

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

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NATION

STATES 360°

West Bengal, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh

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WORLD

CLOUDS DARKEN AGAIN OVER WEST ASIA

The Houthis' dramatic advance in Yemen is a precursor to the next round of the US-Iran war

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RESISTANCE

THE GANDHIAN WAY

More than an old political formula, it's a new test of our resolve in these times

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Scrap the SIR, sack the CEC, reboot the system

'Fraands', is there even a smidgen of doubt the SIR exercise is a gigantic scam?

If you were to judge the SIR and the conduct of the Election Commission of India and its chief Gyanesh Kumar by any reasonable yardstick of transparency, how would you rate them? Take a moment to recall what the many previous exposés about the SIR have revealed. Take just another moment to consider, dear friends and erstwhile colleagues in big media, if you could honestly tell your children how you looked away from all the evidence of wrongdoing. And now decide if it's time to tell the story as you really see it. —Ed

A.J. Prabal and Herjinder

If there was even a smidgen of doubt that India's electoral rolls were being manipulated at scale, the latest investigation by Ritika Chopra of *Indian Express* should settle it. But let's first track back to the most recent election in West Bengal, held after SIR, Phase 2. Administrative and electoral officers in West Bengal remember the briefings with Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar before the assembly polls in April 2026. "How is the *josh*?" the CEC was reported to have mockingly asked. Readers will remember that he was riffing on the 2019 Bollywood war drama *Uri: The Surgical Strike*, which made the line famous. It was a surgical strike alright. He had ordered the replacement of all senior officers who would supervise the election and replaced them with officers of his choice. Over 500 officials were reportedly replaced in the state, down to the level of police inspectors in some constituencies. Officers were brought in from outside the state and there was unprecedented deployment of central security forces.

The man, it was heard at the time, was an authoritarian who demanded nothing less than unquestioning obedience. Turns out, as the *Express* investigation reveals, he didn't even listen to fellow election

commissioners—Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi.

For four months this year, in the midst of a controversial SIR that has seen the deletion of ~13 crore Indian voters, the three-member ECI did not meet even once—not a single meeting between May and August 2026. The first meeting after May took place on 9 September, and only after Messrs Sandhu and Joshi finally wrote to cabinet secretary T.V. Somanathan flagging an 'illegal' administrative reshuffle in Nirvachan Sadan.

For a year starting mid-2025 (likely coinciding with the commencement of the SIR exercise, Phase 1 of which got under way on 24 June 2025), Joshi records in the note to the cabinet secretary, he and Sandhu received no agenda notes before an ECI meeting or the minutes of the meeting after. Between them, the two commissioners, co-equals with the CEC, represent the majority view in the ECI—which under the law must prevail. They flagged their concerns and dissent 14 times in the 10 months before September.

Sandhu and Joshi, Chopra's report says, had on one occasion objected four times in a single day, flagging decisions taken and orders issued without their knowledge. Sandhu complained in writing that the ECI had acted against the written advice of two commissioners. (In other words, flouting the majority view.) These actions, Sandhu recorded, were unauthorised and illegal.

None of this has been denied by the ECI, which leads us to the inescapable conclusion that this once-revered institution is today not just divided but utterly compromised.

There is more. Transparency activist Anjali Bhardwaj sought details of the deliberations that led to the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls. She filed an RTI (Right to Information) application asking for the minutes of the meeting in which the decision was taken to conduct an SIR. The ECI declined the request, stating that there were no such records. Bhardwaj was also informed in writing that the decision to conduct the SIR was not taken by the Election Commission of India. Deposing later in the Supreme Court, ECI counsel claimed the decision was prompted by a study that showed alarming discrepancies in the voter rolls of Bihar. No further details of the study—who did it, who commissioned it, what were the findings—were mentioned

and no explanation was sought by the court either.

In July 2026, Sandhu and Joshi objected to illegal changes in Form 6, used to enrol new voters. The changes required new voters to declare whether they themselves, a parent or a grandparent had appeared on the 'last SIR roll' in 2002-03. They pointed out that the ECI was not authorised to make changes in these forms; that changes can be made by the government and only after informing Parliament.

Of course, the SIR must be declared void and the CEC must go, but the scam trail is longer

Under Section 13B of the Representation of the People Act, the ERO (electoral registration officer) is the legal custodian of electoral rolls in each constituency. Only field EROs are authorised to process applications, decide disputes and add or delete voters. Both Joshi and Sandhu flagged that they had heard from several EROs that their access to ECINet—the new interface introduced in January 2026, integrating the earlier platform ERONet and 40 other applications—had been restricted, that the operation had apparently been 'centralised' without notifying the EROs.

In May 2026, Joshi proposed an audit of the process. The audit, he wrote, must certify that 'no one except the statutory authorities concerned has the credentials to make any change in the [voter] database.' In August 2026, Sandhu reportedly reiterated this. He recorded that state-level election officials were reporting they 'don't have proper and complete access' to the ERONet portal, the system through which they maintain the electoral roll. Joshi reportedly added in his note that Seema Khanna, the ECI's Director General of IT, 'does not have any legal authority to restrict proper and complete access and freedom to operate, as given by law, to the statutory authorities.'

Khanna was copied on repeated requests from state CEO offices, *IE* reports, citing an example from Goa where EROs cleared 97 voters for inclusion in the rolls, but could not make the changes in the database. There was no provision for corrections or a rollback of incorrect entries.

In Bengal, out of 38 lakh appeals pending before the appellate tribunals, 16 lakh appeals sought the deletion of voters cleared for inclusion by judicial officers appointed by the Calcutta High Court. 'Who was

authorised to file these appeals on behalf of the ECI, and by whom?' Sandhu reportedly asked, also recording that neither he nor Joshi nor the chief electoral officer of West Bengal were informed.

During the claims and objections period of SIR, Phase 2, which covered three UTs and nine states (including West Bengal, where elections were held in April 2026), it was revealed that Form 7s were submitted in bulk by booth-level agents (BLAs). The dreaded Form 7, as even unlettered Indians now know, is a way to object to the inclusion of a name or to seek the deletion of an existing name from the electoral roll. The ECI tweaked Form 7 guidelines to first widen the ambit of who could file these objections and then to allow bulk submissions.

This was used with impunity to target Muslims in several states (no prizes for guessing at whose behest), and if you were red-flagged and your name was struck off the draft roll, the timeline of the appeals process made it practically impossible to object, be heard and become eligible once again in time to cast your vote in the next election. Unless this entire exercise is scrapped and we return the voter lists to their pre-SIR baselines, we will see the same sequence repeat itself in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, which go to polls early next year.

If you're still not convinced that the SIR must be scrapped, consider just one more inconvenient detail. India's adult population is ~102 crore, and at the end of this SIR, only about 88 crore will make it to the purged voter roll. The ECI has not told us how many of these supposedly ineligible adults are the illegals ('ghuspathiye') they wanted out.

That, you might remember, was the original rationale for embarking on this illegal SIR. ■

What a 15% rainfall deficit foretells

Jaideep Hardikar

In 2025, it was a problem of too much rain. Rain and flood fury in southeast and central Maharashtra ravaged thousands of hectares of crops, flattened homes, washed away livestock and devastated thousands of households. A year on, the same villages in the same region are a study in contrast.

Take Dharashiv in the state's Marathwada region. Normal rainfall in June and July was followed by 27.9 per cent (of normal) rain in August and only 3.7 per cent till 20 September. Just when soya bean, a major crop in the district, was flowering and forming pods, there was practically no rain. Overall, this season, the district has received just 310.7 mm against a long-period average expected rainfall of 603.1 mm (a deficit of nearly 50 per cent) and there has been no rain in the district for 80 days.

The consequences are devastating: the groundwater level has dropped by over seven metres, and is below the five-year average. Revenue officials estimate crop

losses of 80-85 per cent. Distraught farmers are cutting up their dried soya bean plants to feed cattle.

Dharashiv is not an isolated story.

India's southwest monsoon is receding, and the expected national rainfall deficit is 15 per cent. That bit of data does not reveal the full extent of the problem, though.

The IMD's (India Meteorological Department) district-wise data for

1 June to 30 September shows that 342 of 734 districts for which data is available received 'deficient' (-20 to -59%) or 'large deficient' (-60 to -99%) rainfall. Of these, 303 districts are listed as 'deficient' and 39 as 'large deficient'. Only 305 districts are listed under 'normal' (-19 to +19%) rainfall. In other words, half of India has had a bad monsoon, and while the national deficit figure (of 15 per cent) may look

manageable, it disguises the distress of large swathes of rain-deficit India.

As per the latest signals, the southern peninsula is looking at an average deficit of 29 per cent, with Andhra Pradesh the worst affected in this region (-43%); eastern and northeastern India will see an average deficit of 25 per cent, with Bihar (-36%) looking the worst hit in the east and Meghalaya (-59%) in

the northeast. Punjab, which also witnessed heavy rains and flash floods last year, is likely to see a 40 per cent rain deficit.

