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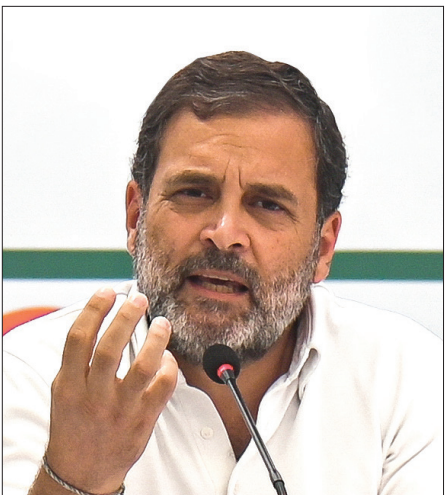
Fixing the voter list or fixing the elections?

Herjinder

The Election Commission of India’s recent invitation to Rahul Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, for a discussion on his objections regarding the Maharashtra assembly elections has triggered a fresh wave of political contention. The Congress party, pushing back against the ECI’s request, has demanded transparency through access to machine-verifiable electoral data and video footage of polling, citing widespread irregularities in voter rolls and polling figures. The confrontation has once again spotlighted growing concerns over the ECI’s neutrality and credibility. An eight-member internal panel of the Congress, called the Empowered Action Group of Leaders and Experts (Eagle), has declined to meet with the Commission unless critical data and surveillance footage are shared beforehand. For context, the ECI in December 2024 changed rules to deny public access to data and documents, which till then were freely available. On 18 June, it issued a circular notifying that CCTV footage at polling booths, strongrooms and counting centres would be destroyed 45 days after the declaration of results, unless election petitions challenging the results are accepted by high courts within that period. (The earlier rule was to retain polling station video footage for a year.)

On 21 June, Rahul Gandhi reacted sharply via a post on X: ‘Voter list? Will not provide in machine-readable format. CCTV footage? Hidden by changing the law. Polling videos and photos? Now to be deleted in 45 days instead of a year. The one meant to provide answers is now deleting the evidence.’ Political analyst Yogendra Yadav added his voice to the growing criticism, saying: “Democracy thrives on openness. The ECI’s move to shorten the CCTV footage retention period—from a year to just 45 days—only deepens public suspicion and erodes trust in the electoral process.” This sequence of events has not only intensified the confrontation between the Congress and the ECI, but also raised broader questions about institutional accountability and the shrinking space for

transparency in India’s democratic machinery. Rahul Gandhi and the Congress party have formally alleged that the 2024 Maharashtra assembly elections were marred by serious irregularities. Their principal charge involves a suspicious spike in the number of registered voters compared to the Lok Sabha elections held just six months earlier. They have drawn attention to the massive net addition of 40 lakh voters (48 lakh new names added and 8 lakh deleted) and an “inexplicable upsurge in polling after 5 p.m. on election day”. (from 58 per cent declared at 5 p.m. on polling day to 66 per cent the next day!) In a detailed letter to the ECI, Praveen Chakravarty, Congress’s head of data analytics, highlighted the anomalies: ‘We had presented data showing an abnormal increase in the total number of new voters enrolled, and votes polled in the assembly compared to the Lok Sabha elections held just six months earlier... Forty lakh new voters were enrolled and 75 lakh additional votes cast in the Vidhan Sabha elections. This represents a 4.3 per cent rise in voter enrolment and a 13 per cent increase in votes



Voter rolls and surveillance footage are not optional extras, but instruments of accountability, Rahul Gandhi has argued



Photos: Getty Images

polled—figures that are significantly out of line with historical trends in Maharashtra.” Rahul Gandhi has raised the pitch of his criticism of the ECI, accusing it of facilitating “vote theft” and demanding access to a “machine-readable, digital copy of the Maharashtra voter lists and video footage from polling day” before agreeing to any dialogue. The Congress party insists that without booth-level Form 20 data and CCTV footage, any conversation with the Commission would be meaningless. For the Opposition, verifiable electoral data is not a formality—it is the basis of electoral legitimacy. On 26 June, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee jumped into the fray. Addressing reporters in the coastal town of Digha in West Bengal’s Purba Medinipur district, she said: “Their [The ECI’s] target is Bengal. The migrant workers and the people of Bengal. The EC’s plan is alarming for democracy.” She was responding to questions on the ECI’s intensive revision of electoral rolls for Bihar, which goes to polls later this

year. Banerjee was suggesting that the voter roll manipulations in Bihar were only a teaser preview of what was to come in Bengal, which goes to polls next year. Rahul Gandhi has repeatedly raised an alarm over the erosion of electoral fairness, calling the 2024 Maharashtra assembly polls symptomatic of “industrial-scale rigging involving the capture of our national institutions”. Voter rolls and surveillance footage are not optional extras, but instruments of accountability, he has argued. “These are meant to strengthen democracy, not [to] be locked away while democracy is undermined.” He has accused the ECI of not merely stonewalling but “actively destroying evidence.” The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) has echoed these concerns. In a statement to *The Wire*, ADR co-founder Jagdeep Chhokar called the ECI’s repeated claims of transparency “hollow,” noting that the Commission’s refusal to release machine-readable data undermines its credibility.

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Violations that went unflagged, unpunished

How budget cuts, undercapacity, regulatory failure and systemic neglect imperil Indian aviation

Aditya Anand

The DGCA, India’s aviation regulator, finds itself in the dock after the tragic crash of Air India flight AI-171 at Ahmedabad on 12 June. It is being accused of treating airlines with kid gloves and not doing enough to enforce its own regulations. The government also appears to be guilty of cutting budgets and not ensuring that critical positions in the DGCA are filled up. The failure to stop encroachment of illegal structures around airports and to enforce height restrictions, now the subject of a PIL before the Supreme Court, is another area that has drawn attention. Between 2018 and 2023, the DGCA published six surveillance reports that exposed a litany of safety violations by different airlines, which had falsified maintenance records, made use of untrained personnel and expired safety equipment, and were guilty of routine breach of aviation norms. Yet, despite these damning findings, no airline was named, no penalties imposed and no systemic reforms mandated. After 2023, the DGCA ceased publishing safety audits and stopped uploading incident reports, further eroding transparency.

Expansion sans regulation

The rapid expansion in the Indian aviation sector—from 66 million passengers

in 2014 to 161 million in 2024—has not been matched with a proportionate expansion in regulatory capacity. Budget cuts have been severe, with the ministry of civil aviation’s capital outlay plunging by 91 per cent in just one year. This has led to critical vacancies, including a 30 per cent shortfall in air traffic controllers—hampering the DGCA’s ability to conduct effective oversight. As per data tabled in Parliament, between 2020 and January 2025, Indian domestic carriers reported 2,461 technical faults, with Indigo Airlines alone accounting for more than half of them. Air India and its subsidiaries reported 389

The DGCA’s approach to audits has been fragmented and reactive, often triggered by incidents rather than proactive risk-based assessments



Photo: Getty Images

faults, including serious safety breaches such as pairing non-qualified crew on international flights. Despite these violations, enforcement has been weak, and budget cuts continue. The DGCA’s approach to audits has been fragmented and reactive, often triggered by incidents rather than proactive risk-based assessments. A glaring example emerged in 2023 when Air India was found to have fabricated internal safety audit reports at

major airports with forged documents signed by unauthorised personnel and no evidence of actual inspections. This scandal, exposed by a whistleblower, not only highlighted airline malpractice but also the DGCA’s inability to detect and prevent such frauds. Calls for reform have grown louder over the years. Aviation safety experts and stakeholders are demanding an independent Civil Aviation Authority

(CAA) with statutory autonomy, enforcement powers and insulation from political and industry influence. Without such structural reforms, audits will remain mere eyewash, unable to restore trust or prevent future tragedies.

Building violations galore

Between 2020 and 2025, the issue of unauthorised structures in the vicinity of airports and buildings violating height restrictions around Mumbai’s Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (CSMIA) has seen legal action. Numerous buildings exceed the prescribed height limit. This obstructs the flight path of aircraft, posing a hazard during takeoff and landing. This long-standing concern was brought into sharper focus through a PIL filed in 2019 by aviation safety activist Yeshwant Shenoy, who urged the Bombay High Court to direct removal of these hazardous structures. The scale of the problem is staggering. According to data tabled in Parliament, more than 1,800 obstacles—ranging from buildings to mobile towers—were found to violate height restrictions around airports across India, with Mumbai alone accounting for over 400. These encroachments not only compromise the safety of aircraft operations but also pose a direct threat to human life.

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Fixing the voter list or...?

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He too highlighted the surge in the number of voters in Maharashtra.

One of the more contentious decisions of the ECI has been the amendment of Rule 93 of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961. In December 2024, the ECI modified this rule to significantly restrict public access to CCTV footage from polling stations.

The ECI justified the amendment on grounds of protecting voter privacy and complying with Supreme Court directives related to the secrecy of non-voters. Chhokar of the ADR points out that while privacy is important, it cannot come at the cost of transparency. “The ECI’s responsibility is to strike a balance between privacy and public accountability—not to use privacy as a shield against scrutiny,” he says.

The Maharashtra controversy, now colliding with the build-up to the Bihar elections, underscores a larger crisis of credibility confronting India’s electoral process. The ECI’s unwillingness to seriously engage with the Opposition’s concerns—brushing them off as politically motivated—has only deepened public distrust.

Congress data analyst Praveen Chakravarty summed it up succinctly: “The ECI is not a private corporation—it’s a constitutional body. It owes citizens data-backed clarity, not vague platitudes. If everything is above board, prove it with evidence.”

Democracy activist M.G. Devasahayam, a former Army officer and IAS official, was scathing: “Total

secrecy has become the new trademark of the Election Commission.”

The real worry is not one state or one election. The ECI’s conduct raises fundamental questions about whether it is playing true to its mandate to safeguard India’s electoral process or shielding electoral secrets and misdemeanours or worse from public scrutiny.

The ‘Special Intensive Revision’ of voter rolls in Bihar has triggered a fresh wave of concern. Scheduled just months before the assembly elections due in October/ November this year, the revision exercise is to be conducted through door-to-door enumeration by booth-level officers (BLOs) between 25 June and 26 July—a period when Bihar is typically lashed by monsoon rains. Large swathes of rural Bihar become inaccessible during this time and many districts are already under orange alerts for heavy rainfall. The logistical challenges alone raise questions about the viability and sincerity of this revision process. But the content of the revision exercise raises even deeper alarm.

As per the new guidelines, all voters—new applicants and those enrolled after 2003—must submit a self-attested declaration affirming their Indian citizenship, whether by birth or naturalisation. They are also required to provide supporting documents, including proof of their birth and that of their parents. M.G. Devasahayam put it starkly: “This is essentially asking citizens to prove their citizenship again. Are we now seeing the CAA–NRC being introduced through the back door?”

What happens to those unable to furnish the required documentation? Will their names be struck off the electoral rolls? If so, it could lead to sweeping disenfranchisement, particularly in a state like Bihar where the official birth and death registration is still under 75 per cent.

Chhokar warns against shortcuts: “There’s a legal and well-defined process for removing names from the voter list. How can you bypass the process with a new declaration requirement?”

These changes, though presented as administrative steps to clean up the voter list, have raised suspicions that Bihar could see the same kind of alleged electoral irregularities that the Congress has flagged in Maharashtra.

In a recent op-ed for the *Indian Express*, Rahul Gandhi warns: ‘The match-fixing of Maharashtra will come to Bihar next, and then anywhere the BJP is losing.’

RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav has echoed the sentiment: “The BJP has been exposed... The whole world saw how the Maharashtra elections were won.” ■

Violations went unpunished

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In 2017, the DGCA issued demolition orders for 49 identified obstacles—part of a larger list of over 110 structures flagged in surveys conducted by Mumbai International Airport Limited (MIAL) and Airports Authority of India (AAI) between 2010 and 2011. However, enforcement lagged, and many structures remain standing, with some owners filing appeals leading to delays in action.

The Bombay High Court intensified oversight in 2022 and directed the Mumbai suburban district collector to remove unauthorised portions of 48 buildings near the airport. The deputy collector of Kurla reported demolishing seven rooms, reducing heights of mobile antenna towers and removing 19 overhead water tanks from these buildings.

In March 2025, the Bombay HC reiterated the need for swift enforcement and directed the DGCA to expedite decisions on pending appeals and instruct the collector and municipal authorities to ensure removal of illegal structures.

The issue has now reached the Supreme Court, where a PIL seeks urgent intervention. The petitioners argue that the failure of authorities to act expeditiously has created a dangerous environment for civil aviation, especially in densely populated urban centres. The court has sought responses from the DGCA, AAI, and various state governments, signalling the gravity of the issue.

Aviation experts warn that even a single illegal structure in a flight path can have catastrophic consequences, especially during poor visibility or emergency situations. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) mandates obstacle limitation surfaces (OLS) around airports, but enforcement in India has been patchy at best. The lack of coordination between municipal authorities, state governments and aviation regulators has allowed violations to persist unchecked.

Even greenfield projects are compromised

Relatively newer airports too are not immune to this crisis. The Kempegowda International Airport in Bengaluru, a modern greenfield facility, once surrounded by open tracts of land, is witnessing rapid changes. What was once a buffer zone of agricultural land and low-rise housing—to protect air funnels—is being filled with high-rise residential and commercial towers as the city expands northwards.

Driven by population growth, infrastructure

projects, and increasing demand for real estate, the safe perimeter around the airport is shrinking. Urban planners caution that unless zoning controls are strictly enforced, even airports designed with safety buffers will face the same challenges that plague older ones.

Disparities across cities

An analysis of AAI data reveals wide disparities in permissible construction heights near airports. For instance, at a distance of 4 km from the airport, the maximum approved building height in Mumbai is only 17.87 metre—compared to 42.14 metre in Vijayawada. Cities like Ahmedabad and Lucknow show minimal increase in height allowance with distance, while others like Chennai and Bhubaneswar are more generous the farther out one goes.

These inconsistencies complicate compliance and weaken uniform enforcement. “Without a national standardised approach, the responsibility of safeguarding the air funnel is falling through the cracks,” a former AAI official said.

The twin crises of regulatory failure and encroachment demand urgent, systemic reform. The government’s recent decision to set up expert committees and strengthen the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) is a step in the right direction but falls short of the comprehensive overhaul required.

- Recommendations from experts include:**
- Establishing an independent Safety Oversight Commission with statutory powers, including enforcement and investigative authority
 - Implementing risk-based, integrated audits that cover the entire aviation ecosystem
 - Ensuring full transparency by regularly publishing audit and incident reports, and making enforcement actions public
 - Strictly enforcing height restrictions around airports, with swift demolition of illegal structures and imposing penalties on violators
 - Modernising the DGCA’s manpower, training and digital systems to enable proactive oversight
 - Strengthening coordination between aviation regulators, municipal authorities and state governments to prevent and remove encroachments.
- The Ahmedabad crash is a tragic reminder that when oversight fails, trust collapses—and lives are lost. ■

“Better late than never”

*A lawyer and a social worker from New Delhi, **Rajendra Pal Gautam** was a minister in the Aam Aadmi Party government in Delhi from 2015 to 2022, when he resigned after the BJP took offence to a vow he administered of 10,000 newly converted Buddhists. This was the same vow B.R. Ambedkar had taken back in the day—that they would never worship a Hindu god or goddess. The conversion event apparently incensed the BJP, which used it to target then Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal. Gautam quit AAP and cooled his heels for a while, before joining the Congress in 2024. He is a Buddhist activist, runs Mission Jai Bheem and an NGO called ‘Parivartan’. Currently in charge of the SC (scheduled castes) cell of the Congress, Gautam took time off to discuss with Vishwadeepak the twists and turns of his political journey so far. Excerpts:*

Your decision to join the Congress surprised many—they expected you to join the BJP. What made you opt for the Congress? You also waited on the sidelines for three years. So, why Congress?

To save the country.

Isn’t that a little dramatic? What are these threats to the country that you believe the Congress can address?

Social justice is threatened. I agree that in this country people have sought political power to amass wealth for themselves and enjoy the perks of power. That is why people tend to join parties in power. I reflected on this trend and the damage it has done to the country. During those three years, I did a comparative study before making my decision.

How was the study conducted? What were the findings?

We debated about which political party is right for the country; which party can take the country forward? Which one is really patriotic? We ruled out regional parties because nationally their influence tends to be marginal. A national party thinks of the nation and make plans before deciding on the best course for

implementing them. A national party alone can make its presence felt in Parliament. So, that ruled out regional parties. Then we compared the two national parties, Congress and the BJP.

Modern India stands on the foundation laid by the Congress and Jawaharlal Nehru, aided by other stalwarts, and the scholarship of Dr Ambedkar. Take education for example. Ours was a poor country and yet education was free. Scholarships were provided to SCs, STs, OBCs and the poor to enable them to study engineering, medicine, law and management. They would still be able to save some money out of their scholarship to pay for their clothes.

Now look at the contrast. The country, we are told daily, is soon going to become a \$5 trillion economy. Education, however, has become so prohibitive that not just children from SC, ST, OBC classes, even those from the general category are deprived of good education.

It was the Congress which introduced a Tribal Sub-Plan in the 1970s. The plan was to provide adequate funds in the budget to allow the tribal population to develop. And now? The decision to give land to the landless, nationalisation of banks and making it mandatory for banks to lend to the core sectors and the poor were also implemented by Congress governments. Liberalisation of the economy was ushered in by the Congress and during the UPA years the country got laws like the Right to Information, Right to Food Security, MNREGA and Right to Education.

In short, the Congress empowered the common man, the poor, the Dalits and the deprived. Besides, the Congress does not spread hatred and communal politics like the BJP. All this helped me arrive at the decision to join the Congress.

The Congress was once criticised for being a party of upper castes. Even today, Ambedkarites complain that SC/ST/OBC/minorities do not have adequate representation in the party. Dalit leaders in the Congress were pilloried as ‘Sarkari Dalits’. So, what has changed?

Everything has changed. The politics of the country has changed. The BJP has changed and so has the Congress. Look at the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi. He has been on the move, meeting marginal sections of society, spending time with porters, carpenters, farmers, gig workers, students, bankers and loco staff in the Railways. He is raising their concerns wherever he can and certainly in Parliament. He has actually been on the road for the past several years. BJP leaders used to call him *shehzada* (prince) but they themselves wear suits and shawls that cost millions, expensive glasses, watches; they travel abroad, send

their children abroad to study and yet feel free to mock Rahul Gandhi.

Today, it is Rahul Gandhi alone who is fighting for social justice. The Congress, too, is a different Congress today, and those who have an open mind can see it.

You were a minister in Arvind Kejriwal’s ministry and Kejriwal proudly flaunted only two portraits in his office—one of Ambedkar and the other of Bhagat Singh. Would you say he was less committed to social justice?

Bhagat Singh was an atheist. Now, nobody expected Kejriwal to be an atheist but when he showed that he was completely immersed in just one religion and promoted it, where was the difference between him and the BJP? Kejriwal did put up the portrait of Dr Ambedkar but he put a stop to all the schemes meant for the welfare of SC/ST/minorities and Dalits. Even the schemes initiated by me were shut down—scholarships, the Delhi SC/ST/OBC/Minorities and Handicapped Financial and Development Corporation and the Jai Bhim Mukhyamantri Pratibha Vikas Yojana etc.

