NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY

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

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NATIONAL ENGLISH WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

NATION

STATES 360°

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Why Marco Rubio took a bypass to Ambani

Ashis Ray

US secretary of state Marco Rubio was in India 20–22 October. Not in Delhi, though. Evidently, meeting his counterpart, Indian external affairs minister S. Jaishankar, or anyone in the Indian government was not his priority. His principal purpose was to visit Jamnagar to interact with Mukesh Ambani of Reliance Industries, whose oil refineries are headquartered there.

Contrary to protocol, Rubio's visit was first announced by the US state department and only later confirmed, a bit sheepishly, by the Indian ministry of external affairs. In other words, the Trump administration bypassed the Modi government to set up this tête-à-tête with a private sector player to pursue its economic and strategic interest.

On arrival in Mumbai and standing on the steps of the iconic Taj Mahal Palace Hotel at Apollo Bunder, Rubio said: "So you have a company (Reliance) with a massive amount of refining capability… I think I should go talk to them, especially when it involves nation states, oil from another country…"

The US has rather controversially controlled Venezuela's oil industry since kidnapping its president Nicolas Maduro and renditioning him to New York in January this year. Reliance Industries has the capability to refine heavy grades of crude and is therefore potentially able to meet the US requirement to process Venezuelan crude in sizeable volumes.

After Mukesh Ambani and son Anant had met with Rubio, Reliance issued a statement that said: 'The visit included wide-ranging discussions on the global energy landscape and opportunities for commercial partnerships across conventional and new energy.' As per a *Reuters* report, 'The Ambanis also shared their perspective on opportunities for collaboration with US companies.' With the gradual increase in Venezuelan output during the course of this year, Reliance has already become a significant importer of the nation's crude.

In his meeting with Jaishankar, who hotfooted to Mumbai for the purpose, Rubio unsurprisingly pressed India to up its energy purchases from the US. In his talks with Ambani, he reportedly urged Reliance to set up refining facilities in Venezuela to service the US market. What's in it for India? Buying Venezuelan crude means incurring exorbitant shipping costs because of the crisis in the Persian Gulf, unless India can negotiate concessions on account of refining support from Reliance.

Rubio also mentioned to media in Mumbai, according to *NHK* of Japan, that the next Quad summit will take place in Manila next month. Thanks to Trump, the Quad alliance of the US, Japan, India and Australia has been dormant for the past 22 months. A meeting of the four heads of government was to take place in India last year, but Trump was not interested. The whimsical convening in November is a lame attempt to gain some leverage over China before he visits that country but Beijing is unlikely to be fooled by these histrionics.

Rubio also met businessman Gautam Adani, though no details were available of the exchange between the two. Their meeting wouldn't have pleased opposition Democrats back in the US who have sought an explanation from the US department of justice on how and why the corruption charges against Adani were dropped earlier this year. One of the reasons why Adani reportedly escaped prosecution in the US was his pledge to invest $10 billion in the US solar energy sector.

Asked by reporters to comment on the adverse remarks by OHCHR (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights) rapporteurs on the Indian government's crackdown on the Jantar Mantar protesters, Rubio was dismissive of the 'UN experts' saying the phrase was an oxymoron.

A group of 25-odd rapporteurs of the OHCHR had stated, 'Any restrictions on peaceful assembly must be legal, pursue a legitimate aim, and be necessary and proportionate'. Referring to the over 7,000 arrests of youth, journalists and human rights defenders, they said, 'These actions violate India's core international legal obligations, including the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, liberty, security of the person, and the right to defend human rights.'

The OHCHR experts described the crackdowns in various places, particularly Delhi, as revealing a 'broader troubling pattern' of Indian authorities using 'undue restrictions on peaceful assembly, excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances and the targeting of student activists'. The rapporteurs have called for an 'independent, impartial and thorough investigation' into the activities of the law enforcement agencies concerned and associated forces 'without delay'.



US secretary of state Marco Rubio with chairman of Reliance Industries, Mukesh Ambani, during his visit to Jamnagar

Rubio reportedly urged Reliance to set up refining facilities in Venezuela. But what's in it for India?

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In September this year, the US Congress passed legislation empowering the US President to impose, at his discretion, 100 per cent tariffs on exports from countries buying Russian crude. The Trump administration has held this now-legal provision as a dagger to India's throat, because of India's high consumption of Russian crude in recent years, and will use it no doubt to extract a favourable trade deal from a petrified Modi. Trump has signalled a 60-day pause on invoking the new law to calm international prices ahead of midterm elections, but the threat lingers.

On his trip, Rubio patronisingly said: "India has repeatedly expressed a desire to diversify its energy portfolio (code for sourcing oil and gas from the US or US-blocked Venezuelan production) […] I think they've made substantial progress in this regard, and we're happy to see that." Under any circumstances, especially with a ballooning trade deficit and a collapsing rupee, it is certainly not in India's national interest to opt for more expensive crude compared to the currently competitive offer from Moscow.

Whereas the *New York Times* presented Rubio's visit as an attempt to 'strengthen economic ties amid strained relations, at a reception to celebrate 250 years of American independence from Britain, the US secretary of state apparently forgot to address Jaishankar in his speech or even acknowledge his presence or make any reference to the bilateral relationship.

Jaishankar, on the other hand, remarked that his discussions with Rubio earlier the same day held 'great value' and reaffirmed India's "continued commitment to advance the India-US strategic partnership".

A US state department readout of the Rubio-Jaishankar meeting said: 'The secretary reiterated that increased energy trade with the United States can play a transformative role in diversifying India's supply chains while meeting its sizeable consumer demand […] and advocated for the increased purchase of US technologies and systems'. That sounded like Washington playing hardball in negotiations to enforce a one-sided trade agreement. India will do well to not buckle under pressure as other more courageous countries have done. ■

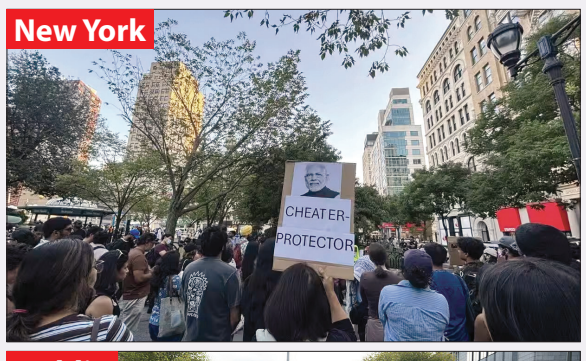
Is the Indian diaspora finally waking up?

Ashok Swain

It's fairly common knowledge that Narendra Modi's frequent trips abroad are less about diplomacy and more about staging diaspora jamborees to convince his followers that he is a leader of great stature, admired across the world. For years, these stage-managed gatherings gave his supporters and crony-controlled media the spectacle they wanted. They cheered a leader they imagined gave them bragging rights.

Crowds at embassy-arranged events chanting 'Modi, Modi' and media amplification of this theatre of endorsement by well-heeled Indians abroad fed into his image at home as well. Not everyone was similarly enamoured perhaps, but his critics kept a lower profile than his supporters. That picture seems to have suddenly changed, with city streets in Europe, North America and Australia erupting simultaneously in solidarity protests running under the banner 'Jantar Mantar Is Everywhere'. They are echoing the demands of their friends, kin and fellow countrymen, demanding accountability, fair elections and the freedom to dissent.









Protest gatherings in London, New York, Toronto, Sydney, Berlin, Dublin, Stockholm, Copenhagen, The Hague and other cities have brought students, professionals and activists together against the reported massive electoral irregularities and the brutal oppression of protesters in India. This surge of diaspora protests matters more than their size may suggest. Even fifty people coming together can break the silence, ease fears of retaliation, build connections and make the next protest easier to organise.

It's still too early, though, to declare that the diaspora has given up on Modi. Indians abroad remain divided by religion, caste, class, generation and political experience.

The surge in the protests matters more than their size suggests

Carnegie's 2024 Indian American Attitudes Survey found that 47 per cent still approve of Modi's performance. The disenchantment is growing but the spread is uneven. Also, a US survey cannot represent the views of Indian communities everywhere else. What these protests show is that space for serious opposition does exist within the wider diaspora community, and people are beginning to occupy it.

That knowledge also challenges a political understanding Modi has pushed for twelve years—that the status of Indians abroad draws on *his* standing in the world. Applauding him, then, becomes proof of their nationalism and criticising him an insult to the motherland. Even as they benefit from the pluralist default of their adoptive countries, or demand protection against discrimination where they live, too many Indians abroad still support majoritarianism back in India. They are not troubled by the targeting of minorities in Modi's India. But a diaspora movement that is now loudly demanding equal citizenship for all Indians back home is confronting this hypocrisy.

Resistance from the diaspora did not begin this October. Sikh organisations played a prominent role in supporting the farmers' movement in 2021. Anti-caste groups, Muslim organisations, secular associations and student networks have challenged Hindu fundamentalism for years. Their work deserves recognition.

The current protests are also resonating with students who worry about recruitment examinations when they return home. Also, many who thought they were 'apolitical' or hitherto stayed away from political discussions are getting vocal about the goings-on at home. They are angry about the brutal police action against peaceful protesters. Many may once have admired Modi and are now coming to terms with their own gullibility. But this change of heart is still a work in progress.

Fear is still a deterrent, and it takes a slightly different form for the diaspora. It is also the reason why the numbers of protesters do not swell easily. People living thousands of kilometres away may still worry about their immediate or extended family or their friends, about problems visiting home and their ties with India.

The recent action against actor Imran Khan, an OCI cardholder, makes those fears all too real. After his alleged participation in a Mumbai protest, authorities ordered him to leave India and later questioned his OCI status. He has challenged the action in court, but whichever way the case ultimately goes, his harassment will convey a message to others: that dissent can threaten your ties with home.

The obverse is also true: by joining a public demonstration people often learn that others share concerns they have kept private. A student may meet a lawyer, a professional may find an organiser, a lone ranger may see the value of community and common cause. Reading the Indian Constitution together gives them a common purpose stronger than personal anger against an autocrat.

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STATES 360° UTTARAKHAND



Governorships or video clips, scandals haunt the BJP in the hills

Rashme Sehgal

Dushyant Kumar Gautam, former BJP national general secretary and erstwhile president of the party's Scheduled Caste Morcha, was sworn in as the 19th Governor of Sikkim on 19 October—despite a plea to the President of India to recall his appointment. Gautam had been named as one of the VIPs who had allegedly sought sexual favours from Ankita Bhandari in September 2022, and been refused.

The 19-year-old receptionist disappeared from Vanantra resort on the night of 18 September. Her body was recovered from the Chilla barrage several days later. While prime accused Pulkit Arya (owner of Vanantra and son of BJP minister Vinod Arya) is currently serving a life sentence, Dushyant Gautam's call details with Pulkit Arya have not been made public as demanded by activist groups in Uttarakhand.

For the past four years, the state has been on the boil, demanding justice for Ankita. Finding it too hot to handle, the government handed over the investigation to the CBI in January 2026. Not only are Ankita's aged parents Soni Devi and Virendra Singh Bhandari upset at the investigation having gone into cold storage, they are deeply disturbed by Gautam's appointment as governor (as this grants him immunity from prosecution).

"When we heard the news, we could not sleep the whole night," Soni Devi said. "We travelled from our village Dobh Srikot to Srinagar, and took an overnight bus to Delhi. On 14 October, we had scarcely sat down at Jantar Mantar when the police arrived and threatened us. If we refused to leave, we would be fined Rs 1.5 lakh for breaking the law. We are poor people, in no position to pay such a hefty fine, so we moved to India Gate. Several activists and Congress leaders including Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi came to express their solidarity with us."

What she did not say was that ever since Ankita's death, both parents have been under the surveillance of intelligence agencies who are monitoring their every move. Embarrassed by their protest at India Gate—where they threatened to go on an indefinite fast if CBI findings were not made public—the Dhami government ordered the suspension of Sarvesh Panwar, superintendent of police (Pauri Garhwal) and Sardar Singh, sub-inspector (local intelligence) for failing to prevent them from reaching New Delhi.

The day after the Leader of Opposition met them, Ankita's parents were whisked away by Delhi Police. The BJP then released a photograph of them meeting two senior CBI officers along with Pauri Garhwal MP Anil Baluni (perceived to be close to Union Home Minister Amit Shah).

The CBI was clearly ordered to set up the photo-op. With the crucial assembly election barely five months away, it remains to be seen which VIPs are made the scapegoats.

Soni Devi is determined to continue her fight. "*Main haar nahi manugi* (I will not accept defeat). The worst the government can do is kill us. Better to die once than accept their lies."

Virender Singh Bhandari is equally resolute. "We believe the CBI needs to conclude its enquiry at the earliest. The call records of both Dushyant Gautam and the other RSS leader Ajay Kumar [Uttarakhand organising secretary also named as a VIP in the case] should be made public. We had appealed to the President of India to do a proper background check before signing his appointment."

The news of Gautam's appointment set off a wave of anger in Sikkim. The Sikkim Bar Council dashed off a letter to Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang and Prime Minister Modi stating that 'the appointment should be kept in abeyance until the controversy around the Ankita Bhandari case is fully resolved and the name of the Governor-designate is conclusively cleared by the competent investigating authorities'.

Speaking from Sikkim, social activist and Citizen Action Party leader Bharat Basnet said the state is embarrassed at the appointment of a man with such an unsavoury reputation.

Student organisations, along with citizens, have been staging daily protests at the district administrative centre. They have vowed to continue the agitation until Gautam's governorship is revoked.

Dr Mukesh Semwal is a member of the Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist) whose cadre has been doing stellar work providing health care and other services in the hills. Semwal believes the only reason for Gautam's appointment is the immunity from all criminal proceedings enjoyed by governors under Article 361 of our Constitution.



Who ordered the photo-op? Ankita Bhandari's parents with senior CBI officials

"The central and Uttarakhand governments are facing flak from several quarters. Yet they have gone ahead with this appointment. What information is Gautam privy to? No doubt he has been an RSS loyalist all his life, but why did they not let the law takes its own course?" Semwal asked.

Another theory is doing the rounds. Appointing Gautam, a long-time RSS and BJP organiser from a powerful sub-caste of Dalits, might help the party consolidate its base in Uttar Pradesh. As a BJP leader quipped, don't be surprised if Sikkim's governor spends more time in UP!

Civil society groups, Left parties and the Congress in Uttarakhand have been leading the 'Justice for Ankita' campaign. Congress leader Suryakant Dhasmana said, "The BJP and RSS have rubbed salt into the wounds of the people of this state by granting Gautam immunity from prosecution. It reveals their true colours."

In a video interview with Congress vice-president Sujata Paul, actress Urmila Sanawar claimed that information in the possession of the Uttarakhand Special Investigation Team has not been passed on to the CBI. "I realised this when the CBI interviewed me," Sanawar said.

Readers might recall that in the last week of December 2025, Sanawar released an audio clip in which her husband, former BJP MLA Suresh Rathore, claimed that the VIP guest at Vanantra was none other than 'Gattu' (Gautam's nickname among friends and close party leaders).

The BJP argues that Pulkit Arya and his two associates are in prison. What more does the family want? Full disclosure, for one. Ankita's family maintains that Gautam's political influence has kept his name out of the investigation. Gautam has denied all allegations and filed defamation suits against those who claim he had a hand in Ankita's murder.

*

October has been an interesting month for the BJP government.

On 15 October, Rekha Arya, the minister for women empowerment and child development, filed a complaint against her husband Girdhari Lal Sahu. She accused him of assault, conspiring to kill her, casteist abuse and fraud. Sahu in turn alleged that his wife had amassed illegal assets worth Rs 210 crore during her tenure as minister.

"I brought her this far," Sahu said in a video that went viral. "She was just a woman standing by the roadside. All I ask is that she withdraw the baseless complaint she has filed against me."

The Congress has demanded an immediate enquiry into the illegal acquisition of assets by Rekha Arya. Sahu has gone underground. This is the same man who was captured on video telling the young men of Almora that they needn't worry about not getting local wives—he would help them 'buy' a bride from Bihar for as little as Rs 20,000–25,000. ■

> *"No doubt he's been an RSS loyalist all his life, but why not let the law takes its course?*



Is the Indian diaspora finally waking up?

Continued from page 1

These newly constructed connections and ties can outlast the current protests. But that requires continuous effort to mobilise, even after the photographs have disappeared from social media.

Protests also spread through example. The demonstrations in France, Italy and Albania have different immediate provocations and should not be treated as one big international uprising. Yet images of young people challenging unresponsive institutions can encourage others to act. They show that frustration does not have to remain a private emotion, that opposing an unresponsive government is not an anti-national act.

An important lesson the diaspora seems to have learnt is the power that flows from organising and protesting peacefully. Violence can endanger protesters, drive away supporters and give governments an excuse to ignore the demands that brought people onto the streets.

The Modi government's sensitivity to overseas criticism gives diaspora demonstrations political weight. The way it reacted to international support for the farmers' agitation is proof how thin-skinned it is about global opinion.

The effects of the diaspora protests will be most visible in Western universities, student associations, civil society and the media. Overseas Indians can help unpack the electoral malpractices of the Election Commission of India, share testimonies and challenge the claim that criticising Modi means opposing India. They can introduce international journalists to voices beyond embassy briefings. They can also help others understand why electoral independence, minority rights and freedom of expression matter.

Western governments are a different kettle of fish. These demonstrations will not make governments change course or influence state policies, driven as these are by a more cynical calculus pivoting on arms sales, trade and financial interests and perceived threats from China. Western governments can pay lip service to democracy and express concerns about the erosion of India's institutions but they will not let it get in the way of business with Modi's India.

Public pressure can prompt questions in Parliament but governments will always prioritise their strategic interests. The diaspora's task is to focus attention on India, support democratic mobilisation and energetically debunk the claim that the Modi government is India. ■

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

STATES 360° BIHAR



Straws in the wind and the EC'S indifference

Pranav Chaudhary

The biennial Bihar legislative council elections (on Friday, 23 October) saw a fiercer fight than ever before.

Ordinarily, the election for eight seats—four each from the graduates' and teachers' constituencies—would not have raised much heat and dust. An overcrowded field with the Jan Suraaj, Congress, RJD and Left parties in the fray against the Janata Dal (U) only partly explains the intense campaigning, road shows and media frenzy.

For Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary and the NDA, the elections are a small but significant political test, especially with Prashant Kishor having wrested the Bankipur seat (held by the BJP since 1995) in the byelections earlier this year.

JD(U) founder Nitish Kumar was, however, conspicuous by his silence during the campaign. Party strongman and MLA from Mokama Anant Singh alias '*Chhote Sarkar*' claimed that the former chief minister was indifferent to the outcome of the elections. Nitish did not even try to dissuade him from campaigning against JD(U) spokesperson Neeraj Kumar—the party nominee from the Patna graduates' constituency—and supporting Jan Suraaj candidate Dr Anuj Singh against him.