The overall rainfall deficit in Maharashtra is about 17 per cent, according to the IMD's district-wise dataset. Yet 20 of its 36 districts are listed as 'large deficient'. The eight districts of Marathwada have recorded 30-50 per cent below normal rainfall. This is a region with low annual average rainfall of about 550 mm. Western Vidarbha's cotton basket has also been deficient—30-40 per cent below normal; August deficits (50-85%) were especially bad. So, while the national average and, in cases like Maharashtra, even the state-level average deficiency may look manageable, it is anything but, when you drill down to the district level.

The rain deficit has a cascading impact on the farm economy and rural incomes. The monsoon deficit affects winter sowing as well.

The first economic consequence of a failed monsoon is the cash crunch. For rainfed crops, a rainfall deficit means a drop in yields,

higher expenditure on protective irrigation and inputs, lower farm-gate income and hardship servicing the crop loan taken at the beginning of the season. Across India, farmers will experience a cash crunch.

Then comes the credit crunch. A farmer who borrowed at the beginning of the kharif season must repay the crop loan irrespective of whether the monsoon failed or was deficient. If the crop fails, the household will struggle to repay the loan and consequently to finance the next crop. The problem then moves beyond the farm household. If crops fail or yields fall, farm labour demand falls too.

The pattern is similar nationally, though some crops are worse affected. The soya bean and cotton belts of Maharashtra, Telangana and Karnataka are under stress. Likewise pulses, across Maharashtra, Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Paddy is under pressure in several southern and eastern states.

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Average rainfall deficit figures conceal more than they reveal

Photo: Getty Images

Nearly half the districts for which data was available have rain deficits

STATES 360° WEST BENGAL



Now Christians too in the crosshairs of Hindutva goons

Kunal Chatterjee
and Sourabh Sen

A mob attack on a partially constructed church in Subhasgram (South 24 Parganas). Disruption and vandalism by a 100-strong crowd on motorcycles in a Major Para (also South 24 Parganas)—a private house broken into, Pastor Pintu Polley and worshippers assaulted, a cross broken. An attack during Sunday service in Faridpur, Purba Bardhaman, as reported by Pastor Surajit Ghosh. A pastor abducted from a prayer service; a Presbyterian house church vandalised by a mob in Medinipur. A private thanksgiving prayer meeting for a newly married Christian couple disrupted in Paschim Medinipur. A house in Hingalraj (North 24 Parganas) stormed into; those praying, including foreign visitors, accused of conversion. A burial disrupted in Sahanagar, Purba Bardhaman, by a group of men demanding documents to prove the land is actually a cemetery. All this in just two months of Hindutva vigilantism on steroids.

The deceased woman, says Father Samuel Hembrom, had to be removed to another cemetery in Bardhaman town. “Her body had already been lowered into the grave; the mob took it out.” His complaint to the superintendent of police and the block development officer had no effect. The SP claimed the deceased woman was not from the area, making her ineligible for burial there.

Victims say the Vishnu Hindu Parishad and the Bajrang Dal are responsible for the violence, with police complicity. In the rarest of cases, the mob is dispersed with a police ‘warning’; typically, it is the pastor who is arrested. The identity of the attackers isn’t a mystery: these are mobs in saffron scarves shouting ‘Jai Shri Ram’.

Attacks on Christians were



The mob attack on this newly built church in Subhasgram (South 24 Parganas) on 5 July was among the first incidents that set off the trend

unheard of in West Bengal until the BJP won the election in May 2026. Christians account for less than one per cent of the state’s population (0.72 per cent according to the 2011 census). While some of these incidents were recorded on video and shared on social media, media reports started appearing between July and September, with none reported between April and June. What changed? Are Hindutva’s foot soldiers being asked to prove their loyalty to the cause?

Oddly, the attacks against West Bengal’s Christian community are being reported at a time when the Centre, as well as some BJP-ruled state governments, have signalled a tactical retreat on the persecution of Christians.

On 12 August, the central government sent the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment (FCRA) Bill, 2026 to a joint parliamentary committee rather than ramming it through Rajya Sabha. On 31 August, the state assembly shelved the Goa Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion

of Religion Bill, 2026 within a week of the state cabinet clearing it. Also on 31 August, the Odisha government rejected the premature release plea of Dara Singh, serving a life sentence for the 1999 murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two minor sons.

The Bangiya Christiya Parishad (BCP) has documented 36 cases of assault, vandalism and persecution over the last three months, including 11 cases where FIRs were registered. BCP founder-secretary Herod Mullick says these are more than isolated skirmishes. Miscreants are filming the attacks and sharing the videos over social media with impunity. “The chief minister has enacted the ‘Goonda Daman’ law. We expect him to find a way out of this,” Mullick added. Meanwhile, the BCP is providing legal aid to the victims, who are, quite naturally, scared.

West Bengal RSS secretary Jishnu Basu claims that these are ‘local disputes, neither mandated by the RSS or the BJP nor encouraged by the state

government”; that there are “vested interests” in blowing them up. Minister Kshudiram Tudu piously adds, “Our government does not believe in disturbing anyone’s personal belief. But if forced conversions are taking place, the law will take its own course”. The law, yes but marauding mobs?

Right-wing activists have rationalised vigilante violence against Christians as ‘public outrage’ against acts of conversion from Hinduism to Christianity, apparently taking place all over West Bengal.

“Conversions with monetary inducement are rampant in Uluberia and other places. It cannot be allowed to continue,” said Debdata Majhi, president of the Hindu right-wing Singha Bahini.

“The Hindutva brigade wants to intimidate Bengal’s minority communities, including Christians, before introducing an anti-conversion law in the state,”

human rights activist John Dayal told *National Herald*. “We plan to organise a public hearing in Kolkata, with the participation of a large number of Christian organisations, including the All-India Catholic Union.”

Muslim police officers aren’t spared either

Drunk on power, BJP supporters are clawing out of the woodwork on a daily basis. From throwing eggs at TMC MP Mahua Moitra to assaulting TMC workers, their newfound freedom seems to be spiralling out of control. On 22 September, a mob assaulted Humayun Kabir, former joint commissioner of police in Kolkata (now a TMC leader), outside a police station. The policemen saw it happening but did not intervene. The retired IPS officer had to go inside and stream a Facebook Live call for help. “I have served in the police for 31 years and have never seen policemen behave like this,”



BJP workers outside Mahua Moitra’s house after eggs were thrown at her

said Kabir.

The assault came close on the heels of Mahua Moitra publicly alleging that serving Muslim IPS officers were kept out of events attended by Union home minister Amit Shah. In a complaint to the National Commission for Minorities (the State Minorities Commission has been comatose) Moitra alleged that Siliguri Police Commissioner Syed Waqar Raza was asked by the DGP to leave a meeting for the SPs of all border districts in July. The complaint stated that Raza sat for the duration of the meeting in his IAS officer wife Shama Parveen’s chamber. The IPS Association is yet to react to this public humiliation of a colleague.

Two other IPS officers, Jawed Shamim, director general of the Special Task Force (STF) and Khalil Ahmed, additional chief secretary of fire and emergency services, were also told to stay out of sight, Moitra alleged.

Yet another IPS officer, Bushra Bano, was transferred ‘in public interest’ within two-and-a-half months of being posted in Kharagpur. A Hindutva outfit flagged her use of common Arabic words—*Inshallah* (if God wills), *Assalam-alaikum* (peace be upon you) and *Jazakallah* (may God reward you with goodness)—in her motivational address to students as ‘offensive’ and ‘unpatriotic’.

On the floor of the state assembly, Chief Minister Suwendu Adhikari has bragged about pushing 10,000 Bangladeshi Muslims out of West Bengal (a declaration not supported by fact). Outside the assembly, he has menacingly said that the bypolls in Nandigram and Rezinagar on 6 October would be a ‘test’ for Muslims. While numerically not significant in Nandigram, without Muslim support the BJP cannot win Rezinagar in Murshidabad. The saffron party is, of course, confident of winning both. ■

36 cases of assault and vandalism have been recorded in just the past three months

What a 15% rainfall deficit foretells

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Rice provides the clearest national warning. *Reuters* has reported that India’s 2026 rice production could fall by about 10 million tonnes, the largest decline in nearly two decades.

Food inflation was already 5.95 per cent in August. A weak monsoon and lower production may pressure food prices.

As of 17 September, water storage in 178 key reservoirs monitored by the Central Water Commission stood at 131.17 billion cubic metres, which is 21 per cent below the level at the same time last year and almost 9 per cent below the 10-year average.

A separate drought assessment by IIT Gandhinagar’s India Drought Monitor that combines rainfall data with other hydro-climatic indicators found that 53.2 per cent of India’s land mass was under some degree of drought—33.4 per cent in moderate drought or worse, 15.4 per cent in severe drought or worse and 3.8 per cent in extreme drought. *

There is another clock ticking rather ominously.

On 16 September, a collage of 188 ecologists and conservation scientists across India put out an urgent statement for colleagues, funders and government agencies to prepare for what they call a ‘Super El Niño’ in 2026-27. They warn of hotter and drier conditions across India, of marine heatwaves and changes in forest/grasslands/freshwater/coastal ecosystems.