You are in charge of the SC cell of the Congress. Dalit loyalties are said to be divided. How difficult is the challenge you face?

Yes, our challenge is to sensitise Dalits about their rights, the importance of a caste census and social justice and how their rights and dignity are being trampled upon. We have to ensure their representation and participation. We have to carry the record of the Congress to them and make them aware of why education and healthcare have become so prohibitive. We are in the process of forming district committees across the country. I agree that we have a lot to do and a lot of ground to cover.

Our challenge is to sensitise Dalits about their rights, about why a caste census matters and to ensure their representation and participation



Let’s focus for a bit on Uttar Pradesh. At least three leaders are wooing the Dalits in the state. Besides the BJP and BSP, Chandrashekhar Azad and Akhilesh Yadav too are busy wooing Dalits. What chance does the Congress have?

Mayawati ji has been a great leader and a good administrator. I have great respect for her. But her era is over. She can no longer identify the concerns of the Dalits, put pressure on the government and get the work done. Only a party serious about the people’s concerns and committed to addressing them will succeed.

As far as Azad is concerned, I am not unduly perturbed by him. Yes, he won a parliamentary election but only time will tell how far he will go, who are behind him and funding him. Some things are now in the public domain and more will be known sooner than later. As for Akhilesh Yadav ji, I think well of him. I once discussed Dalit politics and the concerns of Dalits with him for two hours. But when it comes to implementation of ideas, he tends to slip. He also tends to ride in two boats at the same time. This may have worked earlier but won’t any longer.

How do you deal with the BJP, which claims it has already accepted the caste census? The prime minister, of course, never tires of reminding people that he belongs to the OBC. The BJP also makes claims about adequate representation in the party to SCs/ STs/ OBCs...

Modiji is a puppet following a script given to him by someone else. What’s more,

he must tell people what he has done for the OBCs. In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP has been in power for 20 years, but while the OBC population in the state is 56 per cent, OBC reservation is only 17 per cent. The OBC Mahasabha is tired of protesting, but cannot get a response from him.

In Uttar Pradesh too, the situation is similar. Out of 68,000 posts in the government reserved for OBCs and Dalits, these people have usurped 8,000 posts. The youth from OBC/SC/ST communities in the state have been agitating for the past two years and yet the ‘OBC PM’ cannot hear their cries?

One last question about Dalit votes in poll-bound Bihar. Rahul Gandhi has visited the state six times this year and the Congress has installed a Dalit as state president. But Dalit votes in the state are said to be divided among various other parties. Where do you think the Congress stands in the state?

We can see positive vibes among Dalits for both Rahul ji and the Congress. Once they are convinced that the Congress will be part of a ruling coalition in the state, we believe, it will not take long for them to join us. Our effort is to connect with every section of Dalits and give them responsibilities. They must feel they are partners in our journey. A lot of work is going on and I must admit that if the Congress had done this 20 years ago, it would never have gone out of power. But better late than never! ■

Why the US still fears a full-scale war with Iran

History cautions that a war with Iran may begin on America’s terms but it will not end on those terms

Ashok Swain

The spectre of a US–Iran war has long hovered over the Middle East, occasionally erupting in tanker attacks, assassinations, dramatic standoffs in the Strait of Hormuz or covert sabotage. In June 2025, that spectre edged uncomfortably close to reality, before retreating behind the blurry lines of a ceasefire.

It’s an uneasy truce, brokered under intense pressure from Washington. Masoud Pezeshkian, the Iranian President, claimed a “historic victory” while Israeli defence minister Katz said Israel “will respect the ceasefire—as long as the other side does”.

Meanwhile, Trump faced a fierce backlash back home. While the Democrat-led push to impeach him for ordering the airstrike on Iran without Congressional approval failed, the political spectacle underscores how divided the US is over risking a war that could spiral into the region’s most dangerous conflict in a generation.

Why does Washington, despite its unrivalled military might, recoil from taking this confrontation to ‘the logical conclusion’—a regime change or total defeat of Iran’s military capability?

The answer lies in a tangled history spanning 70 years and an enduring lesson: Iran has never been an easy enemy to conquer or control, and the cost of trying to do so has always been judged too high.

In 1953, when the CIA and MI6 orchestrated the overthrow of democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh—who wanted to nationalise the Iranian oil industry and was feared to be pulling towards the Soviet Union—to restore the Shah to power, Washington planted the seeds of deep Iranian suspicion and resentment.

That resentment exploded in late 1979 when students stormed the US embassy in Tehran and kept 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. President Jimmy Carter, already weakened by the Shah’s fall, watched his presidency disintegrate under the weight of the crisis and a failed rescue mission that left helicopters burning in the Iranian desert.

This episode left a scar on America’s foreign policy establishment, which has been wary ever since of the use of brute force in the context of Iran. US presidents have threatened, sanctioned, bombed by proxy but rarely dared a full-scale invasion.

George W. Bush, who was the US President during and after 9/11, had famously labelled Iran a part of the ‘Axis of Evil’. His administration toppled regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq with breathtaking



Iranians celebrate ceasefire with the US and Israel after a 12-day war, Tehran, 24 June 2025; (below) Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian

Photos: Getty Images

speed. Many hawks in his circle believed Tehran would be next. But the insurgency in Iraq had already claimed thousands of American lives and cost billions of dollars, and the same advisors warned that a war with Iran—a country three times the size of Iraq, crisscrossed by mountains, capable of mobilising not just its own forces but a web of loyal militias from Lebanon to Yemen—would be far worse.

This sobering reality only grew clearer in the Obama years. Faced with intelligence reports that Iran was advancing its nuclear-enrichment capabilities, Barack Obama chose the path of diplomacy instead of bombing. His critics called the Iran nuclear deal naïve, but for Obama, the alternative was a military operation, which might have set back Iran’s programme but couldn’t possibly destroy it, and almost certainly would have forced America into a war involving ground troops.

Trump, during his first term, took the



Iran’s leaders play the game expertly: enough provocation to inflict pain and raise costs, but not enough to justify an invasion

opposite approach. He tore up the nuclear agreement, doubled down on ‘maximum pressure’ sanctions and ordered audacious strikes, including the 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani, Iran’s most powerful general. Yet even Trump, faced with Iran’s retaliatory missile barrage that injured dozens of US troops, stopped short of launching a sustained bombing campaign or committing to a ground invasion.

This time round, Trump edged closer to a direct conflict, yet the same caution reigns once again. American airpower bombed Iranian nuclear sites, struck Iranian command nodes and proxy bases to back Israel and deter a broader missile war in the Gulf. But the US still shunned a massive ground commitment that could ignite an oil crisis and plunge the fragile global economy into recession.

After Iran launched missile attacks on the US military base in Qatar, Trump’s unusual public “thanks” to Iran for providing advance warning signalled what both sides understood: neither truly wanted to open the gates of hell.

Iran, on its part, has demonstrated again why it is so difficult to confront decisively, given its geography, nationalism and the asymmetric arsenal of proxies. Its Revolutionary Guard Corps cannot match America’s conventional firepower but can bleed it slowly through militias in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and beyond. A full-scale war risks ensnaring Gulf monarchies, closing the Strait of Hormuz, and sending oil prices soaring.

The nuclear question remains the ultimate nightmare. Even after the strikes on three suspected nuclear sites, one can safely assume Iran’s programme has not been destroyed for good. Tehran could rebuild deeper underground or make a dash for a bomb—the scenario Washington dreads. For now, an uneasy ceasefire holds, as Iran signals its openness to ‘resolve issues’ with Washington and Israel pledges restraint if Iran does the same. The pattern is familiar: forceful blows and sabre-rattling, calibrated to stop short of a regime-toppling invasion. Iran’s leaders play the game expertly: enough provocation to inflict pain and raise costs, but not enough to justify an invasion that America has learned painfully it does not want.

If history teaches anything about the US–Iran standoff, it is this: overthrowing regimes can be swift, but stabilising what follows drains generations. From the Shah’s fall to the hostage crisis, from the insurgencies in Baghdad to today’s ceasefire, the pattern repeats. America can punish Iran but will not find victory worth the price of conquest.

The recent airstrikes, missile attacks and sudden truce have breached lines once considered unthinkable. Yet inside the White House and the Pentagon, the same cold truth shapes every move towards a strike or ceasefire—a war with Iran might begin on America’s terms but it will not end on those terms. It will end with oil tankers burning, embassies being stormed, prices spiking and US troops slogging and perishing in terrain that has humbled empires for centuries. ■

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Uneasy and anxious in the Gulf

As tensions simmer in the region, the Indian diaspora waits and worries—with many still reluctant to leave

Rashme Sehgal

The 12-day war in the Middle East has come as a rude shock to expats in the region. Nearly nine million Indians work and live there—making up the backbone of labour forces in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar. With US military bases dotting the region, and Iran’s symbolic but audacious strike at the largest US base in Qatar, their sense of security too has taken a hit. Despite the US-brokered ceasefire, the situation remains volatile and anxiety levels are high. Few, if any, are betting on lasting peace.

Rumours of spies masquerading as tourists have added to their worries. Unconfirmed, unverified reports of several Indians rounded up in Iran and Qatar on suspicion of spying added to the uneasiness of the diaspora. Such reports or rumours, they fear, may increase the level of distrust and affect India’s image—and by extension, their standing. “If Iran can attack US bases in Qatar, they can also attack other US bases in the Middle East. There is a lot of warmongering going on in this neighbourhood,” says a project engineer from Andhra Pradesh.

His sentiment is shared by others and the unease is palpable on the ground. “It is like sitting on a live volcano. It can erupt at any moment. Our families are extremely concerned. The father of one of my colleagues is insisting he return to India. There is of course no question of giving up our jobs. What will we do back home?”

India managed to evacuate over 3,000 people from Iran and Jordan under Operation Sindhu. This barely scratches the surface. The estimated number of Indian expats in the Gulf states ranges between seven to nine million. The UAE alone boasts of a population of eight million with local Emiratis accounting for a bare

one million and the rest from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other countries.

Talmeez Ahmed, a former Indian ambassador to Saudi Arabia, says, “People’s apprehensions are understandable. The earlier regional conflicts such as the Iran–Iraq war and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, were contained geographically. Even in 2018–19, when oil tankers were attacked, it was feared this would develop into a regional crisis. But Iranians displayed strategic restraint and retreated.”

While there is a sense of relief over the suspension of hostilities, the diaspora is disappointed at the Indian government’s role in brokering peace. It is in India’s interest to ensure stability and peace in the region, especially because it enjoys good relations with the US, Israel as well as Iran.

India’s backing of Israel has meant the undoing of decades of diplomatic efforts and

the alienation of an old friend like Iran.

This lack of clarity does not bode well for the large Indian diaspora who believe pursuing an autonomous policy in world politics would have served India’s interests more. Narendra Modi, they say, could have played a more meaningful role in the conflict given that he enjoys good relations with all the countries involved in hostilities. Did India miss an opportunity to position itself as a peacemaker in the region?

Ambassador Ahmed believes there was no need for the US to get involved. Once the US attacked Iran, the latter was left with no option but to retaliate, he says. Targeting American assets in the region became legitimate and it complicated the peace process. “It is obvious the Americans did not think it through,” he says. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have both protested against Iran’s attacks at Doha, and Saudi Arabia is reportedly seeking US help to develop or station nuclear weapons as a deterrent to future interventions.

Indian expats in the Middle East remitted over \$125 billion in 2023–24, and this is increasing annually. An Indian rice exporter to the UAE, living in Dubai for the past two decades, said, “The working environment here is any day better than in India but the present uncertainty does not bode well for us.” A large number of Indians own property in Dubai and the number of rich Indians shifting to Dubai to live and work is also increasing.

The situation in Israel however, is completely different. Following the attack by Hamas on 7 October 2023, Israel recruited several thousand construction workers from India to replace Palestinian workers. Estimates vary but the number of such workers largely from Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh and Delhi is anywhere between 11,000 and 18,000.

A former Indian diplomat says, “It was clear after the Hamas attack that the



Indian workers in Qatar

situation would get worse. Indian workers in Israel are reportedly being paid far less than the Palestinians and made to work longer. Sending them was always a putting them in danger, and yet the Haryana and UP governments actually encouraged and lured them with the jobs.”

With Iran having inflicted severe damage in Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, their future is now uncertain. The conflict also generated unconfirmed reports that the workers were ill-treated and prevented from taking shelter in bunkers. While it is difficult to ascertain the truth, some videos did do the rounds showing Indians being asked to return to India.

Raju Nishad, working in Tel Aviv, admits that the last few weeks have been

quite harrowing. He, however, dismisses reports of ill-treatment. “We earn three times more in Israel than what we would in India,” he says. With military censorship in place, none of them are willing to speak out against the Israeli authorities.

While these construction workers have no plans to move out, as many as 300 students, caregivers and techies opted to take the land route via Jordan or Egypt to return to India. Some 35,000 Indian nationals are currently living in Israel. With jobs hard to get back home, Indians are unlikely to be deterred from venturing into conflict zones.

What is of utmost concern is whether the Indian authorities are doing enough to take care of their interests. ■

India’s backing of Israel has meant the undoing of decades of diplomatic efforts and the alienation of an old friend like Iran

More brinkmanship over the Indus

With India unilaterally suspending the IWT and China threatening to alter flow in India’s rivers, the war over water is heating up

Pankaj Chaturvedi

India’s suspension of the Indus Water Treaty with Pakistan in the aftermath of the 22 April terror attack in Pahalgal marked a sharp shift in the relations between the two neighbours. The recent declaration by Union home minister Amit Shah, in an interview to *The Indian Express*, that not a drop of Indus water will flow into Pakistan only signals further aggravation. Calling Pakistan’s share under the 1960 treaty ‘unjust’, Shah said India would re-route water from the Indus to internal regions like Rajasthan through new canals.

Expectedly, the response from across the border was swift and sharp. Former Pakistan foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto—who led a Pakistani delegation to counter India’s diplomatic outreach on Operation Sindoor—threatened retaliation and warned that if the treaty was not restored, Pakistan would “seize all six rivers”. At a public rally, he said, “India has only two options: agree to the Indus Water Treaty, or Pakistan will wage another war.”

While such rhetoric may not be new, this time something feels different. This isn’t just about water anymore. It’s about power, pride and a world that’s slowly slipping away from the rule of law into one where might is right.

India clearly does not seem unduly perturbed by clauses in the ‘treaty’, which allows for international arbitration in case of disputes. The IWT is one of the few sustained cooperative mechanisms between the two countries, surviving multiple wars, and a disruption represents a strategic departure from rule-based diplomacy.

The impact is being felt on the ground. Reports in the media claim that the water flow to Pakistan has been slashed by nearly 20 per cent and dams in Pakistan are hitting ‘dead levels’, causing unrest among the people as uncertainty looms large over the sowing of the kharif crop.

According to media, the latest ‘Daily Water Situation’ report by the Indus River System Authority (IRSA) indicates that the total water released to Sindh province on 16 June 2025 was 1.33 lakh cusecs as against 1.6 lakh cusecs on the same day last year—a drop of 16.9 per cent. The water released to Punjab the same day was marginally less—1.26 lakh cusecs against 1.29 lakh last year.

Global context

India’s act cannot and should not be seen in isolation. Other countries too are ignoring well established international rules. Israel and the United States are thumbing down global norms and dismissing treaties despite all-round criticism. This ‘might is right’ doctrine, being ushered in globally, however, is fraught with uncertainties and risks, the most dangerous of which is allowing stronger and more powerful countries to dictate terms.

China has not only declared that it stands by Pakistan in its conflict with India, but also indicated that if India were to choke Pakistan, China might do the same to India. With several glacial rivers, originating from Tibet, it cannot be a comforting thought for the policymakers in India. Water wars are getting more real and up close.

Almost 80-90 per cent of Pakistan’s agriculture is dependent on the Indus water. While India can afford to gloat for the moment, it can hardly lose sight of the fact that it too can be hit by water shortage in the near future.

The Indus originates from a glacier named Seng Khabab, near Mansarovar lake and Mount Kailash in Tibet, and flows through Ladakh before entering Pakistan via Jammu and Kashmir. The Sutlej too originates from Longchen Khabab glacier near Rakshastal in Tibet, enters India near Shipki-La pass in Himachal Pradesh, then

Photo: Getty Images



The Indus river in Ladakh

flows through Punjab before merging with the Indus in Pakistan.

Geospatial researcher and former NASA station manager, Y. Nityanand, has studied the data regarding water flow received from satellites and claims that Sutlej water coming to India has reduced by over 75 per cent in the last five years—from 8,000 giga litres to 2,000 giga litres. He is on record saying China is controlling the water flow, and if this trend continues, India could be the first to face the water shortage.

The mighty Brahmaputra, the lifeline of the northeastern states, also originates in Tibet where it is called Yarlung Tsangpo. China is currently building a 60,000 MW Medong dam on the river’s Great Bend near its border with India. This could potentially allow China to tamper with the flow of rivers like Brahmaputra and Teesta, increasing the risk of floods or drought downstream.

Nilanjan Ghosh, economist and vice-president at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), who has studied the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra river system for almost two decades, however believes that

any attempt to divert the flow will be counterproductive because it will lead to sediment deposit upstream, causing floods in the upper stream. He argues that the Yarlung Tsangpo contributes only 10-15 per cent of the total Brahmaputra water, the rest drawn from rain and the tributaries, making the Brahmaputra grow massively within India.

The argument still does not address the ability of China, the upper riparian state, to switch the tap off and on. China can arguably manipulate not just the Brahmaputra but also the Siang river in Arunachal Pradesh, which also originates from Tamlung Tso lake located southeast of Mount Kailash and Mansarovar. In Tibet, it is called Yarlung Tsangpo and after entering India, is known as Siang or Dihang. After travelling a distance of about 230 kilometre, it joins Lohit and then Dibang in Arunachal before merging with the Brahmaputra.

China and India too have agreements to share hydrological data. If China cites India’s approach to Pakistan to justify its actions, it is looking at a piquant situation. During the Doklam standoff in 2017, India

experienced first hand the consequences of China withholding hydrological data, leaving India data-blind during floods.

Ecological fallout

Big dams being built by the Chinese can also potentially reduce the natural flow of silt and nutrients, important for making the agricultural land of the lower areas fertile. Lack of such silt can reduce agricultural productivity and damage the ecosystem of the river.

The geologically sensitive Himalayan region from Jammu and Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh, prone to earthquakes, is also bearing the brunt of ‘development’, and the future looks unpredictable due to climate change. Another element of uncertainty is now added by the new doctrine.

The IWT was more than just a water-sharing agreement; it was a rare bridge of cooperation in a region otherwise marked by hostility. Its breakdown sends a stark message: the world order, as we know it, is fraying, and without checks, water may soon become not just a resource, but a trigger for conflict. ■

During the Doklam standoff in 2017, India experienced first hand the consequences of China withholding hydrological data

Moral policing in Punjab

Herjinder

The murder of social media influencer Kanchan Kumari—known to her 4.5 lakh followers as Kamal Kaur ‘Bhabhi’—has turned the spotlight on moral policing in Punjab.

Kanchan Kumari was an unapologetic presence on the internet, known for her bold videos, outspoken commentary and adult content. Her posts did raise eyebrows in some quarters but never crossed a legal line—there were no formal complaints, no FIRs and certainly no court gags. Yet, she was brutally murdered on the night of 9-10 June.

