered this anecdote to the universe as part of his anti-caste activist persona and I was amazed (once again) at how often my fellow savarnas fling women's labour like party confetti. This 30-something man could well have resented his mother and profited by writing about it like the rest of us. Instead, he chose to represent his ability to cook (something he was very vain about and deployed like a social *brahmastra*) as something he was forced into as a tender lad because of his mother's self-indulgence. He could have substituted "because of her periods" with "because she was smoking ganja" and his tone would have stayed the same. Where was Appa? We don't know but I presume he had a long day of sneers to accomplish.

I found myself thinking about that delicate fraud when I read about the Supreme Court's response to a writ petition seeking paid menstrual leave for women in all workplaces in India. The court's disposal order says the 'competent authority' (Union government/ ministry of women and child development) 'may consider the representation and examine the possibility of framing a policy on menstrual leave after consulting all relevant stakeholders'. The observations of the bench, consisting of CJI Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi, expressed deep concern that a mandatory paid menstrual leave policy would discourage the private sector from hiring women and cause discrimination against women in the workplace. CJI Surya Kant reportedly said, "If they are giving (it) voluntarily, then it's excellent. But the moment you introduce it as a compulsory condition in law, you do not know the damage it will do to the career

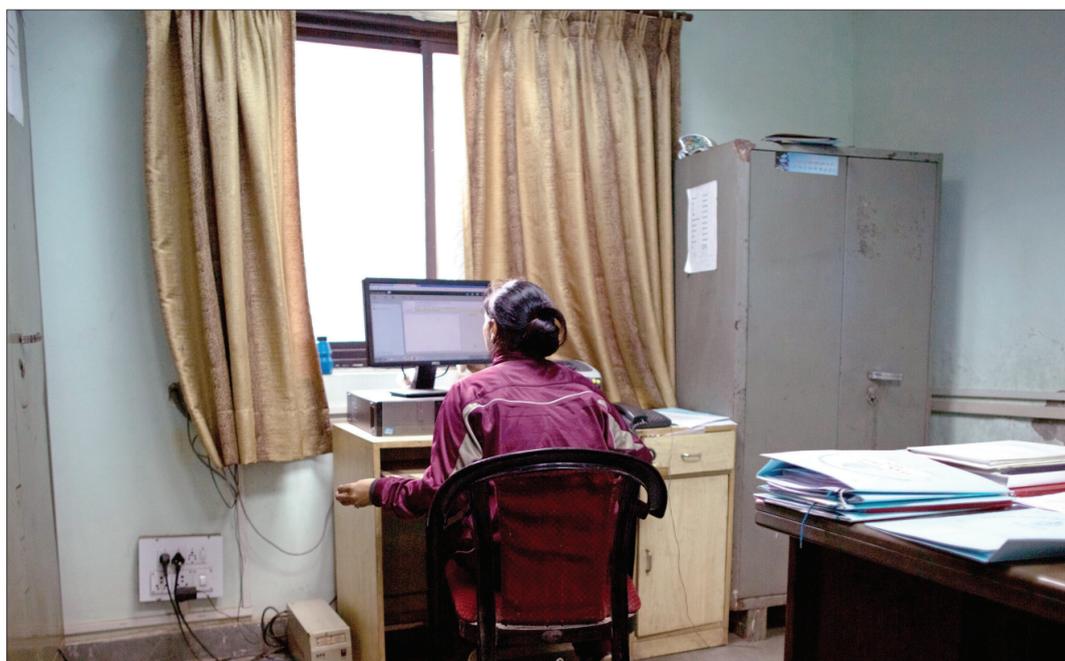


Photo: Getty Images

Equal, did you say? One only has to look at the number of women hired in the organised sector to get the real picture

of women. They (employers) will say you should sit at home... nobody will give them responsibilities, even in judicial services, a normal trial will not be assigned to them."

When workplaces need to include under-represented groups—women, trans people, people with disabilities—inevitably there is twitching and frothing and raising of 'practicalities'. Yet the average workplace is an irrational environment teeming with prejudice and impractical behaviour. Offices are full of inexplicable ritual and irrational displays. CEOs and founders go on LinkedIn every day to air their most nutty ideas about hiring employees and keeping employees. "We only interview

people on weekends at midnight'. 'Our employees sleep in the office to get things done'. 'Why are employees so eager to go home and gaze upon their wives?' Men in charge of hundreds of lives and incomes type up screeds like this and we all respond part mocking, part worried that this is what it means to be hardcore. Instead of declaring this a global mental health crisis. When nurses go on strike—because thankfully they can draw on a history of nurses going on strike—it is often because their precious degree certificates are being held hostage. Shady and non-shady establishments alike are all about the free market until their staff want to be practical

and rational—that is, seek better pay and better working conditions.

When workplaces have worker-friendly regulations thrust upon them—maternity leave, limits on work hours, anti-sexual harassment policies—through labour activism and law, their inevitable response is 'don't say we didn't warn you, but we won't be hiring people who make our workplaces difficult'. If you lived through the relatively recent MeToo years as a working adult, you could have filled your Notes app with details from tut-tutting conversations about how women will not be hired any more. What did those conversations mean? That you can't control your male employees? That you are not equipped for complex conversations about privilege and power? That you would rather keep paying the same sexual assaulter than hire non-violent employees? That you are not prepared for turmoil? Not that India believes in hiring women in the organised sector anyway. I will leave you to go look up the ever-depressing numbers.

Would implementing period leave in India be complicated? Of course. Would it need new models and revised models before it works? Sure.

The vaunted shift from maternity leave to parental leave in Sweden started in the 1970s, but it took decades of legislation and thoughtful adjustments to make it so that fathers took up their share of early parenting. Would legislated menstrual leave help millions of women think of work, at least conceptually, as a social realm that welcomes them—rather than tolerates them? Yes. Capitalism has never been logical or practical. Why pretend otherwise? Money moves like a beast and folks try to ride its tail pretending they have it on a leash.