Pacific sea-surface

temperatures, the scientists say, reached 2.6° Celsius above normal in August, and they project anomalies of up to 4°C, exceeding levels reconstructed from coral records over the previous 1,000 years.

To be clear, these are the scientists’ projections, and ‘Super El Niño’ is not an operational classification the IMD uses. But the warning is important for another reason: they expect the main effects to be felt from November 2026 onwards into 2027, well after the monsoons retreat next year. The Indian Ocean Dipole a.k.a. as ‘Indian Niño’ could amplify or dampen the effects of the El Niño, say the scientists, and the intensity will vary geographically.

Seasonally dry ecosystems such as grasslands, savannahs and dry deciduous forests could experience reduced biomass and tree survival due to fires and drought, their note reads. Reduced precipitation at higher altitudes could mean less grass for wild and domestic grazing. Urban heat could worsen the effects on trees and other vegetation.

The ecologists are appealing for a joint effort to establish the baseline before the crisis fully unfolds. India’s current drought maps indicate *where* rain-deficit stress has accumulated, but not *what* that stress will mean for crop yields, livestock, forests, labour, water availability and rural livelihoods six months down the line.

Crop-loss assessments by the Centre and state governments will start coming in from 5 October, but the relief will come much later, if at all. ■

Prakash Bhandari

The BJP beat the Congress in the recent Rajasthan civic polls by just 0.94 per cent of vote share, as recorded by the Rajasthan State Election Commission. The BJP won 4,179 of roughly 10,000 wards, compared with 3,613 for the Congress and 2,273 for Independents. The RLP won 63 wards, AAP 42, CPI(M) 38 and BSP 19.

Among 309 urban local bodies, the BJP emerged as the largest party in 148, against 104 for the Congress; 10 bodies ended in a tie. Independents, who secured an impressive 27 per cent of the vote, emerged as king-makers in several bodies, playing a decisive role in the election of mayors, municipal chairpersons and boards.

The BJP wrested control of six of the 10 major cities where mayoral elections had been decided. In Jaipur, Jodhpur and Kota, mayoral elections were delayed amid disputes over procedure and counting. The Congress, meanwhile, won the mayoral election in Bikaner.

Even as candidates rejoiced in their victories, a slanging match broke out between Chief Minister Bhajan Lal Sharma and his predecessor Ashok Gehlot. A visibly upset Gehlot told media that he had always believed Sharma to be a good, honest person—he never imagined such a *bhala*, *seedha* man could stoop to such lows to win.

Sharma advised Gehlot to mind his own business, and leave off on the lectures.

Gehlot’s allegation, however, was nothing short of sensational: elected councillors were offered up to Rs 2 crore each to shift their allegiances. This was, he alleged, a first for Rajasthan, as was the deployment of police and bureaucrats to brazenly intimidate elected

councillors and engineer results in favour of the ruling party.

An independent councillor in Hanumangarh was arrested in an old, trumped-up case soon after his victory. Elected Congress councillors were served police notices for alleged municipal-law violations. Businessmen and traders were threatened with action. Councillors booked in fabricated cases—all attempts to browbeat them into switching sides.

In another incident, Congress councillors—on their way back from Himachal Pradesh to cast their votes in Panchkula by Haryana Police. The police used photographs to identify the councillors and separate them from accompanying party workers. This was no random police check, it was a planned and targeted operation. Such interference, Gehlot averred, could not have occurred without the knowledge and consent of the Rajasthan chief minister.

Dramatic videos shared by Congress workers captured the ‘rescue’. After the councillors called party workers to say they were being whisked away, Congress workers stopped the bus on the highway. The councillors were seen scrambling out through the windows before being escorted to Tijara in Alwar district, where they voted to form the board.



Celebrations in Ajmer, one of the 104 urban bodies where the Congress emerged as the single largest party



STATES 360° RAJASTHAN

Board chori? High Court to the rescue

The episode added to the vitiation of civic polls through arbitrary delimitation of wards before the election and threats and intimidation during polling in Mathania, Paota, Kuchera, Ganganagar, Nimbahera, Alwar and Hanumangarh, among other places.

The scale of incidents prompted K.C. Venugopal, Congress general secretary (organisation), to rush to Jaipur and take stock of the situation. He warned police officers and bureaucrats that they would be held accountable for their indiscreet and reckless actions. *

In yet another first, the Rajasthan High Court had to step in to secure the liberty of elected councillors and ensure they could cast their votes in mayoral and board elections. On Sunday, 20 September—a court holiday—at least 10 election-related petitions were heard by benches in Jaipur and Jodhpur. The new Chief Justice Sanjay Kumar Agarwal ordered the registrar to open the court for urgent petitions.

“In civic elections, the intervention of the high court on a Sunday and orders being passed after midnight is unprecedented,” said Ghanashyam Singh Rathor, a former chairman of the Rajasthan Bar Council.

In Jodhpur, a Justice Nupur Bhati heard a string of pleas; in Jaipur, Justices Anup Kumar Dhand, Kuldeep Mathur and Sunil Beniwal heard petitions late into the night. Most petitions sought interim protection from coercive police or state action, relief from administrative bias and high-handedness and more time to cast their votes. Most petitioners were from the Congress or independent candidates who had just been elected councillors.

In Kuchera, the stay on

coercive police action enabled the Congress’s Tejpal Mirdha to win the post of chairperson. In Bikaner, elected Congress councillor, Maqsood Ahmed, received similar relief. In Hanumangarh, Congress councillor Manju Ranwa also received interim protection; she went on to win the chairperson’s post. Protection for nine other elected councillors from Hanumangarh thwarted the BJP’s bid to seize the board.

In Srivijaynagar, the court went further. Justices Nupur Bhati and Baljinder Singh Sandhu ordered the SP to ensure that councillor Vijay Kumar—who had been abducted—be recovered and produced for voting. Two other councillors who were arrested by the police were likewise ordered to be produced and permitted to vote. In Kekri and Tijara, the court’s intervention paved the way for Congress candidates Anil Mittal and Ramavtar Saini to win respective chairperson’s posts.

Advocate Amrit Surolia credited the court’s swift intervention with rescuing the democratic process as the voting window narrowed. Holding an IPS officer, an SP, personally responsible for the recovery of an abducted councillor was historic.

Lawyers called for a high-level inquiry into the role of the Haryana Police, arguing that the detention of Rajasthan councillors could not have occurred without coordination at senior levels in both states. Word had it that 36 independent councillors in Bharatpur, the CM’s home district bordering Uttar Pradesh, were intimidated by UP Police into backing a BJP-supported chairperson candidate. They demanded that officers conspiring to hijack the election be identified and suspended.

Retired DGP Sunil Mehrotra acknowledged that establishing the complicity of senior IPS and IAS officers in abductions, detentions and coercion would be difficult. But, he said, if officers had succumbed to political pressure, it was a matter of regret and concern. ■

When a news channel owner becomes the news

K.A. Shaji reports on the messy business of the Augustine brothers

At around 5 a.m. on 16 September, Kerala Police personnel entered the headquarters of Malayalam news channel *Reporter TV* in Kalamassery on the outskirts of Kochi. The special investigation team was looking for owner Anto Augustine and material relating to violations surrounding the visit of Lionel Messi and the Argentina football team to Kerala—an event that failed to take place. Simultaneous searches were conducted at properties linked to Augustine and his brothers, Roji and Josekutty, in Kochi and their native Wayanad. The Reporter Broadcasting Company, which runs *Reporter TV*, was associated with the event, projected as a major sporting spectacle during the Pinarayi Vijayan-led LDF government.

Home Minister Ramesh Chennithala said the action followed a criminal case registered on the basis of the sports secretary’s report and Augustine’s alleged failure to comply with repeated SIT summons.

The channel’s management claimed police entered their newsroom, disrupted its functioning and seized the phones of journalists on duty. Augustine, a regular participant in prime-time discussions, described it as an attack on press freedom. Former chief minister and opposition leader Pinarayi Vijayan and other senior CPI(M) leaders concurred. The police denied interfering with the channel’s news operations, maintaining that the search was directed at securing evidence.

Defending the investigation, Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan drew a distinction between a journalist hounded for fearless journalism and a media proprietor investigated for financial fraud. The action, he pointed out, was not because the news coverage of *Reporter TV* was unfavourable to the government. The channel was associated with the failed Messi event and the company was named in the case.

The controversy has exposed an old weakness: police action involving media organisations is often judged according to who is in power and who is being

investigated. The day after the raid, Augustine was arrested by the excise department after foreign liquor, IMFL and illegally brewed local liquor was seized from his residential premises in Wayanad. The excise department registered a case under the provisions of the Abkari Act. Augustine denied consuming or possessing liquor and disputed his connection with the property. He was subsequently granted conditional bail by the Kerala High Court.