Both Anant Singh and Neeraj Kumar hail from Mokama, but there's no love lost between them. Singh claims Kumar has always tried to trip him up in politics. He swore that not only would he ensure Kumar's defeat, he would make a comeback impossible. When Kumar got himself hospitalised, Singh called it a 'drama'. (Sure enough, when he was wheeled out, the 'invalid' said he was fit as a fiddle.)

Chhote Sarkar also declared that his loyalty to Nitish Kumar was beyond question. "After all," he said, "who got nine people killed to help Nitish*ji*?" The explosive claim spread like viral fire and was amplified by the Opposition. Belatedly grasping the grave legal and political implications of his statement, he made a U-turn and claimed his words had been twisted. What he meant was: nine of his associates had been killed because of his loyalty to Nitish Kumar. He did not, however, deny helping loot votes for Nitish. "I managed to get three lakh votes by capturing booths at Nitish*ji*'s behest," he bragged.

Anant Singh's outrageous statements have largely been ignored by the state's political parties. "Netas are shying from making any direct comment because of his stranglehold over Kurmis, his caste men. He is also a dreaded don and still faces dozens of criminal cases," said a bureaucrat by way of explanation.

Singh has represented the Mokama assembly segment since 2005. Political observers say he considers it his 'pocket borough'. Any aspiring leader (irrespective of political party) who wishes to contest from this region must have his blessing.

The JD(U) has also played it safe, refusing to condemn or take action against Anant Singh. It did authorise Union minister and MP from Munger parliamentary seat Rajiv Ranjan Singh alias Lallan Singh to broker a reconciliation, but the bid apparently failed. Even party loyalists say JD(U) is too weak to take any decisive action. The moment for the party to be wound up may come sooner rather than later, they fear.

*

Pre-election videos circulated on social media showed religious books being distributed to voters with cash-stuffed envelopes tucked inside. While the videos are not, in themselves, proof of a 'cash-for-votes' scandal, what set people talking was the complete indifference of the Election Commission of India. It would have been easy for the ECI to investigate and find out the truth, said a lawmaker. Rather than probe the allegations and take action, ECI looked the other way.

Why are we not surprised? ■



Photo: Getty Images

Nitish Kumar with Bihar Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary

> *The biennial elections for eight council seats is a small but significant test for the BJP*

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Why I must dance in this revolution

Swarna Bhatnagar

A couple of days after the government made sure we couldn't reach Jantar Mantar, my sister sent me a video game in which I could try to get there. It was called *Chalo Jantar Mantar*.

It's a deliciously funny encounter, once you've lived through the day itself. The government can barricade roads, unleash the police, turn its capital into a fortress and treat citizens trying to exercise a democratic right like fugitives on the run. But a few days later, someone will build a video game about getting there, and you can sit at your desk and take a stab at what the government was so determined to not let you do on the ground.

With its fences and lathis and convoys and uniforms, the State demonstrates its predilection for theatrics, proclaiming that power is heavy business and that those who defy it ought to be in a cold sweat. Humour perpetrates a cathartic act of vandalism against this power play.

The Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin posited the notion of the 'carnivalesque'—moments in which laughter overturns the old guard, bringing the mighty down to earth and letting common people envision a world in which they can mock authority.

There is a similar anastrophe at work in the language of these protests. The placards at the NEET protests that read '*Do bhai, dono bin padhayi*', or the one at the protests this month against the CEC and his two puppeteers, and the slogan '*Ek kachori do chai, Gyanesh Kumar bye bye*,' pull top bananas out of the inflated language of politics into the world of street banter. The same impulse animates the reels about getting ready for detention or going to Delhi to get beaten by the police. The joke, in each case, lies in the indignity of the situation and in our dogged refusal to grant indignity the last word.

A joke will not raze the barricade to the ground and a video game will not undo an arrest, but for the span of the joke, the people who built the barricade will lose their monopoly over what it means.

In *Weapons of the Weak* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, the political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott studied the small, unexceptional ways in which oppressed groups express dissent, the irreverence that burgeons outside the immediate scrutiny of those in power. He called the less public form of this dissent a 'hidden transcript'. The distinction matters because much of what we are seeing at these protests is no longer hidden at all.



Photos: Getty Images



Brute force The State can bring on all its barricades, lathis and uniforms; rambunctious young protesters have shown they can be detained but not tamed

Humour perpetrates a cathartic act against the State's power play

Let's take, for example, the afterlife of Salman Khan's '*Sonam, it's done bro*'. In the itchy hands of protesters, the phrase has been recycled as 'Gyanesh, it's done bro,' a refrain in the October protests.

Then there are the games. Alongside 'Chalo Jantar Mantar' are 'Bhaag Neha Bhaag', 'Digital Tapli' and 'Digi Tiranga', where you can wave the tricolour on your screen, without inviting an arrest warrant, now that it is apparently a crime to wave the national flag in the national capital.

Emma Goldman knew a thing or two about the cynicism directed at pleasure in political movements. In her autobiography *Living My Life*, she reminisces about being scolded by a fellow anarchist for dancing too freely at a social gathering because an agitator was expected to behave with greater dignity. Emma believed that a cause devoted to freedom could not demand the denial of life and joy from those who fostered it. What kind of freedom are we fighting for if we must forego our position to enjoy being alive along the way?

There is a degree of intellectual laziness in treating irreverence as a cute detail of my generation, as another eccentricity of the lot that communicates through memes and understands the world through its phone screens.

That explanation is too glib: the seriousness, if I may tell you, exists alongside the humour; one doesn't cancel out the other. We are frightened *and* funny. A bit enervated and a lot more creative. And we are not going anywhere, anytime soon.

When I played 'Chalo Jantar Mantar', I don't know if I found it funny because it made light of the experience or because it reminded me that the experience had eluded the people who tried to control it. The day had been demeaning and ludicrous, and once again, this time through pixels on my screen, I encountered its ludicrousness on my own terms.

I still want to get to Jantar Mantar. I'm sure I will, sooner rather than later. And until then, we'll keep playing the game with the insouciant spirit of those who have never belonged to a party, never considered themselves activists, and never imagined they would spend their days arguing with the government on matters as basic as flying the national flag or walking the streets peaceably.

We will keep finding ways to reach one another, even when the State won't let us stand beside each other on that road to Janpath.

Those in power can try and make sense of people who are frightened and still won't go away. Or they can hate them. But what can they do with those who show up because something in this country's capillaries became so repugnant that young people brought forth the full, rambunctious business of being young and alive? Those who start singing *Jana Gana Mana* to stop the police from charging at them, who play the flute as an answer to a baton, who look power in the eye and laugh at it… because, sure, they can be detained, but they can never be tamed.

That is the one swell point of dancing in a revolution. They can govern our lives all they want. We will keep living it. ■

There is a degree of intellectual laziness in treating irreverence as a cute detail of Gen Z

What counts as heritage on Race Course Road?

The message of the Central Vista project is hard to miss and it speaks in one civilisational idiom

Herjinder

On 19 October, a century-old mosque, a short walk from the prime minister's residence, was given six days to vacate. Water and electricity had already been cut off on 7 October. The Land and Development Office (L&DO) declared the Race Course Mosque 'unauthorised', saying it stands on government land. A place that has called people to prayer for a hundred years or more is being treated as an illegal structure.

The paperwork tells a different story. Mohammad Hakimuddin Qasmi, representing a Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind delegation, has submitted a memorandum to Union minority affairs minister Kiren Rijiju. The memo establishes the mosque's historical provenance: it appears in the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) heritage list referenced in the 1977 Delhi Gazette, as well as in a revised list maintained by the ministry of minority affairs. The Jamiat has asked that no action be taken until the dispute is legally settled. Rijiju has reportedly promised "every possible effort."

In a video statement reported by *The Hindustan Gazette*, the mosque's imam Mohammed Harun revealed the process has been a lot bumpier. For six months, he had raised the matter with the Delhi Waqf Board, to no avail. The board, he says, did little beyond writing to the NDMC about suspended utilities. Drinking water has run out, and the approach to the mosque has been blocked. When Harun went to the High Court on his own, it ruled against him because he lacked the board's permission. He also points to a 2021 survey, which did not list the mosque as unauthorised or an encroachment.

The century-old race course, which gave the road its name, has already been demolished. The reason offered was its proximity to 7, Race Course Road—rechristened Lok Kalyan Marg—the prime minister's official residence and other sensitive government complexes. Reclaiming the zone, we are told, answers long-standing public security and defence concerns in high-security Lutyens' Delhi.

Meanwhile, a Rs 467 crore residential complex for the prime minister, with an underground tunnel to the PMO and Parliament, is nearing completion. Once Narendra Modi moves, 7 RCR is to be the site for a museum. In other words, the neighbourhood is to be cleared for a residence that will soon be empty.

All this is part of the Central Vista Redevelopment Project, the government's makeover of the national administrative corridor in New Delhi. While national capitals do need new offices, the grand renewal it was sold to us as has meant a swathe of destruction and erasure. A great many trees have gone, and familiar landmarks reworked, renamed or removed. The 135-year-old Central Secretariat Library is being relocated to two rooms, utterly inadequate to hold its historic repository of over 8.5 lakh books.

Inaugurating the Central Vista project, Narendra Modi described it as a move away from the symbols of British colonial rule. A republic is entitled to reconsider its colonial inheritance. A mosque, however, is not a colonial symbol. For Modi, the BJP and the RSS, it is more a Hindu project than a 'redevelopment' project. A mosque finds no place in that schema, even when it is a heritage building.

The government's Central Vista website says: 'While planning this transition, great care has been taken to ensure that the heritage status of the existing structures is preserved while new projects are built around them.' A fine sentiment, utterly disregarded on the ground. Relabelling a building listed in Delhi's own gazette as a heritage site shows just how seriously they are honouring their promise.

This mosque is not the only casualty. Eviction notices have gone out to more than 700 families in the adjoining clusters of Bhai Ram Camp, Masjid Camp and DID Camp. Some have lived here for decades, a few for nearly a century. On 19 October, the same day the mosque got its notice, the Delhi High Court cleared the way for their removal to Savda Ghevra, a resettlement colony about 45 km away.

The people affected are the cooks, drivers, vendors and domestic workers who keep Lutyens' Delhi running. They are being moved far away from their work and their children's schools. Security is the reason given.

How is the ecosystem that sustains the corridors of power a threat?

Nor is the mosque's fate an isolated worry. Muslim communities are already seeing their places of worship and religious structures being demolished overnight in Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, including a mosque in the Saharanpur collectorate that was pulled down in the early hours. The bulldozer at dawn is a pattern people have come to dread.

Then there is the question of who owns the city. Every new layer of VVIP security shuts the citizen out. With every new stretch closed off, ordinary people cannot access the avenues, the lawns, the parks that afford them a modicum of respite from the urban hustle. A national capital is not a private estate for those who govern. Its roads and open spaces are to be held in trust, with the public as beneficiary.

The message of the Central Vista project is hard to miss. Its architecture, its symbolism, its choice of what stays and what goes speaks in one civilisational idiom alone.

But India is much more than that, as should its capital be. A republic's centre must be large enough to hold the mosque, the temple, the church, the gurdwara, and the poor who live beside them.

Delhi has been built and abandoned many times. Rulers who tried to obliterate the legacy of their predecessors are remembered less for what they raised than for what they razed.

The stones of this city have outlasted every empire that claimed them. The test of this government's confidence is not how much it can get rid of, but how much it can bear to keep. ■



Photos: Getty Images



The century-old mosque (*above*) **on Race Course Road which has been declared 'illegal'**

A republic must be large enough to hold mosques, temples, churches, gurdwaras and the poor

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
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Words fail to describe the desecration

Sohini Sengupta

"Boi ta ke noshto koro na, bhai (Don't destroy the book, brother)"

You may have seen a video reel from West Bengal's Barasat during this Durga Puja, in which an elderly man is pleading with a younger fellow to show some respect for the books he is flinging to the ground. It's enduring literature ('*chirayata sahitya*'), the older man says, but his plea falls on deaf ears. All the goon and his gang see is that it is a Left book stall—enough to see red—and their instructions are clear.

In another incident at Nagerbazar, right-wing hoodlums, allegedly linked to the BJP, tore pages from books at a CPI(M) stall and threw them onto the road. The pattern was hard to miss, as underlined by organisations like the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights, which reported similar incidents in Jadavpur, Jorabagan, Entally, Kasba and Haridevpur. Unsurprisingly, the BJP–RSS have sought to distance themselves from the incidents.

Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari reportedly urged Durga Puja committees to not allot stalls to Left organisations that refer to the festival as 'Sharodotsav' (autumn festival) instead of 'Durga Puja'. Soon after, CPI(M) supporters and Jadavpur University students formed a human chain at the nearby 8B bus stand to stop a municipal bulldozer from removing a stall. Garbage trucks were commandeered to carry away books!

On 15 October, the dispute reached the Calcutta High Court. Justice Saugata Bhattacharyya allowed a CPI(M) stall near the party's Bongaon office, but a division bench stayed the order the next day on an appeal by the state government.

The BJP, meanwhile, announced plans for about 5,000 bookstalls near Puja pandals that would sell literature on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Sangh ideologue Syama Prasad Mookerjee and the party's own promotional literature.

A political party has every right to distribute its literature, but that right must apply equally. Or it would, if ours was still a functional democracy and an invocation of citizen rights did not seem a quaint anachronism. What we saw on the streets of Kolkata and elsewhere in the state was not the kind of violation that leaves any room for doubt that this was political vendetta.

Even after Left book stalls were targeted in this utterly lawless fashion, state BJP president Samik Bhattacharya still maintained that 'real party workers' would never throw books onto the road, adding that he had spoken to the chief minister to take action against the perpetrators.

Bhattacharya proceeded to recount his experience of political violence under CPI(M) rule, saying he still carries marks from bomb splinters. Was he perhaps making the case that his stories, even if true, constituted grounds for the vandalism or that the State should therefore wink at it?

State finance minister Swapan Dasgupta feigned outrage: "I don't know who they are. But I must ask, how dare they?" The Sangh also made a show of defending everyone's right to distribute literature, 'provided the stalls did not illegally encroach on public space'.

In Amta, BJP legislator Amit Samanta was filmed leafing through books at a CPI(M) stall while party workers and volunteers sat around, avoiding eye contact. Even as Samanta staged this little 'damage control' charade for the camera, we had more news from Barasat. A copy of *Hanuman Chalisa* had taken the place of the offending left literature flung onto the road. And in the words of a visibly irate BJP legislator Purnima Chakraborty, this was "a response to the Left's use of 'Hanuman' while raging that BJP supporters had been 'monkeying around' the area."

*

Boi Para on College Street, easily one of India's best-known book markets, is a good showcase of Kolkata's love affair with books. Publishers, second-hand book-sellers and pavement hawkers have catered to generations of students and readers.

Days after the new BJP government assumed office in May this year, municipal affairs and urban development minister Agnimitra Paul floated a plan to redevelop College Street on the lines of London's Oxford Street. Pavement 'encroachments' and stalls were removed or placed under surveillance, but one pressing question was left unanswered: how can public infrastructure improve if the people who sustain the market are displaced?

Never before has Kolkata, a city that takes pride in its love of books, witnessed such an assault



The Puja bookstalls have long carried the culture of reading and browsing beyond Kolkata's famous College Street

The Puja bookstalls have long carried the culture of reading, browsing beyond College Street's *Boi Para*. The Left book stalls typically focus on labour history, political theory and party literature alongside other books that might interest readers regardless of their politics. These makeshift stalls, a simple bamboo framework wrapped in red cloth, are points of contact between common folk and ideas they might not otherwise encounter.

The BJP is tapping into this very tradition to display its own literature. Which would have been fine, if displaying their range did not entail vandalising other material. The same extreme intolerance has been on display ever since the BJP came to power in the state.

On 1 September, saffron-clad demonstrators of the BJP's youth wing Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) gathered outside the office of *Anandabazar Patrika* to protest the Bengali daily's use of the phrase 'Gerua Gundami' (saffron hooliganism) in its report on 21 August on the campus violence the previous day at Jadavpur University. The mob defaced the building and smeared its white pillars with saffron paint.

The landmark Academy of Fine Arts in central Kolkata was targeted as well. In July, the ticket room of the Academy received a daub of saffron paint, to mark political territory as it were. It drew condemnation from prominent theatre artists and Left-leaning activists, who gathered on 11 August to paint over the saffron walls with a fresh coat of white paint. Barely 24 hours later, a group of about 50 BJP activists, led by actor Rudranil Ghosh, came by again, to re-do the saffron.

The CPI(M)'s 34-year tenure in power is certainly not above criticism, but never before has this state and its storied capital city, which prides itself on its love of books, of the world of ideas and its cultural mores witnessed this kind of assault on its way of life. ■

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The vote, the court and the protest

Of these three tools of democracy, the third is the only one where Indians have true agency, writes Aakar Patel



Photo: Getty Images

The women who led the protests against the CAA succeeded in halting what happened in Assam from happening elsewhere

Voting is considered to be synonymous with democracy—as if democracy vanishes between elections. For decades, the election process in India has been accretive in adding prestige and credibility. That phase is behind us.

The Constitution says that every Indian over 18, who is not 'disqualified under this Constitution or any law made by the appropriate Legislature on the ground of non-residence, unsoundness of mind, crime or corrupt or illegal practice', shall be entitled to be registered as a voter at any such election.

This direction is more like a suggestion to the present Election Commission, which assumed, no doubt on the orders of the government, that its exercise to gratuitously put crores of people through trauma would carry on undisturbed.

A survey of rollbacks and clarifications issued by the ECI over the last four weeks throws up nearly a dozen. These include a 'special enrolment drive' to bring in people 'left out' by the previous special disenfranchisement drive. Then there is the removal of a declaration for some people, a waiver of in-person appearance for some other people, a review of flawed software, limiting (but not ending) the malicious practice of objections being filed by third party individuals against voters (mostly Muslims of course). There's also the introduction of searchable voter lists—after resisting them all this time for no reason other than a preference for opacity over transparency. And now, private school teachers are being made to do extracurricular work, going door to door for the Census, the way hapless government school officials are doing for SIR.

The number of measures exposes the sloppiness with which this adventure was embarked upon. The speed at which the measures are coming betrays the panic. The disclosure that the ECI's majority was being disregarded in decision-making would have surprised few, if that. Will these corrections, rollbacks and reviews resolve the mess? Of course not. We have already been divided into several tiers of Indian citizens: some struck off, some under appeal, some without information on their status, some beyond caring, others awaiting judgment. (Oh yes, and some voters.)