Punjab Police said Amritpal Singh Mehron, a self-styled radical preacher who found Kanchan’s content ‘immoral’, was the mastermind. Mehron allegedly lured her to Bathinda on the pretext of a promotional shoot. Hours later, he boarded a flight to the UAE from Amritsar. Mehron isn’t just any fringe actor. He leads a vigilante group ‘Qaum De Rakhe’ (Protectors of the Community), which sees itself as Punjab’s moral police, judge and jury, deciding who deserves to live based on their own warped code. While two of his associates, Jaspreet Singh and Nimratjeet Singh, have been arrested, Mehron remains at large.

What followed in the aftermath of the murder is equally revealing. When Kanchan’s body was handed over to her family, no government or private ambulance was willing to offer transport to the crematorium. It was left to Sahara Jan Seva, an NGO that cremates unclaimed bodies, to step in.

At the crematorium, her three grieving family members stood alone; not one friend from the digital world, not one from her social circle. No influencer solidarity. No public mourning from the crowd that once made her videos viral. For someone who had lakhs of followers, it was a very lonely final journey.

Kanchan’s story holds a mirror to a society caught between rising radicalism and a warped sense of public morality and justice. The tragedy is made worse by many trying to justify the killing in the name of ‘culture’ and ‘values’.

Disturbingly, a wave of support rose for the absconding Mehron from several quarters—religious, political and digital—all offering twisted justification by calling Kanchan’s content “vulgar and immoral”. Leading the charge was Malkiat Singh, the head granthi of the Golden Temple. In a public statement, he defended Mehron’s actions, claiming the victim had “adopted a Sikh name to tarnish

the community’s image”. “Such treatment is deserved. Nothing wrong has happened,” he said. His sentiments were echoed by the acting jathedar of the Akal Takht and the general secretary of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. Sarabjit Singh Khalsa, MP from Ferozepur, even promised to raise the issue in Parliament to address the “cultural insult” by Kanchan.

Flex boards featuring Mehron appeared across Ludhiana, portraying him as ‘*Qaum da heera*’ (Jewel of the Community) and ‘*Tazant de rakhe*’ (Protector of Honour), transforming a murder accused into a local hero.

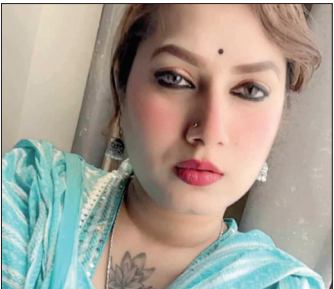
On social media, the narrative grew darker. Fringe groups and radical outfits launched congratulatory hashtags and celebratory posters. Some influencers from Punjab and Haryana jumped into the fray, releasing videos supporting the murder and warning other “immoral elements” to watch out. Mehron soon surfaced online with two videos, taking full responsibility for the murder and portraying it as a message to those posting “vulgar” content. His rhetoric even found an echo across the border with Pakistan-based gangster Shahzad Bhatti releasing a video praising Mehron and calling him a “brave lion”. Mehron and his associates claim to be

Nihangs—members of a traditional Sikh warrior order—but are not affiliated with any established Nihang *jathebandi* (sect). The largest and most influential of these, the Baba Buddha Dal, distanced itself from the act with its chief Baba Balbir Singh saying, “A true Sikh never attacks an unarmed person, especially a woman.”

Equally disturbing is the silence of the state’s mainstream political leadership. Political analyst Prof. Harjeshwar Pal Singh sums it up: “Whenever it comes to speaking out against radical fringe groups, the politicians turn silent. Had there been an opportunity to align with them, they’d have shown up in full force.”

The Punjab State Commission for Women chairperson Raj Lali Gill initially issued a statement condemning the killing, but soon changed her tone to suggest that it was the “primary responsibility” of women influencers to ensure their content didn’t violate the “social and moral fabric” of society.

The Punjab government on its part suspended 106 social media accounts, declaring them “objectionable”. Meanwhile, no similar action is being taken against accounts justifying the murder or glorifying Mehron. The question that begs an answer is: whose values are we really defending? ■



Kanchan Kumari

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UTTAR PRADESH

Graft in Yogi’s ‘zero tolerance’ land

Mini Bandopadhyay

Chief minister Yogi Adityanath has a penchant for making a point about his administration’s ‘zero tolerance’ for corruption. He has repeated it enough to convince people that he means it. His ministers and officials too miss no opportunity to mention this. The image of an incorruptible administration has also been boosted by reports in the media, notwithstanding widespread suspicion to the contrary.

Recent developments have begun to dent this image, even among fans of Yogi’s bulldozing ways of enforcing law and order. The latest controversy centres on a leaked letter from the Union finance ministry to the Lok Ayukta requesting an inquiry into corruption in the state’s information department.

The ‘leaked’ letter was aired on the You Tube channel of a journalist once considered close to the Yogi Adityanath camp. A retired deputy director of the department endorsing the irregularities has lent it further credibility. The corruption allegations assume significance as the information department is under the supervision of the chief minister’s office. While the request for the Lok Ayukta inquiry was made in March 2025, there is no word yet on the progress, if any.

If the deputy director, who retired in August 2024, is to be taken at face value, the department’s annual budget has grown to Rs 3,600 crore during the last eight years, up from Rs 25 crore in 2000. No journalist or media is willing to comment on the department and its working. The retired deputy director has alleged that commissions—for advertisements in newspapers and TV, and publicity events—had become the norm. Much of the work of the department, he said, had been outsourced with decisions made by a tight knit coterie.

The other talking point is the allegations being made by some state ministers against their own

department officers regarding transfers and postings. At least four ministers have spoken of hundreds of officials in their departments transferred between 15 May and 15 June 2025, due to ‘extraneous considerations’. The transfers, they claimed, involved bribes running into several hundred crores. The ministers in charge of stamp and registration, medical and health, animal husbandry and basic education have openly talked about this. Significantly, the CM has cancelled 1,000 such transfers and ordered an inquiry.

Opposition leaders have seized the opportunity. “There is no government in the state,” said Samajwadi Party chief and former chief minister Akhilesh Yadav. It is a money-making racket, he said, adding that government departments had become a “marketplace” with rates fixed for everything, not just desired transfers.

Bahujan Samaj Party chairman Mayawati too expressed concern and demanded an independent SIT to look into the ‘corruption disguised as corruption’. In a strongly-worded statement, she advised the CM to take ‘stern and stringent’ action to protect the government’s integrity.

A retired chief secretary, said to be

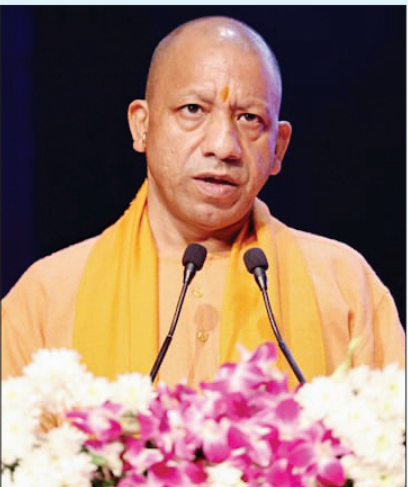
close to Ghilesh Yadav, described it as “a symptom of a larger malaise”. Transfer and posting of government employees at all levels is now a full-fledged industry in UP, he said.

Adding to the discomfort of the government is a recent two-part documentary by *BBC* Hindi challenging the UP government’s claim that only 32 pilgrims died in the 29 January stampede during the ‘Mahakumbh Mela’. The *BBC* journalist identified and visited the homes of next of kin of at least 82 pilgrims from seven states who died in the stampede. While some of them received cash compensation ranging from Rs 10 lakh to Rs 25 lakh, others did not get anything from the UP government.

If this was not bad enough, a departmental inquiry by Prayagraj divisional commissioner found that 42 per cent of the roads built for the Mahakumbh in and around Prayagraj were structurally poor and below par. Even the support infrastructure developed with the massive budget for the event has begun to crumble barely five months later, the inquiry has found.

There is unrest within the state BJP too. While some legislators express frustration in private conversations, others hint to a conspiracy to discredit Yogi by “powerful people” in New Delhi. Neatly sidestepping the question of governing corruption, they question the manner in which the *BBC* documentary got such precise information and hint at the involvement of intelligence agencies.

Meanwhile, as allegations mount, the state government has maintained a studied silence on the *BBC* documentary and the information department. But the ‘transfer scandal’ and the ‘infrastructure scam’ have surfaced from the government itself which Yogi may find hard to overlook, especially with panchayat and urban local body elections drawing closer and the assembly election scheduled in 2027. ■



Yogi Adityanath

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A new name, a renewed dream: Bengaluru South takes shape

From Sholay hills to startup corridors: the evolution of Bengaluru South

“In 10 Years, Bengaluru South won’t just be a name. It will be a destination,” Deputy Chief Minister, D K Shivakumar says.



As Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar eloquently put it, “Now, all official documents will reflect the name Bengaluru South, and I expect everyone to start using it.” This call to action invites citizens, officials, and stakeholders to be part of a collective journey towards development, unity, and progress.

The Karnataka government’s decision on May 22 to rename Ramanagara district as Bengaluru South marks a transformative chapter in the region’s history. This visionary move, spearheaded by Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar, embodies a commitment to preserving Bengaluru’s identity, fostering regional growth, and reclaiming a shared heritage that stretches back decades.

A Strategic Renaming Rooted in History

Ramanagara, a district known for its scenic landscapes, vibrant communities, and rich cultural tapestry, was originally carved out of the expansive Bengaluru Rural district in 2007. The renaming decision is more than a mere change of nomenclature—it is a restoration of a historical connection that was gradually diluted through administrative realignments over the years. Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar, a son of Ramanagara himself, has long advocated for this change. Emphasizing the importance of reflecting Bengaluru’s ever-expanding metropolitan spirit, he states, “Today, the entire cabinet discussed this legally. I’m very happy to announce that Ramanagara district, which was once part of the larger Bengaluru district, will now officially be known as Bengaluru South. The headquarters will remain in Ramanagara, and administratively, it will function as Bengaluru South district. This region spans from 30 to 100 kilometres from the city.” This announcement signals the government’s intent to weave Ramanagara and its surrounding taluks — Magadi, Kanakapura, Channapatna, and Harohalli — more integrally into the fabric of Bengaluru’s identity. The move underscores the district’s strategic significance, both geographically and socioeconomically.

No Extra Cost, Just More Recognition

Opponents argued the renaming could confuse records or burden the treasury. Shivakumar, however, dismissed such claims, emphasizing that: There will be no financial implications. The change was conducted within state legal jurisdiction Land records, postal addresses, and official documentation will transition smoothly. He confidently reassured, “There will be no financial implications.” Minister for Law and Parliamentary Affairs HK Patil also weighed in, clarifying the legal framework: “This was done in 2007 too, when Ramanagara was created out of Bengaluru Rural without Centre’s clearance. We followed the same legal precedent.” This historical precedent bolsters the state government’s position and underlines the legal soundness of the renaming process.

Legal and Administrative Clarity

The renaming, though ambitious, is firmly grounded in the legal powers of the state government. Shivakumar clarifies, “The cabinet has reviewed the legal aspects, and the notification will be issued soon.” He further emphasized Karnataka’s sovereign administrative powers by asserting, “The State Government has the power to rename any district, and we will go ahead with the decision to rename the district as it was the wish of the people there.” By ensuring that the process respects both administrative protocols and fiscal responsibility, the state government demonstrates transparency and foresight.

A Vision for Development and Enhanced Recognition

Beyond symbolic significance, the renaming carries tangible benefits for the people and economy of the district. DK Shivakumar envisions the designation “Bengaluru South” as a gateway to greater recognition and development, “In 10 years, Bengaluru South won’t just be a name. It will be a destination.” He elaborates, “Renaming it Bengaluru South gives the region the identity it deserves—as a vital extension of Bengaluru’s social, economic, and urban ecosystem.” With the Bengaluru metropolitan area rapidly expanding, the renaming can catalyze increased investment, infrastructure development, and improved governance. Businesses, investors, and tourists alike will better associate the region with Bengaluru’s dynamism and growth trajectory. Shivakumar also reflects on the district’s historical ties with the capital city: “Earlier, all these taluks — Hoskote, Devanahalli, Doddaballapura, Ramanagara, Kanakapura, Magadi — were part of the larger Bengaluru district. I myself served as president of the Bangalore Rural Zilla Panchayat. This is a matter of restoring that historical identity.”

Administrative Efficiency and Continuity

An important aspect of the renaming is administrative continuity. Ramanagara will remain the district headquarters, ensuring that governance structures, local administration, and public services continue without disruption. Deputy Chief Minister Shivakumar reassures, “The headquarters will remain in Ramanagara, and administratively, it will function as Bengaluru South district. There will be no financial burden on the government from this decision.” Moreover, all official documents, land records, and government correspondences will be updated to reflect the new district name, aligning public services with the

region’s refreshed identity. This seamless integration is critical to building trust and acceptance among citizens.

The Broader Urban and Regional Context

Karnataka’s capital region is experiencing rapid urbanization, and the renaming aligns with broader developmental plans. Alongside the district renaming, the state cabinet has approved crucial infrastructure projects, including the second phase of the Namma Metro and a comprehensive overhaul of Bengaluru’s waste management system. These initiatives, combined with the administrative rebranding, pave the way for a sustainable and inclusive future for Bengaluru South. The improved connectivity through the metro expansion will enhance mobility for residents, reduce traffic congestion, and promote economic opportunities. Meanwhile, upgraded waste management infrastructure reflects the government’s commitment to environmental sustainability and public health.

Overcoming Challenges and Political Dynamics

The road to renaming was not without obstacles. Earlier, the Union Home Ministry rejected the state’s proposal without clear justification, prompting debates within political circles. The disagreement between Deputy CM Shivakumar and former Chief



Minister HD Kumaraswamy highlighted the complexity of intergovernmental coordination. Despite these challenges, Karnataka’s leadership remains united in pursuing the renaming. The state cabinet’s reaffirmation of the decision demonstrates political will and consensus to prioritize regional aspirations over partisan differences. Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister HK Patil has also weighed in, reinforcing the decision’s legitimacy: “Land records, postal addresses, and official documentation will transition smoothly.”

Community Response and Cultural Resonance

While some residents have questioned what concrete changes the renaming will bring, many view it as a source of pride and recognition. The name Bengaluru South resonates with the district’s history and its relationship with the bustling metropolis next door. This sentiment is particularly strong among local businesses, entrepreneurs, and young professionals who see Bengaluru South as a gateway to greater opportunities. The renaming thus acts as a catalyst for renewed optimism and community engagement, inspiring citizens to contribute to the region’s growth.

A Future-Focused Identity

The renaming of Ramanagara to Bengaluru South is more than an administrative change—it is a declaration of identity and ambition. It signals Karnataka’s readiness to embrace the future while honoring its past, reflecting the evolving dynamics of one of India’s most vibrant regions. As Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar eloquently put it, “Now, all official documents will reflect the name Bengaluru South, and I expect everyone to start using it.” This call to action invites citizens, officials, and stakeholders to be part of a collective journey towards development, unity, and progress. The transition from Ramanagara to Bengaluru South represents a pivotal moment in Karnataka’s administrative landscape. Driven by historical insight, legal authority, and developmental foresight, this renaming promises to usher in a new era of regional pride, infrastructural growth, and socio-economic dynamism. With strong leadership, clear vision, and community support, Bengaluru South is poised to emerge as a beacon of Karnataka’s continued progress — a district that honors its roots while reaching boldly into the future.

Bengaluru South: A District of Distinct Taluks and Shared Potential

With its new identity, Bengaluru South district will encompass five key taluks:

- Ramanagara (Headquarters remains unchanged)
- Kanakapura
- Magadi
- Channapatna
- Harohalli

Each of these regions brings a unique strength to the district:

- Kanakapura is rapidly emerging as a hub for residential development and green tourism.
- Channapatna, known as the “Toy Town of India,” carries a centuries-old legacy of craftsmanship.
- Magadi is steeped in historical and ecological richness, offering untapped cultural tourism potential.
- By bringing these taluks under the Bengaluru brand, the Karnataka government envisions a cohesive developmental strategy—one that leverages their individual identities while aligning with Bengaluru’s metropolitan aspirations.

Bengaluru South: Karnataka’s Bold Step Toward Smarter Urban Expansion

What Happens Now? With the Karnataka Government’s official notification, Ramanagara is now Bengaluru South—a name that will be reflected across:

- All government communications
- Property and land registration
- Civic amenities, taxation, and public services
- Educational and legal documentation

Looking Ahead: A Vision Beyond Semantics This renaming is far more than an administrative adjustment—it’s a forward-looking strategy to reshape the trajectory of Karnataka’s development. As Bengaluru grapples with population growth and infrastructural stress, the elevation of its southern neighbor signals a smart redistribution of urban momentum. **Strategically positioned, Bengaluru South is primed to:**

- Absorb urban spillover through affordable housing
- Ease congestion in core city zones
- Emerge as a thriving economic extension of the state capital

With the right planning and policy backing, Bengaluru South can:

- Accelerate infrastructure investment
- Foster employment and innovation hubs
- Promote sustainable urban-rural integration

From Ramanagara to Bengaluru South: An Organic Transition

Just 50 kilometers from Bengaluru, Ramanagara has long served as a gateway between the city and Karnataka’s heartland. Famous for its cinematic backdrop in Sholay and dramatic granite outcrops, it has symbolized both rural charm and urban proximity. Yet, over the years, the district’s pace of development lagged behind that of its Bengaluru Urban and Rural counterparts. Now, with the renaming to Bengaluru South, Ramanagara’s identity is evolving—not being replaced. This change reflects its growing integration into the economic and social fabric of Bengaluru, offering a platform for faster infrastructure growth, better governance, and renewed public engagement.

Restoring Roots: Why Bengaluru South Is a Name That Comes Full Circle

A Glimpse into History: The Bengaluru That Was To truly understand the significance of renaming Ramanagara to Bengaluru South, it helps to look at the administrative journey of the region:

- Pre-1986:** Ramanagara, along with taluks like Devanahalli, Magadi, and Doddaballapura, was part of the larger Bengaluru district.
- 1986:** Bengaluru was bifurcated into Urban and Rural districts to streamline governance.
- 2007:** Under then Chief Minister H D Kumaraswamy, Ramanagara was carved out as an independent district.

In many ways, the new identity of Bengaluru South isn’t a break from the past—it’s a return to it. It restores a historical association while aligning with the region’s modern aspirations.

Renaming Without the Price Tag: A Strategic Shift with Zero Financial Burden

Concerns were raised that renaming Ramanagara to Bengaluru South might create bureaucratic confusion or strain public finances. However, Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar laid those fears to rest with firm reassurances:

- No financial implications
- Fully within the state’s legal jurisdiction
- Seamless transition of land records, addresses, and official documents

Far from being a costly exercise, the move is a calculated step toward enhancing regional identity and visibility—anchored in both legal precedent and public interest.

STATES 360°



TAMIL NADU

Why khaki knickers are in a twist over Keeladi dig



Shiv Kumar

Not many Indians would have heard of Keeladi—actually Keezhadi in Tamil—a nondescript village in Tamil Nadu. It’s probably obscure even to most Tamilians. But today the name is the stuff of newspaper headlines and political rhetoric, thanks to the effort of one man: K Amarnath Ramakrishna. Between 2014 and 2016, he led an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) team that began excavations along the Vaigai river, searching for traces of ancient Tamil civilisation.