The Wayanad property is also being investigated. Augustine maintains that the palatial house belongs to his mother-in-law. According to the investigation, the property had been pledged to a nationalised bank for Rs 13 crore. As the loan default increased, the bank auctioned it under the 2002 SARFAESI Act that empowers banks and financial institutions to enforce security interests and recover NPAs without court intervention. Augustine’s mother-in-law was the sole bidder and acquired it for about Rs 2 crore. The SIT is examining whether these transactions amount to cheating and whether any bank officials were involved.

A separate criminal case concerns Augustine’s public claim that he was approached with documents alleging that Satheesan had contracted a second marriage in Karnataka in 2012 without annulling his first marriage. *Reporter TV* examined the material but did not run the story.

The police case alleges that the documents were forged and that Augustine and two unidentified persons were involved in a conspiracy to defame the chief minister. If he believed the marriage certificate was inauthentic, why did he not submit it to authorities for investigation?

Augustine and his brothers have been embroiled in other cases.

In 2016, Anto and Josekutty were arrested over Mango Phone, which they promoted as an Indian alternative to Apple’s iPhone. Forged property documents were allegedly used to obtain bank finance against property that had already been pledged. The



(Above) Police at the office of *Reporter TV*; (left) Anto Augustine, owner, managing director and managing editor

business—allegedly importing and rebranding cheap Chinese phones—eventually collapsed.

While a police report referred to multiple complaints from Kerala and Karnataka, the most consequential controversy before the family’s entry into television was the Muttill tree-felling case.

In late 2020-early 2021, 41 rosewood trees were felled (two over 500 years old) and more than 204 cubic metres of timber, valued at about Rs 8 crore, were taken from Muttill in south Wayanad. The investigation subsequently produced 36 chargesheets against the Augustine brothers (and others) and examined the (mis)use of the revenue department order as well as the role of officials and private parties in continuing to fell protected trees after the order was withdrawn.

A timber dealer alleged that the Augustine brothers collected Rs 1.4

crore as an advance and supplied 54 pieces of timber obtained from illegally felled trees. The high court later quashed the criminal-breach-of-trust charge but sustained the cheating allegation.

It was while the Muttill cases were pending that the Augustine family entered media.

Reporter TV, originally launched in 2011, was relaunched in 2023. Anto became managing director and managing editor, while his other brothers assumed senior positions. With one of the principal-accused in the Muttill controversy now heading a news organisation, *Reporter TV* began defending the Augustine brothers and countering criticism. Former *Reporter TV* editor M.P. Basheer, who worked there before the brothers bought it from M.V. Nikesh Kumar, describes it as a problem of editorial decisions being coloured by proprietorial interests.

The Messi case grabbed national headlines. Argentina’s national team was expected to play in Kochi and two other locations. The criminal case alleges that fabricated agreements with the Argentina Football Association were used in a conspiracy that induced the

government to hand over the state-owned Jawaharlal Nehru International Stadium. Augustine and Reporter Broadcasting Company face allegations including cheating, dishonest inducement, personation and criminal conspiracy.

State GST investigators have quantified an alleged tax liability of Rs 25.78 crore. They have questioned borrowings of Rs 213+ crore by a company with a paid-up capital of Rs 10 lakh, and Rs 234.31+ crore in bank credits remaining unreconciled with declared GST figures. The company claimed expenditure of Rs 70+ crore on renovations and related work—which a government engineering assessment valued at around Rs 8.42 crore. Foreign remittances and input tax claims are also being scrutinised. Augustine maintains that the government approached him and officials were involved. The SIT is therefore also examining whether former chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan or former sports minister V. S. Abdurahiman are guilty of any offences in connection with the event that never happened.

Meanwhile, the debate over ‘press freedom’ rages on. Joseph C. Mathew, political analyst and former adviser to the late chief minister V.S. Achuthanandan, put the ownership issue bluntly: “The sanctity of *Reporter TV* as a media institution has been destroyed by those sitting at the top. This is not confined to Kerala.”

Pramod Raman, editor of *MediaOne*, said: “Press freedom protects journalism and editorial independence; it does not provide personal immunity to a media proprietor facing criminal investigation.”

That distinction is central to the present controversy.

A newsroom should not be casually searched. Journalists’ sources and working material deserve protection. Any allegation that police interfered with editorial operations must be examined independently, based on facts.

But a criminal investigation involving a media proprietor or his company cannot automatically become an attack on journalism.

The Messi case concerns contracts, taxes, government property. The Muttill cases concern the illegal felling of timber. The excise case concerns the unlawful possession of liquor. The Satheesan case concerns allegedly forged documents. None of these are journalistic acts.

For the Augustine brothers, television may have become their most powerful platform. The investigations will determine whether it was also expected to become their shield. ■

The Augustine saga is a case of media ownership becoming a cover for shady deals

STATES 360° TAMIL NADU

Making space for a new seat of government



K.A. Shaji

A new proposal to shift the seat of government in Chennai from Fort St George, the 17th century fortress built by the British East India Company, which was later transformed into the political headquarters of the Madras Presidency and Tamil Nadu, has run into an early storm.

Soon after coming to power, Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay took the stand that the present secretariat cannot be expanded or modernised within the heritage constraints of Fort St George, a sizeable portion of which is controlled by the Union defence ministry and another portion by the Archaeological Survey of India.

The Joseph Vijay government has proposed a new assembly and secretariat complex in Foreshore Estate at the edge of the city’s famous Marina Beach. The proposed new complex will be



(Top) A view of Marina Beach; (above) Fort St George

spread over 25.55 acres, with 20 lakh sq. ft of built-up space, and cost an estimated Rs 1,200 crore.

The plan, announced in the state assembly by Vijay on 3 September, is controversial because the proposed new site raises questions of ecology and livelihoods. At the centre of the row is the question: must the new secretariat come up at this very location by the sea, threatening a highly fragile marine environment and the livelihoods of

the fishing communities that live nearby?

Fort St George, founded in 1639, was the nucleus around which colonial Madras grew. After Independence, it became the home of the legislature and government of Tamil Nadu. The Madras Legislative Council began meeting there in 1921, and for decades the assembly chamber became the setting for some of the most consequential political changes in the state.

In 2010, M. Karunanidhi’s DMK government shifted the legislature to the Omandurar Government Estate complex, citing the same reasons—the lack of space in Fort St George to expand. But on her return to power in 2011, Jayalalithaa shifted the assembly and secretariat back to Fort St George, and the Omandurar complex was converted into a big government hospital.

Foreshore Estate is not just another tract of government land. It lies at the southern end of the Marina coastline and is an old coastal settlement of fishing communities. The fishers in Pattinapakkam and Srinivasapuram, where their hamlets are concentrated, have a different relationship with the land. They have produced old government documents and cited a 1957 government order to claim that portions of the site were originally acquired from Mullikuppam fishing families under a rehabilitation scheme. They argue that land acquired from their community for a specific purpose cannot now be treated as surplus government land on which to build a major administrative complex.

For the fishers, access to the sea is the other big concern. The Marina coast supports boat landing, net repairs, fish sorting, drying and

the local fish trade. Fishing families say a large secretariat, security arrangements, roads and parking will cut deeply into the areas where they operate. These spaces have already shrunk due to urban expansion, they point out, and are threatening to protest if the project is not dropped.

DMK chief M.K. Stalin has backed the fishers and warned of a major protest if the project proceeds without addressing their concerns.

G. Sundarrajan of the Chennai-based environment NGO Poovulagin Nanbargal (Friends of the Earth) told *National Herald* that the fishers’ concerns cannot be

brushed aside. “The government must first commission a study by experts in coastal ecology, marine biology, disaster management and livelihoods. It must assess consequences before taking a final decision.” Any large construction project, he said, should first establish how it will affect fishing access, boat parking, net drying and repairs, marine ecology, drainage and the area’s vulnerability to cyclones, flooding and sea-level rise.

Justice (Retd) K. Chandru has raised similar questions.

The TVK (Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam) government argues that neither Fort St George nor other available facilities are adequate for a modern secretariat. That argument deserves consideration, but the need for a new larger secretariat does not automatically make Pattinapakkam the right site.

It appears the decision to shift here is not set in stone. On 8 September, the Vijay government issued an in-principle approval for the Foreshore Estate proposal, but it has since clarified that a final decision has not been taken. Apparently, a detailed project report and further feasibility assessments are to be undertaken before a final decision. The state government has also indicated that alternative locations are being explored.

The Madras High Court has meanwhile been approached by the fishing community. Their petition questions the 8 September government order, raising concerns over the impact on fishing communities and questions of coastal regulation and environmental impact. ■



The protesting fishers have the support of the opposition DMK



Waris Punjab De's street cred and the BJP's solo flight



Photos: Getty Images

With Amritpal Singh in jail in Dibrugarh, Assam, his father Tarsem Singh keeps an eye on the activities of Waris Punjab De ahead of the upcoming assembly polls

Harjeshwar Pal Singh

Sukhbir Singh Badal calls Waris Punjab De (Heirs of Punjab) 'Virus Punjab De'. The intensity of his attacks, coming months before the assembly election, is provoked by the new party's claims to be the true representative of the state's interests and the Panth.