I have been at a workplace where a creepy member of the top leadership secretly moved to another city, drew a salary for many months, stopped answering the phone, was fired and then... then he was re-hired some time later. You can't tell me that hiring him again was a practical decision. Perhaps everyone involved was on their period. Or maybe they were doing ganja. ■

It's all too common for workplaces to invoke 'practicalities' when it comes to hiring under-represented groups

Care needs a community

Karnataka's decision to introduce Kerala-style palliative care builds on a quiet revolution that began in Kozhikode

K.A. Shaji

When Karnataka announced in its budget that it would introduce Kerala-style home-based palliative care in collaboration with Pallium India, the decision carried a significance that went beyond any health policy. It pointed to a quiet experiment that began in Kozhikode three decades ago and gradually transformed the way suffering could be understood within India's healthcare system.

Across Kerala today, small teams of nurses, doctors and volunteers travel every day through narrow village roads and crowded town streets, stopping at addresses rarely recorded in hospital registers. Inside these homes are patients who have exhausted curative treatment. Some are in the final stages of cancer. Others live with paralysis, dementia or severe neurological illness. For them, the arrival of a palliative care team brings what modern medicine often overlooks once treatment ends—relief from pain, guidance for families, the assurance that they will not be abandoned simply because their disease cannot be cured. The idea that care should reach the patient rather than the patient chasing care is now widely known as the Kerala model of palliative care. Yet its origins were remarkably modest.

In the early 1990s, doctors at Kozhikode Medical College noticed a troubling pattern. Patients with advanced illness were discharged from hospitals with little support. Families were left to manage severe pain and complicated symptoms at home. Many patients spent their final weeks in silent suffering. For anaesthesiologist M.R. Rajagopal, the situation raised a fundamental question about the purpose of medicine. "When a cure is not possible, care becomes even more important," he says. "Care should reach the patient rather than forcing the patient to search for care."

Together with surgeon Suresh Kumar and a small group of colleagues, Dr Rajagopal started the Pain and Palliative Care Society at Kozhikode Medical College in 1993. The effort was small and informal. Doctors contributed modest amounts of money to run the clinic. Volunteers helped with patient registration and basic support. What distinguished the initiative was its philosophy: patients with incurable illnesses were not to be abandoned by the

healthcare system.

Early years revealed another challenge: many patients were too weak to travel to hospital. Some lived in remote villages. Others could not afford repeated medical visits. And so, doctors and nurses began visiting patients at home. Those visits transformed the programme.

"When we started entering people's homes, we realised that suffering was much larger than physical pain," says Dr Kumar. "Families were under emotional strain. Many faced financial hardship. Illness affected the entire household." It became clear that palliative care had to extend beyond clinical treatment. Emotional support, practical assistance and community involvement were equally important. This realisation led to the most important innovation in the movement's history.

In 1999, the programme expanded into what came to be known as the Neighbourhood Network in Palliative Care. Instead of depending entirely on doctors and nurses, it mobilised communities to participate in caring for patients in their own localities. Volunteers were trained to identify patients who required support. Medical teams organised home visits. Community groups raised funds to help families with medicines and other necessities.

Palliative care moved out of hospital wards and into neighbourhoods. Teachers, students, shopkeepers and retired people began joining as volunteers. Many had witnessed illness within their own families and understood how isolating it could be. The network spread rapidly across Kerala. Today, hundreds of palliative care units operate with the help of thousands of trained volunteers. The services are not limited to cancer patients. Individuals recovering from stroke, those living with dementia or suffering from severe neurological disorders are all included.

Despite accounting for a small share of India's population, Kerala provides a large proportion of the country's organised palliative care services. For Dr Rajagopal, the strength of the model lies in its social foundation. "This works because communities feel responsible for one another," he says. "It is not simply a medical programme. It is a community response to suffering."

For nearly a decade, the movement expanded largely through voluntary effort



Kerala today has hundreds of palliative care units that operate with the help of thousands of trained volunteers

The idea that care should reach the patient rather than the patient chasing care has now come to be known as the Kerala model of palliative care

character. Training also expanded rapidly. The Institute of Palliative Medicine in Kozhikode, which grew from the original clinic, now attracts healthcare professionals from across India and other countries seeking to learn from Kerala's experience. An important institution in spreading these ideas has been Pallium India, a non-profit organisation founded by Dr Rajagopal in Thiruvananthapuram in 2003.

Pallium India works to improve access to palliative care and pain relief across the country. It conducts training programmes for doctors and nurses, runs clinics and advocates policy reforms that make essential medicines more accessible. Through partnerships with hospitals and governments, the organisation has helped introduce palliative care initiatives in several states.

Training collaborations have been established with institutions such as the Bhagwan Mahaveer Cancer Hospital in Jaipur, the Gujarat Cancer and Research Institute in Ahmedabad and the MNJ Institute of Oncology in Hyderabad. Programmes inspired by the Kerala model have appeared in other states like Assam, Rajasthan, Delhi, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. Even remote regions have begun exploring the approach. In Himachal Pradesh's Chamba district, community-based initiatives are experimenting with home-based care for patients living in mountainous villages far from hospitals. The model has also drawn attention beyond India. Healthcare professionals in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries have studied Kerala's experience while designing their own palliative care systems.

and local support. Eventually, the state government recognised its importance. In 2008, Kerala introduced the country's first state policy dedicated to palliative care. The policy integrated these services into the public health system and encouraged local self-government institutions to support community initiatives. Primary health centres began operating palliative care programmes. Panchayats provided logistical and financial support for home visits.

The movement gained institutional backing without losing its community





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