Ramakrishna chose Keeladi due to the presence of earthen mounds which suggested human settlement. The decision bore fruit as the excavations yielded a treasure trove—remnants of brick walls, ring wells, pottery, iron tools and Tamil–Brahmi script inscriptions.

Some of the inscriptions hinted at the possibility of the origin of Tamil Brahmi dating back to 6th century BCE (580 BCE as claimed by two archaeologists), older than the widely accepted Ashokan Prakrit Brahmi of the 3rd century BCE. This potentially would mean rewriting Indian history (especially in south India), as the antiquity of Tamil would be even greater.

The inscriptions even suggested faint links to Indus Valley scripts, reviving long-standing debates about the continuity of ancient Indian civilisation and the origins of Dravidian culture.

Ramakrishna went public with his findings in 2017, courting controversy. He



A pot unearthed from the Keeladi excavation site (top)

was moved to Assam in what the ASI claimed was a routine transfer. Tamil scholars—among them, V. Arasu, a former professor of Tamil at the Madras University—and Dravidian political leaders saw the transfer as an attempt to suppress a narrative that contradicted the RSS/BJP-backed version of Indian civilisation, centred around the Sanskrit, Vedic north.

The controversy resurfaced in May this year when Ramakrishna sent in his 980-odd page report to the ASI, which rejected it. Questioning his dating methods, the ASI said the 580 BCE claim was premature, and ordered a revision. Ramakrishna refused, defending his use of carbon dating and accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS). He insisted that his reconstruction of the site was fully consistent with stratigraphic practice and cultural/material deposits and that the results had been verified in labs in India, the US and Italy.

The ASI appointed another archaeologist V. Sriraman to re-examine the site. When Sriraman questioned Ramakrishna’s findings, this time the Tamil Nadu government jumped into the equation and moved the Madras High Court which put the

State archaeology department in charge of the site. So far, the dig has yielded over 20, artefacts.

Union minister for culture Gajendra Singh Shekhawat sought to downplay the controversy saying the ASI only wanted further confirmation of the findings in the first report. However, the subsequent transfer of Ramakrishna from Delhi and then as director of National Mission for Monuments and Antiquities, Noida, did nothing to quell the speculation.

The entire controversy, however, is not just about archaeological methods or evidence. It also reflects the deeper Centre–state faultlines. As *The Hindu* pointed out, beyond being a clash over the validity of the methods used, it is a clash of narratives between the RSS-inspired views of the BJP and the secular ideology of the Dravidian parties.

For the ruling DMK it has also become a symbol of Tamil pride. Thangam Thennarasu, the minister of archaeology, saw this as an attempt to reduce Tamils to “second class citizens”. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin too waded into the controversy, calling it a blatant attack on Tamil culture and identity. He asked the BJP for proof of the ‘imaginary’ Saraswati civilisation theory it was propounding.

Keeladi has the potential to reshape ones understanding of south Indian urban civilisation. It is a cultural coup for the DMK in its longstanding battle for the hearts and minds of the state’s voters and it remains to be seen how this will play out. But one thing is certain: it is intimately tied to the politics of the present.

Family feud out in public

An ugly battle brewing for some time in one of Tamil Nadu’s most prominent political and business families has spilt spectacularly into the open. The key players are the sons of the late Murasoli Maran—Dayanidhi Maran, DMK MP and former Union minister, and his older brother Kalanithi Maran, media mogul and chairman of the Sun TV group. Murasoli Maran was a nephew of DMK leader and former Tamil Nadu chief minister M. Karunanidhi.

At the heart of the high stakes battle is the ownership of Sun TV, a media empire—consisting of television channels, radio stations, newspapers, magazines, film production and an Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket team, Sunrisers Hyderabad—worth over Rs 11,420 crore (\$1.4 billion). The group’s TV channels span all four southern languages, as well as Marathi and Bengali. It also had a sizeable stake in Spicejet before divesting it in 2015.

Dayanidhi has accused Kalanithi of fraudulently acquiring 60 per cent of Sun TV’s shares on 15 September 2003—when Murasoli Maran, was on life support.

According to the lawsuit filed in June 2025, Kalanithi transferred 1.2 million shares to himself at face value, bypassing shareholder and board approvals.

Kalanidhi launched his television channels in the early 1990s. Back from the US with an MBA degree, he realised the potential for a private channel. His vision proved successful, his channels became hugely popular and Sun TV went public in 2006, making him a billionaire overnight.

With the group’s immense success, came the inevitable strains over who had what. There were reports of differences between the brothers which were reportedly sorted out by their uncle, Murasoli Selvam—Murasoli Maran’s brother—and Karunanidhi.

According to the lawsuit filed on 10 June, Kalanithi “fraudulently” transferred 1.2 million shares of Sun TV Private Ltd to himself at the nominal face value of Rs. 10 per share when the actual value was Rs 2,500–3,000. This gave 60 per cent control of the company to Kalanithi, violating the 50:50 partnership deal between the Maran and Karunanidhi families.

Dayanidhi has demanded a reversal to the pre-15 September position, return of



Warring siblings Kalanithi Maran (left) and Dayanidhi Maran

dividends, and investigations by the ED, SFIO, and SEBI. He has also alleged money laundering in the funding of other ventures, including the purchase of Sunrisers Hyderabad.

Though Sun TV has dismissed the allegations as baseless and personal, the case has potential political fallout. It involves the heirs of Dayalu Ammal—wife of M. Karunanidhi—including Chief Minister Stalin, his brothers Alagiri, Tamilarasu and sister Selvi. Though Stalin has so far remained silent, some reports suggest he attempted mediation but Dayanidhi refused to compromise.

Political observers see this more as a corporate feud than a political rupture. Still, with elections looming and Tamil pride already inflamed by the Keeladi debate, the DMK leadership is treading carefully. In a state where family, media and politics are deeply intertwined, such battles rarely stay private for long. ■

Beyond archaeology, Keeladi is a clash of narratives between the RSS-inspired views of the BJP and the secular ideology of the Dravidian parties

Making much of not doing anything at all

Why do we run away from discussions we can influence as participants (SCO) and instead attend those where we are spectators (G7)?

Aakar Patel

This month, our government declared that India has taken it as its responsibility to bring the Voice of the Global South (henceforth VoGS) to the world stage. As one newspaper headline put it: ‘Time to make presence felt, India voice for Global South: S. Jaishankar ahead of G7’.

Incidentally, for the last three years, India has been hosting the Voice of the Global South Summit, which the government has shortened to VoGSS.

The immediate provocation for announcing our responsibility was linked to our arrival at the G7, where India is not a member but designated—along with others like Mexico, Brazil, Comoros and the Cook Islands—an ‘observer’ (in plainspeak, a spectator). There is no real role though sometimes hugging and giggling is apparently permitted.

The G7—America, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan—put out a statement condemning Iran for being attacked by Israel. Referring to the bombing campaign, which murdered civilians including scientists in Tehran and elsewhere, the real players reiterated their ‘support for the security of Israel’, affirmed that Israel has a right to defend itself and that ‘Iran is the principal source of regional instability and terror’.

VoGS had no opinion on this, even though our prime minister observed that it was ‘time to make our presence felt’, because VoGS was kept on mute. It is unclear why we attend gatherings where we have no say. But who can question the mighty? They have their reasons. In truth, it was time to make our presence

felt elsewhere.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)—in which VoGS is a member and actually has a say—also put out a statement on the same subject. SCO has nine players: China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Their citizens represent some 42 per cent of the humans on this planet, a majority of the Global South. The SCO charter says its duty is ‘to promote a more democratic, fair and rational international political and economic international order’. Meaning it will stand for the rights of the weaker and poorer nations.

The SCO’s statement ‘strongly condemn[ed] the military aggression carried out by Israel’ and stated that ‘such aggressive actions against civilian targets, including energy and transport infrastructure, which have resulted in civilian casualties, are a gross violation of international law and the United Nations Charter’.

On the same day (14 June) India put out a counter-statement, distancing itself from these words and clarifying that ‘India did not participate in the discussions on the above-mentioned SCO statement’.

Again, it is unclear why we run away from discussions we can influence as participants and instead attend those where we are spectators. VoGS works ‘in mysterious ways, [Its] wonders to perform’, as the poet William Cowper might have put it. Another 14 June newspaper headline read: ‘India abstains, 149 nations back UN resolution for Gaza ceasefire’. The resolution condemned ‘the use of starvation and the denial of aid as tactics of war’ and demanded a lifting of the blockade by Israel. All South Asian nations voted for it except VoGS.



India’s non-ratification of the UN Refugee Convention cannot be an excuse to send people into conditions of danger, persecution and statelessness

The reason given reads thus: ‘India’s abstention was in the belief that there is no other way to resolve conflicts, but through dialogue and diplomacy’ and that ‘our joint effort should be directed towards bringing the two sides closer’.

Yes, of course, we should bring those who are bombing and those who are being bombed closer.

Reminds me that in cricket, the act of making much of not doing anything at all is called ‘shouldering arms’.

The ministry of external affairs website tells us that on 14 August 2024, India hosted its 3rd VoGSS: ‘This unique initiative began as an extension of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi’s vision of “Sabka Saath,

Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas aur Sabka Prayas”, and is underpinned by India’s philosophy of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. It envisages bringing together countries of the Global South to share their perspectives and priorities on a common platform across a whole range of issues.’

On 8 May, in a case relating to the living conditions and deportation of Rohingya refugees, the same Indian government told the Supreme Court that it neither recognises the UNHCR-issued refugee cards nor the Rohingyas as refugees since India is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and, therefore, does not extend any refugee protections. Apparently VoGS and its bombast about a global family comes with several terms and conditions attached.

It need hardly be said that India’s non-ratification of the UN Refugee Convention cannot be an excuse to send people into conditions of danger, persecution and Statelessness. Under the principle of ‘non-refoulement’ in customary international law, India is still required to refrain from forcing people to go back to places where they would be at real risk of being subjected to serious human rights violations and abuses. This is additionally a specific legal obligation under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which India is a party.

But why should we care? And what’s stopping us from making grand speeches about the Global South and our shared humanity while acting in blatantly contrary ways? Nothing, and so the charade will carry on. ■

Views are personal

Trump or Modi: whose lies pack more punch?

We might have to wait for the historians to tell us the truth

Yogendra Yadav

Believing what Donald Trump says is never easy. ‘It’s complicated,’ the man’s relationship with the truth. According to *The Washington Post*, during his first term as US President, Trump lied 30,573 times—an impressive average of 21 lies a day. People who know him say his entire life has been one big experiment in falsehood. From the story of his parents’ origins to his business dealings to his relationships with women to politics—no aspect of his life is untouched by lies. When he is caught, it’s like water off a duck’s back. So when Trump claims he stopped India and Pakistan from hurtling towards a nuclear war, you can’t take it with the kind of seriousness one might reserve for a head of state.

Now, our own prime minister isn’t exactly a modern-day Harishchandra. No one has dared to start counting his lies (which Indian newspaper would dare?), but even if someone did, he’d likely have fallen short of Trump’s tally. That man seems to have pledged to never speak the truth. Modi has made no such vow. He is... shall we say, situational. Not exactly a friend of the truth but not its sworn enemy either. If the truth will do the job, great. If not, he has no qualms about leaning on a falsehood. Be it the promise of Rs 15 lakh in every Indian’s bank account, or the claim to double farmers’ incomes, or the alleged benefits of demonetisation, or fudged Covid death figures, or his famous line about “no one has entered Indian territory” in Ladakh—his record speaks volumes. Which is why, his statements cannot be taken at face value either.

To get at the truth of the India–Pakistan ceasefire—who brokered it and on what terms—it simply won’t do to go by the claims of these two gentlemen. We’ll need to probe deeper. After Trump’s early departure from the recent G7 summit in Canada on 16–17 June, skipping, among other commitments, a face-to-face meeting with Modi, the two leaders had a 35-minute phone call on 17 June—Modi in Canada, Trump back in the US. Following the call, India’s ministry of external affairs issued a press statement detailing the conversation. For the first time, India officially denied Trump’s claim of having mediated the truce between India and Pakistan.

The Indian government’s statement read: ‘Prime Minister Modi made it explicitly clear to President Trump that at no point during the entire episode was there any discussion, at any level, on an India–US trade deal or on any US mediation proposal between India and Pakistan. The discussion on halting military operations



Photo: Getty Images

took place directly between the Indian and Pakistani armed forces via existing communication channels, and it began at Pakistan’s request. The prime minister firmly reiterated that India does not and will not accept mediation. There is full political consensus on this in India.’

So, did Trump accept what Modi told him? The Indian statement is silent on this. The US side released no statement about the phone call. What we have from the Indian side is that Trump ‘listened carefully’. As to the effect of listening carefully, what we know is that just a few hours after the call, Trump repeated—for the *thirteenth* time—that he was the one who stopped the India–Pakistan war. The very next day, Trump invited Pakistan’s Army chief Gen. Asim Munir for lunch, where Munir endorsed Trump’s claim and thanked him for securing the ceasefire. Back to square one!

If the ceasefire was truly a bilateral affair between India and Pakistan, why did President Trump announce it first?

Still, the Indian statement isn’t meaningless. Whatever Modi may have said to Trump and whatever Trump may have heard, the statement made one thing clear: no Indian party wants US mediation in India–Pakistan matters. This has been consistent policy for the past six decades, and we can take heart that whatever may have happened in the latest encounter, India is still firm on this pillar of its foreign policy.

The question that still hangs in the air is: who secured the ceasefire between India and Pakistan, and on what terms? The Indian statement does admit that, 24 hours before the ceasefire, US Vice President J.D. Vance had called Modi to discuss the situation. Modi says there was no talk of trade during that call, but what *was* discussed? The statement offers no details.

If the ceasefire was truly a bilateral affair between India and Pakistan, then why did Trump announce it first, rather than India’s or Pakistan’s foreign minister? Modi claims the initiative came from Pakistan—which checks out, given reports that Pakistan’s air force suffered heavy losses on day three of the conflict. But he does not clarify if Pakistan’s request came *through* the US? Was America the go-between? Did the talks start because Washington stepped in?

The statement also dodges Modi’s bold claim in his address to the nation that the ceasefire came only after Pakistan promised “there would be no more terrorist activity or military misadventure from their side”. Who made this promise? To whom? And how will it be enforced? These questions remain unanswered.

It smells fishy alright. Someone is lying; maybe everyone is, and it’s hard to judge whose lie wins. We might have to wait for the historians to tell us the truth. ■



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BBC sandwiched between Jewish and Palestinian pressure groups

Over the years, the *BBC* has faced the wrath of Britain’s influential Jewish lobby, which has accused it of a pro-Palestinian bias in its coverage of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Recently it was forced to withdraw a documentary on the unbearable suffering of the people of Gaza caused by Israel’s invasion after it emerged that the film’s young narrator was related to a senior Hamas leader. For a change, it is the Palestinians who are complaining that the *BBC* is giving Israeli casualties more prominence. A report by the Muslim Council of Britain’s Centre for Media Monitoring has claimed that it has given Israeli deaths up to ‘33 times more coverage than those of Palestinians’. It also accuses the corporation of suppressing allegations of a ‘plausible genocide’ in Gaza and adopting a ‘systematic pattern’ of failing to properly report on Israeli actions. ‘*BBC* presenters actively shut down interviewees’ genocide claims—in over 100 documented instances—despite human rights organisations such as Amnesty International concluding that a genocide is taking place,’ the report said.

The report (‘BBC on Gaza–Israel: One Story, Double Standards’) which analysed over 32,000 broadcast segments and 3,800 online articles claims the *BBC* gave Israeli deaths 33 times more coverage across online articles and 19 times more on TV and radio, when measured on a per-fatality basis. ‘Across the *BBC*’s coverage, a clear dynamic has emerged: the marginalisation of Palestinian suffering and the amplification of Israeli narratives,’ it says. A *BBC* spokeswoman said that it would consider the report despite “some questions” about the apparent reliance on AI to compile it. “Throughout our impartial reporting on the conflict we have made clear the devastating human cost to civilians living in Gaza. We will continue to give careful thought to how we do this,” she said even as the *BBC* reiterated calls for Israel to grant journalists access to Gaza.

..and not just the BBC

The ruling Labour Party too is caught between warring Palestinian and Jewish groups with one accusing its government of complicity in Israel’s “genocidal” actions and the other of “anti-semitism”. And, much of it is down to Prime



LONDON DIARY

HASAN SUROOR



British PM Keir Starmer

Minister Keir Starmer’s own shifting positions on the Gaza war. First, it threw its full weight behind Israel’s post-October 7 retaliation, upholding its right to self-defence. It continued to stick to this line even long after it became clear that Israel had crossed a line—until it suffered a huge Muslim backlash in last year’s general election, costing it more than half a dozen seats. And then in an abrupt U-turn, the government suspended arms export

licences to Israel for use in military operations in Gaza, holding it in breach of international humanitarian law. Recently, it also sanctioned two far-right Israeli ministers—Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich—over “repeated incitements of violence against Palestinian communities” in the occupied West Bank. Result: it’s now facing a backlash from the Jewish community even as Muslims continue to simmer with Labour MPs facing the heat. Luke Charters, who represents York Outer constituency, has alleged that he has become a target for a group of pro-Palestinian activists who, he says, are using increasingly threatening methods, including throwing missiles at him and chanting “Labour, Labour, genocide”. A group protesters also tried to block entry to his constituency surgery. They carried megaphones and posters accusing him of “genocide”.

How Bibi drove his Iran obsession

Former British foreign secretary William Hague has revealed that Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu had been planning to bomb Iran’s nuclear programme for decades and stonewalled all attempts to find a diplomatic solution. ‘In 1998, I sat with Bibi Netanyahu in a London hotel as he explained the alarming details of the missiles being produced by Iran. He left no doubt, even 27 years ago, that he thought the twin nuclear and

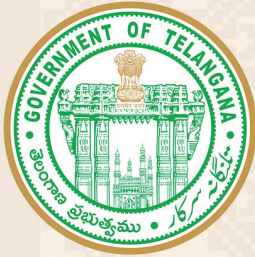
missile programmes of Israel’s sworn enemy could be dealt with only by force. Last week, a combination of circumstances... finally allowed him to launch the attack he has long planned,’ he wrote in *The Times*. He also recalled how in 2013, a proposed nuclear deal with Iran (a precursor to the 2015 agreement) was opposed tooth and nail by Israel. ‘Every day, an Israeli minister would call me to ask that we refuse to do the deal. And every day, I explained why we disagreed,’ he said. Although its efforts failed at the time, it ultimately prevailed on America to withdraw from the agreement. Rest is history.



Mind your phone in London

London has emerged as the ‘phone theft capital’ of Europe amid a sharp rise in incidents of phone-related crime. And iPhones account for an overwhelming majority of the thefts. Last year 80,000 devices were stolen in the capital, up from 64,000 in 2023, costing customers and insurance firms £50 million annually. MPs have accused Apple and Google of ‘dragging their feet’ in fighting mobile phone theft for commercial gain. Both have denied this.

And, finally, a joke about President Donald Trump: “If you asked President Trump to tell you what he thinks about fine china, he’d probably accuse you of siding with Beijing in his trade war.” ■



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Issued By: Special Commissioner, Department of Information & Public Relations, Government of Telangana.