Waris leaders say the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) is a sell-out—having aligned with the BJP to ensure a cabinet berth in New Delhi for itself. They also point to the Panjab University Campus Students Council polls in which the Students' Organisation of India (SAD's student wing) supported RSS-affiliated ABVP. Waris Punjab De is equally unsparing of the BJP, deriding its leaders for donning turbans while touring the state.

For a party whose president Amritpal Singh has not stepped outside a jail cell in Dibrugarh, that's a lot of noise. On 29 July, Waris workers gheraoed Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann's residence in Chandigarh, demanding the release of Amritpal and other 'Bandi Singhs' (Sikhs who have completed their sentences but continue to languish in jail). By evening, scenes of water cannons and breaking barricades were travelling faster on Facebook and

WhatsApp than any press release could.

The most consequential coup of the two-year-old party was a recent defection. Manpreet Ayali—the rebel Akali MLA from Dakha and one of the few SAD legislators to have actually won an election in 2022—formally joined the outfit in June 2026 under the watchful eye of Amritpal's father, Tarsem Singh. Ayali did not need coaxing: his own

panchayat and zila parishad candidates had already campaigned on Amritpal's photograph.

Waris has been first off the block with its list of candidates. Pappalpreet Singh, Amritpal's closest lieutenant, has been fielded from Majitha straight into Akali strongman Bikram Majithia's backyard—more symbolic dare than serious electoral calculation. Mandeep Singh Sidhu, founder 'martyr' Deep Sidhu's brother, gets Talwandi Sabo, cashing in on a surname that still galvanises crowds. Maur has gone to Lakha Sidhana, the gangster-turned-social activist whose journey from Sidhana village to Sikh symbolism via kisan agitation and conventional politics is a mini-essay on how crime, identity and agitation keep marrying each other in rural Punjab.

Underpinning it all is a slogan crafted for a state reeling under narcotics: 'Amritpal leyo, nashe bhajao' (bring in Amritpal, chase out addiction). More prayer than policy, true, but in rural Punjab, prayers still poll well.

Waris's real asset is *josh*—an emotional current that runs through a generation of Sikh youth who feel history has shortchanged them twice over: the defeat of militancy and the Akalis' betrayal of everything that defeat was supposed to mean. Amritpal has become a cult figure with millenarian appeal among sections of the rural community. His jail term has given him an aura of 'sacrifice' and burnished his halo of being a 'martyr'. Add to this a flair for social media, NRI support and a solid base in rural Majha and pockets of Malwa, and you have a formation that can switch on Sikh sentiment when needed.

On the flip side, Waris Punjab De has no tested cadre and precious little beyond Tarsem Singh and a handful of associates to run day-to-day affairs. Formed in January 2024, it is yet to be registered as a party.

Charges of being yet another dynastic outfit are already doing the rounds. Its candidate list, featuring relatives of former militants and reformed gangsters, enhances its street cred while

leaving drawing rooms cold. Urban Punjab and the state's Hindu and Dalit voters remain, for now, entirely unmoved. Can a movement built on absence and grievance mature into a party capable of governing?

For all its scars—the *beadabi* blot, the drug charges, the steady desertion of *taksali* leaders to Waris Punjab De and AAP—SAD remains Punjab's only Panthic outfit with actual experience of running the state. Its century-old organisation, Sukhbir Badal's combative leadership and deep roots in rural Malwa give it a grounding that newbies lack. Recent bypoll and local election results suggest a slow, grinding recovery though, rather than a resurrection.

Sensing the threat to its traditional Panthic votebank, Sukhbir Badal has trained all his guns on Waris in recent rallies. The irony of Punjab's Panthic politics in 2026 is this: the party everyone loves to declare dead keeps refusing to lie down and die, even as the party everyone is excited about is yet to prove it can get up and walk.

The BJP goes it alone

For the first time since 1996, the BJP has indicated it will contest the 2027 assembly election alone. Some see the decision to contest all 117 seats as the boldest political gamble in Punjab since AAP's 2017 debut;

others as a case of ambition getting ahead of itself. Either way, Punjab's crowded political bazaar has another new and noisy stall.

The BJP's pitch rests on crime, corruption and *chitta*. Its Nasha Mukht Punjab Yatra runs from Pathankot in the Kandi belt through Fatehgarh Sahib down to Talwandi Sabo in the deep cotton-and-drugs corridor of Malwa, with Patiala thrower in for royal vibes. The route is shrewdly chosen—drugs are the one issue on which every Punjabi household, Jatt or Dalit, Sikh or Hindu, grimly concurs.

It has, however, run into rough weather, with black-flag protests in Fatehgarh Sahib, Samrala and Dinanagar; in Batala, former Union minister Ravneet Bittu's convoy was pelted with stones.

The BJP is also highlighting the Haryana model of 9.5 per cent growth against Punjab's relatively sluggish 6.1 per cent. Its basket of freebies has been designed to look generous without seeming imitative of the AAP: the Rs 2,100 'Lado Lakshmi' scheme for women, free dialysis, LPG cylinders at Rs 500 for eligible households and MSP cover for a wider basket of crops. The message is: *aa ke dekho, gawandi Haryana kinna vadhia chal reh hai* (come and see how well our neighbour is doing).

Since the BJP parted ways with the Akali Dal in 2020, it has more than doubled its vote share. Modi-

centric consolidation has given it a significant, if narrow, Hindu base in urban Punjab, pockets of the foothills and southwest Punjab. The Centre's resources, a functioning (if thin) organisational machine, and the near-total collapse of the Akali Dal as a credible alternative have opened a vacuum that the BJP, almost by elimination, seems best placed to fill among Hindus and urban Dalits.

Haryana's Chief Minister Haryana Saini has emerged as the party's most effective import. As an OBC farmer's son, Saini offers something the Punjab BJP never had. He speaks to the peasantry in its own idiom, undercutting the old charge that the BJP is a '*shehri* Hindu' party. His rallies are being projected as proof that BJP governance can work wonders for a farming state.

Punjab's pluralism and instinctive recoil from the saffron party's anti-Muslim, anti-Pakistan playbook make the state a tough nut to crack. Jatt-dominated rural Punjab remains largely untouched by the BJP's appeal, however well-packaged. The wounds of the three farm laws and the year-long morcha at Delhi's borders are still fresh. Ever since the Navjot Sidhu episode ended in acrimony, the BJP has no charisma Sikh face.

Radical Panthic sentiment against the RSS also runs deep. Its own traditional cadre are miffed by the wholesale import of over-the-hill Congress and Akali leaders. Newly appointed state president Kewal Singh Dhillion is more of a backroom operator than a mass leader or organiser. In a state where identity may still trump 'development', the BJP looks like an outsider knocking on a door that was opened just a crack.

Which brings us to the obvious question—will the old *jodi* with SAD be revived before 2027?

Going solo will mean the BJP can test its strength and perhaps negotiate with greater leverage. But if the solo flight nosedives, expect a late rapprochement and a quiet return to the negotiating table of a desperate Akali Dal. ■



Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini to the BJP's rescue in Punjab

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When bulldozers backfire and fatigue looms

Mini Bandopadhyay

As is now customary for the BJP in Uttar Pradesh, JCB bulldozers were lined up on the highway to Meerut and Saharanpur on 21-22 September to greet visiting BJP President Nitin Nabin. The *rashtriya adhyaksh* looked pleased as punch when showered with flowers at a toll plaza as his convoy entered Meerut. The welcome ceremony, however, generated considerable resentment even among BJP supporters in Meerut, where bulldozers have been busy demolishing commercial establishments built in violation of building laws. Feedback must have reached Nabin—the next day, his convoy did not stop at Saharanpur and sped past the JCBs 'guard of honour'.

In 2024, the Supreme Court ordered the demolition of 44 properties in Meerut—residential plots put to commercial use—in Shastri Nagar's central market. Some were sealed and some demolished. In July 2026, the Supreme Court was informed that the number of commercial establishments in violation of building laws might be as high as 859. In September, the number shot up to 16,726 'unauthorised constructions' identified in a single survey zone. The Supreme Court ordered that the properties—schools, nursing homes, jewellery shops, sweet shops and houses for economically weaker sections—be sealed.

Residential properties converted into commercial establishments without lawful



The customary bulldozer welcome didn't go down well for BJP chief Nitin Nabin with supporters still smarting from the demolitions in Meerut



approval, unauthorised additions and encroachments into mandatory setback areas were flagged. The court ruled against regularisation merely because they happen to be old constructions and because authorities failed to act earlier. The bench comprising Justice J.B. Pardiwala and Justice K.V. Viswanathan held that illegal constructions remain illegal regardless of how much time has passed.

While traders and businessmen, who have traditionally supported the BJP, are upset with the government's failure to protect their interests and investments, officials have pleaded that they are bound by the court's order. The question people have begun asking is: where will the bulldozers stop? Illegal and unauthorised constructions are common everywhere in Uttar Pradesh, and if demolitions are ordered in Meerut, by what logic can it be

stopped elsewhere?