This steaming pile of excrement cannot be cleared by anything other than a full rollback. Alas, now with elections already having taken place, even this action will lead to problems of electoral legitimacy, for instance in Bengal. So—no. The mess is of a scale that could only have been envisioned by the architect of minimum government, maximum governance.

Now to our second democratic tool. Article 32 says our right to move court for the enforcement of fundamental rights is 'guaranteed'. Note that what is guaranteed is the liberty to move court. What follows thereafter is something we witness daily in this country and need not be expounded on. Our finest lawyers have already spoken about where things stand. As with the Election Commission, here too, there has been erosion.

The State is afraid, that's why it is expending so much energy in throttling protest

The third democratic tool, the only one over which we have real agency, is protest. Showing up to tell the State that we feel violated and it must stop. The government can mess around with our vote, as it is doing, and the justice system can toy with us as it does in service of the executive. It is harder for the government to force itself on our bodies, even though it tries.

Protest is our most effective tool for getting the State to stop its crimes and misdemeanours. This is why so much energy is being expended by the government in attempting to curb it, limit it and throttle it.

Once Indians mobilised in the tens of thousands and arrived in Delhi, the farm laws were as good as dead. It took a full year for the government to finally strike them down, all those wasted months because the monarch did not want to be seen as surrendering to the people. But the moment mobilisation happened, it was clear to many that the people would win. Deliciously, that victory was accompanied by an apology. A qualified one, as may be expected from the person offering it, but an apology nonetheless.

The brave Muslim women who led the protests against the National Register of Citizens succeeded in halting what has happened in Assam from happening elsewhere in India. Yes, it is true that the road this SIR has put us on ultimately leads to the same destination; but as recent events show, it will not be easy for the government to do so unchallenged, no matter how much the BJP leadership salivates at the thought of crores of people disenfranchised, disentitled and interned.

Peaceful assembly (Article 19) is a fundamental right, meaning one that enjoys a high degree of protection from encroachment by the government. In practice, over the decades, encroachment has exceeded freedom. And there that right will stay, caged in designated areas and subject to government approval. Unless it is taken back, by the young protesters on the streets of Delhi, or indeed, anywhere at all. (As the slogan puts it: 'Jantar Mantar Is Everywhere'.)

For many of us, this is the most heartening feature of our times. A hard, authoritarian State finally confronted by a spirited public response from our youth. ■

Views are personal

STATES 360° ODISHA



Herculean on paper, not impossible on the ground

N.R. Mohanty

On 8 October, a 12-hour bandh disrupted transport, mining and normal activity in parts of Odisha. The INDIA bloc held a large 'Parivartan Rally' in Bhubaneswar and activists attempted to march toward the residence of Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi.

With tribals restive in several mineral-rich districts of Koraput, Rayagada, Keonjhar, Sundargarh, Mayurbhanj and Nabarangpur, both the BJP and the INDIA bloc are coming out for and against the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act 2026. Rushed through Parliament, despite the Supreme Court ruling in favour of the states, the amendment prevents state governments from independently levying fresh taxes, cesses or local duties on mineral rights and mineral-bearing lands, bringing them under the Centre's direct regulatory framework.

As the Congress—which has been out of power in Odisha for the last 26 years—shows signs of life, the question being asked is: can it make a successful bid for power in 2029? It's a Herculean task on paper. In the 2024 assembly election, the BJP and BJD had each garnered a little over 40 per cent of the vote share. Congress was a distant third with just about 13 per cent. The GOP will need to treble its vote share to come anywhere close to victory.

The Naveen Patnaik-led BJD government in the state was non-confrontational and believed in 'live and let live'. It extended the olive branch to all top opposition party leaders. The Congress, then the main Opposition, became a victim of the ruling party's politics of accommodation. The BJD's outreach effectively blunted its aggression. The BJP, a BJD-ally from 2000 to 2009, escaped the treatment partly because it was a partner-in-power and partly because it did not need BJD patronage after Naveen Patnaik broke the alliance in 2009. Contesting alone, the BJD won 103 out of 147 seats (39 per cent of the vote share). The Congress came second, with 27 seats (29 per cent). BJP managed six seats (15 per cent).

In 2014, the BJD improved its tally to 117 and increased its vote share to 44 per cent. The Congress imploded, tumbling from 27 to 16 seats; but its vote share decreased only marginally, from 29 to 26 per cent. The BJP increased its seats from six to 10 and its vote share from 15 to 18 per cent.



A 'Parivartan Rally' in Bhubaneswar, led by PCC president Bhakta Charan Das

The most dramatic turnaround came in the 2019 assembly election. The BJD maintained its stranglehold with 112 seats and 45 per cent vote share. The BJP, backed by the Modi government at the Centre, galloped to second position. It increased its seat tally from 10 to 23 and vote share from 18 to 33 per cent. The Congress was down to nine seats, and its vote share fell from 26 to 16 per cent.

In 2024, the BJP finally succeeded in toppling the BJD. Its seats shot up from 23 to 78 while the BJD's dropped from 112 to 51. The BJP's vote share, however, was merely a notch below the BJD's: 40.1 per cent versus 40.2 per cent. The Congress improved its seat tally from 9 to 14, but its vote share plummeted from 16 to 13%.

There is a groundswell of resentment against the BJP in general and Narendra Modi in particular

Ahead of 2029, the Congress faces twin challenges in Odisha. In the ruling space, the electoral machinery (and machinations) of the BJP and the RSS. In the opposition space, the formidable organisational structure the BJD has built over 24 years of being in power. Both the BJP and BJD are cash rich, in contrast to the cash-starved Congress. Barring its core supporters, many Congressmen have switched sides, making it weak both organisationally and financially.

The current situation is, however, extraordinary and holds out hope for the Congress. There is a groundswell of resentment against the BJP in general and Narendra Modi in particular. Anger is also brewing because Majhi has remained a mute spectator while his ministers are on a looting spree, with Gujarati contractors allegedly having taken control of all government projects.

Neither Naveen Patnaik nor the other top brass of his party are in a position to speak openly against the Modi-Shah regime because of ED-CBI-Income Tax threats. With the BJD on the backfoot, there is room for a more assertive Congress.

Current Odisha Congress president Bhakta Charan Das, who highlighted the Kalahandi famine and became an MLA at the age of 27, took charge in February 2025. He has been touring across the state to revive the party. Milestones to his credit include the Nuapada byelection in which the Congress came second, pushing the BJD to third position.

It has taken a little over two years for the Congress to get its act together. It remains to be seen how it will take advantage of the space that has now opened up. ■

STATES 360° WEST BENGAL



Yesterday's foes become today's friends as Sanghis run amok

Sourabh Sen

Durga Puja festivities in Kolkata this year were marred by two rare sights: a bulldozer demolishing a temporary book stall and a purported book stall turned into a temporary *phuchka* vend. As right-wing vandals, Left activists and citizens clashed, book stalls became the most unlikely political flashpoints. It began with Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari warning Left parties on the floor of the Assembly that book stalls at Durga Puja pandals were henceforth forbidden. No minister dared contradict him.

Which is why the mealy-mouthed words of condemnation from a handful of RSS and BJP leaders, including finance minister Swapan Dasgupta, failed to ring true. Even as he wondered who the vandals might be, people pointed out that Dasgupta was sitting right next to Adhikari when the CM held out the threat. How could he claim surprise, let alone outrage?

The truth is that Adhikari and a section of BJP MLAs, mostly Hindi-speaking, have been belligerently uttering war cries against the Left. A BJP MLA's '*Baam Vadh*' banner blazoned death to the left. Gangs claiming allegiance to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal went about smashing book stalls set up by the CPI(M), SUCI and other Left parties. Some of them openly said they were following instructions from Suvendu-da.

Clearly, small-time goons from Bihar and UP—claiming Sangh parentage and protection—are making the Bengali bhadralok queasy about endorsing the BJP.

Jishnu Basu, a scientist and *prachar pramukh* of the RSS's east zonal unit piously asserted, "The RSS never supports [the] destruction of books. We condemn such acts of cowardice."

The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) brought in bulldozers, with police and central forces standing by. BJP, VHP and Bajrang Dal rowdies tore up books and destroyed makeshift stalls. Left workers and local residents formed human chains to prevent bulldozers from moving in. KMC deployed conservancy trucks to cart away the torn books along with other debris. Reports of attacks came in from across the city and different districts. RSS book stalls were left untouched.

Videos of cocky BJP workers also went viral. A local BJP leader from north Kolkata said, "We will not allow distribution or sale of Left literature. What is the point of setting up *bookishtores*? You should distribute *trishuls*, swords and clothes; leave the books to us!"

Sangh-affiliated young men speaking in Hindi or heavily accented Bengali have introduced a new layer of cultural aggression. The semi-literate vandals were clearly engaged for the purpose. They failed to differentiate between literature and Left literature; between novels and political tomes; between Rabindranath and Vivekananda. Titles like Sarat Chandra's *Pother Daabi*, a novel based on the real-life adventures of a freedom fighter and revolutionary were meaningless for these 'nationalist' goons. The faces of the vandals are clearly visible in the videos—none have been arrested. The CM has threatened to book those sharing such 'fake videos'.



Photo: Getty Images

Why sell books, sell trishuls! So say West Bengal's BJP leaders

*

Cornered in the battle to occupy Bengal's mindscape, the stampede at Chorbagan puja pandal on 17 October, which killed 19 people, blew up in the government's face, exposing its ineptness. Recovering lost ground will not be easy for Adhikari & Co.

On 18 October, the Trinamool Congress Mamata faction went to Girish Park police station to submit a memorandum in response to the stampede. Deputations from the CPI(M) and Congress also filed separate memorandums. Political parties staged protests as senior leaders demanded accountability and transparency regarding crowd management and alleged administrative negligence.

Bengal watchers did not miss the significance of the social media posts that followed. Seeing the TMC's Kunal Ghosh, the CPI(M)'s Shatarup Ghosh and Congress spokesperson Suman Roy Chaudhuri helping each other under fluttering party flags is radically different from what the people are used to. The two Ghoshes are usually seen demolishing each other on TV debates!

The message of cross-party camaraderie did not end here. The same evening, Kunal Ghosh was welcomed by Shatarup and other CPI(M) leaders when he showed up at the CPI(M) bookstall at Jadavpur, also targeted for demolition.

"Our politics may be different," Ghosh later told the media, "but we have known each other for a long time. I read Marxist literature, I keep publications from the SUCI, and the CPM. This stall offers not just Left literature but also good books from other genres."

Events in Delhi recently brought leaders like Mamata Banerjee, M.A. Baby, Rahul Gandhi and Dipankar Bhattacharya together over the SIR and the crackdown on students, rekindling the buzz around the resurrection of INDIA bloc. Is this camaraderie percolating down to operational levels, creating conditions for a one-on-one contest against the BJP?

Yesterday's foes becoming tomorrow's bedfellows will be portentous for the BJP in Bengal. ■

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STATES 360°  PUNJAB

A murder in Mansa may have broken the spell of AAP

Harjeshwar Pal Singh

Punjab has seen many killings—perhaps never watched one live. On 13 October, at around 9.15 a.m. Parvinder Singh 'Jhota' walked into a chemist's shop in Mansa, holding his phone out in front of him. It was the only weapon he carried. For approximately four minutes, his followers on Facebook Live watched Jhota confront the shop owner, Ashwani Kumar, accusing him of selling *nasha* (drugs) to an elderly man. Kumar pulled out a pistol. "*Maar mainu, maar mainu*" (Go ahead, kill me), Jhota dared him. Three shots rang out, the phone tumbled to the floor, and the screen went dark.

Jhota means 'bull', a nickname that suited Parvinder to a tee. A former boxer and recovered addict, he had turned his own demons into the *Nasha Roko, Rozgar Do* crusade. His anti-drug taskforce model was replicated by village committees across Mansa and Bathinda. Jhota's method was crude but effective: walk in, camera rolling, and catch the *chitta* (drug) peddler red-handed.

His feud with Ashwani Kumar wasn't new. In July 2023, Jhota and his supporters accused the chemist of selling banned drugs and paraded him through the market wearing a garland of shoes. Both were booked. Jhota spent months behind bars. Kumar, who reportedly faced at least five FIRs, walked away with an arms licence for a 7.62 mm pistol and a 12-bore gun.

The man who fought drugs went to jail; the man accused of selling them got a gun licence. That single irony did more to indict the system than a hundred press conferences. It laid bare the old triangle—politician, policeman, smuggler—that political scientists call an iron triangle and ordinary Punjabis simply call "setting".

Within days of Jhota's murder, the local SHO was suspended and the SSP claimed 138+ cases had been filed against chemists in a single month. Why had they waited over three years to do that?

*

In the last four years, Mansa has given Punjab two 'martyrs'. In May 2022, Sidhu Moosewala, gunned down in his car; now, Jhota, gunned down on camera. The emotional response, as it spills into the streets, has been strikingly similar.

While the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee) has announced that Jhota's portrait will be displayed in the Central Sikh Museum at Darbar Sahib, the family wants official martyr status and a statue in Mansa. A man the state had jailed is now being canonised by both the Panth and the public.

AAP's first instinct was to do what it does best—manage the story. Police hinted at a 'personal enmity' between two old rivals. That did not wash: all of Punjab had seen the video. So, out came the bulldozers. In 24 hours, the administration was seen demolishing Kumar's shop and residence. The crowd didn't wait for 'bulldozer justice' imported from Uttar Pradesh to finish the job. They brought out the medicines, found capsules they claimed were prohibited, and set the place on fire.



Parvinder Singh 'Jhota' (*left*) was shot dead during a live feed (*top*) on his Facebook account

The government's much-advertised pre-election campaign is *Yudh Nashian Virudh* (war against drugs). More like *Yudh Nasha Rokan Walian Virudh* (war against those who stop drugs), said protesters, mockingly. Hoardings proclaiming an '*Imaandar CM*' (honest CM) were blackened, *imaandar* overwritten by *beimaan*. (dishonest). For once, AAP's war room lost the war of words.

There was another deeper irony. According to his friends, in 2022, Jhota had backed AAP's Vijay Singla in Mansa, believing the party would crush the drug trade. Within months, Singla was sacked from the cabinet on corruption charges. Disillusioned, Jhota drifted away. When Singla finally visited the injured at Civil Hospital four days after Jhota's killing, Nihangs and protesters chased him out. The man AAP once counted as an ally had become the face of the fury against it.

Jhota's live feed ended on 13 Oct. But the story is still streaming and AAP may not like the ending

What started as a spontaneous expression of rage has quickly acquired the shape of a classic Punjabi morcha. A joint action committee is running a continuous dharna in Mansa. Opposition parties, kisan unions, ex-servicemen, employees' bodies, civil society and a swarm of social media influencers have joined in. The Punjab bandh of 15 October was a united show of strength rarely seen since the farm agitation. Markets downed shutters from Amritsar to Zirakpur and highways fell silent.

On 19 October, the morcha carried its *lahnat pattars* (letters of condemnation) to the doorsteps of all 92 AAP MLAs. Not one legislator came out to receive them. Sukhveer Singh Maiserkhana, expelled from the party, emerged to accept his and admitted AAP had erred. Talks held the same day between the family and senior IAS officers ended without a breakthrough.

Then the government blinked. On the morning of 20 October, hours before Amit Shah landed in Punjab, Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann announced on *X* that the case was being handed to the CBI, 'respecting the family's demand'. This from a party that has spent a decade calling central agencies the BJP's *tota* (parrot).

Shah made the most of it. He spent barely twenty minutes at Jhota's home and turned the rest of the day into a political roadshow of grief. He called on the families of Bikramjit Singh in Gurdaspur and Gulzar Singh in Sangrur. Calling Mann's regime an '*aapda*' government, Shah declared that anyone who speaks against drugs in Punjab is no longer safe. The BJP, a marginal player in rural Punjab, wants to wave the *chitta* banner as its own.

This is precisely what the morcha has been wary of. It initially resolved to oppose Shah's visit—the Border Security Force is, after all, answerable to the home ministry—before relenting at the family's request. With everyone eager to carry Jhota's *arthi*, the family is making sure no one hijacks what he stood for.

At the centre of it all stands Jhota's father Bhim Singh, an ex-serviceman with a *fauji*'s resolve. When the SGPC offered fixed deposits of Rs 10 lakh each for his two grandsons, he declined, asking instead that help go to the four men injured alongside his son.

Like Balkaur Singh before him, he has turned private grief into public resolve. The CBI sop has not ended his vigil. Jhota's body still lies in the mortuary, and the other demands remain unmet: resignations of the chief minister and DGP Gaurav Yadav, dismissal of the district's police brass and a post-mortem at PGIMER, Chandigarh.

Until 12 October, AAP looked pretty comfortable. Its populist welfare model—free power, mohalla clinics, Rs 1,000 to women—had struck a chord. Mann's 'Teflon image' had survived the *beadabi* controversy, corruption charges against his wife and close confidants, and a host of other crises. With the Akalis split and shrunk, the Congress busy fighting itself and the BJP still fumbling for a rural base, its control of the narrative seemed tight.

The Jhota killing has exposed the fault lines of this model—a party that lives by the reel can also die by the reel. AAP leans on one man; when Mann's credibility dents there is no second line to absorb the blow. Crucially, AAP has failed on the two issues that matter most to the Punjabi household—drugs and law and order.

Recent history should worry the party. In Punjab, governments are discredited on the street before being defeated by the ballot. A powerful civil society and an influencer ecosystem with viral reach has brought governments to their knees.

In 2015, Bargari and Behbal Kalan broke the Akali Dal; it crashed to 15 seats in 2017 and 3 in 2022. In 2020-21, the farm agitation discredited the traditional parties so thoroughly that AAP swept to power with 92 of 117 seats. AAP rode the last great wave of street anger into office. The question now is whether this wave will sweep it out.

With elections only four months away, the arithmetic is unforgiving. If the agitation continues—with a body in the mortuary, a father on dharna and a video playing on every smartphone—it could do to Bhagwant Mann what Bargari did to the Badals. Jhota's live feed ended on 13 October. The story is still streaming and AAP may not like the ending. ■

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Outsourcing 'problem solving' to protesters

Paradoxes in the RSS@100 and Mohan Bhagwat's annual address

A.J. Prabal

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) concluded its centenary celebrations on Dussehra, 20 October 2026. At home, the year-long jamboree saw a national outreach covering 4.61 lakh villages and 10 crore urban households (as claimed in its annual report 2025-26) and the release of a commemorative postage stamp and a 100-rupee coin. Overseas bhakts were graced by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's flying visits as he addressed diaspora in the US, UK and Canada on the organisation's humanitarian non-communal agenda. The converted needed no convincing and the sceptics stayed sceptical.