WORLD

A WAR THE US DREADS
History has taught the US to be wary of waging a full-scale war with Iran

► P3



WORLD

DIASPORA DESPERATION
With no jobs back home, Indian workers in the Gulf are still unwilling to leave

► P3



NATION

STATES 360°
In focus this week: UP Punjab, Tamil Nadu

► P4,6



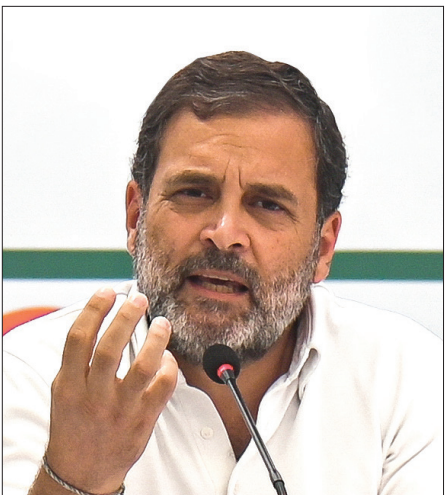
Fixing the voter list or fixing the elections?

Herjinder

The Election Commission of India’s recent invitation to Rahul Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, for a discussion on his objections regarding the Maharashtra assembly elections has triggered a fresh wave of political contention. The Congress party, pushing back against the ECI’s request, has demanded transparency through access to machine-verifiable electoral data and video footage of polling, citing widespread irregularities in voter rolls and polling figures. The confrontation has once again spotlighted growing concerns over the ECI’s neutrality and credibility. An eight-member internal panel of the Congress, called the Empowered Action Group of Leaders and Experts (Eagle), has declined to meet with the Commission unless critical data and surveillance footage are shared beforehand. For context, the ECI in December 2024 changed rules to deny public access to data and documents, which till then were freely available. On 18 June, it issued a circular notifying that CCTV footage at polling booths, strongrooms and counting centres would be destroyed 45 days after the declaration of results, unless election petitions challenging the results are accepted by high courts within that period. (The earlier rule was to retain polling station video footage for a year.)

On 21 June, Rahul Gandhi reacted sharply via a post on X: ‘Voter list? Will not provide in machine-readable format. CCTV footage? Hidden by changing the law. Polling videos and photos? Now to be deleted in 45 days instead of a year. The one meant to provide answers is now deleting the evidence.’ Political analyst Yogendra Yadav added his voice to the growing criticism, saying: ‘Democracy thrives on openness. The ECI’s move to shorten the CCTV footage retention period—from a year to just 45 days—only deepens public suspicion and erodes trust in the electoral process.’ This sequence of events has not only intensified the confrontation between the Congress and the ECI, but also raised broader questions about institutional accountability and the shrinking space for

transparency in India’s democratic machinery. Rahul Gandhi and the Congress party have formally alleged that the 2024 Maharashtra assembly elections were marred by serious irregularities. Their principal charge involves a suspicious spike in the number of registered voters compared to the Lok Sabha elections held just six months earlier. They have drawn attention to the massive net addition of 40 lakh voters (48 lakh new names added and 8 lakh deleted) and an “inexplicable upsurge in polling after 5 p.m. on election day”. (from 58 per cent declared at 5 p.m. on polling day to 66 per cent the next day!) In a detailed letter to the ECI, Praveen Chakravarty, Congress’s head of data analytics, highlighted the anomalies: ‘We had presented data showing an abnormal increase in the total number of new voters enrolled, and votes polled in the assembly compared to the Lok Sabha elections held just six months earlier... Forty lakh new voters were enrolled and 75 lakh additional votes cast in the Vidhan Sabha elections. This represents a 4.3 per cent rise in voter enrolment and a 13 per cent increase in votes



Photos: Getty Images



Voter rolls and surveillance footage are not optional extras, but instruments of accountability, Rahul Gandhi has argued

polled—figures that are significantly out of line with historical trends in Maharashtra.” Rahul Gandhi has raised the pitch of his criticism of the ECI, accusing it of facilitating “vote theft” and demanding access to a “machine-readable, digital copy of the Maharashtra voter lists and video footage from polling day” before agreeing to any dialogue. The Congress party insists that without booth-level Form 20 data and CCTV footage, any conversation with the Commission would be meaningless. For the Opposition, verifiable electoral data is not a formality—it is the basis of electoral legitimacy. On 26 June, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee jumped into the fray. Addressing reporters in the coastal town of Digha in West Bengal’s Purba Medinipur district, she said: “Their [The ECI’s] target is Bengal. The migrant workers and the people of Bengal. The EC’s plan is alarming for democracy.” She was responding to questions on the ECI’s intensive revision of electoral rolls for Bihar, which goes to polls later this

year. Banerjee was suggesting that the voter roll manipulations in Bihar were only a teaser preview of what was to come in Bengal, which goes to polls next year. Rahul Gandhi has repeatedly raised an alarm over the erosion of electoral fairness, calling the 2024 Maharashtra assembly polls symptomatic of “industrial-scale rigging involving the capture of our national institutions”. Voter rolls and surveillance footage are not optional extras, but instruments of accountability, he has argued. “These are meant to strengthen democracy, not [to] be locked away while democracy is undermined.” He has accused the ECI of not merely stonewalling but “actively destroying evidence.” The Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) has echoed these concerns. In a statement to *The Wire*, ADR co-founder Jagdeep Chhokar called the ECI’s repeated claims of transparency “hollow,” noting that the Commission’s refusal to release machine-readable data undermines its credibility.

► Continued on page 2

Violations that went unflagged, unpunished

How budget cuts, undercapacity, regulatory failure and systemic neglect imperil Indian aviation

Aditya Anand

The DGCA, India’s aviation regulator, finds itself in the dock after the tragic crash of Air India flight AI-171 at Ahmedabad on 12 June. It is being accused of treating airlines with kid gloves and not doing enough to enforce its own regulations. The government also appears to be guilty of cutting budgets and not ensuring that critical positions in the DGCA are filled up. The failure to stop encroachment of illegal structures around airports and to enforce height restrictions, now the subject of a PIL before the Supreme Court, is another area that has drawn attention. Between 2018 and 2023, the DGCA published six surveillance reports that exposed a litany of safety violations by different airlines, which had falsified maintenance records, made use of untrained personnel and expired safety equipment, and were guilty of routine breach of aviation norms. Yet, despite these damning findings, no airline was named, no penalties imposed and no systemic reforms mandated. After 2023, the DGCA ceased publishing safety audits and stopped uploading incident reports, further eroding transparency.

Expansion sans regulation

The rapid expansion in the Indian aviation sector—from 66 million passengers

in 2014 to 161 million in 2024—has not been matched with a proportionate expansion in regulatory capacity. Budget cuts have been severe, with the ministry of civil aviation’s capital outlay plunging by 91 per cent in just one year. This has led to critical vacancies, including a 30 per cent shortfall in air traffic controllers—hampering the DGCA’s ability to conduct effective oversight. As per data tabled in Parliament, between 2020 and January 2025, Indian domestic carriers reported 2,461 technical faults, with Indigo Airlines alone accounting for more than half of them. Air India and its subsidiaries reported 389

The DGCA’s approach to audits has been fragmented and reactive, often triggered by incidents rather than proactive risk-based assessments



Photo: Getty Images

faults, including serious safety breaches such as pairing non-qualified crew on international flights. Despite these violations, enforcement has been weak, and budget cuts continue. The DGCA’s approach to audits has been fragmented and reactive, often triggered by incidents rather than proactive risk-based assessments. A glaring example emerged in 2023 when Air India was found to have fabricated internal safety audit reports at

major airports with forged documents signed by unauthorised personnel and no evidence of actual inspections. This scandal, exposed by a whistleblower, not only highlighted airline malpractice but also the DGCA’s inability to detect and prevent such frauds. Calls for reform have grown louder over the years. Aviation safety experts and stakeholders are demanding an independent Civil Aviation Authority

(CAA) with statutory autonomy, enforcement powers and insulation from political and industry influence. Without such structural reforms, audits will remain mere eyewash, unable to restore trust or prevent future tragedies. Building violations galore Between 2020 and 2025, the issue of unauthorised structures in the vicinity of airports and buildings violating height restrictions around Mumbai’s Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport (CSMA) has seen legal action. Numerous buildings exceed the prescribed height limit. This obstructs the flight path of aircraft, posing a hazard during takeoff and landing. This long-standing concern was brought into sharper focus through a PIL filed in 2019 by aviation safety activist Yeshwant Shenoy, who urged the Bombay High Court to direct removal of these hazardous structures. The scale of the problem is staggering. According to data tabled in Parliament, more than 1,800 obstacles—ranging from buildings to mobile towers—were found to violate height restrictions around airports across India, with Mumbai alone accounting for over 400. These encroachments not only compromise the safety of aircraft operations but also pose a direct threat to human life.

► Continued on page 2

Fixing the voter list or...?

» Continued from page 1

He too highlighted the surge in the number of voters in Maharashtra.

One of the more contentious decisions of the ECI has been the amendment of Rule 93 of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961. In December 2024, the ECI modified this rule to significantly restrict public access to CCTV footage from polling stations.

The ECI justified the amendment on grounds of protecting voter privacy and complying with Supreme Court directives related to the secrecy of non-voters. Chhokar of the ADR points out that while privacy is important, it cannot come at the cost of transparency. “The ECI’s responsibility is to strike a balance between privacy and public accountability—not to use privacy as a shield against scrutiny,” he says.

The Maharashtra controversy, now colliding with the build-up to the Bihar elections, underscores a larger crisis of credibility confronting India’s electoral process. The ECI’s unwillingness to seriously engage with the Opposition’s concerns—brushing them off as politically motivated—has only deepened public distrust.

Congress data analyst Praveen Chakravarty summed it up succinctly: “The ECI is not a private corporation—it’s a constitutional body. It owes citizens data-backed clarity, not vague platitudes. If everything is above board, prove it with evidence.”

Democracy activist M.G. Devasahayam, a former Army officer and IAS official, was scathing: “Total

secrecy has become the new trademark of the Election Commission.”

The real worry is not one state or one election. The ECI’s conduct raises fundamental questions about whether it is playing true to its mandate to safeguard India’s electoral process or shielding electoral secrets and misdemeanours or worse from public scrutiny.

The ‘Special Intensive Revision’ of voter rolls in Bihar has triggered a fresh wave of concern. Scheduled just months before the assembly elections due in October/ November this year, the revision exercise is to be conducted through door-to-door enumeration by booth-level officers (BLOs) between 25 June and 26 July—a period when Bihar is typically lashed by monsoon rains. Large swathes of rural Bihar become inaccessible during this time and many districts are already under orange alerts for heavy rainfall. The logistical challenges alone raise questions about the viability and sincerity of this revision process. But the content of the revision exercise raises even deeper alarm.

As per the new guidelines, all voters—new applicants and those enrolled after 2003—must submit a self-attested declaration affirming their Indian citizenship, whether by birth or naturalisation. They are also required to provide supporting documents, including proof of their birth and that of their parents. M.G. Devasahayam put it starkly: “This is essentially asking citizens to prove their citizenship again. Are we now seeing the CAA–NRC being introduced through the back door?”

What happens to those unable to furnish the required documentation? Will their names be struck off the electoral rolls? If so, it could lead to sweeping disenfranchisement, particularly in a state like Bihar where the official birth and death registration is still under 75 per cent.

Chhokar warns against shortcuts: “There’s a legal and well-defined process for removing names from the voter list. How can you bypass the process with a new declaration requirement?”

These changes, though presented as administrative steps to clean up the voter list, have raised suspicions that Bihar could see the same kind of alleged electoral irregularities that the Congress has flagged in Maharashtra.

In a recent op-ed for the *Indian Express*, Rahul Gandhi warns: ‘The match-fixing of Maharashtra will come to Bihar next, and then anywhere the BJP is losing.’

RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav has echoed the sentiment: “The BJP has been exposed... The whole world saw how the Maharashtra elections were won.” ■

Violations went unpunished

» Continued from page 1

In 2017, the DGCA issued demolition orders for 49 identified obstacles—part of a larger list of over 110 structures flagged in surveys conducted by Mumbai International Airport Limited (MIAL) and Airports Authority of India (AAI) between 2010 and 2011. However, enforcement lagged, and many structures remain standing, with some owners filing appeals leading to delays in action.

The Bombay High Court intensified oversight in 2022 and directed the Mumbai suburban district collector to remove unauthorised portions of 48 buildings near the airport. The deputy collector of Kurla reported demolishing seven rooms, reducing heights of mobile antenna towers and removing 19 overhead water tanks from these buildings.

In March 2025, the Bombay HC reiterated the need for swift enforcement and directed the DGCA to expedite decisions on pending appeals and instruct the collector and municipal authorities to ensure removal of illegal structures.

The issue has now reached the Supreme Court, where a PIL seeks urgent intervention. The petitioners argue that the failure of authorities to act expeditiously has created a dangerous environment for civil aviation, especially in densely populated urban centres. The court has sought responses from the DGCA, AAI, and various state governments, signalling the gravity of the issue.

Aviation experts warn that even a single illegal structure in a flight path can have catastrophic consequences, especially during poor visibility or emergency situations. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) mandates obstacle limitation surfaces (OLS) around airports, but enforcement in India has been patchy at best. The lack of coordination between municipal authorities, state governments and aviation regulators has allowed violations to persist unchecked.

Even greenfield projects are compromised

Relatively newer airports too are not immune to this crisis. The Kempegowda International Airport in Bengaluru, a modern greenfield facility, once surrounded by open tracts of land, is witnessing rapid changes. What was once a buffer zone of agricultural land and low-rise housing—to protect air funnels—is being filled with high-rise residential and commercial towers as the city expands northwards.

Driven by population growth, infrastructure

projects, and increasing demand for real estate, the safe perimeter around the airport is shrinking. Urban planners caution that unless zoning controls are strictly enforced, even airports designed with safety buffers will face the same challenges that plague older ones.

Disparities across cities

An analysis of AAI data reveals wide disparities in permissible construction heights near airports. For instance, at a distance of 4 km from the airport, the maximum approved building height in Mumbai is only 17.87 metre—compared to 42.14 metre in Vijayawada. Cities like Ahmedabad and Lucknow show minimal increase in height allowance with distance, while others like Chennai and Bhubaneswar are more generous the farther out one goes.

These inconsistencies complicate compliance and weaken uniform enforcement. “Without a national standardised approach, the responsibility of safeguarding the air funnel is falling through the cracks,” a former AAI official said.

The twin crises of regulatory failure and encroachment demand urgent, systemic reform. The government’s recent decision to set up expert committees and strengthen the Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) is a step in the right direction but falls short of the comprehensive overhaul required.

Recommendations from experts include:

- Establishing an independent Safety Oversight Commission with statutory powers, including enforcement and investigative authority
- Implementing risk-based, integrated audits that cover the entire aviation ecosystem
- Ensuring full transparency by regularly publishing audit and incident reports, and making enforcement actions public
- Strictly enforcing height restrictions around airports, with swift demolition of illegal structures and imposing penalties on violators
- Modernising the DGCA’s manpower, training and digital systems to enable proactive oversight
- Strengthening coordination between aviation regulators, municipal authorities and state governments to prevent and remove encroachments.

The Ahmedabad crash is a tragic reminder that when oversight fails, trust collapses—and lives are lost. ■

Photo: Getty Images



“Better late than never”

*A lawyer and a social worker from New Delhi, **Rajendra Pal Gautam** was a minister in the Aam Aadmi Party government in Delhi from 2015 to 2022, when he resigned after the BJP took offence to a vow he administered to 10,000 newly converted Buddhists. This was the same vow B.R. Ambedkar had taken back in the day—that they would never worship a Hindu god or goddess. The conversion event apparently incensed the BJP, which used it to target then Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal. Gautam quit AAP and cooled his heels for a while, before joining the Congress in 2024. He is a Buddhist activist, runs Mission Jai Bheem and an NGO called ‘Parivartan’. Currently in charge of the SC (scheduled castes) cell of the Congress, Gautam took time off to discuss with Vishwadeepak the twists and turns of his political journey so far. Excerpts:*

Your decision to join the Congress surprised many—they expected you to join the BJP. What made you opt for the Congress? You also waited on the sidelines for three years. So, why Congress?

To save the country.

Isn’t that a little dramatic? What are these threats to the country that you believe the Congress can address?

Social justice is threatened. I agree that in this country people have political power to amass wealth for themselves and enjoy the perks of power. That is why people tend to join parties in power. I reflected on this trend and the damage it has done to the country. During those three years, I did a comparative study before making my decision.

How was the study conducted? What were the findings?

We debated about which political party is right for the country; which party can take the country forward? Which one is really patriotic? We ruled out regional parties because nationally their influence tends to be marginal. A national party thinks of the nation and make plans before deciding on the best course for

implementing them. A national party alone can make its presence felt in Parliament. So, that ruled out regional parties. Then we compared the two national parties, Congress and the BJP.

Modern India stands on the foundation laid by the Congress and Jawaharlal Nehru, aided by other stalwarts, and the scholarship of Dr Ambedkar. Take education for example. Ours was a poor country and yet education was free. Scholarships were provided to SCs, STs, OBCs and the poor to enable them to study engineering, medicine, law and management. They would still be able to save some money out of their scholarship to pay for their clothes.

Now look at the contrast. The country, we are told daily, is soon going to become a \$5 trillion economy. Education, however, has become so prohibitive that not just children from SC, ST, OBC classes, even those from the general category are deprived of good education.

It was the Congress which introduced a Tribal Sub-Plan in the 1970s. The plan was to provide adequate funds in the budget to allow the tribal population to develop. And now? The decision to give land to the landless, nationalisation of banks and making it mandatory for banks to lend to the core sectors and the poor were also implemented by Congress governments. Liberalisation of the economy was ushered in by the Congress and during the Right to Information, Right to Food Security, MNREGA and Right to Education.

In short, the Congress empowered the common man, the poor, the Dalits and the deprived. Besides, the Congress does not spread hatred and communal politics like the BJP. All this helped me arrive at the decision to join the Congress.

The Congress was once criticised for being a party of upper castes. Even today, Ambedkarites complain that SC/ST/OBC/minorities do not have adequate representation in the party. Dalit leaders in the Congress were pilloried as ‘Sarkari Dalits’. So, what has changed?

Everything has changed. The politics of the country has changed. The BJP has changed and so has the Congress. Look at the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Rahul Gandhi. He has been on the move, meeting marginal sections of society, spending time with porters, carpenters, farmers, gig workers, students, bankers and loco staff in the Railways. He is raising their concerns wherever he can and certainly in Parliament. He has actually been on the road for the past several years. BJP leaders used to call him *shehzada* (prince) but they themselves wear suits and shawls that cost millions, expensive glasses, watches; they travel abroad, send

their children abroad to study and yet feel free to mock Rahul Gandhi.

Today, it is Rahul Gandhi alone who is fighting for social justice. The Congress, too, is a different Congress today, and those who have an open mind can see it.

You were a minister in Arvind Kejriwal’s ministry and Kejriwal proudly flaunted only two portraits in his office—one of Ambedkar and the other of Bhagat Singh. Would you say he was less committed to social justice?