While Muslims, mosques and alleged criminals have borne the brunt of bulldozers in the state so far, the consequences of the Supreme Court's order are far-reaching in terms of use, abuse and misuse. Officials conceded that all it takes is RTI information from municipal

bodies on illegal and unauthorised constructions, followed by petitions in court seeking their demolition. Those reveling in the demolition of mosques and properties owned by Muslims are suddenly apprehensive that Yogi Adityanath's 'bulldozer justice' could turn around to bite them instead.

Trouble in paradise?

BJP insiders claim that the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Uttar Pradesh has struck off the names of a large number of BJP supporters. A minister confided that booth level agents (BLAs) of the Samajwadi had done a much better job in ensuring that Muslim voters do not get deleted in the exercise. Even Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, he claimed, is upset. That explains why he has been exhorting BJP workers to speed up the registration of 'new voters' by

filling up Form 6 and Form 6A. The situation, the minister hoped, would right itself before the 2027 assembly election.

There is a tacit admission that the BJP will find it tough to win the election. Anti-incumbency and the fatigue factor would have to be overcome. The RSS held a 'chintan baithak' which flagged four concerns at a coordination meeting in Lucknow. There is growing anger against BJP MLAs and local leaders. BJP workers are demoralised and unhappy, partly because of issues like inflation, unemployment and *chanda chori* from the Ram mandir in Ayodhya, and partly because officials and police are no longer as receptive to BJP MLAs and workers. Corruption in government offices and a growing disconnect with Gen Z were also noted at the meeting.

The broad message from the RSS to the BJP was: "Forget differences and grievances; get down to election preparations." ■

People have begun to ask: where will the bulldozers stop?



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Clouds darken again over West Asia

The war in West Asia has expanded, and it has all sorts of far-reaching consequences, writes **Ashok Swain**

The Houthis’ dramatic advance along the Red Sea, their control of areas around the Bab al-Mandab strait and their renewed missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia have opened another front in the widening confrontation between Iran and the United States. This isn’t simply the revival of Yemen’s civil war; it is a precursor to the next round of the US-Iran war, and Trump is playing a dangerous game.

During the first months of the war, the Houthis kept their distance from the fighting even as Hezbollah and other Iran-aligned forces in Iraq got involved in the confrontation. That restraint has now ended. The Houthis have swept through strategically important territory along Yemen’s western coast and strengthened their position around Bab al-Mandab, through which roughly 10 per cent of global trade normally passes. They have attacked Saudi shipping and launched missiles and drones towards Riyadh, Yanbu and other targets inside the desert kingdom.

The geography makes the situation particularly alarming. Iran has already severely disrupted shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. Saudi Arabia responded by relying increasingly on its East-West Pipeline, known commercially and officially as Petroline, which carries crude from the eastern oilfields across the kingdom to Yanbu on the Red Sea. But that alternative route has now become vulnerable as well. The pipeline has been attacked, and the Houthis are in a much stronger position to threaten Saudi ships passing through Bab al-Mandab.

Saudi Arabia thus faces simultaneous pressure on both its eastern and western oil-export routes. Yet the US, its biggest ‘oil-for-security’ ally, is standing back. It continues to provide intelligence but Trump has declined direct military intervention.

Simultaneously, Washington is engaging with the Houthis via Oman. The Houthis have assured the US that its ships will not be attacked, that their target is Saudi Arabia. For Riyadh, the situation is deeply disturbing.

Saudi Arabia hosts US military facilities, is a big buyer of American weapons and has built much of its national security strategy around ties with



(Above) The advance of the Houthis in Yemen is a likely precursor to the next round of the US-Iran war; (left) Houthi loyalists protesting Saudi Arabia’s charge that Yemenis were behind an ‘attempted attack on Mecca’

Photos: Getty Images

interests throughout the region.

The Houthis are not simply military puppets controlled by Iran. They have their own ideology, domestic constituency and strategic objectives. But their offensive unquestionably increases Tehran’s leverage. Saudi Arabia is already reportedly running short of missile interceptors and has sought assistance from Britain, France, Pakistan and Egypt. America’s own stocks have also been strained by months of war.

Mohammed bin Salman knows the cost of this war only too well. His Vision 2030 economic transformation blueprint for Saudi Arabia depends crucially on political stability, foreign investments and predictable energy exports. The reconciliation with Iran, the easing of Saudi involvement in Yemen and the rejig of his country’s security architecture were all attempts to forestall a regional war that can derail those economic ambitions.

Despite all those precautions, Saudi Arabia is finding itself exposed. Even its new security arrangements with Turkey and Pakistan (the Makka Pact) have yet to provide meaningful military protection. Iran can pressure the kingdom in the Gulf; the Houthis can threaten it at the other end from Yemen. Washington is refusing to intervene directly. Inevitably, the situation brings into the frame the possibility of seeking Israeli assistance.

Trump’s strategy pivots on electoral timing in another way. The Iran war is unpopular in the US and is a big reason why his own popularity has plummeted at home. Expanding the war effort in West Asia is only likely to worsen his already bleak prospects in the midterm election in November. So, he might desist for now, but has been heard saying the Iran conflict will end immediately *after* the midterms. Which suggests he might wait till the elections before cranking up the war effort again.

At any rate, Iran seems to be preparing for another round; it has good reason to mistrust that Trump will choose diplomacy or honour commitments. Even though some diplomatic channels are open—though Pakistan and Qatar—Iran’s military leadership has warned that renewed US attacks will produce retaliation at scale against US

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

The real monument to Donald Trump...

...won’t be the 250 ft arch in Washington DC. Rather, it will be the effects of his ‘war of choice’ with Iran, argues **Aakar Patel**

Work on Donald Trump’s arch begins this month in Washington D.C.. Fashioned on Paris’s Arc de Triomphe, the 250-foot structure is ostensibly meant to mark the 250th year of America’s independence from Great Britain, but it is really a monument to Trump.

He fancies himself the greatest American president in history, and there are two reasons why.

The first is political. Trump was an outsider who captured the Republican Party 10 years ago and has retained his grip on it. America’s two parties choose their candidates based on internal elections (called primaries). Individuals publicly endorsed by Trump have more than 90 per cent chance of defeating their Republican rivals. It is not their policy positions or their background that matters to Republican voters as much as their publicly expressed loyalty to Trump. This is what has given him ownership of that party.

It is a remarkable achievement because Republicans fancy themselves as ideological and conservative, neither of which applies to Trump. One could argue that under this ideological façade, they were always bigots and Trump merely took that façade away. This is likely true, but let us credit him with the achievement because it is real. The Republican Party today is the party of Trump.

Astride this organisation, Trump contested three elections

and won two. The second victory, in 2024, was truly astonishing given how thoroughly and justly he had been demonised after stoking violence at the end of his first term. This is the first of his many achievements.

He does not necessarily offer it as a reason for his greatness, but Trump has survived one assassination attempt and two failed attacks. This, too, likely feeds into his sense of being a man of history.

The second reason he offers is governance. He points to what he sees as his success on immigration and the economy. Indians are familiar with his actions on the former: jailing, shackling and deporting undocumented people, unleashing the entity known as ICE on American cities and attacking the institution of the H-1B visa.

On the economy, his claim rests on a record-high stock market, his tariff policy, sustained investment by the largest companies in AI and low levels of unemployment. Here the record is less settled, but it will become clearer with time. He still has two years in office.

If we limit his achievements to these, his emerging as one of the more successful figures in US politics is not impossible. A maverick who dominated a major party like nobody before him, and who was in office at the time of the most extraordinary technological revolution. In that sense, having a Trump monument in the capital, like those of Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln, is not so outlandish.

Unfortunately, none of the above

will be the first association with his legacy—and Trump already knows that. Trump will be linked forever with his killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the global chaos that has since followed. The war in Iran is a strategic failure of the sort that Afghanistan was not and even Vietnam was not. Limping home from both those defeats, America’s legions returned to a country whose

Trump will be linked forever to the killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and its aftermath

Photo: Getty Images



Trump cannot concede defeat and he doesn’t know how to win. His options are bad and worse

power and influence were undiminished.

I am not referring to the damage done to the world economy by this war of stupidity. That is a separate issue.

The price of energy will likely come down, eventually, if only because renewables are becoming as convenient as fossil fuels. China and its innovations will force the world away from petroleum products over this decade and the next. That is clear.

It is America’s grand strategy that Trump has unwittingly taken his hammer to. America’s physical presence in the Gulf is one casualty. The visuals, published in American media, of its bases shattered by Iranian missiles and drones revealed to the world what the Gulf nations already know. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the UAE will not in future depend

on a military power that cannot protect itself against Iran. Jordan is currently being battered.

The US basing network in the Gulf allowed America to efficiently resupply its navy in a way it now cannot. It relies on an island thousands of kilometres away to fuel ships blockading Iran.

Allies in the Pacific have also noted the failure in the Gulf. American carriers meant to protect Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines and South Korea have been redeployed away from China’s geography.

Trump’s threats to withdraw forces from Europe have not yet materialised. But the mere expression of that intent has changed that relationship permanently.