Undoubtedly stronger, wealthier and politically more influential than ever before, the centenary year hasn't been an unmitigated bed of roses for the RSS. The Gen Z protests in June as well as the countrywide protests against *vote chori* by the BJP in collusion with the Election Commission caught it off-guard. Speaking in Mumbai in August, Bhagwat praised the inherent patriotism of "our very own youth" protesting at Jantar Mantar. In his Vijaya Dashami speech, the same youth were described as emotional, misguided and misled by foreign powers.

Bhagwat, who not only enjoys Z-category security but was also ranked as the fourth most powerful Indian by *The Indian Express* in 2025, met hostile demonstrations abroad and a barrage of hard questions at home. The Congress government in Karnataka served a notice to the RSS to clarify its legal status and furnish details of membership and funding. Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi sustained a no-holds-barred attack, calling the RSS 'a bunch of jokers' and an 'anti-Constitutional all-male cult'.

While the jury is still out on whether the choice of Nitin Nabin as BJP's national president was dictated by the party or the RSS, the loss of the Bankipur assembly seat in Bihar, that too in the centenary year, has grated on both. (The seat vacated by Nabin has been a BJP stronghold since 1995.) Bhagwat turned 75 six days before Prime Minister Modi did. Whatever happened to retirement at 75 being held up as the Hindu ideal of *vanaprastha*? Bhagwat now says he never asked anyone to retire at 75, and that he would step down whenever the Sangh asks him to.

The RSS continues to maintain the fiction that it is a cultural organisation, an unregistered NGO with no connection to the ruling party. Its annual report provides no information on the composition, regional identity and number of members, no details on donors, no audited account of income and expenditure. Why has this 'model of integrity' not voluntarily adopted the transparency standards it expects from others? Bhagwat insists that Hindu dharma requires no registration. If every other NGO is bound to follow the rules, how does the world's so-called largest NGO claim exemption? Saying that the RSS is a 'body of individuals' and hence need not furnish details about its income and expenditure is the tallest of legal tales.

While thousands of NGOs have had their registration cancelled on minor or frivolous grounds, barred from receiving donations from abroad for being in 'violation of the rules', the RSS continues to evade scrutiny. Small wonder that Bhagwat telling protesters to stay on the right side of the law and the Constitution drew more hoots than cheers.

Journalist and author Dhirendra K. Jha, known for his extensive research on the RSS, calls it a private anti-constitutional para-military organisation. The RSS imparts arms training to its cadre. Bhagwat has said on record that they can mobilise an army along India's borders in three days flat (faster than the Indian army). Its cadre wears a uniform and worships weapons (*shastra puja*) on Vijayadashami. Under which Indian law, Jha wonders, can such an outfit be registered?

At a time when people are being detained and jailed in Delhi simply for waving the national flag, the RSS is conducting route marches with its goosestepping lathi-wielding cadre. Karnataka Home Minister Priyank Kharge posted a screenshot of a letter in which the RSS had 'informed' the government of its route marches, sought 'cooperation' from the police and asked the government to make 'necessary arrangements'.





Photos: Getty Images

Ducking the issue RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's Vijayadashami speech avoided any mention of the protests over NEET, CBSE, vote chori or SIR; (*above*) boots on the ground ready for route march this Dussehra

Kharge wrote: 'When lakhs of you intend to march through Karnataka's streets on a single day at the same time, the police department has considerable preparations to make: deployment of personnel, transportation, food, traffic management, security arrangements and other logistics. All of this requires planning, manpower and public resources. So, please fill out the prescribed application form, provide the necessary details and await formal permission.' His sarcastic tweet highlighted the absurdity of a private NGO demanding public services while steadfastly refusing the public's right to information.

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Bhagwat has pronounced that there will be no regime change in India. The current wave of protests was merely a "storm that had swept in from the West", opposed to "every kind of order, every form of civility, everything auspicious… all cultural and human values… it wants to destroy, corrupt and devastate all of these things."

Rattled by the fear of losing power, the BJP and RSS are clinging to conspiracy theories

Expectedly, he blamed it on the 'foreign hand': "Just listen to the news that has been coming in over the past few days. What is happening in France? What is happening in Albania? What happened in Bangladesh? What happened in Nepal? All of these events have been engineered and orchestrated…"

While Bhagwat's discourse on protests came as no surprise, what was breathtaking was his shifting the responsibility of problem solving to the protesters. Agitations, he said, should aim to find solutions rather than deepen hostility or create divisions within society. The chief thinker of the RSS chose to stay oblivious of the government itself creating divisions and deepening hostility.

Not a word was uttered on what triggered the protests—by citizens, workers, youth, women, farmers, students—in the first place. Neither *vote chori* nor the SIR nor the government's failures to conduct the CBSE exam nor the NEET fiasco merited Bhagwat's attention. Instead, he spoke of the evils of social media delivering unfiltered information to the youth, the urgency of restricting and regulating it, while staying mum on the vituperative government-funded mainstream media propaganda machine.

Some analysts read fear in his words. Author, columnist and commentator Ashutosh tweeted: 'Mohan Bhagwat's speech is a classic example of how scared the whole organisation is and how vulnerable they have become.' He recalled 1975, when the RSS lent its support to JP and the then Opposition, exhorting the army and the police to disobey the orders of the government. Morarji Desai, who became prime minister in 1977, had declared that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi would be confined to her residence until she resigned. Wasn't that an operation for regime change, asked Ashutosh.

Jha agrees that the RSS, known to be fork-tongued, may well be driven by fear. He recalls Bhagwat's placatory annual address following the BJP's electoral setback in the Lok Sabha polls of 2024. At the time Bhagwat had said: the Opposition has an important role; the Opposition is not the enemy. After a year-and-a-half of silence on Manipur, he had also spoken about the fire still raging in the state.

Jha believes the bogey of regime change in this year's address could also be driven by the fact that the BJP and the RSS are unsure about how to cope with the protests.

Rattled by the fear of losing power, they are closing ranks around the handy narrative of foreign conspiracies. ■

Still not too late to do the right thing, Mr CJI

Avay Shukla

Recent weeks have seen unprecedented protests across India, reflecting a deep sense of frustration and disenchantment with multiple pillars of constitutional governance. The Supreme Court, traditionally regarded as the last refuge for justice, finds itself at the heart of a growing crisis of public trust and judicial accountability.

When Rahul Gandhi, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, sought a dialogue with the Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant on 12 October to present grievances, the request was declined. In the not-so-distant past, one of the CJI's predecessors had no hesitation in inviting the prime minister for a puja and a cosy tête-à-tête.

This snub was both unfortunate and expected.

Unfortunate, because the CJI is not another divine, non-biological being but a part of the system. This system has become dysfunctional, and the LoP simply wanted to convey this to him.

The LoP has as much constitutional status as a CJI, even though their roles differ. The CJI would not have compromised his much-vaunted, but increasingly doubted, political 'neutrality' if he had had the courtesy to meet the LoP, listen to his grievances, perhaps accept a memorandum or two, share a cup of tea, and bid him "*Auf Wiedersehen"* or "We shall meet at Philippi".

No one expected him to act on the grievances, of course, since many of them pertain to his own court, but at least the window-dressing of democratic accessibility and an 'independent' judiciary would have been preserved. It might even have restored some of the trust that large sections of the public no longer have in the court.

But, as I said, the refusal was expected, for the simple reason that the Supreme Court no longer has the moral authority and public trust to act as an honest broker (or arbiter) between the government and the Opposition/public. It had started shedding this constitutional Teflon long before CJI Surya Kant's tenure, beginning with its orders on Rafale, Pegasus, Hindenburg, Ram Mandir, electoral bonds and Umar Khalid, to name just a few.



We, The People When the guardians of democracy fail in their duty, citizens step out to reclaim it

But the moulting has become more pronounced over the last year or so. There is a perception that it has been consistently siding with the executive and the Election Commission in spite of scientific evidence, ground realities and public demands.

It gave a clean chit to the use of EVMs, made a statistical mockery of VVPAT verification, ignored the selective use of the model code of conduct in favour of the ruling party, stayed silent on the dubious rejection of nomination papers of opposition candidates (which has now been upgraded to blatant intimidation and arrests), the use of police to 'persuade' some voters to stay at home during polling, and the egregious changes, delays and mismatches in voter counts.

It looked on as the Election Commission repeatedly approved the breaking up and hijacking of opposition parties and governments by the BJP, and preferred humiliation to contempt action when the committee set up by it to select the chief election commissioner was thrown into the dustbin by the Modi government.

Every misdeed of this type was brought to its notice through various petitions (which, the CJI reportedly told Rahul Gandhi, was the kosher way of approaching the court!). These were usually rejected with the contempt they deserved or put on the backburner for a more propitious time. In fact, the court occasionally even frowned upon those who filed these petitions and wasted its time, drawing upon its vast knowledge of zoology to term them cockroaches, flies, etc.

The nadir was reached when it did nothing—NOTHING—for over a year to rein in an Election Commission which had gone rogue with its brutal SIR, which has consigned 13 crore voters to the twilight zone between statelessness and deportation. Worse, it greenlighted the politically partisan exercise in May this year, incentivising the ECI to redouble its efforts to rob Indian citizens of their fundamental rights.

With all the gatekeepers of democracy and justice—the higher judiciary, Parliament, the Election Commission, the National Human Rights Commission and the media—abdicating their constitutional duties and oaths and becoming irrelevant, India's citizenry has occupied the space that genuinely belongs to it, and which no wannabe despot can take away from it: roads, streets, parks and open spaces.

Here, too, the Supreme Court has not exactly covered itself with glory: it suggested removing Jantar Mantar as a protest venue and initially failed to take any action against Delhi Police for its excesses on young protesters, including girls, journalists, advocates, passers-by and students.

When public and international outrage finally forced it to issue some directions, these were hedged with so many caveats and conditionalities, escape clauses such as 'in accordance with law', 'provided' and 'however', that the police treated them as cosmetic inconveniences.

Today, a one-stripe constable at Jantar Mantar effectively wields more power than the CJI—or so it seems to most citizens.

This is the background and context—the total breakdown of law and order, denial of constitutional protections and rights, evisceration of the values of democracy, subversion of institutions, rampant use of sovereign violence and defiance of judicial orders—of the the LoP's desire to meet the CJI.

The Supreme Court is the last port of call for the citizens of a failing ship of state, and it does not behove the CJI to wash his hands of the mess by saying, "Law and order is not my domain." Yes, in normal circumstances it is not, but when the pretext of law and order is used to suppress the people's voice, to inflict needless violence, to shut down a city, to deprive citizens of their basic rights and to murder democracy itself, where else can the people turn for legal redress but the Supreme Court?

Such a moment is not the time to split hairs about 'administrative' and 'judicial' sides, as the CJI has sought to do; he should look at the 'justice' side. For, in the ultimate analysis, if the highest court of the land cannot assure justice for citizens, it becomes another legal fiction and might as well be wound up.

The Constitution has given the higher judiciary extraordinary powers, privileges and protection to safeguard the rights of the people, not those of the government of the day. If this authority is instead used to allow authoritarian overreach, it is a breach of the trust the people have reposed in the court, a violation of a sovereign contract, and they—We the People—have the inherent right to enforce accountability and even demand resignations.

That moment in time has arrived.

It's still not too late to do the right thing, Your Lordship. ■

If our highest court cannot assure justice for its citizens, it becomes another legal fiction

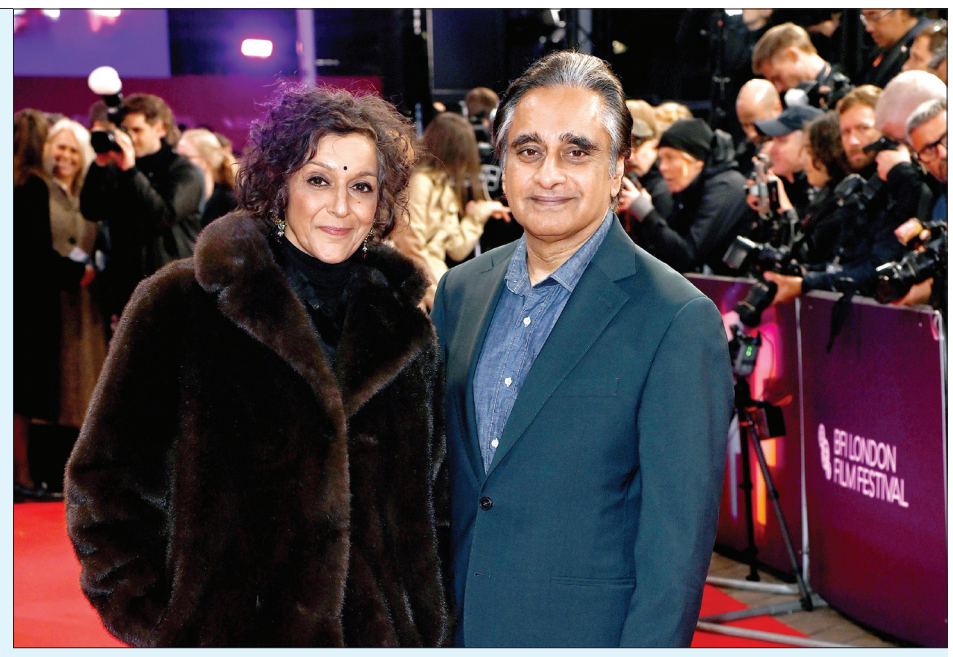
AVAY SHUKLA *is a retired IAS officer*



Migrant workers demand better visa conditions at a rally in Parliament Square, London. The rally was called by UK's public service trade union UNISON

LONDON DIARY

HASAN SUROOR


Dame Meera Syal

Photos: ***Getty Images***

Britain still runs on cheap foreign labour

For all the brave rhetoric about cracking down on foreign workers accused of 'stealing' British jobs, the bland truth is that Britain cannot do without them. Primarily because they come cheap but also because in many critical areas such as social care and high-tech there's an acute shortage of local skilled labour.

Research has revealed that four out of every five new jobs created in Britain since 2014 went to overseas workers rather than British citizens.

Of the 3.7 million jobs added to the workforce in Britain in the past 12 years, some 2.5 million went to foreign workers—an overwhelming majority from outside the European Union. A study by the Centre for Social Justice think tank found that most of them were employed in the hospitality, retail and social care sectors.

This has pushed many more native Brits into an already bloated welfare system that doles out billions of pounds as unemployment allowance to those out of work.

With the cost of benefits set to reach £136.1bn by next year (according to official figures) the government is under pressure to reduce the load by taking harsher measures to keep out foreign workers.

The findings showed an economic crisis which "extends beyond the benefit system" said Sir Iain Duncan Smith, the former Conservative party leader who led the study. "Ministers have repeatedly pulled the easy lever of immigration rather than providing a better deal for left-behind communities."

A separate report from the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford said some 3.4 million people from outside the EU migrated to Britain between 2021 and 2025 during the 'Boriswave'—a surge in migration which followed the post-Brexit policies of the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Ironically, at the time, Brexit was touted as a magic wand to stop immigration and save 'British jobs for British workers'.

Meanwhile, the new Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood has announced a series of even more stringent measures to discourage immigration.

These include doubling the standard time it takes to qualify for indefinite leave to remain, which grants foreign nationals the right to live, work, study and claim benefits in the UK permanently.

Will she succeed in achieving what her predecessors failed to achieve?

Class still matters in 'meritorious' Britain

Tony Blair, that great cheerleader for modern Britain, famously declared that its notorious class system was dead ("We're all middle class now") and henceforth only meritocracy would rule.

A quarter of a century later, it seems that he spoke a bit too early as the well-oiled 'old school tie' system is still very much alive and flourishing, says a new report.

'The old adage of who you know, not what you know, being crucial in finding a job is as true as ever for graduates', said *The Times*, citing research by Graduate Futures Institute, which surveyed university careers advisers.

It would appear that social networking rather than professional competence continues to drive the graduate employment market.

More than three quarters of respondents—79 per cent—attributed their difficulty in finding a suitable job to a lack of their 'social capital'. As many as 97 per cent said that students from under-represented groups, such as refugees, carers or those estranged from their families, faced disadvantages in finding employment compared with their more well-heeled classmates.

A 'meritorious' Britain? Really, Mr Blair?


Former Prime Minister Tony Blair

Partition memories

Filmmaker Meera Syal has recalled her father's first visit since Partition to his childhood home in Pakistan in 1997 for the 50th anniversary of that traumatic event.

Speaking at the Cheltenham Literary Festival about her memoir, *Vigilauntie*, Syal described being led upstairs by the welcoming Muslim family who lived there. Her father seemed confused, she said, as the rooms felt much smaller than he remembered. This is when the host family confessed, "We've had a row with our relatives and partitioned the house."

The two faces of Jeffrey Archer

A lot of important people have said a lot of nice things about Jeffrey Archer who died recently (5 October 2026). However, many have also been critical, citing their personal experiences. Some have highlighted his intolerance of any criticism of his work and his "economical relationship with truth".


Novelist and former politician Jeffrey Archer

Charles Moore, the noted British journalist and former editor of *The Telegraph* who knew him rather too well, has written about Archer's penchant for self-publicity.

In a piece in *The Spectator*, Moore reveals that during a book tour in America, Archer managed to get hold of the person who was to interview him for a TV network and fed him some handy questions to ask.

Came the day and the interviewer asked: "Is it Jeffrey or Lord Archer?"

"Oh, just Jeffrey," Archer replied.

The host then asked: "They say Margaret Thatcher loved your books?"

Archer blushingly said: "How did you know that?"

And was the Queen a fan?

"I ought not to comment."

American viewers, we are told, were suitably impressed by such modesty.

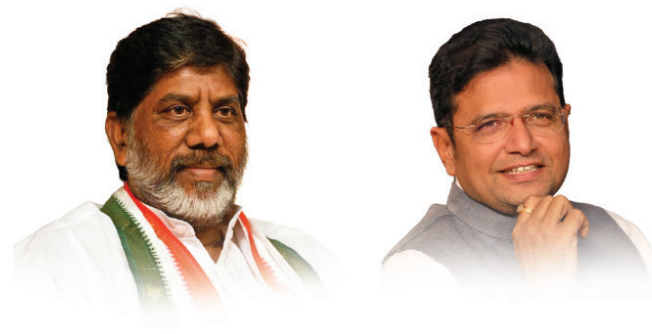


And, lastly, former chancellor of the exchequer and home secretary Sajjid Javid recently happened to drop by Parliament House—once his second home—to attend an event. A young parliamentary aide met him and brightly said, "I'm just going to show you around. Have you been to Parliament before?"