Bhagat Singh was an atheist. Now, nobody expected Kejriwal to be an atheist but when he showed that he was completely immersed in just one religion and promoted it, where was the difference between him and the BJP? Kejriwal did put up the portrait of Dr Ambedkar but he put a stop to all the schemes meant for the welfare of SC/ST/minorities and Dalits. Even the schemes initiated by me were shut down—scholarships, the Delhi SC/ST/OBC/Minorities and Handicapped Financial and Development Corporation and the Jai Bhim Mukhyamantri Pratibha Vikas Yojana etc.

You are in charge of the SC cell of the Congress. Dalit loyalties are said to be divided. How difficult is the challenge you face?

Yes, our challenge is to sensitise Dalits about their rights, the importance of a caste census and social justice and how their rights and dignity are being trampled upon. We have to ensure their representation and participation. We have to carry the record of the Congress to them and make them aware of why education and healthcare have become so prohibitive. We are in the process of forming district committees across the country. I agree that we have a lot to do and a lot of ground to cover.

Our challenge is to sensitise Dalits about their rights, about why a caste census matters and to ensure their representation and participation



Let’s focus for a bit on Uttar Pradesh. At least three leaders are wooing the Dalits in the state. Besides the BJP and BSP, Chandrashekhar Azad and Akhilesh Yadav too are busy wooing Dalits. What chance does the Congress have?

Mayawati ji has been a great leader and a good administrator. I have great respect for her. But her era is over. She can no longer identify the concerns of the Dalits, put pressure on the government and get the work done. Only a party serious about the people’s concerns and committed to addressing them will succeed.

As far as Azad is concerned, I am not unduly perturbed by him. Yes, he won a parliamentary election but only time will tell how far he will go, who are behind him and funding him. Some things are now in the public domain and more will be known sooner than later. As for Akhilesh Yadav ji, I think well of him. I once discussed Dalit politics and the concerns of Dalits with him for two hours. But when it comes to implementation of ideas, he tends to slip. He also tends to ride in two boats at the same time. This may have worked earlier but not any longer.

How do you deal with the BJP, which claims it has already accepted the caste census? The prime minister, of course, never tires of reminding people that he belongs to the OBC. The BJP also makes claims about adequate representation in the party to SCs/ STs/ OBCs...

Modiji is a puppet playing a script given to him by someone else. What’s more,

he must tell people what he has done for the OBCs. In Madhya Pradesh, the BJP has been in power for 20 years, but while the OBC population in the state is 56 per cent, OBC reservation is only 17 per cent. The OBC Mahasabha is tired of protesting, but cannot get a response from him.

In Uttar Pradesh too, the situation is similar. Out of 68,000 posts in the government reserved for OBCs and Dalits, these people have usurped 8,000 posts. The youth from OBC/SC/ST communities in the state have been agitating for the past two years and yet the ‘OBC PM’ cannot hear their cries?

One last question about Dalit votes in poll-bound Bihar. Rahul Gandhi has visited the state six times this year and the Congress has installed a Dalit as state president. But Dalit votes in the state are said to be divided among various other parties. Where do you think the Congress stands in the state?

We can see positive vibes among Dalits for both Rahul ji and the Congress. Once they are convinced that the Congress will be part of a ruling coalition in the state, we believe, it will not take long for them to join us. Our effort is to connect with every section of Dalits and give them responsibilities. They must feel they are partners in our journey. A lot of work is going on and I must admit that if the Congress had done this 20 years ago, it would never have gone out of power. But better late than never! ■

Why the US still fears a full-scale war with Iran

History cautions that a war with Iran may begin on America’s terms but it will not end on those terms

Ashok Swain

The spectre of a US–Iran war has long hovered over the Middle East, occasionally erupting in tanker attacks, assassinations, dramatic standoffs in the Strait of Hormuz or covert sabotage. In June 2025, that spectre edged uncomfortably close to reality, before retreating behind the blurry lines of a ceasefire.

It’s an uneasy truce, brokered under intense pressure from Washington. Masoud Pezeshkian, the Iranian President, claimed a “historic victory” while Israeli defence minister Katz said Israel “will respect the ceasefire—as long as the other side does”.

Meanwhile, Trump faced a fierce backlash back home. While the Democrat-led push to impeach him for ordering the airstrike on Iran without Congressional approval failed, the political spectacle underscores how divided the US is over risking a war that could spiral into the region’s most dangerous conflict in a generation.

Why does Washington, despite its unrivalled military might, recoil from taking this confrontation to ‘the logical conclusion’—a regime change or total defeat of Iran’s military capability?

The answer lies in a tangled history spanning 70 years and an enduring lesson: Iran has never been an easy enemy to conquer or control, and the cost of trying to do so has always been judged too high.

In 1953, when the CIA and MI6 orchestrated the overthrow of democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh—who wanted to nationalise the Iranian oil industry and was feared to be pulling towards the Soviet Union—to restore the Shah to power, Washington planted the seeds of deep Iranian suspicion and resentment.

That resentment exploded in late 1979 when students stormed the US embassy in Tehran and kept 52 Americans hostage for 444 days. President Jimmy Carter, already weakened by the Shah’s fall, watched his presidency disintegrate under the weight of the crisis and a failed rescue mission that left helicopters burning in the Iranian desert.

This episode left a scar on America’s foreign policy establishment, which has been wary ever since of the use of brute force in the context of Iran. US presidents have threatened, sanctioned, bombed by proxy but rarely dared a full-scale invasion.

George W. Bush, who was the US President during and after 9/11, had famously labelled Iran a part of the ‘Axis of Evil’. His administration toppled regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq with breathtaking



Iranians celebrate ceasefire with the US and Israel after a 12-day war, Tehran, 24 June 2025; (below) Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian

speed. Many hawks in his circle believed Tehran would be next. But the insurgency in Iraq had already claimed thousands of American lives and cost billions of dollars, and the same advisors warned that a war with Iran—a country three times the size of Iraq, crisscrossed by mountains, capable of mobilising not just its own forces but a web of loyal militias from Lebanon to Yemen—would be far worse.

This sobering reality only grew clearer in the Obama years. Faced with intelligence reports that Iran was advancing its nuclear-enrichment capabilities, Barack Obama chose the path of diplomacy instead of bombing. His critics called the Iran nuclear deal naïve, but for Obama, the alternative was a military operation, which might have set back Iran’s programme but couldn’t possibly destroy it, and almost certainly would have forced America into a war involving ground troops.

Trump, during his first term, took the



Iran’s leaders play the game expertly: enough provocation to inflict pain and raise costs, but not enough to justify an invasion

opposite approach. He tore up the nuclear agreement, doubled down on ‘maximum pressure’ sanctions and ordered audacious strikes, including the 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani, Iran’s most powerful general. Yet even Trump, faced with Iran’s retaliatory missile barrage that injured dozens of US troops, stopped short of launching a sustained bombing campaign or committing to a ground invasion.

This time round, Trump edged closer to a direct conflict, yet the same caution reigns once again. American airpower bombed Iranian nuclear sites, struck Iranian command nodes and proxy bases to back Israel and deter a broader missile war in the Gulf. But the US still shunned a massive ground commitment that could ignite an oil crisis and plunge the fragile global economy into recession.

After Iran launched missile attacks on the US military base in Qatar, Trump’s unusual public “thanks” to Iran for providing advance warning signalled what both sides understood: neither truly wanted to open the gates of hell.

Iran, on its part, has demonstrated again why it is so difficult to confront decisively, given its geography, nationalism and the asymmetric arsenal of proxies. Its Revolutionary Guard Corps cannot match America’s conventional firepower but can bleed it slowly through militias in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Syria and beyond. A full-scale war risks ensnaring Gulf monarchies, closing the Strait of Hormuz, and sending oil prices soaring.

The nuclear question remains the ultimate nightmare. Even after the strikes on three suspected nuclear sites, one can safely assume Iran’s programme has not been destroyed for good. Tehran could rebuild deeper underground or make a dash for a bomb—the scenario Washington dreads. For now, an uneasy ceasefire holds, as Iran signals its openness to ‘resolve issues’ with Washington and Israel pledges restraint if Iran does the same. The pattern is familiar: forceful blows and sabre-rattling, calibrated to stop short of a regime-toppling invasion. Iran’s leaders play the game expertly: enough provocation to inflict pain and raise costs, but not enough to justify an invasion that America has learned painfully it does not want.

If history teaches anything about the US–Iran standoff, it is this: overthrowing regimes can be swift, but stabilising what follows drains generations. From the Shah’s fall to the hostage crisis, from the insurgencies in Baghdad to today’s ceasefire, the pattern repeats. America can punish Iran but will not find victory worth the price of conquest.

The recent airstrikes, missile attacks and sudden truce have breached lines once considered unthinkable. Yet inside the White House and the Pentagon, the same cold truth shapes every move towards a strike or ceasefire—a war with Iran might begin on America’s terms but it will not end on those terms. It will end with oil tankers burning, embassies being stormed, prices spiking and US troops slogging and perishing in terrain that has humbled empires for centuries. ■

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Uneasy and anxious in the Gulf

As tensions simmer in the region, the Indian diaspora waits and worries—with many still reluctant to leave

Rashme Sehgal

The 12-day war in the Middle East has come as a rude shock to expats in the region. Nearly nine million Indians work and live there—making up the backbone of labour forces in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar. With US military bases dotting the region, and Iran’s symbolic but audacious strike at the largest US base in Qatar, their sense of security too has taken a hit. Despite the US-brokered ceasefire, the situation remains volatile and anxiety levels are high. Few, if any, are betting on lasting peace.

Rumours of spies masquerading as tourists have added to their worries. Unconfirmed, unverified reports of several Indians rounded up in Iran and Qatar on suspicion of spying added to the uneasiness of the diaspora. Such reports or rumours, they fear, may increase the level of distrust and affect India’s image—and by extension, their standing. “If Iran can attack US bases in Qatar, they can also attack other US bases in the Middle East. There is a lot of warmongering going on in this neighbourhood,” says a project engineer from Andhra Pradesh.

His sentiment is shared by others and the unease is palpable on the ground. A young techie working in Kuwait says, “It is like sitting on a live volcano. It can erupt at any moment. Our families are extremely concerned. The father of one of my colleagues is insisting he return to India. There is of course no question of giving up our jobs. What will we do back home?”

India managed to evacuate over 3,000 people from Iran and Jordan under Operation Sindhu. This barely scratches the surface. The estimated number of Indian expats in the Gulf states ranges between seven to nine million. The UAE alone boasts of a population of eight million with local Emiratis accounting for a bare

one million and the rest from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other countries.

Talmeez Ahmed, a former Indian ambassador to Saudi Arabia, says, “People’s apprehensions are understandable. The earlier regional conflicts such as the Iran–Iraq war and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, were contained geographically. Even in 2018–19, when oil tankers were attacked, it was feared this would develop into a regional crisis. But Iranians displayed strategic restraint and retreated.”

While there is a sense of relief over the suspension of hostilities, the diaspora is disappointed at the Indian government’s role in brokering peace. It is in India’s interest to ensure stability and peace in the region, especially because it enjoys good relations with the US, Israel as well as Iran.

India’s backing of Israel has meant the undoing of decades of diplomatic efforts and

the alienation of an old friend like Iran.

This lack of clarity does not bode well for the large Indian diaspora who believe pursuing an autonomous policy in world politics would have served India’s interests more. Narendra Modi, they say, could have played a more meaningful role in the conflict given that he enjoys good relations with all the countries involved in hostilities. Did India miss an opportunity to position itself as a peacemaker in the region?

Ambassador Ahmed believes there was no need for the US to get involved. Once the US attacked Iran, the latter was left with no option but to retaliate, he says. Targeting American assets in the region became legitimate and it complicated the peace process. “It is obvious the Americans did not think it through,” he says. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have both protested against Iran’s attacks at Doha, and Saudi Arabia is reportedly seeking US help to develop or station nuclear weapons as a deterrent to future interventions.

Indian expats in the Middle East remitted over \$125 billion in 2023–24, and this is increasing annually. An Indian rice exporter to the UAE, living in Dubai for the past two decades, said, “The working environment here is any day better than in India but the present uncertainty does not bode well for us.” A large number of Indians own property in Dubai and the number of rich Indians shifting to Dubai to live and work is also increasing.

The situation in Israel however, is completely different. Following the attack by Hamas on 7 October 2023, Israel recruited several thousand construction workers from India to replace Palestinian workers. Estimates vary but the number of such workers largely from Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh and Delhi is anywhere between 11,000 and 18,000.

A former Indian diplomat says, “It was clear after the Hamas attack that the



Indian workers in Qatar

situation would get worse. Indian workers in Israel are reportedly being paid far less than the Palestinians and made to work longer. Sending them was always a putting them in danger, and yet the Haryana and UP governments actually encouraged and lured them with the jobs.”

With Iran having inflicted severe damage in Haifa, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, their future is now uncertain. The conflict also generated unconfirmed reports that the workers were ill-treated and prevented from taking shelter in bunkers. While it is difficult to ascertain the truth, some videos did do the rounds showing Indians being asked to return to India.

Raju Nishad, working in Tel Aviv, admits that the last few weeks have been

quite harrowing. He, however, dismisses reports of ill-treatment. “We earn three times more in Israel than what we would in India,” he says. With military censorship in place, none of them are willing to speak out against the Israeli authorities.

While these construction workers have no plans to move out, as many as 300 students, caregivers and techies opted to take the land route via Jordan or Egypt to return to India. Some 35,000 Indian nationals are currently living in Israel. With jobs hard to get back home, Indians are unlikely to be deterred from venturing into conflict zones.

What is of utmost concern is whether the Indian authorities are doing enough to take care of their interests. ■

India’s backing of Israel has meant the undoing of decades of diplomatic efforts and the alienation of an old friend like Iran

More brinkmanship over the Indus

With India unilaterally suspending the IWT and China threatening to alter flow in India’s rivers, the war over water is heating up

Pankaj Chaturvedi

India’s suspension of the Indus Water Treaty with Pakistan in the aftermath of the 22 April terror attack in Pahalgam marked a sharp shift in the relations between the two neighbours. The recent declaration by Union home minister Amit Shah, in an interview to *The Indian Express*, that not a drop of Indus water will flow into Pakistan only signals further aggravation. Calling Pakistan’s share under the 1960 treaty ‘unjust’, Shah said India would re-route water from the Indus to internal regions like Rajasthan through new canals. Expectedly, the response from across the border was swift and sharp. Former Pakistan foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto—who led a Pakistani delegation to counter India’s diplomatic outreach on Operation Sindoor—threatened retaliation and warned that if the treaty was not restored, Pakistan would “seize all six rivers”. At a public rally, he said, “India has only two options: agree to the Indus Water Treaty, or Pakistan will wage another war.”

While such rhetoric may not be new, this time something feels different. This isn’t just about water anymore. It’s about power, pride and a world that’s slowly slipping away from the rule of law into one where might is right.

India clearly does not seem unduly perturbed by clauses in the ‘treaty’, which allows for international arbitration in case of disputes. The IWT is one of the few sustained cooperative mechanisms between the two countries, surviving multiple wars, and a disruption represents a strategic departure from rule-based diplomacy. The impact is being felt on the ground. Reports in the media claim that the water flow to Pakistan has been slashed by nearly 20 per cent and dams in Pakistan are hitting ‘dead levels’, causing unrest among the people as uncertainty looms large over the sowing of the kharif crop. According to media, the latest ‘Daily Water Situation’ report by the Indus River System Authority (IRSA) indicates that the total water released to Sindh province on 16 June 2025 was 1.33 lakh cusecs as against 1.6 lakh cusecs on the same day last year—a drop of 16.9 per cent. The water released to Punjab the same day was marginally less—1.26 lakh cusecs against 1.29 lakh last year.

Global context

India’s act cannot and should not be seen in isolation. Other countries too are ignoring well established international rules. Israel and the United States are thumbing down global norms and dismissing treaties despite all-round criticism. This ‘might is right’ doctrine, being ushered in globally, however, is fraught with uncertainties and risks, the most dangerous of which is allowing stronger and more powerful countries to dictate terms. China has not only declared that it stands by Pakistan in its conflict with India, but also indicated that if India were to choke Pakistan, China might do the same to India. With several glacial rivers, originating from Tibet, it cannot be a comforting thought for the policymakers in India. Water wars are getting more real and up close.

Almost 80-90 per cent of Pakistan’s agriculture is dependent on the Indus water. While India can afford to gloat for the moment, it can hardly lose sight of the fact that it too can be hit by water shortage in the near future. The Indus originates from a glacier named Seng Khabab, near Mansarovar lake and Mount Kailash in Tibet, and flows through Ladakh before entering Pakistan via Jammu and Kashmir. The Sutlej too originates from Longchen Khabab glacier near Rakshastal in Tibet, enters India near Shipki-La pass in Himachal Pradesh, then

Photo: Getty Images



The Indus river in Ladakh

flows through Punjab before merging with the Indus in Pakistan. Geospatial researcher and former NASA station manager, Y. Nityanand, has studied the data regarding water flow received from satellites and claims that Sutlej water coming to India has reduced by over 75 per cent in the last five years—from 8,000 giga litres to 2,000 giga litres. He is on record saying China is controlling the water flow, and if this trend continues, India could be the first to face the water shortage. The mighty Brahmaputra, the lifeline of the northeastern states, also originates in Tibet where it is called Yarlung Tsangpo. China is currently building a 60,000 MW Medong dam on the river’s Great Bend near its border with India. This could potentially allow China to tamper with the flow of rivers like Brahmaputra and Teesta, increasing the risk of floods or drought downstream. Nilanjan Ghosh, economist and vice-president at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), who has studied the Tsangpo-Brahmaputra river system for almost two decades, however believes that

any attempt to divert the flow will be counterproductive because it will lead to sediment deposit upstream, causing floods in the upper stream. He argues that the Yarlung Tsangpo contributes only 10-15 per cent of the total Brahmaputra water, the rest drawn from rain and the tributaries, making the Brahmaputra grow massively within India. The argument still does not address the ability of China, the upper riparian state, to switch the tap off and on. China can arguably manipulate not just the Brahmaputra but also the Siang river in Arunachal Pradesh, which also originates from Tamlung Tso lake located southeast of Mount Kailash and Mansarovar. In Tibet, it is called Yarlung Tsangpo and after entering India, is known as Siang or Dihang. After travelling a distance of about 230 kilometre, it joins Lohit and then Dibang in Arunachal before merging with the Brahmaputra. China and India too have agreements to share hydrological data. If China cites India’s approach to Pakistan to justify its actions, it is looking at a piquant situation. During the Doklam standoff in 2017, India

experienced first hand the consequences of China withholding hydrological data, leaving India data-blind during floods. **Ecological fallout** Big dams being built by the Chinese can also potentially reduce the natural flow of silt and nutrients, important for making the agricultural land of the lower areas fertile. Lack of such silt can reduce agricultural productivity and damage the ecosystem of the river. The geologically sensitive Himalayan region from Jammu and Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh, prone to earthquakes, is also bearing the brunt of ‘development’, and the future looks unpredictable due to climate change. Another element of uncertainty is now added by the new doctrine. The IWT was more than just a water-sharing agreement; it was a rare bridge of cooperation in a region otherwise marked by hostility. Its breakdown sends a stark message: the world order, as we know it, is fraying, and without checks, water may soon become not just a resource, but a trigger for conflict. ■

During the Doklam standoff in 2017, India experienced first hand the consequences of China withholding hydrological data

STATES 360° UTTAR PRADESH

Graft in Yogi’s ‘zero tolerance’ land

Mini Bandopadhyay

Chief minister Yogi Adityanath has a penchant for making a point about his administration’s ‘zero tolerance’ for corruption. He has repeated it enough to convince people that he means it. His ministers and officials too miss no opportunity to mention this. The image of an incorruptible administration has also been boosted by reports in the media, notwithstanding widespread suspicion to the contrary. Recent developments have begun to dent this image, even among fans of Yogi’s bulldozing ways of enforcing law and order. The latest controversy centres on a leaked letter from the Union finance ministry to the Lok Ayukta requesting an inquiry into corruption in the state’s information department. The ‘leaked’ letter was aired on the YouTub channel of a journalist once considered close to the Yogi Adityanath camp. A retired deputy director of the department endorsing the irregularities has lent it further credibility. The corruption allegations assume significance as the information department is under the supervision of the chief minister’s office. While the request for the Lok Ayukta inquiry was made in March 2025, there is no word yet on the progress, if any.