For the entire world and its nations, America’s word carries less weight now. A peace treaty signed by its president was violated

almost immediately. He cannot concede defeat and he doesn’t know how to win. There are only bad and even worse options before him.

None of this is visible in Trump’s language, as may be expected from a charlatan. “The war is very complete, pretty much,” he said on 10 March. It is not complete, and it has become the thing Trump campaigned against in all three of his presidential runs: a forever war.

Vietnam ended up so unpopular that Lyndon Johnson—despite his considerable achievements on civil rights—chose not to run again. The term-limited Trump doesn’t have that option, of course. He will pass into retirement with the effects of the Iran excursion being the permanent monument to his presidency—not the 250 ft arch. ■

Views are personal

The Gandhian way and the challenge of our fascist times

Shailendra Chauhan

Every year, as 2 October approaches, Gandhi returns to our midst. He appears in official ceremonies, school functions, speeches and the seemingly obligatory advertisements. In that annual ritual, Gandhism is briefly part of public memory, but the Gandhi we remember raises no inconvenient questions.

Today, when democratic societies are grappling with serious concerns over the centralisation of power, intolerance of dissent, political polarisation, the spread of fear and the growing power of propaganda, it is no longer enough to remember Gandhi as an icon of non-violence.

When power demands nothing but obedience from the citizen, when dissent is regarded with suspicion, when institutions have lost their independence, when one section of society has begun to see another as the enemy, what is the Gandhian way? And, in these times, can Gandhi's way still be a force of political resistance?

Gandhi did not see power simply as the strength of the ruler. He tried to understand what allows power to endure. Those who govern may have at their disposal the police, the army, the law and the administration, but they cannot govern indefinitely without some degree of cooperation from society. When citizens refuse to cooperate with an unjust system, when they voice dissent publicly despite fear, power starts losing legitimacy.

That was the great political discovery at the heart of Gandhi's satyagraha.

Satyagraha was not merely fasting, sitting in protest or holding peaceful demonstrations. It went beyond an insistence on the truth: it was a method of withdrawing cooperation from unjust power. Non-cooperation, civil disobedience, the boycott of foreign goods and the refusal to pay taxes were all part of this wider political vision. Gandhi understood that an empire does not run on the strength of the ruler alone; it requires the



Photo: Getty Images

cooperation of the ruled.

So, for him, resistance stemmed from the citizen's conscience. That insight remains just as relevant today.

The strength of a government is not determined by how many police personnel it has, what laws it can invoke or how tight its stranglehold on the media. Its real power lies in how frightened society is, how divided it is, and how readily it accepts what it is told.

These conditions are ideal for fascist politics. A frightened citizenry does not ask questions. A divided society starts policing itself. A society shaped by propaganda forgets that truth may exist outside what power claims as the truth.

Gandhi's resistance was directed at this state of mind.

*

Gandhi's notion of non-violence is misunderstood. It's not a magic wand. To assume that every repressive regime will ultimately yield before a non-violent movement is to flatten the

complexity of history.

The colonial British Empire against which Gandhi fought was unquestionably violent. Jallianwala Bagh is a horrific testament to that violence. The repression was brutal. Yet that regime operated within some constraints. Britain had a parliament, a press and a tradition of political opposition. The empire also had to maintain a claim to moral legitimacy. Echoes of India's freedom movement carried beyond India's borders. British rule was repeatedly forced to confront the contradiction between the democratic and civilised political tradition it claimed to represent and the colonial violence it practised.

A fascist regime can be far more ruthless. It may not regard its opponents merely as political adversaries; it may present them as enemies of the nation, society or civilisation itself. The morality of non-violent persuasion will have limited effect on such a regime. It may interpret the pain of the *satyagrahi* as their weakness and

non-violence as cowardice.

So, it's dangerous to see Gandhi's *ahimsa* outside its political context.

This is not to say that Gandhi's method is rendered irrelevant in fascist times. But it needs to be decoded carefully.

Non-violence in Gandhi's world view is not simply the refusal to commit violence. It is first a refusal to reduce a person to an instrument. Even while resisting power, it urges us to recognise the adversary as human—that was Gandhi's exacting moral framework. To resist the violent language of power even while pressing one's demands.

This is where Gandhi's ideas collide with our own times.

The language of political disagreement has grown harsher. Your political opponent is now an enemy rather than a fellow citizen who happens to disagree. Social media has intensified this tendency. Political debate is less a battle of ideas and more a war of words, lung power—and identities.

Fascist politics thrives in this ecosystem. It reduces citizens to their narrow identities. It needs borders within society, on either side of which fear and hatred can keep growing. Resistance to fascism, then, is not simply a struggle against power, but also a struggle against the fear and hatred being manufactured within society. This is where Gandhi's way becomes important.

Satyagraha means forcing the truth despite fear; non-cooperation (or '*asahayog*') means refusing to obey an unjust command; civil disobedience means recognising that law and justice are not always the same thing. And non-violence means refusing, even while resisting, to lose the humanity that resistance seeks to protect.

There is yet another dimension to the Gandhian method—organisation.

Gandhi's movement was not simply a collection of courageous individuals. It needed mass participation—farmers, labourers, students, women, traders, professionals... were all involved in one form or another. Gandhi's political strength certainly drew on his personal charisma and moral authority, but it didn't stem from that alone. It became political power because it drew mass participation.

This may be the most important lesson for our own times.

An individual citizen can question power, but organised civil society can challenge the structure

of power itself. Independent journalism, universities, trade unions, farmers' organisations, artists, scientists, writers, civil liberties groups, lawyers and social workers—these are all living institutions of democracy. Their independence is not a conspiracy against a government; it is an essential condition of democracy.

If these institutions fall silent out of fear, democracy will wither even if it retains some of its trappings.

So instead of searching for Gandhi at Rajghat, we need to look for him wherever an individual, even while standing alone, refuses to obey an unjust order; wherever a journalist continues to ask questions despite pressure; wherever a teacher teaches students not just the syllabus but how to question; wherever a writer chooses an inconvenient truth over comfortable conformity; wherever a citizen defends the rights of someone whose views are different from his own.

*

Gandhi's way is not above criticism. Gandhi himself was not free of the limitations of his time. His social ideas, his views on caste, his economic thinking and his political experiments have all been debated, and indeed they should be. To turn Gandhi into a saint is as misguided as dismissing him as irrelevant.

A good way to remember Gandhi is to remember his willingness to experiment, to think again.

He made experiments and reflected on them, he tested the relationship between means and ends. At a time when political success is equated with the truth, Gandhi's insistence that the means matter as much as the ends remains important.

If, in the name of saving democracy, we abandon democratic conduct, what exactly have we saved?

If, while opposing racism, we ourselves embrace hatred, falsehood and violence, we may change those who wield power without changing the nature of politics.

Gandhi offers no assurance that the person who speaks the truth will necessarily prevail. The value of satyagraha also lies in its capacity to keep us whole even in the face of injustice. And Gandhi's way is certainly not an old political formula; it confronts us as a test. ■

Adapted from the Hindi original published in Sunday Navjivan

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The school across the river Kiul

In this Adivasi hamlet in Bihar’s Jamui district, it takes much more than a desire to study to make it to school

Umesh Kumar Ray

‘ve fallen into the river several times,” Sarojini Baske says. “My books would get wet, and I couldn’t go to school.” It’s September, and Sarojini, a student of Class 9, is returning home from school. A school bag loaded with books is tied to her back, and she is carrying her shoes in her hands. She stumbles briefly in the middle of the fast-flowing Kiul river but quickly regains her balance.

“I fell a couple of times, but then I got a sense of where the stones were,” says her schoolmate and neighbour, Srishti Kujur, walking alongside. She now carries a spare set of clothes. “We cross the river in our home clothes; once across, we put the wet clothes in a plastic bag and change into our school uniforms,” explains Srishti as the girls walk off towards their home in the Santhal Adivasi hamlet of Jathar, in Bihar’s Jamui district. The bright red ribbons tied in their hair look like red flowers, bobbing up and down.

When Srishti was younger, her stepmother, Reshmi Devi would carry the young child across. “I used to sling the bag over my shoulder and carry Srishti in my arms and cross. I did this for five years,” she recalls. “*Duio time ka ye kaam tha* (It was a twice-daily routine).”

Jathar is a hamlet of Santhal Adivasis in Harni panchayat, cut off by the flowing waters of the Kiul in Jamui district of Bihar. Of the roughly 200 households, half are Adivasis and the rest from the scheduled caste Ravidas community.

“We [mothers] walk to the river together in the morning, and when school lets out, we wait at the bank to check if they have made it over safely,” says Reshmi Devi, who worries her stepdaughter Shristi might fall while crossing the river. “*Padhna zaroori hai, isse dimag khulta hai, isliye bhejte hain* (Education is essential; it broadens the mind, which is why we send them),” says Reshmi, who never went to school.

Around 20-25 Adivasi children from Jathar who can afford the annual fees of Rs 4,000-5,000, attend the missionary school across the river, 1.5 km away. Families here survive on seasonal tendu leaf collection and daily wages, and can barely afford the fees.