Oh, just "once or twice" was Javid's jesting reply. To which the young woman replied, in all earnest: "And did you like it?" ■

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NATION

STATES 360°
Uttarakhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, Punjab

▸P2,5,6



FOCUS

SING, LAUGH, DANCE THE REVOLUTION
The joke's on those who fail to take Gen Z seriously

▸P3



CULTURE

WHEN SAFFRON GOONS SAW RED
Kolkata, a city that prides itself on its love of books, witnessed an unprecedented assault

▸P4



Why Marco Rubio took a bypass to Ambani

Ashis Ray

US secretary of state Marco Rubio was in India 20–22 October. Not in Delhi, though. Evidently, meeting his counterpart, Indian external affairs minister S. Jaishankar, or anyone in the Indian government was not his priority. His principal purpose was to visit Jamnagar to interact with Mukesh Ambani of Reliance Industries, whose oil refineries are headquartered there.

Contrary to protocol, Rubio's visit was first announced by the US state department and only later confirmed, a bit sheepishly, by the Indian ministry of external affairs. In other words, the Trump administration bypassed the Modi government to set up this tête-à-tête with a private sector player to pursue its economic and strategic interest.

On arrival in Mumbai and standing on the steps of the iconic Taj Mahal Palace Hotel at Apollo Bunder, Rubio said: "So you have a company (Reliance) with a massive amount of refining capability… I think I should go talk to them, especially when it involves nation states, oil from another country…"

The US has rather controversially controlled Venezuela's oil industry since kidnapping its president Nicolas Maduro and renditioning him to New York in January this year. Reliance Industries has the capability to refine heavy grades of crude and is therefore potentially able to meet the US requirement to process Venezuelan crude in sizeable volumes.

After Mukesh Ambani and son Anant had met with Rubio, Reliance issued a statement that said: 'The visit included wide-ranging discussions on the global energy landscape and opportunities for commercial partnerships across conventional and new energy.' As per a *Reuters* report, 'The Ambanis also shared their perspective on opportunities for collaboration with US companies.' With the gradual increase in Venezuelan output during the course of this year, Reliance has already become a significant importer of the nation's crude.

In his meeting with Jaishankar, who hotfooted to Mumbai for the purpose, Rubio unsurprisingly pressed India to up its energy purchases from the US. In his talks with Ambani, he reportedly urged Reliance to set up refining facilities in Venezuela to service the US market. What's in it for India? Buying Venezuelan crude means incurring exorbitant shipping costs because of the crisis in the Persian Gulf, unless India can negotiate concessions on account of refining support from Reliance.

Rubio also mentioned to media in Mumbai, according to *NHK* of Japan, that the next Quad summit will take place in Manila next month. Thanks to Trump, the Quad alliance of the US, Japan, India and Australia has been dormant for the past 22 months. A meeting of the four heads of government was to take place in India last year, but Trump was not interested. The whimsical convening in November is a lame attempt to gain some leverage over China before he visits that country but Beijing is unlikely to be fooled by these histrionics.

Rubio also met businessman Gautam Adani, though no details were available of the exchange between the two. Their meeting wouldn't have pleased opposition Democrats back in the US who have sought an explanation from the US department of justice on how and why the corruption charges against Adani were dropped earlier this year. One of the reasons why Adani reportedly escaped prosecution in the US was his pledge to invest $10 billion in the US solar energy sector.

Asked by reporters to comment on the adverse remarks by OHCHR (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights) rapporteurs on the Indian government's crackdown on the Jantar Mantar protesters, Rubio was dismissive of the 'UN experts' saying the phrase was an oxymoron.

A group of 25-odd rapporteurs of the OHCHR had stated, 'Any restrictions on peaceful assembly must be legal, pursue a legitimate aim, and be necessary and proportionate'. Referring to the over 7,000 arrests of youth, journalists and human rights defenders, they said, 'These actions violate India's core international legal obligations, including the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly, freedom of expression, liberty, security of the person, and the right to defend human rights.'

The OHCHR experts described the crackdowns in various places, particularly Delhi, as revealing a 'broader troubling pattern' of Indian authorities using 'undue restrictions on peaceful assembly, excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances and the targeting of student activists'. The rapporteurs have called for an 'independent, impartial and thorough investigation' into the activities of the law enforcement agencies concerned and associated forces 'without delay'.



US secretary of state Marco Rubio with chairman of Reliance Industries, Mukesh Ambani, during his visit to Jamnagar

Rubio reportedly urged Reliance to set up refining facilities in Venezuela. But what's in it for India?

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In September this year, the US Congress passed legislation empowering the US President to impose, at his discretion, 100 per cent tariffs on exports from countries buying Russian crude. The Trump administration has held this now-legal provision as a dagger to India's throat, because of India's high consumption of Russian crude in recent years, and will use it no doubt to extract a favourable trade deal from a petrified Modi. Trump has signalled a 60-day pause on invoking the new law to calm international prices ahead of midterm elections, but the threat lingers.

On his trip, Rubio patronisingly said: "India has repeatedly expressed a desire to diversify its energy portfolio (code for sourcing oil and gas from the US or US-blocked Venezuelan production) […] I think they've made substantial progress in this regard, and we're happy to see that." Under any circumstances, especially with a ballooning trade deficit and a collapsing rupee, it is certainly not in India's national interest to opt for more expensive crude compared to the currently competitive offer from Moscow.

Whereas the *New York Times* presented Rubio's visit as an attempt to 'strengthen economic ties amid strained relations, at a reception to celebrate 250 years of American independence from Britain, the US secretary of state apparently forgot to address Jaishankar in his speech or even acknowledge his presence or make any reference to the bilateral relationship.

Jaishankar, on the other hand, remarked that his discussions with Rubio earlier the same day held 'great value' and reaffirmed India's "continued commitment to advance the India-US strategic partnership".

A US state department readout of the Rubio-Jaishankar meeting said: 'The secretary reiterated that increased energy trade with the United States can play a transformative role in diversifying India's supply chains while meeting its sizeable consumer demand […] and advocated for the increased purchase of US technologies and systems'. That sounded like Washington playing hardball in negotiations to enforce a one-sided trade agreement. India will do well to not buckle under pressure as other more courageous countries have done. ■

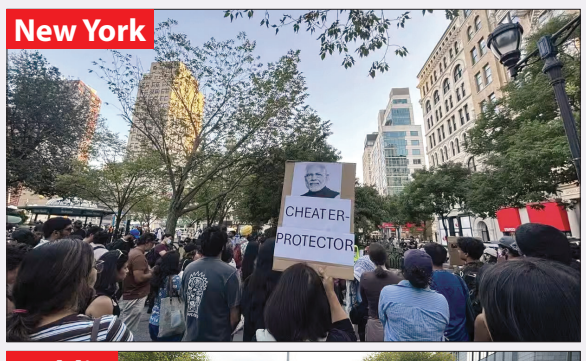
Is the Indian diaspora finally waking up?

Ashok Swain

It's fairly common knowledge that Narendra Modi's frequent trips abroad are less about diplomacy and more about staging diaspora jamborees to convince his followers that he is a leader of great stature, admired across the world. For years, these stage-managed gatherings gave his supporters and crony-controlled media the spectacle they wanted. They cheered a leader they imagined gave them bragging rights.

Crowds at embassy-arranged events chanting 'Modi, Modi' and media amplification of this theatre of endorsement by well-heeled Indians abroad fed into his image at home as well. Not everyone was similarly enamoured perhaps, but his critics kept a lower profile than his supporters. That picture seems to have suddenly changed, with city streets in Europe, North America and Australia erupting simultaneously in solidarity protests running under the banner 'Jantar Mantar Is Everywhere'. They are echoing the demands of their friends, kin and fellow countrymen, demanding accountability, fair elections and the freedom to dissent.









Protest gatherings in London, New York, Toronto, Sydney, Berlin, Dublin, Stockholm, Copenhagen, The Hague and other cities have brought students, professionals and activists together against the reported massive electoral irregularities and the brutal oppression of protesters in India. This surge of diaspora protests matters more than their size may suggest. Even fifty people coming together can break the silence, ease fears of retaliation, build connections and make the next protest easier to organise.

It's still too early, though, to declare that the diaspora has given up on Modi. Indians abroad remain divided by religion, caste, class, generation and political experience.

The surge in the protests matters more than their size suggests

Carnegie's 2024 Indian American Attitudes Survey found that 47 per cent still approve of Modi's performance. The disenchantment is growing but the spread is uneven. Also, a US survey cannot represent the views of Indian communities everywhere else. What these protests show is that space for serious opposition does exist within the wider diaspora community, and people are beginning to occupy it.

That knowledge also challenges a political understanding Modi has pushed for twelve years—that the status of Indians abroad draws on *his* standing in the world. Applauding him, then, becomes proof of their nationalism and criticising him an insult to the motherland. Even as they benefit from the pluralist default of their adoptive countries, or demand protection against discrimination where they live, too many Indians abroad still support majoritarianism back in India. They are not troubled by the targeting of minorities in Modi's India. But a diaspora movement that is now loudly demanding equal citizenship for all Indians back home is confronting this hypocrisy.

Resistance from the diaspora did not begin this October. Sikh organisations played a prominent role in supporting the farmers' movement in 2021. Anti-caste groups, Muslim organisations, secular associations and student networks have challenged Hindu fundamentalism for years. Their work deserves recognition.

The current protests are also resonating with students who worry about recruitment examinations when they return home. Also, many who thought they were 'apolitical' or hitherto stayed away from political discussions are getting vocal about the goings-on at home. They are angry about the brutal police action against peaceful protesters. Many may once have admired Modi and are now coming to terms with their own gullibility. But this change of heart is still a work in progress.

Fear is still a deterrent, and it takes a slightly different form for the diaspora. It is also the reason why the numbers of protesters do not swell easily. People living thousands of kilometres away may still worry about their immediate or extended family or their friends, about problems visiting home and their ties with India.

The recent action against actor Imran Khan, an OCI cardholder, makes those fears all too real. After his alleged participation in a Mumbai protest, authorities ordered him to leave India and later questioned his OCI status. He has challenged the action in court, but whichever way the case ultimately goes, his harassment will convey a message to others: that dissent can threaten your ties with home.

The obverse is also true: by joining a public demonstration people often learn that others share concerns they have kept private. A student may meet a lawyer, a professional may find an organiser, a lone ranger may see the value of community and common cause. Reading the Indian Constitution together gives them a common purpose stronger than personal anger against an autocrat.

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STATES 360°  UTTARAKHAND

Governorships or video clips, scandals haunt the BJP in the hills

Rashme Sehgal

Dushyant Kumar Gautam, former BJP national general secretary and erstwhile president of the party's Scheduled Caste Morcha, was sworn in as the 19th Governor of Sikkim on 19 October—despite a plea to the President of India to recall his appointment. Gautam had been named as one of the VIPs who had allegedly sought sexual favours from Ankita Bhandari in September 2022, and been refused.

The 19-year-old receptionist disappeared from Vanantra resort on the night of 18 September. Her body was recovered from the Chilla barrage several days later. While prime accused Pulkit Arya (owner of Vanantra and son of BJP minister Vinod Arya) is currently serving a life sentence, Dushyant Gautam's call details with Pulkit Arya have not been made public as demanded by activist groups in Uttarakhand.

For the past four years, the state has been on the boil, demanding justice for Ankita. Finding it too hot to handle, the government handed over the investigation to the CBI in January 2026. Not only are Ankita's aged parents Soni Devi and Virendra Singh Bhandari upset at the investigation having gone into cold storage, they are deeply disturbed by Gautam's appointment as governor (as this grants him immunity from prosecution).

"When we heard the news, we could not sleep the whole night," Soni Devi said. "We travelled from our village Dobh Srikot to Srinagar, and took an overnight bus to Delhi. On 14 October, we had scarcely sat down at Jantar Mantar when the police arrived and threatened us. If we refused to leave, we would be fined Rs 1.5 lakh for breaking the law. We are poor people, in no position to pay such a hefty fine, so we moved to India Gate. Several activists and Congress leaders including Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi came to express their solidarity with us."

What she did not say was that ever since Ankita's death, both parents have been under the surveillance of intelligence agencies who are monitoring their every move. Embarrassed by their protest at India Gate—where they threatened to go on an indefinite fast if CBI findings were not made public—the Dhami government ordered the suspension of Sarvesh Panwar, superintendent of police (Pauri Garhwal) and Sardar Singh, sub-inspector (local intelligence) for failing to prevent them from reaching New Delhi.

The day after the Leader of Opposition met them, Ankita's parents were whisked away by Delhi Police. The BJP then released a photograph of them meeting two senior CBI officers along with Pauri Garhwal MP Anil Baluni (perceived to be close to Union Home Minister Amit Shah).

The CBI was clearly ordered to set up the photo-op. With the crucial assembly election barely five months away, it remains to be seen which VIPs are made the scapegoats.

Soni Devi is determined to continue her fight. "*Main haar nahi manugi* (I will not accept defeat). The worst the government can do is kill us. Better to die once than accept their lies."

Virender Singh Bhandari is equally resolute. "We believe the CBI needs to conclude its enquiry at the earliest. The call records of both Dushyant Gautam and the other RSS leader Ajay Kumar [Uttarakhand organising secretary also named as a VIP in the case] should be made public. We had appealed to the President of India to do a proper background check before signing his appointment."

The news of Gautam's appointment set off a wave of anger in Sikkim. The Sikkim Bar Council dashed off a letter to Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang and Prime Minister Modi stating that 'the appointment should be kept in abeyance until the controversy around the Ankita Bhandari case is fully resolved and the name of the Governor-designate is conclusively cleared by the competent investigating authorities'.

Speaking from Sikkim, social activist and Citizen Action Party leader Bharat Basnet said the state is embarrassed at the appointment of a man with such an unsavoury reputation.

Student organisations, along with citizens, have been staging daily protests at the district administrative centre. They have vowed to continue the agitation until Gautam's governorship is revoked.

Dr Mukesh Semwal is a member of the Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist) whose cadre has been doing stellar work providing health care and other services in the hills. Semwal believes the only reason for Gautam's appointment is the immunity from all criminal proceedings enjoyed by governors under Article 361 of our Constitution.



Who ordered the photo-op? Ankita Bhandari's parents with senior CBI officials

"The central and Uttarakhand governments are facing flak from several quarters. Yet they have gone ahead with this appointment. What information is Gautam privy to? No doubt he has been an RSS loyalist all his life, but why did they not let the law takes its own course?" Semwal asked.

Another theory is doing the rounds. Appointing Gautam, a long-time RSS and BJP organiser from a powerful sub-caste of Dalits, might help the party consolidate its base in Uttar Pradesh. As a BJP leader quipped, don't be surprised if Sikkim's governor spends more time in UP!

Civil society groups, Left parties and the Congress in Uttarakhand have been leading the 'Justice for Ankita' campaign. Congress leader Suryakant Dhasmana said, "The BJP and RSS have rubbed salt into the wounds of the people of this state by granting Gautam immunity from prosecution. It reveals their true colours."

In a video interview with Congress vice-president Sujata Paul, actress Urmila Sanawar claimed that information in the possession of the Uttarakhand Special Investigation Team has not been passed on to the CBI. "I realised this when the CBI interviewed me," Sanawar said.

Readers might recall that in the last week of December 2025, Sanawar released an audio clip in which her husband, former BJP MLA Suresh Rathore, claimed that the VIP guest at Vanantra was none other than 'Gattu' (Gautam's nickname among friends and close party leaders).

The BJP argues that Pulkit Arya and his two associates are in prison. What more does the family want? Full disclosure, for one. Ankita's family maintains that Gautam's political influence has kept his name out of the investigation. Gautam has denied all allegations and filed defamation suits against those who claim he had a hand in Ankita's murder.

*

October has been an interesting month for the BJP government.

On 15 October, Rekha Arya, the minister for women empowerment and child development, filed a complaint against her husband Girdhari Lal Sahu. She accused him of assault, conspiring to kill her, casteist abuse and fraud. Sahu in turn alleged that his wife had amassed illegal assets worth Rs 210 crore during her tenure as minister.

"I brought her this far," Sahu said in a video that went viral. "She was just a woman standing by the roadside. All I ask is that she withdraw the baseless complaint she has filed against me."

The Congress has demanded an immediate enquiry into the illegal acquisition of assets by Rekha Arya. Sahu has gone underground. This is the same man who was captured on video telling the young men of Almora that they needn't worry about not getting local wives—he would help them 'buy' a bride from Bihar for as little as Rs 20,000–25,000. ■

"No doubt he's been an RSS loyalist all his life, but why not let the law takes its course?



Is the Indian diaspora finally waking up?

Continued from page 1

These newly constructed connections and ties can outlast the current protests. But that requires continuous effort to mobilise, even after the photographs have disappeared from social media.

Protests also spread through example. The demonstrations in France, Italy and Albania have different immediate provocations and should not be treated as one big international uprising. Yet images of young people challenging unresponsive institutions can encourage others to act. They show that frustration does not have to remain a private emotion, that opposing an unresponsive government is not an anti-national act.

An important lesson the diaspora seems to have learnt is the power that flows from organising and protesting peacefully. Violence can endanger protesters, drive away supporters and give governments an excuse to ignore the demands that brought people onto the streets.

The Modi government's sensitivity to overseas criticism gives diaspora demonstrations political weight. The way it reacted to international support for the farmers' agitation is proof how thin-skinned it is about global opinion.

The effects of the diaspora protests will be most visible in Western universities, student associations, civil society and the media. Overseas Indians can help unpack the electoral malpractices of the Election Commission of India, share testimonies and challenge the claim that criticising Modi means opposing India. They can introduce international journalists to voices beyond embassy briefings. They can also help others understand why electoral independence, minority rights and freedom of expression matter.

Western governments are a different kettle of fish. These demonstrations will not make governments change course or influence state policies, driven as these are by a more cynical calculus pivoting on arms sales, trade and financial interests and perceived threats from China. Western governments can pay lip service to democracy and express concerns about the erosion of India's institutions but they will not let it get in the way of business with Modi's India.

Public pressure can prompt questions in Parliament but governments will always prioritise their strategic interests. The diaspora's task is to focus attention on India, support democratic mobilisation and energetically debunk the claim that the Modi government is India. ■

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

STATES 360°  BIHAR

Straws in the wind and the EC'S indifference

Pranav Chaudhary

The biennial Bihar legislative council elections (on Friday, 23 October) saw a fiercer fight than ever before.

Ordinarily, the election for eight seats—four each from the graduates' and teachers' constituencies—would not have raised much heat and dust. An overcrowded field with the Jan Suraaj, Congress, RJD and Left parties in the fray against the Janata Dal (U) only partly explains the intense campaigning, road shows and media frenzy.

For Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary and the NDA, the elections are a small but significant political test, especially with Prashant Kishor having wrested the Bankipur seat (held by the BJP since 1995) in the byelections earlier this year.

JD(U) founder Nitish Kumar was, however, conspicuous by his silence during the campaign. Party strongman and MLA from Mokama Anant Singh alias '*Chhote Sarkar*' claimed that the former chief minister was indifferent to the outcome of the elections. Nitish did not even try to dissuade him from campaigning against JD(U) spokesperson Neeraj Kumar—the party nominee from the Patna graduates' constituency—and supporting Jan Suraaj candidate Dr Anuj Singh against him.