If the deputy director, who retired in August 2024, is to be taken at face value, the department’s annual budget has grown to Rs 3,600 crore during the last eight years, up from Rs 25 crore in 2000. No journalist or media is willing to comment on the department and its working. The retired deputy director has alleged that commissions—for advertisements in newspapers and TV, and publicity events—had become the norm. Much of the work of the department, he said, had been outsourced with decisions made by a tight knit coterie.

The other talking point is the allegations being made by some state ministers against their own

department officers regarding transfers and postings. At least four ministers have spoken of hundreds of officials in their departments transferred between 15 May and 15 June 2025, due to ‘extraneous considerations’. The transfers, they claimed, involved bribes running into several hundred crores. The ministers in charge of stamp and registration, medical and health, animal husbandry and basic education have openly talked about this. Significantly, the CM has cancelled 1,000 such transfers and ordered an inquiry. Opposition leaders have seized the opportunity. “There is no government in the state,” said Samajwadi Party chief and former chief minister Akhilesh Yadav. It is a money-making racket, he said, adding that government departments had become a “marketplace” with rates fixed for everything, not just desired transfers. Bahujan Samaj Party chairman Mayawati too expressed concern and demanded an independent SIT to look into the ‘corruption disguised as corruption’. In a strongly-worded statement, she advised the CM to take ‘stern and stringent’ action to protect the government’s integrity. A retired chief secretary, said to be

close to Ghanshyam Yadav, described it as “a symptom of a larger malaise”. Transfer and posting of government employees at all levels is now a full-fledged industry in UP, he said. Adding to the discomfort of the government is a recent two-part documentary by *BBC* Hindi challenging the UP government’s claim that only 32 pilgrims died in the 29 January stampede during the ‘Mahakumbh Mela’. The *BBC* journalist identified and visited the homes of next of kin of at least 82 pilgrims from seven states who died in the stampede. While some of them received cash compensation ranging from Rs 10 lakh to Rs 25 lakh, others did not get anything from the UP government. If this was not bad enough, a departmental inquiry by Prayagraj divisional commissioner found that 42 per cent of the roads built for the Mahakumbh in and around Prayagraj were structurally poor and below par. Even the support infrastructure developed with the massive budget for the event has begun to crumble barely five months later, the inquiry has found. There is unrest within the state BJP too. While some legislators express frustration in private conversations, others hint to a conspiracy to discredit Yogi by “powerful people” in New Delhi. Neatly sidestepping the question of governing corruption, they question the manner in which the *BBC* documentary got such precise information and hint at the involvement of intelligence agencies. Meanwhile, as allegations mount, the state government has maintained a studied silence on the *BBC* documentary and the information department. But the ‘transfer scandal’ and the ‘infrastructure scam’ have surfaced from the government itself which Yogi may find hard to overlook, especially with panchayat and urban local body elections drawing closer and the assembly election scheduled in 2027. ■



Yogi Adityanath

MINI BANDOPADHYAY is an independent journalist based in New Delhi

Moral policing in Punjab

Herjinder

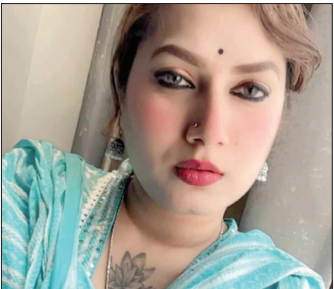
The murder of social media influencer Kanchan Kumari—known to her 4.5 lakh followers as Kamal Kaur ‘Bhabhi’—has turned the spotlight on moral policing in Punjab. Kanchan Kumari was an unapologetic presence on the internet, known for her bold videos, outspoken commentary and adult content. Her posts did raise eyebrows in some quarters but never crossed a legal line—there were no formal complaints, no FIRs and certainly no court gags. Yet, she was brutally murdered on the night of 9-10 June. Punjab Police said Amritpal Singh Mehron, a self-styled radical preacher who found Kanchan’s content ‘immoral’, was the mastermind. Mehron allegedly lured her to Bathinda on the pretext of a promotional shoot. Hours later, he boarded a flight to the UAE from Amritsar. Mehron isn’t just any fringe actor. He leads a vigilante group ‘Qaum De Rakhe’ (Protectors of the Community), which sees itself as Punjab’s moral police, judge and jury, deciding who deserves to live based on their own warped code. While two of his associates, Jaspreet Singh and Nimratjeet Singh, have been arrested, Mehron remains at large.

What followed in the aftermath of the murder is equally revealing. When Kanchan’s body was handed over to her family, no government or private ambulance was willing to offer transport to the crematorium. It was left to Sahara Jan Seva, an NGO that cremates unclaimed bodies, to step in. At the crematorium, her three grieving family members stood alone; not one friend from the digital world, not one from her social circle. No influencer solidarity. No public mourning from the crowd that once made her videos viral. For someone who had lakhs of followers, it was a very lonely final journey.

Kanchan’s story holds a mirror to a society caught between rising radicalism and a warped sense of public morality and justice. The tragedy is made worse by many trying to justify the killing in the name of ‘culture’ and ‘values’. Disturbingly, a wave of support rose for the absconding Mehron from several quarters—religious, political and digital—all offering twisted justification by calling Kanchan’s content “vulgar and immoral”. Leading the charge was Malkiat Singh, the head granthi of the Golden Temple. In a public statement, he defended Mehron’s actions, claiming the victim had “adopted a Sikh name to tarnish

the community’s image”. “Such treatment is deserved. Nothing wrong has happened,” he said. His sentiments were echoed by the acting jathedar of the Akal Takht and the general secretary of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee. Sarabjit Singh Khalsa, MP from Ferozpur, even promised to raise the issue in Parliament to address the “cultural insult” by Kanchan. Flex boards featuring Mehron appeared across Ludhiana, portraying him as ‘*Qaum da heera*’ (Jewel of the Community) and ‘*Tazantia de rakhe*’ (Protector of Honour), transforming a murder accused into a local hero. On social media, the narrative grew darker. Fringe groups and radical outfits launched congratulatory hashtags and celebratory posters. Some influencers from Punjab and Haryana jumped into the fray, releasing videos supporting the murder and warning other “immoral elements” to watch out. Mehron soon surfaced online with two videos, taking full responsibility for the murder and portraying it as a message to those posting “vulgar” content. His rhetoric even found an echo across the border with Pakistan-based gangster Shahzad Bhatti releasing a video praising Mehron and calling him a “brave lion”. Mehron and his associates claim to be

Nihangs—members of a traditional Sikh warrior order—but are not affiliated with any established Nihang *jathebandi* (sect). The largest and most influential of these, the Baba Buddha Dal, distanced itself from the act with its chief Baba Balbir Singh saying, “A true Sikh never attacks an unarmed person, especially a woman.” Equally disturbing is the silence of the state’s mainstream political leadership. Political analyst Prof. Harjeshwar Pal Singh sums it up: “Whenever it comes to speaking out against radical fringe groups, the politicians turn silent. Had there been an opportunity to align with them, they’d have shown up in full force.” The Punjab State Commission for Women chairperson Raj Lali Gill initially issued a statement condemning the killing, but soon changed her tone to suggest that it was the “primary responsibility” of women influencers to ensure their content didn’t violate the “social and moral fabric” of society. The Punjab government on its part suspended 106 social media accounts, declaring them “objectionable”. Meanwhile, no similar action is being taken against accounts justifying the murder or glorifying Mehron. The question that begs an answer is: whose values are we really defending? ■



Kanchan Kumari

A new name, a renewed dream: Bengaluru South takes shape

From Sholay hills to startup corridors: the evolution of Bengaluru South

“In 10 Years, Bengaluru South won’t just be a name. It will be a destination,” Deputy Chief Minister, D K Shivakumar says.



As Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar eloquently put it, “Now, all official documents will reflect the name Bengaluru South, and I expect everyone to start using it.” This call to action invites citizens, officials, and stakeholders to be part of a collective journey towards development, unity, and progress.

The Karnataka government’s decision on May 22 to rename Ramanagara district as Bengaluru South marks a transformative chapter in the region’s history. This visionary move, spearheaded by Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar, embodies a commitment to preserving Bengaluru’s identity, fostering regional growth, and reclaiming a shared heritage that stretches back decades.

A Strategic Renaming Rooted in History

Ramanagara, a district known for its scenic landscapes, vibrant communities, and rich cultural tapestry, was originally carved out of the expansive Bengaluru Rural district in 2007. The renaming decision is more than a mere change of nomenclature—it is a restoration of a historical connection that was gradually diluted through administrative realignments over the years.

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar, a son of Ramanagara himself, has long advocated for this change. Emphasizing the importance of reflecting Bengaluru’s ever-expanding metropolitan spirit, he states, “Today, the entire cabinet discussed this legally. I’m very happy to announce that Ramanagara district, which was once part of the larger Bengaluru district, will now officially be known as Bengaluru South. The headquarters will remain in Ramanagara, and administratively, it will function as Bengaluru South district. This region spans from 30 to 100 kilometres from the city.”

This announcement signals the government’s intent to weave Ramanagara and its surrounding taluks — Magadi, Kanakapura, Channapatna, and Harohalli — more integrally into the fabric of Bengaluru’s identity.

The move underscores the district’s strategic significance, both geographically and socioeconomically.

No Extra Cost, Just More Recognition

Opponents argued the renaming could confuse records or burden the treasury. Shivakumar, however, dismissed such claims, emphasizing that: There will be no financial implications. The change was conducted within state legal jurisdiction Land records, postal addresses, and official documentation will transition smoothly.

He confidently reassured, “There will be no financial implications.” Minister for Law and Parliamentary Affairs HK Patil also weighed in, clarifying the legal framework: “This was done in 2007 too, when Ramanagara was created out of Bengaluru Rural without Centre’s clearance. We followed the same legal precedent.”

This historical precedent bolsters the state government’s position and underlines the legal soundness of the renaming process.

Legal and Administrative Clarity

The renaming, though ambitious, is firmly grounded in the legal powers of the state government. Shivakumar clarifies, “The cabinet has reviewed the legal aspects, and the notification will be issued soon.” He further emphasized Karnataka’s sovereign administrative powers by asserting, “The State Government has the power to rename any district, and we will go ahead with the decision to rename the district as it was the wish of the people there.” By ensuring that the process respects both administrative protocols and fiscal responsibility, the state government demonstrates transparency and foresight.

A Vision for Development and Enhanced Recognition

Beyond symbolic significance, the renaming carries tangible benefits for the people and economy of the district. DK Shivakumar envisions the designation “Bengaluru South” as a gateway to greater recognition and development, “In 10 years, Bengaluru South won’t just be a name. It will be a destination.” He elaborates, “Renaming it Bengaluru South gives the region the identity it deserves—as a vital extension of Bengaluru’s social, economic, and urban ecosystem.” With the Bengaluru metropolitan area rapidly expanding, the renaming can catalyze increased investment, infrastructure development, and improved governance. Businesses, investors, and tourists alike will better associate the region with Bengaluru’s dynamism and growth trajectory.

Shivakumar also reflects on the district’s historical ties with the capital city: “Earlier, all these taluks — Hoskote, Devanahalli, Doddaballapura, Ramanagara, Kanakapura, Magadi — were part of the larger Bengaluru district. I myself served as president of the Bangalore Rural Zilla Panchayat. This is a matter of restoring that historical identity.”

Administrative Efficiency and Continuity

An important aspect of the renaming is administrative continuity. Ramanagara will remain the district headquarters, ensuring that governance structures, local administration, and public services continue without disruption. Deputy Chief Minister Shivakumar reassures, “The headquarters will remain in Ramanagara, and administratively, it will function as Bengaluru South district. There will be no financial burden on the government from this decision.” Moreover, all official documents, land records, and government correspondences will be updated to reflect the new district name, aligning public services with the

region’s refreshed identity. This seamless integration is critical to building trust and acceptance among citizens.

The Broader Urban and Regional Context

Karnataka’s capital region is experiencing rapid urbanization, and the renaming aligns with broader developmental plans. Alongside the district renaming, the state cabinet has approved crucial infrastructure projects, including the second phase of the Namma Metro and a comprehensive overhaul of Bengaluru’s waste management system. These initiatives, combined with the administrative rebranding, pave the way for a sustainable and inclusive future for Bengaluru South. The improved connectivity through the metro expansion will enhance mobility for residents, reduce traffic congestion, and promote economic opportunities. Meanwhile, upgraded waste management infrastructure reflects the government’s commitment to environmental sustainability and public health.

Overcoming Challenges and Political Dynamics

The road to renaming was not without obstacles. Earlier, the Union Home Ministry rejected the state’s proposal without clear justification, prompting debates within political circles. The disagreement between Deputy CM Shivakumar and former Chief



Minister HD Kumaraswamy highlighted the complexity of intergovernmental coordination. Despite these challenges, Karnataka’s leadership remains united in pursuing the renaming. The state cabinet’s reaffirmation of the decision demonstrates political will and consensus to prioritize regional aspirations over partisan differences.

Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister HK Patil has also weighed in, reinforcing the decision’s legitimacy: “Land records, postal addresses, and official documentation will transition smoothly.”

Community Response and Cultural Resonance

While some residents have questioned what concrete changes the renaming will bring, many view it as a source of pride and recognition. The name Bengaluru South resonates with the district’s history and its relationship with the bustling metropolis next door. This sentiment is particularly strong among local businesses, entrepreneurs, and young professionals who see Bengaluru South as a gateway to greater opportunities. The renaming thus acts as a catalyst for renewed optimism and community engagement, inspiring citizens to contribute to the region’s growth.

A Future-Focused Identity

The renaming of Ramanagara to Bengaluru South is more than an administrative change—it is a declaration of identity and ambition. It signals Karnataka’s readiness to embrace the future while honoring its past, reflecting the evolving dynamics of one of India’s most vibrant regions. As Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar eloquently put it, “Now, all official documents will reflect the name Bengaluru South, and I expect everyone to start using it.” This call to action invites citizens, officials, and stakeholders to be part of a collective journey towards development, unity, and progress. The transition from Ramanagara to Bengaluru South represents a pivotal moment in Karnataka’s administrative landscape. Driven by historical insight, legal authority, and developmental foresight, this renaming promises to usher in a new era of regional pride, infrastructural growth, and socio-economic dynamism. With strong leadership, clear vision, and community support, Bengaluru South is poised to emerge as a beacon of Karnataka’s continued progress — a district that honors its roots while reaching boldly into the future.

Bengaluru South: A District of Distinct Taluks and Shared Potential

With its new identity, Bengaluru South district will encompass five key taluks:

- Ramanagara (Headquarters remains unchanged)
- Kanakapura
- Magadi
- Channapatna
- Harohalli

Each of these regions brings a unique strength to the district:

- Kanakapura is rapidly emerging as a hub for residential development and green tourism.
- Channapatna, known as the “Toy Town of India,” carries a centuries-old legacy of craftsmanship.
- Magadi is steeped in historical and ecological richness, offering untapped cultural tourism potential.
- By bringing these taluks under the Bengaluru brand, the Karnataka government envisions a cohesive developmental strategy—one that leverages their individual identities while aligning with Bengaluru’s metropolitan aspirations.

Bengaluru South: Karnataka’s Bold Step Toward Smarter Urban Expansion

What Happens Now? With the Karnataka Government’s official notification, Ramanagara is now Bengaluru South—a name that will be reflected across:

- All government communications
- Property and land registration
- Civic amenities, taxation, and public services
- Educational and legal documentation

Looking Ahead: A Vision Beyond Semantics This renaming is far more than an administrative adjustment—it’s a forward-looking strategy to reshape the trajectory of Karnataka’s development. As Bengaluru grapples with population growth and infrastructural stress, the elevation of its southern neighbor signals a smart redistribution of urban momentum. **Strategically positioned, Bengaluru South is primed to:**

- Absorb urban spillover through affordable housing
- Ease congestion in core city zones
- Emerge as a thriving economic extension of the state capital

With the right planning and policy backing, Bengaluru South can:

- Accelerate infrastructure investment
- Foster employment and innovation hubs
- Promote sustainable urban-rural integration

From Ramanagara to Bengaluru South: An Organic Transition

Just 50 kilometers from Bengaluru, Ramanagara has long served as a gateway between the city and Karnataka’s heartland. Famous for its cinematic backdrop in Sholay and dramatic granite outcrops, it has symbolized both rural charm and urban proximity. Yet, over the years, the district’s pace of development lagged behind that of its Bengaluru Urban and Rural counterparts. Now, with the renaming to Bengaluru South, Ramanagara’s identity is evolving—not being replaced. This change reflects its growing integration into the economic and social fabric of Bengaluru, offering a platform for faster infrastructure growth, better governance, and renewed public engagement.

Restoring Roots: Why Bengaluru South Is a Name That Comes Full Circle

A Glimpse into History: The Bengaluru That Was To truly understand the significance of renaming Ramanagara to Bengaluru South, it helps to look at the administrative journey of the region:

- Pre-1986:** Ramanagara, along with taluks like Devanahalli, Magadi, and Doddaballapura, was part of the larger Bengaluru district.
- 1986:** Bengaluru was bifurcated into Urban and Rural districts to streamline governance.
- 2007:** Under then Chief Minister H D Kumaraswamy, Ramanagara was carved out as an independent district.

In many ways, the new identity of Bengaluru South isn’t a break from the past—it’s a return to it. It restores a historical association while aligning with the region’s modern aspirations.

Renaming Without the Price Tag: A Strategic Shift with Zero Financial Burden

Concerns were raised that renaming Ramanagara to Bengaluru South might create bureaucratic confusion or strain public finances. However, Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar laid those fears to rest with firm reassurances:

- No financial implications
- Fully within the state’s legal jurisdiction
- Seamless transition of land records, addresses, and official documents

Far from being a costly exercise, the move is a calculated step toward enhancing regional identity and visibility—anchored in both legal precedent and public interest.



Why khaki knickers are in a twist over Keeladi dig



Shiv Kumar

Not many Indians would have heard of Keeladi—actually Keezhadi in Tamil—a nondescript village in Tamil Nadu. It’s probably obscure even to most Tamilians. But today the name is the stuff of newspaper headlines and political rhetoric, thanks to the effort of one man: K Amarnath Ramakrishna. Between 2014 and 2016, he led an Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) team that began excavations along the Vaigai river, searching for traces of ancient Tamil civilisation.