Reshmi’s husband, Deepak Kujur works as a tractor driver for a daily wage of Rs 500 with which he manages his household of nine people. Most parents of these school-going children depend on minor forest produce like tendu leaves or they migrate for labour work. Sarojini’s father, Vijay Baske, 50, works in a factory in Tamil Nadu; her mother Rajeena Soren, 45, manages the household and collects tendu

leaves for sale. A young father, Ruben Soren carries his son Ivan, aged 9, on his shoulders. “If we [parents] aren’t around, my father takes him to school. Someone always has to be present at the riverbank,” says the 30-year-old who relies on local wage work and also migrates. “This is a dangerous river; if your feet hit a stone, you could get swept away, and your head could strike a rock,” he adds.

Not too long ago, Ruben too crossed the river to attend the missionary school. “Once, I slipped and fell into the river myself. I was in Class 6 at the time. My bag and school uniform got soaked, so I didn’t go to school that day,” he recalls laughing. Ruben has a graduate degree and has tried for state jobs, but now works as a labourer.

The village had a government primary school, an old lime-and-brick structure that collapsed 15 years ago. A community centre was built around that time, and the government school shifted there. “There were two teachers, but the quality of



Where there is a will... Young parent Ruben Soren (above) helping schoolchildren across the Kiul river; (right) Jathar, the Santhal Adivasi hamlet in Bihar’s Jamui district; (top right) the missionary school across the river (left) “It may be difficult,” says Sarojini Baske, a student of class 9, “...but I’ll complete my studies.”



Photos: Umesh Kumar Ray

education didn’t match the missionary schools. Only four or five children would go and the school was later merged with the one in Kervatari village,” Ruben explains.

However, the school with which the Jathar school was merged is 2 km away, across a deep ravine. “It is so deep that we can drown in it. How can children be expected to make it across?” he asks. Among Adivasis in the state, only 13% finish high school and 3.5% are graduates (Bihar caste survey 2022-2023).

Bihar merged around 2,600 schools, reported *Dainik Bhaskar* on 8 August 2024. Across the country, schools have been closed and others merged to ‘improve the quality of school education’, as per a 2023 Niti Aayog report. But these mergers have put the new schools out of physical reach for many families and out of financial reach where private options exist.

In Jathar village, it’s not just school-children who must cross the Kiul; the village folk have to cross the river even for basic provisions. There is no bridge over the river. Locals have been demanding a bridge for at least a decade and a half. “We have submitted petitions to ministers, MLAs and government officials. But all we’ve got is assurances,” says Ruben.

The Kiul originates at Khajuri on the Chota Nagpur Plateau in the Giridih district of Jharkhand and flows eastward into Bihar. Passing through Jamui district, the river reaches Lakhisarai and then joins the Harohar river near Surajgarha; the Harohar later merges into the Ganga.

The Upper Kiul Dam (also known as the Garhi dam for the village it is located in), was built at a cost of Rs 160 crore. It was meant to irrigate 4,141 acres of land in the hilly areas of Jamui’s three blocks — Sikandara, Jamui and Khaira. Construction started in 1978 about 7 km from Jathar village.

“All our problems started after the dam was constructed [in 2004],” says Ruben. The irrigation scheme displaced 427 families. For the residents of Jathar, the dam made river crossings a challenge because it deepened the riverbed.

Deepak Kujur was around six years old in 1978 when construction started on the dam. “Before the dam was built, the bed was entirely sandy. The river flowed at a higher elevation relative to our village. Back then, no matter how high the floodwaters rose, we could easily cross the river,” says Deepak.

“When the dam was built, river sand

started accumulating on the other side of the sluice gates. When water was suddenly released from the dam, the river’s swift current swept the sand away exposing the underlying stones,” adds Ruben.

One of the first jobs for Rafail Kharwar of Jathar village was working at the dam site. “I built six of the 12 gates of the dam, earning a daily wage of Rs 150 at the time,” says Rafail. He had no idea that the dam he and other tribal villagers were building would one day create problems for them.

There’s still no bridge across the Kiul and the villagers are done with petitions—they have decided to build one. Bamboo or concrete, they don’t know yet, but they have begun collecting donations.

“We could only study till the third grade, but we want to educate our children because education is the only way to move up in life,” says Deepak.

Srishti wants to become a doctor. “It is hard to attend school, but I will try my best to become a doctor.”

Young Sarojini enjoys reading Hindi and aspires to become a nurse. “There may be difficulties, but I will complete my education,” she says with quiet assurance. ■

Courtesy: People’s Archive of Rural India



A campaign video in Urdu by Green Party’s Zack Polanski has sparked a row

“No Urdu please, we’re Brits”

In a country which takes pride in its multiculturalism, and where the government spends an estimated £140-150 million a year on interpretation facilities, a row over Urdu-speaking voters being canvassed in their own language appears rather odd.

It is also, though, an indication of the increasing significance of the Muslim vote in Britain (even as it’s being sought to be marginalised in India).

At the centre of the row is the parliamentary bye-election in London’s Holborn & St Pancras constituency next month, necessitated by Keir Starmer’s resignation after being ousted as prime minister by Andy Burnham.

The constituency has a notable Asian community including Urdu-speaking Pakistani voters who have traditionally voted Labour but have now turned against it because of its initially ambiguous response to the Gaza crisis.

They are now being heavily wooed by the pro-Palestine Green Party. Its leader Zack Polanski, who is contesting the seat against Labour, has released a campaign video in Urdu.

A Green Party spokesman said: “The Greens believe that democracy doesn’t discriminate by languages spoken. Many people are bilingual. We’re proud to reach voters in as many languages as possible.”

Both Labour and the Tories have reacted sharply, saying that Polanski’s “attempt to appeal to group-based grievances by campaigning in foreign languages is poisonous”. Tory leader Katie Lam, shadow housing secretary, said, “We must ban this practice for good.”

Why everyone is talking about a sleepy English village

Forget the campaign by Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales to secede from the United Kingdom—a small village in central England is seeking



HASAN SUROOR

independence in protest against the government’s plans to settle 1,200 male asylum seekers at a disused military base.

On 15 September, Piddington—not to be confused with London’s Paddington—voted overwhelmingly to leave the Union. Given the Union’s non-binding, symbolic nature, nothing will change, of course. But as protests go, this was a more civilised way of registering unhappiness than the sort of hooliganism that has come to typify anti-immigration campaigns.

Not many people knew about this obscure village of just 300-odd people until recently. It has no shop, café or bar—just a



Residents of Piddington, who recently voted for ‘independence’ from the UK

Photos: Getty Images

church and village hall with a pop-up pub once a month. The referendum has suddenly catapulted it into the headlines. International media descended on Piddington with TV crews, laying siege to the village hall where the vote was held in festive mood.

Locals say that the village is too small to accommodate such a large number of asylum seekers—almost three times its population.

“This isn’t just about Piddington. This is about the whole country and Ireland. Wherever they’re putting these people, they’re ruining people’s lives,” Herbert Owen, who has lived there for more than 30 years, told *The Times*.

Meanwhile, 133 female residents have written an open letter to female MPs, saying they feared their ‘safety, security and freedoms will be under threat’. The Home Office has claimed it’s working with local authorities and police to ensure everyone’s safety.

How to bridge the class divide

If you thought that Britain’s (in)famous class system was a thing of the past in modern Britain with its stress on meritocracy, think again.

In a move somewhat akin to efforts in India to check caste prejudice, the British government has decided to put class discrimination at par with discrimination on grounds of sex, race and disability.

A special unit is to be set up in the Office for Equality and Opportunity to improve outcomes for the white working-class. This is the first time a government has created a dedicated team within Whitehall to reduce class inequality and discrimination.

Under the proposed plan, public bodies will be legally required to consider how to improve the lives of working-class families.

“We are seeing a growing divide between a small, detached elite, insulated by wealth and advantage, and everyone else facing increasingly uncertain prospects,” said Lee Elliot Major, social mobility professor at Exeter University, welcoming the move.

Sceptics however dismissed it as just another sop to millions of poor white working-class people who feel left out and are increasingly tilting towards far-right groups that routinely blame their problems on immigrants.



UK Independence Party supporters clash with Stand Up To Racism activists during an anti-Islam demonstration in London

The truth about Roman roads

Did all roads really lead to Rome, as the overwrought proverb would have us believe?

The answer is no, according to a new study which shows that if you travelled by land 1,800 years ago—when the Roman empire stretched from Wales to the Levant—Rome was far from being its best-connected city. It wasn’t even on the most important road in Italy.

By modern standards, Roman roads weren’t that straight either, which means the saying ‘straight as a Roman road’ also falls by the wayside!

Tom Brughmans, of Aarhus University, Denmark, said ideas about the Romans learnt in childhood have had a surprising hold over academia.

“These myths are so persistent, it’s actually prevented scholars from asking really interesting questions.”

And, lastly, Armando Iannucci, one of Britain’s best-known satirists, has spent decades studying the more irritating habits of people in public life. He has now coined a word for one of them: ‘modpest: someone who is modest to such an annoying degree that you want to hit them’. ■



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