Both Anant Singh and Neeraj Kumar hail from Mokama, but there's no love lost between them. Singh claims Kumar has always tried to trip him up in politics. He swore that not only would he ensure Kumar's defeat, he would make a comeback impossible. When Kumar got himself hospitalised, Singh called it a 'drama'. (Sure enough, when he was wheeled out, the 'invalid' said he was fit as a fiddle.)

Chhote Sarkar also declared that his loyalty to Nitish Kumar was beyond question. "After all," he said, "who got nine people killed to help Nitish*ji*?" The explosive claim spread like viral fire and was amplified by the Opposition. Belatedly grasping the grave legal and political implications of his statement, he made a U-turn and claimed his words had been twisted. What he meant was: nine of his associates had been killed because of his loyalty to Nitish Kumar. He did not, however, deny helping loot votes for Nitish. "I managed to get three lakh votes by capturing booths at Nitish*ji*'s behest," he bragged.

Anant Singh's outrageous statements have largely been ignored by the state's political parties. "Netas are shying from making any direct comment because of his stranglehold over Kurmis, his caste men. He is also a dreaded don and still faces dozens of criminal cases," said a bureaucrat by way of explanation.

Singh has represented the Mokama assembly segment since 2005. Political observers say he considers it his 'pocket borough'. Any aspiring leader (irrespective of political party) who wishes to contest from this region must have his blessing.

The JD(U) has also played it safe, refusing to condemn or take action against Anant Singh. It did authorise Union minister and MP from Munger parliamentary seat Rajiv Ranjan Singh alias Lallan Singh to broker a reconciliation, but the bid apparently failed. Even party loyalists say JD(U) is too weak to take any decisive action. The moment for the party to be wound up may come sooner rather than later, they fear.

*

Pre-election videos circulated on social media showed religious books being distributed to voters with cash-stuffed envelopes tucked inside. While the videos are not, in themselves, proof of a 'cash-for-votes' scandal, what set people talking was the complete indifference of the Election Commission of India. It would have been easy for the ECI to investigate and find out the truth, said a lawmaker. Rather than probe the allegations and take action, ECI looked the other way.

Why are we not surprised? ■



Photo: Getty Images

Nitish Kumar with Bihar Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary

The biennial elections for eight council seats is a small but significant test for the BJP

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Why I must dance in this revolution

Swarna Bhatnagar

A couple of days after the government made sure we couldn't reach Jantar Mantar, my sister sent me a video game in which I could try to get there. It was called *Chalo Jantar Mantar*.

It's a deliciously funny encounter, once you've lived through the day itself. The government can barricade roads, unleash the police, turn its capital into a fortress and treat citizens trying to exercise a democratic right like fugitives on the run. But a few days later, someone will build a video game about getting there, and you can sit at your desk and take a stab at what the government was so determined to not let you do on the ground.

With its fences and lathis and convoys and uniforms, the State demonstrates its predilection for theatrics, proclaiming that power is heavy business and that those who defy it ought to be in a cold sweat. Humour perpetrates a cathartic act of vandalism against this power play.

The Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin posited the notion of the 'carnivalesque'—moments in which laughter overturns the old guard, bringing the mighty down to earth and letting common people envision a world in which they can mock authority.

There is a similar anastrophe at work in the language of these protests. The placards at the NEET protests that read '*Do bhai, dono bin padhayi*', or the one at the protests this month against the CEC and his two puppeteers, and the slogan '*Ek kachori do chai, Gyanesh Kumar bye bye*,' pull top bananas out of the inflated language of politics into the world of street banter. The same impulse animates the reels about getting ready for detention or going to Delhi to get beaten by the police. The joke, in each case, lies in the indignity of the situation and in our dogged refusal to grant indignity the last word.

A joke will not raze the barricade to the ground and a video game will not undo an arrest, but for the span of the joke, the people who built the barricade will lose their monopoly over what it means.

In *Weapons of the Weak* and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, the political scientist and anthropologist James C. Scott studied the small, unexceptional ways in which oppressed groups express dissent, the irreverence that burgeons outside the immediate scrutiny of those in power. He called the less public form of this dissent a 'hidden transcript'. The distinction matters because much of what we are seeing at these protests is no longer hidden at all.



Photos: Getty Images



Brute force The State can bring on all its barricades, lathis and uniforms; rambunctious young protesters have shown they can be detained but not tamed

Humour perpetrates a cathartic act against the State's power play

Let's take, for example, the afterlife of Salman Khan's '*Sonam, it's done bro*'. In the itchy hands of protesters, the phrase has been recycled as 'Gyanesh, it's done bro,' a refrain in the October protests.

Then there are the games. Alongside 'Chalo Jantar Mantar' are 'Bhaag Neha Bhaag', 'Digital Tapli' and 'Digi Tiranga', where you can wave the tricolour on your screen, without inviting an arrest warrant, now that it is apparently a crime to wave the national flag in the national capital.

Emma Goldman knew a thing or two about the cynicism directed at pleasure in political movements. In her autobiography *Living My Life*, she reminisces about being scolded by a fellow anarchist for dancing too freely at a social gathering because an agitator was expected to behave with greater dignity. Emma believed that a cause devoted to freedom could not demand the denial of life and joy from those who fostered it. What kind of freedom are we fighting for if we must forego our position to enjoy being alive along the way?

There is a degree of intellectual laziness in treating irreverence as a cute detail of my generation, as another eccentricity of the lot that communicates through memes and understands the world through its phone screens.

That explanation is too glib: the seriousness, if I may tell you, exists alongside the humour; one doesn't cancel out the other. We are frightened *and* funny. A bit enervated and a lot more creative. And we are not going anywhere, anytime soon.

When I played 'Chalo Jantar Mantar', I don't know if I found it funny because it made light of the experience or because it reminded me that the experience had eluded the people who tried to control it. The day had been demeaning and ludicrous, and once again, this time through pixels on my screen, I encountered its ludicrousness on my own terms.

I still want to get to Jantar Mantar. I'm sure I will, sooner rather than later. And until then, we'll keep playing the game with the insouciant spirit of those who have never belonged to a party, never considered themselves activists, and never imagined they would spend their days arguing with the government on matters as basic as flying the national flag or walking the streets peaceably.

We will keep finding ways to reach one another, even when the State won't let us stand beside each other on that road to Janpath.

Those in power can try and make sense of people who are frightened and still won't go away. Or they can hate them. But what can they do with those who show up because something in this country's capillaries became so repugnant that young people brought forth the full, rambunctious business of being young and alive? Those who start singing *Jana Gana Mana* to stop the police from charging at them, who play the flute as an answer to a baton, who look power in the eye and laugh at it… because, sure, they can be detained, but they can never be tamed.

That is the one swell point of dancing in a revolution. They can govern our lives all they want. We will keep living it. ■

There is a degree of intellectual laziness in treating irreverence as a cute detail of Gen Z

What counts as heritage on Race Course Road?

The message of the Central Vista project is hard to miss and it speaks in one civilisational idiom

Herjinder

On 19 October, a century-old mosque, a short walk from the prime minister's residence, was given six days to vacate. Water and electricity had already been cut off on 7 October. The Land and Development Office (L&DO) declared the Race Course Mosque 'unauthorised', saying it stands on government land. A place that has called people to prayer for a hundred years or more is being treated as an illegal structure.

The paperwork tells a different story. Mohammad Hakimuddin Qasmi, representing a Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind delegation, has submitted a memorandum to Union minority affairs minister Kiren Rijiju. The memo establishes the mosque's historical provenance: it appears in the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) heritage list referenced in the 1977 Delhi Gazette, as well as in a revised list maintained by the ministry of minority affairs. The Jamiat has asked that no action be taken until the dispute is legally settled. Rijiju has reportedly promised "every possible effort."

In a video statement reported by *The Hindustan Gazette*, the mosque's imam Mohammed Harun revealed the process has been a lot bumpier. For six months, he had raised the matter with the Delhi Waqf Board, to no avail. The board, he says, did little beyond writing to the NDMC about suspended utilities. Drinking water has run out, and the approach to the mosque has been blocked. When Harun went to the High Court on his own, it ruled against him because he lacked the board's permission. He also points to a 2021 survey, which did not list the mosque as unauthorised or an encroachment.

The century-old race course, which gave the road its name, has already been demolished. The reason offered was its proximity to 7, Race Course Road—rechristened Lok Kalyan Marg—the prime minister's official residence and other sensitive government complexes. Reclaiming the zone, we are told, answers long-standing public security and defence concerns in high-security Lutyens' Delhi.

Meanwhile, a Rs 467 crore residential complex for the prime minister, with an underground tunnel to the PMO and Parliament, is nearing completion. Once Narendra Modi moves, 7 RCR is to be the site for a museum. In other words, the neighbourhood is to be cleared for a residence that will soon be empty.

All this is part of the Central Vista Redevelopment Project, the government's makeover of the national administrative corridor in New Delhi. While national capitals do need new offices, the grand renewal it was sold to us as has meant a swathe of destruction and erasure. A great many trees have gone, and familiar landmarks reworked, renamed or removed. The 135-year-old Central Secretariat Library is being relocated to two rooms, utterly inadequate to hold its historic repository of over 8.5 lakh books.

Inaugurating the Central Vista project, Narendra Modi described it as a move away from the symbols of British colonial rule. A republic is entitled to reconsider its colonial inheritance. A mosque, however, is not a colonial symbol. For Modi, the BJP and the RSS, it is more a Hindu project than a 'redevelopment' project. A mosque finds no place in that schema, even when it is a heritage building.

The government's Central Vista website says: 'While planning this transition, great care has been taken to ensure that the heritage status of the existing structures is preserved while new projects are built around them.' A fine sentiment, utterly disregarded on the ground. Relabelling a building listed in Delhi's own gazette as a heritage site shows just how seriously they are honouring their promise.

This mosque is not the only casualty. Eviction notices have gone out to more than 700 families in the adjoining clusters of Bhai Ram Camp, Masjid Camp and DID Camp. Some have lived here for decades, a few for nearly a century. On 19 October, the same day the mosque got its notice, the Delhi High Court cleared the way for their removal to Savda Ghevra, a resettlement colony about 45 km away.

The people affected are the cooks, drivers, vendors and domestic workers who keep Lutyens' Delhi running. They are being moved far away from their work and their children's schools. Security is the reason given.

How is the ecosystem that sustains the corridors of power a threat?

Nor is the mosque's fate an isolated worry. Muslim communities are already seeing their places of worship and religious structures being demolished overnight in Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, including a mosque in the Saharanpur collectorate that was pulled down in the early hours. The bulldozer at dawn is a pattern people have come to dread.

Then there is the question of who owns the city. Every new layer of VVIP security shuts the citizen out. With every new stretch closed off, ordinary people cannot access the avenues, the lawns, the parks that afford them a modicum of respite from the urban hustle. A national capital is not a private estate for those who govern. Its roads and open spaces are to be held in trust, with the public as beneficiary.

The message of the Central Vista project is hard to miss. Its architecture, its symbolism, its choice of what stays and what goes speaks in one civilisational idiom alone.

But India is much more than that, as should its capital be. A republic's centre must be large enough to hold the mosque, the temple, the church, the gurdwara, and the poor who live beside them.

Delhi has been built and abandoned many times. Rulers who tried to obliterate the legacy of their predecessors are remembered less for what they raised than for what they razed.

The stones of this city have outlasted every empire that claimed them. The test of this government's confidence is not how much it can get rid of, but how much it can bear to keep. ■



Photos: Getty Images



The century-old mosque (*above*) **on Race Course Road which has been declared 'illegal'**

A republic must be large enough to hold mosques, temples, churches, gurdwaras and the poor

NATIONAL HERALD ON SUNDAY
www.nationalheraldindia.com
25 OCTOBER 2026

Words fail to describe the desecration

Sohini Sengupta

"Boi ta ke noshto koro na, bhai (Don't destroy the book, brother)"

You may have seen a video reel from West Bengal's Barasat during this Durga Puja, in which an elderly man is pleading with a younger fellow to show some respect for the books he is flinging to the ground. It's enduring literature ('*chirayata sahitya*'), the older man says, but his plea falls on deaf ears. All the goon and his gang see is that it is a Left book stall—enough to see red—and their instructions are clear.

In another incident at Nagerbazar, right-wing hoodlums, allegedly linked to the BJP, tore pages from books at a CPI(M) stall and threw them onto the road. The pattern was hard to miss, as underlined by organisations like the Association for Protection of Democratic Rights, which reported similar incidents in Jadavpur, Jorabagan, Entally, Kasba and Haridevpur. Unsurprisingly, the BJP–RSS have sought to distance themselves from the incidents.

Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari reportedly urged Durga Puja committees to not allot stalls to Left organisations that refer to the festival as 'Sharodotsav' (autumn festival) instead of 'Durga Puja'. Soon after, CPI(M) supporters and Jadavpur University students formed a human chain at the nearby 8B bus stand to stop a municipal bulldozer from removing a stall. Garbage trucks were commandeered to carry away books!

On 15 October, the dispute reached the Calcutta High Court. Justice Saugata Bhattacharyya allowed a CPI(M) stall near the party's Bongaon office, but a division bench stayed the order the next day on an appeal by the state government.

The BJP, meanwhile, announced plans for about 5,000 bookstalls near Puja pandals that would sell literature on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Sangh ideologue Syama Prasad Mookerjee and the party's own promotional literature.

A political party has every right to distribute its literature, but that right must apply equally. Or it would, if ours was still a functional democracy and an invocation of citizen rights did not seem a quaint anachronism. What we saw on the streets of Kolkata and elsewhere in the state was not the kind of violation that leaves any room for doubt that this was political vendetta.

Even after Left book stalls were targeted in this utterly lawless fashion, state BJP president Samik Bhattacharya still maintained that 'real party workers' would never throw books onto the road, adding that he had spoken to the chief minister to take action against the perpetrators.

Bhattacharya proceeded to recount his experience of political violence under CPI(M) rule, saying he still carries marks from bomb splinters. Was he perhaps making the case that his stories, even if true, constituted grounds for the vandalism or that the State should therefore wink at it?

State finance minister Swapan Dasgupta feigned outrage: "I don't know who they are. But I must ask, how dare they?" The Sangh also made a show of defending everyone's right to distribute literature, 'provided the stalls did not illegally encroach on public space'.

In Amta, BJP legislator Amit Samanta was filmed leafing through books at a CPI(M) stall while party workers and volunteers sat around, avoiding eye contact. Even as Samanta staged this little 'damage control' charade for the camera, we had more news from Barasat. A copy of *Hanuman Chalisa* had taken the place of the offending left literature flung onto the road. And in the words of a visibly irate BJP legislator Purnima Chakraborty, this was "a response to the Left's use of 'Hanuman' while raging that BJP supporters had been 'monkeying around' the area."

*

Boi Para on College Street, easily one of India's best-known book markets, is a good showcase of Kolkata's love affair with books. Publishers, second-hand book-sellers and pavement hawkers have catered to generations of students and readers.

Days after the new BJP government assumed office in May this year, municipal affairs and urban development minister Agnimitra Paul floated a plan to redevelop College Street on the lines of London's Oxford Street. Pavement 'encroachments' and stalls were removed or placed under surveillance, but one pressing question was left unanswered: how can public infrastructure improve if the people who sustain the market are displaced?

Never before has Kolkata, a city that takes pride in its love of books, witnessed such an assault



The Puja bookstalls have long carried the culture of reading and browsing beyond Kolkata's famous College Street

The Puja bookstalls have long carried the culture of reading, browsing beyond College Street's *Boi Para*. The Left book stalls typically focus on labour history, political theory and party literature alongside other books that might interest readers regardless of their politics. These makeshift stalls, a simple bamboo framework wrapped in red cloth, are points of contact between common folk and ideas they might not otherwise encounter.

The BJP is tapping into this very tradition to display its own literature. Which would have been fine, if displaying their range did not entail vandalising other material. The same extreme intolerance has been on display ever since the BJP came to power in the state.

On 1 September, saffron-clad demonstrators of the BJP's youth wing Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) gathered outside the office of *Anandabazar Patrika* to protest the Bengali daily's use of the phrase 'Gerua Gundami' (saffron hooliganism) in its report on 21 August on the campus violence the previous day at Jadavpur University. The mob defaced the building and smeared its white pillars with saffron paint.

The landmark Academy of Fine Arts in central Kolkata was targeted as well. In July, the ticket room of the Academy received a daub of saffron paint, to mark political territory as it were. It drew condemnation from prominent theatre artists and Left-leaning activists, who gathered on 11 August to paint over the saffron walls with a fresh coat of white paint. Barely 24 hours later, a group of about 50 BJP activists, led by actor Rudranil Ghosh, came by again, to re-do the saffron.

The CPI(M)'s 34-year tenure in power is certainly not above criticism, but never before has this state and its storied capital city, which prides itself on its love of books, of the world of ideas and its cultural mores witnessed this kind of assault on its way of life. ■

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The vote, the court and the protest

Of these three tools of democracy, the third is the only one where Indians have true agency, writes Aakar Patel



Photo: Getty Images

The women who led the protests against the CAA succeeded in halting what happened in Assam from happening elsewhere

Voting is considered to be synonymous with democracy—as if democracy vanishes between elections. For decades, the election process in India has been accretive in adding prestige and credibility. That phase is behind us.

The Constitution says that every Indian over 18, who is not 'disqualified under this Constitution or any law made by the appropriate Legislature on the ground of non-residence, unsoundness of mind, crime or corrupt or illegal practice', shall be entitled to be registered as a voter at any such election.

This direction is more like a suggestion to the present Election Commission, which assumed, no doubt on the orders of the government, that its exercise to gratuitously put crores of people through trauma would carry on undisturbed.

A survey of rollbacks and clarifications issued by the ECI over the last four weeks throws up nearly a dozen. These include a 'special enrolment drive' to bring in people 'left out' by the previous special disenfranchisement drive. Then there is the removal of a declaration for some people, a waiver of in-person appearance for some other people, a review of flawed software, limiting (but not ending) the malicious practice of objections being filed by third party individuals against voters (mostly Muslims of course). There's also the introduction of searchable voter lists—after resisting them all this time for no reason other than a preference for opacity over transparency. And now, private school teachers are being made to do extracurricular work, going door to door for the Census, the way hapless government school officials are doing for SIR.

The number of measures exposes the sloppiness with which this adventure was embarked upon. The speed at which the measures are coming betrays the panic. The disclosure that the ECI's majority was being disregarded in decision-making would have surprised few, if that. Will these corrections, rollbacks and reviews resolve the mess? Of course not. We have already been divided into several tiers of Indian citizens: some struck off, some under appeal, some without information on their status, some beyond caring, others awaiting judgment. (Oh yes, and some voters.)