Ramakrishna chose Keeladi due to the presence of earthen mounds which suggested human settlement. The decision bore fruit as the excavations yielded a treasure trove—remnants of brick walls, ring wells, pottery, iron tools and Tamil–Brahmi script inscriptions.

Some of the inscriptions hinted at the possibility of the origin of Tamil Brahmi dating back to 6th century BCE (580 BCE as claimed by two archaeologists), older than the widely accepted Ashokan Prakrit Brahmi of the 3rd century BCE. This potentially would mean rewriting Indian history (especially in south India), as the antiquity of Tamil would be even greater.

The inscriptions even suggested faint links to Indus Valley scripts, reviving long-standing debates about the continuity of ancient Indian civilisation and the origins of Dravidian culture.

Ramakrishna went public with his findings in 2017, courting controversy. He



A pot unearthed from the Keeladi excavation site (top)

was moved to Assam in what the ASI claimed was a routine transfer. Tamil scholars—among them, V. Arasu, a former professor of Tamil at the Madras University—and Dravidian political leaders saw the transfer as an attempt to suppress a narrative that contradicted the RSS/BJP-backed version of Indian civilisation, centred around the Sanskrit, Vedic north.

The controversy resurfaced in May this year when Ramakrishna sent in his 980-odd page report to the ASI, which rejected it. Questioning his dating methods, the ASI said the 580 BCE claim was premature, and ordered a revision. Ramakrishna refused, defending his use of carbon dating and accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS). He insisted that his reconstruction of the site was fully consistent with stratigraphic practice and cultural/material deposits and that the results had been verified in labs in India, the US and Italy.

The ASI appointed another archaeologist V. Sriraman to re-examine the site. When Sriraman questioned Ramakrishna’s findings, this time the Tamil Nadu government jumped into the equation and moved the Madras High Court which put the

State archaeology department in charge of the site. So far, the dig has yielded over 20, artefacts.

Union minister for culture Gajendra Singh Shekhawat sought to downplay the controversy saying the ASI only wanted further confirmation of the findings in the first report. However, the subsequent transfer of Ramakrishna from Delhi and then as director of National Mission for Monuments and Antiquities, Noida, did nothing to quell the speculation.

The entire controversy, however, is not just about archaeological methods or evidence. It also reflects the deeper Centre–state faultlines. As *The Hindu* pointed out, beyond being a clash over the validity of the methods used, it is a clash of narratives between the RSS-inspired views of the BJP and the secular ideology of the Dravidian parties.

For the ruling DMK it has also become a symbol of Tamil pride. Thangam Thennarasu, the minister of archaeology, saw this as an attempt to reduce Tamils to “second class citizens”. Chief Minister M.K. Stalin too waded into the controversy, calling it a blatant attack on Tamil culture and identity. He asked the BJP for proof of the ‘imaginary’ Saraswati civilisation theory it was propounding.

Keeladi has the potential to reshape ones understanding of south Indian urban civilisation. It is a cultural coup for the DMK in its longstanding battle for the hearts and minds of the state’s voters and it remains to be seen how this will play out. But one thing is certain: it is intimately tied to the politics of the present.

Family feud out in public

An ugly battle brewing for some time in one of Tamil Nadu’s most prominent political and business families has spilt spectacularly into the open. The key players are the sons of the late Murasoli Maran—Dayanidhi Maran, DMK MP and former Union minister, and his older brother Kalanithi Maran, media mogul and chairman of the Sun TV group. Murasoli Maran was a nephew of DMK leader and former Tamil Nadu chief minister M. Karunanidhi.

At the heart of the high stakes battle is the ownership of Sun TV, a media empire—consisting of television channels, radio stations, newspapers, magazines, film production and an Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket team, Sunrisers Hyderabad—worth over Rs 11,420 crore (\$1.4 billion). The group’s TV channels span all four southern languages, as well as Marathi and Bengali. It also had a sizeable stake in Spicejet before divesting it in 2015.

Dayanidhi has accused Kalanithi of fraudulently acquiring 60 per cent of Sun TV’s shares on 15 September 2003—when Murasoli Maran, was on life support.

According to the lawsuit filed in June 2025, Kalanithi transferred 1.2 million shares to himself at face value, bypassing shareholder and board approvals.

Kalanidhi launched his television channels in the early 1990s. Back from the US with an MBA degree, he realised the potential for a private channel. His vision proved successful, his channels became hugely popular and Sun TV went public in 2006, making him a billionaire overnight.

With the group’s immense success, came the inevitable strains over who had what. There were reports of differences between the brothers which were reportedly sorted out by their uncle, Murasoli Selvam—Murasoli Maran’s brother—and Karunanidhi.

According to the lawsuit filed on 10 June, Kalanithi “fraudulently” transferred 1.2 million shares of Sun TV Private Ltd to himself at the nominal face value of Rs. 10 per share when the actual value was Rs 2,500–3,000. This gave 60 per cent control of the company to Kalanithi, violating the 50:50 partnership deal between the Maran and Karunanidhi families.

Dayanidhi has demanded a reversal to the pre-15 September position, return of



Warring siblings Kalanithi Maran (left) and Dayanidhi Maran

dividends, and investigations by the ED, SFIO, and SEBI. He has also alleged money laundering in the funding of other ventures, including the purchase of Sunrisers Hyderabad.

Though Sun TV has dismissed the allegations as baseless and personal, the case has potential political fallout. It involves the heirs of Dayalu Ammal—wife of M. Karunanidhi—including Chief Minister Stalin, his brothers Alagiri, Tamilarasu and sister Selvi. Though Stalin has so far remained silent, some reports suggest he attempted mediation but Dayanidhi refused to compromise.

Political observers see this more as a corporate feud than a political rupture. Still, with elections looming and Tamil pride already inflamed by the Keeladi debate, the DMK leadership is treading carefully. In a state where family, media and politics are deeply intertwined, such battles rarely stay private for long. ■

Beyond archaeology, Keeladi is a clash of narratives between the RSS-inspired views of the BJP and the secular ideology of the Dravidian parties

Making much of not doing anything at all

Why do we run away from discussions we can influence as participants (SCO) and instead attend those where we are spectators (G7)?

Aakar Patel

This month, our government declared that India has taken it as its responsibility to bring the Voice of the Global South (henceforth VoGS) to the world stage. As one newspaper headline put it: ‘Time to make presence felt, India voice for Global South: S. Jaishankar ahead of G7’.

Incidentally, for the last three years, India has been hosting the Voice of the Global South Summit, which the government has shortened to VoGSS.

The immediate provocation for announcing our responsibility was linked to our arrival at the G7, where India is not a member but designated—along with others like Mexico, Brazil, Comoros and the Cook Islands—an ‘observer’ (in plainspeak, a spectator). There is no real role though sometimes hugging and giggling is apparently permitted.

The G7—America, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan—put out a statement condemning Iran for being attacked by Israel. Referring to the bombing campaign, which murdered civilians including scientists in Tehran and elsewhere, the real players reiterated their ‘support for the security of Israel’, affirmed that Israel has a right to defend itself and that ‘Iran is the principal source of regional instability and terror’.

VoGS had no opinion on this, even though our prime minister observed that it was ‘time to make our presence felt’, because VoGS was kept on mute. It is unclear why we attend gatherings where we have no say. But who can question the mighty? They have their reasons. In truth, it was time to make our presence

felt elsewhere.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)—in which VoGS is a member and actually has a say—also put out a statement on the same subject. SCO has nine players: China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Their citizens represent some 42 per cent of the humans on this planet, a majority of the Global South. The SCO charter says its duty is ‘to promote a more democratic, fair and rational international political and economic international order’. Meaning it will stand for the rights of the weaker and poorer nations.

The SCO’s statement ‘strongly condemn[ed] the military aggression carried out by Israel’ and stated that ‘such aggressive actions against civilian targets, including energy and transport infrastructure, which have resulted in civilian casualties, are a gross violation of international law and the United Nations Charter’.

On the same day (14 June) India put out a counter-statement, distancing itself from these words and clarifying that ‘India did not participate in the discussions on the above-mentioned SCO statement’.

Again, it is unclear why we run away from discussions we can influence as participants and instead attend those where we are spectators. VoGS works ‘in mysterious ways, [Its] wonders to perform’, as the poet William Cowper might have put it. Another 14 June newspaper headline read: ‘India abstains, 149 nations back UN resolution for Gaza ceasefire’. The resolution condemned ‘the use of starvation and the denial of aid as tactics of war’ and demanded a lifting of the blockade by Israel. All South Asian nations voted for it except VoGS.



India’s non-ratification of the UN Refugee Convention cannot be an excuse to send people into conditions of danger, persecution and statelessness

The reason given reads thus: ‘India’s abstention was in the belief that there is no other way to resolve conflicts, but through dialogue and diplomacy’ and that ‘our joint effort should be directed towards bringing the two sides closer’.

Yes, of course, we should bring those who are bombing and those who are being bombed closer.

Reminds me that in cricket, the act of making much of not doing anything at all is called ‘shouldering arms’.

The ministry of external affairs website tells us that on 14 August 2024, India hosted its 3rd VoGSS: ‘This unique initiative began as an extension of Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi’s vision of “Sabka Saath,

Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas aur Sabka Prayas”, and is underpinned by India’s philosophy of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*. It envisages bringing together countries of the Global South to share their perspectives and priorities on a common platform across a whole range of issues.’

On 8 May, in a case relating to the living conditions and deportation of Rohingya refugees, the same Indian government told the Supreme Court that it neither recognises the UNHCR-issued refugee cards nor the Rohingyas as refugees since India is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and, therefore, does not extend any refugee protections. Apparently VoGS and its bombast about a global family comes with several terms and conditions attached.

It need hardly be said that India’s non-ratification of the UN Refugee Convention cannot be an excuse to send people into conditions of danger, persecution and Statelessness. Under the principle of ‘non-refoulement’ in customary international law, India is still required to refrain from forcing people to go back to places where they would be at real risk of being subjected to serious human rights violations and abuses. This is additionally a specific legal obligation under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights to which India is a party.

But why should we care? And what’s stopping us from making grand speeches about the Global South and our shared humanity while acting in blatantly contrary ways? Nothing, and so the charade will carry on. ■

Views are personal

Trump or Modi: whose lies pack more punch?

We might have to wait for the historians to tell us the truth

Yogendra Yadav

Believing what Donald Trump says is never easy. ‘It’s complicated,’ the man’s relationship with the truth. According to *The Washington Post*, during his first term as US President, Trump lied 30,573 times—an impressive average of 21 lies a day. People who know him say his entire life has been one big experiment in falsehood. From the story of his parents’ origins to his business dealings to his relationships with women to politics—no aspect of his life is untouched by lies. When he is caught, it’s like water off a duck’s back. So when Trump claims he stopped India and Pakistan from hurtling towards a nuclear war, you can’t take it with the kind of seriousness one might reserve for a head of state.

Now, our own prime minister isn’t exactly a modern-day Harishchandra. No one has dared to start counting his lies (which Indian newspaper would dare?), but even if someone did, he’d likely have fallen short of Trump’s tally. That man seems to have pledged to never speak the truth. Modi has made no such vow. He is... shall we say, situational. Not exactly a friend of the truth but not its sworn enemy either. If the truth will do the job, great. If not, he has no qualms about leaning on a falsehood. Be it the promise of Rs 15 lakh in every Indian’s bank account, or the claim to double farmers’ incomes, or the alleged benefits of demonetisation, or fudged Covid death figures, or his famous line about “no one has entered Indian territory” in Ladakh—his record speaks volumes. Which is why, his statements cannot be taken at face value either.

To get at the truth of the India–Pakistan ceasefire—who brokered it and on what terms—it simply won’t do to go by the claims of these two gentlemen. We’ll need to probe deeper. After Trump’s early departure from the recent G7 summit in Canada on 16–17 June, skipping, among other commitments, a face-to-face meeting with Modi, the two leaders had a 35-minute phone call on 17 June—Modi in Canada, Trump back in the US. Following the call, India’s ministry of external affairs issued a press statement detailing the conversation. For the first time, India officially denied Trump’s claim of having mediated the truce between India and Pakistan.

The Indian government’s statement read: ‘Prime Minister Modi made it explicitly clear to President Trump that at no point during the entire episode was there any discussion, at any level, on an India–US trade deal or on any US mediation proposal between India and Pakistan. The discussion on halting military operations



Photo: Getty Images

took place directly between the Indian and Pakistani armed forces via existing communication channels, and it began at Pakistan’s request. The prime minister firmly reiterated that India does not and will not accept mediation. There is full political consensus on this in India.’

So, did Trump accept what Modi told him? The Indian statement is silent on this. The US side released no statement about the phone call. What we have from the Indian side is that Trump ‘listened carefully’. As to the effect of listening carefully, what we know is that just a few hours after the call, Trump repeated—for the *thirteenth* time—that he was the one who stopped the India–Pakistan war. The very next day, Trump invited Pakistan’s Army chief Gen. Asim Munir for lunch, where Munir endorsed Trump’s claim and thanked him for securing the ceasefire. Back to square one!

If the ceasefire was truly a bilateral affair between India and Pakistan, why did President Trump announce it first?

Still, the Indian statement isn’t meaningless. Whatever Modi may have said to Trump and whatever Trump may have heard, the statement made one thing clear: no Indian party wants US mediation in India–Pakistan matters. This has been consistent policy for the past six decades, and we can take heart that whatever may have happened in the latest encounter, India is still firm on this pillar of its foreign policy.

The question that still hangs in the air is: who secured the ceasefire between India and Pakistan, and on what terms? The Indian statement does admit that, 24 hours before the ceasefire, US Vice President J.D. Vance had called Modi to discuss the situation. Modi says there was no talk of trade during that call, but what *was* discussed? The statement offers no details.

If the ceasefire was truly a bilateral affair between India and Pakistan, then why did Trump announce it first, rather than India’s or Pakistan’s foreign minister? Modi claims the initiative came from Pakistan—which checks out, given reports that Pakistan’s air force suffered heavy losses on day three of the conflict. But he does not clarify if Pakistan’s request came *through* the US? Was America the go-between? Did the talks start because Washington stepped in?

The statement also dodges Modi’s bold claim in his address to the nation that the ceasefire came only after Pakistan promised “there would be no more terrorist activity or military misadventure from their side”. Who made this promise? To whom? And how will it be enforced? These questions remain unanswered.

It smells fishy alright. Someone is lying; maybe everyone is, and it’s hard to judge whose lie wins. We might have to wait for the historians to tell us the truth. ■



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BBC sandwiched between Jewish and Palestinian pressure groups

Over the years, the *BBC* has faced the wrath of Britain’s influential Jewish lobby, which has accused it of a pro-Palestinian bias in its coverage of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Recently it was forced to withdraw a documentary on the unbearable suffering of the people of Gaza caused by Israel’s invasion after it emerged that the film’s young narrator was related to a senior Hamas leader. For a change, it is the Palestinians who are complaining that the *BBC* is giving Israeli casualties more prominence. A report by the Muslim Council of Britain’s Centre for Media Monitoring has claimed that it has given Israeli deaths up to ‘33 times more coverage than those of Palestinians’. It also accuses the corporation of suppressing allegations of a ‘plausible genocide’ in Gaza and adopting a ‘systematic pattern’ of failing to properly report on Israeli actions. ‘*BBC* presenters actively shut down interviewees’ genocide claims—in over 100 documented instances—despite human rights organisations such as Amnesty International concluding that a genocide is taking place,’ the report said.

The report (‘BBC on Gaza–Israel: One Story, Double Standards’) which analysed over 32,000 broadcast segments and 3,800 online articles claims the *BBC* gave Israeli deaths 33 times more coverage across online articles and 19 times more on TV and radio, when measured on a per-fatality basis. ‘Across the *BBC*’s coverage, a clear dynamic has emerged: the marginalisation of Palestinian suffering and the amplification of Israeli narratives,’ it says. A *BBC* spokeswoman said that it would consider the report despite “some questions” about the apparent reliance on AI to compile it. “Throughout our impartial reporting on the conflict we have made clear the devastating human cost to civilians living in Gaza. We will continue to give careful thought to how we do this,” she said even as the *BBC* reiterated calls for Israel to grant journalists access to Gaza.

..and not just the BBC

The ruling Labour Party too is caught between warring Palestinian and Jewish groups with one accusing its government of complicity in Israel’s “genocidal” actions and the other of “anti-semitism”. And, much of it is down to Prime



LONDON DIARY HASAN SUROOR



British PM Keir Starmer

Minister Keir Starmer’s own shifting positions on the Gaza war. First, it threw its full weight behind Israel’s post-October 7 retaliation, upholding its right to self-defence. It continued to stick to this line even long after it became clear that Israel had crossed a line—until it suffered a huge Muslim backlash in last year’s general election, costing it more than half a dozen seats. And then in an abrupt U-turn, the government suspended arms export

licences to Israel for use in military operations in Gaza, holding it in breach of international humanitarian law. Recently, it also sanctioned two far-right Israeli ministers—Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich—over “repeated incitements of violence against Palestinian communities” in the occupied West Bank. Result: it’s now facing a backlash from the Jewish community even as Muslims continue to simmer with Labour MPs facing the heat. Luke Charters, who represents York Outer constituency, has alleged that he has become a target for a group of pro-Palestinian activists who, he says, are using increasingly threatening methods, including throwing missiles at him and chanting “Labour, Labour, genocide”. A group protesters also tried to block entry to his constituency surgery. They carried megaphones and posters accusing him of “genocide”.

How Bibi drove his Iran obsession

Former British foreign secretary William Hague has revealed that Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu had been planning to bomb Iran’s nuclear programme for decades and stonewalled all attempts to find a diplomatic solution. ‘In 1998, I sat with Bibi Netanyahu in a London hotel as he explained the alarming details of the missiles being produced by Iran. He left no doubt, even 27 years ago, that he thought the twin nuclear and

missile programmes of Israel’s sworn enemy could be dealt with only by force. Last week, a combination of circumstances... finally allowed him to launch the attack he has long planned,’ he wrote in *The Times*. He also recalled how in 2013, a proposed nuclear deal with Iran (a precursor to the 2015 agreement) was opposed tooth and nail by Israel. ‘Every day, an Israeli minister would call me to ask that we refuse to do the deal. And every day, I explained why we disagreed,’ he said. Although its efforts failed at the time, it ultimately prevailed on America to withdraw from the agreement. Rest is history.

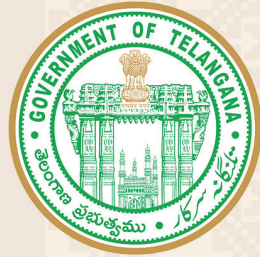


Mind your phone in London

London has emerged as the ‘phone theft capital’ of Europe amid a sharp rise in incidents of phone-related crime. And iPhones account for an overwhelming majority of the thefts. Last year 80,000 devices were stolen in the capital, up from 64,000 in 2023, costing customers and insurance firms £50 million annually. MPs have accused Apple and Google of ‘dragging their feet’ in fighting mobile phone theft for commercial gain. Both have denied this. And, finally, a joke about President Donald Trump: “If you asked President Trump to tell you what he thinks about fine china, he’d probably accuse you of siding with Beijing in his trade war.” ■



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu



Bonalu Handicrafts Fair

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Date : 25-06-2025 Upto 29-06-2025

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Venue : Grounds next to Ambedkar Statue,
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