This steaming pile of excrement cannot be cleared by anything other than a full rollback. Alas, now with elections already having taken place, even this action will lead to problems of electoral legitimacy, for instance in Bengal. So—no. The mess is of a scale that could only have been envisioned by the architect of minimum government, maximum governance.

Now to our second democratic tool. Article 32 says our right to move court for the enforcement of fundamental rights is 'guaranteed'. Note that what is guaranteed is the liberty to move court. What follows thereafter is something we witness daily in this country and need not be expounded on. Our finest lawyers have already spoken about where things stand. As with the Election Commission, here too, there has been erosion.

The State is afraid, that's why it is expending so much energy in throttling protest

The third democratic tool, the only one over which we have real agency, is protest. Showing up to tell the State that we feel violated and it must stop. The government can mess around with our vote, as it is doing, and the justice system can toy with us as it does in service of the executive. It is harder for the government to force itself on our bodies, even though it tries.

Protest is our most effective tool for getting the State to stop its crimes and misdemeanours. This is why so much energy is being expended by the government in attempting to curb it, limit it and throttle it.

Once Indians mobilised in the tens of thousands and arrived in Delhi, the farm laws were as good as dead. It took a full year for the government to finally strike them down, all those wasted months because the monarch did not want to be seen as surrendering to the people. But the moment mobilisation happened, it was clear to many that the people would win. Deliciously, that victory was accompanied by an apology. A qualified one, as may be expected from the person offering it, but an apology nonetheless.

The brave Muslim women who led the protests against the National Register of Citizens succeeded in halting what has happened in Assam from happening elsewhere in India. Yes, it is true that the road this SIR has put us on ultimately leads to the same destination; but as recent events show, it will not be easy for the government to do so unchallenged, no matter how much the BJP leadership salivates at the thought of crores of people disenfranchised, disentitled and interned.

Peaceful assembly (Article 19) is a fundamental right, meaning one that enjoys a high degree of protection from encroachment by the government. In practice, over the decades, encroachment has exceeded freedom. And there that right will stay, caged in designated areas and subject to government approval. Unless it is taken back, by the young protesters on the streets of Delhi, or indeed, anywhere at all. (As the slogan puts it: 'Jantar Mantar Is Everywhere'.)

For many of us, this is the most heartening feature of our times. A hard, authoritarian State finally confronted by a spirited public response from our youth. ■

Views are personal

STATES 360° ODISHA



Herculean on paper, not impossible on the ground

N.R. Mohanty

On 8 October, a 12-hour bandh disrupted transport, mining and normal activity in parts of Odisha. The INDIA bloc held a large 'Parivartan Rally' in Bhubaneswar and activists attempted to march toward the residence of Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi.

With tribals restive in several mineral-rich districts of Koraput, Rayagada, Keonjhar, Sundargarh, Mayurbhanj and Nabarangpur, both the BJP and the INDIA bloc are coming out for and against the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act 2026. Rushed through Parliament, despite the Supreme Court ruling in favour of the states, the amendment prevents state governments from independently levying fresh taxes, cesses or local duties on mineral rights and mineral-bearing lands, bringing them under the Centre's direct regulatory framework.

As the Congress—which has been out of power in Odisha for the last 26 years—shows signs of life, the question being asked is: can it make a successful bid for power in 2029? It's a Herculean task on paper. In the 2024 assembly election, the BJP and BJD had each garnered a little over 40 per cent of the vote share. Congress was a distant third with just about 13 per cent. The GOP will need to treble its vote share to come anywhere close to victory.

The Naveen Patnaik-led BJD government in the state was non-confrontational and believed in 'live and let live'. It extended the olive branch to all top opposition party leaders. The Congress, then the main Opposition, became a victim of the ruling party's politics of accommodation. The BJD's outreach effectively blunted its aggression. The BJP, a BJD-ally from 2000 to 2009, escaped the treatment partly because it was a partner-in-power and partly because it did not need BJD patronage after Naveen Patnaik broke the alliance in 2009. Contesting alone, the BJD won 103 out of 147 seats (39 per cent of the vote share). The Congress came second, with 27 seats (29 per cent). BJP managed six seats (15 per cent).

In 2014, the BJD improved its tally to 117 and increased its vote share to 44 per cent. The Congress imploded, tumbling from 27 to 16 seats; but its vote share decreased only marginally, from 29 to 26 per cent. The BJP increased its seats from six to 10 and its vote share from 15 to 18 per cent.



A 'Parivartan Rally' in Bhubaneswar, led by PCC president Bhakta Charan Das

The most dramatic turnaround came in the 2019 assembly election. The BJD maintained its stranglehold with 112 seats and 45 per cent vote share. The BJP, backed by the Modi government at the Centre, galloped to second position. It increased its seat tally from 10 to 23 and vote share from 18 to 33 per cent. The Congress was down to nine seats, and its vote share fell from 26 to 16 per cent.

In 2024, the BJP finally succeeded in toppling the BJD. Its seats shot up from 23 to 78 while the BJD's dropped from 112 to 51. The BJP's vote share, however, was merely a notch below the BJD's: 40.1 per cent versus 40.2 per cent. The Congress improved its seat tally from 9 to 14, but its vote share plummeted from 16 to 13%.

There is a groundswell of resentment against the BJP in general and Narendra Modi in particular

Ahead of 2029, the Congress faces twin challenges in Odisha. In the ruling space, the electoral machinery (and machinations) of the BJP and the RSS. In the opposition space, the formidable organisational structure the BJD has built over 24 years of being in power. Both the BJP and BJD are cash rich, in contrast to the cash-starved Congress. Barring its core supporters, many Congressmen have switched sides, making it weak both organisationally and financially.

The current situation is, however, extraordinary and holds out hope for the Congress. There is a groundswell of resentment against the BJP in general and Narendra Modi in particular. Anger is also brewing because Majhi has remained a mute spectator while his ministers are on a looting spree, with Gujarati contractors allegedly having taken control of all government projects.

Neither Naveen Patnaik nor the other top brass of his party are in a position to speak openly against the Modi-Shah regime because of ED-CBI-Income Tax threats. With the BJD on the backfoot, there is room for a more assertive Congress.

Current Odisha Congress president Bhakta Charan Das, who highlighted the Kalahandi famine and became an MLA at the age of 27, took charge in February 2025. He has been touring across the state to revive the party. Milestones to his credit include the Nuapada byelection in which the Congress came second, pushing the BJD to third position.

It has taken a little over two years for the Congress to get its act together. It remains to be seen how it will take advantage of the space that has now opened up. ■

STATES 360° WEST BENGAL



Yesterday's foes become today's friends as Sanghis run amok

Sourabh Sen

Durga Puja festivities in Kolkata this year were marred by two rare sights: a bulldozer demolishing a temporary book stall and a purported book stall turned into a temporary *phuchka* vend. As right-wing vandals, Left activists and citizens clashed, book stalls became the most unlikely political flashpoints. It began with Chief Minister Suvendu Adhikari warning Left parties on the floor of the Assembly that book stalls at Durga Puja pandals were henceforth forbidden. No minister dared contradict him.

Which is why the mealy-mouthed words of condemnation from a handful of RSS and BJP leaders, including finance minister Swapan Dasgupta, failed to ring true. Even as he wondered who the vandals might be, people pointed out that Dasgupta was sitting right next to Adhikari when the CM held out the threat. How could he claim surprise, let alone outrage?

The truth is that Adhikari and a section of BJP MLAs, mostly Hindi-speaking, have been belligerently uttering war cries against the Left. A BJP MLA's '*Baam Vadh*' banner blazoned death to the left. Gangs claiming allegiance to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal went about smashing book stalls set up by the CPI(M), SUCI and other Left parties. Some of them openly said they were following instructions from Suvendu-da.

Clearly, small-time goons from Bihar and UP—claiming Sangh parentage and protection—are making the Bengali bhadralok queasy about endorsing the BJP.

Jishnu Basu, a scientist and *prachar pramukh* of the RSS's east zonal unit piously asserted, "The RSS never supports [the] destruction of books. We condemn such acts of cowardice."

The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) brought in bulldozers, with police and central forces standing by. BJP, VHP and Bajrang Dal rowdies tore up books and destroyed makeshift stalls. Left workers and local residents formed human chains to prevent bulldozers from moving in. KMC deployed conservancy trucks to cart away the torn books along with other debris. Reports of attacks came in from across the city and different districts. RSS book stalls were left untouched.

Videos of cocky BJP workers also went viral. A local BJP leader from north Kolkata said, "We will not allow distribution or sale of Left literature. What is the point of setting up *bookishtores*? You should distribute *trishuls*, swords and clothes; leave the books to us!"

Sangh-affiliated young men speaking in Hindi or heavily accented Bengali have introduced a new layer of cultural aggression. The semi-literate vandals were clearly engaged for the purpose. They failed to differentiate between literature and Left literature; between novels and political tomes; between Rabindranath and Vivekananda. Titles like Sarat Chandra's *Pother Daabi*, a novel based on the real-life adventures of a freedom fighter and revolutionary were meaningless for these 'nationalist' goons. The faces of the vandals are clearly visible in the videos—none have been arrested. The CM has threatened to book those sharing such 'fake videos'.



Photo: Getty Images

Why sell books, sell trishuls! So say West Bengal's BJP leaders

*

Cornered in the battle to occupy Bengal's mindscape, the stampede at Chorbagan puja pandal on 17 October, which killed 19 people, blew up in the government's face, exposing its ineptness. Recovering lost ground will not be easy for Adhikari & Co.

On 18 October, the Trinamool Congress Mamata faction went to Girish Park police station to submit a memorandum in response to the stampede. Deputations from the CPI(M) and Congress also filed separate memorandums. Political parties staged protests as senior leaders demanded accountability and transparency regarding crowd management and alleged administrative negligence.

Bengal watchers did not miss the significance of the social media posts that followed. Seeing the TMC's Kunal Ghosh, the CPI(M)'s Shatarup Ghosh and Congress spokesperson Suman Roy Chaudhuri helping each other under fluttering party flags is radically different from what the people are used to. The two Ghoshes are usually seen demolishing each other on TV debates!

The message of cross-party camaraderie did not end here. The same evening, Kunal Ghosh was welcomed by Shatarup and other CPI(M) leaders when he showed up at the CPI(M) bookstall at Jadavpur, also targeted for demolition.

"Our politics may be different," Ghosh later told the media, "but we have known each other for a long time. I read Marxist literature, I keep publications from the SUCI, and the CPM. This stall offers not just Left literature but also good books from other genres."

Events in Delhi recently brought leaders like Mamata Banerjee, M.A. Baby, Rahul Gandhi and Dipankar Bhattacharya together over the SIR and the crackdown on students, rekindling the buzz around the resurrection of INDIA bloc. Is this camaraderie percolating down to operational levels, creating conditions for a one-on-one contest against the BJP?

Yesterday's foes becoming tomorrow's bedfellows will be portentous for the BJP in Bengal. ■

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

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STATES 360°  PUNJAB

A murder in Mansa may have broken the spell of AAP

Harjeshwar Pal Singh

Punjab has seen many killings—perhaps never watched one live. On 13 October, at around 9.15 a.m. Parvinder Singh 'Jhota' walked into a chemist's shop in Mansa, holding his phone out in front of him. It was the only weapon he carried. For approximately four minutes, his followers on Facebook Live watched Jhota confront the shop owner, Ashwani Kumar, accusing him of selling *nasha* (drugs) to an elderly man. Kumar pulled out a pistol. "*Maar mainu, maar mainu*" (Go ahead, kill me), Jhota dared him. Three shots rang out, the phone tumbled to the floor, and the screen went dark.

Jhota means 'bull', a nickname that suited Parvinder to a tee. A former boxer and recovered addict, he had turned his own demons into the *Nasha Roko, Rozgar Do* crusade. His anti-drug taskforce model was replicated by village committees across Mansa and Bathinda. Jhota's method was crude but effective: walk in, camera rolling, and catch the *chitta* (drug) peddler red-handed.

His feud with Ashwani Kumar wasn't new. In July 2023, Jhota and his supporters accused the chemist of selling banned drugs and paraded him through the market wearing a garland of shoes. Both were booked. Jhota spent months behind bars. Kumar, who reportedly faced at least five FIRs, walked away with an arms licence for a 7.62 mm pistol and a 12-bore gun.

The man who fought drugs went to jail; the man accused of selling them got a gun licence. That single irony did more to indict the system than a hundred press conferences. It laid bare the old triangle—politician, policeman, smuggler—that political scientists call an iron triangle and ordinary Punjabis simply call "setting".

Within days of Jhota's murder, the local SHO was suspended and the SSP claimed 138+ cases had been filed against chemists in a single month. Why had they waited over three years to do that?

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In the last four years, Mansa has given Punjab two 'martyrs'. In May 2022, Sidhu Moosewala, gunned down in his car; now, Jhota, gunned down on camera. The emotional response, as it spills into the streets, has been strikingly similar.

While the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee) has announced that Jhota's portrait will be displayed in the Central Sikh Museum at Darbar Sahib, the family wants official martyr status and a statue in Mansa. A man the state had jailed is now being canonised by both the Panth and the public.

AAP's first instinct was to do what it does best—manage the story. Police hinted at a 'personal enmity' between two old rivals. That did not wash: all of Punjab had seen the video. So, out came the bulldozers. In 24 hours, the administration was seen demolishing Kumar's shop and residence. The crowd didn't wait for 'bulldozer justice' imported from Uttar Pradesh to finish the job. They brought out the medicines, found capsules they claimed were prohibited, and set the place on fire.



Parvinder Singh 'Jhota' (*left*) was shot dead during a live feed (*top*) on his Facebook account

The government's much-advertised pre-election campaign is *Yudh Nashian Virudh* (war against drugs). More like *Yudh Nasha Rokan Walian Virudh* (war against those who stop drugs), said protesters, mockingly. Hoardings proclaiming an '*Imaandar CM*' (honest CM) were blackened, *imaandar* overwritten by *beimaan*. (dishonest). For once, AAP's war room lost the war of words.

There was another deeper irony. According to his friends, in 2022, Jhota had backed AAP's Vijay Singla in Mansa, believing the party would crush the drug trade. Within months, Singla was sacked from the cabinet on corruption charges. Disillusioned, Jhota drifted away. When Singla finally visited the injured at Civil Hospital four days after Jhota's killing, Nihangs and protesters chased him out. The man AAP once counted as an ally had become the face of the fury against it.

Jhota's live feed ended on 13 Oct. But the story is still streaming and AAP may not like the ending

What started as a spontaneous expression of rage has quickly acquired the shape of a classic Punjabi morcha. A joint action committee is running a continuous dharna in Mansa. Opposition parties, kisan unions, ex-servicemen, employees' bodies, civil society and a swarm of social media influencers have joined in. The Punjab bandh of 15 October was a united show of strength rarely seen since the farm agitation. Markets downed shutters from Amritsar to Zirakpur and highways fell silent.

On 19 October, the morcha carried its *lahnat pattars* (letters of condemnation) to the doorsteps of all 92 AAP MLAs. Not one legislator came out to receive them. Sukhveer Singh Maiserkhana, expelled from the party, emerged to accept his and admitted AAP had erred. Talks held the same day between the family and senior IAS officers ended without a breakthrough.

Then the government blinked. On the morning of 20 October, hours before Amit Shah landed in Punjab, Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann announced on *X* that the case was being handed to the CBI, 'respecting the family's demand'. This from a party that has spent a decade calling central agencies the BJP's *tota* (parrot).

Shah made the most of it. He spent barely twenty minutes at Jhota's home and turned the rest of the day into a political roadshow of grief. He called on the families of Bikramjit Singh in Gurdaspur and Gulzar Singh in Sangrur. Calling Mann's regime an '*aapda*' government, Shah declared that anyone who speaks against drugs in Punjab is no longer safe. The BJP, a marginal player in rural Punjab, wants to wave the *chitta* banner as its own.

This is precisely what the morcha has been wary of. It initially resolved to oppose Shah's visit—the Border Security Force is, after all, answerable to the home ministry—before relenting at the family's request. With everyone eager to carry Jhota's *arthi*, the family is making sure no one hijacks what he stood for.

At the centre of it all stands Jhota's father Bhim Singh, an ex-serviceman with a *fauji*'s resolve. When the SGPC offered fixed deposits of Rs 10 lakh each for his two grandsons, he declined, asking instead that help go to the four men injured alongside his son.

Like Balkaur Singh before him, he has turned private grief into public resolve. The CBI sop has not ended his vigil. Jhota's body still lies in the mortuary, and the other demands remain unmet: resignations of the chief minister and DGP Gaurav Yadav, dismissal of the district's police brass and a post-mortem at PGIMER, Chandigarh.

Until 12 October, AAP looked pretty comfortable. Its populist welfare model—free power, mohalla clinics, Rs 1,000 to women—had struck a chord. Mann's 'Teflon image' had survived the *beadabi* controversy, corruption charges against his wife and close confidants, and a host of other crises. With the Akalis split and shrunk, the Congress busy fighting itself and the BJP still fumbling for a rural base, its control of the narrative seemed tight.

The Jhota killing has exposed the fault lines of this model—a party that lives by the reel can also die by the reel. AAP leans on one man; when Mann's credibility dents there is no second line to absorb the blow. Crucially, AAP has failed on the two issues that matter most to the Punjabi household—drugs and law and order.

Recent history should worry the party. In Punjab, governments are discredited on the street before being defeated by the ballot. A powerful civil society and an influencer ecosystem with viral reach has brought governments to their knees.

In 2015, Bargari and Behbal Kalan broke the Akali Dal; it crashed to 15 seats in 2017 and 3 in 2022. In 2020-21, the farm agitation discredited the traditional parties so thoroughly that AAP swept to power with 92 of 117 seats. AAP rode the last great wave of street anger into office. The question now is whether this wave will sweep it out.

With elections only four months away, the arithmetic is unforgiving. If the agitation continues—with a body in the mortuary, a father on dharna and a video playing on every smartphone—it could do to Bhagwant Mann what Bargari did to the Badals. Jhota's live feed ended on 13 October. The story is still streaming and AAP may not like the ending. ■

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Outsourcing 'problem solving' to protesters

Paradoxes in the RSS@100 and Mohan Bhagwat's annual address

A.J. Prabal

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) concluded its centenary celebrations on Dussehra, 20 October 2026. At home, the year-long jamboree saw a national outreach covering 4.61 lakh villages and 10 crore urban households (as claimed in its annual report 2025-26) and the release of a commemorative postage stamp and a 100-rupee coin. Overseas bhakts were graced by RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's flying visits as he addressed diaspora in the US, UK and Canada on the organisation's humanitarian non-communal agenda. The converted needed no convincing and the sceptics stayed sceptical.

Undoubtedly stronger, wealthier and politically more influential than ever before, the centenary year hasn't been an unmitigated bed of roses for the RSS. The Gen Z protests in June as well as the countrywide protests against *vote chori* by the BJP in collusion with the Election Commission caught it off-guard. Speaking in Mumbai in August, Bhagwat praised the inherent patriotism of "our very own youth" protesting at Jantar Mantar. In his Vijaya Dashami speech, the same youth were described as emotional, misguided and misled by foreign powers.

Bhagwat, who not only enjoys Z-category security but was also ranked as the fourth most powerful Indian by *The Indian Express* in 2025, met hostile demonstrations abroad and a barrage of hard questions at home. The Congress government in Karnataka served a notice to the RSS to clarify its legal status and furnish details of membership and funding. Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi sustained a no-holds-barred attack, calling the RSS 'a bunch of jokers' and an 'anti-Constitutional all-male cult'.

While the jury is still out on whether the choice of Nitin Nabin as BJP's national president was dictated by the party or the RSS, the loss of the Bankipur assembly seat in Bihar, that too in the centenary year, has grated on both. (The seat vacated by Nabin has been a BJP stronghold since 1995.) Bhagwat turned 75 six days before Prime Minister Modi did. Whatever happened to retirement at 75 being held up as the Hindu ideal of *vanaprastha*? Bhagwat now says he never asked anyone to retire at 75, and that he would step down whenever the Sangh asks him to.

The RSS continues to maintain the fiction that it is a cultural organisation, an unregistered NGO with no connection to the ruling party. Its annual report provides no information on the composition, regional identity and number of members, no details on donors, no audited account of income and expenditure. Why has this 'model of integrity' not voluntarily adopted the transparency standards it expects from others? Bhagwat insists that Hindu dharma requires no registration. If every other NGO is bound to follow the rules, how does the world's so-called largest NGO claim exemption? Saying that the RSS is a 'body of individuals' and hence need not furnish details about its income and expenditure is the tallest of legal tales.

While thousands of NGOs have had their registration cancelled on minor or frivolous grounds, barred from receiving donations from abroad for being in 'violation of the rules', the RSS continues to evade scrutiny. Small wonder that Bhagwat telling protesters to stay on the right side of the law and the Constitution drew more hoots than cheers.

Journalist and author Dhirendra K. Jha, known for his extensive research on the RSS, calls it a private anti-constitutional para-military organisation. The RSS imparts arms training to its cadre. Bhagwat has said on record that they can mobilise an army along India's borders in three days flat (faster than the Indian army). Its cadre wears a uniform and worships weapons (*shastra puja*) on Vijayadashami. Under which Indian law, Jha wonders, can such an outfit be registered?

At a time when people are being detained and jailed in Delhi simply for waving the national flag, the RSS is conducting route marches with its goosestepping lathi-wielding cadre. Karnataka Home Minister Priyank Kharge posted a screenshot of a letter in which the RSS had 'informed' the government of its route marches, sought 'cooperation' from the police and asked the government to make 'necessary arrangements'.





Photos: Getty Images

Ducking the issue RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's Vijayadashami speech avoided any mention of the protests over NEET, CBSE, vote chori or SIR; (*above*) boots on the ground ready for route march this Dussehra

Kharge wrote: 'When lakhs of you intend to march through Karnataka's streets on a single day at the same time, the police department has considerable preparations to make: deployment of personnel, transportation, food, traffic management, security arrangements and other logistics. All of this requires planning, manpower and public resources. So, please fill out the prescribed application form, provide the necessary details and await formal permission.' His sarcastic tweet highlighted the absurdity of a private NGO demanding public services while steadfastly refusing the public's right to information.

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Bhagwat has pronounced that there will be no regime change in India. The current wave of protests was merely a "storm that had swept in from the West", opposed to "every kind of order, every form of civility, everything auspicious… all cultural and human values… it wants to destroy, corrupt and devastate all of these things."

Rattled by the fear of losing power, the BJP and RSS are clinging to conspiracy theories

Expectedly, he blamed it on the 'foreign hand': "Just listen to the news that has been coming in over the past few days. What is happening in France? What is happening in Albania? What happened in Bangladesh? What happened in Nepal? All of these events have been engineered and orchestrated…"

While Bhagwat's discourse on protests came as no surprise, what was breathtaking was his shifting the responsibility of problem solving to the protesters. Agitations, he said, should aim to find solutions rather than deepen hostility or create divisions within society. The chief thinker of the RSS chose to stay oblivious of the government itself creating divisions and deepening hostility.

Not a word was uttered on what triggered the protests—by citizens, workers, youth, women, farmers, students—in the first place. Neither *vote chori* nor the SIR nor the government's failures to conduct the CBSE exam nor the NEET fiasco merited Bhagwat's attention. Instead, he spoke of the evils of social media delivering unfiltered information to the youth, the urgency of restricting and regulating it, while staying mum on the vituperative government-funded mainstream media propaganda machine.

Some analysts read fear in his words. Author, columnist and commentator Ashutosh tweeted: 'Mohan Bhagwat's speech is a classic example of how scared the whole organisation is and how vulnerable they have become.' He recalled 1975, when the RSS lent its support to JP and the then Opposition, exhorting the army and the police to disobey the orders of the government. Morarji Desai, who became prime minister in 1977, had declared that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi would be confined to her residence until she resigned. Wasn't that an operation for regime change, asked Ashutosh.

Jha agrees that the RSS, known to be fork-tongued, may well be driven by fear. He recalls Bhagwat's placatory annual address following the BJP's electoral setback in the Lok Sabha polls of 2024. At the time Bhagwat had said: the Opposition has an important role; the Opposition is not the enemy. After a year-and-a-half of silence on Manipur, he had also spoken about the fire still raging in the state.

Jha believes the bogey of regime change in this year's address could also be driven by the fact that the BJP and the RSS are unsure about how to cope with the protests.

Rattled by the fear of losing power, they are closing ranks around the handy narrative of foreign conspiracies. ■

Still not too late to do the right thing, Mr CJI

Avay Shukla

Recent weeks have seen unprecedented protests across India, reflecting a deep sense of frustration and disenchantment with multiple pillars of constitutional governance. The Supreme Court, traditionally regarded as the last refuge for justice, finds itself at the heart of a growing crisis of public trust and judicial accountability.

When Rahul Gandhi, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, sought a dialogue with the Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant on 12 October to present grievances, the request was declined. In the not-so-distant past, one of the CJI's predecessors had no hesitation in inviting the prime minister for a puja and a cosy tête-à-tête.

This snub was both unfortunate and expected.

Unfortunate, because the CJI is not another divine, non-biological being but a part of the system. This system has become dysfunctional, and the LoP simply wanted to convey this to him.

The LoP has as much constitutional status as a CJI, even though their roles differ. The CJI would not have compromised his much-vaunted, but increasingly doubted, political 'neutrality' if he had had the courtesy to meet the LoP, listen to his grievances, perhaps accept a memorandum or two, share a cup of tea, and bid him "*Auf Wiedersehen"* or "We shall meet at Philippi".

No one expected him to act on the grievances, of course, since many of them pertain to his own court, but at least the window-dressing of democratic accessibility and an 'independent' judiciary would have been preserved. It might even have restored some of the trust that large sections of the public no longer have in the court.

But, as I said, the refusal was expected, for the simple reason that the Supreme Court no longer has the moral authority and public trust to act as an honest broker (or arbiter) between the government and the Opposition/public. It had started shedding this constitutional Teflon long before CJI Surya Kant's tenure, beginning with its orders on Rafale, Pegasus, Hindenburg, Ram Mandir, electoral bonds and Umar Khalid, to name just a few.



We, The People When the guardians of democracy fail in their duty, citizens step out to reclaim it

But the moulting has become more pronounced over the last year or so. There is a perception that it has been consistently siding with the executive and the Election Commission in spite of scientific evidence, ground realities and public demands.

It gave a clean chit to the use of EVMs, made a statistical mockery of VVPAT verification, ignored the selective use of the model code of conduct in favour of the ruling party, stayed silent on the dubious rejection of nomination papers of opposition candidates (which has now been upgraded to blatant intimidation and arrests), the use of police to 'persuade' some voters to stay at home during polling, and the egregious changes, delays and mismatches in voter counts.

It looked on as the Election Commission repeatedly approved the breaking up and hijacking of opposition parties and governments by the BJP, and preferred humiliation to contempt action when the committee set up by it to select the chief election commissioner was thrown into the dustbin by the Modi government.

Every misdeed of this type was brought to its notice through various petitions (which, the CJI reportedly told Rahul Gandhi, was the kosher way of approaching the court!). These were usually rejected with the contempt they deserved or put on the backburner for a more propitious time. In fact, the court occasionally even frowned upon those who filed these petitions and wasted its time, drawing upon its vast knowledge of zoology to term them cockroaches, flies, etc.

The nadir was reached when it did nothing—NOTHING—for over a year to rein in an Election Commission which had gone rogue with its brutal SIR, which has consigned 13 crore voters to the twilight zone between statelessness and deportation. Worse, it greenlighted the politically partisan exercise in May this year, incentivising the ECI to redouble its efforts to rob Indian citizens of their fundamental rights.

With all the gatekeepers of democracy and justice—the higher judiciary, Parliament, the Election Commission, the National Human Rights Commission and the media—abdicating their constitutional duties and oaths and becoming irrelevant, India's citizenry has occupied the space that genuinely belongs to it, and which no wannabe despot can take away from it: roads, streets, parks and open spaces.

Here, too, the Supreme Court has not exactly covered itself with glory: it suggested removing Jantar Mantar as a protest venue and initially failed to take any action against Delhi Police for its excesses on young protesters, including girls, journalists, advocates, passers-by and students.

When public and international outrage finally forced it to issue some directions, these were hedged with so many caveats and conditionalities, escape clauses such as 'in accordance with law', 'provided' and 'however', that the police treated them as cosmetic inconveniences.

Today, a one-stripe constable at Jantar Mantar effectively wields more power than the CJI—or so it seems to most citizens.

This is the background and context—the total breakdown of law and order, denial of constitutional protections and rights, evisceration of the values of democracy, subversion of institutions, rampant use of sovereign violence and defiance of judicial orders—of the the LoP's desire to meet the CJI.

The Supreme Court is the last port of call for the citizens of a failing ship of state, and it does not behove the CJI to wash his hands of the mess by saying, "Law and order is not my domain." Yes, in normal circumstances it is not, but when the pretext of law and order is used to suppress the people's voice, to inflict needless violence, to shut down a city, to deprive citizens of their basic rights and to murder democracy itself, where else can the people turn for legal redress but the Supreme Court?

Such a moment is not the time to split hairs about 'administrative' and 'judicial' sides, as the CJI has sought to do; he should look at the 'justice' side. For, in the ultimate analysis, if the highest court of the land cannot assure justice for citizens, it becomes another legal fiction and might as well be wound up.

The Constitution has given the higher judiciary extraordinary powers, privileges and protection to safeguard the rights of the people, not those of the government of the day. If this authority is instead used to allow authoritarian overreach, it is a breach of the trust the people have reposed in the court, a violation of a sovereign contract, and they—We the People—have the inherent right to enforce accountability and even demand resignations.

That moment in time has arrived.

It's still not too late to do the right thing, Your Lordship. ■

If our highest court cannot assure justice for its citizens, it becomes another legal fiction

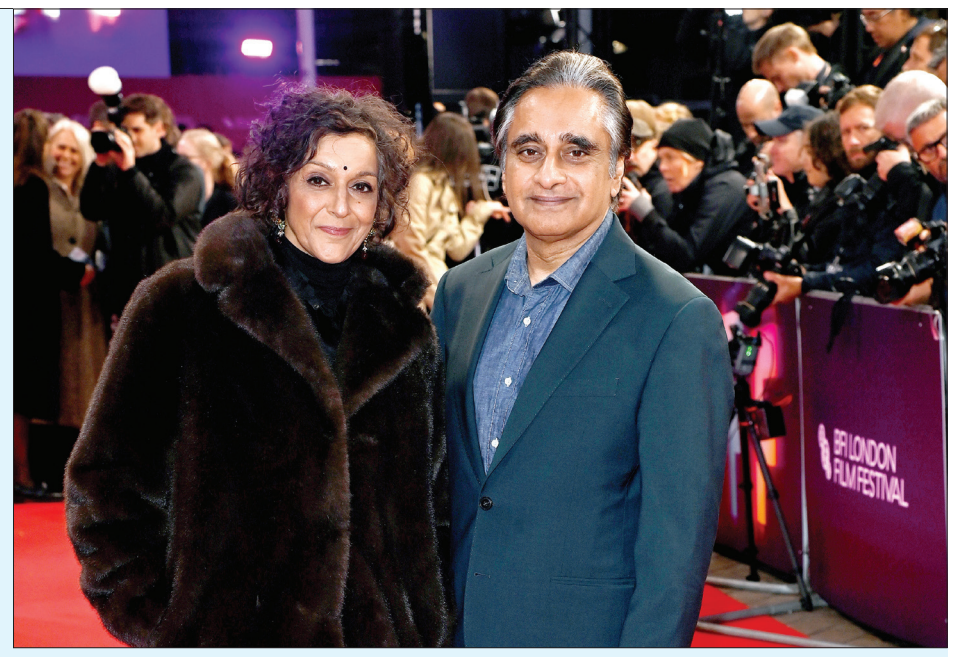
AVAY SHUKLA *is a retired IAS officer*



Migrant workers demand better visa conditions at a rally in Parliament Square, London. The rally was called by UK's public service trade union UNISON

LONDON DIARY

HASAN SUROOR


Dame Meera Syal

Photos: ***Getty Images***

Britain still runs on cheap foreign labour

For all the brave rhetoric about cracking down on foreign workers accused of 'stealing' British jobs, the bland truth is that Britain cannot do without them. Primarily because they come cheap but also because in many critical areas such as social care and high-tech there's an acute shortage of local skilled labour.

Research has revealed that four out of every five new jobs created in Britain since 2014 went to overseas workers rather than British citizens.

Of the 3.7 million jobs added to the workforce in Britain in the past 12 years, some 2.5 million went to foreign workers—an overwhelming majority from outside the European Union. A study by the Centre for Social Justice think tank found that most of them were employed in the hospitality, retail and social care sectors.

This has pushed many more native Brits into an already bloated welfare system that doles out billions of pounds as unemployment allowance to those out of work.

With the cost of benefits set to reach £136.1bn by next year (according to official figures) the government is under pressure to reduce the load by taking harsher measures to keep out foreign workers.

The findings showed an economic crisis which "extends beyond the benefit system" said Sir Iain Duncan Smith, the former Conservative party leader who led the study. "Ministers have repeatedly pulled the easy lever of immigration rather than providing a better deal for left-behind communities."

A separate report from the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford said some 3.4 million people from outside the EU migrated to Britain between 2021 and 2025 during the 'Boriswave'—a surge in migration which followed the post-Brexit policies of the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Ironically, at the time, Brexit was touted as a magic wand to stop immigration and save 'British jobs for British workers'.

Meanwhile, the new Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood has announced a series of even more stringent measures to discourage immigration.

These include doubling the standard time it takes to qualify for indefinite leave to remain, which grants foreign nationals the right to live, work, study and claim benefits in the UK permanently.

Will she succeed in achieving what her predecessors failed to achieve?

Class still matters in 'meritorious' Britain

Tony Blair, that great cheerleader for modern Britain, famously declared that its notorious class system was dead ("We're all middle class now") and henceforth only meritocracy would rule.

A quarter of a century later, it seems that he spoke a bit too early as the well-oiled 'old school tie' system is still very much alive and flourishing, says a new report.

'The old adage of who you know, not what you know, being crucial in finding a job is as true as ever for graduates', said *The Times*, citing research by Graduate Futures Institute, which surveyed university careers advisers.

It would appear that social networking rather than professional competence continues to drive the graduate employment market.

More than three quarters of respondents—79 per cent—attributed their difficulty in finding a suitable job to a lack of their 'social capital'. As many as 97 per cent said that students from under-represented groups, such as refugees, carers or those estranged from their families, faced disadvantages in finding employment compared with their more well-heeled classmates.

A 'meritorious' Britain? Really, Mr Blair?


Former Prime Minister Tony Blair

Partition memories

Filmmaker Meera Syal has recalled her father's first visit since Partition to his childhood home in Pakistan in 1997 for the 50th anniversary of that traumatic event.

Speaking at the Cheltenham Literary Festival about her memoir, *Vigilauntie*, Syal described being led upstairs by the welcoming Muslim family who lived there. Her father seemed confused, she said, as the rooms felt much smaller than he remembered. This is when the host family confessed, "We've had a row with our relatives and partitioned the house."

The two faces of Jeffrey Archer

A lot of important people have said a lot of nice things about Jeffrey Archer who died recently (5 October 2026). However, many have also been critical, citing their personal experiences. Some have highlighted his intolerance of any criticism of his work and his "economical relationship with truth".


Novelist and former politician Jeffrey Archer

Charles Moore, the noted British journalist and former editor of *The Telegraph* who knew him rather too well, has written about Archer's penchant for self-publicity.

In a piece in *The Spectator*, Moore reveals that during a book tour in America, Archer managed to get hold of the person who was to interview him for a TV network and fed him some handy questions to ask.

Came the day and the interviewer asked: "Is it Jeffrey or Lord Archer?"

"Oh, just Jeffrey," Archer replied.

The host then asked: "They say Margaret Thatcher loved your books?"

Archer blushingly said: "How did you know that?"

And was the Queen a fan?

"I ought not to comment."

American viewers, we are told, were suitably impressed by such modesty.



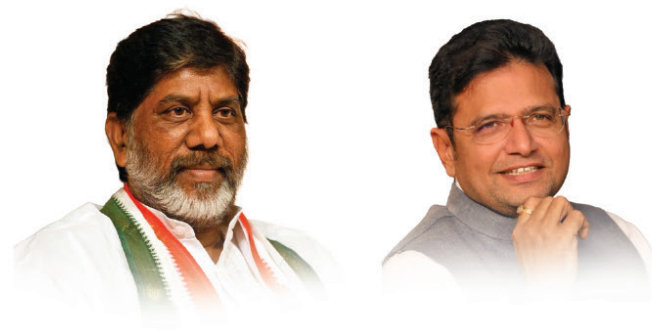
And, lastly, former chancellor of the exchequer and home secretary Sajjid Javid recently happened to drop by Parliament House—once his second home—to attend an event. A young parliamentary aide met him and brightly said, "I'm just going to show you around. Have you been to Parliament before?"

Oh, just "once or twice" was Javid's jesting reply. To which the young woman replied, in all earnest: "And did you like it?" ■

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